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## THE IDYLL AND THE TOPOS OF THE "COTTAGE" AS A CZECH NATIONAL STEREOTYPE

In the late 18th century, the cottage became the centre of the idyllic space, created, according to its popular discoverer Salomon Gessner, by "the power of imagination and a quiet effort" (*die Einbildungs-Kraft und ein stilles Gemüth*)<sup>1</sup>. This space was far removed from the hustle and bustle of modern life, it was a refuge from the town, and, indeed, the town was consistently opposed to it. The idyllic space was created using the conventional literary emblems of classical Arcadia outside real historical time. Its heroes, always prepared to demonstrate their "naivety", bore Greek or Hellenized names, accepted Theocritean masks of shepherds, surrounded themselves with classical or pseudo-classical cultural "scenery" and lived in a cottage as the only adequate dwelling in this illusionary "natural" world. But just as the classical scenery was nothing more than conventional literary emblematics, so, too, was "nature" and "naturalness" formed by means of a strictly limited repertoire of motifs. The limited scope of thematic elements is even a general condition of the idyllic genre. The idyll needs a lucid, simple, understandable microcosm. At the same time, any reference to historical time and space outside the idyll was suppressed. Only quite exceptionally could some poets "from outside" be mentioned, only somewhere at the margin of the Gessnerian paradise lived the shepherd Dorantes who, however, was educated and, therefore, infected with a foreign way of life. He knew the world outside, talked about it, and so it was best to avoid him, because through him the chaos which ruled over external reality entered the world of the idyllic<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> S. Gessner, *Die sämtlichen Werke III*, Vienna 1742, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 127.

It is not a mere coincidence, that one of the more frequent plot patterns in the idyll is a story about the rejection of foreigners who propose to the simple inhabitants of Arcadia a better existence outside, "in the town" (*Menalkas und Äschines, der Jäger*)<sup>3</sup>.

This context, within the narrow, strictly enclosed world of the idyllic (the idyll itself was ingeniously defined in the early 19th century as "a presentation of happiness in a closed environment"<sup>4</sup>), prescribed also the basic attributes of the literary "cottage". Its characteristics were extremely general, not influenced by the global striving for classical stylization, but clearly defined. The cottage was a "modest", "simple", "low" dwelling, and, even within the bucolic landscape which itself stood apart from the "noisy" world, was situated in a hidden place. Its roof was covered with straw (*stroheren Hütten*), snow (*eine braune Hütte mit dem Schneebedekten Dach*) or moss (*bemooste Hütten*); the cottage itself stood under trees covered with blossoms or fruit. All this further strengthened the attributes of its being "hidden", "veiled", "kept aloof", "integrated into Nature". The cottage is always and everywhere a part of Nature: by the material it is built from, by its instability (as the cottage never resists natural changes), and by its adaptation to the surrounding organic processes of birth, growth and decay. As it usually stands in an isolated place (*einsames Haus*), it is an appropriate place for meditation, silence and rest, but also a place of contact with the spiritual (*hier vor meiner Hütte sei der Altar*)<sup>5</sup>, or a place of chaste love.

The entire idyllic world, surrounding the cottage (or village house) and, in a way, "defining" it, was burdened with several paradoxes. It was constructed and perceived as a place for escape from civilization, and hence from complicated relations viewed as artificial, un-natural. In this way it was a vision, an ideal of natural life. Against the background of the long and continuous tradition of European pastoral literature, Gessner's was an attempt at its de-literarization, at the revelation of original "pre-literary" naivety hidden in its roots. At the same time, the world of the Gessnerian idyll was fated to be extremely artificial. It was artificial not only in its conventionalized classical (Greek) styling, but also in its essence, namely the showy "naturalness" it proclaimed. Its semiotic complexity was not reduced, but, rather, increased by an overlapping of cul-

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 63-67.

<sup>4</sup> K. Brodziński, *Dziela, Pisma estetyczno-krytyczne I*, ed. by Z. J. Nowak, Wrocław-Warsaw-Cracow 1964, p. 252.

