

Ivo Pospíšil

ORCID: 0000-0001-8358-0765

Masaryk University, Czech Republic

E-mail: ivo.pospisil@phil.muni.cz

DOI: 10.55159/tri.2023.0101.11



Czech Literature at the Turn of the Epoch and Its International Contexts

Abstract

The contexts of Czech literature are related to the crisis and revolutionary situation which gradually built up towards the end of the 19th century and reached its peak in the years of World War I and during the attempts at the world revolution. This was manifested by a certain dichotomy of Czech literature after 1918 when Czechoslovakia came into existence as a relatively large state and a strong parliamentary democracy amidst more or less authoritarian countries, a state with the first-rate Czechoslovak legions tested in the battles of World War I, with strong industry and agriculture which had been the nucleus of Austria-Hungary in the past. On the one hand, there was a majority and influential left, on the other were conservative groups often connected with Catholic Church, and in the middle — liberal currents linked with the official policy of the so-called Prague Castle represented by the first president T. G. Masaryk (e.g. Karel Čapek). Nevertheless, Czech literature as a whole helped create national and state consciousness, with the currents differing from each other only in their preference for traditions and political and economic systems. The problems of the new state were, of course, not only social,

Suggested citation: Pospíšil I. (2023). Czech Literature at the Turn of the Epoch and Its International Contexts. *Trimarium. The History and Literature of Central and Eastern European Countries*, 1(1), 251–281.

DOI: 10.55159/tri.2023.0101.11

Submitted: 18.12.2022 / Accepted: 05.01.2023

but also national, ethnic and religious and were also reflected in the international arena. Unlike in the other Central European countries, Czech literature exhibited radical leftist tendencies which were realised in the Czech modernist avant-garde, the apex of which was Czech poetism and surrealism (with the corresponding current in Slovakia) and their authors, such as Vítězslav Nezval, František Halas, Josef Hora, Jaroslav Seifert (1984 Nobel Prize winner), and Konstantin Biebl etc., but also the Catholic current which was very impressive from the artistic point of view (Jakub Deml, Jaroslav Durych, Jan Zahradníček, Jan Čep and others). Both of these tendencies were surprisingly and paradoxically linked with each other, as were their representatives. The drama and the novel (the Brothers Čapek, and Vladislav Vančura etc.) occupied a prominent place alongside poetry. What shows the mutual relationship between “the building of the state” (the title of a very important book by the famous Czech journalist and politician Ferdinand Peroutka) and Czech literature is the fact that between 1918 and 1938 Czech literature reached a world level for the first time in modern history. The author defends the thesis that Czech literature connected with the rise of the independent Czechoslovak state regardless of all these problems and idealistic constructs (“Czechoslovakism”), created a specific, original model of the co-existence of various currents of thought and of the relationships between culture in its widest sense and practical politics. This enabled radical artistic innovations anticipating the evolutionary tendencies of world literature (surrealism, anti-utopia/dystopia, baroquizing prose, and experimental novel).

Keywords

National revival, model of the evolution of literary currents, Czech modernism, generational stratification, dichotomies in Czech interwar literature, coexistence of the avant-garde and Catholic modernism, “Protectorate” literature, contrastive poetics

The European conditions of modern times started to develop since the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 and since the Westphalian system that was its consequence. While in Western Europe “modern history” begins with Columbus’ discovery of America, it is generally known that from the standpoint of Europe it had already been “discovered” by ancient Egyptians (who probably also reached Australia where their hieroglyphic instruction-report was found) or by Phoenicians. This can be explained by a Eurocentric vision of the world, which has only recently been abandoned. Nevertheless, the rational core of this reflection consists in the fact that it was not until the discovery of the New World in 1492 that the fundamental transformation of Europe itself began in the first place as was often stated in connection with the 500th anniversary in 1992 (Housková, Hrbata, ed., 1993). However, later the entire European system found itself in constant flux. In this sense, the key processes took place in the 16th and the 17th centuries when the whole European population was transformed as a consequence of deep conflicts which affected all of Europe. Wars during the Reformation involved just parts of the continent, but – and this is the most important – they did affect the key territory of German lands (Thirty Years’ War). The coup d’état and long civil wars in England, Scotland, France and throughout Central Europe, and later also in Eastern Europe (the *smuta*, the war of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth with Muscovite Russia at the end of the 16th and the beginning of the 17th centuries, when the exchange of dynasties took place) – all this had a strong religious subtext, though with ulterior power, political and mainly economic interests. The Reformation affected all of Europe, with the possible exception of Russia, where only the Orthodox Church was reformed in the middle of the 17th century, though with similar intentions and corresponding features and a strong intermingling of the secular and sacred spheres. The Peace of Westphalia influencing the rest of Europe, under which the Lands of the Czech Crown remained part of the Habsburg Empire, while Sweden as a European power became a victor of the Thirty Years’ War, controlled European politics for a long time and started to break down only at the beginning of the 18th century. Its disintegration coincided with the Great French Revolution and the Napoleonic era in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

The notion of Central Europe, with which the subject of this article is closely linked, started to develop at precisely this time: the concept of a United Europe as an imitation of the Roman Empire and its monumental style ("Empire") was accepted to a certain extent and on a different ideological level by the Holy Alliance, which dominated continental Europe after Napoleon's double fall. This lasted in fact up to the 1830s and briefly around 1848 when nationalism started the fragmentation of Europe or at least the internal split of larger empires (Austria). At the same time, on the contrary, unification processes were taking place (in Italy and Germany). These often contradictory movements led to a new division of Europe into blocs in which Central Europe played an important role as the kernel of the Triple Alliance.

