Alfred Thomas, *Prague Palimpsest: Writing, Memory, and the City*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2010.

Much in the spirit of Angelo Maria Ripellino's classic yet problematic *Magic Prague* (1973), Thomas's *Prague Palimpsest* presents less a sustained literary or historical argument than a series of suggestively meditative essays. Thomas commands a formidable knowledge of Czech literature from the medieval period to the present day and has a talent for highlighting both comparative contexts and present-day parallels. The reader encounters a remarkable range of texts and contexts over these five chapters, each focusing on a different thematic cluster particularly resonant within Prague literary modernism: foundational myths and the figure of Libuše (chapter one), the golem and other artificial reproductions of the human form (chapter two), Kafka and Czech literature (chapter three), Surrealism, existentialism, and the politics of identity (chapter four), the Holocaust and Prague as site of memory for postwar Austrian and German writers (chapter five), with an epilogue discussing some recent novels and films about Prague.

These chapters identify coherent and significant cultural themes yet generate a rather eclectic range of observations. Some are thought-provoking, such as parts of the discussion of claustrophobia in Kafka and Jan Neruda. Some are surprising, yet surprisingly plausible, such as the echoes of Gottfried Bürger and the Czech Romantic Karel Jaromír Erben which Thomas finds in an episode of the television series *X-Files*. Some are bold and unconvincing, such as the claim that the Czech word 'věc' in Karel Čapek's play *Věc Makrapulos* 'corresponds to the transcendental signifier which cannot be encompassed by language and which evades the male writer-creator's attempt to decipher and reproduce' (66). And others are utterly unpersuasive: for example, Thomas's assertion that in 1936 Albert Camus intuitively imagined Prague as 'the ghost town of the future from which its Jewish and German populations would be removed' (132). Further, the speed with which Thomas moves from one stop of this literary tour to the next means that a fair number of errors has crept into the text. These range from irksome but relatively harmless—Kafka's short text is not known under the title '*Die* Stadtwappen' but rather '*Das* Stadtwappen' (99)—to more disconcerting: analyzing a story by Rilke, for example, Thomas incorrectly states that the main characters Luisa and

Rezek (*not* 'Řezek') are siblings, which would have considerable interpretive implications (84). All of this means that readers will encounter many novel claims here but also that they must keep up their critical guard.

The book generally assumes its reader knows nothing at all of Czech literature or the relevant historical contexts. That the book intends its audience to include casual as well as academic readers (the first sentence invokes 'the visitor to Prague' [1]) is understandable. But some of the summaries of historical context are so telegraphic as to be simplistic or distorting. Ironically, this condensation at times creates more confusion than it dispells, for example when Thomas glosses the early Czech revivalists as 'products of the Counter-Reformation and the Enlightenment ideals flooding from Europe following the French and American Revolutions' (32); if this isn't odd enough, he goes on to document these influences through examples of the Jan Hus cult.

Whatever the intended readership, *Prague Palimpsest* pays insufficient attention to certain academic protocols. Scholarly books need to cite their sources, but this book does so only minimally. On a general level one would expect a study of Prague literature drawing so heavily on cultural semiotics to situate itself relative to the path-breaking work of Vladimír Macura, if not to the most influential English-language study in this vein, Derek Sayer's *The Coasts of Bohemia* (Princeton, 1998). Thomas's chapter on myths of Libuše revisits ground explored thoroughly by Peter Demetz in his *Prague in Black and Gold* (London, 1997) and *Böhmen böhmisch* (Vienna, 2006), without discussing these earlier treatments. One cannot mention 'the fin de siècle fascination with vampirism and indeterminate states' (40) without referencing Robert Pynsent's influential work on these topics. Thomas's reading of Kafka's *Das Schloss* as an unsettling inversion of Božena Němcová's 1855 novel *Babička* originates from Max Brod and has more recently been elaborated by Hans Dieter Zimmermann and others. Kafka's contact with writers around the Czech *Moderní revue* was first explored by Marek Nekula. Thomas's discussions of the urban physiognomy of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Prague would benefit from engagement with Daniela Hodrová's fascinating analyses. And a number of passages make liberal re-use, sometimes almost verbatim, of material from Thomas's earlier *The Bohemian Body* (Madison, WI, 2007). This is only the beginning of a list of relevant secondary literature, but these are high-

profile names and fundamental contributions to the field. Even a book targeting a broad audience needs to reflect this scholarly context.

Rather than emerging from explicit engagement with previous scholarship, the book's main claim inheres in the image of 'Prague as palimpsest'. The phrase remains more metaphor than concept (there is no discussion, for example, of Gérard Genette's important study of the palimpsest as literary trope) and connotes a tradition of 're-writing' the city under the paradoxical sign of simultaneous memorialization and forgetting. This palimpsest metaphor, along with the attendant vocabulary of 'inscription', 'effacement', and 'site of writing', is squeezed for every last drop of suggestiveness. The result is a relentless emphasis on 'the self-conscious status of Prague as a constantly re-written text' (158), as well as the postulate of a ghostly web of correspondences among texts from or about Prague; many of these are plausible but many are truly stretched. (For example, we are asked to accept that a scene of marital crisis in a recent film set in present-day Prague 'recalls Camus's visit to Prague in 1936, after a terrible argument with his wife, Simone, in Salzburg' [175].) The problem with such extensive reliance on suggestive but vague imagery is that it ends up reinforcing the stereotypes associated with the 'magic Prague' topos rather than providing a critical handle on them. This is clearly not Thomas's intention, yet it is only in the epilogue that a more skeptical tone emerges. Further, the palimpsest metaphor remains static and the argument barely develops throughout the book. By a certain point the reader catches on that each interpretive episode will lead to the same explanatory denouement. This hermeneutic one-liner is simply not up to illuminating the enormous span of material it is called upon to explain, and with each recurrence the phrase appears not deeper or more textured but rather more superficial.

—*Peter Zusi, University College London*