

Sešity Josefíny Rykrové: The Poet as Reader

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In 1981, Milada Součková released the first two notebooks of poems assembled under the title of *Sešity Josefíny Rykrové*¹. The extant cycle of six notebooks augmented by nineteen poems dated from 1982, with an autobiographical appendix in prose, was published in Prague, ten years after the author's death.² The emerging design and the cumulative effect of the individual entries confirm my reading of the incomplete edition, of a poet pausing near the summit of her artistic quest, looking back at the long ascent and patiently revising her literary legacy.

To encompass this panoramic vision of her past, Součková has crafted a new, hybrid form that mixes poetry and prose in a mutual exchange of attributes. The autobiographical fragments of fact and fiction, like crystals flowing between twin communicating vessels, dissolve into each other in that free passage. The speaker, moving in and out of her chosen persona, gazes at the patina of things and places she has lived in, searching for the impenetrable present in the labyrinth of memory.

The question of memory is addressed in the essay, *Vlastní životopis Josefíny Rykrové*, that forms the prose pendant to the poems. It begins „První vzpomínka“, tak se vždy začíná.“³ - evoking the initial sentence of Součková's first published text, in an echo whereby the speaker repossesses her literary past in the name of her present persona. No less significantly, the implied linkage of „vzpomínka“ with „písmena“, identifies the act of remembering with the written word.

The speaker proceeds: „Dívám se na plynovou punčošku. Vidím její strukturu, možná že je to, asi, snad, obraz pozdější doby, protože ta představa souvisí s obrazem punčošky, která se rozsypává, a ten vjem je možný pouze jindy, později, protože v ten okamžik, na který »vzpomínám«, svítí, není rozsypána v křídlové běli v denním světle.“ The journey into the labyrinth of memory hinges on the repeated assertion of the power of sight, uttered with

¹ Milada Součková, *Sešity Josefíny Rykrové*, (Sixty-Eight Publishers), Toronto, Canada, 1981.

² Milada Součková, *Sešity Josefíny Rykrové*, (Prostor), Praha, 1993. I quote from this edition.

³ *Vlastní životopis Josefíny Rykrové*, pp. 200-212, in: *Sešity Josefíny Rykrové*, (Op. Cit.). I quote from the first paragraph. See also Milada Součková, *První písmena* (1934), in: *Dílo Milady Součkové. Svazek 1*, Praha 1995, p. 7: „INICIÁLA první velké písmeno A, začátek má být rádný odhadlaný.“

the authority of the first person singular. But, despite the intensifying progression from „divám“ to „vidím“, the act of seeing is instantly overtaken by doubt. The moment of memory recedes, as the speaker begins an analytical search for the lost moment of immediacy, moving in from the outside to the multiple visual takes stored in her mind. Gradually, with painstaking slowness, an enlarged, more detailed picture emerges to view: „Nevidím nic než punčošku a postavu (dvě?) u mých nohou. Osvětlení jako bývá v impresionistických interiérech, žlutavě hnědé.“

In her notes on memory, which also serve as a guide to the poems, the speaker links her literary quest and her life-long engagement with the Proustian theme. While she acknowledges Proust in numerous references and quotations throughout this volume, she suggests that her obsession with the recovery of lost time predates her reading of his work.⁴ And, in truth, her memory, anchored in the cognitive function of sight, works differently from his. Rarely does it recall the past in a instant of revelation, on the wing of a sensation, a taste in the mouth, whose evocative power matches the intensity of its emotional aura. In Rykrová's memory, the moment past or present (does it really matter?), can only be accessed, never fully disclosed, by an inquisitive mind detecting the hidden associations between things and people, in the quick of the random intersections of time and space. As she puts it: „Vzpomínka zakotvené paměti není nikdy jednoznačná, je vytvořena z mnoha výběravých zážitků.“⁵

The multilayered image of the vanishing moment gains in coherence what it lacks in immediacy. Like any system of signs, a text or a painting, it can be read repeatedly. And with each act of reading, new associations gravitate towards the image's aura, drawn by „the combinational force of memory“⁶. Thus the chalky whiteness of a gas jet, seen from the horizontal position of a baby being swaddled on a table, can be retouched in yellowish brown to illuminate the room in the manner of an impressionistic painting.

