

Zeyer's Epicism and Lyricism

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ANNOTATION

This paper aims to explore the literary creations of the Czech poet Julius Zeyer (1841–1901) within the complexity of his poetic works, except dramas. The poet, prosaist, and dramatist Julius Zeyer ranks among the classic Czech authors active in the second half of the 19th century. Literary historians traditionally link him with the *Lumír* generation but he is often grouped also with the New Romantics contributing to periodicals *Ruch*, *Lumír*, and *Květy*, or, possibly, with the ‘sensitives’ of the 19th-century European culture.

His works comprise texts of indisputable, time-honoured value, beside the texts on the verge of conventional fiction. Quantitatively, the literary production of Julius Zeyer comprises more than two thirds of epic works; almost two fifths are dramas; only a few of them are (purely) lyrical poems representing just a fraction of his comprehensive output. The proportions of the explored poetry and prose also feature two-third ratio in favour of prose against (in Zeyer, mostly epic) poetry.

The starting point of our search for specific features of his authorial style was the accentuation of Zeyer's “epicism” and “lyricism” in references, i.e. throughout the overall reception of the poet's texts, regardless of literary genres, often coexisting in contradictory meanings. Specifically, this study aims at the identification and linguistic analysis of selected devices to convey epic and lyric aspects in Zeyer's epic poetry and prose.

Despite the dominant representation of epics and prose, Zeyer's style shows distinctly lyrical features, even within the extent of his production as a whole. The lyrical nature of his epic works is enhanced by his exclusively visual imagery, purposely different from common speech, with stylistically marked bookish and archaic elements, bearing the marks of literary art nouveau.

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In the middle and final stages of the poet's creative career, his lyricism is enhanced by the changing rhythm of his narrative accentuated by the receding textual dramatization; by a greater share of non-narrative segments in the story; and through the tension ensuing from the contrasts between subjectivity / objectivity; between personification / impersonality; or between outer / inner perspective of the narrative, based on the linguistic form of concrete fictional texts and on the concrete perspective in which the story is actually mediated. Displayed in all of his literary works, lyricism is a characteristic and permanent feature of Julius Zeyer's authorial style.

KEYWORDS

style, Julius Zeyer, Czech literature in the 19th century, poetry and prose, lyricism, epicism, the descriptive style, visual imagery, long epic sentence

This paper aims to explore the literary creations of the Czech poet Julius Zeyer (1841–1901) within the complexity of his poetic works, except dramas. The starting point of our search for specific features of his authorial style was the accentuation of Zeyer's "epicism" and "lyricism" in references, i.e. throughout the overall reception of the poet's texts, regardless of literary genres, often coexisting in contradictory meanings. Specifically, this study aims at the identification and linguistic analysis of selected devices to convey epic and lyric aspects in Zeyer's epic poetry and prose.

Our approach is based on the classic differentiation (HEGEL 1966, HRABÁK 1973, HRABÁK 1977)¹ between typical signs of lyric and epic verse, where the former is perceived as a non-subject genre, lacking in a dominant causal relation. Authors function here as a unifying element expressing the authorial view of the world, their feelings, or ideas. The latter, by contrast, is a subject genre, centred namely on exterior, causally related events (HEGEL 1966: 254, HRABÁK 1977: 263, 284). The subject element here is signalled by "the existence of a certain algorithm, a complex sequence of elements (phenomena, events, experiences, feelings, and ideas)" (POSPÍŠIL 1998: 19).

The commonest form of lyrical expression is verse ("following a pattern"), while the natural expression of epic is prose. Linking lyricism with poetry and epicism with prose is, with respect to literary tradition, conventionalized, connected e.g. with the fact "that using verse in an epic is perceived as a mark of its subjectivization through enhancing the function of the authorial subject" (HRABÁK 1977: 284). Obviously, the author's failure to respect such adjusted associations is considered to be marked or actuated, i.e. part of the authorial intention. Zeyer's epic works, whether written in poetry or prose, can be classified as standard narrative texts typified by a highly organized and structured integrality, invariably in logical concordance with the unfolding plot.

