

The Mnemopoetics of Czech Traditional Ballads¹



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ABSTRACT

This study aims to introduce the Czech traditional ballad to the international reader from the perspective of mnemopoetics, i.e., inherent textual patterns of orally transmitted compositions that support the singers' memory. It discusses Czech traditional balladry's distinctive features and important mnemopoetic textual patterns — such as first line, genre, repetition and incremental repetition, assonance/rhyme scheme, law of three, strophe patterning, and parallelism — which are illustrated in these ballads. Special focus is paid to the supra-narrative function of formulas, especially connected to green and black epithet formulas, using the analytical framework of Flemming J. Andersen's *Commonplace and Creativity: The Role of Formulaic Diction in Anglo-Scottish Traditional Balladry* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1985). The study forms a conclusion that mnemopoetics of Czech ballads exist but are less prominent than in Czech traditional lyric songs, and discusses the role of Czech traditional ballads in the formation of Czech cultural memory.

KEYWORDS:

Czech ballads, mnemopoetics, Czech Lands, Bohemia, Moravia, small epics

To my knowledge, there is no existing study in English about Czech balladry. The task of the following article is thus to introduce specific features of Czech ballads,² and to do so from the perspective of (performative) *mnemopoetics*. By this word, I mean the very features of textual poetics within orally transmitted compositions — here ballads — that support the singers' memory. By putting into brackets the word 'performative', I stress the need to imaginatively step into the singer's (or singers') shoes when involved in the armchair analysis of song texts. I coined the term *mnemopoetics*, as I realized that the extant word *mnemotechnique* is not very precise, as it implies the conscious decision of applying strategies to learn songs, and my field research so far invalidates this: my informer-singers stress that all they did to memorize a new song was to 'sing it again and again.'³ The application of *mnemopoetics* in Czech ballads should thus serve a double-function: both to test the validity of the concept of *mnemopoetics*, and to briefly introduce

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- 1 This study was supported by the grant GA UK No. 300218, entitled 'Memory and Formulas in Folk Songs', realized at Charles University, Faculty of Arts.
 - 2 I use Czech here as an inclusive term for both Bohemian and Moravian part of the Czech Lands.
 - 3 Alžbeta Bašteková, pensioner (b. 1927, Papradno, Slovakia). Similar accounts I received from other informers, Anna Patáčíková, Cecília Patáčíková, Karolína Balušíková, Marie Jedličková. Only Radovan Beťák (b. 1978) from Prague who is interested in folklore from Horňácko in Moravian Slovakia region, would upon request think of the schemata that he would apply when learning new songs.



Czech traditional ballads to the international reader. As far as the latter, this study is much indebted to seminal synthesis by Oldřich Sirovátka and Marta Šrámková (Sirovátka, Šrámková, 1983, pp. 223–249).

I.

Well into the 1830s, Czech romantics thought no songs like Czech ballads existed, and being left only with lyric songs, they stressed the ‘soft’ feature of Czech songs, and hereby initializing the concept of a ‘dove-like’ Czech nation.⁴ They viewed Czech songs in opposition to Russian and Serbian — according to their knowledge — ‘essentially epic’ songs (Sirovátka, Šrámková, 1983, p. 247). Soon, however, the founding fathers of romantic Czech song collecting, who collected both texts and melodies, František Sušil in Moravia (Sušil, 1835/1998) and Karel Jaromír Erben in Bohemia (Erben, 1840/1937), had provided extensive examples of balladry. Sušil refers to ballads as ‘story-telling songs’ (‘písně dějpravné’), and being a Catholic priest, he thought them so significant, that he placed them right after ‘religious epic songs’ (‘legendy’) in level of importance.⁵ Erben grouped ballads under the heading of ‘narrative songs’ (‘písně rozpravné’) which he subdivided into religious ‘legends’ (‘legendy’) and secular ‘ballads’ (‘balady’). Czech traditional folk ballad then — the term *balada* being borrowed from English via German — is defined, implicitly, by these two seminal folk song collections. An explicit definition, based on the nature of the songs included in the two anthologies under their given headings, may be the following: *Ballad — in Czech folkloristic tradition— is a short secular epic song passed through oral tradition with lyric undertones, strophe structure, a thematic showing of intimate human dramas, and based almost entirely in a village setting. It is narrated in the 3rd person using past tense, and its style is detached. Unlike in lyric songs focusing mostly on one moment, the action spreads over a longer period of time. Culprits are punished or punish themselves. The concept includes humorous short epics, though most ballads are tragic.* The concept of *balada*, then, roughly corresponds to its English counterpart — traditional ballad — and we can further refer to these with only the English word. The percentage of ballads within the Sušil and Erben corpora are, respectively, relatively small, yet the amount of unique ballad types is three times larger in Moravia than in Bohemia,

4 In this endeavour Czech romantics were influenced by the much-quoted chapter ‘On Slavian Nations’ from J. G. Herder’s (1800, pp. 482–484). They however narrowed this quote to refer to Czech nation, and not the whole Slavic world. For discourse analysis of the Czech early 19th century debate on Czech ‘softness’ and German ‘hardness’ see: Macura, 1995.

