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## The Secret Portrait of a Romantic? On the Recent Biographies of Karel Jaromír Erben

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In 1853, Karel Jaromír Erben published a collection of ballads *Kytice*, which was immediately seen as a model of national literature. The contact of this model with Romanticism is only selective, because it does not consider all the meta-physical dilemmas resulting from the appreciation of the individualistic attitude to the world. It might seem that *Kytice* should share the fate of other 19th century texts of culture which are currently attributed the position of a respectable, old fashioned literary monument. Meanwhile, in recent years, two novels have been published directly drawing inspiration and thematic material from the life of the poet, namely: *Vřeteno osudu. Tajná zpověď* by Karel Jaromír Erben by Otomar Dvořák (2015) and *Stará škola* by Petr K. Procházka (2022). Both literary biographies expose the close, though hidden, connections between Erben's poetics and worldview with the Romantic aesthetic and ideological context.

**KEYWORDS:** literary biography; poetry and myth; folkloric tradition; Romantic worldview; literary fiction; factography in literature

Romantická vzpoura je krásná na papíře, ale  
když umíráte hlady, už to tak poetické není.

(O. Dvořák, *Vřeteno osudu. Tajna  
zpověď Karla Jaromíra Erbena*)

In 1853, and thus in the midst of the so-called “Bach Night”, the decade in which, following the collapse of the revolutionary hopes of the Spring of Nations, neo-absolutist rule came to be, symbolised by the name of the Minister of the Internal Affairs, Alexander von Bach (1813–1893), Karel Jaromír Erben published a collection of ballads bearing, in accordance with the quasi-genological Czech custom of the time, the “floristic” title *Kytice* (Macura, 1995, 24). From the moment of its publication, surrounded by reviewers’ admiration and a reading cult, this volume almost immediately acquired the status of a canonical model and exemplification of the national character of a poetic work. Attempts to define the essence of this nationality dominated Czech metaliterary discourse in the first half of the 19th century. Initially, questions about the (anti-)Romantic dimension of the literary representation of the world and its ethical message eventually gave way to reflections on the characteristics obligatorily attributed to poetic autochthony, while its unquestionable leading position in the hierarchy of cultural values in practice prevented a full-scale reception of the then “productive” European artistic tendencies, and in particular – blocked the way before the taming of Romanticism, especially in its most radical – Byronic – version. Above all, it emphasised the usefulness of native (meaning at the time: folkloric) models, capable, after an appropriate literary elaboration, of designing a model that could serve as a universal starting point (or a kind of “ideal type”) for the reborn or reinvented, Czech culture (cf. Doorman, 2008, 212–213). Such a model was therefore largely based on the use of folklore inspirations, and its most perfect realisation was – in the eyes of critics and audiences – precisely *Kytice* (cf. Šmahelová, 2011, 331). The contact of this pattern with the poetics and philosophical-identitarian assumptions of Romanticism, although undoubtedly reconstructable and demonstrable, is nevertheless selective and, more importantly, does not take into account (possibly it turns away from them with reluctance) any existentially disquieting metaphysical dilemmas and centrifugal

(shattering communal monolithicity) tendencies emanating from the appreciation from the granting of the artist's right to subjective, concentrated around the manifestation of individual experiences, expression of feelings (cf. Macura, 1995, 210).

The publication of Erben's cycle of ballads can be seen as the culmination of these autochthonous aspirations, closing the revivalist stage of Czech emancipatory ambitions and – despite the text's undeniable qualities – testifying to the exhaustion of the hitherto dominant creative formula. It would seem, therefore, that *Kytice* should share the fate of other 19th century cultural texts, which are now assigned the position of a revered monument, irrevocably belonging to a now dead tradition, arousing – at best – the interest of connoisseurs, but not playing a major role in the space of contemporary reading preferences. Meanwhile, Erben's *opus vitae* has been popular for some time in the space of artistic and intermedia references. Suffice it to recall the film adaptation of several ballads from the collection (directed by František A. Brabec) made in 2000, as well as its comic book translations. Two novels directly drawing inspiration and thematic material from the poet's life stories have also been published in recent years, namely: *Vřeteno osudu. Tajná zpověď Karla Jaromíra Erbena* (The Sparrow of Fate. The Secret Confession of Karel Jaromír Erben) by Otomar Dvořák (2015) and *Stará škola* (The Old School) by Petr K. Procházka (2022).

