

“In a golden forest a blue bird bleeding” On the Reception of Austrian Expressionism in Czech Poetry

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The Austrian expressionist poet Georg Trakl had a significant influence on Czech literature in the 20th century, especially thanks to the early translations of his poetry into Czech by Bohuslav Reynek and later by Ludvík Kundera. Numerous translators and poets dealt with Trakl's poetry. At the center of the investigation is the question of the expression of this influence among the Moravian poets – who and how did Trakl's work reflect in his poems. It turns out that Trakl's work has a firm place in Czech literature and still radiates to the present day.

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Graphic artist, poet and translator Bohuslav Reynek (1892-1971) is now remembered primarily as a visual artist whose work is shown at art exhibitions. While his poetry was rediscovered already in the 1990s, his translations have not yet been fully appreciated – though there is hardly another Czech translator, primarily in the field of German and French literature, to have also been such an inspirer and discoverer of new names. Among the authors introduced by Reynek in the Czech context, Austrian Expressionist poet Georg Trakl held a very unique position, making a significant impact on the direction of Czech poetry in the 1930s through Reynek's translations. Remarkably, the authors influenced by Trakl mostly came from Moravia or were linked to this region – as if Trakl's dark, melancholy poetry reverberated in this cultural environment, traditionally bound to Austria's capital of Vienna rather than to Bohemia's capital of Prague.

Georg Trakl (1887, Salzburg – 1914, Cracow) left a significant mark on the history of modern world literature by his poetry. His troubled life story, and primarily his poetic work, contained in two rather slim volumes – *Gedichte* (Poems, 1913) and *Sebastian im Traum* (Sebastian Dreaming, 1915) and in his literary remains, both disturbed and inspired his contemporaries already; after the Second World War, the interest in Georg Trakl increased in the field of literary studies, still lasting to this day. Trakl's work is mostly ranked among literary Expressionism,

which prevailed in Germany between 1910 and 1920. However, while Trakl was seen as one of Expressionism's precursors in the first half of the 20th century and was perceived as such by his contemporaries, today, he is rather seen as someone who has prematurely consummated and even surpassed this movement. Let me briefly mention the essential features which single Trakl out, laying the foundations for the specific form of Austrian Expressionism.

First of all, Trakl lacks the dynamism, the externally throbbing energy and the open poetic form of Expressionism, counterbalancing it by an almost hermetically confined and stiffly static character of his formally traditional texts (in the first stage of his work). What is also different is the environment in which the dark visions and black farces of German Expressionists took place – the megapolis. To Trakl, the city is a symbol of suffering, while he rather sought the calm, seemingly idyllic countryside or the suburbs. The unique position of Trakl's poetry within Expressionism is only partially due to his being Austrian, and from a relatively small town at that, and due to his mentality and premises being different from those of the authors based in Germany, primarily Berlin, and Prague. Trakl's poetry was definitely strongly influenced by the atmosphere of the declining Austro-Hungarian Monarchy; however, it would be inaccurate to attach greater significance to any external signs in the case of Trakl. In his poetry, anything from the external world melts into an internal numb world of ambiguous meaning through a "soft destructive look".

Trakl's poetry heralded an important turn in modern poetry – the turn towards deliberate ambiguity of expression, absolute metaphor and a new perception of poetry in general, as traditional criteria fail when trying to understand and make sense of his lines. His work, lying at the crossroads of literary movements, influenced an entire branch of modern poetry – not only the German one.

Since the 1920s, Trakl influenced the development of Czech poetry through the early translations of his poetry by Bohuslav Reynek (1917 and 1924) and later by Ludvík Kundera (1965 and 1995). In Reynek's case, it was the very first translation of Trakl into a foreign language. Let me raise the question of how Trakl's poetry influenced Moravian poets and how these authors reflected Trakl's verse and his specific poetics in their work.

Bohuslav Reynek, like many other young poets of his generation, started publishing his poems in the *Moderní revue* magazine. However, soon after that, already in 1914, Reynek started his significant collaboration with Josef Florian, a publisher based in Stará Říše in the Bohemian-Moravian Borderlands. In his *Dobré dílo* publishing house, Florian employed and developed all areas of Reynek's talent – those of translation, poetry and visual arts. This is also where Reynek's early spiritually oriented collections were published: *Žízně* (Thirsts, 1921) and *Smutek země* (Earth's Grief, 1924) in which the author developed his specific archaic style.