5 Here is a list of František Sušil’s groupings in his *Moravské národní písně* (1998) followed by the total of songs in the given section: 1. Sacred epic songs and lyric songs 182; 2. Epic songs, i.e. Ballads 246; 3. Songs about Love 708; 4. Marriage Songs (songs before marriage, after marriage and general) 235; 5. Songs about Family 76; 6. Occupational Songs (During different occupations, during Harvest) 131+54=185; 7. Army songs 117; 8. Tavern songs 199; 9. Jocular, allegorical and naive songs 306; 10. Ceremonial songs 107.

and all major ballad types found in Erben's can also be found in Sušil's.⁶ In order to introduce the richness of Czech balladry, this study will focus on the Sušil collection.⁷

What are specific features of Czech Ballads, i.e., what do Czech ballads share with their Slavic and European counterparts and how do they differ? Czech ballads belong to the 'small epic'. As no heroic epic survived, Czechs are left only with Romantic forgeries of manuscripts by Zelená Hora and Dvůr Králové,⁸ and the maverick works of the historian and musicologist, Vladimír Karbusický, who found traces of a great epic back in medieval Bohemia (Karbusický, 1995). Among the Western Slavic regions there are no *byliny*, which can commonly be found in Ukraine, Russian, and South Slavic epics which — unlike the intimate conflicts of ballads — depict fights of great ethnic importance.⁹ What distinguishes Czech ballads thematically, are their almost exclusively non-heroic, rural setting, offering images of village life from that period. Maidens cutting grass and going for water, and farmers ploughing the field, while shepherds, millers, and servants are its protagonists. The conflict often starts when a figure arrives from outside the village and disturbs the community's quiet way of life, such as when a feudal lord targets a beautiful girl cutting grass and forces her to go to his castle; or a conflict erupts between the young village hero and gamekeeper, the latter a negative or even devilish figure due to his commitment to the feudal lord and his inclinations to seduce or even rape girls from the village, etc (Sirovátka, Šrámková, p. 233). In Moravian ballads, a Turk drags a young mother away, forcing her to leave her children behind. One obvious reason for the lack of aristocracy within Czech people's projection of themselves, is the loss of Czech nobility after the Czech cultural genocide, which followed the Battle of White Mountain in 1620. It was precisely during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that Czech traditional songs gained their current form,¹⁰ they shared many of their plots with other European ballads — such as the return of the beloved from war or from the

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- 6 In Sušil's collection of Moravian songs, the ballads count for 246 of the whole corpus of 2361 songs, that is, more than 10 percent, together with 182 religious epic songs, it is more than 18 percent. In Erben's collection, we find 47 ballads out of 2200 songs, that is less than 3 percent, even if we add to it the total of further 14 religious epic songs Erben collected. The formative push of the singing voice on music in Moravia resulting in less regular music — and stanza schemes than in Bohemia. In Bohemia, western part of Czech lands closer to Germany, Erben and other collectors recorded melodies probably already at a later stage, melodies already much influenced by folk brass music (Markl, Karbusický, 1963, pp. 25–29).
- 7 Songs from Sušil collection will later be quoted by the tune numbers in the 1998 edition, which is a facsimile of the 1941 edition, which respects the numbering of 1860 edition.
- 8 In the light of late 19th century modern scholarship, these forgeries were stripped them of 'authenticity' by the initiative lead by the first Czechoslovak president T.G. Masaryk. This would not have happened if their originators conceived them — instead of ancient texts — as edited recordings of what village people sang, see Burke, 1978, pp. 3–23.
- 9 The Balkan epic, thought, does not limit itself merely to heroic poetry as in the Balkans we find instance of ballads as well.
- 10 One can even refer to the plebeian roots of Czech national narratives, such as the one about Přemysl Ploughman.



grave, the Joan of Arc figure, recognition of one's beloved because of ring, the 'King Lear story', etc.,¹¹— yet 'ruralized' them.

As far as good and evil is concerned, there is opposition between good and bad behaviours, but there is not a complete polarity between terrible and good characters, as in Czech broadside ballads.¹² In Czech traditional oral balladry, the universal Christian moral order is upheld. The moral order is trespassed by the cruel deeds performed, but it is never cancelled (Sirovátka, Šrámková, p. 230). The characters regret their evil actions, repent, and ask for punishment. The message of Czech traditional ballads is clear: learn to discern between good and evil decisions.

According to Šrámková and Sirovátka, ballads would be listened to during monotonous work (spinning, plucking feathers; heavy work in the forest or in the field). Ballads would also be sung during weddings (especially ballads connected to happy and unhappy love and marital life, especially popular in the Strání region was a song about the bride being harassed by her mother-in-law¹³), and religious legends would be sung during Christian festivities. During collective singing and dancing, ballads would often be shortened and turn to lyric songs (!), as there was never enough time or space for a whole ballad during the dance in front of the musicians.

Ballad singing requires a good memory, so there would often be singers who would focus strongly on ballads, i.e., ballads formed a substantial part of their repertoire (Sirovátka, Šrámková, p. 247).¹⁴ Unlike the current song tradition of the Czech Roma, traditional Czech ballads are a rare find today, out of all of my informers, only one of them could sing a ballad.¹⁵ The current variation process of Czech and Moravian songs seems to be very meagre today, compared to its heyday in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: I dare say that the singer may have forgotten a strophe or changed a word due to (creative) forgetfulness, but not much variation occurs in lyric songs, and even less in ballads. Sadly, there are virtually no Czech ballad singers anymore and if there is a traditional ballad in singer's repertoire, a substantial change in wording does not seem to occur if the singer is asked to sing the same ballad or song repeatedly. My research of the Czech and Slovak situation indicates that the versions of the songs include only minor changes/omissions.¹⁶ The Parry-Lord theory

11 Family narratives of Czech traditional ballads were catalogued in a Czech-German edition by Šrámková, 1970. Demonological and legendary narratives were analyzed and catalogued by Šrámková, & Sirovátka, 1990.

