

JÁN ŽIVČÁK: Sila a slabosť periférie. Stredoveká francúzska literatúra na Slovensku v rokoch 1900 – 2017 [The strengths and weaknesses of the periphery: Medieval French literature in Slovakia in 1900–2017]

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The monograph of Ján Živčák is an original contribution to the scholarship on the presence – and present impact – of medieval texts and myths in 20th and 21st century literature. The manner in which the author approaches the given topic on the whole suggests an affinity to research and cultural production that treat the medieval period as a lasting intellectual and cultural influence on the present. In the book, this is mainly evident in the way medieval cultural characteristics are understood. However, since the book focuses on the interaction of the French medieval literature with the Slovak literary and cultural milieu after 1900, it can be also said to directly address the issues pertinent to French and Francophone medieval studies. These fields of research also analyze the historical facts and representations of the medieval period from the present day's point of view and cover their reception throughout various periods and in different contexts.

The author contributes to the said areas of research mainly by what he has concluded from analyses and reflections of concrete literary texts. He has analyzed a well thought-out set of selected literary works and studied the translational and other kinds of creative *réécritures* (i.e. non-translational metatexts) these works helped bring about in the Slovak cultural sphere. Živčák mostly focuses on four core publications: two Slovak translations of the chantefable *Aucassin et Nicolette* (the first translated in 1947 by Valen-

tín Beniak, the second in 1975 by Mariana Pauliny-Danielisová and Gizela Slavkovská); the Slovak translation anthology *Danteho trubadúri* (Dante's troubadours, 1972, trans. Jozef Felix and Viliam Turčány); and the Slovak poetry collection by Anna Ondrejková *Izolda: sny, listy Tristanovi* (Isolde: dreams, letters to Tristan, 2010). The author compiled this corpus of Slovak literary texts in one way or another based on French medieval literature after a meticulous survey of their publication histories. Živčák summarizes the findings of the survey in an overview table on pages 36–39. Apart from factual information on the first editions of the prototexts and metatexts, the author also presents the textual genesis of the texts by employing a typology of metatexts based on the well-known classification by Anton Popovič. It is important to note, though, that Živčák's use of the system, which the Slovak translation scholar associated with the Nitra School pioneered in the second half of the 20th century, in no means indicates the backwardness of the approach or the author's ignorance of more recent scholarship. Quite on the contrary, the first chapter of the book, formulated as a kind of a theoretical prolegomenon and “a dialog with common approaches to defining and classifying interliterary relations” (16), clearly shows it was a voluntary and well thought-out decision. Using Popovič's classification in a 21st century research allows the author to steer clear of its 1960s overly scientific patina and show blank spots

in some of its original definitions. Moreover, it also demonstrates Živčák's ability to think critically, avoid absolutes, and bridge differences. As the author himself puts it, "in the humanities, many approaches are bound to one's point of view. If we are to argue that a translation is no metatext but a new original, dissimilar from the first one which itself was also a derivative, we are merely addressing one important aspect of the whole issue. At the same time, it is prudent to assume that translation is indeed a metatextual activity, related to other forms of intertextual relations" (46). The manner in which the author treats the theories of Anton Popovič is indicative of the manner in which he works with other theoretical concepts and incorporates them to his own approach. In essence, there is a constant and unique critical dialog which resonates even in the footnotes.

The terminological consistency and rich interdisciplinary and transversal movements of ideas presented in the monograph clearly result from comprehensive research. The author's complex and multi-faceted understanding of how the French medieval literature was received (not only) in modern Slovak culture shines throughout the book but is at its brightest in the theoretical chapter where even the most partial issues are explained thoroughly. Here Živčák deals for instance with the scope of French medieval literature, the ontology of the medieval text as opposed to the current one, the forms of interaction between medieval and modern cultural production, the differences stemming from different paces of development of the French and Slovak cultures, and the conservatism of medieval studies. It is perhaps as a reaction to the last of the mentioned theoretical issues that the author has chosen a mostly thematological approach to his literary analyses.

Apart from thematic analyses, however, the author also views the studied metatexts through the lens of sociology of literature. This is especially evident in the third chapter which deals with the conceptions and textological approaches adopted by Jozef Felix and

Viliam Turčány in their anthology of translations of troubadour poetry. A sociological approach reveals that these two leading figures of Slovak intellectual and cultural life during the so-called normalization period adopted an editorial and translational method reflective of the era and their respective positions in the society at the time. This opens up interesting questions about aesthetic elitism, balance in cultural interchange, and a comprehensive approach to transferring Christian ideas.

