

# Singularity and the Czech Interwar Essay among the Currents: František Xaver Šalda, Karel Čapek, and Jaroslav Durych

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*This study examines the Czech interwar essay of the 1920s and 1930s based on the example of three writers and critics: František Xaver Šalda, Karel Čapek, and Jaroslav Durych. It analyzes the specific thematic and formal features of the Czech essay and its typology.*

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To deal with the essay means to touch the kernel of literature in its widest sense, fact and fiction and all the neighboring plasma that links various layers of literary creation in both the past and present. A few years ago, in his book on early German romanticism, Břetislav Horyna, a Brno philosopher with a German orientation, emphasized the former more or less successful attempt at the synthesis of philosophy and poetry with the idea of continuity with the neoclassicist vision of the world, which might remind one of the “Christian Renaissance” based on the similar continuity with the classical, ancient tradition starting from the Carolingian Renaissance – a softer variety of the later genuinely hard, often atheistic Renaissance trying to delimitate itself in comparison to the medieval worldview. If the frequent link between philosophy and literature in its aesthetic or poetic function is taken into account, an essay on essay writing might be understood as a softer attempt at constructing bridges between various, often hostile, antinomic genre forms, cultural epochs, or ideological bias. I am convinced that all the treatises devoted to this subject may accentuate the many-sidedness, plurality, and ambiguity of the essay, its singularity, and its position on the boundary of literature and non-literature, of fact and fiction. I do not wish to philosophize about the essay or generalize its

multiple features; rather, I prefer the inductive approach based on a short comment on selected parts of the Czech essay tradition of the interwar period, the essence of which was being formed by the three writers and essayists in my title.

In Czech literature, the tradition of the essay goes back to modernism (the Czech *moderna*) linked to Czech decadence, which was more or less – as Robert Pynsent puts it – socially biased. Of course, this does not mean the total absence of the essay in preceding periods. One of the leading realist writers, Jan Neruda, may be regarded as the first to tend to a very similar sphere. However, only Julius Zeyer (as understood by Pynsent) represented the path to decadence (Pynsent, *Julius Zeyer*) and was most probably a modernist predecessor of this genre. The group around *Moderní revue* cultivated this genre form, and later Otokar Březina – one of the most significant Czech symbolists and a frequent Czech candidate for the Nobel Prize – wrote his well-known essay collections called *Skryté dějiny* (Hidden History) and *Hudba pramenů* (Music of the Springs) under the influence of František Xaver Šalda. However, the aim of this short article is not to trace the history of the essay in Czech literature, but “simply” to grasp one or two aspects of it that might have a more general meaning.

In Czech literature (and, moreover, in other Slavic literatures) the essay and essay writing was located between the rigid German tradition and the “lighter,” more elegant French and English approach towards literature well understood by younger artists born after 1890. The form of the essay in Czech literature was similar to that cultivated in the course of the entire nineteenth century; it was overloaded with many non-aesthetic functions and developed from general and artistic subjects up to culture in its widest sense, history, and politics. Thus, the essay, in those cosmopolitan currents of Czech post-realist times, often served for the integration of European subjects, bringing the Czech literature of that time closer to western European literary discourse. In the interwar period, when the writers of the 1890s matured, the essay sometimes served as a tool for wider cultural and political aims, including the propagation of the new state, its national ideology, and the democratic principles it was based on, as well as other general cultural tasks. The essay has often been involved in the polemics concerning several crucial subjects threatening the very existence of the new state: the concept of Czechoslovakia itself (i.e., the “Slovak issue”) was very topical if one simply compares the positions of Albert Pražák and Josef Jirásek on the one hand, and of Alexander Mach (the former minister of internal affairs of the First Slovak Republic in the 1940s) on the other. Mach’s fragmentary memoirs portray the entire problem as unsolvable and at an impasse, the problem of political orientation,

the role of President Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, and the popularity of Russian bolshevism among both the Czech working class and the majority of young Czech intellectuals. In the Czech interwar cultural environment, the essay participated in constructing the new cultural policy.

