

Conceptualizing Literary History: A Survey of Poetics in Czech Fiction 1860–1910. Part Two¹

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Abstract

The article provides an innovative model of poetics (or isms, styles, etc.) in Czech prose in the latter half of the long 19th century. It gives an overview of seven individualized and mutually distinct poetics, including ideal, analytical, and psychological realisms, Parnassism, naturalism, impressionism, and decadence. The individual poetics do not represent periods, but exist in parallel, allowing confrontations and intersections either within the author's work or in a specific text, as in the model of Czech literature developed by Dalibor Tureček in the past decade. They are always set in the context of European literature and supported by many illustrative examples. The model is not only typological, but also assumes a diachronic perspective, which can be developed in future scholarly work on the history of Czech literature. The aim is to create a system that can potentially be applied not only to Czech fiction, but possibly also to poetry or drama, in other periods and literatures. – Part Two of the article concentrates on psychological realism, Parnassism, naturalism, impressionism, and decadence.

Parnassism

This poetics, placing primary influence on the formal aesthetic qualities of a work, but also on sensuality (including a vibrantly colorful viewpoint), was expressed in poetry and poetic drama in particular,

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but its use in Czech prose from the 1870s onwards has been rightfully investigated. The greatest inspiration comes from the French Parnassists, or fantasists. Alongside a line – up of poets, in his anthology *Český a slovenský literární parnasismus* (Czech and Slovak literary Parnassism) Jiří Pelán also includes representatives of artistic prose, namely Théophile Gautier and his program of *l'art pour l'art*. Probably the most influential prose of this type was however Flaubert's *Salammbô*, which also shows a certain overlap between Parnassism and realist poetics, because despite it being ruled by aesthetic concerns, the truthfulness of historical facts remains strong here and the author concluded expansive literary and field studies to ensure the faithfulness of his text. According to Pelán, the image of a “lost world” in *Salammbô* is provided to the reader as the “fruit of meticulous archeology and flawless positivistic reconstruction.” It was by combining the countless minute facts from the source material that the author's “poetic fantasy (more exactly: work of composition and stylistics) created a fascinating – and believable – amalgam.” It is therefore precisely through this artificially stylized descriptive factography that Flaubert is able to successfully achieve his “purely artistic goal” (Pelán, 2015, p. 83). Among the main identifiers of French Parnassism, Pelán includes a distaste for the utilitarianism of the time, as well as an aversion for provincial mediocrity, alongside religious beauty expressed through the idea of art for art's sake, a break from the function of poetry as an intimate confession (as expressed namely by subjective romanticism), a common preference for historical topics focusing on the Ancient and Oriental worlds, and a pessimist philosophical perspective (Pelán, 2015, p. 92–93).

In the same anthology, Dalibor Tureček lists the primary identifiers of Parnassism in Czech literature as an emphasis on depicting the world as a “realm of beauty” (this wording was inspired by the name of a play by the decadent Karásek *Sen o říši krásy* “Dream of a Realm of Beauty”), virtuosity of form, rhetorical and decorative vibrancy (for more detail see Tureček, 2015, p. 98–129). We can see, therefore, that the specifics of French and Czech Parnassism differ slightly, which

can however be explained as the result of transposing the original poetics into a new environment. From our viewpoint, we would like to further emphasize exoticism, seen when the prosaic storyline is situated outside of the Czech environment.² In comparison with ideal realism, in Parnassism there is a clear de-ideologization, a departure from direct proclamations of national goals in a literary work.³ Aleš Haman, who included ideal realism under Parnassism and viewed both poetics as a single unit (Haman, 1969, p. 355–359), nevertheless recognized a certain internal break within his concept of Parnassism, creating a polarity between cosmopolitan authors and nationalist ones (we would label the second group as ideal realists here). He did however emphasize that both groups “had in common a range of stylistic traits, namely an intense romanticism, the preconceived dramatic schemes of their novel plots, the polarized ‘black & white’ nature of the characters and idealization of the represented world, the artificially flowery diction” (Haman, 1969, p. 356). With its emphasis on form alongside themes frequently referencing Antiquity or ancient cultures, Parnassism has a broadly prominent connection to its classical heritage (it is sometimes referred to as the neoclassicism or neo-romanticism of the end of the nineteenth century).

