Starting from Katie, Ending with the Joke

Top 10 Czech-Literature Must-Reads

Why to Read (Czech) Literature?

- Central European space
- Psychological depth + esthetic pleasure
- Practising the language
- Acquiring the experience you cannot possibly get
- Features
  - Intersection of influences + folk origins
  - Development in revolutions
  - Importance of the national language
  - Dealing with problematic issues from the past (post-1945 history)

Top 10: Pretending to Be Objective…

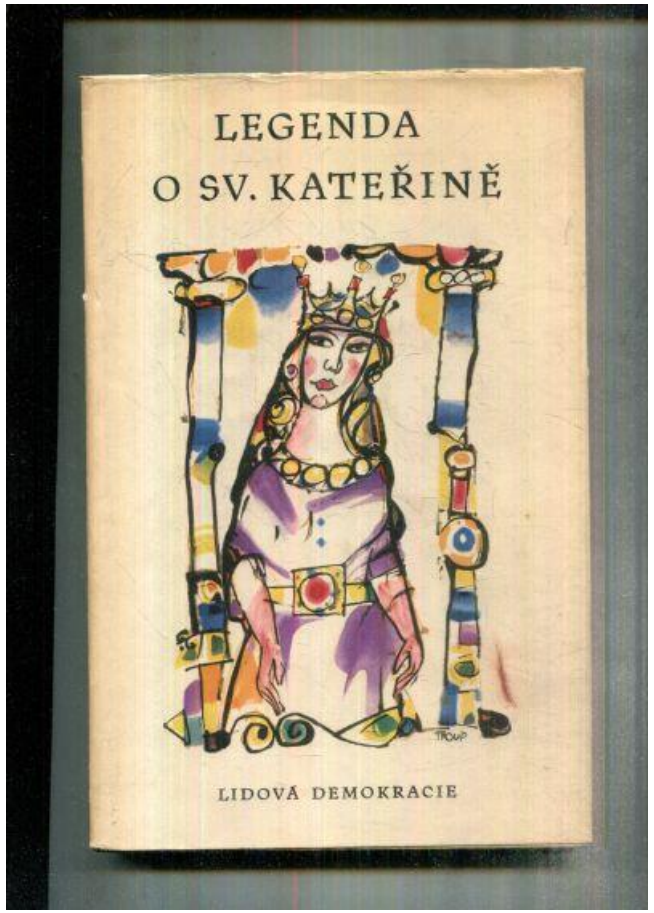
- *Legenda o svaté Kateřině* (The Legend of Saint Catherine; c. 1375)
- Jan Ámos Komenský: *Labyrint světa a ráj srdce* (The Labyrinth of the World and the Paradise of the Heart; 1631/1663)
- Karel Hynek Mácha: *Máj* (May; 1836)
- Karel Jaromír Erben: *Kytice* (A Bouquet of Folk Tales; 1853)
- Božena Němcová: *Babička* (The Granny; 1855)
- Petr Bezruč: *Slezské písně* (Silesian Songs; 1909/1928)
- Karel Čapek: *R. U. R.* (R. U. R.; 1920)
- Jaroslav Hašek: Dobrý voják Švejk (The Good Soldier Švejk, 1921–23)
- Jaroslav Seifert: *Píseň o Viktorce* (A Song of Vicky; 1950)
- Milan Kundera: *Žert* (The Joke; 1967)

St Catherine: Sensual Spirituality

- The reign of Charles IV
- Christianity + chivalry + decadence of the approaching fall
- Whipping scene: a thrilling experience
- Colour symbolism

Colour	Meaning	Body Part
White	Purity	Cheeks
Red	Love	Blood
Green	Conversion	Cheeks in shame
Blue	Hope	Bruises
Golden	Sanctification	Hair
Black	Death	Dryed blood

