

Petr Holman

Nature in
Otokar Březina's Work

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This book is the result of systematic research carried out as part of three interdisciplinary projects of the Faculty of Arts, Charles University. In each of the projects one subsection, *Pandanus*, has been dealing with nature in literature, art and religion mainly in the Indian tradition but also in other world literatures and from a broader interdisciplinary perspective. In the years 2003–2004 *Pandanus* was a sub-program of the Research Project No. MSM 112100005, *Comparative Poetics in a Multicultural World*. Between 2005 and 2011 it was Research Project No. MSM 0021620824, *The Foundations of Modern World in the Mirror of Literature and Philosophy*. Starting from 2012 the work has continued as part of the Programme for the Development of Fields of Study at Charles University, P 08, *Oriental and African Studies*, in a sub-programme entitled *The Process of Transformation in the Language and Cultural Differentness of the countries of South and Central Asia*. Cf. also <http://iu.ff.cuni.cz/pandanus/>.

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Abbreviations of selected Březina's works

MD *Mysterious Distances* (1895)

DW *Dawn in the West* (1896)

PW *Polar Winds* (1897)

BC *Builders of the Cathedral* (1899)

H *Hands* (1901)

E *Earth* (posthumously, 1933)

MS *Music of the Springs* (1903)

HH *Hidden History* (posthumously, 1970, 1989, 1996)

A Few Pieces of Mosaic in Place of an Introduction...

It is in no way easy to answer the question why it has been the work of the most famous representative of Czech literary symbolism, Otokar Březina, that has provoked such an unusual level of interest among readers – and this not only at the time when it was written – and why in spite of some fluctuations at certain periods this interest persists even today. And it would be even more difficult to answer the question in a manner that would reflect the amazement about the variety of forms and permanent dynamism of this work, which later played an irreplaceable role in the development of modern Czech and European poetry, essay writing and the art of correspondence.

It was from the very beginning, i.e. starting from the year of publication of his first collection of poems *Mysterious Distances* (*Tajemné dálky*, 1895), that both the group formed around the *Modern Review* (*Moderní revue*), and the *Catholic Moderne* (*Katolická moderna*), claimed allegiance to him. And in spite of all substantiated as well as completely unsubstantiated assertions about the exclusivity and unintelligibility of this work, it was accepted with obvious sympathy at labourers' recital evenings as well as at prominent European literary and philosophical associations. Březina's verses, essays and later also his letters published in journals and in collections of his correspondence were enthusiastically admired by his contemporaries, and even nowadays they have not lost their potency and impressiveness.

Otokar Březina, by his own name Václav Ignác Jebavý, was born on September 13, 1868 in Počátky. From the record in the school register of the girls' school in the town of Jaroměřice nad Rokytinou, written in the poet's own hand, we learn about a few external "stations on the way through life" (*stanice na cestě životem*): he attended the primary and town schools in Počátky and the provincial grammar school in Telč;

later he worked at schools in Jinošov, in Nová Říše and in Jaroměřice. However, these rather dry official records hide the most dramatic inner life of a poet, one who was passing through stages of development from naturalism to symbolism on the aesthetic level, and from decadent pessimism to a revolutionary affirmative acceptance of life on the philosophical level, while all this was happening in the context of the permanently present tragic connotations of life.

When no more than a twelve year old student, Václav Jebavý offered a cycle of his own verses as a parting gift to Alois Čermák, his friend in Počátky. Later he experienced a happy period and first friendship with František Bauer at the grammar school in Telč. Starting from June 1886 he published his first lyric and epic experiments under the pseudonym Václav Danšovský in the *Spring (Vesna)* journal. Later he published realistic humoresques, sketches and novellas in the journals *Eagle (Orl)* and *She-Eagle (Orlice)*. In autumn 1887 he met Anna Pammrová at Jinošov. Their mutual correspondence, continuing with a three year interruption till the end of the poet's life, became a testimony to his strong will and strenuous struggle to find the meaning of life and creative activity.

After the death of both of his parents within a week at the end of February 1890, events which substantially influenced his further spiritual growth, he devoted two years to working on a never published and later irretrievably destroyed *Novel of Eduard Brunner*. Then, after an extensive reading of ancient philosophers and mystics in the monastery library at Nová Říše and after years of intensive study of contemporary poets and thinkers (especially Baudelaire, Verlaine, Mallarmé, Poe, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and others), during the holidays of 1892, the first period of development of the poet was completed. The following years, affected by melancholy, serious doubts and possibly also deep depressions, resulted in an important transformation both of his life and art. At that time his temporary and – as it appears – only slightly critical acceptance of Schopenhauer and of his ideas about the surrounding world as an absolute self-delusion and illusion prevailed, as did an unequivocal and similarly life-long preference for solitude and its exclusivity, and the rejection of any interference by everyday reality with artistic creation. Tilting towards himself and his own heart and soul, his own dream, brings an artist new opportunities of achieving inner freedom and independence of external, and almost always disturbing, forces.

