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# **Fictions and Histories**



THE DOREEN B. TOWNSEND CENTER FOR THE HUMANITIES was established at the University of California at Berkeley in 1987 in order to promote interdisciplinary studies in the humanities. Endowed by Doreen B. Townsend, the Center awards fellowships to advanced graduate students and untenured faculty on the Berkeley campus, and supports interdisciplinary working groups, discussion groups, and team-taught graduate seminars. It also sponsors symposia and conferences which strengthen research and teaching in the humanities and related social science fields. The Center is directed by Randolph Starn, Professor of History. Christina M. Gillis has been Associate Director of the Townsend Center since 1988.

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FICTIONS AND HISTORIES includes the texts and transcripts of two events connected with the visit of Czech novelist Ivan Klima to Berkeley as Avenali Chair in the Humanities. Attached to the Doreen B. Townsend Center for the Humanities at Berkeley, the Avenali Chair is occupied by distinguished visiting scholars whose work is of interest to faculty and students in a range of humanistic fields. This issue of the Occasional Papers begins with Ivan Klima's Avenali Lecture, *Living in Fiction and History*, and proceeds to a panel discussion on issues in East European literature both during and after Communism. The booklet concludes with a short vignette on a Berkeley scene, written in Czech by Ivan Klima for publication in his native Prague and translated into English by Frances Starn. We at the Townsend Center would like also to express our thanks to the Center for Slavic Studies for their help with the organization and presentation of these proceedings.

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# Preface

Welcome. I am Randolph Starn, director of the Townsend Center for the Humanities. As your program says, the Avenali Chair is attached to the Center through an endowment from Peter and Joan Avenali in memory of members of their family. What the program does not say is that the attachment has no strings, except the confidence that productive exchanges in the humanities will happen when we invite Avenali professors to Berkeley each year. The chemistry works, too, this year, with historian Natalie Davis in February and March, and with director Peter Sellars who has stirred up creative energies all semester and makes a point of being wherever the humanities action is—such as here tonight for this lecture by Avenali Professor Ivan Klima.

The first book by Ivan Klima I remember coming into my hands was *My First Loves*, in which a boy clings to the small, saving solaces of humanity amidst the large horrors of the Nazi camps; my latest but not last Klima is *Waiting for the Dark, Waiting for the Light*, the story of a photographer's compromised life of subjection under the Czech Communist regime and his compromised experience of freedom after the collapse of "really existing socialism" in 1989. In historical time the trajectory of these novels runs about 50 years, through the pathological ups-and-downs of the fever chart of history in the last half of this century. The French abbé who famously said that what he did during the Revolution was survive had a picnic by comparison. Klima and those of his generation who did survive have lived not just once but twice or even three times through revolutions, foreign occupations, totalitarian regimes, systematic persecutions, national partitions, and only at the beginning and now

democratic republics. This would look like a mad political scientist's laboratory or a doomsday fantasy were it not all too real.

So real, in fact, as to call reality into question: Ivan Klima was born in 1931; spent three years in a Nazi concentration camp; studied at Charles University in Prague in the 50s; wrote plays, stories, and novels and became editor of the most prestigious Czech literary weekly before the Soviet invasion of 1968; was a banned author in his own country and a sometime paramedic, surveyor's assistant, and street sweeper after 1970; wrote several much-admired books that circulated in *samizdat* and were published in many languages abroad until he could be published again at home after the Velvet Revolution. These are facts, and Klima's books and stories are about living through them. But at the beginning of one of his novels we read, as a kind of product warning: "None of the characters in this book—and that includes the narrator—is identical with any living person." We could understand this as the statement of an epistemologically minded author telling us that of course characters on the page are not alive; or as a playful ploy of a master psychologist who knows that readers will believe the characters are real precisely because of the disclaimer; or as a taunt to a censor not to look for personal convictions because the book is "only" a fiction; or as a dose of Czech irony bidding us not to take a writer, especially a Czech writer, too seriously, and vice versa, not to take him too ironically either since literature—not history, least of all official history—is true and serious. I suspect that all of those possibilities may figure somehow in Klima's disclaimer, but I also suspect that the narrator who is not "identical with any living person" in Klima's novel *Love and Garbage* is living and with us tonight when he says: "I...believe that literature has something in common with hope, with a free life outside the fortress walls which often unnoticed by us, surround us, with which moreover, we surround ourselves. I am not greatly attracted to books whose authors merely portray the hopelessness of our existence, despairing of man, of our conditions, despairing over poverty and riches, over the finiteness of life and the transience of feelings. A writer who doesn't know anything more had better keep silent." (123)

Ivan Klima knows a great deal more and will not keep silent tonight about one of the central concerns on which his work is such a powerful reflection—Living in Fiction and History.

—Randolph Starn  
Director, Townsend Center for the Humanities







# Living in Fiction and History

## Ivan Klima

When I was still a student—and unfortunately I studied in the not very favorable time of the 1950s—we were made virtually to memorize Engels’ definition of realism and the rendition of Balzac. Realism, according to Engels, meant “apart from the truthfulness of details, the truthful depiction of typical characters under typical circumstances.” Whenever an author does precisely this, he achieves a truthful image of history, and this frequently even against his will. In his *Human Comedy*, at least, that is what Engels claimed. Balzac set out the entire native history of French society from which, Engels went on, he had learned more even in economic details (for example, a new arrangement of movable assets and reality after the revolution) than from all the professional historians, economists and statisticians of that period (Engels, to Minna Kautsky 26.11.1885). On the basis of this statement—which reveals a remarkable lack of understanding of the specific qualities of prose—writers in the Soviet empire were assessed according to the way they depicted typical characters under typical circumstances and the way they described everything the Party regarded as social and economic conditions and historical realities. But even Milan Kundera argues in his stimulating *The Art of the Novel*: “Since Balzac, the world of our being has a historical nature, and characters lived unfold in a realm of time marked by dates. The novel can never rid itself of that legacy from Balzac” (35–36).

It would be futile to argue against the fact that practically every novel, every plot, takes place in a time of its own. This was true even long before Balzac. As we know, Boccaccio’s *Decameron* is played out right from the start in the year “one thousand three hundred and forty eight, when the deadly plague swept the

magnificent city of Florence, more beautiful than all other Italian cities.” The famous *Robinson Crusoe* not only takes place in a specific time, but the hero makes an effort to give an accurate account of the time of his stay on the island.

As an author who attempts to write about people living in the world of today, about their relations, their problems, I am interested to what extent historical events are meant to, are allowed to, or even have to become, components of the composition of the novel. Is it at all possible to determine some permitted or recommended measure?

More than one critic has tried to compare two contemporaries who simultaneously lived their short lives in Prague and, among other things, experienced the time of the first world war: Franz Kafka and Jaroslav Hasek.

As we know, the work which made Jaroslav Hasek famous is closely connected with the history of the first world war. Even the famous first sentence of the novel *The Good Soldier Schweik*, “So they’ve killed our Ferdinand,” directly refers to the Sarajevo assassination and no longer means very much for most contemporary readers. At a time when a recent opinion poll reveals that half of all English school children do not know where London is and what language is spoken in Tokyo, would anyone have the slightest idea that this was Ferdinand, the crown Prince on the Hapsburg throne?

