

## A Short Survey of Czech Literature

James Naughton

### EARLY HISTORY AND WRITING TO THE 18<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

The Slavs are supposed by archaeologists to have arrived in the general area in about the 6th century AD. Both Bohemia and Moravia received their Christianity mainly from the West; the medieval literary influences were thus predominantly Latin and German, but also French and Italian. There was also the linguistically and culturally important mission of Cyril and Methodius to the Moravian prince Mojmir in the 9th century. These two Slav brothers from Salonika are credited with the creation of the Church Slavonic liturgy, which was soon expelled from Moravia, was practised for a while in Bohemia, but which struck permanent root in Bulgaria, the Slav Balkans and Kievan Russia.

Bohemia and Moravia were subsequently ruled, up to the 14th century, by the native Bohemian Přemyslid dynasty, founded, as the story goes, when the nobility could no longer bear to be ruled by a woman, Princess Libuše, who told them to follow her horse, till it led them to her husband-to-be Přemysl, ploughing his field. Had he completed his job before they arrived, many a later disaster in national annals would perhaps never have occurred, and the course of Czech literature might have been quite different - one thinks especially of the nineteenth-century historical novel, so often lamely derivative of the work of Walter Scott, and associated in Czech readers' minds above all with the prolific figure of Alois Jirásek (1851-1930). Jirásek is nevertheless still enjoyed for books such as *Staré pověsti české*, 1894 (*Old Czech Legends*, 1992), retelling these ancient tales of Libuše, of the eponymous patriarchal tribal leader Czech arriving with his people, Moses-like upon the Mount of Říp in Northern Bohemia, of the Amazon-like Wars of the Maidens, and so on - legends of foundation, prophecy, etc, which began their process of detectable creation, accumulation, and mythopoeic refashioning in medieval Latin works such as Cosmas's *Chronica Boëmorum* of the early 12th century. By this time, Latin had ousted the relatively short-lived presence of Church Slavonic writing, which had co-existed with it for a while, latterly at the eleventh-century Sázava Monastery, south of Prague. Its texts include legends of St Wenceslas ('Václav' in modern Czech), that 'Good King Wenceslas' of the 19th-century English carol, murdered in 935 by his brother Boleslav, and soon turned into the national patron saint.

The literary tastes of the medieval Kings, later imperial electors, reflected both the often prominent role of Bohemia as part of that loose conglomerate, the Holy Roman Empire, and the large-scale immigration from Germany beginning in the 13th century, involved in trade, rich silver mines and the foundation of many towns. A number of German poets spent some time in Bohemia under the Přemyslid Kings, and later during the reigns of John of Luxembourg and his son the Emperor Charles IV, a strong patron of the Church and the arts, and founder of Prague University in

1348. Indeed, what is perhaps the outstanding masterpiece of pre-Reformation German prose, *Ackermann aus Böhmen* (*Husbandman from Bohemia*), was composed here by a Bohemian German, Johannes von Tepl (c1350-c1414), in about 1400. A continuous tradition of Czech vernacular writing had also established itself, however, from the late 13th century (with earlier manuscript glosses), and this produced a remarkable spectrum of 14th-century writing in Czech, by far the widest of any Slav vernacular literature at that time, ranging from the vigorous 'Dalimil' chronicle and legends of the saints, especially *Život svatě Kateřiny* (*The Life of St Catherine*), to satires, courtly love poems and chivalrous romances, including a long and long-undervalued *Tristram a Izalda* (*Tristan and Isolde*). Drastic, punning medieval humour is represented by texts such as *Mastičkář* (*The Quacksalver*), in which a quack purveys dubious ointments to the Marys of the Easter story who visit Jesus's tomb (an English translation exists, and an idea of some of the other texts can be obtained in A. French's bilingual *Anthology of Czech Poetry*).