<sup>5</sup> Gessner, p. 64, 17, 10, 124, 54.



tural codes. The Gessnerian idyll referred to the classical world as a specific system of values, but, at the same time, suppressed everything in the picture of Antiquity that in any direction crossed over the boundaries of the traditional literary emblematics of the "pastoral": towards sensuality, towards an open vision of the world, towards the tragic. But the idyll referred also to a picture of country life. It was a sign of the "countryside" in opposition to the "town" (the symbol of a complicated and dehumanized civilization), but at the same time it deprived the picture of the countryside of any concreteness, because it offered only a narrow repertory of acceptable rural motifs free of any relation to real time and space. In relation both to Antiquity and to the rural motifs, the idyll was really an eclogue, that is to say, a "selection" of aesthetically acceptable motifs<sup>6</sup>. The transposition of the ideal of country life as life "in the heart of Nature" to the mythical Golden Age enabled one to ignore everything which was too connected with the completely unideal present. Gessner himself pointed out that if the idyllic scenes were "put into a more distant past, they become more probable, as they are not suitable for our age, when the peasant, enslaved in his bitter daily toil, has to hand over his surplus stock to his lord and to the town"<sup>7</sup>. According to Gessner, the integration of the topical rural motifs into the idyll is basically possible, but it requires more "poetic effort" and extreme caution. Even the speech of Gessnerian shepherds is only seemingly simple and plain. It is predestined to differ from the literary language, but at the same time it is utterly stylized: all its means of expression are *a priori* defined formulas which in no way resemble (and are not meant to resemble) the speech of real peasants.

The evolution was heading towards the gradual solution of these paradoxes. Ways were sought towards a more explicit localization of the idyll in concrete time and space, to its connection with the native context, either ethnographical, natural or social. In other words, precisely these particular aspects, which had led Gessner to suspect that the present village was not the appropriate subject of idyllic poetry, were gradually integrated into the idyllic space.

The classical colouring - even if on the surface - was in the post-Gessnerian idyll restricted to nonthematical, in the broader sense of the word, "formal", devices. Very often, hexameter was an allusion to Antiquity, for example in Goethe's idyllic epic *Herman und Dorothea* or in

<sup>6</sup> Brodziński, p. 253.

<sup>7</sup> Gessner, p. 5.

Johann Heinrich Voss's *Luise*, but some other "classical" references could also be used. For example, *Hermann und Dorothea* is divided into cantos, whose titles bear the names of Muses with more or less distinct bonds to the motifs and atmosphere of the story's episodes. The introductory canto, which sets out the basis plot, takes its name from Calliope, the Muse of epic poetry. The sentimental scene of the meeting of the son and his mother "on the bench under the pear tree" bears the name of Euterpe, the Muse of lyric poetry. The narration by the leader of refugees, fleeing the French army, about the destruction of their native village, caught in the storm of history, has as its title "Clio", the muse of history. The meeting of Hermann and Dorothy was realized in the name of Erato, the Muse of love poetry and so on.

For Goethe, the evocation of the classical Golden Age was not important. The reference to Antiquity - transferred to the other levels of the text - served mostly as a signal of the idyll for which classical styling seemed to be indispensable.

Even the choice of some typical variants of the genre could represent such an allusion to the norms of the idyll. Voss made use of a "shepherds dialogue" as an allusion to the idyll in his poem *Die Leibeigenen*. He does not make do with the mere substitution of the usual ancient Greek pastoral names by German folk names (Michel, Hans), but he transforms the poetic dialogue into a socially biased "genre piece", saturates it with local ethnographical details and concentrates it - in contrast to the traditional character of the idyll - on the irreconcilable social conflict.

In those cases, the allusion to the idyllic genre usually bears clear polemical and even parodical features. Against the background of expectations connected with the idyll, the nonidyllic events and problems arise more distinctly. History, which Gessner places beyond the realm of the idyllic as a strange or even nonexistent element (see, for example, the bogus shepherd Dorantes' meditations on whether or not France will go to war)<sup>8</sup>, bursts into the centre of the idyllic space in *Hermann und Dorothea*. The crowds of refugees now flee from the French army, and the "happy ending" of the two lovers' betrothal is accompanied by a militant appeal to defend the country and its idyllic values (at this moment accepted as situated in the field of historical events) against invasion.

