

Summa versologica

Květa Sgallová, *O českém verši*. Praha: Karolinum, 2015, 436 pp.

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The volume reviewed herein summarizes twenty-two texts by Květa Sgallová (*1929), an expert in Czech verse theory, who laid the foundations for modern research into this field alongside Miroslav Červenka (1932–2005). The works selected come from the years 1964–2012 and vary in genre (conference papers, analyses of specific subtopics, extensive synthesizing studies) and extent (from 6 to 60 pages). The published texts are preceded by an author's preface, and they are accompanied by a bibliography of her works and an afterword, both by Robert Kolár, a disciple of Sgallová and Červenka.

Květa Sgallová engaged in verse theory towards the end of the 1950s.¹ According to her own words, she was attracted by its empirical approach, its rationality, and its resistance to (at the time obligatorily Marxist) ideology. Her theoretical and methodological views were shaped by Prague structuralism, and especially by the interwar works of Jan Mukařovský and Roman Jakobson. Sgallová's first contribution to research into Czech verse was a review of Josef Hrabák's *Studie o českém verši* [Studies on Czech Verse] (1959). Her reviews in the 1960s – of Seymour Chatman's *A Theory of Meter* (1965) and of two anthologies, *Mathematik und Dichtung* and *Poetyka i matematyka* (both 1965), among others – betray a keen interest in the application of mathematical methods in literary scholarship. This was a trend in the Czech environment promoted by Jiří Levý, a renowned Anglicist and metrician (see his *Paralipomena* [1971], comprising papers in English, Polish, and Russian). This tendency is also apparent in Sgallová's first article, which deals with the use of punch cards in researching declamatory verse (trochaic verse with a variable number of syllables) of the Czech National Revival. This research culminated in her thesis *Český deklamační verš v obrozenské literatuře* [Declamatory Verse

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¹ Basic information about the author are contained in an interview “Trápí mě, jak málo se literární historici zajímají o verš...” [It worries me how little literary historians are interested in verse] (*Česká literatura*, vol. 60, 2012, no. 3, pp. 385–397; questioner Robert Kolár) and Kolár's afterword.

in the Literature of the Czech National Revival] (1967). Thus we find Květa Sgallová at the very beginnings of the use of computers in analyzing verse. Similar efforts are being made today by Petr Plecháč and Robert Kolár, members of the Versification Research Group at the Institute of Czech Literature of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic (cf. www.versologie.cz/en). By naming their program for automatic verse analysis KVĚTA, they have declared their strong allegiance to Sgallová's work.

In the mid-60s, Sgallová's cooperation with literary theorist and metrician Miroslav Červenka (who published an important work on Czech symbolist free verse in 1963) began; it lasted until Červenka's death in 2005. According to Sgallová, Červenka outlined the direction of the research, while she was responsible for processing extensive primary material for this research. In the same period, their collaboration with the Warsaw-based group of metricians, and specifically Lucylla Pszczołowska and Zdzisława Kopczyńska, began. This gave rise to a project for comparative Slavic metrics. Over the years, the group expanded to include other Slavic scholars (Bulgarian, Russian, Slovenian, and eventually Serbo-Croatian), and their joint work brought forth the nine collections known as *Słowiańska metryka porównawcza* (1978–2011) – a rare example of methodologically conscious teamwork in the field of comparative metrics. A chapter on Czech verse can be found in each of the nine volumes of *SMP*. It is most often authored by Květa Sgallová and Miroslav Červenka (1st to 5th volume, 7th volume), once by these two authors along with Petr Kaiser (6th volume), and once each by Červenka alone (8th volume) and Sgallová alone (9th volume).

