

A “RIGHT TO SADNESS”

Late Socialist Environmentalism
between Technocracy and Romanticism
and the Czech Nature
Writer Jaromír Tomeček*

Martin Babička

Abstract

The article examines the works of nature writer Jaromír Tomeček, his public image, and his reception by literary theory and criticism as a distinctive late socialist response to environmental concerns. The article argues that the “ecological techno-optimism” of Jaromír Tomeček was representative of the late socialist reconsideration of human-nature relations that rejected the earlier modern understanding of humans as masters of nature and tried to find a new harmony between the two, but that also rejected the “pessimistic” perspective of Western ecology. Revising the tradition of socialist realism, late socialist literature allowed for sorrow over loss (“a right to sadness”) while still giving primacy to joy over progress, negating the “existential despair” of the 1960s. It thus preserved the progressive temporal orientation tied to the socialist ideal of increasing material wellbeing while trying to reconcile technocratic rationality with romantic subjectivity. “Ecological techno-optimism” eventually materialized in the form of the nuclear energy programme as the solution to the ecological crisis.

Keywords

environmentalism, late socialism, Czechoslovakia, socialist realism, nuclear energy

* This work was supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council UK.

Historians of environmentalism in Eastern Europe have mostly focused on the ecological crisis under late socialism as a sort of negation of communist ideology, but there is still very little understanding of what “nature” meant in late socialist culture. Much existing scholarship has too easily presupposed that communist elites would by default be “against nature” while the opposition formed “little corners of freedom” as “a sort of antidote to the materialist logic” of the socialist state, seeing problems such as pollution simply as the result of Marxist-Leninist ideology.¹ In this vein, Miroslav Vaněk has argued that in Czechoslovakia the “lack of interest in anything outside the area [of private life] also affected the environment, in all respects – aesthetic, ecological, and intellectual”.² That itself was a view adopted from the dissidents; in 1987, Charter 77 wrote a letter to the Czechoslovak government titled “To Be Able to Breathe”, criticizing its neglect of environmental problems. Although that discourse became dominant after 1989, to understand better the meanings given to nature under late socialism it is also necessary to pay attention to discourses that were prominent in its culture but lost in later history. This article thus turns attention to the works of the author Jaromír Tomeček, active in literary circles and often appearing in newspapers and on television and radio, and his reception by literary theory and criticism. As I will show, Tomeček was considered the leading figure in the area of nature writing, whose increasing interest in the changing relations between humans and nature was seen by his contemporaries as a rightful response to the ecological crisis.

I argue that what I call “ecological techno-optimism” was a distinctive response of late socialist literature to the ecological crisis, one that combined belief in technocracy with a romantic turn to a subjective perception of nature. Ecological techno-optimism differed (yet was derived) from what is usually called “techno-optimism”, which characterized the previous periods, in its appreciation of the negative aspects of technological progress and an emphasis on renewed relations between humans and nature. Late socialism, as represented by the official literature that I examine in this article, refused the earlier modern understanding of humans as masters of nature (including the Stalinist conception of nature), trying to find a new harmony between the two. But it also rejected the “pessimistic” perspective of Western ecology. A new approach was developed that combined joy over progress and sorrow over loss; a “right to the sadness of memory” as literary theorist Josef Peterka called Tomeček’s approach, one

¹ Arvid Nelson, *Cold War Ecology: Forests, Farms, and People in the East German Landscape, 1945–1989* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), p. xii; Douglas R. Weiner, *A Little Corner of Freedom: Russian Nature Protection from Stalin to Gorbachëv* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Philip R. Pryde, *Conservation in the Soviet Union* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972).

² Miroslav Vaněk, *Nedalo se tady dýchat: ekologie v českých zemích v letech 1968 až 1989* (Praha: Maxdorf, 1996), p. 7.

that emphasized the need to remember what was lost to the force of progress.³ The primacy of joy along with the recognition of pain from which progress was born was also a negation of the "existential despair" of the 1960s socialist reformism and modernism. A new, optimistic perspective was offered instead, which emphasized the newly found harmony of humans with nature, materialized, among others, in nuclear energy as a techno-optimistic solution to the ecological crisis.

The article thus builds on research that has seen environmentalism as being a part of the agenda of socialist experts but also draws attention to how the continuing belief in technological progress was reconciled in late socialist culture with the awareness of the ecological crisis.⁴ In one of the earliest accounts of socialist environmentalism, Joan DeBardeleben has studied East German and Soviet ecological discourses as being both a tool of political legitimacy and an advocacy for nature.⁵ She has argued that since the death of Stalin, natural scientists were not necessarily expected anymore to articulate theories that would approve of the Communist Party's view of historical development. This allowed them "to seek explanation, rather than simply to explicate justifications".⁶ Looking at Czechoslovakia in the 1960s, Doubravka Olšáková and Jiří Janáč have similarly argued that the Stalinist project of "transforming" nature was replaced by a technocratic management that, on the level of ideology, emphasized "control" over nature rather than its "mastery".⁷ Moreover, Petr Jehlička and Joe Smith have argued that the technocratic rationality of late socialism was accompanied by a romantic appreciation of nature that had a long history in Czechoslovakia.⁸ They have asserted that the blend of a scientific approach to nature in education and its romantic undercurrent in the tradition of hiking culture (called *tramping* in Czech) led many people

³ Peterka did not use the "right to sadness" analytically, but I adopt it here to characterize the overall tension in late socialist literature between the individual past and the collective future that he theorized. Josef Peterka, "Téma paměť", *Česká literatura* 33, no. 2 (1985), p. 109.

⁴ For the concept of "technocratic socialism", see Matěj Spurný et al., "Technokratischer Sozialismus in Der Tschechoslowakei", *Bohemia* 57, no. 1 (2017), pp. 12–24.

⁵ Joan DeBardeleben, *The Environment and Marxism-Leninism: The Soviet and East German Experience* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1985), p. 47. Similarly, sociologist Zsuzsa Gille has also contrasted the simplistic view of state socialism as a "wasteful economic order" with her research on waste management in socialist Hungary. Zsuzsa Gille, *From the Cult of Waste to the Trash Heap of History: The Politics of Waste in Socialist and Postsocialist Hungary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007).

⁶ DeBardeleben, *The Environment and Marxism-Leninism*, p. 61.

⁷ Doubravka Olšáková and Jiří Janáč, *The Cult of Unity: The Stalin Plan for the Transformation of Nature in Czechoslovakia, 1948–1964* (Prague: Academia, 2021), p. 251.

⁸ Petr Jehlička and Joe Smith, "Out of the Woods and into the Lab: Exploring the Strange Marriage of American Woodcraft and Soviet Ecology in Czech Environmentalism", *Environment and History* 13, no. 2 (2007), pp. 187–210.

to take an interest in the environment. However, according to Jehlička and Smith, that approach failed to provide Czech environmentalists with a systemic critique of either state socialism or capitalism. Furthermore, they have pointed out that the increasing knowledge of the bad state of the environment in Czechoslovakia before 1989 did not translate into effective policy measures. This article further explores the connections between technocratic rationality and a romantic view of nature as a potentially powerful legitimating discourse that opposed both Western environmentalism and reform socialism of the 1960s with the ambition to bridge an individual attachment to nature with the official narrative of socialist collectivism marching to a better future guaranteed by technological progress.

It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss at length the variety of approaches to nature in that period, but it is necessary to consider some of the most important aspects. Around 1970, there was a debate between Western capitalist and Soviet Marxist technocrats over planetary limits: while Americans like Paul Ehrlich argued that it was necessary to institute limits to growth due to the dangers of overpopulation, critics accused them of neo-Malthusian attacks on the underdeveloped world and social progress.⁹ The publication of *The Limits to Growth*, commissioned by the Club of Rome, was a great influence on Czech experts like Bedřich Moldan, who became the Minister of Environment in 1990. Many Marxist-Leninist ecologists and futurologists, however, took a strongly opposing view to such “pessimism”.¹⁰ Of course, the situation on the ground was much more nuanced and the positions of different nature advocates were hardly so clear-cut. Environmental problems were getting more attention not only from experts, but also journalists and various nature protectionists, who were mainly focused on awakening some sort of enthusiasm for nature.¹¹ The unexplored breadth of late socialist environmentalism is apparent solely from the variety of discourses of the television programmes that Tomeček appeared in: from a literary magazine celebrating the beauties of the national landscape to a documentary promoting the construction

⁹ For the U.S. debate, see Thomas Robertson, *The Malthusian Moment: Global Population Growth and the Birth of American Environmentalism* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2012), pp. 176–200. Although neo-Malthusians were also criticized from many sides in the West (from advocates of consumerism to anti-racist activists), they were also a frequent target in the state socialist discourse on nature and the future, see such Soviet and Czechoslovak popular scientific books as Igor’ Ivanovič Adabašev, *Život zítra - tragédie nebo harmonie* (Praha: Svoboda, 1978, 1978); Jan Bauer, *Uživí naše planeta lidstvo?* (Praha: Albatros, 1978). For Marxist-Leninist debates about the environment, see DeBardeleben, *The Environment and Marxism-Leninism*.

