



Two Poets Between English and Czech

Jan Zábřana and Milada Součková

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TWO POETS BETWEEN ENGLISH AND CZECH: JAN ZÁBRANA AND MILADA SOUČKOVÁ

This article examines two cases of Czech anglophone literature by mid-twentieth-century poets: Jan Zábřana and Milada Součková. The English language as well as anglophone poetry was integral to Zábřana's poetic imagination, adding an important extra dimension to his writing in Czech. Součková goes further, incorporating more anglophone elements in her oeuvre. Her choice of language, and the resultant form of the poem, is a consequence of her mobility, i.e., the particular journey she made from Prague to Boston. The article approaches uncertainty about matrix and embedded languages in Součková's work, not as an anomaly to be solved, but an opportunity to open up literatures labeled by nation, belonging to one place or community. This article argues that Zábřana's and Součková's work disturbs the conventional division between Czech and anglophone literary canons, thus prompting us to reconsider long established canonical and linguistic divisions.

KEYWORDS:

Jan Zábřana — Milada Součková — Czech anglophone poetry — translingual writing — 20th century Czech poetry

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1

Where does one literature end and another begin? Language provides a good marker — if a literary work is in English then it belongs to anglophone literature, and so on for all the other languages.¹ This dovetails with the idea of a community living in a particular place and speaking a particular language, which makes up the nation. Indeed, in research and pedagogy, literatures are usually apportioned nationally. Thus, both curricula and publication series fit works into national groups. Many of these have been augmented in recent decades by postcolonial and globalization studies, and yet they usually retain the nation as the central structural principle.

1 I am grateful to Julie Hansen, Josef Hrdlička, and Václav Kyllar for their comments on earlier versions of this article.

Linguists have begun to question the idea of discrete languages, however. J. K. Chambers and Peter Trudgill remark that the idea of language is “from a linguistic point of view a relatively nontechnical term,” meaning that languages are not as separate and distinct as a lay person might imagine.² We cleave to the concept of languages “for reasons that are as much political, geographical, historical, sociological and cultural as linguistic.”³ Chambers and Trudgill favor the idea of dialect continuums stretching across different communities that can be defined either in geographic and social terms. Here they explain the idea of geographical dialect continuum:

If we travel from village to village, in a particular direction, we notice linguistic differences which distinguish one village from another. Sometimes these differences will be larger, sometimes smaller, but they will be cumulative. The further we get from our starting point, the larger the differences will become. The effect of this may therefore be, if the distance involved is large enough, that (if we arrange villages along our route in geographical order) while speakers from village A understand people from village B very well and those from village F quite well, they may understand village M speech only with considerable difficulty, and that of village Z not at all.⁴

We might also consider the creole continuum in many Caribbean areas. Nigeria is another interesting case: between its standard form of English and the plethora of other languages such as Igbo, Yoruba, Ijo, and Hausa, there are many intermediary stages, most widespread of which is West African Pidgin, which is now being learned as a native language by new generations (thus it is no longer a pidgin).

A further factor is mobility. The dialect continuum assumes that communities of speakers (say, in Chambers and Trudgill’s villages above) are relatively static. But what if speakers are on the move? The question has taken on particular urgency in recent decades. Suresh Canagarajah remarks that “mobility disturbs many of the assumptions behind the Herderian triad” of language, community, and territory:

As people move across borders, they are taking their languages with them and also appropriating new semiotic resources for their identities and communication. With such changes, we must also go beyond considering each person as an owner of a single language. It is possible for speakers to claim intimate and proficient relationship with multiple languages simultaneously.⁵

Dialect continuums and mobility have consequences for the idea of national literatures. It may be more helpful to think of a spectrum in literature stretched between what we have previously thought of as different languages. In this article, I will look at how two writers, whose work spans seventy years, move from a distinctly defined

2 Chambers and Trudgill 2004, p. 5.

3 Ibid., p. 4.

4 Ibid., p. 5.

5 Canagarajah 2017, p. 6. See also Blommaert 2010, p. 5.



literary culture to anglophone literature. In the first, there are only trace elements of English in a predominantly non-anglophone-language text; in the other, there is a zone of provocative and fertile ambivalence. These writers thrive on the linguistic border between Czech and English; the vagueness and uncertainty of their linguistic and cultural allegiances do not limit their imaginations, but rather drive them forward. An examination of their work has consequences not only for how we view twentieth century Czech literature, but also for how we understand the present moment with exophonic writers such as Iryna Zahladko, Zofia Bałdyga, Olga Słowik, and Sufian Massalema writing in Czech.

