

Reasons for Crying and Laughing in Sušil's *Moravian Folk Songs*

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Oh, down in Rehradice / on the land pretty flat / water's gently streamin' /
down the old hamlet / so fine, so clear // And in that fair streamlet / little
fish're leapin' / tell me my sweetheart / why your eyes're weepin' / so sad,
so sorrow? // My eyes're weepin' / for you my laddie / since we were
driven / so far away / from each other.

“A Reason for Crying”

František Sušil (1804 – 1868) was a Czech national revivalist, theologian and folk song collector. In his anthology of *Moravian National Songs with the Tunes Embedded into the Text*¹ he called the song from the surroundings of Rajhrad “A Reason for Crying”. Therefore, we can take it as a starting point for a further exploration of the reasons for the expression of sorrow and specifically crying in Moravian folk songs and particularly in Sušil's collection. His work has been used as one of the main sources of the repertoire by traditional folk song and dance ensembles as well as more contemporary bands.

“A Reason to Cry/ Down in Rehradice” (“Příčina pláče/A ty Réhradice”) was among the songs of The Czecho-Moravian Musical Society folk rock band (later shortened to a simple Čechomor) on their first album *Dověčnosti* (1991). Čechomor has become one of the most popular Czech bands across all genres. The song has also become popular among the fans of musician and songster Vlasta Redl of AG Flek band through their album *Tramtárie* (1991). The song provides a simple and direct story: a lover asks his sweetheart why she cries and she

1) My paper is based on the revised edition of Sušil's third collection, Prague: Vyšehrad, 1951. This was based on a previous edition, edited by Robert Smetana and Bedřich Václavěk in 1941.

explains it clearly. However, the parting of two lovers, which is the case of this story, is not the only reason for crying in folk songs. Songs about death, disease, poverty, and more can be spontaneously recalled. One can also easily provide examples of the reasons for laughter and joy in folk songs. But are crying and laughter really equal partners in Moravian folklore (at least in Sušil's collection)? Are they definitely in binary opposition? In this short paper, I will attempt to answer these questions.²

Out of the 823 analyzed songs, crying appears explicitly³ in 77 of them, which makes up more than 9 % of all texts. In 54 cases out of 77 a woman cries (that is in 70 % of the songs with the topic of crying). Mostly she is a young girl, somebody's sweetheart (the narrator's one, or a secondary character's one). She is rarely named: there are a few exceptions such as Katerinka in the song of the same title, Naninka in the song "A Deceiver" and "Anička in "The Choice".

Despite the fact that the reasons for the crying of young girls are diverse, we can define several recurring themes: The first and most abundant group may be called 'a distant lover': The lover was enlisted into the army, he is wounded, he has drowned, he is slashed, or killed, or imprisoned. Slightly less abundant is the theme which can be characterised as 'a lover too much at hand': The girl is crying, because she lost her virginity, she has a baby, the wooers have left her and she is pregnant. Not always is the accusation deserved, which is so in the song

- 2) Sušil's collection is divided thematically into: I Sacred Songs; II Historical Songs; III Love Songs; IV Wedding Songs; V Family Songs; VI Work Songs; VII War Songs; VIII Pub Songs; IX Humorous, Allegorical and Naive Songs; X Ceremonial Songs; and XI New Collection.

In my paper I analyse sections I to IX. Section X has been excluded since its songs are not related to my topic; Section XI has been excluded as well, because it repeats songs from previous sections. Within sections, songs are arranged into subsections, where the headings briefly summarize their content (such as Divine Retribution, Blood of Christ, Unknown Path, Lord's Ingression, Shepherds of Bethlehem, and Shaking the Sour Cherry Tree.). Often there are more variants included. Considering their similarities, I have been working only with the first item presented under the heading. Altogether I have analysed 823 texts.

- 3) In my analysis I have considered only songs which mention directly the word crying, and related words. I have ignored lyrics where the character may cry theoretically (he has the reason for grief), so I have not analyzed all sad songs..

actually called "The Crying" in which a maiden cries because she is accused of not being a virgin any more. Besides these two main areas we can find a few less frequent reasons for crying. For example a girl would like to resolve her position in society, but external circumstances – mainly financial – pose obstacles to her. Therefore in the song called "An Easy Help" a maiden cannot get married, because she does not have oats and hay for the horses. There are very interesting differences between individual songs: while a woman in the song "A Bride's Cry" disobeyed her mother's advice and now she is getting married, a maid cries in the song "The Prayer" because she is not yet married.