Only the first of these texts can be treated as a “classic” literary biography, with the reservation, however, that the writer, deciding to introduce a first-person narrator, identical (within the framework of textual fiction, of course) to the title character, aims to achieve the effect of the fullest possible illusion of authenticity of the presented confessions, reflections and assessment of the presented world, consistently viewed through the prism of the protagonist's life experiences. This authenticity, certified by the religious connotations surrounding the title term “confession”, serves, at least officially and within the framework of the novel's fiction, only one purpose – the preparation of the poet's biography for the almanac *Máj* prepared by Jan Neruda and Vítězslav Hálek in the spring of 1858:

O čem chcete psát? (...) Můj život je pro čtenáře nezajímavý: boj s chorobami a archivním prachem, nekonečné opisování listin, miliony

kartotečních listku; dokonce i pražská revoluce mně minula, barikády jsem viděl, když je nádeníci rozebírali... Žádné drama se nekonalo. (...) Dobře, povím vám něco o mém životě, pane Jene. Nevím, co z toho nakonec použijete; zřejmě jen nepatrný zlomek. Ale to nevadí. Budu vám o sobě něco vyprávět. Nazvěte si to, jak chcete. Třeba... Tajná zpověď Karla Jaromíra Erbena (Dvořák, 2015, 395).

Presented in the novel in his many life roles: writer, fiancé, husband, father, son, historian, archivist, lawyer, translator, publisher of medieval manuscripts, Erben (re)acquires his full-scale literary image, in which lesser-known facts and events, absent from official biographies (or only mentioned in passing), are highlighted. Dvořák reliably draws on the already extensive body of erbenological research, cites *explicitly* or recapitulates (in the function of a camouflaged quotation) letters and private notes (especially those concerning dreams) or summarises his scientific dissertations, which form an important part of the *Kytice* author's writing legacy:

Ve světnicích, kde je teplo u kamen, se scházejí ženy s kolovraty; do jednotvárného vrčení točících se kol (...) zaznívají vysoké, sólové hlasy přadlen (...). Už na starořeckých amforách spatříme pradávny obraz tří bohyň osudu: jedna vlákno tvoří, druhá navíjí, třetí ho ve vhodné chvíli přestřihuje – zrození, život, smrt. Tři sudičky sedávají nad našimi kolébkami, tři tajemne přadleny... Už několikrát jsem přemýšlel o těchto mytických postavách – a také kolovratu coby jejich symbolu. Kolo-vrat, návrat v kole... Dělal jsem si průběžně poznámky a (...) se mi v hlavě postupně rýsovaly obrysy velké odborné studie, kterou bych rád zveřejnil v Muzeíku (Dvořák, 2015, 13).

By proceeding in this way, the novelist is following in the footsteps of standard biographical approaches (in the terminology proposed by Maria Jasińska, we are talking about uplifted biography) (cf. Jasińska, 1971, 144–183) often limiting his artistic ambitions to the fictionalization of facts documented in source records (cf. Franaszek, 2018, 381). By giving voice to his protagonist, however, he avoids the pitfalls associated with authorial (narrator's) usurpation of the right to omniscience, to

enter the spiritual space of the character and to disrupt the boundaries between what can be confirmed by historical knowledge and what has been fabricated, added, implied by the biographer and – as a theory or hypothesis – passes into the space of the strictly fictional order. For as Anna Legeżyńska reminds us:

The aporetic situation of writing someone else's biography is a challenge and a call not to overstep the boundaries of subjectivity, but at the same time to save the singularity of the experience of meeting the Other. For the biographer, the beginning of the path that makes such an encounter possible is the fascination with the writer's personality. Imagination, empathy and fascination form the hermeneutic modal framework of the biographical text, whose aim – apart from pragmatic gain – is to record the singularity of someone's fate (Legeżyńska, 2019, 26).

In other words, within the fictional world, it is Erben himself (in his function as narrator) who decides what secrets or issues that are inconvenient for him or that cast an ambiguous light on his ethical stance are left in the domain of understatement. As a result, the protagonist takes on the role ascribed to authors of biographies: selector and organiser of the collected textual material (within the fictional world, of course: memorial), while the subjective dimension of the story should confirm the viewer in the conviction that the news delivered to him comes directly from Erben's authentic memories (cf. March, 2017, 91). Thus, the writer enters into a kind of "(auto)biographical pact" with the reader, who accepts the rules of the game offered to him or her, according to which an encounter with a fictional, novelistic text means, in reading practice, contact with a set of ready-made, verified information, while the reading process itself is granted a cognitive function (cf. Kulas, 2013, 72). Behind the *intentio auctoris* here, therefore, is not an ambition for biographical experimentation, testing the narratological potential of authentic life material, but a strategy, steeped in centuries of tradition, of making the content presented to the audience more attractive, which, in the case of a novel devoted to the fate of historical figures, requires subordinating the plot construction to extra-literary criteria of truthfulness on the one hand, and focusing attention around

embarrassing, concealed or scandalous matters on the other (cf. Kulas, 2013, 72).