Among the Czech novelists, whose texts contained elements of Parnassism, Michal Fránek primarily lists J. Zeyer and J. Vrchlický – who was simultaneously the most important Parnassist poet and one of the leading figures of Czech literature – and J. Lier, but also considers other representatives (Fránek, 2015). I only have several minor observations to add to his detailed commentary. The prose of J. Zeyer may be especially viewed as an example of Parnassism, as he characterizes his aestheticism among other things through gestures intended

² For Czech prose until then, the accepted norm had been inspiration with local material and history.

³ The patriotic appeals do not thereby disappear from the work, but rather – presumably in reaction to the controversies within the Czech constitutional opposition of the 70s and 80s – their political aspects are reduced and cultural aspects strengthened.

to annoy pedants and let one's fantasy reign free, something expressed in the preface to his *Dobrodružství Madrány* (Madrána's Adventures). Many of his short stories and novels, some of which belong to the cycle of "renovated images," have a typical Parnassist decorativeness, dressing up even everyday items in beautiful clothing, weakening the realistic motivations behind characters' behavior, subordinating them to lofty ideals of beauty, love or faith. In the limited prose works of J. Vrchlický, which adheres to various poetics, Parnassism can be namely attributed to the short story *Abisag* (from his *Povídky ironické a sentimentální* "Short Stories Ironic and Sentimental"), which has an Old Testament theme, and the novel *Loutky* (Puppets). For Lier these are the salon novels (among others the diptych *Narcissa, Magdalena*) and certain short stories belonging perhaps to a more seedy and humorous prose. Besides, the same could be said of the adventure novels of S. Heller, most often situated in the exotic environments of Russia and the Orient. A satirical view of this type of aestheticized prose is provided in the work of S. Čech (*Pravý výlet pana Broučka do Měsíce* "The Real Excursion of Mr Beetle to the Moon," etc., a series of humorist tales), switching between Parnassism and ideal realism. Some of the early sketches and short stories of J. Holeček could also be loosely associated with Parnassism, those inspired by his trips to the South Slavic regions and their local folklore. The genre of travel sketches, popular throughout the latter half of nineteenth century, regularly combines Parnassist and realist elements.

Psychological realism

Psychologism, which forms the basis for this poetics, may be more than just content-based, but also formal, provided from the internal perspective of the character (usually in certain passages of the text), expressing the mind or consciousness of a character, their sensory experiences, conscious reflections on their internal and external worlds, personal feelings, affects, etc. Psychological realism typically appears in prose, where the narration may (but need not) use the camera eye

technique, the internal monologue, psycho-narration or stream of consciousness, placing psychological realism significantly within the sphere of modernist poetics. Such soul-searching may however be present only in the content of the text, without the aforementioned formal techniques being used. Characters' behavior expresses their internal, psychological motivation, which may or may not correspond with their expected reaction to the external situation – the behavior should be convincing as it relates to the individual perceptions of the character, their sensations, affects, and so on – and may appear illogical from the outside. Allowing this discrepancy is one of the criteria distinguishing psychological and analytical realism, where a character's behavior is in line with the external circumstances of their life and environment. The description and features of characters (their physical appearance, name, externally observed interaction with other characters), typical for analytical realism, may even be entirely absent. A character in psychological realism tends to be individualized, ensnared and imprisoned in the trap of their own perception, sometimes experienced at almost an existential level.

In his *Madame Bovary*, Gustave Flaubert most significantly expanded on a character's internal psychological perspective, and to a somewhat lesser degree in *L'Éducation sentimentale*, which was later taken up for example by Paul Bourget or Camille Lemonnier, appearing more consistently in the English literature of latter-day Henry James. However, Russians such as Fyodor Dostoevsky, Leo Tolstoy, Ivan Goncharov and the storyteller Anton Chekhov influenced Czech writers even more significantly through the subject-matter and intellectual aspects of their works.

