

Spring 2005

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Czech Fiction?

Kafka and History in Czech Literature

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Dr. Petr Bilek, Advisor

Spring 2005

Czech Republic: Arts and Social Change

Drs. Eva Valenta and Luke Bouvier, Academic Directors

For a long time thereafter I would hear the crunch of human skeletons whenever my hydraulic press entered its final phase and crushed the beautiful books with a force of twenty atmospheres, I would hear the crunch of human skeletons and feel I was grinding up the skulls and bones of press-crushed classics, the part of the Talmud that says: "For we are like olives: only when we are crushed do we yield what is best in us."

--Too Loud a Solitude

When in the history books
one day you read our story:
about a land that flourished,
of hail and floods in spring,
maybe you'll catch the sound
of drum-rolls funerary
and from our epoch's depth
will cruel laughter ring.

--Jaroslav Seifert

Foreword

On a personal note, this has been the most engaging and interesting academic work I have completed in some time. I have gained a thorough appreciation for Czech literature, both for its artistic merits and for its authors, who often risked so much to write and publish it. Joseph Škvorecký, in particular, has my admiration as both my favorite Czech author and as the founder of 68 Publishers. Kafka's The Trial was everything I had hoped for and more after reading *The Metamorphosis* in high school in America; his brilliance is undeniable, and his texts demand serious engagement by the reader through interpretation. I believe all of us sees, even if it is small, some piece of our own fear about the world in Joseph K.'s fears. Kundera was, as ever, difficult to deal with, given his colorful character and the wide range of opinions on him here in his native country. I hope that what I have written about him here does him neither service nor disservice, and I will leave it at that. Hrabal was a joy to read, particularly I Served the King of England. Ditie, while quite frustrating, does deserve credit for his candor with the reader, and it's this tell-all, no-holds-barred approach to narration that makes him such an interesting character. Švejk, for all the criticisms of Hašek's lifestyle and artistic merit, or lack thereof, is one laugh after another. Havel's work, while not as popular as I might have thought, is still quite valuable and intelligent, I believe, and has ramifications even in a post-Communist world regarding the use of language by regimes. As for the "post-Communist world," let us hope it remains that way forever in the Czech Republic.

Thanks to everyone who assisted me in my research. In particular, my interview with Jan Pospíšil was invaluable. Thanks to Eva Valenta for forcing Škvorecký on me when I already felt like I had enough to read. Most of all, I am deeply in the debt of Dr. Petr Bilek from Charles University, without whom I would have been quite lost. He put me in touch with all the right people, and the kindness he showed me was eclipsed only by his expertise on Czech literature.

Abstract

Much of Czech literature of the twentieth century leans heavily on the political and historical context of a given time period. This is not true of Franz Kafka, but his work is nonetheless reflective of many elements of Czech history after the turn of the century. This paper explores the role that Kafka's The Trial and Czech political and social history plays in the formation of works of fiction and drama, and concludes that Czech authors Hašek, Hrabal, and Havel all deal explicitly with political and historical themes, and draw from Kafka, while the authors Škvorecký and Kundera are also forced to reconcile with history despite the fact that the historical and political themes in their novels are secondary to the interests of the fiction. The first group of authors is linked by their use of absurdity; the second group does not utilize absurdity, but rather a more straightforward narrative approach. The paper also examines Czech history as relevant to the settings of the novels in an attempt to show that authors had no choice but to deal with their historical and political situation because of the totalitarian nature of the political (and often military) forces occupying the Czech lands. It is argued here that Czech fiction is inextricably linked to its historical context and that the authors' reconstruction of this context plays an important role in the development of the fictional worlds and characters.

Czech Fiction? Kafka and History in Czech Literature

“Twentieth century Czech literature.” It is a frightening phrase given immense diversity of styles, subject matters, and tones found in the works of twentieth century Czech authors. But no less diversity can be expected in literature and other art of the time given the several strikingly different—and in some ways, eerily similar—historical situations of the Czech lands over the last hundred years. The history of the Czech people is long, complex, and fraught with influence or outright domination of the Czech lands by other European cultures and nation-states. The three most recent and most pervasive alien rulers of the Czech lands were the Austro-Hungarian monarchy until the end of World War I; the Nazi regime during World War II; and the Communist regime, which was a product of both Stalin’s design and willing collaboration from many within Czechoslovakia itself. The only periods of true Czech statehood were the First Republic, from 1918-1938, and to a lesser extent the brief period from the end of World War II in 1945 until the Communist government takeover in 1948.

In an attempt to better understand this history, and literature’s role in the context of the sweeping social changes that occurred in the Czech lands during the twentieth century, I spent several weeks enjoying a sampling of twentieth century Czech literature. Franz Kafka’s The Trial. Jaroslav Hašek’s The Good Soldier Svejk and His Fortunes in the War. Josef Škvorecky’s The Cowards. Bohumil Hrabal’s I Served the King of England and Too Loud a Solitude. Milan Kundera’s The Joke and The Unbearable Lightness of Being. Václav Havel’s *Audience*, *Unveiling*, and *Protest*. What do all of these literary works have in common, besides the country of origin of their authors? Little if not nothing, according to some members of Czech academia.

“Hašek...is based on typical Czech sense of humour, while Kafka is a philosopher, a serious and strict thinker” (Lukavská). Hašek’s Švejk brings us humor through absurdity,

while the demise of Joseph K. in The Trial is an existentialist tragedy. And while Joseph K. is a classic “character without qualities,” Škvorecky’s partly autobiographical Danny Smiricky is anything but. Hrabal’s Dítie is a bit of a womanizer, like Danny, and also like Danny he fails to see the larger view of what is going on around him—but the similarities end there. Kundera’s work is considered by many to be in a category of its own, and is difficult to understand completely, much like its author. Havel’s “Vaněk plays,” utilize satire and the absurdity of language to make direct political statements. And so, it seems, the very essence of each of these works makes them so different from one another that no more than two texts or authors can be realistically compared at any time.

Or can they?

I set out intending to examine each of the novels’ and author’s treatments of their time periods. I wanted to examine Kafka’s fear and feelings of alienation in the modern world, and the idea of the character without qualities, and how the legacy of Kafka and the empty character are embodied in later Czech literature. But Škvorecky’s Danny is not without what I will call inborn qualities. Nor are Kundera’s Ludvik, Tomas, or Tereza. Hrabal’s Dítie and Hant’a are also more rounded than Joseph K, though they share his lack of qualities to some extent. I posit that there have been no subsequent “characters without qualities,” who are truly as vacant as Joseph K. in the Czech literature of later periods. In particular, I believe that the political situation of the Czech lands was so fundamentally altered by the extreme and penetrating effect on daily life by totalitarian regimes that to conceive of a man without qualities would be nearly impossible. To have no qualities under the Nazi or Communist regimes seems an impossibility because of their totalitarian nature—such a regime necessarily assigns a person certain qualities. For or against the regime, for instance. A Nazi collaborator or a member of the resistance movement. A working class citizen or a bourgeois capitalist pig. To be without qualities, like Joseph K., became impossible with the dawn of these

regimes. That said, the protagonists of Hrabal, Hašek, and Havel are, like Joseph K., defined in the few qualities they do have primarily by their interaction with specific social structures.

It was only after question and debate with several literary scholars that I came to understand some of the questions that lay at the root of my inquiry into Kafka and the disappearance of the true character without qualities from Czech literature. Can Czech literature, in fact, be considered within its historical context? I believe it is inevitable. Even Kundera, who has publicly pled for his novels not to be read as political works, cannot deny that direct reference to sociopolitical figures, locations, and events situates otherwise fictitious worlds and characters in real history, in our own world. The connections are impossible to ignore. But how does the author's combination of the real and fictional worlds reflect on the time period portrayed? Is judgment passed? Are ideologies espoused? Or are ideas like Communism, Nazism, May 9, informing, Sokol, Prague, jazz, black insignias, courts, and the Brigade of Socialist Labor merely grounded points of reference on which the real story, the more important world of the novel or play, is built? Does history anchor fiction, or is fiction built high and dazzling on history's solid but buried foundation? And is there a common answer to all of these questions for each of these authors?

The answer to the last question is probably no—but there are still many similarities to be seen. It seems clear that the legacy of the AustroHungarian empire, Nazi Germany and the Communist regime combined formed a unique, and terrible, history of domination of the Czech people in the twentieth century, and tragically, the twentieth century was not unlike the preceding four centuries in this respect. Czech authors, like all other Czech people, were forced to deal with these regimes one way or another because of their pervasiveness in daily life. Despite what I have been told by some experts in Czech literature, I believe that each of the novels I read is inextricably linked to its historical context. While I understand the desire

to preserve texts as *art pour l'art*, each of these writers and their works were undoubtedly impacted by the political machinations surrounding them, and so their work was forced to cope with or address the political situation of their time literarily.