Similar to Goethe, Wordsworth sets his poem *Michael* in the semantic field of the idyll merely by its subtitle (*A Pastoral Poem*). The setting

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 127 (*Beim ohm lernt man, dass Frankreich gewiss nicht kriegen wird*).



has the clear conventional features of a literary Arcadia: "a hidden valley", surrounded by "pastoral mountains", where "an utter solitude" reigns. The plot, however, is distinctly nonidyllic: it is set into an actual landscape (Green-head Ghyll)<sup>9</sup>, the shepherd hero of the poem is not a stock character of the idyll, but a particular type, precisely defined both socially and regionally. The entire plot is, in fact, a story of the destruction of illusions about a possible idyll in the modern world. From the heritage of the idyll, the conventional opposition of the "idyllic" space versus the aggressive, pernicious "town" was maintained; even the motif of the integration of the idyll and the cottage as its centre was preserved, but both the parts of the idyllic plot were completely re-evaluated. The town, inimical and alien, finally wins (it lures Michael's son away from him forever) and even the integration of the cottage into Nature turns into a paradoxical, tragical picture of decay: Nature absorbs the idyll and liquidates it, only the stones of the unfinished sheepfold remain as a sign of the bygone dream.

In all these cases, the idyll changes into an anti-idyll, it is a pastoral upside down. The elements of the pastoral stylization, merely allow one to emphasize the sudden change of value perspective, an unwillingness to accept the nostalgic closed realm of "chosen" values both as the starting point and the end. The presentation of the ideal (natural human relations, an uncomplicated attitude towards Nature) provides us an opportunity to stress the opposition between the dream and "reality". The presentation of "happiness in a closed environment" turns out to be impossible in the new, gradually opening world that attacks the boundaries of the dreamy idyll and destroys it, because it does not, indeed, cannot, obey its laws.

In Czech culture, the vision of the idyllic and the topos of the cottage, so closely connected with it, developed in a similar way. The ideal of the pastoral past was gradually sought in the present, in the stylised picture of the countryside, distant from the town, both in terms of space and values. In Bohemia, the standard attributes of the cottage, which we encounter in the Gessnerian idyll, were shaping the basic character of the topos throughout the 19th Century. The Czech cottage is also "hidden", "detached from the world", "silent", "modest", "small", "poor" and "humble", but all the motifs soon acquire new semantic values and are integrated into new contexts of meaning which radically change the

<sup>9</sup> W. Wordsworth, *The Poems Volume One*, ed. by Kohn O. Hayden, London 1977, p. 455.

original Gessnerian conception, and even, in some cases, result in the semantization of the Czech cottage going far beyond the European tradition. In particular, the cottage topos in Czech culture becomes nationalized; it turns into a key element of national self-identification, of the gradually consolidated myth of the nation. The problem is not in the new Czech coordinates of the idyll in space, because the process of freeing it of its classical stylization is European. What is important is the more intimate acceptance of the idyll as something essentially connected with "Czechness" and its values<sup>10</sup>.

The usual semantic relations of the cottage topos were re-formulated. The traditional confrontation of the "idyllic cottage" with the town were transposed to a new level. The town was no longer only a conventional symbol of civilization, of the milieu alienated from Nature, of a world of hypocrisy and sin, but even a symbol of alienation from the nation and a denial of the original Czech identity. The cottage, reversely, was turned into a symbol of ethnic and linguistic authenticity. An analogous situation could be found in the case of the opposition of the "cottage" and the "castle" (or sometimes "manor"). Their opposition cannot be reduced to a mere social antithesis ("folk" vs. "aristocratic") or to a simple ethical opposition ("pride" vs. "modesty", "loftiness" vs. "humility", "refinement" vs. "simplicity") as it is primarily of "our". While the town symbolised the present state of Germanisation, the castle was a sign of the former glory which was now inherited and, little by little, revived by the cottage.

