Hypnotic power of a Czech painter on Murger

In 1857, two foreign painters, who were also friends, were staying in Marlotte: the Irishman Nathaniel Hone (1831–1917) and the Czech Sobeslav Pinkas (1827–1901). That same year, both men painted the same subject, *The Shepherdess of Marlotte*, as noted in an article by Julian Campbell.[1] During this period, Pinkas invited other Czech friends to visit him. Among them, the painter Jaroslav Čermák (1830–1878) accepted the invitation, hoping to draw inspiration from the rock formations in the Forest of Fontainebleau for the completion of his large-scale painting, *The Hussites Defending a Mountain Pass*.[2]



Portrait of Jaroslav Čermák by Jan Vilímek



Self-portrait by Sobeslav Pinkas, 1853

A childhood friend of Čermák, Pinkas shared his recollections of him in a few pages published in 1893[3]; an excerpt from this text is included in the present article. It recounts an amusing anecdote that took place at Mère Antony's inn as the two Czech painters were staying in Marlotte, and that involved Henry Murger.

"I hope I will be forgiven for mentioning a peculiarity of my dear friend that is as interesting as it is strange. He attached great importance to the fact that sparks would sometimes fly from his hair when he combed it in the dark; furthermore, he was firmly convinced that his gaze possessed magnetic power. In fact, while in Brussels, he would often put this power to the test on various wild animals at the local menagerie. He told

---

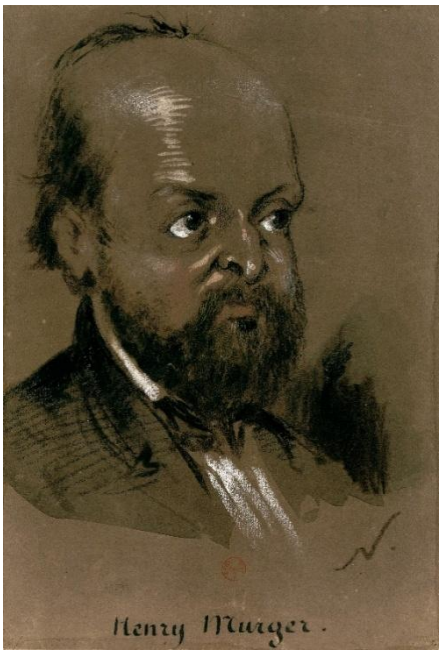
[1] *La bergère de Marlotte* by Julian Campbell – Bulletin des Amis de Bourron-Marlotte n°55, 2013.
[2] Painting presented at the 1857 Salon de Paris. Today, it belongs to the Prague National Gallery.
[3] *Réminiscences marquant les trente ans d'activité de l'Umělecká beseda, 1863-1893*. Prague – Published by Umělecká beseda, 1893.

me that one black panther, in particular, would retreat from his gaze to the very back of its cage, before suddenly hurling itself, in a fury, against the bars, seeking in this way to escape the agitation caused by Čermák's stare, which remained fixed upon it, unceasingly.

Unfortunately, such successes with wild beasts were not enough for Jaroslav; he would sometimes direct his experiments toward his fellow human beings as well. I witnessed this for the first time in a small restaurant near the Palais-Royal, where we often went for lunch. At the back of the room sat a young Spaniard with dark hair and a swarthy complexion' someone who perhaps reminded Čermák of his "black panther" from Brussels. Without my noticing, he immediately fixed his magnetic gaze upon the man. Suddenly, the poor Spaniard sprang up as if propelled by a spring, rushed toward our table, waving his napkin furiously, and, in a very vehement tone, demanded that this persistent staring come to an end. Delighted by the outcome, Čermák paid it little attention, leaving me with the arduous task of calming and placating the enraged Spaniard. As I employed all my powers of persuasion to do so, Čermák whispered to me in Czech, "I knew he would spring up, just like that panther", completely forgetting in the process that we were dealing with a Spaniard beside himself with fury, and that there were no bars to protect us.

On another occasion, in Marlotte, deep within the Forest of Fontainebleau, we found ourselves at the inn run by "Père" Antony, a place where many painters would stay during the summer to create studies of the surrounding countryside. Père Antony was a very jovial man; he was, incidentally, the son of a Czech soldier from the era of Napoleon I, a man who had fallen in love and deserted his regiment to settle there.[4]

He would entertain his guests by singing and dancing. The highlight of his repertoire was a Czech song he had learned from his father, even though he himself no longer understood a single word of the language. He would only perform it when he had been cheered by a bit of wine. It took a great deal of effort on my part to decipher the garbled lyrics of this song; I even wrote them down somewhere. It was, in all likelihood, quite popular among Czech soldiers during the Napoleonic Wars.