František Xaver Šalda (1867–1937) gradually became a founder of the all-embracing Czech essay. It is characteristic that the essay in the Czech lands has often had a hybrid genre structure, drawing closer to the plasma of heterogeneous genres and genre groupings such as the feuilleton, treatise, reflection, contemplation, and so on. Šalda intentionally cultivated the personal essay-portrait, which went back to his aesthetic doctrine based on French biographical models. He also integrated his essay writing in his *Šaldův zápisník* (Šalda's Diary), continuing the tradition of the work in progress with commentaries on world literature (Dostoevsky, Léon Bloy, and Jakub Deml). Although it was conceived in a different way, oriented more toward literature itself, towards the end of Šalda's life the diary contained increasingly more politicizing. Šalda stood somewhere between essay writing and journalistic ironic writing filled with biting remarks, politically attacking new state policy, often from social or leftist positions. His broad interests and the flexibility and dynamism of his conceptual ability in political writing are demonstrated by the titles of some of his essays written as journalism, such as “Krise inteligence” (The Crisis of Intelligentsia), “Střelející stát” (The Shooting State), “Stát a jedinec” (The State and the Individual), and “Stát a ulice” (The State and the Street) on the one hand, and on the other hand his essay-like portraits in the tradition of Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve, such as those on the political journalist Viktor Dyk, the political and social journalist Karel Čapek, and Arthur Rimbaud (*Jean Arthur Rimbaud, božský rošťák* [Jean Arthur Rimbaud: A Godly Rascal]). There was a general impact of a changing social and political situation (a world economic crisis, the unstable position of the new state, totalitarian pressures from Germany, Soviet Russia, and neighboring dictatorships in Poland and Hungary, the end of the “Russian Action” supporting Russian and East Slavic emigration into and outside Czechoslovakia in general, including the founding of universities and secondary schools, and the marking of the centennial of Pushkin's death in Prague in 1937). It is therefore significant that these circumstances grouped all the essay writers together, although not politically, but structurally. Their essays often expressed contradictory views, but were similar in their genre flexibility and dynamism.

Karel Čapek (1890–1938) is a typical example. He belonged to the group of Czech intelligentsia that could successfully continue the results of the victorious national revival in the nineteenth century and also seek

their stimuli outside the traditional German cultural milieu, although Karel Čapek himself also studied at the Faculty of Arts of Friedrich-Wilhelm University in Berlin in the 1910–1911 fall semester (he later found the opportunity to study in Paris at the Sorbonne). Čapek's artistic work was based on the plurality of chances: the axiomatic German tradition in the framework of the Austro-Hungarian Empire together with the spirit of the Austrian monarchy with its Biedermeier and secession (art nouveau, Jugendstil, new art, modern style) on the one hand, and on the other hand French modernist inspiration, the Anglo-American world with its utilitarianism, positivism (different from its French founders), pragmatism and Russian axiological and ethical extremism, melancholy, disillusionment, and suicidal moods. Thus French modernist literature, American pragmatism, and Russian extremism were the spiritual and methodological currents that counterbalanced the prevailing German impact. Čapek's translations of French symbolist and post-symbolist poetry under the title *Francoúzká poezie nové doby* (Modern French Poetry) originated mainly in 1916 in the war years and under the impact of wartime events (as Čapek himself put it in the epilogue to a new edition that appeared under the slightly modified title *Francoúzká poesie* 'French Poetry' in 1936 published in Prague by Borový publishers): "I played with Czech and made it create difficult puzzles of both form and sense and, at the same time, I realized with pleasure, emotion, and gratitude how stimulating, rich, flexible, inexhaustible and shapeable it is" (243; my translation).

