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Writing Literary History in Contemporary Czech Studies

In my paper, I would like to examine two literary history projects that are currently underway in Czech literary studies. There is the “new modernism” project led by Vladimír Papoušek and colleagues, which deals with Czech literature in the first half of the twentieth century. And then there is the nineteenth century Czech literature project which is the work of Dalibor Tureček and his team. Both projects are based on different methodologies, but they overlap in certain aspects. They display a self-consciously constructivist approach to writing history, as well as accepting the writers’ historically determined viewpoints. They depict literary history as an open process which is neither linear nor deterministic. Also, they both approach literature in the broader context of culture and the types of discourse that were relevant at the time, while re-evaluating the process of canon creation. In the context of Czech literary studies, these are pioneering works, which offer a fresh outlook on literary history and give opportunity for confrontation with the approaches that have been used to date.¹

The authors of both of these projects also took part in a 2005 colloquium that examined new approaches in Czech literary history studies.² Issues

¹ In terms of methodology, both of these projects stand in stark contrast to *A History of Czech Literature 1945–1989*, a voluminous collaborative effort where the authors divide up segments of literary history according to major historical events (the four volumes cover the following periods: 1945–1948, 1948–1958, 1958–1969 and 1969–1989). Each volume begins with a long chapter discussing literary life in the wider political and cultural context, while the following chapters focus on the different genres separately (such as “Poetry”, “Prose”, “Non-fiction” or “Literature for children and young adults”). See Pavel Janoušek et al., *Dějiny české literatury 1945–1989*, I-IV (Praha: Academia, 2007–2008).

² Apart from Tureček and Papoušek, members of the colloquium included Petr Bílek, Josef Vojvodík and Vladimír Brabec, as well as Miroslav Červenka and the Slovak scholar Peter Zajac (both literary theorists).

were addressed by means of concrete and thought-provoking questions, such as – how to deal with the sort of tension that exists between the open, non-linear nature of literary processes and the various attempts of one's mind to clarify and categorise them into periods, epochs, and so on? Could the very concept of a “national literature” already constitute a certain deformation of literary processes? How to determine precisely the nature and scope of the different materials a literary historian should study? To what extent should one reflect upon the relationships between literary texts and the different types of discourse relevant at the time, as well as different forms of writing?³ How to define the concept of a canon, and how does literary history work with the concept? All these and many other questions were assessed both from the practical perspective of writing literary history and from different methodological viewpoints, be it structuralism, hermeneutics, reader-response criticism, new historicism, deconstructivism, or pulsating aesthetics.⁴

1. *A History of New Modernism*

Let us take a look at the way the two teams of authors dealt with the questions mentioned above, in their concrete practice of writing literary history. First, there is the History of New Modernism project led by Vladimír Papoušek – two volumes have been published so far – *Dějiny nové moderny* [A History of New Modernism]⁵ and *Dějiny nové moderny 2. Lomy vertikál* [A History of New Modernism 2. Fractures in Verticals].⁶ The authors approach literary history from an unexpected angle – the underlying methodology for the first volume (1905–1923) is based on the concept of “gradual synchrony”. Within this approach, the period of each year is captured separately and its interpretation – or story – becomes an independent entity. There are, of course, limits to this approach, as it divides literary history up into artificial narrative segments framed by a unit of time – one year. However, the approach allows scholars to focus on a short time period while capturing unique relationships between relevant discourses. The limited time perspective also

³ Jan Wiendl (ed.), *Hledání literárních dějin v diskuzi* (Praha – Litomyšl: Paseka, 2006).

⁴ The debate stemmed from *Hledání literárních dějin*, a study published by Vladimír Papoušek and Dalibor Tureček (Praha – Litomyšl: Paseka, 2005), where both authors provided a comprehensive analysis of problematic aspects of current literary history.

⁵ Vladimír Papoušek et al., *Dějiny nové moderny. Česká literatura v letech 1905–1923* (Praha: Academia, 2010).