In 1916, at the age of twenty-four, Reynek wrote to A. L. Stříž, a close collaborator and friend of Josef Florian:

Mr. Florian has a book of poems by G. Trakl, have you read them? I, too, got them these days and will translate them. Outside France and Hlaváček, I do not know of poems more beautiful. He sees things in completely new ways, and the closer to the end of the book, the deeper and broader he can see. (Med, 1992, p. 32)

This letter proves Reynek's budding fascination by Trakl which turned into a long-term one. The translation of Trakl's first collection was published at Dobré dílo under the title *Básně Jiřího Trakla* (The Poems of Georg Trakl) already in 1917; the translation of the second collection was published under the title *Šebastian v snu* (Sebastian Dreaming) seven years later, in 1924. Thus, Reynek's fascination by Trakl initiated the relationship network linking many Czech poets of the interwar generation and several authors from the following generations to Trakl's poetry.

Bohuslav Reynek discovered a soulmate in Georg Trakl; their poetics resonated with each other in a harmonious accord. Trakl's dark, melancholy poetry, for which Reynek the translator found and created a distinctive poetic expression in the Czech language, opened the door of Expressionism for Reynek the poet and visual artist. The underlying themes of this movement, such as the sense of destruction and alienation, as well as the exploration of disharmonious motifs and means of expression, were adopted by Bohuslav Reynek in this stage of his work; in his three collections from the 1920s, he created one of the most genuine, though peripheral forms of Czech Expressionist poetry.

After all, Trakl was not the only Expressionist poet translated by Reynek – thanks to his efforts, the key compositions and extensive selections by poets, prosaists and theorists of this movement were translated into Czech in the 1920s. In the Nova et Vetera editorial line of Florian's publishing house, Czech readers were the first Europeans to meet the work of Theodor Däubler, René Schickele, Kasimir Edschmid, Georg Heym and Else Lasker-Schüler in a non-German language. However, Trakl assumed a special position among them. Already the fact that he was an Austrian at the periphery of the German language field, in an isolation that was sought out rather than forced, strangely corresponds to the budding position of Bohuslav Reynek on the Czech literary scene. Reynek and Trakl both hated the city; moreover, they shared a deep religious background.

Nevertheless, their common ground primarily lies in the intersection of two closely related "autumn poetics". What is already striking is the identical topos captured in their poetries – the motionless atmosphere of desolate country houses, the motif of a forsaken garden, an identical color scheme. Trakl's color scheme – primarily encompassing warm autumn tones besides his specific blue – is echoed in Reynek's lines imbued with the rusty color of rot. When these poets write about the green color, it is not the fresh green of spring but rather the sickly green of mold. Reynek's poetry resonates with Trakl's verse primarily in the tragic vision of the world, viewing everything from the perspective of autumn and ruin. It is then no wonder that the two poets use identical or similar titles for their poems: *Winter Evening*, *Doom*, *Autumn Walk*, *Three Songs of the Heart*, *At the Pond*, *Morn in the Winter*, *Dusk* etc. There are parallels on the levels of themes and motifs, and fewer ones on the levels of words and citations. Decay and ruin, being the usual props of Expressionism, are no longer mere props with Trakl and Reynek. As proved by Vojtěch Jirát in his 1942 study already, rather than expressing a "tragic sense of life", Trakl is directly experiencing it, he is "living the decadent life". (Jirát, 1942, p. 148). His tragic imagination lies in a fatal direction towards extinction, inhabiting every corner of his poetry, every metaphor. No matter how nice the phenomena and terms are, such as spring, angel or love, they are seen through the prism of decay and awareness of death.

