

Zezuláková Schormová, Františka

[Švéda, Josef. Země zaslíbená, země zlořečená: obrazy Ameriky v české literatuře a kultuře (Promised Land, Accursed Land. Images of America in Czech Literature and Culture)]

Brno studies in English. 2017, vol. 43, iss. 2, pp. [179]-184

ISSN 0524-6881 (print); ISSN 1805-0867 (online)

Stable URL (DOI): <https://doi.org/10.5817/BSE2017-2-10>

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/137614>

Access Date: 17. 02. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.



REVIEW

Josef Švéda: *Země zaslíbená, země zlořečená. Obrazy Ameriky v české literatuře a kultuře* [*Promised Land, Accursed Land. Images of America in Czech Literature and Culture*], Příbram: Pistorius & Olšanská, 2016, ISBN 978-80-87855-40-9, 435 pp.

“Nation” has long been a scare word in academic discourse. It has now been over thirty years since Benedict Anderson looked at how national identities are constructed, and as a consequence made them problematic; yet still we encounter nations every day, as the main political, cultural and social frameworks, and divisions, of our lives. It helps us make sense of the world and divide it into neat categories. A belief in its fundamental condition is still embedded in minds and in our speech, and national stereotypes are one of the most visible proofs.

Since World War II, but even more prominently in the last decades, the study of national stereotypes has become more important. Our perception of the national or ethnical Other has been discussed by sociologists, historians, philosophers, and literary scholars. They tried to discover how these stereotypes emerge and how they are determined by circumstances and conventions, examining how certain characteristics come to be attributed to certain nationalities or groups.

Imagology, a specific area of practice of comparative literature, assumes that texts are not written, published, read or translated in a political vacuum, and thus should not be analyzed only according to aesthetic criteria. At the beginning of the 1950s, at a time when literature was governed by New Critics, this approach encountered resistance. René Wellek and Austin Warren in their influential *Theory of Literature* characterized imagology as a form of “literary sociology,” and criticized it for bringing back the nineteenth century *Stoffgeschichte* (1949: 106). Interdisciplinary approaches have since, however, come back into fashion. As for the second accusation, Joep Leerssen (Beller and Leerssen 2007: 20) who has written on imagology, remarks that “at its worst, *Stoffgeschichte* is merely a thematic bibliographical track-record; at its best, it can trace changing fashions, poetics, literary attitudes and cultural values through the *fil conducteur* of a longitudinal theme across the centuries, with all its constants and variables.”

Stymied in the Anglophone context, the discipline developed in continental Europe, especially in France and Germany (in the latter especially in the imagological program in Aachen, designed by the Belgian literary scholar Hugo Dyerinck). In contrast to Western Europe, imagology was never widely spread on the other side of the Iron Curtain, as it did not fit into the framework of Marxist literary critique. In the Czech context, it was only after the Velvet Revolution that critics started to apply imagological approaches, mainly focusing on marginalized groups and their portrayal in literature, as Daniel Soukup (author of one of the few texts that deal with imagology directly, “*Cikáni*” a česká vesnice: konstrukty cizosti v literatuře 19. století [*“Gypsies” and the Czech Village: Constructs of Otherness in Nineteenth Century Literature*]) writes in his article on imagology (Fedrová 2006: 622).

There were, however, attempts to map literary encounters with foreign, often politically antagonistic, cultures before that. One notable figure is Jaroslav Peprník, who published a book on Anglophone elements in Czech literature in 1988. This was followed by a monograph of almost one thousand pages called *Amerika očima české literatury od vzniku USA po rok 2000* [*America Through the Eyes of Czech Literature from the Beginning to 2000*] in 2002. In Peprník's monograph, there is a selection of prose fiction texts on America divided according to topics like Immigration, Geography, History, etc. Last year, he published a similarly extensive book on contacts between Czechs and the Anglophone world.

Although imagological in scope, Peprník's books cannot be labeled as such, because they are deliberately bibliographical: their main contribution is the vast collection of materials they present for future literary scholars. It was therefore exciting to see that Josef Švéda, a literary historian, took up the project of further examining the literary encounters between Czechs and Americans, and asked the questions usually associated with imagology: How do Czechs view America? And what does it say about the Americans and about themselves?

While other scholars have examined the topic, Švéda's book is unique in the range of materials he uses and the period he covers. Other scholars were usually focusing on a specific genre or period. One topic that frequently arose was Czech immigration to the US, attracting critical attention from the outset; moreover, Czech immigrant literature in the US was explored by Vladimír Papoušek in a range of publications, e.g. *Česká literatura v Chicagu* [*Czech Literature in Chicago*] (2001), or "The Horizon That Disappeared and Reappeared: The Image of Austria-Hungary in the Literature of Czech Immigrants in America" (2003).