In Bohemia, psychological realism tends to be associated with modern art, which is not satisfied with mere external descriptions (as with analytical realism), nor schematic ideological character concepts (as with ideal realism), but is capable of expressing a character's mind, their internal world. It was only fully developed in Czech prose around the year 1900, although its first traces can be found some four decades earlier. B. Němcová records the psychological processes of the mind

of a lonely wandering pilgrim woman in her last prose work *Cesta z pouti* (Journey from the Pilgrimage), which remained unfinished. For Neruda, who joins characterization with the art of literary miniature, the reality of the internal world is expressed indirectly, through means of irony, in discrepancies between truths about the character imagined by narrator and reader and the defamatory public opinion, etc.;⁴ generally however Neruda's masterworks are derived from multiple poetics. The poetics of psychological realism was more consistently developed by J. Arbes, who attempted to connect the physiological and psychological aspects of humanity in his prose. The characters of the personal narrators directly involved in the storyline are typical of his invention, the romanetto (novelette), similar to the later *scientific romance* of H. G. Wells, depicting subjects with a limited knowledge horizon, so that the romanetto's readers are "pulled into a world in which people think, doubt, ponder and each character does so based on their own viewpoint and partial experience" (Janáčková, 1975, p. 13). Arbes considers the secrets of the soul, the irrational states of his characters, endowed simultaneously with an intense sensory perception that makes their odd experiences authentically real. The mystery is then only partially rationally explained, with some of its elements enduring. Soul-searching topics, also influencing the construction of the plot, are present in Arbes's "psychic nocturnes" (*Anna a Marie* etc.).

Proposing a realism of the psychological type, inspired by the Russians and Zola, able to grasp a "higher" truth with artistic authenticity was V. Mrštík, who from the end of the 1880s, loudly argued with critics in the magazine *Čas* (Time) and their concept of realism patiently imitating reality (Pytlík, 1988, p. 47–56). From the 90s, the decadents Jiří Karásek ze Lvovic and Arnošt Procházka required highly aesthetic psychological art. In practice this was attempted by A. Sova in his early novella *Kasta živořící* (The Miserable Caste, 1893), K. Babánek

⁴ E.g. *Byl darebákem* "He was a Scoundrel," later *Přivedla žebráka na mizinu* "She Bankrupted a Beggar" in *Povídky malostranské* "Tales of the Little Side".

(*Stíny v duši* "Shadows in the Soul"), F. X. Šalda (*Život ironický* "The Ironic Life") and others. Psychological realism is often combined with decadence (J. Karásek ze Lvovic), impressionism (L. Ziková, K. Kamínek, R. Jesenská), or naturalism (J. Sumín, P. Kles). After the year 1900, use of a character or narrator's internal psychological perspective was prevalent in the novels of B. Viková Kunětická, F. V. Krejčí, K. Scheinpflug, J. Maria, partially with J. K. Šlejhar and others. Psychological topics can however also be found in the non-modernist texts that came closer in practice to analytical realism, which had meantime succeeded in consolidating itself with the requirements of internal characterization and story motivation (most significantly in A. M. Tilschová).

In the modernists' requirements, psychological realism was also associated with the application of findings from current psychiatric science, including Freud's teachings on the sexual basis of a significant portion of human behavior and thought. Only a small number of Czech writers took this route however, most significantly Emil Tréval, a practicing doctor himself, whose prose was concerned with the irrational behavior of individuals with psychiatric diagnoses. His early novel *Maia* was a sensitive portrayal of the issue of sexual deformity. Psychological topics from doctor's records are also present in the sketches of R. J. Kronbauer *Z posledních stanic* (From the Last Stations) or later in *Karlovské povídky* (Karlov Stories) by J. Hais Týnecký, which take place in institutions for the mentally ill, at a maternity hospital or foundling home, and present a gallery of socially-excluded individuals.

