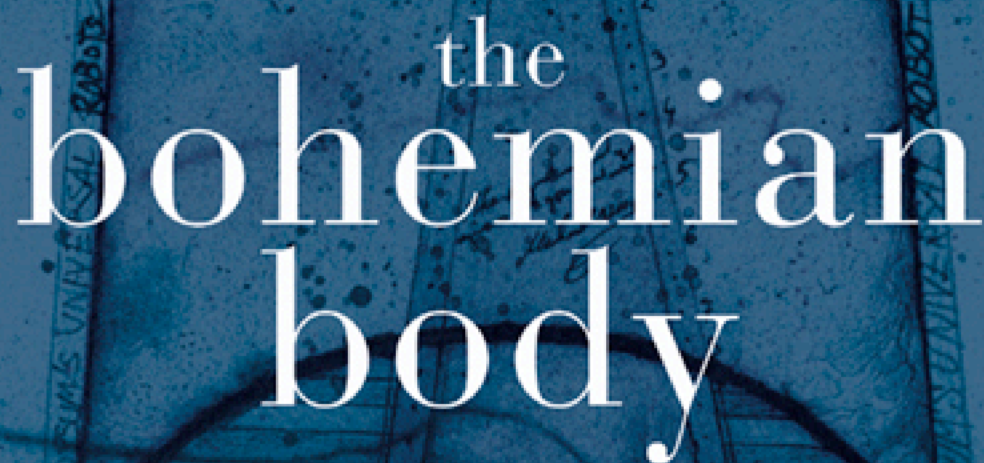

the bohemian body

gender and sexuality in modern czech culture

alfred thomas

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Alfred Thomas

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For Beryl Satter

Bravo, gentlemen literati,
beware of the female sex,
let literature die rather than
take away its virginity!

Jan Neruda

Contents

Preface xi

Introduction 3

1 Maidens, Barbarians, and Vampires: Nationality and Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century Czech Literature 19

2 Gender, Form, and Ethnicity in Nineteenth-Century Czech Women's Writing 60

3 Czech Mates: Homosexuality in Czech Modernist Short Fiction, 1917–20 88

4 Between Paris and Moscow: Sexuality and Politics in Interwar Czech Poetry and Film 104

5 Robots, Golems, and Femmes Fatales: The Drama of Karel Čapek 137

6 Terror and Dream Were My Father and Mother: Postwar Czech Fiction and Film 170

7 "The Unborn": Postwar Feminist Fiction and Film 200

Notes 227
Bibliography 235
Index 249

Preface

Jan Švankmajer's combined live-action and animated feature film *Little Otík (Otesánek)* is typical of modern Czech culture in deploying traditional narratives to tell a new and unfamiliar story. The tale of a childless couple that adopts a tree trunk as their baby is based on a folktale by the nineteenth-century writer K. J. Erben. In this modern retelling of an old story, the tree trunk that turns into an all-devouring monster not only recalls the Prague legend of the golem but also serves as an allegory of the materialist greed inherent in post-Soviet capitalism. Bearing out this political reading of the film are the frequent excerpts from TV commercials in which consumerism appears to run rampant. The corruption of capitalism is embodied by the little girl whose ambition to nurture and feed the insatiable tree trunk becomes as monstrous as the inanimate object itself. In sacrificing the impoverished inhabitants of the building to the greedy maws of the gargantuan Otík, the little girl comes to embody the economic evils of unrestrained capitalism. Moreover, her prostitute-like ruses to ensnare one of the neighbors (a dirty old man) as bait for the tree trunk reinforce the equivalency between out-of-control female sexuality and an unbridled free-market economy.

Such a parallel between the female body and the body politic will become a common feature of this book. Regardless of the political and economic conditions that may have prevailed at any one time, the homology among gender, sexuality, and politics has been a constant in the imaginary of modern Czech culture. In exploring the persistence of this intersection between private and public constructions of identity, this book has sought to revise the more conventional picture of Czech culture as an exclusive reflection of nationalist and ethical values. These constructions of identity have been partly fostered by a critical and readerly tradition that has sought not only to define "Czechness" in essentialist terms but to see it as distinct from modern European culture in

general. This is surely an ironic turn given the equally strong inclination of some scholars to see Czech culture as part and parcel of Western European culture. There is, of course, some truth in both claims; and the purpose of this book is to steer between these two models of identity, one shaped by national concerns, the other by a desire to be part of a larger European picture. In short, this book stresses the common ground, rather than the differences, between Czech and modern European culture and thereby seeks to restore this rich and vibrant culture to the larger mosaic of modernity.

Since this book is primarily directed at an English-speaking audience not necessarily familiar with the languages of Central Europe, I quote entirely in English translation. Unless otherwise stated, these translations are my own. This book has been gestating since I began to teach at Harvard University in 1994, where I taught a survey of modern Czech literature, and has benefited from the insights of the enthusiastic students who took this course both at Harvard (1994–2002) and at the University of California at Berkeley, where I was a visiting professor in the fall semester of 2002. The final version of chapter 6, on postwar Czech fiction and film, was facilitated by the teaching of a graduate seminar at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) on terror and totalitarianism in Central European cinema.

I would like to thank the following friends and scholars for their help with this project: Ondřej Beránek, Maria Němcová Banerjee, the late Karel Brušák, the late Alexander (Sasha) Hammid, Nora Hampl, John Malmstad, Olga Matich, Linda Rugg, Judith Ryan, Stephanie Sandler, Michael Slager, and James S. Williams. Among the other members of the production team at the University of Wisconsin Press who deserve my heartfelt thanks for their commitment to the project are Carla Aspelmeier for her collaboration on the cover image, Amy Johnson for her scrupulous proofreading, and Blythe Woolston for her exhaustive and thorough indexing. Last, but not least, I would like to thank Vera Shack for help in preparing the final manuscript, Raphael Kadushin, the humanities editor at the University of Wisconsin Press, for his great patience and unfailing faith in the project, and Adam Mehring for seeing the book through the final stages of publication.

The Bohemian Body

Introduction

With the rise of national self-awareness in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, the east-central European kingdom of Bohemia, whose political origins lay in the early medieval context of the Holy Roman Empire and whose loss of independence coincided with the Battle of the White Mountain in 1620, began to emerge from the penumbra of political and cultural dependence on Habsburg Austria. At first the so-called National Revival assumed a largely cultural form; but following the revolutionary year of 1848, it began to be reconstructed along ethnic and racial lines. An important instigation for this ethnic construction of identity was provided by the historian František Palacký, whose vastly influential *History of the Czech People* (1848) determined the historic perception of German-Czech relations for generations to follow.

As a consequence of this ethnic polarization, Germans tended to ignore or patronize Czech culture while the Czechs underestimated German cultural influence and emphasized the importance of French influences on the formation of their modern literature. In the story "King Bohusch" (1897) by the Prague-born, German-speaking poet Rainer Maria Rilke, the terrorist Rezek contrasts the overly sophisticated and cynical Czech intelligentsia of the 1890s, enamored of all things French, with the ordinary people, who are still childlike and innocent: "They weren't born yesterday, like the nation, which is still utterly childlike, full of wishes and without a single fulfillment. They became mature overnight. Overripe. . . . One imports everything from Paris: clothes and

convictions, thoughts and inspiration. One was a child yesterday and today one is a young elder—surfeited" (*Two Stories of Prague* 16). In Guillaume Apollinaire's story "The Stroller through Prague" ("Le passant de Prague"; 1910), we hear Francophile sentiments from a Czech who admonishes a French visitor to the city for speaking German instead of his native language: "Speak French, sir, for we hate the Germans much more even than the French do. We detest a race that forces its language on us, profits from our industries and our fertile soil which produces everything: wine, coal, fine jewels, precious metals—everything, except salt. In Prague we speak only Czech. But when you speak French those who know the language will answer you with pleasure" (2).

By the late nineteenth century, however, these nationalist sentiments were being undermined by more complex affiliations that extended beyond traditional Francophilia and the Paris-Prague cultural axis. The 1890s in particular witnessed a rich period of cultural interaction in which Czechs, Germans, and Jews all participated in an active and creative fashion. The young Rilke himself wrote poems in praise of his Czech compatriots, the revivalist dramatist J. K. Tyl and the symbolist poet Julius Zeyer. The poem "To Julius Zeyer" elides Zeyer's Francophilia and cosmopolitanism by emphasizing his role as guide and teacher of the Czech people:

> Master that you are, your people soon
> Will follow your victorious chariot.
> A native breath suffuses all your thought—
> You sing our folklore and the Heimat tune.
>
> Your countrymen do well to strive and not
> To rest their hands, recalling glories past.
> They struggle on, achieving feats that last,
> Proud of themselves and of what elders wrought.
>
> Your people's goals are measured
> For this world and not for distant stars,
> Whose radiance oft induces them to yearn.
>
> Your oriental counsel is well-reasoned:
> Strive ahead but cherish leisure as an art,
> For even in Alahambra's court you learn.
>
> (*Larenopfer* 65)

As Katherine David-Fox has pointed out, the Czechs' nineteenth-century orientation toward France and French culture was complicated

by a "hidden geography" of Central European modernism that connected the cities of Prague, Vienna, and Berlin in a triangular axis of frequently rivalrous cultural allegiances.[1]

Characteristic of this new situation in Czech thought and criticism were the writings of Hubert Gordon Schauer (1862–92). Schauer's influential essay "Our Two Questions" acknowledged that the old model of national resistance was no longer adequate. In the words of Tomáš Vlček: "The goal Schauer laid down corresponded to the goal Czech art actually aimed at. That aim turned out to comprise a process which, in the Bohemian Lands, fundamentally changed the relationship between politics and culture. Instead of the earlier relatively simple and homogenous culture of a National Revival glued together by a unified nationalism, there came onto the scene a pluralist, dialectically determinist culture composed of basic ideological concepts and goals" (108).

Another important critic of the end of the century who recognized the new pluralist pulse of the age was F. X. Šalda (1867–1937). In his essay "The Meaning of Czech Literary History" (1937), Šalda aspires to synthesize inherited national definitions of Czech culture with more cosmopolitan and modernist forces.[2] Šalda's criticism in many ways paralleled the democratic humanism of T. G. Masaryk (1850–1937), who sought to redefine the "meaning" of Czech history as a synthesis of national collectivism and democratic individualism. According to Masaryk, this accommodation of democratic individualism to collective responsibility could be traced back to a long line of national representatives from the fifteenth-century religious reformer Jan Hus and the seventeenth-century Moravian pedagogue Jan Amos Komenský to the revivalist historian Palacký.[3]

At the heart of this tension between individualism and collectivism is the paradox of modernity itself. The rise of nationalism at the end of the eighteenth century witnessed the concomitant emergence of a discourse of human rights and a new emphasis on the dignity of man as an individual. Thus, at the precise moment when the earliest writers of the National Revival began to forge a political sense of their collective identity as Czechs rather than as Bohemians, they were also confronting other constructions of identity such as socialism, feminism, and, somewhat later, a proto–gay rights movement.

I argue here that these forms of identity converged to play a complex and sometimes conflictual role in the formation of a modern and pluralistic culture. In making this claim I depart from standard approaches to

modern Czech culture, which have tended to present it in political or personal, national or individual terms. Such a dichotomous approach is typified by René Wellek's article "The Two Traditions of Czech Literature" (1963), which isolates two discrete traditions along Aristotelian lines, one "lyrical," "poetic," and "personal," the other "intellectual," "rational," and "philosophical."[4] According to this taxonomy, the great Romantic poem *May* (1836) by Karel Hynek Mácha belongs to the personal and poetic category, whereas the writings of Masaryk are characterized as rational and philosophical. But is this subjective-objective opposition as clear-cut as Wellek would have us believe? If Mácha's poetry is lyrical and personal, how do we account for the fact that much of it is also patriotic, including the jingoistic prelude to *May*? And how do we explain Mácha's involvement in the nascent Czech theater of the 1830s if not in political terms? Conversely, just how "rational" and "philosophical" is Masaryk's account of Czech history as innately democratic? Is this not a continuation of, as well as a departure from, the discourse of nationalism it seeks to revise? To be sure, nothing could be more subjective than nationalism; and it is no coincidence that the metaphors and images deployed in nationalist discourse are so often familial, gendered, and sexual. As in Europe as a whole, in nineteenth-century Czech culture the nation is invariably gendered as a protective mother or a vulnerable virgin while the foreigner is personified as a rapacious male invader.

Although recent scholarship has abandoned Wellek's broad synchronic approach in favor of a microcosmic attention to particular periods, these works of criticism continue to distinguish between personal and political constructions of identity as if there were no fluidity between these categories. An inevitable casualty of this dichotomous approach is a blind spot in discussing questions of gender and sexuality, precisely those constructions of identity that mediate between self and society. For example, Vladimír Macura's discussion of the cult of Libuše and the "Amazon on the barricades" motif popular during the 1848 insurrection overlooks the role played by feminism and female subjectivity in the development of these gendered symbols.[5] Moreover, his discussion of Karolína Světlá's use of the Amazon motif in her story "From the Spirit of the Barricades" does not take into account this writer's subjective and feminist appropriation of what is essentially a male construct.

Questions of gender and sexual difference have also been elided in scholarship dealing with more recent phases of Czech literature. Once again this elision derives from the persistence of a subjective-social

opposition in Czech literary criticism in which political and personal constructions of identity are deemed to exist in mutually separate and exclusive domains. This tendency has been reinforced by a taxonomy of nineteenth-century Czech culture that distinguishes diachronically between "nationalist" and "modernist" phases. But just how useful and accurate are such hermetic categories? Jana Janáčková's study of nineteenth-century Czech literature from romanticism to modernism distinguishes between nationalist and modernist phases even though, as we have seen, a poet like Mácha cannot be subsumed entirely under the rubric of nationalism.[6] Robert Pynsent adheres to a similar bipartite literary model in his use of the terms "nationality" and "personality," the former represented by the Slavophile Kollár, the latter by the Decadents Karásek and Procházka. But as Pynsent himself has elsewhere shown, the Czech Decadents were far from apolitical;[7] and, as we shall see in this study, Kollár's nationalism was deeply colored by a Romantic subjectivity that insisted on gendering Slavdom as female.

More recent criticism has begun to challenge the simplistic opposition between poetics and politics in Czech culture. In *The Deserts of Bohemia*, Peter Steiner signals his departure from the Prague School aesthetic approach to literature with an account of modern Czech fiction as innately political.[8] Although this statement is a patent truism, Steiner is correct to restate it as a necessary riposte to the fallacious assertion that it is possible to write outside the domain of politics and ideology. Now that the Communist era has come to an end, it seems fair to me to remind that generation that there is no space outside of ideology and that all writing is political in the sense that it is historically and culturally located at a particular time and in a particular place.

There is a pervasive argument in more traditional academic circles that introducing questions of gender and sexuality into the discussion of literature is in itself a new kind of political orthodoxy, a form of "political correctness" originating in American universities from which Central and Eastern European literatures—formerly burdened by the weight of Marxist ideology—should be completely liberated. I would argue that this kind of elision is utopian and—as is usually the case with utopian assertions—coercive, and that a true definition of a liberated and democratic culture is the pluralist coexistence of more than one approach to the study of that culture. It seems to me that bringing questions of gender and sexuality to the study of modern Czech literature is not necessarily reductive and limiting; on the contrary, important and

crucial insights can be achieved that a more conservative approach will simply overlook.

The claim that personality and politics are always necessarily implicated in each other is relevant not only to Czech writers but also to Prague-German writers, including Rilke, Franz Kafka, Egon Erwin Kisch, Max Brod, and Franz Werfel. In his book *Prague Territories,* Scott Spector explores the continuity between cultural innovation and national conflict in fin-de-siècle Prague with special reference to the so-called Prague School of German-Jewish writers of whom Kafka is justly the most famous.[9] Spector shows how these writers with no apparent anchoring in a particular cultural-political identity and who are usually held up as supreme exponents of modernist alienation can be better understood in the context of turn-of-the century Prague: an immensely rich and deeply conflicted site of ethnic and linguistic tensions in which Germans, Czechs, and Jews struggled to coexist within the political framework of the Habsburg monarchy. Spector's book contrasts the innovativeness of the Jewish circle of Prague writers with the Czech nationalism of their German and Czech counterparts as if the non-Jewish German and Czech writers of Prague automatically and invariably aligned themselves with nineteenth-century nationalism. The truth is far more complicated. Many Czech writers had ceased to identify with a monolithic model of nationalism by the second half of the nineteenth century and participated in a Decadent movement that made Czech culture more cosmopolitan than it had been since the late fourteenth century. The same is true of the non-Jewish writer Rainer Maria Rilke, who left Prague as a young man precisely because he felt suffocated by the parochialism inherent both in Czech and German nationalist ideologies.

Spector's claims for the specificity of the Prague circle could be equally well applied to Prague writers beyond the German-speaking Jews he makes his focus. What the Prague generation between 1900 and 1938 seemed to share was a common sense of nonbelonging and a quest for a pluralist identity that would circumvent the monistic limitations of nineteenth-century liberalism and nationalism. Although the claim could be made that the formation of an independent Czechoslovakia in 1918 caused Czech writers to be less alienated than their Jewish and/or German-speaking compatriots, their emergence as truly cosmopolitan writers—especially during and after the Decadence—ironically rendered avant-garde Czech writers as vulnerable to the uncertainties and vicissitudes of modernism as their German-Jewish brethren. For

example, Paul Kornfeld's expressionist desire to find a kinship with mankind regardless of differences in ethnicity, language, and nationality finds a parallel in the early verse of the Czech Proletarian Poets whose professed love of humanity was influenced by the idealism of the French Vitalists Charles Vildrac and Georges Duhamel, both of whom visited Prague in 1920. Here the cultural map of Prague becomes even more complicated and protean in encompassing not only a German-Czech-Jewish connection but also a Franco–Central European axis. It is no coincidence that Kafka's writings became so influential in interwar France and were instrumental in shaping the existentialist ideas of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. Although Kafka's work was little known in Czechophone circles between the wars, it nonetheless shared many of the proto-existentialist anxieties of Czech as well as French writers. For example, Kafka's excruciatingly painful exploration of the contours of his own troubled sexuality in stories such as "The Description of a Struggle" (in which Prague is most explicitly invoked as a territorial space), "In the Penal Colony," and "Letter to His Father" recalls the early introspective and neurasthenic stories of the Czech-Jewish (and homosexual) writer Richard Weiner who left Bohemia as a young man and settled in Paris (see chapter 3).

A similar desire to transcend the barriers erected by ethnic and linguistic difference can be glimpsed in the early Prague poems and stories of Rainer Maria Rilke. Several of Rilke's Prague poems were dedicated to the Czech literary figures J. K. Tyl, and Julius Zeyer. Rilke's story "The Siblings" ends on a note of hopeful rapprochement between Germans and Czechs in the nascent friendship between the German lodger Ernst Land and Luisa, the orphaned daughter of his Czech landlady. But the affinities between these Prague writers go even further. Kafka's flight from the conflicts within his family and within the ethnically strained city of Prague into the domain of writing finds a parallel in Rilke's actual departure from Prague and his subsequent homeless wanderings across Europe. And just as Kafka sought and found a voice that transcended a localized cultural and geographic territoriality, so did Rilke shed his parochial concerns to blossom into one of the greatest modernist poets of the twentieth century. Ironically, Kafka's and Rilke's universal achievement derives from their shared status as Prague writers struggling to negotiate the limitations imposed on them by the burdens of cultural marginality (Prague as the second city to imperial Vienna and later as the capital of a small nation) and the vexed political and

ethnic tensions inherent in geographic centrality. It is precisely Prague's geographic interstitiality and its cultural liminality that determined what Spector sees as the "simultaneous centrality and marginality" of the Prague circle, a paradox that equally characterizes the efforts of so many of the Prague writers—Czech and German as well as Jewish—who were active between the end of the century and World War II. Whereas Kafka scholarship has moved from an emphasis on its allegorical universality to a more microcosmic and contextual focus on local and national politics in east-central Europe in general and turn-of-the-century Prague in particular, the present study attempts to move in the opposite direction by lifting modern Czech literature out of the narrow political and national context in which it has usually been placed and seeing it in a larger European and modern(ist) context. And where Spector addresses the political implications of the German-Jewish writers' subjective experience, I focus on the subjective implications of a literature that has been interpreted largely in terms of politics and nationalist ideology.[10]

If questions of gender and sexual difference have usually been elided in Czech literary criticism, this is not because these categories of identity are inherently less significant or relevant to modern Czech culture than nationality but simply because they have been deemed to be so by nationalist and—later—Communist literary canons. In part this hierarchization of values proceeds from a deep-rooted misogyny and homophobia in Czech culture that is all the more insidious since some women and homosexual writers have been included in the standard histories of Czech literature. What is at stake here is not so much the exclusion of female and gay writers from the canon but the subordination of their gender and sexuality to their national status. This would explain why some female writers are more prominently represented in the literary canon than others. One reason why the playwright Gabriela Preissová (see chapter 2) is still under-represented in studies of Czech literature is that she not only espoused strongly feminist views but dramatized them in an uncompromising and public fashion, most notably in her naturalistic plays.

It has sometimes been argued that there is less discrimination against women in Czech culture because women played an important role as writers and as symbols of the nation's struggle for survival. But here one needs to distinguish between women as subjects in their own right and as objects of male ideology. Recent feminist studies of Czech

culture tend to focus on women writers and the complicated relationship between gender and nationalism.[11] In this sense Czech literary criticism is still in the mold of 1970s Anglo-American feminist studies, which were largely concerned with bringing neglected women writers into the academic canon. But more recent feminism has widened its focus to address not only the phenomenon of women's writing but also to critique male writing. My aim is not merely to bring neglected Czech women writers to the attention of an anglophone audience but also to reexamine the work of Czech male writers through a feminist lens.

Some of the most prominent Czech writers of the nineteenth century were women. Although they were welcomed by their male contemporaries into literary circles, this had more to do with the male symbolization of women as representatives of the national awakening than with an innately Czech tradition of tolerance and democracy. By the twentieth century the inclination to equate women with the national struggle was being superseded by a more democratic and feminist criticism as typified by the writings of Masaryk.[12] Yet this kind of revisionism is sometimes all the more insidious in emphasizing the transcendental universality of female experience rather than treating it microcosmically and historically.

Although much twentieth-century Czech criticism would appear to be progressive and democratic, this body of writing has to be read alongside an equally important tradition of imaginative works (opera, drama, poetry, fiction) in which women are represented in a far more conservative fashion. In this tradition that extends from the ballads of Karel Jaromír Erben to Milan Kundera's novels, misogyny is all the more pervasive for deploying gender and sexuality to make claims not only about national essence but also about absolute truth and universal experience. Many of these works have entered the collective consciousness of the nation, whether as childhood reading (Erben's ballads) or as manifestations of postmodernism (Kundera's novels).

Admittedly, such conservative attitudes are not limited to men. An important feature of Czech women's historic oppression has been their frequent collusion in their own discrimination, a problem highlighted by the dramatist Gabriela Preissová in her correspondence with female friends in the 1890s (chapter 2). The same kind of internalized misogyny characterizes many responses by contemporary Czech women, including some of the writers discussed in chapter 7 who equate their own identity with their biological role as mothers and their symbolic role as

"mothers" of the nation. When such women protest against the problem of women by invoking the problem of men, they are not actually making a point about gender equality but, rather, asserting their subordination to men under the rubric of the national-socialist collective.[13] As Jiřina Šiklová has pointed out, women's rights have to be seen in the larger context of human rights, this precisely being the reason that women's rights suffered under the Communist regime.[14]

The subsuming of alternative forms of subjectivity under the categories of nationalism and socialism thus proceeds less from a descriptive than from a prescriptive response to historical experience. What such a point-of-view ends up asking is less "What is a subject?" than "What should a subject be?"; and the answer is invariably reductive when it ignores how identity is constituted not simply by the oppositions "Czech"/"foreign" but also by "man"/"woman" and "homo-/heterosexual." The same kind of limitation has historically beset evaluations of African American culture in the twentieth century. Black women writers such as Toni Morrison have been criticized by black male critics for lending the same kind of weight to feminist as to black, nationalist identity. It is only since the 1970s that black women writers have been able to write about their identity as black women with relative impunity.[15]

Symptomatic of this kind of elision has been the tendency to repudiate alternative discourses access to the debate about the native culture and thus to prevent a healthy pluralist discussion about its meaning. At its most extreme, this territorial mentality invests certain works in the Czech literary canon with a quasi-sacred significance. The private reading of literature becomes inseparable from collective experience, perhaps to a much greater extent than in the West. But it also takes a more subtle, if insidious, form: if there has been a symbiosis between politics and poetics in modern Czech culture, there has also been a continuum between politics and literary criticism. As in mainstream political life, the most effective way to deal with critical difference has been to ignore it. Just as the Communist authorities airbrushed political undesirables from history by doctoring photographs and documents, so too have critics been prone to elide discourses with which they do not agree, especially those that appear to emanate from abroad, like feminism and deconstruction.

In reality, of course, these allegedly alien discourses are part of a common Western tradition in which the Czechs have historically played a crucial and integral role. Feminism is not a recent foreign importation; it has its own deep roots in Czech history and culture dating back

to the nineteenth century when women became active participants in the emancipation movement.[16] Analogously, deconstruction and post-structuralism cannot be separated from the structuralist principles of the Prague Circle of Linguists, which arose in the 1920s. It is only since the Communist takeover of power in 1948 that the links with the West, which allowed these common ideas of modernity to flourish in east-central Europe, were severed. Since 1989 Czech women in particular have rediscovered their Western European inheritance and have begun to participate in international debates about gender and feminism. Gradually the nineteenth-century focus on women's rights will be superseded by more modern and contemporary definitions of gender currently being addressed by feminist critics in Great Britain and the United States.[17]

Poised against the fallacy of a teleological model of culture and the concomitant assumption that neutral, "objective" consensus is a feasible project, I do not intend for this book to be a conventional "history" of modern Czech literature—or for that matter of Czech women's writing—but a series of close readings of salient works of Czech culture from the beginnings of the National Revival to the year of the Velvet Revolution, 1989, in which questions of gender and sexuality loom large. I have conceived my book in this fashion for the conscious reason that histories of national cultures tend to be predicated on the assumption that the cataloging of events and movements in a linear, diachronic fashion is an objective, comprehensive, and nonideological way of going about things. But such is hardly ever the case; particularly with respect to a highly politicized culture like Czech.

"Histories" of culture tend to reinforce the illusory sense of a teleological trajectory and normative assumptions of continuity. Such a history of modern Czech literature would be to subscribe to these assumptions. Instead, I propose a series of nodal readings of salient texts, opera, and film—some frankly canonical, some usually elided by critics—to highlight the consistent convergence among gender, sexuality, and politics in modern Czech culture. Thus my selection of texts has been largely determined by the desire to demonstrate the interconnectedness between these categories of identity. In some cases this involves a reassessment of works already familiar to an anglophone readership, such as the novels of Milan Kundera; in other cases my revisionist approach entails the discussion of works not only unfamiliar to Western readers but also works often neglected by Czech critics, such as the fiction of Richard

Weiner. In all cases, however, my concern has been to dismantle the fallacious opposition between personal and political categories of identity in traditional accounts of Czech culture. In so doing I intend to restore modern Czech culture to its rightful place as a pluralist phenomenon in the framework of European experience.

From the National Revival to the Velvet Revolution (1774–1989)

This study begins with the National Revival at the end of the eighteenth century, not simply because this is when modern Czech literature is officially supposed to begin but because it is precisely at this historical juncture that personal and political aspects of identity become deeply and inextricably implicated in each other. Prior to the modern period, Czech identity tended to be defined in terms of class and language rather than race and sexuality.[18] The so-called *Dalimil Chronicle* (ca. 1314), written on behalf of the Czech-speaking gentry, was the first systematic attempt by a Czech writer to construct a collective sense of identity based on linguistic and cultural difference from the German norm. This tendency reached its high point in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries when the moderate Utraquist nobility established its political and cultural dominance in the Bohemian Lands.[19] During this period, religious works such as the *Kralice Bible* (1579–88) helped foster a strong sense of national identity along class-based and linguistic lines. The Renaissance nobleman Václav Hájek z Libočan (d. 1553) reinforced this patriotic tradition with his *Czech Chronicle* (1541), a work of great historical inaccuracy but a source of considerable influence on the revivalists in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. During the Counter-Reformation, following the Battle of the White Mountain (1620) and the loss of national independence, Bohemian patriotism did not die out altogether but was preserved in the scholarship of the Jesuit priest and antiquarian Bohuslav Balbín (1621–88).

In the modern period this notion of geopolitical identity was transformed into a nationalist ideology based on racial as well as linguistic difference. At first it assumed a purely scholarly and antiquarian form in the first phase of the National Revival (1774–1800).[20] Writers during this phase tended to be grammarians and numismatists who simply aspired to retrieve the Czech language from the obscurity and neglect into which it had fallen in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The

most important Czech scholar of this generation was undoubtedly Josef Dobrovský (1753–1829), who began his professional life as a biblical scholar and then turned to historical studies of Czech literature and, finally, to Czech prosody and grammar. In his *Bohemian Prosody* he advocated a natural accentual meter based on the trochaic rhythm of Old Czech poetry and rejected verse based on the quantity of syllables rather than the stress *(časomíra)*. The second phase of the Revival (1800–20) consisted of modest and largely undistinguished attempts at recreating a national literature. Foremost among these poets was the Thám School or *thámovci,* who contributed to Václav Thám's (1765–1816) two-part anthology or almanac, *Poems in Verse* (1785). The second group of poets, the Puchmajer School *(puchmajerovci),* wrote much more varied and talented verse, a great deal of which was published in five almanacs edited by Antonín Jaroslav Puchmajer (1769–1820) and which appeared between 1795 and 1814. The main aim of Puchmajer was to fill in the perceived gaps in Czech literature.

By the third (Romantic) phase of the Revival (1820–48), however, the reconstruction of Czech literature had begun to assume a more political form. The most significant figures of this generation were Josef Jungmann (1773–1847), whose five-volume explicatory dictionary (1835–39) has never been superseded; Václav Hanka (1791–1861); Jan Kollár (1793–1852); and Karel Hynek Mácha (1810–36). This period was dominated by the creed of Panslavism, whose main exponent, the Slovak poet Jan Kollár, treated the Slavic race as a kind of chosen people with a special attachment to peace, an innate sense of democracy, and a love of song and poetry.

Following the revolutionary year of 1848, this monolithic model of Panslavism split into various visions of the nation's future. The Old Czechs, led by the historian František Palacký, envisaged the Czechs within a larger Danubian confederacy under the leadership of Austria, while the Young Czechs were somewhat more radical in their pursuit of national autonomy. At about the same time, Božena Němcová attempted to represent Czech folkloric themes and motifs in terms of the new democratic ideals emanating from France, including feminism. In fact, national and cosmopolitan elements had intermingled in the work of Czech writers well before the consolidation of the National Revival in 1858. Karel Hynek Mácha, who was steeped in German and Polish romanticism, may be said to have set the cosmopolitan train in motion,

but even prior to the publication of his poem *May*, Josef Jungmann had undertaken his important and groundbreaking translations of Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Chateaubriand's *Atala*.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, a further cosmopolitan trend in Czech literature was represented by the poet and prose writer Jan Neruda (1834–91), who hailed from the urban proletariat and became famous as the chronicler of bourgeois life in the closed community of the Prague Lesser Town. But this did not mean that nationalism was eclipsed altogether in his writings. As we shall see in chapter 1, Neruda was unable to escape the heavily gendered treatment of national identity characteristic of previous Czech literature and perpetuated many of its patterns of thought. As he became older, Neruda became more conservative and nationalist in contrast to his espousal of political radicalism and cultural cosmopolitanism as a young man.

Indeed, the 1880s in Bohemia witnessed the so-called Neo-national Revival, itself a reaction to the cosmopolitanism of the Czech symbolist movement. This decade saw the creation of a National Theater built by public subscription (1881) and the splitting of Prague University into two separate German- and Czech-speaking institutions. There was an analogous neo-revivalist movement in the visual arts and literature, exemplified by the historical fiction of Alois Jirásek. But by the 1890s the pendulum of Czech literature was already swinging in the opposite direction, toward subjectivism and internationalism. The Decadent poets of the time reacted strongly against what they perceived as the constricting parochialism and social conservatism of the Neo-revival and celebrated cosmopolitanism and personal sexual liberation. But, paradoxically, even as the Decadents Karásek and Procházka aspired to be cosmopolitan individualists with no parochial agenda, the more the nationalist cast of thought reasserted itself in their writings. The Czech Decadents' evangelical ambition to jettison all vestiges of national parochialism in order to throw themselves into the arms of cosmopolitanism was in this sense merely the obverse of the characteristically revivalist practice of using literature to speak from the pulpit.

Chapter 1 charts the correlation in nineteenth-century Czech literature between nationality and sexuality in the male imaginary. At the heart of this equivalency is the representation of woman as a sexual object. Moving from male to female subjectivity, chapter 2 addresses a similar dialectic among ethnicity, gender, and form in the work of the three most important nineteenth-century Czech women writers. The most

significant of these was Němcová. The narratives that she inherited from the national tradition were deeply permeated with patriarchal assumptions about woman's normative status as an obedient wife and mother. Karel Jaromír Erben's folk ballads, which Němcová knew intimately and deeply admired, were typical of the way men conventionally perceived and represented gender difference: if men were associated with the mind, women were equated with the body; if men were rational, women were irrational; if men were ethically upright, women were always vulnerable to moral corruption. Němcová set about dismantling these traditional male assumptions about women by rewriting Erben's narratives. But this was easier said than done. The national folk material she inherited from Erben implied an essentialist vision of identity; and short of repudiating the genre of the folktale altogether, Němcová was unable to shed many of the essentialist assumptions that underpinned it. There is, thus, a tension in her stories between her attempt to represent village life in terms of her subjective experience as a woman and the social representation of the village as a collective idyll transcending differences in gender and class. I would even claim that this same tension between natural and constructed visions of sexual and generic identity has continued to define discussions on the subject up to the present day.

If nineteenth-century women writers were penalized by critics for departing from prescribed gender roles, the Decadent male poets of the 1890s paid an analogous price for asserting their homosexual difference from a fixed heterosexual norm. In England, Oscar Wilde was consciously subverting the positivist belief in an irreducible moral core to personality by highlighting the hypocritical discrepancy between public and private morality. For Wilde, as Jonathan Dollimore has argued, the moral self was nothing more than a juridical sham, a coercive means of restricting sexual difference and deviation from an arbitrarily enforced heterosexuality.[21] In Bohemia, Jiří Karásek ze Lvovic was attempting an analogous critique of bourgeois morality. But his principal target was the Czech nation itself, which he perceived as coercive rather than liberating, a narrow-minded creed that placed the individual within a constricting monolingual and monocultural straitjacket. For Karásek, subjectivity was a tool with which to dismantle or deconstruct national identity. For him, as for Wilde and the European Decadents, aesthetics and homosexuality went hand in hand, guarantors of individual freedom against the tyranny of nationalism and bourgeois morality.

The principal difference between Wilde and the French gay novelist André Gide, as Dollimore has argued, is that the former undermined Victorian morality in the name of a modern cultural discourse of identity while the latter invoked a traditional discourse of the essentialist self. Chapter 3 examines two Czech short stories about homosexual identity that are located ambiguously between these cultural and essentialist polarities of identity: Karásek's "The Legend of Sodoma" (1920) and Richard Weiner's "Indifferent Spectator" (1917). Writers on Karásek and Weiner tend to emphasize their status as "outsiders" within the Czech literature: Karásek is seen as "aesthetic" while Weiner is presented as "obscure" and "difficult," claims that place them outside the mainstream of national literature. But this exclusion from the mainstream is not simply motivated by questions of style but also by questions of content. For in failing to address these writers' work in all their ambiguous complexity, critics elide its homosexual content.

Chapter 4 examines an analogous tension between sexuality and politics in the culture of the interwar avant-garde. Focusing on key poems by Wolker, Seifert, Hora, and Nezval, it reveals a profound continuity between personal and political constructions of the self in which sexual and social themes become inextricably implicated in each other. A similar desire to dismantle the false opposition between social and subjective constructions of identity informs my reading of Karel Čapek's plays in chapter 5.

Those Czech writers and artists who survived World War II are often said to espouse a subjective stance as a way of expressing their disillusionment with the lost ideals of the avant-garde and subsequent political events following the Communist takeover of 1948. Chapter 6 argues that this view of the postwar cultural scene is more complicated than has been understood and that there is a continuum in the prose fiction and film of the time between masculinity and politics. Focusing on women's prose fiction and film in the same period, chapter 7 examines what it means to be a feminist writer in a culture where the interests of women have been historically subordinated to the interests of the nation and how certain Czech prose writers and filmmakers struggled to reconcile those traditional interests with their personal experience as women.

1

Maidens, Barbarians, and Vampires

Nationality and Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century Czech Literature

The Czech writers of the first two phases of the National Revival (1774–1820) tended to look back to the medieval and early-modern periods for their inspiration and appeared to establish a congenial compromise between their personal and political selves. As the nineteenth century proceeded, however, an increasing gulf emerged between the subjective imagination of the male writer and the social role he was expected to perform as the representative of an oppressed nation. Until fairly recently, Czech literary criticism has tended to emphasize this latter role, prescribing as much as describing the social position of the writer in a small-nation culture. In the last few years, however, there have been some attempts to revise this monolithic model by tracing a transition from "nationality" to "personality" in nineteenth-century Czech literature.[1] But this process was rarely as clear-cut and as diachronically smooth as it would seem. Throughout the nineteenth century, political and personal constructions of identity continued to be implicated in each other. The cosmopolitan phase of Czech literature, represented primarily by the realist fiction of Jan Neruda, is usually seen

as the turning point from nationality to personality. In fact, there is no simple opposition between these categories either before or after Neruda. Mácha's Romantic poetry precedes Neruda, but it is almost wholly concerned with questions of subjectivity, while the Decadents, usually seen as purely subjective in their interests, did not reject nationality altogether but attempted to define it in new ways.

An important area in which these categories intersect is in the representation of gender and sexual relations. An important reason for this intersection in the nineteenth century was that notions of sexuality and nationality shared the same essentialist assumptions: ethnic relationships were deemed as natural a bond as the familial kinship between a mother and a child or a wife and a husband. Such essentialist assumptions have been questioned in recent studies of national identity by Ernest Gellner and Eric Hobsbawm that emphasize its status as a historical construct. Benedict Anderson has highlighted the deficiencies of this purely constructionist model of national identity by showing that Gellner's notion of invention necessarily implies the existence of its immutable and fixed opposite: the true community. The virtue of Anderson's imagined community is that it collapses the simplistic constructionist-essentialist opposition and, in so doing, implicitly demonstrates the continuity among national, gender, and sexual identity. Thus, for Anderson, nationalism is deeply implicated in the relations between men and women. Just as sexual and gender relations are inherently patriarchal, so is the ethnic bond between compatriots profoundly homosocial: "Regardless of the actual inequality and exploration that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings" (16).

Given the shared essentialist assumptions about sexual and national identity, it is not surprising that these categories became interchangeable. In fact, in the nineteenth century nations were often gendered as "male" or "female" according to their perceived political strength. Thus the weaker and poorer peoples like the Irish and the Slavs were generally personified as female, while the strong and wealthy nations like Britain and Germany were masculinized. The feminization of nationhood, however, did not always connote weakness or vulnerability. The French Republic was personified as "Marianne" and imperial Britain as "Britannia." Thus "female" was an ambiguous signifier that

designated weakness and strength, humiliation and pride, virginity and motherhood. In the case of small and politically weak nations, such as nineteenth-century Ireland and Bohemia, these opposite connotations could even coexist. Catholic Ireland was personified by its adherents both as a pure maiden threatened by alien oppressors and as a strong mother who protected the people against the enemy.[2] As one might expect from Catholic Bohemia, the same gendered dichotomy was applied to the Czech nation in the nineteenth century.

In fact, this virgin-mother split image has its imaginary origins in pre-modern Bohemian legend such as the War of the Maidens, in which the female followers of Vlasta rise up against their fathers and brothers and are ultimately defeated. The earliest complete treatment of this episode is found in the early-fourteenth-century *Dalimil Chronicle.* This account was probably invented by Cosmas, author of the twelfth-century *Chronica Boëmorum,* based on the classical legend of the Amazons. The Latin author treats it in the ludic spirit of a fertility rite and concludes it with the assertion that the failure of the rebellion marked the transition not only from myth to history, but from a matriarchal to a patriarchal society.[3] The later Czech chronicler expands the episode into eight chapters and invents some elements, such as the episode of the entrapment of the knight Ctirad by the cunning maiden Šárka, in order to give the impression of a real flow of historical events. In so doing he suggests that the female rebellion was an aberration from a patriarchal norm rather than an organic and sequential process, a view he drives home by ordaining a grisly fate of mutilation for the female rebels. This subordination of random events to a uniformly patriarchal ideology is consistent with the author's insistence that the Czech language (as opposed to Latin and German) and the Czech-speaking nobility provide the sole key to the meaning of Bohemian history, a belief that he asserts in the prologue where he contrasts his own intention of providing a "complete meaning" to events with the "empty speeches" of his Latin precursor.

That the later author does not ignore Cosmas's brief fable of the Bohemian Maidens altogether, however, reinforces both his dependence on his Latin source and his basic acceptance of Cosmas's point that the rebellion marked the beginning of the absolute rule of men. The common link between Cosmas and the later author is that patriarchy—whether understood in terms of the rule of kings or magnates—is normative. Thus our Czech writer did not simply invent a new model of

Bohemian identity but refashioned a preexisting one to fit his ideological purpose as the representative of the Czech-speaking gentry.

These legends were reinvented throughout the early-modern period, most notably in Hájek's *Czech Chronicle,* which identifies Libuše as the "mother" of her people.[4] The conceit of Bohemia as female proved tenacious, aided no doubt by the grammatical gender of the Latin word. Drawing on the Aristotelian distinction between male reason and female instinct, a seventeenth-century elegy on the defeat of the Bohemian nation in 1620 ("O Bohemia") equates the unfettered nation with a woman devoid of reasoning powers:

> Bohemia was bare of men
> in distant pagan days;
> had never known since time began,
> the touch of reason's ways.

After the defeat of 1620, the virginal Bohemia has been deflowered by foreign mercenaries:

> They swarmed into Bohemia
> to seize our native soil,
> to grind the Czechs to slavery
> and live from others' toil;
> to impose their will upon the land,
> to rob, to plunder her;
> and steadfastly they seek this end
> to dominate Bohemia,
> or else ravish her.[5]

The personification of Bohemia as a maiden was reprised during the early National Revival when it assumed various guises. One of the most popular forms was the classical Amazon warrior, a motif whose origins lie in Homer's warrior queen Penthesilea. This classical typology was revived by the Renaissance as typified by Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene;* and it reemerged in the neo-classical period, most memorably in Heinrich von Kleist's tragic drama *Penthesilea* (1806). In the Pre-March period (1830–48) the Amazon motif achieved its political apotheosis in the female personification of the bare-breasted Liberty bestriding the barricades, a subject made famous by the Romantic painter Delacroix at the time of the overthrow of the Bourbon monarchy in 1830. This revolutionary motif was appropriated and adapted to suit Czech political

conditions. Vladimír Macura has traced the acculturation of the classical Amazon as the armed *Slovanka* (Slavic Woman), popular during the 1848 insurrection.[6] Meanwhile, the rediscovery of the mythological figures Libuše and Vlasta coincided with the first phase of the National Revival (1774–1800), when writers began to look back to the Bohemian past and sought renewed meaning in its legendary and historical characters. Although the early revivalists were Catholics, they nevertheless reinvented these historical personages to fit their Enlightenment principles of liberty, fraternity, and equality. Perhaps the most notable literary example of this reinvention of the past in the ideological interests of the present is Josef Kajetán Tyl's patriotic drama *Jan Hus* (1848), which transforms the religious martyr into a political fighter for democracy and national liberation.[7]

Another feature of this reinvention of the past is the legend of the Czech Amazons transmitted to the revivalists by *The Dalimil Chronicle* and Hájek's *Czech Chronicle. The Dalimil Chronicle* was reprinted during the revolutionary year of 1848, revealing the extent to which interpretations of the past, however partial from a historical and ideological perspective, continued to exert a powerful influence on the contemporary political situation. But even prior to 1848, the late-medieval and early-modern legends became a source of renewed inspiration. Václav Thám's play "Šárka or The Maidens' Battle near Prague" was performed at the Prague Bouda (Hut) Theater (1786–89), which was founded by a group of actors formerly employed at the Nostitz Theater for the regular performance of works in the Czech language. A few years later, in 1792, Prokop Šedivý's chivalric romance *The Czech Amazons or the Maidens' War under the Rule of the Heroine Vlasta* appeared in Prague to considerable acclaim. The most important early revivalist treatment of the War of the Bohemian Maidens was the long heroic-comic poem *Děvín* (1805) by Šebastián Hněvkovský (1770–1847), a follower of Puchmajer. Continuing the tradition of reinventing old legends to suit the political and ideological needs of contemporary audiences, Hněvkovský personifies the Bohemian Maidens as the Enlightenment ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity. In their capacity as patriotic heroes they emblematize the spirit of liberty and defiance of absolutist tyranny; but *qua* women they pose a potential threat to the male order. Hněvkovský circumvents this problem by writing his poem in the mock-heroic vein and treating the rebellious Maidens in a skeptical, humorous fashion. Moreover, his harmonious denouement, in which the men and the Maidens establish a

truce, marks a significant departure from the violent ending of *The Dalimil Chronicle,* where the female rebellion is bloodily crushed and their dismembered bodies thrown from the ramparts of their castle. Hněvkovský's ending thus serves as an Enlightenment fantasy of brotherhood and freedom realized in the final rapprochement between the sexes.

In general, the early revivalists regarded the medieval legend of the Bohemian Maidens as evidence of the love of freedom as personified by their leader Vlasta rather than as embodiments of Czech nationalism. It was, in fact, only with the appropriation of the medieval legends for nationalist purposes that the mythic foundress of Prague became synonymous with the aspirant Czech nation. This national apotheosis of Libuše began with the so-called *Forged Manuscripts* and became standard features of later works of Czech culture, such as *The Judgement of Libuše* (1861) by Josef Václav Frič, the opera*'s Libuše's Marriage* (1835) by František Škroup, and Bedřich Smetana's patriotic opera *Libuše,* which was premiered at the opening of the National Theater in Prague in 1881. In this respect, the early revivalist treatment of these female mythic characters differed significantly from the later Revival and Neo-revival in maintaining a rococo lightness and skepticism in their treatment of the legendary heroines. Later in the century they were reinvented as personifications of Czech nationalism. In *The Forged Manuscripts,* for example, Libuše becomes a symbol of national aspirancy, with even her judgments based on a democratic consensus of the people's votes.[8]

Evidence of the fact that these female figures were not originally synonymous with Czech nationalism was the popularity of Libuše and Vlasta among German writers in the nineteenth century. As early as 1779, Johann-Gottfried Herder refers to the legend of Libuše in his poem "The Table of Princes."[9] A few years later appeared prose versions of the Libuše legend titled "Libusza, Duchess of Bohemia" (1791) and "The Daughters of Krok, Princesses of Bohemia" (1792). Inspired by a visit to Bohemia, the poet Clemens Brentano published a lengthy epic poem entitled "The Foundation of Prague" (1815) that introduces the figure of Libuše. Other works of German literature dealing with this mythic material were Egon Ebert's patriotic epic poem "Vlasta," Adolf Meissner's "Vlasta," and—most famous of all—Franz Grillparzer's tragic drama *Libussa* (1872). Ludwig van Beethoven even considered composing an opera about Libuše.[10]

Although Grillparzer was probably influenced by Dobrovský's patriotic treatment of Czech history, he did not perceive Libuše as the

personification of Czech national identity but rather as the eternal spirit of Bohemian history. Grillparzer's Libussa represents the organic and unifying female principle transcending national differences. By contrast, Libussa's spouse, Primislaus, personifies the new bourgeois national politics that culminated in the revolution of 1848 and shaped the rest of the nineteenth century. This gender dichotomy corresponds to a double theory of nationhood in Grillparzer's thinking, the first consisting of an Enlightenment conception based on the contractual consensus between individuals, the second deriving from a Romantic notion of the state as an organic reflection of nature.[11] As we shall see, the Czech Romantics also tended to equate female difference with their own vision of national essence and the eternal feminine with the spirit of the nation.

Romanticism

With the rise of romanticism the age-old split personification of Bohemia as a mother-virgin assumed a new form. Now woman was identified with the cause of Czech nationalism rather than with a specific class (as in the Middle Ages) or with the Enlightenment principles of liberty and equality (as in the early National Revival). The first major Romantic writer in Czech in whom questions of gender, sexuality, and nationality inhere is the Slovak Jan Kollár, who wrote verse in Czech and prose in German and Slovak. Kollár studied theology at Jena from 1817 to 1819, where he came into contact with German nationalism. Influenced by Herder's theories of national essence as embodied above all in folk songs, Kollár expounded the idea of Panslav fellowship and "Slavic reciprocity" *(Slovanská vzájemnost)* along cultural rather than political lines in *Concerning the Reciprocity between the Various Tribes and Languages of the Slavic Nations* (1837). His first volume of verse, *Poems* (1821), contains eight-six sonnets that form the germ of his cycle of lyrical and narrative sonnets *The Daughter of Sláva,* which by its fourth edition (1854) consisted of an introductory elegy and 645 sonnets.

Kollár's Panslavism was an imagined community based on a dream of harmonious relations between brother Slavs rather than a reflection of objective political reality. Indeed, the origins of his ideology were German (Johann-Gottfried Herder) and French (Jean-Jacques Rousseau) rather than Slavic. The figure of the bard equipped with harp and singing of days gone-by was part of the European stock-in-trade of nostalgia for a pre-modern, imaginary Urkultur that conveniently overlooked the shared intellectual roots of Romantic nationalism, a prescriptive

response to—rather than an accurate historical reflection of—modern identity. James Macpherson's poems attributed to the Gaelic bard Ossian were perhaps the most famous example of this mythical quest of origins, but they were not unique. At about this time the Czechs fabricated their own medieval manuscripts—the so-called *Zelená Hora* and *Dvůr Králové Manuscripts*—allegedly discovered by Václav Hanka in 1817 and 1818. These "discoveries" were partly forged in response to Ossian and partly in response to the reinvention of the German medieval *Nibelungenlied* as a national epic.[12]

If Kollár's Panslavism was a Romantic construct based on the Enlightenment ideals of Rousseau and Herder, his female deification of Slavdom was an equally idiosyncratic fusion of German romanticism and Bohemian legend. Ironically, an important personal influence on the composition of this politically engaged poem was the daughter of a German Protestant pastor, Wilhelmina Schmidt (nicknamed Mina), whom Kollár met while studying at the University of Jena but who refused to marry him until 1835. In the poem the real Mina is transformed into the allegorical daughter of Sláva (Glory), the goddess of the Slavs, an interesting conflation of the German nationalist cult of pagan deities and the Czech foundational myth of Libuše. In this way the construction of national identity went hand in hand with constructions of gender and sexuality.

Kollár not only personifies the Slavic race as female; he also imbues it with female-associated qualities—peace, artistry, and meekness—in contrast to the aggressive virility of its foreign neighbors (Germany and Hungary). This masochistic vision of the Slavs is typified by the sonnet "To Barbarians" in which the unarmed and feminized Slavs, enamored of music and song, are contrasted with their masculine Avar captors:

> To savage Avars in the days of old
> came journeying three messengers, in their hands
> Slavonic harps with trembling strings they hold.
> Upon his throne the haughty Khan demands
> "What men are you? from what land do you ride?
> "We are the Slavs, O lord," the bards replied,
> "Our homelands verge upon the Baltic sea,
> We know no wars—no arms to us belong
> We cannot swell your regiments, O lord
> Our people's fancy is for play and song."

> They played for him. They played so tenderly
> The tyrant bade his slaves, as their reward,
> "Lead off these men to close captivity."[13]

A very different poet from Kollár was Karel Hynek Mácha. Yet there are also similarities between the poets, which have sometimes been overlooked in an attempt to present Mácha as supremely timeless and "cosmic." Although Mácha lacked Kollár's tendentiousness, he remained to the end of his short life a committed patriot who participated in the nascent Czech theater of the 1830s. It is equally true, however, that Mácha was a supremely metaphysical poet whose philosophical identity is intimately associated with Polish, German, and English romanticism. Mácha gave expression to the *Weltschmerz* that was the hallmark of the post-Napoleonic era, the age of disaffected anti-heroes like Manfred in Byron's dramatic poem *Manfred* (1817), Julien Sorel in Stendhal's *The Red and the Black* (1830), Eugene Onegin in Pushkin's verse novel of the same name (completed 1831), and Pechorin in Lermontov's novel *Hero of Our Time* (1840). These anti-heroes reveal a growing disillusionment with the earlier ideals of heroic manhood. Like the hero of Mácha's poem *May* (1836), these late Romantic protagonists are filled with guilt, despair, and cosmic and social alienation. They are often presented as having committed some horrible and unmentionable and unmentioned crime in the past. They frequently are outcasts from men and God, and they are almost always wanderers over the face of the earth.

Mácha's sense of *Weltschmerz* constituted a profoundly political gesture in a nationalist culture that had come to expect its poets to celebrate the greatness of the Czech past and express optimism in its glorious future. In fact his masterpiece *May* has nothing to say about the Czech nation, at least not in any overt sense. The poem's hero, Vilém (William), has been arrested, imprisoned, and sentenced to death for the murder of his girlfriend's seducer, who, unknown to him, was his own father. In some ways the characters and subject matter of this Oedipal drama are conventionally Romantic. Byron is said to have slept with his half-sister Aurora Leigh, and Heinrich von Kleist was obsessed with his sister. William is the name of Goethe's hero in *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* and the spectral lover who returns to claim his bride in Gottfried August Bürger's ballad "Lenore." Vilém's former status as the brigand "lord of

the forest" also recalls the hero in *Rinaldo Rinaldini the Robber Captain: A Romantic Tale of Our Century* (1799–1800) by Christian August Vulpius (1762–1827).[14]

But the poem is far more characteristic of disillusioned late romanticism than these early prototypes suggest. As the poem opens, Vilém has already relinquished his heroic role as the antisocial rebel. When we encounter him in canto 2, he has been reduced to the abject level of a chained convict, isolated from his beloved Jarmila who awaits him on the bank of a lake. Sleepless, he reflects on his life and is unable to find meaning in it. Instead he confronts a godless universe in which human beings are destined to be born, live, and die in a seemingly perpetual cycle of suffering. Like Hamlet, Vilém cannot help regard life as a dream followed not by extinction but by an endless sequence of dreams:

> Perchance this life is also sleep,
> This life of now; perhaps the dawn
> Will only change to a new dream?[15]

In themselves, these nihilistic sentiments are neither novel nor original. In the post-Napoleonic era of the early nineteenth century, men had begun to lose faith not only in Man but also in God. The optimism of the Enlightenment had been undermined by Romantic skepticism toward the deistic notion of a rational Supreme Being; and yet there was no turning back to the metaphysical certainties of faith in a benevolent, all-loving God. Instead, there was only that utter cosmic emptiness which had terrified Pascal and which haunts Vilém as he awaits his execution.

But the articulation of such nihilism in the Czech context was itself a profoundly political statement. What makes *May* so unusual for its time is its refusal to take comfort in any of the revivalist banalities about the national homeland. The Homeric quest for the lost Slavic *Urheimat* fundamental to *The Daughter of Sláva* becomes a hopeless metaphysical odyssey through a meaningless and godless universe. For the first time in modern Czech literature, the significance of national politics is diminished—if not completely obliterated—by the sheer nihilism of the poet's metaphysical vision. Paradoxically, Mácha remained committed to the Czech cause to the end of his life. He wrote his early verse in German but, imbued with the Romantic patriotism of the day, began to write in Czech around 1830. In addition to composing poetry and prose in his native language, he took an active part in the revived Czech

theater and eulogized the greatness of the nation's medieval past in the spirit of his contemporaries. And yet there was a profound tension within the poet, which set him apart from his more conventional compatriots. This member of the Prague proletariat liked to stride through the streets wearing a dashing white Carbonaro cloak with a red lining, sporting riding boots with spurs, and carrying a riding whip.

Mácha's diaries and personal letters reveal that his was a violent, passionate, and jealous nature. In the final year of his short life, he documents his relationship with his lover, Lori Šomková, in excruciating emotional and sexual detail. In a letter to his parents dated November 2, 1836, he describes how in a violent fit of jealous rage he smashed everything to pieces in his house when he discovered that Lori had left her house without his permission. In his letters to the girl (written in German), he threatens and bullies her into conforming to his irrational, jealous will: she must see no one (except his parents) and only leave the house on Sunday in order to go to church.[16] Obsessed by the idea that Lori is unfaithful to him, Mácha leaves her in his hometown of Prague while he takes up a lawyer's position in Leitmeritz.

Mácha's isolation in Leitmeritz and his doubts about Lori are mirrored in Vilém's solipsistic anguish in canto 2 of *May*. Vilém languishes in a white tower, chained to the wall of his cell, a liminal figure poised in a twilight world between life and death. Reduced to a state of total isolation from men, his only human contact is with the prison guard to whom he whispers his dread secret as to a priestly confessor:

> Afraid, the watchman leans his ear
> Against the prisoner's mouth; as if
> A light breeze stirred there, softly
> The prisoner breathes his tale.
> The watchman bends down deep and deeper
> Towards the prisoner—near and nearer,
> Until his ear joins to that mouth
> Which whispers softly—softly, softly,
> Till it is dumb—as though asleep.

What is the dread secret uttered by the hero and never repeated by the shocked jailer? The unmentionable crime is part of the stock-in-trade of late romanticism, gesturing mutely to the Byronic transgressions of incest and homosexuality. But apart from the physical description of Vilém as effeminate, there is little to identify him as homosexual.[17] Neither do we see him as actively heterosexual. What is

most striking about Vilém is the lack of any sexual identity. Even though he was allegedly the virile "lord of the forest," a brigand hero in the manner of Rinaldi, his sordid imprisonment and death now recall the emasculated slaves in the poem "To Barbarians" from *The Daughter of Sláva*. The hero's abject masculinity correlates with the absence of patriotism in the poem. The earlier Romantic hero had been a fighter for national freedom, most famously exemplified by Lord Byron's championship of Greek independence from the Turks. The late Romantic hero has become too disillusioned to believe in the nation as the source of his personal and political salvation. So it is with Vilém and his creator Mácha.

But *May* is far more nihilistic than *The Daughter of Sláva*. In Kollár's poem the Slavic homeland has been lost but will be recovered; in Mácha's poem it is lost forever. Even though the homeland in *May* is gendered as female in conformity with revivalist practice, it is stripped of its positive and virginal associations. Vilém's metaphysical exile from paradise is inseparable from his girlfriend's loss of sexual innocence. Raped by Vilém's own father, Jarmila bears the oedipal brunt of the son's anger at this loss, articulated by the plumed messenger in the boat whom she mistakes for her flamboyant paramour:

> He has discovered his shame and your guilt;
> murdering your seducer, he has murdered his father.
> Revenge stalks the heels of his deed.—
> He will die in shame.—
> He will have peace only when his cheeks,
> which now blossom like roses,
> paled, will come to rest over the wheel
> when they have threaded his slim limbs
> into the wheel.
> Thus ends the aweful lord of the forests!—
> For his shame, for your guilt,
> have the shame of the world, have my curse!

Whereas revivalist literature attributes the rape of the virgin homeland to foreigners, *May* is more complex—and more tragic—in identifying the perpetrator of that crime as the hero's own father. The conflict is no longer between the nation and the foreigner but between members of the same family. As we shall see in subsequent chapters, this generational conflict would become a major theme in modern Czech literature, but in Mácha's time it was audaciously novel. *May* is a familial as well as a national tragedy in so far as man must repudiate not only his

political but also his personal loyalties to the world. The only homeland that remains to us, the poem insists, is death itself. Ironically, death can be evoked only in terms of these political and personal affiliations. Hence, Vilém's gruesome execution in canto 3 echoes the revivalist language of the prelude from Kollár's *The Daughter of Sláva* ("before my weeping eyes extends my land, / my people's cradle once, their coffin now") as well as the incestuous imagery of sexual intercourse with the mother:

> O, into the beautiful earth, the beloved earth,
> Into his cradle and grave, his mother,
> Into his only homeland and into his only inheritance,
> Into the wide earth, the only earth,
> Into his mother, into his mother,
> The son's blood flows along her.

After Mácha's death, the most important Czech Romantic was Karel Jaromír Erben (1811–70). As the two major Romantic poets in Czech literature, Mácha and Erben have often been contrasted with each other. If the former is "subjective," "personal," and "Romantic," the latter is "objective," "impersonal," and "classical." According to his principal biographer, Antonín Grund, Erben's verse is characterized by its classical restraint and stoicism, qualities that render him closer in spirit to the eighteenth-century classicism of Goethe than to that of his Romantic compatriot Mácha. But for Roman Jakobson, whose important article on Erben's poetics (1935) marked a decisive reassessment of his work, Erben was the quintessential Romantic poet of nationalist mythopoeia. Jakobson also contrasts Erben's passive compliance with Fate with Mácha's revolutionary and cosmic rebellion against it. Vojtěch Jirát presents this difference between the poets in gendered terms, contrasting the restrained, stoic Erben as "masculine" and the subjective, rebellious Mácha as "feminine."[18] As we shall see, this distinction between male restraint and female waywardness is already prefigured in Erben's sexual poetics.

Erben's "stoic restraint" is inseparable from his political situation following the failure of the 1848 revolution and the ensuing Bach Reaction (1852–59). Although his social life was outwardly normal after the introduction of the "emasculated constitution" of 1849, which signaled the end of the hopes of the previous year, the poet was deeply unhappy about the fate of his nation. At a time of severe political censorship

when all Czech-language newspapers were proscribed, the nationalist fervor that Erben had channeled into political activism during the revolutionary year of 1848 found no outlet beyond the imaginary realm of literature.[19] His greatest poetic achievement, *A Bouquet of National Legends (Kytice národních legend),* appeared in the middle of the Bach Reaction in 1853. During this period, its author's conduct was passive and compliant. Afraid of losing his lucrative position as the city archivist of Prague, to which he had been appointed in 1851, he shunned revolutionary circles and avoided the company of leading political dissidents. Erben's political compliance in the 1850s is an extension of his conservative treatment of gender relations and his national fears for the survival of the nation inseparable from his personal anxieties about women and female sexuality.

In the opening ballad, "A Bouquet"—a thinly veiled allegory of the political status of the oppressed nation—the grave of a dead mother is visited every morning by her children (the abandoned Czech people). Feeling pity for these orphans, the mother reenters the world as a delicate, small-leafed plant. The children recognize her by the aroma of the plant and name it thyme (*mateřidouška,* literally "mother's spirit"). The poet collects a bunch of this plant (his national ballads) and sends the collection into the world. While the opening poem of the collection eulogizes the oppressed nation as a deceased mother, the final poem, "The Fortune-Teller," celebrates its eventual resurrection in the guise of the symbol of Czech nationalism, Libuše.

The female, then, functions paradoxically as a symbol of national defeat and national salvation, at once the personification of its demise and the biological guarantee of its survival. This paradoxical embodiment of the nation corresponds to the polarized representation of the female characters in the ballads and perpetuates an older mother-virgin dichotomy. In their capacity as mothers, Erben's women embody both the metaphysical authority of Nature and the biological assurance of the nation's future. But when they deviate from this prescribed role, they threaten not only the biological imperative but the collective authority of the nation. Presiding over this preordained, normative world is the omnipotent figure of Fate (*Sudice*—a female noun in Czech), the matriarchal enforcer of the moral and social law:

> What is fated at birth,
> there is no cure for it.

What Fate decrees,
no human word can undo![20]
(96)

The omnipotent authority of female-associated Fate is manifested in the ballad "The Noontime Witch" *(Polednice)* in which a fraught mother threatens her naughty, unruly child with the appearance of the supernatural old woman. When the Witch appears in response to the mother's admonition, the latter regrets her unwise words and attempts to protect her terrified child, unwittingly smothering him in her embrace. Here, woman at once embodies Fate and subverts its authority.

Another ballad in which we find the same dichotomy is "The Wedding Shirts." This poem is based on the German ballad "Lenore" (1773) by Gottfried August Bürger (1747–94), which exercised an important influence in the Slavic world, including Vasily Zhukovsky's Russian poems "Ludmila" and "Svetlana" (1808–11). Erben's version was later set to music by the Czech composers Antonín Dvořák and Bohuslav Martinů. The former's choral piece (1885) was commissioned by the British music publisher Novello for the Birmingham Festival, where it received a rapturous welcome. Typical of musical adaptations of literary works, it simplifies many of the psychosexual and political tensions in Erben's ballad, reducing them to a simple love story linked by a series of romantic duets.

In the German ballad, the heroine Lenore, accompanied by her mother, desperately seeks out her beloved Wilhelm among the marching ranks of soldiers returning from the Bohemian war. But he is not to be found; and the girl succumbs to hysteria. Ignoring her mother's admonition, Lenore transgresses against fate by praying for his return, a wish that culminates in the lover's return from the dead and a price for which she must ultimately pay with her life. In the Czech poem, the maiden is a nameless orphan bereft not only of her lover but also of her parents, sister (who died as an infant), and her brother (killed in battle). In this sense she recalls the orphaned children (and the symbols of the defeated Czech nation) who visit their mother's grave in the opening ballad of the collection. In her capacity as an orphan, the maiden embodies the survival of the mother-nation; but in her capacity as an autonomous subject who rebels against all-powerful Fate, she threatens the well-being of the collective at a time of national peril. Whereas in Bürger's ballad this obedient/rebellious split is divided into the maternal and daughter roles, in Erben's poem they are united in the figure of the orphaned

maiden. It is this difference that determines the alternative ending of the Czech poem. Whereas in the German ballad the girl dies as a punishment for her defiance of Fate, in Erben's version she survives, albeit suitably chastened. In this way her status as the embodiment of national survival is guaranteed.

