

And Yet Another Exile: The Contemporary Czech Novel

Elena Deem

"Leave me alone and fuck off" (Jiri Nohavica, 1985)

"This will be ugly" (Jáchym Topol, 1992)

It may seem out of place and perhaps not too inviting to begin an essay on contemporary Czech novel with these two lines of lyrics and verse respectively. However, the motives they express represent an underlying theme that connects Czech literary production of the communist past with that of the capitalist present. Both lines come from works written shortly before and after the so called "velvet revolution," and represent what epitomizes the generation of artistic dissent of the nineteen seventies and eighties: a tendency to record the trauma and simultaneously a strong desire to escape it. In his analysis of Jáchym Topol's poems from that period the critic Jiri Holy identifies the underlying problem and attitude that produces this double bind: "The outside world seems to Topol totally unacceptable. It is devoid of any value. It is sickening. The lyrical hero of the poems sees himself as an outcast, full of despair." The "despair" of the hero also seems to suggest that the generation tended to skeptically admit that an escape was hardly possible, now and in the future. This strategy of confrontation and evasion was reinforced by the modi of existence of Czech literary dissent, which was forced into metaphoric and literal hiding: at "home" into its clandestine, samizdat form, and into exile abroad.

It would be too easy to establish a theoretical breach between pre-and post-revolutionary literary production and to maintain that Czech authors, now free to publish and speak at home, have forsworn this double bind of bitter engagement and skeptical removal from the world in order to embrace the frivolity and playfulness of postmodern styles. The argument that by losing themselves in the "postmodern funhouse" these authors have mitigated, or entirely eliminated the exile narrative of the past, ultimately does not hold up to scrutiny, for one can see that at least in some instances, the desire for the possibility of an escape still underwrites the contemporary Czech novel. While the latter's form may have changed, it is the authors' particular sensitivity, cultivated by years of living in adverse conditions, that has not been altered. It is irrelevant in this context, whether this experience has been lived directly or whether it has been inherited through the medium itself. It is a specific feature of Czech fiction to both refer to the world and to exile it, perhaps by providing an alternative, while at the same time repeatedly pointing to the fact that such an exile is imaginary and impossible to achieve. The sensitivity of the authors is now tuned to the conditions of the developing Czech capitalist state, which produces seemingly new but in fact oh-so-well-known traumas, such as shady politics, the destruction of nature and of human relationships. In the end, the strategy of exile that encompasses the constant oscillation between confrontation and escape (which does not necessarily mean getting at something better), is still the winning theme of the day. The forms of this "exile" are orchestrated by parallel metaphors that recur in contemporary fiction, such as dystopias, utopias, the placement of plots in foreign countries, the employment of magical realism, and reveries about the past. In other words, the Czech authors have made themselves at home in a mighty metaphoric exile in their fiction. And so the tradition of Czech immigration continues, only that now it has mutated to another formal and metaphysical level for the older and middle generation of writers. The youngest ones leave the country both metaphorically and physically.

Jáchym Topol (*1962) is a good example of a transitional figure whose experiences as an underground artist of the dissent entail numerous encounters with the fist of the ruling party and a variety of "escape" attempts, including experimentations with drugs and alcohol. And so he truly represents the younger generation of the seventies and eighties, publishing and writing into the new

millennium. Before the revolution, the unofficial cultural scene was underwritten by this trait of being an "escape artist," one who desires the exile, yet usually stays, one who does not fear confrontation, but longs at the same time to be left alone ("leave me alone and fuck off"). To this day, Topol has not been fooled either by the prospects of the (glorious) present, nor by the possibility to ever escape it. Yet, this impossible exile is all that matters, now as then. And so, as Jáchym Topol concedes in a poem from 1992, "this will be ugly."

