

BETWEEN THE EAST AND WEST**The German Reception of Mácha's *Máj* in the 19th Century****ASTRID WINTER**

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ABSTRACT

In Mácha's lifetime, his Czech contemporaries dismissed his magnum opus as un-Czech. In 1836, it received scathing reviews, and it was not until many years after his death that *Máj* was considered again. The first to receive the main work of the greatest Czech Romantic author with enthusiasm were its German-speaking readers. In particular, it was the Prague journal *Ost und West* in which the first reviewers of the poem *Máj* emphasized and appreciated not only the will to create a national literary language, but also the quality and virtuosity with which the Czech language was employed. Among all the languages into which *Máj* was translated, it was by far most often rendered into German during the course of the 19th century: in 1844 by Siegfried Kapper, 1862 by Alfred Waldau and 1882 by Karel Müller. Alfred Waldau wrote that Mácha was "one of the grandest and most beautiful stars on the horizon of new Bohemian poetry". He accused the Germans of being ignorant of the poetry of this so close a nation, "whose land is so to speak a bridge connecting the East and the West". What appealed most to him was Mácha's mindset which seemed to correspond to the revolutionary spirit of "Vormärz" (West) and which was at the same time assumed to embody the idea of Slavic cultural unity (East). Czech literature was perceived as a certain type of mediator. Last but not least, Mácha, who had been influenced by the Weimar Classics, and whom Jungmann encouraged to participate in the process of creating a Czech national identity, represents, also because of his own German poems, the conflict-riddled interdependence of Germans and Czechs coexisting in a bilingual situation. The current paper pursues the question of how the various German language 19th century re-creation of the text can be interpreted when viewed from the perspective of the Central European horizon of reception.

Generations of scholars have devoted attention to the greatest poet of Czech Romanticism. Their analyses can fill whole libraries. Could there, consequently, possibly be any unknown aspect of Mácha's work? In fact, there is one part of his work which has hardly been studied at all so far. I am referring to his early poems which he wrote in German. Alongside the well-known fact that his masterpiece *Máj* had at first been refused by his Czech contemporaries is probably the much lesser known fact that the lyrical-epic poem was primarily received enthusiastically by the German readers and that German was the target language into which *Máj* was by far most often translate. Therefore, the question arises, whether there is any connection between these facts. Why did the German critics engage themselves to such an extent with a work of Czech Romanticism whose comprehension presented great language-related

complications? Furthermore, at this time German Romanticism was already past its prime. What function did the German recipients attribute to the work?

In order to explain the language-related conditions, the paper will begin with biographical data, Mácha's German surroundings, and his German poems, followed by the changing Czech assessment of the author, which is closely related to the issue of language. The German reception of Mácha will be outlined on the basis of the translations of the poem in verses. The characteristics of his work will also be given attention. In the end, the main points of the reception will be summarized in the context of Central European literary history.

THE GERMAN CONNECTION

Karel Hynek Mácha was born in 1810 in Prague, Malá Strana (the Lesser Town), the son of a miller. While still in high school, which, in line with the whole education system, provided teaching solely in German (Bláhová, Petrbock 2004), Mácha began to write poetry. In 1829, his first book of poems was entitled *Versuche des Ignaz Mácha* (*The attempts of Ignaz Mácha*) (Mácha 1959: 283–325; Eisner 1956).

The collection contained German poetry which showed the influence of the so-called Weimar Classics. Even though scholars classify these texts as epigonic (Fischer 1926: 236; Králík 1961; Králík 1962), they enable us to come to interesting conclusions regarding Mácha's command of German. This is an example from 1829:

Glaube, Hoffnung, Liebe, Vertrauen [...]
Horch, wie in blauer Ferne
so froh die Töne zittern,
daß sie selbst alle Sterne
mit süßer Lust erschüttern.
Laßt uns der Stimme fröhnen, [sic!]
die zärtlich so kann tönen:
„Hoffe!“ [...] (Mácha 1959: 283)

The interferences with Czech are obvious. The imperfect rhyme which contains the central vowel *ü* and the front vowel *i* indicates Czech pronunciation of the diphthong *ü*. When looking at the semantic layer, the synesthetic metaphors (tones tremble in distant blue with sweet desire) markedly resemble the poets Novalis or Eichendorff (Overath 1987). Such images, nevertheless, had already become a convention at that period, but Mácha later deployed them innovatively in his Czech poem *Máj*. The rhythm is determined by trochee, which is employed especially in the accentuated rhyme position. In Czech literature, this was a widely-used metre. The reason for that was the prosodic quality of Czech which puts emphasis (word stress) on the first syllable. It makes this metre a very likely choice in a syllabotonic verse system. In German, which is a language with free word stress, this metre is perceived as falling or static. Here, the most natural metre would be an iamb (Frey 1996).