For a rather long time, "tragic vision" fully absorbed Reynek's imagination, giving rise to three collections which are now rightly considered to be the highlight of Czech Expressionist poetry – two collections of prose poetry *Rybí šupiny* (Fish Scales, 1922) and *Had na sněhu*

(Snake on the Snow, 1924), and a collection of poems *Rty a zuby* (Lips and Teeth, 1925). They were all written during the First World War – which, both to Trakl and Reynek, was a true image of hell on Earth and incited their sensitive spirits to increasingly cruel metaphors. The feelings of anxiety and horror experienced by the poets led to a certain constrained expression which was also typical for the Expressionist era.

As a particular example of the affinity between the two poets, let me quote the third stanza of Trakl's poem *Winterdämmerung* (Winter Twilight) in Reynek's translation:

Chrámý, mosty, nemocnice
v šerosvitu mají hrůzy líce.
Mnohé prostěradlo krví poskvrněné,
plachtou na průplavu vítr žene. (Trakl, 1917, p. 16)

In English translation:

Churches, bridges, infirmary
Faces of fright in the twilight
Many a blood-stained linen
Billowing sail on the canal. (Translation: Tereza Chocholová)

Reynek's poem *Večer* (Evening) employs the same word choice and color scheme:

Moře... nemocnice siná,
v které údů běl se vzpíná
nad zteřelá prostěradla. (Reynek, 1995, p. 295)

In English translation:

The sea... a livid infirmary
The white of limbs raising
Above the rotten linens. (Translation: Tereza Chocholová)

Among the images Reynek directly borrowed from Trakl, let me name the phrase “black dew”, a kind of an absolute metaphor which has a long tradition in German poetry. Reynek employs this phrase in his collection *Odlet vlaštovek* (Swallows Flown) from the 1960s, while Trakl employs this phrase in his poems *An den Knaben Elis* (To the Boy Elis) and *Der Herbst des Einsamen* (The Autumn of the Lonely).

Reynek's poems from this period seem most convincing not where they are carried away by Trakl's imagination but rather where Trakl's poetry was a mere impulse for Reynek's own imagination – thus revealing a source which has been present in Czech poetry for centuries but never played a crucial role.

One can only speculate what the fate of Reynek's translations would be had they not impressed young poet František Halas (1901–1949) who was born in Brno, lived in Prague for most of his life, but was buried in Kunštát in Moravia. What is certain though is that Halas's interest, his

popularization of Trakl's work among his fellow poets "from the centers" as well as the echoes of Trakl's and Reynek's poetry in the first stage of his work – roughly delimited by the collections *Sépie* (Sepia, 1927), *Kohout plaší smrt* (The Cock Scares off Death, 1930) and *Dokořán* (Wide Open, 1936) – played a significant role in the development of Czech interwar poetry.

Trakl's influence on the early work of František Halas is a well-known fact, proved by multiple open witness accounts of the author and his friends as well as by scholarly research conducted by Ludvík Kundera, Jaroslav Med and Karel Milota among others. Rather than merely stating this relationship – since it has already been suggested – let me specify and confirm it by verse. Let me start by observing that this is not an easy task, for Trakl, Reynek and Halas were distinctive authors and despite their tender age (it is their early collections that are mostly discussed here), they were mature poets. Halas's work shows the encounter and partial merging of these three poetics; three similar, though not identical perspectives of the world.

This relationship was first noticed in 1930 by leading Czech poet Vítězslav Nezval, who was himself a Poetist. His critique of Halas's second collection *Kohout plaší smrt*, in which Halas deliberately employs cacophony and motifs of death, was very disapproving:

Halas's lines seem like a lousy translation of poetry that may be good but spoiled by a negligent and incompetent translator that is rather old-fashioned as well... As for Halas's mimicry of Trakl (especially in purely descriptive poems) and delight in death, I do not want to waste my breath, no matter how disgusting they are. (Nezval, 1967, p. 212)

In these sentences, Nezval refers to Reynek's poetic language which indeed seems archaic and which was in fact partially adopted by Halas. To be able to grasp this process, let me explore Halas's juvenilia. Already the earliest manuscripts of Halas were affected by Trakl – the influence is undeniable and even consists in direct quotations (although it would be misleading and limiting to solely look for such parallels). In particular, this refers to the unusual phrase "oblé oči" (rounded, vaulted eyes) based on Reynek's translation of Trakl's phrase "runde Augen" (literally translated as "round eyes"). This expression is found in the third stanza of Halas's poem *Melancholie* (Melancholia) from 1924 in the line "vy oblé oči nemohu pro vás spát" (you rotund eyes I cannot sleep for you).