The corpus of the texts analyzed by Živčák is representative in that it contains both translational and non-translational metatexts but also in that the analyzed works related to French medieval literature come from the 20th and 21st centuries. In his analyses, the author uses the comparative method. Although this is organically employed in analyses all throughout the entire book, the approach is most inventively used in the second chapter called "K dvom slovenským prekladom *Aucassina a Nicolety*" (On two Slovak translations of *Aucassin et Nicolette*). The most important criterion on which Živčák bases his comparative analyses is homogeneity. The corpus of analyzed texts can be said to be homogeneous because a) the aesthetic function plays a dominant role in all of the texts; b) all of them are poetic in nature or at least contain longer passages in verse; c) their origins are in the 12th or 13th century and roots in both historical cultural regions of France (Pays d'Oïl and Pays d'Oc).

On a personal note, it is very nice to see that the monograph also documents the author's professional and personal growth. The reader can clearly notice this development in the gradual "loosening up" of the theoretical and methodological discourse. It is also noticeable on the level of the prose which gradually becomes less structuralist and, on the contrary, deeper, more interpretative and dialogical. This culminates in the essay-like style adopted in the fourth chapter called "Tristanovský mýtus v Ondrejkovskej zbierke *Izolda: sny, listy Tristanovi*" (The Tristan myth in Ondrejková's collection "Isolde: dreams,

letters to Tristan”). Such a style allows Živčák to embark upon nuanced and meditative “pilgrimages across the poetic text lead by the principles of thesis and antithesis” (13). This approach has also lead him to point out possible mystical inspirations in the motifs, as evident mostly in the treatment of love and suffering and the relationships between the lyrical subjects and Christ (Tristan).

In the bibliographical note on page 203, the author offers some hints about how his thinking on the subject developed. However, in the preface to the book, he addresses this matter directly and earnestly. He claims that researching and writing the book was a dynamic process “naturally influenced by the preferences and convictions of an early-career scholar” (13). This dynamism of evolving convictions must surely have also been caused by a certain initial awe a would-be scholar feels towards source materials, inspirational theoretical concepts, methodologies, and terminologies. This gradually makes room for the much-needed critical approaches to traditions and new, also often critical, viewpoints inspired by national and international perspectives.

One must respect and commend the author for having chosen to specialize in medieval studies, such a rare field in Slovak humanities. Apart from the standard skill set for literary studies research, focusing on the Middle Ages also entails specialized philological and exegetical knowledge about writing of the era, its literary and factual background. A literary scholar of the medieval period must also be able to combine and triangulate facts and notions from history, philosophy, cultural history, sociology, and medieval prosopography. By publishing his findings in the monograph *Sila a slabosť periferie. Stredoveká francúzska literatúra na Slovensku v rokoch 1900 – 2017*, Živčák clearly shows that he has much of the required wherewithal. Those of us who have already

had the chance to cooperate with him or at least read his other publications know that he always conducts research with the utmost integrity, strives for methodological consistency, stylistic and semantic precision, and also for depth of (analytical and interpretative) conclusions. Of course, such work ethic is not exclusive to medieval studies scholars, but if they possess it, it greatly aids the deep research that the field naturally requires. This is due to the large time gap between the medieval period and present day which cannot be overcome without vigor and determination. One can easily imagine that attending the lectures and seminars of Georges Duby or Jacques Le Goff in the 1970s and the 1980s inspired the students with such vigor. However, it has always been and to date remains reinvigorated also thanks to the critical editions of medieval manuscripts, a fact Ján Živčák refers to several times throughout the book. Another thing that can spark interest in the Middle Ages is the certainty that it laid the grounds for the modern era, its humanism and in essence developed many of the values and the mental and social structures of contemporary societies. Even though Ján Živčák relies on medieval studies research and on authorities of the likes of Jacques Le Goff and Pierre Le Gentil, it is also evident that he, like Paul Zumthor, recognizes the need to understand the specifics of the period and how different in values and expressions it was when compared to today’s world.

Translated from Slovak by Igor Tyšš

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