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Czech Literature, The King with the Horse's Ears, and Its Translations by Karel Havlícek Borovský and Milan Uhde

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Michelle Woods,
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Abstract: Michelle Woods, in her paper "Czech Literature, *The King with the Horse's Ears*, and Its Translations by Karel Havlícek Borovský and Milan Uhde," analyses the adaptation and "translation" of the Irish legend into the Czech language in Karel Havlícek Borovský's 1854 epic poem *Král Lávra* and in Milan Uhde's 1964 play *Král Vávra*. The translation of Irish language myths and legends into English functioned as way of constructing and disseminating the notion of a great literary and heroic past within the language of the colonizer but also in dissent to the constructions imposed by that language. Woods focuses on how these legends were adopted and adapted by another culture, how these rewritings engaged with the domestic ideological context, and how this relates back to the Irish "origins." In her analysis, Woods questions why this legend spoke to the cultural and political needs of the given periods and how the evolving culture adapted and rewrote the legend to conform to its own changing needs.

Michelle WOODS

Czech Literature, *The King with the Horse's Ears*, and Its Translations by Karel Havlícek Borovský and Milan Uhde

"Let your children / Re-mortar their inheritance," Cú Chulainn tells Conchubar in W.B. Yeats's *On Baile's Strand*, "as we have, / And put more muscle on" (Yeats 267). The invective to Conchubar's heirs to build up their own legacies and add muscle to them parallels the history of retellings of the Chulainn legend and the literary legacies re-formed and passed down, undergoing "shape-changes" across time and across languages. Chulainn appears as a character in two Czech texts from two different centuries: Karel Havlícek Borovský's 1854 *Král Lávra* and Milan Uhde's 1964 *Král Vavra*. Both of these texts are based on an Irish folk tale *The King With the Horse's Ears*, a folk tale that does not itself contain any reference to Chulainn, but to one of the mythic Lagin kings, Labhradh Loingseach. In my study, I question how these Czech "rewritings" (Lefevere) reveal a strategic domestication of the tale and how they, as international literary artefacts, refract onto Irish, Czech, and European literary constructs and why, if this is the case, they are worth re-assessing in a new context, in a year in which the Czechs are becoming new partners for the Irish in the European Union.

Both Havlícek's and Uhde's work are "rewritings of combat" (Tymoczko 178), alluding to Ireland to escape the oppressive binds of censorship instituted by the Austro-Hungarian and Soviet empires. The connection with Ireland is, however, also a surreptitious narrative in the face of imperial and colonial hegemony on both sides and one which even begins to dismantle a limiting history of binaries in which Irish writing is consistently referenced to Britain, or Czech writing consistently limited to Central European writing and legacies of the dominant German or Russian neighbours. The transnational and trans-European links point to both a heterogeneity and commonality within a European rather than a Western European literature -- i.e., one defined by the Occidental powers. Looking at translations and adaptations across these borders reveals the ambiguity of originary narratives allied to national literatures and suggests a give and take in collective self-representations that may help to demystify the mechanisms of cultural hegemony.