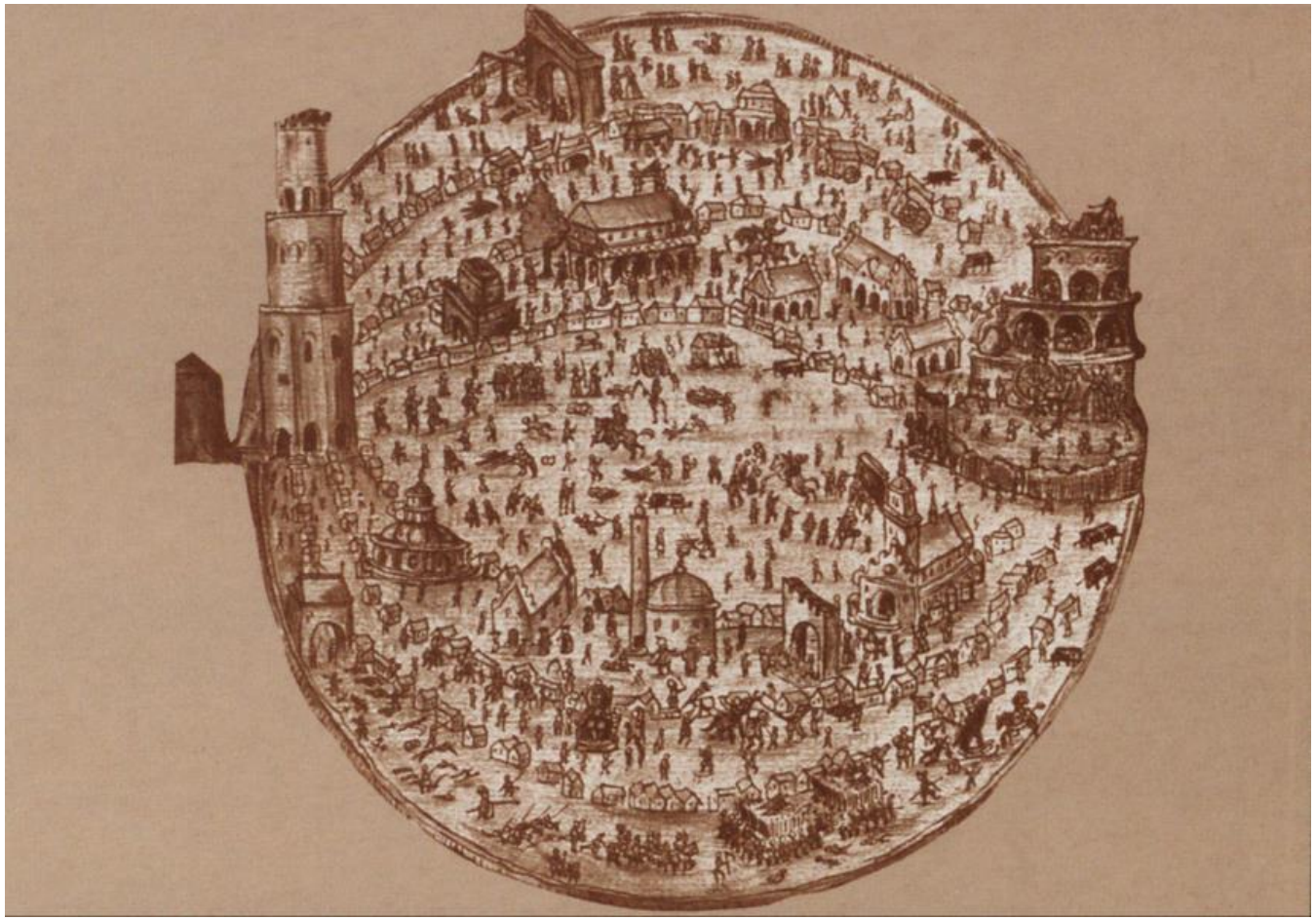
St Catherine: Sensual Spirituality

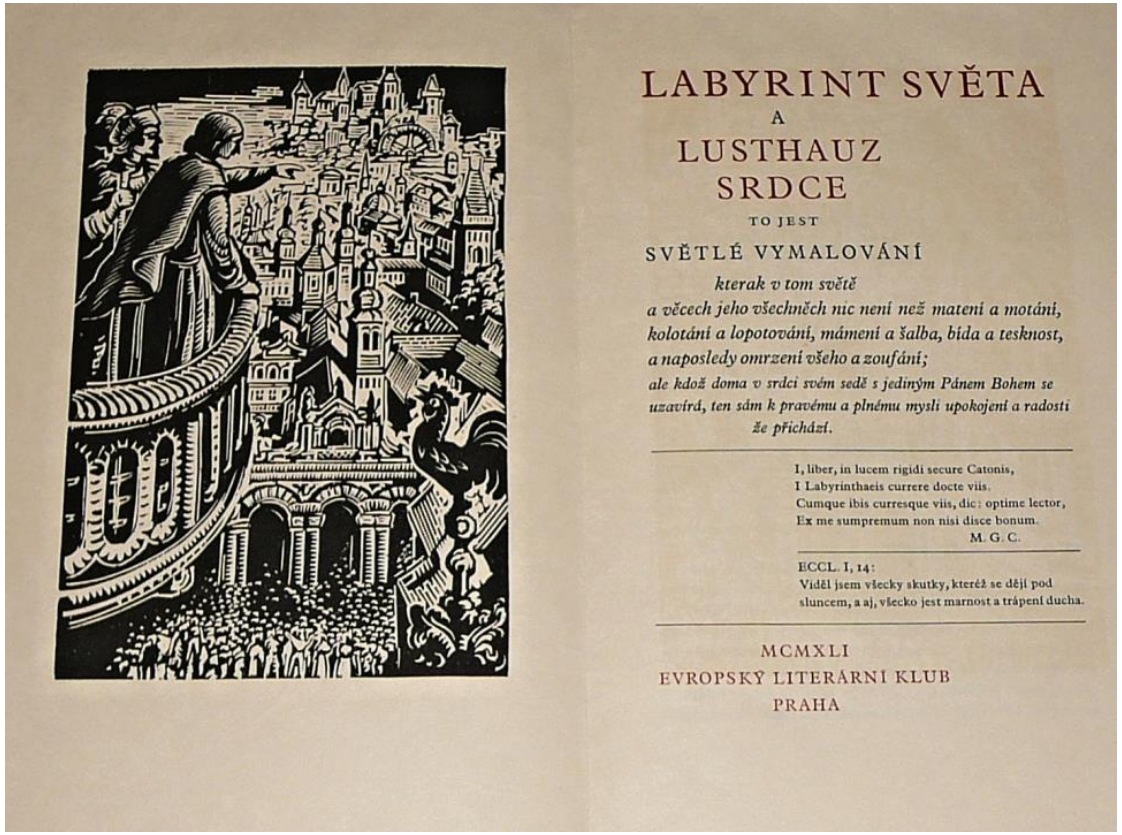


The Labyrinth: Vanity, Exuberance, and Hope

- Jan Ámos Komenský (Comenius; 1592–1670)
- An imaginary, allegory-based travelogue of life's journey
- Komenský's autobiographical features + the spirit of the era
- The Labyrinth = the World: not making any sense, deceptive
- The Heart = the Paradise: gives the World sense
- One cannot enjoy the Labyrinth without the descent into their heart
- Peak of the Czech 17th-century prose
- Complicated syntax, lexical richness, enumerations, unchained flows of words, Baroque excessivity

The Labyrinth: Vanity, Exuberance, and Hope





LABYRINT SVĚTA
A
LUSTHAUZ
SRDCE
TO JEST
SVĚTLÉ VYMALOVÁNÍ

kterak v tom světě
a věcech jeho všechněch nic není než mateni a motání,
kolotání a lopotování, mámení a šalba, bída a tesknost,
a naposledy omrzení všeho a zoufání;
ale kdož doma v srdci svém sedě s jediným Pánem Bohem se
uzavírá, ten sám k pravému a plnému mysli upokojení a radosti
že přichází.