Čapek analyzed a grotesque in modern German literature in a seminar with Arne Novák in 1910, and in 1911 and 1912 he wrote a treatise on Goethe's *Faust* in a seminar with Arnošt Kraus (its text is, however, lost). Last but not least, in 1914 in a seminar with František Krejčí he read his work on pragmatism and simultaneously worked on his study *Vztah estetiky a dějin umění* (The Relation of Aesthetics and Art History), which was then modified into his dissertation written in 1915: *Objektivní metoda v estetice se zřetěním k výtvarnému umění* (The Objective Method in Aesthetics with Regard to Visual Arts). His term paper on pragmatism was first published under the title *Pragmatismus čili Filosofie praktického života* (Pragmatism or Philosophy of Practical Life) by Topič publishers in Prague in 1918, and then in a second edition as the thirty-fourth volume of the series *Duch a svět* (Spirit and World) in 1925 (Čapek, *Univerzity*). In his essay on pragmatism, which followed the theses of pragmatism from Charles Peirce's first impulses up to the mature works of William James (1842–1910) and John Dewey (1859–1952), Čapek demonstrates a crucial controversy between empiricism and rationalism (Čapek, *Univerzity* 266). Exactly in the year of the publication of Čapek's juvenile term paper on pragmatism, John

Dewey published his new book *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (in Czech in 1929 as *Rekonstrukce ve filozofii*; in the Czech epilogue by Josef Schützner there is the term *přestavba*, which might be translated as ‘renewal’ or ‘revival’).

Čapek’s work is wedged between the poles of pragmatism, extremism, and radicalism – it is part of the chains, links, pairs, and triangles put together by a similar spiritual atmosphere in which it is useless to seek influences or thematic theses, but only to observe the complex process of genre continuity; that is, the phenomenon that 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 transcendencey (Bradbrook, *Karel Čapek. In Pursuit, Karel Čapek. Hledání pravdy*; Ohme; Pospíšil, “Primerjalna”; Pynsent, *Julius Zeyer, Pátrání, Question of Identity, “Tolerance”*; Uhle).

This wide range of interests is reflected in the development of Čapek’s essay writing; his engagement in the foundation of PEN, in which the letter “E” is of great importance, is more than symbolic. Čapek – whom Robert Pynsent regarded as a mere journalist because, as he put it, he knew only one Čapek in Czech literature: Karel Matěj Čapek-Chod (1860–1927, a Czech realist and naturalist) – moved between a feuilleton essay and a column, and even invented a specific radio feature (the *rozhlásek*), column ambit, and essay-letter (his letters to Olga Scheinpflugová anticipated Havel’s *Letters to Olga*). He used the essay as a tool for describing practical matters (“Jak se co dělá” ‘How Things are Being Done’); his pragmatism and neo-neoclassicist way of writing since the end of the 1920s tried to form a specific synthesis between a more spiritual, philosophical, and practical function of the essay as a sort of specific description or instruction. The essay in his hands became more journalistic, flexible, and practical, a genre of everyday use. However, like František Xaver Šalda he often used it for purely literary purposes (e.g., *Marsyas čili na okraj literatury* ‘Marsyas or On the Margin of Literature’, examining popular literature, or *Trivialliteratur*).

Čapek’s typology of the essay was extremely rich, and it concentrates on the problems of human culture in its widest sense. He began to deal with literature very early, and his essays cover the period from the mid-1910s up to his premature death. He dealt not only with literature, but also with translations, theater, painting, economics of culture, philosophy, history, and also foreign literature, containing practically all the significant works of his time. He is one of the founders of the literary review in essay form, and he anticipated the power of media over literature in a very impressive and influential manner. He tried to construct a cultural bridge between cultivated journalism and the aesthetically valuable art of writing, between

rigid scholarly approaches on the one hand and free evaluation on the other. In this sense, he became a real predecessor of contemporary criticism of the same sort, but mostly on a much higher critical and aesthetic level. His review essays covered typical examples of the Czech literature of that time, also accentuating outsiders and literature on the margin (e.g., Jiří Mahen, Jaromír John, etc). In his “greeting” to Karel Matěj Čapek-Chod, written on the occasion of his sixtieth birthday, he presented him as a pioneer of modernist literature in spite of his realism, an art that the neo-neoclassicist Karel Čapek tried to manifest. Karel Čapek’s essay is very sensitive to the receiving cultural environment, and therefore he often deals with theater criticism, film, and exhibitions of modern paintings, which reflect the most topical shifts of moods (Čapek *Spisy II, III*).

