

Oneiric Poetics in Modern Czech Literature

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The study treats, in a rather concise way, the development of oneiric poetics in modern Czech literature. It focuses on four representative authors who used dream recordings in some of their works, and examines their individual contribution to the poetic theory of dream texts. Although the genre of dream recording may appear *to be* the same at different historical times, this study shows that there is a fundamental difference between the oneiric poetic theories of Romanticism (Erben) and the avant-garde (Nezval), between the Catholic approach of Deml and the modernist concept of Vaculik. While in Romanticism dreams only symbolize the inner subconscious processes of the poet, in the Catholic work of Deml and in the avantgarde poetics of Surrealism dreams symbiotically signify and thus coexist with concrete experiences of the poet.

The first attempt at formulating the symbolic significance of dreams in Czech literature came from the pen of Karel Sabina (1813–1877), one of the leading figures of Czech Romanticism [1]. In his appeal to the Czech poet, published in the popular magazine *Květy* (Blossoms), he stated:

had many a poet recorded his dreams, we might have learned a lot of interesting things, we might have looked into many new worlds. But instead, poets, these denizens in the history of dreams, have shown us only everyday scenes as if they had agreed beforehand to chase all poetry out of life with hollow verses, or as if life were to be lived in order for poets to merely pour their poems into its inner forms. Therefore, my brother poet, record your dreams with no delay... Even the most ordinary of poets once must have had his poetic dream, but it frightened him because it was only a dream, and he looked around to make sure that nobody had seen him dreaming. Thus, the only dream of his, he did not hand down to the world... Perhaps it was just this dream from which new dreams could have begun (*Květy*, number 34, August 20, 1835).

Unlike many of his contemporaries, Sabina realized that the revival of Czech culture and, consequently, the rebirth of the nation, subjugated for almost two centuries by the Hapsburg yoke, would have to be promulgated not so much by the traditionally sentimental patriotic

writing, as it had been the case, but especially by establishing a new poetics that would contribute to the refinement of the Czech language and literature. For, as Sabina saw it, the aesthetic value and its concomitant pragmatic function were to become indisputable corollaries of the nation's revival movement. That is why he urged the Czech poet to be more individualistic — as the canons of Romanticism demanded it, after all — and to explore new vistas of poetic imagination.

Among the Czech Romantics it was only Karel Jaromír Erben (1811–1870) who seems to have readily responded to Sabina's call [2]. The hitherto discovered three manuscripts of Erben's dream recordings attest the author's interest in the arcane subject of eidetic vision. They come approximately from the end of 1835 (the first two dreams) and from 1836 (the third dream), respectively. In 1934, they were edited by Antonín Grund, the foremost Czech authority on the work of Erben, and published in *Časopis Českého Musea* (The Journal of the Czech Museum). Grund presented a further analysis of the same dreams in his book on Erben (1935). However, his interpretation was confined only to the poet's biography, and did not probe the immanent semantic structures of the dream recordings, as Roman Jakobson stressed in the study *Poznámky k dílu Erbenovu* (Notes to Erben's Work) [3]. As the major proponent of structuralism, Jakobson quite understandably analyzes the three dreams from the perspective of structuralist theories. This enables him to see the text in its inherently manifold significance. He characterized it

as typical amorous dreams with the usual suggestive setting and other symbolic requisites of erotic images (1935 : 159).

Although the apparent psychoanalytic coloring of this observation is in no way intended to either diminish or harm Erben's value as poet, the recent literary scholarship, as represented by Julius Dolanský [4], vehemently rejects the structuralist viewpoint on the grounds of ideological differences. Yet, in spite of this tendentious myopia, Jakobson's views can hardly be discarded by the literary scholarship striving, at least in its program, for maximum objectivity.

Close reading of Erben's dreams leaves no doubts that both Jakobson's and Grund's interpretations ought to be considered as merely complementary and equally indispensable for a global understanding of the text. As both Jakobson and Grund noticed, the three dreams are characterized by an immense anxiety and anguish. This is obvious especially in the first dream, saturated with sublime erotic symbolism, and developed around Erben's love to Miss M (Mečířová),

his later spouse. The protagonists of the dreams are referred to only by their initials concealing, as it were, and, at the same time, protecting Erben's privacy. A particular feature of the dreams is their descriptive topology which, in a rather mnemonic way, evokes localities and events attached to the poet's biography. A sudden lightening, darkness and dense fog [5] form an introductory setting of the nebulous action which is to follow. "A sort of transcendental impellent" (*nadsmyslné nějaké puzení*) drives the dreamer toward the catastasis of the dreamt drama whose denouement symbiotically comprises the apposite states of dreaming and awakening.

