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2/2016

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Let us start with some dates.

In 1966, the radio station Radio Praga announced that a manuscript by the Czech polymath Jáchym Cimerman had been discovered, the existence of which had previously been unknown. Cimerman was a unique figure – a genius (he created the prototype of the electric laundry machine), visionary (the inventor of yogurt), artist and philosopher (a proponent of “externism”). Incredibly, this product of the impressive imagination of Zdeňek Svěrák, Ladislav Smoljak and Jiří Šebánek was a contender in the plebiscite for the title of the Greatest Czech, and in the late 1990s was considered the ideal future candidate for president.¹

Also in 1966, Dr. Miroslav Ivanov, one of the best-known Czech nonfiction writers, undertook a penetrating anal-

¹ *Čtenáři navrhovali, koho nasadit proti Klausovi*, idnes.cz, http://zpravy.idnes.cz/ctenari-navrhovali-koho-nasadit-proti-klausovi-f5t-/domaci.aspx?c=A070801_142212_domaci_klu (9.10.2013). The significance of the Cimerman phenomenon cannot be overlooked in the context of the idea of hoaxes as a kind of “national genre” for the Czechs (a famous thesis advanced by Vladimír Just, invoked by such writers as Mariusz Szczygiel).

ysis of what was called the RKZ manuscript controversy, a particularly sore point in the history of Czech literature. His research culminated in the publication of two books: *Tajemství RKZ* (The Mystery of RKZ, 1969) and *Záhada Rukopisu královédvorského* (The Enigma of the Manuscript of Dvůr Králové, 1970). Ivanov's work was indebted to two linguists. One, Josef Linda, a graduate of Charles University in Prague, had made an astonishing discovery 150 years earlier – inside the spine of a book that was being used to prop up the leg of a table, he is said to have found some ancient parchments (the first experts to examine them identified their origins to date from the tenth century). Next, in 1817, the archivist of the Prague National Museum, Václav Hanka, found a manuscript inside the Church of John the Baptist in Dvůr Králové, consisting of fourteen songs resembling medieval texts, written in Cyrillic and Glagolitic² (they were estimated to date from the thirteenth century). Twenty years later, this event was commented upon with a certain bombast by Lucjan Siemieński: “then, verily, the Czech need not look down with eyes of shame, for he may lift them with joyful pride: the *Dvůr Králové manuscript* equals the fruits of halcyon days of yore.”³ The glory of this “treasure trove” did not last long, however. An anonymous article published in the late 1850s in the magazine *Tagesbote aus Böhmen*, entitled “Literärische Lügen und paleographische Vahrheiten,” strongly questioned the

² D. Świerszczyńska, “Vacla Hanka i staroczeskie rękopisy (przypomnienie słynnej mistyfikacji literackiej),” *Slavia Occidentalis* 46–47/1991, pp. 247–260.

³ *Królowodworski Rękopis. Zbiór staroczeskich bohaterzkich lirycznych spiewów znalezionych i wydanych przez Wacława Hankę, Bibliotekarza Krol(ewskiego) i narod(owego) Muzeum, a z czeskiego na polskie przez Lucyana Siemieńskiego przełożonych*, Kraków 1826, p. XI. Quoted in: Świerszczyńska, “Vacla Hanka,” p. 247.

authenticity of the found documents, initiating a long dispute over the value of the Zelená Hora Manuscript and the of *Dvůr Králové Manuscript*, later acknowledged to be one of the greatest hoaxes in Czech history.

In 1996, Petr Zelenka, director of the film *Mňága – Happy End*, which belongs to a related genre, placed the following cheeky inscription at the beginning of the credits: “Nothing in this film is true, everything happened for real.” Illusion, error, mistake – “a basic part of our cognitive ability”⁴ (as we read in Járý Cimrman’s lexicon) – joined with a fraudulent design, brings about a destabilization of noetic balance, though one element that distinguishes the functioning of a hoax can be the question of the particular context in which it is used and its meaning in terms of a conspiracy theory of history.

