



# Cold War Bohemia: Literary Exchange between the United States and Czechoslovakia, 1947-1989

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Cold War Bohemia:  
Literary Exchange between the United States and Czechoslovakia, 1947-1989

A dissertation presented  
by  
Brian Kruzick Goodman  
to  
The Committee on Degrees in the History of American Civilization

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Cold War Bohemia:  
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**Abstract**

After the onset of the Cold War, literature and culture continued to circulate across the so-called Iron Curtain between the United States and the countries of the Eastern bloc, often with surprising consequences. This dissertation presents a narrative history of literary exchange between the US and Czechoslovakia between 1947 and 1989. I provide an account of the material circulation of texts and discourses that is grounded in the biographical experiences of specific writers and intellectuals who served as key intermediaries between Cold War blocs. Individual chapters focus on F. O. Matthiessen, Josef Škvorecký, Allen Ginsberg, and Philip Roth, and I discuss the transmission of literary works by writers like Franz Kafka, Ernest Hemingway, Langston Hughes, Ludvík Vaculík, and Milan Kundera. I also discuss a range of institutions—from literary magazines and book series to universities and government censors—that mediated the circulation of literature between the US and Czechoslovakia. To reconstruct this history, I draw on a multilingual archive of sources that includes transnational correspondence, secret police files, travelogues, and samizdat texts.

A central argument of “Cold War Bohemia” is that the transnational circulation of literature produced new lines of countercultural influence across the Iron Curtain. By the 1970s and 1980s, literary exchange also helped constitute a network of writers and intellectuals who promoted new discourses about the relationship between literature,

dissent, and human rights. The literary counterculture that emerged between the US and Czechoslovakia during this period took on many local and contingent forms, but in each case, the circulation of literature allowed a new transnational public to imagine an alternative world beyond Cold War boundaries.

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Even before I set foot in the Barker Center, I was fortunate enough to work with a series of advisors and mentors who still shape my approach to scholarship and writing. At Stanford, Shelley Fisher Fishkin took me under her wing and showed me that my eclectic interests had a name: transnational American studies. Along the way, my work was also enriched by the humor and intelligence of Gavin Jones, Adam Johnson, Hilton Obenzinger, and the late Jay Fliegelman. A year at Oxford working with Paul Giles and Hermione Lee vastly expanded my conception of American literature's place in the world. It was also during these early years that I first traveled to Prague (with no knowledge of how frequently I would return). The idea for this project emerged out of conversations during that first trip with Jan Urban, Karel Srp, Tomáš Vrba, Josef Rauvolf, and Josef Jařab. I was also welcomed by a poet and scholar named Justin Quinn, whose hospitality and intellectual generosity have continued up to the present. The next *Únětické pivo* is on me.

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None of this would have been possible without my family. I'm fortunate enough to come from an unruly clan of aunts, uncles, and cousins that is simultaneously boisterous and easygoing, sarcastic and open-minded. My parents are the calm at the eye of the storm. I am a humanist because of my father; I am a reader because of my mother. It's impossible for me to thank either of you enough, so for now I'll just offer my dad an apology: all of this Czech research seems to have only further activated my Kruzick genes. I'll try to even the score on my next project (*Mayer Halff: A Cultural Biography*, maybe?). Finally, there is Alison. You have been my home for these past six years, no matter what challenges of geography or epidemiology we have faced. You are my Director of Results Management. You even had a writing desk built for me out of bamboo and then had it shipped halfway across the world. What more could I ask for in a partner?

Compass Coffee, Washington, DC  
May 2016

To Jane Benjamin and Frank Goodman

“The Czech professor laughs and remarks, ‘To each obstructed citizen his own Kafka.’  
Kepesh replies, ‘And to each angry man his own Melville.’”

—Philip Roth, *The Professor of Desire* (1972)

## Introduction.

### American Bohemia

Where is Bohemia? During the Cold War, there were many ways to answer this question. For the Czech literary critic Igor Hájek, the capital of bohemia was the North Beach neighborhood of San Francisco. In 1959, Hájek introduced the writers of the Beat generation to Czechoslovakia in an essay titled “Americká bohéma,” or “American Bohemia.”<sup>1</sup> Hájek opens his essay by describing the high-profile obscenity trial in San Francisco where the Beat poet Allen Ginsberg successfully defended his controversial poem “Howl.” Although this trial made Ginsberg famous, Hájek quotes a Marxist critic from the United States who writes dismissively of the Beats: “In this age of conformity, bohemianism sells well.”<sup>2</sup> Many of Hájek’s Czech readers would have known to read between the lines of such quotations from ideological hardliners. And even if not, they might have been tipped off by Hájek’s deliberately ironic title: Bohemia is also the name of the western region of the former Czechoslovak Socialist Republic.<sup>3</sup>

“American Bohemia,” and the reception of Beat literature in Czechoslovakia, is just one example of how literary culture circulated across the Iron Curtain during the Cold War, often with surprising consequences. From the late 1940s through the collapse of communism in 1989, a wide range of American writers and intellectuals travelled to

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<sup>1</sup> Igor Hájek, “Americká bohéma,” *Světová literatura* 4, no. 6 (1959): 207–33.

<sup>2</sup> John G. Roberts, “The Frisco Beat,” *Mainstream* 11, no. 7, July 1958, 11–26.

<sup>3</sup> The English-language “Bohemia” is derived from the German name for the region, *Böhmen*, but in Czech this region is called *Čechy*. Although the Communist Party took power in Czechoslovakia in 1948, the country was not formally declared a “Socialist Republic” until 1960, a year after the publication of Hájek’s essay.

Czechoslovakia, including F. O. Matthiessen, W. E. B. Du Bois, Arthur Miller, William Styron, Philip Roth, Edward Albee, Kurt Vonnegut, and John Updike. In 1965, Allen Ginsberg, Hájek's iconic bohemian, visited Czechoslovakia and was expelled from the country by Communist authorities. Within Czechoslovakia writers and translators like Josef Škvorecký eagerly followed literary developments in postwar America, importing works by writers ranging from Langston Hughes and Ernest Hemingway to Malcolm Bradbury and William Faulkner into Czech when it became politically feasible. By the last decades of the Cold War, literary exchange between the US and Czechoslovakia had forged new solidarities between American writers and their Czech counterparts— including Ivan Klíma, Ludvík Vaculík, and Milan Kundera, who were all being punished for their antiestablishment views by the new government that was put in place in the years after 1968.

Remarkably, these stories are almost entirely absent from American literary histories of the Cold War period.<sup>4</sup> Most scholars have instead treated the US and the Eastern bloc as discrete and self-contained cultural worlds.<sup>5</sup> To the extent that these

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<sup>4</sup> The major exception is recent work that explores the politics of poetic translation and influence during the Cold War. For an excellent study that focuses primarily on the Czech case, see Justin Quinn, *Between Two Fires: Transnationalism and Cold War Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015). Clare Cavanagh focuses her attention on both Russia and Poland in relation to the West. See Cavanagh, *Lyric Poetry and Modern Politics: Russia, Poland, and the West* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> The over-reliance on the trope of “containment” in Cold War literary studies has not helped matters. The attempt to define postwar American literature as a symptom of “containment culture” can obscure other ways of framing the literary history of the Cold War period. As Morris Dickstein writes, “Such arguments, which rarely appealed to factual evidence, have given rise to a school of Cold War scholarship that takes little account of other influential factors in postwar social life...Based on a presumed ideological bent that can hardly be verified, such arguments depend on tenuous links between politics and culture that are sometimes suggestive but too often arbitrary or reductive.” See Morris Dickstein, *Leopards in the Temple: The Transformation of American Fiction, 1945-1970* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 2. For a recent review essay on this body of scholarship see Robert Genter, “The Cold War Culture of

literary cultures come into contact in these histories it is under the rubric of the so-called “cultural Cold War.”<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, the broader field of Cold War studies has undergone a major geopolitical reorientation. On the one hand, scholars are increasingly looking beyond the US, the Soviet Union, and Western Europe to explore how the Cold War was experienced across Asia, Africa, and Latin America.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, the opening up of archives across the former Soviet bloc and the rise of new transnational methodologies have brought new attention to the many social, cultural, and political exchanges that penetrated the borders of East-Central Europe.<sup>8</sup>

As the field shifts away from an exclusive focus on containment at home and cultural diplomacy abroad towards a focus on various non-state actors—from

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Containment Revisited,” *American Literary History* 26, no. 3 (September 1, 2014): 616–26. For an examination of the trope of “containment” in New Historicist scholarship, see David Suchoff, “New Historicism and Containment: Toward a Post-Cold War Cultural Theory,” *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 48, no. 1 (1992): 137–61.

<sup>6</sup> The “cultural Cold War” typically refers to the ideological rivalry between Cold War blocs as it played out in literature and the arts. For a recent critical discussion of the “revisionist thesis” at the heart of cultural Cold War scholarship see Greg Barnhisel, *Cold War Modernists: Art, Literature, and American Cultural Diplomacy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 2–11. For canonical works in this field, beginning with Christopher Lasch's revelation of CIA involvement with the Congress for Cultural Freedom, see Lasch, *The Agony of the American Left* (New York: Knopf, 1969); Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* (New York: New Press, 2001); Hugh Wilford, *The Mighty Wurlitzer: How the CIA Played America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009); and, most recently, Eric Bennett, *Workshops of Empire: Stegner, Engle, and American Creative Writing during the Cold War* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2015). For a work that leaves behind the conspiratorial mode behind much of this scholarship, see David Cate, *The Dancer Defects: The Struggle for Cultural Supremacy during the Cold War* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2005);

<sup>7</sup> See Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007). For a recent work on the cultural Cold War as it was experienced in Latin America, see Patrick Iber, *Neither Peace nor Freedom: The Cultural Cold War in Latin America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015).

<sup>8</sup> Once again, Westad has led the way. See Poul Villaume and Odd Arne Westad, *Perforating the Iron Curtain: European Détente, Transatlantic Relations, and the Cold War, 1965-1985* (Copenhagen, Denmark: Museum Tusulanum Press, University of Copenhagen, 2010).

international NGOs to the informal networks of individuals who were engaged in direct communication and exchange—it has become clear that there was a great deal more interaction between Cold War blocs than previous histories had suggested. But as Patrick Major and Rana Mitter point out in *Across the Blocs: Cultural and Social History* (2004), “Only very tentatively have some begun to tackle the view from the East, but still often through the lens of Western assumptions.” Consequently, they call for new work that, aided by the opening of archives across the former Eastern bloc, explores the “terra incognita of Eastern Europe and beyond.”<sup>9</sup> A more reciprocal view demonstrates that the countries of the Eastern bloc were much more than passive receptacles for US cultural propaganda or the exports of Western popular culture.

Instead, the multidirectional circulation of literature and culture between the US and Czechoslovakia often resulted in surprising juxtapositions and combinations. In the introduction to their volume *Samizdat, Tamizdat, and Beyond: Transnational Media During and After Communism* (2012), Jessie Labov and Friederike Kind-Kovács argue that transnational exchange across the Iron Curtain was “much more than a single flow of material smuggled from East to West, or from West to East; it was a network of transfer and dissemination, translation, amplification and distortion.”<sup>10</sup> Although they are focused in particular on the circulation of *samizdat* and *tamizdat*, their model also applies to a

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<sup>9</sup> Although East-Central Europe has often been a “terra incognita” for Western scholars, it clearly was not for the writers and intellectuals who participated in literary exchange between Cold War blocs. See Patrick Major and Rana Mitter, *Across the Blocs: Cold War Cultural and Social History* (London: Frank Cass, 2004), 5–6.

<sup>10</sup> Friederike Kind-Kovács and Jessie Labov, eds., *Samizdat, Tamizdat, and Beyond: Transnational Media During and After Socialism* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012), 9.



range of texts that travelled between the US and Czechoslovakia.<sup>11</sup> As Labov and Kind-Kovács suggest, each of these highly mobile texts served as a meeting point for a variety of political histories and literary traditions across the blocs, often resulting in “an aesthetic cross-fertilization between two cultural spheres that had become visible in the broad aesthetic variety” of texts produced throughout the Cold War. Instead of acting as proxies for the ideological rivalry between a communist East and a capitalist West, literary texts more often followed their own idiosyncratic itineraries.

In order to capture the reciprocal nature of transnational exchange and move beyond a US-centric view of Cold War literary history, this dissertation adopts a multilingual and multi-archival approach. I analyze a corpus of texts that includes both primary sources viewed from new angles (such as translated novels, confiscated travel journals, and transnational correspondence) and secondary sources from Czech and Slavic studies that have not been fully integrated into Americanist scholarship. I read a range of canonical literary texts against non-traditional sources, including state-approved literary criticism and secret police reports.<sup>12</sup> The larger goal of this approach is to provide an account of the material circulation of texts and discourses that is nonetheless grounded in the biographical experience of specific writers and communities. By placing writers and texts from the US and Czechoslovakia together within a shared frame, I am able to show how American literary history was made and remade in places as far away as

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<sup>11</sup> The research included in *Samizdat, Tamizdat, and Beyond* focuses primarily on underground texts and media (known as *samizdat*), which were often published and circulated in the West (*tamizdat*).

<sup>12</sup> New work in both Soviet and US literary studies has pioneered this approach. See Cristina Vatulescu, *Police Aesthetics: Literature, Film, and the Secret Police in Soviet Times* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010); William J. Maxwell, *F.B. Eyes: How J. Edgar Hoover's Ghostreaders Framed African American Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

Prague. As I show, the formation of both national and world literary canons has always been a transnational process.<sup>13</sup>

By focusing on the US and Czechoslovakia in particular, I'm also able to explore a cluster of related questions. What attracted so many American writers and intellectuals to Czechoslovakia in the first place? And how was a small literary culture of around 15 million language speakers able to produce so many writers and artists who had an outsized influence on cultural debates in the US?<sup>14</sup> As Jonathan Bolton writes of the Western reception of dissident writers during the seventies and eighties, the West "often thought it was listening in on a conversation that, in fact, it had helped to stage by choosing and translating the thinkers...that spoke most closely to its own concerns."<sup>15</sup> The same was true of the Czech writers and translators who were bringing American literature and culture into Czechoslovakia during the period. What were their concerns? And finally, what were the aesthetic and political consequences of these transnational engagements?

From the aborted "Czechoslovak road to socialism" in the late forties to the rise of anti-authoritarian dissident politics in the seventies and eighties, the political meanings of literary exchange between the US and Czechoslovakia were never stable or fixed. But the transnational circulation of literary culture during the Cold War did lead to the formation

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<sup>13</sup> For an extensive discussion of the dynamics of transnational canon formation, see Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

<sup>14</sup> Czechoslovakia was a multinational state with two official languages: Czech and Slovak. Czech was the primary language of approximately 10 million people, located primarily in the Bohemia and Moravia regions of Czechoslovakia. It is important to note that this dissertation is almost entirely limited to a discussion of Czech literary culture in its relationship to the US.

<sup>15</sup> Jonathan Bolton, *Worlds of Dissent: Charter 77, The Plastic People of the Universe, and Czech Culture under Communism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 3.

of new artistic affinities and political solidarities between the US and Czechoslovakia. Furthermore, literary exchange enabled a larger transnational public to imagine alternative social and political worlds beyond the bipolarities of the Cold War order. Much of the significance of these phenomena lies in smaller details: in the idiosyncrasies of individual biographies, in the contingencies of cultural translation, and in the form and texture of specific literary works. My hope is that by locating these details in a wider transnational history, I will be able to draw out certain patterns and themes that had important consequences.

As the example of Beat literature in Czechoslovakia suggests, one of the qualities that attracted Cold War publics to specific writers and texts beyond the Iron Curtain was the identification of a particular countercultural ethos. This was true in both directions. Although the “sixties generation” plays a large role in this history, I use the term “counterculture” to refer to a much wider array of alternative cultural formations during the Cold War: an assortment of unorthodox socialists, zoot-suiters, beatniks, dissidents, and other artistic nonconformists who participated in literary exchange across the Iron Curtain. Many of these writers and texts resisted the dominant aesthetic, sexual, or geopolitical arrangements of the Cold War era, participating in transnational communities that were not bound by nation or political bloc. To the extent that there was a *shared* literary counterculture between the US and Czechoslovakia during this period, it also adopted characteristic forms and symbols. In particular, one influential figure from a previous era stands conspicuously in the background of this history: Bohemia’s most famous writer, Franz Kafka.

## **Kafka across the Iron Curtain**

At the World Peace Congress in Moscow in 1962, Jean-Paul Sartre referred to Kafka as a cartload of dynamite positioned between Cold War blocs.<sup>16</sup> In one sense, this was true. Especially during the early Cold War, Kafka figured in many debates among both Marxists and liberal intellectuals about the proper relationship between politics and aesthetics. According to official socialist realist doctrine, Kafka was declared a decadent antirealist. Consequently, his writing was suppressed in Czechoslovakia after 1948. Meanwhile, in the US, Kafka figured prominently in the construction of a new liberal modernist canon that was conceived as a direct rebuke to socialist realism.<sup>17</sup> But just a year after Sartre's speech, Kafka, who had died forty years earlier, was "rehabilitated" at an international conference held at Liblice Castle outside Prague. The Liblice conference is often pointed to as milestone on the road to Czechoslovakia's short-lived liberalization during the sixties, but the emphasis on this singular event can obscure the symbolic role that Kafka played in literary exchange between the US and Czechoslovakia throughout the entire Cold War.

On the most basic level, Kafka provided the West with a literary vocabulary for imagining life behind the Iron Curtain. As Mark Greif writes, for postwar writers and intellectuals in the US, "[Kafka] seemed to show the condition of the individual under a continuous line of totalitarians—first Hitler in Western Europe, now Stalin in the East—

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<sup>16</sup> David Cate, *Politics and the Novel During the Cold War* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2010), 236. For Cate's broader discussion of Kafka in the context of the Cold War, see 229-243.

<sup>17</sup> According to David Suchoff, "As liberal cultural theory separated itself from the radicalism of the Thirties and the realist aesthetic favored by the Popular Front, a notion of modern narrative as subversive had been formed." Kafka along with several other authors was "used to construct a cultural criticism that was liberal and modernist, but set socialism aside." See Suchoff, "New Historicism and Containment: Toward a Post-Cold War Cultural Theory," 138.

with Kafka usefully, geographically, in Prague, Czechoslovakia, on the border between them.”<sup>18</sup> Such invocations of the “Kafkaesque” quality of life under Eastern European communism could be reductive, but Kafka also provided a shared referent for American writers who were communicating directly with their counterparts in Czechoslovakia. For the writers who visited Prague during the Cold War, Kafka was the entry point to a much wider literary subculture. Meanwhile, many Czech writers looked to Kafka for both an alternative to socialist realism and literary strategies that would help them reach a wider, cosmopolitan audience. But given the endless rounds of interpretations that Kafka was subjected to during the Cold War, which Kafka were all these writers invoking?

The postwar reception of Kafka in the US can help us understand the version of Kafka that went on to play such an important role in Cold War literary exchange. At the same time that Kafka’s works were being removed from bookstores and libraries in Czechoslovakia, a Kafka craze was sweeping the US. In an essay on Kafka that appeared in *Partisan Review* in 1947, James Burnham describes the stages in which Kafka became famous in America:

This process of cultural absorption is, as in all such cases, correlated with the wavelike expansion of the new artist’s audience. At first there are a few friends, then scattered outsiders who welcome the first public appearance. Some among these friends and outsiders are not content with having recognized. The news must be told, the swelling begins. The avant-garde is alerted, little magazines publish and comment, a clique forms. A professor here and there revises a lecture, and a semiprofessional publisher decides to take a chance. The stirring is felt internationally, imitations pay their substantial flattery, and the general public, if it is not able to face the original, becomes familiar with chic references and with devices borrowed for the mass market.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Mark Greif, *The Age of the Crisis of Man: Thought and Fiction in America, 1933-1973* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 137–138. Greif also refers to Kafka as “one of the single most important hidden influences on American fiction,” a position that is largely obscured by literary histories constructed in strictly national terms. See Greif, 134.

<sup>19</sup> James Burnham, “Observations on Kafka,” *Partisan Review*, Spring 1947, 187–188.

Burnham's description turns out to be quite accurate in the case of Kafka's reception in the US. And although he doesn't mention it, *Partisan Review* was the "little magazine" most responsible for popularizing Kafka among an influential clique of New York critics and intellectuals, beginning with Hannah Arendt's 1944 essay "Franz Kafka: An Evaluation." By the late forties, Kafka's collected works were being translated into English by Schocken Books (with Arendt's participation), and small presses like New Directions and Vanguard were also getting in on the action. The "chic references" and mass-market paperbacks weren't far behind.

As new translations appeared, so did the first major works of Kafka criticism, many of which were produced by intellectuals who, like Burnham, had been members of America's broad anti-Stalinist Left.<sup>20</sup> Two other influential critics in particular articulated an interpretation of Kafka that situated his work somewhere between socialist realism and liberal modernism. In 1947, Edmund Wilson wrote two reviews in *The New Yorker* that referred to Kafka, although the first only mentioned him obliquely. In January of 1947, Wilson was one of the first writers to use the phrase "Kafka-esque" in print.<sup>21</sup> Wilson repeated the term again in his influential essay "A Dissenting Opinion on Kafka," which

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<sup>20</sup> Alongside American critics who participated in the anti-Stalinist Left, the other key figures in the reception of Kafka in the US were largely postwar émigré intellectuals, including Arendt, Günther Anders, Walter Sokel, Heinz Politzer, and Theodor Adorno. The key point is that both these groups were in dialogue with Marxist critics in East-Central Europe, especially Georg Lukács, who was a vocal critic of Kafka's fictions.

<sup>21</sup> Wilson's early use of the term "Kafka-esque," still in its hyphenated form, is the first usage noted in the *OED*, but there were in fact earlier appearances of the term. The earliest I could locate was in a 1938 review by the English socialist poet Cecil Day-Lewis. For Wilson's first usage see Edmund Wilson, "Stephen Spender and Georg Grosz on Germany," *The New Yorker*, January 4, 1947.

appeared that July.<sup>22</sup> Wilson's essay on Kafka swept away previous interpretations of Kafka as a writer of religious allegories, arguing that a typical Kafka story is "much less like an edifying allegory of the relations between God and man than like a Marxist-Flaubertian satire on the parasites of the bourgeoisie." Wilson's reading locates Kafka somewhere between the US and Russia, or more precisely between Edgar Allan Poe and Nikolai Gogol.<sup>23</sup> Wilson also argues that Kafka's fantasies recently gained validity "under the rule of the Nazis and the Soviets," when "men were to find themselves arrested and condemned on charges that had no relation to any accepted code of morals or law." The prewar religious interpretation of Kafka had now been replaced with an unorthodox and anti-Stalinist political reading, provided in part by a critic whom Louis Menand describes as a "dissident even from organized dissidence."<sup>24</sup>

One of the works that Wilson was reviewing in his "Dissenting Opinion on Kafka" was a strange book called *Kafka's Prayer* (1947) by the social critic Paul Goodman. The interpretation that Goodman puts forward in *Kafka's Prayer* reflects Goodman's own intellectual preoccupations during these years: avant-garde literature, Gestalt psychotherapy, and anarchist social criticism. But Goodman's idiosyncratic reading of Kafka nonetheless captures many of the qualities invested in Kafka by antiestablishment writers on both sides of the Iron Curtain. Two related features in

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<sup>22</sup> Wilson writes, "Kafka's novels have exploited a vein of the comedy and pathos of futile effort which is likely to make 'Kafka-esque' a permanent word." See Edmund Wilson, "A Dissenting Opinion on Kafka," *The New Yorker*, July 26, 1947, 53-56.

<sup>23</sup> But Wilson also draws a distinction between Kafka and Gogol or Poe, who Wilson argues can both be understood in national terms. He writes, "Gogol was nourished and fortified by his heroic conception of Russia, and Poe, for all his Tory views, is post-Revolutionary American in his challenging, defiant temper, his alert and curious mind." Meanwhile, Kafka is "denationalized, discouraged, disaffected, disabled." See *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> See Louis Menand's "Foreword" to Edmund Wilson, *To the Finland Station: A Study in the Writing and Acting of History* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2003), xix-xx.

particular stand out. First, Goodman makes a direct connection between Kafka and Nathaniel Hawthorne. While this comparison might seem arbitrary today, this was a common linkage during the postwar period made by many literary critics, including F. O. Matthiessen and Lionel Trilling.<sup>25</sup> The Kafka comparison authorized new modernist readings of Hawthorne for these critics, and in the same way, the invocation of Hawthorne shaped Cold War readings of Kafka.

In *Kafka's Prayer*, the Hawthorne connection allows Goodman to emphasize the “antinomian” spirit of Kafka’s writing. According to a strict definition, the term “antinomian” refers to “holding or relating to the view that Christians are released by grace from the obligation of observing the moral law.”<sup>26</sup> In American literature and culture, the antinomian tradition can be traced back to Anne Hutchinson and Roger Williams, ex-communicants from the seventeenth-century Massachusetts Bay Colony. David Bromwich characterizes this strand of antinomianism as the discovery of a “conscience to which all society is an encroachment.”<sup>27</sup> For Ross Posnock, this literary antinomianism is a “countercultural endowment” that was claimed by writers from the nineteenth-century American Renaissance all the way up to dissident writers in twentieth-

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<sup>25</sup>According to an essay written by Lionel Trilling on the occasion of the centennial of Hawthorne’s death, “The name of Kafka had to turn up sooner or later in any discussion of Hawthorne, for our awareness of the later man has done much to license our way of reading the earlier.” Lionel Trilling, *Beyond Culture: Essays on Literature and Learning* (New York: Viking Press, 1965), 197. For Matthiessen's discussion of Kafka, Hawthorne, and allegory, see F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 312–314.

<sup>26</sup> See “Antinomian,” *The Concise Oxford English Dictionary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>27</sup> David Bromwich, “The American Psychosis,” *Raritan* 21, no. 4 (Spring 2002): 33.



century Eastern Europe.<sup>28</sup> According to Goodman in *Kafka's Prayer*, Kafka expresses the extreme version of this antinomian position: that moral perversity is justified just so long as it is *your* perversity.

The antinomian Kafka that emerged in postwar US criticism was wildly popular among a specific countercultural milieu that took root in New York City in the late forties. Anatole Broyard's memoir of this Greenwich Village scene is titled *Kafka Was the Rage* for good reason. In the memoir, Broyard describes how after returning from the war in 1946, he opened a bookshop in downtown New York. He writes, "Kafka was as popular in the Village at that time as Dickens had been in Victorian London. But his books were very difficult to find—they must have been printed in very small editions—and people would rush in wild-eyed, almost foaming at the mouth, willing to pay anything for Kafka."<sup>29</sup> Within a few years, the Kafka publishing boom would be in full swing, but when Broyard first arrived in the Village, Kafka had already been adopted by the avant-garde. Broyard observes with a keen sense of irony, "People in the Village used the word *Kafkaesque* the way my parents used *veteran*."<sup>30</sup> In Greenwich Village, Kafka had hipster credibility.<sup>31</sup>

Kafka also had credibility among an underground community of writers and intellectuals in Czechoslovakia during the early years of the Cold War, but the process of

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<sup>28</sup> Ross Posnock, *Philip Roth's Rude Truth: The Art of Immaturity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 9, 192.

<sup>29</sup> Anatole Broyard, *Kafka Was the Rage: A Greenwich Village Memoir* (New York: Vintage, 1997), 31.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>31</sup> Fittingly, Broyard wrote one of the first critical essays on the new American phenomenon of the "hipster." See Anatole Broyard, "A Portrait of the Hipster," *Partisan Review*, June 1948, 721-728.

cultural absorption looked quite different. In the immediate postwar moment, it appeared as if Kafka might undergo a similar renaissance in the Bohemian region where he'd spent his life. In 1947, a book called *Franz Kafka a Praha: Vzpomínky, úvahy, dokumenty* ("Franz Kafka and Prague: Memories, Reflections, Documents") was published in Czechoslovakia. The book attempted to resituate Kafka in both the local context of Prague and the national context of Czechoslovakia. At the time, one of the contributors, Pavel Eisner, was working to publish his own translation of *The Trial* as part of a projected Czech-language edition of Kafka's collected works.<sup>32</sup> (Interestingly, Eisner also translated a section of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* during this period.) But after the Communist takeover in 1948, the publication of the Czech edition of *The Trial* was cancelled even though it had already been typeset. A translation of Kafka's *Amerika*, which was to be the first volume of the Czech collected works, was among the first literary works pulped by Communist censors.<sup>33</sup> As a result, Kafka's reception in Czechoslovakia would take a more subterranean form.<sup>34</sup> During the fifties, for instance, a group of young writers and nonconformists passed around amateur translations of

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<sup>32</sup> Like the English versions, the Czech translation of Kafka's collected works was to be adapted from Schocken's complete German edition. During the 1930s, Schocken decided to publish an expanded edition of Kafka's collected writing in the original German, complete with individual volumes dedicated to his diaries, letters, and miscellaneous fragments. The project continued even as Schocken was forced to flee from Hitler's Germany to briefly continue its operations in Prague. Schocken was next forced to escape to the United States in the face of the German occupation of Bohemia during the war. In New York, Schocken's new English editions competed with the efforts of other American presses like New Directions and Vanguard who were also racing to publish translations of Kafka during the 1940s.

<sup>33</sup> Pavel Janáček, *Literární brak: Operace vyloučení, operace nahrazení 1938-1951* (Brno: Host, 2004), 191.

<sup>34</sup> As Veronika Tuckerova writes, in Communist Czechoslovakia "a continuous undercurrent stream of Kafka reception, appreciation, scholarship and interest continued to flow, unaffected by the vagaries of political censorship and official culture." See Tuckerova, "Reading Kafka in Prague: The Reception of Franz Kafka between the East and the West during the Cold War" (PhD Dissertation, Columbia University, 2012), 17.

Kafka's fictions—good preparation for the more extensive samizdat activities that would help sustain a Czech literary counterculture throughout the seventies and eighties.<sup>35</sup>

### **From American Bohemia to the Other Europe**

Kafka's alleged disappearance in Czechoslovakia, right when a Kafka craze was taking hold in postwar America, is just the beginning of the story. This dissertation presents a narrative history of literary exchange between the United States and Czechoslovakia between 1947 and 1989. Each of the following chapters is organized around a writer who served as a key intermediary in the transnational circulation of literature and culture across the Iron Curtain during the Cold War.<sup>36</sup> Throughout the Eastern bloc, where many novelists and poets also worked as translators, specific writers played a particularly important role in framing the reception of American literary works, but this was also true in the reverse direction.<sup>37</sup> I also discuss a range of larger institutions—from literary magazines and book series to universities and government censors—that mediated the transmission of literature and culture between the blocs. As I show, the collision of literary cultures during the Cold War often resulted in public

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<sup>35</sup> See Bolton, *Worlds of Dissent*, 98.

<sup>36</sup> I am convinced that focusing on such intermediaries is key to constructing a wider model of world literary space. Here I am again drawing on the work of Casanova, whose model emphasizes the importance of “the great, often polyglot, cosmopolitan figures of the world of letters,” who “act in effect as foreign exchange brokers, responsible for exporting from one territory to another texts whose literary value they determine by virtue of this very activity.” See Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, 21.

<sup>37</sup> According to Soviet critical practice, “works of contemporary foreign literature are not simply allowed to speak for themselves. They are accompanied by comments, either in the form of prefaces or separate critical articles and reviews, designed to provide the reader with political, ideological, and cultural orientation.” The same might be said of the reception of foreign literature in the US as well, but this practice was even more pronounced in the Communist world. See Sergei Chakovsky and M. Thomas Inge, *Russian Eyes on American Literature* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1992), 5.

scandals, which only increased the visibility and influence of these exchanges. Beyond the mechanics of cultural transmission and canon formation, I also describe the transnational public that was called into being by the circulation of texts and discourses across the Iron Curtain.<sup>38</sup> Put differently, this dissertation proposes that it is possible to identify an evolving literary counterculture that existed between the US and Czechoslovakia. This counterculture always took on local and contingent forms, but I argue that literary exchange allowed new publics in the US and Czechoslovakia to participate in a shared social imaginary that challenged the division of the world into Cold War blocs.

Chapter 1 describes the journey of the socialist literary scholar F. O. Matthiessen to Czechoslovakia in the autumn of 1947, when he served as a visiting professor of American literature at Charles University. In Prague, which Matthiessen referred to as the “city of Kafka,” Matthiessen engaged with Czech university students across the political Left and promoted what he called the “dissenting tradition” of American literature and culture.<sup>39</sup> Matthiessen published a travelogue about his experiences in Central Europe that was naively optimistic about the political transformation he had observed in

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<sup>38</sup> Here I am adapting Michael Warner’s concept of a “counterpublic,” which he defines as the “the kind of public that comes into being only in relation to texts and their circulation,” particularly when that public defines itself in opposition to a dominant or mainstream culture. In effect, the phenomenon that I’m describing combines and revises aspects of the models provided by both Warner and Casanova: a Cold War counterpublic of letters between the US and Czechoslovakia. See Michael Warner, “Publics and Counterpublics,” *Public Culture* 14, no. 1 (2002): 50.

<sup>39</sup> In his travelogue *From the Heart of Europe*, Matthiessen notes, “In this city of Kafka, whatever direction you go, whenever you turn any wide corner, you find before you or behind you the Castle on its hill. It is no wonder that such an image became so ingrained in him that, transformed by the obsessive force of his imagination, it grew into the dominant image of a whole novel.” Matthiessen’s book contains several such meditations on Kafka. See F. O. Matthiessen, *From the Heart of Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1948), 119–120.

Czechoslovakia. When the book was published in the aftermath of the Communist coup of 1948, Matthiessen's reputation was ruined in the US. But up until his suicide two years later, Matthiessen continued to correspond with his former students and search for ways to resist the centrifugal forces of the early Cold War.

After the official Soviet rejection of Stalinism in 1956, American literature enjoyed a brief renaissance in Czechoslovakia. Chapter 2 examines the shifting status of American literature and culture in fifties-era Czechoslovakia by focusing on the early career of the writer and translator Josef Škvorecký and the groundbreaking journal *Světová literatura* ("World Literature"), where Škvorecký was an editor. In the late 1950s, *Světová literatura* published both Hájek's "American Bohemia" essay and Pavel Eisner's translation of Kafka's story "The Burrow."<sup>40</sup> (It's worth noting that Kafka, a Prague native, was published in a journal of world literature.) Škvorecký's own debut novel *The Cowards* (*Zbabělci*) was attacked in 1958 for its American cultural influences, inaugurating a crackdown on liberalizing actors across the Czech literary world. Although the novel was banned until the mid-sixties, it quickly became one of the most influential novels in postwar Czech literature, in part because of its innovative departures from socialist realism and its embrace of vernacular modernist and African American cultural forms, particularly jazz.

In 1963, the political rehabilitation of writers as different as Škvorecký and Kafka signaled a relaxation of cultural censorship and a new openness to aesthetic experimentation. The same period also saw the rise of a new student subculture in Czechoslovakia that adapted a range of American countercultural styles. Chapter 3

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<sup>40</sup> See Franz Kafka, "Doupě," trans. Eisner Pavel, *Světová Literatura* 2, no. 3 (1957): 132–52.

situates the momentous visit of the Beat poet Allen Ginsberg to Czechoslovakia in 1965 within the context of this emerging student counterculture. Soon after Ginsberg's arrival in Prague, he reported to his father, "Following tracks of Kafka here—*The Trial* a perfect parable of life here in the '50s everybody says. His books are just published after years of silence."<sup>41</sup> But Ginsberg's visit would test the limits of Czechoslovak liberalization. After spending more than two months behind the Iron Curtain, Ginsberg was crowned "King of May" (*Král majáles*) in a traditional Czech student festival and subsequently expelled from Czechoslovakia by the Communist government. The episode only increased the cultural influence of Ginsberg and the Beats in Czechoslovakia during the sixties and after the Prague Spring.

The final chapter explores the novelist Philip Roth's long engagement with Czechoslovakia and its banned writers, including Milan Kundera, Ivan Klíma, Ludvík Vaculík, and Vaclav Havel. "It was Franz Kafka who was responsible for getting me to Prague in the first place," Roth wrote several years after his first visit to Czechoslovakia in 1972.<sup>42</sup> Once in Prague, Roth discovered a literary culture undergoing a repressive period that Czechs refer to as "normalization" (*normalizace*). In the mid-seventies, Roth organized a clandestine financial scheme that funneled money from prominent American writers to suppressed intellectuals inside Czechoslovakia, and he also authored an anonymous country report for the writer's organization PEN. After five years of visits, Czechoslovak authorities finally revoked Roth's entry visa due to his escalating involvement with his Czech literary counterparts.

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<sup>41</sup> Allen Ginsberg and Louis Ginsberg, *Family Business: Selected Letters between a Father and Son*, ed. Michael Schumacher (New York: Bloomsbury, 2001), 228.

<sup>42</sup> Philip Roth, "In Search of Kafka and Other Answers," *The New York Times Book Review*, February 15, 1976.

Before his final visit, Roth initiated the landmark Penguin paperback series “Writers from the Other Europe” and served as its general editor until the series’ end in 1989. I argue that the series is an essential context for understanding this crucial phase of Roth’s career as a novelist, but the consequences were also much wider. The Other Europe series was originally conceived as a way for Roth to help his friends in Prague get their banned work into Western circulation, but it was soon expanded to include major writers from across twentieth-century East-Central European literature, including Tadeusz Borowski, Witold Gombrowicz, and Bruno Schulz. The Other Europe series also challenged the basic political and cultural geography of the Cold War, providing a platform and readership for literary intellectuals like Kundera, Danilo Kiš, and György Konrád, who each played a prominent role in late Cold War debates about the relationship between literature, geopolitics, and human rights.<sup>43</sup> As Kundera wrote in a letter to Roth in 1985, for many East-Central European writers, the Other Europe series “was a stopover between oblivion and Europe.”<sup>44</sup>

From “American Bohemia” to the “Other Europe,” the circulation of literary culture during the Cold War helped a transnational public imagine alternative worlds. Ever since Shakespeare’s reference to Bohemia in *A Winter’s Tale* as a “desert country near the sea,” Bohemia has referred to both a utopian geography of the imagination and a

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<sup>43</sup> According to Samuel Moyn, East-Central European dissident writers like György Konrád and Václav Havel helped redefine human rights as a form of “antipolitics,” a discourse that circulated transnationally thanks in large part to a network of writers who were communicating across Cold War boundaries. See Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2012), 120–175.

<sup>44</sup> Milan Kundera, “Letter to Philip Roth,” April 1985, Box 17, Folder 14, Philip Roth Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

location that can be found on a map.<sup>45</sup> During the Cold War, the literary counterculture that existed between the US and Czechoslovakia was both an idealized space of the imagination and a site of material circulation, translation, and reception.<sup>46</sup> The following chapters will attempt to map the contours of the Cold War bohemia that was located somewhere between North Beach and Prague.

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<sup>45</sup> See Derek Sayer's discussion of "Bohemia" as both a historical region and a construction of cultural memory in Sayer, *The Coasts of Bohemia: A Czech History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 5–17.

<sup>46</sup> As Bolton writes of the texts that circulated among the Charter 77 community, "The lack of clear boundaries is essential: the circulation of material texts, hard to keep track of in itself, both creates a specific community of readers who are connected to each other and yet creates the impression (or illusion) that this community is potentially open to all." See Bolton, *Worlds of Dissent*, 191.



## Chapter 1.

### Behind the Gold Curtain: F. O. Matthiessen and the Czechoslovak Coup

Some time ago, I have asked our Ministry of Information to send you a copy of our new constitution in English. When Hamlet was asked by Polonius what he has read he made the response, “Words, words, words.” Well the constitution is full of words, wonderful quotations, which have to be transformed by laws into a base for a better life.

—Petr Koubek to F. O. Matthiessen, July 18, 1948<sup>1</sup>

In the months after the Communist Party took over Czechoslovakia in a coup d'état, the American literary scholar F. O. Matthiessen began receiving ominous letters from his former students in Prague. For some time, Matthiessen had been fixated on the political transformation occurring in Czechoslovakia. After the 1946 elections, in which the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia received nearly forty percent of the popular vote, the country had been governed by a coalition of left-leaning parties who continued to jockey for power through control of key government ministries. In the autumn of 1947, Matthiessen traveled to Prague to serve as a visiting professor at Charles University. The official purpose for his stay in Prague was to give a series of lectures and seminars on “classic works of American literature,” reaching from Emerson to the present.<sup>2</sup> Although

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<sup>1</sup> Petr Koubek, “Petr Koubek to F. O. Matthiessen,” July 18, 1948, Box 5, Folder “Salzburg Seminar (Charles University),” F. O. Matthiessen Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. All subsequent references to the F. O. Matthiessen Papers will be abbreviated as FOMP.

<sup>2</sup> In 1941, Matthiessen had published *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*, the most influential work of US literary studies published during the twentieth century.

teaching was a vital piece of his mission in Europe, what had drawn Matthiessen to Prague in particular was his attraction to the so-called “Czechoslovak road to socialism.”<sup>3</sup>

Just months after Matthiessen returned home, the Communist Party came to power and Matthiessen published *From the Heart of Europe*, a travelogue that he composed during the summer and autumn of 1947. In the preface, Matthiessen writes, “this is less a travel book than a journal of opinions, a record of what I thought about during half a year abroad. It is as much about America as about Europe.”<sup>4</sup> In *From the Heart of Europe*, Matthiessen is unguarded in his enthusiasm for the transformation he witnessed in Czechoslovakia and its promise as a model for progressive forces in the United States. Even though Matthiessen had ample time to revise his book after the Communist coup, or at least qualify his earlier political judgments, he decided to publish the book almost completely unaltered, with the exception of a few scattered footnotes. In these notes Matthiessen sticks to his guns, providing justifications for the positions he had taken before the coup. For instance, in one note he writes,

Before I went to Czechoslovakia, it had already been consigned by most of the American press to a position behind “the iron curtain.” Since I found this not to be true while I was there, I see no reason to suppose that in the long run the Czechs’ disciplined good sense will fail to demonstrate the compatibility between socialism and freedom. (143)

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<sup>3</sup> According to Kevin McDermott, “this cautious emphasis on a specific, gradual and by implication democratic transition to socialism more attuned to indigenous Czechoslovak political culture and level of socio-economic development and eschewing overt forms of political repression struck deep chords among the party intelligentsia and many rank-and-file members even perhaps among some non-communist workers and intellectuals.” See Kevin McDermott, *Communist Czechoslovakia, 1945-89: A Political and Social History* (New York: Palgrave, 2015), 39.

<sup>4</sup> F. O. Matthiessen, *From the Heart of Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1948), Preface. All subsequent references to *From the Heart of Europe* will be cited in the main text.

Matthiessen's book and his unapologetic stance on the Communist takeover helped to destroy Matthiessen's public reputation and dogged him for the remaining years of his life.

The response to *From the Heart of Europe* was swift and devastating. In a particularly damaging essay in *Partisan Review*, Irving Howe wrote, "if some of us ever end our days in a 'corrective labor camp' it might well be because of the equally good intentions of intellectuals like F. O. Matthiessen."<sup>5</sup> Reaching a much larger audience, *Time* magazine called Matthiessen "a bald, mild-mannered little bachelor," perhaps a veiled epithet meant to attack Matthiessen's closeted homosexuality, and charged that "seldom has the gullibility and wishful thinking of pinkish academic intellectuals been so perfectly exposed as in this little book."<sup>6</sup> In private correspondence, *Time*'s publisher Henry Luce struck a more gallant pose. Although Luce was an anticommunist hardliner and Matthiessen described himself as "a Christian and a socialist," the two men had been acquaintances during their undergraduate days at Yale, where both had been members of the elite secret society Skull and Bones. Late in 1948, Luce wrote to Matthiessen, "I am genuinely puzzled by the radically different conclusions which can be reached by some Americans today who seem to start out from similar major premises."<sup>7</sup>

Matthiessen's book *American Renaissance* is itself one of the major premises of American literary studies, but Matthiessen's successors in the academy have reached radically different conclusions about his legacy ever since 1948. The opening salvo

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<sup>5</sup> Irving Howe, "The Sentimental Fellow-Traveling of F. O. Matthiessen," *Partisan Review*, no. 10 (October 1948): 1129.

<sup>6</sup> "Innocent Abroad," *Time*, September 20, 1948, 114.

<sup>7</sup> Luce, "Luce to Matthiessen." Box 5, Folder "Salzburg Seminar (Charles University)," FOMP.

against Matthiessen's criticism came from Richard Chase, also in the pages of *Partisan Review*. Chase began to paper over Matthiessen's more radical readings of mid-nineteenth century authors, especially Herman Melville, in order to secure a new liberal modernist reading of American literary history suited to the ideological requirements of the early Cold War. Ironically, a later generation of Americanists attacked Matthiessen for unwittingly precipitating the very same liberal modernist consensus brought about by Chase and his cohort. After the end of the Cold War, some scholars have returned to Matthiessen in order to repossess the "radical roots of American studies" as an entire field, while others have claimed Matthiessen for ascendant transnational and queer approaches to the study of American literature.<sup>8</sup> Today, with the Cold War receding into the past, it seems as if a Matthiessen renaissance is well underway.<sup>9</sup>

But nearly all of these discussions, whether critical or laudatory, leave Matthiessen's engagement with Czechoslovakia safely outside of the frame of inquiry, viewing this key phase of Matthiessen's career as a domestic drama of anticommunist politics during the early Cold War.<sup>10</sup> As a result, Matthiessen's career is most often

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<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, Elaine Tyler May, "The Radical Roots of American Studies: Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, November 9, 1995," *American Quarterly* 48. For a recent reevaluation of Matthiessen see Paul Giles, *Transnationalism in Practice* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 147. Giles references works, including Lauren Berlant, *The Anatomy of National Fantasy: Hawthorne, Utopia, and Everyday Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); and Christopher Newfield, *The Emerson Effect: Individualism and Submission in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

<sup>9</sup> To give a sense of Matthiessen's current standing, Mark Greif recently called *American Renaissance* "perhaps the most important book in the literary criticism of America during midcentury (and very likely the most influential book of literary criticism of America, ever)." See Greif, *The Age of the Crisis of Man: Thought and Fiction in America, 1933-1973* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 110.

<sup>10</sup> Even Arthur Redding's chapter on Matthiessen during this period of his life, "Closet, Coup, and Cold War," doesn't look beyond Matthiessen's own selective account in *From the Heart of Europe*. See Redding, *Turncoats, Traitors, and Fellow Travelers: Culture and Politics of the Early Cold War* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), 37-56.

described in tragic terms (which is perhaps fitting for a scholar who elaborated a democratic theory of tragedy).<sup>11</sup> According to this narrative logic, Matthiessen's suicide serves as coda in a story about the decline of the literary Left in the postwar US. But the meaning of Matthiessen's life and work looks quite different when viewed from Prague. By charting Matthiessen's engagement with Czechoslovakia, this chapter proposes an alternative narrative about the fate of Matthiessen's political and cultural project. The Communist takeover of Czechoslovakia did in fact represent a foreclosure of possibility for many of his Czech students, but Matthiessen's engagement with Czechoslovakia also marked the beginning of the history of literary exchange across the Iron Curtain that lasted throughout the entire Cold War.

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Why did Matthiessen travel to Czechoslovakia in 1947? After Matthiessen's suicide, in 1950, the *Monthly Review*, an "independent socialist magazine" that Matthiessen had helped establish, published a commemorative issue in his honor. Several friends and colleagues provided remembrances, including Paul Sweezy, a friend and co-founder of the review. Sweezy recalls that in November of 1947 Matthiessen had sent a letter from Czechoslovakia in which he wrote, "It's very invigorating to live in a country where the majority of the people are committed to the belief that socialism will work." Matthiessen believed that the Czechs were building a model of socialism that would finally extend the "bourgeois freedoms" so valued in the US into the sphere of economic

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<sup>11</sup> According to the remembrance provided by Henry Nash Smith, "The effort which Matthiessen made in *American Renaissance* to effect a synthesis of a theory of art (the organic principle), a theory of tragedy, and a thoroughgoing democratic political theory is the key to his career." See Smith, "American Renaissance," *Monthly Review: An Independent Socialist Magazine* 2, no. 6 (October 1950): 227.

activity. The polarizing effect of the geopolitical rivalry between the US and the Soviet Union was making such a synthesis increasingly difficult to envision anywhere else in the world. Yet, as Sweezy puts it, “while traveling this road, the Czechs were providing a really effective channel of communication, a bridge, between the socialist East and what was still progressive in the capitalist West.”<sup>12</sup> It was precisely this idea—Czechoslovakia as a bridge—that drew Matthiessen to Prague.

Matthiessen’s intense investment in the “Czechoslovak road to socialism” began as early as 1946. In the same commemorative issue of *Monthly Review*, Ernest J. Simmons remembers one of his last visits with Matthiessen four years before he committed suicide. Simmons was a leading Tolstoy scholar and an originator of Russian area studies in the American academy. He and Matthiessen had been allies in the Harvard Teacher’s Union movement in the late thirties. In his statement, Simmons recalls,

We took a long walk and talked much of old friends, of literary interests, and of the political future. Czechoslovakia and [President] Benes’s middle way of compromise between the Soviet Union and the democracies of the West dominated his thoughts like a bright light in the gathering gloom. He was tired and discouraged; he wanted to get away from Cambridge and go to Czechoslovakia the following year. Could I help him get an invitation to teach over there so he could see for himself how a country and people solved the problem of friendly relations with the Soviet Union and remained politically democratic? I obtained the necessary invitation for him.<sup>13</sup>

Simmons’ final meeting with Matthiessen took place after the coup. Back in Boston, Matthiessen had watched the beloved community he discovered in Prague being absorbed into a one-party state. According to Simmons, the coup became “a psychic symbol of defeat” for Matthiessen, a “last illusion that had seemed the only way out of an aching

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<sup>12</sup> Paul M. Sweezy, “Labor and Political Activities,” *Monthly Review: An Independent Socialist Magazine* 2, no. 6 (October 1950): 240.

