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THE POETICS OF SUBVERSION: IRONY AND THE CENTRAL EUROPEAN

NOVEL

by

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A Dissertation submitted to the

Graduate School-New Brunswick

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Graduate Program in Comparative Literature

written under the direction of

Jerry Aline Flieger

and approved by

New Brunswick, New Jersey

May, 2010

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Poetics of Subversion: Irony and the Central European Novel

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The literatures of Central Europe's small countries were seriously engaged in the national project during the nineteenth century, standardizing and exemplifying both the national language and national heroes. However, the breakup of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1918 produced a new ironic consciousness in the literatures of the newly-independent Central European nations. Surprisingly, at a time when the peoples of Central Europe achieved national self-determination, their literatures began using irony to call nation and nationalism into question. Novels such as Jaroslav Hašek's *The Good Soldier Švejk*, Robert Musil's *The Man without Qualities*, Witold Gombrowicz's *Trans-Atlantyk*, and Milan Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* criticize the national project, its cultural manifestations, and its effect on modern subjectivity.

The similarities between these novels are obscured by the multiple historical changes that swept through Central Europe throughout the twentieth century. The breakup of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the independence of Czechoslovakia and Poland in 1918 was followed a generation later first by the Nazi invasion of these countries, and then the rise of Communism less than a decade later. Cold War

geopolitics redrew the map of Europe, grouping Communist countries in “Eastern” Europe while Austria, now a small nation itself, remained in the West. The critical result of this temporally limited topography is a conspicuous absence of comparative scholarship engaging these authors. Despite this critical lacuna, the influence of the cultural development shared by German-speaking Austria and its Slavic neighbors on Central European poetics is undeniable. These novels are products not only of the modernist impulse as a whole but also of the twentieth-century Central European *Zeitgeist*. This dissertation develops a theory of irony in order to examine the structure of subversion common to all four of the novels in this study and then shows how irony structures the text’s interaction with the reader as a political subject and implicates the reader in a network of multivalent textual desire that subverts political hegemony, nationalism, and literary genre convention.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank my committee: Professors Jerry Aline Flieger, Louis A. Sass, Janet Walker, and Irene Sywenky. Without their constant support, encouragement, and criticism, this dissertation would not have been possible. I also wish to thank Graduate Director of Comparative Literature at Rutgers, Elin Diamond, for her constant support and encouragement, and for all she has done for Comparative Literature at Rutgers.

I want to thank Dr. Sanja Bahun-Radunović, Dr. Janet Walker, and Dr. Richard Serrano for their emotional support. They strongly encouraged me to persevere in my studies despite several setbacks.

My initial interest in Central European literature was piqued by courses taught by Dr. Katarzyna Jerzak and Dr. Mihai Spariosu at the University of Georgia. I am also indebted to Jaroslava Saldonová, who taught me Czech at the University of Washington during the 1999 – 2000 academic year.

Finally, I want to thank my fellow graduate students at Rutgers, from both Comparative Literature and other disciplines. Extended conversations with Dr. Geoffrey Baker and Dr. Chadley Loewen-Schmidt, as we drove to and from numerous conferences, allowed me to flesh out my project and talk through the jumbled ideas floating in my head. Dr. Aaron Keck, Dr. Jennifer Miller, and Dr. Christopher Rivera all read multiple drafts of early chapters and provided invaluable feedback. I also owe thanks to Monica Filimon for co-chairing a panel on East-Central European literature with me at the 2009 American Comparative Literature Association Conference, and to Jennifer MacBryan for providing extensive commentary on my introduction.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, who never (openly) questioned my decision to pursue graduate study. This dissertation is also dedicated to my fiancée Bénédicte Lebéhot. You are the light of my life, and I couldn't have done it without you!

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iv
Dedication	v
Table of Contents	vi
1. Introduction	1
2. Prosaic Irony: Structure, Mode, and Subversion in Jaroslav Hašek's <i>The Good Soldier Švejk</i>	63
3. The Center Cannot Hold: Irony and Schizoid Politics in Robert Musil's <i>The Man without Qualities</i>	120
4. "The Second Time as Farce:" The Irony of Displacement in Witold Gombrowicz's <i>Trans-Atlantyk</i>	170
5. Variations on a European Theme: Milan Kundera's <i>The Book of Laughter and Forgetting</i>	229
Conclusion	290
Bibliography	298
Curriculum Vitae	306

Introduction

While modernist writing has no shortage of anti-heroes, the constellation of the Czech good soldier Švejk, the Austrian “man without qualities” Ulrich, the Pole Witold Gombrowicz’s fictional alter-ego, and Milan Kundera’s panoply of marginal figures is particularly striking. Not only do these misfits lack the quality of heroism, but they actively subvert its ideals, having caused each of the novels in which they appear to be banned at times. Difficult if not impossible to pin down ideologically, these protagonists vacillate, betray, and undermine themselves and others even when acting with the best of intentions. They appear not to represent any particular worldview, let alone a political one, and yet they are read as all the more political for this very reason. Indeed, to speak of these works as novels may even force us to reconsider what exactly constitutes a novel. Almost every page is shot through with irony that subverts not only idealistic content but also generic narrative structures as well. This raises the question: are these similarities merely superficial, or is there a deeper explanation for this—are they products not only of the modernist impulse as a whole but also of what Milan Kundera calls the same “*genius loci*” (“From Nation to World” 12-13), of Central Europe?

The conspicuous absence of comparative scholarship engaging these authors is perhaps attributable largely to the national, linguistic and critical traditions into which these authors are often placed. In keeping with the dominant mode of criticism in Eastern and Central Europe throughout much of the twentieth century, much of the scholarship on *The Good Soldier Švejk* is explicitly structuralist, and while much has been written on irony in Robert Musil’s *The Man Without Qualities*, the novel is often situated within the

German tradition rather than considering it against Czech or Polish works. The topographies of marginality in Witold Gombrowicz's *Trans-Atlantyk* have invited approaches from the perspective of gender and queer theory, while Milan Kundera's exilic status has arguably helped him to win a place among the canonical writers of Western Europe despite his thematizing of Central European concerns within his novels. There is thus fertile ground for a comparative reading of these authors, based on shared transnational and translinguistic regional context, benefiting from a critical approach pliable enough to engage their novels in all their variety.

The Problem of Location

If these writers indeed partake of the same *genius loci*, we must specify the location before the genius. However, a cursory glance at the names given to the region that sits in the geographical heart of Europe is enough to suggest that the very definition of the region—to say nothing of its history—is far from a settled matter. The region sandwiched between the traditional powers of Western Europe on one side and Russia on the other is variously known as *Mittleuropa*, Central Europe, Eastern Europe, or—more recently—East-Central Europe. Three of these four designations define the region at least partly in terms of its actual geographical centrality to the European continent, and the fourth also defines the region (somewhat less accurately) in geographical terms. These geographical markers, however, mask the geopolitical interests that have struggled for hegemony over the region for centuries. The term *Mittleuropa*, for example, connotes “the encounter of German culture with the other cultures of the same region, but its predominant implication was that of a German or at best German-Hungarian supremacy in Central Europe” (“Budapest Roundtable” 29). Offering a more

comprehensive definition, Robert Pynsent, the editor of the *Reader's Encyclopedia of Eastern European Literatures*, defines the region in terms of political oppression:

The term Eastern Europe is not simply geographical. This Companion covers East European literature and that is a political designation. Eastern Europe indicates those linguistic areas or nation-states which were or considered themselves oppressed by [...] one of the four great European continental empires (Austrian, Prussian, Ottoman, and Russian) for anything from fifty to a thousand years. (vii)

In giving Eastern European literature a “political” designation, Pynsent categorizes the region’s myriad literatures neither through any immanent quality of the literature itself nor through shared cultural influences, but solely according to whether or not a particular nation has suffered the indignity of being a subject nation of a larger multinational empire.

Moreover, an Eastern Europe that includes obviously Central European countries such as the Czech Republic or Hungary is a strictly post-1945 designation, based on the former Soviet Union’s political domination of the region. Nor has the Cold War’s end brought definitional accuracy. Attempting to redraw the region without a German- or Soviet-centered perspective, Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer define “East-Central Europe” as a “liminal” region between Western Europe and Russia, a region whose countries have typically fallen under foreign domination, but their East-Central Europe includes Asian nations such as Georgia and Armenia, undermining their attempt at greater geographical nuance in favor of again defining the region’s literary cultures in terms of geopolitical boundaries. These editors simply adjust the power dynamic implied

by “*Mitteleuropa*” or “Eastern Europe,” resulting in an emphasis on the perspective of the subject nations and adding countries whose culture bears little resemblance to those of Central Europe’s. Moreover, like Pynsent’s Eastern Europe, Cornis-Pope and Neubauer’s East-Central Europe still excludes the “imperial literatures” of countries like Austria and Russia. In defining this protean region in terms of its political domination by multinational empires, the cultural definition of *Mitteleuropa*/Eastern Europe/East-Central Europe is always imposed from the outside, precluding the possibility of the region’s self-definition. The geographical fact of these countries’ respective locations in Central and Eastern Europe alone might justify the inclusion of their literatures in a survey of Central or Eastern European literature; a study of Austrian literature that fails to take into account the Central European context (or vice versa) would seem to be at best misguided. Thus, while some recent scholarship on Czech and Polish literature aims to correct the weakness of the category of Eastern Europe, the term East-Central Europe is simultaneously too inclusive—because it includes subaltern states from outside the region—and too exclusive—because it excludes nations like Austria—to be useful for a project that incorporates *The Man Without Qualities*.

The region’s practitioners of literature—the writers themselves—are equally frustrated in their attempts to define the region. Rhetorically asking what the idea of Europe means for the inhabitants of Central Europe, Kundera answers, “For them, the word ‘Europe’ does not represent a phenomenon of geography but a spiritual notion synonymous with the word ‘West’” (33). “After 1945,” Kundera continues, “the border between the two Europes shifted several hundred kilometers to the west, and several nations that had always considered themselves to be Western woke up to discover that

they were now in the East” (33). Not entirely unproblematically, Kundera divides Europe into West and East based on the respective influences of the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches. Under the influence of the former, countries like Poland, Hungary, or the former Czechoslovakia would then be Western. What is at stake in these ostensibly geographical designations, then, is not only the question of imperial influence but also how the Central Europeans themselves come to define their own history and culture. This project adds to the debate on whether these small nations have independent cultures or merely local variations of the centralized imperial culture, and addresses how such geographical designations complicate cultural markings.

In terms of their literary development, countries like the Czech Republic and Poland are, regardless of political destiny, as “Western” as Austria or even Germany and France, and so while it may be a bit old-fashioned, I use Central Europe as a name for a region that includes Austria as well as its Slavic neighbors. For comparatists such as Kundera, “Central Europe cannot be defined and determined by political frontiers” (“Tragedy” 35) but the history of “Central Europe” can be defined by its culture, especially its literary culture. While the shifting nature of the region’s political frontiers indeed renders them invalid as the primary means of regional definition, nevertheless, political boundaries can never be entirely absent from a consideration of Central European culture. Insofar as its cultural production reflects, responds to, and even shapes reactions to historical events, the literary production of these geographically central but politically marginal nations necessarily views the seminal moments of European history from a decidedly different perspective. That is, for the majority of the countries situated in the middle of Europe, the ways the dominant culture narrates their “history”—even

after (debatably) achieving geopolitical autonomy—have often been not of their own choosing. Although all of these countries had their own separate linguistic and cultural traditions and in some cases had been regional powers prior to subjugation by one or another of the continental empires, their history is narrated by these very empires. Thus, while Kundera argues that Central Europe must be understood culturally as part of the West, he claims elsewhere that even within the West there are “two different ways of regarding history (in which big nations play, or believe they play, the role of subject whereas the small nations feel like history’s object)” (“From Nation to World” 7). Kundera’s use of grammatical terms “subject” and “object” to distinguish between the roles of powerful and weak nations in relation to history highlights not only their difference in perspective but the discursive, narrative, and even desiring nature of history itself.

Defining Central Europe, then, requires a model that can take borders and frontiers into account while de-emphasizing their importance. In “Variations on Central European Themes,” the Serbian novelist Danilo Kiš adds to this discussion with a terminological shift that, like Kundera’s, effaces the border’s importance while suggesting instead that the border *crossing* may be deserving of our attention. According to Kiš, the two primary models for understanding Central European culture and literature are a centripetal model, in which “we see Vienna as the fountainhead and epicenter of culture for the entire region” (97), and a centrifugal model, which regards Central European literature and culture “as an autonomous and self-sufficient phenomenon in spite of and in opposition to Vienna, a counterreaction to all trends originating in Vienna” (Ibid.). While Kiš’s centripetal model is analogous to *Mitteleuropa* and his centrifugal

model analogous to both Pynsent's "Eastern European" and Cornis-Pope and Neubauer's "East-Central European" categories, his terminology introduces the useful notion of *vectors* or movement. That is, both the centripetal and centrifugal models imply movement and direction, and I argue that it is precisely the notion of movement rather than direction that is crucial here. In a region dominated at various times by different multinational empires, Central European literature must be influenced by the culture of the regional powers. However, if Central European literature is to have any value at all, it cannot simply be a localized deformation of that power's culture. That is, while it is undoubtedly influenced by its position within the orbit of a hegemonic power, it is also influenced by and responds to local concerns, some (but not all) of which are directly opposed to that of the hegemony. To assign primacy to one sphere of influence over another—the either/or of the centripetal vs. centrifugal dichotomy—is an arbitrary move. Attempting to define the region in terms of a multiplicity of vectors, then, may provide a corrective to preexisting models.

The work of the French poststructuralist Michel de Certeau is especially useful for considering vectors and space in relation to power dynamics. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau makes a categorical distinction between *place* and *space*. According to de Certeau, "A place (*lieu*) is the order (of whatever kind) in accord with which elements are distributed in relationships of coexistence. It thus excludes the possibility of two things being in the same location (*place*). The law of the 'proper' rules in the place: the elements taken into consideration are *beside* one another, each situated in its own 'proper' and distinct location" (117, author's italics). The most common example of de Certeau's conception of place is a map, where clear demarcations exist between

countries. Shared cultural influences, trade routes, and border crossings (in the sense of the *act* of crossing a border) do not appear on the map. The map effaces the existence of vectors that establish relationships between separate places. The map of Austria-Hungary, for example, does not show how the empire's satellite populations speak a language different from German, nor does it show the contentious relationship they have with Vienna.

Space, on the other hand, makes this multiplicity of vectors present. "Space," de Certeau writes, "occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it, and make it function in a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs or contractual proximities" (117). That is, space revels in the ambiguity and instability that are anathema to place. "In relation to place," de Certeau continues, "space is like the word when it is spoken, formed into a term dependent upon many different conventions, situated as the act of a present (or of a time) and modified by the transformations caused by successive contexts [...]. In short, *space is a practiced place*" (117, author's italics). De Certeau's analogy comparing space to the word is something to which I will return in my discussion of Jacques Lacan's four discourses, but my point here is that de Certeau's conception of space allows us to consider geography not in terms of borders but border crossings, not in terms of unidirectional influence and action but in terms of a multiplicity of vectors that simultaneously work within and against hegemonic definitions of a geographical *locus* (place).

In fact, every place is already a space, but particular motivated interests can turn space into place, and vice versa. De Certeau uses the example of a map to make this point: "[I]f one takes the 'map' in its current geographical form, we can see that in the

course of the period marked by the birth of modern scientific discourse (i.e. from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century) the map has slowly disengaged itself from the itineraries that were the condition of its possibility” (120). In order to map a state or a region, one must be able to travel to its borders, and it is this voyage that makes mapping possible. At the same time, the map must efface the traces of these voyages in order to create the illusion of “proper” and “distinct” locations. Place, therefore, is fundamentally illusory, the result of a retroactive delineation. To consider a place from a spatial perspective, then, is simply to call attention to the itineraries and operations that are immanent, if repressed, in location. Based on my understanding of de Certeau, *Mitteleuropa* is a place, but so is Eastern/East-Central Europe because the latter does not address shared influence, instead presuming a qualitative separation between the literary cultures of the Czechs and the Austrians, to take one example. Central Europe is for me a protean, amorphous *space* where both the hegemonic and subaltern cultures contribute in different ways to our understanding of the region’s literature.

Taking into consideration all the issues to which I have briefly alluded here, I will argue that this perspective grounded in a subaltern relationship to history informs the novels I consider in this project. For although some modernist authors of East-Central Europe have proclaimed their distance from politics, these novels demonstrate an engagement in conversations about nation, nationalism and history that subvert both the monolithic histories grounded in the perspective of the “big nations” and hegemonic discursive structures. They do so by utilizing comic—especially ironic—narrative strategies and modes of discourse to carve a space for a more cosmopolitan vision of history. After considering the “location” of the *genius loci*, we may now attempt to

define its particular “genius.” The first question is one of historical context: who or what is determining the meaning of artistic “genius”?

Theorizing/Thematizing History

“History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake.” –James Joyce

The ideological predisposition to consider history as merely a chronicling of factual events makes it easy to omit the realization that historical narratives are biased according to who is relating the meaning of these events. Historical narratives “most manifestly are,” as Hayden White claims, “verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much *invented* as *found* and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences” (82, author’s italics). The word fiction here, derived from the Latin *factio* (to shape or form; to counterfeit; to assume), implies the necessarily subjective nature of any historical narrative. However, if histories take as their subject matter facts and real events, what disqualifies them from the status of a purely objective narrative? “Histories,” White answers, “gain part of their explanatory effect by their success in making stories out of *mere* chronicles; and stories in turn are made out of chronicles by an operation which I have elsewhere called ‘emplotment.’ And by emplotment I mean simply the encodation of the facts contained in the chronicle as components of specific *kinds* of plot structures” (83). I understand the word “chronicle” here as designating a sequence of events, factual, fictional or mythic, referred to by any story. Simply presented in order of occurrence, without commentary or interpretation, chronicles lack obvious narrative qualities such as intention or causality, appearing as nothing more than “a congeries of ‘facts’ which, in their unprocessed form, make no sense at all” (White 83). According to White, then, what we conceive of as history is never the purely objective reconstruction of the historical chronicle, but rather

the work of an interested consciousness desiring to generate meaning and perceive relationships among the raw materials of the world.

Moreover, White situates his observation in a psychoanalytic perspective, arguing that facts, inherently devoid of meaning, are an example of the Lacanian category of the Real, or that which can never be known except through the inherently limited and limiting perspective of a meaning-making narrative. It is only through the process of being taken up in the network of signifiers—language—that the Real comes to *mean* anything, to find a place in our psychic and ideological economy. The lack of inherent meaning in (Real) historical events leads White to claim:

[N]o given set of casually recorded historical events can in itself constitute a story; the most it might offer to the historian are story *elements*. The events are *made* into a story by the suppression or subordination of certain of them and the highlighting of others, by characterization, motific repetition, variation of tone and point of view, alternative descriptive strategies, and the like—in short, all of the techniques that we would normally expect to find in the emplotment of a novel or a play[...] Whether they find their place finally in a story that is tragic, comic, romantic, or ironic—to use [Northrop] Frye’s categories—depends upon the historian’s decision to *configure* them according to the imperative of one plot structure or mythos rather than another. (84, author’s italics)

In other words, no matter how “true” the events referred to by any historical narrative may be, they have no explanatory force until placed within a narrative that establishes relationships using familiar plot structures. Knowledge, conceived as the ability to make

meaning, is nowhere inherent in the chronicle, but only in the *structure* of a historical narrative.

We find a parallel to White's terminology in the work of psychoanalytic literary critic Peter Brooks' *Reading for the Plot*, in which Brooks draws upon the categories of Russian formalism in distinguishing between *fabula*, the order of events referred to by a narrative, and *sjuzet*, the order of events presented in the narrative itself (12). These two categories are analogous to chronicle and history, respectively, in White. Commenting on the relationship of *sjuzet*/history to *fabula*/chronicle, Brooks claims, "Narrative always makes the implicit claim to be in a state of repetition, as a going over again of a ground already covered: a *sjuzet* repeating the *fabula*" (97). White's "operation" of emplotment finds a literary cognate in "plot," which Brooks defines as "the active process of *sjuzet* working on *fabula*, the dynamic of its interpretive ordering" (25). Because any plotted narrative—even historical—is always already *sjuzet*, Brooks argues, "We must [...] recognize that the apparent priority of *fabula* to *sjuzet* is in the nature of a mimetic illusion, in that the *fabula*—'what really happened'—is in fact a mental construction that the reader derives from the *sjuzet*, which is all that he ever directly knows (13). Thus any narrative, from the purely imaginary to the "purely factual," is implicitly marked by the shaping consciousness or even an "unconsciousness"—always the product of a perspective limited in time and place—and narrative only comes to the reader with this marking.

I want to argue that the limitations of perspective, however, do not suffice to render a historical narrative invalid. Indeed, two opposing histories could conceivably be generated from arranging and interpreting the same apparently factual material from the

perspective of the empowered or the disempowered. That is to say, while histories that falsify evidence may be discredited by refuting their fact-claims, this mode of criticism cannot account for the explanatory force of a counterfeit history nor those of alternative histories whose fact-claims are equally valid. White stipulates that if histories gain their explanatory power not through factual but through formal means, the “nonnegatable element” in a history “is its form, the form which is its fiction” (White 89). White adds:

The “overall coherence” of any given “series” of historical facts is the coherence of story, but this coherence is achieved only by a tailoring of the “facts” to the requirements of the story form[...] Properly understood, histories ought never to be read as unambiguous signs of the events they report, but rather as symbolic structures, extended metaphors, that “liken” the events reported in them to some for with which we have already become familiar in our literary culture[...] The metaphor does not *image* the thing it seeks to characterize, it gives directions for finding the set of images that are intended to be associated with that thing. (91)

This argument has ramifications for any narrative which follows generic structures. I would agree with Brooks’ claim that “Plot is the structure of action in closed and legible wholes; it thus must *use* metaphor as the trope of its achieved interrelations, and it must *be* metaphoric insofar as it is totalizing” (91), but I would add that White’s emphasis on the importance of plot *structures* which serve as templates for the dynamic of plotting and even reading implies that meaning depends more on these structures than on the interrelation of any thematic content. As White suggests, “Viewed in a purely formal way, a historical narrative is not only a *reproduction* of the events reported in it, but also a *complex of symbols* which gives us directions for finding an *icon* of the structure of

those events in our literary tradition” (88, author’s italics). Rather than operating as “the trope of achieved interrelations,” metaphor functions instead as a pre-existing structure into which variable content may be plugged, suggesting that the overall meaning of a history is predetermined by narrative structure.

If this is the case, then subversion of history cannot be accomplished by an attempt to simply correct the record. Rather, subversion necessarily becomes a formal or structural problem. Here, the work of Jacques Lacan is important because his unique conflation of psychoanalysis, structuralism, and Hegelian dialectics produces a structure of historical discourse. Generic histories and narratives operate under the aegis of what Lacan calls the “master signifier.” Explaining the master signifier in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Lacanian theorist Slavoj Žižek notes that when speaking about the ideological, it is the presence of a certain “master signifier,” the signifier of an ideological system as such, which stops the sliding of other signifiers and fixes their meaning in ways that have political relevance. According to Žižek, “in the ideological space float signifiers like ‘freedom’, ‘state’, ‘justice’, ‘peace’... and then their chain is supplemented with some master-signifier (‘Communism’) which retroactively determines their (Communist) meaning: [for example] ‘freedom’ is effective only through surmounting the bourgeois formal freedom” (102). Discourse in which the meanings of words are dependent on the silent operation of a master signifier is analogous to de Certeau’s conception of *place*, wherein the inherent ambiguity and sliding of meaning is effaced and each signifier appears to have clearly demarcated boundaries. While Žižek’s claim works on the level of language and ideological systems, when discussing narrative the issue is less one of identifying the master signifier *per se*, but rather the discursive

structure which privileges it, allowing it to indicate *a priori* the metaphoric value of all the other signifiers in the text.

The historian, then, succeeds less by bringing new facts to light than by telling a story that use familiar structures, bringing “to his consideration of the historical record[...] a notion of the *types* of configurations of events that can be recognized as stories by the audience for which he is writing” (White 84). “The reader,” White continues, “gradually comes to realize that the story he is reading is of one kind rather than another: romance, tragedy, comedy, satire, epic, or what have you. And when the reader “has perceived the class or type to which the story he is reading belongs, he experiences the effect of having the events in the story explained to him” (86). For this reason, White writes, “historical narratives are not only models of past events and processes, but also metaphorical statements which suggest a relation of similitude between such events and processes and the story types that we conventionally use to endow our lives with culturally sanctioned meanings” (88). Any historical narrative, then, is equal parts manipulation of a chronicle and manipulation of the reader. To the extent that they follow any generic conventions, even the most politically radical and engaged narratives mobilize desire in predictable ways, routing the reader’s “trans-individual” desire through pre-established channels. In this sense, generic narrative discourse, like everyday speech, is always “the discourse of the Other” according to Lacan.

The idea of history as a formalization of data into a metanarrative, as White conceives, is intensified here by the idea of genre. Genres are always both conscious uses of style and “specific socio-historical operations of language by speakers and

listeners, writers and readers” (Heath 168-9). Such genre address, Stephen Heath argues, “*appeals*, is an envisaged mobilization of desire, holding reader or listener to ‘pleasures’ which define her or his generic participation” (169, author’s italics).¹ Genre conventions determine the direction that desire can take toward fulfillment, undermining the subversive potential of the aesthetic. Whether explicit or not, the resistance to a hegemonic version of history is resistance to both a particular discourse and a particular *kind* of discourse, and if irony is a strategy of resistance endemic to the novels under consideration, it is because irony is a technique uniquely suited to address discursive phenomena on the level of both content and form.² However, if irony’s role is to subvert narrative structure, this suggests that irony itself is a structural phenomenon, or at least one that is marked by being different from certain generic structures. This is important not only for the collective modernist impulse, which perceived a historical schism as the world entered modernity, but especially for Central European modernists, whose subaltern position within the European continent provided the ideological distance they needed in order to recognize the relationship between historical narrative structure and its power. It is for this reason that irony appeals to the temporal *genius loci* of Central European modernism. Having already discussed the *locus* of this particular ironic worldview, the next aspect of this concept that requires attention is the *genius*, or better yet, “*le génie comique*.”³

The Comic, or “It’s not funny if I have to explain it”

“If everyone were honest with each other, they’d soon start punching each other’s noses.” –Jaroslav Hašek

¹ Indeed, the title of Wai Chee Dimock’s recent discussion, “Genres as Fields of Knowledge” suggests that genre itself functions in its own creation of “truth.”

² In their engagement with this issue the modernist authors of Central Europe anticipate the distrust of “metanarratives” more commonly associated with postmodernism.

³ I use the French term *génie* here because it connotes the idea of genius and is also a figure for an almost demonic presence—the genie escaped from a bottle or lamp—that is the unconscious.

In describing the motive force behind the comic, I prefer the French “*génie*” because not only is the term cognate with the English and Latin “genius,” it also carries the association with the daemonic, suggesting a residual, repressed specter that haunts the quotidian. Recognizing that there is no universal standard by which everybody can agree on what is or is not funny, it is necessary at the outset to define the comic for the purposes of this discussion. In comic theories that do not impose a rigid dogmatism on their object of study, there tends to be a recurring emphasis—inseparability, even—of the comic from the twin concepts of simultaneity and complexity. Using “comedy” as a broad term that covers the comic genre, Alenka Zupančič writes that “comedy thrives on all kinds of short circuits that establish an immediate connection between heterogeneous orders” (8). This “short circuit” indicates simultaneity insofar as its effect depends on the difference between the literal meaning of words and something that exceeds this meaning. In her survey of modern and postmodern comic theory, Jerry Aline Flieger argues that “comic” is the most inclusive term that can capture the various comic theories’ emphasis on play, suggesting that the comic is “a mode of writing which is not necessarily funny (and which may even be frightening or poignant) but which can nonetheless be associated with the kind of clowning or gaming so prevalent in late twentieth century writing. Indeed, I use the term *comic* as a performing metaphor that both demonstrates and generates the process it describes” (13). Focusing on the novel, I argue that the comic mode of writing shows not only that the content of the message is irreducible to the surface meanings of the words on the page, but that a comic transaction also generates this complexity in the reader. The simultaneity of this connection between heterogeneous orders and the dynamic of its transmission introduces the question of

complexity as well: how is it that we adequately communicate multiple, heterogeneous, and above all *unspoken* ideas simultaneously? An account of the comic must necessarily take intersubjectivity into account.