Now the poet's verses start to appear more regularly in the *Broad Meadow (Niva)* and *Spring (Vesna)* journals, later in the *Modern Review (Moderní revue)*, in *Horizons (Rozhledy)*, in the *Almanac of Art Nouveau*

(*Almanach secese*) and in *New Life* (*Nový život*), now under the pseudonym Otokar Březina. Life-long devotion to the highest Art and a total transformation of a realist into a symbolic poet had now been realised. Then within a few years of his greatest creative effort he published the collections of poems (*Mysterious Distances – Tajemné dálky* 1895, *Dawn in the West – Svítání na západě* 1896, *Polar Winds – Větry od pólů* 1897, *Builders of the Cathedral – Stavitelé chrámu* 1899, *Hands – Ruce* 1901) that attracted attention and enthusiastic appreciation from the leading critics of the day and which by their importance exceeded all other literary creation of that time.

Starting from 1897 the poet was publishing essays in journals which then were collected in his first book *Music of the Springs* (*Hudba pramenů*). There were new signs of the ever greater appreciation of Březina's life work, e.g. the prize for "for previous poetic work" (*za dosavadní dílo básnické*) from the legacy of Rieger administered by the Svatobor Association, or a similar prize from the Czech Academy of Sciences and Arts. In the year of the first publication of his collected poetic works, Březina was elected a corresponding member of the Czech Academy of Sciences and Arts on June 25, 1913, and then a regular member on May 2, 1923. In 1919 he was granted the degree of Honorary Doctorate of Philosophy by Charles University. He then refused the offer of an honorary professorship of the philosophy of art at Masaryk University in Brno, made just before Christmas 1922. Three years later he was superannuated. Finally he was able to leave his life-long teaching profession (at schools at Jinošov, Nová Říše and Jaroměřice na Rokytou), where he carried out his duties fastidiously, although he had always considered them to be a necessary evil and an obstacle to his artistic creation. Březina was proposed eight times (1916, 1917, 1918, 1920, 1921, 1925 and 1929)¹ as the Czech candidate for the Nobel Prize. In 1928, on the occasion of his sixtieth birthday, he obtained a great state prize for literature, a hundred thousand crowns which, however, he donated to the Svatobor Association. On March 25, 1929 Otokar Březina died in Jaroměřice nad Rokytou.

From the very beginning of the century a number of translations of his poems and essays kept appearing in journals and anthologies – in German, English, French, Italian, Polish, Russian, Latvian, Slovenian, Croatian, Serbian, and also in Swedish, Finnish or Esperanto. Not only were single poems translated, but also whole collections of poems. Later

1 This information was first published in Holman 2003, p. 79.

complete German and Swedish translations of his first book of essays *Music of the Springs* (*Hudba pramenů*) were published. It was only at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries that anthologies in the form of books and journals were published in German and Italian, and a translation of the second book of essays *Hidden History* (*Skryté dějiny*) in English (1997) and *Music of the Springs* (*Hudba pramenů*) in Spanish (1999). And just recently a small promotional volume of the poem *My Mother* (*Moje matka*) was prepared and published in fourteen languages (2013), and a complete translation of his work – both poems and essays – was published in Russian (2012). And after many years – and after many delays – there is also a translation of the whole of Březina’s poetic work into Latin (2013); this had been available only in several scattered “official” samizdat typewritten copies and also in manuscript and typewritten copies. This also confirms the fact that Březina’s work is still considered abroad to be alive and a noticeable component part of world literature and culture in general – while the domestic situation is a little different in this respect, to put it discreetly.

For the moment we can skip his first literary experiments as a student in the years 1883–1887 (for example short stories on historical topics, social epics, provincial humoresques and feuilletons written under the pseudonym Václav Danšovský) and also his first printed poems (since 1886) of a more or less epic type, in which he constantly expresses his social sensitivity and tries to capture – not without the author’s typically good-natured and naïve humour – some conspicuous characteristics of the smalltown ideal, an unsophisticated and simple life. However, we have to note that in the extensive specialist and memoir literature about Březina it is often considered very important that Březina used to read extensively in other languages (Polish, Russian, French, German, Italian, English, but also classical Greek and Latin) and privately studied history, philosophy, aesthetics and religious systems in great detail – not only Christianity but also Buddhism, Hinduism and even occultism, which he perceived in a sharply critical manner.

