

# PRAGUE PALIMPSEST



Writing, Memory, and the City

ALFRED THOMAS

PRAGUE PALIMPSEST



---

---

PRAGUE PALIMPSEST

---

---

Writing, Memory, and the City

ALFRED THOMAS

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS  
CHICAGO AND LONDON

ALFRED THOMAS is professor of English and Germanic Studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago and the author of five books, most recently of *A Blessed Shore: England and Bohemia from Chaucer to Shakespeare* (2007) and *The Bohemian Body: Gender and Sexuality in Modern Czech Culture* (2007).

The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 60637  
The University of Chicago Press, Ltd., London  
© 2010 by The University of Chicago  
All rights reserved. Published 2010  
Printed in the United States of America

19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11 10      1 2 3 4 5

ISBN-13: 978-0-226-79540-9 (cloth)

ISBN-10: 0-226-79540-3 (cloth)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Thomas, Alfred, 1958–

Prague palimpsest : writing, memory, and the city / Alfred Thomas.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-226-79540-9 (cloth : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 0-226-79540-3 (cloth : alk. paper) 1. Prague (Czech Republic)—In literature. 2. Legends—Czech Republic—Prague. 3. Libuše [Legendary character].

4. Jewish ghettos—Czech Republic—Legends. 5. Golem. I. Title.

PN56.3.P73T46 2010

809'.9335843712—DC22

2009050626

⊗ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of the American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1992.



FOR MICHAEL

DEM EINZIGEN,  
DER MICH NACH BÖHMEN BEGLEITET HAT



It is the narrow, hidden tracks that lead back to our lost homeland; what contains the solution to the last mysteries is not the ugly scar that life's rasp leaves on us, but the fine, almost invisible writing that is engraved in our body.

—*Gustav Meyrink*

Ancient folio of stone parchments, city-book in whose pages there is "still so much to be read, to dream, to understand."

—*Angelo Maria Ripellino*



---

---

C O N T E N T S

---

---

	Preface	<i>xi</i>
	A Note on Translations, Quotations, and Names	<i>xv</i>
	Introduction	<i>i</i>
1.	Women on the Verge of History: Libuše and the Foundational Legend of Prague	<i>15</i>
2.	Deviant Monsters and Wayward Women: The Prague Ghetto and the Legend of the Golem	<i>43</i>
3.	The Castle Hill Was Hidden: Franz Kafka and Czech Literature	<i>77</i>
4.	A Stranger in Prague: Writing and the Politics of Identity in Apollinaire, Nezval, and Camus	<i>109</i>
5.	Sailing to Bohemia: Utopia, Memory, and the Holocaust in Postwar Austrian and German Writing	<i>137</i>
	Epilogue: Postmodern Prague?	<i>168</i>
	Appendix: Translations of Poems about Prague	<i>177</i>
	Bibliography	<i>183</i>
	Index	<i>193</i>



---

---

P R E F A C E

---

---

The completion of the first draft of this book coincided with a highly symbolic anniversary: forty years earlier, on August 21, 1968, the combined armies of the Warsaw Pact invaded the Czechoslovak capital, Prague. I remember watching these momentous and confusing events unfold on British television. Of course, as a child of nine, I did not understand the geopolitical implications of what was happening—that the Soviet Union was cracking down on a satellite state it perceived to be breaking away from its oppressive orbit. And yet I recall being profoundly moved by the black-and-white images of the distraught citizens of a faraway city appealing to the occupying soldiers to go home. Many of these young men did not even understand the broken Russian that was being addressed to them, since they hailed from the non-European regions of the Soviet Union, including those Caucasian regions that, even as I write, are being threatened by a newly assertive Russia. Moreover, the soldiers had been brainwashed into thinking that they were liberating their Communist brothers and sisters from the threat of capitalist annexation; hence, they were as confused as the natives they thought they were liberating. These raw recruits had expected the Czechs to welcome them with flowers and open arms. Imagine their dismay on witnessing instead angry defiance and clenched fists.

Today I understand the political context of the traumatic events I witnessed as a child all those years ago. The intriguing thing is that I was affected by them at all. Why did this tragedy move me so much? Why did I remember it so vividly while other political crises were forgotten or overlooked? Why Prague of all places?

Ten years later, as a freshman majoring in Slavic studies at Cambridge University, I went to Prague for the first time and saw the place with my own eyes. By now the city was festooned with red banners asserting the

solidarity between the Soviet and Czechoslovak peoples. The defiant protesters had turned into acquiescent and sullen citizens. It was the late 1970s—the so-called Normalization—and there were remarkably few foreign visitors in those days. I would wander alone through the ancient streets of the city like a latter-day flaneur, trying to take in the sheer beauty of its monuments and churches.

