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Review Article

Pynsent's Representative Publication

JIRÍ HOLÝ

Robert Pynsent, *Ďáblové, ženy a národ: Výbor z úvah o české literatuře*. Prague: Karolinum, 2008, 644 pp., 450 CZK p/b.

ROBERT B. PYNSENT IS UNDOUBTEDLY THE MOST well known British scholar involved in Czech and Slovak Studies. Since 1972 he has been teaching at University College London at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, where he holds the only Professorship in Czech and Slovak Literature. Pynsent has published a monograph on the nineteenth century Czech poet and fiction writer Julius Zeyer (*Julius Zeyer: The Path to Decadence*, 1973), a shorter work on a twentieth century Czech prose writer Vladimír Páral (*Sex under Socialism: An Essay on the Works of Vladimír Páral*, 1994) and collections of studies on national stereotypes and national identity in Czech and Slovak literature (*Conceptions of Enemy: Three Essays on Czech and Slovak Literature*, 1988; *Questions of Identity: Czech and Slovak Ideas of Nationality and Personality*, 1994). In these works and in a number of other articles, he has shown extraordinary erudition and a detailed knowledge of the literary material, including little known and marginal writers and their works. His essays are witty; they pose non-conventional, provocative questions and analogies. Most recently, Pynsent raised much attention during a conference on a nineteenth century Czech classic author, Božena Němcová, when he compared her most accomplished work *Babička* (*The Grandmother*, 1855), regarded as an important work in the canon of modern Czech literature, with Hitler's *Mein Kampf*.¹ Some of the participants of the conference saw his paper as meaningless posturing, others found it stimulating. Through his teaching and research, Pynsent has acquired considerable authority in academia and has influenced a number of students, some of whom teach at British universities.

This is why it is important to devote attention to Pynsent's most extensive publication so far, a collection of articles entitled *Ďáblové, ženy a národ* (*The Devils, Women and the Nation*). Its 644 pages are printed in a large format, including an extensive 'Afterword' by the author, a bibliography of his works, and an editorial note

¹He had found a common source for both texts in the work of a German nationalist and trainer F. L. Jahn *Deutsches Volkstum* (1810).

written by Jan Pospíšil, the editor and translator of most of the articles. The number and the range of the articles gathered together here, which have been selected by the author himself, makes this work a representative publication, a summary of Pynsent's thoughts, an outline of his favourite themes (the Czech and the Slovak nineteenth century National Revival, decadence, national myths and stereotypes, the first Czechoslovak President T. G. Masaryk, women's literature, sex) and his methodological approaches.

I admit that the volume surprised me. It made me feel uneasy and provoked a number of polemical objections in me. But something like this is evidently the aim of this author's often provocative writing. Robert Pynsent probably subscribes to Bohumil Hrabal's statement, according to whom 'a real book is not for helping the reader to get to sleep, but to make him jump out of bed in his long johns and run and sock the writer on the jaw' (1994, p. 13). Pynsent's *Ďáblové, ženy a národ* is not fiction, but its essayistic style sometimes approaches fiction. I will attempt to pick up the author's gauntlet and write a polemical review.

The problems start with the Czech translations of Pynsent's articles, most of which were originally written in English. Sometimes it is not quite clear whether the latest published versions, which differ from the English originals, have been changed by the author or whether the changes are due to mistakes made by the translator and editor. In the original English language study on Mácha, Pynsent writes: 'Then the final canto shows us the narrator coming across Vilém's remains several years later—and then hearing Vilém and Jarmila's story' (1990, p. 230). The Czech version of this sentence in this new book runs as follows: 'In the last canto, seven years after the execution, the narrator comes to Vilém's remains, listens to the story of Vilém and Jarmila and thinks about it a little' (p. 107). Since the discussed passages are normally regarded as one of the greatest achievements of Czech poetry, it would be interesting to know whether the addition has been made by the author for the Czech edition or whether it is due to the 'creativity' of the translator. In the first intermezzo of Mácha's poem *Máj*, 'living nature'² prepares to welcome Vilém (who is due to be executed) to the realm of the dead (p. 126). This does not make much sense since Vilém is being welcomed by the moon, the gale, the mist, even by time.