Let us quote a few lines from the much celebrated, adored as well as despised source, Wikipedia; however, in this case the entry “Otokar Březina” is on the whole exact and even, within the limits of a necessary conciseness, appropriate:²

2 Czech version at the address: http://cs.wikipedia.org/wiki/Otokar_B%C5%99ezina. The English version is shorter and does not provide such detail (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Otokar_B%C5%99ezina). Retrieved on May 10, 2014.

“Březina’s poetic work, often standing at the very borderline between art and a philosophical meditation, belongs to the most demanding values of European literary symbolism both as art and thought. In perfect agreement with the symbolistic theory, Březina perceived religious facts only as symbols and appropriated them mainly because of their esoteric character and aesthetic values. In the same way his mysticism is exclusively aesthetic. Březina does not see his aim in merging with God but in creating dreams and visions; instead of a mystic ecstasy aiming at a symbiosis with God, he wants to unveil the secret of being and death in order to transform the ecstatic state into a poetic form.

Even though the constants of Březina’s spiritual world are influenced by Christianity in many respects, his spiritual world does not abide by the rules of Christian spirituality, but it is much more permeated by the subjective spirituality of philosophical idealism in its Plato-Kantian form.

The whole of Březina’s work is permeated by one basic rule: every rapture, enchantment or joy is immediately replaced by depression, fatigue and sadness. These two poles, in between which Březina’s poetic world oscillates, not only control the level of the thoughts of his poetry, they also affect the form of his verses – in his poetic visions, in which the conflict between the dream and reality is escalated, the use of free verse prevails, while more subjectively tuned verses, closer to traditional lyric poetry, prefer regular verse metres and the melodiousness of the verse is accented.

The structure of Březina’s verses as well as his imagery represent one of the most complicated and sophisticated poetic phenomena in the whole history of Czech literature. In his conception the metaphor not only expresses certain feelings, moods and conditions (as e.g. with Karel Hlaváček), but always has a specifically concrete core, subordinated to a unifying composition purpose. The core of the metaphor constitutes the basic context of the poem, which is not blended with other contexts of its images [...]

The literary work of Otokar Březina represents a coherent and accomplished climax of Czech literary symbolism. Through the prism of his work we can clearly perceive not only the basic merits of the symbolist creative method (a philosophically deeper concept of poetic creation, more sophisticated and sensitive poetic imagery), but also its limiting factors (a purely idealistic basis, an inclination towards vague philosophical abstraction). The symbolist form of expression quickly became automatic, it turned into set clichés of both thought and metaphors, and thus symbolism quickly lost its stimulating nature in artistic terms. [...]

It is characteristic that this otherwise reliable entry in the Czech version of Wikipedia completely ignores Březina’s unusual use of knowledge from the sphere of natural sciences (including also his lifelong interest in the most current trends in these disciplines – especially mathematics, chemistry, physics, astronomy, geology, biology etc.) in his

poetry and essays. In fact it ignores this important and evident deposit in the treasury not only of Czech poetry and essay writing, but also of the art of correspondence; it is particularly here, in some of his almost two thousand posted letters (published for the first time by Host, Brno 2004, 2 Vols.; ed. Petr Holman), that the poet's proficiency in natural sciences finds full expression, without any stylization and with concrete references to and commentaries on some distinguished scientists and their discoveries (for example Bernard Bolzano, Max Planck, Albert Einstein, Marie Skłodowska-Curie and the like).

Let us repeat that it is certainly not by chance that more or less in parallel with poetry Březina also wrote essays; he was aware very early – and this was certainly also supported by his readings of Maurice Maeterlinck and by the repeated insistence of his friends and also editors – of what versatile possibilities this manner of expression can offer. Neither is it by chance that Březina's essays started to appear in journals, particularly in the 1890s, which would later be considered to be the time when the first and at the same time most significant essay-length works appeared in this country. The authors of these years, especially F. X. Šalda as the founder and creator of the critical essay, and Otokar Březina as the most distinctive personality of the poetic essay, laid the foundations of Czech essay writing in general. And we do not have to remind the reader that one very substantial feature – very attractive for Březina's psychological constitution – was the distinctive and conscious subjectivity of the essay, well known already from the time of Michel de Montaigne. The author's subjective, and exactly because of that new and original, view is significantly reflected not only in the composition of the essay, but also in the selection of the individual phrases and of the characteristic linguistic means of expression in general. And it is particularly in these contexts, not only in poetry, that we can follow how Březina makes use of his knowledge of natural sciences and their terminology in the complicated structure of his innovative essays. Like Šalda in the sphere of criticism, Březina in the sphere of poetry created a unique and unmistakable form of essay, which is still rated as the culmination of the efforts of the 1890s generation in this country in the sphere of thought and form, and also in European and world literature. And in addition to that, the repeated and completely functional use of the terminology from the sphere of natural sciences in poetry, essays and also correspondence, unusual in Czech literature as well as in other literatures, represents an important feature of Březina's personality as artist and of his manner of creative writing.

