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SUCCESS AND ITS RELATIVIZATION: GENERAL REMARKS ON THE FATE OF LITERARY WORKS AND THEIR AUTHORS (SPECIFIC FEATURES OF CZECH LITERATURE)

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Abstract. The author of the present paper deals with the general features of success of literary artefacts on the examples of several Czech authors. Regardless of some typical cases going back to the 19th century, among others a famous one connected with the name of possibly the only real Czech romantic Karel Hynek Mácha, probably the most significant romantic poet in the world observed from the point of view of poetics and artistic values and existential angles, there are quite a lot of interesting 20th-21st-century authors whose success on the one hand and loss of popularity on the other signalled the causes of the whole process and its markers. While the 19th-century authors and the success of their work were linked with the preparedness of the reading public, with aesthetic tastes and prevalent styles, more modern literature since modernism has been connected, besides the mentioned factors, more with political shifts of emphasis and with the whole social atmosphere; it also depends on the thematic and genre structure of literary artefacts, on the problems dealt with, on the degree of experimentalism. The examples of several Czech 20th-century authors demonstrate various aspects of the problem of the markers of success and their association with their creative individuality.

Keywords: Markers of success; specific features of Czech literature; the paradoxes of the success and failure; Karel Hynek Mácha; Karel Čapek; Jakub Deml; Jaroslav Durych.

From the standpoint of the dynamic movement of the markers of success the specific situation of Czech literature consists in the fact that the new stage of its development (“the new Czech literature”) came into existence in the process of the national revival, its *terminus a quo* of which is usually linked to the 1770s, the end (*terminus ad quem*) to the symbolic year of the so-called Spring of Nations in 1848. The factors which influenced the success or failure of the Czech authors who started to write in Czech instead of the usual German are quite complicated: the period of Romanticism in Slavonic literatures in general which coincides with the Czech national revival had to bear – unlike some other European literatures – several functions except the aesthetic effect: the support of the national revival, the folklore inspiration, the social aspect and the effort to restore the national and cultural autonomy or even independence. Thus, the situation of a writer in such a society must be more complicated and ambiguous than in other literatures in normal nation-states. Even more complicated is the success and failure of the authors belonging to the nations which has no state or quite recently lost it or has no longer cultural and literary tradition. The medieval Czech state called *The Lands of the Bohemian Crown* represented a big Central European power covering in different periods not only Bohemia and Moravia, but also the whole of Lower and Upper Silesia, the region of Cheb (Egerland, “regio Egreensis”), Lower and Upper Lusatia, rarely some of the Austrian lands; the King of Bohemia was sometimes also the King of Hungary and Poland. It is not useless to add that *The Lands of the Bohemian Crown* had their predecessor in the Great Moravian Empire covering at the height of its power parts of contemporary Poland with Cracow probably also founded by Great Moravians, then the whole of Hungary, parts of Croatia, the whole of Bohemia and a part of Lower Austria. The old Czech literature reached its peak in the High Gothic period in the 14th century, its tradition has never vanished though it lost its strength and importance. The Czech revivalists had the chance to continue the traditions using many sources of inspiration and poetological patterns. This all should be taken into consideration while dealing with the subject of the major sources as well as the substantial changes in the flow of time.

The first example goes back to the first third of the 19th century when the only Czech romantic poet (the others usually regarded as

romantics were more or less sentimentalists or preromantics, as the Slovene or Slovenian researcher, professor at Charles University Matija Murko put it in his German book on the impact of German “Romantik” upon the Czech Romanticism) *Deutsche Einflüsse auf die Anfänge der slawischen Romantik I. Die Böhmisches Romantik (1897)*. Romanticism itself as an undercurrent of various modern streams and tendencies has its roots in the baroque poetics exactly as if due to Hegel’s negation of the negation law of dialectics: it negatively reacts upon the cult of form and the formal discipline of neoclassicism and goes partly back to the baroque chaos and amorphism (Rotrekl 1995; *Rozkošný hrob* 2009; Horyna 2005).

Romanticism in Slavonic literatures bears a big burden of several social functions – the national revival, the restoration of the national language, cultural autonomy, equalizing with West Europe, the role of literature as a state forming and state-constituting factor.