Naturalism

Naturalism was primarily applied in prose and drama, but for example in German or Belgian literature one can also talk of naturalist poetry (Furst – Skrine, 1971, p. 40; Luc, 1990; on naturalism in painting and how it inspired literature see Röhl, 2003, p. 2 ff). The naturalist "school" (*école*) or doctrine tends to be associated primarily with

the work of Émile Zola. In his essay *Le roman expérimental* (1880), Zola lists as his first goal to grasp the concurrent physiological mechanisms of human “intellectual and sensual manifestations,” followed by the influence of heredity, external conditions and the social *milieu* (for the full quote see Kociubińska, 2006, p. 13). He therefore considers the naturalistic novel to be a scientific experiment, in which the writer forbids themselves from inserting into the fiction of their story anything they are unable to substantiate from their own knowledge, and as a biologist and sociologist provides something of an “animalogy” of humanity and society of its time (while history, which cannot be empirically observed, remains outside the interests of the naturalists). Zola therefore projects inputs from Darwinist teachings into his picture of the civilized world (*via* the social Darwinism of Herbert Spencer and others). Unlike all the aforementioned poetics, naturalism also applies an aesthetic of ugliness, which it uses to document the primitivism and cruelty of the instinctive natural order that still persists in our modern world. Despite this doctrine however, naturalism takes various forms and is not required to shy from the aesthetics of beauty in its artistic expression. This can be observed in Maupassant’s work, based on amorous themes and precise characterization of details, which have led some to claim he better meets the requirements of naturalism than Zola himself (Markiewicz, 1979, p. 299). Early Huysmans also tends to be included in French naturalism, with his significantly more spiritualist focus, and naturalism once more takes up a different position in the good-natured and almost humorous viewpoint displayed in the works of Alphonse Daudet. Besides, the aesthetic diversity of naturalism can also be seen in Zola’s novels, which include more than just the repulsive portraits of humanity, as in *L’Assommoir*, *Germinal* or *La Bête humaine*. Zola’s nature canvasses, for example when painting a picture of the garden of Eden in a significant chunk of *La Faute de l’abbé Mouret* are no less impressionist than naturalist (in his essays Zola was one of the few to appreciate the works of contemporary impressionist painters) and one can further point to the vividly colorful depictions of the countryside in *La Terre*, the symbolic ending of

Nana, which fails to correspond with the proclaimed scientific method, etc.

Naturalistic texts always somehow capture the elementary natural state of humanity, expressing its existential, anthropological basis. Unlike the psychological realists, who drill down into the subjective reality of the mind and intellect, naturalists are interested in the corporeal, vegetative aspect of humans as animate beings. At the center of their interest is the banal nature of daily life, which supports the typical plot of decline. According to Jaroslava Janáčková, “naturalism broke the story, because it wanted to comprehensively account for human behavior through social and natural determinism and in general went after depictions of social and natural processes and movements” (Janáčková, 1982, p. 114). The concept of a literary character in naturalism was molded in a similar way. Unlike the idiographic approach to establishing the individual, unique characteristics of a person utilized by psychological realism, and unlike character establishment by type as in analytical realism, naturalism took the nomothetic approach, defining a character using general principles and norms. A naturalistic character does not behave ideologically (as they want or intend), but instinctively (as they must according to natural or social pre-determination). As such, they lose their individuality and take the role of the Everyman, a passive representative of the species, social environment, etc. According to Richard Lehan, this character reduction in the naturalist narrative leads to a significant difference between the perspective of the unconscious hero, who blindly rushes forward, dragged on by instincts, and the narrator, who purposefully manages the character in such a way as to emphasize the biological implications of their behavior, as generally applicable to the our species, which results “in the narrative irony that is the benchmark of naturalism – the constant play between what the characters anticipate and what the reader/narrator anticipate” (Lehan, 2002, p. 66).

