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# JAKUB DEML'S PARADOXICAL DENIAL

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In Czech Literature, Jakub Deml stands for a genuine enigma when it comes to poetic classification. His complex literary production is difficult to place within the canonical categories designed to map the heteromorphic nature of the text. Those scholars who have tried to subject the semantic obstinacy of Deml's opus to methodological scrutiny, could not but ultimately admit that Deml's is the work which will always remain at the margin of interpretational theories.

In the present study, the author attempts to delineate the cognitive aspect of supervenience which Deml as a rule applied to the process of composing his text. It might be analogously compared to Bakhtin's carnivalesque inversion of functions, or, for that matter, it could be viewed as a dialectical denial of authenticity for the sake of being authentic. A case in point is Deml's critical stance toward the programmatic announcements of the nascent Czech avant-garde. Despite his ironic and often frivolous suggestions aimed at the avant-garde activities, Deml frequently practiced that which he tried to criticize. In light of his own experimental writings, Deml's rebuke of the innovative artistic conception appears rather paradoxical.

1. Deml's writings have been invariably considered not only as obtuse to the point of being incomprehensible but also as insignificant when evaluated from the critical literary perspective. Needless to say that both views have been a subject to periodic changes. And so was Deml's idiosyncratic poetic system. That is why his manifold works have been referred to at different times as symbolist, expressionist, and even surrealist. In other words, neo-romantic with all the connotations attached. However, Deml's work is essentially Catholic, embedded in the stilted formalism of the Church, as Václav Černý points out in his *Pláč koruny české* (The Czech Crown's Tears, 1977).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Černý, V.: *Pláč koruny české*. Sixty-Eight Publishers, Toronto 1977, p. 284.

It might be thus purported that Deml's metaphysical thought stands for the point of departure of his hermeneutic depiction of reality. Being a Catholic priest, though often vilified and officially abused, Deml's ideas were by necessity constrained by his Catholic faith. Nevertheless, his avowed celibacy did not pose a spiritual obstacle to his being venerated by an entourage of younger and older women who had significantly influenced the course of his life and work. In the eyes of many a young aspiring Czech poet, the artistically mature Deml represented a paradigmatic figure unlike that of Otokar Březina that could be emulated and even included into the literary pantheon. For a certain segment of the Czech readership, Deml was the incarnation of the nation's living conscience that was to be allowed to speak out, no matter how critical his voice might sound.

Indeed, Deml, the poet, and Deml, the priest, appear sometimes as unreconcilable phenomena. The tension produced between these dual functions leaves a discernible impact on Deml's thought and writings. On the one hand, he tried to explore to the utmost his creative freedom. On the other hand, he feared the spontaneous freedom of the *laissez faire* idea, as it had been practised at the economic and personal levels. The emotional spontaneity, concomitant with poetic imagination, Deml found at times rather exasperating. That is why during his personal crises he withdrew into some sort of inner exile, his *centrum securitatis*, in order to seek a personal mystical invocation. Here Deml's women come into scope. They provided Deml not only with so much needed companionship, but also with the spiritual assertion of his prophetic acumen. For Deml was the arbiter in the process of mystery which he time and again offered women to share with him. In his writings, the Goethean concept of *das ewig Weibliche* seems to have been concretized in several versions of the authentic feminine protagonists.

It is only by transitional extension that the concept of the eternal feminine may be also applied to the concept of the fatherland (*vlast*). The spiritual security that appears to figure in Deml's work as a recurring motif, includes also the notion of the nation's existential security. It was above all the establishment and democratic development of Czechoslovakia that Deml at first enthusiastically greeted as an act of resurrection. However, as soon as the novelty of the national independence was replaced by the political expediency of mythologizing reality, Deml did not hesitate to raise his critical voice. It was supposed to serve the Czech society as a stimulus of moral embetterment. But instead it made some people furious and others laugh. „The concept of patriotism in the Czech nation cannot be found anywhere these days but stuck underneath a shack or in an attic

among old trash. Even the Sokol athlete is ashamed these days to mention the word. You can see that the time of the harvest is fast approaching. Should any one wish to taste the fruit of honesty in the Czech nation, he would have to become or at least pretend to be a socialist or a communist. You can see that the time of the harvest is fast approaching<sup>2</sup>.