¹⁰ Bedřich Moldan, “Meze ekonomického růstu na planetě Zemi”, *Vesmír*, no. 52 (1973), pp. 40–42; Jaromír Tomeček, *Živly a osudy* (Brno: Blok, 1985), pp. 9–11.

¹¹ Doubravka Olšáková, “Environmental Journalism? Radio Free Europe, Charter 77 and the Making of an Environmental Agenda”, *Environment and History* 28, no. 2 (2022), pp. 203–227. For a representative example, see Josef Velek, *Jak jsem bránil přírodu* (Praha: Práce, 1980).

of a nuclear power plant as a technocratic solution to the ecological crisis, as well as an educational programme trying to raise environmental awareness.

Analysing the context and reception of Tomeček's work will thus be useful for the overall characterization of the late socialist relationship to nature, since his central, yet in parts ambiguous, position speaks to the inner conflicts of late socialism. As this article will show, Tomeček adhered to several intellectual traditions. He was influenced by the 19th century Czech tradition of nature prose, American Transcendentalism, the interwar Czech left-wing avant-garde, and contemporary Soviet nature writing. Tomeček himself emphasised his memories from the Scouts and the time he spent in Subcarpathian Ruthenia. Yet he was also a member of the Union of Czech Writers, which followed the official line during the period of political consolidation after the Prague Spring.¹² Throughout his writing, he considered the Marxist conception of historical progress to be important, and he was particularly explicit about the anti-fascist, materialist legacy of the Communist Party. Particularly in his later writing, he sought to reconcile the romantic relationship of the human subject to nature, which served as a necessary escape from life in a technical civilisation, and the indispensable role of technocracy as the driving force of progress. In some ways, he could be read as a defender of unspoilt nature and a critic of modern alienation, yet he remained an advocate of a comfortable life guaranteed by the technoscientific advances of the socialist state.

To understand the significance of Jaromír Tomeček in advocating a change in human-nature relations while staying confident about technocratic socialism, I will proceed in three steps, following the trajectory from his early years to his late works. However, I will not give much attention to the main body of Tomeček's work but rather to the biographical narratives, literary interpretations, and media representations that Tomeček and others created.¹³ Rather than assessing his aesthetic merit or originality of thought as many literary scholars might do, my aim is a historical analysis of the mythology of Tomeček as an author who was making the rounds in a variety of media. Literary critics at the time interpreted his increasing interest in the conflict between humans and nature as a reflection of the ecological crisis, thus creating a new discourse around his works that will be the focus here. Firstly, I will discuss Tomeček's understanding of human-nature relations, based on his autobiographical explanations and public

¹² In 1972, when the Union of Czech Writers was established, Tomeček became a member of its control committee, keeping his position from the dissolved Union of Czechoslovak Writers. *4. sjezd Svazu československých spisovatelů (Protokol): Praha 27.–29. Června 1967* (Praha: Československý spisovatel, 1968), p. 202; *Ustavující sjezd Svazu českých spisovatelů ve Dnech 31.5.–1.6. 1972* (Praha: Svoboda, 1972), p. 129.

¹³ For a basic overview of his work, see the entry in the Dictionary of Czech Literature: "Jaromír Tomeček", *Slovník české literatury*, accessed January 17, 2022, <https://slovníkceskeliteratury.cz/showContent.jsp?docId=444>.

image; Tomeček repeatedly provided an interpretative framework for his work by referring to authors he admired and explaining links between his earlier life and his writings. In the second part, I will look at the reception of Tomeček in late socialist literary debates; from the 1970s, Tomeček's literary activities served to criticize and revise the early communist literature. Finally, I will examine the writings of Tomeček and his colleagues about the construction of the Dukovany nuclear power plant; the 1980s thus saw a final attempt at finding harmony between technocratic socialism and ecology.

A Living Classic

Active from mid-1940s, Jaromír Tomeček wrote several books of prose dedicated to nature, with an increasing focus towards the end of his career on ecology and the relation between nature and human civilization. Beginning in the 1950s, Tomeček took part in numerous talks and debates on nature, sometimes organised by the Czechoslovak Society for the Dissemination of Political and Scientific Knowledge, other times at the invitation of local libraries, galleries, and factories.¹⁴ He collaborated with and regularly appeared on both Czechoslovak radio and television to talk about nature. He wrote for diverse readers, both adults and children.¹⁵ One could read his short stories in newspapers, usually lyric narratives or adventure tales.

Tomeček's appearances on radio and television as well as numerous discussions with readers made him into a public figure who should not be understood only as a writer but also as an oral narrator. It is likely, in fact, that more people encountered him telling stories on radio or TV than by reading his books. He appeared in interviews, reviews, and various other news stories; for example, the daily newspaper *Práce* reported on November 21, 1958 that Tomeček brought home ripe strawberries and raspberries from his walk around Brno, adding that "he knows where to go" to get them.¹⁶ He was indeed aware of his own influence as an author-celebrity: commenting in 1963 on debates about leisure time and scientific-technological revolution, he wrote: "Well, I would suggest spending leisure time – apart from self-education – in nature. That's why I am Tomeček."¹⁷ In 1962, he began hosting a television programme whose title could be loosely translated as *Shooting without Guns* (*Lovy beze zbraní*) about nature lovers carrying cameras instead of guns. Originally envisaged as a one-off series, the programme remained on television for two decades thanks to its popular-

¹⁴ For instance, a poster advertising a talk with Jaromír Tomeček in his hometown of Kroměříž, 1956. PNP Fund Jaromír Tomeček, sg. 32/A/5, box 61, unsorted.

¹⁵ The personal archive of Jaromír Tomeček in the Archive of the Museum of Czech Literature contains 11 boxes of mostly newspaper and magazine articles by and about Tomeček that range from dailies to specialist beekeeping magazines to elite literary magazines. Fund Jaromír Tomeček, PNP, boxes 61–71, unsorted.

¹⁶ "Kam na ně chodí?", *Práce*, Nov 21, 1958, p. 5.

¹⁷ Jaromír Tomeček, "Co s volnem a Gilgamés", *Host do domu*, no. 10 (1963), pp. 194–195.

ity.¹⁸ Critics appreciated him for his focus on nature, enchanting personality, and optimism.¹⁹ Particularly later in his life, the media talked of Tomeček as "a living classic".²⁰ He would often be depicted as a poet surrounded by nature; one illustration even potentially evoked the archetypal image of Orpheus summoning animals with his music.²¹ That would mean that Tomeček, through his poetry, transcends the boundary between humanity and nature, which was indeed one of his aims.

Tomeček explained that his initial interest in nature came from his childhood experiences, especially Scouting.²² He recalled how he and his friends would collect forest fruit to bring home during World War I while pretending to be Robinson Crusoe or Winnetou, a fictional Native American hero from the novels of the German writer Karl May that were immensely popular in Czechoslovakia.²³ He joined the Czech Scouts, an organization based on an outdoor lifestyle and nature preservation as much as on ideas about moral citizenship and discipline. In addition to the influence of the British Scout Movement of Baden Powell, the Czech Scouts took inspiration from Ernest Thompson Seton, a US author active at turn of the 19th and 20th century and one of the founders of Boy Scouts of America, who combined an Enlightenment emphasis on education, woodcraft arts, and advocacy for Native Americans in his programme.²⁴ Tomeček remembered his Scouting years as a time during which he cultivated both his love for nature and writing. His first literary attempt was for a Scout writing competition, which he won, using the prize money to buy "world literature".²⁵

The idyllic landscape of Subcarpathian Ruthenia, isolated from civilization and modern technology, became the subject matter of Tomeček's first novels.²⁶ He came

¹⁸ Jarmila Cysařová, *Česká televizní publicistika: svědectví šedesátých let* (Praha: Česká televize, 1993), pp. 34–35. Two books of the same name were published based on the programme: Jaroslav Müller, *Lovy beze zbraní* (Ostrava: Profil, 1967); Jaromír Tomeček, *Lovy beze zbraní* (Praha: Albatros, 1976).