As if to emblematize the girl's ambiguous status as virgin-mother, the poem opens with her kneeling in prayer before an icon of the Virgin Mary. As she weeps, tears fall on her white breasts, a body part on which the poet-narrator fixates and to which he returns in his final admonition to the girl at the end of the ballad. The reference to the girl's breasts suggests a sexual preoccupation with the female body characteristic of the entire poem. In spite of her outwardly acquiescent posture, she intervenes against the moral dictates of Fate by requesting that her dead fiancé be returned to her. When the maiden's prayer is answered and her beloved appears on horseback to claim his bride, he wishes to take her away from her native village to his "castle" (the graveyard). In so far as the maiden's subjective desire for reunion with her lover entails her abandonment of the homeland, her wish does not simply contravene the dictates of Fate; more crucially, it serves to undermine the authority of the national collective that she embodies. Underlying the metaphysical concerns of the poem are more immediate political anxieties about the future of the nation during the Bach Reaction.

The maiden is initially hesitant to accept her lover's invitation but eventually succumbs to his demonic blandishments. As they move through the night, the lover's progress is burdened by the girl's devotional objects of prayer book, rosary and crucifix, all attributes of her virginal purity. At her lover's command, the girl jettisons these devotional objects in order to accelerate their progress. It is tempting to read this scene as reflecting both a rape fantasy (stripping away the impediments to the virgin's body) and as a political anxiety concerning the integrity of the nation. When the maiden leaves the safe confines of her home village (the symbol of the national collective) for the dark, alien world beyond, she becomes increasingly vulnerable to foreign "insemination." The rape fantasy is camouflaged by being projected onto the vampiric Other who has forfeited his status as a son of the nation by his long absence abroad. Like the vampires of nineteenth-century tradition, he is not only rootless and cosmopolitan; in his alien status he is a dangerous source of moral corruption and a threat to the virginal integrity of the unsullied nation.

A further clue to this male fantasy are the traces of the girl's blood left on the undergrowth when she cuts her bare feet on the sharp rocks and brambles. This detail can be read in Freudian terms as a symbolic presagement of the violent rupture of her hymen by the rapistic Other: "Her white legs trampled over wild rose bushes and over rocks; / and on brambles and flint-stones were left traces of her blood" (35). When the maiden and her lover reach their sepulchral destination, the girl finally realizes that her beloved's "castle" is nothing more than a graveyard and that he is a malevolent spirit returned from the dead. After tricking him into jumping over the cemetery wall first, she flees to a mortuary where she locks herself in. The lover comes in pursuit and calls on a corpse laid on a stone plinth within to rise up and unbolt the door for him. But just in time, the girl repents of her foolish wishes and begs the Virgin Mary to deliver her from a fate worse than death. Miraculously, her prayer is answered once more: the corpse lies down on the plinth and the lover vanishes to the sound of the crowing cock and the first light of dawn. When the villagers come to church the next morning, they find the tattered shreds of the wedding shirts, which the girl had embroidered and brought with her, scattered across a gravestone. When they force open the mortuary door, they discover the terrified girl still huddled in a corner of the chamber.

The scene of the demonic lover attempting to break into the mortuary chamber serves as the culminating moment of the rape fantasy initiated in the girl's blood sprinkled across the nocturnal landscape. The imagery of confinement and constriction underscores the sexual equivalency between the locked chamber—compared to a cage—and the girl's corseted body. At the same time the scene also resonates powerfully with traditional Catholic iconography. The mortuary chamber in which the fleeing girl takes refuge recalls the nuptial chamber that serves as the setting of the union of Christ and his *sponsa Christi,* the female-connoted Soul, in the medieval mystical tradition. The spectral lover is here the diabolical obverse of the lover-knight Christ. In the fourteenth-century illuminated *Passional of the Abbess Kunhuta,* this split imago is exemplified in the Latin parable of the Invincible Knight *(De strenuo milite)*. In the illustrations that accompany the Latin text, the female Soul is abducted by the Devil and thrown into a fiery chamber; but she is subsequently delivered from her torment by the lover-knight Christ who slays the abductor and is united with the lady-Soul. In the same way, prayer redeems the incarcerated maiden and permits her to leave her sepulchral

prison. In its medieval context, such religious imagery was intended to serve as a simplified theological guide to the female reader, encouraging her to associate in a passive capacity with the lady-Soul. This was, of course, a role freighted with moral implications, since the lady is poised precariously between hell and salvation.[21] Analogously, the nineteenth-century female reader of Erben's ballad was faced with a drastic moral choice: either conform to the dictates of social convention or suffer a fate worse than death.

In the final strophe of Erben's ballad, the narrator-poet intervenes to address the girl directly, pointing out that her last-minute repentance saved her from a fate worse than death. On one level, these final lines simply reinstate the conventional moral with which Bürger's ballad had begun: that mankind should resign himself to Fate or accept the dire consequences. But in the Czech reworking, the poet's admonition also serves as a necessary reminder of the girl's political role as the maternal embodiment of the nation: "It was a good thing, maiden, / that you thought of God and got rid of your evil companion! / If you had done otherwise, / your life would have ended here: / your graceful, white body / would have been like those wedding shirts" (50).

The fantasy of rape, murder, and mutilation is prefigured in the image of the girl's blood smearing the briar bushes and in the flint of the nocturnal landscape. If this violent imagery fails to culminate in the girl's evisceration at the hands of the demon lover, this is not due to the benevolent intervention of Fate—as the narrator insists and conventionally moralistic readings of the poem reinforce—but the effect of repressed male sexual desires and concomitant political anxieties. In allowing the girl to survive her traumatic encounter with the Other, the poet-narrator is able to reconcile his sexual fantasies with his political need to bear witness to the survival of the Czech people and its language.

Another of Erben's ballads concerned with the symbolic role of woman as mother-nation is "The Willow Tree," which tells of a married couple who have become alienated from each other and no longer enjoy sexual and emotional intimacy. When the husband questions the wife about her frigidity, she replies that she is destined to behave in such a way. As in "The Wedding Shirts," fate has decreed that the woman should be utterly passive; but this time it is the husband's turn to usurp the forces of the supernatural and impose his own will on events. He goes to a sorceress and presents his predicament; the old woman explains that during the day the spirit of the wife dwells at home but at

night it flees to the willow tree. She advises the husband to go to the willow tree where he will find the soul of his wife. Angry that his wife is sleeping with the willow, the husband takes an axe and fells the tree. But in the very instant that the tree is felled, the wife collapses and expires. Distraught at her death and burdened with an orphaned child, the husband complains to the willow tree, which counsels him to make a cradle from the wood of the willow so that mother and child will be reunited. When the baby has grown up, he should make a reed pipe for the child to play so that mother and child will be perpetually in harmony.

Like "The Wedding Shirts," the ending of the ballad can be read in terms of a personal *and* political wish-fulfillment: just as the neglected husband is finally reconciled with his wife in her metamorphosed status as his mother, so is the poet reunited with the eternal spirit of the oppressed nation. In this sense, the ending of "The Willow Tree" looks back to the opening ballad of the collection in which the spirit of the deceased mother returns to life in response to the bunch of flowers placed on her grave by her children, a scene that serves as a political metaphor both for the composition of the ballads and the renewal of the national spirit they are intended to evoke.

Another ballad by Erben that traces a continuity between nationhood and motherhood is "Christmas Eve." Two maidens, Hana and Maria, follow the folk custom of divining their future on the eve of Christ's birth. They seek out two willow trees, at the foot of which is a pond. They break a hole in the surface of the frozen pond and peer into the dark waters. Hana sees an image of her beloved Václav and a cheerful cottage; within the year she is happily married and settled into a conventional domestic existence as a wife and mother. But when Maria peers into the pond, she sees red lights in a church sacristy, a premonition of her death. The ballad ends, as it began, with the picture of an old woman weaving at Advent-tide, symbolic of the normative authority of Nature.

As in "The Wedding Shirts," the bifurcated ending of "Christmas Eve" symbolizes the dichotomous fate of women in nineteenth-century society: either marry and become a mother, as does Hana, or suffer full social exclusion, symbolized by death. But as in "The Wedding Shirts," there is also a political significance in the moralistic conclusion of "Christmas Eve." Female conformity to the will of Fate and the biological imperative of her own body equally symbolize the poet's political expediency in adhering to the conservative status quo of the 1850s and his

acquiescence in the Bach Reaction. In this sense the choice facing the maidens—to conform to societal rules or face the consequences—was also the poet's own political dilemma as a subject of the Austrian empire. By the same token, the female inclination to deviate from the norm prescribed by Fate may be said to allegorize the poet's dangerous fantasies of political defiance and insurrection. In this drama of projection and displacement, sexual and national politics become inseparably locked into a compliant symbiosis. Conformity or defiance was the political choice facing the Czech nation in the second half of the nineteenth century, a choice reflected in the splitting of the nationalist movement into Old and Young Czechs, the former advocating the compliant model of Austro-Slavism, first formulated in 1848, and the latter urging the separatist radicalism of national sovereignty.

Cosmopolitanism

The year 1858 is usually regarded as marking the end of the National Revival and the beginning of a fully consolidated national literature in the Bohemian Lands. This year witnessed the appearance of the *May Almanac,* an anthology of literature by younger writers named in honor of Mácha's great poem *May.* The *May Almanac* was founded by the writers Jan Neruda and Vítězslav Hálek (1835–74), who represented a new cosmopolitan trend in Czech literature. Czech writers of this generation ceased to search for their identity in Czech myth and history and began to look outward to foreign and Western influences. Ironically the writers of this generation manifested their rejection of a purely nationalist agenda by narrowing instead of broadening their focus. By regarding life through a microcosmic lens, their art aspired to achieve a universal significance. Typical of this inclination was Jan Neruda. The son of a grocer-turned-soldier and a female servant in the household of Frenchman Joachim Barrand, Neruda made the Lesser Town of Prague the microcosmic focus of his most famous short stories. After completing high school, Neruda went on to study at the Philosophical Faculty of Prague University, but poverty forced him to interrupt his training to be a teacher. He went to work on a newspaper and spent his whole life in journalism, adapting his gifts for precise and compressed observation to the art of the short story.

Neruda began his career as a journalist in 1856 as a local reporter for the German-language daily *Tagesbote aus Böhmen* (Daily News from Bohemia), since all Czech-language newspapers were proscribed during

the repressive 1850s. After Bach left office in 1859, Neruda started to work for a succession of Czech-language magazines and newspapers, ending up with the newly founded *Národní listy* in 1865. Neruda's first ventures into serious literature were in verse rather than prose. He made his literary debut with a ballad entitled "The Hanged Man," published in *Lumír* in 1854 under the pseudonym of Janko Hovor. His first collection of verse was *Cemetery Flowers* (1857). These impressions and reflections evoked by the concept of a cemetery express profound dissatisfaction with Czech reality and the state of the world. Its Heine-esque irony directed toward the bourgeoisie and its sympathy for the poor were unwelcome to the older generation which expected of literature an optimistic national fervor. In one poem from the collection—"There was a madhouse on the hill"—Neruda castigates the older Czech writers for their narrow-minded attachment to the nationalist values of the past and for their failure to produce a truly cosmopolitan literature. He compares these older writers with impotent madmen who take a young virgin (the national literature) and try to make her pregnant by heating her from below. When she falls sick and dies, they are happy because the girl has remained a virgin:

There was a madhouse on the hill;
a maiden used to walk past it.
The madmen caught her, hoping she'd
produce some young for their delight.

They set her on a desk
and put her under a glass bell,
and began to heat her from below
to make her heavy with child.

The maiden got sickly and finally
the maiden gave up the ghost;
but the madmen were delighted
because she remained a virgin.

Bravo, gentlemen literati,
beware of the female sex,
let literature die rather than
take away its virginity!

(*Spisy Jana Nerudy* 1:65)

The interest of Neruda's poem resides less in its audacious message than the way in which national identity is presented in terms of sexual

difference. In spite of its alleged break with tradition, it perpetuates what it purports to disavow by gendering the nation and its literature as female.

A seemingly healthy antidote to the sexual pathology of the older generation of writers is provided by Neruda's only novella, *Riffraff* (*Trhani,* 1871), which is concerned with construction workers employed in building railways. This story of rugged men was influenced by Bret Harte (1836–1902), the American chronicler of mining camplife in mid-nineteenth-century California.[22] Like Neruda, Harte was a journalist who was attracted by the everyday experience of working-class folk. And like Harte's miners, Neruda's railroad workers are rootless outsiders, symbolic of the author's identification with the cosmopolitan and bohemian artist. In an intertextual allusion to the prelude of Kollár's *The Daughter of Sláva,* we are told that the riffraff never return to their homeland; or, as Neruda puts it, their "cradle" and their "grave" are not in the same "meadow." Although they are nurtured by devoted mothers, they soon repudiate the maternal influence and set off on their aimless journey through life. However, the deployment of the Kollárian metaphor of nation-as-mother in this context is itself telling in the light of Neruda's espousal of cosmopolitanism. In Neruda's novella, the male "outsiders" seek to escape the influence of the mother just as the cosmopolitan Neruda aspired to break away from the narrow, constricting influence of the small nation. However much he may try to transcend the limits of nationalism, he seems unable to relinquish the gendered categories of thought that characterize it.

In his most famous collection of stories, *Lesser Town Tales* (*Povídky malostranské;* 1878) Neruda again treats the theme of "insiders" and "outsiders" in terms of sexual and gender difference. Here his focus is the Prague Lesser Town, that nexus of winding streets between the Castle and the river Vltava. Neruda's Lesser Town can be read as a microcosm of Bohemia itself where, in its winding, labyrinthine streets, Germans and Czechs live in close, if reluctant, proximity. The claustrophobic and constricting pettiness of Lesser Town life is consistently presented in terms of femininity, while men generally feature as social misfits or ineffectual bachelors. In the first story—"A Week in a Quiet House"—it tends to be the ladies who conform to societal norms by speaking German rather than Czech. German verse written by romantic suitors circulates in their albums. Although Czech is proscribed at the office, it is too resilient to disappear from the streets and homes of the Lesser

Town. Embodying this new national self-confidence, the clerk Václav refuses to conform to his superior's ban on Czech and speaks his native language loudly at work. Václav articulates the younger Neruda's idealistic desire to break out of the narrow mold of nationalist tradition and forge a new kind of realistic writing whose standards will be based on those of European literature.

Václav's middle-aged counterpart is the Doctor who rents rooms in the house of the Lakmus family. Although he shares the younger man's frustration at the parochiality of Czech literature, the Doctor is too disillusioned to encourage Václav in his literary endeavors. In fact the Doctor's cynical resignation ends up replicating the impotence of the older generation of writers that Neruda excoriates in his poem "There Was a Madhouse on the Hill": "You'll be hauled over the coals, first for being independent, which neither small families nor small nations can endure, then for telling the truth, which means having a go at their smug little world" (*Prague Tales* 68). The parallel established by the Doctor between "small families" and "small nations" would become an important feature of Czech literature in late nineteenth and the twentieth century when familial relations become a frequent metaphor for the relationship between the individual and the state. The Doctor's status as a failed man of letters correlates with his personal unhappiness as a frustrated bachelor. He dreams of marrying Josefinka and even draws up a marriage contract with her, although he leaves her name a blank on the document. When Václav informs him that Josefinka is about to marry Bavorák the engineer, he looks so ill that Václav is forced to call in his landlady, Mrs. Lakmus, for help. (The name Bavorák for the Doctor's rival in love is hardly coincidental here. Echoing the word "Bavarian," it underlines the correlation between ethnic and familial rivalries in much of Czech literature since the nineteenth century.)

Mrs. Lakmus is a domineering mother who persuades the hapless Doctor to marry Klára. She seizes his pen, dips it into the ink, and forces the Doctor to "insert" Klára's name into the blank space in the marriage contract. In this way the phallic mother usurps the role of the emasculated male. By contrast with the Doctor, young Václav declares that he does not "wish to fill in gaps in our literature." Eschewing the passive role of the scribe or scrivener, he aspires to become a "realistic" writer in his own right: "I refuse to copy worn models. My standards will be those of European literature; my writing will be modern, that is 'veracious.' I'll take my characters from life, describe life as it is, unadorned. I'll say

exactly what I think, what I feel. How can I fail?" (67). In the nineteenth century realism was frequently equated with masculinity and idealism with femininity. Václav's determination to become a writer in the realistic vein serves not only as an assertion of his artistic credo but also as a virile alternative to the impotence of the older generation of writers represented by the Doctor.

Another male outsider is the tragic protagonist of the story "How Mr. Volavka Broke in His Meerschaum Pipe." The eponymous Mr. Volavka is a handsome young man from the provinces who sets up a flour shop in the suspicious, hostile world of the Lesser Town. An embittered German-speaking spinster enters the flour shop of the shopkeeper and immediately takes offence at the latter's informal, friendly manner. She proceeds to spread the rumor that Mr. Volavka's pipe smoke has polluted the supply of flour in the store, and, as a consequence, the business ultimately collapses. The hapless Mr. Volavka takes solace in his pipe smoking and later hangs himself in despair. The spinster may be said to personify not only the bigoted small-mindedness of the Lesser Town but also the pettiness of the small nation. By contrast, Mr. Volavka is an innocent outsider. Not only does he come from the countryside, but he is also of an indeterminate sexuality, with his angelically pretty face and his curly blond hair. Morever, like many of the male characters in Neruda's fiction, Mr. Volavka appears to be sexually inhibited, his incessant pipe-smoking serving as a masturbatory substitute for the sexually threatening German spinster. Another male outsider is Mr. Vojtíšek, who is also brought to ruin by the malicious female gossip that he is a rich man masquerading as a beggar. Like Mr. Volavka, the beggar dies alone and abandoned at the end of the story. The hero of "Dr. Spoiler" is an eccentric bachelor who deliberately shuns the society of the Lesser Town. When he intervenes to resuscitate a deceased counselor on the way to a funeral, his act recalls Christ's raising of Lazarus in the New Testament.

Neruda's most successful short story, "At the Sign of the Three Lilies," involves a passionate encounter on a Sunday evening between the male narrator and a young girl in an inn near the Strahov Gate. In the course of the story the protagonist sees the girl dancing during a violent thunder storm. After several turns the girl is summoned away by a friend, but quickly returns and lures the narrator into the garden where they have sex. It transpires that the girl's mother has just died; and the shocking moral of the story resides in her frenetic pursuit of casual sex immediately following this tragic event.

Located about halfway through the collection, this little masterpiece simultaneously looks back to *May* and forward to Freud's theories of psychoanalysis. Consistent with the Freudian symbiosis of eros and thanatos, sex takes place in figurative and literal proximity to death, as personified by the girl's mother and symbolized by the gaping mouths of the unfilled graves in the darkened garden. Like Mácha's hero Vilém, the narrator is a passive and also a liminal figure. Seated between the dark garden full of open graves and the lively room of dancers, he looks back and forth between these spaces as though poised between life and death—symbolized by the dancing couples on the one hand and the graves on the other. This spatial liminality corresponds to the ambiguous tone of the narrative itself. The opening sentence asserts that the voyeuristic narrator is in a state of high passion: "I must have been out of my mind at the time. I could feel my veins pulse, my blood boil." Yet by the end of the story it is the girl who has become the demonic sexual predator: "She pressed against me. I felt her wet dress clinging to my chest, I felt her soft, warm body, her ardent breath—and I felt as if I had to drink the villainous soul from her" (*Prague Tales* 187). Confident of her own powers of attraction, the female protagonist initially appears to have nothing in common with the frustrated and repressed women in some of the other stories. But by the end of the story, this opposition seems less apparent. Her nymphomaniac urge to have sex with the narrator so soon after her mother's death smacks of compulsive desperation and is as shocking today as it would have been at the time the story was written.

In other ways, too, the story is closer to the spirit of the other stories in the collection than initially appears to be the case. Here, too, the male protagonist is the "outsider," quite literally so as he sits under the arcade looking through the open window at the revelries within. By contrast, the girl seems to be part of the social world from which the narrator is excluded. Her attraction for the voyeuristic narrator is as much the product of her social inclusiveness as her sexual allure. When the narrator fixates on her, he is expressing his own—and ultimately also the author's—desire to break out of the petty-bourgeois mentality encapsulated in the other stories and partake of this hedonistic world. The girl's apparently callous indifference to her own mother's death can be read as a symbolic repudiation of this small-town—and, by extension, small-nation—psychology. In this sense she embodies the liberating bohemianism that the author Neruda at once seeks and fears. Given the

opening sentence of the story and its fixation on the male narrator's pent-up sexual desire, the subsequent obsession with the girl's sexuality can be seen as a displacement from the male author onto his female protagonist. Read in this Freudian light, the death of the girl's mother and her apparently callous reaction to it can be interpreted in the unconscious terms of the writer's ambivalent relation to the mother-nation and his sublimated desire to escape its constricting influence.

Another Neruda tale in which nationality and sexuality are implicated in each other is "The Vampire," from the collection *Various People* (1871).[23] The stories from this collection are loosely based on Neruda's itinerary in 1870 through Hungary, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria, the Black Sea, the Bosphorus, Constantinople, Attica, Smyrna, the ports of Asia Minor, Port Said, the recently built Suez Canal, Cairo, Alexandria, Messina, Naples, Rome, and back home. The story in question tells of a summer excursion by steamer from Constantinople (Istanbul) to an island in the Greek archipelago named Prinkipo. Among the day-trippers are the narrator, his nameless companion, and a Polish family (a mother, father, an ailing daughter, and her devoted fiancé). In the course of the trip, a mysterious Greek artist attaches himself to the party and begins to paint the breathtaking scenery, incorporating the members of the party as background figures. When the tourists descend the mountainside, they find the Greek engaged in a heated discussion with the proprietor of the nearby inn, who later informs the Polish fiancé that the young Greek is a "vampire" who feeds on his victims: as soon as he represents his intended victims as corpses, they are doomed. In the final, shocking scene, the artist drops his portfolio. Among the leaves of paper scattered on the ground lies a sketch of the Polish girl, as a corpse, a myrtle wreath upon her brow. The young lady swoons when she sees the drawing, and her family seeks desperately to revive her.

That the apparently innocuous Greek artist should turn out to be a vampire is not totally surprising. In the context of European romanticism, Greece and vampirism were virtually synonymous. Located between Europe and Asia—a detail highlighted at one point in the story—Greece occupied an ambiguous space in the Romantic imagination in its capacity as a formerly glorious nation without national status. Hence for the classically educated Lord Byron and his traveling companion Polidori (the first English author of a vampire story), Greece was synonymous with vampirism.[24] This liminal status also characterized Bohemia, with its indeterminate location between East and West, its glorious

medieval past, and its degenerate present dominated by foreigners. Analogously, Greece in the nineteenth century was identified as the cradle of civilization yet was ruled by the Turkish empire. To the English and Czechs, Greece and Bohemia connoted both former glory and present decline.

Curiously, it is only at the end of Neruda's story that the theme of vampirism becomes explicit, and the overall narrative skill resides in the effect of shock produced by the dénouement. The beautiful setting of the Mediterranean provides almost no hint of what is to transpire, apart from the ominous detail of a lunatic asylum that crowns the rock of the neighboring island of Chalki and the cadaverous, hollow-eyed appearance of the Greek. It is an important feature of Neruda's skill as a storyteller that he refuses to allow this young man to be identified at the outset with the vampire of the title. Far from conforming to the standard late-Romantic vampiric type—blood-thirsty, overbearing, lustful—the Greek is more akin to the Romantic envisaged by Polidori as he hovers effetely yet insistently on the edges of the company.

Like the Greek painter, the Czech narrator attaches himself in a parasitic fashion to the Polish family at the outset of the story, adding to the list of those present the laconic comment: "And then us two." This cryptic remark ostensibly refers to the narrator's nameless traveling companion who crops up in several of the other stories from the collection *Various People.* Neruda's real-life traveling companion during his foreign tour was one F. Kittl (or Kittel). But who, in terms of the story's status as fiction, is the narrator's nameless companion, and why is he mentioned at all? Male traveling companions were standard features of Romantic narrative. Not only was Polidori Byron's real-life companion on his continental travels, but he also provides the vampiric Lord Ruthven with one in his famous story. One way to explain the presence of the companion in Romantic narrative is in the Freudian terms of the doppelgänger onto whom the ostensibly benign narrator's repressed sexual fantasies can be conveniently displaced, the counterpart to the dead lover in Erben's "The Wedding Shirts" or the anonymous messenger in Mácha's *May.* In the first story from the collection *Various People,* the companion articulates the narrator's repressed sexual aggression when he describes a young woman in terms of a peach into which he would like to bite.

In "The Vampire" the somewhat cryptic allusion to the "two of us" is immediately followed by the initial reference to the Greek artist, as if

Neruda were hinting at the outset of his narrative at some kind of connection between the author's alter ego and the vampire. Indeed, the subsequent narrative would appear to bear out this parallel. Just as the Greek preys upon his invalid victim by observing and representing her from the position of social exclusion, so is the author-narrator a voyeur who notes and records the moods of his characters with deft precision. Moreover, the artist and the author-narrator become interchangeable. Just as the painter reproduces the image of his victims in visual form, so does the author transfer his experience of them into the art of the short story. If the painter and the narrator are both passive and parasitical social misfits, they are equally vampiric in the assertion of their art. The Greek is obviously a different kind of vampire from the crude typology of twentieth-century film and pulp fiction. His refined pedigree is the nineteenth-century artist-as-vampire, the cousin of Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner* and Oscar Wilde's *Dorian Gray.*[25]

Implicated in this equivalency between vampirism and art are submerged anxieties about sexuality and nationhood. If the author's rootless self is identified with the vampiric Greek artist, his Czech identity may be equated with the sickly Polish daughter. In the nineteenth century, Poland, like Bohemia, was a nation without national status: Bohemia was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire while Poland was a dependency of the Russian Empire. The girl's sickliness—a standard feature of nineteenth-century narratives about women—can be read in political terms as symbolic of Poland's (and Bohemia's) political emasculation. Neruda's vampire story also anticipates some of the anxieties about racial purity in Bram Stoker's novel *Dracula* (1896). Like Neruda, the Irish Stoker was a subject of empire; both writers' marginal political status partly explains their obsession with belonging and nonbelonging. Stoker's Dracula is the ultimate embodiment of that ambiguous tension between the status of "insider" and "outsider." Effortlessly crossing national borders, transforming himself from human into animal, male into female, Dracula was a source of fascination and dread for a British middle-class audience anxious about its identity and imperial primacy in the world. The concomitant anxiety about blood and contamination reveals the obsession with racial purity and the perceived threat of international Jewry in British upper-class society in the 1890s. Neruda's story shares many of these submerged anxieties about race and racial purity. Significantly, he was the author of a virulently anti-Semitic article titled "Concerning the Jewish Fear" (1869), which called for Czech

emancipation from the Jews and asserted that Jews are willful outsiders who deny the Czechs their right to national autonomy.[26] In this essay Neruda projects his anxieties about national identity onto the Jews. He identifies the Jews as the privileged "insiders" from whom the disenfranchised and exploited Czechs must be emancipated, an interesting inversion of his original premise that Jews are outsiders. Neruda states that Jews can become Czechs but never vice versa, since the former are quintessentially exclusive and separatist. This strategy of projective inversion may also be said to characterize the fictional treatment of the Greek artist in "The Vampire." Like the archetypal Wandering Jew, the Greek artist is the deracinated outsider who is at once threatening and alluring. Such ambivalence toward the cosmopolitan is merely the inversion of Neruda's equally fraught relationship with his native Bohemia. Just as the Greece of Byron and Polidori was perceived as an oppressed nation with an ancient and glorious past and no national status, a site of decline and degeneracy, so was Bohemia the source of Neruda's profound ambivalence.

Symbolism

The 1870s mark the official beginning of a symbolist movement in Czech literature. Led by Václav Josef Sládek (1845–1912), the editor of the influential journal *Lumír,* the writers of this movement aspired to build on the cosmopolitan trend initiated by Mácha in the 1830s and continued by Neruda in the 1870s. *Lumír* provided the most important forum for Czech poets and writers until the founding of the Decadent journal *Modern Review (Moderní revue)* in 1894. The members of the journal *Lumír (lumírovci)* wanted to make Czech literature less provincial and more competitive with Western Europe. The two leading exponents of this period were Julius Zeyer (1841–1901) and Jaroslav Vrchlický (1853–1912). Paradoxically, the cosmopolitan movement of symbolism also witnessed the increased institutionalization of Czech national culture in the splitting of Prague University into separate German and Czech universities (1882), the opening of the Czech National Theater (1881), and the founding of the Czech Academy for Science, Literature and Art (1890). A parallel development in literature was the so-called neo-revival that grew out of the almanac *Ruch,* published in 1868, 1870, and 1873. Initially, the contributors to *Ruch (ruchovci)* were linked with the *lumírovci,* but they gradually moved in a more national, anti-cosmopolitan direction.

However, these personal/social and cosmopolitan/national oppositions have been exaggerated, largely to fit a convenient literary taxonomy. In fact, there was much more fluidity between these categories than is usually acknowledged. This is especially true for the Czech visual artists such as the Paris-based "cosmopolitan" Alfons Mucha, who, after his return to Prague, created a monumental cycle of pictures titled *The Slavic Epopee.*[27] Similarly, the sculptor Josef Václav Myslbek moved effortlessly between cosmopolitan and nationalist themes. Myslbek was deeply indebted to French sculpture of the 1890s and created statues on universal and patriotic themes in the course of a long and illustrious career.

But the fluidity between cosmopolitan sensualism and nationalism is also evident in the literature of the time. For example, Alois Jirásek's *Old Czech Legends* (early 1890s) is as much ornamentally turn-of-the-century as it is exemplary of neo-revivalist mythopoeia. Jirásek's *Old Czech Legends* has become a canonic text and staple reading for Czech schoolchildren for more than a century. Less original than his plays, the stories have nonetheless entered the collective imagination of the nation, in particular their retelling of the legends of Libuše, Vlasta, and the War of the Maidens. In distinction to the rococo irony and skepticism of the early revivalists, Jirásek's matriarchal prophetess Libuše is the apotheosis of the Czech nation and the didactic mouthpiece of the author's neo-revivalist ideology. In addition to prophesying the foundation of Prague, she predicts the discovery of natural mineral resources that will tempt rapacious foreigners to plunder the land and deprive it of its virginal innocence. We hear this complaint from a Czech whom the French narrator meets on the streets of Prague in Apollinaire's story "The Stroller through Prague." If Libuše is the female embodiment of the nation, her successor, Vlasta, is presented in Decadent terms as a long-haired vampire who drinks men's blood from a goblet. This split between the virtuous mother figure and the dangerous femme fatale corresponds to the nationalist-Decadent tension in the author's own artistic identity. The visual parallel to Jirásek's historical fiction can be seen in the monumental sculpture of Myslbek, who created mythological groupings for the Palacký Bridge in Prague using themes taken from the *Forged Manuscripts.* These included *Lumír and Song* (1888), *Záboj and Slavoj* (1895), and *Ctirad and Šárka* (1897).[28] Like Jirásek's fictional Libuše, these statues are heroic, larger than life, and intended to inspire patriotic fervor. The neo-revivalist treatment of the foundational legend of Libuše reached its

apotheosis in Smetana's opera, which opened the National Theater in Prague in 1881 and became a major national event.

Another cosmopolitan writer who exemplified some of the nationalist concerns of the neo-revival but who provided a bridge to the Decadent movement of the 1890s was the prose writer Julius Zeyer.[29] In spite of his professed internationalism and debt to the French symbolists, much of Zeyer's work betrays a fascination with the fate of the nation, perhaps in part because he was himself of German-Jewish origin and wished to identify more closely with his adopted language. But whereas Jirásek celebrates the nation as a healthy matriarch, Zeyer anticipates the Decadence by representing it in pathological terms as sickly and masochistic. This tendency is also apparent in the Czech visual arts of the period. In the painting *The Prophetess Libuše* (1893) by Karel Václav Mašek, the national matriarch combines elements of neo-revivalism and Decadence. Dressed in ornamental robes, Libuše holds in her extended left arm a sprig of lime leaves, a motif of Czechness (as opposed to the German oak) inherited from the second edition of Kollár's *The Daughter of Sláva* and incorporated in Smetana's opera *Libuše,* where the Czech princess is first discovered sitting in judgment under a lime tree.[30] In other ways, however, Mašek's Libuše is very much a product of the Decadence: her ashen, ghostly features resemble a bloodless vampire.

Foremost among Zeyer's proto-Decadent treatments of the national theme is his novel *Jan Maria Plojhar* (1891), whose hero, the tubercular and passive Jan Maria, becomes the symbol of the martyred Czech nation. Another symbolist example of Zeyer's nationalism is his long narrative poem *Vyšehrad,* the fourth part of which was adapted as a libretto at the request of Antonín Dvořák (1879), who wished to turn it into an opera.[31] But Dvořák never set the libretto to music, perhaps because its representation of Šárka as a femme fatale was too provocative and modern for the composer's conservative temperament. But it was later used by the young Leoš Janáček as the basis of his first opera, *Šárka* (1887, revised 1888). The third tone poem of Smetana's *My Fatherland (Má vlast)* is also entitled "Šárka" (1880), as is Zdeněk Fibich's best-known opera (1897).

"Ctirad" relates how the eponymous hero comes to the castle of Přemysl to guard the tomb of Libuše from the attacks of the Maidens. Here he finds the invincible hammer (a Slavic equivalent to King Arthur's Excalibur) that formerly belonged to the warrior Trut, a companion of his father, and that has been bequeathed to him. Armed with Trut's phallic hammer, Ctirad is able to foil Šárka's attempt to steal Libuše's magical

crown for the female leader, Vlasta. This provides the motivation for Šárka's revenge against Ctirad: she orders the Maidens to tie her to an oak tree, and while the Maidens prepare an ambush in the forest, she calls out for help. Discovering the girl tied to the tree, Ctirad releases Šárka, who explains that she is the victim of Vlasta's envy. Once untied, Šárka summons the waiting Maidens, who surround Ctirad. Unable to recover his former strength, which has been sapped away by the serpentlike Šárka, Ctirad is helpless before the Maidens and is subsequently murdered by them.

In order to negate the disturbingly sadomasochistic implications of his retelling of the legend, Zeyer makes Šárka fall in love with the noble Ctirad so that her hollow triumph is less a victory of female sexual guile than a reaffirmation of Czech heroism. Thus Šárka's femme fatale status is neutralized through her fatal love for the doomed Czech hero. Šárka assures Ctirad that she truly loves him in spite of her betrayal, a confession that allows the fallen hero a joyful death. Ceasing to be a threat to men, she becomes the abject source of male pity, a participant in the male author's sadomasochistic fantasies of alternating submission and control. Significantly, Zeyer does not dwell on Ctirad's suffering and refuses to depict it in a graphic fashion. His demise seems to be geared to a narrative logic that is not immediately obvious: he dies because the neo-revivalist plot—rather than the female leader—dictates that he must do so. Correspondingly, the Bohemian Maidens are no longer heroic in the revivalist mold but satanically alluring in the symbolist manner. Typically likened to snakes, they do not trap Ctirad by a logical ruse but lure him to his doom by the supernatural power invested in them by the malevolent force of Nature. This lends a passive, determinist tone to the whole poem in which Ctirad's death becomes a foregone conclusion, a futile act of sacrifice that has undeniably sadomasochistic overtones.

In spite of the obvious differences between Hněvkovský's early revivalist poem and Zeyer's symbolist poem-libretto on the same theme, both are akin in neutralizing the potential threat of female sexuality to male well-being, although in the former closure is brought about by uniting the sexes in life, whereas in the latter it is achieved by reconciling them in death. This narrative closure enables both writers to narrow the gap between their subjective male fantasies and their political agendas. If Ctirad and Šárka are reconciled in life and death, respectively, this allows Czech national identity to emerge as the undoubted hero of both

retellings. The same kind of closure is found in Karel Hlaváček's dramatic short poem "Ctirad and Šárka." Here, too, Šárka is in love with Ctirad rather than a willing tool of the Maidens.

A more overtly masochistic work by Zeyer is *Three Legends of the Crucifix* (1895), which include the stories "Inultus: A Prague Legend" and "Samko the Bird."[32] "Inultus" is set in Prague twenty years after the fateful Battle of the White Mountain (1620), when the Czech kingdom lost its independence for three hundred years. The Bohemian capital has become full of wealthy, aristocratic foreigners who have profited from the humiliating defeat of the Czech nation at the hands of the Catholic Habsburgs. One lovely evening a beautiful Italian sculptress named Flavia meets the handsome, dejected young Czech Inultus, who is on the verge of committing suicide as a consequence of the nation's loss of independence. Flavia persuades the youth to return with her to her residence, where she shows him her studio and a statue of the crucified Christ, almost completed except for the features whose divinity eludes her evil muse. Flavia believes that the face of the suffering Inultus is the perfect model for Christ's dying countenance, and she persuades him to model for her with the assurance that the finished work will soften the heart of its future owner, the Spanish magnate Don Balthasar, toward his downtrodden Czech subjects.

Eager to serve the interests of his compatriots, Inultus agrees to be the model for Christ and is tied to the cross. After several sessions, Flavia decides that her model's face must be made to exhibit the pain and suffering appropriate to the Crucifixion. When Flavia realizes that Inultus is dying, she takes a dagger to cut him loose; but Inultus mistakenly thinks that she is about to kill him. Eager to be martyred on behalf of the Czech nation, he encourages Flavia to perform the grim deed. She stabs him in the side with a dagger, just as Christ was pierced on the cross. When Inultus dies, Flavia finishes her work, whereupon Inultus's body is removed by Flavia's servants and thrown into a dark pit in the basement of the residence.

The finished marble sculpture is placed on display in the house of Don Balthasar, who arranges a grand reception to toast the sculptress. Don Balthasar claims that Flavia has surpassed the achievement of her great heroine and predecessor, the Italian sculptress Properzia di Rossi. But it is a hollow achievement. At the moment of her supreme achievement, Flavia realizes that she is not Properzia's equal at all: if Properzia was killed by love, she has killed love in the person of the Christlike

Inultus. Characteristic of the heartless femme fatale, Flavia ceases to be a sexual threat and becomes the abject object of male pity by hanging herself. In the meantime, Inultus's body is removed from the cellar and taken for burial. Recognizing Inultus's saintliness, the poor of Prague kneel in reverence as his humble coffin passes by. The story ends with the miraculous appearance of King David with his harp, who precedes the coffin, and Christ the Savior wearing a crown of thorns, who follows it.

Significant about this story is the intricate intermingling of national and sexual elements. If Inultus is the symbol of the suffering and humiliated Czech nation, Flavia is the classically heartless seductress; if the historical setting of Prague in the aftermath of the Battle of the White Mountain points to the author's preoccupation with national identity, the sadomasochistic relationship between the male and female protagonists points forward to the Decadence. As in "Ctirad," however, the story ends by subordinating the latter to the former. What triumphs in the end is not amoral bohemianism but the pious spirit of Czech nationalism.

The story "Samko the Bird" is also a curious blend of Slavophile nationalism, male masochism, and Catholic sensualism. The story tells of a simple Christlike Slovak peasant, who is subjected to acts of physical cruelty by the Magyar oppressors of his native land. As in "Ctirad" from *Vyšehrad*, the hero is doomed at the outset of the story to suffer and then die. In spite of—or perhaps because of—the fact that the sadistic assailants are exclusively male, Zeyer indulges in lengthy and detailed descriptions of the hero's beatings at the hands of the whip-wielding primitive Magyars in what reads suspiciously like a continuum between nationalist and sexual aggression, a homosocial sadomasochism between Magyars and Slavs teetering dangerously on the edge of homoeroticism and revealing the extent to which Zeyer provided (in Robert Pynsent's phrase) the "path to Decadence."

The Decadence

For Zeyer the Slovak Samko and the Czech Inultus are Christlike heroes and national martyrs, while the sadistic Magyars and the Italian sculptress are the villainous foreigners. For the generation of Czech writers who came after Zeyer—the Decadents of the 1890s—this paradigm is reversed: the cosmopolitan "outsider" is heroized while the weak and passive Czechs are despised and denigrated. In some ways this inversion recalls Neruda's fiction of the 1860s and 1870s; and, in fact, the Decadents may be said to take one stage further Neruda's fascination with

vampirism and sexuality. But whereas Neruda remained deeply ambivalent about these manifestations of the Other, the Decadents celebrated sexuality and vitalism in a way that was completely new in Czech literature and that clearly bears the influence of Friedrich Nietzsche. The virile barbarian becomes the quintessential hero of Decadence who brings glamour and excitement into the bourgeois, parochial lives of his victims. Yet the Czech Decadents appropriated the motif of the barbarian not to negate nationalism altogether but, rather, to redefine it in terms of their own sexual difference. Crucial to their desire to reinvent Czech national identity along Decadent lines—as a synthesis of aestheticism and vitalism—was their homosexuality. In examining certain poems by the two major poets of the Czech Decadence, we witness a struggle to reconcile two discrete models of homosexuality that emerged in late-nineteenth-century European society and that corresponded in some ways to the tensions within Decadence itself: the effete, androgyne model of the "third sex" and the masculine model provided by the contemporary cult of the body and exemplified by the national Sokol movement.

The Czech Decadence had begun one year before, in 1894, when Arnošt Procházka (1869–1925), together with Jiří Karásek ze Lvovic (1871–1951), founded *Moderní revue,* which lasted from 1894 to 1925. It was a period that rejected neo-revivalism, the Parnassian ideals of Vrchlický and his followers, and the deliberate politicization of literature. It was a period of individualism and trenchant criticism that placed the emphasis on aestheticism and that clearly bore the influence of Nietzsche and Schopenhauer. Yet in spite of its repudiation of neo-revivalism, the Czech Decadents did not necessarily disavow nationalist sentiments altogether. The most important critic of the Czech Decadence, Procházka, wrote several articles for *Moderní revue* that address the problematic relationship between the individual artist and national politics.[33] One of his later essays, provocatively entitled "The German Werewolves" (1921), attacks German chauvinism in no uncertain terms and invokes the warrior spirit of the Hussites in defiance of the German hegemony in Central Europe. And as Katherine David-Fox points out in her discussion of the correspondence between the Berlin-based Polish modernist Stanisław Przybyszewski and Procházka, an insidious anti-Germanism and Slavic solidarity coexist with—and undercut—their professedly modernist cosmopolitanism.[34]

Procházka was the leading critic of the Decadence, while Karásek was its principal poet, embodying the sexual, sensual, and linguistic

radicalism of the movement. He began to study theology at the University of Prague in 1889, but after two years he gave up his studies to become a clerk in the postal service. He collected books and art, edited periodicals, and wrote in all genres. As the leading Czech Decadent, he wrote poems on homosexual love, the beauty of passionate living, the consciousness of primal memory in man, the delight of organic and inorganic decay—as in *Walled-up Windows* (1894), *Sodoma* (1895; which was confiscated by the police for alleged immorality), and *Sexus necans* (1897).

Karásek has as his motto to *Sexus necans* the famous lines from Wilde's *De Profundis:* "I love a love, but not as other men." In this collection, he calls homosexuals the "exiles of love" *(vyhnanci lásky)* or the "disinherited." Their position outside the social mainstream renders them all the more alluring and glamorous in his eyes. He imagines a world of homoeroticism that combines Symons's ideal of Greek or Arcadian love with Nietzsche's Superman. In addition to poetry, Karásek wrote prose fiction, such as the impressionist study of decay *Stagnant Waters* (1895) and the dandyesque gloom of "The Legend of the Melancholy Prince" (1897). He also wrote novels such as *Gothic Soul* (1900), a study of the end-of-the century psyche, the occultist-homosexual *Scarabaeus* (1908), and *Ganymedes* (1925). Karásek's volumes of literary and art criticism are among his best writing; the influence of Walter Pater and Charles Baudelaire is evident.

Karásek was, above all, contemptuous of the Czech national character with its bourgeois passivity and political nihilism. Like Zeyer, he regarded the Czech nation as essentially decadent and decayed, although the primary object of his criticism was neither nationalism nor patriotism as such but the prevailing creed of neo-revivalism. His contempt for the neo-revival is intimately related to his homosexual defiance of societal norms and bourgeois morality (see chapter 3). Whereas the neo-revivalist movement was primarily masochistic and heterosexual—as exemplified by Zeyer—Karásek cultivated a transgressively homosexual sadomasochistic aesthetic. This sadomasochistic mentality is reflected in the latter's exultation in the humiliation of the Czechs, claiming that they needed to be trampled on after the Battle of the White Mountain in order to have their Catholic faith and piety restored to them.[35]

Karásek's early verse is pervaded by a typically Decadent sense of gloom and melancholy acquiescence in the decaying present. If the Czech nation was for him essentially Decadent, its ancient capital of

Prague was its most quintessential manifestation, often personified as an old woman or a whore. This gendered personification of the city was hardly new in Czech literature. What is new is the homosexual poet's identification with these personae:

> I am an old flagellant tormented till blood flows,
> I am an uncouth sailor under a broken mast,
> I am a gloomy priest who gives absolution,
> I am a wanton woman who gives herself up to wild games,
> I am a morose poet martyred by his own work.
>
> (*Básně z konce století* 8)

By contrast, other poems from the same period strike an extremely violent and sadistic note. One of the most interesting examples of this kind of poem is "Metempsychosis" from the collection *Sexus necans* (1894–97), which had previously appeared as an untitled poem in *Sodoma* (January 1894). The word "metempsychosis" describes the transmigration of the soul, the narrator's imaginary flight from the degenerate present to an atavistic past peopled by a race of heroic pagans. These barbarians are a Decadent counterpart to the Avars in Kollár's *The Daughter of Sláva*. But whereas the revivalist poem vilifies the outsiders as the oppressors of the peace-loving, martyred Slavs, the Decadent poem glamorizes their atavistic cruelty and phallic boldness:

> I do not know who you were. But you often appear to me
> in a sudden apprehension,
> glinting like a naked sword in the sun . . .
>
> (*Básně z konce století* 76)

The opening line of the poem signals the uncertainty of the narrator's perspective and his reliance on subjective perception or dreaming. The narrator then proceeds to describe a vision of this brown-skinned warrior arriving on horseback to destroy all that lies before him. The ostensible setting and theme of this encounter is a violent confrontation between two enemies, but the phallic imagery employed soon alerts the reader to its homosexual subtext in which the victim's effete "white body" is penetrated by the barbarian warrior's lance:

> In iron armor, on a wild horse,
> You broke out in a whirlwind, shield raised,
> A clashing metal shield,
> With your lance you pierced my white body,

> Drunk with victory, you cried out roughly,
> Blinded, deafened, you cried out roughly.
>
> (76)

Unexpectedly the narrator's voyeuristic passivity gives way to violent activism inverted in the penultimate stanza when the roles of barbarian and victim are completely inverted. Throwing himself onto the barbarian's body, the narrator sucks the blood from his lips; and, in a spiraling act of sexual frenzy, he strangles his opponent, smashes his bones and rips apart his brown flesh. Within the limited space of this short, terse poem, the persona of the poet has moved full circle from the purely passive status of effete masochist to masculine sadist, from victim to aggressor.

The sexual glorification of hyper-masculinity also informs the poet's perception of the collective. In the poem "Bacchanalia" (from *Sexus necans*) we witness a supranational utopian world populated by athletic supermen that conflates the Nietzschean cult of Dionysus, the end-of-the-century fascination with gymnastics, and a proto-fascist obsession with power and destruction:

> I will create a new world for my soul,
> I will ignite a new sun over its cities . . .
>
> It will be a world that will give birth to rugged men,
> Bronzed gymnasts with muscular, gigantic limbs . . .
>
> It will be an embrace of bodies clenching like the coils of pythons,
> the lust of limbs crackling like a conflagration of entire suburbs.
>
> (*Básně z konce století* 126–27)

The other important Czech Decadent was the poet, graphic artist, and essayist Karel Hlaváček (1874–98), who began to study modern languages at the University of Prague in 1891 but never completed his studies. After performing military service in 1895–96, he returned to Prague with consumption. From his schooldays on, he was keenly interested in the national Sokol gymnastic movement, and his interest in the movement never waned. Indeed, his first collection of verse (1895) was primarily concerned with the Sokol, and he continued to write manuals and essays on the joys of physical exertion almost until his death. These poems present an interesting blend of patriotism (the Sokol movement was a specifically Czech phenomenon) and Decadence. As the most

imaginative Czech Decadent poet, his life thus embodied that tension between vitalism and aestheticism that characterizes the Decadence as a whole.

Hlaváček's impressionist art criticism constitutes some of the most colorful prose of the period. His second collection of verse, *Too Late for Night, Too Early for Dawn* (1896), consists of a series of moods, auto-stylizations, and depictions of intermediate states. His last, uncompleted collection, *Psalms* (published posthumously, 1934), presents a dying man's striving for mystical union with God, of whose existence he continues to be uncertain. Hlaváček's masterpiece is the cycle *Cantilena of Revenge* (1898), in which he uses the history of the Gueux rebellion against the Spanish and of the anabaptist state of Münster and of the figure of Manon Lescaut to recount in a series of usually ironic pictures the fate of a rebellion doomed to fail from its inception. Hlaváček exploits the acoustic qualities of Czech like no other poet since Mácha and creates an artifact of great aesthetic effectiveness to describe mostly ugliness and frustration.

The tension between vitalism and aestheticism in Hlaváček's poetry can be related to the paradoxical attitude of the Czech Decadents toward the nation in general.[36] In his article "Nationalism and Internationalism," published in *Moderní revue* in January 1897, Hlaváček characterizes nationalism and aestheticism as mutually exclusive, whereas in the article "The Sokol as a Social Movement" he identifies contemporary Czechness as synonymous with aestheticism. As David Chirico points out, the attempt to define Czech national identity loses its coherence when both essays are read alongside each other.

A poem that dramatizes these tensions between aestheticism and vitalism, nationalism and internationalism, is "The Vampire," which takes it cue from the title of *Too Late for Night, Too Early for Dawn (Básně)*. Like the oxymoronic title of the collection, the poem is characterized by the well-known designation for emotional and sexual ambiguity—the "indeterminate state," that shadowy period between night and dawn, sleep and waking, when the distinction between the conscious and unconscious, self and other, becomes blurred. The poem begins with the striking image of a vampire flying low across the sky. Like the hero of Stoker's *Dracula,* this vampire possesses an indeterminate sexual and national identity as he traverses erotic and geographic zones. And like Stoker's novel, the Czech poem highlights the contradictions within the poet's own identity as a cosmopolitan. This split identity would explain

the tension between the first-person and third-person perspectives in the poem. Part way through the poem, the narrator ceases to describe the vampire as "he" and addresses him as "thou," a change of pronoun that signals an unexpected proximity between the passive narrator and the active vampire, a convergence in which Decadent atrophy merges with athletic vitalism:

> You proud and white barbarian, the lover of all things sick and pale:
> Callous and timorous again, you noble madman,
> who feeds upon the ebbing vital power of virginal juices
> struck by inherited atrophy:
> you symbol of decadence!
> The lair where you hide before daylight,
> Is it somewhere in the dark landscapes of my *Dukedom?*

The last two lines reinforce the intimacy between the vampire and the narrator. In suggesting that the vampire's lair originates within the dark landscape of his own subjectivity, the speaker identifies with the Other rather than distancing himself from it. Moreover, the use of the word "dukedom" in italics is surely not coincidental here, having previously occurred as an adjectival reference to the vampire as "the last scion of a once powerful ducal clan." On the one hand, this Huysmanian topos makes the vampire the cosmopolitan epigone who defies the biological imperative of heterosexual procreation. On the other hand, the vampire is characterized in profoundly virile terms when he feeds on the "vital power of virginal juices." Furthermore, the epigonal evocation of the vampire as the "last scion of a once powerful ducal clan" inevitably recalls the neo-revivalist obsession with the former greatness of the Czech nation. This analogy is reinforced by the adjective "ducal" with its implicit allusion to Duke Wenceslas, the patron saint of the Bohemian Lands whose political significance is enshrined in Myslbek's equestrian statue of the warrior-saint at the head of Wenceslas Square.

Reinforcing the narrator's identification with the vampire's combined embodiment of vitalism and decadence, he now depicts himself as sprouting vampire wings as his soul parts company with his body in the depths of the night:

> I know not—
> yet it seems to me, in the darkness of lonely, eerie nights,
> my spirit, parting from the flesh,
> suddenly grows vampire wings . . .

But just as the setting of the poem changes from a nocturnal supernatural landscape to the morning hubbub of the busy street, so does the vampire-poet revert once more to the status of the hated bourgeois:

> And when the night is not quite through
> returns intoxicated by a mystic orgy—
> and wakes up a common parasite
> who will drag his day miserably in the profane hubbub
> of the street as it was on the cursed yesterday
> and will be on the hateful morrow . . .

This aspiration to transcend the normative categories of sexual and ethnic identity in favor of a more protean and indeterminate self was not peculiar to the Czech Decadents but, rather, characterized Central European writing in general at the turn of the century. Here Kafka immediately comes to mind. Like the Czech Decadents, Kafka and his German-Jewish Prague contemporaries sought to resist the localized categories that constricted their own identity as marginalized members of society, most notoriously personified by Kafka's perception of himself as weak and effete and his father as strong and virile. This transcendence of traditional ways of understanding identity correlates with what Scott Spector has termed the cultural "no man's land" cultivated by the Prague German-Jewish writers, that interstitial space that mediates between ethnic and sexual categories of identity. In many ways, this no man's land was not restricted to the German-Jewish population but characterized the dilemmas and the aspirations of all small-nation writers in quest of a cosmopolitan self and universal experience.

2

Gender, Form, and Ethnicity in Nineteenth-Century Czech Women's Writing

In nineteenth-century Czech literature, national identity was more or less synonymous with village life, since the towns had become wholly or partly germanized by this time. Some of the most prominent chroniclers of Czech village were women. These works have been read largely for what they have to say about ethnicity and the nation rather than gender relations; and indeed the female writers themselves were tolerated (and even encouraged) largely in their capacity as representatives of the national cause. Three of the most significant women writers of the nineteenth century were Božena Němcová (1820–62), author of *Granny* (1855), *the* classic nineteenth-century Czech novel and the apotheosis of the rural ideal of Czech village life; Karolína Světlá (1830–99), the founder of the Czech Women's Movement and one of the members of the *May Almanac,* which aspired to inject more realism into Czech literature; and Gabriela Preissová (1862–1946), the founder of Czech naturalist drama (her play *Her Foster-Daughter* is better-known in the English-speaking world as the inspiration for Leoš Janáček's opera *Jenůfa*).[1]

In traditional criticism Němcová's novel *Granny,* her stories "Four Seasons" (1856) and "Wild Bára" (1856), Světlá's *A Village Novel* (1867) and short story "Dead Barbora" (1873), and Preissová's plays *The Farmer's Woman* (1889) and *Her Foster-Daughter* (1890) describe a gradual

progression from Romantic idealism (Němcová) through realism (Světlá) to naturalism (Preissová). I argue that the works of these writers reflect a sustained and unresolved tension between idealism and naturalism. The reason for this formal tension is inseparable from questions of gender and ethnicity. The connection between form and gender was in part the consequence of the nineteenth-century tendency to equate realism (and its later development naturalism) with the "male" inclination to describe the truth as it is and idealism with the "female" tendency to prescribe what the truth should be.[2] The gendering of this realism/idealism binary as respectively male and female is famously expressed in a passage that George Sand attributes to Balzac, where the latter identifies his own writing as realistic and the former's as idealistic:

> You are looking at man as he should be; I take him as he is. Believe me, we are both right. Both paths lead to the same end. I also like exceptional human beings; I am one myself. I need them to make my ordinary characters stand out, and I never sacrifice them unnecessarily. But the ordinary human beings interest me more than they do you. I make them larger than life; I idealize them in the opposite sense, in their ugliness and in their stupidity. I give them frightful deformities or grotesque proportions. You could not do that; you are clever not to want to look at people and things that would give you nightmares. Idealize what is pretty and beautiful; that is a woman's job. (Sand, *The Story of My Life* 923)

In combining realistic and idealistic elements in their work, these three writers subvert the expectation that women should write in a purely idealistic vein. It is no coincidence that the first of these writers—the allegedly "naïve" Němcová—has received the most critical attention, while the last—the naturalist Preissová—has suffered the greatest critical neglect. Although nineteenth-century Czech feminism has been studied in recent Czech historiography,[3] less attention has been paid by literary historians to the manifestation of feminist thought in Czech women's literature. Although both nationalism and feminism were grounded in the Enlightenment principle of human rights, they rarely existed on an equal footing, and this inequity is reflected in the lack of feminist criticism on Czech women writers of the nineteenth century. Even though many of the revolutionary-minded male compatriots of the female writers discussed here regarded them as important representatives of the national cause, they were less happy with the prospect of female emancipation; and even when they paid lip-service to such an aspiration, they failed to do so with respect to their own wives, who were

expected to play a conventionally domestic role. As Gail Finney, a scholar of German nineteenth-century literature, puts it, "Revolutions tend to be made by men, and those men tend to overlook the causes of women" (281). A close reading of the following texts by women reflects this tension between ideal and practice in the social reality of the time.

Božena Němcová

Božena Němcová has been the object of an enormous cult in Czech literary criticism. The standard biography presents her in an idealized light as a "golden-hearted" woman dedicated to the nation as a mother is devoted to her children. Adjectives like "sentimental" and "naïve" abound in critical descriptions of her work.[4] Such terms perpetuate Balzac's prescription that a woman's job is to "idealize what is pretty and beautiful." In fact, Němcová was socially informed and thus far from naïve. In addition to being a patriotic writer who believed deeply in the Slavs' right to political equality within the Habsburg empire, she was also an active feminist who advocated women's political emancipation. This second aspect has generally been overlooked. In this respect, conventional male attitudes to Němcová are profoundly paradoxical: on the one hand, she is celebrated as "our first modern woman" (Novák); on the other hand, she is stripped of those political attributes that rendered her truly modern. A close attention to her stories reveal the extent to which Němcová was deeply conscious of the literary as well as political limitations placed on women. The tension between realism and idealism in her fiction is a clear manifestation of her attempt to break out of the narrow straitjacket of idealism in which women's fiction was confined. In this respect she typifies the progressive efforts of certain German women writers in the 1840s and 1850s.[5]

Božena Němcová was born Barbora Panklová in a German-speaking family in Vienna, where her mother worked as a servant and her father as a groom in an aristocratic household.[6] She spent most of her childhood in Ratibořice, in eastern Bohemia, where her parents settled soon after her birth and where her father was in service with Princess Katharina Wilhelmina von Sagan. Young Barbora was brought up by her maternal grandmother, Magdalena Novotná, who had a strong influence on her favorite grandchild and whose story-telling inspired Barbora to try her hand at creative writing in Czech. At the age of seventeen, Barbora made an unhappy marriage with a customs official named

Josef Němec. Although the couple shared the same patriotic fervor, they were emotionally incompatible: she passionate and wayward, he conventional and difficult. They had four children, whom she supported through her own writing when her marriage failed. Both Barbora and Němec supported the pro-reform movement of 1848. When the Prague Uprising collapsed, Němec was demoted, sent to Hungary, and finally dismissed from his work. Barbora stayed behind in Prague with her four children, enduring considerable poverty and hardship. She died at the age of forty-two.

Passionately interested in folklore, Němcová wrote several books of Czech and Slovak fairy tales, several ethnographic studies, many stories of village life, as well as her best-known and best-loved work, the novel *Granny*. Written at the time of her greatest bereavement, after the death of her eldest son, Hynek, and when she herself was already seriously ill, *Granny* was based on her own happy childhood and her adored grandmother. It was first published in 1855 and has since become the most widely read classic of Czech literature. *Granny* is an idyllic study of Czech rural life in which all classes live in blessed harmony, disturbed only by outsiders.

The Prague intelligentsia sought and found in this beautiful young woman a female writer who would personify their political agenda of partial autonomy from Austrian rule. Thus, from the outset there was a seamless continuity between Němcová's life and her iconic status.[7] In part it reflected the desire for a Czech equivalent to George Sand. But it also perpetuated a much older national fantasy: the need for a mother figure to symbolize the collective struggle for survival. Initially Němcová appears to have acquiesced in this role. With the encouragement of her first lover, the poet Václav Bolemír Nebeský, whom she met after her social debut in Prague literary circles, Němcová wrote her first Czech poem, titled "To Czech Women." Published under her own name in the literary journal *Květy* on April 5, 1843, this poem typifies the sentimental view of woman as a weak mother dedicated to the welfare of her children:

> A man, ah, he has his own sharp sword,
> arms and strength—a man has everything;
> but a slim, weak woman
> has only her heart—and her child.[8]
>
> (*Sebrané spisy* 9:3)

In spite of its sentimental and naïve tone, this brief eulogy to motherhood already contains in embryo the radical and uncompromising sentiments of the later feminist: implicit is the contrast, rather than the affinity, between the sexes; interesting also is the hint of resentment in the phrase "a man has everything." Yet such progressive sentiments were overlooked by her compatriots, who preferred to see their great female writer as the symbolic mother of the nation. Even in the twentieth century, and especially during the Nazi occupation of the homeland, Czech writers continued to identify the cult of Němcová with the political struggle for national survival. The cult also has Catholic and Marian overtones. Significant in this connection are the titles of Jaroslav Seifert's collection of verse *Božena Němcová's Fan* (1940) and František Halas's *Our Lady Božena Němcová* (1942), both of which appeared during the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia.[9]

In perpetuating this mythopoeic correlation between Němcová and the mother-nation, critics have insisted that her writing—like her image—transcends the social context of her time. In an essay published in 1930, Arne Novák typified this transcendental view of Němcová's fiction as timeless and eternal: "And lo, among these transitory thinkers and publicists, scholars and poets . . . stands a female figure, our first modern woman altogether, Božena Němcová, who through the strength of her poetic personality succeeded in transcending the ontological debates of that critical time, and albeit at the cost of personal happiness, in creating a higher synthesis which eluded her male peers" (*Česká literatura* 31). By raising Němcová symbolically above the social debates of her male contemporaries, Novák ironically denies her an autonomous voice within the polyphony of Czech literature. His apparently profeminine attitude is insidious because it panders to a certain kind of idealistic feminism that emphasizes the transhistorical, transnational, and transclass specificities of women's writing. But as Naomi Schor has pointed out, "female specificity in writing is also contextual, local, a microspecificity that shifts opportunistically in response to changing macrohistorical and literary historical circumstances" (*George Sand* 48).

Far from transcending her time and place, Němcová was actively and deeply involved in the political events of the day. During the revolutionary year 1848, she published several political pamphlets in such newspapers as *Národní noviny, Česká včela,* and *Květy.*[10] Furthermore, her fiction was capable of arousing a hostile reception from her male contemporaries. In *Květy,* May 30, 1846, one critic accused Němcová of giving her

stories a bias in favor of female emancipation.[11] Němcová's fiction from this revolutionary period may be said to mark a transition from sentimentalism to realism, which was mainly the fruit of Němcová's experience during and after the failed revolution of 1848 when the focus of Czech political thought began to shift from the vague idealism of Panslavism to a more realistic concern with human rights and socialism.

Němcová's access to the socialist ideas of her day was mediated through the influence of František Matouš Klácel (1808–82), an Augustinian monk and professor at the Episcopal Institute of Brno who was later dismissed for his ideas contrary to the teaching of the Church. Klácel was the author of *Letters to a Female Friend about the Origins of Socialism and Communism* (1848), which he wrote specifically for Němcová. After appearing as a series of articles in the newspaper *Moravské noviny,* they were later published in book form. Němcová had met Klácel probably in 1844, while he was in Prague after his first break with the Church. His *Letters* were a compilation, and in many places a free translation, of Lorenz von Stein's *Socialism and Communism in Contemporary France,* published in Leipzig in 1848.

Klácel's delineation of the history of socialism from the radical Czech sect of the Adamites in the fifteenth century to the events of 1848 interested Němcová, but she was especially fascinated by the brief account in letter 18 of the Saint-Simonian advocacy of equal rights for women (*Listy* 54). The immediate product of her exposure to these socialist and feminist ideas was a short pamphlet entitled "A Word with You Housewives!" which was published under Klácel's editorship in *Moravské noviny* on November 29, 1848 (*Sebrané spisy* 11:1–6). "A Word with You Housewives!" marks a significant departure from the sentimental spirit of the poem "To Czech Women" and advocates the emancipation of women in the revolutionary spirit of liberty, equality, and fraternity.

As previously mentioned, an important source of influence on German and Czech women writers in the 1840s and 1850s was that doyenne of progressive causes, George Sand.[12] Like her German contemporaries Ida von Reinsberg-Duringsfeld and Louise Aston, Němcová identified strongly with the figure of Sand as a woman and as a writer: a portrait of the French novelist hung in her study; she had several lovers and admirers in the Sandian manner; and she refused to restrict her role to that of a dutiful housewife. Sand had herself undergone a transition from an idealistic to a politically active writer and was deeply involved in the 1848 revolution that abolished the authoritarian July Monarchy

of Louis-Philippe (1830–48) and inaugurated the short-lived Second Republic (1848–51). In her early work there is already a tension between idealism and realism, essentialist and constructed accounts of gender identity. As Naomi Schor has pointed out, Sand's first independent work of fiction, *Indiana* (1832), combines a male narrative voice, which expresses essentialist ideas about the natural difference between the sexes, and a sexually unmarked humanist voice, which deems female identity and that of other oppressed groups such as black slaves to be culturally determined.[13] It is the second, more critical, voice that comes to the fore in Sand's later works.

As her correspondence reveals, Němcová admired the life and work of Sand. In a letter to her friend Žofie Rottová, dated October 3, 1852, she writes: "I believe you that you like Sand; that woman is also my ideal" (*Sebrané spisy* 13:69). In Sand's novels conventional gender roles are challenged and, in some cases, reversed; her female characters are allowed to have happy rather than tragic fates; they are assertive and passionate, while the male protagonists are passive and weak.[14] Němcová's fiction reveals a similar desire to reverse gender stereotypes by portraying strong female characters with traditional masculine attributes. The first story written in this affirmative vein was "Baruška" (1852), based on "The Teacher's Wife" ("Die Frau Professorin") by the contemporary Swabian writer and exponent of the *Dorfgeschichte,* Berthold Auerbach (1812–82). It relates the transformation of a village girl's unhappy marriage to a painter into a successful relationship thanks to the heroine's goodness and selfless dedication to her husband. Revising Auerbach's pessimistic ending, Němcová makes Baruška's love for her husband and forgiveness of his failures the means of his salvation, a shift of emphasis that recalls the innovations of much nineteenth-century female fiction.