The problem is connected with the function of Romanticism in national revivals of Slavonic nations. **Karel Hynek Mácha**’s prose works and dramas as well as his masterpiece *May* were regarded as a treason against the patriotic tendencies of the Czech so-called patriotic community. Therefore later the poem was interpreted as a love celebration, the poem about nature and passion (Pospíšil 2010a; Vašák 1981, 2009, Vašák 1986). The real narrative poem (Pospíšil 2003b) is about something else: about the betrayed love, the family split. The total uncertainty, the hopelessness, desperateness of human fate, the eternal, cursed questions of human being, and the existential view of the human and the world. If compared with other European romantic poets, e. g. G. G. N. Byron, J. Keats, F. R. Chateaubriand, partly J. W. Goethe, F. Schiller (more or less rather pre-romantics or sentimentalists), Novalis/G. F. P. von Hardenberg, A. von Arnim, A. Mickiewicz, J. Słowacki, A. S. Pushkin, M. Yu. Lermontov, T. H. Shevchenko, H. Botev, F. Prešeren, P. Njegoš, S. Vraz, Jakub Bart-Čišinski (1856–1909), and others representing rather respected national classics, he is the poet in the modern sense of the word. In 1836 Mácha deceived an official Austrian censor declaring that his narrative poem is about nature and love. His existential poem crossing the boundaries of all the patriotic and national limits was misunderstood and sharply criticised while several years later towards the 1850s a representative community of talented

Czech poets was named after his poem *May – The May Group*. Mácha is probably the best and most significant world romantic poet at all, the most poetical and high quality writer inspiring modern 20th-century Czech poetry, mainly the Czech surrealists (The Surrealist Group in the Czechoslovak Republic arose in 1934). He was nearly forgotten for the European reading public, but now he has been translated into many languages, including English (even several times, the best translations belong to James Naughton, died 2014, and Edith Mary Pargeter, 1913–1995) and his poetry became world famous. His chains of oxymora and inventive metaphorical expressions in the third and fourth cantos of his *May*, in Pargeter's translation are as follows:

*Time in its headlong flight has carried that Spring away.
Far fled is his dream, a shadow no more found,
Like visions of white towns, deep in the waters drowned,
The last indignant thoughts of the defeated dead,
Their unremembered names, the clamour of old fights,
The worn-out northern lights, after their gleam is fled,
The untuned harp, whose strings distil no more delights,
The deeds of time gone by, quenched starlight overhead,
Heresy's pilgrimage, the loving, lovely dead,
The deep forgotten grave, eternal board and bed;
As the smoke of burned-out fires, as the shattered bell's chime,
Are the dead years of the dead, their beautiful childhood time!*

Another example was **Karel Čapek** (1890–1938) who sometimes together with his brother Josef, writer and painter, created world famous modern dramas with the science fiction dystopic subjects, originally constructed short stories, partly detective ones, and, last but not least, famous novel trilogy regarded as pragmatic (Čapek 1985, 1986, 1987, 1990, 1998).

Čapek's work wedged between the poles of pragmatism and extremism, radicalism is part of the chains and links, pairs and triangles put together by a similar spiritual atmosphere in which it is useless to seek the influences or thematic theses, but just to observe the complex process of genre continuity, i. e. the phenomenon which is sometimes called the poetological function of art: endless chains of steps, returns, repetitions, retrospectives, stagnation, progression, crises and catharses

confirming art as an irreplaceable transcendence (Bradbrook 1998, 2006; Ohme 2002; Uhle 2006; Pynsent 1973, 1994, 1996, 2000; Měšťan 1987, 2002).

Čapek's fate was to be permanently disappointed by former friends: his attitude towards communism evoked the hatred of radicals as well as his love – maybe idealistic – for the Czechoslovak Republic – a bitter, though silent (from his side) controversy with his former friend G. K. Chesterton – are generally known being linked to Čapek's relations to some of the Czech and Slovak Catholics. It might be quite inspiring and again paradoxical to know that in the inquiry published by the famous Czech democratic journalist (also a supporter of the “Prague castle political wing”) Ferdinand Peroutka the Czech Catholic writer Jaroslav Durych expressed his affection for Soviet communism though only on the basis of emotionality and the movement of masses while Čapek not radically, but clearly declared the rationalistic reasons why he is no Communist. It is characteristic that Ferdinand Peroutka even decided not to publish Durych's opinion regarding it as too provoking and irrational.

