

István VÖRÖS
Budapešť

The Spectres of Mácha or Multilingualism as a Literary Canon

For Tibor Žilka

This essay is written for those who sometimes consider it their duty to be embarrassed.¹ Embarrassment, ignorance and doubt are very important elements of understanding – they complement self-confidence and knowledge; like salt to flour, they are added ingredients, to make the dough tasty. The understanding that is reached in this way is, if we are to believe our own simile, tasty, enjoyable. It is enjoyment itself.

Are we being picky about our readers? Not at all, only about our addressees; as if this were an open letter. We are addressing those who would like perhaps to shift the coordinates of academic thinking about literature, or at least to find new supporting pillars for them. Or even, perhaps, our experiment intends to tempt our readers to a more fundamental reconsideration. And the means of temptation will be enjoyment itself, intellectual enjoyment – at least as hoped by this narrator.

Ever since the beginning of the 19th century, we have been living in the paradigm of monolingualism. The nation lives through its language, as many have claimed², and this implies monolingualism. Yet this is far from being self-evident. I do not claim that before the birth

¹ As Jacques Derrida says in *Monolingualism of the Other*, trans. Patrick Mensah. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998.

² „Nejtesnější spojení pojmu národnosti s jazykem, vyjádřené lakonickým Jungmannovým »V jazyku naše národnost« nutně položilo krajní důraz na jazykovou stránku” (Macura 1995, p. 61). (Jungmann’s laconic statement which draws a very tight connection between national self-identity and language, claiming that ‘our nationality lies in language’, puts extreme emphasis on the linguistic aspect.)

of 19th-century nationalism people, or even the majority of people, were plurilingual. But the construction of society and the world was plurilingual. Or is it simply that, because of the lack of mobility, all the monolingualisms in their cheek-by-jowel existence gave the impression of plurilingual worlds?

Presently we are living in a monolingual cultural-historical paradigm³; we talk about the history of Czech literature, the history of Hungarian literature, yet these expressions are hardly self-evident and can be maintained only as working hypotheses. Why do we consider Anonymus or Janus Pannonius, both writing in Latin, as part of Hungarian literature, or why do we consider Kosmas’s chronicle, also written in Latin, as part of Czech literature? Why is István Széchenyi’s *Diary* part of Hungarian culture or why are Franz Kafka’s works part of Czech culture? Is Ján Kollár’s poetry, written in Czech, part of Czech or Slovak literature; do Pavol Országh Hviezdoslav’s poems, written in Hungarian, form part of Hungarian or Slovak culture?

Could it be that the national paradigm of literature that has become familiar to us in the last 150–200 years has become outdated? Or perhaps it would be better to leave aside the question of time, as it is hard to say what time has (and has not) passed by. However, with some embarrassment (in the Derridean sense) we may venture the thought that family trees simplifying literary influence to one single language and culture are inadequate for the understanding of great works.

At this historical point, it seems that in our region, one of the most important challenges of the 21st century is the reevaluation of our self-image. Which should not necessarily mean the renouncement of our former values – but rather their supplementation with new ones. However, we cannot maintain a European consciousness if we remain within the paradigm of monolingualism. Renouncing our provincialism will perhaps be the impetus that is needed to push Europe into

³ „One can, of course, speak several languages. There are speakers who are competent in more than one language. [...] But do they not always do it with a view to an absolute idiom?” (Derrida 1998, p. 67).

a new direction, into a necessary detour from that seemingly inescapable path leading towards provincialism. In order to prepare for a different future, from the standpoint of the present, a new understanding of the already understood past must be acquired.

