The Reception of the Manuscripts of Dvůr Králové and Zelená Hora (1817–1886)

Historical Fiction, Mystification and Functional Stratification in a National Literature in Central Europe

The aim of the collective project within the Institute of Czech Literature of the Czech Academy of Sciences is to research the perception of the fabricated Manuscripts of Dvůr Králové and Zelená Hora ([Rukopis královédvorský, Rukopis zelenohorský] found in 1817 and 1818), and how they influenced Czech-German and Czech literature and culture in the 19th century.

The Manuscripts were created to look as if they originated from the 10th-14th century in the tradition of European Ossianism, pioneered by the Scottish poet James Macpherson in the 1760's. Having incorporated also some influential models of the contemporary national society, the Manuscripts echoed not only throughout Czech literature, but throughout Europe as well. They became known as extraordinary works of literature, a standard for modern national literature and even culture, and they were kept as the standard till 1886, when T. G. Masaryk and some scientists at the Athenaeum journal verified the suspicion that the Manuscripts were fabricated. The Manuscripts not only motivated the development of Czech literature of this period, but (as stated previously), they also helped shape works to come, as they had become the quintessential pieces of national literature by which all were measured (a reference to the Manuscripts can be found in essential works by K. H. Mácha, K. J. Erben, B. Němcová, J. Zeyer, J. Vrchlický etc. and in important discussions on the literature in this time).

The main input of the project, which accompanies a commented edition of the Manuscripts by the researcher (2010), is a text of a collective book on social, artistic and especially intertextual literary perception of the Manuscripts by the Czech-German and Czech society in the context of European mystifications and historical fictions, especially Ossianism (including research into their relationship with similar fabrications in the Czech lands, such as: Ramschak’c Chronicle in which the Jewish
population explains their history) and an anthology of related literary works (expected 2014). The project begins by researching the context in which the Manuscripts were created (taking into account the thesis by Karel Krejčí, that the origins of the Manuscripts should also be studied by the generations that preceded that of their founders). The chapters of the collective book correspond with periods of time when the Manuscripts were perhaps their most influential (1817-1829, 1829-1848, 1848-1858, 1858-1867, 1867-1886, 1886-); these chapters expound upon how the Manuscripts were generally perceived, and the role they had in the literary process in particular. According to James Porter, „the cumulative impact [of the Manuscripts] was no less sensational than that of Ossian itself in Britain, and the effects are still felt in the Czech Republic to this day“ (The Reception of Ossian in Europe. Ed. by H. Gaskill. New York: Thoemmes Continuum 2004, p. 209), and the project focuses also on the general lines of the later reception of the Manuscripts towards the 21st century (e.g. by J. Hašek or recently by M. Urban).

The project delves into the literary perception of the Manuscripts in individual works (e.g. the role of the intertextual remark of Strawberries [Jahody] from the Manuscript of Dvůr Králové in one of the central places of Babička [Grandmother] by B. Němcová, where Viktorka meets the Black soldier) but also within a dynamic framework of genres while taking into account relevant corpuses of texts and contemporary horizons of expectation (the justification of the „non-national“ romantic tale through a reference to the Manuscripts in Nebeský's Antipods [Protichůdci], accepted by J. K. Tyl, but refused by J. Malý and other critics). Such an approach, based on modern genre theory, is justified by the role of genres in the contemporary discussion about literature (the forming of national Czech literature as it corresponds to the functions and genres of other European literatures; “Czechness” of this literature, for which the Manuscripts were an important point of reference). The research into dynamic relationships between definitions (expectations) and realizations of genres can also connect the project with reception of the Manuscripts in Czech-German literature (K. E. Ebert whose Czestmir influenced works by J. K. Tyl written in Czech, M. Hartmann etc.) or, perhaps even influence other avenues of artistic expression, as well as the Czech society in general.

The theoretical aim of the project is, in other words, to develop traditions of Czech theory of literature (semiotic-structural approaches, studies of perception in context of European theory of literature and semiotics) into an interdisciplinary-opened approach to functioning of historical fiction, mystification in national cultures in the central Europe.

A secondary input of the project is to connect the detailed account of the literary reception of the Manuscripts with their scientific one, studied as an anthology Rukopisy královédvorský a zelenohorský a česká věda (1817-1918) [The Manuscripts of Dvůr Králové and Zelená Hora and the Science in the Czech lands (1817-1918)], which is prepared by the research team in the Institute of Czech Literature (expected 2013).