

**Zuzana
Říhová
(ed.)**

From Laughter to Forgetting



**A Sourcebook of
Czech Avant-Garde Discourses**

From Laughter to Forgetting

A Sourcebook of Czech Avant-Garde Discourses

Zuzana Říhová (ed.)

With an introductory essay by Peter Zusi

INSTITUTE OF CZECH LITERATURE is part of the Czech Academy of Sciences

Na Florenci 1420/3, 110 00 Prague 1, Czech Republic

www.ucl.cas.cz

KAROLINUM PRESS is a publishing department of Charles University

Ovocný trh 560/5, 116 36 Prague 1, Czech Republic

www.karolinum.cz

Authors – heirs © 2024

Bohuslav Brouk, Artuš Černík, František Götz, Roman Jakobson, Jan Mukařovský, Václav Navrátil, Ladislav Novomeský c/o LITA, Josef Šíma c/o Adagp, Jindřich Štyrský, Toyen (Marie Čermínová), Arnošt Vaněček

Authors – heirs c/o Dilia © 2024

Kamil Bednář, Jindřich Chaloupecký, Milča Mayerová, Vítězslav Nezval, Vít Obrtel, Jaroslav Seifert, Milada Součková, Ladislav Štoll, Jiří Voskovec

This edition and commentary © Zuzana Říhová, 2024

Introduction © Peter Zusi, 2024

Translation © 2024

Meghan Forbes (pp. 40–73, 78–145, 159–201), Dan Morgan (pp. 38–39, 350–500), Ian F. Stone (pp. 23–37, 98–100, 111–120, 146–156, 202–349, 403–415, 481–485, 501–504, 513–517)

© Institute of Czech Literature of the Czech Academy of Sciences, 2024

© Karolinum Press, 2024

Cover and graphic design Stará škola

Translation support Barbora Bartůňková (pp. 40–73, 78–145, 159–201)

Copyediting Nikola Dlabajová, Matthew Sweney

Set in the Czech Republic by Karolinum Press

First English edition

This publication was created with the support of Research Development Program RVO 68378068.

This book was published with support from the Czech Academy of Sciences. During the work on this text book, use was made of Czech Literary Bibliography resources/services (ORJ identifier: 90243).



Institute of Czech Literature of the CAS



Czech Academy
of Sciences

Reviewed by Jindřich Toman (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor) and Wolfgang Müller-Funk (Universität Wien)

Cataloguing-in-Publication Data is available from the National Library of the Czech Republic

ISBN 978-80-7658-090-9 (Institute of Czech Literature of the CAS)

ISBN 978-80-246-5308-2 (Karolinum)

ISBN 978-80-246-5309-9 (pdf, Karolinum)

ISBN 978-80-246-5310-5 (epub, Karolinum)



Univerzita Karlova
Nakladatelství Karolinum

www.karolinum.cz
ebooks@karolinum.cz

Contents

Introduction (Peter Zusi) / 9

I. The Birth of the Avant-Garde: Between Avant-Garde, Expressionism, and Proletarian Art / 23

1. Richard Weiner: The Curtain Rises; At the Castle / 32
 2. U. S. Devětsil: The Age Has Broken in Two... / 38
 3. Josef Hora: On New Art / 40
 4. Jiří Mahen: The Moon / 45
 5. Stanislav K. Neumann: Devětsil / 46
 6. Karel Teige: Images and Fore-Images / 49
 7. Karel Čapek: A Note / 55
 8. Devětsil: A Poem Is Not an Apparition... / 56
 9. Vladislav Vančura: The Form of Things / 57
 10. František Götze: On the Magazine Host, and Those Who Stand Behind It / 58
 11. Karel Teige: On Expressionism / 63
 12. František Götze: A Little Bit of a Polemic, a Little Bit of a Confession / 68
 13. Jiří Wolker: Proletarian Art / 74
 14. Karel Teige: New Proletarian Art: An Introduction / 78
 15. Literary Group: Our Hope, Faith, and Work / 98
 16. Karel Schulz: Poetics / 101
 17. Jindřich Honzl: Theatrical Expressions of the Street / 104
 18. The General Meeting of the Literary Group / 107
-

II. From the World of Acrobats: Poetism and Constructivism / 111

1. Karel Teige: Foto Kino Film / 121
2. Josef Šíma: Advertisement / 139
3. Jindřich Štyrský: A Picture / 143
4. Vítězslav Nezval: Parrot on a Motorcycle, or On the Craft of Poetry / 146
5. Karel Teige: Poetism / 151
6. Bedřich Václavěk: New Techniques in the Poetic Craft / 159
7. Karel Teige: Constructivism and the Liquidation of "Art" / 166
8. Artuš Černík, František Halas, and Bedřich Václavěk: Enough of Wolker! / 176
9. Vítězslav Nezval: Film / 178