The discovery and acceptance of, as well as the reflection on the oeuvre of Karel Hynek Mácha proved an extremely hard task for Czech literary historians and scholars. Initially, professionals and amateurs alike had to struggle with a broad current of rejection and misunderstanding; then a Mácha cult burst forth in a proliferation of interpretations, to such an extent that even future generations could be subject to its burden. However, as far as I can see, this is not the case. Mácha's poetry is a paradigmatic question for Czech literary history and self-understanding, with arguments both for and against. The oeuvre itself has been transformed as a consequence of its becoming paradigmatic. As Josef Jedlička has pointed out, this process has made this highly variegated poetry, which stems from several sources, more Czech: 'Again, it was our patriotism that made us locate the narrative of *May* at a fish pond in northern Bohemia, even though the location is undoubtedly a pond in Italy.'⁴

Mácha advanced the process of Czech literature precisely by cutting it off from its freshly acquired provincialism – even though this provincialism was its essence. Is this too high a price for the survival of a nation? Is the cost of provincialism really worth national existence? And does this necessarily entail a verdict? If Eastern European nations have chosen survival by locking themselves up in language, have they doomed themselves necessarily and forever to provincialism? These questions were raised in 1967 by Milan Kundera in his keynote address to the congress of the Czechoslovak Writers' Union.⁵

⁴ „Jen právě zase naše vlastenectví nás přimělo k tomu, abychom děj Máje situovali k doksánskému rybníku, když je přece nade vši pochybnost zřejmé [...], že scenerií Máje je italské jezero“ (Jedlička 1992. 24. o.).

⁵ *IV. sjezd Svazu československých spisovatelů*. Československý spisovatel, Praha 1968, pp. 22–28.

His answer to this question in this instance was negative. This doom is not inevitable, nor is it forever; ways can be sought leading out of provincialism. However, Kundera gave a different answer to this question through his own life. When he started writing essays in French in the 80s, and when after *Immortality* he stopped writing even novels in Czech, he espoused the cause of multilingualism and of a European-ness which involves multiple identities.

However, it is not certain that Mácha's decision to write poems in Czech rather than German is the opposite of Kundera's. These two decisions are only opposed from the perspective of the Czech language. From the point of view of the authors they indicate, in both cases, a shifting into multi-traditionalism, or an affirmation or confirmation of their place there. An artistic advance, or at least an expansion of horizons which makes this advance possible.⁶ All the more so as this decision means freedom for both of them – linguistic, artistic freedom and freedom of thought. It is not the Czech question that Kundera wants to leave behind; he poses this question very ardently in his works written in French. The Czech question, of course, is not one question, but several questions at once, with the first accurately posed question necessarily evoking the next. We tread the same path, because for a Hungarian Bohemist the Czech question inevitably opens the Hungarian question, and if we take both together, that is already a European question.

On the other hand, Mácha's choice is not merely a shift from the language of a greater culture to that of a smaller one, since at that time German was considered the language of oppression at least as much as it was considered a lingua franca. It was already beginning to super-

⁶ „Mácha *básnil* česky, protože v češtině objevil řeč, která má *moc* vyslovit *dosud* nevyslovené, pojmenovat dosud nepojmenované, vynést na světlo *dosud* skryté“ (Kosík 1997, p. 84). [Mácha wrote poetry in Czech because in Czech he found the language that has the *power* to tell what has not been told *so far*, to name what has not been named so far, to bring to light that which has been hidden *so far*.]

sede Latin⁷, a development that was part of the same linguistic awakening that brought the Czech language into play. It was not as a language of multilingualism that German began to stir; it attempted to introduce its own monolingualism, and moreover, with support from the authorities of the state; that is why it was unable to take over the role of Latin as a second language in the process of Czech national awakening.

For Mácha, the question of language appears as a question of freedom, or rather – and this is already the aesthetic side of the issue – freedom appears as a question of language. There is no greater freedom for a writer than to be able to choose his or her language.⁸ One could object that it is not the proper sense of freedom if there is only the choice of two alternatives. Yet this is the basic formula of choice. The quality of a choice is not enhanced in proportion to the range of possibilities: there are either so many that it is impossible to decide, or the question can basically be reduced to yes and no. For many people freedom means that the master builder has the right to undermine the building that he had erected and the fish has the right to swim out to the shore from the water. Those who think like that regard necessity as constraint; order as deprivation. In this case even the fact of life is offensively fatal, a state that is equal to captivity and that clashes with that person's need to *choose*. Yet it is inherent in the nature of choice that it does not take place in a vacuum. One can only choose between

⁷ "Ústup latiny před němčinou ve vědeckých spisech možno pozorovat na spisovné řeči nejstarší generace buditelské" (Jakubec 1934, p. 136). [The retreat of Latin in the face of German within scholarly treatises can be observed in the literary discursion of the earliest generation of Czech "national awakeners".]