Another story with a strong Sandian theme is "Four Seasons" (1856), which consists of four seasonal episodes from the life of a woman, each reflecting her subjective state of mind—from the blissful, virginal days of spring, through the wintertime of her enforced, loveless marriage, to her widowhood and miraculous assumption into a virgin-filled heaven and reconciliation with an all-loving God (*Sebrané spisy* 4:392–401). Some elements of the story recall the essentialist sentiments expressed in the poem "To Czech Women." For example, when the widow prays for forgiveness for having married against her own wishes, she invokes her own female weakness and innately sinful nature: "I am a weak woman—sick—I am

a sinner!" (400) Earlier in the same story, however, we hear the radical voice of feminism in the parodic description of the oath of obedience to her husband: "The priest has finished speaking. From the bride is demanded an oath, an oath whereby she wishes to go through life with the man who holds her hand in his, through good and bad, until death do them part; that she wishes to bear patiently whatever he imposes upon her, that she wishes to deny herself at all times and willingly become a slave!" (398).

The description of the wedding night is couched in even more extreme language. The husband is compared with a grinning satyr who tears apart the white curtains of the nuptial bed to force himself on his bride. At dawn she gets up, pale, and sees the bed stained with the man's semen, her disheveled wedding robe, and a withered garland. The season reflects her subjective mood: the sky is gray, the landscape is covered with snow, and yellow leaves are falling from the trees. "Four Seasons" was so critical of women's unemancipated social status that it could not be published during the author's lifetime and was printed in 1891, nearly thirty years after her death.

Another important influence on Němcová was Sand's pastoral novel *La petite Fadette* (1849) with its portrayal of the natural peasant heroine Fadette. Němcová, who did not know French, read *La petite Fadette* in German translation and was also familiar with it in a dramatic adaptation that she translated into Czech and that received its premiere at the Estates Theater in Prague on February 18, 1858. Two years earlier, Němcová wrote the story "Wild Bára" under the direct influence of Sand's novella.[15] Fadette, a young country girl who is regarded as a sorceress by her neighbors on account of her unconventional behavior, provides the prototype for Bára. She too refuses to conform to the conventional ideals of femininity and is regarded with suspicion by the other villagers. The principal difference between the two works is the transformation of the male twins in Sand's novella into the inseparable girlfriends Bára and Elška. In this way Němcová focuses entirely on her female protagonist and her intense relationship with the pretty Elška. In some ways this lends a feminist focus to the story; but in other ways the female dyad reproduces the narrative conventions of traditional folklore typified by Erben's ballad "Christmas Eve," with its twinlike heroines Maria and Hana. The major difference between Erben's ballad and Němcová's story is that the former ends with a happy marriage for Hana and death for Maria, while in the latter both heroines are allowed

to live happily ever after. Three distinct episodes in "Wild Bára" recall Erben's *Kytice:* the alleged intervention of the Noon Witch at Bára's birth ("The Noon Witch"); the scene on St. John's Eve when Bára and Elška throw their wreaths into the river to divine their fate, which recalls the ending of "Christmas Eve" when Maria and Hana make a hole in the ice to peer into their future; and the final scene when the heroine is locked overnight in a graveyard ossuary, which resembles the culminating scene in "The Wedding Shirts" when the maiden takes refuge in a burial chamber. In each episode Němcová revises the standard folkloric narrative to fit her progressive, feminist beliefs. Yet Němcová cannot entirely repudiate the fatalistic plot and punitive overtones of Erben's ballad. Even though the story has a happy ending, the shadow of Erben's tragic heroine Maria is cast on Bára's ambiguous fate.

Bára is the daughter of Jakub and his wife (also called Bára), whose house lies between the familiar social milieu of the village and the mythic, fairy-tale world of the forest. The strange circumstances of Bára's birth lead to a conflict of interpretation in the village: the midwife claims that she is an ordinary baby, while other old women suspect that she is a supernatural changeling planted by the Noon Witch. Closely following the plot of *La petite Fadette,* in which the virtuous, strong-minded heroine is shunned as a sorceress by the villagers, "Wild Bára" contrasts the enlightened vision of the midwife with the superstitious bigotry of the old women. Bára grows up to be an independent, good-natured girl but remains the victim of prejudice on account of her unusual behavior. She forms an intense emotional friendship with the priest's niece, Elška. In the course of the story, Elška leaves for Prague to receive a young lady's education. Devoted to her friend, Bára patiently awaits Elška's return. After an absence of three years, Elška returns to the village. On St. John's Eve, the two girls perform the traditional prebridal custom of casting wreaths from the river bank to discover what their future will be. This scene recalls Erben's ballad "Christmas Eve," when the two girls Maria and Hana break a hole in the ice and peer into the darkness to divine their future. But whereas Erben's heroines are denied personal agency as the hapless instruments of fate, Bára and Elška make their subjective desires determine the trajectory of their wreaths. Keen to stay in the village and find happiness with the forester, Bára casts her wreath somewhat awry so that it gets stuck on the branch of a willow tree, while Elška, wishing to marry her aunt's doctor in Prague,

throws her wreath directly into the river, thereby ensuring that it will be carried far downstream and away from the village.

In a humorous subplot, Bára tries to foil the bailiff's attempt to woo her friend by disguising herself as a ghost and frightening him away. When her ruse is uncovered by the villagers, the local priest, in consultation with the elder, alderman, and schoolteacher, decides to submit Bára to a public humiliation by locking her overnight in the cemetery ossuary. But the story ends happily when the forester, whom Bára knows only by sight, learns of the injustice from her father and breaks down the door of the ossuary and frees the girl. He asks for her hand in marriage and she accepts; soon after the wedding the couple leaves for the forester's ancestral home in the woods.

The contrasting characters of the two heroines—one plain and masculine, the other pretty and feminine—reflect the two halves of the writer's own identity. Bára's name is a diminutive of the author's real name, Barbora; and in other ways, too, it seems that Němcová identified with her protagonist's moral strength and progressive defiance of superstitions. In other respects, however, the beautiful and charismatic Němcová was more like Elška. The close relationship between the characters can be read as a feminist desire to reconcile these disparate elements in the author's character and overcome the societal tendency to present these qualities—moral strength and female beauty—as oppositional and mutually incompatible. The split between conventional femininity and strength of character is typified by the divergent fates of Hana and Maria in Erben's "Christmas Eve," where Fate determines a happy marriage for the former and death for the latter. In revising this ending, Němcová not only invests both of her heroines with subjective agency; she also demonstrates that their respective qualities should be equally acknowledged and rewarded.

A third example of an Erben intertext in "Wild Bára" is her incarceration in the ossuary. This scene too provides a feminist alternative to the final sequence in "The Wedding Shirts," where the maiden locks herself in the chapel to escape her demonic lover. Němcová transforms Erben's punitive ending into a social allegory of the unfair treatment meted out to women and a vindication of her heroine's moral strength. If the vampire's attempt to smash down the door is a projection of the author's rapistic fantasies onto his diabolical protagonist, the forester's act of breaking into the locked charnel house to deliver the imprisoned

Bára is a symbolic confirmation of the injustice of the heroine's punishment. The latter might even be read as an ironic comment on the superfluousness of this kind of male bravado, since Bára has survived her nocturnal imprisonment completely unscathed and without external support.

If the incarceration of the heroine takes its cue from Erben's ballad, its happy resolution is more in the spirit of Sand's progressive fiction. The forester's last-minute intervention recalls the idealized Sir Ralph in *Indiana,* who remains calmly in the background for most of the plot but eventually spirits the heroine away to a distant idyll in time of urgent need. And just as Němcová's heroine is taken away by the forester from the oppressive social conditions of the village to his home in the woods, so too Sir Ralph saves his Creole cousin Indiana from a tragic fate in France by taking her back to the idyllic Bourbon Island (her birth place), where they devote their lives to freeing poor and infirm slaves.

Although Bára's union with the forester in some ways resembles the fraternal, democratic relationship between the sexes celebrated in Sand's novel—and the desire of the forester's mother to make Bára the daughter she never had would appear to confirm the platonic status of this siblinglike relationship—its resolution outside the village in the idealistic milieu of the forest reveals that a happy ending cannot be fully realized in the realistic world of Bára's home. Furthermore, in so far as the forest traditionally connotes quietude, peace, and death, Bára's departure for this destination suggests that her fate is less straightforwardly happy than it appears to be. Although she is taken there by the idealized forester, his behavior recalls the specter's abduction of the virgin to his graveyard home in "The Wedding Shirts." When the forester jumps over the cemetery wall before breaking down the door of the ossuary, his action is reminiscent of the specter leaping over the graveyard wall in Erben's ballad. Although her revised version was probably envisaged by Němcová to provide a moral contrast between the two episodes, the similarity between them remains intriguing. Of course, this similarity may have been purely unconscious; but if so, it suggests that for Němcová marriage—however idealized it may seem at the outset—contains the seeds of unhappiness and death. This would chime with the pessimistic moral of "Four Seasons," where marriage is equated with slavery. And other elements in "Wild Bára" bear out the author's pessimistic assessment of marriage as an institution of female enslavement. The association of marriage with death is prefigured in the earlier scene when

Bára's wedding wreath gets stuck on a willow tree. The forester later finds the withered wreath hanging in the willow and hides it in his cottage in the woods. In Erben's ballad of the same name, the willow tree connotes death. The association of marriage with death also finds an echo in the ostensibly humorous episode when Bára dons a white sheet, which is suggestive both of a shroud and a wedding dress. Similarly, in "Four Seasons" the description of the wedding night more closely resembles rape than the nuptial bliss conventionally held up to young female readers of the day.

Thus, Erben's stark and tragic choice between conventional marriage and death as the only viable options available to his women characters (and readers) is to some degree replicated in the ending of "Wild Bára" when Elška makes a conventional marriage to a Prague burgher and Bára disappears into the forest. The same sense of fatalism is evident in the denouement of Sand's *Indiana*. When Sir Ralph and Indiana resolve to jump to their deaths into the ravine below as a prelude to their idyllic life in the valley of Bernica, Sand is tacitly acknowledging that there is a fine and ambiguous line between marriage and death. The tragic fates ordained by male writers for their independent-minded heroines—and the idealistic alternative envisioned by their female detractors—are in this respect merely opposite ways of representing the same set of restricted options available to real nineteenth-century women. As the victim of an unhappy marriage, Němcová certainly had no illusions about the institution. Her fiction from the second half of the 1850s—a decade coterminous with her separation from her husband and her struggle to support herself and her four children in Prague—demonstrates her ambivalence very strongly. That this period also coincided with the Bach Reaction and the end of the dream of national liberation created by 1848 could only have intensified the writer's less than idealistic vision of Czech rural life.

Němcová's most famous work, *Granny,* would appear, at first sight, to have little in common with the progressive stories "Four Seasons" and "Wild Bára." In many ways this chronicle of Czech village life represents the apotheosis of the conventional revivalist belief that rural life is good and city life is bad. Yet close attention to the novel—and particularly its interpolated scenes—reveals a darker, more troubled vision of this collectivist ideal than traditional criticism would have us believe. Although the eponymous heroine of the novel is an idealized fairy godmother who embodies the spirit of the Czech village, she is also a bigoted and

authoritarian matriarch who savagely beats the family dogs for killing farmyard chickens. Published in the middle of the Bach Reaction, *Granny* repudiates the life of the city—the site of political activism both during and after the revolutionary year of 1848—and thereby represses the burning political issues of the day. Its glorification of the nationalist collective is thus achieved at the expense of political defiance. On a submerged level the novel articulates two antithetical impulses within Czech society in the 1850s: the urge to conform and the desire to rebel.

This tension comes to the surface in the interpolated tale of Viktorka, who refuses all the suitors in the village and becomes obsessed with a foreign soldier (chapter 6). When the outsider leaves with his company, Viktorka pursues him but is abandoned and returns home bearing his illegitimate child. Demented by grief and suffering, Viktorka gives birth to a stillborn child in the wild and throws its corpse into a pond. An outcast from village life, she lives as a vagabond for fifteen years. Her tragic fate leads to her devoted father's premature demise and her family's unhappiness.

This cautionary tale of a wayward girl provides both a contrast with and a complement to Granny's role as the moral backbone of village life. But they are in fact merely opposite manifestations of the same split female imago that characterized much of the nineteenth-century Czech literature about women. In many ways the tale of Viktorka resembles the fate of the maiden in Erben's ballad "The Wedding Shirts" who yearns to be united with her absent lover. The foreign soldier who stalks Viktorka recalls the spectral lover in "The Wedding Shirts" who returns from the foreign wars and abducts his fiancée to his graveyard-castle. In both cases the maiden's resistance to conformity leads to her humiliation and ruin.

Viktorka's growing mental instability can be seen as the consequence of the conflict between her personal desires and the social taboos imposed by the village collective. The family's response to Viktorka's emotional turmoil is to take her to see the village wise woman (the wife of the blacksmith), who identifies the soldier as a vampire against whom the girl must be protected with charms and amulets. Němcová's implied critique of such narrow-minded bigotry recalls her similar disapproval of the superstitious old women who brand the newborn Bára as a changeling. We may speak here of the writer's ambivalence toward the collective ideal, a conflict which also characterizes her doomed protagonist. On the one hand, Viktorka yearns for romantic experience

that lies outside the narrow, claustrophobic world of the village. On the other hand, she knows that there is no viable alternative to life in the village, as her ultimate fate as an outcast bears out.

This tension between rebellion and conformity can also be understood in terms of Němcová's own dilemma as a Czech woman writer. Like Viktorka, she is torn between the impulse to rebel against the collective ideal and the urge to conform to it. Her conflicted relation to Erben's ballads is exemplary in this regard. Although "Wild Bára" rescripts Erben's fatalistic narrative and endows her story with a happy ending, Viktorka's tragic fate in *Granny* reproduces Erben's fatalistic and punitive denouement in "The Wedding Shirts." Viktorka's mental breakdown can even be read as a projection of Němcová's own inability to reconcile her identity as a feminist *and* a nationalist writer. Němcová's dependence on traditional folklore provides a correlative to Viktorka's inability to shake off the presence of the soldier. Even though she aspires to give her female characters a happy fate, she cannot repudiate entirely the patriarchal master plot provided by Erben. In fact, the interpolated tale of Viktorka serves a similar moralizing purpose to Erben's "The Wedding Shirts." By highlighting the tragic fate that will meet a stubborn girl who refuses to adhere to the collective will and marry a local suitor, the interpolated tale of Viktorka at once critiques and reinforces the novel's authoritarian spirit embodied by the matriarchal figure of Granny.

In many ways this tale of a young girl who refuses the hand of many local suitors only to fall in love with a mysterious outsider reproduces the hagiographic genre of the Catholic saint's life. In the late-fourteenth-century Czech verse *Life of St Catherine of Alexandria,* the virgin-martyr repudiates all earthly suitors in favor of her celestial husband, Christ: "I would be mad to take a husband whom I have never set eyes on and whom I do not know; whether he is hunchbacked or handsome, whether he has castles or run-down houses, whether he is blind or can see, hideous or lovely, generous or stingy, beautiful or ugly, foolish or wise, false or true, sickly or healthy, or what his manners are like. I would rather preserve my chastity forever until I die, since no one alive is equal to my wisdom and my beauty" ("The Old Czech Life of St Catherine" 771). The urge to preserve female chastity goes to the heart not only of the medieval saint's life but also nineteenth-century cautionary tales about out-of-control women. In "The Wedding Shirts" male anxieties about the loss of virginal innocence (understood both in personal and

political terms) coexist with fantasies of rapistic violence and control. Similarly, Viktorka's refusal to marry one of the local suitors mediates between the female desire to preserve one's chastity and the fantasy of losing it to a mysterious alien lover. In the following passage, Viktorka's desire to marry an outsider echoes the virgin-martyr Catherine's defiance of her mother's will: "Girls, take my word for it, if a bridegroom came after me now, let him be poor or rich, handsome or ugly, I'd take him on the spot—if only he came from some other place" (*Granny* 79).

Unlike the female audience of *The Life of St Catherine,* which was encouraged to eschew marriage by assuming the veil as a nun, nineteenth-century readers of *Granny* faced no such alternative to heterosexual normativity. The only choice available to them—in fiction as in life—was marriage or madness and death.

Karolína Světlá

The question of women's emancipation in the Habsburg monarchy was rekindled after the end of the repressive Bach era in 1858. By the 1860s it was a burning issue of the day throughout Central Europe. The first feminist association in Austria, the Viennese Women's Employment Association, was founded in 1866.[16] In 1863 an institute of higher learning for women was founded in Prague, the first of its kind in the lands of the Habsburg monarchy. An important role in the fermenting of the woman's question was played by the American Club for Women founded in 1865 by the explorer-scientist Adalbert Fingerhut (later bohemicized as Vojta Náprstek) in the brewery of U Halanků in Prague. Karolína Světlá's founding of the Women's Production Association in 1867 also had an important role to play in the creation of a self-confident and socially aware class of educated women. The pupils at the institute studied commerce, foreign languages (English, French, German, and Russian), housekeeping, needlework, the theory and skills of teaching, artificial-flower making, and glass painting. The monthly magazine *Women's News* appeared from 1871 on. Finally in 1890, thanks to the efforts of the feminist prose writer, poet, and librettist Eliška Krásnohorská (1847–1926), the first grammar school for girls in the entire Habsburg lands was established with the name of Minerva.[17]

Karolína Světlá (1830–99) is the pen name of Johanna Rottová, the daughter of a Prague tradesman. In 1852 she married Petr Mužák, who helped her strengthen her already awakened sense of Czech patriotism. She grew very fond of her husband's birthplace in northeastern

Bohemia, the village of Světlá (from which she derived her pen name) at the foot of the Ještěd Mountains, and spent several months there every year. The locale and the people and their dialect were to serve as material for her writing. In 1862 she had an affair with Jan Neruda, but she broke off the relationship because of the ensuing scandal.

The Rott family was acquainted with Němcová, whose literary career and writings had a great influence on Světlá's own life and work. She resembles Němcová in her ethnographic interests and the use of folkloric motifs in her stories and novels *A Village Novel* (1867) and *The Cross by the Brook* (1868). But according to standard accounts of Czech literature, Světlá's stories and novels are more realistic and less naïve than Němcová's. Arne Novák, for example, distinguishes between the former's "female naïveté" and the latter's rebellious feminism (*Česká literatura* 82–83). But this distinction is more apparent than real. As we have seen with regard to Němcová's late fiction, idealism exists in an uneasy state of tension with realism. A similar formal tension exists in Světlá's fiction.

Like her contemporary Jan Neruda, Světlá was concerned to make Czech literature less parochial and more cosmopolitan. In the 1860s, when Světlá was active as a writer, realism became the dominant mode of the European novel, as exemplified by Tolstoy and Turgenev in Russia and Charles Dickens and George Eliot in England. But as a woman, Světlá was still expected to write in an idealistic mode. In spite of her desire to bring Czech literature into the mainstream of European realism, Světlá could not entirely escape the prescriptive urge to describe life as it ought to be rather than as it is. The tension between realism and idealism is especially apparent in her depiction of the relations between men and women. Following the cue provided by George Sand and Němcová, Světlá tends to present her female characters as strong and assertive and her male characters as passive and weak. In *A Village Novel,* for example, the male protagonist Antoš is endowed with the conventional female attributes of patience and endurance, whereas the older woman he marries is—initially at least—self-confident and domineering. Characteristically, the wife proposes marriage to the younger and poorer Antoš. Soon after the wedding, however, the wife succumbs to irrational jealousy, and her passionate love for her young husband turns into pathological hatred. The early part of the novel is concerned with Antoš's stoicism in the face of his wife's psychological and emotional abuse, while the later part witnesses his triumphant vindication in the discovery of true love.

In itself there was nothing subversive or unusual about presenting women as strong and assertive and men as passive and weak in Czech literature; after all, this was the way many male writers portrayed the relations between the sexes. For Světlá the problem resided less in the relations between the sexes per se than in the institution of marriage. Like Němcová, Světlá found herself in an unhappy marriage and was unable to forge her own life as an independent woman. These biographical circumstances tended to color her depiction of her female characters. Before they marry they are generally happy; but once they commit themselves to matrimony, conventional gender roles destroy the egalitarian status they formerly enjoyed. Typical of this transition from independence to marital subjugation is the story "Dead Barbora" from the collection of tales *Sketches from the Ještěd Country* (1873). Initially the strong-willed Barbora and her lover, the shy, retiring Matýsek, are happy in spite of the village resentment of their unconventional relationship. However, in response to societal pressure they marry. Soon afterward Barbora comes into an unexpected inheritance of a house and some land. She sets up Matýsek as the master of the household, who begins to lord it over the female housekeeper and her four children in a bullying fashion while Barbora reverts to the conventional role of obedient housewife. One day Barbora develops a mysterious bone-rotting disease. Fated to waste away from this condition and anxious to spare her husband the sight of her slow death, she persuades him to go to another district to gather berries said to have a miraculously curative effect. After Matýsek sets off on his mission, Barbora dies and is buried even before his return. Her husband is unable to accept his wife's death and pretends that she has simply gone away on a pilgrimage to her mother's home village of Bezděz in northern Bohemia. Eventually, however, he is unable to deny reality any longer: one Sunday morning, during Mass, the depth of his true grief is revealed when he dies in church, anxious, the narrator concludes, to join his beloved Barbora.

In some ways the story is quite realistic in depicting gender roles as culturally constructed rather than innate. When Matýsek assumes the mastership of the household, it is clearly at Barbora's instigation and with her financial backing. Even though Matýsek is inherently weak and unassertive, he is expected by society to perform the role of master of his household. Conversely, Barbora, albeit strong and self-confident by nature, assents to her role as a dutiful and passive housewife. Although such gender role-playing seems harmless enough at the beginning of

the story, its more serious implications come to the fore when the narrator mentions that a woman in the village was beaten to death by her drunken husband. But the heroine's sacrifice of her own happiness for the love of her husband might equally be seen as idealistic in conforming to the expectation that women's writing should describe how married life should be rather than how it actually is. Barbora's unexpected and improbably sudden demise may be said to bring closure to a narrative unable to resolve its own inherent tension between a realistic and idealistic portrayal of married life. Just as Bára is spirited away from the real world of the village to the forest by her savior at the end of Němcová's story, so does Barbora's death sidestep, rather than resolve, the problematic status of women in society.

Gabriela Preissová

The last two decades of the nineteenth century witnessed a significant burgeoning of fiction by European women writers. This was especially true of small-nation cultures where strong nationalist sentiments seemed to galvanize the issue of women's rights. In Norway, a country ruled by Denmark, the novelist Amalie Skram (1846–1905) published her ground-breaking novel *Constance Ring* (1885), a passionate condemnation of marriage that recalled Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and looked forward to Fontane's *Effi Briest* (1894–95). Her three later novels all deal with the theme of women in destructive marriages. Nor was the issue of women's rights restricted to female writers. One of the most forthright advocates of female emancipation was the Norwegian dramatist Henrik Ibsen. His play *A Doll's House* (1879) ignited a fierce European-wide debate about the problematic status of women in conventional marriages.

In the Bohemian Lands growing political nationalism also coincided with the increased demand for women's rights. By the final two decades of the century, the "Woman's Question" was even being addressed by Czech male writers. Josef Svatopluk Machar treated the plight of unemancipated women in his narrative poem *Mary Magdalen* (1887). Among the Czech women writers at the turn of the century were Tereza Nováková; Růžena Svobodová; Anna Maria Tilschová; Božena Benešová, with her novels of "sentimental education;" Helena Malířová, whose novel *The Right to Happiness* (1908) expressed the theme of female revolt against convention and women's quest for emotional fulfillment and social equality; and Marie Majerová, author of the novella

Virginity: The Story of a Girl (1907), about an oppressed married girl who dies a virgin.[18]

Perhaps the most important Czech woman writer at the end of the nineteenth century, and one of the most important Czech dramatists of all time, was Gabriela Preissová (née Sekerová). Preissová is important for Czech literature as a whole since she was the first naturalist dramatist, the Czech counterpart to Hauptmann in Germany and Ibsen in Norway. And yet her work has been neglected in the Czech literary criticism, partly due to the fact that her most important plays are better known in their operatic form, as *Eva* (1985–87) by Josef B. Foerster and *Jenůfa* (1904) by Leoš Janáček, and partly due to the fact that naturalist drama was not deemed an appropriate genre for women writers.

If Preissová's plays are original works of art in their own right, they are also, and were intended to be, acutely political explorations of the plight of the rural poor and, in particular, of the difficult situation of women at the end of the nineteenth century. Foerster and Janáček obscure this polemical quality by presenting their female protagonists as conventionally tragic figures rather than as real individuals caught up in events determined by their social situation. This shift of focus is signaled by the change in the title of *The Farmer's Woman*—with its implicit recognition that female subjectivity is contingent on preexisting social and familial structures—to the one-word operatic title *Eva,* with its exclusive focus on the personal fate of an individual.

Gabriela Preissová was born in Kutná Hora in Bohemia but visited Moravia as a child. At the age of eighteen, in 1880, she married Jan Preiss, a forty-two-year-old German-speaking official at a sugar refinery who worked in the town of Hodonín in southeastern Moravia.[19] Hodonín is the center of a border area between Southern Moravia and Slovakia known as Slovácko. Preissová spent nine years in Hodonín. There she got to know the local people and their way of life and collected folk embroidery. During this period she came into contact with Moravian patriots and ethnographists like František Bartoš (1837–1906), the headmaster of a grammar school in Brno, and his disciple Františka Stránecká, with whom Preissová shared her passion for ethnic folk culture and the issue of female emancipation. Preissová's interest in the cause of female emancipation and her strong feelings on the subject can be readily gauged from her correspondence with Stránecká. In a letter dated May 9, 1888, Preissová writes with a certain bitterness about the struggle faced by progressive women even by their alleged supporters in

the emancipation movement: "Our woman, my dear Stránecká, this extremely valuable half of the nation, the woman who tries to participate in work and the struggle beyond the realm of her family responsibilities, in a wider perspective has to struggle. The greatest spokesman of female emancipation wishes to see his own wife remain by the family hearth and undervalues other exemplary women . . . And still sadder is the fact that women themselves—having escaped from slavery—bravely help their husbands to run down exemplary women" (Závodský, *Gabriela Preissová* 39). After Stránecká's death in 1888, Preissová became friends with another feminist ethnographist named Julie Kusá (née Kominíková, 1858–1908), a country schoolteacher who had come from Prague to acquaint herself with the folk culture of the region.

Like most Moravian towns of that time, Hodonín had a sizeable German-speaking population. But unlike other towns in Moravian Slovakia, the German population was increasing rather than on the decline.[20] Perhaps concerned with chronicling a culture that seemed threatened, Preissová traveled through the Czech-speaking villages of the region while accompanying her husband on his business trips. She wrote of her experiences in a series of short stories that she began to publish in journals from 1884 on, later assembling a three-volume collection titled *Pictures from Moravian Slovakia* (1886–89). One story from Moravian Slovakia that deals with the unsuccessful relationship between a rich man and a poor woman is "The Farmer's Woman" ("Gazdina roba"). This story attracted the attention of the director of the National Theater in Prague, František A. Šubert (1849–1915), who encouraged Preissová to turn it into a play. So successful was its first performance in 1889 that it was later set to music as the opera *Eva* (1895–97) by the Czech composer Josef Bohuslav Foerster (1859–1951). From the late eighties on, several Czech dramatists had attempted to portray Czech life as truthfully as possible. They had taken their subject matter from the village, convinced that only there was typical Czech life to be found. Whereas the Russian realist Nikolai Ostrovsky was concerned largely with the merchant class, and Ibsen portrayed the small-town Norwegian bourgeoisie, the Czechs looked to the peasantry with its rich folk traditions beloved of folklorists, musicians, and ethnographers alike. But, according to Karel Brušák, these dramatists, even when dealing with the darker side of village life (greed, brutality, and alcoholism), always avoided naturalism and rarely portrayed peasant characters as being influenced by social conditions ("Drama into Libretto" 14).

Preissová's plays *The Farmer's Woman* and *Her Foster-Daughter* went further than previous Czech drama in exploring the relationship between individuals and their social environment in a naturalistic fashion. In this respect she is rightly seen as an important precursor of Alois Jirásek's plays *Mrs Vojnarová* (1891) and *The Father* (1895) and the Mrštík brothers' *Maryša* (1895), the story of a strong-willed young woman who is forced to marry an older man against her will and ends up poisoning him. What distinguished Preissová's drama from previous Czech drama was her authentic exploration of the social relations between ordinary people and her insistence that issues of gender, class, and ethnicity were all implicated in each other.

In *The Farmer's Woman,* Mánek, the son of a rich farmer, loves the poor and headstrong seamstress Eva, who refuses him because she has been slighted by his mother, who wishes her son to court his social equal, Maryša, the daughter of a neighboring estate owner. At the village festival, Mánek and Eva quarrel. She accuses him of being weak willed and decides to end the relationship. In pity, Eva promises her hand to the lonely and lame furrier Samko. Eva and Samko have a baby girl, but when the child falls ill, the superstitious Samko refuses to call a doctor and thus brings about his daughter's death. After their baby's death, their marriage is empty and unhappy. Eva turns to Mánek, now also married, and they become lovers again. They leave as seasonal harvesters for Hungary, where they live as man and wife. But when they are prevented from being divorced from their spouses, Eva, driven by despair and guilt, drowns herself in the Danube.

Preissová's play may have a conventionally Romantic ending, but her treatment of the plot, including the use of authentic dialect and folklore elements, is wholly naturalistic. Although Eva's suicide replicates the Romantic convention that strong-headed women must suffer for a mistake or crime that they have already committed—and in Eva's case, this fatal error seems to have been her initial rejection of Mánek because she was slighted by his mother—her unhappy fate reflects the difficult social conditions of the time, such as the prevalence of superstitious beliefs concerning modern medicine, the extremely strict divorce laws, and the opprobrium attached to adultery.

Foerster's opera *Eva* adheres closely to the original plot of the play while replacing its regional dialect with standard Czech to make the libretto comprehensible to an educated audience. But Foerster's adaptation is also conservative in its transformation of Preissová's feminist play

into a conventional opera in which the heroine is doomed to die. The death or madness of the heroine was a common operatic denouement.[21] Although Eva commits suicide in the play, she does so because she has no alternative: her fate is dictated by her social circumstances, not by her character. By contrast, Foerster makes Eva's fate a foregone conclusion by insisting at the outset that she is a doomed character. In her speech in act 1, scene 3, Preissová's character states that she is sleeping badly, that she often dreams of her dead mother, and that there is room enough next to her in the cemetery. Foerster's libretto amplifies this suggestion of morbid foreboding by turning the short speech into a fully fledged Romantic death wish wholly alien to Eva's character:

> My paradise is growing dark.
> But don't think I spend my days
> just longing and dreaming.
> Ask other people, they will tell you
> what casts a shade across my brows,
> what desolates my heart with grief,
> what gnaws my soul with anguish raw,
> what grants me no respite at night
> and hounds me from my bed at dawn,
> what leads me to the graveyard gate
> and to my mother's wretched tomb . . .
>
> (*Eva* 6)

The motif of paradise lost is taken up again in Eva's soliloquy shortly before she throws herself into the Danube. Unlike Preissová's laconically bitter heroine, Foerster's Eva articulates the conventional atonement for her sins at great length in a vision of her dead daughter and mother in paradise that provides the requisite moral closure to the transgressive life of an adulteress:

> I repent of my sin,
> let me enter the next world,
> my soul cleansed.
> May the breath of pity
> help me, wretched sinner,
> from out of the turmoil of life
> to everlasting peace.
> I hear father's voice—the sound is sweet,
> but no—it is mother's gentle murmuring.
> O dearest ones, come, I long to join you! . . .

> And you my child,—oh, moment of bliss,
> it is you, oh, my darling daughter,
> oh, happiness, I have you again!—
>
> (102)

Eva's reasons for refusing Mánek in favor of the crippled, kindly Samko are far more complex in the play than in the opera. Preissová's strong-willed heroine refuses Mánek from wounded pride and self-respect yet when Samko asks her why she continues to be associated with him, she is unable to offer a reasonable explanation and merely mutters that "it is difficult to say." Eva is clearly conflicted between her expected social role as a woman and her subjective impulses, between the acquiescent recognition (reinforced by the insult leveled against her by Mánek's mother) that such a morganatic marriage is impossible and her continued attraction to Mánek, a conflict that continues to motivate her actions and ultimately determines her tragic death.

In Foerster's opera, Eva is denied personal agency altogether. Whereas for Preissová Eva's death is the culmination of a tragic combination of complex social and personal factors, in the operatic version her fate is determined by supernatural forces completely beyond her personal control. In her dialogue with Samko prior to accepting his hand in marriage, Eva exhibits resignation in the face of these transcendental powers:

> That's what everyone tells me,
> but I know that Mánek for my sake
> will go against his mother's will.
> The wings of love cannot be clipped,
> not even by the whole world!
> *ominously*
> But it has been otherwise decreed.
> Let him look for another now.
> Believe me, Samko, I shall never be
> Mejšaný's housewife!
>
> (20)

In her second play, which she was encouraged to write by Šubert, Preissová created a less resigned female protagonist, a fact that may have contributed to its controversial reception. *Her Foster-Daughter* was also set in Moravian Slovakia. This time the reviews of the premiere in Prague (November 9, 1890) were not so positive. In his review of the

play for the journal *Voice of the Nation* (November 11, 1890), the leading Czech poet Jaroslav Vrchlický (1853–1912) found the drama's rebellious spirit unsuitable for the pen of a woman: "The theme of the play, which reeks of the criminal courts, is elaborated in complete accordance with the recipe already provided by Tolstoy, Strindberg and Hauptmann, and its basic idea, the murder of a baby, is particularly reminiscent of Tolstoy's *The Power of Darkness.* The good points of the play are weighed down by the unsympathetic and embarrassing atmosphere of the whole, which suggests the pen of a young literary rebel rather than that of a woman."[22]

In spite of the criticism it generated at the time of its first performance, *Her Foster-Daughter* is in fact a highly accomplished drama. But like the texts examined so far, it mediates ambiguously between realistic and idealistic modes. Its basic artistic device is the Romantic tale of a girl in a secluded mill and a lonely cottage. Preissová uses these Romantic conventions as a dramatic foil to throw her drama into stark relief. Romanticism is also apparent in the parallelism between the mood and nature: the sunset in the first act, the windy moonlit night in the second, and the frosty winter day in the third. Yet Preissová derived her plot not from Romantic literature but from two real-life incidents she heard about during a stay in Moravian Slovakia: the first was the crime of a jealous peasant who deliberately slashed the face of his brother's fiancée with whom he was in love; the second crime was that of a woman who helped her step-daughter kill her illegitimate baby. Preissová used the first story unchanged but altered the second to provide a contrast between the gentle Jenůfa, incapable of hurting a living creature, and her stepmother, Kostelnička, who becomes the sole murderess.

As the village sacristan (Kostelnička in Czech), she leads religious processions, takes care of burials, and knows how to cure the sick. She is the widow of a man whom she married for love but who became a drunkard, squandered her money, and beat her. When he dies, she is left destitute with Jenůfa, his daughter from his first marriage. Resilient in the midst of adversity, she peddles victuals from the village to the town, making enough money to support herself and Jenůfa, who becomes the center of her life, the child she never had. After Laca, the step-brother of Jenůfa's lover, Števa, slashes Jenůfa's face out of jealousy, and after Števa ceases to love Jenůfa, who is already pregnant by him, Kostelnička conceals the birth of the child. When she is unable to marry Jenůfa to either Števa or Laca, she tells the latter that the child has died to

convince him to take her disfigured foster daughter. Once she has said this, she must get rid of the baby one way or another.

Here Preissová found it difficult to reconcile the requirements of Romantic convention with her progressive feminist beliefs. It is certainly not a feature of Kostelnička's character to commit murder, and the necessity for doing so introduces a determinist element into the plot that is foreign to the feminist spirit of the play as a whole. Up to this point everything about Preissová's naturalism presupposes a cultural understanding of gender: the lives of the female characters reflect the real social conditions of the time; they work for their living and are physically abused by men; and the unmarried Jenůfa becomes pregnant, after which she must either marry or get rid of the child, but because of her disfigurement, neither Števa nor Laca will marry her. In a monologue, Kostelnička rejects the idea of giving the child away because Jenůfa would not agree to it; hence, she rationalizes her decision to kill the child to spare it from possible diphtheria and to give the hapless mother a second chance in life.

Contemporary law exonerated a woman if she had been insane following the birth, but not if she had previously concealed the pregnancy, which suggested premeditation. Preissová complicates this legal issue by attributing the crime to two characters instead of one: although Jenůfa conceals her pregnancy, it is Kostelnička who murders the child in a temporary fit of insanity. Having modified the real-life story by making Kostelnička the murderess rather than the child's mother, Preissová poses a complex legal question: who is the guilty party, Jenůfa, who conceals the pregnancy, or Kostelnička, who kills the child? In this way, the play subtly highlights the inadequacy of the contemporary law as it stood.

The tension created between the naturalistic plot and its Romantic basis is also true of the representation of Kostelnička. In one respect, she is presented in a realistic light as an ordinary woman who performs menial work and who was beaten by her husband. In other ways, however, she shares affinities with folkloric portrayals of women who are invested with the supernatural power to determine between life and death. As a totemic figure in the village hierarchy, her eventual fall is all the more disturbing, since she is held up to an ideal more mythic than real. It was probably this demystification of the Romantic image of the village matriarch that contributed more than anything else to the critics' moral outrage at the play's first performance. If Preissová had made

Jenůfa the murderess in conformity with the real-life story, her drama would probably have been subjected to less criticism. Her real crime in the eyes of the male critics was not that she portrayed female infanticide but that she made the *matriarchal* figure of Kostelnička the transgressor against the moral norm. By presenting the village matriarch as a real woman with human failings rather than as an idealized embodiment of the national collective (like Granny), Preissová's play contravened not only public morality but, more crucially, the quasi-sacred myth of the mother-nation.

Reflecting conservative reservations about this realistic and nuanced portrayal of the village matriarch, Leoš Janáček transforms Preissová's complex heroine into a conventionally tragic operatic portrayal of a woman who must suffer for the sins she has committed.[23] Janáček had imposed a similarly conservative ending on his first staged opera, "The Beginning of a Romance" (1894), based on a short story by Preissová. In stripping away the irony of Preissová's story, Janáček was following the conservative trend already established by Dvořák's operas. Similarly, in *Jenůfa* the composer plays down Kostelnička's attempt to rationalize the murder and, faithful to the conventions of operatic narrative, places greater emphasis on her deranged state of mind:

> "In a moment . . . in a moment."
> and I have to wait here a whole eternity,
> a soul's eternity?
> What if I took the child off somewhere?
> No . . . no . . .
> The baby's the only obstacle,
> a lifelong disgrace!
> That would be a way of redeeming her life . . .
> and it's God who knows best how everything stands,
> it's God who knows best how everything stands,
> how everything stands.
> (takes woollen shawl off a peg
> and wraps it round herself.)
> I'll deliver the little boy to his Maker . . .
> that will be quicker, easier!
> By springtime, when the ice melts,
> there'll be no trace.
> He will come to God
> before he knows anything.
> (in the highest excitement and taking leave of her senses)

> They would all be down on me, and on Jenůfa,
> They would all be down on me, and on Jenůfa!
> (pointing at herself as the victim of persecution)
> "Look at her! Look at her!
> Look at her! Kostelnička!"[24]

In the play, Kostelnička first of all considers giving the child away rather than killing it. But she changes her mind since Jenůfa would not agree to the plan: "No . . . Jenůfa would not allow it and, besides, she is not capable of lying." She now presents the murder as merciful since the child will probably die of childish convulsions or diphtheria anyway: "I will deliver the little boy to the Lord . . . It will be a shorter and lighter burden than suffered by those children who die of convulsions or diphtheria." Finally she persuades herself that murder is the best solution since she will be able to spare her own and Jenůfa's honor: "In this way I shall redeem an adult's life. My own and Jenůfa's honor . . ." In this fashion, Preissová shows her psychological skill by making Kostelnička rationalize her drastic solution to the problem and convince herself that the child's death will be to the advantage of the baby, Jenůfa and herself. (In the opera, it is only Jenůfa's honor that is invoked).

Janáček simplifies Kostelnička's complex soliloquy by excising all the remarks that might be construed as rational, thereby endowing her character with greater dramatic consistency while deviating from Preissová's intention to create a truthful feminist portrayal of a real woman's dilemma. Thus Janáček reappropriates a feminist play based on a Romantic plot and turns it back into a Romantic tragedy whose denouement entails the inevitable madness or death of the heroine. This treatment of his heroine is consistent with the composer's other operas such as *The Beginning of a Romance, The Makropulos Case,* and *Kát'a Kabanová*.[25] Opera is not a neutral art form whose passionate music transcends the mundaneness of social reality, but an ideological system whose patriarchal values and assumptions are deeply implicated in those of the society that engenders it.

From a traditional perspective, the texts analyzed describe a gradual progression from idealism to naturalism in the literary representation of Czech village life. But the reality of women's writing is more complicated than this trajectory suggests. As *the* masculine literary mode of the late nineteenth century, realism may be said to prescribe as much as it describes the conditions of village life and the social relations among the sexes. Conversely, as *the* feminine mode, idealism describes as much as it

prescribes those same relations. Thus, in Czech women's representation of village life, idealistic and realistic modes come to coexist in an ambiguous tension with each other. This formal incongruency is inseparable from the impossible realization of the authors' ambition to reconcile fully their commitment to the harmonious ideal of the national collective with a realistic portrayal of their social experience as real women.

3

Czech Mates

Homosexuality in Czech Modernist Short Fiction, 1917–20

In the early years of the twentieth century, Czech history and identity were no longer being defined exclusively in terms of nationalism. In the writings of T. G. Masaryk, and even that of his detractors, the meaning of Czech history was, above all, ethical.[1] Masaryk popularized the idea that Czech history had been synonymous with the love of truth, justice, and freedom since the time of the religious reformer Jan Hus in the early fifteenth century. Czech gay writers of the modernist period at once asserted and undermined these ethical assumptions. In order to articulate their sexual deviance from the heterosexual norm, they were required to question the social assumptions on which these moral values were founded. But they did not repudiate this moral discourse altogether; they tried to reconcile it with their private subjective experience. Even though they rejected nineteenth-century nationalism in favor of cosmopolitanism, their concern with morality betrays the pervasive influence of the prevailing ethical model of national identity. In fact, this tension between moral and subjective truth claims was part of a larger picture of European modernism.

Wilde versus Gide

According to Michel Foucault, the formation of sexuality in the modern period is inseparable from the discursive struggle over the status of truth. Emerging from the frequently coercive practices of the Church (in particular the confessional practices of the Inquisition), the modern scientific branches of medicine and psychology privileged the quest for truth as the basis of their modus operandi. Homosexuality emerged as a "reverse" discourse or inverted reaction to this mainstream, scientific discourse. Resisting the definition "perversity," the new discourse began "to speak in its own behalf," to insist on its own legitimacy in the face of medical and juridical hostility.[2]

According to Jonathan Dollimore's important study *Sexual Dissidence,* toward the end of the nineteenth century homosexual writers approached the challenge of representing their sexual difference from the mainstream in two ways. Dollimore perceives the work of Oscar Wilde (1854–1900) and André Gide (1869–1951) as embodying alternative early articulations of homosexual identity and interprets Wilde's aesthetic creed—long regarded and dismissed as the flippancy of a Decadent—as a conscious political assault on Victorian morality and its sustaining origin of truth. He sees Wilde's aesthetic philosophy as a vehicle for a purely cultural view of sexual identity that was automatically subversive of Victorian morality and its positivist assumptions. In contrast to this "transgressive aesthetic," Dollimore presents Gide's advocacy of sexual transgression in the name of morality as the "transgressive ethic." These transgressive modes, contends Dollimore, are discursive forerunners of the modern culture versus nature debate about sexual and generic identity (3–18, 69–70).

The emergence of homosexual discourse was coterminous with the movement known as "art for art's sake," exemplified by Joris-Karl Huysmans (1848–1907) in France and by Oscar Wilde in England. Fundamental to the creed of art for art's sake was the denial of positivism, the Comtian assumption that truth is completely represented by observable phenomena and scientifically verifiable data. The nineteenth-century literary forms of realism and naturalism were founded on the claim that the truth of art resided in its ability to represent in a scientifically detached mode the observable reality of life. In rejecting the tenets of positivism, art for art's sake embraced a new set of ideals that deliberately

reversed the valorized oppositions life/art and truth/lie on which positivism was predicated. Art was no longer to be an objective photographic copy of life but a reflection of the artist's inner life; art should cease to be a mirror of bourgeois morality and should explore the amoral, even immoral, vision of the subjective imagination.

The dethronement of realism by the art for art's sake movement was synonymous with the homosexual assault on the dominant scientific and sexual discourses of the nineteenth century, since realism and naturalism were predicated on the scientific superiority of the "real" and the "truth." According to the realist creed, the value of art consisted in its subordination to the scientific assertion of dispassionate objectivity. By inverting the life/art, truth/lie oppositions, fin-de-siècle art was implicitly subverting the hetero/homosexual binary as well, since heterosexuality was perceived by scientific discourse as the truthful norm from which homosexual conduct was a dangerous deviation. It can be readily appreciated, then, that the Decadents' desire to promote the autonomy of art over life and the lie over truth proceeded from a political resistance to the tyranny of dominant sexual discourses. In an age long before "gay rights," writers such as Wilde and Gide asserted their sexual deviance from the moral norm through the discourse of art for art's sake. Art was not simply a private refuge from the burdens of everyday life; it was a conscious vehicle of political resistance to Victorian morality.

The tension between subjective and social visions of identity in the work of Czech women writers of the nineteenth century is also evident in Jiří Karásek ze Lvovic's story "The Legend of Sodoma" (1920) and Richard Weiner's "The Indifferent Spectator" (1917). Issues of subjectivity are as much at stake in the work of these gay writers as in the work of their female predecessors. Just as women writers of the nineteenth century struggled to reconcile the traditional essentialist views of patriarchy with modern feminist insights into their identity, so did these homosexual writers confront a conflict of interests between the essentialism of Gide's "transgressive ethic" and the constructionism of Wilde's "transgressive aesthetic."

Jiří Karásek ze Lvovic

In spite of a renewed interest in Karásek's work in the last few years, the question of his homosexuality, and how it might be expressed in his writings, has been generally elided by scholars in the Czech Republic. Although the major scholar of the Czech Decadence, Robert Pynsent, has

discussed Karásek's homosexuality, he tends to treat it exclusively in terms of Czech national politics.[3] Karásek's assertion of (homo)sexual difference is inseparable from his artistic objection to neo-revivalism and positivism that provided the philosophical basis of Czech criticism in the 1880s. Karásek understood that the vision of truth which subtended late-nineteenth-century Czech criticism precluded both artistic *and* sexual deviance from the norm provided by realism and positivism. Realizing that Czech philosophy and art had shared the same moral principles, he insisted on asserting the subjective and amoral counter-principles of Decadence. In his collection of essays "Art as Criticism of Life," Karásek refuses to distinguish between art and criticism in their superior status to life: "Art is above life; it is its criticism" (*Umění jako kritika života* 5). Art should no longer be subject to the dictates of life, but the other way round: life must become a reflection of the artist's subjective world. The positivist concern with objectivity in literature and criticism led Karásek to insist on the subjective, nonscientific function of criticism that should not aspire to the objective precision of the natural sciences but should reflect the dilettante interests of the individual critic. In setting scientific objectivity as its goal, conventional criticism pursues an impossible ideal of absolute truth, a philosophical pipe dream.[4]

In his preface to Arthur Breiský's collection of essays on Watteau, Baudelaire, and Wilde (first published in 1910), Karásek praises the Czech dandy's assault on the moral assumptions of Czech criticism. He argues that the artist-critic should have the courage (here the English aesthete Walter Pater is seen as exemplary) to discover his own subjective truth through the transgressive aesthetic of the "lie": "It is above all necessary that the artist . . . should have a certain courage of *artistic mystification* and the awareness that he cannot ever lie enough to reach truth, *his own* truth for which he yearns" (*Triumf zla* 10). In his preface to the novel *The Gothic Soul,* Karásek states the same proposition in a more apophthegmatic manner: "Truth is ephemeral, deceit eternal" (*Gotická duše* 11). In his illuminating essay on Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray,* Karásek could equally well have his own dissident view of art in mind when he claims that "Wilde inverts orthodox truths with the sweetest smile of a man for whom the horror of the bourgeoisie affords delight" (*Renaissanční touhy v umění* 67). Both men perceived that the sustaining origin of Victorian morality was truth itself, and it was truth that they wished to subvert through the agency of art. In a manifesto-like pronouncement on the primacy of art over life, the homosexual narrator of Karásek's

novel *The Novel of Manfred Macmillen* (1907) articulates the author's own point of view in his scathing comments on the petty bourgeois, small-nation obsession with truth: "The geniuses of small nations were fanatics of truth. Why shouldn't a genius for once be a fanatic of the lie? All geniuses of small nations had an aim; they were workers of humanity and that is vulgar" (*Román Manfreda Macmillena* 82). The typical Karásek hero is the liar who subverts the "truth" of social respectability. Similarly, in a later poem, "The Carousel," Karásek celebrates this hero as the "divine conjurer" who is "the synthesis of all lies" ("Kolotoč" 54–55).

The "lie" and the "deceit" *(klam),* cultivated by Karásek's transgressive heroes, entails a new discourse of subjective truth distinct from the positivist prejudice of nineteenth-century criticism. But it falls short of the truly revolutionary implications of Wilde's "transgressive aesthetic." In "The Decay of Lying" (1889), a humorous dialogue on nature and art between Cyril and Vivian, the latter states: "Art, breaking from the prison-house of realism, will run to meet him, and will kiss his false, beautiful lips, knowing that he alone is in possession of the great secret of all her manifestations, the secret that Truth is entirely and absolutely a matter of style" (72). For Wilde, art is a subversive means of setting Victorian truth on its head in the name of style. As Dollimore argues in *Sexual Dissidence,* Wilde's "transgressive aesthetic" is revolutionary to the extent that it takes the Decadent "lie" to its most radical extreme, and for a clear political purpose: if all truth is denied, it follows that all political authority—including the power of oppressive governments and heterosexual society in general—has no epistemological or moral basis to legitimize its claim to power (25). For Wilde, the "truth" of the homosexual self resides in the complete denial of moral truth. This, *in nuce,* is a precursor of the cultural account of homosexual identity according to which homosexuality is a discursive construct rather than an essential category of being.

Although Karásek's cultivation of the Decadent motif of the "lie" appears to be modeled on Wilde's "transgressive aesthetic," his vision of dissident art is in some crucial ways closer to Gide's "transgressive ethic." In this sense he does not totally repudiate the moral basis of Czech thought with the consequence that his battle against the moralizing animus of Czech culture paradoxically reinforces its own moral prejudice. Nietzsche regards this paradox as typical of the fin de siècle: "*L'art pour l'art*—the struggle against *purpose* in art is always a struggle

against the *moralizing* tendency in art, against the subordination of art to morality. *l'art pour l'art* means: 'the devil take morality!'—But this very hostility betrays that the moral prejudice is still dominant. When one has excluded from art the purpose of moral teaching and human improvement, it by no means follows that art is completely purposeless, goalless, meaningless, in short *l'art pour l'art*—a snake biting its own tail" (*Twilight of the Idols* 21). For Wilde the route to the subjective self is via the negative path of art's denial of truth; for Karásek the same route proceeds from a similar set of subjective assumptions but ends by espousing a moral view of art. Echoing Wilde's personification of art as a young man with beautiful lips, the preface to *The Gothic Soul* states: "Let us therefore not be afraid of forgetting life for art: for only its/his beautiful lips can tell us the truth of all our being" (*Gotická duše* 12).

As for Wilde, it is no longer a question of the absolute negation of truth but, rather, of the reinscription of moral truth in support of the subjective self. This fundamental difference of emphasis between Wilde and Karásek can be illustrated with reference to the Decadent motif of the mask.[5] The prevalence of this image at the fin de siècle signals a crisis of the self at a time when, as Eve Sedgwick reminds us, the homo/heterosexual binary began to coexist alongside the male/female binary (*Epistemology* 11). If the motif of the mask is an indicator of modernist crisis, it is equally a subversive weapon in the hands of a transgressive Decadent artist like Wilde, for whom the mask is more important for what it is than for what it hides. In "The Decay of Lying," the dandy Vivian states that what is interesting about people in good society "is the mask that each one of them wears, not the reality that lies behind the mask" (63–64). For Wilde, therefore, the value of art lies in its exposure of the self as an empty mask. For Karásek the mask is not a source of subversive postmodernist pleasure in beholding the self as empty (as for Wilde) but a source of modernist anxiety in glimpsing the emptiness behind the moral facade. In the novel *The Veiled Picture* the narrator looks at a portrait and is horrified by the emptiness and nothingness below the masklike face of the sitter: "This face mirrored back to me the inside, looking into which as through a crack, I glimpsed hell there, not the hell of traditional heat, but an inferno of frost, emptiness, nothingness" (*Zastřený obraz* 66). If Wilde takes subversive delight in the surface masking a void or absence of essence, Karásek is terrified at the absence of essence. While Wilde's spokesman exults in the pleasurable awareness that there is no truth behind the mask, Karásek's narrator is anguished by the

absence of truth. For Wilde art is liberating precisely because it denies truth, whereas for Karásek the value of art consists paradoxically in its reinscription of morality. For Karásek art is ultimately a means to a subjective end and is therefore a social tool. The goal sought in all his essays and numerous prefaces to his poems is the social and cultural pluralism permitted by an art free of positivist constraints. Karásek's essay "The Socialization of Art" provides such a plea for pluralist tolerance through the agency of art: "Art has only one social teleology: to multiply the life, environments and societies in which it arose. But it will only achieve this when it multiplies each individual ego. To impose any other aim on art is simply an error" (*Umění jako kritika života* 154). In spite of its cosmopolitan appeal both to social and solipsistic pluralism, the passage quoted above paradoxically encodes teleological, prescriptive terms like "aim" and "error" that perpetuate the moral prejudice of the small-nation culture. In Karásek's criticism the oppositions art/life and lie/truth are ambiguously subject to reversal. Moral truth is not discarded altogether but redeployed to meet the cosmopolitan aspirations of social and subjective pluralism. As the earlier comparison of Wilde and Gide suggests, the dialectic between morality and subjectivity in Karásek's thought derives from an ongoing discursive debate between essentialist and constructionist accounts of identity within European society as a whole.

"The Legend of Sodoma" describes an episode from the life of the Italian Renaissance painter Antonio Battista Bazzi (1477–1549), popularly known as "Il Sodoma." The story is based on Giorgio Vasari's life of the artist from the third volume of his celebrated *Lives of the Painters*. The Czech story focuses on only one episode from Vasari's account: the execution of the fresco cycle of the life of Saint Benedict at the Monastery of Monte Oliveto Maggiore near Siena. According to Vasari these frescoes had been left unfinished by the painter Luca Signorelli, and so Sodoma became the somewhat controversial choice to complete the cycle. The respectable burghers of Siena have complained on the grounds that the artist (an avowed sodomite as his self-styled nickname brazenly asserts) is morally unworthy to carry out the pious task of representing scenes from the life of a holy man. Vasari provides us with an extremely vivid cameo of Sodoma's character and reputation:

> He [Sodoma] was a gay and licentious man, keeping others entertained and amused with his manner of living, which was far from creditable. In which life, since he always had about him boys and beardless youths, whom he loved more than was decent, he acquired the by-name of

> Sodoma; and in this name, far from taking umbrage or offence, he used to glory, writing about it in songs and verses in *terza rima,* and singing them to the lute with no little facility. He delighted, in addition, to have about the house many extraordinary animals; badgers, squirrels, apes, marmosets, dwarf-asses, horses, barbs for running races, little horses from Elba, jays, dwarf fowls, Indian turtle-doves, and other suchlike animals, as many as he could lay his hands on. (246)

Vasari paints a negative picture of a man who carries over his immoral personal life into his art:

> For the last, in order to do despite to the General and the Monks, he painted the story of the priest Fiorenzo, the enemy of S. Benedict, bringing many loose women to dance and sing around the monastery of that holy man, in order to tempt the purity of those fathers. In this scene Sodoma, who was as shameless in his painting as in his other actions, painted a dance of nude women, altogether lewd and shameful; and, since he would not have been allowed to do it, as long as he was at work he would never let any of the monks see it. (247)

According to Vasari, the painter comes to an unfortunate end due to his immoral behavior. Karásek attenuates Vasari's strict opprobrium by representing his hero as a dreamy modern artist. Appointed to undertake the commission of painting the fresco, Sodoma now abandons his former promiscuous life in the outside world to take up his ascetic residence within the walls of the monastery. But he is unable to forget his past dissolute life of freedom and yearns for the company of his beloved assistant Riccio. Art now becomes the means of recapturing that lost freedom outside the monastery walls. Instead of dutifully representing the scenes from the holy life of the saint, Sodoma transfers the lost features of the beautiful boy onto the fresco wall. The illusion of art evokes the Platonic ideal of male beauty that life inside the monastery cannot provide: "If the living Beatrice could not be here, Sodoma would introduce his love in colorful illusion" (*Legenda o Sodomovi* 22).

In Vasari's account, Sodoma consciously flaunts convention in the name of immorality, whereas Karásek's sensitive, brooding artist reinscribes the moral norm in the name of a higher subjective truth. Similarly, the abbot in the Czech story is a genial eccentric who prefers reading Plato's *Dialogues* and the Kabbala to his breviary and has almost nothing in common with Vasari's irate and domineering Master of the Order. The spiritual affinity between the abbot-patron and the painter in Karásek's story is important for its theme, since it removes Sodoma's

motive of revenge against the monastery when he paints a group of naked dancing girls instead a group of pious women. For Karásek the entire psychology is different. Instead of being an issue of social defiance, the failure to perform the will of the monastery becomes a modern crisis of artistic self-confidence. Consistent with his "indifference" to women, Karásek omits all reference to Vasari's dancing women and replaces it with a scene based on a later episode in Vasari in which Sodoma paints his self-portrait with a mirror (*Lives of the Painters* 248). In place of Renaissance impropriety we have Decadent narcissism.

Vasari represents Sodoma as self-indulgent, vain, and greedy. We are told that he completes the frescoes only after being offered an assurance by the General of the Order that he will be paid more money (247). Karásek provides a completely different explanation for Sodoma's alleged delinquency. His reluctance to finish the fresco cycle is not motivated by greed but by the Platonic quest for beauty and a higher subjective truth: "His hands yearn to create beauty, unusual, distant beauty, that has nothing in common with the ordinary lines and forms" (*Legenda o Sodomovi* 9). Karásek's Sodoma thus personifies the Decadent ideal of the gentle, sensitive epicene: "In the slim enchantment of his body, the sweet carmine of the lips, the charm of pale, fragile cheeks" (15). Tormented by an acute awareness of his ephemeral beauty, Sodoma turns with narcissistic absorption to his own image, seeking to transfer it to the last empty space on the wall.

Weary by now of the cloistered life in the monastery, Sodoma finally paints his own self-portrait in the last empty space of the fresco cycle. Karásek makes the painting of this self-portrait the central episode of his story. The transgression involved in this act has quite a different significance from Vasari's description of the painting of naked dancing girls. The inclusion of the artist's self-portrait in a space intended for the eyes of the community is at once an assertion of the artist's subjectivity over the general interests of the community and a celebration of art's high moral purpose. For Vasari's contemporaries, the representation of dancing girls in a sacred context was a sign of shocking immorality. Karásek has found a modern equivalent to this Renaissance act of transgression in the artist's subjective resistance to bourgeois conformity: "He took the brush in his hand and began to paint his portrait onto the last fresco" (33–34). It is this self-portrait that greets the shocked monks as they emerge from their orisons to discover that the artist has vanished into thin air. Sodoma's mysterious disappearance at the end of the story

symbolizes the modern artist's fusion with his art: he has become his own portrait. Just before he vanishes forever, the hero addresses a narcissistic valedictory to his own painted image: "Stay here," he said to his portrait, "Stay here, true, immutable, eternal, splendid" (34).

In realizing the Platonic ideal of an essential, immutable self, the aesthetic opposition between art and life is ambiguously subject to reversal: art does not exist for its own sake but serves to enhance life's meaning and value. As Sodoma puts it moments before his departure: "I don't want glory, I want life" (34). Both in his criticism and fiction, Karásek's aestheticism betrays its moral prejudice in conceiving of art as an end to a purposeful means: the realization of a truthful, essential self. Karásek's "The Legend of Sodoma" exemplifies the tensions apparent in his critical writings: truth/lie, art/life, transgression/morality are not mutually exclusive categories but interdependent. If the transgressive aesthetic of Oscar Wilde and the transgressive ethic of André Gide anticipate the culture-versus-nature debate about homosexual identity, Karásek's critical and fictional writing embodies both of these discursive positions at the same time.

Richard Weiner

Richard Weiner is considered to be one of the most important Czech writers of the twentieth century. Yet his work has suffered considerable critical neglect since his death in 1937. Literary criticism of Weiner's work has tended to emphasize the introverted, difficult, and enigmatic nature of his writing. In his obituary in *Lidové noviny* (5 January 1937), titled "Poor Old Weiner" ("Chudák Weiner"), Karel Čapek refers to Weiner as "the man of pain," an allusion to the latter's neurasthenia, which led to his discharge from the army in the First World War. In a review in *Zápisník* (vol. 6, 1933–34), the critic F. X. Šalda claimed that Weiner, who spent most of his creative career in Paris, had been ignored in Czechoslovakia due to the subtlety and inaccessibility of his work. More recent criticism has continued to dwell on Weiner's status as the difficult "outsider" of Czech letters. In his preface to Weiner's mature prose work, Štepán Vlašín refers to him as "The Odd-Man out of Our Literature."[6] The fact that Weiner, who was Jewish as well as homosexual, spent many years in self-imposed exile in Paris can only have reinforced the Czech perception of him as an outsider.

The perception of Weiner as the difficult outsider of Czech literature is usually ascribed to the opacity of his language characteristic of

modernism in general. Authentic reality points to silence that is pregnant with new and undiscovered meanings: "Beyond language, naming, is the unuttered, the unnamed, silence: and now this silence manifests itself as full of new, unknown meanings: it is loud with them."[7] According to Jindřich Chalupecký, Weiner's work is "difficult" and "enigmatic" because meaning has passed from the exhausted, defunct medium of language to the domain of silence. In fact, his fiction does not so much expose the crisis of language in itself as the crisis of homosexual identity, which precedes and determines it. Rather than locating truth and meaning within the contours of silence that border on language, we can discern it within the sphere of linguistic periphrasis and preterition, the double-entendres and ambiguities that are such an important part of Weiner's project to analyze the relationship between truth and transgression. Chalupecký's distinction between meaningful silence and meaningless language presupposes a binary opposition between true and false, presence and absence. Weiner's language both asserts and dismantles these oppositions not to valorize silence as such but to criticize its own truth claims as well as those that proceed from the moral tradition to which it belongs.

Weiner's story "The Indifferent Spectator" (1917)[8] begins with a conversation about "enigmatic people" within a homosocial group of intimates at the house of Ludvík Marek, who claims that there is no such thing as an "enigmatic" type. To illustrate his assertion, he proceeds to relate the story of a stranger whom he met late one night in the bohemian district of Montmartre in Paris. The stranger in question—who turns out to have the suggestive family name of Black (Černý)—appears to be an example of the "enigmatic" type alluded to in the discussion. Black invites Marek to go for a drink in a local bar. At first Marek is suspicious and refuses but accepts an invitation to visit him at home the next day. When he arrives at the apartment of his late-night interlocutor, Marek does not find the low-life bohemian he expected but a respectable son of a Czech farmer immaculately attired and not wearing makeup. The host relates to Marek the details of his past life, from his beginnings as the son of a farmer—via adventures in Berlin—to his present occupation as a bank clerk in Paris. Black now reveals himself as a "passionate spectator" of life, an oxymoronic indicator of his active-passive status as a transvestite with the double identity of Karel (Charles) and Kamilla (Camilla). Disgusted at Black's confession, Marek defies his interlocutor to prove, at whatever cost, his commitment to his

life as a "passionate spectator." Black takes a vial of poison, swallows it, and dies. The story ends as Marek rebukes his scornful listeners and announces that he too is a "passionate spectator" of life. On this defiant note, Marek gets up and parts with the skeptical company.

What is striking about this story is not its melodramatic denouement; after all, the theme of homosexual confession as a prologue to suicide was commonplace by the time Weiner was writing his story.[9] The real interest of the story resides in the way its theme—homosexual transgression—is constantly affirmed and denied through the ambiguities of language. Even the ending exemplifies this tendency. From the outset Marek's story mediates between a moral injunction to tell the truth of the protagonist's real self and the antithetical impulse to efface this truth through the linguistic expediencies of periphrasis and preterition. As in Karásek's "The Legend of Sodoma," transgression and morality are intricately interwoven into the very fabric of the narrative.

The key to this "open secret" is the all-male setting that opens the story, with its initial reference to "enigmatic" people. The ambiguities and anxieties inherent in the homosocial world of nineteenth-century society have been the subject of considerable critical attention in theoretical studies of English and American literature.[10] Eve Sedgwick has argued that the nineteenth-century typology of the homosocial bachelor moved from a status of desexualization to an institutionalized homosexuality, which involved an increased vulnerability to legal prosecution. Sedgwick defines the paranoia which resulted from this perpetual threat of prosecution as "homosexual panic" (*Epistemology* 182–212). The need to be covert about one's real intentions would explain the tone of ambiguous caution established at the outset of the story. From the opening sentence, key words seem to assume a heightened significance in the context of the story's unfolding. Consider, for example, the salient word "enigmatic" *(záhadný):* "O cease with these so-called human enigmas! I tell you there are no enigmatic characters, that all human behavior—even the most unpredictable and complex . . . derives from simple inclinations" (*Netečný divák* 9).