⁶ Vladimír Papoušek et al., *Dějiny nové moderny 2. Lomy vertikál. Česká literatura v letech 1924–1933* (Praha: Academia, 2014).

allows for a closer encounter with the open nature of literary and cultural processes. Literary, cultural, social, and political events appear in a unique configuration, affecting each other, interweaving, or standing in opposition to each other. The authors attempt to re-create these dynamics, describing the literary achievements in the given year while depicting relationships within the wider socio-political context. Papoušek's approach thus shows influences such as the new historicism, Pierre Bourdieu's sociology and Peter Zjac's synoptic-pulsating theory of literary history, which I will return to later in my paper.

Every horizontal section thus becomes a unique map of historical events, with different key figures and marginal occurrences every time. For each year, the analysis shifts focus, and follows a different set of relationships, depending on the dominant events, the types of discourse, and the major works of art at that particular time. For instance, in the year 1913, the focus is on philosophy, namely phenomenology – it is the year when Husserl's *Ideas* first went into print, as well as Karl Jaspers's *Allgemeine Psychopathologie*. The year also marks the separation between Jung and Freud. This forms the context for an analysis of literary works that deal with an inner perception of time (such as the first volume of Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*) or, in the Czech context, those that provide an insight into a person's inner world. We may argue that stressing a particular discourse in a particular year is somewhat artificial – Husserl's phenomenology was being formed long before that, not to mention that the different changes in phenomenology and its effect on the literary world were also significant in the years to come. However, this path is a very self-conscious one, with the authors stressing the constructivist nature of their approach. Once chosen, the centre of the authors' attention then becomes the starting point of a number of excursions in time, both into the past and into the future, in order to investigate certain historical aspects of the phenomenon while demonstrating its significance and its pulsating nature. Thus, the "synchronous sections" approach is complemented with a number of "vertical probes", which examine changes in poetics and different types of discourse over a longer period of time.

Every chapter provides a very thorough analysis of the historical material, which encompasses not only the literary world, but provides an overview of major events in art, politics, currents of thought, economics, and so on. However, each such analysis is, quite necessarily, already a simplification, as it is impossible to capture changes in every single type of discourse in a given year. Therefore, every author has to make choices. For instance, in 1905, one of the major topics is the female world in works of art. The author, Libuše Heczková, examines the attitudes of František

Xaver Šalda, a significant Czech literary critic, towards literary works written by female authors. Also, there are texts describing female beauty, images of women in the pornographic production of the time, opinions on women given by a major feminist, Artuš Drtil, and so on. However, female writing is given only marginal attention in other chapters, or years. On the other hand, however, the year 1905 is not solely devoted to women – the story of the year is a complex one: much attention is given to major works of fine art as well as major exhibitions (for example, Eduard Munch's exhibition in Prague). The tension between old and new poetics is described, and fairly marginal events are given some space as well, although they are perceived more as the background for major cultural phenomena. To illustrate my point, I have chosen to quote the opening lines of the chapter: “In the building of the Medical Club in Cracov, almost hidden from the public eye, there is one of the most significant installations by Stanisław Wyspiański. A railing is wrapped around a regular staircase and, very much like some giant tentacles, it seems to be attacking anyone attempting to hold onto it.”⁷

In my opinion, the real dynamics of particular tendencies and types of discourse does not manifest itself at the level of the individual chapters (or years), but at the level of the text as a whole. It allows us to compare different analyses and vertical probes, and to see changes in discourse over a longer period of time.

The authors seem to be aware of the limits imposed on their interpretation of literary history by the “gradual synchrony” approach. In the second volume (1924–1934), their methodology went through a number of changes. The focus shifted towards probing into and analysing the key themes and poetics of a given period. This effectively removed the need to work within a set time frame (one year), while allowing the authors to explore issues in a much wider context and in a larger time frame. The so called “vertical probes”, whose latent presence in the first volume allowed for a measure of continuity, have now become a key structural feature. For instance, Libuše Heczková focuses on the depiction of women in literature and culture, images of the human body and the wider context of gender, Josef Vojvodík explores changes in philosophical and scientific paradigms, while Michal Bauer examines the relationship between literature and Catholicism, and so on. The different “probes” are chosen selectively, and we might easily imagine a completely different set of criteria. However, the authors are fully aware of these limits and they admit that their narrative is by no means definitive.

