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The Development of Czech Literature

Vladimír Nosek

Poets of the Czech Regeneration

The most popular, though the weakest of the poets of this period was the Slovak **Jan Kollár** (1793-1852). It was aptly said about him that he was too much of a philologist to be a good poet and too much of a poet to be a good philologist. His chief work, *Slávny Dcera* (*Sláva's Daughter*), is a quaint mixture of the erotic with the pan-Slav idea. The woman whom he loved and married is personified as the daughter of Sláva, the goddess of all Slavs. The past of the ancient Slavs, especially of those of the Elbe, is described with minute archeological details which make the work heavy and monotonous. It is clear that Kollár was impressed by Petrarca and by Byron's *Childe Harold*, but he copied only the form, the outward mask and attitude, of Byron, while the spirit of his romanticism remained a closed book to him. It is a pathetic and naive conglomeration of abstract archeology and pan-Slav idealism. Today we hardly can understand how it could have provoked the enthusiasm of his generation. Added to the weakness of the contents, the Latin hexameter employed, which was already condemned by Dobrovský as being completely unsuitable for the accent of the Czech language, makes the work even more dry and indigestible. The opening stanza deplores the fate of the Slavs of the Elbe in the following words:

Here lies the country, alas, 'fore my eyes that in tears are overflowing,
Once 'twas the cradle, but now – now 'tis the tomb of my race.
Check thou thy steps, for the places are sacred wherever thou turnest.
Son of the Tatra arise, cast to the heavens thy gaze,
Or to the mighty old oak, that stands there yonder, incline thee,
'Gainst the treacherous time holding its own till today.

(Translated by Paul SELVER.)

It is not surprising that later poetry found no inspiration in Kollár's example, which from the artistic point of view was doomed to oblivion. On the other hand, a more fruitful ground was found in Bohemia by romanticism in its ethnological aspect. The interest in folk-poetry originated in England, where under Addison's influence Bishop Thomas Percy published a collection of English and Scottish ballads in 1765 under the title of *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*. The study of folk-lore which romanticism promoted found a ready echo in Germany, where Herder, the brothers Grimm, Brentano, and von Arnim began to collect folksongs, stories, and ballads.

The influence of this movement is marked also in Robert Burns, Goethe, Uhland, Heine, and many other poets of this period. In Bohemia a great deal of study was devoted to the collection of folk-songs, ballads, and proverbs from the commencement of the regeneration, especially by Šafařík, Kollár, Sušil, Erben, and Čelakovský. The latter two were inspired by these studies to a production of successful imitations and original works in folk-lore style, many of which constitute the only classical gems of the poetry of this period. Of the two Čelakovský, though not as original as Erben, showed a greater sense for the lyric element, while Erben's ballads are almost purely epic. Both were influenced by the philosophy of Rousseau, Herder, and Goethe.

F. J. Čelakovský (1799-1852) is an extremely sympathetic personality. Well versed in Slav literature, as well as in German classic and romantic poetry, Čelakovský devoted his whole life to the study of Slav folk-lore. He suffered a great deal from poverty, having had to earn his living first as a tutor in aristocratic families, then as the editor of the official *Prague Gazette* and of the *Česká Včela* (*Czech Bee*). In 1835 he had to resign this position owing to the intrigues of his personal enemies, and his existence was uncertain until in 1842 he became Professor of Slav Studies in Breslau and finally at the Prague University (1849). His health was by then, however, so undermined through all the hardships of his life that he died soon afterwards. As a character, Čelakovský possessed a rare balance and broadness of mind. He had something of Goethe's grace, lucidity and wit, and to Goethe he was also in no small measure indebted for his outlook on life. His literary ground was limited, but he mastered his subject well. He had a great command of style and language and wrote a firm and easy verse, full of sonority, wit, and melody, for which we would in vain look in any of his contemporaries. The only criticism which might be brought to weigh against his work is that it lacked in originality of subject-matter – all his works being but reflections of folk-poetry. His genius, though lyrical in temperament, was inspired more by aesthetic reasoning than by the direct impulse of his spirit. Besides his collections of Slav folk-songs (1827) and of Slav proverbs (1852), Čelakovský bequeathed as his best works *Echoes of Russian Songs* (1829), *Echoes of Czech Songs* (1839), and *The Rose of a Hundred Leaves* (1829). The Russian echoes, though only imitations of Russian heroic ballads (*byliny*), are original in artistic conception and combine well the epic, heroic spirit with a romantic sense for the beauties of nature and for the erotic. More lyrical still than the *Russian Echoes* are the *Czech Echoes*, which express admirably the nature of the Czech peasant, playful, ironic and excitable, and again graceful and possessing deep popular wisdom. A classical example of his genius is his poem *Toman and the Wood-nymph*, a story of a demoniac, passionate love in romantic wood surroundings. In addition to the above-mentioned works Čelakovský translated from Sir Walter Scott, Herder, Goethe, and Krasiński. Through the harmony of his life-conquering spirit, his sense for a brilliant and heroic grandeur of effect, and his command of diverse styles, well suited to the wisdom and wit of the folk-ballad, he brought to perfection the folk-song form and must be ranged among

the classics of Czech poetry. As a protagonist of perfect form and of wealth of contents he was naturally an opponent of everything superficial, imperfect, pathetic, abstract and insincere, and for this reason he was also opposed to Kollár and Mácha.

K. J. Erben (1811-1870) also devoted himself to the study of folk-lore and knew thoroughly Slav sagas, songs, ballads, and proverbs. His greatest work is the *Kytice*, a collection of folk-ballads which earned him the fame of the classical Czech ballad-writer. Though his ballads are based also on folk-poetry, they are much more original in subject than those of Čelakovský. Erben succeeded in interpreting through his work those epic and psychological elements of folk-poetry which are the most characteristic of the various Slav races. His ballads, taken mostly from mythology, show man in a dramatic moral struggle with supernatural phenomena, and usually end harmoniously with the victory of man by the aid of a firm faith in all that is good. As regards form, they are written in a simple, primitivist style which most aptly reflects the spirit of folk-poetry. Through this simplicity Erben succeeds in producing wonderful effects in the description of characters and of general atmosphere, and adds thereby to the dramatic flow of the story. Erben has, indeed, become the teacher of the new generation of Hálek, Neruda, and Heyduk, to say nothing of Vrchlický, but he alone remained the master of the true folk-ballad style. The artistic defect of his work lies in the lack of any lyric element. His poems are the work of a scientific mind, transplanting successfully the finished form of the Scottish ballad into Bohemia with the use of native themes.

A personality which stands quite apart in Czech literature is **Karel Hynek Mácha** (1810-1836), the only truly lyric poet of this period. Unfortunately, he lived in an age when Czech literature was in its infancy, and he remained, therefore, alone, misunderstood, and boycotted by his contemporaries. He was also handicapped by his youth, for he died prematurely before his great talent could ripen. But though he did not digest and understand romanticism in its full scope, retaining only its negative, melancholy pessimism, Mácha remained the one Czech poet on whom Byronism had more than a superficial influence. His greatest and almost only work, called *May*, which made him famous and dear also to later generations, contains delicious lyric passages, despite a good deal of fantastic and pathetic elements in the story itself. The poem begins:

‘Twas late in the evening, the first of May,
The first of May, the time of love,
Of love alone sang ev’ry dove.