Reading Topol's fiction is by no means an easy feat. Within seconds, one becomes submerged under the glassdome of a paranoid nightmare that does not stop with the last page. Although this fiction dates from after the revolution, the claustrophobic notion of total constriction has the taste of the barbed-wire fences that once lined Czechoslovakia's border. Topol is never explicitly political, yet merciless in his pursuit of the wisdom, attained from the corrupt police regime, that there is no rest for the wicked, while the innocent always get the worst. Again and again, innocence is beaten into a pulp, and Topol continually repeats the "police-baton event" with a multitude of metaphors transposed onto human relationships. With remorseless drive, Topol is painting the glass walls of the human condition blood red. His fiction reaches beyond life delineated by the pre-and post-communist conditions in the Czech republic, into an apocalyptic portrayal of human existence. Things go from bad to worse in his novels, in which Topol forges an image of a black hole, ever-inviting and ever-awaiting, a magical place of ultimate evil that magnetically attracts and swallows all the innocent. We all know the escape, and so the amphetamine ride towards exile ends up back where it begun, over and over again, only that each time the blood-shot darkness deepens. Sometimes, under especially lucky conditions, the final exit is attained, but the conditions are tentative and uncertain. This search for the exit is often correlated with the hero's search for innocence, love and life, as represented by the lost woman in *Sister*, lovingly nicknamed the "little white bitch," or a girl figure in *Angel* (1995) and *Night Works* (2001).

Sestra, Sister (1996), Topol's major novel, mostly takes place in Prague, shortly before, but mainly after the revolution, and it maps out the constantly shifting grounds of the new social and economic order. Potok, the hero of the novel, is originally (and tellingly) an actor turned businessman after the revolution, but the world of "business" develops in the new democracy rather in accordance to the semi-legal, mobster-like Eastern European standards. This seedy and increasingly cynical world of deceit, violence and corruption is often linked to the highest government circles and ultimately collides with the group of which Potok is a part. While this group, this tribe of kinsmen, willingly plays into the system, it becomes violently undone because of its scruples and almost utopian ideas that underwrite the group's "business" activities. This violence carries over into Potok's relationships with women, and disallows him to build a lasting relationship. At the beginning, Potok's life is one under police oppression but of innocence, represented by his relationship with his love, whom he affectionately (but without a trace of sentiment) calls the Little White Bitch. When she is lost, shortly before the revolution, Potok realizes that a part of himself, and of the honesty and innocence of the times of dissent, is perhaps forever lost. The woman becomes his "sister," but also a pagan goddess and a madonna for which he spends the rest of the novel searching, finding and losing her again. The new times after the "grand explosion of time" are supposed to bring the desired exit from the oppressive regime, a new time-space continuum.

That dream, however, quickly turns into a nightmare in which Potok must now undertake his search, takes him on a fictional trip under the surface of cities (Prague and Berlin), human relations, and individual and collective consciousness. Prague becomes a nightmarish distopia, a place of dark visions and dangerous underground life of different "tribes." Topol ingenuously forges a new generation of Europeans--nomadic and semi-legal tribes consisting of Czechs, immigrant Ukrainians, Russians, Vietnamese, Laotians, Germans, and others, all mixing together and flowing from one place to next. Topol coins the neologism "kanacky" for this phenomenon of eternal exiles who have

populated Europe. He thus puts his finger on this new aspect of a Europe with its heart in Prague, which has turned into a place of exile and constant flux. The tribal theme becomes reinforced with archetypal figures from the mythology of the collective human subconscious. Potok and his own tribe perform a series of rituals to ward off various potential dangers. Some rituals are more helpful than others, such as narrating individual dreams to the tribal members in order to purify their own selves. Topol here constructs a breathtaking and at the same time almost unbearably raw vision in which he undertakes an unsentimental reckoning with the past--both bolshevik and nazi. For example, when Potok relates his personal dream of an Auschwitz "visit," he vents a nightmare that to this day effectively haunts the collective Czech subconscious. This exposure is immensely scary but at the same time healing because Topol has the guts to attach this nightmare to the post-war period, and hence to Potok's own generation. However, this Jungian reality of underground tribal co-habitation, with its increasingly violent feats and dark hallucinogenic visions, is ultimately all-consuming, as it permeates Potok's life. It thus makes it impossible for Potok to leave the underground (because there is nothing but the underground), find his first love, and develop a meaningful relationship with the world and with his own self. This involuntary ride into the nightmare of that underlies human existence is a ride into the apocalyptic night, a vision ironically prompted by that which ought to bring relief and escape, signaled by the new era after the "time explosion." Each attempt to escape this nightmare (voluntary or by force, as Potok, after his tribe is violently disbanded, is both moving and being moved from Prague to "the east" and back, and from everyday reality to the hallucinogenic "breaks" in his apartment) ends in a deeper despair. Some critics suggest that there is a ray of hope at the end of the novel, when Potok gets together with the "sister" of the Little White Bitch, called Black. However, this hope is ambiguous, as suggested by the very name of the woman.