⁸ But this freedom was not evident always and everywhere. Mácha is the poet of freedom in the same way as his Hungarian contemporary Sándor Petőfi, born a bit later, and what they both successfully achieve is exactly what a third contemporary does not: "And who knows how many works remained only potentially written by Prešeren, because they could only have been written in German, despite his linguistic and poetic innovations" (Fried 1989, p. 47).

alternatives.⁹ Of course, the alternatives facing a nation are not completely identical with the alternatives facing an individual, yet there must be some connection between the two. As for our region, this process can be described as follows:

[...] we usually distinguish two great stages of forming a nation from an ethnic group. [...] The stage of cultural self-organization usually coincides with the initial phase of economic modernization, and it strongly correlates with the conflict of interests between the local elite and the foreign power or between the local elites (Romsics 2004, p. 13).

These oppositional circles and struggles of the elite are outside the horizon of Mácha's choice; at most, they provide a backdrop for it. His choice is cultural, and it fits in with several other choices he makes. He chooses the Czech language, and with it freedom, and with freedom he chooses cultural attention with a European horizon, made possible by his knowledge of German. He read Byron in German translation, as confirmed by the copies of Byron's texts that have survived in his own handwriting (*Dodatky k literárním zápiskům*), and we can read in his collected works, in a somewhat Borgesian fashion: *Stellen aus Byrons Korsar* (Mácha 1986, pp. 312–313). And it is part of the overall picture that Mácha's choice of Czech does not end at the horizon of this language and culture in the making, but, as for many of his contemporaries, Slavic mutuality is very important for him – he learns Polish; in his notebook (*Zápisník*) he quotes Adam Mickiewicz in the original (Mácha 1986, pp. 295–296), he shows an interest in Slovenian language and literature and during his travels he meets France Prešeren in Ljubljana (see Jakubec 1934, p. 778).

In the hindsight of the 21st century it is not enough to point out that choosing the Czech language was the right decision; we also have to notice that the act of choosing itself was right. We can delight not only in the high level of the Czech he uses, but also in the possibility of choice. Mácha is the poet of alternatives in a milieu which raises the land-

⁹ Andrei Plesu: *Minima Moralia*.

marks of national identity in the delusory originality of forged manuscripts¹⁰ – in nonexistent things that convulsively are claimed to exist. So perhaps we should then talk about the spectre rather than the spirit of Czech national awakening?

The specter is a paradoxical incorporation. [...] *It is* something that one does not know, precisely, and one does not know if precisely it *is*, if it exists, if it responds to a name and corresponds to an essence. One does not know; not out of ignorance, but because this non-object, this non-present present, this being-there of an absent or departed one no longer belongs to knowledge. At least no longer to that which one thinks one knows by the name of knowledge (Derrida 1994, p. 6).

Literary self-understanding in the era of nascent nationalism was indeed spectral in this sense; it had to make its accommodations with the spectre of a resurrecting spirituality as a literary and cultural background. 'For lack of a literary language Central and Eastern European enlightenment could only produce a 'pre-literature' – works of inestimable value from the point of view of cultural history, the history of ideas or the society of the nation, but which exist in a stage of 'pre-literariness', if by literature we mean readings that continue to give us 'aesthetic pleasure' (Bojtár 1986, p. 76). To be precise, these spectres are not the after-images of something that no longer exists, but rather the pre-images of something that has hardly come into existence. Thus Mácha's wildly romantic spectral world is not so much the adaptation of the style of an age to the Czech language; in a spiritual sense it is very much a realism. As Hrabal would say, total realism, though it is perhaps less anachronistic (less spectre-like) if we stick to our previous expression, or even elevate it to the rank of a technical term: very-