The description of the beauties of nature, with doves, roses, nightingales, pale moonlight, and other romantic attributes, is followed by a contrasting tragedy of the desperate feelings of a girl waiting in vain for her beloved who lies in prison awaiting execution for having murdered his own father out of jealousy. Then follow the meditations of the prisoner about after-death life, about the meaning of life and the

vanity of everything on this earth. His soul is full of melancholy, yearning, and discontent at the tragedy of the fate of a man condemned by society to perdition because he violated the existing order under the influence of excessive love and jealousy. The epilogue is a fascinating elegy of lost youth, a foreboding of the poet’s own coming death.

Despite all the imperfections of this work – its pessimism, scepticism, pathos, and weak story – its merits are many. It contains places which are evidently characterized by that inspiration, depth, and sincerity of feeling which are only given to true poets. In the lyrical parts Mácha was the first to use to the full advantage of its wealth of colour and sonority the Czech language in harmony with the spirit of the ideas expressed. He was the first, and for a long time the only, Czech poet who dared to express his personal feelings directly and sincerely to the horror of his simpleminded patriotic contemporaries, who saw in him a revolutionary. He was the first who “had the courage to look straight in the face of that which is called nought,” and beneath all the pathetic imperfections we discover in him that strong yearning for truth in philosophic thought and sentiment which later characterized the greatest Czech poets Neruda, Vrchlický, Machar, Bezruč, Sova, and Březina.

First Attempts in Prose

If the beginnings in poetry were difficult, attempts at original prose were even more so. Even in later Czech fiction we find seldom great originality or that high standard which is characteristic of Czech poetry. Czech novelists limited themselves mostly either to realistic pictures from the life of the peasants, or to historical subjects, without attempting to solve any great human problems and usually also without striving for that depth of thought and psychology for which the Scandinavian and Russian literature is famous. Nevertheless, we find in later Czech literature the influence of these as well as of the French literature. The prose of the first half of the nineteenth century, however, is such poor reading-matter, consisting chiefly of sentimental patriotic stories, that we do not propose to deal with it.

An honourable exception is the work of **Božena Němcová** (1820-1862), who successfully fulfilled in prose those ideals which guided Erben and Čelakovský in poetry. It was this intelligent warm-hearted woman who first turned her attention to the life of the peasant. Let it be said at once that women occupy a very prominent position in Czech literature, and we shall later have the opportunity of speaking about the service rendered by K. Světlá, Víková-Kunětická, G. Preissová, and R. Svobodová to the development of the Czech novel.

The life of Němcová was very sad. She married at the age of seventeen an official fifteen years older than herself, who showed no understanding for her work and often treated her brutally out of jealousy for her friendship with various fellow-writers. She was always suffering in health, and in addition to the care of her five

children she had later practically to provide for her own living, because her husband was pensioned in 1853 in consequence of a groundless denunciation, but in reality on account of her purely nonpolitical writings. Němcová died an old woman at the age of forty-two before her talent could develop sufficiently to make her into a truly great novelist. Nevertheless, the work she left is of sufficient literary value to assure her immortality.

Her patriotism and literary interest were aroused by the dramatic writings of Josef Kajetán Tyl, and by her contact with Czech literary circles generally during her stay in Prague in 1842-1845. Her chief interest centred in folklore, which she studied zealously wherever she came: in her own native district in North-Eastern Bohemia, in South-Western Bohemia and in Slovakia. Perhaps of the greatest value are her charming fairy-tales, adapted mostly from original tales heard from the peasants. She wrote also many stories from the life of peasants, the greatest and most popular of them being *The Grandmother*, translated also into English, French, German, Rumanian, and other languages. *The Grandmother* is really a biography of Němcová's own grandmother, founded on recollections from her early youth. It is a charming picture of an old woman whose only mission in life is to be kind to others, and it contains also a wealth of picturesque descriptions of local customs. Her description of characters and her naive romanticism remind us of Charles Dickens, but her rendering of the peasant's relation to nature is obviously influenced by Rousseau's ideas. It is a book full of lofty idealism, simplicity of heart, light humour, and poetry. Němcová's impressions, her ethnographic studies, her romantic descriptions of nature, and her understanding of the human heart are well combined in this simple, yet dramatic story. Her talent was limited, but fortunately she never overstepped her limitations. Her work is the work of a romantic, erotic soul, displaying tender womanly tact and intuition, simple and charming, and entirely free from sophistry or false intellectualism.

The decade from 1845 to 1855 meant a period of slumber in prose as in poetry. The Young German movement and Hegelian Radicalism in Germany had only a slight repercussion in Bohemia, where romanticism and Byronism died hard. It prepared the ground for the Liberal and Democratic movement personified in Havlíček. A new critical current began to be felt in philosophic scepticism and realism in opposition to romanticism and the period of slumber, with the advent of Havlíček and Neruda. The same revolution which in political ideas created Havlíček was accomplished in poetry by Neruda, whose importance greatly outweighs the literary value of his more popular contemporary, Hálek. The second half of the nineteenth century, although often showing cosmopolitan tendencies, retains the nationalistic idea and love of folklore of the romantic period, while realism purifies and uplifts Czech poetry and contributes fresh ideas. Instead of a blindly sentimental culture of the erotic, Czech literature proclaims the emancipation of women; instead of uncritical patriotism it adopts a critical attitude towards national as well as religious and social questions. Neruda, Hálek, Svatopluk Čech, and Vrchlický bring gradually

to perfection excellence of form. The struggle of cosmopolitan with national tendencies enriches poetry both in form and in contents, although cosmopolitanism had also many detrimental effects inasmuch as it brought too many foreign influences to weigh against the development of a sufficiently original Czech literature. Its chief merit lies in the fact that through the translations of the most important works of English, French, Italian, German, Scandinavian, and Russian literatures it widened the outlook of the reading public and filled to a large extent the gap in literature felt through the lack of literary tradition.

The "May" Generation

The period between the publication of the programme of the rising literary generation in 1854, and Hálek's death belonged to the *May* generation, so called after the literary review *May*. The chief personalities of this period were Hálek and Neruda, poets of vastly different talent and temperament. The poets of this period generally labour under the influence of Heine and of the Young German movement, and lay the foundations of modern Czech poetry which followed. The *May* generation recognized Erben as its teacher, but it lay also under the spell of individualism and of the sentimental lyric Byronism of Mácha, whom it tried to vindicate. Rational scepticism, irony, and realistic tendencies also begin to gain ground.

Vítězslav Hálek (1835-1874) was considered a great genius by his contemporaries, and yet today he is, like Kollár, rightly relegated to oblivion. The myth of Hálek's greatness was finally and definitely disposed of by Machar in 1894. From a student of philosophy Hálek became a poet and later a journalist as a contributor to the newly founded *Národní Listy*. Through the marriage with a rich woman he soon acquired a wide circle of friends in society, which, together with the pleasing light sentimentality of his poems, assured him a quick rise to fame and popularity. This circumstance undoubtedly did him more harm than good, because it seduced him to attempt such tasks for which his manifold, yet second-rate talent did not suffice. His first work was a collection of ballads in the style of Erben's *Kytice*. Then followed various epic poems on exotic themes which are no more than slavish imitations of Byron in form, and lack in psychology and sincerity of feeling. His *Alfred* is, indeed, nothing but a caricature of Mácha's *May*. His most popular work is a collection of lyric poems called *The Evening Songs*, clearly reflecting Heine's poetry, but lacking Heine's sense of humour. They are sugary, monotonous examples of lyric romanticism. For instance:

The trees are rustling softly. Through
The leaves scarce moves a breeze.
The birds in blissful dreams repose
So silent and at ease.