<sup>13</sup> Ernest J. Simmons, “Statements by Friends and Associates,” *Monthly Review: An Independent Socialist Magazine* 2, no. 6 (October 1950): 304.

ideological impasse.” Despite Matthiessen’s stubbornly optimistic posture in public, the archival evidence confirms Simmons’ impression. In particular, Matthiessen’s correspondence with his Czech students and contacts—preserved with Matthiessen’s papers—are an invaluable resource for reconstructing how the Communist transformation affected a cohort of young Western-leaning Socialists and Communists in Czechoslovakia after the coup. While this record reveals how the coup became a symbol of defeat for Matthiessen, the correspondence also demonstrates that Czechoslovakia was much more than just a symbol for Matthiessen.

In the summer of 1947, Matthiessen made his way to Prague via occupied Austria, where he participated in the inaugural meeting of the famous Salzburg Seminar in American Civilization, which had been organized by a leftwing Austrian émigré named Clemens Heller who was then a graduate student at Harvard.<sup>14</sup> Matthiessen viewed the Salzburg Seminar as a utopian alternative to developments at his home institution, which he felt was increasingly suffering under a “managerial revolution” marked by the multiplication of administrative deans and a decline in faculty governance (68). As a result, Matthiessen felt a sense of “crippling isolation.” Matthiessen’s long-term partner, the painter Russell Cheney had died just two years earlier, cutting off Matthiessen’s

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<sup>14</sup> For more on Matthiessen’s participation in the Salzburg Seminar, see George Blaustein’s book-in-progress, tentatively titled *Nightmare Envy and Other Stories: American Culture and the Reconstruction of Europe*, which is one of the few works that locates Matthiessen in a truly international context. See, in particular, “Chapter 4. To the Heart of Europe: F. O. Matthiessen’s Baedeker,” which discusses Matthiessen’s role in bringing the American studies movement to postwar Europe.

connection to the Whitmanian erotic life that he had concealed behind a patrician exterior.<sup>15</sup>

The critic Alfred Kazin, who taught alongside Matthiessen in Austria, describes Matthiessen at the time as “bald, short, as neutral-looking as a clergymen,” but also notes that “the tension, the unforgettable fixity of his manner and voice in that seemingly mild-looking Harvard professor, became a need to bind that audience to himself, to find affinities.” Matthiessen would find new affinities in Austria and Czechoslovakia, especially among a community of Czech socialists and communists who were committed to the study of American literature. This political and cultural combination was becoming increasingly hard to find in mainstream American literary culture. Matthiessen’s students in Salzburg were drawn from across ruined Europe, but Matthiessen forged relationships with three Czech students in particular: Petr Koubek, Jan Štern, and Jaroslav Schejbal. These three, along with Zdeněk Stříbrný, would serve as Matthiessen’s unofficial guides in Prague. Given Matthiessen’s popularity with his students in Salzburg, Kazin worried that Matthiessen “seemed wired to go off like a bomb.”<sup>16</sup>

## 1. The Gold Curtain and the Dissenting Canon

Matthiessen’s inaugural lecture at Charles University in early October of 1947 was treated as a major event by his hosts. As Matthiessen describes in *From the Heart of*

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<sup>15</sup> For an edited collection of their letters see F. O. Matthiessen and Russell Cheney, *Rat & the Devil: Journal Letters of F.O. Matthiessen and Russell Cheney*, ed. Louis K. Hyde (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1988). For the presence of and absence of Whitman in Matthiessen’s *American Renaissance* and private life, see Jay Grossman, “The Canon in the Closet: Matthiessen’s Whitman, Whitman’s Matthiessen,” *American Literature* 70, no. 4 (1998): 799–832.

<sup>16</sup> Alfred Kazin, *New York Jew* (New York: Knopf, 1978), 168–169.



*Europe*, his entourage included the entire English faculty as well as Dr. Jan Kozák, Dean of the Faculty of Arts, “who put his traditional gold chain around his neck and led us in procession to the lecture hall” (106). During the interwar period, Kozák had been one of founding Czechoslovak President T. G. Masaryk’s “Friday Men” and had also served as chair of the Social Club (*Společenský klub*) in Prague, set up to entertain foreign diplomats and dignitaries. As the historian Andrea Orzoff has shown, Kozák was part of a network of literary intellectuals and semi-public institutions that had worked to convince Western and American elites during the interwar years that Czechoslovakia was “an island of democratic values, rationalism, and fair mindedness amid a Europe falling quickly into the thrall of authoritarianism and fascism.”<sup>17</sup> During the postwar period, this cultural-diplomatic strategy shifted to address the encroachment of Soviet influence. Czechoslovakia was now presented as an island of democratic socialism standing between the Soviet Union and the Western capitalist democracies. The current President Edvard Beneš told *The New York Times* in 1946 that, “Above all we want no trouble between the East and West...we shall do everything in our power to try to interpret them to each other.”<sup>18</sup> Matthiessen hoped to accomplish something similar in Czechoslovakia.

In front of his new Czech students and colleagues, Matthiessen outlined some of his reasons for coming to Prague. He began by observing that Masaryk famously composed the Czechoslovak Declaration of Independence in Washington, D.C., first reading the founding document aloud from the steps of Independence Hall in

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<sup>17</sup> Andrea Orzoff, *Battle for the Castle: The Myth of Czechoslovakia in Europe, 1914-1948* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 11.

<sup>18</sup> See John MacCormac, “Beneš Sees No War but Notes Spheres,” *The New York Times*, March 10, 1946; Quoted in Igor Lukes, “The Czech Road to Communism,” in *The Establishment of Communist Regimes in Eastern Europe, 1944-1949*, ed. Norman M. Naimark and Leonid Gibianskii (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997), 249.

Philadelphia in 1918. Both Czechoslovakia and the US were countries of revolution, Matthiessen claimed, and now he wanted to observe how Czechoslovakia “was carrying forward its political revolution into the economic sphere, supplementing the revolution of Wilson and Masaryk with that of Marx and Lenin.”<sup>19</sup> For Matthiessen, Czechoslovakia was “a test-case” for the American future. He felt strongly that “the most vital creations in American culture had depended on open assimilation of ideas from all sources,” but now worried that the US was isolating itself “hopelessly from the progressive peoples’ movements of the present, behind a heavy gold curtain of our own making” (105-106). What did Matthiessen mean by a “gold curtain”?

Matthiessen’s phrase was intended to suggest that the popular image of the US abroad was as distorted as Winston Churchill’s bleak vision of an “iron curtain.” Churchill’s placement of Czechoslovakia behind the iron curtain was in fact premature. The country was still a parliamentary democracy when Churchill delivered his iron curtain speech in Fulton, Missouri in 1946.<sup>20</sup> Matthiessen singled out Luce’s *Time*, which he observed was readily available on Czech newsstands during the early postwar period, for promoting Churchill’s geopolitical metaphor. According to Matthiessen, the latest issue contained an article on Czechoslovakia with multiple distortions about “the sinister

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<sup>19</sup> Matthiessen’s inaugural lecture can be reconstructed by cross-referencing his lecture notes with his own narrative account in *From the Heart of Europe*. See F. O. Matthiessen, “Inaugural Lecture: Prague,” Box 7, Folder: “Czech seminar materials,” FOMP.

<sup>20</sup> As Igor Lukes points out, “In March 1946, Winston Churchill’s ‘Iron Curtain’ speech incomprehensibly placed sovereign Czechoslovakia, a multi-party democracy, in the same bag as occupied Prussia, Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania, Yugoslavia, as well as the NKVD-brutalized Poland.” See Lukes, “The Czech Road to Communism,” 244.

conditions ‘behind the iron curtain.’”<sup>21</sup> Matthiessen also decried the view of the United States presented by “promotion literature, spread-eagle orations, sales talk, slick propaganda, the obsessive development of advertising techniques, the phony standardized picture given by the news magazine” (107). In other words: the image of an “American Century” being exported by the Luce publishing empire.

In order to help his students look beyond the gold curtain, Matthiessen articulated a “dissenting tradition” in American literature in Czechoslovakia, arguing that, “One of the main functions of our writers, from Emerson to the Steinbeck of *The Grapes of Wrath*, had been to burn through the official version of American life.”<sup>22</sup> Matthiessen’s dissenting canon drew on some of the core ideas in *American Renaissance* as well as the wider movement in American criticism to redescribe canonical US writers as outsiders and nonconformists. According to Sacvan Bercovitch, Matthiessen and other critics on the Left “tended to privilege the subversive: duplicity in Hawthorne, protest in Thoreau, marginality in Poe, antinomianism in Emerson.” The challenge for Matthiessen and these critics, as Bercovitch writes, had been to articulate these subversive qualities “in the name of a distinctly *national* tradition, a classic literature newly recovered for its quintessential ‘Americanness.’”<sup>23</sup> At the end of the forties, Matthiessen was once again rearticulating this antinomian interpretation of American literary history in increasingly

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<sup>21</sup> Of the two articles to which Matthiessen might have been referring, both paint a picture of a Czechoslovakia quickly falling under the control of Stalin’s stooges in Prague. See “Bread, Votes & Treason,” *Time*, December 15, 1947; “The Mixture as Before,” *Time*, October 6, 1947.

<sup>22</sup> Matthiessen, “Inaugural Lecture.”

<sup>23</sup> Sacvan Bercovitch, “The Problem of Ideology in American Literary History,” *Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 4 (1986): 641–642.

comparative terms. Matthiessen had already connected Hawthorne to Kafka in *American Renaissance*, but this was a connection he emphasized again in Salzburg and Prague.

In the context of mid-century American criticism, what distinguished Matthiessen's dissenting canon was his embrace of both "social realist" authors like Theodore Dreiser and modernist writers like Henry James and T. S. Eliot. The roster of names that made up Matthiessen's now-familiar canon were the subject of his weekly lectures in Prague: Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Edgar Allan Poe, Walt Whitman, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, James, Mark Twain, Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, Eugene O'Neill, Sinclair Lewis, John Dos Passos, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, Steinbeck, Edwin Arlington Robinson, Robert Frost, Carl Sandburg, Hart Crane, and Eliot. In his opening lecture, Matthiessen told his audience that the work of these varied writers were filled with both "affirmations and protests." American literature, he argued, must be studied "in terms of expansion and dissent, the widest forces released by the double movement of the Reformation and the Renaissance." In the American Protestant strain, Matthiessen located a "residue of ethical fervor" and protest. Meanwhile, the experience of the frontier had created "a literature of first discovery, concerned with what lay over the next hill."<sup>24</sup> Even as industrialization replaced the frontier as a central American experience, literature remained an important site of utopian dissent. As in *American Renaissance*, Matthiessen's dual commitment to modernist aesthetics and Popular Front radicalism remained just below the surface.

Matthiessen's dissenting canon was a key revision of prevailing critical interpretations of American literary history in Czechoslovakia, as it had been in the

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<sup>24</sup> Matthiessen, "Inaugural Lecture."

United States earlier in the decade. For much of the second half of the nineteenth century, the so-called “Local Color School,” the literary regionalism of authors like Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, and Bret Harte, were especially popular in Czechoslovakia, as were “Fireside Poets” like Bryant, Longfellow, and Whittier. This began to change in the early twentieth century. Essays by Thoreau and Emerson were translated into Czech at the turn of the twentieth century through Jan Laichter’s *Otázky a Názory* (“Questions and Opinions”) series. (The series also included translations of works by William James and John Dewey, who, Matthiessen learned, were well known in Czech philosophy circles.) To a limited extent, some of the more recent members of Matthiessen’s dissenting canon—Steinbeck, for instance—were also being made available in translation.<sup>25</sup>

But even this gives a false sense of coherence to the reception of American literature in Czechoslovakia, and in Europe more generally, before the Second World War, where American literature was not frequently studied in an academic setting. In *From the Heart of Europe*, Matthiessen surveys the “layers and accretions” of the American literature collection at Charles University, observing, “Only since 1945, with the United States now inescapably involved in Europe as it was not after the last war, has Czechoslovakian education started to become systematically concerned with our culture” (101-102). As such, criticism of US literature was exceedingly rare before Matthiessen’s arrival. In 1934, Laichter, the publisher who introduced translations of Thoreau and Emerson, also published Otakar Vočadlo’s *Současná literatura Spojených států. Od zvolení presidenta Wilsona po velkou hospodářskou krizi* (“Contemporary Literature of

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<sup>25</sup> Marcel Arbeit, *Bibliografie Americké Literatury v českých Překladech* (Brno: Votobia, 2000), 29–32.

the United States: From the Election of President Wilson through the Great Economic Crisis”). Vočadlo was one of Matthiessen’s academic hosts at Charles University, and as a parting gift Vočadlo gave Matthiessen a copy of his condensed *Moderní americká literatura* (“Modern American Literature”). The survey that Vočadlo provides is impressively broad, but the overall historical narrative it presents tethers literary developments to the US’s emergence as a world economic power, echoing American progressive critics from the interwar period. Matthiessen’s favored writers from *American Renaissance* are treated as regional New England authors who, Vočadlo notes, exhibit the freedom of conscience so important to the English Puritan tradition.

After the end of the Second World War, this began to change. In 1945, a section of *Leaves of Grass* was one of the first works translated into Czech from any foreign language after the war. Pavel Eisner, the translator, was best known for his Czech translation of Franz Kafka’s *The Castle* in 1935. In a time of democratic enthusiasm after the end of the Nazi occupation, Eisner had chosen the section of *Leaves of Grass* titled “For You O Democracy,” which Eisner published as *Demokracie, ženo má!* (“Democracy, ma femme!”). Reading Whitman’s lines, it’s easy to imagine how these verses would have held a strong attraction for the small country at the heart of a continent riven by war:

Come, I will make the continent indissoluble,  
I will make the most splendid race the sun ever shone upon,  
I will make divine magnetic lands,  
    With the love of comrades,  
    With the life-long love of comrades.

I will plant companionship thick as trees along all the rivers of America, and  
    along the shores of the great lakes, and all over the prairies,  
I will make inseparable cities with their arms about each other’s necks,  
    By the love of comrades,

By the manly love of comrades.

For you these from me, O Democracy, to serve you ma femme!  
For you, for you I am trilling these songs.

A great deal has been written about Matthiessen's complicated relationship to Whitman's poetry, especially his avoidance of Whitman's most homoerotic poem "Calamus" in *American Renaissance*.<sup>26</sup> In Prague, however, Matthiessen put his radical reading of Whitman, including "Calamus," front and center in his course. In his inaugural lecture, Matthiessen emphasized how Whitman achieved unity and wholeness through his integrative vision of politics, writing, "all the things that he is: democrat, pioneer, mystic, pagan sensualist, all dissolve into the essence of life, into shadow, cloud, dirt, and grass." He ended the lecture by claiming Whitman as "a poet for the British Labor movement and for affirmers of democracy in other lands."<sup>27</sup>

Matthiessen's socialist reading of Whitman was hardly groundbreaking. Instead, it was Matthiessen's fusion of "conservative" critical strategies more often associated with the New Critics and Popular Front political commitments that made *American Renaissance* startlingly original. According to Gerald Graff's formulation, Matthiessen "ingeniously blended the organicist poetics of Coleridge and Eliot with a homemade brand of Christian democratic socialism."<sup>28</sup> Matthiessen's contemporary, Henry Nash Smith, put it this way: "The means by which he attempted to reconcile his commitment to democracy with his belief in the tragic basis of all experience was a theory of knowledge

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<sup>26</sup> See Grossman, "The Canon in the Closet"; Redding, *Turncoats, Traitors, and Fellow Travelers*, 51–52.

<sup>27</sup> Matthiessen, "Inaugural Lecture."

<sup>28</sup> Gerald Graff, "American Criticism Right and Left," in *Ideology and Classic American Literature*, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch and Myra Jehlen (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 106.

developed from Coleridge.”<sup>29</sup> In a key passage of *American Renaissance*, Matthiessen borrows an obscure critical term from Coleridge in order to characterize the symbolism of Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick*. Whereas Hawthorne’s use of allegory “deals with fixities,” Matthiessen describes Melville’s symbolism as *esemplastic*, “since it shapes new wholes.”<sup>30</sup> Coleridge had coined the term “esemplastic” in his *Biographia Literaria* to describe the power of the literary imagination to reconcile seeming opposites.<sup>31</sup> If any term can describe Matthiessen’s critical method it is Coleridge’s neologism, but Matthiessen’s geopolitical commitments should also be described as esemplastic. He viewed Czechoslovakia as a political and cultural common ground where the tensions between emerging Cold War blocs might be balanced or resolved.

Matthiessen’s project in Czechoslovakia was therefore continuous with the aesthetic and political commitments he espoused in *American Renaissance*. Coleridge’s organicist poetics had well-known appeal for the conservative New Critics, but his esemplastic ideal also took on unexpected meanings for Matthiessen during the early period of the Cold War. In Prague, Matthiessen worked to reconcile the political conflict between East and West, in part by establishing a dissenting canon of American literature and culture. If Matthiessen’s initial canon-building project in *American Renaissance* had been to adapt the cultural strategies of the American Right to the political goals of the Popular Front, as Graff and others argue, then Matthiessen’s new mission in

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<sup>29</sup> Smith, “American Renaissance,” 227.

<sup>30</sup> F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 249–250.

<sup>31</sup> According to Coleridge, “I constructed it myself from the Greek words, *eis en plattain*, to shape into one; because, having to convey a new sense, I thought that a new term would both aid the recollection of my meaning, and prevent its being confounded with the usual import of the word, imagination.” See Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* (1817), Chapters X and XIV.



Czechoslovakia was to mobilize that canon against the emerging geopolitical order of the Cold War.<sup>32</sup>

## 2. John Brown's Body in Prague

Matthiessen's dissenting canon provided a textual basis for the establishment of new political solidarities in Prague. But these political solidarities were also based in personal relationships, particularly between Matthiessen and his Czech students. One of Matthiessen's most gifted students in Prague was Zdeněk Stříbrný. After the end of the Second World War, Stříbrný enrolled at Charles University in order to study both English and Russian literature and, influenced by Matthiessen, went on to become Czechoslovakia's leading Shakespeare scholar. Following the elections of 1946, he also became an active Social Democrat. Sixty years after encountering Matthiessen as a teacher at Charles University, Stříbrný recalled Matthiessen's "profound and lasting" impact on him and his fellow students in his memoir. He writes,

[Matthiessen] was a charismatic, friendly, but serious and demanding teacher who did not try to impress us by any acrobatics of words and gestures, or to talk down to us with elementary information...Exacting as he was, his lectures on major American nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers and poets were attended by hundreds of students, even though many were not able to come up to all his expectations. He was not only deeply immersed in his subject, but also strongly interested in his students and their cultural and social background and political future.<sup>33</sup>

The evidence of this strong interest in his Czech students' lives is everywhere in both Matthiessen's public statements and private correspondence. *From the Heart of Europe* is filled with the voices of his students, who are often given the final word on issues of

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<sup>32</sup> Graff, 106.

<sup>33</sup> Zdeněk Stříbrný, *The Whirligig of Time: Essays on Shakespeare and Czechoslovakia* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2007), 18.

Czech politics. By attending to Matthiessen's relationships with these students, we can better understand the depth of his attachment to the political community he discovered in Czechoslovakia.

In addition to Stříbrný, two students in particular figure in Matthiessen's travelogue, each serving to represent a faction of the left-leaning National Front political coalition in pre-coup Czechoslovakia. Matthiessen first met both these students at the Salzburg Seminar, and they later served as his guides to the shifting politics of Czechoslovakia. The first student, Petr Koubek, was a twenty-seven-year-old Social Democrat who had been sent to Buchenwald during the war because of his political activities. When Matthiessen met Koubek in Salzburg, he was still "a government economist in Prague, and feels himself on good independent terms with both Russians and Americans" (32). Now in Prague, Koubek was between jobs, hesitant to take a position within any party apparatus. The second student from Salzburg, Jan Štern, also spent time in a concentration camp, but was younger than Koubek—twenty-two years old in 1947—and a committed Communist. Matthiessen describes him as "Big and husky and somewhat nearsighted, he bumps around like a Saint Bernard puppy" (32). Matthiessen enjoyed listening to Štern and Koubek discuss Czech politics, in part because "they seem to differ hardly at all in objectives" despite their different party allegiances. Instead, Matthiessen observes, "What distinguishes the [Communists] from the [Social Democrats] is no fundamental divergence in aims, but, just as between Jan and Petr, a difference in temperament, a different emphasis on means" (94).

In Prague, Matthiessen discovered Štern in his element. Štern had recently obtained a passport to study in the Soviet Union and was working as the poetry critic for

*Mladá fronta* (“Young Front”), a Communist youth paper staffed mainly by editors and writers in their twenties. While in Prague, Matthiessen visited Štern’s family home, where he observed a “modernist abstraction” hanging on the wall and a desk filled with drafts of Štern’s translations of the Russian writer Vladimir Mayakovsky. Štern read Matthiessen poems aloud by the Czech writer Vladimír Holan. According to Matthiessen, Holan “uses something of the delicate technique of Rilke, but has filled it with a more direct social content” (93-94). Štern later asks Matthiessen to recommend English-language works to translate into Czech, prompting Matthiessen to observe, “here was one of the most devoted of the young Communists in a city hardly more than three hundred miles from the Soviet border. And his mind, instead of being fixed in a hostile pattern, was as curious for new experience as any I have ever found at home” (117). Matthiessen saw great promise in the world of the young Communist intelligentsia in Prague, in large part because they appeared to have avoided the dogmatic attitudes of their Soviet counterparts.

A related reason that Matthiessen left Prague with an overly rosy view of the political transformation in Czechoslovakia was that his experience was centered on the world of the Czech university. Unlike other Communist Parties across East-Central Europe, the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia was relatively uninvolved in higher education in the late 1940s. After their electoral victories in 1946, the Communists had actually relinquished control of the Ministry of Education, instead focusing on consolidating key posts like the Ministry of Interior. Czech universities were consequently highly autonomous and students played a large role in the direction of higher education during the early postwar years. Hardline Communists fared relatively

poorly in the elections to student councils during these years, even when allied with more moderate Social Democrats.<sup>34</sup> Only between 7 and 9 percent of Prague's university students were active members of the Communist party in 1947.<sup>35</sup> As John Connelly points out, Czech university students and faculty were exceptional in their liberal-left political attitudes. Even the broader Czech intelligentsia supported the Communist Party in much stronger numbers than university students.

Because of his vantage point, Matthiessen was cautiously optimistic that Czechoslovakia might maintain its balance between Western and Soviet influences. As Matthiessen elaborated in *From the Heart of Europe*, “the test was whether [Czechoslovakia] could fuse and preserve elements of both, whether, habituated through its whole long history to looking both East and West, it could still manage to do so in our threatened times” (105). But maintaining an intermediate position between the US and the Soviet Union was no easy task, as the Czechs had learned the summer before Matthiessen arrived. In July 1947 the Czechs had expressed interest in accepting Marshall Plan funds from the US and planned to send Jan Masaryk—the half-American son of T. G. Masaryk and current Foreign Minister of Czechoslovakia—to the European Recovery Program conference. But a furious Stalin quickly summoned Masaryk and the head of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, Klement Gottwald, to Moscow and demanded that they pull out. The Czechs acceded to Stalin's demands and turned down Marshall Plan assistance.<sup>36</sup> Matthiessen and Masaryk were acquaintances in Prague. Even

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<sup>34</sup> John Connelly, “Communist Higher Education,” in *The Establishment of Communist Regimes in Eastern Europe, 1944-1949*, 196–198.

<sup>35</sup> Connelly, *Captive University: The Sovietization of East German, Czech, and Polish Higher Education, 1945-1956* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 40.

<sup>36</sup> Lukes, “The Czech Road to Communism,” 250.

without the personal connection, Matthiessen would have been well aware of these widely reported developments.

“A favorite joke here,” Matthiessen records in *From the Heart of Europe*, “is that Czechoslovakia is sick of being called ‘the bridge between East and West,’ since a bridge is something everyone walks over” (141). Interestingly, Matthiessen’s source for this joke might have been a propaganda booklet he brought back with him from Prague. The booklet was produced by Orbis, the official publishing house of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. As Andrea Orzoff has shown, Orbis was established during the interwar period “to persuade the world—especially the West—of the moral and strategic necessity of Czechoslovakia’s continued existence, and to heighten Western commitment to the young republic.”<sup>37</sup> By 1947, however, Orbis was also increasingly propagandizing for a leftward political transformation. Although the publication that Matthiessen brought back from Prague begins with familiar platitudes about Prague as the meeting place of East and West, it ends with an altogether different message:

[Czechoslovakia] is not a bridge between the East and the West, for a bridge has a thankless task: it is trodden on and at all times is only a means of transit. Czechoslovakia, is, in truth, a workshop of the new European order, a melting pot where the old is destroyed and the new is formed... Therefore today, when many of the nations of Europe and of the whole world stand undecided at the crossroads of destiny, Czechoslovakia, true to its moral ideals, has entered on the path leading humanity to the fulfillment of those ideals, the path of Socialism.<sup>38</sup>

Matthiessen’s paraphrase of the joke from the Orbis publication suggests that

Matthiessen was quite receptive to the Communist public information campaign.

Although Matthiessen knew it would be difficult for Czechoslovakia to “maintain its own

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<sup>37</sup> Orzoff, *Battle for the Castle*, 3.

<sup>38</sup> See “Czechoslovakia,” Box 7, Folder “Czech Background Material and Postcards (Czech VI),” FOMP.

hard-won balance” in the face of increased belligerency from both the US and the Soviet Union, he remained hopeful both because of his exposure to Communist propaganda and because of his relationships with left-leaning students like Stříbrný, Štern, and Koubek.

The bonds that Matthiessen formed in Czechoslovakia were clearly affective as well as intellectual. The radical democratic political community that Matthiessen felt he had discovered in Prague, however short-lived, held out the possibility that Matthiessen might be able to reconcile all of his own political, aesthetic, and personal contradictions. In this regard, one particular episode that Matthiessen recounts in *From the Heart of Europe* stands out. Recently arrived in Prague, Matthiessen is invited by Petr Koubek to a party at his local canoe club, which calls itself the Varjag Club, after a Czech word for “Viking.”<sup>39</sup> Bottles of wine in hand, they travel a short journey down the Vltava River from central Prague, “to witness the final ceremony of the year: saying good-bye to the boats for the winter.” After they arrive, Matthiessen is introduced in a speech by the president of the Varjags, a carpenter by trade. Next, according to Matthiessen, “they sang ‘John Brown’s Body,’ which may have been the only American song they knew, but no other could have been more heart-warming” (97). A group of Czech canoe enthusiasts spontaneously singing a Civil War-era anthem to a visiting American professor: how can we account for this strange scene?

The answer might lie with the history of the song itself. Scholars have long noted the improvisational character of “John Brown’s Body” and traced how the song was adapted to a wide range of political and religious causes, both radical and conservative,

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<sup>39</sup> Technically *Varjag* translates to “Varangian,” a Slavic term assigned to the Vikings who ruled territory in present-day Ukraine, as well as other regions of Eastern and Northern Europe.

across racial, class, and geographic lines.<sup>40</sup> “John Brown’s Body” began as a tune played at revivalist camp meetings during the early nineteenth century before becoming the Union Army’s most popular marching song during the Civil War. The lyrics were adapted to celebrate the millenarian abolitionist John Brown, whose failed raid on Harper’s Ferry in 1859 brought the country to the brink of disunion and civil conflict. Even after Julia Ward Howe rewrote the song as a nationalistic anthem and retitled it “Battle Hymn of the Republic,” the song’s lyrics were animated by millennial and apocalyptic imagery. The next iteration of “John Brown’s Body,” however, was very likely its most popular: in 1915, Ralph Chaplin, a leader of the Industrial Workers of the World, or the Wobblies as they are better known, reinvented the song as “Solidarity Forever.”

By the time that Matthiessen arrived in Prague, “Solidarity Forever” had spread around the world thanks to a diverse cast of Wobblies, socialists, communists, and trade unionists. Consequently, it would seem much more likely that the version of “John Brown’s Body” being sung at the Varjag Club was “Solidarity Forever,” but Matthiessen gives the earlier Civil War-era title in his travelogue. Whatever the case, the tune of “John Brown’s Body” would have perfectly invoked the tensions that Matthiessen was exploring in *From the Heart of Europe*: the dream of “One Big Union” as a way of deferring the “meteor of war.” In their book on the history of the anthem, John Stauffer and Benjamin Soskis draw attention to exactly this “dynamic between the forces of unity

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<sup>40</sup> David Reynolds argues, “It was a song that lent itself to verbal riffs. In that respect it was like the spirituals sung by slaves, who, as Frederick Douglass famously noted, made up words on the spur of the moment. Improvisation became a characteristic of African American music, as evidenced later by jazz and the blues, and it was a feature of the John Brown song as well.” David S. Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist: The Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Rights* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 467–468.

and dissolution pulsing through the song.”<sup>41</sup> As numerous scholars have also shown, John Brown’s adoption by the Left was a part of the larger Popular Front cultural strategy that culminated in the CPUSA proclaiming, “Communism is 20th Century Americanism.” From Mike Gold’s 1924 biography *Life of John Brown* on, many on the Left looked to abolitionists—often alongside Matthiessen’s American Renaissance writers—in order to locate a usable past for Left cultural radicalism.<sup>42</sup> Even though this strategy had largely disappeared by 1947, along with the Popular Front, an antinomian reading of John Brown still held great appeal for Matthiessen as it long had for the international Left.<sup>43</sup> The same ethos fed directly into the Americanist canon that Matthiessen was rearticulating through his course at Charles University.

As discussed earlier, both Matthiessen and the international Left had adopted Whitman alongside John Brown. Appropriately, then, Matthiessen’s long night at the Varjag Club also had a certain Whitmanian temper, mixing exuberance and erotic charge. At around midnight, Matthiessen is bundled up by his hosts and paddled on a boat out into the river, “the distant towers standing out sharply in the full moonlight.” Later there are skits, including a “very tall ungainly” Czech cross-dressing as Esmeralda and “having so much difficulty in preventing her improvised breasts from sliding down to her belt that most of her hypnotized answers were drowned in laughter.” Next, Matthiessen describes how “four of them grabbed my shoulders and feet, tossed me in the air, and bounced me, gently, on the floor. After this all the men shook hands with me, I was kissed by the girls,

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<sup>41</sup> John Stauffer and Benjamin Soskis, *Battle Hymn of the Republic: A Biography of the Song That Marches On* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 8.

<sup>42</sup> Bruce A. Ronda, *Reading the Old Man: John Brown in American Culture* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2008), 109–126.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.



and felt that I was really *in*.” The president of the canoe club makes yet another speech honoring Matthiessen, presenting him with a certificate of membership and a pennant bearing the colors of the Varjag Club. The certificate was decorated with the slogan of the club: *Varjagové nezapomínají*, or “Varjags Do Not Forget.” Before the night ends, Matthiessen is treated to a “final salvo” of “John Brown’s Body” (97-98).

### 3. After the Coup

“And Now, the Czechs,” announced the March 1, 1948 issue of *Time*. The news magazine reported that on a cold night in late February, the “police of Communist Vaclav Nosek’s Interior Ministry, armed with tommy guns and bayoneted rifles, surrounded most government offices and the Prague radio station.”<sup>44</sup> In fact, the political maneuvers and counter-maneuvers that occurred in February of 1948 were significantly more complex, but by the end of February the Communist takeover of the Czechoslovak state was complete.<sup>45</sup> As Kevin McDermott describes, in subsequent years many of the features of Soviet Stalinism were soon imported into Czechoslovakia: “a pervasive secret police service, sham show trials, forced labor camps, deportations of peoples, state propaganda campaigns.”<sup>46</sup> All these Soviet-inspired tactics were aimed at eliminating any civil or political alternatives to the Communist Party’s monopoly on state power.

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<sup>44</sup> “COMMUNISTS: And Now, the Czechs,” *Time*, March 1, 1948.

<sup>45</sup> For a recent work that synthesizes research about the Communist takeover and subsequent Stalinization of Czechoslovakia see McDermott, *Communist Czechoslovakia, 1945-89*, 54–57.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 60. For more on the imposition of Stalinism in Eastern Europe, see Anne Applebaum, *Iron Curtain: The Crushing of Eastern Europe, 1944-1956* (New York: Doubleday, 2012).

Now back in Boston, Matthiessen was monitoring events closely. He collected media reports—including the *Time* article quoted above—and continued to correspond with many of his former students. With the exception of the *New York Times*, which had been covering Czechoslovakia’s steady drift towards one-party rule ever since the rejection of Marshall Plan funds, the US media portrayed the coup as a sudden and dramatic crisis, a repeat of the Munich Agreement a decade earlier.<sup>47</sup> Meanwhile, Matthiessen’s extensive correspondence with his former Czech students paints a more nuanced, if no less disturbing, picture.

After he left Prague, Matthiessen worked to maintain direct ties with his contacts in Czechoslovakia. He sent hard-to-find scholarly books, including copies of his own monographs. He worked on behalf of his Czech students to secure scholarships with US foundations and universities so that they could continue to study American literature and culture through exchange programs in the United States. After the coup, he arranged for his students at Harvard to send CARE packages to their counterparts in Prague. Over several months he even supplied one Czech woman with at least five shipments of nylon stockings and cans of coffee, both of which became difficult to procure in Czechoslovakia after the Communist takeover. American periodicals were becoming just as scarce as nylons and coffee. One Czech student, representing the Students’ British Association at Charles University wrote to Matthiessen, “Not even the old stand-bys, TIME & LIFE, are naturally sold here. And much as you despise them as slick stuff, we

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<sup>47</sup> Gregory Curtis Ference, ed., *The Portrayal of Czechoslovakia in the American Print Media, 1938-1989* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 55–73.

hated to see them go.”<sup>48</sup> Matthiessen instead arranged for subscriptions to *Atlantic Monthly* and *The New Yorker*, but only the latter was cleared for delivery by the mail censors.

In return, Matthiessen was getting on-the-ground reports from Prague. One former student named Jaroslav Schejbal wrote that only a week after the takeover, “I was able to see it as a film, as a picture, clearly fixed in my mind.” Schejbal elaborates in the letter to Matthiessen,

The February events were shocking for many people in my country. They were shocking even for me. The immediate impression to see rows of civilists [*sic*] marching with rifles along the streets was not pleasant indeed, because the thought that Czech people are ready to use weapons against other Czech people was able to stop my breath for a while. The streets were deadly quiet. There echoed only the steps of the armed Factory Guards on the pavement. Many people were unable to believe it as late as it was over.

Schejbal, like many other Czechs, knew he would soon be forced to take sides. Schejbal had identified as a socialist before the coup and had reservations about hardline Marxism. But now Schejbal could see only two options: to publicly embrace the changes while continuing to harbor his own private doubts or to accept Communism fully in his heart and take active part in the transformation. In a resigned tone, he wrote to Matthiessen, “This is a period of paradoxes, paradoxes in the official life, paradoxes in the private lives. The paradox of my case is a typical one, I think.”<sup>49</sup> Filled with ambivalence, Schejbal, like many of Matthiessen’s former students, decided to join the Communists.

Student correspondence also informed Matthiessen about how the political transformation was playing out within the Czechoslovak higher education system. One

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<sup>48</sup> Vladimir Kosina, “Vladimir Kosina to F. O. Matthiessen,” Undated, Box 5, Folder “Salzburg Seminar (Charles University),” FOMP.

<sup>49</sup> Jaroslav Schejbal, “Jaroslav Schejbal to F. O. Matthiessen,” April 5, 1948, Box 7, Folder “Czech seminar materials,” FOMP.

letter began by reiterating the students' appreciation for the strong influence of Matthiessen's course, "still our chief source in dealing with the American classics," but also reported, "there are many changes going on at our faculty now, some of them good, some less."<sup>50</sup> The future Shakespeare scholar Zdeněk Stříbrný reported that "action committees" had been formed and even the liberal-minded dean, Jan Kozák, had been forced to participate in their creation. One of the first tasks of the action committees was to expel all of the university students who had actively protested the Communist takeover in the first days after the coup. In fact, the student protests were among the most visible demonstrations against the Communist takeover, leading to mass arrests and one student being shot in the leg when police fired into a gathering of students at Prague Castle.<sup>51</sup> The student-led action committees would continue to purge the student body and faculty of Charles University for several years after the coup until central Party authorities assumed more formal responsibility for higher education in 1953. By then, more than 8,000 students had been expelled in the Czech lands, a fifth of all students enrolled in the academic year 1948-49.<sup>52</sup> Most of these students were reassigned to industrial labor, the worst "reactionaries" sent to the uranium mines.

Matthiessen, for his part, put a positive spin on Kozák's participation in the action committees, telling the *Harvard Crimson*, "This would indicate that these committees, which have been described in our press as though they were composed solely of

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<sup>50</sup> Květa Marysková, "Květa Marysková to F. O. Matthiessen," April 14, 1949, Box 5, Folder "Salzburg Seminar (Charles University)," FOMP.

<sup>51</sup> Connelly, *Captive University*, 118.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 250.

Communists, are apparently much more broadly representative.”<sup>53</sup> By then, however, Kozák was an empty suit with little power over the affairs of the university. Student Communists were now running the show, receiving almost no guidance from the central party authorities in Prague let alone Moscow. According to the historian John Connelly, “The only common currency was radicalism: in the humiliation and removal of professors, in the interrogations and expulsions of students, in the penetration of university curricula with Stalinist thought.”<sup>54</sup> These purges were among the harshest across the world of postwar Communist higher education, giving rise to what was referred to as “studentocracy” (*studentokracie*) in Czechoslovak universities.<sup>55</sup> Despite Matthiessen’s public assurances, his correspondence actually supports Connelly’s description. Still in the enthusiasm of late February, Stříbrný concludes, “So we have finally managed to rid ourselves of people, who wanted dissension and what is worse, who discredited all good and honest criticism. Under the name of criticism, they acted as agents provocateurs.”<sup>56</sup> Here was the atmosphere that Milan Kundera so brilliantly captured in his debut novel *The Joke* (*Žert*) from 1967.

Inevitably, the new atmosphere had a direct impact on the study of American and English literature in Czechoslovakia. A representative of the Students’ British Association reported that mail controls were just one example of the “changes and innovations” they were experiencing. After reporting in passing that one member of the

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<sup>53</sup> “Masaryk’s Suicide Seen: F. O. Matthiessen Calls Death a ‘Blow,’” *Harvard Crimson*, March 11, 1948.

<sup>54</sup> Connelly, *Captive University*, 10.

<sup>55</sup> Connelly, “Communist Higher Education.”

<sup>56</sup> Zdenek Stříbrný, “Zdenek Stříbrný to F. O. Matthiessen,” February 29, 1948, Box 5, Folder “Salzburg Seminar (Charles University),” FOMP.

English faculty had recently committed suicide, the letter goes on to describe curricular changes for students of English. “According to rumors which are very possibly partly true,” the letter reports, “ours will be about the last PhD degrees as no more theses are supposed to be accepted after July 15.”<sup>57</sup> The letter writer was hopeful that his own thesis on American literature during the 1930s would be approved, but worried that Schejbal’s project on the “feeling of loneliness in Am Lit” would face more difficulty. Schejbal himself reported to Matthiessen, “members of the Committee told me it would not be accepted if it were not written from the Marxist point of view.” He asked Matthiessen to send him anything he knew that might qualify as “a book on American Letters, written on the Marxist basis,” and Matthiessen obliged by sending Schejbal copies of works by Granville Hicks.<sup>58</sup> Meanwhile, another student had changed her thesis topic from Eugene O’Neill to “the American Negro in literature,” yet another to the proletarian novel. Both were politically safe topics for the time being.

Several of these students were unable to obtain permission to study in the US as they’d planned. Schejbal, for instance, had received a fellowship from the Rockefeller Foundation to study in the US, but now feared he would be suspected as either a spy or a defector: “Your Authorities will not allow me to come to your country to study your Literature and History...On the other hand my Government would be afraid that I want to escape.”<sup>59</sup> Matthiessen’s other promising student, Stříbrný, had been awarded a grant to study at Brandeis University in 1948 (in part because Stříbrný had attended high school

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<sup>57</sup> Kosina, “Kosina to Matthiessen.”

<sup>58</sup> Jaroslav Schejbal, “Jaroslav Schejbal to F. O. Matthiessen,” February 3, 1949, Box 5, Folder “Salzburg Seminar (Charles University),” FOMP.

<sup>59</sup> Schejbal, “Schejbal to Matthiessen,” April 5, 1948.

in Brandýs nad Labem, the ancestral home of Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis), but ultimately the new Communist government did not allow Stříbrný to study in the American “center of imperialism.”<sup>60</sup> While the new Czechoslovak government was certainly making it more difficult for students to study internationally, the US was also enacting stricter controls. One student had received fellowships from both Temple University and the Rockefeller Foundation (alongside Schejbal) to study the poetry of Emily Dickinson in the United States. Although the US Consulate in Prague had promised her a visa, she was asked to appear at an interview at the London consulate, which she described to Matthiessen as “a most humiliating cross-examination.” According to the student, “I was told that working for international cultural understanding is not important, as long as you cannot prove a strongly anticommunist attitude.” She writes that she was asked to sign what amounted to a confession, “a statement of my attitude against our government, which I, of course, refused.”<sup>61</sup> Even after she obtained letters of support from prominent figures like Thomas Mann and Roman Jakobson, the State Department consigned her to administrative limbo.

Matthiessen also learned that the Czech students were having a great deal of trouble returning to the second Salzburg Seminar in the summer of 1948. The seminar newsletter informed Matthiessen, “There were a few students selected who for other reasons were, at the last minute, unable to attend, and five from Czechoslovakia were, so far as we know, unable to obtain passports, but their case is a separate one.”<sup>62</sup> A few

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<sup>60</sup> Stříbrný, *The Whirligig of Time*, 20.

<sup>61</sup> Dagmar Eisnerová, “Dagmar Eisnerová to F. O. Matthiessen,” January 17, 1949, Box 5, Folder “Salzburg Seminar (Charles University),” FOMP.

<sup>62</sup> “Salzburg Seminar in American Studies: Newsletter I,” n.d., Box 5, Folder “Salzburg Seminar (Charles University),” FOMP.

students from Czechoslovakia did make it to Salzburg however. Writing from outside Czechoslovakia, Schejbal finally had an opportunity to write more freely to Matthiessen. Schejbal told Matthiessen, “it is easier for me to write from here than from Prague.” He described how the action committees at Charles University had taken over the role of selecting students for the Salzburg Seminar: “Prof. [Vančura] had this year practically nothing to do with the selection of students, because the selection had a political basis.” Schejbal goes on to describe how the other student from Charles University at the Salzburg Seminar was “too overscared to say anything,” requesting that other students not ask her “compromising” questions. Schejbal explains to Matthiessen, “I describe this not only to show the difference between the members of the Czech delegation last year and this year, but as an illustration of the changed conditions in my country.”<sup>63</sup>

Meanwhile, the assistant to the English Faculty, Jana Fričová, also made it out of Czechoslovakia. Writing from Switzerland, she described to Matthiessen,

I am staying now in Switzerland with my parents / they are American citizens / and do not intend to return to Prague because of the unfortunate political developments after the February coup. The communist methods over there do not seem to differ very much from those used by the Nazis during the war and the University itself has been subjected to several “purges.”

Fričová asked Matthiessen for a letter of recommendation because she couldn’t ask her colleagues in Prague, including Vančura and Vočadlo. She explains, “letters from abroad are passing through the censor’s office and a letter of recommendation for me could cause them serious trouble.”<sup>64</sup> Although Vančura would remain a member of the English

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<sup>63</sup> Jaroslav Schejbal, “Jaroslav Schejbal to F. O. Matthiessen,” August 14, 1948, Box 5, Folder “Salzburg Seminar (Charles University),” FOMP.

<sup>64</sup> Jana Fričová, “Jana Fričová to F. O. Matthiessen,” September 3, 1948, Box 5, Folder “Salzburg Seminar (Charles University),” FOMP.



Faculty, Vočadlo was soon forced into retirement.<sup>65</sup>

What about Petr Koubek and Jan Štern, the two students from the Salzburg Seminar that Matthiessen describes so vividly in *From the Heart of Europe*? Koubek, the sober-minded Social Democrat, reported to Matthiessen that the Social Democrats had been folded into the Communist Party. “It is generally accepted,” he writes, “that there is no alternative to the one party system with its refusal to permit organized political opposition to the new political and economic order.” It was the summer of 1948 and Koubek had just returned from compulsory military service. According to Koubek, the newly constituted military had brought together men from across classes and political factions and he was therefore interested to learn about their reactions to the political changes in Czechoslovakia. Koubek concluded that the people had not been adequately prepared or educated for the changes. He writes, “Many of them refuse any participation out of complete ignorance and therefore it is of vital importance to go to these people and tell them what they instinctively feel but are not aware of.”<sup>66</sup>

A month later he wrote to Matthiessen again. He thanked Matthiessen for sending news from the US and tried to answer Matthiessen’s concerns about the one-party state. Koubek had been working to organize youth groups for workers across occupations: “And for this group where we discuss and criticize and cultivate the fine Czech tradition of free speech—as you have called it—I need information, as much as I can get.” Koubek also provided Matthiessen with information, asking the Ministry of Information to send

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<sup>65</sup> Stříbrný, *The Whirligig of Time*, 25.

<sup>66</sup> Petr Koubek, “Petr Koubek to F. O. Matthiessen,” July 18, 1948, Box 5, Folder “Salzburg Seminar (Charles University),” FOMP.

Matthiessen an English translation of the new Czechoslovak constitution. He ends his letter, cryptically: “When Hamlet was asked by Polonius what he has read he made the response, ‘Words, words, words.’ Well the constitution is full of words, wonderful quotations, which have to be transformed by laws into a base for a better life.” As Koubek’s reference to Shakespeare suggests, literature had become an important site of ideological battle in Czechoslovakia. In this letter, Koubek’s reference to Shakespeare signals his wary acceptance of the methods of the one-party Communist state.

It’s not clear whether Matthiessen remained in contact with Štern, the enthusiastic Communist that Matthiessen likened to a Saint Bernard puppy. Štern never finished his degree at Charles University. Instead he became a leading ideological critic and Communist poet in the wake of the coup. As Justin Quinn writes, Štern, along with more infamous figures like Ladislav Štoll and Jan Mukařovský, “channeled Zhdanovist theory into Czechoslovakia in the late 1940s and early 1950s, creating awful consequences for writers who didn’t get into line immediately.”<sup>67</sup> As many scholars have now shown, Zhdanovist socialist realism was never a total system of control; it was applied inconsistently and unevenly even at the height of Stalinism.<sup>68</sup> This did not prevent many of the doctrine’s adverse effects on the life and work of countless artists, however. In the midst of the chaotic transition to Communism, in late 1948 Štern authored one of the earliest attacks on a major Czech poet for not satisfying the requirements of socialist

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<sup>67</sup> Justin Quinn, *Between Two Fires: Transnationalism and Cold War Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 90. It’s worth noting that while Štoll was an uncompromising and ideological critic, Mukařovský, who made his reputation as a prominent theorist of structuralism, had a more complicated relationship to the rise of Communist aesthetics in Czechoslovakia.

<sup>68</sup> McDermott writes, “as in politics, so in culture, communist rule in the months immediately following the seizure of power was ‘fragmented, haphazard, and improvisational.’” See McDermott, *Communist Czechoslovakia, 1945-89*, 79.

realism. The poet was Jiří Kolář. Writing in the magazine *Tvorba*, Štern objected in particular to Kolář's embrace of modernist sources in his poetry collection *Ódy a variace*.

In a representative passage from Štern's critique, he writes,

we find in each section of the book mottos from the following authors: from Henry Miller, famous for his pornography. From James Joyce, [companion] of Proust and pioneer of psychological idealism in literature. From T. S. Eliot and Herman Hesse, who both fled from literature into mysticism. From Franz Kafka, the writer whose novels reflect the absurdity of bourgeois life. Every writer chooses his introductory quotations from those writers whose work is close and related to his own. Kolář, then, fell for authors whose work is typical of the ideology of the bankrupt bourgeoisie.

As an immediate consequence of Štern's review, Kolář lost his job at the magazine *Lidová kultura* ("People's Culture"). Kolář remained critical of the new regime and was eventually banned from publishing. Several years later, in 1953, Kolář spent eight months in prison.<sup>69</sup>

Although Matthiessen was corresponding with many Czech voices in the months following the Czechoslovak coup, many of those letters did not reach him until after *From the Heart of Europe* went to press. Two letters did make it into the final version, however: one from Koubek and a second from Stříbrný. The quoted letters are two of the only changes Matthiessen made to the manuscript of *From the Heart of Europe* after the coup. Matthiessen included the letter from Stříbrný, in particular, as a way of addressing a troubling event that had made headlines in the US in March of 1948: shortly after the Communist takeover, Jan Masaryk, who was still acting as Foreign Minister, was found dead on the cobblestones sixty feet beneath his bathroom window dressed only in his pajamas. Masaryk's death has been called the "Third Defenestration of Prague." Defenestration, the act of throwing someone out of a window, had already played a

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<sup>69</sup> Quinn, *Between Two Fires*, 62–67.

decisive role in Czech history on two occasions, adding to the symbolism of Masaryk's death.<sup>70</sup> Although the Communist government denied any foul play and claimed that Masaryk had committed suicide—a conclusion now rejected by most historians—the symbolic impact of Masaryk's defenestration in the United States was immense. At Secretary of State Marshall's press conference on Masaryk's death, he claimed that Czechoslovakia had fallen under “a reign of terror.” The suicide was a central event of the war scare of March 1948, in which the Truman administration exaggerated the threat posed by Stalinism to Western Europe.<sup>71</sup>

After the coup, Matthiessen added a footnote to a passage in *From the Heart of Europe* that describes his last meeting with Masaryk before Matthiessen departed Prague. The footnote reproduces Stříbrný's letter in its entirety, providing no commentary from Matthiessen himself on the topic of Masaryk's death. Stříbrný, for his part, refers to the death as a suicide and implies that Masaryk had been driven to despair because the West had turned its back on him. With the benefit of hindsight, we can see that these were highly dubious claims, but Stříbrný's letter reflects the official account being circulated by the Communist Party in 1948. Stříbrný ends his letter to Matthiessen by inviting Matthiessen back to Prague to write a second book: “About Czechoslovakia suffering and yet not despairing, afflicted by evil and believing in good, limiting freedom and democracy for some only to give it back, revived and strengthened, to all” (189). In a

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<sup>70</sup> In 1419, seven Prague city councilmen were thrown out of a window, helping to ignite the Hussite Wars. Almost exactly two hundred years later, in 1618, two Catholic Lords Regent were thrown from Prague Castle, precipitating the Thirty Years' War.

