



FACULTY OF ARTS
Charles University

Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

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Report on
Studie o poezii a poetice
submitted by Josef Hrdlička
for his habilitation

Josef Hrdlička's study of poetry and poetics is an excellent collection of essays. The book is preoccupied with several ideas and follows their contexts and consequences, in the process illuminating terrain that heretofore has remained obscure. It is striking for its theoretical range and for the critical dexterity that allows him to move between disciplines (philosophy, literary criticism), as well as connecting key figures in the Czech literary tradition with broader movements of European thought and literature in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In my view it meets all necessary requirements for a habilitation text, and his application should now go forward to the next stage in the habilitation process at the Faculty of Arts, Charles University.

A casual reader might feel that there is the book's variety of subject renders it less persuasive. Such a reading misses the way that all such excursions – to see Roger Caillois's stones, to visit Jan Zahradníček in a cell on Bartolomějská, to introduce Jiří Kolář to Paul Celan, among many others – are underwritten by Hrdlička's recurrent preoccupations. In theoretical terms – that is, those defined by lyric theory – Hrdlička's question might be phrased: who speaks in a poem? In political terms, it might be phrased: can a poet speak in a poem during a repressive time? If not, then what are we

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to make of the poems that emerged, say, in Czechoslovakia in the 1950s, both officially and unofficially? In geological terms: how does a radically longer timeframe affect poetic speech? Is it rendered meaningless, or can it be extended in innovative ways? In canonical terms: how can we understand a poem's speech outside the bounds of the national canon? In biographical terms: how is the poem's speaker affected by exile from their community (linguistic, cultural, familial)? Is such poetry closer to nonexistence than which is written in the midst of such a community? These questions lead in various directions, but they are all motivated by the same concern, and this what it comes to the fore as one completes the book.

I will begin with an analysis of exilic poetry. By contrasting Ovid and Charles Baudelaire, Hrdlička provides two diametrically different examples: Ovid was sent to Tomis and wrote his *Tristia* from there; whereas Baudelaire remains in Paris and becomes an "inner exile" at odds with his community. Hrdlička correctly comments that not all poetry written in exile can be designated exilic poetry – a poet who perhaps wrote beautiful lyrics about trees at home continues with the theme abroad – and this prompts the question of what *is* exilic poetry. I wondered, however, if by calling Baudelaire a poet of exile Hrdlička wasn't stretching the term too much and ultimately making it unuseful as a way of thinking about poetry and literature. It was only when I read the chapters about Czech poets such as Ivan Blatný, Ivan Diviš, Konstantin Biebl, and Milada Součková, among others, did I begin to see the usefulness of the idea. It brings much needed nuance to the category of exilic poetry, drawing us away from a reduction of these different poets oeuvres.

Related to this was the idea of speaker or persona in the poems. Milada Součková, when she writes a poem, becomes Josefína Rykrová. Hrdlička correctly wonders who the latter person is, refusing to treat her purely as a fiction (in Pessoa's manner), but neither as a full biographical entity. It would be too simple to say that Rykrová allows Součková to *distance* her own immigrant story, refracting it through a persona and thus curtailing its poignancy (though indeed self-pity is far from Součková's concerns). Hrdlička remarks:

Josefína Rykrová je tím, čím Milada Součková byla ve skutečnosti nebo v idealizované minulosti. Tato identita ale neplatí pro přítomnost *ted' a tady*, protože tu Josefína nemá, je vždy jen v básni. V tomto ohledu literarizovaná nebo estetizovaná paměť v básních dostává povahu uspořádaného světa, je logická, protože vše v ní má svůj význam, ačkoli nepodléhá časové chronologii, spíše jí vládne čas opakujících se situací [...]



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This might be called a strategy of exile, and it is one of several different strategies that Hrdlička examines in the book. We can't counterfactually imagine what kind of poetry Součková would have written had she remained in Czechoslovakia (perhaps she wouldn't have written poetry at all). And although Hrdlička doesn't consider counterexamples of, say, a Czech poet who remained in the country, we might think in this connection of Jan Zábřana, especially in a poem like "Zkrat" which figures a rupture in both political and personal life. For Zábřana this was February 1948, which divided him from his own youth. Many of the poems of the collection *Stránky z deníku* are generated by this bifurcation of the self, and Zábřana fits well with Hrdlička's characterization of Baudelaire's exilic poetry. And again, such an idea of bifurcation of the poem's speaker – whether in Součková or Zábřana – loops back helpfully to Jonathan Culler's discussion of the poem's speaker in *Theory of the Lyric*, and Hrdlička's book is outstanding for the way that it constantly provokes further discussion, contrast and debate.

Kolář, on the other hand, erases the self from poems of *Prométheova játra*. Once again, this could be viewed as another strategy of exile, in this case of inner exile (as Hrdlička is discussing his poems of the late 1940s). Although he mentions himself *within* poems, he is merely one more element in the urban panorama. Likewise Zahradníček in the poem "Zvon" refers to the poets he imagines outside on the streets of Prague in *Summer*, implying that he, or his poem's speaker, is not a poet (even though he speaks in rhymed quatrains). At points like these, Hrdlička deftly introduces lyric theory to the highly politicized context of Czech literature in the 1950s. He doesn't do this to erase or dismiss the importance of either the context of Czech literature or Czech history, but rather to inaugurate a complementary critical discussion (just as inversely lyric theory is enriched by a criticism that emphasizes politics).

