

Dreams of the Great Past in Czech Romantic Poetry: Edmund Břetislav Kaizl and His Poem *Křivoklát*

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Abstract:

This paper discusses the relations between the dreams of the *great past*, i.e., the reflections of legendary historical places, events and personalities, in Czech translations of English Romantic poetry, in particular Thomas Moore and Lord Byron, in the context of Czech Romanticism in the 1830s through 1850s. The poem *Křivoklát, rýmovaná chronika* [Křivoklát, a Chronicle in Rhyme] (1858) by Edmund Břetislav Kaizl (1836-1900) is specifically featured. Kaizl's work demonstrates how influential English Romantic poetry was in the Czech lands, and how the work of translators can contribute to the enrichment and growth of original creative writing.

I. Romantic Dreams in Nineteenth-Century Czech Literature

The dream is among the most common themes and motifs of the Romantic period in European literatures (most recently discussed by Hrbata and Procházka 2005). The dreams of a great past – poetic reflections on legendary places, events and personalities of history – were particularly strong in Czech literature during the period of the National Revival, which included the culmination of Czech Romanticism.¹ Because of the uniqueness of Czech history, these reflections possessed a number of specific features. In his collection of penetrating semiotic essays entitled *Český sen* [The Czech Dream], Vladimír Macura (1998) has analyzed the complex semantics of the motif of the dream, which in early nineteenth-century Czech culture usually combined the concepts of European Romanticism with Czech ideology. In this combination the dream functioned as an integral component of the process of ‘awakening’ the nation (Macura 1998:31). Macura has convincingly demonstrated how the motifs of sleep, dreams and awakening were metaphors for the paralyzed state of the Czech nation and for its resurrection. Macura has defined a typical feature of the ideology of Czech emancipation: mythicizing certain aspects of the nation. Architectural monuments (castles in particular), historical events, localities (especially towns), rivers, documents and distinguished historical figures were all idealized. The great past was thus revered for example in Mount Blaník with its knights, by the forged *Manuscripts of Dvůr Králové and Zelená Hora*, in Prague Cathedral as well as through the celebrated deeds of Jan Hus and Jan Žižka. This ideology produced numerous patriotic and sentimental poems evoking the beauty of the homeland and its former glory, cryptically regretting lost independence and strength, and deploring the contemporary downtrodden state of the nation. Many poems full of pathos concerned historical places and events, highlighting the fame, self-sacrifice, courage, and wisdom of great national figures of the past. Furthermore, the great past also served as encouragement in the struggle for a better future, often envisaged in the image of a flowering spring landscape. This is also the case with several of Kaizl's poems.

Kaizl was continuing in the tradition of the Czech Romantics of the 1830s and 1840s, for example, Karel Hynek Mácha (1810-1836), who had employed the castle of Křivoklát as the setting of his prose tale *Křivoklát* (1834), which takes place during the reign of King Wenceslas IV. Many of

¹ This author shares the interpretation that the period of the Czech National Revival extended from the 1780's until the 1860's.

the afore-mentioned features can be found in Máchy's poems (Máchy 1949, 1959). An extract from Václav Bolemír Nebeský's (1818-1882) poem 'Básník' [The Poet] (1842) may also be quoted as a typical example of this style (Nebeský 1913:75-76)²:

Na mžik oka jen
Vstaň, oživni a rozkvěť zase,
Snů mých obraze, ty slavný čase!
Na mžik v jednom z hradů chtěl bych dlíti,
Na mžik velkou dobu žíti!³

Nebeský's 'Český máj' [The Czech Month of May] (1839, Nebeský 1913:26) characteristically offers a new hope. A fresh spring seems to resurrect the old heroes and bards, and the country will flourish again. The use of Czech history and heroic figures of the past had already been legitimized during the Napoleonic wars, then later through the efforts of the historian and diplomat Joseph Hormayr, Freiherr von Hortenburg (1782-1848) and the writer Caroline von Pichler, neé Greiner (1769-1843) who had a literary salon in Vienna. Hormayr and von Pichler were attempting to stimulate Austrian patriotism also within Bohemia and other provinces of the state (Kutnar 2003:175-176).