Prose of the late 14th and early 15th centuries includes medieval classics such as the *Trojan Chronicle* and *Marco Polo*, the theological prose of Tomáš ze Štítného (c1335-c1409), and a long, luxuriant and effusive Czech text inspired by the German *Ackermann*, known as *Tkadleček* (*The Weaver*), c1407. The work takes the form of a dispute between a Lover (the weaver-of-words) and Misfortune (Death in *Ackermann*), who has deprived him of his mistress (not, as in *Ackermann*, his wife). This period also gave rise, as in England, to the first complete vernacular Czech Bible. It is thought to have been initiated by Charles's court in the 1360s, while, in the reign of his son Wenceslas IV, reformist preachers, the most famous among them Jan Hus (c1371-1415), influenced by the English Wyclif, laid the theological, if not the social, groundwork for the Hussite Wars, which followed the burning of Hus at the stake for heresy at Constance. Apart from all the later national literary and dramatic myth-making centred around Hussitism, for which we ought not to blame him (most of it is anyway inaccessible to the English reader), Hus contributed to the Czech language his clear straightforward register and avoidance of archaisms; his name is also linked with the adoption of diacritic marks in Czech spelling to distinguish different sounds (š for 'sh', č for 'tch', etc).

The years of Hussite conflict with the Church, religious factions and fanaticism, intermingled in a complex way with social resentments (in which anti-German feeling was by no means absent). All this led to a literature dominated by moral didacticism, warlike hymns, and pamphleteering satires. Among these, the Czech prose of Petr Chelčický's (c1390-1460) *Síť fiery* (*Net of Faith*), c1440-43, stands out sharply. A pacifist proponent of primitive, biblical Christianity, against the official hierarchy of society, Chelčický was recognized by Tolstoy as a forerunner of his own thinking. Secular Renaissance influences are visible in scholarship, in book printing (which reached Bohemia before 1500), in Latin poets, but are prominent only in a few imaginative authors such as Hynek z Poděbrad (c1450-92), son of King George of Poděbrady, author of erotic verse and a collection of bawdy Boccaccio stories. Another 'unserious'

amusing text, *Frantovy práva (Franta's Laws)*, 1518, from the beer town of Plzeň, surviving in only one printed copy, makes up disreputable guild-like rules for everyday life and drinking, and tells uproariously irreverent stories of heaven, hell and foolish husbands.

From 1526 Bohemia saw its first rulers from the Habsburg dynasty, which lasted till 1918. One was that famous patron of the arts, sciences and pseudo-sciences, Rudolf II (Emperor from 1576-1612), whose Prague court saw figures like the astronomers Tycho Brahe and Kepler - also the English astrologer and magus John Dee, later depicted in the Bohemian German Gustav Meyrink's novel *Der Engel vom westlichen Fenster*, 1927 (*The Angel of the West Window*, 1991). Prague also the home of an Englishwoman and fine Latin poet, Elizabeth (d 1612), who compared her fate to that of Ovid, and married an imperial lawyer. Meyrink's most famous novel, *Der Golem*, 1915 (*The Golem*, 1985) reminds us again of the long-standing importance of Jewish Prague, both for its history and its culture: the book is based on the Prague legend of the sixteenth-century Rabbi Löw, and his creation of a golem, a clay homunculus with affinities to Frankenstein's monster - as well as to the robots in the 20th-century Czech writer Karel Čapek's play *RUR (Rossum's Universal Robots)*, 1920, whose success in translation in the UK and the USA in the 1920s gave the word 'robot' to the English language.

In 16th- and 17th-century Bohemia, like today, translation was already a vital source of literary nourishment: imported authors included Erasmus (*The Praise of Folly*), Petrarch (prose), Luther, many versions of Aesop's fables, and so on; while biblical translation culminated in the Kralice Bible (1579-94) of the Protestant Unity of Brethren. Travel writing was already an active genre: the Czech aristocrat Václav Vratislav z Mítovic (1576-1635) wrote in 1599 of his part in a diplomatic mission to Turkey, involving imprisonment and the galleys - the work is available in English translation. Descriptions of Elizabethan England taken from the Latin of Zdeněk Brtnický z Valdštejna are available in *The Diary of Baron Waldstein*. The writer saw a play at the London Globe theatre in 1600 - what it was, we do not know. (Shakespeare's sea-coasted 'deserts of Bohemia' in *The Winter's Tale* are clearly coasts of the imagination, just as poverty-stricken artistic and writerly 'Bohemians' later received their epithet from Henry Murger's mid-nineteenth-century *Scènes de la vie de bohème*, the term being earlier associated in France with gypsy vagabonds.) For more fascinating or curious information on Anglo-Czech contacts, consult J. V. Polišenský's *Britain and Czechoslovakia: A Study in Contacts*.

