

“Circus variations” in interwar Czech literature

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Hanuš Jordan writes in the introduction to the monograph *Orbis cirkus* (2014) that the history of the Czech circus has not yet been comprehensively described. He somewhat pessimistically concludes that:

Due to the lack of scholarly studies, Czech public opinion learns about the circus from other sources – especially from fiction, for example, from Eduard Bass’s most popular novel *Umberto’s circus* (1941), which is a required reading in schools and has been further popularized by the TV series directed by František Filip (1988). As a result, the Czech people believe that *Umberto’s circus* is a real famous family circus. They believe that the talented children of Czech farmers, like Vašek Karas, were excellent acrobats and even became the co-owners of the enterprise. In every European circus, there was a Šumava band... But in reality, everything was different...¹

For Jordan, therefore, Eduard Bass’s famous novel, which created (and embedded in cultural memory) ideas about circus life, is misleading. It is “because of” Bass’s novel that the Czech reader has a vision of the circus in which fact is mixed with fiction to such an extent that they can no longer distinguish between them. It is not possible to tell reliable and unreliable information apart. Such complaints, understandable from the point of view of a historian interested in the “objective truth” and worried about the “distortions” of fiction, to a large extent become irrelevant when a literary scholar takes a look at the strategies used by the prose writer to represent the circus world. It might turn out that, as Grzegorz Kondrasiuk writes,

We always **perceive** the circus through meaning. As if this phenomenon could only be touched by some form of representation, through an image, a text [...]. We write about, think about, and evaluate the circus, inscribing it into the present order, the current matrices of understanding, where it does not quite fit...

¹ Hanuš Jordan, *Orbis cirkus. Příběh českého cirkusu* [Orbis circus. The story of the Czech circus] (Prague: Nakladatelství Akademie múzických umění v Praze, 2014), 21. All translations from Czech into Polish were made by Anna Gawarecka. In the present English language version of the article, all translations into English are based on the Polish text, unless stated otherwise.

Such operations leave us with excess, with a sense of inadequacy. We want to get rid of all clichés but in the end we are left with a projection of longing for freedom and organicity that have been lost in modern times.²

Indeed, while in the Czech context the "imagology" of the circus has been shaped by Bass's monumental saga, it does not have to raise reservations or cause scholarly concerns. The novel's value lies not so much in the naïve identification of the characters with their potential authentic prototypes, but in the "historicization" of the narrative. It combines different discourses, bringing together fiction and essay writing. In other words, in the absence of scholarly studies, the novel *Umberto's circus* "has the right" to function as a reliable source of knowledge concerning the roots, evolution, and glory days of the European circus. This right, by the way, is no longer questioned in the current era of poststructuralist pantextuality (additionally reinforced by cultural studies and the narratological affinity between literature and historiography, as explained by Hayden White). Rafał Mielczarek writes:

Interpretation as fiction (i.e. a product) blurs the line between content and its representation. [...] Nevertheless, relying on existing interpretations allows us to draw on various cultural texts (not necessarily scholarly ones) in our quest to understand the circus. Geertz's comparison of *Madame Bovary* to an ethnographic report confirms that fiction, similarly to film or theatre, is able to convey the unique nature of a given reality just as well as non-fiction.³

Recognizing the documentary value of Bass's novel about the European career of the multi-generational Berwitz and Karas circus families does not diminish its literary value. Rather, it reminds us that a mimetic representation of a (model) world complicates but does not rule out exploring the epistemological potential of the fictional narrative.⁴ The sophisticated game between *Dichtung* and *Wahrheit* in *Umberto's circus* might be confusing for the reader (as stated by Jordan). Overwhelmed with all the information, the reader is often forced to determine for themselves whether the "circus lives" presented in the book are, exclusively and individually, fictional, as experienced by the characters, or whether they should be treated as "islands of references" in the "sea of fiction." Even a cursory comparison of the history of the titular Umberto's circus with the history of the world and Czech circus reconstructed in the aforementioned monograph *Orbis cirkus* proves, however, that Bass knew the topic well. In the absence of relevant studies, Bass decided to present his knowledge of the circus, probably acquired as a result of what could only be described as field research, as an entertaining fictional story about the international career of a talented Czech performer (in accordance with the ancient maxim that literature should "teach by entertaining"). The respective narrative sequences rely on durative narration. The lasting, repetitive nature of the presented phenomena, events, and behaviors is emphasized, which suggests the exemplary and synecdochic dimension of the "model" circus run by the Berwitz and Karas families, as well as its history and business strategies. The reader should perceive them as representative of all traditional circuses:

² Grzegorz Kondrasiuk, "O cyrku w świecie widowisk" [The circus in the world of the spectacle], in: *Cyrk w świecie widowisk* [The circus in the world of the spectacle], ed. Grzegorz Kondrasiuk (Lublin: Warsztaty Kultury, 2017), 14–15.

