What is the Proper Peasant to Do? Changes in Perspective on Cultivating Land in Czech Ruralism

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Abstract: The paper focuses on cultural changes that the depiction of land cultivation in Czech ruralism literature (authors like Josef Knap, František Křelina, Václav Prokůpek, etc.) goes through in Modernism. It refers to the impact of political discourse and the influence of media – especially newspapers – at the time. The analysis points to the relevance of how traditionalist literature discourse incorporates modern approaches to agriculture and new modes of representation of the countryside.
Keywords: Czech literature, ruralism, Modernism, agriculture, newspaper.

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At the beginning of the 20th Century, the Czech lands were still part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. As far as industry is concerned, they were the most developed regions of the Monarchy, and yet the percentage of inhabitants who were (at least to some extent) making their living by agricultural labour was relatively high. It was exactly these inhabitants who were targeted by a new political party called Česká agrární strana (Czech Agrarian Party), established on 6th January 1899. This party was continuing the work that had been already started earlier by some politicians oriented towards the topics and problems of land and agriculture (mainly from the Young Czech Party, officially named as National Liberal Party). It was also developing the agenda of Českomoravský selský spolek pro Moravu a Slezsko (Bohemia-Moravian Agrarian Society pro Moravia and Silesia). Up until the proclamation of the independence of Czechoslovakia the influence of the Czech Agrarian Party had been steadily rising and between the years 1918 and 1938 it counted among the strongest party of the newly established.[1] During the whole interwar period, it was a government party, its representatives were repeatedly holding important ministry posts (ministries of interior and defence, among others).

Within the spectrum of Czech politics, Agrarian Party represented a conservative attitude. Its political program had its roots in agrarianism that sees agriculture as the fundamental basis not only for the life and well-being of an individual and his or her family but, even more importantly, as the basis of a healthy society and nation. Advocating the interests of inhabitants involved in agriculture lead to a logical concentration on the sphere of economic politics, strengthening the protection of domestic agricultural production and supporting potential export opportunities. From this point of view, the most important success of Agrarian Party remains the political enforcement of the land reform in the years 1919 and 1920. Consequently, the reform strengthened the status of small and medium farmers at the expense of the biggest farmers and landowners. Agrarian Party has referred to its own function within the young republic as "state-forming" and it really contributed to the development of the Czechoslovakian Republic in an important manner. Apart from reinvigorating the social and existential position of peasants the party (in fulfilling its goal of "national good"[2]) also attempted at addressing the problem of a multinational

state. Yet the attitudes towards this problem were, as in the whole interwar Czechoslovak politics, largely Czech (Slovak)-centred. The Agrarian Party was also supporting education: the popular pedagogical organisation Svobodné učení selské (The Free Agrarian Education) has to be mentioned in this context. It also advocated cultural development in the villages: it was recommending the titles of books to appear in village libraries; it was running courses for amateur theatre actors or local chroniclers. The party was also well aware of the role of modern media, especially the press (the central newspaper of the party was called *Venkov* [The Country] and the party was also publishing the magazine *Brázda* [The Furrow]. Newspapers and books were seen as substantial in forming public opinion, introducing new innovative was of agriculture, and communicating with the supporters and potential voters.[3] Antonín Matula was a key figure in the party publicity activities and he also instigated the new literary orientation that is called ruralism.