As early as the 1880s, Zola’s naturalism led to a number of discussions in Czech literature. It was entirely rejected by the conservative authors of the *Osvěta* journal (Ferdinand Schulz etc.). Zola’s depiction

of peasants in *La Terre* – instinctively thirsting for sex and possessions – irritated the ideal realists, who were scouring the countryside for virtuous and exemplary types for their national literature. As a result for example in 1888 Karolina Světlá came out against the immorality and nefariousness of Zola's novel, published in the Czech translation of Vilém Mrštík. Zola's work helped Czech analytical realists such as K. V. Rais learn how to write about the poverty of the mountain people and other socially depressing topics, all the while rejecting his morally provocative tone. The step from analytical realism to naturalism was represented from the 80s by the prose and drama of M. A. Šimáček, discussing with bitter social accents the environment of a sugar refinery, and in the novel *Otec* (Father), also explicitly working with the concept of heredity. In Czech prose, naturalism was almost never applied as a sociological experiment. Although it is often associated with the general concept of realism and even considered to be its continuation, in Bohemia it was embraced with significant individual variety by the modernists, who found, in its "scientific" conception of literature, a new, fearless view of society, corresponding to their shared aversion to parochial morality. In 1893, the decadent critic Arnošt Procházka pointed to the "inseparable, foundational differences" between pseudo-art, the conventions of realism and the great art of naturalism, "where the observed reality, the minutest details, precise colors go hand in hand with the author's dream and vision, are soaked throughout their dynamic and intellectual ideal, embracing the Body and Psyche, the Moment and Eternity" (Procházka, 2020, p. 59). By naturalism and modern art V. Mrštík intended a return to nature and a detailed analysis of the human spirit, "passions, habits and demands," expressed in artistic form (Mrštík, 2015, p. 306).

The aforementioned Zola connection between naturalism and impressionism was also significantly at play, as can be seen with J. K. Šlejhar, V. Mrštík, J. Merhaut and others. In Šlejhar's early short stories, aesthetic considerations dominate, despite this being an aesthetic of deterioration, death, decay, violence, with decadence also at play here. He has an almost overblown dislike of parochial morality, describing the ugliness of life, horror of humanity and feeling of evil run-

ning throughout society. Šlejhar illustrates the animality of the country person, coming close to Zola's *La Terre*, by frequent comparisons between humans and animals and developing parallels between their bleak destinies (*Kuře melancholik* "Melancholic Chicken"). These are somewhat the same, although more restrained, in Merhaut, who often supplements his depressing human stories (among others *Had* "The Snake," a Goncourtian prose about a seduced maidservant) by evoking rich sensory experiences of the town and surrounding nature, as in his short story *Bahnitá luka* (Muddy Meadows), or in his novel *Andělská sonáta* (Angelic Sonata) where the impression of a desolate existence is eventually ended by a renewal of the broken marriage, although paid for by a child's death. Mrštík's early novel *Pohádka máje* (May Fairy Tale) is already naturalistic with its cult of nature, while the colorful depictions of Prague in his novel *Santa Lucia* correspond to naturalism through the plot of disillusionment. The prose works of Jiří Sumín (Amálie Vrbová) are also deeply naturalistic. In the short story *Můj přítel vlk* (My Friend the Wolf), the protagonist is compared to a feral dog, in his greatest novel *Spása* (Salvation), inspired by Dostoevsky (the cult of *starets* Zosima, etc.) and Zola, a peasant girl is pursued by a superstitious mob that considers her to be a saint. Naturalism gains an entirely different form for K. M. Čapek-Chod, who in many of his short stories and novels (such as *Antonín Vondřejc*) focuses not on scenes of relentless cruelty, but instead on the banality of a mundane, town life, depicted in grotesquely exaggerated detail, using a burlesque language full of bodily metaphors and wordplay. Despite his specificity, it is Čapek-Chod who is often considered to be the key author of Czech naturalism (Hobland, 1991).⁵

Impressionism

Although more pronounced in painting and music, impressionism also broke through into the primary areas of literature. The visual and

⁵ Dobrava Moldanová also notes early traces of Expressionism (Moldanová 1985, p. 233).