³ Rafał Mielczarek, "Robienie cyrku. Krótka historia zmiany – od rytualnego eksperymentu do eksperymentalnej sztuki" [To make a circus: A brief history of change from ritual experiment to experimental art], in: *Nie tylko klaun i tygrys. Szkice o sztuce cyrkowej* [Not just a clown and a tiger: Essays on circus art], ed. Małgorzata Leyko, Zofia Snelewska-Stempień (Łódź: Łódź University Press, 2019), 24–25.

⁴ It should be noted that the writer, "aware of the risks" which could arise from a literal interpretation of the novel, warned the reader that: "not everything that seems true in literature is a reliable linguistic copy of specific existing facts" (Eduard Bass, *Lidé z maringotek* [People from circus wagons] [Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1972], 15).

When circumstances were favorable and there were no hindrances, and if all the men could be used, Kerholec was able to erect and ready the main tent and the neighboring side tents in two hours and a half [...]. Things went more slowly in the larger cities, where Berwitz loved to stage a colorful parade on their entry. [...] Somewhere on the edge of the suburbs the cavalcade would form, the men and women would put on their most brilliant costumes and then ride into the city to the sound of trumpets and the march music of their own band, most of them mounted on their resplendent horses. The wild beasts were dragged along in show cages, while the other animals were led in the procession. Finally came the giant Bingo, whose monumental appearance formed the climax of this strident and picturesque form of publicity, so dearly loved by all.⁵

Published during World War II (in the so-called Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia writers were treated better than in occupied Poland, which does not mean that Nazi censorship was not active there), *Umberto's circus* (and, to use a modern term, its spin-off, the collection of short stories *Lidé z maringotek* [People from circus wagons] published in 1942⁶) has thus become deeply rooted in the Czech cultural space, as a kind of *summa* or crowning achievement of the already established conventions of representing circus themes in literature.

It was a crowning achievement because this subject had already appeared in Czech literature, somewhat later than in other European literatures, in the 1910s and the 1920s. Its “overpresence,” both in prose and poetry, was associated with the rehabilitation of the marginal, proscribed, or taboo aspects of mass entertainment. At that time, cultural peripheries offered literature (and art in general) new motifs and problems. The exploration of both gave rise to, in some cases, sociological observations (as in the novels by Ivan Olbracht, Karel Poláček, and Eduard Bass) and, at other times, to the avant-garde “glorification of the ‘low’ arts” and discovering in them new sources of artistic inspiration (Karel Teige, Vítězslav Nezval).

In 1913, in the *Almanac for 1914*, a collection of programmatic essays and literary manifestos which marked the departure from the idea of *l'art pour l'art* and called instead for art as an integral part of everyday life (a slogan that later guided the entire Czech interwar avant-garde), Stanislav Kostka Neumann, a poet who at the time was promoting futurism, published a poem entitled *Cirkus*. *Cirkus* employed almost all the motifs of the “avant-garde circus reflection,” from praising the “modern aesthetics” of the advertising posters, through delighting in the kitsch character of the show (including the cavalcade before the performance), the “perfect execution” of individual “acts,” and the exoticism associated with trained animals. Respectively, in the essay *Otevřená okno* [Open windows] devoted to, to put it briefly, “airing the stale atmosphere that is stifling Czech culture,” Neumann contrasted positive (vitalist and futuristic) tendencies with negative (“current”) cultural trends. The positive trends were:

⁵ Eduard Bass, *Umberto's circus*, trans. William Harkins (New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, Inc., 1951), 127.

⁶ To justify the use of this term, anachronistic in relation to the customs of Bass's era, let me quote the writer: “A certain brilliant reviewer noticed that during the writing of *Umberto's circus*, I must have cut a lot of material and that unused good material must have been lost in the process. This was really the case, and I thought that from what was not included in the novel, I could easily put together another book. However, when I returned to the subject, it turned out that it was not that simple, because in a novel, as in life, many characters can function beautifully and usefully next to each other, but in solitude they only vegetate. So, I chose a few most attractive episodes and tried to place them in a new space. [...] However, I did not feel like the whole was endowed with some kind of novelistic coherence, especially since this was not my intention from the beginning. I assumed that the reader's imagination would be activated and that they would fill in what I had consciously omitted” (Bass, *Lidé z maringotek*, 16).

Machinery, sports grounds, central slaughterhouse, Laurin & Klement, crematorium, future cinematograph, the Henry Circus, concert of a military band, world exhibition, railway station, artistic advertising, iron and concrete.⁷

The most important interwar avant-garde initiatives (above all the literary, painterly, and theatrical trend of *poeticism* developed by the Devětsil Art Association) largely accepted this repertoire of glorified attributes of modernity, partaking in Neumann's fascination with contemporary mass culture institutions and communication strategies:

In the new world, the function of art will also change. It will no longer be an ornament that renders life more beautiful. Life's raw and powerful beauty does not have to be hidden behind decorations. Art will no longer come from life. Art will no longer be intended for life. Art will be an immanent part of life. Its concept should be redefined. Let art elevate the soul, just as sport elevates the body. We refer to sport, or perhaps to acrobatics (as a perfected and idealized sport), and not to mysticism, metaphysics, or religion, because the mental and the physical are today widely seen as equally important.⁸