Many a star in heaven appears,
 Around it all is so free
 But in my bosom there is grief,
 In my heart is misery.
 Upon the petals of the flowers
 The dew in splendour lies.
 O God, and even so the dew
 Wells up into my eyes.

(Translated by Paul SELVER.)

The lack of self-criticism, erudition, and originality is especially obvious in his epic poems, which are but fantastic plays of unreal phantoms and by far do not reach the heights of a Puškin or a Mickiewicz, to whom Hálek's poems have been compared. They have no depth and little charm. The naiveté of the descriptions of nature surpasses even Mácha's simplicity and often borders on the comic. As an example of how his powers fell short of his examples we may quote his apostrophe of liberty in the poem "Goar".

O freedom! Thou golden gift of nations
 By man for ages trodden down and torn,
 Conceived in hideous pain and lamentations,
 To be but foully murdered, tho' scarce born,
 Be welcome as a ray in thickest fog,
 Thou lovely rose, flower of consolations,
 Thy roots are in man's long-past hopeless sighs,
 Thy dew – the bitter tear – drops in his eyes.

And compare this paraphrase of Byron with the inspiring text of the original:

Yet Freedom! Yet thy banner, torn, but flying,
 Streams like the thunderstorm against the wind.
 Thy trumpet voice, though broken now and dying,
 The loudest still the tempest leaves behind.
 Thy tree has lost its blossoms, and the rind,
 Chopp'd by the axe, looks rough and little worth,
 But the sap lasts-and still the seed we find
 Sown deep, even in the bosom of the North.
 So shall a better Spring less bitter fruit bring forth.

Hálek wrote also several dramas in which he tried to imitate Shakespeare. He succeeded in imitating his weak points, but his philosophy, wit, and charm eluded

him. Hálek's dramas lack in dramatic climax, and the whole fabric is superficial, improvised, and insincere. His *dramatis personæ* are unreal, pathetic talkers. Hálek's dramas have, therefore, hardly survived his own lifetime. Somewhat better are Hálek's last works, consisting of lyric poetry and short stories.

How different, on the other hand, were the life and work of Neruda. Hálek's life was happy and easy, his success and popularity complete. Neruda was born in poverty, never found happiness in love, lived in continuous struggle and suffering, misunderstood and despised by his contemporaries, and died in poverty after a long and painful illness which for years confined him to bed. His fate presents in many respects a parallel to Smetana's. Both Neruda and Smetana earned the full recognition of their nation only long after their death – Smetana as the founder of Czech opera, Neruda as the founder of modern Czech poetry. And although to a foreign observer their merits might seem overrated, for it is little short of heresy to criticize one or the other to a Czech of today, the fact remains that without Smetana the development of Czech music had been as unthinkable as the development of Czech poetry without Neruda. Despite their defects, or rather their more local, national importance, both of them have created works of classic, permanent values, and in their works the Czech spirit for the first time found its true, original expression.

Like Hálek, **Jan Neruda** (1834-1891) was influenced by Heine and the Young German movement. But if Hálek lacked in self-criticism, Neruda suffered rather from too great a self-consciousness. Although they both were friends and contemporaries, they had few things in common. Hálek's sentimental romanticism, in fact, belonged to the past, while Neruda's realism and his outlook on life belonged to the future. In his character Neruda was, especially in his early life, a sceptic and a pessimist, reserved and sensitive, proud, self-critical, with a cold reason, yet not without a warm heart. From the cosmopolitanism of his early works he soon returned to nationalism in an effort for the creation of a nationally original style, while remaining a pronounced enemy of Jingoism. A born sceptic and a man of intellect, Neruda, like Havlíček, denounced patriotic sentimentality and demanded that patriotism should be conscious and reasonable, not blind.

In the expression of his own personal feelings he was, like Smetana, very shy and discreet. Only his first and his last poems are purely lyrical and personal. His other works conceal his personal feelings in poems written with a lofty idealism and a broad, humanitarian outlook, *sub specie aeternitatis*. None the less, all his poems bear the mark of his strong and original personality, and tell us more about his Soul than had he written volumes about himself.

Neruda was, especially in his prose, a humorist, but not a satirist. Being a proletarian, he wrote stories which constitute a veiled protest against the existing social order, but without any contempt, envy, or hatred of the upper classes. His prose consists mostly of feuilletons written for the *Národní Listy*, of which he wrote over two thousand. Perhaps the most characteristic and best known are the stories about his native Malá Strana – a quaint old quarter in Prague, just below the Castle of

Hradčany. These stories are short realistic sketches of the common people, and their compassionate humour often reminds us of Čechov. They contain many allusions to his own life, and altogether represent a tribute paid to the surroundings in which he was born and in which he led a suffering, yet often happy life. His best prose works, however, are considered to be the impressions of his travels in France, Germany, Egypt, and Palestine, full of picturesque descriptions and the keen perspicacity of a modern European. In all his stories Neruda likes to exaggerate and to caricature. The general tendency of his writings shows him to be a democrat and a liberal both in politics and in religion. His Later prose works unfortunately show a growing incongruity and a distinct weakening of wit.

Neruda's prose is of a far smaller artistic and human value than his poetry. Through his prose works he paid a heavy penalty to the belated influence of the Young German movement in Bohemia, from which his poetry is almost free. The Young German movement was meant as a revolution against the ideas of classicism and romanticism. By trying to replace these ideas with new ones in the sense of Strauss and Feuerbach philosophy, it fell into the abyss of shallow cosmopolitanism and humanism. After Byronism it became the fashion of the day in Bohemia, and Neruda, Hálek, and K. Světlá often sought in it their ideals. Neruda was stimulated by it to the search of an enriched content, and a reflection of its influence is also in his attempt to refresh poetry by the use of the living language as spoken in the street. But the fallacy of the movement lay in its superficiality. Literature was to be but an improvisation of the impressions of the moment without regard to beauty of style, rhythm, and organic construction, without which genuine poetry cannot exist. Heine himself, therefore, protested to be identified with the Young German movement, and Neruda discovered its dangers in time. His return to the folk-song form and to the ballad in the footsteps of Erben obviously was a step in the opposite direction from the Young Germans, who distrusted and scorned folklore study.

Neruda wrote six volumes of poems. The first book, called *Cemetery Blossoms* (1857), contains the confessions of his pessimistic youth and reminds us of Mácha. The verse is as yet rough but vigorous. The poet has obviously created it with difficulty, but its sincerity and depth of feeling revealed the future master, and at any rate did not merit the scorn of the critics of the day which it received, and which made him feel as one "buried alive." The two books of verses which followed, containing poems written between 1860 and 1867, are ballads and legends, and are inspired by Neruda's admiration of Erben and Heine, from whose works they differ by a broader humanitarian out-look. If Heine was foremost an artist and then a man, Neruda strove above all to be human, and artistic aims were a secondary consideration to him. In these two works Neruda found for the first time his own self. Their original style, concise yet full of youthful *joie de vivre*, their rhythmic melody and the intensity of feeling of their contents, make them living books even today. In all his suffering Neruda apparently lived an intense spiritual life, and searched in higher ideals of art for a balance of mind and inner harmony.

