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“OF THE TIMES, YET TIMELESS”:
A SKETCH ON THE SUBJECT OF ART AND RELIGION
IN THE WORK OF F.X. ŠALDA

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Abstract

A religious experiencing of the world, a search for some stance on matters of spiritual integrity, permeated the entire critical oeuvre of the founder of modern Czech art criticism, F.X. Šalda, though in many different, and often surprising, ways. Many later interpreters of his work have pointed to the key role played by his belief in an absolute spiritual principle that gave order to his ideas about art and culture, or to the role of religious thought as the pivot of his convictions, indeed his entire personality. During the almost fifty years of Šalda’s creative life, this “desire for integration”, or spiritual synthesis, evinced many different, often contradictory, forms, yet invariably directed towards encapsulating that unity of variables, the entirety of life and one’s role within it. His relationship to religious discourse in literature and art, an issue which he raised time and again with both trepidation and a determination to arrive at some rational, systematic resolution, permits us an insight into how he approached the problem of inner unity and thus into the overall moulding of his attitude to life, the world and art. Hence I shall focus here on three particular stages in Šalda’s career as critic and poet where – with a different variable each time – he broaches this troublesome relationship.

Keywords: *Czech Literature; F.X. Šalda; Art; Religion*

I. The first decade of his creative life – the 1890s – culminated in his first published book, *Boje o zítřek (Fighting for Tomorrow, 1905)*, a collection of

“meditations and rhapsodies” marked by a frantic, often diffuse search for fitting philosophical and methodological points of departure for his work as a critic. Yet it was already apparent from the first extensive study – the benchmark essay ‘Syntetism v novém umění’ (‘Syntheticism in New Art’, late 1891-1892) – that he had accorded a decisive role to integral spiritual experience in his embryonic search for the “deepest sensation of the unknowable”;¹ this may thus be taken as the key postulate of this early essay. The gradual moulding of his attitude can be traced not only in such early keynote essays as ‘Syntheticism in New Art’ or such later texts as ‘Renesance – čeho?’ (‘The Renaissance – of What?’) and ‘Renesanční sen’ (‘The Renaissance Dream’) of 1897, but above all in his critical essays on poetical works motivated or inspired by Christian values.

Šalda’s attitude to the artists who were soon to feature as representatives of the Catholic Modernism movement (conveying a religious revival through their works of the mid-1890s), evolved early on. He was particularly interested in books by two leading exponents of the movement, Xaver Dvořák and Sigismund Bouška, although they were poles apart in their points of departure. In appraising Dvořák’s *Stínem k úsvitu* (*Through the Shadows Towards Dawn*, 1892), Šalda considers the religiously motivated art of the day from the perspective of the search for and delimitation of the “typical shape of the psychology of the generation”² as inspired by his early contact with the aesthopsychology of the French critic and aesthetician Émile Hennequin (1859-1888). Šalda accordingly defines two potential types inspired by religion among his co-eval poets, whose work sprang fundamentally from a widely-sensed generational need for the spiritual rebirth and integration of modern man. One type lived bound in close harmony with their Church and its dogma; they were simple, whole, complete, “perhaps feeling like people of the thirteenth century”;³ they were naïvist poets, creators and advocates of problem-free, positive attitudes to art and life. Šalda considered the other type to be “passionate and fretful children of the age, restive souls, complex, feeble, inconstant, treacherous, wicked and, above all else, unhappy”.⁴ Šalda emphasises that these people, he says, can never be good Catholics, or even good Christians, though they do come closest to a profound expression in art of the contradiction-ridden predicament of modern man. Xaver Dvořák is assigned to the first group. However, he falls outside the strict demands of strict application of criteria of “contemporary psychology”, being admittedly a simple soul, but also rather flat, often more self-pitying than piteous. On the other hand, Xaver Dvořák, as one of the few young poets of his day, presents a particular type of poetry that did permit Šalda to apply his theses. No matter, then, that he had plenty of reservations about Dvořák’s early verse, as he did seek to defend the position he had adopted within it. And he did so in a manner that was highly unusual for him: by engagingly and benevolently confronting the poetry’s mediocre imagery with critical maxims thereby sug-

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