In the shadow of these marriageable girls, victimized and deceived maidens and young girls, who have lost their possible grooms in war and other troubles, there are elderly women, who cry for different reasons. They do not lose their lovers but husbands or sons, for example in the song "The Killed". These are but isolated examples, considering the total number of the songs. The ballad "Saint Laurence" has a unique theme: the woman is crying because a heathen is roasting her baby.

There are only ten crying men in all the analysed songs (approximately 13 % of the songs with the theme of crying). Approximately half of them are young men and they cry over the death of a sweetheart, because of the distance between them, or adultery. There are also more explicit expressions of the sadness about the poverty in the family (in the song "A Non-mother"). In other songs, a farmer is crying because he is poor, a Turk is crying because his girl has drowned, a prisoner is crying because he cannot be free, an old father is crying because his daughters treat him ungratefully. A very interesting moment is in the song "The Burned", where a group of young men are crying because sparks are falling on Babushka/Granny. There is no reference to a volunteer fire squad activity. The crying therefore represents a significant feature of a passive approach of the main characters towards reality.

Other characters than those mentioned above appear crying in songs only rarely. Children weep only in three songs (the gender is not given):

the reasons are poverty, the death of their mother and nanny's refusal to look after them.

A repenting soul cries in two songs, Virgin Mary cries once for her son's suffering, an adult Jesus is forced to cry over his sufferings, and the same reason drives the baby Jesus to cry who has to redeem Christians by his own body.

There is only one example of a crying animal noted by Sušil: a tomcat rests with his tail cut off and that makes the cat and her kittens cry.

The last category is the crying of things, though usually imaginary. In two of the three examples found a weeping thing substitutes a living being: The wood which weeps in the song "An Enchanted Daughter" is in fact a girl herself, and the fish trap in the song "The Ferryman" is crying instead of the slain girl and asks the murderer: Why have you hurt me? Therefore the only real cry of inanimate objects is the sorrow of the crockery and cutlery – the spoons and the plates – because of the departure of the girl who took care of them.

While laughter is very rare in Moravian folk songs, crying is present in various forms. Although a typical crying creature is represented by a young girl – deprived of her lover or on the contrary seduced – the statement "men don't cry" is not valid in these songs. Men do cry, and even, though rarely, do animals and things.

What about laughter? When we search explicitly for words like laugh, grin, smile, chortle, chuckle, or possibly semantically more distant words like jeer, scoff, or mock, surprisingly we find only eight songs, which is less than 1 % of all the songs⁴. In the folk songs collected by Sušil virtually nobody laughs, or there is no such need to describe joy and happiness as there is in the case of sadness.

Laughter is mentioned only eight times and even if it may seem not enough, the final number can be even shattered as a result of too much of

4) I would definitely obtain slightly different results if I did not search for an explicit occurrence of laughter and crying, but for the frequency of various expressions of joy and sadness respectively. However, even then sad themes would outnumber cheerful ones.

a semantic benevolence set at the beginning of this mini research. Frequently, it is not laughter as an expression of joy, as we usually consider it today. It is rather mockery, so again it is a negatively viewed situation. Furthermore we find the hysterical laughter of a villain (in the song "The Murderer" a Hungarian king is laughing during an act of violence). Eventually the only one laughter really reflecting the amusement of the narrator is the following verse from the song "The Committee": The tailor's jabbin', jabbin', I'm all o'er laughin'. Despite the significant rate of malevolence at least here we may look at the laughter the way we would like to regard it.

When we perceive Moravian folklore through the prism of the collection of the Catholic priest František Sušil, crying and laughter are not two different poles in a perspective on life. In Sušil's collection the feelings of the characters and their external expression are markedly shifted towards sadness and crying. Therefore it should not be "the crying and the laughter" but "the crying and the crying"; that would be a suitable title.

As he was a cleric, Sušil preferred some themes to others. If the characters of the songs collected by him commit sins (or, enjoy earthly pleasures), they will pay for it or at least regret it. Despite this specific attribute of the most famous Moravian song collection I can give two general conclusions: 1. We may see in folk songs a predecessor of a contemporary journalism – more tabloid than serious – which tends to be interested in tragedies rather than in delight; 2. Anonymous authors needed to express their sorrows in songs, while keeping their joy to themselves.

References:

- Sušil, F. (1951). *Moravské národní písně s nápěvy do textu vřaděnými*. Praha: Vyšehrad.