Karel Čapek, a Czech writer and an unsuccessful Nobel prize candidate, a man who in his youth created a new Czech poetic language through his translations of French modernists (“les poètes maudits”), inclined towards American pragmatism he wrote a seminar essay about as a student of Charles University, was strongly influenced by Dostoevsky and Chekhov, but, at the same time, was afraid of the precipices of Russian radicalism and extremism, together with his brother, writer and painter Josef were extremely popular as playwrights in the UK and all over the English speaking world, especially during the 1920s–1930s, had several good English friends – though with certain rigmaroles – among others, G. K. Chesterton, wrote a travel book on England, intentionally a little naive and idyllic, the plays *R. U. R.* and *From the Life of Insects* made a sensation on the English stage, in *R. U. R.* he (in fact his brother Josef) even invented the word “robot” (from the Czech word “robota”, meaning “a hard, often involuntary work”), he cultivated philosophical science fiction and was translated into many languages of the world. In the 1930s he warned against totalitarian regimes (his answers to the question “Why Am I not a Communist?”), mainly against fascism and German Nazism (his play

The White Illness and a novel *War with the Newts*). Besides, he wrote quite a lot instructive and witty essays on journalism and various arts and crafts with a strong sense of humour, he tolerantly commented upon mass literature. In spite of his physical defect (problems with backbone) he – being a famous and influential Czech journalist – fought against the danger of German Nazism at the time of the first and second Czechoslovak mobilisation and the shameful Munich Agreement in autumn 1938. After the Czechoslovak government accepted the hard conditions of the agreement dictated by the four European powers (Great Britain, France, Germany and Italy), he became a target of brutal attacks of right-wing journalists and his colleagues-writers who were not ashamed to mock even his physical defect. He died run to death in December 1938.

Čapek's struggle for tolerance starting from his concept of "a little Czech man" applying the theory of pragmatism, of small steps, patience and humanity. A special attention is paid to his views of culture, to his affection for T. G. Masaryk (*Conversations with T. G. Masaryk*) and to the years of the so-called Second Czechoslovak Republic (October 1938 – March 1939) which ended with the German military occupation of the rest of the country on the 15 March 1939, and his conception of democracy he often manifested on the example of interwar Czechoslovakia as a pioneer of parliamentary democracy in Central Europe. A special passage concerns his effort to be awarded the Nobel prize for literature associated with his journey to Scandinavia (Pospíšil 1998; Slavíčková 1995; Slavíčková 1996; Michl 1995) and with the political situation in these countries in the atmosphere of German ideological and military impact (Nuremberg racial laws).

Čapek's specific position between several cultural impacts: German, French, Anglo-American and Russian manifested his tendency to synthesize all important cultural values. His passion for Russian classics whom he loved but was afraid of their extremism, was counterbalanced by his pragmatism; he translated modern French poetry with its bohemian character, but has become neither a bohemian nor a poet himself. His conception of life and life style is expressed in his prose trilogy of the 1930s – *Hordubal*, *Meteor* and *Ordinary Life*. The passage concernig his prose works is concentrated on the expression of the ideas of humanity a tolerance. Karel Čapek and his work is again

nearly forgotten these days after he was pursued by extreme right-wingers, he was banned by the Nazis and partly by the communists. The tendencies to underestimate his work as mere journalism and the covering up the political atmosphere leading to his premature death in autumn 1938 may be regarded as dangerous symptoms in contemporary integrating Europe. The British bohemist Robert Pynsent several times declared that he knows just one Čapek in Czech literature – Karel Matěj Čapek Chod (1860–1927), the famous Czech naturalist (Pospíšil 2023).

Probably the 1920s and partly the 1930s represented the real top of his popularity on world stages and in world publishing houses and bookshops, especially in the English speaking countries. The cult of Čapek culminating in the mentioned decades later faded away under the brutal experiences of the Second World War he had warned against before, and the split of the world into two ideologically inimical military blocs. Čapek's fate even in his homeland was then very strange and tragic, not only the German Nazis banned to publish his works and after their occupation of Prague their secret police (Gestapo) came to arrest him, but at this moment he was dead and buried. After 1948 the new Communist régime evaluated his personality, his political views and literary art in a negative way, and his work was banned again completely or partly. It is the merit of professor Sergey Nikolsky (1922–2015) who as a young critic and bohemist wrote an introduction to the Russian Čapek anthology which was immediately translated into Czech (Nikolskij 1952; НИКОЛЬСКИЙ 1966, 1967, 1968, 2009). This fact contributed to the rehabilitation of Čapek's work in Czechoslovakia though not everything written by Čapek was permitted; part of it remained banned.

Karel Čapek's way to new readers was quite adventurous and often based on accident demonstrating the political changes and shifts of emphasis in Czechoslovakia up to the present day. Paradoxically even nowadays when many of his predictions fulfilled (*R. U. R.*, *Pictures from the Insects' Life*, *The Absolute at Large*, *Krakatit*, *The Makropuls Affair*, *The War with the Newts*) the interest in his work remains weak. By coincidence, I was a witness and stood close to the attempts to revive Čapek's work in the English speaking world towards the end of the preceding century and a bit later (Pospíšil 1990a, 1998, 1999, 2008a, 2022). The English-Czech authoress Bohuslava Bradbrook whose partly

successful attempt at the revitalization of his work in her brilliant book – later translated into Czech – called *Karel Čapek: In Pursuit of Truth, Tolerance and Trust* asserts that he taught through laughter and humour (Bradbrook 1998; 2006).