More proof is brought by a poem from Halas's literary remains from 1929. It is part of a letter addressed to Halas's future wife Libuše Rejlová:

Ve zlatém hvozdu modrý pták krvácí
chlavec tají dech a klopýtá o své slzy
Malý zpěváček vypadlý z hnízda hvězd
[...]
Tehda jeho spravedlivé dny jsou naplněny
a chlavec proměněn v krystal
stává se trůnem lásky
Jeho něha zní strachem kolouchů a pláče
na nebevzetí jejích ňader se usmívá
a říká jí jménem při němž mlknou ptáci

(Halas, 1967, p. 43)

In English translation:

In a golden forest a blue bird bleeding
 The boy, breathless, stumbling upon his tears
 A little songster fallen out of his nest of stars
 [...]
 Then his just days are fulfilled
 And the boy, turned into crystal,
 Becomes a throne of love
 His tenderness resounds with the fear of fawns and tears
 Upon the assumption of her breasts he smiles
 And calls her a name which makes the birds fall silent

(Translation: Tereza Chocholová)

This raises the question why Halas never included this poem in any of his collections. Let me suggest what is perhaps a rather daring hypothesis: it was affected by Trakl too much; perhaps as a kind of Halas's "variation on a Traklian theme" – in particular the poems *An den Knaben Elis* and *Elis* from Trakl's second collection. The similarity between Halas's poem and Trakl's poems, not on the surface level but somewhere deeper in the texts, must be striking to an astute reader. Let me quote excerpts from Reynek's translations of the two poems from *Šebastian v snu*.

Elise, zvolá-li v černém lese kos,
 toť tvoje zkáza.
 Rty tvé pijí chlad modrého pramene ze skály.

Zanech, krvácí-li potichu tvé čelo,
 pradávných legend
 a temného výkladu z drah ptačího letu.

Ty však béřeš se tichými kroky do noci,
 jež ověšena všecička jest hrozny purpurovými,
 a krásně rozvíráš náručí v modro.
 [...]
 Černá jeskyně jest naše mlčení

z níž občas vychází sladké zvíře
 a pomalu klopí těžká víčka.
 Na tvé spánky kane černá rosa,

poslední zlato rozpadlých hvězd.

(Trakl, 1987, p. 41)

Dokonalé jest ticho tohoto zlatého dne.
 Pod starými duby

ty se, Elise, zjevuješ, odpočívající s oblýma očima.

Modř jejich odráží dřímotu milujících.

[...]

Ó! Jak spravedliví jsou, Elise, všickni tví dnové!

[...]

a zatím hlava jeho klesá do podušek černých

Modrá zvěř

ticha krvácí v houští trnů.

[...]

Znamení a hvězdy

tiše propadají v soumracném jezeře.

(Trakl, 1987, p. 112)

In English translation:

Elis, if the blackbird calls in the black forest

That shall be your destruction.

Your lips drink the cool of the blue spring from the rock.

Leave, if your brow bleeds in silence,

The ancient legends

And the dark reading of the paths of birds in flight.

You though make your silent steps into the night

All bedecked with grapes of purple

Opening your arms beautifully into the blue.

[...]

From the black cave of our silence

A sweet beast comes once in a while

Slowly lowering its heavy eyelids.

Black dew trickles down your temples

The last gold of the broken stars.

Perfect is the silence of this golden day.

Under the ancient oaks

You, Elis, appear, resting with round eyes.

Their blue reflects the slumber of the loving.

[...]

Oh! How just, Elis, all of your days are!

[...]

While his head sinks into the black cushions.

The blue beasts
Of silence bleeding in the thicket of thorns.
[...]
Signs and stars
Slowly falling through the dusky lake.

