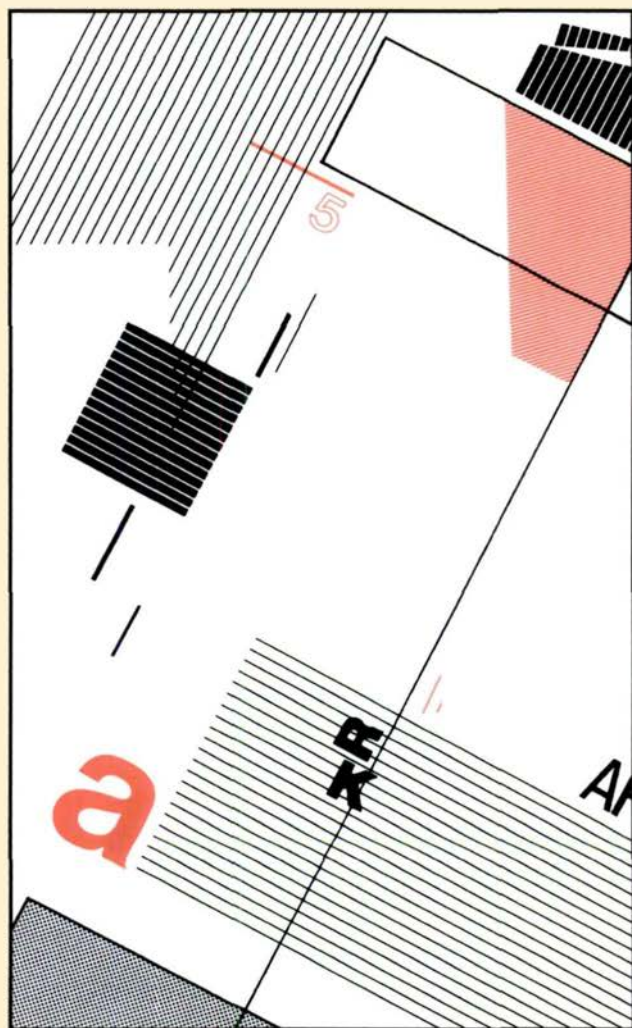


LANGUAGE IN LITERATURE



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What Is Poetry?

“Harmony is the result of contrast,” I said. “The whole world is made up of opposing elements. And . . .” “And poetry,” he interjected, “true poetry—the more original and alive its world, the more contradictory the contrasts in which the secret kinship occurs.”

Karel Sabina, biographer and close friend of Mácha

What is poetry? To define the term, we shall have to juxtapose what poetry is to what it is not. But to determine even what poetry is not is no longer simple.

The list of acceptable poetic themes during the Neoclassical or Romantic period was quite restricted. The traditional requisites—the moon, a lake, a nightingale, a cliff, a rose, a castle, and the like—are well known. Even the dreams of the Romantics were not allowed to stray from the beaten path. “Today I dreamt I was standing among ruins that came tumbling down around me,” writes Mácha. “And in the lake below I saw bathing nymphs . . . a lover going to the grave to join his mistress. . . . And then piles and piles of bones came flying out the windows of the old Gothic ruin.” Gothic windows, preferably with the light of the moon filtering through, were favored above all other windows. Nowadays, the department-store mirror monstrosity and the village inn’s tiny fly-bespattered pane of glass are considered to be of equal poetic worth. And just about anything can come flying out of them. The Czech Surrealist Vítězslav Nezval writes:

I can be dazzled in mid-sentence by a garden
or a latrine it makes no difference
I no longer tell things apart by the charm
or plainness you have given them

For today's poet, as for Karamazov senior, "there is no such thing as an ugly woman." No nook or cranny, no activity, landscape, or thought stands outside the pale of poetic subject matter. In other words, the issue of poetic subject matter has no validity today.

