

For Everyone His Own Verhaeren: Czech Reception of Belgian Modernist Literature as an Example of Cultural Transfer and a Path to the Czech Avant-Garde (1880s–1920s)

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ABSTRACT

Translating and interpreting the work of the Belgian francophone poet Émile Verhaeren in Bohemia between 1880s–1920s was a way of being Czech, Francophile, modern, and certainly not German – not always in the same order or with the same understanding of what ‘modern’ means. The study analyzes Czech reception of Émile Verhaeren (1855–1916), in critical discussion with the German (Austrian) appropriation and in the context of debates on modern art. Jaroslav Vrchlický needs to be given credit for introducing to his Czech aesthetic adversaries of the 1890s their Belgian symbolist models. The trajectory that leads Verhaeren, a “Rubens in words” of Vrchlický’s 1888 interpretation, to Šalda’s recognised representative of Belgian symbolism of the 1910s and the proto-communist collective author of Neumann’s and Hilar’s appropriation of 1920s guides us through the complex development of Czech modernist art from early modernism of the 1880s to its avant-garde peak in the 1920s. Verhaeren served as a catalyzer and a guiding figure for the Czech artists, who helped to steer them, through complex meanders, towards the modernity of the 20th century.

KEYWORDS

Émile Verhaeren, Czech modernism, Avant-Garde, Belgian Symbolism, Cultural Transfer, Cultural Networks, Cultural Mediation, Reception Studies

The Czech search for cultural autonomy was carried out since the 1860s and 1870s through the appropriation of foreign, often Francophone, cultural models. “Être francophile fut bien plus une manière d’être tchèque que d’être gallomane” [Being a Francophile was much more a way of being Czech than of being a lover of the French], writes Stéphane Reznikow in his groundbreaking monograph *Francophilie et identité tchèques 1848–1914* [Francophilia and Czech Identity 1848–1914]. This insightful and witty remark quoted by Antoine Marès points to the complex nature of Czech Francophilia, which was as much a cultural and aesthetic phenomenon as it was geopolitical (Reznikow 2002; Marès 2003: 153). We could say, being Francophile in Bohemia meant finding ways of not being German (or Austrian). Reznikow’s work can be used as a starting point for the exploration of paradigms of cultural appropriation. Indeed, a triangular model might reveal the complex dynamics at work within Czech Francophilia in Bohemia at the turn of the 20th century with a constant consideration of the

Germanic reception. We can understand this triangulation paradigm as an example of cultural transfer in Bohemia. This methodological approach is inspired by classical studies on cultural transfer between France, Germany and Russia edited by Michel Espagne and Katia Dmitrieva (Dmitrieva/Espagne 1996) but also by German studies scholars such as Hubert Roland (Roland 2004; 2013) and the Czech researcher Ondřej Vimr, who highlighted a triangulation pattern with German culture in the case of the Czech reception of Scandinavian literatures (Vimr 2014).

We suggest analyzing Czech reception of the francophone Belgian modernist poet Émile Verhaeren (1855–1916), which developed in triangulation and in critical dialogue with the Germanic (mostly Austrian) reception. Translating and interpreting the work of Verhaeren in Bohemia between 1880s and 1920s would thus be a way of being Czech, modern, Francophile and certainly not German. Not always in the same order or with the same understanding of what ‘modern’ means. We will argue that Czech interest in Francophone modernisms was symptomatic of the transformation process of a ‘peripheral’ society grappling with modernity and seeking to define its national and cultural project.

Since its foundation in 1830, Belgium has been attracting the attention of Czech intellectuals, writers, and translators. A country founded as a buffer state between France and the German states and the end of the Napoleonic wars with an ambiguous identity in shaping, it has been continuously struggling with competing cultural, linguistic, and political influences of its powerful neighbors, France, Germany, and the Netherlands. The place of modern Belgium – “entre la France ardente et la grave Allemagne” [between fiery France and earnest Germany] as Émile Verhaeren wrote was accepted and promoted as a defining principle of positive syncretism by modernist Belgian intellectuals and artists before the political and cultural closeness with Germany was questioned because of German invasion of Belgium during WWI and the invaders’ policy of forced acculturation (Roland 2004; 2013).¹

The modernist movement of Belgian (largely Flemish francophone) poets, met with keen interest of their Czech counterparts immediately in the 1880s. However, the first major article dedicated to the authors of the group of Belgian symbolists *La Jeune Belgique* [Young Belgium] was not published by one of the representatives of the upcoming Czech modernist generation, who will dominate the 1890s, but by the older member of the established school of poetry of *lumírovci*, Jaroslav Vrchlický (1853–1912) (Mocná 1993).² His extensive review *Parnas mladé Belgie* [Parnas of Young Belgium] was published in March 1888 and Vrchlický commented on the works of Verhaeren

1 The leading Czech Germanist Otokar Fischer (1883–1938) was one of the major mediators of Czech-Belgian cultural relations during the interwar period. He was invited as a visiting professor to University of Gent in 1926, where he met with important Belgian scholars, such as Henri Pirenne (author of the concept of syncretic Belgian identity between French and German cultural influences) and wrote a dense and interesting synthesis of Belgian relations to Germany entitled *Belgie a Německo* (Fischer 1927; Petrbock/Stašková/Zbytovský 2020).

2 It was probably thanks to Vrchlický, that his friend, author and translator Marie Kalašová (1854–1937) took interest in Materlinck’s work, befriended him and became his translator. Their personal contacts represent one of the major examples of Czech-Belgian cultural contacts of the period. The author of this study is currently preparing the critical edition of Maeterlinck’s letters to Kalašová (to be published in 2023).

and Rodenbach, viewed by him as already established authors, while bringing to the Czech readers the first translations of Belgian poets such as Maurice Maeterlinck, Charles Van Lerberghe, Iwan Gilkin, Albert Giraud, Max Waller and others. Vrchlický includes these poets in his large anthology *Moderní básníci francouzští* [Modern French Poets] of 1893.³

The historical role of the Habsburgs and the experience of baroque culture were cultural frames that Vrchlický chose to present Belgian modern culture to Czech readers. Indeed, Vrchlický describes Verhaeren as “Rubens in words” [„Verhaeren jest jakýsi Rubens slova“], further comparing him to Spanish baroque painters Ribera and Zurbaran before strengthening the Flemish baroque aesthetic filiation in the anthology of 1893 where he likens Verhaeren to Rubens and Jacob Jordaens, another prominent Flemish baroque painter. In the subsequent study we will demonstrate the complex development of the Czech reception of Verhaeren, which will establish this symbolist Francophone Flemish poet as the patron of the Czech avant-garde. It is important to note that while the cultural frames chosen by younger Czech artists for the appropriation of Belgian symbolists within the Czech literature differed from that of Vrchlický, the canon established by him changed little over three decades – Karel Čapek, in his much more famous anthology of modern French poetry *Francouzská poezie nové doby* [French Poetry of the New Era], considered as a key inspiration for the Czech avant-garde of the 1920s, adds only two new names from Belgian symbolism⁴ – Albert Mockel (1866–1945) and Max Elskamp (1862–1931), both members of the older symbolist generation – and otherwise maintains the authors, who had been translated by Vrchlický in 1888 and 1893.⁵