It is not easy to define the author's methodology. He himself writes, in the aforementioned piece dealing with Němcová: 'I hope that I am completely non-methodological ...' (2006, p. 193). In the blurb on the cover of *Ďáblové, ženy a národ* the editor Jan Pospíšil praises the Anglo-Saxon tradition of close reading, but it seems that Pynsent is not interested in an analysis of the internal structures, the forms of a literary work. Rather than to literary analysis, his thoughts, as exemplified by his proposal to compare works of quite different textual regimes, such as *Babička* and *Mein Kampf*, seem to be close to today's cultural studies in which literary works—as well as non-literary texts—tend to serve as evidence of a social and cultural reality. Pynsent is much more self-assured in the realm of ideas than in the realm of narrative and verse structure analysis. Even when he examines, in a rather interesting way, Karel Hlaváček's collection of poems *Mstivá kantiléna* (*The Vengeful Cantilene*, 1898), which

²In Czech 'živá příroda' (Pynsent 2008, p. 126). In the earlier version this is translated as 'animate nature' (Pynsent 1990, p. 260).

is built up using euphony and a complex vowel structure, Pynsent ignores the structure of the poems and analyses only their motifs and themes. This approach has its advantages, but it proves insufficient when Pynsent leaves the empirical field and moves into the realm of unverifiable speculation. So when discussing the scene of the execution of St Catherine in the fourteenth century Czech medieval legend, when milk instead of blood spouts out from the neck of the heroine (this is connected to the medieval system of colour symbolism), Pynsent argues that this may be a metaphor for vaginal secretion. Another famous death scene, in Mácha's romantic poem *Máj* (1836), when the robber Vilém is executed after he had killed the seducer of his lover Jarmila, is discussed by Pynsent thus: 'Vilém's blood in death replaces the blood he would have shed by deflowering Jarmila' (p. 116). Here as elsewhere, Pynsent's obsession with sex and erotica is apparent. In the study devoted to Karel Čapek, Pynsent mentions the rumour that Čapek was impotent, although elsewhere he criticises Karel Scheinpflug, Čapek's brother-in-law, for not mentioning in his memoirs that Čapek and his wife Olga Scheinpflugová were expecting a child. In Pynsent's view, a mediocre novel *Passiflora* by Sezima is a significant watershed in literary history 'because it is the first Czech literary work which analyses sexual perversion' (p. 317).

Elsewhere, rash and unfounded links are made between literary fiction and historical reality. When dealing with a short story by Karel Čapek in which the police beat up an embezzler, Pynsent adds: 'Police beating of arrested men was more or less normal in interwar Czechoslovakia ...' (p. 385). Pynsent obviously sees literature as an image of the times and social customs within a given period. This is documented by a number of statements on anti-Semitism in Czech literature of the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. For instance, in a novel by Libuše Hanušová there is a Jewish prostitute, on which Pynsent comments thus: '... in Austria, there existed many Jewish prostitutes, but there were many more non-Jewish prostitutes, so it can be no accident that the authoress who has written a novel about sex lists a Jewish woman as the only representative of prostitution' (p. 419).

In spite of these passages, however, Pynsent quite openly supports the notion of art for art's sake and rejects the primary communicative and mimetic function of art as something lowly:

It is obvious that art for art's sake is the highest art ... but Masaryk praised Havlíček exactly because for him 'art was not for art's sake, science was not for science's sake, literature was not literature for literature's sake, but painting, book, journal, were *life* for him ... a real, present life, our Czech life'. (pp. 165–66, emphasis in original)

Since Pynsent signs up to such aesthetic purism, it is no surprise that he loves decadence: six studies in the volume (some 130 pages) are devoted to decadent literature, but decadence is a fairly rare and unusual occurrence in Czech literature, although recently it has provoked some renewed interest.³ Pynsent believes that the defence of the individual and accusations against modern industrial society constitute the essence of decadence. This broad concept of *décadence sans rivages* has probably

³See Urban and Merhaut (1995). The Prague-based Thyrsus publishing house systematically brought out work by Jiří Karásek ze Lvovic (1871–1951), perhaps the most important Czech decadent poet, in the 1990s.

lead him to assert, very unconvincingly, that decadence became a mass movement in the 1960s and that Václav Havel is a direct heir of decadence.