The idea still persists that one can only write, or writes best, in one's mother tongue, and the resulting literature is still framed by the nation. This idea goes back to the eighteenth-century German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder. As Yasemin Yildiz has remarked, Herder "celebrated the distinctness of each language, which he saw as emanating from the genius of a particular nation (*Volk*)."⁶ Yildiz argues that this Herderian idea of language and literature "cannot abide [...] the notion of blurred boundaries, crossed loyalties, and unrooted languages."⁷ Such a blurring of boundaries, a crossing of loyalties, and uprooting of languages is precisely what we find in the work of Jan Zábřana and especially Milada Součková.

Czech linguaculture furnishes us with a good instance of the Herderian bundle of community, language, and place. In the nineteenth century, there was a strong cultural nationalist movement in the lands of Bohemia, Moravia, and part of Silesia (which now make up the Czech Republic). The community was formulated as a nation in opposition to the multicultural formation of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, to which it belonged until 1918, when Czechoslovakia was founded. The Czech language, which had languished for centuries in the shadow of the imperial language of German, was recuperated and accorded prestige, undergoing a national revival from the beginning of the nineteenth century. It became the language of literature, although occasionally written by authors who were more comfortable in German. One of the major efforts of codification was Josef Jungmann's Czech-German dictionary in five volumes (1835–1839); if any message of cultural power underlay this, it was that the Czech language was equal to any task that German was. Czech is now spoken by over 90% of the population, and the linguaculture is more or less coterminous with the geographic territory of the nation. Such a clearly defined nexus of territory and language will thus provide one end of a spectrum that stretches to the amorphous, vague, and extensive regions of anglophone literature.

The English language was integral to the literary imagination of several mid-twentieth-century Czech writers, and here we'll consider two of them. The first is Jan Zábřana (1931–1984), a friend of Josef Škvorecký, who in his lifetime was known mainly for his translations of English and Russian literature (among others, he translated Allen Ginsberg, Sylvia Plath, Wallace Stevens, Osip Mandelstam, Sergei Yesenin, and Ivan Bunin). Unlike Škvorecký, who emigrated to Canada after the Warsaw Pact invasion of 1968, Zábřana remained in Czechoslovakia, and he wrote extensive diaries which reflected on life under the Communist regime. These were published

6 Yildiz 2012, p. 7.

7 Ibid., p. 8.



posthumously, after the Velvet Revolution of 1989, and extended his reputation from translator to expert witness of the compromises made by his generation. He was also a poet, who published three collections in the 1960s; these poems were also republished after 1989. The opening sentence of the book that we'll consider is not in Czech, as one might expect, but in English.

2

A Czech book of sonnets lies before us. It opens with two epigraphs, the first of which is in English, from a poem by C. Day Lewis:

Move then with new desires,
 For where we used to build and love
 Is no man's land, and only ghosts can live
 Between two fires.⁸

The second epigraph, by Vítěslav Nezval, is in Czech (“Básnictví bez veteše je nuda” — poetry without junk is a bore). Epigraphs from foreign languages have a long tradition in Czech poetry, going back at least to the late nineteenth century, and they serve several semiotic functions. First, they can display the education of the writer. Second, they express an engagement with another linguaculture. For instance, if the language is European, then the curious reader will be tempted to scan the lines to see if anything can be unpuzzled; perhaps some words are recognizable from other languages they know. If you have some German, you might make more sense of a text in Dutch or Swedish. Third, the poet's gesture toward another linguaculture might indicate an intercultural theme, or conversely the desire to emphasize a transnational commonality. Fourth, in a politically repressive context, information might be included in the foreign text that cannot be expressed in the author's first language. Such epigraphs may indicate a functional lack in the main language: the poet needs these foreign words because their own language is insufficient in some respects.

The book in question is Zábřana's *The Lesser Histories* (1968).⁹ The phrases “new desires” and “between two fires” on a page that has two languages strongly suggests the ways that new desires can develop in new languages, in this case between English and Czech (other fires emerge in the book itself). He began writing the poems of *The Lesser Histories* in the 1950s, and added a further section after the first edition was published in 1968 (the expanded edition was published posthumously in 1993).

The collection is unusual within Zábřana's output, as his two other collections were mainly written in free verse. The sonnet is a difficult form to write in, a little more difficult in Zábřana's version because most of his lines have only four feet (the fewer feet in a line, the harder it is to rhyme). Poetry written in rhyme and meter is hardwired into a language to a greater degree than free verse, no matter how elliptic

⁸ Zábřana 1993, p. 115.