Poeticism was a reaction to the direct and explicitly articulated ideological involvement of proletarian art (which was a dominant trend among the members of Devětsil in the early 1920s). It thus marked a programmatic change. Still, most members of Devětsil believed in the final (perceived in terms of the end of history) global victory of communism. Understandably, the rift between the experimental ambitions of the avant-garde and the "obligation of political subordination" inspired a renewal of the conservative formula of "official art," which at the time was still positioned at the center of the cultural field (and seen in academic and symbolist painting, bourgeois drama, realistic and/or decadent novels). In the eyes of the young reformers, it had been long dead. The members of Devětsil who called for the transformation of the universal anthroposphere found inspiration in the peripheral and proscribed fields of popular literature and "folk entertainment." Both seemed to express the aesthetic preferences of the proletariat which they, for ideological reasons, glorified. When adapted well, they could be a great example of the "avant-gardization of working-class tastes."⁹

Unlike film and sports, that is fields often mentioned in discussions about radical reconstructions, modernizations, and regenerations of culture, the circus has a long history, dating back to ancient times. What is more, its power is based on tradition, on repeatable scripts.¹⁰ The circus

⁷ Stanislav K. Neumann, *Ať žije život: volné úvahy o novém umění* [Long live life: Free reflections on new art] (Prague: Nakladatelství František Borový, 1920), 68.

⁸ Karel Teige, "Umění dnes a zítra" [Art today and tomorrow], in: *Revoluční sborník Devětsil* [Devětsil revolutionary anthology], ed. Karel Teige, Jaroslav Seifert (Prague: Edice Skrytá moderna, 2010, reprint of the 1922 edition), 199.

⁹ Cf. Ewa Mrowczyk-Hearfield, "Współistnienie formacji kulturowych: modernizm, postmodernizm, kultura masowa" [Coexistence of cultural formations: Modernism, postmodernism, mass culture], in: *Odkrywanie modernizmu. Przekłady i komentarze* [Discovering modernism: Translations and commentaries], ed. Ryszard Nycz (Kraków: Universitas, 2004), 419.

¹⁰ According to Paweł Stangret, "despite many changes and attempts to reform the circus, the circus technique – the very essence of the circus – remained unchanged. It thus functions as a nostalgic memory of the 19th century and as such as a 'poor' and 'low' spectacle. The ossification of the circus formula meant that going to the circus became a ritual comparable to seeing a museum exhibition. Carol Duncan points out that it meets all the requirements of a ritual (it is liminal, repetitive, exclusive, etc.). [...] The museum is a stagnant form, just like the circus or, to be more precise, the discourse of the circus, which was codified by the creators of modern art. Such an attitude fits into one of the basic dichotomies of the avant-garde. It oscillates between novelty and repetition" (Paweł Stangret, "Awangardowa rehabilitacja cyrku" [The avant-garde rehabilitation of the circus], in: *Cyrk w świecie widowisk*, ed. Grzegorz Kondrasiuk [Lublin: Warsztaty Kultury, 2017], 145). Cf. Carol Duncan, "The art museum as ritual", in: Carol Duncan, *Civilizing rituals* (London: Routledge, 1995), 7-20.

respects the “horizon of expectations” of the recipient who expects that they will see something they have already seen many times. It does not take into account avant-garde dreams of absolute, and thus unachievable, innovation. Karel Teige writes:

The whole nomadic framework of the circus is basically traditional. [...] The circus is not developing: it has probably achieved such acting and theatrical perfection and such a high standard that it is no longer able to develop. Its charm, moreover, lies in its old-fashionedness – and this is indeed a very Dadaist charm. The circus repertoire remains more or less traditional and unchanging; it is a universal folk show with a predictable program based on established solutions which are so attractive that they seem new, although they always stay the same. While on the stage of literary life trends follow one another with dizzying speed, so that theatres, some of which are twenty-five years behind, have to catch up with the “spirit of the times,” in the circus we can still admire the beautiful acrobat and Japanese equilibrists who climb the ladder just as they did fifty years ago.¹¹

Teige, probably the most radical supporter of cultural modernization inspired by constructivist ideals, does not really come across as a supporter of anachronistic spectacles with their outdated tools of artistic expression. However, he respects the circus, primarily because – and in this respect the main theoretician of the Czech avant-garde followed in the footsteps of many other European reformers of the performing arts – it inspired attempts to renew or even “save” theatre, which, as was believed, had exhausted its innovative potential and should seek “new” and surprising models of regeneration. In the 1928 essay *S clowny a komedianty* [Among clowns and comedians], Teige, writing about negative and positive traditions, as the said differentiation could help young artists turn their reformist ambitions into action, argued:

There is no room for literary or academic theatricality in a circus performance, there is no room for psychological hypochondria reminiscent of Ibsen’s or Wedekind’s plays. The circus does not talk about subjective emotions and moods. Instead, it is a constant, risky, and tense struggle, in which life is literally at stake. Modern theatre, the kind that [...] wants to be truly modern and authentically theatrical – can learn almost everything from the traditional circus, or at least that which is basic and absolutely necessary. [...] Comedy in its pure form, without repulsive, pointless, conversational gestures [...]. Because the circus is not only about clowning and acrobatics. The circus is above all an example of harmony. It teaches hard work and hidden strength.¹²

