

PENGUIN CENTRAL EUROPEAN CLASSICS

Thomas Bernhard: *Old Masters*

Karel Čapek: *War with the Newts*

E.M. Cioran: *A Short History of Decay*

György Faludy: *My Happy Days in Hell*

Gyula Krúdy: *Life is a Dream*

Czesław Miłosz: *Proud to be a Mammal*

Sławomir Mrozek: *The Elephant*

Ota Pavel: *How I Came to Know Fish*

Gregor von Rezzori: *The Snows of Yesteryear*

Josef Škvorecký: *The Cowards*

‘Without Bach, God would be a completely second-rate figure’

Emil Cioran

These books all come from a culture which has suffered hideously throughout much of the twentieth century – it has been invaded, despoiled and mutilated in a way which it is hard for outsiders to appreciate. In an essay written on the tenth anniversary of the Hiroshima bombing (and reproduced in **Proud to Be a Mammal**), Czesław Miłosz looked back in puzzlement that he had not at the time given such an event ‘the attention it deserved’, because he had been preoccupied by the recent Nazi destruction of the entire city of Warsaw, using merely ordinary dynamite: a once great city being reduced to a surviving population of ‘only isolated men, leading the lives of hunted animals’. The result of such extremity was the unwilling creation of a uniquely powerful literature – with so many regimes wishing to control or suppress words it is almost unsurprising that words should take on such weight. Words could be used as a consolation, a warning or a weapon.

The entire region had begun the century in a spirit of confidence and prosperity, as captured in Gyula Krúdy's stories in **Life is a Dream**, tales of the pleasure of life in a greedy and hedonistic Budapest. Krúdy himself fully endorsed what he wrote about, leading a chaotic existence fuelled by sex, gambling and alcohol which left him, despite his great success as a writer, often completely broke. By the time he died in 1933 Krúdy's stories could only be viewed with bitter regret – the First World War had destroyed the entire Habsburg Empire, dismembering it into a mass of new, bitterly antagonistic, hyper-national little countries. What had once been a single if sometimes acrimonious culture had been broken apart by revolution, pogroms and economical failure. For most of Central Europe something approaching normality would only be found again after 1989.

This lost world is beautifully evoked in Gregor von Rezzori's **The Snows of Yesteryear**, a baffled lament for a time when, under the protection of the Empire, it was possible for numerous peoples to just about get along. Born and raised in the remote Habsburg region of Bukovina, von Rezzori lived in a world where Germans, Romanians, Hungarians, Jews, Gypsies, Ruthenes and Ukrainians all uneasily rubbed along – with different languages, religions, clothing and food, but able to cooperate, albeit with high levels of mutual contempt. The twentieth century destroyed this as its inhabitants were one by one murdered or expelled. Progressively Bukovina became part of Romania, then of the Soviet Union and then of Ukraine. Von Rezzori himself stopped being a Habsburg citizen, became a Romanian citizen, then a Soviet citizen, then became stateless, before finally becoming an Austrian citizen living in Italy. He enchantingly describes his remote childhood home, trampled over by its restless new Romanian owners while he was growing up. He sadly revisits it in old age at the end of the book, when the only inhabitants remaining are Ukrainians with almost no memory or, indeed, contact with the old culture of the region.

For many nationalists the break up of the Habsburg Empire had been an exciting time and despite the brief civil wars and protracted economic collapse there had been a hope for positive change – nowhere more than in Prague where an independent Czechoslovakia had been declared in 1918 as the First World War was coming to an end and the bitter survivors of the Habsburg armies came home. At the heart of this excitement was Karel Čapek, a brilliant playwright, novelist, gardener and journalist

who, with his brother Josef, a painter and novelist, turned out much of what was most attractive about the new state, a haven of relatively democratic government in an increasingly brutal region. Čapek is today remembered above all for the play *Rossum's Universal Robots* which introduced the word 'robot' to the world, for the play *The Makropoulos Case* (which another Czechoslovak genius Leoš Janaček turned into his last completed opera) and for **War with the Newts**, a dystopian satire which manages to be both funny and chilling at the same time.