⁹ This was published as *Stránky z deníku*, which might be translated as “Pages from a Diary.” The English translation was published in 2022; see Zábřana 2022.



or abstruse it is, and it is consequently more difficult to translate. Thus the two twentieth-century anglophone poets who have arguably been most influential in other languages are the unlikely duo of T. S. Eliot and Allen Ginsberg — not W. B. Yeats, not Robert Frost.¹⁰ Here I must mark my other role with regard to Zábřana's poems: the translations that follow are mine, and my translations attempt to replicate the sonnet form in English. This means that on occasion I take lexical liberties for the sake of rhyme, and I note these in the discussions that follow. Some readers may think that more “literal” translations would be appropriate, feeling that the lines' denotation is of greater importance than the poetic form. Some might view rhyme as a superficial device, laid on top of thought, like a layer of icing on a cake. Yet when asked where he got his ideas, W. B. Yeats replied: “Looking for the next rhyme.”¹¹

Paradoxically, even as Zábřana anchors his poems securely in his native Czech language (through his use of the sonnet), he makes them more permeable to other languages. He does this on two levels. First, through his use of epigraphs, allusions, and the incorporation of short passages of other poems into his work. He reflected upon this in a diary entry of 1980:

The citations — other people's formulations, used or abused — entered into the poems themselves, without forethought, simply with the same degree of insistence they had in my own consciousness. If everyday things are present for you, if they are the subject of your work with words — and for me they always are and will be; a professional translator would have to be a dead stump overgrown with moss for them not to be — then words will eventually change into a part of your reality. They'll be just as real as a light switch on the wall, a rainy day outside the window, the carpet beneath your feet. [...] Such words, such combinations or chains of words, will then shine anew — they are now “dressed up,” stepping into “society” in a jester's costume or in a tuxedo, in overalls or a bathing suit; they smell of perfume, or of the shit they just stepped in. Such words carry two or three times the weight — they drag along a baggage of emotion, something that words don't have when they're taken from linear reality... Such verses then become a collection of golden and rainbow-colored flies in amber.¹²

The first poem in *The Lesser Histories*, “Summer 1944,” shows how Zábřana works with quotations. First, he sketches a quick landscape with horseraces, and the distant scent of a knacker's yard. There are reports of the progress of World War II, from the distant battleground of Omaha Beach in Normandy:

Z řeznictví „Omaha“ se k autu
vracel houf SS-Argonautů:
„Sterbe wohl, sterbe... Erika...”¹³

10 Quinn 2015, pp. 26–29.

11 Qtd in Longley 2003, p. 65.

12 Zábřana 2001, p. 740. Translation by Jonathan Bolton. Qtd in Zábřana 2022, pp. 107–108.

13 Zábřana 1993, p. 119.

From the butcher shop of Omaha,
the SS Argonauts withdraw.
*Sterbe, Erika... sterbe wohl...*¹⁴

Hitler's troops used to sing a song entitled "Lebe wohl, Erika" (Farewell, Erika, which literally means "live well"), but in retreat from the Normandy landings, Zábřana changes this to "Sterbe wohl, Erika" (die well, Erika). He rhymes the name "Erika" with a Czech word in the final line and winsomely finds a chime with two Greek words long domesticated in Czech (as they are in English — autos and Argonauts — though speakers of both languages have perhaps forgotten their Greek roots): *autu/argonautů*, though I was unable to accommodate this in the English translation.

In the next stanza, as though finding analogies for troop movements in his immediate surroundings, he moves from the Allies and Germans in the northwest to the approach of Russian soldiers from the east:

A senná rýma na plovárně
nad azbukou... A posté, marně:
co se jak rusky neříká...¹⁵

The baths. Hay fever. Cyrillics stain
the surface... Now, once more, in vain:
not thus in Russian, not at all.¹⁶

Here the Russian typeface is written on the rippling waters of the baths where he sits learning the language and also marking differences between Russian and Czech. In a poem like this, one sees how foreign linguacultures undulate through a Czech imaginary, with Zábřana picking up their different wavelengths. The lyric situation of the poem itself embodies the very contact zone between languages that I discussed above — here Czech, German, and Russian; but as the troop movements indicate, and as Zábřana's life would show, English was on the way.