¹⁹ Josef Hrabák, *Život s literaturou* (Brno: Blok, 1982), p. 181.

²⁰ See, for instance: *A léta běží ... Jaromír Tomeček*, Czechoslovak Radio, 1986, Czech Radio Archives.

²¹ Vilém Reichmann, "Jaromír Tomeček", *Stadion*, May 24, 1961.

²² *Spisovatel Jaromír Tomeček hovoří o svém životě*, Czechoslovak Radio, 1969, Czech Radio Archives, part 1, 15:23–15:37.

²³ Jaromír Tomeček, "Kalokagathia", *Zlatý máj*, 2 (1972), pp. 74–76.

²⁴ While the two later disagreed because of that, the founder of the Czech Scouts, Antonín Benjamin Svojsík, stressed both traditions. Brian Morris, "Ernest Thompson Seton and the Origins of the Woodcraft Movement", *Journal of Contemporary History* 5, no. 2 (1970), pp. 183–194; Antonín Benjamin Svojsík, *Základy Junáctví* (Praha: Merkur ve spolupráci s Junáckou edicí Ústřední rady Českého Junáka, 1991), pp. 19–24.

²⁵ The authors included Jack London, Rudyard Kipling, Ernest Thompson Seton and Henry David Thoreau. Sylva Bartůšková, *Jaromír Tomeček* (Praha: Československý spisovatel, 1981), p. 32.

²⁶ His early novels, which were reprinted throughout the socialist period, took place in Carpathi-

there in his twenties as a notary after studying law in Brno. In Subcarpathian Ruthenia, which was then part of the Czechoslovak Republic, Tomeček made the acquaintance of Czech communist writer Ivan Olbracht and got his first offer to publish in *Lidové noviny*.²⁷ Tomeček was greatly influenced by Olbracht, finding the region fascinating not only for its spatial but also temporal distance from “civilization”: both the landscape and people seemed to be “from the eleventh century”.²⁸ He was fascinated by Rusyns, who populated the mountainous region, as “they believed in superstitions” and many did not know modern technology.²⁹ The image of unspoiled nature and “uncivilized” people as its part served Tomeček as a way to inspire modern humans to reconnect with nature, but also as an argument for modernization, which he saw as a necessary step towards greater material wellbeing.³⁰

Indeed, Tomeček’s desire to perceive nature affectively was linked to the Baroque religiosity of his hometown. Jaromír Tomeček grew up in Kroměříž, a South Moravian town known for its Baroque architecture that served in both autobiographical and biographical narratives to explain his ideas about human life, beauty, and the landscape: as an altar boy he was supposedly drawn to the mystique and decoration of the church that made him contemplate the mystery of life and death.³¹ Tomeček remembered that he would learn from a Catholic catechist both good manners and a relationship with nature, particularly flowers and their traditional symbolism in interpersonal relations that was important to know on his trips to the Subcarpathian Ruthenia and other regions to the East of the “down-to-earth” Czechs.³²

In that and many other regards, Tomeček reflected the notion of nature developed by American Transcendentalists, particularly Henry David Thoreau, an American author

an Ruthenia: Jaromír Tomeček, *Sříbrný lipan* (Praha: J. Lukášik, 1944); Jaromír Tomeček, *Vuř se směje* (Brno: Průboj, 1944).

²⁷ Ludvík Štěpán, “Boj o zemi zaslíbenou”, *Tvorba*, no. 40 (1976), p. 9.

²⁸ *Spisovatel Jaromír Tomeček hovoří o svém životě*, part 1, 18:18–18:28. Ivan Olbracht dedicated several works to the region: Ivan Olbracht, *Nikola Šuhaj Loupežník* (Praha: Melantrich, 1921); Ivan Olbracht, *Země bez jména: Reportáže z Podkarpatska* (Praha: Otto Girgal, 1932).

²⁹ *Spisovatel Jaromír Tomeček hovoří o svém životě*, part 2, 4:54–6:34. Although the Czech left-wing avantgarde criticized the interwar Czechoslovak Republic for its imperialism towards Subcarpathian Ruthenia, some could not resist exoticizing the local people, see Geoffrey Brown, “Blaming the Bourgeoisie: The Czech Left-Wing Response to Perceived Czech Imperialism in Subcarpathian Ruthenia, 1931–1935”, *New Zealand Slavonic Journal* 46 (2012), pp. 71–90.

³⁰ Under state socialism, the image of the region was alive largely thanks to Tomeček’s generation. For example, a children’s adventure writer, František Továrek, active in the Scouts and later the Pioneers, also admired the region for both its natural beauty and former technological backwardness, which he witnessed when he was sent there as a teacher. Továrek contrasted the region’s interwar poverty and superstition with today’s “health centres” and “radio and television”. František Továrek, *Hory a lidé* (Hradec Králové: Kruh, 1985), p. 13.

³¹ Bartůšková, *Jaromír Tomeček*, p. 31.

³² *Spisovatel Jaromír Tomeček hovoří o svém životě*, part 1, 09:30–14:01.

whose holistic vision of nature offered an experiential and transcendental understanding of the relation between humans and the natural world.³³ Much as Thoreau was fascinated by Native Americans, Tomeček found his way towards the experience of nature through Karl May stories and his sojourn in Ruthenia; both gave him a semblance of a direct, unmediated access to old traditions and nature, unspoiled by civilization.³⁴ Thus, they both romanticized indigenous peoples from a position of power as men coming from "civilization".

So if Tomeček had a particularly "baroque" sensibility, it was not so much a matter of religiosity as a Transcendentalist concern for the unity of humans with their landscape and perhaps a turn to existing local heritage.³⁵ The baroque provided him with a vocabulary of cultured landscape, human misery, and the unity of nature. In his book *The Mountain is Burning (Hora hoří, 1984)*, Tomeček described the misery of a dying forest, with trees being called "baroque friends" and likened to martyrs.³⁶ In a rather eclectic fashion, just after the passage about "baroque" elms in *The Mountain is Burning*, Tomeček praised the romanticism of the old path he walked, which was like "leafing through Thoreau" without any fear the fumes from a car would poison his lungs.³⁷ Elsewhere, confessing his dedication to the life on Earth, Tomeček depicted the "one law" guiding humans and animals "from creation to extinction"; when one realized the law's existence, one would be "permeated with love of the ordinary day and its hardships".³⁸ Tomeček therefore did not see in nature God's creation but a celebration of life itself. In that regard, Tomeček drew upon a romantic, emotional connection with nature, similar to that proposed by the American Transcendentalists, to question some of the technological advancements of contemporary civilization: "After all, we are part of nature, and I think that if we abandon the natural way of life once, it will be a kind of foreshadowing, a vigil of the extinction of humanity, because it is impossible to live without nature. [...] [W]hen humans leave nature, nature leaves them."³⁹ Even the literary scholarship of the time noticed Tomeček's holistic approach to nature; Sylva Bartůšková explained that what separated humans from nature in Tomeček's philosophy was their insatiable desire to overcome the transience of life, which manifested itself in the conquest of nature and space. However, this separation

³³ Indeed, he noted that Henry David Thoreau was his biggest literary influence. *Spisovatel Jaromír Tomeček hovoří o svém životě*, part 2, 24:51-26:11. Thoreau and other transcendentalists greatly influenced Western environmental thought, see Donald Worster, *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 58-111.

³⁴ On Thoreau, see Worster, p. 96.

³⁵ Thoreau, like the Romantics, saw the "God-principle [diffused] throughout nature". Worster, p. 87.

³⁶ Jaromír Tomeček, *Hora hoří* (Praha: Československý spisovatel, 1984), p. 56.

³⁷ Tomeček, *Hora hoří*, p. 57.

³⁸ Tomeček, *Lovy beze zbraní*, p. 14.