In Czech cultural memory, the use of “circus-like” tropes in theater is often associated with the Liberated Theatre (*Osvobozené divadlo*), an avant-garde theatre company founded by Jiří Frejka (as part of Devětsil) in 1925. It first staged a “Molière-esque” play entitled *Cirkus Dandin*, which dramatized scenes from circus life, as actors imitated the gestures and actions of jugglers and

¹¹Karel Teige, *O humoru, klaunech a dadaistech* [About humor, clowns, and dadaists], vol. 1: *Svět, který se směje* [The world that laughs] (Prague: Akropolis, 2004), 59. One of the leading Czech theatre “innovators” Jindřich Honzl concurred: “The circus is only and exclusively a theatre of reality... In the circus, one does not care for Ibsen’s psychological paradoxes, which almost no one can understand. In the circus, one triumphs over the world, people, and animals thanks to the power of muscles and nerves. The victories of the circus performers amaze and delight. [...] Discipline gives the circus eternal youth, while the theatre dies in its senile perversion, trying in vain to excite itself... The circus’s raw emotions are a far cry from theatrical aping; its goal is production, not reproduction” (Jindřich Honzl, *Roztočené jeviště: úvahy o novém divadle* [The spinning stage: Reflections on new theatre] [Prague: Odeon, 1925], 24, 164).

¹²Teige, *O humoru, klaunech a dadaistech*, 60–61.

acrobats. Respectively, we must mention Jiří Voskovec and Jan Werich (the V+W duo), who, from their very first joint show (*Vest pocket revue*, 1927), not only drew inspiration from *varieté*, the circus's "sister art," but also developed a specific "clown" stage persona (including costumes and characteristic make-up; they would also recite improvised nonsensical dialogues between the scenes of the comedic-parodic play that in no way corresponded to the plot).

In his memoirs, Voskovec emphasized that tricks "borrowed" from circus performances could modernize theater. He also quoted Vsevolod Meyerhold who was delighted with the plays of the V+W duo. Meyerhold also saw innovative potential in circus techniques. This proves that Czech artists and European reformers had a common source of inspiration. Voskovec emphasized above all the transgressive character (imperative) of acting "on a tight rope" and "without a safety net," where make-believe gave way to absolute and unconditional authenticity (akin to being on the verge of death).¹³ Similar conclusions may be found in contemporary metatheatrical reflection. Some called for fusing art with life. Respectively, others emphasized the autotelic dimension of the circus world – its "isolation" and cerebral nature – which did not require any references to the real.¹⁴ Voskovec and Werich, writing about the music hall (a show which was related to both the circus and their own concept of the theatre), stated, for example:

We do not intend to be biased and proclaim that theatre will be saved by the music hall. [...] It is no coincidence that the sources of theatre lie in religion, while the Parisian music hall stems from café-concerts. The difference between the two does not lie in their purpose either: the music hall is meant to entertain, while theatre is supposed to evoke deeper experiences. These differences should be sought deeper: in actors and clowns. [...] Theatre, to put it briefly, works with substitutes: painted canvas represents a forest, and a young man with a glued-on mustache pretends to be a respectable old man. Bullfighters, jugglers, clowns or showgirls, on the other hand, only show what they have mastered. For theatre, performance is a tool; for the circus, performance is the goal.¹⁵

In most plays staged by V+W (who were also playwrights, directors, and actors in episodic roles), these maximalist ideas clashed with slightly different functions (of both the circus and the theatre) and strategies for controlling the viewer's reactions. They did not necessarily reflect the radical declarations cited above. On the one hand, their comedic plays, based on "increased" intertextuality and inspired by "great cultural themes," engaged in a (most often parodic) dialogue with the literary tradition. On the other hand, a simplified take on "clownery," devoid of all Romantic, sacral, and demonic connotations, did not invite deep philosophical interpretations. The clown was not a tragic, dangerous, or grotesque figure. He did not suffer from existential despair or social exclusion:

¹³Cf.: "I have attended many schools all over the world, but none of them compares to Cirque Médrano. I did not receive a diploma, a title, or a certificate, but I would not give up what I learned there about theatre and comedy for anything. [...] In this world of very real sur-reality, in the enchanted land of gladiators, I was convinced that a performance – any performance – must be performed on a tight rope and that authentic acting, like true acrobatics, means playing without a safety net" (Jiří Voskovec, *Klobouk ve křovi. Výbor veršů V+W [1927–1947]* [A hat in the bush. A selection of writings by V+W [1927–1947] [Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1965], 233).

¹⁴Cf. Tomáš Winter et al., *Cirkus Pictus. Zázračná krása a ubohá existence. Výtvarné umění a literatura [Circus Pictus. Miraculous beauty and miserable existence. Fine arts and literature]* (Cheb, Řevnice, Prague: GVU, Arbor vitae, Artefactum, 2017), 5; Katarzyna Donner, "Idiomy (nowego) cyrku" [Idioms of the (new) circus], in: *Cyrk w świecie widowisk*, ed. Grzegorz Kondrasiuk (Lublin: Warsztaty Kultury, 2017), 213.

