

## THE SONNET OF THE CZECH DECADENCE

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**I**n *fin de siècle* the Czech sonnet was not more than a hundred years old. It had been introduced by Joser Jungmann as late as in the last stage of classicism at the beginning of the 19th century. In all literatures, the metre of the sonnet is usually the most frequent long metre of the given versification; the trochaic pentameter in the first half of the 19th century fully supports this thesis. The canonical form of the sonnet is represented by Jan Kollár's *Slávy dcera* (1821, followed by new editions with growing number of sonnets, the last edition containing 645 sonnets). Kollár preserves traditional enclosing rhymes of the quatrains and the alternation of masculine and feminine endings. The function of the sonnet as a stanzaic form is twofold in *Slávy dcera*: it is both an independent poem of a Petrarchan cycle, and an equivalent of a complex stanza (e. g. ottava rima) as a constitutive part of one type of romantic epos (e. g. *Child Harold's Pilgrimage*). The connection between these two genres, love lyrics and a presentation of motion through space, seems to be something uncommon in the history of the sonnet cycle. Imitating Kollár led to sonnet fever in the second quarter of the century, an inevitable childhood disease of each European literature. Not only pentameters are used, but the trochee is strongly dominant. Iambic sonnets are exceptional; one of their authors is Karel Hynek Mácha, but all his remaining splendid sonnets except one are trochaic. Among the attempts to break down Kollár's rigid scheme during the first half of the century, translations, above all from Petrarch and Mickiewicz, preceded the original writings.

The sonnet's definite transition to iamb was effected as late as about 1860 by the minor poets of Neruda's generation (Neruda and Hálek themselves were minimally interested in it); Rudolf Mayer and Gustav Pflieger Moravský were influenced by German romantic poets,

who, as we know, were led by Schlegel to iambs and feminine endings in sonnets. This iambic upheaval is very important, because an opposition trochee/iamb was central to all Czech verse of the second half of the century. It corresponds to the semantic contrasts “domestic / international”, “traditional / modern”, “simplicity / pretentiousness”, “emotional / rational” and so forth. The leading Parnassian poet Jaroslav Vrchlický in a highly technical study on the sonnet definitively preferred the iamb as the metre solely proper for this form. In the Parnassian sonnet, stereotyped quatrains (feminine endings, enclosing rhymes common for both stanzas) contrast with variable tercets. Vrchlický’s sonnet cycles represent a sort of encyclopedia, systematically treating particular motifs of a traditional thematic domain. Vrchlický influenced many epigones among the younger poets (e. g. E. A. Mužík, whose *Čerň perly* was highly praised at the beginning of the nineties), and who all wrote technically correct but not very interesting sonnets on patriotic, erotic, mythological, and descriptive subjects. An emphasis on technical virtuosity stimulated also the rise of some “crowns of sonnets” by poets such as Quis and Táborský in the sixties and eighties.

A young opponent of Parnassism, Josef S. Machar, the representative of so-called poetical realism, by contrast, based the composition of his sonnet cycles on the dimension of time. Similarly to his other early volumes of lyrics, his “books” of sonnets represent a sort of a lyrical diary. A diary is *ex definitione* polythematic, which corresponds to polymetry on the level of verse. Machar tries to select and change his metres in accordance with his themes. In his collection we can count 27 metres and their combinations, including trimeters, dactylic and dactylic-trochaic verses. The verse forms are changed also within the framework of one sonnet; for instance, the transition from iambic pentameter in the octave to alexandrine in the sextet corresponds to a contrast between intellectual style and emotional expression. Thus, the features of the strict sonnet form are weakened; a sonnet is conceived as a “normal” poem. The rhyme schemes in both parts of sonnets are variable, although, strangely enough, the principle of two repeated rhymes remains untouched in most cases: the semantic feature of virtuosity is a constitutive part of the sonnet for Machar, too. The traditional pattern remains as a background which makes possible the interplay of old and new constitutive parts. Machar, too, departs from the pathos-filled style of the Parnassian sonnets, confronting the traditional form with the langua-

ge of the modern city, journalism and intimate discourse. Ant. Sova, Machar's contemporary, in one part of his work violently forces the sonnet to a genre of harsh modern ballads, intensively using dialogues and direct speech. Josef V. Sládek, a Parnassian poet, also approached the sonnet as a presentation of a little epic scene; the high form of the world poetry is used to ascribe nobility to the simple village heroes of these scenes. From the point of view of metrics, these sonnets are without exception Parnassian.