The King With the Horse's Ears is itself a rewriting, based on one of the Midas legends. Midas, the king of Phrygia becomes entangled in an argument between Pan and Apollo as to which is the best instrument -- the pipes or the lyre. Midas sides with Pan and in vengeance Apollo gives him ass's ears. Midas hides these except to his barber, who needs to let the secret out and tells it to a tree. However a musician picks a reed from the bark of the tree and when he plays his pipes, Midas's secret is out and he becomes a figure of mirth. In the Irish folktale, the Irish king has horse's ears, and in order to keep the secret he kills each barber he takes on. But he is persuaded by the mother of his new barber Thigue not to kill him as long as he holds the secret. Thigue however tells it to some reeds by the riverbank and the King's harpist, Craftine, going to a ball at the King's palace picks up a reed for his harp. When he plays the last tune of the night "a loud voice began to shout out from the strings that were keeping hold of Craftine's fingers, 'Da Chluais Chapail ar Labhradh Loingseach!' [Labhradh Loingseach has horse's ears]" (Kennedy 253-54). The mortified king apologizes for the dead barbers and pensions their wives and mothers, his barbarity towards barbers being somewhat dismissed in the final sentence of the story: "Only for the blood he got shed he'd never be made the holy show he was in the sight of people from all parts within the four seas of Ireland" (Kennedy 254). Labhradh Loingseach was promoted as "the ancestor-deity of the Lagin [a pre-historic and pre-Celtic tribe in Ireland]," who was euhemerised: Thomas O'Rahilly writes "at the hands of the pseudo-historians and storytellers" (103). There were several early writings based on his legend which O'Rahilly argues were an attempt by the Lagin who originated in Gaul to establish their origins in Ireland -- they represented Labhradh as an exile returning to Ireland and who gained power there. His second name refers to the ambiguity of these origins, as it means both "seafarer" or "exile" in Gaelic, and the legends vary in depicting his place of exile, ranging from Munster (one of the four provinces of Ireland) to Gaul, and even to Armenia. Craphtine also appears in these legends as a musician sent either by Labhradh to woo an Irish king's daughter

Muiriath or sent by her to woo him. O'Rahilly suggests that Craphtine is in fact Labhradh's double -- that they are the same deity from the otherworld because of the similar origins of their names (110).

The ambiguous origins of the tale raise several issues as to the interlinking of Irish literature with other literatures, and the role of literature in the formation of distinct national cultures. It points to the mode by which ethnic and national narratives are spun, and to what extent fictionality inhabits local histories. The fundaments of this are perhaps linked to the orality of early Irish culture, which led to multiple and ever-changing versions of a base legend and the means by which a changing culture reinforced material to create and consolidate its own origins, concealing perhaps non-indigenous pasts in teleological certainties. The translation of early Irish legends and verse into English began in the late eighteenth century, partly engendered by the huge international success of James MacPherson's Gaelic epic and pseudotranslation, *Ossian* (Welch 1-3; on the *Ossian*, see Gaskill). There was a clear purpose in these translations to widen awareness of Irish linguistic and cultural heritage; as Maria Tymoczko writes: "An antiquarian tradition arose in Ireland itself, in which early Irish texts were translated for the purposes of the reclamation of Irish culture … The Irish seized translation of their own cultural heritage as one means of re-establishing and redefining their nation and their people: throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries alike translation was engaged for the purposes of nationalism or protonationalism … The apparently neutral, academic, and recondite translation of medieval Irish texts has been an arena of intense ideological and even political activity" (20-21). This led to what the Irish poet, James Clarence Mangan called (with regard to his own work), "versions and perversions" (8) of both early Irish language writing or foreign language writing, as Irish translators and writers adapted prior work for contemporary ideological needs. Yeats's use of Irish legends and specifically of Chulainn was inherently linked to the cultural nationalism of the Irish literary revival, in which the heroic figures of Irish language writings were adapted and rewritten into traditional English language forms, in some ways acculturating the material to colonial language and stylistics but also challenging these forms by the use of an "alibi," that is, a hoodwinking of the colonizer by the use of familiar forms which are concurrently however, subverted by the Irish content. Tymoczko argues this as the beginnings of articulating decolonisation, and in paraphrasing Frantz Fanon, as a "translation of revolt" and a "translation of combat" (Tymoczko 135, 178). There is some ambiguity in this: first there is the question of how Irish the Irish material is and secondly, how Irish someone like Yeats was. In Patrick Kennedy's collection of Irish tales from 1866, there is a proviso as to the authenticity of *The King With the Horse's Ears* as a specifically Irish legend which simultaneously exposes the reason for publishing the legends and tales in the first place (i.e. in the promotion of a specifically Irish cultural heritage): "But for fear of being detected, we should willingly claim this as an original Celtic legend. But alas! The learned in classic mythology would soon humble our national vanity by quoting that troublesome old Midas of Asia Minor, renowned for the fatal pair of ass's ears bestowed on him by Apollo, the secret told to the reeds, the minstrel fashioning a Pandean pipe out of these reeds, and the treacherous miniature organ squeaking out, 'King Midas has the ears of an ass!'" (254).

