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**Polish and Czech “literary reciprocity”
in the second half of the 19th century:
Eliza Orzeszkowa’s reception
by the Czechs and Karolina Světlá’s
reception by the Poles**

ABSTRACT. Fournier Kiss Corinne, *Polish and Czech “literary reciprocity” in the second half of the 19th century: Eliza Orzeszkowa’s reception by the Czechs and Karolina Světlá’s reception by the Poles* (Polsko-czeska „literacka wzajemność” w drugiej połowie XIX wieku. Czeska recepcja Elizy Orzeszkowej oraz polska recepcja Karoliny Světlej). „Poznańskie Studia Slawistyczne” 2. Poznań 2012. Adam Mickiewicz University Press, pp. 355–370. ISBN 978-83-232-2409-9. ISSN 2084-3011.

The aim of the article is to describe the extraordinarily animated and extensive relationships between Polish and Czech literature in the second half of the 19th century. Literary correspondence is extremely clearly revealed with regard to the Czech writer Karolina Světlá and her reception in Poland and the Polish writer Eliza Orzeszkowa together with her reception in Czech. The article attempts to indicate the reasons for their popularity in these neighbouring countries in the last decades of the 19th century. Thus the subsequent reflection explores a shared viewpoint of both writers concerning national questions, combined with the necessity of women’s liberation, including their accessibility to education. By exploring the critical possibilities of literature, Světlá and Orzeszkowa were exposing the imperfections of their own nations regarding patriotism and emancipation. At the same time, it is worth stressing that both writers regarded their neighbouring nation as a model.

Keywords: Polish and Czech literature, literary reciprocity, women’s writing, Eliza Orzeszkowa, Karolina Světlá, reception, nation, education, female emancipation

The nineteenth century was a crucial time for the history of literary and cultural contacts between the Polish- and Czech-speaking lands. In these regions, the national revival went hand in hand from the beginning of the century with a feeling of “Slavic solidarity”: the valorization of the mother tongue raised awareness of the proximity of the Slavic languages, while the formulation of a national identity led to a (re-)discovery of

a common origin shared with other neighbouring peoples (the popularity of the legend of the three brothers Lech, Rus, Czech, according to which each of them is supposed to have started a separate country, is a case in point). We are familiar with the lyrics of Ján Kollár, who presents himself not only as the bard of such cultural solidarity in his poem *The daughter of Slava* (*Slávy dcera*, 1824), but also as its theorist in his collected essays entitled *Treatises on Slavic reciprocity* (*Rozprawy o slovanské vzájemnosti*, 1836). He dreamed of a great Slavic nation whose destiny would be to guide the culture of mankind in a similar way as the Greeks and Romans had done in the past.

Under the impact of political events, this Slavic solidarity often came to be realized in the more specific form of a Czech-Polish solidarity. In the 19th century, Czechs as well as Poles were under the yoke of foreign powers: Poland was divided between Russia, Prussia and Austria, whereas the Kingdom of Bohemia was a part of the Austrian Habsburg Empire; each of them suffered repression in relation to their desire for independence and were threatened either by Russification or Germanization. This awareness of similar experiences, similar dangers and similar interests inevitably triggered the sympathy they had for one another, and both sides began to carefully monitor what was happening next door, not only in politics but also in cultural and literary life.

From the literary point of view, the Czech lands had fallen behind (the Czech written language had almost disappeared by the early nineteenth century), and in the beginning they had everything to learn from the Poles: studies have been devoted to the prominent role exercised by the Polish Romantic triad (Mickiewicz, Słowacki, Krasiński) on Czech literature in its search for models¹. In the second half of the nineteenth century, which is the period that concerns us here, Czech literature had by now found its way, and literary exchanges were reciprocal. This reciprocity was widely promoted by literary associations, mainly by the “Czech Circle” (*Koło Czeskie*) founded in 1879 in Warsaw and the “Polish Club” (*Koło Polskie*) founded in 1880 in Prague, and by the existence of symbolic individuals such as the Czechophile Bronisław Grabowski in Warsaw and the Polonophile Edvard Jelínek in Prague: they regularly acted as intermediaries in

¹ Cf. for example the studies by M. Szykowski, *Polski udział w czeskim odrodzeniu*, Poznań 1935 and *Polski romantyzm w czeskim życiu duchowym*, Poznań 1947.

promoting personal contacts between scholars of both nations, suggesting literary works considered worthy for translation and translated many works themselves².