The dream from the end of 1835 is composed in a balladlike manner. The dreamer roams about an identifiable romantic countryside where he meets a pregnant woman begging together with her dwarfish son. A metamorphosis of the outer dream world suddenly occurs, and the poet now hears a sort of diabolic singing.

The topos of the devil's song appears also in the next dream (1835), entitled *Píseň Luciferova* (The Song of Lucifer). In this case, a dark cave provides the setting of the episode, in which Erben together with his father try to make fire in order to dispel the fear of umbrae. The eidetic reflection of the dream colors appears vivid and red and green predominate. Agreeable music emanates from the flames and changes into the song of Lucifer. As in response, the memories of the poet's mother pass through the slumbering mind of the dreamer.

The often grotesque distortion of the *dramatis personae* as well as the demonic nature of Erben's dreams tend to abnegate the poet's world of concrete reality, supplanting it with the ontological vagueness of metaphoric uncertainty and fear. The poet's reality thus ceases to signify, and instead merely symbolizes transcendental states of consciousness. Erben's dream recordings thus typify the function of an oneiric poetics in Romanticism which considered dreams as symbols "durch die der Geist, der vom Schein ins Sein zu gelangen versucht, die Vernichtung der Sinnenwelt ausdrückte" (Beguín, 1972 : 483).

The Romantic notion of dream symbolism, coupled with the baroque concept of the semantically polyvalent mask of histrionic *personae*, was further cultivated by the poets of the *fin de siècle*. With it coincided the Christian renaissance in Europe, initiated and officially sponsored by Pope Leo XIII who in his papal encyclical of 1879 urged the Catholic clergy to return, in their quest for existential certainty, to the philosophical foundations of scholasticism, and to study the teachings of St. Thomas Aquinas. In this way, the modern

industrial age promoting an atomization of each society's spiritual unity was to be juxtaposed to and contrasted with the religiously homogenous Middle Ages, the idealistic refuge of all the Romantics who had subscribed to Catholicism.

Due to the traditional association between the Hapsburgs and the Catholic Church, the restoration of Catholicism in Bohemia and Moravia encountered much antagonism generated in an atmosphere of national pathos. Divested of its ornate patriotism, the Catholic Church was portrayed by liberals as a vehicle of national suppression and present political reaction, alien to the very character of the Czech nation. Contrasted with Catholicism was the native Hussite tradition that was to symbolize the nation's independence and glory.

Realizing the potential danger stemming from the public's growing sympathies with Protestant forces, the Czech Catholics countered the liberals' attack by stressing the immense national and international significance of St. Wenceslas, patron saint of the Czechs, and Sts. Cyril and Methodius, the two holy messengers of Christianity venerated by the Moravians. The Catholics thus wished to demonstrate that "the revival of Catholicism also means the strengthening of national aspirations, that the Catholics truly believing in their faith are an indivisible part of the nation" (Bitnar, 1941 : 8). In order to be reckoned with as an actual "indivisible" part of the nation's cultural heritage, all members without distinction as to their hierarchical rank in the Church were encouraged to help create and develop Czech Catholic arts in correspondence with present-day aesthetic norms.

Their noble intention notwithstanding, the literary aspirations of the Czech Catholics suffered from an acute lack of exemplary artistic traditions. The varied literary production of the Catholics, represented by such authors as Vladimír Štastný, Vojtěch Pakosta, or Adam Chlumecký, who for years had been catering to Catholic mass consumption, was rather anachronistic as to its aesthetic demands and sometimes explicitly proficient as to their writing trade.

The absence of a historically immediate predecessor qualitatively on a par with the Catholic literary tradition in Europe caused the Czech Catholics to turn to their own non-Catholic contemporaries whose works would be used as poetic paradigms. It was especially the cosmopolitan poetry of Jaroslav Vrchlický (1853 - 1912), the Czech Parnassian *par excellence*, that lent the Catholics the dynamic impetus necessary for the further evolution of the Catholic tradition in Czech literature.