12 Terminologically, in Czech broadside ballads are commonly referred to as 'kramářské písně' (hucster songs), the word *balada* is not used, and the scholarly study of the two is lead separately.

13 Popelka 1995, p. 15.

14 Popelka mentions a singer from Strání, Alžběta Končítíková, who sang to him 80 ballads in the 1970s and 1980s (Popelka, p. 16).

15 Marie Jedličková from Slavkov u Brna listed among the songs in her repertoire the ballad 'Orphaned Child' ('Osiřelo dítě'), Sušil 341 (p. 151).

16 I can draw this conclusion only from my recording sessions with five Czech and Slovak informants in their late eighties and early nineties. Current cimbalom groups ('cimbálové muziky') also do not much encourage variation process, texts are written down, and the words of the regional variants are piously kept. In a personal interview in Brno in October

can thus only be imagined having held currency in the past, but not in today's current state. This, however, does not apply to the still rich singing tradition of the Czech Roma (see the project www.gilora.cz). The Czech and Moravian traditions have been fixed within collections, and current singers piously stick to the versions they had learned and do not re-create them, as they feel they cannot take the liberty (unless in jest and children's folklore!). The following lines may only help us *imagine/(re)construct* the singers' situation during the time when variation processes were still alive, before 1900, by using *lyrics* as a starting point and accompanied by commentaries of current and recorded singers.



II.

Our task is framed by the application of the term *mnemopoetics* to Czech traditional ballads. The term is my coinage, but the poetics of traditional oral literature have been amply described. As far as the epic, Axel Olrik created the first set list of organizational patterns for an epic singer's memory by describing the 'laws' that 'limit the freedom of [oral] composition' (Olrik, 1999, pp. 83–97). Olrik's idea of 'limiting freedom of composition' was more recently adopted by David Rubin (Rubin, 1995) and Daniel Levitin (Levitin, 2008). Our task here, is to list the most important mnemopoetic features, as they are relevant to Czech traditional ballads, while imagining — following Parry and Lord — the singer during the moment of performance. As traditional ballads are songs, of course, we need to keep in mind that while doing this, we are dealing with an amphibian creature who dwells both in music and text.

However, we need to start even before the singing. In order to sing, i.e., before the first line is sung, often a *rhythmic bodily movement* is needed.¹⁷ Ludvík Kuba, Czech song collector and painter, has recorded such a connection in the Slavic world:

A seventy-year-old woman, a wonderful singer and very helpful otherwise, would not sing a *skakucha* to me. And when she wanted to start, she could not. Only as she succumbed to herself, that is, when she started swinging with her whole body as if when dancing, she managed (Kuba, 1953 p. 265).¹⁸

Ludvík Kuba refers here to a different region (Belarus) and different song-genre ('*skakucha*'), yet this passage is quoted by another well-known Czech song-folklorist, Vladimír Úlehla, who extends the validity of Kuba's observation on the mnemonic role of bodily rhythm to the inhabitants of the South-Moravian town, Strážnice. Úlehla describes the performance of the 'long song' ('*táhlá píseň*') by his contributor,

2016, the ballad scholar Marta Šrámková was also sceptical of current variation process. There often seems to be extensive pressure to keep the preserved version.

¹⁷ Scholars, such as French Jesuit Marcel Jousse, have contributed to establishing mnemonic 'laws' by focusing on oral cultures and linking parallelism to human breath and body, and to song recall (Jousse, 1990).

¹⁸ Translation mine.



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auntie Žalmánková. Úlehla admits that the movement may be less conspicuous, but stresses the singer moves ‘like a walking youngster’ (‘jako kráčející šuhaj’) even while sitting, and links this movement to a short gap between the initial movement and the first words of the song.¹⁹ Such bodily movement — no matter how pronounced it may be — obviously helps mnemonic recall not only at the very beginning of the song, but also in the midst of singing.²⁰

After a few rocking movements — or a short moment of concentration — the *first line* sung sets the music and metre of the whole (balladic) song. During my field-research in Slovakia and Moravia, singers either regretted not having written down the beginnings of songs,²¹ or they really did write the list beforehand and then used it as a starting point for singing.²² (The biblical book of Ezekiel famously bears witness to this principle as the prophet first needs to eat a piece of paper to start his prophesy!) The general semantic contour of the song is often provided by the very first lines, the initial sentence structure determining the topic of the song. No wonder first lines — incipits — have been largely collected and analysed by Czech folklorists (Šrámková, Hrabalová, 1968, pp. 207–222; Šrámková, 1968, pp. 333–339).

The first lines determine the (balladic) *genre* that ‘provides general cues for recall and limits the available recalls to those that fit its pattern’ (Rubin, p. 304). Czech ballads — like their English counterparts — are mostly in past tense and 3rd person, with prominent dialogue and the narrator’s cool distance from the story, unlike in love songs. The singers know this, and such rules of the genre productively limit their choices.

In Moravia, the first line is often *repeated* — just like in the blues. The second line is often repeated in Bohemian ballads.²³ Repetition is an important mnemopoetic feature which gives time for the singer to recall the song, but the repeated words also have a greater semantic significance and often hint at the underlying theme of the song.

