

Macura, Vladimír: The Mystifications of a Nation. The "Potato Bug" and Other Essays on Czech Culture. Translated and Edited by Hana Píchová and Craig Cravens. Foreword by Caryl Emerson. Introduction by Peter Bugge.

The University of Wisconsin Press, Madison 2010, 150 S., ISBN 978-0-299-24894-9.

I remember when I first came across Vladimír Macura's work. It was the 1990s, and I was in graduate school wondering how to write a history of communism that was not just about the Party and its dissenters. I held Macura's book "*Šťastný věk*" (The Joyous Age, 1992) reverentially, for it spoke to the possibilities of seeing what others had not. It is a shame that a comprehensive selection of his work has not been available in English until now because although Macura was not a historian as such, his work speaks to the wave of recent new histories of Eastern Europe. Semioticians "love to demystify myths, thereby disabling them," Caryl Emerson writes in the preface, and that is indeed what Macura does. His explorations are like small wrecking balls in the heavily built up landscape of Czech mythologizing. Yet Macura is also entirely sympathetic to the early construction of that landscape, recognizing it as the inevitable architecture of a nation looking to define itself so late in the game. The presence of the wrecking ball, his work insists, is the mark of a nation's progress and maturity.

Hana Píchová and Craig Cravens, the translators and editors of this volume, should be applauded for their Herculean efforts in bringing about this collection of Macura's various short essays spanning from the National Revival period to post-communism. The prose is fluid and unhesitating as only the best translations can be. Since Macura wrote for a Czech audience, his essays are dotted with shared cultural touchstones; for the English-reading audience, the editors have been careful to include explanatory footnotes. In addition, they preface each essay with a short explanation of the theme or issue present. This sense of a well thought-out volume is bolstered by Peter Bugge's introduction. Bugge points to Macura's start as a literary historian and his discovery in the 1970s of the Tartu School of semiotics, which fed his interdisciplinarity and shifted his focus toward a historically-based cultural studies. Bugge argues for the interconnectedness of Macura's essays, which track "a unique 'Czech world' or culture" (p. xviii), be it through a particular aspect of the 19th century National Revival or a piece of propaganda of the Stalinist period or a seemingly meaningless detail of post-communism. Bugge also offers readers a masterful summary of the National Revival when, as he writes, "an entire Czech world was virtually spoken into being" (p. xxi). The communist period, he knows, needs less introduction. By being so mindful of their potential readers, the collaborators on this project have done their utmost to make the anthology accessible to all.

"The Mystifications of a Nation" is divided into two parts (Part I: The Nineteenth Century: Genesis of a Nation and Part II: The Joyous Age: Reflections on Czechoslovak Communism), reflecting the two historical periods that are the main focus of Macura's semiotic forays. "Where Is My Home?", the first essay of Part I, effectively sums up Macura's understanding of what the National Revival meant to Czech nationhood. "Where Is My Home?" is the essay's title as well as the opening lament of the Czech(oslovak) national anthem, and Macura uses it to consider which "space" (what "home") constituted a Czech national community at a time when its concrete manifestation seemed remote and fantastical at best. His answer is that in the 19th century the Czech home was constructed out of literature, offering enthusiasts a space that was in fact more concrete than anything else available at the time. Moreover, as the next essay shows, the words were what mattered, their authenticity less so. In this feuilleton, from which the anthology takes its title, Macura embraces the nineteenth century trend for "mystificatory high jinks" (p. 9), including forged ancient manuscripts. To his eye, the motives and effect of these infamous documents were little different from Josef Jungmann's "legitimate" vision to publish Czech scholarly works on "physics, chemistry, mathematics, military science, aesthetics, philosophy, and so on" (p. 9), although few could read them and none could yet use them. But their very existence staked out a claim for nationhood. Macura does not let it rest there, however; he notes that these "mystificatory high jinks" did something more — they whetted the Czech appetite for irony, creativity, and good old fun. How else, Macura asks, are we to explain the grandest postwar Czech illusion: no, not communism, but Jára Cimrman, the fictional multi-faceted, know-it-all genius and now national hero, author as well as subject of many books, plays, and films.