Among the names which circulated from one Slavic region to another, two novelists enjoyed an unprecedented and unequalled popularity in the neighbouring region: the Czech writer Karolina Světlá in Poland, and the Polish writer Eliza Orzeszkowa in the Czech lands. Not only were their works translated and widely read as soon as written, but many laudatory articles were also regularly devoted to them in the press of the neighbouring country. For example, on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of Světlá's literary activity, we can read the following in the Polish review "Atheneum":

We would like to express here our most sincere recognition in the name of a nation, which among the nations of the same blood, was not only the first to acknowledge Světlá's talent but also most fervently welcomed her work and most properly appraised her extraordinary capacities as well as her noble and sublime tendencies. Světlá's work undoubtedly awakened in our hearts all the emotions an author can only wish to awaken³ –

while on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of Orzeszkowa's literary activity, the same superlatives were applied to the Polish writer in an article in the Czech periodical "Ženské Listy":

The most famous Polish author Eliza Orzeszkowa is honoured and celebrated not only by her own nation, but is well recognized too by other brother Slavic nations. Thanks to her brilliant spirit and her warm friendship with the Czech nation, this outstanding writer has won many admirers especially among Czech women; to mark her Jubilee, Czech women sent her numerous wishes and evidence of their respect for her⁴.

² For more details on these issues, see for example the first chapter of J. Magnuszewski's book, *Stosunki literackie polsko-czeskie w końcu XIX i na początku XX wieku*, Wrocław 1951.

³ B. Grabowski, *Karolina Świetła, Studium literackie*, "Atheneum" t. 2, 1880, p. 370: "Pragnęlibyśmy dołączyć objaw szerszego uznania z ziemi, która z pomiędzy pobratymczych, pierwsza zapoznała się z talentem autorki, która może najgoręcej przyjęła jej utwory i należycie ocenić umiała jej niepospolite zdolności i szlachetne, wzniosłe tendencje, jakie niewątpliwe w sercach naszych pożądaną oddźwięk znalazły".

⁴ *Literatura a umění*, "Ženské Listy" no. 2, 1892, p. 33: "Eliza Orzeszkowa, nejslavnější autorka polská, oceněna a oslavena byla nejen vděčnosti jejího vlastního národa, ale

How can this huge recognition of the Czech woman by Poles and of the Polish woman by Czechs be explained? How is it that two women writers were so popular, and why especially these women?

Karolina Světlá and Eliza Orzeszkowa were almost contemporaries: Světlá, born in 1830, was eleven years older than Orzeszkowa, and also died eleven years before her, in 1899. Karolina Světlá, pseudonym of Johana Rottová, came from a bourgeois family in Prague and spent a happy early childhood with her parents and her little sister (who later became the writer Sophie Podlipská). Things changed when she was sent to a German school for girls. In *From my literary privacy (Z literárního soukromí)*, a kind of memoir of those years, Světlá relates her struggles to learn to think in a language other than her mother tongue. She explains that without leaving the town where her parents were living, she went through all the sufferings of exile. As a result of a series of traumas (she was locked for hours in a closet and got very bad marks for behaviour, because she was unable to learn German), her resistance broke down. With time, Světlá forgot her mother tongue and became apparently a true German young woman. But deep down, and as a result of being constantly confronted by the hatred of teachers for the Czech element, her indignation grew. Not only was she forced to speak exclusively German, but she had to hear that Czech was the language of uneducated people, that the Czech nation did not exist because it had no specific history or language and literature of its own, and moreover she was taught that she was a German because she was educated in German. Seething with anger and in order to overcome this feeling of being delocalized (“nezlokalisovana”), she took up her pen to say what she had no right to share with anybody⁵.

As to Eliza Orzeszkowa, she was born into the rich and noble Pawłowski family in the neighbourhood of Grodno (at that time in Lithuania, part of the Russian Empire, now in Belarus). Her childhood was marked by a series of deaths: first her father died when she was three years

bratrským uznáním než jiných Slovanů a Slovanek. Zvláště dámy české, mezi nimiž má znamenitá spisovatelka ta mnoho ctitelek jako skvělý duch (...), jako vřelá přítelka národa českého, vzpomněly v době jubilea jejího na ni četnými a srdečnými pozdravy i důkazy své úcty”.

