

*Goodman, Brian K.: The Nonconformists. American and Czech Writers across the Iron Curtain.*

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This excellent book explores literary interactions between Czechoslovakia and the United States during the Cold War, focusing chronologically on figures who travelled to Prague, from the Harvard professor and arguable founder of modern American literary studies, F.O. Matthiessen, in 1947, through Allen Ginsberg in 1965 and Philip Roth in the 1970s to John Updike in the 1980s, and their relationships with leading Czech writers, notably Josef Škvorecký and Milan Kundera. As the title indicates, Brian K. Goodman suggests that each was drawn to the other through their status or self-perception as “nonconformists” in their own societies.

Goodman’s opening description of the genesis of the project, when in 2004 he was given copies of secret police files relating to Ginsberg’s stay in Prague in May 1965, sparked for me a memory of seeing Ginsberg in the autumn of 1993, signing autographs and chatting with local students and several generations of hippies in Olomouc’s pre-eminent alternative pub. I had just arrived in the Czech Republic after finishing my undergraduate degree, spoke little Czech and knew very little about Czech literature. Ginsberg held court among his adoring, awestruck courtiers, seeming to have wholly embraced the title “King of May”, conferred in 1965 and immortalized in his poem “Kral Majales”, an episode meticulously unravelled and analysed by Goodman. Goodman’s considerable achievement is that he dispels this image of American gods and subservient Czechs and persuasively demonstrates the balanced, two-way nature of the relationship; there is no hierarchy of literary worth here, and the Czech writers sometimes seem almost more important to their American counterparts than the reverse.

A key levelling factor, Goodman reveals, is that each side, each individual writer, sees in the other the embodiment of an ideal that they are looking for, and where gaps emerge between that ideal and the reality, interactions or encounters – while

always interesting and never fruitless – may also be marked by elements of failure, disappointment, disillusion or confusion. Goodman establishes this central thread of his study in his first chapter, which suggests that the catalyst of the Cold War relationship between American and Czech writers was their shared idea of Franz Kafka, whose “image as a ‘denationalized’ writer, symbolically available to nonconformist writers and intellectuals on both sides of the emerging Cold War divide, would help transform Kafka’s writing into a mediating force in literary exchange across the Iron Curtain” (p. 30). Typical of the range and depth of research and grasp that Goodman displays throughout the book, the chapter becomes, however, a judiciously detailed comparative history of how Kafka’s image is cemented through his reception in inter-war and early Communist Czechoslovakia and in post-war America, and what that reception reveals about the preoccupations of those writing it.

In subsequent chapters, Czechoslovakia emerges for “nonconformist” American writers sequentially as some sort of “third way” between US democratic capitalism and Soviet communism, the fleeting realization of a fantasy Beat carnival, and a place that gives the act of writing renewed purpose through literary dissent. In turn, America constitutes for “nonconformist” Czech writers at first a means, through translation, of liberalizing post-Stalinist culture, moving almost seamlessly from its leftist voices to its counterculture, of reconnecting Czech literature with world literature, and after 1969 of gaining international visibility and support for dissident ideas. While these findings are not unfamiliar or unexpected, the merit of Goodman’s book is their elucidation through complexly researched case studies. These case studies contribute to the readability of the book, aided by Goodman’s easy, authoritative style; they are sometimes even moving stories of intellectually independent human beings with fierce interests and good intentions motivated by beliefs, principles and personal aspirations, who nevertheless have their limitations and make mistakes. Goodman acknowledges the exceptionally male world he portrays, but avoids analysis of the extreme homosociality of literary life in this period in both national contexts. He likewise touches on both the Jewishness and sexuality of several of his American protagonists without systematically examining how they might have informed individuals’ “nonconformism” or attraction to Czechoslovakia.

From a Czech Studies perspective, I wondered if room might have been found to explore or at least reflect on writers who emigrated to the United States from Czechoslovakia during and/or after the Second World War but became part of the Cold War story, notably Egon Hostovský and Milada Součková. On the other hand, I especially appreciated the chapter on Škvorecký’s mediation of American literature in 1950s and 1960s Czechoslovakia through translation, journalism and his own fiction, which exemplifies the smooth interdisciplinarity of Goodman’s approach. The chapter combines literary analysis of Škvorecký’s first novel, *The Cowards*, including its intertextual relationship to Crane’s *Red Badge of Courage* and Mezzrow’s *Really the Blues*, with an account of the changing attitudes of the censor to American literature and how Škvorecký exploited and drove them. As in several other chapters, Goodman also uses a much less well-known, shorter text to disclose authorial positions; this approach usefully allows Goodman in other chapters to highlight texts by American writers including Roth, Updike and Arthur Miller that more or

less explicitly portray Czechs or Czechoslovakia. In this chapter, as throughout, Goodman demonstrates the extent to which key source material for Czechoslovak cultural history, especially in the Communist period, lies in private or oral sources or repeated anecdotes that generate a mythology that can be difficult to verify or dismantle. Goodman dismantles gently where he can, but perhaps even more valuably, while he often, with very clearly elaborated justification, presents particular incidents or stories as emblematic of an aspect of his topic, unlike in some other recent English-language attempts at Czech cultural history, he never trivializes that history by reducing it to a stereotype-perpetuating sequence of quaint or absurd details.

English-language Czech literary studies have benefited immensely from the fairly recent turn towards comparative, transnational research, most obviously in relation to Kafka, but also, for example, with Michelle Woods's and Justin Quinn's work on translation and circulation, on which Goodman's book builds. What makes their work so persuasive and rewarding is their confidence and competence in multiple fields. Goodman is manifestly as comfortable in the world of Czech literature and literary and intellectual history as he is in its American counterpart and the result is a richly varied, informative and enjoyable study that deserves wide attention.