¹⁰ "Mýtus neříká ani pravdu ani lež. Obecně řečeno je to vyprávění, kterým mýtovůrce vyjadřuje aktivní vztah ke společnosti, jejímž je členem, či za jejíhož člena se považuje" (Pynsent 1996. 67. o.). [Myth neither tells the truth nor lies. Generally stated, it is a tale whereby the myth-spinner expresses an active relationship to the society to which he belongs, or to which he regards himself as belonging.] Míndezt Pynsent a 19. század eleji cseh nemzeti mitológia létrehozásáról mondja.

much-realism. Of course, we do not mean to use this concept as an all-purpose tool, in the interest of avoiding a reductive interpretation of the concept of realism. What we call realism in this context is when the structure of the represented world and the method of representation show a similarity, are of one substance with each other. In other words the scanning of deep layers: we could call this method of examining reality 'ultrasonic realism' or, to push our image further and return it to Mácha, 'bat realism', since in nature it is bats who use ultrasound for orientation. And in the dark, for that matter. So if we want to find our way in situations of obscurity, we always have to use ultrasonic realism to determine our bearings in the unclear sections of reality. Thus, what later on seems characteristic for a whole age may at first sight or at first hearing appear impossible to understand, because it does not show what is visible but what lurks behind the visible. For European literature, Mácha may be one of the most significant figures of Romanticism, but within the Czech context he is the most typical (and perhaps the only?) example of bat realism – the ultrasonic signaling that allowed him to find his way in an age that was haunted, in the spiritual sense. And thus we can also understand the naive opposition of his contemporaries who wanted to expel the bat from the hall of literature, reserved for much more elevated¹¹ and noble beasts. The spirits and spectres acknowledged by Mácha as such had a brutal effect in an intellectual milieu which cherished spectres and yet did not treat them as such. Derrida calls this dilemma the *visor effect*, meaning that 'we do not see who looks at us' (Derrida 1995, p. 7). In this sense, is it perhaps after all Mácha who is really the spectre of the age? Does he see the others while they do not see him?

Mácha's greatness lies in the fact that he dared to be brave and strong even in desperation: he did not close his eyes before such contrasts as those between the world and the inner world, life and desire, reality and the ideal; he did not make them artifi-

¹¹ "...dobová obraznost [...] stává svět idejí „nad“ svět reálný" (Macura 1995, pp. 102–103. o.). [...the imagination of the age.... places the world of ideality "above" the real world".]

cially smaller, did not try to tint with pink what was black, did not fill the abysses with fog and haze, did not delude himself with illusions and did not delude others.¹²

And the reason why he did not need such things was precisely that he could and dared to see where his contemporaries did not notice anything or indulged in the beauty of their lies.

But the question still remains if we ourselves are not lost behind the spectres of our explanations and ideas, if we can see the actual work itself. Is it really like that? Haven't we, like so many before us, got ourselves entangled in a spiral of interpretation that only chases itself around and around? The same dilemma is formulated and answered by Stanley Fish as follows:

By asserting, as I did at the close of my last lecture, that interpretation is the only game in town, I may have seemed only to confirm the fears of those who argue for the necessity of determinate meaning: for, one might say, if interpretation covers the field, there is nothing to constrain its activities [...]. The mistake is to think of interpretation as an activity in need of constraints, when in fact interpretation is a *structure* of constraints (Fish 1980, p. 356).

But what are these restrictions? There are several, and they necessarily emerge in the course of interpretation. What is important at this juncture is to ask precise questions, which are essential in literary investigations, but – unlike in philosophy – no less essential than the ability to give answers that are almost as precise. There may be some room for uncertainty – but there is no alternative for those who answer the wrong question. Our intention here is not to analyse Mácha's oeuvre, or at least not on the level of textual interpretation (since he is in any event the most interpreted figure of Czech literature, and these interpretations will continue to proliferate on the 200th anniversary of his birth, the spiral will be unstoppable even without us) – but to put him into context. Or rather to free him from a context so that his

¹² "Velikostí Máchovou jest a bude jíž, že byl statečný a silný i v zoufalství: nezavíral očí před rozpory nitra a světa, života a touhy, skutečnosti a ideálu; neumenšoval jich umělé, nebarvil na růžovo, co bylo černé; nevyplňoval parami a mlhami propastí; neklamal sebe a neklamal ani druhých" (Šalda 1947, p. 44).

figures should not roam about like spectres in literary history, in the readers' conscience, in the space of interpretations; so that we should see his imprecisely known face neither as an idealized fairy-tale character nor as a monster.