³⁹ *Spisovatel Jaromír Tomeček hovoří o svém životě*, part 2, 26:46-27:52.

from nature was only apparent, Bartůšková argued, since the desire emanated from humans as a part of nature. Nature thus “extends to the whole universe”, with humans “its thinking, creative and conscious part”.⁴⁰

However, Tomeček’s romanticizing approach to nature was combined with an allegedly strong dedication to scientific accuracy, which was based on Soviet nature writing and on the realistic conceptions of socialist literature.⁴¹ Since nature was seen as constantly changing, it was as necessary for an artist as for a scientist to “look with the eyes of an expert” to gain a “current perspective”.⁴² Tomeček himself claimed to spend two thirds of his creative time exploring nature, often in the company of experts.⁴³ The blend of objective knowledge and subjective experience echoed the works of Soviet author Mikhail Prishvin, who was an author of Siberian fairy tales and travelogues.⁴⁴ Soviet criticism described Prishvin as a “unique blend of fact and fantasy, of science and art”, combining authorial lyricism with scientific data to create a cognitive truth.⁴⁵ The combination of scientific and aesthetic perspective was the key to understanding nature. Whereas science stood for objective, empirical knowledge, art brought in subjective perception.⁴⁶ As a host of a popular scientific programme broadcast by Czechoslovak Radio put it: “Every modern person should have in oneself a bit of Einstein and a bit of, say for example, Prishvin and his relationship with nature.”⁴⁷ In a

⁴⁰ Bartůšková based her interpretation on Tomeček’s novel *Disquiet*. Bartůšková, *Jaromír Tomeček*, p. 117; Jaromír Tomeček, *Neklid* (Praha: Československý spisovatel, 1965).

⁴¹ Literary critic Markéta Uhlířová stressed that Tomeček’s childhood in Kroměříž surely was not enough to make him a good nature writer. What he also needed was a “great sensibility” and a “very thorough knowledge of natural phenomena and laws”. Jaromír Kubíček, *Přírodní tematika v literatuře* (Brno: Státní vědecká knihovna, 1987), p. 17.

⁴² Kubíček, *Přírodní tematika v literatuře*, p. 105.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

⁴⁴ At one point, Tomeček claimed that Prishvin was his “only literary role model”. It somewhat contradicts his praise for Thoreau and others elsewhere, but since Thoreau also had a great influence on Prishvin, it should be taken as a way to claim allegiance to the tradition of nature writing generally. *Kultura*, no. 28 (1959), p. 1, cited in Bartůšková, *Jaromír Tomeček*, p. 34. Prishvin was in turn sometimes compared to Thoreau, see Richard Fleck, “Mikhail Prishvin: A Russian Thoreau”, *The Concord Saunterer* 9, no. 2 (1974), pp. 11–13.

⁴⁵ The two merged in the genre of *ocherk*: Ray J. Parrott, “Questions of Art, Fact, and Genre in Mikhail Prishvin”, *Slavic Review* 36, no. 3 (1977), pp. 465–468. For the genre’s characteristics, see Hans Elveson, “The Rural Ocherk in Russian Literature after the Second World War”, *Commentationes Slavicae Gothoburgenses* 1 (Göteborg, Inst. f. slaviska språk, Göteborgs univ., 1975), pp. 1–13.

⁴⁶ Jiří Opelík noted that Tomeček’s turn from unmediated fascination with wild nature to its perception by a “loving observer” – firstly in his book *Eternal Woods (Věčný hvozd)* – was accompanied by a simultaneous turn to scientific observation. Oleg Sus, *Cesty k dnešku*, vol. 2 (Brno: Blok, 1966), p. 163; Jaromír Tomeček, *Věčný hvozd* (Praha: Státní nakladatelství dětské knihy, 1956).

⁴⁷ *Meteor*, Czechoslovak Radio, April 6, 1974, Czech Radio Archives. The programme first appeared in 1968, and in 1972 it became a regular Saturday morning magazine with hundreds of

similar vein, Tomeček's late works used elements of facticity to tackle the "subjective" causes of the ecological crisis, aiming to "send a warning" and help people find their lost connection with nature.⁴⁸

Already towards the end of the 1960s and even more so in the 1970s, there was a notable change in Tomeček's focus from nature as an idyllic retreat from civilization to the ecological crisis caused by a conflict between technology and nature. Indeed, he explained that he abandoned the idea of idyllic nature after experiencing acid rains and seeing forest springs full of nitrates.⁴⁹ He would draw comparisons with memories from his childhood, for example, of the river Morava where he used to catch fish as a young boy that had effectively turned into an "industrial sewer" during his lifetime.⁵⁰ He conceived of the changes as nature "becoming less romantic because of civilization".⁵¹

A "Right to Sadness"

Literary critics noticed Tomeček's interest in environmental problems, interpreting his works as part of a broader value shift from pure productivism to ecological concerns. For literary historians, he epitomized the genre of "nature prose" (*přírodní próza*) in Czech literature, whose increasing focus on humans' place in nature they saw as a reaction to environmental problems.⁵² The change in the perception of the human subject as being a part of nature was reflected in a focus on the introspection of human narrators. A Czechoslovak Radio host noted in 1986 that Tomeček's "admiration for the beauty of nature turned into a warning against insensitive human interference in nature".⁵³ Humanity and its relation to nature vis-à-vis industrial destruction was brought into focus in Tomeček's works, as opposed to earlier aestheticization of nature devoid of social criticism.

Moreover, late socialist literary critics contrasted the turn to ecology with literature in the Stalinist period. For example, literary theorist Marie Uhlířová noted that in the 1950s nature writing was on the fringes of literature because it was deemed unhelpful in the early days of communism with its focus on production and construction.⁵⁴ In

thousands of listeners. Among its recurrent topics was the environment, see Ivo Budil, *Hlásí se Meteor: populárně vědecký magazín Českého rozhlasu* (Praha: Horizont, 1993), p. 3.

⁴⁸ Štěpán, "Boj o zemi zaslíbenou", p. 9.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁵⁰ *Spisovatel Jaromír Tomeček hovoří o svém životě*, part 1, 26:18–27:29.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 23:11–23:30.

⁵² Kubíček, *Přírodní tematika v literatuře*, p. 15. Literary historian Sylva Bartůšková interpreted Tomeček as a successor of Josef Thomayer, a Czech professor of medicine active at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries who wrote popularizing books, including some about nature. Bartůšková, *Jaromír Tomeček*, p. 5; Josef Thomayer, *Příroda a Lidé* (Praha: Militký a Novák pomocí Lumíra, 1880).

⁵³ *A léta běží ... Jaromír Tomeček*, 5:10–5:26.

⁵⁴ Kubíček, *Přírodní tematika v literatuře*, p. 21.

contrast to that era, theorist Milan Blahynka saw the rise of an “ecological civilizational poetry” in the 1980s, and predicted that the ecological question would soon penetrate all literary production.⁵⁵ Similarly, Josef Hrabák understood Tomeček’s work in the 1950s as ecologically vanguardist at a time when industrial production was the focal point.⁵⁶ He recalled a meeting of the Writers’ Union in Brno sometime around 1950 at which Tomeček’s interest in nature was badly received. Hrabák argued that the topicality of his work was appreciated only later when ecology and human-nature relations became the centre of attention.

Tomeček’s romantic criticism of technocratic alienation resonated with ecologists too. In 1986, the ecologist Jan Lacina wrote an article on Tomeček in the inaugural issue of the magazine *Veronica*, published by the Czech Union for Nature Conservation, pointing out that his books were published in several thousand copies and were often reprinted as he was “perhaps the most read Czech author”; this, he argued, was clear evidence that the Czechoslovak population was eager to hear about nature.⁵⁷ He also repeated the argument that Tomeček had been devoted to nature since the early years of communism, a time when most authors were interested only in writing novels about production and the building of communism. Unlike others, it was argued, Tomeček seemed to never give in to the idea of conquering and exploiting nature. To illustrate this, Lacina quoted Tomeček’s short story “The Purple Sun” (1966):

Yes, we will perhaps occupy all the stars, but we have lost the spring, we have lost the breeze, we have lost the all-liberating church’s silence of the forest, and we have surrounded ourselves with sewers, with smoke and roaring machinery.⁵⁸

In the context of the magazine’s advocacy of nature conservation, Tomeček was presented as a strong voice against a technocratic neglect of the affective role natural environment played in human lives.

But it would be wrong to read Tomeček as anti-technocratic. Indeed, his dialectical understanding of nature and technology, with humans in need of both, was in line with some of the theoretical attempts of the time to reconcile a technocratic, rational orientation towards the future with a sense of the cultural, emotional value of the past.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

⁵⁶ Hrabák, “Lovec beze zbraní Jaromír Tomeček”, pp. 26–27. Later reprinted in Hrabák, *Život s literaturou*, p. 182.

