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## The originality or worldliness of Czech literature? Magazine polemic in the period when the *Májovci* were appearing on the Czech cultural scene<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** This paper deals with the situation in the mid-nineteenth century when periodicals of the day featured heated discussions about national literature and a broader European context. This period of Czech literary history overlaps with the appearance of the *Májovci* [the “May School”], more precisely precedes it slightly. The study is based on the relevant chapter in Ivo Říha’s monograph *Možnosti četby. Karolina Světlá v diskurzu literární kritiky druhé poloviny 19. století* [Possible readings. Karolina Světlá in critical literary discourse of the second half of the nineteenth century] (Červený Kostelec: Pavel Mervart, 2012).

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<sup>1</sup> The essay is based on the author’s long-term research on the issue. The results of this research have been published in a number of journal articles and in a monograph *Možnosti četby. Karolina Světlá v diskurzu literární kritiky druhé poloviny 19. století* [Possible readings. Karolina Světlá in critical literary discourse of the second half of the nineteenth century] (Červený Kostelec: Pavel Mervart, 2012). In this form it is an original text.

In the context of Czech culture, the period around the middle of the nineteenth century can be considered one of the most critical turning points in discussions about the direction of Czech literature, its desirable forms and functions, and how a writer and his work should relate to reality. Many researchers have already noted that the period around the publication of the first *Máj*<sup>2</sup> [May] (1858) almanac and subsequent magazine polemic launched, in their own way, a new era in Czech discussions about literature – in general as well as in quite specific aspects (an example of one of the more prominent newer contributions on this topic is Martin Hrdina’s book *Mezi ideálem a nahou pravdou*,<sup>3</sup> [Between the Ideal and the naked truth] in which the author follows the development of discussions about Czech literary realism – naturally taking into account European contexts and relationships – certainly not by chance commences his investigation of this issue with the situation at the end of the 1850s).

However, prior to the appearance of the *Májovci* on the Czech cultural scene, we see a relatively ambitious attempt at naming relationships between national literature (its historical and contemporary form) and a pan-European context in *Obzor* [Horizon] magazine, edited and published by Jaroslav Pospíšil in Prague in 1855.<sup>4</sup> The initial text explaining its program, whose author is not specified but evidently was Karel Štorch, states: “To observe intently every event in our intellectual, especially *literary life*, to express a justified judgment on every more important phenomenon on the Czech literary horizon, but at the same time diligently monitoring emancipation from *foreign literature*, both Slavic and Western, as well as expressions of national life as such; to report on those activities that aim for *greater knowledge of the country and its inhabitants*; to describe *journeys on water and on land* – that shall be the main purpose of these pages.”<sup>5</sup> Although such ambitiously formulated plans soon came to an end (the magazine ceased to be published, 1855 was its first

2 *Máj. Jarní almanach na rok 1858*, [May. Spring almanac for 1858], Prague: H. Dominikus, 1859.

3 HRDINA, Martin, *Mezi ideálem a nahou pravdou. Realismus v českých diskusích o literatuře 1858–1891* [Between ideal and the naked truth. Realism in Czech discussions about literature 1858–1891], Prague: Academia 2016.

4 *Obzor*. Listy pro národopis, dějepis, veřejný život, literaturu a umění, zvláště nyní a vlasti. [A paper for national studies, history, public life, literature and art, especially now and the nation.] Ed. J. POSPÍŠIL, Prague 1855.

5 (an.) “Náš věk a literatura česká” [Our age and Czech literature], *Obzor*, vol. I, 1855, No 1, p. 7; italics and boldface identical to the original text. We can read about the anonymity of individual contributors to *Obzor* in, for example, Vlček’s *Dějiny české literatury*: “A new feature of editorial practice at *Obzor* was the principle of not signing submitted contributions and to tend to look at *what* was being submitted rather than *who* was submitting it. The publisher merely guaranteed that individual contributions come from reliable sources and that they come from serious authors who focus on the matter and not on persons.” (VLČEK, Jaroslav, *Z dějin. Dějiny české literatury III*. Prague: SNKLHU, 1960, p. 273).

and simultaneously last year, incomplete at that – the magazine de facto ended in August of that year) and the contemporary Czech literary history studies tend to downplay the importance of this project in extensive and detailed synthetic works,<sup>6</sup> its role in the issue at hand cannot be entirely overlooked. The quoted introductory article contains a number of ideas whose clear echoes can be found, inter alia, in subsequent manifestations by the *Májovci*. More precisely: in discussions that the *Májovci* joined toward the end of the 1850s, we see a direct continuation of issues that had already been broached in this form several years earlier – against a background of confrontations between stances taken between Pospíšil's *Obzor* and Frič's almanac *Lada Nióla*.<sup>7</sup> The latter was published soon after the New Year in 1855, and adverse reactions from many sides were not long making an appearance. The approach taken by *Obzor* was among them, though it differed in many ways from other indignant voices, above all in that despite publishing a negatively-tinged assessment of *Lada Nióla*, its overall direction (declared in the program mentioned above statement) also exhibited some remarkable and important areas of agreement with Frič's project.