II. Edmund Břetislav Kaizl

E. B. Kaizl was a minor Romantic poet and in his youth a relatively prolific translator of English poetry (see Mánek 1983, 1991). He was born at Cítoliby, near Louny in Central Bohemia, on 20 February 1836. In 1842 after his father's death, the family moved to Prague where he attended elementary and secondary school. In the 1850s he read law at Charles University, and in 1860 he was granted his doctoral degree. After 1868 he worked as a solicitor in the Prague borough of Karlín and was active in politics at the local as well as national level as a representative of the Old Czech Party. Kaizl supported the pioneering cultural and educational activities of his friend Vojta Náprstek (1826-1894), for instance lecturing at Náprstek's American Club for Ladies during 1865-1866. Kaizl died in Prague on 14 April 1900 (Cinková 1993). JUDr. Josef Kaizl (1854-1901), a Czech politician and minister in the Austrian government, was his nephew.

Kaizl published his poems, prose and translations in various magazines and anthologies, mainly from 1853 to 1869 (Mánek 1983:27-48). He translated for the most part British and American Romantic and post-Romantic poets. The bibliography of his translations of British poets includes substantial selections from Robert Burns, Lord Byron and Thomas Moore, as well as several poems by Thomas Campbell, Samuel Rogers, Walter Scott and Alfred Tennyson. In 1864 Kaizl published the first Czech translation of William Wordsworth. He was also the first Czech translator of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, publishing an anthology of 15 numbers in 1860. Kaizl's translations of American poetry include works by eleven writers, the most important being Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Edgar Allan Poe. He also contributed articles on these and other British and American authors to literary magazines as well as to several volumes of the first Czech encyclopedia *Slovník naučný* (1860-1874). These activities made him one of the founders of English and American studies in the Czech Lands. Throughout the nineteenth century, the influence of foreign writers in translation played a role of enormous cultural significance. These works helped to develop a full range of genres, styles, narrative and verse techniques, verse forms, etc., and also to establish and develop apposite aesthetic standards. Czech society, its culture, language and literature, was gradually recovering from a period of near extinction during the previous two centuries.

Kaizl's original writings and translations have as yet not been collected. His only published book of poems is *Křivoklát, rýmovaná chronika* [Křivoklát, a Chronicle in Rhyme], written in 1857 and printed in 1858. Besides the long title poem, the book includes a dedicatory poem and an appendix (*Přidávky*) of nine poems about the region around the castle.

² All Czech quotations are reprinted in their original form. Literal prose translations of the stanzas and notes quoted are given in the succeeding footnotes.

³ Just in the twinkling of an eye rise up and flourish again, you, the image of my dreams, you, the famous era! In the twinkling of an eye I would like to dwell in one of the castles, in the twinkling of an eye to live in a great era!

III. Kaizl's Inspiration

Kaizl's oeuvre makes it possible to demonstrate two aspects of the role played by translated English poetry in the development of original Czech Romantic poetry: firstly the introduction and employment of common themes and motifs typical of European Romantic poetry, thus supporting their use in Czech writing, and secondly the contribution to Czech poetic technique of a particular stanzaic form, the Spenserian stanza.

Kaizl's greatest contribution consists in his translations from Byron, thirteen poems in all. They include the famous 'Childe Harold's Good Night' from the first Canto of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, the full tale *The Prisoner of Chillon*, five poems from *Hebrew Melodies*, two more poems from *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, and four poems from other collections. These translations were completed during the years 1853 to 1855, prior to the composition of *Křivoklát* (Mánek 1991:129). In mid-nineteenth-century Bohemia, similarly as in the 1820s and 1830s, Byron was still considered a highly controversial figure, although later in the century he would be praised as the leading poet of European literature (Durdík 1870, Mánek 2000 and Procházka 2004). The widely used and abused term Byronism was practically a synonym for Romanticism.