<sup>71</sup> Frank Kofsky, *Harry S. Truman and the War Scare of 1948: A Successful Campaign to Deceive the Nation* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 8. More broadly, the Czechoslovak coup set the Cold War on a new footing. The Truman administration used the coup as a justification for a rapid peacetime militarization. Congressional opposition to the Marshall Plan evaporated and the European Recovery Program would soon be implemented.

second letter that never made it into *From the Heart of Europe*, Stříbrný concedes to Matthiessen that the evolutionary vision of democratic socialism had failed in Czechoslovakia. Stříbrný, like most of Matthiessen's other students, as well as Professor Vančura, had still elected to join the Communist Party. Stříbrný wrote to Matthiessen, "Here in Czechoslovakia life is a merciless teacher, giving its pupils very little time to study its lessons and requiring from them almost every day definite and binding answers."<sup>72</sup>

#### **4. The Defenestration of F. O. Matthiessen**

The attack on Matthiessen started to take shape after the publication of *From the Heart of Europe* early in the fall of 1948. Predictably, *Time* magazine's review was the most vicious among mainstream publications, but even more temperate publications took their shots at Matthiessen. In *The New York Times*, Charles Poore suggested that even if Matthiessen had succeeded in cramming "all the Melville and Hawthorne he could down the necks of his customers around the Iron Curtain," he had also managed to swallow much of the Communist party-line criticism of the US in the process.<sup>73</sup> In a largely sympathetic review in *The Nation*, the émigré writer Franz Hoellering claimed that Matthiessen had fallen victim to an "embarrassing positivism" and complained, "We get only exonerating regrets for the horrors of Stalinism, the regrets of a family member for the shortcomings of a beloved father." In the closing line of the review, Hoellering writes, "Perhaps mankind on its torturous way will have to pass through another period of

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<sup>72</sup> Stříbrný, "Stříbrný to Matthiessen."

<sup>73</sup> Charles Poore, "Books of the Times," *The New York Times*, September 9, 1948.

slavery but no admirer of Shakespeare and Melville ought to help us into it, however innocently.”<sup>74</sup>

Given what we know from recent scholarship, how might we judge Matthiessen’s interpretation of events in Czechoslovakia? It seems clear that Matthiessen remained convinced in 1947 that the Soviet Union was still pursuing its “People’s Democracy” strategy in Czechoslovakia, content to let the country follow its own path to communism. In the immediate postwar years, this was in fact part of Stalin’s strategy for maintaining some semblance of productive East-West relations, but by the time Matthiessen arrived in Prague this was no longer true. As Kevin McDermott and Bradley Abrams have both demonstrated, by the second half of 1947, antagonisms between the Communists and Social Democrats in Czechoslovakia were out in the open.<sup>75</sup> According to John Connelly, “No one who read newspapers in 1947 could have illusions about a gentler Czechoslovak road to socialism.”<sup>76</sup> As Connelly points out, “Well before their 1948 coup and the onset of high stalinism, KSČ functionaries repeatedly alluded to the stalinist methods they would employ after achieving full power, including the elimination of political opposition through coercive means, and the degradation of intellectual and cultural life.”<sup>77</sup> Meanwhile, the US had effectively given up on influencing events in Czechoslovakia by the end of 1947.<sup>78</sup> According to Connelly, the archival record remains inconclusive on the question of how actively the Soviet government was involved in the Communist takeover

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<sup>74</sup> Franz Hoellering, “The Head and the Heart,” *The Nation*, September 11, 1948.

<sup>75</sup> Bradley F. Abrams, *The Struggle for the Soul of the Nation: Czech Culture and the Rise of Communism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005).

<sup>76</sup> Connelly, *Captive University*, 116.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>78</sup> Igor Lukes, *On the Edge of the Cold War: American Diplomats and Spies in Postwar Prague* (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 2012).

in February of 1948. No matter what role the Soviets played in the coup, Matthiessen was clearly wrong in his political judgments in *From the Heart of Europe*. But it is also worth noting that many of the worst Stalinist measures were instituted after the publication of Matthiessen's book in September of 1948.

This did not stop the American anti-Stalinist Left from denouncing Matthiessen. In October of 1948, Irving Howe published his scathing essay, "The Sentimental Fellow-Traveling of F. O. Matthiessen," in *Partisan Review*. At the end of the essay, Howe summarizes his charges against Matthiessen:

Here, then, is the political portrait of our outstanding literary fellow-traveler: a literary critic succumbing to the most abominable totalitarian movement of our time; a man of literary refinement insensitive to half a continent of victims and charmed by the pseudosocialist rhetoric of those who grind these victims... a writer who calls himself a democratic socialist while apologizing for the regimes that have jailed, exiled, and murdered democratic socialists.<sup>79</sup>

Howe had warned Matthiessen about his "harsh and polemical" review several months before it appeared. In a letter to Matthiessen, Howe wrote, "It seems to me nothing short of tragic that you, who are one of the few literary intellectuals left still aware of the need to be concerned with politics, should fail to take the inescapable minimum stand for a democratic socialist: total rejection of the Stalin dictatorship, its satellites and its supporters."<sup>80</sup> William Phillips, editor of *Partisan Review*, had initially asked Dwight Macdonald to write the takedown of Matthiessen, who Phillips felt had been "getting away with his politics because most people still think he's just a literary man—a little

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<sup>79</sup> Howe, "The Sentimental Fellow-Traveling of F. O. Matthiessen."

<sup>80</sup> Letter from Howe to Matthiessen, August 17, 1948, Box 5, "Reviews of From the Heart of Europe," FOMP.

dopey but just a literary man.”<sup>81</sup> After Macdonald declined the offer, Howe took up Phillips’ assignment.

While Howe attacked Matthiessen as a fellow traveler, the literary scholar Richard Chase attempted to cleanse Matthiessen’s Americanist canon of his corrupted Popular Front politics. In the very next issue of *Partisan Review* to appear after Howe’s review, Chase published his essay “Dissent on Billy Budd,” which contained a veiled attack on Matthiessen expressed through a rereading of Melville’s novella. Chase pressed his attack further in the preface to his pioneering book on Melville, published a year later in 1949, asking pointedly, “If it is true that one’s liberalism stands or falls with one’s image of the common man, can we any longer wish to apotheosize the common man of the contemporary liberal-progressive vision: this mindless, heartless, unsexed, and remote youth who stands—a dummy already dead and wonderful in his righteousness—in the midst of historical catastrophe?”<sup>82</sup> In the same preface, Chase calls out Matthiessen by name, criticizing him for adding “an unresolved religious strain to the earlier progressivism.”<sup>83</sup> In a letter to Newton Arvin, he goes even further, complaining that Matthiessen “loves Melville and Hawthorne, has a tragic view of life, believes even in original sin and *nevertheless* commits himself to the most childish, shallow, and unexamined political liberalism.”<sup>84</sup> In the years after his death, Matthiessen’s radical

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<sup>81</sup> Quoted in William L. O’Neill, *A Better World: Stalinism and the American Intellectuals* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1990), 179.

<sup>82</sup> Richard Chase, *Herman Melville, a Critical Study* (New York: Macmillan, 1949), x.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, ix.

<sup>84</sup> Quoted in Christopher Castiglia, “Cold War Allegories and the Politics of Criticism,” in *The New Cambridge Companion to Herman Melville*, ed. Robert S. Levine (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 224.



dissenting authors would be refigured as embryonic Cold War modernists by Chase and other champions of the so-called “New Liberalism.”<sup>85</sup>

Matthiessen spent the fall of 1948 feverishly responding to many of the publications he felt had unjustly attacked him. To *Partisan Review* he wrote, “The fact that your review of my book *From the Heart of Europe* was virtually indistinguishable from the one in *Time* should be of more concern to *Partisan Review* than it is to me.”<sup>86</sup> Matthiessen also wrote a series of letters to the editors of *Time*. He attempted to clarify, “my book is not primarily an ‘excursion’ into world politics, but rather an essay on ‘the necessity for Americans and Europeans to reach beyond the barriers of their political differences to human and cultural understanding.’” He also wrote directly to Henry Luce, his old acquaintance from Yale. This letter listed a series of distortions that *Time* had included in its coverage of Czechoslovakia in the lead-up to the coup. Luce wrote back that he’d “like very much, if agreeable to you, to have a leisurely talk” about their disagreement the next time he was in Cambridge.<sup>87</sup> The October 18 issue of *Time* published only a shorter version of Matthiessen’s complaint.<sup>88</sup>

Matthiessen’s book received mixed reviews even from friends and acquaintances like Malcolm Cowley and Alfred Kazin. Although Cowley’s review in the *New York Herald Tribune* had been positive, in private Cowley wrote to Matthiessen, “I think the book would have been more effective if you had kept your opinions more in the

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<sup>85</sup> For more on this critical shift as it pertains to Melville, see Gretchen Murphy, “Ahab as Capitalist, Ahab as Communist: Revising Moby-Dick for the Cold War,” *Surfaces*, no. 4 (1994).

<sup>86</sup> Letter to Partisan Review, October 12, 1948, Box 5, “Reviews of From the Heart of Europe,” FOMP.

<sup>87</sup> Letter from Luce to Matthiessen, Box 5, FOMP.

<sup>88</sup> See “Letters,” *Time*, October 18, 1948.

background and had placed all the spotlights on the people you met in Europe.”<sup>89</sup> This, of course, had been a major goal of Matthiessen’s in *From the Heart of Europe*. His decision to let his students speak for him at key points of the book can partially account for his inadequate handling of the coup. Instead of providing his own commentary on Jan Masaryk’s suicide, for instance, he had published Stříbrný’s letter in its entirety. But Matthiessen’s colleague at Salzburg, Alfred Kazin, would have preferred that Matthiessen had not relied so heavily on his surrogates. In a scene in *From the Heart of Europe*, Matthiessen describes how Kazin led a rousing rendition of the “Internationale” at the Salzburg Seminar. Consequently, Howe singles out Kazin in his *Partisan Review* essay, suggesting that Kazin had sung the communist anthem “with a gang of future culture commissars.”<sup>90</sup> Kazin wrote to Matthiessen, complaining that the inclusion of this scene had been “hostile.” In his private journal Kazin went further, writing that *From the Heart of Europe* “sickened me by its compromises and bad faith.”<sup>91</sup>

Matthiessen’s letters of apology to Kazin are worth quoting at length because they reveal a great deal about Matthiessen’s mindset in late 1948. Before he even realized how strongly Kazin opposed his book, Matthiessen wrote to him, “I’m not surprised at what PR has done, since, from the end of the war on, I have come increasingly to regard that group as the most vicious cultural force in the country...But why they chose to [illegible]

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<sup>89</sup> Malcolm Cowley, *The Long Voyage : Selected Letters of Malcolm Cowley, 1915-1987* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 388.

<sup>90</sup> Howe, “The Sentimental Fellow-Traveling of F. O. Matthiessen,” 1125.

<sup>91</sup> See “Journal, vol. 7,” in Alfred Kazin Collection, The Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature, The New York Public Library. The quotation appears on page 358.

you – whose political differences from me are well known to them – is something else again.” In a second impassioned letter, Matthiessen defended himself to Kazin:

I put on record my political opinions largely because I believed that it was time for an American intellectual, feeling as I did in our fear-ridden culture, to make as concrete as possible what he affirmed. I expected controversy, and I knew, for instance, that you would be opposed to many of my specific conclusions. But I am basically concerned, not with opposing, but with cutting through the thinker’s alienation from society to as broad as possible a common ground.

I’m aware how difficult that is in the present state of tension between the USA and USSR. But out of my own experience I know, for example, that if I were in Czechoslovakia now, I would go with Peter Koubek in supporting the new government while criticizing it freely, as he continues to do. For I am concerned with active participation in politics, which involves specific choices, and I don’t see that in the pressures between the Truman Doctrine and the Cominform any other choice was viable for the Czech left.

Matthiessen did not feel as confident as he once had about the Czechoslovak future, or the possibility of meaningful criticism in a one-party state, but he also felt that there existed “the same possibility here [in the US], perhaps not yet to the same degree, but very actively whipped up by Time, PR, the Unamerican Activities Committee, the threatened Mundt bill, etc.” Although the immediate feud between Matthiessen and Kazin seems to have resolved itself, Kazin’s view of Matthiessen was permanently damaged. Three decades later he would write of Matthiessen, “I have never known another teacher whose influence on students had so many harsh personal and political consequences.”<sup>92</sup>

Matthiessen’s reputation as a naive enabler of Stalinism was sealed after his participation in the infamous Cultural and Scientific Conference for World Peace held at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in 1949. Although the event was put together by a progressive organization of American intellectuals called the National Council of Arts, Sciences, and

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<sup>92</sup> Kazin, *New York Jew*, 169.

Professions, the stated purposes of the conference were entirely consistent with the goals and strategies of Cominform during the early years of the Cold War.<sup>93</sup> The Waldorf conference turned out to be one of the originating moments of the so-called “cultural Cold War.”<sup>94</sup> The Congress for Cultural Freedom, which would receive funding and support from the CIA, was created in 1950 as a direct response to the Waldorf conference. More immediately, the conference was disrupted by a group organized by Sidney Hook calling themselves the Americans for Intellectual Freedom. Hook, along with Dwight Macdonald, Mary McCarthy, Nicolas Nabokov, and Max Eastman, planted themselves in the audience of the conference, asking pointed questions of many of the panelists, including Matthiessen.

At the conference, Matthiessen appeared on a high-profile panel alongside W. E. B. Du Bois, Louis Untermeyer, Shirley Graham, Howard Fast, Norman Mailer, and others. Matthiessen spoke on his usual themes: the significance of the American Renaissance authors to the contemporary political moment. Even though the situation in Czechoslovakia was far gone by 1949, Matthiessen included an anecdote from his time in Prague:

I wondered, when I lectured civil disobedience and Thoreau in the [Charles] University in Prague in the fall of 1947, whether it would seem too innocent to contemporary Czechs. Most of my students had spent two, three, four years in forced labor camps, in concentration camps, or in the resistance movement. I wondered whether Thoreau would seem so far away as to be meaningless to them. Not at all. They recognized in Thoreau a challenge of principle, the power of the mind, and responded to him in that way. At the same time they laughed at an issue

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<sup>93</sup> For background on the Waldorf conference, see Terry Klefstad, “Shostakovich and the Peace Conference,” *Music and Politics* 6, no. 2 (Summer 2012): 3–6.

<sup>94</sup> Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* (New York: New Press, 2001), 45–56.

of *Life* magazine with its deluxe pictures of Walden today. They perceived the gulf separating what *Life* stood for and what Thoreau stood for.<sup>95</sup>

After Matthiessen finished speaking, Mary McCarthy asked from the audience, “What does Mr. Matthiessen honestly think would have happened to Emerson if he went around organizing liberty in the Soviet Union? What would have happened to Thoreau if he made a consistent effort, or even a mild effort to practice civil disobedience in the Soviet Union today?”<sup>96</sup> Matthiessen responded by reiterating his theory that the “philosophic anarchism” of Emerson and Thoreau had eventually evolved into the socialist radicalism he claimed that Whitman embraced late in life. Matthiessen then conceded that he did not think either Emerson or Thoreau would thrive in the Soviet Union, but then added, “nor do I think that great figures like Lenin could have existed very well in the twentieth century America.”<sup>97</sup>

A week later, *Life* magazine published an article entitled “Red Visitors Cause Red Rumpus” on the Waldorf conference and ran a two-page photo spread “exposing” the participants. A large photo of protesters outside the hotel accompanies the first page of the article. The caption reads: “PRAYER FOR CZECHS is offered at the Waldorf-Astoria by women dressed in the national costumes of their immigrant forbears. Many of the pickets were of families from countries now behind the Iron Curtain.”<sup>98</sup> The article gathered together head shots (arranged like mug shots) of Matthiessen and other prominent “dupes and fellow travellers,” including Arthur Miller, Dorothy Parker,

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<sup>95</sup> Daniel S. Gillmor, ed., *Speaking of Peace: The Widely-Discussed Cultural and Scientific Conference for World Peace* (New York: National Council of the Arts, Sciences, and Professions, 1949), 79.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 86–87.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>98</sup> “Red Visitors Cause Red Rumpus,” *Life*, April 4, 1949, 41.

Langston Hughes, Albert Einstein, Clifford Odets, Aaron Copland, Leonard Bernstein, Norman Mailer, Charlie Chaplin, Thomas Mann, Lillian Hellman, and several dozen others. The caption reads, “They are not the most notorious 50 but a representative selection ranging from hard-working fellow travelers to soft-headed do-gooders who have persistently lent their names to organizations labeled by the US Attorney General or other government agencies as subversive.”<sup>99</sup> The entire attack in *Life* had been personally overseen by Luce.<sup>100</sup>

A year later, in 1950, Matthiessen committed suicide. He chose defenestration as his method, jumping out of the twelfth-story window of a Boston hotel. We can only speculate on the reasons behind Matthiessen’s decision, but the hardening geopolitical situation was certainly weighing on him right up until his death. According to Matthiessen’s suicide note, “How much the state of the world has to do with my state of mind I do not know. But as a Christian and a socialist believing in international peace, I find myself terribly oppressed by the present tensions.”<sup>101</sup> Among the personal effects discovered in Matthiessen’s bureau after his death was a clipping of the *Time* review of *From the Heart of Europe*. The clipping is now preserved in Matthiessen’s papers, along with his certificate of membership to Petr Koubek’s canoe club, where Matthiessen and his Czech hosts had sung “John Brown’s Body.” The handwritten dedication reads “Varjags Do Not Forget.”

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<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 42–43.

<sup>100</sup> Timothy Melley, *The Covert Sphere: Secrecy, Fiction and the National Security State* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012), 242.

<sup>101</sup> See F. O. Matthiessen, *The Responsibilities of the Critic*, ed. John Rackliffe (New York: Oxford University Press, 1952), 91–92.

## **Conclusion: *Bílá velryba*, or the White Whale**

Because of his premature death, we'll never know how Matthiessen would have navigated the shifting cultural politics of the Cold War, either in the US or in Czechoslovakia. Matthiessen's former student, the Shakespeare scholar Zdenek Stříbrný, remained convinced that Matthiessen, "a man of exceptional integrity and courage," would have avoided many of the compromises that his former students were forced to make over the coming decades.<sup>102</sup> The lives and careers of Matthiessen's counterparts in Czechoslovakia, like the biographies of many of the participants in this history of literary exchange across the Iron Curtain, followed surprising trajectories after 1948.

After Matthiessen's departure from Prague, Jan Štern, the committed Communist, embarked on a career as a leading Communist poet and critic during the Stalinist period. But like many in his generation, he eventually became disillusioned with the Stalinist model and embraced reform socialism during the mid-sixties. As a result, Štern was denounced by the newly installed Communist regime after the Soviet-led invasion ended the Prague Spring in 1968. Forced to work at a water plant during the period known as "normalization" (*normalizace*), Štern ultimately became a signatory and spokesmen of Charter 77. From ideologue to dissident, Štern's political evolution was dramatic, but not entirely uncommon for literary intellectuals in Czechoslovakia. It's also worth noting that Jiří Kolář, the poet who Jan Štern had attacked for succumbing to Western and modernist influences, worked with Zdeněk Urbánek to translate additional works by Whitman after Kolář's release from prison. Their new version of "Song of Myself" was published by a state-run press in 1955, along with additional sections of *Leaves of Grass* in 1956.

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<sup>102</sup> Stříbrný, *The Whirligig of Time*, 19.

After the passing of Stalinism, Jaroslav Schejbal, along with several other students of Professor Zdeněk Vančura (including the novelist Josef Škvorecký), went on to write essays on American literature for the influential literary journal *Světová literatura* (“World Literature”), a publication I discuss in the next chapter. Matthiessen had an immense influence on Schejbal’s life and career. In an essay prepared for the 34th Congress of PEN International in New York in 1965, Schejbal describes how Matthiessen affected the reception of US literature in postwar Czechoslovakia:

After the War Czechoslovak publishing houses were influenced in no small degree in their decisions to bring out new translations of works already translated by the contemporary assessment of their authors in the United States itself. Here we may cite a typical example: the preoccupation of the great five humanistic writers of the middle of the 19th century—Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville and Whitman—with the possibilities of democracy in the United States, as formulated by F. O. Matthiessen in his *American Renaissance*. A kind of renaissance of the works of these authors has taken place also in Czechoslovakia. The critical examination to which they subjected Puritanism, their insight into the duality of good and evil in man, their high recognition of man’s power to face up to his own imperfections and the imperfections of the world, the courage with which these great representatives of socially critical literature penetrated to the core of the individual and of society, fearlessly exposing its unplumbed and often terrifying depths—these are the qualities for which the works of American humanistic writers will always find a large and appreciative reading public in Czechoslovakia.<sup>103</sup>

Fifteen years after Matthiessen’s suicide, during a period of relative liberalization in Czechoslovakia, Schejbal was once again able to publicly affirm the influence of Matthiessen and his dissenting canon in Czechoslovakia. After the Soviet invasion of 1968, however, Schejbal’s life would take an unexpected turn. Instead of remaining in normalized Czechoslovakia, Schejbal chose to emigrate to the US, where he spent the remainder of his long career as a professor of American literature at the University of

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<sup>103</sup> Hela Kunzova and Hana Rybakova, *American Literature in Czechoslovakia 1945-1965* (Prague: Czechoslovak P.E.N. Club, 1966), 8.



Illinois. Perhaps Matthiessen's initial description of Schejbal in *From the Heart of Europe* was prophetic: "with his endless fund of energy," he was "like a boy on any Middle-Western campus" (46).

In contrast to Štern and Schejbal, Stříbrný's career was characterized by a series of political compromises, many of which he struggled to justify later in life. Looking back on the letter he had written to Matthiessen that was included in *From the Heart of Europe*, Stříbrný writes, "This can be read now with hindsight as the naïve effusion of a romantic student, but then I could not know or anticipate the full extent of the brutal totalitarian methods that started to be applied gradually in the whole society."<sup>104</sup> Stříbrný earned his PhD in English Literature in 1951, teaching briefly at Charles University before leaving to join a small group of modern philologists at the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences and Arts in 1952. Amidst this quieter ideological atmosphere, he continued to specialize in Shakespeare, limiting his work in the American field to the Leftist writer Howard Fast. During the liberalization of the 1960s, he was able to return to Charles University as the head of the English Faculty.

In 1963, when travel restrictions were relaxed for Czechoslovak citizens, Stříbrný finally had the opportunity to travel to the US. In San Francisco, he met Lawrence Ferlinghetti at City Lights Bookstore and with his help tracked down Allen Ginsberg in Greenwich Village. He and his wife Mariana offered to secure an invitation from the Czechoslovak Writer's Union for Ginsberg. When Ginsberg finally visited Prague in 1965 (the subject of Chapter 3 of this dissertation), Stříbrný invited Ginsberg to read "Howl" in front of hundreds of enthusiastic students at Charles University. In the 1970s,

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<sup>104</sup> Stříbrný, *The Whirligig of Time*, 19.

Stříbrný hosted another important visitor in Prague: the novelist Philip Roth, the subject of the final chapter of this dissertation. In his memoir, Stříbrný claims that Roth based a minor character from *The Professor of Desire* (1972) on him. Given Matthiessen's influence on Stříbrný, it seems fitting that Roth's old professor has adopted a rather perverse form of political dissent against the Communist regime: he is laboring at a Czech translation of *Moby-Dick* that has no prospect of ever being approved for publication because of the professor's politics. In any event, a perfectly good translation had already been published. In 1947, Herman Melville's novel had been published in Czech as *Bílá velryba*. But the Czech professor confesses, "the futility of what I'm doing would appear to be my deepest source of satisfaction."<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Philip Roth, *The Professor of Desire* (New York: Vintage, 1994), 171.

## Chapter 2.

### Heroes and Cowards: Josef Škvorecký's American Epigraphs

Within a year of its publication in 1958, Josef Škvorecký's debut novel *Zbabělci*, or *The Cowards*, was banned in Czechoslovakia. The first strike against the novel was that it contradicted earlier socialist realist representations of the glorious uprisings of May 1945.<sup>1</sup> The novel takes place in a small town in northeastern Bohemia in the closing days of the Second World War. The Nazi occupation forces are retreating to the west and refugees stream in from camps recently liberated in the east. Soviet troops are expected to arrive any day. Meanwhile, the townspeople prepare themselves by organizing an ineffectual militia that conducts its drills without any weapons. And as the Red Army approaches, all young Danny Smiřický wants to do is pursue his love interest Irene and play his saxophone with his friends at their local hangout, the Port Arthur. Danny is a self-absorbed daydreamer who has been obsessed with Dixieland music ever since the ninth grade. "That's when I fell in love with Judy Garland and that's when it all began," he thinks. "I thought about myself and about her, but mainly about myself, and I thought about how things would be *if*."<sup>2</sup> Škvorecký's references to jazz and Judy Garland didn't ease the novel's reception. The second strike against *The Cowards* was that, as one

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<sup>1</sup> See, for, instance Jan Drda's socialist realist novel *Němá barikáda* (1946), which presents a black-and-white picture of heroic Czechs rising against their fascist oppressors.

<sup>2</sup> Josef Škvorecký, *The Cowards* (Toronto: Vintage Books, 1995), 19.

leading Czech critic put it, the novel stunk of “the breath exuded by the concoction of American contemporary literature.”<sup>3</sup>

When *The Cowards* was released in 1958, Škvorecký was one of the most influential editors and translators of American literature in Czechoslovakia. In fact, Škvorecký’s key role as an intermediary between literary cultures in the US and Czechoslovakia underscores how the idiosyncratic tastes and preoccupations of a single figure can affect which texts and discourses made it into circulation throughout the Cold War. In the case of Škvorecký, those tastes and preoccupations are usefully encoded within the text of *The Cowards*. Even the paratext bears close reading. The original dust jacket of novel described *The Cowards* as “a caustic satire on the cowardice of the bourgeoisie,” but as Škvorecký himself points out, “the story, which presented an important historical event not from the ‘objective’ (i.e., Marxist) point of view, but through the eyes of a sax-blowing bourgeois youngster, was ideally suited to become the target of righteous fury.”<sup>4</sup> Like a number of Czech writers and translators from the fifties, Škvorecký hoped to rejuvenate Czech literature through a reconstituted “realism” that drew on heterogeneous sources but paid little attention to official socialist requirements.<sup>5</sup>

Even though *The Cowards* had been approved by censors before its publication, there is significant evidence that the conservative wing of the Czechoslovak Writer’s Union was setting up *The Cowards* to be a part of a forthcoming cultural crackdown in

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<sup>3</sup> Jiří Hájek, “Novoroční úvahy o nové české próze,” *Literární noviny* 8, no. 3 (January 7, 1959): 1–2. Hájek’s quote is translated in Michal Schonberg, “The Case of the Mangy Pussycat: An Account of the Literary Scandal Surrounding the Publication of *The Cowards*,” in *The Achievement of Josef Škvorecký*, ed. Sam Solecki (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 537.

<sup>4</sup> Josef Škvorecký, *Talkin’ Moscow Blues*, ed. Sam Solecki (Toronto: L. & O. Dennys, 1988), 46–47.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

1959.<sup>6</sup> In March of that year, Ladislav Štoll, one of the leading cultural apparatchiks in the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, stepped up to the dais at the Congress of the Czechoslovak Writer's Union. For most of the decade, Štoll had assumed a lead role in the Stalinization of Czech literary culture.<sup>7</sup> Štoll's ideological goal at the conference was to undo the damage done to socialist literature in the years since Nikita Khrushchev had denounced the personality cult of Josef Stalin at the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956. Towards the conclusion of Štoll's long-winded speech he turned his attention to what he considered a dangerous development in the contemporary Czech literary scene: "It is a book by Škvorecký, which I would prefer not to deal with at all, because its whole spirit is profoundly alien to our beautiful democratic and humanistic literature. It is an artistically dishonest thing, untrue and cynical."<sup>8</sup> Škvorecký's novel was "dishonest" because it departed from socialist realist conventions and adopted a subjective, first-person mode of narration associated with bourgeois genres abroad.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See Schonberg, "The Case of the Mangy Pussycat," 533.

<sup>7</sup> In 1950, Štoll's lecture titled *Třicet let bojů za českou socialistickou poezii* (Thirty Years of Struggle to Create a Czech Socialist Poetry) was adopted by the Communist Party and published as a guide to the official doctrine of socialist realism in Czechoslovakia. See Michal Příbáň, ed., *Z dějin českého myšlení o literaturu: Antologie k dějinám české literatury 1945-1990* (Praha: Ústav pro českou literaturu AV ČR, 2001), 16-33.

<sup>8</sup> Excerpts of Štoll's speech are translated and quoted in Schonberg, "The Case of the Mangy Pussycat," 538. For the speech in its original see Ladislav Štoll, "Úkoly literatury v kulturní revoluci," *Literární noviny* 8, no. 10 (March 7, 1959): 1-8.

<sup>9</sup> According to one history of Czech literature, "against the dictates of ideological models," *The Cowards* presents "the spontaneous vitality of experience (of music, of eroticism); against the pathos of impersonal historical processes, everyday reality and the intensity of the moment; against communal mythology, a record of external reality, human speech and thought." Furthermore, Škvorecký's use of slang betrayed his familiarity with the Anglo-American literary context. See Pavel Janoušek, ed., *Dějiny české literatury 1945-1989. III. 1958-1969* (Praha: Academia, 2007), 282. All translations are mine, unless otherwise noted.

After the release of *The Cowards*, several moderate critical voices in Czechoslovakia made the mistake of providing cautious support to Škvorecký's book. In his speech, Štoll singled out these critics, accusing them of "revisionist tendencies and hostile ideological influences." Štoll declared that these "foreign and unhealthy influences" would not "deflect our literature from the path already embarked upon."<sup>10</sup> In the subsequent campaign against Škvorecký, not only was his novel banned, but supportive editors from several publishing houses and journals were fired. Škvorecký himself was removed from his influential position as an editor and translator at the journal *Světová literatura* ("World Literature"), and he was called in front of the Central Committee of the Writer's Union for self-criticism.

In just a few short years, however, the political winds would shift yet again. A new edition of *The Cowards* would be approved for publication in 1964, with only a few subtle edits.<sup>11</sup> Already infamous, the book sold over 100,000 copies (an astounding number in a country of less than 15 million). While the 1958 edition had begun with a single epigraph from the French socialist writer and Nobel Prize winner Romain Rolland, the new edition opened with two additional quotations: one from Ernest Hemingway and the second from the American jazz musician Milton "Mezz" Mezzrow. Later in the chapter, I will discuss each of these epigraphs in greater detail, but for now it's worth emphasizing that while Hemingway had won the Nobel Prize a decade earlier, Mezzrow was almost completely unknown in the Eastern bloc. (David Yaffe describes the eccentric

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<sup>10</sup> Štoll, "Úkoly literatury v kulturní revoluci."

<sup>11</sup> In addition to two new epigraphs, the 1964 edition begins with a new preface from Škvorecký that tried to clear up several "misunderstandings" from 1958. The updated edition is also the basis for the English translation of 1970. See Josef Škvorecký, *Zbabělci* (Praha: Československý spisovatel, 1964). In 2009, Michael Špirit released a new edition of *Zbabělci* with extensive commentary. See Špirit, *Zbabělci: komentář* (Praha: Books and Cards, 2009).

Mezzrow as “a hepcat, a pothead, and Virgil through the jazz matrix—a Jew who actually believed he had physically turned black.”<sup>12</sup>) Škvorecký’s new epigraphs signal how he helped promote an idiosyncratic canon of American literature in Czechoslovakia during the late 1950s that combined mainstream authors like Hemingway and William Faulkner with writers and artists associated with mid-century Harlem, including Mezzrow and Langston Hughes. Through a complicated process of transnational and cross-racial identification, Škvorecký introduced a new vernacular modernism into postwar Czech literature.<sup>13</sup>

The controversy surrounding *The Cowards*, and the novel’s crucial place in Czech literary history, is linked to the status of American literature in Czechoslovakia, both before and after Khrushchev’s “secret speech” in 1956. This chapter will examine the shifting meanings of American literature in Czechoslovakia during this period through the lens of Škvorecký’s early career as an editor at the landmark journal *Světová literatura*, which was founded in 1956. The journal was extremely popular among Czech readers in large part because it provided a view of life and culture in the West that had been unavailable for much of the Stalinist period. Through the pages *Světová literatura*, Škvorecký, along with a new generation of ambitious editors and translators, also helped reinvent American literature for the readers of communist Czechoslovakia. Furthermore, Škvorecký and *Světová literatura* were instrumental in bringing new styles and discourses into Czechoslovak literary culture. Against Štoll’s socialist realist ideal of

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<sup>12</sup> David Yaffe, *Fascinating Rhythm: Reading Jazz in American Writing* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 5–6.

<sup>13</sup> For a recent account of American “vernacular modernism,” see Michael Borshuk, *Swinging the Vernacular: Jazz and African American Modernist Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

revolutionary purity, Škvorecký championed a new transnational and cross-racial hybridity, seeking to integrate literary and cultural resources from abroad that could reinvigorate Czech literature and culture. Through his epigraphs for the 1964 edition of *The Cowards*, Škvorecký inscribes this entire history of critical labor into one of the central texts of postwar Czech literature.

### 1. Literary Trash

Any work of art that lives was created out of the very substance of its times. The artist did not build it himself. The work describes the sufferings, loves and dreams of his friends.

–Romain Rolland<sup>14</sup>

Josef Škvorecký composed the first version of *The Cowards* between 1948 and 1949, almost a decade before it could be published. The delay was due in large part to the Communist takeover, which occurred just as Škvorecký was beginning to draft the novel. We can get a sense of Škvorecký's experience of this dramatic political transformation from his long story "Spectator on a February Night" (1948). The narrative takes place as Prague is gripped by political demonstrations and counter-demonstrations. A group of young, pro-Western Czechs take shelter inside the American Institute located just above the Prague YMCA. The glass sign in front of the Institute has just been smashed by rocks, evidently thrown by comrades from the nearby Communist Party secretariat building. Inside, an American flag hangs on the wall alongside posters of Truman and Roosevelt. An American radio station plays in the background and a young Socialist

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<sup>14</sup> Lone epigraph to the first edition of *The Cowards* (1958). All epigraphs are quoted in their English versions taken from the 1970 translation by Jeanne Němcová.



leader sits reading a Pan American Airlines brochure. As they briefly “hold the fort,” the group strikes a series of self-conscious Hollywood poses, interspersing their conversation with language borrowed from American movies.

Škvorecký’s story chronicles the passing of a world in which enthusiasm for American culture was widespread among young Czechs. By the story’s end, the narrator is presented with an opportunity to escape Czechoslovakia. This was a common dilemma for many Czechs—after 1948, tens of thousands of people emigrated to the West.<sup>15</sup> Although Škvorecký himself would not emigrate until after the Soviet-led invasion two decades later, Škvorecký’s unnamed narrator decides to flee across the border in a friend’s Packard. For the journey, the narrator changes into his best suit, “a suit tailored from the fabric of American army officer’s uniforms, dyed dark brown.”<sup>16</sup>

Like his characters in “Spectator,” Škvorecký was later accused of being one of the Czech “rich kids, golden youth, zoot-suiters” who had come of age during the German occupation thrilling to the forbidden fruits of American popular culture.<sup>17</sup> This is a self-mythology that Škvorecký also embraces in his autobiographical writing. Škvorecký claims he began learning English soon after the Munich Agreement was signed in 1938 so that he could write a fan letter to Judy Garland. He then spent the war years reading writers like Mark Twain, Jack London, Theodore Dreiser, Upton Sinclair, and Sinclair Lewis, who were all well known and available in Czech translation. After the

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<sup>15</sup> According to Jiří Holý, sixty thousand people fled Czechoslovakia to the West after the coup. That number would swell to around 250,000 by the sixties. See Jiří Holý, *Writers Under Siege: Czech Literature since 1945*, trans. Elizabeth S. Morrison and Jan Culik (Portland: Sussex Academic Press, 2010), 25.

<sup>16</sup> Josef Škvorecký, *When Eve Was Naked: Stories of a Life’s Journey* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), 143.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

war, Škvorecký moved to Prague to study medicine at Charles University, but quickly switched to the Faculty of Arts, where he wrote his undergraduate thesis on Ernest Hemingway and eventually earned a PhD in 1951 with a dissertation titled “Thomas Paine and His Significance Today.”<sup>18</sup> Škvorecký would have overlapped with F. O. Matthiessen at Charles University during the fall of 1947, but there is no evidence that Škvorecký enrolled in Matthiessen’s American literature seminar. It seems likely that he would have attended some of Matthiessen’s public lectures, however, and Škvorecký was an enthusiastic student of Matthiessen’s colleague Professor Zdeněk Vančura.<sup>19</sup> Škvorecký completed the first draft of *The Cowards* during these years, but he would choose to keep the manuscript in the drawer for nearly a decade.

It’s not hard to understand why. The first half of the 1950s in Czechoslovakia saw the establishment of a new censorship regime that sought to transform Czech literary culture according to a Stalinist model. As with many post-revolutionary societies, the ČSSR became obsessed with surveillance and control of national cultural life after 1948. Communist *purity* became the watchword; contamination from abroad, especially the enemy United States, was seen as a great danger. This was true across the Soviet bloc during these years. As the scholar Deming Brown wrote in his early study of Soviet attitudes towards American literature, “Soviet abuse of American literature and culture in

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<sup>18</sup> Sam Solecki, *The Achievement of Josef Škvorecký* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 197–198.

<sup>19</sup> Škvorecký remembers, “He had a habit of talking with a kind of dry English objectivity and wit, and yet it was obvious that he loved his subject very deeply.” See Škvorecký, *Talkin’ Moscow Blues*, 71. Matthiessen refers to Vančura in *From the Heart of Europe* as the first professor of American literature in Central Europe (see Chapter 1).

the years 1946-1955 was as indiscriminate as it was thorough.”<sup>20</sup> More recent scholarship has shown that the system of censorship and control was never total and a great deal of culture existed in a grey zone, even during the Stalinist period.<sup>21</sup> But between 1948 and 1956, much of what had constituted American literature in Czechoslovakia disappeared from public view.

In order to accomplish this transformation of Czech literary culture, the Communist Party coopted nationalist discourses that predated the Cold War. For example, the Communist campaign against what was called *literární brak*—or “literary trash”—had immediate antecedents in the period of German occupation, but could also draw on a much older strain of Czech cultural nationalism. The category of *brak* was epitomized by broadly popular genres like Westerns and detective novels, many of which were imported from the United States. As Pavel Janáček demonstrates, conservative forces within the Czech lands had long been trying to exclude such pulp genres in order to cultivate an elite national culture. According to Janáček, “the existing literary periphery was depicted as a parasitical system, a malignant tumor, a dangerous aggressor, which like a virus penetrates Czech literary culture from without, causing it to disintegrate.”<sup>22</sup> Although a new cadre of Communist officials had replaced the old “bourgeois elite,” they took up the nationalist battle against *brak*. But instead of

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<sup>20</sup> Deming Brown, *Soviet Attitudes toward American Writing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), 169.

<sup>21</sup> See Jiřina Šmejkalová, *Cold War Books in the “Other” Europe and What Came After* (Boston: Brill, 2011).

<sup>22</sup> See Pavel Janáček, *Literární brak: Operace vyloučení, operace nahrazení 1938-1951* (Brno: Host, 2004), 398. Janáček emphasizes the continuities in the “representation, rejection, and censorship” of popular literature before and after the establishment of Communism in Czechoslovakia. Furthermore, he argues that the two operative principles in the construction of a new “socialist literature” were *exclusion* and *replacement*, especially of popular genres, or *brak*.

promoting the “higher” forms of literary expression that had been celebrated during the First Republic, Communist officials enforced a strict adherence to the doctrine of socialist realism.

Between 1949 and 1957 no American detective novels would be published in Czechoslovakia, but a new form of fiction just as formulaic as the outlawed *brak* began to fill Czech bookshelves.<sup>23</sup> Škvorecký himself has pointed out the ironic similarity between a stereotypical socialist-realist plot and the American pulp fiction he grew up reading, referring to socialist realism as “a type of socialist western”:

I always compared so-called socialist realism with the American western, because they are the same types of formulaic fiction. The original western, for example, features a ranch, a band of desperadoes stealing cattle from it, a local sheriff who’s an incompetent, and a stranger who appears out of nowhere. The stranger is fed up with the desperadoes, and decides to take care of them himself, which he does. He also winds up marrying the daughter of the ranch owner, and off they go together into the sunset. Compare that to the socialist-realist novel: here there’s a collective farm, a band of saboteurs or lazy workers slowing down production, local authorities who are incompetents, and a Party Secretary from the district capital who appears out of nowhere. He exposes the saboteurs and saves the farm. Then he marries the local school teacher, and off they go together for someplace else.<sup>24</sup>

According to Škvorecký, “only the rising and setting suns are missing.”<sup>25</sup> Škvorecký was familiar with the formula because he had written several Western stories for the popular pulp weekly *Rodokaps* (“Pocketnovels”) before the war. In his book on *brak*, Janáček describes the elite backlash against *Rodokaps* during the early years of the German occupation in order to show how later Communist censorship practices adopted a very similar discourse about the purification of Czech national literature. After 1948, the

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 394.

<sup>24</sup> See Josef Škvorecký, interview with John Glusman, “Josef Skvorecky, The Art of Fiction No. 112,” *Paris Review*, Winter 1989.

<sup>25</sup> Škvorecký, *Talkin’ Moscow Blues*, 45.

forces of the state could now be organized to help execute this cleansing operation and replace American pulp fiction with approved socialist genres.

Centralized control of the publishing industry began in 1949 with the Publishing Nationalization Act. Under its authority, the Czech National Publication Council (*Národní ediční rada česká*) was created with the authority to review the publishing programs of individual houses and to approve individual titles. The council would be replaced by the even more powerful *Hlavní správa tiskového dohledu* (HSTD) in 1953. The scholar Petr Šámál translates the name of this government body as the “Central Office of the Guardians of the Printed Word,” which, although melodramatic, does capture the Orwellian quality of the HSTD’s work.<sup>26</sup> The HSTD was modeled on the famous Soviet censorship agency *Glavlit* (short for General Directorate for the Protection of State Secrets in the Press) but also took on the related responsibilities of the Soviet organization *Goskomizdat*, which was concerned with the ideological and political control of literature. Despite the ominous presence of such centralized agencies, censorship in Czechoslovakia depended on a diffuse exercise of state power. As Derek Sayer writes, “Printing presses, newspapers, magazines, and publishing houses were ‘publicly’ owned, and their editorial boards were disciplined through the *nomenklatura* system of politically vetoed appointments before any formal censorship came into play.”<sup>27</sup> As a result, the state publishing house responsible for foreign literary translations after 1953 *Státní nakladatelství krásné literatury, hudby a umění* (SNKLHU) was extremely cautious about the American titles that it chose to publish.

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<sup>26</sup> See Šámál’s English rendering of HSTD in *Soustružníci lidských duší*, 197.

<sup>27</sup> Derek Sayer, *The Coasts of Bohemia: A Czech History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 264.

Although writers such as Mark Twain continued to be published as part of SNKLHU's "Library of Classics" during the first half of the fifties, SNKLHU only published a very select group of contemporary American writers who could be squared with the doctrine of socialist realism. Scholars and critics also attempted to redescribe American literature according to communist terminology. In 1953, Zdeněk Vančura, Škvorecký's former professor, published a volume entitled "The Literature of American Colonial Struggle and Liberation War in the Eighteenth Century" (*Literatura amerického koloniálního odporu a osvobozené války v 18. století*), which recast American Revolutionary culture in Marxist-Leninist terms.<sup>28</sup> The same year, SNKLHU published a book on the American writer Howard Fast called "The Pioneer of Socialist Realism in the U.S.A." (*Průkopník socialistického realismu v U.S.A.*). The book was written by none other than Zdeněk Stříbrný, one of F. O. Matthiessen's prize pupils during the fall of 1947. Fast had become one of the few living American authors to receive positive critical attention in the Soviet sphere.<sup>29</sup> But the Czech regime's love affair with Fast was short-lived. After the Hungarian Uprising in 1956, Fast broke with the Communist Party USA and SNKLHU cancelled the Czech publication of his collected works after just one volume.<sup>30</sup> This episode demonstrates why SNKLHU was so cautious about releasing works by living authors, even if their sympathies were with the Left. The problem with

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<sup>28</sup> Hana Ulmanova, "The Reception of American Literature in Czechoslovakia under Communism: 1945-1989," *American Studies International* 33, no. 2 (October 1995): 34.

<sup>29</sup> The situation was the same across the Soviet Union. As Deming Brown has observed, "In a time of cold war, Soviet publishing houses were by no means unwilling to bring out American works, but they were strongly disinclined to break new ground. The sole exceptions to this principle were a tiny group of 'critical realists,' of whom Mitchell Wilson was the most popular, and a larger group of writers of the extreme left wing, headed by Howard Fast." See Brown, *Soviet Attitudes toward American Writing*, 170.

<sup>30</sup> Ulmanova, "The Reception of American Literature in Czechoslovakia under Communism," 34.

living writers was that they sometimes changed their minds.

Because publishing houses proceeded with such caution (and because they had ceased the publication of *brak* entirely), much of the work of the censorship apparatus was focused on controlling the body of literature already in circulation. Petr Šámal has recently catalogued the methods used by the HSTD and the national public library system to shape Czech national literary culture. In 1953, the HSTD drew up a list aimed at the ‘purging of library holdings of inferior literature’ that included highly elastic categories such as “cosmopolitanism,” “naturalism,” “formalism,” and “existentialism.” The so-called “List of Hostile, Unsuitable, Antiquated, and Undesirable Literature” (*Seznam nepřátelské, závadné, zastaralé a nežádoucí literatury*) explicitly banned American texts including Ernest Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* (for being too cosmopolitan), Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (politically objectionable), William Faulkner’s *A Light in August* (decadent and morally objectionable), as well as both T. S. Eliot’s poetry and John Steinbeck’s novels (both formalist). A special label was even found for the little-known American writer H. G. Carlisle: “American bourgeois literature feigning puritanism” (*Americká měšťácká literatura předstírající puritanismus*).<sup>31</sup>

Although these different forms of censorship had a stultifying effect on Czech literary culture during the first half of the fifties, Škvorecký and a group of young writers attempted to maintain links to both foreign literature and an older generation of Czech writers who were no longer able to publish. This latter group gravitated around Jiří Kolář’s table at the Café Slavia in Prague and passed around their own surreptitious

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<sup>31</sup> For the complete list of over 7,500 works see Petr Šámal, *Soustružníci lidských duší: Lidové knihovny a jejich cenzura na počátku padesátých let 20. století* (Praha: Academia, 2009), 219–466.

translations of writers like Kafka and Joyce. In 1956, Kolář and Josef Hiršal organized a very early samizdat anthology that featured many of the figures who would later come to define postwar Czech literature, such as Bohumil Hrabal, Jan Zábřana, and Václav Havel. Included in the volume, which was called *Život je všude: Almanach z roku 1956* (“Life is Everywhere: An Almanac from the Year 1956”), was a draft version of the first chapter of *The Cowards* which Škvorecký contributed under the pseudonym “Pepýt.”<sup>32</sup> After almost a decade, Škvorecký’s manuscript was almost ready to come up for air. But first Škvorecký would help to create an entirely new critical context in which his novel could be read and understood. To accomplish this, American literature would have to be reclaimed as world literature.

## 2. World Literature

A writer’s job is to tell the truth.

–Ernest Hemingway<sup>33</sup>

Following Nikita Khrushchev’s call for de-Stalinization in 1956, the cultural climate in Czechoslovakia appeared to be undergoing a thaw. One of the most important developments in postwar Czech cultural life was the establishment of the literary journal *Světová literatura* (“World Literature”) in 1956, where Škvorecký was appointed deputy editor. The publishing house SNKLHU created *Světová literatura* based on the model of the Soviet journal *Inostrannaia literatura* (“Foreign Literature”), a new publication that emerged as a chastened version of the earlier Soviet journal *Internatsionalnaia literatura*

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<sup>32</sup> See Josef Hiršal and Jiří Kolář, eds., *Život je všude: almanach z roku 1956* (Praha: Paseka, 2005).

<sup>33</sup> Epigraph added to the second edition of *The Cowards* (1964).



(“International Literature”), which had perished along with the Popular Front. Before the official shift to socialist realism, *Internatsionalnaia literatura* had published important avant-garde works in Russian, including chapters from Joyce’s *Ulysses*. In its new incarnation, *Inostrannaia literatura* introduced an entirely new attitude towards the West and the United States. Following this lead, *Světová literatura* would provide the first major challenge to socialist realism in Czechoslovakia since 1948. Škvorecký’s editorial beat was English-language translations and essays on American literature.

The best way to think about the critical work done by *Světová literatura* is as a rapprochement between Czech national literary culture and foreign modes of writing that sharply defied the strict requirements of socialist realism as first laid out by the Soviet theoretician Andrei Zhdanov in 1934. As Justin Quinn writes of *Světová literatura*, “the people involved in the magazine tried to continue the work of nationalist ideologues of the nineteenth century by conveying those works of foreign literature into Czech that they thought would best profit the language’s literature.”<sup>34</sup> Škvorecký in particular framed his essays about American literature in such terms. He and his fellow editors had to walk a careful line, introducing new writing through the double lens of Czech nationalism and socialist aesthetics. But Škvorecký was also smuggling in innovative and often subversive cultural material from abroad through the pages of *Světová literatura*. Many of these cultural styles would inform his own aesthetic and political commitments for the rest of his career.

Škvorecký and *Světová literatura* pushed the boundaries of what could be read and discussed in Czechoslovakia, often reintroducing major writers who still wouldn’t be

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<sup>34</sup> Justin Quinn, *Between Two Fires: Transnationalism and Cold War Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 97.

fully “rehabilitated” until the 1960s. One prominent example is Franz Kafka. If Kafka’s ever-changing status in Czechoslovakia can serve as a litmus test for shifts in Communist cultural policy, then things were indeed changing in 1956. According to Škvorecký, writing years later,

Kafka had not been particularly lucky in terms of the publication of his works in his native country. His first novel translated into Czech was *The Castle*, but it appeared at the time of the Munich crisis in 1939, and simply disappeared. To the Communists, Kafka was considered a decadent writer, so he wasn’t published again in Czechoslovakia until we brought out his last, unfinished story, “The Burrow.”<sup>35</sup>

The history of Kafka’s reception in Czechoslovakia is more complicated than Škvorecký suggests, but the publication of “The Burrow” in *Světová literatura* was in fact an important event in that history.<sup>36</sup> Ironically, Kafka—who had spent most of his life in Bohemia—was published in a journal of world literature. In the same issue, *Světová literatura* commissioned the famous portrait of Kafka by the artist František Tichý and published a landmark essay by Pavel Eisner, the same translator who had been thwarted in his efforts to publish *The Trial* in 1948. The Czech translation of *The Trial* was published in 1958 in an edition of 10,000 by the most prominent publishing house in the ČSSR.<sup>37</sup> Although the steps were tentative, Czech literary culture was entering a new era.