⁴ In the Recitativo passage of the poem „Tudy prošel...“, in: Sešit 2, she writes: „Anna's bachelor uncle lived in one of the wings of the courtyard into which opened the apartment of the janitor Sitar; later, in retrospect, Josephine associated its location with that of Jupien. Was that because it was closest to the situs as it was described by Proust? It was among the books of Anna's mother that Josephine saw the volumes of *A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs* for the first time. After World War I she recognized them in the window of a bookshop in Monte Carlo.“ (p. 55)

For quotations from Proust, see U fotografia, Comments, p. 13 and Erga kai hemerai, Comments, p. 49.

⁵ Otázka paměti, in: Vlastní životopis Josefiny Rykrové (Op. Cit.) p. 203.

⁶ Ibid., the section Kombinační síla paměti, pp. 206-208

Milan Kundera has observed that our memories come in stills like photographs, rather than in the moving real of a film⁷. In one of the most striking poems of *Sešity, Dětská podobizna*⁸, the portrait of Josefinka holding a doll was painted from a photograph. The child's eyes, which have taken in death in the image of her grandmother's burial slab (white veined marble topped by gum flowers) gaze on the grown-ups with the solemn equanimity of a Velasquez Infanta. The posture of the child as „a spectator in a *theatrum mundi*“ is the objectified analogue of memory as analyzed by the grown woman, who writes: „Pamatuj se, že jsem byla obklopena lidmi a věcmi.“ Her⁹ memory attaches to man made things, a kitchen table or a door, to cultural artifacts styled by historical time, like a bouquet à la Makart¹⁰ tucked behind a mirror. The realm of feelings („citové vztahy“) remains outside the purview, except in the objectified state of the world as „non ego“¹¹, the outer image of people as they appear.

And yet, the essayist ensconces love in the fable of memory she contrives from an old myth. Theseus could emerge alive from the labyrinth of memory because he was a god and because Ariadne, who loved him, gave him the thread. Ariadne herself, once Theseus abandoned her, surrendered to Dionysos, in whose embrace all memories are abolished.¹²

The Apollonian task of making images out of vanished moments is a labor of love after all. Note the name under which the cycle was conceived and written. In the persona of Josefina Rykrová, the woman I knew as Milena has fused the Christian name of her grandmother, Josefina Horová, with the surname of her husband Zdeněk Rykr. In that layered sign are rooted some of the motifs out of which the text of the cycle is patterned. The grandmother had held the infant Josefinka at the baptismal fount. She combines the solemnity

⁷ „Rubens découvrait une chose assez curieuse: la mémoire ne filme pas, la mémoire photographie.“, p. 375, Ch. 17, Sixième Partie, *Le cadran* in: *L'Immortalité* (Gallimard), Paris, 1990.

⁸ Sešit 1, pp. 31-32. See also the English translation by Ron D. K. Banerjee in: *Metamorphoses*, Vol. 7, No. 2, 1999, p. 65.

⁹ The exact quotation reads „Pamatuje se...“ Here, the speaker has stepped out of her persona and refers to herself in the third person, (Op. Cit.) p. 285.

¹⁰ See the poem, *Makart Bukett*, in: Sešit 1, p. 16.

¹¹ „To vše byl svět »non ego«, kategorie lidí, vnější obraz, jak se jeví.“ (Op. Cit.) p. 212.

¹² „Freud má pravdu, první vzpomínky - nejsou vzpomínky, ale signály v labyrintu paměti, kde všichni hrdinové zabloudili, jen Theseus unikl, protože byl bůh a protože ho Ariadné milovala...“ (Op. Cit.) p. 204 and later, on p. 206: „V řeckém mytu to bylo klubko Ariadny a její osud rozřešil Dionysos svou bezprostředností. Pro Ariadnu skončily útrapy lásky, na skále tvář tvář širému moři, a začala žít bez hrozby labyrintu.“

of death and baptism, salted with the comedic vigor of Czech speech, in her prophetic words: „To dítě pro rozum nevyroste.“¹³ The memory of Zdeněk Rykr¹⁴, an inventive painter and intellectual, is honored in the many references to paintings and drawings, and in the painterly crafting of many of the poems.