The cottage's traditional attributes were turned into symbols of national character. The fact that it is "small" seemed to signify profounder qualities of a "small nation", whose prestige is not based on material values and quantity, but on moral and intellectual values. The ceiling of the cottage is low, "black and soiled with soot", but this mark of poverty (and also of unequivocally positive humbleness), means a bit more: it was a ceiling before which even the most powerful and prominent persons were forced to bow their heads. Similarly, the motif of the unlocked doors of the village cottages was not a mark of their inhabitants poverty, but an exalted symbol of the "openness" of the "Czech national character", of Czech sincerity, frankness, and hospitality.

This kind of symbolism partially extricated the cottage from the context of country life. The cottage means more than a "village house"; to

<sup>10</sup> J. Rak, *Bývalí Čechové. České historické mýty a stereotypy*, Praha 1994 [1995], p. 83-96.



a large extent, it is a sacred place, too. Even in this respect, the Gessnerian tradition was preserved; the cottage's integration into Nature was associated with the idea of classical religiousness looking for the divine in elemental forces. The cottage begins to usurp the functions of the temple: it is *another* temple, different in that it refuses the lofty upward motion typical of a representative religious building, but, however, is even closer to the divine humbly manifested in the natural world and its inhabitants.

In the 19th century, the cottage is the seat of the "old Czech faith", a place, where the Czech bible and other Czech books are hidden and read, it is a source of spiritual activity which combines a search for God and maintains the Czech national identity and culture. It connects in itself the functions of a spiritual and an intellectual centre. "Around the humble lamp, I have met such a goodly amount of ingenuousness and wit that dozens of salons could be revived with its help", we read in one of Karel Sabina's novels<sup>11</sup>. The lamp itself turned into a popular symbol of the "spirituality" and "cultural standard" of the Czech cottage.

Even if semiotically taken out of the village milieu, the cottage preserves its original "idyllic" localization at the margin, outside the big world, in seclusion. Although it became a general national symbol, it preserved its idyllic quality. Strictly speaking, it was able to change into a national symbol precisely thanks to its idyllic character. It is a sign with indubitable reference to the national history, but at the same time it is - as the cottage in Gessner a-historical. It is viewed as an important factor in the nation's struggles, but its struggles seem not to be of this world. Very often, the hero from the cottage, if he appears on the historical scene, triumphs by his defeat. It is the spiritual struggle (moral defiance, preservation of old traditions, cultivation of language) that is typical of him; in this sense he represents a secular version of the ideal Christian hero, who is fighting not with real weapons but with weapons of spirit.

The sacredness of the cottage seems to be a reflection of a particular Czech messianism. This assertion might seem debatable - we usually speak about Polish, Russian, or Slovak messianism<sup>12</sup>, but Czechs seem to be more pragmatic, more sober, free of the tendency to the bombastic self-perceptions typical of messianism.

<sup>11</sup> K. Sabina, *Na poušti* [1863], Prague 1911, p. 119.

<sup>12</sup> J. Ujejski, *Dzieje polskiego mesjanizmu*, Lwów 1931. J. Goszczyńska, *Problem mesjanizmu w słowackiej literaturze romantycznej*, in *Z polskich studiów slawistycznych, seria VIII*, Warszawa 1992, s. 45-51.

Czech messianism might not be so evident, but in spite of this it played an important role in the emancipatory process of Czech society. It has ties to its model, to the story about the Messiah, at least at three important points: the story of the birth in Bethlehem, the story of the crucifixion, and of the resurrection. The topic of the crucifixion was a metaphor for mythicized "Czech suffering" in the past, especially the Czech martyrdom for the idea of Hussitism that brings the Czech nation - as formulated in the nineteenth century - to the brink of catastrophe. The theme of resurrection is a metaphor for the Czech "revival": the nation, as Christ rises from the dead, leaves the grave where it was laid to rest after the Battle of the White Mountain, in 1620, ("as the phoenix from the lost epochs of time / the Czech genius arose, leaving the tomb"<sup>13</sup>). The topic of the birth in Bethlehem is, as compared with the pathos-filled Easter myths, more a nostalgic Christmas parable about a nation born in bed of straw, a nation which came from below, from the "cottage" (which in this context tends to be an analogy for the stable in Bethlehem): "You poor and meager shacks of Bethlehem / the star of the Saviour was shining above your roofs"<sup>14</sup>. It was a story about a nation which was poor, but for that reason more valuable, as not tainted by the materialism of this world. On those three metaphorical levels (which represent three versions of the same symbolic language), the meditations on the task of the Czech nation in world history, its "special" mission, were at work.

