

HODROVÁ, URBAN, MACURA – A POSTMODERN PERCEPTION OF CZECH NATIONAL MYTHS

Vladimír Macura, one of the major and most influential scholars studying Czech literature of the 19th century, in the introduction to his epoch-making book *Znamení zrodu*, the foundations of the semiological model of culture of the National Revival period (late 18th century – mid-19th century) admits: *V jistém smyslu bude snad náš pohled demystifikační, alespoň v té míře, jako je demystifikační pohled na začátek jako na začátek. Avšak je naším přáním, aby i za žánrem vnuceným autorovým odstupem a snad i za jeho přeintelektualizovanou showívatostí bylo dobře čitelné čiré dojetí, okouzlení a možná trochu nostalgický smutek...* (Macura 1995: 8). On the one hand, the above statement strikes the reader with the subjective and emotional attitude of the interpreter to the issues studied, surprising in an avowed proponent of the structural and semiotic school. On the other hand, it is expressive of the need to justify the signals, evident in the text, of a departure from established cultural and literary axioms, questioning them and demonstrating an autonomous approach, not so much antithetical but rather complementary and enriching.

Macura's book, following Lotman's definition of the operation of culture mechanisms (Lotman, Uspiensky 147–170), proposed a concept of the National Revival based on the dominance of symbols and emblems. They impact collective consciousness but are clearly distant

from the real indicators of life practice. The scholar suggests that, first of all in the first half of the 19th century the very existence of the Czech nation was limited solely to textual representation, with no (or nearly no) corresponding social processes. Among others, Macura addresses in his text the question of mythology, which to his mind defines the fundamental canon of collective reflection and dominates all socio-political motivations of a renewal of Czech national identity (Macura 1995: 79). The Revival project assumes here the form of a myth which brings together all the ideological and cultural components into a unified system, with no provision for any outside, being confined to its own elements, pushing off all foreignness beyond the limits of clearly defined space of what is national, and unaccommodating of any heterogenic additions.

The myths, filtered through an entire system of corrective mechanisms, codified in nineteenth-century literature, continue to be a yardstick of Czech national identity, although at present, in the world of a postmodernist undermining of all certainties, are no longer the ultimate factor defining a repertory of collective values. In his book *Bývalí Čechové*, Jiří Rak addresses the role of common images concerning history, its development, character, and interpretation. It is these images that determine the stock of beliefs that are the focus of the current perception of rudimentary markers of national existence (Rak 5). This means, among others, that the fatalism of the past, transforming into variable coordinates of historical policy, has continued to define the Czech nation to date, determining both the ways of understanding tradition and projecting possible future perspectives. The modification of coordinates stems first and foremost from the evolution of the political reality, which contributes to redefining previously binding truths. This modification is moreover underpinned by transformations within rhetorical systems, which primarily provide an evaluative account of reality and thus construct the set of national images. As a result, the narrative of the history of nineteenth-century revivalists gains the form of pre-established narrative patterns, which pre-determine the strategies of event ordering and indicate the directions of their valuation (Šmahelová 19).

Direct proof of the above persistence can be found in postmodern literature, which after 1989 willingly takes up the subject of the National Revival. Such revisions of the past are most often neither simple nor easy. They are often accompanied by historiosophic reflection,

stressing the merits of nineteenth-century *vlastenec* (patriots) and often making accusations or revisions of the accomplishments of the major representatives of the Czech emancipation movement. Milan Kundera pulled no punches when, while looking back on the events of August 1968, he included them into the tradition of reflection on Czech identity: "I often thought in those days about the Czech National Revival which, in the middle of feverish Europe, floundered atop its own small pile of sand, a Revival that rapped Mácha's knuckles with its pedant's ruler, a Revival incapable of forging values relevant to greater humankind, a Revival filled with trifling acts and devoid of great deeds. I thought of the legacy of this small mentality that has left its imprint even on the Czech twentieth century" (Kundera 3). Josef Jedlička speaks in a similar manner, but offers a less scathing judgment in his series of essays, where he tries to reconstruct a model of a Czech literary protagonist, exemplifying patterns of collectively respected values. In an introduction to his reflections, the author admits as follows: *At' už dáme tomu předznamenání znamení kladné nebo záporné, faktem zůstane, že česká kulturní tradice, a tedy ani česká literatura nemá skutečného hrdinu. (...) Už naši obrozenci z toho měli pocit méněcennosti a těžkou hlavu. (...) Připadalo jim, že i my máme právo na své Nibelungy či na české "chansons de geste", a když nenašli při nejlepší vůli po hrdinských zpěvech ani stopy, sestrojili k všeobecnému užitku Záboje, Slavoje, Zbyhoně a ještě asi půl tuctů národních reků* (Jedlička 9). The scholar transfers the entire question from the realm of political diagnoses onto the surface of literary discourse, referring to the cultural role of literature, much stronger in Bohemia than in other countries. At the beginning of the National Revival, literature not only described or codified, but sometimes completely replaced all the other forms of life of the community in the process of consolidation.

