

FROM A TERRACE IN PRAGUE
A PRAGUE POETRY ANTHOLOGY

edited by
STEPHAN DELBOS



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Contents

PREFACE 7

A BRIEF HISTORY OF PRAGUE POETRY 10

I. LOCAL VOICES (1888-1911)

Svatopluk Čech, from "Prague" 32

Karel Hlaváček, "Evening at Libeň Cemetery" 33

Antonín Sova, "Old and New Prague" 34

Rainer Maria Rilke, "Hradčany" 36

Rainer Maria Rilke, "Out of Smíchov" 37

František Gellner, from "At the Typographer's Meeting Place" 38

Petr Bezruč, from "Palacký Day" 39

II. FROM "ZONE" TO WAR ZONE (1912-1939)

Guillaume Apollinaire, "Zone" 42

Antonín Macek, "Prague" 48

Josef Hora, "Prague" 49

Jiří Wolker, "Late toward Morning" 52

Marina Tsvetaeva, "Mount Poem" 54

Marina Tsvetaeva, "Poem of the End" 61

Josef Svatopluk Machar, "Old Town Square" 83

Karel Toman, "Love" 84

Philippe Soupault, "To Prague" 85

Vítězslav Nezval, "City of Spires" 88

Vítězslav Nezval, "Prague with Fingers of Rain" 90

František Halas, "Malá Strana Night Vision" 93

František Halas, "Prague" 94

John Berryman, "Prague" 95

III. INTRUDERS & EXILES (1940-1959)

Jaroslav Seifert, "To Prague" 98

Jaroslav Seifert, "Prague Castle" 99

Edwin Muir, "Autumn in Prague" 102

Edwin Muir, "To Franz Kafka" 103

Konstantin Biebl, "February 1948" 104

Byambin Rinchen, "A Greeting to a Friend" 106

Pablo Neruda, from "The Bridges"	108
Marie Pujmanová, "Prague Shines"	109
Sergej Makara, "Recollections of Prague"	111
Nazim Hikmet, "Faust's House"	112
Nazim Hikmet, "Prague Dawn"	113
Nazim Hikmet, "Noon in Prague"	114
Nazim Hikmet, "Optimistic Prague"	115
Nazim Hikmet, "This Thing Called Prague"	117
Věra Weislitzová, "The Park in 1957 in Prague"	119
Vladimír Holan, "Simply"	120
Jiří Kolář, "Golden Prague"	131
Jiří Kolář, "Bertramka after Mozart"	132
Ladislav Novák, "Babylonian"	133

IV. THE FROZEN THAW (1960-1969)

Paul Celan, "In Prague"	138
Ingeborg Bachmann, "Prague, January '64"	140
Ingeborg Bachmann, "Bohemia Lies by the Sea"	141
Václav Havel, "The Brno Complex"	143
Václav Havel, "We Promise"	144
James Schuyler, "The Infant Jesus of Prague"	145
Allen Ginsberg, "Kral Majales"	150
Roque Dalton, "Tavern"	153
Inger Christensen, "Action I: Extensions"	171
Egon Bondy, "Yesterday It Was"	172
Anthony Blake, "August 6, 1968. Mikulandská"	173
Anthony Blake, "August 10, 1968. Na Příkopě"	174
Robert Lowell, "From Prague 1968"	175
Yevgeny Yevtushenko, "Russian Tanks in Prague"	176
Muhammad Mahdi Al-Jawahiri, "The Fish Seller Girl"	178
Muhammad Mahdi Al-Jawahiri, "A Conversation with Prague"	179
Miroslav Holub, "The Prague of Jan Palach"	181
David Shapiro, "The Funeral of Jan Palach"	182
David Shapiro, "Christ in Prague"	183

V. ENFORCED NORMAL (1970-1989)

Ivan Blatný, "From a Terrace in Prague"	186
Pavel Šrut, "Beerspective"	187

Pavel Šrut, "Žižkov Evenings"	188
Carolyn Forché, "Letter from Prague, 1968-78"	189
Carolyn Forché, from "The Angel of History"	190
Ivan Martin Jirous, "20. August 1979 on Letná"	194
Ivan Martin Jirous, "Babylonian Whore"	195
Larry Levis, "Sensationalism"	196
Donald Revell, "Prague"	199
Jiří Žáček, "South City"	201
Jáchym Topol, "Moreover It's Clear"	202
Michal Ajvaz, "Café Slavia"	204
Michal Ajvaz, "Bird"	205

