

Chitnis, Rajendra A. *Vladislav Vančura: The Heart of the Czech Avant-Garde*. Prague: Karolinum, 2007. 172 pp.

Vladislav Vančura (1891-1942) is without doubt one of the greatest Czech interwar writers and arguably belongs among the first rank of European modernists, yet for most readers without Czech his name means nothing. For one thing almost none of his works has been translated into English (although one hopes that the recent English edition of *Summer of Whimsy* from Karolinum press may inspire translations of Vančura's more important novels as well). For another, Vančura's texts are complicated, his language difficult, his ideas often dark. This is not what English-language readers have been taught to expect from Czech modernism: the reigning 'export version' of Czech modernism balances on the Hašek-Čapek-Seifert axis and emphasizes characteristics such as boisterous humour, pragmatic humanism, or studied naïveté. Chitnis, in his introduction, notes that the subtleties and paradoxes of Vančura's prose meant that 'finding a name' (13) for him—that is, teasing out the inherent logic of his writing—was a challenge even for his contemporary readers and critics. Chitnis's excellent critical study takes up this challenge and aims to give Vančura's name its rightful place among leading European modernists.

Chitnis has resisted the temptation to write an 'overview' monograph that would neatly package (and necessarily simplify) Vančura for the non-specialist reader; thankfully, this is not one of those studies that say little more than 'here is an author you probably don't know but should'. While Chitnis writes clearly and sketches in the literary and historical contexts required to follow his argument, his focus is on the complexities of Vančura's texts. The book thus elegantly balances the requirements of

two different audiences: for specialists in Vančura or Czech modernism this study will be required reading, but it will also interest students and scholars of literary modernism in general who do not read Czech.

Chitnis structures his analysis through a series of conceptual oppositions that recur in Vančura's work: rational work versus poetic imagination, collectivism versus non-conformism, automatization versus defamiliarization, constructive form versus organic life, archaism versus innovation, epic versus fragment, and scepticism versus certainty. Many of these are common not only to other figures within Czech modernism (early 1920s debates between proponents of 'Poetism' and 'proletarian art' play a significant role in Chitnis's argument) but to European modernism more broadly (Robert Musil comes to mind in this context). What is original here, however, is that in Chitnis's account Vančura does not aim for a 'reconciliation of opposites' or a 'third way', dialectical or otherwise, but rather presents the process of seeking balance as an *act*: fragile, transitory, to be repeated ever anew and perhaps never to be fully achieved. Consequently Chitnis describes 'Vančura's implicit characterization of the Avant-garde writer as a figure of transition, not of resolution, with the notion of life as movement towards an ideal challenged by the notion that preserving life as movement, as an endless transition, *is* the ideal' (20). 'Life', therefore, is not only (as so often in avant-gardist rhetoric) the opposite of form or inherited structure; 'life' is also the process of seeking equilibrium between apparent opposites, a process calling for constant re-adjustment. The consequences for Vančura's prose become evident, for example, through his use of archaisms. Vančura's language at times both echoes the 16<sup>th</sup>-century Czech 'Kralice bible' and incorporates contemporary vulgar slang, but not in order to emphasize the

contrast between high and low registers so much as to bring these registers into a delicate alliance. Linguistic innovation for Vančura thus need not presuppose the avant-garde ideal of newness. In a similar manner Chitnis uses the concept of equilibrium to challenge the widespread view that *Obrazy z dějin českého národa* (*Pictures from the History of the Czech Nation*), a late work still unfinished when Vančura was executed by the Nazis, represents a straightforward turn away from the stylistically more complex work of the 1920s towards ‘extra-literary’ criteria. Chitnis writes: ‘In *Obrazy z dějin českého národa* Vančura in fact fights against the subjugation of literary criteria to others in the period, in an attempt to preserve the “normality” of literature and the literary process at an abnormal time’ (145). The ideal of a vital search for equilibrium remains, but the process takes on a different form in dark times. Indeed, the greatest contribution of Chitnis’s study is that it reveals Vančura to be an uncompromising modernist who nonetheless at times went directly against the grain of modernist orthodoxy.

There are moments where one wishes Chitnis had gone further in drawing connections between his insightful interpretations of Vančura’s works and the broader modernist context. For example, essays on Vančura by the important Czech structuralist Jan Mukařovský are prominent in Chitnis’s footnotes, but the theoretical links and parallels between these two contemporaries (and friends) are not explicitly discussed. In the chapter discussing Vančura’s notion of *proud* (current) Chitnis quite rightly discusses Bergson but could have extended the discussion to the *Lebensphilosophie* of which Bergson was but one representative, which would also have illuminated connections extending as far back as German Romanticism [V. Černý’s study\*\*\*]. In a later chapter Chitnis offers a brief discussion of Vančura’s relation to German Expressionism, but

spends much more time on the (admittedly engrossing) comparison with the Slovak avant-garde novel *Živý bič* by Milo Urban than on the broader cultural landscape of Expressionism. Finally, one might add that the book's title does not give sufficient indication of the sophistication of the actual argument. The broader interest of this study beyond scholars of Czech literature thus could have been enhanced.

It is commendable that such a high-quality study written in English has appeared in a Czech academic press. To be sure, certain aspects of the copy editing deserved closer attention: annoyingly, the table of contents does not number the chapters, which will unnecessarily complicate citations (especially as one is forced to decide whether the 'introduction' should count as 'chapter one' or not). More seriously, in some cases the chapter titles given in the table of contents do not correspond to those given in the body of the text (cf. for example pp. 7 and 118). Nonetheless, such editorial faults hardly detract from the overall contribution this absorbing, well-written study makes to debates on both Czech and European literary modernism.

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