In reflections on the genological attributes of literary biography, there is a recurring theme of its location in the vertical order of communicative circuits, and more specifically these reflections concern the belonging of biographical fiction to the sphere of highbrow, popular writing or to the domain of so-called middlebrow literature. Dvořák's novel, as already mentioned, does not, however, set itself far-reaching "revolutionary" tasks; even the use of the first-person narrative mode does not lead to any genological transformations or innovative modifications; rather, it sticks to the "safe" zone of tried-and-tested solutions and tricks the reader is already familiar with. Jiří Trávniček recalling the reluctant stance of avant-garde critics who accuse writers publishing literary biographies (on the example of the comparison between the "traditionalist" prose of Stefan Zweig and the innovation of Robert Musil) of making far-reaching concessions to the "average taste", reminds us that the novel (as a genological construct) was born as a result of changes in the structure of the reading public and was originally intended to meet the reading needs of a less sophisticated audience, and that this function – contrary to the demands of various coryphaeans of anti-illusionist experiments – has been preserved to this day (Trávniček, 2011,10).

Aiming to achieve the effect of maximum "cognitive clarity" of narration, typical of commercial writing, Dvořák completely disregards the memorial discourse characteristic of today's literary (or more generally, textual) evocations of the personal past. Using the now anachronistic convention of "ideal memory", he quotes dialogues *in extenso*, reconstructs situations (family, social and moral), recapitulates information and comments on political decisions, and inscribes his protagonist's biography into the network of historical conditions, which allows Erben's quasi-autobiography to be transformed into a historical novel (with literary biography linked by many genological threads). The poet's (self-)portrait is thus transformed into an image of a patriotic milieu, which in official statements was described as an identity and worldview monolith, but in the novel is disintegrated from within, broken up by ideological disputes, petty grudges, private ambitions, gossip and unconfirmed accusations of betraying national interests or personal

animosities. As the narrator of a fictional memoir, Erben concentrates his attention on matters closest to him – family life, professional matters, work on subsequent publications – which does not mean that he avoids reflecting on more general issues. As a result, the viewer receives a report on the fate of an honest man, sincerely committed to ethical and national ideals, but entangled in a tangle of historical and political conditions that force him to make constant concessions to the “political” demands of the time and to adopt an almost cocksure attitude. The awareness of the inevitability of compromising behaviour, declared in a private “confession”, which causes frustration and a constant feeling of identity “disruption”, gives rise to the need to “unwind” the traumatic experience resulting in the desire to locate the vision of a desirable world order, governed by strict (ruthless) norms and rules, in fictional (fantastic) ballad constructions or fairy-tale models of reality (cf. Harák, 210, 356). Not only that. Dissatisfaction with the course of political events (the aforementioned neo-absolutist tendencies are in question), forces the protagonist to, at least partially, revise his views on the individualist-relativist usurpations of Romanticism:

Třetího dne dopoledne bylo v Praze k vidění něco mimořádného: všichni úředníci radnice kráčeli průvodem přes Karlův most na Hrad ke svatému Vítu, aby se tam zúčastnili velké děkovné mše za císařovo zachránění, celebrowané samotným pražským arcibiskupem. (...) Stál jsem u pilíře, trochu ztracený v tom obrovském davu, kde se teatrálně předváděla manifestace oddanosti a lásky k Bohem vyvolenému panovníkovi, a styděl jsem se. (...) Byla to pouhá náhoda, že se mi právě teď vytanula na mysli vzpomínka na Mickiewiczův veršovaný epos Konrád Wallenrod? Příběh opovrhovaného zrádce v nepřátelských službách (...), zanechal ve mně, když jsem ho jako student četl poprvé, značné rozpaky. Teprve teď mě napadlo, že ho začínám chápat (Dvořák, 2015, 341–342).