Portrait of Murger by Nadar, ca 1850 - Bibliothèque Nationale de France

In addition to the renowned landscape painters Harpignies and Ciceri, along with a good number of younger artists, Henry Murger, author of the famous *Vie de Bohème,* also spent the entire summer in Marlotte. He was a regular at "Père" Antony's establishment, arriving each evening with a shotgun

[4] Louis Antony's father was indeed born ca 1772 in *Bisseau-en-Bohême*, currently Nový Bydžov, in the Czech Republic.

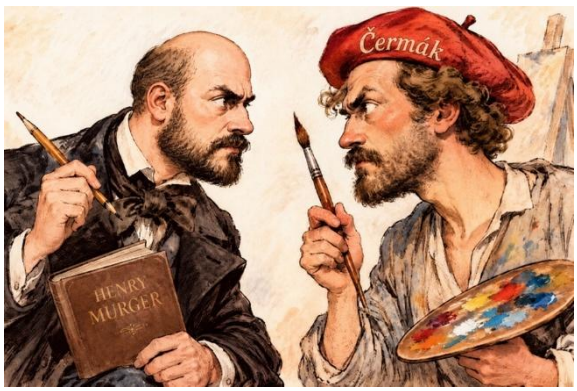
slung over his shoulder. Though he never actually shot at anything, the gun nonetheless helped complete his persona as a poet. It was during this period that he composed his fine poem *Les Corbeaux*[5] ("The Crows"), a work that bears witness to the close attention he paid to the many flocks of crows in the surrounding area during his "platonic" hunting excursions. He also devised a melody for his verses, which he would perform for us at dinnertime. The composer Membré[6], who happened to be present, transcribed the music, since Murger was no musician and could not even read musical notation. Murger would preside at the table; he was a charming companion, held in high regard by the entire group.

One might object that none of this has anything to do with Čermák. To such an objection, I would reply that before addressing the event itself, it is necessary to understand the setting and the milieu in which it took place. The immense popularity of the poet, who was already bald at the time, made the magnetic experiment that our friend Čermák directed toward him all the more delicate.

Čermák had come to spend a few days in Marlotte, as I had written to tell him he would find excellent opportunities there to study rock formations, something he needed for his painting, *The Hussites Defending a Pass*. During the day, our group would scatter throughout the forest, each of us working in a different spot. We would set off early in the morning, equipped with our painting gear and carrying a clean canvas bag slung over our shoulders, a bag that the diligent Mère Antony had stocked with a cold meal and half a bottle of wine, sparing us the need to return to the village at midday from work sites that were sometimes quite far away. Then, when everyone reconvened after sunset for our communal dinner, the conversation was always lively and boisterous, with everyone having a story to tell.

This made the sudden silence that fell over the group, during the first dinner following Čermák's arrival, all the more striking and awkward. Taken aback, I glanced around, trying to understand the reason for this unusual occurrence. To my utter astonishment, I soon realized that Čermák, sitting beside me, was locked in a stare with Murger, who was seated at the other end of the table.

I urged my companion, in Czech, to stop, pointing out that the entire company had already noticed. But it was in vain. Unperturbed, he continued to spear morsels of food and bring them to his mouth, all the while keeping his eyes fixed on his adversary; he merely replied, in a low voice and still in Czech: "Why doesn't *he* look away? Why should *I* be the one to give in?"



[5] This poem of Murger is a part of his collection of poems entitled *Les Nuits d'hiver*, published in 1861.
[6] Edmond Membrée (1820-1882)

Seeing that Murger’s gaze, ordinarily full of great kindness, was growing increasingly ferocious, and not knowing what else to do, I finally tossed my heavy fork onto my compatriot’s plate. Startled, Čermák involuntarily broke off his visual duel, just as he was on the verge of pouncing, leopard-like, upon his adversary; an attack that had seemed all but certain. A subtle amusement, tinged with gratitude, appeared on the faces of all the guests at this resolution brought about by my mediating fork. The conversation quickly resumed, while I took the opportunity to lecture my intense friend in Czech, imploring him not to spoil our good spirits any further. He grumbled at length and, for the remainder of his stay, spoke almost exclusively to me. Murger never forgave him for attempting to repeat upon him an experiment he had once conducted on a wild beast. "