Topol's style is fascinating in its versatility and inventiveness. In his novels form always respects content. His latest novel *Night Works* for example has a more linear story line, lived and narrated by a child, and so Topol writes short sentences that make clear statements. In *Sister*, however, where reveries, visions, dream states and hallucinations disturb the linearity of the plot, Topol creates elastic sentences that are able to streamline the flux of the hero's perceptions and experiences into a seamless narrative. The elongated narrative without punctuation recalls that of Hrabal, and the author renders the story as though sitting next to the reader. Consequently, the written form attains an aspect of oral storytelling. The effect is considered an intrinsic trait of Czech fiction, dating back to the Czech Romantic writer Mácha: it facilitates intimacy between author, text and reader. This intimacy (Topol maintains that Czech writers talk to the reader as though over a beer) enables the reader to profoundly empathize with the events and the character's plight. At the same time, the reader accepts the formal experimentation in the prose as almost a part of his own language. And this is strange, for Topol forges a series of initially incomprehensible neologisms in which he cross-breeds the mobster, capitalist and profoundly Eastern realities with the Slavic tribal mythology. This absurd combination becomes in no time a more than familiar ground, and orchestrates the plunge under the surface, into the dismal tribal exile of contemporary Prague.

Almost on the opposite side of the novelistic spectrum, informed by a theme of hope and escape are the novels of Miloš Urban (*1967). Topol's strategy of exile is "no exile" -- his hero has to stagger through apocalyptic scenarios toward a tenuous ray of hope. Urban counters this tendency by steering the plots of his novels toward utopias at the end, specifically in *Waterman* (2001) and *The Area of Seven Churches* (1999). Where Topol goes tribal and brutally unsentimental, Urban goes medieval and profoundly nostalgic.

This nostalgic exit into the times before the industrial revolution characterizes his novel *Waterman*, subtitled the "Green Novel." In the novel's first part, Urban re-creates the early nineteenth-century life in a region of northwest Bohemia, which is now completely devastated by mining and other industries. In vivid colors, he portrays the pagan customs of the villagers and their inherent connection to the

motions of nature, as well as the strength of the natural elements of the countryside. A sacred mountain provides the first treacles of the local river, which the caring hands of numerous generations have turned into natural ponds and canals, and ancient rituals take place under the Slavic variations of dolmens and sacred trees. This connection to nature is represented by the village's young woman, Katynka, who performs the semi-secret ceremonies (under the nose of the young local priest). But this is also the time of Enlightenment ideals and the beginnings of the industrial revolution. Thus the waterman, an animal turned learned nobleman, is on the one hand in tune with the nature, but becomes corrupt on the other, because of his vast knowledge of science and philosophy. In the end, he gives in to the greedy caretaker of his old mill, and allows it to be equipped with stone cut from the sacred mountain. This initial blasphemy, this first sin, does not go unpunished. It will take no less than several murders and the eventual self-sacrifice of the waterman in order to repair the disaster of the industrial invasion the countryside consequently suffers. And Urban maintains that it is indeed possible to make things right. However, it is not the murders that eventually perform the change, but a non-violent persistence and self-sacrifice. In the second part of the novel, the waterman and the girl awaken from a sort of hibernation, into the present. The countryside is devastated, the village lies under water because of a huge dam, and the mountain is being mined for stone. The waterman at first tries to appeal to various functionaries, from the director of the company to the minister of "ecology" who approved the mining. Each time, he gets sent to a higher level of bureaucracy with the excuse that orders are merely being fulfilled. After seeing through the scheme of corruption and greed, the waterman kills each of the participants. This killing, however, would not stop the insatiable capitalist machine, as all of those people are replaceable. Only the growing movement of ecology-minded young people, the Rainbow Children, who stage a non-violent standoff with the government and force it to stop the mining and give the region away to the group can ultimately be successful. This movement, in which Katynka takes a leading role, restores the mountain and the village, after the waterman willingly dies on the mountain and the ensuing wave of water takes the dam away. A pre-industrial community of hardworking folks is established, and so life and nature may return to their state before the Waterman's first industrial "sin."