Postmodern novelistic strategies violate epistemological paradigms in a meaningful way, especially when the focus of the game involves the lexicon of fundamental concepts – history, facts, reality, rationalism, reference. Such play is also engaged in by the Czech writer Josef Urban, author of a novel whose title not coincidentally corresponds to the object of the historical and literary quarrel discussed above – *Poslední tečka za Rukopisy*⁵ (The Final Mark on the Manuscripts, 1998). The “driving force” of the author’s concept, placed at the dividing line between two cultures, the world of seriousness and the world of fun, lies not in the possibility of heightening tension be-

⁴ Cimrmanův zpravodaj, <http://www.cimrman.at/list.php?l=9&str=O> (10.10.2013).

⁵ J. Urban, *Poslední tečka za Rukopisy. Nová literatura faktu*, Praha 1998.

tween them, but rather violation of the antinomy itself and the functions arbitrarily assigned to both spheres. Here we can talk of a parody of the literature of fact or, holding with the formula suggested by the narrator, of a “new literature of fact” (*notlitfak* for short), a particular way of engaging in “new journalism,”⁶ an ironic commentary on authentic literature, an intertextual carnival, a paradocumentary game, the Czech national imaginary in miniature, a “double hoax” (Joanna Czaplińska),⁷ a polemic with scientific axioms (Lubomír Machala)⁸ or a new emancipatory novel, whose liberationist element would inhere not in the projection of a conspiracy theory, but in the intention of revealing the skeleton of such a theory. Such a novel would thus be situated close to the concept described by Leszek Kołakowski of a “philosophy of the clown,” and thus would to a certain extent be “a vehicle of change and an appeal to rethink the foundations of our culture anew.”⁹ The driving mechanism of its functioning turns out to be fiction, but fiction that has undergone multifaceted redefinition.

The documents and information cited by the narrator of the novel, Josef Urban, an employee at the Institute of Czech Literature, working together with Maria Hořakova (his partner in both professional and private life), exist

⁶ L. Doležel, “Fikční a historický narativ: setkání s postmoderní výzvou,” *Česká literatura* 4(50)/2002, pp. 341–367.

⁷ J. Czaplińska, *Gra z tekstem, gra z mitem. Podwójna mistyfikacja Miloša Urbana* (‘Poslední tečka za Rukopisy’), [in:] I. Kowalska-Paszť (ed.), *Intertekstualność w literaturach i kulturach słowiańskich*, Szczecin 2006, pp. 216–223.

⁸ L. Machala, *Literární bludiště. Bilance polistopadové prózy*, Praha 2001, p. 183.

⁹ A. Szahaj, *Ponowoczesność – czas karnawału. Postmodernizm – filozofia błazna*, [in:] *Postmodernizm a filozofia. Wybór tekstów*, ed. S. Czerniak, A. Szahaj, Warszawa 1996, p. 389.

at the limit of tension between truth and falsehood, and furthermore are bound up within their own rhetorical framework (the language of scholarship, the language of literature), allowing those orders to become mixed. The polyphonic reading of a hoax directs our attention to the important qualitative change in how its tasks are examined. As Lenka Krausová¹⁰ has shown, the idea of a hoax has travelled a long trajectory: from the concept of lying to humour and a new aesthetic quality.¹¹ That dimension is linked in some measure to the legacy of the avant-garde (Dadaism, which “defended the right not to take seriously everything around us, and rehabilitated the principle of playing with scientific discourse”¹²). Similarly, a reading of Urban’s novel in terms of Raymond Federman’s theory of surfiction may be understood as distantly referencing the Surrealist “method,” shifting the centre of weight to the irrational, hitherto placed in a position subordinate to the logic of reality.¹³ In this sense, a hoax can be understood to conceal the intention to, if not break up, then at least clearly violate binding cultural paradigms.

In *Poslední tečce za Rukopisy* a kind of fusion can be found that joins together all four of the forms perceived by Krausová in the semiotics of mystification: firstly, along the axis of referentiality between “reality” and “fiction”;

¹⁰ This cultural studies scholar invokes the theory of Eugen Brikus. See: L. Krausová, “Mystifikace – typ sémantické kretivity,” [in:] *Euro litteraria* & *Euro lingua*. Series Bohemistica, Liberec 2007, p. 9.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹³ R. Federman, *Surfiction – Four Propositions in Form of an Introduction*, [in:] *Idem* (ed.), *Surfiction. Fiction Now... and Tomorrow*, Chicago 1975, pp 5-18.

