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ARTICLE

National Mourning and the Poetics of Public Grief: Jaroslav Seifert's Elegies for T. G. Masaryk

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Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between elegy, national mourning, and the poetics of public grief by taking as an example Jaroslav Seifert's sequence of elegies, *Osm dní* (Eight Days), published in 1937 to mourn the death of Czechoslovakia's first president, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk (1850–1937). An extraordinary work of poetry—exceptional both in its ambition and in the apparent speed with which it was composed and published—Seifert's *Eight Days* has largely been forgotten today and remains little known outside of Czech literary criticism. This article offers a reading of the sequence as a modernist elegy, with the purpose of rethinking the multidirectional relationship between poetry, nationalism and public mourning.

Voicing a familiar modernist aversion to public poetry, W. H. Auden claimed that in 1962, it was no longer possible to author a good poem about Winston Churchill. For a modern poet to take Churchill as a subject would be no more than a feeble attempt to give poetry back the political influence and social status it had lost in our times. Since the public realm no longer functions "as the sphere revelatory of personal deeds" and hence no longer needs poets as legislators acknowledged or unacknowledged, "all attempts to write about persons or events, however important, to which the poet is not intimately related in a personal way are now doomed to failure."[1] W.B. Yeats, as a rare exception to this rule, "could write great poetry about the Troubles," admits Auden, but only "because most of the protagonists were known to him personally and the places where the events had occurred had been familiar to him since childhood."[2]

At first glance, Auden's claim would seem easily dismissible; it is contradicted by a vast ocean of poems dealing with political events and figures of undeniable public importance and his engagement with these issues. Granted, Auden's "Elegy for J.F.K.," composed to accompany Igor Stravinsky's music and featured among the fifty-two poems published in Kennedy's honor in 1964, could hardly pass as great poetry.[3] But it would be difficult to imagine the poetic landscape of the second half of the twentieth century without the profoundly political poems of Anna Akhmatova, Czesław Miłosz, Seamus Heaney, or Geoffrey Hill, to name but a few examples. Auden could, of course, reply that all of these poets wrote about issues that concerned them personally: Akhmatova's *Requiem,* for instance, is at once a deeply intimate poem focused on the experiences of an overtly autobiographical poetic persona and

[1] Wystan Hugh Auden, *The Dyer's Hand, and Other Essays* (London, 1962), 81.
[2] Auden, *The Dyer's Hand*, 81.
[3] Erwin A. Glikes and Paul Schwaber, eds., *Of Poetry and Power: Poems Occasioned by the Presidency and by the Death of John F. Kennedy* (New York, 1964).

the testimony of a "tormented mouth/Through which a hundred million people cry," and it draws its emotional and poetic force precisely from the skillful interplay of the personal and the public (or rather, in Akhmatova's case, the communal).[4] But even if it were true that a personal connection to the poem's object is enough to balance its "lyric and civic impulses," to borrow Dale Paterson's phrase, it still would not explain why a work like *Vladimir Ilyich Lenin* does not measure up to Vladimir Maiakovskii's other literary achievements.[5]

The present article seeks to address these issues by exploring what may seem like a straightforward case of a modernist poet sacrificing his muse to public demands: Jaroslav Seifert's sequence of elegies written to mourn the death of Czechoslovakia's first president, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk (1850–1937). Published in autumn 1937, first in the newspaper *Právo lidu* and then as a separate volume entitled *Osm dní* (Eight Days), Seifert's poems for Masaryk were exceptional both in their ambition and in the apparent speed with which they were composed, the first one appearing no less than a day after the former president's death.[6] Today, these poems are practically unknown outside of Czech literary criticism. At best, they are given a passing mention in connection to Seifert's more notable works or public responses to Masaryk's death.[7] At the time of their publication, however, Seifert's poems for Masaryk were perceived as the ultimate literary expression of the nation's grief. In a readers' survey of "the most interesting books of 1937," conducted by the *Lidové noviny* (committed, since 1927, to mapping out the most distinguished publications every year), *Eight Days* was selected in the top ten books. The respondents included more than five hundred men and women of letters and some of the most prominent figures in the cultural life of the First Czechoslovak Republic. Seifert's collection was the highest-ranked work of poetry, admired by many of his fellow writers.[8] Similarly, in a review of the commemorative volume *Monumenty a květiny T.G.M.* (Monuments and Flowers T.G.M.), the historian and literary critic Jan Blahoslav Čapek, singled out "the lyrical value of Seifert's fervently heartfelt cycle," praising the poet for his ability "to evoke the darkened background of the medieval monumentality of the Castle and the autumnal face of the mournful Czech landscape."[9] Čapek found Seifert's lyrics particularly impressive due to their immediacy, straightforwardness, and emotionality, which "subtly avoids all rhetoric," emphasizing that the poems were the spontaneous outpouring of pure emotion and a suggestive evocation of a mournful atmosphere.[10]

[4] Anna Akhmatova, *You Will Hear Thunder: Akhmatova, Poems*, trans. D.M. Thomas (Athens, OH, 2017), 96.

[5] Dale Peterson, "Maiakovskii's Lenin: The Fabrication of a Bolshevik Bylina," *Slavic Review* 41, no. 2 (Summer 1982): 284–96.

[6] All the quotes of the poems in Czech are from the first edition, see Jaroslav Seifert's *Osm dní* (Prague, 1937). An English translation by Paul Jagasich and Tom O'Grady was published in a bilingual edition: Jaroslav Seifert, *Eight Days: An Elegy for Thomas Masaryk = Osm dní* (Iowa City, 1985). Since the edition lacks pagination, all the quotations from the English edition will be referenced by the poems' title. Also, unless stated otherwise, this translation will be used for all the English quotations from *Eight Days*, except when it deviates too drastically from the original. In these cases, we will provide an ad hoc literal translation—A.M. and D.D. We would like to thank Dr. Christopher W. Harwood for his invaluable help with the translations, especially with the stanza from "Na lemu silnic" (At the Edge of the Road).

[7] Except for Jonathan Bolton, who analyzed *Eight Days* in an article on Czech public elegy, "Elegie veřejné a soukromé Melancholie u Seiferta, Ortena a Blatného," *Česká literature* 49, no. 2 (2001): 128–143, Seifert's sequence has received little critical attention over the past thirty years. Even though its significance is repeatedly acknowledged in academic and popular journals and even textbooks for secondary schools, see Bohumil Hoffmann, ed., *Literatura III—Výbor textů, interpretace, literární teorie* (Prague, 1999), *Eight Days* is typically mentioned as no more than a historical document, an illustration of how deeply the literary community was affected by the former president's passing.

[8] "Nejzajímavější kniha 1937," *Lidové noviny* (Prague), December 5, 1937, (Moravian Library), digitalniknihovna.cz/mzk/uuid/uuid:970c4610-37c2-11dd-a904-000d606f5dc6 (limited access).

[9] Jan Blahoslav Čapek, review of *Monumenty a květiny T. G. M.*, by Miloš Jirko, ed., and *Osm dní*, by Jaroslav Seifert, *Naše doba: revue pro vědu, umění a život sociální* 45, no. 6 (March 1938): 372.

[10] Čapek, review of *Monumenty a květiny T. G. M.* and *Osm dní*, 372.

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Contrary to appearances, however, Seifert's carefully crafted elegies for Masaryk emerged from a complex mourning process rather than a spontaneous outpouring of pure emotion or a conventional expression of grief. As we will show, these elegies circulated within an elaborate network of mourning rites, gestures, symbols, and artifacts occasioned by Masaryk's death. Yet for all their occasionality, they were not merely a political tribute. The poems were also an interesting and, setting aside the issue of literary value, noteworthy attempt to address modernist dilemmas and assumptions about the relationship between lyric poetry and society.