1. NOVINA: ČASOPIS ČESKÉ DUŠEVNÍ KULTURY [THE VIRGIN SOIL: THE NOTEBOOK OF CZECH SPIRITUAL CULTURE] AND ITS FOREIGN CULTURAL MODELS⁶

The years 1895–1925 were marked by a paradoxical development of Czech-French relations. The failure of a diplomatic rapprochement between the Czechs and the French, a diplomatic effort, that did not go beyond the opening of the French consulate

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- 3 While Belgian Francophone symbolist poets are well represented in the anthology of 1893, Vrchlický did not include any of them in his previous anthology *Poesie francouzská nové doby* [French Poetry of the New Era] of 1877, considered to be the first systematic introduction of French modern poetry in the Czech context. It is thus during the 1880s that Czech artists got acquainted with Belgian symbolism.
 - 4 Součková (1964) discusses Vrchlický's and Čapek's translations of Baudelaire and puts forward the quality of Vrchlický's translations and the importance of his work for Čapek.
 - 5 In his text of 1888, which is a detailed review of the French anthology of Belgian symbolist poetry *Parnasse de la Jeune Belgique* (Paris, Vanier, 1887), Vrchlický regrets that the poetry of Verhaeren (along with that of Georges Rodenbach) was not included in the anthology edited in Paris. The text shows that Vrchlický is aware of their poetry, while considering them the most important of Belgian symbolists (“bez odporu nejvýznamnější dosud z celé belgické kolonie”). The anthology was edited by the Belgian symbolist poets themselves – Iwan Gilkin, Albert Giraud and Max Waller.
 - 6 The title of the magazine – *Novina* – is polysemic. While its first meaning is simply “news”, its second meaning in Old Czech is also a new field created by cutting down trees of a forest. Šalda's use of the polysemy is intentional and is intertextually connected to the last novel by Turgenev, *The Virgin Soil*. The meaning is discussed further in this article.

in Prague in 1897, contrasts with the richness and extent of the presence of French culture in Bohemia during this period. However, the actual Czecho-French exchange was, according to Reznikow, based on small networks of Czech and French expatriates from modest social backgrounds (Reznikow 2002). Cultural scene in Bohemia before 1918 shows a constant triangulation between Czech, German (Austrian) and French (or Francophone) cultures in the multi-ethnic and multilingual space within the Habsburg Empire. Indeed, it is paradoxical that during this period, even the great Francophiles in Bohemia might have had more direct contacts with Austrian artists and critics and their works were probably more often translated into German than into French.⁷ The Francophilia of the Czech writers was still more an act of identity activism than a reality supported by existing cultural and political ties. Belgian francophone literature offers an interesting case study of these complex processes of cultural mediation between the perceived cultural centers and its peripheries.

The Prague cultural journal *Novina*, founded in 1908, offers an important testimony of the struggles of modernism in Bohemia during the key period of sensible shift from early modernism to early avant-garde. Indeed, the first years of the journal *Novina* are interesting to follow as their collide with the years of this shift, which Daniel Vojtěch situates around 1910, the moment of culmination of thirty years of early modernism in Bohemia (Vojtěch 2008). The journal reveals the pattern of triangulation of foreign cultural models through the critical discussion of the Austrian reception of Francophone literatures.

Novina was one of the first independent platforms of F. X. Šalda (1867–1937). Although Šalda founded *Novina* together with Jindřich Vodák (1867–1940) and Josef Svatopluk Machar (1864–1942), it was Šalda himself who decided on the concept and content of the journal, which he edited from its first issue in 1908 until 1912. The contacts of Machar with Viennese literary figures of the 1890s, such as Hermann Bahr and his magazine *Die Zeit* (Kostrbová 2011), are less visible in the journal, although its contributors continue to closely follow publications in Viennese literary journals. Whereas the editors are well informed about literary activities in Vienna, they rely on foreign correspondents for information about what is happening in Paris, showing that the proclaimed Francophilia of the journal is rather a cultural project in the making than a reality comparable to the networks developed by Czech artists (most prominently by Machar) in Vienna in the 1890s (Kostrbová 2011).

As Robert Pynsent notes, the Czech modernists, including the representatives of the fin-de-siècle aesthetics around *Moderní revue* (contrary to their loud programmatic proclamations) paradoxically shared a social sensitivity with the circle around Šalda and Machar and their 1895 *Manifest české moderny* [Manifesto of Czech Modernism] (Pynsent 1987: 428).⁸ This social commitment might have well distinguished them from

7 See the works of Merhautová and Ifkovits on the Viennese cultural magazine *Die Zeit* and the collaboration of its editor Hermann Bahr with Czech artists and intellectuals (Merhautová 2011, 2013, 2016) and the books of the teams working on transnational approach to the history of literature in Bohemia (Petrbok et al. 2019; Fialová-Fürstová 2022). What still deserves a more detailed analysis is the circulation of ideas and cultural transfers among these three cultural and linguistic spaces (Czech, Germanic, and Francophone). We might discover the vital role that German (Austrian) culture played in the mediation of French literature.

8 The Manifesto united an aesthetically very diverse group (realists, impressionists, symbolists, naturalists), who came together around common cultural and political goals (Pešat 1998: 229; Pynsent 1987: 428).

their Austrian counterparts, most of whom were members of wealthy aristocracy or upper-middle-class, a social reality of art that would still deserve a more detailed analysis.⁹ This social divide, although it needs more nuancing, was often referred to by Czech modernists themselves who, observing the Viennese art scene, criticized the detachment of its representatives from social realities. Machar and Šalda were often commenting the work of Hugo von Hofmannsthal in this sense (Simonek 2021: 51).¹⁰ This specific social dimension of Czech modernist art of the 1890s might well explain the less radical rupture between the symbolist generation of the 1890s and the avant-garde of the 1920s in Bohemia. The rallying of the key figures of the older generation such as Šalda and Stanislav Kostka Neumann around the social and political commitment of the young avant-garde artists of the 1920s constitutes a proof of this continuity.

2. BOHEMIA WRITES TO VERHAEREN

The Archives of the Museum of Literature [Archives du Musée de la Littérature, AML] of the Royal Library in Brussels contain documents that testify to the importance of Émile Verhaeren for Czech artists in the early 20th century. They reveal that in February 1908 Verhaeren received a postcard from Prague at his French address in Saint-Cloud (Verhaeren was spending part of the year in France since 1898), which was intended as a ‘hommage of the artistic youth of Prague’ to Verhaeren and his art. It was signed by Karel Čapek, Josef Čapek, Bohumil Kubišta, Otto Gutfreund, Vlastislav Hofman and Pavel Janák. These young people (Karel Čapek, the youngest of them, was then only 18 years old) would become in the 1920s major representatives of Czech modernism and avant-garde in various art forms and genres.