My approach to the comic is grounded in psychoanalytic theory both because I find it to be the best theoretical exploration of intersubjectivity and because even in its nascence, psychoanalysis deals extensively with the comic. Indeed, Sigmund Freud's *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (hereafter *Jokes*) stands close enough to the inception of psychoanalysis that it may be regarded as one of the movement's seminal texts. Written only six years after *The Interpretation of Dreams*, in which Freud "discovered" the unconscious and delineated the processes by which unconscious desires are disguised so that they may be presented to the dreamer in acceptable form, *Jokes* finds in the joke-work the same processes of displacement and condensation that enable the sublimated expression of forbidden desires in the dream-work. In other words, the dream-work and the joke-work rely on the same techniques in order to dissimulate, disguise, and sublimate repressed desire. In allowing repressed desire to find an acceptable form of release, dreams and jokes are both aesthetic and sexual in Freud's sense of being unattached to vital need.⁴ However, because the joke-work, like the novel, is a product of language, it is a much more explicitly social and therefore intersubjective—even political—phenomenon. In his study of the psychic dynamics of plotting, Peter Brooks suggests that "the tale as read is inhabited by the reader's desire, and that further analysis should be directed to that desire, not his individual desire and its origins in his own personality, but his transindividual and intertextually determined desire

⁴ I draw here on Flieger's argument that Freud uses the terms "aesthetic" and "sexual" interchangeably. I agree with her when she posits that Freud is not, as his critics claim, reducing everything to sex, but rather broadening the category of the sexual. See Flieger, 1991, pp. 57-84.

as a reader” (112). Similarly, for Flieger the comic is the symbol for intersubjectivity *par excellence*; she emphasizes both the intersubjective nature of the comic and its origins in desire when she writes that the comic may be “considered as coextensive with human *désir*—desire as motor not only of the literary transaction, but of all human interaction understood as a textual inweaving of subjects” (11). While the dream-work functions to ensure the non-transmissibility of desire, to keep repressed desire from even the dreamer herself, the intentional purpose of the comic is precisely to communicate unspoken, repressed content to an other, the result of which is identification through shared desire.

The participants in any comic transaction are defined by their ambivalent relation to intersubjective, intertextual desire. To complicate matters further, Freud argues that the joke is not simply reducible to communication between two individuals, but is in fact a transaction among a minimum of three subject positions.⁵ This is perhaps most apparent in Freud’s discussion of the tendentious “smut” joke, born of a situation of sexual desire. An explication of Freud’s rough schematic here will help to establish the dynamics of desire and transference for textual analyses in the chapters to follow. Freud begins by hypothesizing a male who makes “wooing speech” (*Jokes* 117)—suggestive comments, if not an outright proposition—toward a woman he desires sexually. If she is of a similar mindset, Freud suggests, the initial verbal suggestion may yield to sexual intercourse, in which case desire is fulfilled and there is no need for further aesthetic dissimulation (117). However, the more “civilized” the social conventions of the woman’s society, the more likely she is to reject any overt advances: “The obstacle standing in the way [to direct fulfillment] is in reality nothing other than women’s incapacity to tolerate undisguised sexuality, an incapacity correspondingly increased with

⁵ See Flieger, 1991, pp. 65-68.

a rise in the educational and social level” (120). Although Freud does not state this explicitly, the woman’s intolerance for undisguised sexuality (and the male’s recognition of this fact) is evidence of a third position that maintains a psychic presence in the room if not a physical one. In rejecting the man’s advances, the woman allies herself with this third position of social convention (the superego) against the socially unacceptable—unacceptable because unrouted through social institutions such as marriage—advances of the man. There are psychic barriers, then, to speaking desire directly, and it is the “law” of social convention, a prohibiting agency with not inconsiderable psychic force, with which the woman allies herself in denying immediate fulfillment of the male’s desire.

The denial or repression of desire is not the same thing as its annihilation; repressed desire continues to seek an outlet. Frustrated by the force of social convention, the male turns to indirect means of fulfillment. Freud writes, “The woman’s inflexibility is therefore the first condition for the development of smut” (*Jokes* 118). Although it may be counter-intuitive to consider smut as in any way “developed,” Freud’s use of the word indicates that smut arises in response to an initial repression of desire, and there is a direct correlation between the level of repression and the level of development that even smut must undergo. Smut is aesthetic insofar as it does not fulfill a vital need—reproduction—but serves instead as an outlet for desire through marginally more socially acceptable means. The comic mode of communication, no matter how lowbrow, is an aesthetic means of “unblocking” and communicating repressed desire. This last point is crucial, for the Central European novels I examine here frequently employ demotic humor and a consideration of their poetics cannot overlook this humor’s aesthetic and even political function.

The communication of repressed desire requires someone willing to hear it. If the woman's inflexibility is the first condition for smut's development, the second condition is the presence of a third person—another man—that guarantees the woman's refusal. This is because the third, whether he knows it or not, occupies the subject position of social convention. For Freud, "This third person soon acquires the greatest importance in the development of smut" (118), for although this third person's presence guarantees the woman's refusal, it also offers a conduit for the sublimated realization of the first man's desire. The original male makes a joke at the woman's expense to the third person. The joke-work thus has a minimum of three subject positions: the joker, who disguises his desire; the "butt" of the joke, against whom the verbal hostility is directed; and the "laugher," who is witness to the joker's desire. Indulging in smut, the joker renounces direct sexual satisfaction by the woman, exchanging his frustrated desire for a lower yield of satisfaction at her expense. Freud notes that the more "proper" the woman, the more likely she is to leave the room at this speech; this means that her physical presence is no longer even necessary for the comic yield of the smut joke. Nevertheless, just as the presence of a third subject position was already implied by the desired woman's refusal of the initial advance, her subject position within the triangular structure of the joke-work remains even as her physical absence emphasizes that the joker's object of desire is lost.⁶

The woman's physical absence in this joke scenario shows that what is really at stake in the comic transaction is the desire (or refusal thereof) of this third position,

⁶ Freud's use of gender categories is particularly troubling because he regards the masculine category as active while the feminine is passive. Therefore, for Freud the male has subjectivity while the female often assumes the status of an object. While later elaborations of psychoanalytic theory have rightly criticized Freud on this issue, I only want to say here that the female has agency in Freud's scenario—she chooses whether or not to give in to masculine desire, and if she assents it is likely because she also desires. It is precisely because she exercises her agency that her suitor must find a sublimated outlet for his desire. The laughing male may be the most passive figure in this triad to the extent that he laughs "in spite of himself."

whose identification and allegiance will determine the success and even the normative status of the joke. Disguising his desire, the joker renounces his original aim in favor of an alliance—sealed with laughter rather than a handshake—with the third person. The joker exchanges fulfillment of his desire for a recognition that legitimates it, albeit in altered form. Insofar as the laugher, who is “bribed by the effortless satisfaction of his own libido” (119), fulfills the expectations assigned to him, he is the primary recipient of the joker’s deferred satisfaction. Laughing, he identifies with the joker’s subject position, sharing not only the joker’s mirth but also his desire and the impossibility of its direct fulfillment. On the other hand, if the laugher refuses to laugh, thus denying explicit approval to desire sublimated through the joke-work, he identifies instead with the joke’s butt, in which case these two form an alliance against the joker and his desire. Thus, in addition to dissimulating desire, the aim of the comic transaction is to legitimize that desire in lieu of fulfilling it.

There is a structural analogy between the precondition for joking, which is dependent on repression, and the “primal horde” scenario that Freud develops seven years later in *Totem and Taboo* (1912). Attempting to explain the structure of repression in this later work, Freud finds it necessary to assume a foundational myth in which there is a primal horde dominated by an alpha male who jealously keeps the horde’s female population to himself, killing or driving off the other males with brute force. The younger males, finding their vital reproductive drive stymied, are too weak individually to defeat the alpha male, so instead they bond together and kill him, thus removing the primary obstacle to sexual fulfillment. They are able to do so because each male

recognizes that the others share his desire.⁷ However, the initial identification, which leads them to band together in the first place, also leads them to fear another taking the father's place. Therefore, they agree to renounce their claims to the females by instituting the psychic remainder of the dead father as a prohibition. In death, the father acquires totemic status, his name is immortalized, and his power, having been transformed from brute strength to psychic residue, ironically becomes even greater.⁸ The precondition for joking and the primal horde share a triangular structure of desirer, desired, and prohibiting agency. In *Totem and Taboo* these positions are first occupied, respectively, by the younger male(s), the female, and the mythical father, but after the primal murder the father has become a psychical, rather than physical agency. The primal horde's physical violence against the father is replaced in the joking scenario by verbal violence against the female who identifies with the father's subject position, and the remaining males in both scenarios renounce direct satisfaction of desire in favor of a "civilized" refusal that, according to Hašek (in the quotation that forms the epigraph to this section) keeps our noses intact.

The third position in these two scenarios—the band of brothers and the laughter, respectively—is thus ambivalent, simultaneously bearing witness to the transgression against and submission to the social order. On one hand, the laughter bears witness to the joker's obedience to social norms, and like the band of brothers after the installation of the father-as-totem, he identifies with sublimated desire even as his presence in the comic transaction guarantees the persistence of direct fulfillment's repression. On the other hand, because the joke is itself a transgression against the symbolic order, the social

⁷ See also Flieger, 1991, p. 79.

⁸ Jacques Lacan recognizes this with his puns equating the "*nom du père*" with the "*non du père*"; the "name" of the father is also the "no" of the father.

expression of repressed desire, the laugher is complicit in a transgression against the Other. The laugh in the comic transaction thus rewards the joker's artistry in simultaneously observing social norms and transgressing against those very norms. The joke "paradoxically act[s] to reinforce the civilized prohibitions [...] that it seems to transgress, by working as a safety valve for excessive desire" (Flieger 68). The comic "punch" stems in part from the complexity of the laugher's simultaneous occupation of multiple, seemingly contradictory subject positions ("guarantor of" and "accomplice in transgression against" the Other). In the comic novel this sense of complexity (to say nothing of laughter) is provoked in the reader by the text, so an analysis of the novel's comic function must account for the reader's ambivalent relation to the desire of, for, and in narrative.

This ambivalence, as Flieger insists throughout her work, is further complicated by the problem of the reader's comprehension, for despite the palliative effect of evoking laughter with a joke, it is far from obvious that laughter indicates actual comprehension of desire. Because the "inactive listener" in Freud's comic scenario is "bribed by the effortless satisfaction of his own libido" (*Jokes* 119), Flieger correctly notes, "In a sense, it is the dupe of the jokework, and not the joking trickster, who seems to come out on top" (64). Indeed, presuming to barter satisfaction for recognition of his desire, the tendentious joker may be the biggest dupe of all. Although the joker's aim is to dissimulate and deliver desire, the laughter that he elicits may be more a response to the fact of the joke itself than its contraband. Emphasizing the formal impact of jokes, Flieger writes, "Freud tells us that the displacement joke relies on automatism in order to make its point: rigid thought patterns in the hearer, which take for granted the direction or

meaning of the joking statement, cause the listener to be caught unaware by the joke's punch line" (64). According to Freud, "A comic façade encourages the effectiveness of a joke in more than one way; not only does it make the *automatism* of the joking process visible, by holding the attention, but it also facilitates the discharge by the joke, by sending on ahead a discharge of a comic kind. The comic is here operating exactly like a *bribing fore-pleasure*" (187, my italics). What Freud calls the "fore-pleasure principle" (168), also at play in both the sexual act and the act of reading,⁹ is the recognition of aesthetic artifice that allows the hearer/reader to suspend quotidian, more rigid mental functioning under the reality principle for a brief period of time, allowing for the temporary dominance of the pleasure principle. Indicating comic intentions by formal means in order to create anticipation in his audience, the joker replaces one automatism with another. Here, it is the *form* of mental functioning, rather than the *content* of the aesthetic work itself, that creates fore-pleasure because the aesthetic work resembles the form of mental functioning that recalls the infantile state and the pleasure principle's reign. The fore-pleasure principle's appeal is regressive, and jokes that produce laughter merely through formal techniques undermine their own potential transgression to the extent that the laugher, by responding to the aesthetic façade, is simply going through the motions without holding up his end of the bargain by recognizing the joker's desire. For the comic to be subversive, it must do more than hint at a temporary regression into aesthetic play; the joker must seduce the laugher into filling the comic form with the content of his illicit desire.

This discussion suggests that subjectivity may be viewed as spatial, in de Certeau's sense of the term. However, under the ideology of the quotidian, we tend to

⁹ See *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* and "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming," respectively.

assume that subjectivity is stable and thus on the order of place. By virtue of its displacement of both linguistic meaning and subjectivity along the intersubjective circuits of desire, the comic makes explicit the ambiguity and ambivalence immanent to subjectivity. The specific trope of irony will intensify the dis-*place*-ment of the comic even further.

Irony and Intentionality, or *Le génie ironique*

“Lacan was unequivocal about the fact that only the agency of wit or intellect could transform tragedy into comedy.” –Stuart Schneiderman

To Flieger’s analysis, I want to add the all-important category of irony, which I claim is necessary to ensure the laugher’s conscious recognition of and identification with the repressed content. Having discussed the comic essence of this *genius loci*, I will now detail its specifically *ironic* aspect. My argument is that irony is a more subversive mode of the comic because of the work a successful ironic transaction requires of the reader and also because of the affective charge that results. This argument draws on the work of two important contributions to the study of irony, Wayne Booth’s *A Rhetoric of Irony* and Linda Hutcheon’s *Irony’s Edge*, both of which emphasize the reader’s role in the successful ironic transaction. A preliminary definition of irony, drawn from numerous sources, is *meaning* something *other than* and *in addition to* what one *says*. Irony is created when the literal meaning of an utterance is rejected in favor of an unspoken meaning that carries with it a number of implications and contextual presuppositions. What makes irony fascinating is that despite the misdirection of the ironist, the attentive listener or reader should be able to reject the literal meaning *and* almost simultaneously arrive at the correct meaning despite the fact that its implications and contextual presuppositions remain unspoken. In order for this to happen, according to Linda

Hutcheon, the interpreter must attribute both meanings and motives, making the interpretation of irony a highly conscious act (12). This suggests that the fact that we communicate ironically all the time makes it easy to ignore the complex nature of what is actually occurring in the ironic transaction.

An immediate problem to be addressed, then, is how to define irony: one defining feature of literature is that a literary work is (ironically) rarely literal. Booth problematizes the distinction when he asks, “If the reader is expected to use his powers of inference to make so much out of simple straightforward words like rain and hotel when there is real rain and a real hotel, are we not dealing with irony?” (*Rhetoric* 9). A literary work is (ironically) rarely literal and even the most seemingly unimportant details within a text are changed by their relation to the sum total of the text’s signifiers. There is an inherent doubling of meaning because the word’s meaning is split between its quotidian use and its function within any text as a whole. For example, when the narrator of *The Man Without Qualities* calls the interior of the Hofburg Castle hollow, he is not only describing the apparent paucity of furnishings but also commenting on the absence of a core to the ideological edifice of the Habsburg Empire. The detail becomes important because of its place in a signifying network; the description is changed by the meaning of the other signifiers in the text and changes them in turn—in the above example, the hollowness of the empire reflects back on the novel’s characters, who themselves are described as “hollowed out” (Musil 30) by the competing demands of Austro-Hungarian subjecthood, making them symptomatic of a larger social epidemic. The end result of which is that practically everything in a text construed as literary has a meaning different from and in addition to the straightforward definition of the words themselves. Milan

Kundera seems to be defining irony in just such a broad fashion, averring, “Irony means: none of the assertions found in a novel can be taken by itself, each of them stands in a complex and contradictory juxtaposition with other assertions, other situations, other gestures, other ideas, other events” (*Testaments* 203). Kundera’s definition of irony, however, is much closer to what Peter Brooks calls “binding:” “to speak of ‘binding’ in a literary text is thus to speak of any of the formalizations, blatant or subtle, that force us to recognize sameness within difference” (101). The product of the master signifier’s operation on the text, binding occurs when the formalizations of a text—literary *or* historical text, as Hayden White has shown—cause verbal constellations to accrue around a signifier, enriching the meaning of that signifier for the duration of the reading act. Although essential to the literary transaction, then, binding is inherently hegemonic, so a subversive text must “unbind” its own formalizations, or at least the generic formalizations that it presents to its readers.

While binding creates a recognition of “sameness within difference,” irony works in the opposite direction, forcing the reader to recognize difference within sameness. Booth advocates just such a recognition when he argues that the successful ironic transaction requires “a special form of complex verbal reconstruction” (*Rhetoric* 9). Booth describes four steps to the successful ironic transaction. First, the reader must reject the literal meaning of the utterance because of some incongruity either among the words of the utterance or because of some contextual information that the reader knows (10). Rather than simply rejecting the original statement as wrong, the reader must then perform the second step and entertain alternative explanations that “come flooding in” (11). In order for this to happen, the reader can neither immediately conclude that the

writer is mad nor can he simply disagree; there must be a realization by the reader on some level that the ironist is trying to convey something other than what he has said. This leads to the third step, in which the reader makes a decision about the writer's knowledge or beliefs and concludes that the utterance and its incongruity were both intentional. The fourth and final step occurs when, having made this decision about the writer's knowledge and beliefs, the reader "can finally choose a new meaning or cluster of meanings with which [he] can rest secure" (12). For Booth these four steps can happen almost simultaneously, and indeed they should; like other forms of the comic, irony loses its punch when it requires explanation. This criterion of reconstruction moves the ironic transaction's subversive potential beyond the mere "fore-pleasure" offered by the form of the comic, playing with the reader's affective response and ideological presuppositions in ways that may prove to be radical. I find Booth's four-step reconstruction to be convincing not only because it provides a model for analysis of any particular irony, but also because each of these four steps is useful in elaborating on the connection between irony and a psychoanalytic model of reading and desire.

The first step of this reconstruction, in which the reader is required to reject the surface meaning of the utterance, typically stems not from any inherent mistake in the sentence itself—ironic utterances typically use a common vocabulary and are grammatically correct—but from some incongruity between what the sentence says and what the reader knows to be true. However, irony does not stop there; in addition to rejecting the surface utterance, Booth continues, "we must reject an unspoken proposition on which it depends" (*Rhetoric* 10). Structured around an impossibility that the reader must recognize, then, the ironic statement calls attention to the inadequacy of its surface

meaning. This latter requirement is especially true when the ironic statement is entirely consistent with itself (10), suggesting that the ironic utterance necessarily extends beyond itself into a larger network of signification. For this reason, Booth claims that “the distinction between internal and external clues [...] becomes strangely irrelevant when one is deciding whether a passage is ironic” (10-11). As an intersubjective phenomenon, irony must often mobilize the reader’s extrinsic knowledge in order to call attention to itself.

Moreover, this inadequacy is not wholly contained within the ironic utterance itself, but either originates in or extends to other unspoken utterances. Once reconstructed by the reader, the ironic utterance does not merely unwork its own meaning, but operates throughout the text like outward ripples after a rock is thrown into a pond. This effect may be explained with reference to Roman Jakobson’s topography of the metaphoric and metonymic axes of language.¹⁰ Jakobson asks us to conceive of language as operating on a Cartesian coordinate plane: (+) in which the vertical axis is the axis of “metaphor,” or substitution, while the horizontal axis is of “metonymy,” or syntax. To state this problem in structural terms, the aforementioned rhetorical tropes of metaphor, allegory and fable function to precipitate a move along the vertical, “metaphoric” axis of language, the axis of substitution. A term in the manifest signifying chain is a substitution for what the author is *really* talking about. If we take as our

¹⁰ Although I use “metaphoric” in Jakobson’s sense, the rejection of the ironic utterance’s overt meaning helps to distinguish it from other rhetorical tropes such as metaphor, allegory, and fable. For example, metaphor relies on a condition of similarity; the spoken and the unspoken are essentially interchangeable, and the metaphor is sustained by the condition of sameness while irony depends on the difference between the literal and hidden meanings. Meanwhile, allegory and fable rely on a sustained doubling of meaning that does not entail a rejection of one meaning in favor of another, while irony necessitates an at least hypothetical rejection of the literal meaning.

example the phrase “the early bird catches the worm,” we see that the metaphoric substitution operates on a one-to-one correspondence:

The	early	bird	catches	the	worm.
	employee	earns	promotion.		

Each “metaphoric” term is substituted by one equivalent term, and we arrive at the intended meaning. In irony, however, this one-to-one correspondence rarely exists. The impossibility of the ironic utterance typically necessitates a wholesale replacement of the manifest signifying chain with the latent one, which may be very different indeed. To consider this rejection in spatial terms, we might borrow Booth’s example, the sentence in *Candide* that begins, “When all was over and the rival kings were celebrating their victory with Te Deums in their respective camps...”. It is not just the statement that we reject, but the unspoken proposition that both sides can win a war. We cannot substitute terms on a one-to-one basis and arrive at what Voltaire’s narrator is really saying, which might be reconstructed as: “After the battle, both sides claimed victory, even though it’s only possible for one side to win, which means that at least one of the kings is manipulative and/or deluded.” Irony thus says *more* than the surface utterance.

Booth’s second step of ironic reconstruction, in which a “flood” of alternate explanations for the utterance’s incongruity in the utterance are entertained, is perhaps the most perplexing. If a statement simply cannot be true, it seems that it would be more intuitive to simply regard the incongruity that makes it so as a mistake on the speaker’s part and move on. In the above example, we know that both sides cannot win a battle, and the easiest way of dealing with this impossibility would be to say that Voltaire must have made a mistake. Rather than reaching this conclusion, however, even minimally

attentive readers will likely conclude that Voltaire was making an ironic statement about the stupidity of war and its leaders. As Booth notes, we only accept the conclusion that the author was careless or stupid when there is no other plausible explanation. This suggests that we are in some respect captives of a drive toward meaning, assuming that meaning in-sists in the verbal transaction. Although readers enjoy and even eagerly anticipate the act of reading because it operates, according to Freud, under the aegis of the pleasure principle, in the realm of fantasy, the comic “unworking” of everyday reality does not mean that we are content with utter non-sense. We expect a text to mean something and make sense, and as a result we will seek extrinsic justifications for the apparent meaninglessness of an utterance. Irony makes use of this desire not only to communicate unspoken content, but also to place the burden of constructing this content on the readers’ shoulders.

In making the reader responsible for the reconstruction of the ironic utterance, Booth highlights the intersubjective nature of irony: the ironic utterance, taken on its own, is merely incongruous, but if the reader successfully performs the operation Booth requires of him, the utterance in question gains meaning. This is where the third step—the readers’ decision about the author’s knowledge and beliefs—becomes key, for this decision entails myriad unspoken suppositions. The truth of every utterance is necessarily supported by what we can call an ideological worldview, which is nothing other than pre-existing discourse that has pinned the meanings of words in a particular fashion. However, in order to emphasize the stability of reconstruction in his model, Booth tends to assume careful readers who operate in an ideological and cultural vacuum of their own. Providing a useful corrective, Hutcheon notes that there are dynamic, plural

relations among text or utterance, the ironist, the hearer, and circumstances surrounding the discursive situation (11). In other words, “Irony never occurs within a utopic vacuum, but always from within social activity, which involves relations of real and symbolic power (17). Words have a relatively stable meaning in everyday use only because we agree on some basic, yet arbitrary presuppositions that are always operative—if unspoken—when we communicate. When we use everyday language in predictable ways, there is fairly consistent pre-conscious agreement as to which ideological chain is operative, what knowledge and beliefs the speaker has. However, the apparent non-sense of irony combined with our drive to integrate this strange utterance into a comprehensible unit of meaning requires the reader to reconstruct a *different* discursive chain in which the incongruous utterance is meaningful. Thus, when we make a decision concerning the ironist’s knowledge and beliefs, we are actually doing nothing less than inferring a worldview in order to explain a single statement’s incongruity.

To return to Booth’s four-part system, Booth conceptualizes this third step of reconstruction in spatial terms harking to Aristotle, whose treatises on rhetoric provided an account of intellectual “locations,” positions from which a certain host of presuppositions were held to be true or certain types of arguments considered to have more rhetorical force (*Rhetoric* 34). “Sometimes,” Booth writes, “rhetors constructed for themselves mental blueprints of entire edifices containing many places. Such buildings were recommended most often as aids to memory—an orator could move through his building and find not only his places but recall his chosen sequence with [...] incredibly detailed memory” (34). This architectural metaphor is useful in its emphasis on both metaphoric “location” and metonymic sequence. The construction of the final “truth” of

the argument requires not only these arbitrary positions but also their situation within a sequential discourse. Modifying the idea of intellectual locations from its original use, Booth suggests that we might see a rhetorical position as a platform on which to stand. Around each platform/position accrue a number of assumptions and ways of seeing the world, and it is the deception of the ironist to pretend to stand on one platform, when in fact he stands on a better, perhaps “higher” platform from which he invites readers capable of comprehending his irony to join him in rejecting the inferior position and all its attendant assumptions and beliefs. Booth suggests that “perhaps the implied intellectual motion is really ‘downward,’ ‘going beneath the surface’ to something solidier or more profound; we rip up a rotten platform and probe to a solid one” (*Rhetoric* 35).

I want to distance myself from Booth’s topographical model here because his vertical positioning implies a value judgment whereas I wish to emphasize the seismic dimension suggested by a topographical model of irony. While my interest in psychoanalytic theory tempts me to regard the ironic platform as “lower,” corresponding to an unconscious level of meaning,¹¹ the question of whether the ironist’s position is really higher or lower is irrelevant.¹² Instead, I wish to consider this ironic reconstruction in terms of Jakobson’s metaphoric/metonymic model. The ironic statement shares its position on the vertical axis with a horizontal signifying chain—a discursive worldview—that the irony will in fact undermine. The ironic statement’s incongruity refers the reader to another statement altogether elsewhere on the vertical axis, but not to a single term on the metaphoric axis that simply replaces a single term in the statement.

¹¹ It is important to note here that Freud used the term “unconscious” rather than “subconscious.” Nevertheless, the dynamic of repression lends itself to a topographical conception of the unconscious as “below” the surface of consciousness.

¹² Indeed, Lacanian topographical models confound the upper-lower distinction.

Rather, the entire signifying chain is displaced vertically, the manifest meaning of the ironic statement *and the worldview it implies* being rejected in favor of the reconstructed statement and its worldview. Regardless of whether the position of the ironist is topographically higher or lower, the point is that there is a displacement along the vertical axis to another entirely different horizontal sequence.

Unfortunately, Booth, at least at the time of his *Rhetoric of Irony* (1975), was unaware of the work of the Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, whose categories would challenge Booth's attempt to stabilize irony and argue that the "embodied intentions" in ironic works "lead us to go so far—and no farther—in seeing ironic meanings" (*Rhetoric* 91). While Booth's argument grants a limited role to the author, he privileges the reader's role in the reconstruction of the ironic utterance. The work itself has no agency in this transaction, which is instead reducible to the two aforementioned figures—author and reader—who are assumed to understand each other. Nearly a decade later, however, Booth admits that Bakhtin forces him to rethink his own position. In his introduction to Caryl Emerson's translation of Bakhtin's *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics* (1984), Booth recognizes "the [novelistic] author's imaginative gift" as "the ability or willingness to allow voices into the work that are not fundamentally under the 'monological' control of the novelist's own ideology" ("Introduction" xx). That is to say, if the Bakhtinian novelist approaches his art ethically and in good faith, the character and his horizon of possibilities will never be reducible to the author's conception of him or her. The various familial, political, and social factors, in addition to the character's individual history, make his position—again borrowing from Booth's positional metaphor—an irreducibly particular (k)not" wherein innumerable factors converge. By Booth's own admission,

Bakhtin's theory provides a corrective to Booth's reader-response-centered approach.

The novel thus has an agency that exceeds both authorial intention and the reader's own (necessarily) limited understanding.

That said, I do think that Booth is correct that unraveling all of the associations that make an individual particular would truly be an interminable task. Appropriately enough, this is a problem encountered in psychoanalysis as well. As early as *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud acknowledges that there is simply a point in analysis beyond which one should not go. In Freud's analysis of the dream of Irma's injection, we find a footnote that states,

I had a feeling that the interpretation of this part of the dream was not carried far enough to make it possible to follow the whole of its concealed meaning. If I had pursued my comparison between the three women, it would have taken me far afield.—There is at least one spot in every dream at which it is unplumbable—a navel, as it were, that is its point of contact with the unknown. (111)

Now, Freud does assert here that he could very well have pursued this comparison, but that to do so would then take the analysis in a direction that deviated from the primary objective of interpreting the dream. Therefore, I would argue that what Freud calls the navel of a dream—the navel, appropriately enough, is shaped like a period—is simply the arbitrary stopping point, equivalent to the Lacanian moment of scansion. To continue beyond would be to draw meaning out so dramatically as to render it impossible. To provide all the prosaic details that enable novelistic characterization, every single novel would be as interminable as an analysis. Thus, while I argue that irony is always far more unstable than Booth wishes, it is nevertheless comprehensible insofar as we impose

a provisional “navel” that punctuates the ironic reconstruction and fixes meaning. In the study that follows, my provisional stopping point is the relationship of irony to history and subversion. In most cases of what Booth calls stable irony, the act of scansion, enabling a fairly sturdy ideological platform on which to stand, is easily done. In this case, successful comprehension of the ironic utterance entails making a decision about the author’s knowledge and beliefs, and this means seeing the world from the ideological viewpoint from which what will eventually be the reconstructed meaning of the ironic utterance may be “true.” In other words, it involves seeing the world with a different set of givens, some of which may be antithetical to those that the reader himself holds. Furthermore, simultaneously holding multiple subject positions turns the ironic speech act into what, using de Certeau’s category, we might call a comic space, establishing a more ambiguous subjective relationship between positions previously considered merely oppositional.