Last year, Marek Vlha published a book with a similar focus, *Mezi starou vlastní a Amerikou* [*Between the Old Homeland and America*]; and Czech immigrants were also in the centre of a dissertation at UC Berkeley, written by Michael Dean in 2014 ("What the Heart Unites, the Sea Shall Not Divide." *Claiming Overseas Czechs for the Nation*). In articles and conference proceedings, other scholars have focused on the Czech image of America in various periods and also on the ideological role of American popular genres. Wild West stories were published in special, pocket editions in the interwar period, and together with detective stories, they have formed a subgenre called "rodokaps," which translates as "pocket novel." (Pavel Janáček and Michal Jareš devoted a whole book to the phenomenon in 2003.)

Země zaslíbená, země zlořečená. Obrazy Ameriky v české literatuře a kultuře [*Promised Land, Accursed Land. Images of America in Czech Literature and Culture*] could therefore be seen as an attempt to connect these two strands in Czech literary discourse: the compilations done by Peprník and the critical insight of authors who focused on particular aspects of the representation of America. Švéda himself (2016: 20) says that he aims is to "provide a compact overview of the images of the Czech discourse on America from the nineteenth century to the present day." The book consists of seven chapters, ordered chronologically, in which the depiction of America in fiction and travelogues is described, from 1870 (when writing on America started to appear in greater quantities) until now. There are several specific areas that Švéda focuses on in his readings: the depiction of America itself,¹ the depiction of its inhabitants (which are divided into "proper" Americans and members of ethnic or racial minorities), and also Czech immigrants. In each period, Švéda discusses travel writings, accounts in popular literature (such as westerns, detective stories, and literature for children), and literary fiction. Švéda introduces us to authors who wrote about America, examining some of their works in a greater detail than others (ranging from well known representations by Josef Václav Sládek or Miroslav Holub to lesser known authors such as Jan Harris Zachar), providing summaries or pointing out particular passages that are especially relevant.

The framework for the narrative Švéda presents is that America and Americans serve as the Other to the Czech Self. The depiction of the Other has changed through time and it often served specific political agendas. For example, writings dating from the end of the nineteenth century especially praised the American federal system, democracy, and its status as a republic, thus criticizing the Austro-Hungarian Empire (Švéda 2016: 80). Another example would be the negative depictions of the fates of Czech immigrants in the US: these narratives, common at the end of the nineteenth

century, were supposed to discourage other potential immigrants. Their characters, having left their homeland, either failed to settle successfully, or, having succeeded economically, they lost their Czech identity and with it their happiness, just as the main character of the first story in Svatopluk Čech's *Ve stínu lípy* [*Under the Shadow of the Linden*], Bárta. Rich but unhappy, he comes back from America, only to find his father dead and his mother ill. Bárta's subsequential death and burial in the native soil becomes, as Švéda puts it, "destiny fulfillment for the stray emigrant who exchanged his native village for the vision of gold" (Švéda 2016: 94).

Švéda demonstrates how in other periods, too, immigrants were a crucial factor in changing notions of both Czech and American identity, through similar stories of success and failure. The journey to the New World was often presented as an initialization ritual, in which immigrants often succeed thanks to a unique combination of their Czech and American qualities. These narratives were particularly prominent in the interwar period and variations also appear in post-communist narratives (these often resemble narratives from the end of the nineteenth century, as the immigrants' Czechness prevents them from succeeding in the foreign land and they have to return home). One of the reasons was Czech women, who were often depicted as beautiful, passive, nurturing, and domestic, in contrast to American or Americanized women, who were seen as plain, unfaithful, and, at worst, emancipated (Švéda 2016: 224–229). This pattern is not limited to the end of the nineteenth century: feminism and political correctness are often ridiculed in more recent texts, as they are seen as a restriction of freedom for which the authors travel to the US in the first place.

Failure and success figure prominently in travel writing, too, and authors' understanding of the American state system and American values strongly influence their depiction. In earlier narratives, failure was often seen in individual terms, but observers in the 1920s and 1930s viewed social problems in a broader context: while some praise Ford and the living standards of his workers, others notice the lack of social security, and the uniformity and mechanization of work in the US. These traits are magnified in the texts from the period of state socialism, when the mention of racial problems in the US, criminality, drugs, pornography, and alienation were almost a compulsory part of each text on America. Perhaps as a reaction to that, the early post-socialist travelers seemed to overlook them: "If social problems are mentioned at all, they are not seen as integral to the system, but as local color or the exception to the rule" (Švéda 2016: 321).

The material Švéda provides is often fascinating and the concept of connecting travel writing with fiction and popular literature works well. However, most of the texts rely on a binary opposition of positive/negative representation of given categories. He shows how the representations have shifted in different periods, but does not analyze the reasons (he uses the word "analysis," but instead he observes and describes). This is clear visible when politics are involved: Švéda often states that a particular depiction of America is a part of a certain ideological conflict (e.g. in the interwar fiction, 2016: 238); however, he does not say in what way, and neither does he analyze the particular dynamics of the conflict. This stands out because he divides historical periods according to political changes (from Empire to Republic, from Republic to state socialism, and then to capitalism).