⁷ Papoušek, *Dějiny nové moderny*, 69.

To counterbalance the decidedly constructivist nature of the aforementioned chapters, both volumes include a second part called “A map of the fields of literary and cultural events in the various years,” providing a sort of catalogue of events, both in the Czech and international contexts. It also includes events in both political and social history, as well as those in the history of everyday life. The thematic subchapters have a detailed structure – for example, in a subchapter called “the Czech cultural context”, there are separate sections for theatrical performances, paintings, sculptures, major works of architecture, musical compositions, and significant writings in the fields of history, philosophy, and aesthetics. Also, there are sections devoted to marginal or bizarre texts (publications like “The wonders of electricity”, “Telepathy or the transfer and reading of thoughts”, or “How to write a restaurant menu”).

This detailed description of literary and cultural fields in the various years provides a valuable overview of various contexts, while offering new links between literature and the wider socio-cultural milieu. Petr A. Bílek, the author of this part, actually admits that the text is by no means the ultimate goal – it merely provides the reader with a compass to navigate through the given period, “allowing him or her to find parallels and points of contact as well as barriers and misunderstandings, all of which happen in the context of literary and artistic creation in the given period.”⁸ In this particular way, the History of New Modernism project is an innovative one – it creates a basis for further scholarly work, while allowing for new readings of a given epoch. However, Bílek also mentions the risks that are inherent in this approach – dividing history up into separate periods framed by a time unit – one year is both artificial and arbitrary, and one should take this into account when reading the text. Moreover, in some cases, determining the time when a work of art was created is rather problematic, some categorisation is only approximate, and other events or artifacts simply defy categorisation (e.g. instances where illustrations and the typographical aspects of a book become its integral part, as is the case with the painter and writer Josef Váchal). And finally, the choice of significant events, books and artifacts is always subject to selection and it may never encompass the whole reality – therefore, in some cases, one work of art becomes the epitome of one genre in one particular period (as in the instance of low-brow literature whose primary goal is enjoyment).⁹

⁸ Petr A. Bílek, “Mapy polí literárního a kulturního dění v jednotlivých letech období 1905–1923,” in *Dějiny nové moderny*, 398.

⁹ To read more about the risks of constructing literary and cultural fields, see Bílek, “Mapy polí,” 397–398.

To sum up, the authors of *A History of New Modernism* have produced a text which attempts to capture the world of literature in a particular historical situation, always within the space of one year, where the authors analyse common ground with other forms of discourse and with relevant historical and socio-cultural events. However, it is impossible to avoid a linear approach or the wider historical context – as is demonstrated by the use of vertical probes. Furthermore, the one-year time frame proved to be too limiting, and in the second volume, the authors decided to abandon it for longer time periods, where they examine key themes and poetics.

2. The “synoptic-pulsating” model of 19th century literary history

I will now move on to the second project – a new approach to writing 19th century literary history – which is currently being undertaken by Dalibor Tureček and his team. So far, two volumes have been published – *České literární romantično* [Czech literary Romanticism]¹⁰ in 2012 and *Český a slovenský literární parnasismus* [Czech and Slovak literary Parnassianism],¹¹ which came out in 2015. The agenda for the following years contains volumes about Realism and Classicism.