In October 1909, Verhaeren received another message from Prague, this time from his “most fervent and humble admirer”, who reverently informed him of the publication of his poems in the literary magazine *Novina*. The author was none other than F.X. Šalda. Twenty-three years separated him from Karel Čapek, and although Šalda’s importance for the development of Čapek’s poetics has already been mentioned (Malevič 1987), they are often considered adversaries in the artistic debates of the 1910s–1920s. Their common interest for Verhaeren can serve as a starting point for the exploration of the ambiguities and complexities of Czech Francophilia and the diverse modernist projects of the nascent, early avant-garde in Bohemia in the 1910s.¹¹

9 See for example Merhautová’s study on Otokar Fischer’s interpretation of Hofmannsthal (Merhautová 2020: 426–464).

10 According to Simonek, the dislike and caution was mutual.

11 Both documents can be found in Archives et Musée de la littérature (AML) at the Bibliothèque Royale in Brussels.

3. LETTER FROM FRANTIŠEK XAVER ŠALDA TO VERHAEREN

Prague, 20 Octobre 1909

Monsieur et Maître,

J'ai l'honneur de vous faire parvenir les trois numéros de ma revue littéraire « Novina » (= en français *Les terres vierges*), écrite en tchègue qui est la langue de six millions habitants slaves dans le royaume Bohême et dans Moravie. Deux entre eux contiennent un chapitre d'un livre critique sur votre Œuvre à paraître par le poète viennois, M. Stefan Zweig, le troisième la traduction de vos deux poèmes, spécimen de votre admirable livre « Les multiples Splendeurs » que je voudrais appeler « Le Bréviaire poétique de l'homme moderne » et dont je suis avec quelques amis l'admirateur le plus fervent et le plus humble. A cette occasion je prends la liberté de vous adresser, Monsieur et Maître, au nom de vos admirateurs tchègues la prière de vouloir bien écrire pour ma revue quelques pages sur l'admirable renaissance littéraire moderne dans votre beau pays. Je le répète: il suffiraient deux ou trois pages. D'autres traductions de vos poèmes s'ensuivront j'espère bientôt et je ne tarderai pas de vous en envoyer le spécimen.

Agréez, Monsieur et Maître, l'expression de mon admiration.

F.X.Šalda

Directeur de la revue *Novina*

Prague (Bohême)

III. 28b.

[Prague, 20 October 1909

Sir and Master,

I have the honour of sending you the three issues of my literary journal "Novina" (= in French *Les terres vierges*), written in Czech, which is the language of six million Slavic inhabitants in the kingdom of Bohemia and Moravia. Two of them contain a chapter of a critical book on your work to be published by the Viennese poet, Mr. Stefan Zweig, the third the translation of your two poems, a specimen of your admirable book "The Multiple Splendors" which I would like to call "The Poetic Breviary of Modern Man" and of which I am, along with a few friends, the most fervent and most humble admirer. On this occasion I take the liberty of addressing to you, Sir and Master, in the name of your Czech admirers, the request to write for my review a few pages on the admirable modern literary renaissance in your beautiful country. I repeat: two or three pages would suffice. Other translations of your poems will follow, I hope soon, and I will not delay in sending you a specimen. Please accept, Sir and Master, the expression of my admiration.

F. X. Šalda

Director of *Novina* magazine

Prague (Bohemia)

III. 28b.]

The eminent critic, a central and imposing figure on the Czech cultural scene for almost two decades (often locked in bitter and personal disputes with the representatives of decadence around *Moderní revue*), makes himself very small in front of Verhaeren. He feels the need to ‘translate’ himself to him, aware that the Czech culture and language, which are little known outside the Habsburg empire, are in the shadow of Germanic culture on the one hand and Russian culture on the other. The need to explain what being Czech means shows that Šalda is aware of the peripheral character of Czech culture at that time. We have found no evidence of earlier personal contacts between Czech writers and Verhaeren. Vrchlický, despite his visit of Brussels that he refers to in his text of 1888, seems to have maintained correspondance contact only with Flemish authors from Antwerp (see the diploma thesis of Štěpán Eliáš 2011).¹²

What is important for our argument is the fact that Šalda clearly addresses Verhaeren as a representative of Belgian symbolism (in line with Vrchlický). Seeking original contributions from foreign correspondents, such as the French symbolist poet and critic Charles Morice (1860–1919),¹³ who wrote regularly about French literature, he was asking Verhaeren for a similar participation concerning Belgian francophone literature. Beyond flattery, his request testifies to an awareness of the specificities of a modern French-speaking Belgian literature that had been developing rapidly since the 1880s. This development could not but arouse the interest of a representative of Czech culture, seeking its place as a ‘minor’ literature in the shadow of a dominant one.

The three issues of *Novina* referred to in Šalda’s letter are issues 8, 21 and 22 of 1909. The first contains František Tichý’s translation (under the pseudonym Zdeněk Broman) of two poems from the collection *La Multiple Splendeur* [The Multiple Splendor] (1906), “To the Glory of the Heavens” and “The Praise of the Human Body” (Verhaeren 1909). Tichý later became the translator of two anthologies of Verhaeren’s poetry, both of which appeared in 1917 as a tribute to the Belgian poet who had died tragically the previous year, in 1916, while boarding a train in Rouen, France.

The other two issues contain a chapter of the original essay that Stefan Zweig dedicated to Verhaeren’s poetry, which was not published in full until a year later, in 1910, simultaneously, in French and in German.¹⁴ As Clément Dessy affirms, this relatively unknown text by Zweig effectively launched the writer’s career in the German and, more broadly, in the European cultural context. On a scale of a chapter, it was however in Prague and in Czech that this work appeared for the first time, in agreement with Zweig, with whom Šalda was clearly in contact, at least by mail. In another review, Šalda referred to Zweig as “our valuable collaborator” and introduced him as a “young, excellent Viennese poet”¹⁵. This publication of Zweig in Czech is indicative of the Czech Francophile triangulation with Germanic culture. With this translation, Šalda entered a dialogue with Zweig’s interpretation of Verhaeren. In 1910, when

12 The only personal contact that we found evidence of is from after Verhaeren’s death between Otokar Fischer and Verhaeren’s widow Marthe, who thanks Fischer for his Czech translation of Verhaeren’s historical play *Philip II*, that Fischer had sent to her. LA PNP, file of Otokar Fischer.

13 It is interesting to note that Charles Morice lived in Brussels between 1896–1901 and for some time was collaborating with the University in Brussels. He wrote several essays dedicated to Belgian art.

14 „Báseň Verhaerenova a její architektonika“ (Zweig 1909) corresponds to the chapter “Le poème de verhaerenien” of the French translation of Zweig’s essay (Zweig 2013 [1910]: 190–214).

15 F. X. Šalda (1909: 447). It is a very positive commentary of Zweig’s review of the German translation of Březina’s poetry published in the number 6 of the magazine *Oesterreichische Rundschau*.

Zweig's essay was published in its entirety, Šalda commented on it in *Novina*, before writing one himself in 1917 entitled *Émile Verhaeren: Odpověď na otázku po smyslu jeho díla* [Émile Verhaeren: Answer to the Question about the Meaning of his Work], which appeared in Tichý's anthology of Verhaeren's poetry (Verhaeren 1917). This dialogue with Zweig was clearly conditioned by the geopolitical context – especially Šalda's effort to distance himself from Zweig's insistence on the Germanic aspects of Verhaeren's aesthetic. Thus, Šalda's Verhaeren, still considered as one of the key texts on the Belgian author in Bohemia today, is the result of a critical confrontation with Zweig's Verhaeren and a clear example of a triangulation of the Czech reception of Francophone modernist literature at the turn of the 20th century. In this complex case of cultural transfer Šalda succeeded in imposing "his" Verhaeren in Bohemia and Zweig's monograph was never translated into Czech in its entirety.

