

IVAN WERNISCH – A VOICE FROM CENTRAL EUROPE

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ABSTRACT

The title of the following essay was inspired by the first English written monograph about the personality of Milan Kundera which has the same subtitle “A Voice from Central Europe”. [1] Critical vision of Europe in the second half of the last century in Kundera’s novels and essays is generally known. Ivan Wernisch (born 1942) is internationally less famous than Kundera, because he did not emigrate after the Soviet invasion to Czechoslovakia in 1968, he published mostly in samizdat and began to be highly appreciated and translated to foreign languages especially after the Velvet Revolution in 1989. His unofficially published poems were admired by Václav Havel and set to music by the famous underground rock group The Plastic People of the Universe. Wernisch is now understood as one of the most original Czech poets of the last five decades. Maybe it is caused by the fact that his texts are not rooted in the impulses of French modernism as it used to be so common before WWII. In the golden 1960s he started to become a representative of post-modern poetry in the tradition of German (and Scandinavian) way of expression. The methodology of comparative literary studies prevails in the following text, as well as traditional ways of analysing modernist and post-modern poetry. The essay is based on interpretation of typical samples of the poetry of Ivan Wernisch as they are available in the book of translations called *In the Puppet Gardens: Selected poems, 1963–2005* (Michigan Slavic Publications, Ann Arbor, 2007).

Keywords: Czech poetry after 1945; Ivan Wernisch; Central European absurdity and its literary reflection; postmodern poetry; intertextuality.

INTRODUCTION

The influence of the author’s family roots and his biography should not be overestimated, because the main thing that remains and to which both readers and literary historians return are texts that have a certain chance of remaining in our cultural memory. In the case of Ivan Wernisch, however, a brief note on the milieu from which he emerged may be useful, because in it we encounter in a very concentrated form many of the fates and feelings that are typical of Central Europe and to which Czech writers return repeatedly, because they are part of the local social (and cultural) identity. The eminent American translator and literary historian Jonathan Bolton summarises the American (and generally Western) attitude towards Czech literature after the Soviet occupation in 1968 as follows: “We like our Central Europeans to be serious, metaphysical, and discursive, humanists with an edge of mysticism or religion; we tend to prefer poet-emigrés and poet-dissidents (...), we admire their poised, sad humor in the face of vileness and stupidity (...).” [2] Ivan Wernisch only partially fits this Western description of a Central European poet; Wernisch is different and goes beyond this longstanding expectation. He is one of the less admired solitaires whose distinctive work is appreciated only after a certain time lag. His original