secondly, in the mutual interrelationship between two texts (“quotation vs. fictional quotation, allusion vs. quasi-allusion”¹⁴); thirdly, in the compositional or stylistic framework (“the method of disappointed expectations, the false lead, camouflage”¹⁵); and fourthly and finally, at the communicative level (for example in the activation of the function a pseudonym or an authorial persona).¹⁶ This last perspective opens a wide field of play, because it represents one of the first indications of the sleight of hand central to the novelist’s design. Behind the pseudonym of Josef Urban stands a Czech prose writer whose first name is Miloš, born in the 1960s, a graduate of the English and Scandinavian Studies programs in Prague. The change in his personal information is not random – the pseudonymous persona is a member of the Czech Manuscript Society, called upon to verify the authenticity of manuscripts. The narrator himself serves up a respectable scholarly exposition to the reader in the form of a commentary on the fate of the documents, whose status over the course of history has shifted from recognition of their priceless historical value (and at the same time, their compensatory function in the context of the idea of national rebirth and the formation of linguistic knowledge) to their exposure as forgeries instrumental to a purely ideological (conspiratorial) purpose in building the Czech national mythology of the nineteenth century.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

The story, which would have best suited an easygoing, adventuresome form, is thus clad by Urban in a specialized scholarly language that treats the object of its analysis as a detective story with a riddle to be solved (in the spirit of the convention developed by Ivanov). Its solution can be guaranteed by the logic of facts – the greatest ally of the man of science. And that logic becomes the object of the artistic provocation being carried out by Urban. Curiously, there was some suspicion among literary critics that the name Josef Urban masked the writer Vladimír Macura – a literary scholar known for his revisionist position, and furthermore, a writer-scoffer who often conceals himself behind invented personae. Not only were his novels a point of encounter between national mythology and fraudulent narratives, but that combination also assumed the form of journalistic publications such as a collection of reviews for the fictional book *Sametová Anna* (Velvet Anna), relating to the events of 1989.¹⁷ And though Macura was not responsible for the provocation *Poslední tečka za Rukopisy*, his typical method of deconstructing the idea of national renewal as a thought construct with the post-script *hra* (play) dovetails with the attempt to reformulate the literary-historical context undertaken by Miloš Urban, representative of the next generation of writers, since his debut in the late 1990s.

Taking into consideration the referential context of the problem under discussion, the novel constitutes a space

¹⁷ P. Janoušek, *Macura albo drapanie czułymi pazurkami*, [in:] *Mistyfikacja w kulturach, literaturach i językach krajów słowiańskich*, eds. K. Ćwiek-Rogalska, I. Doliński, Warszawa 2013, pp. 4–14.

of confrontation between fiction, on the one hand, and historical figures and the sphere of national mythology, on the other. It is the dividing line between history and literature – an area frequently overlooked, its obscurity maintained in order to preserve the sovereignty of science and art. In the novel, this integrity is unceremoniously violated by the activation of a network of textual allusions. The formula invoked from Zelenka’s film is an example of a standard ploy of the postmodern novel – balancing on the border between what designates the sphere of convention (the adoption of the framework of illusion proposed by it) and what conspicuously disrupts it (signals of anti-mimesis triggering a disillusion effect). Brian McHale has noted the “scent of scandal” connected with using this deceptive strategy: “And what exactly is the source of this scandal? Ultimately, its source is *ontological*: boundaries between worlds have been violated.”¹⁸

The author is thus taking a dispute in hand which cannot remain untouched by controversy, since it was settled in one of the spheres that monopolizes the truth (science), but which, with the passage of time, has ceased to be the reservoir of certainties. And although in the space of less than two centuries various theories have arisen alternately juggling the epithets “authentic” and “false,” turning the dispute into grist for the mill of political entertainment as well, this converted product of the historical “dialectic” has its scent of scandal not only in the sense proposed by McHale, but also at the literal level. Because it is included

¹⁸ B. McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, London 1987, p. 85.

in the “drama of concealment and disclosure”¹⁹ – a typical feature of sensation in the purely sociological context. In this instance, the phenomenon of scandal would involve the transference of the centre of gravity from the object of the scandal to what John B. Thompson describes as “a series of subsequent actions which are aimed at concealing the [scandal—M.B.]”²⁰ (thereby vindicating one side) or exposing it (vindicating the other). Going further in this direction, we can say that in the dispute over the manuscripts, the question of their actual existence or nonexistence fades away and its place is assumed by the mediation of rhetoric or, to use the language of a classic of the theory of hyperreality, the “precession of simulacra,”²¹ the dynamic of images unstuck from the source of their emission.