Tureček has developed the so-called “synoptic-pulsating” model of literary history. It derives its methodology from Peter Zajac’s pulsating aesthetics, with some inspiration in reader-response criticism. Also, it utilises the concept of a “non-object event”, as developed by the Czech philosopher Ladislav Hejránek, while using a comparative, intermedia approach. However, the main methodological focus lies within pulsating aesthetics, a term coined by Peter Zajac.¹² This approach, developed by the Slovak literary scholar in the 1990s, presents a non-linear model of literary and cultural history, while stressing the fluid, multilayered and overlapping nature of different tendencies, poetics, and types of discourse. A literary historian is then challenged with the task of capturing these tensions, shifts, and overlaps between different poetics, not only in a broader time period, but also within a concrete work of literature. Zajac is also inspired by deconstructivism, pointing out the limits of the human mind which tends to ignore the different ruptures, cracks,

¹⁰ Dalibor Tureček et al., *České literární romantično. Synopticko-pulzační model kulturního jevu* (Brno: Host, 2012).

¹¹ Aleš Haman, Dalibor Tureček et al, *Český a slovenský literární parnasismus* (Brno: Host, 2015).

¹² For more details, see Peter Zajac, “Literarne dejepisectvo ako synoptická mapa,” in *Mezi texty a metodami*, ed. Dalibor Tureček and Zuzana Urvalková (Olomouc: Periplum, 2006), 13–22.

and marginal aspects of a material which do not fit within the pre-set frame for analysis. This feature becomes important mainly in the process of canon creation and in the choice of works for analysis. According to Zajac, linearity and causality may not be the most suitable forms of approach. Instead, literary history should be perceived as a “synoptic map”. In literary history – just as in meteorology – we may observe different classes of phenomena and their relationships, while capturing their movement. The metaphor of a map stresses another important aspect of writing history – a map is, by definition, only a model – it is not reality itself. A map’s function is to provide opportunity for orientation. As we have seen, the synoptic model was also used in the History of New Modernism project – there, however, it was utilised only on the level of a horizontal section – one year. Tureček pushes the concept further, focusing on the dynamics and tendencies of development in larger areas or epochs, such as Romanticism or Realism.

I will illustrate this new approach to writing literary history on the example of Romanticism. In the Czech context, Romanticism is traditionally represented by the work of Karel Hynek Mácha and his followers. In contrast, Tureček shows that certain Romantic elements were already present in the works of earlier authors; however, they did not play a dominant role in their writing, or there was a tension between Romanticism and other tendencies (for example, in the foreword to *Slávy dcera* [The Daughter of Slava] by Ján Kollár (1824), Romantic markers such as looking back into the past, extreme emotionality, and the like, are in contrast with elements of Classicism – the foreword is written in an elegiac couplet).¹³ Following Zajac’s non-linear approach, Tureček attempts to capture elements of “the Romantic” in literary works preceding Karel Hynek Mácha, which allows him to place the beginning of Czech Romanticism at the start of the nineteenth century, although in the Czech context, it is usually said to have started in the 1830s. Similarly, Tureček dates the end of the epoch as late as the 1860s or 1870s. However, it is important to note that in his model, the literary period does not have clear boundaries. Tureček does not see Romanticism as a literary movement that started or finished at particular points in time. He perceives Romanticism as a dynamic, multilayered event, examining not only its dominant period, but also times when Romantic tendencies were beginning to influence literary discourse, creating tensions with other tendencies or movements, such as Classicism (as we can see in Jungmann’s

¹³ Dalibor Tureček, “Synopticko-pulzační model českého literárního romantična,” in *České literární romantično*, Dalibor Tureček at al. (Brno: Host, 2012), 109.

translation of Chateaubriand's *Atala*, or Kollár's *Slávy dcera*, which was mentioned above).¹⁴ From the perspective of the relevant time period, it was unclear which tendencies would dominate literary discourse, and Tureček finds it interesting to analyse works which defy clear categorisation.