Are we right when we denounce his age as an intellectually rigid one? No, we are not. We would certainly be wrong to summarize all the previous reflections with this phrase. The age was notably flexible, and Mácha's spectre-like choice of language is not at all a unique gesture, yet the flexibility of the age has a different direction from Mácha's. 'We play a piano that may not yet even have its strings,'¹³ Jan Kollár writes. There is an essay of a few pages in Kafka's diary in which he analyses the beauty and misery of small Eastern European literatures on the basis of his knowledge of Yiddish literature in Poland and especially of Czech literature. It is also apt for the Czech literature of the beginning of the 19th century; moreover, one often feels that it describes the convulsions of modern Hungarian literary development as well:

The creative and beneficent force exerted in these directions by a literature poor in its component parts¹⁴ proves especially effective when it begins to create a literary history out of the records of its dead writers. These writers' undeniable influence, past and present, becomes so matter of fact that it can take the place of their writings. [...] Everything is done very honestly, only within a bias that is never resolved, that refuses to countenance any weariness, and is spread for miles around when a skilful hand is

¹³ "Hráme klavír, jenž snad strun v sobě ještě nemá" (Kollár 1952, p. 351).

¹⁴ Perhaps Kafka is being too summary here. Contemporary Czech literature was not bad, and I definitely do not think that this judgment is true for modern Hungarian literature. So why do I quote it? Because it is impossible to omit from this train of thought, which after all has a certain characterizing force. Indeed, this statement is probably true for the literature of Mácha's age. What they achieved then was marvellous, and the great Czech literature after Kafka is unimaginable without it, yet the Czech literature of the first half of the 19th century as a whole is not so great. And perhaps it is not unreasonable to make this claim for other ages as well. So after all, should we ask the question whether the Czech literature of the beginning of the 20th century is good? The debate is not about whether there are good works, but whether there is a unified literature. Which is possible only if the existence of the nation does

lifted up. But in the end bias interferes not only with a broad view but with a close insight as well – so that all these observations are cancelled out. Since people lack a sense of context, their literary activities are out of context too. They depreciate something in order to be able to look down upon it from above, or they praise it to the skies in order to have a place up there beside it. (Wrong.) (Kafka 1988; Diary entry December 25, 1911).

For all the injustice, this text is just; for all its strictness, it is exact; for all the exaggerations, it is moderate; for all the generalizations, it is particular. We can recognize ourselves in it, if we are brave enough. Because the real spectre that Mácha let loose is not one of the spectres roaming in his works, and neither is it himself, as one of the most important spectres these works have to offer¹⁵, but rather the spectre of our own literature as the spectre of something evil; the idea that the history of Czech or Hungarian literature is not an unambiguous suc-

not depend on it. In the 19th century the question was whether literature is capable of sustaining language and literature like some seed-leaf. The answer was positive then. In that particular constellation this literature was not only good; it was far above the average. But this constellation was one within the nation – not literature, but politics. It was this literary historical situation that Mácha haunted. And they were scared accordingly. But today there is no reason to be afraid of Mácha. Yet the problem is that if we wake ourselves up from this fear, then we might eradicate devotion for his poetry together with the cult. So let's say: Today it would be good to be afraid of Mácha. It would be good to be afraid only of him. It would be good to be afraid of him again.