I, liber, in lucem rigidi secure Catonis,
I Labyrinthaeis currere docte viis.
Cumque ibis curresque viis, dic: optime lector,
Ex me sumpremum non nisi disce bonum.
M. G. C.

ECCL. I, 14:
Viděl jsem všecky skutky, kteréž se dějí pod
sluncem, a aj, všecko jest marnost a trápení ducha.

MCMXLI
EVROPSKÝ LITERÁRNÍ KLUB
PRAHA

May: Metaphorical Madness

- Karel Hynek Mácha (1810–1836)
- A lyrical narrative poem of 4 chants and 2 intermezzoes
- Compared to Byron, but beating it on the ground of stylistic richness
- The love triangle of a father, son, and a girl + indifference of the May nature
- Nihilism vs. Beauty
- Rich in all possible tropes and figures, rhyme schemes, verse meters, and euphony measures
- The basis of modern Czech poetry

May: Metaphorical Madness

Late evening, on the first of May—
The twilit May—the time of love.
Meltingly called the turtle-dove,
Where rich and sweet pinewoods lay.
Whispered of love the mosses frail,
The flowering tree as sweetly lied,
The rose's fragrant sigh replied
To love-songs of the nightingale.
In shadowy woods the burnished lake
Darkly complained a secret pain,
By circling shores embraced again;
And heaven's clear sun leaned down to take
A road astray in azure deeps,
Like burning tears the lover weeps.

Byl pozdní večer – první máj –
večerní máj – byl lásky čas.
Hrdliččin zval ku lásce hlas,
kde borový zaváněl háj.
O lásce šeptal tichý mech;
květoucí strom lhal lásky žel,
svou lásku slavík růži pěl,
růžinu jevil vonný vzdech.
Jezero hladké v křovích stinných
zvučelo temně tajný bol,
břeh je objímal kol a kol;
a slunce jasná světů jiných
bloudila blankytnými pásky,
planoucí tam co slzy lásky.

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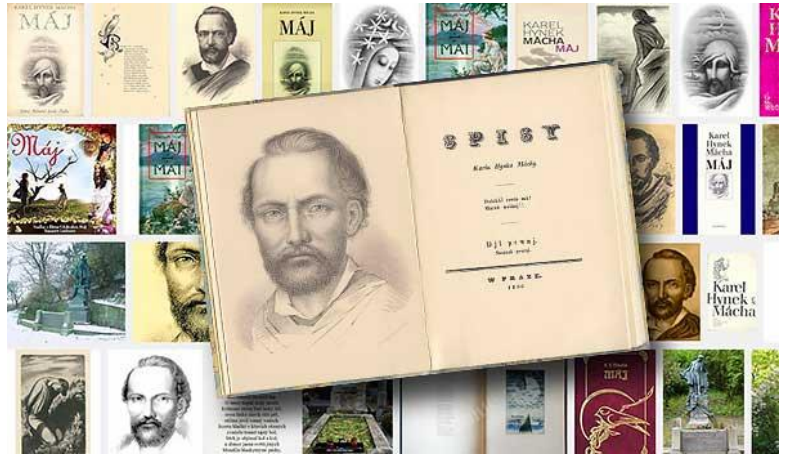
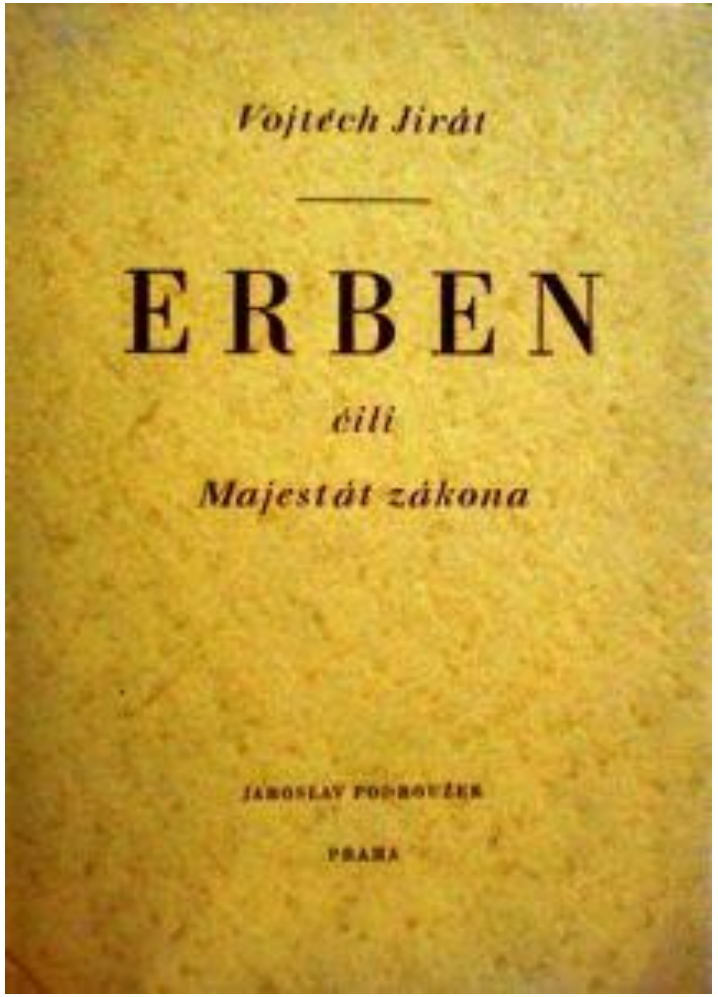


