

Afterword

Many years ago, as an undergraduate majoring in Slavic Studies at Cambridge University, I attended a reception at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies in London. One of the guests, the exiled Czech poet Ivan Jelínek, approached me and enquired: “Alfred, which do you think is better, Czech prose or Czech poetry?” Astonished that such a distinguished man of letters should acknowledge my existence, let alone know my name, I replied: “Czech poetry.” “Yes,” mused the poet sadly, “Czech prose isn’t much good.”

Of course, as a poet himself, Mr. Jelínek was clearly biased in his dismissal of Czech prose as an inferior genre. But if there is any truth in his generalization, it is all the more ironic that Czech verse has received far less attention in the English-speaking world than Czech fiction. While educated native speakers of English may have read a novel by Milan Kundera, how many non-specialists could name a Czech poet or a Czech poem? Such ignorance is, of course, more of a reflection of our own cultural insularity than the merits of modern Central European poetry.

Unfortunately English translations of Czech poetry are fewer in number than their Polish or German counterparts. Browsing in the poetry section of a large bookstore, the curious reader will find translations of poems by Czesław Miłosz or Paul Celan but not by the 1984 Nobel laureate Jaroslav Seifert (1901–86). Of course, the principal reason for this deficiency is the current climate of profit-driven publishing allied with the more pervasive problem of linguistic and cultural Anglo-centrism. I was recently curious to see whether any work of fiction by the Czech novelist Bohumil Hrabal was available in Borders and was discouraged to discover he had vanished from the shelves of this large Chicago bookstore just as surely as Clementis was airbrushed from the photograph of the Czechoslovak Communist leadership at the beginning of Milan Kundera’s novel *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*.

It is a particular pleasure, therefore, to welcome the publication of *Up the Devil’s Back*. As I leaf through this marvelous volume, I am reminded of the truth of Ivan Jelínek’s assertion all those years ago: the real *forte* of Czech literature *is* its poetry. What’s more, Czech poets have tended to excel in the intimate, personal form of the lyric rather than the grand *récit* of narrative verse (there is no Czech equivalent, for example, to Alfred Lord Tennyson’s *Idylls of the Kings*). Let us consider the case of the great Romantic poem *Máj* (May) by Karel Hynek Mácha (1810–36). This poem is sometimes categorized by

scholars as “lyrico-epic” because it is essentially a series of lyric reflections integrated into an epic framework along the lines of Byron’s *Manfred* or Mickiewicz’s *Pan Tadeusz*. Everything about this astonishing poem is personal and subjective: Even the titular setting of May—the vernal *locus amoenus* of lovers—turns out to be an illusory snare devised by nature. This sense of reality as a solipsistic illusion is reinforced in the second canto of the poem: the brigand William has been imprisoned in a white tower and is awaiting his execution on the next day for the murder of his own father. The cell, where the hapless William is chained against the wall, serves as a metaphor for the prison of human consciousness as the doomed hero meditates on time, death, and eternity. Even though the poem is framed as an oedipal drama of patricide, this is really just a flimsy pretext for what is actually a series of personal reflections on the meaning of humanity in a world without God.

The highly subjective nature of *May* was the major reason why Mácha was disliked by his nationalist compatriots and ignored by the critics at the time of his tragic death at the age of twenty-six. What the Czech revivalists wanted was an epic glorification of Slavdom along the lines of Jan Kollár’s *Slávy dcera* (The Daughter of Sláva). Even this massive, unwieldy poem is really just a series of lyrical and narrative sonnets strung together to give the impression of epic monumentality. Ironically, for a Slavophile encomium, many of these sonnets were inspired by the poet’s great love Mina, the daughter of a German Protestant pastor. Kollár transforms Mina into the eponymous Daughter of the Slavic pagan goddess Sláva in a highly self-conscious imitation of Dante’s deification of Beatrice.

The perceived lack of an heroic-epic tradition in modern Czech literature helps to explain that curious phenomenon known as the *Forged Manuscripts*, a series of poems purportedly written in the medieval period and “discovered” in 1817 and 1818, but in fact fabricated to provide the nation with a Slavic equivalent to the *Nibelungenlied* (ca. 1200), which had been reinvented in the early nineteenth century as *the* national German epic. The fact that this powerful medieval story of love, betrayal, and revenge was composed for a courtly elite at Passau (in Austria) rather than for a mass German audience seems not to have been a problem for its early editors; such was the German need to compete with the British and Celtic races whose own literary pedigree had been assured by the rediscovery of the Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf* and the invented poems of Ossian in the late eighteenth century.