From this point of view, the emblem of the cottage played the most important role. The Christmas myth of the cottage in Bethlehem which gave birth to the nation factually corresponds to the impressive, grand Easter myth about the nation which was laid to rest some time ago and now rises from the dead. In both cases, the signified (signifié) of the myth is the central motif of the Revivalist ideology - the "resurrection", "revival" of the Czech nation sentenced by the White Mountain defeat to two hundred years of sleep. The context of the Bethlehem variant, however, shifted the sacred story of the National Revival into the field of the idyll. In opposition to the Romanesque, apocalyptical vision of resurrection, involving skulls and bones, gravestones, open tomb, broken coffins, the Bethlehem myth offers a silent scene of a poor cottage with the usual attributes (a low ceiling, poverty, straw, humbleness, love), some-

<sup>13</sup> J. Neruda, *Básně II, Spisy II*, Prague 1956, p. 200.

<sup>14</sup> V. Šolc, *Prvosenky*, Prague 1951, p. 187.



times newly adapted (a lamp as a symbol of knowledge and wisdom, a book, the language of our forefathers).

The Messiah born in a humble house is either the nation itself or its outstanding representative, the "awakener of the nation", the Czech man of letters. The strict "either-or" model, however, does not work here, as, in the mythopoetic perspective of those times, the birth of the prominent man means simultaneously the rebirth of the nation itself. The cult of the Czech intellectual was formed on the background of the New Testament story of the Saviour's birth - it was supported in Czech also by phonic similarity between the word *spisovatel* (writer) and *spasitel* (saviour). It was the reason why the cult of the "native village house", "native cottage" as an analogy to the Nativity scene was so important here. In clear analogy to the birthplace of the Christ child, Josef Jungmann's house was celebrated, for example, in the small village of Hudlice: "above the cottage, a star began to shine when Herods were murdering our children or, at least, the language in their mouths. It was in this cottage when the Czech spirit revived for the first time in one hundred and fifty years. It was in this cottage, that our national striving spontaneously obtained its future character"<sup>15</sup>. Similar motifs were at work also in the celebration of Palacký's native house:

O quiet cottage! Salutations!

You, chosen by the Genius of the country for our salvation,  
so modest by origin, but consecrated by the Almighty's hand!

The mysterious star of the East  
shone above you in its wondrous power.  
The residences of princes, beautiful palaces  
reaching the skies,  
are nothing compared to you,  
beautiful palaces reaching the skies.

Lo! the nation of heroes, the family,  
their heads inclined, in devotional respect  
lips whispering their hearts gratitude  
"He was our father, he turned into our light!"  
And excited shining eyes, welled up with tears,  
bless the Bethlehem of our country!<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> V. Hálek, *O umění*, Prague 1954.

<sup>16</sup> M., *Chaloupko tichá!*, "Humoristické listy" 18. 1876, 23, p. [177].

But even in cases, where the topic is not developed in such detail, we usually find the Bethlehem analogy in a subtext, conveyed by means of allusions which obtain their full meaning only against the background of the generally accepted conventions of imagery. Note how Anna Jahodová-Kasalová describes the native house of the humorist Frantisek Jaromír Rubes:

this simple cottage, stooped low like a feeble old woman (...). In my mind's eye I often see it in its summer green garb which I so used to enjoy; surrounded by fruit-trees, so that only the chimney and the roof top peeped out (...) as if it were ashamed of its inferiority and age. Its little elfin windows, as small as those in Bethlehem, were in the same way covered by green curtains<sup>17</sup>.