⁵ Cf. K. Světlá, *Dopisy o výchování ženské mládeže české*, in: *Z literárního soukromí I*, Praha 1959.

old, then her sister when she was ten, finally her half brother when she was fifteen. At the age of eleven, she was sent to a convent school in Warsaw; her institutional experience resembled that of Světlá on some points, but was much less dramatic: the girls were not allowed to speak to each other in Polish at all, one day they had to speak German, the next day French, but at least they had Polish literature lessons, and very good ones. It was noticed very early on that Eliza had a talent for writing: in the boarding school, she was the author not only of her own French and Polish compositions, but also of these of some of her friends. Nevertheless, when she returned home from Warsaw after five years, she was still an impulsive and immature girl who did not know what to do with her life. Without much consideration, she agreed to marry her relative Paul Orzeszko. However, political events in partitioned Poland would play the role of "her university"⁶. If we believe her correspondence, the year 1863, a turning point in Polish national history (the 1863–1864 January insurrection against Russia), was also exceptional in terms of her personal history – since, on the one hand, it made it clear to her that she did not love her husband and for that reason would not follow him into exile in Siberia; on the other hand, this year triggered her literary creativity⁷:

This moment had a decisive influence on my whole future (...). This moment awakened in me the desire to serve my nation to the best of my strength and ability (...). Without the hammer and anvil of that year 1863, my destiny would have been completely different, and no doubt I would never have become a writer (letter to Marian Dubiecki, 4 March 1907)⁸.

As we can see, the literary calling arose for both women out of a sense of harm done to their nation and their people, and besides, it was first as

⁶ Cf. E. Jankowski, *Eliza Orzeszkowa*, Warszawa 1973.

⁷ On Orzeszkowa's experience of the January insurrection and the role played by this experience in her fictional texts, see U. Phillips, *Glory to the Vanquished or Tribute to Lived Experience: Eliza Orzeszkowa's Recreation of 1863 in her Cycle "Gloria victis"* (1910), in: *Mapping Experience in Polish and Russian Women's Writing*, eds U. Chowanec [et al.], Newcastle 2010, pp. 64–87.

⁸ E. Orzeszkowa, *Listy zebrane*, t. IV, Wrocław 1958, pp. 244–245: "Moment ten wywarł na całą przyszłość moją wpływ decydujący (...). Ten moment wzniecił we mnie pragnienie służenia Ojczyźnie według miary sił i natury moich zdolności (...). Gdyby nie jego młot i dłuto, losy moje byłyby najpewniej inne i prawdopodobnie nie byłabym autorką".

patriotic writers that they acquired fame among their compatriots. Unlike what was happening at the same time in Western Europe, where, to use the words of Christine Planté in *La petite soeur de Balzac*, “women’s writing represented a disorder” and “announced changes immediately perceived by the opposite sex as being a threat”⁹, in the Polish and Czech Lands, provided it was done for patriotic purposes, men generally offered little resistance to women’s writing.

As women put pen to paper to defend national values, this inevitably led to the questioning of the role of women in the process of nation building. To be exemplary mothers and wives, as required by the nationalists, was considered good, but women might be much more effective mothers and wives for their families and their nation if they were to enjoy greater independence and a better education. According to both Světlá and Orzeszkowa, the spirit of emptiness in which most of the female population existed, because of its lack of education, was the greatest obstacle to the emancipation of the nation. Basically, it is by starting from the question of national emancipation that Orzeszkowa and Světlá came up against the issue of female emancipation. Along with their reputation as patriots, they were also recognized as initiators and ideologues of the emancipatory desires of women in Poland (Orzeszkowa) and in Bohemia (Světlá), mainly through the production of almost contemporary essays which, curiously enough, have the same title: *On the Education of Women*.

In 1867, Světlá wrote an article under the title *On the Education of Women (O vychování ženy)*, which was published in the journal “Květy”¹⁰. In the same year, but in Poland, Orzeszkowa began to work on a text to which she gave the title *Debates about Women (Rozprawy o kobietach)*; the text was finished and published only in 1870 under the title *A few words on women (Kilka słów o kobietach)*, and consists of three parts, of which the second is entitled *On the Education of Women (O wychowaniu kobiet)*¹¹. The essay by Světlá is short (it occupies less than ten pages of the journal), clear and informative: Orzeszkowa’s essay is much more erudite, philosophical and precise, and resembles a real academic or scien-

⁹ Ch. Planté, *La petite sœur de Balzac: Essai sur la femme auteur*, Paris 1989, p. 29.