Incremental repetition — the repetition of the previous line followed by a new piece of information — occurs both in Czech ballads and lyric songs. Its most simple form is shown in the following example: ‘[...] that he was my sweetheart. || The sweetheart | they carry over the graveyard’.²⁴ Yet the repeated word does not necessarily need to come from the last position in the line: ‘Do not hang me on the oaks, | where I would be eaten by pigeons, | hang me rather on the fir tree, | where my love goes for water.’²⁵ Another, similar instance of syntactic incremental structure, is the repetition of the pre-

19 Úlehla, 1949, p. 313.

20 current neuroscientific research on kinesthetic memory.

21 Alžbeta Baštěková from Papradno during my field research in 2018 in Western Slovakia.

22 Marie Jedličková from Slavkov u Brna, Czechia.

23 ‘Strophes are mostly two-lined, (consisting of eight, six or seven syllables); or four-lined (consisting mostly of 6— syllables). [...] Repetition of whole verses is common, in Moravia more often the first verse repeats, whereas in Bohemia it is more common that the second line repeats which gives rise to three-line strophes. But common is also the repetition of both lines, so that a four-line form appears. [...] Refrain, too, appears but mostly as a marginal phenomenon’ (Sirovátka, Šrámková, pp. 235–236).

24 ‘[...] že bel můj mládenec. || Jož toho mládenca | po krchově nesó,’ Sušil 174 (p.79).

25 ‘Nevešajte mne na duby, | objedli by mě holubi. | Povešte mě radš na jedlu, | kam chodí milá pro du.’ Sušil 196 (p. 91).



ceding line, now expressed as an apostrophe: '[...] how come his black horse | moves so heavily under him? | How come, my horsey, | how come you move so heavily?'²⁶ Even a question prompting an answer, such as in the following example, may be placed under the rubric of incremental repetition: 'What has happened over the mountains? | A wife has killed a husband.'²⁷ Incremental repetition may also combine with the *antithesis*, another common principle of mnemopoetic patterning of folksongs: 'a mother walks to you, | so does your sister and your brothers. || It is not my mother, | nor my sisters and brothers. || It is the executioner | who is to chop off my head'.²⁸

When illustrating incremental repetition, Marcel Jousse (1886–1961), French renegade anthropologist, modernist experimenter and biblical studies scholar, gives an example of a schoolmate who was unable to recite a poem in front of the class, but when someone whispered to him the beginning of the verse, he would finish the verse or even strophe on his own. Jousse then interprets incremental repetition as way in which the reciter can self-cue himself (Jousse, 1990, p. 22). One of my informers, Radovan Beták, succinctly expressed this as a song's cumulative iteration: 'So when you breathe in at the end of the strophe, you always know what you're going to sing next...'²⁹

Šrámková and Sirovátka (1983), according to their statistics, point out the two-line and four-line forms of the Czech *ballad strophe*, with — as mentioned above — first or second line repeated, and the merely marginal occurrence of refrain. The verses are stapled by *rhymes* or *assonances*, forming mostly the AA BB CC... pattern. The assonance is more prominent than the rhyme. As rhyme is a more recent phenomenon, this fact probably points out the greater age and stability of ballads, as well as their less frequent singing occurrence, in contrast to lyric songs which are more fully rhymed. However, no matter if we deal with rhyme or assonance, a pair is always involved, and there is a tendency for many of these pairs to be quite stable and thus ease into memory. The rhyme pair *květ — svět* (flower — world) links the loss of the flower (i.e. lover), to the loss of the world, like in the following Moravian ballad ending: 'A fragrant rose flower is dead, | the whole world aches,'³⁰ an assonance pair *ryba — libá* links the fish ('ryba') which refers to the drowned corpse of the beloved which is being delightful ('libá') to the singer's heart: 'this is the fish, | delightful to my heart's wish.'³¹

Similarly to the situation in Polish songs, as described by Bartmiński, one may discern two major types of *mnemopoetic patterning of the strophe(s)*: the themes either develop the 'immediately preceding theme' — which again is an instance of the above discussed incremental repetition —, or they one by one develop one superordinate theme (Bartmiński, 2016, p. 48). The latter appears in the 'rural King Lear' ballad. After two

26 '[...] což jeho vraný kůň, | pod ním tak těžce jde? || Což pak, můj koníčku, | což mi tak těžce jdeš?' K.J. Erben, *Prostonárodní písně a říkadla*, p. 404.

27 'Co se stalo za horama? Zabíla tam paní pána' Sušil 205 (p. 94).

28 'Jde pro ťa máti, | jdú sestra i brati. || Nejde pro ma máti, | ani sestra brati. || Než to idú kati, | co mia mají státi' Sušil 319 (p. 142). See discussion of parallelism below.

29 Radovan Beták, b. 1978, Prague.

30 'Umřel mně z vonné růže květ, | mrzí mě cely šířý svět' Sušil 394 (p. 172). This translation mine, as well as all following translations from Sušil and Erben.

31 Sušil 396 (p. 173), See also Sušil 187 (p. 85), 395 (p. 172), 399 (p. 174).



cruel daughters offer the old man a noose and beggar's basket respectively, in comes the youngest daughter with a pie.³² Here the pattern combines with other patterns of mnemopoetics, such as Olrik's *law of three* and the *law of initial and final position*.