¹⁵ "Vidiš-li poutníka, an dlouhou lučinou | spěchá ku cíli, než červánky pohy- nou? | Tohoto poutníka již zrak neuzří tvůj, | jak zajde za onou v obzoru sklaninou" (Karel Hynek Mácha: *May*). In English translation, by Edith Pargeter: "See you the pilgrim there, hastening on his quest | Through the long, sunset fields, beneath the dimming west? | Strain your eyes as you will, the end you cannot see, | As over the edge of vision he falters and finds no rest." (<http://www.lupomesky.cz/maj/may.html>). These four lines are from the fourth part of *May*. In fact, the poet changes the genre of his work in this part and transforms it into a giant lyric poem, a confession summing up the whole of existence. It turns out that basically what we were reading is not an epic poem, but a poem of astonishing range in which he depicts the nightmares of his own fate in an exciting series of visions. The previous parts in fact set out one great simile about the lyrical I who appears in the fourth part, creating perhaps the longest poetic simile ever.

cess story; that in these literatures there is not so much spirit as there is spectre. We should not take fright at this expression. It is not at all our aim to revile either Czech or Hungarian literature as is now the fashion; to impose a scornful global critique on it. We should define its form of existence more precisely, so that our self-understanding should be more precise, and our tasks clearer. If we are aware that even in this moment as we are writing we are locked in the body of a spectre and we are feeding this spectre, this is a good starting point. We must make world literature haunted.

Let us add that this necessity was recognized by the literature around and preceding Mácha. The making of the national language was a European act, but its adoption was provincial. The making of the national literature was a European act, but its cultivation provincial. The introduction of the iambic verse based on word stress was a European act, but relinquishing the metrical verse was provincial.¹⁶ In any case, Mácha did not simply switch over to the Czech language, but rather to a Czech language placed inside a conscious poetic space by Dobrovský. Could we imagine *May*, for instance, in metric verse? Could a poet of Mácha's stature choose the Czech language if the iambic shift had not been already made? Not because that decision was absolutely right – it was made absolutely right by the first great works that were sounded in this new poetic language; that is, some sonnets by Kollár and, as a matter of fact, by Mácha's poetry. It is not the decision that is right, but the act of the decision: that this language now belongs among consciously cultivated languages not only in its vocabulary and its grammar, but in its prosody as well. This results in the clear sound of the Czech language, because some kind of filter

¹⁶ "První revoluci je přirozeně obrat Dobrovského a puchmajerovců k přízvuk- nému verši. [...] Nikdy – snad výjimkou surrealistů – nebyli básníci tak ochotní řídit se pokynem autoritativního odborníka jako při výkonu této revoluce" (Červenka 2006, pp. 283–284). [The first revolution was of course the turn of Dobrovský and the Puchmajerists towards stress-based versification. Poets – perhaps with the exception of the Surrealists – were never so willing to follow the advice of an authority as in this revolution.]

emerges; by virtue of the conscious shaping, the language itself starts to sound like a poem. In Mácha's poetry, the Czech language has a new sound. When I referred above to the absurdity of *May* in metre, I did not mean to horrify, only to evoke a lost, but less clear sound. The more important of Mácha's choices is not the one between German and Czech, but the one between filtered and unfiltered Czech. The first, more spectacular one would be impossible without this second, more obscured choice. Only alternatives can make other alternatives possible. Choice is only possible as part of a series of choices, that is, in an insecure existential situation. And let us add that only such existential situations are real. One can only choose in an existential situation. There are no secure situations. And if there are, there are no choices involved.

The Czech language cannot be the property of someone. But it *can* be the property of something. It cannot be Mácha's, but it can be that of Dobrovský's choice. It cannot be the poet's, but it *can* be that of the poem born in the chosen language. Mácha chose one of the potential prosodies of the Czech language for himself, but not on the basis of his own decision. He cannot choose a language, but he can choose a sound, even though it may seem that he chooses a language as well, yet it is from our own language that we are the most separated, but the poem does not know this abyss. Or rather, it does know it, but it is no obstacle for it. For it is perhaps born in that abyss. Mácha's poetry certainly is.