Jedlička, recalling nineteenth-century literary forgeries, refers to one of the major Czech foundation myths, i.e. to the 1817 "discovery" made by Václav Hanka of two allegedly medieval manuscripts (*Královédvorský rukopis; Zelenohorský Rukopis*) with excerpts of Old Czech epic and lyrical poetry. Faith in the authenticity of the texts, which were in fact meticulously forged palimpsests (in terms of execution technique), imitating masterfully and in line with the then current medieval scholarship Russian, Serb and West European heroic songs, was for a long time treated as the yardstick and litmus paper of patriotic feelings (Macura 1995: 109–111; Nawrocki 38). The forgery was

unmasked only in the 1880s amidst heated disputes where, as Miloš Urban highlights: *Obě strany problém pravosti důsledně politizovaly. Obhájcí vášnivě argumentovali národními zájmy a nezřídka sklouzli do nacionálně šovinistických pozic. Odpůrci apelovali o rozum a objektivitu, šlo jim o dobré jméno české vědy za hranicemi; nevíra v Rukopisy byla pro ně znakem pokrokovosti* (Urban 1998: 19). The above observation is quoted after a 1998 novel *Poslední tečka za rukopisy*, where the writer unleashes scathing criticism of the illusion of authenticity of the manuscripts, which is incidentally upheld in some circles, and ironically addresses the recent fad of the literary pseudo-factual. The latter, based on little confirmed facts and hypotheses, skilfully tampers with the lacunae of historical knowledge. Combining reliable conclusions with less or more probable conjecture as well as fabricating documents, Urban proposes here an alternative history of the Czech National Revival, where the superimposed layers of mystification on the one hand blur the reality of historical events and on the other hand lay bare the questionable character of historical interpretation. The quasi-scientific nature of extensive excerpts of the novel, the absurd conclusions of its two protagonists, who happen to be scholars in the Institute of Czech Literature of Prague University, acquires a semblance of authenticity (naturally, within the fictional world of the book), and the eponymous “last word” concerning the manuscripts becomes a word with a power to create reality:

Prohlašujeme, že jmenované rukopisy jsou skutečnými památkami krásného písemnictví středověkých Čech. (...) Desítky generací znaly ony dvě osoby nejtěsněji spjaté s Rukopisem královédvorským a Rukopisem zelenohorským, jejich údajné padělatele, pod jmény Václav Hanka a Josef Linda. Naše habilitační práce tento omyl vyvrací. Hanka a Linda neexistovali. Hanka a Linda existovaly. Jmenovaly se Hannelore Vierteilová a Linda Janovitzová (Urban 1998: 189–190, 191)

A clear inclusion of the “manuscript mystery” into the gender discourse, confirmed by a totally spurious “involvement” into a meticulously designed plot of major women of letters of the Czech National Revival, i.e. Magdalena Dobromila Rettigová and the unfavourably presented Božena Němcová, ultimately pokes fun at all the conspiracy theories of excessive exegetic interference into the matter of history¹.

¹ In the text *Urodzić naród. Z problematyki czeskiej i słowackiej literatury kobiecej II połowy XIX wieku* [To give birth to a nation. Questions of Czech and Slovak women’s literature of

In his later novels (*Sedmikostelí*, 1999; *Hastrman*, 2001; *Pole i palisáda*, 2006), Urban revisits the individual components of a mythology codified in the ideological order of the Czech National Revival in order to scrutinise them and open up avenues of their “heretical” interpretations. Especially in the first of the three novels, published in Poland under the title *Klątwa siedmiu kościołów*, describing in a utopian convention a full restitution in Prague of the principles and living condition from pre-Hussite Middle Ages, the narrator, a medieval scholar and proponent of history which evokes the everyday, observes in his theoretical comments:

Barbarství armád nikdy nezklame – ve všech dobách má podobnou tvář. Vojsko se v servitském klášteře Na Slupí usadilo už koncem století osmnáctého, poté, co byl na příkaz císaře Josefa zrušen. Posádka dělostřelců a chovanci vzdělavacího ústavu Kinského a Kallenbergova pluku řádili v odsvěceném kostele jako v dobytém území nepřítele: (...). Ale co to bylo proti podzimu 1420, kdy odsud, přímo z chrámu Páně, stříleli husité na Vyšehrad! (Urban 1999: 133–134)