His following book, *The Cosmic Songs* (1878), is a further proof of his search in the mysteries of the universe for a liberation from the annoying pettiness of this world. There is a joyous outcry for the conquest of the universe in these charming poems, some of which are written in the simple, concise, and witty folk-song style, others in a rich, harmonious verse. His keen astronomic phantasy makes him compare human life with cosmic life, only seldom contrasting the two. Every word is in its place, nothing is false or superficial. His own personality remains in the background: art and poetry are something holy to him which does not allow profanation. The only drawback of the *Cosmic Songs* is a certain incongruity of ideas and too much anthropomorphism.

His best work is considered to be a volume of *Ballads and Romances*, written in 1883, in which his intellectual positivism finally overcomes his pessimism. His ballads, founded mostly on Czech motives, are superior ethically and philosophically to those of Erben. A warm, human feeling pervades them, together with a delicate touch of humour, so that the primitivist folk ballad becomes, in the interpretation of this cultured European, a higher work of art with a humanitarian tendency. Erben's simple morality becomes in Neruda a boisterous outcry against the existing social order, as well as a joyous hymn to the Almighty, with a deep philosophic meaning throughout. The epic and the lyric elements are happily combined in a work full of grandeur, rhythm, and decorative charm. It is a refuge of the poet from empty liberalism and rationalism to the world of miracles. The motive of the pure, simple, and noble soul of a child comes up again and again, pointing out the road of salvation for sophisticated mankind. Jesus does not appear as a martyr or as a fighting revolutionary, but as a prophet full of wisdom and pure humour, enveloping the world with its shining splendour. Neruda pictures Jesus either as the loving and beloved Saviour, or as a charming, kind-hearted bambino.

The forebodings of his long illness are contained in *The Simple Motives* (1888), in which Neruda embodied the yearnings, erotic dreams, and scepticism of his second youth. They are a description of the four seasons in nature which serve him to express symbolically the experience of his life. Sceptic Spring disbelieves that snow will ever disappear and struggles bard for supremacy. Hot, erotic Summer follows triumphant in light and happiness, but melancholy Autumn intervenes and the year ends in cold Winter, with its long sleepless nights, foreboding the coming death. Neruda's last book of poems, *The Friday Songs* (1890) is again, as his first work, purely lyrical. It contains religious reminiscences, elegies of personal sufferings, pathetic hymns, and prayers of an almost mystic national Messianism.

If we examine wherein lies the Czech character of Neruda's work, we shall find it in his humanitarian, liberal patriotism, in his sense of humour and love of the truth, in the simplicity and conciseness of language, using with special effect Slav diminutives, and finally in his depth of feeling combined with fine intellectualism. It seems a pity that almost nothing of this our great classic, has as yet been translated into English.

When speaking of Czech poetry of this period, we must add two more names to

those of Hálek and Neruda, namely, those of Heyduk and Světlá. **Adolf Heyduk** (1835-1923) was a happy son of nature, and his poetic improvisations are in many ways related to Hálek's lyric poetry. He had nothing of the solitary, cultured pessimism of Neruda. Heyduk's value in literature, however, is greater than Hálek's, because Heyduk is more sincere and original. The best of the numerous poems that Heyduk wrote are his lyric songs on romantic love and nature themes, reflecting the folk-poetry of Slovakia and of Šumava (the Bohemian Forest). Heyduk's epic works do not attain a high artistic level, and often suffer from a too pronounced nationalistic tendency.

The greatest novelist of this period was again a woman, **Karolina Světlá** (1830-1899), who was attracted by the work and personality of George Sand. George Sand herself took great interest in Bohemia, and borrowed a great deal of local colour from Bohemia for her novels *Consuelo* and *The Countess of Rudolfstadt*. Světlá looked to George Sand for the psychology of her woman types. She had more pathos and a greater ambition than Němcová, but her real talents were unequal to the task. Her early novels show the soul of women who have to struggle against social prejudices. Some of her novels, rather phantastic in conception, show a patriotic tendency and deal with reminiscences of her family and with the Czech regeneration. Her later novels are of greater literary value, and aspire at tragic stories with strong moral ideals behind them. The last period of her production is tainted with undue patriotic tendency at the expense of a truly human outlook on life and its problems. Her whole work, which consists of thirty large volumes, appears rather out of date today and does not compare with the artistic standard of Němcová's work. Her women, fighting for new ideas, are too schematic and unreal, her stories lack in organic construction and inspiration, and her novels, therefore, strike us as being grey and monotonous.

The cosmopolitan tendency which manifested itself so strongly later in Zeyer, Sládek, and Vrchlický, had an important influence already on the generation of Hálek and Neruda. Neruda himself translated from Scandinavian, Hungarian, and French (Victor Hugo), P. Durdík translated Byron's *Cain*, P. Sobotka translated Tennyson and Longfellow, and various translations appeared also from Russian (Puškin, Lermontov, Nekrasov, Rylejev, Kolcov, etc.), and from Polish (Slowacki).

A few words have to be added about the progress of Czech drama. The interest in theatricals, and especially in opera, has always been keen in Bohemia. Very important is the tradition of Shakespeare, whose dramas are still on the permanent repertoire of the Czech theatres of today. As early as 1786 Czech theatrical performances were given in the wooden theatre called "Bouda" (Booth), when *Macbeth* was played for the first time in Czech in the translation from German of K. H. Thám. Later on, Czech actors were allowed occasionally to give matinees in the old Theatre of the Estates, where Mozart's *Don Juan*, composed in Prague, had its first performance. The first translation of Shakespeare from the original (*Macbeth*) was made by J. J. Kolár in 1839 and other translations soon followed, so that the Society *Matice Česká* could, in 1872, present the Czech public with a complete translation of all Shakespeare's plays. It was

the work of J. J. Kolár, J. Čejka, F. Doucha, L. Čelakovský, and J. Malý. These translations contained, however, many imperfections, and the task of revising them or rather of translating Shakespeare afresh, fell to J. V. Sládek, who translated altogether thirty-one plays. The work of this poet, who belonged to the generation which came after Neruda and who had a good knowledge of English, having lived for some time in the United States, was most successful, and reproduces well the spirit as well as the melody of Shakespeare's verse.

The Czech theatre had meanwhile made great progress. In 1862 a provisional theatre was built in which within twenty years of its existence Shakespeare has been produced more than three hundred times. In 1883 at last was opened the present theatre and opera, the *National Theatre*. On this occasion the great Czech political leader Rieger rightly observed: "Our National Theatre is not like other theatres. It was built from voluntary contributions made with unheard-of sacrifices. Whenever you touch it you touch the sacrifice of poor widows and poor labourers who may not be able even to see it in their lifetimes, because they have not sufficient means to come so far to see it." The National Theatre, which has become a true temple of art, is in itself a wonderful work of the best Czech architects, sculptors, and painters, and proudly boasts that it was built by "the Nation for itself." It became not only the home of fine recreation, but also an instrument of artistic education, for it uplifted the artistic sense of the Czech people, who affectionately call it "The Golden Temple."