Thus in the present book readers can get acquainted with Březina's work, with his diction, images, metaphors etc. from a slightly different point of view than the currently established one. It will be seen how exceptionally rich Březina's imagery, language and linguistic means of expression in general are. Readers will understand the vagueness of some efforts (with even more vague results) to describe some characteristic elements of the melodiousness of his verses, or to explore the rhythmic patterns of his prose or the phrasing of his verses and essays so unusual for his time. This involves the use of terms, and not only terms, from the sphere of natural sciences – and it is this sphere that the following studies will explore.

The first three discuss several botanical entities in Březina's work, namely the incorporation, use and meaning of Our Lady's bedstraw (*Galium verum*), which he liked all his life (first published in 2003), of the motif of the ear of grain (wheat, barley or only as a general symbol; 2004) and the use and symbolism of the grapevine, or bunch of grapes, as a part of his work (2005). The second triplet of studies (2006, 2007, 2008) analyses the contexts and meanings of the names of trees, plants and flowers, while the last triptych (2011, 2012, 2013) deals mainly with Březina's use of geological terminology and precious or half-precious stones, since they are also important "building stones" of his poems and essays. No doubt each of the topics would deserve a separate monograph study in other contexts going beyond the individual disciplines. Therefore we have to underline again that the studies published here in no way claim the right to make definitive judgements and that they only *indicate* possible further research into the texts of a sovereign, *real* poet, texts which doubtless deserve such study nowadays, and possibly especially nowadays.

Petr Holman

O. Březina's *Galium*

[In: *Pandanus '03: Nature Symbols in Literature*, Publication of Charles University in Prague, Faculty of Arts, Institute of Indian Studies, Prague 2003, Signeta, pp. 49–75. – Czech version in: *Srovnávací poetika v multikulturním světě*, eds. Vladimír Svatoň a Anna Housková, FF UK, Praha 2004, p. 217–233.]

Introduction

Within European literary and cultural space, just as in other regions and areas of the world, it was common in the past for certain flowers (given their botanical, pharmacological or other properties) to be favoured by writers and poets who were primarily taken by their aesthetic qualities. The same applied to history, considering the frequent publishing of various types of “herbals” and other publications which covered more than botany (for both experts and a wider public), including colours and their symbolism in both general and specific terms. In literary works, this included all types of formalized comments about flowers, trees and bushes. However, among the flowers most beloved by artists, we often find those which are not at first attractive due to their beautiful shape, colour or other exceptional characteristics, but because of their inseparable integration – not necessarily within works of art as such, but at least within the lives of the artists.

Despite its ample occurrences in Czech literature, one of the rarer examples of this, neglected nowadays due to little being known about it, is Our Lady's bedstraw. This was the favourite flower of the Czech symbolist Otokara Březiny (1868, Počátky – 1929, Jaroměřice nad Rokytnou).¹

1 As Antonín Juránek has shown (See his dissertation, Faculty of Arts, Charles University, 1951 – *The Inspirational Sources of Otokar Březina: The Otokar Březina Dictionary*. This

At this point in the introduction, it is necessary to remind the reader that Březina's poetic œuvre (Březina 1975) which was written from 1895–1901, along with the essays (1989) which he wrote later and his prolific correspondence (2004), have been analyzed in detail not only by literary scholars, historians and critics,² but also in modern times, by medical doctors,³ physicists⁴ and scholars specializing in India⁵ (This