The term "world literature" and its formation is associated with the emergence of so-called modernity which led to primary globalisation, the awareness of contexts and the formation of one cultural and mental entity in Europe and later America. There is no need to analyse the conceptions of Dionýz Ďurišin, his notions of "specific interliterary communities", "interliterariness" and "interliterary centrism" or the theses of his brilliant book *Čo je svetová literatúra?* [What Is World Literature?] (1992) and his summary of the conceptions of world literature (additive, axiological, synthetic, and representative), nor today's revelation of what has already been revealed, and is gradually demonstrated at world congresses of comparatists.¹

The position of Czech literature, whose evolution – due to various historical events – was punctuated with the turning points in Hussitism and the Thirty Years' War, was unique. The national revival (Macura, 1983, 1999, 2015) presupposed – to a certain extent – the existence of an artificial community of intellectuals ("vlastenecká společnost" / "patriotic society") which meant, for example,

¹ In connection with this, we formulated an approach which was to be presented at the world congress of comparatists in Tbilisi, Georgia, in 2022, but participation was dependent on the membership in a national association of comparatists, one of which I co-founded several years ago (The Czech and Slovak Association of Comparatists) but was later forced to leave; the text will be published in 2023 under the title *Interpoeticity as a Crucial Node in the Construction of the Complexes of the National Literature and World Literature*.

the Czechisation of German communities, albeit of Czech origin in the past. This was well captured by Hubert Gordon Schauer in his essay “Naše dvě otázky” [Our Two Questions] (1886). It was a hard, bitter dilemma that Czech literature was forced to solve, openly or covertly, over the entire course of its existence: certainly at the very beginning and during several reversals, later after the establishment of Czechoslovakia in 1918, then in the period of the threat to national existence under the Nazi German occupation (1939–1945) and later. In fact, this permanent process which is partly open, however mostly hidden, runs like a red thread through the history of Czech Lands, sometimes unexpected and stealthy as the undercurrent of the national danger, under various circumstances and in various geopolitical pressures. While the end of the Czech national revival was connected with the Spring of Nations (1848), the final inclusion of Czech literature into a broad European and perhaps world context rather occurred in the second half of the 19th century when the systematic translations appeared, in which the two tendencies associated with the geopolitical and ideological orientation of Czech national life can be found. Translations from Slavonic literatures, mainly Russian, form – to a certain extent – an artificial construction of Slavonic mutuality/reciprocity having its roots in Pan-Slavonic efforts with the elements in various milieus, including Polish and Russian messianisms, and at the general humanist level (“*Litteraria humanitas*” in Frank Wollman’s concept) in Jan Kollár’s work, continued by the more modern national efforts, for example, in Thomas G. Masaryk (Pospíšil, 2016, 2022, 2022). Simultaneously there were translations from other, more advanced national literatures (Pospíšil, 1998, 2000, 1997, 2017, 2014) of the European West, such as French and English, besides the strong German tradition and influence if we take into consideration that German was often the first literary language of the future Czech writers (Pospíšil, 2003, 2005, 2012, 2014, Pospíšil, Zelenka, 2020), such as, Karel Hynek Mácha and Julius Zeyer. A good example is Thomas G. Masaryk for whom German remained the *de facto* first literary language until his death. The very role of Germany was peculiar: Germany was situated, so to speak, both in the West and in the East. As its border was located along the Kiel-Trieste axis, as is often traditionally

asserted, the majority of German Lands, including the dominant Kingdom of Prussia, was actually situated in the East (Pomerania, the Baltic coast, Upper and Lower Silesia, the Hansa cities, and the neighbourhood of the Russian Empire). Only the rest of Germany lied in the West: Hamburg, Alsace, Lorraine, Rhineland, which had been under a long-term and strong influence of French culture (the region was home to periodicals written in French, i.e. *Spectateur du Nord* in Hamburg). This is closely connected with the *Sturm und Drang* movement aimed at forming a Pan-German cultural consciousness and distinctive literary forms (the German Preromantic ballads by Johann Wolfgang Goethe, Friedrich Schiller, Gottfried August Bürger; later Goethe's *Erziehungsroman* as an allegedly artificial genre which was supposed to be a contribution of German literature to the world) (Sammons, 1981). Czech literature follows a similar pattern as other Slavonic literatures, i.e. it has a specific, individual evolutionary trajectory. The Baroque ends as late as the 1730s at the time when poetic sentimentalism first appeared in England, e.g. James Thomson (1700–1748), author of the poetic cycle *The Seasons* (1726–1730), Edward Young (1681–1765), who penned *The Complaint, or Night Thoughts on Life, Death, and Immortality* (1742–1745) or Thomas Gray (1716–1771), author of the *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* (1751, translated into Czech by Josef Jungmann under the title *Elegie na hrobkách veských* (1807), which became one of the most representative works of the so-called “graveyard school of poetry”. Czech Neoclassicism and Enlightenment produced poetry, music, painting and scholarship (Haubelt, 1986; Tureček, Zajac, 2017), but it was a weaker output than, for example, in Poland or Russia. Similarly, Romanticism in Czech literature was significantly belated and leaned more towards Preromanticism or even Neoclassicism or Rococo, according to Vojtěch Jirát, for example, in Karel Jaromír Erben's work (Jirát, 1944; Pospíšil, 2003, 2011). Essentially, the only genuine Czech poetic Romantic par excellence was Karel Hynek Mácha, probably the most significant romantic poet in the world whose metaphors and oxymora, a symptom of truly modern poetry, were imitated by Czech surrealists. He was only recently followed through contemporary English translations of high quality; including probably the best ones by James Naughton (1950–2013). His narrative

poem *May* was published in six English translations (in 1932, USA, by Roderick A. Ginsburg, in 1949 by Hugh H. McGovern, in 1967 by Edith Pargeter, in 1987 by William E. Harkins, in 2000 by James Naughton, and in 2005 by Marcela Sulak, a highly qualified translator of several languages); besides, of course, some incomplete translations and a recent new attempt of British professor Alfred Thomas (University of Illinois, Chicago) who is known to Czech readers by the translation of his English book *Anne's Bohemia. Czech Literature and Society, 1310–1420* (1998; in *Czech: Čechy královny Anny: česká literatura a společnost v letech 1310–1420*, HOST, Brno 2005).²

The roots of the transitive period in the Czech and Czechoslovak milieu after 1918 are related, as it seems, to the nature of the national revival whose scientific stage began as early as in the second half of the 18th century and culminated as early as the second half of the 19th century. The risky project brought, as mentioned above, dilemmas which remain unresolved by the Czech national community to this day (Pospíšil, 2013).