Bouquet of Folk Tales: The Law of Fate

- Karel Jaromír Erben (1811–1870)
- A book of ballads with the mirror-like compositions
- Rich in meters, strophe forms; using folklore-like repetitions, irony, and dynamic style
- Horror-movie gloom, crafted simplicity, and features of the grotesque (E. A. Poe from the countryside)
- One principle: guilt and punishment according to the fate
- Protagonists: mostly women – murderers and victims
- A sum of the primordial Slavonic mythological thought

Bouquet of Folk Tales: The Law of Fate



The Granny: Immortality not Petrified

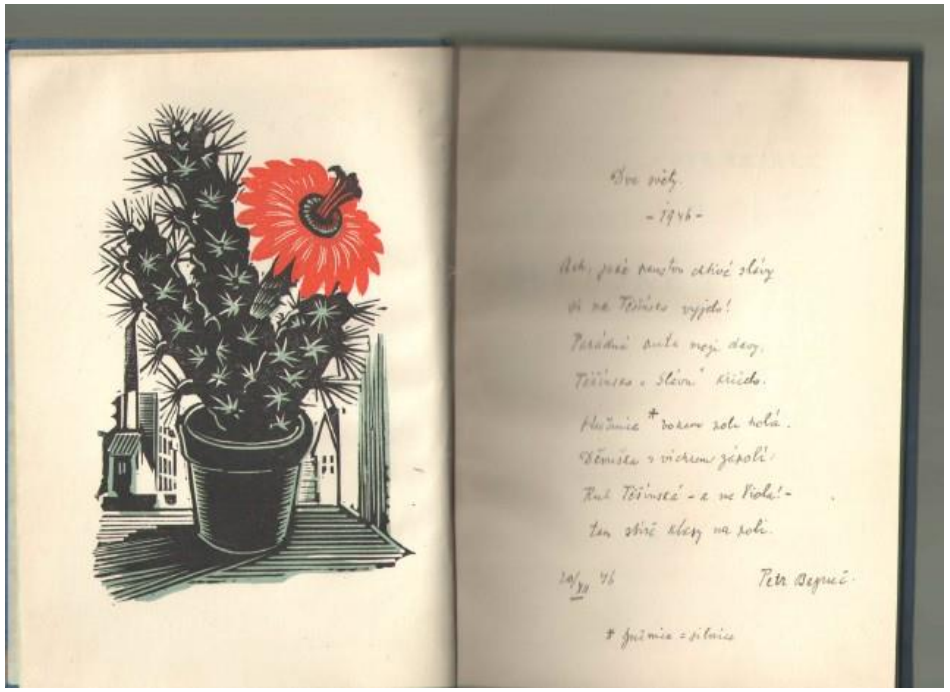
- A novella by Božena Němcová (1820–1862)
- The first distinctly feminine voice in the Czech literature
- A complex narrative with shifts in time, focusing both on the lifestyle of the Czech village, and its protagonist
- Values: wisdow, bravery, deep-rootedness, calmfulness
- Clash: The Granny vs. The Mad Vicky
- Hidden: the power of Love and its intricacies
- Quoted, filmed, painted, parodied, hated, loved, …