For ideological reasons, Sgallová and Červenka were not allowed to continue their scientific activities professionally in the 1970s and 1980s. Working meetings in Warsaw in this period were for them the only forum for scholarly discussion. Cooperation with the Warsaw circle continued in a freer atmosphere after 1989. In the 1990s, institutional patronage of the Institute of Czech Literature enabled Květa Sgallová and Miroslav Červenka to revive their efforts to use computers for verse research and gave birth to the online metrical database *Thesaurus českých meter 1795–1825* [Thesaurus of Czech Metres] (<http://isis.ucl.cas.cz/?form=cme>). Červenka's opus *Kapitoly o českém verši* [Chapters on Czech Verse] (2006), posthumously edited by Květa Sgallová, is a synthesis of their joint efforts. Its postscript (2012) is Sgallová's most recent article on long trochaic verses; Červenka originally intended it as a part of his book, but never wrote it.

Sgallová's collection *O českém verši* [On Czech Verse] – whose title echoes the title of Červenka's book mentioned above – brings together her essential works on Czech verse. Only occasional articles, scholarly reviews, and a few

studies were left out. This collection omits one early work “On a Probabilistic Model of Czech Verse” (1967, together with Miroslav Červenka), which was described by the author herself as “a blind alley” and was already problematically received at the time of its release. Furthermore, works with more than two authors were probably omitted (I write “probably” because the book formulates its selection criteria quite vaguely). These are the very inspiring study “Rhyme, Stanza, and Rhythmic Types” (1973, co-authored by Miroslav Červenka, Stanislava Mazáčová, and Pavel Vašák), investigating the distribution of rhythmic types (i. e. the configurations of accents in verses) within a stanza (namely a quatrain), and a chapter from the sixth volume of *SMP* (2006, co-authored by Miroslav Červenka and Petr Kaiser). The reason for omitting the chapter “Přízvukový rytmus v krátkých rozměrech českého verše” [Accentual Rhythm in Czech Short Metres] from the eighth volume of *SMP* (2004, co-authored by Miroslav Červenka) remains unclear.

The book is divided into five sections. The last one is the only one with a title – “Studies from the volumes of *SMP* co-authored by Miroslav Červenka”. It occupies 3/5 of the book, and I will address it later. The first four sections are identified only by numbers; the principle behind their delimitation is not specified. The first section contains two papers focused on the use of computational technology for processing and analyzing metrical data (punch cards), and presenting it in an online database. The second section summarizes studies dealing with the Czech accentual-syllabic metres (a comparison of the distribution of phonetic words [speech measures] in verse and in prose; the function of monosyllabic words in Czech accentual-syllabic verse; the characteristics of Czech trochaic verse; long trochaic verses in Czech poetry). These works mostly come from the mid-to-late 1960s and the early 1970s, and can be considered as preparatory studies for a chapter on the rhythmic vocabulary of Czech verse in the first volume of *SMP*. The last study of the second section discusses the quantitative metres of the Czech National Revival. It is exceptional within this section both for its purely historical focus, and for the fact that it was originally published in the ninth volume of *SPM* (2011). The third section focuses on analyzing the verse of individual authors. It consists partly of a comprehensive analysis of individual verse technique (Jan Kollár, František Hrubín’s children’s verses) and partly of an analysis of a single feature (non-metricity in K. H. Mácha’s verse). The section closes with a survey of Czech accentual-syllabic translations of Heine’s tonic verse in the 19th century. The fourth section is reserved for studies dealing with rhyme. Rhyme is Květa Sgallová’s key topic. One can find an unusually extensive chapter dedicated to research on rhyme quite soon into her work: in her thesis on declamatory verse (pp. 95–109). Her program paper – delivered at a verse-theory conference in

Brno (1966) – set out the areas for exhaustive research into (Czech) rhyme, which until then had occupied a marginal position within research on Czech verse and had been studied in a way that lacked the needed methodological sophistication (the chapter on rhyme in Josef Hrabák's prominent verse-theory handbook is one of the weakest in the entire book). Other studies in this section are devoted to problems special to Czech rhyme: the relation of rhyme with the grammatical structure of the Czech language, vocalic quantity in rhyme, and the forms and function of rhyme within the poetry of the Czech National Revival. The section's last study offers a comprehensive analysis of the rhyming technique of leading Czech avant-garde poet Vítězslav Nezval.