With Machar's and Sova's beginnings we come to the first period of the Decadence poets, i. e. to the main theme of this paper. The creations of the poets Kvapil, Borecký and Auředníček stood between the strong influences of Vrchlický and a fascination with Baudelaire and the French Decadence (in Vrchlický's interpretation). Their sonnet gradually freed itself of the absolute dominance of the iambic pentameter, in favour of the alexandrine or other forms of the iambic hexameter. Borecký's translation of Mickiewicz's sonnets is part of this process. These poets introduce an exotic lexicon and tropical expressions on the model of Baudelaire into their lyrics, including their sonnets. Their return to Vrchlický's model unfailingly lead to the renovation of more traditional forms.

In their works, the first evolutionary succession of the Decadent sonnet begins, distinctive features of which include the strict preservation of a metrical standard, the considerable length of a line, and experiments with distribution and verbal and acoustic realization or rhymes. The leading representative of this current is the great poet of the Czech Decadence, Karel Hlaváček. In the sonnet, he predominantly used iambic hexameters as the equivalent of the alexandrine, but mostly without a caesura, which did not fit into his musically fluent verse, which lacked sharp boundaries between words. The imitating of music manifests itself also in partial substitutions of rhymes by the repetition of words at the ends of lines. French patterns inspire experiments in the composition of the sonnet: Hlaváček wrote two sonnets where sextets are transposed into the middle of a poem, which thus begins and ends with a quatrain, the rhyme scheme being ABBA ACABCA ABBA; the distribution of motifs, too, is cyclical. The sonnet is treated as an artistic creation, a sort of bibelot for connoisseurs, able to appreciate those refined innovations of the tra-

ditional pattern. The Parnassian ideal of virtuosity is still alive — not as the masterly preservation of the same pattern in all themes and moods, but as the sublime varying of the pattern in search of new nuances.

For the *fin de siècle* poets, the tension between Parnassism and modern poetic consciousness was more dramatic, because their débuts were strongly influenced by Vrchlický and other older poets; the poetics of the Lumír generation and its numerous epigones exercised a strong tendency towards inertia. All young poets passed through a period of imitating Parnassian patterns, including sonnets. This applies also to Sova and even Březina, who later had not the slightest intention of writing sonnets, but before his adherence to symbolism tried composing a few very orthodox *Sonnets from the Village*. Hlaváček at the same time with his decadent book *Pozdě k ránu* published the cycle *Sokolské sonety* in which a few poems which slightly exceed the borders of traditional patriotic conventions do not use the obligatory iambic pentameter.

An inevitable conflict of the young generation with its predecessors is reflected in the fortune of its sonnet. A programmatic critic of Modernism, F. X. Šalda, had begun his literary career at the end of the eighties as author of sonnets: only the more conventional of them were accepted by the literary reviews. One aggressive sonnet, which has survived, although unpublished, preserves all the attributes of the Parnassian form, including iambic pentameter, but energetically breaks its tedious elegance by its subject and the selection of “atrocious” words and motifs. Its lines are cut into short sections by the fragmentary and complicated syntactic structure, which opposes metrical articulation by using striking enjambements.

In the early nineties Šalda declared a new conception of poetry, which did away with the opposition of extrinsic and intrinsic forms and accepted only intrinsically motivated poetic means. In his approach, the work is totally semanticized, all its parts being (or intended to be) the signs of a personality. In connection with this, he rejects all, as he put it, “formulae”, because they represent a hindrance to a personality thirsting for his or her self-realization. As an example of such forms, he mentions, besides the alexandrine, also the sonnet.