In addition to bringing Kafka back into public view, *Světová literatura* played a central role in shaping a new canon of American fiction in Czech translation. According

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<sup>35</sup> See Josef Skvorecky, interview with John Glusman, “The Art of Fiction No. 112,” *The Paris Review* 31, no. 112 (Winter 1989).

<sup>36</sup> For an account of the Czech reception of Kafka in Czechoslovakia during the Communist period, see Veronika Tuckerova, “Reading Kafka in Prague: The Reception of Franz Kafka between the East and the West during the Cold War” (PhD Dissertation, Columbia University, 2012); For Kafka’s Czech reception prior to 1948, see Josef Cermak, “Die tschechische Kultur und Franz Kafka: Die Kafka-Rezeption in Böhmen 1920-1948,” *Monatshefte* 61, no. 4 (1969): 361.

<sup>37</sup> Šmejkalová, *Cold War Books in the “Other” Europe and What Came after*, 244.

to the Czech scholar Marcel Arbeit, the period inaugurated by the journal's creation was "the golden age of literature in translation in the Czech lands."<sup>38</sup> In some cases it was just a matter of resuming publication activities that had been suspended during the hardline years. In the first year of the journal, for instance, Škvorecký published essays on writers like Sinclair Lewis and John Steinbeck, who couldn't be published during the early fifties despite holding critical views towards American capitalism. As F. O. Matthiessen had discovered during his stay in Prague, Steinbeck underwent a brief publishing renaissance in Czechoslovakia after the war, but disappeared after 1948. By the end of the fifties he was again firmly established in school curriculums. In the case of Sinclair Lewis, SNKLHU published *Kingsblood Royal* in 1957 and Škvorecký's own translation of *Babbitt* would appear in 1962.<sup>39</sup> In the year 1956 alone, Škvorecký contributed articles to *Světová literatura* on a range of American authors that included Lewis, Steinbeck, Hemingway, Faulkner, Vachel Lindsay, and Ray Bradbury.

These years also saw new translations and publications of American classics by writers such as Edgar Allan Poe and Walt Whitman, whom Škvorecký wrote a preface for in 1956. Both writers had been consistently translated in the Czech lands since the middle of the nineteenth century, and Whitman in particular had received renewed attention immediately after the Second World War. A translation of a section of *Leaves of Grass* was one of the first works translated into Czech from any foreign language in 1945, by none other than the Kafka translator Pavel Eisner. Even as publication became

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<sup>38</sup> Marcel Arbeit, *Bibliografie americké literatury v českých překladech* (Brno: Votobia, 2000), 33.

<sup>39</sup> It's worth noting, however, that in Russian versions of *Kingsblood Royal* from the period disparaging references to the Soviet Union were removed during translation. See Brown, *Soviet Attitudes toward American Writing*, 7–8.

more difficult after 1948, work on Whitman translations continued. Fresh from a stint in prison, Škvorecký's friend from the literary underground Jiří Kolář busied himself translating additional works by Whitman alongside Zdeněk Urbánek, another member of Škvorecký's circle. Their version of "Song of Myself" appeared in 1955, and additional sections of *Leaves of Grass* were published in 1956. Whitman remained a safe choice for publication throughout the fifties. But in order for *living* American authors to be published, a more dramatic shift in critical attitudes would be required.

The first major signal of a change in the status of contemporary American literature in Czechoslovakia was Škvorecký's 1956 essay in *Světová literatura*, titled "Some Views on American Literature." The occasion for Škvorecký's essay was the appearance of the first Czech edition of Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* in 1956, translated by František Vrba. In the essay, Škvorecký sets up his reading of the novella by arguing that the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, and the subsequent reexamination of the failures and successes of world socialism under Stalin, meant that it was finally time to rethink recent Czech criticism of American literature and culture. According to Škvorecký, the work that had been passed off as criticism was "in the best cases incomplete, and in the worst cases irresponsibly fraudulent." Furthermore, these errors could not be justified by ideology. He writes, "In our efforts to create a socialist culture" it was not necessary to "criminally disorient our readers so frequently."<sup>40</sup> A major goal of the criticism in *Světová literatura*, therefore,

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<sup>40</sup> Josef Škvorecký, "Některé pohledy na americkou literaturu," *Světová literatura* 1, no. 5 (November 1956): 179. ["Není sporu ani pochyby o tom, že v pohledu na západní literatury jsme se dopouštěli chyb. že obraz o těchto literaturách, jaký nám podávala značná část naší kritiky -- a hlavně toho, co se za ni ne vždy oprávněně vydávalo -- byl v nejlepších případech neúplný, v nejhorších nezodpovědně zfalšovaný. A co víc, že jsme se těchto chyb dopouštět nemuseli, že v

was to reorient socialist literary culture through the reintroduction of Western literary alternatives.

In “Some Views,” Škvorecký takes advantage of the critical space opened up by shifts in Soviet criticism of American literature. The decision of the Soviet journal *Inostrannaya literatura* to publish *The Old Man and the Sea* in 1955 had been a major event in the USSR. Before the Second World War, Hemingway had been the most celebrated American author in the Soviet Union, and throughout the thirties Soviet critics had been openly solicitous of Hemingway, who they believed had strong Leftist sympathies based on his activities during the Spanish Civil War. They would ultimately be disappointed. While they embraced Hemingway’s anti-fascist reportage and his play *The Fifth Column*, the Russian translation of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* was denied approval for publication in part due to its negative portrayal of Comintern officials operating in Spain during the Civil War.<sup>41</sup> As a result, between 1939 and 1955 no new translations or reprintings had been allowed to appear and Hemingway had largely disappeared from Soviet critical discussion.<sup>42</sup> Hemingway’s reappearance in 1955 was a signal to Russian readers and to critics across the Eastern bloc that it was once again possible to discuss Hemingway openly and to even express a degree of admiration. In “Some Views,” Škvorecký mimics some of these Soviet critical gestures in order to argue for an even fuller reintegration of American writers into Czech literary culture.

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našem úsilí o vytvoření socialistické kultury nebyly nutné, že mu uškodily a že mnohdy trestuhodně desorientovaly naše čtenáře.”]

<sup>41</sup> Brown, *Soviet Attitudes toward American Writing*, 309–310. For a more recent discussion of Hemingway in the Soviet Union, see Cary Nelson, “Hemingway, the American Left, and the Soviet Union: Some Forgotten Episodes,” *Hemingway Review* 14, no. 1 (1994): 36.

<sup>42</sup> Brown, *Soviet Attitudes toward American Writing*, 311–313.

Early in the essay, Škvorecký highlights a key distinction between the reception of Hemingway in Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union. Even though Hemingway was banned in Czechoslovakia during the early fifties by the HSTD for being too “cosmopolitan,” *For Whom the Bell Tolls* had already been published in a well-known Czech translation that appeared in three editions between 1946 and 1947.<sup>43</sup> As a result, Czech readers were in a better position than Russians to spot the distortions and misrepresentations that appeared in communist criticism of Hemingway’s work before 1956. In his essay, Škvorecký condemns these critical works for their “forced interpretations, concealment of important features of the work, unsubstantiated claims, assumption of bad intentions, parroting of foreign opinions, as well as their direct and deliberate falsification of facts, such as the content, storyline, and so on.”<sup>44</sup> According to Škvorecký, once the texts are back in readers’ hands, these distortions will backfire against the “conniving and uninformed missionaries” who call themselves critics.<sup>45</sup> As for the foreign voices that Škvorecký explicitly attacks, they are rarely Russian critics. Such a maneuver would be too dangerous. Instead, Škvorecký attacks Czech critics for parroting the views of Leftist critics in the United States.

Škvorecký’s primary interlocutor in “Some Views” is the largely forgotten American Marxist critic Milton Howard. For Škvorecký’s purposes, Howard makes a useful straw man. In 1952 Howard wrote an essay called “Hemingway and Heroism” that

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<sup>43</sup> Šámal, *Soustružníci lidských duší*, 302.

<sup>44</sup> Škvorecký, “Některé pohledy na americkou literaturu,” 180. [“násilnou interpretaci, zamlčování důležitých rysů díla, neodůvodnění tvrzení, podkládání zlých úmyslů, papouškování cizích názorů i přímé a vědomé falšování faktů, jako je obsah, děj. a pod.”]

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 180–181. [“ale zbraní dvojsečnou, boomerangem rukou potměšilého a nezasvěceného misionáře.”]

had an outsized influence on how Hemingway was read behind the Iron Curtain. Howard was a contributing editor at *Masses & Mainstream*, which was then one of the only American publications readily available in Czechoslovakia.<sup>46</sup> As a result, Howard's essay is used by Škvorecký to represent the orthodox critical position on Hemingway among communist critics. Howard's basic argument is that Hemingway's signature ambiguity enabled the appropriation of his work by capitalist interests in the United States. *The Old Man and the Sea* debuted in Henry Luce's *Life* magazine in 1952, and Howard uses Luce and his publication as a stand-in for the capitalist "planners of the national betrayal of America." To call Howard's tone vitriolic would be an understatement. Luce and his associates are described as "the men of the Hiroshima atomic butchery, of the jellied gasoline dropping in tons of fire on the flesh of mothers and children below, the men who clutch the passionate love (their only real love) the weapons of germ warfare." According to Howard, because these men had not been able to find their "Business Man As Hero," "they will now try to hijack a Cuban fisherman, Santiago, as their Siegfried, and they will hold him up before their eyes and paint his picture maybe on their jetbombers."<sup>47</sup> Hemingway is implicated in this act of capitalist appropriation because *The Old Man and the Sea* is "full of that ambiguity which makes it acceptable to the horror-men of the jelly bomb and the premeditated atomic massacre." For Howard, Hemingway's "abstract heroism" is a strategy used to avoid the "concrete heroism of the social struggle."<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Howard would take over as editor of *Masses & Mainstream* and serve in the position until 1958. See Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker, eds., *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines, Volume II: North America, 1894-1960* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 837–857.

<sup>47</sup> Milton Howard, "Hemingway and Heroism," *Masses & Mainstream* 5, no. 10 (October 1952): 2.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

Škvorecký quotes Howard at length in “Some Views” in order to argue for a reevaluation of Hemingway and contemporary American literature. Škvorecký enacts two strategies in order to create some critical space for his reappraisal, both of which required giving up significant ground to socialist realist critics, at least initially. The first strategy is to acknowledge that Hemingway has been subject to a degree of “bourgeois” absorption, but to point out that this had also been the case for many celebrated Czech writers from the pre-Communist era. Škvorecký writes, “The ideologues of the ruling class have naturally always tried to appropriate great and humanistic writers.” His list of Czech writers includes figures as diverse as the national revival icon Božena Němcová, the realist storyteller Jan Neruda, the surrealist poet Vítězslav Nezval, and Karel Čapek, an anti-fascist writer of science-fiction and metaphysical novels.<sup>49</sup> A second strategy used by Škvorecký is to argue against a strict doctrine of socialist realism in favor of a more elastic socialist humanism. Against Howard’s view, Škvorecký asserts that *Old Man and the Sea* “does not function in the manner of a social novel, but in the manner of a lyrical generalization, which does not aim to depict social reality, but rather captures the essential dignity of man.”<sup>50</sup> The appeal to humanism was a common trope of the period, especially among socialist intellectuals who longed to move beyond the cultural and political bipolarity of the early Cold War era.

In Škvorecký’s case, an appeal to humanism is used to create critical space for

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<sup>49</sup> Škvorecký, “Některé pohledy na americkou literaturu,” 184. Ideologové vládnoucí třídy se přirozeně vždycky snažili přivlastnit si velké a humanistické spisovatele. Můžeme zůstat doma: odmítala snad naše buržoasie a její kritici díla Jiráskova, Čapkova, Dykova, Nerudova, Němcové, ano i Olbrachtova, Majerové, Pujmanové, Nezvala, Jiřího Wolkra.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 186. [V hrubých simplifikacích si nepovšimla uměleckého charakteru díla, které není epickým příběhem, nýbrž lyrickou básní v próze, a které proto nepracuje methodou sociálního románu, ale methodou lyrického zevšeobecnění, které nesměřuje k zobrazení sociální skutečnosti, nýbrž k postižení bytostné důstojnosti člověka.]



him to explore Hemingway's trademark style, which was still quite innovative in the Czech context. Škvorecký was also creating a new critical context in which his own work might eventually be read. Throughout his entire career, Škvorecký emphasized how Hemingway directly influenced his own writing style, especially in his rendering of dialogue. According to Škvorecký, many of the Czech books he read growing up employed a formal version of the Czech language, "without contractions, distortions, or slang," referred to as *spisovná čeština*.<sup>51</sup> Elsewhere, Škvorecký describes literary Czech at the end of the Second World War as being analogous to pre-Twain American English.<sup>52</sup> It was Škvorecký's first reading of *A Farewell to Arms* in 1945 that suggested an alternative. As the war came to a close, Škvorecký read through Hemingway's collected works and imagined new ways to capture spoken Czech in fictional prose.<sup>53</sup> Although Škvorecký's simplified account of his (and Hemingway's) central place in the development of postwar Czech literature can be reductive and self-serving, his role in popularizing Hemingway in Czechoslovakia was unquestionable. By 1958, Škvorecký's translation *A Farewell to Arms* was published along with a new "Our Troops" (*Naše vojsko*) edition of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, translated by F. O. Matthiessen's former

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<sup>51</sup> Škvorecký might be overstating his case. While *spisovná čeština* does refer to "literary" or "standard" Czech, as opposed to *obecná čeština* (or "spoken Czech"), Škvorecký has a tendency to oversimplify the distinction, especially in Western interviews. See Josef Skvorecky, interview with John Glusman, "The Art of Fiction No. 112," *The Paris Review* 31, no. 112 (Winter 1989).

<sup>52</sup> Škvorecký, *Talkin' Moscow Blues*, 33.

<sup>53</sup> Škvorecký claims that although Hemingway opened his eyes to new ways of presenting spoken Czech, his vernacular style was equally inspired by his love affair with a Czech shop girl named Maggie who spoke in a distinctive "he said-she said" mode. He writes, "So Hemingway taught me to write dialogue, and Maggie acquainted me with the use of the vernacular." See *ibid.*, 34.

student Jaroslav Schejbal (who was also a contributor to *Světová literatura*).<sup>54</sup>

Hemingway was the first major ingredient in the vernacular modernism that Škvorecký was attempting to bring to Czech literature. Škvorecký also played an enormous role in popularizing William Faulkner in Czechoslovakia through the pages of *Světová literatura*. Even more so than Hemingway, integrating Faulkner into the communist canon of American literature behind the Iron Curtain proved to be a unique challenge for critics in both the Soviet Union and in Czechoslovakia. During the fifties Faulkner was also at the center of the “Cold War modernism” being propagated by the US in its ideological contest with the Soviet Union.<sup>55</sup> Unsurprisingly, as Deming Brown has shown, prior to Stalin’s death critics in the Soviet Union had stigmatized Faulkner “as a decadent reactionary who displayed an unhealthy interest in degeneracy.”<sup>56</sup> The critical discourse on Faulkner was very similar in Czechoslovakia. In “Some Views,” for example, Škvorecký quotes a pamphlet that equated Faulkner with pornography. As in the Soviet Union, the turning point came with the translation of Faulkner’s *A Fable*, which Škvorecký would co-translate with Jiří Valja in 1961. As early as 1956, Škvorecký had begun a series of essays on Faulkner that helped establish his reputation in Czechoslovakia.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Audre Hanneman, ed., *Ernest Hemingway: A Comprehensive Bibliography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 176.

<sup>55</sup> For a recent discussion of “Cold War modernism,” see Greg Barnhisel, *Cold War Modernists: Art, Literature, and American Cultural Diplomacy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015). For an account of Faulkner’s postwar canonization, see Lawrence H. Schwartz, *Creating Faulkner’s Reputation: The Politics of Modern Literary Criticism* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1988).

<sup>56</sup> Brown, *Soviet Attitudes toward American Writing*, 182.

<sup>57</sup> The other key figure was Valja who translated a number of works by Faulkner after 1958.

One of Škvorecký's most controversial essays, "An Attempt to Understand Modernity in Literature," was published in the widely read pages of *Literární noviny* in 1957, and attempted to do for literary modernism what his other essays were doing for contemporary American literature.<sup>58</sup> By reintroducing authors as different as Kafka, Hemingway, and Faulkner, Škvorecký and *Světová literatura* were integrating a range of new modernist literary models into an official critical system that had remained static for almost a decade. Škvorecký ends his essay in *Literární noviny* by claiming, "Only what is alive can be immortal. The most perfect construction, the most reliably functioning robot, is nevertheless as dead as a stone blocking the road."<sup>59</sup> In order to reanimate the suspended robot of Czech literature, Škvorecký would call on another cultural form associated with American vernacular modernism: jazz and blues.

### 3. The Sweet Flypaper

There was a revolution simmering in Chicago, led by a gang of pink-cheeked high school kids. These rebels in plus-fours, huddled on a bandstand instead of a soap-box, passed out riffs instead of handbills, but the effect was the same. Their jazz was a collectively improvised nosethumbing at all pillars of all communities, one big syncopated Bronx cheer for the righteous squares everywhere. Jazz was the only language they could find to preach their fire-eating message. These upstart small-fries ... started hatching their plots way out in ... a well-to-do suburb where all the days were Sabbaths, a sleepy-time neighborhood big as a yawn and just about as lively, loaded with shade-trees and clipped lawns and a groggy-eyed population that never came out of its coma except to turn over ... They wanted to blast every highminded citizen clear out of his easy chair with their yarddog growls and gully-low howls.

— Milton "Mezz" Mezzrow<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Josef Škvorecký, "Pokus o chápání modernosti v literatuře," *Literární noviny*, April 27, 1957.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid. ["Jen to, co je živé, muže byt nesmrtelné. Nejdokonalejší konstrukce, nejspolehlivější fungující robot, je však mrtvy jako kamen na cestě."]

<sup>60</sup> Second epigraph added to the second edition of *The Cowards* (1964).

Although Škvorecký was making an appeal to both literary modernism and socialist humanism in his early criticism, he was also doing something arguably more provocative by expanding the Czech canon of American literature to include African American cultural forms. Ironically, the cultural commissars of Czechoslovakia barely took notice. Although jazz and blues were suspect genres according to Soviet cultural theory, during the late fifties African American culture in general was seen as useful in the *kulturkampf* against the US.

Even as *Světová literatura* reintroduced Czech readers to a host of international writers across the political and aesthetic spectrum, it was still careful to publish work that had been politically safe in the Stalinist years before 1956. For instance, Škvorecký himself wrote an essay introducing several Leftist poets associated with *Masses & Mainstream* in one of the first issues of *Světová literatura*. A few years later Škvorecký's friend and colleague at the journal Jan Zábřana published an anthology of radical poetry from the United States that included many of the same poets called *Pátá roční doba: Antologie americké radikální poezie* (The Fifth Season: An Anthology of American Radical Poetry).<sup>61</sup> The 1959 collection is especially surprising given Zábřana's reputation in Czech literary culture today. Famously uncompromising, Zábřana went on to become a

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<sup>61</sup> See Justin Quinn's full discussion of Zábřana's possible motivations for editing *Pátá roční doba* in Quinn, *Between Two Fires*, 68-88. Zábřana's decision is perhaps less surprising if we follow Jonathan Bolton's lead in thinking of him as a quintessential "boundary figure" within Czech literary culture. According to Bolton, "Zábřana's complicated position—between Russian and American culture, high and low literature, hatred of the regime and dependence on it—far from being barren ground, was fertile soil for creative engagement with the forces he so mightily despised." See Bolton, "Writing in a Polluted Semiosphere: Everyday Life in Lotman, Foucault, and de Certeau," in *Lotman and Cultural Studies: Encounters and Extensions*, edited by Andreas Schönle (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), 336.

celebrated translator, underground poet, and countercultural icon for nonconformists in Czechoslovakia. Given the later trajectories of their careers, why were Škvorecký and Zábřana willing to adopt some of the same critical vocabulary as their hardline rivals?

The scholar Justin Quinn has several theories about why Zábřana edited the 1959 anthology, which we can also apply to Škvorecký's occasional adoption of "official" rhetoric in his early criticism. It is possible that Zábřana's anthology was simply a concession to the authorities that would have given him some political cover. This is what Czechs euphemistically call a "libation" (*úlitba*), which, according to Quinn, involved the inclusion of "certain stock phrases in forewords and afterwords, paying obeisance to communist ideology, with the general understanding among readers that these sentences did not affect the quality of the remaining pages."<sup>62</sup> Another possibility is that Zábřana might have felt that in order to represent the full and uncensored spectrum of American poetry he had to include the radical poets who were blacklisted in the US. Quinn raises a third, related theory: Zábřana might have seen Leftist writers in the US as being in a parallel position to underground poets in Czechoslovakia, despite the obvious political discrepancy. The repressive conditions that Leftist poets faced in the US could therefore serve as a kind of allegory for Zábřana's own situation during the fifties. Was this also true for other marginalized groups from the US?

If white Leftist writers were a rare example of continuity in Czech literary translations before and after Communist takeover, so were African American authors. During the interwar period, Czech publications frequently printed work by writers like Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, and Frank Horne. An anthology called *Litanie z Atlanty*

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 73.

(“A Litany of Atlanta,” after the W.E.B. Du Bois poem) appeared in 1938.<sup>63</sup> After the onset of the Cold War, many black writers and artists were still afforded a measure of prestige in communist countries; many of these writers had been fellow travelers and even visited the Soviet Union during the interwar period.<sup>64</sup> A number of these figures were interested enough in events behind the Iron Curtain to travel to the Eastern bloc during the fifties. In 1958, for example, Du Bois received an honorary degree from Charles University in Prague and delivered a speech entitled “The American Negro and Communism.” In his speech, Du Bois commended Czechoslovakia, along with East Germany and Yugoslavia, for the strides they had made towards achieving what he calls “complete socialism.”<sup>65</sup> The embrace was mutual: the same year Du Bois appeared on a Czechoslovak postage stamp. A year later, the performer and activist Paul Robeson again visited Prague after the US government finally reinstated his passport after years of travel restriction.

But the Czechoslovak regime’s embrace of African American writers and thinkers on the Left sometimes had unintended consequences. Hughes in particular enjoyed a contradictory status in fifties-era Czechoslovakia. As Marcel Arbeit points out, “although Langston Hughes was very popular in official circles, he was at the same time one of the

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<sup>63</sup> Arbeit, *Bibliografie americké literatury v českých překladech*, 32.

<sup>64</sup> Figures who bridged the world of the Harlem Renaissance and the Old Left were not hard to find. Recent scholarship has demonstrated the rich engagement between interwar African American literary culture and the Soviet-allied international communist movement. See William J. Maxwell, *New Negro, Old Left: African American Writing and Communism between the Wars* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); Kate A. Baldwin, *Beyond the Color Line and the Iron Curtain: Reading Encounters between Black and Red, 1922-1963*, *New Americanists* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).

<sup>65</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, “The American Negro and Communism,” October 23, 1958, MS 312, W.E.B. Du Bois Papers, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

favorite poets of dissidents and jazz musicians who disapproved of the socialist regime.”<sup>66</sup> For many in the communist world, Hughes evoked the close relationship that had once existed between many Harlem writers and the Old Left. Hughes himself had felt such a strong attraction to communism during the 1930s that he travelled to the Soviet Union in order to make a film about American race relations. (The film was never made; instead Hughes travelled to Central Asia where he encountered a young Arthur Koestler.<sup>67</sup>) Even after Hughes’ high profile testimony in front of the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1953, where he denied his participation in the CPUSA, he remained a prestigious author in Czechoslovakia. Hughes’ *The Ways of White Folks* was one of the few American texts published in Czechoslovakia in the early 1950s. Lines from his poem “Homesick Blues,” which had been included in the 1938 anthology *Litanie z Atlanty*, were quoted by a range of Czech poets from Ivan Blatný to Miroslav Holub.<sup>68</sup> At the same time, Hughes’ jazz-inflected writing was also popular among Škvorecký’s underground circle during the early fifties.

It should therefore be no surprise that Hughes was featured in the pages of *Světová literatura* in 1958. But the specific Hughes text that Škvorecký chose to translate underscores how individual preoccupations often determined what makes it into transnational circulation. The journal published Škvorecký’s translation of *The Sweet*

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<sup>66</sup> Arbeit, *Bibliografie americké literatury v českých překladech*, 33.

<sup>67</sup> For a discussion of Hughes in Central Asia, including his encounter with Koestler, see David Chioni Moore, “Local Color, Global ‘Color’: Langston Hughes, the Black Atlantic, and Soviet Central Asia, 1932,” *Research in African Literatures* 27, no. 4 (1996): 49–70.

<sup>68</sup> For two discussions of intertextuality focusing on traces of Hughes’ influence in Czech poetry, see Zornitza Kazalarská, “„Smutná píseň je ve vzduchu“ Opakování jako textová strategie zpřítomňování skrytého,” *Česká literatura*, no. 2 (2012): 147–72; and Julie Hansen, “Singing the Blues: Intertextuality in the Poetry of Ivan Blatný,” *Kosmas: Czechoslovak and Central European Journal* 16, no. 1 (2002): 21–36.

*Flypaper of Life*, a creative collaboration between Hughes and the photographer Roy DeCarava. DeCarava was the first African American to earn a Guggenheim fellowship in 1952 and spent the next several years photographing the lives of the black residents of Harlem. A selection of these photographs was published in book form in 1955 under the title *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*. Best known for his jazz photography, DeCarava would later gain additional fame through his photographs of John Coltrane. His haunting photograph of the bassist Edna Smith made it into both *Sweet Flypaper* and Edward Steichen's blockbuster photography show *The Family of Man*, which also opened in 1955. The presence of DeCarava's work in both venues underscores the dialectic tension in his Harlem photographs. As Benjamin Cawthra writes, "The two contexts for the Smith photograph suggest the elasticity between expressions of vernacular and high culture, masculinity and femininity, and local and global meanings via the juxtapositions of images."<sup>69</sup> In other words, DeCarava's photographs render both the music and urban geography of Harlem as essentially African American and yet symbolically available to a global audience.

DeCarava's photographs therefore travelled to the communist world in two very different forms, one emphasizing the local setting of Harlem and the other proposing a universal and humanist context for his photography.<sup>70</sup> Although Steichen envisioned *The Family of Man* exhibition as a way to transcend Cold War divisions, the exhibition would soon be used as a form of cultural diplomacy by the US government, travelling to over

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<sup>69</sup> Benjamin Cawthra, *Blue Notes in Black and White: Photography and Jazz* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 222.

<sup>70</sup> Whether in the novella *The Old Man and the Sea* or the exhibition *The Family of Man*, the discourse of universal "man" was everywhere during this period in the US. See Mark Greif, *The Age of the Crisis of Man: Thought and Fiction in America, 1933-1973* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 96–99.



thirty countries and drawing an audience of nine million thanks to the sponsorship of the USIA.<sup>71</sup> According to one contemporary report, “In the case of Soviet citizens in the summer of 1959, the collection's overtones of peace and human brotherhood evidently had an added significance as symbolizing a lifting of the overhanging danger of atomic war, in the spirit of the forthcoming exchange of visits between President Eisenhower and Premier Khrushchev, and this meaning seemed to be grasped especially by students and other intellectuals in Moscow.”<sup>72</sup> Although, revisionist scholars have since attacked the *Family of Many* tour as a form of propaganda covering for US imperialism abroad, the tour has also been reassessed more recently as a radically utopian and antiauthoritarian project.<sup>73</sup> In any case, *The Family of Man* exhibition travelled to Poland, Yugoslavia, and the Soviet Union in 1958-59, but appears to have never made it to Czechoslovakia. Instead, the Czechs got *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*.

Why did Škvorecký choose this photography book to publish—in its entirety—in the pages of *Světová literatura*? Beyond DeCarava’s images, Škvorecký was drawn for specific literary reasons to Hughes’ companion text to *Sweet Flypaper*. Hughes’ narrative style provided Škvorecký with another model, alongside Hemingway, for rendering vernacular language in fictional prose. In particular, Škvorecký was interested in finding ways to render jazz lingo and other slang in written language. Whereas the poet Carl Sandburg had written the companion text for the *Family of Man* exhibition, Langston

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<sup>71</sup> As Eric Sandeen writes, “The international tour of *The Family of Man* took place in the bipolar world of Cold War nation-states,” beginning with a visit to West Berlin in 1955, which was attended by thousands of East German visitors. See Eric J. Sandeen, “The International Reception of The Family of Man,” *History of Photography* 29, no. 4 (2005): 354.

<sup>72</sup> Ralph K. White, “Soviet Reactions to Our Moscow Exhibit: Voting Machines and Comment Books,” *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 23, no. 4 (1959): 464.

<sup>73</sup> See Fred Turner, “The Family of Man and the Politics of Attention in Cold War America,” *Public Culture* 24, no. 1 66 (January 1, 2012): 55–84.

Hughes provided a text to go along with DeCarava's photographs in *Sweet Flypaper*. DeCarava sought out Hughes in part because he associated Hughes with the bygone era of Popular Front artists and intellectuals who had been role models to DeCarava. But as Sonia Weiner argues, Hughes' fictionalized text pushed *Sweet Flypaper* beyond the documentary realism of earlier New Deal projects that had also photographed African American subjects.<sup>74</sup> Weiner argues, "Dual readings were possible because Hughes crafted a dynamic text that accommodated two diverse audiences."<sup>75</sup> The two audiences that Weiner has in mind are white and black Americans, of course, but the Czech readers of *Světová literatura* also brought their own reading strategies to *Sweet Flypaper*.

In the context of late-fifties Czechoslovakia, the double-ness that Weiner describes could be useful for communicating subversive ideas within a particular literary subculture. According to Weiner, Hughes' narrator in *Sweet Flypaper* is signifying, a cultural strategy that had its own corollaries under censorship regimes in the Eastern bloc.<sup>76</sup> When Škvorecký translated Hughes' text for publication in *Světová literatura* he was likely drawn to the text's strategic ambiguity as well as its evocation of an alternative form of cultural protest. As Cawthra points out, many other photographers "made their names documenting freedom marches, sit-ins, and violence that captivated the country, DeCarava made a quieter but no less forceful argument for equality through his images of

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<sup>74</sup> Sonia Weiner, "Narrating Photography in The Sweet Flypaper of Life," *MELUS* 37, no. 1 (2012): 155.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>76</sup> For Henry Louis Gates' groundbreaking work on African American vernacular strategies in literature, including several discussions of Hughes, see Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

Harlem and of jazz.”<sup>77</sup> While the photographers that Cawthra mentions all documented political actions with quite specific meanings, DeCarava’s photographs were much more available for appropriation and repurposing by a figure like Škvorecký.

In Škvorecký’s own short text accompanying his translation of *Sweet Flypaper*, Škvorecký refers to the fictional narrator of the book, Sister Mary Bradley, as a “Harlem grandmother from the family of another of Hughes’ heroes, the Švejk of Harlem, Jesse Semple.”<sup>78</sup> At the time, Hughes was best known to many readers through his invented narrator Jesse B. Semple, a Harlem mischief-maker whose speech Hughes renders in black dialect. Škvorecký makes this character legible to Czech readers through a comparison to the protagonist of Jaroslav Hašek’s interwar classic *The Good Soldier Švejk*. Yet again, Škvorecký is using a strategy of cultural translation in order to claim a new set of vernacular resources for Czech literary culture. But in the case of *Sweet Flypaper*, Škvorecký’s companion text also imports tropes of racial primitivism, describing Harlem as being filled with “children, lots of children, everywhere little black children with pink palms, with the white teeth of the African race, with the large eyes of the poor.”<sup>79</sup> The perceived exoticism of Harlem seems to have only heightened Škvorecký’s attraction to Hughes and DeCarava’s work.

The setting of Harlem also fascinated many Czech readers of the period. One of the most controversial, and popular, translations of a contemporary American novel during this period was also set in Harlem: Warren Miller’s *The Cool World* (1959).

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<sup>77</sup> Cawthra, *Blue Notes in Black and White*, 223.

<sup>78</sup> Langston Hughes, “Sladká mucholapka života,” trans. Josef Škvorecký, *Světová literatura* 3, no. 5 (1958): 1–39.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

Written by a white American author in black dialect, and then translated into Czech as *Prezydent krokadýlů* (“President of the Crocodiles”) in 1963, *The Cool World* is an example of a book that was quickly forgotten in the United States, but through the vicissitudes of translation and reception is still relatively well known in the Czech context.<sup>80</sup> In Škvorecký’s retelling, he first discovered the book in 1961 and secured a copy from Dilia, the state agency responsible for acquiring foreign book rights.<sup>81</sup> The novel was ultimately published in Czechoslovakia with Jan Zábřana listed as the translator, but after Zábřana’s death Škvorecký made the controversial claim that the translation had in fact been his all along.<sup>82</sup> As Justin Quinn writes, the subsequent debate was rancorous but also revealing about the complicated politics of translation and authorship in Czechoslovakia during the late fifties and early sixties. Škvorecký claimed that the two translators had agreed to publish *Prezydent krokadýlů* under Zábřana’s name because, after 1959, Škvorecký was seen as more politically controversial than his friend Zábřana. It would therefore be easier to publish the book without his name on the cover.<sup>83</sup>

According to Škvorecký, *The Cool World* was another quintessential example of the

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<sup>80</sup> Even if *The Cool World* was forgotten in the US, at the time of its publication James Baldwin called it “one of the finest novels about Harlem that has ever come my way.” As Arnold Rampersad writes, Langston Hughes, in contrast to Baldwin, was not a fan of either the dramatic or film adaptations of *The Cool World*. See Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes: Volume II: 1914-1967, I Dream a World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 308.

<sup>81</sup> See Josef Škvorecký, “O Honzovi a situacích,” *Revolver Revue Kritická příloha*, no. 8 (1997): 112–113. For more on Dilia and the mechanics of securing foreign copyrights in Czechoslovakia, see Philip G. Altbach and Edith S. Hoshino, eds., *International Book Publishing: An Encyclopedia* (New York: Garland, 1995), 533.

<sup>82</sup> The controversy flared up again in 1997 with the publication of Patrik Ouředník, “Prezydent, nebo krokadýl? Ke sporu o autorství jednoho překladu,” *Revolver Revue Kritická příloha* 7 (1997). In the next issue, *Revolver Review* published a debate on this controversy featuring essays by Škvorecký, Jiří Pelán, Jarmila Emmerová, Lubomír Dorůžka, Vladimír Justl, Michal Přibán, Zdena Slivarová, and Miloslav Žilina. See “Ad Prezydent krokadýlů,” *Revolver Revue Kritická příloha* 8 (1997): 99-120.

<sup>83</sup> Quinn, *Between Two Fires*, 75.

dangerous American-style “naturalism” that got him in trouble with *The Cowards*.<sup>84</sup>

Luckily, Warren Miller was a Leftist associated with *Masses & Mainstream*, and *The Cool World* had received a glowing review from the Marxist publication. This certainly helped the translation get approved by the Czechoslovak press supervision authorities.

Although the question of who translated the novel is still unresolved, the Czech translation of the novel included an afterword titled “Harlem Ballad and How I Translated It.” *The Cool World* is written entirely in first-person vernacular language, making it an extremely challenging text to render in translation. According to Škvorecký many years later, “Its characters spoke as they speak in Harlem, which is certainly not the language of socialist realism; they did the things that are done there, that is, they drank, smoked marijuana, prostituted themselves even on the gay market; and there was not one single Marxist *Besserwisser* (know-it-all) among them to point out the only correct way out of their misery.”<sup>85</sup> The title was changed from *The Cool World* because there was no good way to capture the multiple meanings of “cool” in Czech. (The Czech title refers to the youth gang at the center of the novel, “the Crocodiles,” although “crocodiles” is intentionally misspelled in Czech in order to reflect that vernacular style of the novel’s prose.) Like *The Cowards*, the Czech translation of *The Cool World* caused a minor scandal upon its completion, which only increased its visibility.<sup>86</sup>

The strange history of *The Cool World* in Czech is yet another example of how the idiosyncratic tastes and preoccupations of specific translators affected what works made it into circulation. But why was Škvorecký so interested in the setting of Harlem

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<sup>84</sup> Škvorecký, “O Honzovi a situacích,” 112.

<sup>85</sup> Škvorecký, *Talkin’ Moscow Blues*, 52.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 52–53.

during these years? In his commentary on *Sweet Flypaper*, Škvorecký describes the sense of claustrophobia and confinement of living in an environment of cultural and social isolation, which is evoked by DeCarava's photographs: "Everyone here is crammed in to a few square kilometers of black ghetto, like fish caught in a net, like black flies on flypaper."<sup>87</sup> While Škvorecký does not claim this Harlem imaginary as an allegorical representation of life in Czechoslovakia, he does signal his identification with the African American world portrayed by DeCarava, Hughes, and others. It's much too simple to write off Škvorecký's translation of *Sweet Flypaper* as a form of racial appropriation, though. The text of *Sweet Flypaper* is closer to what Michael Warner calls an "engine of translatability," mediating both a universalized discourse of resistance and local meanings produced in places as far apart as Harlem and Prague.<sup>88</sup>

In "Some Views," Škvorecký relates an anecdote in which he encounters two elderly Czech women on a bus transporting textile workers between villages. The two women, wearing traditional headscarves, are discussing books that they've recently read. Although they cannot remember the title of one particular novel, Škvorecký realizes that they are discussing Richard Wright's *Native Son*, which appeared in Czech translation in 1947. Two years later, Wright's essay about his disillusionment with communism was included in *The God that Failed* and Wright was subjected to vicious attacks in Czech criticism. But according to Škvorecký, these two old ladies provide an independent reading of Wright's novel. They "perfectly understood the moral and social sense of the

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<sup>87</sup> Hughes, "Sladká mucholapka života," 39.

<sup>88</sup> I borrow the phrase "engine of translatability" from Warner's model of a "counterpublic." Rather than a model of "local appropriation," Warner's concept of a counterpublic is meant to "give form to a tension between general and particular that makes it difficult to analyze from either perspective alone." See Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 11.

work” and were filled with indignation about the system that had deformed Bigger Thomas. They also drew a comparative lesson: “quite spontaneously the book led to an unwitting comparison between our situation and this inhuman racism.”<sup>89</sup> Was Škvorecký’s anecdote intended as an appeal to a transcendent humanism, or as a veiled protest against the local conditions of cultural life in fifties-era Czechoslovakia? Very likely, the answer is a combination of both possibilities. Škvorecký’s critical work at *Světová literatura* reveals the tension at the heart of all cultural translation: between the utopian humanism of *The Family of Man* and the inescapable rootedness of *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*

#### 4. The Cowards

In January of 1959, the leading critic Jiří Hájek reversed his earlier cautious praise of Škvorecký’s debut novel *The Cowards*, instead detecting in it an “odor of decay of the Golden Youth and the breath exuded by the concoction of American contemporary literature.”<sup>90</sup> The stinking concoction that Hájek is referring to is the one brewed by Škvorecký and his colleagues at *Světová literatura*. After the attack on *The Cowards*, Škvorecký was removed as deputy editor of the journal. The Slovak novelist Vladamír Mináč, a socialist-realist hardliner, criticized Škvorecký and other young writers for emulating American literary models, especially Hemingway, Faulkner, and Dos Passos. The Czech Army’s daily publication accused Škvorecký of drawing his style from the world of *literární brak*: “penny dreadfuls, the illicitly distributed pornography, and the

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<sup>89</sup> Škvorecký, “Některé pohledy na americkou literaturu,” 188–189. [“Zcela samovolně ji kniha přivedla k bezděčnému srovnávání našich poměrů s nelidským rasismem.”]

<sup>90</sup> Schonberg, “The Case of the Mangy Pussycat,” 91.

even more illicitly circulating trashy American literature.”<sup>91</sup> This latest critique became a self-fulfilling prophecy: after his ban Škvorecký resorted to writing detective fiction under a pseudonym until 1964, when *The Cowards* could again be published in Czechoslovakia.

Rereleased at a time of cultural liberalization, the 1964 edition of *The Cowards* contained a number of subtle edits, as well as a new preface from Škvorecký in which he defended his novel against its critics, often using their own terminology (perhaps as another *úlitba*). He claimed that he had not intended to debase “sacred” concepts such as “revolution” and “homeland,” suggesting that their rehabilitation “was a matter for the future and for other social classes.”<sup>92</sup> As for the accusation of American cultural influence, though, the new edition made an even stronger claim of affiliation. The Hemingway epigraph in particular—“A writer’s job is to tell the truth”—was a callback to the critical work done by *Světová literatura*. In the foreword to the very first issue of the journal in 1956 the same quotation from Hemingway is used to describe the journal’s founding vision. But the function of this epigraph in *The Cowards* is less straightforward than either the novel’s critics or champions suggest. Hemingway’s quotation bears an ironic relationship to Škvorecký’s novel, highlighting the satirical elements of *The Cowards*.

The Hemingway epigraph is taken from his introduction to a volume called *Men*

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>92</sup> The preface and other paratextual additions are preserved in the English translation of *The Cowards*. See Škvorecký, *The Cowards*, 7.



*at War: The Best War Stories of All Time* (1942).<sup>93</sup> Released upon the United States' entry into World War II, *Men at War* is a volume of stories that incorporates the experiences of fighting men from Julius Caesar up through Winston Churchill. The paperback anthology was produced in large numbers with the intention of being distributed widely among US soldiers during the war, and the book's far-flung circulation might explain how a copy found its way to Škvorecký in northeastern Bohemia. According to Hemingway's introduction, the mission of the volume was to instruct contemporary soldiers in "how all men from the earliest times we know have fought and died."<sup>94</sup> Although cowardice is a central theme of both *Men at War* and Škvorecký's novel, *The Cowards* thumbs its nose at many of the very ideals that *Men at War* seeks to inculcate. The volume is organized around themes taken from the Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz's *Vom Kriege* (*On War*). An entire section of *Men at War* is dedicated to the issue of courage, under a heading taken from Clausewitz: "*War is the province of danger, and therefore courage above all things is the first quality of a warrior.*"<sup>95</sup> This section includes the entirety of Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*, which could serve as a useful countertext to *The Cowards*. In fact, Škvorecký wrote the forward to Jiří Valja's 1958 translation of Crane's novel.

*The Cowards* proceeds as if the opening camp scene from *The Red Badge of Courage* were repeated for seven straight days. The final battle with the Nazi occupiers is

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<sup>93</sup> In 1955, Hemingway's introduction was revised for the new Cold War context. For a comparison of these two versions of the text, see Richard K. Sanderson, "Cold War Revisions of Hemingway's *Men at War*," *The Hemingway Review* 20, no. 1 (2000): 49–60.

<sup>94</sup> Ernest Hemingway, ed., *Men at War: The Best War Stories of All Time* (New York: Crown, 1942), xi.

<sup>95</sup> Hemingway, *Men at War: The Best War Stories of All Time*, vii.

repeatedly deferred, as if Škvorecký never wants the Soviet liberators to arrive. But ultimately, the ending of *The Cowards* feels like a reversion to socialist realist formula and a betrayal of the earlier parts of the novel. Danny and his friends finally decide to join the Communist partisans and attack the retreating Nazi soldiers (here the ending is not so different from *The Red Badge of Courage* either). After Danny destroys a Nazi tank, we are even treated to a western sunset. The result is a highly ambivalent text.

Unlike Crane's novel, *The Cowards* never answers the question its title invites: who are the cowards? Are they the members of the jazz band who avoid military service? Or the "bourgeois" citizens who pull their Czech flags back into their homes at the first sign of trouble? There are many candidates in the novel, but Škvorecký claims that he wasn't even sure when he wrote the novel:

Cross my heart and hope to die, I don't know. I don't know why and I don't know who. It just occurred to me, that's all. Maybe it's a challenge to take a look at the truthfulness of the bathos of lofty words (like the word *cowards*).<sup>96</sup>

If anything, it is the rhetoric of heroism that Škvorecký is satirizing in his novel, a tactic he might have picked up from Hemingway's own writing. Even if *Men at War* is a volume filled with the bathos of lofty words, Škvorecký's representation of war owes a distinct debt to Hemingway's war novels. For instance, the retreat from Caporetto from *A Farewell to Arms*, which is excerpted in *Men at War*, is an important precursor to the parade of soldiers and refugees depicted in the middle sections of *The Cowards*.

Recalling the abandoned weaponry from Hemingway's masterfully absurd scene of retreat, Škvorecký writes, "For now anyway, the best thing to do was just take in this big, mixed-up, shabby parade—all those men and cars and guns and pistols and the end of

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<sup>96</sup> Josef Škvorecký, *Headed for the Blues: A Memoir* (Hopewell: Ecco Press, 1996), 95.

their splendor.”<sup>97</sup>

Hemingway’s epigraph in *The Cowards* has garnered much of the critical attention, but Mezz Mezzrow’s quotation might be an even stranger and more revealing intertextual marker in the novel. The Mezzrow epigraph is taken from Mezzrow’s autobiography *Really the Blues* (1946), written with Bernard Wolfe, a former Trotskyist novelist and cultural critic. As the ellipses in the epigraph signal, Škvorecký excised specific names from the quotation in order to transpose its message into a new context.<sup>98</sup> Translating even this epigraph was no easy task. For instance, “yarddog growls and gully-low howls” becomes something closer to “honk and howl and bellow.”<sup>99</sup> Like both *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* and *The Cool World*, Mezzrow’s book contains sections composed entirely in slang. Mezzrow describes jive as “a strange linguistic mixture of dream and deed...a whole new attitude towards life.” For Mezzrow, jive was also a form of cultural resistance. He writes, “I think you’ve got to keep hammering away at the fact that it *is* a protest, and not so inarticulate at that.”<sup>100</sup> The book contains an entire glossary of jive terminology, which must have been an invaluable resource for a jazz enthusiast and translator like Škvorecký.

Mezzrow’s personal investment in jive and African American culture has made him a controversial figure in contemporary scholarship. Mezzrow was born Milton Mesirov to Russian-Jewish immigrant parents in Chicago, but later moved to Harlem and

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<sup>97</sup> Škvorecký, *The Cowards*, 280.

<sup>98</sup> Škvorecký removes the name of the “Austin High Gang,” an all-white jazz band that helped define the Chicago jazz sound of the 1920s. See Mezz Mezzrow and Bernard Wolfe, *Really the Blues* (New York: Random House, 1946), 103.

<sup>99</sup> See first epigraph in Škvorecký, *Zbabělci* (1964).

<sup>100</sup> Mezzrow and Wolfe, *Really the Blues*, 222.

claimed to have quite literally turned black, declaring himself a “voluntary negro.” When Mezzrow was arrested for drug possession in 1940 and sent to Riker’s Island he demanded to be put into an all-black cell. An article in *Ebony* in 1946 says of Mezzrow, “He has been color-conscious for a long time; so much so that years ago he crossed the color line, married a Negro girl and became a Negro officially and for the records. His draft card even reads: ‘Race, Negro.’”<sup>101</sup> As a result of Mezzrow’s cross-racial performance, *Really the Blues* has been analyzed as both a “passing” narrative and a sociological artifact of mid-century counterculture. For Gayle Wald, “Mezzrow can use jive to fashion a ‘black’ self on paper,” but Wald argues that Mezzrow’s quest for black authenticity also demonstrates the limits of cross-racial performance.<sup>102</sup>

It’s hard to disagree with Wald’s argument, but the meanings of cross-racial performance are also quite different when they are transposed across national and political borders. While Wald calls Mezzrow’s style “contrived and rehearsed,” Charles Hersch claims that the experiments of Mezzrow and other Jewish jazz artists “were not minstrelsy or exploitation, but attempts to find a platform of resistance against a tranquilized America and Jewishness.”<sup>103</sup> Just as many Jewish musicians and artists embraced black culture as a way to avoid assimilation and to maintain their outsider status, it’s clear that the marginal cultural position represented by jazz and jive held a strong attraction for Škvorecký. But for Škvorecký, the significance of *Really the Blues* was even more specific and local.

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<sup>101</sup> “Case History of an Ex-White Man,” *Ebony* 2, no. 2 (December 1946): 11.

<sup>102</sup> Gayle Wald, *Crossing the Line: Racial Passing in Twentieth-Century U.S. Literature and Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 71.

<sup>103</sup> Charles Hersch, “‘Every Time I Try to Play Black, It Comes Out Sounding Jewish’: Jewish Jazz Musicians and Racial Identity,” *American Jewish History* 97, no. 3 (2013): 282.

During the Nazi occupation, when jazz was still an outlawed musical genre in Bohemia, Škvorecký stayed informed about jazz culture through an underground publication called *O.K.*, which stood for *Okružní korespondence*, or “Circulating Correspondence.”<sup>104</sup> After the Communist takeover, when jazz was again a suspect genre, Škvorecký and his friend Lubomír Dorůžka organized a jazz revue in Prague, an extremely rare event. The show was titled “Really the Blues” after Mezzrow’s book. The revue had to be performed under a guise of anti-Americanism in order to get official authorization. Škvorecký and his band *Pražský dixieland* were only able to get the show approved by fronting the band with the American performers Herbert and Jacqueline Ward who had both sought political asylum in Czechoslovakia in 1954 due to their pro-Soviet views. According to Škvorecký, “Since Herb’s terribly shouted blues had anti-American lyrics and because Jackie’s skin was not entirely white the authorities didn’t dare protest, and left us alone with our towering success.”<sup>105</sup> The show eventually died because Herb and Jackie wanted more money. Škvorecký’s artistic fame would have to wait for the publication of *The Cowards* and the resulting scandal.