At the fourth congress of Czechoslovak writers (1967), Milan Kundera aptly pointed to Hubert Gordon Schauer (1862–1892), born in Litomyšl, co-founder of Czech modernism (*Česká moderna*), and to his article “Our Two Questions” (*Naše dvě otázky*). It was published in the periodical *Čas* [Time], subtitled “a magazine devoted to public issues”, which came out regularly on the 5th and the 20th of each month. When Schauer’s article appeared on the 20th December 1886, i.e. in the first year of the magazine’s existence, it caused a stir within the editorial office itself even before publication, as confirmed by their “Short Editorial Supplement” as well as a note by Masaryk, who was originally mistakenly credited as the author of the article. Masaryk’s attitude to the article changed over time: even national myths evolve. While at the time of the publication of Schauer’s article he was quite pragmatic and rationally critical which was typical of the so-called realists, later in Čapek’s *Hovory s T. G. Masarykem* [Talks with Thomas G. Masaryk] – of course, in a different situation – he commented upon Schauer and his article in a rather disparaging

2 For a different view see Stanislav Rubáš: *Levého máchovské studie Máje*. Acta Universitatis Carolinae, Philologica 2, 2018, pp. 81–89.

manner. After 1918 the basic questions seemed to have clear-cut answers and these answers were secured by the geopolitical situation of the time, though Masaryk himself was certainly not as optimistic as a man of science, in the role of the President he was to become. That is why Schauer, a Czech literary critic, writer and thinker, characteristically descended from a German-Czech family, kept returning to Czech society. These two questions were: "What is the duty of our nation?" and "If we have the proper goal, are we able to reach it?"

These problems were not handled any more by the 1890s generation which grew up on the May/Máj, Ruch and Lumír writers' circles or groups, no matter how contradictory these groupings, their poetics and cultural orientation were. On the one hand, they advocated fulfilling the elementary tasks of the national revival in the 1850s and the 1860s, on the other they pursued Slavic and European trends, so that Czech decadence and symbolism reached a world level from the axiological point of view, though they manifested their unique features, especially social ones (Pynsent, 1973, 2008). The mixture of literary currents at the beginning of the 20th century completed the whole process of the merging and clashing of creative generations (after the *fin de siècle* group born in the 1890s). For them, the tasks of the national revival seemed to be too archaic. There is much more freedom in their inspirations which could not be used in the past, e. g. the cult of Arthur Schopenhauer or Friedrich Nietzsche, of German philosophy of will, but also of the *Naturphilosophie*, of French and British positivism, Russian radical positivism and extremism and, at the end of the period, of American pragmatism – all this finally erupted only in the 1920s together with belated expressionism, outbreaks of naturalism and the new, more optimistic trends which – through their playfulness and future-centrism – were moving away from the suffocating atmosphere of pre-war and war calamities by means of the glorification of new technologies and the idea of bright prospects: the different varieties of Futurism (Gwóźdź-Szewczenko, 2009; Pospíšil, 2011), Dadaism, constructivism or functionalism which permeated the whole range of arts.

In this context, it is not possible to ignore – besides the traditional relation with German thought and its traditions and the

re-orientation on the Romance and Anglo-Saxon world – also the Russian influences which affected the Czechs several times. If we leave aside the distant past, there is the national revival in which Russia obviously played a supporting and idealising role, followed by critical distance, but Czech and deep Russian culture collided with each other,, as can be seen in the instructive albeit limited reflections of Karel Havlíček Borovský, and later also translators, among other, Karel Jaromír Erben and Vilém Mrštík (Parolek, 1964). It was not a mere exception, as the “miracle of Russian literature” of the so-called Golden Age influenced the entire world literature and shaped the great names and key works of various national literatures (Hofman, 1959).

The problems of literary evolution became very sharply visible in the period of positivism with a strong impact of Darwinism: this applied to the concept of literary history, but also to thinking about literary genres (Ferdinand Brunetière). In several published studies, I formulated the conception of the so-called “pre-post effect” or “pre-post paradox” (Pospíšil, 1999). It concerns more or less the development of Russian literature, but – to a certain extent – also Slavonic literatures in general or at least some of their periods; their vestiges or defining features can be found also in other national literatures. The impact of poetological impulses of artistically rich European literatures, such as French, Italian, German, English and others, led to the imitation of their poetics, but also to a mere vague adoption of some trends, and gave birth to quite different innovative trends: the transformation of such impulses created the phenomenon called the miracle of Russian literature. In other words: an imperfect poetological impulse led to the adoption of another, new poetics.