Kafka, Hašek, Hrabal, and Havel, despite their vast differences in style, tone, and language, are linked by their use of various forms of absurdity. Kafka's treatment of time and space, Švejk's incorrigibility, Hrabal's slightly crazy protagonists, and Havel's language are all an absurdity of one kind or another. Further, despite the fact that only Kafka has a true "character without qualities," as a protagonist, Hašek, Hrabal, and Havel all feature protagonists whose characteristics are derived substantially from their interaction with the world around them—like Joseph K. However, unlike Joseph K.'s unsituated reality, the fictitious worlds built by Hašek, Hrabal, and Havel are often filled with explicit political references specific to the Czech lands and their history.

Škvorecky and Kundera, on the other hand, are not absurdist, and do much less to directly address or reference their historical context the way the others do—but their works are only slightly less bound to their political time and place because of it. The protagonists of Škvorecky and Kundera have more inborn qualities than Joseph K., Švejk, Ditie, Hant'a, or Vaněk, and are more full, rounded, and perhaps universal characters. But despite this, Tomas, Tereza, Ludvik, and Danny Smiricky are also revealed to the reader through some interaction with expressly political elements of a particular period of Czech history. For the authors—Kundera and Škvorecky, at least—those elements seem to take a back seat to the fiction, and the characters are built more on inborn qualities. This is, of course, an oversimplified analysis, and may leave literature scholars dissatisfied to that end; however, given that I am bringing my own foreign viewpoint to bear on Czech culture and Czech literature, I believe I have the perspective to make a reasonable case.

* * *

Since the door leading into the Law stands open as usual and the door-keeper stands to one side, the man bends down to peer through the entrance. When the door-keeper sees that, he laughs and says: 'If you are so strongly tempted, try to get in without my permission. But note that I am powerful. And I am only the lowest door-keeper' (Kafka 235).

Franz Kafka's The Trial is perhaps the most difficult novel, in some ways, to include in this paper, for the simple fact that Kafka wrote in German, and because the setting of the novel itself is not situated in reality of our actual world. Joseph K.'s boarding house, the bank, the cathedral, the attic court offices—they are all in one city, but what that one city is, and what the year is, is not clear. Also problematic in interpreting the novel in a historical context, is the fact that what the final version of the novel was supposed to be is unclear. Kafka gave the manuscript—unfinished, as the novel remains—to his friend Max Brod in 1920, who had to put some of the chapters in the order he thought they went in (Brod in Kafka, 255). So it is difficult to draw conclusions not just about the relation of the novel to specifically Czech history, but also the reality of the novel itself, and its relation to a particular period of that history.

Although I am attempting to look at Czech history through literature, the fact that the novel is not situated in a historical time and place is not as important an omission as it might seem. Kafka is a Prague Jew, and though he may be considered internationally as a German author because his books were written in that language, he also spoke Czech and his father was of Czech origin (Pospíšil). That the city which is the basis for the setting of The Trial is unknown is actually irrelevant. What is most important about The Trial is Kafka's penetrating gaze into the frightening realities of the modern world, and to feelings of alienation, detachment and powerlessness in the face of it. To that end, despite their cultural and linguistic differences, the cities and nations of Eastern and Central Europe, which had

been subjugated by the Austro-Hungarian empire, are comparable in some ways because of it. All of this is irrelevant to Kafka, though, who did not care for historical background or situation (Drtina). Kafka is more accurately described as a proto-existentialist, as he explores issues of human existence, in particular feelings of alienation and paranoia in the age of modernity (Soukup).

What Joseph K. loses control of, ultimately, is his identity. In one sense, the novel charts an identity crisis from beginning to end. This crisis begins in the first sentence of the novel: “Someone must have been telling lies about Joseph K., for without having done anything wrong, he was arrested on fine morning” (Kafka 7). The scene follows with the entrance of two warders who detain Joseph K. in his room, and tell him—despite their “express orders,”—that he has been charged with something, that “proceedings have been instituted” against him (9). From the very beginning, there is a lack of certainty about Joseph K.’s situation. This opening scene, by the presence of the warders as representatives of a larger, more ominous and unknown bureaucracy, also begins to shed light on the root of the identity crisis, namely, the tension between individual and collective identity (Bilek). This tension is a problem important to Kafka’s time, to the era of modernization and nationalization at the turn into the twentieth century.

In 1918, the Austro-Hungarian monarchy’s domination of the Czech lands ended with the defeat of the Axis powers in World War I. That year saw the founding of the First Republic, with which T.G. Masaryk is most commonly associated, among others. The First Republic represented the first period of sovereign statehood for the Czech lands since before the Hapsburg monarchy began in 1526. For Slovakia, it was the first period of sovereign statehood ever (Bilek). Masaryk and Edvard Beneš tried to gain support among the Allied powers for the idea of an independent Czechoslovak state, yet the Allies for a time still

thought that preserving the Austro-Hungarian monarchy could sufficiently balance the power of Germany in the region. But the Bolshevik revolution in Russia in 1917 belied the weakness and instability of the ancient European monarchies, and made the idea of independent nation-states more attractive to the Allies, mainly because such independent states seemed “the best barrier against the threat of Bolshevism” (Čornej 41). When Masaryk’s national committee took power, they left the old monarchical bureaucracy in place, including civil law, and merely assumed administration of the existing structures (42). The post-war period was one of great instability though, and despite the formation of the Czechoslovak Republic, Germans in border areas of Czech lands were intent on their own political self-determination, and founded provinces which they declared to be part of the German or Austrian empire (42).

When the Czechs sent military forces to occupy these regions, local residents clashed with them on March 4, 1919, the day Austrian parliament went into session, and the fighting resulted in over fifty people being killed, further straining Czech-German relations (42). This could only have increased feelings of alienation and detachment for someone like Kafka, a Jew living in the Czech lands who spoke and wrote in German. The next year, during the Prague riots of November 1919, Czech patriots turned their ire against German symbols in Prague, such as The Estates Theatre, and also against the Jewish Town Hall and Jewish ghetto of Josefov, which were put under the protection of the American embassy (Sayer 115). Kafka wrote at the time to his lover, Milena Jesenska, “I have been spending every afternoon outside on the streets, bathing in anti-Semitic hate...Isn’t it natural to leave a place where one is so hated?” (115). Here again, Kafka’s fiction can be connected back to historical events, this time because of his biography. He lived with the stifling bureaucracy of the Austro-Hungarian empire even after the empire had lost the war. Czech sovereignty and self-realization did not make for immediate stability in the life of the Czech people. Kafka also

suffered for his collective identity, as a Jew and as someone who wrote and spoke in German. Clearly, some of Kafka's own struggles and own identity came from forces without as well as within.

A similar struggle with identity and self-determination is what makes Herr K. a "character without qualities." He is an empty character, per se, without any inborn qualities. As seen from the first sentence of the novel, Kafka wastes no time in propelling us into the action of the story. There is no background laid, no obvious biography of K. Everything we know about Joseph K. we know from his interactions with other people and institutions, right from the beginning. Perhaps the one hint of any kind of quality he may have possessed before the story begins can be found in the presumption of innocence in the first sentence, but that is all. He is most easily identified with his institutional position, as Assessor at a bank, where his colleagues are referred to by positions only: Manager, Deputy Manager, Clerks. The same can be said of those involved in the trial: warders, the Inspector, the Whipper, the high Judges, the Examining Magistrate, the Clerk of Inquiries, the Law-Court Attendant. Even many of those outside these two explicitly hierarchical structures are referred to only by their institutional positions: the Advocate, the traveler, K.'s Uncle, the Captain, Titorelli the Painter. This highlights again the tension between the notion of individual versus collective identity, in this case on an institutional, and not a national, level. There are precious few characters ever referred to by their names, the most notable being Leni, Fraulein Burstner, and Frau Grubach.

That the women are treated as names and not merely positions may be more than coincidence, given that Kafka is thought to have had mostly unhappy love affairs during his life, and never took a wife. His relationship with Leni, and his lack of a relationship with Fraulein Burstner, are a great source of frustration for Joseph K. in the novel. He longs for an

intelligible, rational world. The world of women and men is not that. Nor is the court. He is used to the Bank, to being called “Herr Assessor,” and to giving orders, not to having his life ruled by a mysterious proceeding which no one will inform him about. Joseph K. expects the rest of the world to be like the bank, and it is not (Bilek). The unfamiliarity of the new world of the court is uncomfortable for K. particularly because that world is not like the bank, and the situation is further complicated by his selfishness and egotism. Overly self-assured, he cannot fathom a reason that the Fraulein refuses to see him after their kiss, or that the proceedings of the court would be so difficult to find and understand. He is unable to see outside of himself, and this is ultimately his downfall.

What K. fails to realize throughout the novel, perhaps because of his self-centeredness, is that his job and his lifestyle were never threatened by the warders or the trial. Only his image was threatened. The warders barely guarded him. The trial and the law court offices seemed to pay him almost no attention. In fact, most of his interaction with the court he seeks out after the initial arrest. He is so concerned with maintaining his image that his attempts to do so consume him. In the second half of the novel, he loses his self-confidence and his self-esteem. The first real turning point, and the first hint at his ultimate demise, comes in the middle of the novel, when he is working late at night in the Bank and goes to investigate strange noises, only to find the warders being whipped on his account. Seeing the whipping, understanding the physical pain involved for others and perhaps later for himself, Joseph K. loses his rationality. It begins to be pervaded by raw emotion. K. is not used to such feelings, to their spontaneity, to their power. He can no longer organize his world, categorize things and events neatly, or push his work off on some clerk. He slips into a steeper downward spiral after the whipping, and that he ultimately fails at the struggle for self-determination of his identity is demonstrated by the fact that he becomes vacant and reliant on others, such as

the traveler Block, his Uncle, and the Advocate (Bilek). Reliance on others, beyond the old woman who brings him his breakfast, is not a quality the “old,” Joseph K. possessed.