Wallenrodism, one of the central categories of the Polish Romantic reevaluation of the hitherto unquestionable axioms of political (but also Christian) anthropology, becomes for Erben, contemplating his somewhat schizophrenic situation (a Czech patriot employed in a state Austrian office), a kind of signpost, an “instruction manual”, advising how

to act in given circumstances (to continue to undertake activities supporting the national emancipation movement, hiding his real intentions under a mask of forced loyalty), which also inspires him to change his view of the Romantic ethos and admit that it is, at least partly, right. The cautiousness, bordering on cowardice, which governs the protagonist's behaviour and which is sometimes *explicitly* reproached, is, as can be inferred from the discussions reconstructed in the novel among the representatives of the patriotic milieu, and which Dvořák by no means conceals, a kind of "side effect" of a well-thought-out strategy of behaviour. Its basic assumptions, which emphasise the effectiveness of small, everyday, organic, so to speak, work and which place the security of "partial successes" above the risks involved in designing radical and far-reaching undertakings, put a dam against a too open approach to romantic inspirations based on maximalist desires and aspirations. The sobering up of revolutionary enthusiasm, triggered by the defeat of the Spring of Nations, is accompanied by a return to a reassuring policy of "small steps", and the Czech "government of the soul" is once again being held by representatives of the older generation, accustomed to/convinced of the validity (effectiveness) of the methods used to date:

Ti chlapani umírali v nadšeném sebeobětování, aniž by tušili, že jim byla přidělena role v tragikomické frašce. Je mi jich líto, ale rozzlobili mě tak jak dosud nikdo. (...) Je pravda, že Thun už měl sestavenou prozatímní českou vládu, byl jsem do ní také jmenován... Všechno to bylo zmarněno kvůli hlouposti nezodpovědných mladíků, kteří se nechávají vést vášněmi místo rozumem (...). Vášně jsou momentálně naší největší hrozbou. Musíme setrvat v postoji klidného sebevědomí, stát za svými zásadami, (...) pracovat dál ku prospěchu národa... Zrovna vám, pane Erbene, by bylo zcela zbytečně připomínat, že drobná, každodenní mravenčí práce je v konečném důsledku daleko důležitější než patetické řečnění z tribunu (Dvořák, 2015, 258–259).

These words are uttered by František Palacký, in other words one of the most important representatives of Czech historiosophical and political thought with unquestionable authority, who repeatedly set



the directions of the revival initiatives and codified their philosophical background. In the novel, however, “caught” in a private situation, he frankly reveals his emotions, questioning the sense of any mechanism of action beyond the stock of proven methods absolutising the meaning of this “ant’s daily work.”<sup>1</sup> The anti-romantic cutting edge of these accusations seems obvious and sheds new (possibly differently focused) light on the reasons for the firmly declared dislike of the “Byronic formation” that dominated Czech cultural discourse in the first half of the 19th century. This was based, of course, on Herder’s philosophy and official statements on an appreciation of *mediocritas* (disavowing the status of any extremes) and, also linked to the German thinker’s concepts, on ideas about the Czech (or Slavic, more broadly) national character. It is to these that Erben refers in the novel, in a letter to Stanko Vraz intended for publication in the Croatian journal “Kolo”:

Rozhorčeně jsem odsoudil módní rozervanectví, to oblibování si pocitů zmaru a nicoty, které i nám zavedli Karel Hynek Mácha, v jehož stopách se i nadále snaží kráčet Karel Sabina a několik dalších. Českému národu tyhle byronovské temnoty nic neříkají, pravý Čech, ač pronásledovaný četnými nesnáze, si ze svého trpného osudu tropí posměch. (...) Prostý člověk je zkratka skoro vždy vesel. Ať ho potká cokoliv, setře slzy a jde dál, neboť povinnost ho nutí pracovat a nedá mu času na bolestiplné zpytování vlastního nitra; prostý člověk není nikdy sám, je pouhou ztracenou a zdánlivě bezvýznamnou krůpějí v tekoucí bystřině, která se valí

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1 Writing about the situation of Polish culture in the period between the uprisings, Maria Janion highlights the specific relationships differentiating the ideological positions characterising the life stances of the “young” and “old” generations: “The biography of a Romantic writer (...) is most often the biography of a conspirator who learned to use Aesopian language freely and to understand ‘hieroglyphs’ incomprehensible to others. Others were not only representatives of the partitioning authorities, they were also various ‘old men’, cautious, sensible, cold” (Janion, 1975, 77). These considerations could be applied to Czech culture with the proviso, however, that the dividing lines between “old” and “young” are somewhat differently distributed here, and that in patriotic discourse, the representatives of “assertive organicism” gain the upper hand.

směrem k budoucnosti, a nemůže uhnout z koryta, neboť koryto je dáno (Dvořák, 2015, 139–140).<sup>2</sup>

Ultimately, however, in the final chapters of the novel, in a conciliatory atmosphere that soothes outdated disputes and outdated controversies, this asceticism, previously reproached to the poet, is forgiven (though not entirely forgotten), and the former adversaries admit their earlier mistakes, finding the real, which in this case means: romantic, intertextual and world-view subsoil of Erben's ballad paraphrases, underneath the folkloric stylisation hiding a never completely undiscovered existential and metaphysical anxiety (cf. Hrbata, Procházka, 2005, 285–286).