The title of the third poem in the book is in English ("Splendid Isolation Destroyed"), and later poems draw on William Carlos Williams and William Shakespeare. The poem "Thirty" perhaps best illustrates the permeable line between translation and original work, English and Czech, in Zábřana's imagination. The epigraph, from Dylan Thomas's poem, "Should Lanterns Shine," is given in the original English. Thomas's poem meditates on love and the aging body, with more emphasis on female physical decrepitude. In this case, I will delay providing the English translation, so the reader can dwell on the graphic aspects of two languages occupying the same page:

14 Zábřana 2022, p. 11.

15 Zábřana 1993, p. 119.

16 Zábřana 2022, p. 11.



The ball I threw while playing in the park
 Has not yet touched the ground...
 — Dylan Thomas

Už nikdy nebudem tak šťastní...
No jo Tak dobře Co má bejt
 Co bude z našich starých básní?
Bude z nich do jitrnic prejt

Co bude se starými dluhy?
 Přijdou si pro ně? Oželí je?
Budou z nich popěvky a stuhy
Traumata jedné Ofélie

Nebo už budem navždy němí
 mít škrkavku nad hrncem škvarků
 a rozpíchaní injekcemi

budem se těšit z drobných dárků?
...Míč dětství, vyhozený v parku,
ne, ten míč dosud nedopadl k zemi...¹⁷

With its drizzle of diacritics, consonant clusters, and its Slavic roots, Czech can seem impenetrable and forbidding to the anglophone eye. All the more intriguing, then, is the English epigraph: Zábřana has taken two lines from a popular anglophone poet of the era and embedded them in a Czech linguacultural environment. Is he mocking the lines, or Thomas himself? Is he riffing off them? At first glance there is a surreal disjunction between epigraph and text. What on earth does Thomas mean for such a poet? Does Zábřana read him the same way we might?

Now, we flip this around to a Czech reader who does not know English. This reader may not realize that the last two lines of the poem are in fact a translation of the epigraph: the poem completes a circle in its movement from English to Czech. The best reader of this poem, then, is an English-speaking Czechophone (like Zábřana) who occupies the contact zone between linguacultures.

Zábřana situates two speakers in the contact zone between the two languages. They are perhaps a married couple considering the bleak prospect of old age, which contrasts with the creative élan and intense affections of earlier years. Here is the poem in English translation:

We'll never be as happy as those times...
Yes and? Who cares they won't repeat?
 What's to be done with our old rhymes?
We'll grind them into sausage meat.

¹⁷ Zábřana 1993, p. 169.

What's to be done with our old debts?
They'll turn into fa-la-la-la.
 Will they come for them? Drop their threats?
They'll cry like some Ophelia.

Or will we sit there always, no sound
 but clinking cups, hiccups, a belch or bark,
 new needles sunk into old wounds,

content on days that small gifts mark?
...The ball thrown high while playing in the park
*Has not yet touched the ground...*¹⁸

In the tenth line, the perhaps mellifluous poems and passions of youth are replaced by the harsh noises of everyday life: “clinking cups, hiccups, a belch or bark” (in Czech, this is conveyed by the intense internal rhyme of “mít škrkavku nad hrncem škvarků”). Yet, in the final lines — the lines translated from Thomas — a note of lyric soaring is introduced, now given a different emphasis from the original English poem, which is a florid and sibylline improvisation on the theme of youth. Zábřana, in contrast, unambiguously fast-forwards that youth five decades or so further.¹⁹

It is hard to say why Zábřana reaches for an English text to strike this lyric note in such an otherwise desolate poem; after all, Czech poetry has many lyric modes. His involvement with English was almost completely through the written word, and because he had few opportunities to converse in the language, his spoken English was poor.²⁰ But he does need it, just as he needed to engage with anglophone poets such as Ginsberg, Plath, and Stevens, whom he translated into Czech, among others. As the above-quoted passage from the diary attests, his citations of other authors were the furnishings of his imagination, for him “just as real as a light switch on the wall, a rainy day outside the window, the carpet beneath your feet.” The movement between languages was integral to Zábřana’s poetic imagination: often his finest work occurs at the very moment that he allows other, foreign voices to inflect his lines. Claudio Guillén has remarked how a writer’s dialog with a second language can become integral to their imaginative life:

The second idiom, not mastered by the poet to the same degree as his own, but with which he holds a dialogue that finally became part of the growth of his spirit, does not imply the same degree of externality or of separation characteristic of the history and atmosphere of modern nation states.²¹

18 English translation in Zábřana 2022, p. 61.

19 Zábřana also shifts the Thomas’s straightforward “ball” to the “ball of childhood,” arguably a weakening of the image.

20 Goodman 2023, p. 153.

21 Guillén 1993, p. 260.



How might we describe Zábřana's engagement with English? It is not as immersive as, say, the novelist Edith Templeton's, who grew up speaking Czech and German in Czechoslovakia, and switched to English for her novels, which she wrote while living in Britain.²² But neither is this negligible code-switching. It supplements a lack in the Czech literary and linguistic imaginary, one that is perhaps satisfied in this case by incorporating anglophone elements into the poems.