For this reason, irony is a uniquely seductive comic form. In the more ordinary form of the comic, one’s desire for/toward an other may be masked far less subtly, as in the case of the smut joke. To return to Freud’s smut-joke scenario, the butt of the joke—the woman—recognizes the joker’s sexual aggression in the *form* of the smut joke; the specific content is relatively irrelevant. The joker’s desire is sublimated through the overt form of the joke in an unsophisticated manner. However, the ironic transaction relies on a much more complex dynamic insofar as the *form* of the ironic utterance is recognizable as an ordinary statement, save for the presumably detectable incongruity that necessitates a rejection of the literal meaning. This incongruity on the level of content leads to the formal reconstruction whereby the content is completely replaced, although the original

statement is one that *could* be true if one held different beliefs. The ironic victim, of course, actually subscribes to the beliefs being held up to ridicule, and moreover, they ground his way of being in the world. For the ironic victim, it is not enough that he is ridiculed; if he is present and comprehends the irony, that is to say, completes the ironic transaction, he unwittingly—pun intended—steps out of his own ideological horizon and into that of another, from where he looks at his worldview from a distance. To make the point explicit, the ironic transaction seduces the victim from one ideological position to another, and the victim is left to hold two ideological viewpoints simultaneously. His subject position *and* his subjectivity have been undermined in the temporal window of ironic seduction. In his place, irony (and more generally, the comic) becomes the agent of the transaction.

The Structure of Subversion

While I have thus far discussed the importance of history as a narrative phenomenon whose ideology is hidden in narrative structure, on the one hand, and irony as a structure that subverts surface narrative in favor of an unspoken one, on the other, these two discussions lack a common framework with which to discuss irony's relationship to history and genre convention in the novel. In order to synthesize these two discussions with a common set of terms moving forward, Lacan's theory of the four discourses is helpful in allowing me to transcode the terms developed by the diverse thinkers discussed earlier into common terms. In his seminar *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, itself a response to the political and social upheaval of 1968-9, Jacques Lacan posits the four discourses, four possible structural manifestations of discourse, each with a different productive capacity. Each discourse has the same four terms,

simply rotated counter-clockwise in order to create the next discourse. They are as follows:

Master's discourse: $S_1/\$ \rightarrow S_2/a$

University's discourse: $S_2/S_1 \rightarrow a/\$$

Analyst's discourse: $a/S_2 \rightarrow \$/S_1$

Hysteric's discourse: $\$/a \rightarrow S_1/S_2$

Discourse begins with a speaker, so each discourse is read in a clockwise direction starting from the upper left position. The upper terms are the subjects of the discourse; the upper left is the agent of the discourse, while the upper right is the other or interlocutor. The lower terms constitute the repressed side of discourse; the lower right term is the production of the discourse, and the lower left term is the discourse's "truth." The four terms that appear in the discourses are S_1 , the "master signifier"; S_2 , knowledge contained in the signifying chain as a whole; a , the unsymbolizable Real; and $\$$, the divided subject. The counterclockwise rotation of terms, each of which creates a different discourse, also creates a different *vector* insofar as a different term assumes the dominant position and addresses a different other.

The first discourse, the one most evident throughout history, is the discourse of the master ($S_1/\$ \rightarrow S_2/a$). The master, or the signifier of the master, addresses the remaining battery of signifiers, pinning down their meaning within an ideological network. The product of this operation is the leftover real, represented by a , while the truth of this discourse is the divided subject $\$$. The master's discourse represents any ideologically dominant system, and insofar as it is also the Other, it fails to adequately address the subject's particularity as discussed in the section above, thus producing a , whatever that may be in each particular system. This is the discourse we operate in whenever we are engaged in everyday speech, the "empty talk" that perpetuates

ideological norms. If we consider the terms in the lower half of Lacan's ideogram to be unconscious (in the dynamic sense of being repressed), we see that despite its adequacy for the majority of people, this everyday discourse nevertheless produces the split that Freud refers to in *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Moreover, the discourse of the master may be found in literature in any literary narrative that follows genre conventions, in which an "icon," to use White's terms, silently provides the key to interpreting its metonymy. Thus, despite the inherent self-consciousness of the novel as a genre, the authors in this study came to regard it as a formalization of certain literary conventions that they actively tried to subvert. In twentieth-century Poland, for example, the novel had become synonymous with nationalism and the romantic portrayal of Poland's uniquely heroic past, and so in order to subvert the latter two, Witold Gombrowicz ironizes the (Polish) concept of the novel by using novelistic form satirically. All of the authors in this study are explicitly engaged with what they regarded as the prevailing genre convention of their era.

The twentieth century has witnessed the rise of the discourse of the university, although its beginnings might be more properly located in the Enlightenment. The university discourse is simply one counter-clockwise turn of the terms in the master's discourse; ergo, $S_2/S_1 \rightarrow a/\$$. In the university discourse, knowledge (S_2) addresses the unsymbolizable real (a) in an attempt to master it. However, knowledge is already compromised insofar as it is effected by the button-tying of the master signifier. Furthermore, because the real is a product of the master's discourse, the university discourse represents an attempt at self-correction on the part of the discourse of the master. Thus, in the university discourse, knowledge is mobilized in the service of the

master signifier in a hegemonic play designed to incorporate what the master signifier cannot incorporate. The product of this operation is a further divided subject; for example, Musil emphasizes the discomfort felt by the application of positivism, which evacuates all existential categories from the subject in favor of a scientific—academic—objectification and explanation of human behavior. The truth of this discourse is simply another master signifier; Lacan suggests that the university discourse is the master's discourse in disguise.¹³ Perhaps the exemplary university discourse is Hegel's dialectic, which claims to sublate subjective experience with objective knowledge ($S_2 \rightarrow a$) and is the primary opponent of postmodernists, who engage in countless theoretical moves in an attempt to prevent this very process. In its pretensions to objectivity, history is a manifestation of the university discourse; its aim is to explain the present as the inevitable outcome of the past, thus perpetuating ideological norms. The novels I study here thematize history in different ways, but in each the arbitrariness of history is at times conflated with the idea of the novel, so that subversion of one of these discursive structures is subversion of the other.

Although the next counter-clockwise turn in this progression through Lacan's four discourses leads to the discourse of the analyst, I want to address this discourse last and will therefore put it aside for a moment. The hysteric's discourse is represented by $\$/a \rightarrow S_1/S_2$. Here, the divided subject interrogates the master signifier. Although the majority of people can function despite their divided subjectivity, for the hysteric the inability of the master signifier to account for her subjectivity boils down to the basic question: "why am I what you say I am?" In other words, why does the master signifier pin down her

¹³ Much could be said of the overlap between Lacan's discourse of the university and Adorno and Horkheimer's argument in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

meaning and objectify her in a way inadequate to her subjectivity? This discourse produces a kind of knowledge expressed by the body (the hysterical symptom), and the truth of this discourse is the kernel of the real that the signifying chain cannot account for, which I will address in my discussion of Lacan's "The Structure of Subversion." The hysteric's discourse represents a kind of discursive impasse that requires the "talking cure" of psychoanalysis. In the intersubjective/intertextual act of reading the ironic novels I discuss here, the hysteric's discourse is precisely the ironic reconstruction described by Booth. The reader occupies the place of the hysteric, split subject (\$) who, thanks to the ironic guideposts in the novels that frustrate conventional meaning-making, becomes aware of the arbitrariness of the iconic master-signifier.

When the hysteric enters into analysis, the conditions of transference mean that she initially expects the analyst to provide an "oracular" reply from the position of the master, effectively speaking in the discourse of the master, which has already proven ineffective in addressing her symptom. Therefore, the analyst must be very careful not to provide an answer to the hysteric's question.¹⁴ Nevertheless, in transference the hysteric regards the analyst as the "subject supposed-to-know"—the Other, even—and will anticipate certain answers that the analyst may not offer. Because the transference places the analyst in the position of Other and the subject's desire is always already that of the Other, the subject initially will talk about what she thinks the analyst wishes to hear.¹⁵ This merely perpetuates the impasse insofar as the analyst's/Other's reply can only be inadequate. Therefore, the analyst's discourse, according to Lacan, must have "[a] reject-

¹⁴ Freud's case history of "Dora" is the negative example of why this is so. By attempting to force his interpretation on Dora, Freud unwittingly occupied the position of the master whose inadequacy had led Dora to psychoanalysis in the first place. She stopped the analysis shortly thereafter.

¹⁵ This is especially apparent in the case of the "Wolf Man," who began his analysis by speaking about sex because he thought that was what Freud wanted to hear.

producing effect, that is, the object a ” (44). The subject of the analyst’s discourse, a , addresses the hysteric but without giving an oracular answer, thus prompting her to “unwork” the coordinates of the master’s discourse. In doing so, she must locate and take responsibility for her own desire, producing a new master signifier, the truth of which is a new kind of knowledge. Thus the analyst’s discourse: $a/S_2 \rightarrow \$/S_1$. This new discourse contains the subject’s desire rather than the Other’s.

In its emphasis on a “reject-producing effect,” the discourse of the analyst is analogous to ironic discourse in the literary transaction. Like the analyst’s discourse, the dominant position is the point of rejection (a) that the reader must recognize and try to explain ($\$$). As I have already discussed, this requires a “vertical” move (along the Jakobsonian axis of substitution) to a discourse ruled by a different master-signifier (S_1). However, this move places the subject in a new signifying chain button-tied by a different master-signifier required for the reconstruction of the ironic statement to be “true” (S_2). The ironic novels that I examine here subvert the drive toward a master’s discourse which takes the forms, respectively, of history on the novel’s thematic level, and genres and narratives on the formal level. These novels thematize the discursive structure of the master inherent in historical narrative, conflating (the master’s) history with generic form, and proceed to undermine both through the ironic use of form and narrative.

At the same time, subversion is also accomplished spatially; by undoing the work of the master-signifier, irony reemphasizes that meaning is dependent on the sliding metonymy of signifiers within an utterance. It should come as no surprise, then, that the subversion of the discourse of the master—or of the university—is done through the

theme of movement. Two examples here show this conflation of discursive subversion and space. In *The Good Soldier Švejk*, the titular character appears before a board of medical experts who intend to determine whether he is mentally competent to serve in the Austro-Hungarian army. One of the doctors orders Švejk, “Take five paces forward and five to the rear.” Švejk, however, takes ten: “‘But I told you to take five,’ said the doctor. ‘A few paces more or less are all the same to me,’ said Švejk (34). Here the discourse of the master, barely (if at all) disguised in the form of the discourse of the university—the doctors are trying to see if he can serve in the military, after all—is frustrated by Švejk’s amiable violation of the boundaries instituted by the speech-act. Similarly, in *The Man Without Qualities*, the psychotic Moosbrugger recalls his own interview with medical experts:

When asked by psychiatric experts, “How much is fourteen plus fourteen?” and he would say in his deliberate way, “Oh, about twenty-eight to forty.” This “about” gave them trouble, which made Moosbrugger grin. It was really so simple. He knew perfectly well that you get twenty-eight when you go on from 14 to another 14, but who says you have to stop there? Moosbrugger’s gaze would always range a little farther ahead, like that of a man who has reached the top of a ridge outlined against the sky and finds that behind it there are other, similar ridges. (259)

Here, Moosbrugger’s conscious refusal to respect the boundaries implied by the scientific discourse is described in explicitly spatial and geographical terms. The “trouble” Moosbrugger’s reply gives the psychiatric experts stems from the rigid stability of their mode of discourse. The prisoner’s answer has precisely the “reject-producing effect”

Lacan emphasizes. Moosbrugger does not negate the discourse of the university here, but he does show its arbitrariness (“who says you have to stop there?”) and frustrate the meaning-making process of his interlocutors.

Jacques Lacan’s structural psychoanalysis provides a useful model for mapping both the structure of (inter-)subjectivity through language and the effect of subversion on both the subject and his speech. The title of Jacques Lacan’s paper “The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious” (hereafter “Subversion”) suggests that subversion is immanent to psychoanalytic practice, and while the claim, on one hand, that irony is subversive (*sub-vertere*, to undermine, to turn or corrupt from below), and on the other hand, that irony might best be explained by a theory that is grounded in a practice intended to cure patients seems contradictory at first. Nevertheless, my argument here is that the structures elucidated by Freud and Lacan demonstrate a *structure* of ironic subversion that is useful for discussing ironic literary works which themselves appear to lack a structure. In his essay, Lacan intends to clarify “the *question of the subject* such as psychoanalysis properly subverts it” (282, my italics). To be sure, this phrase is ambiguous; “it”—the object of psychoanalytic subversion—seems to refer to both “question” and “subject” (a point to which I will return later), but what is clear is that according to Lacan, psychoanalysis *should*, i.e. “properly” subvert something.

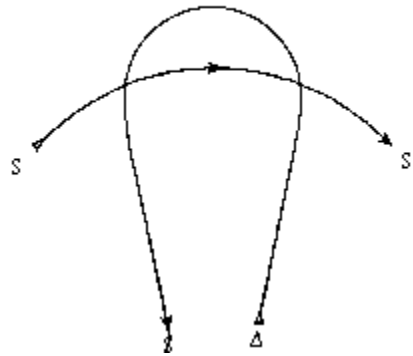
Lacan opens “Subversion” by declaring, “A structure is constitutive of the praxis known as psychoanalysis” (281). It follows, then, that the subversion “proper” to psychoanalysis is a structural phenomenon. However, psychoanalysis is also a linguistic practice, so while one is clearly dealing with subversion of the human subject, it is

important to remember that s/he is necessarily a speaking subject as well. In “Subversion,” Lacan elaborates his graph of desire through which we might understand human subjectivity itself as a kind of structure, with psychoanalysis elaborating the hidden, or “repressed” part of that structure. It does this by “subverting” the manifest part of this structure in several important ways.

The first “subversion of the subject” that Lacan accomplishes is to undermine the idea of the unified subject that is central to a tradition of philosophy since Descartes, as well as the science of psychology. He writes, “the function of the subject, as inaugurated by Freudian experience, disqualifies from the outset what, going by the name ‘psychology,’ merely perpetuates an academic framework... [whose] criterion is the unity of the subject” (282). For Lacan (as for Freud) the subject is always a split subject, conscious of perhaps anything except what he really “wants” and “knows.” This is because language is the precondition for the unconscious, and therefore, as soon as the subject enters the symbolic—even in analysis—he is irrevocably split between his demand and desire. Lacan identifies the subject of science—of knowledge—in order to subvert the ego’s primacy. Psychoanalytic experience shows how every signifying chain leaves a gap whereby we might locate that which cannot be accounted for by either the conscious subject or the Other; the most famous example of this “gap” is the “Freudian slip.” Presuming that all ideology is in fact a kind of partial knowledge, the subject of ideology—that is, the subject interpellated by ideology—will be subverted by psychoanalytic practice. The subject of ideology, as a split subject of language, has an immanent gap in its knowledge that always leaves it open to subversion, provided that one knows how to access this gap, and provided that one knows, according to Lacan,

which subject position to take in order to change the subject's position in relation to ideology.

For Lacan, what differentiates humans from animals is our use of language; that is, entry into the chain of signification marks the beginning of a specifically human subjectivity. The relative helplessness of the human infant requires that its vital needs be met by physically autonomous members of the species, so the child must learn early on to communicate its hunger and other needs. In order to do so, the child enters into and is in turn interpellated by a seemingly endless chain of signifiers that are differentially defined—individual signifiers have no immanent meaning of their own, but only acquire meaning within the total network. Following de Saussure, there is no inherent connection between the word “dog” and a four-legged canine; “dog” means dog because it does not mean “cat,” “horse,” etc. The individual's entry into language stops the sliding of these signifiers, conferring a retroactive meaning, in the same way that a punctuation mark halts the sliding of meaning within an individual sentence. In Lacan's schema the subject's entry into the signifying chain creates what he calls the *point de capiton*, or “button tie”, which (more or less) anchors the meanings of words within a particular lived social context so that the individual may communicate with other individuals. The cost to the individual, however, is a split in his subjectivity because the libidinal forces which motivate his life activities are now caught up, however, imperfectly, in the signifying network. Thus, the end result of the entry of drive into the Symbolic order is the split subject, albeit with (human, linguistic) meaning now conferred upon his existence. Lacan represents this process with the first stage of the “graph of desire”:



In this initial phase of Lacan's graph of desire, the vector $S \rightarrow S^1$ represents the signifying chain of language. On the vector $\Delta \rightarrow \$$, Δ represents a primal—pre-linguistic—intention that pierces the signifying chain, stopping the sliding of signifiers in $S \rightarrow S^1$ and fixing meaning retroactively. To begin to use language, the individual must settle on a relatively fixed, if contingent, meaning for words, “binding” his affect to particular signifiers. The product of this operation is the split subject (\$) because the signifying chain is always external to the subject, leaving the organism with a split between pre- or non-linguistic drive on one hand, and drive submitted to the Symbolic order—“the Other”—on the other hand.¹⁶

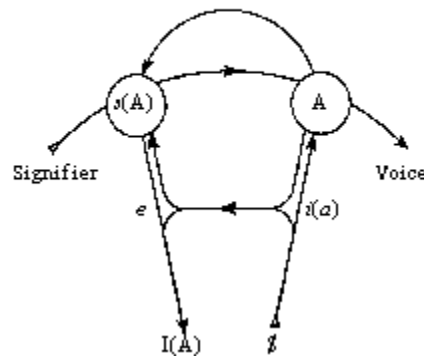
The effect of the subject's entry into language intensifies the imaginary identification that previously took place during what Lacan calls the mirror stage. In the mirror stage, the young individual, unable to control his body and wholly dependent for others in terms of satisfaction of need, identifies with his specular image, which has at least the appearance of greater physical autonomy than the infant is capable of. This specular image establishes a psychical apparatus, called the ideal-ego by Freud, by which the subject might judge himself and his own behavior. However, upon his entry into

¹⁶ Lacan distinguishes between *l'autre*—“the other”—and *l'Autre* (the Other). The former is another subject for the individual, while the latter represents the symbolic order—language as such.

language, the subject must appeal to the Other for the satisfaction of need, so the subject must figure out what the Other wants, what pleases the Other, in order that the Other will want to fulfill his demand. Despite the relative physical autonomy that the subject will develop, once he is interpellated by language, he is nevertheless a social being from this point onward. The psychical apparatus through which the subject identifies with the Other's ideals is the ego-ideal, which is the subject's best guess as to what the Other's ideal is. As an apparatus that represents the social to the individual, the ego-ideal is a position external to oneself, or the position from which one looks at oneself *as if through the eyes of the Other*. The apparatus of the ego-ideal implies an (internalized) normative position from which one judges one's own behavior by means of externally imposed standards. In contrast to the ideal-ego, which is the infant subject's ideally autonomous self, the ego-ideal is the subject's ideal social—and necessarily dependent—self. Lacan writes, "And while the somatic *ananké* of man's inability to move, much less be self-sufficient, for some time after birth provides grounds for a psychology of dependence, *how can that psychology elide the fact that this dependence is maintained by a universe of language?*" (297, my emphasis). The institution of the ego-ideal is the (split) subject's answer to his own question, "Why must I do to appear likeable to the Other?" In identifying with the ego-ideal, one identifies with the Other and its desire, which is why Lacan claims that "man's desire is the Other's desire" (300). Thus, the initial subversions of the subject are inherently conservative: the first subversion occurs when the subject enters into language, producing the ego-ideal. Although the subject presumes to make demands of the Other, whatever he demands is already the Other's demand. In terms of subject positions, once the subject identifies with his ego-ideal, he is always already

speaking for a subjectivity *other than his own*, his desire always subverted and replaced by the Other's desire.

Now, if man's desire is the Other's desire, two important conclusions can be drawn from this last statement. The first conclusion is that the subject's need, filtered through language, becomes a demand that is always improperly addressed to the Other. The Lacanian theorist Bruce Fink notes, "Due to the fact that we must express ourselves in language, need is never fully expressed in demand" (118). We cannot locate the subject's desire in the totality of his discourse because the only desire we will find is the Other's. The second conclusion concerns the Other's desire: because desire is always desire for a lack, for something one does not have, the subject's attempt to be desirable to the Other—to be the Other's object of desire—suggests that *the Other is also lacking* something. This process is represented by the second stage of Lacan's graph:



The already-divided subject enters the signifying chain, which is represented by the vector $s(A) \rightarrow A$. "A" stands for *l'Autre*, the Other, which might be conceived here as the entire collection of signifiers in a given language. In attempting to be desirable to the Other, the subject will attempt to occupy the place of the Other's lack, here represented

by $s(A)$. However, the subject can only arrive at his ego-ideal, marked on the graph by $I(A)$: the ideal of the Other.

The subject's ego-ideal is necessarily ideological. The second stage of Lacan's graph therefore represents the subversion of the subject by an ideological network and the resulting ideological subject in the form of the ego-ideal. This stage of the graph represents everyday functioning for the average individual. That is, the split subject is subverted by a signifying network into occupying the position of an ego-ideal that perpetuates that very network. We may not get what we desire, but our demands are met well enough that we can function. Indeed, we function so well that we come to regard it as in our best interest to perpetuate the ideological network that divides us. This second stage of the graph of desire is also an example of the discourse of the master ($S_1/\$ \rightarrow S_2/a$).

However, because every ideological system is a linguistic system (albeit with real consequences), it will always produce a remainder, the ideological subject's relationship to the unsymbolizable object-cause of desire. Because the ideological network "button-tied" by the its master signifier is always an address to the Other that is lacking (circling around the Real but unable to integrate it into its symbolic network), Lacan claims that "No authoritative statement has any other guarantee here than its very enunciation, since it would be pointless for the statement to seek it in another signifier, which could in no way appear outside that locus [of the Other]. I formulate this by saying that there is no metalanguage that can be spoken, that there is no Other of the Other" (299). Rather than an objective ground that provides support for the ideological metanarratives that structure our existence, there is only the silent button-tying operation of the master signifier.

The paradox of subjectivity is that the subject tries to overcome his divided-ness by identifying with the Other's lack, but this lack is precisely what precludes the Other from ever fully satisfying the subject's demand. Although this paradox does not pose a problem for the vast majority of ideological subjects in their everyday lives, evidence of this paradox nevertheless persists, demonstrated by Freud in the founding text of psychoanalysis. The entire argument of *The Interpretation of Dreams* is that desire may be found in the unconscious, for in this work we discover that whatever is left over from the Other's response to the subject's demand finds distorted expression each night in our dreams. The phenomena of dreams are evidence of a surplus beyond both demand and the Other's interpretation/response to demand, a surplus Lacan defines as desire.

While dreams may provide adequate relief for the pressure of the leftover desire that is not accounted for by demand, there are many for whom the Other's inadequacy to their desires is crippling. These are the hysterics of psychoanalysis. If the split between their demands and their desires is so problematic, we should ask what it is that they really desire. What is this something for which the Other cannot account? What is it that the Other lacks, that the Other cannot provide? Because the Other as symbolic network constitutes the realm of the social—because the Other is always “other”—one answer might be recognition of my own particularity (Fink 119). There is no signifier to represent my particularity, my desire; indeed, the signifier “I” only “designates the subject insofar as he is speaking” (“Subversion” 287). The subject's particularity, lost in his submission to the Other, which he feels existentially but nevertheless cannot express in language, is the Real that resists symbolization, represented by Lacan as the *objet petit a*, and marked on his graph by “a”. Because the Other cannot account for the Real, the *a*

in Lacan's graph is always an impossibility. This is the "truth" of the discourse of the hysteric ($\$/a \rightarrow S_1/S_2$), in which the hysteric interrogates the Other's non-recognition of her particularity by asking, in essence, "Why am I what you say I am?"¹⁷

Desire is desire for recognition of some particularity that has a positive value for me subjectively, but a negative value for the Other insofar as this particularity is not contained within the Other's trove of signifiers.¹⁸ Lacan designates the subject's relationship to this lack in the Other, this lack that the subject wants to become, as fantasy. In contrast to the usual way of thinking about fantasy as a sexual scenario that must be repressed by the subject, Lacan's use of the term fantasy designates the subject's relationship to this lack in the Other, the subject's desire to fill that lack. In other words, because the Other—as trove of signifiers, as language—cannot represent my particularity, it cannot fully meet my demands of it. For most people, the Other responds to our demands adequately, and any excess of need over demand is given release through aesthetic means such as dreaming or joking. However, for the hysteric the demand for existential recognition and the Other's inadequacy prevents normal social functioning. Although the hysteric is commonly thought of as ill, in fact her existence is an indictment of the social and ideological network into which she is unable to fully integrate.

Because the desire of the Other is inadequate to the subject's particularity, in the psychoanalytic situation the analyst must begin to lead the patient (the analysand) away from the desire of the Other in order to locate the subject's own desire. In response to the "What do you want?" of the subject, the analyst must not occupy the position of the

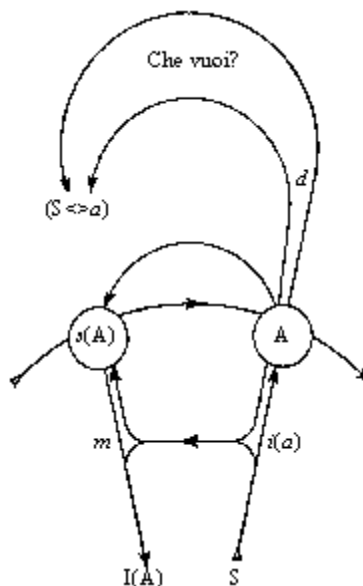
¹⁷ The hysteric's "question" is the $\$ \rightarrow S_1$ vector of this discourse.

¹⁸ The problem of the recognition of particularity is obviously a political concern as well, especially in a region such as Central Europe. One of the overriding concerns of all the authors in this study is a dominant discourse's recognition of *national* particularity, or even a national discourse's recognition of individual particularity.

Other and attempt to give an “oracular” reply anticipated by the subject (Lacan 300).

Were this to happen, the analyst would enter into the discourse of the university ($S_2/S_1 \rightarrow a/\$$), perpetuating within an academic framework the myth of the subject’s self-identity within language. Instead, the analyst must effectively turn the question back upon the subject: “What do you want?” is the question that best leads the subject to the path of his own desire, assuming that, thanks to the know-how of a partner known as a psychoanalyst, he takes up the question, even without knowing it” (Ibid. 300).

Psychoanalysis’s manipulation of the unknowing subject is analogous here to irony’s seduction of the ideological subject. The third articulation of Lacan’s graph represents this moment:



The first thing to notice here is that the psychoanalytic subversion implies a subjective *movement* from the seemingly stable lower half of the graph to the upper. It is through a type of speech (psychoanalytic speech, implied by the “che vuoi?”) that this movement is effected, again showing how linguistic vectors subvert topographies of subjectivity. The upper level of this articulation indicates the subject’s desire (d) that is not accounted for

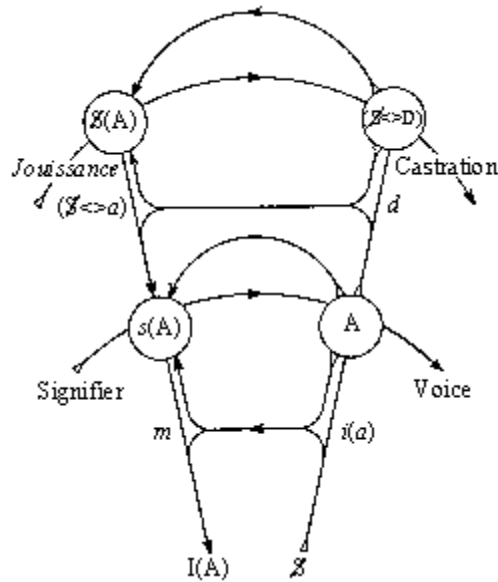
by the symbolic order in the lower half of the graph, while $(S \diamond a)$ is the Lacanian matheme for fantasy. Fantasy is a screen that causes the subject to misrecognize her own desire, leading her back into the realm of symbolic meaning. The “che vuoi?” is the question of the subject to the analyst, returned in question form. The reply that the analyst must give to the subject’s “che vuoi?” is no reply at all, thus confronting the subject with the Other’s lack, the inability of the Other to justify the subject’s being. This non-reply is precisely the reject-producing effect of the discourse of the analyst.

Whenever the Other gives an “oracular” reply, it always necessarily provides a meaning situated in language, a meaning that brings desire back to the level of demand. Thus, if in the analytic situation the analyst were to give an answer to the subject, he would merely provide the Other’s reply that masks its own lack, and fantasy would continue to perpetuate the subject’s neurosis insofar as it maintains the pretense that the Other can answer for the subject’s desire.