In the lead poem, *Po přeslici v nebeklíči*¹⁵, personal memory extends into family lore, reaching back to Burdová, the poet's maternal great-grandmother. She had figured in *Odkaz* and *Zakladatelé* (1940), a novelistic diptych built around scenes from the history of the rising Czech bourgeoisie. Here, that theme is encapsulated in the symbolic shorthand of the Latin subtitle, „Emblematum familiae“, blazoning the speaker's spiritual genealogy. The date of the inscription 1974, in Latin letters, with the A.D. of the Christian era, frames Burdová and her worldly fortunes inside sacred time.

That year corresponds to Milena's teaching stint at Berkeley, when she might have visited one of the Mission churches dating back to the Spanish settlements in California. By initialing the inscription (M.S. inscribit), she gives a clue at the entrance to the labyrinth of memory. Inside, the name Fra Junipero, read on the tombstone of a mission graveyard, is interchangeable with Bratr Norbert, a native of Milevsko.

The narrative potential of the poem hinges on the fiction of Norbert, the only son of Burdová's friend and rival Zelenková, writing to his mother from his far away mission. In the autobiographical subtext, his letters serve as a bridge between California, the western limit of M.S.'s exile and her ancestral home. The linkage in space parallels the leap in time, suggested in the *Recitativo*, which „ties the story of Josephine in with the Cross found by St. Helena“. The material basis of this tenuous association is the gilded monstrance containing a splinter of the Holy Cross, which the worthy Burda, carpenter and Mayor of Milevsko, received as a reward for carving the pews for the Church of the Praemonstratene monastery. The authenticity of the relic is discussed in a parodic vein, bringing the pedantry of archival research down to the playful mingling of fact and fiction within the narrative.

In counterpoint, a graver note - „vanitas, v kostele, marnosti!“ - resonates in the vastness of imagined space and time. The Baroque motif of ostentation stalked by memento mori, first overheard in Burdová's sotto voce censure of

¹³ See (Op. Cit.) p. 203, where the grandmother's saying („výrok“) is quoted from family memory.

¹⁴ He is named in the Comments to the poem *Márinka v exteriéru*, p. 14: „Z. Rykr said about Josephine's mother: look into her chest of drawers, and you would say: an actress!“

¹⁵ SeSít 1, pp. 9-10.

Zelenková's gloating over Norbert, encompasses her, too, in the *Recitativo*. From there, it echoes down into the subtext, where I imagine Milena reading the modest gravestone of a long forgotten monk in the shimmering luminosity of a Californian day. In my mind, the visual detail of Burdová's hands, grown brown with the peels of almonds she has kneaded into the dough of her Easter bochánky, is a sign that connects her image with the dark skinned faithful for whom the Mission was built.

The formal composition of the lead entry, which sets the tone for the cycle, is equally characteristic. A poem made up of a fragmented narrative that holds together visually as a single image is followed by a prose passage, often titled *Recitativo* or alternately in English - Comments, Margins, Quotations. The relation between poetry and prose varies with each composition. Like a *Recitativo* following an operatic aria, the prose passage may advance the narrative line, deliberately scrambled by the twists and turns of the poetic diction. This was one of the functions of the story of Burdová's relic. But more often than not, the added commentary with its own host of factual and fictional associations, is a mystifying device, complicating rather than clarifying the riddle of the text. Similarly, the quotations from other writers, obscure or renowned, expand the imaginative aura of the prime characters and the situations encapsulated in the narrative image.

Out of all the literary allusions in *Sešity*, ranging from simple references and citations to more complex intertextual play, I shall focus on Claudel. He is an emblematic presence, both alter-ego and anti-self of the speaker, who ingeniously weaves him in. The import of Claudel, for all its singularity, illuminates the reciprocity between the acts of reading and writing in Součková's poetry.