The poet, prosaist, and dramatist Julius Zeyer ranks among the classic Czech authors active in the second half of the 19th century. Literary historians traditionally link him with the *Lumír* generation but he is often grouped also with the New Romantics contributing to periodicals *Ruch*, *Lumír*, and *Květy*, or, possibly, with the 'sensitives' of the 19th-century European culture. Dis-

¹ It also takes into account modern, possibly also critical concepts (HUGO 1974, JACKSON–PRINS 2014, CULLER 2015).



cerning readers can unravel in his voluminous writings (*Collected Works*, comprising 35 books) baroque, Gothic, decadent, or art nouveau motifs. Last but not least, he can be associated with the Czech modernists, namely the Catholic branch. Despite many attempts to classify him within Czech literary history (VOBORNÍK 1907, KVAPIL 1942, PYNSENT 1973, FRYČEK 2009), Julius Zeyer still stands apart in Czech literature, as a figure difficult to rank and understand, an exceptional and almost cultish personality. His works comprise texts of indisputable, time-honoured value, beside the texts on the verge of conventional fiction. Zeyer's name is generally known but his popularity is affected by familiar attributes ascribed to his attitude to life. His works themselves are rather removed from the interests of (not only) today's readers. Nevertheless, this manifest contradiction does not rule out Julius Zeyer's secure position in the treasure trove of Czech literary classics.

ZEYER'S EPICISM

Quantitatively, the literary production of Julius Zeyer comprises more than two thirds of epic works; almost two fifths are dramas; only a few of them are (purely) lyrical poems, representing just a fraction of his comprehensive output. The proportions of the explored poetry and prose also feature two-third ratio in favour of prose against (in Zeyer, mostly epic) poetry. The quantitative research confirms Zeyer as a born dominant epicist. Concordant with the genre classification of his compositions is also Zeyer's presentation in literary history as an epic author: "Zeyer was an epic... he has poor sense of music" [...] "his ideas and images burst like torrent from the bedrock of his unmatched fantasy", as Viktor Novák describes the poet metaphorically in one of his studies (NOVÁK 1921). His "based on narration" style with "so vivid imagery" (ZBROJNÝ 1921: 6) skilfully combines "... 'the image' with 'the movement' [...] dynamizing the depicted mythical stories and disturbing the museum-like rigidity liable to befall to themes concerned with the sacred roots of the Czech nation" (TOMÁŠEK 2009: 229).

The genre composition of the works as well as the prevailing variation of the expressive form harmonize with the devices, enhancing the perception of the poet's narrative in its dominant epicism. Zeyer's narration is largely developed through his peculiar structure of the long epic sentence, whose inner dynamics ensues from the contrast between multiple attributes and expanding attributes and from the close contact between adjectives and past participles in the predicate. Zeyer achieves increased tension between the rheme and the theme of a sentence through a distinctive pause between multiple sentence members set apart and the sentence. The narrative flow of the prose is jointly produced by marked disproportions in the length of successive, linearly shorter, simple sentences and linearly longer compound sentences. The length of a simple sentence is in a meaningful relation to the vertical arrangement of the text; the characters' utterances in Zeyer's prose feature a simple sentence which is, as a rule, noticeably longer than in the narrator's utterances.

In Zeyer's prose, linearly shorter simple sentences in the narrator's utterances determine the significant actions and situational moments in the story by contrastive shortening of the narrator's diction. Typical of Zeyer's epic creations written in his early years is the prevalence of non-narrative parts over the narrations. Yet throughout the poet's literary career, the dramatization of the text, i.e. the proportion of characters' utterances to the narrator's utterances, or the ratio of the present action and the narrated story is on the decrease. While in his early prose, the



ratio of prose and poetry was one to one and the narratives were significantly dramatized (e.g. in the short novel *Jeho svět a její* [His world and hers], the ratio was P(P) 57% of the text; in the novel *Ondřej Černyšev*, it was 50%); in the middle of his career the proportion decreases (in the epic *Vyšehrad*, the ratio is 40% already), to fall yet further in the final stage (in the novel *Jan Maria Plojhar*, the P(P) ratio is 37%). The most dramatized texts are his works completed in the early years.