The first part of this statement fully corresponds to the traditional reflection on valuating historical events, stereotypically ascribing a destructive role to the Germanic element (in this case Austrian troops). Its second part, however, radically departs from the kind of thinking rooted in collective memory and recalls the consistently blocked from this memory the Hussite rebellions, so destructive for the existence of the Czech nation. A conclusion which stems from these reflections seems in effect not only surprising, but also blasphemous, as it lashes at the convictions that are the most deeply rooted in collective memory. However, contrary to what it seems, Urban’s assessment is no different from that of twentieth-century historians, who no longer shy away from indicating the consequences of Hussite’s iconoclasm, disastrous for Czech culture (both spiritual and tangible). In this case, then, Urban questions in the first place the set of socially ingrained stereotypical beliefs, an inspiration for literature, which sometimes follows them blindly and unreservedly, on other

the second half of the 19th c.], Marcin Filipowicz reflects, for instance, on the risks connected with applying today’s “feminist approach” to nineteenth-century women writers. As he observes, *Similar attempts [...] made [...] by scholars, are schematic and limited to defining a woman writer as the first Czech feminist, a warrior of feminism, etc. Such statements are not corroborated by any in-depth analysis, which would involve the assumptions of feminist literary criticism. [...] Such an a priori recognition of Němcova as a feminist is a gross overstatement and becomes part of criticism which can be defined as feminist social realism* (Filipowicz 18–19).

occasions making them an object of demystification processes and a tool for questioning the national mythology and its pivotal axioms and for proposing novel solutions in this respect.

Furthermore, Czech writers who, since the National Revival, were accustomed to play the roles of spiritual leaders and teachers of the nation found it difficult to get accustomed to the loss of this privileged following the 1989 political transformations. It was then that their role was degraded to that of providers of disinterested and playful entertainment. Jiří Kratochvíl, the only Czech prose writer to openly admit adhering to postmodernism, maintains that the features of this lost privilege can be found in the resignation (forced out and not fully accepted) of non-artistic tasks, which previously determined the significance of literature in Czech society, but stresses that this loss is offset by gaining a complete and uncontrolled creation power, activating the patterns of individual mythopoetic activity (Kratochvíl 84). In the case of Macura, Urban and Daniela Hodrová, however, this private mythology takes into account also previous mythical constructs, comprising the stock images of the National Revival and provoking public opinion. References to the Revival motifs and stereotypes are after all one of the stock repertory of Czech postmodernist playing with history, deliberately undermining established beliefs and manners of their literary representation.

In the 1990s, in the novel tetralogy titled *Ten, který bude* (1999), Macura transposed the results of his studies into the world of literary fiction, carrying out an experiment and verifying the viability of his semiological conclusions in the practice of everyday life of the Revival representatives. He lays bare the particular and very often mundane motivation of the seemingly noble and patriotic aims. Moreover, he demonstrates with the use of numerous examples of peoples' lives how the initial enthusiasm or curiosity and the will to get to know the patriotic community transform into disillusionment or lack of interest. Instead of legendary "martyrs for the national cause", the reader received portraits of schemers and life's total failures. The second group included dogmatic fanatics, who are decisively opposed to any other viewpoints, while the third one (as in the last volume of the series titled *Medicus*) focuses on madmen whose troubled minds give birth to foundations of alternative history. In the first part of the tetralogy (*Informator*), the protagonist, a failed member of the intelligentsia, forced to be an agent of Austrian police, arrives in Prague hoping to regain his social

position and to gain the love of Antonia Rajská (1817–1852), one of the major activists of the national movement. His encounter with the city, often shown in Revival literature as a “rite of passage to the Czech faith”, fails to produce the expected epiphany. Instead of a vibrant and robust metropolis that addresses the challenges of the time, the protagonist, who copies in his thinking the semiological conclusions of the novel’s author, finds within the city walls only traces and signs of old-forgotten glory, with no correspondence to the current time (Macura 1999: 36, 38–39). This attack on one of the primary emblems of Czech identity – a city transformed into an allegory – is coupled with the questioning of the entire conglomerate of symbols characteristic of the Czech National Revival. The protagonist of the *Informer* does not gain the author’s approval, but it is his point of view which dominated over the others present in the novel and it is this point of view that is ultimately decisive which ideas and interpretative conclusions will reach out to the reader. It is up to the readers, equipped with stereotypical knowledge and trite beliefs, whether they will accept the potential of the “alternative proposal” and agree to reinterpret the most influential period of Czech history, or whether they will stick to their guns and see the protagonist as a spineless opportunist and traitor.