He not only fails to save his image, but in doing so loses his self identity. Like Gregor Samsa in *The Metamorphosis*, he accepts his situation right from the beginning. He doesn't reject the trial, but instead seeks to persevere in the face of it, the way Samsa resigns himself to living the rest of his life as a giant bug. This is where Kafka might be considered a proto-absurdist (Soukup). The opening scene with the arrest, for instance, is one of many passages that boggles the mind of the contemporary reader in Western civil society. Joseph K. is arrested, but without knowing what for, and by men wearing simply black. His acceptance of things beyond his control is not indicative of a cool head prevailing. It is absurd, and foreshadows the move from self-assurance and egotism to feeling of complete impotence when K. finally discovers that things seem irreconcilably beyond his control. A similar theme of impotence is seen in much of Kafka's work, and even in his personal diaries. At the beginning of the first World War, Kafka's diary entry read simply that the war had started that day, and that he had gone swimming (Pospíšil).

K.'s unwitting acceptance of the words of complete strangers, his willingness to play by the rules of the court, when the court seems to the reader far from being real or official and said rules are nowhere to be found—this is all quite absurd. But because the small absurdities are only questioned in passing, and K. accepts the answers readily—i.e. the Inspector's rebuke of his questioning the warders' lack of uniforms. This makes the larger absurdities—such as K.'s murder-suicide at the end of the novel—seem reasonable. The symbolic conclusion to be drawn is that Joseph K.'s frustrations with bureaucracy, his decision to sit and wait at the door instead of trying just once to get past the gate keeper, and his inability to control even his own image and identity—two things which in fact may be one and the same for K.—ultimately

kills him. After the case Kafka makes for increased feelings of alienation and detachment in the face of the modern world, it isn't difficult to accept the symbolic as literal.

* * *

I do not know whether I shall succeed in achieving my purpose with this book. The fact that I have already heard one man swear at another and say "You're about as big an idiot as Švejk" does not prove that I have. But if the word "Švejk" becomes a new choice specimen in the already florid garland of abuse I must be content with this enrichment of the Czech language (Hašek 232).

Jaroslav Hašek's attitude as reflected in the epilogue to the first of three volumes of The Good Soldier Švejk and His Fortunes in the War seems a very Švejk-like comment, downplaying the importance of his own literary and cultural contributions as perhaps nothing more than a small addition to the treasure trove of vulgarities to be found in the Czech language. But the importance of Hašek and his idiot savant protagonist reaches well beyond the fact that Švejk's name became synonymous with first-rate idiocy. Indeed, Švejk became a figure not just of international literary significance, but of great import to the Czech people, some of whom loved Švejk and to this day see him as an embodiment of Czech passive resistance, and to others who continue to abhor and revile Švejk and his author for their low-brow humor and gross misrepresentation of the Czech people.

Hašek seems to have succeeded in creating a novel and protagonist which are quite diametrically opposed to Kafka's The Trial. Kafka is symbolic, serious, and cerebral; all of his work is thought to require interpretation, and represents a major field of scholarly study. Švejk, on the other hand, requires little or no interpretation, and is clear at the first reading, according to Karel Kosik, who compared Hašek and Kafka in a famous essay, saying "these two Prague authors...described two human types that at first glance seem far apart and contradictory, but which in reality complement each other" (Steiner 26). Kosik's point

seems quite right. Joseph K. is interested only in preserving his image; Švejk is not, or, perhaps, is interested in cultivating a decidedly less respectable image, that of a “patent idiot.” Whereas Joseph K. is unable to cope with the changes in his surroundings and the new uncertainties in his life and spirals slowly towards his own death, Švejk welcomes each new situation, however dangerous, and always manages somehow to prevail. Joseph K. is “Herr K.,” socially upstanding and respectable before the trial begins, and a proper gentleman. Švejk—and many characters in the novel—use less proper language, and he shirks responsibility for his actions, managing to attribute whatever wrongs he has done to his idiocy. He is largely successful in doing so in part because of the cherubic countenance he casts on those who find him at fault.

The differences between Joseph K. and Švejk can also be attributed to the equally divergent biographies of each author. Whereas Kafka had an important job at the Workman’s Accident Insurance Institution, Hašek was a true “bohemian,” in the now common sense of the word (Janouch 11). Hašek had “the tastes and habits of a hobo or beatnik,” and the “main occupations in his life [were] writing and vagrancy,” according to biographer Cecil Parrot (Parrot in Hašek xi). He could not manage to hold down a steady job, since he often up and left for weeks or months at a time. He decided to attempt to make his living as a writer, but also had other favorite activities, such as “tearing down proclamations of martial law, damaging emblems of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, breaking windows of government offices and joyfully helping to set fire to the yard of a Prague German” (xii). He pretended to commit suicide by jumping off the Charles Bridge at the same place where the Czech Saint John of Nepomuk was thrown into the Vltava River, and was subsequently arrested and taken to a mental institution, where he gathered material for certain portions of the novel. He moved politically from being an anarchist to a member of the Austro-Hungarian imperial army to a member of the Czech legion in Russia, and then

defected to the Red Army and became a member of the Communist party (xiv). While many of the characters in the novel are named after actual officers Hašek met in his time in the 91st battalion—the same battalion as Švejk—his protagonist’s name, Josef Švejk, seems to have been taken from a parliamentary deputy of the time (xvi). In short, Hašek’s writing is full of real people, places, and events, and he like Švejk does not hesitate to mock them all, whereas Kafka’s Joseph K. shrinks in horror at the world closing in around him.

But Joseph K. and Švejk are not so opposite as they might seem. Joseph K. is without qualities. He has no needs or pressing desires, and is not bound to any moral or ethical code. Švejk is also to a large extent without any qualities, save his idiocy, which is probably disingenuous, and the fact that he talks a lot. In fact, it is through his constant anecdotes that we know a slight bit about his past. These same anecdotes are the real basis of Švejk’s idiocy or lack thereof. He must be an idiot for driveling on all the time and telling long, seemingly pointless stories whose truth is debatable at best. At the same time, that he is able to recollect or invent so many stories seems a key to the real nature of his idiocy—it is a *willing* idiocy. Švejk acts the way he does to avoid the war. While he may not be the picture of passive resistance many Czechs take him for, he certainly manages to attain a sort of anti-hero status. His willing compliance only mocks the military bureaucracy which is so unfortunate as to have to deal with him. Even in jail, Švejk is incorrigible, and manages to maintain the freedom he enjoys when marching about “lost” for days in search of the 91st battalion and his beloved Lieutenant Lukaš.

One of Hašek’s main criticisms of the Austro-Hungarian regime seems to be that there is no praxis within the monarchy’s bureaucracy, no customary practice of the way things are done by the various officials. Hašek’s construction of the monarchy’s beauracracy and infrastructure serves to satarize it, and as with most of Švejk he uses absurdity to drive home

his point. Take Švejk's attempts to reenlist in the army for the war. Despite his obvious mental deficiencies, or those he so convincingly portrays, he has genuine rheumatism, which is easily verifiable. But instead they label Švejk a maligner, and he goes to the garrison gaol. All of this comes after he has already spent time in jail for "high treason," and his subsequent arrest by the secret police officer at The Chalice. How much more smoothly things would go if the police and military shared information, and the military understood that Švejk was not a maligner, but, in fact, a genuine idiot, at least according to the medical board.

But of course, Švejk's action is key for all of this—and when they call him a maligner, he willingly goes along to gaol, never bothering to stop and mention that he had been certified an idiot by both the medical board during his arrest and by the very same army a few years earlier. I believe that Švejk *acts* like an idiot, though I do not think it is clear, like many readers seem to, that Švejk is “the incarnation of the passive resistance of the Czech people and a symbol of healthy good sense opposed to the universal madness of the times” (Novak 289). Švejk seems in fact more of an opportunist, and his vocal political statements are really more akin to sarcasm, part of his act of patent idiocy. This idiocy is, in fact, an act of malignment, and for Švejk a means to a cushier end. It remains clear throughout that Švejk is quite clever when he needs to be, for instance when it comes to helping the chaplain sell the couch and piano. The fact that Švejk, appearing to be a genuine idiot, manages to both survive his time in jail, befriend the chaplain and make it to the very cushy job of batman—indeed, that he survives as long as he does—is unreal, and is possible only in fiction. This is, again, Hašek utilizing absurdity, and in doing so he implies that the military beauracracy is as inept as Švejk himself acts. It is the officers of the Austrian army, police, and medical personnel who turn out to look like real fools in the novel.