¹⁵Jiří Voskovec, Jan Werich, "Music-hall a co z toho pošlo" [Music-hall and what it inspired], *ReD – měsíčník pro moderní kulturu* 7 (1927–1928): 265.

Let's take a closer look at clowns: Why have they always [...] been the crowd's favorites? Liked by both the intellectuals and the simpletons? The clown's stage persona is complex. Their organs have more pipes and registers than the greatest instruments in the world. And whatever song they play on them, it always vaguely sounds like *vox humana*, the voice of the people. *Vox vulgaris* is equally distinct, and then there is the voice of the absurd and *vox nonsensi*, the voice of nonsense. People rush to the circus to hear it. And they want to hear it, they need it like air: they want to laugh.¹⁶

Poeticism, especially in poetry, was different. It was more interested in the tightrope walker and the conjurer and the symbolism associated with both figures than in "pure" clownery. In both cases, as is best demonstrated by two poems by the leading representative of the trend Vítězslav Nezval – *Podivuhodný kouzelník* [The strange wizard] (1922) and *Akrobat* [The acrobat] (1927) – the title characters become metaphorical incarnations of the avant-garde artist who has the magical, alchemical, power of transforming reality (the wizard) and influencing crowds (the acrobat):

Byl očekáván příchod akrobata
jenž kráčel po laně z madridské katedrály
přes Řím Paříž Prahu až na Sibiř [...]
pln koketérie kreslil v kozelcích půvabná akrosticha [...]
Rozšířila se pověst o tomto muži
jenž prý lečí svou gestikulací chromé od narození
a vesnice doprovázely svá procesí o berlách¹⁷.

However, the messianic and redemptive quest of Nezval's acrobat ends in failure – the hero falls and dies. This defeat is sometimes interpreted as marking the start of the so-called carnival of Poeticism, i.e. the period in which members of Devětsil (somewhat artificially, ideologically) reduced art (in this case poetry) to the function of a "safety valve." Poetry was seen as cathartic, as a means of getting rid of negative emotions and frustrations caused by the oppressive social order.¹⁸ It is no accident that Artuš Černík listed the circus among the praised "delights of the electric age."¹⁹

¹⁶Jan Werich, "Knihkupectví (Hříčka pro klauny)" [Bookstore (clown prank)], *Plamen* 1 (1964): 52.

¹⁷"They were expecting the arrival of an acrobat / who walked on a tightrope from the Madrid cathedral / through Rome, Paris, Prague and all the way to Siberia / [...] full of coquetry, he drew charming acrostics with his somersaults, / [...] News spread about this man / who supposedly heals congenital disabilities with his touch / and entire villages followed him on crutches in processions" (Vítězslav Nezval, *Bázně noci* [Poems of the night] [Prague: Odeon, 1966], 70–71).

¹⁸Writing about the romantic identification of the poet with the jester, Monika Sznajderman invokes the myth of the artist's "alienation" (indirectly present in one of the possible interpretations of the failure of the acrobatic performance). According to Sznajderman, this alienation can be understood "on many levels: as the alienation of the character, his role in society and culture, the values, meanings, and orders of meanings he represents. It is often said that the freedom of the artist, his cultural image, defies conventional masks, official façades, socially conditioned costumes [...]. The artist should abandon all conventions, also to discover a different person behind a given individual, and a different world behind this world [...]. This in itself places the artist in direct proximity to the clown and the jester; he is both" (Monika Sznajderman, *Blažen. Maski i metafori* [The jester: Masks and metaphors] [Gdańsk: Slowo/Obraz Terytoria, 2000], 169–170).

¹⁹Cf.: "It is known that the migration of peoples, the Middle Ages, and the modern era, gas furnaces, and the electric diamond grinder were born from human dissatisfaction with the world. For the same reason, fairy tales were created, and Columbus set out to conquer America. The clucking of hens pleases housewives, but only until the circus arrives with its magnificent wagons, jungle themes, the illusion of the Sahara, real lions, zebras, rattlesnakes and monkeys, vaulters, clowns, jesters, Roman wrestlers. The brilliant human mind which always wants to explore the unknown, the new, as well as the contemporary economic and political drive towards communist revolution, the need for strong sensory impressions, the fascination with beauty and the wonders of the world... All these attract people to the circus. Who would dare to disregard the circus these days?" (Artuš Černík, "Radosti elektrického století" [The joys of the electric age], in: *Revoluční sborník Devětsil*, ed. Karel Teige, Jaroslav Seifert [Prague: Edice Skrytá moderna, 2010, reprint of the 1922 edition], 138).