When in *Literatura česká devatenáctého století* [Czech literature of the nineteenth century] Leander Čech analyzes the causes of the stiff resistance encountered by Frič's *Lada Nióla*, he primarily draws attention to political (and personal) reasons. He claims that “in literature, supporters of old political parties are speaking, as they were created after 1848. [...] Literature is looked upon from a political perspective, and only thus shall understand the subsequent battles, seemingly literary, but actually waged against persons of other

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6 In *Literatura české devatenáctého století*, published in 1907, Leander Čech still devotes several pages to *Obzor* when he speaks of it in relation to Frič's *Lada Nióla* (cf. ČECH, Leander, “Literární směry v letech padesátých,” in: *Literatura česká devatenáctého století*. III/2. *Od Boženy Němcové k Janu Nerudovi*. Prague 1907, p. 151–165). In *Dějiny české literatury*, in the passages written at the start of the twentieth century, Jaroslav Vlček also does not fail to mention *Obzor*. Like L. Čech he focuses primarily on the context of *Lada Nióla* (VLČEK, 1960, p. 272–280). But onward – just as an example: Arne Novák, in his *Přehledné dějiny literatury české*, where otherwise discussion of nineteenth-century literature spans almost a thousand pages, mentions *Obzor* on four lines of text (he labels it a “short-lived magazine” with a “conservative fact” – cf. NOVÁK, Arne, NOVÁK, Jan V., *Přehledné dějiny literatury české*, Brno: Atlantis, 1995, p. 414); after another not quite thirty years the authors of the third volume of *Dějiny české literatury* are completely silent on the subject of Pospíšil's *Obzor* (cf. *Dějiny české literatury III. Literatura druhé poloviny devatenáctého století*, ed. M. POHORSKÝ., Prague: Československá akademie věd, 1961).

7 *Lada Nióla. Almanach na rok 1855*, ed. J. V. FRIČ, Prague 1854. – When looking at projects of this type published in the mid-1850s, one cannot but also notice another almanac: *Perly české. Vydaný od Sboru Musea království českého*. [Czech Pearls. Published by the Collection of the Museum of the Czech Kingdom], ed. A. J. VRĚTKO, Prague 1855). We shall leave aside the characteristics of the almanac as such and its relationship with Frič's *Ladě Nióle* or Pospíšil's *Obzor*. With respect to the questions dealt with there, we are focusing on the mutual relationship between *Lada Nióla* and *Obzor*.

political views [...] Political reasons certainly ignited this resistance and elicited voices that absolutely rejected the almanac. Hence, the sharpest criticism also came from the most conservative party, which saw in Frič nothing other than a conspirator and revolutionary, and in writers represented here the successors of the March and post-March radical party in Bohemia.”<sup>8</sup> From the perspective of period approaches to national literature, he then sees the center of this conflict in particular in two of Frič’s requirements for new Czech literature: “to notice contemporary life and the ideas that affect it” and “to convey only things lived and experienced”. And he adds: “That is precisely what set him apart from the existing patriotic school and its heirs: it was either enthused by German classicism and had no thoughts of temporal questions, or it was in the later Romantic spirit, delving too deeply into the Middle Ages, the past, historicism.”<sup>9</sup>

If, at this point, we remind ourselves of the thesis contained in the introductory programmatic article “Náš věk a literatura česká” [Our age and Czech literature], quite a clear unity and differences of opinion between *Lada Nióla* and *Obzor* appear: “The emulation of Western poets, though not without utility, shall evidently never elevate us in the eyes of the West itself. [...] Only extraction from rich national mines, from national myths, legends, and songs shall give our poetry, our literature that quality of independence without which it would not be literature apart. Only thus shall we be equal partners to the Western world, rewarding it for the mighty stream of ideas it furnishes us; only when we multiply the treasure sent us with our treasures shall we gain the right to call the learning we enjoy our own, as does the Frenchman, the Englishman, the German. [...] In the great harmony of all nations, our voice will be distinguished only if we sing in our own voice.”<sup>10</sup>

Pospíšil’s *Obzor* thus agreed ultimately with Frič in promoting domestic lexical sources in contemporary literature. Neither did it oppose it in its view of the approach that needed to be taken to studying foreign literature and the eventual absorption of their influences (in other words, our literature will be *world-class* only when it is original, specifically *Czech*). The sticking point was elsewhere: in the different stance on artistic reflection of temporal issues. The author of the cited article “Náš věk a literatura česká” deals with this issue but definitely does not do so in agreement with Frič’s stance. On the contrary – that which Frič formulates in the given sense as one of the key tasks of the new forms of our literature is firmly rejected by the personalities associated with

8 ČECH, 1907, p. 156–158. Here this “most conservative party” in Čech’s interpretation is represented primarily by the editorial staff of *Slovenské noviny* located in Vienna, which published an indignant review of *Lada Nióla* in 5 January 1855.

9 ČECH, 1907, p. 160–161.

