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IS LEOŠ JANÁČEK'S *PŘÍHODY LIŠKY BYSTROUŠKY* A REJECTION OF A ROMANTIC LIE?

In his recent little book, *Můj Janáček* (Brno: Atlantis, 2004), Milan Kundera refers to Janáček as a supremely reticent composer – one for whom the Romantic lie of artificial theatricality was always to be rejected. And he gives several examples of “lovers” of Janáček who demanded conventional theatricality from him, in a way that amounted to betrayal: Karel Kovařovic, to whose reworking Janáček had to submit so that *Její pastorkyňa* could reach the Prague stage, Břetislav Bakala, whose misunderstanding of *Z mrtvého domu* produced a very inappropriate ending, and notably Max Brod, who famously objected to the ending of *Příhody lišky Bystroušky*, where the last word is given to the comic utterance of the frog who appears under (or on) the nose of the forester. Of the three, *Příhody lišky Bystroušky* is perhaps the most problematic case. Its libretto presents any producer with substantial problems: these mean that Kundera’s verdict may need some qualification, even though as he says the opera arguably possesses far more artistic value than its model, charming though that is.

As is well known, *Příhody lišky Bystroušky* was composed in 1922 and 1923, and is based on the novel *Liška Bystrouška* of 1920 by Rudolf Těsnohlídek. Těsnohlídek was born at Čáslav in 1882; in 1906, helped by S.K. Neumann, he turned to journalism, and from 1908 until his suicide in January 1928 contributed to the Brno newspaper *Lidové noviny*. Around 1920, one of the editorial staff of the paper came across a series of some 200 drawings, made much earlier by the artist Stanislav Lolek (1873-1936), who worked as a forester on an aristocratic estate near Blatná. These depicted the adventures of a vixen, shown in comic anthropomorphic terms, and were serialized in the paper between April and June 1920; Těsnohlídek was asked to write verses to accompany them. In fact he wrote prose instead, entitling the result *Liška Bystronožka* (a printer’s typographic error altered this to *Liška Bystrouška*, but he allowed the change to stand). *Liška Bystrouška*, published as a book in 1921, was his most successful prose work, winning a state prize in 1923 and running into many editions. Lolek’s illustrations were not retained in all later editions, though many appear again in the book published together with the Prague production of the opera in 2002.

The plot of the novel was determined by the illustrations; they are so numerous and detailed that Těsnohlídek had no possibility of deviating from their narrative. This, distributed over 23 short episodes in the novel, is situated in a village community near Brno (the book is unspecific though the opera specifies the Adamov woods), focusing on forester, schoolmaster and priest – those in such a village rich enough to employ servants.

The first two chapters introduce the reader to the animals of the forest, who, it turns out, talk and sing, and are stereotypes of First-Republic politics. They provide the main means for depicting the poorer strata of society, apparently a special interest of Těsnohlídek's, though these emerge also in such human figures as Andulka, the forester's maidservant, and Martínek, the poacher with no fixed abode. The mosquito of the first chapter is a fervent Catholic, keen on singing hymns and attending pilgrimages; in chapter 2 he bickers with the frog, an enthusiastic socialist in favour of strict control: "Naša strana, to je strana, u nás nesmí každé myslet, jak by se mu zachcelo, nebo řečňovat podlivá svýho. U nás se musí každé řídit podlivá důverníka a usnesení, protože je u nás přísná orkanisací", our Party is a Party that does not permit dissidence, because we have strict organization. Then in chapter 3 we finally meet the vixen, who is the stereotyped redhead woman of much Czech literature. The forester captures her and takes her home to deflect the wrath of his wife; three chapters with her escapades follow, two at the lodge, picking off the poultry, and one where she is back in the forest and evicts a badger from his sett by urinating into it.

Chapters 7 to 10 return to the village: first the forester, priest and schoolmaster are drinking companions in the pub, and then each of chapters 8, 9 and 10 comically centres on one of them. The third (with the forester outwitted by the vixen in the forest) makes a natural link to chapters 11 to 15, all set in winter, presenting further unrelated comic escapades of the vixen. Chapters 16 to 18, now set in spring, are coloured differently, with the vixen's thoughts turning towards mating and the forester's towards old age, and with the new characters of Harašta (retail butcher from the Brno district of Líšeň) and Martínek (poacher), rivals of both forester and vixen. And then chapters 19 to 23 have the meeting, courtship and marriage of Zlatohřbítek, the fox, and the vixen; the happy-ending sentimentality of the end of the novel is undercut (though only to a limited extent) by the parting of the human friends in old age.