Is it then possible to limit the range of poetic devices? Not in the least; the history of arts attests to their constant mutability. Nor does the *intent* of a device burden art with any strictures. We have only to recall how often the Dadaists and Surrealists let happenstance write their poetry. We have only to realize what pleasure Xlebnikov derived from typographical errors; the typographical error, he once said, is often a first-rate artist. During the Middle Ages, *ignorance* was responsible for the dismemberment of classical statues; today the sculptor does his *own* dismembering, but the result (visual synecdoche) is the same. How is the music of a Musorgskij and the painting of a Henri Rousseau to be interpreted? By the genius of their creators or by their creator's artistic illiteracy? What causes Nezval's grammatical errors? A lack of textbook knowledge or a conscious rejection of it? How would the norms of the Russian literary language ever have been relaxed had it not been for the Ukrainian Gogol' and his imperfect Russian? What would Lautréamont have written instead of his *Chants de Maldoror* had he been sane? Speculations like these belong to the category of anecdotal themes like the famous composition topic "How would Gretchen have responded to Faust had she been a man?"

But even if we succeed in isolating those devices that typify the poets of a given period, we have still to establish the line of demarcation between poetry and nonpoetry. The same alliterations and other types of euphonic devices are used by the rhetoric of the period; what is more, they even occur in everyday, colloquial language. Streetcar conversations are full of jokes based on the very figures found in the most subtle lyric poetry, and the composition of gossip often corresponds to the laws of composition followed by best-sellers, or at least last year's best-sellers (depending on the degree of the gossip's intelligence).

The borderline dividing what is a work of poetry from what is not is less stable than the frontiers of the Chinese empire's territories. No-

valis and Mallarmé regarded the alphabet as the greatest work of poetry. Russian poets have admired the poetic qualities of a wine list (Vjazemskij), an inventory of the tsar's clothes (Gogol'), a timetable (Pasternak), and even a laundry bill (Kručenyx). How many poets now claim that reportage is a more artistic genre than the novel or short story? Although "Pohorská vesnice" (A Mountain Village)—a story by one of the leading mid-nineteenth-century Czech prosaists, Božena Němcová (1820–1862)—can boast but few enthusiasts today, her intimate correspondence is for us a brilliant work of poetry.

A short anecdote is in order here. Once, when a world wrestling champion lost to an underdog, one of the spectators jumped up, charged that the bout had been fixed, challenged the victor, and defeated him. The next day a newspaper carried an article saying that the second as well as the first bout had been fixed. The spectator who had challenged the victor of the first bout then burst into the newspaper's offices and gave the editor responsible for the story a slap in the face. But both the newspaper article and the spectator's pique later turned out to be prearranged hoaxes.

Do not believe the poet who, in the name of truth, the real world, or anything else, renounces his past in poetry or art. Tolstoj tried in great exasperation to repudiate his works, but instead of ceasing to be a poet, he forged the way to new, unhackneyed forms of literature. As has rightly been noted: when an actor tears off his mask, makeup is sure to be forthcoming.

Do not believe the critic who rakes a poet over the coals in the name of the True and the Natural. All he has in fact done is to reject one poetic school, that is, one set of devices deforming material in the name of another poetic school, another set of deformational devices. The artist is playing no less a game when he announces that this time he is dealing with naked *Wahrheit* rather than *Dichtung* as when he assures his audience that a given work is sheer invention, that "poetry as a whole is one big lie, and the poet who fails to lie audaciously from the word go is worthless."

There are literary historians who know more about a poet than the poet himself or the aesthetician who analyzes the structure of his work or the psychologist who investigates the structure of the poet's psyche. With the certitude of a Sunday schoolteacher, these literary historians map out what in the poet's work is mere "human document" and what is "proof of artistic merit," what is "sincere" and "a natural outlook on

life” and what is “sham” and “a labored literary outlook,” what “comes from the heart” and what is “affected.” All the quotations given here come from the study “Hlaváček’s Decadent Erotica,” a chapter in a work by Fedor Soldán. Soldán describes the relationship between an erotic poem and a poet’s erotic life as if he were dealing with static entries in an encyclopedia rather than a dialectical alliance with constant shifts, as if he regarded a sign and the object designated by it as monogamously and immutably bound to one another, as if he had never heard of the age-old psychological principle of the ambivalence of feelings—no feeling is so pure as to be free from contamination by its opposite feeling.