War with the Newts is a parallel 'what if...' history of the world in which, on a remote island, a race of large and intelligent newts are discovered. Throughout the nineteenth century these newts are exploited in freak-shows, treated as a joke, but also taught how to speak like humans. The ability of the newts to work underwater means that they spearhead a new industrial revolution, living in vast cities at the bottom of the sea, working tirelessly in the mines that make humans rich. Eventually the newts proclaim an end to their servitude and, to give themselves 'living space', start destroying and submerging the land, which humans are by now helpless to prevent. The newts are, of course, the Nazis, but the satire is really directed more generally at authoritarians in all their forms and is expressed in newspaper parodies, fake academic documents and so on, the whole book being a wonderful sort of circus-act. Čapek lived long enough to see the Munich Agreement transfer Czech borderlands to Nazi Germany but died in the short interval before the Nazis absorbed the rest of the Czech state. His brother died in Bergen-Belsen at the end of the War.

Events moved so quickly across the whole of Central Europe that those writers who survived could only look back on the mounting disasters with disbelief. György Faludy's marvellous autobiography (in some respects perhaps a 'dramatized memoir') **My Happy Days in Hell** recounts the author's life from the daft idyll of feudal old Hungary with its demented noblemen and grovelling Slovak peasants through the devastation of Hungary in 1918-20 and the crypto-Fascist regime of the Habsburg 'Regent' Admiral Horthy, to collusion with the Nazis, invasion by the Red Army, the total destruction of Budapest in late 1944 and, after an uneasy interval, the imposition of Communist rule. Faludy was admittedly able to enjoy the long view, dying as he did just short of his ninety-sixth birthday in 2006, but by the time he was forty years old he had been a celebrated poet, an exile in France, an exile in North Africa, a

volunteer in the US Army, a journalist in the ruins of post-1945 Hungary and an inmate in a Communist labour camp. This sort of switchback-ride is what makes **My Happy Days in Hell** such an enchanting, curious and distressing book. In one little scene in Paris in the summer of 1940 Faludy describes lying in bed while his friends shout at him that to everyone's surprise and horror the Germans have broken through, Nazism has won and they must flee for their lives. To get him out of bed they have to tip the mattress onto the cold floor and those few, uncomprehending extra milliseconds of sleep seem a precious and valuable attempt to fend off just for one moment the relentless march of events. Faludy's account of his eventual imprisonment by the Communists is one of the great Cold War testimonies – shocking, but curiously funny.

The wish to be left alone haunts many Central European writers – the yearning for a few more minutes sleep. This was true in even the most extreme circumstances: Josef Škvorecký's exhilarating novel **The Cowards** is about many things, but at its heart lies a group of Czech teenagers who just wish to play in their jazz-band but who are being constantly thwarted by giant world historical events, such as the Nazis and Soviets battling each other through the streets. The book's plea on behalf of its characters to be allowed by history *not* to be heroic, *not* to strike poses and *not* to engage in any struggle whatsoever is a profoundly cheering and subversive one – which ensured the book's immediate banning by the Communist authorities. In the collective, harsh atmosphere of the period nothing could be more subversive than a jazz-trumpeter who has just emerged from the camps being viewed as a worry by his fellow band members simply because his trumpet-playing might have been adversely affected by his experiences, or the narrator's being constantly distracted from the revolutionary events swirling around him by cravings for sex and music. Škvorecký eventually fled to the West and became for the remainder of the Cold War a beacon for Central European culture, as writer, journalist and publisher.

A fellow Czech from the same generation as Škvorecký, the sports journalist Ota Pavel, had a brief and melancholy life, working for both newspapers and radio, obsessed with fishing and with ice-hockey, but suffering from severe mental illness before finally dying in Prague aged forty-two in 1973. It was at the end of his life that his marvellous story sequence **How I Came to Know Fish** was written. As always in

Central Europe it tries to be about private life – the intimate pleasures of fishing and poaching – but ends up being about politics, as the Nazis take over Czechoslovakia, the author’s father and brothers are taken off to camps and young Ota has to use his skills to keep his mother and himself alive. Among so many other things **How I Came to Know Fish** is a hilarious fictionalized portrait of Pavel’s father – a Jewish vacuum-cleaner and refrigerator salesman and his endless, generally catastrophic schemes for making quick money – and a matchless evocation of the dream-like wooded countryside outside Prague.

