

*Proudý české umělecké tvorby 19. století. Smích v umění [Currents in nineteenth-century Czech art. Laughter in art]. Hrsg. v. Marta Ottlová.*

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This volume of thirty-three essays is the ninth volume of a series of proceedings of one of the most important institutions of the Czech "oasis culture" under socialism, the spring Pilsen conferences run by the Fine Arts Institute of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences. The essays concern art, architecture, photography, art-criticism, music, history, psychiatry, philosophy and, mostly, literature. The theme is humour and the title *Smích* was chosen by the organisers, not mainly because of Bergson's or Bakhtin's studies (they are the most frequently mentioned analysts of humour here), but because Czech, like German, does not have a word for "humor". The Czech word *humor* suggests the comic, which probably usually belongs to humour, and when people like Milan Kundera or the average *Lumpenintellektueller* in Prague pub tells one that the Czechs have a great *humour* tradition, they mean comic tradition. The distinction is clearest in Old Czech literature: *Mastičkář* (The unguentarius) manifests primarily *humor*, *Tkadleček* humour; in the period this volume treats one might say that Herrmann (a strange omission from the book) manifests predominantly *humor*, where Čapek-Chod (treated here only as an art-critic for *Světazor*) manifests predominantly humour. Jan Lukeš is probably demonstrating his awareness of the problem when he writes, "The laughter of the Czech *Moderne* is ironic, bitter, even sour; there is truly little *humor* in it" (p. 209).

Zumr in his essay, which concerns mainly Ladislav Klíma, usefully quotes the much maligned (especially by Masaryk and his cronies) critic and aesthetician, Josef Durdík: "Humour can be anything: the fusions of opposites and opposites themselves, Heaven and Hell, repugnance and delectability, a wretched illusion and, again, the *essence* of the world" (p. 200). That statement is internally linked with the Judaeo-

Christian mystical tradition which conceives of God as laughing. Jaromír Loužil mentions the Greek gods' laughing on Olympus (p. 14) and Wittlich writes of Hesse's vision of the "supreme geniuses of human creativity", Goethe and Mozart, "laughing with the absolute laughter of immortals" (p. 114). As Zúmr virtually points out, Klíma radicalises nineteenth-century solipsism by giving man mystical laughter (and, at the same time, ironising the mystical): Klíma's ludibronism states that "the world is the game of the sovereign self" (p. 202). In this (as in his use of paradox, his apparent rejection of any style of thought but his own, his air of superiority) Klíma may be considered the serious philosopher of dandyism (Mekula fails to understand dandyism in his essay on *fin-de siècle* irony), as the culmination of the attempts at analysing dandyism carried out by Barbey d'Aurevilly, Baudelaire, Wilde and Klíma's contemporary, Artur Breiský.

Irony appears also to be a far simpler matter for many contributors here than it has been for anyone since the ironically obfuscatory Schlegel. Aristotle may have said that irony is "saying the opposite of what one means", and Mekula claims that is what it means today (p. 211), but the jungle between that notion and irony in its primary meaning, the Socratic discussion method based on professing ignorance, is inviolable – at least in a book review. If, however, one ignores the implied discussion contained in the concept, irony, one will find it difficult to distinguish it from "the lowest form of wit". Perhaps Mekula himself is demonstrating a sense of irony when he cites Šalda's use of the word, for Šalda showed little or no understanding or irony before syphilis drove him to the walking-stick. On the other hand Mekula is sensible to guess at irony in the title of Hlaváček's first collection of verse, *Sokolské sonety* (Sokol sonnets) even if one has to be careful because of the poet's entirely unironic disquisitions on gymnastic exercises. Certainly the title, like the contents, of his third collection, *Mstivá kantilena* (Cantilena of revenge), is ironic. The ironic concerns the paradoxical (not the same as saying the opposite of what one means), and Wittlich discusses the paradoxical as the essence of humour – not *humor* – in his essay on Zola, Manet and others (see particularly, p. 111).

Shandyism epitomises humour (and irony), and Grebeníčková's discussion of Shandyism (*sternovstvi*) in Mácha and, to a degree, in the neglected J. J. Langer, is one of the liveliest essays in the volume. Probably thousands of essays have been written on Mácha, but very few of them deal with Mácha as an essentially humorous writer. A writer who saw existence as grimly awful as non-existence, whatever he did with Lori back-stage, can only be fundamentally humorous (ironic) or, perhaps, a political extremist, a revolutionary. In humour (not *humor*) melancholy comes along with laughter (Grebeníčková, p. 22), though, psychologically laughter may be release from melancholy, if one suggests, as Jiří Růžička does, that melancholy is roughly equivalent to depression. Nevertheless, when "laughter" does constitute release from depression, the melancholy (in a non-medical sense) surely lurks in the wrinkles of the laugh. As long as that laughter is not manic. Depressive melancholy, Růžička writes, contains strong elements of guilt and punishment (p. 96), of a conscience out of joint. Melancholy is "imprisonment, isolation from what we are fond of, what we love [...] Melancholy deprives one of freedom and love. [...] laughing is made possible by liberty and the opportunity to be together with what we are fond of" (p. 97). Laughter comes with the

re-tying of old bonds, the retrieving of old loves (p. 98), a restructuring of conscience (p. 99).

That is closely linked, with another aspect of humour, one Čornej touches on in his perceptive, funny essay on the myth of nineteenth-century Czechs as descendents of the Hussites, a myth which he reminds us was also particularly strong after World War I (he does not mention "legionary literature" nor, perhaps more important, Arnošt Dvořák's just prewar *Husité* – nor Pekař as an antidote) and in the 1940s and 1950s. He does not see a general subsidence of the myth until the 1980s. Laughter is not only a product of reunion with what one loves. One laughs at what one loves; the old *risus paschalis* has been sorely lacking in mainstream Czechs' self-perception (Čornej is particularly interested in the period from the 1860s). Čech's pan Brouček may be a comic figure but the author's picture of the Hussites is essentially so deadly serious that it amounts to *kitsch*. The kitschification of the Hussites continued right up to authors like M. V. Kratochvíl; just as the kitschification of the *obraný jazyk český* (defences of the Czech language, in Balbín, but mainly in the early Revival) may be seen in Karel Čapek's essay in *Marsyas* or Pilař's *Na rodnou řeč* (Pohled do očí 1979). Humour is anti-kitsch; *humor* often is not.

Other essays in the volume are valuable primarily for their information and analysis of that information: Macura on Klácel's long essay on humour; Lorenzová on the 1840s Prague periodical, *Für Kalobiotik*, and on Antonín Veith's callobiotic retreat for intellectuals, Liběchov; Douša's account of the bourgeois and official Prager's retreat to Pilsen in the Austro-Prussian War; Kořalka on Czech stereotypes of Germans and German stereotypes of Czechs; Krejčová on Vojtěch Rakous and Czech antisemitism in the 1890s; Ottlová and Pospíšil on the translations and adaptative leading to the libretto of Smetana's *Dvě vdovy*.

Pomajzlův's essay on Josef Váchal's *Krvavý román* (Penny dreadful) and trash literature does not go far enough in deciding what Váchal was actually up to. Nevertheless the essay is important because it is sober, does not evince the Váchal mania which until after the "velvet putsch" lived mainly underground in Czechoslovakia. It seems fitting to end this review of a generally rewarding volume on comic phenomena and humour with Váchal, occultist, parodist, messianist, who saw Hitler as the saviour of the Czechs from a degenerate Masarykian plutocracy (*O té nebožce zpěvy patery* [Five canti on the deceased one, 1941]), and who died of a heart attack when the Communist authorities awarded him the title, Meritorious Artist.