Numerous studies in the field of literary history still apply the dualistic scheme of “psychic reality versus poetic invention,” seeking out relations of mechanistic causality between the two so that one cannot help recalling the problem that tortured the old French aristocrat, namely, is the tail attached to the dog or the dog to its tail?

As an example of how sterile these equations with two unknowns can be, let us look at Mácha’s diary, an extremely instructive document, which to date has appeared only with considerable expurgations. Some literary historians concentrate entirely on the poet’s published work, leaving aside all biographical problems; others try to reconstruct the poet’s life in as much detail as possible. While conceding the merits of both these approaches, we very definitely reject the approach of those literary historians who replace genuine biography with official, school-book interpretation. Mácha’s diary has been expurgated so that dreamy-eyed youths admiring his statute in Prague’s Petřín Park will not be disillusioned. But as Puškin once said, literature (to say nothing of literary history) cannot take fifteen-year-old girls into account. And fifteen-year-old girls read much more dangerous things than Mácha’s diary anyway.

The diary describes the author’s physiological acts—both genital and anal—with epic tranquility. It records, in laborious code and with the inexorable accuracy of a bookkeeper, the manner and frequency of his sexual gratification with his mistress Lori. Karel Sabina (1813–1877) has written of Mácha that “the keen regard of darksome eyes, a sublime brow furrowed with deep thoughts, a pensive mien, which is so often marked by a pale complexion—these plus the feminine traits of refinement and fidelity are what endeared the fair sex to him above all else.” And this is how feminine beauty appears in Mácha’s poems and stories.

The detailed diary descriptions of his mistress's appearance, however, are more reminiscent of Josef Šima's surrealist paintings of headless female torsos.¹

Is it possible that the relationship between lyric poetry and the diary parallels the relationship between *Dichtung* and *Wahrheit*? Not at all. Both aspects are equally valid; they are merely different meanings or, in more scholarly terminology, different semantic levels of the same object, the same experience, or, as a filmmaker would put it, two different takes of a single scene. Mácha's diary is every bit as much a work of poetry as *Máj* (May, the narrative poem for which Mácha is best known) and "Marinka" (Marinka, a short story). It has no trace of utilitarianism; it is pure art for art's sake, poetry for the poet. Were Mácha alive today, he might well have set aside the lyrical poetry ("Little deer, little white deer, listen to my plea") for his own intimate use, and published the diary. He would consequently have been compared to Joyce and Lawrence, with whom he has many details in common, and a critic would write that these three authors "attempt to give a true picture of the type of man who has rid himself of all rules and regulations and now merely floats, drifts and rears up as pure animal instinct."

Puškin wrote a poem that begins

I recall a wondrous moment:
You appeared before me like a fleeting vision,
Like a spirit of pure beauty.

Tolstoj in his old age waxed indignant over a bantering letter Puškin had written to a friend in which he referred to the woman of this poem in the following terms: "With God's help I had Anna Petrovna today."² But medieval farces like the Czech *Mastičkář* (*Unguentarius*) are far from blasphemy! The ode and the burlesque are equally valid; they are simply two poetic genres, two modes of expression for one theme.

A theme that never ceased to torture Mácha was the suspicion he was not Lori's first lover. In *May* this motif takes the following forms:

Oh no, it is she! My angel!
Why did she fall before I knew her?
Why was my father her seducer?

and

My rival—my father! His murderer—his son!
He, the seducer of my mistress,
Unknown to me.