This outburst signals a tension between Marek's defiance and his companions' complacent sense of belonging to a closed circle of initiates, between the desire to be different and the desire to blend in. This tension is encoded in a narrative sprinkled with oblique lexical pointers to the necessity of dissembling and assuming a double identity. Reacting to a remark about mysterious others, Marek states that "there is no

greater complexity there than here" (12). "There" can be understood as the homosexual underworld beyond the narrow homosocial circle to which Marek ostensibly belongs. Marek's carefully ambiguous terms of reference have the strategic effect of simultaneously reinforcing and subverting the moral norm. Speaking of his nocturnal visits to Montmartre, Marek refers to the "order over there" (10), the demonstrative adjective reinforcing the demarcation between two discrete worlds. At this moment the narrator intervenes to comment on Marek's mysterious, elusive personality, informing us that he writes under a pseudonym and that he can be identified by a variety of nicknames. The narrator and his circle are ignorant of Marek's social connections; he was "always half-present" (12); he leads a mysterious "other [*druhá*] existence" (11). Like Weiner himself, Marek is referred to as "enigmatic" and "complicated" (13).

Marek proceeds to relate the details of an encounter with Black and two other youths on the streets of nocturnal Montmartre. Black asks for a light while his companions approach Marek menacingly from the rear. An outbreak of violence seems imminent, whereupon Black notices a Czech-language newspaper hidden in the stranger's pocket and recognizes a "fellow country man" *(krajan)*. Upon making this fortunate discovery, Black dismisses his ruffian friends and begins to take a personal interest in the other man. The first element in the word *krajan* means "edge" *(kraj),* and its derivative means "fringe" *(okraj);* both of these related terms emphasize the character's social and sexual marginality. At one point Marek underscores this theme of marginality by referring to the bohemian quarter of Montmartre as the northern "periphery."

Black invites his interlocutor for a drink in a local bar: "So come on. I invite you to a bar. No luxury and no fops. But nearby there is warmth and friends. I want to go" (17). The sentences are politely allusive of deviation from the norm: "fops" are a euphemism for effeminate customers; the noun "warmth" *(teplo)* suggests the adjective "warm" but also the colloquial "queer" *(teplý)*. Black invites his countryman to his house the next day. At first Marek refuses, but he accepts at the last moment, largely from a sense of curiosity. He admits that he is motivated by the desire to discover the truth, although his curiosity is carefully concealed beneath a mask of froideur and "indifference" *(lhostejnost)*. In the discourse of dandyism, "indifference" is a key term pointing to the homosexual's lack of sexual interest in women.[11] It becomes clear that the story's title "indifferent spectator" describes not just Black's creed but

both men's circumspect reaction to the hostile world around them. Marek maintains the appearance of indifference even as he desires to tell and conceal the truth. Analogously, the language of the story resorts to the linguistic expediencies of periphrasis to reinforce the fascination of proscribed knowledge.

When he arrives at the stranger's apartment the following day, Marek notes tellingly: "Nothing is more deceptive than the homogeneity of the houses in the rue de Rennes" (16). The entrance hall and rooms are said to be "*orné*[*es*] *de glaces*" (17). The host's living room is brightly lit by light bulbs like a stage on which a drama is about to be enacted; Black is dressed in a dandyish, modish fashion and sports a rose in the lapel of his jacket. Marek notices that Black is no longer wearing makeup: "I saw that he was neither powdered nor made-up" (20). Everything about the scene—the mirrors, brightly lit rooms, the host's attire, absent makeup—suggests theatrical illusion and narcissistic display, recalling the well-known definition of the dandy as an actor interested in nothing but his own beauty.[12] The spectacular theme is also implied by the title of the story: *divák* can mean "spectator" in the theatrical as well as the purely phenomenological sense. For this is a story about counterfeiting and acting, about pretending to be someone different.

To reassure his suspicious guest, Black insists that he is not *un individu mal famé* but, on the contrary, perfectly harmless—a respectable bank clerk of honest farming pedigree: "I am neither a nobleman from a decadent line nor the bourgeois son of an ancient family with a too-narrow circle of relatives. [. . .] At the first glance—*dégénéré*—and not just in appearance—in fact, I come from an honorable farming family" (23). The French word *dégénéré* is a key word within moral discourse to denote the sexual deviant. Ironically, Black feels compelled to use a word to define his own identity in terms that automatically oppress him. He is doomed to delineate his personality in the very terms of opprobrium with which society marginalizes him: "Perhaps, after all I have said, you will say to yourself: a bookworm, a respectable boy, a dreamer, a weakling" (23). Later in the conversation he appears to confirm the stereotype of the homosexual unable to experience (heterosexual) love, merely physical passion: "I succumb to passion frightfully, but I do not know the torments of love" (23).[13] Black is torn between the social imperative of moral truth and the transgressive desire to subvert that truth through the deliberate cultivation of his own subjectivity. This tension parallels the language of periphrasis, which treads an

ambiguous line between the desire to inscribe and an antithetical impulse to erase difference.

This story of confession reaches its culmination when Black, who has persistently hinted at his sexual nonconformity, gestures to his closet where his transvestite self is concealed. Marek, who up to now has been responding with occasional expressions of revulsion and disgust, expresses moral outrage at this explicit disclosure of transvestism and sexual deviance. He declares that Black is a *neutrum,* a reference to the "intermediate sex" or fin-de-siècle model of border-crossing and liminality.[14] Marek adds the insult that Black is an *escamateur,* a performer who dissembles with different voices and distorting mirrors just as Black counterfeits his real self beneath an elaborate array of masks and disguises. Responding to these insults, Black refers to himself as a "passionate spectator," an oxymoronic inversion of the title that hints—again, periphrastically—at the active-passive dichotomy conventionally associated with homosexuality. But it also corresponds to the ambiguous function of the language that both actively asserts and passively denies difference and deviation.

The skeptical Marek states that he will only believe Black's commitment to being a "passionate spectator" if he does something to prove it. In response, Black takes off his ring and quickly swallows a secret vial of poison. Marek tears the poison from his hand, but it is too late: Black is dead. The story-within-a-story concludes on this grim, rather melodramatic note. The listeners respond that Marek is well rid of such a "creature" *(kreatura)*, which provokes in the speaker a sudden and passionate outburst: "The world is indivisible and whole in each molecule and that I, passionate spectator, have a sacred right to any place I choose in this lachrymose music-hall" (39).

With this collectivist sentiment, Marek applies the term "passionate observer" to himself and the rest of society. If Black's confession was a kind of "coming out" (culminating predictably in death), Marek's story was—it now transpires—his own version of the same thing, an attempt to reconcile his subjective individuality with collective morality. Yet in spite of Marek's courageous solidarity with the fate of his interlocutor, he has continued to collude with the social practices and pressures that oppress him. By the end of the story he has become the active confessor, as opposed to his earlier role as passive auditor, the victim of the double-game enacted by the language of the story: the truth of the self remains concealed within the oblique folds of preterition. In the secondary

criticism of Weiner's work as a whole, commentators have practiced exactly the kind of occlusion in their response to his oeuvre as they do to his life and personality. Moreover, there is a continuum between the ambiguity of the critical terms used to define Weiner's style and the ambiguous lexical indicators that occur in the story itself. Loaded terms like "odd-man-out," "outsider," "complicated," and "enigmatic" describe both the man and his fiction. We have seen that the language of Weiner's early story is not emptied of meaning as critics insist; neither does it defer meaning to a semantically saturated domain of silence. On the contrary, meaning exists within language on the ambiguous border between self and society.

These Czech modernist short stories explore the relationship between identity understood in terms of social morality and identity conceived in the subjective terms of sexuality. In Karásek's and Weiner's short stories discussed above the moralizing tradition of Czech culture clashes with the modernist urge to explore the contours of subjectivity. In this sense, two diametrically opposite impulses—one geared toward the acceptance of bourgeois morality, the other seeking to undermine it—conflict and collude. This was not peculiar to modernist writing in Czech but also characterized other Central European writers such as Kafka, whose early story "The Description of a Struggle" (1912) contains homosexual—or at least homoerotic—elements. As in Weiner's story, these elements are at once exposed and denied in a double movement of revelation and repression that can be partially explained in terms of both men's bourgeois and Jewish upbringing.

4

Between Paris and Moscow

Sexuality and Politics in Interwar Czech Poetry and Film

According to standard accounts of modern Czech culture, the devastation caused by World War I (1914–18) brought an end to the Decadent depoliticization of literature. Literature now became a vehicle of protest and satire aimed against the conservative forces that had brought the conflict into being in the first place. In France Henri Barbusse, in Germany Erich Maria Remarque, and in England Siegfried Sassoon directed their moral fury at those leaders and members of the European establishment who allowed the devastation to take place; and poets like Wilfried Owen and Georg Trakl eulogized the loss of a whole generation. The interwar generation of European writers and artists was deeply scarred by the spiritual and biological consequences of this massive loss of human life and was forced to confront the nightmarish question: could the human race destroy itself and cease to exist entirely? This fear had far-reaching implications for the male imaginary of modernism. The crisis of masculinity is characteristic of much modernist literature between the wars. Well-known examples are Virginia Woolf's novel *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), Fritz Lang's Weimar film *Metropolis* (1926), and Franz Kafka's story "Brief an den Vater" (Letter to the Father, 1919).

After 1918 there was a notable shift to the Left by Czech politicians and writers. In part this was a reaction to the futility of the Great War and the utopian desire to forge a new, fairer society on the ruins of the

old Habsburg empire. The frustration of the younger generation with the failure of the new republic to cure all social ills also led many members of the intelligentsia to seek solutions to social ills such as poverty and unemployment in radical, left-wing politics modeled on the example of Soviet Russia. The creation of the Czechoslovak Communist Party in 1921 was mirrored in the cultural sphere by the formation of new literary movements like the Brno Literary Group and the Prague-based Artistic Union Devětsil.[1] Devětsil was founded in Prague on 5 October 1920. It was the product of a number of student writers at the Café Union in Prague. Their first venture had been the journal *Orfeus,* for which they cooperated with more established writers such as Josef Hora and Karel Čapek. After only three issues, the journal was discontinued and the young writers decided to branch out on their own. The Literary Group was tepid in its political views, but the Devětsil group was convinced that communism should determine the nature of Czechoslovak society. It drew its inspiration principally from writers such as Vladimir Mayakovsky, Demyan Bedny, and Anatoly Lunacharsky in Soviet Russia and from the Dadaist movement in the West. Its main theorist was Karel Teige (1900–51). Both the Literary Group and Devětsil made a conscious break with the prewar trends in Czech poetry and art. Writers rejected the creed of the art for art's sake movement as exemplified by the cosmopolitanist Otakar Theer and the political program of the right-wing nationalist Viktor Dyk. Like many of their contemporaries in Germany, France, and Russia, they began to espouse a politically engaged view of art.

The principal representative of this new Proletarian Poets movement was the middle-class Moravian Jiří Wolker (1900–24). After his premature death from tuberculosis in 1924, however, the movement lost momentum and fellow Proletarian Poets soon turned away from the narrow tendentiousness of their previous verse to embrace the exhilaration of poetism founded by Karel Teige and Vítězslav Nezval in 1924.[2] If Wolker was the quintessential Proletarian Poet, Nezval was the bard of poetism, with its consciously hedonistic cultivation of modern pleasures such as film, radio, and jazz. Rejecting the tendentiousness of Wolker's Proletarian poetry, poetism was to emulate the intoxicating spirit of everyday life for its own sake, as exemplified by Nezval's long poem "The Wondrous Magician" (1922). Later Nezval was to turn to surrealism, inspired by the French surrealist movement. Yet all three phases of the avant-garde were relatively brief and ultimately yielded to the dominance of socialist realism by the later 1930s.

It would seem that the interwar development in Czech culture was characterized by a conscious break with prewar subjectivism and individualism in favor of engaged left-wing politics. That is at least the accepted wisdom. So Alfred French states in his book *The Poets of Prague:* "Post-war political creeds put much emphasis upon the solidarity and discipline of the group, and in art the problem of the individual's relationship to the mass became an important motif. Whereas the artist of the 1890s had stressed his aloofness and shunned the vulgar herd, the writer of the twenties tended rather to identify himself with the crowd" (5). A close analysis of Czech interwar culture, however, suggests that the opposition between personal and political constructions of identity is never so straightforward and clear-cut. Just as the Decadent poets of the 1890s did not totally repudiate Czech national identity but reinvented it to reflect their inner, subjective world, so did the avant-garde artists of the interwar period find it impossible to distinguish between their private and public selves. An analysis of selected avant-garde poetry and cinema reveals how Czech culture of the interwar era reproduced a familiar continuum between the personal and political dimensions of selfhood. The way this continuity is played out in Czech poetry is as a sexualized and gendered struggle between the "feminine" and "masculine" polarities of identity. This struggle also assumes a cultural form, reflecting the Czech avant-garde's double allegiance to Moscow as its ideological teacher and Paris as its teacher on art.[3] Thus the revolutionary fervor of Soviet Russia is associated with masculinity, while Paris is identified with femininity and female sexuality. In some ways the masculinization of art characteristic of the first phase of the Czech avant-garde—Proletarian Poetry—is reminiscent of high European modernism in general, an example being Ezra Pound's vorticist manifesto with its imagery of power and domination.[4] But as in Anglo-American modernism, contrary instances of male feminine identification can also be found in avant-garde Czech poetry, especially in the poetist and surrealist phases. That is not to say, however, that the male identification with the feminine is necessarily positive. Female imagery is often ambivalent and even at times downright misogynistic in interwar Czech poetry. Of course, this tendency was hardly peculiar to the Czech avant-garde. André Breton's surrealist novel *Nadja* (1928) is fraught with ambiguities toward the eponymous heroine and the female in general. These kinds of ambivalences are, needless to say, more revealing about male than female subjectivity. Underlying the political crisis of the Left

is a prevailing crisis of masculinity; and this sense of crisis is reflected in imagery of sterility and castration that permeates poems by all the Czech writers concerned, regardless of their labels and affiliations. If men are seen as sexually inadequate, women's sexuality is more often than not depicted as threatening, an emphasis that fully comes to the surface in the surrealist phase of the Czech avant-garde. In proceeding from the subjective depths, such imagery serves to highlight the continuity rather than the differences between the three major phases of the avant-garde (Proletarian Poetry, poetism, and surrealism).

A highly influential study that was at once symptomatic of the crisis of masculinity and fuelled it in others was Otto Weininger's controversial book *Sex and Character: An Investigation of Principles* (1903).[5] Intended as a resolution of the "Woman's Question," this misogynistic and anti-Semitic work of a young Viennese Jewish intellectual exemplified the crisis of masculinity and the perceived threat of feminist activism in Central Europe. Thus the crisis of masculinity was hardly a novel phenomenon in European modernist culture; but it assumed a new and heightened form after the devastation of the Great War. The poets, photographers, and filmmakers of the avant-garde were pulled in opposite directions at once: they were fascinated and attracted by the potential and excitement of modern technology, yet at the same time they were anxious about its deleterious consequences for the future of humanity. While the *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) movement in Weimar Germany, futurism in Italy, and constructivism in Russia celebrate the glories of the machine in terms of masculine power and strength, expressionism, which was the dominant mode in interwar Germany, explores the negative psychological effects of male sexual fears and fantasies; here Fritz Lang's classic film *Metropolis,* with its destructive vamp-machine and its neurotic male hero, is exemplary. It has been frequently shown how Lang's film dramatizes a conflict between the utopian optimism of the New Objectivity movement and the bleak pessimism of expressionism. In its convoluted and at times incoherent filmic narrative, the modernist city becomes a psychological rather than a realistic space where these irreconcilable tensions are played out, culminating in the breakdown of the male protagonist. In interwar Czech poetry and film, Prague functions in a similar fashion to Lang's futuristic city as a site of unconscious male fears and fantasies. However, I shall be concerned less with the fears of technology in the Czech construction of masculinity (although that too will play a part) than the correlation between the

crisis of masculinity and the crisis of the political Left. Fascinated by the recent revolution in Russia and disappointed by the failure of the new Czechoslovak state to create a fairer society, the poets and filmmakers of the Czech avant-garde represented their enthusiasm for Soviet Russia in terms of youthful energy and masculinity. But this cult of masculinity rapidly becomes subject to deep-seated anxieties and inadequacies, partly because most of the Proletarian Poets came from middle-class backgrounds and partly because the revolution simply did not materialize in Czechoslovakia. After the demise of Proletarian Poetry, the negative preoccupation with masculinity yields to an increasing obsession with female eroticism and especially its symbolic function as a commodity fetish. In the poetry of Seifert and Nezval Prague is identified both with female sexuality and capitalism. By this time Prague's Other has become Paris, the capital of the surrealist movement and the supreme icon of modernity.

Proletarian Poetry

The group of Moravian writers who formed the Literary Group had a more equivocal attitude to communism than Devětsil but were attracted to the ideal of socialism even if they were not prepared to support violent measures to attain that ideal. Lacking a firm resolve of their own, the members of the Literary Group waited for the Prague Devětsil to be formed in September 1921 before holding their own inaugural meeting on 15 October 1921. The journal of their group became *Host* (The Guest), named for Wolker's first collection *Host do domu* (A Guest into the Home, 1921).

The philosophy of the Literary Group expressed a belief in man's innate goodness and in human progress yet lacked a metaphysical system of values to justify the members' humanist beliefs and inevitably fell back on conventional Christian themes and images derived from memories of childhood religion. Eclectic by its very nature, the Literary Group was influenced by many postwar European strands of humanist thought. From Germany they looked to Alfred Döblin with his belief in a new social order; and from postwar France Henri Barbusse, Romain Rolland, and the iconoclastic tenets of Dadaism were powerful influences. Above all their ideas were indebted to French unanimism centered around Jules Romains, René Arcos, Georges Duhamel, Charles Vildrac, and Luc Durtain. The Literary Group was especially influenced by the unanimist belief that alone man was nothing but in the

collective everything. The greatest French influence on the Literary Group was probably Henri Bergson, whose intuitive philosophy was sufficiently vague to attract their interest.

A Guest into the Home reveals the special influence of the French vitalist poets Vildrac and Duhamel, both of whom visited Prague in 1920 and whose idealistic belief that collective love could cure mankind's social ills is reflected in many of Wolker's poems written around this time. A good example from *A Guest into the Home* is the poem "The Mail Box," with its charming tone of naïveté and its implicit trust in human love as a force capable of establishing an organic and inseparable bond between man and his world. Like the image of the pollination at the heart of the poem, this love is genderless and sexless:

> The mail box on the corner of the street
> Is not just any old thing.
> It blossoms in blue,
> People respect it a great deal,
> They trust it completely,
> Throwing letters in from two sides,
> One for the sad, the other for the happy.
> The letters are white as pollen
> And wait for trains, boats and people
> To carry them like bumble-bees and wind
> Where hearts are,
> Red stigmata
> Veiled in rose blossom.
>
> When the letters reach their destination,
> They burst into fruit,
> Bitter or sweet.
>
> (*Básně* 16)

In the poem "Things," inanimate objects, like the mailbox in the previous poem, are invested with a deeply spiritual and asexual affinity with human beings, providing an idealistic harmony between man and his social environment:

> I love things, silent comrades
> Because everybody treats them
> As if they were not living,
> But they are alive and look at us
> Like faithful dogs with concentrated looks
> And suffer,

> Because nobody speaks to them.
> They are too ashamed to speak first,
> They remain silent and wait,
> And yet
> How they would love to chat!
> That's why I love things
> And also why I love the whole world.
>
> (44)

The final poem in the collection *A Guest into the Home,* titled "Holy Hill," marks a transition in Wolker's philosophy from unanimism to a more explicit struggle for social justice. About the same time, Wolker lost his faith in traditional religion and left the Roman Catholic Church in 1921. After coming to Prague as a student of law in 1919, he had been exposed to greater urban poverty and hardship than he had ever witnessed in his native Moravia. He now began to associate with Prague café revolutionaries with whom he founded the short-lived journal *Orfeus* in Café Union, only three issues of which appeared. A major source of influence on Wolker's development were Karel Čapek's translations of modern French poetry, most of which were published in 1916.[6] This collection included translations by Duhamel and Vildrac as well as Apollinaire's poem "Zone" (1913), whose influence has been discerned in "Holy Hill" in its stylistic freedom from formal rhythm and syntax and its thematic rejection of the old world and its glorification of the new.

The politically galvanized Wolker now repudiated his former work, which he associated with French effeminacy, and began to cultivate a tough, masculine persona. In a letter to his fellow poet Konstantín Biebl, he dismissed his earlier verse as "satanic verses full of sodomitical sins and soda water" (Hards, "The Concept of Revolution in Czech Writing" 67). If this unexpected reference to deviant sexuality marks a determined effort to espouse a new kind of objective and "virile" poetry, it also reveals the extent to which Wolker's political posture on behalf of the proletariat was suffused with subjective anxieties about his own masculinity and his poor health. He increasingly identifies the cause of Marxism with his own physical and sexual maturity. In "Holy Hill," for example, Russia and Lenin become symbols of male courage, health, and virility. Having rejected the "sexless metaphysics" of his Brno colleagues, Wolker now identifies his former vitalism with old women and his new political radicalism with masculinity:

The sun is a wild revolutionary, it demolishes the day and reconstructs
 it over night;
we prefer ruddy maidens to grasping, old widows;
we will tell each other stories about great Russia and brave Lenin, our
 thoughts are as green and as high as trees in a forest.

(*Básně* 49)

Wolker's association of Soviet Russia with youthful virility can be partly explained as a reaction against the prevalent view of liberal democracy as old and effete. But this identification can also be explained with reference to the cult of masculinity in Soviet art and propaganda. For example, in Dziga Vertov's film *Man with a Movie Camera* (1927), Moscow is identified with masculine power and strength as symbolized by the shot of an accelerating train entering a tunnel. John Malmstad has even identified a cult of masculinity in the pre-Soviet period. In his study of Russian self-portraiture before the Revolution, Malmstad discerns a fascination with the masculine pursuits of weight lifting and wrestling in the work of the artists reacting against the perceived effeteness of the symbolist "World of Art" movement.[7] This cult of masculinity reached its culmination with the October Revolution of 1917. Yury Olesha's novel *Envy* (1927) parodies the new *homo sovieticus* through the figures of Andrei Babichev and his protégé, the virile soccer player Volodya Makarov, who envies the machine and wants to achieve physical perfection. In the Stalinist 1930s there was a utopian attempt in Soviet Russia to merge gender and sexual identities into an undifferentiated androgyny, as can be seen in El Lissitzky's famous exhibition poster of the fused faces of a Komsomol boy and girl. This was, however, a later aspiration to transform an already-established socialist society into a perfect communist state. In Czechoslovakia, where socialism was still an unrealized dream in the 1920s, the prevailing model of left-wing political identity remained unequivocally masculine.

Wolker's rejection of French "effeminacy" had already enjoyed a certain pedigree in Czech literature. The strong identification of the Czech intelligentsia with French politics and culture in the second half of the nineteenth century and especially at the fin de siècle suffered a reaction in the early years of the twentieth century. French modernist culture was increasingly identified both with sexual degeneracy and the failings of bourgeois democracy. The collection of protest ballads *Silesian Songs* (1909) by Petr Bezruč (1867–1958) contrasts the poet's masculine auto-stylization as a rough-hewn miner singing militant chants on

behalf of the oppressed and neglected Silesian Czechs with wealthy well-dressed ladies, Viennese politicians, and the effete Francophile poets of Prague:

> Before me go ladies in velvet and silk,
> Around me the men of power and fame
> From the golden city beside the Danube,
> And the long-haired poets from the Vltava's banks,
> Lovers of fair women as Paris instructed.
>
> (French, *Anthology of Czech Poetry* 325)

Characteristic of this desire to strip away all vestiges of gallic femininity, Wolker's next (and last) volume of verse—*The Heavy Hour* (1922)—repudiates the influence of Apollinaire and French poetry altogether. Yet for all its sense of political resolve, *The Heavy Hour* strikes an overall melancholy, even fatalistic, tone and continues to be pervaded by the subjective anxieties about sexual potency and ill health already apparent in "Holy Hill." The introductory poem is particularly revealing on account of the funereal metaphor used to convey the end of Wolker's youthful dreams: "Today is my heavy hour / My youthful heart has died and alone I carry it out in its coffin." The poet's earlier trust in the innate bond forged by love between man and the external world has seemingly suffered a devastating blow. Now he needs the reassurance that "the lover's letter, the lamp, a friend's book / things born of love, light and faith" will remain steadfast and true. The overall feeling evoked by the poem is one of disenchantment with material things and the loss of the simple Catholic faith the poet enjoyed as a boy. But neither has the poet succeeded in achieving the masculinity for which he yearns: "I still do not have a man's heart, / I am alone at the heavy hour; / And therefore I do not believe" (*Básně* 103, 104).

In spite of the tone of subjective hopelessness evoked by the opening poem, the collection represents the apotheosis of Wolker as the major Proletarian Poet of Czech literature. Less evident is the mawkish sentimentality of the earlier work. Many of Wolker's new poems possess a hard, decisive edge and an impassioned political message. With this new collection, Wolker repudiated the influence of Apollinaire and French poetry in favor of the realism of Erben and Neruda. In a letter to his friend A. M. Píša dated February 21, 1921, Wolker paves the way for his new creed: "In my view Erben is closer to proletarian and modern art altogether than all those gadfly-like young Frenchmen who in

my opinion are ingrained subjectivists, literary salon wits and incomprehensible in a refined and sentimental kind of way."[8]

In spite of his elaborate disclaimers, Wolker was unable to shed completely his debt to French literature. In fact the more he displayed his proletarian sympathies and asserted himself as a poet of the ordinary man, the more his bourgeois origins seemed to get in the way. The fact was that Wolker had remained a bourgeois idealist; but instead of expressing his idealism in the vitalist terms of universal love between men, he now channeled it into the cause of the working class. Characteristic of these sustained tensions within Wolker's poetry are three ballads from *The Heavy Hour:* "The Ballad of the Unborn Child," "The Ballad of the Dream," and "The Ballad of the Stoker's Eyes." In all these ballads sublimated sexual imagery undermines rather than reinforces the poet's masculine persona. In "The Ballad of the Unborn Child"—about a working-glass girl who becomes pregnant with her lover's child and is forced to get a back-street abortion—sex between the girl and the boy is seen in the displaced terms of male castration rather than penetration:

> Love is woman and a man,
> Love is bread and a knife.
> I have cut you open, my love,
> Blood flows through my hands
> from the white loaf.
>
> (*Básně* 106)

Not only is the image emblematic of masculinity in crisis, it also reifies the girl's body as a commodity item (a loaf of broad). After she has undergone an abortion, the girl refers to herself as a "wound":

> Give me your hand my love,
> While we walk down the steps.
> I am no longer brave and shall weep
> That from all the riches
> Have remained only a bottle of eumenol,
> That I am only a wound
> Embraced by the dead hands of a child.
>
> (108)

The image of a wound underscores the preceding male anxiety about castration. The reference to a dead child also evokes postwar fears of

sterility created by the threat of technology to the survival of the human race. For the German poet Georg Trakl, postbellum Europe was haunted not only by its own unborn progeny ("die ungeborenen Enkel") but also by the prospect of its eventual extinction. The girl's gravelike womb—now articulated through her own rather than her lover's voice—becomes the displaced embodiment of this male-centered anxiety about the nemesis of the human race:

> I am not a woman,
> I am a grave.
> Two eyes stand on it like two candles
> Burning in the autumn for the souls of little ones.
> No one will pray over me.
>
> (108–9)

Wolker's sexual anxieties also correlate with political doubts about his working-class credentials. His middle-class origins remain to haunt him as a source of social guilt and sexual self-disgust. These anxieties color the language of the ballad, distorting it as a poem of social protest. In fact, the ballad tells us far more about Wolker's subjective state of mind than it does about the actual social conditions of the working class: legal abortion, for example, was universally available in Czechoslovakia in the early 1920s. The doctor's reference to "broken things" in the following lines recalls Wolker's earlier idealistic belief in the curative bond between man and his physical environment evinced by the poems "The Mail Box" and "Things" as well as his residual nostalgia for such innocence. And the doctor's line "I don't know how to cure women" ventroliquizes the male poet's fears about his health and fears of impending death:

> The doctor's hands breathed carbolic soap
> And his words were cold as ice:
> "I don't know how to cure women;
> I can only mend broken things."
>
> (109)

In "The Ballad of the Dream," Wolker appears to strike a more optimistic tone when the workers Jan and Marie resolve to realize their dream of a classless society and, in the final lines of the poem, arm themselves with hammers and swords in the fight for the revolution. Yet in spite of its resolute ending, this poem also betrays a sense of melancholy fatalism in deploying the subjective imagery of male castration

symbolized by Jan's wounded and scarred eyes. The Freudian association of blindness with male castration is more fully developed in "The Ballad of the Stoker's Eyes," in which the alienation of the proletariat from society is personified by the plight of the worker Antonín who has labored for twenty-five years by stoking coal to generate electricity. In the course of that time, he has begun to lose his eyesight as a consequence of the terrible working conditions. As in the previous poems, the harmony between man and nature has been ruptured by ruthless capitalism. Every time Antonín stokes the oven with coal to provide the city with electrical power, he sacrifices a "piece of his eyes." Striking about this ballad is the way in which the socialist affirmation of technology as a positive means of transforming the conditions of modern life is undermined by personal imagery of growing blindness. Far from being a celebration of socialist optimism, the poem demonstrates the opposite: the impotence of the working class in the face of unrestrained capitalism. In distinction to Vertov's Moscow, pulsating with male energy, Wolker's Prague is a city in which masculinity—embodied by the stoker—is weakened and ultimately emasculated by technology:

> With each piece of coal he throws in a bit of his eyes,
> And these eyes bright and blue as flowers,
> Float through the wires over the cities,
> The cafés, theaters, above all the family table
> And create a joyous light.
>
> (143)

Addressing his fellow power-station workers, Antonín tells them that his wife now weeps when she looks at him and says that he is cursed. In contrast, when the couple first walked down the church aisle together, his eyes were big and beautiful:

> "When she went with me to the altar,
> They were two big and beautiful loaves,
> But now only two crumbs remain
> On my face as on an empty plate."
>
> (144)

Curious about the following lines is how Antonín's alienated labor is seen in terms of his alienated relationship with his wife. Here the image of the oven *(pec)* draws on an ancient metaphor of the oven as a symbol of the female genitalia.[9] A Freudian counterpoint to the female-connoted

oven is Antonín's phallic spade that, heavier with his increasing age and growing infirmity, is unable to perform its function effectively:

> But Anthony once more, as twenty-five years before,
> Only opens the oven with a heavier spade.
> It is always difficult to understand a woman,
> She has another truth yet truthful nonetheless.
>
> (144)

The correlation between sex and labor implicit in these lines culminates in the stark image of a "flaming knife" whereby the female genitalia, associated with the oven and the furnace, become the instrument of male castration. What began as an ostensible celebration of Soviet constructivist principles—the transformation of modern life by technology and labor—ends as an expressionist articulation of abject masculinity:

> At that moment Anthony, the calloused stoker,
> Recognized the twenty-five years at the stove and the shovel,
> In which a flaming knife was cutting his eyes,
> And having recognized that it suffices a man to die like a man,
> Began to shout across the entire night and the entire world:
>
> "Comrades, electrical workers,
> I am blind—I cannot see."
>
> (144)

A similar tension between political optimism and subjective resignation bordering on melancholy characterizes the mature poetry of Josef Hora (1891–1945). Like Wolker, the young Hora was influenced by French vitalism and reveals his love of life and its creative fire in his collection of poems *A Tree in Flower* (1920), but his enchantment was marred by the awareness of social injustice. Associating himself with the younger Wolker generation, Hora joined the Communist Party, and, with *Working Day* (1921, rev. ed. 1922), he turned to proletarian themes. He greeted the revolution as a necessary evil, the realization of an ethical ideal. As time went on, Hora found it more difficult to reconcile the didactic tenets of Marxist dogma with his predilection for lyrical subjectivity. The conflict between his early unanimism and the constraints of tendentious verse led him to retreat to his former vitalist lyricism in *Italy* (1925) and *Strings in the Wind* (1927), the latter published two years before he was expelled from the Communist Party. In these collections Hora

reverts to the personal themes of death, memory, dreams, silence, solitude, and, above all, a concept of time, half metaphysical and half material, that became "the brother of my heart" ("bratr mého srdce"). This fusion of the political and the sexual is well exemplified in the short lyric poem "In Moscow" from *Strings in the Wind* where the Soviet capital provides a physical backdrop to the poet's poignant awareness of human transience and the fragility of love. There is no sense here of Vertov's exhilarating Moscow; rather, it is a metaphysical meditation on eternity and the ephemerality of human time:

> The white land extends
> Into infinity.
>
> What was the hour that
> Struck just now?
>
> I am walking through Red Square
> Round Lenin's Tomb.
>
> Your heart beats. It is a metronome
> Measuring the age.
>
> (*Struny ve větru* 22)

By this time Hora's poetry was beginning to take a more personal direction. In his future poetry he would continue to be preoccupied with traditional Romantic themes couched in the unsentimental language of existentialist alienation. Other important literary figures of the same generation whose voices would similarly remain subjective in spite of their commitment to Marxism were the poets Seifert and Nezval.

Like the Literary Group, the members of Devětsil could not break away entirely from the subjective legacy of nineteenth-century poetry in spite of their espousal of radical, left-wing politics. Jaroslav Seifert's first collection of poetry, *Town in Tears* (1921), is particularly striking on account of the continuity it displays between personal and political sentiments. In "The Monologue of the Handless Soldier" political protest is expressed through the personal experience of a soldier maimed in the Great War. As in Wolker's ballads, imagery of impotence and frustration replaces sentiments of working-class strength and optimism. In fact, the lyrical language of Christian resurrection implicit in the opening stanza is entirely at variance to the conventional language of political protest:

Two days I slept in the cold grave,
But on the third
I rose again gloriously from the dead,
my face like lightning,
my garment like fallen snow,
I lay naked on the pillow
and the sun,
the sun above my head
was my halo . . .

(*Dílo* 15)

The young man's initial hopefulness evaporates when he realizes that without his hands he cannot embrace a pretty girl's waist. This handicap also prevents him from taking part in a demonstration against the police. Here sexual inadequacy and political impotence dovetail in a poignant antiwar poem:

Only then did I regret for the first time,
my hands, my little hands,
that you had once been taken away from me
by a fiery grenade.

(17)

Politics and sexuality are equally intertwined in the poem "Sinful City" from the same collection, but here the tone is quite different, optimistic and celebratory rather than fatalistic and despairing. Initially, the Old Testament theme of divine revenge for human sin (the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah) is invoked to express revolutionary indignation against the excesses of capitalism. But, in the final couplet of the poem, political anger is unexpectedly tempered by the redemptive love of a courting couple in the city park:

The city,
The city of factory owners, rich men and coarse boxers,
The city of inventors and of engineers,
The city of generals, shopkeepers and patriotic poets
With its black sins has transgressed the limits of God's wrath:
And God was enraged;
A hundred times he had threatened vengeance on that town,
A rain of sulphur, fire and thunderbolts,
And a hundred times he had forgiven it.
For he always remembered what once he had promised

> That even for two just men he would not destroy his city,
> And it would be hard for God not to keep his word:
>
> Just then two lovers walked through the spring garden,
> Breathing in the scent of a flowering hawthorn bush.
>
> (51)

In spite of his apparent commitment to the communist revolution, the language of Seifert's first collection of poems is deeply suffused with the sensibility of late-nineteenth-century symbolism and decadence. In the poem "Revolution," for example, the rebellious proletarians compare themselves in their struggle against their capitalist masters with the turn-of-the-century homosexual renegade Oscar Wilde in his defiance of British moral hypocrisy: "Ardent, / in the midst of life, / we stand like Wilde before his judges" (34).

The intermingling of sexual desire and political frustration is also apparent in Seifert's next collection of verse, *Nothing but Love* (1923). But in distinction to the poems considered so far, an alternative perspective is provided by the hedonistic allure of the modern city. Now the city is no longer identified with abject masculinity but with potent femininity. In the opening poem, "The Electric Lyre," the everyday pleasures of modern technology (cinema, sport, modern American architecture) are personified by the poet's female-associated muse invoked to guide and strengthen the feeble poet:

> Muse, my modern muse of today,
> who with a timid motion at eight in the evening unveils
> the red curtain on the white screen of the cinema,
> come to me today, the creative hour is heavy;
>
> Muse, you who soar in amazing haste
> over the helmet of the cyclist, who at a sprung pace
> sweeps boldly along the stadium's track.
>
> Muse, who guides the hand of the engineer,
> as he draws a plan of an American skyscraper,
> come to me today, my strength is waning
> and I take hold of my pen with fear . . .
>
> (*Dílo* 75–76)

The signature poem of the collection is "Paris," a paean to the modernist city and its pleasures. The poem opens with a sad evocation of Prague as a joyless provincial town where the police shine their flashlights

at courting couples in the park. The alienated condition of the Prague working class is contrasted with the Rousseauian joys of the natural man in Africa and the sexual pleasures of the city on the Seine. After painting a melancholy picture of provincial Prague, the setting switches to the Africa of the poet's imagination. Then, halfway through the poem, the setting shifts unexpectedly to Paris, a city wholly personified as female:

> There are beautiful actresses and famous detectives,
> naked dancers dance in a suburban variété,
> and the perfume of their lace confounds your reason with love,
> for Paris is seductive and one cannot get over her.
>
> (83)

In spite of his proletarian identification with the cause of revolution and Soviet Russia, Seifert is now more enamored of Paris than Moscow. By 1922 the proletarian phase of Czech literature had lost momentum. The Czech workers had not risen in revolt against the capitalist order, and there was general disenchantment among the Proletarian Poets.

Poetism

The turning-point in Czech literature was provided by Vítězslav Nezval (1900–58), who joined Devětsil in April 1922. The crucial experience for Nezval, who had arrived two years earlier from his native Moravia, was a student meeting in Prague at which Seifert read an essay by Teige entitled "The New Proletarian Art." It proposed that the artist should bridge the gulf between art and the working class by turning to modern popular Western culture. In his autobiography Nezval describes the invigorating experience of hearing this lecture.[10] The next day he sought out Teige in order to show him his long poem "The Wondrous Magician," which he regarded as an exact expression of the tenets of Teige's theory. "The Wondrous Magician" recounts the metamorphosis of a magician of the imagination. The magician of the title is born from the crystal belly of a mysterious nun who was fertilized by the fragrance of a sick anemone blossom. He falls in love with the Lady of the Lake but loses her when he changes into foam. He goes through many metamorphoses: water jet, statue of Buddha, stalagmite cave, and the moon. The poem, a firework display of fancy and whimsical metaphors, was innovative in the Czech context as it opened the way for the expression of sensual enjoyment of life, an uninhibited exploration of consciousness,

and a new melodiousness. Identity was liberated from its old nationalist and social carapace and had become indeterminate, ambiguous, and hedonistic.

The Devětsil attachment to popular Western culture like jazz and film brought the movement into conflict with the Czechoslovak Communist Party for whom it smacked too much of a reversion to Western bourgeois influences. In fact, Devětsil failed to interest the proletariat in their work and supplant the popularity of traditional art forms. The writers themselves came mostly from the middle class and turned to communism on personal, subjective grounds. They developed a new form of social mysticism in which the future society would be based on love. For them the communist revolution was an engaging idea that stimulated the imagination. It was above all based on ethical grounds and in this sense betrayed its attachment to the social values of the past.

The first major collective work of Devětsil appeared in the fall of 1922. It was titled *The Revolutionary Anthology of Devětsil* and was edited by Teige and Seifert. It consisted of an eclectic mix of articles, poems, and short stories, including Seifert's poem "Paris," Wolker's "The Ballad of the Stoker's Eyes," Nezval's "The Wondrous Magician," and an essay by Teige entitled "Art Today and Tomorrow," which sought to sum up the preceding contributions. *The Revolutionary Anthology* paved the way for a new direction in Czech literature. In July 1924 Teige published his manifesto of poetism. In it he moves away from the belief that art is merely an instrument of political change and widens the scope of the group to encompass the whole of modern life. In Teige's view individual freedom was identified with collective freedom, personal happiness with social happiness. As the theoretician of the movement, Teige defined the new poetry as an "eccentric carnival," "a series of intoxicating film sequences," a "miraculous kaleidoscope." Poetry must be cleared of intellect and ethics and must be clowning and acrobatics—"a poetry of Sunday afternoons, picnics, luminous cafés, intoxicating cocktails, lively boulevards, spa promenades, but also the poetry of silence, night, quiet, and peace."[11]

If Teige was the chief theorist of poetism, Nezval was its main practitioner. In his collection *Pantomima* (Pantomime, 1924), he defines a poetist poem as a "miraculous bird, a parrot on a motorcycle" (32). A new vision of language was the key to poetism. In order to achieve this new vision, images had to be liberated from the bonds of convention through the replacement of logic by the free play of associations and

images. Nezval stated his own version of the poetist creed in the following way:

> When words were new, they shone next to one another in their unremitting, inherent intensity. But soon, through their frequent use, phraseology was created. No-one imagines in an everyday greeting the lips on the white hand of a woman. It was necessary to dislocate this phrase if I was to evoke its original sense.
>
> Logic is precisely that which makes shining words into phrases. Logically, the glass belongs to the table, the star to the skies, and the door to the stairs. That is why we do not see them. It is necessary to place the star on the table, the glass near the piano and the angels, the door next to the ocean. Our aim was to unveil reality, to give reality the shining form it had on the first day of existence. If I did this at the expense of logic, it was an attempt at heightened realism. ("Kapka inkoustu" 184)

This emphasis on a juxtaposition of unfamiliar things represented nothing less than an attempt to reinvest through a new language the harmonious relationship between human beings and their environment, which Wolker celebrates in his early poem "Things." In the later poetry of Wolker, this relationship had broken down because of the alienating effects of modernity, ruthless industrialism and total war having sundered the organic bonds between man and the natural world. For Nezval and Teige, poetism was intended to reconstruct an idealistic bridge between the human subject and the external, social world. Poetist language aspired to restore the mythic harmony between man and his environment not by turning to the real world as such but by exploiting the imaginative resources of the unconscious. If the disastrous consequences of modern technology had driven a deep wedge between man and society, the new language was intended to repair that rupture and restore the freedom of the individual. Hence, the aims of the poetists were as political as those of the Proletarian Poets—to ensure man's freedom—but their methods were different. Political freedom was to be achieved through the subjective imagination, through personal interaction with reality as a necessary prelude to the wholesale transformation of society. In this sense Proletarian Poets and poetists were not at variance with each other's interests but were dialectically intertwined and aimed toward the same idealistic resolution.

Poetism had an enormous impact on the development of Czech modernism, an influence reflected not only in Czech poetry but also

in the collage and montage techniques of Czech painting, photography, and film. Indebted to Guillaume Apollinaire's interest in cubism and the dynamic relationship he established between the visual arts and poems—especially his innovative use of typography to make calligrammes and postcard-poems sent from the war—poetism influenced Seifert's *On the Wireless Waves* (1925) and Nezval's *Poems on Postcards* (1926) and *ABC* (1926), with its incorporation of photography into the aesthetic framework of the whole composition. The artistic confidence and social optimism of poetism are reflected in the bold imagery of female sexuality and the female body in the visual and literary experimentation of the time. Typical of this continuity between political optimism and sexual hedonism are the photographs of the female dancer and acrobat Milča Mayerová in Nezval's *ABC*. Notable also are the advertisement photographs of Jaroslav Rössler from the late 1920s and early 1930s in which images of the female body are juxtaposed with commodity items such as perfume, toothpaste, and washing powder. Seifert's poetry of the early 1920s is also typical of this congruence between social optimism and sexual hedonism, as exemplified by the charming picture-poem "Abacus" from the collection *Honeymoon,* in which the beads on an abacus frame figure as the breasts of the beloved:

> Your breast
> is like an apple from Australia.
> Your breasts
> are like two apples from Australia.
> How I like this abacus of love!
>
> (*Dílo* 55)

For all its exciting innovations, poetism, like Proletarian Poetry, was ultimately an ephemeral phenomenon in the overall development of modern Czech literature. The main problem was that it wanted to go in two opposite—political and personal—directions at once. Teige proclaimed Marxist historical materialism; yet at the same time his aesthetics were personal and antirealist, an offshoot of the Romantic and French symbolist traditions that Czech literature had adopted in the nineteenth century. Thus, there was an ever-widening discrepancy in the poetist movement between theory and practice. This attempted marriage of personal and engaged art is most successfully exemplified in Nezval's *Pantomime,* in which revolution is not violent in nature but an exciting adventure.

By 1925 Nezval wanted to free himself from the constraints of dogma imposed by Teige. He was not alone. Increasing disenchantment with Teige's dogmatism is reflected in Biebl's poem "The Break" (1925) and Seifert's verse collection *On the Wireless Waves,* with its attachment to Western technology, lyrical individualism, and sexual hedonism. Seifert's poems from the mid- to late 1920s are especially indicative of a reaction against Teige's tendentiousness. The high point of disillusionment with Teige's dogmatism came in Seifert's aptly named next collection, *The Nightingale Sings Out of Tune* (1926), which was dedicated to Jean Cocteau, from whom the title of the collection was borrowed. As the prospect of revolution in Czechoslovakia receded, the work of Devětsil became ever more elegiac and wistful. Whereas in Wolker's "Holy Hill" Lenin and the revolution had been equated with sexual virility and the forces of nature, in Seifert's poem "Lenin" from *The Nightingale Sings Out of Tune* the leader of the revolution is now feeble and close to death:

> In a chaise longue
> Already seriously ill and old,
> Like a frail shadow and an old tree
> Lenin reposed.
>
> (2:128)

For the Proletarian Poets Soviet Russia and its leader had conjured forth images of masculine vigor and strength; now, in contrast to the optimistic technological vision of the future identified with Paris, Seifert's evocation of Moscow is replete with imagery of the past and the decrepitude of the old feudal order. In spite of losing his main followers, Teige continued to regard Soviet constructivism as the basis for modern art. He even issued a second manifesto of poetism in 1928 in an attempt to reassert his control over the movement. But the momentum had already been lost. By the late 1920s a darker, less vigorous tone was emerging in the poetry of Seifert and Nezval. In Seifert's collection *The Carrier Pigeon* (1929), the youthful joie de vivre of poetism has given way to predominant imagery of sexual frustration and emotional disenchantment. In the poem "Wedding Song," the refrain "How nice it is / when someone gets married" at the end of the first two verses changes to the regretful "How sad it is / when someone gets married" at the end of the third and fourth. No sooner has the wedding taken place, than its freshness seems to have worn off:

The bouquet has withered
and falls apart,
how sad it is
when someone gets married.

The fan has closed,
kissing turns bitter;
how sad it is
when someone gets married.

(3:18)

The same year of the poem's publication, Seifert left the Communist Party and definitively rejected Teige's aesthetic and ideological influence. It is difficult not to read these expressions of rapid disenchantment with marriage as a veiled statement about Seifert's short-lived, if intense, involvement in the poetist movement and the Communist Party. A similar tone of valediction and loss informs many of the poems in the same collection. In the poem "Wet Picture" the personification of Prague as beautiful girls becomes tinged with the elegiacal sadness of emotional farewells:

Those beautiful days
When the city resembles a die, a fan, and a bird song
Or a scallop shell on the seashore
—goodbye, goodbye, pretty girls,
we met today
and will never meet again.

(3:26)

By the end of the poem, the loveliness of female beauty has yielded to ugliness, decrepitude, and death glimpsed in the skull-like bare knees of the thin girls in the bar. In the companion piece to "Wet Picture"—"Prague"—we find an even gloomier correlation between Eros and Thanatos. Already anticipating surrealism, this enigmatic poem provides a quasi-baroque meditation on the futility of human desire. But its most startling quality is its sublimated imagery of sexual castration. In the opening stanza, Prague is evoked as a "gothic cactus," an image at once powerfully suggestive of the prickly spire of St. Vitus Cathedral and the frustrated male libido. The skull imagery that ended the previous poem recurs here in the phrase "with royal skulls," *(královskými lebkami)*,

which links the previous phallic image of the cactus with the fear of death and extinction. The sexual imagery continues in the next stanza with the autoerotic line "cannon-balls like seeds of wars / were scattered by the wind." The theme of castration is underscored later in the poem with the image of blindness—"the telescopes have gone blind from the horror of the universe," which recalls the castration image of blindness in Wolker's "The Ballad of the Stoker's Eyes." Significantly, Seifert's poem ends with the triumph not of Eros but of Thanatos: "and His Majesty dust / settles lightly on the abandoned throne" (3:28).

Similar in tone to Seifert's *Carrier Pigeon* is Nezval's poem "Edison" (1927), which may be said to mark an important point of transition from poetism to surrealism exemplified by the collections *Prague with Fingers of Rain* (1936) and *The Absolute Gravedigger* (1937). "Edison" belongs to the collection *Poems of the Night,* a series of separate poems written between 1921 and 1929 with the overall theme of night and death. It signals a departure from the life-affirming exuberance of Nezval's earlier poetism and a move toward a more melancholy and introspective meditation on the theme of sexual loneliness and the creative battle against oblivion and death. The eponymous hero of the poem is the famous American inventor and entrepreneur Thomas Edison. The choice of Edison as the hero of this dark, introspective poem is not as surprising as it might seem. In the late nineteenth century Edison had already become a modernist icon, embodying the split between the New World mass celebrity culture and the dandyesque European ideal of the remote and lonely genius. Edison is the ambiguous protagonist of Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's novel *l'Eve nouvelle* (1876), "the embodiment of America's recent grand-scale technological advances, but also a refined European spirit."[12] This dichotomy is also apparent in Nezval's poem, but it assumes a somewhat different form in reflecting the Czech avant-garde's conflicted allegiance to Soviet constructivism and French aesthetics.

For Nezval, as for Seifert, America is intimately associated with modernity and technology—with cinema, skyscrapers, motorcars, and airplanes. In this capacity Edison emerges as a dynamic hero of the new age akin to the new Soviet man celebrated in Vertov's films and ambivalently portrayed in Olesha's novel *Envy.* But such self-confident exuberance coexists with a profound sense of introverted melancholy. Here Edison is the personification of the lonely Baudelairean *flâneur,* the walker in the city who becomes the central protagonist in Nezval's later poems about Prague. Nezval's ambiguous portrayal of Edison as a man

of technological progress and poetic contemplation corresponds to an analogous division within the identity of the interwar Czech poets who were torn between a commitment to a revolutionary future and nostalgia for the poetic traditions of the past. In this sense the profoundly ambivalent figure of Edison becomes the personification of the Czech avant-garde liminally located between nineteenth-century French aesthetics and twentieth-century Soviet ideology.

The poem opens with a description of a solitary gambler's nocturnal return from a casino. The notion of the game *(hra)* in the first canto suggests the world of casual sex and prostitution. But this is no longer a city of hedonistic excitement—as in Seifert's "Paris"—but a melancholy urban landscape of sexual loneliness and alienation:

> Our lives are as mournful as a lament
> Once toward evening a young gambler left a casino
> Outside it was snowing over the monstrances of bars
> The air was moist since spring was approaching
> Although the night trembled like the prairie
> Under the blows of stellar artillery
> Listened to by drinkers at tables soiled with drink
> Over glasses of alcohol
> Topless women in boas made of peacock feathers
> Melancholics of late afternoon
>
> There was something here heavy and oppressive
> Sadness anguish and anxiety of life and death.
>
> (*Dílo* 2:83–84)

Signaling a split in the poet's identity is the sudden switch from a third-person to a first-person voice and a concomitant transposition from a vaguely North American setting ("the night trembed like a prairie") to the ancient city of Prague:

> I was returning home across the Legions' Bridge
> Singing to myself a short aria
> A drinker of lights of night barges on the Vltava
> At Hradčany it had just struck twelve
> Midnight of death the star of my horizon
> From this moist night at the end of February
> There was something here heavy and oppressive
> Sadness anguish and anxiety of life and death.
>
> (2:84)

The switch in voice signals a split in the poet's identity. As in Wolker and Seifert's poetry, this conflict of identity can be understood in the context of the crisis of Central European democracy and the Czechoslovak Left's lack of a firm commitment to Soviet Marxism. Torn between "masculine" Moscow and "feminine" Paris, the split in the poet's political identity translates into the personalized language of doubling and sexual ambiguity. When the poet meets his suicidal shadow at midnight on the bridge in Prague, he takes him home where the latter disappears into thin air. The mysterious atmosphere of this scene is charged with melancholy loneliness and homoerotic doubling. The Romantic motif of the dopplegänger also figures in Alexandr Hackenschmied's short film *Aimless Walk* (1930). An anonymous man takes a tram through the streets of Prague to the terminus in the outskirts of the city where he goes on an aimless walk. When he arrives at his destination, he lies down and starts to smoke a cigarette. As he gets up to return home, he splits into two people, one taking the tram home, the other remaining behind in the periphery. This double motif mirrors an overall artistic split in the identity of the avant-garde artist: to what extent does the film assert the principle of *l'art pour l'art* (embodied in the *flâneur* motif) and to what extent is it a politically engaged art suggested by the background images of factory chimneys? As one critic has pointed out, the objectivist ideals of the film are undermined by the subjective and individual vision inherent in its imagery of splitting and reflections in water and shadow.[13] But are these ideals really "objective"? In the city outskirts the emphasis is placed on the physical labor of the urban proletariat such as the shot of a factory chimney churning out thick industrial smoke and a worker shoveling piles of coal dust. In the shot of the aimless walker lying on the grass, the factory smoke replicates the smoke from the stroller's cigarette, as if we were being invited to compare the leisure of the bourgeois stroller with the labor of the urban proletariat. This juxtaposition is reinforced by the alternating shots of the sleeping stroller and a sleeping worker, his grimy boots placed poignantly by his side. Such editing should not be seen as neutral or "objective" but as expressing a political commentary on the working conditions of the proletariat. Yet there are also undoubtedly subjective moments in the film, such as the sequences in the tramcar at the beginning where the hand-held camera assumes the perspective of the protagonist as he looks out and jumps from the moving vehicle. Complementing this subjective/objective tension, there is also an ideological ambiguity in the film. When the stroller

divides into two people—one remaining on the grass in the working-class outskirts, the other returning to the city—the bifurcation appears to illustrate the avant-garde artist's conflicted allegiance to the working class and attraction to the capitalist pleasures of modern urban life.

Another film of Czech modernism in which left-wing politics and bourgeois hedonism appear to conflict is *Ecstasy* (1933), directed by Gustav Machatý. Between 1929 and 1933 Machatý made a trio of Czech films all linked by the theme of sexual passion: *Erotikon* (1929, silent), *From Saturday to Sunday* (1931, the first Czech sound film), and *Ecstasy,* which achieved instant notoriety at home and abroad on account of a fifteen-minute sequence of nudity. *Ecstasy* starred the young Austrian actress Maria Kiesler, whose controversial nude appearance made her an overnight Hollywood star, where she was renamed Hedy Lamarr. The movie caused a scandal on its release. Pope Pius XII censured it, and it was the subject of much gossip in Hollywood. The ban on showing the film in the United States was not lifted until 1940.

The plot is ostensibly straightforward: a young bride named Eva is frustrated in her marriage to an older, impotent man. When she meets the virile manager of a construction site, her repressed sexuality is suddenly awakened. She petitions for a divorce from her husband. But when the latter finds out about his wife's affair, he tries to kill himself and her lover in a car accident, but he loses his nerve at the last moment. Eventually he takes his own life as the couple celebrates their engagement. Stricken by remorse and grief, Eva abandons her lover. The film ends with the lover back at the construction site, sadly imagining unrealized married life with Eva and their newborn baby.

This narrative of an illicit love affair between a middle-class woman and a working man is familiar enough from D. H. Lawrence's novel *Lady Chatterley's Lover,* which only three years earlier, in 1930, had been the subject of a controversial obscenity trial in England. But the film also betrays a more localized pedigree. As we have seen, strong, independent-minded women had been a common feature of Czech national myth and literature since the nineteenth century. In addition to this feminist legacy, the film also reveals its socialist credentials and—consistent with other works of the Czech avant-garde—establishes a connection between politics and sexuality. The virile lover is reminiscent of the socialist hero of Soviet cinema; indeed, the final sequence of the film is directly influenced by Sergey Eisenstein's celebrations of physical labor. This affinity may seem odd for a film made in a democratic state;

but it is important to remember that most members of the Czech avant-garde were either full-fledged members of the Communist Party or at least sympathetic to left-wing politics. For the Proletarian Poet Wolker, the young Soviet Russia connoted virility, strength, and masculinity while the capitalist system was regarded as effete and effeminate. Seen in the context of the left-wing avant-garde, the young protagonist of *Ecstasy* becomes the embodiment not simply of a masculine ideal but also of a political vision: the realization of a new socialist society. Conversely, the impotent husband is not merely the personification of masculinity in crisis—by this time hardly a novel theme in European modernism—but a symbol of the degeneracy of bourgeois democracy itself. Even on a stylistic level, the hyper-realist, at times almost expressionist, close-up shots of the distraught husband set him apart from the more heroic and detached half- or full-body shots of the lover.

If there is an obviously constructed opposition in the film's portrayal of masculinity, its treatment of femininity is no less contingent on tensions within the film's political ideology. On one level, female nudity is equated with nature and in this spirit is celebrated as an integral feature of the film's socialist message. The famous scene in which Hedy Lamarr swims naked in the lake draws on a common association of female sexuality with water. Yet the correspondence between the female body and nature can be seen as the valorized image of an equally pervasive negative homology between out-of-control female sexuality and destructive technology. Perhaps the best-known filmic treatment of this male fantasy is the robot-woman in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis.* In Lang's movie the robot-woman's sexuality signals a threat both to masculinity and the bourgeois capitalist system it subtends. The rather incoherent ending of the film seeks to put these anxieties to sleep in the wish-fulfillment reconciliation between the Master of Metropolis and the worker, representing capitalism and labor, respectively.

The denouement of *Ecstasy* is equally fraught with unresolved tensions, in particular in its vision of female sexuality. Having celebrated its heroine's sexual liberation yet unable to countenance that liberation beyond the framework of conventional respectability, the film proceeds to impose a moralistic ending by making Eva abandon her lover. Yet this ending is tempered by a fantasy sequence in which the lover imagines that Eva has given birth to his child. In this way the demands of bourgeois subjectivity are reconciled with the exigencies of socialist optimism. The film's ending is an attempt to straddle the contradiction

between its ideological vision of a socialist brave new world of sexual liberation and its bourgeois moral scruples about how such a world may be realized.

Surrealism

By 1929 the Devětsil and its poetism were a spent force. The group had always been little more than a collection of very different individuals. Teige had contrived to present the group as an organic whole, but the camouflage had been transparent. Now he was still carrying the banner of poetism but with no followers. Attempts to revive the Devětsil in 1932 foundered. The dissolution of cultural unity was paralleled by political discord. Seifert left the Communist Party in 1929, although Teige and Nezval remained members. By the end of the 1920s, Dadaism had lost its popularity in Prague and a new form of Western modernity emerged in the form of surrealism, a movement better suited to the personal and introspective quality of Czech poetry.

Czech surrealism did not resolve the ideological tensions we have discerned within the cultural Left. Rather, these tensions become more submerged and thereby contribute to the pervasive image of abject masculinity in the poems of Seifert and Nezval. The temptation is to claim that Czech surrealist poetry is apolitical since there is little or no inherent ideological content; but this very turn away from political overtness in itself constitutes a profoundly political gesture. To appreciate the effects of this gesture, one is required to look closely at the unconscious associations within certain surrealist poems and especially how these relate to similar imagery in the preceding phases of Proletarian Poetry and poetism. In other words, the political significance of Czech surrealism is illuminated by placing it within the larger context of the interwar avant-garde.

The starting-point for Czech surrealism was Breton's publication of his *Surrealist Manifesto* (1924). According to Breton, the artist must subject himself to the dictates of thought in the absence of all control exercised by reason and outside all moral or aesthetic preoccupation; the flow of impulses from the unconscious mind has to be recorded automatically, without interference. Nezval and some of his friends were fascinated by these ideas but were wary of adopting Breton's ideas because they still professed their adherence to Marxism. This obstacle was removed when, in his *Second Surrealist Manifesto* (1929), Breton proclaimed that the surrealists supported the principles of historical materialism.[14]

In 1934 Teige and Nezval founded the Czech surrealist movement. Its principal adherents were the poets Nezval, Biebl, and Mákovský and the visual artists Jindřich Štyrský, Teige, and Toyen. In 1935 these poets and artists welcomed Breton and Paul Eluard to Prague, where Breton delivered an important lecture on the political position of surrealism and paid flattering homage to his Czech followers.[15] However, soon afterward, in August 1935, Breton issued yet another manifesto attacking Soviet Russia and Stalin in particular. This was a bitter blow to the surrealist writers and artists who were members of the Communist Party. Nezval remained loyal to Breton for two more years, but when surrealism was condemned by Marxist critics and he himself repeatedly subjected to attacks, he finally denounced surrealism, ironically soon after publishing his most surrealist collection of poetry, *The Absolute Gravedigger,* in 1937.[16]

The key to the appeal of surrealism for Nezval was that it wanted above all to combat individual loneliness and fear. Thus it reflected a very traditional Czech need for a strong sense of collective identity, which explains why it was not deemed to be in conflict with Marxism. Through the unconscious the poet could reach the collective solidarity he sought. The collection *Prague with Fingers of Rain* (1936) exemplifies Nezval's attempt to reconcile the personal and social dimensions of his identity. Prague is personified as a woman. In itself this gendering of Prague was hardly new, enjoying a pedigree extending back into the nineteenth century and beyond.[17] New was Nezval's treatment of the motif. Prague becomes a dream landscape rather than a real city in which unconscious sexual drives assume their own peculiar logic. For Nezval to write about the city in terms of the unconscious was not particularly new in the context of European modernism. In Russia Andrei Bely had already introduced the idea of the dreamlike city with his novel *Petersburg* (1913–16), and a few years later T. S. Eliot famously wrote of London in *The Waste Land* (1922) in similar terms:

> Unreal City,
> Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
> A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
> I had not thought death had undone so many.
>
> (29)

Nezval's Prague is very different from Eliot's London. His Prague is a sexualized space and a site of hedonistic pleasures rather than a Dantesque

vision of urban alienation. The immediate cue for Nezval was provided by Apollinaire's story "The Stroller through Prague," in which a French visitor to the city meets Ahasuerus, the Eternal Jew. This Ahasuerus is not the tragic figure of Christian legend but a modernist libertine and cosmopolitan, a fictional reflection of the rootless Apollinaire himself. Ahasuerus leads the narrator through the city, pointing out its landmarks and taking pleasure in its erotic distractions. At one point he has sex with a prostitute on the street. Nezval's initial encounter with Prague is equally synonymous with prostitution and anonymous sex. In the autobiographical poem "The Prague Walker" the young poet arrives in the big city in April 1920. His first memories of the city involve an encounter with a prostitute in a brothel: "You are sitting on the embankment / It's past midnight we've come from a terrible cell / It was beautiful with a naked woman on a leather sofa" (*Praha s prsty deště* 11).[18]

Significantly, the sexual encounter with the woman-city is not couched in terms of virility and masculinity but in terms of lost virginity. Moreover, it is not unequivocally pleasurable but characterized as nightmarish ("we've come from a terrible cell"). Generally speaking, sexual intercourse in the poems is presented as cold and alienating, a source of guilt and anxiety rather than unalloyed pleasure. In the poem "Obscure Hotels," sex between a hotel guest and a prostitute is expressed in the most impersonalized of terms. Unlike the promiscuous Jew of Apollinaire's story—a personification both of cultural modernism and international capital moving freely across frontiers and equally at home everywhere—Nezval's narrator is a provincial newcomer to the big city and is distinctly intimidated, albeit intrigued, by the commodity culture of anonymous sex he finds there. For him sex is less real than imagined, the woman's body a source of masturbatory fears and fantasies. As in Teige's collages, Nezval's women are fetishized objects of a disaffected male libido. Moreover, they become indistinguishable from the commodification culture of the city itself. This impression is well illustrated in Teige's frontispiece to the first edition of *Prague with Fingers of Rain,* in which a woman's naked torso is juxtaposed with buildings, shoes, and rings as if the female body and the commodity culture of the city were one and the same thing. At the center of the collage is located an eye, an emblem of male voyeurism that reduces the female body to a fetishized commodity. One notices the same voyeuristic perspective in Teige's other collages, which are dominated by images of women's bodies in various states of fragmentation. In the realm of cinema one

might compare the short film *May* (1936), directed by Emil František Burian, which consists entirely of close-up shots of a young woman's body in which her mascara and lipstick are provocatively foregrounded. In Nezval's poems women's eyes and lips are similarly a source of obsessive voyeurism: "The magnolia blossoms are bursting now they are skirts / They are her eyes they are her lips" (*Praha s prsty deště* 12).

In "The Lilac by the Museum on Wenceslas Square," flowers and women are also seen in terms of each other. But here female sexuality is differentiated from the naturalness of flowers. Woman is identified with the artificial city. Typical of surrealist art in general, woman becomes an artifact, the very antithesis of the natural:

> I don't love flowers
> I love women
> Yet I slept beneath the lilac
> From afar a cellar breathed on me
> Like stuffy flats on the high street under an artificial night
> Of your artificial eyes
> Of your artificial mouth
> Of your artificial breasts and hair
> I love you lilac spray.
>
> (20)

In fact, the entire poem can be read as an auto-erotic fantasy, a reading that reinforces the status of the poet as a voyeur:

> And a nameless rose
> With breasts in the rose leaves
> The town breathes through all the windows
> A chilly twilight
> And while I slept
> A lilac bush blossomed by the Museum on Wenceslas Square.