Throughout much of the Cold War it was probably Czesław Miłosz who was one of the greatest voices of Central Europe. Awarded the Nobel Prize in 1980, Miłosz wrote his powerful analysis of intellectual prostration in the face of Stalinism, *The Captive Mind*, in 1953 and ever since, for many years in exile in California, he used essays, memoirs and poetry to create a parallel, non-Communist world based on humanism and faith. The essays and extracts in **Proud to be a Mammal** include his extraordinary account of life in Nazi-ruled central Poland, ‘the experimental laboratory’, and beautiful, hopeful meditations on the nature of human life.

Most of the writers in this series found themselves for racial, political or moral reasons readily in opposition to the forces that ripped Europe apart, whether Nazi or Soviet. The mesmerizing figure of E.M. (Emil) Cioran is an exception. Growing up and being educated in newly Romanian-ruled Transylvania, Bucharest and Berlin, Cioran became enamoured of Fascism in all its varieties, with an enthusiasm that culminated in endorsing the repulsive Iron Guard. Having moved to Paris in the late 1930s, Cioran excitedly visited Romania during the war at the height of the Iron Guards’ anti-semitic violence and just before they were disposed of in a coup. Cioran never went to Romania again, living in Paris and writing his extraordinary sequence of reflections and ideas, beginning in 1949 with **A Short History of Decay** and continuing with such books as *The Temptation to Exist* and *The New Gods*. **A Short History of Decay** puts the reader at the terrible heart of the twentieth century – a book which sums up in so many ways the ‘burnt’ minds of its intellectual survivors. Having been complicit and face to face with atrocities of a seemingly impossible kind, Cioran rails brilliantly and often very wittily against the dreadful power of history and ideas and the utter damage caused by ‘belief’, proposing instead humankind’s final shelter

in Doubt and Sloth (‘vices nobler than all virtues’) and a bristling aversion to any religious or political systems, such systems always ending in mass killing. **A Short History of Decay** is an intellectual ghost-train ride of an extraordinary kind.

For many who crawled from the disaster of 1945, Communism seemed a legitimate corrective to Nazism: Central Europe was mainly liberated by the Soviet Union, Communism was the political strand most hated by the Nazis and for everyone who puzzled as to why the countries of Central Europe had so failed in the 1930s it offered a new development model: mass mobilization and heavy industry would end poverty and weakness. This hope was rapidly shaken to pieces by wave after wave of persecution, chicanery and incompetence. Sławomir Mrożek was born in southern Poland in 1930 and grew up a convinced Communist who nonetheless found himself pushed into opposition by the absolute claims of the authorities. He went on to become a major playwright (creator of absurdist works such as *The Police* and *Tango*), but he will always be associated with his wonderful set of very short fables illustrated by Daniel Mróz: **The Elephant** (1957), which brings to life with surprising good humour the second-guessing bureaucratic chaos of the People’s Republic of Poland. No other book gives a better sense of the day-to-day strangeness of living in a closed-for-repairs utopia.

Thomas Bernhard’s short novel **Old Masters** ends the series. Bernhard, for reasons that were never entirely clear, was filled with an almost pathological hatred of his native Austria (a ‘mindless cultural sewer’) and from the late 1960s to his early death in 1989 poured out invective in a series of plays and novels. The novels (including *Gargoyles*, *Yes*, *Extinction* and the startling micro-stories *The Voice Imitator*) are utterly addictive and snarl like no others. **Old Masters** is a highly entertaining story about two men, one an elderly and distinguished musicologist, who meet in the great art museum in Vienna and mull over the overwhelming artistic failings of the heart of Central Europe, reducing the entire Habsburg inheritance to a mountain of debilitating *Kitsch*. Much like Cioran, Bernhard saw the terrible lies, compromises and polite amnesia of Central Europe as something which so poisoned the culture as to make it effectively at an end. Bernhard died just before the Berlin Wall came down and the weird limbo into which Central Europe had fallen came to an end, but it is unlikely that he would have allowed himself to be impressed.

One startling change since the fall of Communism is that books which had once meant so much suddenly meant less – the acts of witness in writers such as Miłosz or Faludy were messages from a distant world behind the Iron Curtain, a place that could often only be visited under escort and in which outsiders could only be viewed with anxiety and suspicion. When Communist rule ended and this great weight mysteriously vanished, almost overnight the books and writers associated with that time suddenly found themselves without an audience. *Central European Classics* is designed to transform this wildly disparate group of authors – disparate in form, experience, political views – from their previous roles as guardians of an oppressed, violated or ruined culture into the more simple one of simply being great, fascinating writers.