Antonín Matula: Merging Agrarianism and Ruralism

Antonín Matula (1885-1953) was a writer, teacher, and cultural worker,[4] who was interested in the specifics of country life for a fairly long time (his parents were owning a farmstead; his father was a mayor of village Drnholec).[5] As soon as 1907 Matula became active in Sdružení venkovských akademiků (Association of Country Academics), which was cooperating tightly with the Agrarian Party. The cooperation of Matula and the Agrarian Party is reflected in his activities there, as he became the member of the party as soon as 1904. In his people educational activities and ideas Matula were most importantly influenced by the philosophy of Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk (namely by his treatise *Česká otázka* [The Czech Question]) and also by positivism. Regarding his educational purposes, he was using a popular voice or style in his writing.[6] Already in 1912 Matula published a short essay *České otázky a agrarismus* [Czech Questions and Agrarianism] which tried to introduce the bases of practical philosophy for the country.[7] After the establishment of the Czechoslovak Republic, Matula saw popular education as a necessary means for the healthy development of the new state. He hoped that this type of education could reduce social difference and injustice, at the same time supporting the development of democracy and civil society.[8] According to Matula "popular education provides general knowledge, life orientation, and encourages and inspires self-education and self-improvement. It forms moral and life values, touches human emotions, human will, reason, and conscience."[9] In the year 1919 Matula cooperated in establishing Selská akademie svobody (Peasant Academy of Freedom), later renamed Svobodné učení selské (Free Peasant Education), which for him represented "the school of the peasantry and Czechoslovak democracy."[10] The education within the organization should have been providing both general education in the humanities and introduced new findings from the field of agriculture. Free Peasant Education was founded on agrarian philosophy and different ideas and conceptions of Matula. The courses offered were undertaken by tens of thousands country youths.[11]

Thanks to Matula's involvement many contemporary writers held speeches or lectures at Free Peasant Education, for example, Alois Mrštík, Karel Václav Rais, Josef Holeček, and Gabriela Preissová. These authors devoted their literary work to different topics related to country and village life. Josef Holeček employed these thematics most prominently and his novel series *Naši* [Family] (1898-1922) was often mentioned and endorsed by ruralist authors.[12] Holeček also wrote an essay called *Selství* [Peasantry] (1928), which, as Drahomír Jančík pointed out, is actually a rather rigid repetition of the political program of Czech Agrarian Party from 1903. It stresses peasantry as forming the foundation of a nation, showing a natural understanding of civil virtues, love for nature and countryside, devoting their lives the care for a soil, being modest and other exquisite qualities.[13]

Antonín Matula was also active as a writer, he wrote novels *V začarovaném kruhu* [Within an Enchanted Circle] (1917), *Ohnivý vítr* [Flaming Wind] (1920, changed version 1942), *Tělo, svět, ďábel* [Body, World, Devil] (1930), and *Stráž* [Guard] (1935). Apart from writing novelistic prose, he was actively contributing articles for the agrarian newspapers *Venkov* [Country] and the magazine *Brázda* [Furrow]. It was especially thanks to his *Brázda* articles that he became connected to a group of younger writers, who will later form the core of the ruralist literary group.

Ruralism: from *Časopis agrárního studenstva* [Magazine of the Agrarian Studentship], through *Sever a Východ* [North and East], to the Edition *Hlasy země* [Land Voices]

In the late 1920s the postwar agrarian writer generation is gaining its prominence. It introduced its work in 1926 in the first number of the magazine *Časopis agrárního studentstva* [Magazine of the Agrarian Studentship]. The whole generation sought continuity with the traditional conception of the peasantry, yet it tried to make it more modern to keep it in touch with the changes within society and new scientific discoveries in the relevant fields.[14] In the above mentioned magazine the writers attempted "to utilise the artistic word in their depiction of the country and through a scientific method to comprehend it [...] and transform into a better form."[15] Writers, who later became prominent ruralist authors, had also been active in the magazine, especially Josef Knap (1900-1973), František Křelina (1903-1976), and Václav Prokůpek (1902-1974). After the *Časopis agrárního studenstva* [Magazine of the Agrarian Studentship] ceased to exist, the authors just mentioned ventured to establish their own magazine, which they published tin the years 1925-1930. They called it *Sever a Východ* [North and East], the reason being, among other factors, that they wanted to orient themselves towards Scandinavian and East European literatures.[16] Needless to say the "north and east" belonged to the areas with a strong agrarian focus, which was supported in Scandinavia by influential agrarian politics.