The second most important author whom Kaizl translated was the Irishman Thomas Moore. Twenty-eight poems, most of them from *Irish Melodies* (1807-1835), were all printed during the same period, including for example 'Let Erin remember days of old', 'Erin! The tear and the smile in thine eyes', 'Tho' the last glimpse of Erin with sorrow I see', 'My Gentle Harp', 'The Minstrel Boy', and 'Silence is in our festal halls' (Mánek 1983: 32-34, Moore 1929). In nineteenth-century Czech literary circles, Moore's reception was closely connected with Byron's. In Moore's work particularly we can find many ideas and motifs of the Romantic repertoire which occur also in Czech poetry: scenic beauty, historical places and events, the warrior-poet, the harp, minstrels and others. Czech interest in Irish affairs was also stimulated by the similar geopolitical and economic positions of the two nations during that period of history. In Moore's obituary in the magazine *Vesna* in 1852 the anonymous Czech writer expressly values Moore's "patriotic songs about the history, woes and hopes of the Irish nation."

IV. Křivoklát

The title work of Kaizl's collection, *Křivoklát, rýmovaná chronika* [Křivoklát, a Chronicle in Rhyme], is a long poem narrating the history of this medieval castle. The poem connects the poet's personal experience of the place with a survey of the castle's and country's great past as well as hopes for a better future. Another element in the poem's genesis is also typically Romantic: the poet drew on a contemporary article outlining the history of the famous place (Mikovec 1852), as Kaizl acknowledges in his prefatory note. The author of this inspiring paper was Ferdinand Břetislav Mikovec (1826-1862), a dramatist and theatre critic. The article had been published in 1852 in the magazine *Lumír*, which Mikovec founded and edited. The poem has two opening quotes, the first in Polish from a poem by the Romantic poet [Józef] Bohdan Zaleski (1802-1886), mentioning "all golden dreams" and mourning over the great past, and the second in English from Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (Canto III, 48; Byron 1921:209): "Beneath these battlements, within those walls / Power dwelt amidst her passions[.]"

The Romantic ambience of a dream of the great past also permeates throughout the dedicatory poem 'Panu Bedřichu Wagnerovi, t.č. v Křivoklátě' [To Mr. Bedřich Wagner, at present at Křivoklát], (Kaizl 1858:5):

On strmí ještě hrdě na své výši
Ten dávný králův našich Křivoklát,
A hledí dolů k potoku a chýši,
A vládne posud po návalu ztrát,
Jež dopadaly krutě častokrát.
Ten hrad byl slavných často mužův bytem,
A vážný pro korunu i pro stát,

A dějiště v jednání důležitém,
A nade všecko krásným nedostupným skrytem.⁴

Another typical example of Kaizl's style is the poem's 55th stanza (Kaizl 1858:28):

Však pěvec kráčí zticha z hradu brány
A nebudí víc harfy svojí strunu,
Jsouť po tom zpěvu skoro přetrhány,
Tož při pohledu k zpuchřelému trůnu.
A Hrádek vymřelý jest ve svém lůnu.
Jak z báječného bohatýra hrobu
Když kosti vynesou, zbroje i korunu,
Tak přes chatrnou směs tady a mdlou
Ční hrdé upomínky na slavnější dobu.⁵

On the contrary, the following 56th stanza (Kaizl 1858:28) and the concluding 60th stanza (Kaizl 1858:30) show thriving contemporary scenes, featuring the bounty of nature as well as the progress of industry, both of which suggest a brighter future:

Však vábí cesta mile ozářená
V ten z jara budící se vonný les,
Kde ptáče víří, raduje se, stená,
Kde zvěř unáší rychlonohý ples.
Tu hlučí bujará průmyslu směs,
A valná vlna žene hřmotná kola,
A silné rámě bije do želez,
Tu ohně chomáč sičí, prchá, volá,
A nakonec oněmí, když jej přemoc zdolá.⁶