The reader meets the protagonist in the course of his process of research, receiving a series of pieces of information that fit with the stereotype of a member of the scientific sphere, unconditionally devoted to the empirical principle. The author of the treatise confronts the reader with relevant “facts” concerning the dispute over the manuscripts’ authenticity – there are descriptions of the discovery, partial biographies of Hanka and Linda, information about the roles of authoritative figures from the era of national revival (the Dobrovski government, the participation of Puchmajer and Jungmann, and then – Palacki and Šafářík), results of expert chemical and paleographic analyses, and some reminiscence about the publication of

¹⁹ J.B. Thomson, *Political Scandal: Power and Visibility in the Media Age*, Cambridge 2000, p. 18.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

²¹ J. Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. S.F. Glaser, Ann Arbor 1994.

trenchant feuilletons that cast doubt on the discovery by the two archivists. Nor does he forget to invoke the political context of that polemic (the role of Masaryk and those affiliated with *Athenaeum* magazine in undermining the documents' authenticity) or the fate of Professor Josef. L. Pič, the archaeologist who investigated the case and whom he calls "the first and last victim of the dispute" ("he gave his life for the truth"). There is also a mention of the twentieth-century continuations of the dispute (the formation of the Czech Manuscript Society in the 1930s, the Marxist analysis of the problem in Ivanov's edition, which defended the assertion of the manuscripts' falseness). Using the terminology of political campaign theory analysts, we might thus say that the reader receives a "staging of pseudo-events,"²² which itself is also a pseudo-event, with the character of a simulacrum, enhanced by references to the stylistics of the literature of fact, a genre particularly propitious to a conspiracy theory of history.

In showing a kind of literary-historical skeleton hidden under the cloak of "factography," Urban reveals his method (how do conspiracy theories develop?), the mechanisms underlying the cover of description, and thus the tools serving to popularize the phenomenon; he shows its process of formation – focusing public opinion's on whatever is "scandalous" (and therefore attractive), the maintenance of an atmosphere of sensation as a result of the accumulation and exposition of various explanations that cancel each other out (from various scientific disciplines).

²² W. Schulz, *Politische Kommunikation Theoretische Ansätze und Ergebnisse empirischer Forschung*, Wiesbaden 1997.

In this context, the dynamic of the controversy takes the place of its object, and thus atop one layer of mystification (which in the literary-historical process was reduced to its basic factors) another is laid. To this is added the design of yet another “game” – an intrigue, whose explanation the reader finds in the introduction to the treatise – the mystification of the theory of the manuscripts being fake, and thus of the whole dispute, for which its potential “victims,” Hanka and Linda, having managed to outwit history, are to be held responsible. An analysis of their correspondence, however, reveals that “Hanka and Linda did not exist” (they are the products of the collective imagination), yet in fact “a Hanka and a Linda existed. Their names were Hannelore Vierteilová and Linda Janowitzová.”²³

The axis of intrigue is thus a hidden mystery regarding the revolutionary, emancipatory role of Czech literature in a particular period of its national development (the nineteenth century), whose fundamental direction was set by women using male pseudonyms to conceal their identities. Not only have they stifled the “truth” about the manuscripts, directing public opinion toward the forgery issue, and therefore, according to the logic of conspiracy, effectively putting whole ranks of “truth seekers” onto a false scent; the women have also exposed those seekers’ scholarly analyses to ridicule (in the form of Josef Urban’s discoveries), with men representing 99% of those participating in the battle raging in the press and academic

²³ J. Urban, *Poslední tečka...*, op. cit, p. 5.

circles. The novelistic hoax thus reaches the point where not only is a dispute over a key concept relating to the idea of revival demythologized, but also a legend about those who led the revival, including in particular Božena Němcová, a precursor of Czech feminism and a “Communist firebrand” (according to such critics as Fučík, Nejedlý, Zápotocký). The form in which the two myths are confronted consists of passages from letters printed on the pages of the novel – the “icons” of the national revival are referred to either in commentaries or are the addressees or sources of messages analyzed, which constitute the basic archival material beside which the titular final mark is to be placed.