Using the example of the Baroque, it is possible to demonstrate a more general problem of the so-called literary currents, styles and – on a different level – the projects of literary currents, or, in other words, the capability of the terms which emerged from the period of positivism to the present to more precisely capture concrete literary phenomena, to schematize them in an adequate way and generalize them under common labels. While earlier the significance of literary currents was not questioned, later, especially from the period of

Modernism and Postmodernism, literary currents are understood as schematic labels with a low cognitive potential. Literary currents and genres are often understood as contrasting components of the same or similar processes: literary currents express evolutionary changes, while genres are rather conservative components; both are, however, complementary and subject to mutual modification. However, contemporary theory of literature and poetics re-revises literary currents as phenomena defined rather in the framework of positivist-evolutionist methodology, but ones which are perhaps functional and useful even in the new arrangement at the beginning of the 21st century, if we regard them as schematic entities – similarly as genres – with the elements of phenotype and genotype, i.e. surviving thanks to some of their elements, thus forming the internal structure of literature.

In the 1930s, literary history was extensively analysed from the structural standpoint by René Wellek (1903–1995), a young scholar at that time, who used the term “theory of literary history” in his study written in English (Wellek, 1936, Zelenka, 1995, Pospíšil – Zelenka, 1996, Pospíšil, 2008, 2009, 2009). If we overlook the “auxiliary” character of the concepts of literary genres in the sense that they are unable to capture the details of each author’s earlier work and its development, the key question still remains about the evolutionary paradigm and mutual relations of literary currents the poetological elements of which have never expired, but often live on within the framework of other poetics.

One of the older elaborate conceptions attempting to create a general model of the evolution of literary genres is that of Dmytro/Dmitrij Čyževskij/Čiževskij/Tschižewskij (1894–1977), a literary scholar of probably Ukrainian–Polish–Russian–German–Czech–Slovak–American background (Mnich, Urban, ed. 2009, Blashkiv – Mnich, 2016, Pospíšil, 2017, 2016), but also a philosopher, theologian and an expert in culture and religion (Pospíšil, 2022) who has considerably influenced both the Czech and Slovak scholarly communities.

His remarkable work on the history of Russian literature, divided into two volumes, Romanticism (*Die Romantik*) and Realism (*Der Realismus*) was conceived in close connection with his theory of the

mutability of literary/artistic currents (Tschizewskij, 1967; Pospíšil, 2010; Čyževs'kyj, 1948).

Roman Mnich in his monograph evaluates Čyževs'kyj's concepts of literary currents as very competent, but naturally unfinished. He himself supplements Čyževs'kyj's *Wellentheorie* with the stage of post-modernism. Čyževs'kyj based his concept on the idea of the Platonic and Aristotelian poles: the first kind is represented by ancient Neoplatonism, medieval Gothic period, Baroque, Romanticism, and Modernism/Neoromanticism/Symbolism, whereas the second by Antiquity, medieval Romanesque style, Renaissance, Neoclassicism, and Enlightenment, Realism/Positivism; Postmodernism – due to Mnich – shifts between these currents.

I would rather regard postmodernism as part of the neo-classicist trend, or more broadly speaking, as one of the Aristotelian currents, but the Russian theorist Igoř Smirnov (born 1941 in Leningrad) holds a different view. In the 1970s, he wrote an innovative book in which he described the alternation of artistic/literary currents. He returned to this book and to its edition much later, after he authored several monographs and studies in the meantime and became affiliated with the *Konstanzer Schule* and German university theory of literature (Smirnov, 1977, 1981, 2000, 2001). In his early book *Chudožestvennyj smysl i evoljucija poetičeskich system* [The Artistic Sense and the Evolution of Poetological Systems] (1977), he dealt with the logic of artistic modifications, transformations of tropes, semantic figures and text typologies as well as with the so-called post-symbolism, the basis of diachronic poetics and the notion of artistic presupposition, i.e. preconditionality. At exactly the same time, Šabouk's research team, often deliberately forgotten, formed by scholars pushed to the professional margins for political reasons, with virtually no chance of having their work published originally, developed an interdisciplinary concept involving visual arts, music and literature, which was similar to Smirnov's semiotic reflections.

Smirnov illustratively demonstrates that artistic/literary currents often return in other forms, e.g. and hearken back, for example, to Baroque, Romanticism, Realism, and Futurism (Pavera, 2000). This is not Čyževs'kyj's *Wellentheorie* based on the Platonic and Aristotelian poles, but undercurrents which carry literary semiotic currents

through the streams of time. Thus, they do not vanish completely, but live on in other currents. This is an idea based on semiotic analysis; elsewhere we can find similar ideas from other sources and based on other paradigms. These are the epochs of Romanticism and Baroque, the currents which led to the birth of other currents often forming their substance, as Zdeněk Rotrekl argues, for example, in the case of Baroque (Rotrekl, 1995; Pospíšil, 1995). Partial examples can be documented with concrete phenomena, for example, how Baroque penetrates Romanticism, Realism, Modernism.

In the 1990s the monograph *Tvorivost literatúry* [Creativity of Literature] by a Slovak theorist and historian of literature Peter Zajac came out. I reviewed it immediately and came to the conclusion that it was quite a new view of literary evolution, and consequently also of the changing literary currents, but Zdeněk Mathauser sceptically opposed, dampening my enthusiasm somewhat, and he was right: most probably it was due to his knowledge of Čyževský; I read Smirnov the year his book was published (1977), but not Čyževsky's study dating back to 1948. I found the concept of pulsation fruitful, because it was based on other sources than Smirnov, but also because I found there a response to my term "chronicle space pulsation" from my book *Ruská románová kronika* [The Russian Novel Chronicle], from 1979 (published in 1983). From a terminological and methodological standpoint (Pospíšil, 2018) pulsation is – like everything in literary criticism – a metaphorical notion which, of course, does not mean a natural biological movement, but rather a pendulum-like development of literary/artistic structures. In other words, the so-called synoptic-pulse model comes from the same source as Čyževský's or Smirnov's reflections, but is more schematic. This was evidenced, above all, by its rather rigid application to the development of Czech literature, traced for practically twenty or more years after Zajac and his collaborators (Zajac, 1990; Pospíšil, 1990; Tureček, 2012; Haman – Tureček 2015, Tureček – Zajac, 2012).