Švéda often refers to possible frameworks of interpretation that would help him to shed new light on the text (like the noble savage or myth of the frontier), but does not apply them consistently. One reason for this might be the lack of a system of representation: Švéda mentions Said and Todorova in the introduction (2016: 15–17), but he does not adopt any specific system of representation analysis. Moreover, his use of the concept of the Other is never conceptualized: it is merely used to create a division between the Czech Self and American Other.

Besides a brief mention in the introduction, Švéda does not identify his approach as imagological. Many of the text's inconsistencies can be, however, seen as symptomatic of imagology as a discipline, which asks interesting questions and presents valuable material, but which does not have any coherent theoretical system with which to analyze and interpret this material. One of the reasons might be the lack of dialogue with other disciplines which, too, have dealt with the various Others. Claudia Perner (Munkelt et al 2013: 30) even notes "an unfortunate lack of theoretical progress during precisely those decades when research on localities, nationality, and ethnicity was subject to fundamental transformation." In most cases, the discipline also stayed untouched by the

post-structuralist approaches to language and identity. As a result, imagology often stays enclosed within boundaries it wants to deconstruct: although Leerssen (2007: 19) claims that “the various stereotypes and assumptions concerning national peculiarities never form the topic of investigation, but always part of the interpretative tool-kit,” it often ends up being, as Perner (2013: 32) puts it, “implicit validation of national and cultural categories.”

Current imagology studies have claimed kinship with post-colonial theory (though, mostly for reasons mentioned above, it is not very exact). Švédá, too, reads some texts through the lens of this theory, mainly drawing on Said’s *Orientalism* (1978). As many critics have pointed out, Said’s concept does not travel without incurring some tolls and levies. In the introduction, Švédá remarks on this, referring to attempts to apply Said’s theories to Central Europe. In the following chapters, however, he implies that the Czechs adopt the colonizer’s gaze in relation to African Americans and Native Americans. This is a promising idea which, unfortunately, Švédá does not flesh out. Another area that deserves more attention is immigrant fiction. Criticism has focused on immigrants now for at least two decades, but Švédá does not draw on this work when he categorizes the characters of immigrants in the examined texts.

Švédá clearly sets the criteria for the material in his book but he does not specify other choices he had to make. The idea to combine travel narratives with popular literature and fiction serves his purpose well, as he examines whether the representations in these two modes differ or not; readers’ curiosity is piqued by what a deeper engagement between these might yield. It might also have been helpful to consider the specific positions of the authors. Some of the travelogues he examines were written by authors of fiction; some fiction was written as a result of the author’s travels, while others never visited the US. Although the difference between the last two should not be important for a publication which deals with America as a literary concept, it becomes crucial if one of the book’s key points is a comparison between travelers’ personal experiences and fictional accounts. In this context, also Švédá’s own position is interesting: the book is, in part, based on his research in the US, so he himself has joined the line of authors travelling between the continents, drawing on what he found there in order to construct his account.

Švédá often remarks that the scope of the book prevents him from engaging with further materials, but there are certain key elements missing. One of these is other European representations. Švédá occasionally refers to them in the early chapters, but draws mainly from Ray Allen Billington’s *Land of Savagery, Land of Promise. The European Image of the American Frontier in the Nineteenth century* (1981). Further engagement with the European, or even Central and Eastern European context would help us with some important questions: Were the Czech representations different from those of other nations? If so, then in which periods, and in which ways? For an analysis of certain aspects of representation (e.g., the image of the African Americans), it would be also useful to engage with the American literary tradition, especially American texts translated into Czech in these periods: they, too, significantly shaped the way Czechs wrote America.

Neither is it clear that Švédá has found the optimal organization for his materials. For each period, there are two chapters (one dedicated to travel writing and one to fiction); however, the period of state socialism in Czechoslovakia (between 1948 and 1989) is discussed only in one chapter. Švédá’s justification is that during this period the representations were determined by a single principle (2016: 246). Several Czech critics have challenged such a view, which Alexander Catalano (2008: 11) characterizes as a “long (and boring) period without any internal development,” the narrative of strict rules and “authoritative discourse” (Švédá 2016: 257). Švédá, of course, is aware that some change occurred during these years: overall, however, he sees the period between 1948 and 1989 as a discontinuity in the representations of America. Caught in the binary of promised land and accursed land, he misses the nuances, for instance, how the official representations of the US often undermined itself, and also the role played by the unofficial culture in this process.