As far as politics is concerned, apart from the Agrarian Party the Czech ruralists were also really close to ideas represented by the Catholics. Jaroslav Med delineated their ideological position in his book *Literární život ve stínu Mnichova* [Literary Life in the Munich Shadow] (2011): "The most basic ruralist ideological constant still consisted of the celebration of the peasantry as the only firm foundation of Czech nationality, necessarily connected with catholicity as the guarantee of morality and order."[17] The ruralists themselves defined ruralism as a return "to the roots of the peasantry to find beauty, truth and renaissance: from the roots to a strong nation."[18] The repertoire of most important ruralist motives consisted of the relationship to the mother soil, feeling of family solidarity (while "family" was also understood in the broader sense of a village and nation), and the accent on territorial and language identity.

Ruralism as a literary movement was founded in 1932 – the impetus coming from Antonín Matula, who tried to present ruralism as a well-established group of authors. Antonín Matula was also active in starting the edition *Hlasy země* [Land Voices] in 1935. The edition was part of a press concern of the Agrarian Party. During the 1930s ruralists published two anthologies: *Básníci selství* [Poets of Peasantry] (1932) and *Tváří k vesnici* [Vis-a-vis Peasant Life] (1936). Despite Matula's attempts at formulating a ruralist programme of a philosophical kind, the group of ruralist authors remained a relatively independent association. Their "philosophy" could be deduced implicitly from their work and civil stance rather than from any theoretical manifestos.[19]

Ways of depicting land cultivation in Czech Ruralism

Despite the fact that ruralist authors (namely Josef Knap, František Křelina, and Václav Prokůpek) were in line with the ideas of the Ruralist Party about the role and forms of the peasantry, a particular development in the views of what is the "proper" peasant life entails can be observed.

It should be remembered that the said authors were a generation younger in comparison with Antonín Matula and their viewpoint on peasant life was not strictly conservative. In Knap's novel *Réva na zdi* [Vine on the Wall] (1926) the main protagonist Josef finds himself in conflict with his parents who do not endorse the novelties he tries to introduce in the plantation, nor do they approve of the woman of his choice. His beloved Lidka does not conform to the traditional viewpoints on what a peasant woman should look like and what experience she should have. Neither the mother, nor the father understand him: the latter bestows him only empty buildings and empty fields to prove himself worthy and show whether he is capable of running a farm and keeping the farmstead. As far as his mother is concerned, Josef doubts that she is capable to see the change the role of a peasant woman underwent. The common opinion of the village dwellers is on the side of Josef's parents; they are suspecting of any innovation:

> "Oh, that [mother's] prehistoric thinking. Would she ever understand, even if he repeated all of it over and over again, that the times have changed? How she let herself heard immediately when he mentioned that hand work is not the most important quality you can find at a landlady. How would she react to a notion that the old image of a landlady, as soon as she leaves the building, is surrounded by hen, geese are gabbling and cows are mooing in the stead, that this exquisite image of good-will and abundance, is a thing of the past? How would she react to the idea that a landlady does not have to be a housewife, that he only needs her to be something like a cook? And what about the idea that the proper farmer should have control over the profitable direction of breeding stock and domestic fowl; that it is necessary to start work with your head and do the paperwork, that it is not only the fields, but everything that is on the farm?"[20]

The only one who shares Josef's vision is his friend and former schoolmate Jeník Hron, with whom he "[...] used to attend the economic school in Tábor:"

> "we used to experiment with all different kinds of novelties: in fertilization, in stock feeding that we found in agricultural newspapers – if the parents allowed. The Old Hron was more open-minded. Jeník succeeded in getting a large part of a field just for their experiments and it represented a little free realm for the two friends. They did not talk anything else when they were alone but seed ventures, cultivation, and bastardisation."[21]

The cited passage suggests that the parents of Jeník, especially his father, are more open to the experiments than Josef's parents. Yet Hron parents seem to be just benevolent, they do not seem to take the experiments as something that could have any practical impact on the way they run their farm.