Yet, the influence of Vrchlický upon the Catholic poets cannot be understood except in the terms of a larger literary movement to which he belonged. In Bohemia, it was a group of young writers and poets gathered around the journal *Lumír*. Its main objective was to enhance the quality of Czech literature by introducing into it poetic norms and ideas from Western Europe, and from French and Italian Romanticism, in particular. The works of Victor Hugo (1802–1885) and Alfred de Vigny (1797–1863) as well as Giacomo Leopardi (1798–1837) and Giosue Carducci (1835–1907) were avidly read and translated in the Czech lands. Through the emphasis on the cosmopolitan nature of Czech literature, the adherents to the *Lumír* program also wished to minimize the impact and actual volume of a prolific nationalistic poetry which abounded in mediocrity and aesthetic conservatism.

By virtue of their initial romantic epigonism, the Catholic poets came into contact with the most progressive force in Czech literature. The *Lumír* movement, most universal in its advocacy of poetic prototypes, and avant-garde in its aesthetic and ideological norms, became in this way associated with the beginning and further development of modern Catholic poetry in the Bohemia and Moravia of the late eighties.

In the whirl of Catholic literary activities also fermented the *élan vital* of Jakub Deml (1878–1961), a rebellious Catholic priest and one of the most significant Czech poets of this century. The main book of Deml's dream recordings is *Můj očistec* (*My purgatory*) published in 1929. It differs from most of his earlier works in that it is more "conventional", in the sense of being comprehensibly divided into a series of dream episodes which are individually named. In other words, this time the author did not let the text expand like a single symphonic movement through the entire volume of the book. In *Můj očistec*, each dream is halted, as it were, at its very end, and carefully retold from the beginning which is usually preceded by a topological-like description. Surprisingly precise directions of movements and various minute details of the dream setting are given in the text. Yet, Deml's dream recordings appear at some points almost too premeditated. By and large, they stand for the dichotomy between reality and surreality developed in the repertoire of motives based on the idea of existential dualism, or of binary oppositions. For instance, Deml draws a contrast between time in the city and in the village, between life (represented by the village) and death (associated with the city), etc. Most of Deml's dreams are characterized by permanent metaphysical fear which carries such names

as *bílý medvěd* ('the white bear'), *jed* ('poison'), *cizinec* ('a stranger'), *hrající revolver* ('a playing revolver'), etc. The question of responsibility toward God and man, the recurring problem of the priest's mission among people as well as man's ingratitude to Christ whose Second Coming would be much unwelcome, these are some of the major themes of Deml's dreams.

The text does not show the spontaneous rhythm of illogical sequences and the character of nonfunctional ideation which are so typical, e.g., for Surrealist and Romantic dream recordings. Deml deliberately stylized his dream recordings in an intricate way in order to communicate to the reader the pivotal ideas of his faith. That is why the text is interspersed with maxims reminding the reader that the poet's dreams should be treated as seriously as non-fiction. In this respect, Deml's dream recordings must be considered as "programm-atic," as they are designed both to educate and indoctrinate his reader. The following example illustrates how Deml incorporates some of his philosophical convictions into the dream recordings:

Inasmuch as reality and dreams do not, in principle, differ — dreams being actually endowed with much more truth than "reality" — so do the spiritual and worldly powers; for any power is a power only as far as it is spiritual (1929 : 102).

Deml here obviously refers to a political power ("reality"), to the relationship between State and Church. He does not approve of any ideology which excludes from its dogma the postulate of the existence of God and the right of the Catholic Church to intercede between Him and man.

Vítězslav Nezval (1900–1958), the most important Surrealist poet in Czech literature, maintained that Deml was "the only precursor of Czech Surrealism" (1964). Although Nezval did not further elaborate on this idea, it might be assumed that he referred especially, to Deml's dream recordings. In the light of what has been said above, Nezval's statement ought to be considered as rather problematic. For Deml's dream recordings are in fact diametrically opposed to the Surrealist concept of the automatic writing through which the poet spontaneously registers processes of the state of unconsciousness.

Nevertheless Deml's dream recordings appear to be relevant to the further formulation of oneiric poetics in that they pragmatically function upon reality. They can symbiotically permeate it and thus allow the philosophical tenets incorporated in them to coexist and cooperate with the conscious processes of life.