On the other hand, the parts in which Švédá deals with the representation of African Americans and Native Americans in Czech literature are among the most enlightening aspects of the book. Although Švédá does not admit it, his observations go against the received wisdom in Czech literary criticism that Czechs have always sympathized with the oppressed and had a special bond with

them, as they, too, were often subjected to foreign powers.² This narrative is usually connected with the generations of the national revival in the nineteenth century. While it is true that revivalist authors were fascinated by Native American mythology (or, more precisely, by their own, romanticized version of it, as Švéda effectively illustrates with drawings by Mikuláš Aleš in which the Native American characters strongly resemble characters from Slavic mythology), it is also true that they criticized race relations in the US of that time. However, their actual descriptions of the Native Americans and especially African Americans do not differ from the racist discourse from larger, more dominant nations.

It is one of the few insights that bring us further than a mere confirmation of well-known stereotypes of America and Americans. However, it might be symptomatic for the Czech critical discourse that in the only detailed review of the book (published in a widely-read magazine and on a reputable website on literature), the book is seen as controversial, prejudiced, and lacking in balance (Lukavec 2017). The reviewer, Jan Lukavec, an established literary critic, confuses the authors' critical stance towards America with Švéda's personal opinion. Lukavec's final verdict is worth quoting in its entirety:

It is undeniable that there are numerous things we can justifiably criticize about the United States of America. After reading Švéda's book, however, readers might (if indeed they are not supporters of the Communist Party) feel it necessary to remind themselves that for all its faults the US is a democratic country in which you can freely express your opinion, and whose government co-finances even the projects as critical of America as this publication.³ (Lukavec 2017)

After reading Lukavec's review, other readers may regret that Švéda's book is as controversial as the reviewer claims; as such, it would provide a fresh perspective on the Czech literary representations of America. Pace Lukavec, Švéda does not critique US society, but merely analyses Czech image of it in a diachronic perspective. It is unfortunate that he relies on the binary of positive and negative representation, and the result only confirms our preexisting notions. In the introduction, the author expresses the wish that his book will serve scholars who come after him (2016: 20), and indeed it gathers valuable material (the immense archival work behind is impressive). In the years ahead, it will no doubt become an important source of primary and secondary materials, facts, and information.

Švéda, unwittingly, provided an imagological approach to his material. But the limits of the discipline become the limits of his text, too. Imagology as it stands now can only bring interesting materials to scholarly attention (and Švéda certainly does that) but it still struggles with finding the right tools to analyze and interpret them.

Notes

¹ "America" is used as a synonym for the US: Švéda claims it is because of the mythical potential of the term and also because authors he writes about also used it in a similar way (2016: 365).

² One of many examples: Josef Jařab, in a radio broadcast dedicated to anthologies of Native American and Afro-American poetry, speaks about "traditional Czech sympathies towards the oppressed minorities in America," and the "symbolic identification" with them, based on the history of the Czech nation (Jařab 2016).

³ Švéda's research in the US was supported by a Fulbright scholarship.

References

- Catalano, Alessandro (2008) *Rudá záře nad literaturou. Česká literatura mezi socialismem a undergroundem (1945–1959)*. Brno: Host.
- Janáček, Pavel and Michal Jareš (2003) *Svět rodokapsu: Komentovaný soupis sešitových románových edic 30. a 40. let 20. století*. Praha: Karolinum.

- Jařab, Josef (2016) "Česká antologie americké poezie (3/5). Antologie věnované menšinám." *Český rozhlas Vltava*. Accessed on 22 Feb. 2017.
- Leerssen, Joep (2007) "Imagology: History and Method." In: Beller, Manfred, Joep Leerssen (eds.) *Imagology: The Cultural Construction and Literary Representation of National Characters. A Critical Survey*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 17–32.
- Lukavec, Jan (2016) "Amerika v zakřiveném zrcadle. Poněkud zaujatá kniha o českých obrazech USA." *iLiteratura.cz*. Accessed 22 Feb. 2017.
- Perner, Claudia (2013) "Dislocating Imagology. And: How Much of It Can (or Should) Be Retrieved?" In: Munkelt, Marga, Markus Schmitz, Mark Stein, Silke Stroh (eds.) *Postcolonial Translocations: Cultural Representation and Critical Spatial Thinking*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 29–44.
- Soukup, Daniel (2006) "Stereotypy, imagology a literární hodnoty." In: Fedrová, Daniela (ed.) *Otázky českého kánonu. Sborník příspěvků z III. kongresu světové literárněvědné bohemistiky*. Prague: ÚČL AV ČR, 622–630.
- Švéda, Josef (2006) *Země zaslíbená, změna zlořečená: Obrazy Ameriky v české literatuře a kultuře*. Prague: Pistorius & Olšanská.
- Wellek, René, Austin Warren (1949) *Theory of Literature*. London: Jonathan Cape Ltd.

Františka Zezuláková Schormová