In contrast, Franz Kafka’s note that Germany has entered the war is well known. “August 2. Germany has declared war on Russia.—Swimming in the afternoon.” (*Franz Kafka Diaries* 11, 75). The second sentence totally destroys the historical significance of the first sentence. It is worth noting that in the dialogue between Schweik and his landlady even Hasek disparages that which was seen as a historical event. Schweik asks which Ferdinand had been killed—He knew two: one was an attendant in the chemist’s store; the other one collected dog excrement. However, the course of events of the war form an inseparable background to Hasek’s novel, whereas war, which seemed to form the lives, destinies and thinking of at least two generations, rarely entered Kafka’s work. I am convinced that this in no way weakens the impact of his work. What is more, I maintain that when reading Hasek’s brilliant work today we perceive all that refers to the knowledge of history, to individual battles or transfer of troops almost as a superfluous burden, something that might be omitted. Nonetheless, I am convinced that an

attempt at determining the extent to which the author ought to incorporate historical facts in his work would be a waste of time.

Let us formulate the question in greater detail: Should the author of a novel expect the reader to be familiar with a historical event which the author regards to be of vital significance and with which he is working, in brief, to refer to something that exists outside his work but which nevertheless shifts the destinies of his heroes and which very frequently is presented as destiny?

I would say that most contemporary novels give a negative answer to this question. There are few things in this world which are as transient as a historic event. Milan Kundera notes: “Of the historical circumstances, I keep only those that create a revelatory existential situation for my characters.” Further on he outlines the difference between historiography and the art of the novelist: “Historiography writes the history of society, not of man” (35, 42).

Unless the author intends to address only his contemporaries and, what is more, only those in his own country, he ought to refer to historical events outside his work as little as possible. This does not mean that he should not be able to portray how this or that event, whether large or small, has been reflected in the life of his heroes. This does not mean that his characters could or should exist outside time. After all, all of Kafka’s major works, since we have mentioned him, are anchored in time. Few works reflect the emotions of a human being who has been isolated in the modern world well as his *Metamorphosis*, *The Trial* or *The Castle*.

With some exceptions, the significance of historical events is generally transient. All that generations of contemporaries see as having a great impact on world history shrinks into an insignificant episode in the life of later generations. This applies to most battles, revolutions, the fate of dictators—I do not share the view that we find ourselves at the end of history but am rather convinced of something else, most substantial for an author. Each historic event was—and remains—hard to understand. It does not resemble a rock to which we are able to give a precise definition and description of its degree of hardness, its composition as well as its height above sea level. Each historic event is subject to countless interpretations, and it can be said that it is at all times merely a variety. In addition to some event which has really taken place, this variety comprises a multitude of personal views, renditions and attitudes. Even that which appears to be beyond doubt such

as the time when it has occurred could be inaccurate. I remember that we used to deride the so-called Great October Revolution—saying that it was not great, that it took place not in October but in November, and that it was not a true revolution. But regardless of whether this seizure of power occurred in October or in November, it is undisputed that for some it represented a supreme event in history, while for others it was an event in which Dostoevsky's gloomiest forecasts came true, the demons which terrified him spread out their clutches and tyrannized mankind. If we compare Babel's work with those which, for example, Merezhkovsky wrote, we cannot but have our doubts that they attempted to portray the same historic event.

Everyone writing about a historic event introduces into his own image his own experience, his own way of looking at things. While the historian does his utmost (and generally in vain) to suppress this personal way of seeing things, the writer, on the contrary, uses it as his foundation.

Tolstoy's Napoleon, in one of the greatest works of world literature, is rather a projection of Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoy than an image of the actual Napoleon. His portrayal is such that it should bring out the character of the Russian warrior Kutuzov; but even Kutuzov is more than likely only a projection of Tolstoy's conception of a great patriot who personified the genius of the Russian people. And both warriors confirm his theory that great personalities do only that for which they are predestined. "There are," he wrote, "two aspects to the life of every man: the personal life, which is free in proportion as its interests are abstract, and the elemental life of the swarm, in which a man must inevitably follow the laws laid down for him." Napoleon suffers defeat because he fails to understand that which Tolstoy considers the fundamental law of history.

Reflections on the Russian national character and on the demons hiding in the Russian soul very often proceed from the works of Dostoevsky. As the eminent modern Czech literary critic and historian Vaclav Cerny wrote, "Masaryk based the entirety of his famous book *Russia and Europe* (1915–1919) on the thesis that analyzing Dostoevsky was the best means of understanding the complete historical, spiritual and political development of the Russian people." Cerny then analyzes the various characters in Dostoevsky's work and notes that their portrayal shows signs of the author's sadism: "This could only be invented by

completely overwrought nerves and a perverted imagination intoxicated with delirious vengeance!” In analyzing any major literary work, we always discover a great deal about the author and less about history. Or, to be more exact, at best we are able to form a picture of his view of history.

Let us complete Kundera’s definition: the novelist does not discuss history but the personal experience of man in history. His image of the world is essentially influenced by his manner of seeing and perceiving—in other words, by his personal characteristics, by his convictions. The novel provides a picture of the world as seen by the individual even when the author attempts to create the impression of giving an objective account of the world, of conditions, people, the lifestyle, the morality and immorality of a given era. Great literature originates precisely because there is a fragile balance between the subjective and the objective in a novel. The more there is of the objective, the more of the subjective is added. Whenever there is an absence of the subjective, the result is a boring pamphlet; where the objective is missing, the result is a fairy-tale or dream about the world.

This is an important point because a reader—even an educated reader such as Masaryk and before him Engels—is inclined to analyze a literary work as a sociological study and present it as the portrayal of an era.



In 1990 Philip Roth wrote: “When I returned to the US from Prague after my first visit in the early seventies, I compared the Czech writers’ situation to ours in America by saying, ‘there nothing goes and everything matters—here everything goes and nothing matters.’” With these words he expressed a view I had heard expressed in my lifetime many times by my colleagues in the free world: namely, that history had “passed on” to us more significant experiences and thus had made our work easier. We do not have to invent things. All we have to do is to live and record events. It was this view that motivated the question repeated time and again after the November revolution: And what are you going to write about now?

To my generation in my country life has indeed been most generous with regard to events which we considered to be revolutionary. We spent our childhood in the democratic republic of Masaryk. Then came Munich, two mobilizations, capitulation, the Nazi occupation and war. The enraptured experience of the defeat of Nazism and the restoration of peace. Less than three years of relative freedom, and then the communist coup. On the one hand, the enthusiasm of the builders of socialism; on the other hand, hundreds of thousands of those whom the new regime deprived of their employment, property and freedom. Trials. Concentration Camps. The first wave of emigration. The immediate sealing of the border. Censored libraries, a press forced into conformity. Massive brainwashing. Then the thaw in the 1960s, the Prague Spring and again an occupation, this time at Soviet one. Again, hundreds of thousands stripped of their jobs, again political trials. A new wave of emigration and again sealed borders. Then came the velvet revolution—My generation has lived through so many historical transformations, people had to adapt so many times, that it could not fail to influence their character. What more can an author wish for than a world where the characters of people, including those of the authors themselves, are repeatedly exposed to such trials?

From a social and economic point of view, the majority of my colleagues, in the same way as I, were hurled to the very bottom of social strata, at least during some part of their lifetime. We were definitely not threatened by that which Thornton Wilder wrote about American writers: “One of the dangers of the American artist is that he finds himself almost exclusively thrown in with persons more or less in the arts. He lives among them, eats among them, quarrels with them, marries them...” Almost all of us had more than one job: as janitor, watchman. Several of my colleagues cleaned windows or spent their time in caravans measuring water wells. All that which for a normal citizen would be the cause of humiliation, strife and poverty is figured as a source of inspiration for a writer.

When history affects a writer and draws him into its net, this might serve as an inspiration. I said *might* serve, with emphasis on the word “might,” because reality proves that only few will take advantage of this opportunity. Some become so entangled in the net that they cannot disentangle their hands sufficiently to take up a pen. Others try to become disentangled even when it means forfeiting

their souls to the devil. This “devil” might take upon himself the form of money, a career or willingness to accept a foreign ideological image of the world. Historical changes appear more attractive from outside than from inside. From within they are able to crush or, on the contrary, to blind—to the extent of depriving a person of his good judgment.