Another poem in which woman is associated with the artificiality of the city is the masterly "Moon over Prague":

> The decorator is mixing his plaster
> He's lit an oil lamp on top of the stepladder
> It is the moon
> It moves like an acrobat
> Wherever it appears it causes panic
> It turns black coffee into white

> It offers paste jewelry to women's eyes
> It changes bedrooms into death chambers.
>
> (176)

In Nezval's early surrealist poem "History of the Six Empty Houses" (1932), the narrator describes a fairground waxworks *(panoptikum)* that includes a mechnical woman on a torture machine.[19] In "Covered Market" this male sadistic fantasy is inverted when a mundane, everyday scene of a fish and meat market is transformed into a masochistic fantasy in which a market woman becomes a sinister dominatrix in a torture chamber:

> There are vats of blood
> Stylishly like an executioner a woman peels off her glove
> Her coiffure trembles
> Like some dreadful paper
> A pheasant stares with desperate eyes.
>
> (106–7)

This is a woman's world from which men are banished. The poet also has a feeling of enclosure and restriction; he imagines himself as a caged animal. This image recalls "The Prague Walker," where the newcomer to the city finds himself in a brothel resembling a prison cell. But it is also reminiscent of Nezval's autobiographical narrative "History of the Six Empty Houses," in which the unborn poet compares his prenatal life in the mother's womb to enclosure in a corseted cage: "What strange clothes are worn in January 1900 / And why am I locked in a cage? / It is a corset" (*Pět prstů* 9).

The city envelops the poet just as the baby is enclosed within the mother's womb. The child's intimacy with the mother within the Freudian scenario of the Oedipus complex here meshes with the modernist topos of Prague as a mother. For Nezval the mother-city is not simply nurturing and protective; she is also vicious and domineering. One might even conclude that Prague becomes the site of an oedipal struggle within the Czech political unconscious between Moscow as father and Paris as mother. And, as Freud asserts, the mother always wins out in their struggle for the male subject.

Karel Srp has discerned a similar obsession with the mother in Karel Teige's collages, in which images of female breasts are especially

prominent: "In Teige's view, the breast was not an exclusive ambivalent object; rather, it reminded him of the return to his mother's breasts, which, according to Freud, is the first object a person ever encounters" (*Karel Teige* 21). As the theoretician of the avant-garde, Teige never ceased to insist that art should be subordinated to politics. Yet, ironically, his own art work contradicts this precept in its exclusively subjective focus on the female anatomy. And in so far as the female body is presented by him as a commodity fetish—and thus a capitalist signifier—his privileging of socialism over capitalism is here subject to reversal. In inverting the traditional male/female, active/passive, socialist/capitalist binaries, the Czech surrealists articulate in personal terms the political failure of the avant-garde to forge a new society based on left-wing principles.

In fact, one might go so far as to conclude that there was a conflict between art and ideology at the very heart of the European surrealist movement as a whole. Initially Breton, the theoretician and founder of French surrealism, argued that psychoanalysis and Marxism were perfectly compatible; and the Czech surrealists adopted the same utopian position. But this desire for synthesis turned out to be a futile pipe dream, as confirmed by Breton's attack on Stalin and Soviet Russia in 1935. Throughout the 1930s a similar battle was being waged within the poetry of the Czech avant-garde between the tenets of French surrealism and Soviet socialist realism. Although Teige thought that theoretically they could coexist, Czech poetic practice suggested otherwise.[20] After an argument between Teige and Nezval, the Czech surrealist group was dissolved in March 1938, opening the way for the socialist realists to dominate the field.

5

Robots, Golems, and Femmes Fatales

The Drama of Karel Čapek

The protagonist of Harry Mulisch's novel *The Procedure* (1998) is a Dutch biologist named Victor Werker whose research into DNA cloning causes an international uproar when he creates a complex organic crystal that has a metabolism and can reproduce. Like Mary Shelley's Dr. Frankenstein, Werker is a man on the run, fleeing from the demons within himself. Trapped within an unhappy marriage, his relationship with his wife is doomed by the death of their stillborn daughter in an Amsterdam hospital. The last in a long line of literary fathers whose daughters have died in infancy—the anonymous author of the medieval English poem *Pearl* and the Polish Renaissance poet Jan Kochanowski being salient exemplars of this tradition—Werker seeks solace for his grief by keeping an intimate diary addressed to the beloved child God has denied him. When we first encounter him he is he spending a semester as a visiting professor at the University of California at Berkeley:

> *Monday, January 10.* I read on the noticeboard in Dwinelle Hall that Slavonic Languages were giving a performance of Karel Čapek's *R.U.R.* I'd vaguely heard of that play; I've always wanted to see it. R.U.R. is the abbreviation of "Rossum's Universal Robots" and it is the first occurrence

of the word "robot"; in the program I read that it was dreamed up by his brother Josef, also a writer. It isn't about machine people, but about the production of artificial people of flesh and blood, who threaten mankind with the original "protoplasm." It was first performed in Prague in 1921. The auditorium in the huge labyrinthine building was half filled with pizza-eating and cola-drinking students, their Walkmans pushed scarcely half an inch from their ears. That was probably what struck me the most: the contrast between those privileged children in their sunny California and the ancient, misty Prague of three quarters of a century ago. (99)

The Czech writer Karel Čapek (1890–1938) referred to in this passage was only thirty years old when the National Theater of Prague first produced his robot play on 25 January 1921. It was rapidly translated into English and staged in London and New York; and the young playwright became an overnight literary celebrity. But with time his play was eclipsed by other, more famous treatments of the robot theme, most notably Fritz Lang's modernist film classic *Metropolis* and Ridley Scott's postmodern masterpiece *Blade Runner* (1982). Today Čapek is little known outside his own country and the discipline of Slavic Studies. Only a few of his works are available in English translation. And yet this writer introduced the word "robot" to the languages of the world.

One reason why Čapek's oeuvre has been overlooked in the West since his death is that he aligned himself too closely with T. G. Masaryk's system of democratic humanism and identified too narrowly with the interests of the Czechoslovak state as the model of democratic humanism. Masaryk's vision of democratic humanism now seems unduly idealistic; and so Čapek's dependence on Masaryk's ideas appears equally so. But alongside the disciple of Masaryk, there was from the beginning—and remained—another side to Čapek, one whose deeply skeptical and agnostic qualities typified rather than negated the crisis of postwar European modernism. His early collections *Wayside Crosses* (1917) and *Awkward Tales* (1921) suggest that there is no absolute truth to which modern man can cling. In "The Footprint," two men discuss the enigma of a lone boot print in a snowy landscape. Much as they try to explain and rationalize this phenomenon, they are unable to do so.[1]

But increasingly Čapek felt the need to exceed the limits of his skeptical art and prescribed rather than described the complex ambiguities of modernity. His primary concern was the threat to man posed by modern conditions, especially the dehumanizing and destructive potential of

technology. In his essay "Rule by Machines," Čapek articulates these concerns: "Isn't our admiration for machines, that is, for mechanical civilization, such that it suppresses our awareness of man's truly creative abilities? We all believe in human progress; but we seem predisposed to imagine this progress in the form of gasoline engines, electricity, and other technical contrivances. . . . We have made machines, not people, our standard for the human order" (*War with the Newts* xvi).

The subordination of man to the machine has become the thematic touchstone for critical readings of *R.U.R.* There is some justification for interpreting the play in this way. Almost all the characters—Domin, the factory manager; Fabry, engineer and general director of technology; Dr. Gall, chairman of the physiological and research divisions; Dr. Hallemeier, head of the Institute for Robot Psychology and Education; and Busman, general marketing director—defend the invention and mass reproduction of robots from the capitalist perspective, while only three characters (Helena, her old maid Nan'a, and the builder Alquist) represent the dissenting voices of, respectively, socialism, folk wisdom, and Tolstoyanism. In an article for *The Saturday Review* of London (1923) in which he responded to a debate with George Bernard Shaw and G. K. Chesterton following the play's London premiere, Čapek tried to explain his intention to a British audience and asserted his relativist opinion that all these perspectives are truthful and all the characters right. At the same time it is apparent from his extra-dramatic pronouncements that Čapek's favored character was Alquist, who articulates the Masarykian investment in gradualist "small-scale work" *(drobná prace):* "I think it's better to lay a single brick than to draw up plans that are too great." (Alquist's name is derived from the Spanish *el quisto* which means "most favored.")[2] In spite of Čapek's assertion that every character is right, he ultimately identifies with Alquist's perspective on the world. This is why Alquist is the only human being to survive the robot rebellion. It is he who presides over the forlorn attempt to experiment on the robots and discover the principle of their invention following Helena's decision to burn the formula of robot production.

The robot play is thus at once relativist *and* programmatic. Although it professes to eschew any notion of absolute truth, its ending is wholly consistent with Masaryk's belief that gradualism is the only viable way forward for mankind. Miraculously reborn as human beings at the end of the play, the robots Helena and Primus are akin to Adam and Eve in paradise, the sins of the past wiped clean. This tension between a relativist

and an absolutist perspective can be traced back to Masaryk's own views on democracy as defined in his rather nebulous system of "humanita," which consists of a relativist aggregate of philosophies such as Christianity, communism, and Nietzsche's will to power shorn of their metaphysical content to create an a priori system based on the principle of negation rather than the integration, exclusion rather than inclusion.[3] This principle of exclusion would explain why all the dramatis personae in *R.U.R.* perish with the sole exception of Alquist, who serves as the spokesman of Masaryk's belief in gradualism.

Critics have had to acknowledge the artistic cost of using drama as a vehicle for the exploration of these less-than-unified ideas: *R.U.R.* has an anticlimactic plot, an irresolute ending, and characters who are little more than convenient mouthpieces for different points of view.[4] I have suggested that the incoherence at the heart of the play derives, at least in part, from Masaryk's system of humanita. According to Roger Scruton, the problem with this system as a political basis on which to build a state ideology—as it subsequently became during the wars in Czechoslovakia—was its denial of metaphysics: the members of a collective, whether citizens of a modern state or the faithful adherents of a church, require an absolute set of beliefs to unite them.[5]

In so far as the robot play is an endorsement of Masaryk's system of humanita, it replicates the tensions and contradictions inherent in the philosopher-president's system. On the one hand, Čapek argued that the various points of view expressed in the play (socialism, capitalism, fascism) are equally valid; on the other hand, the fact that the rise of the robots allegorizes these ideologies *as a threat* suggests that the playwright did *not* regard them as equally valid to his own favored system of democratic humanism as articulated by Alquist. In emphasizing the threat posed by the robot insurrection, the Masarykian system of humanita was more exclusive than inclusive and therefore more fragile and vulnerable to criticism than is usually claimed.

Similarly, scholars of Weimar cinema have long since acknowledged that Lang's *Metropolis* does not present a harmonious, unified vision of the world but is internally beleaguered by discordant ideologies: its socialist message (personified and articulated by Maria) is complicated and undermined by its protofascist ending in which the heart and the mind, labor and capital are programmatically reconciled. Scholars of Weimar cinema have fruitfully explained the film's irrationalities in terms of the correlation between the modernist crisis of masculinity

and the crisis of Weimar democracy. An analogous reading of *R.U.R.* would explain the play's incoherence in terms of the crisis of masculinity and Masarykian democracy. As in *Metropolis,* political fears of ideological extremism (such as communism and unbridled capitalism) are linked on the unconscious level with fears of unrestrained female sexuality.[6] In highlighting the play's personal and political anxieties, I shall seek to restore *R.U.R.* to the larger context of high modernism, in which the crisis of masculinity and Central European democracy become inextricably implicated in each other.

Modernism and Masculinity

The link between modernism and masculinity is most famously articulated by the Moravian-born inventor of modern psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud. For Freud femininity was always a great "mystery." According to Luce Irigaray, this mystery can be explained as a displacement of the central patriarchal suppression of the feminine. The mystery of man's role in reproduction (paternity never being self-evident) is reassigned to the "passive" woman in the oedipal scenario.[7] Another crucial example of the continuity between modernism and repressed male sexuality is to be found in the work of Freud's contemporary, the Czech-Jewish writer Franz Kafka. Recent criticism on Kafka and his circle has addressed the social and ethnic contours of the crisis of masculinity in such stories as "The Metamorphosis" and "The Judgment." This criticism situates Kafka's subjective anxieties about his sexuality and his traumatic relationship with his father in the specific and localized circumstances of the German-Jewish experience of fin-de-siècle Prague.[8] Loss of a coherent masculine self is as much an extension of the political and cultural marginalization of Central European Jewry in the increasingly nationalistic and anti-Semitic milieus of Prague and Vienna as the fraught circumstances of Kafka's personal and familial life. The same is true of the controversial figure Otto Weininger, whose influential book *Sex and Character* (1903) was symptomatic of the crisis of masculinity in Central Europe.[9]

The same fluidity between politics and personality can be applied to Czech writers between about 1880 and 1938. A heightened sense of national identity among the Czech-speaking intelligentsia did not foreclose anxieties about the self. On the contrary, as they grew more self-confident about their nationhood and began to embrace the cosmopolitan trends of Western culture, Czech writers of the modernist period

became as vulnerable to the subjective crises of the age as their more famous counterparts in the German-speaking world. In their book *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (1977), Deleuze and Guattari distinguish between what they term Kafka's "deterritorialization" and the allegorical method of what they vaguely refer to as the "Czech School" of Karel Čapek. This distinction is misleading. Just as Kafka's highly personal writing is anchored in the sociopolitical framework of turn-of-the-century Prague, so is Čapek's allegorical treatment of social themes inseparable from the male crisis at the heart of European modernism.

R.U.R.

R.U.R. is set on a remote island where robots are being manufactured en masse and sent in shiploads to Europe to serve the needs of the human population there. The choice of an island for such a seemingly utopian project is hardly novel or surprising. Since Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), the island has been the *locus classicus* of many modern utopias and dystopias, among them H. G. Wells's novella *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1895), a nightmarish account of vivisection that anticipates not only *R.U.R.* but other works of Slavic science fiction such as Mikhail Bulgakov's anti-Soviet novella *Heart of a Dog* (1925). But unlike most other island dystopias, the setting of the robot island is neither rural nor tropical. Just as many early-modern visions of utopias were identified with the New World, so is the robot island redolent of modern capitalist America. The robots are shipped to "Old Europe," and it is from Europe that the feminist and socialist Helena Glory arrives to protest against the inhuman treatment of the robots. A clue to the implicit association of the island of robot production with twentieth-century America is provided by a letter Čapek sent to *The New York Sunday Times* in 1926 in which he equates the United States with industrial efficiency: "To my knowledge, American efficiency concerns itself with multiplying output, not life. It's true that man works in order to live; but it is also evident that he lives while he is working. One could say that European Man is a very poor industrial machine; but this is because he is not a machine at all" (*War with the Newts* xvi). The corollary of this generalization is that Americans *are* efficient machines; and it is tempting to read the robot island as a veiled allegory of the United States and its managerial class as the new industrial elite of that rising economic giant. The Jewish businessman Busman is an obvious and rather crude personification of this elite. In his narrow concern with the profit motive and his total disregard for the

workers' welfare, Busman betrays all the characteristics of the soulless robots he has helped to create. Čapek's critique of America betrays traces of the anti-Semitism that characterized much of high modernism: in the list of dramatis personae Busman is described in stereotypical terms as a "fat, bald, short-sighted Jew." It is also rather simplistic in distinguishing between mechanized America and artisanal Europe. Čapek's characterization of the Old World as pre-industrial is more the product of humanist nostalgia for a pre-technological era than an accurate assessment of the economic realities of interwar Europe, which was plagued with the same problems faced by America—industrial alienation, high unemployment, and unscrupulous profiteering. The fledgling Czechoslovak Republic was far from free of these problems, as demonstrated by the foundation of the Czechoslovak Communist Party in 1921, the same year in which the robot play was staged.

Set in an indeterminate future, *R.U.R.* begins with a visit by Helena Glory, the daughter of the World President Glory, to an island far from Europe where robot production is in full swing. Helena has arrived on a ship from Europe, although, ironically, she is the only character in the play to bear an American family name—Glory. This would explain her profile as a socialist and a feminist: Britain and America had recently given the vote to women (in 1918 and 1920, respectively). As such Helena embodies the independent-minded feminist of the 1920s, the descendant of the late-nineteenth-century "new woman." Her forceful character arouses the interest of the plant's managing director, Domin. A heated debate ensues between them about the rights of the robots. The socialistic Helena opines that they should share the same rights as humans, while the pragmatic Domin counters that the raison d'être of the robots is to increase productivity and alleviate the plight of humankind.

Domin's name suggests man's lordship of the robots and, by extension, the world (from the Latin word *dominus*). But his significance in the play is altogether more complicated and ambiguous than his name implies, since Domin is not the master of the robots at all but merely the manager supervising their production, the successor of the robot inventor Young Rossum. The latter is not the father of the robots either, since he inherited the formula of invention from his uncle, Old Rossum, who first formulated the principle of artificial life. Young Rossum simply transformed this scientific formula into a practical principle of mass reproduction, which was then perfected by Domin into an efficient business enterprise. As Čapek pointed out to his British audience in his 1923

essay, the name Rossum derives from the Czech word for reason *(rozum);* the inventor personifies nineteenth-century scientific materialism. But Old Rossum also belongs to a long genealogy of mad inventors who usurp the role of God as creator of mankind that predates the nineteenth century. Among these are Rabbi Loew, the sixteenth-century creator of the Prague golem; Goethe's Faust; Mary Shelley's Frankenstein; Professor Spalanzani in Hoffmann's story "The Sandman;" H. G. Wells's Dr. Moreau; Thomas Edison in Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's Decadent novel *The New Eve;* and, most recently, the biologist Victor Werker in Harry Mulisch's novel *The Procedure.*

From the outset *R.U.R.* betrays its literary descent from a Romantic and modernist tradition concerned with the rise and fall of rational, scientific man; but it also shares with its antecedents and analogues the continuity between the crisis in modern scientific knowledge and the crisis of masculinity. This would explain why the allegorical theme of man as master of his world implied by the name Domin is complicated and undermined by the play's inability to align such dominance with one particular character. Who *is* the real "father" of the robots: Old Rossum, who pioneers the biological principle of cloning but fails in his endeavor to reproduce human life; Young Rossum, who takes over from his uncle but ends up producing simplified and functional machines rather than human beings; or Domin, who subordinates the quality of the machines to the profit motive and the need for mass production?

The play's anxiety about masculinity can be related to the general context of modernism and its legacy of Darwinian theories of evolution that undermined the age-old Aristotelian notion of male rationality and superiority to woman. A key protomodernist articulation of these Darwinian-induced doubts about man's primacy over woman is August Strindberg's play *The Father* (1887), which explores the unraveling of a man's identity based on his inability to prove his biological status as the father of his own daughter. Thirty years later Kafka documented the failure of manhood in his stories "The Judgment" and "The Metamorphosis"; and in his "Letter to His Father" he more or less admitted that writing was a substitute for the masculine independence his overbearing father had denied him.[10]

R.U.R.'s inability to answer the question who is the father of the robots makes more sense in the light of Strindberg's and Kafka's inexorably self-destructive excavation of masculinity than in the putatively objective terms of social allegory. Such doubts are further exemplified by

Domin's and Helena's impassioned debate about the rights of the robots. Just as Strindberg's Captain resents and fears his wife's absolute status as the biological mother of their child, so is the technocrat Domin threatened by Helena's menacing posture both as a sexually alluring femme fatale and a socialist-feminist spokeswoman on behalf of the disenfranchised robots The perception of Helena as a potential threat to the patriarchal order correlates with the allegorical theme of the robots as members of the oppressed laboring classes who threaten—and ultimately destroy—the capitalist supremacy embodied by Domin and his male colleagues.

Traditional readings of the play equate the rights of the robots with the rights of man in a universal sense; but Helena's concern with the robot Sulla's enslaved status in the Prologue may also be seen as a topical allusion to women's recent access to the right to vote. Speaking for the League of Humanity, Helena asserts that the robots should be treated like people, prompting Dr. Hallemeier's sarcastic question of whether they should also be allowed to vote. Helena's solicitous concern for the disenfranchised robots would certainly have reminded American and European audiences of recent debates concerning a woman's right to vote. George Bernard Shaw's play *Pygmalion* (performed in London and New York in 1914) had reinvented the classical story of Pygmalion, who falls in love with his own statue and requests Aphrodite to bring it to life. In Shaw's witty modern version of the story, the heroine does not become her master's slave but asserts herself as an independent woman, thereby turning an Ovidian legend into a topical feminist fable.[11]

The discussion between Helena and Domin concerning the advantages and disadvantages of modern technology—and humanity's role within that tension both as capitalist oppressor and as alienated worker—was characteristic of the ambivalent response to modernity within the avant-garde movements of Central and Eastern Europe. Weimar Germany witnessed a conflict between the expressionist distrust of man's potential for self-destruction in the wake of the Great War and the pro-technological stance of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) movement with its glorification of the machine and its idealistic belief in technological progress.[12] In early Soviet Russia we encounter a similar conflict between utopian collectivism and anti-utopian individualism exemplified respectively by Nikolai Punin's constructivist essays and Yevgeny Zamyatin's famous parody of Punin's cult of the machine in his novel *We* (1920–21).

As a relativist Čapek seems to have lent credence to both of these views of technology at once. In a short humorous essay entitled "Inventions" ("Vynalezá," 1924), he praises the labor-saving convenience of such modern inventions as coke stoves and vacuum-cleaners, machines conventionally associated with female domestic labor: "I like all kinds of technical inventions, not because they seem logical to me, but because they fascinate me beyond all belief. I don't like them in the sense that an expert or an American likes them; I like them the way a savage would; I like them as wondrous, mysterious and incomprehensible things" (178).

Yet elsewhere—as in the essay "Rule by Machines"—the dramatist expresses deep concern that admiration for machines is beginning to suppress and usurp human individuality and creativity. The ending of *R.U.R.*—in which the robots Primus and Helena emerge as the new Adam and Eve—is traditionally interpreted as the triumph of humanity over machines, since the robots miraculously assume a soul. But the opposite could also be said to be the case: human beings become machines. Such an equivocal ending tries to reconcile the pro-technological and anti-technological points of view and at the same time obscures the play's profound ambivalence toward what the playwright terms "mechanical civilization."

The ostensibly "happy ending" of *R.U.R.* in some ways anticipates the conclusion of Fritz Lang's film classic *Metropolis*. Like the robot play, Lang's film concludes on a harmonious note with the Master of the city and the representative of the alienated workers shaking hands in a gesture that is intended to heal the rift between the "heart" and the "mind," labor and capitalism, man and technology. Moving beyond the standard reading of this denouement as an allegory of class rapprochement, Andreas Huyssen interprets it in Freudian terms as an attempt to impose closure on a fundamentally irrational and conflicted narrative in which the male fear of uncontrolled female sexuality and mankind's social anxieties about unbridled technology become inextricably intermeshed. Huyssen grounds this homology between the female and the machine in the psychological phenomenon of male projection and displacement onto women: "There are grounds to suspect that we are facing here a complex process of projection and displacement. The fears and perceptual anxieties emanating from ever more powerful machines are recast and reconstructed in terms of the male fear of female sexuality, reflecting, in the Freudian account, the male castration anxiety" (70).

The castration anxiety is symbolized by the mad inventor Rotwang's amputated hand that is veiled by a rubber glove. In a famous still from the film, Rotwang raises his glove in a simultaneous gesture of disclosure and defiance, exposure and assertion. This is, of course, how fetishism works: it celebrates castration in the very moment of lamenting it.

We can locate a similarly mixed moment of pleasure and anxiety in the Prologue of *R.U.R.* when Domin asks Helena to remove her veil. This request would appear to be a harmless example of Domin's erotic fascination with the lovely young woman. But in her capacity as a feminist, Helena also represents a threat to Domin's masculine power. The act of unveiling recalls the classical mythological motif of the Medusa's head, the sight of which turns men to stone. In his essay on the Medusa's head—published in 1922, the year after the robot play was staged for the first time and at the height of the women's movement—Freud links the terror caused by the sight of Medusa with the fear of male castration: "Numerous analyses have made us familiar with the occasion for this: it occurs when a boy, who has hitherto been unwilling to believe the threat of castration, catches sight of the female genitals, probably those of an adult, surrounded by hair, and essentially those of his mother" ("Medusa's Head" 105). Freud goes on to emphasize the complexity of his analogy, however, by suggesting that the fear of castration coexists with the mitigating affect of sexual stimulation. Just as Rotwang raises his amputated gloved hand in a gesture of phallic assertion, so too does the male beholder of the Medusa—the mirror image of his own castration—become "stiff" with sexual desire: "The sight of the Medusa's head makes the spectator stiff with terror, turns him to stone. . . . For becoming stiff means an erection. Thus in the original situation it offers consolation to the spectator: he is still in possession of a penis, and the stiffening reassures him of the fact" (105). Freud identifies the Medusa's head with a "woman who is unapproachable and repels all sexual desires—since she displays the terrifying genitals of the Mother" (106). The effect of the sight of Helena on Domin and his fellow managers is akin to the maternal emasculation described by Freud. Significantly, the word "Medusa" actually occurs later in the Prologue when Domin is describing Old Rossum's insane attempts to replicate human life. Referring to Rossum's botched experiments, Domin states that the old man was only capable of producing a jellyfish *(meduza)* with the brain of Socrates. If this ridiculing remark highlights the inventor's inability to

reproduce human life, the allusion to Medusa also serves to remind us of the correlation between the limits of scientific knowledge and the specter of male castration.

Like her classical antecedent—the legendary Helen of Troy, whose face "launched a thousand ships"—Helena wreaks emotional havoc not only in Domin but among all her male hosts. Quite suddenly these ruthless, efficient managers of the robot factory begin to behave like effete and subservient bachelors, rushing off to cook a banquet for their beautiful guest. In Act 1 this apparent emasculation is confirmed when—ten years later—the managers are still doting on Helena by bringing her flowers and gifts instead of addressing the growing crisis of robot insurrection. Although their doting is treated in a humorous vein, the managers' neglect of their duties clearly reflects a degree of anxiety about the deleterious effect of Helena's sexuality on the men.

The inverse parallel between the men's increasing emasculation and the rise of the robots establishes a further correlation between the power of female sexuality and the dangers of unrestrained technology. This link between women and machines partakes of a universal continuum between fears of female sexuality and out-of-control technology in the male imaginary of modernist culture. Emblematic of this connection are Karel Teige's surrealist collages in which the female body is represented as a machine whose mechanical contents are exposed to the gaze of the male spectator. Similarly, the link between the vamp-machine in *Metropolis* and the technology of the modern city is fundamental to the plot, which explains why the dancing figure of the robot Maria appears to radiate electrical light. At the beginning of the film, Maria mediates between the alienated workers and Fredersen, the Master of Metropolis, much in the same way that Helena in *R.U.R.* tries to reconcile the robots with their human master, Domin. Although female sexuality and the technology of the city are initially under firm control, the status quo is soon disrupted when Maria is abducted by the mad scientist Rotwang (the bad counterpart to the good father Fredersen) and used as the physical prototype for the destructive vamp-machine. Suddenly the danger of female sexuality is unleashed when the latter begins to sow discord among the workers and incites them to destroy the machines.

Another Weimar film that explores the relationship between unbridled female sexuality and threatening technology and whose subject matter is closely related to that of the robot play is *The Golem: How He*

Came into the World (*Der Golem—wie er in die Welt kam*) (1920, directed by Paul Wegener). Based on the Prague legend of the sixteenth-century Rabbi Loew, who fashioned an artificial man of clay to perform menial labors but who instead destroys the Jewish quarter of Prague, this film is significant in combining two seemingly unrelated plots: the invention of a destructive golem and the illicit love affair between the rabbi's daughter and the knight, Florian, who has been sent by the emperor to the ghetto to announce the official banishment of all Jews from the imperial lands. A first impression is that these plots seem extraneous to each other; but in the light of the homology between out-of-control technology and unbridled female sexuality considered so far, the simultaneous disobedience of the golem and the Jewess's illicit romance is more than coincidental. Following the rabbi's return from the imperial court where he has exhibited his new creation, the golem betrays the first sign of defiance by raising his hand against his master's assistant, a gesture that coincides with the daughter's passionate tryst with the knight.

The power of the golem is finally neutralized outside the gates of the ghetto by a flower-garlanded child whose purity and innocence symbolize the redemptive power of nature to negate the destructive force of man-made technology. Needless to say, this distinctly Aryan-looking blonde girl also provides a moral contrast to the Jewish daughter of the rabbi. This classic virgin/whore split corresponds to the Bad Maria and the Good Maria in *Metropolis;* and it also parallels the contrast between the threatening sexual potency of Helena in the first part of the Prologue and her rather implausible transformation into a submissive wife by the opening of Act 1. In *Metropolis,* the good Maria is turned into her negative counterpart by means of an elaborate sequence of narrative events as improbable and as convoluted as Čapek's reverse transformation of Helena from a strident feminist into a passive housewife: the evil scientist Rotwang abducts Maria and takes her to his laboratory where he has been developing the prototype of a robot; there he superimposes the female image of the bad Maria onto the robot.

In both the play and the films discussed so far, the link between woman and the machine is the irrational consequence of a male fantasy whose origins lie in European romanticism. In *R.U.R.* the robot Sulla's work as secretary and typist to Domin in the Prologue (both traditional female activities) and Helena's domesticated status in Act 1 can be traced back to the golem legend of Prague and the animated doll Olympia

invented by the mad Professor Spalanzani in Hoffmann's story "The Sandman." The phantasmatic continuum between women and robots would explain the uncanny effect the latter produces on human beings. Like Olympia, the robots are at once human and inanimate, familiar yet strange. Although their bodies are made of organic tissue, they lack the psychological individuation necessary to render them fully human and the biological ability to reproduce necessary to distinguish them as male and female. In fact, their indeterminate gender becomes a source of anxiety as well as of amusement when it transpires that the female robot Sulla has a masculine name, since the scientists were under the mistaken impression that Marius and Sulla were lovers rather than military rivals in the Roman Civil War.

A further example of the equivalency between women and technology is the parallel development of Helena and the robots from threats to male supremacy to abject dependency on men. By Act 1 Helena has ceased to be an independent-minded feminist and has become thoroughly domesticated. After ten years on the island, she spends her time in idle distraction playing the piano and receiving visits from the infatuated managers. Furthermore, she has mysteriously become infertile. Formerly the threatening embodiment of feminism she is now the allegorical mother of dying humanity. But at the same time she is also the agent of the robots' sterility, since it is she who destroys the two manuscripts on which the secret of the robot invention has been preserved. Helena's double role as the mother of doomed humanity and the instigator of the robots' extinction not only reinforces the homology between woman and the machine; her transition from feminist to sterile mother also parallels the decline of the robots from the destroyers of mankind to abject victims of man's scientific hubris.

In a desperate attempt to rediscover the secret of the robot invention, Damon—the leader of the rebellious robots—forces the sole-surviving human Alquist to cut him open and examine his inner parts:

ALQUIST'S VOICE: Hold him—firmly!
DAMON'S VOICE: Cut!
[pause]
ALQUIST'S VOICE: You see this knife? Do you still want me to cut? You don't, do you?
DAMON'S VOICE: Begin!
[pause]
DAMON *(screaming):* Aaaa![13]

The assumption that looking inside the robots and seeing how they work will automatically unlock the scientific key to their invention recalls the male desire to master scientific knowledge that led to the frequent anatomical experiments on the female body in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when women's bodies were treated like wax display cases and were opened up to reveal the mysterious organs of sexuality and reproduction. Elaine Showalter emphasizes the irrational male impulse underpinning the scientific motivation for such experiments and the correlation between the female body and the male pursuit of scientific knowledge: "For the nineteenth century, eagerness to open up woman and see deeply into the secrets of her body and of creation was central to the process and method of science itself" (*Sexual Anarchy* 128–29). These nineteenth-century waxwork models can be compared with Teige's famous collages of mechanized women. Another interesting example of the same motif is a photograph from Jindřich Štyrský's *Frogman* cycle (1934). The photograph depicts a painting from a circus fair in which a male scientist, surrounded by the attributes of his trade (skulls and learned treatises), ruminates on the mystery of human life and reproduction embodied by the naked corpse of a woman laid out in front of him.[14] In all these examples, the female body invites the male spectator to peer inside the woman, just as the scene of the dancing vamp-machine in *Metropolis* implies a male voyeuristic gaze. The motif of the mechanized woman can be related to Freud's theory of the male castration complex. Discussing one of his most disturbing collages, in which a woman's naked body is exposed to reveal a machine surrounded by a coil of devouring tentacles, Karel Srp states of Teige: "According to psychoanalytic theories, he manifested an infantile fear of female genitalia as if he were afraid that his phallus, in Freudian thinking, would be engulfed and crushed by a mechanism hidden inside the women."[15]

Complicating the homology between machine and woman is the fact that Damon is a male robot. Although his horrendous scream at the moment of incision can be seen in the allegorical terms of the robots' painful initiation into humanity, there is in fact no causal connection between the failed experiment and the sudden emergence of the humanized robots Primus and Helena. A more plausible explanation for this expressionist scene of "cutting" into Damon is the male castration anxiety, which is immediately denied and repressed through the miraculous emergence of the new Adam and Eve. In this sense the robots are not merely genderless; they are also sexual tabula rasa onto which the

play inscribes the projective fantasies within the male imaginary of modernism.

The cutting scene makes little sense in terms of the play's allegorical structure. Earlier on Helena had persuaded Fabry to modify the design of the robots to allow them to develop emotions. It was this small group of humanized robots who subsequently encouraged the other robots to rebel against humankind; and it was they, too, who provide the pretext for the miraculous emergence of the new humans Primus and Helena in the finale. Thus, from the thematic point of view, the cutting scene is completely gratuitous. Its real significance lies in its expressionist deviance from the rest of the play, since it is at this anomalous juncture that the subjective anxieties inherent in masculinity are most acutely exposed.

Related to the violent expressionism of the cutting scene is the name of the leader of the robot rebellion, Damon. Unlike the other names of the robots—Sulla, Marius, Primus—this name is suggestive rather than strictly symbolic. It connotes the demonic agency of evil, death, and destruction rather than the humanist optimism inherent in the play's ending. It also resonates with and against the name of the murdered plant manager, Domin. If the latter connotes man's benevolent lordship over nature as prescribed by God in the Book of Genesis, Damon suggests the diabolical subversion and destruction of the natural order. In some ways this chimes with the play's allegorical intention, since the robots become man's destroyer rather than his savior. But in other ways it undermines the overall allegorical coherence of the drama. If the robot rebellion, led by Damon, allegorizes the triumph of the workers over capitalism, it also symbolizes the destruction of the natural order by the power of unrestrained capitalism. It is precisely within this allegorical *aporia* that the crisis of masculinity and Central European democracy becomes most apparent. If Domin's name suggests mastery over the world understood both as nature and capitalist technology, Damon's name implies the destruction of nature in the name of capitalist technology. While Domin's name is derived from Latin (and hence the language of Christianity), Damon's name is Hebraic and, by implication, an extension of the usurial threat to artisanal Old Europe associated earlier in the play with the Jewish Busman and capitalist America. As suggested earlier, Helena Glory's Anglo-Saxon name and feminist beliefs also implicate her in the "mechanical civilization" of America, especially since the "new woman" was so prominent in that country by the end of the nineteenth century.

As in the robot play, the creation of artificial life in Mulisch's novel *The Procedure* becomes inseparable from questions of sexual, ethnic, and gender difference. Just as Old Rossum is unable to create a perfect human being, so does Rabbi Loew, responding to a commission from the Emperor Rudolf, create a clay woman by mistake:

> A living being is lying there. The clay has become flesh, the chest goes up and down breathing calmly, like that of a person asleep. On the forehead three letters have appeared, which he didn't put there: A M T—the first and last letter of the aleph-beth, with the capital M between them.
>
> "eMeT," he reads. "Truth."
>
> "We've done it!" rejoices Isaac. "We've done it!"
>
> But with an imperious movement of his hand Loew silences him and bends forward a little. Something's not right. Something's gone wrong. The creature has unmistakable female breasts, not large but with a clear curvature. He quickly looks a little lower: the penis has not turned into flesh, but has become baked clay. He carefully takes hold of the organ and lifts it up. It immediately comes free. He looks at Isaac reproachfully.
>
> "Schlemiel!" With a sweep of his hand he hurls the terracotta penis into the Moldau. "Now I understand. After your stupid mistake with 'eL came 'aM, that is 'mother.' That obviously caused a short circuit. So we haven't imitated the creation of Adam, but that of Lilith." (49)

Not only does the botched experiment reprise the Romantic topos of hubristic science exemplified by the spectacular failures of Doctors Frankenstein and Moreau; like Professor Spalanzani's doll Olympia and Rotwang's vamp-machine, the flawed creature ends up being a woman. The theme of woman as a defective version of man has its origins in the biblical text from which all these Romantic and modernist narratives of creation are ultimately descended: the Jahwist account in Genesis 2 where God creates a woman from a rib in Adam's side. According to the biblical myth of gender hierarchy, Adam is born first and Eve second, a sequence that established for centuries the Aristotelian distinction between male rationality and female irrationality, the pre-modern precursor of the modernist homology between woman and machine.

In Mulisch's novel the creation of a female golem not only highlights the modernist continuity between the fear of female sexuality, anti-Semitism, and the threat of unrestrained technology; it also serves as a parodic inversion of the Jahwist myth in privileging the biological

primacy of woman as the mother and perpetuator of the species. As Victor Werker's father baldly puts it, "Women have children; men don't" (72). The failure of the golem's clay penis to be translated into flesh merely reinforces this biological given. In this sense the golem myth and its modern successors can be seen as variations on the same age-old male desire to circumvent woman and replicate life *in loco matris*. In all these accounts the male scientist aspires not simply to be the divine creator of mankind but, above all, the biological mother. In the case of the female golem, the consequence of such hubris is not only catastrophic but absurdly ironic.

True to her monstrous pedigree as the descendant of Rabbi Loew's golem and Hoffmann's mechanized doll Olympia, the bald female golem proceeds to murder the rabbi's assistant, Isaac, in a scene of bloody dismemberment that highlights the castration anxiety at the heart of this male fantasy. The creation of a female golem also anticipates Werker's creation of an organic clay crystal. Seeking to circumvent the biological primacy of the mother, Werker aspires to reproduce by artificial, scientific means what nature has denied and taken away from him.

These modernist accounts of masculinity in crisis suggest that the Freudian castration anxiety can be read not only as the male fear of the castrating Mother but—more radically—as the male desire to usurp the role of the Mother. This is precisely the displacement that Irigaray detects in the writings of Freud. In the succinct rearticulation of Irigaray's ideas by Marianne Dekoven, "the 'mystery' of man's role in reproduction . . . is reassigned to the 'passive' woman. Her terrible power to engender life is repressed and reassigned to the man, who then appropriates all ownership of reproduction and powers of naming" ("Modernism and Gender" 179). In Čapek's case, the Freudian fantasy of assuming the role of the Mother appears to have its immediate origins in his childhood memory of his mother's overprotective concern for his health, which led her to substitute for him a golemlike wax figure at a holy shrine: "My mama would walk there (to the shrine of the Virgin Mary at Malé Svatoňovice) with me to make an offering of a small wax model of a human torso, so that my lungs would be strengthened; those wax torsos, however, always had a woman's breasts, which gave rise to the peculiar notion that we boys didn't have lungs, and to the futile expectation that, under the influence of my mother's prayers, they would grow on me" (Klíma, *Karel Čapek* 20). Poor health and a pathological

attachment to his mother appear to have contributed to a troubled adult life plagued by illness and sexual impotence. In a letter to his mistress (and later wife), Olga Scheinpfugová, Čapek complained that he felt unwell while working on *R.U.R.* and that his illness was preventing him from writing a satisfactory ending to his drama. Illness, death, and sexual anxiety were the psychological ingredients of Čapek's later plays.

The Makropulos Case

The Makropulos Case (premiered in November 1922) is conventionally treated as a philosophical comedy on the advantages and disadvantages of human longevity made possible by advances in medical science. This theme was highly topical at the time the play was written, since George Bernard Shaw had just completed an optimistic piece extolling the virtues of longevity with the title *Back to Methuselah* (1922). Čapek, it seems, was unaware of the Irishman's play while he was writing his own.[16] The idea, apparently, had occurred to him three of four years earlier, before he wrote *R.U.R.* In spite of addressing the same theme as Shaw, Čapek's conclusions were very different: "Mr. Shaw believes that it is possible for an ideal community of people to live several hundred years in a sort of paradise. As the play-goer perceives, long life in my play is treated quite differently: I think that such a condition is neither ideal nor desirable. Both ideas are purely hypothetical since neither has the proof of experience. Yet perhaps I may say this much; Mr. Shaw's play is a classic example of optimism, and my own—a hopeless instance of pessimism."[17]

Čapek's own statements about the play have provided the touchstone for subsequent critical readings of it as a philosophical comedy. In fact, the core story of the eternally youthful femme fatale Emilia Marty is essentially tragic and has more immediate sources and analogues in Romantic works of literature. One direct source of influence on the play was František Langer's collection of short stories, *Dreamers and Murderers* (1921), which includes a tale entitled "Eternal Youth" in which a beautiful, young woman, Monna Lisetta, has lived for two centuries under a variety of names and disguises but has remained in the prime of youth by bathing in the blood of murdered little girls. The idea of a man or woman cursed to live forever is the subject of many Romantic writings, including Percy Bysshe Shelley's early narrative poem *Queen Mab* (1810); Eugène Sue's classic novel *The Wandering Jew* (1844), which tells of the Old Testament Jewish king Ahasuerus, who was doomed to inhabit the earth until the second coming of Christ; Hans Christian

Andersen's "Angel of Doubt" (1848); James Hilton's *Lost Horizon* (1933); and Simone de Beauvoir's *All Men Are Mortal* (1946).

The Makropulos Case begins with an exposition of a century-old lawsuit over the estate of a Baron Josef Prus, who died intestate and without issue in 1827. A relative's claim to the estate was contested by Prus's ward, Ferdinand Gregor, on the grounds that he had once been introduced by Prus as his prospective heir; the relative contended that it was not Ferdinand but one Mach Gregor who was so meant and who never turned up. The suit is still before the courts as the play opens at the turn of the twentieth century. When the lawyer of Ferdinand Gregor's grandson Albert Gregor recounts the story of the famous opera singer Emilia Marty, she mysteriously asserts that Ferdinand Gregor was actually the baron's son by the singer Ellian MacGregor, so that he was the unknown "Mach" Gregor and that a will in his favor may be found in a sealed yellow envelope in the Prus house. It is found and does designate the testator's illegitimate son Ferdinand as the heir. But Emilia Marty refuses all rewards; she is only interested in finding still another envelope, one containing a Greek manuscript, which she believes must be in the same house. Challenged to offer proof that the said Ferdinand is identical with Ellian MacGregor's son, she promises to produce one. But her opponent, a descendant of the Prus family, learns that the birth register shows the son's name as Ferdinand Makropulos, not Gregor. Emilia insists that she can clear that up as well, but first Prus must find and sell her the Greek manuscript; she asks him to name his own price. He proposes a night with her, to which she coolly assents; and so she gets the manuscript at last.

In a series of subplots, Emilia is depicted as an icy femme fatale, cold to all men, including Prus's son Janek, who shoots himself when he learns that his chief rival is his own father. The proof of identity she now produces is an evident fake—although backdated a century, it is in her handwriting—and a search of her luggage yields letters addressed to various women whose initials are all E. M. Emilia confesses that she was born in Crete in 1575, the daughter of Dr. Hieronymus Makropulos, who became the court physician to the emperor Rudolf II and provided him with a recipe for an elixir that would allow the emperor to remain young for three hundred years. The emperor ordered it to be tried on the physician's daughter first and, when she lost consciousness for several days, jailed her father as an impostor. But the daughter recovered, the emperor went mad, and Emilia lived on under various aliases:

Ekaterina Mishkina, Else Müller, Eugenia Montez, Ellian MacGregor, and Emilia Marty. She lent the formula to her lover, Baron Prus, and has been frantic to recover it because she is beginning to age. But she realizes that she no longer wants it, and neither does anybody else. An aspiring young female singer Kristina (the dead Janek's fiancée) takes it from her and burns it to Emilia's triumphant cry: "The end of immortality." With these philosophically resigned words, the play comes to an end and the curtain falls with Emilia still standing on stage.

The ending of the play appears to unravel the conundrum of Emilia's identity. But it also brings closure to the identity of the male characters who figure in her life. The outcome of the lawsuit depends on the necessity of establishing with certainty that Albert Gregor is the legal descendant of Baron Prus, itself contingent on the need to prove that Albert's grandfather, Ferdinand Gregor, was the son of the baron. This elaborate chain of uncertainty is contingent on the mysterious identity of Ellian MacGregor, the alleged mother of the illegitimate Ferdinand. As in *R.U.R.,* the convoluted plot of the contested lawsuit can be linked to male anxieties concerning the uncertainty of proving the truth of paternity. According to the theory of the Freudian castration complex, this anxiety is repressed and projected onto Emilia Marty, who is at once the source and resolution of the crisis of identity at the heart of the play: if Emilia holds the key to the identity of her male descendants, she is also the source of the uncertainty of their identity. The crisis of masculinity tends to be overlooked because the social and ethical issues raised by the theme of longevity have become the thematic touchstone of readings of the play. Yet curiously, these ethical issues are raised only in the second scene of the last act when the characters are offered and reject the magic formula of eternal life. Their reactions ostensibly reflect the playwright's relativist beliefs at this time: Vítek, the lawyer's clerk, an optimist and a socialist, sees the disadvantages of a normal life span; his employer, Dr. Kolenatý, is more practical and ridicules the idea of longevity from a legal and economic point of view; Baron Prus claims that the formula should be reserved for the exclusive use of an "aristocracy," probably a satirical reference to the Wellsian and Shavian concept of the Nietzschean "superman."

Based on this scene, most critics interpret the play as a philosophical repudiation of Shaw's optimism about the advantages of longevity. Writing about the denouement of *The Makropulos Case,* Angelo Maria Ripellino states that "the order of existence must not be upset. In the

great ontological dilemma tormenting the world, death is necessary if only to give life beauty" (*Magic Prague* 108–9). But Ripellino's comment does not explain the profound irrationalities in the play. Why does Čapek refer to himself as a pessimist if he is writing a comedy? Why is the formula of eternal life sought so desperately and yet suddenly repudiated by Emilia? And how do we explain the fact that Emilia is described as cold and sexually frigid yet is also the mother of so many illegitimate children?

As with Helena in *R.U.R.*—a woman paradoxically allegorized as the mother of humanity and the sterile source of its ultimate extinction—Emilia's split role as mother and femme fatale can only be satisfactorily explained in terms of authorial projection and displacement: Emilia embodies the playwright's own male anxieties about castration and impotence even though as a woman she embodies the biological continuity of the human race. The playwright's anxieties about sterility and death evinced in *R.U.R.* are inverted and recast in *The Makropulos Case* as a fantasy of eternal life. But the fact that eternal life is ultimately not endorsed but repudiated perpetuates rather than resolves these anxieties.

A parallel to Emilia's paradoxical role as the embodiment of life *and* death is the mysterious formula she at once seeks and rejects. Just as in *R.U.R.* Helena's fate parallels that of the robots, so in *The Makropulos Case* Emilia and the mysterious "case" *(věc)* of the title seem to exist in a curious symbiosis. The semantic indeterminacy of the key word in the play's Czech title—*Věc Makropulos*—is inseparable from the enigma of Emilia's own identity. When Gregor asks her why she is so interested in the legal case, her retort encodes in Czech the same word as in the title of the play: "To je má *věc*" ("That's my business"; *Dramata* 200). Thus the mystery of Emilia's origins is linked to—one might even say dependent on—the elusive meaning of the word *věc,* which can be translated by a whole range of English words: "business," "case," "affair," "thing," "problem," "secret." It is both a concrete thing and an abstract concept, the document on which the formula is inscribed and the formula itself. It is all of these meanings at once and yet none of them. Like Emilia's initials, "E. M.," its identity is elusive, impossible to pin down. In Emilia's confession to Hauk-Šendorf in the final scene of the play, even she is unable to define it in words:

EMILIA: Well, when the emperor started to get old, he began trying to find an elixir of life, or something, that would make him young again,

> you see? And so my father went to him and wrote that . . . that thing for him, that "magic", so that he could stay young for three hundred years. But Emperor Rudolf was afraid that this "magic" might poison him, and so he made my father try it out on his daughter. That was me. I was sixteen years old. So father tried it on me. Then they all said it was magic, but it wasn't any such thing, it was something else entirely.

HANK-ŠENDORF: What was it?

EMILIA *(shudders)*: I cannot say. No one can.

(*Věc Makropulos* 245–46)

At the beginning of her speech, Emilia paraphrases *věc* as "magic" *(kouzlo)*, but by the end of it she is no nearer to a precise explanation of what it is. And in struggling to explain it, she merely comes back to same word: "It was something else entirely" ("Ale byla to docela jiná *věc*").

Located ambiguously between the concrete and the abstract, the word *věc* is oxymoronic. In her study of the fantastic in literature, Rosemary Jackson argues that oxymoron is the basis of all Romantic fiction: "[Oxymoron] is a figure of speech which holds together contradictions and sustains them in an impossible unity, without progressing toward synthesis" (*Fantasy* 21). Oxymoron is an important rhetorical feature of Romantic fiction because it corresponds to Freud's notion of the "uncanny"—that which is at once familiar and strange. At the end of the play, as the formula burns, Hauk-Šendorf detects a smell that is both strange and familiar: "Excuse me, but there is such a strange smell in here . . . a smell like . . ." (259). Elaborating on Freud's notion of the "uncanny" *(das Unheimliche),* Hélène Cixous relates its indeterminacy in the tropological terms of oxymoron: "A relational signifier; for the uncanny is in effect composite, it infiltrates itself in between things, in the interstices, it asserts a gap where one would like to be assured of unity" ("La fiction et ses fantômes" 208).[18] The uncanny removes structure; it empties the "real" of its meaning; it leaves signs without significance. In her analysis of Freud's famous essay on "The Sandman," Cixous presents its unfamiliarity both as displaced male sexual anxiety (since Freud refuses to address this aspect of the story) as well as the rehearsal of an encounter with death, which is pure absence. Death, she argues, can never be portrayed directly: in medieval literature it assumes the form of a skeleton or decaying corpse; in Romantic fiction it is manifested as a ghost or a doll; in modernist literature (and here Čapek's play is exemplary) it becomes pure space or a void encapsulated in the fantastic trope

of oxymoron. In the uncanny, then, we discover our latent deaths, our hidden lack of being, for nothing is both better known *(heimlich)* and stranger *(unheimlich)* to thought than mortality. As Cixous puts it, "Our unconscious has no room for a representation of our mortality" ("La fiction et ses fantômes" 213).

Consistent with Cixous's reading of the uncanny as the expression both of male sexual anxiety and the fear of death, the identity of the femme fatale Emilia Marty is inseparable from the meaning of the oxymoronic *věc*. Like her initials, this word can mean lots of different things yet resists a definite meaning. And like this indeterminate "thing" she seeks and ultimately disavows, Emilia is paradoxically the key to the biological continuation of the human race and the embodiment of its extinction. The notion of death is linked to her perfect singing voice. In Romantic literature the perfection of the female voice is associative of death. Examples of such beautiful voices are to be found in Novalis's *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, Kleist's "St Cecilia or the Force of Music," and E. T. A. Hoffmann's "Counsellor Krespel."[19] In all these instances men covet this perfection and yet are terrified of it, since it encompasses both their yearning for immortality and reminds them of their own death.

In most of these Romantic narratives the woman dies or goes mad in order to provide the necessary closure to male fantasy.[20] In *The Makropulos Case* this does not happen, since Emilia is still alive as she utters the final words of the play: "Ha-ha-ha, the end of immortality." We logically assume that, having repudiated the magic formula—having finally sundered her symbiotic link to the mysterious *věc*—Emilia will die; but the point is that she does not do so, at least not on stage. Why does Čapek end his play in this indeterminate way? Is it a sign of his dramatic weakness? This suggestion has led translators and adapters to give his dramas a more resolute ending. In fact, the indeterminacy of the play's denouement can be explained in terms of the uncanny *věc:* in Cixous's formulation, our unconscious has no room for our mortality and therefore it cannot be represented. This repression is entirely consistent with the ending of Čapek's drama in which Emilia's death is not represented on stage. Seen from this perspective, there is no closure to the drama. The anxiety about death and female sexuality is not resolved but deferred, just as the word *věc* cannot be defined: both represent a void at the center of the play.

But there is another reason for her indeterminate fate, and this is linked to her paradoxical function as the embodiment of life *and* death.

Just like the *věc,* Emilia mediates oxymoronically between mortality and immortality, at once the personification of doomed humanity and the maternal guarantee to its survival. In this respect her role is reminiscent of Helena in *R.U.R.,* who is at once a femme fatale and the mother of doomed mankind. But she also recalls the maiden in Erben's ballad "The Wedding Shirts" whose fate is equally ambiguous: when the villagers come to the graveyard the next morning and open up the funeral chamber where the girl has taken shelter from her demonic lover, it is not clear whether they find her alive or dead. Just as Erben's heroine must be punished and yet kept alive as the mother of the defeated nation, so does Emilia remain alive in spite of her repudiation of the magic formula, since her death would negate her biological function as the mother of humanity.

The ending of Janáček's operatic adaptation of *The Makropulos Case* (1923–25) is more straightforwardly tragic: Emilia collapses and dies while the formula burns.[21] The opera critic John Tyrrell has pointed out that the principal difference between the play and the opera is the fact that the former is conceived as a philosophical comedy on the shortcomings of longevity while the latter is a tragic treatment of the heroine's doomed fate.[22] There is, of course, some truth to this distinction, but it overlooks the common ground—as well as the differences—between the play and the opera. I have already suggested that the play's levity belies deep-seated fears and fantasies that cannot be acknowledged on the conscious level. Janáček entertains similar fears and fantasies, but his opera is more satisfactory as a work of art in bringing these elements to the surface. The artist in Janáček realized that Čapek's play—and especially its ending—left a lot to be desired. Stripping away its philosophical elements and going back to the Romantic kernel of the plot, he cuts the scene where Vítek, Kolenatý, and Prus express their views on the advantages and drawbacks of immortality. We might compare his transformation of a philosophical comedy into a tragedy to the treatment of Eliza Doolittle in the musical version of Shaw's play *Pygmalion.* Like Emilia, Eliza becomes a romantic heroine rather than the independent feminist envisioned by Shaw. While Emilia in the play mediates between the author's subjective fantasies and social ideas, the operatic heroine becomes an archetypal femme fatale whose power over men is finally neutralized when she becomes the abject object of their pity. In Act 3 of the opera, Emilia's triumph over the men is expressed in far more forceful terms than in the play. In the play Emilia's speech

breaks off; and when she is pressed to continue, she confesses that she is dying:

GREGOR: And you came here just for the Greek thing?
EMILIA: Ha! Well, I won't give it to you! It's mine now. Don't flatter yourself, Berti, that I ever gave a damn about your stupid lawsuit. I couldn't care less that you are mine. I don't know how many of my brats are still running around this world. I wanted to get that thing. I had to get that thing, because
GREGOR: because what?
EMILIA: Because I'll get old. I'm at the end.

(*Věc Makropulos* 247)

By contrast, the opera excludes all expressions of doubt and fallibility in Emilia's soliloquy:

Ha-ha-ha,
ha-ha-ha!
I don't care a rap about your being my boy!
Do I know
how many thousands of my brats
are scampering round the world,
brats of mine scampering around the world?
(pressing the envelope to her heart)
Now you are mine,
mine,
now you are mine!
That is what my father wrote out
for the emperor Rudolf.[23]

But in turning Emilia into a tragic rather than a comic figure, Janáček acknowledges in a way that Čapek cannot that she is an extension of his own fantasies of eternal life and fears of death. From the first moment he saw Emilia on stage in a production of the play, Janáček was obsessed and fascinated by the prospect of this woman doomed to live forever. Was she not the embodiment of the composer's own desire for artistic immortality? In a letter to his friend Kamila Štoesslová, he writes: "A 300-year-old beauty—but only burnt-out feeling! Brrr! Cold as ice! About such a woman I shall write an opera." And in subsequent letters to friends and associates, it is clear that the composer was consumed with the thought of the icy femme fatale and her quest for eternal life. Writing to another friend, Rosa Newmarch, the composer confesses

his frustration at not being able to reach an agreement with the dramatist on the legal rights to the opera; and in an aside that reveals his latent identification with his "burnt-out" heroine, he adds: "And when I do not have ideas for a new work, I am like an empty shell."[24]

As we have seen, the play's Romantic subject matter is subordinated to its philosophical message, which repudiates all expressions of absolutism. But there is a way in which the drama has the last word and in so doing exposes the metaphysical void at the heart of Masaryk's political system of humanita: the absolute returns to haunt the play, not as presence but as absence, in the form of the elusive *věc* around which everything else revolves. In the opera the absolute is acknowledged as Emilia dies on stage, whereas in the play it is repressed and denied to the very last moment. Yet in spite of their different endings, the play and the opera share the same anxieties about the threat posed by female sexuality and femininity. In considering this submerged anxiety, one should not forget that the early 1920s saw women's access to the vote both in America and Europe.

Janáček's opera *The Cunning Little Vixen* (premiered 1924) also ends with the death of its female protagonist when the vixen is shot and killed. Although this tragic moment is recuperated by the theme of the eternal cycle of life and death, the incident is gratuitous rather than inevitable since it does not take place in the novel by Rudolf Těsnohlídek from which it was adapted. Like the deaths of Helena and Emilia, the shooting of the vixen can be linked with topical concerns about the "Woman's Question" in Central Europe. In an ostensibly humorous moment earlier in the opera, the vixen, having slain the rooster, urges the hens to assert their rights as women and rise up. The vixen is also described by her fox-suitor as a "modern woman." Although these moments reflect the composer's amused awareness of the recent enfranchisement of women, they can also be seen as indicators of his need to neutralize the threat posed by the vixen as a "modern woman."

The White Sickness and *The Mother*

Like his early drama, Čapek's plays *The White Sickness* (1937) and *The Mother* (1938) may be said to form a kind of dramatic diptych of related issues. Just as the early plays are concerned with the themes of artificial intelligence and human longevity, so are *The White Sickness* and *The Mother* meditations on the theme of the just war and the principle of employing evil to counteract evil. It has frequently been argued that

Čapek's later drama is more successful and satisfying than his early plays because he abandoned his relativist philosophy in favor of a more absolute response to reality. Yet these two late plays are in fact similar to their earlier counterparts in being unable to resolve their own internal ambiguities. In both plays there is a sustained and unresolved conflict between relativist and absolutist perspectives, between the advocacy of pacifism and the use of violence to resist violence, between the conscience of the individual and the social imperative of collective self-interest. And just as in the earlier plays a female character is required to restore order to a threatening modern world paradoxically associated with menacing female sexuality (Helena and Krista in *R.U.R.* and *The Makropulos Case,* respectively), so in the later plays a woman brings resolution to a crisis that the male characters cannot resolve.

These late plays inevitably reflect the playwright's preoccupation with the grave political situation in Europe in the late 1930s. Hitler had come to power in Germany in 1933 and thereafter pursued a belligerent policy of threat and annexation toward his neighbors. By the time Čapek wrote *The White Sickness,* there was little doubt that an independent Czechoslovakia was under immediate threat from Nazi aggression. Hitler made no secret of his contempt for the Versailles treaty at the close of World War I and the Wilsonian principle of the right to national self-determination that had led to the creation of the Czechoslovak state in 1918. Complicating this legacy was the fact that the so-called Sudeten Germans (the ethnic minority within Czechoslovakia) was agitating to be incorporated—clearly with Hitler's encouragement—into the newfound Third Reich. Following the Munich summit with British prime minister Neville Chamberlain in 1938, the Nazis occupied the Sudetenland of Czechoslovakia. The political integrity and independence of the country was in dire peril. The way was now clear for the entire destruction of the Czechoslovak state: in March 1939 German troops entered Prague. High on their blacklist was Čapek. But when they arrived at his house to arrest him, they discovered that he had died in December of the previous year.

Of particular interest is the metaphor with which Čapek chose to explore the looming threat of fascism: the white sickness. In some ways "brown sickness" would have been a more appropriate image for the Nazi threat. "White sickness" connotes tuberculosis, the most deadly threat to human health before the war. Why did Čapek choose to express a political crisis in terms of a medical condition? *The White Sickness*

concerns the conflict between two powerful protagonists, each of whom stands for an ostensibly opposite ideology: the Marshal, the leader of the state in which the action is set, believes in the principle of might is right and is waging aggressive warfare against the nation's enemy; by contrast, Dr. Galen (whose name allegorically evokes Galenus, the Roman father of modern medicine) favors the poor and sick members of society. The Marshal represents a militaristic response to the Nazi threat to Czechoslovakia, while Dr. Galen is the spokesman of the socialist-pacifist position. The playwright's own position was in the political center and as such was subject to ongoing criticism from both political extremes during the final few years of his life. And yet on closer analysis it soon becomes apparent that the Marshal and Dr. Galen represent opposite sides of the same coin, polarized articulations of Čapek's own profound ambivalence toward violent resistance. Far from having abandoned his earlier relativism, the later dramatist seems to be more conflicted than ever about the means to reconcile his personal antipathy to violence with his collectivist recognition that his country's survival depended on its willingness to defend itself militarily.

As the play begins, a mysterious "white sickness" has begun to infect the adult population of the country; and no cure can be found to this fatal condition. Dr. Galen soon discovers a cure. But instead of making it freely available to the state, he uses it as a means of blackmailing the regime into rejecting its militaristic policy in favor of universal pacifism and allows it to be administered only to the poorest and most disadvantaged members of society. In spite of the high number of fatalities, the regime resists Galen's demands, until the Marshal himself succumbs to the sickness. Faced with the prospect of his own death and a leaderless nation, he relents and agrees to comply with Galen on condition that the latter provide him with the cure. The doctor agrees; but as he is approaching the Marshal's residence to hand over the cure, a belligerent mob takes violent exception to the doctor's pacifist remarks and attacks him. In the scuffle that follows, Galen is trampled to death and the glass vial containing the cure is smashed to pieces. The spirit of intolerance and war, it seems, has triumphed.

Like the early plays, *The White Sickness* leaves a great deal to be desired in terms of its dramatic coherence. Far from offering a clear-cut resolution to the moral question of the justified war, it fails to reconcile the interests of the collective with the freedom of the individual. Dr. Galen's use of the cure as a bargaining chip to bring about peace is itself

an instrument of evil and death, since many innocent people perish of the sickness as a consequence of his refusal to administer the cure. *The White Sickness* is caught on the horns of an ethical dilemma it cannot resolve, since Dr. Galen's right to exercise his personal conscience is achieved only to the detriment of the society he is supposed to be protecting. Yet at the same time, Čapek cannot be said to be endorsing the needs of the majority over the individual conscience either, as the ugly mob scene at the end clearly reveals. Rather, the play ends on a note of uncertainty, poised between two diametrically opposite responses to the central problem of human evil.

The film version of *The White Sickness* (1937), directed by Hugo Haas, ends on a deliberately more resolute note: when the mortally sick Marshal learns that the cure has been destroyed, he is persuaded by his daughter to declare the end of hostilities and commits himself to peace. Yet far from resolving the moral predicament posed by the play, this pacifist ending merely sidesteps the problem altogether, since, if the white sickness symbolizes evil, the cure to it has perished with the death of Dr. Galen. Declaring a state of peace is thus redundant if evil is still at work in the world. So neither the play nor the film based on it is able to provide a satisfactory resolution to the inner conflict between the pacifist desire for peace and the pragmatic acceptance that war is sometimes unavoidable.

The plot of *The White Sickness* is problematic as political allegory because it cannot reconcile these issues. The metaphor of the white sickness is deficient on both the moral and the political levels (as a symbol of human evil and totalitarianism, respectively), since its lethal contagion is as much dependent on Dr. Galen's desire to perform good as the Marshal's refusal to end military hostilities. Like the mysterious *věc* in *The Makropulos Case,* the white sickness cannot be reduced to a logical explanation or a precise meaning. It signals something profoundly irrational and inexplicable that takes on a life of its own unrelated to the consciously articulated themes of the play. In an illuminating article on Čapek's later fiction, Peter Bugge discusses the widespread prevalence of illness and disease, including the motif of the white sickness. Although this motif has been seen as a political allusion to the rise of fascism in Germany, it was also a common circumlocution in the modernist period for tuberculosis. Čapek suffered poor health for most of his life, even in childhood when his mother took him on a pilgrimage to a local shrine in the hope of finding a cure for his weak lungs. His social

anxieties about diseases and epidemics in his later works would appear to be an extension of his personal anxieties about death and female sexuality in the early plays. This would explain why women are equally important in the early and the late plays, both as threats to—or saviors of—the human race. It is significant in this connection that the Czech word for illness—*nemoc*—is grammatically gendered as female. There is a sense in which the political menace of militarism correlates with a more personal anxiety about the threat posed by female sexuality; and here it is important to recall that the term *robota*—from which the word "robot" is derived—and the mysterious *věc* are both feminine nouns in Czech. If the white sickness represents a female-connoted threat to male well-being, the pacifist antidote to it is not provided by Dr. Galen (who is really an advocate of death in refusing to dispense the cure to all regardless of their political beliefs) but by the Marshal's daughter. But unlike Helena and Kristina in *R.U.R.* and *The Makropulos Case,* respectively, this character is unable to avert a tragic outcome. This is the only play analyzed here that ends on a note of despair, and it does so because there is no effective female protagonist to reverse the drastic denouement.

The Mother is also concerned with the predicament of war, but it is, at least on the surface, a far more resolute and optimistic piece. This is because its central protagonist is a woman who at first opposes but eventually endorses the nation's need to defend itself against military aggression. In the first act, the eponymous Mother is visited by the ghosts of her husband, an officer in the army; her eldest son, Andrew, a doctor who died trying to find a cure for a fatal tropical disease; and her second son, George, an aviator who perished while attempting to fly his plane too high. The Mother insists that her husband and sons died in vain, while they maintain that they died for a worthy cause. Thus in Act 1 the Mother is a pacifist who struggles valiantly to keep her three remaining sons alive at a time of escalating violence, imminent civil war, and threat to the nation from foreign invasion. In the second act, two of the Mother's sons, Peter and Kornel, respectively, become embroiled in right- and left-wing politics. Both advocate the necessity of violence, a position opposed by the Mother, who, like her creator, deliberately resists extreme left- and right-wing political positions and repudiates the need for violence altogether. By the end of the third act, however, the Mother, having lost these two sons to the conflict and confronted by the enemy's cruel murder of innocent children, relinquishes her former pacifism and sends her youngest son, Tony, into the fray.