Are there *opening and closing strophes* in Czech ballads? (Olrik, 1999, p. 88). As far as the beginnings, stock 'openings' are very brief, i.e., 'There was once a ...' ('Byl jest jeden...'), and 'What news?' ('Co se stalo vnově?'). Although there exist ballads with closing paragraphs following tragic events,³³ most Czech ballads end abruptly: 'And they caught the woman, | manacled her | and put her on the gallows.'³⁴ During field-work, it often happens that the singer starts commenting on the song right after they have finished singing the last line,³⁵ often to the detriment of the recording. Ring structure — also sometimes called 'annular structure' — is, to my knowledge, not present in Czech ballads.³⁶

III.

An analogy with repetition is parallelism, which Czech ballads share with their oral counterparts elsewhere. This structure bridges the semantic and syntactic levels. The phenomenon was discovered, and the term *parallelism* was coined by Anglican bishop Robert Lowth, when he searched for poetics in the Hebrew Bible. In his *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of Hebrews*, first published in Latin in 1753, Lowth distinguishes three types of parallelism: synonymous, antithetic and synthetic (Lowth, 1835, p. 200).³⁷ For purposes of ballad mnemopoetics, we can collapse Lowth's categories to merely one which we will simply call 'parallelism' and by it mean a semantic correspondence — a synonymy — between lines.

Lowth hints in the book that parallelism also exists in the (oral) poetry of other nations (Lowth, pp. 200–216, 37–50, pp. 205, 41–46).³⁸ Lowth's claim is verified by Czech

32 Sušil 255 (p. 113).

33 Sušil 181 (p. 82).

34 'A tu paničku chytili, | do želez ju zakovali, | na šibenice ju dali.' Sušil 206 (p. 95).

35 Which I often experienced with my informers, the Patáček sisters of Horná Mariková, Slovakia in Summer 2018, for example.

36 Rubin describes this organization pattern in following terms: 'Progress through a piece can be viewed as a skewer traveling in a straight line through an onion, piercing the skin, each layer, and the centre before continuing through the same layers in reverse order until the skin is reached again at the opposite side. Each layer entered provides the expectation of a layer to be encountered again' (Rubin, 1995, p. 274).

37 Lowth's distinction in *Lectures* in has been Hebrew poetry problematized by Kugel, J. 1981 in *Idea of Biblical Poetry*. New Haven: Yale University Press, who entirely however rejects the mnemonic role of parallelism. The formalist philologist Roman Jakobson has devoted much attention to parallelism, however, his studies on parallelism combine literary and folkloric material, and are unfortunately often exceedingly confusing.

38 The implications of Lowth's linking oral poetry 'among nations' with biblical poetry via parallelism, are enormous, Herder's influential romantic idea of 'Holy Spirit' talking individually to each nation.

balladry and lyric songs. In the following example, where parallelism combines with antithesis, a synonymy between ‘townspeople’ and ‘bees’ is suggested.

The bees were swarming,
 The bees were swarming,
 It was not bees, it was good people
 good people — townspeople.³⁹

The townspeople-bees take the girl against her wishes. She does not want to leave the village where her mother cruelly sent her. It is suggested, by the big dowry the mother bequeathed the girl before her untimely death, that the mother regretted this decision.

The following example from a *Sušil* ballad is more enigmatic: here we encounter a synonymy between (white village) ‘church’ and ‘white rose’, and between a ‘beautiful green meadow’ and the ‘dear girl’:

You church of Bobrov,
 you stand on a beautiful meadow.

A white rose blooms there,
 my dear girl has died.⁴⁰

Parallelism is an important part of mnemopoetics as it structures the song for recall, suggesting vertical synonymous’ pairs.⁴¹ Bartmiński rightly stresses that the philosophical underpinning of parallelism is animism, ‘the faith in unity and interconnection between human beings and nature’ (Bartmiński, 2016, p. 48) and claims that symbols are a ‘reduced parallelism’. This claim is very useful from the standpoint of mnemopoetics and song hermeneutics. In the song above, the initial two-line parallel structure foreshadows the tragic situation. The church stands as a grave on the meadow, the latter symbolizing the young girl.

IV.

Living and co-creating the singing tradition and having the song-repertoire of the region on their tongues, the bearers of tradition are aware of the symbolic meanings in songs where eroticism often plays the main part (Freud, 1999, pp. 177–196). My informers⁴² in western Slovakia thus claimed that the song starting with the line ‘Little

³⁹ ‘Rojily se včeličky, | rojily se včeličky, | nebyly to včeličky || To byli dobří lidé, | dobří lidé měščané.’ *Sušil* 214 (p. 99).

⁴⁰ ‘Ty bobrovsky kosteličku, | stojíš na pěknym travničku. || Kvecě z něho růža bila, | umřela mñe moja mila.’ *Sušil* 1030 (p. 345).

⁴¹ Vertical pairing links this pattern to assonance/rhyme scheme, see above.

⁴² Alžbeta Bašťková and Karolína Balušíková, June 2018.



maple boat, sycamore oar' (Čunček javorový, vesialko klenové), where the girl asks a man to take her over the red sea, refers to a 'pair of lovers'. Karolína Balušíková then added: 'Today lovers ask: Will you come over for coffee? Before they asked: Will you come over for some milk?'⁴³ There is plentiful evidence that bearers of tradition know what they are singing, and there is little need to argue that textual understanding helps them remember the song they decide to sing.