In German poems, Mácha most commonly used an iamb with a monosyllabic word in the beginning and a masculine rhyme at the end of the line. However, this type of metre can be achieved in German by employing the natural stress of disyllabic words. Thus, Mácha applies a principle which will later come to the foreground in an ingenious way in *Máj*. An example may be the poem *Columbus* with the content corresponding to the above.

Kolumbus

Wer steht dort an des Schiffes Rand,
sich seiner Größe stolz bewußt?
Er ist nach Westen hingewandt.
Dort scheint zu liegen seine Lust.
Man sieht's ihm an, daß ihn sein Geist
zum fernen Ziele wirbelnd reißt.
[...] (Mácha 1959: 296)

The German poems contain a whole set of conventional Romantic motifs such as: night, moon, grave, cemetery, death, wanderer, Bohemia, homeland, gypsy, distance, mountains, seas and lakes, castles, ruins, etc. Interestingly, Mácha toys with the semantic polysemy of Czech geographic names. An example of that is the poem *Die Trümmer*, which means rubble (“trosky” in Czech). At the same time, “Trosky” is a Czech name of a castle (Padevět 2010: 214–217), and this homonymy of the Czech word, which is a hidden pun in the German text, presents a Bohemism comprehensible only to those readers who understand both languages.

Die Trümmer

Es ziehen die Wolken, es brauset der See,
die Trümmer stehn ruhig in wolkiger Höh'.
Die Wolken verschwanden, die Sonne schien hell,
es glänzte so stille die silberne Well';
da löst aus den Trümmern vom wüsten Gestein
ein Steinchen sich ab, wohl leicht ist's und klein,
doch wie es sich stürzt über Felsen daher,
da wird es im Falle gar kräftig und schwer;
es rasselt so heiser und nimmer es ruht,
bis es sich stürzt in die spiegelnde Flut;
laut seufzte die Flut, es zittert der See,
die Trümmer stehn ruhig in wolkiger Höh'.
(Mácha 1959: 320; Králík 1961: 390; Králík 1962: 61)

Again we notice the typical imperfect relation of *ö* and *e* in the rhyme. Mácha employs a falling dactyl which is accompanied by a regular monosyllabic upbeat (theoretically

an amphibrachys). In this case, however, the metre already has a certain semantic use – just as later in *Máj*. Syntactic means (such as shortening of the lines, parallel sentence structure and an increase in monosyllabic words), accompanied by the growing speed of the rhythm in the 2nd part of the stanza, show the dialectics of the falling stone between passivity and dynamics. In this way an opposition is created – existing in a limited period of time – to the unchangeable static tranquillity of the repeated opening and closing line (“die Trümmer stehn ruhig in wolkiger Höh”). Thus, the poem itself becomes during its implementation a symbol of transience and can be considered a very successful example of semantic usage of prosodic means. (This poem was written later than the school verses.)

The defeat of the Polish uprising in 1831 and the fight for the Polish national idea had a huge influence over Mácha’s literary development. Another event, important for the evolvement of Mácha’s patriotism, was his meeting with Josef Jungmann, the most prominent advocate of the Czech language. Despite his German education, which was common among the middle-class, Mácha made a deliberate decision in favour of Czech during his law studies and started calling himself Karel Hynek Mácha. However, even in this time of his life, he used German not only as the official language but also in his private letters, even in his love letters addressed to Lori Šomková.

MILESTONES OF THE CZECH RECEPTION

Mácha published the rhymed epos *Máj* in 1836, a few weeks before his tragic early death; nevertheless, he was not very well known as a poet among his contemporaries. The first reviews disapproved of his magnum opus as unpatriotic (Vašák 2004: 70–72). His pessimism seemed to be detrimental to the national cause, despite the fact that otherwise any Czech work was embraced enthusiastically simply because it was Czech. It was only since the second half of the 19th century that Mácha began to be honoured as the most prolific representative of Czech Romanticism, whose work has its equal place in the world literary classics alongside Puškin or Mickiewicz.

The main reason for respect was, and still is, above all the virtuosity and innovativeness of his use of Czech. In 1858, in the almanac *Máj*, the younger generation of poets with Jan Neruda as the main figure intentionally referred to Mácha’s work written many years ago. Men of letters and artists began to make pilgrimages to Mácha’s grave in Litoměřice.