The complex racial dynamics that underlie Mezzrow’s book looked very different from Škvorecký’s vantage point in Prague. For instance, the ethnic politics that Škvorecký has in mind in his essay “Red Music” are not American but Central European. Škvorecký describes how Hitler and Goebbels first declared jazz to be “Judeo-Negroid” music. Under the new Communist regime, this hybridity was recoded in class terms as bourgeois.<sup>106</sup> When literature and culture travelled during the Cold War, a great deal of

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<sup>104</sup> Škvorecký, *Talkin’ Moscow Blues*, 90.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

the original cultural baggage got left behind. So, what did travel? As Škvorecký has suggested about Czech jazz enthusiasts in the fifties, “We knew nothing—but we knew the music.”<sup>107</sup> Even before Škvorecký added the Mezzrow quotation to the 1964 edition, his novel was obsessively filled with references to specific jazz titles and artists. In just the first day of the novel’s action, Škvorecký presents a laundry list of jazz shout-outs, both famous and obscure: “St. James Infirmary,” “Bob Cats,” “Annie Laurie,” “Riverside Blues,” Louis Armstrong, Bob Crosby, Jimmy Lunceford, and Chuck Webb. Crucially, the novel takes place during the brief period in Škvorecký’s young adulthood when it appeared as if jazz might be the future for the country: the years between Hitler and Gottwald. Although he has disagreed with those like LeRoi Jones who have claimed that jazz has an inherent quality of protest, Škvorecký obviously identified with Mezzrow’s marginal position within mainstream American society.<sup>108</sup> The epigraph from *Really the Blues* is a call back to the days of clandestine jazz magazines and surreptitious Dixieland performances. According to Škvorecký, “*Really the Blues* was the end of a beginning.”<sup>109</sup>

### **Conclusion: What if?**

In a 1983 review for *The New Republic*, Škvorecký relates an anecdote about the status of both a Hemingway novel and a jazz record as contraband in the Soviet bloc in the late 1950s. In 1957, Škvorecký’s friend, the translator Jan Zábřana, travelled to the Soviet Union in order to do research for a series of Isaac Babel translations he was

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<sup>107</sup> Škvorecký’s disagreement with LeRoi Jones comes from his 1977 essay “Red Music,” translated and reprinted in *Ibid.*, 89. A version of this essay was also published in *Harper’s* but omits the LeRoi Jones comment.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

working on at the time. The visit was also social. He hoped to smuggle in some records as a present to a Russian friend who was also a jazz buff. In order to get them past Soviet customs he came up with a clever ruse. Škvorecký writes, “To divert the attention of the Soviet customs officers from his valuable black-market goods, he displayed, on top of his belongings in his luggage, a British edition of Hemingway’s *For Whom the Bell Tolls*.”<sup>110</sup> According to Škvorecký’s retelling, the trick worked: after a long discussion, the customs officers confiscated the novel (even though Hemingway had recently been rehabilitated in Russia). His jazz records, though, were never discovered.

This anecdote may be apocryphal, but it is revealing about how Škvorecký thought about his own efforts as a cultural translator in the late fifties. Although Hemingway, Faulkner, and other canonical American modernists were central to the critical work being undertaken by Škvorecký and *Světová literatura*, Mezz Mezzrow’s *Really the Blues* heralded the arrival of an alternative lifestyle that would have even broader appeal for an emerging Czech counterculture. Several critics have pointed out that Mezzrow was a real-life antecedent to Norman Mailer’s famous “White Negro.”<sup>111</sup> Mezzrow was also a cultural hero to writers like Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac who passed around dog-eared copies of *Really the Blues*.<sup>112</sup> As Gayle Wald argues, “it was the thoroughness of Mezzrow’s commitment to a hipster ethic he helped innovate that made

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>111</sup> As we’ve seen, Škvorecký’s identification with African American culture was imbued with a primitivism also present in Mailer’s essay. What might distinguish Škvorecký from Mailer, though, is his genuine investment in the musical practice of jazz. It’s hard to imagine Škvorecký ever referring to “jazz as orgasm” (as Mailer did), especially given his deep knowledge and love of the actual music.

<sup>112</sup> Loren Glass has recently argued that Mezzrow’s *Really the Blues* “deeply influenced [the Beats’] cultural and aesthetic program.” See Loren Glass, “The Mighty Mezz, Marijuana, and the Beat Generation,” *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, May 7, 2015.

him a readily available model for those post-war white male intellectuals whose romanticized appropriations of black culture were similarly instrumental to their development of a critique of the national social and culture ‘mainstream.’”<sup>113</sup> A similar hipster ethic would also be instrumental to the critique of mainstream socialist culture in Czechoslovakia during the sixties. But the Czech reception of countercultural sources from the US required more than a straightforward process of romanticized appropriation. As with Škvorecký’s work at *Světová literatura*, cultural translation was a dizzying process of transnational identification, adaptation, and repurposing.

What Czech readers made of all of this is a harder question to answer, but certain countercultural forms were beginning to take hold in Czechoslovakia. In *Really the Blues*, Mezzrow suggests that a shared hip language can help constitute a new underground community: “Jive does knit together a kind of tight secret society—but it’s a society which resents and nourishes its resentment, and is readying to strike back.” He continues, “The hipsters’ fraternal order isn’t just an escape valve, a defense mechanism; it’s a kind of drilling academy too, preparing for future battles.”<sup>114</sup> A range of texts and publications circulated a new language in Czechoslovakia that fit Mezzrow’s description, from *O.K.* and *Světová literatura* to *The Cool World* and *The Cowards*. But Škvorecký’s hybrid novel is as much about looking back as it is about the battles it precipitated. Sam Solecki has described the presence of the English language in Škvorecký’s fiction as “the language of ‘what if’—what if, that is, Czechoslovakia’s history had been different.”<sup>115</sup> The same might be said of the presence of jazz in *The Cowards*. As I have suggested, the

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<sup>113</sup> Wald, *Crossing the Line*, 59.

<sup>114</sup> Mezzrow and Wolfe, *Really the Blues*, 223.

<sup>115</sup> See Solecki’s preface to Škvorecký, *Talkin’ Moscow Blues*, 3.



Mezzrow epigraph refers to a stolen future. The novel ends with Danny watching zoot-suiters dancing in front of a bandstand erected to welcome the Soviet army, innocently imagining all the jazz that the future will hold.

### Chapter 3.

#### The Kingdom of May: Allen Ginsberg and the Prague Counterculture

More than any other literary movement originating in the United States, the Beat generation charted a global itinerary that trespassed the boundaries that had been established during the first phase of the Cold War.<sup>1</sup> This was especially true in Czechoslovakia, where Beat literature and culture presented a radical alternative to socialist realism. But, crucially, Beat aesthetic commitments were also at odds with the official version of American literary culture being exported as part of US cultural diplomacy during the Cold War. As Greg Barnhisel argues, the US promotion of a chastened form of liberal modernism abroad had required “deactivating or nullifying its associations with radicalism and antinomianism,” making it safe for consumption by a global audience.<sup>2</sup> Beat literature, on the other hand, was free of any association with US cultural diplomacy, making it easier to import into socialist countries. But the Beats also embodied the irrational, perverse, and antinomian qualities that had once been associated with the modernist avant-garde, which was still officially viewed as decadent and bourgeois across the communist world.<sup>3</sup> While these aesthetic qualities held a special appeal to literary nonconformists in Czechoslovakia, many in the Eastern bloc were also

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<sup>1</sup> Gerd-Rainer Horn makes a similar argument in his study of cultural rebellion during the “long sixties” in Western Europe and North America. See Horn, *The Spirit of '68: Rebellion in Western Europe and North America, 1956-1976* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 16-18.

<sup>2</sup> Greg Barnhisel, *Cold War Modernists: Art, Literature, and American Cultural Diplomacy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 5.

<sup>3</sup> See Robert Genter’s discussion of the Beats as a Cold War example of “romantic modernism” in Genter, *Late Modernism: Art, Culture, and Politics in Cold War America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).

attracted to the set of countercultural styles associated with the Beats, which symbolized a forbidden mode of youthful rebellion.

Not only were Beat texts and styles circulating globally during the Cold War, but Beat writers also travelled the world extensively. And wherever they went they tended to attract significant local attention and controversy. The journey of the poet Allen Ginsberg to Czechoslovakia in 1965 might be the most dramatic instance of this phenomenon. After spending more than two months in the Eastern bloc, Ginsberg was elected as the ceremonial *Král majáles*, or “King of May,” during a massive student celebration in Prague. Unsurprisingly, leaders of the Communist regime were outraged, and within days Ginsberg was expelled from the country. Ginsberg’s poetry was officially banned and his name was soon used by the Ministry of the Interior in an aggressive campaign against the disaffected Czech youths who had adopted the styles associated with American beatniks and hippies. This only reinforced Ginsberg’s subversive appeal in Czechoslovakia. After the Soviet-led invasion of 1968, copies of Ginsberg’s poems began to circulate again in samizdat editions among a reconstituted cultural underground.<sup>4</sup> For Communist hardliners and cultural nonconformists alike, Ginsberg’s name became a symbol of antiestablishment revolt in Czechoslovakia until the end of the Cold War.

After the Velvet Revolution, the story of Ginsberg’s visit to Prague became part of a larger mythology about the influence of Western counterculture in the Eastern bloc.

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<sup>4</sup> Ginsberg and the Beats are most often linked to the Czech underground culture of the 1970s and 1980s, especially the antiestablishment poet Ivan Martin Jirous, who went by the nickname “Magor” (or “Madman”). For examples of this linkage, see Jiří Holý, *Writers Under Siege: Czech Literature since 1945*, trans. Elizabeth S. Morrison and Jan Culik (Portland: Sussex Academic Press, 2010), 157; and Justin Quinn, *Between Two Fires: Transnationalism and Cold War Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 162. For a broader contextualization of Jirous and Czech underground culture, see Jonathan Bolton, *Worlds of Dissent: Charter 77, The Plastic People of the Universe, and Czech Culture under Communism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012).

According to the Czechoslovak variation of this narrative, Ginsberg's election as King of May and his subsequent expulsion from Czechoslovakia provided a model of cultural protest and resistance to the future dissidents who toppled the Communist regime in 1989. After the fall of communism, this triumphalist narrative had obvious appeal for liberal intellectuals in the United States.<sup>5</sup> A version of this narrative was promoted by Czechoslovakia's first post-Communist president, the dissident playwright Václav Havel. Ginsberg himself had obvious reason to embrace this theory of cultural change, which he first encountered in an interview that Lou Reed conducted with Havel for *Musician* magazine in 1990.<sup>6</sup> As Ginsberg reductively interpreted Havel to be saying to Reed, American countercultural icons—from the Beats to Reed's own Velvet Underground—had been absorbed by the Czech dissident underground and repurposed for their peaceful cultural revolution in 1989, “all this in a straight line, from rock and roll to closing the offices of the secret police.”<sup>7</sup>

While Ginsberg's election as King of May did have enormous consequences for him, the line from the Beats to the Velvet Revolution was hardly a straight one. The impact of Ginsberg's visit to Prague can only be understood in the context of two wider developments in the period: the Czech reception of Beat literature and culture beginning in 1959, and the emergence of a new student counterculture in Czechoslovakia during the early sixties. Indeed, the Beats were already popular in Czechoslovakia when Ginsberg

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<sup>5</sup> See for instance Paul Berman, *A Tale of Two Utopias: The Political Journey of the Generation of 1968* (New York: Norton, 1996), 232–233.

<sup>6</sup> Václav Havel, interview with Lou Reed, “To Do the Right Thing,” *Musician*, October 1, 1990.

<sup>7</sup> Allen Ginsberg, *Spontaneous Mind: Selected Interviews, 1958-1996*, ed. David Carter (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), 533.

arrived in 1965. In a letter sent from Prague, Ginsberg wrote to his father, “Everybody here adores the Beatniks, & there’s a whole generation of Prague teenagers who listen to jazz & wear long hair & say shit on communism & read *Howl*.”<sup>8</sup> In the preface to a book of Ginsberg’s interviews, Havel describes how this came to be. First, the circulation of texts by Beat writers in Czechoslovakia in the late fifties and early sixties encouraged the formation of a small but vital literary counterculture in Prague. Havel refers to “those who knew [Beat] literature and, by fostering it, created through this common knowledge a brotherhood, a community of nonconformists.”<sup>9</sup> But how did this community read and interpret the Beats?

According to Havel, the Beats were understood as “a denouncement of the social establishment and as a quest for new attitudes and a new lifestyle,” much as they were in the United States. But eventually Beat culture was also adapted in Czechoslovakia as “a potential instrument for resistance” to the “totalitarian” regime. How did this new dissident reading come about? Rather than a case of unidirectional influence, Beat culture in Czechoslovakia drew on indigenous traditions of student dissent as well as literary sources and cultural styles that had previously been translated from abroad. Ginsberg therefore collided with a hybrid counterculture in Czechoslovakia in 1965 that had already adapted select features of American literature and culture for its own purposes. By the mid-sixties this student counterculture was becoming increasingly confrontational with the Communist regime, which had shown only halting signs of liberalization since

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<sup>8</sup> Allen Ginsberg and Louis Ginsberg, *Family Business: Selected Letters between a Father and Son*, ed. Michael Schumacher (New York: Bloomsbury, 2001), 228.

<sup>9</sup> Václav Havel, “Preface,” in *Spontaneous Mind: Selected Interviews, 1958-1996*, ed. David Carter (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), ix.

the official rejection of Stalinism in 1956. When Ginsberg arrived in Prague in 1965, this counterculture was ready and waiting.

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But how and why did Ginsberg get to Czechoslovakia in the first place? Ginsberg arrived in Prague having been freshly deported from Cuba where he had been invited to serve as a judge in an international poetry competition.<sup>10</sup> Because of the US embargo on Cuba, Ginsberg's travel itinerary to Cuba had required that he return to New York via Czechoslovakia, a country with much friendlier relations with the Castro regime. (Just to get the required visas and permits for his trip, Ginsberg had to threaten legal action against the State Department.) In Cuba, Ginsberg was an official guest of *Casa de las Américas*, a cultural organization established by the Cuban government. Once in Havana, Ginsberg befriended a group of young poets associated with the literary magazine *El Puente* ("The Bridge") and began to speak out publicly about the treatment of homosexuals in Cuba. It didn't help that Ginsberg told one reporter that he'd had a sexual fantasy about Che Guevara.<sup>11</sup>

Ginsberg's visit to Cuba was a late example of the Beat fascination with Cuba's political and cultural revolution. In the first years after the Cuban Revolution, many American writers and intellectuals, including Lawrence Ferlinghetti, C. Wright Mills, Mark Schleifer, Harold Cruse, and Amiri Baraka, wrote dispatches about their travels to Cuba. Todd Tietchen argues that the Beat encounter with Cuba "allowed for the

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<sup>10</sup> For more on Ginsberg's trip to Cuba (as well as Czechoslovakia) see Barry Miles, *Allen Ginsberg: Beat Poet* (London: Virgin, 2010), 336–364; and Michael Schumacher, *Dharma Lion: A Biography of Allen Ginsberg* (New York: St. Martin's, 1992), 418–448. Ginsberg's biographers typically reserve one chapter to cover both Ginsberg's trips to Cuba and Czechoslovakia. These episodes are reconstructed almost entirely from Ginsberg's perspective.

<sup>11</sup> Miles, *Allen Ginsberg*, 343.

crystallization of Beat attitudes toward Cold War domestic and foreign policy, a group pronouncement of dissenting outlooks that had been deemed irrational, non-pragmatic, and even un-American.”<sup>12</sup> But Ginsberg’s experience in Cuba also reinforced his conviction that there could be no true political revolution without a fundamental transformation of attitudes towards gender and sexuality. Given his own experiences with censorship and obscenity trials in the US, Ginsberg also became a vocal advocate for free expression across both Cold War blocs.

Because Ginsberg expressed these convictions in public, including on Cuban public radio, his stay in Havana was cut short. One morning, three Cuban officials in green khaki uniforms woke Ginsberg and informed him that he was being kicked out of Cuba.<sup>13</sup> To his father Louis, Ginsberg wrote, “In Cuba I committed about every ‘infraction of totalitarian laws’ I could think of, verbally, and they finally flipped out & gave me the bum’s rush. It was half Kafkian & half funny.”<sup>14</sup> The incident was less whimsical for Ginsberg’s contacts in Cuba. There were direct consequences for Ginsberg’s hosts after his expulsion, both for the young poets of *El Puente* and even for

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<sup>12</sup> Todd F. Tietchen, *The Cubalogues: Beat Writers in Revolutionary Havana* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2010), 9. Tietchen’s work is an example of the recent effort to resituate the Beats in the transnational context of the global Cold War. Many of these works reassess the trajectories of Beat writers and texts, showing that their social and aesthetic commitments often moved well beyond a politics of disaffection. See also Nancy McCampbell Grace and Jennie Skerl, eds., *The Transnational Beat Generation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); and Timothy Gray, *Gary Snyder and the Pacific Rim: Creating Countercultural Community* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2006). Gray, for example, shows how Snyder and others seized upon the idea of the Pacific Rim as way to resist the Cold War division of East and West.

<sup>13</sup> For Ginsberg’s description, see Allen Ginsberg, “Journal: Cuba V,” February 18, 1965, Series 2, Box 18, Folder 2, Allen Ginsberg papers, M0733, Dept. of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, Calif. All subsequent references to the Allen Ginsberg Papers will be abbreviated as AGP.

<sup>14</sup> Ginsberg and Ginsberg, *Family Business*, 230.

*Casa de las las Américas*, which was entering a final stage of participation in the cultural Cold War.<sup>15</sup> The editors of *Casa* were replaced and at least two radical poets associated with *El Puente* were arrested after Ginsberg's departure.

At the airport in Havana, Ginsberg wrote in his journal, "Outside waiting to go toward huge silver jetplane with CZHECKOSLOVAKIA [*sic*] painted along it like the backbone of a fish—great gang of check [*sic*] visitors being greeted farewell."<sup>16</sup> Even though Ginsberg was determined to keep a lower profile in Prague, his visit to Czechoslovakia would again result in his deportation. But in Czechoslovakia the cultural and political consequences would be even wider than in Cuba. This is because Ginsberg arrived into a perfect storm in Czechoslovakia. The country was undergoing a social and cultural transformation in the mid-sixties, and the Communist regime had no idea how to react. Two months after Ginsberg's arrival these cultural and political pressures would erupt into the carnivalesque spectacle of Majáles, a traditional student festival celebrating the arrival of spring.

## **1. Americká bohéma**

To comprehend the role that Ginsberg played in this event, we first need to understand the idiosyncratic reception of Beat literature and culture in Communist Czechoslovakia. The writing of Allen Ginsberg and the Beat Generation was first introduced to Czech readers in the pages of *Světová literatura* in 1959 when the critic

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<sup>15</sup> Patrick Iber, *Neither Peace nor Freedom: The Cultural Cold War in Latin America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 200–201.

<sup>16</sup> Ginsberg, "Cuba V."



Igor Hájek published a review-essay entitled “Americká bohéma.”<sup>17</sup> The first thing to point out is the essay’s title, “American Bohemia,” which signals the ways that Czechs would adapt Beat culture to the local national and socialist contexts. Not only did the title refer to the American countercultural environments that had produced the Beats—from Greenwich Village to North Beach—but the title also contains a not-so-subtle reference to the historical region of Czech Bohemia. The Beat subculture that emerged in Czechoslovakia was a hybridized and contested cultural space from the start.

Censorship was always at the heart of how the Czechs understood Ginsberg and the Beats. Hájek begins his review with a discussion of the 1957 trial in which Ginsberg’s poem “Howl” was brought up on obscenity charges. This also allows Hájek to situate his discussion in the very specific countercultural neighborhood of North Beach in San Francisco where Ginsberg first performed “Howl” at the Six Gallery in 1955 and defended his poetry in court two years later. But in his description of North Beach, Hájek imports a long quotation from an article written by the American critic John G. Roberts in the communist magazine *Mainstream* entitled “The Frisco Beat.”<sup>18</sup> *Mainstream* was the latest incarnation of the magazine *Masses & Mainstream*, which was frequently quoted in *Světová literatura*. Hájek quotes Roberts, who claims, “the international flavor of the neighborhood and its mixed class composition attracts bohemians who find inspiration and solace in the illusion of democracy achieved.”<sup>19</sup> Just as Josef Škvorecký had quoted *Masses & Mainstream* in 1956 as part of a larger effort to reintegrate Hemingway and other contemporary American writers into Czech literary culture, Hájek turns to Roberts’

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<sup>17</sup> Igor Hájek, “Americká bohéma,” *Světová literatura* 4, no. 6 (1959): 207–33.

<sup>18</sup> John G. Roberts, “The Frisco Beat,” *Mainstream* 11, no. 7, July 1958, 11–26.

<sup>19</sup> Hájek, “Americká bohéma,” 207. Translations from “Americká bohéma” are mine.

essay three years later as part of a strategy of misdirection. In order to get his essay approved by the censors, Hájek quotes hardline critics from the Soviet Union and the US throughout the essay. The Marxist line of attack on the Beats is a familiar one: the anarchistic and nihilistic Beats lack a positive program to go along with their general attitude of cultural disaffection. Hájek's strategy of socialist quotation allows him to smuggle in a fairly sophisticated and systematic analysis of the Beats, especially for 1959. The essay focuses most closely on works by Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, but there is also discussion of John Clellon Holmes, Kenneth Rexroth, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti, as well as an exploration of the racial "primitivism" expressed in Norman Mailer's "White Negro" essay.

"American Bohemia" is a monumental work of cultural translation. On the most basic level this involved the challenge of rendering the term "Beat" in Czech. Hájek opts for *zbité generace* rather than the term used by a Slovak critic in Bratislava, *úderná generace*, which translates back into English as the "Percussive Generation," with militant overtones.<sup>20</sup> But Hájek's critical task was much wider. By the end of the 24-page essay, Hájek also introduces an entire American countercultural and literary milieu to Czech readers. He starts out by explaining new sociological concepts like "square," "suburbia," "the commuter," "conformity," and the "organization man," before analyzing the counter-phenomenon of "hipsters," "hotrodders," and "blue jeans." Along the way he discusses an impressive range of "highbrow" and "lowbrow" authors, including: John Cheever, Herman Wouk, Truman Capote, Gore Vidal, Jean Stafford, Carson McCullers, J. D. Salinger, and Saul Bellow. Crucially for our story, Hájek also describes the presence

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 216.

of live jazz at poetry readings in the US, a combination still rare in the Czech context, where jazz was only recently becoming politically palatable.

Hájek's essay also includes the first translations of Ginsberg's poems "Howl," "America," and "At Apollinaire's Grave," all credited to the nonconformist poet and translator Jan Zábřana. The choice of the first two poems makes obvious sense, especially given their powerful criticism of Cold War domestic culture in the US. As for the third poem, Apollinaire was a figure of great interest in Czechoslovakia, in part because of his references to Prague in the poem "Zone" (1913).<sup>21</sup> From the late fifties on, Zábřana, who was a close friend of Josef Škvorecký, was the key translator of Beat poetry into Czech.<sup>22</sup> Later in life, Škvorecký claimed that it had actually been him who first translated "Howl" into Czech for his friend Zábřana. In a letter from 1996, Škvorecký writes,

At the time [Zábřana] "discovered" Ginsberg, his English wasn't very good yet, so I made a rough translation of "Howl" for him. This was then published in 1959 in a literary bi-monthly *World Literature* (*Světová literatura*) of which I had been the editor until early 1959 when I was fired on account of my banned novel *The Cowards*. This was the first appearance of Ginsberg's poetry in Czech.<sup>23</sup>

Škvorecký made a similar claim about the Czech translation of Warren Miller's forgotten novel *The Cool World*, which had also been credited to Zábřana. As with Škvorecký's much more public claim about *The Cool World*, which was met with significant controversy in literary circles in Czechoslovakia, Škvorecký's statement should be

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<sup>21</sup> Derek Sayer, *Prague, Capital of the Twentieth Century: A Surrealist History* (Princeton University Press, 2013), 33–78.

<sup>22</sup> For an English-language discussion of Jan Zábřana, especially in the context of transnational literary exchange, see Quinn, *Between Two Fires*. See also Jonathan Bolton's discussion of Zábřana as a "boundary figure" in "Writing in a Polluted Semiosphere: Everyday Life in Lotman, Foucault, and de Certeau," in *Lotman and Cultural Studies: Encounters and Extensions*, edited by Andreas Schönle (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), 320–344.

<sup>23</sup> Josef Škvorecký, "Letter to Ms. Phillips," October 11, 1996, Box 62, Allen Ginsberg Correspondence, Josef Škvorecký Papers, Fisher Library Collection, University of Toronto.

viewed skeptically.<sup>24</sup> It seems likely that the first translation of “Howl” into Czech had required some amount of collaboration between Zábřana and Škvorecký, but many of the best and most important translations of the Beats are credited to Zábřana.

To get Ginsberg’s poems past the censors, certain lines were excised, including the reference to “super communist pamphlets” in “Howl.”<sup>25</sup> Political considerations weren’t the only challenge in translating Ginsberg’s poetry into Czech. In an essay, Škvorecký describes the difficulty of helping his friend Zábřana translate “Ginsberg’s verses, incomprehensible to a non-American, and the numerous words that came into use long after my obsolete dictionaries had been published.”<sup>26</sup> Zábřana and Škvorecký actually began to correspond directly with Ginsberg in order to ask for assistance with rendering Ginsberg’s hipster vernacular in Czech. Again, years later, Škvorecký took credit for these communications with Ginsberg. In the 1996 letter, he writes,

While I was working on the rough translation I realized that the poem contained many allusions to events, people and things unknown to me—don’t forget there were no American journals or books available in Prague. So I wrote Ginsberg several letters asking for clarification which Zábřana signed (I was already under the ban). In this way we exchanged several letters.<sup>27</sup>

Regardless of Škvorecký’s controversial claim, this prior contact between Ginsberg and the two Czech translators would prove important when Ginsberg arrived in Prague in 1965.

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<sup>24</sup> See the essays featured in “Ad Prezydent krokadýů,” *Revolver Revue Kritická příloha* 8 (1997): 99-120. For more on *The Cool World* controversy see the previous chapter.

<sup>25</sup> For a brief discussion of these omissions see Josef Rauwolf, “Prague Connection,” in *The Transnational Beat Generation*, 180.

<sup>26</sup> Josef Škvorecký, *Talkin’ Moscow Blues*, ed. Sam Solecki (Toronto: L. & O. Denny’s, 1988), 55.

<sup>27</sup> Škvorecký, “Letter to Ms. Phillips.”

Poetry by Ginsberg and other Beat poets like Corso and Ferlinghetti, all translated by Zábřana, continued to appear into the early sixties—often published by the official publishing house *Státní nakladatelství krásné literatury a umění* (SNKLU), which became *Odeon* after 1965. This publishing house was a bastion for liberal-minded editors who had sophisticated taste in literature. One of their goals was to fill in the perceived gaps in Czech literary culture that resulted from official socialist artistic policies.<sup>28</sup> Prague was not without its own indigenous poetry scene with similarities to the Beats, but many of these writers disseminated their works in private samizdat editions. Josef Rauwolf emphasizes the parallels between Beat poetry and the writers who gathered around the early samizdat publication *Edice Půlnoc* (“Midnight Edition”), which originated during the Stalinist period. Rather than being influenced by the Ginsberg and the Beats, Rauwolf points to *Edice Půlnoc* as an example of “synchronicity” across the Iron Curtain.<sup>29</sup> By the mid-sixties there were also poets who were more directly influenced by the Beats, including Václav Hrabě, Vladimíra Čerepková, Inka Machuková. These writers were a part of a broader countercultural scene that took root in Prague in the years before Ginsberg’s arrival.

There are several factors that enabled Beat literature and other countercultural sources from the US to catch on in Czechoslovakia during the early sixties. First of all, in

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<sup>28</sup> Petr Kopecký, “Czeching the Beat, Beating the Czech: Ginsberg and Ferlinghetti in Czechia,” *The Sixties* 3, no. 1 (2010): 98.

<sup>29</sup> According to Rauwolf, “Other characteristics typical of the Midnights (we can say almost the same about the Beats) were conscious outsiderdom; sympathy with the insulted and humiliated; fascination with the dregs of society; life on the edge of the law and often over the edge; embrace of extreme psychological experiences, including use of psychedelic drugs; hospitalization in psychiatric institutes, viewed as important experiences or as refuge from a hostile universe; refusal of military duty; rejection of ‘success’ and ‘career’; emphasis on individual freedom; and negation and transcendence of sexual taboos.” See Rauwolf, “Prague Connection,” 182.

1962 there was a relaxation in travel policies, allowing Czechoslovak citizens to visit the West, and the United States, in increasing numbers. Several important Czech writers travelled to the US during this period, including the poet Miroslav Holub who was deeply influenced by Ginsberg and the Beats.<sup>30</sup> It was on just such a trip in 1963 that Zdenek Stříbrný, the Shakespeare scholar who had been one of F. O. Matthiessen's students in 1947, rode a Greyhound bus around the US for two months, amazed by the diversity of his fellow passengers: "African Americans, Asians, Chicanos, European students, American beatniks on the road, and so on."<sup>31</sup> During this journey, Stříbrný actually met Lawrence Ferlinghetti at City Lights Bookstore in San Francisco and tracked down Allen Ginsberg in Washington Square Park in New York. Stříbrný and his wife, who worked at the Writer's Union, invited Ginsberg to visit Prague, an idea that may have stuck in Ginsberg's mind as he made his travel arrangements to Cuba two years later.

Czechoslovakia, along with other parts of the communist world, was also beginning to embrace a socialist corollary to Western consumerism during the late fifties and early sixties.<sup>32</sup> The regime's new embrace of mass leisure activities and popular entertainment helped fuel a growing youth subculture that was coming of age in a period of uneven de-Stalinization. The Beat rejection of consumerism, therefore, had its own

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<sup>30</sup> The celebrated Czech poet Holub published a book of reportage on his 1962-63 journey to the United States titled *Anděl na Kolečkách* ("Angel on Wheels") that included significant discussion of Ginsberg and the Beats. For an excellent discussion of this reportage see Quinn, *Between Two Fires*, especially 112–131. For another brief discussion of *Anděl na Kolečkách* see Harold B. Segel, *The Columbia Literary History of Eastern Europe since 1945* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 313–315.

<sup>31</sup> Zdeněk Stříbrný, *The Whirligig of Time: Essays on Shakespeare and Czechoslovakia* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2007), 27.

<sup>32</sup> For a synthesis of recent scholarship on Czechoslovakia during this period see Kevin McDermott, *Communist Czechoslovakia, 1945-89: A Political and Social History* (New York: Palgrave, 2015), 111–114.

special resonance in Czechoslovakia. The embrace of Beat culture was also closely tied to the rise of rock and pop music in the Eastern bloc. As Peter Bugge argues, “by the mid-1960s ‘Western’ youth styles and modes of behavior were incorporated into what could be presented as a modern, Czechoslovak *socialist* culture.”<sup>33</sup> By this point jazz had largely been “rehabilitated” in official culture and some communist theoreticians were looking for ways to appropriate rock music in order to attract a new generation to the ongoing mission of constructing their socialist utopia. Although the fit was never an easy one, there were also genuine attempts to situate Beat culture within these existing socialist discourses.

By the mid-sixties Ginsberg was a well-known figure in Czechoslovakia. His poetry could be heard on Czechoslovak radio and even on television.<sup>34</sup> But to understand his appeal among the student counterculture, we must turn to the localized social world of Prague’s indigenous Beat scene, which was centered on a strip of hip bars and concert halls lining Národní street.<sup>35</sup> One location in particular played a decisive role in the popularization of Ginsberg and Beat poetry among Prague’s student underground: a poetry café called the *Viola*.

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<sup>33</sup> Peter Bugge, “Swinging Sixties Made in Czechoslovakia: The Adaptation of Western Impulses in Czechoslovak Youth Culture,” in *1968: Pražské jaro 1968: občanská média, přenos politických a kulturních procesů*, ed. Oldřich Tůma and Markéta Devátá (Praha: Ústav pro soudobé dějiny AV ČR, 2011), 147.

<sup>34</sup> Kopecký, “Czeching the Beat, Beating the Czech,” 99.

<sup>35</sup> According to Michael Žantovský, “The role of Národní Street, a kilometer-long boulevard running from the Vltava River to Wenceslas Square, played in the intellectual renaissance of the sixties can hardly be overestimated.” In close proximity to the *Viola*, Žantovský lists the National Theater, the offices of the Writers’ Union, the Prague Academy Film School, *Slavia* Café, the *Reduta* music club, the publishing house *Odeon*, the *Laterna Magika* theater, and a “Bermuda Triangle” of seedier bars also in the area. See Michael Zantovsky, *Havel: A Life* (New York: Grove Press, 2014), 80–81.

The Viola, which opened in 1963, introduced an entirely new format to Czechoslovakia: poetry readings accompanied by live jazz performances.<sup>36</sup> This was the strange combination that Hájek had described four years earlier in “American Bohemia.” A typical program at the Viola included poetry readings by local poets alongside readings of works by Ginsberg, Ferlinghetti, and Corso, all accompanied by covers of Miles Davis and other American jazz musicians.<sup>37</sup> The Viola became the preferred hangout of Czech Beat writers like Hrabě, Čerepková, and Machuková, as well as a wider collection of Prague writers, intellectuals, and filmmakers. As the blown-up photos of Ginsberg that adorned the walls of the café attest, Ginsberg was the patron saint of the Viola.

One of these photos is actually visible on the cover of a Communist propaganda magazine called *Czechoslovak Life* that appeared in April 1964, a year before Ginsberg’s arrival in Prague.<sup>38</sup> Intended as a Communist rejoinder to the popular *Life* magazine, *Czechoslovak Life* was published by Orbis, the official publishing house of the Czechoslovak Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and distributed in English, French, Swedish, and Italian editions. The magazine was an outward facing front in the cultural Cold War. Amazingly, the cover article of the April 1964 issue was written about the Viola café. As a piece of state-approved propaganda, the article therefore provides a rare glimpse of the official Communist Party line on Beat-inspired youth culture in Czechoslovakia on the eve of Ginsberg’s visit.

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<sup>36</sup> For a history of the Viola and its owner Jiří Ostermann, see Veronika Müllerová, *Ostermannova Viola* (Tábor: Kotnov, 2008).

<sup>37</sup> Ginsberg brought back a typical evening program from the Viola, which is still preserved in his archive. See “Viola Program,” Series 17, Box 46, Folder 5, AGP.

<sup>38</sup> See cover article by Rosemary Kavanová, “Poetic Venture,” *Czechoslovak Life*, April 1964. The issue is preserved in Series 13, Box 46, Folder 10, AGP.



Many of the same themes from Hájek's essay on "American Bohemia" are repeated in the *Czechoslovak Life* article, although the analysis is somewhat less sophisticated. The writer of the article, Rosemary Kavanová, has just attended an evening of jazz and poetry readings at the Viola, where Ginsberg's poems are the centerpiece. Kavanová asks rhetorically whether the Viola should therefore be considered a "Beat haunt." Although she initially answers in the negative, her longer response is more ambivalent:

No, the Beats dissociate themselves from a society they write off as not worth changing. Our youth criticizes certain aspects of society, but the wish for improvement is coupled with a sense of responsibility and commitment. The youth movement recently adopted as one of its aims the uncovering of waste and misuse of materials in industry and agriculture. Youth constructions never lack applicants. This month, the first volunteers will be starting work on the wide-gauge railway line from the Soviet border to the East Slovak Iron Works.

We can, however, find some common features with the Beat generation. Our young people are Beat in the sense of searching for the truth. After the shock of the Stalin cult revelations, they are no longer content to swallow a faith pre-fabricated by adults. They are beginning to search for their own answers, to strive towards convictions in their own way. They are Beat, too, in their worship of spontaneity—a reaction to the studied art of the past—hence the popularity of jazz, the twist, the new exuberant young theaters—and the *Viola*.<sup>39</sup>

It's easy to dismiss this cultural analysis, especially with its reference to youthful enthusiasm for socialist construction projects. (The article immediately preceding the piece on the Viola heralds the construction of a new nuclear reactor in Western Slovakia.) But the article also provides some important insights. Kavanová acknowledges that ever since the official Communist rejection of Stalinism in 1956, young Czechs had been searching for new modes of truth-telling in literature, including Beat forms of authenticity. The article goes on to discuss contemporary Czech poetry with similar references to the "cult period" of the early fifties. The embrace of Beat poetry was also

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

motivated by a new cultural curiosity. When interviewed for the article, one young geologist reports, “There are compelling pictures of a life we do not know and allusions to things and places beyond our experience.” A student of philosophy adds, “Depressing, violent, arresting, and for us who have so little contact with America, illuminating.”<sup>40</sup> Beat poetry gave young Czechs a voyeuristic view of American youth culture that had been forbidden until very recently.

In its cautious evaluation of the Beat phenomenon, the *Czechoslovak Life* article reflects the Communist regime’s ambivalent response to the emerging youth counterculture in Czechoslovakia. During this period the government was faced with a dilemma: should they coopt this new subculture or find ways to repress it? Up until the mid-sixties, the government experimented with a combination of both approaches. This official policy of ambivalence would continue right up to until the eve of Ginsberg’s arrival in Czechoslovakia, when the extent of Czechoslovak liberalization would be tested.

## 2. Prague Howl

“Then, one night in early winter,” according to Josef Škvorecký, “the phone rang.”<sup>41</sup> It was actually February 18, 1965, and Ginsberg had just arrived at Prague’s Ruzyně Airport freshly deported from Cuba. At the Havana airport, Ginsberg had searched his papers and found a letter from Ferlinghetti that listed the contact information

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 7–8.

<sup>41</sup> Škvorecký, *Talkin’ Moscow Blues*, 54.

for his Czech translators.<sup>42</sup> Jan Zábřana and Škvorecký drove to the airport and brought Ginsberg back to Zábřana's apartment. Ginsberg was apparently the first native English speaker that Zábřana had ever met and Ginsberg would later remark that Zábřana talked like a dictionary. Ginsberg was also fascinated to meet Škvorecký. Ginsberg later remembered, "[Škvorecký] was a real writer and he was also a jazz clarinetist and he edited a jazz magazine and knew all about Charlie Parker and Bebop and he completely understood Kerouac's prose from the point of view so he was totally right on as far as understanding what was going on with American prosody and was himself considered sort of like the new, almost Kerouac of Czechoslovakia."<sup>43</sup> Although an excerpt of *On the Road* had appeared in "American Bohemia" in 1959, the full novel would not arrive in translation for another two decades. For now, they had Škvorecký.

It remains unclear how long Ginsberg had originally planned to stay in Czechoslovakia<sup>44</sup>, but with his translators' assistance the Writer's Union agreed to sponsor Ginsberg's initial stay in Prague, providing a small stipend and two weeks' accommodation at the Hotel Ambassador on Wenceslas Square. Ginsberg also learned that he was owed significant royalties for the Czech translations of his poems and for the

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<sup>42</sup> Many of the details of the next two sections are taken directly from Ginsberg's travel notebooks, which can be found in the Allen Ginsberg Papers at Stanford University. His notes from Prague are scattered across several notebooks. See Ginsberg, "Cuba V"; Allen Ginsberg, "Translation of Confiscated Prague Journal," trans. Eva Zábřanová, February 20, 1965, Series 2, Box 20, Folder 1; Allen Ginsberg, "Czech/USSR Journal," May 4, 1965, Series 2, Box 18, Folder 4.

<sup>43</sup> Andrew Lass and Allen Ginsberg, "The King of May: A Conversation between Allen Ginsberg and Andrew Lass," *The Massachusetts Review* 39, no. 2 (1998): 172.

<sup>44</sup> In several accounts of Ginsberg's travels in 1965, it is suggested that Ginsberg never planned to visit Czechoslovakia at all and the choice of destination was made for him in Havana. This is not the case. Ginsberg had always planned to stop through Prague on the way back to the US, due in part to the complexities of getting to and from Cuba. The only thing that remains unclear is how long a stopover he had originally planned in Czechoslovakia before deciding to extend his stay.

popular weekly performances of his poetry at the Viola. He calculated that his royalties (which needed to be spent in-country) would support him long enough to remain in the Eastern bloc until his visa expired in mid-May. He would spend one month in Prague then travel to the Soviet Union and Poland before stopping back in Prague to catch his flight out of Czechoslovakia on May 8th.

Why did Ginsberg decide to travel in the Soviet bloc for almost three months? Ginsberg had long been curious about the lived experience of Soviet-style communism and he also hoped to travel to Moscow to seek out his mother's Russian-Jewish relatives. But Ginsberg was also attracted to Prague in particular because of the city's association with Franz Kafka. Once on the ground, Ginsberg wrote to his father Louis, "Following tracks of Kafka here—*The Trial* a perfect parable of life here in the '50s everybody says. His books are just published after years of silence."<sup>45</sup> Throughout his first month in Prague, Ginsberg carried a copy of *The Trial* as if it was a travel guidebook. In another letter he suggested that "you can measure the winds of political change" in Czechoslovakia according to the shifting status of Kafka.<sup>46</sup> Soon after his arrival, Ginsberg visited the house where Kafka wrote *The Trial* and also visited Kafka's grave at the New Jewish Cemetery, which was located right near Zábřana's apartment. It's clear that Ginsberg associated Kafka with the eradicated world of Prague's pre-war Jewish population. He wrote to his father, "Also met Jewish community—77,000 pre war and 3,000 now," and, "went to services last Friday in oldest synagogue in Europe—met them

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<sup>45</sup> Ginsberg and Ginsberg, *Family Business*, 228.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 231.

again this morning—all sorts of Tales of Golem to hear & Rabbi Seou’s grave & full of Kabbalistic mss.”<sup>47</sup>

The city’s preserved Jewish sites filled Ginsberg with nostalgia for a vanished past, but he was also excited to discover a thriving Beat scene in Prague. Soon after he arrived, Ginsberg was brought to the Viola café by Škvorecký and Zábřana and was stunned to discover a large photo of himself with his long-term partner Peter Orlovsky hanging on the wall. According to one anecdote, the Czech poet Čerepková saw Ginsberg walk in and loudly exclaimed, “Nowadays every bum looks like Ginsberg!”<sup>48</sup> Not only did Ginsberg meet Czech Beat poets like Čerepková at the Viola, but he also encountered young writers like Václav Havel at the café. We have Ginsberg’s first description of the Viola, recorded in one of his travel journals that was later confiscated by the Czechoslovak secret police:

Then along Národní street towards the river, Viola the club of poetry on the way, I dropped in, atmosphere like a night-club, many handsome boys, some with beards, fat girls in Black. One girl asked me if I wasn’t Ginsberg, I say that’s my name and she was holding my hand the whole evening. I left late in the night with two guys, one with a beard, in a fur-coat and with a walking stick, we had grilled sausage and rye bread.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 228. It’s unclear whether Ginsberg meant to reference the famous scholar and rabbi Judah Leow.

<sup>48</sup> Škvorecký, “Letter to Ms. Phillips.”

<sup>49</sup> This key source has a particularly interesting story. Ginsberg’s main Prague journal was stolen by the Czechoslovak secret police (the StB) and never returned, but the StB’s Czech translation of the journal remains in the ABS archive. In 1990, Jan Zábřana’s daughter Eva Zábřanová sent Ginsberg her English translation of the StB’s copy of the missing journal. Amusingly, this version of the document includes some marginal notes from the original StB translator. Out of frustration the translator writes at one point, “It’s difficult to read notes of a drunken man, his handwriting is illegible, his thoughts unintelligible and on the top of that to translate them and perhaps in an intelligible way?” See Allen Ginsberg, “Translation of Confiscated Prague Journal,” trans. Eva Zábřanová, February 20, 1965, Series 2, Box 20, Folder 1, AGP.

Ginsberg spent most of his nights during that first month at the Viola and at the after-parties that spilled into student apartments and dormitories across Prague. At one gathering at Škvorecký's apartment, the assembled group got drunk and began to sing a medley of songs, including the "Internationale" and "John Brown's Body," in an uncanny echo of F. O. Matthiessen's journey to Czechoslovakia almost two decades earlier.<sup>50</sup>

Ginsberg's other guide through this subterranean student culture was Andrew Lass, an American teenager who had moved to Prague after his father, a communist, had applied for political asylum in Czechoslovakia in the fifties.<sup>51</sup> As Ginsberg raced around Prague meeting with groups of students, sex was clearly on his mind, as evidenced by the detailed descriptions of sexual encounters—both real and imagined—he kept in his travel journal. He even prepared a cheat sheet with Czech slang terms for various sexual acts.<sup>52</sup> Ginsberg bragged to his father, "I run around with teenage gangs & have orgies & then rush up to Writer's Union & give lectures on the glories of US pornography Henry Miller etc." His father wrote back, "Is sex your only subject you regale them with?"<sup>53</sup>

In fact, Ginsberg was doing a great deal of listening. His travel notebook also contains a detailed record of his conversations about the political situation in Czechoslovakia from the fifties up to the present. Many of these conversations occurred between Ginsberg and his translator Zábřana, who, Ginsberg noted, would constantly

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<sup>50</sup> In his book about the Salzburg Seminar and his time in Prague, Matthiessen highlights events at which both these songs were sung. See F. O. Matthiessen, *From the Heart of Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1948), 31, 98. For my discussion of Matthiessen and "John Brown's Body," see Chapter 1.

<sup>51</sup> See Andrew Lass, "The King of May: An Update," *The Massachusetts Review* 39, no. 2 (1998): 165.

<sup>52</sup> "Czech Slang," Series 17, Box 46, Folder 5, AGP.

<sup>53</sup> Ginsberg and Ginsberg, *Family Business*, 231.

look over his shoulder to see if anyone was listening. Zábřana was working on a translation of the poem “Kaddish” at the time and he joked that the censors had asked him what Ginsberg meant by the line referring to “Czechoslovakia attacked by robots.” Zábřana answered, “Hitler, of course.”<sup>54</sup> With his new contacts, Ginsberg also found his way to an abandoned house called Hanzlberk where a group of avant-garde poets, dancers, and artists were squatting. At Hanzlberk, Ginsberg met the novelist Bohumil Hrabal, who later recalled, “He bowed to me, I bowed to him, he bowed to everybody, people drank, there was music, somebody playing the guitar.”<sup>55</sup>

Ginsberg also gave readings of “Howl” at the Viola and at other events across Prague. Zdenek Střibrný, who had run into Ginsberg two years earlier in Greenwich Village, invited Ginsberg to read and discuss his poetry at his regular seminar at Charles University. On the day of Ginsberg’s classroom visit, a huge crowd had assembled through word of mouth and Střibrný had to convene the class in the university’s largest lecture hall. Střibrný later recalled, “It was soon crammed full, with some students sitting on the floor at Allen’s feet, peering at the holes in his tennis shoes and looking up to him as their guru.”<sup>56</sup> In Ginsberg’s memory of the “thrilling” reading at Charles University, “there were people hanging from the rafters.”<sup>57</sup> According to Střibrný’s account, he struggled to provide a contemporaneous translation of “Howl” as Ginsberg bellowed his famous lines to several hundred students. Other sources suggest that it was in fact

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<sup>54</sup> Ginsberg, “Confiscated Prague Journal.” The reference was actually to the Czech writer Karel Čapek’s play *R.U.R.* (1920), which introduced the word “robot” into the English language.

<sup>55</sup> Bohumil Hrabal, *Pirouettes on a Postage Stamp*, ed. László Szigeti, trans. David Short (Prague: Karolinum Press, 2008), 107.

<sup>56</sup> Střibrný, *The Whirligig of Time*, 30.

<sup>57</sup> Lass and Ginsberg, “The King of May,” 173.

Ginsberg's translator Zábřana who recited the Czech versions of Ginsberg's poems to the assembled crowd.<sup>58</sup> Regardless, the reading was a sensation.

Coverage of Ginsberg's visit appeared in all the major official publications. On March 20, the most important literary magazine, *Literární noviny*, published an interview between Ginsberg and Igor Hájek, the author of "American Bohemia," that did not shy away from politics.<sup>59</sup> The interview is titled "From Bradbury's World to Prague's Early Spring," which might seem odd, but Ray Bradbury was well known to readers in Czechoslovakia, thanks in large part to Škvorecký who first translated excerpts from *Fahrenheit 451* in the inaugural issue of *Světová literatura*. The first part of Hájek's interview had actually been conducted in New York, where Hájek had visited Ginsberg after the relaxation of travel policies in Czechoslovakia. Ginsberg wrote to his father that he "answered all sorts of sex and brainwash questions,"<sup>60</sup> but the interview covers significantly more ground than that. Ginsberg's responses to Hájek's questions focus in particular on the poetic influences on the current generation of writers in the US, but the other major theme is the potential of emotional and sexual honesty as a response to modern social problems. Ginsberg tells Hájek that the modern state in particular tries to separate people from one another, deforming true communication into empty slogans and propaganda. "That's why I turn to my body," Ginsberg explains, "as a compass in my relationships with people, because sexuality is one of the roots of these relations."<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> See for instance Ginsberg's recollection in *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> Igor Hájek, "Z Bradburyovského světa do pražského předjaří," *Literární noviny*, March 20, 1965.

<sup>60</sup> Ginsberg and Ginsberg, *Family Business*, 231.

<sup>61</sup> Hájek, "Z bradburyovského světa."



Hájek's own interjections in the interview show the critic taking greater risks than he had in "American Bohemia" six years earlier. He confronts Ginsberg's political views directly, writing, "Ginsberg isn't yet a communist, even though he grew up among them." (Ginsberg's mother Naomi had been a member of the Communist Party.) Hájek argues that Ginsberg's poetry is a polemic against the Marxist conception of literature that reigned on the Left in the US during the 1930s. But Hájek also asserts that these Marxist ideas are outdated and don't reflect the latest currents of thought in the socialist world. Later in the interview, Hájek describes his impression of a dive bar on Second Avenue in New York where he observed the Beats socializing. Compared with this shabby East Village pub, he writes, Prague's Viola café looks like a millionaire's club. (At the pub they are watching a news report on the Gulf of Tonkin incident, so the year must be 1964.) The next day they all attend a demonstration in Union Square against the Vietnam War, where the only other people protesting are a few scattered students. Hájek's interview with Ginsberg picks up again a year later in Prague and ends with Ginsberg's reflections on the "ancient and natural" phenomenon of youthful rebellion.