The collision between the two realities dismantles the myth of the fomenters of national awakening, which is also harnessed to other spheres of meta-hoax set up by Miloš Urban. He directs attention once again toward the method by which an idea (with unheard-of power to generate cultural activity) is developed, and thus reveals the “stitches” in the national story that had been carefully kept from view over the course of the history of Czech literature. In this context, it becomes possible to discuss the “artificial” aspect of the revival (in the sense proposed by Macura): “the creation of Czech culture as ‘another existence,’” where “cultural products were in fact installed in empty space,”²⁴ and the project itself constituted the product of an idea that had been painstakingly worked out (as opposed to appearing *a priori*),

²⁴ V. Macura, “Ideálnost, hra a mystifikace,” [in:] idem, *Znamení zrodu: České národní obrození jako kulturní typ*, Jinočany 1995, p. 105.

it was “a free decision by the people taking part in it, a project undertaken ‘during their overtime,’”²⁵ which testifies to its illusory character as well. This theory simultaneously outlines the complex context implied in activating an idea – Barbara Jaroszewicz-Kleidienst and Zofia Trajło-Lipowska note that Czech culture organized and even (particularly in the early nineteenth century) replaced the national sphere.²⁶ Against that background, its connection to ideology becomes even more boldly accented, a connection that would represent its severance from reality, and in the context of Miloš Urban’s provocation itself – the placement in quotation marks, beside the concept of reality, a whole lexicon of epistemological definitions that construct an entire cultural universe. This referential game that he proposes not only creates an imaginative picture of one of the founding concepts that shaped how we see the development of national literature, but also remains a form of imaginative “play” or mental simulation, far from any intent to monopolize truth – any judgment on which of the various worlds is the real one. Urban effectively textualizes both, so that their opposition to each other has an illusive character, allowing us to uncover the gesture of a mystifier who could, in the style of Odo Marquard, declare: “There was a time when [...] what was real and what was fictional

²⁵ Z. Tarajło-Lipowska, “‘Prawdziwy’ charakter czeskiego odrodzenia narodowego,” [w:] H. Mieczkowski i T.Z. Orłoś (ed.), *Odrodzenie narodowe w Czechach i na Słowacji. Księga ku czci prof. Zdzisława Niedzieli*, Kraków 1999, p. 93.

²⁶ B. Jaroszewicz-Kleidienst, “W cudzych oczach. Z problematyki świadomości narodowej we współczesnych literaturach zachodnio- i południowosłowiańskich,” *Slavica* 30/1983, p. 27.
Z. Tarajło-Lipowska, “Nieodparta pokusa syntezy literatury czeskiej czy ‘neodepřený pokus o syntézu české literatury’?”, *Porównania* 7/2010, p. 84.

stood in real opposition to each other; [...] today, reality and fiction occur only in the form of an amalgam, never in a pure form anymore [...].”²⁷

There is yet another way of understanding information (fundamental to the literature of fact), one that illuminates it as “destructive of meaning and signification”.²⁸ To deal with that problem, it produces the appearance of communication – “it exhausts itself in the act of staging communication.”²⁹ The edge of novelistic irony is also targeted at (aside from the academic milieu) a certain significant, exceptionally popular field of literature, especially successful after 1989 during the novelist boom, and at the growing expectations tied to the search for writing marked by authenticity. Seen thusly, the literature of fact becomes a mediatized product, particularly vulnerable to manipulation that aims to claim for it the title of a mirror held up to reality. We can therefore recognize this Czech writer’s provocation as a manifestation of awareness of reality’s simulacric form, a result, to borrow again from Marquard, of the “economy of the fictional,” or the “growing susceptibility to illusion,” particularly demystified in Urban’s version, given the enduring power of national myth.³⁰

translated by Timothy Williams

²⁷ O. Marquard, *Aesthetica i anaesthetica. Rozważania filozoficzne*, trans. K. Krzemieniowa, Warszawa 2007, p. 155.

²⁸ J. Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, op. cit., p. 79.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

³⁰ O. Marquard, *Apologia, przypadkowości*, trans. K. Krzemieniowa, Warszawa 1994, p. 83.