At the outset I put forward a rather massive rhetorical question in order to discover to what extent historic events can become a component in the construction of a novel. It is, of course, senseless to look for an answer to a question of that scale. I think it makes more sense to ask in what way an author is able to allow history to enter his work, make it part of its structure, without jeopardizing its credibility, its impact.

Something has changed substantially since the time of Balzac, the time of Tolstoy or Dostoevsky. Mountains of work permeated with ideology have been created which distort history along an *a priori* pattern as determined, for example, by so-called socialist realism. But what is more important, a “mass media” has emerged, treating historical facts in the same way they treat everything else, including language—they change everything into a cliché, what is worse, often into a cliché with an ideological blemish. As presented by the mass media, historic events become a collection of prepared symbolic images which frequently have nothing in common with any real event. The entire agonizing history of the end of Czechoslovak independence was transformed into a picture of Hitler and Chamberlain signing a scrap of paper; the end of the war into a meeting of the soldiers of the victorious Allies on the river Elbe, a soldier hoisting the soviet flag on the roof of the Reichstag. In communist Czechoslovakia, some thousand political trials were held, more than two thousand people were executed. A quarter of a million innocent persons were imprisoned while the general Secretary of the Communist party, Slansky, became the symbol of the utterly absurd game of justice. In a trumped-up trial he was condemned to death and executed. Czech Television screens over and again showed the brief shot where he stood face to face with the fuming prosecutor. The occupation and revolution in my country were accompanied by battles for the building of the broadcasting station. Tanks in flames. Each one of us has seen these shots on innumerable occasions. Kundera recalls Dubcek virtually in tears on his return from Moscow. These shots, too, were seen by mil-



lions of viewers throughout the world, in the same way that the crumbling wall which for decades divided Berlin and was the symbol of the Cold War was viewed globally. The mass media make a cliché of everything that is shocking, everything we might consider to be substantial in our history, everything that in the past might have been the skeleton of a literary work: starving children, raped women, executions of the innocent, torture, people perishing in flames, funerals of famous persons, cheering crowds, demonstrations, police officers beating the innocent, phony embraces of statesmen, shots fired from the rear, crashed aircraft, sinking ships, derailed trains, bereaved families.

The most tragic thing in all this is that the audience accepts these clichés as the only image of the history of mankind. A cliché facilitates communication and helps to reduce a complicated reality into simple and understandable elements. A cliché makes genuine communication impossible, just as it makes it impossible to grasp the complexity of each historic event.

Many writers—in Czech literature almost the entire post-war generation—have concluded from this that literature should turn away as much as possible from a world contaminated by the cliché, in other words, from life as it is perceived by the ordinary citizen. Literature should create its own world which has its own laws or has no laws whatsoever, but rather is no more than succession of images, ideas, absurdities, shouts, sighs and intimacies which until now have been taboo.

However, several works in Czech literature about which I now want to speak, which did not embark along this road, but rather attempted to capture historical changes, were also created. The authors of these works mostly belonged to a generation which experienced the second World War as well as the communist coup. The way these authors attempt to reflect history deserves a close examination.

I remember how my generation was affected after the war by Salinger's novel, *Catcher in the Rye*. The novel, just as Hemingway's prose, unquestionably influenced the young Czech author Josef Skvorecky who less than five years after the war at the age of 25 completed a remarkable novel about the revolution, set in a small town during the last few days of the war: *The Cowards*. The plot spans the time of the revolution between May 4 and 11, 1945.

Skvorecky, like Salinger, chose a teenager to be the narrator, a keen jazz fan. His hero, if for no other than for generational reasons, sees the entire attempt at an uprising against the already essentially defeated German army as an incompetent farce, an escapade. Although he takes part in the revolution and is even taken prisoner, then liberated, whereupon he destroys a German tank, his unfulfilled longing for love is more important for him. Events which were officially or in general presented as being among the principal moments in modern Czech history thus lose all their glory. This vision of the young hero deprives these events of their *pathos* by giving priority to his amorous longing. An ironic distance, long, jabbering enamored dialogues, and a seemingly cynical view of all that is sacrosanct, helped Skvorecky use dramatic historic events in the fiber of the novel in such a way as to avoid cliché. (In its time the novel was so unconventional that for political reasons it could only be published seven years after it was written and even then it triggered a wave of hostile reaction among official reviewers and among party writers.) Skvorecky again used a similar method of belittling historic events in his other great novel, *Mirakl*, where he attempts to capture the contradictory character of the Prague Spring as well as the brutality of the Soviet occupation.

Since I mentioned Salinger, I cannot but remember how fascinated I was by his short story “A Perfect Day for Bananafish.” It came out roughly at the time major wartime novels such as *Catch 22* or *The Naked and the Dead* were published. Salinger’s plot also centered on a defect suffered by the hero during the war. But the fact that he was in the war is mentioned merely in two brief remarks, while the entire story takes place at a level which has nothing in common with the war. There remains only the wound in the soul resulting in a lethal bullet fired into his own temple.

As distinct from the mass media cliché but also from major epics, the modern author resorts more and more frequently to intimate stories, which the historic event enters without bombastic shots, or weeping or cheering crowds.

One of the key events in modern Czech history was the communist coup of February 1948. Authors dedicated to the regime described it time and again. Clips of the huge demonstration in the Old Town Square, convened by the com-

munists, were shown on innumerable occasions, as was the speech by the chairman of the Communist Party, Klement Gottwald.

One of the most original Czech authors, the late Bohumil Hrabal, also incorporated the communist coup into his autobiographic novel *Mestecko, kde se zastavil cas* (*The Small Town where Time Came to a Halt*), but the way he did this differs totally from the method used by Skvorecky. He writes of the hero's father, the manager of a beer brewery, who is replaced by a worker-manager in those days in February. The worker-manager forbids his predecessor to enter his own office and asks him to take away his personal belongings:

When father took away the last box with pens and calendars and small notebooks, he opened the cupboard and took two bulky lamps, the same lamps in the light of which he used to write years ago and which were ready in case the electricity was cut off, bulky lamps with green shades, and as he was taking them away the worker-manager said: "But these lamps are part of the brewery inventory. . ." and took them out of father's hand. "I shall pay for them," father said quietly. But the worker-manager shook his head and said in a distant voice: "You have hoarded enough, you have built yourself a house..." And when father left the office the worker-manager was waiting for this opportunity and threw the two lamps with the green shades out of the window onto a scrap heap and the green shades as well as the cylinders broke into small pieces and father held his head and it gave a crack as though his brain had split. "A new era is starting even here," the worker-manager said and entered the office.

This very short scene about a small episode in an insignificant beer brewery magnificently captures the absurdity, inhumanity and arrogant destructiveness of the communist coup. Here Hrabal finds a way of capturing a dramatic moment of history without cliché, without the setting up of great events. Instead of stereotypical metaphors he chooses his own: two entirely useless, broken old lamps tell us about the character of the revolution and its protagonists.

I spoke of Kundera and his principle of using historical facts. He also mentions the fact that "in the years that followed the 1968 Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia, the reign of terror against the public was preceded by officially organized massacres of dogs. An episode totally forgotten and without impor-

tance for a historian, for a political scientist... By this episode alone I suggested the historical climate of *The Farewell Party*." I must admit that I cannot remember a massacre of dogs, but basically it is not relevant whether this was a real event or the author's hyperbole. It is again a metaphor attempting to avoid the pathos of the mass media cliché.