VI. IRON CURTAIN, VELVET ROPE (1990-2010)

Kamil Bouška, "The Velvet Revolution"	208
Bei Dao, "Prague"	210
Adam Zagajewski, "September"	212
Michael Carter, "Midsummers Night Prague"	214
Jaroslav Hutka, "I Live in Prague"	216
Věra Chase, "The Museum Goers"	218
Kateřina Rudčenková, "Meeting, 3.3.97"	220
Tereza Riedlbauchová, "Fairytale"	221
Viktor Špaček, "Summer in Prague"	222
Martin Langer, "Partagaskies Smelled"	223
Radek Malý, "Verses about Prague"	225
Jiří Brynda, "Riegrovy Sady"	226
Petr Král, "Moth"	228
Petr Hruška, "Ocean"	229
Viola Fischerová, "[Untitled]"	230
Louis Armand, "Orbis Sensualium Pictis"	231
Louis Armand, "Leden"	232
Vincent Farnsworth, from "Bridge in Prague"	234
James Ragan, from "The Stone Steps to Hradčany"	237
James Ragan, "Obscurity"	238
Richard Katrovas, "The Bridge of Intellectuals"	239
Jas H. Duke, "Alekhine and Junge at Prague"	241
Anne Waldman, "3 Moments in Prague"	246
Lawrence Ferlinghetti, "Rivers of Light"	250
Justin Quinn, "Seminar"	253

Justin Quinn, "Russian Girl on Pařížská"	254
Phil Shoenfelt and Kateřina Piňosová, "Magdalena"	256
Jane Kirwan, "Still Life: Prague 1943"	257
Wojciech A. Maślarz, "Stalin Monument"	259
Wojciech A. Maślarz, "Mirror"	260
Wojciech A. Maślarz, "El Niño over Prague"	260
John Tranter, "Bats"	262
Ian MacNeill, "Prague in the Twenties"	263
Iggy McGovern, "The Child of Prague"	264
Seisuke Tsukahara-Watashi, from "Thresh Old Prague"	265
Phillis Levin, "A Rhinoceros at the Prague Zoo"	266
David Lehman, "On Kafka's Birthday"	269
Mark Terrill, "A Poem for the Here & Now"	271
Ed Sanders, "The Rose of Prague"	273
Gary Snyder, "The Bend in the Vltava"	275
Jason Mashak, "Telegram to the West"	277
Gil Fleischman, "Looking over the Rooftops"	278
Christopher Crawford, "Poem for the Warring Lovers"	279
Razvan Tupa and Claudiu Komartin, "Doorsteps-Powers [Globe]"	281
Razvan Tupa and Claudiu Komartin, "And Now in the Morning"	282
Razvan Tupa and Claudiu Komartin, "Trees at Three"	282
Tiago Patrício, "The End of Autumn in Dolní Počernice, Prague 9"	283
Marcela Sulak, "The Love-Life of Objects"	285
NOTES ON THE POEMS	288
TRANSLATORS	333
PRAGUE POETRY MAP	338
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	342

Preface

What makes a city inspiring? What combination of historic, political, sociological, architectural, geographic and meteorological elements compels us to write? In the 20th century alone, a number of key literary movements were centered in cities: New York in the 1950s and 1960s, Paris in the 1920s, London in the first decade of the century, for example. But few cities have attracted poets so steadily, from such a diversity of cultures as Prague. The city has been the central – if unlikely – subject of major poets from around the world for more than a century. *From a Terrace in Prague* gathers 120 poems from 16 languages¹ written between 1888 and 2010 that describe Prague or an event that took place here. More than a poetry anthology, this book is the record of one city and the range of poetry it has inspired. In the poems collected here, the singular subject of Prague takes many forms: confidant, lover, relic, setting, object of praise, active force and mere backdrop. This collection allows us to read how literary movements, political beliefs and historic events affected poets' descriptions of Prague, revealing both poetry's metamorphic nature and the indelible elements of the city that have found their way into words.

The editorial focus of this collection has been put primarily on poets from beyond the borders of the Czech Republic to elucidate the number of international poets who have visited or written about Prague. The poems translated here from Czech only hint at the rich tradition of Prague poetry by those native to the city. One might question the accuracy of a description of Prague from a poet who has been here only temporarily or in some cases not at all. Perhaps there is an essence of Prague, a spirit that is unchanging and that can be more or less accurately captured in poetry. But historical, social and literary forces change the tools and vocabulary poets have at their disposal for description and therefore, where impressions and similes are concerned, accuracy is always relative. Each poem describes the city from a particular point of view, a particular terrace, so to speak, some of which are similar, some less so.

Walking through Prague with these poems in mind, one has an indelible awareness of the lineage of poetry written in and about these streets and buildings, many of which have remained virtually unchanged for centuries. Therein lies the startling tension of Prague, and its power to inspire: The city's rulers, inhabitants and visitors have changed drastically, while its physical nature has remained much the same. This modern city with ancient architecture affords a glimpse into time. How a poet interprets what he or she sees there varies according to history and cultural context. Some see intimations of death like Guillaume Apollinaire; some see the dialectic in action like Josef Hora; some see art and creation like Marcela

1 Arabic, Chinese, Czech, English, Finnish, French, German, Japanese, Mongolian, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Spanish, Turkish and Ukrainian

Sulak and Larry Levis; some see tragedy and sacrifice like Jaroslav Seifert and Miroslav Holub; some, like Robert Lowell and Allen Ginsberg, see themselves.