Thus, Labhradh Loingseach is, in a sense, really from the "other-world" not only in the sense of being a fictionalised deity, but also one from abroad and one who has his metafictional roots in a classical Greek legend. Yet he is also Irish, too. Similarly, Yeats's Chulainn is the product of an Anglo-Irish heritage, of a writer who spoke no Irish but promoted a specifically Irish heritage. Tymoczko comments on this in relation to Yeats's use of the name "Cú Chulainn," suggesting not only his rewriting of it but the rewriting of others to maintain an image of Yeats as being more *au fait* with Irish language culture: "the problem with using Yeats's spellings and pronunciations as the standard is his representation (following that of Gregory and others) of Cú Chulainn's name as Cuchulain, where various orthographic accommodations to English have been made, including the representation of two words as one, the omission of the long vowel, and the obliteration of the Irish phonemic tense nasal. It should also be noted that Yeats's spelling of Irish proper names, particularly proper names of characters and places in literary texts, was actually not uniform, a point which modern editions are usually careful to obscure in an effort to adapt Yeats's oeuvre to

current standards (and perhaps to represent him as more learned and authoritative than he actually was about the early literature). In part Yeats treats Irish names as he does because his knowledge of Irish was almost negligible and he was not much of a linguist" (242-43).

The heterogeneous components and origins of Irish literature are exposed through an analysis of the rewritings of it and this is also symptomatic when looking at inter-national links. If Chulainn's name is transliterated by Irish writers, it is also transliterated in Borovský's *Král Lávra* and Uhde's *Král Vavra* and his person injected into their rewritings of the *King with the Horse's Ears*: to some extent this fusion of legends enacts the constant intra-cultural versions and perversions but it is necessary to question how loaded with meaning the introduction of Chulainn would be for a Czech audience or readership. Many Irish legends were translated at the turn of the century and Borovský's exposure was probably from German translations of the tales and legends (there was a translation boom following the huge German success of *Ossian*, see Gaskill). The portrayal of Kukulín in the Lávra and Vavra narratives are quite different from each other and from the Irish mythology surrounding him. Shorn of his heroics, in *Král Lávra*, Kukulín is a barber whose mother pleads with the King not to murder as he has his other barbers, in order that they not tell the truth about his donkey's ears. In *Král Vavra*, Kukulín is no sort of hero at all but a Machiavellian character who is not only the King's barber but his secret serviceman and who at the close of the play asphyxiates the King to take power. The abuse of power is the cynosure of all of these Labhradh texts; the pivotal character of the King acting *ex juris* as a consequence of nothing more than his own vanity. The implications of this misrule are satirical and the grotesque notion of the horse or donkey ears, something of a wish fulfilment. Yet they are a re-use of the central material for different satirical contexts, and it is interesting as a result to analyse the rewritings which suggest the writers re-focusing towards their certain targets.