As I've said, in modern Czech history there has been no shortage of great and dramatic events. The repercussions of these events strongly influence the life of almost every human being often for years or even decades. In such a situation it is difficult to write a novel and entirely pass over these moments. True, the fact that literature is practically the only vehicle by which it is possible to express a view on the conditions of life in a totalitarian system has no doubt done its bit. I remember that in the seventies, when I was writing the novel *Judge on Trial*, I burdened it not only with a number of scenes which referred to historic events but even with several very brief pieces wherein I quoted documents. These documents demonstrated in a terse and effective manner the unbelievable, almost comical changeableness of Czech history, of the values and leaders whom society revered. This version was published only in German. However, that was around the time Charter 77 came out together with a number of documents concerning modern history and problems such as those mentioned in my novel. For me this was a great relief, and for the second edition I revised the novel and left out all I felt to be an excessive encumbrance burdening the composition of the novel.

In 1975, Jiri Grusa, then aged 37, an author banned at the time like most Czech authors, completed one of the most interesting works of prose written in Bohemia after the war: *Questionnaire: or, Prayer for a Town and a Friend*. Like Skvorecky's hero, the hero of this slim work is the author's contemporary, his alter ego. But in contrast to Skvorecky, Grusa covers a longer span of time, from the German occupation to the Soviet invasion, with reference to even more remote events during the previous century. The author used a character reference questionnaire as an external formal vehicle. The questionnaire allowed him, among other things, to highlight identical procedures in two totalitarian systems in which his hero lived—first in one, then in the other. As in Skvorecky's novel, the narrator's interest focuses on his personal, mainly amorous relations and experiences. Historic events are recorded only in passing, although they are of decisive importance

for the heroes' lives, for, after all, they directly and indirectly threaten their livelihood—they kill, drive them out of their homes, deprive them of their freedom. Most scenes of intimacy recur with accounts of political events, realistically captured images of petit-bourgeois life with dreamlike and phantasmagoric visions. The result of this collage is a suggestive picture of the world on the brink of reality and absurdity, a life on the brink of love and death. In addition to material significance there is also a visible political significance: the folly of the totalitarian system underlines the absurdity of life and the folly of history as such.

One of the most remarkable works of contemporary Czech literature came out in 1979; in a way, it influenced and still influences a number of further literary works by other authors. I am speaking of the novel *The Czech Dreambook* by Ludvik Vaculik.

Vaculik came to literature after being a radio reporter and journalist, and his work was always marked by a reporter's pithiness, a registering of actual events intermixed with nonconformist reflections on the problems of life in a totalitarian society. Vaculik made a name for himself throughout the world with his rebellious speech at the Writers' Congress and, later, at the time of the Prague spring, with his Manifesto *2000 Words*. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, his regular monthly three-page *feuilletons* were circulated as *samizdat* and are, in my opinion, the best that has ever been written in this genre.

Vaculik's work became more and more documentary, and in *The Czech Dreambook*, the author reaches the actual threshold of what is possible. He keeps a virtual day-to-day diary between January 1, 1979 and the beginning of February 1980: a real diary in which he puts down all major events in his life—his meetings, his interrogations, as well as most minor jobs such as work in the garden or feeding the canary and cleaning the windows, but also his thoughts about the world in which he has to move and, as the title of the novel intimates, his dreams. His work gives repeated vent to Czech common sense or, to be more exact, the common sense of the Moravian villager. As an author of *feuilletons*, Vaculik mastered to perfection the art of the punch line—brief excursions into the most varied spheres of life and the art of the most laconic and concise generalization. If I were to compare his method with the subtler construction of Kundera's works, I would

say that Vaculik is Kundera's antipode. The readers were shocked that, with exceptions, the author used the real names of those closest to him. The characters enter the work as they entered the author's life: often during accidental meetings, sometimes characterized, sometimes merely mentioned by name, sometimes namelessly. The author laconically mentions some very personal facts of his life, his infidelities as well as forbidden activities which included first and foremost the organization of the Czech *samizdat* edition *Padlock*. It can be said that he sacrificed everything to the vision of authenticity. "Dear reader!" he writes in his entry on February 6, "A fat lot you know. All those deceptions that writers practice on their readers! I, however, as you can see, am not out to deceive..." The novel thus creates the impression—and Vaculik does his best to reinforce this all the time—that the work was not written by an author but by life: the author merely records all that life has brought along. The fact that in that year a tragic love appeared in his life is simply a coincidence.

It is true, and I myself can confirm this, that Vaculik did not invent the events he recorded, but all he recorded, all he committed, all he emphasized, all about which he brooded, all that was his own choice. In actual fact, a work which gives the impression of a chronicle of random events has been composed with utmost ingenuity and, above all, untraditionally.

Vaculik succeeded in portraying his vision of the historical reality in the late 1970s with exceptional, at times even with brutal, ruthless authenticity, and he succeeded in doing this with an effectiveness achieved by no other Czech author.

With his work Vaculik influenced several other Czech writers, including in part another of his world famous contemporaries—Pavel Kohout.

Kohout published his novel of memoirs, *Where the Dog is Buried*, seven years later. His story, too, is based mainly on a record of personal experiences captured in diary form. The novel consists of two constantly intermingling dimensions. The first concentrates on an absurd game, lasting several days, which the Czech political secret police played with the author in 1978. The police sent him a letter of blackmail and then pretended that it would have to protect him against the alleged blackmailers. In this way the Police forced him to agree to be

followed by guards. The second dimension, covering a longer period, records all the more notable moments of the establishment of the dissident movement, as experienced by the author. It records the birth of Charter 77, of which Kohout and Vaculik were co-authors, and, naturally notes the hostile reaction of the regime to the Charter. As a participant in these events, I can again confirm that they enter the work without major distortions. In the novel, just as in Vaculik's *Dreambook*, several characters are presented under their real names and the condemnation of those who collaborated with the regime is much more severe. But as distinct from Vaculik, Kohout seeks to introduce a greater stylization, or, rather, to produce an effect. He selects only those realities which promise to attract attention. Kohout replaces philosophizing with politicizing. Moreover, he turns a dachshund into one of his major heroes, the only one who lost his life in Kohout's struggle with the totalitarian regime. Even though Kohout was after the same authenticity as Vaculik and used similar methods, he had to sacrifice at least a little of this authenticity in his pursuit to capture the reader's attention and achieve a narrating effect.

Vaculik's novel no doubt influenced contemporary Czech literature, or, to be exact, the youngest writers. During the past few years a number of works, not only autobiographical but written in diary or memoir form, have appeared, written strangely enough by authors under the age of thirty. I shall mention two very recent titles: *A Dairy or the Death of a Film Director* by Igor Chaun, and *Kraft* by Martin C. Putna. The authors of other entirely autobiographical works, Zdenek Zapletal (*Born in CSR* or *Vekslstube cimmerfraj*) and Vlastimil Tresnak, (*The Key is under the Mat*) are only slightly older.

I have given some examples of how at least some of the most eminent Czech authors reacted to the colorful history they were made to experience, while still avoiding the danger of turning this history into a cliché. Some did this by giving history a very personal dimension in the vision of their hero; others found more effective metaphors for historic events; still others reached for a diary-form authenticity by introducing non-fictional elements into fiction.

I personally believe that the purpose of literature is to talk to man. Man is never outside of history. The fact that in the mass media and in ideological

literature this history is reduced to symbols and clichés should be grasped as a challenge to the writer, inciting him to do his utmost to overcome the cliché. A literature which decides to dodge this task abandons its most innate mission, and its creators are then surprised in vain when the place they have vacated has been seized by someone else who plays a deceptive game with the lives of human beings.