To 'outsiders', however, such as the generations of Czechs taught to sing traditional lyric songs, many famous song-texts make little sense, as little or no background knowledge is offered in schools.⁴⁴ If the outsider happens to be a folklorist, they may employ the hermeneutic circle which starts with understanding of the co(n)text in which the given symbolic formula is employed, shedding light on the formula by the parallel synonymous pair, and broader ethnological study. For current research, the pairs suggested by parallelism are crucial, the database of songs like www.folksong.eu (Koláček, 2019) proves to be an essential tool for finding (re-) occurrences of the same expression.

In my brief inquiry here into the symbolism of Czech ballads as a means of mnemopoetics, I follow Flemming J. Andersen's conceptual framework.⁴⁵ Andersen suggests that next to an ordinary narrative function, there is a 'supra-narrative function' hinted at by the 'narrative function'. The narrative function of the ballad formula 'He took her by the lily-white hand' is simply that the man takes the girl's white hand, nothing more. Its supra-narrative function, however, is rape-seduction. The supra-narrative function of the formula family 'S/he sets his / her back against a tree / oak / thorn / stone / wall' has varying supra-narrative meaning, depending on the gender of the one who leans. If it is a girl, the formula suggests extra-marital child-birth. If it is a man, it implies physical aggression between the protagonist and other men (Flemming, 1985, pp. 181–185). Andersen maintains thus the distinction between 'simple narrative' (literal, manifest) idea and 'supra-narrative' (secondary, latent, symbolic) meaning, and he applies it successfully to epic story lines. The boundary between plain narrative and supra-narrative meaning can often be quite fuzzy, yet the distinction is necessary. The importance of supra-narrative function for mnemopoetics lies in the fact that supra-narrative functions determine 'what the song is about' and cues additional specific formulas.

Let us now return to Czech ballads and start with two nominal-epithet formulas, involving the colours of black and green. One frequent formula, 'black/dark

⁴³ Karolína Balušíková, June 2018.

⁴⁴ the lyric song 'Little Dove Flew' (Vyletěla holubička): 'A little dove flew from a rock | it woke up blue eyes from slumber. || If the blue eyes had not slept, | they would have got the little dove. | It was not a dove, it was a bird, | If you don't want me, my love, let it be' Sušil 1037 (p. 347). To my knowledge, the meaning of song-texts is rarely discussed in classrooms. Even in folkloristic ensembles, children are often not aware of the symbolic, 'supra-narrative' meaning of the songs.

⁴⁵ See Andersen's 'working definition' of formula: 'The ballad formula is a recurrent, multifunctional unit expressing a significant narrative idea, with more or less pronounced supra-narrative function' (Flemming, 1985, p. 37).



wood' (černý/tmavý les) — which sometimes takes the form of a 'black field' (černé pole) — appears both in Czech balladry and lyric songs. Under certain metrical conditions it appears without the epithet 'black'. This formula in Czech ballads is a foreboding that something bad will happen, the death of a girl, or the rape and subsequent murder of a girl in the forest. The boundary between the 'narrative' function and 'supra-narrative' function of this formula is not clear-cut, as impenetrable dark woods are obviously dangerous. Yet the 'black wood' has gained the significance of a formula with supra-narrative function, since anytime the textual formula is utilized, something evil follows: In the dark woods, 'he cut her to nine pieces'.⁴⁶ Ulianka goes to the black forest to find a poisonous snake so she can poison her brother, leaving her free to run away with a group of hussars.⁴⁷ A boy steals four horses in a black forest and is then hung at the gallows,⁴⁸ etc. In lyric songs, the black wood formula signifies the end of a relationship.⁴⁹

Even more flagrant is the 'green cluster' which has great importance in Czech lyric songs and reaches into ballads as well. This cluster covers natural entities with green colouring — grass ('tráva', 'travička', 'travěnka'), grove ('háj', 'hájek', 'hájíček'), wreath ('věnec', 'vínek', 'věneček'), meadow ('louka'), hilltop ('vršek'), field ('pole'), garden ('zahrádka', 'zahrádečka'), etc. Depending on the metrical situation of the line, the adjective 'green' ('zelený', 'zelená', 'zelené') need not be explicitly mentioned. When a green entity from the list, or its derivate, appears in song, its supra-narrative function is linked to the notion of 'erotic attractivity', accompanied by accessory meanings of youth and beauty. In Czech legends, it refers to the Virgin Mary's immaculate conception.⁵⁰ When village lovers are involved, green clusters often suggest erotic relationships or longing for an erotic relationship. When it refers to men, it usually refers to attractive virility, which goes hand in hand with youth and beauty. There is a further binary opposition between the green grass (grove, wreath, meadow, hilltop, treetop etc.) being green, and the same entity *not* being green anymore, or being scythed, hewed, withered etc. The latter refers to the loss of maidenhood which did not lead to marriage, and possible conception of an extra-marital child. The examples, even in ballads, are numerous. For example, the phenomenon of the 'green rose' in the ballad where the gamekeeper killed a girl named Maryška 'instead of a fox', and 'there grew on her three roses, | which nobody can pluck: | the first is white, | the second red, | and the third is beautifully green.'⁵¹ Here, of course, is a clash with reality: rose petals are not green. The greenness is mentioned, highlighted in Olrik's third place, and even preceded by the adjective 'beautiful' to stress the rose's spring-like quality, and the attractivity of the girl. Similarly, special attention is paid to (peacock) green feathers, which girls in lyric songs collect to pass along to a boy they fancy, so

46 'A když došli tmavých lesů, | rozťal ju na devět kusů.' Sušil 244 (p. 109), 'three men' tearing Maruška in forest in Sušil song 301 (p. 133).

