

Vladimíra Derková

Stručni rad

17

*Department of Czech Literature*

*Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University*

<https://www.doi.org/10.17234/9789533792101.03>

## The peasantry and national identity in the context of Czech ruralism<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** Since the National Revival in the 19th century the portrayal of the countryside and its inhabitants as bearers of traditional and folk values in Czech literature has been closely linked to the portrayal of national identity. The paper aims to analyse links between the countryside, the peasantry, and national identity within the context of Czech ruralism.

**Keywords:** ruralism, national identity, peasantry, countryside

Ruralism as a literary movement focuses on depicting the countryside and the land (mostly as a place where one comes from, or, literally, where one is rooted), farming (in most cases the main characters or protagonists in ruralist novels are peasants who work on the land, raise animals or, again literally, cultivate the soil). Therefore, language and tradition play an important role (both as something that has eternal or symbolic value and something that is passed down from generation to generation), along with religious belief, and Czech patriotism (e.g. Brabec 2005: 16; Halamová, Jiroušek 2005: 163 and 167; Kropáček 2005: 235; Med 2005: 13).

The authors gathered around the magazine “Sever a Východ” (“North and East”), such as Jan Čarek, Josef Knap, František Křelina, Václav Prokůpek, and others are considered major ruralist authors or proponents of the ruralist literary movement. I would like to point out that in ruralist texts the

<sup>1</sup> This paper was produced within the project *Identita a tělesnost v české ruralistické literatuře* (MUNI/A/1242/2020).

motifs of Czech national identity should not be taken as axiomatic, which is often the case. I will argue that in ruralist literature the depiction of Czech national identity is at least not as prominent and its role within the logic of these narratives not as important as it might be presumed.

In Czech literature there has been a long tradition of connecting the motifs of national identity, language, and tradition with the depiction of the countryside, the land, or the “mother soil”. Therefore, in this respect, ruralism was not actually innovative. Since the beginning of the Czech National Revival, the *Czech peasantry* has been viewed as a bearer, a reservoir, and also a guardian of the Czech language and true Czech identity. While the National Revival movement was initiated by members of a Czech educated class (intellectuals, such as Josef Dobrovský, Josef Jungmann, František Palacký, Karel Josef Šafařík), the existing beliefs and ideas concerning the countryside and peasants also stimulated first attempts to build a modern civil society. In his book *Bývalí Čechové. Historické mýty a stereotypy* (1994), Czech historian Jiří Rak claims that in most languages the word *citizen* is linked to urban life and related ideas (human rights, freedom, etc.). However, in the Czech word *občan* we can detect the uncertainty of 19th-century Czech city-dwellers along with the adoration for the Czech peasantry (Rak 1994: 3–4). In his study *Exotismus doma aneb Venkov versus město*, Rak emphasises that the Czech countryside was constructed and viewed as a symbol, an idyllic place, a picture of immaculate and innocent peasant life, which was an artificially constructed sociocultural fiction or myth (Rak 2008: 222–223).

The popularity of the countryside as a setting of novellas increased over the 19th century in the works of Božena Němcová (especially in her novel *Babička*), Karolina Světlá, and Vítězslav Hálek. Later, the countryside as a setting of literary works found its way into the narratives of realist and naturalist authors, such as Karel Václav Rais, Teréza Nováková, Jindřich Šimon Baar, Josef Holeček and others. Ruralist authors, as they explicitly acknowledge in their anthologies *Básníci selství* (1932) and *Tváří k vesnicí* (1936), derived inspiration for their work from the above-mentioned authors.