10. *Host 4, or the Dissipated Dreams of the Paper of a Generation...* / 181
 11. Zdenek Rykr: Teigism / 182
 12. Karel Teige: Words, Words, Words / 185
 13. Jindřich Štyrský and Toyen: A Popular Introduction to Artificialism / 202
 14. Vítězslav Nezval: Dada and Surrealism / 204
 15. Jiří Voskovec: The Turtle That No One Mentions / 205
 16. Vít Obrtel: Harmony / 209
 17. Karel Teige: Karel Teige On Himself / 213
 18. Milča Mayerová: Šíma's Dolls / 219
 19. ReD [= *Devětsil Revue*]... / 220
 20. Bedřich Václavek: Buried Alive! / 222
 21. Vítězslav Nezval: A Notice About Poetism / 223
 22. Bedřich Václavek: Resurrection of the Novel? / 225
 23. Karel Teige: To All Those Who This Year Have Declared... / 228
 24. Vítězslav Nezval: A Drop of Ink / 230
 25. Karel Teige: Manifesto of Poetism / 241
 26. Karel Teige: Ultraviolet Pictures, or Artificialism / 250
 27. Jaroslav Seifert: Guillaume Apollinaire / 254
 28. Jindřich Štyrský: Vest Pocket Revue / 257
 29. In Its Third Year *ReD* Intends to Continue.... / 260
 30. Karel Teige: Poem, World, Human Being / 262
-

III. Coming of Age: Crises and New Perspectives / 273

1. Josef Hora: Education for Modernism / 279
 2. Richard Weiner: The Barber (Poetics) / 281
 3. Jindřich Štyrský: Cozy Nook of a Generation 1 / 284
 4. Julius Fučík: Generation on Two Chairs / 286
 5. Jindřich Štyrský: Cozy Nook of a Generation 2 / 287
 6. Karel Teige: Epilogue to Discussion About Generation on Two Chairs / 289
 7. Jindřich Štyrský: I Was Not, and Am Not, an Organized Communist... / 295
 8. Jindřich Štyrský: Cozy Nook of a Generation 3 / 297
 9. Josef Čapek: Crisis of Characters / 299
 10. Kurt Konrad: Manifesto of the Left Front / 301
 11. Bedřich Václavek: On the Marxist Theory of Art / 304
 12. Arnošt Vaněček: On Words / 307
 13. Ladislav Štoll: People in a "Laboratory" / 310
 14. Bedřich Václavek: The End of the "Revolutionary" Avant-Garde / 317
 15. Bohuslav Brouk: In Defense of Individualism / 320
 16. Jindřich Štyrský: Little Prolegomena / 326
 17. Karel Teige: Introductory Remarks: Towards a Dialectics of Architecture and Sociology of Housing Forms / 330
-

IV. Complicating the Real: Czech Surrealism / 335

1. Vítězslav Nezval: Preface to *She Wanted to Rob Lord Blamington: Poetry and Analysis* / 345
2. Bohuslav Brouk: Afterword to Jindřich Štyrský, *Emily Comes to Me in a Dream* / 350
3. Jindřich Štyrský: Surrealist Painting (a few notes) / 355
4. Bedřich Václavek: On Surrealism / 358

5. Karel Teige: Ten Years of Surrealism / 362
 6. Vítězslav Nezval: What Is Surrealism? / 365
 7. Závěš Kalandra: The Sur-Reality in Surrealism / 369
 8. Karel Teige: Socialist Realism and Surrealism / 376
 9. Jindřich Štyrský: Surrealist Photography / 380
 10. Jindřich Chalupecký: A Word on the Situation of Surrealism in Our Country / 382
 11. Ladislav Novomeský: Czech-Slovak Cultural Relations / 392
 12. Vítězslav Nezval, Jindřich Štyrský: An Attempt at Realizing the Irrationality of Photography / 394
 13. Karel Teige: Surrealisms Against the Current / 396
-

V. Alternative Modernities: New Myths, Art, and Science / 403

1. Vít Obrtel: The Right to Theory / 416
 2. Václav Navrátil: The Breakdown of Individuality and of Poetry / 418
 3. Zdeněk Rykr: Introduction / 422
 4. Vít Obrtel: On Building Towers / 424
 5. Václav Navrátil: Kvart / 426
 6. Vít Obrtel: On the Work Method / 428
 7. Václav Navrátil: On the Crisis of Crisisology / 430
 8. Zdeněk Rykr: In Today's World... / 437
 9. Kamil Bednář: On the Youngest Generation of Czech Poets / 440
 10. Kamil Bednář: Notes on "Today", "Reality" and "Czechness" in Poetry / 442
 11. Václav Navrátil: Myths / 445
 12. Kamil Bednář: A Word to the Young / 456
 13. Jindřich Chalupecký: The World in Which We Live / 460
 14. Jindřich Chalupecký: History / 466
 15. Jindřich Chalupecký: Art Imitates Reality / 470
 16. Milada Součková: On the Contemporary Novel / 479
 17. Roman Jakobson: On Contemporary Czech Language Cleansing / 481
 18. Jan Mukařovský: Dialectical Oppositions in Modern Art / 486
 19. Jan Mukařovský: The Individual in Art / 501
-