Two days before the interview appeared, Ginsberg boarded a train headed to the Soviet Union. In Moscow, Ginsberg kept busy, tracking down family connections and meeting with a number of major Russian poets, including Anna Akhmatova and Yevgeny Yevtushenko.<sup>62</sup> On the return journey, Ginsberg spent time in both Krakow and Warsaw and visited Auschwitz. He arrived back in Prague on April 29, just two days before the Czech student counterculture was set to celebrate the festival of Majáles.

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<sup>62</sup> For a discussion of Ginsberg's visit to the Soviet Union that takes advantage of Russian archival sources, see Joseph Benatov, "Looking in the Iron Mirror: Eastern Europe in the American Imaginary, 1958-2001" (PhD Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 2008).

### 3. Král majáles

If Ginsberg had returned to Prague just two days later, his time in Czechoslovakia would demand little more than a few paragraphs in his biographies alongside his visits to Cuba, Poland, and the Soviet Union. Instead, Ginsberg's participation in Majáles on May 1, 1965 would transform Ginsberg's self-conception as a poet within the context of the global Cold War. More importantly, Majáles in 1965 would turn into the most dramatic manifestation of shifting student attitudes in Czechoslovakia until the arrival of the Prague Spring in 1968. How did this happen?

Part of the answer lies in the history of the event itself. The student festival of Majáles dates back to the Middle Ages in the Czech lands, but Majáles had undergone a revival in the mid-19th century. According to tradition, during Majáles students dress up in costume, lampoon traditional sources of scholastic authority, proclaim satirical slogans, and create general mayhem for a day. At the heart of Majáles there is a ceremonial election of the "King of May," or *Král majáles* in Czech. The festival had been banned under the Nazi protectorate during the Second World War and then again for much of the Communist period since 1948. The Communist Party instead wanted to encourage youth participation in official May Day festivities. The one exception prior to Ginsberg's arrival was 1956.<sup>63</sup>

In the aftermath of Nikita Khrushchev's "Secret Speech" in February of 1956, the Communist Party in Czechoslovakia was in turmoil and the intelligentsia was becoming

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<sup>63</sup> Many sources, including Rauwolf, suggest that Majáles in 1965 was the first celebration in twenty years. This was also Ginsberg's impression, but he was evidently never informed about Majáles in 1956.

increasingly restless. Although there was no equivalent to the Hungarian Uprising or the Poznan riots in Poland, there were stirrings of a student revolt in Czechoslovakia that spring. The regime's confused decision to allow Majáles to take place in both Prague and Bratislava in 1956 for the first time since the Communist takeover resulted in a large student demonstration with about 5,000 participants. The government had hoped that Majáles would serve as a pressure valve for growing student restlessness, but they were outraged when the event included signs that obliquely mocked the Communist government. In the park where the parade ended, there was also a confrontation between police and students who were reveling alongside a jazz band. Many of the students' protests only make sense in context. For instance, one sign reportedly read "We want World Literature" and was trailed by a group of students dressed as books marked with "on the index." In 1956, censorship of foreign literature finally eased and the journal *Světová literatura* was established. Although these anti-government protests were still in embryonic form, Majáles was banned until 1965.<sup>64</sup>

The government revived the event after almost a decade in order to counter growing student discontent.<sup>65</sup> Beginning in 1962, over a thousand students began to gather every May 1st for unofficial Majáles celebrations at the statue of the Czech romantic poet Karel Mácha on Petřín Hill in Prague. These parties involved students chanting anti-regime slogans and resulted in clashes with the police. To put an end to the rowdy gatherings the Czechoslovak government and the Czechoslovak Union of Youth

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<sup>64</sup> For the larger socio-political context of Majáles in 1956, see McDermott, *Communist Czechoslovakia, 1945-89*, 94–100; for a detailed account of Majáles, see John P. C. Matthews, "Majales: The Abortive Student Revolt in Czechoslovakia in 1956," Working Paper No. 24 (Washington, DC: Cold War International History Project, 1998).

<sup>65</sup> McDermott, *Communist Czechoslovakia, 1945-89*, 118.

organized an official Majáles celebration to occur in the afternoon after the official May Day parade had ended on May 1, 1965. A great deal was riding on the May Day festivities that year, which also marked the twentieth anniversary of the liberation of Czechoslovakia from the Nazi occupation.

Ginsberg arrived back in Prague just in time to step into this already volatile situation. The nomination process for King of May in 1965 involving several of the big schools and universities in Prague choosing a candidate for the throne. A day before Majáles a group of students from the Faculty of Mechanical Engineering at the Czech Technical University approached the controversial writer Josef Škvorecký to be their official nominee for the throne. The Czech Technical University was home to a group of radical students who, according to historian Petr Blažek, hoped to make a provocative political statement with their nomination.<sup>66</sup> As it turned out, Škvorecký had come down with the flu, but he had an even better idea: the students should nominate Ginsberg, recently arrived from the Soviet Union. When Škvorecký asked Ginsberg over the phone if he would participate, Ginsberg hesitated and only agreed after being assured that his candidacy would not be interpreted as political. He had made it this far in the Eastern bloc without running into any trouble and he didn't want to repeat another incident like in Cuba. Škvorecký told Ginsberg not to worry, it was simply an old "Middle-European fertility festival."<sup>67</sup> Ginsberg was told that there would also be an election of a ceremonial queen, who it would be his prerogative to sleep with at the end of the night. Škvorecký

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<sup>66</sup> Petr Blažek, "Vyhoštění krále majálesu: Allen Ginsberg a Státní bezpečnost," *Paměť a dějiny*, no. 2 (2011): 40.

<sup>67</sup> Lass and Ginsberg, "The King of May," 172.

told Ginsberg that it would be the first Majáles in twenty years, conveniently making no mention of the trouble in 1956.<sup>68</sup>

After observing the morning May Day parade with Andrew Lass, Ginsberg ate a lunch of hot dogs and lemonade and went home for a nap. According to his notebook, he was suddenly awoken by a knock on the door: “in come huge band of students in parasols & top hats, 1890’s dress, wescoats [*sic*], canes, with jesters, trumpets.” A student he’d met at the Viola announced, “Mr. Ginsberg we have the honor to beg your presence in procession to the Crowning of King of May and to accept our support for your candidacy of Kral Majales & we humbly offer you crown & throne.”<sup>69</sup> Ginsberg was given a paper crown and led out to a truck waiting downstairs. Ginsberg and his entourage then met up with the assembled students of the Technical School in the Dejvice neighborhood of Prague. The students, who already numbered in the thousands, hoisted Ginsberg onto the back of an even bigger truck, which was loaded with beer kegs, a loudspeaker, and, improbably, a live Dixieland jazz band. Ginsberg reportedly announced to the crowd, “I’ll be the first kind king and bow down before my subjects. I’ll be the first naked king.”<sup>70</sup> The students were already in costume and carrying signs with satirical slogans. Above the float they carried a large banner that read (in English translation): “Ginsberg as King of May, an expression of proletarian internationalism.”<sup>71</sup> As Ginsberg notes in his

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<sup>68</sup> Allen Ginsberg, “Czech/USSR Journal,” May 4, 1965, Series 2, Box 18, Folder 4, AGP.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Schumacher, *Dharma Lion*, 440.

<sup>71</sup> In the original Czech, the banner read, “GINSBER KRÁLEM MAJÁLES / VÝRAZ PROLETÁŘSKÉHO INTERNACIONALISMU.”

journal, he was confused by all this and tried to ask what was happening. But there was no turning back now.

The crowd processed towards the center of Prague, where all of the schools would converge along with their candidates at Old Town Square. We have Ginsberg's recorded impressions of this experience, but only refracted through a double translation.<sup>72</sup> Here are the first lines of Ginsberg's stream-of-consciousness description of the May 1st events:

Yesterday I arrived in Prague. Škvorecký range me up. Afternoon with a golden paper crown on shoulders of seven steel fair-haired [*sic*] students, through crowded streets singing, beer bottles coming from 10,000 hands, asked for cigarettes. Complete paranoia. My symbols are mixed up, my head is swimming, I was waving at children like Novotný, in a bright sunshine, wonderful afternoon under Prague's astronomical clock, poet greeting the house where Kafka has written his *Process*, finally alone, a crowned king, lonely, strange, mad shouts Ginsberg! Ginsberg! with an echo of stone alleys of houses and above the old time bridges.

As Ginsberg records in his journal, he stopped his float in front of the building where Kafka had composed *The Trial* near Old Town Square, dedicating his future reign to Kafka and reciting his trademark mantras as he played finger cymbals and the students chanted Ginsberg's name. There was an important context to Ginsberg's chanting of mantras. As Ginsberg later told Lass, "I'd been to India for several years and so I was somewhat into Buddhist notions, especially the idea that 'when the mode of music changes the walls of the city shake.'" <sup>73</sup>

By then all of the different student groups had formed a single parade, crossing the Vltava River, passing beneath the pedestal where an enormous statue of Stalin had

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<sup>72</sup> See note 49 in this chapter for details about how this source arrived back in Ginsberg's archive only after several rounds of translation.

<sup>73</sup> Lass and Ginsberg, "The King of May," 172; for an account of Ginsberg's travels in India, see Deborah Baker, *A Blue Hand: The Beats in India* (New York: Penguin Press, 2008).

been detonated three years earlier, and finally arriving at the Julius Fučík Park of Culture and Rest. Ginsberg's description continues:

Face to face a cathedral, face to face a hill where Stalin's statue has stood for ten years, I was carried over the heads of a jazz band to a huge park where I was glaring among the most beautiful long haired boys handing out the autographs all night. The king of Prague's Majáles with my beard and long hair and crown on it, my smokers' cough, singing Hari Om Namo Shiva over and over again, up, the brass, and then I sit here in front of a huge crowd waiting for my queen who I neither love nor I love even myself nor I know nor I can see because of the spotlights.<sup>74</sup>

As Ginsberg's disorientation suggests, Majáles exceeded anyone's expectations for the event. Majáles fell on a Saturday that year and because of the official May Day festivities that morning, which had attracted some 400,000 participants, the streets of Prague were packed with onlookers. The authorities expected a few thousand participants as in 1956, but the crowds were instead estimated at 150,000.<sup>75</sup> The official Majáles festival quickly turned into a carnivalesque spectacle, like something taken straight from the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, complete with a ritual crowning and decrowning.<sup>76</sup> For at least one day, all existing hierarchies and systems of authority in Prague seemed to be overturned.

Although Ginsberg's election as King of May seems almost inevitable in retrospect, his selection was not a foregone conclusion. Some have even raised doubts about whether it was a truly "democratic" election. In a conversation between Ginsberg

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<sup>74</sup> Ginsberg, "Confiscated Prague Journal."

<sup>75</sup> Sources cite figures ranging from 100,000 to 150,000, but the official estimate reflects the larger figure. See Blažek, "Vyhoštění krále majálesu: Allen Ginsberg a Státní bezpečnost," 41.

<sup>76</sup> For Mikhail Bakhtin's elaboration of the concept of "carnivalesque," see Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Cambridge: MIT University Press, 1968). In a striking instance of synchronicity, for political reasons *Rabelais and His World* could not be published in the Soviet Union until 1965, the same year of Ginsberg's participation in the carnival of Majáles.

and Lass conducted twenty years later, the two tried to reconstruct the event. The election took place on an elevated stage in an outdoor concert venue located in the Park of Culture and Rest. Each candidate for the Majáles throne was required to give a speech. Ginsberg remembers to Lass, “So the student from the medical school came up to the microphone wrapped in bandages with ketchup all over and gave a long speech in Latin, remember that?” When it was Ginsberg’s turn, Ginsberg resorted to chanting “Ohmshrimatraia, Ohmshrimatraia,” the mantra of the future Buddha, promising a forthcoming enlightenment. According to Ginsberg, that “was the obvious situation there.” In their conversation, Lass also described to Ginsberg the procedure for the final election of the King of May, which Ginsberg hadn’t been aware of in 1965:

The procedure was to measure the loudness of the applause and so there was this microphone hooked up to this enormous meter, and while you were singing I went behind this enormous thermometer-bulb meter and there were these two guys looking at a little version of the meter connected to the microphone you were singing into and that was also pointing into the crowds—and these two guys would move the arrow of the meter as you were singing...<sup>77</sup>

Ginsberg tells Lass that he thought “it was more spontaneous than that.” But the implication was that the election was fixed. According to Lass’s version, “what this tells you is the extent to which this was a political demonstration and how important it was for the people who were arranging the parade and masterminding it to actually use you as a symbol and a vehicle.”<sup>78</sup> Was Lass correct in his description of the election?

Students from the famous Prague film school FAMU (*Filmová a televizní fakulta Akademie múzických umění v Praze*), which would produce many of the celebrated filmmakers associated with the Czechoslovak New Wave, documented Ginsberg’s

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<sup>77</sup> Ginsberg, “Confiscated Prague Journal.”

<sup>78</sup> Lass and Ginsberg, “The King of May,” 178.



election on film.<sup>79</sup> The recording corroborates many of the details that Ginsberg and Lass recall in their conversation, including the applause meter and even the medical student wrapped in bandages and covered in ketchup. In addition to Ginsberg chanting mantras in the film, he repeats the phrase “long live the King of May” in Czech. Even if the election procedures were not scientific, the enthusiasm for Ginsberg’s candidacy was clearly overwhelming. After Ginsberg’s chanting, the camera spins around revealing a pulsating and cheering throng of students when the results of the election are announced.

But the film doesn’t end there. After Ginsberg’s election, an unidentified man on the stage raises his arms and yells, “Král je mrtev!” The king is dead! Next a group of students dressed in the uniforms of American MPs depose Ginsberg from his throne as rock music blares in the background. These were actually costumes borrowed from the Barrandov film studio, which was making a movie about the US antiwar movement. As the dizzying cinematography of this film suggests, Ginsberg had no idea what was going on. As he recalls to Lass, “Suddenly about six big guys like the ushers came over and told me, ‘You are no longer King of May,’ lifted me, lifted the entire chair and took it off the stage to the side.”<sup>80</sup> This prank was actually part of the ceremony, but the students had no idea that their ritual decrowning would turn out to be prophetic.

#### **4. The End of May**

Within hours of Ginsberg’s election as the King of May, the Ministry of the Interior and the StB began targeting Ginsberg for expulsion from Czechoslovakia. Two

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<sup>79</sup> At the time of writing, a video clip of the film is available on YouTube. See “MAJÁLES s Allenem Ginsbergem – 1965 – část 1-2.VOB,” filmed May 1, 1965, YouTube video, 09:00, posted Feb 4, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vrB1Wb91LBM>.

<sup>80</sup> Lass and Ginsberg, “The King of May,” 179.

high-ranking Communist Party members were present at the Majáles election and were outraged that Ginsberg was selected as King of May. Secret police files recently uncovered by Petr Blažek reveal in astounding detail how the security forces choreographed every step of Ginsberg's expulsion from Czechoslovakia.<sup>81</sup> Even though Ginsberg's scheduled flight out of the country was just a week after Majáles on May 8th, the authorities decided to take matters into their own hands.

The StB operation proceeded in several stages. First, there was a surveillance program (fittingly) codenamed "May Bug."<sup>82</sup> Just hours after the end of the rock concert that marked the conclusion of Majáles, Ginsberg went back to a student dormitory with a large group of students, where he engaged in frank political discussions until the early hours of the morning. Little did Ginsberg know that he was accompanied to the dormitory by an undercover agent named Karel Vodrážka who was an alumnus of the Technical School that had selected Ginsberg as their candidate. The telephone in Ginsberg's hotel room was also bugged and a surveillance operation was initiated so that the security forces could compile a list of all of Ginsberg's Czechoslovak contacts. Somewhat ironically, the StB had difficulty in locating Ginsberg until two days later on May 3, because Ginsberg did not return to his hotel from the student dormitory for a full 48 hours. Only then could Vodrážka, the StB agent, submit his report on Ginsberg's comments at the dormitory.

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<sup>81</sup> Some of the files relating to Ginsberg were filed under a misspelled version of his first name ("Allan") for decades, but now his entire file has been uncovered. See "Allen Ginsberg Files," a. č. 591839 MV, Archiv bezpečnostních složek, Prague, Czech Republic. A key document from the files was translated into English and published in "Final Report of the Activities of American Poet Allen Ginsberg and His Deportation from Czechoslovakia," *Massachusetts Review* 39, no. 2 (Summer 1998): 187–96. For the most complete examination of Ginsberg's StB files see Blažek, "Vyhoštění krále majálesu."

<sup>82</sup> Rauwolf, "Prague Connection," 187.

On May 3, undercover agents finally located Ginsberg at the Viola. That night Ginsberg also attended a concert featuring the Slovak rock group The Beatmen at the Špejbl and Hurvínek puppet theater.<sup>83</sup> At the concert, the secret police managed to steal Ginsberg's travel journal, which contained Ginsberg's frank political impressions of Czechoslovakia as well as a running account of his sexual activities in Prague. It also contained several poems that he had drafted about his experience, including one he had written while on the Majáles stage. According to the report prepared by the Ministry of the Interior, Ginsberg's notebook included the following statement: "Czech Communism with its bureaucrats above and its secret trials. Terror like in Cuba, only better masked. All the capitalist myths about Communism are true."<sup>84</sup> The context for this quote was a late-night discussion about Czechoslovak politics with his translator Zábřana during one of Ginsberg's first nights in Prague. The StB now had access to many such details. From Ginsberg's notebook, the police also culled several dozen new names to investigate.

Two days later, Ginsberg was assaulted while walking back to his hotel from the Viola by a mustached stranger who called Ginsberg a *buzerant*, a derogative term for a homosexual in Czech, and then punched him in the face. Ginsberg had left Viola with a young Czech couple and the provocateur later claimed that they had been engaging in sexual contact on the street. Until recently this assailant remained anonymous, but Josef Rauvolf has discovered that this man too was an undercover policeman.<sup>85</sup> The entire group was arrested and brought to the police station for questioning. Ginsberg and his

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<sup>83</sup> Lass, "The King of May: An Update."

<sup>84</sup> Ginsberg, "Confiscated Prague Journal."

<sup>85</sup> Rauvolf, "Prague Connection," 187. The identity of the attacker is also confirmed in Blažek, "Vyhoštění krále majálesu."

companions were finally released at 5 AM after Ginsberg demanded to speak with the US Embassy.

The next day Ginsberg was brought back to the police station in connection with the missing notebook. As Ginsberg recalled the event, “I was eating and suddenly two big, the Kafkian fat men, big bulky guys, came up to the table and said: ‘Mister Ginsberg,’ and I said ‘Yes.’ ‘Did you lose a notebook?’”<sup>86</sup> Ginsberg confirmed that he had lost his journal and accompanied the men to the station in the hope that he might recover his notes and unrecorded poems. Once Ginsberg acknowledged in writing that the journal was his, he was informed that he was under investigation and that the notebook would now be turned over to a state prosecutor. When he asked what he had done wrong, the officer said that he had produced “writings against the state.”<sup>87</sup>

On May 7, the day before Ginsberg was already set to leave Czechoslovakia, he was called in front of the Department of Visas and Passports and informed that he was being deported from Czechoslovakia. The official charge against Ginsberg was that he had corrupted the Czechoslovak youth. The Ministry of the Interior had gathered expert testimony, which claimed that Ginsberg had caused several Czech teenagers serious sexual and psychological harm.<sup>88</sup> It’s worth noting that technically Ginsberg hadn’t broken any laws regarding homosexuality, but the issue of age of consent is more ambiguous. Although the age of consent for heterosexual contact was fifteen in Czechoslovakia at the time, as Ginsberg had been careful to confirm, the age of consent

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<sup>86</sup> Lass, “The King of May: An Update,” 181.

<sup>87</sup> This was the charge according to Ginsberg’s memory. See Lass and Ginsberg, “The King of May,” 182.

<sup>88</sup> For original report see “Allen Ginsberg Files.” For the translation in *Massachusetts Review* see “Final Report.”

for homosexual relations was eighteen.<sup>89</sup> In any event, Ginsberg was being expelled from the country. He requested to the immigration officials that he be allowed to leave as planned on May 8 in order to avoid a diplomatic scandal, but the authorities were insistent. Ginsberg departed on a plane headed for London later that day.

On the outbound plane from Prague, Ginsberg wrote one of his most important spontaneous poems, which he titled “Kral Majales.” As is typical for Ginsberg, the poem transmutes Ginsberg’s real-life experiences in Czechoslovakia into a poem characterized by long Whitmanesque lines and strophic repetitions. As he later told Lass, this poetic strategy was directly related to his frequent chanting of mantras throughout the Majáles festival. He was experimenting with an idea:

That a change in the literary attitude and verse measure, the measure of the verse line, probably indicated some change of body-English, attitude and perspective on the phenomenal world outside. Actually I was using that as a way of undercutting the rigidly hyper-rationalistic Marxist dogmatism that I was hearing both from Cuba and not so much from the Czechs who were sophisticated but from their official voices.”<sup>90</sup>

“Kral Majales” therefore marks a shift in Ginsberg’s relationship to both Marxist aesthetics and the communist world in general. In a *Paris Review* interview conducted in London immediately after his expulsion, Ginsberg tells his interviewer, “there’s one thing I feel certain of, and that’s that there’s no human answer in communism or capitalism.”<sup>91</sup> While earlier poems like “Howl” and “America” were cries of dissent against the stultifying domestic culture of the US during the early Cold War, “Kral Majales” was a

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<sup>89</sup> The Czechoslovak Criminal Code from the period is quoted in Bugge, “Swinging Sixties Made in Czechoslovakia: The Adaptation of Western Impulses in Czechoslovak Youth Culture,” 155 n. 445.

<sup>90</sup> Lass and Ginsberg, “The King of May.”

<sup>91</sup> Allen Ginsberg, interview with Thomas Clark, “Allen Ginsberg, The Art of Poetry No. 8,” *The Paris Review*, no. 37 (Spring 1966).

poetic counterstatement to the larger framework of Cold War geopolitics. The poem begins with an alternating pattern:

And the Communists have nothing to offer but fat cheeks and  
eyeglasses and lying policemen  
and the Capitalists proffer Napalm and money in green suitcases  
to the Naked,  
and the Communists create heavy industry but the heart is also heavy<sup>92</sup>

This pattern captures Ginsberg's sense of being caught between two corrupt political systems. The poem chronicles all of his abuses at the hands of the Czechoslovak government: being followed "thru Springtime Prague" by secret agents, the multiple arrests and interrogations, the assault "by a mustached agent who screamed out BOUZERANT," the stolen notebook, and finally his deportation. All these events are interpreted as a Kafkaesque parable, which he signals through a reference to the "two strange dolls that entered Joseph K's room at morn."<sup>93</sup>

Some have criticized Ginsberg for his equation of communist authoritarianism with milder forms of repression in the US. Many years later, for instance, Škvorecký refers to "Ginsberg's infantile notions about the sameness of the Soviet Union and the United States in cultural matters."<sup>94</sup> But "Kral Majales" is also an attempt to escape the negative dialectic of Cold War geopolitics by articulating a third utopian possibility.<sup>95</sup>

Beginning with the middle section of the poem, Ginsberg repeats the line "and I am the

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<sup>92</sup> Allen Ginsberg, "Kral Majales" in *Planet News, 1961-1967* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1968), 89.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Škvorecký, "Letter to Ms. Phillips."

<sup>95</sup> In his *Paris Review* interview Ginsberg tells his interviewer, "I think it's time for a new utopian system," but he has trouble articulating exactly what he means, mentioning "Blake's idea of Jerusalem" as one possibility. This provides another context for understanding the references to Blake and Albion in "Kral Majales." See Ginsberg and Clark, "Allen Ginsberg, The Art of Poetry No. 8."

King of May,” positioning himself as the symbolic and physical embodiment of the liberating “power of sexual youth.” The poem positions this “Kingdom of May” as an anarchistic and libertarian alternative to the systems of state control that he felt characterized both capitalism and communism.<sup>96</sup> While there is nothing particularly groundbreaking in Ginsberg’s desire for a third option beyond the Cold War binary, his poem arrives at its power by evoking the temporary world of Majáles, which represented the realization of Ginsberg’s romantic desire to dissolve the boundary between poetry and life. “Kral Majales” is therefore a nearly perfect expression of Ginsberg’s goal of an embodied poetics that could transcend Cold War geopolitics. As Ginsberg makes clear in the final line of the poem, “Kral Majales” was a poem literally composed in the space between Cold War blocs, “on a jet seat in mid Heaven.”

### **Conclusion: Thru Springtime Prague**

The consequences of Ginsberg’s visit would be felt in Czechoslovakia for years to come. A week after Ginsberg’s departure, the youth Communist daily *Mladá fronta* published an article called “Allen Ginsberg and Morality,” which elaborated on the official charges against Ginsberg, quoting concerned parents and psychologists about Ginsberg’s negative influence on Czechoslovak students.<sup>97</sup> Many of these quotations had been compiled by the StB, who then provided them to the editors of the newspaper.<sup>98</sup> According to the article, “From these letters it resulted without a shadow of doubt that

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<sup>96</sup> For Robert Genter’s discussion of the Beat, and romantic modernist, attraction to anarchism during the Cold War, see Genter, *Late Modernism*, 35–36.

<sup>97</sup> “Allen Ginsberg a morálka,” *Mladá Fronta*, May 16, 1965.

<sup>98</sup> Rauwolf, “Prague Connection,” 188.

Ginsberg exerted strong demoralizing influence upon his Czech friends, that he inspired and actively participated in drunken parties and sexual orgies, that he was bisexual, homosexual, a dope addict, poseur, and a social extremist.”<sup>99</sup> The *Mladá fronta* article also singles out Igor Hájek, the author of “American Bohemia,” for his frank interview with Ginsberg in *Literární noviny*. As in Cuba, there were immediate consequences for Ginsberg’s contacts, including Hájek. Many of Ginsberg’s new Czech friends, dozens of whom had appeared in Ginsberg’s confiscated travel journal, were interrogated in the aftermath of Majáles. A planned edition of Ginsberg’s poetry, translated by Zábřana, was cancelled.<sup>100</sup>

Several of Ginsberg’s biographers have criticized him for acting too provocatively in Czechoslovakia and for ignoring local laws and customs.<sup>101</sup> Indeed, Ginsberg sometimes encourages this view with his flippant remarks, as when he told his father he’d been expelled from Czechoslovakia for “anti-state orgies.”<sup>102</sup> Meanwhile, his contacts in both Cuba and Czechoslovakia faced serious consequences after his departure. But Ginsberg’s naivety has been overstated, with the exception of Majáles itself when Ginsberg had little control over the proceedings. Indeed, throughout Ginsberg’s entire visit, his Czech hosts had a great deal of the agency. When Ginsberg arrived in Prague in 1965, he was stepping into the middle of a cultural and political contest between an

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<sup>99</sup> I am quoting the translation of “Allen Ginsberg a morálka” that was distributed by wire services across the Eastern bloc and the West after Ginsberg’s expulsion. See “Allen Ginsberg and Morality (Translation),” Series 17, Box 46, Folder 5, AGP.

<sup>100</sup> As always, there were cracks in the censorship system. It’s therefore worth noting that Zábřana and others continued to publish excerpts of Ginsberg’s poetry right under the censors’ noses after 1965, but in several cases there was a price to pay. See Rauwolf, “Prague Connection,” 195.

<sup>101</sup> See for instance Schumacher, *Dharma Lion*, 444.

<sup>102</sup> Ginsberg and Ginsberg, *Family Business*, 234.



emerging student counterculture and political hardliners in the Communist Party. It's clear that both sides tried to use Ginsberg as a symbol in this contest over the future direction of Czechoslovak socialism.

The day after Ginsberg's expulsion, Czechoslovak President Antonín Novotný made a thinly veiled reference to Ginsberg in a major speech, stating "the next time we will think more carefully about such a guest."<sup>103</sup> In 1966, the regime initiated a public campaign against the so-called *vlasatci*, or "longhairs," a Czech term for hippies and beatniks.<sup>104</sup> According to Rauwolf, "Thousands of young men were affected (often beaten, always cropped), refused service in restaurants, and expelled from public transportation, movie theaters, and schools."<sup>105</sup> The regime tied their campaign directly to Ginsberg's perverse influence on Czechoslovak youth. Majáles was allowed to take place again in 1966, but the event was put under the strict control of the Czechoslovak Union of Youth. Even though participation declined dramatically, the event still resulted in a rowdy student demonstrations and dozens of students were arrested, including several children of high-profile Communist officials. The Majáles tradition was terminated for the remainder of the Communist era.<sup>106</sup>

In 1968, the poem "Kral Majales" was finally published in Ginsberg's collection *Planet News*, with only very minor edits. The poems of *Planet News* chronicle the global

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<sup>103</sup> Quoted in Rauwolf, "Prague Connection," 189.

<sup>104</sup> For a full account of the regime's attack on the "vlasatci" and the links to Ginsberg's visits, see Filip Pospíšil and Petr Blažek, "*Vraťte nám vlasy!: první máničky, vlasatci a hippies v komunistickém Československu* (Praha: Academia, 2010).

<sup>105</sup> Rauwolf, "Prague Connection," 197.

<sup>106</sup> Bugge, "Swinging Sixties Made in Czechoslovakia: The Adaptation of Western Impulses in Czechoslovak Youth Culture," 150–151; Michal Svatoš, "Studentský majáles roku 1965 aneb Allen Ginsberg králem majálesu," in *Česká věda a Pražské jaro (1963-1970)*, ed. Blanka Zilynská and Petr Svobodný (Praha: Karolinum, 2001), 370.

itinerary that took Ginsberg from Calcutta and Tokyo to Havana and Prague throughout the sixties. By the time Ginsberg published the collection in 1968, he had become an icon of the transnational counterculture that exploded in a series of protests across the world, from Chicago to Prague.<sup>107</sup> In Czechoslovakia, much of the student population joined with members of the intelligentsia after 1967 in demanding fundamental reforms. In calling for “socialism with a human face” and a “third way” between Western capitalism and Soviet-style communism, reformers in Czechoslovakia drew on discourses that had been developing for over a decade. We have already seen how the literary journal *Světová literatura* promoted cultural liberalization through a new “socialist humanism” as early as 1956. In March of 1968, reformers within the Communist government ended censorship in Czechoslovakia, intensifying what has come to be known as the Prague Spring.

But as Ginsberg writes in “Kral Majales,” the “Kingdom of May is too beautiful to last for more than a month.” In August of 1968, the Soviet Union, worried that Czechoslovak-style reform socialism would destabilize the entire Eastern bloc, decided to end the Prague Spring. On the night of August 20-21, Warsaw Pact tanks invaded Czechoslovakia in a gesture of “fraternal assistance to the Czechoslovak people” and put an end to the liberalization of the sixties. The subsequent neo-Stalinist period, which saw the resumption of strict cultural controls, was referred to as “normalization,” or

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<sup>107</sup> One of the first critics to apprehend Ginsberg’s rising global status was Richard Kostelanetz who opened his 1965 article on Ginsberg’s expulsion from Czechoslovakia by claiming, “To university students all over the world today, Allen Ginsberg is a kind of cultural hero and sometimes a true prophet.” See Kostelanetz, “Ginsberg Makes the World Scene,” *The New York Times Magazine*, July 11, 1965. It’s also worth noting that *Planet News* ends with the text from Ginsberg’s attempted exorcism of the Pentagon in 1967, a scene made famous in Norman Mailer’s *Armies of the Night* (1968).

*normalizace* in Czech. But just as there was nothing “normal” about this political development, it is a mistake to view Majáles in 1965 as an entirely anomalous event that only occurred because of the unexpected presence of a foreign provocateur. The accident of Ginsberg’s participation in Majáles had spectacular consequences, but the Ginsberg episode was also just the most visible sign of larger cultural shifts in Czechoslovakia that drew on years of literary exchange with the West.

What Ginsberg’s surprise visit does reveal is the contingency at the heart of cultural transmission during the Cold War. If Ginsberg had arrived back in Prague from the Soviet Union just a few days later and missed Majáles, Beat literature would have likely had a very different status in Czechoslovakia during the subsequent period of normalization. In the early sixties, the Beats represented an entire alternative world for a subculture of young Czechs. If Ginsberg had never visited Prague, perhaps the Beats would have been a passing fad in Czechoslovakia. Instead, they became a part of a much larger mythology about Western sources of cultural resistance in the Eastern bloc. But if many Czechs were looking West for their bohemia in the late fifties and early sixties, by the last decades of the Cold War, the rest of the world was increasingly looking to a literary counterculture located in Prague.

## Chapter 4.

### The Tourist: Philip Roth, Counter-Realism, and the Other Europe

In May of 1973, the Czechoslovak secret police, the *Státní bezpečnost* (StB), began keeping a classified file on the novelist Philip Roth. The American writer was flagged after an informant told the StB that Roth had met with “suspicious persons” during a visit to Prague earlier that spring. The secret report also identified Roth as a “supporter of international Zionism,” an anti-Semitic code established during the Stalinist era that was making a comeback in the seventies. The StB charged that Roth had traveled to Prague under the cover of a tourist visa in order to make contact with several “persons of interest in Czechoslovakia, who in 1968 participated actively in the creeping, opportunistic, right-wing developments in the ČSSR,” the reform movement better known as the Prague Spring. The persons in question were all well-known Czech writers and intellectuals: Ivan Klíma, Antonín Liehm, Stanislav Budín, Miroslav Holub, Ludvík Vaculík, and Milan Kundera. Major Hoffman, the agent assigned to the case, recommended the preparation of “operational measures for Roth’s next arrival in the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic.” For the purposes of this secret operation, Roth was assigned the codename *TURISTA*, or “the Tourist.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See “TURISTA: Philip Roth,” a. č. 692253 MV, Archiv bezpečnostních složek, Prague, Czech Republic, 12-14. Here is Hoffman’s request in the original Czech: “Připravit operativní opatření při dalším příjezdu ROTHY do ČSSR.” The StB believed that Liehm was Roth’s key connection: “Jedná se o spojku A. J. LIEHMA na zájmové osoby do ČSSR, které se zúčastnily v roce 1968 aktivně progresivního pravicově oportunistického vývoje v ČSSR.” All translations of Roth’s StB file from the original Czech are mine. Page numbers refer to handwritten numbers in the upper right hand corner of each page of the file.

What exactly was the nature of Roth's "tourism" in communist Czechoslovakia during the seventies? "It was Franz Kafka who was responsible for getting me to Prague in the first place," Roth would write several years after his first visit to Czechoslovakia in 1972.<sup>2</sup> Almost on a whim, Roth drove to Prague from Vienna with his companion Barbara Sproul to see the city where Kafka spent his life. Upon his arrival, Roth discovered a country still undergoing a period referred to by Czechs as *normalizace*, or "normalization," following the Soviet-led invasion of 1968.<sup>3</sup> These years were characterized by the resumption of strict state censorship and an official backlash against reform-minded intellectuals and cultural nonconformists. After befriending a small group of Czech writers and intellectuals, most of whom were high-profile targets of the regime, Roth returned annually to Prague. He also began to take greater risks. First, Roth gathered information about the treatment of dissident writers in Czechoslovakia for the writers' organization PEN, including details about how the Communist government seized foreign royalties from a targeted group of writers. To help make up for this lost income, Roth then organized a clandestine financial scheme that funneled money from prominent US writers to suppressed intellectuals in Czechoslovakia. After five years of visits, Czechoslovak authorities finally revoked Roth's entry visa due to his escalating involvement with his Czech literary counterparts.

But Roth's extended *literary* engagement with Czechoslovakia continued through the end of the Cold War and had even wider consequences. Paradoxically, normalization

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<sup>2</sup> Philip Roth, "In Search of Kafka and Other Answers," *The New York Times Book Review*, February 15, 1976, 6.

<sup>3</sup> See Jonathan Bolton's discussion of the term "normalization" in *Worlds of Dissent: Charter 77, The Plastic People of the Universe, and Czech Culture under Communism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 72-74.

was also the period when Czech literature underwent an international renaissance. Roth played a large role in this surprising development. In 1975, Roth initiated the landmark Penguin paperback series “Writers from the Other Europe” and served as its general editor until the series’ end in 1989. The Other Europe series was originally conceived as a way to help Roth’s friends in Prague get their banned work into wider circulation, but it should also be understood as Roth’s great counter-realist project: the creation of an alternative canon that stood in contrast to dominant literary categories on both sides of the Cold War divide. For 15 years, Roth gathered together a wide range of aesthetic models, all of which resist classification according to the prevailing realist literary modes of the postwar era. This project also extended to his own fiction from the period. Building on the fictional strategies of the Zuckerman trilogy and its epilogue, *The Prague Orgy*, which first appeared in 1985, Roth began to move away from the self-directed provocations of *Portnoy’s Complaint* (1969) toward counter-realist interrogations of the individual’s relationship to history that we see in his late fiction. Until recently, we could only speculate about the precise relationship between Roth’s development as a novelist and his engagement with the larger political world he inhabited. This chapter incorporates previously unexamined sources—including Roth’s personal correspondence, manuscript drafts of his work, and Czech-language secret police reports—in order to discover how Roth’s political imagination was transformed through its encounter with the Other Europe.

By reconstructing Roth’s encounter with his Czech counterparts during these years, we can also see how their East-West contact brought a new literary mode into circulation at a key moment in the Cold War. The literature of the Other Europe series

was especially significant because of the transitional era in which it first appeared, a period of superpower détente during the 1970s in which foreign-policy “realism” began to supplant a more confrontational approach to international relations. In the wake of the global disruptions of 1968—from Chicago to Prague—societies on both sides of the Cold War divide required a new narrative. As historian Tony Judt writes: “In the East the message of the Sixties was that you could no longer work within ‘the system’; in the West there appeared no better choice. On both sides of the Iron Curtain illusions were swept aside.”<sup>4</sup> What new stories would take their place? If the 1970s were experienced as a period of demobilization in both the US and Czechoslovakia, a brief détente before the retrenchment of superpower rivalry in the early 1980s, it was also a period in which new discourses were emerging: the communist regime’s post-invasion account of the Prague Spring, for one, but also a new image of the persecuted Czech intellectual, couched in an emerging language of dissent and human rights. This was not only a political or legal language—it was also a literary discourse that had to be translated and framed in terms that a Western audience could understand. As before, Kafka was a crucial starting point.

## 1. Kafka Obstructed

“IT BEGAN ODDLY,” according to the opening line of Roth’s antirealist novella *The Breast*, a reenactment of Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* (1915) in which the protagonist David Kepesh is transformed into an enormous human mammary gland.<sup>5</sup> Published in 1972 on the eve of his adventures in Prague, the novella is evidence of both Roth’s

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<sup>4</sup> Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945* (New York: Penguin Press, 2005), 447–447.

<sup>5</sup> Philip Roth, *The Breast* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), 3.

desperate attachment to Kafka and his pursuit of alternative aesthetic models during these years. Many of the biographical details that Roth has made available about this first trip appear in his more conventional Kepesh novel *The Professor of Desire* (1977), in which the protagonist—no longer a breast—visits Prague with his girlfriend Clare during a European tour. Kafka provides the lens through which Kepesh views normalized Prague. Kepesh and Clare are guided around the city’s Kafka-related sites by a former professor, a “smallish, bespectacled, neatly attired” Czech referred to simply as Soska.<sup>6</sup> One of the real-life models for this character was Zdeněk Stříbrný, a Shakespeare scholar who Roth met in Prague.<sup>7</sup> Twenty-five years earlier, Stříbrný had been one of F. O. Matthiessen’s students at Charles University. Forced into retirement due to his political views, the fictionalized Soska is resigned to spend his days translating *Moby-Dick*, one of Matthiessen’s favorite novels, into Czech.<sup>8</sup> Soska stands in for an entire class of deposed intellectuals. A series of purges initiated in 1969 had decimated the intelligentsia and the official cultural industries of Czechoslovakia, including the universities.<sup>9</sup>

As Soska explains to Kepesh, in normalized Czechoslovakia “Kafka is an outlawed writer, *the* outlawed writer.”<sup>10</sup> Rather absurdly, Kafka was assigned a central role in the official Soviet-approved account of the intelligentsia’s participation in the

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<sup>6</sup> Philip Roth, *The Professor of Desire* (New York: Vintage, 1994), 168.

<sup>7</sup> Zdeněk Stříbrný, *The Whirligig of Time: Essays on Shakespeare and Czechoslovakia* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2007), 40.

<sup>8</sup> This is the context for the epigraph for this dissertation. Soska says to Kepesh, “to each obstructed citizen his own Kafka,” and Kepesh counters, “And to each angry man his own Melville.” See Roth, *The Professor of Desire*, 173.

<sup>9</sup> For more on these dramatic purges, see Paulina Bren, *The Greengrocer and His TV: The Culture of Communism after the 1968 Prague Spring* (Cornell University Press, 2010), 35–37; and Jonathan Bolton, *Worlds of Dissent*, 59–71.

<sup>10</sup> Roth, *The Professor of Desire*, 173.



Prague Spring. The status of Kafka's writings was always tenuous in post-1948 Czechoslovakia: after being banned as a "decadent antirealist" during the 1950s, Kafka was briefly "rehabilitated" in 1963 at an international conference organized by the scholar Eduard Goldstücker, an event widely seen as an early harbinger of liberalization. Now Goldstücker himself was a prominent enemy of the regime and Kafka's books were again taken off of the shelves.<sup>11</sup> According to Paulina Bren, "Normalization's new set of cultural critics thus insisted that the alienation described by Kafka was felt merely by marginalized, nonrepresentative Czech and Slovak intellectuals who were so anxious to mimic their West European counterparts that they had even adopted their neuroses."<sup>12</sup> Although this was just one aspect of the normalization regime's revision of the Prague Spring narrative, the focus on Kafka usefully allowed critics to inject a dose of anti-Semitism into their attack on reform-minded intellectuals. The attack on Kafka reached a crescendo in 1972, the same year of Roth's first visit, which was also the ninetieth anniversary of Kafka's birth. Accordingly, Roth's StB file includes conspiratorial references to foreign "Zionist centers," a common line of attack on literary intellectuals who had dared express their admiration for Kafka.<sup>13</sup>

During his initial visit to Czechoslovakia, Roth was put in touch with his Czech translators, the couple Luba and Rudolf Pellar, by the foreign publishing house Odeon.

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<sup>11</sup> For more on the normalization regime's attack on Kafka see Bren, *The Greengrocer and His TV*, 67–68. For an account of Kafka's ever-changing status in Czechoslovakia and the momentous 1963 conference on Kafka organized by Goldstücker, see Antonin J. Liehm, *The Politics of Culture*, First Edition (Grove Press, 1968), 280–283; Antonin J. Liehm, "Franz Kafka in Eastern Europe," *Telos* 1975, no. 23 (March 20, 1975): 53–54; and Veronika Tuckerova, "Reading Kafka in Prague: The Reception of Franz Kafka between the East and the West during the Cold War" (PhD Dissertation, Columbia University, 2012), 221.

<sup>12</sup> Bren, *The Greengrocer and His TV*, 68–69.

<sup>13</sup> "TURISTA: Philip Roth." See references on pages 16, 21, 27, and 35.

Dating back to their involvement with the landmark literary journal *Světová literatura*, the Pellars had translated a number of American novels into Czech during the sixties, including J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* in 1960 and Roth's own *Letting Go* in 1968. During his visit, Roth learned from the Pellars that they had recently completed a translation of *Portnoy's Complaint*, but they couldn't get the book approved for publication. Censorship practice during this period was increasingly dispersed among publishers and editors, who all behaved conservatively under the new conditions of normalization.<sup>14</sup> On the same trip Roth was alarmed to discover that the United States Information Agency (USIA) had also deemed *Portnoy's Complaint* inappropriate for inclusion in the USIA library attached to the American Embassy in Prague. After contacting the agency directly, Roth learned that *Portnoy's Complaint* had been added to a long list of novels that were systematically excluded from US libraries abroad.<sup>15</sup> The experience only deepened Roth's interest in the comparative politics of censorship during the Cold War.

The Pellars had also translated Edward Albee's play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* into Czech in 1964, a year after Albee had visited Czechoslovakia as part of an official exchange. But the Pellars made a conspicuous change to the title of Albee's play:

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<sup>14</sup> According to a contemporary report on the attempts to publish *Ulysses* in Czech during normalization, "Now the onus for producing something acceptable to the censor rests entirely on the shoulders of the responsible editor...If a book is rejected in this final stage, the entire run must be pulped, with enormous losses to the publisher. Thus the political conservatism is reinforced by the financial conservatism of someone who, naturally, does not want his firm to operate in the red." See Robert Hardy, "A Prague Odyssey," *Index on Censorship*, no. 3 (May 1978): 55.

<sup>15</sup> The proscription of certain titles at USIA libraries was most intense during the period of McCarthyism, but contradictory selection principles reigned well beyond the fifties. See Greg Barnhisel, *Cold War Modernists: Art, Literature, and American Cultural Diplomacy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 113–116.

in Czech the title became *Who's Afraid of Franz Kafka?*<sup>16</sup> Roth was fascinated by the many ways that Kafka was put to use in his native land. As Roth soon discovered, not only the regime but many of the banned writers he encountered in Prague were proliferating their own political interpretations of Kafka. Years later, Roth observed,

Literature is put to all kinds of uses, public and private, but one oughtn't to confuse those uses with the hard-won reality that an author has succeeded in realizing in a work of art. Those writers in Prague, by the way, were well aware that they were willfully violating the integrity of Kafka's implacable imagination, though they went ahead nonetheless—and with all their might—to exploit his books to serve a political purpose during a horrible national crisis.<sup>17</sup>

Roth himself provides his own politicized reading of Kafka in *The Professor of Desire*. For David Kepesh, the erotic and spiritual obstructions encoded in Kafka's fiction serve as an allegory for life under Czechoslovakia's repressive government. At one point, Kepesh says to Soska, "I can only compare the body's utter single-mindedness, its cold indifference and absolute contempt for the well-being of the spirit, to some unyielding, authoritarian regime."<sup>18</sup> There is evidence that Roth shared Kepesh's preoccupation with Kafka's erotic blockages. Ivan Klíma, one of the first Czech writers Roth met in Prague, writes in his 2010 memoir that Roth immediately "surprised me by asking if I thought Kafka had been impotent."<sup>19</sup> Klíma objected to this interpretation: at the time, he was working on an adaptation of Kafka's posthumous work *Amerika* (1927) with the playwright Pavel Kohout. The play they envisioned would be stripped down to include

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<sup>16</sup> The play was included under its new title *Kdopak by se Kafky bál?* in a collection of plays published in Czechoslovakia in 1964 called *Hry*.

<sup>17</sup> Philip Roth, "The Story Behind 'The Plot Against America,'" *The New York Times*, September 19, 2004, sec. Books.

<sup>18</sup> Roth, *The Professor of Desire*, 172.

<sup>19</sup> Ivan Klíma, *My Crazy Century: A Memoir*, trans. Craig Cravens (New York: Grove Press, 2013), 308.

only language taken directly from the source text, as a kind of protest against the many politicized readings of Kafka that surrounded them.

Although they disagreed on the point of Kafka's impotence, Klíma became Roth's "principle reality instructor" during these years.<sup>20</sup> A Kafka enthusiast from a Jewish background and a vocal participant in the Prague Spring movement, Klíma already had three strikes against him in the eyes of the normalization regime. For a short time he worked as a street sweeper alongside other writer friends who had also been banned from publishing. According to Roth, "He drove me around to the street-corner kiosks where writers sold cigarettes, to the public buildings where they mopped the floors, to the construction sites where they were laying bricks, and out of the city to the municipal waterworks where they slogged about in overalls and boots, a wrench in one pocket and a book in the other."<sup>21</sup> Helena and Ivan Klíma hosted a number of other prominent literary visitors from the US during this period. In his memoir, Klíma describes visits by both William Styron and Arthur Miller, but Klíma distinguishes Roth from these visitors because of Roth's intense desire to understand Klíma's circumscribed world. Klíma writes,

Given [Roth's] interest in the fate of Jews, of course, he could not ignore one of the most fundamental Jewish experiences: persecution. However much he had managed to evade it in a free country he harbored a feeling of solidarity with those being persecuted in a country that had been deprived of its freedom. I don't think any other [American] author has written with such understanding and earnestness about the oppressive fate of Czech writers and Czech culture.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Philip Roth, *Shop Talk: A Writer and His Colleagues and Their Work* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001), 41.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 309. The English translation of *My Crazy Century* omits the adjective "American" from this passage; Klíma writes "americký spisovatel." This is a minor point, perhaps, but relevant to the focus of this essay. For the original, see Klíma, *Moje šílené století II: 1967-1989* (Praha: Academia, 2010), 170.

Clearly, this narrative of Czech intellectual persecution was very different from the official story promoted by the normalization regime.<sup>23</sup> Even if the unofficial version was much closer to Klíma's lived reality, this new counter-narrative also had to be fashioned in the seventies. Interestingly, Kafka played a role in both emerging discourses. For Prague's banned writers, Kafka provided a common literary language that could be addressed to an international audience. But this was just a starting point. Roth soon met a number of other "reality instructors" besides Klíma, and discovered a counter-realist literature that extended far beyond Kafka.

## 2. Reality Instructors

Roth's first trip to Czechoslovakia was brief—only a few days—but he continued his Czech education soon after returning home, finding an able tutor in an unlikely location: Staten Island, New York. In a letter to Roth written during the summer of 1972, Robert Silvers, the editor of the *New York Review of Books*, put him in contact with Antonín J. Liehm, a Czech journalist and critic who had emigrated to the US after the Soviet invasion and taken a job teaching at CUNY Staten Island. Liehm had been an influential editor at the publication *Literární noviny*, which played a central role in the Prague Spring. Silvers mentioned that Liehm was about to publish "a big book on the Czechoslovak uprising, with an introduction by Sartre."<sup>24</sup> Written in Czech under the title

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<sup>23</sup> See Jonathan Bolton's discussion of the "shadow world" of literary intellectuals from the 1970s, who drew on a reconstructed memory of the Stalinist 1950s and liberalizing 1960s in order to fashion an alternative literary culture that now relied heavily on forms of samizdat publishing.

<sup>24</sup> Robert Silvers, "Letter to Philip Roth," June 30, 1972, Box 31, Folder 10, Philip Roth Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. All subsequent references to the Philip Roth Papers will be abbreviated as PRP.