# Symposium

## Literature in Post-Communist Central Europe

### Michael Heim

Welcome to a roundtable discussion on literature in post-Communist Eastern Europe sponsored by the Townsend Center for the Humanities and the Center for Slavic and East European Studies here at Berkeley. I am Michael Henry Heim from the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures at UCLA and I am a translator of novels and plays from several literatures of the area under consideration today. I will serve as moderator and have the pleasure of introducing my fellow panelists.

In the seventeen years since he won the Nobel Prize for Literature, Czeslaw Milosz has certainly tired of hearing that he needs no introduction. But even though the statement holds all the more here on his home turf, I would like to pay special tribute first to his book *The Captive Mind*, which gave me—and so many others—an introduction to the ideological constraints on literature and life in Communist Central Europe. It is no exaggeration to claim that *The Captive Mind* is the place from which today's discussion must implicitly start. (I should note that the book first came out in English in 1953, only a few years after the Communist regimes took over, and remained relevant all the way to their fall in the late eighties.) Of course there is his poetry: you might start, for example, with *The Collected Poetry, 1987*, or a few more recent volumes like *Provinces* or *Visions from San*

*Francisco Bay* or—the most recent, I believe—*Facing the River*. And then there is the autobiographical prose of *The Issa Valley* and *Native Realm*, or the literary criticism in *The History of Polish Literature* or *Emperor of the Earth*, or the essays “Beginning with My Streets” or “A Year of the Hunter”—An embarrassment of riches.

Next we have our visitor from Prague, Ivan Klima, who is, if I again may be permitted a personal remark, also important in my own formation as a scholar because I remember reading his works from the early sixties (*A Perfect Day* and *One-Night Lovers*) when I first visited Prague in the mid-1960s as a graduate student. They came recommended as “prose by a talented author who refuses to compromise,” a label that stuck after the Soviet invasion, when Mr. Klima became a prominent dissident and could publish only abroad (works like *My Merry Mornings* and *My First Loves*), a label that holds today (in such novels as *Judge on Trial*, *Love and Garbage*, and—last year—*Waiting for the Dark*, *Waiting for the Light*). He also wrote an early book-length introduction to the twentieth-century Czech author Karel Capek (my introduction to Capek), and I was particularly happy to translate his fine essay on the nineteenth-century Czech author Jan Neruda as the preface to my translation of the latter’s *Prague Tales*. Mr. Klima has recently published a collection of essays, *The Spirit of Prague*, and his stories and essays appear regularly in *The New Yorker* and *The New York Review of Books*.

Martina Moravcova is a Fulbright lecturer visiting the UC Berkeley Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures from Charles University in Prague, where she studied American and Czech literature and now, appropriately enough, teaches Czech literature to Americans and translates American literature—mostly African American and Native American—for Czechs.

Now if I may take advantage of my position as moderator, I would like to open the personal presentations with a brief somewhat impersonal historical introduction. When the cold war was at its height, the West tended to view the East as a gray mass. We lumped everything together. And when the lump came apart, many were surprised at how heterogeneous its pieces turned out to be. I suspect we will spend a good deal of our time learning how much more heterogeneous

they have become. But I would propose taking the unpopular tack of showing why I believe them to share one specific quality: the belief in, the faith in, literature as a social and political as well as an aesthetic construct.

If we continue—even now, even at this roundtable—to lump the societies in question together, we do so not only because of their geographical propinquity, that is, because they are forced to share a certain physical space, but also because for nearly half a century they were forced to share an ideology. While not even the ideology turned them into a gray mass, it did give them some common features, features superimposed on their individual social, political, and cultural histories. One of these features is the view that art is an arm of ideology and that art for art's sake is downright subversive because representative of the other side, of enemy ideology. Literature is particularly prone to be identified with propaganda because it is verbal. And whereas literature is left to find its own place in a *laissez-faire* society, in a planned society it is accorded pride of place. Writers thus became, as Stalin put it, engineers of human souls. The degree to which this issue informs the history of literature in Poland and in Czechoslovakia informs our discussion today.

## Czeslaw Milosz

Whoever lived in Berkeley during the so-called Berkeley Revolution in the 1960s, and now tries to reconstruct the events and the aura of that time, encounters a great difficulty. But also, in Poland, it seems that the time of the breakdown of Communism, 1989, is remote by many decades. Those events in history recede from view so quickly that the problems and discussions and tensions of ten years ago seem to be placed in a very remote past. I hope that Klima agrees with me.

At the time of the Martial Law in Poland, I published an article, “Noble-mindedness, Alas!”, which referred to the noble-minded struggle against the system on the part of the opposition—Solidarity and other groups. I warned that this struggle would be short-lived because you cannot create good literature with noble feelings, that literature is something that goes deeper. And now I see that those noble feelings underwent a complete erosion and it is the authors who were connected with that very honorable movement who are, so to say, stranded.

For that very reason, a poet who, for most of her life, has been preserving a distance and irony, Wislawa Szymborska, who received the Nobel Prize in Literature this autumn, is a winner. It is true that as a young person she was a Communist and a Stalinist, but she became disillusioned. She then became an ironic kind of poet, and her poetry now corresponds largely to the taste of the Polish reading public.

It is extremely difficult to understand what is going on in a country like Poland. I am a Polish writer, I spend part of every year in Poland, and still I do not understand. The trouble is the ideological erosion of values that I mentioned. It does not seem to correspond to social and political change. If you go to the provinces, you see the same political faces bearing different names: a former Secretary of the Party now is Director of the Bank. So the general erosion is progressing faster than social changes. Also, it is enormously difficult to diagnose what has happened because the political obstacles are still considerable. I cannot write without considering the political implications of what I write. In Poland, the ruling party's former communists still hold power, and I don't want to write anything that would help them in their maneuvers. On the other hand, my strategy as a

writer is also not to give fuel to the Right, because they look for weapons and fuel for the fire mostly along the lines of “lustration,” delving into the past of individual citizens.

In Poland, the situation is perhaps more complicated than in the Czech Republic, because the Czechs introduced a law prohibiting the Communists from holding some government offices for five years. But in Poland, the present system was achieved through a compromise with the Communist Party, which relinquished its power in exchange for certain protections and privileges. Because of this compromise, the problem of the past and the issue of cooperation with the internal security police is still very difficult and very present.

I speak here from the point of view of a writer, even a poet: If you give even one finger, for instance, to the Right, and they immediately use you for propaganda. And the same applies to the Communists. So strategic considerations are still very important.

A potent survival from the previous system in Poland—one that is a bit more positive, not totally negative—is an enormous market in publications of all kinds, on the national, local and government levels. This market in publications has created a peculiar sector, together with the support of foundations like the Soros Foundation which is extremely important to the arts in that part of Europe. In Lithuania, for instance (I am a native of Lithuania and have traveled there several times now), the activity of foundations is very important, because a relatively small amount of money has a noticeable impact on the publishing scene. I imagine that without the contributions of this foundation money, Plato and Kant and Hume would not have been translated into Lithuanian. This activity also fosters a sense of municipality, of self-government, and encourages help for local publishing enterprises.

## Ivan Klima

I offer two theses for our discussion. The first is, “What has really changed between pre-revolutionary times and the contemporary situation?” I will quote a very short section from the introduction to my book *The Golden Trace*, which was written about four years ago, because I still agree with what I wrote at the time:

I am often asked these days what Czech writers will write now that the revolution is over. I usually reply that such questions are based on the false assumption that writers, especially Czech writers, have written mainly about repression, the secret police, prison, and the bizarre practices of the Communist regime. Not at all. They have written mostly about the same things as writers everywhere, the only difference being, perhaps, that life sometimes put them in situations writers in a free country almost never experience.