In essence, Švejk takes the opposite tack of Joseph K.: instead of being confused and lost in the uncertainties of Europe in the 1910s, Švejk plows blindly ahead into the confusion of the world around him. He welcomes the alienation and detachment; for him, they are a means of escape. In essence, The Trial and The Good Soldier Švejk represent two distinct methods of survival in the face of instability and the explosive possibilities of Europe at the time (Pospíšil). In The Trial, the alienation and confusion are largely self-generated by Joseph K.'s fatal combination of egotism and acceptance of an absurd situation; Švejk, on the other hand, doesn't accept the rules from the very beginning—and for more reasons than his supposed idiocy.

* * *

Another “beer soaked idiot,” (as his boss calls him) who is anything but is Hant’a, the drunken protagonist of Bohumil Hrabal’s Too Loud a Solitude. This is one of the texts which, I believe, is more readily accepted as being somewhat overtly political. Škvorecky called it a “poetic condemnation of the banning of books” (Porter 82). History is perceptible through Hant’a, as with Ditie in I Served the King of England, because Hrabal’s characters are often outside of the action, and are watching or observing rather than participating (Matonoha and Kubicek). Hant’a fits this description well. He works in a paper-pulping plant in Prague, and has worked there for thirty five years; he has just five years to go until his retirement. His job is to destroy the many books which have been banned by the Communist government. But Hant’a has a secret: he reads many of the books before he destroys them, and even saves some to take them home. He quotes Lao-Tzu, Jesus Christ, the Talmud, Hegel and Goethe, and has their books—and hundreds of others—hidden in his flat, stacked over him on his bed as he sleeps at night, so many he is afraid they might fall and crush him.

In the short novel, Hrabal speaks explicitly to some aspects of the political situation in 1970s Czechoslovakia (the book was finished in 1976) (82). Consider a passage in the third chapter:

Most of all I enjoy central-heating control rooms, where men with higher education, chained to their jobs like dogs to their kennels, write the history of their times as a sort of sociological survey and where I learned how the fourth estate was depopulated and the proletariat went from base to superstructure and how the university-trained elite now carries on its work. My best friends are two former members of our Academy of Science who have been set to work in the sewers...(Hrabal 1993, 22).

This is a clear reference to post-1968 Communist Czechoslovakia. In the 1960s, the Czechoslovak Communist Party underwent a series of liberalizing reforms which were quite popular in the republic after the “very ugly years of Communist terror, the 1940s and 1950s” (Drtina). The late ‘40s and early ‘50s are remembered tragically as a period filled with purges of the party, executions, terror, and extreme socialist propaganda (Drtina). The Communist Party, after a coup-de-tate in 1948, established a one-party Socialist system in Czechoslovakia. This included the establishment of publishing restrictions and censorship of all media—books, newspapers, and radio. All media was under state control, and that control was turned over to “faithful” party members who oversaw publishing houses, printing presses, etc; this was only part of the establishment of the enormous top-to-bottom bureaucracy which would be part of Communism’s ugly legacy in the Czech lands (Drtina).

1968 represented the peak of liberalization of the Communist system. Alexander Dubček, promoting “socialism with a human face,” was elected First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party. The April 1968 Plenary Session of the Communist Party attempted to answer the questions of how to democratize society to the greatest possible extent while still maintaining Communist party control, and the solution that emerged was to try and persuade the nation that the Communist party’s decision were the

right ones, rather than enforcing decisions through the state power apparatus (Čornej 74). This alarmed Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev, and supporters of the old order in the USSR, who feared that the USSR's empire would be undone by the events in Czechoslovakia; afraid that this form of socialism, which was no longer based on the threat of terror, would spread, Brezhnev decided to undertake military action (75). Overnight on August 20-21, 1968, Warsaw Pact forces from the USSR, People's Republic of Bulgaria, Hungarian People's Republic, German Democratic Republic and Polish Peoples' Republic moved into Czechoslovakia and began what was termed the "normalization," of the country, that is, a return to the totalitarian rule of earlier decades. This normalization included screening of all members of the Communist party in 1970, which led to 500,000 being expelled from the party, and a wave of mass emigration that further weakened an already-depleted Czech intelligentsia (77).

Many of those who were forced to leave the party but did not emigrate are the intellectuals Hrabal refers to, Professors and the like who were given menial jobs at the bottom rung of the working class ladder. Another reference to the period is the trick Hant'a plays with a philosophy professor, pretending to be two people, in order to get two ten-crown notes from the professor each visit, who comes looking for banned books and newsmagazines. The professor "used to work at *Theater News*, and even though he'd been dismissed from the editorial board five years ago for political reasons, he still had a passion for theater reviews from the thirties" (Hrabal 1993, 44). Again, there is a direct statement on the totalitarian nature of the Communist system and its intolerance of divergent political views. Later, when Hant'a sees the gigantic press at Bubny, he begins to understand that mechanization will overtake him and his small hydraulic press—not just the mechanization of the new, large press itself, but of the machine-like Brigade of Socialist Labor who feeds wastepaper into it. Hant'a's disdain for them is clear from the start, and he despises the fact

that they wear gloves—“I loved the feel of paper in my fingers”—and drink milk instead of beer (64).

The giant press is probably also symbolic of more than just the paper-pulping industry, and might be read as a reference to the forced “normalization,” of society, a return to the iron-fisted Soviet rule of the 1950s. There is, in fact, quite a bit of symbolism at work in the novel. Hant’a works underground, and the new press is above ground, ventilated, and lit by sun streaming in through the glass facade; the world, for him, is being turned upside down, much like Czechoslovakia was turned upside down by the normalization of the 1970s (Pospíšil). This upside-down turn is further reinforced by highlighting the intellectual elite’s being lowered to the lowest of the working class, and the working class’s rise to power through the Socialist system. Hant’a makes art out of his bales of wastepaper, decorating the outermost layers with books and prints of famous paintings; this makes an art out of the destruction of literature, which seems to be a sort of reclamation of the destruction of culture.

It means that he understands the basis of the culture on which the world stands, and what future such a world will produce: a world where society has nothing to offer an educated man like Hant’a, who has read the great writers and philosophers and poets, who has seen other worlds and ideas in his books than the limited reality of Communist Czechoslovakia. Perhaps the most memorable symbolization of the struggle between socialism and capitalism, or perhaps between the democratic and totalitarian elements of the Communist party, is the story of the wars between the brown rats and white rats that his former-Professor friends witness in their work in the sewer. The “human-like” war results in the white rats winning, then promptly breaking down into two more opposing sides, and the same cycle repeating itself, “the desire for conflict resolution promising imminent equilibrium, the world never stumbling for an instant” (Hrabal 1993, 23).

Hant'a understands that the further mechanization of society, the continued banning of literature, philosophy and thought, is to strip humanity of the very things that makes us human. Seeing that such a world has nothing to offer him, and that he is small and powerless in the face of a mechanized totalitarian Communist society, he crushes himself in his press, the ultimate protest against mechanization. This suicide is but one element of a certain Kafkaesque surrealism in Too Loud a Solitude. Though of a different era, Hant'a's fears of the world are not unlike the fears Joseph K. experiences in The Trial. Hant'a, like K., struggles with his own identity and his changing place in the world which is moving quickly around him. Like Joseph K., Hant'a identifies mostly with his job—all but three of the chapters begin with some variation of the sentence "For thirty-five years now I've been compacting old waste paper." Hrabal himself, it is worth noting, held the same job for a few years. Like Joseph K.'s desire for a rational, habitual world, Hant'a is used to stability. He has been doing the same job at the same press for thirty-five years, and anticipated doing it for five more and then retiring. And like Joseph K., it is the introduction of a manifestation of power of a new order—instead of a court, the new printing press and the Brigade of Socialist Labor—that is the beginning of Hant'a's downfall. The most obvious, and perhaps most important parallel, is that like K., Hant'a commits suicide. Both suicides are an act of desperation, a final escape from two fictional worlds but for two different reasons. There is something more dignified about Hant'a's suicide, something perhaps defiant in it. He says in the first chapter:

I can be by myself because I'm never lonely, I'm simply alone, living in my heavily populated solitude, a harum-scarum of infinity and eternity, and Infinity and Eternity seem to take a liking to the likes of me (9).

But in his death, he defies Eternity and Infinity. Hant'a knows the world has nothing to offer him and so he leaves it. But Hant'a leaves not so defeated as Joseph K., who wants only to escape the maddening uncertainty which seems as much in his own mind as in the

world around him. In his last moments, Hant's pleasantly remembers the name of a gypsy girl he once loved that had eluded him throughout the novel: "ILONKA. Yes, that was her name" (98). Joseph K., in sharp contrast, dies by the words: " 'Like a dog!' he said: it was as if he meant the shame of it to outlive him" (Kafka 251).

* * *

Also highly important to Hrabal's work is his use of language, specifically the speech of the *pabitel*. This use of vernacular is so unique and so authentic that "Bohumil Hrabal's work, Czechs say, is untranslatable," and the language he writes in is referred to as "Hrabalovština" (Wilson). Hrabal explains the *pabitel* thus:

A pabitel is a person against whom there is always welling up and ocean of intrusive thoughts. His monologue flows constantly, sometimes like an underground stream in a hollow of thought, sometimes gushing out of his mouth...A pabitel is an instrument of language, which enriches itself on all the endearments and tricks that the linguist is interested in. As a rule, a pabitel has read almost nothing, but on the other hand has seen and heard a great deal. And has forgotten almost nothing. He is captivated by his own inner monologue, with which he wanders the world, like a peacock with its beautiful plumage (Porter 54).