manuscript does not have page numbers and has not yet been published.), Březina uses many words taken from nature in his poems. In addition to animals (reptiles, birds, sea creatures, insects), both domestic and foreign, trees and other words related to trees also make an appearance. He includes the following (here listed in alphabetical order): acacia, apple, apple tree, avenue, bark, branch, bud, cherries, chestnut (as an adjective), core, cypress, graft, grove, growing branches, ivy, jasmine, jasmine (as an adjective), leaves, linden tree, olive, orchard, palm tree, palm tree (as an adjective), root, sap, splintered, spray, sprig, tree, twig. Within the category of plants, Březina includes: balsam, balsam (as an adjective), barley (as an adjective), bent-grass, bushes, caraway, clover, clover (as an adjective), ear (as in ear of corn), fern, grape, grass, lichen, mold, moss, mushroom, paddy-field, plant, poppy, reeds, rice, saffron, strawberry, thyme, tuft, weeds, wine. Within the category of flowers, the following are included: asphodel, bloom, bloom (as a verb), bouquet, cactus, common wormwood, cowslip, daisy, edelweiss, flower(s), flower-bud, forget-me-not, lilac, lily, myrtle (as an adjective), pollen, rose, stem, sunflower, water lily, weeds, violet.

- 2 See the three volumes published so far of the bibliography (at the end of the paper).
- 3 It is interesting to compare the manuscripts of Emil Černý, stored at the Otokar Březina Muzeum in Jaroměřice nad Rokytnou. The majority of the following selected texts were taken from a series of lectures given at the Faculty of Medicine at Masaryk University in Brno: *The Medical Aspects of Otokar Březina's Work* (1992), *The Contribution of Otokar Březina's Work to Modern Medicine* (1993), *Otokar Březina's Conception of the Organism and Disease: The Phenomenon of Death in the Work of Otokar Březina and in Modern Natural History* (1994), *The Spectrum of Pain in the Work of Otokar Březina* (1995), *The Scope of Love in the Work of Otokar Březina* (1997), *Ruminations of a Doctor on the Health and Death of Otokar Březina* (1998), *Mistakes by the Doctors Caring for the Health of Otokar Březina* (2003).
- 4 Otokar Březina's work still serves as an inspiration nowadays for leading people in the field of natural history, as testified by this verbatim quote from the penultimate paragraph of Březina's essay "The Beauty of the World" (from his first book of essays *The Music of the Springs* – 1903) quoted in its English translation by Prof. Karel Kuchař, Dept. of Physics, University of Utah, Salt Lake City:
He who was able to reveal to us a new line, an unforeseen perspective within the beauty of things and of the world, is our benefactor, unique and unforgettable. It seems to us as if he belonged to us before his birth and was approaching us throughout all eternity, to find us in this life and tell us what he had to tell. We are grateful to him all our lives according to the law of love which is able to forget nothing but that which she herself gave to others.
This quote was placed at the beginning of the commemorative publication dedicated to the Czech theoretical physicist, Jiří Bičák, who is renowned on a world level (his interest in Březina is well known): *Gravitation: Following the Prague Inspiration. A Volume in Celebration of the 60th Birthday of Jiří Bičák*. New Jersey, London, Singapore & Hong Kong: World Scientific, 2002. O. Semerák, J. Podolský and M. Zofka, editors.
- 5 After his move to the provincial, western Moravian town of Jaroměřice nad Rokytnou in 1901, Březina intensively studied Indian literature, philosophy and religions. He did so

is also important given Březina's long-term interest in ancient Indian literature and philosophy).

Galium verum – its description, occurrence and use

Among the many varieties (approximately 300!) of bedstraws, we are here introducing the following as an example: catchweed bedstraw (*Galium aparine* Linn.), crosswort (*Galium cruciata* Linn.), Our Lady's bedstraw (*Galium verum* Scop.), cheddar bedstraw (*Galium fleurotii*), marsh bedstraw (*Galium palustre* Linn.) Hemsl (*Galium silvaticum* Linn.), smooth bedstraw (*Galium mollugo* Linn.), fen bedstraw (*Galium uliginosum* Linn.), false cleavers (*Galium spurium*), etc. Woodruff is also a close relative of bedstraw; in fact, sweet woodruff (*Asperula odorata* Linn.) used to belong to the bedstraw family and bore the name of *Galium odoratum* /L./Scop.).⁶