Paul Claudel (1868-1955), poet, dramatist and essayist, was born in a bourgeois family of high culture, in a village in Aisne, where his granduncle was parish priest. His genealogy and career as man of letters and diplomat parallel Milada Součková's, albeit in a more triumphant version. Unlike her, Claudel was never an exile and died in his own country. The historical conditioning of their contrasting fortunes was surely appreciated by her, in the spirit with which she addressed Czech speech, in the 22nd verse of *Kaladý* (1938): „Věřím, že jste neústupná, jako je neústupné vše určené, aby žilo. Věřím, že se vyrovnáte svým sestrám šťastnějších osudů. Kolikrát jsem se spolu podivovali jejich nádheře a vznešenosti.“¹⁶

¹⁶ I cite from the original limited edition of the poem, *Kaladý aneb útočiště řeči*, illustrated by Zdeněk Rykr, which is preserved in the Houghton Library of Harvard University. For the

Splendor and nobility are two attributes that describe the quality of Claudel's poetic diction. Whether heard in the lyrical rhetoric of his cantatas and odes, or in dramatic dialogue on the stage, his voice is forever linked to his experience in the church of Notre Dame in Paris, on December 1886. In *Ma conversion* (1913), he describes the shock of this sudden return of faith, long asleep under the heavy overlay of intellectual culture, „tel un soulèvement de tout mon être“¹⁷.

As regards poetic voice and diction, Claudel represents the extreme pole of Součková's artistic anti-self. But I would argue that Josefina Rykrová, the experiencing self created by the speaker of *Sesíty*, defines herself by the quest for that elusive unity between faith and poetry, which she found fulfilled in Claudel, her ideal alter-ego as a Christian writer.

My reading starts with the poem „Někdy koncem ledna“¹⁸. The location is Prague; it is noon in the church of Panna Marie Vítězná; and the occasion Josefinka's baptism on January 24, 1899. But not yet. Let's pause to note how the melting snow holds on to the edge of the sidewalk, „oběma rukama“, like a woman cradling an infant, see how she is being carried up the steps, but first take in the flash of gold from the cross and the globe in the sky above the city -these are signs - observe the stranger caught up in the commotion of three women with the infant on the steps, „ve zmatku cizí řeči“, he hears their excitement, it is Paul Claudel accompanied by his interpreter Jiránek.

The *Recitativo* fills in the official record of the event. „Baptizata est Milada, Marie, Josefa, Božena, Domini Antonín Souček et Dominae Mariae Hora legitima filia. Patrinæ: Domina Josephine Hora, Domina Marie Milde, Domina Božena Hora.“ But in the poem, the baptism described in the lines, „V Bostonu sůl sněhu slzí / nad křtitelnici doteck soli / na čele, na rtech, zakřičí / dojetím kmotry zaslzí“, occurs on a different stage. Another infant is being purged of the salt of human sin in the life giving water („Jak krásné jsou vody v zátočině v kamenech vyhloubené křtitelnice!“¹⁹). The generic quality of the

English translation, see Ron D. K. Banerjee, in *Metamorphoses*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 1995, pp. 119-123.

¹⁷ „J'étais moi-même debout dans la foule, près du second pilier à l'entrée du chœur à droite du côté de la sacristie. Et c'est alors que se produisit l'événement qui domine toute ma vie. En un instant mon cœur fut touché et je crus. Je crus, d'une telle force d'adhésion, d'un tel soulèvement de tout mon être, d'une conviction si puissante, d'une telle certitude ne laissant place à aucune espèce de doute, que, depuis, tous les livres, tous les raisonnements, tous les hasards d'une vie agitée, n'ont pu ébranler ma foi...“. I quote from Paul Claudel par lui-même, (Editions du seuil) Paris, 1963, p. 26.

¹⁸ *Sesíty* I, pp. 14-15.

¹⁹ *Kombinační síla paměti*, (Op. Cit.) p. 207.

sacrament of spiritual rebirth („v nádheře a lidské důstojnosti“²⁰) is further heightened by the quotation from Claudel in the opening lines of the *Recitativo*: „Baptême. 1868. St. Sulpice. Je suis né dans un très vieux village de l’Île-de-France.“²¹ Prague, Boston, Paris, three superimposed places, three separate chronological reels, all lead back to the single instant of sacred time, which the ritual commemorates.

Here, I turn to the passage in the autobiographical essay where the speaker explains that, lacking all memory of her own baptism, she always identified it with what she heard from her mother about the baby brother („bratr nikdy nespatřený“²²), who died shortly after his birth, but baptised. This information suggests that the narrative image in „Někdy koncem ledna“, with its visual details, is a composite of fact and fiction.