Dominant ideas about peasant life, the countryside, and village life as the genuine bearers of true Czech national identity and character did not influence solely literary depictions of Czech national identity. The same rhetoric or discourse can be found at the Czechoslavic Ethnographic Exhibition held in 1895<sup>2</sup>. The exhibition had an enormous influence on how people,

<sup>2</sup> For further reading about the Czechoslavic Ethnographic Exhibition see works of Marta Filipová (e.g. Filipová, M. 2011. *Peasants on display: The Czechoslavic Ethnographic Exhibition of 1895*. „Journal of Design History“, 1. 15–36.) or publication Winter, T.; Machalíková, P. (ed.). 2019. *Jdi na venkov! Výtvarné umění a lidová kultura v českých zemích 1800–1960*, Revnice: Arbor vitae societas.

especially the Czechs living in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, symbolically constructed features that constitute *Czech nationality* and *Czech identity*. Those who could not visit the exhibition in person were bombarded with often detailed reports on the exhibition accompanied with pictures in the “*Národopisná výstava československá*” magazine. It should also be noted that the concept of Czechs and Czech national identity in Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk’s philosophy<sup>3</sup> was profoundly influenced by the 19th century ideal of innocent peasants.

In the early stages of the Czech National Revival, language and its use were seen as the central concept that constitute a national identity. In 1806, Josef Jungmann was rather categorical with regard to this: speaking the Czech language means that you are a Czech<sup>4</sup>. Jungmann’s concept of nationality (and he was not alone in this) was deeply influenced by the works of Johann Gottfried Herder, especially his *Ideas on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind* (1784–1791), where he says: “Their own mode of representing things is the more deeply imprinted on every nation, because it is adapted to themselves, is suitable to their own earth and sky, springs from their mode of living, and has been handed down to them from father to son” (Herder 1966). This extract clearly formulates all the important motifs that fascinated both the Czech intellectuals of the day and ruralists.

Herder saw Slavic nations as people who do not strive to fight and go to war. According to him, they are calm and peaceful, deeply connected with the land they live on through their work on the land (ibid.). In other words, Slavic nations are peasants and their identity and amicable character are formed exactly through their connection with the land.

On the basis of what has already been said one would assume that ruralist literature is actually, or at least potentially “political”, in the sense that it comments on national identity or uses it as a theme. However, even a brief look at ruralist literature will tell us that the employment of the theme of national identity varies, both in qualitative and quantitative terms, depending on the period when a particular work was written.

<sup>3</sup> See Masaryk’s works *Česká otázka* (1895) / *The Meaning of Czech History* (1974; translated into English by Rene Wellek)/ and *Světová revoluce* (1925) / *The Making of a State* (1927; translated by Henry Wickham Steed).

<sup>4</sup> [„[...] jestliže vlasti bez národu, národu bez jazyku zvláštního pomysli nelze, dokládám ještě jednou, že se žádný, kromě kdož jazyk národu svého miluje, pravou láskou k vlasti honositi nemůže“]. „[...] It being impossible to think about a nation without its home soil, about a nation without its language, it has to be once more clearly stated that no one can boast a true love for his land unless he also loves the language of his nation“ (Jungmann; translated by Miroslav Kotásek).

Of course, the majority of national identity themes can be found in the works of Jan Matula<sup>5</sup> written in the late 1910s and early 1920s. Yet, obviously, in the years immediately preceding and following the establishment of the Czechoslovak Republic, texts that foreground the motifs of national identity can be found in almost every author's *oeuvre* (Vebrová 2014: 249–284). It has to be taken into account that during the late 1920s – 1940s, when ruralists (the group of authors around the magazine “Sever a východ”<sup>6</sup>) published their works, the situation was quite different. It can be easily seen that the frequency of motifs of national identity used varied depending on the socio-historical context.

Amongst the works in which the theme of national identity is given little focus are Jan Čarek's *Chudá rodina z Heřmaně* (1924) and *Temno v chalupách* (1926); Josef Knap's *Réva na zdi* (1926); František Křelina's *Hlas kořenů* (1927); Václav Prokůpek's *Baba* (1928) and *Marie* (1930), rewritten in 1937 as *Zakryto slzami*). These works also do not address the theme of national differences. It is possible to come across references to other countries or to the nationality of some protagonists, but their character is not based on the features related to their national identity.