The "Lumír" Generation

The task of the generation which under more auspicious circumstances followed in the footsteps of Hálek and Neruda was equally grateful and difficult. It meant nothing less than the creation of modern Czech poetry which could favourably compare with the poetry of other nations with a far older tradition. The cosmopolitan tendency gained ascendancy in the artistic group gathered round the review *Lumír*, and led by Vrchlický, Sládek, and Zeyer. Old patriotic romanticism and pan-Slavistic Byronism culminates and dies with Svatopluk Čech, who brings to perfection the epic form of poetry. Only later on a new school arises as a reaction against both the cosmopolitan and the nationalist schools in the realistic movement which proclaims modern social and ethical ideals in poetry.

Svatopluk Čech (1846-1908), who stood at the head of the nationalist school, has been aptly called the last poet of the regeneration period. His pan-Slav ideas and lofty patriotism remind us of Kolár, and his epic poems are the realization of the ideals for which Hálek in vain strove. There is an obvious continuity between the work of Čech, a pupil of Russian and Polish Byronism, and the preceding Czech romantics. As regards form, Čech is related to Vrchlický, because they both are verbalists. But while Čech lays stress on poetic description and his form becomes schematic,

Vrchlický loves rhetoric contrast and variety of form. Nevertheless, technically Čech is superior not only to Hálek, but even to Neruda.

From the beginning Svatopluk Čech was a master of the small ballad form, in which we perceive the continuation of Hálek's Byronic tradition. Later on Čech indulged in writing long epic poems mostly from Czech (Hussite) history, the best of them being *The Adamites*, *Europe*, and *Václav z Michalovic*. His poems are carefully worked out in detail, their verse is solid and conscientious, their spirit simple and warm-hearted. Problems are solved rhetorically rather than philosophically or psychologically. Thus, for instance, Čech solves the Slav problem by a reconciliation of Poles and Russians, and, similarly, all other conflicts end in an optimistic conclusion, usually in a grand hymn on humanitarian, pan-Slav, or democratic ideals. The poems contain scenes calculated at dramatic effect, but they Buffer from too detailed descriptions. The poet loves to paint his pictures of scenery and to describe everything very minutely, and seldom only do we find any attempt at psychology, because his *dramatis personae* are usually symbolic, whereby the whole story acquires an abstract, unreal character; pan-Slav or patriotic tendency prevails in *Europe*, *Slavia*, *Lešetinský Kovář* (*The Blacksmith of Lešetice*), *Žižka*, and *Václav z Michalovic*. On the other hand, Čech wrote also idyllic stories, *Under the Linden-tree*, and *Hanuman*, a light story about a monkey. His sympathies for the oppressed are embodied in the symbolic *Songs of a Slave*, perhaps his most inspired work, which became equally popular among the working classes as among the nationalists. The poet's religious ideals are contained in his *Prayers to the Unknown*.

Besides the above poems Svatopluk Čech wrote also a number of charming stories, full of romance, satire, and wit. The most popular are his phantastic *Excursions of Mr. Brouček to the Moon*, in which Čech drew a caricature of a Prague bourgeois.

To the romantic school belonged also Eliška Krásnohorská, who held similar ideas to K. Světlá, and wrote chiefly lyric poetry. Her literary merit lies chiefly in her translations of Byron, Puškin, and Mickiewicz.

Much more important for the development of Czech poetry than Svatopluk Čech was the rise of the cosmopolitan school, gathered round the review *Lumír* and represented by Sládek, Zeyer, and Vrchlický, of which Sládek alone could claim some continuity with past tradition, especially with Neruda.

J. V. Sládek (1845-1912) lived for some time in America, and his good knowledge of English literature left clear traces in his work. His poetry developed, as in the case of Neruda, from melancholy to pan-human lyricism. His style was simple, manly, and concise. His greatest merit lies in his original translations from Robert Burns, Longfellow, T. Coleridge, and Shakespeare, as well as from Swedish and Polish authors.

Quite an exceptional position, not only in Czech but in European literature, is occupied by Julius Zeyer (1841-1901). Outwardly he represents ideas similar to those of Vrchlický. Both Zeyer and Vrchlický drew inspiration from French and Italian sources, both could boast of great erudition and of a keen sense for the assimilation of foreign ideas. Their work is quite a new leaf in Czech literature, which had

hitherto, with the exception of Mácha and the early works of Neruda, been devoted mainly to nationalism. The *raison d'être* of the cosmopolitan school lay in the absence of Czech Renaissance literature, which it sought to rectify. Its tendency was still favourable to romanticism in its hostility to realism and naturalism, but it excluded all political or nationalist tendency from poetry and laid chief stress on the beauty of the word and form. It enriched the poetic language and form in a way undreamt of before with a great ability of technique and a wide imagination, but its dependence on foreign examples resulted in a certain lack of unity, depth, and originality of ideas – in short, in eclecticism. Of the two poets Zeyer was more subjective and sensitive, Vrchlický stronger in brain-power and in abstract thinking. Both were sensuous poets of nature and of reflective philosophy. Vrchlický has often been blamed for lack of a consequent philosophic outlook, because he wavered between metaphysics, pantheism, and materialism. Even the greatest opponents of Zeyer must admit, however, that he was consequent in his ideas. His whole outlook differed profoundly from Vrchlický's: Zeyer was a Gothic, romantic symbolist, his ideals lay in the past, in mediaeval mysticism. Hence his esthetic inclination towards Catholicism. On the other hand, Vrchlický is a thoroughly modern spirit, fascinated by Roman, but also by modern, civilization, with a joyous outlook into the future.

That Zeyer should have been a cosmopolitan is not surprising: his father was a merchant of French aristocratic origin, his mother was Jewish. Although at home only German was spoken, the historic atmosphere of Prague and Czech surroundings soon awoke in young Zeyer a keen interest in Czech literature. His father's wealth enabled him to complete his education by frequent travels in Scandinavia, Italy, Germany, Russia, and the Near East, and by an assiduous study of Oriental theosophy and Catholic mysticism. His works comprise thirty-four large volumes of epic poetry, poetic novels, and dramas. Despite his love of foreign literatures, especially of Gautier, and of exotic surroundings, Zeyer often chooses native Bohemian mythology for the subject of his poems. His poetry includes two cycles of heroic songs, *Vyšehrad* and *The Caroline Epopee*, composed on the lines of old French chivalrous poetry about Charlemagne; four volumes called *Love Chronicles*, reflecting various epic stories of Latin and Eastern origin and characteristic of Zeyer's erotically mystic philosophy of love; *The Advent of Forefather Čech*, describing the conflict between Celt and Slav in ancient Bohemia; *The Chronicle of St. Brendan*, a monastic Irish legend, and *Ossian's Return*, another old Gaelic legend. His dramas either take place in exotic surroundings or else deal with the distant past, and suffer from a too pronounced lyric and pathetic element. Their chief effects lie in contrast of characters and conflicts of passions. His dramas include a Chinese comedy, *The Brothers*; an Italian *comedia dell' arte*, *The Old Story*; a Biblical legend, *Sulamit*; an Irish tragedy, *The Legend of Erin*, which served as a libretto to one of Ostrčil's operas; a Japanese play, *Love's Wonder*; and a Spanish tragedy of sinful passion, *Dona Sancha*. Of the same character as his poems and dramas are also his novels and short stories: *Andrea Černyšev*, a Russian story from the reign of Catherine the Great; a chivalrous story,

Amis and Amil; a Japanese love story, *Gompachi and Komurasaki*; and a psychological novel, *Jan Maria Plojbar*, perhaps his best work of all, containing a great deal of the poet's own experience of life. The story deals with Bohemia and Italy, and tries to solve the erotic problem, consisting in the tragic conflict of frustrated love and higher religious ideals.