The conclusions that emerge from these considerations correspond with the discussion that takes place around the proposal to find an answer to the question of whether *Kytice* belongs to the competing artistic currents and tendencies on the Czech literary scene at the time. Romantic elements, on the one hand, and signals of Biedermeier ethical discourse, on the other, have been taken into account in this debate (cf. Vondráček, 2010, 62–63). Recent research findings recognise here a specific – one could say: intrinsically aporetic – strategy of using the determinants of both currents,<sup>3</sup> which consists in using the Romantic imaginarium in order to question its (anti-)ethical message, based on the absolutisation of individualistic values, and proposing instead a radically different message, seeking the sense of existence (or making such a sense of life) in the consequent limiting of individual aspirations and subjecting them to a specific correction, which, on the example of the fate of the ballad protagonists, demonstrates the supremacy of the *a priori* given and supreme authority of the sanctified order.<sup>4</sup>

2 Cf. Dolanský, 1970, 71–79.

3 With the caveat, it should be stressed, that the “discovery” of the distinct nature of Biedermeier attitudes and aesthetics did not occur until the late 19th century, and therefore their literary realisation could not have been the “realised goal” of Erben's creative ambitions.

4 Vojtěch Jirát was the first to write about the Biedermeier (“taming Romanticism”) nature of the rules governing the ethos of the ballads included in *Kytice* in

In the novelistic world of *The Spindle of Fate*, the issues of the poet's complicated relationship with the Romantic legacy come to the forefront of the narrator's reflections. By quoting specific texts from *Kytice*, Dvořák reveals their literary intertextual pedigree, in one case in particular, namely in the case of the poem *Záhořovo lože* (Záhoř's Bed) unambiguously (in accordance with established literary interpretations, by the way; cf. Jakobson, 1935, 160–162) motivating its creation by Erben's reaction to the publication of Karel Hynek's poetic novel *Mácha Máj* (May, 1836):

V těch několika zvukomalebných slovech se chvěla temná vodní propast, rozvlněná osudovým dotykem a znějící, jako by někdo v basových rejstřících ladil varhanní píšťaly. (...) Zatraceně, říkal jsem si v duchu, ten bláznivý šílenec Mácha otevřel vrátka snům a vypustil do světa smršť obrazů! Je to tak krásné – a tak rozčilující, něha májových květů, potřísněná krví zločinu... Kdesi v hlubině té Hynkovy básně je skryta lidová balada (...), ale přesto to není ohlas lidové písně, je to cosi naprosto nového, výkřik autorovy zmučené duše... (...) Bože můj, co je proti tomuhle má úporně zvěřovaná báchorka o pokladu! (Dvořák, 2015, 73).

Ambivalences or rather the poet's complex attitude towards Mácha's personality and literary achievements should be regarded as a kind of guiding thread for the metapoetic layer of the narrator's reflections, and the linking of these to the revelation of intertextual creative inspirations, proves that, as time passes, spontaneous admiration here gives way to the need for a polemical response to nihilistic existential despair, which is the ultimate consequence of the romantic individualist's separation from a world that does not fulfil his dreams and expectations (cf. Jakobson, 1935, 159–160):

Vybavil se mi obraz Máchova poutníka, (...) jenž kráčí k zapadajícímu slunci, bičován ledovým větrem... Ach, ano, co učiní ten poutník Hynek

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194.4, in a treatise bearing the telling title *Erben čili Majestát zákona* (Erben or Majesty of the Law) (Jirát, 1978, 43–74).

Mácha? Vrhne se ze skaliny do propasti, pohrouží se do temných vod jezera, přehodí svůj pás přes větev dubu jako oprátku... Co jiného mu zbývá? Máchův pahorek, na něm kolo se zpráchnivělými, přelámanými kostmi (...). Představují si podobnou holou vyvýšeninu, ale místo popravčích nástrojů na ní zřím jedinou jedlu, vysoko vyrostlou, ale zbavenou téměř všech větví, jen s jedinou příčkou pod vrcholem, na níž je rozepjatá dřevěná socha Ukřižovaného... (Dvořák, 2015, 74–75).