10 (an.) “Náš věk a literatura česká,” *Obzor*, vol. I, 1855, No 1, p. 4.

*Obzor* magazine. Though they generally welcome artistic reflection of temporal issues as a positive phenomenon, they understand this term quite differently than Frič. Our interpretation of this conflict is basically the same as that offered by Vlček's approach (as we note above, alongside Čech's discussion in *Literatura česká devatenáctého století*, in Vlček's case, this is actually the only contemporary literary history syntheses that deal with Pospíšil's *Obzor* in greater detail – this is also why we focus on it here): "If *Obzor* wants our literature to faithfully describe 'domestic life and morals,' by this, it certainly means only its positive, clear, elevating, and calming side, hence its bright side, while *Lada Nióla* intends to also deal with its shadows, struggles, inconsistencies, distortions, it wants to whip and damn, revolt and reform, it wants to show rot and perversion, obsolescence and internal disagreements to the world, in short, in the field of poetry it also wants to include all sorts of life's dissonance and its dark side."<sup>11</sup> We find an even more succinct attempt and an unambiguous description of the problem in Čech's study: "The heart of the dispute between Frič and *Obzor* was therefore actually just the question whether a poet should be a representative of his age, whether he should and can participate in contemporary events and fights and struggles."<sup>12</sup> Here, Leander Čech also notices something that, in finality, he interprets as a direct link to the thinking of the members of the generation of the *Máj* almanac: the influence of Young Germany.

In the case of *Lada Nióla*, he even sees this fact as the main benefit of Frič's entire project. When he speaks of the low artistic quality of the contributions it contains (including those that the protagonist himself penned), he adds, on the other hand: "But nevertheless *Lada Nióla* is not without literary significance, yes, it is an important milestone in the history of Czech literary tendencies. It illustrates how current literary developments in Germany did not fail to influence younger writers. *Lada Nióla* is Czech resistance, though not independent, created through foreign agency, against the old orders of Classicism and Romanticism. The literary tendencies of Young Germany resound from *Lada*

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11 VLČEK, 1960, p. 275. – Vlček further describes the interpretation of agreement and differences of opinion between *Lada Nióla* and *Obzor* (inter alia with an emphasis on how the criticism of *Lada Nióla* published in *Obzor* differed from other unfavourable reactions): "*Obzor* is far from orthodox, it is not reactionary like other previous unfavourable voices. It too is for the study of foreign poetry, it too sees this poetry as mere preparation and a means toward independent domestic poetry, it too advocates the highest ideals of humanity like *Lada Nióla*. The difference is merely in that *Obzor* wants to present to the domestic reader only that which came from his spirit and opinion, while *Lada Nióla* presents everything that attracts the poet through his personal individuality and mood; and the difference is then in the fact that *Obzor* sees negation and scepticism, raggedness and spleen, darkness and grief in the thoughts and material of our poetry as a dangerous and harmful element, while *Lada Nióla* sees it as the right, even the obligation of every true poet to be a 'faithful mirror of what stirred and bubbled in humanity during his time', – hence also of Czech poets." (Ibid, p. 279–280.)

12 ČECH, 1907, p. 162.

*Nióla*, and after Havlíček, these are new reverberations of the realism being born in European literature. [...] Frič, like Young Germany, also criticizes Romanticism and Classicism for its proud elevation above its time and its milieu, and emphatically demands close contact with today's great and mighty ideas."<sup>13</sup>

What has been stated up to now, therefore, indicates that if the *Máj* almanac of 1858 was the ideological heir of one of the sides participating in the confrontation of stances described here, then that which we find in Neruda's and Hálek's statements from the end of the 1850s seems to be the legacy of Frič's opinions (more precisely: as agreement with his sympathies for the tendencies of Jung Deutschland – in the sense described above), and in the very least in opinions regarding the artistic involvement of a writer in temporal questions. Naturally, it is necessary to also take into account that there was a direct link in the person of Josef Václav Frič himself, who since 1858 had been in direct contact with Neruda and Hálek, helped prepare *Máj* and is featured in it as an author (the introductory poem devoted to the memory of Karel Hynek Mácha and other poetry published here under the pseudonym of M. Brodský).

At the same time, however, it is impossible to ignore how the ideas presented by Pospíšil's *Obzor* could have resonated in the thinking of the new *Májovci*. From our perspective, the repeatedly accented demand for originality and specificity in national literature is of primary importance – as the sole path to the community of great European works of literature. In the already quoted declaration (perhaps by Štorch) about a “great harmony of all nations” in which “our voice will certainly also be distinguished only if we shall sing in our voice,” it is genuinely possible to read what *later*; we also find in the case of Jan Neruda and Vítězslav Hálek (as participants in the discourse on the role of literature and also as writers of poetry). This “later” needs to be underscored, however – we must consider that Neruda's and especially then Hálek's perspective on this critical question changed significantly over the coming years.