Superficially at least, the play resembles Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage* (1939). Both plays are concerned with the destructive effects of modern warfare, but Brecht's play is set during the Thirty Years' War while Čapek's play takes place at an indeterminate time and place. Both plays are dominated by a strong matriarch who refuses to let her children become sacrifices of war. However, in every other respect, the Mother is quite different from Mother Courage. As the embodiment of capitalism and its collusion with war, Mother Courage struggles to keep her children alive even as she sacrifices them to the economic imperative of her business, so that their deaths are to some extent attributable to her collusion with capitalism. The conflict between family loyalties and the need to survive in a time of war adds a pathos to Brecht's drama that seems to transcend the playwright's tendentious criticism of his heroine. There is no such pathos in the Czech play, largely because the Mother lacks the human complexity of Brecht's character in simply personifying an idea—initially pacificism and finally the necessity of violent resistance to evil. Similarly, her husband and sons merely reflect a particular point of view, whether socialism, militarism, or devotion to science. The ghost scenes, which form the dramatic center of the play, become an occasion for Čapek to display his relativist view of the world, although as the drama unfolds, he seems to identify increasingly with the Mother's plight.

In her pacifist nonresistance to evil, the Mother resembles Dr. Galen. Just as he is ultimately prepared to use the cure of the white sickness in his personal struggle against state tyranny, so does the Mother sacrifice her youngest son in the name of an absolute cause. In this way the play's relativism is finally negated. This shift of philosophical position has led some scholars to claim that these last two plays are more absolutist than the earlier drama. But in fact they offer two different, relativist responses to the same central problem. The conclusion of *The White Sickness* witnesses the triumph of evil after the death of Dr. Galen, while *The Mother* ends with an unexpected and programmatic acceptance of the need for violent self-defense. In the first play the dramatist's centralist political position, mediating between the Marshal's militarism and Dr. Galen's socialism, does not prevail but collapses in the face of right-wing belligerence; this is why the director of the film version felt the necessity of adding a new ending in which the Marshal accepts peace instead of war. In the case of *The Mother,* the dramatist's personal

ambivalence toward war is reflected first in the Mother's rejection of violence and finally in her acceptance of its necessity.

What is significant, however, is how the playwright's ultimate acceptance of the need for an absolute resistance to an absolute evil is articulated through the voice of his female protagonist. Ironically, it is the Mother, formerly the ardent pacifist, who becomes the advocate of death. Suddenly the symbol of the Mother as the biological guarantee of humanity's survival becomes the moral advocate of what may turn out to be its extinction. The point is, however, that the fate of humanity in all the plays—whether positive or negative—is intimately linked with the symbolic role of woman.

6

Terror and Dream Were My Father and Mother

Postwar Czech Fiction and Film

Terror and dream
were my father and mother.
János Pilinszky

Following the end of World War II in May 1945, Czech poets and filmmakers who had survived the Nazi occupation began to look back to the subjective strain in the interwar avant-garde as a means of asserting the freedom of the individual at a time of increasing political uncertainty and looming totalitarianism. But as in the interwar years, Czech writers also felt the need to bear witness to the political events happening around them. Postwar writers and filmmakers frequently represented political relations in a totalitarian society in the personal terms of sexual and familial relations between husbands and wives and parents and children.

The emotional upheavals of family life become a persistent and convenient metaphor for articulating in a veiled and indirect fashion the power struggles and political frustrations in a totalitarian society. For example, the motif of the weak, absent, or dead father symbolizes the

nation's failure to oppose Nazi aggression before and during the German occupation of Czechoslovakia (1939–45), while the dominant role of the mother bespeaks a long tradition of the woman as the symbol of the nation's survival in times of crisis and peril. During the post-Stalin thaw in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the emasculated male also serves as a powerful metaphor for the nation's subordination to Soviet communism. But given the rather different circumstances of socialism in which the opposition between the authorities and the people assumed an ideological rather than a national form, women in these narratives tend to be equated less with their maternal function as the symbol of the nation than their role as sexual partners to men; that is to say, their positive qualities as mothers are transformed into the negative power of the sexual dominatrix. Their attributes are now not protective and nurturing but fickle and deceitful; in this second capacity they often symbolize the moral cowardice and downright treachery that absolute power engenders in its subjects. In this sense, the female characters in Czech fiction and film are invariably objects of male fantasies and fears rather than subjects in their own right.

From the War to the Thaw (1945–56)

Some of the most important and prominent works of immediate postwar Czech culture were concerned with the experience of the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia and how to represent it in artistic form. After the French and British reneged on their agreement to support Czechoslovakia in the event of an invasion by Germany, the Czechoslovak government ceded to the demands laid out in the Munich Agreement on 30 September 1938. The Munich Agreement paved the way for the dismantling of Czechoslovakia in May 1939. Renamed the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, the rump of the old Czechoslovakia (Slovakia having become a quasi-independent puppet state) was placed under direct German rule. Reichsprotektor Reinhard Heydrich, who arrived in Prague on 28 September 1942, was Himmler's deputy in the SS and one of the foremost architects of the Final Solution. Thus the fate of the Czech and Slovak Jews was sealed: between 1942 and 1945, 77,297 Czech and Slovak Jews were murdered following their transportation to concentration camps inside and beyond Czechoslovakia.

Almost forty years before Steven Spielberg's film *Schindler's List,* Czech and Slovak novelists and filmmakers were representing the horror of the mass transportation and the extermination of European

Jewry in a variety of original and creative ways. This experience of death and loss on a massive scale left an indelible impression on postwar Czech and Slovak fiction and film, examples of which include Egon Hostovský's *The Hideout* (1946); Jiří Weil's *Life with a Star* (1949); Jan Otčenášek's *Romeo, Juliet and Darkness* (1958); Arnošt Lustig's *Diamonds of the Night* (1958) and *Dita Saxová* (1967), both of which were made into films soon after publication; Josef Škvorecký's *The Menorah* (1964); and Ján Kadár's Slovak film *The Shop on Main Street* (1965).

These representations of the war years are important not simply for their explicit statement about the experience of Czech and Slovak Jews but also for their implicit commentary on the plight of the individual in a totalitarian state. In addressing the sensitive theme of collaboration with the Nazis, they explored the relationship between the individual and society in general. It was for this reason that Weil's *Life with a Star* was banned by the authorities almost as soon as it was published in 1949, in spite of the author's communist sympathies in the 1930s. The novel's unspecified distinction between "us" and "them" could be interpreted not simply as referring to the Czech Jews and the Nazi occupiers of Czechoslovakia but also to the relationship between the individual and the Communist state. It is not surprising therefore that *Life with a Star* was deemed too dangerous to remain in print for long: following its publication in Czechoslovakia in 1949 in a limited print of 7,000 copies, it was quickly suppressed on the grounds of "pernicious existentialism" and banned by the Communist authorities who had come to power the previous year.

The novel concerns the wartime experience of Josef Roubíček, a Czech Jew who avoids transportation to the concentration camps. Josef wanders through the forlorn, war-ravaged city, eking out a meager existence; he is later forced to hide from his Nazi overlords. Its focus on the protagonist's solipsistic isolation from the world recalls the prevailing trend of existentialism exemplified by Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea* (1938) and Albert Camus's *The Outsider* (1947). Just as Camus's protagonist Mersault is alienated from the bourgeois values of his time, so does Josef lead a completely solitary existence in Prague. Interestingly, one of Camus's earliest stories, "Death in the Soul" (1937), is also set in Prague and concerns the visit of a stranger to that melancholy and lonely city. But the crucial difference between Weil and the French existentialists is that for the former the personal and the political aspects of identity are not mutually exclusive but deeply implicated in each other. The role

played by Prague in the novel exemplifies this continuity between self and society. Although the Czech capital is never mentioned by name, it is clear through topographical references that Josef is living there. This tension between the particular and the general is also exemplified by the protagonist's name. His first name recalls Kafka's antihero Josef K., while his last name anchors him in a specific cultural and political setting. This tension between the particular and the general has the effect of blurring the distinction between dream and reality. The narration functions in a similar way, alternating between the mundane details of Josef's everyday life—the perpetual quest for food and the desperate attempt to keep alive and warm—and his private fantasy world dominated by his mistress Růžena. This female character appears, as in a dream, throughout the narrative, a source of comfort from the horrors of everyday life. She is Josef's imaginary companion; she is, paradoxically, more real and immediate than the two-dimensional, unfeeling characters in Josef's life. Toward the end of the novel, Josef hears on the public loudspeaker that a woman with the same name has been executed by the Nazis, although it is unclear whether or not this is Růžena. In the final pages Růžena appears to Josef as in a dream to assure him that she is still alive.

Another important Czech novelist whose work presents political and personal elements as a continuum is Egon Hostovský (1908–73). Born into a Czech Jewish family that owned a small provincial factory, he studied philosophy and later worked in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. During World War II he lived in Paris and America. After the war he served as a Czechoslovak diplomat in the Oslo embassy; and when the Communists came to power, he emigrated to the United States. In his early novels, *The Ghetto within Them* (1928), *The Case of Professor Körner* (1932), and *The House without a Master* (1937), the outsiders are Jews who reject their Jewishness and vainly try to belong to what seems to them to be a community. His later works—such as *The Hideout,* published first in English in New York in 1943 and then in the original language in Czechoslovakia in 1946 following the temporary restoration of democracy in that country; *The Midnight Patient* (1958); *The Charity Ball* (1958); and *The General Plot* (1969)—dissect, in a self-ironizing narration, the fantasy worlds of refugees from nazism and communism.

Like *Life with a Star, The Hideout* combines the realistic representation of political persecution with the existentialist evocation of erotic anguish. An anonymous Czech military engineer, unfulfilled and bored by

his marriage, becomes infatuated with a woman and follows her to Paris, leaving his wife and children in Czechoslovakia. At the beginning of the novel, the narrator addresses the wife (Olga) he has left behind in the same terms of regret with which he abandoned his country in time of dire need. The growing crisis in the protagonist's personal life is played out against—and, to some extent, parallels—the political backdrop of the Munich ultimatum and the Nazi annexation of the Sudetenland. The narrator is abandoned by his mistress and finds himself stranded and friendless far from home. His personal situation constitutes an intriguing parallel to the fate of the narrator's homeland: just as he is abandoned by his mistress, so is Czechoslovakia deserted by its Western allies and left to face alone the growing threat of Nazi aggression. Aware that he is on the Nazis' blacklist as a pioneering inventor of a Czech antiaircraft device, the hero decides that it is too dangerous to return to his homeland. But unable to persuade the French government to patent his military invention, he falls into an increasing sense of despondency, poverty, and despair.

Hostovský's evocation of his protagonist's subjective plight owes something to the existentialist influence of Jean-Paul Sartre. But it is also characteristically Czech in the way the protagonist's inner crisis mirrors his external status as a political refugee: "And then war broke out and a Czechoslovak army formed in France. I reported without enthusiasm, but they rejected me: they said that they would not win the war with men of my age. But even then I felt no anger, no pity, no despair, only a kind of melancholy defiance. Something like pride" (48). When the narrator has an argument with the manager of his hotel, his personal humiliation at being thrown out of the establishment is akin to the political humiliation of his defeated nation:

> "You're a Czechoslovak, aren't you, sir?" he asked me, digging in his ear with his penholder.
>
> "Yes!"
>
> "Hm, a sad story! But why, in the devil's name, didn't you fight?"
>
> I roared, frightening myself with my own voice, that he was an idiot, and he quite calmly and without removing the penholder from his ear, invited me to leave his hotel by evening. (92)

Forced by penury and misfortune to drift from one hotel to another, the protagonist is on the brink of total spiritual collapse and material ruin. Following the German occupation of Paris, he is saved from certain

arrest by an eccentric Frenchman named Dr. Aubin, who takes him to a safe refuge in the countryside. The narrator spends the rest of the war hidden in a basement room in Dr. Aubin's country house, where he suffers mental agony from extreme anxiety and isolation. One day, as he is looking through the window of his underground refuge, he recognizes a German school friend in the yard outside and runs out to greet his old compatriot. Both men are delighted to see each other after so many years; but it rapidly becomes apparent that the German is a member of the SS. In a desperate effort to prevent his disclosure and arrest, the Czech kills his former classmate in a scene of shocking and unexpected violence.

Following this violent climax, the narrator's identity begins to fall apart under the psychological ordeal of fear and total isolation: "Nearly the whole time I half-sat and half-lay on the bed like a soulless bundle of meat and bones. The light which makes a thought a thought, had gone out. My head changed into an ant-hill; instead of a brain I had in my skull a repulsive mass of tiny, self-devouring little creatures. Of all feelings none was left in me but revulsion" (50). The protagonist's irresolute posture—half-sitting and half-lying—and the phrase "the light which makes a thought a thought, had gone out" recalls the moment in Mácha's *May* where Vilém languishes in a prison cell that has become inseparable from the prison of his mind. Just as the Romantic Vilém yearns to be reunited with the Mother Earth after death, so does the despairing protagonist of the novel invoke the feminine spirit of the Mother of the Fourth Age as the source of his salvation, a spirit personified by his mother, wife, and daughters.

From the Thaw to the New Wave

The period between 1948 and 1956 in Czechoslovakia was dominated by socialist realism. An important literary figure who deviated from this norm was Edvard Valenta (b. 1901). His novel *Go in Search of the Green Light* (1956) marked a major new trend in the development of the postwar Czech novel. The story relates the experiences of a Czech intellectual, teacher, and writer during the Nazi occupation of Bohemia. Following two unsuccessful marriages, the hero retires to solitude in the countryside. But the political events during the German Protectorate force him to confront the harsh reality of the time. He begins to familiarize himself with the life of the people in the local village and comes to the realization that the bourgeois values of the past are falling apart and

that a new, morally stronger world is about to be born. He now sets off in search of this new world (the green light of the title) and, following a series of inner crises, finds his true self and the resolve necessary to transform his desires into deeds. The originality of the novel for its time lies in its emphasis on the protagonist's inner life and the psychological process whereby he comes to accept the importance of collective responsibility. This subjective approach is enhanced by the use of first-person confessional "intermezzi" interpolated into the third-person narrative of the novel as a whole.[1]

The first work of fiction to signal the new climate of liberalization after 1956—the year of Khruschev's famous speech condemning the excesses of Stalinism—was Josef Škvorecký's novel *The Cowards* (1958). This novel was as groundbreaking and significant for its time as Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (1962) in the Soviet Union. *The Cowards* chronicles the events of May 1945, shortly before the liberation of Czechoslovakia. The first-person narration depicts the final days of the Nazi occupation of a small town (Kostelec) through the subjective eyes of the disenchanted teenager Danny Smířický. The novel is striking on account of its humorous treatment of the hero's sexual exploits and its unflattering portrayal of the older generation of Czechs who were unwilling to place their own lives at risk and more or less collaborated with the Nazis. The resulting conflict of values between an older, compromised wartime generation and their disillusioned "children" would become a characteristic feature of post-1956 fiction and film, serving as a persistent metaphor for the generational conflict between those who had accepted Stalinism and the liberal, proreform generation of the 1960s.

Another important early contribution by Škvorecký was the collection of seven stories entitled *The Menorah* (1964). These deal with various small-town Czech Jews and their wartime experience as seen through the eyes of the young protagonist Danny. The stories are linked by episodes from the postwar erotic relationship between Danny and Rebeka, a Jewess who has survived the Holocaust and has returned from Terezin to a lonely new life in the dreary city of Prague. Rebeka provides the male narrator with a redemptive link both to the living tradition of the Jewish past and his own childhood in a provincial small town.

A writer who followed the party line more closely than Škvorecký was Jan Otčenášek (1924–79), whose main novels are *Citizen Brych* (1955) and *Romeo, Juliet and Darkness* (1958). The latter deals with a Czech boy's

heroic attempt to shelter a Jewish girl in Nazi-occupied Prague. This is one of the earliest works of postwar Czech fiction to deal in an honest and realistic fashion with the Holocaust. *Romeo, Juliet and Darkness* transposes Shakespeare's star-crossed lovers to wartime Prague. The young Jewess Esther has failed to report at the allotted time for transportation to a concentration camp. As the novel opens, she is sitting forlornly on a park bench where the teenager Pavel finds her. When they begin to speak, Pavel realizes the gravity of the situation and offers to help Esther. She reminds him that an Aryan is not permitted to have dealings with Jews, but Pavel dismisses this objection. He takes Esther to the building in which his father's tailor's workshop is located and hides her in an adjacent storeroom. In so doing, of course, Pavel runs the risk of dooming his family and all the residents in the same building to arrest and execution. This drama is played out against the historical backdrop of the assassination of Reichsprotektor Heydrich by Czech partisans on 27 May 1942. The partisans, who had been flown in from Britain, went into hiding in a church. Thus, Pavel's heroic act of concealing Esther is all the more dangerous given the fact that the Nazis were actively seeking Heydrich's assassins and executed thousands of Czechs in reprisal.

The conflict explored in the novel between the courageous idealism of the younger generation (personified by Pavel) and the moral compromises made by the older generation (represented by his father) would become a commonplace in the next decade. But in spite of its honest treatment of this theme, Otčenášek's novel remained loyal to the ideological tenets of socialism in its equation of the national resistance to nazism with the communist struggle for a more just society.

Even more significant in terms of the reemergence of postwar Czech cinema and the beginnings of the new wave of the 1960s was the film version of the novel, released in 1959 and directed by Jiří Weiss. The film's treatment of the tragic story of Pavel and Hana (as Esther is named in the film) is refreshingly free of socialist realist convention and still has the power to move audiences more than forty years later. Pavel describes himself as an "ordinary man"; and it is precisely this quality that enhances the pathos of his story. By contrast, Hana is more spiritual and ethereal than Esther is in the novel and becomes the idealized "eternal feminine" spirit who inspires Pavel to heroic deeds. In the film the counterpart of the male collaborator Rejsek is an actress named Kubiašová who takes over an apartment confiscated from a Jewish family whose transportation to the concentration camps opens the film.

Her role in the film is crucial from a dramatic and psychological point of view, since it makes the concealment of the Jewish girl in the same building all the more dangerous. In fact, one of the most striking points of difference between the novel and the film version is the way most of the compromised characters are women. In the novel it is Pavel's father who reluctantly colludes with the authorities, whereas in the film the same role is assumed by Pavel's mother. In the film Pavel's father is dead, a significant departure from the novel and a potent political symbol of the leaderless nation in a time of peril. In place of the absent father it is Pavel's mother who assumes the moral responsibility for the family-nation. But, consistent with her function as the symbol of the nation, Pavel's mother is morally weak and emotionally dependent on her son, whom she treats like a surrogate husband. She is even complicitous with the Nazi regime. In one scene Pavel's seamstress mother is blackmailed by the actress into altering an overcoat abandoned by the Jewish lady whose apartment she has occupied.

The effect of this departure from the novel is not only to shift much of the moral blame from men to women but also to sharpen the contrast between the idealized Hana and the other female characters. For example, Pavel's Czech girlfriend (a character introduced in the film) is portrayed in an overtly sexual and seductive fashion. In the scene where Pavel is sunbathing, a parallel between female sexuality and political collaboration is immediately suggested by the brief shot of a Nazi officer and woman in a rowboat on the Vltava River; in the next sequence we see the girlfriend's shapely legs cross the screen in front of Pavel, as he lies on the ground reading. This predatory behavior is repeated by the female collaborator who discovers Pavel in the dark as he is fetching water for Hana. Catching him by surprise, she shines her flashlight on him in a dramatic shot that recalls the moment in *Metropolis* where Maria is pursued by Rotwang as she tries to escape: The drunken Kubiašová attempts to kiss the handsome young man on the lips.

By contrast, Hana is the idealized embodiment of the eternal feminine. In one of the most moving scenes in the film, we see her and Pavel, the night before her betrayal, peering up at the night stars and ruminating on time and eternity. Hana's Platonic purity sets her apart from the other women's material and sexual natures. And in so far as Pavel's mother lacks the moral strength to oppose the Nazi occupation, her role as the redemptive spirit of the nation is assumed by the Jewess Hana. Her assumption of this role is also implicit in the novel: the name Esther

recalls the Old Testament matriarch who mediates between the king of Persia and the Jewish people to save them from destruction. In Christian typology Esther prefigures the Virgin Mary who intercedes with God for the salvation of mankind.

The setting of the film alternates between the interior of Pavel's apartment building and exterior sequences of the Prague streets and Pavel's occasional forays into the countryside to find food for Hana. This split provides an atmospheric contrast between the darkness of Hana's confinement in the photographic darkroom and the hot summer weather outside (most of the action coincides with the hunt for Heydrich's assassins after the attempt on his life at the end of May 1942). Pavel and Hana try to recreate their own romantic idyll within the darkroom by imagining a life together in the bucolic Czech countryside. In one of the most beautiful sequences in the film, we see them dancing together in the darkroom and then suddenly transposed to an imaginary meadow where they spin around in the sunlight and look up at the summer sky. In this split between Prague and the countryside we find a typical Czech association of the city with evil and the countryside with paradisial innocence. This contrast is underscored by the fact that it is in the farmland outside Prague that Pavel finds a friend who agrees to provide shelter for Hana. Ironically, on the same day that the move is planned, the female collaborator discovers Hana, who heroically leaves the building in order to save the lives of its occupants. After she has left the building (to the ominous sound of shooting on the street outside), Pavel's mother orders the main gate be locked to prevent Pavel from running after his beloved but also to stop the Nazis from entering the courtyard. In this way the apartment building becomes a metaphor for the occupied nation itself and Pavel's mother the female embodiment of its survival. But, at the same time, she also personifies its moral shortcomings, just as Hana, whose first appearance in the film is not in the park outside but as a mysterious visitor to the apartment building itself, is the embodiment of its spiritual redemption.

Weiss's next film, *The Coward* (1962), is also a story of moral cowardice and redemption, this time set in a remote Slovak village during the final days of World War II. A middle-aged schoolteacher and his beautiful young wife, Františka (played by Dana Smutná the same actress who plays Hana in *Romeo, Juliet and Darkness*), discover a wounded Russian parachutist in their front yard and hide him in the attic of their house. The handsome young Russian provides a stark contrast with the

middle-aged teacher. The ensuing romance between the soldier and Františka symbolizes the affinity between the Soviet ideology and the cause of the partisans. Shortly afterward the Germans arrive in the village, and the commander, a Czech-speaking Sudetenlander, befriends the cowardly schoolteacher. When the Russian soldier, Oleg, leaves the house in search of the Slovak partisans, Františka follows him. In his attempt to escape from the village, Oleg kills two German guards. In retaliation the Germans threaten to hang every tenth member of the village unless the culprits are found. The schoolteacher is required to select these villagers from a list but finally breaks down and denounces himself as the real perpetrator. In the meantime Františka has bidden farewell to Oleg and has returned from the mountains to face responsibility for her deeds and save the innocent villagers from execution. Following an interrogation by the German commander, she is freed, but her husband is condemned to a public hanging.

Unlike in *Romeo, Juliet and Darkness,* here the moral cowards and collaborators are not women but men: the village priest, the chief policeman, and the schoolteacher all collude with the occupiers in drawing up a list of villagers to be executed in reprisal for the death of the two German soldiers. The reason for this gender opposition between the two films can be explained with reference to the different political situation in Bohemia and Slovakia. The so-called Reichsprotektorat of Bohemia and Moravia was under direct German control, while the Czech government was absent in exile in London; hence, moral responsibility for the nation's conscience is personified by women rather than men. In the case of Slovakia, the moral cowardice of the three male leaders of the local community symbolizes the collaboration of the Slovak political elite with the Nazis. The teacher's wife takes the place of the failed moral leadership of her husband and his fellow village elders.

Another Slovak film is *The Shop on Main Street,* directed by Ján Kadár and Elmar Klos (1965). This film also represents political and ideological conflict in terms of familial or pseudo-familial relations. The hero Tono Britko is appointed "Aryan supervisor" to a high-street haberdashery store owned by an elderly Jewish lady named Mrs. Lautmann. But the owner has not yet been sent to the concentration camps; and the tragicomic predicament faced by Tono is how to explain the situation to the deaf old lady who stubbornly refuses to grasp the absurdity of the situation. Mrs. Lautmann embodies the civilized tolerance and common sense of a former age. Her stable life is structured around her store,

her Jewish neighbors, and the strict observation of the Sabbath. Instead of assuming the role of "Aryan supervisor" given to him by his collaborator brother-in-law, Tono succumbs to the role of assistant and handyman of the strong-willed Mrs. Lautmann. At the same time, he becomes more attached to this woman and increasingly alienated from his opportunistic and shallow wife. As the film develops, Tono even takes on the role of a surrogate son and husband to the widowed Mrs. Lautmann. At one point she gives him her dead husband's Sunday clothes; and in a fantasy sequence, which contrasts with the growing barbarism of life in the small Slovak town, we see Tono and Mrs. Lautmann promenading down the main street in their Sunday best like husband and wife. The deterioration of Tono's married life parallels and symbolizes the moral breakdown of society as the fascist brigade prepares to transport the entire Jewish population out of the town. In the climactic scene set on the Sabbath when the local Jews are forced to gather on the town square in preparation for their departure to the camps, Tono tries to save his own life by confronting the old lady with the stark truth of her situation; but she is incapable of comprehending the madness that is being unleashed around her. In the struggle that ensues, Mrs. Lautmann falls and dies. Overcome by grief and guilt, Tono staggers around the store, his anguished features reflected in a series of mirrors. The motif of mirroring and reflections pervades the film, symbolizing not only the hero's conflicted identity as "Aryan supervisor" and a "White Jew" (a Jewish sympathizer) but as an unhappy husband and surrogate son to Mrs. Lautmann.[2] Finally, in despair, Tono hangs himself behind the store. The film ends with another fantasy sequence of the couple dancing through the town square.

A similarly tragic treatment of the Holocaust is the film *A Prayer for Kateřina Horovitzová*, based on a novel by Arnošt Lustig. At the end of the film it is the young and beautiful Jewess Kateřina, not the six middle-aged American men held in Nazi captivity, who defies a German bully by turning his own gun on him and one of his accomplices. The new wave film *Dita Saxová* (1967) is also based on a story by the writer Arnošt Lustig. It concerns the postwar experiences of a group of Jewish survivors of the Holocaust, all of whom are young women who live together in an orphanage. The most beautiful of these women is the eponymous Dita, whose parents and family were killed in the death camps and who is the object of several male suitors. The transitional nature of these women's experience (one is married to an older man, another leaves for

a new life in England) parallels the political setting of Prague two years after the end of the war and just a few short months before the Communist takeover of the country. Another way in which gender difference is equated with political reality is Dita's role as the embodiment of memory and bearing witness to the past. References to the Holocaust and the murder of European Jewry are channeled through her subjective memories and monologues; her remarks are strangely detached from their context, isolating her from her male lovers and suitors. In fact, Dita's real emotional attachment is not to any of these men but to her female friend, the sickly and fragile Tonička, who becomes the surrogate family she has lost in the Nazi extermination. When the girl dies, Dita no longer sees any reason for living, and she commits suicide in a haunting dreamlike scene in the snows of alpine Switzerland.

Another film based on a story by Arnošt Lustig is the experimental masterpiece *Diamonds of the Night* (1964), directed by Jan Němec. It shows how two youths escape from a transport train, flee through a forest, and are eventually captured by a group of geriatric German hunters. In their joint film script Němec and Lustig decided to make the story as universal as possible by removing almost all the Jewish references in the original story. The extended flashback sequences set in Auschwitz-Birkenau and so prominent a feature of Lustig's story "Darkness Casts No Shadow" (1958) are completely absent from the film. Dialogue is reduced to a minimum and even the youths' names (Danny and Manny) are left out.[3]

The decision to play down the Jewish identity of the protagonists and focus instead on their desperate struggle for survival can be explained partly in terms of the director's desire to produce a timeless meditation on human cruelty and suffering. But the conscious turning away from political explicitness was itself a reflection of political circumstances in 1960s Czechoslovakia. Anti-Semitism was not only a feature of the Nazi occupation but also a legacy of the Stalinist era. Prior to the infamous case of the Doctors' Plot in Soviet Russia, a campaign aimed against high-level Jews in the Czechoslovak Communist Party led to the show trials and executions of eleven Party members, among them Rudolf Slánský, in 1952. Although the 1960s ushered in a more liberal attitude toward the Jews, writers and filmmakers had to tread warily if they were to avoid an anti-Semitic backlash, and memories of the events of 1952 would have been fresh in the minds of viewers of the film twelve years later. The label of Zionism was later applied to Lustig's fiction and film

work after he immigrated to the United States in the early 1970s. So the absence of explicit references to the Holocaust in *Diamonds of the Night* can be read not simply as an attempt to tell a universal tale of barbarism but also as a veiled allusion to recent Czech anti-Semitism.

Němec graduated from the Prague film academy with a short film titled *A Bite to Eat* in 1959. This film was based on a short story by Lustig about two prisoners who steal a loaf of bread from a freight car guarded by the SS. The theme of this graduation film—the dehumanization of man in extreme conditions of hunger and persecution—was developed at greater length and in greater depth in *Diamonds of the Night*. Made when the director was still only twenty-eight years of age, this film was a technical tour de force that incorporated formal innovations such as the use of a hand-held camera and narrative innovations such the disruption of linear narrative with flashbacks and dream sequences. Running counter to the official dogma of socialist realism, these innovations made Němec a highly controversial director in a country where formalism, as Peter Hames points out, "automatically poses a threat to the art establishment."[4]

According to Hames, Němec attempted to develop a non-realistic form of cinema reminiscent of the experimental fiction of Franz Kafka. What Němec and Kafka share is the inability—or refusal—to differentiate between reality and dream, objective and subjective perspectives. We might take as our starting point the opening sentence of *The Trial* (1925): "Someone must have slandered Josef K., for one morning, without having done anything truly wrong, he was arrested." This example of what Robert Alter terms "the narrated monologue" exemplifies a tension between the objective view-point of the third-person narrator and a subjective set of suppositions attributable to K. alone.[5] A visual correlative to this merging of external and inner worlds in *Diamonds of the Night* is the alternation between objective shots of the boys moving through the forest—an impression heightened by the use of the hand-held camera as if they were being observed and followed by a third person—and shots from the boys' own point of view, for instance, the views of Prague life seen through the windows of a moving tram. The hand-held camera is particularly effective in dismantling the distinction between objective and subjective perspectives since it presupposes human involvement in the action as well as the external observation of action.

The effect of the breakdown between external and internal reality is what Alter, speaking of *The Trial,* describes as "the hallucinatory clarity

of a certain kind of dream." Striking about Kafka's narrative technique "is the perfect continuity between the waking world and the ostensibly oneiric one" (154). We find a similar continuity between waking and dream in *Diamonds of the Night*. The interpolated dream-like sequences of the boys taking a leisurely walk or jumping onto a tram in Prague may be flashbacks but equally proleptic fantasies of return. These sequences are initially random and sporadic but become longer and more detailed as the film progresses. Forming an alternative reality to the main narrative of flight through the forest, these longer sequences set in Prague pose the question whether we are witnessing reality or merely a dream. Only the second sentence uttered in the film ("Are you asleep?") signals the ontological uncertainty established by the film's unconventional editing. For example, the scene of the boys making a crude brushwood bed to keep warm and escape detection alternates with comforting shots of everyday Prague life such as a soft feather mattress hanging from an upstairs window and a maternal, big-breasted woman leaning through a window frame. Are images such as these recollections of the boys' former life in the city or fantasies of what they hope to find if and when they get back to Prague? The film deliberately withholds the answer to this question and, in so doing, addresses the complex connection between past and present, memory and subjectivity.

A good example of the film's preoccupation with subjectivity is the scene where the hungry youths stumble on a farmhouse in the midst of the countryside. Significantly, we see the farmer's wife for the first time from the boys' perspective as she crosses a field to bring bread and milk to a farmer plowing the earth. The camera follows her laborious progress across the field and her return to the farmhouse, again seen from the boys' point of view. This tracking sequence is interrupted by shots of the boys looking at her through hanging branches in a curious conflation of predatory hunger and sexual voyeurism. When one of the boys enters the farmhouse kitchen with a large stick, the subsequent scene is repeated in different versions: the boy strikes the woman with his stick and she falls onto the floor; she lies down seductively on the sofa; and she takes a loaf of bread and cuts thick slices from it for the boy to eat. In some ways these fragmented sequences mirror the boy's heightened subjective state of hunger, sexual frustration, and fear. But they also reflect male ambivalence toward the female sex. The boy imagines the woman not only as a maternal provider of food and drink (the motif of milk underscoring her nurturing function as a mother) but also as a sexual

predator as she seductively lies down on the sofa. With her hair loosened she actually resembles the large-breasted woman leaning from the window in the city sequence, another example of how past and present, reality and dream, become confused.

The boys' voyeuristic act of watching the woman through the branches is reversed when we see her observing them through the window as they sit outside the farmhouse and eat the bread. As they hobble off into the distance, we see her putting on a headscarf and moving away from the window. The next scene shows the geriatric German hunters already armed with rifles and lining up for inspection. The significance of the editing here is clear: the woman has betrayed the boys. The representation of the only female character in the film is typically ambiguous: she is by turns a nurturing mother, a sexual predator, and a traitor. In this last capacity she embodies the betrayal of the Czechs by their German neighbors.

In one of the Prague sequences we see a tram bearing the sign "Bílá Hora," a reference not only to its terminal destination but also to the Battle of the White Mountain fought in 1620 between the Czech Protestant Estates and the Catholic Habsburgs. This crucial historical event signaled the end of the political independence of Bohemia for the next three hundred years. According to the official Protestant view of Czech history promulgated in the nineteenth century and pervasive throughout the twentieth century, the Battle of the White Mountain was tantamount to an act of political betrayal. If memory in the film is fragmented and subjective, it is also obsessive and collective.

Another example of the subjective treatment of memory is the final scene where the boys are about to be taken out and shot. Crucially, we do not actually see them being executed but rather witness it as a fait accompli: the sound of gun shots is followed by a still frame of their motionless bodies on the ground. This sequence of events is then replayed with a hand-held camera that follows the boys as they are hurried down a flight of stairs while the elderly hunters wait outside with cocked guns. As the boys walk away from the firing squad we hear a voice shouting "fire" (in German), but instead of gun shots we hear cries and applause in a typical disconnect between sound and image. The superimposition of unrelated sound onto image heightens the impression of the subjective nature of memory and time.

The oneiric effect created by the complex interplay of sound and image is well illustrated in the scene of the old men eating, drinking, and

dancing while the boys stand with their arms raised against the wall. The minute attention to detail (the toothless old men trying to eat bread and sausage, their drunken revelries as they swig beer and dance around the municipal hall like grotesque automata) is taken so far that it blurs into surrealism. It is this combination of reality and dream that makes the film so redolent of Kafka's narrative technique.

Another way in which *Diamonds of the Night* evokes the world of Kafka is the familial conflict between fathers and sons. In *Diamonds of the Night* the innocence of youth, personified by the two boys, is contrasted with the old men who hunt them down. The bizarre inversion of normative roles, whereby the geriatric and infirm prevail over the young and healthy, recalls Kafka's story "The Judgment" with its conflict between Georg Bendemann and his ailing father. When Georg takes his father in his arms, places him in bed and covers him up—in what is a transparent symbolic act of burial—the father unexpectedly rises like a corpse from the grave to defy the act of filial triumph:

> "Am I well covered up now?" asked his father, as if he were not able to see whether his feet were properly tucked in or not.
>
> "So you find it snug in bed already," said Georg, and tucked the blankets more closely round him.
>
> "Am I well covered up?" asked the father once more, seeming to be strangely intent upon the answer.
>
> "Don't worry, you're well covered up."
>
> "No!" cried his father, cutting short the answer, threw the blankets off with a strength that sent them all flying in a moment and sprang erect in bed. Only one hand touched the ceiling to steady him.[6]

For Kafka this oedipal conflict clearly had its roots in the author's fear of paternal disapproval. In Němec's film the son's desire for the mother, glimpsed in the farmhouse fantasy scene, immediately activates the vengeance of the father personified by the murderous hunters. But the nightmare scenes of the elderly hunting down the young men also collapses personal and political trauma. The persecution of the two boys can be seen as a metaphor for the destruction of the fledgling democratic Czechoslovakia by the Nazis only twenty years after its creation in 1918. But it also may be said to predict the crushing of the 1960s reform movement by the ruthless—and elderly—Soviet leadership in August 1968, four years after *Diamonds of the Night* was released, when Leonid Brezhnev ordered the combined armies of the Warsaw Pact to invade Czechoslovakia. Němec filmed the Soviet tanks as they entered Prague and used the footage to create the documentary film *Oratorio for Prague*.

The Prague Spring created by the rebellious Czech "sons" had been crushed by the avenging Soviet "fathers."

Another important treatment of the breakdown of familial relations is Ludvík Vaculík's novel *The Axe* (1966). The story is set during the mid-1960s at a time when the Communist ideology was losing its moral and political grip on Czechoslovakia. A disillusioned, middle-aged journalist retreats from the politics of Prague to the Moravian countryside of his childhood, where he recalls his dead father, an early crusader for communism who reappears to him through letters written decades later. The narrator's realization of his father's political naïveté through the latter's correspondence coincides with and intensifies the former's political disillusionment with the Communist system. Thus the narrator's rejection of communism becomes indistinguishable from the son's disenchantment with his father's values. When the hero is accused of disgracing his father and his proletarian background, he realizes that he must now assume the paternal role of responsibility himself by rejecting a political system that prevents human beings from thinking and exercising their individual conscience, a system that treats adults like children. The themes addressed in Vaculík's novel—the moral alienation between the generations—would achieve even greater relevance in August 1968 when the values of the younger generation of students, intellectuals and writers (whose reformist ideals were articulated in Vaculík's "2,000 Words" manifesto) clashed with the reactionary forces of Soviet oppression.[7]

Vaculík's contemporary, Vladimír Páral (b. 1932), is a very astute observer of male ambitions and frustrations displaced from the social sphere onto the private realm of casual, mechanical sex. Citing Herbert Marcuse's statement that "in the totalitarian society the human attitudes tend to become the escapist attitudes," Robert Pynsent highlights the connection between socialism and sex in Páral's fiction. According to Pynsent, Páral's characters experience sex without love and the emotional emptiness that results from this personal state of affairs makes man politically and socially malleable (*Sex under Socialism* 6, 12). But the converse also holds true: that the political manipulation of man under socialism engenders a cynical passivity that makes sex either completely undesirable or—more often than not—a compensatory addiction for failed political participation.

This is certainly true of the protagonist of Páral's best-known novel, *Catapult* (1967). Jacek Jošt is a thirty-three-year-old engineer with a wife and a little daughter. Their homophonic names Lenka and Lenička (the

latter a diminutive of the former) indicate that—in Jacek's perspective at least—they are indistinguishable, doll-like automata in a world of domestic tedium from which the hero escapes into casual sex. He spends his working life as an industrial chemist traveling on international express trains between the northern Bohemian town of Ustí-nad-Labem (where several Páral novels are set) and Brno. The ironic contrast between his provincial, uninteresting routine and the potential glamour of international train travel only serves to highlight Jacek's comic status as a would-be playboy. On one such journey, the train comes to a sudden halt and Jacek is catapulted into the lap of a woman sitting opposite him. This chance meeting with Nad'a Housková leads to their becoming lovers. The woman's comic last name suggests the Czech word *houska* (a kind of Czech bread-roll) and links anonymous sex with consumerism in an advanced industrial society in which casual partners become mere products and sexual relations are akin to soulless business transactions.

After rapidly tiring of Nad'a, Jacek places an advertisement in the lonely-hearts column of the significantly named daily newspaper *Work*. He receives 114 replies; from them he selects those whose addresses fit in with his rail travel and that will maximize his efficiency as a lover, another example of how addictive sex becomes a surrogate for work. He chooses seven women, one for each day of the week. One day Jacek decides to go to Brno by airplane rather than train and is killed when he is catapulted against the back of the pilot's cabin as the plane touches down. The comic incongruity of this ending only serves to emphasize the hero's utter slavery to routine: on the one occasion he deviates from his routine, he loses his life. The tragicomic denouement offers a more serious and profound insight, however, into the continuum between sex and death. The implication is that eros and thanatos are the twin aspects of human existence to which man has no resistance and into which he is "catapulted" by forces beyond his control.

Bohumil Hrabal

A key work of Czech fiction that explores the relationship between sex and politics and especially the parallel between the family nexus and the national collective is Bohumil Hrabal's *Closely Watched Trains* (1965). Although the novella is set during the final weeks of World War II, the contrast it provides between the conformity of the older, compromised generation and the political and sexual rebelliousness of youth is wholly typical of the transitional situation of the mid-1960s, both in reformist

Czechoslovakia and in the West as a whole. Like other postwar writers and filmmakers (such as Weiss), Hrabal in his fiction evinces an ambiguous attitude to the matriarchal ideal that had been such an important feature of the Czech imaginary since the nineteenth century. Although the matriarchal figures (both the hero's biological mother and her various surrogates) exercise a powerful influence on the young ineffectual hero, her strength can be construed as negative and damaging as well as positive and nurturing. The matriarch's dominant role also contrasts with the weakness of the patriarchal line in the hero's family and, on a symbolic level, reinforces the perception that the Czech nation lacks decisive and strong leadership.

The novella relates the gradual coming to manhood of Miloš Hrma, a railway apprentice suffering from the inability to achieve ejaculation (ejaculatio praecox). After several unsuccessful encounters with women and a failed attempt at suicide, Hrma finally loses his virginity with the mysterious partisan Viktoria Freie, who brings the explosive device that Hrma uses to detonate the SS armaments trains known as "closely watched trains." Although Hrma is shot and killed during this action, he succeeds in blowing up the train and emerges as a national hero.

Hrma's inability to perform as a healthy heterosexual male is related both to his relationships with his ineffectual father and his overbearing mother. His father, also a state railway employee, retired at the age of forty-eight, is the latest in a long line of ridiculous and work-shy men. Collaboration with the occupying powers also plays a role in this inglorious tradition. Hrma's great-great-grandfather Lukáš had led the advance against the revolutionary insurgents on the Charles Bridge in 1848 but was crippled by a stone thrown by a student that hit him on the knee. After those events Lukáš was unable to work and was granted a lifelong state pension by the Habsburg authorities. The derisory fate of Lukáš provides the cowardly precedent for all his male descendants, a familial metaphor for the defeated nation. Hrma's grandfather attempted unsuccessfully to halt the German invasion in 1939 by hypnotizing the Nazi tank drivers as they entered Prague. But the tank carried on, and grandfather's head was crushed between the wheels of the moving vehicle.

As if to reinforce the parallel between the crisis of masculinity and the crisis of the nation, the pre-credits sequence of Jiří Menzel's film version of the novella (1966) cuts between Hrma's transformation into a railway employee (presided over by his proud mother) and key moments

from the lives of his male ancestors. The pitifulness of this patriarchal line and the ancestors' inglorious role in Czech history are intended to provide a tragicomic contrast with the mother's investment in her son's glorious future. The scene culminates in the mother's placing of an employee's hat on her son's head in a solemn gesture comically reminiscent of a coronation: Eistenstein's famous scene of the coronation of Ivan the Terrible comes to mind here and underscores the contrast between the ideal of strong male leadership and its abject embodiment in Hrma.

As a symbol of the mother's phallic power, the hat serves as an important motif at various moments in the film. Hrma wears it in bed with Máša, a fetishistic token of his emasculated dependency on his mother. Only when he is finally initiated into mature sex with Viktoria Freie does Hrma relinquish the hat altogether: Hubička removes it and pushes the diffident young man into the room where intercourse will take place. The image of the hat recurs at the very end of the film when Máša catches it as it blows through the air in the wake of Hrma's successful destruction of the SS train. At his moment of political triumph, the hero is also liberated from the constricting influence of his mother.

Just as Hrma is emotionally dependent on his mother, so is he sexually reliant on other women. In fact, in scene after scene, women are equated more with power and strength than men are. In one early scene, for example, we get a close-up of the countess's strong legs as she sits astride her horse while in conversation with the stationmaster. Later we see Hubička's female cousin grinding a coffee mill between her legs in a gesture that highlights the contrast between the phallic mother and Hrma's sexual impotence. In a scene toward the end of the film, Hrma solicits the sexual advice of the stationmaster's wife, Mrs. Lánská, who straddles a goose while stuffing bread down its elongated, phallic-looking throat. Even the virile character Hubička is to some extent an inadequate lover. The station stamps he uses in the film scene with the female office clerk can be seen as a fetishistic substitute for the phallus. While such phallic motifs equate women with sexual authority, they equally highlight the impotence of the male characters.

The continuity between sex and politics is reinforced by the theme of watching and being watched implicit in the novel's title and assumes two distinct aspects: the voyeuristic gaze that articulates sexual desire and the act of surveillance that perpetuates political power. The theme of watching opens Menzel's film version of the novella when Hrma's grandfather attempts to halt the inexorable advance of the German

tanks in 1939, his hypnotic gaze at once aggressive and pathetic. The motif of being watched, however, opens the novella when Hrma sets out on foot to work and feels that his movements are being scrutinized by his invisible, inquisitive neighbors:

> At that time we were still living outside the town, it was only afterwards that we moved into it, and I, who had always been accustomed to solitude, felt the whole world close in on me as soon as we entered the town. The only times I've been able to breathe freely ever since, were when I was able to get out of it. And again, as soon as I came back, as soon as the streets and alleys shrank in on me as I crossed the bridge, I shrank too. I always had the impression- and I still have and always shall have- that behind every window there was at the very least one pair of eyes watching me. (28–29)

This is none other than the mother's gaze, at once loving and oppressive. Here the maternal functions not only as a form of sexual emasculation but as a sinister symbol of political surveillance in a totalitarian state:

> That's how I shall set out in the morning, while it's still dark; and my mother will gaze after me, standing quite still behind the curtains, and in just the same way there'll be people standing behind all the windows, wherever I pass, and like my mother they'll watch me, with a finger parting the curtains, and I shall ride along to the river where I shall halt for a breath of air on the footpath, as I always do, because I don't like going to work by train. Along by the river I can breathe freely. There are no windows there, no trap waiting for me, no needle jabbed from behind into the nape of my neck. (36)

Miloš can escape the persecuting gaze only at the edge of the town. But even here he is pursued by the oppressive gaze of the stationmaster's wife: "I was standing between the tracks when I felt that someone was watching me, and when I turned round I met the eyes of the stationmaster's wife in the dark as she was feeding a goose and looking at me" (37). If the female gaze is oppressive, the male gaze tends to be scopophilic, as in Hubička's passive fantasy about metamorphosing into the Countess's inanimate saddle: "'Miloš, you know what I wish? I wish I could be that saddle!' and he pointed to the saddled black stallion, and then spat and laughed again, and said to me confidentially: 'Miloš, I had a beautiful dream. I dreamed I was changed into a cart, and the Countess held me by the shafts and steered herself and me into the warehouse'" (42). Significantly, it is Hubička who intends to plant

the bomb at the end of the novella. In the film this heroic act is thwarted by the mock trial convened to punish Hubička for marking the female clerk's legs and backside with station stamps. It is this parody of a political show-trial that allows Hrma to slip out of the room unseen and successfully detonate the bomb that will destroy the SS train. And just as Hrma stands in for Hubička as the hero at the end of the film, so is he confused with him by the stationmaster after the younger man's sexual initiation with Viktoria Freie.

Both in the film and in the novella, the correlation between sex and politics, family and nationhood, is sustained from the first to the final scene. The phallic mother's power, symbolized by the mock-coronation scene in the opening sequence of the film, is eventually neutralized by Hrma's successful sexual intercourse with the femme fatale Viktoria Freie. By replacing the all-powerful mother in Hrma's affections, the female lover also empowers him to perform the ultimate deed of political sacrifice. Up to that point all the sexual acts performed by Czech men are in some sense inadequate, paralleling their political passivity. Even when the ladies' man Hubička has sex on the stationmaster's couch, it ends comically with a loud rip in the leather fabric. Only in the final scene with Viktoria Freie is male sexual potency achieved; and even then the couch receives a second rip. And just as the hero's sexual performance is made possible by the intervention of Viktoria Freie, so is his unique act of political defiance to some extent contingent on the agency of this mysterious femme fatale.

Hrabal's novel *I Served the King of England* (1986) is told from the first-person perspective of the childlike Ditie (whose name evokes the Czech word for child, *dítě*). During his picaresque life, Ditie experiences the rise and fall of the interwar Republic, nazism, and communism. In some ways, the figure of Ditie recalls the stunted child Oskar Matzerath in Günther Grass's novel *The Tin Drum* (1959). According to one scholar of postwar German literature, "Oskar has the child's-eye view of the truth; but he is also a monstrous dwarf, and as such represents the perverted viciousness of Nazism."[8] Just as Oskar is a colluder with the Nazi regime, so is Ditie implicated in the political systems he experiences as a Czech. Throughout his life, which is coterminous with the interwar republic, the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia and the Communist era, Ditie's sexual exploits do not merely reflect the ideological spirit of the age; in some sense they *embody* it. Thus, during his employment as a busboy in the Golden Prague Hotel, Ditie's patronage of the Paradise

brothel becomes an extension of the interwar capitalist system itself. When the Germans annex Czechoslovakia, Ditie finds sexual fulfillment with a Nazi dominatrix named Lise from the city of Cheb (Eger), a negative counterpart to Viktoria Freie in *Closely Watched Trains*. After the war and his separation from Lise, Ditie drifts from one casual job to another, his unfulfilled personal life forming a parallel to the pitiful fate of his country as a political puppet of the Soviet Union. In fact, as the novel progresses, it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish between the personal life of the protagonist and the political fate of his country.

Milan Kundera

Milan Kundera published his first major novel, *The Joke,* in 1967. The antihero is the student Ludvík who perpetrates a foolish adolescent prank by sending a postcard to his girlfriend (who is away at summer camp) with the provocative words: "Optimism is the opium of the people! A healthy atmosphere stinks of stupidity! Long Live Trotsky! Ludvík." The instigation for the sending of the postcard is Ludvík's sexual frustration at Markéta's apparent indifference to his desire. He initiates a deed that results in the ruin of his entire life. The postcard is intercepted and read by the authorities, and Ludvík is summoned to appear before a committee of three student Party members. He is severely reprimanded and expelled from the university and the Party. This youthful catastrophe initiates a series of calamities in Ludvík's life. When the novel begins, fifteen years after this "joke," Ludvík has returned to his home town in Moravia. But instead of turning a new leaf, he merely repeats his former pattern of self-destructive behavior, torn between the sadistic urge to control others' lives and the masochistic impulse to submit to their control. In a barber's shop he succumbs to a castration fantasy at the hands of a hairdresser, who turns out to be his former lover, Lucie. Thereafter Ludvík devotes his life to avenging himself on the stupid political system by seducing and humiliating the aging wife of the young Communist Pavel Zemánek, who had been primarily responsible for his dismissal from the Party. Revenge is enacted by one man on another through the vicarious agency of the latter's wife, who is at once the projective object of Ludvík's self-hatred and his secret admiration for the successful, handsome Pavel. By having sex with Helena, Ludvík seeks to avenge himself on the man he at once loathes and admires. Ironically, Pavel is relieved when he discovers that Helena has taken a lover, since he himself has recently begun an affair with a younger woman.

While Ludvík cynically repudiates the Communist system, Helena (the second narrator) remains a true Marxist and retains a lifelong affection for the wartime communist martyr Julius Fučík while disapproving of the cynicism of the new political revisionism. While her husband, Pavel, has affairs with other women, she takes solace in her devotion to the Communist Party. For Helena, the party is a surrogate lover, "almost a living being." The lie of her marriage correlates with the lie she perpetuates as an active member of a corrupt political system. While Ludvík finds compensation for his political failures in sexual revenge, Helena takes solace for her emotional unhappiness in political revenge: at a meeting she urges that an adulterer be expelled from the party. Helena personifies a deeply misogynistic association of women with political collusion and conformism.

The film version of *The Joke,* directed by Jaromil Jireš and released in 1968—but rapidly suppressed by the authorities following the Soviet invasion in August of that same year—foregrounds the male-centered, subjective perspective of the narrator in distinction to the novel's multiperspectival polyphonic structure. Instead, the film narrative incorporates dreamlike flashbacks alternating with experiences in the present. The effect of the flashback technique is to blur the distinction between dream and reality, past and present. One of the most interesting uses of the flashback technique is the scene where the older Ludvík follows a pretty young woman to a state baptismal ceremony. This orchestrated event alternates with scenes from Ludvík's staged trial and expulsion from the party and university fifteen years before. The point of these parallel scenes—one set in the past the other in the present—is to show that the party controls every aspect of an individual's life from birth to death. But the parallel also highlights the active role of women in Ludvík's political humiliation and his recollection of it: fifteen years after Markéta's denunciation culminates in his trial, Ludvík repeats his sexual dependency on women by following the attractive girl to the state baptism.

Immediately following his expulsion from the university, the scene cuts to Ludvík's enforced initiation into military life. The moving sequence of the raw recruits having their hair shaved to the sound of a falsetto lament perfectly encapsulates the sexual emasculation implicit in Ludvík's humiliating removal from the party. As the naked recruits rush along holding their new military boots and uniforms, the film cuts to the present with the crowd of visitors streaming out of the baptismal ceremony. The next flashback of young men performing hard labor at

the coal mines of Ostrava alternates with the playing of Moravian folk songs by Ludvík's middle-aged contemporaries to the ironic accompaniment of their own composition "Masters and Slaves."

The most brilliant satire in the film comes in the next scene, where the dissident artist Čeněk, who has been expelled from the Czechoslovak Academy of Arts as a cubist renegade, is explaining the meaning of his full-length drawings of naked female figures to the other prisoners. The artist claims that they are various views of the whore Alena, whose vagina is as big and flexible as an accordion, allowing every man and child free access. This misogynistic image reinforces the parallel between the female body and the body politic, since Alena's sex serves a collective as well as a personal function. When the commandant arrives and demands an explanation, the artist offers an official interpretation of the same images, recasting it as an allegory of the victorious socialist army personified by the soldier in the middle. To the right are three female figures representing liberty, equality, and fraternity; to the left, her backside facing the viewer, is the bourgeoisie leaving the scene of history

At first sight, this comic switch from obscenity to mock-political orthodoxy sets up an opposition between a subversive and a conformist discourse; and the humor proceeds both from the automatic reflex of the narrator's switch from one narrative to the other and the extreme contrast between them. In the first instance, the individual asserts his personal and artistic freedom by means of sexual obscenity, and in the second he redeploys the same images to affirm his mock loyalty to the state. But this scene is more complex than it initially seems to be. Whose are these drawings? If they are Čeněk's, as would seem to be the case, why are they examples of academic art, the very idiom favored by the Communist regime? If the drawings are by Čeněk, their official style raises the question of political conformity and complicity. Thus the images in themselves complicate and undermine rather than reinforce the oppositional narratives applied to them. And in so far as both perpetuate power relations—the power of men over women and the power of the state over the individual—there seems to be more continuity between these sexual and political discourses than at first seems apparent.

This scene encapsulates the structural dynamic at the heart of both the film and the novel on which it is based. The novel's division into two halves is not one of opposition and difference but of continuity and repetition. The power struggle between Ludvik and the Communist Party (the state versus the individual) is restated in terms of the sexual

power exerted by Ludvík over Helena. Whereas Peter Steiner discerns a progression from the myth of transcendental Truth in the first half to the myth of transcendental Justice in the second, I see a pattern of repetition in which Ludvík moves from a perpetuator of state power in the first half to a perpetrator of sexual power in the second.[9] As Steiner himself points out, Ludvík was deeply implicated in the Stalinist purges as a student in the late 1940s, a fact that he simply refuses to accept in painting himself as a victim of the system rather than one of its perpetrators. In other words, what the novel—and the film, too—highlights is not the opposition between sex and politics but the continuity between these categories: Ludvík's sexual oppression of women is merely a transference of the political oppression he initially exercised over his university colleagues and professors in the Stalinist era. Both the novel and the film ultimately expose how the master-slave dialectic that socialism aspires to negate cannot be canceled out but perpetuates itself endlessly throughout history.

The film version omits the character of Lucie and focuses on the triangular relationship among Ludvík, Helena, and Pavel. The end of the film is particularly effective: when the older Pavel arrives in the small town, he is now transformed into a 1960s radical in trendy clothing and accompanied by a beautiful, younger girlfriend. The effect of this intervention is to highlight the contrast between the successful, if cynical, trajectory of Pavel's career and Ludvík's abjectly miserable life as a self-imposed outsider. Like many of the male protagonists in Kundera's subsequent collection of short stories *Laughable Loves* (1969), Ludvík pursues his quest for power and control through sex, compensating for his political helplessness by denigrating women yet humiliating himself in the process. Women and sex thus become an expression of male anxieties, and their sexual denigration the index of the individual's political impotence in a totalitarian society.

This is also the theme of the short story "The Fake Hitchhike" (1969), in which a young couple on vacation interrupts their journey through the Czech countryside by acting out the fantasy of an anonymous hitchhiking scene. Although this fantasy is instigated by the young woman, it is perpetuated by the man who transforms it into a humiliating experience for the girl when she is forced to behave like a prostitute by dancing naked on a hotel table as he watches lasciviously from below. When the girl slips on the tablecloth, the man pulls her onto the bed and has sex with her in what is closer to rape than lovemaking. This final

sexual act is mutually alienating, and the woman breaks out sobbing; only then does she move the young man into taking pity on her and showing some genuine intimacy. What is so disturbing about the story is the way it shows how unliberating fantasies can be. Far from allowing the protagonists to pursue their inner freedom, unconstrained by social taboos and conventions, they perpetuate societal norms and prescribed gender roles: the young man acts out his fantasy of being a heartless womanizer who uses the opposite sex for purely selfish reasons of physical gratification, while the girl acts out the stereotypical role of the prostitute. Their subjective fantasies are not liberating at all but, on the contrary, reinforce social conventions. Kundera summarizes its overall theme in the following succinct fashion: "Even in a game there lurks a lack of freedom; even a game is a trap for the players" ("Falešný autostop" 74).

Kundera's novel *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1979), published in exile in France, is also concerned with the continuity between the erotic experience of individuals and the collective experience of totalitarian subjects. The failure of sexual relations in these novels signals the novelist's increased disillusionment with politics in the 1970s. After the invasion of August 1968, Kundera published an article in which he argued that the experiment of socialism with a human face was not dead. By the time of his exile from Czechoslovakia, such optimism had not simply evaporated; it had turned into its opposite—cynical disillusionment. The novelist's political pessimism is most keenly felt in his depiction of the cynical emotional and sexual liaisons of his fictional characters. In the first section, "Lost Letters," of *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting,* Mirek seeks to rediscover his lost political identity following the Soviet invasion by reclaiming a cache of lost letters from his former mistress, Zdena. He vows to maintain the struggle for historical memory, a resolution that rapidly evaporates when he is confronted with the pressure of political conformity under the new repressive regime. Faced with the prospect of arrest, Mirek decides in a moment of self-interest to hide his papers, diaries, and minutes of meetings. Mirek's passivity is underscored when his arm, broken during an accident, swings helplessly in its plaster cast like the executed Clementis's feet swing from the noose (part 1, page 2). Just as Mirek censors his political past, so does he erase all memories of his copulations with Zdena. Mirek's desire to forge a link with history by reclaiming the supply of lost letters from Zdena is a good example of how political and sexual

relations become hopelessly implicated in each other. He hopes that that the rediscovery of these personal love letters will help him reconstruct his memories, thereby seeking redemption from his political guilt in the sphere of subjective memories.

The sixth and final section of the novel, "The Angels," relates the sad story of Tamina, who is exiled in a small town in Europe. One day she is discovered to have gone missing. In a café she had met a young stranger who addressed her by name and began a conversation with her. The young man (whose name, Raphael, recalls the biblical angel of the same name who accompanies the blind Tobias in the apocryphal Book of Tobit) takes Tamina in a car to a distant shore, where she is ferried to a strange island populated exclusively by children. When she realizes that she has found herself in a tyrannical society, Tamina attempts to escape by swimming but drowns. What is interesting about this story is its obvious function as a political allegory of Kundera's own situation as a Czech exile in France. Typically, however, this parallel is camouflaged by being displaced onto a female character. Tamina becomes the embodiment of the folly of an entire generation of Czech intellectuals whose Hegelian, teleological quest for the ideal society is encoded in Tamina's name, the first syllable of which *(tam)* signifies the Czech word "there."[10]

In Kundera's next novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984), the three protagonists, Tomáš, his wife Tereza, and his mistress Sabina, experience the cataclysmic events of August 1968 and all decide to go into exile in Switzerland. Here the standard split between the "maternal" and the "sexual" roles are embodied by Tereza and Sabina, respectively. The homesick and vulnerable Tereza returns to occupied Czechoslovakia and is soon followed by her philandering partner. Sabina, by contrast, moves even further away from her homeland by emigrating to America. Her masculine strength and independence (symbolized by the phallic bowler she wears during sex) contrast with the female-associated homeland she disavows and with which Tereza is constantly equated. The two female protagonists also embody the polarities implicit in the novel's title. Tereza represents the "heaviness" of political and moral responsibility, while Sabina symbolizes the "lightness" of amoral promiscuity; Tereza is aligned with the soul, while Sabina is equated with the body. Kundera also identifies Tereza with the maternal spirit of the nation and Sabina with the female divorced from the biological imperative. While Tereza's death in the Czech countryside resembles a regression to the womb of the mother-nation, Sabina finds freedom and a new life in

exile. When Tereza returns to Prague and retreats to the Czech countryside in order to escape the tyranny of the normalization, she embodies not only the revivalist association of woman with the Czech village but also the spirit of the defeated Czech nation. Just as the deceased mother in the opening ballad of Erben's *Kytice* symbolizes the failure of the Czech nation to find independence in 1848, so Tereza's death in a road accident symbolizes the political fate of the Czechoslovak nation after 1968. Whereas Tereza embodies the fatalist and defeatist impulse within the Czech national psyche, Sabina personifies the pugnacious will to fight and resist tyranny. In Switzerland, she attacks the self-pitying, finger-pointing Czech exiles and admonishes them for not fighting for their nation. If Sabina is assertive and strong, Tereza and her moral earnestness seem to symbolize both the defeated Czech nation and the unbearable "heaviness" of its history. Furthermore, Tereza's betrayal by the adulterous Tomáš parallels the betrayal of the Czech nation by the Soviet Union. And her preoccupation with his sexual indiscretions parallels the Czechs' obsession with their own history. This parallel between sex and politics would also explain Tereza's dream in which Tomáš shoots the women exercising beside the swimming pool and her cryptic remark that her photographs of the invasion of 1968 and the nude bathers on the beach "are the same thing." Tereza's voyeurism collapses the distinction between her political and personal life, so that taking photographs of invading tanks and of the naked Sabina becomes an extension of the same experience. By contrast, Sabina's sardonic indifference to Tomáš's infidelities resembles the self-conscious irony of Kundera's fictional antidote to history. In fact, these two female protagonists can be seen as a polarized transference of the traditionally Czech dichotomies within the author's own identity: amoral lightness and moral-freighted weight, cosmopolitanism and nationalism, sex and politics.

So to what extent are these films and works of fiction misogynistic in that they perpetuate stereotypes about women such as the virgin/whore binary? And to what extent might they be regarded as feminist in so far as they tend to present women as strong and men as weak and ineffectual? Regardless of their authors' intentions, these works rarely come down clearly on one side or the other of the question.[11] The importance of postwar Czech fiction and film is that it complicates rather than resolves the opposition of misogynist/feminist. Czech women writers and filmmakers in the same period address the same set of questions.

7

“The Unborn”

Postwar Feminist Fiction and Film

What does a woman want? In recent years this question, first asked famously by Freud, has been appropriated by such Western feminists as Luce Irigaray and Shoshana Felman to address the central issues of feminism: What is a woman? Does she exist? Does she have an identity or a subjectivity of her own? Discussing the pioneering work of the French feminist Irigaray, Felman is skeptical about these questions: “Throughout the Platonic metaphors that will come to dominate Western discourse and act as a vehicle for meaning, Luce Irigaray points out a latent design to exclude the woman from the production of speech, since the woman, and the other as such, are philosophically subjugated to the logical principle of Identity—Identity being conceived as solely a *masculine* sameness, apprehended as *male* self presence and consciousness-to-itself” (*What Does Woman Want?* 23). If female speech has always been subjugated to male identity, how, we might ask, is it possible for women to conceive of their own subjectivity in the first place? And if Western discourse is as intrinsically male in its consciousness as Felman and Irigaray imply, it follows that all attempts at female writing are on some level citational and derivational. This derivational status of femininity is further complicated by the woman’s position in a small-nation culture. In nineteenth-century Bohemia, as discussed in chapter 2, gender was invariably associated with national identity, and

the relationship between these categories was not always harmonious. In fact, more often than not, feminism was subordinated to the interests of nationalism.

How do women writers and artists react against this potential conflict of interests between their female subjectivity and their collective obligations as representatives of a national cause? A parallel to the situation of Czech women can be found in the experience of other ethnic female writers. For example, the Irish poet Nuala Ni Dhomnaill uses traditional Gaelic folkloric narratives to explore the situation of female subjects, and the African American writers Toni Morrison, Gayl Jones, and Alice Walker challenge traditional models of black identity by questioning a heterosexual and reproductive definition of black femininity. As Madhu Dubey argues, the "second renaissance" of African American cultural history centered on the black man, leaving the black woman liberated racially yet still confined by traditional gender definitions. A major work of fiction to deal with such themes is Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* (1987), which portrays the tragedy of a mother who kills her own offspring and the haunting consequences of the crime for her and the community to which she belongs. Morrison's novel is set in the nineteenth-century American South, but it also serves as a metaphor for the situation of black women in the 1970s: although liberated on racial grounds, black women still faced the same sexual subjugation to men as they did in the nineteenth century.