By Hrabal's own definition, the term *pabitel* could no more accurately describe Ditie, the diminutive protagonist of I Served the King of England.

When I started to work at the Golden Prague Hotel, the boss took hold of my left ear, pulled me up, and said, You're a busboy here, so remember, you don't see anything and you don't hear anything. Repeat what I just said. So I said I wouldn't see anything and I wouldn't hear anything. Then the boss pulled me up by my right ear and said, But remember too that you've got to see everything and hear everything. Repeat it after me. I was taken aback, but I promised I would see everything and hear everything. That's how I began (Hrabal 1990, 1).

Somewhat like Švejk, Ditie seems to have few or no moral values. Ditie is opportunistic, and perhaps could be called pragmatic, sacrificing ideals out of practicality, though in some cases he is driven to such ends, as his involvement with a Nazi woman and

his sympathies towards the treatments of Germans by Czechs, which probably would have been nonexistent had he not been deemed “too small,” for service when he tried to enlist in the Czech army. Interestingly, Dítie means “child,” and is an appropriate name for a character who is both small in stature and small on maturity and wisdom of any kind, at least until he realizes this fact at the end of the novel. He is also comparable to Joseph K. in the sense that he is somewhat of a character without qualities. Part of the reason I believe he represents K. in this respect is that, as with K., we know almost nothing about who Dítie is or where he came from, nothing from before the beginning of the time in the novel. There is quite literally only the brief mention of parents at one point in the novel. Secondly, Dítie identifies primarily with his job—or in this case, jobs, his career in the hotel restaurant business. He holds various positions, first as bus boy, then waiter, then head waiter, and finally as a hotel owner. At the end of the novel, he works at a forestry outpost, and finally as a road mender in a lonely stretch of wilderness. Though his jobs change frequently during the course of the novel, he is not like Joseph K., in constant need of habit and predictability. Quite the opposite, Dítie is always looking for the next chance, the next opportunity, the next step up in the world. Unlike K. he adapts well to situations, but like K. often thinks only of himself and his image.

Dítie’s consideration for his image might in part be a reflection of the strain the author was writing under, according to Porter:

Clearly, Hrabal was racked by the need to pursue his art while repeatedly having to reach a *modus vivendi* with odious, albeit changing, regimes. This explains in part Dítie’s fixation with appearances (86).

The publishing of the text itself was also affected by politics. It was completed in 1975 but “deemed inappropriate by the authorities for publication. Hrabal has partially ingratiated himself with the post-1968 regime...but received...only token publication in

return” (Porter 76). This was typical of Hrabal’s writing, as he enjoyed an uneasy position between “official” culture and underground culture; some of his work was deemed appropriate for print, while other texts were not, several of which were still released on a limited basis through samizdat underground publishing (Soukup). I Served the King of England was published in 1983 by the Czech Musician’s Union’s “Jazz Section,” an “act of defiance...which finally led to the arrest of some of [the CMU]’s members and their imprisonment in 1987” (Porter 76).

The novel, though, is set decades before it is written, in the years leading up to and including World War II. Following World War I and the establishment of the First Republic, Czechs began to enjoy a relatively stable and prosperous life. The Austro-Hungarian monarchy had situated much of its heavy industry in Czechoslovakia, leaving the dirty jobs and the dirty byproducts of mass production to the Czech people and lands; Austria and its people were, apparently, above such work. But when the Empire lost the Czech lands at the end of the war, the Czechoslovak First Republic was left with a ready-made infrastructure, and became one of the top ten economies in the world. There were two major questions facing the First Republic, though: the Slovak question and the German question. With the ascension of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi party to power in Germany, the German question quickly became of the utmost importance. The problem was the Sudetenland, the border area between Germany and Czechoslovakia that was a part of Czechoslovak territory but was inhabited in many places by a large majority of Germans. The Western powers did little to stop Hitler in the early years of German expansion, hoping he would focus towards the east; when he took Austria in March of 1938, the ČSR was nearly surrounded by Germany, and the border was unfortified (Čornej 54).

The Munich conference in September of the same year sealed Czechoslovakia's fate. Britain and France, which had guaranteed Czechoslovakia's security, betrayed the Republic. Both countries were unprepared for war, despite numerous warnings, and were most interested in avoiding a war with Germany, so they pressured Czechoslovakia to avoid a crisis and satisfy Hitler by ceding the Sudetenland to him. Despite Czechoslovakia's treaties with France, England, and the USSR, which promised to aid Czechoslovakia if France did, the Western powers offered the Sudetenland border area to Hitler at the Munich conference. The "Munich dictate," was decided upon by Hitler, Daladier, Chamberlain, and Mussolini, sans Benes and the Czechoslovak delegation. In the following months, Czechoslovakia also lost other border territories with Poland and Hungary, including border fortifications, and areas of important natural resources, industry, and railroad; in the end, the size of the Republic was reduced by almost a third (56). Czechs were forced to withdraw from these areas and move inland; when Slovakia declared its separation in 1939 at Hitler's behest, Czechs were again expelled. On March 15 and 16, German troops occupied Czech lands and declared the state the "Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia" (59).

Ditie comes face to face with these historical developments in I Served the King of England. After being rejected from the army for the third time because of his height, Dite begins to study German and see German films. While at one of these films, he accidentally steps on a woman's foot, and she began speaking German to him. This is Lise, who he falls in love with.

I apologized to her in German, and I ended up seeing her home. She was attractively dressed, and to get on the good side of her I said it was awful what the Czechs were doing to those poor German students, that I'd seen with my own eyes on Narodni how they pulled the white socks and brown shirts off two German students. And she told me that I spoke the truth, that Prague was part of the old German Empire and the Germans had an inalienable right to walk about the city dressed according to their own customs. The rest of the world cared nothing for this right, but the hour and

the day would come when the Fuhrer would come and liberate all the Germans, from the forests of Sumava to the Carpathian Mountains. When she said this, I was looking straight into her eyes and I noticed that I didn't have to look up at her the way I did at other women, because it was my bad luck that all the women I'd had in my life were not just bigger than me but giants among women, and whenever we were together I would be looking at their necks or their bosoms, but this woman was as short as I was and her green eyes sparkled, and she was as spattered with freckles as I was, and the brown freckles in her face went so well with her green eyes that she suddenly seemed beautiful to me (Hrabal 1990, 121).

Ditie's inner monologue here—both the language with which he speaks, and his nihilistic non-reaction to her Nazism—prompts me to call Hrabal's work somewhat surreal, much in the way Kafka's Joseph K. is surreal to the reader for his total inability to see outside himself. Hrabal's writing style is also somewhat similar to that of Hašek, in that it seems likely they both gleaned a lot of writing material from time spent sitting in pubs, speaking with people, and overhearing conversations and stories being told. Hrabal has a uniquely colloquial style, and he incorporates it into Ditie's inner monologue, as well as Hant'a's. In Hrabal's own words, he is not a writer, but a recorder, a *zapisovatel*, and not a *spisovatel* (Short). The *pabitel* or palavering style, as it has sometimes been translated in English, is well-embodied by Ditie. In fact, palavering may not be a fair translation, as it means “to talk profusely or idly,” and while there may be something of a gushing or spill to the way Ditie tells his story, there is nothing idle about it. Ditie loves the world, and is enthralled with the beauty around him. It is what leads him to spread flower petals on the laps of the women he makes love to, what leads him to see the beauty in Lise for all her inner ugliness, and leads him ultimately to his beautiful hotel site at the quarry. As Hrabal says, “The *pabitel* is filled with wonder at the visible world, so that that ocean of beautiful sights allows him no sleep” (Porter 54). *Pabitele*, a collection of stories by Hrabal, features this same type of character, who, according to William Harkins, is “a new eccentric type of hero who deforms the reality of his existence in terms of his own grotesque imagination and colorful speech” (Harkins in Arne Novak, 347). This is clearly happening with Ditie in the

passage above. Lise speaks happily of the day when Hitler will rule all over Europe, and Ditie sees only that she is beautiful, largely because she is as short as he is. His view of reality is quite skewed, and that he finds Lise attractive despite her espousing of Nazi ideology only reinforces the fact that he has no values, and lacks some crucial wisdom about the world, that he is constantly looking for his next chance, wherever and at whatever price it might come.