Original Sources / 507

List of Illustrations / 510

Afterword and Editorial Note / 513

Index / 519

Introduction

In his memoirs the Czech poet Jaroslav Seifert recalled his final meeting with Roman Jakobson, the Russian linguist, literary theorist, poet, and central figure of 20th-century Structuralism. They met by chance on the platform of a train station as Jakobson, who was Jewish, was preparing to leave Czechoslovakia “at the critical hour” in March 1939, following the arrival of Nazi German occupying forces in Prague and a few months before the outbreak of World War Two. Jakobson had lived in Prague for nearly two decades and during that time had been a central figure in the internationally influential Prague Linguistic Circle, as well as friend of and collaborator with many of the leading figures of the vibrant avant-garde cultural scenes in interwar Prague, Brno and Bratislava. But all that was now ending. Seifert’s account of their hurried, happenstance meeting on that train platform under gathering clouds of war conveys a decidedly elegiac tone. “I was glad to be in this country, and I was happy here,” Seifert reports Jakobson as having said. “And if it is any consolation, let me say that I feel myself to be Czech, and I am sad.” Seifert concludes his sketch by observing: “At that moment [Jakobson] had two small, broken tears in his eyes. He looked right at my face, and it seemed to me as if he were looking past me and talking with someone else. But aside from me there was no one else there.”¹

This anecdote says much about the fate of the interwar avant-garde in Czechoslovakia. A sense of ending and loss hangs over this scene; indeed the final sentences almost give the impression that Seifert himself is disappearing, being left behind, replaced, forgotten. Jakobson, to be sure, continued to recall and refer to his Prague years throughout his later, eminent career in the United States (and his apparently

1 Jaroslav Seifert, *Všecky krásy světa*, 3rd, rev. ed. (Praha: Československý spisovatel, 1992), 365.

distant gaze was in fact due to nothing more than a slight eye defect). But for a long time thereafter the wider world *did* largely forget this place, this period. Lost was the milieu symbolised by friendship between a Czech poet who at the height of the Cold War in the 1980s would be awarded the Nobel Prize for literature, and an émigré Russian linguist and theorist who in the 1950s would revolutionize French and American academia through the Structuralist principles he brought to them from Prague. Also lost was the memory of just how cosmopolitan, international, and convivial the intellectual life in this young Czechoslovak democracy could be.

Established in October 1918, upon the collapse of the Habsburg Empire at the end of World War One, and dismembered in stages between 1938 and 1939 around the time of Seifert and Jakobson's final, transitory encounter, the first Republic of Czechoslovakia had nourished a remarkable period of cultural achievement. Over the twenty years of its existence, central figures in the cultural life of the republic cultivated ties, cooperation, and influences among leading modernist groups across Europe and the world, and Czechoslovakia also provided a home to a range of European artists, writers and thinkers displaced from their native lands in the turbulent interwar years. During this period Czechoslovak modernism and its avant-garde generated vibrant art and literature, for example producing some of the most significant examples of modernist architecture (in the early 1930s Le Corbusier praised how "the Czechs have shone so brightly in the emerging sky of the new times"²), providing fundamental impetus to the development of semiotics and structuralist thought, and even giving world culture a new word: "robot," from Karel Čapek's 1920 play *R.U.R.* about man-made humanoids who are first exploited as cheap labor but then, having developed consciousness, revolt against and defeat humanity.

Seifert's anecdote thus relates a double loss. The outbreak of war, and later the imposition of Soviet influence, brought *de facto* an end to an all too brief florescence under what is now called the "First Republic," when Czechoslovak culture was internationally engaged and at the forefront of some of the most advanced European modernist trends. But further, in the decades following the war the avant-garde traditions and accomplishments of this "far-away land of which we know nothing" faded from wider consciousness and were effectively written out of mainstream accounts of the European avant-garde.³ In many ways Czechoslovakia was not unique in undergoing this erasure, but rather stands as a particularly striking example of the fate that befell other avant-garde and modernist traditions in Central and East-

2 Le Corbusier, "In Defense of Architecture," trans. by Nancy Bray, André Lessard, Alan Levitt and George Baird, *Oppositions* 4 (1974): 93–106 (p. 94).

3 The quotation glosses the notorious phrase that British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain used when defending his attempt to appease Hitler in the September 1938 Munich negotiations, which ceded large parts of Czechoslovak territory to the German Reich. On historical forgetting of the Czech avant-garde (and for useful bibliographic references), see Derek Sayer, "How We Remember and What We Forget: Art History and the Czech Avant-garde," in Dariusz Gafijczuk and Derek Sayer (eds.), *The Inhabited Ruins of Central Europe: Re-Imagining Space, History, and Memory* (Houndmills and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 148–177.

ern Europe as well, in particular those that found themselves on the “wrong” side of the Iron Curtain during the Cold War period. How did this process of forgetting play out? And what conditions emerged later that have allowed the recovery of some sense of the vibrancy and diversity of the avant-garde not only in Czechoslovakia, but in interwar Central and Eastern Europe as a whole?