(Translation: Tereza Chocholová)

This is a more complex relationship network than in the case of the previous poem. Citations will hardly do, although they, too, can be found here – what is striking is the concord between Trakl’s line “O! How just, Elis, all of your days are!” and Halas’s “Then his just days are fulfilled”. What is even more significant is the formal concord – three-verse stanzas with long free verse. The lexical concord is also obvious – while Trakl has a specific, idiosyncratic vocabulary, it is free of archaisms – those were only added by his translator Bohuslav Reynek. Halas’s choice of words like “hvozď” (archaic word for deep forest), “tajnosnubný” (mysterious, enigmatic) and “mlknou” (festive, archaic term for falling silent) can originate from this very source. However, all of the borrowings are interpreted in a sophisticated way and worked into the new text – perhaps Halas’s variation on Trakl’s “Elisian” poem.

This approach later became typical for Halas – his collections *Sépie* and *Kohout plaší smrt* include many such examples on multiple levels, ranging from word choice through syntax to the composition of the poems. As an example of a metaphor adopted by Halas for his collection *Kohout plaší smrt*, let me name the poetic rendering of the figure of an angel which appears in Trakl’s work in the phrase “blue poppy eyes of an angel” and in Halas’s work directly as “the poppy angel”; another time, Trakl writes the verse “Angels with muddy wings leave their grey rooms” (Trakl, 1924, p. 51) while Halas writes “The angel of the heart is limping, dragging a dirty wing behind” (Halas, 1948, p. 14).

Halas, like Reynek, primarily shared a tragic vision of the world with Trakl. While Halas retained it later as well, in his collections from the second half of the 1930s, the last traces of Traklian inspiration disappeared. While tragic vision was shared by all three poets at a certain stage of their work, it was most authentic in the case of Halas due to its consistency. Although the early works of Halas even included direct citations of Trakl, there is no reason to consider these poems “copies” or “unoriginal”. On the contrary, this is where Halas heralded the way in which modern poetry employs citations. After all, Trakl himself cited Jean Arthur Rimbaud in his poetry – of which Halas must have been unaware – yet this did not lower the quality of Trakl’s work.

When searching for the traces of Trakl’s poetry in 1930s Moravian poetry, there is at least one more author to be mentioned. The name of Jan Zahradníček (1905–1960), whose life and work are closely linked to the region of Třebíč, is now rightly associated with the culmination of Czech spiritual and Catholic poetry. Zahradníček, however, only found his characteristic poetic expression in his third collection *Jeřáby* (Rowans, 1933), while his earlier work is marked by coping with the influence of Halas and Závada, and thus also Trakl. Zahradníček was well-versed in Trakl’s work – he even translated two of Trakl’s poems into Czech. His first collection *Pokušení smrti* (The Temptation of Death, 1930) manifests these relations so strongly that it puts the atmosphere which reigned in the realm of poetry at the time into

the foreground – however, Zahradníček was lacking an authentic life feeling to correspond with it. Thus, Zahradníček's early poetry reaches the limits of Trakl's influence in Czech poetry – without experience, it only mechanically juxtaposes desolate images of ruin, misery and self-pity. To a large degree, Zahradníček's poetry is a conglomerate of quotations and formal approaches of other poets from Trakl through Reynek to Halas. As a brief example, let me quote two stanzas from the poem *Proč* (Why).

Hoře rozumu přikrýváje se stíny si šeptám
Podobny do jiného světa otevřeným dveřím
sladké rány kvílející purpurově zejí
Vystaven úpěnlivým průvanům překrásně hořím

Ale proč zrána úmyslně oči rozbívám si?
Proč v popelavém úsvitě tolik se podobám své smrti?
Proč nechci se dát ničím utěšiti
a nejmíc miluji to co mne skličuje a drtí?

(Zahradníček, 1991, p. 24)

In English translation:

Covering the woe of reason, I whisper to the shadows
Akin to the open door to another world
Sweet wounds gape in purple, moaning
Exposed to mournful draughts, I am beautifully burning

Why do I break my eyes deliberately in the morning?
Why do I resemble my own death at the ashy dawn?
Why will I not be consoled
And love the most that which lies heavy on me?

(Translation: Tereza Chocholová)

Zahradníček has overcome this stage of his work already in his second collection *Návrat* (Returning, 1931) in which he found his distinctive spiritual expression which he has retained ever since.