We do not know whether Verhaeren replied to Šalda's letter; no letter from him is to be found in his Prague archive and no contribution by Verhaeren on Belgian symbolism was ever published in *Novina*. We also do not know whether Verhaeren sought to meet Šalda during his brief visit to Prague with Zweig on 7th and 8th March 1912, when they stayed overnight at the 'Hotel zum Blauen Stern'. Indeed, in 1912 and 1913, Verhaeren undertook a series of trips and lectures throughout Central and Eastern Europe, but Bohemia probably remained for the Belgian poet, to paraphrase Zweig's words, a marginal, borderline space, through which one passes on the road 'between Leipzig and Vienna'.¹⁶

4. NOVINA, RURAL METAPHOR FOR REGIONAL MODERNITY

In 1909, Šalda wrote Verhaeren that the title of his magazine translated as 'The Virgin Soil' (*Les Terres vierges*). If *novina* in Czech simply means 'news', it was also the term chosen for the title of Turgenev's last novel, *НОВЬ*, i.e. in French *Les Terres vierges* (The Virgin Soil) – a title that Turgenev had no doubt accepted, having reviewed Émile Durand-Gréville's translation published in Paris in 1877, the year of its publication in Russian.¹⁷ It is the subtitle of the magazine, published on the cover of each issue, that allows this connection: "Novinu orati třeba pluhem hluboko zabírajícím." [The virgin soil must be ploughed with a plough that goes deep into the soil.]

This quotation is the Czech translation of the epigraph with which Turgenev opens his novel *The Virgin Soil* and which he claims to quote from a diary of a peasant-agronomist. The already mentioned centrality of social commitment of Czech modernism of the 1890s, is thus inscribed in *Novina*'s very title and subtitle, more than 10 years after the publication of the Manifesto (1895). It thus places itself, probably at Šalda's instigation, under the aegis of Turgenev (who spent most of his life in France). Turgenev's social and political ideals as well as his openness to the West stand here as central qualities. The fact that a journal that aimed to represent modern art in Bohemia was placed under the aegis of a Russian realist novel published 30 years earlier confirms the complex and ambiguous nature of modernism in Bohemia, which at this

16 "[L]e 7 mars, Verhaeren et moi en wagon entre Leipzig et Vienne" [7th March, I and Verhaeren on the train between Leipzig and Wien] (Van de Kerkhove 1996: 49–53). I thank Fabrice van de Kerkhove for this information (e-mail from 29 June 2021).

17 The first German translation was also published in 1877.

stage included also critical realism and social awareness alongside its openness to West-European cultures (inherited from Vrchlický's generation around the revue *Lumír*).

Turgenev's novel was published in Czech translation between 1884 and 1895. With a social aim, it evokes the members of the *narodniki* (populist) movement, a group of Russian intellectuals in the second half of the 19th century who tried to enter dialogue with the popular masses and bring about more or less radical social reforms in Russia. Although Turgenev insisted that the 'plough' in his epigraph was not a metaphor for revolution, the novel makes clear the inadequacy of small-scale reforms and accentuates the need for more profound social and political change, metaphorically

NOVINU ORAŤI TRĚBA PLUHEM HLUBOKO ZAPÍRAJÍCÍM TURGENEV

NOVINA

LIST DUŠEVNÍ KULTURY ČESKÉ

REDIGUJ:

J. S. MACHAR

F. X. ŠALDA

J. UODATK

OBSAH:

F. X. Šalda: Věra kulturní. —
 F. X. Svoboda: Básně. — Vlastimil
 Kybal: Francouzská metoda
 historická. — J. S. Machar: Básně.
 — Frne Novák: Večerní dialog
 o Janu Nerudovi. — A. Sova:
 Rajka erotická. — Růžena Svoboda:
 Z dopisů a zápisníků. —
 J. S. Machar: Politická situace. —
 KRONIKA: Výtvarný přehled.
 Krásná literatura. Divadlo. Glossy.



represented by the plough that needs to enter deep into the soil in order to bring real renewal and productiveness.¹⁸ In Russian, 'Новъ' means both an un-ploughed field, the 'virgin soil' (*les terres vierges*) in French translation, and news: the same polysemy is found in Czech. The Dictionary of Ancient Czech defines *novina* (or *kopanina*) as a new field, created by cutting down trees of a forest, which has not been ploughed yet. This quote can be understood as definition of cultural mission that Šalda gave to his magazine: to introduce modern culture into Czech-speaking Bohemia by bringing about profound cultural and social changes. This natural and rural metaphor certainly applied to modern art in his eyes and basically followed the programme of the Manifesto of Czech Modernism from 1895.¹⁹

5. ALMANACH NA ROK 1914 [ALMANAC FOR THE YEAR 1914]: DIALOGUE BETWEEN SYMBOLIST AND REVOLUTIONARY VERHAEREN

This same oscillation between rural and urban metaphors in the visions of modernity characterizes the *Almanach na rok 1914* (hereafter *Almanac*), prepared in 1913 and commonly regarded as the first manifesto of the early Czech avant-garde (Gilk 2014; 2016). It brings together several signatories of the postcard to Émile Verhaeren, including Josef and Karel Čapek and Vlastislav Hofman, who continue their search for modernity and the formal expression to be given to modern art. Verhaeren also makes his presence felt in this manifesto publication through the participation of five of his translators – Stanislav Kostka Neumann, Otokar Fischer, Stanislav Hanuš, Otokar Theer and Karel Čapek.²⁰

The *Almanac* project brought together artists who had just split from the art journal *Umělecký měsíčník* [Art Monthly] (hereafter *UM*) following a disagreement over the concept of cubism (Lahoda 2016: 26–32). As Lahoda reminds us, the early avant-garde in Bohemia (including the group around *UM*) were committed to the motifs of a sensual, pantheistic and vitalist idyll, whether in prose, as in František Langer's *Island of the Gods*, or in painting (see Vincenc Beneš's *Idyll* and Emil Filla's *The Morning*, both from 1910). These works of art evoke the space of a primeval, bucolic, 'primitive' humanity (Lahoda 2016: 28). This orientation is also reflected in *Almanac*. Despite their secession from *UM*, most of the contributors to *Almanac* continued in this representation of an arcadian idyll.

This vitalist, bucolic element, which was so prominent in Verhaeren's symbolism, attracted the contributors of *Novina*, whether Šalda, who admired the arcadian harmony in *La Multiple Splendeur* [The Multiple Splendor], or Tichý, who had chosen

18 My thanks to Rajendra Chitnis and Andrei Zorin for the discussion of Turgenev's novel and the meaning of its epigraph.