In identifying with the fate of this city as a child, I realize now that I was simply forming part of a literary tradition that goes back at least a century and a half. As I began to research this book, I discovered numerous writers who had similarly traveled to the city in quest of their own identity. The eponymous protagonist of W. G. Sebald's novel *Austerlitz* (2001) hears a British radio broadcast about Jewish refugees from Nazi-occupied Prague who had come to England on the *Kindertransport* and settled there. This broadcast triggers his childhood memories—or what he thinks are his memories—and he goes to Prague to rediscover his origins. Sebald does not make it clear whether Austerlitz is really a Czech Jew or just imagines that he is one. Perhaps his protagonist is so alienated by the modern world that he is searching for an alternative homeland that will finally banish his sense of loneliness.

What Sebald's novel ultimately shows is that one's quest for the truth of origins is always discursive: our only *Heimat* in a world vacated by God is writing itself. Austerlitz is the author's fictional surrogate. Just as his protagonist goes to Prague looking for his lost mother and father, so does Sebald "write" Prague in search of the ultimate meaning of things through language. But the novel's repetitions and citations (mainly of Kafka) succeed only in pointing to another text, another forlorn quest for the truth.

The challenge of "writing" Prague is of course a daunting one. So many people have written about the city that it would seem impossible to encompass them all. Given the magnitude of the task, the attempt to include everybody and everything is precisely what one should avoid. Angelo Maria Ripellino's *Magic Prague* (1973)—a curious blend of memoir, essay, and literary criticism—gives the impression of exhaustive erudition, yet even this magisterial work is selective and exclusive. What links the diverse writers in *Prague Palimpsest* is not simply that they wrote about Prague but that they obsessively "rewrote" it. Inevitably, many great writers (Philip Roth, for example) do not feature in my project. In defining Prague both as a European city and as a metaphor for its identity in the twentieth century, I limit my focus to European writers.

The first half of chapter 1 on the medieval sources of the foundational legend of Prague was delivered as a paper at the Medieval Academy of America in March 2009 with the title "Myths of Origins and Textual Authority

in the Medieval Legend of Libuše." The president of the academy, Patrick J. Geary, was kind enough to attend my panel and made some helpful comments about my paper in the discussion that followed. Part of chapter 2 (on *Metropolis* and *R.U.R.*) was given as a paper at a panel organized by Vicki Callahan at the conference "Film and Science: Fictions, Documentaries, and Beyond" in Chicago in November 2008. The second half of chapter 4 was delivered as a lecture on Apollinaire, Kafka, and Camus at the University of Chicago in January 2008; at Queen Mary College, London, in April 2008; and at DePaul University in July 2009. This lecture profited greatly from the insights of John Ireland, James S. Williams, John Malmstad, Paul J. Smith, and Jonathan Romney.

A German version of the same lecture was given in Klagenfurt, Austria, in May 2009 with the title "Ein Fremder in Prag: Schreiben und Identitätsreflexion bei Apollinaire, Kafka und Camus." I would like to thank Vera Pollina for translating the lecture and Primus-Heinz Kucher for inviting me to give it at his home university. Professor Kucher also read an earlier version of the manuscript and made some useful suggestions for its improvement. The second half of chapter 5 (on Sebald's *Austerlitz*) provided the basis of my fellowship lecture at the UIC Institute for the Humanities. The lecture owes a great deal to the brilliant insights of my friend and colleague at the University of Chicago, Kathryn Tanner, who made important suggestions for its improvement.

Finally, I would like to extend my thanks to those colleagues, students, and friends who helped and inspired my project in all kinds of ways: Tom Bestul, Pietro Bortone, Sara Hall, Kristina Förster, Nora Hampl, Dagmar Lorenz, Ervin Malakaj, Colleen McQuillen, Mary Beth Rose, Astrida Tantillo, Jon Tillotson, Vera Pollina, Julia Vaingurt, and Linda Vavra. Alan Thomas at the University of Chicago Press has been a very gracious and helpful editor, and Randy Petilos, also at the Press, has been a source of immense practical support along the way. Erik Carlson did a brilliant job of editing the manuscript, while the anonymous readers of the manuscript offered valuable insights and suggestions. Last but not least, Marilyn Bliss produced a detailed, exhaustive index for which I am most grateful. Closer to home, Porphyria and Prince have been my constant companions during the lonely process of writing. Porphyria (the cat) kept the manuscript warm by lying on it while my dog Prince lay by my side as I sat at my desk and snored his way through most of the writing. The benevolent spirit of my friend Beryl Satter infused the entire project from beginning to end, while the loving support and patience of my partner Phillip Michael Engles provided the stability I needed to bring it to fruition. I dedicate this book to him.



---

---

A NOTE ON TRANSLATIONS,  
QUOTATIONS, AND NAMES

---

---

All quotations are given in English translation. Where deemed necessary and for purposes of clarification, the original is provided in parentheses or in the footnotes. Unless stated otherwise, these translations are my own, including the two Czech poems in the appendix. For the sake of simplicity, I give the Czech form of places and persons rather than the German names (e.g., Vltava rather than Moldau). Only in the case of established usage do I opt for the English-language versions of Czech names and places (e.g., Saint Wenceslas; Charles Bridge).