Works with more focus on national identity are represented by Jan Čarek's *V zemi české* (1942); Josef Knap's *Cizinec* (1934) and *Věno* (1944); František Křelina's *Jalovčí stráně* (1937); Václav Prokůpek's *Nebe nad námi* (1940) and *Žitný dvojklas* (1943). It is important to note that these works were published in the early 1930s (when Germany was not yet viewed as an actual threat – Knap's *Cizinec* (1934); Křelina's *Jalovčí stráně* (1937)) and the early 1940s, when some motifs of Czech identity were tolerated by Protectorate censorship<sup>7</sup> (see Čarek's poems). For example, Knap's *Věno*, set in the late 19th century deals with the theme of Czech and Italian identity: a protagonist, who is an Italian, brings something foreign, exotic to the Czech countryside village, he affects the fate of the other (Czech) protagonists, but that is all as far as the influence of his national identity on the plot is concerned. The national identity of the other characters does not change

<sup>5</sup> See for example Matula, V. 1932. *Ruralismus v krásném písemnictví*. Praha: Vladimír Matula.

<sup>6</sup> For the relationship of these authors to agrarism and their attitude to ruralism see Jančík, D. 2014. *Agrarismus a cesta básníků „české půdy“ k ruralismu. Obraz vesnice v revue 'Sever a východ' literární generace Josefa Knapa*. In: Kubů, E.; Šouša, J.; Zářický, A. (eds). *Český a německý sedlák v zrcadle krásné literatury 1848–1948: diskurz mezi historií a literární vědou na téma selského a hraničářského románu*. Praha: Dokořán.

<sup>7</sup> Regarding the situation in the Protectorate's literature see Mohn, V. 2018, *Nacistická kulturní politika v Protektorátu: koncepce, praxe a reakce české strany* (translated by P. Dvořáček). Praha: Prostor.

nor is it in any way challenged. In Prokůpek's *Nebe nad námi*, the main protagonist, a painter, becomes famous (something he has always longed for) and in the end accepts his identity (national and also personal) and starts to paint Czech motifs and landscape. In these works, the emphasis is on one's national identity but this identity does not represent a source of any open or hidden conflicts between the characters as members of a nation.

The works that can be classified as ruralist texts with intense (high) focus on national identity include Jan Čarek's editing of the anthology *Básně rolníků* (1939), Josef Knap's *Puszta* (1939), and Václav Prokůpek's *Ztracená země* (1938). Františe Křelina's works can be classified as spiritual Catholic literature, i.e. as being outside the scope of ruralist literature (*Klíče království* (1939), and *Dcera královská, blahoslavená Anežka česká* (1940)).

The works mentioned above were published at the time of intense political debates<sup>8</sup>, when people in the Czechoslovak Republic (mostly Czech inhabitants of the Republic) felt an intense insecurity with regard to whether their national state would survive in the form it had in 1918, when it was founded. Knap's novel *Puszta* narrates a story about the Czechs who try to build a new village near the (Czecho) Slovak border with Hungary and cultivate the fields. Differences and tensions between the Czechs and the Hungarians are illustrated in several ways: they grow different crops on their fields, eat different kinds of bread and food, and perform their daily chores in different ways. The Czechs, who are aware of these differences, are starting to be more acutely aware of their own identity. At several points in the narrative they comment that the Hungarians are different and consider their way of doing things rather bizarre, but no open conflicts ensue between the Czech and Hungarian protagonists of the novel. It seems that living next to each other is, after all, possible.