Karel Havlícek Borovský wrote *Král Lávra* in exile, having been forced to leave Prague because of his provocative articles as editor of the Czech language daily *Pražské noviny* and later of *Národní noviny* -- the latter an attempt at publishing outside of the jurisdiction of the Austro-Hungarian authorities. Borovský campaigned for a free press under the Austro-Hungarian regime, writing articles on liberalism and political freedom. Havlícek was indicted for sedition in 1848 following the Prague uprising and then again in 1849 but was acquitted both times, only to be arrested again in 1851 and immediately escorted into exile in the Tyrol mountains. Although many of the Austro-Hungarian censors, of necessity Czech speakers, were sympathetic to the causes Borovský wrote about, his other strategy for bypassing direct seditious comment on Austro-Hungarian rule over the Czech nation was by pretending to a foreign writer, by translating foreign writers, and by writing about other situations which might be paradigmatic of the Czech situation. With regard to the latter, he famously wrote a series of articles on Daniel O'Connell and the Irish situation in *Pražské noviny* in 1847. Barbara Reinfeld writes: "As a liberal interested in encouraging efforts at self-rule among the Czechs, Havlícek followed progressive movements outside of Bohemia as closely as possible. He was most attracted by the Irish movement for home rule, 'Repeal,' and its leader O'Connell. In order to avoid censorship he used the Irish predicament cleverly in order to expose the Czech one in *Prazské noviny*. Short reports purporting to have originated in Ireland, which were datelined Cork or Tipperary and in which Havlícek attacked English policy in Ireland, were particularly popular with the readers, who had little difficulty translating Ireland and 'Repeal' into Bohemia and the Renascence" (25-26). The articles cover the period of Irish greatness in the Middle Ages, followed by the decay that had set in, accompanied as it was by a gradual loss of nationality, and finally the contemporary struggle of the Irish to regain their national identity which was being led by Daniel O'Connell. The entire Irish problem gave Havlícek an opportunity to examine a process similar to the Czech experience, the loss of nationality. Using Ireland as an example, he showed how a nation begins its journey into oblivion. First the dominant or ruling nationality incorporates all the resources of the country as its own, leaving to the native, now subordinate group, only those positions which wield no power and have little or no status attached to them. At this point many people abandon their own identity and join the ruling nation; they adopt the language of the masters and rise in society. Their alienation from their former nationality is complete, and they are often ashamed of their origin. Henceforward the awakening of the people's

dormant nationalism became an immense undertaking, and such a nationality is in danger of extinction.

From this general theoretical statement, Havlícek turned to a discussion of Ireland's plight: its loss of political and economic independence. And, finally he gave a painstaking description of the fight O'Connel (*sic*) was then leading among the Irish to improve their existence, and hopefully, restore their one-time greatness. What impressed Havlícek most about O'Connell was his method, constant reliance on legal means of opposition. O'Connell resorted to the use of petitions, newspapers, pamphlets, public meetings, and organizations, all ways of exposing his people's plight. Whether through the Catholic Union or Repeal, O'Connell marshalled public opinion for the objectives of Irish nationalism, always working within the boundaries of the law. It was this legal opposition and the constitutional framework within which O'Connell worked that Havlícek admired. Under a similar system he hoped that his press would make Czech demands known. Until such a time he continued his self-imposed task of political education (see Reinfeld 25-26). O'Connell attempted constitutional reform in Ireland by fighting for the repeal of the Act of Union, an act initiated in 1800 which dissolved the Irish parliament to bring Ireland once again under the direct rule of the English parliament. He fought for Catholic emancipation and in 1830 was elected to the English Parliament. The Repeal Movement gathered force but split just before his death in 1847, with the Young Irelanders group leaving the movement. 1847 was not only the year of his death and of the articles written by Borovský, it was also the middle of the Famine in Ireland and the period leading up to 1848 and the year of revolution across Europe. The awareness of colonial and imperial injustice and oppression suffuses Borovský's reading of O'Connell, and he opens his arguments suggesting that 'a nation having lost its nationhood always sinks into misery and abomination' and argues that the Irish situation is the most flagrant example of this, thanks to English colonisation (Borovský, "Daniel O'Connell" 107-08; all subsequent translations from the Czech are mine unless noted otherwise). The subtext is in fact itself quite flagrant, with his catalogue of the evildoings of the English empire sounding increasingly familiar to the Czech reader. This comparison becomes explicit at times: "They simply are different to the English and a comparison of the Irish and English national character is exactly like that between the Slav and the German. The Irishman is courageous, good-hearted, happy, welcoming, a lover of old paternal customs, however he is also skittish but completely fair, whereas the Englishman calculates coldly and does business efficiently" (Borovský, "Daniel O'Connell" 109).