---

---

## INTRODUCTION

---

---

The visitor to Prague, one of the oldest sites in Europe, cannot fail to be impressed by the architectural diversity of this lovely city: Romanesque, Gothic, baroque, Sezession, and cubism succeed each other in a dazzling layering of styles (fig. 1). A major reason for Prague's miraculous preservation is the fact that it was spared the wartime destruction which reduced to ashes other central European cities like Warsaw, Berlin, and Dresden. In a particularly ironic twist of history, Adolf Hitler deliberately preserved the remains of the city's ancient Jewish Quarter—including the medieval Old-New Synagogue and the nearby cemetery—as a museum of Europe's "extinguished race." The fact that those who transported the Jewish inhabitants of Prague to their deaths also saved the city's Jewish culture from oblivion constitutes one of the cruelest ironies in modern European history and exemplifies the extraordinary paradox that is Prague.

In contrast with other major central European cities, Prague survived World War II virtually unscathed. Combined with its obvious longevity, its apparent immutability camouflages a complex history of discontinuity and disruption. In spite of its physical intactness, Prague is a ghostly city from which many of its citizens have vanished: its long-standing Jewish population, which was transported to the east and murdered in the years 1941–44; its German population, deported after the end of World War II; and many of its leading intellectuals, who were imprisoned and perished during the Stalinist Terror of the early 1950s. This history of trauma may come as a shock to those who have experienced the city as tourists. Unlike Berlin or Warsaw, Prague does not bear the obvious visible scars of its tragic history. It is easy to overlook, therefore, that this is a city that has changed political hands numerous times as a consequence of external invasions and internal upheavals.

[To view this image, refer to  
the print version of this title.]

Fig. 1. Hradčany Castle, seen from the Charles Bridge, Prague, Czech Republic.  
Photograph: Vanni/Art Resource, New York.

This study departs from most of its predecessors by presenting Prague as a constantly rewritten or revised text in which history and imagination, memory and forgetting have been impossible to disentangle. Most cultural accounts of Prague treat the city either as an unbroken historical continuum or as a site of the imagination *tout court*. An example of the former is Peter Demetz's *Prague in Black and Gold* (1997), in which Prague emerges as a grand historical narrative punctuated by the intervention of great men—Přemysl Otakar II, Charles IV, Jan Hus, Rudolf II, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, and T. G. Masaryk.<sup>1</sup> A native of the city and a victim of its political caprices, Demetz left Prague as a young man following the Communist putsch of February 1948 and came to the United States, returning only in 1990 following the fall of Communism.

Another victim of the city's political vicissitudes was the renowned Italian Slavist Angelo Maria Ripellino, who wrote his classic *Praga Magica* (*Magic Prague*, 1973) from the distance of enforced exile. Refused a visa to enter Czechoslovakia, the author conceived his book less as a conventional cultural history of the city than as a paean to its magical transcendence. If

1. Peter Demetz, *Prague in Black and Gold: Scenes from the Life of a European City* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1997).

Demetz's book avoids historical gaps and ruptures by glossing over them with an impression of seamless cultural continuity, Ripellino goes in the opposite direction by disrupting all chronological sequence and presenting literature and history as part of an eternal present: "To this day, every evening at five, Franz Kafka returns home to Celetná Street (Zeltnergasse) wearing a bowler hat and black suit. To this day, every evening, Jaroslav Hašek proclaims to his drinking companions in one or another dive that radicalism is harmful and wholesome progress can be achieved only through obedience to authority. To this day Prague lives under the sign of these two writers who better than all others expressed its irrevocable condemnation and therefore its malaise, the ins and outs of its wiles, its duplicity, its grim irony."<sup>2</sup> Paradoxically enough, Ripellino's mystification of the city as "Magic Prague" was in part a tendentious reaction to the Soviet invasion of Prague five years before his book was published. Confronted by the effacement of the ancient city on the Vltava from the memory of the West, the author seeks to reinscribe it as a transhistorical and supratemporal phenomenon. In fact, the epithet "Magic Prague" was itself historically contingent and was coined by André Breton as recently as 1935.

Whereas *Magic Prague* subordinates history to the redemptive power of the artistic process, my book tries to steer clear of any such idealistic agenda. If in *Magic Prague* cultural memory ultimately triumphs over political oblivion, I interrogate in a less optimistic vein the complex interplay between memory and forgetting in the evolution of the city both as a physical space and as a site of writing. To this extent my study seeks to demystify Prague as a *locus magicus* in which the truth of art prevails over life. We shall find many instances in this book where the memory of writers is effaced in the interests of a prevailing ideology, a salient example being the Prague-born Franz Kafka, whose works were largely overlooked in interwar Czechoslovakia and banned outright by the Communist state after 1948. If Kafka's memory is seemingly alive and well in present-day Prague, this is in part a reaction to the Czechs' own collusion in the effacement of his memory in the decades after his death.

There can be no more glaring example of this interplay between remembering and forgetting than the fate of the city's Jewish ghetto, which was largely demolished by the city fathers in the late 1890s as part of an extensive slum clearance and sanitation program. At the height of Czech Francophilia the municipal authorities superimposed on the ruins of the

2. Angelo Maria Ripellino, *Magic Prague*, translated by David Newton Marinelli (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 3.