Even more paradoxical were the markers of success of the two Catholic modernists – **Jaroslav Durych** (1886–1962) and **Jakub Deml** (1878–1961), both poets and prose writers, creators of experimental styles and genres (Šalda 1987–1988; Bednaříková 2000; Marek 2000; Merhaut 1994, Pospíšil 2001).

Jaroslav Durych was the adherent of the Catholic conception of Czech history opposing the leading protestant grasp of the Czech past formed by the historian and man of letters František Palacký (1798–1876) and supported by T. G. Masaryk (1850–1937), later the first Czechoslovak president. His baroquizing style and the original historical conception of the consequences of the Thirty Years' War as well as his radical, right-wing political essays brought him popularity among intellectuals, some historians and Catholic youth. In the years of the First Czechoslovak Republic he was not so attractive as the prevalent left-wing or liberal writers of the so-called Prague Castle group connected with the President Masaryk. Later in the years of the Second Czechoslovak Republic (1938–1939) after the German Nazis, the Poles and Hungarians occupied the Czechoslovakia's borderland and the idea of democracy in Europe seemed to be dead, these authors, including Jakub Deml, a rebellious Catholic priest who created an experimental writer's diary called *The Footprints*, original work in progress, found themselves in the centre of attention (Pospíšil 1990b). This changed after the Second World War and in the years of the communist régime when their works were banned with the exception of the end of the 1960s connected with a sort of political thaw and the Prague Spring when some of their works, more or less non-political, were published. Later they appeared after the Velvet Revolution in 1989.

Though there were several prevalent artistic/literary currents in Czech literature, there is a certain dichotomy obvious, e. g. the modernist, revolutionary and avant-garde art inspired by the cult of the new in Soviet Russia, and a more regressive, traditional, but, at the same time very inventive pseudo baroque Catholic movement.

Jaroslav Durych (1886–1962), a military doctor by profession, fought against the protestant conception of Czech history (František Palacký, T. G. Masaryk, Alois Jirásek) as a misinterpretation (Pospíšil 2004). In his prose and poetic work he constructed quite a different picture of an ideal man and woman of modern times: religious piety, the cult of poverty, sensibility, strong emotionality and ecstatic love of God. Due to his Catholic faith he regards this reality as part of a higher order inspired by the poetics of Romanticism (*The Fair of Life*, 1916; the novel *In the Mountains*, 1919; love novella *A Daisy*, 1925, essays *A Gothic Rose*, 1923). Probably the most impressive are his historical novels situated in the time of the immense religious wars in the 17th century (*The Wandering*, 1929; *The Requiem*, 1930; *The Shrovetide*, 1938; *The Useless Servants*, 1969; *The Soul and the Star*, 1969; *The God's Rainbow*, 1969). In his pseudo baroque style he found out a new, modern poetics demonstrating and revealing the hidden layers of the Czech poetic language being influenced and formed for many centuries by baroque poetics. In his essays and reflections he very often expresses controversial views and depressions of modern human individuality searching for God, extreme opinions, emotions, sincerity and openness (see, for example, his essays *A Word of Warning to the Czech Poets*, *Why I feel Bad to Be a Czech Writer*, *The Canon of Sexuality*, *I Am Waiting for the Liberating Word* – in his essays Durych even came to the positive appraisal of communism). The rational kernel of his utterances consists in his revealing some common features of big mass movements: emotions, psychosis, a weak brain control, extremism and expressing absolute opinions consisting in the condemnation of post-war unmanliness, impotence and weakness:

After the War our men became softer: it became fashionable to exhibit this unmanliness. The influence of post-war French literature is in this sense glaringly demoralizing. Though this unmanliness dwells rather on the tongue than in the real physiognomy of men, the word has its powerful spell which has its affection even through the crust of hypocrisy. So it happened that the idea of speaking softly and lamentably about the war horrors became common and that these horrors will be expelled for the future. And communism seems to be an apparition which threatens these dispositions <...> The Bolshevik revolution attempted at the formation of the balance between the natural and unnatural death, as even at war many people died naturally. It carried out the work of destruction