Borovský undulates between suggesting that the Irish-English colonial situation is unique in its horror ("it is not easy to think of any other nation whose own unhappy history could be compared to the wretched Irish") and suggesting implicit parallels ("even in ancient Czech history we see that in common local disputes some side will call the Germans for help, who will then become the enemy of both sides (at least the whole nation) by staying in the country and ruling evilly"). Yet crucial to the National Revival and to Borovský's own involvement in bringing a free Czech language newspaper to a Czech reading public was the issue of language itself. In his articles on O'Connell, Borovský emphasizes how the loss of a national language serves as a tool of subjugation referring to the ban on the use of the Irish language in schools and government. This is a misreading of O'Connell -- who, although delivering speeches in Irish, advocated the adoption of the English language because it seemed to him to be the language of the future, and of empowerment through the system in place (in fact, the success of the Czechs in resuscitating the Czech language was later seen as a model in Ireland at the beginning of the twentieth century). Borovský has his own agenda here implicitly emphasizing the goals of the Czech national revival movement and this is also clear in his articulated sorrow at the split in the Irish Repeal movement, and the defection of the Young Irelanders, as this mirrored something of a split in the national revival movement because of the radicalism of the Ceský Repeal movement. Those involved took their name from O'Connell's Irish Repeal movement but advocated a revolutionary rather than constitutional approach to changing the Czech situation in the 1840s, and were thus opposed by Borovský. Borovský's choice of the Irish legend as a base for an epic poem written in exile is perhaps then, not surprising given his interests in the cultural and political parallels between Ireland and the Czech lands, and he uses some of the same techniques as he had in his political journalism. Most

obviously, that of analogy and implication hemmed at the edges by an overt and superficial distancing of Ireland from the Czech situation, which is immediately apparent from the opening lines: "There was once one / Old good king, / But it was long ago, / And also far away from the Czech lands, / Three seas, a dozen mountains / Separates that land where he ruled / from the Czech lands" (*Básne* 35).

The names Labhradh and Chulainn are transliterated into Czech, becoming Lávra and Kukulín, the county Wicklow to Víklov. Kukulín replaces Thigue as the King's next barber and does not have much of the heroic aspect of the Chulainn of the Irish tales or of Yeats's later incarnation. In fact, initially Borovský's hero is defended by his old widowed mother and when he is finally called before the King he is "white as a shadow" (Borovský, *Básne* 42). He tells the secret of the King's donkey's ears to a willow tree in Wicklow, from which a Czech musician, Cervicek, picks his reed for the ball. After the secret is made public when Cervicek plays, the King is loved again by his people and Kukulín is his barber for evermore -- the King not realizing that Kukulín had initiated the release of the secret. It is interesting to note here that the whistleblower is in fact the Czech character who is the unwitting hero of the piece. This resonates strongly with Borovský's own journalistic attempts to expose the practice of censorship imposed by Austro-Hungarian rule and he does make quite explicit attacks on ethnic German hegemony. For instance, the musicians travelling to the King's ball are, however, from the "most famous Karlový Váry band' and the narrator comments that while for Czechs 'home is always of small consequence / but everywhere else / Czechs fill the world / musicians, riders, harpists / administrators, entertainers from Sušice / you will find them straight away everywhere" (Borovský, *Básne* 49). A note at the end of the edition comments that these lines are a non-too veiled attack on the Germanization of Czech culture: "There are few Czechs in the Czech lands, the Germans rule it all … many Czechs found work abroad as musicians, circus entertainers, and administrators" (152-53; note that Borovský was himself at this time an exile in Germany). While there are Czech characters in the poem, the Irish and King Lávra are also representative of the situation in the Czech lands. The apathy of the Irish people – they forgive their King his one eccentricity of barbering barbers -- is perhaps also an call to action. The poem ends with the narrator telling a daughter that she should tell her secrets when she needs to a willow tree, though warns they might not all be like the one in Víklov / Wicklow. The anatomy of silence -- for a journalist forcibly exiled and for the then Czech culture, bereft of its own official language -- is dissected to a certain degree through the analogy with a mythic Ireland. The use of the fairy-tale format in the stylistics of an epic poem again distances the events from contemporary life and appears, at superficial glance, to sanitize them -- the donkey's ears and the killing of barbers apparently functioning as ludicrous grotesquerie – but it serves also to intensify the tension between form and content. The reader may, like the addressed child, be lulled into a false sense of security but not for long.