That is one issue we can discuss, but there is another. Something else of interest to this panel has also changed. I remember that years ago I took part in a conference of Eastern European writers in Turin. Writers there from Bulgaria, Russia, and Rumania were nearly crying about how the situation has changed. In former eras, writers were willing not to be officially sanctioned, always found ways to express things that could not be expressed officially. To those writers at the conference in Turin, it seemed that there was no longer any interest in exploring that material, those possibilities of writing “without sanction.” Earlier writers used their works to express or comment on political realities. That political engagement was present in Havel’s plays and in Kundera’s novels, and in almost everything that was published—especially in *samizdat* publications. But I do think this development, this change, is healthy because politics is no longer the main subject of literature. Even though circumstances under past regimes required political engagement, I have a feeling that we are, as writers, liberated from the burden to express what nobody else could express under those circumstances.

There is another way this change in focus is satisfying: We are entering an entirely different era, an era of audio-visual arts. New political freedoms have changed the interests not only of the audience, but also of the creators. One hundred years ago, an Anatole France or Chekov or Kafka or Gertrude Stein had only

one means to express her or himself: literature and words. Now people who might have been writers of literature one hundred years ago become writers for TV. And they make social commentaries and documentaries for television, with images, instead of in words alone. People who might have devoted themselves to poetry are now writing folk songs or protest songs, which are very popular.

We have to reflect upon this part of culture as a whole, and perhaps see that literature and the forms of expression are changing. Is literature losing something? gaining something? For me the most important consideration is that *culture* should survive, regardless of how it is expressed. And I hope it will survive.



## Martina Moravcova

When Michael mentioned the 19th century and Czech revivalism, one more thing came to my mind about the role of literature. The position of the author might be changing because literature, be it fiction, drama, or poetry, was extremely important for the constitution of a new Czech nation during the times of Czech revivalism. For a long time, Czech literature didn't have the opportunity to be simply literature. Somehow there was no luxury to have literature as art for the sake of art. It always was called upon to serve a secondary function to educate, to fight something. An author was not only an author and writer, but also a very strong and important moral authority. If you think about the 19th century, this would be true about literature written, for example, during the Second World War, then the literature of the Fifties, then again, in a completely different cultural milieu, of the early 1960s. It seems to me that Czech authors have been looked at by their fellow citizens as leaders, teachers in a way, educators. And I wonder what's going to happen to this in coming years.

I can recall several books that were written after 1989, the topics of which seem to be very, very diverse, all centered around new values in the society. For example, in one of Ivan Klima's latest books, *Waiting for the Dark, Waiting for the Light*, you have an artist who could not really create because of the pre-1989 oppression. But suddenly the situation has changed, and he doesn't feel any more free than he was before because suddenly there are new forces that limit his creativity: he's limited by the market, and he starts thinking about this aspect of his work, and he's actually not able to liberate his art.

Amongst these "new values," you also find literature dealing with religious questions, especially in the works of young people, in their new search for Christianity, and their investigation of problems with Catholicism. This is something very new in Czech literature. The "trend" is one of diversity.

## Open Discussion

**Audience Question:** Can anyone address the problem of translation? Has the volume of translation changed since 1989? Who are the authors who are translated? Has that changed in the Czech or any other situation?

**Klima:** I can start. Martina probably can add something more precise. The situation has changed. In the 1960s the most important books from the free world were translated. After the Soviet invasion, for twenty years, less and less of this literature appeared, mainly because some of the best known writers protested the Soviet occupation, and were banned. The result was that the Czech reading audience lost a feeling of continuity, of being informed. There were some writers still available, but mostly the big names were banned: Salinger, Roth, Morrison. This means that now, for example, my publisher tries to publish Toni Morrison, and nobody knows who she is. Nobody knows that she got the Nobel Prize. And he can't sell her. Before the Soviet invasion, the circulation of American writers was fifty or sixty thousand copies a year; now it's a problem to sell three or four thousand copies of a good American writer. Before the Revolution there was the bi-monthly magazine *Zavod*, which published translations and articles about foreign literature. It collapsed and doesn't exist anymore. The daily newspapers now carry very little information about or reviews of foreign authors. That's the situation. Our market is filled with "quick" literature, like Stephen King, which is doing much better. Or worse. It depends on your point of view.

**Heim:** Would you like to add anything?

**Morascova:** Maybe a couple of names. It's true, obviously, that many authors could not be translated, but translations were done during those times. In addition to the names that Mr. Klima mentioned, I would like to add Emily Dickinson, for example, and William Styron. Faulkner was extremely popular through translations. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* was a popular cult book. The Beats like Jack Kerouac were extremely popular. There were beautiful translations. We are a small country, and translations have always existed and circulated. There has been a long history of translation, but today it seems to me that the art and quality of translation have somehow worsened. And it is a pity that people would, for example, not know who Toni Morrison is, or Gwendolyn Brooks; that today, when I pass the windows of publishing houses, authors like Dick Francis would be there instead of more "difficult" authors. I think that the ways in which choices of what to translate or not are made have changed dramatically, and I wonder what's going to happen to translation.

**Klima:** It's quite easy to explain. Before the revolution they published only a very few translations, and the translators were very talented. Some of those translators are still doing the work. One, for example, translates Toni Morrison—it's such a beautiful translation. But, of course, now there are hundreds of books being published—mostly trash, as I said—so there are many more new translators who are not experienced, and there are many more mistakes.

**Heim:** I would like to add just one observation to broaden this discussion. The situation is probably fairly similar in other Eastern European countries. *Tsvetovaya Literatura*, the world literature magazine that Mr. Klima referred to, has a parallel in each one of these countries. In Russia it's *Mirovaya Literatura*; in Hungary it's *Nog Vilad*, and so on. There's one in Poland, too. Depending, of course, on the degree of liberality, they published more interesting or less interesting works, but they really did a fine job of keeping the population informed about other litera-

tures during the Communist period. People were so informed that I always found, when talking to people from these countries, that they knew more about the most important contemporary writers than I did, although I thought it was part of my formal and self-education as a translator to keep up with all these. But they simply had these materials at their fingertips all the time. What we're dealing with now is a phenomenon that is a very interesting one. Mr. Milosz talked about the positive as well as the negative aspects of the early regime, and this is one of the negative aspects of the change. Now, when there is less money coming from the State, these literary institutions are dying out, and you have these holes the market economy simply isn't willing to fill. Mr. Milosz pointed out that George Soros, the Hungarian American financier, who has stepped into the breach in many of these instances, is doing something to help this, and he's helping in various publishing concerns in these countries. But it is a very big problem.

**Audience Question:** Could you say something about the effect the Communist period has had on languages such as the Czech and Polish languages?

**Milosz:** Well, you see, every language changes constantly, and it is obvious that the Polish language underwent many changes during the Communist regime, and under the Communist regime. It absorbed a certain bureaucratese, bureaucratic language. This has created sometimes incongruous mixtures, especially in view of the fact that so many bureaucrats were recruited from villages, and they didn't really know the sophisticated language of the intelligentsia. So they absorbed some superficial elements of so-called culture and created a special language. Even today when I listen to television, and hear people speaking, I here the impact of the journalistic and bureaucratic languages, which is very funny.

**Heim:** One thing that I've noticed that seems to be happening in all of the languages that I deal with in this area is the foreign words, a very clear increase in foreign usages, and you can imagine that English and American English are the most prevalent.

**Audience Question:** In Western Europe there's now a tendency to consolidate into one unit, under the influence of the European union. One currency, one government, perhaps one army. Is there any parallel analogous force in Central Europe or Eastern Europe?