As Kundera remarks, this is a book without literary ambition. Its tone is comic, one of sympathetic tolerance of human foibles, avoiding allegory or satire, except that the badger in chapter 6 is a superannuated bureaucrat from the Austro-Hungarian imperial regime. (For this, the reader is expected to "hate" him enough to approve of the fouling and expropriation of his sett by the vixen.) And although the characters, especially the forester, are sceptical in a down-to-earth way rather than devout (with the exception of priest and mosquito), the novel (unlike the opera) is far from anti-clerical.

The dialect of much of the dialogue is that shared by Brno and the Haná region; the forester speaks in dialect, but the dialect is stronger with some of the other

characters, notably the animals and particularly the butcher, Harašta, who not only transforms adjectival -ý or -ej endings to -é, and ou to ó, but also adds prothetic h as well as prothetic v before vowels: “Ha já hí nebodo [= “a já jí nebudu”] měť slovíčkem vodpověď [= “odpověď”]. Nezvěří-li vona celé Dominikánské trh, vod starýho Zemskýho domo haž do Zámečnické, dyž se hí zasce?” In fact his name, Hypolit Harašta, seems to be a joke on the prothetic h. Priest, schoolmaster and forester are distinguished by registers of speech, with priest and schoolmaster using *obecná čeština*, normal current Czech, without dialect but priest also using Latin, understood by the schoolmaster but not by the forester.

At the end, the narrator archly addresses his “milé čtenářky”, dear female readers: this is a girls’ novel, *dívčí román* as Janáček called it. More precisely, the implicit readership is one of young, well-off, unmarried bourgeois girls from Brno with an eye to modern fashion and the marriage market. The authorial voice is that of an older man: it frequently converges with that of the forester. His dialect even intrudes into the third-person narration at the beginning of chapter 1, so that the connection is established at the outset: the forester intends to make new skittles for the pub, and the narration archly mixes the “tož” and the imprecations of dialect with constructions from literary – and not spoken – Czech: “Tož první neděli letos při partii na kuželně, uvědomiv se, že veškeré lidstvo zesláblo podvýživou a starostmi, hodil si do plných důkladně babuškou. Vynaložil na ten hod všechny síly a podařil se mu! Vandl jak bič, setsakrapes.”

The identity of narrator as older man, not always the forester, continues, making deviations from its expected “respectable” attitudes comic. So when Zlatohřbítek invites Bystrouška out for a walk, she announces that her favourite time for solitary walks is between midnight and 1 a.m. – when no respectable female reader could possibly dream of walking out alone. When she tells him that she owns her own house and is proud of her independence, he jokes that she is “prostě ideál moderní dívky”, simply the ideal of a modern girl, and goes on to ask, “Kouříte snad taky?” perhaps you smoke too? – to which she coyly replies, “Ještě ne”, not yet! Another nice example is in Zlatohřbítek’s proposal of marriage. The vixen rebuffs him sharply, he tells her melodramatically that he will die before dawn if she rejects him, and the transparency of this ploy is comically overlooked by the narrator as she instantly responds “Opravdu? Proč ste to neřekl už spíš?” really? why didn’t you say so before? and throws herself into his arms.

The implicit readership also adds some spice, maybe, to the frequent references to sex and other half-taboos, in terms both comic and sentimental (there are repeated descriptions of sunrise in terms of the sun rising in post-coital rosinness from his dewy bed, perhaps as half-comic and half-sentimental reworkings of *fin-de-siècle* conceits). And there are descents into low humour – sometimes turning purely on the foolish things people get up to when drunk, and several times spilling over into the vulgar, as with the results when the mosquito bites the forester’s nose. But there are amusing, if unsubtle, reversals of expectation: the forester’s dog, Lapák, complains in chapter 3 that the sad art-songs composed by himself, performed during his nocturnal howling, are unappreciated in a quite inhuman,

nelidský, way by his master, and in chapter 14, when the vixen enters a room full of meat, she complains: “čert ví, proč někdy lidí jijou tak zvířecky”, the devil knows why humans sometimes eat like animals. Conversely, Lapák’s sniffing of the vixen’s private parts at their first acquaintance is presented in the narrator’s voice as a manifestation of old-fashioned courtesy: “očenichával ji kavalírsky a zdvořile, všude, kde se sluší a patří”, he took account of her courteously, like a gentleman, in all the places where it is right and proper so to do. (Janáček liked the idea that animals could do and say things on stage that were forbidden to humans.) One joke, amusing the first time, is spoilt by repetition: characters predict three separate times that they will be written about in the papers.