Jaroslav Durych (1886–1962) was a military doctor by profession and he fought against the Protestant conception of Czech history (e.g., František Palacký, T. G. Masaryk, Alois Jirásek) as a misinterpretation. 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 an ecstatic love of God. Due to his Catholic faith, he regarded this reality as part of a higher order inspired by the poetics of Romanticism (*Jarmark života* ‘The Fair of Life’, 1916; the novel *Na borách* ‘In the Mountains’, 1919; the romantic novella *Sedmikráska* ‘A Daisy’, 1925, and the essays in *Gotická růže* ‘A Gothic Rose’, 1923). Probably the most impressive are his historical novels set in the time of the great religious wars of the seventeenth century (*Bloudění* ‘The Wandering’, 1929; *Rekviem* ‘The Requiem’, 1930; *Masopust* ‘Shrovetide’, 1938; *Služebníci neužiteční* ‘The Useless Servants’, 1969; *Duše a hvězda* ‘The Soul and the Star’, 1969; and *Boží dýha* ‘God’s Rainbow’, 1969). In his pseudo-Baroque style he found 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 expressed controversial views and impressions of modern human individuality searching for God, extreme opinions, emotions, sincerity, and openness (see, e.g., his essays *Výstražné slovo k českým básníkům* ‘A Word of Warning to the Czech Poets’, *Proč mne mrzí být českým spisovatelem*, ‘Why I Feel Bad to Be a Czech Writer’, *Kánon sexuality* ‘The Canon of Sexuality’, and *Čekám na slovo osvobozující* ‘I Am Waiting for the Liberating Word’; in his essays Durych even came to a positive appraisal of communism). The rational kernel of his utterances consists in his revealing some common features of large mass movements: emotions, psychosis, weak mental control, extremism, and expressing absolute opinions consisting of the condemnation of postwar unmanliness, impotence, and weakness:

After the war our men became softer: it became fashionable to exhibit this unmanliness. The influence of postwar French literature is in this sense glaringly demoralizing. Although this unmanliness dwells rather on the tongue than in the real physiognomy of men, the word has its powerful spell that has its affection even through the crust of hypocrisy. So it happened that the idea of speaking softly and lamentably about the horrors of war became common and that these horrors would be expelled in the future. And communism seems to be an apparition that threatens these dispositions ... The Bolshevik revolution attempted the formation of a balance between natural and unnatural death, because 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 an ephemeral experiment, it showed its ability of inertia. It even organized its own principles to a certain degree. 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 respect for communism and I may even have more affection for it; I recognize many of its principles and especially its view of the 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. However, I am no communist because communism does not mean completeness for me, but just a part, maybe a stage. I could not become a communist although they would make me do so, although I know I will not be forgiven without complete obedience, although I know the communist hammer strikes not only nail heads, but also human ones, although 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 it will forgive us, or it will treat us due to its common methods. Or communism will be defeated by its opponents, and then they will 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. Humanity has not created anything higher. For us, though, it is not the highest peak. No empirical reasons against communism are sufficient for me. For that matter, communism has not had its own historian that would at the same time be its critic and visionary. I can see the monstrosity, but also beauty and mainly strength. However, there is even a bigger strength and in the order of eternity the lower must serve the higher.<sup>1</sup> (Fialová 189–190; see Pospíšil “Primerjalna”)