These qualities are apparent later in the novel as well, when Ditie goes with Lise to Dečín and has a job as headwaiter at a hotel that serves as an Aryan breeding ground for “noble-blooded young German women with pure-blooded soldiers, both from the Heereswaffe and the SS” (Hrabal 1990, 132). He says, “It was here that I first felt myself really blossoming...here I became the darling of the pregnant German girls” (135). He has no qualms about his new job or his acceptance by the Germans, at least the women, because he remembers with disdain how he had been deemed too small to participate in the Sokol gymnastic team, and how everyone at the Hotel Paris, including the headwaiter and the hotel owner, head of the local Sokol chapter, had spit in his face for dating Lise. He puts himself through physical testing just so he can be deemed eligible by German doctors of marrying and impregnating Lise—they had to be sure he was pure enough to bring a child into the new Aryan world. Then he marries her, in a pub covered with the full regalia of the Nazi party. He uses stamps Lise confiscated from Polish Jews bound for extermination camps to finance the purchase of his hotel. When the legacy of the stamps and his life with Lise begins to haunt him, in particular the constant hammer-on-nail pounding of their little son, he simply leaves his son behind. Only towards the end of the novel does he begin to realize the larger picture of all his opportunistic plunges into new lives and new ideologies.

...it occurred to me to look at myself in a mirror that was fastened to the station wall, and when I did I suddenly saw myself as a stranger, like those

Germans from all the regions and districts with their different professions and interests and states of health...So I took a penetrating look at myself from that angle and saw myself as I never had before, as a member of Sokol who when the Germans were executing Czech patriots had allowed Nazi doctors to examine him to determine if he could have sexual intercourse with a German gym teacher, and while the Germans were provoking a war with Russia he was getting married and singing “Die Reihen dicht Geschlossen,” and while people at home were suffering, he was sitting pretty in German hotels and inns, serving the German army and the SS-Waffe (153).

Clearly, Hrabal is forced to deal with Czech political history not just in attempting to publish his work, but within the fiction itself. Hrabal is able to successfully merge a protagonist and his often unlikable traits into an even darker period of Czech history, and to bear witness to the development of that character in the face of his own shortcomings, and the harsh world of Nazi-occupied Czech lands. While the originality of Dítie’s story and the literary merit of the novel are unquestionable, it seems equally obvious that it was the particular political situation of the historical time period portrayed that allowed for the story to be told the way it was. Dítie’s own story unfolds parallel to the situation in Czechoslovakia at the beginning of World War II. Hrabal’s reconstruction of history on a personal level, and his believable juxtaposition of his diminutive narrator’s interaction with that history with a sense of the larger picture of the same time, seems to offer a unique and valuable, if fictional, insight into the Czech situation and Czech mentality of those years.

* * *

Václav Havel’s work differs from that of Kafka, Hašek, and Hrabal in several important ways. While he is linked to all of them by a definite regard for Czech political history—his work is perhaps most easily seen as a “statement” on his time—and by his use of absurdity, he goes about making his point in a much different way than the authors of the novels previously discussed. Havel’s Vaněk perhaps comes closest to being a “character without qualities,” like Joseph K:

Vaněk is really not so much a concrete person as something of a “dramatic principle”: he does not usually do or say much, but his mere existence, his presence on stage, and his being what he is make his environment expose itself in one way or another. He does not admonish anyone in particular; indeed, he demands hardly anything of anyone. And in spite of this, his environment perceives him as an invocation somehow to declare and justify itself. He is, then, a kind of “key,” opening certain—always different—vistas onto the world in which he lives; a kind of catalyst, a gleam, if you will, in whose light we view a landscape. And although without it we should scarcely be able to see anything at all, it is not the gleam that matters but the landscape (Havel ix).

Though Vaněk is a character from a play, and not a novel, Havel’s words about his literary alter ego are somewhat useful for understanding the role of a character like Joseph K. While Joseph K. is as vastly different from Vaněk as Kafka’s style is from Havel’s, they share one important feature: both of them are known to the reader primarily through their interactions with hierarchical social structures. In Joseph K.’s case, his interactions come with the hierarchical structures of the bank and the court. Vaněk’s come in a similar setting—with the foreman in *Audience*—but also in more casual social settings, at the apartment or office of friends in *Unveiling* and *Protest*.

Despite Vaněk’s similarities to Joseph K., he is as Havel says more of a “dramatic principle,” and not a true empty character who remains almost without inborn qualities for the duration of a novel. Perhaps the largest difference between K. and Vaněk is that K. is clearly the basis of The Trial. Without K., without his anguish and struggle, without his interaction with the world, there is no novel. Vaněk, on the other hand, is, as Havel says, more of a catalyst. Like in *Garden Party*, though perhaps to a lesser extent, in the Vaněk plays it can be said that language, and the mechanism of language as a tool of the totalitarian regime, can be considered the central character (Matonoha). Language functions on its own, as is shown by the fact that it is Vaněk’s mere presence, and not anything he says, that leads his foreman and friends to begin repeating themselves. Language is not a means of

expression, but a means of persuasion, or defense. Language is a means to an end, as it was for the Communist regime.

Consider, for instance, the term “normalization,” used by the Soviets to describe the re-totalitarianization of the Czech lands after the Prague Spring of 1968. Normalization infers a return to the norm—but there was nothing “normal,” about life after the invasion. It wasn’t what people were used to, though there was perhaps some precedent for it in the early 1950s, and the reign of fear and terror that characterized the Soviet regime before Stalin’s death and Khrushchev’s rejection of his overly violent methods. The “normalization period,” took what had been the norm during the 1960s—gradual reform of the Communist system, increased democratization, increased freedom of expression and publishing—and turned it on its head.

How does this use of language translate into the Vaněk plays? Even though Vaněk is not in direct contact with the totalitarian regime itself in the plays, the regime’s effect on language can be seen in people’s personal interactions with one another, further reinforcing the extent of the regime’s effect on daily life. Consider the repetitive structure of each of the three plays. In *Audience*, for instance, in the opening scene:

Brewmaster: Well? So how is it goin’?

Vaněk: Fine, thank you—

Brewmaster: Like there was any other choice, right?

Vaněk: Right (Havel 5).

The brewmaster’s comment is doubly meaningful. When he suggests that there is no other choice, he means both that there is no other choice than for the two of them to be at work, and that there is no other choice than the positive “Fine, thank you,” reply Vaněk gives. To voice dissatisfaction with one’s job in the “dictatorship of the proletariat,” would

be a risk, particularly for a bourgeois like Vaněk who was already a known dissident, probably under surveillance and in a tenuous position with his new job. The dialogue here, though absurd for its repetitiveness, especially on the brewmaster's part, seems quite authentic. Though Havel tries to separate himself from Vaněk in the introduction essay, the parallels are too obvious to ignore. Vaněk, like Havel, is a writer, and also like Havel, becomes a brewery worker. Vanek's refusal to inform on himself is also quite possibly based on a personal experience of Havel's, given that he was a dissident who spent several years in jail. The play pokes fun at both Vaněk's and the brewmaster's inability to change their own fate, and is a typical example of Czech dark humor, taking the tragic and the dreadful and poking fun at them somehow.

There is a different type of humor at work in *Unveiling*, a humor less expressive of solidarity among the oppressed than at the expense of those who are the oppressors, or who collaborate with them for the sake of maintaining their lifestyle. (Ferdinand) Vaněk's friends Vera and Michael have invited him over in order to, unbeknownst to him, unveil their newly-decorated apartment. Vaněk, though as usual he speaks very little, seems rather taken aback by the decadence and exoticism that must be present in the apartment. It becomes clear that the various foreign items adorning the apartment are a result of the couple's personal travels or their connections, implying that they took advantage by gaining some sort of favor within the party. Travel visas were difficult to obtain in the late 1970s when Havel wrote the three Vaněk plays, as the borders of Czechoslovakia were effectively closed both to the inside and to the outside for long periods under Communism, making their new furnishings rather suspicious. It isn't just Michael and Vera's apartment that has changed, though. We get the sense, though there is no flashback, no exposition of the previous relationship, that the couple has also changed greatly since Vaněk last saw them. It is difficult to imagine the quiet, respectful Vaněk as friends with such ridiculous people. They go out of their way to pry into

his personal life, mostly his marriage, and to offer unwanted advice over and over again. It is as though they are trying to express to Vaněk the value of cozying up to the regime: look at us, we're happy, we have so many new things, life is perfect. Vaněk is ill at ease, which seems to indicate that they were not this way the last time he saw them. Their criticisms become brazen to the point of absurd towards the end. At one point Michael offers the ridiculous statement:

Michael: Don't get offended, Ferdinand, but I think that the times are just another excuse for you, just like the job at the brewery, and that the real problem is inside of you and nowhere else! You're just all bent out of shape, you've given up on everything, you find it too tedious to strive for anything, to fight, to wrestle with problems (Havel 45).

Shortly thereafter, he contradicts his own criticisms of Vaněk as he and Vera try and tell Ferdinand what is best for him.

Vera: To just throw yourself away like that—to bury yourself in a brewery somewhere—only to ruin your health—

Michael: All these gestures are completely senseless! What are you trying to prove? It's been a long time since that kind of thing impressed anybody—

Ferdinand: I'm sorry, but it was the only thing I could do in my situation—

Michael: Ferdinand! Don't tell me that you couldn't do better than that—if only you really wanted to and tried a little harder—I'm convinced that with a little more effort and a little less ego on your part, you could've long been sitting in an editorial office somewhere—

Vera: You are, after all, basically an intelligent, hard-working person—you have talent—you have clearly proven that in the past with your writing—so why would you suddenly be afraid of confronting life? (Havel 45-46).

