MODERN CENTRAL AND EAST EUROPEAN LITERATURE
(Introduction to modern Czech and Central European literary and cultural history)

Syllabus Spring 2012

Professor Tomáš VRBA
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Tuesday 3:00 – 4:00 P.M., NYU Professors’ Room

Course description: The idea of the course is not to bring a full and detailed picture of the modern and contemporary Central and East European literature, but rather to take advantage of the unique occasion and offer students a more focused view. Examining Czech literary history as a specific example of the European history of national, cultural and political emancipation plans to guide “newcomers” along the most important cultural streams influencing the face of Czech literature in the 19th and 20th century. The larger cultural context includes the political role of art and literature in Czech history, language, religion, social and national currents and crosscurrents, as well as its Central and East European dimension.

Grading policy
Class attendance: 30 %
Reading presentation or other assignment: 20 %
Mid-term paper and test: 20 %
Final paper: 30 %

Schedule of classes

Week 1
14 February
Overview of course
1a. Time: Historical background of Czech national culture.
Start reading Hašek, Jaroslav: The Good Soldier Švejk
Start reading Kafka, Franz: America /The Man Who Disappeared/

16 February
1b. Time: Historical background of Czech national culture.

Week 2
21 February
2a. Humor: Kafka, Hašek, Hrabal. Irony, the grotesque and the absurd, the political implications of Kafka's work in the 60’s, the Czech New Wave cinema and absurd theater.

23 February
Reading presentation: Kafka, Franz: America /The Man Who Disappeared/
Start reading: Němcová, Božena: Grandmother
Continue reading: Hašek, Jaroslav: The Good Soldier Švejk
Week 3
28 February
3a. **Space**: Geography, geopolitics, Czech patriotism, landscape, the physical world, beer and food. (Božena Němcová, Franz Werfel, Viktor Dyk, Ota Pavel). Austrian, Hungarian and Polish neighbors (Karl Kraus, Peter Esterhazy, Witold Gombrowicz).

1 March
3b. **Space**: Geography, geopolitics, Czech patriotism, landscape, the physical world.
Reading presentation: Němcová, Božena: *Grandmother*
Start reading: Mácha, Karel Hynek: *May*
Start reading: Hrabal, Bohumil: *Closely Observed Trains*
Start reading: Hrabal, Bohumil: *Too Loud a Solitude*

Week 4
6 March
3c. **Space**: Geography, geopolitics, Czech patriotism, landscape, the physical world.

8 March
3d. **Space**: Geography, geopolitics, Czech patriotism, landscape, the physical world.
Reading presentation: Hašek, Jaroslav: *The Good Soldier Švejk*

Week 5
13 March

15 March
4b. **Existential writing I.**: Romanticism, Decadence.
Reading presentation: Mácha, Karel Hynek: *May*
Start reading: Čapek, Karel: *Talks with TGM*

Week 6
20 March

22 March
5b. **Spiritual context**: Genius loci. Czech literacy. Czechs and Germans.
Reading presentation: Hrabal, Bohumil: *Closely Observed Trains*
Reading presentation: Hrabal, Bohumil: *Too Loud a Solitude*
Start reading: Lustig, Arnošt: *Dita Saxova*
Start reading: Havel, Václav: *Garden Party*
Start reading: Kundera, Milan: *Life is Elsewhere*

Week 7
27 March
6a. **Conceptual writing I.**: Political thought, political satire (Karel Čapek).
MIDTERM TEST WRITTEN IN CLASS 27 MARCH - TODAY
29 March
6b. Conceptual writing I.: Political thought, political satire.
Reading presentation: Čapek, Karel: Talks with TGM
Start reading: Klíma, Ivan: Love and Garbage
MIDTERM PAPER DUE 29 MARCH - TODAY

Week 8
3 April

5 April
7b. Existential writing II.
Reading presentation: Lustig, Arnošt: Dita Saxova

Week 9
SPRING BREAK – NO CLASSES

Week 10
17 April

19 April
Reading presentation: Havel, Václav: Garden Party
Reading presentation: Kundera, Milan: Life is Elsewhere

Week 11
24 April

26 April
Start reading: Viewegh, Michal: Bringing Up Girls in Bohemia
Start reading: Topol, Jáchym: City Sister Silver

Week 12
1 May
NATIONAL HOLIDAY – NO CLASSES

3 May
9b. Dissent and Exile.
Reading presentation: Klíma, Ivan: Love and Garbage
Start reading: Ash, Timothy Garton: Two Essays on Central Europe

Week 13
8 May
NATIONAL HOLIDAY – NO CLASSES
10 May
10. A new social role for Czech literature after 1989 (Michal Viewegh, Jáchym Topol).
   Reading presentation: Viewegh, Michal: Bringing Up Girls in Bohemia
   Reading presentation: Topol, Jáchym: City Sister Silver

Week 14
15 May
   Reading presentation: Ash, Timothy Garton: Two Essays on Central Europe

17 May
11b. Central Europe recreated: Concentric circles, multiple identity.
12. Persistent message: Summary

Week 15
FINAL EXAM: FINAL PAPER DUE 22 MAY (TUESDAY)
   FINAL INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS IN CLASS 22 MAY

(NB: One or two guest lectures will be included, possibly by prominent Czech authors, and
the order of lectures may change slightly according to the guests’ availability.)