Zeyer's style is unique and full of rare, even if somewhat phantastic, beauty. The spirit of his works is effeminate and exotic, yet it contains many qualities of true poetry rich metaphors, picturesque descriptions of landscapes, and a passionate lyric sense, which sometimes leads to exaggerated rhetoric or decorative sentimentality, sometimes to really good dramatic effects. The usual conclusion is the rejection of worldly love for the metaphysical love of God. The souls of his heroes, tired and weary after seeking in vain for happiness in the enjoyment of the senses, turn back to religion in search of the Absolute. Zeyer's Later stories especially are unequalled for masterly descriptions of exotic surroundings. The leading epic story is clothed in rich, symbolic language, and deals with erotic and metaphysical problems. Zeyer's works show him to be a great idealist, thinker and poet, and disclose a passionate, yet refined and erudite mind, fond of phantastic, erotic, and mystic reflection. The only objection that could be raised against him from the point of view of art is that he indulged in improvisations on borrowed themes. From the French romantics especially he learnt to use rich and exotic colours, while his love of legendary and chivalrous poetry is explained by his admiration for the English pre-Raphaelite poets, who too were pious Gothic Catholics. Zeyer's chief talent lay in his vivid imagination and in his knowledge of old mythology, medieval legends, and Eastern traditions. The aesthetic objection to his work may be that his style is too rich and that his stories seem unreal and therefore become monotonous.

One of Bohemia's greatest poets was undoubtedly **Jaroslav Vrchlický** (1853-1912), whose real name was Frída. Had he not written in Czech, but in some more universally known language, his name would certainly be pronounced among the names of the world's greatest poets. The very amount of his work is imposing, and earns him the fame of one of the most prolific poets that ever lived. His original work fills one hundred and fifty large volumes, including thirty-two dramas and several books of prose and of critical studies. Even greater in volume are his translations, comprising an anthology of French and Italian modern poetry, translations of Victor Hugo, Leconte de Lisle, Baudelaire, Corneille, Molière, Rostand (*Cyrano de Bergerac*), Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Petrarca, Tasso, Ariosto, Michel Angelo, Leopardi, Carducci, Canizzaro, Vivanti, Giacosa, the dramas of Calderon, Camoens, Verdagnero's *Atlantis*, Goethe's *Faust*, Schiller's *William Tell*, Hamerling's *Abasver in Rome*, Ibsen's dramas, Anderson's *Fairy Tales*, Mickiewicz, Aranyi, and Petöfi, as well as translations from Chinese. Prose translations include novels by Dumas, Balzac, France, and Maupassant. In his youth Vrchlický was fascinated also by Shelley, but it was only in his later years that he took a deeper interest in English poetry, from which he translated Browning, Shelley, Rossetti, Swinburne, Byron, Tennyson, Edgar Allan

Poe, and Walt Whitman. What is most surprising, however, is not his knowledge of languages and the quantity of his work, but its quality. He had an absolute command of the Czech language in all its subtleties, which enabled him to write with perfect ease the most difficult forms of poetry, in which respect he may be compared only with Tennyson. His marvellous technique produced with equal ease sonnets, Barnville ballads, rondels, odelettes, ghazels, triolettes, and rispets. His translations not only reproduce the originals almost verbally, but they conserve their spirit, form, rhythm, and rhyme, and are, indeed, examples of how a good translation from one language into another ought to be made. How intensely must have burnt the flame of his genius, how keen must have been his sense of perception, when his soul was ever ready for fresh impressions and ceaseless work. His poetic imagination was constantly spurred on to conjure up fresh pictures and to go through ecstasies or depressions, while the poet was in his library on the embankment of the River Vltava, overlooking the beautiful Castle of Prague. What energy, erudition, and brain-power must have been hidden in this genius, if he not only found time to read and learn practically the whole poetry of the world from Homer to the modern Parnassists, but if he could also lecture as Professor of Comparative History of Literature at the Prague University, translate and compose original poetry!

After so many poets who failed, who lived or died prematurely, Bohemia had at last given birth to a truly great poet – a poet of great talent, outlook, and opportunity. Vrchlický and his friends mark not only a new era in Czech literature, but a new period in the development of Czech civilization, for their advent coincided with the birth of the two great Czech musical composers, Smetana and Dvořák.

It is not surprising that for a genius of such talent and outlook as possessed Vrchlický the Czech horizon and past literary tradition were too limited, and that he therefore turned to the great Renaissance poets and to modern France for inspiration. Among the foreign poets which were nearest to his heart, and which influenced him most of all, were Dante, Victor Hugo, and Leconte de Lisle. Nearest to his temperament were those poets who, like himself, possessed a passionate erotic and lyric spirit with an inclination to reflective philosophy. Dante and Leopardi were the favourites of his youth, although he found the former not modern enough and the latter too pessimistic. Victor Hugo he loved for his prolific pen and his outer splendour, and for his rhetoric and rhythmic power. Vrchlický himself was superior to Victor Hugo in many respects, for his poetry was deeper and more sincere. In his best works Vrchlický indeed completely emancipated himself from the influence of Victor Hugo, and gave up the rhetoric pose for a frank exposition of his own views on history and eternity in the spirit of Dante and Goethe. Leconte de Lisle influenced him only outwardly as regards form and colour effect and general outlook on classic culture, but even this poet cannot be equalled with the wealth of ideas and joyous spirit of Vrchlický. Leconte de Lisle was a positivist, a nihilist, while Vrchlický wisely avoids the dangers of agnosticism. He believes in evolution and as a pantheist adores God in Nature, whose beauty he felt as a living force. Besides Victor Hugo and

Gautier, Vrchlický was also fond of their pupils, the Parnassists (Supy-Prudhomme, Vigny, de Banville), and of modern Italian poets. The only Slavs that interested him were the Poles, with whom he sympathized also politically. No doubt the spirit of the Polish poets, who were also under French influence, was nearest to his heart.

To give an adequate picture of Vrchlický's work is an obvious impossibility, and we shall therefore content ourselves with mentioning only his most important works. At the same time, when Neruda published his *Cosmic Songs* at the age of forty-four, Vrchlický, then only twenty-five years old, published already his fifth book, *The Spirit and the World*, which definitely established his claim as a great poet. Both Neruda and Vrchlický had the same ambition to penetrate the mystery of the Universe. If Neruda says "We shall bow before no mysteries, our spirit the dome of heavens shall reach," Vrchlický proclaims:

We'll tear ev'ry cloak,
 We'll break ev'ry ire:
 Between Hesperus and Orion,
 In a sea of Light and Tone,
 Shall ring the song of our choir.

But Neruda's songs, though great in their sincerity, appear very simple beside the grand style of Vrchlický. Never before has a Czech poet shown such a wide outlook, such a great conception of the world and its history. Beginning with Biblical pictures, the poet dreams of the beauty of Greek culture, tells us eight medieval legends, and after reflecting on some modern problems ends with a grand hymn to the Unknown, full of a joyous faith in the victory of human civilization. In this faith Vrchlický was no doubt stimulated by the great progress of science, by Darwin, Haeckel, and Spencer.