One evident key is to be found in the intellectual mapping that accompanied the Cold War itself. After a constitutional coup in 1948, which allowed the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia to seize control of the entire government, Czechoslovakia found itself solidly within the Soviet Bloc and underwent a swift and thorough process of Stalinization that saw mass nationalization of industries, curtailment of individual liberties, show trials of political opponents, and even a cult of personality (modeled in many respects upon the bombastic cult around Stalin) centered on the figure of the “worker President,” Klement Gottwald. These radical changes affected not only social, economic and political life, but culture as well. During the 1950s, officially sanctioned culture in Czechoslovakia, as throughout the Soviet Bloc, was dominated by the doctrine of Socialist Realism, a deeply ideological aesthetic platform adopted in the Soviet Union in the early 1930s, which demanded that art and literature be “comprehensible,” address questions of class struggle, and reflect the ideals and principles of the Communist Party. In particular the criterion of comprehensibility set Socialist Realism in direct conflict with the radical aesthetic experimentation, and consequent “difficulty,” of much art and literature of the interwar period. Stalinist cultural orthodoxy of the 1950s thus vehemently rejected the avant-garde traditions of the First Republic as representing “bourgeois decadence” and unhealthy “formalism” (a term of condemnation that acquired particular truculence). After 1948 many major figures of the interwar avant-garde either emigrated to the West or were effectively forced into internal exile, as they were prevented from publishing and banned from public cultural life. Some succumbed physically to the pressure campaigns directed against them; others committed suicide or even were executed during the political show trials.⁴ Yet others made their peace with the new regime, though this required “self-criticism” and renunciation of their earlier avant-gardist work.⁵ This internal purgation of avant-garde traditions within the Soviet Bloc made it all too easy for commentators on the other side of the Iron Curtain to forget those traditions as well. The cultural map on which the Cold War played out thus set up an Iron Curtain of its own by equating the experimental free-

4 The poet František Halas (1901–1949) and the theorist and artist Karel Teige (1900–1951), both targeted by Communist authorities in official smear campaigns, died of heart attacks. The poet Konstantin Biebl (1898–1951) committed suicide. The historian, philosopher and sympathizer with Surrealism Závěš Kalandra (1902–1950) was one of four people judicially murdered following the infamous show trial centered on the politician Milada Horáková (1901–1950).

5 The poet Vítězslav Nezval (1900–1958) turned towards Socialist Realism and published poems praising Stalin in the late 1940s. The literary theorist Jan Mukařovský (1891–1975) was made rector of Charles University in Prague in 1948 after having denounced the methods of Czech Structuralism, which he had played such a central role in developing during the 1930s and 40s.

doms of modernism and the avant-garde with “the West,” in stark contrast to the ideological oppressiveness of Socialist Realism in the Soviet Bloc.⁶

A related, though less obvious key to this process of forgetting requires understanding an odd paradox in that postwar Western critical reception of the literary and artistic avant-gardes. Most European avant-garde groups and movements had been consciously cosmopolitan, intentionally international. This was true even in the case of groups that, like the Italian Futurists, allied themselves with nationalist or indeed fascist politics: F. T. Marinetti’s 1909 “Futurist Manifesto” was published in Paris, in French, within weeks of its original publication in Italy, and perhaps no single document of the interwar avant-garde had such wide international resonance in the interwar period. This internationalism was not coincidental but inherited in the underlying dynamic of the avant-garde, in the claim to represent not a specific national “spirit” or “identity” but the cutting edge of art itself (even while that cutting edge was often turned against the very notion of “art”).⁷ Yet despite such internationalism, Western critical reception (and, consequently, public awareness) of these avant-garde movements long displayed a stubborn tendency to attach a national modifier to each movement. Futurism thus becomes “Italian” and then “Russian”; Expressionism becomes “German”; Surrealism becomes “French.” Even Dada—that most rambunctious and rebellious assault on national traditions—appeared to have had necessary geographical groundings in its Zurich, Paris, Berlin or New York variants, each of which has been presumed to reflect something of the wider national culture surrounding it. So the paradox is how much Western critical reflection in the postwar period has felt oddly comfortable in placing these internationalist European avant-garde movements within traditional, national literary and cultural histories. And, perhaps not surprisingly, those national traditions that lay on the “near side” of the Iron Curtain received the most attention. The cutting edge of art in early twentieth-century Europe was thus divided up among the major Western European national traditions.⁸

-
- 6 This ideological mapping also guided Western impressions of postwar “dissident” culture within the Soviet Bloc. The notion of heroic resistance against an oppressive official culture was often taken as creating a spiritual kinship between postwar dissident practice and the interwar avant-garde, even though in practice much dissident culture made no use of avant-gardist techniques.
 - 7 The understanding of the interwar avant-garde as a practice of “anti-art” has its classic formulation in Peter Bürger’s widely influential thesis of an avant-gardist “liquidation of the institution of art”; see Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. by Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984 [1974]).
 - 8 Russia and the Soviet Union are the exception in this list of otherwise Western European national appropriations. The significance and influence of these Russian and Soviet impulses were impossible to ignore but western accounts often treated them hesitantly or associated them largely with émigré groups in the West (Wassily Kandinsky in Munich in the 1900s and later at the Bauhaus, for example, or the Russian Constructivist circles in Berlin in the 1920s). Further, the Soviet suppression of avant-garde cultural trends during the 1930s meant that the influence of the Soviet avant-garde could be presented as intense but short-lived, thus