That in which Frič's *Lada Nióla* and Pospíšil's *Obzor* agreed, the *Májovci* at first emphatically rejected: “Whereas in *Lada Nióla* Frič stated that he wants to give the new Czech poetry a national foundation, whereas those working with *Obzor* wanted to have new Czech poetry that is a mirror and image of national life, some writers from the *Máj* circle, mainly Hálek and Neruda, decided to prove that poetry not only should not, but cannot be national.”<sup>14</sup> They declared their stances like this at the end of the 1850s. These were revised only later – both in the case of Neruda and also in the case of Světlá, and evidently most prominently in pronouncements by Vítězslav Hálek published after 1861 (but more on that later).

13 ČECH, 1907, p. 159–160.

14 ČECH, 1907, p. 185.

The situation that arose in 1858 and 1859 in connection with the arrival of the Májovci in the contemporary literary arena is most often interpreted as a clash of “cosmopolitan” thinking with attachment to the richness of domestic cultural history as the sole source of contemporary art; a clash of youth with conservative “ruminants” (in Hálek’s terminology)<sup>15</sup> requiring the new Czech literature to rehash purely Czech (folk) though artistically long dead creative models. However, the entire dispute was relatively more complex, for it is impossible to synecdochically reduce its essence to a black-and-white conflict between the “old” and the “young.” As we have already indicated, the main thing is that the roots of the conflicting nature of this developmental phase of discourse about literature are much more profound. In their statements from the end of the 1850s, the personalities within the *Máj* circle advanced and accented issues that had already been topical during the first half of the decade, even (in their essence) during the pre-March period.

One of the key texts in which the new generation expressed themselves regarding these permanently present questions was Hálek’s essay “Básnictví české v poměru k básnictví vůbec”<sup>16</sup> [Czech poetry in relation to poetry as such] printed on 24 June 1859 in *Obrazy života*. The author thus only joined the discussion that had developed on the pages of *Obrazy života* and *Poutník od Otavy* a half-year after they began. He was originally spurred to write these thoughts by an unsigned text entitled “Básně Adolfa Heyduka. Máj”<sup>17</sup> [Poems of Adolf Heyduk. May], which was published in installments starting in June

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15 “...after all, we are here for only a year and a half, and hopefully with this our journey is not yet over; just wait a few short years, my dear sirs, perhaps you will be convinced otherwise, perhaps even that we know those national songs that you advised us to read, know *at least* as well as you. But after those few short years, God willing, it will also be evident who is more of a poet, whether he who is a real poet or he who is capable of being only a national ruminant.” HÁLEK, Vítězslav, “Básnictví české v poměru k básnictví vůbec,” *Obrazy života*, vol. I, 1859. Cited according to V. H. *O literatuře I (Úvahy o písemnictví a spisovatelích. Časové projevy a boje literární. Příležitostné články o české literatuře.)* [On literature I. (Thoughts on literature and writers. Temporal manifestations and literary battles. Occasional articles on Czech literature)], Prague: Jan Laichter, 1920, p. 8.

16 HÁLEK, Vítězslav. “Básnictví české v poměru k básnictví vůbec,” *Obrazy života*, vol. I, 1859, No 6, pp. 233–235.

17 (an.) “Básně Adolfa Heyduka. Máj,” *Pražské noviny* 3, 4, 5, 8, 18, 21, and 26 June 1859. The author of the text is unknown, but he is most likely not the loudest participant in clashes with the editorial staff of *Obrazy života*, Jakub Malý. This is because at the beginning of the essay we find a negative statement that is clearly aimed at him: “...we read examples of his [Heyduk’s] poems classified among the field of creations of those poets that one of the older Czech writers sharply and yes, also roughly criticized, ‘apparently’ wanting to correct them, and steer them in the right direction. Although we recognize the intent pretended by this judge as a good one and in many respects we ourselves with that the direction and manner of thinking of these poets became different: after all, we cannot approve sharp denunciations of the so-called ‘Romantic school’ and partial judgement that it received both ‘for’ and ‘against’. This shall correct nothing and only once again elicit indignation and partiality” (“Básně Adolfa Heyduka. Máj,” *Pražské noviny* 3 June 1859.)

of that year in *Pražské noviny*. By discussing Heyduk's poems, the writer addresses questions of a much more general nature. We find the formulations that became the primary impulse for Hálek's reaction right in the introductory paragraphs: "... published once again were poems that for all purposes call: 'Hey Byron, Heine, et al. have not died yet; we are proof of this!' forgetting for all their rambling on foreign meadows to look around in their own homeland for grammar, for syntax, for the characteristics and nature of Czech songs especially and Slavic ones in general, and thus became enrichment for any literature, not just Czech!"<sup>18</sup> Here, the author of the text looks upon Heyduk's poetry as one of the manifestations of the misguided direction of the "school" of some young literati; to characterize their work, ironic shorthand suffices: "... one borrows Byron's raggedness, Lenau's ravings, Heine's coldness and sarcasm, often including immorality..."<sup>19</sup> and then offers his own vision of the only path along which the new Czech literature should continue: "If the Czech nation is to be served by Czech poems, if the Czech people is to be cultivated and educated in every respect, we must go back to the Classical past, and then go forward, stopping at Čelakovský and Erben."<sup>20</sup> This is followed by emphatic rejection of any accusations that such an approach would distance Czech writing from Europe and by condemnation of work that merely emulates foreign examples, along with an expression of deep faith in the richness and potential of domestic cultural history: "... we do not condemn the reading of foreign, truly excellent poets, but we condemn absolutely blindly following and repeating these foreign examples. Czech poetry has long been recognized as being its own and independent and hence has a sufficient life force to, in time again, become what it once was. It was classical; hence, without foreign help, it can once again achieve classicism."<sup>21</sup>