In the past thirty years or so, literary critics have often insisted on the fact that even the most individualistic and disinterested lyric poetry is fundamentally social, quoting Adorno's dictum that "the lyric work is always the subjective expression of a social antagonism" and should not be experienced "as something opposed to society, something wholly individual . . . free from the coercion of reigning practices, of utility, of the relentless pressures of self-preservation."[11] However, these insights are seldom applied to poetry that openly engages with the public, as if the implications of this engagement were somehow too obvious and straightforward to deserve discussion. For many poets, including Seifert, this was not the case.

Elegy scholars have extensively studied the role of poetry in mourning for private losses, whether it is the loss of a loved one, a literary predecessor, or a version of oneself.[12] Surprisingly little attention has been paid to the problems raised by collective and public grief.[13] There are, of course, both intra- and extraliterary reasons for this, which would require a much more detailed explanation than we can provide here. We would agree, though, with Jahan Ramazani, Sandra Gilbert, and many others since, that the suspicion towards public elegy has had its roots in the ambiguity of modern, individualist attitudes toward death and mourning, but would also emphasize that the modernist aversion to political poetry, which implicitly informed the critical discourse on poetry for decades in Europe and America, contributed to this phenomenon.[14] Seifert's ambivalence towards the role of the Czech national bard and public mourner can be traced back to the same modernist paradigm, countering longstanding "Western" clichés about specifically "Slavic" images of the poet, so eloquently dismantled by Claire Cavanagh in *Lyric Poetry and Modern Politics*.[15]

By doubly situating Seifert's poems—in the context of their publication and the framework of the elegiac genre—we explore the tensions involved in the poetic mourning for public losses. *Eight Days* seems like a good starting point not only because Seifert was a major Czech poet of the twentieth century, whose trajectory—from an avant-garde rebel to a national bard—is, in many ways, representative of the broader movement of Czech modernism. It also holds a special place within Seifert's opus, marking a turn from his earlier affiliation with the declaratively apolitical movement of poetism (*poetismus*) towards a new focus on political themes. Composed under the growing threat of fascism, *Eight Days* is a telling example of what happens when a modernist poet feels compelled to address pressing

[11] Theodor W. Adorno, "On Lyric Poetry and Society," in *Notes to Literature*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson, vol. 1 (New York, 1991), 39–40.

[12] The literature on these topics is vast enough to fill a sizeable library. Some of the most influential discussions (in English) of elegy and the work of mourning include Peter Sacks, *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* (Baltimore, 1987); Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (Chicago, 1994); Sandra Gilbert, *Death's Door: Modern Dying and the Ways We Grieve* (New York, 2006).

[13] See the special issue of *Poetry* magazine devoted to the poetic responses to 9/11: Can Poetry Console a Grieving Public?", *Poetry,* 12 (September 2006), available at the *Poetry Foundation* website, and especially Sandra Gilbert's contribution to the topic: "Can Poetry Console a Grieving Public?": www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/68667/can-poetry-console-a-grieving-public (accessed July 25, 2024).

[14] For the US, see Joseph Harrington, *Poetry and the Public: The Social Form of Modern U.S. Poetics* (Middletown, CT, 2002) and, more recently, Daniel Morris, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to American Poetry and Politics since 1900* (Cambridge, Eng., 2023).

[15] Claire Cavanagh, *Lyric Poetry and Modern Politics: Russia, Poland, and The West* (New Haven, 2009).

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public concerns.[16] Rather than dismiss it as occasional poetry prompted by a political crisis and a (possibly misguided) sense of civic duty, this article offers a new reading of *Eight Days*. By arguing that the relationship between the community and the modern poet, even as he reluctantly endorses the role of a national bard, can be much more complex and dynamic than commonly assumed, we show how poetry questions, bends, and dissolves the presumed boundaries between the private and public.

The Body Politic in Crisis

Because of what they reveal about a group's self-understanding, the elaborate rituals devised to heal the bereaved community after the loss of charismatic political figures have been a privileged object of anthropological and sociological study.[17] According to Robert Hertz (and many others since), while mortuary rites for leaders provide a "a major opportunity, if not *the* major opportunity, for ritual display," they also mark a dangerous moment of transition when the community—"stricken in the very principle of its life," says Hertz—feels threatened—its vulnerability matched only by the rites' grandiosity.[18] Masaryk's burial was, by all standards, both grandiose and crucial to the self-definition of a nation that found itself at a particularly painful crossroads.

Although Masaryk had resigned from office two years earlier, his actual demise, just a year before the Munich Agreement, heralded the end of the First Czechoslovak Republic and the shattering of an image of Czechoslovakia—"an island of democratic values, rationalism, and fair-mindedness amid a Europe falling quickly into the thrall of authoritarianism and fascism," as Andrea Orzoff put it—which he created and symbolically embodied.[19] The symbolic capital of his dead body was thus directly tied to the political elites' attempt to preserve a moral and political order under threat. Its purpose was not so much to "reorder a meaningful world," to paraphrase Katherine Verdery, but to make sure the world stays meaningful.[20]

There is an additional component to the public grieving for Masaryk, which made it special even by Czech standards. As Czech philologist Marek Nekula has shown, public funerals in the Czech Lands have a long tradition with political and symbolic significance, even compared to other modern European nations.[21] Nekula focused on the role of nineteenth-century burials of public intellectuals—the so-called national revivalists (*národní buditelé*), such as František Palacký, Václav Hanka, Karel Havlíček Borovský, and Božena Němcová—in the shaping of the Czech national idea. These funerals formed a larger cluster of commemorative rites and practices meant to mobilize and transform the community. By participating in them, the mourners would undergo a symbolic "resurrection," whereby the political and cultural ideas of the deceased would symbolically enter the Czech body politic, becoming the "people's ideals" instead. Although funerals were the main means of performing nationhood, pantheons, mausoleums, monuments, and, of course, literature equally contributed to the construction of this narrative of national, cultural, and linguistic "resurrection."[22] Nekula explains the prominence of demonstrative public funerals in the nineteenth century by the Czechs' self-understanding as a "small," subjugated people who used burials as a legitimate instrument of political protest and national mobilization. With the establishment

[16] See Jan Lehár, *Česká literatura od počátků k dnešku* (Prague, 1998) and Zdeněk Pešat, *Jaroslav Seifert* (Prague, 1991).

[17] Robert Hertz, *Death & the Right Hand* (Aberdeen, 1960), 78.

[18] Richard Huntington and Peter Metcalf, *Celebrations of Death: The Anthropology of Mortuary Ritual* (Cambridge, Eng., 1991), 140.

[19] Andrea Orzoff, *Battle for the Castle: The Myth of Czechoslovakia in Europe, 1914–1948* (New York, 2009), 11.

[20] Katherine Verdery, *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies: Reburial and Postsocialist Change* (New York, 1999), 33–40.

[21] Marek Nekula, *Smrt a zmrtvýchvstání národa: Sen o Slavíně v české literatuře a kultuře* (Prague, 2017), 306.

[22] As Nekula persuasively argues, this narrative was, to a surprising degree, shaped by public commemorators, particularly groups like Svatobor.

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of the independent Czechoslovak state, this practice began to diminish in importance. Only two public funerals in the twentieth century had similar potential for national mobilization: the funeral of T.M. Masaryk in 1937 and the reburial of Karel Hynek Mácha during the Protectorate.[23] While the political context of Mácha's second burial (perceived as a form of protest against Nazi occupation) shares some parallels with the Czech national situation in the nineteenth century, Masaryk's funeral stands out as a special case.