acoustic impression from seeing a painting or interpreting of a piece of music became a metaphor among intellectuals, which they used to transform impressionism into written form as a poetics of soft colors and subdued tones, suppressing forcefulness in exchange for melody, blurred outlines and overlapping vision of things. Impressionism is non-ideological, does not lead to controversy about current issues, contains no assertive or tendentious statements, convinces through nothing else than the beauty of the written and voiced word, requiring a specific reader attuned to the same note as the author. The impressionists usually don't have any sharply defined detail within their viewfinder, but rather a feeling, emanating from the broad image of the viewed scene. There is a characteristic impression of intimacy, loneliness or abandonment, natural *plein air* scenes in subdued light, but also the topic of love. An impressionist narrative may make use of internal perspectives of a character or personal narrator similarly to the narrative of psychological realism, however it does not focus on spiritual (self-)analysis, but rather on the perception of exteriors, which – together with the experience of beauty – tend to evoke a sad, melancholic impression or mood in the subject. Its significantly artistic focus subsumes impressionism within the modernist poetics (it tends for example to be related in various ways to symbolism), however its essential component is a specific treatment of reality, subjectivized through sensory perception.

Due to these properties, impressionism is most often seen in poetry and lyrical drama.⁶ The most significant representative of impressionism in poetry is Paul Verlaine with his melodic, subtly acoustic modulate verse; in Bohemia his counterpart became particularly Antonín Sova. Another person to explicitly endorse impressionism was the Viennese Peter Altenberg, author of short temperamental stories and reminiscences coming close in form to prose verse. However, we can also associate this poetics with certain specific pieces of prose by Rus-

⁶ This is similar to Parnassism, from which it namely differs by its overall internalization, favoring the personal experience of beauty in reality over learned aestheticism, a reduction of intertextual references and absence of exotic motifs.

sian authors such as Ivan Turgenev (e.g. *The Spectres, Poems in Prose*) or Anton Chekhov (*The Steppe*). Individual prose works of the modernists such as Conrad, Proust and others are also commonly referred to as impressionist.

Impressionist prose, present in Bohemia from the 1890s, is characterized above all by a lyrical internalization of the storyline and its separation from the world of social facts and events. One could describe the early *Novelky* (Novellas) of B. Viková Kunětická – unlike her later novels – as impressionist: they contain dynamic, painter-like depictions of nature scenes and countryside activities such as grazing gees, fishing, walks, etc., while the plot usually takes place in the background of these depictions. A typical example of impressionism in Sova's prose (very diverse from the perspective of literary poetics) is *Ivův román* (Ivo's Romance), describing the bloom and dissolution of a love affair. The plot is ostentatiously story-less: without twists or reversals, composed of small events unraveled in slowly-moving time, with common motifs of nature and music completing the broad aesthetic impression of the story. The topic of a melancholy breakup between lovers is accompanied by the merging of impressionism and psychological realism in the short stories of K. Kamínek (*Dissonance, Dies irae a jiné prosy* "Dies irae and other prose") and L. Ziková (*Západ* "West" in the book *Spodní proudy* "Lower Currents"). In the short story *Nina* by R. Jesenská, the topic is of a couple's marital breakup due to the illness and death of the male protagonist. From Nina's psychological perspective, death is aestheticized, increasing the sorrowful atmosphere, but is not accompanied by ugliness or any physical feeling, pain also remains spiritual, and some decadent motifs associated with disease are also present. Jan z Wojkowicz writes about a love only dreamed and not physically consummated, which was nevertheless a rich sensory experience, in his short story collection *Mysteria amorosa*, and particularly in the novel *Gerda*.

Obrázky (Sketches) by V. Mrštík are almost exclusively impressionist. These small sketches are marked by a clear effort to remove the traditional plot and its replacement with subtle action, where mood

reigns supreme. Descriptions of mornings during various yearly seasons, full of visual sensations, smells and sounds, are also repeated. Descriptions are delicately introduced into the storyline, not interrupting it, but rather acting as a continuation of the imagery. Even in Mrštík's novels we can find both impressionist depictions of nature (*Pohádka máje* "May Fairy Tale"), and the city (*Santa Lucia*). As has been said above, these novels also contain significant naturalist elements, despite Mrštík's texts not making use of the aesthetic of ugliness. The characters of J. Merhaut's prose (incl. *Černá pole* "Black Fields") see and feel their surroundings with an impressionist sensitivity, usually with a distressing fate. The merging of impressionism and naturalism, familiar to Zola, is especially visible in early Šlejhar. These "impressions of nature and society," as one of his short story books is called, interpret with terrible cruelty the narrator's feelings of disillusionment, disgust with life, inconsolability and hopelessness. The narrator makes use of impressionist technique and strongly aestheticized language, including the significant absence of named places, people, etc. (a bird is just "bird," an illness is just "the illness," etc.), which feeds into the overflow of unspecified entities towards symbols.