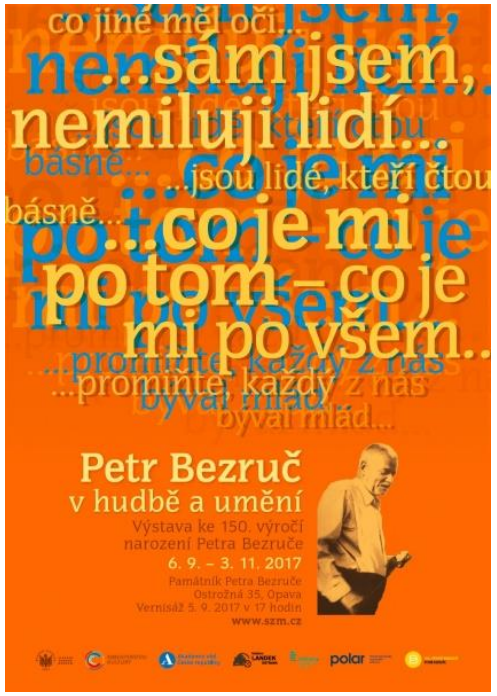
The Granny: Immortality not Petrified

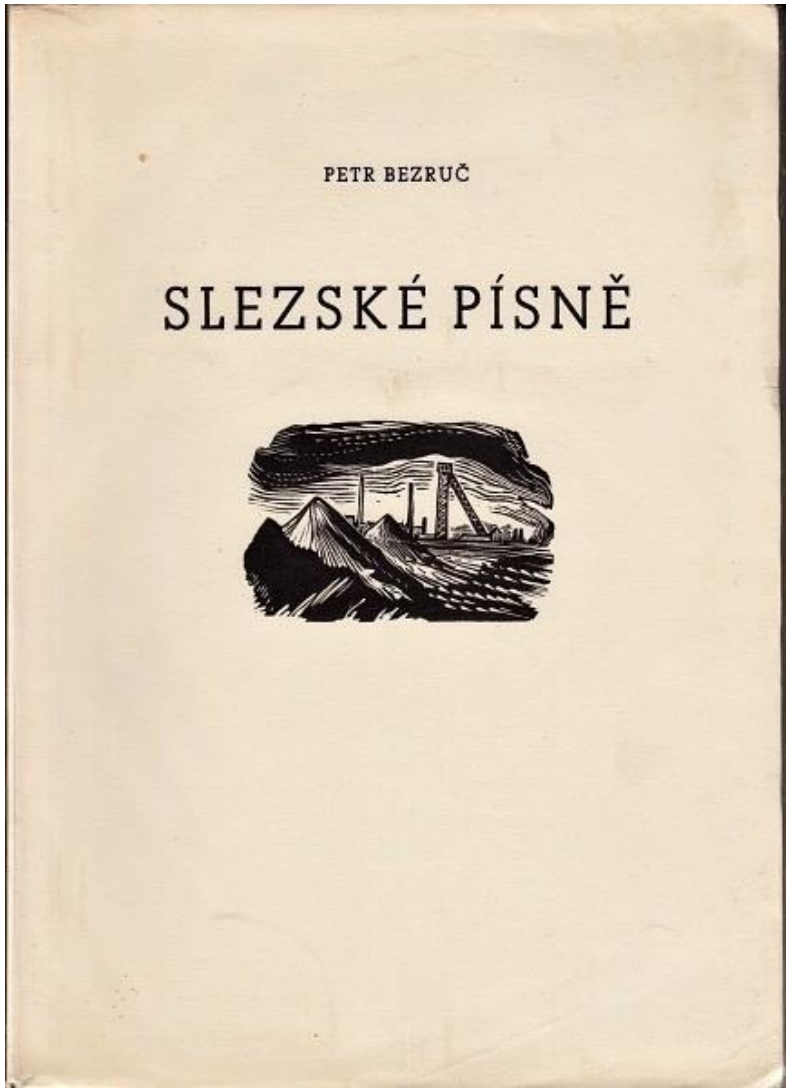
Silesian Songs: Despair Multiplied

- A collection of poems by Petr Bezruč
- Petr Bezruč = supposedly Vladimír Vašek (1867–1958)
- The core of the collection + minor contributions ex post
- National and lingustic persecution
- Hidden: unfulfilled love
- Best-known poems
  - *Maryčka Magdonova* (Magdon's Mary)
  - *Kantor Halfar* (Halfar, the Teacher)
  - *Ostrava* (The City of Ostrava)
  - *Krásné Pole* (The Village of Krásné Pole)
  - *Motýl* (A Butterfly)
  - *Červený květ* (A Red Bloom)

