

CULTURE AND SURREALISM IN THE MANIPULATED WORLD

Ivan Sviták, *The Windmills of Humanity: On Culture and Surrealism in the Manipulated World*, ed. Joseph Grim Feinberg (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr Publishing Co., 2014), 148 p. ISBN 9780882861272.

In 2014 the American publisher Charles H. Kerr published an anthology of texts written by the Czech philosopher, critic, poet, and theorist of the Surrealist movement Ivan Sviták, titled *The windmills of humanity: On culture and surrealism in the manipulated world*. Sviták, born in 1925 in the town of Hranice na Moravě in Czechoslovakia, emigrated to the United States after the suppression of the Prague Spring in August 1968 and lived there until the end of communism in 1989. He returned to Czechoslovakia in 1990 and died four years later in Prague.

In his wide ranging work, Sviták dealt with various themes, such as the history of utopianism and the future of love. He undertook social analyses of television and sports, polemicized on contemporary politics, and reflected on “automobilology” (a “philosophy of the automobile”). He undertook some critical forays into modernist poetry, the *nouveau roman*, variety theatre, and new wave film (p. 14). He also wrote and published a short history of early Christianity, sociological studies of atheism in Moravia, renaissance alchemists, and edited an anthology of love poetry (*ibid.*). Additionally, Sviták wrote some surrealist essays, compiled in this anthology. His surrealist work revolves, as we can see in this volume, around the themes of “love, poetry, and revolution” (p. 21).

Formally, the 148-page volume is divided into four main parts. The extensive introductory essay (pp. 7–26) by the book’s editor and translator, the American sociologist, philosopher, and essayist Joseph Grim Feinberg, represents at the same time a tribute to Sviták. This is followed by the main section (pp. 27–137), comprised of essays with illustrations by Andy Lass, an authority on Czech culture. This part is followed by editorial notes (pp. 138–144) and by a bibliography of selected writings from Sviták (pp. 145–147). So the anthology fulfils all the formal standards and demands of such a work.

This collection is primarily but not exclusively published for English-speaking readers. This can be inferred from the two main objectives of the volume. In general, Feinberg strives “to reintroduce” the reader “to a radical writer whose renown has unfairly faded

from both mainstream and leftist political thought” (p. 8). Specifically, Feinberg would like to introduce Sviták as a cultural critic, a defender of experimental literature, an analyst of mass media, a philosopher of love, and as a theorist and poet of surrealism. This aim is justified by the fact that these topics represent the largest part of Sviták’s output during the crucial 1960’s (p. 9). Both objectives are interconnected. In the English-speaking world Sviták is known first and foremost as an “abstract philosopher and a biting political commentator” (*ibid.*). He “never received the same recognition” for his critical essays, published in this book (p. 25). This is reason enough for Feinberg to publish this well-edited book, containing useful editorial notes and background information on the respective essays (the translation, first publication date, and journal).

The charm of this anthology, which combines an interesting idea with a precise execution, results from the division of the selected texts into two categories: eleven essays are presented with an equal number of anti-essays, which are directly opposed to their corresponding essays. The noteworthy result of this is a comprehensive anthology with 22 texts, many of which appear in English for the first time. The more extensive essays numbered with Roman numerals are, as Feinberg explains, “ordinary essays” (*ibid.*). The Arabic-numbered shorter anti-essays “are fairly conventional short stories and poems, didactic and philosophical treatises in verse, prose poems” (p. 25). The texts included in the anthology were written in different political as well as situational constellations and contexts.

Apart from one exception (essay III), the essays originated in the 1960s. They were written in Sviták’s native country, that is, Czechoslovakia. The anti-essays on the other hand were written after 1969 during his exile. The exception is the anti-essay 2, which originates from the late 1950s or 1960s. It should be pointed out that the essays and anti-essays are not ordered chronologically but thematically. The newer anti-essays are more or less reacting to or interpreting the older essays. Sviták would no doubt agree with Feinberg’s idea of arranging it so because it is an interesting idea and bears witness to Feinberg’s deep knowledge of Sviták’s writing.

Essay V “The civilization of the Eye” (pp. 68–70) and anti-essay 5 “Feeling” (p. 71) correspond to each other in a very interesting way. While the essay deals with film and cinema, that is with pictures, and for Sviták “the history of film is the history of pictures in which words played a secondary role, because the language of the film related to the visual aspects of the world” (p. 69), the anti-essay is a written dialogue between a man and a woman. In the foreground are words not pictures, but the dialogue’s words evoke pictures or a film in one’s head. Thus, it is not in fact, on the one hand, possible to separate the language from the picture, but on the other hand, as Sviták says, one can separate the picture from the language. The next (sixth) essay, “Evolutions in the Structure of Film Languages” (pp. 72–78) indirectly corresponds to Essay V and also anti-essay 5. Here Sviták examines the meaning of language in films. Interestingly, anti-essay 6, “The monologue of a human shadow” (p. 79), hardly evokes pictures at all. So the interaction between picture and word is not as easy as one might think.

Essay III, a loose collection of separate articles on related themes that was first published in 1988, raises the question as to whether there is something like a “Conscience of the Nation.” For Feinberg, this essay is an interesting one because it describes the prominent place that writers occupy in politics in Central Europe compared to the United States and Western Europe (p. 139). Sviták answers this question by arguing that, despite their being politically and socially fully developed, the subordinate position of the Central European nations in the 19th and 20th centuries within multinational kingdoms (like the Hapsburg monarchy) or under bureaucratic dictatorships in the Soviet Bloc meant that these nations had no opportunity to act politically in the narrow sense. Writers took the place of parliaments in terms of speaking for the people (p. 48); as a result, writers become the consciences of the nation. Anti-essay 3 fits very well with Essay III because in a way it describes the relationship between the writer (in Central Europe) and the political system he or she lived in during the 19th and 20th centuries.

