

## **Syllabus: Czech Literature in the Central European Cultural Context**

**Western Michigan University  
Prague Summer Program  
Prof. Petr A. Bilek, Charles University, Prague  
Monday, Wednesday, and Friday afternoons**

**The course will cover the development of Czech and Central European literature in the modern era. As a central issue, it will focus on the notion of identity and its transformations through the 20th century historical context:**

- 1) The notion of the collective national identity in the 19th century and its shifts into local, ethical, or religious modifications (National Revival writings, Jirasek, Neruda, Meyrink);
- 2) The appearance of "men without qualities" after the turn of the century as a specific product of Central European modernism (Kafka, Hasek);
- 3) The era of building up the state: identification with a state-based society construct (Capek);
- 4) Void identity as an enforced totalitarian effect: Holocaust writings and texts responding to the first phase of building up Communism (Klima, Pavel, Margolius-Kovaly);
- 5) Artificial identity as a social/cultural product (Havel, Hrabal, Kundera);
- 6) Postmodern identity as a palimpsest-like construct (Hodrova, Topol, Ajvaz).

**The course will also cover the following issues:**

- 1) The image of the city perceived as a metaphor of modern human existence, aspects of mimesis vs. diegesis dilemma, especially the paradigm shift from overwhelming representation of the actual world to recognized arbitrariness of a fictional world;
- 2) The notion of writing as artifice, literariness, and textuality;
- 3) The challenge of traditional genre and narrative structure expectations, the role of irony and textual games and plays.

**Walking tours to the places connected with the literature and cultural issues in Prague mean an integral part of the course.**

**All readings and discussion will be conducted in English.**

**Reading: approximately 200 pages per week**

**Grading:**

- 1) Attendance and class participation [70%]: includes brief written responses (bullet points) to all the discussed texts, submitted for the beginning of discussion.
- 2) Final paper [30%]: Personal essay due on the last Wednesday of the Program.

## **Tentative Program:**

### **Week 1:**

#### **I. Collective pattern of the National identity as the 19th century standard:**

##### **Reading:**

Extracts from the Czech revival ideological writings (in *The Course Pack*)

Ján Kollár: The Prelude to *The Daughter of Slavs* (in *The Course Pack*)

Alois Jirásek: (from) *Old Czech Legends* (in *The Course Pack*)

#### **II. Shift of the collective national paradigm to the notions of local belonging in the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century:**

##### **Reading:**

Božena Němcová: Four Seasons (in *The Course Pack*)

Jan Neruda: At the Three Lillies, How Mr. Vorel Broke in His Meerschaum (in *The Course Pack*)

Gustav Meyrink: GM, The First Vision (in *The Course Pack*)

##### **Walking Tour: I. Vysehrad National Cemetery and Spatial Re-construction of the Time of the Origin**

### **Week 2**

#### **Arrival of the modern era and its consequences: The crisis of collective belonging.**

#### **Central European Modernism:**

##### **Reading:**

Gustav Meyrink: *The Golem*

Franz Kafka: Selected short stories: Passers-by, On the Tram, The Judgment, The Metamorphosis, In the Penal Colony, The New Advocate, An Old Manuscript, The Great Wall of China, The City Coat of Arms, A Hunger Artist (in Franz Kafka: *Collected Short Stories*)

Franz Kafka: *The Trial*

##### **Walking Tour: II. The Old Town Square area as a place for Modernistic symbolism**

### **Week 3**

#### **The 1920s and 1930s: The tension between individuality and temptation to build up artificial collective social constructs:**

##### **Reading:**

Karel Čapek: The Footprint, Footprints, Elegy (in *The Course Pack*)

Jaroslav Hašek: (from) *The Good Soldier Švejk* (in *The Course Pack*)

#### **Holocaust and Communist takeover as new enforcements of collective identity in the 1940s and 1950s:**

##### **Reading:**

Ivan Klima: Miriam (in *The Course Pack*)

Ota Pavel: A Race through Prague (in *The Course Pack*)

Heda Margolius-Kovaly: (from) *Under a Cruel Star* (in *The Course Pack*)

##### **Walking Tour: III. Prague monuments as ideological re-interpretations of history: St. Wenceslas, Žižka's Monument and the site of former Stalin's Monument**

#### Week 4

#### **Deconstructing Communism from the Inside and from the Outside (the 1970s and 1980s):**

**Reading:** Vaclav Havel: *Audience* (in *The Course Pack*)

Bohumil Hrabal: *Too Loud a Solitude*

Milan Kundera: *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*

#### **Excitement and confusion of living in a post-totalitarian society: The last challenge of the notion of identity**

**Reading:** Bohumil Hrabal: *The Magic Flute* (in *The Course Pack*)

Daniela Hodrova: *I See a Great City* (in *The Course Pack*)

Jachym Topol: *A Trip to the Train Station* (in *The Course Pack*)

Michal Ajvaz: *The Beetle* (in *The Course Pack*)

#### **Walking Tour IV: Olsanske Municipal Cemeteries and the New Jewish Cemetery: Traces of individuality within the collective eternal space**

**Following books should be obtained by students and, if possible, read in advance.**

**Any edition is O.K.:**

Gustav Meyrink: *The Golem*

Franz Kafka: *The Trial*

Franz Kafka: *Collected Short Stories*

Bohumil Hrabal: *Too Loud a Solitude*

Milan Kundera: *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*

**Petr A. Bilek** (born 1962) is the chair of the Department of Czech and Comparative Literature, Charles University, Prague. He has published extensively on contemporary Czech literature in the 1990s, including two books on modern Czech poetry („*Generace osamělých běžců*“ and *Stavitelé křídel*, both in 1991). In recent years, he has focused more on literary theory. As a result, his new book on interpretation theories of modern narratives (*Hledání jazyka interpretace: k modernímu prozaickému textu*) appeared in 2003 (re-printed in 2007). His recent publications also include essays on Milan Kundera in the context of contemporary Czech literature and in the context of Central European modernism (*Brown Slavic Contributions*, Vol. XI. and XIII., *Kosmas* 17, 2003, No. 1), on the image of the City of Prague in literature (*Style* 40, 2006, No. 3) and on contemporary Czech poetry (*New Orleans Revue* 26, 2000, , No. 1-2).