Constructing the scenery in such a way that – at the level of symbolic suggestion – it connotes senses that are completely different from Mácha's spatial constructions, antithetical in essence and rooted in Christian anthropology, is Erben's starting point for offering the reader a storyline that is to some extent analogous in terms of the nature of the situation presented (the use of the motif of the father's rejection of his son) and the choice of characters (the figure of the pilgrim), but which bears inverse signs of valuation. It is no longer the legitimate rebellion of an outsider condemned blamelessly to social and existential ostracism, but the metaphysics of humility and the duty of repentance, leading towards forgiveness, reconciliation and – consequently – salvation, that govern the ethical eloquence of Erben's poem, while its message radically contrasts with the Romantic (self-)destructive disagreement with all forms of restriction of individual freedom (Exner, 2010, 381–382; Tureček, 2012, 136–137).

In Dvořák's novel, however, the narrator's doubts, triggered by his first reading of *Máj*, lose their intensity as time passes. They are transformed into an admittedly resigned and nostalgic awareness of the poetic, intertextual affinity that binds the whole of Czech literature together, thanks to a sense of coexistence constituted over (under?) overtly exposed divisions, in a complex network in which every element, even at first sight completely disharmonious, gains a *raison d'être*:

A na konci všeho popravčí pahorek, šibenice, kůl a kolo, *nad nímž se bladá lebka míhá...* (...) Běda tomu, kdo své umění dá do služeb zla... Však *bez konce láska je!* (...) Na okamžik (...) mě uchvátila síla emocí: opět mi ve vzpomínce ožil Mácha, jeho strašný lesů pán Vilém a můj strašný lesů pán Záhoř. Dávné hořkosti a vzájemné spory jsou dávno pryč. Najednou

jsem si uvědomil, že jsme všichni na jedné vlně, ti bývali, ti současní a ti budoucí, že se vzájemně inspirujeme – možná vědomky, možná nevědomky... (Dvořák, 2015, 230–231).

These conclusions, born from watching Josef Kajetán Tyl's stage tale *Strakonický dudák* (1847), show this knot of colligation in the function of a keystone of tradition and a guarantor (or *conditio sine qua non*) of its peculiar cyclicity and long duration.

The concept of the cyclical nature of time, in which decisive moments repeat themselves, giving the protagonists the opportunity to enter a space of supernatural miraculousness close to the domain of the *sacrum*, also underlies the construction of the time frame in Procházka's *The Old School*. The novel's plot, alternating between two precisely dated historical moments (September 1966 – September 1969; July 1849 – February 1853), proves this repetitiveness. It assigns the protagonists of both narrative lines (the seven-year-old Philip, son of a well-known erbenologist, and the author of *Kytice* himself) an analogous role, partly that of adepts in the initiation process, partly that of saviours bringing salvation to a community threatened by the political scheming of representatives of oppressive regimes and infernal forces interfering in the workings of earthly historical mechanisms. Although there is no lack of signals of biographical fiction, the novel operates with a much broader spectrum of genological references, on the one hand including traces of fairy-tale, located at the intersection of its mythical origins and contemporary horror, and on the other, drawing inspiration from the numerous returns in Czech culture to the thawing atmosphere of the 1960s and its sudden collapse in August 1968. The increased or multiplied intertextuality not only corresponds to Erben's creative technique, which drew inspiration, virtually exclusively, from the well-known wandering themes of Slavic folklore, but also determines the direction in which the narrative is conducted:

Otec se na posteli neklidně pohnul, neprobudilo ho však ani následné bušení na dveře, při kterém závora málem vylétla ze zárážek. „Vstávej, ty spáčí, nahoru, odstrč mi tam tu závoru!“ ozval se hlas zvyklý, že ho na slovo poslouchají. Karel klíče ulekaně vytáhl (...) – ať už je venku, kdo chce,

nikomu neotevře! Rozkaz však nebyl určený jemu. Když pohlédl za sebe k loži, spatřil otce, ještě před chvílí nemohoucího, jak si sám, bez cizí pomoci sedá. „Pro Boha, otče, pokoj měj, zůstaň, kde jsi, a nevstávej!” vykřikl pln strachu o jeho zdraví (Procházka, 2022, 312).