⁵⁷ Jan Lacina, “Jaromír Tomeček (stále zelený)”, *Veronica*, no. 1 (1986), pp. 13–14.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁵⁹ See a discussion of the differences between the Marxist social-philosophical approach and the Western formal-model analysis in “anthropoecology” and human ecology, respectively, as well as the place of the cultural past in such a conception: Miroslav Gottlieb, *Poznámky k pojmu “ekologie člověka”* (Praha: Ústav krajinné ekologie ČSAV, 1976), pp. 27–33, 41.

Tomeček saw the function of literature in parallel to the escapism from city to nature; he believed that people would escape to art: "From the desert of technocracy they will resort to the ever-living water of poetry."⁶⁰ He lamented civilization's alienation from nature, and strove to reconnect children deprived of the charms of the forest with nature through his writings.⁶¹ Tomeček explained that his task was to make "new" nature as beautiful as the "old".⁶² He argued that it was possible and even necessary to see beauty in, for instance, an agricultural landscape changed by the industrial boom. He considered change a necessary step on the path to progress that guaranteed people comfort, and his task then was to help people appreciate the new beauty. His lament that children were no longer as close to nature as he had been when he was a child was not mere nostalgia but was instead intended to challenge literature to appreciate nature in a changed world.

In the 1980s, the literary theorist Josef Peterka wrote about the themes developed by Tomeček and other contemporary writers, describing them as a "right to the sadness of memory" (*právo na smutek paměti*).⁶³ He observed them in Tomeček's essay about the construction of the Dukovany power plant. In the essay, Tomeček argued that "as humans are born out of pain, the future is born out of the present in a very painful way. That nothing is for free in this world, everything has its price."⁶⁴ Using long lyrical passages, he described the emotions of "men under whose hands the concrete giants grow" as they cut the trees: "Man, remember, the spruce tells me, that I have given my place to you, that I had to fall, for you want heat, light, comfort, life."⁶⁵ Here, the intervention into nature was no longer conceived of as a celebration of its mastery, but a painful act for which humans ask nature its forgiveness.

Peterka reinterpreted the doctrine of socialist realism to emphasize sadness as a complement of joy and individuality as a prerequisite of Marxist-Leninist goals.⁶⁶ While he rejected the abandonment of "the people" as a concept in the post-Stalinist years,

⁶⁰ Tomeček, "Kalokagathia", p. 76. Similarly, some urban theorists insisted that people needed "rhythmical contrasting alternation" of both city and countryside: Jaroslav Pěnkava, Miroslav Gottlieb, and Milan Šimek, *Volný čas Pražanů* (Praha: Ústav pro výzkum kultury, 1973), p. 9.

⁶¹ *Spisovatel Dr. Jaromír Tomeček provází děti přírodou*, Czechoslovak Radio, 1970, Czech Radio Archives, 01:10–02:06.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 17:25–20:01.

⁶³ Peterka himself wrote two collections of poems that were introspective observations about life in late socialist technological civilization. Peterka, "Téma paměť", p. 109; Josef Peterka, *Autobiografie vlka* (Praha: Československý spisovatel, 1980); Josef Peterka, *Autobiografie člověka* (Praha: Československý spisovatel, 1984).

⁶⁴ Jiří Křenek, *Sklizeň světla* (Brno: Blok, 1983), p. 18.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁶⁶ For socialist realism see Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), pp. 3–37; Vít Schmarc, *Země lyr a ocele: subjekty, ideologie, modely, mýty a rituály v kultuře českého stalinismu* (Praha: Academia, 2017), pp. 71–110.

since it had allegedly led to anti-socialist intellectual elitism, he also criticized seeing “the people” as an undifferentiable whole, an idealized mass. Stalinist art represented people as “an abstract collection of positive characters who only work manually [and] subtler forms of art and more complex ideas are inaccessible to them”.⁶⁷ The problem was, according to Peterka, that people as the mover of history became effectively immobilized, “as a reflection of the romantic ideas” of artists and ideologues, forgetting that there could be no people “without ordinary persons”.⁶⁸ Instead, a focus on memory would place history “inside a human”, emphasizing the “personal acquisition of time”.⁶⁹ One’s actions influenced, transformed, and were remembered through the actions of others, creating a “materialist image of human immortality”.⁷⁰ This conception of memory and time was explicitly put in opposition to the “existentialist” tendencies of reform socialism and its “nostalgic, subjectivist” memory that prevailed in the elite culture produced in the 1960s, as the 1970s saw the return of socialist realism as an official doctrine and a criticism of previous deviations from social reality.⁷¹

Peterka’s revision of socialist realism thus stood against both Western “oblivion” and 1960s reformist “existentialism”.⁷² Returning to the Marxist literary debates of the interwar period, Peterka saw socialist realism as a merger of romantic and realist approaches that would remain true to social reality and actively reuse historical tradition to create something new.⁷³ Communism was for Peterka a “civilization of memory”, whereas capitalism was a “civilization of oblivion and decay”.⁷⁴ The idea was that the preservation of the destroyed past in memory would surpass time and become part of the new – which was the task of art. Peterka described it as follows: “Vital progress

⁶⁷ Josef Peterka, *Principy a tendence* (Praha: Český spisovatel, 1981), p. 21.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁶⁹ Peterka, “Téma paměť”, p. 98.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

⁷¹ Czech literature after 1968 saw the return of socialist realism as an official doctrine and a criticism of deviation from social reality, as asserted by Sáva Šabouk in his reproach of Roger Garaudy’s *Realism without Shores*: Roman Kanda, *Český literárněvědný marxismus: kapitoly z moderního projektu* (Brno: Host, 2021), pp. 222–36; Jan Mervart, *Kultura v karanténě: umělecké svazy a jejich konsolidace za rané normalizace* (Praha: Nakladatelství Lidové noviny, 2015), pp. 40–41.

⁷² Similarly in the GDR, Joachim Siebelt contrasted the historical “socialist consciousness” with the “nostalgic” and “ahistorical West”: Marcus Colla, “The Politics of Time and State Identity in the German Democratic Republic”, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 29 (2019), p. 232.

⁷³ See also Peterka’s works on the Marxist understanding of literary tradition, the contradictions of Romanticism and the theory of socialist realism: Josef Peterka, *Metamorfózy tradice: k ideologickým aspektům působení literárního dědictví* (Praha: Československý spisovatel, 1983), esp. pp. 87–106; Josef Peterka, *Teoretické otázky rozvoje socialistického realismu* (Praha: Československý spisovatel, 1986).

⁷⁴ Peterka, “Téma paměť”, p. 110.

brings along with joy also sorrow from the loss of unused worth that, as a rule, needs to be left [...] on the bottom of a future lake".⁷⁵ In that way, Peterka rendered human interactions with the environment as "sad" but "necessary" aspects of a modern civilization committed to maintaining material comfort. He thus believed that being sad about the loss of the past to the productive forces constructing the future was a necessary complement to the joy of progress. For late socialist writers then, the human subject was no longer the omnipotent master of nature but instead had to find ways to reconcile technological progress and ecological crisis, which became obvious during the construction of the Dukovany nuclear power plant in the 1980s that was presented as a work of technology in harmony with nature.

The Harvest of Light

By making the romantic turn to nature part of the socialist project, the ecological techno-optimism of late socialist literature legitimized the solutions to the ecological crisis proposed by technocrats. Nuclear energy was supposed to become the vehicle of a qualitative change in the relation between the human world and the world of nature, without the need to abandon economic growth, as "pessimistic" ecologists in the West were allegedly proposing.⁷⁶ In 1979, Ladislav Bohal, Director of Development of the Czechoslovak Energy Company, asserted that nuclear energy was overcoming "the earlier limiting conditions of nature" as humans were penetrating the microstructure of matter, saving labour time and increasing productivity.⁷⁷ Nuclear energy was seen as a practical application of the principle of the scientific-technological revolution and as such, it would lead to a fundamental change in relations "between humans, nature, environment and society".⁷⁸ Older techno-scientific imaginaries combined with the new ecological discourse. As one promotional booklet put it in 1987, nuclear energy was a matter "of life and death of our landscape, forests, clean water, food safety".⁷⁹ The Cold War idea of a "peaceful" atom that stood in contrast with nuclear weapons was increasingly coupled with the danger of environmental disaster, represented by the continuous use of heavily polluting sources of energy – mainly coal power plants.⁸⁰

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

⁷⁶ Jozef Štrba, ed., *Jaderná energetika a životní prostředí, Žďár Nad Sázavou, Duben 1979* (Praha: Ústřední informační středisko pro jaderný program, 1979), p. 12.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁷⁹ Pavel Vrbka, *Jaderná Elektrárna Dukovany* (Brno: Průmyslové stavby, 1987), p. 5.