The last thirty years or so have brought developments allowing a correction—slow, piecemeal, unfinished, but a correction nonetheless—of that process of forgetting that had obscured the significant role Central and Eastern European traditions played in the interwar avant-garde. Most obvious are the seismic political shifts in 1989–1991, when the collapse of the Soviet Bloc, followed by the disintegration of the Soviet Union itself, led to the scrapping of first the political and then the mental maps that had governed during the Cold War. The establishment of new or renewed democracies in states such as Poland, Hungary, Romania, Czechoslovakia (divided into the Czech and Slovak republics after the so-called “Velvet Divorce” in 1993) and elsewhere energized and expanded interest in the cultural history of those states as well. In particular their vibrant modernist and avant-garde traditions, so long smothered by official hostility from within and ignorant indifference from without, emerged as obvious objects of investigation.

This resurgence had its own complexities. The convoluted legacies of the interwar avant-garde in Czechoslovakia, for example, harbored currents that could appear quite ambivalent for audiences in the post-1989 period. Following the deepest Stalinist phase in the 1950s, bold scholars and intellectuals in Czechoslovakia had engaged from the late 1950s through the 1960s in efforts to rehabilitate central figures of the interwar avant-garde, in an implicit (or often explicit) rejection of the earlier cultural orthodoxies. Scholarly studies and critical editions of important avant-garde works and figures appeared, and the distortions in the accepted official accounts of such works, and often the injustice of what had befallen many of those artists and authors at the hands of the postwar Socialist regime, were discussed with increasing frankness. Much of this work of reappropriation attempted to reclaim these avant-gardists as key figures in a Marxist cultural tradition that, it was argued, a socialist state should embrace rather than suppress. This groundbreaking 1960s revisionist scholarship on the interwar avant-garde should thus be understood as a significant cultural component in the build-up to that striking period of social and political reform culminating in the 1968 Prague Spring, with its vision of a “socialism with a human face.” (The same is true of scholarly efforts

keeping in place the “cultural Iron Curtain” discussed above. Contrast, for example, the fame of the Bauhaus (familiar enough to have provided the name for a popular English gothic rock band in the 1980s) with the obscurity of the Soviet VKhUTEMAS (an acronym for the Higher Art and Technical Workshop), an institute of comparable importance for the development of modern architecture and design, which interacted extensively with the members of the Bauhaus; see Anna Bokov’s recent monograph *Avant-Garde as Method: Vkhutemas and the Pedagogy of Space, 1920–1930* (Zurich: Park Books, 2020). Both the Bauhaus and VKhUTEMAS were state-sponsored institutions, and both eventually closed (in 1933 and 1930 respectively) under the pressure of rising totalitarianism. Yet VKhUTEMAS has remained little known, while the Bauhaus has always played a central role in accounts of interwar modernism, largely due to its role in the 1920s avant-garde in the Weimar Republic and then to its later transplantation to and domestication within the United States when László Moholy-Nagy founded the “New Bauhaus” in Chicago in 1937.

beginning in the early 1960s to reclaim the work of Franz Kafka—another towering feature of interwar Czechoslovak and late Habsburg culture that the Stalinist orthodoxy of the 1950s had condemned and repressed.) The violent suppression of the Prague Spring through the Soviet-led invasion in August 1968, and the ensuing, nearly 20-year occupation of Czechoslovakia and imposition of renewed political and cultural orthodoxy, meant that in the 1970s and 1980s the interwar avant-garde was once again subject to censure and censorship.⁹ Yet here lies the root of a serious complication in the rediscovery of these avant-garde traditions after 1989. Marxism had been extremely influential within much of the interwar avant-garde, and many of the major figures in that period had been confirmed supporters of communist ideals and of the Soviet Union. So despite their bitter fate later at the hands of the postwar Czechoslovak Socialist regime, these figures were often regarded with some suspicion or distaste in the 1990s, when the trend was to emphatically discard anything smacking of Marxism or Soviet influence. To some degree this paradox—on the one hand the celebration of the interwar avant-garde for its aesthetic independence and its “martyrdom” under the postwar Czechoslovak regime, and on the other the suspicion of the Marxism and pro-Soviet convictions of so many of its central figures—remains within public reflection on this topic to the present day.