Optimism and a felicitous view of human life, which initially determined the vision of the circus as just a space of "carefree entertainment," still resonate in the novella *Rozmarné léto* [Summer of Caprice] (1926) written by the outstanding Czech avant-garde prose writer Vladislav Vančura. While they are somewhat tamed by the inevitable victory of everyday routine, they point to the dream of replacing the obvious and permanent axiological and habitual model of "small-town life" with an "alternative" – a nomadic lifestyle of wandering jugglers, free from all social obligations:

Oh, she exhaled, feeling that she was bereft for a moment of all her self-assurance as a citizen, and wiped away a tear with the back of her hand. Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear. How I long to conjure with fire and to wander the wide world juggling with those little round things. How wonderful to be thinking no more than three days ahead, to be peregrinating from one town to another. How marvelous to plan a performance from beginning to end and then to repeat it day after day before people not one of whom, besides ourselves, knows what's going to happen next! [...] The splendour of it!²⁰

We find in the novella, which engages in an intertextual (and polemical) dialogue with Nezval's poem, the motif of a tightrope walker's fall caused by the thoughtless (or complicit) spectator. Although it is presented in a humorous tone and does not lead to any serious health consequences (and certainly not death), the fall triggers reflection on the mechanisms of reception, which, often unconsciously or deceptively (due to the ethical dilemmas associated with them) render circus performances more attractive:

The old man slowly approached the rope, which hung down alongside one of the supporting poles, and then [...] began jerking and shaking it, all the while repeating his demand that the magician stop being foolish and climb down. Several neighbours of the troublemaker started admonishing him, but before they could intercept the hand of mockery or madness, the great pole fell, and with it, with a cry of terror, the unfortunate tightrope walker fell. [...] Dear God! Some [...] thought that this terrible fall was part of the performance, and they began to applaud.²¹

In Ivan Olbracht's *Bratr Žak* [Brother Žak] (1913), one of the first texts to refer to various aspects of the circus discourse in Czech literature, this sophisticated play with the viewer who is expecting the tightrope walker to fall is formulated explicitly:

During their exercises, they did not install a safety net beneath them. What sense can there be in working when you know that it does not matter whether you succeed in your jump or not [...]? And he could sense how exciting it would be for the audience if one of them fell – the thrill, the excitement, the shouts, the terror. [...] Accompanied by the music of the drums, which grew louder and louder, they imitated an uncontrolled fall, which, however, did not end in a bloody splat in the sawdust at the bottom of the arena. After a split second of silence, filled with terror, the foot would be caught in the scaffolding. They liked to tease the audience, and the audience rewarded them with applause.²²

The above shows that circus performance is considered authentic, if life is put at risk. Such risk, part and parcel of the tightrope walker's act, makes him, as Jean Starobinski suggest-

²⁰Vladislav Vančura, *Summer of Caprice*, trans. Mark Corner (Prague: Karolinum Press, 2006), 200-201.

²¹Vančura, 160-161.

²²Ivan Olbracht, *Bratr Žak. Román komediantského osudu, lásky a zrady* [Brother Žak: A novel of comedic fate, love, and betrayal] (Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1957), 53-54.

ed and as has been already mentioned, an alter ego of the avant-garde artist.²³ They both cross boundaries in and through their art, sacrificing oneself in the face of constant danger. They agonizingly clash with other experimenters in pursuit of novelty that can never be fully grasped or understood.²⁴

Olbracht, representative of the political (left-wing) trend in Czech literature, did not of course draw such comparisons or parallels, as he was much more interested in the social exclusion of travelling jugglers (who, as the writer demonstrates through the life of his characters, rank even lower in the community hierarchy than performers from stationary and traveling circuses), their displacement, and more or less voluntarily chosen homelessness. In *Brother Žak*, a story subtitled *Román komunistantského osudu, lásky a zrady* [A novel of a comedic fate, love, and betrayal], the narrative respects the characters' identity. It means, among other things, that the circus craft is not, as is most often the case (also in Bass's iconic novel), observed from a distance. Benevolent as such an image might be, it still repeats (both positive and negative) clichés. By giving voice to the comedians, Olbracht tries to show the circus environment from the inside and offer the reader a narrative that differs from the dominant discourse, in which, as the authors of the monograph *Cirkus pictus* remind us: "Behind romantic ideas about a glamorous world, we find displacement, difficult living conditions, and even poverty that often accompanies a nomadic existence."²⁵ And more. *Brother Žak* was published in a collection of three short stories titled *O zlých samotářích* [About bad loners] (1913) that directs the gaze towards social taboo, not, however, in order to discover Hrabal's "pearls of the deep" but to accept the right of the excluded to feel anger, hatred, and rebellion against bourgeois ideology and lifestyle. And both, as Roland Barthes proved, are considered to be "given" and natural and, thus, non-negotiable.²⁶ When the roles are reversed and the comedians are considered to be right, they act as spokesmen for Otherness (although not yet in the metaphysi-

²³In his famous essay *Portrait de l'artiste en saltimbanque*, Starobinski, examining the "eternal" relevance of circus aesthetics, stated: "Without a doubt, this interest can be explained by purely external factors – in the coal-black atmosphere of society immersed in industrialization, the world of the circus and the noise of the fairground created a wonderfully shimmering island, a surviving part of childhood, a land where [...] illusions and spontaneous sounds of life whirled deceptively before the viewer, exhausted by everyday monotony. But there is [...] more. [...] The choice of such a topic cannot [...] be exhaustively explained by visual stimuli. In addition to the pure pleasure of looking, there is a different tendency, a psychological bond, which makes the modern artist experience some mysterious nostalgic understanding with the microcosm of farce and elementary magic. In most cases, one must speak of a special form of IDENTIFICATION" (Jean Starobinski, "Artysta kuglarzem" [The artist as a street performer], trans. M. Trenkler, *Pismo Literacko-Artystyczne* 11-12 [1986]: 132). The above quotation was translated into English from the Polish version.