Also in his subsequent books of poems Vrchlický is fascinated by the history of humanity. Inspired by Victor Hugo's *Legend of the Ages*, Vrchlický attempts to write in verse the history of the world, and thus originate numerous ballads, romances, legends, and mythological stories, each one expressed in a different form suitable to the spirit of the times, whether prehistoric, mediaeval, Renaissance, or modern. The leading idea of his philosophy is the final triumph of civilization over barbarism, of spirit over matter. Like Faust, Vrchlický wishes to penetrate everywhere, and to acquire all the knowledge of this and the supernatural world. Among all these books we may mention at least two for their great artistic value. *Hilarion* (1882) for the first time in Czech poetry contrasts the ideas of Christianity with classic culture. The poem, which consists of more than 3,500 verses, ends in an apotheosis of life as the incorporation of classic beauty. *Twardowski* (1885) was inspired by the Polish poet Krasiński, and deals with a legend of an unhappy sinful human being struggling in vain with sensual passions. In both these poems Vrchlický solves the problem of a moral struggle by the triumph of the good through the optimistic philosophy of

pantheism and humanism.

In his historical philosophy Vrchlický did not depend on the Catholic Dante, but rather on Victor Hugo, who saw in progress the leading idea of history, "*le grand fil mystérieux du Labyrinthe humain*," and to whom history was "*un seul et immense mouvement d'ascension vers la Lumière*." Nevertheless, Vrchlický's work is far from being a mere imitation of Hugo's. It is more realistic and quite original in conception, actuated by no mere narrow-minded fixed rules and dogmas, as may be found in a similar attempt of Machar. Vrchlický is guided by purely aesthetic considerations in wishing to revive dead beauty and poetry. Like Zeyer, Vrchlický shows a great knowledge of the history of human civilization. In erudition Vrchlický surpassed perhaps even such great poets as Browning, Leconte de Lisle, and Carducci.

In order to understand fully Vrchlický's mentality, and especially his lyric poetry, we must remember that fate was always favourable to him and that he suffered few disappointments in his life. He rose quickly to fame and never suffered from poverty. As a poet he is a mere observer of life, not its conqueror. One book of his poems is characteristically called *What Life Gave Unto Me*. In comparison with Zeyer, he travelled little: he knew Northern Italy and Germany, and visited Paris and Poland. Otherwise his whole spiritual world was centred in his library, from which he looked at life. His first and last love ended in a happy marriage, and his erotic poetry, therefore, is also free from any discordant, pessimistic strain. It is the poetry of a happy lover and husband whose love-songs are joyous songs of life of a sensuality which never loses the charm of modesty.

His lyric poetry is either sensuous, expressing his erotic temperament or his love of nature, or reflective, expressing his human sympathies for all oppressed. Sometimes his poems are also discreetly patriotic, as the one in which he sings his hymn to Prague, or others about the great past and future of his country. To quote from a translation by Mrs. Rosa Newmarch on the Hradčany Castle at sundown:

The City's old green crest in golden sheaves,
 Like fulgent arrows from a quiver bright,
 Breaks forth, till towers and gables, roofs and eaves,
 And rows of windows bear clear scars of light.
 A Bacchic train of clamant, reeling hues
 Burns round the keep-sad, silent reveller.
 Below spreads night, the dusky leveller.
 How glows the castle in this final blaze!
 How from the gloom emerge its lofty walls,
 Lit up as for the reflex of glad days!
 O pilgrim, stay awhile thy soft footfalls
 And, dreaming that day's death is the new morrow,
 Forget for one brief moment thy wild sorrow.

Vrchlický's reflective poetry shows the drawback of his dependence on others: philosophic problems are often solved merely rhetorically. In his early works there are signs of pessimism under the influence of Dante and Leopardi, from which he later emancipates himself in favour of evolutionism. When deserted by his friends in the nineties he suffers from a new attack of scepticism, but even this crisis he conquers through a stoic quietism under the influence of de Vigny. His reflections about the meaning of life and death become then more profound.

In 1883 Vrchlický began to write dramas, but these suffer from many defects. Vrchlický was in the first place handicapped by an almost complete lack of Czech dramatic tradition, and had to rely on foreign examples. Shakespeare, the romantics, and Sardou left traces on his style and composition. Like Shelley, Vrchlický suffers from a too pronounced lyrical element and lack of dramatic line and detail. On the other hand, dialogues are full of charm and manly energy. The local atmosphere gives a fitting impression of the place and times, and the esthetic standard is high. But his best dramas are only the first, while his later works are too pathetic and tedious. His first dramas comprise the classic trilogy *Hippodamia*, to which Fibich composed melodramatic music, *The Death of Odysseus*, and *Julian the Apostate*. Later followed *Love and Death*, *Mary Calderon*, *The Samson Trilogy*, *Lady Godiva*, *Catulla's Revenge*, and others. Of all these *Hippodamia* is considered the best, and shows the poet's great sense of classic fatality. Its philosophy is that life is sweet, but blossoms over precipices of evil and perdition, and has to be protected from falling into them. It is a widely built work with good dramatic effects.

Vrchlický rose quickly to fame and popularity. The only opposition which he met at first came from bigot moralism and short-sighted patriots, who deplored in him a lack of Czech spirit in the choice of his subjects in the spirit of Turgeněv's words that "outside of nationalism there is no art and no truth." At the end of the eighties Vrchlický was, nevertheless, the object of universal and uncritical praise, which unfortunately only strengthened Vrchlický's own lack of self-criticism, obvious in many of his hasty improvisations. Only later criticism (Masaryk, Šalda, Karásek) estimated rightly the poet's true value and importance.

But the campaign which the so-called "young generation" raised somewhat unscrupulously against the forty-year-old poet sorely touched his sensitive soul and affected severely his nervous system. What touched him most was not so much the injustice of many of the objections raised against him as the fact that most of his critics were his own pupils. Among the most unjust objections was, of course, the statement that Vrchlický, the translator of Baudelaire, Maeterlinck, and Walt Whitman, was not modern enough. The young generation understood modernity differently. The influence of Zola and of Russian realism produced a realistic movement among novelists (Hermann, Šimáček, Mrštík, Herben, Šlejhar, Čapek-Chod) and poets (Svoboda, Machar, Bezruč) who opposed Vrchlický's culture of form, his verbalism, conventionalism, and eclecticism, with a demand for free verse, for realistic, natural expression, and deeper foundation in sentiment (psychic

naturalism). French influence was to be paralysed by English and Russian influence. Vrchlický himself was not against modernity, but unfortunately he aggravated his own position by a misplaced defence of Hálek and by a prejudice against realism, naturalism, and decadentism. It is well known that he disliked Ibsen and Nietzsche intensely. Of Nietzsche he said that "he had always a confused, aphoristic, fragmentary mind which could achieve fame only through an exaggerated cult of a few adepts." Another reason why Vrchlický compromised his own position was his disinclination to fight for his own cause. Betrayed by his friends, Vrchlický – at any rate for a time – lost confidence in his success and courage to seek for new ideals.