Study of the European avant-garde has also pushed back in recent decades against that other feature that contributed to the forgetting of the Central and Eastern European avant-gardes: the Western European national appropriations that had long remained unquestioned. Not only were the inaccuracies in such national accounts too glaring, but it became increasingly difficult to ignore that the countries to which most such accounts gave a controlling interest—France, Germany, Italy, Britain and, with caveats (see note 8), Russia and the Soviet Union—were also the major colonialist powers of that period, contributing to a sense that academic study was, wittingly or not, reflecting geopolitical bias and cultural hegemony. The push-back has taken several forms. First, scholars pointed out how the national labels obscured the varied origins of many of the most significant figures. For example, the “French” avant-garde was shaped in fundamental fashion by many Romanians (e.g., Tristan Tzara, Constantin Brâncuși), the “German” avant-garde by many

9 This see-saw dynamic is well illustrated by the fate of one of the most important of those 1960s revisionist publishing projects. Karel Teige, a key figure in the Devětsil and Czechoslovak Surrealist groups and a name that features prominently in this anthology, had been denounced during the Stalinist 1950s and his work had been suppressed as a prime example of “decadent formalism.” In the early 1960s, however, editors Vratislav Effenberger, Jiří Brabec, Robert Kalivoda, and Květoslav Chvatík began work on a three-volume critical edition of Teige’s selected works (*Výbor z díla*). The first volume appeared in 1966. The second volume, due for publication in 1969, was completed and printed, but before it could be published nearly the entire print-run was destroyed following the August 1968 invasion and the ensuing political changes (the few surviving copies became a valuable rarity). Volume three did not appear until 1994.

Hungarians (e.g., László Moholy-Nagy, Marcel Breuer); the “Russian” avant-garde by many Ukrainians (e.g., Kazimir Malevich, Vladimir Tatlin); and so on. Second, increasing attention has been paid to the fact that the most prominent nations by no means had a monopoly on many of the familiar movements: Expressionism and Futurism flourished in Poland, for example, as did Cubism and Surrealism in Czechoslovakia. Third, international scholarship (especially that written in English, French or German) has begun to explore more deeply the unique, original movements and styles that arose in what had previously too often been ignored as “peripheral” regions of Europe: Zenithism in Yugoslavia, for example, or Poetism in Czechoslovakia. The rediscovery of such movements, and the presentation of them often as “alternative avant-gardes,” has rejuvenated the study of the interwar avant-garde by opening up what many had begun to perceive as an ossified canon of works, figures and movements. Taken together, these trends have done much to raise awareness of the geographical diversity in the early twentieth-century European avant-garde, and in particular of the contributions of Central and Eastern European avant-gardes that accounts centered on the “major,” primarily Western European national traditions long obscured.¹⁰

This push for greater inclusiveness has in many ways learned from and echoed academic critiques first developed within postcolonial studies. The process of national appropriation described above is easily framed as a sort of “colonialization” within the postwar critical discourse on the European avant-garde. The ways in which postcolonial studies have worked to upend set hierarchies of cultural power, to decolonialize cultural canons, to reframe notions of non-European Otherness and the abject, and to recuperate what had for so long been excluded from Eurocentric master narratives, offer clear models for efforts to push back against both “Iron Curtain” and “west-centric” accounts of the European avant-garde. Further, such efforts dismantle from within the notion of an undifferentiated European master narrative, replacing it with a more complex, variegated, and hybridized image of the European avant-garde. Critical literatures on different Central and Eastern European modernist traditions have responded with varying degrees of enthusiasm to the postcolonial parallel. Scholars of Ukrainian modernism, for example, have often embraced the model, as it dovetails neatly with accounts not only of Stalinist suppression of the avant-garde but also of a longer history of Russian appropriation or oppression of specifically Ukrainian cultural phenomena, a history that can make the all too common glossing of the Soviet avant-garde as “Russian” particularly vexing. Scholars of other areas, however, such as Czechoslovakia, have been more skeptical about the usefulness of the postcolonial paradigm, focusing instead

10 English-language readers seeking insight into this broadened European avant-garde corpus should consult Timothy O. Benson and Éva Forgács (eds.), *Between Worlds: A Sourcebook of Central European Avant-Gardes, 1910–1930* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002); and the essays in the companion volume, Timothy O. Benson (ed.), *Central European Avant-Gardes: Exchange and Transformation, 1910–1930* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002).

on the various forms of interconnection across the European avant-gardes and thus pursuing a model of inclusion within, rather than oppression by, the main European accounts.

There is in any event no question that the process of opening up the catalogue of European avant-gardes to include Central and Eastern Europe has faced several of the same obstacles that postcolonial studies faced in its early phases in the 1970s and 80s as it argued for the decolonization of literary studies and the importance of wider attention to non-European cultural traditions. The first of these could be labelled “ghettoization.” This occurs when the significance of the previously overlooked traditions comes to be acknowledged more widely yet is not granted any particular impact on the accepted narrative. “New” movements are admitted into the house, as it were, but are left standing alone in the corner. In such a situation Czech Poetism, for example, may become a more familiar term to a larger number of scholars of the European avant-garde and its originality may be acknowledged, but as a movement that never spread internationally it will be understood as only really having significance for specialists on Czech culture. Capsule descriptions or general summaries of the new movements are then deemed sufficient, as the notion that a deeper understanding of Poetism could reveal anything substantial to a scholar of Breton’s Surrealism, for example, will appear eccentric. So when previously overlooked traditions are ghettoized in this manner, the catalogue of avant-garde movements may be broadened but the central canon remains intact.