In the week between Masaryk's passing on September 14, 1937 and his burial on the 21st, there was a widespread feeling that the mourning of the former president was an occasion to both display national unity and create a spectacle of the nation's essence.[24] This essence was being acted out in the funeral procession and on the streets of Prague, where crowds had gathered for days to pay their last respects to the former president. [25] The key component of these gatherings was the multitudes' (self-)fashioning into a unified body of mourners: all the commentators emphasized the crowds' orderliness, endurance, patience, and spontaneous rather than coerced self-control. Instead of simply integrating Masaryk into a national community, "the crowds seemed literally to embody him, to become his reincarnation, as if his soul had migrated into them."[26] Many commentators interpreted the disciplined conduct of the crowds as Masaryk's ultimate "deed" or "service to the nation." Even their dignified grief was distinctly "Masarykian," as the congregation of individuals from diverse nationalities and political beliefs seemed to epitomize the tolerant coexistence that Masaryk advocated. The spectacular mourning of Masaryk was thus an elaborate act of self-definition-through-mourning.[27]

The inscription of Masaryk's funeral into the tradition of the Czech revivalists' burials underscored his role as an important cultural figure, linking his cultural significance to his political program. Towards the end of the 1930s, a period marked by the perceived threat to national sovereignty, Czech revivalism gained a new, pressing significance. As a part of this "revival of revivalism," many writers, including Seifert, began to promote a return to tradition and a modernist reassessment of Czech cultural heritage, with an emphasis on folk art.[28] Although *Eight Days* may not align entirely with this aesthetic and political program, recently dubbed *modernized nationalism,* it reflects a profound appreciation for the revivalist legacy.[29] This admiration is most apparent in Seifert's homage to František Palacký in his poem dedicated to Petr Bezruč, but it is evident throughout the sequence. It accounts, in part, for Seifert's fascination with Masaryk as the embodiment of a national program based on a negotiation of universalist and nationalist tendencies.

Ladislav Holý argued that Czech national mythology was distinctly universalistic, imbued with the belief that the Czech national ideal consistently strives toward democracy and supranational humanism. Masaryk's booklet *Problém malého národa* (The Problem of a

[23] Nekula, *Smrt a zmrtvýchvstání národa*, 246–308.

[24] See Jonathan Bolton, "Mourning Becomes the Nation: The Funeral of Tomáš Masaryk in 1937," *Bohemia* 45, no. 1 (2004): 115–31.

[25] The procession was an elaborate performance charged with symbolism: six soldiers walked beside the coffin, representing each nationality living in Czechoslovakia; they were followed by President Edvard Beneš, who, in the guise of official interpreter of Masaryk's legacy gave the only speech at the funeral, and the representatives of the Czechoslovak Legions, veterans of World War I. See Bolton, "Mourning Becomes the Nation."

[26] Bolton, 128.

[27] The notion of spectacular mourning draws on Michael Hviid Jacobsen's notion of "spectacular death" with the difference that, in our view, spectacular mourning is not an exclusively late twentieth and early twenty-first century phenomenon, as Jacobsen claims. See Michael Hviid Jacobsen, ed., *The Age of Spectacular Death* (London, 2020).

[28] Nekula, *Smrt a zmrtvýchvstání národa*, 90

[29] The twin notions of *nationalised modernism* and *modernised nationalism* were introduced by Marta Filipová in *Modernity, History, and Politics in Czech Art* (New York, 2019) to encapsulate the dynamic relationship between modern art and identitarian politics in Central Europe. Although centred on Czech visual art, Filipová's study provides an illuminating context for understanding Seifert's modernism.

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Small Nation), which seeks to present the "Czech question" as a "world question," is the most influential expression of this belief in the universal significance of the Czech national idea.[30] Although he strives to reconcile the national and supranational, Masaryk distances himself from the Enlightenment concept of cosmopolitanism, which he perceives as a political project of the French elite. According to Masaryk, this reconciliation comes about through a vision of humanity as a cultural whole, consisting of individual peoples/nationalities (*národnosti*) rather than states.[31] Within this framework, "each nation has its task."[32] One of the main responsibilities of the Czech nation and a kind of unifying strategy linking nationalities and the whole of humanity is "to study literature, history, to learn about world development and our task in the world, and to stand in what we have learned."[33] Language and literature thus hold an exceptionally high place in Masaryk's conception of the Czech national idea and politics. Beyond their traditionally amplified political role in "small nations," specifically in the realm of "national education," it is through literature, language, and culture that Masaryk expressed his dedication to what he termed "non-political politics."[34] In his book of recollections on the First World War and the creation of the Czechoslovak state, *Světová revoluce* (The Making of a State), Masaryk articulated this idea in distinctly cultural terms: "I have always been in favor of cultural politics, as I said, of real democracy. I was not satisfied with parliamentary and narrowly political politics."[35]

Masaryk's funeral marked the end of an era and a specific political culture. In the face of looming dark times, it called for a nationwide rejoining by resorting to nineteenth-century strategies of national mobilization. This time, however, the apprehension extended beyond Czech national boundaries. The mourning of Masaryk had a noticeably global dimension, wherein cultural nationalism, serving as the small nation's ultimate "safeguard," regained its central political role.

Literary Mourners

The literary contribution to this mourning is a fascinating phenomenon on its own. A cursory glance at major Czechoslovak periodicals of the time, such as *Lidové noviny*, *Právo lidu*, *České slovo*, *Národní osvobození, Venkov*, *Národní listy*, *Národní politika*, including even the communist daily *Rudé právo*, reveals an abundance of literary tributes to Masaryk. Every relevant magazine and newspaper, not to mention the magazines specialized in literature, such as *Přítomnost*, *Tvorba*, *Lumír*, *Naše doba*, *Zvon,* and others, published a literary piece on Masaryk with similar themes and motives. These were often later repurposed and used in the collective memorials published between September and December 1937.[36]

Out of the thousands of essays, narrative, and poetic texts that appeared in newspapers, magazines, special issues, and books dedicated to Masaryk's last days, death, funeral, and legacy, two texts stood out for their documentary and literary value: Karel Čapek's detailed reportage of Masaryk's funeral, *Cesta devíti hodin* (The Nine-Hour Journey) and Jaroslav Seifert's *Eight Days*.[37] Selections of poems from Seifert's collection were published in numerous commemorative literary publications, the most notable of which—*Monuments and*

[30] Ladislav Holý, *The Little Czech and the Great Czech Nation: National Identity and the Post-Communist Social Transformation* (Cambridge, Eng., 1996), 118–20.

[31] Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, *Problém malého národa (1905)* (Prague, 1937), 14–16.

[32] Masaryk, *Problém malého národa*, 20.

[33] Masaryk, *Problém malého národa*, 44.

[34] Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, *Světová revoluce: Za války a ve válce 1914–1918* (Prague, 1936), 32.

[35] Masaryk, *Světová revoluce*, 32.

[36] "Nejzajímavější kniha 1937," *Lidové noviny* (Prague), December 5, 1937, (Moravian Library), digitalniknihovna.cz/mzk/uuid/uuid:970c4610–37c2–11dd-a904–000d606f5dc6 (limited access).

[37] Ladislav Sitenský, Karel Čapek, Jaroslav Seifert, and Karel Novotný, *To kalné ráno: Fotografie Ladislava Sitenského doprovázené slovem Karla Čapka a Jaroslava Seiferta* (Prague, 1997), 124.