¹⁰ K. Světlá, *O vychování ženy*, “Květy” no. 6, pp. 47–50; no. 7, pp. 55–58; no. 8, pp. 67–70.

¹¹ I read and quote this text from: E. Orzeszkowa, *Kilka słów o kobietach*, in: *Publicystyka społeczna*, t. 1, eds G. Borkowska, I. Wiśniewska, Kraków 2005, pp. 471–598.

tific treatise. However, what strikes the reader when comparing the two texts is the great similarity between the arguments put forward by the two women. The text by Světlá, written at least one year prior to that of Orzeszkowa, could be regarded as a kind of proleptic summary of the text of the Polish writer; we notice that the few references given by Světlá (Michelet, Jules Simon) also served as starting points for Orzeszkowa, although the latter quoted many other sources. We cannot exclude the possibility that Orzeszkowa had read Světlá's text and that it served as a kind of canvas or springboard for writing her own: from a letter dated 1891 and addressed to the *Artistic Society (Umělecká beseda)* in Prague, we know that Orzeszkowa was very familiar with Světlá's work (she writes that "Karolina Světlá was one of my dearest literary models in my youth"¹²) – however, given the fact that we cannot find any reference to that text in particular, we cannot go beyond mere suppositions.

Let us now take a look at the similarities between these essays. Both women writers begin their reflections by stating that many criticisms are levelled at the women's emancipation question, but that unfortunately, these criticisms are mostly based on a completely wrong understanding of the emancipationist idea. For opponents of emancipation, the emancipated woman is one who neglects her family and domestic duties in order to lead a dissolute life, who having acquired a veneer of knowledge, takes every opportunity to show off, and flouts her sex by dressing and behaving like men. Orzeszkowa and Světlá recognize that such women really do exist and indeed have the means to threaten men through what they call their "emancipation": but these are not, however, the representatives of the true meaning of the word "emancipation", and before thinking about emancipation, they should first free themselves from their mistakes. To qualify them, Orzeszkowa uses such words as "pseudo-emancipated", "adventuress" or "lioness"¹³, whereas Světlá, in a text strictly contemporary to *O vychování ženy*, forges the neologism (in Czech) of "emancipistky"¹⁴. According to Orzeszkowa and Světlá, what is at stake in true emancipation is women's liberation from their incapacity to live independently and by

¹² "Karolina Svieta (sic!) byla jedną z najdroższych mistrzyń mojej młodości" quoted by J. Slizinski. *Materiały: kontakty literacko-artystyczne czesko-polskie*, "Przegląd Zachodni" t. 2, 1954, p. 186.

¹³ E. Orzeszkowa, *Kilka słów o kobietach*, p. 476 and *passim*.

¹⁴ K. Světlá, *Listy ženám o ženách* (1867), in: *Z literárního soukromí I*, p. 435.

extension, women's access to education and to professional life. Understood in this way, emancipation does not decrease women's moral strength and duties, but on the contrary increases them – the much sought-after freedom is not a freedom to act in a depraved way, but a freedom to take on greater responsibilities and become useful to one's family and nation. "Thanks to a higher education and more liberty of action, the woman will understand and fulfil her duties a hundred times better than with a neglected, short-sighted and uncultivated mind"; "women's intelligence, so far completely lying fallow, will have a beneficial role to play in the national economy"¹⁵, claims Světlá. Following precisely the same train of thought, Orzeszkowa explains:

It is not in the name of a erroneous emancipation of women, nor in the name of a false wisdom depriving the female of all grace and distracting her from all useful and compulsory work, but in the name of family peace as well as a powerful idea of family, in the name of human dignity, whose strongest support are education and work, in the name of the inviolable rights of every human being to take part in the happiness resulting from knowledge, that women's access to education is necessary¹⁶.