⁸⁰ Michaela Kůželová, "Příroda na prahu atomového věku: obraz jaderné energetiky a životního prostředí v publicistice socialistického Československa", *Soudobé dějiny* 24, no. 1/2 (2017), pp. 102–126.

The construction of the Dukovany nuclear power plant in the early 1980s was thus accompanied by a major campaign involving writers and filmmakers, whose task was to bring to people's imaginations not only the construction itself but also to give it a meaning that went beyond the provision of electricity. Jaromír Tomeček was involved in writing the book *Harvest of Light*, authored by members of the South Moravian branch of the Union of Czech Writers. The book included short stories, reportages, poems, and illustrations. In his contribution, Tomeček asserted that the problems of polluted air and diminishing coal reserves would be solved by nuclear energy, evoking an assemblage of technocrats and comfortable homes in harmonious unity with nature. In a similar vein, the television documentary film *Dukovany at the Starting Line* emphasized both experts' "perfect knowledge of technology", guaranteeing the plant's safe operation, and the absence of "smoking chimneys, sulphur dioxide, acid rains".⁸¹ As Tomeček put it, the workers of Dukovany were more powerful than Prometheus: they brought people heat and light that they themselves extracted from the earth to power electric stoves in our homes – and (allegedly) without pollution.⁸² The power plant itself was portrayed in an organicist way – one that in a dialectical process was becoming one with its surroundings.⁸³ It was a supreme example of Tomeček's aspiration to use art to teach people to appreciate the beauty of a new nature, as discussed earlier.

The books and films were no different from other works of the time in their proclaimed focus on Dukovany primarily as a workplace, but their emphasis on ecology and negative aspects of the construction was rather novel. The television programme *The Story of Light* captured the handover of the completed book to the workers: the writers went back to Dukovany, where they had spent considerable time collecting material for the book, to reflect and read out loud parts of their work. Writer Ivan Milota remembered that when they first came, their fear of being rejected by the workers was gone in an instant as they were accepted spontaneously and even made long-lasting friendships.⁸⁴ According to the First Secretary of South Moravian Committee of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, Vladimír Herman, the publication was an "excellent example of collaboration" between the artistic intelligentsia and the working class, the former having conversations with the latter to inform their creative work.⁸⁵ To that extent, the literary project followed the convention of socialist reportage, which was

⁸¹ *Dukovany před startem*, Czechoslovak Television, 1984, Czech Television Archives, IDEC 384 451 62653, 24:10–25:14.

⁸² *Příběh světla*, Czechoslovak Television, 1984, Czech Television Archives, IDEC 384 451 52626, 23:05–23:36; Křenek, *Sklizeň světla*, p. 20.

⁸³ For instance, Jiří Křenek wrote that "above the forest of cranes floats a black necklace of ravens"; and Ivo Odehnal portrayed "a vehicle with a peacock's tail of dust". Křenek, *Sklizeň světla*, pp. 44–45.

⁸⁴ *Příběh světla*, 16:30–17:36.

⁸⁵ Křenek, *Sklizeň světla*, p. 11.

equally applied to the shooting of the film *Atomic Cathedral*, based on Stanislav Rudolf's novel *Race of a Weary Horse*.⁸⁶ To make the plot realistic, Rudolf spent about half a year collecting material for his book to get to know Dukovany's work environment, even taking part in meetings and reading through "boring final reports and correspondence with subcontractors"; therein, he believed, lay his ability to depict problems at the workplace.⁸⁷ *Atomic Cathedral*, like other late socialist popular culture, based its veracity on showing imperfect human lives and failures of both individuals and the system, which also made it fit into Peterka's conception of the people as a collection of ordinary individuals: it showed problems and conflicts between management, the dissatisfaction of workers and the daily drama of family life.

However, South Moravian writers also innovatively focused on the landscape and its meaning, which Peterka interpreted as accounting for sorrow in the joyful creating of the new. The landscape's several layers – literary, cultural, natural, and technical – created a unique sense of time and place that stretched into both the past and the future, the material and the imaginary, the natural and the technical. To evoke the literary meaning of the place, several authors referred to Czech surrealist writer Vítězslav Nezval, a native of a village near Dukovany and member of the avant-garde leftist association of artists *Devětsil*, who was active in the interwar period. In *Edison*, one of his most famous epic poems, Nezval melancholically pondered upon life and death while celebrating technical inventions of the modern age that he compared to writing poetry.⁸⁸ Following Nezval's linking of poetry and scientific invention, Tomeček stressed the combination of poetry and hard work that was needed to bring a comfortable life to the people.⁸⁹ Similarly, the writer Ludmila Klukanová wrote that "the nuclear power plant pervades the poetic space of the inventor Edison".⁹⁰ In this way, the literary and technical landscapes merged, literary meanings piercing the natural landscape. So the writers Antonín Buček and Jan Lacina described a lizard "basking in Nezval's verses", further extolling the biological diversity of the area by naming endangered species living there.⁹¹ Lacina's activities perhaps best epitomized the connection between ecology as science and art, as he was himself a scientist who collaborated on ecological surveys of the area. Furthermore, faithful to his literary style, Tomeček presented Dukovany in a number of diverse ways: he described walks in the countryside, a railway bridge, the ruins of the Rabštejn castle, also evoking local history and a biologists' research station

⁸⁶ Stanislav Rudolf, *Běh znaveného koně* (Praha: Československý spisovatel, 1983); Jaroslav Balík, director. *Atomová katedrála* (Studio Barrandov, 1984).

⁸⁷ Miloš Skalka, "Lákové téma současnost", *Květy*, February 28, 1985, pp. 38–39.

⁸⁸ Vítězslav Nezval, *Edison* (Praha: Rudolf Škeřík, 1928).

⁸⁹ Křenek, *Sklizeň světla*, p. 21.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

belonging to the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences.⁹² Tomeček was describing a cultural landscape “recreated” by humans during its long history, from the first ploughmen to contemporary excavators.⁹³ In that way, the landscape of Dukovany was comprised of both natural and technological beauty, past and future, literature and science.

Memory of the landscape included the reflection of loss that echoed the “right to sadness” analysed by Peterka. Describing the landscape of Dukovany, Buček and Laci-na talked about “hillside romanticism” but also “melancholic wandering”.⁹⁴ They were observing an area where a dam was constructed: “We tried to imagine what it used to look like here, with old mills in the valley, spring paddlers in a wild river and *tramp* songs heard till late at night around campfires. And we understood the sorrow of our friends who knew the former river intimately and whose favourite places were lost to the dam, leaving them only with memories and photographs.”⁹⁵ The old and the new were contrasted and the need for progress was defended, but in a way that acknowledged the value of the old and the weight of emotional attachment.⁹⁶ Thus, the collaborative work *Harvest of Light* was a prime example of the attempt to reconcile emotional attachment to nature and the ideology of technological progress.

In that vein, the loss of the former landscape to the industrial complex, consisting of a nuclear power plant and a dam, was justified by the guarantee of a comfortable life. On 20 March 1985, a Czechoslovak Radio report from Dukovany began: “Soon it will get dark, we will turn on the lights in our homes, turn on our electric stoves and radios, and the TV screen will light up the room. At that moment, the lights on the panels in the power stations come on and the meter swings to the right.”⁹⁷ And about a year later, Jaromír Tomeček posed a rhetorical question on Czechoslovak Radio: “Do you want central heating? Do you want comfort? Warmth? Light?” Tomeček recognised the adverse effects of industrialization but asserted that it was necessitated by people’s material needs. He remained optimistic about the future, because he believed in the power of new technologies that would revolutionize relations between humans and the natural world. “There will be no need for chimneys. No octanes. No pollutants. No acid rain. [...] It will be the sun again, it will be the wind again, it will be the elements again.”⁹⁸ The new potential sources of energy gave Tomeček hope that a harmony be-

⁹² *Ibid.*, pp. 14–15.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁹⁶ For example, *Story of Light* portrays a power plant behind an old house coexisting with one another. *Příběh světla*, 12:23.

⁹⁷ *O čem se hovoří*, Czechoslovak Radio, March 20, 1985, Czech Radio Archives, 0:21–0:36.