The starting point for Hálek's broad "answer" in the essay "Czech poetry in relation to poetry as such" is thus, in the first place, skepticism toward the possibilities of such development of our national writing, which is based solely on itself (on its historical forms): "...will Czech poetry limp behind others, if we accept the canon of those who say: let Czech poetry become the only source of your poetry. [...] Does Czech poetry already have so much in itself that it can, without all danger, draw only from itself? God knows it hasn't! [...] Czech poetry has excellent examples of songs, ballads, and small expository poems, perhaps as any nation can be proud of. But what else? Should this be poetry in its entirety? Where, then, shall drama remain? The novel? The epic? Does

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18 Ibid.

19 (an.) "Básně Adolfa Heyduka. Máj," *Pražské noviny* 3 June 1859.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.



Czech poetry now also have examples for this? It does not.”<sup>22</sup> Against the call for literature based on national, traditional roots, Hálek here pits the notion of artistic literary production that exceeds such a narrowed space: “Poetry was, is, and shall be only one, and this being only that which has true poetic value.”<sup>23</sup> He then explains his own understanding of the term *actual poetic value* as follows: “The realm of poetry is infinite and extends where man extends, and the world around him, and the subject of poetry is, therefore, *man* and the rest of the world as far as it stands in relation to *man*, and truth as far as man knows it; [...] Therefore, the subject of poetry is the whole of man with the whole of his life and all relations. [...] There is no difference here; a man may call himself a Czech man or an English, Greek, or Eskimo man: if he is a man, he is the subject of poetry.”<sup>24</sup> Along these lines (a literary work as an image of reality, a mirror of “man as man” and the reality he experiences) Hálek proceeds further, in the first place naturally touching upon the problem of the reception of an artistic text and its didactic effect.<sup>25</sup>

From the quoted statements, among other things, it is pretty evident that Vítězslav Hálek agrees with the opinions of those around Pospíšil’s *Obzor* – and actually also with the author of the aforementioned essay published in *Pražské noviny*, which became the initial impulse to write “Czech poetry in relation to poetry as such.” Like his detractors, Hálek also, in fact, rejects the copying of foreign literary works. But his thinking then takes a different direction. Suppose the representatives of *Obzor* see the only possible path to the worldliness of Czech literature to achieve *specific Czechness* (“Only extraction from rich national mines, from national myths, legends, and songs shall give our poetry, our literature that quality of independence without which it would not be literature apart. Only thus shall we be equal partners to the Western world...”),<sup>26</sup> then Hálek opposes them in the sense that he prefers an effort to achieve artistic expression that would, on the contrary, interfere with the *nationally specific*, exceed it: “Not Czech but, not English, not Greek poetry is poetry exclusively;

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22 HÁLEK, Vítězslav, “Básnictví české v poměru k básnictví vůbec.” Cited per NOVOTNÝ, Miloslav (ed.), *Život Jana Nerudy. Dopisy – dokumenty. Díl druhý. Mladistvé zápasy* [Life of Jan Neruda. Letters – documents. Part two. Struggles of youth,] Prague: Československý spisovatel 1953, pp. 218–219.

23 Ibid, p. 215.

24 Ibid, p. 215.

25 “That which is purely poetic is understood by every person as a *person*, because it is purely human, and that which is *only* Greek or *only* Jewish or *only* Arabic about poetry, this is understood *only* by a Greek, *only* by a Jew, *only* by an Arab, but never by a person as a *person*. Such poetry may nurture a Greek, a Jew, or an Arab, but never a person; such [poetry] may satisfy the passions of one or the other, put this or that lazy nation to sleep, but can never educate it; a poet who is *only* such may be good *Greek* poet, etc., but a very average *poet as such*.” (Ibid, pp. 215–216.)

26 (an.) “Náš věk a literatura česká,” *Obzor*, vol. I, 1855, No 1, p. 4.

but poetry, including Czech poetry, is *poetry as such*, and that is the only true, unerring, enlightening, elevating, redemptive.”<sup>27</sup>

However, it is also worth mentioning that Hálek’s theses described above contain a certain inner contradiction. Leander Čech had already noticed that the author contradicts himself in one crucial aspect. In a detailed commentary on Hálek’s theoretical concept of poetry as such (whose subject is “man as man” and not “*just a Greek, just a Jew, just an Arab*”), he notes: “Truly oddly does this theory compare with the other opinion that the subject of poetry is *life!* Where in life do such people exist? Where are these people who would be neither Czechs nor Englishmen nor Greeks nor Eskimos, etc.?”<sup>28</sup> Discovery of what he thus interprets as a key contradiction, Čech then provides evidence that “the problem of nationality in poetry and in art was not posed clearly by the *Máj* circle. This is why later Neruda and Světlá took back some opinions declared at that time and spoke entirely differently about the matter.”<sup>29</sup> Perhaps it could have in part been thus, nevertheless in this form, we consider Čech’s causal interpretation (“back then they did not have a clear idea, and hence later took it back”) to be a bit of a simplification. But from our perspective, something else is more important.