In some of the fiction of F. Šrámek, an antimilitarist member of the anarcho-bohème, I recognize significant impressionist elements, namely in his novella *Stříbrný vítr* (Silver Wind) with a lyricized conception of the story. However especially in passages connected to the titular motif of "silver" wind, symbolizing life, spring and youth, even this work overcomes the impressionist melancholy.

Decadence

It would seem that apart from psychological realism, naturalism and impressionism, little space remains for the decadence. However, in the 1890s, decadent writers, critics and visual artists from the circles of the magazine *Moderní revue* left a significant imprint in both Czech poetry as well as prose and peripherally in drama, as for exam-

ple the surrealists later followed up on. The form that Czech decadent prose took was influenced by continental writers such as J.-K. Huysmans (*À rebours*), P. Bourget, S. Przybyszewski, A. Garborg (*Tired Men*), M. Artsybashev (*Sanin*) and others, while the English failed to find a direct successor despite the significant popularity of the works of Oscar Wilde. Czech decadence (see e.g. Vojtěch 2008, p. 76 ff; Otto M. Urban (ed.) 2006) therefore, out of all the modernist poetics, became the most significant expression of the spiritual and intellectual mood of the *fin de siècle*, reacting to the positivist tradition with aesthetic subtlety, fatigue and disgust. The manifested properties and positions of the decadent character may even be mutually contradictory (for example the individual's prerogative and Nietzsche's superman vs. weakness, infirmity; sexual perversion vs. infertility; Satanism vs. Catholicism). The aesthetics of evil, the psychological complexity and upheaval were a gesture of aversion to the bourgeoisie and shallowly optimistic values, the haughty aristocratism prevented interest in the issues of the poorer classes (unlike Morris and Wilde's attempts in England) and any form of popularization, a sense of reality was replaced with a cynical pose. Adherents of decadence such as J. Karásek ze Lvovic and A. Procházka were defining themselves exclusively in opposition to the analytical type of realism, with Karásek entering into a critical dispute with the work of A. Jirásek from the viewpoint of decadence and psychological art (Janáčková, 1982, pp. 23–24).⁷

In his *Glosa k dekadenci* (Gloss on Decadence), Procházka explains this term as "decadence in relation to our personal ideal." The goal of the efforts of the greats of modern art that Procházka equates with naturalism is, according to him, the superman, "that perfectly free, spotless white being," while artists themselves may only be "his decadents", or derivatives (Procházka, 2020, p. 101). Decadence is

⁷ On the contrary, for example the representative of analytical realism, A. Stašek in the words of his fictional characters made fun of these "decrepit" decadents, who are not in fact some brave divers into the depths of the human psyche, but rather naive and "inquisitive children" that are "fishing around in the mud" (Stašek 1908, p. 306).

therefore an admittedly futile attempt to implement the ideal of a new human, capable of surpassing the scorned bourgeois. Almost a decade later in his essay *K vývoji moderního umění* (On the Development of Modern Art), Karásek emphasizes the ephemeral and temporary nature of decadence, which he already refers to in the past tense:

Decadence was a transition. Seductive works and critical paradoxes remain in its wake, those that it deceived itself with. [...] It cuddled with its own disease. [...] On all those things born under other suns, ripened in other genres, it threw but the barren reflection of its melancholy, yellowed and constricted beauty (Karásek, 1903, p. 8).