Compared to Zeyer's prose writings, the narrative in the form of epic poetry features a longer and linearly more fluent utterance. Epic poems evidence noticeable prevalence of compound sentences over simple sentences, with both the simple sentence and the compound sentence being considerably longer and the compound sentences consisting of more units. On the whole, the prose text is more segmental and in its (in Zeyer, natural) fluency tempered and purposely dramatized. The epicism is enhanced here, namely by the author's tendency to dramatize the text through the narration with the prevalent characters' utterances; particularly long epic sentences in poetry and prose; and functionally variable linear length of the simple sentence in prose. The static character of the descriptive style with large representation of non-narrative segments grounded in the descriptive approach is unravelled by dynamization; by accentuating the verbal position in a sentence; by strengthening the tension between the rheme and the theme of the utterance; by transitions between static segments comprising loosely linked, gradually developed multiple sentence members and the close contact of adjectives and past participles in the predicate; by the contrastive concept of the depicted subject; by interconnecting the presented images, the movement, and the intrinsic dramatization of the narrative profile.

ZEYER'S LYRICISM

As early as the late 1920s, Arne Novák in one of his studies dealing with Zeyer noticed that “the most significant and most effectual component of Zeyer's entire literary output” is not epicism but, oddly, lyricism. He even labels Zeyer “the greatest lyricist in the 19th-century Czech literature” (NOVÁK 1928: 125). In his mind, the poet's lyricism can be detected in two functions: firstly, in the psychological element, through projecting his own emotional content into a character and similarity of the protagonists, and further, it functions on the compositional level as “a vigorous emotional wave of pathetic rhythm” (NOVÁK 1928: 125). Zeyer neither experimented with narrative methods, nor did he introduce innovations within the textual arrangement. Still, in the Czech literary context, he deserves praise for developing new themes, namely in rendering literary protagonists in his creative prime, as aptly highlighted by Arne Novák; moreover, for his original transformations of variegated thematic material into Czech national literature. He was one of the first Czech prosaists to introduce into Czech literature the feeling of cultural displacement, disillusion, and Zeyeran portrayal of personal emotional crisis. He offered the Czech reader his idiosyncratic version of the novel of lost illusions and the motif of ‘superfluous’ (non-)hero, still a novelty in the Czech surroundings.

Thus, it is the formal exclusivity of Zeyer's literary craft, i.e. its form rather than the content, that has always captured the attention of literary critics. The content of Zeyer's workings has often been given minor importance, as evidenced by literary historical studies, prevailingly based on comparative research focused on the authorial (non)originality. General appraisals in the past either uncritically celebrated him, e.g. “his depiction offered a broad spectrum of col-



ours” (VRCHLICKÝ 1901); “brilliant speech; refined and replete expressions; a rich style, precise and picturesque; very individual, though Zeyer never was a formalist” (Čas 1900–1901: 462); “a masterly style which autocratically governs the content [...] developed grand, magnificent style” (KIRILOV 1897: 408); “what attracts the reader’s attention to Zeyer’s works at first sight is their verbal form [...] the expression precedes the content, not thematically, yet what is artistic as [...] The indulgence of a beautiful expression, this is the essential constituent of the impression conveyed by his works [...] his vocabulary is quite extensive” (KREJČÍ 1901: 20); “with a wide brush he painted remote countries [...] his speech is an exalting unison of colours and sounds ablazing with the most delicate shades; his words breathe with emotional fervour and astonishing sensuality; his ideas and images burst like a torrent from the bedrock of his immensely rich imagination” (NOVÁK 1921: 6–7); or repudiated (e.g. “I regret, but I have no choice [...] Zeyer was a wimp, a second-rater-poet – he Zeyered everything in his monotonous manner without any sense of colour and its form [...] his utterances are lolly water and instead of emotions they render shepherd-like sentimentality” (MRŠTÍK 1902: 339–340); “He, who will once carry out a detailed analysis of the artistic content of Zeyer’s works; his themes; his concept and style, will probably find them very slender and monolithic.” “It is always the same: women, in general, are always demoniac or passionate, or boundlessly devoted and sweet; the same lovers are determined to do anything in their mistress’ service and anything for her alone; the same old men are experienced, noble, and mundanely unblemished; the same hollow people too plain to resist any instigation, knowing just one narrow direction; the same dangers; the same adventures; the same solutions; the same sceneries; the same colourful costumes; the same expressions and images (these at the most)” (HERBEN 1901: 2). The quoted samples of the works’ reception facilitate our endeavour to describe the imagery of Zeyer’s visual style (e.g. VLČEK 1988, VLČEK 1997), which is a significant mark of his creations on the whole, regardless of the genre or the form of expression. At the same time, they corroborate the authorial accentuation of the form (how) at the expense of the content (what) within the reception of Zeyer’s texts. His figurative style mainly consists in the cumulation of linguistic means and in the phonetic arrangement; in the syntactic exuberance; and in the rhythmical segmentation of his long epic sentence enhanced in the prevailing coordination through the subjectivity of the nominal characteristic of his poetic diction; and through the exclusive position of his description, which is in the narration reflected in a distinctive share of non-narrative segments; all of these are linguistic preconditions of the complex perception of Zeyer’s epic style in its peculiar poeticity and lyricism.