Deml saw the Czech nation in the permanent state of existential danger. Hence the evocation of the harvest time, i.e., the time of the biblical reaping and recounting trespasses. In Deml's work, it is not only people and nature that die, but also the very idea of the nation whose existence Deml considered as something that was not to be taken for granted. On the contrary, he believed that the idea of the nation had to be constantly created by the common work. The human certainty, reflected by the oscillating political power in democracy, Deml saw from the standpoint of the biblical *vanitas vanitatum*. Even the progress of modern technology spreading its roots in the Moravian countryside at the beginning of the past century could not but convince Deml of the destructive force that was mercilessly undermining the old ways. In spite of all the political rhetoric of such people as Bohumil Šmeral, his old schoolmate, and in spite of the *élan vital* of the Sokol sport activities, the nation was not better off, as Deml could see it. Indeed, the social disparity might be at first sight less apparent in Deml's work, but for all practical purposes it is there to be retrieved.

The radicalization of Deml's thought did not come about merely as a result of his personal difficulties with the Church and civil authorities. Neither the often mentioned Deml's relationship with his stepmother should be thought of as a primary stimulus of his personal bitterness towards the civic society and the Church hierarchy. Deml's anger as well as his laughter seem to have been embedded in his metaphysical perception of transient reality. *Sub specie aeternitatis*, all the political bickering and business profiteering, all the Church activities subservient to the State as well as all the individual assumptions and mystifications appeared to Deml as rather vain and grotesque. He knew all this by now from his own personal experiences because he tried his practical hand in Sokol activities, insurance activities, and even in a political gambit only to be disappointed time and again and laughed at himself in his reflexive journal *Štěpěje* (Footprints).

2. In order for the reader to understand the complex system of Deml's poetic devices, one has to patiently delve into the contiguous episodic nar-

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<sup>2</sup> Deml, J: *Katolický sen*. J. Deml, Tasov 1932, p. 12.

rative which constitute the content of *Šlěpěje*. Whether or not the very conception of Deml's journal had been inspired by the example of Leon Bloy, as Stanislav K. Neumann asserted in his review of *Rosnička* (The Tree Frog, 1912), is the question of a minor import when seen from the perspective of the immanent meaning of the text<sup>3</sup>. As commonly known, the intertextual relationships in literature might throw some light upon the genotypical interdependence of texts. However, more often than not, every modeling textual meaning stands in a dialectical critical opposition to its own reflective surrogate. The process of negation and consequent synthesis appears to be the crucial principle of individual creativity. That is why it would be almost futile to look for the real meaning of Deml's *Šlěpěje* in Bloy's example.

Within the context of Deml's *opus*, the volumes of *Šlěpěje* represent a sort of concordance to the symbolic codification of some of his less comprehensible writings. In all their volumes, he tends to adhere to the idea of making himself understood. That means, the ambiguity of meaning is replaced by the poet's intention to modify and channel the reader's process of decoding the text. Therefore, Deml rectifies, as it were, what the reader might have deduced from the work, taken out of the complete semantic context. In the first volume of *Šlěpěje* (1917), Deml explicitly states the objective of his literary endeavor. He wished to become a pedagogue to the people<sup>4</sup>. It is this sacerdotal function of teaching that infuses the meaning of Deml's *Footsteps*. They should almost visually indicate where to and whence he was going while constructing the meaning of his own life and deconstructing the meaning, imposed upon him by society. Deml's disobedience of the Church authority and his derision of the worldly power acquired as a consequence a revolutionary proportion which inevitably appealed to such avant-garde poets as Vítězslav Nezval.