If it was an easy matter to show those who took pseudo-emancipation for real emancipation that they were on the wrong track, Orzeszkowa and Světlá are aware that there is a class of opponents more difficult to convince: those who are already persuaded from the outset that women's education is a waste of time and money, because women completely lack the capacity necessary for learning and have no other interests than talking about clothes. To this, Orzeszkowa and Světlá both argue that it is precisely the way females are brought up which limits their interests and capaci-

¹⁵ Cf. K. Světlá, *O vychování ženy*, p. 55 and p. 50: "Vyšším vzděláním a větší svobodou v jednání stokrat lépe pochopí a vykoná povinnosti svoje než duchem obmezeným, neosvíceným a zanedbaným" and "intelligence ženská, dosud úplně ladem ležící, se stane činitelem prospěšným v hospodařství národním".

¹⁶ Cf. E. Orzeszkowa, *Kilka słów o kobietach*, p. 561: "Nie w imię błędnej emancypacji kobiecej, nie w imię fałszywej mądrości, która odbiera jej wdzięk właściwy i odrywa ją od użytecznej i obowiązkowej pracy, ale w imię spokoju rodzinnego i potęgi idei rodzinnej, w imię godności człowieczeństwa, której najsilniejszą podporą oświata i praca, w imię nieodjemnego prawa każdej ludzkiej istoty do udziału w szczęściu ze światła płynącym, wołać potrzeba o naukę dla kobiet".

ties. Girls of the upper and middle classes are indeed already subjected from early childhood to all manner of social conventions and proprieties: whereas boys receive a healthy and strong diet, girls' food is rationed and consists largely of sweets; whereas boys are allowed to move and run in the open air, girls do not receive any physical education and have to remain seated most of the time; whereas boys have access to all areas of knowledge, the only lessons girls receive (piano, language learning and consciousness of one's appearance) are given with the sole aim of attracting a husband and being able to serve him as an interesting decoration in his drawing-room¹⁷. In these circumstances, how can we expect a woman to distinguish herself by her intelligence and open-mindedness, when everything is done since her childhood to pervert her heart and stifle her gifts?

This point once established, Orzeszkowa and Světlá both argue that better education for women is a matter of great urgency, especially in times when domestic work loses its value as a result of important socio-economic changes. The number of single women and widows who become a burden to their families, or are on the road to ruin, is increasing, according to the two authors. Education could allow them to provide for their own needs. But education would also be of benefit to mothers and wives. On the one hand, it would increase the number of successful marriages: a woman who is able to think independently would also be better able to choose her husband, and rather than hinder him in his initiatives because of her lack of knowledge, she would be able to support and advise him in many areas¹⁸. On the other hand, education would also allow women to be better prepared for their role as mothers. Here, both Světlá and Orzeszkowa do not mince words when they claim that the high rate of infant mortality is largely due to the inexperience of mothers¹⁹.

The conclusions are clear: if emancipation is synonymous with the accessibility of women to education and work, it has absolutely nothing immoral about it but is on the contrary essential to family peace and dignity,

¹⁷ Cf. K. Světlá, *O vychování ženy*, p. 56, and E. Orzeszkowa, *Kilka słów o kobietach*, pp. 509-528.

¹⁸ Cf. K. Světlá, *O vychování ženy*, p. 58, and E. Orzeszkowa, *Kilka słów o kobietach*, p. 592.

¹⁹ Cf. K. Světlá, *O vychování ženy*, p. 50, and E. Orzeszkowa, *Kilka słów o kobietach*, p. 511.

national peace and dignity, and human peace and dignity. Here again, we notice that nothing happens exactly as in the West: whereas in Western Europe, women's emancipation movements were from their inception independent movements, Czech and Polish women's movements were closely linked to national programmes.

Let us add that Orzeszkowa's and Světlá's arguments for the urgency of educating women and allowing them access to a profession, also find expression in some of their literary works. Both are representative of a specific genre, the so-called "thesis novel" (*powieść tendencyjna* in Polish, *tendenční povídka* in Czech), which presupposes that art has to educate and teach, to point out what needs to be improved. This is the case for example of *Marta* (1873) by Orzeszkowa, and of *The Rich Bride* (*Bohatá nevěsta*) by Světlá, stories which both demonstrate the tragic consequences of women's lack of education on family and national life.

