

"Heart in a trance": William Ritter and Czech modernism

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It is a historical paradox that William Ritter can be credited with shaping the opinions of the modernists in Czech visual art and criticism. His friendship with the painter, art critic and man of letters Miloš Jiránek, which lasted for ten years and culminated in a dramatic divergence of views and a bitterness that continued beyond the grave, raised questions that are still relevant today. They concern the nature of modernism and the relationship between artistic centres and peripheries. This relationship to Ritter reflects the path to self-awareness followed by the Czech modernists, the need for them to set their own goals and to find their place in relation to contemporary events in the world and to their own tradition and environment.

The beginnings of Ritter's close links to the Czech milieu and culture go back to 1895, when he resolved to visit Prague for a second time. His first brief visit in October 1889 had ended in a fiasco: he had soon fled back to Vienna, frightened by the dark and unfriendly city. This time, however, he was so fascinated by Prague that he returned there repeatedly, and immediately described his impressions in his literary work. He interpreted Prague as a city of dreams and melancholy memories, where legend is more truthful than history. In his eyes it was thus the ideal city for romanticism and mysticism. Unlike Apollinaire, who a few years later "was terrified to behold his own features in the agates of St. Vitus's Cathedral" (see *Zone*), Ritter took an aesthetic delight in the bond between his own physiognomy and the face of the mysterious city with its occult past: "It seems to me, if I am to honestly admit this vanity, that my head is seen at its best when compared with the adornments of this city. Faces such as mine are beautiful in Prague"¹. It was only natural that in 1899, by contributing an article to the magazine *Lumír*², he took part in the struggle to preserve the old city of Prague, threatened by the redevelopment of the Jewish ghetto.

¹ William Ritter, *Prague nocturne*, Gent 1896, p. 7.

² William Ritter, Z lásky k Praze, *Lumír* 28, 1899-1900, No. 1 (September 1899), pp. 5-8.

One factor that helped to give rise to Ritter's enthusiasm for the Czech metropolis was the Ethnographic Exhibition in 1895, which in his eyes represented an important counter-balance to the tragic spirit of Prague. It conjured up a bucolic vision of the Czech village, full of music and national costumes. The Slavophile Ritter declared that in the Ethnographic Exhibition the entire Czechoslavonic branch of the Slavonic race had achieved self-awareness before the eyes of an astonished Europe. This active renaissance was symbolised for Ritter by the figure of a young man in national costume in a popular poster (though by no means the most well-executed one) advertising the Exhibition, designed by Vojtěch Hynais. Ritter even acquired Hynais's original sketch for this figure, which was based on an authentic photograph, and which represented a substantial source of inspiration for his novel *Fillette slovaque*, the first manuscript version of which had already been composed in July 1895.

Among Czech artists, the ones to first attract Ritter's attention were the middle-aged ones known as the National Theatre generation, such as Vojtěch Hynais, who transferred Parisian luminism into the Czech milieu, Mikoláš Aleš, regarded as an original Czech talent, or the sculptor Josef Václav Myslbek. In February 1896, while visiting the Prague Academy, he was introduced by the poet Jaroslav Vrchlický to Hynais's pupil Miloš Jiránek, who was twenty years old at the time. This was the start of a friendship that inspired both sides and that grew through personal meetings and correspondence. Ritter deepened the knowledge that young Czech artists had of French art, while Jiránek initiated Ritter into the Czech milieu. He soon became involved in the Prague "Mánes Association of Visual Artists", which was the focus for the significant young generation of modernists, who were starting to propagate their views on art both through exhibitions and the magazine *Volné směry*, which first appeared towards the end of 1896. William Ritter drew attention to the new magazine abroad straight away in 1897 in the review *La Plume*. On Jiránek's suggestion, he wrote an article on Hynais for *Volné směry* in 1898 which, however, was not published. The reservations that were expressed in the debate in the Mánes Association about both Hynais and Ritter upset Jiránek to such an extent that he decided to leave the Association and break off his connections with the editors of *Volné směry*. This is documented by a hitherto unpublished letter from the Mánes Association archive dated 18 May 1898. However, Jiránek was quickly reconciled

with his colleagues, and *Volné směry* soon opened up to Ritter, as well: in 1899 the magazine published a study by him on Marold and in 1902 another one on Segantini. When Jiránek and his friend the painter Arnošt Hofbauer set off for Paris in the autumn of 1900, they stopped with Ritter's family in Monruz on the way, and Ritter gave them letters of introduction to the graphic artists Florian and Henri Rivière. Nevertheless, in a letter to his family Jiránek emphasised that during their visit to Paris they were not dependent on Ritter's recommendations, for thanks to sample copies of *Volné směry* they themselves were able to form contacts with the art critic Arsène Alexandre and especially with Auguste Rodin, with whom they were able to complete negotiations on an issue devoted entirely to him. At the beginning of 1904 Ritter helped arrange a short stay for Jiránek in Munich, devoted to the study of graphic techniques. In 1904-1905, when Ritter was living temporarily in Prague, he was able to frequently meet a trio of friends – Jiránek, Hofbauer, and the remarkable, underestimated painter Karel Myslbek, son of the sculptor Josef Václav Myslbek. Ritter first drew attention to Karel Myslbek's work, which reflected the tragic feelings in his life, in the magazine *L'Art et les Artistes*, and later, in 1914, he devoted a longer study to him in the Italian review *Emporium*.