In his study on Jakub Deml, Jindřich Chaloupecký says that „Deml was no religious thinker and he never studied anything but Catholic Christianity, not to speak of non-Christian religions. Religious doubts were unknown to him and so were theological disputations as well as abstract thinking“<sup>5</sup>. Despite of his erudite exposition of Deml's thought, it is disappointing that Chaloupecký could not see in Deml a Catholic thinker in his own right. It could be Deml's pragmatic concerns which kept his thought

<sup>3</sup> Neumann, S. K.: Setkání s katolíkem. Lidové noviny (4. IX. 1912), p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Deml, J.: Šlěpěje I. P. Kytlicová, Tasov 1917, p. 41.

<sup>5</sup> Chaloupecký J.: Jakub Deml, Rozmluvy, 2, 1984, p. 25.

closer to the earth than to the heavens that defied Chaluppecký's analysis. In *Šlěpěje*, Deml often repeated how much he enjoyed adventures. They made him laugh and sometimes cry. But they undoubtedly exemplified the concrete authentic experience that was the spiritual food he craved for. His laughter, mentioned by the people who came in contact with him, represented in a complimentary manner the depth of his metaphysical and abstract, one might say, his truly logical thought.

Deml's reference to his own laughter is rather terse, though significant for understanding his existential philosophy. Expressed in the way it happens to be, it lacks the speculative dimension, for instance, of such contemporary texts as Henri Bergson's *Le Rire. Essai sur la signification du comique* (1900). And yet, as Bedřich Fučík keenly observed, the laughter *an sich* played a special role in Deml's intimate relationship with death<sup>6</sup>. One might thus posit that it is the concept of laughter in Deml's cognitive poetics that defines the clear limits of the mystical conceptualization in the pragmatic mind. It is almost on a par with the pragmatic idea of the ceremonial *danse macabre*. In the process of revelling, man contemplates the idea of personal death while living through the present turbulent events. Deml mentions a very similar state of his mind, his existential fear, in the monometal and certainly unique composition of *Zapomenuté světlo* (Forlorn light, 1934), „I am not that much afraid of life. But dreams, I really fear. They torture me“<sup>7</sup>. During my conversations with Roman Jakobson, I came to believe that Jakobson's interpretation of Deml's *Forlorn Light* as one of the three most tragic works in Czech literature had been, indeed, no overstatement.

The text of the *Forlorn Light* was Deml's response to all the critical comments, aimed at his personal credibility as a poet and a witness, after the appearance of his outspoken *Testimony* (*Mé svědectví o Otokaru Březinovi*, 1931) of Otokar Březina's thought. The point of departure of Deml's resolute stance against the crowd, as he refers to the voices of opposition, is the biblical announcement of Jesus Christ: *Noli me tangere, nondum enim ascendi ad Patrem meum*. Deml believed to have been chosen by God to see the natural and the supernatural because the poet and the priest were united in his person. It is this idea of *poeta nascitur* which, as Deml claimed in *Šlěpěje*<sup>8</sup>, was the spiritual acme and the blossoming beau-

<sup>6</sup> Fučík B.: *Sedmero zastavení*. Arkýř, Mnichov 1981, p. 25.

<sup>7</sup> Deml, J.: *Zapomenuté světlo*. J. Deml, Tasov 1934, p. 132.

<sup>8</sup> Deml, J.: *Šlěpěje* XXIV. M. R. Junová, Tasov 1939, p. 112.

ty of every nation. Therefore, he saw his mystical calling as the uncompromising revelation of truth.

Deml challenged all those who had called him a liar to bring forth their own evidence of Březina's words and deeds. Following the public backlash, Deml's writings were gradually taking a new turn. He employed even indecent expressions in his writings in order to get across the meaning of a disappointed and angry man. He began to compose German poetry and miscellaneous texts that seem to have said that the Czech poet was just about to return to his German ancestral roots. Interestingly enough, Deml's return to his roots coincided with Hitler's ascension to power. Deml's disillusion with the Czech nation reached almost tragic dimensions. The role of the nation's poet and prophet that Deml wished to play on behalf of the Czech people was not appreciated. As a result, his writings were composed in such a way so as to resemble the complex polysemantic structure of the surrealist collage. Thus it happened that Deml rather unconsciously put himself in the forefront of the avant-garde in the Czech letters.