Identifying the national and feminist components of Světlá and Orzeszkowa's work does not exhaust the specific contributions of these two women writers. To reinforce their points of views on the nation and on the right of women to education and professional independence for the good of the nation, both authors regularly turn to the neighbouring nation and present it as an example and a model to follow. Světlá does this in particular in a text devoted to the Polish uprising of 1863. This story was written at the request of her friend Vítězslav Hálek, who was strongly moved by the events unfolding in Poland and wanted to include in his newspaper *Lumír* a text expressing Czech sympathy towards the Polish insurrection. Světlá, very well informed about the events thanks to her brother-in-law who had recently returned from Poland, wrote the story *A few days in the life of a Prague dandy* (*Několik dní z života pražského hejska*, 1863) in less than a week.²⁰ In this story, Odolan, a dandy who treats women as objects of pleasure and who is deprived of any patriotic feeling (he feels German because he was educated in German) is sent by his father to Poland to see what is going on there. The antipathy of Odolan towards the Poles is initially very strong: he accuses them of being Don Quixotes, seeking adventure and making trouble for no reason, and even holds Polish women re-

²⁰ Cf. K. Světlá, *Několik dní z života pražského hejska*, in: *Časové ohlasy*, Praha 1958, pp. 145–163.

sponsible for the insurrection. However, during his trip, he is constantly amazed: the women he meets on the road do not respond to his advances and cannot speak of anything else but the plight of their homeland. The climax of the story is a meeting, on a devastated battlefield, between Odolan and a wounded soldier who happens to be a woman, Jadwiga. Odolan feels compassion and wants to encourage her by telling that her youth will prevent her from dying. The woman reacts in way which for him is entirely unexpected:

Tell me, what is nobler than to die for one's nation, holding the national flag in one's hands and defending it with one's own blood (...)? A Polish man would never have said to a Polish woman what you just said to me. A Polish man knows that for a Polish woman, homeland is more important than the pleasures of love, than family happiness, than the charm of beauty, than personal life. He wouldn't pity her, but rather envy her.

When she learns that her interlocutor is Czech, Jadwiga is pleasantly surprised and exclaims: "Czechs are the closest brothers of Poles!"²¹. There follows a long discussion where she sings the praises of the Czech forefathers who sacrificed everything for their patriotic convictions, and persuades the dandy to be proud of his nation as she is of hers. She finally asks him about the role played by women in his society and refuses to believe him when he says that Czech women are mostly confined to the home. Just before dying, she expounds her views on women: a woman has to be a true partner of man in public life and participate fully in the progress of her nation and of mankind in general.

Světla's response to Hálek's request is, as we can see, very personal. While illustrating Polish patriotism in general, this story focuses above all on Polish women's patriotism. Historic examples of Polish women combatants (such as Emilia Plater and Anna Henryka Pustowójtówna) probably inspired her in her creation of the figure of the Polish Jadwiga; but critics²²

²¹ K. Světlá, *Několik dní z života pražského hejska*, p. 158: "Rcete, čeho slavnějšího se mohu dožiti než smrti za vlast, držíc prapor v ruce, jehož jsem krví svou uhájila (...). Nikdy by nemluvil Polák k Polce, jak to činil pán. Polák ví, že jí jde vlast nad blaho lásky, nad štěstí rodinné, nad kouzlo krásy, nad vlastní život, a nelitoval by jí, nýbrž by jí záviděl", and "Čech – toť nejbližší bratr Polákův".

²² Cf. K. Kardyni-Pelikánová, *Kontakty literackie polsko-czeskie w dobie powstania styczniowego*, Wrocław 1975, p. 123.

have also identified the role played by the memory of a Polish friend of her youth, Honorata z Wiśniowskich Zapova, who had died in Prague a few years before: Honorata was not only the niece of a famous conspirator who took part in the troubles in Galicia in 1846 but was herself a very passionate Polish patriot and through her example managed to arouse Czech patriotic feelings in many hearts. *A few days in the life of a Prague dandy* is clearly a thesis novel whose message is obvious: Jadwiga the Polish woman is to show Czech people the way (like her compatriot Honorata) – first by making them understand that progress goes hand in hand with national consciousness, labour and sacrifice, and secondly, by calling Czech women to wake up, because they have a role to play in this undertaking.