**Milosz:** Well, this is rather a question that should be addressed to those who rule in the Kremlin. But as to those nations, those countries which liberated themselves from the big brother, it is always something different. The maximum we can dream of in our part of Europe is a friendly cooperation between the states and nations. I consider it a great achievement in my part of Europe that Poland and Ukraine have established good relations with each other, as those are two nations which murdered each other for centuries, which now have developed sort of a mutual forgiveness and cooperation. It's very important in that part of Europe. Also, in relations between Poland and Lithuania. I was born in Lithuania and, being Polish, I must boast that I have contributed to those good relations. [laughter] These forms of cooperation are an announcement of some future. But the issues are very difficult to solve because, for instance, we had the Hapsburg monarchy, and we had the Tsarist empire, and we had the Stalinist empire, and in the past there was a Polish imperialist policy embracing people speaking Ukrainian, Russian and Lithuanian, so there's a lot of mutual distrust which first must be overcome.

**Klima:** I guess one can testify in both directions. One direction is toward atomization: cases such as those of Yugoslavia—and our country, which just split into two states, each of which has a different tradition, different culture, different language. That's one direction. Another is unification: we can observe this trend also, mostly coming from the worst in culture, in industry, in the way of life. And I have a feeling, based on the attitudes and questions that I always met when I was visiting in western countries after the revolution, that it must seem that it's an important question for eastern countries, whether they will be members of the union or not. I guess that within the Czech Republic, as opposed to observers

from abroad, for most people, it's not such an important question, because we have so many more important issues to attend to, which touch our everyday lives.

**Heim:** I'd just like to say one thing about this. After the forced friendship—friendship was a very important political word during the Communist period—you had fraternal relations with all of these nations, and there was, I think, immediately after the fall a kind of wariness that Czechs weren't that interested in being brothers anymore with, let's say, Hungarians. Hungarians weren't that interested in being brothers with the Poles. And everybody was a little bit less interested in their immediate neighbors and more interested in Western Europe. The slogan that I read over and over again in the press, in all these countries, was "We are returning to Europe." So that was where they wanted to go. And they were much less interested in their own nations. The question before about translation, I think, can be instructive here. There's very little translation of the literatures of one of these nations into the languages of other nations. Hungarian literature is not very much translated into Czech literature, not very much in Polish. A certain amount still is done, but less than might happen otherwise, given the situation that they are in now, which is a common situation. So I think it's going to take a while for those fifty years of forced friendship to become something more natural.

**Audience question:** Is there a danger of these countries becoming a fourth force, a fourth world, now that they are no longer—they're not the third world and they're no longer, I guess, the second world—the Communist world. But are they in danger of not joining, let's say, Europe, and becoming something in and of themselves? Havel has mentioned this.

**Milosz:** Personally, I would like very much for those countries to have a certain autonomy even with regard to the West. But I don't see any possibility of this. Now the slogans are "Join European Union," "Join NATO," and this is understandable because there is a feeling of danger in the East. Nobody can predict what will happen there. What has happened in Belarus is horrible. There is a sort

of a petty dictator. And nobody knows what can happen in Russia. So that movement towards the West is quite natural, and probably for a while unavoidable.

**Klima:** It's a very interesting question. Nobody knows the answer now because it happens that shortly after the revolution there were great expectations among, for example, Czechs that we would be on the same level with Germany or America within a few years. Yet it was impossible, and it will be impossible for a long period of time, not only because we have lost fifty years, but the people lost many normal capabilities and abilities. They were used to an entirely different way of life. Dishonesty was rewarded, not honesty; real work was badly paid. People were used to stealing, cheating, and it's impossible to educate people within, I'm afraid, the whole time of their life. It needs a new generation, and who will educate the new generation? So it's another question. It's really a complicated situation, and it depends on your mentality, whether you're an optimist or a pessimist, whether you can answer positively or negatively.

**Audience Question:** Are Czech and Slovak literatures, in fact, mutually comprehensible? In other words, can Czechs read Slovak literature without translation, and vice versa? What was the situation—did they read one another's literature during the Communist regime? And what is the prognosis for the future?

**Morascova:** Czech and Slovak are the two most closely related Slavic languages within the branch of West Slavic languages. So I as a Czech can understand a Slovak without any problems. We can easily talk to each other in our own languages and understand each other perfectly. But if I wanted to, let's say, translate from English into Slovak, I could not do it because, in spite of the fact that I understand Slovak perfectly, there are tiny differences in each single word. As a Czech, you can read Slovak literature without problems, without a translation, but the two languages are slightly different. I would say that Slovaks read more of Czech literature than vice versa. And this is one of the things that Slovaks blamed Czechs for a lot during the years of split. Slovaks had a much better knowledge of

Czech authors, whether or not they were official authors, while Czechs would know a couple of names of Slovak literature, be it Karabas, be it Krasko, be it Natcko.

**Heim:** I've translated a story by Vaculik, a fine writer who has dealt with many themes of totalitarianism. The story, called "The Herb of Forgetting," was interesting to me because it is about what is going on now. It's about Catholicism. The two main characters are an older man and a younger woman with whom the man is involved, so it's that kind of Catholic eroticism that you sometimes see, those two things together. It's as if the Communist regime had never existed. There is no reference to it. Absolutely none. It's fifteen pages, a short story, but still, nothing. It could have been written anywhere in Catholic Europe. So I think that's an interesting change. Biography was mentioned, and one of the things that we talked about beforehand, an interesting phenomenon that both Mr. Klima and Martina have mentioned, is that there are biographies of people who are very young. Thirty-year-olds are writing their biographies. I just happen to be reading a biography in Romanian literature, written by somebody who is thirty-five years old. Same thing—these things seem to be catching. I don't know what it is that has encouraged people of younger age to write about themselves, but that seems to be another tendency.

**Audience Question:** How have writers from the past been reintroduced, and how have they been reaccepted in this new context? There was a reference to an article that you wrote for *Coutura* about Maria Yevichuvna. This is one example. Are there other examples?

**Milosz:** Well, as you know, writers of the past are constantly reevaluated. The life of literature largely consists in constant reevaluation of the writers of the past, and they appear constantly in a new light. If a given literature, a given cultural life is alive, really, then revision is done constantly. You ask especially about Yevichuvna. Well, this is a good example. Yevichuvna was a novelist from the grand duchy of



Lithuania, living, if you prefer, in the territory of Polish penetration. So the upper classes were Polish in the Belarussian and Lithuanian areas, and so on. She represented that Polish class of landowners. She wrote about the life of those people, and has been widely read. But the literary critics of some renown never touched her because she belonged to a lower literature. I was brought up on her novels, because she was a very lively writer, but personally never treated her as a serious writer. In a feeling of spitefulness, I wrote an analysis of *Yevichuvna* recently. Why? Because by reading her you learn much about the situation of those areas which were neither Polish, nor Belarussian, Ukrainian, nor Lithuanian. You learn a lot about the sociology. Poland has changed, lost its eastern territories and moved west. Yet so many families in Poland had their roots in the east. And so suddenly for me *Yevichuvna* appeared in a new light, from this point of view.

**Heim:** People are reading her now again.

**Milosz:** People were reading her constantly. And for me it was a problem in my essay, why people were reading her. They were reading her under the Communist system. They were reading her now. [laughs]

**Audience Question:** Now that we have a new—one regime has collapsed, and we have a new regime—capitalist regime, coming in, with its own moral dangers, how is literature going to cope with this new capitalist challenge? The people's spirit has been destroyed once. Is capitalism going to destroy it again, and how is literature going to deal with that new situation?

**Klima:** As I said in answering the previous questions, I am now finishing a manuscript, which deals even more with the situation after revolution. The main protagonist is a priest, and there is a religious question. But for me the most important problem—and I guess that it's one of the real problems—is that people are entering an entirely new situation, and even the people who are craving change or expecting freedom find that it's not easy to accept entirely a new life. Mostly they

are older, 50 or 60 years, so this, I guess, is a great theme for literature. People are pushed into entering a new society. You can see, for example, these people who are losing all their money because they don't know how to move in the new situation, and it's a marvelous opportunity for the cheaters and for theft and so on. It's a problem. Of course, another problem is that the new direction our civilization is taking. This is not only a western problem; it's a problem of the whole world, how we'll deal with technical revolutions and so on. And so I don't see any danger from capitalism as such, but, as I said, from some aspects of the direction civilization is taking.