Now we turn to a writer whose engagement with English went further than Zábřana's (though still not as far as Templeton's). In such ambivalent zones of contact between languages and literature, we find texts that challenge most strongly our divisions between one language and another.

3

Many languages flow through the work of Milada Součková. Born in 1899 into the family of a wealthy Prague property developer, she attended the progressive Minerva school, one of the first of its kind in Bohemia to offer girls an advanced education, as well as to encourage equal rights for women. Both the apartments of bourgeois Prague and the Bohemian rural landscape would play an important imaginative role in the poetry she wrote while in exile. At school, she learned French, English, and Latin; and because Prague was a bilingual city at that point, she picked up German as well as her native Czech. She later learned Italian. But it is between English and Czech that her work commutes, as she discovered unique formal devices to dramatize the interzone between her first home of Bohemia and adopted home of the United States, where she lived from 1946 to her death in 1983.

Součková wrote a doctoral thesis in natural sciences, entitled *On the Spiritual Life of Plants*, and graduated from Charles University, Prague, in 1923. She was associated with the Prague Linguistic Circle, and her debut with an experimental modernist prose work, *První písmena* (First Letters, 1934), was praised by Roman Jakobson, at that time a professor at Masaryk University in Brno. During World War II, she was involved in the anti-Nazi resistance, and in September 1946 she traveled to the US to take up a post as cultural attaché of the Czechoslovak Consulate in New York City. Součková resigned, however, in 1948, after Czechoslovak Communists staged a putsch. She would never return to her homeland.

In the United States, she pursued a career in academia, where she worked variously as a lecturer and librarian at Harvard University, University of Chicago, and University of California, Berkeley. For the remainder of her life, she wrote mainly poetry, publishing in Czech exile presses and journals, foremost among them Sixty-Eight Publishers, which was run by expatriates Zdena Salivarová and Josef Škvorecký. Her work frequently mixes Czech with German, Italian, and above all English. To this extent, she resembles the Czech exile poet Ivan Blatný, whose work, line by line, switched back and forth between Czech and English. For both writers, Czech was insufficient to represent the complexity of their exilic experience. Surrounded in their

²² See Ladislav Nagy, "Edith Templeton's Prague: Provinciality, Not Magic," in this special issue.



daily lives by English, yet most at home in the Czech poetic tradition, they evolved linguistically hybrid imaginations that pushed them to discover new lyric models, more radical than the translanguing experiments of Anglo-American modernism.²³

Jakobson's admiration of Součková helped her not only at the outset of her career, but also in the subsequent decades, when both found themselves in the United States. Already an eminent figure, he assisted her in the search for funding for exile publications of her work, and also in securing academic positions, above all at Harvard University, where Součková worked for most of the remainder of her life as librarian and researcher in Slavic Studies. As her letters attest, Cambridge, Massachusetts, became her home away from home.²⁴

It is routine to think of the modernist period as one of rupture, both stylistic and thematic. Peter Gay figures it as a kind of heresy against earlier arrangements of culture and society.²⁵ Součková embraced the avantgarde in the 1920s and 1930s, and she associated with Group 42, a circle of artists and writers who wished to transform Czech culture. Součková experienced this heretical excitement also, and we observe a hunger for innovation in these lines from *Hlava umělce: studie k větší práci* (Head of the Artist: Notes Toward a Larger Work, 1946), which is a mixture of autobiography and aesthetic theory:

If a scientific thought, carried over into the life of society, can change large swathes of the economy, technology, power relations, then art, too, can change large swathes of humanity and from there penetrate back into their acts and life.

In this I see the calling of today's writer. In the creation of a contemporary style. Not in the writing of poems, novels, dramas, however. At first, indeed, it will appear to be in that kind of form. But I expect from the artist not "a novel," "a poem," or "a drama," but a work that will be the expression of our time, which will be recognized as such by contemporaries or by the next generations.²⁶

The same excitement coursed through Futurism, Constructivism, and Vorticism, and also in Communism's desire for a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. But while Czechoslovak Communists and others eventually fell back on older forms (folk poetry, the realist novel of the previous century, among others) to accommodate the new realities they wished to create, Součková insists again, a few pages on, that the age requires new forms.²⁷

Součková was not motivated by the same disdain as, say, Ezra Pound's for the Victorian generation immediately before him. Even as she searched for new forms, she forged ever stronger links with nineteenth-century writers of the Czech National Revival. Not only did she write studies of their works, introducing them to an anglophone