A different social approach towards innovation is brought around by the economic crisis, whose consequences are being acutely felt in the early 1930s. The novel authored by František Křelina, called *Hubená léta* [Dry Years] (1935), already depicts this change of the general discourse of the time. The main character of the novel – Václav – starts to introduce modern agricultural methods on his farm, in a similar manner to that we have encountered in Knap's *Réva na zdi* [Vine on the Wall]. As opposed to Josef's situation, Václav is not so eager to introduce novelties but is challenged by the task of maintaining the family and preserving the farm in a time of crisis. Another difference is that his attempts are not condemned, but are welcomed both by the older generation (his father, a former landlord, eagerly participates in the experiments) and by his peers, who gradually join him in his undertaking: "Young Václav improved the field and the meadow, experimented with seeds and fertilizers, deepened the ploughing furrow, competed in organizing both the solid and liquid manure pits, and the father, who is in early his fifties, learned alongside his son and the other youngsters who did not want to farm as it had been done years ago."[22]

Václav Prokůpek in his novel *Zakryto slzami* [Covered in Tears] (1937) repeatedly mentions the communal approach to dealing with the consequences of the economic crisis. The farmers buy an electric threshing machine, press, and reaper-binder as communal property and they plan to build a silo.[23]

In all the novels mentioned so far, the peasants are trying to cope with the different obstacles by themselves. In the novel *Puszta* (1937) by Josef Knap, and later in the novel authored by Václav Prokůpek, *Žitný dvojklas* [Rye Twin-spike] (1943) we find instances where the characters are also turning their heads towards the state government in an anticipation of help (in *Puszta* state subsidies are thematised; in *Žitný dvojklas* the subventions concern pig breeding).

Land reform and its consequences are the main topics of the novel authored by Václav Prokůpek called *Ztracená země* [Lost Country] (1938). Not only do the consequences form a vital part of the novel's plot, it also helps to inform the reader about the idea of land reform itself in a soft implicit manner. All the relevant information come through the voice of an old landlord Hanys Gaj, who is one of a few people who own their own farm in the Hlučín region. He is not a squirearch; he just owns a farmhouse and adjacent land that he farms on. From the political point of view, he represents an ideal voter of the Agrarian Party: he is an owner of a medium farm; he shows patriotic (i.e. Czechoslovak) feelings, and emphasises education and enlightenment (he advocates building a Czech basic school in the village and he donates money to that end as well). In his eyes the land reform is a remedy for social and national inequalities among the inhabitants of Hlučín region:

> "It appears that never again will in our land the wind be blowing through the wheat field of baron Rothschild, duke Pinkus and the squirarch Prinzenstein. These are the lords who own almost all the fields on our land. [...] And as I have heard, most of these fields should be divided. The landless will become farmers. You know, it should have happened a while ago. [...] If a man holds some land, however tiny that bit might be, he is nearer to God. [...] You will see: when everyone has a field, when he will be able to stand on it and say: this is my land, the everything changes. People will have something to care for, something to love. [...] Plotting is on its way – they call it land reform. God bless that it happens. I will probably not live long enough to see it and I am not looking for any profit from it. But I experienced myself the way the fields keep you alive."[24]

The announced allocation of fields among the inhabitants of Hlučín region evokes happiness and future hopes:

> "It should be no surprise that the rumours about allocating the lords' fields to the landless were travelling through the land merrily. [...] The whole Hlučín region was rejoicing. Even before all the corn from the lords' fields found its way to the barns [...] and the land reform had already started. Meetings were announced and noble gentlemen were giving lectures about what will happen. Everyone, who wants, will receive one allotment. And the land is not to be paid immediately."[25]

But it does not take long and people, experiencing the consequences of the economic crisis, start to become restless. They feel that not enough land was allotted, making it impossible to make a living on the given land. They riot and demand the allocation of the so-called remaining farmsteads. Yet Gaj is supporting the decision to keep bigger farms in the region; he sees in them a bigger benefit for society than the further allocation of land would bring. In a dialogue with his successor, he explains the role of remaining farmsteads in this way:

> "You must know, my friend, that I have been active in the land reform and did not want that every bit of land gets divided. Remaining farmsteads, taken over by experienced farmers, could become centres of progress and then it would be a sin to leave all the buildings empty. [...] If everything was divided, the Hlučín region would have become a beggar country. It is always great when you have someone else, when you can help others. [...] If everything was divided, it would not have been a greater help."[26]

Supposedly, while writing the novel, Prokůpek's primary goal was not to educate his readers. Yet the explanation (or defence) of the land reform as offered by the narrative could have been much more comprehensible than any explanation to be found in contemporary newspapers.