The encounter between Claudel and the three godmothers on the steps of a Prague church is purely imaginary. In fact, Paul Claudel was acting consul of France in Boston from 1893 to 1895 and served the year of 1899 in China, excepting for a Christmas visit to Bethlehem. From 1909 to 1911 he was posted in Prague, where his daughter Reine was born and²³, perhaps, baptised.

The scrambling of the time and space coordinates of Claudel’s biography is a chosen device, pointing somewhere beyond the discordance of fact and fiction.²⁴ In the *Recitativo*, the speaker associates Claudel with that strategy, by quoting his saying: „La biographie n’explique pas grand-chose. Elle ne peut que confirmer ce que l’œuvre porte à un degré supérieur d’évidence.“²⁵

Chronology has little hold over the poet-reader, who views her own past through the prism of combinational memory. Lacking a mooring in time, the imaginary encounter with Claudel is nevertheless anchored in the real place,

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Kristián Suda, in Ediční poznámka to the 1993 edition of Sešity (Op. Cit.), p. 232, notes that in this volume, the quotations from other authors are often transcribed from memory, in indirect paraphrase. I assume this to be the case with this quotation from Claudel, which I am unable to pin point exactly. It may be a composite from two texts, possibly *Mon pays* (1913) and *Art poétique* (1936).

²² Kombináční síla paměti, (Op. Cit.) p. 205. And, cont. on. p. 206: „Tenkrát (zdá se) Josefina ztotožňovala bratrův křest s vlastním, logicky i podle vyprávění matčina. Z vlastního křestu jsem viděla (po matčině smrti) povíjan, nádherný, který ani po desetiletích neztratil krásu bruselských krajek a růžového grogenu.“

²³ See Chronology, pp. 146-171), in *Paul Claudel par lui-même*, (Op. Cit.).

²⁴ In Rodoznaky, one of the poems from the year 1982, she appears to hint at this in the lines: „Jiránek s Claudelem / u Panny Marie Vítězné / Dítě v hedvábi / vyšperkováné. / Čemu se divíte?“ (Sešity, p. 180).

²⁵ See my Note 21.

where the historian might still find the archival record of Josefinka's baptism. „Claudel nebyl ani první, ani poslední, kdo tudy prošel,“ she says in the essay. „Minuli jsme se také v Bostonu. Marně jsem hledala, pomůže-li mně z labyrintu.“²⁶

The church of Panna Marie Vítězná in Karmelitská Street has the distinction of being the first Baroque building in Prague. Erected in 1611-13 by German Lutherans, it was converted by Carmelite monks and rebuilt in the style of the victorious Counter Reformation between 1636-44.²⁷ It houses the statue of Pražské Jezulátko, a gift of Polyxena z Lobkovic, which is its claim to international fame.

In a pamphlet from Paris published in May 1938, Claudel, speaking as a Catholic poet, pleads with the Polish people to protest against their government's opportunistic grab of Těšín. „Car Prague n'est pas seulement la cité de Jean Huss,“ he argues, „elle est celle de Jean Nepomucène et de saint Wenceslas, celle qui couvre de son ombre la cathédrale de Hradschin. Et elle est surtout celle de l'Enfant Jésus.“²⁸

I cannot vouch if or when Milena read this plea, penned several months before her *Kaladý* ode. She may have noted it retrospectively, in the 1970s, while researching her book, *The Baroque in Bohemia*²⁹. By that time, our contacts had become sporadic.

In the period between 1957 and 1974, I used to visit Milena in the one room apartment on the ground floor of the yellow New England frame house at 1727 Cambridge Street, which now houses the administration of the Harvard Russian Research Center. There was always a page in progress on her typewriter, as we drank tea and talked about literature. I can still hear her voice, in Czech, paraphrasing a line from a scene of Claudel's drama, *Le soulier de Satin* (1923). Before leaving the convent of her childhood for the world, Dona Prouhèze places her shoe in front of the statue of the Virgin Mother and says: „Mais quand j'essayerai de m'élançer vers le mal, que ce soit avec un pied boiteux!“³⁰ I remember that Milena, quoting from memory, used the expression „k hříchu“.

²⁶ Kombinační sila paměti, (Op. Cit.) p. 207.

²⁷ See Miloslav Jenšík, *Toulky Prahou*, (Práce) Praha, 1973, p. 46.

