
A librarian trying to catalogue this book professionally is faced with a difficult task. Over its almost 300 pages, arranged in 103 sections, the text keeps slipping from one bibliographical category to another, constantly changing shape — an exotic, untamed and unfamiliar creature in the sober academic zoo of scholarly historical or literary studies.

When entering the magic paradigm of this book, the reader is bound to fumble mentally, having to cope with rapid changes in historical perspective, numerous quotations, references to painting, sculpture and music, while being haunted by all kinds of ghosts and spirits, encountering on every page a challenging mixture of the surreal and the real. But after some initial disorientation, perhaps even irritation, the open-minded reader is likely to surrender to the author's inimitable voice (rendered admirably into English by David Newton Marinelli).

Perhaps, then, this is what we might call a truly "postmodern" text in the sense that it is a "blurred genre," remaining a flowing, shimmering, billowing texture of words and images. But when it touches ground (and it does so firmly!) we get closely researched historical facts, emperors' power struggles or alchemists' checkered careers, battles and occupations, the steady bustle of trade and commerce — and Prague becomes alive.

Angelo Maria Ripellino (1923-1978) has been called the most learned and enthusiastic propagator of Czech culture abroad. For many years as Professor of Slavic Studies at the University of Rome, in addition to his own poetry he published a considerable body of work on Russian and Czech literature and culture. Indeed the first "free" International Conference on Czech literature in Prague in June 1995 included several papers on Ripellino's oeuvre and influence. For *Magic Prague* he was awarded the coveted Prize of Italy in 1973, when he was already banned from visiting the city into which he had "sunk ... [his] roots like a tree." (p. 280) Sadly, he did not witness the book's impact, just as he did not a more weighty loss — witness Prague's "Velvet Revolution" of 1989, and his beloved city's "return to Europe" (Václav Havel's words).

Writing about Prague proved a difficult task. Near the beginning he tells us: "This compendium of Prague-related obiter dicta is incoherent and confused, written in uncertainty and poor health, with despair and constant second thoughts, with infinite regret of not knowing everything. . . . " (p. 17) And, a page later, he states his gallant decision not to follow "the rigor mortis of methodology" but to "weave a capricious book, an agglomeration of wonders, anecdotes, eccentric acts, brief intermezzi and mad encores." (p. 18) After such admissions, it is no wonder that this reviewer goes reluctantly about her attempt at judgment, at unravelling this magic tapestry. This text makes one somehow want to deny scholarly pedantry.

Here then is a modest brief attempt at an assessment. First, *Magic Prague* is an historical work: By and large it covers about four centuries of Czech history which is, of course, an integral part of Central European history. Apart from significant glimpses into the further past, the study delves into the period of Holy Roman Emperor Rudolf II (1576-1611), whom Ripellino calls "patron of luminaries and impostors" (p. 67). The disastrous Battle on the White Mountain, lost to the Austrians, with the subsequent execution of the whole Czech aristocracy is seen as a sort of sister tragedy to the Soviet occupation of 1968, more than three and a half centuries later. There is, the reader realizes, a fascinating double vision at work throughout the book. The "historical" passages are surrounded by an aura of myth and legend, or filtered
through the minds of writers and poets, while passages dealing with legendary or literary material are subjected to scholarly scrutiny and tested against "objective" historical sources. This seems to me a remarkable accomplishment, though it contributes to the book's opaque and ambiguous quality. For example, the famous "historical" version of Saint Nepomuk, staunch keeper of the Queen's confessional secrets, being hurled from Charles Bridge on May 13, 1383 is followed by a crisp analysis of the hagiographical question whether Nepomuk actually existed.

Merged into the historical context is an important thought that keeps emerging throughout the volume: Prague's triple nature consisting of Czech, German and Jewish cultural imprints. A Czech scholar recently commenting on Magic Prague sees this as a reminder that the Czech nation has been living for a thousand years in a multicultural area, and that it is part of the multilevel culture of Central Europe, just as this culture is part of its own particular essence. At a time of rising national consciousness in many parts of the world, this recognition, expressed two decades ago, when the world still had a different face, today has salutary implications far beyond the subject of the City of Prague.

There is no doubt that Magic Prague is also a literary work. Its pages are peopled by figures from a broad spectrum of European literature and art: from Pieter Brueghel's teeming village scenes to Karel Capek who coined the word "robot" in the 1920s; from Arcimboldo whose fantastic images pleased Rudolf II to Arthur Rimbaud who appears as a psychiatric patient in a contemporary Czech writer's story. Above all, we frequently meet Kafka emerging from a dark gate, Hašek grinning under a lantern, Czech poets providing lyrically contemplative accompaniment. Embarras de richesse? Perhaps. But the detailed notes provided by the author and carefully prepared for the English reader by Michael H. Heim testify to the scholarly quality of the volume.

Last but not least, there must be a mention of the author's unique voice that guides the reader through this almost Danteesque pilgrimage through shadows and light. Although obviously written with burning intellectual and artistic passion, the text never makes the reader feel cornered, lectured to or ignored. There are even places where the latter is addressed directly: "Do you remember...?" (pp. 194,199); or else the author's reminiscences become a conversational exchange: "While we are on the subject..." (p. 244), or the author enters his pages playfully, having one of Prague's clowns remind him: "Mr. Ripellino, you forgot me!" (p. 221)

In a darker mode, the last pages of Ripellino's book are a mixture of bitter melancholy and flaming hatred of what Soviet imperialism had wreaked upon the city. Yet the end finds him again on "the Chaplinesque road of hope" in an almost mystical vision of a return to Prague. Today this ending even gains in poignancy because a changed political reality has provided the potential realization of this vision—though not for the visionary himself.

Two oddly appropriate politico-literary tidbits might be of interest: The Czech translation of Praga Magica, published by the Czech emigré publisher INDEX in Germany in 1978, lists the translator's name only as "K". Although we know that the political situation in Czechoslovakia then was such that anyone translating for publication a book that was critical of Communist dictatorship would prefer to remain anonymous, the mysterious Kafkaesque "K" adds a special flavor of mystery to the translation. In 1992, the book appeared in Prague itself in another Czech version, this time, of course, with the full names of the translators.

The second tidbit brings us back to the question of the nature of Magic Prague: In December 1993 The New York Times Review ran a review of the book under the "Travel"