Havlícek's *Král Lávra* is the inspiration for Milan Uhde's play *Král Vavra*, an absurdist play which was a huge success from its premiere in the Vecerní divadlo, Brno, in 1964. The play is also set in Ireland where a peasant King, *Král Vavra* has killed and banned all barbers except for his secret serviceman Kukulín. Along with the Uncle of the nation, Starý Vrba [Old Willow] they run one half of the terrestrial axis, while the British run the other half. Problems have arisen because of the lack of barbers -- all the people are hindered in their work because of their excessive beards and hair and there has just been a calamitous accident on the Cork to Belfast railway line, because the engine-driver's beard got caught in the train's wheels. Uhde references references Havlícek directly as the instrument which is attempting to reveal the secret is not a musical one but is the state newspaper, *Krok vpred* (One Step Forward). Two young journalists, Cervicek (little worm: the name of the musician in *Král Lávra*) and Kolicek (little peg: a reference to the peg for Cervicek's bass in *Král Lávra*) decide to find out and print the truth of what is happening in the state rather than what they are told to. They discover that the people are unwilling to expose themselves and in the end, they are offered joint chief editorship of the newspaper (now to be called *Skok vpred* [One Leap Forward]) as a bribe to stay within the state discourse. By the end of the play, the people's faith in King Vavra's regime has been shaken, literally, by an earthquake because they have been told that he controls everything and through the play the weather is appar-

ently controlled by rudimentary machines -- a fridge, the toilet, a till. The King, terrified by the earthquake, lets slip that he does not control everything and Kukulín sees his opportunity to gain control -- the play closing with Kukulín murdering the King with his barber's apron.

Král Vavra, the "most famous and most penetrating anti-regime satire" was heavily influenced by the drama of Eugene Ionesco, Freidrich Dürrenmatt, and Slawomir Mrožek in its mix of social criticism and absurdity. In premiered within three months of Václav Havel's first play, *Zahradní slavnost* (*The Garden Party*) which uses a similar structure in its cyclical style and in its use of repetitive scenes and phrases (see Horínek 152-53). Uhde rejected the notion of *Král Vavra* as being a political satire rooted only in the Czech context of the time, that is, Czechoslovakia under communism and just following a period of Stalinism, referred to as a time of the "personality cult." In 1964, Uhde said: "I did not want to write a play about the personality cult. I want the play, as long as it was of good artistic quality, to be produced in ten to fifteen years, when the personality cult will be for us only a chapter in a schoolbook. I hope that my play will have something to say then, because then I hope it will be clearer that the play is not about the cult of personality, or not only about the personality cult. It's a play about what happens when you do not want to hear the truth about yourself … Understandably it is -- or it could be – a play about the abuse of power, and so one can see the motives for the abuse of power in an era of the personality cult" (Horínek 153). Thirty years later, Uhde also rejected the label of political satire, and said that in hindsight he disliked that element of *Král Vavra* because "I was strongly convinced then that I knew how society should be changed and what I had to trounce" (qtd. in Král 159). Critics have also assumed that the play is infused by the context in which it was written: Paul Trensky calling it "a grotesque farce containing a venomous attack against the sterility and degrading stupidity of totalitarian social structures" and he that "Uhde's play is by far the most explicit of the satirical plays of the mid-1960's. It contains little ambiguity and leaves no doubt that the principal satirical thrust is directed against historico-political conditions in Uhde's own country" (126-27). Yet Trensky adds perceptively that "Uhde also succeeded in giving the play a universal significance. King Vavra achieves through hyperbolic abstraction a philosophical understanding of the degenerative processes of history" (127). Uhde's play, although connotative of the time it was written, does not reference it explicitly. As with Havlícek's *Král Lávra*, all the action is set in Ireland and there is no absolutely explicit reference to political or historical conditions of the time. While Uhde does not explicitly reference historical conditions, he does reference several literary works, placing the play within a definite literary referential network. Most explicit is the reference to Borovský, not only in the use of the storyline as a basis (and the use of the Irish legend) but also in a discussion of him in Scene 7. In the scene, the young journalists Cervicek and Kolicek go to the Historical Archives to look for the truth. The archivist is writing a disputation of the truth of Havlícek's assertions, but he gives the young journalists a short history of King Vavra -- how the English created his legend by mistaking him for a King because his surname was King. He adds that he has an "ancient book" by a journalist Karel Havlícek and he quotes the opening lines from the poem, telling them how Karel Havlícek was sent for life abroad -- an obvious warning. Kolicek is astounded and asks him: "What? Our play has happened somewhere before?" The archivist answers: "This play? The truth is that is has happened, is happening and will happen, only no one knows its secret, only me and now you two. The last keepers of the truth. The last people, in the real sense of the word. It is the end; the end of humanity" (Uhde 45).