The first years of the 20th century brought some stability although it was quite clear that it was the eve of revolutionary events, of local conflicts and, finally, the world war called the Great War at that time. The war period gave birth to three different books: Berdyaev's *Duša Rossii* [The Soul of Russia] (1915), Naumann's *Das Mitteleuropa*

[Central Europe], 1915) and Lenin's brochure *Imperializm, kak vysšaja stadija kapitalizma* [Imperialism as the Highest Stage of Capitalism] (1916) (Berdyayev, 1915, 1992; Naumann, 1915; Lenin, 1917). The first two books present a glorification of war, each time from a different angle and with a different structure and scope (Berdyayev's brochure is unlike Naumann's precise Prussian analysis of economics and military affairs). Berdyayev demonstrates the messianic role of Russia which will be purified through the war and will feel its male principle more strongly as opposed to the hitherto dominant female principle; while Naumann proposes the restructuring of Austria-Hungary and the suppression of the Slavs as the only way towards gaining control of continental Europe. Lenin's popular text, in turn, radically accentuates the political-economic basis of the war in well-known theses defining imperialism which is – according to him – the real cause of the war. I would prefer to leave all the three books without critical commentary, which has already been made by others in different times and in a different way.

What is self-evident is that 1) The Great War arose from the undercurrent of local conflicts going all the way back to the beginning of the 20th century and perhaps much further back. It was preceded by the Boxer Uprising in China (1899–1901), the Anglo-Boer wars (1880–1902), the Russo-Japanese war (1904–1905) and the Balkan wars (1912–1913).

2) Politically speaking, the Great War showed the disastrous failure of political and cultural élites, especially those whose programmes precluded such a war: Social Democrats and Socialists. This enabled the radicalisation of left-wing movements and the rise of communist factions and parties which then determined the character of the whole of the 20th century.

A compelling topic for a case study is Karel Čapek (1890–1938), as well as his brother Josef (1887–1945) (Pospíšil, 1999, 1999, 2008, 2010). Karel Čapek belonged to a group of intellectuals in his native Czech Lands who were able to successfully lead the national revival and look for stimuli, particularly outside of the conventional German sphere, though Čapek himself – as is well-known – studied at the Faculty of Arts of the Friedrich Wilhelm University in Berlin in the winter semester 1910–1911 (and then at Sorbonne in the summer).

On the one hand French literature, the modern branch of which he mediated to the Czech reader and especially to the new generation of poets, and, on the other, American pragmatism and the so-called Russian extremism represented the cultural influences that offset the impact of German philosophy and literature for Czech intellectuals (Pospíšil, 2009, 2010). *Francouzská poezie nové doby* [The French Poetry of New Times] was largely written in 1916 in the midst of and under the pressure of the war (as Čapek himself wrote in the afterword to a new edition which was published under the title *Francouzská poezie* [French Poetry] in 1936 by the Borový publishing house). Vítězslav Nezval famously stated in his foreword that before Čapek's interference into poetry there had never been such a tone in Czech speech. Later, Čapek abandoned the poetry of Baudelaire, Verlaine, Rimbaud, Mallarmé, Moréas, De Rénier, Le Roy, Fort, Apollinaire, Vildrac, Romain and others and returned to it only like to a youthful memory.

In 1910, at Arne Novák's seminar, Čapek analysed the grotesque in modern German literature, in 1911–1912 at Arnošt Kraus' seminar he wrote his work on Faust (the text has not survived) and finally in 1914, in professor Krejčí's seminar, he read his treatise on pragmatism and wrote a study *Poměr estetiky a dějin umění* [The Relation between Aesthetics and the History of Art] which led to his dissertation from 1915 *Objektivní metoda v estetice se zřetím k výtvarnému umění* [The Objective Method in Aesthetics with Regard to Visual Arts]. His seminar work on pragmatism was published for the first time under the title *Pragmatism or the Philosophy of Practical Life* by the Topič publishing house in 1918 as the 34th volume of the popular-education series *The Spirit and the World*. A year before interpreting his work on pragmatism in the treatise *Směry v nejnovější estetice* [Currents in the Newest Aesthetics], 1913), Čapek reflects on aesthetic relativism. In the dissertation, he speaks out quite strongly against “the aesthetics of production” and mentions understanding and empathising. Though there is a background of Dilthey's *Geisteswissenschaft*, many of his expressions foreshadow something even from future Gadamer and Jauss. The grotesque, Faust, the harmony of beauty, pragmatism and translation of French modernism: somewhere in this flow, as Dostoevsky said, arise “the cursed questions”, which Čapek tried to

answer by testing French modernism, Russian extremism, and Anglo-Saxon practicality and finally answered by abandoning poetry and by juxtaposing plurality with monocentrism. American pragmatism and Russian ethical maximalism do not cease to inhabit his work and even become new, though contradictory foothold on which his work rests.

Which of Čapek's needs does the theory of pragmatism actually meet? It is the fear of the abyss that modern relativism opens up before humankind in natural sciences and in modern literature; it is the uncertainty in which the human being finds no space of support. He clearly explicates this in the 9th chapter of his seminar work before the so-called *Five Kinds of Amendments* which later completed it. The *Five Kinds of Amendments* deepen his understanding of pragmatism as a partial answer to the questions he asks himself: pragmatism is not a new definition of truth, but a new definition of philosophy, a combination of scepticism and enthusiastic energy, reason and will, representing, above all, a new form of individualism. In this sense it concerns the four kinds of antinomic notions that prominently characterise Čapek's work: individualism vs collectivism and totality/totalitarianism vs plurality. The total crisis of society, sciences, and arts which manifested itself in the period of fin de siècle, opened up several new avenues for Čapek: modern poetry, relativistic philosophy, but also the question of the boundaries of human reason (Bradbrook, 1998, 2006).