At one point in the diary Mácha describes how, after having Lori twice, he talked with her once more “about her having permitted someone else to take her. She wanted to die. ‘O Gott,’ she said, ‘wie unglücklich bin ich!’” There follows another violent erotic scene, after which a detailed description is given of how the poet moved his bowels. The passage concludes: “God forgive her if she is deceiving me; I will not. If only she loves me. She seems to. Why, I would marry a whore if I knew she loved me.”

Whoever claims that the diary version is a photographically perfect reproduction of reality and *May* a sheer fabrication on the part of the poet is simplifying the matter as much as the schoolbooks do. Perhaps *May* is even more revealing than the diary as a manifestation of psychic exhibitionism, intensified as it is by its Oedipal overtones (“My rival—my father”).³ The motif of suicide in the poetry of Majakovskij was once thought to be a mere literary trick. It might well be thought so today, had Majakovskij, like Mácha, died of pneumonia at the age of twenty-six.

Sabina writes that “Mácha’s notes contain a fragmentary description of a person of the neoromantic ilk. That appears to be a faithful picture of the poet himself as well as the principal model he patterned his lovesick characters after.” The hero of the fragment “slew himself at the feet of the girl whom he loved ardently and who returned his love even more ardently. Believing her to have been seduced, he tried to force the name of the seducer from her so that he might avenge her. She denied everything. He seethed with anger. She swore that nothing had happened. Then an idea struck him like a bolt of lightning: ‘To avenge her I would have to kill him. My punishment would be death. Let him live. I cannot.’” And so he decides to commit suicide, firm in the conviction that his mistress “is a long-suffering angel, unwilling to bring sorrow even upon her seducer.” Then, at the last minute, he realizes that “she has deceived him” and that “her angel face has turned into the face of a devil.” Here is how Mácha describes his own tragic love affair in a letter to a trusted friend: “I once told you that one thing could drive me insane. It has come; eine Notzucht ist unterlaufen. The mother of my beloved died. A fearful vow was taken at midnight by

her coffin . . . and . . . it was not true—and I—ha ha ha!—Eduard, I did not go mad, but I did rant and rage.”

And so we have three versions: murder and punishment, suicide, and ranting followed by resignation. Each of them was experienced by the poet; all are equally valid, regardless of which of the given possibilities were realized in the poet's private life and which in his oeuvre. Who can draw a line between suicide, the duel that led to Puškin's death, and Mácha's classically ludicrous end?⁴

The many-sided interplay between poetry and private life is reflected not only in the characteristically Máchovian heightened ability to communicate but in the intimate manner in which literary motifs intermingle with life. Moreover, the social function of Mácha's moods is as worthy of investigation as their individual psychological genesis. As Mácha's contemporary, the critic and playwright J. K. Tyl, pointed out in his brilliant pamphlet *Rozervanec* (The Malcontent), Mácha's words "My love has been deceived" are not his private concern; they signify a role, since the slogan of his literary school proclaims that "only pain can be the mother of true poetry." On the level of literary history (and only on that level), Tyl is correct in stating that it was all to Mácha's good to be able to say he was unhappy in love.

The seducer versus jealous lover theme is a fitting way of filling up an intermission, the period of exhaustion and melancholy following satisfied desire. A languorous feeling of distrust turns into a conventional motif thoroughly developed by poetic tradition. Mácha himself stresses the literary coloring of the motif in a letter to a friend: "Neither Victor Hugo nor Eugène Sue in their most terrifying novels had the ability to describe the sorts of things that have happened to me. And I was the one who experienced them, and—I am a poet." The question of whether Mácha's ruinous distrust had a basis in reality or—as Tyl implies—was born of free poetic invention is of importance to forensic medicine and forensic medicine alone.