His works are written in literary language, deliberately dissimilar from the contemporary popular speech. The bookish character of his language, together with the marked archaism (even within the contemporary usage) opened the way for intentional manifestation of the aesthetic function which was reflected, among others, in the artistic nature of his expression (SCHACHERL 2013, SCHACHERL 2019). Zeyer’s exuberant lexis is grounded in wide synonymity that is supported by the nominal character of his expression. The exclusivity of his linguistic imagination is aided by amply represented means of language cumulation, whose lavish artistic expressivity and decorative aestheticism bear the unmistakable signs of the literary *art nouveau*. In Zeyer, every appellation is potentially figurative, as it acquires intricacy through activating the lyrical strain of his narratives. Zeyer’s epicism emanates from the specific structure of his long epic sentence, in which, however – throughout the development of the authorial narrative – the dominant role is more distinctly assumed by the attribute and the simile, along with the metaphor and metonymy. The attribute, to a large extent, comprises independent sentence members and additionally joined



sentence members, which take a significant share in the lavish syntax and variative rhythmicity of the author's long epic sentence. The poet's epic diction evolves in a compatible sequence of semantically related contents of sentences and multiple sentence members. The typical looseness of such fluent narration results from the syndetic and asyndetic coordination of sentences and sentence members. The author's linguistic enumerations are typified by the asyndeton, whereas the polysyndeton supports the looseness and rhythmical arrangement of Zeyer's syntactically overloaded sentence. The course of events unfolds through the long paratactic compound sentence which fluently develops the story line by continually prevalent verbal predicates.

The extent of metaphoric devices or, possibly, imagery enabling the author to individualize or subjectivize the notion of the fictional world, quantitatively increases, in line with the development of his narrative, and culminates at the turn of 1890s. In his production, this process is advanced by two gradual transformations of his approach to the narrative arrangement of the story. The first stage is represented by the augmenting descriptive character of his narration enhanced by a high proportion of non-narrative segments within one narrative profile. The other factor is typified by a symptomatic tension between the intrinsic and extrinsic perspectives of the mediating process in the zenithal narratives of the poet's late creative career, as it is reflected in increased subjectivization. Non-narrative segments, whose function is to locate the individual components of the action, or possibly to mediate the semblance of the involved characters, significantly impact the general framework of Zeyer's works, representing one of the distinguishing marks of his style. The setting of the presented action in a (prodigious) place and time and the presentation of (prodigious) characters, i.e. the full concretization of the reader's ideas, assumes, mainly in the middle stage of his creative career, in the 'renewed and dramatized' images (in the 1880s), the quality of a stylistic dominant. The narrated action is scenically fixed in space and frequently it is implicative of the very existence of the rendered story. The narratives are conceived as lyrically timeless events as if they happened in particular places perpetually. Typical of Zeyer is employing the characters to retell certain parts of the topic, which constitutes a repetitive narrative profile in his epic works, whether written in verse or prose. The narrative rhythm ensues from the succession of dramatic forms (dialogues; dramatized scenes).