Boží muka [Wayside Cross] (1917) and *Trapné povídky* [Embarassing Stories] (1921) are relatively early artistic depictions of the conflict between rationality and irrationality, absolute truth and relative truths. These themes later resonate in *Šlěpěj* [Footprint] and [Elegie] which develop the subject of a rationally ungraspable epiphany, *Lída* and *Milostná píseň* [A Love Song] which portray the mystery of love, and *Hora* [A Mountain], which is strongly reminiscent of Wells' *The Invisible Man* (1897). The miniatures *Utkvění času* [The Resting of Time], *Ztracená cesta* [The Lost Way], *Čekárna* [Waiting Room] and *Nápis* [The Inscription] are preoccupied with similar themes: they present seemingly commonplace phenomena (roaming, waiting, the inscription above the bed of a sick man made with his own hand) as enigmatic and tormenting, torturous and evoking sympathy. In *Embarassing Stories*, there appear themes of injury and

offence (*The Offended*), social and mental depression, and dejection and sorrow (*Na zámku* [At the Castle], *Otcové* [Fathers], *Tři* [Three]). The noetic crisis arises from the contrast of values and the infinite modification of the axiological scale: what stands tall, falls, what is down, rises, the weak becomes stronger and the strong becomes weaker. In *Stories from a Pocket* and *Stories from Another Pocket* (1929) this tension is often overcome by humour which, however, never weakens the relativity of the truths being demonstrated. The theme of life's variants is fully developed in *Hordubal* (1933), *Meteor* (1934) and especially in *An Ordinary Life* (1934). Asking "radical questions" was characteristic of Čapek: his works were often responses to the questions of immortality (*The Makropulos Affair*), responsibility for the world (*Krakatit*, *War with the Newts*), and the relativity of truths (*Meteor*). The problems of plurality and totality/totalitarianism, chaos and order of the world are also evident in his travel books.

The Czech literary theorist and historian, translation critic and comparatist, later American literary scholar René Wellek (1903–1995) (Pospíšil, Zelenka 1996) demonstrated the problem of the two currents in national literatures, based on English and Czech literature: the materialistic, sensualist, the empirical current vs the spiritual and metaphysical current (Wellek, 1929). Milan Blahynka (born 1933) put forward, especially since the 1970s, but in fact much earlier, the concept of the so-called "earthly poetry" (*pozemšťanská poezie*), which is not rejected even by Catholic authors: this can be evidenced by the account of the Catholic poet Jiří Kuběna (real name: Jiří Paukert, PhD, conservationist by profession, born 1936, died 2017, who belonged to the famous Havel generation) and the works of Vítězslav Nezval, as well as the discussion was held together more or less by Kuběna's impulses in Bítov Castle between authors and critics of various political and ideological views, including Blahynka himself. After all, even "avid communists" who had been surrealists in the past, such as Vítězslav Nezval (1900–1958) and Konstantin Biebl (1898–1951), found themselves in danger at the beginning of the 1950s (Voda, Blahynka, eds, 2011).

Modernist avant-garde and spiritual and even Catholic poetry interpenetrate in the Czech literary panorama of the interwar period, reacting to each other, but also functioning complementarily and

seeking common ground (*loci communes*, *topoi*), which is far from fundamentalism and irreconcilability: this was the source of the only Czech attempt in the 1960s at a dialogue with Marxism and religion, as manifested, for example, by the work of the philosopher and playwright from Brno, persecuted during the so-called Czechoslovak normalisation or, more precisely, consolidation, Vítězslav Gardavský (1923–1978), author of the work *God is Not Quite Dead* (1967). This intermingling and debate in the Czech circles first waned after 1948 and again after 1970 for a long time and they have never been re-established in the original scope.

The lives and creative careers of Czech Catholic poets, prose writers and playwrights were not simple: the current situation placed them, especially in the time of the Second Czechoslovak Republic (October 1938–March 1939) at the centre of the debates that were oriented against the traditions on which the First Czechoslovak Republic was based; they raised accusations of artificiality, anti-religiousness, and some of them even welcomed the new situation as a return to the roots, despite not openly collaborating with the Nazi occupation power. This had dire consequences for them after 1945, but especially after 1948 when these attitudes were used against them, they were imprisoned or were – often together with their families – driven to despair and death; but their fates were by no means identical: the fate of Jaroslav Durych was different from that of Jan Zahradníček or Zdeněk Rotrekl and Josef Suchý.

Predecessors of this type of literature included, among others, Karel Dostál-Lutinov (1871–1923), Ludvík Sigismund Bouška (1867–1942) and their *Literary and Artistic Company* (1913–1948), including Dostál-Lutinov, Emanuel Masák, and the Russian émigré Sergij Vilinsky (1876–1950), the Olomouc magazine *Archa* [Ark], *Akord* [Chord] in Brno, (up to 1948, Jan Zahradníček, Robert Konečný, and young Zdeněk Rotrekl), which featured authors influenced by ruralism, e. g. Jaroslav Durych, Jan Zahradníček, František Křelina, Václav Renč, Josef Kostohryz, Jan Čep and others, and also the specialist in this type of literature Mojmír Trávníček (1931–2011). The natural background of this literature, especially poetry, was the region of Třebíč and Velké Meziříčí, a poor area – in contrast to Southern and Eastern Moravia – yet typical of the strong currents of past religious

thought (Kralice is situated here, in the neighbourhood of Ivančice): this is the birthplace of Vítězslav Nezval but also a residence and place of activity of the surrealist poet and the world famous artist/painter Ladislav Novák³ (1925–1999).