Daniela Hodrová performs a similar deconstruction of the Revival myths in her novel *Podobojí* (1999), where a thematised reflection on Czech national history is inscribed into a convoluted plot depicting the duality of being, where all living forms acquire their *pendant* in the world after death. Ontological reflection is supplemented by a historical-philosophical one, and the situation of eternal existence, unique because it is stripped of metaphysical justification, makes the historical events of the past prefigure those of the events of the future, where the past returns in a degraded and oftentimes caricature form:

Obrodný proces na Olšanském hřbitově pokračuje (...). Pan Klečka, jak se tak ve dne potuluje mezi hroby, nachází jeho další a další neklamné známky. Všimne si, že pan Šafařík se začal shánět po panu Palackém (kampak se poděl otec národa?) a mluví cosi o vládě bodáků a špěhů, která do hrobu klesá. Pan Kollár teskní po Míně, i když dávno spí po jeho boku, a pan Jungmann vede na hrobech rozmlouvání o jazyce českém. A všude kolem vzniká plno hřbitovní poezie. A pan Klečka z toho pochopí, že zase začíná národní obrození. A jednoho dne potká pana Havlíčka, který se něčemu ironicky usmívá. (Hodorová 83)²

² This statement refers to the political “thaw” period of the 1960s. In a similar way, the novel signals the events of August 1968: Pan Klečka se jde jednou za letní noci jako

The cemetery in Olšany, the most well-known national shrine, belongs in the world of Hodrová's novel to a uniquely exposed ontological indeterminacy. It is this cemetery that witnesses the intermingling of all kinds of being and it is here that the "ordinary" residents of the twentieth-century world might coexist on equal terms with the legendary representatives of the National Revival who, in the shackles of their own biographies, cannot come to terms with the new historical situation, regarding it through the prism of the Revivalist mythology. However, as follows from the reflections included in the novel, this mythology, not losing its legitimacy, has its "dark sides" too, the "spaces of *podobojí*", where previously unquestioned unequivocal statements clash with the ambivalence and relativity of a perception born with the passage of time and the acquisition of knowledge of historical transformations. A remembrance of the "black legend" of the awakeners, the history of "betrayal" and collaboration of the Romantic poet, Karl Sabina, one of the inhabitants of the cemetery, is for example an accusation of the entire National Revival. It allowed its leaders "to die of starvation" (which really happened to Božena Němcová and the author of the Czech national anthem Josef Kajetán Tyl), only to be later – depending on the political situation – or in an act of belated expiation buried with honours (in the case of Němcová and Tyl), or to criticise their difficult life choices, made under the impact of the current circumstances. As a result, Hodrová overtly ascribes this tendency to the duality of approaches of the Czech nation, seen as an ideological construct developed due to the appropriately prepared historical memory and commonplace experience of community members, often forced to meander between respect of ethical imperatives and the necessity to live within the political and social conditions of the time:

Jsem národ. Upadl jsem v nové egyptské zajetí. Vyznávám víru podobojí, přijímám tělo a krev Paně. (...) Mám své revoluce a své hrdiny. Jeden z nich vzplál na hranici, kterou si sám navršil – mezi Národním muzeem a Domem po-

obvykle nadechnout hřbitovního vzduchu. A zase potká pana Havlíčka. Pan Havlíček se tentokrát už neusmívá a ke všemu pana Klečku neočekávaně osloví. Dokonce mu řekne příteli a že je zle (...). Hůře bude než zle. Pan Havlíček totiž tuší, že co nevidět přitáhne Windischgrätz, v Praze se zase budou stavět barikády... A dokonce se panu Havlíčkovi zdá, že už slyší dunět zem pod Windischgrätzovou artilerií. A vyzve pana Klečku, aby přiložil ucho k zemi a poslechl, jestli už nejedou. Pan Klečka přiloží ucho k olšanské zemi a poslouchá. A opravdu slyší, jak země duní, jako by se dole měla rozevřít propast, Jan Paskal by řekl Gehenna. (Hodrová 91–92).

travin. (...) Jsem národ vystřízlivělý ze svých revolucí a svých zápalných obětí. Jsem národ, který konvertoval. (Hodrová 104)

A nation which has betrayed the ideals informing the process leading to its emancipation does not deserve protection of a commonly respected myth. Therefore, perhaps, Hodrová ironically reevaluates the particular components of Czech mythology, for instance the legend about the knights sleeping in Mount Blaník, proving the inadequacy of the myth in the current situation³. However, even a nation which has undergone a conversion and lost its initial faith needs to take root in permanent and immutable spaces organised according to the myth order. As Leszek Kołakowski proves: *The inheritance of myths is the inheritance of values the myths impose. Thus, coherence of human coexistence demands that tradition as such – and not just because in the past it had been judged a good tradition – should radiate authority. But from this it does not yet follow that the values of myth are wholly immanent in relation to those values which myth transmits and which human societies require. Nor does it follow that one should worship tradition unreservedly. Particular traditions stay alive or lose their force and wither, depending on a variety of conditions; they live and die like human beings.* (Kołakowski 7–8) Czech writers, then, often make use of national myths, if sometimes in a degraded, ridiculed or subversive form, since they continue to operate in the collective stock of images and have a permanent impact on the construction of individual and collective identity.

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³ The role of myth of Blaník knights for the images of the National Revival is widely addressed by V. Macura in the text *Český sen* (Macura 14-47).

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