In the 1960s, Czech poetry saw a second wave of interest in Georg Trakl's poetry. Though not as strong as in the 1930s, it was interestingly also linked to Trakl's translations into Czech. An extensive anthology of Trakl's verse was published in 1965 under the title *Básně* (Poems); it was translated by Ludvík Kundera (1920–2010), a poet who was linked to the city of Kunštát like František Halas. Having dealt with Trakl for several decades, Kundera published an updated edition of his translations in 1995.

Although this Traklian response was not as strong as in the case of Reynek's pre-war translations, one could still see the connection between Kundera's translations, his popularization activities (Expressionist poetry evenings among others) and the presence of Traklian reverberations in the poetry of Jan Skácel – though always in original, individual form. It would be a wonder if Kundera's interest in Trakl did not show in his own poetry as well. His poetry

collection *Sny též* (Dreams, Too) which was published in 1995 and can be seen as a distinctive set of notes and memories (though written in verse and undoubtedly being poetry) contains the following lines in the section dedicated to Skácel:

Honza Skácel šel na truc do fabriky, do té kostrbaté
 Líšně, pak však vydal první knihu básní
 a v uvážlivém rytmu roků druhou a další a další,
 [...]

 v Tyrolích jsme jednou v poledním žáru putovali ke hrobu
 Georga Trakla, v Kunštátě pak na krchově chraplavě pravil:
 Můj starý básníku, to už se u něho dveře netrhly, (Kundera, 1995, p. 54)

In English translation:

Honza Skácel went to the mill out of spite, to that bumpy
 Líšně, then brought out his first book of poems though
 And the next one and the next one in a reasoned rhythm of years
 [...]

 In the Tyrol, in the heat of noon, we journeyed to Georg Trakl's
 Grave, at the boneyard in Kunštát he said huskily
 My old poet, people were pouring in back then already
 (Translation: Tereza Chocholová)

In the form of loosely arranged yet complex memories, Kundera reminds the informed reader of all the titles of Skácel's collections, his work for the Czech Radio as well as their common journey to the grave of Georg Trakl. This trip to the village of Mühlau at the outskirts of Innsbruck in 1964, thus documented in Kundera's poetry, confirms Kundera's obvious interest in exploring the landscape where the poet he studied lived, while also proving Skácel's special interest in the genius loci of Trakl's verse. In 1964, Skácel and Kundera were sent to the Alpbach International Writers Forum in the Tyrol; the journey is also mentioned in Ludvík Kundera's memoirs *Různá řečiště* (Various Riverbeds, 2005). The last two lines from the excerpt from the collection *Sny též* mention, though not explicitly, another poet linked to Skácel; František Halas who is also closely connected to Trakl, as analyzed above, and who is buried at the Kunštát cemetery.

In the case of genuinely Moravian poet Jan Skácel (1922–1989), information about his possible links to Trakl is very scarce in secondary sources. The only proof that Skácel had an interest in Trakl's work, a very strong one at that, is provided by Zdeněk Kožmín in his monograph on Skácel: "A special occasion to probe Skácel's sensitivity towards life's dominants lies in his notes on the biographies of others. Let me focus on Skácel's study of the life of Georg Trakl. I am holding the book *Erinnerungen an Georg Trakl. Zeugnisse und Briefe* (Memories of Georg Trakl. Testimonies and Letters, Otto Müller Verlag, Salzburg, 1959) from Skácel's bookcase in my hands. Skácel underlined in the text, marked the text on the side, added exclamation marks and other signs, and even made notes and comments on some pages from the book on the dust jacket and the back endpaper. [...] Reading the book on Georg Trakl, Jan Skácel responded to

those passages with which he resonated with particular intimacy. One could say that he read about the lives of others in the same way in which he "read" his own life; that is with constant shifts towards certain intersection points of life events that were essential for his thinking" (Kožmín, 2000, p. 25).