⁹⁸ *A léta běží ... Jaromír Tomeček*, 15:01–15:21.

tween increasing material comfort and nature could indeed be achieved. "We are the children of nature", Tomeček declared in the same breath.⁹⁹

It thus appears that, in the emphasis on material provision overseen by technocratic management, the discourse of ecological techno-optimism analysed here legitimised the preservation of the existing social order structured around family values and national prosperity.¹⁰⁰ The discourses on nuclear energy, for instance, focused on the idea that the children's future would be a result of the "manly" work of both construction workers and experts that guaranteed a "comfortable life" for all.¹⁰¹ Meanwhile, late socialist writers saw the love of nature as a healthy manifestation of one's patriotism.¹⁰² Tomeček himself expressed a patriotic sentiment for the Czech landscape that was "more beautiful than in other places"; its beauty was both physical and economic, as Tomeček stressed the importance of the national ownership of forests.¹⁰³

Nuclear energy was presented simultaneously as something in harmony with nature and as a technological achievement that would guarantee the continuation of a comfortable life. The television programme *Pilgrims to Light* (*Poutníci za světlem*, 1985), about the benefits of nuclear energy, depicted a grandfather and a grandson on a walk in fields near an atomic power plant.¹⁰⁴ The grandfather was amazed that the boy was not looking for mushrooms, but for the power plant. The boy explained that "the atomic plant is the nature of today". The programme concluded that "the true purpose of the blue planet called Earth is to be, not to wander like a cold sphere through the endless wastes of dark space. The point is to be able to pick mushrooms and blueberries behind the walls of a nuclear power plant. It is the only way to get back to where humans started – nature. Because the moment one forgets this, one ceases to be human."¹⁰⁵ The quote perfectly illustrates how the discourse of ecological techno-optimism was in no way supposed to be a "return to nature" in the conservationist sense but rather a

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 16:18.

¹⁰⁰ In other words, the reconsideration of human-nature relations under late socialism involved mainly the economic issues of production and consumption and did not result in the questioning of human nature in the ways some Western theories did, cf. some Western eco-feminist and Marxist critiques: Donna Jeanne Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Kate Soper, *What Is Nature? Culture, Politics and the Non-Human* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).

¹⁰¹ *O čem se hovoří*, 0:21–03:07. See also *Poutníci za světlem*, 0:01–4:20.

¹⁰² See the television debate about the relationship between the landscape and literature: "Vztah krajiny a tvorby", *Literární klub*, Czechoslovak Television, 1985, Czech Television Archives, IDEC 285 310 23805/0003.

¹⁰³ *Spisovatel Dr. Jaromír Tomeček provází děti přírodou*, 5:29–6:58.

¹⁰⁴ *Poutníci za světlem*, 13:52–14:06.

¹⁰⁵ *Poutníci za světlem*, 24:31–25:27.

“re-creation of nature” that would keep the progressive temporal orientation of socialist modernity. The materialist understanding of nature was supplanted by a romantic take on the human subject who would find peace in that “new nature”.

Conclusion

Tomeček never got directly involved in politics and his views of existing socialism were indeed critical at times, but he remained confident about ecological techno-optimism. Unlike many of his colleagues in the Writers’ Union who took part in the debates about democratic socialism in the 1960s, what seemed to interest Tomeček more was “catching fish”.¹⁰⁶ When asked about the elections in 1971, Tomeček did not proclaim his confidence in the candidates of the National Front as did other writers who were queried but emphasized his patriotism and the need to care about nature.¹⁰⁷ Perhaps it was his disinvolvement that brought him in 1972 to the Control Committee of the “consolidated” Writers’ Union. Even in the 1990s he explained that he was not interested in politics but instead cherished his home, mother, town, country, “people of good will, the sun, the moon, the stars”.¹⁰⁸ Nevertheless he remained confident about ecological techno-optimism since what environmentalists preached was, according to Tomeček, surely admirable but hardly possible without “light and central heating”.¹⁰⁹

Nevertheless, the romantic turn also gave way to the discourse of individual responsibility for environmental issues that gained traction towards the end of the 1980s. It thus made complete sense that Tomeček appeared in a 1988 television programme that aimed to raise environmental awareness, emphasizing a change of behaviour on an individual level.¹¹⁰ In his book *Elements and Destinies* (1986), Tomeček criticized pessimistic ecologists of the West but also lamented that he could hardly see any change on the level of human behaviour. He took a highly moralizing perspective, reflecting on the “frightening” rate of negative changes in his own lifetime.¹¹¹ If it made sense to struggle with nature in a “backward” Carpathia at the start of the 20th century, Tomeček asserted, today’s nature was ultimately defeated.¹¹² Tomeček criticized water pollution,

¹⁰⁶ When writers debated the future of their association, Ivan Kříž allegedly said: “Why should Jaromír Tomeček, who would go fishing last year and was not at all interested in the politics I was doing, lose together with me?” Kříž implied that Tomeček should not be disqualified from continuing to be active in the association, given his disinterest in politics. Ludvík Vaculík, *Nepaměti (1969–1972)* (Praha: Mladá fronta, 1998), p. 40.

¹⁰⁷ “Hlas pro socialismus”, *Tvorba*, no. 40 (1971), p. II.

¹⁰⁸ Jan Lacina and Jiří Poláček, *Odkaz Jaromíra Tomečka* (Veronica, 2008), p. 74.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

¹¹⁰ *Ekologie všemi pády*, Czechoslovak Television, 1988, Czech Television Archives, ep. 3, 23:25–25:14, ep. 4, 24:36–27:40.

¹¹¹ Tomeček, *Živly a osudy*, p. 9.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 10.

deforestation, and species extinction, but he also opposed experts who "announce that there is no way to help our planet, which [they say] is rushing towards destruction", as there were many people who believed in a "calm" and "joyful" life.¹¹³

As I have argued, the ecological strand of the late socialist literature mobilised the romantic tradition to reintegrate memory as part of the technological progress promised by communism. To be sure, ecological techno-optimism was not the only environmental discourse available in late socialism, but nevertheless it formed an integral, and largely forgotten, part of late socialist environmentalism that spoke to the ordering of the world that came to be seen by more and more people as a complete whole with humans making up its integral part. Perhaps most interestingly, it was an attempt to retain the technoscientific orientation towards economic growth, using the romantic relation to the natural world with its emphasis on subjective experience as a complement rather a subversion of technocratic socialism.

References

4. *sjezd Svazu československých spisovatelů (Protokol): Praha 27.–29. června 1967*. Praha: Československý spisovatel, 1968.
- A léta běží ... Jaromír Tomeček*. Czechoslovak Radio, 1986. Czech Radio Archives.
- Adabašev, Igor' Ivanovič. *Život zítra – tragédie nebo harmonie*. Praha: Svoboda, 1978.
- Balík, Jaroslav, director. *Atomová katedrála*. Studio Barrandov, 1984.
- Bartůšková, Sylva. *Jaromír Tomeček*. Praha: Československý spisovatel, 1981.
- Bauer, Jan. *Uživí naše planeta lidstvo?* Praha: Albatros, 1978.
- Brown, Geoffrey. "Blaming the Bourgeoisie: The Czech Left-Wing Response to Perceived Czech Imperialism in Subcarpathian Ruthenia, 1931–1935". *New Zealand Slavonic Journal* 46 (2012), pp. 71–90.
- Budil, Ivo. *Hlásí se Meteor: populárně vědecký magazín Českého rozhlasu*. Praha: Horizont, 1993.
- Clark, Katerina. *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981.
- Colla, Marcus. "The Politics of Time and State Identity in the German Democratic Republic". *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 29 (2019), pp. 223–251.
- Cyšařová, Jarmila. *Česká televizní publicistika: svědectví šedesátých let*. Praha: Česká televize, 1993.
- DeBardeleben, Joan. *The Environment and Marxism-Leninism: The Soviet and East German Experience*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1985.
- Dukovany před startem*. Czechoslovak Television, 1984. Czech Television Archives, IDEC 384 451 62653.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