A second obstacle is when the previously overlooked traditions are understood as “belated” versions of what is already familiar, as merely echoes or copies (which may be adjudged more or less successful, more or less interesting) of phenomena that originated elsewhere. Under this model, for example, Czech Surrealism may be acknowledged to have produced striking works of art and literature, yet is understood simply as evidence of the growing influence, the “exportation” of (or colonization by) Breton’s conception of Surrealism. The “belatedness” model takes much of its persuasiveness from its apparent foundation on indisputable chronological facts (the Prague Surrealist group was indeed founded a decade later than Breton’s Parisian group, for example). So here too the original canon is left untouched by an expanded catalogue of movements—indeed the original canon may even be reinforced by the apparently irrefutable evidence of its spreading influence.

If the recuperation of Central and Eastern European avant-gardes from the forgetting in which they had lingered so long is to reveal deeper significance, it is necessary to move beyond the twin pitfalls of ghettoization and belatedness. We must seek to understand how these newly appreciated traditions interconnect with—and even potentially alter—our understanding of the “major” movements around which accounts of the European avant-garde have so long been constructed.

How this might work can be illustrated through a specific example. The major theoretician of two important Czech avant-garde groups that feature prominently in this anthology, Devětsil in the 1920s and the Czechoslovak Surrealist Group in the 1930s, was Karel Teige (see notes 4 and 9). From the early 1920s onwards Teige

constructed a wide international network of contacts and cooperation with other avant-gardist figures who nowadays are far more famous. And many of those figures came to appreciate Teige's important role within what could be called the "international republic of the avant-garde." The words of Le Corbusier quoted at the beginning of this introduction were in fact addressed directly to Teige, and can here be cited more extensively: "If since 1921, the Czechs have shone so brightly in the emerging sky of the new times, it is largely because of you people, your magazines, your manifestos, your poems, people such as Teige, Nezval, Krejcar, etc." Similarly, evidence of the international reputation enjoyed by Teige and other Czech Surrealists (such as the poet Vítězslav Nezval) is provided by André Breton's praise during his 1935 visit to Prague: "[For] many long years I have enjoyed perfect intellectual fellowship with men such as Vítězslav Nezval and Karel Teige, whose trust and friendship is a source of pride to me. [...] Constantly interpreted by Teige in the most lively way, made to undergo an all-powerful lyric thrust by Nezval, Surrealism can flatter itself that it has blossomed in Prague as it has in Paris."¹¹ Such quotations demonstrate that a figure who may now be unfamiliar to many people interested in the avant-garde was once far better known. For a scholar of the Czechoslovak avant-garde hoping to persuade others to take an interest in a figure like Teige, the temptation is strong (and I confess to having done this myself at times) to cite such strong praise from these major authorities, and trust that those who are interested in Le Corbusier or Breton will feel inspired to investigate further. This may or may not lead to a successful outcome, but in any event one must recognize that such marshalling of borrowed authority is not only patronizing but remains beholden to the twin traps of ghettoization and belatedness. Le Corbusier's praise may inspire some more or less decorative mentions of Teige's name, thus including him in the main narrative about the international architectural avant-garde, yet Teige is likely to be left standing, "ghettoized," in the background, for nothing about such praise indicates how Teige's work could convey something of deeper significance to those interested in Le Corbusier. Similarly, Breton's praise may well come off as little more than diplomatic protocol, since Breton was, after all, visiting Prague to cement relations with a Czechoslovak Surrealist group that can easily appear to be simply a satellite of the Paris movement, a "belated" effort to catch up with *le dernier cri*.

Yet if one knows more about the context of Teige's interactions with these more famous figures, things appear differently. Let us start with Le Corbusier. His praise of Teige and the Czechoslovak modernist architecture movement was not offered randomly but rather in response to a sharp critique that Teige, who had been a strong supporter of Le Corbusier for years, had made of what he deemed the "monumentalizing" and "historicizing" tendencies in one of Le Corbusier's

11 André Breton, "Surrealist Situation of the Object," in André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. by Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972), 255–278 (p. 256).

major projects. Given Le Corbusier's acknowledged status as a towering master of modern architecture at that time, this critique came as a surprise. That Le Corbusier responded at all was unusual (he generally left such criticism unanswered), let alone that he responded in such a mollifying tone, and indicates that Teige's critique struck a nerve. Historians of modern architecture have taken note of this exchange and have generally framed it as illustrating the moment when the modernist movement in architecture split between a radically "utilitarian" faction (supposedly represented by Teige) and a "humanistic" practice (represented by Le Corbusier). That framework does go some way towards identifying a deeper significance in this exchange, yet it remains ignorant of Teige's broader aesthetic positions, in which his alleged utilitarianism was inseparable from the whimsical, playful, and deeply anti-instrumental impulses that came bundled under the label of Poetism. Only a fuller understanding of the surprising range and complexity of Teige's positions releases him from the "ghetto" and allows the fuller resonance of his exchange with Le Corbusier, and its potential consequences for thinking about avant-garde aesthetics more generally, to emerge. And now Breton: the "lively" interpretation of Surrealism that Breton attributes to Teige in fact refers to Teige's roughly 15 years of rigorous *critique* of Breton and his group. Teige had only come to embrace Surrealism fully a few months before Breton's Prague visit, and not because he wished to join in with a more famous movement but because he felt that Breton's Surrealists had finally matured their positions sufficiently to dispel the whiff of idealism and mysticism Teige had always found suspicious about their activities. In Teige's understanding, Czech Poetism during the 1920s had represented a far more defensible position than had Breton's Surrealism in that period; in the early 1930s, he argued, both movements had evolved to the point where they could merge into a shared enterprise, represented by the foundation of the Czechoslovak Surrealist Group in 1934—but it was the Parisians, not the Praguers, who had had the rockiest path to that point. So the apparent "belatedness" that mere chronology would seem to demonstrate conclusively—the decade or so separating the foundations of the French and Czechoslovak Surrealist groups—in fact obscures a far more nuanced (and more interesting) picture.¹²