The analyst’s non-reply then, provides no answer to the subject’s “che vuoi?”, forcing the subject to confront the lack in the Other. For Fink, “this is crucial, for the Other sometimes has to work very hard to provide nothing, not to give an answer, an answer that could only be premature” (123). This is what is represented in the upper half of the discourse of the analyst ($a \rightarrow \$$), in that the analyst must strive to occupy the position of a rather than S_1 or even, given the occasional attempt to justify psychoanalysis within scientific discourse, S_2 . That is to say, if the analyst performs his role properly, according to Lacan, he gives agency to the object-cause of desire. If we consider the relationship between Lacan’s four discourses on one hand, and the graph of desire elaborated in “Subversion,” on the other, it becomes apparent that the analyst’s

occupation of the *a* position vis-à-vis the analysand (\$) leads the latter from the lower half of the graph of desire to the upper half. Here we arrive at the second subversion of the subject: the speaking subject is subverted or lured away from his (already subverted) subject position as ego-ideal. Although the Other's lack, symbolized by *a*, structures the subject's fantasy, the subject does not recognize it as such, and must therefore be confronted *with the signifier of the Other's lack*. Recognition of this signifier means that the subject has traversed the fantasy and recognizes his subjective existence as being non-justified by the Other. In practical terms, the analysand, recognizing that the Other cannot justify her desire, learns to take responsibility for her own desire (and possibly to pursue it). The analyst's "reject-producing" non-reply leads the analysand to produce a new master-signifier, the truth of which is a new relationship with the trove of signifiers in the symbolic order. That is to say, analysis effects a *displacement* that shifts the coordinates of the subject's symbolic reality. By subverting her unintentional attempts (in the transference) to perpetuate the continued rule within her psyche of the symbolic (ideological) system that made the analysand ill in the first place, the analyst helps the analysand to occupy a different psychic subject position.

The subject whose being is non-justified by the Other, now occupies a subject position, or place, other than that of his own ego-ideal. "This place," according to Lacan, "is called *Jouissance*" (305). The second subversion of the subject, then, the psychoanalytic subversion, lures the subject to the place of his own *Jouissance*, of his own "proper" desire. The subject becomes aware of how his *jouissance* enters the field of his desire precisely at the point where the Other is shown to be lacking. This is represented in the final articulation of Lacan's graph:



which demonstrates the incompatibility between the subject's primal *jouissance* and the Other, which is why *jouissance* can only enter the Other's field at this point. However, the signifier always evacuates *jouissance* from the body in some way. Although *jouissance* is lost when it enters "the defiles of the signifier", resulting in a kind of psychical castration, the reminder of this *jouissance* is signified by the cut, usually the borders between the body and the external world: the eyes, the lips, the anus, etc.¹⁹ The cut as the location (and perhaps the signifier) of the remaining *jouissance*, which can only have entered the field of the symbolic through its lack, will be central to my discussion of the subversion inherent in each of the texts I discuss. Symbolic castration, obviously, need not occur only on the personal level; it can also be political, especially in the cases of the subaltern nations of Central Europe. This last version of the graph also creates a *space* in which the unconscious, repressed level of discourse is continually protruding through the surface of conscious discourse, allowing its inherent ambiguity to become explicit.

¹⁹ In my discussions of individual works, the emphasis shifts from border regions to their excretions.

In Lacan's article, we have seen (at least) three instances of subversion. First, the unitary subject is *divided* by his entry into language. This division is a *subversion* insofar as the subject is diverted from what she actually desires, and also because this division creates the unconscious that roils like an undertow beneath the stream of our consciousness. Second, insofar as the subject's desire is expressed in language, it is subverted and replaced by the desire of the Other. Third, within the analytic session the analyst subverts the subject by causing him to identify with the signifier of the lack in the Other. In all three of these instances, we find the subject moving from one position on Lacan's graph to another, similar to the movement that Booth posits in the ironic transaction. Significantly, in both the psychoanalytic and the ironic transaction, the analyst/ironist feints in a direction where his desire is *not*, and this requires the analysand/reader to reconstruct where the former's desire *is*. For this reason, Booth's reader-response approach works extremely well with a Lacanian psychoanalytic approach. To subvert a subject in psychoanalytic terms—regardless of who initiates this subversion—means to move the subject from one position to another, shifting the ideological ground underneath his feet, and this subversion is possible because human subjectivity, bound up in language, is necessarily intersubjective.

From Psychoanalytic Subversion to Literary Subversion

“God creates the world and thinks while He is at it that it could just as well be done differently.” –Robert Musil

It may be a dubious move to transcode the discursive structures of psychoanalysis to the literary transaction, but I claim that the structures Lacan elaborates are applicable in the latter situation. Insofar as (non-objectively grounded) Other's signifiers' meaning have been “button-tied” by a master-signifier, any ideological manifestation of the Other

is nevertheless centered around a lack that the ideological subject both hopes to be and to hopes to avoid by the screen of his fantasy. Now, because the ideological subject is not necessarily a hysteric in the psychoanalytic sense of the word, i.e. unable to come to grips with the meaning imposed by this master signifier, but rather consciously interpellated by it and often happily so, the fantasy as a screen for the Other's lack works quite adequately for the ideological subject. So if the fantasy works, one cannot puncture it by argumentation; the fantasy will always serve to deflect rational arguments away from that which it hides. Rather, according to Žižek, one "hystericizes" the subject by calling the master signifier to her attention, and in making it explicit, this allows the process of political/ideological de-hystericization to begin. Again, it should be pointed out here that "truth" as such, presented linguistically, will never be adequate to accomplish this task; there is simply no metalanguage that could express a "truth" outside of the symbolic network. Power, as well as the "truth" of the counter-argument is a matter for the political, a matter of "might equals right." Subversion is another matter entirely. Puncturing the fantasy means raising the lack in the Other to a matter of the subject's consciousness, signifying it somehow, although it *a priori* entails operating from a position of weakness. The unconscious lies in the connections between discourse, and only becomes apparent in the gaps and pauses that interpellate nonsense into discursive speech.

This happens in the literary transaction as well. The ironic text subverts not by a full frontal assault on conventional values or norms, but in the apparent reject-producing effect that leads the reader to conclude that a work is ironic, in the moments of the literary transaction when the reader perceives the ironic incongruity and performs the

reconstruction expected of him. We open a novel expecting the meaning of its story to eventually become accessible to us, and in this way we anticipate an “oracular” pronouncement from the pages of the novel that fixes meaning. Through an ironic relationship to both content and form, the text can unsettle fixed meanings by leading the reader to perform the ironic reconstruction that shifts his symbolic support, if only within the pages of the novel. Thus, while the four novels I examine in this study are formally very different, in their use of irony they all share a structure that undermines ideology, encountered both within their pages and without.

In Chapter 2, I will examine the ironic narrative and structure of Jaroslav Hašek’s *Osudy dobrého vojáka Švejka za světové války* (*The Adventures of the Good Soldier Švejk in the World War*). Criticized for being plotless—Švejk never does quite make it to the front lines—and full of lowbrow humor, *The Good Soldier Švejk* actively subverts plot and genre expectations, the lowbrow humor functioning in the service of both subversions. Complicating Peter Brooks’s understanding of textual desire as initiatory of plot, the novel is agitated into metonymic movement by the forces of history while Švejk’s activity disrupts both this movement and the inherent drive toward meaning. The historical forces which motivate the plot are structurally analogous to the master’s discourse, while Švejk occupies the position of the analyst, punctuating the drive of plot in order to “unwork” desire bound up in formulaic plot structures and interpellate the reader with ambivalent desire for both plot and anti-plot.

Marking a shift from the periphery of the Austro-Hungarian Empire to its center, the focus of Chapter 3 is Robert Musil’s unfinished masterpiece *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* (*The Man Without Qualities*). Arguably the most philosophically

sophisticated novel ever to emerge from Central Europe, the novel thematizes the irreconcilability of subjective and objective modes of experience. Unable to transcend this split, the characters are unable to act, while the narrator seeks to apply a coldly objective eye to their stasis. However, the narrator's mobilization of philosophic-scientific categories in order to explain this basic disjunction of being is structurally analogous to the discourse of the university. *The Man Without Qualities* may be the least subversive of the novels I examine because the narrator is as trapped in a hegemonic discursive structure as the characters are, causing the novel to remain in a condition of stasis, blocking both textual desire—desire for the end—and desire on the narrative level, with the result that nothing ever happens.

In Chapter 4, I focus on Witold Gombrowicz's comic novel *Trans-Atlantyk* and its ironic use of form to subvert formulaic mobilizations of desire in order to create a space for cosmopolitan hybridity. The novel's transnational context—the novel tells of a Pole stranded in Argentina and similarly transplants an extremely local Polish form across national and even epochal boundaries—generates an all-consuming irony that subverts any identifications through gender, sexuality, or nationalism. *Trans-Atlantyk* traces a path to the cosmopolitan by paradoxically reclaiming and recasting the discredited and obsolete. Only apparently regressive in terms of form, *Trans-Atlantyk* utilizes irony in order to locate repressed desire and incorporate it into new configurations of cosmopolitan subjectivity.

My final chapter looks at a novel of Milan Kundera that shows both the impossible Real as that which always ironically subverts ideology and persists despite political repression. Although Kundera had emigrated from Czechoslovakia by the time

he wrote *Kniha smíchu a zapomnění* (*The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*), the specter of Communism looms heavily in the novel's background. For Kundera, "forgetting" becomes a repressive ideological technique both under Communism and in the West, but the Real nevertheless persists in this novel, generating in its variations an ironic laughter that opposes hegemonic formations. The resistance and difference of Central European history, however, cannot persist in the West, which swallows up difference. The novel accepts both psychic/novelistic castration while still acknowledging the persistence of desire only in the repressed truth that Central Europe represents.

Chapter 1

Prosaic Irony: Structure, Mode, and Subversion in *The Good Soldier Švejk*

In his essay “From Nation to World,” Milan Kundera writes, “I am convinced [that] the aesthetic value of a literary work... is fully comprehensible only in the great context... of European literature” (6). Deploping the tendency of Slavacists to situate Slavic-language works only within the Slavic context, excluding wider historical and cultural considerations that factor into literary production, Kundera suggests that a deeper understanding of the Czech literary work entails situating it first within the Central European context, and then within the context of European literature as a whole.

Kundera’s suggestion is especially relevant in the case of Jaroslav Hašek’s comic novel *Osudy dobrého vojáka Švejka za světové války* (*The Fortunes of the Good Soldier Švejk during the World War*, hereafter *Osudy*). Although Hašek’s novel has been situated, predictably and properly enough, within the twentieth-century Czech literary and political context, there has been almost no corresponding effort to situate it within the broader Czech and European literary traditions. The seemingly peripheral but critical result of this neglect is that the aesthetic value of Hašek’s novel has been overlooked.²⁰ Therefore, I want to situate *Osudy* in relation to three sources in which it finds inspiration: Czech nationalism, the Czech prose tradition inaugurated by Božena Němcová’s novel *Babička* (*The Grandmother*), and finally, the European demotic tradition exemplified by writers such as Boccaccio and Rabelais. My contention is that a

²⁰ Peter Steiner’s excellent article “Tropos Kynikos” discusses Švejk as the reincarnation of the *kynik* in the tradition of Diogenes, Sancho Panza, and Jacques le Fataliste. However, Steiner does not consider Czech literary precedents and focuses for the most part on *Osudy*’s reception within Czechoslovakia after its publication.

recontextualization of Hašek's novel within these respective traditions will reveal its formal concern as the relation of irony to the prosaic, which I call prosaic irony. In my view prosaic irony, occurring in the divide between linguistic meaning developed through everyday use and meaning imposed by a dominant ideological metanarrative, is simultaneously a structuring principle, a narrative mode, and a means of subversion in Hašek's novel. This examination will then lead to a re-reading of the novel that suggests an overlooked tragicomic element; in short, *Osudy* is simultaneously about the futility of resisting the march of History and more optimistically, the inability of hegemonic power structures and discourse to ever become fully totalizing. The novel calls our conception of history itself into question and posits an alternative understanding of history from a subaltern position.

My conception of prosaic irony derives from Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson's coining of the term "prosaics," which they define as both "a theory of literature that privileges prose in general and the novel in particular" and "a form of thinking that presumes the importance of the everyday" (15). For this reason, my concept of prosaic irony rests on three important assumptions. First, in opposition to poetry, which is situated more heavily on the metaphoric axis of language, prosaic meaning in both the novel and everyday life rests on an interplay between the numerous, sometimes contradictory significations that occur in the metonymy of language. In Bahktinian terms, every prosaic utterance occurs within a surplus of contextual signification without which meaning is impossible. Second, prosaic speech occurs in everyday life. Both the meanings of words and their combinatorial possibilities have developed from their everyday use within a particular *lived* sociolinguistic context; meaning breaks down and

nonsense occurs when these contextual premises, whether explicit or implicit, are ignored. Finally, prosaic speech is inherently ironic and open to mis- and re-interpretation insofar as we use words not to communicate perfectly, but adequately. Prosaic irony acts as a structuring principle because Hašek employs it to comment metatextually and ironically on the nature and style of the novel itself, marking the arbitrary and mediated nature of both the prosaic utterance and the historical narrative. At the same time, prosaic irony is a mode that continually generates irony within the text, alternately driving and frustrating its plot. Prosaic irony also acts as an ethical position, insisting on the prosaic as the primary meaning-generating context even in the most catastrophic of situational contexts. Finally, prosaic irony is a tactic for subversion. That is to say, prosaic irony is an ideological preference and mode of critique reflected on the level of structure. This ideological position—that of the Everyman trapped within the hegemonic network, lacking the wherewithal to escape—is represented by vernacular language and typically expressed through the trope of storytelling.

Although prosaic irony requires a wealth of contextual information, three factors obscure *Osudy*'s position within the local and European literary contexts. First, the apparent influence of the Švejk archetype in twentieth-century Czech literature and cinema tends to preclude recognition of both the novel's response to nineteenth-century Czech literature and European precedents hailing from outside Central Europe. Second, the vulgar language of the characters makes it easy to dismiss the novel's aesthetic merit; none other than the New Critic René Wellek, a native Czech who helped to found Comparative Literature in the United States, has described the novel as "not much of a

work of art, [and] full of low humour and cheap propaganda” (41).²¹ While *Švejk* is unlikely to be mistaken for a work of high modernism, critics unable to see past the vulgar language and its position in relation to the overall text either miss its literary function entirely or deny that it can have such a function. This blindness vis-à-vis vernacular and even vulgar language in literature has existed at least since Boccaccio’s time, and it is unlikely to go away anytime soon. Nevertheless, Mikhail Bakhtin’s work has made it commonplace to view any speech genre—even the demotic—as a conscious literary choice so long as it is represented between the covers of a novel, and while critics may contend that the vulgar language weakens the plot, I will argue that this “weakening” is precisely what this language intends. Finally, in its twentieth-century reception the novel is most often cited not by literary critics, but by the politically committed who try to interpret the actions of the protagonist via their particular political ideologies.²²

By taking the novel seriously—as seriously as one can take a comic novel—I hope to correct the first of these factors, which will lead to a correction of the latter two. Therefore, the initial task of this chapter is to consider *Osudy* not from the perspective of its critical reception and later influence, but rather in terms of its position within the broader continuum of Czech and European literature and culture. In approaching this task, I shall elaborate the novel’s aesthetic and show that it is much more than merely a profane parody of the Austrian military apparatus. Instead, I argue, it is a novel that

²¹ Wellek’s encyclopedic knowledge of Western literature makes his failure to consider *Osudy* within a broader demotic tradition somewhat striking. For more on early critical responses to the novel, see Toman.

²² The turbulent history of Czechoslovakia in the twentieth century, especially the rise of Communism, paved the way for a belief that literature had to be committed to the nation. For a brief overview of specific interpretations of *Švejk*, See Steiner.

performs its subversion of hegemonic histories, nationalist obligations, and narrative conventions by means of prosaic irony.²³

Modern Czech Literature and Nationalism, or Hašek's Precedents

Small and nascent nations seem acutely aware that nothing is written in a vacuum, especially when the very right of the nation and its language to exist cannot be taken for granted. However, even by the relative standard of small nations, modern Czech literature is intimately bound up with the question of nationalism because the modern form of Czech nationalism was initially a *linguistic* phenomenon. Czech nationalism of the Middle Ages had been conflated with the proto-Protestantism advocated by Church reformer Jan Hus and later by the Czech Brethren, who chased the Jesuit Order from Bohemia. After the defeat of the Bohemian Estates by the Habsburgs at the Battle of White Mountain in 1620, the ethnic Czech nobility faced either emigration or execution and were shortly replaced by German-speaking nobility approved by the Habsburgs. In 1624 the Jesuit order returned to dominate the cultural and educational life of Bohemia, imposing a strictly religious framework on the interpretation of Bohemian history that ignored the more overtly nationalist (because Protestant) aspects of the region's history. The Czech language remained in use among the peasantry, but although this social class constituted the majority of the Bohemian population, most of them were illiterate and their consciousness was hardly nationalist. Meanwhile, the nobility was politically, ethnically, and linguistically connected to Vienna. Thus, the next century and a half

²³ For Bakhtin, the novel is inherently subversive and dialogic. However, while I use his categories (such as dialogism and heteroglossia) in my analysis of *Osudy*, his general conceptualization of the novel remains problematic for me. Bakhtin's analysis of actual novels tends to be superficial at best, and his sweeping claims about the novel are entirely too limiting in that many of what we consider to be novels would be excluded from his generic conception. That is, Bakhtin's idea of the novel seems to be limited to a select list of canonical works and authors such as Dostoyevsky, Balzac, Stendhal, et al.

marked a long decline for the Czech language, which was, as the historian Hugh Agnew writes, “practically driven from use in the public sphere and was viewed in most cultured circles as a debased peasants’ jargon” (52). “By the later eighteenth century,” Agnew comments, “faced with a newly flourishing German language and culture in Bohemia, Czech seemed to be on its way to oblivion” (51). This possibility loomed ever larger as first the Habsburg monarch Maria Theresa, and later her son Joseph II, began a series of reforms aimed at consolidating the Habsburg Empire’s power and streamlining its functioning. This was done in part by making German the official language of the growing imperial bureaucracy. When schools were established throughout the Empire in the late eighteenth century, German was the language of instruction, making the Czech language’s demise seem all the more likely.

It was only in the last quarter of the eighteenth century that a small group of Czech intellectuals revived the study of Czech history and language, and this led directly to the rise of Czech nationalism in the nineteenth century. These intellectuals devoted a considerable amount of energy to arguing for the stature of the Czech language and the history of Czech culture. The linguist Josef Dobrovský, the leading figure of this linguistic renaissance, began to compile a Czech dictionary that standardized the vocabulary and developed a Czech grammar that modernized the language’s orthography and established rules governing neologisms. Because of the advocacy of Dobrovský and others, Czech was instituted as the language of instruction in schools at a time when the Czechs were experiencing an abnormally large population growth, creating a sizable reading public for the first time in the language’s history. This in turn led to the first generation of poets writing in Czech in the early nineteenth century and a revived interest

in the collection and preservation of Czech folklore. Thus, even the grammatical rules utilized in Czech literary creation are responsible for not only Czech literature itself, but also Czech nationalism, a unique relationship between language and nationalism, to be sure.

Significantly, Dobrovský's primary language—the language in which he published his polemics arguing for the importance of Czech—was German. Dobrovský himself learned Czech only as an adult and his knowledge of Czech was grounded in his training as a philologist. For this reason “Dobrovský's knowledge of Czech was more theoretical than practical” (Agnew 89) and he was concerned with a “purer” form of Czech, limiting the dictionary to “purely” Czech words and rejecting dialectal forms. In establishing the rules for the future development of the language, he wanted to ensure that future developments followed what he called the “spirit” of the language (Agnew 90). However, because the early nineteenth-century peasantry was relatively dispersed—and thus more prone to developing dialects in isolation—and education was not yet compulsory, the “revived” Czech language did not correspond to the myriad forms employed by the actual speakers of the language, so although “linguistic nationalism became central to the Czech national movement, part of its ideology” (Agnew 91), it contained an element of elitism and abstraction at its core.

This development had several important implications for the study of modern Czech literature. First, although the decision to write in any language is a political one, the decision by Czechs to write in Czech is explicitly political in a way that it is not, for example, for a German writing in German. Works written in Czech are necessarily *a*

priori implicated in the nationality question.²⁴ Second, the *type* of Czech an author uses—standard or dialect form—also indicates a political position. From which linguistic-national position does a literary character speak? The more “proper” the spoken Czech, the more it represents the Czech developed by Prague’s bourgeois intelligentsia, some of whom (like Dobrovský) did not learn the language in a lived social context. That is to say, to the degree that characters in Czech prose spoke the idealized Czech of Dobrovský, the less their speech represented that of actual Czechs. The connection between language and nationalism is thematized throughout nineteenth-century Czech literature and is taken up again in conjunction with the second issue by Hašek in *Osudy*.²⁵

The Genealogy of Švejk

The themes of storytelling and the political dimension of speaking and writing in Czech exists in the Czech novel at its inception. In order to situate *Osudy* within a national prose tradition and show how it engages these themes, I will briefly discuss the most famous Czech novel of the nineteenth century. Less than three decades old by the time of Hašek’s birth, the Czech prose tradition was inaugurated by Božená Němcová’s 1855 novel *Babička*. Influenced by the Czech romantic poets of the preceding generation who “revived Czech folklore and cultivated a linguistic nationalism” (Wellek 27) and herself a folklorist by occupation, Němcová had spent the better part of the decade preceding the creation of *Babička* traveling the Czech and Slovak lands cataloguing the

²⁴ Indeed, in *Osudy* even the act of speaking in either German or Czech indicates a political position. Lieutenant Lukáš, a Czech hoping to advance in the Austrian military, “spoke German in society, wrote German, read Czech books, and when he taught a course for one-year volunteers, all of whom were Czechs, he told them in confidence: ‘Let’s be Czechs, but no one need know about it. I’m a Czech too.’ He equated being a Czech with membership of some sort of secret organization, to which it was wiser to give a wide berth” (Hašek 166). The narrator adds, “He should have been a captain long since but his cautiousness in the nationality question had not helped him” (167).

²⁵ This problematic also becomes acute in postcolonial literature. Because of this, recent scholarship has sought to apply postcolonial theory to Central Europe. For example, see Petkovic.

local folklore. Němcová's occupational concerns show in her novel as the narrative frame is frequently interrupted, sometime for entire chapters, so that the characters may tell stories to one another in Czech peasant vernacular with a natural eloquence that belies their lack of formal education. Storytelling functions in provincial, primarily oral communities as a means of preserving past traditions and wisdom. That is to say, storytelling represents the transindividual desire of the community to pass fixed truths and meanings from one generation to the next. Frankfurt School theorist Walter Benjamin's essay "The Storyteller" is useful for conceptualizing the function of the trope of storytelling in pre-modernist novels like *Babička*. He claims, "every real story [...] contains, openly or covertly, something useful. In one case, the usefulness may lie in a moral; in another, in some practical advice; in a third, in a proverb or maxim. In every case the storyteller is a man [sic] who has counsel for his readers" (145). Dismissing the gender specificity of Benjamin's assertion, *Babička*'s characters are well practiced in the art of delivering counsel through storytelling. However, storytelling has a function outside the narrative frame as well because there is an obvious political dimension here: the desire of these Czechs is also the desire *for* Czech, both politically and linguistically. As the titular protagonist, reflecting the linguistic nationalism of the Czech Romantics, says, "If a man's sprung of Czech blood, let him hold by the Czech tongue" (120). Strikingly, in this view the nation changes from a geopolitical concept to a linguistic one, and is performed whenever Czech is spoken. The use of Czech cultivates the nation even when the nation as a geopolitical entity doesn't exist.

Although Němcová's novel emphasizes both storytelling and the political dimension of Czech, it depicts a world that seems far removed from that of Hašek.

Babička's titular protagonist is a wise old peasant woman who goes to live with her daughter's family in rural northeastern Bohemia. The typical occupation for a peasant woman like Granny is spinning fabric, and indeed Granny's spinning-wheel accompanies her whenever she visits her neighbors and is present whenever she entertains their company. The spinning-wheel acts as both a symbol of Granny's peasant status and a metaphor for the cyclical nature of pastoral life. This cyclical nature of rural existence in turn is reflected on the narrative level as Granny, deeply attuned to the rhythm of pastoral life, rises at four o'clock in the summer and goes outdoors to spin flax, and in the winter rises at five and spins in her room. As a young woman she spins for her own dowry, and after her marriage she spins for her daughters and granddaughters. Reinforcing the novel's cyclical structure, Granny and her grandchildren go to town every Sunday in order to observe Mass, and the events of the novel are often located by their proximity to the holidays of the Catholic calendar rather than historical events. Late in the novel, an aging Granny increasingly cedes her place of primacy in the narrative to a pair of young lovers. She drifts to the margin of her world, and "looked on as everything around her grew and flowered, [and] she rejoiced in the happiness of those near to her" (Němcová 344), finally dying "a happy woman" (349).

The Czech peasantry of the time are not particularly disposed toward nationalism, and this is directly reflected in Granny's ideology. Despite her strictly linguistic nationalism, Granny accepts the political order as natural and given.²⁶ For her part, Granny is loyal to the Austrian crown, recalling with fondness an unexpected encounter she once had with the Emperor Josef II, remembered by the Czech peasantry as a

²⁶ Lest one assume that Granny's apolitical nature is identical to Němcová's, it must be noted that the author was an outspoken proponent of social reforms, and had been living for several years under the surveillance of the Austrian secret police for her active public role in the failed revolution of 1848.

benevolent monarch because he abolished serfdom and granted his subjects religious freedom (Součková 12). We learn that as a young woman, Granny made her living selling woolen blankets and had been walking with her mentor (later her mother-in-law) Mrs. Novotný into the town of Ples to sell them. A young man carrying a telescope approaches them, strikes up a conversation with the two women, and even allows Granny to look through his telescope. The young man is in fact Josef II, but Granny and Mrs. Novotný do not recognize him. He asks Granny what she thinks of the Emperor, and she replies, “We pray for him every day, that the Lord God may grant him a long reign, and to his lady mother (*panímáma*), too” (Němcová 53). The term Granny uses to refer to the Empress, *panímáma*, is the peasant word for a farmer’s wife. The Emperor then shows his ability to identify with the peasantry when he tells Granny to remember both him and the Empress in her prayers, repeating the vernacular “*panímáma*” (Němcová 54). Josef II then departs, but not before giving a silver thaler to Grandma and adding, “When you get home you can say that you have spoken with the Emperor” (54). Recalling the encounter later in life, Granny says, “He was a good man, especially to the poor people” (116). Granny’s story is slyly subversive because it suggests that the Emperor’s worth is measured by his kindness toward the Czech peasantry, and not by his military success. More importantly, the Czech vernacular becomes an instrument of subversion here because it effaces distinctions between the emperor and a common peasant.

Despite Granny’s love for Josef II, the Czech peasantry historically showed a strong aversion to participating in the Habsburgs’ military campaigns. In the novel, George Novotný, the future husband of young Magdalena (Granny), flees from his uncle’s apprenticeship when press-gangs begin scouring the Bohemian countryside for

young men to serve in the army. George seeks shelter with Magdalena's family, and Magdalena's father agrees to "do what we can" to help George "escape the white coat" (262) worn by soldiers in the Austrian army. Misfortune strikes, however, and George has to flee to the Prussian frontier, where he is drafted instead into the Prussian army. As a result of George's conscription, Magdalena accompanies George to Silesia for the next fifteen years. There she also sees King Frederick of Prussia and the Russian Tsar Alexander when George serves in the former's army before dying from a cannon wound, ultimately leaving Magdalena a widow with three children. Thus the novel suggests that military campaigns, whether the Habsburgs' wars or those conducted by foreign powers, do not represent the Czechs' interests and bring nothing but misery.

The novel makes Czech peasant culture, to the degree that it is self-contained and unconcerned with foreign affairs, into a trope of resistance to the Czechs' position as a satellite of a multinational empire. Moreover, the idyllic and cyclical nature of *Babička*'s plot even situates the novel outside of history, and northern Bohemia becomes a timeless *locus amoenus*.²⁷ Magdalena/Granny's encounters with important historical figures provide the only means of placing certain episodes within a historical timeline: Josef II carries a telescope so that he may view construction on the Ples-Josefov fortress that was under construction between 1784 and 1787, and George dies of a wound suffered during the Kościuszko Rebellion in Poland in 1792. With age, Granny leaves not only her youth behind; the grand events of Central European history also fade into the background, and Granny's homecoming represents an escape from history into the refuge of pastoral

²⁷ Milada Součková persuasively argues that the *locus amoenus* is an important part of the Czech national tradition, and the trope provides the material for the Czech national anthem. Of course, the *locus amoenus* is a frequent literary setting for storytelling throughout Europe (for example, in the *Decameron*), and thus it is unsurprising that *Babička* infuses both the *locus amoenus* and storytelling with nationalist sentiment.

existence. Widowed, penniless, barefoot, and begging for food along the way, Granny returns to the village of her birth where her life again becomes happy.