23 For an excellent contextual comparison of Součková's work with T.S. Eliot's, see Říhová 2017.

24 Most of these details are taken from Suda 2018, pp. 9–18.

25 Gay 2007.

26 Součková 2002, p. 43, my translation.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 46.



audience, but references to their persons and allusions to their literary texts marble her poetry.²⁸ Many, though not all, of these poems by earlier writers now read like fey stylizations of rural life, as natural forces and processes that European romanticism had represented as gigantic and fearsome were rendered as ornaments on Biedermeier porcelain. But this was not wholly a reduction. By representing the countryside in their works, these writers harnessed Romanticism for a nationalist aesthetic ideology that demanded independence from the Habsburg Empire. Although a seeming infantilization and prettification, their representations of village life or sweet flowers in deep forests had other innovatory functions that were not immediately obvious from close readings of the text. Součková retools this nationalist landscape for modernist models of literary representation. And after 1948, such imagery serves a further purpose: it asserts longer continuities and traditions in opposition to the historical rupture of the Cold War, which left her in exile. Throughout her oeuvre she continues to lay imaginative claim to the landscapes of Milevsko and Bechyně, although she has long lost the travel documents that would allow her to visit them.

As with *Zábrana*, we learn much from merely observing the untranslated text of a Součková poem, which I include in its entirety below. First, its graphic layout reflects its bilingual nature; and second, we see that Czech and English are not the only languages involved (some lines are in Latin). “Jmeniny” (Namedays) from *Šesity Josefíny Rykové* (Josefina Ryková’s Notebooks), was probably written in the mid-1970s, and first published in 1981. These workbooks are a series of seven collections written over the period 1974 to 1983. There is a slim column of mainly Czech text, which is immediately recognizable as poetry. The lines are unrhymed. This stands on a plinth of English prose:

JMENINY

Navštívení.

Tak časně? před snídaní?

sotva se rozední?

nechodí návštěvy.

Bábovka, ubrus kávový

cukřenka, koflík sváteční

sotva se v zimě rozední

obláček, oblak zlacený

na míšni sváteční

snad modrý vzor cibulky

snad jen z kameniny

zhruba vypálený

na Kampě z trhu, levný.

světívali jmeniny

O felix patrona

²⁸ She was the author of *The Czech Romantics* (1959) and *The Parnassian Jaroslav Vrchlický* (1964); she also wrote about other periods in Czech cultural history, for example, in *A Literature in Crisis: Czech Literature 1938–1950* (1954) and *Baroque in Bohemia* (1980).

jméno pozdraveno
časně, jen se rozední
stůl k svátku prostřený,
kdys dávno rozhodnuto
křtitelnicí vysloveno
v dojetí, s úsměvy
v tichu navštívení.
Duae verae sunt olivae
matka, dcera
tu mater et regina,
strýc prý byl ubohý
na jmeniny zapomněli —
Si narratur femina.

Recitativo

The name of Josephine's mother was Mary. She never mentioned the name of her uncle, who seems to have been a gentle, feeble-minded man. Perhaps Rozárka inherited St. Vitus' dance from him.

The grandmother of Josephine used to chew a coffee-bean and her granddaughter loved to watch the coffee-grinder, to look at the beans disappearing from the shining copper cup inside the wooden-boss [*sic; recte* box] and the emergence of the ground coffee in the little drawer with the copper knob — a real Dalí drawer. While shopping with her mother she visited Kulík in Platýz. After a few stone steps one entered a vaulted room with a battery of tall copper containers. When the customer asked for a certain brand of coffee, the clerk would loose a rivulet of coffee-beans from one of them. The most luxurious kind was *Mocha*: an exotic word, an exotic place with exotic people and plants like coffee. Gentlemen sipped *mocha* and smoked cigars called *portorico*. The cashier gave Josephine a couple of fairy tales with crudely colored illustrations. In comparison with the story of *Mocha*, their tale was the usual: kings, princes, witches.

It all happened at the time when John S. Trowbridge & Co. had a big ornamental wrought-iron coffee-grinder at 6 Faneuil Hall Sq. in Boston. Josephine was to learn this much later. As well as about the existence of *Federación Nacional de cafeteros de Columbia*. Still, the coffee-bean remained a mystery.²⁹

We can guess that Josephine is the Josefína of the book's title (she is a kind of version of Součková herself; Josef Hrdlička calls Josefína Rykrová a logonym of Součková, which is a kind of alter ego that exists only verbally in poems and memories).³⁰ The first paragraph seems to gloss the preceding lines with family background. While the monolingual anglophone may be relieved to encounter nearly a page in English, with some international frames of reference (Salvador Dalí, mocha coffee, and, later, some Boston realia), they may be pulled up short by the references to Platýz (a small court-

²⁹ Součková 2009, pp. 23–24.

