

RUSSIAN POETRY AS INTERPRETED BY FRANTIŠEK TÁBORSKÝ

Passages From the History of Czech-Russian Literary Relationships

Summary

František Táborský (1858—1940) belonged to the second "wave" of the National Revival, both as a poet and as a translator and propagator of Russian literature in Bohemia. In Moravia this wave was represented by the *Young Moravia* movement, to which the poet belonged. Táborský's interest in Slav life and culture found its strongest expression in the field of Russian literature and fine art. This was furthered by his two journeys to Russia, in particular by his stay of almost a year in Petrograd in 1909—1910. Even at that time Táborský actively contributed to the practical realization of Czech-Russian cultural relationships. A typical example was Táborský's participation in the New Slav movement, with which he was personally closely connected, although he had a number of critical objections to it. It was in particular the political aims of *Neo-Slavism* — the lack of reality of which Táborský became fully aware of in the course of this stay in Russia — that were foreign to him. What mainly attached him to Neo-Slavism was his interest in the practical realization of inter-Slav relationships and his personal friendship with the leaders of the movement. World War I and the Revolution entailed the interruption of Táborský's personal contacts in Russia, but in the course of the Twenties and the beginning of the Thirties these were partly supplemented by contact with Russian emigrés in Prague and in other countries. It was not until the mid-Thirties that Táborský, thanks to his study of Pushkin, made contact with the recently established Soviet Embassy in Prague.

This conscious Slav orientation can be traced throughout the entire poetic work of Táborský, the strongest influence being that of Pushkin and of Russian folk art. The marked debt to Russian literature in the works of Táborský is however mingled with a fair number of other influences, mainly from the Czech literary tradition, which is comprehensible in the case of a writer who was highly imitative.

As a translator and as a theoretician of translation Táborský represents a *transition* between the *Ruchites*, the *Lumirites* and the *subsequent generations of translators*. He follows the *Ruchites* and *Sládek* in his stressing of the need for strict adherence to contentual meaning in translation, and like *Vrchlický*, translates "... in the dimension of the original", while at the same time, in distinction to *Vrchlický*, his interest in detail sometimes overshadows the whole. By birth, Táborský belongs to the generation known as the *Revisionists of the Nineties*, sharing their demand for faithfulness to both content and form in translation, but he differed from them in his attitude to *Vrchlický*, whom in spite of all reservations he nevertheless always acknowledged as a writer of great ability and by whose style he himself was strongly influenced. Táborský is related to the succeeding generation by his freer conception of rhyme and his demand for a natural, simple, and clear translation, as well as by his emphasis on the repon-

sibility of the translator with regard to literary history. The stress which Táborský laid on the translator's task of discrimination links him to Šalda and the translators of the *inter-War period*. Táborský did not always succeed in applying his theoretical ideas in practice. His translations suffer from a number of inadequacies, entailed primarily by his endeavour to be as literal as possible, his slavish adherence to detail and his preference of formal analogies to the signification adequacy of the translation. In spite of the fact that the criticism of his time considered Táborský to be an excellent translator, we can discover in his work many Russicisms, artificially padded-out rhymes and rhythms, unnatural word order and so forth. The result of this is on occasion obscurity, distortion or complete reversal of meaning. Such instances of course are merely extreme cases; for the translations of Táborský are decidedly uneven. This is not the result of the process of development, for Táborský throughout his long lifetime remained faithful to the same aesthetic requirements, and when his older translations were republished he changed comparatively little in them. The differences tend rather to arise from the nature of Táborský as a poet inclined to be more successful with epic than with the intensity of lyric, while the forms of the latter which he found most attractive were those of song, close to traditional folk song, or verse satire. This was the reason why Táborský's most successful translations were from the *narrative poetry* of Lermontov, the *political lyrics* of Pushkin, and the *fairy-tales and nursery rhymes* of the *Slav nations*. Less successful are his translations of Lermontov's lyrics, which were Táborský's apprentice work. The pioneering translation of "*The Masked Ball*", in spite of inadequacies, was better than the interpretation of Gribojedov's "*Grief Out of Reason*", the gnomic verse of which was beyond Táborský's skill. The translations for periodicals of the poets of "pure art" are among his merely average works. With regard to modern poetry, however, Táborský was entirely unsuccessful — namely in his translations of Blok's experimental poem "*The Twelve*", which for this reason remained in manuscript.