²⁴Ondřej Kavalír also lists agonism among the primary "anatomical" features of the avant-garde (together with activism, anti-traditionalism, nihilism and belief in the future). It is, he writes, "characterized by an ambivalent spirit of competition, struggle, and sacrifice. We are talking here about the avant-garde artists' typical drive to go further than others, to the limits of the impossible, even at the cost of failure, the drive to transform the impending catastrophe into a miracle of a new form. In this case, the artist is a victim-hero, an authentic explorer of possible aesthetic worlds. Thus, to refer to the original meaning of the avant-garde, he is an advance guard, marching at the front. As such, he is always exposed to extreme danger, ready to sacrifice himself in the name of those who will follow. The avant-garde artist sees art in terms of fatalistic obligation. Like a Romantic, he sees it as salvation and threat at the same time" (Ondřej Kavalír, "Evropa modernismu a avantgard" [Europe of modernism and the avant-garde], in: *Revoluční sborník Devětsil*, ed. Karel Teige, Jaroslav Seifert [Prague: Edice Skrytá moderna, 2010, reprint of the 1922 edition], 220).

²⁵Winter et al., 5.

²⁶Cf. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 139.

cal sense, as exposed by contemporary (popular) culture).²⁷ They show that past resentments, the inferiorization of the Other, are not limited to the "eternal" conflict between society that respects "institutionalized" norms and circus performers who reject/violate them.²⁸ In Olbracht's world, as if in a mirror reflection, the anthropology of Otherness has two faces. The mutual ambivalent axiological inversion – in equal terms marked by fascination and abject distance (the circus is perceived through such complex lenses as well²⁹) – forces the reader to question the "standard" emotional relationship between the comedian and the audience:

Žak loved his craft and hated everything that was not a part of it. And this was something that Friczek had difficulty understanding. It was true that people did not like them, but they were still their audience, and they tossed their coins into a tin bowl on the barrel organ. And what was the point of all of it if no one applauded after the performance they had prepared with so much joy? And wasn't that beautiful: to make your enemies applaud you?³⁰

The nature of this relationship, which, as scholars argue, distinguishes the circus from other performative arts,³¹ was a common theme in literary representations of the circus. In Karel Poláček's novel *Bylo nás pět* [We were a handful] (1943), a circus troupe which comes to a small town excites the local children and brings back the "lost paradise of childhood" (with children expressing delight at the posters, the cavalcade, and the dazzling performance itself; they also catch a glimpse of the prosaic life behind the scenes). The innocent perspective of a child, who rejoices at the clown's tricks, clashes with the cool assessment of adults, who see in them a thinly veiled deception.

²⁷Stephen King writes: "Bradbury's carnival, which creeps inside the town limits and sets up shop in a meadow at three o'clock in the morning [...], is a symbol of everything that is abnormal, mutated, monstrous ... Dionysian. [...] The carnival is chaos, it is the taboo land made magically portable, traveling from place to place even from time to time with its freight of freaks and its glammers attractions" (Stephen King, *Danse Macabre* [New York: Everest House, 1981], 351). Jean Starobinski, who sees metaphysical or transgressive potential in the skills of the clown and the acrobat, seems to agree: "Since the clown is the one who comes OUT OF THERE – a smuggler crossing forbidden borders – we understand why his APPEARANCE in the circus and on stage has been considered so important. [...] Every real clown comes from a different space, from a different universe: his performance must lend credibility to the fact that he crosses the boundaries of the real: and even in his most joyful debauchery he should appear as a PHANTOM. [...] The abyss creates the framework for his appearance and from within it the clown throws himself at us. [...] The acrobat also appears thus: the arduous NOWHERE lies under his heel, and he walks the tightrope before our eyes. [...] The victorious acrobat reappears there, on the other side, in the new realm" (Starobinski, 135–136).

²⁸Cf. Mielczarek, 35.

²⁹Cf.: "What is particularly intriguing is the fact that there are many testimonies of ambivalent attitudes towards the circus, stemming from an unusual combination of understanding and rejection. On the one hand, the circus is critically juxtaposed with (a lack of) maturity. On the other hand, it arises a suspicious and ambiguous curiosity; it seduces with its shows, burdened with negative valuations, by provoking extreme situations, transgressions, lack of control, surprise, revealing and flaunting in the bright light the existence of ethical and aesthetic boundaries. These two extreme reactions are glorification and disgust" (Kondrasiuk, 14–15). Monika Sznajderman connects such extreme emotional attitudes with ambivalence with which archaic cultures approached the sacred, arguing that the taboo status of circus performers (primarily clowns) renders them "sacred: as much shameful as they are chosen, as much abject as they are sanctified. In other words – they rank among marginal professions and phenomena, transcending the human cosmos with its order and culture. [...] Carnal passions [...] or shameless acrobatics of tightrope walkers signify, in religious thought, the world of the other: a world of chaos, nature, and death; a world of darkness which precedes creation" (Sznajderman, 16–17).