Orzeszkowa, for her part, did not produce any stories featuring Czech heroes. She devotes, however, a whole paragraph to the Czech nation in a theoretical text entitled *Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism* (1880), and from the patriotic point of view, presents the Czech people as a model. The Germans have colonized the Czechs for centuries, she claims, and as a consequence, the Czech language had almost disappeared by the early nineteenth century. However, it needed only a few eloquent and energetic individuals (Rieger, Palacký) to reawaken the Czech people to a sense of their own identity²³.

But the place where Orzeszkowa voices most clearly her opinion on the Czech nation is in her correspondence with Czech intellectuals. In fact, she does not miss an opportunity to praise and express her admiration for the neighbouring people. Thus we read the following: “I welcome everything that comes from the Czechs” (to Jelínek, 1882); “I love and hold in high esteem the Czech nation, and today more than before, I feel bound to it by ties of gratitude and friendship” (to Jelinek, 1892); “I appreciate this nation for its social and civic virtues, I love it for its sufferings similar to those of my country” (to Kredba, 1906)²⁴. Her letters to Czech women are maybe the most revealing. After having read Krásnohorská’s essay on Czech women to be published in *The Women Question in Europe* by Theodore Stanton, Orzeszkowa confesses to her Czech correspondent in 1882:

²³ Cf. E. Orzeszkowa, *Patriotyzm i kosmopolityzm*, in: *Publicystyka społeczna*, pp. 149–150.

²⁴ These quotations are taken from Orzeszkowa’s letters to Czech intellectuals published in J. Slizinski, *E. Orzeszkowa i G. Zapolska a Czesi*, “Przegląd Zachodni” t. 3, 1975.

I would have fallen in love with Czech women even if I didn't already love the Czech people as a whole for a long time for their bravery, perseverance, political judgment, for the freedom of their philosophical thought, and especially for their democratic virtues (...). We Poles also have national qualities. But we lack some very beneficial properties that you possess. That's why in my modest work, I often use you as an example for my own nation; that's why I wish for my homeland a closer and sounder alliance with you.

The letter continues as though with undertones directly borrowed from Kollár; Orzeszkowa confides to Krásnohorská her dream to see the two sister nations living and working together one day for a better mankind: "Your nation and mine will stand side by side, hand in hand, free, happy, united by the same strength to work for knowledge and to prevent the return of darkness. Do you have sometimes such dreams?"²⁵. Her letter *To Czech Women*, written to thank the Czech women's associations for their words of congratulation on the occasion of her 25th years of literary activity, is written in exactly the same vein, with the difference this time that it focuses only on the qualities of Czech females. Orzeszkowa indeed held in high esteem the spirit of association that prevailed among Czech women at that time and hoped they soon could serve as an example to Polish women, because "associations are the best way to go forward on the road of progress". The letter finishes with similar undertones to the earlier one: calling upon the racial kinship of the two nations and their common historical memories, she appeals: "Let's love one another!"²⁶.

²⁵ This letter is published in J. Slizinski, *Materiały: kontakty literacko-artystyczne czesko-polskie*, pp. 189–190: "Zakochałabym się w kobiecie czeskiej, gdyby nie to, że od dawna już kocham cały naród Wasz za dzielność jego i wytrwałość, za rozum polityczny jego i wolnomysłność filozoficzną, nade wszystko za to demokratyczne jego cnoty (...). My Polacy mamy także narodowe zalety nasze. Ale niektórych właściwości Waszych bardzo zbawiennych niedostaje nam wcale; dlatego w ubogich pismach moich stawiam Was często za przykład narodowi memu; dlatego pragnę dla mojej ojczyzny najściślejszego z Wami i najgruntowniejszego przymierza", and "Twój i mój naród stać będą obok siebie, ręka w rękę, wolne, szczęśliwe, razem zjednoczonymi siłami pracując dla światła, broniące się od powrotu ciemności. Czy marzysz tak kiedy?"

²⁶ Cf. E. Orzeszkowa, "Do Pań Czeskich" (11.01.1892). A hand copy of this letter (re-written by Orzeszkowa's secretary) can be found in the Library LMAB in Vilnius, signature F 29 LRK 328, k. 3-9. I'm very grateful to Iwona Wiśniewska, author of the *Kalendarium życia i twórczości Elizy Orzeszkowej* (2008), for having provided me access to this letter.