Via Hálek’s discussion of the problem of “poetry as such” in relation to the requirement for artistic reflection of “real life,” we come closer to what we call a clear sign of period thinking of Young Germany. Hence, what can be assumed to be an influence present both in the creation of Frič’s opinions in the first half of the 1850s and in the attitudes of those around the *Máj* almanac several years later. If the idea of the new generation is a literary work with pan-humanistic semantic content and reach (in the sense of Hálek’s theses), a work written by an author instructed by foreign examples, but without mechanical copying of that which others have long since put behind them, and if the only path to it is a *truthful* artistic reflection of experiential reality (although it is precisely here where, along with Czech, we can see a certain contradiction), then for the given period it is fundamental and necessary to above all define this *truth of artistic expression* – to specify the character and sense of the correlation of literary fiction and “the world as the horizon of this fiction”.<sup>30</sup>

We thus find ourselves at the foundation of one of the most essential discourses on artistic methodology of the entire nineteenth century: in the discussion of the mimetic function of a literary work, about critical reading,

27 HÁLEK, Vítězslav, “Básnictví české v poměru k básnictví vůbec.” Cited according to *Život Jana Nerudy II* [The Life of Jan Neruda II], p. 218.

28 ČECH, 1907, p. 189.

29 Ibid, p. 189.

30 STIERLE, Karlheinz, “Co je recepcce u fikcionálních textů” [What is reception in fictional texts]. In *Čtenář jako výzva (Výbor z prací kostnické školy recepční estetiky)*. Brno: Host, 2001, p. 202.

interpretation, and evaluation of the meaning of a text as a “mirror of reality” – at the core of *disputes about artistic realism*. Already in polemics initiated by the arrival of the Máj circle on the Czech cultural scene, we clearly recognize that which, three decades later, was formulated in the first and in its significance, foremost synthetic work on the aesthetics of realism by Otakar Hostinský as the “dispute between beauty and truth.”<sup>31</sup> When in “Škodlivé směry” [Harmful directions], Neruda rejects accusations that the artistic direction of his generation is immoral, his claims include: ...we thus need mainly faithful stories from life, images of people in all circumstances, collections of authentic examples, experiences unfabricated and real. [...] Our younger writers are turning to the truth, to reality, that is the origin of their heresy, the immorality of their direction.”<sup>32</sup> In the young Jan Neruda, attempts at defining the term *truth of artistic expression* (see above) are de facto the pursuit of the right to present a faithful picture of reality (i.e. artistic expression that faithfully corresponds to how the writer perceives and interprets reality), regardless of how sharply it conflicts with the current notion of verbal “beauty.” In which, years later, Hostinský once again agrees with him in his way: “If human life is to be described faithfully and ruthlessly, it is, however, quite often necessary to also touch its less melodious strings...”<sup>33</sup>

It is natural that an attitude formulated in this spirit regarding the form and function of a literary work became one of the foci of disputes at the end of the 1850s. Especially the one that flared up between *Obrazy života* [Pictures of life] and *Poutník od Otavy* [Pilgrim from Otava], published in Písek. We do not intend to retell this well-known chapter of Czech literary history. We merely want to emphasize those aspects that, in this developmental phase, advance the long-term critical discussion about the role of national literature quite a bit further. The focus is still primarily on identifying what is “ours” and what is “foreign,” what is our own national identity, and what is *other*. Suppose today we read again the individual statements in the polemic between *Obrazy života*

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31 HOSTINSKÝ, Otakar, “O realismu uměleckém,” *Květy* 1890. Cited according to O.H., *Studie a kritiky*, Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1974, p. 65. – Here Hostinský states: “According to the most popular formula the entire question of realism is nothing else than a dispute between beauty and truth: in this dispute realistic art stands on the side of truth, and he who asks for this truth also stands against beauty.” However, he then goes on to prove that the entire problem is much more complicated and that its resolution in the context of the aforementioned “most popular formula” can scarcely lead to the desired conclusion, for it is already at its essence misguided: “Artistic truth, i.e. the faithfulness of an artistic image, is just as much an aesthetic element, the creator of beauty, as shapeliness of lines and shapes, harmony of colours and sounds, continuity and contrast of poetic thoughts, overall symmetry of composition.” (Ibid, p. 66).

32 NERUDA, Jan, “Škodlivé směry,” *Obrazy života*, vol. I, 1859, pp. 190–192, 231–232. Cited according to *Život Jana Nerudy II*, p. 188.