Macura also inevitably confronts the two pillars of the Czech myth — the idea of (indeed, the insistence on) belonging to "Central Europe" and the country's self-defined role as a "bridge." Before Slav brotherhood proved rather unbrotherly, the Czechs embraced their Slavdom. It was a time when it was good to be a Slav, who were said to embody the positive values missing further West. These Revivalist myths about Slavdom later morphed into the Central Europe argument, reiterated by even the most questioning of intellectuals after 1968. As for that bridge, Macura does not hold back: "Czech national identity has never been satisfied with the type of pronouncement 'we are'; it has always required a different declaration of identity: 'we are, because we have a metaphysical mission.'" (p. 48). Unlike the idea of Central Europe, the bridge metaphor was not resurrected for ideological purposes in the postwar era but stamped out by the powers-that-were, who were not in favor of promoting an easily traversed east-west pathway such as a bridge — be it real or otherwise.

Part II, the section on the communist and post-communist years (Macura died in 1999), brings us into the 20th century with accompanying images and photographs which, again, give the less knowledgeable reader a chance to see what Macura saw — an anti-American potato beetle poster aimed at children, a pencil sketch of Stalin and Gottwald set against a hammer-and-sickle emblazoned Czechoslovak flag, an advertisement for the Spartakiad, and the before, after and after-after photographs of

Stalin's monument in Prague. Macura's best known essay on communism is probably his exposé of the 1950s propaganda surrounding the "American beetle" attack on Czechoslovak potato fields. Macura points out that the national "collection and destruction" of the bug culminated in a "celebration" of the Bloc as a "world of honorable labor" (versus the dishonorable labor of the capitalist world) (p. 59). The Cold War divide and its accompanying myths were further reinforced when Soviet pilots arrived as saviors to help destroy the bug whose carapace was said to be marked with various fascist insignias, which now represented American imperialism. In contrast to the potato bugs, Macura shows us, Stalin and Gottwald were invincible, even in death (Chapter 8: Death of the Leader). Yet Alexander Dubček's mythicization was not so different: according to Macura in "Chapter 9: Symbol with a Human Face," he was cast as "Christ Dubček" to "Judas Brezhnev," and his life was "viewed against the backdrop of the stations of the cross" (p. 70).

Very different kinds of stations – those of the new metro system built to much fanfare in the early 1970s – offered little to orient the traveller below ground to what lurked above. In his essay on the metro, one of the longer pieces on the communist era, Macura notes that nothing is what it seems to be: the Hradčanská metro stop is in fact nowhere near to Hradčany (the castle), and most station names refer to "ideological values" rather than topographical markers (p. 78). The whole surreal experience is punctuated by "[t]he voice ('screach of a crazed teacher') driving children away from the broken white line along the platform" (p. 82-83). A more overt form of Foucaultian control was packaged as fun and games in the Spartakiad, an arena-sized gymnastics display held every five years in Prague, where the possibilities of both youth and Soviet friendship were on display as thousands of citizens moved in mechanized unison (Chapter 12: Spartakiad). The last three very short essays focus on the post-communist period; namely, the renaming of streets, the placement of the metronome in place of the former Stalin statue on Letná, and the recent fad for insisting on Celtic genealogical roots. This last essay is particularly amusing and demonstrates how within a mere three pages, Macura is able to bring us back and forth through time, connecting the dots where others might not see them. In answer to why every Czech now wants to be a Celt rather than a Slav, Macura reminds us of the popularity of the Celt in the earlier "Revivalist dreams" and notes that the "Celts help us extend Czech history all the way to antiquity, and today they strengthen us as we cut ourselves off from Slovakia" (p. 116). It is the last lines of this last essay of the anthology, however, which encapsulate the playfulness that is the hallmark of Macura:

And if we are ever beset with doubts about Czech creativity, Czech aversion to violence, faithfulness to ideals, skillfulness and diligence, we can easily cast them away: it is the old creativity, aversion to violence, faithfulness, and diligence of the Celts. To doubt that would surely be foolish.

In his preface, Caryl Emerson refers to Macura's short essays as "semio-feuilletons," calling them "marvelously humorous and small" (p. xii). He means this as a flattering contrast to Macura's intellectual inspiration, Yuri Lotman (1922-1993), an Estonian semiotician who introduced the notion of a "semio-sphere." Despite Lotman's Estonian loyalties, writes Emerson, he nevertheless was writing within an

empire and “a big-nation, big-influence aura clung to the project: an empire of signs” (p. xi). This implies, however, that Macura’s work is the inevitable product of a small nation (just as Lotman’s was the inevitable product of an empire). Yet Macura is not defined by his nation; rather, in these essays, he defines his nation. He does so with an ironic twinkle in his sharp eye, all the while catching what others missed seeing or, more often still, hoped would be overlooked.