Silesian Songs: Despair Multiplied

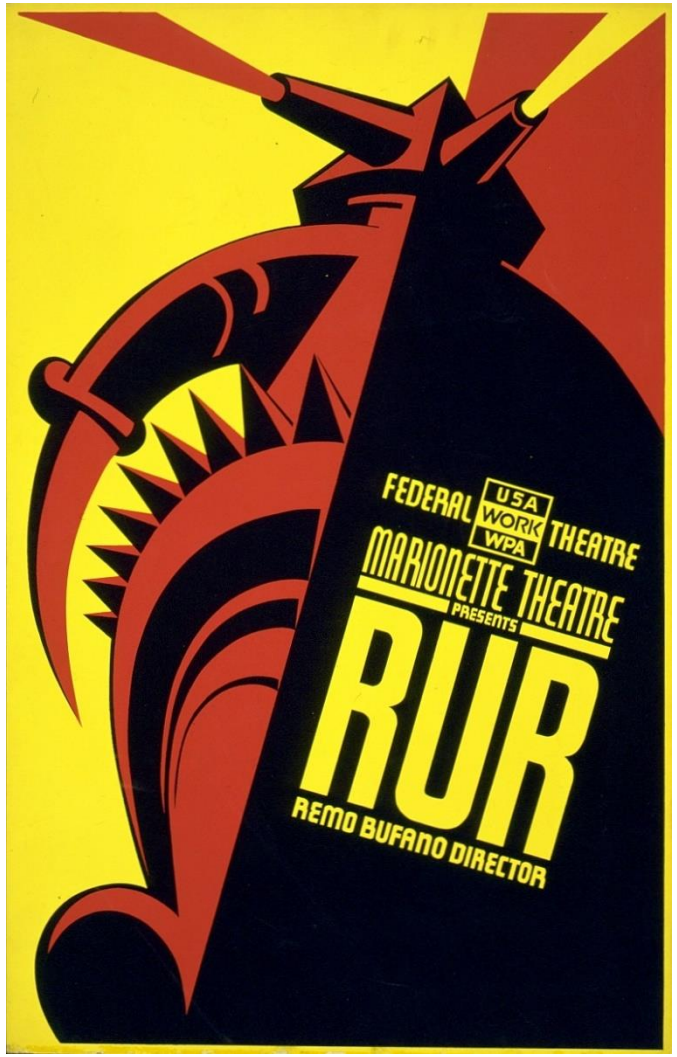






R. U. R.: The Arrival of the Robots

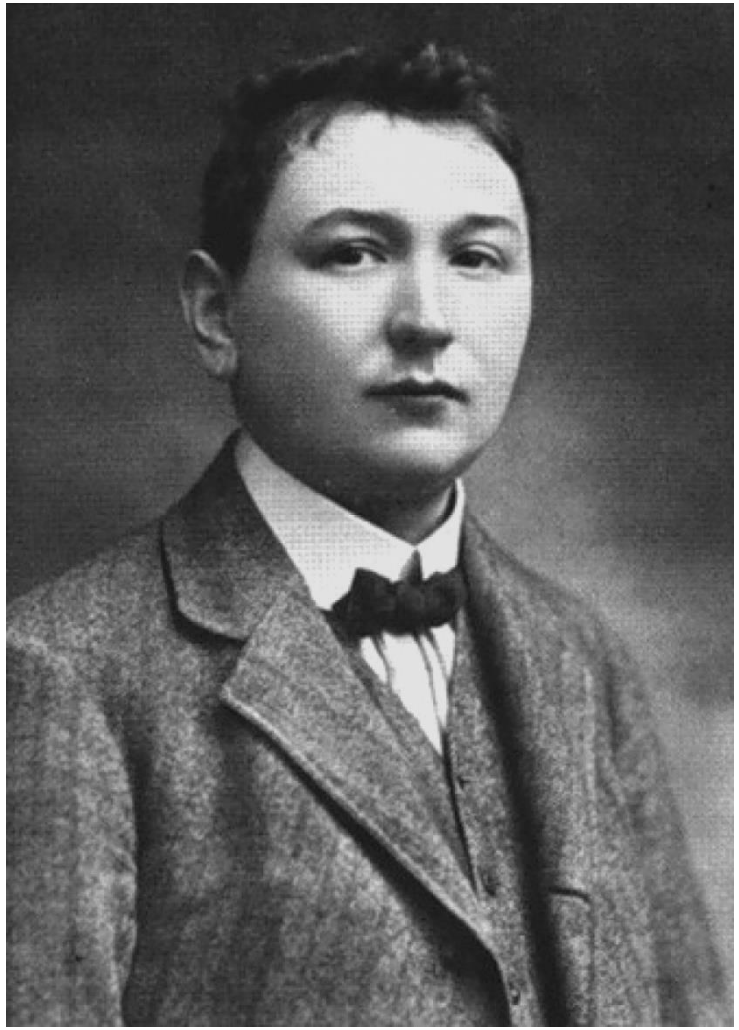
- A sci-fi theatre play by Karel Čapek (1890–1938)
- R. U. R. = Rossum's Universal Robots
- The word invented by Karel's brother, Josef
- A warning message for the humankind, but only a part of Karel Čapek's literary heritage
- Fighting against mechanization, dehumanization, absence of common sense, and life without work
- The ending: the rebirth of love



R. U. R.: The Arrival of the Robots

Švejk: An Expressionist Humanoid?

- A four-volume novel by Jaroslav Hašek (1883–1923)
- A woman-free writing, endless narratives
- No description of the protagonist – just the speaking mouth
- Competing interpretations
  - Complete idiot, humorous figure (basic)
  - Czech national character (classic)
  - Expressionist dehumanized creature (modern)
  - Sexlessness (autobiographical)

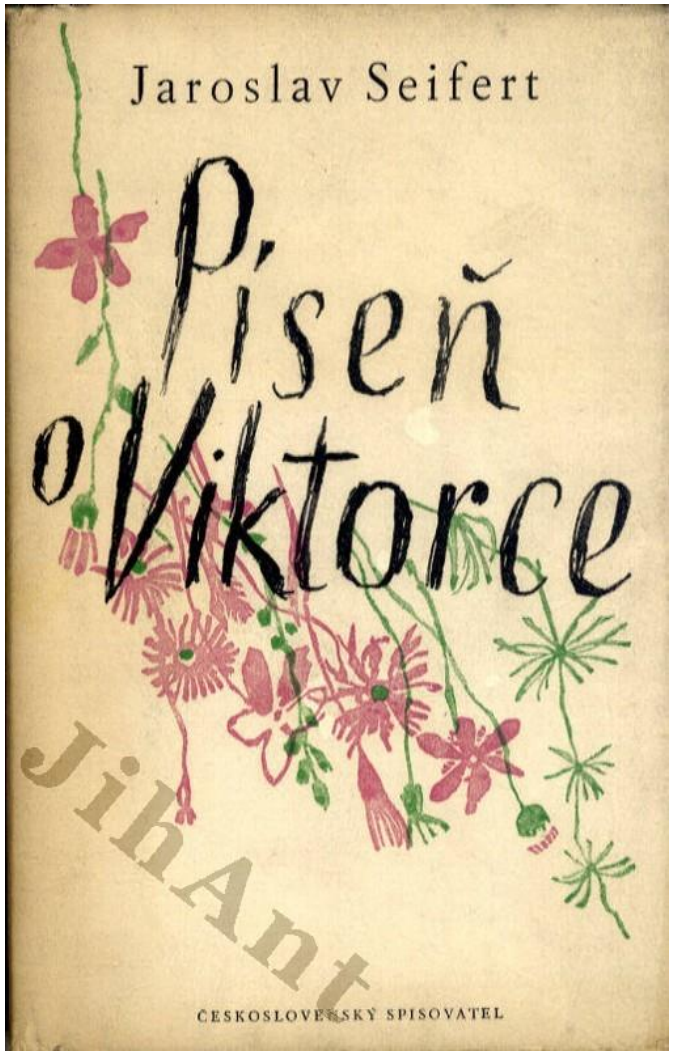


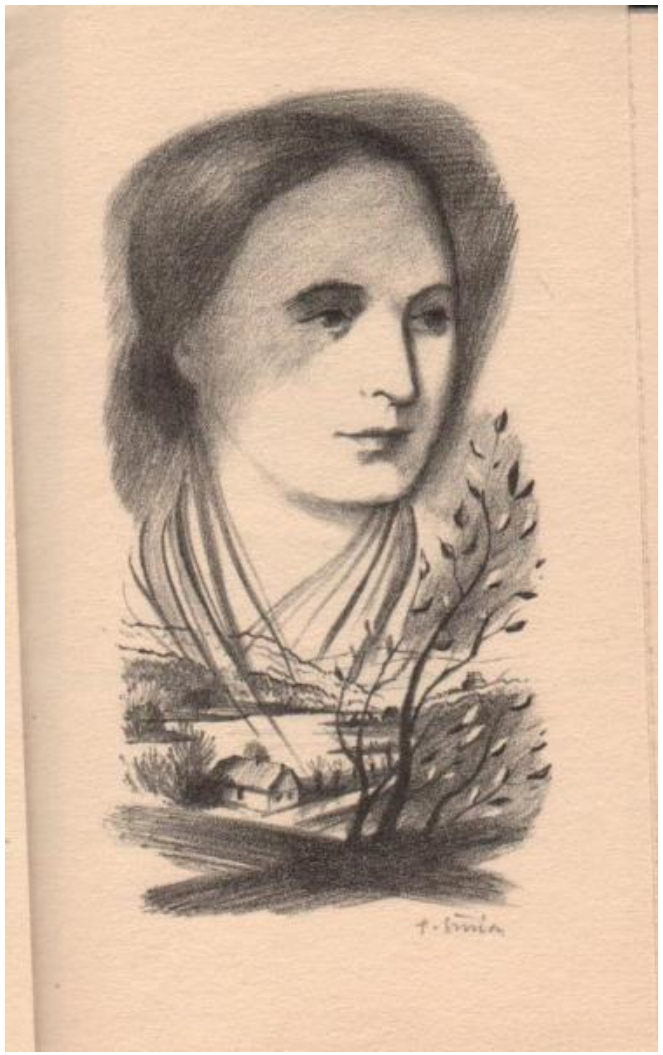
Švejk: An Expressionist Humanoid?