Late in *Babička*, however, the threat of military conscription again rears its ugly head, this time threatening the happiness of the aforementioned pair of young lovers. The young man, Jakub, is drafted into the army, and his family is too impoverished to bribe the local gendarmes into letting him escape service. Fortunately, Granny has become close to the local Princess, and thus she uses her influence with the Princess to win Jakub's release from service, saving him from the white coat in exchange for valuable advice regarding the Princess's foster-daughter, the Countess Hortensia.²⁸ Here, Granny's earthy common sense—what Benjamin might call her counsel—appeals to the Princess's faculty of reason, repeating an earlier scene in the novel where Granny advised the Princess to adopt socialist principles on her estate by giving employment to the local paupers. This storyline reveals much about nineteenth-century Czech nationalism: although the Czechs accepted, to varying degrees, their subject status within a multinational empire as long as the latter allowed the Czechs their particularity, they did not share the empire's larger concerns.

The Princess will deliver the valediction that closes the novel; as Granny is led to her final resting place and her cortege passes the princess's castle, "a white hand drew back the heavy curtains at one of the windows, and the Princess appeared between them. As long as the procession remained in sight her sorrowful gaze followed it, and when it was lost to view she let the curtains fall back into place, and whispered with a deep sigh: 'There goes a happy woman'" (349). The dropping of the curtain ends this drama, ending the idyll.

²⁸ The Countess Hortensia is modeled on the historical Lady Binzer, with whom Němcová was acquainted.

Granny's death and her funeral procession exemplify Benjamin's comment that "[I]t is not only a man's knowledge or wisdom, but above all his real life—and this is the stuff that stories are made of—which first assumes transmissible form at the moment of his death [...] Death is the sanction for everything that the storyteller can tell" (151). Or, as Peter Brooks puts it, "The desire of the text is ultimately the desire for the end, for that recognition which is the moment of the death of the reader in the text" (108).²⁹ Brooks does not mean the depiction of the reader's death within the narrative, but rather that "what we seek in narrative fictions is that knowledge of death which is denied to us in our own lives: the death that writes *finis* to the life and therefore confers on it its meaning [...] only the end can finally determine meaning, close the sentence as a signifying totality" (22). That is to say, the end of a narrative and its metonymy stops the sliding of meaning. Once all the signifiers have been uttered and the final period placed, the overall meaning of the text (or one's life read as text) becomes clear. The metonymy of a narrative plot, once completed, acquires transmissibility as metaphor. Here, Granny's death confers final meaning: her happiness was dependent on her investment in the prosaic details of both Czech life and language. The novel's escapism—*literal* escapism vis-à-vis foreign military campaigns—may strike readers as unrealistic, a charge *Babička* would then share with Hašek's novel, but its realism is saved for the authentic representation of peasant speech. The material fact of the novel itself, reproducing Czech vernacular on paper, performs this transmission of knowledge, rendering Granny herself superfluous, as all storytellers eventually become once their wisdom has achieved transmissibility.

²⁹ I have already discussed the importance of Brooks' take on narrative to my own reading of irony (see pp. 12 – 14).

Sixty-six years separate the publication of *Babička* from that of *Osudy*, and the historical events of these years have altered the political and ideological situation so drastically that another escape from history is surely impossible. Nevertheless, there are some striking similarities between *Babička* and *Osudy* that invite comparison and suggest that Hašek's novel responds to Němcová's in significant ways. Both novels demonstrate their respective authors' ears for dialect, and both rely heavily upon the theme of storytelling as a vehicle for representing it. However, where the stories told by the characters in *Babička* reflect their pastoral setting, the language of *Osudy*'s characters, rife with crude subject matter, is that of Prague's petit-bourgeoisie and lumpenproletariat and their stories are often told in the pubs or even less idealized settings, such as prison or the military barracks. Signaling the changed attitude toward the Habsburg head-of-state, the endearing *panímáma* has been replaced by the ironic *Procházka*.³⁰ The earlier peasants, content with their lot in the world, are replaced by malingerers who desperately try to maintain their lot, and have to be tortured into going to war.

Němcová's Granny can escape into a country life relatively safe from the great march of history, save for an idyllic encounter with the Emperor. However, we should note that while Josef II's reforms may historically have benefited the Czech peasantry of which Granny was a part, they were not the result of an altruistic feeling toward the Czechs. As an Enlightened monarch, the emperor wished to undermine the Church's authority in favor of a strong and secular centralized government. In the long reign of Josef II's grandson Franz-Joseph, these reforms have culminated in the pervasive,

³⁰ The Czechs declared that the constitution imposed by the Austrians had no validity unless Emperor Franz-Joseph validated it as Monarch of Bohemia, a specification that required him to be crowned in Prague. Although Franz-Joseph did indeed visit Prague, he declined to be crowned, instead opening up the new city bridge. The Czechs began to refer to the Emperor as Mr. *Procházka*, or 'Walker', referring to the newspaper photographs of this incident showing the Emperor walking across the bridge.

inescapable bureaucratic apparatus confronted by Hašek's protagonist Švejk.³¹ Thus, while Granny could appeal to the local Princess's reason, the source of decision-making in *Švejk* is the inhuman, irrational bureaucracy. Historical figures from Hašek's time are mentioned in the text, but are never present in the events of the novel and the characters do not encounter them. In their place looms a Habsburg bureaucracy that has extended its reach everywhere, and even the countryside is not a place where one can hide for long.

In the chapter "Švejk's Budějovice Anabasis", Švejk has become detached from his regiment and is first helped by "some old grandmother" (*nějaká stará babička*) who assumes that Švejk has deserted. Although Němcová and her grandmother are long dead, this unnamed grandmother's behavior is consistent enough with Němcová's that it might be useful to imagine that Hašek is staging an encounter between his and Němcová's respective protagonists. The grandmother offers Švejk food and advice on how to avoid the rural gendarmes: "[S]oldier, avoid Čížová. The gendarmerie there would flay you and they always catch dissenters. Go straight through the wood to Sedlec by Horažďovice. There's a very good gendarme there who lets everybody through the village" (243). This grandmother, like Granny, seems more interested in helping Švejk desert the army than in rejoining his regiment, even though he states contrary intentions, and she even knows the authority figures that might help. Unfortunately, the acquaintances she recommends to Švejk are of no use, as the Bohemian countryside during the First World War is swarming with gendarmes on the lookout for deserters, and Švejk is captured and returned to his regiment after being interrogated. Even the countryside has become infested with informers and members of state security. The

³¹ The bureaucracy that results from Emperor Joseph II's reforms is more famous for its nightmarish depiction in Franz Kafka's work.

encounter between Švejk and the grandmother reveals just how much Bohemia has changed in the years since the appearance of *Babička* and her idyllic world.

Hašek, Boccaccio, and the History of Irony

A comparative reading of *Osudy* with *Babička* is initially undermined by the much cruder style of Hašek's novel. Yet while *Osudy* is indeed full of "low humor," it is a mistake to overlook the way this humor functions in the novel. First, the objectionable dialogue comes not from the narrator, but from the mouths of the novel's characters, and Hašek clearly wants his readers to recognize this. In the Epilogue to Part I of *The Good Soldier Švejk*, the narrator (also named Jaroslav Hašek) writes that in the novel,

[B]udou vojáci i obyvatelstvo mluvit a vystupovat tak, jak je tomu ve skutečnosti.

Život není žádnou školou uhlazeného chování. Každý mluví tak, jak je schopen.

Ceremoniář dr. Guth mluví jinak než hostinský Palivec u Kalicha a tento román není pomůckou k salónnímu ušlechťení a naučnou knihou, jakých výrazů je možno ve společnosti užívat. Jest to historický obraz určité doby.

("[T]he soldiers and civilian population will go on talking and acting as they do in real life. Life is no finishing school for young ladies [...] and this novel is neither a handbook of drawing-room refinement nor a teaching manual of expressions to be used in polite society. It is a historical picture of a certain period of time") (214). The phrase 'certain period of time' here situates the events of the novel within history, distancing it from the cyclical, ahistorical model that structures *Babička*, and although the historical veracity of Hašek's novel itself is open to debate, this is beside the point. The sheer absence of situational realism in Švejk's world attests to its fictional status. However, Hašek has an ear for stories, and the novel does present a realistic portrayal of the speech of Prague's

pub-goers. Indeed, the brilliance of *Osudy* rests in the frequent ironic juxtaposition of absurdly grotesque situations and the prosaic, yet colorful language of the characters in these situations. It is a mistake to take Hašek's claims to historical accuracy at face value; the purpose of this epilogue is to call attention to the artificial, mediated nature of this realistic, if "low" language and the ways in which it generates the ironic juxtapositions that structure the novel.

In keeping with my effort to situate the Czech novel within a broader geo-historical context, it is useful to note that this Epilogue to Part I of *Osudy* invites comparison with another work from the European literary-demotic canon—one of the first great prose works of Europe—in which storytelling is also emphasized: Boccaccio's *Decameron*, specifically the Introduction to the Fourth Day.³² These two passages have striking parallels: on the formal level of the text, these passages lie outside the plot of the work itself; in both cases the author/narrator is directly addressing his audience. Both passages are situated approximately one-third of the way into the text; Boccaccio's introduction occurs after the third of ten days, while Hašek's epilogue occurs after the first of three planned parts to the novel. Third, both authors are justifying prose—the decision to write in prose in Boccaccio's case, and the vulgarity of prose in Hašek's. Most importantly, both passages highlight the inherently ironic nature of prose in order to call attention to its function within the respective works taken as wholes.

Addressing the women in love to whom the *Decameron* is dedicated, Boccaccio writes that his critics, "showing deep concern for my renown, say that I would be better

³² Although Hašek does not explicitly claim Boccaccio as an inspiration, he references him in the novel. After a drunken religious debate, a pious chaplain preparing for sleep requests his breviary. In response, Švejk "put into his hand a book which was lying on the night table. The pious chaplain then fell asleep with Boccaccio's *Decameron* in his hand" (140).

advised to remain with the Muses in Parnassus, than to fritter away my time in your company” (284). The Muses are goddesses responsible for artistic inspiration, but because Boccaccio is writing in an era when prose fiction is regarded as an inferior art form (if indeed it is an art form at all), the inspiration of the Muses has nothing to do with prose fiction. That is to say, if Boccaccio is in any way concerned with his reputation, he should stick to poetry. Boccaccio’s response to this criticism is a striking statement of aesthetic principle by fourteenth-century standards. “I fully concede the soundness of this advice,” Boccaccio replies, “but all the same one cannot actually live with the Muses, any more than they can live with us [...] Moreover, [real] ladies have caused me to compose a thousand lines of poetry in the course of my life, whereas the Muses never caused me to write any at all” (289). Art—even poetic art, according to Boccaccio—draws its inspiration from real, prosaic concerns and not only is the quotidian inspiration for his work reflected in his choice of prose, but this choice is a more honest reflection of art’s actual inspiration than poetry, which disguises its source. This is a somewhat disingenuous move on Boccaccio’s part, however, because the *Decameron*’s prose hardly represents the quotidian. Boccaccio moved among the rising bourgeoisie and banking families of Florence, so his prose is written for a historically young social class, albeit one whose affectations retain a courtly manner. It is for this reason that although Boccaccio is one of the first writers to argue for the artistic merit of prose, then regarded as but a poor cousin to poetry, he must do so in an elevated style. The narrator claims that his stories are written “not only in the Florentine vernacular and in prose, but in the most homely and unassuming style (*istilo umilissimo e rimesso*) it is possible to imagine” (284), a judgment that itself is obviously ironic; Boccaccio’s prose is extremely florid and

masterful.³³ Even the most “unassuming” statement within a literary text is dialogic and ironic, and by mocking the belief that prose lacks artistic merit, Boccaccio calls the reader’s attention to the mediated nature of the prosaic utterance. Prose is not simply a reflection of everyday speech; in the context of the literary work it is a deliberate aesthetic choice with a particular function. The ironical “homeliness” of style becomes a structuring principle of the *Decameron* because it communicates something more than simply thematic content.

While Boccaccio marshaled his rhetorical skills to defend his already masterful prose, Hašek’s task is to defend *Osudy*’s decidedly lowbrow dialogue. Here, the narrator resorts to a familiar argument in order to ridicule the outrage that his bawdy prose is sure to incite, claiming, “Je-li třeba užít nějakého silného výrazu, který skutečně padl, nerozpakuji se podat jej právě tak, jak se to stalo. Opisovat nebo vytečkovat považuji za nejpitomější přetvářku. Slova těch užívá se i v parlamentech.” “Where it is necessary to use a strong expression which was actually said, I am not ashamed of reproducing it exactly as it was. I regard the use of polite circumlocutions or asterisks as the stupidest form of sham. The same words are used in parliament, too” (214). While the lowbrow speech is indeed an accurate representation of the Prague vernacular (although perhaps not of parliament), I have already argued that the reader cannot accept Hašek’s claim, following as it does on the heels of over 200 pages of the absurd narrative itself, that his novel is an accurate depiction of reality. *Contra* Wellek, however, neither is the novel simply a compendium of vulgar stories and anti-Habsburg propaganda. (Indeed, Hašek

³³ The phrase “homely and unassuming style” references Boccaccio’s own commentary on Dante’s *Inferno*, which he says is written in “a homely and unassuming comic style [*lo stilo comico è umile e rimesso*]” (McWilliam lxv).

indicates that his authorial desire and intentions remain hidden.³⁴) Rather, in defending the novel's prosaic and profane language, Hašek calls attention to the dynamic of its interaction with both the background of nightmarish and grotesque situations in the Habsburg Empire and its interaction with the plot. That is to say, Hašek uses this passage to mark not only the mediated and overdetermined nature of the novel's prosaic dialogue, but also its ironic function within the novel and the way this dialogue structures the novel as a whole.

Ironizing Narrative, Genre, and Structure in *Osudy*

Having begun my analysis of the novel with Hašek's after-the-fact highlighting of the relation between prose and irony—prosaic irony—in the Epilogue to Part I, I want to return to the book's beginning. The irony of Hašek's novel begins with its title: *Osudy dobrého vojáka Švejka za světové války*, literally “the fortunes of the good soldier Švejk during the world war,” implying that this “good soldier” actually fights in the war. *Osud*, the first word of the title, translates to “fortune”, “destiny”, or “fate”, implying that the hero does not play an active role in driving the narrative forward. Instead, the narrative will guide the protagonist along. Passivity, however, is typical of neither heroes nor good soldiers. Therefore, this choice of wording in the title already undermines the usual assumption that the protagonist's individual desire will motivate the narrative. Furthermore, *osud* typically has only a singular construction in Czech, but here it has a plural ending—*osudy*, “fortunes”—suggesting an episodic structure rather than one that builds toward its conclusion, raising the possibility that the novel will simply not be

³⁴ “Nevím, podaří-li se mně vystihnout touto knihou, co jsem chtěl. Již okolnost, že slyšel jsem jednoho člověka nadávat druhému: ‘Ty jsi blbej jako Švejk,’ právě tomu nenasvědčuje.” “I do not know whether I shall succeed in achieving my purpose with this book. The fact that I have already heard one man swear at another and say ‘You’re about as big an idiot as Švejk’ does not prove that I have” (216).

coherent as a whole; meaning will be contained within partial units of individual “fortunes” rather than in an overarching structure. These etymological implications of the plural *osudy* undermine the importance of the final words in the title, “*za světové války*” (“during the world war”), which indicate a bounded temporal period providing a contextual background against which to understand and judge discrete moments. Whereas the individual moments of a novel typically acquire meaning within what Brooks would call the context of the work’s completed “metonymy,” the individual episode is the meaningful unit in the novel, *not* the World War as a whole. By undermining the meaning-producing effect of the phrase “*za světové války*,” the title does not simply suggest that the war is meaningless—an apparent, if accurate conclusion—it also invalidates the tropes and plot structures that typically become guarantors of meaning in a more conventional martial narrative.

The novel’s preface continues this reversal of categories, establishing Švejk as an Everyman figure whose heroism lies in his anonymity. Hašek begins,

Veliká doba žádá velké lidi. Jsou nepoznaní hrdinové, *skromní*, bez slávy a historie Napoleona. Rozbor jejich povahy zastínil by i slavu Alexandra Macedonského. Dnes můžete potkat z prazských ulicích osumilého muže, který sám ani neví, co vlastní znamená v historii nové velké doby. Jde *skromně* svou cestou, neobtěžuje nikoho, a není těž obtížován žurnalisty kteří by ho prosily o interview. Kdybyste se ho otázali, jak se jmenuje, odpovídl by vám prostince a *skromně*: “Já jsem Švejk...” (1, my italics)

A great epoch calls for great people. There are unknown heroes, *modest*, without the glory and history of Napoleon. Analysis of their character would eclipse even

the glory of Alexander of Macedonia. Today you can meet in the streets of Prague a poorly-dressed man who does not even know himself what he signifies in the history of these great new times. He goes *humbly* on his way, not bothering anybody, and is not bothered by journalists asking him for an interview. If you asked him his name, he would answer you simply and *humbly*: “I am Švejk.” (1)

Its repetition lost in Cecil Parrott’s English translation, the adjective used to describe unknown heroes like Švejk, *skromní* (humble, modest) is repeated in its adverbial form two more times in this paragraph alone, and twice more in the rest of the Preface. Švejk is an object worthy of our fascination precisely because of the humility of his speech and manner, but in highlighting it, the narrator invests this prosaic attitude with heightened significance. Švejk’s anonymity is due in part to the fact that he lacks the *history* of a Napoleon (bez slávy a *historie* Napoleona), and indeed, there is no desire on the part of journalists to write about him. Suggesting that Švejk is unsuitable for narration, at least in any conventional sense, the author concludes the Preface by saying, “On nezapálil chrám bohyně v Efesu, jako to udělal ten hlupák Hérostrates, aby se dostal do novin a školních čítanek. A to stačí” (Ibid). (“Unlike that stupid fellow Herostrates he did not set fire to the temple of the Goddess in Ephesus just to get himself into the newspapers and school books. And that is enough.”) Thus, not only is Švejk’s anonymous humility significant, his actions invite narration precisely because they are not the actions that typically invite a historical chronicle, suggesting that they are also important because they will be generative of new narrative conventions.

More than simply a thematic question, Švejk’s apparent passivity is also a formal problem because it establishes an absence of identifiable desire at the novel’s outset.

Peter Brooks writes that textual desire is “that which is initiatory of narrative, motivates and energizes its reading, and animates the combinatory play of sense-making” (48). Now, this “textual desire” (or “animus”) in the nineteenth century—especially in novels of ambition—is often equivalent to the desire of the protagonist. Here, in contrast, the initiatory desire is not the protagonist’s. Rather, the agency mentioned in the preface is that of history: “A great epoch (*velká doba*) calls for great men.” The preface establishes a tension between narration and the march of history, on one hand, and Švejk’s indifference—if not resistance—to it, on the other. Although this opening establishes a discontinuity between *Švejk* and the Czech prose tradition, it also marks the novel’s relationship to the modernist impulse. Just as Western European modernism required precedents from which to distance itself, so, too, does *Švejk* utilize themes from earlier Czech literature in order to break from prior models by changing the function of these themes.

Whatever Švejk’s interest regarding history and narration, a “world” war is not so easily ignored, and the narrator’s references to it continually bookend more discrete narrative units, tying them together and struggling with the foregrounded fortunes of the good soldier Švejk over the final imposition of meaning in the narrative as a whole.³⁵ The first paragraph, a sentence in length, reads, “‘Tak nám zabili Ferdinanda,’ řekla posluhovačka panu Švejkovi, který opustiv před léty vojenskou službu, když byl definitivně prohlášen vojenskou lékařskou komisí za blba, živil se prodejem psů, ošklivých nečistokrevných oblud, kterým padělal rodokmeny.” “‘And so they’ve killed our Ferdinand,’ said [Mrs. Müller] the charwoman, to Mr. Švejk, who had left military

³⁵ Perhaps Hašek should have titled his novel “The Fortunes of the Good Soldier Švejk *Against* the World War.”

service years before, after having been finally certified by an army medical board as an imbecile, and now lived by selling dogs—ugly, mongrel monstrosities whose pedigrees he forged” (3). While the opening sentence, referring to the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, establishes the historical background of the narrative, the offhand tone with which the charwoman speaks suggests that this event is relatively unimportant. Mrs. Müller hardly appears to be the heroic type, and Švejk has already been discharged from the army for imbecility.

Again, Peter Brooks’ theory of narrative is illuminating here: Brooks writes, “One could no doubt analyze the opening paragraph of most novels and emerge in each case with the image of desire taking on shape, beginning to seek its objects, beginning to develop a textual energetics” (38). While desire, for Brooks, is not equivalent to an individual’s desire, the latter was often a text’s expressed desire in the more canonic novels of the nineteenth century (Balzac’s *Le Père Goriot* or Stendhal’s *Le Rouge et le Noir*, for example). In this respect, *Osudy*’s opening complicates Brooks’s claim because it contains no apparent indication of individual desire, suggesting instead that we cannot identify textual desire in the form of individual desire, but needs must look elsewhere for the motive force of plotting. Because the archduke’s assassination was the catalyst for the World War named in the novel’s title, it appears that the forces of history itself are responsible for this novel’s metonymy. This opening paragraph situates *Osudy* in an era in which history becomes a force controlling the lives of men, rather than the other way around.

To name history as a protagonist, however, is unsatisfactorily vague. Suggestively, the Czech philosopher Karel Kosík writes, “The opening sentence [...] is

not only the beginning of the narration but also announces a contemporaneous event which has started a certain progression. ‘Something’ has been set into motion [...] The Great Mechanism” (83). Although the war was the first event in which industrialization and militarization forced such a large percentage of the European population to take part, this mobilization was the result of the forces of modernization and centralization of the state apparatus throughout Western society. Therefore Kosík’s “Great Mechanism” is not only the war, but also the bureaucratic state apparatus of the Habsburg Empire and even the system of international alliances, some grounded in racial politics, that caused the war to escalate beyond the initial conflict between the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Serbian nationalists. That is to say, what Kosík calls the Mechanism is the “desiring machine”—heterogeneous linkages—forces well beyond the comprehension of the novel’s characters, which agitate the novel out of its preliminary stasis, surreptitiously appearing in the narrative as an offhand remark. If Švejk is the novel’s protagonist, such a Mechanism is perhaps its antagonist insofar as it continues to draw Švejk into a (narrative) plot that he has no desire to participate in and which continually threatens him with death.

It is clear that for his part, at any rate, Švejk is concerned less with the events of world history than with the goings-on of his neighborhood. As soon as Mrs. Müller has finished speaking, he immediately interprets her statement within his local frame of reference. He asks, “Which Ferdinand, Mrs. Müller? [...] I know two Ferdinands. One is a messenger at Průša’s, the chemist’s and once by mistake he drank a bottle of hair oil there. And the other is Ferdinand Kokoška who collects dog manure. Neither of them is any loss” (4). This exchange is semantically loaded: while the charwoman’s use of the

possessive “our” to modify “Ferdinand” is unsurprising given her German surname, Švejk does not recognize this relationship between foreign Habsburg royalty and the Czechs, a failure that, like so many other moments in the novel, suggests either imbecility or political provocation. In what will become a recurring motif in the novel, Švejk, appearing ignorant of the historically relevant referents of other’s words, replaces them with insignificant local referents, generating irony through the equivalence of radically opposed elements, the worldly/historical/important and the local/anonymous/unimportant; the deceased archduke becomes no more important than a collector of dog manure. The “vertical” vacillation generated here—the privileged term is degraded while the degraded is in turn privileged—is matched by a “horizontal” vacillation between background and foreground on the level of plot; although the assassination agitates the Great Mechanism into motion by creeping into what is otherwise the most banal of conversations, Švejk’s “patent idiocy” quickly forces the Mechanism into the background, replacing one frame of reference with another. Importantly, neither the narrator nor Mrs. Müller read much into Švejk’s remark, giving the reader no indication as to whether his certification as an idiot is justified; his desire remains hidden. Historical events generate the metonymy of narrative, but Švejk, his motivation still a mystery, hijacks the metonymic process, bending it back toward his “modest” and “humble” frame of reference; Švejk’s verbal utterance here is akin to a pawn that, once moved, confounds the player that moves it by returning to its starting position.

Prosaic Irony and the Demotic

Ignoring the Mechanism and the narrative metonymy it generates, Švejk is nevertheless caught up again in its motion when he goes to a local pub called The

Chalice. His rejection of the Mechanism of history has caused it to try a less subtle approach; in the bar, the plain-clothes member of the State Security Bretschneider—the eaglet insignia of his professional affiliation on the inside of his coat—is “vainly endeavoring” to lure the barkeeper Palivec into conversation. “‘Well, it’s a glorious summer!’ said Bretschneider, embarking on his serious conversation” (6). Despite the fact that the surface utterance is about the weather, Palivec can hardly misunderstand Bretschneider’s “serious” provocation; the phrase “glorious summer” refers again to the assassination that occurred at the end of June and attempts to solicit a sympathetic response. However, the cagey Palivec is as unwilling to get caught out as Bretschneider is eager to catch him. Palivec replies, “Stojí to všechno za hovno” (“Everything’s worth shit”) and refuses to talk politics, causing Bretschneider to “[lapse] into silence and [look] disappointedly around the empty pub.” Looking for another sign of sedition, Bretschneider then says, “Hallo, there used to be a picture of His Imperial Majesty hanging here once [...] Just where the mirror hangs now” (7). Palivec confirms this, adding, “It did hang there, but flies used to shit on it, so I put it away in the attic” (8). Interestingly, Bretschneider does not attach any significance to this remark and is again disappointed. Here, Bretschneider’s query about the picture suggests that Palivec may have political reasons for taking it down, while the bartender’s comment about the flies is intended to assure the policeman that his intentions are in fact apolitical. In such a politically charged environment, however, to say nothing of a surveillance state, even the most quotidian speech is overdetermined and every utterance has a doubling of meaning.

It is this environment of carefully weighed and measured utterances that greets Švejk, as we shall see later. The exchange between Palivec and Bretschneider does

suffice, however, to sketch the background against which Švejk's speech functions. Despite Palivec's deliberate phrasing, Bretschneider arrests him, ironically, for having claimed that flies defecated on the emperor's portrait. This exchange is the manner in which a bureaucratic apparatus (with Bretschneider as its representative) already desires a certain outcome, a certain meaning of the other's discourse, in this case an admission of guilt. The care with which Palivec words his responses is futile because his words are always being judged by an external standard, in this case Bretschneider's motivation to interpret whatever he says as treasonous. Palivec's discourse merely needs a contingent element that fits within the coordinates of Bretschneider's ideological interpretive apparatus, and this occurs whenever a word that signifies filth—in this case *hovno* (shit)—is placed in any proximity to words related to the Empire. Ironically, if Palivec is telling the truth about the flies—and we find out several pages later that he is—then removing the picture of the emperor to prevent its further defilement is a patriotic act on Palivec's part, albeit one for which he is arrested. Irony is created here not because the world is inherently contradictory, but because the Czechs' world is structured by an ideological system that refuses to recognize the influence of lived experience on language use. Answering a simple question has implications that undermine the whole ideological edifice of an empire, and even the most apolitical speech is charged with unintended meaning containing political ramifications. It is enough to have even suggested that he and Bretschneider live in a world where flies could shit on a representation of the emperor to land Palivec in prison. Early on, we see that prosaic speech, even when seemingly unreflective, conveys much more to the reader than the surface content of the words.

On the narrative level, the Mechanism and its representatives operate using what Lacan would call the discourse of the master ($S_1/\$ \rightarrow S_2/a$).³⁶ The master signifier (the Empire itself) button-ties the meaning of the overall battery of signifiers, pinning their meaning in ways that justify and consolidate the master's hegemony. However, the repressed products of this operation are the signifiers of the Czechs' prosaic existence (the proximity of the word "shit" to "Emperor"). In this discursive situation, "shit" occupies the position of the real (a). The "truth" of this discourse, the split subject, is perfectly embodied by Palivec, who after all desires to be apolitical. In these early pages, the novel explicitly thematizes the role of the master signifier in both *Osudy* and in *all* narratives, showing how it only arrests the sliding of signifiers and enables the work of interpretation, binding initiatory desire to certain signifiers and providing them with an affective charge. In other words, transcoding Hašek and Lacan reveals that one cannot subvert the master signifier by ignoring its structuring role in the signifying network because the subject of ideology—in this case, Bretschneider—still interprets the other's discourse by pinning meaning under the master signifier's aegis.

Through the repetitions of scatological humor, the novel draws a parallel between a disciplinary discourse which must be cleansed of signifiers of impurity and the subject's body. Just as the body is often a metaphor for ideological systems—the body politic, for example—that which traverses the body's borders, signaling its lack of integrity, becomes a threat to the corporeal integrity of a political system.