3. Deml's actual relationship with the Czech avant-garde movement was not really convivial. Already in 1922 when the *Revoluční sborník Devětsil* (Revolutionary Work Collection of Devětsil) came out in Prague, Deml ridiculed the programmatic statements of Karel Teige and others in the collection of his writings, published under the title of *Česno* (The Beehive Entrance, 1924). The personal dissemination of truth becomes an underlying motif of Deml's work. The overall nature of the complete text is immediately critical. It scrutinizes not only the impact of modern technology on the traditional society, but also the persistent effort of the political Left to undermine the role of the Church and the moral foundation of the nation.

A case in point is the text of *Americké houpačky* (American Swings). The author distributes within a very concise space virtual meshes of themes, combined through the single intention to subvert the nascent principles of mass culture. Deml employs the metaphor of the clock pendulum. Its precise, regular movement evokes life's *ennui*. It is this boredom, caused by the monotonous propaganda of the political Left as well as by the laziness and passivity of the materialistically thinking bourgeois that Deml truly abhors. He translates the constantly repeated rhythm of the American swings to the same metaphoric image of the pendulum. The swinging rhythm functions like some kind of algorithm which is to estimate the gravity of social problems. As a result, it is not only communism and bolshevism that are exposed to Deml's scrutiny, but also the philosophical tenets of the avant-garde movement.

Deml considers all the *isms* as mutually juxtaposed phenomena, endowed with a similar negative social function. In principle, he does not distinguish among them as to their ideological postulates and pragmatic objectives. Exposing their vainglory and self-confident political and artistic strivings, Deml ridicules all the pretentious adepts in the arts and politics in his proverbial sardonic way. And yet, paradoxical as it may seem, it was Deml himself who attempted to revive the nation's spirit through his own admonitory proclamations. It was he who together with his friends (e.g., Josef Florian) attempted to ground the nation's identity on the principles of the Catholic faith, combining in a symbiotic way the physical and the metaphysical, the authentic as the signifier, and the illusory as the signified of the mystical consciousness.

In *Česno* also appears a long poem, entitled *Piccolo*. From the structural point of view, the rhymed couplets sound in a rather singsong way and could hardly be considered as poetically innovative. The interesting aspect of the text is its critical tenor. It is emitted through the paradoxical combination of incongruous distinctive features and based on the cognitive principle of semantic reversal. The following example should make the case in point more obvious.

*Let us begin from the start: the time will come  
When every man is going to resemble an exile.  
(.....)  
But the thieves, murderous plotters,  
Lovers, Desperadoes, word critics  
And the builders of spiritual fortresses,  
If they are Catholics, they love synagogues,  
If they are Jewish, they are looking for cathedrals  
And so on, and so forth.<sup>9</sup>*

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<sup>9</sup> Deml, J.: *Česno*. P. Kytlicová, Tasov 1924, p. 117.

Začněme tedy znova: pějěde ěas,  
kdy kaŹděy ělověk podobě se exulantu.

(.....)  
ale zloději, osnovatelě vraŹd,  
milenci, zoufalci, znalci slova  
a budovatelě duchověch bašt,  
jsou-li katolěky, milujě synagogy,  
jsou-li Źidě, hledajě katedrěl,  
a tak děl:



The juxtaposition of various types of human characters, enumerated in a rather causal syntagmatic progression, results in a bifurcate conditional possibility. The Catholics of all the colors tend to be more Jewish than the Jews, and, on the contrary, the Jews tend to be more Catholic than the Catholics themselves. The conscious reversal in cognitive supervenience is exactly what Deml seems to loathe and ridicule.

A bit further in the poem, Deml alludes to the programmatic proclamation of the Czech avant-garde poets.