The thematic range of Durych's essay is closely connected with *Weltanschauung*, religion, and culture. First of all, it concerns the position of the writer in modern society; even if Durych goes back to the nineteenth-century Czech tradition (Havlíček), he stresses the moral integrity and protests against the impact of immoral sexuality and pride associated with wealth (*Česká krása* ‘Czech Beauty’, *Kánon sexuality* ‘The Canon of

Sexuality', *Chudoba jako podmínka* 'Poverty as a Condition'). He sharply criticizes the tendencies towards progressivism and leftist ideas that were fashionable in the interwar period (*Pokrokovost až k zblbnutí* 'Progressivism ad Nauseam'), and he insists on preserving a certain mystery in connection with literary creations (*Škodlivost autorských vykladů o genezi básnického díla* 'The Harmfulness of Authors' Interpretations on the Genesis of Poetry'). One of Durych's significant essays deals with František Xaver Šalda: Durych expresses his view of Šalda's personal integrity: "Time changes the face, but very rarely the human being itself. The face is a human matter, the human being is from God" (Durych 108). Politics occupy a very important position in Durych's essay writing. Here, he criticizes the reality of the first Czechoslovakia, which seemed to him too atheistic, anti-Catholic, and immoral (*Řád svobody* 'The Order of Freedom', *Kult moci* 'The Cult of Power', *Demokracie* 'Democracy'); this is closely linked to the problems of the political situation of the 1930s, including the Spanish civil war, in the evaluation of which he differed a great deal from other Czech and foreign intellectuals, even Catholic ones (e.g., Edvard Kocbek) of that time. Durych opened the structure of the essay to many subjects and applied some significant features of the Baroque style known from the Czech Baroque literature of the seventeenth century: long sentences, florid language, rich imagery, conservative views, and a Catholic vision of the world against modern liberalism. Unlike Čapek, he concentrated on a relatively narrow circle of ideas, on ideological integrity, and on the spiritual model of the world, although he was also very (even extremely) emotional and expressive. For Durych, however, the depiction of the material world was the revelation of God's will and creativity.

At this moment I would like to take a step aside: even the history and theory of the Czech essay seems to confirm a certain Czech isolationism, which is reminiscent of some other nations, nationalities, or national communities. This includes the concentration of the Czech essay on intrinsic Czech affairs and problems, and the development of its genre structure towards its social dimension and function. Not long ago, in 2007, a book was published on one of the topics of this article: the conference proceedings *Na téma umění a život: F. X. Šalda 1867–1937–2007* (On the Subjects of Art and Life: František Xaver Šalda 1867–1937–2007). There are many sophisticated articles, but very few concern the comparative aspect of Šalda's activity, although he was a professor of comparative literatures at Charles University. It always surprises me that the Czechs have been too little interested, say, in Poland and the Poles whereas there are hundreds of students of Czech at Polish universities, even on the Ukrainian border. To speak about non-comparative aspects of Czech globalism



(Mukařovský's *Kapitoly z české poetiky* 'Chapters from Czech Poetics') is not necessary if it has something in common with the general Czech position in Europe. One marginal remark: it has much in common with the tradition of Russian political thought so influential in Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Whereas Šalda (even in old age) and Čapek tried to integrate the Czech essay with its social and genre flexibility into a wider European democratic tradition, in his attacking, aggressive essay Durych stressed the fact that modern, liberal, atheistic times resulted in an absence of spirituality, put the entire religious (above all, Catholic) tradition on the margin of contemporary philosophy and practical politics, and lost the entire artistic tradition connected with past epochs. Therefore he protested against the anti-Catholic policy of the Czechoslovak state and filled his essay with pseudo-Baroque stylistic figures, with simple, yet determined, political and cultural positions. Ignoring his harsh attacks (among others, on Čapek himself), and his sometimes vulgar and offending words, one has to admit that Durych filled the modern essay with the features of the religious literature of the Baroque: exempla, homiletic structures, litanies, emotional exclamations, and ecstasies as if confirming Wellek's famous idea of the two currents in both Czech and English literatures: a materialist, pragmatic one on the one hand, and the spiritual, metaphysical one on the other (Wellek, "Two Traditions").