This kind of mystification of the poet as a tragic figure was surely boosted also by censorship. When the 600 copies of *Máj*, which Mácha had to self-publish, went out of stock, the poem circulated only as transcripts. The attempts to publish the whole work failed repeatedly. It was only 25 years after the poet’s death that the Czech readers gained easy access to the poem.

Nevertheless, it was on Mácha’s grave at the end of the 19th century that the national and political problems of the region unfolded (Křen 1998). On one hand, his admirers thought a new and more representative grave monument was necessary.

On the other hand, nationalists defaced the grave and added the inscription “mluvte česky” – speak Czech.

During the first decades of the 20th century, especially between Mácha’s 100th birthday and the 100th day of his death, there was a boom of his Czech reception. Mukařovský, Pražák and Jakobson wrote their academic analyses on Mácha’s work; at the same time, Mácha’s texts also gave new impulses to Czech surrealists.

However, it was with the Germans entering Sudetenland that he was rediscovered as a Czech national poet. In October 1938, Mácha’s corpse was exhumed and brought from Leitmeritz (Litoměřice) to Prague. In May 1939, already during the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, he was reburied in Vyšehrad, as a national symbol against Hitler’s Germany. Since no authentic portrayal of the poet exists, the re-burial was taken as an opportunity to have the skull analyzed by an anthropologist. The results of the reconstruction, though, do not seem to shed much light on the question of the poet’s looks; the idealized portraits, thus, continue to contribute to the mystification of the figure (Faktorová 2010: 80–123).

The polarizing evaluation of the work in the Czech context points to the complicated interdependence of Czech and German language and culture.

THE SPECIFICS OF *MÁJ*

Before coming to how German speakers received the work, the text itself and the challenges arising from translation should be examined.

The tale of 824 lines is rather banal and matches Mácha’s partiality to thrillers and nocturnal sceneries. The bandit chief Vilém has killed his rival and realizes afterwards that the seducer of his beloved Jarmila was his own father, who abandoned him long ago. On the eve of the first of May, Vilém is in prison, awaiting his cruel execution, and Jarmila, who waits for him in vain, drowns herself in the lake. In the last canto, the story is revealed as a flashback and the narrator, who visits the region after years of restless wanderings, is finally identified as the author, Hynek (Mácha 1959: 15–53).

The composition, though, is not defined by the drastic events, but by the contrast of the finite human fate to the cyclical regeneration of nature. The underlying themes are the search for meaning and the realization of human transience. Notwithstanding the fact that the literary sources – Byron, Mickiewicz, Goethe, Schiller and Novalis (Striedter 1963; Přibil 2009) – are unmistakable and that the recurrent rose metaphor comes from the third-class novel by Ernst Schulze, *Die bezauberte Rose* (Schulze 1818), the poem remains unique in its verbal virtuosity.

As early as in the first canto, the erotically charged nature full of desire and gloomy overtones forms an idyllic contrast to the triviality of the human existence. The formal aspect of the work has been analyzed in a congenial way by Mukařovský and in many other scholarly works (Mukařovský 1948). Repetitions, similarity of symbolic sounds, euphony, alliterations, semantics of the rhymes and an extraordinary musicality of the verse create a network of hints at various meanings, which have a very suggestive, even magic effect (for example: the repetition of the word “love” – láska

and “rose” – růže, also the vowels *a* and *u/ou*). The variety of possible meanings is created by the loosening of the relationship between a noun and the adjective which determines the noun. Often, this adjective changes into a noun (*šero hor* instead of *šeré hory*). Added to this are unusual metaphors, anthropomorphizations, and, above all, synesthetic images.

In this way, natural processes evoke the symbolic function of the world. For this reason, Mácha appears to draw on mystic scriptures or on Baroque literature. Mácha responds to the optimistic Czech patriotism of his contemporaries with nihilism (Čyževskij 1938). What is characteristic of *Máj* are paradoxical oxymora and chiasmi (zborné harfy ton – the tone of broken harp, ztrhané strůny zvuk – the sound of broken string).

The introductory poem paying homage to Czechs was, consequently, interpreted either as a parody of the nationalistic poetry of those days or as a concession to censorship. Mácha was the first who contrasted Classical genres and rigid metres in a virtuosic way with a rhythm marked by iambus. He created iambs with a great flexibility by utilizing monosyllabic unstressed words at the beginning of the line and masculine cadences in the rhyme position (Jakobson 1995; Červenka 1989). The metre is given a semantic quality, too. In positions which carry meaning, symbolized by falling, a trochee is used intentionally (Jakobson 1995: 445).