The sinister aspect of the play is looped into a series of conspiratorial silences and informers, twisting the whistle-blowing musician Cervicek of Borovský's poem into the Cervicek who initially wants to tell the truth and anthropomorphizing the peg and the willow tree from which it was carved in *Král Lávra* into Kolicek the other compromised journalist and into Old Vrba who despite his muddled old man's demeanour serves to regurgitate historical myths of the regime -- of great heroic battles against the "Englishermen" -- but who is also the person to whom the previous barbers have confessed. Kukulín realizes the precariousness of his position when he misguidedly confesses his disillusion with the King to Vrba and realizes that it is Vrba who is the effective executioner. Unlike the good King Labhradh / Lávra of both the Irish legend and Borovský's poem, King Vavra is ignorant, signalled by his demotic Czech and the donkey's ears. The change of name from

Lávra to Vavra is significant and again referential; this time, to Vilém and Alois Mrštik's 1894 play *Maryša*. Vavra is the husband to which Maryša is sold and whom she poisons and it also interestingly the name of one of the leaders of the Cesky Repeal movement, Vincent Vavra, who also worked with Borovský. In *Král Vavra*, all the King's subjects, known collectively as "The People of Two Sexes" are referred to anonymously except for the "Third Woman" who Kolicek knows by as Pepika. She tells him, "I haven't been Pepika for a long time, Kolya, for a long time. I am Josefka. Josefka K." The dialogue follows on: "Cervicek: Josefka what? / Third Woman: K, friend, K. / Kolicek: Sorry, but since when have you been K? / Third Woman: Since always. We're all K. If you're not already a K, you will be a K. One morning you'll get these two men in black come and tell you that you're arrested. And your life from that point on won't be a life but a Trial. Have you not read Kierkegaard, Kafka, Camus? / Cervicek: We wanted to ask you…. / Third Woman: Whatever question you ask someone, they won't answer. The question that someone would answer would never be asked. / Kolicek: I don't know, are we in a nuthouse?" (Uhde 36). Kafka was rehabilitated officially (after being banned under the communist regime) only in 1963, a year before the play's premiere and here Uhde explores blatantly the links between Kafka's *The Trial* -- feminizing Josef K -- and playing with the dehumanization not only by naming the people simply The People of Both Sexes but by then giving them Kafka's own version of this process. The songs which end each scene perhaps lend a human touch to the mechanized prose of the play and also reference the cabaret style Osvobozené divadlo of the inter-war Czech comic duo Voskovec & Werich, as well as Bertholt Brecht.