*Generace* (“Generations”), Liehm’s “big book” was published later that year by Grove Press as *The Politics of Culture*. Once Liehm and Roth were in direct communication, Liehm recommended that he read his new book, which dealt “with all the Czech problems and people you are interested in.”<sup>25</sup>

*The Politics of Culture* is less about the so-called “uprising” than it is about the development of Czech literary culture during the 1960s, a topic Liehm explores through a series of interviews with leading Czech writers, including Ivan Klíma, Josef Škvorecký, Milan Kundera, Ludvík Vaculík, and Václav Havel. In his lengthy forward, Liehm draws on hundreds of years of Bohemian history to create an exceptionalist narrative about the historical role of the Czech intellectual. Liehm argues that in Bohemia, “the connection between culture and politics had an organic basis from the very first.”<sup>26</sup> In the absence of a strong aristocracy, writers, linguists, and scholars had been established as the “spiritual elite of a subjugated nation.” This “usable past” proved very important to oppositional intellectuals from the sixties on. Both *Politics of Culture* and Liehm’s course on Czech culture at CUNY, which Roth attended regularly, framed the author’s thinking about culture in Czechoslovakia.

In preparation for his next trip to Prague in 1973, Roth also read what little Czech literature he could find in English translation. With Liehm’s help, he then assembled a list of writers to meet with in Prague, many of whom were interviewees in *Politics of Culture*. On this second trip, Roth met with Kundera, Stříbrný (the Shakespeare scholar who was a partial basis for Soska in *The Professor of Desire*), Miroslav Holub, Karol

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<sup>25</sup> Antonín Liehm, “Letter to Philip Roth,” August 6, 1972, Box 20, Folder 1, PRP

<sup>26</sup> See *Ibid.*, 46.

Sidon, and Stanislav Budín and his daughter Rita Budínová.<sup>27</sup> Roth became close with several of these writers, most famously Kundera, over the next decade, but he initially hid these friendships from public view in order to protect his contacts from possible Czechoslovak government retaliation. In a 1976 essay Roth assigned each Czech writer he'd met an alphabetical codename. Roth wrote, "Let me just say here that with 'X,' who wanted to show me the confluence of two beautiful rivers, I have taken a trip by car to a countryside castle for lunch, with 'Y' I have spent an evening listening to his wife sing for us some favorite Moravian folk songs, and one night I lost a post-dinner contest to 'Z,' who shamed me by knowing the names of more American Indian tribes than I did."<sup>28</sup> From Roth's correspondence from the period it's possible to confirm that Z was the writer Ludvík Vaculík. It's also likely that X and Y are the novelists Klíma and Kundera.

Kundera and Klíma are often contrasted because of the very different choices they made in the face of political difficulties. While Kundera, whose codename with the StB was "the Elitist" (*ELITÁŘ*), eventually chose exile, Klíma repeatedly turned down opportunities to teach abroad, including an appointment at Bucknell University arranged by Roth. But Roth himself was just as interested in the different aesthetic choices the two writers made in response to their overlapping political reality. Roth viewed Kundera's abstract and ironic style as a kind of antithesis to Klíma's rough autobiographical realism. This contrast was even more remarkable to Roth because of "the correspondence of

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<sup>27</sup> Rita Budínová, who later became Rita Klímová, was the Czechoslovak Ambassador to the US after the Velvet Revolution. Remarkably, while she was still an active dissident in the eighties, she also translated Jiří Weil's *Life with a Star* into English on Roth's urging. Roth revealed her role in a letter to *The New York Times* responding to her obituary. See Philip Roth, "Letter to the Editor: Czech Dissident Also Translated War Novel," *The New York Times*, January 7, 1994.

<sup>28</sup> Roth, "In Search of Kafka and Other Answers," 7.

preoccupations” in their work.<sup>29</sup> According to Roth, both writers used fiction to ward off political despair, and displayed an affinity for exploring erotic vulnerability and various kinds of “social excreta, whether garbage or kitsch.” Both writers sought to translate their political situation into a literary vocabulary but opted for a very different aesthetic grammar. Roth writes, “I sometimes had the feeling while reading *Love and Garbage* that I was reading *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* turned inside out.” In the end it was Kundera, not Klíma, whom Roth would place at the center of the Other Europe series. Although the reasons for Klíma’s exclusion remain obscure, one obvious interpretation is that Kundera’s antirealist inclinations made him a more natural fit for Roth’s emerging canon.

Roth and Kundera became close friends, but at first the two writers could barely communicate and relied heavily on Kundera’s wife Vera as a translator for their hours-long conversations. Vera, who spoke much better English than Milan, later corrected many of his letters to Roth. Vera Kundera’s role as mediator underscores how well-known friendships with both Kundera and Klíma have sometimes obscured the essential roles played by their female partners.<sup>30</sup> Roth also formed a close friendship with Ivan Klíma’s wife Helena Klímová, whom Roth describes in *Shop Talk* as “a psychotherapist who received her training in the underground university that the dissidents conducted in various living rooms during the Russian occupation.”<sup>31</sup> The view of Czech literary culture that Roth would later present in his book series was a decidedly masculinist one, but this

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<sup>29</sup> Roth, *Shop Talk*, 43.

<sup>30</sup> Quotes like this from Roth haven’t always been helpful: “By the time it was over Vera looked like she’d had sex with both of us...pale, hair all over her face, and very excited from the conversation.” See Claudia Roth Pierpont, *Roth Unbound: A Writer and His Books* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), 91.

<sup>31</sup> Roth, *Shop Talk*, 46.



was related in part to the gender politics of underground literature in Czechoslovakia. As Jessie Labov and Friederike Kind-Kovacs write, “women were essential in running the machinery of samizdat publications in the East, smuggling texts, supporting tamizdat publications in the West, while being almost completely eclipsed by their better-known male colleagues and husbands.”<sup>32</sup> This invisible labor made the rise of many writers, including Kundera, possible in the West.

Although less well known to English-speaking audiences, Roth’s third reality instructor, Vaculík (“Z”), was at center of the Czech literary opposition, a role that only intensified after his momentous speech at the 1967 Writers’ Congress. In 1975, the *New York Review of Books* published an open letter by Vaculík addressed to Kurt Waldheim, Secretary General of the United Nations, and Robert Silvers asked Roth to write an anonymous headnote “explaining who Vaculík is, what his position and recent difficulties have been.”<sup>33</sup> In the resulting note, Roth describes how Vaculík’s authorship of the “Two Thousand Word Manifesto” during the Prague Spring was viewed as one of the precipitating events of the Warsaw Pact invasion later that August. After being expelled from the party in disgrace, Vaculík had, according to Roth, “retreated into silence.”<sup>34</sup> In fact, at the time Vaculík was busy founding the first Czech samizdat publishing house

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<sup>32</sup> Friederike Kind-Kovács and Jessie Labov, eds., *Samizdat, Tamizdat, and Beyond: Transnational Media During and After Socialism* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012), 9. Jonathan Bolton also discusses the key role played by many women as copyists for samizdat presses, but also argues that “the overwhelming attention paid to a few male dissidents needs to be expanded in order to include more women, and to consider gender roles inside dissident thinking.” See Bolton, *Worlds of Dissent*, 269.

<sup>33</sup> Robert Silvers, “Letter to Philip Roth,” September 29, 1975, Box 35, Folder 13, PRP

<sup>34</sup> Ludvik Vaculik, “An Open Letter to the Secretary General,” *The New York Review of Books*, October 30, 1975.

under the name *Edice Petlice*, “Padlock Editions,” through which he continued to circulate his own writing as well as that of dozens of other banned writers.<sup>35</sup>

Vaculík’s open letter enumerates the depredations he faced as a result of all his vigorous activity: the seizure of his passport, daily surveillance of all his contacts (“postal, telephone, friendly, foreign-language, sexual”), the police harassment, and interrogations. Stylistically, the letter is an unusual political text: in a false confessional tone it moves from a pastiche of a legalistic appeal to a surrealist critique of détente. Vaculík writes, “The world is enthusiastic over the Americans and the Russians screwing together two spaceships, and I, far beneath them, am miserably worried about my papers.”<sup>36</sup> It also references his subjection (in absentia) to a Kafkaesque trial by the regime: “There I was condemned for an unknown crime to an unknown sentence, my sons and I.”<sup>37</sup> The familiar trope of a Kafkaesque trial provides a rare moment of traction for Western readers of Vaculík’s oblique letter.

In the Czech context, the genre of the open letter is most often associated with the playwright Václav Havel, whom Roth also met in Prague.<sup>38</sup> By the 1970s, Havel was already familiar to New York theater circles, where several of his absurdist plays were performed—and often reductively interpreted as allegories of communist bureaucracy.

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<sup>35</sup> Bolton, *Worlds of Dissent*, 241. As Bolton points out, this stage of Vaculík’s career was far from devoid of written work. During the 1970s, he produced dozens of short feuilletons that were distributed in samizdat some of which made it into translation. Most importantly, he completed *Český snář*, “The Czech Dream Book,” a 466-page manuscript that chronicled his daily life during the year 1979. Although this work has not yet been published in English, see Bolton’s extended discussion, 243-65.

<sup>36</sup> Vaculík is referring to the Kosmos 782 satellite mission, the first joint US-Soviet space operation, launched in 1975, which was treated as a symbol of détente.

<sup>37</sup> Vaculík, “An Open Letter to the Secretary General.”

<sup>38</sup> For a discussion of the genre of the open letter in the context of 1970s Czechoslovakia, see Bolton, *Worlds of Dissent*, 202-207.

Roth was able to meet Havel in 1974 when the latter was visiting Klíma to show him a draft of one of his first open letters, addressed to the leader of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, Gustav Husák. Havel's letter eventually became one of the foundational documents of Czech dissent. As part of his defense of a culture under attack by an authoritarian state Havel included a damning assessment of the narrow literary realism that the regime enforced on its writers, which he referred to as "the aesthetics of banality."<sup>39</sup> Rather than revealing social truth, Havel writes, this literature "will never stray one inch beyond the taboos of a banal, conventional and, hence, basically fraudulent social consciousness . . . a concatenation of smooth, hackneyed, superficial trivia of experience; . . . pallid reflections of such aspects of experience as the social consciousness has long since adopted and domesticated."<sup>40</sup> Havel's own plays had long exposed the aesthetics of banality, but in "Dear Dr. Husák" he restates these artistic commitments in an emerging language of dissent.

With Vaculík and Havel available as models, Roth considered writing his own open letter on the situation of writers in Czechoslovakia, but Liehm counseled him against going through with the idea. "Why not wait until [the Czechoslovak government] really turn down your request for a visa," Liehm asked, "As long as you—and Barbara [Sproul], because this would inevitably effect [sic] her too as far as visas are concerned—can go there is nothing more valuable."<sup>41</sup> Kundera agreed with Liehm's advice. He wrote to Roth, "Your occasional personal visits in Czechoslovakia are much more than the

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<sup>39</sup> Václav Havel, *Open Letters: Selected Writings, 1965-1990* (New York: Vintage, 1992), 66.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>41</sup> Antonín Liehm, "Letter to Philip Roth," Date unknown, Box 20, Folder 2, PRP

article. The possibility of meeting and speaking with you in Prague meant for me and for my mates more than our coyness allowed to tell.”<sup>42</sup> Roth discarded the idea of an open letter, but he did provide PEN with an unsigned “Country Report” on Czechoslovakia, the first in “a series of reports to be published from time to time by American PEN on the situation of writers in a given country.”<sup>43</sup> Although the report is unsigned, it provides a detailed summary of the political situation that Roth discovered during his visits to Czechoslovakia during the early 1970s.

The first section of the report, subtitled “A Visitor’s Notes on Kafka’s City,” begins by listing the ways that normalization had affected many of Czechoslovakia’s most prominent writers and intellectuals: Josef Škvorecký, Antonin Liehm, and Eduard Goldstücker had all emigrated and were teaching abroad; Helen and Ivan Klíma were no longer allowed to publish; Milan Kundera had been removed from his position as a teacher at the famous Prague film school (FAMU); and the regime was dedicated to turning Ludvík Vaculík “into a Czechoslovak Solzhenitsyn.”<sup>44</sup> Roth describes how each of these writers was being punished for participating in the Prague Spring movement. In his account of the Prague Spring, Roth repeats the narrative presented by Liehm in *The*

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<sup>42</sup> Milan Kundera, “Letter to Philip Roth,” June 9, 1975, Box 17, Folder 14, PRP

<sup>43</sup> “Country Report #1: Czechoslovakia” (PEN American Center, August 1973). According to the text accompanying the report, the Country Reports “will be concerned with the writer in relation to his government, with the workings of restrictive laws and practices by which the writer is denied the right to work and publish freely. They will be concerned with violations on the terms of the international covenants to which the country is a signatory, particularly the UN Declaration of Human Rights and the Universal Copyright Convention, whose preamble states that UCC is intended to ‘ensure respect for the rights of the individual and encourage the development of literature, the sciences and the arts’ and to ‘facilitate a wider dissemination of works of the human mind...’ Future reports were planned for Greece, Portugal, Brazil, USSR, Indonesia, Spain, Turkey, Yugoslavia, Philippines, South Vietnam, and the US.

<sup>44</sup> In further emphasizing the Kafka connection, Roth quotes the president of the French League for the Rights of Man, who declared, “in the land of Franz Kafka blind terror and an absurd revenge reflex are raging again.” See “Country Report #1.”

*Politics of Culture*. Roth writes, “That the Prague Spring happened at all is largely due to the role of the intellectual community, from whose ranks have merged leaders of political movements throughout the modern history of the nation: the 19th-century revival of Czech and Slovak political identity; the First Republic (1918-1938); the struggle against Nazism.” As a result, many Czech writers were singled out for retribution by the regime after the Soviet invasion of 1968. In particular, Roth provides detailed information on the methods used by the Czechoslovak government to confiscate the foreign royalties owed to this small group of politically undesirable Czech writers. Roth lists the ten writers whom the government had designated as “authors of subversive and anti-socialistic works as well as authors whose work is not distributed in Czechoslovakia.” In addition to Klíma, Kundera, and Vaculík, the group included Václav Havel, Alexandr Kliment, Pavel Kohout, Jiří Šotola, Karel Kosík, Robert Kalivoda, and Jan Procházka. According to the report, “It is estimated that a dissident author will now receive, after deductions and taxes between 2% and 4% of his total foreign royalties.”

In order to provide material assistance to his contacts in Prague, Roth established the short-lived “Czech Ad Hoc Fund for Czechoslovak Writers and Intellectuals,” which secretly funneled money from US authors to suppressed writers and intellectuals in Czechoslovakia. A letter that Roth sent to Allen Ginsberg in August of 1974 provides a window into how this scheme operated and which writers participated. Roth was contacting Ginsberg, who had been expelled from Czechoslovakia a decade earlier, to solicit contributions for the fund. Roth writes, “Late in June I returned from a trip to Prague, where I spent a week talking and visiting with some of the dissident writers and intellectuals who are being persecuted and harassed in a variety of effective ways by the

Czech regime.”<sup>45</sup> Even though the government was confiscating foreign royalties, Roth explained that there was a way to get money to the specific writers using Tuzex coupons, a Czechoslovak pseudo-currency used to control the circulation of foreign cash. Roth hoped that Ginsberg would be willing to contribute fifty dollars a month, “which would assist fifteen Czechs who are having serious financial problems because of ideas they have espoused and/or books they have written.” Roth enclosed his “Country Report” along with a list of participants in his scheme. Both Vaculík and Klíma are listed along with 13 other recipients in Czechoslovakia.<sup>46</sup> The US writers that Roth lists as contributors include Edward Albee, Saul Bellow, John Hersey, Joyce Carol Oates, William Styron, Barbara Tuchman, Gore Vidal, and Kurt Vonnegut.<sup>47</sup>

The Czech Ad Hoc Fund came to an end soon after PEN, and its president Jerzy Kosiński, got involved. In 1975, Kosiński sent Roth a one-line letter asking, “don’t you think it’s better to do it *our way*?”<sup>48</sup> Roth had been using sketchy Czech travel agencies in Yorktown, New York that specialized in sending remittances back to Czechoslovakia in the form of Tuzex coupons.<sup>49</sup> But Kosiński wanted PEN to take over the financial transfers and make them tax deductible. Roth went along with this idea at first, but soon

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<sup>45</sup> Philip Roth, “Letter to Allen Ginsberg,” August 30, 1974, Series 1, Box 167, Folder 53, Allen Ginsberg Papers, M0733, Department of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, California.

<sup>46</sup> The other names listed in Roth’s letter are Vladimír Blažek, Jiří Brabec, Vladimír Karfík, Sergej Machonin, Karel Kostroun, Jiří Gruša, Jaroslav Putík, Petr Kabeš, Jan Trefulka, Karol Sidon, Milan Uhde, Alexandr Kliment, and Zdeněk Pochop.

<sup>47</sup> Claudia Roth Pierpont also lists Arthur Miller, Arthur Schlesinger, Alison Lurie as contributors to the Czech Ad Hoc Fund. For additional details on the Ad Hoc Fund see Pierpont, *Roth Unbound*, 92.

<sup>48</sup> Jerzy Kosiński, “Letter to Philip Roth,” June 24, 1975, Box 17, Folder 12, PRP.

<sup>49</sup> As Roth told Roth Pierpont, “It was a hole in the fabric and it worked.” See Pierpont, *Roth Unbound*, 92.

the PEN oversight committee decided that if they were going to provide assistance to suppressed writers in the Eastern Bloc then they would also need to support writers suffering under pro-American dictatorships elsewhere in the world. Roth decided not to work with PEN on the project, and the Czech Ad Hoc Fund was soon abolished.

By this point all of Roth's political activities in Czechoslovakia were catching up with him. During his 1976 visit to Prague, he was approached by two uniformed policemen who had joined the plainclothes agents that usually followed Roth around Prague on his visits. As Roth dramatically recalls the incident to Pierpont, he reacted by jumping onto a passing tram, narrowly avoiding a confrontation.<sup>50</sup> A few years later, Roth learned that the secret police had apprehended and interrogated Klíma the same evening of his narrow escape. Klíma and Kundera both tried to reassure Roth that this was hardly an unusual occurrence, but Roth remained shaken by the news. In a letter, Kundera wrote to Roth to confirm that, "without any doubts there is your dossier, a long time ago in hands of Czech police and probably many your friends were interrogated about you and you knew nothing."<sup>51</sup> But Kundera also emphasized that "those interrogations are not to be dramatize, very often it is only a matter of routine work. Whenever someone is questioned by Czech police he is questioned about everything that he can be asked. They are interested in everything."<sup>52</sup> Despite Roth's considerable efforts, most of his plans to help his friends had collapsed and, after his close call with the secret police, his education

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<sup>50</sup> Pierpont, *Roth Unbound*, 92–98.

<sup>51</sup> Milan Kundera, "Letter to Philip Roth," April 25, 1978, Box 17, Folder 14, PRP

<sup>52</sup> I have preserved all grammatical and spelling errors from Kundera's letters to Roth. Kundera's wife Vera, who also served as an interpreter whenever he met with Roth, proofread many of his English letters, but Kundera's most impassioned letters to Roth do not appear to have been edited. Also, the underlining in this quotation comes from Roth's copy of the letter.

in Prague was complete. The next year, Roth's tourist visa application was denied, and the author would not return to Prague until after the Velvet Revolution.

### 3. The Other Europe

Two years earlier, in 1974, Roth had pitched the idea of a new paperback series to Penguin Books. In his country report for PEN, Roth had noted that although Czech film and theater had undergone an international revival during the liberalizing sixties, "literature reached the world's notice more slowly."<sup>53</sup> According to Roth, a group of writers had almost broken onto the world scene in 1959, and again at the end of the sixties writers like Vaculík, Klíma, Kundera, Liehm, Havel, Bohumil Hrabal, Josef Škvorecký, and Miroslav Holub were finally becoming known outside Czechoslovakia. "By August 1968, when their work had begun to appear more and more frequently in foreign translations," Roth writes, "Czech and Slovak writers were already the prime quarry of repression." In the mid-1960s, the influential poet and editor Al Alvarez began taking an interest in Holub and other Eastern European poets and published several important translations with Penguin. Alvarez's attraction to writers like Holub and the Polish poet Czesław Miłosz had great consequences for the development of Anglophone poetry during the final decades of the Cold War.<sup>54</sup> Roth therefore envisioned a parallel series that would collect translated fiction by some of the writers he had met in Prague, as

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<sup>53</sup> "Country Report #1: Czechoslovakia."

<sup>54</sup> In addition to editing the Penguin Modern European Poets series, Alvarez wrote a book comparing the politics of literature in the Eastern bloc and the US. See Al Alvarez, *Under Pressure: The Writer in Society: Eastern Europe and the U.S.A.* (New York: Penguin, 1965). For a discussion of Alvarez, Holub, and other poetic transmissions during the 1960s, see Justin Quinn, *Between Two Fires: Transnationalism and Cold War Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 98–142.



well as other important writers from across communist Europe who were having trouble being published at home.

A year after he made his pitch, the first two volumes of the Penguin collection were published under the series title “Writers from the Other Europe” and Roth, as general editor, was responsible for selecting titles. The first two books in the series, both published in 1975, were by Czech friends: *Laughable Loves* by Kundera and *The Guinea Pigs* by Vaculík.<sup>55</sup> On one of his first trips to Prague, Roth had also made a side trip to Budapest and realized that the Czechoslovakian situation was not unique. The Other Europe would eventually expand beyond Czechoslovakia to encompass Hungary, Poland, and Yugoslavia and introduce literary intellectuals like György Konrád and Danilo Kiš to Western readers. By the time the series came to an end in 1989, it had published 17 works by 11 different authors, most of whom Roth never met. Although the series sprang from a very specific political context and a particular set of personal relationships, the Other Europe would constitute an alternative literary space that pushed the cultural logic of the Cold War in new directions.

The formation of this alternative space has a vital material history. The eventful publishing history of Vaculík’s *The Guinea Pigs* demonstrates how much effort was required to get many of these texts into wider circulation. According to Derek Sayer, the novel’s publishing contract in Czechoslovakia had been torn up because the work was inconsistent with “the newly established tasks of the publishing house” after

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<sup>55</sup> In Czech, the titles are *Směšné lásky* and *Morčata*, respectively. For the remainder of this article, I will refer to works according to their English titles.

normalization.<sup>56</sup> When the official publishing houses all rejected the manuscript, Vaculík published the book himself in samizdat form, as one of the first volumes put out by *Edice Petlice*. At first, *The Guinea Pigs* circulated only in this hand-typed, stapled form among a small circle of readers in Prague. The samizdat text was then smuggled out of the country and an excerpt was printed in one of the first issues of *Index on Censorship* in 1972. Over the next decade *Index* would become a major venue for what is known as *tamizdat*—samizdat material published abroad.<sup>57</sup> A year later, the Third Press in New York published a full English translation, but only in a very small edition. The Other Europe series specialized in taking small editions like this and reprinting them for a much wider audience. From samizdat to tamizdat to one of the world’s largest commercial presses, the path taken by *The Guinea Pigs* involved the work of countless people besides Roth: editors, translators, publishers, copyists, and even smugglers. This last role entailed some risk if Roth ever acted as a courier, as the StB already suspected Roth of exporting “tendentious anti-socialist materials” to foreign countries and made sure that his bags were searched at the airport.<sup>58</sup> Roth’s hotel room was also searched for suspicious documents on at least one occasion with no result.

Although Roth certainly had assistance in the trafficking of literary manuscripts, he played the key role as general editor in framing how the series would be received by critics and common readers alike. In private, Roth was forthcoming about the political

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<sup>56</sup> Derek Sayer, *The Coasts of Bohemia: A Czech History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 267.

<sup>57</sup> For more on tamizdat, see Friederike Kind-Kovács and Jessie Labov, eds., *Samizdat, Tamizdat, and Beyond: Transnational Media During and After Socialism* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012); and Peter Steiner, “On Samizdat, Tamizdat, Magnitizdat, and Other Strange Words That Are Difficult to Pronounce,” *Poetics Today* 29, no. 4 (Winter 2008): 613–28.

<sup>58</sup> “TURISTA: Philip Roth,” 20.

impetus behind the series' creation, and sent letters to editors at influential reviews in order to publicize it. As he writes in a typical letter,

The first two books, published in 1975, are by two of the most highly regarded Czech novelists, Milan Kundera and [Ludvík Vaculík]. Because of their activities in helping bring about the Prague Spring, and their support for the short-lived Dubcek reform government, neither Kundera nor Vaculík has been allowed to publish his work in Czechoslovakia since the Russian invasion of August 1968. All their foreign royalties are taxed at about 90%, a punitive measure by which the government has attempted to impoverish and demoralize about a dozen of the most gifted writers in Czechoslovakia.<sup>59</sup>

Roth stopped short of mentioning his own experiences in Prague, but he is quick to reference the political circumstances faced by these authors. In contrast, he omitted this political context in the editor's note that opens every volume of the Other Europe series. According to this note, the purpose of the series was simply "to bring together outstanding and influential works of fiction by Eastern European writers," most of whom were "virtually unknown in America."<sup>60</sup> In public, Roth advertised his series on the literary merits alone and left their political interest implicit.

Roth's other major responsibility as general editor was commissioning introductions for each volume. These introductions also proved crucial in mediating the reception of these challenging texts, which often proved difficult to classify. In Irving Howe's introduction to Konrád's *The Case Worker* (1987), for instance, Howe relates how difficult it was for him to "place" Konrád's work, "to find terms of description drawn from other works of literature that might evoke its special qualities."<sup>61</sup> The

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<sup>59</sup> Philip Roth, "Letter to Editor," September 10, 1975, Box 27, Folder 1, PRP

<sup>60</sup> See front matter in each volume. In volumes published after the initial print run (1975-76), "America" was changed to "the West."

<sup>61</sup> See Howe

's "Introduction" in George Konrád, *The Case Worker*, trans. Paul Aston, Writers from the Other Europe (New York: Penguin, 1987), viii.

impressive list of writers recruited to write introductions—John Updike, Heinrich Böll, Carlos Fuentes, Joseph Brodsky, Angela Carter—helped draw attention to the series, but also associated the relatively unknown writers in the series with established figures in contemporary world literature. Roth himself wrote the introduction to the first book of the series, Kundera’s *Laughable Loves*, an essay that provided critics with an interpretive paradigm for how to address the political circumstances behind many of the books in the series. Immediately after acknowledging how recent events had impinged on Kundera’s career as a writer, Roth quotes Vaculík, who asserted that it was “unfortunate . . . when foreign critics judge the quality of Czech literary work exclusively by the degree to which it ‘settles accounts with illusions about socialism’ or by the acerbity with which it stands up to the regime here.”<sup>62</sup> Rather than promoting antisocialist polemics, as StB agent Major Hoffman would have it, Roth actually hoped to shield Kundera’s text from an overly politicized reading.

Roth might have been responding in part to pressure from Kundera, who understood the influence of these introductions and the immense impact the series would have on his own reputation. In total, four major works by Kundera were included in the series (more than any other writer), and yet he feared that a reading focused on the regional political context would prevent him from reaching a wider, cosmopolitan audience. Kundera was therefore thrilled with Elizabeth Pochoda’s introduction to the Other Europe edition of *The Farewell Party* (1977) because she wrote about how it was “as difficult as ever to place him within a definite literary tradition.” She also deftly sidestepped the impact of politics on the text, suggesting that, “one might also say

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<sup>62</sup> Philip Roth, “Introducing Milan Kundera,” in *Laughable Loves*, by Milan Kundera, trans. Suzanne Rappaport, *Writers from the Other Europe* (New York: Penguin, 1975), xi.

[Kundera's novel] was forged in a laboratory that ran rather different experiments on the human animal than have been available to writers of Western Europe."<sup>63</sup> Kundera liked this depoliticized framing enough to include it in a later French edition and even wrote to Roth, "All the critics repeat what they gather elsewhere and that's why I should like them to repeat what Mrs. Pochoda says."<sup>64</sup>

But Kundera was much less pleased with the introductory note that Roth included in each volume, which used the geographic labels "Other Europe" and "Eastern Europe" interchangeably. For Kundera, "Eastern Europe" was a political fiction that Roth's series seemed to ratify, and in a series of impassioned letters he complained to Roth that this artificial context would make his own work appear "merely political, anti-Staliniste." The occasion for this strong disagreement appears to be Kundera's completion of the novel *Life is Elsewhere* and the question of whether it would be included in the series. Kundera explained to Roth, "My situation isn't simple: I love you, I don't love your collection. You love my books, you don't love *Life is Elsewhere*. Hence a solution: we can liberate *Life is elsewhere* from this collection. One reason more over: exactly for this book the regional contexte can be dangerous."<sup>65</sup> Furthermore, by accepting the Cold War division of Europe the label enforced a cruel uniformity on a diverse set of authors. Despite admiring many of these writers, Kundera felt that grouping them together under the heading of the Other Europe was a terrible mistake. He argued to Roth that the "regional contexte is very bad...more over wrong, unreal," calling the Other Europe "a batard born from Yalta,

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<sup>63</sup> Elizabeth Pochoda, "Introduction," in *The Farewell Party*, by Milan Kundera, trans. Peter Kussi, Writers from the Other Europe (New York: Penguin, 1977), ix.

<sup>64</sup> Milan Kundera, "Letter to Philip Roth," October 5, 1977, Box 17, Folder 14, PRP

<sup>65</sup> Milan Kundera, "Letter to Philip Roth," Undated, Box 17, Folder 14, PRP

by the father Stalin and the mother Roosevelt.” Kundera told Roth that there were still a few ideas he took very seriously, and the *nonexistence* of this Other Europe was one of them.

Kundera preferred what he called the great Central European idea, which was at the heart of his evolving cultural critique of the Cold War division of Europe into East and West. Kundera first articulated this idea in a series of public statements between 1979 and 1985, gathered together for the first time in English translation in *The Art of the Novel* (1985). Rather than referring to any geographic Europe, Kundera’s Central Europe is closer to a form of cultural identity—an identity he explores through the tradition of the Central European novel. His history of the novel, thus, constitutes a “parallel history of the Modern Era.”<sup>66</sup> The particular tradition that Kundera has in mind passes through a “pleiad of Central European novelists,” including Bruno Schulz, Herman Broch, Robert Musil, Witold Gombrowicz, Jaroslav Hašek, and Kafka.<sup>67</sup> Kundera argues that this tradition of the novel—ambiguous and antilyrical, radically skeptical about modern history—is ultimately “incompatible with the totalitarian universe.”<sup>68</sup> Given the dark history of the twentieth century, the novel represented an alternative “possibility for Europe.”<sup>69</sup> Kundera’s project sought out a counter-history of the novel that could stand opposed to the degraded political reality of a divided Europe and point towards an alternative future in which the borders of Europe would be redrawn.

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<sup>66</sup> Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2003), 9.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

#### 4. Counter-Realism

Kundera's reconstructed history of the novel was also intended as a course correction for Cold War literary aesthetics. The imposition of socialist realism in the Eastern Bloc had muted an entire tradition within the history of the European novel, and Kundera sought its rejuvenation, especially in his own work. Despite their disagreements, Roth's series helped Kundera accomplish this goal in front of a growing international audience. Just as Kundera elaborated his own heroic "pleiad," the Other Europe series was Roth's attempt at counter-realist canon formation. Roth's series introduced new aesthetic models into US literary culture that offered a new alternative to dominant postwar styles, which we might even call perverse. Throughout the remainder of this chapter, I will be using the term "perverse" to call attention to some of the qualities that helped distinguish the fictions of Roth's Other Europe: grotesque representations of historical experience, characters who often display a pathological contrariness, and an unsparingly confessional mode of narration. To be sure, Roth included writers who enacted a range of fictional strategies in their work, yet, taken together, the Other Europe series represented a provocative departure from both American and socialist modes of postwar realism.

Roth himself has suggested that the writers from the Other Europe revealed to him a side of literature that he felt was particularly underdeveloped in the US. As he told Pierpont, "American realism is a powerful source, and I love it—it's given us Bellow and Updike—but it's only one literary given."<sup>70</sup> This was a common view during the sixties and seventies: the unruly and antinomian impulses of modernism had been domesticated

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<sup>70</sup> Pierpont, *Roth Unbound*, 93.

in the postwar American realist novel. In a 1960 essay entitled “Writing American Fiction,” Roth famously suggested that, by midcentury, US social reality had already exceeded the novelist’s powers of imagination.<sup>71</sup> Critics point to this essay as a signpost on the road to American postmodernism, but for Roth, this aesthetic crisis led ultimately to Prague and to what I have termed counter-realism. While many of the works in the Other Europe series have since been declared archetypes of Eastern European postmodernism, those same works bear less resemblance to American postmodern texts by Donald Barthelme, Thomas Pynchon, or William Gaddis. In Kundera’s *Laughable Loves*, for instance, Roth discovered a distinctive narrative turn towards erotic play, comic analysis, and extended philosophical speculation.

Rather than abandon realist strategies wholesale, the Other Europe books challenge Western readers with oblique symbolic representations of life in East-Central Europe. Even as these works seem to invite allegorical political readings, they undercut that same impulse. Vaculík’s *The Guinea Pigs*, for instance, is a strange, elliptical novel that describes a bank clerk’s disturbing treatment of the pet guinea pigs that he brings home to his family. The novel tempts the reader to identify the story’s tortured animals with the helpless subjects of the communist state, while simultaneously resisting that same reading at every turn by denying the guinea pigs any stable referent outside of the story.<sup>72</sup> The obvious archetype for this beguiling quality is the fiction of Kafka, a key

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<sup>71</sup> “Writing American Fiction” is reprinted in Philip Roth, *Reading Myself and Others* (New York: Vintage, 2001), 117–136.

<sup>72</sup> The *Columbia Dictionary of Modern European Literature* (1980), for instance, calls *The Guinea Pigs* “a Kafkaesque allegory of guinea pigs and their world; their arbitrary and sadistic treatment by their once-beneficent master serves as a metaphor for the totalitarian state and its treatment of its citizens.” See Jean-Albert Bédé and William B. Edgerton, eds., “Vaculík, Ludvík,” *Columbia Dictionary of Modern European Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 834.



member of Kundera's own pleiad. But Vaculík's other major influence is Edgar Allan Poe.

Vaculík invokes Poe in several ways in *The Guinea Pigs*, including a coded reference to Poe's story "A Descent into the Maelström."<sup>73</sup> In a larger sense, the *Guinea Pigs* rewrites Poe's 1843 story "The Black Cat" and also appropriates Poe's recurring motif of the perverse confession. In Poe's story, the motive for the pet owner's cruelty is said to be *perverseness*, "an unfathomable longing of the soul *to vex itself*."<sup>74</sup> In Poe's "The Imp of the Perverse" the ultimate example of a perverse act is the narrator's voluntary confession of a murder. Both "The Black Cat" and *The Guinea Pigs* feature such confessions. Early in *The Guinea Pigs*, the narrator describes a snake he has decided to watch die rather than kill off with a decisive blow: "my most perverted impulse, if you will, was—having saved its life already—my present urge to dissect the act for you here, and you being so interested in it."<sup>75</sup> Rather than incriminating some abstract political system, Vaculík implicates the narrator—and his audience. Both the perverse and oblique qualities of this work make it nearly impossible to be read according to the logic of Cold War politics.

We might also connect another of the Other Europe books to the influence of Poe: *Closely Watched Trains* by Bohumil Hrabal, which had been the basis for an Oscar-winning film of the same title in 1966. During normalization, Hrabal's status was

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<sup>73</sup> The novel's subplot involves a theory that a "mysterious circulation" of currency is threatening the world with a financial depression. In order to describe the impending monetary catastrophe, the narrator quotes a long passage found in "some specialized literature" on economics (38). But the quote is actually taken from Poe's 1841 story.

<sup>74</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, *Poetry and Tales*, ed. Patrick F. Quinn (New York: Library of America, 1996), 599.

<sup>75</sup> Ludvík Vaculík, *The Guinea Pigs*, trans. Káča Poláčková, *Writers from the Other Europe* (New York: Penguin, 1975), 6.

different from Kundera's or Vaculík's in Czechoslovakia. Hrabal worked in the grey area between official and underground culture, publishing occasionally with state presses while also circulating versions of his work in samizdat form. For the Penguin edition of *Closely Watched Trains*, Roth enlisted Josef Škvorecký to write the introduction and provide the Czechoslovak context. In a letter inviting Škvorecký's participation, Roth wrote, "virtually no one knows him here, and even those who remember the movie, don't know he wrote the book it was based on, or that there even is a book."<sup>76</sup> Škvorecký accepted and also wrote an essay for the journal *Cross Currents* a year later, in 1982. In the essay, Škvorecký argues that Hrabal's *Closely Watched Trains* contains a number of motifs borrowed directly from Poe. In particular, Škvorecký points to a short story by Hrabal that was the seed of the later novel. "With its morbid imagery," Škvorecký argues, it is "truly Poesque."<sup>77</sup> But he also wonders,

What is the link? Is there direct literary influence at work here, the general impact of massive doses of Poe who was by far the American author most frequently translated into Czech? Or is it the circumstances I mentioned earlier, namely the fact that the two-dimensional horrors, allegedly borrowed by Poe from Germany and claimed by him to have originated in his soul, have been made three-dimensional in the regions of Bergen-Belsen, Treblinka, Maidanek?

Škvorecký thinks that "all the links are probable," but acknowledges that the question of literary influence is a complex one.<sup>78</sup> In addition to Poe, some have claimed the Beats as

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<sup>76</sup> Philip Roth, "Letter to Josef Škvorecký," August 6, 1980, Box 58, Folder 10, Josef Škvorecký Papers, Hoover Institution Archives.

<sup>77</sup> Josef Škvorecký, "American Motifs in the Work of Bohumil Hrabal," *Cross Currents* 1 (1982): 208.

<sup>78</sup> On the question of influence, Škvorecký writes, "Instead of looking for evidence of imitation we may seek an explanation in the mass media network of this century, which, of course, includes the proliferation of cheap and accessible books. It is a network extending over the European mental landscapes, and against it some of the recurrent motifs of American literature and arts are silhouetted, removed from the two dimensions of the printed word and the electronically projected image, and elevated into the three dimensions of reality." See *Ibid.*, 207.

an influence on Hrabal, who met Allen Ginsberg in person during his momentous 1965 visit to Czechoslovakia.<sup>79</sup> Both connections underscore the fact that Hrabal, like many of the Other Europe writers, was not easy to categorize according to the major aesthetic categories of Cold War literature, in either the US or Czechoslovakia.

By sidestepping both realist and allegorical conventions, many entries in the Other Europe series inoculate themselves against being read as stable representations of communist social reality or straightforward parables of life in the Eastern Bloc. Roth's eventual decision to include works by the Polish writers Schulz and Gombrowicz that predate the Cold War further removed the Other Europe from its immediate political and temporal contexts. (Kundera had also included Schulz and Gombrowicz in his "pleiad," another sign of Kundera's influence on Roth's growing canon.) In his groundbreaking work on Roth, Ross Posnock uses *Ferdydurke* (1986) as the basis for constructing a transnational and transhistorical "genealogy of immaturity" connecting Roth to writers like Gombrowicz, Schulz, Kundera, and Ralph Waldo Emerson.<sup>80</sup> For Posnock, the trope of immaturity ties Roth to the "antinomian" literary politics that "began to appear in the American renaissance of the mid-nineteenth century as part of Romanticism's critique of Enlightenment scientism and rationalism, a critique that also informs modernist European

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<sup>79</sup> See Josef Rauwolf, "Prague Connection," in *The Transnational Beat Generation*, ed. Nancy McCampbell Grace and Jennie Skerl (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 192–193.

<sup>80</sup> Ross Posnock, *Philip Roth's Rude Truth: The Art of Immaturity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 57. The Other Europe series is an essential context for understanding Posnock's transnational genealogy, which he only briefly mentions. This is a missed opportunity. Posnock's insights have even greater force when viewed in light of Roth's real-world encounters with Czech writers and his creation of the Other Europe series. In addition to discovering affinities with his own art, Roth was actively appropriating Gombrowicz, Schulz, and other writers in order to construct the larger counter-realist genealogy of the Other Europe.

and Eastern European novelists and thinkers.”<sup>81</sup> This recurring antirational critique has often expressed itself in a parallel resistance to realist modes of narration. As I have suggested, the late Cold War was fertile ground for such counter-realist strategies: the free play of erotic and comic themes, extended narrative digression, and ambiguous use of allegory.

But what most clearly marks these fictions as counter-realist is their “disabused view of history,” Kundera’s phrase to describe the attitudes of Central European novelists like Broch, Musil, and Hašek.<sup>82</sup> “Above the entry gate to Central Europe,” Kundera wrote, he would engrave a sentence from Gombrowicz: “Never forget that only in opposing History as such can we resist the history of our own day.” For Kundera, novels resist the teleological and progressive theories of history that arose alongside the nineteenth-century realist novel through a variety of strategies. Kafka’s fictional worlds, for instance, simply stand outside of historical time. Kafka’s heirs in the Other Europe series discovered other ways to confront the violent history of the region. Roth praised Tadeusz Borowski’s stories in particular for showing him “the only way to write about the Holocaust was as the guilty, as the complicit and implicated.” Beyond Borowski, Schulz in particular would prove central to a new generation of Jewish American writers who were looking for new ways to write about the memory of the Holocaust.<sup>83</sup> For Roth,

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<sup>81</sup> Ross Posnock, “Planetary Circles: Philip Roth, Emerson, Kundera,” in *Shades of the Planet: American Literature as World Literature*, ed. Wai Chee Dimock and Lawrence Buell (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 141–142.

<sup>82</sup> Milan Kundera, “The Tragedy of Central Europe,” *The New York Review of Books*, April 26, 1984, 36.

<sup>83</sup> Schulz figures prominently in fictions by Cynthia Ozick, Michael Chabon, Jonathan Safran Foer, and Nicole Krauss. See Emily Miller Burdick, “The Ghost of the Holocaust in the Construction of Jewish American Literature,” in *The Cambridge History of Jewish American Literature*, ed. Hana Wirth-Nesher (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 348–352.

the perverse confessional mode marked many other works from the series' authors, including "Tadeusz Konwicki, Danilo Kiš, and Kundera, say, to name only three K's, who have crawled out from under Kafka's cockroach to tell us that there are no uncontaminated angels, that the evil is inside as well as outside."<sup>84</sup> Eschewing the linear and bounded temporality of traditional realism, as well as the ethical boundaries that realism draws between the self and social forces, Roth's *Other Europe* instead displays a perverse attitude towards history.

What about the series' attitude towards Cold War political geography? In 1985, Roth asked Kundera to write the introduction for Gombrowicz's *Ferdydurke*, but he declined. Instead, Kundera reiterated his concern that the *Other Europe* would be understood as a euphemism for Eastern Europe. Kundera emphasized that, for better or worse, language had an immense power to frame the political imagination. In a rush of broken English, Kundera again argued that the entire notion of Eastern Europe was a monstrous mystification, even if it had already become so common as to appear banal.<sup>85</sup> By this time, he had articulated the aesthetic arguments of *The Art of the Novel* in a more forceful political language. "The Tragedy of Central Europe," Kundera's most influential essay, argues that "Central Europe is not a state: it's a culture or a fate. Its borders are imaginary and must be redrawn with each new historical situation."<sup>86</sup> He asserts that turbulent political events in places like Prague and Warsaw are not Eastern European events but must be understood as "a drama of the West—a West that, kidnapped,

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<sup>84</sup> Roth, *Shop Talk*, 62.

<sup>85</sup> Milan Kundera, "Letter to Philip Roth," April 1985, Box 17, Folder 14, PRP

<sup>86</sup> Kundera, "The Tragedy of Central Europe," 35. Kundera himself redrew those borders depending on his audience. See Charles Sabatos, "Shifting Contexts: The Boundaries of Milan Kundera's Central Europe," in *Contexts, Subtexts and Pretexts: Literary Translation in Eastern Europe and Russia*, ed. Brian James Baer (Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing, 2011).

displaced, and brainwashed, nevertheless insists on defending its identity.”<sup>87</sup> By challenging the immutability of Cold War political boundaries, Kundera also hoped to get Western intellectuals to reinvest in the cultural fate of the small nations of Central Europe.

By the mid-1980s Kundera was beginning to see how Roth’s series complemented this project. Kundera continued to identify the Central European novelistic tradition as a last site of resistance, and now, thanks to the Other Europe series, this tradition was more readily available to Western audiences than ever before. The Other Europe series helped to establish an alternative cultural space that intellectuals and dissidents across the Iron Curtain could embrace as the Cold War was coming to an end. The work of influential scholars and journalists like Judt, Timothy Garton Ash, and Jacques Rupnik increasingly moved away from the vocabulary of “Eastern Europe.”<sup>88</sup> Whereas literary intellectuals on both sides of the Iron Curtain had relied on overburdened references to Kafka to address one another, Roth had opened up an entire new counter-realist language. As Kundera acknowledged to Roth, “Your collection (even with this terminology) was necessary to remake the ‘other Europe’ again Europe. It was a stopover between oblivion and Europe.” But Kundera also asked Roth if it wasn’t now time to change the presentation of the series and move away from the “Other Europe,” to “leav the stopover.”<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Kundera, “The Tragedy of Central Europe,” 33.

<sup>88</sup> For example, see Timothy Garton Ash, “Does Central Europe Exist?,” *The New York Review of Books*, October 9, 1986; Jacques Rupnik, *The Other Europe* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989); and Tony Judt, “The Rediscovery of Central Europe,” *Daedalus* 119, no. 1 (January 1, 1990): 23–54.

<sup>89</sup> Kundera, “Letter to Philip Roth,” April 1985.

## 5. The Little World Around the Corner

Roth's novella *The Prague Orgy*, published in 1985 as an epilogue to his trilogy of Zuckerman novels, can also be read as an epilogue to Roth's entire encounter with the Other Europe. Early drafts of *The Prague Orgy* reveal that the novella was initially intended as the concluding section of *Zuckerman Unbound* (1981), the second book in the trilogy, and that the Prague section was to be titled "The World Around the Corner." According to this original design, Zuckerman's career as a celebrity novelist in the US was brought into sharp relief by the counter-situation of the Czech writer. In both versions, the novella takes the form of Zuckerman's diary entries during a 1976 visit to Prague, the last year Roth was allowed in Czechoslovakia. Roth's own recorded impressions from his visits provided the raw material for these entries and biographical traces of real Czech writers are peppered throughout *The Prague Orgy*. Critics have recognized traits of Klíma in the character of Bolotka and Kundera in the fictional exiled writer Zdenek. In an early outline of the novella, Roth notes that Zdenek and Zuckerman should communicate through Zdenek's wife, "like M and I through Vera." Plus, several writers peripherally involved in Roth's network of activity during these years—such as Heinrich Böll, Carlos Fuentes, and Jerzy Kosiński—are mentioned by name in the text.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Manuscript drafts of *The Prague Orgy* can be found in Boxes 189 and 190 in the Philip Roth Papers at the Library of Congress. In a comment attached to one of his drafts of the novella, Roth writes, "the diary notes aren't mine, though for many years after the 1968 Prague Spring, I was a frequent visitor to Prague and came to have some good friends there, particularly among the outcast novelists and poets. Any impressions I gathered, I eventually turned over to the fictional American novelist I call Nathan Zuckerman, and now, nearly a decade after I was last permitted to visit Czechoslovakia, Zuckerman, having plundered my memories and recollections, has composed a novella-length diary of his own about a quixotic journey he makes to Prague in 1976 to rescue from oblivion two hundred unpublished stories by an unknown Yiddish writer." See Roth's "Notes" in Box 190, Folder 5. Evidence of the alternative title can be found in "Copy A," Box 189, Folder 1, PRP.

Roth, however, deliberately undercuts many of these same biographical parallels. The fictional Yiddish writer Sisovsky, whose unpublished manuscripts Zuckerman comes to Prague to retrieve, is clearly meant to resemble the Polish-Jewish writer Bruno Schulz. The circumstances of Sisovsky's murder by a Gestapo officer are taken straight from Schulz's own tragic biography. Yet at one point Zuckerman is told that the story of Sisovsky's death is a lie: "It happened to another writer, who didn't even write in Yiddish . . . [Sisovsky] was killed in a bus accident."<sup>91</sup> Like Zuckerman, the reader should proceed skeptically. Elsewhere, Bolotka, who critics associate with Klíma, is given a line taken directly from one of Kundera's letters to Roth: that secret police "interrogations are not to be dramatized."<sup>92</sup> Roth is clearly up to more than straightforward dramatization, but what exactly?

Joseph Benatov argues that *The Prague Orgy* "gives voice to an array of internal Czech positions" in order to deconstruct the dominant Cold War narrative of "Eastern European suffering and oppression."<sup>93</sup> This narrative proceeds according to what he calls the "logic of tamizdat," a discourse "symptomatic of the broader politics of representing life behind the iron curtain." Benatov points to the novella's central device of a failed tamizdat mission to argue that Roth subverts the idea of a lost Eastern European manuscript finding redemption through Western publication. Despite its overall strength, Benatov's interpretation has several flaws. First, Roth's entire Other Europe series can be understood as a wildly successful tamizdat mission. Is Roth then undermining the

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<sup>91</sup> Philip Roth, *The Prague Orgy* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 59.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>93</sup> Joseph Benatov, "Demystifying the Logic of Tamizdat: Philip Roth's Anti-Spectacular Literary Politics," *Poetics Today* 30, no. 1 (March 1, 2009): 107.



accomplishment of his own series? Secondly, Benatov is overly schematic in identifying Roth's characters with specific Czech figures, which leads him to read the novella as a critique of Kundera's participation in this larger Cold War discourse (itself a dubious claim). Although Benatov overstates his case, his reading does illuminate a key function of the text's competing voices and rightfully draws attention to one of the strangest aspects of a text with "orgy" in the title: the conspicuous absence of any actual sex.

While sexed-up language is everywhere in the novella, the characters themselves are all remarkably chaste. Unlike the eroticized world of *Professor of Desire*, sex is closer to a strategy of misdirection in *The Prague Orgy*. At one point, Zuckerman's friends tell him that if they are questioned by the secret police about the American writer's presence in Prague, they will lie and say that he "came for the fifteen-year-old girls," a cringe-worthy line Klíma supposedly used in his own interrogation about Roth.<sup>94</sup> Elsewhere Zuckerman speculates that his Czech hosts are exaggerating their own sexual depravity in order to throw "a little cold water on free-world fantasies of virtuous political suffering."<sup>95</sup> Whatever their function, these alibis and boasts are all voiced by the novella's Czech characters, never Zuckerman. Roth's protagonist realizes midway through, with astonishment, that he is "not fucking everyone, or indeed anyone. . . . I am a dignified, well-behaved, reliable spectator, secure, urbane, calm, polite, the quiet respectable one who does not take his trousers off, and *these* are the menacing writers."<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Roth, *The Prague Orgy*, 38. Roth's remarks to a PEN gathering in 2013 concluded with a reference to this episode. The police enquired about the reason behind Roth's visit. Klíma responded, "Don't you read his books? He came for the girls." See Philip Roth, "In Prague," *The New Yorker Blogs*, May 3, 2013.