47 Sušil 354 (pp. 156–157).

48 Sušil 277 (p. 122).

49 Sušil 477 (p. 200), 549 (p. 217), Sušil 593 (p.228), 616b (p. 233) et al.

50 Sušil 15 (p. 19).

51 Sušil 250 (p. 111).



that he will boast that the girl is his.⁵² Another instance of the green cluster family is the verbal formula of a girl 'cutting grass' which has a direct parallel to the Child ballad formula of a girl going to 'pick flowers in the woods', described by Andersen (Andersen, 1985, pp. 116–119). Thus, for both Sušil and Child, the supra-narrative function of 'cutting grass' is the portent of a rape by a young man often on the pretence that the girl was not allowed to enter the wood.⁵³

Why is the 'green cluster' so prominent? Its central place embodies the young people's struggle to unite true love with the institution of marriage. Unlike among the town's middle-class families, pre-marital sex was mostly tolerated, provided the village pair would marry. Being a single mother, of course, was a social stigma. Only unmarried and childless people in Bohemian and Moravian villages were placed in a worse social position. Girls' persuasions, cries and laments about false love are the theme of many lyric love songs, paralleled by songs depicting men escaping from responsibility after a girl's pregnancy, voluntarily recruiting themselves for the army, finding excuses, or even publicly mocking the girl. For the village boy, the marriage was also a major shift in life, and many songs lament the end of freedom and flirtations, which had often dire consequences for the girls.

There are many other frequent formulas in Czech songs, let me mention the formulas that specifically occur in ballads. The formula of 'washing clothes' ('prádlo pere') shares the same supra-narrative function in Czech songs as the formula of grass cutting: 'I was washing my clothes on the bridge, | this is where I lost my beauty.'⁵⁴ 'Ulianka, pure virgin, | was washing clothes at the Danube. || There came three hussars: | Come, little Ulianka, come with us.'⁵⁵ In some ballads, though, the act of washing lacks this supra-narrative meaning, as in the moving ballad with a Romeo and Juliet plot about a woman, who waits seven years for her beloved who was recruited into the army and who drowns herself shortly before his arrival. Learning about her death, the returned soldier kills himself.⁵⁶ There is a prominent supra-narrative function of 'knocking on a little window', always suggesting a courtship.⁵⁷ Here the border between narrative and supra-narrative function is again unclear, as the courtship and gift-exchange would often take place underneath the house where the girl lived. A 'footpath' ('chodník') hints at courtship, suggesting the path which the boy walks to woo the girl 'under her window'. Another prominent formula is that of 'running water', which in lyric songs relates almost exclusively to complications in love, with death by drowning present in ballads. Frequently, there is also the formula of a boy asking a girl to 'water his (four) (black) horses' taking the supra-narrative meaning of the girl quenching the boy's burning erotic desire.

52 Sušil 486 (p. 202).

53 Sušil 401, 402, 403, 404 (pp. 174–176). This Czech song type is very popular in Japan under the name 'Oo Makiba Wa Midori'.

54 'Pod mostem sem šaty prala, | tam jsem krásu zanechala.' Sušil 332 (p. 147).

55 Sušil 354 (p. 156).

56 Sušil 189 (p. 86).

57 From ballads, see Sušil 192 (p. 88) and Sušil 198, 199, 200, 201 (pp. 92–93) and Sušil 248 (pp. 110–111).



In ballads however, the supra-narrative function may not be always present. Yet in the following example, the 'footpath' formula, 'running water' formula and 'water my horse' formula go together, with their respective supra-narrative functions. In this beautiful ballad, the girl decides to accompany her lover—soldier to war: 'Not far from the footpath, | good water runs, | come along, my dear, | we will water my horse. || Our black horses | drank from water. | Sit down, my love, sit down, | we will ride slowly.'⁵⁸ The ballad, illustrating an instance of one formula cueing additional formulas, ends by the boy being called to fight and wondering about how high the red blood gushes from him.⁵⁹

As it was already mentioned above, the bearers of tradition are well-aware of the symbolic meanings or 'supra-narrative functions' of the texts they sing. One of my informers, Marie Jedličková, told me, that the 'green grove' was a place where village lovers often went for a walk 'as there were not many other places where to go'. However, one must not be misled by the authenticity of this testimony and only accept answers on the reality of Czech village settings, overlooking that the grove is a continuation of the classical *topos* of ideal landscape, a *locus amuens*, 'beautiful and shaded' (Curtius, 1998, p. 215). In a Czech medieval courtly song, 'In Method's Little Grove' ('V Strachotině hájku'), it is, according to Václav Černý, a re-make of an older Czech folk erotic dancing song of birds as allegories of people (Černý, 1948, pp. 177–185). Even the earliest Czech recorded love lament song, 'Tree Covers with Leaves' ('Dřevo se listem odieva'), refers to the potency of the colour green (Havránek, Hrabák, 1957, p. 397). The green cluster is prominent in French courtly love songs, which find their way to Bohemia via German *Minnesang* (Jaluška, 2010, pp. 107–118).