In relation to this approach, he coins the term “node point”, which alludes to a work of literature that becomes the focus of a clash between different poetics, making it impossible for it to be placed within the constraints of a particular movement. Tureček's analysis thus contains texts which have stood on the margin of interest of literary historians. This allows him to capture the open nature of the literary world, while examining certain transitory stages, as well as tensions between different types of discourse. Tureček observes these tensions during the whole period of “the Romantic” (that is, from the beginning of the 19th century up until the 1860s), but also in concrete texts. A “node point” can be seen, for instance, in *Toman a lesní panna* [Toman and Wood Nymph], the opening poem of František Čelakovský's collection *Ohlasy písní českých* [Echoes of Bohemian Songs] (1839). In this poem, romantic individualism meets a biedermeierian concept of order.¹⁵

In analysing “the Romantic”, an important role is given to the relationship between literature and other art forms or other types of discourse – namely, the philosophical concepts of Romanticism and the fine arts of the time. If we take a broader comparative look, we can see that Mácha's unique fictional world is merely a variation on the poetics that had been present in painting, both in the Czech lands and abroad. For example, certain paintings by the German artist Caspar David Friedrich or those by Antonín Mánes seem to be direct illustrations of particular scenes in Mácha's short prose or poetry – however, they had been created long before Mácha set his pen to paper.¹⁶

Within the scope of his work on Romanticism, Tureček forms a working hypothesis in relation to Realism, which I will expand upon shortly. His take on Realism does not limit itself to a textbook version of the movement – he searches for its origins and early manifestations, which could be seen in Czech literature as early as the 1830s, in the form of marginal genres such as the travelogue, images from real life etc. In this context, even Mácha's work suddenly exhibits a great deal of internal diversity. In his short story *Marinka* [Marinka], we can find elements

¹⁴ Tureček, “Synopticko-pulzační model,” 140–142.

¹⁵ Dalibor Tureček, “Čelakovského ‘Toman a lesní panna’ jako uzlový bod,” in *České literární romantično*, Dalibor Tureček at al. (Brno: Host, 2012), 218–229.

¹⁶ Dalibor Tureček, “Krajina jako mytologický prostor: Předzpěv ke Kollárově Slávy dceři,” in *České literární romantično*, Dalibor Tureček at al. (Brno: Host, 2012), 148.

of Realism and journalistic fiction. However, for Mácha, the Realist viewpoint serves merely as a vehicle for developing the general semantics of the text, which is Romantic in its nature, and the Realist stylisation is only there to provide contrast.¹⁷

As I have shown, Tureček attempts to capture the Realist view of the world at a time when it was little more than one of a number of competing tendencies. Therefore, this synoptic-pulsating model abandons literary history as a sequence of epochs with clear-cut boundaries, while giving us opportunity to contemplate it as a multilayered, non-linear process, in which different poetics and types of discourse overlap, develop gradually and then, very slowly, disappear.

In the context of Czech literary studies, Tureček's project is equally as inspiring as Papoušek's work. His team has managed to demonstrate, using two examples so far (Romanticism and Parnassianism), that literary history may be viewed and depicted as an open, constantly moving and diverse interplay of different poetics and types of discourse. At the same time, both projects have shown Czech literary studies new ground – they are proof that literary history may be written differently – outside the confined box of linearity – while capturing historical reality as a multilayered narrative in which different texts and types of discourse interact, engage in dialogue and compete for their place under the sun.

Abstract

The paper reflects on new methodological approaches in writing Czech literary history – namely, the “new modernism” project supervised by Vladimír Papoušek and the “synoptic-pulsating” approach to 19th century literary history, put into practice by Dalibor Tureček and his team. The two projects are based on different methodologies, but they overlap in certain aspects. They display a self-consciously constructivist approach to writing history, as well as accepting the writers' historically determined viewpoints. They depict literary history as an open process which is neither linear nor deterministic. Also, they both approach literature in the broader context of culture and the types of discourse that were relevant at the time, while re-evaluating the process of canon creation.

Key words: Czech literary history; gradual synchrony; synoptic pulsating model; Vladimír Papoušek; Dalibor Tureček

¹⁷ Dalibor Tureček, “Synopticko-pulzační model českého literárního realismu – pracovní hypotéza,” in *České literární romantično*, ed. Dalibor Tureček (Brno: Host, 2010), 265–282.