This is, then, a concept of literature as a passionate, non-conformist gesture, a gesture which appears often in the nineteenth and even more so in the twentieth century. Art, in its exclusivity, is meant to make an impact through its power of subversion and negation. It is supposed to be a counterbalance to the consumerist society of Western civilisation, which deprives Man of his original individuality. Under the influence of this idea, Pynsent rejects Czech medieval Hussite literature, the literature of the nineteenth century Czech and Slovak National Revival, as well as Karel Havlíček, T. G. Masaryk and Karel Čapek, that is, the authors and the literary movements which are traditionally regarded as highly significant within Czech (and Slovak) literary history. Pynsent scorns the myth of the National Revival and those surrounding Masaryk. He despises Čapek as an establishment writer of interwar Czechoslovakia and Josef Škvorecký, the well-known novelist of the second half of the twentieth century, as 'a well-meaning author of trash' (1986, p. 16).

This one-sided approach is highly questionable. It may be suitable for literary criticism or for a one-off lecture, such as the one comparing Němcová to Hitler, which can usefully debunk old stereotypes. The problem is that Pynsent applies this approach to large areas of literary history, which cannot be simplified in this way. Thus, the approach which is supposed to debunk and subvert, becomes an arbitrary straitjacket which ignores empirical literary facts and becomes a new mythology. Inspired by Masaryk, Pynsent writes that the Czechs suffer from a martyr complex, and apart from Jan Hus he includes the tenth century prince Saint Wenceslas in this category. But the character of Wenceslas, as a hero of early medieval legends, displays martyr characteristics common in the culture of the period; there is nothing specifically Czech in this. What is more, Wenceslas appears in the active role of the commander of the Czech army. Just as arbitrary is Pynsent's judgment of Karel Čapek as a nostalgic philistine, a 'pussyfooting mediocrity' (Pynsent *et al.* 1984), who was characterised by nationalist sentiment, by laziness and by closing his eyes before reality. Here, Pynsent merely repeats criticism of Čapek hurled at him by the communists and the Catholics for whom Čapek, as a supporter of liberal democracy and President T. G. Masaryk, was an enemy. The only element that Pynsent seems to have added is the assertion that Čapek was allegedly worshipped by the communist regime and the far-fetched thesis that Čapek's world famous drama *R.U.R.* is an 'anti-Semitic play' (p. 415).

Neither assertion will stand up in an impartial debate. It is true that some parts of Čapek's work (*Válka s mloky* (*The War with the Newts*), 1936; *Bílá nemoc* (*The White Disease*), 1937) were accepted by some communist critics, but they deliberately distorted the meaning of Čapek's output, suppressed Čapek's criticism of Stalinism and the overall democratic ethos of his writing. A much more substantial contribution to the interpretation of Karel Čapek's work has been made by non-communist literary scholars, such as Oldřich Králík and Jiří Opelík. The alleged anti-Semitism of *R.U.R.* is based on Pynsent's observation that the financial director of Rossums' Works has some implicit characteristics of a Jewish businessman. This is one of many minor features of the play. If we could deduce on the basis of this that Čapek was an anti-Semite, Bohumil Hrabal as well as the Czech Jewish writers Karel Poláček and Ota Pavel and many others would also have to be anti-Semitic. It would be much more

plausible to see *R.U.R.* as 'anti-communist' (the mutiny of the robots is reminiscent of a communist revolution) or 'anti-capitalist' (the manufacturing and the distribution of robots is motivated by profit). Even these would of course still be black and white interpretations, albeit slightly more persuasive than that proposed by Pynsent.

He is, of course, right in saying that there is a Čapek myth which simplifies his personality as well as his work and which has been built on the basis of some of Čapek's writing. But such a myth originates around any great artist. And Čapek is not only the author of *Zahradníkův rok* (*The Gardener's Year*, 1929) and *Povídky z jedné a druhé kapsy* (*Tales from One and the Other Pocket*, 1929), a fairy tale about a puppy (*Dášeňka*, 1932), but also of a collection of metaphysical short stories *Boží muka* (*Wayside Crosses*, 1917), the 1933–1934 trilogy *Hordubal*, *Povětroň* (*Glider*), *Obyčejný život* (*An Ordinary Life*), and outstanding translations of French lyrical poetry. Even the Catholic writer Jaroslav Durych, whom Pynsent prefers to Karel Čapek, produced not only excellent writing, but also a piece of schematic Catholic propaganda *Paní Anežka Berková* (*Mrs. Anežka Berková*, 1931) and the sentimental work *Duše a hvězda* (*The Soul and the Star*, published posthumously, 1969).