Avery F. Gordon has argued that *Beloved* can be read as a palimpsest in which a nineteenth-century slave narrative, based on humanist assumptions of literacy, moral truth, and reason, is overwritten by a feminist focus on orality, folklore, and corporeality.[1] In this way, Morrison rescripts a conventional narrative in the interests not only of her identity as an African American but also as a woman. The palimpsest that emerges from this revisionism supplements what the slave narrative forgot. This act of remembering is personified as the ghost of the murdered baby who returns from the past to unsettle the present. Her incomprehensible baby-babble dramatizes ways in which a slave narrative born of a patriarchal European tradition of literacy and rationality can be supplemented and revised by a native African tradition of "female" orality, antireason, and physicality.

In a similar way postwar Czech women's fiction and film negotiate between a traditional master narrative and a subjective female rescripting of that narrative to create a complex, multilayered palimpsest. This

is not to say that Czech women writers and filmmakers completely rewrite traditional narratives as feminist texts. Like Toni Morrison's representation of slavery, Czech women's fiction and film constitute a more complex and ambivalent reaction to the inherited narratives of nationalist tradition. Their revisions do not erase the trace of the original text entirely, but they come to exist in a state of ambiguous tension with it, a tacit acknowledgment that their identity as women is to some extent contingent on their collective identity as Czechs.

Postwar Czech Women's Fiction

The situation for women writers in postwar Czechoslovakia was even more complicated than it had been in the nineteenth century, for now they were expected to be fighters for socialism as well as dutiful Czechs. A good example of a feminist-socialist writer before World War II is Marie Majerová, author of *The Siren* (1935) and *The Ballad of a Miner* (1937). Majerová was an active champion of the working class who declaimed the protest ballads of the Silesian poet Petr Bezruč to the striking miners of Silesia in the 1920s. Majerová was the feminist heir to an illustrious tradition of engaged women's writing that dates back to the first half of the nineteenth century. But after the Communist takeover in 1948, Majerová's work was appropriated by the regime, even though she had left the party in 1929. Nonetheless, she continued to serve it faithfully, much to the detriment of her later work. Since the nineteenth century, the cause of feminism had been linked with the general struggle for social justice; and with the nominal realization of a socialist society, revolutionary feminism was deemed to be an anachronism by the Communist Party. In fact, although there were social improvements in the status of women under socialism, the feminist cause was hardly obsolete. Patriarchal attitudes toward women persisted and even flourished both in official, state-sponsored writing and in exiled samizdat literature.

It was only toward the end of the socialist era that women's writing began to reemerge from the cultural penumbra. By the early 1980s, in fact, there was something of a renaissance of female writing in Czech literature, aided no doubt by the new era of *glasnost* in Eastern Europe. If these writers are largely unknown in the West, this is because they have been overshadowed by more famous male novelists like Kundera and Hrabal. Since the fall of socialism, however, a few English-language anthologies of recent Czech fiction have appeared, and these reflect a

growing number of interesting works by women.[2] Among these writers are Alexandra Berková, author of *The Book with the Red Cover* (1986); Tereza Boučková, author of *Indian Run* (1992); Jana Červenková, best-known for her novel *The Semester of Life* (1971, published 1981); Zuzana Brabcová, author of the stream-of-consciousness novel *Far from the Tree* (1984, published 1991); Daniela Fischerová; Daniela Hodrová; Eda Kriseová; Věra Linhartová, who had come to maturity in the late 1960s; Iva Pekárková; Sylvie Richterová; and Zdena Salivarová.[3]

Most of these writers experience femininity as an extension of their political dissidence, which tends to be expressed in terms of personal suffering and self-sacrifice. The body becomes the most common and resilient metaphor for the experiential suffering of women. In a culture in which the nation's survival and well-being have been symbolically equated with the mother, it is hardly surprising to find dissident women writers deeply preoccupied with their biological role as wives and child-bearers. Brabcová's novel *Far from the Tree* centers around the personal experiences of a troubled teenager during the Communist era and her alienation from the older generation, a theme ironically underscored by the title, a modified version of the Czech proverb "the apple does not fall far from the tree." The diluvian imagery of water is introduced to convey the Czech nation's submergence under Communism, its regression to the Paleozoic age of flooded continents. This political metaphor is paralleled by the girl's personal nostalgia for the watery womb of the maternal body. Throughout the novel the girl's regressive fantasy of returning to the watery womb is equated with the nation's atavistic slide into political oblivion: "Out of the sea we came in the form of a little trilobite and into the sea we shall go again."[4] The metaphysical fate of mortals and the political fate of nations seem to be locked into the same despairing sense of fatalism.

A similarly fatalist parallel between the suffering female body and the oppressed nation characterizes Tereza Boučková's story "The Woman from the Region of Tyre," in which a woman's traumatic experience of a miscarriage alternates with the account of an unsuccessful collective struggle to divine a spring deep in the earth. The gynecological intricacies of the female body are seen in terms of the irrigational imagery of drilling into the earth for water. Both the story of the infertile mother and the unsuccessful diviners can be regarded as metaphors for the spiritual and moral sterility of communism at the end of the 1980s.

At one point this connection ceases to be metaphorical and becomes quite literal in the suggestion that the nuclear disaster at Chernobyl may have caused the woman's infertility.

In the certain knowledge that the woman will never give birth to a healthy child, the couple decides to adopt an unwanted half-Gypsy baby in the custody of the state. It turns out that the baby is mentally retarded, but the woman persists in her desire to adopt it. The story ends with an unexpected elegy to the dissident Pavel Wonka who has died in police custody; and in the final sentence the narrator informs us that she is about to celebrate her baby's first birthday, confirming that she has adopted the mentally retarded child. Thus the story closes on a tendentious note in which the woman's role as a nurturer of a handicapped child and the dissident's resistance to the state are presented as complementary acts of social responsibility.

For the rest of this chapter I would like to consider one film and two short stories that are more overtly feminist in their reluctance to endorse the master narratives they inherit from tradition. Although they, too, are unable to reject these narratives entirely and end on a fatalistic note of resignation, they become palimpsests in which a traditional script is revised and overwritten by an emerging feminist subjectivity. As we shall see, each of these texts explores in its own distinct way the issue of female subjectivity and its ambivalent relationship to collective identity.

Chytilová's *Daisies*

Věra Chytilová originally studied philosophy and architecture but moved into film after varied experiences as a draughtswoman, photographic retoucher and model. She gained a place at FAMU (the film school), where she studied direction under Otakar Vávra. Her graduation film, *Ceiling* (1961), and a second short, *A Bagful of Fleas* (1962), were released together.[5] Her best-known films are *Daisies* (1966) and *The Fruits of Paradise* (1969).

The film *Daisies* was made only two years before the invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968. Highly significant in this regard is the opening credit sequence of wheels turning on an industrial machine and alternating with shots of an aerial bombardment, the latter repeated right at the end of the film. The intervening antics of the two automaton-like young women act out the absurdist and fatalist mood suggested by these sequences of industrial mechanization and wartime destruction. In its daring identification of women's resistance to patriarchal norms with

the small-nation resistance to superpower hegemony and the ultimate failure of both forms of resistance, *Daisies* is more than just a harmless romp. In implicating the oppression of women in the larger context of geo-political relations, the film's feminist ideology becomes inseparable from the tragic experience of the Czech nation as the plaything of imperialism. And yet when the film was released it aroused strong criticism from the authorities, prompting the director herself to argue that *Daisies* was not intended as a celebration of the two heroines' subversive antics but a radical critique of their self-indulgent and immoral conduct.[6]

Recent feminist scholarship on *Daisies* has sought to explain the curious tension between the film's identification with and condemnation of its female protagonists. Bliss Cua Lim's perceptive article "Dolls in Fragments" presents *Daisies* as a feminist allegory that simultaneously sustains two opposite interpretations: a parody of the bourgeois ideal of the domesticated Woman and a critique of the girls as bourgeois parasites. Lim places the film within a feminist tradition of using dolls as a metaphor to subvert the conventional association of femininity with bourgeois docility and domesticity. She cites the examples of Angela Carter's story "The Loves of Lady Purple" (1974) and Rosario Ferré's "The Youngest Doll" (1976, English translation 1991).[7] But dolls also have an important pedigree in Central European culture. Olympia in E. T. A. Hoffmann's story "The Sandman" is perhaps the most celebrated nineteenth-century example of a doll as symbol of female docility. As we saw in chapter 5, Čapek's play *R.U.R.* can be placed within this tradition of aligning independent women with the threat of machines. Chytilová's heroines are direct descendants of this male-centered fantasy about wayward women. Although they run riot through the film, they meet a predictably punitive fate at the end of it.

The two Maries not only resemble dolls; they are also female doubles, a folkloric motif found in Erben's childhood classic *Kytice,* most notably the ballad "Christmas Eve" with its twin heroines Hana and Maria. It is significant that the girls in *Daisies* are both named Marie; like Hana's doomed double, they perish in an improbable and overdetermined fashion. The difference between the film and Erben's ballad, however, is that there is no exemplary equivalent to the domesticated Hana in *Daisies.* Both heroines die while only Marie does so in Erben's poem. As we saw in our discussion of "The Wedding Shirts" in chapter 1, the female protagonist must survive, albeit chastened, because she is the symbol of the nation and its freedom. That neither of

the girls survives in *Daisies* marks a radical departure from patriarchal convention.

The tension between the subversive elements in the film and its fatalistic denouement has led some recent critics to detect a blind-spot in the film's feminist ideology. Brigita Ptáčková detects "strife between ethics and aesthetics" in *Daisies* while Petra Hanáková argues that there is a productive tension between the "proclaimed moral message of the framing" and the "impulsively 'naughty' film core." Hanáková attributes the "cleavage" [*sic*] between the film's apparently moral conclusion and its naughtiness to the fact that the original film script was written for Chytilová by Pavel Juráček, "probably the most misogynistic writer and director of the Czech New Wave." According to Hanáková, the script was significantly reworked by Chytilová and Eva Krumbachová, but it still revealed traces of the original sexism.[8]

The palimpsestual model is a productive one for making sense of the film's apparent contradiction between its feminist celebration of the girls' transgressions and the punitive fate meted out to them at the end of the film. Underlying the film's feminist ideology lies concealed not only vestiges of a misogynist film script which Chytilová herself did not write but a set of contradictory assumptions about gender which can be traced back to the nineteenth-century National Revival in which Woman functions as the symbol of the nation's freedom *and* the threat to its moral integrity. As we saw in chapter 2, Božena Němcová became the personification of the nation's spirited resistance to political oppression both during and after the Prague uprising of 1848. Some of her fictional heroines, such as the strong-willed and unconventional Bára, embody the defiant nation during the period of political oppression in the 1850s. Other female protagonists are presented as a moral danger to the cohesiveness of the national collective. If Granny is the matriarchal spirit of that cohesiveness, the young girl Viktorka who elopes with a foreign soldier is a reminder that wayward women can pose a threat to the nation's moral fabric.

I would argue that the girls in *Daisies* perform a similarly paradoxical role in embodying the Czechoslovak reform movement of the 1960s in its struggle to break free from the oppressive model of Soviet communism while threatening the survival of that movement with their selfish and irresponsible behavior (hence the final destructive imagery of bombs). Although they symbolize the reform movement's heroic resistance to Soviet oppression through their absurdist tricks and antics

perpetrated against old and established men, their apparent indifference to the welfare of the workers and food shortages also makes them negative symbols of a reform movement that, left to its own device, may end up rejecting socialism and leave the Soviet sphere of influence altogether (this was the fear which prompted the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia just two years after the film was made).

It is significant in this regard that the victims of the girls' antics are usually older representatives of the establishment. The dark-suited, middle-aged gentleman who takes Marie 2 out on a dinner date—only to have it usurped by Marie 1—resembles the reactionary members of the Soviet Presidium, in particular, Leonid Brezhnev, who two years later engineered the invasion of Czechoslovakia. The girls' embodiment of the defiant spirit of the reform movement which came to be known as "socialism with a human face" would explain the empathetic reaction of contemporary Czech audiences to the film when it was first released. Although the girls' symbolic role as representatives of reform communism was new, their allegorical function as embodiments of collective freedom (as well as the threat to that freedom) merely replicated a tradition that went all the way back to the National Revival of the nineteenth century.

The ambiguous tension in the portrayal of the girls is prefigured in the opening scene where they are seen dressed in bathing suits and seated on a wooden boardwalk at a beach resort. Moving with stiff and angular doll-like gestures, their staccato dialogue initiates their feminist defiance of bourgeois convention as well as their disregard for all moral values:

MARIE 1: A virgin! I'm like a virgin, aren't I? I'm a virgin.
MARIE 2: Uh-huh.
MARIE 1: You understand?
MARIE 2: Nobody understands anything.
MARIE 1: Nobody understands us!
MARIE 2: Everything's being spoiled in this world.
MARIE 1: Everything?
MARIE 2: Everything . . .
MARIE 1: In this world.
MARIE 2: You know, if everything's spoiled . . .
MARIE 1 *(drumroll):* Well?
MARIE 2: We'll—
MARIE 1: Be spoiled—
MARIE 2: Too—
MARIE 1: Us too.

MARIE 2: Right?
MARIE 1: Does it matter?
MARIE 2: It doesn't matter.

The next scene in the film begins as one girl pushes the other into a brightly colored, flowery meadow. In a setting akin to the Garden of Eden, the girls dance around an ornate artificial-looking apple tree to the elegant strains of renaissance music. This reenactment of prelapsarian bliss is significant in lacking its key patriarchal protagonists: God and his human surrogate Adam. Supplanting the Biblical role assigned to Adam, who eats of the fruit and then offers it to Eve, the girls proceed to pluck ripe apples from the tree and begin to eat them, signaling their initiation into a series of post-Edenic gustatory antics. Unlike Eve, who in the Biblical myth is assigned a purely passive and punitive role after the Fall, the girls are endowed with their own disruptive agency: they, rather than men, will determine the direction and shape of the ensuing narrative. As the proto-text for all subsequent narratives of transgressive women, the Eden myth is introduced at the very outset of the film only to be subverted.

Fundamental to this feminist re-scripting of patriarchal narrative is the reversal of standard linear and logical narrative. Like Dada art, the film dispenses with Cartesian logic by stringing together in a non-sequitur fashion random and mutually disconnected scenes. As the film progresses linear live-action sequences of human interaction are gradually displaced by speeded-up shots of collages and assemblages of flowers, fruit and butterflies. The influence of surrealism is evident here in the Arcimboldo-like blurring of human and mineral, animation and still-life. But Dadaist techniques are also apparent in the breakdown of illusionism and the rapid alternation between color and black-and-white. Max Ernst's painting "Two Children are threatened by a Nightingale" (1924) inserts three human grisaille figures into a framed color canvas. The effect of this tension between color and monochrome in the painting—as in the film—is to enhance the illusory nature of realism, although they operate in opposite terms to each other: in Ernst's canvas the grisaille figures undermine the realistic perspective associated with color landscape. By contrast the black-and-white sequences in the film are identified with the neo-realist and *cinema vérité* modes favored by directors of the Czechoslovak New Wave like Jiří Menzel, while color is used in still-life compositions such as shots of green apples,

red roses, and butterflies. There is also a gendered opposition in the use of black-and-white versus color. The former tends to dominate in the scenes where the girls are placed in "realistic" social settings (in particular their interactions with men in restaurants and at the train station) whereas color predominates in the early Eden scene and in the all-female space of the girls' bedroom. One exception to this generalization is the use of color in the boyfriend's apartment whose walls are covered with displays of butterflies. This can be explained in terms of the fact that the effete and ineffectual butterfly-collector offers no threat to the girls and their independence.

The walls of their bedroom are especially significant in resembling Dada paintings and collages. In one scene a wall is filled entirely with the phone numbers of men whom the girls have picked up and discarded in a typical reversal of normative heterosexual roles. In another bedroom scene the girls' own disembodied heads and arms are inserted into the patterns on the walls as they enact a parody of the surrealist practice of using reified images of female body parts for collages. This sequence also recalls Yoko Ono's film "Cut-Piece" (1965) based on a series of one-woman performances during which members of the audience are invited on to the stage to snip pieces from the performer's dress. Important both in Ono's and Chytilová's film is the subversive way in which women are at once the creator of the composition and the composition itself.

As if to initiate such feminist revisionism of standard male-centered practice, one of the girls removes her crown of daisies from her head and casts it into a pond. Just as Jan Švankmajer draws upon Erben's nineteenth-century Czech folktale as the source for his film *Little Otík,* so does Chytilová here reprise nineteenth-century proto-feminist responses to Erben's patriarchal ballads in which women are cast in the punitive role of transgressors against societal norms. The throwing of the daisy crown into the water, for example, recalls the scene in Němcová's story "Wild Bára" where Bára and her friend Elška cast wreaths into the river on St. John's Eve in order to discover what their fate will be and whom they will marry. But Chytilová's citation of this folkloric motif takes the feminist re-scripting of Erben's ballad "Christmas Eve" one stage further: if Bára and her friend are endowed with subjective agency by making their fates follow the direction of the wreaths, Chytilová's heroines exhibit absolute indifference to their fate by ignoring the daisy crown in the water. A recurring motif in the film, to be worn and discarded at will,

the daisy crown becomes a symbol not of female conformity to patriarchal convention but of the girls' subversive indifference to convention.

Anarchic indifference to heterosexual decorum is reinforced in the next scene which takes places in the elegant surroundings of a high-class restaurant in Prague. One girl is having a dinner date with an older man. As Herbert Read suggests in his analysis of this scene, there is an implication here of sexual services provided in exchange for an elegant dinner.[9] This expectation, however, is summarily disrupted by the intervention of the other girl who usurps the role of the older man by taking the initiative while he assumes the passive role normally assigned to the young woman in such situations. Asked by the waiter whether she will be dining, the interloper sets the subversive tone of the scene by responding: "And drinking." She proceeds to order food in a high-handed tone ("Do you have snails? Do you have rabbit?"); and when the courses arrive, she devours them in reverse order and in an unconventional fashion: a cream-filled dessert is eaten decorously with a knife and fork, whereas the soup is drunk straight from the bowl without a spoon and the whole chicken is dismantled and eaten by hand. In the same spirit of parody Marie 1 takes complete control by dominating the conversation and asking the older man the kind of inappropriate questions usually reserved to men in this situation: "Do you have any little ones?"—"How old are you?"—"Do you smoke?"

Following the restaurant scene, the girls again subvert and invert normative gender roles by suddenly announcing that the man's train will be leaving in 40 minutes. The next scene shows the hapless figure being rushed along the station platform by the girls. In an attempt to speak to Marie 2 alone, the man asks the other to buy him a newspaper. Offering an ironic bow, the latter goes off to buy a whole pile of reading matter with the implication that reading is *all* that the man will be doing. Meanwhile Marie 2 explains to the man that she had to tell her "sister" (as she describes Marie 1) that he was her boyfriend's uncle, a ruse intended to get rid of the man without having sex with him. The man and Marie 2 get on the train while Marie 1 remains on the platform. But as the train departs in puffs of smoke, Marie 2 re-emerges from the other side of the car.

The entire scene parodically inverts the patriarchal convention of a lachrymose mistress bidding farewell to her playboy lover as she returns to her provincial home. (This cliché scenario is familiar from Milan Kundera's novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* in which Tereza, having

spent the night with Tomáš in Prague, returns by train to her provincial hometown.) In the film, this narrative convention is repeated several times with a series of increasingly old and ugly men cast in the inverted role of the mistress. In one such scene Marie 1 asks the fifth man: "How old is your old woman?" We then see the man waving goodbye from the train window as tears stream down his face. Standing on the platform, she waves a scarf as she feigns parodic tears of regret.

If the scenes analyzed so far invert conventional gender roles, the next scene is even more subversive in parodying the standard heterosexual dyad of the married man and woman going out on a date. The girls show up at a night club where they wreak drunken havoc. Usurping the real performers of the evening—a bearded man in a tuxedo and a woman in a Twenties-style dress—they emerge through heavy satin curtains under a spotlight as if making an appearance on stage. When the two performers come out they are forced to push their way past the girls to achieve the spotlight on the stage. The girls then take their places behind a high parapet which makes them resemble figures in a Punch and Judy show. Indeed, their doll-like movements bear out this impression as they walk precariously along the parapet which separates them from a bourgeois older couple seated below. Stealing the limelight, the drunken girls perform mischievous antics such as drinking from the lady's wine glass or stroking the man's bald head with their feather boas. The scene ends with the forced ejection of the drunken girls from the club. As Herbert Read points out, the girls' expulsion from the nightclub anticipated the film establishment's devastating criticism and outright rejection of the film when it first appeared in 1966.

In the next scene we see Marie 2 is lying on her bed and surrounded by green apples in what resembles an artistic composition. Marie 1 comes in and, detecting the smell of gas, turns off the valve. "Who is going to pay for this?" she asks the supine girl, then walks up to the open window and laughingly adds: "You forgot to close the window." When the phone rings, Marie 1 says "Don't answer it!" but picks up the receiver herself and announces in an official voice: "Rehabilitation Center. Die, die, die!" In what is manifestly a retort to a long history of the clinical classification of women as inherently predisposed to mental instability, this scene makes fun of the pathologized status of women in western society. The reference to gas in this scene recalls the celebrated suicide of the American poet Sylvia Plath in London in 1963. When the girls literally play with fire in their apartment by setting colored streamers alight,

one recalls the self-immolation of the student Jan Palach in a public square following the Soviet invasion of Prague in August 1968. Although *Daisies* was made prior to this tragic event, a sense of despair pervades the entire film, a reminder that the exuberant experiment of "socialism with a human face" symbolized by the girls' antics was destined to come to an abrupt and violent end.

Throughout the film eating serves as one of its major preoccupations, a surrogate for sex and an act of defiance in a culture which defines women exclusively in terms of their bodies and their physical appearance. The film shows the girls eating on several occasions. To the sound of a boyfriend's plaintive and cliché-filled phone call ("You don't belong to this century"), the girls roast and devour various forms of phallic food (sausages, pickles, bananas), which they hold with surgical forceps and snip with large scissors in a ritualistic parody of birthing. But here the act of giving birth is reversed: instead of men performing the gynecological act on women's bodies, the girls perform it on men in the symbolic form of phallic food. Not only does this scene set the birthing function in reverse, it also exploits male Freudian anxieties of castration and impotence. As if in revenge for the consumer-status of women's bodies, symbolized by the boyfriend's large butterfly collection, the girls turn the tables by transforming men's bodies into inanimate objects of consumption.

In spite of—or perhaps because of—their unrelenting anarchism, a sense of nihilistic anxiety increases as the film progresses. In the country sequence the gardener seems oblivious of the girls as they call out for attention; and the workers riding their bicycles to (or from) work also fail to notice them. The girls are worried that none of these men notice them, reinforcing their dilemma that they cannot imagine their identity outside the narrow matrix of heterosexual desire. In achieving their goal of a world without men, the girls become invisible to themselves as well as to the men they shun. The fear of being overlooked also correlates with the geopolitical anxieties witnessed by the aerial bombardments which frame the entire film: just as the girls become increasingly invisible as they gradually achieve their desired goal of freedom from male constraint, so too the small nation Czechoslovakia risks being ignored by the West as it deviates from the political conformity imposed by the Soviet Union.

The film culminates in a bizarre scene where the girls enter a deserted banquet hall and begin to eat the delicacies laid out on the tables.

In what Herbert Read calls "the spirit of a Dada happening,"[10] the scene shows the girls' gluttonously devouring the food and destroying the exquisite arrangement of dishes. Once again they parody established gender roles by walking up and down the table draped in curtains in a mock reenactment of a fashion-show cat-walk. As if being punished for their wanton destructiveness, the girls are next shown floating in the dark waters of a river just as—as Read points out—pre-modern witches suffered punishment by drowning. But this expectation of punishment is rapidly dispelled when the girls reemerge into the banqueting hall dressed with scraps of newspaper strapped tightly to their bodies with string. Mocking the redemptive ending of patriarchal narratives which inserts wayward women back into their dutiful domestic roles as wives and mothers, the girls waddle around and declare: "We won't be spoiled anymore. We'll be diligent. We'll be happy!" They proceed to clean up the mess in a parody of uxorial obedience, placing broken bits of crockery together in what resembles a Dada still-life. Finally, the girls lie down next to each other on the table in an apparent gesture of resignation and surrender to the inevitable fate they must suffer. Their dialogue concludes as it by began in the Dadaist spirit of negation and nihilism:

> Are we pretending?
> No, we are really and truly happy.
> Does it matter?
> It doesn't matter.

Immediately following this dialogue, we see an enormous chandelier crashing down onto the women in a crescendo of blurred colors. But then suddenly the film cuts to a shot of bombs falling onto and destroying buildings. A bulletin-like message is typed onto the screen to the sound of staccato gunfire: "Dedicated to all those, whose indignation is limited to a smashed-up salad." In the Dadaist spirit of the film as a whole, this final message represents a parody of a conventional film dedication: instead of dedicating the film, as the bombing sequence might lead us to suppose, to the victims of war, the director dedicates it those who have nothing more to worry about than a "smashed-up salad." The dedicatees of the film, we might conclude, are the kind of bored conventional housewives whose empty lives are being inverted and parodied in the film. The superimposition of the dedication over the stark shot of military destruction does not, however, trivialize war: on the contrary it has the opposite effect of highlighting the tragic discrepancy

between the petty tedium of everyday life in peacetime and the horrors being perpetrated in our name.

In spite of—perhaps even because of—its subversive exuberance, the film offers no alternative to the nihilistic negation of traditional gender and sexual roles. In the opening dialogue cited earlier, one of the girls asserts that she is a virgin before donning the floral crown traditionally associated in folklore culture with maidenhood. In repudiating patriarchal and heterosexual values, the women choose to remain virgins rather than defining their gender and sexual identity in alternative ways, styling themselves as sisters rather than, say, as lovers. The sense of nihilism implicit in this ultimate acceptance of hetero-normative relations correlates with the imagery of violent destruction with which the film both begins and ends. The film offers no way out of its own sexual and political impasse: women will always be subordinated to male power just as small nations will always be oppressed by the great powers.

Linhartová's "A Barbarian Woman in Captivity"

Věra Linhartová was born in Brno in 1938 and studied art history there and aesthetics in Prague, later gaining her Ph.D. in oriental art in Paris, where she has lived since 1968. She is now curator of Oriental Art at the Musée Guimet in Paris. In the 1960s she was a member of the surrealist group and one of the most prominent Czech prose writers of the period. Her story "A Barbarian Woman in Captivity" was written in French in 1982 with the title "Une barbare captive."[11] The fact that the story was not written in the author's native language (like Kundera, Linhartová switched from Czech to French after moving abroad) is more than a coincidence and relates to the central dilemma at the heart of her project: how to write in her native language without succumbing to the influence of a patriarchal-nationalist mentality.

The story takes the form of a letter composed by an anonymous female slave to her teacher and jailer in which she articulates her deep ambivalence toward him: although she is in love with him, she is determined to liberate herself from his constricting influence. "A Barbarian Woman in Captivity" reprises the medieval legend of the Bohemian Maidens who rebel against their fathers and brothers as first related by Cosmas in his twelfth-century *Chronica Boëmorum* and constantly revised by male authors. Instead of focusing, as one might expect, on the freedom of the women in Libuše's reign or the events of the rebellion itself with its obvious appeal to modern notions of feminist activism,

Linhartová significantly sets her story after the standard events of the legend when the women had regressed into a state of servitude to men.

This emphasis on the female experience of subjugation allows the author, through the persona of her female slave, to explore her own complex and ambivalent attitude toward patriarchal nationalism. The love-hate relationship felt by the heroine for her teacher speaks to the paradoxical relation of the writer to the national tradition she is expected to represent. The legend of the Bohemian Maidens was deployed by generations of male writers to allegorize their own situation, whether this be the medieval nobles' resistance of the monarchy or the modern bourgeoisie's opposition to foreign rule from Vienna. For women, however, this rescripting of this myth was more than an allegory of national resistance to a foreign power, since its denouement in every case involved the subjugation of women to perpetual male rule. So just as male writers like the anonymous author of *The Dalimil Chronicle* and the revivalist Hněvkovský struggled to make the myth as they inherited it reflect their own ideology, so is Linhartová unable fully to overhaul a narrative that militates against women's rights.

Consequently, her heroine's final escape from the tutor's control and her mysterious disappearance reproduces the wish-fulfillment denouement of Němcová's "Wild Bára," in which the eponymous Bára and her lover depart from the village into the forest. Linhartová's narrative is also reminiscent of "Wild Bára" in another respect. Like the story of the child of nature unjustly incarcerated, Linhartová's story functions as a double allegory of female subordination to male power and Czech subjugation to an oppressive foreign regime. To be a Czech woman is thus to confront the dilemma of how to reconcile one's loyalty to the national collective with the aspiration for personal freedom. "Wild Bára" does not provide a resolution to this predicament but side-steps it by allowing Bára to leave the village of her birth and enter the egalitarian, fairy-tale space of the forest with its Romantic associations of quietude and death. The barbarian woman also abandons the confined space of her captivity, but in contrast to Bára, who subordinates her wild nature to the paternal authority of the forester, she repudiates the authority of her teacher completely and vanishes from the narrative altogether.

Bára's acceptance of the forester's patriarchal authority can be interpreted as an allegory of the nineteenth-century female writer's ultimate acceptance of her passive status as a Czech woman. Just as Bára relinquishes her desire for emancipation from the oppressive rules of

the village, so is Němcová forced to accept her limited role as a Czech patriot within the national canon. Linhartová's story can also be read as a reflection of the author's double status as a woman and as a Czech, but the different ending reflects her more radical response to this ambiguous status.

Ironically, the only way she can achieve total freedom from the constraints imposed on her by national tradition is to cease writing in her native language altogether. Linhartová's decision to write in French, then, is entirely consonant with her radical denouement. The barbarian woman's ambivalent valedictory letter to her old tutor can even be read as an allegory of the author's farewell to her native tongue and the patriarchal tradition with which it is inextricably related. Why writers decide to relinquish their own language in favor of another is, of course, a complex issue that goes beyond matters of gender and ethnicity. Samuel Beckett's decision to turn from English to French or Kundera's rejection of Czech for French defy generalizations and must be linked to each writer's specific cultural and personal situation. Yet, in the case of both Kundera and Linhartová, the transition from Czech to French can be related to the burden of the small-nation literature in which the writer's language cannot be separated from his or her prescripted social role. As has been evidenced repeatedly in this study, no important Czech writer in the modern period could fully escape the social imperative to represent a political cause or witness to a moral version of truth that often interferes with the personal quest for artistic freedom. It was only by ceasing to write altogether in their native language that Kundera and Linhartová were able to break out of the constricting straitjacket of national tradition. In Linhartová's case, the heroine's escape from her role as a captive pupil allegorizes the dilemma faced by the Czech woman writer about how to witness to the national cause while retaining her autonomy as a female subject.

Kriseová's "The Unborn"

In the 1960s Eda Kriseová (b. 1940) worked as a journalist and traveled extensively in this professional capacity in Europe, North Africa, and the Middle and Far East. From the 1970s she began to write short prose fiction that was published either abroad or at home in samizdat. After the Velvet Revolution of 1989, her work became accessible to the general Czech public. Two years before the appearance of Morrison's *Beloved* in 1987, Kriseová wrote a similar work of fiction titled "The Unborn."[12]

Just as the initial action of *Beloved* takes place on the eve of the abolition of slavery, so is the story "The Unborn" set in Czechoslovakia four years prior to the Velvet Revolution and the fall of communism. Like Morrison, Kriseová uses the basic plot of the murdered baby and its subsequent haunting of a place as a powerful metaphor for the enormous challenge faced by women writers within a culture where issues of gender and nationalism become deeply implicated in each other.

"The Unborn" begins with the arrival of a young, unmarried couple at an abandoned country house where they bivouac for the weekend. The story relates the unsatisfactory relationship between the woman, Eva, and the young man, Martin, culminating in her decision to leave him. The principal point of contention between the couple is Eva's ardent desire—and her partner's equally strong reluctance—to have a baby. This conflict between the sexes contrasts with the situation in the United States where feminists usually identify their autonomy as women with their right to relinquish the biological imperative. Kriseová's feminist mode of narration works the other way round: Eva's desire to give birth—rather than her desire to repudiate birth—provides the emotional focus of the story. This female protagonist's desire to give life explains the complex alternation between a first-person voice and a third-person narrative voice in the story. The first-person voice, which opens the story and punctuates it at regular intervals until it eventually falls silent, can be identified as the introjection of the female author's voice into the main third-person narration. With hindsight the reader will identify this voice as that of the unborn child so ardently desired by Eva. But initially it reads as the author's voice as she imagines and orchestrates the scene of her story much as a playwright provides stage directions for a drama. This scene is a darkened and abandoned house, which, as the story unfolds, becomes a metaphor for the womb-life of the unborn child but also, as we shall see, a ghostly palimpsest of earlier stories of transgression and violence.

The tension between first- and third-person perspectives is characteristic of much modernist writing. For example, the narrated monologue, in which the subjective "I" merges with the objective third-person narration, is used by Kafka in his novel *The Trial* (1925). But as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar point out in their classic study of women's writing in the nineteenth century, the "I" employed by a female writer is especially prone to uncertainty and cannot be so easily taken for granted: "For all literary artists, of course, self-definition necessarily

precedes self-assertion: the creative 'I AM' cannot be uttered if the 'I' knows not what it is. But for the female artist the essential process of self-definition is complicated by all those patriarchal definitions that intervene between herself and herself."[13]

The tension between a first-person and third-person point of view within the main narrative is complicated by a story-within-a-story related by an elderly neighbor who comes to the house and explains what happened to the previous inhabitants of the house. After their father's death, a brother and sister were left to live alone in the house where they continued to lead a reclusive existence. One day the neighbor was woken up in the middle of the night by the sound of banging on his door. It was the brother, in a distraught state, begging the neighbor to come and help. When the two men returned to the house, they discovered the sister lying on a mattress soaked with blood. A baby boy lay at her feet—the incestuous offspring of their union, which she later strangled.

On the most obvious level—and with the hindsight of the story-within-a-story narrated by the neighbor—the first-person voice that opens the story can be identified as the ghost of the dead child waiting to be reborn as Eva's baby (hence the masculine form of the title in Czech): "*I, the being behind the beam, am trembling with anticipation. How long are they going to spend telling these old stories? Time flies, the room is sweltering with heat. I'm all bedewed, glistening cold and lifeless as a pearl. I'm practically alive, I only have to slide into the kindly fertile darkness, where I can grow and ripen*" (127). In so far as the "unborn" was present in the house before the couple arrived, it is a liminal embodiment of the past and the future:

> *I see them enter the house, which is dark. He goes in first, fumbling with upraised arms in the darkness, groping over the walls and feeling for the light switch. When he finds it, he turns the light switch, but the darkness remains. He has to find the fuse box and the main fuse. This is his first task here, but by no means his last.*
>
> The plaster digs into his nails and he hisses, as if he'd hurt himself.
>
> "What happened?" asks Eva, who is standing on the threshold. Eva is a name stretched on the cross, like Anna, Jana, or Hana. But Eva is expecting something nice, because she hasn't yet given up her girlish dreams. One of them is about a cosy cottage, where the fire burns in the stove and she is there with her lover. Yellow light at a distance gives the sense of a real destination, and they are inside. You and me. Except that here it's cold and dark. (119)

The last sentence of this passage turns abruptly into a first-person perspective. This would appear to be Eva's voice merging with that of the

third-person narrator. This unexpected switch in perspective has the effect of identifying the voice of the female protagonist with that of the "unborn." This, then, is not simply a story of an unborn child but also the "unborn" story of a female narrator. If the introjected narration is the voice of a creature wishing to be born, it can also be interpreted as a woman's story that has not been told. Just as Eva is first seen standing on the threshold of the house, so is the voice of the unborn caught in a state of liminal tension between past and future, impotence and intention: *"I see them both and I exult. Now he kisses her. And then he'll go on kissing, kissing, kissing her"* (122). When Eva tries to make the reluctant Martin come and make love to her, her anxious desire to be made pregnant is accompanied by the agitated utterance of the unborn:

> "Come to me," Eva repeats, wanting to expel her own fear, every disagreement and apprehension.
>
> *I'm trembling all over with anticipation. I need flesh and bones, in order to live. I watch with eyes, which I am yet to acquire. She's been making toward childbed for years, but he always resists.* (124)

Poised between nonbeing and being, the "unborn" can be read not simply as the articulation of Eva's maternal desires but, more radically, as a feminist voice that is yet to be born into its own story, existing in the interstices of the two main patriarchal plot lines: the story of Eva's inability to make Martin give her a baby and the story-within-a-story narrated by the neighbor. This story of a murdered baby—the fruit of an incestuous union of a brother and sister—reprises the punitive nineteenth-century narratives of wayward women discussed in chapters 1 and 2. Specifically, the fate of the sister recalls the tragic episode of Viktorka from the novel *Granny* in which the doomed protagonist kills her illegitimate child and becomes a social outcast from the village collective. Important here is the fact that this tragic story is seen through the eyes of the male neighbor:

> Now she went from tree to tree, stroking the bark, embracing the trunk and going on empty-handed to the barn and from the barn to the woodshed. Once he'd met her at the spring, but without a jug. She was like a skeleton cased in dry skin; she looked at him, but her glance was blurred, or misted over. Who knows what she saw in the mist of her existence. She got thinner, sickened, then stopped coming out of the house, till one day he saw her, wrapped in a bedsheet, on the wheelbarrow. She was so light that he was practically running uphill with her.

> Perhaps he wanted to rid himself of her quick with this wild rush to the cemetery, wished to have her swiftly buried. (129)

This account of a female outcast recalls the episode in *Granny* where Viktorka throws the body of her illegitimate baby into the water and becomes a mad woman wandering aimlessly through the nocturnal forest. Here too the account is presented by an eyewitness observer:

> Once I was standing watch in the night, on the hillside above the Old Bleaching-Ground. The moon was shining as bright as day. And there I saw Viktorka come walking out of the forest. As she went she had her arms laid before her under her breast, and her head bent forward, and she went so lightly that it seemed as though she didn't touch the ground. Just like that she came gliding out of the wood and straight to the weir. By that time I'd already seen her several times sitting by the water or on the hillside under that big oak-tree, and that's why I didn't pay attention at first on this occasion. But when I took a good look at her I saw her throw something into the water, and I heard her burst into such wild laughter that my hair stood on end. My dog began to howl horribly. I was shaking with horror myself. (98)

Having transgressed against the moral law by eloping with a foreigner, Viktorka becomes a social outcast from the village and succumbs to infanticide and madness. Although the form assumed by the act of transgression is somewhat different in the subplot of "The Unborn" (incest replaces the nationalist taboo of elopement with an outsider), in both cases the instigator and the victim of the transgression is a woman. In fact, elopement with a foreigner and incest can be seen as merely opposites of the same small-nation obsession with woman as the symbol of collective identity. The first-person perspective in "The Unborn" can be interpreted as a feminist voice anxious to get beyond "these old stories" which invariably present women as either angels or monsters (and sometimes as both) who must suffer for their actions. In the words of Gilbert and Gubar, "women writers must kill the angel's necessary opposite and double, the 'monster' in the house, whose Medusa-like face also kills female creativity" (17).

"The Unborn" can be read as a ghostly palimpsest of an established patriarchal narrative tradition in which children born out of wedlock are doomed to die and their mothers are punished with madness and/or death. One example is the episode of Viktorka from *Granny* discussed

earlier. Another is Wolker's "Ballad of the Unborn Child," which addresses the theme of an aborted child and the tragic fate of its mother:

> Give me your hand my love
> when we go down the steps.
> I am no longer brave and I shall weep
> that from all the richness
> only a bottle of eumenol remains in my pocket,
> that I am a wound
> embraced by the dead arms of a child.
>
> (*Básně* 108)

Wolker's poem perpetuates the punitive practice of denying the woman agency and equating her desire for sexual freedom with death:

> I am not a woman,
> I am a grave.
> My eyes are like two candles on a pall
> Burning for the souls of little ones in the autumn.
> No-one will pray over me.
>
> (108–9)

Another trace of an older narrative in "The Unborn" is Erben's ballad "The Wedding Shirts." The nursery rhyme "The first hour struck, and the lamp still shone" sung by Eva as a child echoes the opening of Erben's poem when the orphaned maiden prays to the Virgin Mary that her dead lover be returned to her:

> Already the eleventh hour had struck,
> and the lamp was still shining,
> and the lamp was still burning,
> which hung over the prie-dieu.

An even more overt allusion to Erben's "The Wedding Shirts" is young Pospíšil's desperate appeal to the old neighbor to come to his assistance in the house where his sister lies in a pool of blood. The injunction "Come straight away!" ("Honem pojd'!") echoes the vampire lover's command to his beloved to accompany him to his graveyard castle:

> You ask too much, too much, my girl!
> Come straight away, you will see.
> Come straight away; time does not wait,
> and our journey is long.

All these traditional narratives are freighted with moral injunctions against women whose transgression culminates in violence and death: in "The Wedding Shirts" the maiden who so ardently desires a reunion with her absent lover narrowly avoids evisceration. I suggested in chapter 1 that this violent ending can be read as a displacement of the male narrator's own repressed desires onto his female protagonist. In so far as the Czech author displaces his desire for his heroine onto the vampiric Other, he may be accused of incestuous desire for his own kind. The subplot of "The Unborn" is a more overt account of the incest taboo, culminating in the predictable moral closure of the baby's and the mother's death. Both in Erben's ballad and in the subplot of "The Unborn" it is the woman—not the man—who must suffer the consequences of having contravened against the moral law.

Infanticide is also the theme of Gabriela Preissová's play *Her Foster-Daughter* (chapter 2), which ends with the punishment of two women, the mother of the baby and her step-mother. Just as the house in "The Unborn" is haunted by the violent act that was committed within its walls, so is the story haunted by these established patriarchal narratives of female transgression, violence, and death. The ghastly sounds of an infant being murdered resonate through the house just as these old stories echo in the memory of the author: "Somewhere near the ceiling she heard a cry resembling the screech of a dumb rabbit smashed with a log behind the ears, eye turned bloodshot. The body twitches for a while, the eye glazes over ruby-red" ("The Unborn" 131).

This terrible cry appears to rouse Eva from the inertia of her emotional dependence on a man who will not provide her with the fulfillment she desires: a baby of her own. In many ways her decision to leave Martin can be read as a feminist denouement to a story in which the heroine defers to her lover's selfish wishes. Ironically, it is one that can be conceived merely as a negation of the boyfriend's desires—her acceptance that she will not have his baby—rather than a positive expression of her own personal wishes: "Eternity did not interest her, she was no longer afraid of death or of solitude. Her mind was intent on free hands, and free, still swift-moving legs. She waited for dawn to come, because she couldn't yet see in the dark, and after rain all the tracks in the hills are heavy with clay" (132–33). In relinquishing her biological function as the mother of Martin's child, Eva is not only entering a new and unknown phase of her life; she is about to become the protagonist of her own—as yet unborn—story.

Like their Irish and African American counterparts, the film and stories examined here reveal motifs derived from native folklore and myth to explore the challenge of inscribing a feminist voice within a traditional patriarchal narrative. Such revisionism engenders a deep feeling of ambivalence. In all three examples discussed, revising the patriarchal plot entails a degree of loss as if the artist's subjectivity were to some extent implicated in and dependent on a larger collective identity. In spite of its subversive hedonism, Chytilová's film *Daisies* ends on a pessimistic note with the death of its protagonists and images of exploding bombs; Linhartová's heroine must abandon her homeland in the act of asserting her independence from her male teacher; while Kriseová's heroine must face a future without her lover and his baby. That all three examples end with the negation, rather than the fulfillment, of the heroines' desire reveals the extent to which Czech women tend to see their identity in terms of their biological function as mothers and their symbolic role as representatives of the nation. In that Czech feminism has yet to become a purely autonomous and straightforward assertion of women's interests and desires, it is still "unborn," liminally poised between nonbeing and being.

Notes

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Index

Notes

Introduction

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Chapter 1. Maidens, Barbarians, and Vampires

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6. Macura, *Český sen,* 78–87.

7. Alfred Thomas, "Forging Czechs: The Reinvention of National Identity in the Bohemian Lands," 36.

8. Jitka Malečková, "Nationalizing Women and Engendering the Nation: The Czech Nationalist Movement," 299; Macura, *Český sen,* 93.

9. Macura, *Český sen,* 88–89.

10. John Tyrrell, "Russian, Czech, Polish, and Hungarian Opera to 1900," 245.

11. Heinz Politzer, *Grillparzer oder das abgründige Biedermeier,* 322.

12. Thomas, "Forging Czechs," 41–42.

13. French, *An Anthology of Czech Verse,* 175, trans. John Bowring. I have changed "minstrels" (l. 2) to "messengers" in the interests of accuracy. For the original, see Jan Kollár, *Básně,* 93.

14. For a sketch of the plot and the delineation of the self-destructive hero, see Nicholas Saul, "Aesthetic humanism (1790–1830)," in Helen Watanabe-O'Kelly, *The Cambridge History of German Literature,* 217–18.

15. French, *An Anthology of Czech Verse,* 191, trans. Karel Brušák and Stephen Spender. All subsequent quotations of the poem refer to this translation.

16. Karel Hynek Mácha, *Spisy,* 3:339, 340–41.

17. For Vilém's effeminate appearance, see Robert B. Pynsent, "Characterization in Mácha's *Máj.*"

18. Antonín Grund, *Karel Jaromír Erben;* Roman Jakobson, "Poznámky k dílu Erbenovu"; Vojtěch Jirát, *Erben čili majestát zákona,* 6–8.

19. Grund, *Karel Jaromír Erben,* 62–63.

20. In these discussions of Erben's *Kytice,* I use my translation.

21. See Alfred Thomas, "Women Readers and Writers in Medieval Bohemia," 7–8.

22. Jan Neruda, *Spisy Jana Nerudy,* 5:19; Bret Harte, *Selected Stories and Sketches.*

23. Jan Neruda, "Různí lidé."

24. See Ken Gelder, *Reading the Vampire,* 24–41.

25. James B. Twitchell, *The Living Dead: A Study of the Vampire in Romantic Literature,* chap. 4.

26. Jan Neruda, "Pro strach židovský." The article was reprinted in 1935 in the weekly newspaper *Fronta* with an anti-Semitic commentary by Jaroslav Slavata and in 1942, during the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia, as a pamphlet edited by Rudolf Hudec.

27. See Tomáš Vlček, "National Sensualism: Czech Fin-de-Siècle Art," 112–13.

28. Petr Wittlich, *Prague Fin de Siecle,* 38.

29. Robert B. Pynsent, *Julius Zeyer: The Path to Decadence.*

30. John Tyrrell, "Russian, Czech, Polish, and Hungarian Opera to 1900," 245.

31. Julius Zeyer, "Šárka."

32. Julius Zeyer, *Tři legendy crucifixu.*

33. See Filip Wittlich, "Arnošt Procházka a politika na stránkách Moderní revue."

34. David-Fox, "The Hidden Geography," 755–56.

35. Pynsent, "The Decadent Nation," 80.

36. For a discussion of these issues, see David Chirico, "Karel Hlaváček a Moderní revue," 145–60.

Chapter 2. Gender, Form, and Ethnicity in Nineteenth-Century Czech Women's Writing

1. For a survey of this period, see Dobrava Moldanová, "Czech Women Writers from the National Revival to the Fin de Siècle."

2. Naomi Schor, "Idealism," 771.

3. See Marie Neudorflová, *České ženy.*

4. See Václav Tille, *Božena Němcová;* Arne Novák, *Česká literatura a národní tradice,* 82.

5. Gail Finney, "Revolution, Resignation, Realism," 281.

6. The circumstances surrounding Němcová's birth have caused a great deal of speculation. For the claim that she was the illegitimate daughter of Dorothea von Sagan, the youngest sister of Princess Katharina von Sagan, see Susanna Roth, "Božena Němcová: Sehnsucht nach einem anderen Leben," 12. The assumption that genius and refinement cannot have modest origins but must derive from an aristocratic pedigree is in itself dubious.

7. See Susanna Roth, "B. Němcová jako mýtos a symbol," 29–40.

8. For Nebeský's influence on this poem, see Václav Tille, *Božena Němcová,* 46–47.

9. See also Karol Rosenbaum's critical anthology *Božena Němcová: Paní našeho času.*

10. See Marie Gebauerová's introduction to Božena Němcová, *Sebrané spisy,* 11: vi.

11. Stanley Z. Pech, *The Czech Revolution of 1848,* 326.

12. See Josef Kopal, *George Sandová a Božena Němcová.*

13. See Naomi Schor's introduction to *Indiana* by George Sand.

14. See Isabelle de Courtrivon, "Weak Men and Fatal Women: The Sand Image."

15. Jaromír Každa, "Božena Němcová a dramatické umění," 131–32. For an English translation of "Wild Bára," see William E. Harkins, *Czech Prose: An Anthology,* 113–55.

16. Harriet Anderson, *Utopian Feminism: Women's Movements in Fin-de-Siècle Vienna,* 25.

17. Eva Uhrová, *Po nevyšlapaných stezkách,* 11–17.

18. See Robert B. Pynsent, "Czech Women Writers, 1890s–1948."

19. Artur Závodský, *Gabriela Preissová,* 15–28.

20. In 1880 there were 4,797 Czechs and 1,717 Germans in Hodonín; in 1890 there were 4,348 Czechs and 3,268 Germans. See ibid., 24.

21. See Catherine Clément, *Opera: or, The Undoing of Women.*

22. Quoted in Brušák, "Drama into Libretto," 13.

23. See Michael Ewans, *Janáček's Tragic Operas.*

24. *Jenůfa* libretto 137–39. Leoš Janáček, *Jenůfa,* dir. Sir Charles Mackerras, Decca Recording Company, London, 1985, in Gabriela Preissová, *Její Pastorkyňa.* The dialogue removed from the libretto is placed in italics.

25. For the changes to the play, see Brušák, "Drama into Libretto," 18–20. *Kát'a Kabanová* is based on the play *The Storm* (1860) by the Russian realist Alexander Nikolaevich Ostrovsky (1823–86). See Alex de Jonge, "A Russian Heart of Darkness."

Chapter 3. Czech Mates

1. See Karel Brušák, "The Meaning of Czech History: Pekař versus Masaryk." For all their differences of emphasis, Brušák discerns common ground between Pekař and Masaryk: "Pekař, just like Masaryk, put the main emphasis on ethics. The national question was for him an ethical question, the programme of truth, justice and tolerance" (104).

2. See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality,* 53–73, 101.

3. See Pynsent, "The Decadent Nation."

4. Jiří Karásek ze Lvovic, "Kritika diletanntní," in *Chimaerické výpravy,* 213, 219.

5. For the Decadent use of the mask, see Masao Miyoshi, *The Divided Self: A Perspective on the Literature of the Victorians,* 289–40.

6. Richard Weiner, *Lazebník; Hra Doopravdy.*

7. Jindřich Chalupecký, *Nesrozumitelný Weiner,* 16, and Marie Langerová, *Weiner.*

8. Richard Weiner, *Netečný divák a jiné prosy,* 9–39.

9. In a short story titled "La nuit avant" (The Previous Night, 1893), Marcel Proust treats the theme of suicide following a confession of lesbian love. See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet,* 248.

10. See, in particular, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire.*

11. See Arthur Breiský, "The Quintessence of Dandyism" ("Quintessence dandysmu") in *Střepy zrcadel: Essaie,* 93–101. See also the classic definition of the dandy in Charles Baudelaire, *Selected Writings on Art and Literature,* 419–22.

12. Breiský, "Quintessence," 100.

13. For this topos, see ibid., 97.

14. See Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle,* 172.

Chapter 4. Between Paris and Moscow

1. See Peter Hards, "The Concept of Revolution in Czech Writing, 1918–38"; Peter Drews, *Devětsil und Poetismus;* Alfred French, *The Poets of Prague: Czech Poetry between the Wars.*

2. Vladimir Müller, *Der Poetismus.*

3. "Poetism wanted to achieve a synthesis between Moscow and Paris, Moscow as its political teacher, Paris as its teacher on art" (Hards, "The Concept of Revolution," 67).

4. See Marianne Dekoven, "Modernism and Gender," 176–77.

5. See Chandak Sengoopta, *Otto Weininger: Sex, Science, and Self in Imperial Vienna.*

6. Karel Čapek, *Francouzská poezie nové doby.*

7. John Malmstad, "Wrestling with Representation: Reforging Images of the Artist and Art in the Russian Avant-Garde."

8. A. M. Píša, *Listy příteli,* 76.

9. See the example in the prose dispute *The Weaver* discussed in Thomas, *Anne's Bohemia,* 139.

10. Vítězslav Nezval, *Z mého života,* 88–89.

11. Quoted from Karel Teige, "Poetism," in Eric Dluhosch and Rostislav Švácha, *Karel Teige / 1900–1951,* 68, 71.

12. Rhonda K. Garelick, *Rising Star: Dandyism, Gender, and Performance at the Fin de Siècle,* 79.

13. Jaroslav Anděl, *Alexandr Hackenschmied,* 8.

14. See Karel Brušák, "Vítězslav Nezval and the Czech Avant-Garde."

15. For Breton's visit to Prague at the invitation of Teige and Nezval, see Anna Balakian, *André Breton,* 164.

16. Brušák, "Vítězslav Nezval," 117.

17. For the nineteenth-century gendering of Prague as a woman, see Angelo Maria Ripellino, *Magic Prague,* 56. For the female personification of Prague in the Hussite tract *The Dispute between Prague and Kutná Hora,* see Thomas, *Anne's Bohemia,* 144–46.

18. The 2000 edition of Nezval's *Praha s prsty deště* is a facsimile reprint of the first edition (1936) with Teige's cover illustration and frontispiece. A selection of the poems is translated by Ewald Osers in *Three Czech Poets,* 25–63.

19. Vítězslav Nezval, "Historie šesti prázdných domů," in *Pět prstů,* 7–23.

20. Karel Teige, "Socialistický realismus a surrealismus," in *Socialistický realismus,* 164. For Teige's similar inability to reconcile poetism and Soviet constructivism, see Peter A. Zusi, "The Style of the Present."

Chapter 5. Robots, Golems, and Femmes Fatales

1. These stories by Čapek are available in English in *Cross Roads.*

2. Quoted in Ivan Klíma, *Karel Čapek: Life and Work,* 82.

3. See Alfred Thomas, *The Labyrinth of the Word: Truth and Representation in Czech Literature,* 116–31.

4. For the plays' endings, see Pavel Janoušek, *Studie o dramatu,* 39–71.

5. See Roger Scruton, "Masaryk, Kant and the Czech Experience."

6. For male anxiety in the political and literary culture of Weimar Germany, see Richard W. McCormick, *Gender and Sexuality in Weimar Modernity,* 20–37.

7. Marianne Dekoven, "Modernism and Gender," 179–80.

8. See Spector, *Prague Territories.*

9. See Sengoopta, *Otto Weininger.*

10. For the crisis of masculinity in Strindberg and Kafka, see Gerald N. Izenberg, *Modernism and Masculinity: Mann, Wedekind, Kandinsky through World War II,* 1–2.

11. See Nicholas Grene's introduction to *Pygmalion* by George Bernard Shaw, x.

12. See Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism.*

13. Karel Čapek, *R.U.R.,* 170.

14. Karel Srp, *Jindřich Štyrksý,* illus. 31.

15. Karel Srp, *Karel Teige,* 20. For a reproduction of the collage in question, see illus. 31.

16. See William E. Harkins, *Karel Čapek,* 110–11.

17. Quoted from the introduction to the first American edition of the play translated as *The Makropoulos Secret,* v–vi.

18. The English translation in the text is my own. For the published English translation, see Hélène Cixous, "Fiction and Its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud's *das Unheimliche.*"

19. See Alice Kuzniar, "Hearing Women's Voices in *Heinrich von Ofterdingen.*"

20. This is especially true of opera. See Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender and Sexuality,* 80–111.

21. Compare the insanity of Kostelnička in the operatic version of *Her Foster-Daughter.* See Brušák, "Drama into Libretto."

22. Endnotes to the recording of Janáček's *The Makropulos Case,* conducted by Sir Charles Mackerras, 14.

23. Ibid., 172–73.

24. Quoted in John Tyrrell, *Janáček's Operas: A Documentary Account,* 309, 304–5, 308.

Chapter 6. Terror and Dream Were My Father and Mother

1. Jaroslav Kunc, *Slovník českých spisovatelů a beletristů, 1945–1956,* 443–44.

2. See Annette Insdorf, *Indelible Shadows: Film and the Holocaust,* 165.

3. Lustig's story is autobiographical since he too was incarcerated in Auschwitz, escaped from a train, and returned to Prague in order to fight in the resistance. See Arnošt Lustig, "Darkness Casts No Shadow," in *Children of the Holocaust,* 407–526.

4. Peter Hames, *The Czechoslovak New Wave,* 187.

5. Robert Alter, *Imagined Cities,* 146.

6. Franz Kafka, "The Judgment," in *The Metamorphosis, In The Penal Colony, and Other Stories,* 58–59.

7. See Kieran Williams, *The Prague Spring and Its Aftermath: Czechoslovak Politics, 1968–1970,* 89–91.

8. Moray McGowan, "German Writing in the West (1945–1990)," 456.

9. Peter Steiner, *The Deserts of Bohemia,* 204, 206.

10. Maria Němcová Banerjee, *Terminal Paradox: The Novels of Milan Kundera,* 49.

11. In his book *Milan Kundera and Feminism: Dangerous Intersections,* John O'Brien concludes that, "Milan Kundera is neither excessively sexiest nor feminist but shares elements of both at the same time" (138).

Chapter 7. "The Unborn"

1. Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Social Imagination,* 146.

2. Alexandra Büchler, *This Side of Reality: Modern Czech Writing,* includes

four stories by contemporary Czech women. See also Alexandra Büchler, *Allskin and Other Tales by Contemporary Czech Wome*n.

3. See Veronika Ambros, "Czech Women Writers after 1945."

4. An excerpt from the novel translated by James Naughton is included in Büchler, *Allskin and Other Tales,* 15–28.

5. See Peter Hames, *The Czechoslovak New Wave,* 206–8.

6. See Bliss Cua Lim, "Dolls in Fragments: *Daisies* as Feminist Allegory," 37–38.

7. Ibid., 39.

8. Brigita Ptáčková, "O sváru etiky a estetiky v *Sedmikráskách* Věry Chytilové"; Petra Hanáková, "Voices from Another World," 67.

9. Herbert Read, "Dada and Structuralism in Chytilová's *Daisies,*" 228.

10. Ibid., 233.

11. A translation of the story by Keith Waldrop is included in Büchler, *Allskin and Other Tales,* 202–8.

12. The story, translated by James Naughton, is included in Michael March, *Description of a Struggle: The Vintage Book of Contemporary Eastern European Writing,* 119–33. All quotations refer to this translation.

13. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic,* 17.