In one respect his critics were right. They reproached him, as well as Zeyer and Sládek, with eclecticism and conventionalism. It is only natural with a poet whose work was so prolific that a great deal of his poetry should give the impression of mere improvisation, that he should not always be able to rely on his own inspiration, but had to look for ideas and forms to others. Through a regular practice of the culture of form he naturally succumbed to a certain conventionalism. What is surprising is not that he suffered from conventionalism and eclecticism, but that he suffered from them so little. In almost all his works the high artistic standard and the underlying originality of his genius are sufficiently strong to ensure him immortality.

Vrchlický was a protagonist of the culture of form, which is one of the essential attributes of true art. Form gives art life, because through artistic form the poet amplifies life and nature, and transforms them into art. The danger of epigonism lies in its inability to find original form for artistic expression. Epigons try to imitate great masters by borrowing their forms without putting new life into them. Intuition thus gives way to formalism. Vrchlický cannot, however, with justice be called an epigon. It has been rather paradoxically, yet truly, said of him that, owing to his great technical skill and absolute mastery of form, he failed to create a form of his own, yet his work has always those rare qualities of a noble, artistic spirit which are a guarantee of its artistic value. It is not given to every poet to find an absolutely original way of expression, construction, and contents, without regard to past traditions, just as it is almost impossible for a musical composer to be quite original in every respect, and free from all influence of his predecessors. A typical example of a composer who did not, except in instrumentation, contribute to the progress of music, and nevertheless was a great genius by virtue of his strong artistic personality, was Dvořák. As in the case of Dvořák, the greatest difficulty for Vrchlický was an almost complete lack of native tradition. None the less he rendered Czech literature signal service by widening its outlook beyond the narrow limits of local patriotism and local history. Vrchlický was an idealist, in so far as his works did not express his personal feelings, but served the high ideals of art, beauty, and humanity. In this respect he resembles B. Smetana, who also placed the ideals of art above his personal feelings. For this reason both Vrchlický and Smetana laid so much stress on the perfection of their works. There is no doubt that Vrchlický, though a cosmopolitan, was also prompted by patriotic motives in his desire to enrich the Czech language

with fresh possibilities and Czech literature with a new spirit. His effort was, of course, beyond the scope of understanding of narrow-minded patriots just as in the case of Smetana. The fact remains that Vrchlický's poetic language still remains exemplary. Throughout his verses runs joyous melody and a light spirit, and even where he uses old forms or ideas they bear the imprint of his own inspiration. The very existence of other poets inspired him equally as the realities of life and nature. He possessed an unlimited resource of poetic expression for every kind of feeling or idea. His verse is seldom false or pathetic, but often full of vigour, wisdom, and joy of life.

A special category in his production is occupied by books of poems on other poets. *Masks and Profiles*, which includes portraits of Homer, Goethe, and Shakespeare, is a volume of brilliant essays which have no equal in literature for understanding and intuition. Equally witty and eloquent are *The Sonnets of a Recluse*, and *A Breviary of a Modern Man*, containing pictures of all great men of the nineteenth century, including Renan, Ibsen, Tolstoy, Edison, and Pasteur. In all these works Vrchlický is an interpreter, not a critic, because he appreciates art equally in every form without fixed principles of philosophy, except the general principles of art. He is, in fact, a perfect literary cosmopolitan for whom the power of understanding others becomes an active force of art and life. He formulates his ideal himself as follows:

All to encompass, all to know, all to intoxicate the soul with
 All that blossoms, shines, and dazzles in statue, picture and song,
 Ev'ry mine to exploit and to drink from ev'ry source,
 To admire the old Greek torso that lies decayed through ages
 Just as the trembling of the present-day y earning Soul,
 That lost the leaflets of its flower of Miss and happiness,
 To live through exaltation of medieval saints of titanic strength
 And through the caprice of maiden lips, thirsting for love,
 We will live, feel, and understand it all, for
 The springs of all pleasures shall freely flow for us.

The translation of *Faust*, which Vrchlický accomplished in 1890, influenced his later works considerably. Only then did he fully grasp the true greatness of Goethe, his sincerity and directness of expression. Vrchlický's own poetry becomes deeper and less rhetorical, to which contributed greatly also the crisis he had gone through at that time as a result of the campaign raised against him by the "new generation." His bitter feelings of this period are embodied in several volumes, of which *The Windows in Storm* is the most poignant. He inclines to the view that loneliness is his true fate from birth to death, because he discovered that his friends were but shadows. And yet "a faint perfume of past happy days" remained in his heart, helping his soul to come out of the storm strengthened and purified. Abandoned quietism remains,

however, at the background of all his Later works (*Books of Fairy Godmothers, Songs of a Wanderer*), full of new wisdom and promise. "A new peace reigns now in my soul, though I be worn and quite alone. To future days' darkness I look in silent resignation. So will I go, not knowing where."

The influence of English poetry, which now also occupies Vrchlický, is most pronounced in the collection *E Morta*. It contains souvenirs of a Czech lady singer who had gone to Brazil and died there. He dreams of her as of an ideal noble woman, converses with her spirit in terms of gentle affection, and reflects on the meaning of life. He concludes that to live in pleasure and glory is all nought, and that to be true to oneself is all. Also in other works his optimistic pantheism now gives way to deeper philosophy. Vrchlický becomes the champion of human brotherhood. He denounces slavery at all epochs of history, and sees in the Christian ideal of love and brotherhood, though never realized, the one ray of sunshine and hope in the dark history of mankind. This Christian ideal he wishes to reconcile with Greek and Roman ideals, striving for equal culture of body and mind. In *Lazar's Hymn*, Lazar's soul rises with the strength of a Hercules and the love of Christ. Yet pantheism remains his ultimate faith:

My chamber is vaulted
 Unto the free dome of heaven
 I feel to be carried away.
 I feel death to be a mere window
 To the true life, the everlasting day.

An exceptional work among his later books is *Bar Kochba*, dealing with the tragedy of the fall of Israel. This "great dream of my youth," as he called it, is indeed, besides Hilarion and Julian the Apostate, the most powerful of his historic visions. It is rather paradoxical that the greatest work of this lover of the Renaissance should have been a story on the tragic fate of the Jewish race, but the explanation lies in his love of all that was great and tragic in history as well as in his contempt of popular prejudice. The Jewish tragedy is conceived in a purely racial aspect, and no attempt is made at a contrast between the ideals of Jewry and those of Christianity and the classic world. The concluding prayer of Akiba is a desperate outcry of a dying nation for whom the future has only sufferings in store.

After the year 1900 Vrchlický still produced a number of works, but none of them had the former *élan* of his spirit. The best of them are *Omar's Wisdom* and *Episodes*. Unlike Goethe, Hugo, and Ibsen, Vrchlický in his old age becomes more and more lyrical, simple and natural, and less schematic. In 1908 a nervous shock began to paralyse his physical powers, but not his spirit, which remained active almost to the very end of his life. Though lying in a sanatorium, he wrote in 1909 his *Tree of Life*, which still shows the marvellous power of his mind. The poems show a surprising spirit of energy, sunshine, and harmony. His inspiration is free from any scepticism or

fear of the approaching catastrophe. The tree is to him a symbol of the life of nature. It is the same tree of life which "Walt Whitman saw blossom in Louisiana," and which year after year gives birth to youth which turns into old age, to life that ends with death. Soon after Vrchlický died with this mighty pantheistic hymn to Nature and Life on his lips.

In: Nosek, Vladimír. "Poets of the Czech Regeneration." *The Spirit of Bohemia*. London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1926. 230-261.