

*Hruby, Peter: Daydreams and Nightmares. Czech Communist and Ex-Communist Literature 1917–1987.*

East European Monographs, Boulder 1990, 362 S.

Hruby begins his book with the premise that “politics and poetry do not mix well” (p. 22), which is an arguable point in itself: one only has to think of the nineteenth century Russian novel, or those of Dickens, Thackeray or Cervantes, the poetry of Shelley or Auden; or indeed of a substantial body of Czech literature from the fourteenth century onwards. Moreover, it is a statement which immediately begs a question why, given this premise, did the author devote so much of his time to the study of literary politics and political literature? There is little doubt that such a theme has potential. Czech literature, no less than any other, has raised important questions as to the relationship between literature and (for want of a better word) society. In *Daydreams and Nightmares*, these questions are largely avoided.

In the preface, we are warned that the author’s point of view is “not (that) of a literary historian, but of a political scientist”. Nevertheless, what follows purports to be literary history, for the most part dealing with the lives and works of various writers in independent Czechoslovakia, paying particular attention to their “enchantment

and disenchantment with Communism" (p. 40). In blending critical analysis with biography/history, Hruby falls into the trap of doing justice to neither. The biography is anecdotal while the literary evaluation is often little more than a string of emotional adjectives. Seifert's work, for instance, is "warm and charming" (p. 127); Hašek's Švejk is "hilarious and rightly famous" (p. 141); and Kundera is "charming, witty and very entertaining" (p. 249). Furthermore, literary merit for Hruby is too often related solely to the political stance of a given author at the time he or she was writing. In short, the truer the blue, the better. Hruby is even suspicious of Olbracht's naming his own daughter Lenka, "as close as you can get in a Czech girl's name to Lenin" (p. 169). Needless to say, the same author's "best creative period" (p. 172) was when he was not a member of the Communist Party.

As a "personal review", *Daydreams and Nightmares* is frustratingly subjective and unscholarly. Hruby is liberal with his "clever" comments and tiresome in his fondness for exclamation marks; his sarcasm is intrusive, rarely funny, and less than helpful.

The book is useful for information on the political fortunes of Seifert and others, while the chapter on Kundera treats early works which will be unfamiliar to readers who are not students of Czech literature, devoting space to his verse, drama and journalism, as well as his novels. However, to write on Czech Communist and Ex-Communist literature without mentioning Jaromíra Kolářová, Ladislav Fuks or Jiří Fried is feckless to say the least.

Hruby's explicit theory that poetry, for the good of us all, ought to avoid politics altogether, is not only an over-simplification, but also a missed opportunity. What is potentially the most interesting question of his chosen field of study, that of writers' self-ordained function in social affairs, is dismissed as mere weakness or naivety. To be fair, Hruby admires writers such as Ludvík Vaculík or Ivan Klíma for their outspoken criticism of Communism, or "dissidence". But even in this there seems to be something of a contradiction. Hruby wants, so to speak, to eat his cake and have it. Perhaps he is suggesting that while poetry should stay out of politics, prose need not – so long as the politics are of the right hue. Either way, his arguments are rather banal, and put across in such a way as to annoy, if not alienate, the reader. By the end of the book, your reviewer's tolerance of Hruby's superficial psychologising and pocket-book philosophising was strained.

London

Michael Cooke