The description of the cottage makes use of the traditional idyllic repertoire, as it was nothing more than a logical continuation of Rubes's own verse "There's a small cottage near the river Sázava, surrounded by a small orchard", which Jahodová-Kasalová quotes at the beginning of her article. Even here - through the innocent comparison with the Nativity - the obligatory messianic gesture is realised.

The birth in the cottage became a requisite item in the biography of any eminent Czech of the nineteenth century. Jirí Dlouhy, the biographer of the patriotic lawyer Josef Fric, formulates this problem openly: "How do the biographies of our eminent persons, born in the first half of the century, begin? 'He was born in a poor cottage'". Sometimes the growing impact of this stereotype evoked protests, but they were usually sporadic and feeble. Jan Neruda, born in Prague's Malá Strana, rejects, from the start, opinions "that anyone who wants to be successful in literature has to come from a village cottage" (1862)<sup>18</sup>. But finally, even he submits to the advancing stereotype and develops it further: "nearly all the important persons in Bohemia came from poor cottages" (1864)<sup>20</sup>.

The second half of the nineteenth century was full of celebrations at the native homes of writers (Jungmann, Hanka, Palacky, Nemcová, Krolmus, Rais, Rubes, Chládek, Havlicek), installation of memorial plaque ("a small commemorative plaque is more touching than a big stone monument"<sup>21</sup>) and cultivation of the cult of the cottage. The ideal

<sup>17</sup> A. Jahodová-Kasáková, *Vzpomínky na Františka Jaromíra Ruběše*, Kutná Hora 1898, p. 7-8.

<sup>18</sup> J. Dlouhy, Dr. Fric, "Osvěta" 6, 1876: II, 8, p. 557.

<sup>19</sup> Neruda, *Literatura I, Spisy XI*, Prague 1957, p. 296.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 447.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.



of a simple village cottage remained in the background also in those cases where a man of letters was born in a town (Celakovsky, Chocholousek), and resulted sometimes in radical modifications of autobiographical facts if they did not correspond to the normative idea. In the cult of Božena Němcová, the small house of the Old Bleachery at Ratiborice came to the fore, although the authoress was not born here – it was only later that she and her children lived there for a short time. Hálek's birth place was usually called a "cottage", even though it was an inn. Svatopluk Čech, the national bard of the late nineteenth century, was born in the manor at Ostředek, as the son of the manager of the estate and thus a member of the local elite. The image of his birthplace, however, was also completely subordinated to the all-encompassing myth:

Neither in a royal castle, nor in a palace of a duke,  
is the poet born, swaddled in brocade,  
the salvos of cannonade do not celebrate his birth,  
the cheering of the exalted crowds does not welcome him.  
The thatched roof of a cottage gives birth to him,  
a small, poky house of an artisan.  
The administrator watches every penny  
and worries whether or not he'll have enough money for his children.

While father controls the accounts  
for the welfare of a rich man,  
mother in a small room waits till the child falls asleep  
to continue then quickly in her work<sup>22</sup>.

In Czech culture, the connection between the cottage as a sacred place and the cult of the writer was so close, that "silence" as a conventional attribute of the cottage ("a silent cottage") was transferred to the ideal of a Czech eminent person. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the term "silent genius" thereby became the obligatory appreciation of many patriotic intellectuals, regardless of their actual importance, this attribute was used for important persons such as Jungmann or Hanka as well as many minor figures (such as Tomáš Burian)<sup>23</sup>.

<sup>22</sup> E. Muzík, *U Kolébky Svatopluka Čecha*, in *Čechův památník, Na oslavu odhalení pamětní desky na rodném domě Svatopluka Čecha v Ostředku*, 8. září 1921, ed. by J. Vycpálek, Benesov [1921], p. 5.

<sup>23</sup> Neruda, *Podobizny III, Spisy XXXI*, Prague 1954, p. 306. On "quiet genius" see M. Otruba, *Druhá historická role Josefa Jungmanna*, "Tvar" 4, 1993:29-30, p. 1, 4.