The idea of experiencing the effect of the arts upon man's total existence was ultimately formulated and more or less faithfully practiced by the avant-garde. In Czech literature it was especially *Poetismus* (Poetism), founded in 1924, that claimed to be not merely another literary current of the time, but a *modus vivendi*, a world view which had to be lived in order to be understood. It was to be lived through pure poetry, uncontaminated by any socio-political commitment. This purity was to be attained through the immediacy of perception, unhindered by any intermediate conceptual system. In order to be able to achieve the state of intuitiveness within which the immediacy of perception could be realized man should no longer be a *homo faber*, but only *homo ludens*. In other words, the objective of Poetism could be reached exclusively under the auspices of leisure. Yet, the Poetists recognized the inevitability of work and socio-political participation. That is why, in accordance with the dichotomized nature of life composed of work and leisure, Poetism, too, was to allow within the confines of its poetic system the coexistence of these two components. Work, as man's practical pursuit, underscored with ideological pragmatism, was relegated to the purposes and artistic explorations of Constructivism. Poetism, on the other hand, was to retain for itself the domain of the purely aesthetic. In this way, Poetism was to be the "holiday" art securing man's freedom and imagination, whereas Constructivism represented man's existential necessities, of which the socialist reconstruction of the world was to be an important attribute.

The Poetist program of "art for art's sake" resembled in several respects its French predecessor, Surrealism. In the 1924 Surrealist manifesto, imagination, freedom, and the contempt for bourgeois society were the three key ideas, believed to be able to assist man in reestablishing his existential self-awareness. For this reason, reality had to be stripped of its superimposed layers of symbolic significance. The world should be only seen anew, from such unusual and bizarre perspectives as man's pathological states (madness, hallucination, illusion), his dreams, and his spontaneous self-expression (automatic writing) carrying him back to the innocence of a child's associative vision. Offering to its adherents a sort of "new morality", Surrealism proclaimed itself to be not only an alternative, but the ultimate way of living.

The Czech version of Surrealism was inaugurated in 1934 by its chief ideologue Karel Teige (1900-1951) and the most prominent poet, Nezval, both of whom had been instrumental to the Poetist movement.

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The Czech surrealists did not, in principle, differ from their French prototypes. They, too, viewed the communist doctrine of historical materialism as the ideological pedestal of their movement. Yet, unlike the French surrealists who through their arbiter, André Breton, later announced the definite split with the communist vanguard (1935), the Czech surrealists, paradoxically enough, continued to support the policy of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia.

In the Second Manifesto of Surrealism (1935), Breton demanded the "profound, the veritable occultation of Surrealism" (1972: 178). He urged his followers to concentrate more on such arcane sources of inspiration as horoscope, astrology, metapsychics, and cryptesthesia. And in accord with the alchemists' quest for the *lapis philosophorum*, he proclaimed the attainment of this philosopher's stone to be the major objective of Surrealism. Henceforth Surrealism was to become "the alchemy of the word" (Breton, 1972 : 173). Through the gentle fire of love, the mystical *incendium amoris*, Breton hoped to kindle in man the spark of transmutation from the state of materialistic naturalness to a state of pure spirituality. The resultant achievement of man's endeavor at accomplishing this spiritual change was then to appear in the form of harmony, in some kind of *unio mystica*.

The French surrealists' Second Manifesto decisively influenced the further development of the Czech avant-garde. The emphasis on the metaphysical evoked the surrealist poet's interest in the realm of mysticism in which dreams were to be wholly experienced through the stream of consciousness.

Among the Czech surrealist poets, Nezval was the most prolific and successful as to the exploration and application of the dream logic both to his poetry and prose. The two collections of poems, *Skleněný havelok* (The Glass Cape, 1932) and *Praha s prsty deště* (Prague with the Fingers of the Rain, 1936) demonstrate to what extent Nezval seriously attempted to reconcile phantasy with reality, the states of dreaming and awakening, the past with the present. The poet's treatment of his own dreams and subconscious imagery is even more effectively expressed in the novel *Chtěla okrásť Lorda Blamingtona* (She Wanted to Rob Lord Blamington, 1930).

Although Nezval's texts carry the imprint of the author's idiosyncratic approach to the technique of dream recording and its inclusion into a work of art, he himself (and for that matter, the Czech avant-garde, as such) did not particularly contribute to the theory of oneiric poetics in Czech literature. The reason being that with the

dissolution of Poetism — the amalgamated avant-garde movement which, in spite of its eclectic origin, retained the character of an independent artistic school—the Czech surrealists could do very little in the way of elaborating upon the philosophical base of Surrealism except follow the instructive voice of Breton.