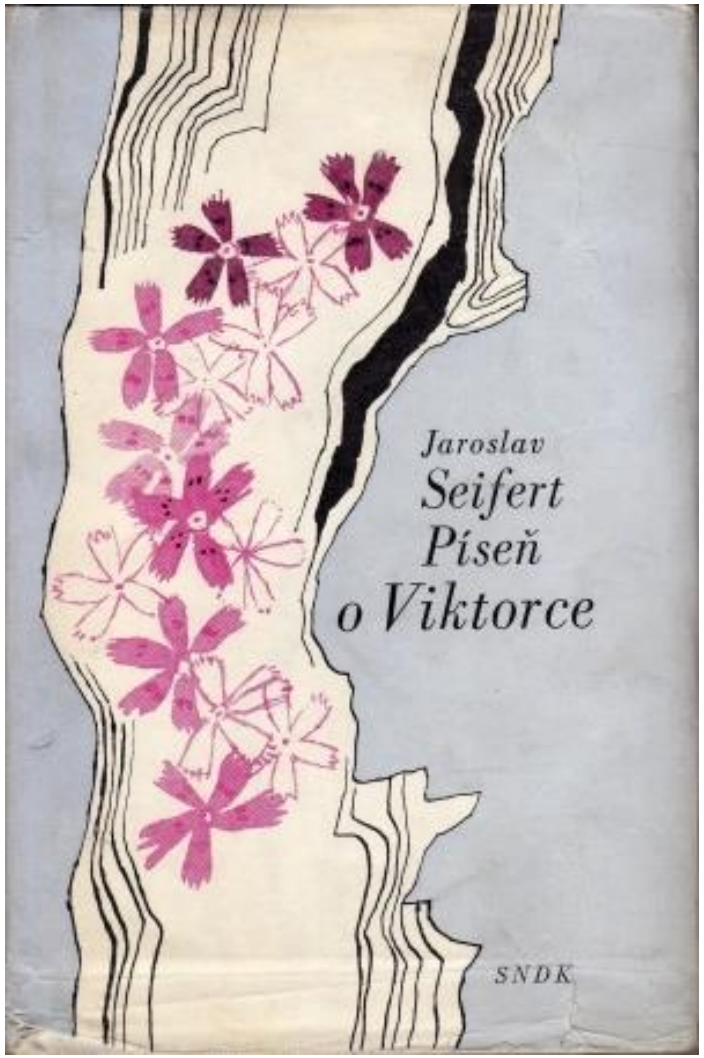
A Song of Vicky: An Apotheosis of Love

- An extensive lyric poem by Jaroslav Seifert (1901–1986)
- Written in strophes evoking the Continental poetic tradition
- Treating the character of the Mad Vicky from Božena Němcová's *The Granny*
- A homage paid to love and womanhood
- Accused by the that-day Communist reviewers of pessimism and formalism
- A poetic testament of the Czech Nobel-Prize winner (1984)

A Song of Vicky: An Apotheosis of Love

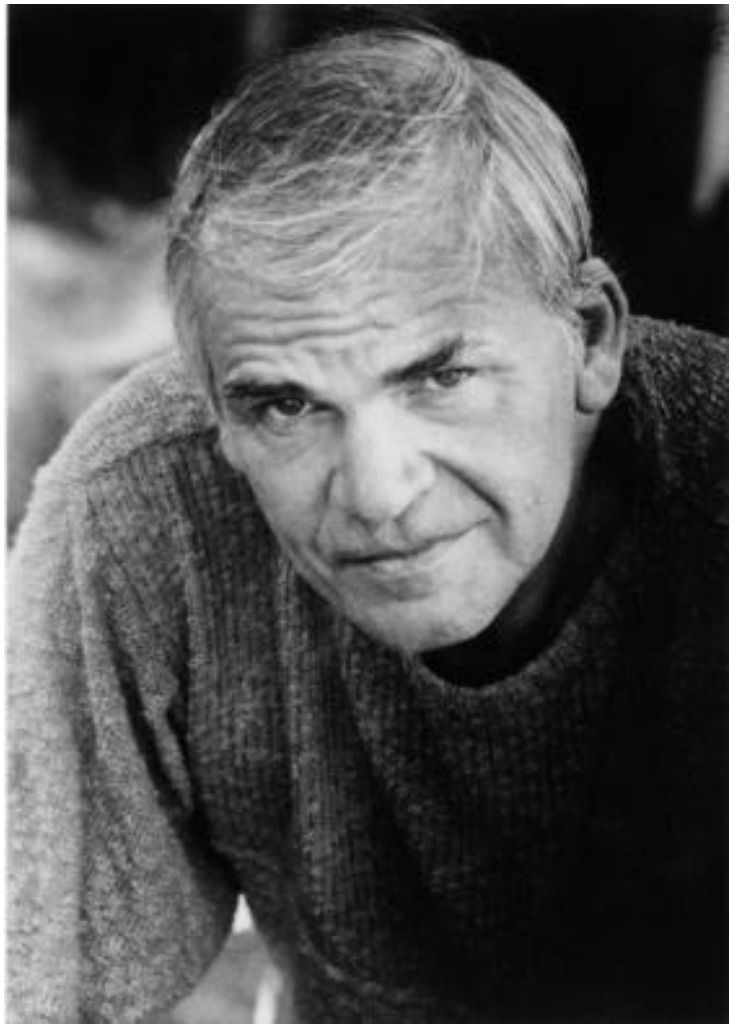






The Joke: The 1950s in a Nutshell

- A novel by Milan Kundera (1929)
- The story of the 1950s Czechoslovakia from multiple perspectives
- Narrative shifts, retrospectives, reflective passages, complex style remindful of French prose, musical composition (sonata form)
- Kundera was an expert at novel studies (Ph.D.)
- Nowadays, he is a French author of the Czech origin
- Discredited, cold, rationalistic, sophisticated, …