At the same time, the mythical position of the cottage in Czech culture enabled its acceptance as a symbolic double of the mythical mountain Blaník. The basis of the analogy was a metaphor comparing the Czech patriotic élite to the "knights of Blaník", to the "warriors of God" coming out of the heart of the Blaník mountain to save the nation from disaster. The motif of the cottage was very often associated with the motif of Blaník:

It was the Czech cottage that returned to the nation its lost self-confidence while the Blaník mountain with all its knightage was overcome by eternal sleep<sup>24</sup>.

We Czechs have a legend about the Blaník mountain and the knights sleeping inside who will awake in the time of extreme danger and liberate the depressed country. This prediction has come true. From the heart of Bohemia, which has been opening, emerge the warriors with swords of enthusiasm, shields of the truth and justice, and in the armour of patriotic feelings<sup>25</sup>.

This process of mythicizing the cottage was first stimulated by Jan Kollár's sonnet "May you all work hard..." from his *Daughter of Slavia* (1824), the final verses of which run as follows:

a shepherd's quiet cottage  
can often do more for the country  
than the camp of Zizka's warriors<sup>26</sup>.

In those few words, the topos of the "cottage" broke out of the framework of the Gessnerian pastoral. Without leaving the space of the idyll, "the shepherd's cottage" ceased to be a place isolated from real civic life, it turned into an important place "for the country". It is noteworthy that Kollár provocatively compares its importance with the celebrated Hussite epoch of Czech history, he even prefers the cottage to the encampment of the Hussite warriors. The idyllic shepherd or countryman is now no longer an exile from civilization; he becomes a participant in the spiritual task of building the country, a subject of "small-scale", "quiet" work for the country (this motif, emblematic of the Czech National Revival, was adopted later also by Masarykian pragmatism).

The supreme period of the mythicizing of the cottage in Czech culture can be illustrated with a well-known poem "Our Cottages", written by Václav Šolc<sup>27</sup>. The topos is reflected here in a set of different but

<sup>24</sup> Hálek, *O umění*, p. 109.

<sup>25</sup> Neruda, *Menší cestý, Spisy IX*, Prague 1961, p. 415.

<sup>26</sup> J. Kollár, *Slávy dcera*, Buda, 1824, II - 76.

<sup>27</sup> Šolc, *Prvosenky*, p. 187-188.



closely tied metaphorical levels. The basic idyllic level ("sprinkled all over the gardens", "quiet", "in a hiding place of peace", "modest", "small") is here fully absorbed by the myth of the nation. The cottages are witnesses of the nation's fall ("you have seen our most cruel humiliation") as well as its salvation ("you helped to change our tears to pearls", "you were the pure fountains in the endless desert", "you are the jewels from the ruins of glory", "you are the places where the nation found refuge", "you nursed our Muses", "from you the first flowers were woven into our wreaths").

The cottage in Šolc's poem is a clear analogy to the house in Bethlehem where Christ was born: "You poor and meager shacks of Bethlehem / the star of the Saviour was shining above your roofs", it is a "sacred altar", the birthplace of the Saviour, the place of the nation's resurrection. It is confronted with the castle, its opposite, but at the same time it is its legal heir and double ("You're the castles of a lovelier consecration"). The cottage is the birthplace of a new Czech hero, a "knight of the spirit" ("your knights armoured with spirit / have not hurt anybody, but healed the wounds of all") and represents, in spite of its modesty and "low" social status, not a phenomenon from the periphery of culture, but the real heart of cultural activity. The conventional "plot" of a return to the roots is transformed into an allegorical vision of the Nation, which arose from the cottages and now returns to them to regain its old strength: "Behold, the Nation-pilgrim is returning to you: bless his hard and sacred toil". The poem ends with a grandiose apotheosis of the cottage as a monument of Czech culture.