At first the artists in the Mánes Association were in agreement with Ritter in their appreciation of the pluralism of the national art schools and their recognition of the role of folklore and regionalism in the search for the distinctive character of national art. They were united in their admiration for Moravian Slovakia, an area that for many Czech artists and intellectuals at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries epitomised a lost paradise, which, however – as many of them realised – was threatened by destruction. Many painters travelled to this picturesque region, which still retained its folklore, in order to look for themes and ideas for their work. A prominent feature of the local scene was the cult of Joža Uprka, a Moravian Slovak painter both by birth and in terms of his oeuvre. The young Jiránek, too, described Uprka in 1898 with undisguised enthusiasm as "a true self-made man of our visual art scene"³, who created his work alone, completely cut off from the rest of the world and the artistic milieu, face to face with nature. In so doing he rather overlooked the not inconsequential fact that Uprka had undergone training at the Prague Academy and in

³ Miloš Jiránek, *Literární dílo* II, ed. Jiří Kotalík, Praha 1962, p. 31.

particular at the Munich Academy, and that his work placed him in the context of his time. For several years Uprka enjoyed the respect of the artists in the Mánes Association. When Auguste Rodin came to Bohemia in 1902 to visit his exhibition in Prague, which had been demonstratively organised by the Mánes Association, they prepared for him, as the second greatest attraction, a visit to Moravian Slovakia, culminating with a banquet at Joža Uprka's house. It was on this occasion that Miloš Jiránek first visited the area, as a member of Rodin's numerous entourage. He was so fascinated that he immediately returned there to paint in the following summer.

The following year Jiránek met up with Ritter in Moravian Slovakia and took him to meet Uprka, with whom Ritter had corresponded since the mid-1890s, and whom he had been the first to propagate abroad, but whom he had yet to meet in person. For Ritter, Moravian Slovakia represented another example of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's vision of a natural, unspoilt, rural life, where "wholesome" popular art flourished. He did not take any notice of the contradictions and dark aspects, but found in it a "surviving witness of the ancient Slavonic world", in which he encountered the "purest" art, which had not yet had any opportunity to become spoilt because it was firmly rooted in the soil: Joža Uprka, its main representative, appeared to him like a living image of Přemysl the Ploughman. Ritter was enchanted by Uprka's pupils – the self-taught Cyril Mandel, his nephew, and "a whole legion" of other Moravian Slovak artists. These views of Ritter were reinforced during a journey around Moravia which he undertook in 1908 with Janek Cádra. He first published them in *Národní listy* under the title "Three Excursions into Artistic Moravia", and later incorporated them into the book *La Passion de l'art en Moravie* (1912). Ritter adopted a more reserved approach in the text that accompanied the graphic cycle *Moravian Slovakia* by the Prague artist Vojtěch Preissig (1909). While hoping that the cultivated form would at least be more acceptable for the big cities abroad, in which it would arouse interest in the beauty of the Moravian Slovak countryside, he also expressed the wish that the local muse of Preissig's followers would have a rural roughness and strength. Just as Vilém Mrštík, for example, had done earlier, Ritter eventually contrasted his dreamed-of Moravia with Prague, which was embracing Western innovations (expressionism and cubism) that he himself regarded with contempt. He defended the folklore conservatism of Moravian art. Miloš Jiránek, on the

other hand, reconsidered his earlier views. In a paper on the autumn exhibitions in 1909 he admitted that in theory it would be possible to welcome the Moravian decentralising tendencies, but in practise he raised serious objections to them. He pointed out that the ethnological theme in itself was not enough. Even the most interesting motifs remain simply material that needs to be worked on and added to.