Václav Prokůpek's novel *Nebe nad námi* [The Sky Above] (1940) presents a farmstead as a potential tourist location. In his novel, an ordinary village in the Tábor region attracts the attention of newspapers thanks to the success of the painter Jiří Kubín, who lives there. The interest in the man not even the locals know much about, and consequently the interest in the whole village comes as a surprise:

> "And now [...] you plunge into the news and you can hardly believe your eyes. It must be at least a fourth article mentioning some Kubín [...] 'Triumph of Honest Work Gets Rightly Honoured' is the title of one of those articles and the valley below Tábor is troubled. Householders read those almost unbelievable tidings. [...] In the next days, the valley below Tábor became the destination of many and many visitors. [...] Prague reporters with cameras came, as well as diverse curious fellows from the neighbour towns and Prague too. The journalists, surprised by the beauty of the winter there, zealously made photographs of absolutely anything that they came upon."[27]

The seminal surprise changes into displeasure as a consequence of the tone of the newspapers becoming almost tabloid-like:

> "Intense excitement and shock were brought about by the news of Jan and the whole valley. [...] But there was

one positive aspect the news contributed to the land. [...] 'The skiing opportunities are wonderful, [...]. The snow is exquisite.' The most eager evening paper trumped all expectations. It came with a catchword: 'On Sunday we are Leaving for the Land of Master Kubín'."[28]

Obviously, the narrator is pointing to the fact that the newspapers raised interest in the region. First, there appear tourists and skiers looking for sensation. They are ready to pay for staying directly in the farmhouses. The locals, totally unprepared for such a huge wave of interest, try to be as hospitable as possible; they offer everything they have; they treat the visitors as guests, not as customers. Later, when the sensation around the painter calms down and the skiing season is over, these tourists disappear. Those who do come back are the ones who were genuinely attracted by the region and have built ties with their hosts. In the novel tourism has two forms: the first could be called "calamity tourism," and the other "sustainable tourism." Despite the fact that the newspaper articles and the unexpected seasonal visitors create great excitement, the invasion of a peaceful village is not experienced in a purely negative way. The householders and their wives realize that they could financially benefit from the situation: "Almost every household got some money from the visitors. The housewives saved a few crowns for children's clothes, for a new apron. Some have even saved some for the Christmas."[29]

Conclusion

Ruralists and their work are often labelled as conservative. Consequently, their tendency towards the traditional depiction of country life, village people and their way of living are highlighted. The article tried to demonstrate that such a viewpoint is rather simplifying. Ruralism cannot be called "modernist" in the same way we refer to the "modernism" of futurism or poetism. It is far from being as radical. Ruralism is definitely tending (as agrarianism) towards conservative understanding of the country, but this understanding is not static, it is not devoid of any possible evolution. In their words, ruralists describe the needs and problems of the country in a given (historical) time; they make use of modern ways of agriculture; they depict the slowly changing mentality of peasants; they show new ways of making a living, for example from tourism. We can say that it is the ruralists who (in narrative form) capture the process of the passage from rural and modern country life in the first half of the 20th Century.