This very fact – Skácel's interest in Trakl's biography – does not necessarily prove that Trakl's poetic was reflected in Skácel's work. However, upon a closer look at Skácel's writing, there are links to be found; sensed and often fragile, yet obvious. While direct citations and allusions are rather exceptional (after all, this would be foreign to Skácel's poetic style), it rather seems that Skácel and his work – at least partially, in his "smuténky" (sad ones) and "Traklian life feeling" – embraced the pole of European poetry that could be labeled as Hölderlinian-Traklian. This is also observed by Zdeněk Kožmín in the above-mentioned monograph: "Skácel's uniqueness, however, is still anchored in the depths of what has already been reached in the contexts of life and literature, in the ethical and aesthetical humanization of the world. He is being his own self, always and under any circumstances, while remaining grown into the objects of the world, into traditions, into the legacies of people long gone. These fruitful foundations of Skácel's world, spanning between father and mother, Erben and Trakl, home and world, poetry and prose, myth and attention to the present are lived and experienced with a realism that commands both admiration and confidence" (Kožmín, 2000, p. 14).

It is difficult to seek literary models and "teachers" in the case of a poet of Skácel's caliber. However, it seems that names as opposed as Erben and Trakl may help to satisfactorily define the wide range of Skácel's poetry, which, however, resounds on a single string. Skácel's connection to Trakl, an inner one rather than a formal one, will stand out even more when looking at Czech literature from the outside, within the European context. In his laudatio on the occasion of Jan Skácel receiving the Petrarca-Preis in 1989, German author (with Slovenian roots) Peter Handke interpreted Skácel's poetry based on the seemingly opposing worlds of Georg Trakl and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (Handke, 1991, p. 28). Such a comparison seems especially revealing since Handke could only have known Skácel's work through a few translations into German. Skácel himself is said to have been pleasantly surprised by this insightful interpretation.

However, Trakl's influence on Skácel is also apparent in his individual collections which include the motifs of death, anxiety and autumn to a large extent. Following the three poetry collections in which Skácel defined and cemented his distinctive poetic which has practically never changed – *Kolik příležitostí má růže* (How many chances does a rose have, 1957), *Co zbylo z anděla* (What remained of an angel, 1960) and *Hodina mezi psem a vlkem* (The Hour Between Dog and Wolf, 1962), his fourth collection *Smuténka* (The Sad One, 1965) shows its tendency to melancholy already in its title. While melancholy has always been a staple in Skácel's verse, in the second half of the 1960s, feelings of anxiety became overwhelming. It is hard to say though whether this collection already shows Trakl's influence – which only becomes indisputable in his next collection.

In Skácel's fifth collection entitled *Metličky* (Little Brooms) from 1968, the Skácel – Trakl relation becomes more pronounced and concentrated in the five-line stanza *Čistota* (Purity):

Září A lovec s rozlomenou puškou
 Toulá se při okraji lesa Ze strnišť
 Divoké husy vracení se v klínech
 Ve starých básních jako v zahradách
 Tlumené pády plodů Ticha nesbíraná

(Skácel, 1995, p. 247)

In English translation:

September And a hunter with a broken rifle
 Roams the fringe of the forest From the stubble fields
 Wild geese return in wedges
 In old poems like in gardens
 Muffled falls of fruits Silences unpicked

(Translation: Tereza Chocholová)

The fall hunting scene bears a striking resemblance to the introductory scene from Trakl's poem *Im Winter* (In the Winter):

Na poli chladný bílý třpyt.
 Ohromné nebe je tak opuštěné.
 Hejno kavek nad tůň se žene,
 lovci jdou z lesa, panuje klid.

Mlčení dlí v černých korunách.
 Svít ohňů z domků měkce plane.
 Chvillemi z dálky zazvoní saně,
 šedavý měsíc stoupá v tmách.

(Trakl 2005: 36)

In English translation:

The field shimmers cold and pale.
 Immense and lonely hangs the sky.
 Circling the pond, the jackdaws fly –
 Down from the woods the hunters trail.

Black silence on the trees descends.
 The firelight winks from huts around.
 At times a distant sleigh-bell sounds
 And slowly the grey moon ascends.