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Flowers T.G.M.—brought together poems by many other renowned poets such as Petr Bezruč, Josef Hora, Vítězslav Nezval, Otokar Fischer, Vilém Závada, and others, to portray the so-called "Great Dead One" (*Velký mrtvý*), as Masaryk was often referred to in the days following his death. "The tremendous outpouring of love and grief," wrote the editor Miloš Jirko in the afterword, "that brought us all together in an unprecedented emotional unity, so simple and so sublime, was our inheritance from the Great Dead One."[38] The volume was built upon the longstanding cult of Masaryk as "the Revivalist, the Liberator, and the Creator," culminating, unsurprisingly, in the posthumous title of the "Great Dead One."[39] It aimed to contribute to this myth-making not by merely lamenting Masaryk's passing but by showcasing Czech literature, creating "a display, in which the lively, trembling face of all Czech lyricism is revealed."[40] Although Jirko conceived and composed the volume as a memorial, he believed that, given the importance and solemnity of the occasion, it provided readers with a unique insight into Czechoslovak poetry in general.[41] "After all," concludes Jirko emphatically in the afterword, "there is hardly a poet among those who represent the positive values of Czech lyricism who could stand silently above the national mound over which shines the eternal light of T.G.M."[42] In other words, the mourning of Masaryk was not only a matter of civic duty and national importance but also an opportunity to (re)draw the landscape of contemporary literature and strengthen the tight bond between the Czechoslovak literary canon and the country's political interests.

The first poem in a sequence that was to become *Eight Days*, "To kalné ráno" (That Bleary Morning), was published on the front page of the newspaper *Právo lidu*, the herald of the Czechoslovak Social Democratic Workers' Party, on September 15, 1937, the day after the announcement of Masaryk's death. The poem was printed below a photo of Masaryk's body, displayed on a plain white bed with a rose on his chest.[43] Seifert also published most of his other poems for Masaryk in *Právo lidu*, except for "Už jenom pro pláč" (If Only for Those Tears) and "Luna nad hrobem" (Moon Over the Grave), which appeared in *Ranní noviny* and *Panorama,* respectively. The Prague publisher Melantrich printed the poems as a single volume at the beginning of October 1937, accompanied by Josef Čapek's illustrations.[44] *Eight Days* was a big success for Melantrich, which published eight reprints in the next four months.[45] Unfortunately, the success was brief: in less than a year, Czechoslovakia entered a long period of political turmoil that began with the Munich Agreement in 1938.

[38] Miloš Jirko, afterword to Miloš Jirko, ed., *Monumenty a květiny T.G.M.* (Prague, 1937), 201.

[39] Jirko, afterword to *Monumenty a květiny T.G.M.*, 201.

[40] Jirko, 202.

[41] Another significant attempt to further filter out what could be of lasting literary value was a contest organized in 1938 and aimed at promoting Masaryk's heritage. Sponsored by Jan Antonín Baťa (a shoe entrepreneur and one of the founders of the multinational company *Bat'a*), it included a staggering 111 submissions (76 of which were taken into consideration, as scientific works and essays were excluded). The substantial amount of 50,000 CZK that Bat'a had allocated for the competition was divided by a four-member jury into four prizes of 10,000 CZK and two of 5,000 CZK, with Seifert's *Eight Days* among these four. A jury of Seifert's fellow writers and literary critics praised the volume for expressing "in a unique way the feelings of the nation about the death of the President." ("Ceny v Baťově literární soutěži uděleny," *Zlín*, March 3,1938, 1.); For the sake of comparison, the average worker's (*dělnictvo*) daily wage in August 1937 was 17.62 CZK while the average annual salary of so-called private civil servants (*soukromé úřednictvo*) in 1936 was 16,400 CZK (for men) and 8,500 CZK (for women). Jaroslav Kladiva, "Zaměstnanci roku 1937," *Lidové noviny*, January 5, 1938, 8, (Moravian Library), digitalniknihovna.cz/mzk/uuid/uuid:6be584d0-3b71-11dd-8672-000d606f5dc6 (limited access).

[42] Jirko, 202.

[43] *Právo lidu* (Prague), September 15, 1937, 1.

[44] More precisely, the last poem, "Moon Over the Grave," was written on September 21, but it was published on October 4, in the monthly *Panorama*. The earliest stamp on the first edition of *Eight Days* suggests October 2 as the date of release, which is two days before the last poem was published in the magazine.

[45] Pešat, *Jaroslav Seifert*, 145. While the multiple reprints of a limited run were a common strategy among publishing houses during this era, with each printing being promoted as a new reprint, the frequent reprints of *Eight Days* undeniably suggest public interest in this collection.

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Právo lidu, *Ranní noviny* and *Panorama* all published Seifert's poems alongside telegrams of condolence, biographical pieces, personal recollections, and analyses of Masaryk's political and cultural legacy, which gave them a more prominent public character. In other words, they appeared not only as Seifert's individual contribution to a lyrical tradition of mourning but also as an expression of the *collectivity* of grief. Given the timing and the extraordinary speed of their publication, the poems printed in journals seem to evoke Czechoslovakia's everyday life more explicitly than when they later appeared in book format. In this regard, they can be seen as a sort of social commentary and chronicle of the mourning of Masaryk, an impression shared by some critics and scholars of Seifert's work, such as Zdeněk Pešat, who characterized them as "newspaper poetry."[46] For example, the poem "Noc na Hradě" (Night at the Castle) is a lyrical vision of Hradčany at night, which captures the elaborate preparations for the public display of Masaryk's body in the castle. In *Právo lidu,* it is followed, only a few pages further, by meticulous descriptions of the technical details of the transfer of Masaryk's remains to the Prague castle from the castle in Lány, where he had spent his last days. Seifert's poetry was not simply a repetition of the common themes and popular motifs found in newspapers and everyday discourse (such as, the gloomy morning of Masaryk's death, the roses on the bier, the grieving multitudes, the president's death mask). It also served as a personal response, a poetic transformation, and a critical commentary on these motifs. For instance, in the poem "Ne, ještě nebyl čas" (No, It Wasn't Time Yet), the speaker "reads" from the wrinkles etched onto Masaryk's death mask, recognizing in them the "anxiety of Siberian frost" and the markings of a profound love for the country that now stands in silence. The image of Masaryk's wrinkled forehead, often shown in newspapers, suggests a lasting bond between the leader and nation while expressing profound anxiety over his "premature" departure—a departure that, Seifert seems to suggest, would always have been premature, regardless of the timing. Viewed in the context of *Právo lidu,* Seifert's poems occupied, quite literally, a space between contrasting responses of the public to Masaryk's death—on the one hand the assurance of the political elites that they will pursue Masaryk's path, and on the other a genuine concern for the future of the state whose existence Masaryk had embodied.[47] As a result, Seifert found himself torn not only between the public and private but also between two visions of the public: a popular, more diverse and dispersed vision, and an official one, which interpreted Masaryk's legacy through his political program. *Eight Days* offered a way of coming to terms with this legacy while staying within the bounds of a, broadly speaking, liberal and democratic paradigm.

The Poetics of Public Grief

Elegies, says Max Cavitch, are "poems about being left behind," not rhymed biographies of the departed.[48] Of the six elegies that Whitman wrote for Lincoln, four of which were published under the title "Memories of President Lincoln," none mention any memories of the president or provide details about his upbringing, character, appearance, or actions in office. But even by traditional elegiac standards, Seifert's *Eight Days* exhibits an astonishing absence of Masaryk. He is only alluded to throughout the sequence, and only once as a leader, in the poem "Na lemu silnic" (At the Edge of the Road), where he appears as "that wise ruler with the scepter of the rose's power/ Which fell out of his hand that moment, that day."[49] Otherwise, he is almost exclusively designated as a dead body, a corpse displayed on the scaffolding or referred to metonymically by his "wrinkled forehead," "wrinkles," death mask

[46] Pešat, *Jaroslav Seifert*, 143.
[47] Ivan Šedivý, *T. G. M.: K mytologii první československé republiky* (Prague, 2022), 76.
[48] Max Cavitch, *American Elegy: The Poetry of Mourning from the Puritans to Whitman* (Minneapolis, 2007), 1.
[49] Trans. by Jagasich and O'Grady, with slight modifications—A.M. and D.D.