- Ekologie všemi pády*. Czechoslovak Television, 1988. Czech Television Archives, IDEC 488 224 13804/0003 (ep. 3), IDEC 488 224 13814/0004 (ep. 4).
- Elveson, Hans. "The Rural Ocherk in Russian Literature after the Second World War". Göteborgs univ, 1975.
- Fleck, Richard. "Mikhail Prishvin: A Russian Thoreau". *The Concord Saunterer* 9, no. 2 (1974), pp. 11–13.
- Fund "Jaromír Tomeček". Archives of the Czech Museum of Literature, boxes 61–71, unsorted.
- Gille, Zsuzsa. *From the Cult of Waste to the Trash Heap of History: The Politics of Waste in Socialist and Postsocialist Hungary*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007.
- Gottlieb, Miroslav. *Poznámky k pojmu "ekologie člověka"*. Praha: Ústav krajinné ekologie ČSAV, 1976.
- Haraway, Donna Jeanne. *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge, 1991.
- "Hlas pro socialismus". *Tvorba*, no. 40 (1971), p. II.
- Hrabák, Josef. "Lovec beze zbraní Jaromír Tomeček". *Literární měsíčník*, no. 10 (1979), pp. 26–28.
- . *Život s Literaturou*. Brno: Blok, 1982.
- Jehlicka, Petr, and Joe Smith. "Out of the Woods and into the Lab: Exploring the Strange Marriage of American Woodcraft and Soviet Ecology in Czech Environmentalism". *Environment and History* 13, no. 2 (2007), p. 187–210.
- "Kam na ně chodí?". *Práce*, Nov 21, 1958, p. 5.
- Kanda, Roman. *Český literárněvědný marxismus: kapitoly z moderního projektu*. Brno: Host, 2021.
- Křenek, Jiří. *Sklizeň světla*. Brno: Blok, 1983.
- Kubíček, Jaromír. *Přírodní tematika v literatuře*. Brno: Státní vědecká knihovna, 1987.
- Kůželová, Michaela. "Příroda na prahu atomového věku: obraz jaderné energetiky a životního prostředí v publicistice socialistického Československa", *Soudobé dějiny* 24, no. 1/2 (2017), pp. 102–126.
- Lacina, Jan. "Jaromír Tomeček (stále zelený)". *Veronica*, no. 1 (1986), pp. 13–14.
- Lacina, Jan, and Jiří Poláček. *Odkaz Jaromíra Tomečka*. Brno: Veronica, 2008.
- Mervart, Jan. *Kultura v karanténě: umělecké svazy a jejich konsolidace za rané normalizace*. Praha: Nakladatelství Lidové noviny, 2015.
- Meteor*. Czechoslovak Radio, April 6, 1974. Czech Radio Archives.
- Moldan, Bedřich. "Meze ekonomického růstu na planetě Zemi". *Vesmír*, no. 52 (1973), pp. 40–42.
- Morris, Brian. "Ernest Thompson Seton and the Origins of the Woodcraft Movement". *Journal of Contemporary History* 5, no. 2 (1970), pp. 183–194.

- Müller, Jaroslav. *Lovy beze zbraní*. Ostrava: Profil, 1967.
- Nelson, Arvid. *Cold War Ecology: Forests, Farms, and People in the East German Landscape, 1945–1989*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005.
- Nezval, Vítězslav. *Edison*. Praha: Rudolf Škeřík, 1928.
- O čem se hovoří*. Czechoslovak Radio, March 20, 1985. Czech Radio Archives.
- Olbracht, Ivan. *Nikola Šuhaj loupežník*. Praha: Melantrich, 1921.
- . *Země bez jména: reportáže z Podkarpatska*. Praha: Otto Gírgal, 1932.
- Olšáková, Doubravka. "Environmental Journalism? Radio Free Europe, Charter 77 and the Making of an Environmental Agenda". *Environment and History* 28, no. 2 (2022), pp. 203–227.
- Olšáková, Doubravka, and Jiří Janáč. *The Cult of Unity: The Stalin Plan for the Transformation of Nature in Czechoslovakia, 1948–1964*. Prague: Academia, 2021.
- Parrott, Ray J. "Questions of Art, Fact, and Genre in Mikhail Prishvin". *Slavic Review* 36, no. 3 (1977), pp. 465–474.
- Pěnkava, Jaroslav, Miroslav Gottlieb, and Milan Šimek. *Volný čas Pražanů*. Praha: Ústav pro výzkum kultury, 1973.
- Peterka, Josef. *Autobiografie člověka*. Praha: Československý spisovatel, 1984.
- . *Autobiografie vlka*. Praha: Československý spisovatel, 1980.
- . *Metamorfózy tradice : k ideologickým aspektům působení literárního dědictví*. Praha: Československý spisovatel, 1983.
- . *Principy a tendence*. Praha: Český spisovatel, 1981.
- . "Téma pamět". *Česká Literatura* 33, no. 2 (1985), pp. 97–111.
- . *Teoretické otázky rozvoje socialistického realismu*. Praha: Československý spisovatel, 1986.
- Poutníci za světlem*. Czechoslovak Television, 1985. Czech Television Archives, IDEC 385 451 62675.
- Pryde, Philip R. *Conservation in the Soviet Union*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972.
- Příběh světla*. Czechoslovak Television, 1984. Czech Television Archives, IDEC 384 451 52626.
- Reichmann, Vilém. *Jaromír Tomeček. Stadion*, May 24, 1961.
- Robertson, Thomas. *The Malthusian Moment: Global Population Growth and the Birth of American Environmentalism*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2012.
- Rudolf, Stanislav. *Běh znaveného koně*. Praha: Československý spisovatel, 1983.
- Schmarc, Vít. *Země lyr a ocele : subjekty, ideologie, modely, mýty a rituály v kultuře českého stalinismu*. Praha: Academia, 2017.
- Skalka, Miloš. "Lákavé téma současnost". *Květy*, February 28, 1985, pp. 38–39.
- Soper, Kate. *What Is Nature? Culture, Politics and the Non-Human*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1995.

- Spurný, Matěj, Doubravka Olšáková, Vítězslav Sommer, and Jiří Janáč. "Technokratischer Sozialismus in Der Tschechoslowakei". *Bohemia* 57, no. 1 (2017), pp. 12–24.
- Spisovatel Dr. Jaromír Tomeček provází děti přírodou. Czechoslovak Radio, 1970. Czech Radio Archives.
- Spisovatel Jaromír Tomeček hovoří o svém životě. Czechoslovak Radio, 1969. Czech Radio Archives.
- Sus, Oleg. *Cesty k dnešku*, vol. 2. Brno: Blok, 1966.
- Svojsík, Antonín Benjamin. *Základy junáctví*. Praha: Merkur ve spolupráci s Junáckou edicí Ústřední rady Českého Junáka, 1991.
- Štěpán, Ludvík. "Boj o zemi zaslíbenou". *Tvorba*, no. 40 (1976), p. 9.
- Štrba, Jozef, ed. *Jaderná energetika a životní prostředí, Žďár Nad Sázavou, Duben 1979*. Praha: Ústřední informační středisko pro jaderný program, 1979.
- Thomayer, Josef. *Příroda a lidé*. Praha: Militký a Novák pomocí Lumíra, 1880.
- Tomeček, Jaromír. "Co s volnem a Gilgamés". *Host do domu*, no. 10 (1963), pp. 194–195.
- . *Hora Hoří*. Praha: Československý spisovatel, 1984.
- . "Kalokagathia". *Zlatý máj*, no. 2 (1972), pp. 74–76.
- . *Lovy beze zbraní*. Praha: Albatros, 1976.
- . *Neklid*. Praha: Československý spisovatel, 1965.
- . *Stříbrný lípan*. Praha: J. Lukášik, 1944.
- . *Věčný hvozd*. Praha: Státní nakladatelství dětské knihy, 1956.
- . *Vuř se směje*. Brno: Průboj, 1944.
- . *Živly a Osudy*. Brno: Blok, 1985.
- Továrek, František. *Hory a lidé*. Hradec Králové: Kruh, 1985.
- Ustavující sjezd Svazu českých spisovatelů ve dnech 31.5.–1.6. 1972*. Praha: Svoboda, 1972.
- Vaculík, Ludvík. *Nepaměti (1969–1972)*. Praha: Mladá fronta, 1998.
- Vaněk, Miroslav. *Nedalo se tady dýchat: ekologie v českých zemích v letech 1968 až 1989*. Praha: Maxdorf, 1996.
- Velek, Josef. *Jak jsem bránil přírodu*. Praha: Práce, 1980.
- "Vztah krajiny a tvorby", *Literární klub*. Czechoslovak Television, 1985. Czech Television Archives, IDEC 285 310 23805/0003.
- Vrbka, Pavel. *Jaderná elektrárna Dukovany*. Brno: Průmyslové stavby, 1987.
- Weiner, Douglas R. *A Little Corner of Freedom: Russian Nature Protection from Stalin to Gorbachëv*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.
- Worster, Donald. *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.