and the work was really immense. We could be instructed that great dangers were still ahead <...> Communism manifested its lack of the sense of sentimentality, and I must accept it with respect. Regarded as a ephemeral experiment it showed its ability of inertia. It even organized to a certain degree its own principles. It plundered the fear of violence, accentuated the significance of the army, the sense of dictatorship, it proved to be more vital and stronger than socialism; it declared its privilege to rule over the world without any compromises and at any cost. I have the respect for communism and I may even have more affection for it; I recognize many of its principles and especially its view of bourgeoisie; I recognize that cultus is really the work of the proletariat; I even recognize the haughtiness of the proletariat without any incidental explanations and escapes. But yet I am no communist, as communism does not mean completeness for me, but just a part, maybe a stage. I could not become a communist though they would make me do so, though I know I will not be forgiven without the complete obedience, though I know the communist hammer strikes not only the nail heads, but also the human ones, though not every day. If I long for completeness, I can serve a part, but I cannot believe in the sufficiency of this part. What possibilities can then appear? Either nothing happens, and we will quietly die. Or communism will win the so-called old world and they will forgive us or will treat us due to its common methods. Or communism will be defeated by its opponents, and then they let us live not being interested in us or cover us with the ruins of communism without knowing about it. Or afterwards quite different circumstances will dominate in the spiritual world, and in this case it depends on our ability to create history or not. The peak of communism is relatively high. The human has not created anything higher. But for us, it is not the highest peak. No empirical reasons against communism are sufficient for me. For that matter, communism has not have its own historian who would be at the same time its critic and visionary. I can see the monstrosity, but also beauty and mainly strength. But there is even a bigger strength and in the order of eternity the lower must serve the higher (Durych 2001: p. 189–190).

The avant-garde movement identified with modernist poetics was stronger and more pluralistic in Czech literature than in some other national literatures; therefore the first big post-war exhibition of the so-called Soviet fine art in Prague in 1947 was a big shock for all Czech communist artists – a medieval return of pathetic, robust, realist, non-inventional state art (Pospíšil 2013). The relative irreconcilability of the Czech left-wing and Catholic artistic positions has, of course, some

exceptions to the rule: one of them is a Czech communist poet with spiritual orientation František Halas (1901–1949).

The complicated lives and creative career of the above-mentioned Czech writers deserve permanent attention of the contemporary literary criticism, e. g. the split of Czech literature into two halves – a left-wing, avantgarde, and more conservative, often Catholic; the same could be said about the Czech interwar literary scholarship: the Prague Linguistic Circle with its immanent tendencies, especially structuralism on the one hand and the Society of Literary History linked to psychological, spiritual (Geisteswissenschaft) sociological and spiritual methods on the other (Wellek 1931, 1936, 1943; Pospíšil a Zelenka 1996, Pospíšil 2008b, Voisine-Jechová 2005). I am convinced that this methodological split and its consequences were the real cause – supported by the ideology of that time – of the hard way of some 20th-century Czech authors to their readers in the period 1918–1989.

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УСПІХ І ЙОГО РЕЛЯТИВІЗАЦІЯ: ЗАГАЛЬНІ ЗАУВАЖЕННЯ ПРО ДОЛЮ ЛІТЕРАТУРНИХ ТВОРІВ ТА ЇХНІХ АВТОРІВ (ОСОБЛИВОСТІ ЧЕСЬКОЇ ЛІТЕРАТУРИ)

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Анотація. Висвітлено загальні риси успіху літературних артефактів на прикладі кількох чеських авторів. Попри деякі типові випадки, що сягають XIX століття, зокрема відомий випадок, пов'язаний з іменем чи не єдиного справжнього чеського романтика Карела Гінека Маха, можливо, найбільш значущого поета-романтика у світі з погляду поетики, художніх цінностей та екзистенціальних ракурсів, є чимало цікавих авторів XX–XXI століть, чий успіх, з одного боку, і втрата популярності – з іншого, сигналізують про причини цілого процесу та його маркери. Якщо автори XIX століття та успіх їхніх творів були зумовлені підготовленістю читацької аудиторії, естетичними смаками та панівними стилями, то більш сучасна література з часів модернізму пов'язана, крім згаданих чинників, радше з політичними зміщеннями акцентів та загальною суспільною атмосферою, а також залежить від тематичної та жанрової структури літературних артефактів, від порушених проблем, від ступеня експериментаторства. На прикладах кількох чеських авторів XX століття показано різні аспекти проблеми маркерів успіху та їхнього зв'язку з творчою індивідуальністю.

Ключові слова: маркери успіху; специфіка чеської літератури; парадокси успіху і невдачі; Карел Гінек Маха; Карел Чапек, Якуб Демл; Ярослав Дурих.

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