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Notes:

1. Since 1919 the official name was Republikánská strana československého venkova (Republican Party of the Czechoslovak Country) and since 1922 the official name changed to Republikánská strana zemědělského a malorolnického lidu (Republican Party of the Agriculture and Smallholder People). Yet in the public discourse the most frequent denomination was Agrarian Party. For detailed history of the party see Jan Rychlík, Lukáš Holeček, and Michal Pehr, eds. *Agrarismus ve střední a východní Evropě 19. a 20. století* (Prague: Masarykův ústav a Archiv AV ČR, v. v. i., 2015); Jan Rokoský, *Rudolf Beran a jeho doba: vzestup a pád agrární strany* (Prague: Ústav pro studium totalitních režimů, 2011).
2. ***, *Ottův slovník naučný nové doby*, V/1 (Prague: J. Otto, 1938), 575.
3. As Lukáš Holeček points out, *Selská čítanka* [Peasant Reader] (1931), edited by Adolf Sedláček, was published almost exclusively with propaganda in mind. The reader contained lectures from different courses held by The Free Agrarian Education – see Lukáš Holeček, *Antonín Matula, filozof a úředník ve službě venkovu* (Prague: NLN, 2019), 23.
4. From 1919 to 1944 he was employed at the Ministry of Education and National Enlightenment.
5. Matula's father, Josef Matula, was regarded "representative of peasant conservatism" – see Holeček, *Antonín Matula*, 12.
6. Ibid., 17.
7. Ibid., 18.
8. Ibid., 21.
9. Antonín Matula. "Československá výchova lidu," *Česká osvěta* 23, no. 8 (1926/1927): 402.
10. Holeček, *Antonín Matula*, 22.
11. Ibid., 23.
12. Drahomír Jančík, "Agrarismus a cesta 'básníků české půdy' k ruralismu," in *Český a německý sedlák v zrcadle krásné literatury: 1848-1948*, eds. Edvard Kubů, Jiří Šouša, and Aleš Zářický (Prague: Dokořán, 2014), 591. For further reading see e. g. Ondřej Macura, "Josef Holeček a selství," in *Ruralismus, jeho kořeny a dědictví: osobnosti, díla, ideje: sborník referátů z vědecké konference konané ve dnech 22.-23. dubna 2005 v Sedmihorkách*, ed. Ivo Navrátil (Semily: Státní okresní archiv Semily, 2005), 36-38.
13. Jančík, "Agrarismus a cesta," 592.

14. Ibid., 592.
15. František Kutnar, *Generace Brázdy* (Prague: Historický klub, 1992), 7.
16. For more information regarding the magazine and its role in the development of Czech ruralism see Vlastislav Hnízdo, "Role časopisu Sever a Východ v koncepci českého ruralismu," in *Ruralismus, jeho kořeny a dědictví: osobnosti, díla, ideje: sborník referátů z vědecké konference konané ve dnech 22.-23. dubna 2005 v Sedmihorkách*, ed. Ivo Navrátil (Semily: Státní okresní archiv Semily, 2005), 60-69.
17. Jaroslav Med, *Literární život ve stínu Mnichova (1938-1939)* (Prague: Academia, 2011), 146.
18. Antonín Matula, "Ruralismus v krásném písemnictví," *Osvěta venkova*, no. 4 (1932/1933): 1.
19. Holeček, *Antonín Matula*, 25-28.
20. Josef Knap, *Réva na zdi* (Prague: Alois Hynek, 1947), 37.
21. Ibid., 39-40.
22. Quoted from the translation of David Livingstone used in the paper of Lukáš Holeček, "The Countryside as an Indicator of Changing Times Representation of the Countryside in Czech Prose of 1935 to 1946," in *Portraying Countryside in Central European Literature*, eds. Jakub Ivánek and Jan Malura (Ostrava: Univesity of Ostrava, 2021), 291.
23. Václav Prokůpek, *Zakryto slzami* (Prague: Novina, 1937), 56-61.
24. Václav Prokůpek, *Ztracená země* (Brno: Družstvo Moravského kola spisovatelů, 1946), 68-70.
25. Ibid., 72-73.
26. Ibid., 164-165.
27. Václav Prokůpek, *Nebe nad námi* (Prague: Novina, 1941), 272-274.
28. Ibid., 275.
29. Ibid., 278.

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