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(described in the poem "No, It Wasn't Time Yet"), and pale face (in "Moon over the Grave"). Seifert's Masaryk seems doubly absent—both physically dead and unnamed.

The only individuals Seifert explicitly names in *Eight Days* are Seifert's literary predecessors: Petr Bezruč, to whom Seifert devoted the second poem of the sequence "Petru Bezručovi" (To Petr Bezruč), and Jaroslav Vrchlický, whom Seifert referred to as "my master" in "Night at the Castle." The reasons are partly circumstantial: September 1937 marked a double anniversary, seventy years since Bezruč's birth and twenty-five since Vrchlický's death. These anniversaries were extensively publicized and commented upon in *Právo lidu*, where Seifert published his elegies for Masaryk, including the poem dedicated to Bezruč.[50] However, the choice of the two poets was by no means accidental: at a moment when the former president's death and the growing Nazi threat rendered Masaryk's vision of Czech national identity, on which the First Republic was built, more and more precarious, both Bezruč and Vrchlický mattered deeply to Seifert.

Seifert had joined the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia in the early 1920s, participating in various communist publishing ventures until 1929, when he and six other prominent writers were expelled from the Party. This expulsion came after they signed a letter objecting to the new leadership and the so-called *bolshevization* of the Party. The decision was based more on tactical and strategic than ideological disagreements. It did not signify the immediate end of Seifert's political engagement, as he continued to be involved in intellectual and artistic endeavors closely linked to the Communist Party. Yet, by the late 1930s, he had drifted away from his early allegiances towards a more moderate, Social Democratic political stance compatible with the national program of the First Republic. Simplifying things considerably, one could say that Bezruč, as the author of *Slezské písně* (Silesian Songs), a passionate turn-of-the-century protest against Habsburg imperialism and seminal poetic document of Czech nationalism, represented one facet of this program, whereas Vrchlický, with his universalist, pacifist reinterpretation of the Blaník legend in *Selské ballady* (Peasant Ballads), provided the other. Indeed, the picture of Bezruč—as a poet unwilling to surrender, to resign himself to old age (*básník neusmířený k stáru*)—that Seifert paints in the poem "To Petr Bezruč" largely conforms with this image.

The poem begins with a moto—"I saw banners flying high"—taken from Bezruč's poem "Den Palackého" (Palacký's Day)—a fiercely nationalist, bitter complaint against what Bezruč perceived as the Germanization and pauperization of the Silesian Czechs, aided by the Czech political elites. The poem is cast as a cry of revolt: its speaker refuses to participate in the elaborate, imperially sanctioned celebrations of František Palacký's anniversary in Prague in 1898—"I saw the flags upraised waving high/ and the whole city in wreaths and velvet dressed, / I heard the thousands of voices thunder to the sky."[51] While Prague celebrates, Czech people in the Beskyds are being oppressed by "Rothschild and Gutmann, Count Laryš and Vlček / and the noble Marquis Gero."[52] Rather than engage with Bezruč's political message, however, Seifert uses the motif of hoisted banners, "strung high in a proud city," to contrast the image of a city in mourning, draped in "black flags." Thus, he evades the class issues raised by "Palacký's Day" and the poem's open antisemitism. The real focus of Seifert's identification with Bezruč here is the figure of the poet, presented by both authors, albeit for different reasons, as an outcast, lonely amidst the crowds, unable to connect with the gathered masses or participate in their rituals—"and in the sea of rejoicing I stood silent, alone."[53] This shift in focus is a highly characteristic strategy of Seifert's and is a vital part of his effort to articulate a new poetics of public grief.

[50] Vrchlický's death was commemorated in *Právo lidu*, no. 212, September 9, 1937, 4, while Bezruč's birthday was celebrated on the front page of the paper's special issue, published on September 16, 1937.

[51] Petr Bezruč, *Silesian songs*, trans. Ian Milner (Prague, 1966), 83, slightly modified—A.M. and D.D.; Cf. Petr Bezruč, *Slezské písně* (Brno, 1937), 135.

[52] Bezruč, *Silesian songs*, 84.

[53] Ibid., 83.

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Temperamentally much closer to Seifert's lyricism, Vrchlický is summoned in *Eight Days* as the major Czech poet of the second half of the nineteenth century. In "Night at the Castle," he is described as *il miglior fabbro*, more precisely, as a better elegist than the poem's speaker, marking the very height of his doubts and self-reproaches: "Oh, if my master Vrchlický were here, he would sing / a lovely sad song, but I just cry." Seifert's reference to Vrchlický here is not a mere acknowledgment of his influence as a key figure in modern Czech poetry. Instead, it suggests a deeper connection between the two poets, extending beyond "their shared vital relationship to the world, in both cases fervently amorous and sensually positive."[54] On an obvious, explicit level, Vrchlický is summoned here as an elegist who mourned the loss of his friends, fellow writers, and poets in collections such as *Okna v bouři* (Windows in the Storm), *Fanfáry a kadence* (Fanfares and cadences), and *Co život dal* (What Life has Given), and whose large and diverse body of work included richly allusive, intertextual poems that reveal his familiarity with and reverence for his literary predecessors, contemporaries, and successors.

To Seifert, Vrchlický was not only a poetic precursor. A professor of comparative literature at Charles-Ferdinand University and translator of French, Italian, German, and English poetry, he was also instrumental in introducing generations of Czech poets to Dante Alighieri, J. W. von Goethe, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Victor Hugo, Charles Baudelaire, Edgar Allan Poe, Walt Whitman and others.[55] And it was through Vrchlický that Seifert first encountered the old masters.[56] More than a mere intermediary in this encounter, Vrchlický was the great cosmopolitan voice of Czech poetry. Hence, addressing him as *můj mistr* (my master) was a gesture resonant with centuries of (predominantly European) poetic tradition. Like T. S. Eliot's dedication of *The Waste Land* to Ezra Pound, itself an echo of Dante's address to Arnaut Daniel, Seifert's homage to Vrchlický was a display of poetic self-awareness, a signal of his ambitions as a poet and an elegist.

These ambitions are made evident in the opening poem of *Eight Days*, "That Bleary Morning," which marks the first day of mourning and sets the stage for Seifert's performance of grief:

> At three-thirty exactly, before the dawn, the last tear
> Fell and the dying ended and the year
> Finished as death gently touched the silver hair
> And left with the early fog in the rising air.[57]

That the stage and the performance will be distinctly cosmopolitan is implied in the poem's two apostrophes, which announce Masaryk's death as a tragedy for both Czechoslovakia and Europe. Biblically personified as a "terrible" army with swords and guns (*Evropo hrozná nad meči a děly*), Europe is summoned to join the speaker in mourning and reminded that it should be among the first ones to do so (*Evropo, Evropo, až zvony rozhoupají, / Měla bys první být mezi těmi, kdož lkají*). Not so much a late 1930s Europe, daily faced with the growing threat of fascism, the Europe invoked here is a distinctly "Masarykian" Europe, a cultural-political entity inseparable from his political ideas and his legacy.