Fortunately, this joke comes only once in the opera, to which we should now move. Janáček read the episodes of the novel as they were published: there is a complete set in the Janáček archive, besides the first edition of 1921. He was attracted by the combination of the forest motif with that of old age (and, no doubt, though he does not say so, by the sex), as usual seeing the story in naively autobiographical terms – he was approaching 70 at the time. The Janáček’s maid-servant, Marie Stejskalová, claimed in her memoirs to have introduced him to the story in 1920 and to have suggested that he compose an opera on it, but she is probably not to be believed. Whether she is right or not, by early 1921 there was a rumour abroad in Brno that the old man was considering it as a subject, and he confirmed this on 15 May 1921 in an interview in *Lidové noviny*. The paper was able to spin out the story because Těsnohlídek, a generation younger than the composer, was afraid that he was being made a fool of, until he met Janáček in 1922. Again in *Lidové noviny* (3 July 1924), he gave an amusing description of the meeting, which recalls his drunken schoolmaster declaring his love to a sunflower, thinking it is Terynka: “Leoš Janáček was waiting for me in the little garden of the Conservatory. He sat among the bushes, with thousands of tiny little blossoms above his head; that head of his was just as white, and seemed to be the largest of the flowers. He smiled, and I knew at once that this was the smile which life awards us like a gold medal for bravery in the face of the enemy.”

In fact Janáček had composed much of the opera before asking Těsnohlídek’s permission, making up his libretto as he went along. (Těsnohlídek played no part in the libretto apart from giving Janáček a text for the song “o panně Veronice”, about the virgin St Veronica, sung in the pub in chapter 7; Janáček treated this just as cavalierly as he did the rest of the text, omitting and rearranging lines.) Janáček’s method, used also in *Z mrtvého domu*, was to extract isolated lines from the novel, drawing both on direct speech and descriptive third-person narrative, and assembling these, unedited, as dialogue, in an approximation to logical order, sometimes transferring lines of dialogue from one character to another. This often destroys the motivation for utterances and also produces strange juxtapositions, very short sentences and long, complicated ones, for instance. In this opera, the chief casualty is the priest, whose Latin tags are almost all that remains of his lines; no trace remains of any friendly exchanges between him and his other two friends. He becomes a foolish, interfering moralist barely able to communicate,

and a character with whom it is impossible to sympathize, though it seems unlikely that Janáček consciously intended this.

Equally, though, Janáček's composing method produces some miraculous results – and most probably purely by instinct. This is very clear in the first scene. Here, the fragmentation of the animals' dialogue and its allocation to children's voices deprive it of sense or motivation, deprive the animals of political awareness, and replace these with a static, ceremonious, dance-like atmosphere. Although the animals are wedding guests, we don't even know whose wedding is being celebrated. With the unsettling music right from the beginning of the overture, about which Kundera writes well, a surreal uncertainty is created, setting a forest scene with an idyllic melancholy, but with irrational violence constantly just under the surface, even when the waltz begins. This is quite typical of the composer's style. Here, it places quite a new construction on the forester's first words, "Dostaneme bóřku", "We're expecting a storm". And here the music has the chief task of compensating for the loss of coherence. As Kundera says: "If the libretto were staged without music, it would not be attractive and would make no sense. From the moment that he conceived the opera, Janáček unambiguously gave the leading role to music. It is music that narrates, that reveals the psychology of the characters, that constructs emotion, surprises, meditates, enchants, and organizes the whole piece and constructs its architecture."

Another good example, in which one can see some of the sense of the original destroyed for a higher purpose, occurs in the scene in which the fox proposes to the vixen. There is comedy in Těsnohlídek's original, with the topos of "love at first sight" the instant that fox and vixen spy one another. In the opera, this happens even faster in the dialogue in which the vixen consents to take Zlatohřbítek, and the speed with which they copulate and she becomes pregnant is almost farcical. But the music is able to make us believe instantly in the sincerity and ecstasy of the love on both sides – it is a wonderful scene, with a touch of comedy colouring an enormous depth of feeling. Without the music, this would be quite impossible.