This passage, recounting the night during which Erben keeps vigil at the bedside of his dying father, specifically dated and located in the poet's hometown of Miletín (and thus using information that is a referential sign defining the historical dimension of the narrative), updates, both by reviving the “standard” signals of the atmosphere of horror and horror-fantasy elements, and by introducing – in the function of novelistic dialogues – (almost literal) quotations from the ballad *Svatební košile* (Wedding Shirts), questions about the sources of poetic inspiration. An analogous mechanism controls both time frames of the story. Behind the apparently realistic narrative, fissures gradually open up leading to an ontologically different reality – an infernal/chthonic underworld, the interior of Blaník Mountain or the Midsummer Night's enchanted forests. In other words, the factual verifiability of the literary representation of the world collides here – in a kind of feedback – with a different conception of poetic truth: mediated by mythical constructs of fiction, traces of which the poet sought in folklore, trying to find there the original *mythos* in the conviction that such a path can lead to the recreation of the original (equally original) *logos*. Erben, as has often been emphasised by experts of his work (cf. Jakobson, 1935, 155–159), treated the question of his poetry's relation to ancient myth in terms of a fundamental and authoritative exegetical key, enabling him to delineate the interpretation of texts by means of the actualisation of meanings belonging to the most archaic cultural traditions of humanity. Moving to the margins of consideration the question of the hierarchical priority of scientific and/or poetic discourse (cf. Jakobson, 1935, 155; Frye, 1969, 294; Čoláková, 2015, 148), attention should be directed towards the strategy employed in the novel, a somewhat, it must be admitted, perverse one, of exploiting the Romantic (using the authority of Johann Gottfried von Herder and the brothers Wilhelm and Jacob Grimm) belief in the eternal authority of that universal and timeless truth of myth, whose only “spiritual heir” remains

folk art and its poetic stylisations (cf. Weinman, 1969, 310; Hrbata, Procházka, 2005, 285).

Procházka thus starts from Erben's documentarily attested biography, which, however, is for him only a tool for a particular game of making novel fiction more real. Such verification serves primarily to situate the fictional – fantastic – events within a referentially verifiable world. The basic biographical data, integrally linked to the balladic and fairy-tale narrative patterns, blur the common-sense boundaries between *Dichtung* and *Wahrheit*, which, on the one hand, helps to build narrative tension, incidentally giving new meanings to the intertextuality associated with Czech *ohlasová* (folklore-inspired) poetry, but on the other hand, on an intra-fabric level, makes Erben a pawn in the game of otherworldly powers who try, through the reading of his works, to obtain the keys (in both a literal and metaphorical sense),<sup>5</sup> opening the way towards the attainment of supreme knowledge and – consequently – the fulfilment of the salvific mission.

The alternative history of *Kytice's* genesis, on the inversion principle of rearranging the succession of effect and cause, allows the ballad stories to be transformed into an encrypted “report” of real events, in which quasi-folk convention conceals a latent meaning, only to be found and read by the initiated. This means, among other things, that in the fictional world of the *The Old School*, Erben's ballads record facts (and facts that are momentous from the point of view of the proper – in ethical, interpersonal, but also political and historiosophical terms – functioning of reality), and folkloric stylization is used to precisely program the obliteration of traces of the poet's real experiences. These experiences not only go far beyond Erben's biography known from the research findings, but also defy the fundamental principles of probability. Behind the ordinary events “taking place” in the profane sphere, there is here – in the transcendent space – an eternal war between the forces of good and evil, reminiscent of the angelic-satanic mystery struggle for

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5 In the novel's reality, the enchanted objects, plants and animals known from the fairy-tale imaginarium (the basic, recurring motif in both time planes concerns the search for the fern flower) turn out to be real, although attainable only to a select few (Erben, Filip).

the soul of man and the fate of the world. In this conflict, the protagonists of the two plot lines of the novel play the role of depositaries of the power bestowed upon them (possibly discovered in them) by these transcendent powers, which predestine them to protect and save the rudimentary values that determine the survival of the ethical universe of the anthroposphere:

“Četli jste to pozorně? Nedožvěděli se snad, kam mají na určitý den a hodinu zajít a jak se tam dostat? Tak proč tam nešli? (...) Nenapověděl jim snad on sám při jednom ze setkání, že má pocit, jako by jejich příběhy skutečně byly?” (...) “Měl jsem strach, že je to jenom... pověst. Že... bych tam přes to přese všechno nakonec přišel, udělal všechno, co je psáno, a... nic. Nestalo by se nic.” (...) “Oni byli vyvoleni, oni se rozhodnout musejí” (Procházka, 2022, 345–346).