19 The metaphor and the name of the journal was mocked by *Moderní revue*, whose members were opposed to Šalda in petty mutual attacks that sometimes went beyond the strict realm of aesthetic oppositions and culminated in a public scandal in 1909, when Jiří Karásek ze Lvovic was accused by Šalda of being the author of anonymous vulgar letters addressed to him and some of his friends.

20 The correspondence between the participants of the *Almanac*, especially between Karel Čapek and Otokar Fischer, helps us to reconstruct the circumstances surrounding the preparation of the *Almanac* and reveals its arbitrary nature. PNP, Prague.

to translate two Verhaeren's vitalist poems in *Novina* and commented on this aspect of the work in his review of the collection *Les Heures du Soir* [Evening Hours] in 1912 (Tichý 1912). Influenced by the Zweigian interpretation, Tichý is interested in the 'architecture' of Verhaeren's poetry, admiring, like Šalda, the powerful and harmonious synthesis he achieves in his intimate poetry. It is a symbolist Verhaeren that the pair Šalda-Tichý promotes as model of modernism – a powerful synthesis of tradition and modernity. The selection of Verhaeren's poems translated and presented by these two artists reinforces this interpretation, still very much in line with Vrchlický's interpretations from 1880s and 1890s. Šalda's 'neo-classical' Verhaeren is in dialogue with S.K. Neumann's proletarian, revolutionary and progressive Verhaeren. The two lines of thought confront each other on the pages of *Almanac*.²¹

The programmatic texts written by S.K. Neumann, Karel Čapek and Otokar Theer in the years 1912–1913 as a preparation of the publication of the *Almanac* are full of modernity, sport, cement, iron, speed, and metal.²² In Neumann's view, technological modernity is linked to aesthetic modernity, especially the free verse. He writes in this sense in his polemics with Arnošt Procházka from *Moderní revue*, entitled *Volný verš a nová poezie* [Free Verse and New Poetry]:

Moderní poezie [...] nemůže se obejít bez šířky a pružnosti verše nepravidelného, jako moderní člověk neobejde se bez pošt, telegrafů, vlaků a novin. (Neumann 1988 [1913]: 266)

[Modern poetry [...] cannot do without the width and the flexibility of the irregular verse, as much as the modern man cannot do without post-offices, telegraphs, trains and newspapers.]

However, these words and metaphors hardly appear in the *Almanac* poems, whose content these essays were supposed to describe and foreshadow. Rather, the poems attest to the strength of the poetic impulses of the Symbolist generation of the 1890s and to Šalda's strong influence on the members of the younger generation. Indeed, most of the poems, even those by S. K. Neumann, except for the poem *The Circus*, are still strongly influenced by symbolism. As Vojtěch Lahoda argues, *Almanac* is still very much in line of *UM* aesthetic programme, presenting almost exclusively bucolic pantheistic nature.

The *Almanac* project shows that it is easier to quickly change and adapt styles in the visual arts than in literature. Moreover, it is easier to write a programmatic manifesto than a corresponding poem – the discrepancy between the theoretical and programmatic writings and the content, style and form of the poems is striking. Only the contributions of Karel and Josef Čapek and Neumann and Hofman's programmatic text foreshadow the direction that the Czech avant-garde of the 1920s would take, through their pronounced formal radicalism and focus on the exploration of

21 Šalda develops his project of 'Neoclassicism' from 1908, period that coincides with his interest for Verhaeren. In 1912, he publishes in *Národní listy* his programmatic essay 'Novoklasicismus' [Neoclassicism] where he defines his concept (see Gilk 2014: 99).

22 See Neumann's article, *At žije život* [Long Live Life] (1913) and its critical analysis by Thomas Ort (2013: 72–82).

the urban environment. Hofman's text, which defends the anti-mimetic aesthetics of cubism and abstraction, is a particularly good example of the process of a shift in the aesthetics that is unfolding in front of our eyes. His article, *The Spirit of Change in Plastic Art*, urges a shift away from the idealized, bucolic past to the representation of the present. Hofman demands a "trust in the present", for "the modern age must seem to us the most beautiful of all". And for modernity we must find "a new beauty and a new artificiality" (Hofman 2014: 53). It is his text that most clearly shows a break with the bucolic idyll of the *UM*.

Although his name is not mentioned, the presence of the Belgian poet is clearly felt in *Almanac*, especially in Neumann's use and defense of free verse, which he had adopted after discovering Verhaeren's poetry (see Černý 1955 and Červenka 2001). Even Stanislav Hanuš, Verhaeren's translator and a writer of rather neo-classical poetry, chose the free verse for his poems published in *Almanac* under Verhaeren's auspices. Hofman compared the introduction of free verse in poetry with the cubist organization of space in painting (Hofman 2014: 56). In 1913, the year of the publication of *Almanac*, Neumann published the above-quoted article *Free verse and new poetry* (Neumann 1913) in the first issue of the short-lived theatre magazine *Scena* (1913-1914 [The Stage]), founded by Karel Hugo Hilar. Neumann asserted the importance of Verhaeren's influence, while referencing the writings of the Austrian critic Johannes Schlaf (1862-1941) as inspiration for his essay. As Hubert Roland points out, Schlaf was a representative of naturalism and author of a monograph on Maeterlinck from 1906, of essays on Verhaeren, whose poetry he also translated into German. In his essays, Schlaf compares Verhaeren to Whitman, an aesthetic proximity that will become commonplace in Czech reception of Verhaeren. As Hubert Roland affirms in his well-informed review of Strohmann's thesis on the German reception of Maeterlinck:

Influenced by Walt Whitman in particular, Schlaf, like others, moved from naturalism to vitalist forms of thought, both mystical and esoteric, which served as a basis for his appropriation of Maeterlinck. Where he went wrong, Strohmann notes, was that he continued to link these to a post-Darwinian racial and biological model of thought, which is entirely lacking in the Belgian poet. (Roland 2012)

Schlaf later embraced the idea of Nazi Germany and died in 1941.

6. STRIVING FOR UNITY BETWEEN LIFE AND ART

The authors are aware of the need to open up art to life and everyday reality, but the poems are rather testimonies of their failure than of their success. Stanislav Hanuš (one of Verhaeren's translators) in his poem *Midnight* stages the confusion of a lyrical subject, who is aware of the need to let enter life into his isolated artistic seclusion (of the symbolist poet): "In the abode of my four walls, so sad and inconsolable today, the voice of life does not resound", he writes. The poem expresses the position of a symbolist, fin-de-siècle artist, the artist, who stylized himself as an exclusive superior being, an aesthete in his ivory tower and he affirms the notion of the consequences – "Jsme samotni, ty a já, daleko všeho, co žije." [We are alone, you and me, far from everything that lives] as Hanuš writes (Hanus 2014: 76). And the lyrical subject expresses at the

end of his poem the criticism of the symbolist-decadent position – its artistic exclusiveness not only isolates the poet but also makes him socially insensitive. Such criticism can be found in Vrchlický's critical interpretations of symbolist poetry in the 1880s and 1890s but also in Šalda's mocking reviews of decadent Czech poets (1890s–1910s).