As proof of how he 'supported mediocrity', Pynsent refers to Čapek's essay 'Místo pro Jonathana!' ('A Place for Jonathan!'), which was published on 21 March 1934, shortly after the German Nazis seized power. Pynsent quotes this passage from the essay:

nothing devastates [culture] as much as the rule of pedants and bullies, men intellectually crippled by specialization, simpering pseudoparsons and cultural stuffed shirts, narrow-minded mentors and doctrinarians, learned asses, sourpuss evangelists, radical nit-pickers, neurasthenic aesthetes and egotists, the rule of that whole intolerant, cramped, puffed-up, sapless and horribly boring intellectual elite. (Čapek 1986, p. 551)

Pynsent concludes from this that it is a manifestation of an exaggerated version of Masaryk's populism and a proof of how anti-intellectual Čapek was. The problem is that this essay by Čapek is not an attack on intellectuals, but a criticism of the breeding ground of totalitarianism. (Consider for instance the corrupt Professor Sigelius, the head of the state clinic in Čapek's play *Bílá nemoc*.) In this essay, Čapek criticises those intellectuals who have relinquished responsibility for public affairs in their own countries in favour of posturings to please authoritarian wielders of power or to hide away from public life in their specialised fields. Those who work in the arts, Čapek argues, have an important obligation to fulfil, the arts have an 'elevated and an exclusive position'. But apart from the 'aristocratic concept of the arts', the arts are, according to Čapek, also to 'lead Man to a broader and freer outlook in life'; culture must be 'alive' (1991, p. 551). Čapek condemns the professional blindness, negativity and primitivism of those intellectuals who are ideologically blinkered and reject different political standpoints 'on principle' (1991, p. 552). Such an attitude is dangerous, he says, since 'in Germany, so many people have ceased being good poets, artists or scholars simply because they are Jews or they have retained their own independent views in certain matters' (1991, p. 554).

I am afraid that Čapek's words also apply to the attitudes of Robert Pynsent to an extent. His non-conformist and aesthetic purism does not limit itself to provocative statements such as 'Unlike most intelligent people, Masaryk was an optimist' (p. 183) or 'Masaryk's words cannot but remind us of words by Leo Trotsky or Mao Tse-Tung'

(p. 220). Unfortunately, Pynsent's attitudes have also been reflected in his public, cultural-political statements. During the neo-Stalinist regime in Czechoslovakia in the 1980s, Pynsent said in an article, printed in the Munich-based periodical *Bohemia*, as well as in an interview in the Prague-based weekly *Tvorba*, that 'Czech independent and émigré literature is being overestimated and fiction published within Czechoslovakia [the censored fiction] is being underestimated' (1986, p. 16). In his 'Afterword' in the volume *Ďáblové, ženy a národ* Pynsent says, rather euphemistically, that this study had been criticised both by the communist establishment and by some Czech dissidents. At the same time, Pynsent translated into English a work by the communist Foreign Secretary Bohuslav Chňoupek *The Breaking of Seals* (1988), dealing with the participation of French citizens in the Slovak National Uprising against the Nazis in 1944. A few years later, in October 1984, after the Nobel Prize for Literature was awarded to the Czech poet Jaroslav Seifert, Pynsent along with his teacher Karel Brušák and colleague David Short published a letter in *The Times*, stating that Seifert was 'a master in producing sentimental drivel', he wrote verse of 'mawkish self-pity' and that only communist poems from his youth were any good (Pynsent *et al.* 1984).

In the context of the times this was more than just a specialised literary polemic. The voice of an authoritative British expert in Czech affairs, seen on a personal level possibly as nothing more than a non-conformist gesture, was an attack on an independent Czech literature which was trying to retain its creative and critical freedom under very difficult circumstances. For instance, at the beginning of the 1980s, Czech sociologist Jiřina Šiklová was prosecuted for sending to the West a manuscript of Seifert's memoirs from Czechoslovakia and background material on Seifert for the consideration of the Nobel Committee. Thus Robert B. Pynsent moved from radical non-conformism towards what psychologists call 'opposing conformism': he became a supporter of the communist establishment, albeit unintentionally. To use a parallel from current times, it is as if a Western Russianist publicly criticised the quality of the work of writers who now oppose Lukashenko's regime.

Fortunately, the latest work by Robert Pynsent cannot have such unfortunate consequences. However, Pynsent's one-sided aesthetics of negation remain doubtful. In my view, his attitude is no more justifiable and no more productive in a literary and social sense than the aesthetics of identification, as represented by Čapek and Seifert.

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