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TOWARDS A TYPOLOGY OF CZECH AND SLOVAK LYRICAL POETRY FROM THE 1920S¹

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Abstract

Within literary comparative studies, inquiries into typological connections represent a markedly high level, primarily because the principle of *comparing* phenomena can be applied in its full spectrum, which includes dissimilarities. An overarching central European climate becomes clearly apparent when comparing the Czech and Slovak poetry of the 1920s (e.g., Březina, Hlaváček, Hviezdoslav, Lukáč, Novomeský, Smrek, Toman, Wolker). Czech movements such as Devětsil and Poetismus ran alongside the Slovaks' poetic naïveté, not unlike its Czech counterparts and their socially-engaged lyrics, as this developmental relationship was fostered in large part by the union of both nations' literatures. Set against the backdrop of a wider context, including French and American poetry, as well as Russian prose, this paper traces the highly international niche established by the Czech and Slovak lyrical schools.

Keywords: *Czech and Slovak Literature; 1920s; Lyrical Poetry*

Literary comparative studies have recently arrived at two aspects to investigate the mutual relations among literatures, namely: 1) the aspect of ascertaining the so-called genetic (contact) relations and 2) the aspect of investigating typological connections on the basis of literary analogies.

The first approach encompasses the widest field of literary relations and influences, beginning with the exploration of foreign words' echoes in a certain milieu and ending with the concrete study of the influences which

give rise to a work. The second approach assumes the study of parallel phenomena in two or more literatures, or as the case may be, their relation to world literature. As a rule, scholars of comparative literature consider both approaches to have the same weight. The study of the genetic relations surely has its own significance, especially when explaining the origin of individual words and when investigating personages. However, if sufficiently concrete, it can also be applied to the investigation of an extensive variety of elements, literary movements, epochs, etc. Nevertheless and in agreement with Ďurišín,² I surmise that this study, in and of itself, only possesses a kind of helpful nature, serving to gather together facts which may indeed be cogent. Yet it cannot describe the essence of the phenomenon under investigation or its genetic essence. Likewise, it cannot describe its peculiarities and certainly not its function in the given society which it addresses. Finally, the study of the genetic relations cannot have anything essential to express concerning the quality of the phenomenon, as long as it is not dealing with, for example, direct plagiarism. In my opinion, the qualms which have resulted from comparative literary studies both here and abroad lay precisely in that they were often reduced to almost exclusive investigation of literary facts, especially those concerning modern literary phenomena.

Such an inquiry into typological connections represents a markedly higher level of comparative studies, primarily because the principle of comparing phenomena can be applied in its full spectrum – not only to details and other relational features, but also to dissimilarities, specifics and other overall aspects. Here we now sense that we are indeed much closer to the actual essence of literary scholarship, since we take the works as a whole, together with their accompanying functionality. Scholars in this field naturally emphasize, first and foremost, analogical phenomena and their relation to the whole of world literature. For those in other scholarly areas, this method can reveal particular characteristics on a deeper level, including the peculiarities of certain phenomena and their functioning.

These differences among methods are clearly apparent when comparing the Czech and Slovak poetry of the 1920s. The genetic relations of this poetry concretely show us Czech poetry's inspiring stimuli, especially in Symbolism and Poetism, wherein it has demonstrated its own distinctiveness. The poetry of Březina and Hlaváček has influenced some of Smrek's poetry in his collection *Odsúdený k večitej žizni* (*Sentenced to Eternal Life*), while Březina held sway specifically in terms of Lukáč's and Wolker's poetry. Likewise, Poetism inspired Novomeský. This indicates that the influence of Slovak poetry on Czech poetry was not overly intense, even though the effect of Novomeský's work remains an open issue in Czech poetry. All these findings, as well as a host of others, even if attained via exceptional seriousness and exhaustiveness, only represent a portion of the facts. Thus, they may serve at best as the material for further research, being far more important for literary

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