They go on to accuse Vaněk of beating his head against the wall in vain for not making his own life easier by ending his dissidence, and of being “mixed up,” with Communists, when it is quite clear that they know Vaněk is working his job at the brewery because of what they call his “ego,” his dissidence, his refusal to comply with the

Communist regime. Finally, they suggest that he and his wife “live a little more like humans” (47). While the absurdity present in their words to Vaněk has much to do with their horrendous treatment of him, it also seems based on satirizing the absurdity of Communist ideology. There is an attempt to convince the brain’s rationality to forget the soul’s supposedly misguided desire for freedom, the “ego,” of dissidence that keeps Vaněk from a cushy editorial job somewhere. This play is also particularly interesting because Michael and Vera seem very bourgeois characters, and the type of people that someone like Havel himself, as the son of a wealthy Prague family, might have dealt with in a similar manner—the type of people who would not understand sacrificing the comforts of a lifestyle for principal at the steep cost of working in a brewery.

The third play featuring Vaněk, *Protest*, also deals heavily with the issue of language and communication. Again, Vaněk is separated from the other character in the play, Staněk, by his dissidence. He is trying to get Staněk to sign a petition for the release of a political prisoner. Staněk is reluctant, even though the prisoner is the father of the child his daughter is pregnant with, and he spends time telling Vaněk, as Michael and Vera had, what he ought to do with his life, with his career. The humor is again of a dark variety, as Staněk praises Vaněk for his actions while at the same time seeming completely unwilling to undertake similar actions—such as signing the petition—himself. In fact he seems to envy Vaněk his sense of clarity of conscience, and though must he know otherwise, he seems to think with some disdain that in a way dissidents have things more easily than others. He says to Vaněk:

Staněk: Forgive me, Ferdinand, but you don’t happen to live in a normal environment. All you know are people who manage to resist this rot. You just keep on supporting and encouraging each other. You’ve no idea the sort of environment I’ve got to put up with! You’re so lucky you no longer have anything to do with it. Makes you sick at your stomach! (58)

Again, someone who is accepted within the totalitarian regime—despite whatever trifling claims he may lay to having trouble with his television work—is looking at someone on the outside and passing judgment on them. Much in the way Vera and Michael’s conversation with Vaněk seemed to reflect their own insecurities, here Staněk reflects on the advantages of Vaněk’s position, knowing full well he spent time in jail for it. The story Havel tells seems unique. He shows the mentality and attitude of those who lived comfortably and who had few or no problems with the regime. Havel, who himself spent time in jail, and who was a member of Charter 77, has the personal experience with history to explore such a line of inquiry. In *Unveiling* he mocks the attitude of superiority—which is really a thin veil over vast insecurity—that his friends have. In *Protest* he seems to mock Staněk’s idea that there is some worthy inner struggle for those who comply with and survive under the regime. Staněk knows Vaněk might have been followed, had spent time in jail, and was very busy with petitions and letters of protest. At the same time, he turns the tables, telling Vaněk that he is in the enviable position, because his world seems much clearer and requires less compromise. Yet the truth is that Vaněk knowingly makes his own life less comfortable through his dissidence. What is truly absurd is the idea that Staněk wants in some way to be pitied for the fact that he puts up with the regime, and wants Vaněk, a dissident, who spent time in jail, and who was under surveillance, to admit that in some way he has it easy. It seems an excellent characterization on Havel’s part, revealing the skewed values of someone Vaněk respected and liked, who had been utterly changed by the political realities of the time.

* * *

One character who remains unfazed by the turbulent political and social situation of his time—or who at least pretends not to care—is Danny Smiricky in Josef Škvorecký’s *The*

Cowards. Danny is a largely autobiographical character for Škvorecký, whose narrative strategy differs greatly from those of Kafka, Hašek, and Hrabal. In Škvorecký's novel, Danny is anything but a "character without qualities." He is, in fact, full of qualities. He loves girls, girls, and more girls. He is narcissistic and self-centered. While he is similar to Joseph K. in that he cares greatly about his image, he is far more "fleshed out," than K. We know that he is from an upper-middle class family, has a mother who worries greatly about him and a father who works hard, that he is "in love," with many girls but in particular Irena, and that he loves jazz.

His love of jazz is quite important, as is his love of girls, but perhaps not for obvious reasons. The first of the Danny Smiricky novels, written when Škvorecký was just twenty-four, is set in the fictional town of Kostelec, based on Škvorecký's hometown of Nachod (Porter 89). The book reads as a series of diary entries during the last week of World War II, in early May, after Hitler had committed suicide and the Germans began retreating. Danny is not particularly brave, but rather acts like it to impress Irena and others. His bravery gets him nearly executed by the Nazi troops, before he is saved in last-minute negotiations by the Mayor of Kostelec, one of the men Danny, like Přema, labels a coward. Danny joins the Kostelec Army for the "uprising," he thinks will happen, though he does so mostly because it's something to do, a reason not to go back to the factory, and another opportunity to impress Irena. I say his love of jazz and his love of girls are important because they are to Danny more important than anything else, particularly more important than anything to do with the war. Though Danny witnesses the Nazi retreat, his patrol's scuffle with Communists, Jews returning from concentration camps, and the arrival of thousands of prisoners of war, he seems to take it all in stride. For Danny, the war coming to an end, the Nazi flags replaced by Czech flags and then Communist flags, the presence of Communist

revolutionaries—these things are all secondary to him. He is interested in jazz, girls, jazz, and girls.

There are some hints of the political as well, mainly the way Danny expresses some amusement at the Red Army's victory ceremony, the speech by the Russian general, and at watching the residents of Kostelec scramble to haul in the red flags they had flown in honor of the Red Army when the Nazi SS came retreating through town, fighting the Russians on the run. That said, the novel is still mostly apolitical. The novel is about Danny, not the period in time, a fact which is easier to accept when the reader discovers that there are several more novels featuring Danny as the protagonist. Perhaps the book's social importance might be best expressed by saying that the novel, because it is apolitical in such extremely political times, was an extremely strong statement. Written in the era of Socialist Realism and banned from publication, Škvorecky's work stands out from the other novels reviewed here as a more universal story. The fiction is what's important here, and while that story relies on its historical context, that context seems clearly secondary to the development of the character. And while Danny does overcome his own cowardice to help Přema take out a Nazi tank, and decides in the novel he will leave for Prague, there are some things about Danny—both his passions, and his egocentrism—which will remain forever the same:

I thought about...whether something new wasn't about to start, something as big as a revolution and I wondered what effect it would have on me and my world. I didn't know. Everything was tearing by so fast I felt lost in it all...I didn't have anything against communism. I didn't know anything about it for one thing, and I wasn't one of those people who are against something just because their parents and relatives and friends are. I didn't have anything against anything, just as long as I could play jazz on my saxophone, because that was something I loved to do and I couldn't be for anything that was against that. And as long as I could watch the girls, because that meant being alive (Škvorecky 392).

As Škvorecky himself said of history's influence on his work, "I think you're right in saying that I've always been concerned with history; being from Czechoslovakia it was hard

not to be. In almost all my novels the action takes place against a historical background. The stories do have a context within which they take place and which influences the characters and their lives in some way” (Solecki).

* * *

Another author whose fiction seems to take clear priority over its social and historical setting is Milan Kundera. Kundera scholars with whom I spoke were quite wary of reading anything historical or political into Kundera’s work. His novels, several experts said, certainly seem more based on the fictional story, and his work is less overtly political than Hašek, Hrabal, or Havel. Though they certainly are not as overtly ideological as the Stalinist poetry Kundera wrote as a supporter of the Communist regime in the late 1940s, I believe there is something undeniably political about both of the novels I read, The Unbearable Lightness of Being and The Joke.

Kundera is an existentialist, according to Prof. Tomas Kubiček. In The Unbearable Lightness of Being, Tomas is a surgeon who loses his job for writing an essay that compares early Communists to Oedipus, for claiming that because they did not know what would happen, they could not be held responsible for supporting Communism. After being demoted to a job as a physician in a small clinic, he quits medical practice altogether to become a window washer. This was one of the points that sparked debate in the 1970s about Kundera’s novel. Many said that such a story was a lie, that a surgeon never would have lost a job over such a letter, since they were far too important. Kundera argued that the novel ought not be thought about as a political statement (Bilek). Indeed, Kubiček agreed heartily that the novel’s political and historical elements were almost unworthy of consideration. Tomas and Tereza, the wife he so often cheats on, are “possibilities of being,” according to Kubiček, who belong to their situation. But that situation is a situation of human beings, not

of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, according to Kubiček. He says that the novel is “about body and soul, not woman and man,” and that that discrepancy between Tomas and Tereza is because they are both “one moment body, one moment soul,” Tomas in particular. Kubiček believes the novel asks which of these—the body or the soul—is the higher of the two. Tomas has many women, and Tereza has only Tomas, and so the tension comes from a battle over proverbial territory.