For most of the nineteenth century the Czechs languished under the shadow of their German neighbors. Only later in the century did they swerve away from what Harold Bloom has termed the “anxiety of influence” to embrace English and French literary sources. The principal exponent of this western cultural orientation was Jaroslav Vrchlický (1853–1912) who substituted French and English for German literary models and subordinated nationalist

and utilitarian criteria to aesthetic values, thereby exercising an enormous influence on the development of modern Czech poetry. As the present volume eloquently demonstrates, twentieth-century Czech poets have been deeply enriched by their Romantic and Parnassian predecessors.

So why did Mácha write in a personal, lyrical vein rather than in the heroic-epic mode? By the time Mácha came to pen his great poem the ideals enshrined in early Romanticism had been dashed by the political developments of post-Napoleonic Europe. This was no longer the era of heroic warriors like Napoleon, but of bourgeois monarchs like Louis Philippe. Mácha despised the petty-bourgeois world he saw around him and reacted against it by defiantly dressing in a cape, large hat, and riding boots, and wielding a riding crop as he strode through the streets of Prague. This “angry young man” was clearly nostalgic for an earlier age of heroes. But the tenor of the time was against such self-styled aristocrats of the soul.

Another reason why Mácha could not write an epic poem was the lack of such a tradition in Czech literature. Though epic poems had been written in medieval Czech, these were derived from Classical sources (such as the superb, if fragmentary, Romance of Alexander or *Alexandreida* from the end of the thirteenth century) rather than manifestations of a native Slavic tradition. Even the ancient legend of Libuše, the mythic foundress of Prague, was reinvented in the twelfth century by a Czech cleric named Cosmas based on the Classical models provided by Homer and Herodotus.

By contrast, the lyrical strain of Czech poetry has been strongly present since the medieval and baroque periods (by the late fourteenth century, the Czech love lyric had attained the stylistic sophistication and metrical intricacy of its French and Italian counterparts thanks to the cosmopolitan atmosphere of the imperial-royal court culture based in Prague). Scholars of Czech literature have long since detected the influence of baroque poetry on Mácha’s *May*. The sense of nihilistic futility which pervades the poem—the assertion that there is “no aim” to our human strivings—echoes the metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century. The Jesuit poets of the Counter Reformation saw all human striving as an exercise in *vanitas* in the face of God’s impotence. Ironically, in Mácha’s cosmology, there is no God: “I love God, nay I worship Him, because he doesn’t exist.”

After the Battle of the White Mountain in 1620, the Roman Catholic Church needed to consolidate its position not simply by enforcing religious conformity, but by winning the hearts and minds of the Czech-speaking peasantry and small-town merchants who remained after the elimination or exodus of the Protestant élite. Among these exiles was the greatest Czech writer of the seventeenth century, Jan Amos Comenius, who was forced to leave his native land, establishing a tragic precedent in Czech history. One way the Church achieved its goal of re-catholicizing the Bohemian Lands was by encouraging

priests of the Jesuit Order to compose devotional texts in the Czech language for a provincial audience. The result was a rich harvest of hymns and carols by Adam Michna z Otradovic (c. 1600–76) and Bedřich Bridel (1619–80), the two most talented poets of the Czech Baroque. If Mácha's anomalous syntax and nihilistic sentiments exerted a profound influence on the avant-garde poets in the 1920s and 30s, Czech Baroque poetry of the seventeenth century inspired the modern Catholic poets Jakub Deml, Bohuslav Reynek, and Jan Zahradníček.