**Milosz:** I can add something. Literature of the 19th century lived through a protest, a dissatisfaction with society, and hatred of the bourgeois. Flaubert hated the bourgeois. For him the bourgeois was not necessarily capitalist. For Flaubert the bourgeois was a certain style of life. Workers were also bourgeois. But that element of opposition, a certain utopian project, was a permanent feature of literature of the 19th century and continues in many ways. For some friends of mine, to pronounce the words "free enterprise" is very difficult. Far easier to pronounce the name of a saint. [laughs]

**Audience Question:** Is there any parallel with what has happened in Russia, the emergence of literature for export, literature written almost primarily to be translated and perhaps to make money abroad? This has happened in literature and to a certain extent, maybe to an even greater extent, in the film industry. The films "Burnt by the Sun" and the recent Czech film, "Kolya," are examples.

**Klima:** I don't think that "Kolya" was made for export. I know the writer very well, and I'm sure he had no intention of writing something for export. It's a typical film in Czech tradition. And I'm very sorry that when I see the advertisement for "Kolya" there's no mention it's a Czech film. I don't think that we—that our filmmaking—is able to compete with Hollywood in making action movies or mysteries or horror movies. We do not have enough money to do it. And about

literature, it isn't possible to write for export because what does that mean? There are different states—Scandinavia, France, Italy, Japan, all different. So how you can produce something for export? Trash, maybe—it's everywhere, but we are not speaking of this kind of literature, not even in movies.

**Heim:** Martina?

**Morascova:** Now I was quickly trying to run through possible themes that can be catchy or that might be a potential success, but I really cannot come up with one single book where I would suspect the author of this motivation. I spoke of religion as a recurrent theme, but these books do not offer an easy solution. They do not offer a way. Very often they end in doubt, and I don't really think that this is something that would be easily picked up. There is also a kind of university novel, a genre that is extremely popular in Great Britain. Many of these have been translated and read back home, even though such books seem to be bound so specifically to a particular university and to a certain department that I really couldn't imagine that they would become such popular books generally.

**Heim:** I think there is a tendency, but Mr. Klima's right, that it's on, let's say, a middle brow level rather than anything else. We haven't mentioned sex yet. But that is something that has come back, with a vengeance. And that's true of all these literatures.

**Klima:** That disappeared.

**Heim:** That will disappear. Maybe "no sex, please, we're Czechs." But that has come back, and sex is always sellable. A little bit less so in translation, I think, but it is sellable. I can think of writers in each one of the literatures that I deal with who have used that and have succeeded. These things have been translated. So it is there. Actually, I've found when I've read these things—sometimes I've had to read them as reader's reports—that, generally speaking, the level is much higher

than the corresponding book would be, let's say, in English. They have more interesting. They're more interesting themes. So if you see one of them, you might read it anyway.

**Audience Question:** This is a two-part question. Since you talked about writers as being the moral consciousness or conscience of the nation, in the Communist times when they were in opposition, has that position changed now that the situation has changed? And have writers changed their way of writing since the political changes took place?

**Milosz:** The question goes very deep into some basic problems of people living in this world at the end of the 20th century. It's not the specific problem of those countries. I must give you some information about what I have written of late. First, I wrote a book entitled *Searching for My Homeland*, where I wanted to contribute to friendly relations between Poland and Lithuania particularly because my roots are in Lithuania and I am Polish, and relations have been very complicated during and because of history. And so I was interested in this entanglement, especially since my cousin, who considered himself and is considered a Lithuanian poet, in fact, wrote in French, and was the first representative of the independent Lithuania after 1918, while my father took a Polish option and many complications. I wanted to delve into that complicated area ethnically and historically and so on. Considering it is such a little book, it's very useful. I wrote another book, *What A Guest We Had*, about the poet Anna Szrivinska, whom I translated into English as Anna Sweer. There's a book of her poems, *Talking To My Body*. It's a kind of rehabilitation, bringing her back to a deserved fame. So those are utilitarian writings, as you see. Useful. As to more serious endeavors, well, I'm interested in the general problems of the human condition.

**Heim:** That hasn't changed, I guess.

**Klima:** Yes. About conscience, it depends on the writer. Some writers, I'm sure, are persuaded that literature has no mission. They feel contempt towards writers

who are of a quite different opinion. I think that literature should have some important mission. It's my own obsession that I mostly write about relations between men and women, or infidelity and how to deal with these problems. It's an eternal theme. So in my last novel, which is not yet published in English, I deal with the same theme—under new conditions, of course, but the theme is the same.

**Heim:** This seems to be a good place, I think, to end our discussion because the question is soul-searching. I thank all the panelists, and I thank you as an audience because you had wonderful questions. [applause]

# The Lonely Preacher

Ivan Klima

*translated by Frances Starn*

[this piece was originally written for the Prague paper, *Lidove noviny*, where Klima is a regular columnist.]

When I walk down the street from the main entrance to the university campus in Berkeley, I see there—besides a lot of vendors selling the widest imaginable range of nonsense—ragged skinheads, who are sitting like snakes on the sidewalk, expressing their disgust with life and humanity. Their “skinheadedness” is only recognizable from their hairstyles, since among them are people of all races.

In the small square right in front of the university can be found the strangest types, some beating drums, others hopping and whirling around, dancing and orating. I was fascinated by a beautiful white-haired black man in a sweatshirt, jeans and white tennis shoes, with a Bible in his hand. I saw him every day, preaching to a few listeners, sometimes arguing with whoever openly paid attention to him. Then one evening I was returning home quite late, and in the square was that old man, alone and singing an ancient and beautiful psalm. Everywhere in the world people sing to themselves. But the next day I passed the same way early in the morning. The old fellow was there. He was entirely alone in that space. With the Bible in his hands, he was preaching. I stayed at a distance so that he couldn't see me, and watched as that man preached, to nobody at all, about the redemptive work of Jesus. As I went on my way, I considered his behavior. It would be easy to dismiss him as eccentric or crazy. It would also be possible to see in his actions something sadly symbolic: a man preaches the Gospel in his own space and time without a single listener. But his behavior can be seen from another perspective as

well: he is a person who is convinced that he has something to impart, and consequently he speaks, no matter how many people are listening, because, after all, that he preaches, that he speaks, refining his own thoughts, is for him possibly the most important thing. Not only that, but he expresses himself to the world, announcing his glad tidings, in which he differs from those ragged skinheads, whose only tidings are that the world and their own sojourn here is disgusting even to themselves.

It occurs to me that such solitary preachers are lacking among many of us. Whoever feels called upon to speak cares more about having an audience than what it is that he says. It would be an interesting test for every novice preacher, writer, politician, singer, journalist, and those of similar professions: to stand in an empty square and show what you can do. Anyone who passes that test would most likely hold his own ground in a square packed with listeners.

## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Novelist, essayist, and critic **IVAN KLIMA**, who makes his home in Prague, was the Avenali Visiting Professor in the Humanities in April, 1998. His novels, written in Czech and widely translated, include *First Loves*, *Waiting for the Dark*, *Waiting for the Light*, *Love and Garbage*, and, most recently, *The Ultimate Intimacy*.

Poet **CZESLAW MILOSZ**, who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1980, is the author of numerous works of poetry, criticism and biographical prose, including *The Captive Mind* and *Provinces*. He is Professor Emeritus in the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures at UC Berkeley.

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