Besides radically altering the dynamic of the action in ways such as this, Janáček materially recast the story, in the process introducing a good deal of mime and ballet, and also inventing symbolic parallels between some of the animals and some of the humans (for example, between the unsympathetic badger and the unsympathetic priest; apart from this one, these remain puzzling, and I won't follow them through). His operas generally comprise three acts, each act ending with an emotional climax (violent, joyful, etc.). Těsnohlídek's episodic novel by its nature does not fit this conception well, and Janáček instead considered a succession of "obrazy", tableaux, rather than scenes; the final version represented an uneasy compromise between the two conceptions, with nine scenes (with titles) distributed over three acts. Act I ends with the vixen encouraging an uprising of the hens for her own ends, in a scene entitled "Bystrouška politikem", the vixen as politician. Despite the mayhem, this is not a typical ending for a Janáček act; Act II is more typical, ending ecstatically with the wedding between fox and

vixen (this is the episode that concludes the novel). But the third act is entirely original, while drawing on his usual models. It begins with the episode of Harašta and Martínek (here combined uneasily into a single character), but in the opera the vixen is killed in a matter-of-fact way by a random shot from Harašta, and she does in fact become a muff for Harašta's bride, Terynka. So she is no conventional operatic heroine, dying or marrying in a final apotheosis.

The two scenes that follow, and end the opera, first present a nostalgic pub scene where the forester, complaining of old age, briefly meets the schoolmaster, sadly considering his loss of Terynka; Kundera rightly praises the originality of the setting of banal dialogue here, lightly concealing the emotion of the scene. He has a comparison in mind with Hemingway's technique in short stories – he quotes Hemingway's "Hills like White Elephants", in which an anonymous couple sit in a Spanish bar conducting a banal conversation: the reader knows that he is American and that she is evidently expecting an abortion, but we know little else. For Kundera this low-key banality represents the "truth" that rejects the lie of Romanticism, and is replicated in the Janáček pub scene.

But the final scene even surpasses it, and is one of the most impressive in the whole of Janáček's output. It has the forester back in the forest setting of the first scene of Act I; the original animals return, but with vixen and frog now replaced by Bystrouška's daughter and the original frog's grandson, and the scene brings the opera to an overwhelming lyrical climax. (This scene was performed in 1928 at the composer's funeral in the Městské divadlo, now the Mahenovo divadlo, and the composer's widow found it too much to bear; the marriage had been difficult.) In this scene, the forester abandons his usual dialect to sing part of the excessively purple passage at the end of Těsnohlídek's chapter 17; the change in register may not even have been noticed by the composer, for it is simply the result of his literalism in mining the text for lines of dialogue. This allows an elevated, almost Romantic, mood in the erotic manner of Richard Strauss; the music does most of the work, and makes even this vision believable and touching, even though it is alien to the forester's persona, of *rusalky*, water nymphs, disporting themselves sexily and weeping for joy in their skimpy garments, and mankind understanding that a supernatural happiness has passed its way. But this passage turns out not to be the real apotheosis: it is quickly undercut by a return to dialect and down-to-earth utterance from the forester, and then a child's voice representing the frog; and the real apotheosis follows, purely orchestral, much less erotic, but powerfully expressive, with Janáček's usual trumpets, trombones and percussion, here triumphant rather than violent (think of the tone of the *Sinfonietta*).

If we are to understand Brod's part in this opera, its later history needs to be traced a little. The opera had its Prague premiere in 1924, and was reviewed critically by Zdeněk Nejedlý in *Rudé právo*, 21 May 1925. The terms of his hostile polemic had already been voiced in his review of *Jenůfa* a decade earlier, but here he criticizes the humour too: "Generally, Janáček is not capable of humour, which is self-evident, because humour is a product of high culture. Here, the humans, if they are to be funny, first get drunk, and this is a cheap device; and the animals

behave and speak like the scum of the earth, which is yet cheaper. We should never forget that Janáček is not and cannot be creative in art: for that, he is too primitive, for creativity means overcoming the primitive through culture. The primitive can constitute a mannerism, but not a style, and even that which seems original in Janáček's work is nothing but a mannerism." Admittedly, the production by Ferdinand Pujman (husband of the authoress Marie Pujmanová) seems to have been horrible, with the forester convulsed in death throes in the final scene; both Janáček and his wife hated it, and Brod wrote that it was kitsch.