For fear of being exposed, Erben consequently decides to keep his most “referential” (within the framework of novelistic fiction, of course) work secret, namely the ballad *Svatojanská noc*, never finished by him and therefore also “absent”, in the otherwise carefully considered composition of *Kytice*. This absence, noted in research into the poet’s work (and not only in scholarly reflection; one of the comic book adaptations of the volume takes this ballad into account), is the object of conjecture in the novel by demonic (in the literal sense of the word) figures (incarnated in the form of the Royal and Imperial censor and the headmaster of the eponymous old school) and the decision-makers of the communist state (allied directly with these devilish figures) trying to find the clues encrypted in the ballad’s tale that lead to the place where the fairy-tale treasure is hidden and (more importantly) to the gate/portal opening the mythical Blaník Mountain. The only and necessary condition to achieve this goal turns out to be the acquisition of the magic flower/fern seed:

Oj divná, divná, svatojanská noc,  
Kdež kapradí svou rozvinuje moc.  
Komu se dostane jeho zlaté sémě,  
Zjevny mu budou poklady země,  
Zjevny mu mu budou tajnosti všude,



Dozvíš se, co prve bývalo, co někdy bude.  
Avšak sotva kdo pro závistné síly,  
Muž' z toho semene zrnka zlatého dobyti;  
Pakli by dobyl maně v dobrou chvíli,  
Sotva kdo muž' jeho užiti (qtd. in: Zíbrt, 1913, 186).

This *sotva kdo'* ("hardly anyone"), transposed into the space of the novel world, determines the (lack of) success of the mission entrusted to Filip (and earlier Erben). The protagonists, unconsciously and, so to speak, against their will, are drawn into the cogs of the machinery of history, in the metaphysical sphere "working" to programme the course of earthly/modern history, parallel to all its rational interpretations. The dependence of the vision thus formulated on Romantic historiosophical concepts seems evident, although traces of postmodern counterfactual narratives, possibly elements of where worlds theory, play an equally important role (cf. Doležel, 2008, 35–52; 112–128).

These links, made more explicit in the twentieth-century plotline, make it possible to root the novel's "intertextual phantasmagoria", close in essence not so much to the autotelic-anti-illusionist experiments of postmodernism as to popular horror sensationalism, in the space of metaliterary discourse and to revive seemingly long-debunked notions of the real-world influence of poetry on the workings of empirical reality. Such notions, which defined the status of literature (as a transmitter of collective aspirations and a codifier of identity models) and its creator (a singer, bard, tribune, spokesman for the collective) in Erben's time, have now lost their obviousness and were consigned to the dustbin of receptionist theory and practice as early as the 1960s, i.e. even before the (inter)media boom. A commonly felt (or rather provoked as an unwanted side-effect of a simplified school education) resentment of the "anachronistic" nineteenth-century canon, which no longer corresponds to the horizon of the reader's expectations (Hans Robert Jauss's term; cf. Jauss, 1972, 271–307), as it poses "outdated" questions with unconvincing answers. From this point of view, the choice of a child protagonist is justified in Procházka's novel, as only a child can direct a spontaneous, naïve and unencumbered by apriori prejudices gaze towards Erben's ballads:

Namátkou zalistoval a oči se mu zastavily na prvních řádcích balady *Vodník*. Když je četl, vzpomínal na obrázek pod kterým sedával v jídelně (...). Byl na něm hastrman na vrbě, pokojně pokuřoval z fajfky a měsíc na tmavém nebi nad ním se jako v zrcadle odrážel na hladině rybníka (...). *Svit, měsíčku, svit, at' mi šije nit'!* zasmál se Fíla. (...) Jak ale četl, úsměv se mu pomalu vytrácel z tváře, dech se zrychloval a několikrát se přistihl, že by knížku nejradší zavřel. Nějaká síla ho však nutila číst dál, tak byl děj balady napínavý, že se od ní nedalo odrhnout. (...) Tu noc se idylický obrázek Ladova hastrmana ze školní jídelny, který nosil ve vzpomínkách, vzňal plamenem a navždycky shořel (Procházka, 2022, 247).



Fig. 1 Josef Lada, *Vodník*

The child's reading perspective not only restores the ballads' original capacity to emotionally affect the viewer (Filip reads Erben's texts not as a "respectable relic" that is the subject of trivialised school interpretations, but "experiences" them through emotional or affective immersion), but also makes it possible to question the imaginative paradigm that is

most entrenched in Czech communal memory, namely the conviction of the idyllic character of native culture. The iconographic convention of Josef Lada, which embodies this arcadianism, loses out in the novel to the romantic, close to the *intentio operis* (although not necessarily *intentio auctoris*), exegetical code, arguing that it is only in this interpretation that *Kytice* is capable of sustaining its receptive appeal and that any attempt to “disenchant” its profound metaphysical message only results in a “shallowing” of the text’s sense-making richness and deprives it of the chance of a “living” presence in the space of readers’ preferences.

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