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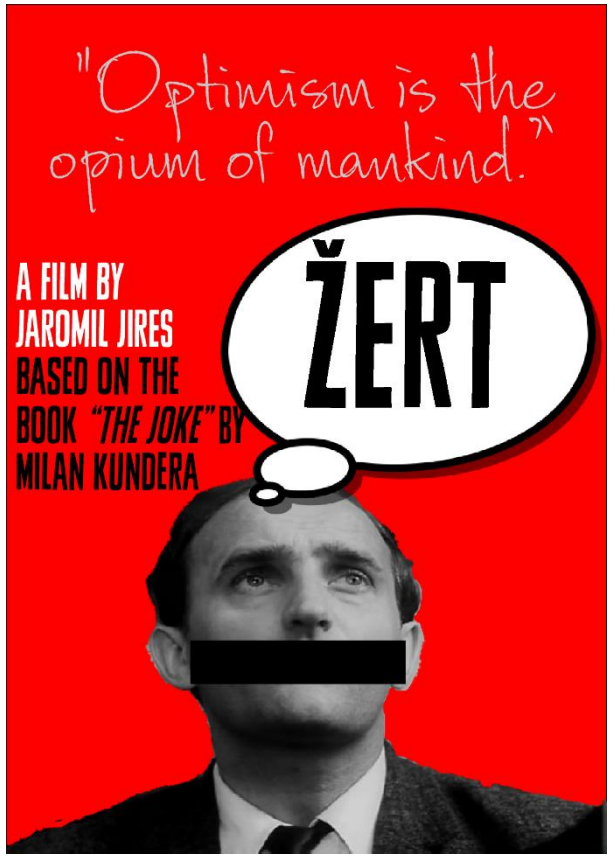
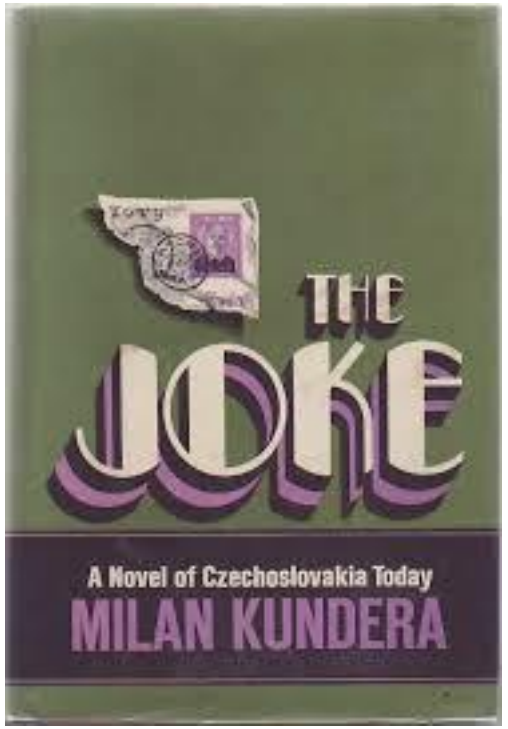
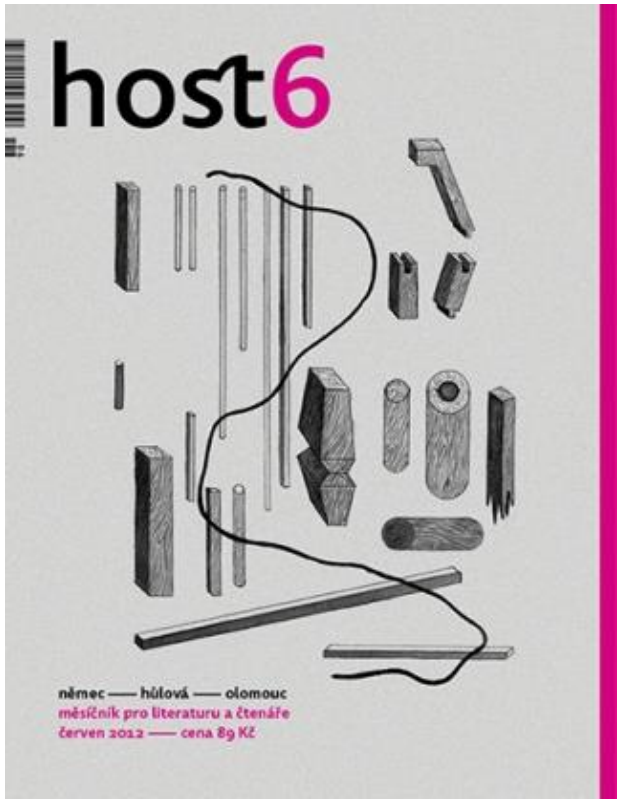




Nowadays?

- Doyens
  - Karel Šiktanc
  - Ivan Wernisch
  - Milan Kundera (?)
- Best-selling authors
  - Miloš Urban
  - Michal Viewegh
  - Jiří Hájíček
  - Kateřina Tučková
  - Petra Hůlová