<sup>95</sup> Roth, *The Prague Orgy*, 26.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 36–37.

This is the larger function of sex, or its absence, in the novella: to signal how Prague has transformed Zuckerman as a writer and a narrator.

Instead of the novelist's relentless self-expression and obsessive desires driving the action, the voices of the writers of the Other Europe are given free play. "They, silenced, are all mouth. I am only ears," as Zuckerman points out.<sup>97</sup> Prague has become a distorted mirror for Zuckerman; all the usual positions are reversed. In a sense, Roth has reenacted *The Metamorphosis* yet again, but this time, rather than a bug or breast, he imagines the transformation of an American writer into one of his Czech counterparts. Recalling Kafka's opening line, Roth writes, "As Nathan Zuckerman awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a sweeper of floors in a railway café."<sup>98</sup> This reversal is extended later to include Zuckerman's native literary scene. In one memorable passage, Zuckerman imagines, "Styron washing glasses in a Penn Station barroom, Susan Sontag wrapping buns at a Broadway bakery, Gore Vidal bicycling salamis to school lunchrooms in Queens—I look at the filthy floor and see myself sweeping it."<sup>99</sup> On the surface, this might read as Roth returning to the romanticized cliché of the repressed writer living under communism, but as always the author stands at an ironic distance from Zuckerman's fantasies.

The very writer who introduced Roth to Prague's street-sweeping authors did find something reductive in Roth's rendering of Czechoslovakia. On the eve of the publication of *The Prague Orgy*, Klíma came across Roth's remarks in a *Paris Review* interview:

"When I was first in Czechoslovakia, it occurred to me that I work in a society where as a

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 61.

writer everything goes and nothing matters, while for the Czech writers I met in Prague, nothing goes and everything matters.”<sup>100</sup> In response, Klíma accused Roth of subscribing to the false, categorical logic of the Cold War, with its assumptions about the “dark prospects of literature in unfreedom.”<sup>101</sup> Klíma saw Roth’s statement as yet another instance of the outdated tendency to divide the world into opposing categories. According to Klíma,

It is one of the failings of our time that it endeavors to minimize and simplify all the problems of our contemporary world to the common denominator of political conditions, transfer them to the sphere of ideological terminology, dividing the world up into good and evil, free and unfree, a world in which you can live with hope and a world in which (at least theoretically) it is not possible to live at all.<sup>102</sup>

In one sense, Klíma was right: Roth’s dialogic imagination was particularly well suited to the binary oppositions that defined the Cold War mindset. But even if Roth was drawn to oppositions of all kinds, he also rejected the uncontaminated dualism of Cold War discourse.

Previously, I emphasized Poe’s literary idea of the perverse. But I have also sought to invoke a secondary definition in the *OED*, specifically as “a mirror image of a figure or object, in which the transverse directions of the original are reversed.”<sup>103</sup> Roth’s strategy for confronting the categorical logic of the Cold War was to expose “here” as a perverse reflection of “there.” Near the end of *The Prague Orgy*, he quotes K. from *The*

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<sup>100</sup> Philip Roth, interview with Hermione Lee, “Philip Roth, The Art of Fiction No. 84,” *Paris Review*, Fall 1984.

<sup>101</sup> Ivan Klíma, trans. George Theiner, “The Writer and Unfreedom,” *Harper’s Magazine*, December 1985, 30.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>103</sup> “Perverse, n.,” *OED Online* (Oxford University Press), accessed April 12, 2016, <http://www.oed.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/view/Entry/141671>.

*Trial*: “What would entice me to this desolate country except the wish to stay here?”<sup>104</sup> Zuckerman wishes to remain “here,” in Prague, precisely because it is a place where stale oppositions fall apart, a place “where the division is not that easy to discern between the heroic and the perverse, where every sort of repression foments a parody of freedom.” But when Zuckerman is finally expelled from Czechoslovakia he has no choice but to return to “the little world around the corner.”<sup>105</sup> For Zuckerman, the “little world” is no longer the small Czech nation, suffering through the latest in a series of great power occupations; the bounded, claustrophobic reality is the US.

Many critics, including Posnock, have referred to Roth’s next book, *The Counterlife* (1986), as the crucial pivot in Roth’s writing. But Roth’s manuscripts show that the novel actually originated in a draft version of *The Prague Orgy*. Despite *The Counterlife*’s departure from traditional realism, Roth himself has distanced the book from both modernist and postmodernist genres.<sup>106</sup> “Counter-realism” can help us describe this new stage in Roth’s career, in which he leaves behind both the Jamesian realism of his earliest fiction and the desperate fabulism of *The Breast* (1972). After *The Counterlife*, Roth’s fiction gives way to a series of counter-realist experiments, culminating in *Operation Shylock* (1993) and *Sabbath’s Theater* (1995). But all the novels written during the print run of Writers from the Other Europe bear the series’ imprint: it is no coincidence that *Zuckerman Bound* begins with a dedication to Kundera and ends in Prague. In promoting the Other Europe series, Roth was also proposing a new transnational context in which his evolving work might be read. Even the so-called

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<sup>104</sup> Roth, *The Prague Orgy*, 83.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>106</sup> Roth, *Reading Myself and Others*, 162.

“American” trilogy, which has been cited as evidence of Roth’s late reconciliation with traditional realism, displays the relentless counterfactual imagination, typically associated with *The Plot Against America* (2004), and that was already present in his miniature fantasies of Jewish escape and survival in both “Looking at Kafka” and *The Ghost Writer* (1979). And there are other continuities with Roth’s Prague-era fiction. In the American trilogy, Zuckerman resumes the narrative pose he first occupied in Czechoslovakia, as history’s innocent bystander. But Vaculík’s guinea pigs should remind us to be suspicious. Because Zuckerman is himself implicated in this history, the trilogy can also be read as his perverse confession.

### **Conclusion: The Antipolitical Imagination**

Right before Zuckerman returns to the US, a final government official asks to see his passport. He “reads over the biographical details” to determine if the writer is “fiction or fact.”<sup>107</sup> After evaluating Zuckerman’s papers, the official says, “Ah yes...Zuckerman the Zionist agent.” Although Roth couldn’t have read his own surveillance file (he never learned Czech), *The Prague Orgy* unwittingly ironizes the StB’s secret judgment: Philip Roth, a.k.a. “the Tourist,” at the center of an international Zionist conspiracy. But Bolotka, as the fictional “reality instructor,” has already cautioned the reader against taking these secret policemen too seriously. The StB are just “like literary critics—of what little they see, they get most wrong anyway. They *are* the literary critics. Our literary culture is police criticism.”<sup>108</sup> The real-life StB got one big thing wrong in their surveillance of Roth: they missed entirely the activities of Roth’s companion Barbara

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<sup>107</sup> Roth, *The Prague Orgy*, 85.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

Sproul in Czechoslovakia. There is little mention of Sproul in Roth's StB file aside from a mistaken reference to the presence of Roth's wife in Prague. But by the mid-seventies, Sproul had taken over as the country coordinator for the human rights organization Amnesty International in Czechoslovakia. As Sproul tells Pierpont, she was able to do her work with little interference because every day the "government agents would set off after Philip," while she would spend their visits checking in on the families of Czech political prisoners.<sup>109</sup> This detail never made it into any of Roth's novels.

The relationship between literary exchange and the rise of new human rights discourses at the end of the Cold War has been similarly overlooked. Several of the writers that were popularized through the Other Europe series also became prominent voices in late Cold War debates about the relationship between literature, geopolitics, and human rights. As mentioned, Kundera made his most forceful argument in the form of his essay "The Tragedy of Central Europe." In 1978, Danilo Kiš also launched an incisive and witty attack on the literary and political establishment of Yugoslavia in *The Anatomy Lesson* (*Čas anatomije*), which also happens to share a title with Roth's 1983 novel. And during the mid-80s, the effect of the Hungarian writer György Konrád was even more far-reaching. Along with Václav Havel, Konrád was responsible for articulating a new moral discourse of "antipolitics" that helped redefine the meaning of human rights during the late seventies and eighties.<sup>110</sup> During the seventies and eighties these discourses were

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<sup>109</sup> Pierpont, *Roth Unbound*, 87. In Roth's StB report, Sproul is also repeatedly referred to, mistakenly, as Roth's wife.

<sup>110</sup> See György Konrád, *Antipolitics: An Essay* (San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1984). For an influential and revisionary account of the history of human rights discourse that places Havel and Konrád's "antipolitics" at the heart of its argument, see Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2012), 120–175.

traveling on the same transnational routes that had been established through the circulation of literature across the Iron Curtain.

In his country report for PEN, Roth refers to Ludvík Vaculík as “a Czechoslovak Solzhenitsyn.” Although the two writers were very different—for example, in their aesthetic relationship to socialist realism—the case of Solzhenitsyn’s reputation in the West is suggestive. By the time that Solzhenitsyn was expelled as a dissident from the Soviet Union in 1974, he was already famous in the US in large part because his novel *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* had been a Book-of-the-Month Club selection more than a decade earlier, in 1962.<sup>111</sup> These material circulations mattered a great deal for the Western reception of Soviet bloc dissidents. But so did the particular literary forms that many dissident writers adopted. If a new discourse of human rights as a moral critique of geopolitical realism was ascendant at the end of the Cold War, then the counter-realist literary qualities of that discourse deserve far more attention. In his country report, Roth refers to the “qualities of ironic wit, common sense, humane feeling, and disarming intellectual penetration that are Vaculík’s distinguishing characteristics as a political spokesman and an imaginative writer—qualities he holds in such abundance that, to both enemies and friends, he has come to seem an immovable obstruction in the path of a regime that would appear to like nothing better than to commit cultural genocide upon its own people.”<sup>112</sup> Roth’s rhetoric is itself revealing. Those same qualities are also what attracted Roth to Czechoslovakia in the first place. Thanks to over four

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<sup>111</sup> Mark Philip Bradley, “American Vernaculars: The United States and the Global Human Rights Imagination,” *Diplomatic History* 38, no. 1 (2014): 16. Solzhenitsyn’s novel *The First Circle* was also a selection in 1968, and became a source of far greater controversy.

<sup>112</sup> “Country Report #1: Czechoslovakia.”

decades of literary exchange between the US and Czechoslovakia, a new transnational public was now paying attention.



## Conclusion.

### The Jazz Section

Philip Roth's novella *The Prague Orgy* travelled back to Czechoslovakia in two clandestine forms prior to 1989, thanks in large part to the efforts of Josef Škvorecký, who was now an émigré living in Toronto. In 1973, Škvorecký began a monthly radio broadcast that was beamed back into Czechoslovakia by Voice of America. Škvorecký recorded hundreds of broadcasts on VOA during the seventies and eighties, mostly about literary and cultural topics that otherwise went unreported in Czechoslovakia. One of these reports was dedicated to *The Prague Orgy*, which "gives an American writer's view of the literary situation in Czechoslovakia, extremely interesting for Czechoslovak listeners."<sup>1</sup> The second form of Roth's novella that made it back to Czechoslovakia was a Czech translation of the novel made by '68 Publishers, an émigré publishing house founded by Škvorecký and his wife, Zdena Salivarová, in 1971. The text of *Pražské orgie* was then smuggled back into Czechoslovakia and circulated in samizdat form in 1988.<sup>2</sup> The afterword to the Czech edition of Roth's novella was written by Igor Hájek, the author of the 1959 essay on the Beats titled "American Bohemia."

During the eighties, Škvorecký was once again at the heart of a network of literary circulation between the US and Czechoslovakia, but by the end of the Cold War the network had grown much more extensive. Decades of literary exchange had helped

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<sup>1</sup> Josef Škvorecký, "Philip Roth: Zuckerman Bound," Date Unknown, Box 7, Folder 7, Josef Škvorecký Papers, Fisher Library Collection, University of Toronto.

<sup>2</sup> Philip Roth, *Pražské orgie*, trans. Jiřina Kynclová and Karel Kyncl (Toronto: Sixty-Eight Publishers, 1988). The samizdat version was distributed through *Časopis SPUSA*, a publication associated with the "Friends of USA Society" (*Společnost přátel USA*).

establish new channels of communication across the Iron Curtain. In addition to human rights groups like Index on Censorship, Helsinki Watch, Charter 77, and the writer's organization PEN, a range of publications were drawing increasing global attention to the situation of writers and artists in East-Central Europe. Liberal publications like *The New York Review of Books*, *Harper's*, and *The New Republic* were joined by new university-based journals like *Cross Currents* and *Formations*.<sup>3</sup> Philip Roth saw these efforts as an extension of the work being undertaken by his Writers from the Other Europe series at Penguin and even participated in fundraising for *Formations*. In a 1985 letter to Allen Ginsberg, Roth recruited the poet to help fund the journal while a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts was still pending. Roth writes,

*Formations* came to my attention because it is the first literary magazine to have been founded, in part, in response to the growing American interest in Eastern European literature. While more and more books by Eastern European writers have begun to be translated and published in the U.S. during the last decade, *Formations* is the only magazine whose policy is to give over a substantial number of pages in each issue to the shorter works—essays, stories, diaries, criticism—of writers like Milan Kundera, Josef Skvorecky, Arnost Lustig, Witold Gombrowicz, Danilo Kis, and Gyorgy Konrad, all of whom have already appeared there or are scheduled for future issues.<sup>4</sup>

With the exception of Lustig and Škvorecký, all of these writers also appeared in the Other Europe series. In the letter to Ginsberg, Roth also quotes the Polish émigré critic Jan Kott, a *Formations* contributor who also wrote an introduction for one of the Other Europe books. Kott claimed that what set the magazine apart was its objective of “bringing together the literature of West and East.”

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<sup>3</sup> *Cross Currents* was published by the Slavic Languages and Literatures department at the University of Michigan beginning in 1982, while *Formations* was first published by the University of Wisconsin in 1984.

<sup>4</sup> Philip Roth, “Letter to Allen Ginsberg,” October 17, 1985, Series 1, Box 286, Folder 10, Allen Ginsberg Papers, M0733, Department of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, California.

Meanwhile, '68 Publishers was the most important hub in a network of Czech émigré publishing houses that connected Czech readers inside and outside of Czechoslovakia.<sup>5</sup> Škvorecký's wife, Salivarová, ran much of the editorial operations of '68 Publishers, but she was also a novelist herself. Her novel *Honzlová* was translated into English as *Summer in Prague* in 1973, and Škvorecký actually pitched the novel to Roth for his Other Europe series two years later. In a letter to Roth, Škvorecký points out that Salivarová had been a student of Milan Kundera at Prague's film school FAMU, and she had written her first collection of stories *Pánská jízda* (1968) as a kind of feminist response to Kundera's *Laughable Loves*, which had been one of the first volumes in the Other Europe series.<sup>6</sup> Roth ultimately declined the novel for his series. Škvorecký also contacted Roth in the mid-seventies to ask for help spreading the word to Czech writers about the establishment of their new press. (Roth's tourist visa hadn't yet been cancelled.) Škvorecký asked Roth to let their friends in Prague know that '68 Publishers "is always ready to publish any of their manuscripts under a pseudonym or under their own name, or pretending [*sic*] that it was myself who wrote it, in short, in disguise."<sup>7</sup> By the end of eighties, '68 Publishers had printed countless Czech-language books by prominent banned writers in Czechoslovakia. These books were then smuggled back into Czechoslovakia, where each copy was passed among a population of hungry readers.

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<sup>5</sup> In addition to the range of samizdat publications being produced inside Czechoslovakia, the other significant players in this transnational publishing circuit included The Palach Press in London, the Ivan Medek Press Service in Vienna, the magazine *Svedectvi* ("Testimony") based in Paris, *Listy* ("Leaves" or "Sheets") founded in Rome, the small publisher Rozmluvy ("Conversations") in London, and the larger publisher Index Verlag based in West Germany.

<sup>6</sup> Josef Škvorecký, "Letter to Philip Roth," July 20, 1975, Box 31, Folder 15, Philip Roth Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC. Subsequent references to the Philip Roth Papers will be abbreviated as PRP.

<sup>7</sup> Josef Škvorecký, "Letter to Philip Roth," February 22, 1974, Box 30, Folder 15, PRP.

While Salivarová oversaw the press, Škvorecký worked as a professor of American literature at the University of Toronto and continued to publish novels. In 1984, Škvorecký's most celebrated novel *The Engineer of Human Souls* was published in English and became the first translated book to win the Governor General's Award for Fiction in Canada.<sup>8</sup> The novel continues the adventures of Danny Smiřický, the protagonist of Škvorecký's debut novel *The Cowards*. Like Škvorecký, Danny has emigrated to Toronto after the Soviet-led invasion of 1968 and is teaching American literature at a Canadian university. Each section of the novel is arranged around a major English-language author from Škvorecký's personal canon: Poe, Hawthorne, Twain, Crane, Fitzgerald, Conrad, and Lovecraft. Even Allen Ginsberg makes a cameo in the novel, although he is referred to by only his first name. Škvorecký describes Ginsberg's 1965 visit to Prague in the novel, but in this fictionalized version Ginsberg's primary translator Jan Zábřana is erased entirely from the story. Danny claims, "I was the only one [Allen] knew in Prague. That was because I'd once translated *Howl* into Czech and a part of it had been published in the literary monthly *World Literature*."<sup>9</sup> Škvorecký also recounts Danny's visit to see Allen at his farm in "Pear Valley," which is a fictionalized version of Škvorecký's real-life reunion with Ginsberg in Cherry Valley, New York.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The original Czech-language version, titled *Pribeh inženýra lidských dusí*, was printed by '68 Publishers in 1977. The title, meanwhile, references the phrase repeated by Stalin to refer to writers and artists: "the engineers of human souls." The English edition also added a subtitle: "An Entertainment on the Old Themes of Life, Women, Fate, Dreams, The Working Class, Secret Agents, Love and Death."

<sup>9</sup> Josef Škvorecký, *The Engineer of Human Souls: An Entertainment on the Old Themes of Life, Women, Fate, Dreams, the Working Class, Secret Agents, Love, and Death*, trans. Paul Wilson (New York: Knopf, 1984), 289.

<sup>10</sup> Škvorecký mentions this visit in a 1996 letter, writing "if you are interested in that—but why should you?—read my novel *The Engineer of Human Souls*." See Josef Škvorecký,

Although Danny isn't exactly complimentary of Ginsberg in the novel, he is charmed by the farm in Pear Valley. Škvorecký writes, "the countryside of Upper New York State fell away into the distance in a series of theatrical stage flats just as it does in Central Bohemia."<sup>11</sup>

In the eighties, Škvorecký remained in contact with Ginsberg, enlisting him in a transnational network of writers and intellectuals who were protesting on behalf of a persecuted group in Czechoslovakia known as the Jazz Section. Officially named the *Jazzová sekce Svazu hudebníků ČSR* ("the Jazz Section of the Musician's Union of the Czech Socialist Republic"), the group was legally established in 1971 under the umbrella of the Czech Musician's Union, and initially the group's activities were not terribly controversial. For much of the seventies, the Jazz Section organized music festivals and other events for a community of jazz musicians and enthusiasts in Czechoslovakia. But after 1977, the activities of the Jazz Section expanded and grew more controversial. Under the leadership of their new "chairmen," Karel Srp, they began to embrace more avant-garde forms of jazz and rock music and also joined the International Jazz Federation, an affiliate of UNESCO, without asking for regime approval. In 1979, the Jazz Section also began to produce a range of publications, which were printed privately and then circulated among a growing membership. By the early eighties, the Jazz Section had several thousand members, but because its publications were distributed only to

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"Letter to Ms. Phillips," October 11, 1996, Box 62, Allen Ginsberg Correspondence, Josef Škvorecký Papers, Fisher Library Collection, University of Toronto.

<sup>11</sup> Škvorecký, *The Engineer of Human Souls*, 292. Danny reflects on "Allen" in the novel: "His inclinations were different from mine, and we had nothing of burning importance to say to each other. If I had ever had any ambition to be the friend of Whitman's heir, the desire had been crushed when I was interrogated by the secret police after his *Majales* trouble in 1965, and he was expelled from Czechoslovakia." See *Ibid.*, 460.

members, they existed largely outside of the state censorship apparatus. (Škvorecký estimates that these quasi-samizdat publications reached an audience of 100,000 readers, but it's unclear how he arrives at this figure.<sup>12</sup>) The most controversial of their publications was *Jazzpetit*, which moved well beyond the realm of jazz, publishing everything from theoretical texts on contemporary art, surrealism, and Dada to an anthology focused on the experimental Living Theater in New York City, which had performed in Prague in 1980. The Jazz Section even published a complete novel by the celebrated writer Bohumil Hrabal, which they printed in an edition of 5,000.<sup>13</sup> After years of legal battles, the Czechoslovak regime was finally able to disrupt the activities of the Jazz Section by bringing up their leaders on trumped up charges of tax evasion and embezzlement. The official legal status of the Jazz Section was revoked in 1984 and seven of its leaders were arrested two years later.<sup>14</sup>

Between 1984 and 1988, Škvorecký published a series of articles on the plight of the Jazz Section that appeared in publications including *The New Republic*, *Cross Currents*, and *The New York Review of Books*.<sup>15</sup> Writing in 1984, Škvorecký laments, “When, after thirteen years of existence, the Jazz Section was finally, for all practical

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<sup>12</sup> See Josef Škvorecký, “Hipness at Dusk,” *Cross Currents* 6 (1987): 54. As Peter Bugge and others point out, even if the figure is much lower, the semi-legal status of the Jazz Section allowed their publications to reach a much larger audience than either the musical underground or other samizdat presses.

<sup>13</sup> *Obsluhoval jsem anglického krále* was composed in the seventies and finally published by the Jazz Section in 1982. Paul Wilson’s English translation, titled *I Served the King of England*, was published in 1989.

<sup>14</sup> For an account of the rise of the Jazz Section and an examination of their evolving relationship with the Czechoslovak regime, see Peter Bugge, “Normalization and the Limits of the Law: The Case of the Czech Jazz Section,” *East European Politics & Societies* 22, no. 2 (May 1, 2008): 282–318.

<sup>15</sup> See Josef Škvorecký, “Hipness at Noon,” *New Republic* 191, no. 24 (December 17, 1984): 27–35; Josef Škvorecký, “Hipness at Dusk,” *Cross Currents* 6 (1987): 53–62; and Josef Škvorecký, “Jamming the Jazz Section,” *The New York Review of Books*, June 30, 1988.

purposes, forced out of existence, the event went unnoticed in the West. *Time* did publish a story, but ran it only in its European edition.”<sup>16</sup> In the essay, Škvorecký explains why the Jazz Section mattered so much to many Czechs. While the trial of the underground rock band Plastic People of the Universe and the subsequent formation of the Charter 77 movement presented some Czechs with a radical alternative to official culture in Czechoslovakia, the Jazz Section offered independent-minded Czechs an intermediate option—what Škvorecký refers to as the “gray zone.” According to Škvorecký, this gray zone “is merely the conspiracy of normal people who stand between the fanaticism of the orthodox and the cynicism of the pragmatic on the one side, and the abnormal moral courage of the dissidents on the other.”<sup>17</sup> In order to expand this gray zone, the Jazz Section worked within official legal structures, while also adopting increasingly clandestine methods as the Czechoslovak regime intensified its crackdown in the mid-eighties.<sup>18</sup>

Thanks in large part to Škvorecký, the arrests of Srp and six other leaders of the Jazz Section in 1986 gained widespread attention in the West. Months later, an article in

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<sup>16</sup> Škvorecký, “Hipness at Noon,” 27.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 28. Jonathan Bolton describes the Gray Zone as “the world of professionals and academics who worked in official structures but maintained their sympathy for dissent and cooperated with dissidents, usually anonymously, when possible.” During the mid-eighties, this sphere “became a more and more identifiable phenomenon and opened up possibilities for well-placed people who saw no need to sign the Charter [77] but also wanted to participate, for example, in drawing up its documents about the state of Czech society.” See Bolton, *Worlds of Dissent: Charter 77, The Plastic People of the Universe, and Czech Culture under Communism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 267.

<sup>18</sup> For a detailed account of the Jazz Section’s legal strategy, and its limits, in the context of normalized Czechoslovakia, see Bugge, “Normalization and the Limits of the Law.” Bugge uses the case of the Jazz Section to argue that the regime’s “references to ‘law and order’ had a central legitimizing function in the social discourse of the Husák regime, and that the resulting need to translate policies of repression into legal measures inhibited the authorities in their assertion of power and created an ambiguous window of opportunity for independent social activism.” See Bugge, 282.

*Cross Currents* announced, “Twenty-six leading American writers, artists and musicians joined to call on the Czechoslovak government to cease prosecution of the Executive Committee of the Jazz Section and to restore its legal existence.”<sup>19</sup> Referencing the Jazz Section’s status as an affiliate of UNESCO, the petition claimed that the actions of the Czechoslovak government “can only be viewed as a violation of Czechoslovakia’s commitments under international agreements, particularly the Helsinki accords.” The petition was signed by writers like Toni Morrison, Susan Sontag, and E. L. Doctorow, musicians like Dave Brubeck and Wynton Marsalis, and artists like Robert Rauschenberg.<sup>20</sup> A number of the writers who signed the petition had visited Czechoslovakia in person since the 1968, including Arthur Miller, William Styron, Edward Albee, Kurt Vonnegut, and John Updike. The petition stated, “We look forward to increased cultural exchanges with groups such as the Jazz Section as part of the cultural exchange agreement that was signed in 1986 by the United States and Czechoslovakia.” It was through these kinds of semi-official exchanges that writers like Styron, Vonnegut, and Updike had already been able to meet with the imperiled Jazz Section in Prague.

### **Updike in Czech**

John Updike actually visited Czechoslovakia twice. His first visit was in 1964 as part of an official, six-week State Department tour that also took him to the Soviet Union,

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<sup>19</sup> “American Artists Protest Arrest of Jazz Section,” *Cross Currents* 6 (1987): 65–66.

<sup>20</sup> The full list of signatories of this petition includes Edward Albee, Joan Baez, Dave Brubeck, Hortense Calisher, E. L. Doctorow, Gil Evans, Tommy Flanagan, Max Gordon, Nat Hentoff, Mel Lewis, Wynton Marsalis, Arthur Miller, Dan Morgenstein, Toni Morrison, Gerry Mulligan, Robert Rauschenberg, Sonny Rollins, Gunther Schuller, Susan Sontag, Frederick Starr, Rose Styron, William Styron, Billy Taylor, Cecil Taylor, John Updike, and Kurt Vonnegut.



Romania, and Bulgaria. One of Updike's literary alter egos, the character Henry Bech, was conceived during this cultural diplomacy trip. But Bech, a Jewish American writer who bears a passing resemblance to Philip Roth, does not make it to Czechoslovakia in Updike's first two published collections of Bech stories (although he does make it to other Soviet bloc countries that Updike visited in 1964). Instead, Updike fictionalizes his second visit to Czechoslovakia in 1985 through a short story titled "Bech in Czech" that was first published in *The New Yorker* two years later. According to Updike's biographer Adam Begley, two incidents from this story were taken directly from Updike's real experiences in Prague: "a visit to Kafka's grave and a book signing at the US Embassy."<sup>21</sup> Both these incidents can help us locate "Bech in Czech" in the wider history of literary exchange between the US and Czechoslovakia.

"Here he is, your pal," the fictionalized Ambassador announces as Bech stands in front of Kafka's grave in Prague.<sup>22</sup> In "Bech in Czech," the New Jewish Cemetery in Žižkov is the very first stop after the author's arrival in Prague. Updike writes, "Bech had seen photographs of this tombstone—a white stone, relatively modest in size, wider at the top than at the bottom...It all struck Bech as dumbfoundingly blunt and enigmatic, banal and moving." Kafka's grave was a site of pilgrimage for many of the American writers who travelled to Czechoslovakia during the Cold War. Both Ginsberg and Roth describe visits to the New Jewish Cemetery, where they laid pebbles at Kafka's grave. Although F. O. Matthiessen makes no mention of visiting Kafka's grave in *From the Heart of Europe*, he does observe, "In this city of Kafka, whatever direction you go, whenever you turn any wide corner, you find before you or behind you the Castle on its hill. It is no

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<sup>21</sup> Adam Begley, *Updike* (New York: Harper, 2014), 314.

<sup>22</sup> John Updike, *Bech at Bay: A Quasi-Novel* (New York: Knopf, 1998), 8.

wonder that such an image became so ingrained in him that, transformed by the obsessive force of his imagination, it grew into the dominant image of a whole novel.”<sup>23</sup> Similarly, Kafka’s tombstone is the dominant image of Updike’s story, which ends with a reference to the “inscrutable Kafkaesque authorities” of Czechoslovakia.<sup>24</sup> By the mid-eighties, though, such references had become a cliché. Perhaps that’s what Updike meant when he described Kafka’s tombstone as simultaneously being “blunt and enigmatic, banal and moving.”

The second episode in “Bech in Czech” that is adapted from Updike’s real visit to Czechoslovakia is perhaps more surprising. When the USIA organizes a book signing for Bech at the embassy, an “endless line” of enthusiastic Czech readers stretches down the block outside.<sup>25</sup> Bech discovers that many of his books have already appeared in popular Czech translations, as was also true for Updike. A great deal of Updike’s fiction had been translated into Czech by the mid-eighties, beginning with a few short stories published in *Světová literatura* in 1963. Many of these translations were done by Igor Hájek. In fact, when Warsaw Pact tanks invaded Czechoslovakia in 1968, Hájek was out of the country traveling on a grant awarded him by the Ford Foundation for his 1967 translation of Updike’s novel *The Centaur*. And when “Bech in Czech” was translated into Czech in

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<sup>23</sup> Writing in 1947, Matthiessen also notes, “It is a further irony in his whole strange career of isolation that he is now almost unread here by the new generation,” Matthiessen writes, “at the very moment when his command over the allegories of the inner life has given him such a vogue in England and America, has made him an influence upon nearly every younger writer determined to escape from the surfaces of current realism.” See F. O. Matthiessen, *From the Heart of Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1948), 119–120.

<sup>24</sup> Updike, *Bech at Bay*, 36.

<sup>25</sup> Updike writes, “His presence here had squeezed these tattered volumes—all out of print, since Communist editions are not replenished—up from the private libraries of Prague.” See *Ibid.*, 10-11.

1988 and published in a samizdat edition, the translator was again Hájek.<sup>26</sup> It also turns out that Updike wasn't exaggerating when he described the long line of Czechs who appeared for his book signing at the embassy. According to William Kiehl, who was a public affairs officer for the USIA in Prague during these years, "we have pictures, in fact, I remember a great shot of people lined the whole length of the street, five abreast, to come into that library to get an autograph by John Updike."<sup>27</sup> Czechs knew about these events largely because they were publicized on the popular VOA radio station in Prague.

Updike's host in Czechoslovakia was Ambassador William Luers. It was Luers who brought Updike to visit Kafka's grave as soon as he arrived in Prague. Updike first met Luers in 1964, when Luers was Updike's guide in the Soviet Union. In 1981, Updike visited Luers again when he was the US Ambassador in Caracas, Venezuela.<sup>28</sup> Once Luers was reassigned to Czechoslovakia, he invited a number of famous writers to Czechoslovakia as part of a USIA speaker series, including Updike, Albee, Styron, and Vonnegut. Albee had also been Luer's guest in Moscow during an official exchange in the sixties and had also visited Czechoslovakia during his tour of the Soviet bloc.<sup>29</sup> The playwright was best known in Czechoslovakia for the translation of his play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, which had been retitled in Czech as *Who's Afraid of Franz*

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<sup>26</sup> More than one Czech translation of "Bech in Czech" circulated in samizdat form in Czechoslovakia in 1988. Hájek's version, "Bech co Čech," was published in *150000 slov*, a samizdat journal put out by the émigré publishing organization *Index*. Another version, "Bech v Česku," translated by Saša Vondra, appeared in *Revolver Revue*. See Marcel Arbeit, *Bibliografie Americké Literatury v českých Překladech* (Brno: Votobia, 2000), 1623–1625.

<sup>27</sup> See interview with William Kiehl in "Country Reader: Czechoslovakia," Oral History, Country Reader Series (Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training), 221.

<sup>28</sup> Begley, *Updike*, 263, 313–314.

<sup>29</sup> For brief references to both of Albee's trips to Czechoslovakia, see Mel Gussow, *Edward Albee: A Singular Journey* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999), 205, 332.

*Kafka?*<sup>30</sup> Updike, Vonnegut, and Bill and Rose Styron all arrived in Prague just as the Czechoslovak regime was putting increased pressure on the Jazz Section. These writers were then put in touch with the Jazz Section by officials at the American embassy. According to Kiehl, who was a USIA officer in Prague at the time, “We brought people in and we held clandestine lectures with [the Jazz Section], where we would tell people to meet at a certain place and we’d bring a lecturer in to talk about popular culture, generally, of the Western variety.”<sup>31</sup> On these visits, Updike, Vonnegut, and the Styrons all visited the Prague headquarters of the Jazz Section. Each visitor planted a symbolic “peace” tree in the small courtyard outside of the headquarters of the Jazz Section.

What was the significance of these tree plantings? Škvorecký’s essay on the Jazz Section in *Cross Currents* from 1987 provides some useful context.<sup>32</sup> In the courtyard outside their headquarters, the Jazz Section had set up a stone monument with the inscription: “In commemoration of the 40th Anniversary of the End of the Second World War and of the Founding of the United Nations Organization by the Jazz Section.”<sup>33</sup> It is likely that both the monument and the peace trees were part of a larger legal and political strategy tied to the Jazz Section’s membership in UNESCO. The trees are later mentioned in an op-ed that Vonnegut wrote in *The New York Times* in 1986, which drew US attention to the trial of the recently arrested leaders of the Jazz Section. In the op-ed,

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<sup>30</sup> The Czech title of Albee’s play *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is *Kdopak by se Kafky bál?* The translation was completed in 1964 by Rudolf Pellar a Luba Pellarová, who also translated Roth and Updike during these years.

<sup>31</sup> “Country Reader: Czechoslovakia,” 218.

<sup>32</sup> The *Cross Currents* essay is titled “Hipness at Dusk,” while Škvorecký’s 1984 essay in *New Republic* had been titled “Hipness at Noon,” likely a reference to Arthur Koestler’s *Darkness at Noon* (1940). After three years, Škvorecký was suggesting, “noon” had turned into “dusk.”

<sup>33</sup> Škvorecký, “Hipness at Dusk,” 55.

which was also reprinted in *Cross Currents*, Vonnegut writes, “I met some of [the leaders of the Jazz Section] and other members of their extended family a couple of years ago, and so did John Updike a few months later.”<sup>34</sup> Vonnegut continues,

Messrs Srp, Skalník, Kouřil, Křivánek, Huňák and the two Drdas are rooted like saplings in a tiny nation whose people, despite their small numbers, have created a major fraction of the Earth’s most important architecture, sculpture, painting, music, poetry, theater, imaginative prose and most recently, as emigres, motion pictures. If a flying saucer person were to ask me what Earthlings considered their most habitable city, architecturally speaking, I would reply without hesitation, “Come with me to Prague.”<sup>35</sup>

In the end, Srp and Kouřil were both sentenced to prison terms, but their sentences were less severe than many had feared. The prosecutor had sought three to four years for Srp, but in the end he spent eighteen (very difficult) months in prison before being released in 1988.<sup>36</sup>

Some credit this “leniency” to a combination of pressure from the West and the onset of Glasnost in the Soviet Union.<sup>37</sup> According to Škvorecký, Western attention to the Jazz Section trial had other unintended consequences. In the Czechoslovak regime’s attempt to keep up appearances in the West during the trial, they relaxed most restrictions on jazz culture in Czechoslovakia and even promoted the musical form by establishing new jazz-themed organizations. Škvorecký refers to this development as a paradoxical victory for the Jazz Section: “just when people in the West feared that jazz was being banned in Czechoslovakia, the country was enjoying an orgy of regional jazz festivals—

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<sup>34</sup> Kurt Vonnegut, “Can’t Prague Leave Even Jazz Alone?,” *Cross Currents* 6 (1987): 63. The short essay first appeared as an op-ed in *The New York Times* on December 14, 1986.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>36</sup> According to Škvorecký, at one point Srp was punished severely for writing a letter to President Husák: “He spent twenty days in solitary confinement, forced to stand in a cell whose floor was covered in excrement.” See Škvorecký, “Jamming the Jazz Section.”

<sup>37</sup> Bugge, “Normalization and the Limits of the Law,” 293.

twenty in Bohemia and Moravia alone, an all-time record.”<sup>38</sup> Even though the Jazz Section’s original purpose had been to encourage the growth of jazz in Czechoslovakia, by the late eighties their mission was more ambitious. Once out of prison, Srp founded two new organizations—Artforum and Unijazz—that continued the Jazz Section’s work of fostering an independent culture in Czechoslovakia.

Updike doesn’t mention the Jazz Section in “Bech in Czech,” but his character Bech does attend a gathering of unofficial writers and artists who conspicuously listen to jazz and pass around lovingly produced samizdat texts.<sup>39</sup> Updike was clearly charmed by these literary objects. As Bech turns over a samizdat book in his hands, Updike describes how he is “returned to some archetypal sense of what a book was: it was an elemental sheaf, bound together by love and daring, to be passed with excitement from hand to hand.” Updike understood that these texts connected this community to a much wider transnational public. In the story he writes, “There was, beyond this little party flickering like a candle in the dark suburbs of Prague, a vast dim world of exile, Czechs in Paris or London or the New World who had left yet somehow now and then returned, to visit a grandmother or to make a motion picture, and émigré presses whose products circulated underground.”<sup>40</sup> From ’68 Publishers in Toronto to the Jazz Section in Prague, both Vonnegut and Updike were now connected to a larger network of literary exchange and political activism across Cold War boundaries.

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<sup>38</sup> Škvorecký, “Jamming the Jazz Section.”

<sup>39</sup> See Updike, *Bech at Bay*, 16.

<sup>40</sup> Updike writes, “the Russians could not quite seal off this old heart of Europe as tightly as they could, say, Latvia or Kazakhstan.” See *Ibid.*, 13.

Beyond Updike's biographical connection to the Jazz Section or his visit to Kafka's grave, "Bech in Czech" offers a fitting coda to this dissertation for other reasons. By the end of his trip, Bech is exhausted by his constant conversations with Czech students "about Whitman and Melville," names that evoke F. O. Matthiessen's visit to Czechoslovakia forty years earlier.<sup>41</sup> For Matthiessen and many of the American writers who visited subsequently visited Prague, part of the attraction to Czechoslovakia was the weight of the young country's history during the twentieth century. But ultimately, the "historical fullness of Prague" catches up with Updike's protagonist. After Bech gives a final talk at the US embassy (ironically titled "American Optimism as Evinced in the Works of Melville, Bierce, and Nathanael West"), he is approached by a "blond dissident, with plump lips and round cheeks." The dissident explains to Bech, "Václav sends the regrets he could not come here your excellent talk. He must be giving at this same hour an interview, to very sympathetic West German newspaperman."<sup>42</sup> This is almost certainly a reference to the dissident playwright Václav Havel, who was released from prison in 1983, thanks in large part to international pressure.

Despite Havel's release, Bech seems to have lost his "American optimism" by the time he is preparing to leave Prague. Throughout his visit, Bech has worried that the moon always seemed to remain hidden behind Prague Castle. But on his final night in Prague, Bech looks up to see that "the moon was out, drenching in silver." The moon above Prague appears to Bech "like the back of a mirror."<sup>43</sup> Many of the fictions

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 24–25.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 31, 35.

discussed in this dissertation function this way, providing a perverse reflection of the lived experience of writers who travelled across the Iron Curtain.

### **City Lights at the Lucerna Palace**

Where does the history of literary exchange between the US and Czechoslovakia end? One possible endpoint is the political ascendancy of many of the Czech writers and intellectuals who participated in Cold War literary exchange, beginning with the election of Václav Havel as the first president of Czechoslovakia after the Velvet Revolution. Havel was not alone in his rise. Rita Klímová (née Budínová), who Philip Roth met in Prague and worked as an anonymous translator, became Havel's first Ambassador to the US in 1990. Lesser-known figures also embarked on political careers after the changeover. Josef Jařab, an important scholar and translator of the Beats and African American literature, served as an influential senator beginning in the nineties. The playwright and Charter 77 activist Jaroslav Kořán, who was Vonnegut's chief translator in Czechoslovakia and had also written about the Living Theater for the Jazz Section, was elected Mayor of Prague in 1990. That same year Kořán invited Allen Ginsberg back to Prague for the first time since 1965.

Ginsberg returned to Prague in 1990 in order to attend the Majáles festival, which was being held for the first time since the sixties. Fittingly, Ginsberg wrote a poem for the occasion entitled "The Return of the Kral Majales," which he read in front of a large crowd:

So King of May I return through Heaven flying to reclaim my  
paper crown  
And I am King of May with high blood pressure, diabetes, gout,  
Bell's palsy, kidneystones & calm eyeglasses



And wear the foolish crown of no ignorance no wisdom  
Anymore no fear no hope in capitalist striped tie &  
Communist dungarees<sup>44</sup>

As these line suggests, Ginsberg was perhaps less idealistic upon his return to Prague than he had been during his first visit. Ginsberg left the romanticization to others. In 2010, Louis Armand edited a poetry anthology that took its title from Ginsberg's poem. In Armand's introduction to *The Return of Král Majáles: Prague's International Literary Renaissance, 1990-2010*, Armand writes, "Ginsberg's return...signified for many the inauguration of a new cultural moment."<sup>45</sup> Armand cites the many journalists who referred to Prague during this period as the "Left Bank of the Nineties."<sup>46</sup> But even though many aspiring writers from the US did move to Prague in the nineties, only a handful of novels were produced by this new expatriate generation.<sup>47</sup> Meanwhile, Czech novelists and poets continued to produce provocative and innovative work after the Velvet Revolution, but the prestige of these writers both inside Czechoslovakia and in the West was not the same as it had been during the late communist period.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Allen Ginsberg, *Collected Poems, 1947-1997* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 982.

<sup>45</sup> Louis Armand, ed., *The Return of Král Majáles: Prague's International Literary Renaissance 1990-2010: An Anthology* (Praha: Litteraria Pragensia Books, 2010), 12–13.

<sup>46</sup> In particular, Armand quotes the expatriate journalist Alan Levy, whose editorial in *The Prague Post* from October 1, 1991, was widely quoted in the Western media and in travel guides.

<sup>47</sup> Caleb Crane's novel *Necessary Errors* (2013) is the most recent entry in this small subgenre. Before its publication, the most successful expat novel from associated with Prague was Gary Shteyngart's *The Russian Debutante's Handbook* (2002). Arthur Phillips' expatriate novel *Prague* (2002) was largely set in Budapest. Meanwhile, Jonathan Safran-Foer's *Everything is Illuminated* (2005), which takes place in present-day Ukraine, appears to largely have been conceived in Prague. According to Josh Lambert, "When the nineteen-year-old Foer traveled to Ukraine in 1996 in search of the town where his grandfather was born, he found 'nothing' and then retreated to an apartment in Prague, where he drafted the imaginative novel." For Lambert's discussion of Foer, see Lambert, "Since 2000," in *The Cambridge History of Jewish American Literature*, ed. Hana Wirth-Nesher (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 625.

<sup>48</sup> See Andrew Wachtel's account of this development in Wachtel, *Remaining Relevant after Communism: The Role of the Writer in Eastern Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago

Back in the US, an aging generation of writers and intellectuals were taking stock of what it had all meant. In April of 1992, Rutgers University hosted a high-profile conference on the theme of “Intellectuals and Social Change in Central and Eastern Europe.” The entire proceedings were published in *Partisan Review* later that fall.<sup>49</sup> Participants included many famous writers and intellectuals from across the US, East-Central Europe, and beyond, including Susan Sontag, György Konrád, Norman Manea, Adam Michnik, Doris Lessing, and Ivan Klíma. The first panel alone included Saul Bellow, Czesław Miłosz, Ralph Ellison, and Joseph Brodsky. Bellow’s remarks in particular capture a certain post-Cold War ennui that was spreading among an older generation of literary intellectuals. Bellow describes his experience reading the published volume of letters between Havel and his wife Olga from his multiyear stay in prison. In one letter from 1982, Bellow read something that “stopped me in my tracks.” Havel reports to Olga, “I came across a good book: *Herzog*, by Saul Bellow.”<sup>50</sup>

From his Czechoslovak prison cell, Havel describes *Herzog* to Olga as being “about the crisis of intellectuality in conditions of complete intellectual freedom.” Havel observes that Moses Herzog can read and think and write whatever he likes without fear of punishment, “but his thoughts are constantly in a whirl until at last it drives him batty.” Reading *Herzog* leads Havel to meditate on the relationship between literature and life: “Words that are not backed up by life lose their weight, which means that words can be

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Press, 2006). As the series editor of “Writers from an Unbound Europe” at Northwestern University Press, which has published outstanding contemporary literature from East-Central Europe since 1991, Wachtel would know.

<sup>49</sup> “Intellectuals and Social Change in Central and Eastern Europe,” *Partisan Review* 59, no. 4 (Fall 1992).

<sup>50</sup> Václav Havel, *Letters to Olga: June 1979-September 1982* (New York: Knopf, 1988), 306.

silenced in two ways: either you ascribe such weight to them that no one dares utter them aloud, or you take away any weight they might have, and they turn into air.”<sup>51</sup> Speaking to the Rutgers conference in 1992, Bellow takes all of this quite literally, interpreting Havel’s reflections according to the recent experience of the Cold War. He provides the following summary of Havel’s letter:

[Havel] spoke of the difference between words spoken or written in the East as compared with the West. In the East, you were arrested and imprisoned for voicing your opinions, while in the West, you could make as many revolutionary statements as you pleased, and no one would give a damn or pay the slightest attention to you. In the East, it was a dictatorship and its jails, its *gulags* that waited for you if you spoke the truth as you saw it. In the West, what you said simply didn’t. There were no penalties, and therefore, there was no seriousness. Your freedom, therefore, was something of a joke.<sup>52</sup>

This paraphrase reveals more about Bellow’s own cultural anxieties at this historical moment than it does about Havel’s reading of *Herzog*. (Bellow’s paraphrase is also essentially a repetition of Philip Roth’s earlier comparison between literary culture in Czechoslovakia versus the US: “There nothing goes and everything matters; here everything goes and nothing matters.”<sup>53</sup>) Bellow worried that “as the Stalinist world collapses, the problems of the West become the problems of the East.” But maybe the line between East and West had never been so easy to draw.

So, we have two potential endpoints: Ginsberg reclaiming his paper crown, or Havel reading *Herzog* in prison. One is triumphalist, the other is pessimistic, but both involve a significant degree of romanticization. Both also play on the age-old theme of

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 306–307.

<sup>52</sup> “Intellectuals and Social Change in Central and Eastern Europe,” 533.

<sup>53</sup> This statement was made in conversation with Ivan Klíma in 1990. See Philip Roth, *Shop Talk: A Writer and His Colleagues and Their Work* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001), 53. Roth was rephrasing a previous observation made in a 1984 interview. See Philip Roth, interview with Hermione Lee, “Philip Roth, The Art of Fiction No. 84,” *Paris Review*, Fall 1984.

the literary intellectual's relationship to power. But a third option might better capture the “sheer playfulness and deadly seriousness” that characterizes much of the countercultural literature that circulated between the US and Czechoslovakia during the Cold War.<sup>54</sup>

In 1998, the still-existing Jazz Section organized a series of events in Prague, which they called the Beat Generation Fest. In the main arcade of the famous Lucerna Palace, an art-nouveau complex built by Havel's grandfather, the Jazz Section set up an exhibition called “On the (Beat) Road.” The Lucerna was a fitting location: the main concert hall had hosted the first International Jazz Festival in Czechoslovakia in 1964, and Louis Armstrong recorded a live album in the same space a year later. As part of the exhibition, Karel Srp prepared a special catalogue “mapping only a few days in the year 1965” when Ginsberg had been elected as *Král majáles*, or King of May, in Prague. The catalogue made many of the secret police files associated with Ginsberg's subsequent expulsion public for the first time. As leader of the Jazz Section during the eighties, Srp had his own extensive contact with the secret police.<sup>55</sup> Srp closes his preface to the catalogue by writing, “*Vydali jsme jej proto, aby se nám hůř zapomínalo.*”<sup>56</sup> Translated into English, his closing line reads, “We released the catalogue so that we would be worse at forgetting.”

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<sup>54</sup> I borrow this phrase from Philip Roth. See Roth, *Reading Myself and Others* (New York: Vintage, 2001), 96.

<sup>55</sup> Srp and other members of the Jazz Section's inner circle were later discovered to be registered as collaborators by the StB. It's possible that Srp was attempting to shield the Jazz Section through his interactions with the StB, but the issue remains controversial. For a recent discussion of Srp's possible collaboration, see Peter Bugge, “Normalization and the Limits of the Law,” 294–295. Bugge cites research conducted by Karel Tomek in “Akce JAZZ,” *Securitas Imperii* 10 (2003).

<sup>56</sup> Karel Srp, “Katalog k výstavě On the (Beat) Road - Beat Generation Fest” (Vydalo Artforum - Jazzová sekce, 1998). This document was provided to the author by Srp.

The guest of honor at the Beat Generation Festival was the poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti, who travelled all the way from San Francisco to visit the capital of Bohemia and take part in the festivities. Ferlinghetti had been a hero to a small subculture of readers inside Czechoslovakia ever since Jan Zábřana's translation of *A Coney Island of the Mind* appeared in *Světová literatura* in 1960. The translation of Ferlinghetti's famous title has a beautiful ring to it in Czech: *Lunapark mysli*. Thirty-eight years later, to mark the occasion of Ferlinghetti's visit to Prague, Srp and the Jazz Section constructed a model replica of City Lights, Ferlinghetti's bookstore in North Beach, but scaled down to fit inside the Great Hall of the Lucerna Palace.

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