



Petr A. Bílek, Vladimír Papoušek. *Models of Representation in Czech Literary History*. Boulder: Columbia University Press, 2010. 200 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-88033-680-2.

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A Most Unhelpful Contribution to the Study of Czech Literature in English

The Czech literary scholars Petr A. Bílek and Vladimír Papoušek have both contributed prominently to the Czech post-Communist reevaluation of twentieth-century Czech literary history and the concomitant opening up of Czech literary studies to late twentieth-century theoretical approaches, particularly those prevalent in North America. Their writing is not marked by either the desiccated pseudo-structuralism or the tendency to construct every piece of analysis as a “polemic” that have lingered too long in post-Communist Czech literary scholarship. Instead, their approach is pragmatic and eclectic, open to the possibilities offered by new approaches, but sensitive also to their limitations. In *Models of Representations in Czech Literary History*, a collection of twelve individually authored essays that exemplify this method, they focus essentially on the representation in literature of historical events, figures, and settings, and the representation of literature and literary figures by literary historians and critics.

The major problem of this volume is that, from the awkward title onward, the reader’s patience is tested by what is too palpably an English translation from the Czech by a nonnative speaker. The essays, while hardly incomprehensible, are nevertheless pervaded by the mistakes typical of Czech-speaking writers of English: haphazard use of definite and indefinite articles, unwieldy replication of Czech syntax and word order, inaccurate collocations, and often absent punctuation. For example, early in the opening essay, by Papoušek, we read: “Jan Neruda, a canonized author of the Czech prose of

the 19th century, is far from representing in his *Prague Tales*, having belonged for at least one hundred years to the obligatory reading of Czech pupils, any boundary of Realism towards which each on his own and in his own time [Fyodor] Dostoyevsky, [Leo] Tolstoy or [Gustave] Flaubert labour” (p. 7). The jargon-heavy theories under discussion, which frequently rely on unusual usage of words, phrases, and punctuation, acquire a further, unwanted layer of complexity that tries the reader’s patience. In the final sentence of the paragraph quoted above, the translator’s failure to find synonyms for the volume’s key word—“represent”—leads to an impossible clouding of its meaning: “For example in the tale ‘How Mr Vorel Broke In His Meerschau’ representing one of the key texts, which every graduate of Czech classes will recollect, Neruda represents a wholly immovable image where the fatality of the destiny represented is fixed from a punctual description of space situation to the representation of a settled traditionalist collective paradigm” (p. 7). The volume appears to have received no serious attention from a qualified native speaker, never mind an editor, and it is surprising that Columbia University Press, which distributes the East European Monographs series, would associate itself with it in this form.

The lack of editorial attention extends to the presentation of the content. There is no referencing of sources, no system for presenting authors and texts (with dates) or reflecting repeat mentions in the volume, and no index at all. Perhaps more vitally, there is no serious attempt to make the material accessible to readers beyond a narrow

audience of English-speaking Czech literature scholars, who can access the author's work in the original Czech. Papoušek writes as a comparatist in his four essays in the first part of the volume, which are prompted by observations found in the work of Stephen Greenblatt, J. H. Miller, and Hayden White, and which draw on a wide range of examples from "world literature." The Czech authors and texts to which he refers are never properly contextualized, and must therefore remain mysterious, if not meaningless, to the uninitiated. For example, in an essay on Greenblatt's conception of "new history," Papoušek asks without preceding or subsequent elucidation: "Do then Jan Čep and Jakub Deml attract greater attention of both literary historians and critics than [Miroslav] Nohejl or [Frantisek] Heřmánek because of the authority of an eternal, and thus ahistorical, covenant of an imaginary Sanhedrin of snobs and celebrants of aesthetic models?" (p. 64). At the same time, however, in the comparative context, observations pertinent to Czech literature are underplayed. For example, Papoušek's rejection of the conventional presentation of Jan Neruda's tales as implicitly equivalent to contemporaneous European and American realism is incidental to his broader argument.

By contrast, Bílek uses exclusively Czech sources to explore, for example, ideas of the literary canon or what is meant by the use of an author's name. This approach produces essays of value to Czech literature specialists, for instance, on the Czech literary representation of Joseph Stalin and Klement Gottwald after their deaths. The addition of Tomáš Masaryk would have re-

ally spiced up this piece. In the second part of the volume, however, which focuses on Czech-language literature, both authors tackle subjects potentially attractive to a broader audience, such as Czech emigre literature from the late nineteenth century, exile literature from the post-1968 Communist period, Czech notions of Central Europe, and perceptions of Milan Kundera. Through the use of representative or exhaustive samples, these essays offer engaging commentary of the subject. Both authors understandably dislike adversarial approaches to literary criticism, but—in keeping with a different Czech (and indeed American) cultural tradition—their own conclusions often seem banal in their conciliatory nod to all sides. Bílek, for example, ends his essay on perceptions of Eastern, Western, and Central Europe by asserting that "we need our misunderstandings" (p. 115).

Bílek and Papoušek are perhaps unduly accurate in asserting, in their brief preface, that their volume has only the "humble" aim of adding "new questions into the field of methodological problems connected with literary history" (p. x). The volume appears caught between international and "Czech" audiences, one that demands boldness and bite, the other that appreciates moderation. The overall lack of care taken over the presentation of this volume gives the impression, at least to someone who also inhabits the increasingly absurd world of publicly funded research, that the priority here was simply a publication in English with an American publisher. Neither author's work deserves to be judged on that basis.

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