³⁰ Hrdlička 2017, p. 112.



yard arcade in Prague, which still exists) and to Kulík (a coffee emporium, which no longer exists, although there are still two coffee shops in Platýz). Of course, from the context we gather what kind of establishment Kulík runs, but the tone suggests that we should know it already, which most people, even old Praguers, do not. The last paragraph establishes a simultaneity between Prague and Boston, but little in the poem, or even the first workbook, from which this is taken, can explain why Boston and not London, Vienna, or Stockholm. The only thing that can explain this is the fact that Josefina's alter ego, i.e., Milada Součková herself, lives there. Only biographical knowledge holds these together, as Součková links her childhood history in Prague to the history of her adopted city in the United States.

Having examined the poem visually, with its Czech and English parts, let us turn to the translation of the first part:

NAMEDAYS

Visitation.

So early? before breakfast?
 day hardly broken?
 and visitors arrived?
 Marble cake, coffee tablecloth,
 sugar bowl, good teacups,
 day hardly broken, winter,
 cloudlets, gilded clouds
 the Meissen taken out
 blue scallioned patterns, no?
 and only crockery, no?
 fired roughly
 from Kampa market, cheap.
 they honored all name days
 O felix patrona
 thy name be hailed
 early, just at daybreak,
 feast-day table laid,
 decided long ago
 thy name be spoken
 through font baptismal
 with feeling, oh with smiles
 in visitation's silence
 Duae verae sunt olivae
 mother, daughter
 tu mater et regina,
 the uncle pitiful, they said,
 forgot the name days —
 Si narratur femina.³¹

31 Translation mine.



Name days are still celebrated in the Czech Republic, often with a gift of flowers and an expression of good wishes; in earlier times, one might have friends or family over for cakes and coffee. Name days serve as ritual link to a saint's name. Součková's fell in winter (earlier it was December 29, now it is February 8), and it memorializes Mlada Přemyslovna (930/935–994 CE), who was beatified but not canonized. The clipped, telegraphic nature of the lines facilitates a wonderful ambiguity about who exactly is visiting, or making a visitation. The tenth-century Benedictine abbess herself seems to be hovering nearby, although it could just be a more mundane early visitor. As a lifelong Roman Catholic, Součková would have been on the *qui vive* for such presences.

Other aspects of the poem are worthy of comment. For instance, it switches registers between Latin, gossipy tones, and more elevated ecclesiastical formulations. It also quickly sketches a distaff family history, and places this under the aegis of a Church Matriarch. The patterns on the Meissen delph — clouds and scallions — blur with their real referents, to the degree that Součková wonders to herself which is which: those clouds and cloudlets may be floating past the windows of the apartment or only depicted on the crockery. We find a similar ambiguity in many of the workbook poems. Also of note is the careful mapping of exotic elements in the Prague scene, which cumulatively in the *Šesity Josefíny Rykrové* creates a sense of the city as shot through with elsewheres, in a similar manner to Walter Benjamin's meditations on Berlin and Paris.

But the question that interests us most here is: what is the poem? Is it just the slim column of verse, or does it include the Recitativo prose? When I've taught this poem, students have tended to refer to the Czech text as the "poem" and the English part as "commentary." In the United States, Součková's academic work in part involved glossing and explaining Czech literature for anglophone students; is she glossing her own poem here? Not all of the poems in the *Šesity Josefíny Rykrové* have such commentaries; and not all the commentaries are in English. Some move in and out of Součková's other languages, but, as Hrdlička observes, Czech is mainly reserved for the ostensibly lyric component.³² He also remarks that "the commentaries sometimes explain, but also other times confuse. Their purpose is not to provide a 'real' context or factual explanation; often they indicate a fictive framework or serve as an associative continuation of the poem in a different form."³³ Arguably, the recitativo, rather than broadening the poem's audience, narrows it: the non-anglophone Czech reader will doubtless be frustrated by a long commentary in English; while the anglophone reader without Czech may wonder why Součková does not simply *translate* the "poem," i.e., the Czech part. Perhaps the poem includes both Czech and English parts? These questions are part of the imaginative work of the poem. As we ponder the questions, we find ourselves, again, between two literary canons.

For all her allegiance to the Czech literary tradition (in her professional life and in her poetry), Součková produced texts that radically break with its monolingualism. Jahan Ramazani has remarked that:

³² Ibid., p. 125.