All this helped to form the specific Czech identity and its illusions:

We are the children of the cottage, / the brood of a poor village nest, / we carry in our heart the fervour of our fathers, / and fire in our breast. // Though they wished others no harm, / but only happiness for all, / they knew how to defend their beloved country. // They saved for us / this pleasing tongue and heartfelt love of toil, / together with their burning passion for this native soil. / This heritage might help us / to protect the country in the future. / Let's try hard to regain us Czechs our lost positions<sup>28</sup>.

The Czech nation was presented as a "nation originating in the cottages" with all the trappings as a nation connected with ahistorical scenery of the idyll, with the ideal of peasant work as well as the ideal of cultural activities which the cottage emblemized as a place where the continuity of the Czech language and literature was preserved.

<sup>28</sup> K. V. Rais, *Pod Zvičinou, Verše i povídky*, Prague 1921, p. 169-170.

At the same time, the Czechs saw themselves both as a peasant nation and as a nation of "intellectual work" (brainwork), of course, in its unequivocally positive aspect: that is to say: not as a nation of romantic inner conflicts and Weltschmerz but as one of the sort of intellectual activity which is positive, constructive, and "messianic", connected with God. "The Czech nation is not in quarrel with God" - wrote Karel Jaromír Erben, a Czech Romantic poet, in one of his letters, to formulate his disagreement with West European Romanticism<sup>29</sup>. The ideal of the cottage helped to present the Czech "national character" as gentle, quiet, and typical of its patient confidence in a better future and the divine order of the world.

This bond with the sacred values of the nation gave the idyll in Czech culture a position it did not have elsewhere in Europe<sup>30</sup>. Once in this position, however, it was very difficult to destroy it, to unmask it, to reveal its illusion. All the mythology of the cottage was so closely connected with the Czech national identity that it was extremely difficult to abandon it - in this sense the idyll soon became a serious obstacle to Czech cultural evolution.

<sup>29</sup> K. J. Erben in *Slovanská korespondence Karla Jaromíra Erbena*, ed. V. Bechyňová and J. Jirásek, Prague 1971, p. 369-370.

<sup>30</sup> See D. Hodrová, *Idylický a ideální prostor v české próze 19. století*, in *Proudý české umělecké tvorby 19. Století, Sen a ideál*, Prague 1990, p. 100-107.



## SIELANKA I TOPOS CHATY JAKO NARODOWY STEREOTYP CZESKI

(Streszczenie)

Autor zauważa, że chata stała się elementem sielanki czeskiej pod koniec osiemnastego stulecia, a jej „odkrywcą” był Salomon Gessner. Chata miała być przestrzenią wyizolowaną, obiektem oddalonym od hałasów i bieganiny miasta, któremu była zresztą zawsze przeciwstawiana. Jednak gessnerowskie pojęcie chaty i sielanki, choć obciążone tradycją klasyczną, uwikłane było w rozmaite paradoksy – z jednej strony miało to być miejsce ucieczki od cywilizacji, sztuczności i nienaturalności, zarówno otoczenia, jak i stosunków międzyludzkich, a z drugiej idealny świat Gessnera jawił się jako sztuczny właśnie, ze względu na konwencjonalną, antyczną stylizację oraz pokazową naturalność, którą głosił.

W procesie historycznoliterackim doszło jednak z czasem do mitologizacji „chaty” w literaturze czeskiej. Pod koniec lat dwudziestych dziewiętnastego wieku topos chaty wyłamał się z ram sielanki gessnerowskiej. Pozostając elementem idylli „chata pasterska” wychodzi z obywatelskiej, społecznej izolacji i staje się „miejscem ważnym dla kraju”. Artysta, geniusz, intelektualista lub idylliczny pasterz bierze udział w duchowym dziele budowy ojczyzny i nie jest już uciekinierem od cywilizacji, lecz podmiotem „cichej” pracy na rzecz swojego kraju.

Macura twierdzi, że ten związek z uświęconymi tradycją wartościami narodowymi nadaje sielance w kulturze czeskiej znaczenie, którego nie uzyskała w innych literaturach europejskich. Mit chaty stał się jednak z czasem przeszkodą w czeskiej ewolucji kulturowej.