*Seventeen Moravian poets  
Will make meat patties out of our rhymes  
Because it is a holiday –  
Every single day is a holiday<sup>10</sup>.*

The conceptual opposition of work and leisure, of the normative and the spontaneous, is one of the salient features of the avant-garde, be it the Czech Devetsil and Poetism, or the Czech version of the imported surrealism. The new art was supposed to become a revolutionary playground of the new *homo ludens*. The idea of play was conceived as a subversive tool for the complete destruction of the bourgeois society. The play of self-imposed and oft-changing rules was seen as an effective negation tool of the ossified moral and aesthetic values of the traditional society. By elevating the marketplace entertainment onto the level of the prescriptive avant-garde art, the inversion of the aesthetic value and the consequent cognitive impact on the reflected reality were to accomplish the desired poetic effect.

Deml's writings indicate that the avant-garde concept of new reality and consciousness was also present, though in a more endemic form, in Deml's own poetics. As a matter of fact, its very precursor was the revolutionary program of *Katolická moderna*, as it appeared in the journal *Nový život* (New Life) in 1903. For the first time in the Czech lands, the Catholic poets summoned up the courage to sound the French revolutionary trumpet: Egalite, Fraternite, Liberte goes the message. These were the principal

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<sup>10</sup> Ibidem.

Sedmnáct moravských básníků  
udělá z našich rýmů karbanátek:  
neboť je svátek –  
kterýkoliv den je svátek.

English translation done by the author of the study.

virtues which the Catholic poet was supposed to advocate and defend. Deml, too, adhered to the slogan, though he tried his best to disassociate himself from the narrow programmatic format of the *Katolická moderna* movement.

From the formal, stylistic point of view, Deml's *Česno* reflects its author's cognitive disposition. It is designed as a compilation of texts in prose and poetry which defy established poetic definitions. In that sense, the work is revolutionary and innovative in its very conception. However, the ideational aspect of the text appears to contradict the formal layout. It is in some respects orthodox and dependent on the canonical precepts of the Catholic dogma. A case in point is Deml's idea of work as opposed to leisure.

Deml mentions in *Česno* that anything done out of habit is a sign of laziness. And to be lazy is a cardinal sin, seen from the Christian viewpoint. Hence Deml's reference to the concept of work. To be a poet means to be a worker. To be a worker means to have a special calling to change whatever is meant to be changed. That may be why Deml is so resolutely opposed to the idea of leisurely pursuit in the process of creativity. And yet, paradoxical as it may be, it was the leisure time at Deml's disposal which allowed him to pursue a career of the poet. In other words, Deml seems to disapprove of the free time which he in fact enjoys and cherishes. He refers to the cognitive process as to the physical process of labor. Having assumed the role of the poet, he considers it as his paramount duty to work not only in the metaphysical sense of the word, but also in the pragmatic way of making his living. The process of Deml's abnegation of the pragmatic reality thus completes a dialectical circle. Reality is supervened by surreality. They appear to be concomitant and ultimately indistinguishable from each other.

An analogous paradox surfaces in Deml's criticism of the Prague Linguistic Circle in the book entitled *Do lepších dob* (Toward Better Times, 1927). Deml, as it were, is distrustful of all programmatic *isms*. Therefore, he seems to have all the more reason to be suspicious of the methodological approach and the research objective that ought to be attained by the Prague structuralists. As a result, he treats the structuralist academic endeavor with derision and sarcastic curiosity. Next to oxymoron, hyperbole is Deml's favorite rhetorical device. He uses it rather abundantly in his critical writings. In his animative baroque-style syntax, Deml treats the concepts of the objective and the subjective with his tongue in his cheek, trying to demonstrate in a hilarious manner the absurdity of structuralist functionalism.

By the end of the 1920s, Deml attained in his writings the phenomenal point of non-sequitur syntagmatic logic. The denotative meaning of the verbal sign often functions in Deml's cognitive aesthetics as a means of connotative amalgamation, and vice versa. This process of semantic reversal works in effect in a cross-referential way. That is why the meaning of Deml's text appears rather difficult to grasp and elicits a multiple possibility of reading and interpreting the text. It is therefore feasible to postulate that it is in fact this quality of Deml's text which approximates the versatile poetic system of the avant-garde, as defined by Renato Poggioli in his masterpiece *Teoria dell'arte d'avanguardia*.