

Charly Traktor

Presented by: Ivana Perica

Charly Traktor was published in 1973, at the height of the so-called Kreisky era (with Bruno Kreisky at the head of the Austrian Social Democratic Party – SPÖ), and draws on the traditional literary genre that tells of a single peasant's move from the countryside to the capital. By observing the main character's initial disorientation and then his growing insight and social awareness, this 'proletarian Bildungsroman' (Geoffrey C. Howes) tells the 'success story' of the upward mobility of the Austrian proletarian and petty-bourgeois milieus. Charly Traktor is a factory novel and a document of the time when European workers were successively making, or at least striving to make, the transition from blue-collar to white-collar workers. It accurately depicts the organisation of work in the factory, the interpersonal dynamics between the workers, their representatives on the factory council and the employers (factory owners), as well as how these dynamics intersect with experiences in private life and intimate relationships. In this way, the novel is related to other representative European production novels of the period, such as Nanni Balestrini's *Vogliamo tutto* (1971; engl. *We Want Everything: The Novel of Italy's Hot Autumn*, 2016).

The main character, who is characterised as stubborn, simple-minded and angry, and is mentioned only by the nickname Charly Traktor (after an advertising baseball cap of an American tractor company that in his childhood became Charly's personal trademark), develops after his move to Vienna from the status of unskilled workforce to skilled worker and from day labourer to worker with a proper employment contract. This is accompanied by a growing professional self-confidence – he saw "that he made something; that he created value" (40) – that eventually matures into class consciousness. A similar evolution from apolitical cluelessness to self-awareness is evident in Charly's relationship with his lover Elfi, about whom he occasionally states, "We have a few sentences about women [...] and we pass them around like pornographic photos. [...] We talk about women the way entrepreneurs talk about us." (64) At the same time, thanks to a residue of carelessness and hasty manners, Charly is different from his fellow co-workers in that he doesn't simply buy the story of professional (financial) advancement opportunities, which is prepared for them both by their conservative (ÖVP) and Social Democratic (SPÖ) representatives, who all argue for the benefit of the owners of production enterprises. Instead, thanks to his provincial origins and inadequate training in modern disciplinary society, he retains that raw instinct that allows him to recognise the difference between promise and reality, much like between political labels such as 'Social Democrat', 'Communist' and 'Black' (the last refers to the Austrian People's Party – ÖVP): "For him, the entrepreneurs and the big farmers are one and the same rabble. He doesn't want to be as stupid as his mother and politically support those who rip him off." (58)

However, Charly's development, both on a professional, ideological and personal level, is neither linear nor continuous. The narrative, which provides the reader with rich introspective insights into the mental and emotional staccato of the main character's thought processes, reads, alongside externally focused narrative sections, like an unpolished document of anxiety, restraint, then also of hastiness and doggedness, and finally of private and political lessons from the peripheral viewpoint of a peripheral social subject. As such, it skirts the danger of serving the reader political slogans at

the expense of literary form; rather, literary inspection brings this novel closer to a research material offered to the reader for his or her own evaluation than to a well-rounded and unambiguous character study.

To read the novel as a research material providing insight into the proletarian consciousness of the early 1970s would be much in line with Claude Lefort's 1952 essay "L'expérience prolétarienne" ("Proletarian Experience"). Claiming that revolutionary theory necessarily requires an investigation of "proletarian phenomenology" (Hartley), Lefort argues for a methodology of social research based on the "workers' inquiry" and aimed at producing "militant knowledge as part of a project of autonomous worker organization" (Hartley). However, Lefort's "concrete approach", which seeks to understand the relationship of the proletariat to its work and to society at large, ignores the fact that workers' inquiry, as a "type of self-reflexive writing", is "as much a literary construction (a set of genre rules and expectations) as an account of actual experience" (Hastings-King). Considering the legacy of the 20th-century political novel in Europe, one should also consider specific literary accounts of that experience. Charly Traktor is an exceptional case in this regard, as it offers the reader insights and reflections on the worker's relationship to his work and to the production process as a whole, to his fellow workers and members of other social classes belonging to the same production site, and to his relationships with other individuals, professional groups and social classes he encounters outside the factory. Charly Traktor is thus not only a literary portrait, but also a social study of how an individual worker with a particular (rural) background and professional qualities (or lack thereof) fits into the modern enterprise, how he copes with hierarchies and what forms of new experiences determine his successive evolution from "class mentalité" to a "bourgeois mentalité" (Lefort). The novel is a political document of early 1970s Austrian society, which develops its welfare-state model in the interval between the European socialist East and the capitalist West. The aforementioned success story of the rise of the Austrian working class develops not thanks to but in spite of autonomist and workerist demands emanating from the economic base. Demands for better working conditions are dismissed with the argument that they are excessive in a system of profit-oriented ownership of production; at the same time, it is claimed that they are equally impossible in the "Eastern" (i.e. socialist) states (84), where workers who would make such demands would be punished by death (the latter is claimed by a workers' representative who is derided by other workers as an "old Nazi", 84). In short, the "democratic rules of the game" (103) are to be understood as workers following the prudence of the entrepreneur and, accordingly, never asking for too much, thus keeping the struggle in check, in contrast to the parole "vogliamo tutto" (Balestrini) mentioned above.

References

Hartley, Daniel. "Militant Structures of Feeling: Raymond Williams, Claude Lefort, and Workers' Inquiry." *The Political Uses of Literature: Global Perspectives and Theoretical Approaches 1920–2020*. Eds. Benjamin Kohlmann and Ivana Perica. Bloomsbury, 2023. In press.

Hastings-King, Stephen. "On Claude Lefort's 'Proletarian Experience'." *Viewpoint Magazine*, 27 Sept. 2013, <https://viewpointmag.com/2013/09/27/on-claude-leforts-proletarian-experience/>. Accessed 20 April 2023.

Howes, Geoffrey C. "A Proletarian Bildungsroman? Michael Scharang's Charly Traktor (1973)." *Towards the millennium: interpreting the Austrian novel 1971–1996*. Ed. Gerald Chapple. Tübingen: Stauffenburg-Verlag, 2000.

Lefort, Claude. "Proletarian Experience." *Socialisme ou Barbarie* 11 (Nov.–Dec. 1952),

viewpointmag.com/2013/09/26/proletarian-experience/. Accessed 20 April 2023.

LANGUAGE: German / Deutsch

PUBLISHERS: Luchterhand, Verlag Volk und Welt, Libro, Ariadne Press, Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, Magvető

This title was not censored before publishing