33 HOSTINSKÝ, c. d., p. 76.

and *Poutník od Otavy*. In that case, we find in them, among other things, several articulate examples of how intensely this direct linkage of young Czech literati to Jung Deutschland was perceived (and in this regard also the ideological linkage between the *Lada Nióla* and *Máj* almanacs), especially in how its detractors saw the causes of malignant cosmopolitan and, hence (in the context of the given polemic of the day), anti-national tendency.

From the very beginning of this soon-to-be-heated discussion, prior to the most severe mutual attacks, on the pages of *Poutník od Otavy* in December of 1858, Jakub Malý expressed criticism of “the destructive direction of a certain youngest literary party (a *party*, alas), whose unprecedented arrogance is only matched by their incompetence.” And he went on to add: “No one can doubt that we mean the direction from which the *Lada Nióla* and *Máj* almanacs resulted, and which *Večerní písně* [Evening songs] is joining with dignity.”<sup>34</sup> A few months later, he was already addressing the members of the “certain youngest party”<sup>35</sup> directly as the objects of his assaults: “So your wisdom is from Germany. I could also assist with German wisdom, [...] newer, which is quite comparable with my conviction that every literature can grow independently solely based on nationality. [...] this cosmopolitan direction, then, to which you so willingly attach yourself, is merely a transient temporal growth, cultivated by favorable circumstances, against which, however, strong resistance is now rising (and namely in Germany, where you go for your wisdom) and which sooner or later shall be put in its place.”<sup>36</sup> These statements by Malý from 20 March 1859 are a response to an article entitled “První a poslední slovo panu J. Malému” [First and last word to Mr J. Malý], signed by the editorial staff of *Obrazy života* and printed in it only a few days earlier, on March 11. But they can basically be taken as a reaction to everything that had been kicked off (by *Obrazy života*), mainly by Sabina’s essay *Literární obrazy* [Literary pictures], the first part of which was published on 4 February 1859.

34 MALÝ, Jakub, “Listy z Prahy a o Praze IV” [Letters from Prague and about Prague IV], *Poutník od Otavy*, vol. I, 1858, p. 275. Cited according to *Život Jana Nerudy II*, p. 122.

35 Neruda himself objected to the labelling of the *Májovci* as a “party” for entirely understandable reasons. For example, this is what he said in the article “Smíření” [Reconciliation] (in which he reacted to a commentary by Václav Štulc entitled “Památce Jungmannově” [To Jungmann’s memory] and printed in November 1859 in *Pražské noviny*: “Everyone who observed the attacks waged against us convinced themselves that all which hitherto spoke against us younger people, was quite false, unimportant, and unjustified. Above all, they called us a ‘party’ so that everyone was warned that in this party there are other people and other names than those that had been read everywhere.” (NERUDA, Jan, “Smíření.” *Obrazy života*, vol. I, 1859, p. 398–399. Cited according to *Život Jana Nerudy II*, p. 266.)

36 MALÝ, Jakub, “Z Prahy” [From Prague], *Poutník od Otavy*, rvol. II, 1859, pp. 142–143. Cited according to *Život Jana Nerudy II*, p. 171.

In it, Karel Sabina attacks the quality of contemporary Czech literary criticism. He evaluates it as “ignorant and highly stupid”,<sup>37</sup> wherein, as is known, Jakub Malý himself was labeled by him as a “late bloomer grown on the dry landscape of Czech criticism.”<sup>38</sup> In contrast to such approaches to national literature, which for him are represented precisely by Malý in this polemic, Sabina presents the direction charted by *Lada Nióla* and *Máj*. As opposed to Malý, who in this direction saw the doom of contemporary Czech writing, Sabina presents it as the “free flow of a spirit whose slogan is independent fecundity, individual development, vigorous progress, fresh flexibility [...] the bustle of literary independence, the bustle of versatile spiritual progress, so that Czech writing would not limp on foreign crutches, but would forge new paths, took new positions, and would not drown in belated comfort.”<sup>39</sup> It is evidently no wonder that in his subsequent “Odpověď panu K. S.” [Answer to Mr. K. S.] (two weeks later: 20 March 1859), Jakub Malý vigorously attacked this “sensitive spot” that directly asked for such a reaction: “You speak of independent fecundity, of casting aside the foreign crutches on which Czech writing has been limping up to now? All right, I am with you: stop following foreign examples, cast aside the pretense that you truly feel what you are attempting to describe, and return as wayward sons to the eternal living source of nationality: then you shall be able to speak with a greater right of independent fecundity than now when such words in your mouths are a barefaced lie.”<sup>40</sup>

Sabina’s thoughts were not the only impetus that spurred Jakub Malý to launch a counter-attack. In the same issue of *Obrazy života*, Neruda’s essay *Nyní* [Now] was also published, touching on the essence of the same problems as Sabina’s text broaches. With bitter irony, Neruda interprets the results of the insistence up to then on purely Slavic foundations for the further development of Czech literature: “Suddenly everything that was newer, what was foreign, became destructive to our nation; our nation was so pure, innocent, dovelike, that the hearts of all children leaped in joy, talents were to be placed in greenhouses filled with only Slavic soil and great literature based only on a national foundation was to develop artificially. It wanted to isolate itself (but not in science) when everything around was merging into one and mighty progress in the exchange of ideas was developing, to the joy of all the feeble-minded, literature became so-called ‘virginal’ and it was forgotten that nothing can be

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37 SABINA, Karel, “Literární obrazy” [Literary pictures], *Obrazy života*, vol. I, 1859, pp. 32–35, 74–75, 113–115. Cited according to *Život Jana Nerudy II*, p. 149.