The reader might perhaps rightfully ask what on earth is going on in this rather clumsily written novel. Urban, unlike Topol, is not a born writer, and especially the novel's second part often comes across as almost tasteless in a style that reflects the perhaps too idealistic or naïve content, but he is a nitpicking historian and a careful researcher. And so his rendering of nineteenth-century life, customs and natural beauties is fascinating and provides a good juxtaposition to the dismal present. Moreover, one may ask what is wrong with good old idealism (a question Urban himself asks in the novel) and why it should be constantly rejected in favor of a tasteless postmodern house of mirrors. Urban is intelligent enough to smell the rat on both ends, however. While he creates this miraculously perfect eco-utopia in *Waterman* as a form of exile from the ruthless, industrializing capitalist present, his other novel, *The Area of Seven Churches*, is darker and less explicitly utopian. The series of bizarre murders that take place in contemporary Prague are eventually justified by a small group's plight to re-create a medieval haven in a particularly significant, historical part of Prague. After the feat is accomplished, cars are banned, and the whole medieval spiel unravels. However, this reality is so overstated and bizarre that it serves more as an ironic statement about the impossibility to create this (or any) kind of exile from the industrial free-market systems. Regardless, Urban's nostalgia for the past, his desire to escape into it, and his moralizing tendencies--in the vein of the medieval "exempla"--add interesting features to post-revolutionary Czech literature, where Urban negotiates the distinctions between right and wrong, and the possibilities of utopian exiles.

Magical realism as another possible form of exile from reality had never been truly explored in Czech literature, which generally preferred surrealist paths. Never that is, until Jiri Kratochvil (*1940), a brilliant, Brno-born writer finally began publishing and writing after the revolution. Literary critics and the author himself call his playful style postmodern. Yet, these days one might ask what that label

actually means and how this cozy umbrella, under which one can easily sweep every cotemporary eclectic and collage-like literary production, can possibly account for the brilliance of the author's inventions. In his oeuvre, Kratochvíl simply takes off. He truly employs all kinds and levels of novel-writing and stretches the genre to its maximum potential--he blends various narrative styles and points of view, makes intertextual references, mixes pop culture with philosophical treatises and historical research. And yes, his works are open in the sense of Ecco's definition. But three aspects of his writing stand out. They make Kratochvíl distinctly his own, and perhaps less generally "postmodern": his passion for good storytelling, the way he forges intimacy with the reader, and his employment of the bizarre and the magical. Like Topol, Kratochvíl creates an intimacy with the reader, for example in his best and tightest novel, *An Immortal Story*. Even though Kratochvíl tends to freely change points of view, the predominating narrator, Sona, directly addresses the reader as "my darlings," "my dear little pigeons," and by even more bizarre, but intensely familiarizing expressions. Moreover, the expanded sentence structures, especially when the character renders her experiences or perceptions, take on a form of breathless oral narrative full of wonder. And so the reader falls under the magic spell of a text that is intensely narrated as though for his own ears. Like Topol, or even more so, Kratochvíl thus employs this imitation of intimate oral narrative, this typically Czech aspect of literary writing, and instantly turns the text into a platform where the reader can meet the author. This intimacy is as far as can be from the typical distancing of a postmodern text. Secondly, Kratochvíl fully exploits what can only be termed his "Lust zum Fabulieren." One can tell that Kratochvíl's premise of a damn good plotline permeates the novels to the bone. No matter how he pastes together the bizarre, the supernatural, the historical, the intertextual and so on into these streams of narrative, Kratochvíl does not budge from orchestrating ultimate entertainment, with a sophisticated and at the same time clearly discernible story line.

The supernatural and magical is emblematic of Kratochvíl's fiction, such as the novels *An Immortal Story* (1997) and *Lady Carneval* (2004). In these novels, Kratochvíl creates a plot that is unrealistic and where the supernatural constantly intervenes. Simultaneously, it is supplied with concrete historical and contemporary details (both novels take place in Brno). *An Immortal Story* is a stream of narrative, a collage of a plot line with bizarre content, which spans one hundred years of Brno life, starting in the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. A little girl, Soňa, born in Brno in 1900, is kidnapped by bearded men in blimps. While she is hypnotized (significantly by Charcot rather than Freud), they deposit into her a "message" from the last millennium's best minds, intended for the generations of the next one. As a result, she achieves a lifespan long enough to enable her to pass the message on to the next lucky girl. At the same time, from before her birth she is instinctively committed to her future partner, Hugo. He, however, dies before their "human" relationship can be fulfilled, and so a series of amorous encounters ensues, in which Hugo re-appears in various animal reincarnations. All this develops against the backdrop of the last century, as the story unfolds over the South Moravian region of today's Czech republic, in the heart of Europe: the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, the briefly democratic Czechoslovakia, the nazi occupation, the communist desolation, and the capitalist who knows what; the story "never-ends" here. Each brief era has its bizarre situation in addition to Soňa's encounters with the next animal variation of Hugo. For example, a family trip to the monarchic Vienna turns out to be paralleled and blended with Soňa's own paper model of the city, behind the facades of which are empty boxes and cockroaches; or Soňa's WWII mission proves to consist of caring for a lost group of Soviet paratroopers turned wolves in a park in the middle of Brno. Kratochvíl sets up the story by forging this unorthodoxly typical central-European genetic pool for his heroine: her father is a son of a Ukrainian orthodox priest, while her mother comes from a typically mixed Czech/German family; a catholic with protestant demeanor. As a consequence, Russian, German and Czech are spoken in the family; and Soňa becomes in a sense a "bastard" with no specifically pronounced national or religious identity by which she could define herself. Her strange episodes with the reincarnated animal forms of her lover Hugo, the implanted message, and her longevity, moreover, turn her rather into an out-of-the ordinary being, making her a freak.