In English, the *Galium verum* Linn. is also known as ladies' bedstraw, Bun an Ruadh and yellow bedstraw. Some of these names refer to the legend where the Virgin Mary prepared a bed for herself and for the little Jesus from bedstraw. This is the reason why this plant is blessed in some churches on the occasion of the saint's day. This plant is of a medium-tall height (from approximately 30–120 centimetres), a tufted perennial herb with grounded rootstock and an erect stalk with few branches. The plant becomes woody lower down (in the upper portion, it has four sides, while lower down it is rounded, smooth and even labial). Its single-veined leaves have from 8–12 whorls and are elongated or narrowly linear lanceolate, pointed. They are curled under on the edges, dark green on their topside and velvety on their underside. Their inflorescence is located in their tips and produces thickly-latticed, richly-branched, tiny (approximately 2.5–3.5 mm in diameter) flat flowers. They are sharply

primarily using the translations of Max Müller. He was also familiar with several Vedic and Upanishadic texts, as well as the epics of Mahabharatam and Ramajanam, the Bhagavadgita, the Dhammapadam, Manu's Code of Laws, Panini, Buddha's Speeches using Neumann's translation, and later, the work of Rabindranath Tagore, etc. The influence of Indian thinking on Březina has been documented by Vincenc Lesný (1927). A portion of this work was printed in India (Lesný 1933). Other books dealing with similar topics: Lesný (1945), Záhoř (1928); see also Holman (1989).

6 As examples, we list the following: blue woodruff (*Asperula arvensis* Linn.), river woodruff (*Asperula rivalis* Sibth.), glaucous bedstraw (*Asperula glauca* Linn.), dyer's woodruff (*Asperula tinctoria* Linn., syn. *Galium triandrum* Hyland.) or squinancywort (*Asperula cynanchica* Linn.).

lemon yellow in colour, and thus impossible to overlook in the landscape, and their fragrance is bewitching. It blooms from May to September. The fruits are dry double samaras, composed of two tiny, rounded, glabrous, smooth to tubercle-like samaras with good germinating power in the springtime. Almost all bedstraws are good fodder crops, although some of them are known to be bothersome field and meadow weeds.

Our Lady's bedstraw occurs in two sub-types:

- I. ssp. *verum* 20–100 cm high, rich yellow in colour, fragrant; its stalks are protruding or erect, with short cells, the leaves are a small 1 mm in breadth, longer than the stalk's cells, it has a slim, but dense panicle, its branches stand straight out and are longer than the stalk's cells.
- II. Ssp. *wirtgenii*: the stalks are stiffly erect with lengthened cells, the leaves are up to 2 mm in breadth and are longer than the stalk's cells, the panicle is sparse and discontinuous, its branches are approximately the same length as the branches of its leaves.

This plant is a common type of mesophilic–xerophilic grassy herbage in the *Arrhenatherion* group, also categorized within the bush herbage group known as *Pruniospinosae*. As with other Euro-Asiatic types, it is largely widespread from May until August or September on dry, grassy, bush-covered hillsides, in banks, in dry meadows, pastures, on the edges of forests, in pine forests which allow adequate light, on embankments, on the borders of roads and on other sunny, grassy places, i.e. in areas of dry soil where there is little humus, with skeletal even sandy soil which is acidic and rich in minerals.

Generally speaking, *Galium* grows in Europe's temperate belt (with the exception of the most northern and most southern regions), in Asia (and in many regions of the Indian subcontinent), in Iceland and also in the isolated position of Japan. Within the Czech Republic, it occurs exclusively within the warmer regions up to 600 meters above sea level and only sporadically at higher altitudes.

Even though it may seem that bedstraw has no practical use, certain scientific publications (in other publications it is not listed at all!) highlight several of its specific characteristics which indeed categorize it as a medicinal plant.

The haulms of Our Lady's bedstraw (*Herba galii lutei*, i.e. literally "yellow") are recommended for gathering when in bloom by cutting them and then drying them in the sun or in shaded places (any artificial

temperature should be higher than 40°C). Unlike the fresh herbs, the drug which is acquired does not smell nice and is bitter in taste. Of particular benefit are its galiosin glycoside, rubiadin glycoside and asperuloside, however, it also contains traces of essential oil. It is mainly used as a diuretic and against cramps.

The drug is used internally in a syrup as a diuretic and as a muscle relaxant if the organism has heightened retention of water (approximately 1–2 soup spoons of the drug chopped/1 litre of water), for inflammation of the lower urinary tracts and for problems with dysuria or cramping of the smooth muscles within the gastrointestinal and urinary tracts. It is well-known that in some regions of the countryside, bedstraw was put in cradles not only to protect against cramps, but also against sorcery and evil eyes. Women also prepared tea for themselves from bedstraw.

Externally, this drug is most often used in baths against furunculosis and rashes, as well as in burn compresses. Catchweed bedstraw also functions in much the same way, as its haulms contain the above-mentioned asperuloside glycoside. As with its relative, the common madder (*Rubia tinctorum* Linn.), it is used externally to treat wounds and boils.