Czechoslovakia, on the other hand, is represented by its children, the future generations of Czechs and Slovaks, who are given the task of preserving Masaryk's memory:

> A hundred years from now, maybe our children's children
> Will mournfully tell their children

[54] Bohumil Polan, "Seifertovo loučení s jarem," in Jiří Flaišman, ed., *Čtení o Jaroslavu Seifertovi: Hledání proměn autorovy poetiky* (Prague, 2014), 63.

[55] Zdeněk Pešat, "Jaroslav Vrchlický," in Miloš Pohorský, ed., *Dějiny české literatury III: Literatura druhé poloviny devatenáctého století* (Prague, 1961), 294–322.

[56] See Seifert's afterword in: Jaroslav Vrchlický, *Duha na zemi: Výbor z básní* (Prague, 1961), 128–29.

[57] Trans. by Jagasich and O'Grady, with slight modifications—A.M. and D.D

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Of the grey morning of the fourteenth of September
Marked in the calendar forever.

That bleary morning, remember,
My child.[58]

Czechoslovakia is again apostrophized in the poem "To jsem zpíval tobě" (I Sang for You), which ends with a double address, to the poet's "unhappy country" (*nešťastná země*) and to himself, an "unhappy poet" (*nešťastný básník*). In a characteristically self-deprecating autopoietic statement, the speaker compares his poem to a clod falling over Masaryk's coffin (*Když jako hroudy padne na rakev*) and himself to a gravedigger, crying in the grave (*když hrobník pláče v hrobě*).

This prolific apostrophizing is one of the most striking features of *Eight Days.* Normally, speakers constitute themselves as poets by addressing all sorts of beings and things ordinary people have no power over: asking winds to blow, seasons to stay their coming, or mountains to hear one's cries is, as Jonathan Culler has argued, the mark of poetic vocation, central to the lyric.[59] Seifert, however, addresses so many entities—including poets, saints, Europe, his country, children and grandchildren, Death, the Moon, the stars, and himself—that apostrophe becomes the sequence's master figure. As the sequence progresses and the poetic speaker gains mastery over his subject, the objects of address become more audacious: in "Rozhovor se smrtí" (A Conversation with Death), Death itself is summoned to take Masaryk's body as the nation's ultimate sacrifice (*Jen vezmi je, to nejkrásnější dává/ Ti tento národ, který oplakává / V tom mrtvém víc, než mohl ti snad dáti*). Finally, in the sequence's grand finale, "Moon over the Grave," cosmic elements are addressed—the Moon, depicted as a wailer at Masaryk's grave, and the Evening Star, who wants nothing more than to serve as a wreath, woven by the dead poets' white hands (*Nic víc a nic méně, / Než věncem být, jenž leží na tom jméně, / Jen býti věncem z kvítí, které vila/ Básníků mrtvých ruka bílá*).

There is a distinctly ritualistic aspect to *Eight Days,* which becomes even more conspicuous when the poems are read as a sequence, structured upon a movement familiar to scholars of elegy—from the acknowledgment of loss via a series of negotiations with the sad realities of human life, towards a final consolation. In its use of elegiac conventions—the initial invocation of the Muses, replaced here with modern European nations and their citizens; the procession of mourners ("At the Edge of the Road" and "Night at the Castle"); the complicity between the lyrical subject and nature (emphasized throughout the sequence, but especially in "Moon over the Grave"); the elaborate (self-)questionings and accusations ("Night at the Castle," "I Sang for You," "Conversation with Death"); and even a collection of appropriate flowers ("Autumn Requiem" and "Moon over the Grave")—*Eight Days* is visibly classical, and to a surprising degree, given Seifert's earlier poetic inclinations. More importantly, starting with "That Bleary Morning," punctuated by the apostrophic refrain "Remember, my child," moving through a series of emphatically apostrophic poems ("That Bleary Morning," "Night at the Castle," "I Sang for You," "Conversation with Death") and finishing with "Moon over the Grave," the sequence is organized around the lyrical subject's repeated attempts at creating, within the space of the poem, a mnemonic community. Constituted by Seifert's contemporaries, witnesses to Masaryk's passing and the threat to his political heritage, this community is meant to be reconstituted by future generations of Czechs and Slovaks ("our children and children's children"), and, with each new reading, the readers of *Eight Days.*

Elegy always implies an absence resulting from loss. It displaces this loss by removing it from linear time and locating it in a discursive time governed not by laws of physics but by poetic ingenuity and power. It thus replaces an irreversible temporal disjunction, the

[58] Jaroslav Seifert, "To kalné ráno" in *Osm dní* (Prague, 1937), trans. A.M. and D.D.
[59] Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* (Cambridge, Mass., 2015), 216–17.

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movement from life to death, with a reversible alternation between mourning and consolation, evocations of absence and presence.[60] In *Eight Days,* Masaryk's absolute absence alternates with the presence of mourners, who preserve his memory. They act as a mnemonic community of witnesses to the nation's terrible loss—"its beauty" or, as Seifert phrased it in "If Only for Those Tears," "the ancient glory of Czech gemstones"—now and for all of eternity. It is equally important that Seifert's multiple apostrophes present the poet in the traditional role of Orpheus, conversing with nature and the lord of the underworld, and in the more modern guise of a national bard conversing with Europe and the world of politics.

That this conversation should occur within an elegiac framework is hardly surprising, given elegy's long history, which goes back to the ancient Greek and Roman lyric, and the very beginnings of European poetry. Having fused with other poetic genres, such as the lament, the pastoral, and the funerary ode, postclassical elegy became both a prestigious global poetic practice and a notoriously self-conscious and agonistic genre. Like John Milton, Shelley, Whitman, and many others before him, Seifert engages in a constant, sometimes quite explicit, dialogue with his predecessors. Fittingly, his mourning of Masaryk begins with a poem dedicated to Petr Bezruč, which sets the tone for the rest of the sequence and ends with a symbolically charged image of dead poets weaving Masaryk's funeral wreath. The dead poets' society is also explicitly summoned in the sequence's centerpiece, "Night at the Castle," to help Seifert with his task (*Ó mrtví básníci a světci pod oltáři . . . Pojďte mi na pomoc, abychom vyzpívali*). Conventional as they may seem, the self-doubts and reproaches voiced here (*Ach, být tu Vrchlický, můj mistr, ten by zpíval / Kancónu truchlivou, já jenom jdu a pláči, / A pláč je zbabělost, já vím, já vím*) and in "I Sang for You" are more than mere humility topoi; they are central to the elegist's project of self-definition through mourning. As the critic Jonathan Bolton remarked, in *Eight Days*, images of the lyrical subject's inability to express grief—"A word is not enough, the word is and it isn't, / Hardly spoken, it dissolves into the distance"—give way to images of the poet as an eloquent spokesman for the nation.[61] For Seifert, mourning Masaryk was ultimately less a patriotic duty than a poetic challenge. Indeed, when the poems for Masaryk are read as a sequence, as Seifert intended them, it becomes clearer that their focus is neither on the mourners (and whether they can be consoled) nor on the object of mourning (Masaryk and his political heritage), but on the ways of mourning. In other words, *Eight Days* is not (only) a poetic monument to Masaryk but (also) an exploration of the issues that Seifert was intimately concerned with as an artist: how does a modern Czech poet mourn? And what can he give to a nation that had lost its beauty?

Seifert's answer was at once straightforward—his elegies acting as a tribute, a "bouquet" or "wreath" of "modest flowers" ensuring a place, for both Masaryk and himself, in Czech literary history, with an unmistakable nod towards European literature as well—and ambiguous—for this place could no longer, in his view, be ensured by passionate protests in the tradition of Romantic national bards *à la* Bezruč. The modern poet knows that the public may no longer need poets as legislators and that "the word freedom" is "like the laughter of a dove." Seifert believed that the lost "ancient glory of Czech gemstones" could, therefore, only be recuperated by poetic means, articulated in a genre familiar to the great European powers—for it was, after all, a genre used by European poets for centuries to mourn their dead—and immortalized within the space of his poems.