38 Ibid, p. 151.

39 Ibid, p. 152.

40 MALÝ, Jakub, “Odpověď panu K. S.” in *Obrazy života* vol. 2. *Poutník od Otavy*, vol. II, 1859, pp. 92–94. Cited according to *Život Jana Nerudy II*, p. 158.

born without the penetration of foreign elements.”<sup>41</sup> That which then became the central point of Hálek’s text in the article “Czech poetry in relation to poetry as such” (see above) is already accented here repeatedly by Neruda: “We do not know the exclusively individual efforts of individual nations, but we do know the powerful direction of all of humanity...”; “Let us learn from other nations, let us come to know the degree of their development, let us befriend their world of thought, and then let us process it all in ourselves into a new whole with what we already received in our mother’s milk and learned in our homelands. It will then certainly be Slavic because, as Slavs, we are incapable of creating otherwise.”<sup>42</sup> The last of the quoted sentences once again reveals to us the core of the entire dispute back then.

Even in formulations in which Neruda and Hálek, from a particular perspective, espouse “extreme” viewpoints (“Yes, for us the constant prattling about nationality and patriotism is by now an ‘obsolete opinion’!”;<sup>43</sup> “...poetry must no longer be a national poetry, but a general one, which will now depict the desires of all of humanity and which world literature is successfully advancing.”<sup>44</sup> one cannot simply see the unconditional rejection of the requirement for the specificity of national literature – although it was often seen and expressed in this way<sup>45</sup> (after all, in the quoted statement Neruda does not explicitly attack patriotism itself, but rather prattling on about it). The point was that in Neruda’s and Hálek’s visions of the development of modern Czech literature, the merger with worldliness was “pan-humanism,” “poetry as such” were a necessary *starting point*; a primary condition that, if unfulfilled, would make it impossible for Czech literature to be its own, i.e. nationally specific – at the same time, however, in its appearance and the functions that it is to perform (at home as well as before the eyes of cultural Europe), *contemporary*.

It has already been said multiple times (cf., for example, the above-quoted syntheses of literary history by Čech or Vlček, as well as later reflections by the protagonists of the entire polemic) that the statements of the *Májovci* at the end of the 1850s were full of internal contradictions, ambiguities, and vagueness in their attempts to formulate the key questions of that time. Hence, they often made easy targets for those with opposing opinions. It is also necessary to see

41 NERUDA, Jan, „Nyní,” *Obrazy života*, vol. I, 1859, p. 71–73. Cited according to *Život Jana Nerudy II*, p. 147.

42 Ibid, p. 145, or 148.

43 NERUDA, Jan, “Něco o ‘posledním slově’” [Something about the “last word”], *Obrazy života*, vol. I, 1859, pp. 236–237. Cited according to *Život Jana Nerudy II*, p. 223 – see above.

44 HÁLEK, Vítězslav, “Básnictví české v poměru k básnictví vůbec.” Cited according to *Život Jana Nerudy II*, p. 216. – This statement, however, is part of one of the editorial notes supplementing Hálek’s text. Their author is Jan Neruda.

45 Cf. for example ČECH, 1907, p. 166.

as not negligible the circumstance (at first glance, perhaps banal) that a number of statements in this discussion were strongly affected by the mutual personal resentment of the individual participants. A response written with a lesser or greater degree of passion, intended to be published as quickly as possible, has, after all, different gravity than a text created based on thorough consideration of the problem, all relevant circumstances – and avoiding all irrelevant ones. We do not intend to in any way reduce the importance of the polemic at the end of the 1850s from the perspective of the long-term evolution of the Czech literary canon and how it is seen. On the contrary, precisely as a *polemic*, hence a comprehensive whole, it doubtlessly had deep meaning, and its influence on subsequent transformations of the appearance of Czech literary culture was far-reaching. Nevertheless, if we see the theses of the new *Májovci* as independent semantic units, which are, of course, suitable to interpret in their mutual relations, more than one internal contradiction of the entire “new direction” surfaces. At the same time, it is evident that a number of these statements were empty phrases (often quoted, however, in subsequent decades precisely due to their vagueness, hence “universal utility” or susceptibility to intentional misinterpretations), whose noisy and pathos-filled rhetoric was in no way less than that of its opponents. And that the originators of these “theses” often had only a foggy idea of the specific meanings of their words – hence, of the form of specific goals set before the new Czech literature and of the paths leading to their achievement.

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