In the growing political polarization this apolitical and socially non-committed stylization is no longer possible. As we argue, a key inspiration in their strife comes from the work of Émile Verhaeren. It is certainly not a coincidence that most of the contributors to the *Almanac* translated Verhaeren. His own aesthetic trajectory, leading from symbolist exclusivity and the naturalist celebration of the Flemish peasant and countryside to socially sensitive poetry and vitalist, cosmic flow, must have been inspiring for Czech artists. Both Šalda and the leftist journalist Antonín Macek (in the introduction to the anthology of poetry *Vzpouza*) write commentaries on the work of Verhaeren although their approaches differ, especially in their accent on the committed, engaged aspect of Verhaeren's work. We would claim that the negotiation of the first effort of an avant-garde synthesis that is going on the pages of the *Almanac* is largely tributary to Verhaeren and his capacity to synthesize the rural and the urban in order to find a new artistic form capable of seizing the modern experience with its social complexities and relevant political implications. We would argue that the most inspiring and revolutionary synthesis that happens in the *Almanac*, in the poems of Neumann, is inspired by Verhaeren's own ambitious synthesis of his previous collections of poetry that he attempts in his influential play *Les Aubes* [The Dawn] from 1898, translated into Czech by Neumann and published in 1905 (Verhaeren 1905). In this lyrical drama set in Antiquity, the tribune Hérein unites the people of the countryside and the city in their struggle for a fairer society. His final sacrifice heralds the revolutionary change in society, the 'dawn' of a new world. Neumann's translation immediately attracted the attention of the *Moderní revue* circle, for which Miloš Marten wrote a glowing review (Marten 1906). The stage adaptation of *Les Aubes* in Prague in 1920 by Karel Hugo Hilar (with whom Neumann had collaborated in 1913 and 1914 in the short-lived theatrical magazine *Scena* [The Stage]) transformed this lyrical drama, which was not originally written with a potential stage adaptation in mind, into a call for revolution, when Hilar experimented with avant-garde crowd dynamics. As Jiří Brabec recalls, when the premiere was announced at the National Theatre in Prague, the writer Viktor Dyk, in his capacity of a deputy of the National Assembly, tried to ban the play because he feared it would undermine public order (Brabec 2010: 336, 338). The Czech adaptation was the world's first professional production of the play, which had previously only been performed by an amateur troupe in 1900 at the socialist headquarters *Maison du peuple* [The House of the People] in Brussels and was never performed in Paris during Verhaeren's lifetime.²³ The avant-garde theatre set for the 1920 adaptation, designed by Hofman, highlighted Verhaeren's revolutionary appropriation in Bohemia. Hilar was quick to recognize the political dimension of the play, describing it as the high point of the "avant-garde mise-en-scène in the sense that it achieves harmony between theatre and the spirit of the time, the harmony that

23 The socialist politician Jules Destrée (1863–1936), who accompanied Verhaeren to Russia during his visit in 1913, played the role of Hérein. I thank the director of the Museum of Émile Verhaeren in Saint-Amand Rik Hemmerijckx for pointing this out.

the youth of all time have always dreamt about” (quoted according to Brabec 2010: 338f.). The revolutionary potential was also recognized by the members of the Russian avant-garde. Indeed, Verhaeren’s play was staged in 1922 in Moscow by Meyerhold and Bebutov with stage decorations by Dimitriev (Quaghebeur 1990: 207).

The harmony between art and life that Hilar mentions here and that he claims to achieve in his *mise-en-scène* of Verhaeren’s play is the consequence of the search for artistic synthesis that was at the heart of *Almanac for the year 1914*. The fact that it mostly failed to achieve this goal certainly contributed to the dismissal of its place in the genealogy of the Czech avant-garde. However, it represents an important link between the successive artistic generations. The coveted unity between art and life, whose loss by the previous generation was criticized by the members of the early, 1910s avant-garde around *Almanac*, will be heralded by the post-WWI avant-garde of the 1920s. It enables us to pursue this surprising genealogy consecrated by the second edition of Verhaeren’s play, published by Fromek in 1925, with the graphic design and typography of Karel Teige.

The Czech appropriation is indeed a significant example of cultural transfer, in which the political aspect of Verhaeren’s work is definitively strengthened in relation to the original. As stated above, it served as a link between Neumann and the generation of the avant-garde of the 1920s led by Karel Teige. The further appropriation of Verhaeren’s poetry in the Czech context further strengthens its revolutionary dimension. The selection and translation of Verhaeren’s ‘revolutionary’ poems by Jindřich Hořejší, published in 1923 under the evocative title *Vzpouřa* [The Revolt], with a committed preface by Antonín Macek, further coined this Czech ‘revolutionary’ appropriation of Verhaeren. However, it is important to point out that the poems that Šalda and Tichý chose for their 1917 anthology of Verhaeren’s poetry were more recent than those presented by Hořejší and Macek in 1923. Verhaeren had indeed moved towards a more harmonious creation, that of *La Multiple Splendeur* [The Multiple Splendour] admired by Šalda in his letter to Verhaeren in 1909. Šalda returned to Verhaeren in an essay from early 1930s (Šalda 1930/31: 419–425), where he proposed a Promethean (Titanic)²⁴ and vitalist reading of Verhaeren while strengthening his skepticism towards what he considered as Verhaeren’s exaggerated revolutionary idealism of the 1890s (such skepticism is already present Šalda’s interpretation of the play *Les Aubes* in his essay of 1917).

It is evident that in Bohemia it is Neumann’s Verhaeren who ended up becoming ‘the Czech Verhaeren’ after 1945: the poet of the crowd, of the revolution and of social progress. Thus, the Czech critical reception of Émile Verhaeren emphasized the committed and urban aspect of his work to the detriment of its more meditative, rural, and symbolist aspects.²⁵ The geopolitical context for this interpretative bias is evident. The Czech Marxist critic after 1945 emphasized the ‘Verhaeren-revolutionary’, which

24 Šalda’s influence is visible in Černý’s book (habilitation thesis) of 1935 dedicated to the legacy of Romanticism in European literatures, entitled *Essai sur le titanisme dans la poesie romantique occidentale entre 1815 et 1850* (Černý 1935).

25 Jaroslav Vrchlický chose for his anthology of 1893 meditative, symbolist poems with ‘baroque’ motifs of the transient character of life and Karel Čapek chose as example of Verhaeren’s poetry in his anthology *Francozská poesie nové doby* [French Poetry of the New Era] a poem entitled *Strom* [Tree], which is a perfect example of Verhaeren’s symbolist, ‘rural’ vitalism. The tension between the rural and urban is present in Neumann’s poetry as well and would deserve a closer critical attention. In *Almanac*, this tension is represented by Neumann’s poems *Dub* [Oak] and *Cirkus* [Circus].

was further confirmed by the Czech staging of his plays (all of whom were translated into Czech, in comparison with a rather limited selection of Verhaeren's poetry, which is available to Czech readers), especially of his anticlerical, anti-Habsbourg and revolutionary *Philip II*. Verhaeren's 'radicalisation' in the Czech context is an interesting case of cultural transfer – the Czech reception creates a 'false teleology', interestingly mirroring the codes of social realism and the typical characters of the novels of the genre, who evolve from political indifference to political commitment. However, Šalda in his essays from 1917 and the 1930s and later, in the 1960s, Jiří Konůpek²⁶ (1960), Jan Zábřana and Vladimír Stupka (1960; 1976) balance the Czech insistence on the revolutionary dimension of Verhaeren's work, recalling that Verhaeren had turned in his post-1900 poems to a more appeased poetry that abandoned the revolutionary utopia. The decision by Konůpek and Zábřana to reprint Šalda's essay of 1917 in the largest anthology of Verhaeren's poetry in Czech, published in 1962 (Verhaeren 1962) proves the will to counter-balance the dominant revolutionary interpretation of Verhaeren in Bohemia.²⁷ Nevertheless, their voice was less 'audible' in the Czech academic sphere as they did not occupy central academic positions, contrary to Vladimír Brett, who hold key positions within Prague cultural establishment. Moreover, the numerous theatre adaptations both in Bohemia and in Slovakia reinforced the 'engagé', committed interpretation of Verhaeren's works in the Czechoslovak context.