In his discussion of Kolář, Hrdlička briefly considers Walt Whitman, who Kolář, along with Zdeněk Urbánek, translated in 1955. Hrdlička points out that Whitman also mentions himself in "Song of Myself," the first publication of which was otherwise anonymous, carrying no author name on the cover or in the front and back papers; he also goes on to connect him with Arthur Rimbaud. In my view here, Hrdlička scants the political context of Whitman's early poetry, overlooking how embedded it was in democratic ideology of the US in the 1850s. The poem's proclamation of the self finds its first and arguably final justification as an expression of US individualism and its attendant democratic ideology. In itself, this point would be challenged by many American critics, who would side with Hrdlička's reading. But allow me here to pursue it and ask what are its consequences for Hrdlička's understanding of 1950s Czech poetry. At one point, he contrasts Czech official poetry of the early 1950s with Kolář and others.



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Ideologický básník je fakticky slepý k velké části skutečnosti, jako by na rozdíl od Rimbaudova vidoucího básníka podle pokynů redukoval své smysly pouze na ideologické obsahy. Zjevně se tu rozchází řemeslná zdatnost a bravura se schopností vidět, tedy autorská pozice a lyrické já. Proč by potom, v takové situaci měl veřejně vypovídat právě básník? Protože je jeho poezie rétoricky účinná? Protože využívá tradice?

Here I believe that Hrdlička is overlooking the ideological underpinnings of his own critical approach. His Czech ideological poet is blind to reality, whereas Hrdlička's favored poets can simply *see* reality. In a work that otherwise displays such philosophical subtlety I was surprised by the starkness of the characterization here. Communist authorities in Czechoslovakia from 1948 to the late 1950s wished to *change* reality, and poetry's new job, in their view, was to reflect but also foreshadow that new reality. A text that did not meet that demand was simply not considered poetry. Kolář and others, in equal measure, refused to acknowledge this. Such an idea of poetry, with its attendant idea of "authenticity," is underwritten by democratic ideology. If one bristles at the idea of poets such as Rimbaud, Kolář, Součková, Zahradníček, and Blatný as ideological poets, then this is only because democratic ideology, in its political and cultural expressions, usually presents itself as pre- or extra-ideological, with an intuitive apprehension of reality in all its variety, which escapes, say, Communist and Fascist poets (remaining here within the mid-twentieth century European arena). If I disagree with Hrdlička in this matter, I would like to emphasize that this does not detract from my admiration of his work.

I must also here note how much I admire his chapter on Roger Caillois (which I had the honor to translate into English). Near the beginning of the book Hrdlička writes:

Příkladem takové variace může být Pascalův výrok o úzkosti z nekonečna, v němž je lidský čas nazřen měřítkem kosmického času. Pokud má poezie tento paradox přeformulovat, musí na hranici obou zmíněných časů narušit obvyklý způsob řeči, který jen potvrzuje zažitý obraz světa. Musí hovořit v jiném režimu, i když bude používat tatáž slova. Jedním z příkladů takového posunu řeči jsou meditace nad kameny Rogera Cailloise.

In other chapters, Hrdlička explores how exile and historical trauma disturb our accustomed view of the world (*zažitý obraz světa*), and the consequences of this for poetry. (The idea of such a view [or image] is picked up also in the chapter about Gaston Bachelard.) Caillois offers a different type of disturbance, as the chronologies of our

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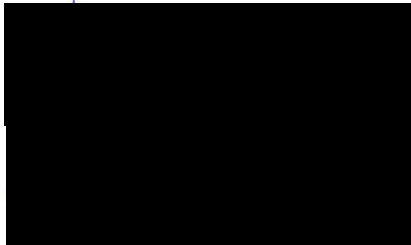
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lives, communities, and civilizations are dwarfed by the grander chronology of geology. But rather than remain an abstraction of words with Greek roots this disturbance takes physical form in the rocks that the French writer confronts in his texts. Once again, Hrdlička's approach is timely, overlapping with ideas of ecology and hyperobjects that at present animate anglophone criticism.

Near the beginning of the book, Hrdlička asks: "V jakém směru může být tedy [Cullerova] Teorie lyriky přínosná pro české prostředí?" He asks the same question of Paul Celan, Roger Caillois, Arthur Rimbaud, Gaston Bachelard, Theodor W. Adorno, and many others throughout this splendid, original book. He answers the question in relation to Culler thus: "Cullerův komparativní záběr [...] dobře ukazuje, jak přínosné je přistupovat k poezii v širším rámci, než je národní literatura." The same may fairly be said for Hrdlička's own book.

Before ending, I must disclose that I have known Josef Hrdlička personally for over a decade, and I have profited from his intellectual and artistic example in many ways. It is a pleasure to acknowledge this here, just as it is a pleasure to offer these few notes of admiration and appreciation of his *Studie o poezii a poetice*.



doc. Justin Quinn Ph.D.