Every verbal act in a certain sense stylizes and transforms the event it depicts. How it does so is determined by its slant, its emotional content, the audience it is addressed to, the preliminary "censorship" it undergoes, the supply of ready-made patterns it draws from. Because the poeticity of the verbal act makes it very clear that communication is not of prime importance, "censorship" here can be relaxed, toned down. Janko Král' (1822–1876), a truly gifted Slovak poet, a poet who in his ruggedly beautiful improvisations brilliantly obliterates the bor-

derline between delirium and the folksong, and is even freer in his imagination, more spontaneous in his exquisite provincialism than Mácha—Janko Král' is along with Mácha a classic Oedipal case. Here, in a letter to a friend, is Božena Němcová's description of her first impressions of Král': "He is terribly eccentric, and his wife, though very young and nice, is terribly naive. He only keeps her as a servant girl, really. He said himself there was only one woman he ever loved, above all else, with all his soul—and that woman was his mother. He hated his father with the same passion: his father tormented his mother (just as he torments his wife). Since she died, he claims to have loved no one. As I see it, that man will end his days in an insane asylum!" But even though it frightened even the intrepid Božena Němcová with its overtones of madness, Král's extraordinary brand of infantilism elicits no alarm whatsoever in his poems. Published in a collection entitled *Čítanie studujúcej mládeže* (Readings for Students), they seem little more than a mask. In fact, however, they reveal a mother-and-son love tragedy in such brutally straightforward terms as poetry has rarely known.

What are Král's ballads and songs about? Ardent maternal love that "never could be shared"; the son's inevitable departure, in the firm belief—despite his "mother's counsel"—that "it was all in vain. Who can go against fate? Not I"; the impossibility of returning "home to mother from far-off lands." Mother searches desperately for son: "Throughout this world my mourning is of the grave, but no news have I of my son." Son searches desperately for mother: "Why go home to your brothers and father, why to your village, winged falcon? Your mother has gone out into the broad field." Fear—the physical fear of bizarre Janko sentenced to destruction—together with Janko's dream of his mother's womb recall the themes of present-day surrealist poets such as Nezval.

Here is an excerpt from Nezval's *Historie šesti prázdných domů* (A Story of Six Empty Houses):

Mother

Can you leave me forever down there
In the empty room where there are never any guests
I enjoy being your subtenant
And it will be terrible when I am finally forced to go
How many moves await me
And the most terrible move of all

The move away to death.

And now an excerpt from Král's "Zverbovaný" (The Recruit):

Oh mother, if you really loved me,
 Why did you deliver me into the hands of fate?
 Don't you see you have put me out into this alien world
 Like a young flower discarded from a flower pot,
 A flower no one has ever sniffed.
 If they plan to pick it, why do they plant it?
 It is hard, so hard for a meadow to be without rain,
 But it is a hundred times harder for Janko to be tortured.

The inevitable antithesis of poetry's sudden flow into life is every bit as sudden as its ebb. Here again is Nezval, this time in the vein of poetism, a school he was instrumental in creating.

I've never walked along this path
 Have I lost the egg who found it?
 A white egg of a black hen
 He's been in a fever three whole days
 The dog's been howling all night long
 The priest, the priest is coming
 He's blessing all the doors
 Like a peacock with his plumage
 There's a funeral, a funeral, it's snowing
 The egg is running around behind the coffin
 What a joke
 The devil is in the egg
 My bad conscience spoils me
 Then live without the egg
 Reader madman
 The egg was empty

Out-and-out advocates of a poetry of revolt were either so embarrassed by these poetistic games that they did their best to hush them up, or so annoyed by them that they spoke of Nezval's decline and betrayal of the cause. I am thoroughly convinced, however, that these childlike rhymes are as significant a breakthrough as the carefully thought-out, mercilessly logical exhibitionism of his antilyrics. They are an integral part of a united front, a united front to keep the word from being treated like a fetish. The latter half of the nineteenth century was a period of a sudden, violent inflation of linguistic signs. This thesis can be easily justified from the standpoint of sociology. The most

typical cultural phenomena of the time exhibit a determination to conceal this inflation at any cost and shore up faith in the paper word with all available means. Positivism and naive realism in philosophy, liberalism in politics, the neogrammarian school in linguistics, an assuasive illusionism in literature and on the stage (with illusions of both the naive naturalist and the solipsistic decadent varieties), the atomization of method in literary theory (and in scholarship and science as a whole)—such are the names of the various and sundry expedients that served to bolster the credit of the word and strengthen confidence in its value.