Because of its various interrelations, the main work of Czech Romanticism presents a text open in meaning; but as far as form is concerned, it is an artistic creation which draws only on itself.

From the main attributes of the work, we can deduce the challenges for translations: Translations should reach an equivalent aesthetic effect with appropriate means of the target language. This means keeping the musicality, usage of sounds, function of repetitions and openness of meaning.

THE GERMAN RESPONSE

In contrast with Czech critics, German-speaking circles, especially the Prague magazine *Ost und West* (Hofman 1957) and the magazine from Leipzig *Unser Planet*, received *Máj* immediately after its publishing in 1836 with enthusiasm (Krčma 1932; Vašák 2004). The reviewers praised the Romantic irony and the contrast between the representation of nature and feelings. They highlighted the linguistic beauty and the will to create a literary language. Implicitly, it was perceived as putting into effect the idea of Panslavic unity, which, in the revolutionary time of “Vormärz”, served as a model for German poets (Jähnichen 1967).

The first German-language translator (Polák 1936; Donath 1937, Nezdářil 1985: 89–108) was a Croat, Petar Preradovic. He translated *Máj* very soon after the author’s death (in 1836/1837). Even though this translation was not published, individual texts by Mácha appeared continuously in magazines (*Marinka*: 1839 in the periodical *Der Adler*, Vienna; 1841 Siegfried Kapper’s translation in the journal *Ost und West*, Prague). And then in 1844, in *Libussa*, a Prague German magazine, Siegfried Kapper

published the first complete translation of *Máj*, which was received with revolutionary verve.

Kapper (1820–1879), a Czech-German poet of Jewish origin writing both in German and in Czech, translator of Czech, Slovak and Serbian texts and author of scholarly papers on literature, was the most important mediator of Czech literature in German-speaking circles. In his translation of *Máj*, he allowed himself several liberties. He standardized the changing rhythm of the original to a 5-bar iamb, which is not marked in German, and thus evened out the original. Kapper also made the metaphors rich in allusions, hints and references more concrete in line with the ideology of German Romanticism. When Kapper translates “noční čas” as “Waldeinsamkeit” (Mácha 1844: 107), it is an intentional reference to the central Romantic neologism, which was for the first time used by Ludwig Tieck in 1797 in a poem of the same name.

Shortly after the release of the first Czech edition of Mácha’s work in 1861, Alfred Waldau published another translation of *Máj* in 1862 (Mácha 1862). Waldau (1837–1882), a writer and translator from Czech into German, who also popularized Hálek, Havlíček and Hanka among the German readership and published Czech fairytales, folk songs and texts on the history of Czech dances. In the preface to his translation, Waldau recognizes Mácha as one of the most important poets of Neo-Bohemian literature. At the same time, Waldau chides the German readers for being interested in Eskimo songs, but not knowing much about the literature of their closest neighbour, despite the fact that Bohemia forms a bridge between the East and West.

Waldau also very accurately noticed Mácha’s nihilism. Even though he made a philological analysis of the linguistic effect of the text, his translation shows a tendency toward a semantic reduction of the original and is predominantly based on Kapper’s work. This edition was important mainly because of the great number of Mácha’s other poems (59). Until the collected works were published in 2000 (Mácha 2000), this was the most important German publication of his lyrical work.

In 1882, yet another new translation (Mácha 1882) of the text was undertaken by the freethinker and journalist Karel Müller (1837–1892). He was born to a German family and published various journals in Pilsen and Prague. With the reinforcement of anti-Czech sentiments in the German press in the 1880s, Müller advocated, with his translations, the mediation of Czech literature. Even the new publications of the early 20th century drew upon his efforts. With regard to the phonetic side, he came close to the original. However, in places he differed in semantics because of extensive paraphrases.

It was not until fifty years later that another new translation of *Máj* was published. Neither the revival of Mácha reception, connected to his 100th birthday, nor Modernism with an emphasis on form, nor the Neo-Romanticism of the turn of the century led to a new German publication of *Máj*. From 1933 (Mácha 1933) to 1937, though, the military doctor Eduard Neumann published the text in four different versions. Neumann, a military doctor, poet and translator, was also the author of an elegy on Mácha’s death, which he wrote in German. Even though his translation captured the rhythmical structure of the original, he used the expressive contrast of sound and

semantics, which could not reach the level of openness of meaning found in the original Romantic text.