From a Terrace in Prague has been designed for maximum utility. This collection is intended as a poetic guidebook to the city of Prague for those who live on both sides of its borders. The poems included here illustrate the main points of the stylistic evolution outlined in "A Short History of Prague Poetry" after this preface. The time span covered, from 1888 to 2010, reaches back to Prague poems written just before the modern period and brings the critical narrative to the present, as the city's attraction for poets is very much ongoing. The profusion of poems in the anthology's final section, which covers the two decades since the Velvet Revolution, reflects the important change in the history of Czechoslovakia and of Prague poetry wrought by the fall of communism and the resulting flood of foreign poets to the country. The poems are generally arranged chronologically according to the date of publication, but some poems have been rearranged to coincide with the events they address rather than the year in which they were published.² In the case of close proximity of publication dates and subject matter, the poems are grouped thematically. Additionally, when poets have written more than one Prague poem in different decades, these have been grouped according to the earliest poem. It is assumed that readers may not be familiar with all the cultural and geographic allusions found here, and therefore a section of notes follows the poems. To present a more complete picture of Prague as a city of poetry, a map detailing the settings of the poems and photographs of the settings depicted in those poems have been included.

The international scope of this collection posed specific challenges, as the arduous, imperfect art of translation necessitates intense editorial acumen and a team of collaborators. This book would not exist without the help and patience of all the translators involved. The sheer diversity of cultures, languages and poetries included here was daunting, and the difficulty of finding and translating these poems became only more apparent as time went on and new poems were discovered in more "exotic" languages, suggesting other poems hidden between the covers of unknown books. An effort has been made in these translations to stay as close as possible to the form of the original poem, with exceptions in cases where fidelity to rhyme, for example, would result in a more obscure version in English. Where native speakers who were willing and able to translate into English were unavailable, translations were made through Czech. Though this situation is not ideal, it proved necessary with Mongolian poet Byambin Rinchen and Iraqi poet Muhammad Mahdi Al-Jawahiri. It is hoped that

2 "The Park in 1957 in Prague" by Věra Weislitzová, for example, has been placed in the section covering the period between 1940 and 1959 although it was published in 1994. Similarly, Kamil Bouška's "The Velvet Revolution" has been placed at the start of the section beginning in 1990, although the poem was published two decades later.

each poem's essence, if not its physical attributes, has been carried across.

Several poets featured in this collection never actually visited Prague, and a number of great poets did visit but unfortunately never wrote about the city. The Nobel Prize-winning Polish poet Czesław Miłosz visited Prague in 1931, 1950 and 1990, and referred to the city in his autobiography as "My first western European city."³ The Welsh poet Dylan Thomas came to Prague in 1949 as a guest of the Czechoslovak Writers' Union. Thomas had several meetings with Czech poets, including the elusive Vladimír Holan, whom he met at a party. While no poem remains to record Thomas' visit, several stories about the poet's time in Prague exist. Crossing Charles Bridge one day with his translator, an exasperated Thomas climbed the stone railing and threatened to throw himself into the Vltava if the translator didn't stop irritating him. Thomas also reportedly wrote a poem comparing the Czechoslovak Writers' Union to a cage, but tore it up, saying he did not want his words exploited.⁴ The American poet Frank O'Hara visited Prague briefly in the fall of 1963 after a professional trip to Amsterdam, where he oversaw the installation of an exhibition of the work of Franz Kline at the Stedelijk Museum.⁵ Unfortunately, no written record of his visit to Prague exists.⁶

Complete objectivity is impossible in poetry, but taken as a whole, *From a Terrace in Prague* is a more objective description of Prague than any single poem. What is presented here is a city that is inviting, foreboding, violent, peaceful, energetic, somnolent, captive, free, beautiful, ugly, gothic, romantic and above all inspiring. May it stay that way. May this collection offer a vibrant record of contemporary and historic attempts to capture the spirit of Prague through various methods of poetry, and may it be a guide for future poets – not a map of the way forward but a testimony that no map is possible, or necessary.

Stephan B. Delbos
Smíchov, February 2011

3 Czesław Miłosz, *Rodna Europa*, trans. Helena Stachová (Prague: Votobia 1997).

4 Andrew Lycett, *Dylan Thomas: A New Life* (London: Phoenix, 2004) 311.

5 Brad Gooch, *City Poet: The Life and Times of Frank O'Hara* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993) 410.

6 In fact *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*, edited by Donald Allen, and *City Poet* by Brad Gooch disagree as to the exact date of O'Hara's visit to Prague. The former suggests O'Hara was in Prague when President Kennedy was assassinated November 22, 1963, and the latter claims the poet arrived in the city November 24.