The shift in the perspective does not often bring a new quality in relation to its impact on the narrated stuff, but it mostly dramatizes the mediation. Early on, this change involved the subject function, where the position of the narrating characters was highlighted against the structure of the plot (SCHACHERL 2013); subsequently, the continual confrontation between the reader and the personal narrator is neutralized by the author, as personal narrators are distinctly upstaged in their fictional utterances and stylized into a kind of formal representation of a concrete authorial narrator. Zeyer's intricate narratives based on multi-layered mediating process are impedimental to clarity on the one hand, while, on the other hand, being most concretizing and accentuating the perspective (the situational moment) from which the narration is rendered. Different variations of the frame-like compositional presentation helped the author to achieve certain detachment and stylization of the specific, purposely exotic and outlandish themes. The exceptional nature and exclusivity of a topic could also be exploited by the pragmatic author to defend his creative processes consisting in specific transformations of the borrowed material.

The reason why Zeyer lets his personal narrators, whose subjective influence on the narration is almost zero, feature in their stories can be explained by his accentuated reference to the traditional oral presentation of narrative literature. His fictional texts emphasize the mimesis of the narrator; of the story; and frequently even of the public during the narrative act, including a



particular recipient's immediate perception within the fictional world. Thus conceived narratives sustain our awareness that all our knowledge is determined by the fact that it is mediated. In accordance with Kant, Zeyer rejects the objective view of the reality. Any perception always exists in a context which meaningfully formulates it. An important function in Zeyer's fictional world is always fulfilled by the situational moment. In his narrative, the knowledge, which is invariably biased, typically assumes the form of visually sensual rendering of reality. In his writing, reality is not perceived as it really is, but as it exists at the moment of our perception, i.e. in the process of being mediated. Zeyer has this concrete reflection in the narrative utterance secured by a bodily present narrator, often no more than a formal semblance, whose authority is based on its own testimony striving for verisimilitude and authenticity. Yet he is not satisfied merely with the delegated fictionality of the construed fictitious world; using the personal narrator as a realistic filter of events lends many of Zeyer's unrealistic prose texts realistic features and an intentional character. In the author's fictional worlds, both the *ich*-form and the *er*-form personal narrators become spontaneous subjective standpoints that transform the alethic modalities of the fictional world into axiological potentialities. Nevertheless, in the poet's fictional world, the demonstrated realistic elements do not perform their natural function, emphasizing rather the axiological construction of a particular fictional world.

The new representation of Zeyer's narrative modifies the function and the role of the depicted surroundings, especially in relation to the mediated action. In the subject of this type of authorial narrative, the spatial description achieves not only a higher quantitative ratio, but the depicted space ceases to be solely an attractive setting, its meaning becoming somewhat independent of the plot structure. Zeyer's renewed and dramatized portrayal represents a kind of narration that can be segmented into a sequence of many successive concrete images. The resulting figurative metaphors comprise a loosely interconnected entity, while acquiring independent meaning. "The principle of segmenting the whole into separate details that begin to live their own life is a characteristic feature of the poetics at the turn of the century and later on" (KŠIČOVÁ 1998: 33) as well as a typical mark of *art nouveau*. Man's relation to the surrounding world is in Zeyer's prose newly determined by a symptomatic specification of the spatial context. The narration is conveyed as an action that is conditioned by a concretized place and time. The location is closely connected with the characters and their conduct in the story. The spatial and temporal localization of the action becomes the principal determinant of the plot structure. In the middle and final stages of Zeyer's creative career (the 1880s and the 1890s, respectively), the lyricism of his texts is enhanced by decreasing dramatization and an increasing proportion of non-narrative segments in the narration.

From his middle career, the lyricizing trends in his works are also created by the characteristic narrational dynamics between the construed fictional world and the formal aspect of mediation (SCHACHERL 2009, SCHACHERL 2011, SCHACHERL 2013). A significant share in his narrative rhythm can be assigned to the symptomatic tension between subjectivity / objectivity; personification / impersonality; or the extrinsic / intrinsic perspective of the narrative based on the linguistic form of particular fictional texts and on a particular perspective of the story's presentation. The choice of the narrator thus carries a very specific implication consisting in the tension between the used form of grammar and the created fictional world, or potentially the narrative perspective. In a number of his prose works, Zeyer seems to be inclined to use a narratory person that is oppositional to the grammatical form normatively employed in a concrete fictional world. The grammatical *er*-form chosen for the narration notwithstanding, the reader of Zeyer's selected prose seems to reconstruct the fictional world from the perspective of the protagonist, i.e. the *ich*-