The last section, as I mentioned earlier, summarizes the chapters on Czech verse – co-authored by Miroslav Červenka – that were originally published as part of the *SMP* volumes. This section comprises these chapters from the first five volumes of *SMP*: I. *Słownik rytmiczny i sposoby jego wykorzystania* (1978); II. *Organizacja składniowa* (1984); III. *Semantyka form wierszowych* (1988); IV. *Wiersze przekładu. Mickiewicz i Puszkina* (1992); V. *Sonnet* (1993). A chapter from the ninth volume (*Heksamet. Antyczne wzorce wiersza i strofy w literaturach słowiańskich*), covering Czech versification's adaptations of classical quantitative metres and stanzas, was included in the third section, as mentioned above. In the preface, the author presents her sole selection criterion: the section comprises “articles focused on the relationship between the system of language and that of verse” (p. 7). But this actually holds true only in the case of the first two volumes, exploring the bidirectional relationship between language (on the one hand its rhythmic structures, on the other hand its syntactic structures) and verse. On the contrary, the focus of the third through the fifth volume is generally on the “sign function” of metrical units (cf. L. Pszczołowska, “Słowiańska metryka porównawcza...,” p. 166). Extracting the texts from their original context – comprising mainly a methodological introduction and an (English) summary comparing the results from individual chapters – has deprived them of a comparative and general perspective, but it has not in any way weakened the author's interpretation of the principles of Czech verse. However, any person interested in the comparative dimension will have to still reach for the original volumes. The methodological and theoretical principles for the research into a particular area are comprehensively formulated at the beginning of each study, after which extensive sets of verses (mostly accentual-syllabic verses from the 19th century) are examined pursuant to these principles. Each article is oriented towards a typological generalization and/or historical synthesis. Regarding the research into Czech verse, the immense quantity of material processed – unprecedented until then – should be emphasized. The articles in the last section are the

cornerstones for our current knowledge of the Czech accentual-syllabic verse of the 19th century, and we can only regret that the two remaining chapters were not included.

The book reviewed here summarizes texts that originated over the course of nearly fifty years. Naturally, as these studies come from such a long period of time, they illustrate transformations of terminology and methods, and perhaps even their fadings into obsolescence – especially where they are linked to the rapidly evolving area of computing technology. For this reason, some of them can not be regarded as relevant today (e.g. punch cards). Yet their publishing can still be regarded as useful, either because they document the history of the discipline and manifest its continuity, or because they contain a wealth of valuable and inspiring observations and insights, untarnished by the passing of time. The merit of the volume under review consists mainly in how it collects and provides a new presentation for texts scattered throughout journals and anthologies. Together with Červenka's *Chapters...*, Sgallová's book defines what has been done in the last half century in the field of Czech verse theory. And what, despite the admirable diligence of both researchers, has not. The nearly exclusive focus on accentual-syllabic verse caused the vast area of Czech syllabic verse (the 9th–18th century in the history of Czech verse) to be disregarded. Also one of the four traditional areas of verse research – stanzaic forms – has remained on the periphery of interest. Likewise, although the area of Czech rhyme has been Sgallová's reigning topic, it has failed to be crowned with a synthetic work (as Sgallová herself complained in the interview with Robert Kolár). I do not mean these facts as criticism, but rather as a challenge for current researchers.

Almost half a century passed since the publication of Květa Sagllová's debut. *On Czech verse* is only her second book so far. Her work in the field of Czech verse is presented through these two publications in relative completeness. And it is a body of work that deserves our recognition.²

² This study was created within the framework of the program for the long-term conceptual development of the research institution no. 68378068. This study is a result of the research funded by the Czech Science Foundation as the project GA ČR GA15-19820S "The metrical structure of Neruda's verse". The sources of the Czech Literary Bibliography research infrastructure (<http://clb.ucl.cas.cz>) were used throughout this study.