And today! Modern phenomenology is exposing one linguistic fiction after another. It has skillfully demonstrated the prime importance of the distinction between sign and designated object, between the meaning of a word and the content at which the meaning is directed. There is an analogous phenomenon in the sociopolitical field: the heated opposition to muddled, empty, harmfully abstract cant and phrasemongering, the ideocratic struggle against “humbug words,” to use the picturesque expression. In art, it was motion pictures that revealed clearly and emphatically that language was only one of a number of possible sign systems, just as astronomy had revealed that the earth was only one of a number of planets and thus revolutionized man’s view of the world. Columbus’ voyage had essentially already marked the end of the myth of the Old World’s exclusivity, but not until the recent rise of America did it receive its mortal blow. The film too was first regarded as no more than an exotic colony of art, and only as it developed, step by step, did it break asunder the ruling ideology that preceded it. Finally, the poetry of the poetists and poets belonging to related schools gave a sound guarantee of the autonomy of the word. Nezval’s playful rhymes have therefore found effective allies.

It has been quite fashionable in critical circles to profess certain doubts about what is called the Formalist study of literature. The school, say its detractors, fails to grasp the relationship of art to real life; it calls for an “art for art’s sake” approach; it is following in the footsteps of Kantian aesthetics. Critics with objections in this vein are so completely one-sided in their radicalism that, forgetting the existence of a third dimension, they view everything on a single plane. Neither Tynjanov nor Mukařovský nor Šklovskij nor I have ever proclaimed the self-sufficiency of art. What we have been trying to show is that art is an integral part of the social structure, a component that

interacts with all the others and is itself mutable since both the domain of art and its relationship to the other constituents of the social structure are in constant dialectical flux. What we stand for is not the separatism of art but the autonomy of the aesthetic function.

As I have already pointed out, the content of the concept of *poetry* is unstable and temporally conditioned. But the poetic function, *poeticity*, is, as the "formalists" stressed, an element *sui generis*, one that cannot be mechanically reduced to other elements. It can be separated out and made independent, like the various devices in, say, a cubist painting. But this is a special case; from the standpoint of the dialectics of art it has its *raison d'être*, yet it remains a special case. For the most part poeticity is only a part of a complex structure, but it is a part that necessarily transforms the other elements and determines with them the nature of the whole. In the same way, oil is neither a complete dish in and of itself nor a chance addition to the meal, a mechanical component; it changes the taste of food and can sometimes be so penetrating that a fish packed in oil has begun to lose, as in Czech, its original genetic name, *sardinka* (sardine), and is being baptized anew as *olejovka* (*olej*-, oil- + *ovka*, a derivational suffix). Only when a verbal work acquires poeticity, a poetic function of determinative significance, can we speak of poetry.

But how does poeticity manifest itself? Poeticity is present when the word is felt as a word and not a mere representation of the object being named or an outburst of emotion, when words and their composition, their meaning, their external and inner form, acquire a weight and value of their own instead of referring indifferently to reality.

Why is all this necessary? Why is it necessary to make a special point of the fact that sign does not fall together with object? Because, besides the direct awareness of the identity between sign and object (A is A_1), there is a necessity for the direct awareness of the inadequacy of that identity (A is not A_1). The reason this antinomy is essential is that without contradiction there is no mobility of concepts, no mobility of signs, and the relationship between concept and sign becomes automatized. Activity comes to a halt, and the awareness of reality dies out.