The general revival of the religious stream in Czech literature directly connected with Catholic theology and cultural tradition was naturally international, all-European and began as early as the second half of the 19th century, when something like a canon of Catholic literature gradually arose both in historicising trends and in the permeation with modernist styles of Paul Claudel, Francis James, Jacques Maritain, Georges Bernanos, François Mauriac, John Ruskin, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, Gilbert Keith Chesterton, Hilaire Bellow, Evelyn Waugh, and Graham Greene. We must make one side note: the Catholic convert Graham Greene (1904–1991), an MI 6 agent, as it later turned out, has been often translated into Czech as a critic of imperialism since the second half of the 1950s; later, when he spoke unfavourably of the occupation of Czechoslovakia in August 1968 and supported the figures of the so-called Prague Spring, he became persona non grata in former Czechoslovakia. Nevertheless, probably by mistake or oversight, at the most inopportune time, a monograph dealing with his work appeared in the series of academic writings by the specialist in German, Scandinavian and English studies Jiří Munzar (born 1937), *Angažovanost v tvorbě Grahama Greena*⁴ [Commitment in the Work of Graham Greene] (1983). Graham Greene was then the subject of the monograph by Jan Čulík (1925–1995; *Graham Greene: básník trapnosti: literárně filozofické zkoumání jednoho z posledních existencionalistů* [Graham Greene, Poet of Embarrassment: Literary-Philosophical Investigation of One of the Last Existentialists], 1994; and *Graham Greene: dílo a život* [Graham Greene: Work and Life]. Academia, Praha 2002). Not coincidentally, Rainer Maria Rilke's *Die Aufzeichnungen des*

3 As a poet he is the author of *Pocta Jacksonu Pollockovi* [Homage to Jackson Pollock], 1966; *Závratě čili Zdoufalství* [Vertigo or Hope/Despair], 1968; *Textamenty* [Textaments], 1968; author and translator of concrete and phonic poetry, translator of Eskimo/Inuit poetry, Aimé Césaire, and Achim von Arnim.

4 See our review *Literatura jako politikum* [Literature as a Political Issue], *Rovnost* 15 March 1984, p. 5

Malte Laurids Brigge was translated into Czech by a Catholic author Josef Suchý (1923–2003), translator of German, Austrian, and Sorbian poetry and prose (Pospíšil, 1984, 2004, 2008), of Reinhold Schneider, Hans Canossa, Richard Billinger, Giovanni Papini, and Sigrid Undset (Juříčková, 2011). The Czech and Slovak literatures of this trend were, consequently, part of this massive trend: in the Czech milieu, the works of the world famous symbolist Otokar Březina (1868–1929) and the poet and prose writer Jakub Deml (1878–1961) appeared in connection with modernism practically since the 1890s or the beginning of the 20th century, also in the works of some authors in Slovakia, e. g. of Pavol Strauss (Pospíšil, 2014).

The line leading from German and Czech expressionism of the Brno Literary Group (*Literární skupina*) further runs through Czech Poetism (*poetismus*), e. g. in the novels by Vladislav Vančura (1891–1942), e.g. *Amazonský proud* [The Amazon Stream], 1923; *Pekař J. M.* [The Baker Jan Marhoul] (1924); *Pole orná a válečná* [Ploughshares into Swords/Arable and Battle Fields] (1925), *Poslední soud* [The Last Judgement], 1929; *Hrdelní pře aneb Přísluví* [Capital Crime Lawsuit or A Proverb], 1930; a short story *Rozmarné léto* [Summer of Caprice], 1926; and also a historical novel *Konec starých časů* [The End of Old Times], 1934; a historical short story *Markéta Lazarová* (1934) to psychological, expressive introspection of the prose of the second half of the 1930s and the 1940s. Unlike the historicising style practiced, for example, by Vladislav Vančura (who returned to the apotheosis of the Middle Ages, to the Renaissance “Veslavín” Czech language) or by Jaroslav Durych (who used baroquized style in his trilogy *Bloudění* [The Roaming], 1929, and in his prose triptych *Rekviem* [Requiem] containing the short stories *Courier*, *Budějovice Meadow*, *Valdice*, 1930) which are often interpreted ideologically (two examples: the communist Vladislav Vančura criticised the bourgeoisie as a natural stage, the Catholic Jaroslav Durych and his skeptical return to the principals of Czech history); the prose writers of the end of the First and in the Second Czechoslovak Republic and the Böhmen und Mähren Protectorate, Jaroslav Havlíček, Václav Řezáč, Jan Drda, Egon Hostovský, and Jan Čep, on the contrary, free the human being from history on the grounds which might mean both protest and resignation, for which the context is the manifesto

Slovo k mladým [Speech to the Young] by Kamil Bednář (1912–1972) with his conception of “the naked human”. This ahistoricity was, of course, understandable at that time and had an existential dimension which enabled one to survive by focusing on the present moment and general freedom.