Thus, the political threat posed by excremental signifiers is mirrored by the military threat posed by excrement itself. After being conscripted Švejk is accused of

³⁶ I am reluctant to read particular moments within a narrative as illustrative of psychoanalytic theory, but elaborating this episode as an example of the master's discourse is necessary in order to show how *Švejk* subverts this discourse.

malingering and sent to the garrison prison, where the prison doctor prescribes a daily enema, a grotesquely comic reaction that is nevertheless entirely consistent with Bretschneider's earlier reaction to Palivec's cursing. Švejk and his fellow malingerers³⁷ are in prison precisely because they do not identify with imperial ideology, so if they are to become ideological subjects they must be cleansed of their (real) particularity, any interiority that outwardly traverses the body's borders, in this case their excrement. Švejk appears to intuit this when he responds to the punishment with his typical equanimity: "'Don't spare me,' he invited the myrmidon who was giving him the enema. 'Remember your oath. Even if it was your father or your own brother who was lying here, give him an enema without batting an eyelid. Try hard to think that Austria rests on these enemas and victory is ours'" (69). That is to say, the empire's survival is contingent on its ability to fully repress the Czechs' biological waste product, a signified whose signifier "unconsciously expresse[s] [...] the detestation the ordinary Czech feels [...] for the Emperor and for polite phrases" (215-6). Within *Osudy*'s narrative, then, vulgarity functions propagandistically as the return of the repressed, an inescapable reminder that the ideological edifice sustaining the Austro-Hungarian Empire is a house of cards.

Were that the vulgarity's sole function, however, critics like Wellek might be justified in conflating "low humor" with "cheap propaganda" in their curt dismissals of the novel. However, as I have already suggested, the demotic has a formal function in *Osudy* that Hašek uses in order to comment on the relationship between literature, the nation, and discursive structure. Recognizing the repressive nature of the discourse of the

³⁷ Although Švejk suffers from rheumatism at the beginning of the novel, immediately before he is sent to prison Švejk "observed with horror that his rheumatism was beginning to disappear" (61) and his rheumatism does not return.

master vis-à-vis the real world, in the epilogue Hašek writes, “Years ago I read a criticism of a novelette, in which the critic was furious because the author had written: ‘He blew his nose and wiped it.’ He said that it went against everything beautiful and exalted which literature should give the nation” (214). This unnamed (and probably apocryphal) story highlights literature’s nationalist obligation so that Hašek may point out that, structurally, overtly nationalist literature is another form of propaganda because it merely replaces Austro-Hungarian ideology’s intolerance for the real with the Czechs’. Clearly situating himself in opposition to this intolerance, Hašek continues, “Those who boggle at strong language are cowards” (214), adding, “Lots of people of the type of the late Bretschneider [...] are still knocking about today in the Republic. They are extremely interested in what people are talking about” (216). In contending that censorious critics are no better than the Austrian secret police, Hašek argues that literature submitted to nationalist sentiment merely reinforces a social order that is a repetition of the previous one—and as such is a manifestation of the discourse of the master.³⁸ As a formal element of *Osudy*, then, the vulgarity is decidedly anti-propagandistic.

Even though *Osudy* is not a work of high modernism, Hašek’s break with received nationalist, literary, and narrative convention—especially those of the nineteenth century Czech tradition—situates *Osudy* within the broader modernist break with tradition endemic throughout the Europe of the 1920s. At the same time, Hašek’s lowbrow humor is an ironic commentary on the “purification” of the Czech language advocated by Dobrovský and his circle and embodied in Němcová’s novel. Meanwhile,

³⁸ *Osudy* is not the first modernist work whose content caused controversy for failing to adhere to received aesthetic norms. For example, see Pericles Lewis, pp. 37-63.

literary criticism, especially when infected by a nationalism that establishes standards of propriety for literature, is a manifestation of the discourse of the university ($S_2/S_1 \rightarrow a/\$$). The “truth” of this discourse is the master signifier. As a result, nationalist criticism is just the discourse of the master in disguise.³⁹ Use of both the vernacular and vulgar subject matter distinguishes *Osudy* from both discursive structures. If, in the passages of *Osudy* that thematize the master’s discourse, these signifiers of impurity occupy the position of the real (a), then the novel’s frequent use of vulgarity *performs* the discourse of the analyst ($a/S_2 \rightarrow \$/S_1$) by subverting the audience’s (nationalist) aesthetic and genre expectations. Thus, the vulgar content expressed in the vernacular has a dual function in *Osudy*: it first thematizes the discourse of the master within the novel’s narrative in order to subvert this discursive structure both within the narrative and on the novel’s formal level.

Tactics of Subversion, Games of Chance

Although the vernacular subverts a conventional heroic narrative structure, the plot continues to be motivated by a drive toward mobilization in the war. That is to say, Švejk may not desire to take part in a heroic narrative, but nevertheless the “Mechanism” draws him closer and closer to the war’s orbit. As Kosík notes, both Švejk’s individual plot and the background plot (the “*za světové války*” of the title) “are impeded by a ‘retarding element,’ Švejk’s narrative” (84). *Osudy* may subvert narrative norms, but it constantly veers toward becoming a conventional war novel, save for Švejk’s delaying tactics. To be sure, he does not stop the war, which is ongoing in the background of the text anyway, but he arrests the narrative drive towards that end. At times, for instance, he

³⁹ As Lacan notes, the Soviet Union represents the discourse of the university. The prevalence of this political discourse and its literary equivalent may explain why *Osudy* remained so popular throughout the region during the Communist era.

gets separated from his regiment—entire chapters pass before he rejoins it—and at other times he is literally “detained” in prison. The result of this retardation is that these two plotlines never fully merge. My use of the term tactic is borrowed from Michel de Certeau, who writes that a tactic “must play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign power [...] must accept the chance offerings of the moment, and seize on the wing the possibilities that offer themselves at any given moment [...] In short, a tactic is an art of the weak” (37). *Osudy* exemplifies this power relationship; as we have already seen, even Prague’s pubs and the Bohemian countryside through which Švejk wanders are controlled by the Austro-Hungarian bureaucracy. Švejk cannot escape the war, but he can take advantage of the “chance offerings” that allow him to briefly go AWOL or avoid combat. For my purposes, then, a tactic is any action on Švejk’s part that opens a temporal window in which the narrative is diverted from its ultimate end, participation in the war and an overall coherence that marks the narrative “death” of which Brooks writes. Because tactics are spur-of-the-moment, Švejk cannot adopt a singular *modus operandi*, and thus he finds a new way to get into trouble every time.

Tactics of narrative diversion and digression are necessary because Švejk is clearly in the weaker position vis-à-vis the Mechanism. The Mechanism reveals itself after Bretschneider arrests Švejk and takes him to police headquarters, where he signs a document affirming the allegations contained within Bretschneider’s deposition. In the labyrinth of the regional criminal court system, the narrator says, “Zde mizela povětšinou všechna logika a vítězil §, škrtil §, blbl §, prskal §, smál se §, vyhrožoval §, zabíjel §, a neodpouštěl” (30). “Here logic mostly disappeared and the § triumphed, the § strangled,

the § went mad, the § fumed, the § laughed, the § threatened, the § murdered and gave no quarter” (24).⁴⁰ What is immediately striking about this sentence is not only the agency possessed by the §, but also its wholly irrational nature. By ironically ascribing agency to the § rather than the bureaucrats who use it, Hašek reveals the signifier of the law that structures Švejk’s social reality.

Because the § and the operation it performs in structuring social reality has suddenly become apparent, Švejk can now counter it. Nevertheless, while for Hašek no less than for Kafka the Mechanism is all-powerful, for Hašek its anthropomorphic behavior means that it also has weaknesses. Švejk is not powerful enough to stand up to the Austrian war machine, and indeed he only survives because of luck. After his first visit to prison, the papers on Švejk somehow wind up “in the archives of the Army Legal Department and were minuted: ‘Planned to throw off his hypocritical mask and come out publicly against our ruler and our state’ (Hašek 92). Fortunately for Švejk, however, “the papers had been stuck into files dealing with a certain Josef Koudela.⁴¹ On the file cover was a cross and underneath it ‘Action completed’ with the date” (92). Although nothing more is known of the unfortunate Josef Koudela, he receives the sentence (in both the legal and literal senses of the word) intended for Švejk, demonstrating that because he holds the weaker position, Švejk’s survival is equally dependent on both his tactics and the Mechanism’s mistakes.

Švejk’s initial tactic is to identify fully with the discourse of the master (and the signifier of the master). Without duress Švejk confesses to the charges against him,

⁴⁰ The mark §, denoting “section sign,” is commonly associated with legal code (not only in Central Europe but here as well).

⁴¹ Peter Steiner has pointed out that abbreviating Josef Koudela’s surname serendipitously results in Josef K.

leading the police warder to have him examined by medical experts to make sure he's of sound mind. When Švejk appears before them, however, he sees a picture of Franz-Joseph hanging on the wall and exclaims, "Long live our Emperor, Franz Joseph I, gentlemen" (28). This unsolicited expression of loyalty to the Habsburgs on the part of a Czech leads the three medical experts, each of whose opinions previously "differed gloriously" from the others' (28), to unanimously declare Švejk insane and remand him to an asylum. In *Osudy*, a Czech who supports the continued existence of the Habsburg Empire must clearly be insane. In the asylum Švejk is happy because, in contrast to Prague's streets and pubs swarming with the secret police, "Everyone there could say exactly what he pleased and what was on the tip of his tongue" (31). Thus, full identification with the master's discourse gets Švejk placed in a space outside the normal rules of society, where language is not button-tied by the master signifier. This exemplifies that there is an explicitly *narrative* dimension to freedom in this novel. To be free is to be able to narrate freely, meaning to narrate without regard for the political consequences and outside of formulaic narrative categories. The caution with which Czech subjects must speak prevents expression of desire, and desire is always open to mis-interpretation, as the unfortunate Palivec can attest, but the asylum allows for all manner of desiring speech. Speech within the boundaries of normative society, however, is always politically overdetermined.

Švejk is eventually thrown out of the asylum and allowed to return home, now no closer to the war than he was before. His initial tactic is temporarily successful in returning the narrative back to its starting point. Although Švejk's tactics change in method, their consistent goal seems to be to return the novel back to a point prior to the

war's intrusion in his life. When the War Ministry "suddenly remembered Švejk" (55), he is back home in bed, suffering from rheumatism as before. Were Švejk's tactics to prevail, however, the novel would now be over after a mere 55 pages. Unfortunately for Švejk, "one after the other of the Austrian divisions were taken with their pants down and got the wallop they had long deserved" (55), leading yet another avatar of the Mechanism, this time the War Ministry, to call Švejk up, necessitating new tactics throughout the novel. Švejk's tactics, then, represent a resistance to the Habsburg military's discourse of the master and to narrative plotting.

Švejk's tactics, like the episode discussed above, generate moments of specific irony in the narrative; when Švejk is committed for being patriotic, the reader sees the absurdity of any Czech's outward display of patriotism. However, because Švejk, in his anonymity alluded to in the preface, is a quintessential "everyman," he is not in control of his own destiny. When we analyze what happens to the utterances of Everymen within the context of the novel as a whole, the specific irony of the epilogue gives way to General Irony on the narrative level. The everyday speech of *Osudy*'s characters is continually ironic, and even the most apparently direct speech may be subject to ironic misinterpretation, regardless of whether this is intended by the character or not. For example, Švejk says, "Our Lieutenant Makovec always used to say: 'There's got to be discipline, you bloody fools, otherwise you'd be climbing about on the trees like monkeys, but the army's going to make human beings of you, you god-forsaken idiots.' And isn't that true? Just imagine a park, let's say at Charles Square, and on every tree an undisciplined soldier! It's enough to give you a nightmare!" (8-9). Here Švejk takes his former lieutenant's metaphor at face value, thereby ridiculing it. The image the

lieutenant chooses to justify his harsh military discipline, interpreted literally instead of metaphorically, is simply absurd. This shows that even hegemonic systems are never entirely literal, suggesting that the power to mis- and re-interpret exists even in institutions otherwise known for the simplicity and directness of their speech.

Švejk's literal-minded interpretation becomes a recurring motif in the novel, and Švejk's desire to take orders too literally will subvert the military apparatus again and again, creating one ironic situation after another. After Švejk is arrested along with Palivec and undergoes interrogation, he is asked, "Do you confess to everything?" and Švejk promptly replies, "If you want me to confess, your worship, I shall" (Hašek 22). Here Švejk takes the order to confess literally, the irony of course being that even a demand as simple as "confess!" comes with the expectation that the recipient of the order will do anything but confess. In actually following the order, Švejk makes his interrogators question his sanity, leading to his fateful meeting with the three doctors. Thus even direct speech is exposed as not meaning what it says, and irony is inescapably inherent in even the most prosaic of utterances. In order to communicate (or follow military orders) adequately, one cannot take linguistic utterances at their face value; they always occur within a larger context that renders the meaning of even the most prosaic speech ambivalent.

Although the life of the everyman is inherently contradictory, it is no less so for power structures. Prosaic irony provides a way for characters (and perhaps readers) to accept their relative helplessness while still maintaining a space for subversive action. The language of those marginal to, yet trapped within a Czech society dominated by Austria-Hungary is their means of resistance. Although individuals escape military

service, vast numbers of Czechs had no choice but to serve the Habsburgs in World War I. Although they can reject neither the war itself nor their forced participation in it, they can subvert by means of a prosaic orientation the military ideology that they have no choice but to serve. Similarly, de Certeau argues that it is through the everyday *use* of the products of hegemonic systems, what he calls “the practice of everyday life,” that the everyman trapped within an inescapable network of power relations opens up a space of creativity and subversion. He writes, “Innumerable ways of playing and foiling the other’s game (*jouer/déjouer le jeu de l’autre*), that is, the space instituted by others, characterize the subtle, stubborn, resistant activity of groups which, since they lack their own space, have to get along in a network of already established forces and representations” (18). The external imposition of ideology permeates lived existence, but possibilities unaccounted for by the hegemonic system remain open to us because in our prosaic existence we still use language to *do* things, and it is in the space between the saying and doing that we depart from the literality of an utterance.

Tactics imply intentionality, and while Švejk’s intentions are not always clear, the novel employs the theme of gaming on several occasions, suggesting that Švejk’s primary function is ludic.⁴² As we have just seen, a ludic element is immanent to prosaic irony. De Certeau suggests that we can locate the formal rules of prosaic practice in games, “which as operations are disjunctive, because they produce differentiating events, [giving] rise to spaces where *moves* are proportional to *situations*” (22, author’s italics).

⁴² In “Švejk – The *Homo Ludens*,” Hana Arie Gaifman provides excellent analysis of the role particular games play in the novel, but her overall thesis—“In such a fictional world the ludic function of man is of much greater importance than all other human functions, so that the *homo ludens* proves to be the only true *homo sapiens*” (307)—strikes me as hackneyed, both because it ignores the importance of bodily functions that I discussed earlier and because the term *homo sapiens* is extremely problematic in *Švejk*. Finally, although Gaifman recognizes that Švejk “generally undermines the schematism of the traditional adventure novel” (321), her discussion remains almost exclusively thematic and thus fails to elaborate this insight into an analysis of the novel’s aesthetic.

Although games have rules that limit the possible courses of action, the element of chance still exists within this limited context. Although each situation limits the possible moves in a different way, the player still retains the agency to choose among the possible combination of moves in order to manipulate events.

Švejk's ludic tactics are unaccounted-for by the rules of the military apparatus, and for this reason they are equivalent to a wrench thrown into the gears. Shortly after he is accused of malingering, Švejk ends up in military prison. Here he is forced to attend a mass presided over by the Chaplain Otto Katz, who arrives intoxicated and spends the entire mass haranguing the prisoners with vulgarities. Švejk finds this spectacle highly entertaining and whispers, "This is first class," to his neighbor (Hašek 85), and shortly thereafter bursts into tears (87). After the mass ends, Chaplain Katz has Švejk brought into the vestry, where the chaplain "jerk[s] at Švejk's shoulder and shout[s]: 'Confess that you only blubbed for fun, you sod'" (88). Katz's aggressive tone and gesture suggest that he anticipates that Švejk will deny the allegation. However, the following occurs:

"'Humbly report, sir,' said Švejk *deliberately, staking everything on a single card*, 'I confess to God Almighty and to you, venerable Father, who are God's deputy, that I was really only blubbing for fun'" (88, my emphasis). Švejk's play during the mass produces a confrontation with the Chaplain in which Švejk is limited to two obvious moves, and his choice of the unexpected, albeit possible move wins him a position as Katz's batman and keeps him away from the front for several chapters. The card metaphor makes explicit the fact that Švejk recognizes that the order to confess is really a demand to do anything but confess, so that the Chaplain can then punish him. As Kosík notes, "[Švejk's] changeability, elusiveness, and 'mystery' are consequences of the fact that he

is part of a system which is based on the general premise that people pretend that they are what they are not” (84).⁴³ Ironically, Švejk avoids punishment through the disobedient act of ignoring the pragmatic meaning of the Chaplain’s command and confessing his guilt.

As Katz yells for Švejk to confess, the narrator pauses to describe the décor of the chaplain’s office. On one wall a portrait of St. Francis of Sales looks down on Švejk, while on the opposite wall:

[A] martyr gazed open-mouthed at him, while Roman mercenaries were sawing through his buttocks. During this operation no suffering could be detected on the martyr’s face, nor the joy nor the glory of martyrdom either. He only stared, open-mouthed, as though he wanted to say: “How on earth did this happen to me? What on earth are you doing to me, gentlemen?” (88)

This brief description of the painting in Chaplain Katz’s office highlights Švejk’s own inscrutability: “The chaplain look[s] searchingly at Švejk’s artless countenance” (Ibid). Here the artless countenance of Švejk indicates a certain *sang-froid* to the reader, who knows from the narration that Švejk’s humble appearance is but a ruse—he is described as gambling, after all—but in contrasting it with the open-mouthed gape of the unnamed martyr, the narrator also highlights the difference between Švejk’s motives and those of the martyr, giving Švejk a limited amount of agency in the network within which he is trapped. Švejk’s successful play here endears him to the chaplain, earning him a period of service as the chaplain’s batman, far from the front. It is only through the use of the card metaphor that the reader may make this assumption; the chaplain does not have the benefit of a narrator to tell him how to interpret Švejk’s behavior. A good poker face is

⁴³ Find Freud’s joke about two Jews on the way to Krakow and cite.

blank, even unreadable, and Švejk's superiors are frequently unable to find a motive or communicative function in Švejk's expression and must impute one. Švejk's inscrutability, a result of his ludic function, thus has a subversive function on the narrative level.

The trope of game-playing becomes a metaphor for subversion later in the novel. Playing a card game called *mariaš*, Švejk tells a fellow soldier, "Two-handed *mariaš* is more important than the whole war" (456). Considering that the outcome of the war will bring about the end of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and that Hašek is writing the novel in the early days of the first Czechoslovak Republic whose very existence is enabled by the empire's defeat and breakup, this would be a striking statement were it not fully consistent with the opposition of history to everyday life inherent in this novel. The card game, a modest activity to pass the time on a military train, is significant because, as Hana Arie Gaifman notes, one of the "regulative rules" of this game is that "sitting in a pub and playing *mariaš* erases every social difference (312). *Mariaš* disrupts hierarchies both during the temporal duration of its playing, and also as a prosaic activity that becomes privileged over historical events, and it continues the delaying action of the novel because as long as the card game (and the players' chatter) continues, the war stays in the background of the narrative. The card game thus displays the novel's performative form: it is an instance of both the disruption of hierarchies and the subversion of the war narrative.

Švejk as a Clown

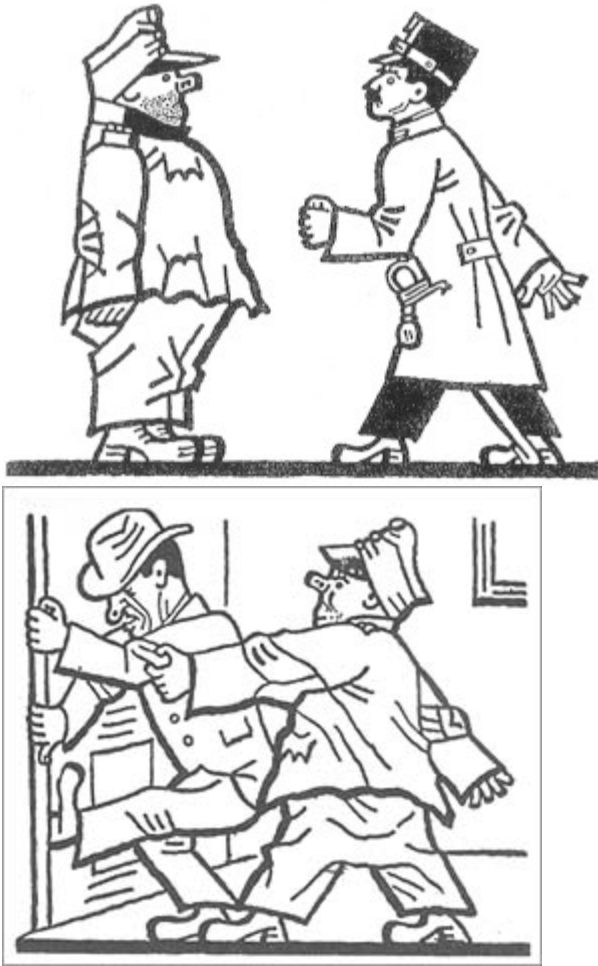
Švejk's unreadability suggests that he is not merely an ironic figure, but *the embodiment of irony* itself. When Švejk finally enters military service, he is given "an old

military uniform which had belonged to some pot-bellied fellow who was taller than him by a head” (99). The text continues:

Do kalhot, které měl na sobě, byli by se vešli ještě tři Švejkové. Nekonečné faldy od noh až přes prsa, kam až sahaly kalhoty, mimovolně způsobovaly obdiv diváků. Ohromná blůza se záplatami na loktech, *zamaštěná a špinavá*, klátila se na Švejkovi jako kabát na hastrošovi. Kalhoty visely na něm *jako kostým na klaunovi z cirku*. Vojenská čepice, kterou mu též na garnizóně vyměnili, šla mu přes uši. [page #?]

(As for the trousers three more Švejks could have got into them. An endless succession of baggy folds from his feet up to where his trousers reached over his chest involuntarily evoked the admiration of the spectators. A vast tunic with patches on the elbows, *covered with grease and dirt*, dangled around Švejk like a coat on a scarecrow. His trousers hung on him *like a circus clown's costume*. The military cap, which they had also changed in the garrison gaol, came down over his ears.) (99, my italics)

This is the uniform that Švejk will wear almost until the novel's end, and Švejk's oversize costume contrasts with those of other characters (Lieutenant Lukaš and Chaplain Katz, respectively) as is apparent in Josef Lada's illustrations throughout the novel.



Thus attired, Švejk's body is hidden and becomes obfuscated in the text. Švejk appears to be almost superhuman since the long night marches in freezing temperatures simply have no effect on him. He is able to drink large amounts of spirits without actually seeming drunk. In contrast to characters like Chaplain Katz, who consume similar amounts and pay the price, Švejk is able to drink with impunity. Švejk's body is only manifest in the text when he has consumed too much food or alcohol and begins to release gas from one end or the other. Thus, he does not suffer, but produces bodily reminders that the Austrian military has failed to fully evacuate him of excrement. Ironically, his value as a soldier is precisely his body which, voided of excrement, has been purified and can be sacrificed for the empire's preservation, but instead his body

shows the impossibility of both purification and Austrian victory. Švejk's appearance is thus a double reminder of the real: the real as the impossibility of Habsburg ideology, on one hand, and the historical "real" of the empire's defeat, on the other.

In addition to the obfuscation of his body, Švejk's uniform calls attention to his face, which in its placidity stands in stark contrast to the nightmarish world around him. Almost every physical description of Švejk begins and ends with his face. While the ostentatious costume draws attention in public, "Švejk answer[s] the smiles of the spectators with a sweet smile of his own and the warm tender look of his good-natured eyes" (98). The interplay between Švejk and his spectators calls attention to the performative nature of Švejk's antics rather than a hidden psychology. At the same time, this further heightens the contrast not only between Švejk's apparent equanimity and the terrible background of the war, but also between Švejk and other characters such as Lieutenant Lukáš, whose emotional state is always apparent. As Robert Storey notes, this contrast, regressive in nature, connotes mastery in an environment of chaos (33), but as I have already pointed out, it also makes Švejk more difficult to "read," because the face is the visual cue that we most often rely on when guessing at the motivation of the other.

The combination of this oversize uniform and Švejk's expression turns him into a blank screen onto which others—both other characters and readers—may project an interpretation. Indeed, to return to the notion of Lacan's four discourses, we could argue that Švejk here performs the same function as the Lacanian analyst, situated in the discourse of the analyst. In contrast to the conventional image of an analyst who listens to the analysand and then provides an interpretation of his unconscious, the Lacanian analyst acts as a blank screen onto which the analysand projects his fantasy. Švejk is

similarly “blank” insofar as his face betrays no traces of desire or underlying psychology; the narrator does not confirm or contradict Švejk’s motives or the interpretations of his utterances put forth by his interlocutors. In this regard the novel is consistent with the preface, where despite Hašek’s implication that an analysis of Švejk’s character is possible (“If you analyzed [Švejk’s] character you would find that it eclipsed even the glory of Alexander the Great.”), the rest of the preface speaks precisely to the inscrutability of his character.

The withholding of any psychological explanation of Švejk’s behavior—in marked contrast to at least cursory psychological portraits of supporting characters, such as Lt. Lukáš—suggests that Švejk is exemplary of what the structuralist theorist Tzvetan Todorov calls “literary a-psychologism” (67). For Todorov, literary a-psychologism is not characterized simply by a lack of psychological description, but also a causal structure different from that of psychological literature. The latter has a causal relationship of *consequence*, where action refers back to and furthers understanding of the personality of the acting character. In contrast, a-psychological narrative follows a relationship of *consecution* in which “action is important in itself and not as an indication of this or that character trait” (67). For the purposes of reading *Osudy*, this means that we should not look for moments that provide access to Švejk’s character, but rather look at the effect of Švejk’s actions and speech on the narrative itself.

Indeed, any attempt to explain Švejk’s actions by means of psychological analysis fails. Despite being out of earshot of the authorities on numerous occasions, he reveals his thoughts on Austria only once. While drinking coffee Švejk and an unnamed soldier engage in “an endless series of utterances which would certainly have been defined in the

court as treasonable and for which both of them would have been hanged” (207). Finally, Švejk “až konečné [...] odsoudil Rakousko nadobro slovy: “Taková blbá monarchie nemá ani na světě bejt,” (“condemn[s] Austria forever with the words: ‘Such an idiotic monarchy ought not to exist in the world’” (208). Despite his assessment, Švejk does not give any indication that his words will lead to actions, in contrast to his interlocutor, who “aby jaksí ten výrok doplnil *v praktickém směru*, dodal druhý: ‘Jak přijdu na front, tak se jim zdejchnu.’” (in order to complete the pronouncement *in a practical direction*, said ‘When I get to the front, I’ll hop it [desert] pretty quick’”) (208, italics mine). While Švejk’s judgment will indeed be affirmed by the course of historical events, the point here is that Švejk’s own political utterance does not lead to action; his interlocutor has to move the discussion in that direction. Although this scene is an unexpectedly frank glimpse of Švejk, it also reveals that there is no connection between his psychology and his behavior; the latter cannot be explained by reference to the former.

Švejk is not wholly devoid of character traits, but in a manner consistent with *Osudy*’s resistance to an overarching meaning, these traits are immediate and applicable only within the episode or “*osuda*” in which they appear. For example, while on a scouting mission Švejk comes upon a small lake in which an escaped Russian prisoner is bathing. The Russian runs away naked and because Švejk “[is] curious to know how [the Russian prisoner’s uniform] would suit him” (666), he takes off his own uniform and puts on the Russian’s, only to be captured by field gendarmerie who are looking for the escaped prisoner. Although Hašek actually deserted to the Russians during the war, according to the narrator it is only Švejk’s curiosity, rather than political commitment, that causes this unfortunate misunderstanding. This is again exemplary of literary a-

psychologism, which Todorov argues has an *immediate* as opposed to a *mediated* causality (68). The immediacy of this characterization, he claims, means that “The cause is not a primordial *before*, it is only one element of the ‘cause-and-effect’ couple, in which neither is thereby superior to the other” (69, author’s italics). In contrast to psychological narrative, where a character’s essential trait motivates behavior throughout the text, actions serving to further elucidate the character’s psychological makeup, for Todorov a-psychological literature works in the opposite direction; the trait suddenly appears only long enough to motivate action, and just as quickly disappears. Švejk’s decision to change uniforms results not from any event in his psychological history, but rather from simple curiosity, and thus it provides no insight into Švejk’s character. This immediate causality is another way that the novel effaces hierarchical distinctions, in this case the subordination of effect to cause in psychological narrative.

