

Demetz, Peter. *Böhmen böhmisch. Essays*. Vienna: Paul Zsolnay Verlag, 2006. 173 pp.

In this book's opening essay, entitled "Spekulationen über Prager Jiddisch," Peter Demetz describes that lost language as "ein philologisches Atlantis" (9)—sunk in the depths of time, quietly undergoing a sea-change from history to myth. The image is apt for this book as a whole: in ten essays on various aspects of Czech, German, and Jewish culture in the Bohemian lands, one of the eminent Germanists of the post-war era continues his exploration (prominent in his publications since the mid-1990s) of the cultures in which he grew up. There are various ways to lose a historical tradition—through indifferent forgetting, through engaged mythologizing—and Demetz is aware that both dangers are particularly strong in the case of the "Bohemian symbiosis," which never was what it should have been, yet should never have suffered the fate it did.

These essays glide between scholarly analysis and reflective reminiscence in a manner that navigates a sure course between such dangers. One of this book's delights is that very often memoir and scholarship turn out to be identical: for example, the essay "Eine Prager Buchhandlung—1943" begins as reminiscence of the socio-political instincts Demetz cultivated while working in a bookstore during the occupation, but then suddenly transforms when the circle of friends presented to the reader turns out to consist of poets now little known if not forgotten—and a piece of literary history is raised from the seafloor. Inversely, an essay on the controversial Beneš Decrees (which among other things laid the groundwork for the expulsion of Germans from post-war Czechoslovakia) takes a personal turn when Demetz describes the work of the exile journal *Skutečnost*, for which he worked in the early 1950s and which engaged in perilous questioning about the *Aussiedlung* long before the better known debates of the late 1960s. Shifts like this tempt

one to reach for the well-worn phrase “no one else could have written such a book,” which of course is clear. Demetz’s combination of erudition and personal experience allows these essays to roam effortlessly from the libraries of Enlightenment-era Prague aristocracy to the Jewish émigré café society of New York’s Upper West Side. The memoiristic pieces (the essay on Johannes Urzidil also partially belongs in this category) are complemented by more traditional forays into untraditional literary history: on the ambiguities of Walter Benjamin’s reception of Adalbert Stifter; on Bernard Bolzano and the intersections of language theory and nationalism; on Zdeněk Fibich and the various literary incarnations of the Czech “Amazon” myths; and on Siegfried Kapper, whose aspiration to become the first modern Czech Jewish poet encountered remarkable social resistance. Paradoxes of national identity and co-existence are recurring themes, featured prominently not only in the essays on the Beneš Decrees and on Bolzano but especially in the essay “Nation als Frage—Konfigurationen.”

Yet the situation is more complicated: one feels that not only could “no one else have written” some of these essays, but that no one else would have ever even formulated the topic. Case in point: “Jiří Orten und Rainer Maria Rilke.” Jiří Orten—the great Czech Jewish poet, tragically killed at the age of 22 in occupied Prague, with uncertain command of the German language and intense devotion to his own—and *Rilke*? Yet not only does Demetz reveal that Orten’s own elegies (among the highpoints of 20th-century Czech poetry) contain layered echoes of the *Duineser Elegien*, but he goes well beyond what could, after all, seem largely an antiquarian issue: “In unserem Zeitalter eines ungebrochenen Nationalismus oder einer Stammesloyalität, die sich gelegentlich als tugendhafte Opposition zur Globalisierung empfiehlt, staune ich immer noch über die

merkwürdige Selbstverständlichkeit, mit der sich ein tschechischer Dichter, der jüdischer Herkunft war, von der Poesie Rilkes angezogen fühlte und ihn, mitten im Zeitalter der Wehrmachtsokkupation, im Verein mit anderen Autoren deutscher Zunge zu zitieren fortfuhr. Mir fehlt das richtige Wort, um das zu beschreiben; ich weiß nicht, ob ich das heroisch, widersprüchlich, absurd oder nachahmenswert nennen soll“ (130). Here we have entered the inner labyrinth of this philological Atlantis, and can be thankful to be in the company of such an experienced guide.

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