

*Pynsent, Robert B.: Conceptions of Enemy. Three Essays on Czech and Slovak Literature.*

Cambridge Associates, Cambridge 1988, 151 S. (Cambridge Studies in East European Culture 1).

This little book comprises three essays on the theme 'Conceptions of Enemy'. The first essay deals with political and social comment in Pre-Hussite Czech Narrative Literature; the second provides a critique of the rebel historian of the National Revival, Antonín František Žalud-Vysokomýtský, while the last and longest piece explores the problem of myth in Vincent Šikula's *Majstri trilogy* (1976–79).

The link between these widely disparate topics is the theme of the enemy in the Czech and Slovak literary traditions. Dr. Pynsent is at pains to point out that this concept is not as straightforward as we may at first suppose. In the pre-Hussite Czech literature, for example, the identity of the enemy is contingent upon the identity of the author and his public. Czech medieval literature was anonymous with the exception of two writers known to us by name - Tomáš ze Štítného and Smil Flaška z Pardubic. Pynsent argues that although the Germans were the principle scapegoat for the problems of Bohemian society in the earlier period (most notably, in the so-called *Dalimil Chronicle*), the growth of a non-aristocratic literature in the mid-fourteenth century entailed a diversification of the concept 'enemy' to encompass various estates of society from the nobility and clerics to the increasingly influential burgher class. Economic resentment toward the growing burgher class was one important aspect of Czech medieval literature. In his introduction, Pynsent maintains that the fringes of European culture have

always made major issue of what were in the West marginal political and social trends. An example of this was the minor preoccupation with the rise of the burgher class in England, France and Germany in the fourteenth century (p. 1). The author does not clarify his understanding of the term 'burgher'; he seems to have the middle-classes in mind. In fourteenth-century England the middle-classes had not yet reached a position of political dominance in the state. Pynsent is suggesting that the class situation in Bohemia was rather different. This would involve a complex study of the economic and political climate in fourteenth-century Bohemia. Literary texts alone cannot hold the key to such a problem.

The second essay is devoted to a discussion of the little-known nineteenth-century historian Žalud-Vysokomýtský (1815–73). According to Pynsent, the work of this highly idiosyncratic historian anticipates many of the Marxist tenets of twentieth-century historiography. Žalud-Vysokomýtský emphasized two factors previously neglected by historians of Czech-German relations (such as Palacký). Firstly, he lay great emphasis on the idea of permanent class conflict and, secondly, regarded the Roman Catholic Church as the perpetual enemy of 'progress', education and freedom (p. 31). Although Pynsent is quick to see the xenophobic and partisan aspect of Žalud-Vysokomýtský's work, he upholds its importance as a forgotten chapter in the history of Czech-German political relations.

The third essay in *Conceptions of Enemy* is entitled 'Mythopoeic Mythoclasm: Šíkula's Version of the Slovak War.' According to Pynsent, Šíkula's war trilogy *Majstri* (The Master Carpenters, 1976), *Muškat* (Geranium, 1977) and *Vilma* (Vilma, 1979) dismantles many of the pervasive myths surrounding the official interpretation of the Slovak fascist state, the war and, in particular, the Slovak National Uprising. Šíkula ironizes Slovak life of the time and shows that Slovaks were often greater enemies to Slovak than Germans. Pynsent argues that myths are not simply forms of imaginative escape; quoting Northrop Frye, he states that myths are stories which 'seem to have a particular significance: they are the stories that tell a society what is important for it to know, whether about its gods, its history, its laws or its class structures.' (p. 67). For Šíkula, play is an important corrective to the humourless self-importance of most modern myths. Play and playing (personified by the eccentric Communist Karčimarčík) permit the common man to rediscover his true dignity, a dignity denied by the vast apparatus of national mythologizing.

Dr Pynsent combines erudition, liveliness of thought and originality of insight in these three essays. He goes some way to achieving his goal as outlined in his introduction, that a political literature should be the object of dispassionate criticism, not a source of partisan commitment.