²⁸ „L'Enfant Jesus de Prague“, pp. 385-388, *Contacts et circonstances*, (Vol. 16) Oeuvres Complètes, (Gallimard) Paris, 1959.

²⁹ Milada Součková, *Baroque in Bohemia*, with a Postscript by Roman Jakobson, University of Michigan Press, 1980.

³⁰ Paul Claudel, *Le soulier de satin*, (Gallimard) Paris, 1968, Première journée, p. 49.

In Claudel's drama, Dona Prouheze projects the image of the human soul struggling between the desire to possess the goods of this world with the senses and the supernatural imperative of renunciation. Her inner conflict is played out on a global stage in four „days“ which correspond to the four corners of the expanding space of 17th century Christendom. The opening scene of third day is set in Bohemia, inside the Church of St. Nicholas in Malá Strana, on a winter day in the cruel aftermath of Bilá Hora. Before ascending to his pedestal in one of the four loggias of the temple, St. Boniface, who argues the Providential meaning of the Catholic victory, characterizes the Czech people as „une grande réserve au centre de l'Europe, semi-fluide, une négation confirmatrice“³¹.

In the 1970s, while working on the book that documents the popular roots („fermentation profonde“³²) of the Czech Baroque, as well as its high culture, Milena may have recalled St. Boniface's paradox. The setting of the poem, „Někdy koncem ledna“, a winter day in Prague at the entrance to a Baroque church, resonates to Claudel's scene. But the material evidence of intertextuality is tucked inside this sentence of the *Recitativo*: „At the christening Josefine was swaddled in bands of Brussels lace and pink grosgrain.“ (They were in her possession until 1946.)

The swaddling bands of Josefinka's baptism, in which she was released from the bondage of original sin, can be read as a variation on the motif of „le soulier de satin“. The *Recitativo* hints at it by referring to an earlier poem, („Cf. Baptisterium. Případ poezie.“), set inside the Church of Panna Marie Vítězná. Here it is nightfall („večer lednovy“³³) and the gesticulating saints in niches point at sins lurking in corners. The votive spot at the feet of the Virgin Mother is empty. Meanwhile, on a brightly lit terrace, (U Mánesa?) flits the shade of a woman dancing, shod in silk slippers („botičky ještě z hedvábí“).

Dana Prouhèze's gesture at the start of her worldly journey signified a vow of fealty to the spiritual imperative of renunciation, coupled with an admission of her creaturely frailty. The transference of the votive offering to the feet of the impenitent dancer denies the first half of that meaning. In the definitive version of Josefinka's baptism, the silk slippers are only seen in pentimento, like an outline of a shape concealed under a layer of fresh paint. In the poem itself, the motif is overwritten by the image of the swaddling bands, („povijan“)

³¹ Ibid., Troisième journee, p. 231.

³² Ibid.

³³ Milada Součková, Případ poezie, Řím, 1971, pp. 73-74.

which the speaker had preserved as a talisman of primal innocence until the mid-point of her worldly journey.

The grace of baptism, unlike Dionysos' gift to Ariadne, does not obliterate individual memory. Along with her name and the rich family legacy handed down by her godmothers-Parcae, Josefinka was granted the boon of imaginative remembrance. Nearing the end of her course, she has recollected her past in a volume of poetry and prose, where memory shades human forms and objects in the chiaroscuro of Dichtung and Wahrheit.

I propose that the writing of these notebooks implies a concealed votive gesture of gratitude and atonement, offered in the conviction that „literature means essentially the integrity of one's life“³⁴.

Résumé:

Autorka ve své eseji analyzuje motivy, které v knize Milady Součkové *Sešity Josefíny Rykrové* působí jako evokace paměti lyrického subjektu v díle. M. Němcová-Banerjee uplatňuje ve své práci metodu komparativní a srovnává analyzovaný text s tvorbou Proustovou či Claudelovou. Dokazuje zde, že nejpůvodnější motivací anebo zabírání labyrintu paměti je hledání integrity a identity konkrétní lidské existence.

³⁴ „I understood early, though only vaguely, that literature means essentially the integrity of one's life.“ See Comments to the poem *Podobizny* (1914), in Sešit 2, p. 66.