The two most significant translators of the modern era are Otto F. Babler and Walter Schamschula. Babler (1901–1984) came from Bosnia and later worked as a librarian and lector of Croatian in Olomouc. Altogether, he translated nearly 3500 works belonging to world literary classics into Croatian, German or Czech. Even though he had his translation of *Máj* completed in 1976, it was not published until 1983 in Germany, in a two-language edition (Mácha 1983). In the publication was also included the translation of Walter Schamschula, a professor of Czech studies. Both translations also appeared later in other editions (Mácha 2000, Mácha 2006). Schamschula, who taught Slavic studies at universities in Frankfurt am Main and Berkeley, California, accomplished one of his greatest scholarly achievements in the field of Czech studies in a three-volume history of Czech literature written in German.

Both of these translations emphasize, in contrast to the previous attempts, the timeless meaning of the text, but they also reveal the challenges the translator faces when trying to give a true picture of all the details and nuances. That is precisely why these two-language editions which are as close to the original text as can be expected from scholars, seem to refer to the original as unattainable.

Also Antonín Měšťan, a Czech studies scholar who used to work in Freiburg, had a philological aim in mind. In 1988, he published a glossary of *Máj* for students (Měšťan 1988). By gathering the complete vocabulary of the poem, and providing all German translations, he proved, though unintentionally, that the poem is not just an accumulation of words. At the same time, studies in history by Pavel Vašák gave the Czech audience important information on how the work was received early on by the German readership (Vašák 2004). On the German side, this topic was addressed notably by Manfred Jähnichen. And finally, in 2000, the first German edition of Mácha's collected works was issued, including the *Máj* translation by Babler.

Contrary to how positively the work was received in the 19th century, the German critics were not any more unified in their opinion. Some called Mácha the Czech Heinrich Heine and praised the historic value of the new edition. Others could not understand the significance of the author and even thought that the text was kitsch. (Brandt 2001)

Despite the fact that this shows certain ignorance, the modern opinions also clearly show the difficulties of diachronic reception. They refer to the insuperable obstacles which the phonetically and semantically extremely condensed original presents to an adequate translation. It seems to prove the inevitable failure of every translation attempt, as Pavel Eisner had remarked (Eisner 1938). At the same time, it was this impression of untranslatability, which presented a challenge to many translators. The extraordinary appeal of the text to the translators lay in its linguistic beauty, despite – or because of – the unprecedented virtuosity with which it arouses specifically from the system of the Czech language.

In the bilingual situation of the early 19th century, Mácha also embodies the historic interdependencies of both language-defined nations. The dual, dialectic

reception by Czech readers reflects the complicated relationship concerning the co-existence of Czechs and Germans. On both sides, the identification of language with a national idea played a role rooted in the political situation (Höhne, Ohme 2005) – it even gave rise to a new meaning compliant with German revolutionary aims. Another motivation, which can be presumed common among the translators of *Máj*, is an unusually strong identification with the craftsmanship and mindset of Mácha.

Today, the poem *Máj*, initially dismissed as unpatriotic, became the most often published Czech work of literature, and Mácha became a symbol of rebels and lovers. In this way, the text and how it was received can be taken also as an illustration of the changing history of Czech-German relations.

ASPECTS OF THE RECEPTION HISTORY OF *MÁJ* – SUMMARY

1. As a point of departure, we take the close relationship of Mácha to the German language and literature. Above all, the creative usage of German shows parallels to his later work written in Czech.
2. To this is connected the fact that his work is rooted in the Czech language and that he used Czech verse in an extremely innovative way which remains effective even today.
3. Still in the context of the period of publication, various positive updates of the Czech text in German context appeared. In the Vormärz period, the text was received and re-interpreted as Panslavic, in which way the integration of Mácha into the revolutionary-nationalistic German literary development should take place. Czech literature was perceived as a bridge between the East and West.
4. At the same time, it was the lack of a nationalist paradigm, a factor determined by the era, which made the Czech critics dismiss the work.
5. The later re-evaluation of *Máj* in the Czech context took place on the background of a change in the aesthetic paradigm and went hand in hand with the mystification of the author. This process led, in its unscientific form, to the 20th century reinterpretation in a nationalistic and explicitly anti-German way.
6. Finally, the period of objective research of the early German reception through Czech literary scholars began.
7. On the German side, it was paralleled by a philological translation – an offer to the German readership to rediscover the author.

It is interesting that the Czech-German history of how *Máj* was received always resulted in opposing updates of the text. And these later updates had an influence over the reception in the ever-changing context.

The example of Mácha shows how important it is to broaden the scope of national literary history and how important it is to leave room for a literary history which transcends historic borders between the East and West. Such a history could be described as Central European.

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