In addition to this (and to using the plant's root for dyeing purposes), *Galium verum* has other practical uses connected to the etymology of how it received its name. It was taken from the Greek *gala* (meaning “milk”), since the plant's leaves contain the bedstraw enzyme (approximately 1 miligram/100 grams of leaves) which significantly assists in the clotting of milk. The plant was thus formerly favoured for its use in cheese-making, not only for its easy availability, but also for its yellow colouring and the specific taste which it afforded to cheeses.

The Occurrence of the *Galium verum* in Březina's Work

Březina's poems comprise many proper nouns which, as in any other text, significantly aid the reader in better orienting himself through the imparted information. As a small example, we will here cite the first fifty⁷ (in terms of nouns chosen for their alphabetical order in Czech) most regularly occurring proper nouns (within the text, their first letters are capitalized) in Březina's works and thus embodying the language,

7 Svatopluk Pastyřík has analysed this in his study (as yet unpublished) “*Nomina Propria* in the Poetic Works of Otokar Březina,” designed for the volume from the Otokar Březina 2003 Symposium which took place on 17.–19. 10. 2003 in Jaroměřice nad Rokytnou.

style and time period in which they were composed. All of these works are still highly valued today, even beyond the realm of Czech literature:

Eternal, Highest, Secrets, Unrecognized, Unknown, Night, Word, Gehenna, City, Grand, Approaching, Thought, Holy, Heart, Victory, Omnipresent, Resurrection, the West, Angel, Asparagus, Beethoven, Nameless, God's Body, Pure, Man, Distance, Breath, Dolphin, Elijah, Elijah's, Gideon's, Gethsemane, Hallucination, Proud, Illusion, the Only, Name, Swan, Love, Lyre, Owner, Beloved, the Past, Past, Master, Master's, Silence, Power, Mystery, the Assumption. (1)

The name of our said plant and its grouping of tiny yellow flowers remained unforgettable for Březina from the time of his student years at the *Realschule* in Telč (or probably already since his youth spent in Počátky). For the poet's friends, this plant was a legendary symbol of brotherly sympathy and represented the deep belonging of one person to another. However, this plant does not occur in any of the poetic texts or essays. The fact that the poet took a liking to this plant because of some kind of "inexplicable partiality" which he himself could not understand (see later in the study) gradually became a part of his consciousness as a whole; various mentions of this are scattered throughout the secondary literature.⁸ However, we are now interested exclusively in the poet's authentic testimony, primarily in his own notes from his exceptional (for multiple reasons) correspondence. Quite extensive at times, his correspondence dates from 1884 until his death, was written either regularly or occasionally and includes more than two hundred addressees.

Instead of this flamboyant colourfulness (the colour of the *Galium* flowers is here designated, as it is in another letter to the same addressee also cited here, as "sulphuric yellow"), the very first documentation

8 As one example, we cite Jakob Deml's interpretation (highly subjective in the majority of cases) of Březina's words about the colours of flowers (Deml 1931, p. 462; recorded in 1927): Looking at the zinnias, he said, "The most beautiful are the yellowish red ones – that is my colour!" I led him to the nemesis flowers, most of them were yellow and about these, he said, "That is not my colour. It has some ochre in and is thus disturbed by the earth." And indeed, I noted that the nemesis flowers, whether they were red or bluish, their colours were still burdened and polluted by the earth. But Březina did not like the sulphuric yellow colours either, only a warm yellow, light, "the colour of the sun," such as the bedstraw. Thus, this attribute of the sulphuric in "Noontime Maturation" must be taken with a grain of salt [such as in the 10th poem of the collection *Polar Winds* – note P. H.], "It was only the sulphuric flowers on the parched balks, the melancholy flowers that welcomed me with the image of the sun." Březina's face so happily lit up when I once brought him a bouquet of dwarf poppies and bedstraw.

is in the letter to the individualist thinker, writer, translator and life-long correspondent, his friend Anna Pammrová (1860–1945) dated 9. 6. 1890 (Březina 2004, pp. 176–177). This marked the period of the poet’s “grounding,”⁹ a time of exhaustive, passionate polemics covering the meaning of art and its relation to nature. In contrast to Pammrová, who continued throughout her life to propagate Rousseau’s ideals of a return to nature, in this letter Březina supported the necessity and beneficial influence of culture and art on man:

The following must be mentioned once again concerning your repeated admonition by which you create art. According to you, art is not only ridiculous, but is completely detrimental! Believe me that this is an absurd claim. Can what nature itself gives rise to in our soul actually be ridiculous or even detrimental, what it invokes in a person, what it creates – any more than a person can be? You will certainly not be able to confirm this – you who render homage to the cult of nature, you for whom nature is everything, you for whom it is enough that the trees rustle once to have peace fill your soul and the storm die down. Perhaps you will ask – how is it possible to prove that nature has put the rudiment of art in us? Listen to me. You see the countryside during a June heatwave, with the withered green of the leas and the intense colours of the field flowers. It is immersed in a yellow sea of sunrays which sucks up succus from the delicate stems of numerous grasses. Here you see an enormous amount of colourful tones, drawn in a multitude of ways against the enormous backdrop of the horizon. Here you feel the hot breath on your face, that hot breath of the sun which desiccates the path before you and makes a cloud of grey dust billow up at each breeze. All that you see is excellent, unfathomable, enveloped in the enigma of mysterious strength which plays with a rainbow on a beetle’s shell and cuts your eyes with Our Lady’s bedstraw sulphuric yellow flower in the balks. That combination of colours, forms and sources gives rise in you, if you indeed are attentive and possess the gift of observation, to discernment and wonder, to the special sense of mysterious astonishment. You see, you feel, you want to think, you involuntarily feel the yearning to show yourself how astonished you are, given this mighty image which fills you with a peculiar amazement, a pleasant amazement which only injures that which does not last. During that moment when you stand lost in thought over that mute speech of colours, it is then when you draw close to the artist, that you yourself become a poet, without even knowing how. Each person who is not blinded from observing the sublime and the excellent – both of which are concentrated within nature, each person who is capable of linking a thought with an impression, yet who perhaps could not pronounce either one or the other via human speech, each such person is an artist. And you would criticize the artist who is, as you well know, able to show you this? You would reproach him that his work is ridiculous or harmful? I say this unto you: I am able to do

9 Later, he would put all his works which had been published thus far to the side and consider only the five poetry collections published from 1895–1901 as his works: *Tajemné dálky* (Mysterious Distances), 1895; *Svítání na západě* (Dawn in the West), 1896; *Větry od pólů* (Polar Winds), 1897; *Stavitelé chrámu* (Builders of the Cathedral), 1899; *Ruce* (Hands), 1901.

so as well, since many are called, but few are chosen. And this crossing from the sublime to the ridiculous only demands a small step. You ask – how do you come across such thoughts, you who had nothing else to do except to scoff at the cult of nature? The misunderstanding is that the poet who wants to attain an impression and who misses his aim, awakens an impression of suffering. This poet does not know what he wants and instead gropes for images and metaphors which create an errant odyssey through all the poetics of high school and introductions of “how to write poetry,” this poet is the ridiculous one. A thinker who with his opinion of nature’s beauty links sentimental reflection, he will exaggerate, the one for whom the bothersome, monotone moaning of the frogs is the same as a melancholic lullaby and for whom the anxious whistling of a hungry bird is as passion. This same poet speaks about the reflection of the silver moonlight on the smooth surface of a lake and yet only has a puddle before him, thus he has been created for irony. That which is sublime is never ridiculous. However, does it not appear as thoughtless banality via exaggeration and stereotyping? (2)

His other two poetic mentions of the *Galium* date from when he already had written first two collections written (and precisely when he was approaching the publication of his third, more enlightened and more spiritual collection of poetry, *Polar Winds*¹⁰) and when Březina had already definitively and irreversibly decided to take an artistic path. The first mention is in a letter to another well-known Czech poet, Antonín Sova (1864–1928), dated 5. 3. 1897 (Březina 2004, pp. 419–420) with an important note on a mutual meeting in Prague about which few people knew:

My dear friend, you granted me joy with your letter. A letter is an event in the life of a lonely person, a guest coming from afar. How nice for it to have come from you!

I remember well the meeting with you during my last visit to Prague. That pandemonium so characteristic of large cities fell on me and shouted louder than that which speaks to a person inside and is actually worth being heard. It is only once I returned home and breathed in the fragrant greetings of our forests that I feel like my old self once again. I who love the unhindered view into the distances, dreaming over a book beneath the shade of nervous birches, the dry hillsides with their yellow bedstraw near forgotten mills, the poor grace of the landscape whose only pride is its several weeks of yellow summer. Remember how you they introduced you to me during some kind of loud, blaring music (but the music did not have the same magic effect on me amidst the crowd as it would if I had heard it in the silence, engaged only by the resonances of several souls whom I love).

10 This collection came out on 15 September of that same year.