7. HOW DOES A BELGIAN POET BECOME FRENCH?

But let us return to Šalda's interpretation of Verhaeren, as he set it out in his 1917 essay. Its centrality is further confirmed by Vladimír Stupka, who values it as the most important Czech study on Verhaeren in *Dějiny francouzské literatury* [History of French Literature] from 1976 (Stupka 1976: 360). Šalda's essay shows the evolution of his interpretation of Verhaeren between 1909 and 1917: from a Belgian French-speaking poet representing the specificity and success of a 'peripheral' modernist project, Verhaeren became for Šalda in 1917 a representative of the pure French spirit and its classical balance.

During WWI, the atrocities committed by the German army in Belgium, shocked Europe, causing a rift between Verhaeren and Zweig (Dessy 2021) and among many other Belgian and German artists, while German cultural propaganda in occupied Belgium during the war was actively trying to develop the Flemish literary movement (Roland 2013; Crombois 2020). The opportunistic support for Flemish national movement, along with the arrest and internment of eminent Belgian academics, such as the leading specialist in Belgian history Henri Pirenne (Fischer 1927), caused yet another rift between German and Belgian intellectuals (mostly both Walloon and Flemish). The

26 Jiří Konůpek was one of the most important Czech translators of French and Francophone literature, a disciple of Václav Černý, who was excluded from academia for political reasons.

27 These two facets of the 'Czech' Verhaeren were thus reflected in the academic reception of the period 1945–1989: while Vladimír Brett, who headed the Department of Romance Studies at Charles University in Prague, emphasized the importance of Verhaeren for the development of Czech committed literature, especially in the work of Stanislav Kostka Neumann, Vladimír Stupka, who headed the Department of Romance Studies at Brno University, focused on Verhaeren's symbolist beginnings. I thank Petr Kylaoušek for helping me access the habilitation thesis of Vladimír Stupka from 1960.

motivation for Šalda's insistence on the 'French' character of Verhaeren's poetry can be seen as a reaction to the systematic efforts of German-speaking artists and critics, such as Zweig (Buchinger 2012) and Schlaf to stress the 'Germanic' features in the aesthetics of French-speaking Flemish writers (Defraeye/Mitterbauer/Reyns-Chikuma 2022) and against the German efforts to 'germanise' Belgian authors, a strategy clearly used by authors and critics such as Stefan Zweig or Johannes Schlaf (Roland 2012; 2013). Indeed, as Clément Dessy writes, when Zweig's book on Verhaeren was finally translated and published in Great Britain during WWI, similar criticism was raised by British critics against the efforts by Zweig to make Verhaeren more 'German'. By this time, Germany invaded Belgium and Verhaeren, forced into British exile, broke all contacts with Zweig and even his widow Marthe Verhaeren did not renew the contacts after the end of the war (Dessy 2021; Defraeye/Mitterbauer/Reyns-Chikuma 2022).

Zweig participated in the climactico-geographical identity cultural discourse, widespread in Europe at the beginning of the 20th century (Boia 2005). The discourse on the 'Nordic' cultures was part of it and Zweig was including Belgian literature in the 'Nordic' ones, which he considered more 'clairvoyant' and positively detached from French literature and its 'Latin purity' eroded by positivism. As his 1910 monograph on Verhaeren reveals, Zweig "believed that the Belgian race lay essentially in the mixture the neighboring French and Germanic races and thus reflected the ethnic and linguistic diversity of Europe" (Rensen 2015: 4), mirroring the narrative promulgated by Belgian historians themselves (most importantly by the aforementioned Henri Pirenne and further developed by Edmond Picard and Paul Colin, see Roland 2004), while trying to establish a positive identity for Belgium based on cultural syncretism and openness to Europe, which would also strengthen its political project as an independent country. However, after trying to establish their position somewhere between France and Germany, the Belgian intellectuals and artists decidedly moved towards France during and immediately after WWI (Roland 2004; 2013).

Šalda therefore follows Verhaeren's own cultural shift when he claims in his essay of 1917 that Verhaeren is a pure Frenchman by his "objectivist idealism, his creative social faith, by the style of his sensibility, thought and judgement" (Šalda 1962: 15f.). This definition does not contain any geographical, climatic, or biological-racial criteria. Šalda thus rejects a racially and politically motivated pan-Germanic interpretation and places the Belgian poet within the French aesthetic tradition, while criticizing Zweig's interpretation. From a 'valuable collaborator' of 1909 Zweig becomes for Šalda 'a German literary essayist':

The poet, once dismissed as a barbarian by the narrow French traditionalists, Jean Moréas and the *Ecole romane*²⁸, and hastily and superficially appropriated by various German literary essayists as a German of race and soul, was in truth a pure Frenchman, in his objectivist idealism, in his creative social faith, in the very style of his feeling, his thinking, his judgement. His magnificent *Soir* [Evening] from *Les Forces Tumultueuses* [The Fiery Elements], in which he placed himself and his entire

28 Despite this comment, Jean Moréas and his circle were very popular in Bohemia since 1880s, being highly regarded by Jaroslav Vrchlický, promoted by Charles Morice, his collaborator and translated by Karel Čapek in his anthology of modern French poetry of 1920.

work like a grain of wheat before the immense objective of an accomplished future, of accomplished times, by this unique movement of humility and pride fused into one, is an essentially French poem, a fiery spark, springing straight from the hearth of the national soul. (Šalda 1962: 15f.).

Šalda was clearly aware of the cultural debates of his time, both in German and French cultural sphere. Contrary to the tendency to associate national character (and aesthetics) with geography, climate, and biology, Šalda adopted the model of national belonging by choice. His shift in interpreting Verhaeren offers interesting evidence of that. At the crossroads of French and Germanic cultures, between ‘North’, ‘West’ and ‘East’, Belgium had a special place in the climate-racial discourse of the turn of the 20th century. As Svetlana Čečović notes, Belgian writers themselves used this symbolism in their aesthetic and identity research, forging the myth of the ‘Nordic soul’ in the late nineteenth century: “This literary stereotype combining ‘French and German ingredients’ into a Belgian culture, was crystallized by French-speaking Flemish authors such as Émile Verhaeren, Maurice Maeterlinck and Georges Rodenbach” (Čečović 2019: 33). Conversely, their conservative French detractors used the same strategy to attack the ‘impurity’ of Belgian French-language poetry. In reaction to these discursive strategies of symbolic exclusion, the members of *La Jeune Belgique* came to embrace a model of cultural hybridity and “métissage” (Čečović 2019: 33).