The present volume takes as its starting point the sudden efflorescence of Czech verse at the end of the nineteenth century. These Symbolist and Decadent poems are notoriously difficult to translate. So it is a great pleasure to see such skillful renderings of selected poems by Antonín Sova, Otakar Březina, and Karel Hlaváček, the most melodious poet in the Czech language after Mácha. Perhaps the most distinctive accomplishment of this volume is its comprehensive range. All the major exponents of modern Czech poetry are represented from the turn-of-the-century Symbolists to contemporary poets born in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The Proletarian poets Josef Hora and Jiří Wolker make an appearance as precursors of the avant-garde phases of Poetism (a short-lived celebration of the everyday pleasures of life) and Surrealism, which maintained close links to its older French sibling and survived it as a postwar expression of anti-Communist defiance. The compilers of the collection have wisely resisted the temptation to force highly individualistic talents like František Halas and Vladimír Holan into artificial taxonomies, opting instead to group them together with more capacious rubrics like "Philosophical Lyricists," "Poetry under Pressure," "Masters of Irony and Futility," and "Four Generations of Prison Poets," including the Catholic poet Jan Zahradníček and Ivan Jirous, the dissident manager of the rock band Plastic People of the Universe.

It may come as a surprise to the uninformed reader of these poems just how many of the writers in this volume suffered grave political consequences for writing verse. Like Comenius before them, numerous post-war Czech writers were forced to leave their homeland in order to express themselves freely (one of the translators of this volume is a case in point). Other poets became internal exiles, a prominent example being Vladimír Holan, who lived as a virtual recluse in his house on the Kampa Island in Prague. Others occupied what the editors of the volume call the "gray zone" between conformity and dissidence.

Why should poetry—and especially the highly personal and subjective strain of poetry that we have explored in Czech literature—have posed such a threat to the Communist authorities? The obvious answer to this question is that the *personal* element is exactly what the régime found objectionable. The official artistic creed known as "socialist realism" privileged the "objective" depiction of the world over the subjective apprehension of reality. The

Communist state demanded of its poets what the nineteenth-century Czech revivalists had expected of Mácha: an idealized depiction of what the world *should look like* rather than what it is in reality.

The notion that poetry can pose a threat to the security and stability of the state may even be said to *precede* the Communist era. When the young Decadent poet Jiří Karásek ze Lvovic published his flamboyantly homosexual collection of poems known as *Sodoma* in 1895 (the same year as the notorious Oscar Wilde trial in England), the police raided the publishers' office in Prague and confiscated all two hundred copies of the volume. Although the late Habsburg Monarchy was liberal in its own way, this subversive little volume was simply too much for the bourgeoisie to accept:

I am Sodom's child, errant in my dreams,
before the fire of destruction pours over all debris.
I love sin and passion, in red flaming gleams,
and I adore mysterious cults with their extravagant orgies.

I am the old flagellant, who flogs the naked flanks
singing a dark song till weariness makes one die
to fall exhausted onto love's tepid banks
to turn my eyes for the last time to Christ's bloody side.

Albeit a typical product of the Decadence, Karásek's poem is suffused with the spirit of the Czech Baroque (the last line above could have been written by Bridel) and Mácha's *May* with its sadomasochistic description of William's torture on the wheel and execution by beheading in canto three of the poem.

The inevitable fate of the poet in a culture where art seems to pose a threat to the well-being of the collective is *loneliness*. And here the subjective, lyrical strain in Czech literature affords a curiously ironic refuge. Many of the poets in this collection seem to treat writing as a source of solace as well as a means of defiance. The Catholic poet Bohuslav Reynek, who spent most of his adult life on his family farm in Petrkov far from Prague, articulates this sense of loneliness precisely in terms of a gift of grace bestowed on the "beggar" poet:

A high mount
beautiful and furtive
robed in forested expanse,

A beggar will find there
ferns for his eyes,
for his yearning fragrance,

grass for his forehead
boulders, beeches,
raspberries, vipers.

This isn't Horeb,
nor is it Sinai.
Here the beggar imbibes

the wine of loneliness;
here
Mount Nebo hides...

If Reynek found a physical refuge from the darkness of the twentieth century in his lush, overgrown garden at Petrkov, his exquisitely delicate poetry may be said to provide a lyrical antithesis to the corrupt, sinful world: "a holy garden / with milk and honey / dressed."

Whether the reader of this volume of Czech poetry intends it as a literary *vademecum* for a future trip to Prague, an armchair companion to be enjoyed in the comfort of one's own home, or as an aid to understanding Central European culture in the scholastic setting of the university classroom, he or she should always bear in mind that these poems are more than an expression of a series of individual talents: above all they bear witness to a culture whose survival in the calamitous twentieth century is nothing short of a miracle. The same might be said of the publication of this most welcome anthology.

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