The Czech interwar essay represented a new stage in its development. It became more flexible, closer to other genre forms and groupings. Moreover, the essay was gradually becoming the dominant genre form and, like the novel, it swallowed up other genre forms, spreading beyond the borders of its former existence. It is said that the essay moved somewhere between philosophy and literature; I would only like to add that it is both philosophy and literature in the same degree in which literature had to philosophize and philosophy became literature more than in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Philosophers shocked by the practical disastrous impact of their teachings on twentieth-century politics stressed the non-systematic nature of philosophy, philosophy as artistic creation. In this tendency, the revival of the essay is playing an important role. *Quod erat demonstrandum*.

The essay cannot avoid the specific situations of national literature, its functions and its development; therefore it is impossible to analyze the Czech essay outside Czech literature as a whole as something supranational.

Thus, essay research must address both the genre aspect of literature (genology) and history, and – as René Wellek (*Theory*) put it – the theory of literary history not speaking about its obligatory comparative aspect.

If it must be admitted that the postmodernist essay sometimes degenerates into an attempt to replace literary criticism or scholarship as such, it must also be admitted that essay research – like the genre itself – might swallow up all the substantial disciplines of literary criticism necessary for its more profound understanding.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> “Po válce naši lidé změkklí: stalo se aspoň módou nosit změkčilost na odív. Vliv poválečné francouzské literatury je v tomto smyslu okatě demoralizující. Změkčilost ta sídlí sice spíše na jazyku než v pravé fyziognomii lidí, ale i slovo má své mocné kouzlo, které působí i skrze krunýř přetvářky. Tak se stalo, že se vžila představa, že je nutno o hrůzách válečných mluvit měkce a žalostivě, a tím že se tyto hrůzy pro budoucnost zažehnají. A komunismus je strašidlem, které tyto dispozice ohrožuje . [...] Bolševická revoluce pokusila se, aby zjedнала rovnováhu mezi smrtí přirozenou a nepřirozenou, poněvadž i ve válce ještě příliš mnoho lidí umíralo přirozeně. Vykonalna dílo zničení, a bylo to dílo veliké. Mohli jsme se poučit, že na nás číhají ještě velká nebezpečí . [...] Komunismus ukázal nedostatek smyslu pro sentimentalitu, a to musím uznávat s úctou. Považován za efemerní experiment, dokázal svou schopnost setrvačnosti. Zorganizoval do jisté míry i svoji řeholi. Vyplnil strach před násilím, vyzdvihl smysl armády, vyzdvihl smysl diktatury, ukázal se životnějším a silnějším než socialismus; ohlásil svůj nárok na vládu nad světem beze všech kompromisů a za jakoukoli cenu. Ctím komunismus a snad k němu chovám city ještě vřelejší; uznávám mnohé z jeho zásad a zvláště jeho názor o buržoazii; uznávám, že kultus je skutečně dílem proletariátu, uznávám i povýšenost proletariátu beze všech postranních výkladů a zadních dvířek. Ale komunistou přece jen nejsem, poněvadž komunismus pro mne neznamená úplnost, nýbrž část, třebaš i etapu. Nemohl bych být komunistou, ani kdyby mne nutili, třebaš vím, že bych pardonu nedošel bez poslušnosti úplné, třebaš vím, že komunistické kladivo bije nejen do hlav hřebíků, ale i do hlav lidských, třebaš ne každý den. Toužím-li po úplnosti, mohu sloužit části, ale nemohu věřit v dostatečnost části. Jaké nastávají možnosti? Buď že se nám nic nestane a že zemřeme klidně. Nebo komunismus zvítězí nad takzvaným starým světem a pak nám buď dá pardon, nebo s námi naloží podle běžných metod. Nebo komunismus podlehne svým odpůrcům a pak nás jeho odpůrci buďto nechají žít, nedbajíce o nás, nebo nás zasypou troskami komunismu, třebaš ani o tom nevěduce. Nebo posléze nastanou zcela jiné poměry v duchovém světě, a to záleží na tom, zda historii tvořit umíme, nebo neumíme. Vrchol komunismu je značně vysoký. Lidský duch sám o sobě nevytvořil dosud ničeho vyššího. Ale pro nás přece jen není vrcholem nejvyšším. Žádný empirický důvod proti komunismu mi nestačí. Ostatně komunismus ještě neměl svého historika, který by byl i kritikem a vizionářem. Vidím obludnost, ale i krásu a hlavně sílu. Je však síla ještě vyšší a v řádu věčnosti nižší musí sloužit vyššímu.”