Šalda was visibly aware of the polemics initiated by *École romane* against the Belgian symbolists, and Verhaeren in particular. As Patrick McGuinness has correctly observed, Charles Maurras multiplied attacks against Belgian writers, accusing them of mastering the language by subverting it and diverting it from French culture. These accusations were also present in Rémy de Gourmont’s essays of this period (see the special issue of *Worlds of Literature* of 2022, in particular Gauthier 2022). The hybrid mythological creatures (such as centaurs) that populate their poetry symbolized, according to McGuinness, representatives of mixed cultures, such as Jews, Belgians or Germans, dubious peoples against whom the purity of Latin poetry had to be erected. These criticisms were relayed by representatives of *Ecole romane*, such as Ernest Raynaud in 1892 in the *Mercure de France*:

Il importait de restituer à la langue française son intégrité première. Il importait de sauvegarder notre patrimoine de cet assaut furieux donné au nom de Wagner par des hordes belges, allemandes et tartares. L'idée romane est donc née surtout d'un réveil de l'esprit national. (Raynaud quoted by McGuinness 2015: 235)

[It was important to restore the French language to its original integrity. It was important to safeguard our heritage from this furious assault in the name of Wagner by Belgian, German and Tartar hordes. The idea of Romanity was therefore born above all out of a revival of the national spirit.]

Let us return to the meaning of the title *Novina* of Šalda’s magazine. An aspect of Turgenev’s novel that could have inspired Šalda was the concept of national culture. A convinced Westerner, Turgenev in his last novel gives a positive value to hybridity and cultural and national mixing. As Olga Gortchanina notes in her doctoral thesis,

The Virgin Soil is dominated by a trio of characters – Neжданov, the illegitimate son of a Russian aristocrat, Marianna, a young Russian girl with a Polish father, and Solomine, a simple Russian man steeped in Anglo-Saxon pragmatic culture. While the most typical representative of the Russian character, Neжданov, ends up committing suicide, Marianna and Solomine unite after his death and form a couple who clearly represent a vision for the future of Russia. The solidity and strength of these two characters is nourished by their cultural ‘hybridity’ (Gortchanina 2014). Turgenev sees the future in openness to other cultures and transnational mixing. This is how his work fits into modernism and partly explains the interest he aroused in Šalda, an advocate of opening of Czech culture to international impulses.²⁹ As in the conclusion of Turgenev’s *Virgin Soil*, Šalda establishes miscegenation and hybridity as positive principles: Verhaeren’s ‘hybrid’ cultural identity thus strengthens the quality of his French identity for Šalda. Šalda’s ‘francization’ of Verhaeren can be further understood as a gesture against the strategies of alienation by the perceived dominant cultures employed against the peripheral ones. It is a rejection of cultural identity being defined by geography and biology (as does Raynaud, who gives a ‘racial’ definition of the ‘national spirit’) to which Šalda prefers a belonging to ideas. Šalda’s insistence of Verhaeren’s ‘French’ identity can be seen as a modernist act – affirming identity as a personal choice, independent of place of birth (geography), socio-economic determination (class) and ‘ethnicity’ (biological and racial aspect).

8. CONCLUSION – VERHAEREN AS CATALYSER OF CZECH MODERNISM AND AVANT-GARDE

The extensive body of work authored by Émile Verhaeren explains the multiplicity of interpretations and the diverse reception that have unfolded around it, revealing the diversity of modernist art projects at the turn of the century in Europe. As the editors of the 2016 special issue of the Belgian literary magazine *Textyles* dedicated to the reception of Verhaeren argue:

Émile Verhaeren est probablement le poète qui bénéficie du plus de stature dans la poésie belge francophone entre la fin du XIXe siècle et le début de la Seconde Guerre mondiale. Il est un peu notre Victor Hugo, quoique d’une autre époque, le romantisme en moins, le modernisme en plus. (Aron/Bertrand 2016: 8)

[Émile Verhaeren has probably enjoyed the most eminent status in French-speaking Belgian poetry between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the Second

²⁹ It is to be noted that while not succumbing to general antisemitic atmosphere in Bohemia of the turn of the 20th century, Šalda did not hesitate to use a homophobic argument in a vicious public scandal of 1909, which opposed him and his aesthetic adversary Jiří Karásek ze Lvovic (pseudonym of the Czech decadent artist Josef Karásek, 1871–1951). While publicly accusing Karásek of being the author of vulgar anonymous letters addressed to him and four other artists of Šalda’s circle, Šalda used Karásek’s homosexuality and his defence of Oscar Wilde as proofs of Karásek’s flawed morals. The affair had major professional consequences for Karásek, who was temporarily suspended from his employment as a public servant at the national postal services and remained marked by the affair for the rest of his life.

World War. He is a bit like our Victor Hugo, albeit from a different era, without romanticism and with modernism added.]

In Great Britain, as Clément Dessy notes, “it is the regions of northern England and Wales where the memory of his work has perhaps best persisted, thanks to the poetic mirror it held up to them” (Dessy 2016: 137). In Germany, Zech’s translation of Verhaeren’s poetry is said to have been the underestimated impetus for the expressionist aesthetics (Roland 2016: 102). In Poland, in Kazimierz Filip Wize’s translation, “the Polish public could read in Verhaeren’s stanzas a hymn to the glory of the native land and of the peasant, the faithful guardian of national values” (Niedokos 2016: 118). In Italy, Verhaeren’s importance for the development of futurism has been the focus of critical interest in recent years (Castiglione 2011). *Textyles*, however, omits the importance of Verhaeren in the Czech context discussed here, and his role in the formation of Czech modernism from its early onset in the 1880s till the historical avant-garde of the 1920s.

The major actors of Czech modernism each constructed ‘their own’ Verhaeren, whether baroque, symbolist, neo-classical, avant-garde, or revolutionary. Indeed, the inspiration by Émile Verhaeren’s work in the first decade of the 20th century seems to be one of the few commonalities shared by representatives of several generations with different (often violently opposing) agendas and visions of modern art that were to confront each other between 1880s and 1920s.

Before 1918, the reception of Belgian francophone writers, with Verhaeren at the center, developed in a triangular model. It was an opportunity to create a critical dialogue with the dominant Germanic Austrian culture of the Habsburg empire but also to further nuance Czech Francophilia as a militant, identity-affirming tool, through the appropriation of a foreign literature that might have been perceived as peripheral at various times both by the French and German cultural establishment. Šalda’s rejection of the Germanic appropriation of Verhaeren by Austrian critics such as Zweig and Schlaf and his identification with French literature must be understood within this larger cultural context.

After 1918, Verhaeren’s work was used for establishing the avant-garde of the 1920s, especially through the theater adaptations, stressing the revolutionary dimension of the work. This tendency would further prevail between 1948–1989. The work of Émile Verhaeren was thus steering Czech culture through complex meanders of modernism and modernity throughout the large part of the 20th century.

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