In *Eight Days,* the tension central to Seifert's attempt to articulate his own poetics of public grief between the poet's two roles—as a modern elegist and a national bard—is developed in various ways. The most obvious one is a contrast between the isolated and dejected poetic speaker, who mourns in private, and the "others," who display their grief openly and publicly. The contrast first appears in "Night at the Castle," where the poet is shown as a solitary

[60] Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, 227.

[61] Jonathan Bolton, "Elegie veřejné a soukromé Melancholie u Seiferta, Ortena a Blatného," *Česká literatura* 49, no. 2 (2001): 131.

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wanderer who goes alone "with his shadow" in the cathedral. Gazing upon the altar, creative doubts immediately beset him, and the rest of the poem deals with Vrchlický and the challenges of mourning in verse, offering neither consolation to the grieving masses nor a solution to Seifert's poetic predicament. In "Podzimní requiem" (Autumn Requiem), he is, again, shown as an outcast, hidden under the dark arcades with his simple bouquet of wildflowers, whispering to himself words "heavier than a monolithic rock and sadder than the Castle's stairs." Although he wishes to pose his bouquet onto Masaryk's scaffold, the Castle guards prevent him.[62] His poetic gift to the bereaved nation thus remains unrecognized, which is a pity, because these unpretentious flowers hold the secret and the glory of his poor country:

In this meadow flower lies the humble glory,
Of a sad land, the bitterness of its salts,
The fragrance, which few recognize,
And the mysteries, which few apprehend.[63]

Finally, in "I Sang for You," he is the ultimate "unhappy poet," "unhappy among the unhappiest," who knows better than anyone the transience of all things human and, most importantly, of the dream of freedom, epitomized in the First Republic:

Unhappy poet, seeking rhymes
Where only longing, only sorrow traverse
Mournfully he chants his verse,
Unhappy among the unhappiest.

For who better understood the word
Freedom, which like the laughter of a dove
Burst shining through the clouds
Over a land doomed to be fettered.[64]

It is crucial, however, that opposition between the poet and the nation is destabilized just as soon as it is posited. The speaker may present himself as a solitary "I," detached from the community and unable to fully participate in the mourning rites. Still, he moves in an easily recognizable, public, spatial, and temporal frame.[65] The poems record his wanderings through the streets of Prague and through well-known public spaces, such as the Prague Castle, the Malostranské náměstí, and the cemetery in Lány where Masaryk was buried. They also take place within a regime of shared social temporality: by exactly dating the liminal period between Masaryk's death and his burial, which becomes eight days in September 1937, Seifert retains some of the more mundane character of the poems' initial place of publication (on the pages of *Právo lidu*) and anchors his private grief in the secular, public calendar.

The grouping of the poems into a sequence and their publication as a separate volume rendered their public character somewhat less visible. This was not the case when they were first published, for their appearance on the pages of *Právo lidu* secured them both wide circulation and a broad readership. But Seifert also intended these poems to communicate with the public. This is clear from his use of easily identifiable allusions to locations, symbols, and artifacts that his contemporaries, witnesses to Masaryk's death and burial, would have been

[62] The Jagasich-O'Grady translation deviates too much from the original here: "Somewhere the last flowers grow / scattered along the frozen roadside. / Gather them in a simple bouquet and hide / with me under the dark arcades among our shadows."

[63] Jaroslav Seifert, "Podzimní requiem" in *Osm dní* (Prague, 1937), trans. A.M. and D.D.

[64] Jaroslav Seifert, "To jsem zpíval tobě" in *Osm dní* (Prague, 1937), trans. A.M. and D.D.

[65] See Bolton, "Elegie veřejné a soukromé Melancholie," 130.

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familiar with. Seifert consciously worked with clichés and images that filled the press in the days after Masaryk's death.

The transfiguration of these clichés is another one of Seifert's characteristic poetic strategies. For example, the rose pinned on the speaker's coat in the poem "At the Edge of the Road" (originally entitled "Masaryk's Rose") was meant to recall the photographs of the dead president with a rose on his chest; the black banners mentioned in "To Petr Bezruč" could be found everywhere in Prague in mid-September, while the entire poem "If Only for Those Tears" describes the spectacle of crowds silently waiting to see Masaryk's coffin. However, in Seifert's hands, these images become something more than snapshots of a shared reality or emblems designed to make his poetry easily accessible and relatable. For instance, the rose motif, introduced in "At the Edge of the Road" and further developed in "If Only for Those Tears" and "Autumn Requiem," is at once an element drawn from the popular mourning of Masaryk and an instrument in Seifert's continuous dialogue with the poetic tradition. The use of floral imagery may be one of the most conventional of all elegiac conventions, but Seifert tried to breathe new life into it and, at the same time, repurpose a somewhat trite popular image for his poetry. The pinned rose is thus first transformed from an emblem into a symbol of the nation as a body of individuals united by mourning. The mourners are synecdochically designated as "the other roses"–

> Just a cap on his lap, on his coat a rose to keep;
> Thus he leaves the gate. But other roses sigh
> With jealousy of the one who with him shall sleep
> And, with fragrance waning, on his heart shall die.[66]

–and their tears compared to "petals falling into a vase."[67] In the "Autumn Requiem," the poet is shown as an exile from this flowery unity, as unsympathetic guards reject his bouquet for the late Masaryk. Nevertheless, he manages to find a home for his floral tribute. In the last poem, the "Moon over the Grave," the Evening Star, draped in black and summoned by the speaker with a daring "Why have you come?" and "What do you want?" declares her desire to be nothing more than a wreath above Masaryk's name. From a bouquet of seemingly insignificant roadside flowers, the elegies for Masaryk have been transformed into a starry wreath woven by the dead poets of the past. In other words, they have become the work through which Seifert achieves his ambition, shared by every major elegist since Milton, of joining the ranks of his predecessors. The transfiguration of floral imagery—from a mundane, realistic detail to a metatextual device—serves as a commentary on Seifert's creative process and his ambition to secure a place for his nation, its leader, and himself in a—secular and emphatically literary—eternity.

The "Moon over the Grave" thus offers a solution to the tension at the heart of Seifert's project—between the calling of the national bard and the credo of the modernist poet. As Seifert gains mastery over his subject, his apostrophes become more audacious: here, we find the poetic "I" conversing with cosmic elements, the Moon and Venus, who join him in mourning. No longer a mere onlooker, paralyzed by grief, reduced to cries and whispers, gazed down upon by his predecessors, poets, and saints depicted in Hradčany, the speaker finally found a voice. His tribute may not be acknowledged by officials or by his compatriots (although it was, as we have seen, acknowledged by both), but it is recognized by the Evening Star, who submits to his will, and by the dead elegists of the past, who helped him weave his wreath. This move—from the local to the universal, from familiar Prague spaces to the cosmos—functions as a *mise en abyme* of the transfiguration of political ideas into a national

[66] Jaroslav Seifert, "Na lemu silnic" in *Osm dní* (Prague, 1937), trans. A.M. and D.D.

[67] Jaroslav Seifert, "If Only For Those Tears" in *Eight Days: An Elegy for Thomas Masaryk,* trans. by Jagasich and O'Grady.

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cultural agenda. In keeping with Czech national mythology, Seifert aimed to pay tribute to the deceased leader by translating his political ideas into a poetics of public grief. This task demanded careful navigation through the corridors of Czech poetic tradition, its modernist reinterpretation, and the European literary canon.