In literary a-psychologism, Todorov claims, “We are in the realm of narrative-men” in which “a character is a potential story” (70). Indeed, Švejk is just such a narrative-man, whose stories subvert narrative *by means of* narrative. Let us return to the early episode at the Chalice. I focused on the exchange between Bretschneider and Palivec, and now I wish to reconsider Švejk’s part in the conversation. Stymied in his effort to draw Palivec into treasonous conversation, “Civilní strážník Bretschneider definitivně umkl a jeho zachmuřený výraz se zlepšil teprve příchodem Švejka, který, vstoupiv do hospody, poručil si černé pivo s touto poznámkou: ‘Ve Vídni dneska *taky* mají smutek.’” (“Bretschneider finally relapsed into silence and his sullen countenance did not improve until the arrival of Švejk who, entering the pub, ordered a black beer with his comment: ‘In Vienna they’ll *also* be mourning.’” (8, italics mine). This

sentence, typical of the narrator's style (and indeed, of most narrative), is an example of hypotaxis, in which connectives create subordinate or dependent relationships between the clauses in a sentence. With its political associations, Švejk's ironic remark (the word *taky*, "also," creates an equivalence between Švejk's beer and mourning attire) helps to explain the improvement in Bretschneider's mood; hypotaxis thus indicates a relationship of consequence. In contrast to the caution displayed in the innkeeper and the policeman's terse remarks, on one hand, and the hypotaxis of the narrator on the other, Švejk appears to be suffering from logorrhea:

Tak už tam je na pravdě boží, dej mu pánbůh věčnou slávu. Ani se nedočkal, až bude císařem. Když já jsem sloužil na vojně, tak jeden generál spadl s koně a zabil se docela klidně. Chtěli mu pomoci zas na koně, vysadit ho, a divěji se, že je úplně mrtvej. A měl taky avancírovat na feldmaršálka. Stalo se to při přehlídce vojska. Tyhle přehlídky nikdy nevedou k dobrému. V Sarajevě taky byla nějaká přehlídka. Jednou se pamatuji, že mně scházelo při takové přehlídce dvacet knoflíků u mundúru (page?)

And so he's already lying with God and the Angels. Glory be! He didn't even live to be Emperor. When I was serving in the army a general once fell off his horse and killed himself without any fuss. They wanted to help him back onto his horse, to lift him up, but to their surprise he was completely dead. And he was going to be promoted to Field Marshal. It happened at a review. These reviews never come to any good. In Sarajevo there was a review too. I remember once at a parade like that I had twenty buttons missing from my uniform... (8)

Here, it would seem impossible to interpret his speech as even sane, let alone political. Švejk's monologue is characterized by parataxis, in which propositions follow one another without any indication of their interdependence. Jumping from one idea to the next without an obvious connection, Švejk's parataxis resembles the free association that drives the psychoanalytic session.⁴⁴ While each sentence here has a tangential thematic connection with the next, the overall narrative does not subordinate individual sentences or clauses to an overarching point. The relationship expressed is one of consecution rather than consequence.

Regardless of content, Švejk's speech is structurally antithetical to the discourse expected of a national subject, which is the discourse of the master. This discursive structure is inherently hypotactic insofar as all utterances—indeed, all signifiers—are subordinate to the “button-tying” work of the master signifier. That is, signifiers become semantically loaded and their meaning is fixed by the national discourse in which they appear; for example, the terms “emperor” and “patriot” have either positive or negative connotations depending on whether they appear in a Austrian or Czech nationalist discourse. In the former, a patriot would be a loyal subject who supports the emperor, while in the latter a patriot wants to dethrone the emperor, whom he regards as an illegitimate head of state. In contrast, parataxis refuses the fixing of a signifier's meaning within the broader utterance. Individual sentences and clauses become more or less equivalent, in its drive toward absurdity parataxis resists and “unbinds” the master signifier's button-tying. In this episode, Bretschneider interprets Švejk's babbling as

⁴⁴ Compare Stuart Schneiderman's description of free association: “Free association is [...] letting thoughts come to you without thinking or reflecting on each one as it comes [...] Each thought in free association is a discrete unit, counted as one, and no effort is made to form these thoughts into a whole or a unity that would have coherence and consistency” (135).

treasonous and arrests him, but in the absence of psychological realism vis-à-vis Švejk's character, any motive imputed to his speech is wholly arbitrary. On the surface, Švejk's narrative is neither pro- nor anti-imperial, neither patriotic nor revolutionary, but it represents a discursive *structure* opposed to that of the national(ist) discourse. These passages thus become a verbal representation of the subversion that the novel as a whole performs.

Švejk's stories are tactics that function to frustrate the desire of military authorities (who often want to punish Švejk's transgressions). For instance, when Švejk becomes Lieutenant Lukáš's batman, the latter says, "The chaplain recommended you as a frightful idiot and I think he was not wrong" (168). Švejk replies,

"Poslušné hlásím, pane nadporučíku, že se opravdu pan polní kurát nemýlil. Když jsem sloužil aktivně, byl jsem superarbitrován pro blbost, a ještě k tomu notorickou. Od regimentu nás kvůli tomu pustili dva, mé a ještě jednoho pana hejtmana von Kaunitz. Ten, s dovolením, pane nadporučíku, když šel po ulici, tak se současné pořád dloubal prstem levé ruky v levej nosní díře a druhou rukou v pravý dírc, a když šel s námi na cvičení, tak nás vždy postavil jako při defilérungu a říkal: 'Vojáci, éh, pamatujte si, éh, že je dneska středa, poněvadž zejtra bude čtvrtek, éh.'"

Nadporučík Lukáš pokrčil rameny jako člověk, který neví a nenalézá ihned slov k vyjádření určité myšlenky.

"Humbly report, sir, he certainly was not wrong. When I was serving as a regular I got a complete discharge for idiocy and for patent idiocy into the bargain. In our regiment only two of us were discharged in this way, me and a

Captain von Kaunitz. And whenever that captain went out into the street, if you'll pardon me, sir, he always at the same time picked his left nostril with his left hand, and his right nostril with his right hand, and when he went with us to the parade ground he always made us adopt a formation as though it was going to be a march past and said: 'Men, ahem, remember, ahem, that today is a Wednesday because tomorrow will be Thursday, ahem.'"

Lieutenant Lukáš shrugged his shoulders like a man who does not know and cannot immediately find the words to express a certain thought. (168)

Again we see the parataxis typical of Švejk, and we see its subversive effect on his superiors. He has already affirmed the Lieutenant's accusation, and there is no need for further comment on his part. Nevertheless, he continues with wholly irrelevant and pointless information. Švejk here derails the train of Lukáš's thought process, diverting it away from its intended goal. Lukáš is attempting to make a meaningful point, but Švejk frustrates this process. Within the plot, then, the parataxis of Švejk's stories diverts the implied and intended hypotaxis of his superiors (and the Mechanism) from achieving its desired effect. Moreover, by describing Lukáš as the victim of a temporary aphasia—he suddenly neither knows the necessary words nor can he find them—the narrator makes it clear that despite being subversion *within* narrative, this is also the subversion *of* narrative.

Although Švejk's paratactic utterances are structurally different from the hypotaxis of both the narrator and *Osudy's* other characters, as embedded narratives they also have an effect on the novel's larger structure. That is to say, Švejk's narratives are not self-sufficient, but acquire their comic and subversive status through their effect on

Švejk's interlocutors and on the larger plot. The function of embedded narrative, Todorov claims, is to highlight the non-self-sufficiency of narrative as such. He writes,

Each [embedded] narrative seems to have something excessive, a supplement which remains outside the closed form produced by the development of the plot.

At the same time, and for this very reason, this something-more, proper to the narrative, is also something-less. This supplement is also a lack; in order to supply this lack created by the supplement, another narrative is necessary. (76)

Švejk's embedded narratives are *lacking* both because they require the larger narrative context for their comic effect and because their absurdity becomes meaningful as a tactic only in this context. Simultaneously, these narratives are *excessive* insofar as they affect the larger narrative, as in the examples discussed above. Precisely because of this immanent lack/excess, Švejk's narration has a viral effect on *Osudy*, forcing the novel into digressions that are longer than the story from which they purportedly digress. In such circumstances, Todorov rhetorically asks, "Can we even call them digressions?" (72). It is when these digressions take over the novel's plot that they become individual *osudy* in themselves. These stories thus have a subversive effect both *in* and *on* the novel's plot.

In the vacillation between the plot's foreground and background, not only does subversion acquire a specifically narrative dimension, so too, does life. Within the plot, Švejk's narration—his prose—successfully deflects his superiors' intentions of punishing him. Given the fate of the unfortunate Josef Koudela mentioned earlier, punishment is not something to be taken lightly. As Todorov notes, for narrative-men, "Narrative

equals life; absence of narrative, death” (74).⁴⁵ This equation of narration with life, however, means that not only must Švejk avoid punishment or execution, but he must also avoid the war, which is explicitly associated with death. When Švejk and his battalion are crossing into the Galician frontier, the camp at the scene of a previous battle, where “all around [...] lay the traces of the most recent battles [...] Everywhere could be seen splinters of shrapnel and somewhere in the immediate neighborhood the corpses of soldiers must evidently have been buried, because it smelt frightfully of putrefaction” (598). Although death is present in its olfactory effects, it remains in the background (and in this episode it does not even disturb the battalion’s dinner).

Not only is war equivalent to death within *Osudy*’s plot, it is also equivalent to the death of the plot. Although Todorov makes explicit the connection between narration and life, death as merely the absence of narrative is too simplistic here. As I noted before, Benjamin’s “The Storyteller” allows us to conceptualize death as integral to narration. Benjamin suggests that the art of storytelling is coming to an end because “the thought of death has become less omnipresent and less vivid” (151). He writes that “in the course of the nineteenth century, bourgeois society—by means of medical and social, private and public institutions—[has enabled] people to avoid the sight of the dying” (151). This avoidance of death is a manifestation of the intolerance for waste that motivates the enemas the army gives to malingerers. Given the unprecedented loss of life engendered by the Great War (evident in the smell of putrefaction discussed above), death is ubiquitous, and it looms over *Osudy*. However, the novel keeps it at bay. As Benjamin notes, “it is not only a man’s knowledge or wisdom, but above all his real life [...] which

⁴⁵ Cp. narration-as-life in *Osudy* with a-psychological predecessors, specifically *The Arabian Nights* and the *Decameron*. Scheherazade narrates so that the sultan will not decapitate her, while the Boccaccio’s Florentine nobles escape the plague by retiring to the countryside to tell stories.

first assumes transmissible form at the moment of his death” (151). The arc of a life is here equivalent to the figure of metonymy, defined by Brooks as “the figure of contiguity and combination [...] the movement from one detail to another, the movement *toward* totalization” (91, author’s italics). Metonymy is a movement toward totalization, but it cannot become total unless it concludes, at which point its meaning becomes transmissible only as metaphor. For Brooks, plot “must *use* metaphor as the trope of its achieved interrelations, and it must *be* metaphoric insofar as it is totalizing” (Ibid). Death, then, provides the conclusion to life, the point at which the metonymy of the lifespan stops and can be understood in its totality. Narrative “death” is the moment at which *meaning* occurs. The world war, which makes up part of the novel’s title, is equivalent to death, not only for the death it threatens to *Osudy*’s soldiers but also as the temporal boundary that should provide closure to the novel. Švejk’s subversive narratives thus have a structural function in the *Osudy* taken, paradoxically, as a whole: they extend the novel’s metonymy *ad infinitum*, preventing any closure that would enable the novel to end. Every one of Švejk’s narratives becomes a deflection of the plot away from the expected end, away from closure, and away from the fixing of meaning.

By staving off death—both Švejk’s death and the novel’s “narrative death”—the two stories of Švejk’s discussed above and many like them in the novel function as a commentary on the experience of modernity. Karel Kosík argues that in *Osudy*, “only single, individual ‘movements’ (*destinies*, encounters, events) make any sense, while the movement of the machine as a whole is senseless; the movement of the machine is the movement of absurdity” (84, italics mine).⁴⁶ While the movement of the plot as a whole

⁴⁶ In the original Czech, “individuální ‘pohyby’ (*osudy*, setkání, příběhy) [mají] *smysl*, kdežto pohyb mašinerie je pohyb *absurdního*” (100). Although he does not develop the idea further in this article,

fails to generate an overall meaning, Kosík here fails to recognize that it is precisely the digressions-cum-*osudy* that frustrate any drive toward meaning. This frustration is consistent with Benjamin's discussion of the changing function of storytelling that I addressed earlier. Benjamin writes that "the ability to exchange experiences" necessary for storytelling is coming to an end in modern times (143). According to Benjamin, this is primarily because in modernity, "experience has fallen in value" (Ibid.). Benjamin continues, "Beginning with the First World War, a process became apparent which continues to this day... For never has experience been more thoroughly belied than strategic experience was belied by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power" (143-144). For Benjamin, the sheer scale of a modernity increasing to global proportions makes the small, local exchange of meaning that is the function of storytelling impossible. This does not mean that storytelling disappears, but it suggests that it acquires a new function. In *Osudy*, storytelling reflects its lost function of exchanging meaning by becoming meaningless. At the same time, the trope of storytelling in *Osudy* comments on the inability of the prosaic frame of reference to communicate the experience of the war meaningfully.

Prosaic irony is thus a narrative mode within *Osudy* because it allows Švejk and others to generate ironic situations and responses, thus frustrating the Austro-Hungarian military bureaucracy on the level of plot. At the same time, prosaic irony comments on and subverts the Czech linguistic nationalism in its nineteenth- and twentieth-century manifestations as well as Czech nationalism's most famous literary prose manifestation,

Kosík's use of the term *osud* suggests that he intuits the tension between individual *osudy* and the narrative taken as a whole that I am trying to articulate here.

Babička. Structurally, prosaic irony subverts genre convention (especially that of historical narrative) and hegemonic discourse. It also comments on prose *as such*, marking the prosaic utterance as always mediated and inherently political. Moreover, it also marks prose as resistant to closure. Finally, anticipating Benjamin's essay by thirteen years, it acts as a commentary on the changing relationship of man to the concept of death in the twentieth century and on the changing function of storytelling.

Ultimately, *Osudy* cannot reach a conclusion because it is the very idea of a conclusion that the novel subverts. Instead, it can only stop with the literal death of its author, as Hašek's demise in January of 1923 finally brings the fortunes of the good soldier to an end. The unintended end of the novel becomes oddly appropriate, as the Czech Lieutenant Dub remarks that the soldiers "v dohledné době překročí hranice" (will in foreseeable time be crossing the frontier). Were the soldiers to have finally arrived at the front, the novel would have reached its end, but instead *Osudy* is left in the continual deferral and construction of individual moments of meaning that open up spaces for the desire other than that of the master, showing, as Lacan says, that "our desire is (always) the desire of the other," and that "true" desire eludes and exceeds narrative closure.

Chapter 2

The Center Cannot Hold: Irony and Schizoid Politics in *The Man without Qualities*

“When casting a retrospective glance over the Central European cultural sphere as a whole, then, we must not forget the existence of national cultures and literatures, which base their autonomy not only on reciprocal differences and reciprocal repulsions [...] but also and primarily on a rejection of Vienna and the Viennese cultural sphere.” –Danilo Kiš, “Variations on Central European Themes”

“Having a split personality has long since ceased to be a trick reserved for lunatics.” –Robert Musil, *The Man without Qualities*

Among the authors that I regard as exemplary of the object of this study—the *genius loci* of Central Europe—Robert Musil seems the most out of place. Hašek, Gombrowicz, and Kundera are linked by virtue of having been born in (or at least having spent their formative years in) “small” nations oppressed by larger multinational empires. Where Hašek and Gombrowicz write with extremely lowbrow and slapstick humor, Musil tends to be much more intellectual and his characters, far from marginal outcasts, have access to the inner halls of Habsburg power. However, Musil is no less ironic an author than the others, continually mobilizing irony in order to critique and subvert the nationalist identifications that not only led to World War I, which looms in the background of his masterpiece *The Man without Qualities*, but also the Second World War which was raging at the time of Musil’s death in 1942. Begun in 1921 and still-unfinished when Musil died, *The Man without Qualities* thus creates a temporal bridge spanning the World War I-themed *Good Soldier Švejk* and Gombrowicz’s *Trans-Atlantyk*, whose action occurs during the first year of the Second World War. More importantly, Musil’s novel adds an important perspective to this study of Central Europe—that of the region’s “major” nation, language, and literature—providing a fuller picture of Central Europe’s ironic *genius loci*.

Although I hope to show that reading *The Man without Qualities* comparatively with the other authors in this study is indeed profitable, there are nevertheless several factors as to why it has heretofore not been read in this particular constellation. First, significant scholarship is devoted to *The Man without Qualities* and its place within the European modernist canon. The novel is often placed in a triad that includes Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* and James Joyce's *Ulysses* (the three authors' masterpieces also share extraordinary length). Second, Musil was unusually well-read and was highly adept at swimming in the intellectual currents of his day. His engagement with contemporary European high culture, frequently referenced explicitly in his novel, leads to his novel's placement within any canon of high modernism, thus preventing it from being read comparatively with lowbrow novels such as *The Good Soldier Švejk* or overtly absurd novels such as *Trans-Atlantyk*. This exclusion cuts both ways, however; as I have noted in my introductory chapter, the various recent mappings of the region—Central/East-Central/Eastern Europe—exclude Austria. However, Central Europe, at least, could never have existed without it. Of course, language departments within academia also, for pragmatic reasons, tend to study works written in a single language, or at best a language family, and so for this reason Czech and Polish are often studied—when they are studied—as secondary languages in a Russian department, while Austrian literature is taught in German departments. Thus, an institutional barrier exists to reading these works together that is seemingly superable only within the context of Comparative Literature.

Even taking into account the Habsburg influence on Central Europe, the stylistic differences between Musil's novel and the others that comprise this study are significant.

Indeed, an argument claiming that Musil is better read with Proust, Joyce, or, selecting an author from Habsburg territories who fits within the high modernist canon, Franz Kafka, would not be entirely without merit. For example, Musil's novel, set in the city where Freud developed the concept of the Oedipus complex, shares with Kafka's work (and that of other modernists such as Joyce, or even Gombrowicz) the theme of historical rupture embodied in generational conflict between fathers and sons. Moreover, despite the differences in their respective backgrounds, both Musil and Kafka wrote in German. I do not deny the validity of approaches grouping Musil with his Western European counterparts, but a study of Central European literature that excludes him on the basis of his nationality does so to the detriment of an understanding of that literature. The decision to read Musil with Hašek and Gombrowicz is certainly counterintuitive, even if a comparison with Kundera is more obvious. Nevertheless, any study of irony in Central European modernism would be incomplete without a consideration of *The Man without Qualities*. The Serbian novelist Danilo Kiš argues that the national literatures of Central Europe's small nations such as Czech literature (exemplified by *The Good Soldier Švejk*) "base their autonomy [...] primarily on a rejection of Vienna and the Viennese cultural sphere" (105). Because of this rejection of Vienna, Kiš defines these literatures as "centrifugal." My argument is that this is no less true of *The Man without Qualities*. That is to say, Musil's novel (to say nothing of some of its most important characters), which also rejects the Viennese cultural sphere and the imperial culture of the Habsburgs, is itself centrifugal in relation to Vienna and Viennese culture. As Musil's narrator notes, by the outbreak of the Great War, Austria was "a state just barely able to go along with itself" (31). If this is the case—that is, if the smaller Central European nations' rejection

of Austria is in fact mirrored by Austria itself, then an exclusion of Austrian culture from the Central or East-Central European cultural (and specifically literary) sphere is misguided. Musil's novel, at least, traffics in the same concerns as novels from Austria-Hungary's satellite nations. *The Man without Qualities* shows a similar distrust of Habsburg ideology and, indeed, depicts this ideology's utter inadequacy to the existence of Austria's subjects, both citizens and non-citizens. Like Hašek, moreover, Musil explicitly thematizes the relationship of language to everyday life. If the former finds in prosaic language a resistance to hegemonic bureaucracy and ideology, the latter regards language as inadequate to prosaic reality, resulting in a lack of narrative coherence experienced by the novel's characters.

Musil's irony is certainly more clinical and detached than Hašek's or Gombrowicz's. His novel is more clinical in another way, too: it explicitly thematizes a schizoid condition—and possibly outright schizophrenia—as endemic not only to modernity, but also to the subjects of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in its waning days. This is represented not only in several of the novel's characters, but within the narrative itself, as I shall discuss later. The scope of my discussion will be more limited than other studies of Musil's novel, in that I wish to consider the novel as Central European literature instead of German literature, but this nevertheless requires some explication of the psychological conditions permeating Musil's fictional representation of Austria.⁴⁷ In what follows, I shall first discuss the novel's exploration of the irreconcilability of subjective experience and objective reality in the modern era, and then how political concerns in Austria-Hungary cause this irreconcilability to be manifested as schizophrenia, a fascination therewith, and even schizoid behavior among the citizens of

⁴⁷ Other important studies of Musil's novel include Jonsson and Luft, to name two examples.

Austria. The psychologist and phenomenologist Louis A. Sass identifies the schizoid personality as the character type most commonly found in cases of schizophrenia (76). Instead of feeling at home in the world or together with others, the schizoid tends to feel alone and isolated. Thus, while schizophrenia is a clinical disorder, the schizoid personality type can more or less function within the boundaries of normalcy but still manifest certain symptoms, which I will discuss later. For the moment, however, I wish to say that subjectivity (especially when “deformed” by normative standards) is affected not only by the subjective crises of modernity, but also by Central Europe’s particular entry into it. With *The Man without Qualities*, Musil attempts to overcome divided modern subjectivity by creating a dilatory space in which time grinds to a halt so that his characters can work through this split. However, the actual expressions of subjectivity that culminated in nationalist fervor during World War I render this project impossible, which I believe accounts for the novel’s remaining unfinished. Still, the novel manages to examine ironically these reactionary impulses and to point toward a critical reflection on them.

Austria’s Divided Subjects

The novel’s opening paragraph establishes the fundamental split between objective conditions and the subjective experience of the same phenomena. The narrator begins with an extended and detailed account of meteorological conditions:

A barometric low hung over the Atlantic. It moved eastward toward a high-pressure area over Russia without as yet showing any inclination to bypass this high in a northerly direction. The isotherms and isotheres were functioning as they should. The air temperature was appropriate relative to the annual mean

temperature and to the aperiodic monthly fluctuations of the temperature [...] The water vapor in the air was at its maximal state of tension, while the humidity was minimal. (3)

This thorough account of weather conditions suggests a bird's-eye view of conditions not only across Europe, but beyond its borders as well. The viewpoint indicates how a (meteorological) phenomenon developing outside the national border affects the local weather and even the future weather elsewhere, and although this description is meteorological, one cannot help but consider the double-entendre of the phrase "high-pressure area over Russia" in this forecast. However, the narrator immediately juxtaposes this scientific report on weather conditions with the immediate experiences thereof, concluding the paragraph by adding, "In a word that characterizes the facts fairly accurately, even if it is a bit old-fashioned: It was a fine day in August 1913" (3). This last assertion posits discordance between objective evaluation of a phenomenon and the language used to describe the subjective experience of the same. That is, the discourse demanded by one perspective is wholly inadequate to the other, and vice versa. Because the latter mode of description is "old-fashioned," this paragraph establishes scientific discourse as particular to modernity, while the language of subjective experience is presented as no longer adequate in the era of disciplinary knowledge. These are precisely the psychic "conditions" that are generative of the discourse of the hysteric.⁴⁸ That is to say, while the majority of the novel's opening paragraph represents the discourse of the university, its concluding sentence in its everyday language may be said to represent the discourse of the master, a mode of expression guaranteed by common linguistic norms. In representing these two discourses, the opening paragraph thematizes the

⁴⁸ For my discussion of Lacan's four discourses, please see pages 38 – 44.

irreconcilability of these two discourses, resulting in conditions generative of both individual and mass hysteria. The discourse of the hysteric, represented as $(\$/a \rightarrow S_1/S_2)$, occurs when the structuring operation of the master signifier creates a condition in which language is inadequate to the hysteric's experience. The address of the hysteric to the master signifier, shown in the vector $\$ \rightarrow S_1$, takes the form of the question "why am I what you say I am?" Because this passage does not suggest any means of reconciling this division, it foreshadows mass psychological conditions in which divided subjects experience historical events in a way that prevents them from achieving a position of reflective knowledge that would enable them to understand their historical situation for what it is, and acting accordingly.

Because subjective experience is immediacy, its horizon is too limited to see the larger process unfolding. The reference to the date of the novel's setting—August 1913—contains an ominous undertone, as a worldwide war looms just around the corner. Thus, the opening paragraph establishes the following themes: the split between subjective experience and objective conditions, the ignorance immanent to a limited subjectivity, and the maelstrom of history that nobody sees coming. Like *The Good Soldier Švejk*, then, *The Man without Qualities* has a plot, or lack thereof, that derives its structure from a historical event that is never directly represented within its pages. Moreover, the novel has an ironic structure because the first paragraph establishes historical irony as one of the novel's structural principles. Historical irony is similar to dramatic irony in that it relies upon knowledge that the audience (here the reader) has. The difference is that in historical irony, the audience's knowledge has an actual historical referent. All events and actions in *The Man without Qualities* must be

understood in the light of the historical catastrophe that none of the characters see coming.

The novel quickly narrows its spatial dimension from a view overlooking all of Europe to “the Imperial Capital and Royal City of Vienna (3). For any German or Austrian reader, this can only heighten the emphasis on the date mentioned earlier because the assassination of the Austrian archduke Franz Ferdinand is less than ten months away. At the conclusion of the Great War, of which this assassination was one of the primary catalysts, Vienna will no longer be the “imperial and royal” capital of a large multinational empire. Instead, it will be relegated to a mere national capital. The narrator, however, suggests that the novel’s location is unimportant, adding: “Like all big cities it was made up of irregularity, change, forward spurts, failures to keep step, collisions of objects and interests, punctuated by unfathomable silences; made up of pathways and untrodden ways, of one great rhythmic beat as well as the chronic discord and mutual displacement of all its contending rhythms” (4). In this passage, the narrator makes Vienna symptomatic of any large city that has entered into the modern era. However, it is precisely these violent “collisions of objects and interests,” especially of the national and ethnic variety, that constitute the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Indeed, as we shall see, these very collisions, endemic to Central Europe under Habsburg rule, simultaneously create and efface Austrian subjectivity.

Despite the bustle and commotion he has just said was endemic to Vienna, the narrator also suggests that Austrians did not experience their all-too-typical urban life as such. In the last days of the empire, when one experienced “[a] homesickness, a longing to be stopped, to cease evolving, to stay put, to return to the point before the thrown

switch puts us on the wrong track,” the narrator says, “one could in such a case get off the train of time, get on an ordinary train of an ordinary railroad, and travel back to one’s home” (28). In her book on boredom and the experience of modernity, the interdisciplinary scholar Elizabeth Goodstein notes:

[T]he experience of boredom had literalized the metonymic identification between progress and a speeding train which, though debased to a cliché, is still with us[...] Although by the early twentieth century, trains themselves had long been an accustomed part of the landscape, the metaphoric force of the identification remained, and so did the dual link to subjective disaffection. (345)

Because this train is identified with both progress and history, it is also a metaphor for a narrative moving ever forward. The desire to get off the train is also a desire to return to a static condition prior to history-as-narrative. Peter Brooks famously “conceive[s] of the reading of plot as a form of desire that carries us forward, onward, through the text” (37), meaning that an initiatory narrative desire propels the act of reading a text.⁴⁹ The desire Musil’s narrator is describing, however, stands in opposition to the progressive narrative desire. That is, to be aboard the metaphorical train is to be in a state of agitation and to be helpless to stop it; the desire to do so is necessarily regressive. As we shall see, the train is not only a metaphor for historical progress but also for the inability to situate oneself in a determinate narrative.

This regressive desire comes with its own vocabulary. The industrial image of the train above contrasts with the catalog of images of nature from the far reaches of the empire. As the narrator evokes nostalgic images of “Glaciers and sea, Karst limestone and Bohemian fields of grain, nights on the Adriatic chirping with restless cicadas, and

⁴⁹ See Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, pp. 37 – 61 and 90 – 112.

Slovakian villages where the smoke rose from chimneys as from upturned nostrils while the village cowered between two small hills as if the earth had parted its lips to warm its child between them” (28), Austria-Hungary appears as a timeless utopia immune to the ravages of modern life. Here the subjectively-experienced atemporality of the empire is undermined by the narrator’s backward glance at “the good old days when the Austrian Empire still existed” (28); the fact of the empire’s end negates the subjective illusion for the reader, highlighting for him the illusory nature of the characters’ fantasies. Indeed, there is no getting off the train of time.

Further undermining the idyllic illusion that Austrians maintain about their soon-to-be-dissolved empire, the narrator continually refers to it as Kakania. “Everything and every person in it,” he explains, “bore the label of *kaiserlich-königlich* (Imperial-Royal) or *kaiserlich und königlich* (Imperial *and* Royal), abbreviated as ‘k.k.’ or ‘k.&k.’” (29). In this designation, the two markers of an obsolete system of government are reduced to a scatological play on words. To be imperial and royal—literally “emperor-like” and “king-like” is to be “kaka,” a child’s word for feces. This pun speaks to the nature of Austria-Hungary’s dual monarchy, which resulted from a political compromise of half a century earlier and which was making the empire increasingly untenable as a legitimate geopolitical entity. The 1848 revolutions in France had spread to Central Europe, leading the smaller nationalities of the Habsburg Empire to force concessions out of the Habsburgs. Austria made reforms that failed to meet the nationalist demands of the empire’s various ethnicities, and once Austria suffered successive military defeats at the hands of Prussia in 1866, the empire was too weak to suppress internal revolution. The Habsburgs therefore had to agree to a compromise that recognized Hungary as a

sovereign kingdom united with Austria. As a result, the Austrian Empire became Austria-Hungary. The imperial-royal designation, then, is an artificial gloss covering a decaying political order, just as the rose-colored view of the empire masks its obsolescence. As the scholar Stefan Jonsson writes, “The Compromise of 1867 in effect bound Magyar feudalism and German-Austrian centralism together, but back to back, in a struggle against nationalities whose demands for cultural and linguistic equality inevitably actualized demands for political democracy and economic reforms as well” (226). The dual identity of the empire thus contained the seeds of its own downfall.