As already noted, the volume starts with a twenty-page introductory essay titled “Human, All Too Human.” It contains six parts of differing lengths. In the first, “This book,” Feinberg makes reference to Franklin Rosemont (1943–2009), the American artist and co-founder of the Chicago Surrealist Group, who was in touch with Sviták and who is described by Feinberg as the driving force and moving spirit for this anthology.

The following three parts are quite affirmative and relatively uncritical. In the second part, “Sviták’s Road from Nowhere to Nowhere” (p. 9–14), Feinberg introduces the reader to Sviták’s life. The convincingly written CV illustrates the moving lifecycle of Sviták as a witness of the eventful “short” 20th century. Feinberg emphasizes that Sviták had been a staunch supporter of democratic socialism for the entirety of his life. He remained faithful to this belief even when the idea of socialism in Czechoslovakia had lost its once enormous power of attraction because of the experience of forty years of Communist rule. Here the reader might expect some critical distance. This insistence on outdated ideas can also be interpreted as stubbornness, especially since Sviták did not have to experience the harsh life of real socialism on his own, albeit only because he was forced into exile by the new established regime. However, Sviták distinguished two forms of socialism, a true – democratic – socialism and a false socialism, the “real socialism” in the Eastern bloc. After returning to Czechoslovakia he tirelessly criticized the newly emerging free market economy, which he had learned about in the USA with all of its advantages and disadvantages. It is not surprising that after 1989 Sviták’s attitudes were little understood by the Czech public, who had experienced the “harsh reality of real socialism.”¹ As a deputy of the Federal Assembly and representative of the Left Bloc (Levý blok), he soon became, as Feinberg notes, one of the most unpopular politicians in the country (p. 13). This section also explains the chosen subtitle of

¹ Miroslav Kusý, “Charta 77 a reálny socializmus,” in Miroslav Kusý, *Eseje* (Bratislava: Archa, 1991), pp. 5–33, here 6.

this anthology. “Manipulated world” illustrates how Sviták kept some distance from his home country as well as from his exile. In speaking about “manipulated worlds,” Sviták stands in the tradition of Egon Bondy, the Czech philosopher and writer, who, at the end of the 1940s and at the beginning of the 1950s, was engaged in the Czech Surrealist group and who, in the 1970s and 1980s, accused the socialist Eastern as well as the democratic and capitalist Western world of manipulating the people.

The third part (pp. 14–19), “Human, all too human,” is the most extensive section of the introduction. Feinberg tries to integrate Sviták with specific ideological movements. Thus, he characterizes Sviták as a “pure philosopher of humanism” (p. 14). According to him, Sviták in his writings expressed “the insights of revolutionary humanism to an ever-expanding range of human activity” (*ibid.*). At the same time, Feinberg also states that Sviták had never pretended to be an “exceptional innovator.” He instead “synthesized and forcefully reiterated the points of classic writers like Montagne, Voltaire, and Holbach, and he shared the general perspective of the wave of young Marxists who, during the years following Stalin’s death in 1953, made socialist humanism into one of the most vigorous intellectual movements in the world” (*ibid.*).

Regardless of the fact that Sviták worked on many different topics, he always used the same fundamental approach, as Feinberg emphasizes, “to unearth the social and existential philosophies contained in ever-changing genres of human expression, to laud the ‘human potentiality’ realized therein, and to condemn structures of alienation that inhibit this realization” (p. 15). Again, at this point a more critical consideration would have been desirable. It raises the question of whether Sviták was an ideologist rather than a scientist. On the other hand, this introduction is an homage and not a critical essay. The part that follows (pp. 19–23), “Towards a Surrealist Humanism,” is connected directly with the texts selected for the main section of this book. Feinberg traces Sviták’s (limited) involvement in the surrealist movement. He emphasizes that surrealism “underlies nearly all that he wrote” (p. 21).

In the next two sections one sees a more critical approach. In the fifth part (pp. 23–24), “Master of Paradox,” Feinberg accuses Sviták of inconsistency: “He would at the same moment describe the human being as fundamentally rational, while at another moment he would describe human meanings founded on ‘an irrational act,’ and he would look to the surrealist unconscious for salvation from abstract rationalized domination” (p. 23). In the closing section, “This Book, Again” (pp. 24–26), Feinberg discusses the difficulties which he faced in editing the book, noting that it was often the case that the same essay “would appear in two different collections under different titles; at other times the same title would appear in different collections above completely different pieces” (p. 24). But he has passed this test with flying colors. For this reason especially the anthology does not claim to be complete. Finding the “real versions” of the essays appears a Sisyphean task “since many of the pieces were originally written as samizdat” (*ibid.*). The translations, which required a considerable amount of imagination, were done by Feinberg himself. Other, already translated texts, he “reviewed

and improved, if necessary” (p. 26). Because of the imperfection of Sviták’s English, this task was a tricky one.

The volume concludes with a bibliography (pp. 145–147) covering the years 1954 to 1994 and orientated to a large extent towards Sviták’s surrealist work. Again, Feinberg faced some serious problems when compiling this: “Many of the books below can also be found under other imprints, with other dates of publication, and sometimes under different names” (p. 145).

The Windmills of Humanity is an attractive book that is both well edited and translated. The affirmative and yet not uncritical introduction acquaints the reader with the person and the work of Ivan Sviták and underlines Feinberg’s skills as an essayist. The editorial notes facilitate considerably the handling of the texts both in form and content. It is to be hoped that this volume will get some attention, not only in the English-speaking world but also in Sviták’s home country.

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