On the other hand, in Prokůpek's novel *Ztracená země* an open conflict between Czechs and Czech Germans in the Hlučín region is described. The conflict is more intense on the "German" side – the Germans are portrayed as radicals, people who cannot imagine a peaceful cohabitation with the Czechs in the Czechoslovak Republic. When we compare Prokůpek's novel *Ztracená země* and Knap's novel *Puszta*, we can notice a difference in the outcome of nationalistic tensions, which is also a consequence of the historical moment in which the respective narratives take place. The plot of *Puszta* is set in the late 1920s and early 1930s (it ends when the protagonists learn about the death of Antonín Švehla, i.e. in December 1933). The plot of

<sup>8</sup> For a thorough account of literature during the time of The Second Czechoslovak Republic see Med, J. 2010. *Literární život ve stínu Mnichova: (1938–1939)*. Praha: Academia.

*Ztracená země* takes place at the time when the novel was actually written (the end of the First Republic).

The abovementioned classification of ruralist prose works allows us to conclude that the motif of national identity might have its indisputable place within ruralism, yet the intensity of its employment is different in different periods, depending on reaction to the current socio-political context. Thus, it seems that in these works the motif of national identity is not as crucial as the motif of the soil and tradition that is passed down from generation to generation.

### Works cited

- Brabec, J. 2005. *Geneze ruralismu*. In: Navrátil, I. (ed.). *Ruralismus, jeho kořeny a dědictví: osobnosti, díla, ideje: sborník referátů z vědecké konference konané ve dnech 22.–23. dubna 2005 v Sedmihorkách*. Semily: Státní okresní archiv Semily. 15–20.
- Halamová, M.; Jiroušek, B. 2005. *Sřety a paralely českého ruralismu a katolické literatury*. In: Navrátil, I. (ed.). *Ruralismus, jeho kořeny a dědictví: osobnosti, díla, ideje: sborník referátů z vědecké konference konané ve dnech 22.–23. dubna 2005 v Sedmihorkách*. Semily: Státní okresní archiv Semily. 162–168.
- Herder, J. G. 1966. *Ideas on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind*. (Translated by T. Churchill). <https://archive.org/details/outlinesaphilos00churgo/>. Access: 20/2/2022.
- Jungmann, J. *Dvoji rozmlouvání o jazyce českém*. <http://ld.johannesville.net/jungmann-01-dvoji-rozmlouvani-o-jazyce-ceskem/0/>. Access: 20/2/2022.
- Knap, J. 1939. *Puszta*. Praha: Novina.
- Kropáček, J. 2005. *Ruralismus – regionalismus – proměny*. In: Navrátil, I. (ed.). *Ruralismus, jeho kořeny a dědictví: osobnosti, díla, ideje: sborník referátů z vědecké konference konané ve dnech 22.–23. dubna 2005 v Sedmihorkách*. Semily: Státní okresní archiv Semily. 234–238.
- Med, J. 2005. *Ideové kořeny ruralismu*. In: Navrátil, I. (ed.). *Ruralismus, jeho kořeny a dědictví: osobnosti, díla, ideje: sborník referátů z vědecké konference konané ve dnech 22.–23. dubna 2005 v Sedmihorkách*. Semily: Státní okresní archiv Semily. 11–14.
- Prokūpek, V. 1940. *Nebe nad námi*. Praha: Novina.
- Prokūpek, V. 1938. *Ztracená země*. Praha: Novina.
- Rak, J. 1994. *Bývali Čechové: České historické mýty a stereotypy*. Jinočany: H & H.
- Rak, J. 2008. *Exotismus doma aneb Venkov versus město*. In: Piorecká, K.; Petrbock, V. (ed.). *Cizí, jiné, exotické v české kultuře 19. století: sborník příspěvků z*

27. ročníku symposia k problematice 19. století: Plzeň, 22.–24. února 2007. Praha: Academia. 221–227.

Veberová, V. 2014. *Spisovatelé ve vztahu k tradicionalistickým a regionálním kulturněpolitickým aspektům v letech 1924–1934*. In: Papoušek, V. (ed.). *Dějiny nové modern 2, Lomy vertikál: česká literatura v letech 1924–1934*. Praha: Academia. 249–284.