King Vavra, in his ignorance and stupidity, is also linked to Alfred Jarry's *Ubu-Roi*, a play in which power is seized by a stupid King and his Machiavellian wife, both of whom are eventually exiled from their land -- something of a wasteground -- which the French Jarry designated as being "Pologne, ou Nulle Part." The Central European setting attarcted perhaps the Czech Jan Grossman to directing a version of it, *Král Ubu*, which was a huge international success in the early 1960s, winning awards and touring Europe. Uhde references both the play and the Czech production: *Ubu-Roi* opens with the expletive *merde* and this is echoed in the words of "Third Man" who acts as a slight chorus in Král Vavra, walking around saying, "Hovno, hovno" ("Shit, shit") (Uhde 18). In the Czech production, Ubu's horse is a wheelchair, and this is also Old Vrba's mode of transport. Coincidentally, Yeats attended the Paris premiere of *Ubu-Roi*, remarking on the protagonist as "some sort of King," and taking part in some strange mirror of the riots at the Abbey Theatre, in a riot that followed *Ubu-Roi*'s premiere. However, Yeats proclaims himself "sad" later on because of the lack of heroics in the play, because of "its comedy, objectivity" which has "displayed its growing power once more" (qtd. in O'Donnell and Archibald 266). The satire is too much for his poet's soul and he ends his diary entry: "I say after Stéphane Mallarmé, after Paul Verlaine, after Gustave Moreau, after Puvis de Chavannes, after our own verse, after all our subtle colour and nervous rhythm, after the faint mixed tints of Conder, what more is possible? After us the Savage God" (qtd. in O'Donnell and Archibald 266). Yeats's distaste for the scatological *Ubu-Roi*, the Savage God, shows an underlying choice in the re-presentation of older writings. Jarry's *Ubu-Roi* uses a range of classical references from Sophocles, Shakespeare, to Corneille, Molière and Racine, but for Jarry the ignobility of Ubu pertains to the modern condition where heroicism is not a tragedy but the modalities of everyday life, with its greed and cowardice. Yeats's need to canonize Irish legends had a very different agenda in terms of its relevance to the modern condition, because he uses the terms of classical tragedy to articulate the "terrible beauty" of contemporary Irish life. It is the heroicization of tragedy rather than the tragedy of heroicization. However, in some senses Uhde's "Savage God" has a great deal in common with the style and expression of the Irish legend behind it, which works within the parameters of absurd comedy -- a feature which Tymoczko argues was often omitted in English translations of old Irish texts because it was outside the bounds of decency and did not fit into contemporary perceptions or forms of art. There is also little doubt however that Uhde's play is based on Havlícek's poem rather than the Irish legend itself, as Trensky suggest that "Uhde relies to a considerable degree on the audience's familiarity with Havlícek's tale, which had been a standard text in Czech schools for generations. Some shades and nuances of his play can be fully appreciated only if related to Havlícek" (126). There

are, as I argue above, a series of references to Czech and international literature in the play which enhance a reading of it, as equally would knowledge of the historical and political context of the play in understanding why the rewriting of Havlícek's poem was so timely. Yet Uhde's play, while informed by its context, is not constrained to it, and the play has not been reassessed partly because it is only linked to the conditions of the 1960s in the then Czechoslovakia (including to a degree by Uhde himself).

The play is worth reassessing on its own merits and is much more tightly structured and carefully counter-pointed than critics have suggested. As a transnational literary artefact it is certainly worth reassessing, in its allusive portrayal of Ireland and its adaptation of Havlícek's more direct rewriting of the Irish folk tale (based on the German translation). Havlícek's strategic identification with the Irish in their struggle against colonialism is re-focused in Uhde's *Král Vavra* where the Irish "directorate" are a puppet regime defined by their confinement to a "terrestrial semi-axis," the other half of which is ruled by the imperialist "Englishermen," a direct satiric comment on the Czech government of the time, the Soviet Union and, in Soviet Cold War terminology, the imperialist West. The absurdity of Uhde's Ireland lies in the society which is upheld by these kinds of falsehoods and badly reconstructed mythical histories that can only function because of a collective and inward focused hatred of the "Englishermen." Kolícek, searching for the truth, asks the Archivist: "But how did it all come about? How did it come to this?" For the Archivist, there is a simple and self-evident reason: "Ireland, my dear young friends, is surrounded by the sea on all sides. You try cutting off something from the world and see what it does to you" (42).

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