A na konec hostinné práhy minou,
A hlouběji se v lese ztrácí dráha,
Nás jízda rychlá nese v stranu jinou,
A v pustou pláň, jež předaleko sahá,
Až naposled se zjeví zlatá Praha.
Leč v dálce – v budoucnosti krytých dnech
Si v mysli chovám dávného kraj blaha,
Toť Křivoklátský hrad! jsa věrný Čech,
Jsa přítel lásky schopný – v ukojení snech.⁷

With regard to content and style, Kaizl's poem is quite conventional even by period standards, using stock Romantic motifs as well as themes typical of the Czech patriotism of the era. The poem's

⁴ Křivoklát, the ancient castle of our Czech kings, proudly rises to its height and looks down to the stream and cottage below. Still ruling after a flood of frequent cruel losses, the castle often provided lodgings for famous men, and it was important for the Crown and state, the scene of important activities, and above all, a beautiful, unassailable hiding place.

⁵ The singer silently walks from the castle gate and does not awaken the strings of his harp, as all of them are nearly broken after the song. He gazes at the decayed throne. And the womb of the Castle is dead. Like the bones, arms and crown rising from a grave of a legendary hero, so through this poor collection and faintness proud remains of a more famous period still dominate here.

⁶ But a pleasantly sunlit road welcomes you into the sweet-smelling woods awakened in the spring, where the bird whirls, rejoices, moans and where the swift-footed animals run in joy. Here a zestful jumble of industry makes a din, a huge wave runs noisy wheels and a strong arm batters iron, and a tuft of fire fizzles, runs away, cries, and is made dumb in the end, overcome by formidable power.

⁷ And at the end we are past the hospitable thresholds. The path is lost in the woods and we are quickly taken in a different direction toward a wasted, far-extending plain, and finally golden Prague emerges. But in the distance – in the days covered by the future I keep in mind the region of old bliss, the Křivoklát castle, and being a true Czech, a friend capable of love, satisfied in dreams.

innovative feature was mainly technical – it was most likely the first time a Spenserian stanza was used in Czech poetry. Kaizl was aware of this, as he mentioned this detail in his prefatory note: “Forma k básni vyvolená jest stance anglická Spenserovská, u nás posud málo pěstovaná, ale k myšlénce podobného druhu velmi vhodná. Jest-li že se mi zde nepodařilo dobře jí použiti, jinému z našich bohdá jinde se to podaří.”⁸ The Spenserian stanza, devised by Edmund Spenser for his poem *The Faerie Queene* (1590, 1596, 1609) consists of nine iambic lines, the first eight being pentameters and the last a hexameter or alexandrine, rhymed *a b a b b c b c c*. Its most successful proponents proved to be the Romantic poets: Byron in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812, 1816, 1818), Keats in *The Eve of St Agnes* (1820), Shelley in *The Revolt of Islam* (1818) and *Adonais* (1821).

To adapt the Spenserian stanza to Czech literature was a difficult task. Czech translators and poets did not fully master this device until three decades later. Even more than a decade after Kaizl, in his book on Byron (interspersed with many quotations) Josef Durdík (1837-1902) (1870:90) stressed the difficulties of using the stanza and resigned himself to them. He used and recommended using blank verse for the first seven lines and rhyming only the eighth and ninth. It was not until Eliška Krásnororská (1847-1926) in 1890 that the complete *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* was published in readable Czech Spenserian stanzas.

Kaizl's *Křivoklát* is not an astounding literary achievement, only the standard, typical product of Czech Romantic revivalism. However the poem is at the very least technically innovative. I hope this paper has succeeded in demonstrating how influential English Romantic poetry was in the Czech lands, and how the work of translators can contribute to the enrichment and growth of original creative writing.

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⁸The form chosen for the poem is the English Spenserian stanza, little cultivated in our country, but it suits the idea of this kind very well. If I have not managed to use it well here, it is to be hoped that, God willing, some of us will succeed at a later time.

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