As one of the generation of Revisionists, Táborský was led to *translate anew* (after Alois Durdík), certain parts of the work of Lermontov, and it was he who first presented to the Czech public a comparatively complete version of Lermontov's poetry. Here the achievement of Táborský has not yet been superseded. Táborský's great erudition in the field of literary history enabled him to make an excellent selection. For this reason he confined himself to the most valuable works of Russian literature, filling in the gaps still remaining in Czech translation. Although his actual translations were for the most part undistinguished, his keen discernment of literary value won him an honourable place in the history of Czech translation.

In the light of his broad cultural outlook Táborský followed with interest cultural events in pre-Revolutionary Russia and eventually also in the new Soviet State, conveying his information to the Czech public. From the aspect of literary history his most significant contributions relate to Pushkin, of whom he wrote throughout the course of half a century, later collecting his observations in an important *monograph*. Also of importance are Táborský's illuminating *studies* devoted to *Russian folk literature*, the *history of the Russian theatre* and Russian literature of the 19th century. Valuable too are the introductory notes to the poets presented in periodical publications, as are also the prefaces, concluding notes and commentaries which accompanied the publication of his translations in book form. The view-point from which he expressed his comparative evaluations, which were here essential because of the hitherto fragmentary treatment of Czech-Russian literary relationships, confirms the opinion that Táborský's contribution to the Czech appreciation of Russian culture was no negligible one.

The placing of Táborský in literary history and his critical evaluation as a man of letters is somewhat complicated. His largely informatory and educational purpose links him to the tradition of the National Revival, while as a student he was influenced by the *Philological School*, and his monographs frequently resort to the *biographical*

method. Closest of all, however, was the influence of *Positivism*, with the chief representatives of which, such as Jiří Polívka, Jaroslav Vlček and Jan Jakubec he closely collaborated. Characteristic of the nature of Táborský as a scholar is his eminent interest in the study of the material which he accumulated with scholarly care, consistently drawing public attention to his results. For this reason the majority of his critical writings are to some extent devoted to the history of literature. With the sobriety of his aesthetic opinions, his interest in poetry of political motivation, and his largely sociological conception of literature, Táborský has much in common with the Masaryk type of realist. Nevertheless his feeling for the aesthetics of fine literature, enabling him to discern the true values of the works he passed under consideration, at the same time brings Táborský closer to the younger generation of Czech literary critics and historians, brought up on the *aestheto-psychology* of Hennequin, such as F. X. Šalda and A. Novák; both these men were his close friends and for many years he collaborated with them. Thus from this aspect, too, Táborský is a personality standing on the frontiers of two epochs, and to a large extent this was the cause of his eclecticism.

The translations of Táborský, which we have necessarily considered both from the aspect of genetic relationships, and from the aspect of relationships of style-types, carried out in their time the function of internal contacts, for they provided a representative selection of Russian poetry and thus furthered the absorption of this poetry into the Czech poetic consciousness. Less attention has been devoted here to the result of internal genetic relationships, that is to say, to the immediate effect of Russian literature on Czech literary development. Because of the purpose of the present study, this question has been examined only with regard to the poetry of Táborský himself and its legacy. The aim of Táborský's translations was to provide information, for he based his work on the literature which was being transmitted, rather than on the literature which was the recipient. This is clear both from his endeavours to extend Czech knowledge of Russian literature and also from his style as a translator. Táborský always did his best to bring Russian literature closer to the Czech reader, along with the ethnological and linguistic peculiarities of the background presented. In this respect, too, his work is determined by his historical position. In the subsequent development of the Czech tradition of translation it is the aspect of innovation with regard to the recipient literature which prevails, that is to say the aspect concerned with needs of Czech literature itself and of the Czech poetic language.

Translated by *Jessie Kocmanová*