The refinement of their differing views on Moravian art reflected in a peripheral way the much more fundamental crux of the dispute between Jiránek and Ritter, which had already flared up into a full blaze after Ritter published the book *Études d'art étranger* in 1906, in which he brought together various essays on visual art and music. He offended Czech artists only in peripheral references, but nevertheless did so in such a fundamental way that Jiránek considered it necessary to present his review of Ritter's book in *Volné směry* as a manifesto in which he defended the artistic agenda of the Czech modernists. For Ritter had added to the criticism of Edvard Munch that he had included in his book an ironic postscript in which he reacted to the interest shown by the Mánes Association in Munch's work. Jiránek, who had been one of the main organisers of the pivotal exhibition of Munch's work in Prague in 1905, was outraged by Ritter's criticism that it was merely a case of "insincere snobbism and chasing after modernism". Ritter attempted to disparage the entire exhibition programme of the Mánes Association and began to dispense advice to Czech artists from the superior position of a representative of a more highly-developed culture: "...they still need to learn everything; there still remain so many stages of culture for them to gradually and diligently go through.... However, they think that it is easier to go directly to the most recent disease..." And Ritter recommends a list of traditional artists that they should first work hard to come to grips with. Jiránek swept aside Ritter's arguments, emphasising that he could not deny Czech modernists the right to "breathe the European air of today and live out today's ideas". The programmatic character of Jiránek's text reflects a turning point in the way the Czech modernists understood themselves: integrating Czech art into the international context became just as essential as expressing their national identity. The relationship between the national and the international is no longer seen as an opposition, but as a dynamic process taking place between local traditions and external influences. *Études d'art étranger* clearly showed that Ritter's ideas were fundamentally diverging from

the artistic development that Jiránek's generation was going through at that time, and which found its authority in the critical work of Julius Meier-Graefe. Ritter, by contrast, espoused the cause of novo-idealism right from the beginning and did not conceal the fact that he regarded impressionism with complete indifference. In a polemic with Camille Mauclair, which he included in the introduction to *Études d'art étranger*, he rejected the establishment of a unified taste and international beauty, based on turning the French position into something absolute. He disagreed with the assertion that for true art the theme is only a secondary matter, and stressed its importance in a moral sense, determining hierarchy in the work of art. Because of this, Jiránek criticised Ritter for failing to understand the logic of the way modern French art was developing. Retrospectively he described him as a "formerly progressive critic" who was now proclaiming reactionary slogans. In so doing he did justify his earlier respect for Ritter's opinions, but somewhat capriciously included among Ritter's characteristics the term "progressiveness", which Ritter had always regarded as an alien one. Ritter liked to be in a "minority opposition" and from his youth had promoted art that was neglected and suppressed, but in doing so he had been guided not by the principle of modernity, but by personal impressions and relationships. He did not believe in the existence of objective criteria for evaluating the artistic value of a work. He transformed even his academic essays into subjective notes. When looking at works of art he experienced intoxication and shock, which he re-evoked in many ways when he wrote about them. His impetuous nature often led him to make rash judgements, some of which he later recanted. His style of writing was the opposite of Jiránek's responsible, carefully thought out approach to art criticism, based on clarity of thought and the logic of literary expression.

Jiránek and his colleagues considered Ritter's views to be dangerous because Ritter often published them in prestigious foreign reviews, where he was regarded as the sole expert on "eastern art". Jiránek observed that Ritter's articles were published abroad simply because nobody else in western artistic circles followed "eastern art", and so they had no yardstick to judge them by. Jiránek pursued his public dispute with Ritter, in which he protested against Ritter's attacks on modernism and his tendency to enclose Czech and Moravian art in a regional ghetto, until his early death in 1911. Nor did Ritter overcome his bitterness. In a text about Jiránek written 35 years later, he conveyed the difference between his nature and

Jiránek's by a reference to religion: "He came from Protestant stock.... and imbued his later principles with a kind of severity and rigidity which I was unable to reconcile with the vocation of an artist, who should perceive with delight what life has to show, cleansed and revived by the beauty that is reflected in it"⁴. The Catholic Ritter declared that his meeting with the three young Czechs, Jiránek, Hofbauer, and Karel Myslбек, showed him that "the Czech lands are an arena where an eternal contest is played out between the sober views of Hussitism and the Catholic belief in the beautiful world of art".

After he fell out with the Prague modernists, Ritter inclined fully to the side of the Union of Visual Artists and the Association of Moravian Artists. In these circles interest in Ritter did not fade away, as can be seen from the detailed biography of him written by the advocate of programmatic Slavism, Romance scholar and art historian František Žákavec, published in 1925. For the Czech avant-garde, however, Ritter had by then been long since lost from view. In the late 1920s the painter and editor of the prestigious art review *Musaion* František Muzika contemptuously referred to "some W. Ritter or other". However, not long after Ritter obtained unexpected satisfaction in the pages of the same journal in an autobiographical recollection by Le Corbusier, who wrote about him: "... he believed neither in Cézanne nor still less in Picasso, but that did not by any means divide us. He was wisdom itself; his heart was in a permanent state of trance in the face of the phenomenon of nature and the struggle that must be waged by every human being."⁵

⁴ William Ritter, Mládí Miloše Jiráňka, in: *Neznámý Miloš Jiránek* (exh. cat.), Praha, Topičův salon 1946, pp. 12-27.

⁵ Le Corbusier, Životopis, *Musaion* 1, 1928-1930, pp. 249-250.