What is Poetry which Does not Save/ Nations or People?

Reading Seifert's elegies for Masaryk today, one is struck by how much they engage with issues that poets like W. H. Auden would raise much later and in altogether different political contexts. Moreover, Auden's arguments against public poetry continue to inform critical discussions of the lyric, whether in debates over poetry's presumed lack of political influence or outcries against its "privatization."[68] Seifert's example confirms that when it comes to the lyric and, more specifically, to the poetry of mourning, the opposition between "public" and "private" is, at best, simplistic. The mourning performed by *Eight Days* is both private and public, not because Seifert was intimately struck by the loss of an important public figure (and in this respect, it matters little whether Masaryk had a personal or symbolic importance to him), but because this loss prompted him to address a problem which deeply concerned him as a poet. The problem he was facing was literary *and* political: can a modern poet grieve and offer solace to his nation?[69]

Seifert's solution was that of an interwar liberal Czech nationalist or *cosmonationalist*.[70] As a modernist, keenly aware of his artistic allegiances, of the place he hoped to take in the literature of his nation, and of his nation's literature in the broader European landscape, Seifert was a prime example of how the concepts of *nationalized modernism* and *modernized nationalism*, embraced by many artists of his generation, served to fulfill Czech national goals. Simplifying things considerably, one might describe the politics behind *Eight Days* as a poetic reaffirmation of Masaryk's notion that "the Czech question is a world question."[71] Seifert's political concerns about preserving national sovereignty and Czech culture were articulated through a literary dialogue with Masaryk's cultural nationalism.

As a thoroughly self-conscious, global literary genre, elegy provided him with a means for achieving this. Writing in a particular genre always entails an element of choice. Informed by various preconceptions and expectations, this choice can be a strong indicator of the poets' understanding of their place and desired position in the literary field. Although never entirely neutral, the question of choice becomes crucial when it involves a global poetic genre with considerable cultural weight. Seifert's choice of elegy was at once a way of reinforcing the continuity of the Czech literary tradition and communicating the magnitude of the loss experienced by his nation in a fundamentally transnational literary genre. In other

[68] Most notably, on the poetry's presumed lack of political influence, in the debate sparkled by Dana Gioia's essay "Can Poetry Matter?," which appeared in the *Atlantic* in 1991. See Dana Gioia, *Can Poetry Matter?: Essays on Poetry and American Culture* (Minneapolis, 2002); On the "privatization" of poetry see Kirill Medvedev, "Beyond the Poetics of Privatization," *New Left Review* 82 (July–August 2013) at newleftreview.org/issues/ii82/articles/kirill-medvedev-beyond-the-poetics-of-privatization (accessed July 25, 2024).

[69] By alluding here to Northrop Frye's argument in his seminal essay on Milton's *Lycidas,* that *Lycidas* is a "passionately sincere poem because Milton was deeply interested in the structure and symbolism of funeral elegies, and had been practicing since adolescence on every fresh corpse in sight," we intend to emphasize the point that, *contra* Frye's claims about the conventionality of elegy, Seifert's concerns as a elegist were not solely literary, but political as well. See Northrop Frye, "Literature as Context: Milton's *Lycidas*," *Fables of Identity: Studies in Poetic Mythology* (New York, 1963), 119–29, esp. pp. 124–25.

[70] On the notion of cosmopolitan nationalism, see Kai Nielsen, "Cosmopolitan Nationalism," *The Monist* 82, no. 3 (1999): 446–68. For a recent overview of the relationship between artistic modernism, nationalism, and cosmopolitanism in interwar Europe, see Lidia Głuchowska and Vojtěch Lahod, eds., *Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism in the Avant-Garde and Modernism* (Prague, 2022).

[71] Masaryk, *Problém malého národa*, 34–35.

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words, it was a way of rethinking the role of poetry towards the bereaved community and reconceiving the relationship between local and global literary traditions.[72]

In making this claim, we do not intend to oversimplify Seifert's poems, reducing them to a rhymed solution to a political problem, nor do we wish to completely deny they had a personal aspect as well. The fact is that, for many modern poets, elegy proved to be an effective means of mourning and addressing larger public concerns (some political in the term's narrow sense, others less so). Whether it was W. B. Yeats paying tribute to Irish Republicans in "Easter, 1916" (1920) or Milutin Bojić to Serbian soldiers fallen in the First World War in "The Blue Tomb" (1917), Anna Akhmatova lending the voice of a grieving mother to the victims of Stalinist repression in *Requiem* (1935–1961), or Nizar Qabbani grieving for his wife, killed during the Lebanese Civil War, in the poem "Bilqis" (1981), George Barker contemplating the photo of a child killed in an air raid on Barcelona ("Elegy on Spain," 1939), or Krzysztof Kamil Baczyński lamenting the death of a nameless boy in Warsaw ("Elegy on . . .," 1944), numerous poets of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries acted simultaneously as mourners and spokesmen for bereaved communities. In some of the best modern elegies, the two impulses—to express personal grief and address the needs of a community with whose plight the elegist identifies—cannot be separated without ignoring the poems' artistic qualities and distorting their meaning.

The audience's overwhelmingly positive reaction to Seifert's *Eight Days* confirms that writing a poem on public themes can perform both functions: it can address the needs of a community in crisis *and* reinforce a profound belief in poetry's public presence and political meaning. This belief, implied in Czesław Miłosz's famous lines "What is poetry which does not save/Nations or people?" may seem very far removed from today's understanding of poetry.[73] And yet, despite the tremendous changes in poetry's status and place in the hierarchy of literary genres over the past sixty years, poets are still being summoned to "touch/The deep wounds of the nation," in Miłosz's words, whether these were inflicted by the 9/11 attacks, reopened by the murder of George Floyd, or rendered visible by the death of Queen Elizabeth II.[74] What each of these crises brought to the fore, in varying ways and degrees of intensity, is an acute sense of anxiety about the future of the bereaved community.[75] Filtered through a net of intertwined social, political, and literary issues to which contemporary poets feel driven to respond, this anxiety is still a powerful creative motor. It shows that the opposition between the "personal" and the "political," the "private" and the "public," "lyric" and "society" is too crude to capture the myriad ways in which the relationship between poetry and the community has been negotiated and renegotiated in modern times.

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[72] Valuable insights on these issues, and the politics of elegy more generally, can be found in Jahan Ramazani, "Nationalism, Transnationalism, and the Poetry of Mourning," *A Transnational Poetics* (Chicago, 2009), 71–93.

[73] Czesław Miłosz, *New and Collected Poems*, trans. Czesław Miłosz and Robert Haas (New York, 1988), 77.

[74] Czesław Miłosz, *New and Collected Poems*, 77. On the poetry in the aftermaths of the murder of George Floyd, see Tiffany Austin, Sequoia Maner, Emily Ruth Rutter, and darlene anita scott, eds., *Revisiting the Elegy in the Black Lives Matter Era* (New York, 2020). At the time this article was written, the internet was flooded with freshly composed elegies (both literary and musical) for the late British queen. See, for example, Simon Armitage, "Floral Tribute," *The Guardian*, September 13, 2022, at www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/sep/13/floral-tribute-poem-queen-elizabeth-simon-armitage-poet-laureate (accessed July 25, 2024), and Neah Lekan, "An Elegy for Her Late Majesty Elizabeth II," *Medium*, September 19, 2022, at medium.com/@neahlekan/an-elegy-for-her-late-majesty-elizabeth-ii-dd0937be384e (accessed July 25, 2024).

[75] For an elegant defense of poetry's continuing ability to address these crises, see Eric Falci, *The Value of Poetry* (Cambridge, Eng., 2020).

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