Approaches of this sort gave rise to the second typical evolutionary succession of the Decadent sonnet. Instead of the masterly,

exclusive realization of sonnet, we have here its parody and self-mockery. A conflict between the constitutive parts of the work is introduced, by which I mean an opposition between the artificial strophic form, the semantics of which was always connected with statements such as “a Master can be recognized in strict limitations”, with subtle discussions on metre and rhyme patterns and on the other hand its provocative, inconvenient rhythmic filling, i. e. free verse. I hope it is not necessary to mention that the semantics of this verse form, which had just been entering the repertoire of poetic devices, was quite different than its meaning nowadays, when free verse is the most conventional and neutral kind of rhythmic organization. A poet, through the skeleton of the sonnet entering the old tradition of poetical artificiality, at the same time, by the use of free verse, voted for extreme modernism and freedom to interpret freely shared conventions. It was Antonín Sova who summed it up in one of his creations of this type:

Nemají prý rádi rozkvetlou, nádhernou sloku  
(přece jen nejvyšší drobný květ v pralesích umění!).  
Řemeslníci od kusu přišli, řemeslníci vše padělali,  
rota řemeslnická, která tak unavila tiskařský lis!

Ta řemeslnická rota, podkouřená kadidlem doby,  
blýskáním planým unavila zraku diváků,  
tam vůně vyčichlých hodů šumí a šeptají vyzpívané árie,  
tam reminiscence na mrtvé básníky vybledlé přecházejí.

Já, nespokojený buřič, slyším již umírat pozíi,  
vztekle rozbívám ještě kadluby, v nichž cítím zvetšelé formy,  
at' volně vyteče kov můj žhavý na lebky hlupáků;

má-li umřít a má-li umřít navždy zhnusená,  
at' vztekle ještě smích svůj vychrlí a vzkřek svůj blasfemický  
a blázný si stropí z krasocitných filistrů.

As we can see, the idea of breaking of casting moulds is here connected with chiliastic visions of the end of poetry.

Without metre, the Decadent sonnet turns into a synecdoche of the sonnet, an empty scheme of two quatrains and two tercets. In the cases when a poet excludes rhymes, this blasphemy sounds more radical. But also a weak rhyme cannot change very much, as its

weight is relatively low in the very long lines exclusively used in these cases. The free verse of these sonnets is predominantly noted for its tendency towards a dactylic rhythm. A pathos-filled syntax with many apostrophes, rhetorical questions, and invocations is used.

The themes of these poems are usually connected with revolt and provocation in the extraliterary realm. In St. K. Neumann's sonnet cycle *Jsem apoštol nového žití* we meet pro-anarchist attacks against bourgeois society and its moral norms, in Jiří Karásek's collections *Sodoma* and *Sexus necans* it is homosexual eroticism, which was, of course, very provocative at that time and led to the work being censored. It is typical that in the later editions, returning to the Parnasian approach to art, Karásek reshaped his free verse, including sonnets, into regular metrical stanzas. The connection of free verse and sonnet represents only an episode: after a few years of Decadent *Sturm und Drang* new sonnets were again written in strict regular metre, which applies also to avant-garde and contemporary texts.

Nevertheless, the free-verse sonnet of the nineties had in some cases overcome its use as a mere provocation. In Šova's free verse the stanzaic organization generally preserved its relevance for the composition of a poem; Šova found a more complex role for the free-verse sonnet in poems aimed towards intimate emotional speech and pervaded with gentle stylization. Related to this approach to the erotic themes the sonnet is not exposed to persiflage; its scheme acts as an allusion to an old order, which is present even in the world of modern unstable emotionality. Instead of straightforward oppositions, we meet a dialogue of forms pertaining to the subtle expression of a specific situation. Note the stanzaic anaphores bringing simple musicality into a complex free-verse rhythm.

Našli jsme se kdys v jedině touze: milovat stejně a stejně klnout,  
až v srdce naše stejný víchř navál nekonečné sněhy.  
Neslyšeli jsme zvonů vánočních ni zpěvu pastevců  
a nevíme, že by se narodil ten, jenž by nás vykoupil.

Našli jsme se zas v jedině touze: odumřít sami sobě,  
nekonečné sněhy ve své duši a nekonečné noci,  
tisknout si ruce s posledním polibkem dávno rozloučených  
a nenaslouchat již dravcům vášní v nás oddychujícím.

Oddalujeme se. Pláněmi našich duší zasněženými  
lesy husté stojí, nebetyčné, jak mezníky neproniklé,  
vrány snů nízko se strou pod šerým klenutím větví.

Oddalujeme se; nezříme se již roky, jen tajemnou hudbu  
však slyšíme dosud. Jsme vzdálené výkřiky poutníků  
na opačných stranách mizících do dalek zasněžených.