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## Singularnost in češki medvojni esej med tokovi: F. X. Šalda – Karel Čapek – Jaroslav Durych

Ključne besede: češka književnost / 20. stol. / esej / Šalda, František Xaver / Čapek, Karel / Durych, Jaroslav

Začetki modernega češkega eseja segajo v drugo polovico 19. stoletja, čeprav so njegove korenine nasploh starejše. Toda šele uspešen zaključek procesa češkega narodnega preporoda in začetek češkega modernizma pod vplivom francoskih *poètes maudits* sta pokazala pripravljenost češkega kulturnega prizorišča, ki se je nagibalo k prevladujoči svetovljanski miselnosti Evrope, da sprejme esej kot žanr v vsej njegovi jezikovni in slogovni kompleksnosti. Čeprav je bilo med generacijo češke »moderne« od 90-ih let 19. stoletja naprej veliko dobrih esejistov, smo izbrali tri, ki razločno ponazarjajo singularnost češke esejistične pisave v 20. stoletju, obenem pa kažejo na tesne vezi z drugimi nacionalnimi literaturami in kulturnimi okolji. F. X. Šalda je bil tesno povezan z začetnim obdobjem češke »moderne«

po letu 1890, pa tudi z njenim nadaljnjim razvojem in s čehoslovaškim avantgardnim gibanjem v 20-ih in 30-ih letih 20. stoletja. Bil je vnet zagovornik moderne francoske književnosti, francoskega načina ustvarjanja artefaktov in francoskega esejističnega pisanja, polnega čustvenih izrazov, metafor in bogatega podobja. Njegova redna, goreča kritiška dejavnost, struktura njegovih kritik in poseben žanrski izbor, ne le njegove knjižne ocene, ampak tudi študije in kritiški Dnevnik (Šaldův zápisník) so izoblikovali novo poetiko češkega eseja in pomenijo tudi določeno stopnjo v razvoju češkega kritiškega in umetniškega jezika. Karel Čapek je bil predstavnik mlajše generacije, ki je kritizirala enostranskost svojih predhodnikov, pobudnikov češkega modernizma: njegovo neoklasicistično pisanje in kulturna usmeritev sta bila raznolika, saj je odraščal v nemški kulturi, naj pa je močno vplivala tudi ruska, francoska in angleška oz. britanska esejistika, v kateri so odsevali določeni tokovi filozofije britanskega utilitarizma in predvsem ameriškega pragmatizma. Njegovo nagnjenje k žanrski strukturi eseja je razvidno tudi iz njegovih kratkih zgodb. Jaroslav Durych je predstavljal tip grobe katoliške, neo- ali psevdo baročno čustvene, napadalne, ofenzivne in agresivne esejistike, ki je protestirala proti meščanski civilizaciji, konformizmu, ateizmu in vulgarnemu materializmu ter težila k absolutnim duhovnim vrednotam. Njegovi eseji so pomenili vnovično vzpostavitev konservativnega sloga v politični in literarni misli.

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