One can begin to understand what Kratochvíl does here with his magical realism: Soňa's story is a form of exile for the author; but it is far from concretely defined and more tuned in to the Rimbaudean "I is another." A singular chapter towards the end of the novel interrupts the flow of the narrative. In it, the author himself takes over and begins to reminisce about his childhood, spent in his imagination with the semi-mythological creatures of his ancestors' religions rather than with other kids, and about his family roots paralleled by Soňa's own ancestry. And so this animal epic with moments of reincarnation, this fantastic, bizarre and grotesque story of a multicultural Brno woman in the end aligns with what Kratochvíl maintains about himself, that "now I know that I am not only a cross-bred between Czechs, Germans and Ukrainians, but also between those and wolves, cheetahs, chimpanzees and bastardized mythological beings, and so I will always side with bastards and outcasts, with those whom your world will never find acceptable." His pity and empathy with the outcasts is one that comes from his own predicament, and simultaneously goes back in literature to Romanticism (the impossibility for the hero to be understood by the world) and the French Symbolist poets. In his fiction, Kratochvíl creates a world for these "creatures" to exist and thrive; an exile. The employment of magical realism as well as the open endings to his novels suggest that this exile is indeed fictional and does not provide any solution or relief; but that it simply exists, as long as does the text.

And so Kratochvíl joins the ranks of contemporary Czech authors whose oeuvres still seek for a somewhere else. It is this intrinsic Czech trait that becomes so underemphasized these days especially, this lack of national feelings that is perceived as shameful by some (hence Vaclav Klaus' attempts to appeal to the masses through nationalistic, anti-European Union slogans), this desire to escape, this foresight so ingrained into the perceptive artists, not to believe the promises of the bright future (no matter what the regime), this shameless passion to go beyond the denomination by nation and regime and to address the predicament of the human condition. The youngest generation of writers, then, take this exile literally. In fact, a quote by Jáchym Topol from the magazine *Hospodarske noviny* is illuminating enough to summarize what is happening: "Literature of the catacombs has long ago washed over the shopping counters. Only a few authors are left now. Mostly those we used to smuggle into the country. After fifteen years, a new generation of writers is stepping in. It is only these authors who will be able to look back and laugh at those incredible times when poetics was politics. It may not be a coincidence that Czech debutantes see history as a coffin and often send their manuscripts to the Czech republic from abroad. Like for example Tomáš Kolský, whose *Rutie and the Colors of the World* takes place in Israel. Petra Hulová (1979) who found the theme for her novel in Mongolia (*Memories for my Grandmother*, V.S.), Katerina Rudcenková, who wrote her book *Nights* while on grants in Germany and Austria and thought nothing of it. Milena Oda, she writes directly in German. Magdaléna Platzová, who stuck her love story to India. It seems like young talents are exiling the Czech Republic." There is nothing to add, except that the exile has once again become real. And Šimon Šafránek (1977), who lives between Prague and Berlin, and wrote his first collection of short stories in English, makes his generational addendum in his latest novel *23* (2004). Here the hero, a techno sound-system traveller through Europe without a permanent home, this new kind of avant-garde nomad, sums up the contemporary experience of the youngest generation without borders: "In the end, everyone is alone; desperately lonely and desperately lost."

Further Reading:

- Kratochvíl, Jirí: *An Immortal Story* [Nesmrtelný příběh]. Brno: Atlantis 1997.
- Kratochvíl, Jirí: *Lady Carneval* [Lady Carneval]. Brno: Petrov 2004.
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