I found it interesting that The Unbearable Lightness of Being features Tomas, a rather stubborn protagonist, who obstinately refuses to retract his letter. This seems quite brave and idealistic compared with the protagonists of other novels, and it’s interesting to note that while Hrabal and Havel remained in the country during Communism, Kundera left, and this novel was written and published almost a decade after he moved to France in 1975. I wondered if there was perhaps a connection between a loss of touch with the harsh reality inside the country and such a brave protagonist, but Kubiček again suggested that history was not of great importance. The novel is not different from other Czech literature or from Kundera’s novels because Kundera wrote it in exile, but because it was his sixth novel, and that at that point he knew very well how to write in a way that would appeal to many people. The language is clear, and the metaphors are simple. This historical situation is a construct, and not intended to be a reconstruction of real history. The construct is necessary, said Kubiček, because of the new audience, that is, the rest of the world.

He says the fact that Kundera wrote certain novels after departing the Czech Republic is not necessary to know to understand the literature. In fact, according to Kubiček, it’s not necessary to know Kundera’s biography to enrich the reading of the novels, because they are existentialist. And yet, it’s interesting to note, according to Kubiček who wrote a book on him, that when Kundera applied for the Association of Czech-Slovak Writers, he had to

explain in his application that he had been kicked out of the Communist party for a postcard that mentioned Trotsky, almost identical to Ludvik's from The Joke. In a sense, Kubiček said, Ludvik is Kundera's alter ego. As with The Unbearable Lightness of Being, he believes the novel is not political, but rather purely fictional. The Joke represents "the possibility of how to make the world better" (Kubiček). Again, Kundera is read as existentialist. There are two ways to understand writing from the 1960s, Kubiček said, those that belong to the political situation and those that do not. He argues that Kundera's novels do not need this background because they are not political.

Whether or not the novels need such a background, they have it, and that is one thing that I believe makes The Unbearable Lightness of Being and The Joke unmistakably political. The novels are set in Czechoslovakia during a certain time period. As with the literature of any other culture, knowing the context in our own reality that serves as the basis of the reality of the fictional world is crucial to understanding the novel. Is Kundera seemingly asking much larger, existentialist questions with his novels? It seems so. At the same time, it is impossible to separate the fiction from its non-fictional surroundings, and from the politics-related events in the books. In The Unbearable Lightness of Being, Tomas is fired from his job for refusing to retract the letter; Tereza is possibly set up by the state security man in his flat; there are narrator interjections that speak of Communism and the death of Stalin's son: all in all, it seems quite political to me for these reasons. There is also much meaning to be derived from symbolism in the novel, in particular the dog, Karenin, a female dog given a male name. This is calling something what it isn't—pretending a female dog is male—much in the same way Tomas and Tereza both pretend about their relationship to a certain degree. Tereza knows he sees other women, but cannot stop him from doing it, and also cannot bring herself to stop loving him. In a similar way, there is a denial of the

situation. They don't live under a totalitarian regime, but in a Socialist revolutionary workers' utopia.

The Joke is even more overtly political. Again, the stories of Ludvik, Helena, Jaroslav and Kostka, like the story of Danny in The Cowards, are the most important part of the novel, and can be considered as fiction, as art for art's sake. At the same time, politics is both in and under the nature of the characters. According to Lubomír Doležel, "The Joke can be designated an *ideological novel*...the narrators of The Joke are representatives of various systems of false-ideologies myths" (Steiner 199). Steiner explains that Kostka is a chialist. He is Christian of some kind, and steadfast in his faith. He dwells solely in the present. Jaroslav, Ludvik's old friend, represents the conservative ideology. He lives a life so steeped in folklore, that revolves around tradition and preservation of the past, that he is uncomfortable in the present, which is quite evident from the sections he narrates. Thirdly are Ludvik and Helena, who, according to Steiner, represent the Socialist-Communist utopian ideology, who look fondly upon a future that will never be, but which they believe in. For Helena, that future is a life with Ludvik, who she has fallen madly in love with—mad perhaps being the key word in describing Helena.

I am not sure that Ludvik so easily falls into the category of "forward looking," as Helena. In fact, his entire journey to his home town, his romancing of Helena, their violent sexual encounter, are all part of his plan to get revenge for what Pavel, Helena's husband, did to Ludvik decades before. He had overseen the hearings in which Ludvik was unanimously voted out of both the Communist Party and the University in one fell swoop, for a joke he had written on a postcard to Marketa, his pseudo-girlfriend, while she was off at a party political training course. Ludvik lives heavily in the past; though he'd like to leave it, he has looked forward to his vengeance a long time. Only when it is complete will he be able to

move on. However, after sex with Helena, he meets her husband and his much younger, prettier girlfriend. This is a new low for Pavel, to bring a girlfriend to meet Helena, and only fuels her misguided love for Ludvik, who is disconcerted that his revenge failed—to have sex with another man’s wife seems quite negated when that man is busy doing the same with a younger, prettier woman; Ludvik cannot take something if Pavel has already discarded it. Furthermore, upon seeing Pavel, Ludvik learns how much he has changed since the last time they were together, and admits to himself that like it or not, they were probably in agreement on many political issues now. Certainly, Pavel’s quest for revenge does raise certain existential questions, and make for good fiction regardless of its historical context. But the novel is situated where and when it is for a reason. Ludvik’s bitterness comes from being kicked out of the Party, and then from the years he had to spend as a black insignia soldier, and his subsequent years in the mines. Like Kundera, perhaps, the prime of Ludvik’s life was robbed from him by a political system which he was mostly good to, and by Pavel, both of whom simply wouldn’t take a joke.

* * *

In conclusion, a few things seem quite clear to me. Czech literature is undeniably linked with its historical context—but this is neither bad, nor very different from the literature of other nations and cultures. That said, Czech literature, at least in the small sampling I experienced of its major authors, seems more tied to the political and historical forces in the country’s history than the literature of other cultures. This may be a misconception on my part, but I think is more indicative of the severity of changes in the political situation of the Czech Republic in the twentieth century, and the fact that the regimes were largely foreign. The Nazi and Communist regimes simply made politics a fact of daily life. To try and write a novel set in the Czech Republic without addressing the

historical forces at work at that time seems impossible, for they were simply a fact of daily life. They were a more integral part of daily life because of the totalitarian nature of the regimes, and the tension between personal history and larger political ideas and historical forces can be seen in the protagonists' interactions with their fictional worlds, as set against the background of the history of our world.

I believe Kafka has heavily influenced literature not just in the Czech and German lands but all over the world. Albeit that I could not draw the same connections from Kafka to Kundera and Škvorecký that I could to Hrabal, Hašek, and Havel, both are clearly familiar with him, and there may be some other less evident legacy of Kafka in their work. The connection between Kafka and Hašek seems quite natural, and Hrabal and Havel, while not Kafka's contemporaries, seem to draw heavily on The Trial and the "character without qualities," in their own later work. Joseph K.'s feelings of alienation and detachment in the face of the modern world transform into similar feelings in the face of the Nazi and Communist regimes for the later protagonists. Interestingly, it is the combination of a book not situated in our own reality and the pure history of that reality that combine to influence much of twentieth century Czech fiction, which falls somewhere in between.

Research Evaluation

While I believe I have made a reasonable case here, it was more difficult than I initially thought to link Czech literature to Czech history. I had not expected to encounter such resistance to the idea of historical interpretations of the novels and plays from some members of Czech literary academia. However, I believe my methodology was successful. I combined my own interpretations of the novels and my knowledge of Czech history with supporting or contrasting arguments by Czech literature professors and graduate students. Some of the literary interpretation was my own, while other literary analysis was backed up by one of the Czech literature anthologies. Some specifics of each historical time period were taken from texts on Czech history. I believe the information herein to be wholly accurate, both because of the care of my research and the fact that the paper was overwhelmingly confirmed by Prof. Bilek, an expert in Czech literature and no slouch at Czech history.

Error and bias are sure to be present in my data and analysis. As I said to each of my interviewees, I am not a Czech. I do not have the intrinsic sense of Czech history and literature that they do, and so I am coming from a uniquely American standpoint in my interpretations. I think this worked out in my favor, however, given the resistance to historical interpretations by some of the interviewees. I was able to agree to disagree because for me, as an outsider, the historical and political implications seemed quite clear. Another opportunity for error and bias comes from the fact that I took most of my interviewees' comments as professional opinions, which they were, and superior to my own—though there were many arguments I disagreed with and therefore countered or disregarded in the paper. It is literature, after all, and open to a wide variety of interpretation. I believe the quality of my data and analysis to be good, because all of my data comes from reliable sources, and my

analysis often coincided with their own. In the end, everything herein meets with Prof. Bilek's approval, so nothing is wildly incorrect.

Certainly, there are both objective and subjective values in my research and analysis. It's clear that, as I said, I am bringing my own interpretations, opinions, and assumptions to the paper. That said, most of my research came from reading literature, and objectivity and subjectivity go out the window here. I don't want to go off about Derrida, but each reader necessarily brings a different set of values and experiences to their reading, and so there is no one correct interpretation of any piece of literature, though there are admittedly more widely accepted theories among academics about each piece—although usually, they are not universally accepted, and there are two or three prevalent schools of thought on an author or novel. So objectivity and subjectivity are clearly discernable from one another here, I believe, and are both used appropriately, though drawing the line between the two seems less necessary in fiction, where authors are not held to a standard of objectivity.

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