The avant-garde activities in Czechoslovakia were dramatically precluded by the communist *coup d'état* in 1948. Within a year all the literary and artistic schools and groups that did not fit into the narrow format of the officially sponsored socialist realist doctrine were banned and a great number of non-communist writers and poets ended up in prison. Several of them were executed, among them Závěš Kalandra (1902–1950), a former member of the Czech Surrealist group. Excepting the mediocre works solicited by the new regime and extolling the wishful achievements of communism, no other literature could be published. The communist censorship was merciless and destructive.

The cultural atmosphere in Czechoslovakia substantially changed in 1968 when the change of the political climate allowed all the formerly persecuted authors and artists to participate in the social life of the country. This was the time of the post-war renaissance in the arts and literature, the time of the renewed interest in dream recordings, in oneiric poetics.

Because of the forceful interruption in the continuum of liberal creativity, the literary production of the period had to be necessarily synthetic, encompassing both the pre-war avant-garde techniques and the recent experience with the absurd world of socialist realism. It was no longer the abstract conception of State glorified in countless jingles, but the existential status of an individual human being that became the pivotal theme in literature. The best examples of the philosophical trend of the sixties can be found in the works of such remarkable authors as Václav Havel (1936–), Bohumil Hrabal (1914–), Milan Kundera (1929–), Ludvík Vaculík (1926–) et al.

With the resumed attack against the writers and poets who refused to collaborate with the regime imposed over the country by the Soviet military force on 21 August, 1968, Czech literature had to move underground.

A number of literary groups and schools started to secretly publish a whole scale of works whose variety and quality stand high above the perpetuated mediocrity of socialist realism. Among them, *Český snář* (The Czech Book of Dreams) by Ludvík Vaculík deserves to be included in the category of those works which have enhanced the development of

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The book is written in the form of journal kept by the author from Monday, 22 January, 1979, until Saturday, 2 February, 1980. Vaculik records the daily life of his family and friends in Prague. The suppressive political climate of the country still occupied by the Soviet troops is contrasted by the omnipresent freedom of nature. The weekly interrogations by secret police constantly following and terrorizing their victims are portrayed with humor and disdain, and, ultimately, with hopelessness. It is in his and his wife's dreams which he inserts in the text that the daily routine acquires the dimensions of the phantastic, of the free and pleasurable. And yet, even in his dreams, the author cannot escape from the suffocating feeling of the horror that permeates the real world surrounding him. The haunting fear of the present causes his memories of the distant past to interact with immediate experiences.

In *Český snář*, Vaculik rather symbolically resumes contact with the traditional genre of journal literature and dream recordings, as practiced especially by Deml. With the exception of the historically new realia, the formal aspect of Vaculik's text differs little from its prototypes. It, too, uses extratextuality, drawing on the code systems of other texts that could illuminate the complex meaning of the work. Nevertheless, in the period of inverted aesthetic values, propagated by the ideologues of "new culture," this is a novel perspective in the process of conceptualizing reality.

Conclusion

That the development of oneiric poetics has, indeed, never ceased in Czech literature and that it has been merely halted and altered in accordance with the immediate needs of each generation of poets, is the fact essential for a further understanding of the periodical recurrence of Romantic tendencies in the arts. For, without fully appreciating the function of oneiric poetics in the process of encoding historical experiences of imagination, we could hardly begin to evaluate the merits of Romantic vision.

Notes

- 1) René Wellek believes that "Romanticism in a narrow sense prevailed in Bohemia only after 1830," and "the majority of the Czech romanticists were romantic only in the sense that they revived Czech folklore and cultivated a linguistic nationalism (1963 : 27)."

- 2) Wellek regards Erben as the first Romantic poet in Czech literature who was "an extremely well disciplined, highly self-conscious artist (ibid.)." Erben's *opus magnum Kytice z pověstí národních* (A Bouquet of National Tales) was published in 1853. It comprises ballads and legends which are based on ancient Czech and common Slavic traditions and have their roots deep in the Romantic mythological outlook. It became the prototype of the Czech ballad style.
- 3) Roman Jakobson, 'Poznámky k dílu Erbenovu. O Mythu.' In: *Slovo a slovesnost*, no.3, 1935.
- 4) Julius Dolanský, *Karel Jaromír Erben*, Praha, Melantrich, 1970. The most relevant and typical work of the Czech socialist realist criticism aimed against structuralism is Ladislav Štoll's *O tvar a strukturu v slovesném umění*, Praha, Academia, 1966.
- 5) As pointed out by J.W.Smeed in *Jean Paul's Dreams*, London, Oxford University Press, 1966, the use of fog in the work of Jean Paul is rather topical and symbolic.

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