Thus Orzeszkowa and Světlá resort to an identical device: they recognize that both nations have common concerns and issues, but at the same time, they very skilfully pinpoint their different ways of coping with them. Their praise of the neighbour is not vague, but aimed at very specific ways of being that are precisely lacking in their own nations. Hence their common dream of collaboration between the two nations, which would allow the weaknesses of both to be remedied.

This ability to identify in the sister nation what is missing in their own is most likely inspired by the literary movements of which the two women are representatives. Světlá belongs to the *májovci*²⁷ (*May School*), Orzeszkowa to the *pozytywiści* (*Positivists*), two movements that could be called realistic movements, because while they maintain the ideal of national freedom, they have been mostly purged of the chimerical dreams and intense lyricism of Romanticism. National freedom is now seen to be attainable only by means of the work and commitment of everybody – both rich and poor, women and men. The idea of *praca u podstaw* (work at the grassroots) and *praca organiczna* (organic work) become the watchwords of the Polish Positivists, this being also the programme for action of the Czech *májovci*.

If the aims of the two movements are very similar, it is interesting to note that each movement seems to value elements that are precisely characteristic of the neighbouring nation. The *májovci* emphasize the need for action: admiring, as Světlá does, the heroism of Poles who fight, fits perfectly into this programme, and here we can see how certain heroines of Světlá choose to struggle against social prejudices by sacrificing themselves rather than by giving up. The Positivists, meanwhile, stressed the need to focus on social and material progress and to stop cultivating the spirit of revolt, in contrast to the Polish Romantics: here Orzeszkowa's example of the democratic culture of the Czechs as well as their ability to set up associations and resist foreign (German) culture while knowing how to make compromises, is also consistent with this principle. Understood in this perspective, it is not surprising that by describing her heroines as vic-

²⁷ The name denotes a group of writers (Neruda, Arbes, Světlá, Hálek, Heyduk, etc.) whose first organ of expression was *Máj*, an almanac (1858–1862) whose title referred to the famous poem by Mácha.

tims gripped by fatality, Orzeszkowa also puts her finger on what needs to be improved in contemporary society.

I believe these few considerations may help us to better understand the extraordinary success of these two women in the neighbouring nations. The similar aims and endeavours of the two women writers are numerous: in the final decades of the nineteenth century, they occupy in the literature of their respective societies a very similar place and significance in relation to their patriotic commitment and contribution to women's issues. Their way of addressing these issues is also very similar: without offending or blaming men, whose minds they tried to put at ease by clearly differentiating their claims from those of the so-called "pseudo-emancipated" or "emancipistky", they were able to show that national emancipation cannot be an isolated claim, but necessarily involves the emancipation of women, particularly through education. For Světlá and Orzeszkowa, woman is not an angel or a doll, but a female human being who works hard for a better world. In order to ensure that their arguments are correctly understood, they do not hesitate to illustrate them by appealing to a very specific literary genre, in vogue at that time: the thesis novel. In light of these similarities, it is not surprising that the work of the two women, recognized by their compatriots as debating current issues, also found a particular resonance in the neighbouring nation concerned with similar problems.

But their reception, it is true, would not have been as resounding if it had not been for the attitudes of the two women writers themselves. They straightaway showed understanding and admiration for the sufferings and virtues of their respective neighbours. Fierce patriots, they nevertheless paid attention to the deficiencies and imperfections of their own national characters and sought to improve them by following certain inspirational behavioural patterns adopted by the neighbouring nation. Thus Orzeszkowa suggested to her compatriots to take a page out of the book of Czech democratic virtues, while Světlá promoted the combative heroism of the Poles as an example to follow. Their conviction that the neighbouring nation could contribute to the advancement of their own nation was so strong they nurtured dreams of a close collaboration between the two nations, and even of a common future. The sister nation could only be flattered by such expressions of interest and enthusiasm.

As a result, if the work of Orzeszkowa was of fundamental importance for the Polish national and feminist movements, then it was also important

for the Czech national and feminist movements, while the same could be said of Světlá. There is no doubt that the duo Orzeszkowa-Světlá, whether consciously or unconsciously, interpreted two voices singing from the same score, and that this score, played and appreciated in both Polish and Czech society, contributed to strengthening a sense of a Czech-Polish literary solidarity, while giving it a specifically female tone.

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