It is not merely bilingualism that Mácha grasps, but a new, non-metric sound for the Czech language. He stands in several traditions and several languages at the same time, but it is a less assertive, less grotesque prosody, made more modern and European, that makes this choice possible. We could say that real multilingualism is only possible between languages that are each other's equals. Of course, two languages are never equal; they always picture the totality of the world. The question is whether these two worlds are identical in essence. If someone divides himself or herself between languages that do not have identical worlds, then this division may lead to an unavoidable

split or breach. If they divide themselves between languages that have identical worlds, then the two languages tend to strengthen each other in experiencing and creating the unity of the world. Mácha opts for Romanticism, not only in his images and compositions but first and foremost in his prosody. Without this sound, his poetry would be impossible. It is not a simple imitation of a model, because his most important model is not Byron, but European forms of verse. Not that there is no potential in the Czech language for metric poetry – at least it seems so for an outsider – but this is a matter of a later choice, and not at all a retreat to the linguistic, prosodic and poetic world before Mácha and Dobrovský. A new decision making it possible to choose Europeanness not simply as a set package tied up with the national language, but neither against it, at last¹⁷. Mácha's and Dobrovský's decision is basically a linguistic turn, which changed the competences of the Czech language – the intellectual space at its disposal. It put forth the possibility to manoeuvre into the space of another language and another literature besides our non-chosen (in other words, mother) language – by choice, by inheritance, by learning or by forgetting.¹⁸ If one cannot move around in a (mother) language completely at ease, then one cannot be a complete stranger in the space of another language either, and if we move around in two such spaces, then languages and literatures allow us to experience the role of the one who remains at home and of the one who emigrates; of the immigrant and of the one who wants to exclude others; of the host and the self-hater;

¹⁷ "...the past (tradition) is interpreted as regressive, so it must be rejected, annihilated, its existence terminated. But only until the myths of old can be projected into more modern utopias" (Žilka 2006, p. 285).

¹⁸ Yes, because with Mácha, the choice is the other way round: he chooses German as long as he thinks that he is forced to choose, and by renouncing his mother tongue he can write or must write poetry in the language of the *spirit*. His choice is precisely the abdication of this choice. Or even more precisely, the abdication of the potential results of the choice. For the alternative is: If it cannot be Czech, then it is inevitably German. The same spectre-like quality appears in texts written much earlier than *May*. The poem that starts with the words *Die kühle Nacht* (*Rozproštělá chladná noc*)

of the one who desires to know and the one who gazes at the unknown. And then the expression 'European literature' will have a meaning again. This notion has been threatened with extinction ever since the notion of 'world literature', invented by Goethe for this particular phenomenon, has started to become commonplace across the entire world. Of course, world literature can even be understood as more spacious than its original designation, potentially containing the truly unbounded literature of cultures not yet discovered as well as extraterrestrial cultures, or even literature that is born beyond our world (and is attested, though in a quite puzzling manner, by the Bible and other sacred texts, or certain prayers). European literature cannot live without multilingualism, yet it must settle for bilingualism and one-world-ism. Europe, however colourful, is one world. And yet, languages and literatures are layered; however much these layers ignore each other, their future is only guaranteed if they are open to each other. To the extent, of course, that future can be guaranteed at all. It cannot, but luckily it cannot be destroyed either. There is no reason to be afraid of Máchá any more, but nor is there any reason to fear his contemporaries who rejected him. The spectre of the future that haunts the past is the present.

Translated from the Hungarian by Ágnes Orzóy

Literatura

B o j t á r E., 1986, „Az ember feljő...” *A felvilágosodás és a romantika a közép-és kelet-európai irodalmakban*. Magvető, Budapest.

is only one example. Its closing lines practically give voice to the confession of a spectre: "Meine Heimat is der dunkle Wald, | Mein Freund is mir das Schwert von Stahl, | und mein liebchen ist die finstre Nacht." [Vlastí mou jest temný les, | druhem meč můj ocelivý, | a mou milenkou černá noc] (Máchá 1985, p. 109 and 111). – It is not only the images and the spiritual world (of ghosts) that are identical to those in later works by Máchá, but even the versification, the rejection of metrical verse in favour of stress! How could it be otherwise in German... In any case, there is no change in the prosodic sense, Máchá turned from one anti-metric poetry to another.

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