form narrator living in the world of characters. This trend is most conspicuous in the writings completed in the poet's middle and late career, such as in the novel *Gompači a Komurasaki* (1884) and *Jan Maria Plojhar* (Lumír, 1888), or in the legend *Inultus* from the triad *Tři legendy o krucifixu* (Lumír, 1892). The tension between the chosen grammatical form and the actual narrational perspective enables the author to achieve a specific aesthetic effect facilitating, among others, the linear isolation of many his protagonists according to their optical and meaningful context within the concretized fictional world. The passive attitude, lacking in energy, which is typical of Zeyer's *er*-narrators (Xaver – Jan Maria Plojhar – Inultus), is implicitly related to the subjectivity and objectivity of the mediated fictional world on the one hand, and the linguistic form of a particular narrative utterance on the other. In Zeyer, the choice of the narrative person often features marked tension in opposition to the inner and outer perspective of the narrated topic. The concrete choice of the grammatical narrative form thus does not anticipate the formational aspect of his narrator, i.e. it does not offer a reliable prediction of the concrete narrative level. In the poet's narratives, the grammatical form of the narration then does not guarantee the perspective from which the presented narrational world will be reconstrued by the reader. The tension between subjectivity and objectivity produces a delicate relationship between the protagonist of the narration and the narrator. This peculiar mode of grammatical formula of the *er*-form narration (the subjective *er*-form) is typical of Zeyer's prose completed in the 1880s and, in particular, in the 1890s, those from the poet's creative prime. By contrast, the process of mediation in his early texts was characterized by the narrator's impersonality, typical of the *er*-form narration, which in Zeyer frequently becomes part of its physical narrator. The impersonal authorial narrator is indicative of the whole of Zeyer's epic poetry. Similar tension between objectivity and subjectivity in the process of mediation, i.e. the suppression of anticipated qualities ensuing from the choice of a grammatical narrative form (SCHACHERL 2013), can be observed even within the genre classification of Zeyer's literary output into lyrical; epical; and dramatic texts, or within the differentiation of the poet's works according to the linguistic form, as poetry; prose; and drama. The relationship between the mediating subject and the rendered fictional reality is in Zeyer's prose frequently subjectivized, whereas in his poetry, this relation remains strictly objective. Therefore the poet's prose is in its primary epicism more lyrical than his epic poetry. The lyricity of his prose is also supported by mutually changing relations between the action, the space, and characters, as many of Zeyer's narratives and epic poems meaningfully accentuate the description of the setting. The works written in the 1880s and the early 1890s evidence a higher incidence of lyrical elements than those completed in his early career, i.e. in the 1870s. Václav Renč in his study on Zeyer aptly remarks that "Zeyer was not fully aware of the differences between the two verbal systems, poetry and prose, nor of the specific function of their form" (RENČ 1941: 26). Although lyricism is contained in all of Zeyer's works, the ratio of lyrical elements follows the chronological sequence of his creative development through gradual increase in their representation, rather than through literary or genre limitations.

Julius Zeyer authored a large collection of literary works, with the greatest share of epic poems and the lowest representation of lyrics. With respect to the form of expression, prose prevails over poetry. Despite the dominant representation of epics and prose, Zeyer's style shows distinctly lyrical features, even within the extent of his production as a whole. The proportion of lyrical elements increases, following his authorial development, as the lyricizing passages gradually become prominent markers typifying his style. The lyrical nature of his epic works is enhanced by his exclusively visual imagery, purposely different from common speech, with stylistically



marked bookish and archaic elements, bearing the marks of literary *art nouveau*. In the middle and final stages of the poet's creative career, his lyricism is enhanced by the changing rhythm of his narrative accentuated by the receding textual dramatization; by a greater share of non-narrative segments in the story; and through the tension ensuing from the contrasts between subjectivity / objectivity; between personification / impersonality; or between outer / inner perspective of the narrative, based on the linguistic form of concrete fictional texts and on the concrete perspective in which the story is actually mediated. Displayed in all of his literary works, lyricism is a characteristic and permanent feature of Julius Zeyer's authorial style.

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