*The Winter's Tale* was performed at the wedding of Elizabeth, daughter of James I of England, to Frederick of the Palatinate. In 1620, a brief bungled attempt by the Bohemian Estates to install this Protestant ruler Frederick as King was defeated by the Habsburg Ferdinand II just outside Prague, at the famous 'Battle of the White Mountain' (*Bílá hora*). This marked the start of the Thirty Years' War between Protestant and Catholic powers in Europe. For nationalistic Czechs, it marked the onset of a period of national 'Darkness' (*Temno* in Czech), represented as a disaster for the Czech language and its culture. In fact, insofar as there were grave weak points

(such as widespread indifference to vernacular culture amongst the nobility), they were there already, and it can just as easily, in fact more easily, be argued that Czech imaginative literature derived new impetus from the re-Catholicization, if not from the political changes.

Following the execution on Prague's Old Town Square of twenty-seven prominent rebels, there was large-scale confiscation of rebel landowners' estates, royal powers were enlarged, the official use of German alongside Czech was sanctioned, and the practice of no Christian faith other than Roman Catholicism was permitted. Many members of the higher classes chose emigration instead of conversion. Subsequent decades brought lengthy wars with the Turks, and aggravation of peasant burdens, accompanied by periodic revolts. The weakening in the public status of Czech became most apparent in the 18th century, especially when German letters began to achieve a dramatic resurgence. (The aristocracy often preferred to cultivate French.)

Czech remained the majority language of the populace, however, and the later 17th century saw a considerable flowering of Czech imaginative literature, including skilful sermons and lyrical poetry, inspired by the spiritual values of renewed Roman Catholicism, full of bold emotive effects, playful ornament and daring figures of speech. Similar stylistic traits are also apparent in the most famous 17th-century Protestant writer, Jan Amos Komenský (Comenius) (1592-1670), born near Uherský Brod in Moravia, and last Bishop of the Unity of Brethren. In exile from 1628, he was famous in his day throughout Europe for his works on education and the encyclopaedic ordering of human knowledge. In Czech he is remembered above all for his classic work of allegorical fiction *Labyrint světa a ráj srdce*, 1623, 1631 (*The Labyrinth of the World and Paradise of the Heart*, two translations), in which a pilgrim, wishing to see the ways of the world for himself, finds only a monstrous chaotic labyrinth in which people absurdly delude themselves, enslave and mistreat each other; the paradise of the heart is reached only when he returns into himself and the Christ within. The text is full of caustic observations, on marriage, the pretensions of philosophers and academics, and on political power. On the Catholic side one outstanding poet is the Jesuit missionary Bedřich Bridel (1619-80), whose best known poem 'Co Bůh? Člověk?' ('What is God? Man?'), 1659, is powerful in its mystic use of bold metaphor, oxymoron and natural imagery: Thou art the chasm's base, top, / I am the smallest droplet, / Thou art the orb of the sun, / I am its tiniest sparklet, / Thou art the very bloom's blossom, / I am but midday's gossamer, / To Thy dew's dew, new world, / I am a bubble at evening.' Another poet was Adam Michna z Otradovic (c1600-70), organist in Jindřichův Hradec, author of religious lyrics set to melodies, combining sensually adroit imagery with colloquial familiarity and domesticity: you can find recordings of his Christmas carols and other music. If subsequent decades, from the later 17th century up to the 1780s, were not exactly abundant in works of coherent literary imagination, it ought perhaps to be emphasized (as it generally is not) that a good deal of printed literature was nevertheless published, in the form of playfully vivacious, vivid and emotive sermons and other devotional prose and verse; there were also popular

printed tales and songs, as well as folk plays, puppet theatre, and of course a great amount of orally transmitted folksong, forming the basis for the subsequent standard 19th-century collections by the poet Erben and, for Moravia, by František Sušil (1804-68). Many fine traditional folksongs and ballads are obtainable in modern recordings. There was even an early 18th-century official Czech newspaper, from 1719, albeit struggling with only a small clientele.

The end of this period (generally known as 'the Baroque', a term more familiar to the English reader in architecture and music) is signalled by a series of radical state initiatives, including the institution, under the Empress Marie Theresa, of universal primary schools, in her Ordinance of 1774. German was taught everywhere, and was required for entering secondary schooling and universities (where it had only recently replaced Latin), but the primary schools also brought about general basic literacy in Czech. Her son Joseph II's decrees enlarging peasant liberties and permitting Protestant worship followed in 1781.

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