(Translation: Jonathan Steffen)

The tones of both poems, the presence of silence as well as the tension of hunting, are very similar (despite Trakl being more brutal and more particular), while the seasons of the year in which the scenes take place are naturally different. What is essential though is that each verse of Skácel's text alludes to Trakl's work. The "fringe of the forest" from Skácel's poem is

a literal translation of Trakl's typical, essential expression "Waldsaum" – the edge, the border of the forest with a symbolical meaning of transcendence, a divide between the earthly and the unearthly. The wild geese above the stubble fields evoke Trakl's "Vogelzug" (bird migration), which is yet another key term linked to the desire for an escape and its unfeasibility. Last but not least, *muffled falls of fruits* are an almost literal quotation of the line from Trakl's poem *Die Verfluchten* (The Damned Ones): *Im Garten fallen Äpfel dumpf und weich*, literally "in the garden, apples fall dull and soft". In summary, a single five-line poem includes two identical key motifs and two almost literal translations. This could still be a mere similarity if it were not for another proof of the deliberate affinity of this poem to Trakl's poetry – the phrase *in old poems* from the fourth line. This is where Skácel directly alludes to the poetry of another author, perhaps that of Trakl.

The increase in existential motifs in the collections *Smutěnka* and especially *Metličky* is also observed by Zdeněk Kožmín in his monograph, as he remarks that *Metličky* is imbued by more anxiety and unease than the previous collections. He does not see a direct link to Trakl there but rather to Halas though:

"Looking for reasons why Skácel called his collection *Metličky* (the word is linked to a poem about casting a death mask), one of them will be that this collection addresses death the most. Casting a death mask can be read within the context of Halas. Skácel leads a dialogue with his poet. *Metličky* is a homage to the life and work of Halas" (Kožmín, 2000, p. 86). The parallel with Trakl's work, which co-defined the early poetics of Halas, still suggests itself.

More poems from *Metličky* are imbued by the Traklian atmosphere of the Austrian countryside which bears a strong resemblance to that of Skácel – the Moravian one. While similar motifs do not necessarily prove a direct influence by Trakl, their increased number in Skácel's poetry at the time may be telling of it.

The following poetic work by Skácel shows a departure from this dark, existential tone. However, even his collections from the 1980s do include (though rather sporadically) poems where a possible influence by Trakl is apparent. What is vanishing though, primarily since Skácel employs a rather free verse form, is the underlying feeling, the "Traklian mood", which was distinctly present in the above-mentioned poems by Skácel.

Jan Skácel represents an exception among the Moravian poets influenced by Georg Trakl's poetry in several respects. First of all – and rightly so – he is not traditionally ranked among poets with a melancholy, tragic vision of the world. Yet he can still be called a "poet of the fall". Unlike the others, Skácel does not show Trakl's influence in his early poems but rather in his mature stage – in the second half of the 1960s. However, even here, Trakl's influence is rather encrypted in the inconspicuous and "probable" concurrence of motifs and settings of the poems. Nevertheless, in some of Skácel's texts, Trakl's influence seems indisputable.

Skácel cannot be said to have had an Expressionist period or expressive style. His work rather shows a continuous presence of existential elements, with a gradation in the second half of the 1960s in his collections *Smutěnka* and *Metličky*. In his collections from the 1970s and the 1980s, these elements never vanish; they are still present and more or less co-create Skácel's poetics until his last collection.

The question of whether Trakl's "poetics of inexplicable melancholy" plays a role in contemporary Czech poetry or whether it is a closed chapter suggests itself. Let me state the following: Trakl's work is still alive, both as an academic research topic (new translations are made and

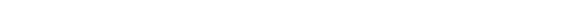
diploma theses written) and as an inspiration source. Contemporary poets like Radek Fridrich, Bohdan Chlábek, Jan Dadák, Jiří Staněk, Alena Nádvořníková and Viky Shock still address Traklian motifs; however, Traklian inspiration has left the Moravian space. The drama *Trakl* written by Brno-based dramatist Marek Horoščák (born 1976) has an exceptional position though. It was written in 1998 and produced in 2001 as a radio play.

Let me conclude that the “Traklian line” based on the specifics of Austrian Expressionism lives on in Czech literature without losing its strength and intensity.

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ON THE RECEPTION OF AUSTRIAN EXPRESSIONISM IN CZECH POETRY



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