³³ Ibid., p. 119.



code-switching in poetry often points in two opposite directions at once: by virtue of breaking with monologic literariness, it heightens poetry's speech-effect, its seeming orality; and yet by virtue of its pattern-rich code-switching, it also signals poetry's literariness, its bending back of reference onto itself, its insistence on the verbal materiality and sonic textures that resonate even across languages.³⁴

So when Součková switches to English in "Jmeniny," she ostensibly breaks with the Czech-language lyric; it is as though she says that this mode is not enough to contain her experience. It is a reflection both on the Czech lyric and on the Czech language. Součková's maneuver is different from the plurilingual works of Anglo-American modernism, such as T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) and Ezra Pound's *Cantos* (1915–1959). In both, foreign languages play an integral role, but English is always the matrix language in which particles of Sanskrit, Chinese, or French are embedded. In Součková's "Jmeniny," however, it is difficult to say which is the matrix language. Perhaps there isn't one. Moreover, as Ramazani nudges us to see, the recitativo's code-switch is also the eruption of orality into the hushed, vatic space of lyric. This is all the more striking because we know that she uses English as an exophonic speaker. Even though her grasp of English is weaker than of Czech, she still uses it, even as she keeps it out of the lyric space. It reveals the Czech lyric mode as insufficient, as lacking, as needing a supplement.

We might also ask what her choice of English means. Alice Loda and Antonio Viselli remark that:

For poets, choosing to write translingually has many implications. Among other things, it means immersion in and dialogue with other — sometimes distant — traditions, opening unprecedented spaces of rhythmical and lexical encounters, and — in the majority of cases — asserting nonmonocultural and nonmonolingual views of the world.³⁵

Certainly, Součková opens up an unprecedented space in the Czech lyric when she brings in her Boston realia. Also, English has a possible political valency, as it is the language of Czechoslovakia's enemy in the Cold War. Yet, it also seems to be an aleatory choice: if, say, Součková had ended up in Italy, she would, we feel, have written these recitativos in Italian. Perhaps there is no good *poetic* reason for the language; instead there is a biographical reason: her US experience is required in this new lyric mode, as it gives her a vantage point inaccessible in Czech. The choice of language, and resultant form of the poem, is a consequence of her mobility, a consequence of the particular journey she made from Prague to Boston. For her, English is a language, in the words of the Italian writer Ornella Vorsi, "without a childhood."³⁶ Not every poem in the *Sešity Joseřiny Rykrové* concludes with a long paragraph in English; sometimes the annotations are quite short, and other

34 Ramazani 2020, p. 200.

35 Canagarajah 2017, p. 19.

36 Ornella Vorsi, qtd in Loda and Viselli 2022, p. 20.

times they are in other languages (Latin, Italian, French, and German, though English is most frequent), and sometimes there are none, which may also be of significance.

We might also ask about the intended audience of Součková's work. She had elitist expectations of her readers — they had to be as educated, well-travelled, and multilingual as she was; and they had to be Czech-speaking. To a lesser degree, Zábřana had the same expectations. Few contemporary writers have similar expectations of their readers, and moreover, such a position implies that the audience for Czech anglophone literature would be too small to be worth the candle.

In considering the work of these two mid-twentieth-century Czech poets, we gain a different viewpoint on writers at the far end of the Czech anglophone spectrum — writers such as Mark Slouka, Jana Prikryl, Janet Malcolm, and Edith Templeton, among others. They can no longer be absorbed into the anglophone tradition without more consideration of their Czech hinterland. Součková and Zábřana also prompt us to reconsider the linguistic, cultural, and national choices of writers who wrote only in Czech. Petr Mareš has explored the representation of foreign language in Czech literature. In the case of Božena Němcová, German — a language that had been at home in the Czech lands for many centuries — is figured as foreign; whereas, say, Vladimír Holan used foreign language elements in more a complex, structural manner.³⁷ In all his chosen cases, however, Czech remains the matrix language, and more generally, the nation remains the controlling structure of his research. Součková and Zábřana connect with this tradition, but also connect it with purely anglophone works, which problematizes the idea of the nation for the consideration of literature.

By way of conclusion we might return to the linguist Suresh Canagarajah who promotes an approach that “resist[s] the territorialization of labeled languages as belonging to one place or community, with static norms and meanings deriving from a preconstructed structure.”³⁸ The multilingual echoes that haunt Zábřana's sonnets, like the uncertainty about matrix and embedded languages in Součková's work, are not anomalies to be solved, but opportunities to open up literatures labeled by nation, belonging to one place or community. Rather than starting from the idea of Czech literature, or American literature, Canagarajah says “we should consider how diverse verbal resources (unrestricted by their labels) are taken up by people to establish meanings and negotiate relationships.”³⁹ Perhaps it is time to leave canons aside, and explore the new paths that are opened by Milada Součková's work, and the work of other translingual writers.

³⁷ Mareš 2012, p. 15, 43.

³⁸ Canagarajah 2017, p. 19.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 19.



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