The point of course is not necessarily to claim that Teige's critiques get the better of these famous figures, but rather to acknowledge that only deeper awareness of the particularities of the Czechoslovak context allows one to perceive how these exchanges might potentially speak to new insights about those famous figures—and thus of the interwar avant-garde more generally. The initial dynamic, in which the borrowed authority of those commendatory quotations from Le Corbusier and Breton might perhaps serve to bring Teige's name more fully into the avant-garde catalogue yet leaves the canonical figures untouched, gives way to a more nuanced exchange, speaking to our understanding of *all* the figures involved. This deeper

12 I discuss both of these interactions in more detail in Peter Zusi, *The Integrity of the Avant-Garde: Karel Teige and the Biography of an Ambition* (Cambridge, England: Legenda, 2023).

sense of nuance, however, is impossible without a more granular understanding of those Central and Eastern European contexts that remained so long obscured.

Which brings us to the crucial role played by an anthology such as the present volume. Few people have the linguistic competence to read widely across the different avant-garde traditions at stake here, so translation is an essential task. Anthologies offering a broad sweep across the region (see note 10) are essential in allowing larger comparative perspectives to emerge, but they necessarily can only provide some of the “greatest hits” within each tradition. The requisite level of granular detail, however, can only be achieved through a more generous selection, rendering the major positions, practices and polemics that determined a particular historical time and place. Every such effort inevitably makes certain compromises, of course, yet the present anthology, containing a wide range of primary texts set into their historical context through Zuzana Říhová’s historical introductions to each section, provides the most thorough resource currently available to an English-language reader interested in the Czechoslovak interwar avant-garde. What emerges is by no means a neat or coherent picture; indeed, in many ways granular detail always makes the picture messier, more ambiguous, open to different interpretations. Thus, for example, the usual emphasis in accounts of the Czech avant-garde (in secondary literature in both Czech and in English) on the narrative arc leading from Devětsil in its early “proletarian art” phase through its subsequent Constructivist and Poetist period, then to the foundation of the Levá fronta (Left Front) in the early 30s, and finally to the establishment of the Czechoslovak Surrealist Group in 1934, is here complemented by a selection of texts from less familiar groups: the Brno-based Literární skupina (Literary Group), for example, or the Slovak DAVists, or the group around Vít Obrtel and the journal *Kvart* (Quarto). The sense of a single narrative arc thus gives way to a wider field of avant-garde positions and activities. Similarly, should one feel inclined to understand the position of the Czechoslovak avant-garde within the wider European narrative through a decolonizing framework emphasizing rectification of its marginalization and distortion (indeed much in the present Introduction shows such an inflection) then one may be surprised by, for example, the degree to which the Czech avant-garde often echoes tropes that exoticize and orientalize Eastern European or non-European “Others” in troubling ways. Firmer inclusion of the Czechoslovak tradition within the larger European narrative account of the avant-garde may also mean inclusion within some of those broader prejudices and blind spots as well.

For most readers making a first acquaintance with the interwar avant-garde in Czechoslovakia, one of the most striking discoveries is the programme and practice of Poetism, which has already been referred to several times. The most original credo of the Czech interwar avant-garde, Poetism is also one of the most appealing, most endearing movements of the European avant-garde as a whole, marked by both humility and an enthusiastic focus on discovering the beauty of the modern world and the happiness that is to be found there. Teige’s famous 1924 “Poetismus” (Poetism) manifesto refuses to *define* what Poetism is and rather merely *suggests*

the atmosphere it supports: “The art that is brought by Poetism is nonchalant, frolicsome, fantastical, playful, unheroic, and amorous. [...] It was born in an atmosphere of exuberant sociability, *in a world that laughs*; no matter that tears are running from its eyes.”¹³ Much about the interwar Czechoslovak avant-garde inevitably appears in the melancholic light with which this introduction began, with its opening anecdote of Seifert and Jakobson parting on a bleak train platform. It is impossible for us now to ignore the end of this story; the horrors of World War Two and the Shoah cast a pall over the entire period. Yet those years of the avant-garde were primarily years of creativity and exuberance. The present anthology will have served its purpose if it succeeds in reviving interest in and refreshing the memory of that laughter that long ago fell into forgetfulness.

Peter Zusi

¹³ See below, p. 153.