³⁰Olbracht, 14.

³¹According to Małgorzata Leyko, "the viewer [...] lied at the heart of all borrowings from the circus. The creators of the new theatre were primarily interested in changing reception habits, in stimulating criticism, immediate reaction, and sometimes even in activating the audience physically. This can be achieved by changing the rules of communication between the stage and the audience, thanks to the free flow of energy between the performers and the audience. Just like trapeze exercises performed without a safety net take the audience's breath away, so should the new theater" (Małgorzata Leyko, "Dwudziestowieczna awangarda teatralna a cyrk" [Twentieth-century avant-garde theatre and the circus], in: *Nie tylko klaun i tygrys. Szkice o sztuce cyrkowej*, ed. Małgorzata Leyko, Zofia Snielewska-Stempień [Łódź: Łódź University Press, 2019], 121).

However, the dishonesty or rather the unreliability of the circus profession (contrasted with the reliability of provincial merchants and craftsmen), was rarely described. Usually, (both avant-garde and “sociological”) writers placed emphasis on the unique nature of the circus (perceived, to refer to Lotman and Bakhtin, in terms of carnival counterculture³²), undermined negative stereotypes, and emphasized the role of hard work required to achieve perfection in the execution of tricks and acrobatic feats. The circus was no longer seen as primitive entertainment:³³

Perfection can be achieved only through the greatest self-sacrifice. We people of an ancient art must have the strength to forswear everything which takes us away from it. We have forsworn our homes, society, domestic life, peace and comfort, safety and security of life, convention, and the Lord knows what else. We have set ourselves a goal beyond the world. This is a proud thing, but it is also a curse. We have made other laws for ourselves than those which govern ordinary people, and so we have lost our right to private happiness. Every one of us gambles daily with death in one way or another, and probes daily to find to what extreme he may carry his wager. [...] Only members of that special order which is called the circus do that. And whoever has dedicated his life has no right to [...] violate the social order which binds us together. That is the law of the man who is set apart from the crowd. If it is not kept our art will fall.³⁴

The “law” described in Bass’s novel shows that the circus was elevated to the ranks of a “special order.” All doubts and reservations vanished. They were redefined and the negatives that had traditionally surrounded the circus gained a new meaning. The circus regained its original character, lost because of historical revaluations. It is as much “sacred” as it is a respected form of art.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

³²Although Lotman and Uspensky do not explicitly mention the circus, their take on the enclaves of alternative culture which dynamize the dominant culture, may also refer to it: “As a result of this need for structural variety, every culture singles out special spheres, differently organized, which are valued very highly in an axiological sense although they are outside the general system of organization. Such were the monastery in the medieval world, poetry within the concepts of Romanticism, the world of gypsies, the backstage in the culture of [...] the nineteenth century, and many other examples of little islands of ‘different’ organization in the general body of culture, whose aim was to increase the structural variety and to overcome the entropy of structural automatization. [...] And this, as M. M. Bakhtin has shown, was the function of the carnival in the highly normative life of the Middle Ages” (Y. Lotman and B. Uspensky, “On the semiotic mechanism of culture”, trans. George Mihaychuk, *New Literary History* 9.2. (Soviet Semiotics and Criticism: An Anthology), 225-227).

³³Bogdan Danowicz apologetically writes: “The very atmosphere of the circus gives off childish naïveté and delight in the inimitable truth, authenticity, which appeals not only to our emotions but also to our minds and imagination. This gives rise to a much broader definition of the circus, in which, apart from circus humor and the physicality and formal perfection of art that is sometimes deemed primitive, there is still room for certain arch-human values, indisputable honesty, manifested in selfless risk, and even peculiar bravery. A true circus professional is also quite disciplined, which manifests itself in striving for maximum professional perfection” (Bogdan Danowicz, *Był cyrk olimpijski* [There was an Olympic circus] [Warsaw: Iskry, 1984], 12).

³⁴Eduard Bass, *Umberto’s Circus* trans. William Harkins (New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, Inc., 1951), 291.

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ABSTRACT:

In Czech interwar literature, the circus (similarly to other mass culture phenomena, e.g. sports or cinema) became the subject of complex analyses, inspiring axiological questions. At that time, cultural peripheries opened up new fields of thematic exploration for Czech literature. Some authors formulated sociological observations (novels by Ivan Olbracht, Karl Poláček, and Eduard Bass), while others were part of the avant-garde (Karel Teige, Vítězslav Nezval) and looked for the yet undiscovered sources of artistic inspiration. In both cases, the circus functioned as a *topos* – a signal that triggered both curiosity and fear and that was only partially “domesticated.” The circus was perceived as a “transgressive” (exotic and / or romantic) space in which the routine laws of everyday life were suspended. It demonstrated that an “alternative” way of life was possible and that the boundaries of the Other could be crossed.

MASS CULTURE

social exclusion

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