How does the above relate to the singers' memory and creativity when singing? From the armchair analysis and the current singers' comments, we may only *construct* what role the initial parallelism played for singers before the fixation on tradition, that is, when solo singers themselves felt freer to "compose" lyrics from the given reservoir of formulas, and before folklorism gradually started to supersede folklore. The role of the opening parallelism with its symbolic/supra-narrative meaning was to limit a singer's "composition during performance" (Parry/Lord). This creative limitation enabled their memory to "stich formulas" together within the given theme. For example, a song starting with the image of a dark wood is followed by a tragic narrative, an image of running water would— in Czech and Moravian⁶⁰ folklore — always signal a breach in the love of the portrayed lovers, etc. I suggest that this limitation,

58 'Nedaleko chodníčka | teče dobrá vodička, | slízej, milá, slízej dolů, | napojíme konička. || Naše vrané koničky | napily se vodičky: | Sedej, milá, sedej na ně, | pojedem pomalůčky' Sušil 176 (p. 80).

59 Omnipresent expressions such as 'little dove' ('holuběnka'), 'little sparrow' ('laštovečka'), 'little daughter' ('dcerečka'), 'little rose' ('ružička'), etc., for young women, and 'eagle' ('orel'), 'hawk' ('sokol') and 'little son' ('syneček'), etc., for young men are almost too obvious to mention.

60 In current Czech Romani song tradition, however, for example, the image of wood and running water suggest a completely different set of cues.



accompanied by the other mnemopoetic features, especially incremental repetition, play a crucial role in the solo singer's rendering and re-composing of the ballad or lyrical song in the traditional setting before nineteenth century folklorists entered the scene.⁶¹

V.

We have traced mnemopoetic features in Czech ballads from the level of verse and strophe to the semantic level. It needs to be stressed that unlike Czech lyric songs, Czech ballads seem to still be less typified and less 'grounded' by the variation process than Czech lyric songs. The supra-narrative function of formulas is not as universal in Czech ballads as it is in lyric songs, the formulaic shaping of song texts goes much farther in lyric songs, one can even observe Czech lyric songs made almost entirely of formulas,⁶² but this is hardly the case in balladry. Parallelism, too, is far more frequent in lyric songs than in ballads. Rhyme prevails in lyric songs and assonance in ballads. The names of protagonists in lyric songs are almost universally diminutives of Jan and Anna,⁶³ whereas in ballads, next to the usual suspects Janko and Anička, many different protagonist names appear.⁶⁴ All this refers to the already mentioned fact that ballads were sung less often, on more ceremonial occasions and by a special type of singers who specialized in ballads, which were harder to remember, because they are intrinsically less patterned by mnemopoetic features. This is explained by the fact that ballads tell stories within a longer space of time, whereas lyric songs squeeze 'more meaning' into a short expressive form and are semantically denser. The meanings of Czech ballads are thus made quite explicit, as we see the story unfold, whereas Czech lyric songs are more enigmatic in their condensed lyricism and symbolism.

Let us now briefly consider Czech ballads and their relation to Czech collective memory in the view of the preceding paragraphs. While lyric songs tell different nuances, joys, pains, expectations and disappointments of courtship, ballads go on to tell the consequences of courtship, they see to it that the guilty are punished, and warn against the actions of the protagonists (mothers abandoning children and poisoning husbands, men killing maidens in woods, etc.). Ballads (sung in past tense and 3rd person) could for the village community represent what Jan Assmann's named 'cultural memory', as opposed to 'communicative memory' rendered in lyric songs (sung in present tense and 1st person singular), i.e., for the village people, ballads

61 Stabilizing feature for lyrics, apart from the later textual fixation, would of course be group singing where the singers would have to previously agree about the lyrics.

62 See e.g. Sušil 635 (p. 238).

63 Janíček, Janeček, Janko, Janek and Anička, Anka, Andulka, and other diminutive forms of Anna and Jan, according to the region and the rhythmic need.

64 Jas, Heřman, Jan, Václávek, Martin, Vichorýnek, Salvarýnek, Matoušek, Sobol, Trud etc.; Katerina, Marijanka, Komendová, Maruška, Barbora, Verunka, Pivníčková, Ranoša, Durna, Uliška etc. in the ballads section of Sušil.

may be viewed as the superego of the lyric love songs (Assmann, 2008, pp. 109–118). Second, it is tempting to juxtapose the rural protagonists of Czech ballads, whose evil decisions are often provoked from the ‘outside’, and the historical fears of alterity that would pierce the comfort zone of the Czech nation state. Third, in the Czech Lands, the social bandit songs — as well as social banditry! — existed merely in Eastern Moravia and Moravian Wallachia and are virtually non-existent in Bohemia and the western part of Moravia (Votruba, 2010, pp. 153–173). Fourth and last, Czech traditional ballads never entered the scope of wider knowledge, most educated Czechs today are simply unaware of Czech traditional ballads. Today, Czech traditional ballads are taught neither during music classes nor literature classes. Their late discovery, greater length, less prominent mnemopoetics, scarcity of singing opportunities, crudity, cruelty and lack of grand historical themes may be the reason why. For those Czechs of the nineteenth century with more elegant tastes, it was hard to relate to traditional ballads.

The segue out of obscurity was provided by the folklorist and poet Karel Jaromír Erben. Drawing on Czech traditional ballads and fairy tales, both of which he collected, Erben authored a collection of literary ballads named *Kytice* in 1853 (Erben, 2016). In his wreath of ballads, a true literary jewel, Erben managed to render the ballad’s crudeness and guilt-and-punishment morality acceptable to the gilded taste of the nineteenth century Czech reader, while stylistically adapting ballad mnemopoetics for literary purposes via the usage of incremental repetition and parallelism. But that is another story.

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