As a temporarily influential wave of fashion, whose reverberation in Czech poetry can be found as early as in Vrchlický's successors, J. Kvapil and J. Borecký (Bednaříková, 2000, p. 27 ff), decadence also proliferated throughout prose and for a short period of time tickled the fancies of authors who excelled in other poetics. Jaroslav Med wrote about the early short story of O. Březina *Protější okno* (The Window Opposite, 1890) as "one of the first Czech decadent prose works," in which two people "are prevented from meeting by an insurmountable timidity, and so end up in total solitude" (Med, 2001, p. 76). Some of Šlejhar's short stories also play with decadence, however I consider their basic tone to be naturalistic and impressionistic. For example *Havran* (The Raven, 1893, then in the book *Co život opomíjí* "What Life Misses"), connects decadent moods with a motif of Poe's raven, accentuating the protagonist's despair from his cage. The man uses introspection to evaluate his unsuccessful life and in this mental state considers suicide; he later dies. In his remarkable novella *Pseudokontessy*, O. Auředníček also successfully expresses the decadent feeling of understanding the shallowness of love and life associated with nuanced impressionist observation, invoking an autumnal and winter Prague. The haze of the fantastic is entirely lost here, characters are in situations and environments corresponding to the writer's experiences.

Probably the most characteristic figure of Czech decadence was J. Karásek ze Lvovic, in his prose works such as *Gothická duše* (Gothic Soul), according to Jaroslav Med "the most typical prosaic ex-

pression of Czech decadent literature" (Med, 1991, p. 243), *Lásky absurdné* (Absurd Loves), *Román Manfreda Macmillena* (Manfred Macmillen's Novel), *Scarabeus* etc. have become the benchmark and model for its successors. Karásek's protagonists such as Albert from *Legenda o melancholickém princí* (Legend of the Melancholy Prince) are characterized by an excessive interest in beauty and art, a weariness flowing from degenerative disease, a disdain for physical love. The aristocrat Albert dies in the last lines, in order to confirm the fall of a once royal lineage. In comparison to impressionism, with Karásek we can see fewer descriptions of nature, but these are compensated for by descriptions of the city, its temples, palaces, and most importantly interiors. Some decadent prose takes place in the semi-fantastic backdrop of pre-Kafka Prague (*Gothická duše* "Gothic Soul," A. Breska: *Eurydike*). The sketches and short stories of Miloš Marten are also characterized by a decadent aestheticism and an attempt to define the slightest movement of the soul or subtlety of the external world. For example the protagonist of the prose *Mimo dobro a zlo* (Outside Good and Evil) in *Cyklus rozkoše a smrti* (The Cycle of Pleasure and Death) fluctuates in and out of a love affair and after a mental breakdown, ends up in a state resembling stupor. Arthur Breisky in his sketches *Triumfzla* (The Triumph of Evil) expresses decadent feelings in an essay-like form, in the fictional monologues of the poets (Baude-laire, Byron, Wilde) and other interlocutors.

I have attempted here to establish an innovative model of Czech fiction within the interval of 1860 – 1910, based on the plurality of literary poetics, developing in parallel and close proximity. In comparison with the traditional phase models, which presume the monopoly of one or another poetics over a given period and are therefore significantly reductive as concerns literature, my model includes next to elite literature, the so-called *midcult*, meaning quality middlebrow literature that functions as more than just a commercial product and has permanent artistic ambitions. By increasing the number of poetics I am striving for a more complex approach to prose within the given time

period and by removing the developmental hierarchy, achieve a more even-handed assessment. The concurrence of poetics places significant requirements on their precise definition and distinction, but at the same time one of my primary goals was to show that the mutual intertwining of poetics (even between generalized realism and modernism) was common literary practice. One cannot therefore simply assign authors to individual poetics, but instead one must always start with textual analysis and assume a possible clash between two or more poetics within the collected works of an author (e.g. Neruda's, Mrštik's) or even within a single text. Despite all its accuracy then, the presented model is not strictly normative, but instead allows for interpretation, adaptation, and enhancement. Concerning its use in literary historiography, so far it has not been possible to provide a detailed diachrony of the individual poetics. A comprehensive development of the model throughout time, commenting in detail on specific authors and works, remains a task for the future, and – within Slavic studies – it will presumably be of primary interest to literary Bohemists around the world. Here I have focused only on those aspects with a more general validity. My conception was therefore not merely formulated *pro domo sua* and may, I hope, inspire similar attempts in other periods and literatures.

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