After this performance, Brod produced the German translation that was to be published by Universal Edition in Vienna; his part in the opera was more intimate and complicated than Kundera suggests. For years he had been supporting Janáček, introducing him to Universal Edition and, by translating his libretti, providing him with access to German opera houses. And Janáček wanted Brod to help him with this new opera. Brod had known about Janáček's plans for *Liška Bystrouška* already in 1921, and Janáček began a correspondence about it again in August 1922. By March 1923, Janáček's libretto was complete, and Brod had read it. Two years later he was involved in translation; no doubt he had the critical reception of the Prague performance in mind.

He thought the libretto problematic for German taste, and he decided heroically, perhaps misguidedly, to solve its problems by revising the plot comprehensively. He turned the character of Terynka (never seen on stage, but the schoolmaster's infatuation and eventually Harašta's bride) into a gypsy girl, the obsession and former love of all three men, and the alter ego of the vixen, by altering the translated dialogue throughout while leaving the music intact. In the second pub scene, for example, the "Verunka" about whom the forester sings in the song "o panně Veronice", referring to his wife, becomes Terynka in the German version, referring to his former lover instead. And in Brod's German version, the dialogue and action inform us that the forester has taken pity on Terynka and brought her into town, and that she has been taken in at the church and has seduced the priest, who is forced to flee from the pub as the outraged parishioners break in. None of this is in Janáček's libretto. Brod manages this by a wholesale replacement of some of the illogical dialogue, including the forester's demands for one last drink.

During his work on this translation, of which he was very proud, Brod reread Těsnohlídek's original novel, and corresponded with Janáček, who approved of most of his alterations, but refused to yield on two points. One was the episode with the badger: Brod felt (reasonably enough) that the vixen urinating was too vulgar and in any case impracticable on stage, and suggested that she might affront the badger by kissing him publicly. The other, already mentioned, was the frog. On 26 June 1925 Janáček replied: "It's impossible for Liška Bystrouška to kiss the Badger! The reason for the scene: expropriative-communistic is the only one possible! And the end of the opera! Surely it's charming when the little Frog ends the opera! The music is absolutely made for it." Brod answered a fortnight later: "I am very happy with your verdict. I have left the ending unchanged. It really is, as it stands, quite charming." Although Brod's understanding of the

ending may have been questionable, and Janáček's response the correct one, one can't help feeling that Kundera is not being quite fair in raking up these ancient coals seven decades later. And Brod's translation was a hugely essential contribution to the eventual acceptance of the opera in the international repertory.

This translation formed the basis for the German premiere in 1927 in Mainz. Though this was also unsuccessful, it was reviewed perceptively in *Anbruch*, Universal Edition's house journal, by Hans Redlich. Redlich's review anticipates Kundera in stressing Janáček's reticence and avoidance of cheap theatricality, and he commented much more specifically on the musical techniques used than any other reviewer of the period, but Janáček was not pleased with it. In fact, though, Redlich's comments on deficiencies refer to Brod's work rather than to Janáček's: "The opera presents in a sense only the silhouette of a plot: the seduction of the principal personalities of a village by a beautiful gypsy girl, Terynka, is presented only obliquely [...] In a clever and original manner, Janáček has used this reflection of a plot as the framework for the "fable of the cunning little vixen" [...] which, in the metaphysical analogy between the vixen and Terynka, or rather in the analogy between the effect both figures have on the memories of the three human figures, is the aspect producing coherence in the whole conception [...] But Janáček has not completely succeeded in making the analogies clear between the persons in the framing plot and the animals in the central plot, and this is not mitigated by the brief magical transformation of the vixen into Terynka during one of the symphonic interludes."

These comments confirm that Brod's attempt to clarify the libretto may solve some problems in the dramatic conception, but inevitably leaves others unsolved and indeed raises new ones. These days, Brod's Terynka is usually omitted in productions, at least in English-speaking countries, but problems still remain; productions usually resort to ever new devices in order to impose coherence on a deeply mysterious piece – as in the framing of the action, in the recent Prague production, by a gratuitous love affair between Frantík (one of the forester's sons) and the daughter of Pásek, the innkeeper, in mute roles involving the growing up of characters from childhood to maturity. Is this – something quite extrinsic to the main action – more or less acceptable than Brod's radical reformulation of the action? Every operatic production tends to do something of the sort; opera texts (or rather operatic interpretations) are unstable, and particularly so when they attempt to solve the problems that beset this opera; but in the case of *Příhody lišky Bystroušky* we may be grateful that Janáček's methods, his abandonment of the "Romantic lie", as Kundera has it, leave so much mystery, in a piece that is sur-realist as much as realist.