The group of the authors of the psychological introspection trend also called “the prose of the protectorate” may be regarded as the stylistic pinnacle of the Czech prose of the 1920s–1940s, though its representatives had different personal and political fates. One of them, the emigrant and perennial sceptic Egon Hostovský (1908–1973) started his writing as early as the 1920s, and was the author of the prose works *Zavřené dveře* [The Closed Door] (1926), *Ztracený stín* [The Lost Shadow] (1931), *Žhář* [The Fire Raiser] (1935), *Nezvěstný* [The Missing] (written in exile, 1955), *Dobročinný večírek* [The Charity Ball] (written in exile, 1957). Another author, Jan Drda (1915–1970), who continued the early prose works of Karel Čapek (Kautman, 1993), later became a communist and much later the supporter of the Prague Spring, was the author of the excellent prose works *Městečko na dlani* [The Open Townlet] (1940, also filmed), *Živá voda* [Water of Life] (1942) and *Putování Petra Sedmilháře* [The Travels of Peter the Liar] (1943), Václav Řezáč (1901–1956), and the author of the short stories *Černé světlo* [The Black Light] (1940), *Svědék* [A Witness] (1943) and *Rozhraní* [The Boundary] (1944). Finally, there was Jaroslav Havlíček (1896–1943), practically all whose works, e. g. *Neviditelný* [The Invisible] (1937), *Ta třetí* [The Third] (1939), *Helimadoe* (1940), *Neopatrné panny* [Careless Virgins] (1941), *Vyprahlé touhy* [Burnt-Out Desires/Thirsty Lusts] (1934, after the reworking better known under the title *Petrolejové lampy* [Kerosene Lamps], 1944); were filmed in various years; Jan Čep (1902–1974), an emigré after 1948, who was the author of the refined prose works in the rural, introvert style *Zeměžluč* [The Centaury] (1931), *Letnice* [The Pentecost] (1932), *Děravý plášť* [The Perforated Cloak] (1934).⁵

A substantial feature of the poetics of the so-called prose of the Protectorate, the problems of which go beyond the boundaries of

⁵ The key stories appeared in the anthology *The Sister Anxiety/Sestra úzkost* (1944) (Pospíšil, 2014).

the present study, is anxiety as an existential feeling, pessimism based on the rational reflection of the movement of the world, sometimes also on a return to biological instincts and deep introspection based on philosophical spirituality (*Geisteswissenschaft*), and psychoanalysis revealing fear as a dominant feeling in life. All this was closely connected – not only in sociological and psychological terms – with the general social atmosphere, but also with the philosophical conception which lost its supporting elements of positivism, and practically of all optimistic currents both in thought and arts, such as Futurism, vitalism and sensualism, the foundations of Dadaism, Czech Poetism, and surrealism.

Conclusion

The present study attempted to grasp the specific features of the position of Czech literature in the life of the Czech nation as continuing the historical traditions from the period of national revival, and being the impulse for the total restoration of the Czech statehood. The contexts of Czech literature are linked with the crisis and revolutionary situation which gradually arose towards the end of the 19th century and culminated just before the First World War together with the attempts at world revolution. This became apparent in a certain dichotomy of Czech literature after 1918, when Czechoslovakia came into being as a relatively large state and a strong parliamentary democracy surrounded by authoritarian states, a country with a Czechoslovak legion tested in the battles of the First World War, with strong industry and agriculture which had long before become the kernel of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. On the one hand, there was the majority and influential left, on the other the conservative currents often connected with the Catholic Church, and in the middle moderate liberal streams supporting the official so-called “Prague Castle policy” of the first Czechoslovak president Thomas Masaryk (one of its representatives was, for example, Karel Čapek). Nevertheless, Czech literature as a whole helped construct the national and state consciousness that differed in their preferences for traditions and the political and economic system. The problems of the new state were, of course, not only social, but also national,

ethnic and religious and were also reflected in the international arena. A well-founded analysis of strong and weak elements of interwar Czechoslovakia was presented – paradoxically, but characteristically and multifariously – by a talented foreigner with a tragic fate, Valery Vilinsky (Vilinskij, 1931, Pospíšil, 2017). It is interesting to note that the author of the book cover was the painter and architect Josef Kaplický, father of the famous architect Jan Kaplický (1937–2009). Valery Vilinsky asserted that Czechoslovakia was a model (albeit an unsuccessful one) of a multinational and multilingual state gravitating towards European globalism, but preserving the specific features of a national state. Unlike the other countries of Central Europe, we reject the term “East Central Europe”, “Ostmitteleuropa” in German, as asymmetric as the notion of “Westmitteleuropa” / “West Central Europe” which is practically not used; Central Europe is a compact, synthetic concept and the so-called ethnic mixture of its eastern part does not constitute a strong argument. In Czech literature, there were radical, left tendencies which were obvious especially in the strong modernist avant-garde with a peak in Czech Poetism and surrealism (*nadrealismus* or Slovak surrealism) and among their authors, such as Vítězslav Nezval, František Halas, Josef Hora, Jaroslav Seifert (Nobel Prize winner, 1984) and Konstantin Biebl, but the already mentioned Catholic stream was also artistically impressive (Jakub Deml, Jaroslav Durych, Jan Zahradníček, Jan Čep and others); both streams were sometimes paradoxically linked, as were their representatives. Besides poetry drama and novel were also prominent (the Čapek Brother, and Vladislav Vančura). The list of influential writers can be, of course, extended. The mutual context of the building of the state (this is the title – *Budování státu* in Czech – of the famous book written by the Czech interwar and post-war journalist and politician Ferdinand Peroutka) and Czech literature may be confirmed by the fact that in the period 1918–1938 Czech literature reached a world level for the first time in modern times. I defend the thesis that Czech literature linked with the rise of the independent Czechoslovak state, with all its problems and idealistic ideological constructs (e. g. Czechoslovakism), formed a specific, original model of co-existence of various streams of thought and the relationship between culture in its broadest sense and practical politics. This enabled the creation

of radical innovations anticipating the future tendencies of world literature (surrealism, antiutopia/dystopia, baroquizing prose, and experimental novel).

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Ivo Pospíšil – Professor at Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic, professor, DrSc., historian and theorist of Slavonic literatures. He deals with theory and history of literature, poetics, comparative, genre and area studies, editor-in-chief and member of editorial boards of tens of international academic journals, chairman and president of three scientific societies, author of 42 books and hundreds of studies.