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Index

"Abacus" (Seifert), 123
ABC (Nezval), 123
abortion, 113–14, 221
The Absolute Gravedigger (Nezval), 126, 132
Academy for Science, Literature and Art, 47
aesthetics and aestheticism: as Czech, 57; Decadent movement and, 17, 89–90; in Hlaváček's works, 57–59; homosexual identity linked to, 17–18, 89–90; Karásek and, 17–18; Prague School critical approach and, 7; transgressive aesthetic of Wilde, 18, 89–90, 92
Africa, 120
Ahasuerus, the Eternal Jew, 133, 155
Aimless Walk (film, Hackenschmied), 128–29
alienation, 8; in Čapek's works, 148; between generations, 187; modernity and, 122, 132–33, 145; Proletarian Poets and, 117, 127; sexual frustration or loneliness and, 124–27, 197; surrealism as antidote to loneliness and fear, 132; urban life and, 127, 133; in Wolker's works, 115–16
allegory: Bohemian Maidens legend as political, 215; Čapek's works as allegorical, 140, 142, 144–46, 150–52, 158, 166, 168; Chytilová's *Daisies* as, 205, 207; Erben's works as political allegory, 32, 34; feminist deployment of, 205, 215; Kundera's works as, 198
All Men Are Mortal (de Beauvoir), 155–56
Alter, Robert, 183–84
Amazon motif, 6, 21, 22–25
America: in Čapek's works, 142, 146, 152; Edison as icon of, 126–27; in Nezval's works, 126–28
American Club for Women, 74
Andersen, Hans Christian, 155–56
Anderson, Benedict, 20
"Angel of Doubt" (Andersen), 155–56
anti-Semitism, 46, 107, 149, 153, 182
Apollinaire, Guillaume (Wilhelm de Kostrowitzky), 4, 48, 110, 112, 123, 133
Arcos, René, 108
Aristotle, 22, 153
"art for art's sake," 89–93, 105, 128–29
artificial life: golems as, 149, 153–54; robots as, 138, 143, 163; Shelley's Dr. Frankenstein and other literary precursors, 137, 144
Artistic Union Devětsil. *See* Devětsil
"Art Today and Tomorrow" (Teige), 121
Atala (Chateaubriand), 16
"At the Sign of the Three Lilies" (Neruda), 42–44
Auerbach, Berthold, 66
avant garde. *See* poetism; Proletarian Poets; surrealism
Awkward Tales (Čapek), 138
The Axe (Vaculík), 187

"Bacchanalia" (Karásek), 56
Bach Reaction: as context, 31–32, 34, 38, 71, 72
Back to Methuselah (Shaw), 155

A Bag of Fleas (film, Chytilová), 204
Balbín, Bohuslav, 14
"The Ballad of the Dream" (Wolker), 114–15
"The Ballad of the Stoker's Eyes" (Wolker), 115–16, 121, 126
"The Ballad of the Unborn Child" (Wolker), 113–14, 221
Balzac, Honoré de, 61
barbarians, 26–27, 55–56, 58, 214–16
"A Barbarian Woman in Captivity" (Linhartová), 214–16
Barbusse, Henri, 104, 108
Bartoš, František, 78–79
"Baruška" (Němcová), 66
Battle of White Mountain, 3, 14, 52 54, 185
Bazzi, Antonio Battista, 94–97
Beckett, Samuel, 216
Bedny, Demyan, 105
The Beginning of a Romance (opera, Janáček), 85, 86
Beloved (Morrison), 201, 216–17
Bely, Andrei, 132
Benešová, Božena, 77
Bergson, Henri, 109
Berková, Alexandra, 203
Berlin, 4–5
Bezruč, Petr, 111–12, 202
Biebl, Konstantín, 110, 124, 132
A Bite to Eat (film, Němec), 183
Blade Runner (film, Scott), 138
blindness, 115, 126
blood: in Erben's work, 34–36, 221; racial purity and, 46; sexualized violence and, 34–36, 55–56, 113, 135; as symbol of vitality, 155; in Wolker's works, 113. *See also* vampires
the body: castration imagery, 113–16, 117, 126, 146–48, 151–52, 154, 193; dismemberment and, 24, 117, 133–34, 147, 154; dismemberment of female, 24; female body as commodity, 113, 123, 133–34, 136, 212; fetishized, 133–34, 146–47; gaze and, 151; as machine, 148, 150–51; as metaphor of women's experience, 203–4; nudity in film, 130; objectification of female body, 123, 133–34; politic as female body, *xi,* 195; science and knowledge of, 150–51; sexuality as threat, 130; Sokol movement and cult of masculine body, 53, 55
Bohemia: ancient glory and decline of, 45–47; female personifications of, 22. *See also* nation, female personifications of
Bohemian Maidens (mythological and literary figures), 24, 50, 214–15
Bohemian Prosody (Dobrovský), 15
The Book of Laughter and Forgetting (Kundera), 197–98
The Book with the Red Cover (Berková), 203
Boučková, Tereza, 203–4
Bouda Theater (Prague), 23
"A Bouquet" (Erben), 32
A Bouquet of National Legends (Erben), 32, 68, 198
Božena Němcová's Fan (Seifert), 64
Brabcová, Zuzana, 203
bread, 113, 116, 183–86, 188
"The Break" (Biebl), 124
Breiský, Arthur, 91
Brentano, Clemens, 24
Breton, André, 106, 131–32, 136
Brezhnev, Leonid, 186, 207
Brno Literary Group, 105; Christian themes and images used by, 108; unanimism and, 108–10
Brod, Max, 8
Brušák, Karel, 79
Bugge, Peter, 166
Bulgakov, Mikhail, 142
Bürger, Gottfried August, 27, 33
Burian, Emil František, 133–34
Byron, George Gordon, Lord, 27, 29, 30, 44, 45

Camus, Albert, 9, 172–73
Cantilena of Revenge (Hlaváček), 57
Čapek, Karel, 18, 97, 105; allegorical nature of works, 140, 142, 144–46,

150–52, 158, 166, 168; critical reception of works, 157–58, 161, 163–64, 166; evil as theme in works, 163–69; fatherhood in works, 143–44; feminism in works, 142, 143, 205; film adaptations of works, 166; identity in works, 156–60; ill health of, 166–67; indeterminate or unresolved nature of works by, 146, 160, 164, 165–66; Janáček's adaptation of works, 161–63; "just war" as theme in works, 163–69; Kafka contrasted with, 142; on machines and technology, 138–39, 142, 146; motherhood in works, 150, 154–55, 158, 161, 167–69; pacifism in works, 164–69; politics in works, 163–69; as relativist, 138–39, 146, 165; Shaw and, 139, 157–58; skepticism and lack of absolute truth, 138–39; socialism and class in works, 143; as translator, 110; word play in works, 158, 167
capitalism, *xi;* body as commodity, 113, 123, 133–34, 136, 212; in Brecht's *Mother Courage,* 168; in Čapek's works, 140–46, 152, 168; female sexuality linked to, 108, 136, 192–93; in film, 128–29; *Metropolis* as critique of, 130; in Nezval's works, 108; Prague and, 108; in Seifert's works, 108; sex as commodity, 113, 133, 188, 192–93; in Teige's works, 136
"The Carousel" (Karásek ze Lvovic), 92
The Carrier Pigeon (Seifert), 124–25
The Case of Professor Körner (Hostovský), 173
castration: blindness linked to, 115, 126; dismemberment and, 117, 147, 154; eating linked to, 117; fetishism and, 146–47; Freud on, 147–48; in Kundera's works, 193; male displacement and projection, 146–47, 158; robot vivisection scene in *R.U.R.* and, 150–52; in Seifert's works, 125–26; in Teige's collages, 151; in Wolker's works, 113–16
Catapult (Páral), 187–88
Ceiling (film, Chytilová), 204
Cemetery Flowers (Neruda), 39
censorship, 31–32, 38–39, 172, 194
Červenková, Jana, 203
Chalupecký, Jindřich, 98
The Charity Ball (Hostovský), 173–74
Chateaubriand, Viscomte François-René, 16
Chesterton, G. K., 139
children, as metaphor: for Czech people, 32–34, 37; for democratic nation, 186–87; for nature's redemptive power, 149; for social responsibility, 203–4. *See also* infanticide
Chirico, David, 57
Christian imagery. *See* religious themes or images
"Christmas Eve" (Erben), 37–38, 67–69, 205
Chronica Boëmorum (Cosmas), 21
cities, 4–5, 132; as evil or corrupt, 179; female personification of, 119–20, 134–35; as symbol of potent femininity, 119–20; womb imagery and, 135. *See also* Moscow; Paris; Prague
Citizen Brych (Otčenášek), 176
Cixous, Hélène, 159
class, 129–31; in Čapek's works, 142–43, 145, 146; Czech identity and, 14; Majerová and, 202; in Němcová's works, 63; peasants as idealized, 79; in Preissová's works, 79–80; robots as exploited underclass, 142, 145, 146; in Seifert's works, 63; sexual relationships and, 129–31; in Wolker's works, 113–15; workers as idealized, 111–12. *See also* Proletarian Poets
classics, as influence, 22, 31
Closely Watched Trains (film, Menzel), 190–92
Closely Watched Trains (Hrabal), 188–92
Cocteau, Jean, 124
Coleridge, Samuel Taylor, 46
collaboration, 172, 180; in Hrabal's works, 192–93; sex and, 178, 185, 192–93

collective/individual dichotomies, 48; in criticism, 12; in *Diamonds of the Night,* 185; family as homologous to nation in, 188–93; in Kundera's works, 195–98; as modernism's central paradox, 5; national/personal identity, 141–42; National Revival and, 207; in Soviet Russian works, 145; Teige and individual freedom as basis of collective freedom, 121; in Weiner's works, 102. *See also* collectivism; individualism; personal/political dichotomy
collectivism, 5; absolutes and ideology of, 140; Němcová and collective ideal, 72–73; surrealism and, 132; Teige and individual freedom as basis of collective freedom, 121; unanimism and, 108–9; utopianism and, 145; village as collective, 17. *See also* collective/individual dichotomies; Communism; socialism
comedy: Čapek's works as comedies, 155, 158, 161; Kundera's subversive use of, 195; Páral's works as tragicomedy, 187–88
Communism, 10, 12, 143; Devětsil and, 105, 121, 130, 131; feminism and, 202; "forbidden" literature and censorship, 172, 194; Hora and Communist Party, 116–17; as infantilizing, 187; in Kundera's works, 193–96; Seifert and, 125; as sterile, 203–4; subjectivity and, 18; subordination of women and, 11–12; as theme in works, 187; Velvet Revolution, 216–17
"Concerning the Jewish Fear" (Neruda), 46–47
Concerning the Reciprocity between the Various Tribes and Languages of the Slavic Nations (Kollár), 25
conformity. *See* social convention or conformity
Constance Ring (Skram), 77
constructivism, 107, 124, 126, 145
Cosmas, 21–22, 214
cosmopolitanism, 4, 15–16, 19–20; German-Jews of Prague and, 49, 59; *lumírovci* and, 47; Mácha and, 15–16, 20; nationalism/cosmopolitanism dichotomy, 47–48; Neruda and, 38–39, 40; Světlá and, 75
The Coward (film, Weiss), 179–80
cowardice: in Škvorecký's works, 176; as theme in post-WWII works, 189; in Weiss's works, 177–80; women as symbol of moral, 171. *See also* collaboration
The Cowards (Škvorecký), 176
crisis of masculinity, 104–7, 140–41; impotence, 130; in Kafka's works, 141, 144; as national crisis, 189–90; science and technology linked to, 144
criticism, literary: construction of Czech identity and, 5–7; Czech canon and, 10, 12; dichotomies in, 5–7, 12, 53; national identity and, 5, 10, 12; as political action, 12. *See also specific individuals and approaches*
The Cross by the Brook (Světlá), 75
Ctirad, 21, 49–51
"Ctirad and Šarka" (Hlaváček), 51
"Ctirad" (Zeyer), 49
The Cunning Little Vixen (opera, Janáček), 163
"Cut Piece" (Ono), 209
The Czech Amazons or the Maidens' War under the Rule of Heroine Vlasta (Šdivý), 23
Czech Chronicle (Hájak), 14, 23
Czech identity "Czechness," *xi–xii;* aestheticism and, 57; class and, 14; dichotomies and constructions of, 5–7; essentialist constructions of, 17; ethical or moral model of, 88, 92; feminism and Czech nationalism, 77; Hlaváček and, 57; ideology and construction of, 21–22; institutionalization of Czech culture, 47; Kundera and dichotomies of, 199; language and, 14–15; lime tree as symbol of, 49; National Revival and, 5; national *vs.* personal, 141–42;

Sokol movement and, 57; subjectivity and, 16–17; village life as essential to national identity, 60, 79; women authors and, 201–2
"Czech School" per Deleuze and Guattari, 142

Dadaism, 105, 108, 131, 208, 209, 213
Daisies (film, Chytilová): critical reception of, 206, 211; gender role reversal in, 210–13; suicide in, 211–12
Dalimil Chronicle, 14, 21, 23, 24, 215
"Darkness Casts No Shadow" (Lustig), 172, 182
Darwinian evolution, 144
The Daughter of Sláva (Kollár), 25–26, 30, 31, 40, 55
"The Daughters of Krok, Princesses of Bohemia," 24
David-Fox, Katherine, 4–5, 53
"Dead Barbora" (Světla), 60, 76–77
death: Čapek's works as preoccupied with, 167; Eros/Thanatos in Neruda's works, 42–43; Eros/Thanatos in Páral's works, 188; Eros/Thanatos in Seifert's works, 125–26; female voice as Romantic trope for, 160; femme fatale as embodiment of both life and, 160–61; homosexuality linked to suicide, 99, 102; immortality as theme of Čapek's works, 155–63; in Mácha's works, 31; marriage as alternative to, 36–37, 67–68, 71–74, 77–78; as penalty for female sexual freedom, 80, 82–85, 211–12, 221, 222; suicide, 99, 102, 181, 182, 211–12; the uncanny or oxymoronic as trope of, 159–60; Wolker's works and, 114
"Death in the Soul" (Camus), 172
de Beauvoir, Simone, 155–56
Decadent movement, 8; aesthetics and, 17, 89–90; "art for art's sake" and, 89–93; cosmopolitanism and, 16; deceit and lies as motif in, 92; Hlaváček and, 56–59; homosexuality and, 17, 53; individualism and, 7, 20, 53; Karásek ze Lvovic and, 53–55; masks as motif in works, 93; *Modern Review (Moderní revue)* and, 47; nationalism and, 20, 53; neo-revivalism rejected by, 53, 54, 58; Neruda as precursor to, 52–53; and "personality" per Pynsent, 7, 20; Procházka and, 53–54; Seifert as influenced by, 118–19; sexuality and, 16, 17, 53; social conformity rejected by, 54; subjectivity and, 20; vitalism and, 53, 57–59; Zeyer as precursor to, 52
"The Decay of Lying" (Wilde), 93
deconstruction, 12, 13, 17
Dekoven, Marianne, 154
Delacroix, Eugène, 22
Deleuze, Giles, 142
democratic humanism, 5, 138, 139–40
democratic ideals: as Czech legacy, 5–6, 11, 15, 23, 24, 138; democratic humanism, 5, 138, 139–40; democratic individualism, 5, 6; as impotent, 130; metaphors for destruction of, 186–87
The Deserts of Bohemia (Steiner), 7
Devětsil, 105, 124; Communism and, 105, 121, 130, 131; love as basis of, 121; political orientation of, 121; Seifert and, 121; Western culture and, 121
Děvin (Hněvkovský), 23
Diamonds of the Night (film, Němec), 172, 182–83
Diamonds of the Night or "Darkness Casts No Shadow" (Lustig), 172, 182
Dita Saxová (Lustig), 172, 181–82
Döblin, Alfred, 108
Dobrovský, Josef, 15
Dollimore, Jonathan, 17–18, 89, 92
dolls, 187–88, 205, 207–8, 211
A Doll's House (Ibsen), 77
doubling: *doppelgängers,* 45–46, 127–28, 149; in Erben's works, 37–38, 67–69, 205; in Hlaváček's works, 57–58; homosexuality and double identity,

doubling *(continued)*
98, 99–100; in Karásek's works, 93; mirrors and reflections, 93, 96, 101–2, 181; in Němcova's works, 67–69; in Nezval's works, 127–28; in Páral's works, 188; split identity, 57–58, 127–28, 181; in Weiner's works, 98–99
"Dr. Spoiler" (Neruda), 42
Dracula (Stoker), 46, 57
Dreamers and Murderers (Langer), 155
dreams: in Chytilová's films, 208–10; life as series of dreams in Mácha's *May,* 28; as undifferentiated from the real in works, 55, 183–84, 185
Dubey, Madhu, 201
Duhamel, Georges, 9, 108–9, 110
Durtain, Luc, 108
Dvořák, Antonín, 33, 49
Dyk, Viktor, 105

Ebert, Egon, 24
Ecstasy (film, Machatý), 129–31
Edison, Thomas (as literary figure), 126–28, 144
Effi Briest (Fontane), 77
Eisenstein, Sergey, 129
"The Electric Lyre" (Seifert), 119
Eluard, Paul, 132
emasculation: illness as metaphor for, 46; impotence linked to political powerlessness, 46, 117–19, 131, 171; mother as dominatrix or emasculating, 147, 171, 189–90; technology as emasculating, 115; weak or absent father as political metaphor, 170–71, 178, 190. *See also* castration
enigma, homosexuality as, 99
Enlightenment principles (liberty, fraternity, equality), 23–24, 25, 28, 61, 65, 195
Envy (Olesha), 111, 126
Erben, Karel Jaromír, *xi,* 11, 17, 209; allusion to in Kriseová's works, 221–22; Fate *(Sudice)* in works, 32–34, 36, 37–38; Mácha compared with, 31; mother as symbol of nation in works, 32, 36–37; mother-virgin dichotomy in works, 32–34, 161; musical adaptations of works, 33; Němcová and, 67–71, 72, 73; political allegory in works, 32, 34; religious imagery in works, 34–36; romanticism and, 31; sexuality in works, 32–35; sexual poetics of, 31; social conservatism and role of women in works, 36–38; Wolker on, 112–13
Ernst, Max, 208
Eros/Thanatos: in Neruda's works, 42–43; in Nezval's works, 134–35; in Páral's works, 188
Erotikon (film, Machatý), 129
Erwin, Egon, 8
essentialism, 17, 20, 66–67, 94
"Eternal Youth" (Langer), 155
ethnicity, 8–9; identity and, 3, 59; in Neruda's works, 41–42; racial purity in Neruda's works, 46–47
Eugene Onegin (Pushkin), 27
Eva (opera, Foerster), 78, 79–83
L'Eve nouvelle (Villiers de l'Isle-Adam), 126, 144
existentialism, 9, 117, 172–74

Faerie Queen (Spencer)
"The Fake Hitchhiker" (Kundera), 196–97
family, as metaphor: for nation, 41; for political situation, 170–71, 176–80
Far from the Tree (Brabcová), 203
The Farmer's Woman (Preissová), 60–61, 79–83
Fate *(Sudice):* in Erben's works, 32–34, 36, 37–38
fatherhood: in Čapek's works, 143–44, 157; masculine identity and, 144, 147; weak or absent father as political metaphor, 170–71, 178, 190
The Father (Jirásek), 80
The Father (Strindberg), 144
Felman, Shoshana, 200
female imagery: Amazon motif, 6, 21,

22–25; bread and woman's body as commodity, 113; during interwar period, 106–7; memory as embodied by women, 182; as misogynistic, 106; natural or vegetative images linked to women, 32, 36–37, 130, 134; oven as, 115–16; redemptive or salvatory role of female characters, 173, 175, 176, 177, 178–79; vamp-machine in *Metropolis,* 148, 151, 153. *See also* femmes fatales; nation, female personifications of

female sexuality: machines or destructive technology linked to, 107, 119, 130, 145, 146–52; male ambivalence toward, 184–85; male displacement and projection, 38, 146–47, 158, 171, 222; mother as dominatrix or emasculating, 147, 171, 189–90; phallic imagery linked to female sexual authority, 190, 192; political collaboration linked to, 178, 185; as predatory behavior, 44, 178, 184–85; as threat or cause of anxiety, 106–7, 130, 145, 149, 160, 163

femininity: as derivational, 200–201; Freud on, 141; Paris or France as "feminine," 106, 111–12, 120, 128, 135; as potent in contrast to abject masculinity, 119. *See also* female imagery; female sexuality

feminism, 10–11, 77; in Čapek's works, 142, 143, 145, 150, 152; in Chytilová's works, 205–14; Communist regime and subordination of women, 11–12; crisis of masculinity and perceived threat from, 107, 145; in Czech history and culture, 12–13, 15, 61, 129; Czech nationalism and, 77, 205; on identity and female subjectivity, 200–201, 222; identity construction and, 5; Kundera as misogynist, 199; language as patriarchal, 214–15; Němcová and, 62, 65; political and social movements, 61–62, 74, 145, 163; postwar culture and, 18; Preissová and, 78–79; subjectivity and, 6; subordination to nationalism, 18; Světlá and Czech Women's Movement, 60; voting rights of women, 143, 145, 163; women as doubly subordinated, 215–16; women's emancipation and, 61–62, 65, 74, 77, 78–79

femmes fatales: in Čapek's works, 145, 155, 156; in Czech folklore, 48–50; in Hrabal's works, 192; in Janáček's operas, 162–63; mother figures as, 48; political empowerment linked to, 192; Šárka as, 48–49; Vlasta as vampiric figure, 48; in Zeyer's works, 48–52

Fibich, Zdeněk, 49

film: Čapek's works adapted to, 166; capitalism in, 128–29, 130; crisis of masculinity in, 104, 130; New Wave film making, 175, 177, 206, 208–9; nudity in, 130; objective/subjective tension and, 128–29; Prague in, 107–8; sexuality as theme in, 128–29. *See also specific titles*

Fingerhut, Adalbert (Votja Náprstek), 74

Finney, Gail, 62

Fischerová, Daniela, 203

Foerster, Josef B., 78, 79

folklore, *xi,* 15, 17, 209; feminist deployment of, 214–15, 223; femmes fatales in, 48–50; Linhartová's deployment of, 214–16; national essence preserved in, 25; Němcová and ethnography or, 63, 67, 75; neo-revivalism and, 48; Preissová and ethnography or, 78–79, 80; Světlá and ethnography or, 75; virgins or maidens in, 21

Fontane, Theodore, 77

food: bread, 113, 116, 183–86, 188; death or sex linked, 184, 186, 212–14; images of, 184, 212–13

"The Footprint" (Čapek), 138

foreigners: as rapacious Others, 22–23, 34–35, 48, 52, 53

Forged Manuscripts, 24, 26, 48

formalism, 183
"The Fortune Teller" (Erben), 32
Foucault, Michel, 89
"The Foundation of Prague" (Brentano), 24
"Four Seasons" (Němcová), 60–61, 66–67, 70–71
France: cultural influences of, 3–5, 9, 15, 25, 48, 49, 58; existentialist influences from, 172–73, 174; as feminine or effeminate, 106, 110, 111–12, 120; George Sand as influence on Czech authors, 65–66; Proletarian poets and influences, 108–9, 116–17, 126; sexual degeneracy linked to, 101, 111
freedom: collective *vs.* individual, 212, 215; as Czech ideal, 24, 88, 206; as illusory, 197; in Karásek's works, 95; in Kundera's works, 196–97; national autonomy, 205–6, 207, 212; subjectivity and individual, 170; Teige and, 121–22
French, Alfred, 106
Freud, Sigmund, and Freudian theory: on castration anxiety, 147–48; on femininity, 141; feminist readings of, 154; literary criticism and, 43–44, 45, 115, 135, 159–60; the uncanny, 159–60
Frič, Josef Václav, 24
From Saturday to Sunday (film, Machatý), 129
The Fruits of Paradise (film, Chytilová), 204
futurism, 107

gambling, 127
Ganymedes (Karásek), 54
gaze: blindness, 115, 126; maternal gaze as oppressive, 191–92; "passionate spectator" in Weiner's works, 99–102; photography and, 151. *See also* voyeurism
Gellner, Ernest, 20
gender: androgyny, 111; anti-heroes and disillusionment with heroic manhood, 27; Darwinian theory and conventional social roles, 144; dichotomies of, 22, 25, 41–42, 61, 144; National Revival and contradictory expectations of, 206; national symbols as gendered, 7 (*see also* nation, female personifications of); Němcová and reversal of gender roles in works, 66; patriarchy and women's roles, 16–17, 153; poetry as sexualized and gendered struggle, 106; politics and, *xi,* 18; reversal of gender roles in works, 66, 210–13; sexual and gender difference in Neruda's works, 40–41; sexuality and, *xi;* subjectivity and, 6, 10–12, 16–17; "third sex" *vs.* "masculine" models of homosexuality, 53; transvestitism, 98. *See also* femininity; homosexuality; masculinity
The General Plot (Hostovský), 173–74
generational conflicts: in Hrabal's works, 188–90; interwar period politics and, 104–5; in Mácha's works, 30–31; in Němec's works, 185–86; in Neruda's works, 39, 41; Oedipal readings of, 186–87; political ideology and, 9, 203; in postwar works, 176, 177; in Vaculík's works, 187
German-Jews of Prague, 8, 10; cosmopolitanism and, 49, 59; as marginalized, 59
German language, 4, 8, 16
"The German Werewolves" (Procházka), 53
Germany: anti-Germanism, 3–4, 53; cultural influences of, 3–4, 14, 25, 65; Decadents influenced by, 53; Erben and, 33–34; Kollár, 25; Libuše and Vlasta in literature of, 24; literary influences (sort for more), 33; as "masculine" nation, 20; Nazi aggression and occupation of Czechoslovakia, 164; Nazi occupation as context, 64; Prague German writers, 88–89; Proletarian poets and German influences, 108–9
The Ghetto within Them (Hostovský), 173
Gide, André, 18, 89, 90
Gilbert, Sandra, 217–18, 220

glasnost, 202
Go in Search of the Green Light (Valenta), 175–76
The Golem: How He Came Into the World (film, Wegener), 148–49
golems, *xi,* 148–49, 153–54
Gordon, Avery F., 201
The Gothic Soul (Karásek), 54, 91
gradualism per Masaryk, 139–40
Granny (Němcová), 60, 63, 71–74, 206, 220
Grass, Günther, 192
Greece, 44–45, 47
Grillparzer, Franz, 24–25
Grund, Antonín, 31
Guattari, Felix, 142
Gubar, Susan, 217–18, 220
The Guest (journal), 108
A Guest into the Home (Wolker), 108–10

Hackenschmied, Alexandr, 128
Halas, František, 64
Hálek, Vítězslav, 38
Hames, Peter, 183
hands, imagery of, 117, 147
"The Hanged Man" (Neruda), 39
Hanka, Václav, 15, 26
Harte, Bret, 40
Heart of a Dog (Bulgakov), 142
The Heavy Hour (Wolker), 112–13
hedonism: in Chytilová's film *Daisies,* 223; female body as icon of, 123; sexual hedonism and poetism, 105, 119, 123, 124, 133; surrealism and, 132–33
Herder, Johann-Gottfried, 24, 25–26
Her Foster-Daughter (Preissová), 60–61, 80, 83–86, 222
Hero of Our Time (Lermontov), 27
hetero/homosexual binary, 90, 93
Heydrich, Reinhard, 171, 177
The Hideout (Hostovský), 172, 173–74
Hilton, James, 155–56
History of the Czech People (Palacký), 3
"History of the Six Empty Houses" (Nezval), 135
Hlaváček, Karel, 51, 56–59
Hněvkovský, Šebastián, 23, 50–51
Hobsbawm, Eric, 20
Hodrová, Daniela, 203
Hoffmann, E. T. A., 149–50, 205
Holocaust: in Czechoslovakia, 171–72; as setting for works, 176–77, 181–83
"Holy Hill" (Wolker), 110, 112, 124
homoeroticism: in Karásek's works, 54; in Zeyer's works, 52
homosexuality: as covert, 99; Decadents and, 17, 53; as *dégénéré,* 101; double identity and, 98, 99–100; ethical assumptions challenged by, 88; hetero/homosexual binary, 90, 93; "homosexual panic" and threat of prosecution, 99; identity construction and, 5, 17–18; as "indifference," 96, 100–101; in Kafka's work, 9; in Mácha's works, 29–30; masks or disguises and, 93, 102; narcissism and, 96, 101; as "reverse" discourse, 89; subjectivity of homosexual writers, 17–18, 89, 101–2; suicide and, 99, 102; "third sex" *vs.* "masculine" models, 53; as transgressive, 89, 101–2, 119; truth as contested and, 89; Weiner's stylistic ambiguity linked to covert, 98–103; Wilde and homosexual identity, 92
Honeymoon (Seifert), 123
Hora, Josef, 18, 105, 116–17
Host (journal), 108
Hostovský, Egon, 172–75
The House without a Master (Hostovský), 173
Hovor, Janko. *See* Neruda, Jan
"How Mr. Volavka Broke in His Meerschaum Pipe" (Neruda), 42
Hrabal, Bohumil: family as nation in works, 188–93; sex and politics in works, 188–93
Hus, Jan, 5, 23, 88
Huysmans, Joris-Karl, 89–90
Huyssen, Andreas, 146

Ibsen, Henrik, 77
idealism: Devětsil and, 121; as female artistic inclination, 61, 86–87; poetism and, 121, 122. *See also* idealism/realism dichotomy

idealism/realism dichotomy: as gendered binary, 61, 86–87; Němcová and, 60, 62; Světlá and, 75
identity: binary oppositions or dichotomies and construction of, 12; Bohemian, 3, 14, 21–22; in Čapek's works, 156–60; constructivist, 94; *doppelgängers,* 98–99; essentialist, 20, 94; ethnicity and, 3; gender and sexuality and construction of, 6–7, 10, 18, 200–201; gender identity subordinate to national, 10, 18, 200–201; generic *vs.* sexual, 17; homosexual identity, 5, 17–18, 89–90, 98–100 *(see also under specific authors);* ideology and construction of, 21–22; language and, 4, 14–15, 21; masks or disguises, 93, 102; memory and, 197–98; modernism and subjective crises of, 141–42; national and sexual identities as interchangeable, 20, 39–40, 46; Nezval and personal, 121; personal/political dichotomy and, 6–7, 18, 106, 172–73; as sexualized and gendered struggle, 106; social/subjective constructions of, 18; in Weil's works, 175. *See also* Czech identity "Czechness"
ideologies, 7–8; generational conflicts rooted in, 9, 203; identity construction and, 21–22; objectification of women and, 10–11; reinvention of the past and, 23–24. *See also* nationalism
illness: decadence and metaphors of, 49, 58; as metaphor in Čapek's works, 164–67; political emasculation of nation or identity linked to metaphors of, 46
impotence: democracy as impotent, 130; emasculation linked to political, 46, 117–19, 130–31, 171, 196; Freud on maternal emasculation, 147. *See also* emasculation
incest, 27, 31, 218, 220, 222
Indiana (Sand), 66, 70–71
Indian Run (Boučková), 203
"The Indifferent Spectator" (Weiner), 18, 90, 98–103
individual/collective dichotomies. *See* collective/individual dichotomies
individualism: Decadent movement and, 7, 20, 53; democratic individualism, 5, 6; interwar period and, 106, 170; Karásek and, 96–97; subjectivity and, 170; Teige and individual freedom as basis of collective freedom, 121. *See also* collective/individual dichotomies; subjectivity
infanticide, 82–86, 201, 218–20, 222
infertility or sterility, 113–14, 150, 158, 203–4
"In Moscow" (Hora), 117
interwar period, 170; as context, 104–5, 131
"Inultus: A Prague Legend" (Zeyer), 51–52
"Inventions" (Čapek), 146
Irigaray, Luce, 141, 154, 200
I Served the King of England (Hrabal), 192
Italy (Hora), 116–17

Jacobsen, Roman, 31
Janáček, Leoš, 49, 78; adaptation of Čapek's works, 161–63; adaptation of Preissová's works, 60, 79–83, 85
Janáčková, Jana, 7
Jan Hus (Tyl), 23
Jan Maria Plojhar (Zeyer), 49
Jenůfa (opera, Janáček), 78, 85–86
Jews: Ahasuerus, the Eternal Jew, 133, 155; anti-Semitism, 46, 107, 149, 153, 182; in Čapek's works, 142–43; cultural influence of, 4; the Holocaust in Czechoslovakia, 171–72, 176–77; Jewish writers, 8 *(see also specific authors);* Loew ben Bezalel, Rabbi Judah (Maharal of Prague), 144, 149, 153–54; as marginalized, 59, 141; Neruda as anti-Semitic, 46
Jirásek, Alois, 16, 48, 80
Jireš, Jaromil, 194
The Joke (film, Jireš), 194–96

The Joke (novel, Kundera), 193–96
Jones, Gayl, 201
"The Judgment" (Kafka), 144, 186
The Judgment of Libuše (Frič), 24
Jungmann, Josef, 15, 16
Juráček, Paval, 206
justice, as Czech ideal, 88

Kadár, Ján, 172, 180–81
Kafka, Franz, 8–9, 10, 59, 217; crisis of masculinity and, 104, 141, 144; Němec compared to, 183–84, 186; Weiner compared to, 103
Karásek ze Lvovic, Jiří, 16, 17–18; art as moral affirmation of identity, 96–97; and art as political and social tool, 90–92, 94; as critic, 94, 97; as Decadent, 53–55, 90–91, 95; homosexual identity and, 54–56, 90–94, 96–97; as representative of "personality" per Pynsent, 7, 90–91; sadomasochism in works, 52, 55–56; social norms rejected by, 54, 94–95; subjectivity and, 90–91, 95; subversive role of the artist in works, 90–92; transgression of social norms in works, 94–95; truth and, 90–95; on truth and deceit, 91–92; Wilde and, 91–94
Kiesler, Maria (Hedy Lamarr), 129–31
"King Bohusch" (Rilke), 3–4
Kittl (Kittel), F., 45
Klácel, František Matous, 65
Kleist, Heinrich von, 22, 27
Klos, Elmar, 180–81
Kollár, Jan, 15–16, 55; Mácha compared with, 27, 31; Panslavism and, 25–26; as representative of "nationality" per Pynsent, 7
Komenský, Jan Amos, 5
Kornfeld, Paul, 9
Kralice Bible, 14
Kriseová, Eda, 203, 216–23
Krumbachová, Eva, 206
Kundera, Milan, 11, 13; collective/individual dichotomy in, 195–98; Communism in works, 193–96; Czech language abandoned by, 216; freedom as theme of works, 196–97; gender dichotomies in works, 198–99; as misogynist, 199; as political exile, 198
Kusá, Julie, 79
Kytice (Erben), 32, 68, 199, 205

Lady Chatterley's Lover (Lawrence), 129
Lamarr, Hedy (Maria Kiesler), 129–31
Lang, Fritz, 104, 107, 130, 138, 140–41, 146–49
Langer, František, 155
language, 8–9; abandonment of native tongue, 214–16; censorship of Czech during Bach Reaction, 31–32, 38–39; Czech as proscribed in Neruda's works, 40–41; identity and, 4, 14–15, 21; Kundera's abandonment of Czech, 216; Linhartová's abandonment of Czech, 214–16; Prague Circle of Linguists, 13; Prague University, language-based divisions in, 16, 47
Laughable Loves (Kundera), 196
Lawrence, D. H., 129
"The Legend of Sodoma" (Karásek), 18, 90–97
"The Legend of the Melancholy Prince" (Karásek), 54
"Lenin" (Seifert), 124
"Lenore" (Bürger), 27, 33
Lermontov, Mikhail, 27
Lesser Town Tales (Neruda), 40
Letters to a Female Friend about the Origins of Socialism (Klácel), 65
"Letter to His Father" (Kafka), 104, 144
Libočan, Václav Hájek z, 14
Libuše (opera), 6, 23, 24, 48–49; depictions in visual arts, 48, 49; in Erben's works, 32; in German literature, 24; in Linhartová's works, 214–15; as "mother" of nation, 22; as national symbol, 24; as personification of Bohemian history, 24–25
Libuše's Marriage (opera, Škroup), 24

Libussa (Grillparzer), 24–25
"Libusza, Duchess of Bohemia," 24
The Life of Saint Catherine, 73–74
Life with a Star (Weil), 172–73
"The Lilac by the Museum on Wenceslas Square" (Nezval), 134
Lim, Bliss Cua, 205
lime tree as symbol of "Czechness," 49
liminality: Edison as liminal figure, 126–27; in Hlaváček's works, 57–58; in Neruda's works, 43, 44–45; vampires as liminal creatures, 57–58. *See also* marginality
Linhartová, Věra, 203, 214–16
Lissitzky, El, 111
Little Otík (film), *xi*, 209
Liuše (opera, Smetana), 24, 48–49
Lives of the Painters (Vasari), 94–97
Loew ben Bezalel, Rabbi Judah (Maharal of Prague), 144, 149, 153–54
longevity: in Čapek's works, 155–63
Lost Horizon (Hilton), 155–56
"Ludmila" (Zhukovsky), 33
Lumír (journal), 47
Lunacharsky, Anatoly, 105
Lustig, Arnošt, 172, 181; as alleged Zionist, 182–83; narrative discontinuity in works, 182

Mácha, Karel Hynek, 6, 15, 175; antiheroes in works, 27–28; cosmopolitanism and, 15–16, 20; Czech language works, 28–29; Erben compared with, 31; generational conflicts in works, 30–31; Kollár compared with, 27, 30, 31; nationalism and, 7, 28–29; Neruda compared with, 43; nihilism in works, 27–28, 30; romanticism and, 27–28; sexuality in works, 29–30
Machar, Josef Svatopluk, 77
Machatý, Gustav, 129–31
machines or technology: ambivalence of avant garde toward, 107; America and Edison as icons of, 126–27; American efficiency as dehumanizing, 142; Čapek on, 138–39, 142, 146; cult of masculinity and, 111; cult of the machine, 145; as dehumanizing, 138–39, 142; as emasculating, 115–16, 147–48; golems as, 148–49; modernism and, 145; in Seifert's works, 124; women and female sexuality linked to, 107, 119, 130, 145, 146–52, 204. *See also* robots
Macpherson, James, 26
Macura, Vladimír, 6, 23
Magyars, 52
maidens: Bohemian Maidens or War of the Maidens, 21, 23, 24, 48, 50, 215. *See also* virgins
"The Mail Box" (Wolker), 109–10, 114
Majerová, Marie, 77–78, 202
The Makropulos Case (Čapek), 155–63
The Makropulos Case (opera, Janáček), 161–63
Malířová, Helena, 77
Malmstad, John, 111
Manfred (Byron), 27
Man with a Movie Camera (Vertov), 111
Marcuse, Herbert, 187
marginality: critics and, 101–2; Czech culture as spatially and ideologically liminal, 10, 127; Edison as liminal figure, 126–27; homosexuality and marginalization, 102; Jews as marginalized, 59, 141; Neruda's characters as outsiders, 40, 43–44; Prague and, 10; spatial liminality in Neruda's works, 43, 44–45; in Weiner's works, 100
marriage: death as alternative to, 36–37, 67–68, 71–74, 77–78; European feminism and depictions of, 77; extramarital sex and pregnancy in Preissová's works, 82–85; infidelity in Preissová's works, 80–82; in Světlá's works, 76
Martinů, Bohuslav, 33
Marxism: Hora and, 116; surrealism and, 131–32, 136. *See also* socialism
Mary Magdalen (Machar), 77

Maryša (Mrštík brothers), 80
Masaryk, T. G., 5, 6, 11, 88, 138, 139–40
masculinity: anti-heroes and disillusionment with heroic manhood, 27; "crisis of masculinity," 104–7, 113, 115, 130, 189–90; cult of masculinity in pre-Soviet period, 111; cult of the male body and, 53, 56; fatherhood and, 144, 147, 157; impotence and frustration in works of Proletarian Poets, 115–16, 117–18, 131; Moscow linked to, 106, 111, 128, 135; and postwar politics, 18; rationality as male, 144, 148; reason or science linked to, 148; Soviet Russia as "masculine," 106, 108, 110–11; surrealism and images of abject, 131. *See also* emasculation
Mašek, Karel Václav, 49
masks or disguises, 93, 102
materialism, *xi,* 123, 131, 144
May (film, Burian), 133–34
May (Mácha), 6, 27–31, 175
Mayakovsky, Vladimir, 105
May Almanac (anthology), 38, 60
Mayerová, Milča, 123
"The Meaning of Czech Literary History" (Šalda), 5
Medusa, 147
Meissner, Adolf, 24
memory: in Kundera's works, 197–98; in Lustig's works, 181–82; subjective treatment of, 185
The Menorah (Škvorecký), 172, 174
Menzel, Jiří, 208–9
"The Metamorphosis" (Kafka), 144
"Metempsychosis" (Karásek), 55
methodology: gender and sexuality as lens, 7–8, 13; inclusion of women authors, 10–11
Metropolis (film, Lang): capitalism critiqued in, 130; crisis of masculinity and, 104, 130; ideology in, 140–41; *R.U.R.* compared to, 146–49
The Midnight Patient (Hostovský), 173–74
Milton, John, 16
misogyny, 11, 199, 206
modernism: alienation and, 122, 132–33, 145; America linked to, 126–27; in Central Europe, 4–5; collective/individual tension as central paradox of, 5; crisis of masculinity and, 104–7, 115, 130, 141; Czech culture and, 13; death and the uncanny, 160; democracy and, 141; Edison as icon of, 126–27; masculinity and, 141–42; the "modern woman," 163; moral *vs.* subjective truth and, 88; nationalism and, 4–5, 7; poetism and, 105, 122–23; Proletarian Poets and, 106; sexual degeneracy and, 111; skepticism and, 138; truth and morality as contested, 103. *See also* machines or technology
Modern Review (Moderní revue), 47, 53, 57
"modern woman," 163
"The Monologue of the Handless Soldier" (Seifert), 117
"Moon over Prague" (Nezval), 134–35
morality: in Chytilová's works, 207–8; homosexuality and subjective, 17–18, 54, 88–97, 102–3; Karásek and rejection of bourgeois, 54, 90–97; modernism and truth as contested, 103; Preissová's works as challenge to conventional, 84–85; in Weiner's works, 98–100; women as corrupt or moral danger, 17, 206
Morrison, Toni, 201, 216–17
Moscow: as "father," 135; masculinity linked to, 106, 111, 128, 135; as subject in Hora's works, 117
The Mother (Čapek), 163, 167–69
Mother Courage (Brecht), 168
motherhood, 11–12, 17; in Čapek's works, 158, 161; dominating or emasculating mother in Hrabal's works, 189–90; in Erben's works, 32, 36–37; femme fatale as mother, embodiment of both life and death, 160–61, 184–85; Freud and link between castration anxiety and the mother,

motherhood *(continued)*
147; golem or robot manufacture as usurpation of, 153–55; as identity, 223; infanticide or abortion, 82–86, 113–14, 201, 218–20, 221, 222; Libuše as "mother" of nation, 22; as metaphor for authorship, 219; mother-of-nation trope, 63–64, 171, 178–79; nation as mother, 22, 32, 36–37, 40, 198–99; in Neruda's works, 40; sterility or infertility, 113–14, 150, 158, 203–4; Teige's collages and imagery of, 135–36; virgin-mother image, 21, 25, 32–34; womb imagery, 203; as women's theme, 203
mother-virgin dichotomy, 21, 25, 32–34
Mrs. Dalloway (Woolf), 104
Mrštík brothers, 80
Mrs Vojnarová (Jirásek), 80
Mucha, Alfons, 48
Mulisch, Harry, 137–38, 144, 153–54
Myslbek, Josef Václav, 48

Nadja (Breton), 106
nation, female personifications of, 16, 20–21, 206; Bohemian Maidens of mythology and, 24; foreign invasion as rape, 22–23, 34–35, 48, 52, 53; Libuše as, 22; maidens or virgin, 21, 22–25, 26; nation as mother, 32, 36–37, 63; Němcová as national icon, 63–64; Slavic race as feminized, 26–27
national identity: gender and sexuality in constructs of, 20, 26, 39–40, 46; gender identity subordinate to, 10, 18, 200–201, 216; women authors and, 201–2. *See also* Czech identity "Czechness"
nationalism, 8; aestheticism as antithetical to, 57; cosmopolitanism/nationalism dichotomy, 47–48; Decadents and, 20, 53; Erben and, 31; Hlaváček and, 57; institutionalization of Czech culture and language, 47; Mácha and, 28–29; modernism and, 4–5, 7; Old *vs.* Young Czech and conformity/defiance dichotomy, 38; rapacious or vampiric Other, 22–23, 34–35, 48, 52, 53; Romantic nationalism, 25–26; *ruchovci* and, 47; women as symbol of nation, 7, 10–11, 40; in Zeyer's works, 49, 52
"Nationalism and Internationalism" (Hlaváček), 57
National Revival: gender and, 206; identity construction in context of, 14; "maiden" Bohemia images during, 22–25; medieval and early-modern period as inspiration, 19; Neo-national Revival, 15, 16, 47–50, 54, 58; Panslavism and, 15; personal/political identity and, 19; Romanticism, 15
National Theater (Prague), 16, 24, 47
nationhood: crisis of masculinity linked to crisis of nation, 189–90; family as metaphor for nation, 41; lack of statehood, 46; loss of Bohemian, 47; Poland and, 46
naturalism: in Preissová's works, 61, 84, 86–87
nature: female nudity as symbol of, 130; identity and nature *vs.* culture debate, 89, 92; nation as natural or organic, 25; poetism and harmony between man and, 115, 120; Preissová's use of natural imagery, 83; as redemptive, 149; village life as idealized, 79, 86–87, 179; women as artificial, 134; women as embodiment of, 32, 37
Nausea (Sartre), 172
Nazism: Čapek's works as response to, 164; collaboration and, 172, 180; occupation as context, 64, 172–77
Nebeský, Václav Bolemír, 63
Němcová, Božena (Barbora Panklová), 15, 16–17, 60; collective ideal and, 72–73; critical reception of works, 60–61, 64–65; death of, 63; Erben and, 67–71, 72, 73; as essentialist,

66–67; feminism and, 62, 65, 69, 73, 215–16; folklore and ethnography, 63, 67, 75; as icon of mother-of-nation, 63, 206, 216; Klácel and, 65; marriage in works, 70–71, 73–74; marriage to Josef Němec, 62–63, 71; as naïve or sentimental writer, 62; political engagement of, 62, 64–65; realism in works, 65; Romantic idealism in works, 60, 62; Sand as influence on, 65–66, 67, 70; social conventions as source of tension in works, 72; Světlá contrasted with, 75; tension between realism and idealism in works, 62; village life in works, 60, 63, 71–73

Němec, Jan, 172, 182–84; Kafka compared with, 182–84, 186

Neo-national Revival (neo-revivalism), 15, 16, 47–50, 54, 58

Neruda, Jan, *vii,* 16, 19–20; cosmopolitanism and, 38–39, 40; generational conflict in works, 39, 41; Harte as influence on, 40; insider/outsider status in works, 40–42, 43, 46–47; journalistic career of, 38–39; Mácha compared with, 43; marginality and, 40, 43–45; *May Almanac* and, 38; national identity expressed through sexual difference, 39–40; nation and literature as gendered female in works, 40; nation-as-mother trope in works, 40; as precursor to Decadence, 52–53; sexuality and nationhood, 46; sexuality in works, 39–44, 46; spatial liminality in works, 43, 44–45; Světlá and, 75; voyeurism in works, 45–46

The New Eve (Villiers de l'Isle-Adam), 126, 144

Newmarch, Rosa, 162–63

New Objectivity *(Neue Sachlichkeit),* 107, 145

Nezval, Vítězslav, 18, 105; capitalism in works, 108; Devětsil and, 120; dual identity in works, 127–28; Eros/Thanatos in works, 134–35; female sexuality in works, 108; identity and, 132; poetism and, 105, 120–22; politics and, 128; Prague in works, 108, 127–28, 132–33, 135; sadomasochism in, 135; surrealism and, 105, 126–27, 131–35; Teige and, 120, 123–24; virginity in works, 133

Ni Dhomnaill, Nuala, 201

Nietzche, Friedrich, 53, 54, 56, 92–93

The Nightingale Sings out of Tune (Seifert), 124

"The Noontime Witch" (Erben), 33

Nothing but Love (Seifert), 119

Novák, Arne, 64, 75

Nováková, Tereza, 77

The Novel of Manfred Macmillen (Karásek ze Lvovic), 91–92

objective/subjective dichotomy: in Czech literature, 5–7; dual perspectives in works and, 183, 217–18; film and, 128–29; gender and, 10–11, 16, 212. *See also* objectivity; subjectivity

objectivity, 6; in *Aimless Walk,* 128–29; New Objectivity *(Neue Sachlichkeit),* 107, 145; symbolic use of women and, 10–11

"O Bohemia," 22

Old Czech Legends (Jirásek), 48

Olesha, Yury, 111, 126

Ono, Yoko, 209

On the Wireless Waves (Seifert), 123, 124

opera, 48–49; adaptation of Preissová's works, 60, 78, 79–83; as patriarchal and conservative art form, 85–86

Oratorio for Prague (Němec), 186–87

Orfeus (journal), 105, 110

organicism, 24–25

Ossian cycle, 26

Otčenásek, Jan, 172, 176–77

Our Lady Božena Němcová (Halas), 64

"Our Two Questions" (Schauer), 5

Owen, Wilfried, 104

oxymoron in Romantic fiction, per Jackson, 159

Palach, Jan, 212
Palacký, František, 3, 5, 15
palimpsestual model of women's works, 201, 206, 220–22
Panslavism, 15; Kollár and, 25–26
Pantomima (Nezval), 121–22, 123
Paradise Lost (Milton), 16
Páral, Vladimír, 187
Paris: as feminine or effeminate, 106, 120, 128, 135; as "mother," 135; as "Other" to Prague, 108, 119–20
"Paris" (Seifert), 119–20, 121
passivity: as Czech trait, 54–56, 192; as female trait, 154; in Kundera's works, 197; male fantasies of, 191; socialism and, 187. *See also* voyeurism
patriarchy, 16–17, 153; Amazon maiden images in context of, 21–22, 23–24; Darwinian theory and erosion of, 144; master narrative and, 201–2, 204, 208, 214–16, 223; in Němcová's works, 215–16; opera as conservative and patriarchal form, 85–86; weak or absent father as symbol of national crisis, 170–71, 178, 190; women as complicit in, 214–16
Pekárková, Iva, 203
Penthesilea (Kleist), 22
personality *vs.* nationality, per Pynsent, 7, 19–20
personal/political dichotomy, 18; Erben and reconciliation of, 37; identity and, 6–7, 18, 106, 172–73; modernism and, 141–42; National Revival and, 19; poetism and tensions caused by, 123; in Seifert's works, 117; in Weil's postwar works, 174
personal/social dichotomy, 48
Petersburg (Bely), 132
La petite Fadette (Sand), 68
photography, 199; male gaze and, 151; poetism and, 123; voyeurism and, 199
The Picture of Dorian Gray (Wilde), 46, 91
Pictures from Moravian Slovakia (Preissová), 79
Píša, A. M., 112–13
Poems (Kollár), 25
Poems in Verse (Thám), 15
Poems of the Night (Nezval), 126
Poems on Postcards (Nezval), 123
poetics/politics dichotomy in Czech literature, 5–7
poetism: free association as foundation of, 121–22; idealism and, 121, 122; Nezval and, 105, 120–22; as optimistic in outlook, 121–23; as pessimistic or melancholic in tone, 124–27; political/personal tensions within movement, 123; Seifert and, 124–28; sexual frustration and alienation in, 124–27; sexuality and politics conflated in, 123; Teige as theorist of, 105, 120–21, 124; visual arts and, 122–23; Wolker and, 121
The Poets of Prague (French), 106
Poland, 46
politics: art as political and social tool, 94; Čapek's political concerns as expressed in works, 163–69; conformity/defiance dichotomy in Erben's work, 37–38; Devětsil and communism, 105, 121, 130, 131; family as metaphor for political situation, 170–71, 176–80; fascism, 164; gender and the body politic, *xi,* 195; interwar period and literary, 104; left-wing politics as masculine, 111; Masaryk on Czech political history, 5, 6; Munich Agreement, 171; Nezval, 128; poetics/politics dichotomy in Czech literature, 5–7; poetism and, 125, 128; political identity, 106; Prague Spring, 186–87; Proletarian Poets and leftist, 108; in Proletarian Poets' works, 108, 117, 118–20; sex fused with, 38, 117, 118–20, 123, 129, 187–88, 192–93, 194–95, 197–98; shift to the left after WWI, 104–5; women's emancipation, 145. *See also specific ideologies*
Pound, Ezra, 106
Prague: as context for authors, 8–10;

female personifications of, 125, 132; gendered personifications of, 55; modernism and, 4–5; in Nezval's works, 108, 127–28, 132–33, 135; Paris as "Other" to, 108, 119–20; as setting for Camus story, 172–73; as setting for Neruda's works, 38, 40–42; "simultaneous centrality and marginality" of, 10; Soviet invasion and occupation, 186–87; as trope in film, 107–8
Prague-German writers, 8. *See also specific authors*
Prague School, 8, 10
Prague Spring (August 1968), 186–87, 194, 197–99, 204–5, 206, 212
Prague Territories (Spector), 8
Prague University, language-based divisions in, 16, 47
"The Prague Walker" (Nezval), 133
Prague with Fingers of Rain (Nezval), 126, 132
A Prayer for Kateřina Horovitzová (Lustig), 181
Preissová, Gabriela, 10, 11, 60; critical reception of works, 82–83; extramarital sex in works, 82–85, 222; feminism and, 78–79; folklore and ethnography, 78–79, 80; Jirásek and, 80; marriage and marital infidelity in works, 80–82; marriage to Jan Preiss, 78; naturalism in works, 61, 79–80, 82–84, 86–87; operatic adaptations of works, 60, 78, 79–83; Romantic conventions used by, 83, 84
private/public dichotomy: interwar period and, 106
The Procedure (Mulisch), 137–38, 144, 153–54
Procházka, Arnošt: as Decadent, 53–54; as representative of "personality" per Pynsent, 7
"The Proletarian Art" (Teige), 120
Proletarian Poets, 9; alienation and, 117; Brno Literary Group, 108–9; class insecurity of, 108, 113; French influences on, 108–9, 116–17; love as ideal of, 109; modernism and, 106; political activism and, 108, 110–11; political insecurity and, 110–11; political leftism and, 108, 130; sexual insecurity in works, 110–11; socialist politics and, 108; unanimism and, 108–10; Wolker as apotheosis of, 105, 112–13
protest, literature as, 104
Przybyszewski, Stanisław, 53
Psalms (Hlaváček), 57
Ptáčková, Brigita, 206
Puchmajer, Antonín Jaroslav, 15
Puchmajer School, 15
Punin, Nikolai, 145
Pushkin, Aleksandr, 27
Pygmalion (Shaw), 145, 161
Pynsent, Robert, 7; on Karásek ze Lvovic, 90–91; on link between sex and socialism, 187

Queen Mab (Shelley), 155

racial purity: in Neruda's works, 46–47
rape, 22–23, 30, 31, 34–35, 48, 52, 53
Read, Herbert, 210, 213
realism: "art for art's sake" and, 89–90; as illusory, 208; as male artistic inclination, 61, 86; Neruda and, 41–42; Nezval and poetism as "heightened," 122; Russian literary influences and, 75, 79; Světlá and, 60, 61, 75; Wolker and, 112–13. *See also* naturalism; socialist realism
The Red and the Black (Stendahl), 27
religious themes or images: Adam and Eve, 126, 144, 148, 153, 208; Brno Literary Group and, 108; in Erben's works, 34–36; Esther as redemptive figure, 179; hagiography of martyred virgins, 73–74; mother-of-nation trope linked to Mary cult, 64; in Němcová's works, 73; Proletarian Poets and loss of faith, 112, 117–18; in Zeyer's works, 51–52

Remarque, Erich Maria, 104
revival. *See* National Revival
"Revolution" (Seifert), 119
The Revolutionary Anthology of Devětsil (Teige and Seifert), 121
Richterová, Sylvie, 203
Riffraff (Neruda), 40
The Right to Happiness (Malířová), 77
Rilke, Rainer Maria, 3–4, 8, 9
The Rime of the Ancient Mariner (Coleridge), 46
robots: as artificial life rather than machine, 138, 143, 163; as *doppelgängers,* 149; golems as, 148–49; motherhood as usurped by male creation of, 153–55; as new Adam and Eve in *R.U.R.,* 148, 151–52, 153; sexuality and, 149–50; vamp-machine in *Metropolis,* 148, 149, 151, 153; word coined by Čapek, 137–38. *See also R.U.R.* (Čapek)
Rollard, Romain, 108
Romains, Jules, 108
Romanticism, 7; Čapek's use of romantic elements, 144, 149–50; gendered symbols of nation and, 25; mother-virgin and, 25; nationalism and, 25–26; National Revival and, 15; nation perceived as natural or organic in, 25; Němcová and Romantic idealism, 60, 62; Neruda's use of romantic elements, 45; oxymoron and, 159; Preissová's use of Romantic conventions, 83, 84; reinvention of mythic past and, 25–26
Romeo, Juliet and Darkness (film, Weiss), 177–79
Romeo, Juliet and Darkness (Otčenásek), 172, 176–79
Rössler, Jaroslav, 123
Rottová, Johanna. *See* Světlá, Karolína (Johanna Rottová)
Rottová, Žofie, 66
Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, 25–26, 120
Ruch (almanac), 47
"Rule by Machines" (Čapek), 146
R.U.R. (Čapek): as allegory, 140, 142, 144–46, 150–52, 158; America in, 142, 146, 152; capitalism and the working class in, 140–41, 146, 152, 168; contexts of writing, 154–55; critical reception of, 139; fatherhood or reproduction as issue in, 143–44, 153–55; *Metropolis* compared to, 146–49; Mulisch on, 138; names as significant in, 139, 143, 144, 150, 152; political contexts for, 141; relativism and, 139; utopian literary precursors of, 142
Russia: literary realism and influence of, 75, 79; masculinity and virility linked to, 106, 108, 110–11, 124, 129–30; Soviet Russia as literary influence, 105

sadomasochism: in Karásek's works, 52, 55–56; in Kundera's works, 193; in Nezval's works, 135; vivisection, 142; in Zeyer's works, 49–51, 52
Šalda, F. X., 5, 97
Salivarová, Zdena, 203
"Samko the Bird" (Zeyer), 51, 52
Sand, George (Amandine-Lucile-Aurore Dupin, Baroness Dudevant), 63, 65–66, 70–71; Balzac and, 61; Světlá and, 75
"The Sandman" (Hoffmann), 149–50, 205
Šárka, 21, 23, 49–51
"Šárka or The Maidens' Battle near Prague" (Thám), 23
Sartre, Jean-Paul, 9, 172, 174
Sassoon, Siegfried, 104
Scarabaeus (Karásek), 54
Schauer, Hubert Gordon, 5
Scheinpflugová, Olga, 155
Schindler's List (Spielberg), 171
Schmidt, Wilhelmina, 26
Schopenhauer, Arthur, 53
Schor, Naomi, 64, 66
scientific materialism, 144
Scott, Ridley, 138
Scruton, Roger, 140

Second Surrealist Manifesto (Breton), 131
Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky, 93, 99
Šedivý, Prokop, 23
Seifert, Jaroslav, 18, 64; capitalism in works, 108; Communist Party and, 125; Decadent and Symbolist influences in works, 118–19; Devětsil and, 121; Eros/Thanatos in works, 42–43, 125–26; female sexuality in works, 108; personal and political in works, 117; Prague in works, 108; sexual and political impotence conflated in works, 117–19; sexual imagery in works, 125–26; surrealism and, 130, 131; Teige and, 125
The Semester of Life (Červenková), 203
sensualism, 48, 52, 53–54, 120–21
sex: as alienating, 124–27, 197; Freud's "uncanny" and sexual anxiety, 159; impotence linked to political powerlessness, 117–19, 189–90. *See also* sexuality
Sex and Character: An Investigation of Principles (Weininger), 107, 141
Sexual Dissidence (Dollimore), 89, 92
sexuality: binary constructions of, 93, 106; consumerism, sex as commodity, 188, 192–93; female sexuality as threatening, 106–7, 145, 149, 160, 163; femmes fatales in Čapek's works, 145, 155, 156; femmes fatales in Zeyer's works, 49–52; hedonism, 105, 119, 123, 124, 132–33; hetero/homosexual binary construction of, 93; homoeroticism in Karásek's works, 54; homoeroticism in Zeyer's works, 52; in Kafka's work, 9; in Mácha's works, 29–30; male/female binary construction of, 93; Proletarian Poets and, 109; socialism and casual, mechanical sex, 187–88; as theme in film, 128–29
Sexus necans (Karásek), 54–56
Shaw, George Bernard, 139, 145, 155, 157–58, 161
Shelley, Mary, 137, 144
Shelley, Percy Bysshe, 155
The Shop on Main Street (film, Kadár and Klos), 172, 180–81
Showalter, Elaine, 151
"The Siblings" (Rilke), 9
sight. *See* gaze
Šiklová, Jiřina, 12
silence: in Weiner's works, 98, 103
Silesian Songs (Bezruč), 111–12
"Sinful City" (Seifert), 118–19
Sketches from the Ještěd Country (Světlá), 76–77
Skram, Amalie, 77
Škroup, František, 24
Škvorecký, Josef, 172, 176
Sládek, Václav Josef, 47
Slánský, Rudolf, 182
slave narratives, 201
Slavic identity: gendered symbols of Slavdom, 7
Slavophile movement, 15
Slovanka (Slavic Woman), 23
Smetana, Bedřich, 24, 48–49
Smutná, Dana, 179
social convention or conformity: Decadents and rejection of, 54; in Erben's work, 37–38; feminism in literature and rejection of, 77; homosexuality as transgression of, 54, 88, 98–100, 119; Karásek's rejection of, 54, 94–95; in Kundera's works, 197; in Němcová's works, 67; in Neruda's works, 40–42; Old *vs.* Young Czech and conformity/defiance dichotomy, 38; Weiner's use of homosexual transgression as theme in works, 98–99; women's roles and, 34–36, 40–42, 61–62. *See also* morality
socialism, 65; casual, mechanical sex linked to, 187–88; feminist-socialist authors, 202; Hora and Marxism, 116; "with a human face," 207, 212; identity construction and, 5; sexuality and, 129–31; surrealism and Marxism, 131–32, 136

socialist realism, 105, 175, 183
"The Socialization of Art" (Karásek), 93
Sodoma (Karásek), 54, 55
"The Sokol as Social Movement" (Hlaváček), 57
Sokol movement, 53, 56–57
Šomková, Lori, 29
Soviet Russia: as literary influence, 105; masculinity and virility linked to, 106, 108, 110–11, 124, 129–30
Spector, Scott, 8, 10, 59
Spencer, Edmund, 22
Spielberg, Steven, 171
Srp, Karel, 151
Stagnant Waters (Karásek), 54
Steiner, Peter, 196
Stendhal (Marie-Henri Beyle), 27
sterility or infertility, 113–14, 150, 158, 203–4
Štoesslová, Kamila, 162
Stoker, Bram, 46, 57
Stránecká, Františka, 78–79
Strindberg, August, 144
Strings in the Wind (Hora), 116–17
"The Stroller through Prague" (Apollinaire), 4, 133
structuralism, 13
Štyrský, Jindřich, 132, 151
subjectivity: "art for art's sake" and subjectivity of truth, 90–93; Communism and postwar, 18; female authors and perspective in works, 217–18; first-person perspective and, 217–18; as gendered, 6, 10–12, 16–17, 64, 200–201; of homosexual writers, 17–18, 89–95, 101–2; individualism and, 170; interwar period and rejection of, 106; Karásek and deconstruction of national identity, 17; Mácha and, 20; male subjectivity, 10–11, 16; master narrative and female subjectivity, 201–2, 204, 208, 214–16, 223; memory as subjective, 185; Proletarian Poets and, 114, 116; subjective/objective opposition in Czech literature, 5–7; symbolic use of women and, 10–11; truth as subjective rather than absolute, 88, 98, 101–2; of women writers, 64, 200–201. *See also* gaze
Sue, Eugène, 155
suffrage, 143, 145, 163
suicide: in *Daisies* (film, Chytilová), 211–12; homosexual confessions linked to, 99, 102; in Lustig's works, 182; in Němec's works, 181
surrealism, 208; as antidote to loneliness and fear, 132; female imagery in, 106–7, 133–35; Marxism and, 136; Nezval and, 105, 126–27, 131–35; politics and, 131–32; Seifert and, 130, 131; Teige and, 132, 133–34; women's sexuality as threatening, 106–7
Surrealist Manifesto (Breton), 131
Švankmajer, Jan, *xi,* 209
Světlá, Karolína (Johanna Rottová), 6; cosmopolitanism and, 75; Czech identity and, 74–75; as feminist, 60, 74; folklore and ethnography, 75; genders as depicted by, 75–77; marriage in works, 76–77; marriage to Petr Mužák, 74–75; Němcová contrasted with, 75; Neruda and, 75; realism in works of, 60, 61
"Svetlana" (Zhukovsky), 33
Svobodová, Růžena, 77
Symbolism (Symbolist movement), 4, 16; Czech literature and, 47–52
symbolists: Seifert as influenced by, 119

"The Table of Princes" (Herder), 24
"The Teacher's Wife" (Auerbach), 66
technology. *See* machines or technology
Teige, Karel: collages and visual art by, 133–34, 135–36, 148, 151; Devětsil and, 105; Nezval and, 120, 123–24; poetism and, 105, 123–24; political orientation of, 123; surrealism and, 132, 133–34
Těsnohlídek, Rudolf, 163
texts, selection of, 13

Thám, Václav, 15, 23
Thám School, 15
theater: Czech language dramas, 23; folklore as dramatic source, 23–24; Mácha and, 29–30; National Theater, 47, 79, 138. *See also specific works*
Theer, Otakar, 105
"There Was a Madhouse on the Hill" (Neruda), 39, 41
"Things" (Wolker), 109–10, 114, 122
Three Legends of the Crucifix (Zeyer), 51–52
Tilschová, Anna Maria, 77
The Tin Drum (Grass), 192
"To Barbarians" (Kollár), 26–27
"To Czech Women" (Němcová), 63–64
"To Julius Zeyer" (Rilke), 4
Tolstoy, Leo, 83, 139
Too Late for Night, Too Early for Dawn (Hlaváček), 57–59
totalitarianism, 170–71, 196
Town in Tears (Seifert), 117
Trakl, Georg, 104, 114
transgression: female agency as, 208, 209–10; in Karásek's works, 94–95; transgressive aesthetic of Wilde, 89–90, 92; transgressive ethic of Gide, 89–90; in Weiner's works, 98–99
translations, *xii*
transvestitism, 98, 102
A Tree in Flower (Hora), 116
The Trial (Kafka), 183–84
truth: "art for art's sake" and, 89–93; Čapek and skepticism, 138–39; deceit and, 90, 97; homosexual subjectivity and, 89–95; Karásek and, 90–92, 97; in Kundera's works, 196; life/art binary and, 90, 97; Masaryk and love of truth as Czech historical legacy, 88; modernism and truth as contested, 103; as moral absolute, 88, 98; relativism and, 139; as subjective, 88–95, 97–98, 101–2; Weiner and, 98–102
"Two Children are Threatened by a Nightingale" (Ernst), 208
"2000 Words" (Vaculík), 187
"The Two Traditions of Czech Literature" (Wellek), 6
Tyl, Josef Kajetán, 4, 9, 23
Tyrrell, John, 161

unanimism, 108–10; Proletarian Poets and, 116–17
The Unbearable Lightness of Being (Kundera), 198–99, 210–11
utopianism, 56, 104–5, 107, 142, 155; androgyny and, 111; collectivism and, 145

Valenta, Edvard, 175
"The Vampire" (Hlaváček), 57–59
"The Vampire" (Neruda), 44–46, 47
vampires: artists as, 45–46; demon lover in Erben's work, 34–36, 221; foreign invaders as, 34–35, 48; Greece associated with, 44–45, 47; in Hlaváček's works, 57–59; immortality and, 155; in Neruda's works, 44–46, 47; vitality symbolized by, 58–59; Vlasta as vampiric figure, 48
Various People (Neruda), 44–46
Vasari, Giorgio, 94–97
The Veiled Picture (Karásek), 93
Velvet Revolution, 216–17
Vertov, Dziga, 111
Vienna, 4–5, 62
Vildrac, Charles, 9, 108–9, 110
village life: Czech national identity and, 60, 79; as idealized, 79, 86–87, 179; in Němcová's works, 60, 63, 71–73
A Village Novel (Světlá), 60, 75
Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, Jean-Marie-Phillipe-Auguste, 126
Virginity: The Story of a Girl (Majerová), 78
virgins: death of, 73–74, 77–78, 214; demon lover and the maiden, 34–36; in Erben's works, 32–34; in folklore, 21; male virginity as political impotence, 189; mother/virgin dichotomy, 21, 25, 32–34; as national symbol, 21–25, 26; in Němcová's works,

virgins *(continued)*
66–67, 73–74; in Neruda's works, 39; in Nezval's works, 133; redemptive purity and, 178–79; religious hagiography and martyred, 73–74; Romanticism and mother-virgin, 25; virgin/whore dichotomy, 149
visual arts, 47–48; poetism and, 122–23; surrealism and, 132, 133–34; Teige's collages, 133–34, 135–36, 148. *See also* film
Vitalism, 9, 57–59, 116–17
vivisection, 142, 150–51
Vlašín, Štepán, 97
Vlasta, 21, 23, 24, 48, 49–50
"Vlasta" (Ebert), 24
"Vlasta" (Meissner), 24
Vlček, Tomáš, 5
voyeurism: female body as invitation to, 133; female body fetishized by, 133; in Hrabal's works, 190–91; in Karásek's works, 55–56, 56; in Němec's *Diamonds of the Night,* 184; in Neruda's works, 42–43, 45–46; in Nezval's works, 133–34; passive homosexuality linked to, 55–56, 134; photography and, 199; political surveillance linked to sexual, 190–91. *See also* gaze
Vrchlický, Jaroslav, 47, 53, 83
Vyšehrad (Zeyer), 49, 52

Walker, Alice, 201
Walled-up Windows (Karásek), 54
The Wandering Jew (Sue), 155
War of the Maidens, 21, 48
Wayside Crosses (Čapek), 138
We (Zamyatin), 145
"The Wedding Shirts" (Erben), 33, 68, 72, 73, 161, 221
"Wedding Song" (Seifert), 124–25
"A Week in a Quiet House" (Neruda), 40–42
Wegener, Paul, 149
Weil, Jiří, 172; identity in works, 172–73; real and imaginary as indistinguishable in works, 173
Weiner, Richard, 9, 13–14, 18; collective/individual tension in works, 102; critical reception of works, 97, 102–3; double entendre or word play in works, 98–99, 100–101; homosexual identity and, 97–98, 99, 101; homosexual transgression as theme in works, 98–99; Jewish identity of, 97; Kafka compared to, 103; as "outsider," 97, 102–3; silence in works, 98, 103; as stylistically ambiguous, 97–103; subjective nature of truth in works, 98, 101–2; subjectivity and, 90, 101–2, 102
Weininger, Otto, 107, 141
Weiss, Jiří, 177–80
Wellek, René, 6
Wells, H. G., 142
Wenceslas, Saint (Wenceslas I, Duke of Bohemia), 58
Werfel, Franz, 8
Western cultural traditions, 12–13, 16, 38; classics as influence, 22; Czech culture as distinct from, *xii. See also* America; France; Germany
"Wet Picture" (Seifert), 125
The White Sickness (Čapek), 163–67
The White Sickness (film, Haas), 166
"Wild Bára" (Němcová), 60–61, 67–71, 209, 215–16
Wilde, Oscar, 17–18, 54; homosexual identity and, 89, 90; Karásek ze Lvovic and, 91–93; in Seifert's works, 119
"The Willow" (Erben), 36–37
Wolker, Jiří, 18, 105; abortion and castration anxiety in works, 113–14; class insecurity of, 113, 114; on Erben, 112–13; female imagery in, 113, 114–15; French influences and, 110, 112–13; inanimate objects in works, 109–10; love in works, 109–10; masculine persona cultivated by, 109–10, 111;

physical health and fear of death, 110, 114; poetism and, 121; political activism and, 110, 112; realism and, 112–13; sexual anxiety in works, 111–12
"The Woman from the Region of Tyre" (Boučková), 203–4
womb imagery, 135, 198–99, 203
Women's Production Association, 74
"The Wondrous Magician" (Nezval), 105, 120–21
Woolf, Virginia, 104
"A Word with You Housewives!" (Němcová), 65
Working Day (Hora), 116
World of Art movement, 111
World War I: as context for literature, 103
World War II: Nazi aggression and occupation of Czechoslovakia, 164, 172–77

Zamyatin, Yevgeny, 145
Zeyer, Julius, 4, 9; Christian religious themes in works, 51–52; femmes fatales in works, 48–52; nationalism and, 49; as precursor to Decadence, 52; sadomasochism in works, 49–51, 52; as symbolist, 47, 49–52
Zhukovsky, Vasily, 33
"Zone" (Apollinaire), 110