The meeting of objects and interests typical of life in 1913 Vienna becomes a literal collision in the novel’s introductory chapter, and in it one can see the inadequacy of Kakanians to comprehend the era into which they have entered. The chaos and bustle described earlier is something that the *haute-bourgeoisie* of Vienna are able to ignore, save for the moments when it violently forces itself upon their consciousness. In the first chapter, a man and a woman are walking down a street in Vienna, apparently oblivious to the everyday commotion around them. These two “clearly belonged to a privileged social class [...] [T]hey knew who they were and that they belonged in a European capital city and imperial residence. Their names might have been Ermelinda Tuzzi and Arnheim—but then, they couldn’t be, because in August Frau Tuzzi was still in Bad Aussee with her husband and Dr. Arnheim was still in Constantinople” (4). Although these characters remain unidentified, the narrator’s suggestion that they “might” have been two of the novel’s central characters (the reader will later discover that Frau Tuzzi and Dr. Arnheim are important characters) establishes an equivalence between the two anonymous pedestrians, on one hand, and Arnheim and Diotima (the narrator and

Ulrich's name for Frau Tuzzi), on the other. Both pairs are representative of an entire social stratum of Viennese society. This is significant for the novel because it hints here (and Musil will develop this idea throughout), that the social and ideological space they believe they occupy is in fact false, and the scene shows the obvious unease that modernity—especially the discourse of modernity—creates in otherwise grounded individuals. Their sense of belonging to Vienna suggests that they regard their capital city as a *place* in the de Certeauan sense of the term, in which everything and everybody is “situated in its own ‘proper’ and distinct location” (117).⁵⁰ That is to say, they regard themselves as coherent subjects and the city of their residence as homogeneous and distinct from the world outside Austrian borders. However, as we shall soon see, Vienna is not merely a spatial collision of objects and interests, it is also a temporal collision.

The two draw near to an accident; a truck has hit a pedestrian, causing a crowd of bystanders to gather around the victim. The lady “had a queasy feeling in the pit of her stomach, which she credited to compassion, although she mainly felt irresolute and helpless” (5). In this she is hardly alone, standing among a crowd of people who “were really only marking time while waiting for the ambulance to bring someone who would know what to do and have the right to do it” (5). The crowd apparently feels just as helpless as the woman. Moreover, the narrator describes her thinking as “still on the unjustified assumption that she had experienced something unusual” (5). Although her reaction is similar to that of the crowd and therefore typical, she perceives this accident as something atypical, and strangely, the discourse of modernity allows her to continue to feel this way. As she stands there feeling helpless, her companion notes: “The brakes on these heavy trucks take too long to come to a full stop” (5), a comment which “gave the

⁵⁰ For my discussion of de Certeau's categories of place and space, see pages 7 – 9.

lady some relief [...] She did not really understand, or care to understand, the technology involved, as long as his explanation helped put this ghastly incident into perspective by reducing it to a technicality of no direct personal concern to her” (5). The man’s utterance is exemplary of what Martin Heidegger calls “chatter,” idle speech that effectively communicates nothing. For precisely this reason, however, it has a palliative effect. (The banality of this statement is doubly ironic insofar as the sudden recognition that one lives in a world where automobiles hurtle down the streets at lethal speeds without adequate brakes ought to be quite alarming) In its “ghastliness,” the incident corresponds to the Lacanian Real—the Real of modernity—at least for the pedestrian couple, because they cannot find words to describe either the accident or their own emotional reaction to it; they simply talk *around* the subject. The man’s utterance reestablishes the symbolic order, eliding the woman’s encounter with the Real of modernity. In Musil’s novel, everyday speech thus has a double aspect. First, it is inadequate to the characters’ objective reality, an obsolete discourse. At the same time, it functions as an ideological curtain that allows wealthy Austrians to continue ignoring the actual conditions in which they live.

Slavoj Žižek’s discussion of different perceptions of violence can be useful in understanding the ideological ramifications of the characters’ reaction to the traffic accident. In his recent book *Violence*, Žižek distinguishes between two fundamentally different types of violence. The first, subjective violence, is violence “performed by a clearly identifiable agent” (1), such as a murderer or terrorist. Žižek does not say whether or not subjective violence requires intentionality, and for the purposes of my discussion it does not. That is, I am arguing that a violent event lacking a subject who

intends the violence may still be regarded as subjective violence so long as there is a subject. The truck driver never intends to hit the pedestrian, but this is nevertheless an example of subjective violence. Žižek distinguishes subjective violence from objective violence, which consists of the objective conditions that drive individuals to commit violent acts. That is to say, the “clearly identifiable” agents of subjective violence function as a screen that allows us to misrecognize objective conditions that caused them to act as they did. For example, we perceive the events of 9/11 as subjective violence, caused by radically evil agents who simply hate the American way of life, only if we overlook the objective conditions—among them, crushing poverty in the Middle East caused in no small part by the U.S.’s interventions in the region. According to Žižek:

[S]ubjective violence is experienced as such against the background of a non-violent zero level. It is seen as a perturbation of the “normal,” peaceful state of things. However, objective violence is precisely the violence inherent to this “normal” state of things. Objective violence is invisible since it sustains the very zero-level standard against which we perceive something as subjectively violent.

(2)

This accident witnessed by the two pedestrians is a perfect example of subjective violence that masks its necessary objective preconditions. In the first chapter of *The Man without Qualities*, objective violence is the speed of modern life, in which people become distracted while crossing the street, and in which trucks have brakes insufficient for abrupt braking in the city. Instead of perceiving this accident as the natural consequence of the modernity in which she lives, this anonymous woman (who is effectively an Everywoman here) regards it as an aberration set against a zero-degree of complacent

normalcy. Moreover, to the degree that this allegedly anomalous accident is actually commonplace, so is her psychological reaction. That is, her irresolute helplessness is a more frequent condition than actual compassion. We have seen that Milan Kundera has noted that the inhabitants of large nations feel like history's subject while the inhabitants of small nations feel like history's object, establishing either an active relationship or a passive one, depending on one's national (and therefore ideological) identifications. Here, these Austrian bystanders identify themselves as the active agents of history, and the degree to which they find this accident unsettling is the degree to which it functions as the return of the repressed—the fact that history is out of their control—continually looming in the background.

Crucially, this means that in *The Man without Qualities*, there is a double-reversal between subject and object positions. Objective violence manifests as subjective violence, thus allowing people whose actions, thoughts, and behavior are structured by objective conditions to experience themselves as the subjects rather than the objects of history. Nevertheless, the unease felt by these characters suggests that they, too, recognize something uncanny in their reaction to the accident. What is again present, if not represented within the narrative, is the discourse of the hysteric; the awkward conversation of these two characters is a clumsy and inarticulate manifestation of the hysteric's question posed to the master signifier, and the "truth" of this uncomfortable discourse—what it reveals on an implicit level, in other words—is the Real (*a*). The Real cannot be reconciled either by conventional modes of understanding or by the new disciplinary discourse that the man utters.

Similarly, the (repressed) notion that these actors are not the subjects of their own history is unsettling for the Kakanians. Indeed, the narrator presents history as not only out of human control, but so dizzying that they cannot even comprehend its path. He writes: “People not yet born in [the pre-war years] will find it hard to believe, but even then time was racing along like a cavalry camel, just like today. But nobody knew where time was headed. And it was not always clear what was up or down, what was going forward or backward” (7). Here, the narrator shifts metaphors—from a train to a camel—changing the subjective perception of time. Far slower than a train, the simile comparing time to a camel suggests that the linear progression of history had opened into a dilatory space in which the rush of historical events failed to materialize. This foreshadows the novel’s own dilatory space, in which the looming historical rupture never arrives. This has important implications for the novel as a whole, both in terms of its structure and also of its narrative. In my introduction, I discussed narrative, following Peter Brooks and Hayden White, as the effect of plotting (or “emplotment,” to use the latter’s terminology) on the sequence of events that constitutes “what actually happened.”⁵¹ To plot actions, events, and perceptions into a narrative entails arranging the raw data of existence into a particular sequence of presentation. In a novel, this plot is then read in a particular direction, leading to a certain sequence of events and overall structure. We read front-to-back, left-to-right, top-to-bottom, and the novel almost assuredly becomes nonsensical if we violate this order. The ending of the novel, following Brooks, has a structuring force that retroactively confers meaning on the pages that came before. In pre-war Austria, once history itself has gone off the rails we expect it to follow, it becomes increasingly difficult to make a coherent narrative out of it. It is for this reason that the narrator is not

⁵¹ For my discussion of Brooks and White, see pages 10 – 16.

even sure that the novel, if it is to accurately re-present the confluence of historical forces that culminate in the Great War, can do so with conventional narrative form. As a result, the sections of the novel deliberately undermine the novel's attempt to create an overarching meaning. Part I of the novel consists of nineteen chapters under the heading "A Sort of Introduction," while the next 104 chapters are grouped under the heading "Pseudoreality Prevails," suggesting that although the novel itself has a certain sequence and order of presentation, its form is inadequate to the myriad forces that comprised Austrian life in the years prior to World War I. The titular character of *The Man without Qualities* is hopelessly implicated in this system that has been described, but intellectually, he stands apart from it. He is introduced in the novel's second chapter when the narrator follows the path of the street where the accident occurred in chapter 1:

The street where this little mishap had occurred was one of those long, winding rivers of traffic radiating outward from the heart of the city to flow through it surrounding districts and empty into the suburbs. Had the distinguished couple followed its course a little longer, they would have come upon a sight that would certainly have pleased them: an old garden, still retaining some of its eighteenth- or even seventeenth-century character, with wrought-iron railings through which one could glimpse [...] a sort of little chateau with short wings, a hunting lodge or rococo love nest of times past. (6)

This is the home of Ulrich, the man without qualities. The location and description of Ulrich's house is important. First, the house exists along a street that radiates outward from the center of Vienna, so while it is not marked as central, it is nevertheless situated on a continuum that begins at the empire's center of power. The chateau's prior use as

either a hunting lodge or a love nest speaks to the rapidly changing size and demographics of Vienna throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In 1850, Vienna had just over 500,000 inhabitants, a number that swelled to over two million by 1910. With this growth, Vienna incorporated a number of former suburbs into the city, including the house now inhabited by Ulrich, “a former summer house outside the city gates that had lost its vocation when it was engulfed by the spreading city” (8). The house, now obsolete as a dwelling for wealthy Viennese wishing to distance themselves, even if only for purposes of leisure, from a center to which they ordinarily have access, marks its owner as one whose intellectual distance from the Habsburg Empire’s cultural and ideological center is only a screen masking his actual position.

Were the description of the chateau’s location insufficient proof, the first appearance of Ulrich himself makes his distance from the reality around him evident. Ulrich is first seen “standing behind a window gazing through the fine green filter of the garden air to the brownish street beyond, and for the last ten minutes he had been ticking off on his stopwatch the passing cars, trucks, trolleys, and pedestrians, whose faces were washed out by the distance, timing everything whirling past that he could catch in the net of his eye” (6). Here, Ulrich is perhaps more intellectually engaged with everyday life than the anonymous couple described earlier, but the image of the pane of glass between Ulrich and the street emphasizes his distance from Viennese reality. To borrow from the subjunctive in which Ulrich lives his life, had the novel been set several decades later, he could just as easily have been watching the street on television (or even a security camera) instead of from behind his window. The stopwatch in Ulrich’s hand indicates that his attempt to comprehend the reality just outside his window is one grounded in the

precision of scientific discourse. In his first appearance, then, the novel's protagonist occupies the position of scientific objectivity that, as we have already seen in the weather report that opens the novel, fails in its address to everyday life.

It may be a defense mechanism, given how unsettling this reality is to the average person walking up or down the street, but Ulrich's attachment to precision gives him no sense of hope or resolution. "No matter what you do," Ulrich thinks to himself, "within this mare's nest of forces at work, it doesn't make the slightest difference" (7).

Ulrich's admission of impotence here may be seen as representing the discourse of the university ($S_2/S_1 \rightarrow a/\$$). Occupying the position of scientific knowledge (S_2), Ulrich brings this knowledge to bear on the quotidian condition (a) for which old forms of expression are no longer adequate. However, just as the car accident discussed earlier produced a feeling of irresolution and helplessness in the pedestrian couple, Ulrich's utterance speaks of the same irresolution. Whatever subject position he occupies, he is still no more in control of his destiny than those he observes through the pane of glass. Ulrich is therefore a divided subject ($\$$), and the truth of his submission to "what is" shows that his choice of career merely perpetuates the status quo, represented here by the master-signifier (S_1).

Because of his distance from the political and social reality of which he is a part, Ulrich lacks the requisite, albeit false, "sense of reality" that the other characters in the novel share. Lacking this sense, he replaces it with a sense of possibility (11). Far too skeptical to take anything around him, even money, seriously, Ulrich is the paradigm of "a man who cannot summon up a sense of reality even in relation to himself," and therefore "come[s] to see himself as a man without qualities" (13). This is in part

because Ulrich, a mathematician by training, effaces quality in favor of quantity, as evidenced by his window observation. Moreover, his lack of a sense of reality has ontological and theological implications. As an adolescent, Ulrich wrote a school essay arguing “that God Himself probably preferred to speak of His world in the subjunctive of possibility (*hic dixerit quispiam*—“here someone might object that...”), for God creates the world and thinks while He is at it that it could just as well be done differently” (14). Without a firm mooring in the reality that *does* exist in *The Man without Qualities*, Ulrich becomes incapable of action. At the same time, this passage suggests that Ulrich’s speculative condition renders him the one person capable of imagining or thinking through alternatives to the historical catastrophe that is to come.

Ulrich has tried three different career paths, each of which reflects an aspect of the modern condition and each of which he abandons. The first is a military career, but as Ulrich rises through the military ranks, he has a misunderstanding with a civilian, who speaks with one of Ulrich’s superiors, leading to chastisement. “From then on,” the narrator recalls, “the profession of a warrior lost its charm for him. He had expected to find himself on a stage of world-shaking adventures with himself as hero, but now saw nothing but a drunken young man shouting on a wide, empty square, answered only by the paving stones” (32). Ulrich’s expectations of his initial career are couched in narrative terms—he expected to be the hero of an adventure story, a subject who makes his own destiny, but his encounter with the military bureaucracy shatters this illusion and reduces him to one object among others (in this case, paving stones). Ulrich then becomes an engineer, a career which he again hopes will enable him to be a man of action; this profession “could serve as the frame for a charming future self-portrait,

showing a man with resolute features, a shag pipe clenched between his teeth, a tweed cap on his head, traveling in superb riding boots between Cape Town and Canada on daring missions for his business” (34). Again, Ulrich’s desire is to be a heroic man of action rather than a functionary within a “mare’s nest of forces at work,” but he recognizes in engineers a failure to live up to this ideal. “Engineers,” the narrator informs us, “don’t quite live up to this vision [...] They all [turn] out to be men firmly tied to their drawing boards [and] any suggestion that they might apply their daring ideas to themselves instead of their machines would have taken them aback” (35). While the first career choice produces a subject whose capacity for action is unexpectedly constrained by a bureaucratic apparatus, the second provides a capacity for action all too limited to its disciplinary specialty, offering the ability to fashion a machine’s destiny, but not one’s own. This leads to Ulrich’s third career, as a mathematician, the result of which we have witnessed in the scene with the stopwatch by the window.

The narrator describes Ulrich as being in a frequent state “of incoherent ideas spreading outward without a center, so characteristic of the present” (15). Thus, while he may be more intelligent and self-conscious than most of his fellow Austrians, his psychic topography is not uncommon. The effect of this topography on the individual is indeed symptomatic of the general conditions in Austria. As the narrator argues:

[T]he inhabitant of a country has at least nine characters: a professional, a national, a civic, a class, a geographic, a sexual, a conscious, an unconscious, and possibly even a private character to boot. He unites them in himself, but they dissolve him, so that he is really nothing more than a small basin hollowed out by these many streamlets that trickle into it and drain out of it again [...] Which is

why every inhabitant of the earth also has a tenth character that is nothing more than the passive fantasy of spaces yet unfilled. (30)

Because modern subjectivity operates simultaneously on so many levels, it produces a kind of hollowing-out of the individual, leaving him a space shot through with a variety of appropriate codes of behavior that do not reflect his particularity. In this, the national/imperial subject is subservient to the symbolic order in the form of the discourse of the master. This is further complicated by the complexity of modern life, in which multiple and conflicting discursive forms join in the individual like streams flowing into a raging torrent. Although the narrator perhaps exaggerates the applicability of this analysis when he applies it to “every inhabitant of the earth,” his topography of the individual’s character is consistent both on the individual level, in the form of Ulrich, and on the national level, in the form of Austria’s subjects taken collectively. We see here a society made up of individuals who cannot embrace their own identity because they cannot locate it. The “interior space” of individuals becomes, according to the narrator, “an empty, invisible space, with reality standing inside it like a child’s toy town deserted by the imagination” (30). The Kakanians, both as subjects of the Austrian crown and as representatives of the modern world, also “cannot summon up a sense of reality in relation to [themselves]” (13).

This hollowing-out of the individual creates an air of hostility in Austrian society. Austria itself becomes “a state just barely able to go along with itself” (31), and this hostility extends to intersubjective relations as well. We can see this most clearly when Ulrich is mugged by three men one night. Intellectually detached even at the most visceral of times, even while his attackers are cursing him, Ulrich “toy[s] with the notion

that they might not perhaps be hooligans at all but citizens like himself, only slightly tipsy and freed of their inhibitions, whose attention had fastened on his passing form and who now discharged on him the hatred that is always ready and waiting for him or for any stranger [...] There were times when he felt something of the sort himself” (21). The narrator’s use of free indirect discourse blurs the line between his thoughts and Ulrich’s, making it unclear whose judgment establishes a parallel between Ulrich and his attackers. If it is the judgment of the narrator, perhaps Ulrich is unconscious of these impulses, whereas if the last statement is Ulrich’s own admission, his intellectual tendency is nearly pathological because Ulrich is distanced from every experience regardless of how immediate it is. The line between the narrator and Ulrich remains blurred in the next sentence: “Regrettably, a great many people nowadays feel antagonistic toward a great many other people” (21). This episode, then, is again something that is experienced as subjective violence, a violation of the status quo, but the narrator’s musings (or are they Ulrich’s?) reveal the objective conditions that make such violence possible. Although this barely-repressed hostility does not explode into a mass event until the end of Part 2 of the novel, I argue that it is the conditions of objective violence, to return to Žižek’s category, that form the backdrop of the novel.

Because Ulrich moves, for the most part, in circles too refined to express base sentiments, one must look elsewhere for evidence of the objective violence inherent in pre-war Vienna. Even more than Ulrich’s mugging, the Austrians’ collective fascination with the psychotic murderer Moosbrugger is evidence of the objective violence that permeates Vienna. Moosbrugger is an itinerant carpenter only a couple of years older than Ulrich who has killed a prostitute “in a horrifying manner” (67). Moosbrugger is,

Sass notes, “an inarticulate character who is probably of subnormal intelligence” (145), but who has nevertheless managed to capture the attention of the general public: “There was also the amazing fact that no sooner had they become known than Moosbrugger’s pathological excesses were regarded as ‘finally something interesting for a change’ by thousands of people who deplore the sensationalism of the press, from busy officeholders to fourteen-year-old sons to housewives befogged by domestic cares” (Musil 68).

Despite Moosbrugger’s disturbed personality and presumed lack of intelligence, then, he captures the imagination of Kakanians, who in their ill-informed understanding of his psychopathology come to view his murderous violence as expression of a primitive man unspoiled by modernity and who still has the capacity to act (without the necessity, in contrast to the first chapter, of technical expertise). The Kakanians see Moosbrugger as a unique case, but the widespread fascination with him is more telling. That is to say, as an individual psychopath, Moosbrugger manifests subjective violence, but the fascination he holds for the citizens of Kakania is telling. In their fascination with Moosbrugger, the Kakanians are projecting the objective violence—their own alienation in modernity, of which they’re only unconsciously aware—onto him in order to avoid recognizing it as such.

Himself fascinated with Moosbrugger, Ulrich nevertheless recognizes that the murderer’s condition is “clearly madness, and just as clearly it was no more than a distortion of our own elements of being. Cracked and obscure it was; it somehow occurred to Ulrich that if mankind could dream as a whole, that dream would be Moosbrugger” (76-77). Because he exists in a similar relation to the rest of the population, Ulrich is able to observe that Moosbrugger’s conscious suffering is exactly

that which Kakanian suffers unconsciously. He alone seems to recognize that the Kakanians' fascination with Moosbrugger speaks to a repressed objective violence that allows the killer to be regarded as exemplary of subjective violence. The narrator seems to have intended Moosbrugger's suffering to be on behalf of all Kakanians; the murderer is, after all, a journeyman carpenter. That is, Moosbrugger's background suggests Christ-like connotations. Prior to his entry into the headlines, he is the most marginal of figures, "an orphan shepherd boy in a hamlet so small that it did not even have a village street" (69). After being in several violent incidents, he emigrated to Turkey but found the people there equally inhospitable (71). This suggests that Moosbrugger's alienation stems in part from his travels through two multinational empires. Both the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires were on their last legs by 1913, and as a modern subject, Moosbrugger feels alienated in both.

It is at this point that I would like to venture a brief comparative reading of *The Man without Qualities* and *The Good Soldier Švejk*. Their respective characters are as different as the registers in which their stories are told. *Švejk* never fails to be blatantly comic, even when the novel's narrator or characters are describing the most unspeakable atrocities. On the other hand, the subplot involving Moosbrugger tends to be less overtly ironic than that of the Parallel Campaign. If anything, Musil's depiction of Moosbrugger evidences a startling familiarity with clinical descriptions of schizophrenia; Moosbrugger is prone to hallucinations, delusions, and his behavior suggests that he regards society and even language as wholly arbitrary conventions from which he feels distant. That said, both characters share a certain relationship to hegemonic discursive structures and their avatars. *Švejk*'s opponent is the Great Mechanism, which there is no escaping,

while Moosbrugger concludes that “the world was in league against him everywhere; no magic word and no kindness could prevail against this conspiracy” (71). Although Moosbrugger lacks the linguistic facility to ameliorate his suffering, he is fully aware of the performative power of language. The narrator continues: “He had eagerly picked up such phrases in the mental wards and prisons, with scraps of French and Latin stuck in the most unsuitable places as he talked, ever since he had discovered that it was the possession of these languages that gave those in power the right to decide his fate with their ‘findings’” (Ibid.). In Hašek’s novel, the narrator identifies the § as the signifier investing an utterance with legal authority, while here Moosbrugger understands that French and Latin words have the same power, albeit by virtue of simply being in another tongue. His use of random French and Latin words is indicative of his attempt to use language in order to establish himself as an integrated speaking subject, able to participate in the discourse of the master. Ironically, however, the fact that he imputes such power to certain words and phrases simply because they are in another language shows just how alienated Moosbrugger is from the discourse of the master. That is to say, Moosbrugger hopes that these words will integrate him into the symbolic order on both a personal and a legal level. “For the same reason,” Moosbrugger also acts out during his trial hearings, “express[ing] himself in an exaggerated High German, [and] saying such things as ‘This must be regarded as the basis for my brutality’ or ‘I had imagined her to be even more vicious than the others of her kind in my usual estimation of them’” (Ibid.). Moosbrugger, then, recognizes symbolic investiture as both arbitrary and a product of language. Nevertheless, he is unable to master the discourse of Austria’s legal system, and when he sees that his use of officious language fails to

impress, “he could rise to the heights of a grand theatrical pose, declaring disdainfully that he was a ‘theoretical anarchist’ whom the Social Democrats were ready to rescue at a moment’s notice [...] This would show them that he too had a ‘discipline,’ a field of his own where the learned presumption of his judges could not follow him” (71-72). In his important book *My Own Private Germany*, Eric Santner argues that official language (for example, the language of judges in their legal capacity) consists of “calls to order, rites and procedures of *symbolic investiture* whereby an individual is endowed with a new social status, is filled with a symbolic mandate that henceforth informs his or her identity in the community (xii, author’s italics). Whatever his mental faculties, Moosbrugger recognizes that not only does the Austrian legal system work through the process of symbolic investiture in language and its practitioners, but so too, does identity. In his imitation of official language, then, Moosbrugger is futilely attempting to establish a place for himself in the Kakanian community. Although it is not (always) his conscious intention, he makes a mockery of this investiture by throwing it back at the courtroom participants.

Ironically, his performative outbursts usually lead his interrogators to regard him as highly intelligent (72), establishing yet another parallel with the absurd universe of *The Good Soldier Švejk*. Of course, one of the reasons that many Kakanians hold Moosbrugger in high intellectual regard is that they are unable to see that the performativity of discourse is entirely arbitrary, identified as they are with the discourse of the master and its modern manifestation, the discourse of the university. Moosbrugger’s pseudo-intellectual outbursts are thus analogous to the empty recitation of (possibly made-up) statistics by the anonymous gentleman in the novel’s opening

chapter. The divided subject remains unable to see how the Other causes him to misrecognize his own desire; statistics merely perpetuate alienation. The specialization of discourse, however, means that anyone can appear like an expert if they speak a discursive jargon to one of the uninitiated. The difference between Musil's novel and Hašek's, however, is that while the Kakanians fall for this ruse because of their identification with an "enlightened" society, the Czechs greet such language with immediate ridicule.

Despite the fact that Moosbrugger's inability to "fit in," that is, to identify with a particular master signifier and situate his identity within the discourse of the master, is indicative of a serious clinical condition, the psychotic's separation from integral discourse is clearly a central concern for Musil. When psychiatrists evaluating Moosbrugger ask him to add fourteen and fourteen, for example, the narrator tells us that

[Moosbrugger] would say in his deliberate way, 'Oh, about twenty-eight to forty.'

This 'about' gave them trouble, which made Moosbrugger grin. It was really so simple. He knew perfectly well that you get twenty-eight when you go on from fourteen to another fourteen; but who says you have to stop there?

Moosbrugger's gaze would always range a little farther ahead, like that of a man who has reached the top of a ridge outlined against the sky and finds that behind it there are other, similar ridges. (259)

In this scene, roughly analogous to Švejk's interrogation by three medical experts, Moosbrugger's relationship to discourse is not only one of irreconcilability, but also of excess; Moosbrugger's consciousness exceeds the boundaries of discourse. The image of a superior vista misleadingly suggests that Moosbrugger's viewpoint is superior to those

around him. It is this very excess that misleads seemingly reasonable, trained professionals to regard the hulking simpleton before them as a mystery. Thus, while the psychiatric experts are undoubtedly correct in assuming that Moosbrugger is profoundly disturbed (and possibly a simpleton), his particularity, which is excessive to their judgments, ironically subverts them and their discourse.

Moosbrugger's condition, excessive and even extreme as it may be, is profoundly modern. Almost as if he gets a scrambled radio reception, "Moosbrugger [hears] voices or music or a wind, or a blowing and humming, a whizzing and rattling, or shots, thunder, laughing, shouts, speaking, or whispering. It [comes] at him from every direction; the sounds [are] in the walls, in the air, in his clothes, in his body. He had the impression he was carrying it in his body [...]" (257). The consistent use of the conjunction "or," rather than "and," suggests that Moosbrugger is unable to isolate the various (real or imagined) stimuli that penetrate him.⁵² For this reason, it becomes difficult for him to distinguish between what comes from him and what environmental factors are influencing him:

"[T]he visions [come] from outside, but a shimmer of observation [tells] him at the same time that they [are] really something inside himself. The important thing [is] that it is not at all important whether something is inside or outside; in his condition, it [is] like clear water on both sides of a transparent sheet of glass" (258). While the simile that includes a sheet of glass is doubtless intended to hark back to Ulrich, the most significant part of this passage has to do with the unclear boundary between inside and outside.

Moosbrugger is the clearest evidence of the subject as a spatial phenomenon; there is no clear distinction between inherent aspects of his personality and external stimuli. His

⁵² The penetrative quality of these stimuli is reminiscent of the "rays" detailed by another famous schizophrenic, Daniel Paul Schreber. See his *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness*.

entire being is fragmented precisely because he cannot determine where he ends and the external world begins.

However, from the perspective of the average Kakanian, Moosbrugger is interesting precisely because he exceeds discursive disciplinary boundaries. Despite their linguistic origins, these discursive boundaries fragment the subject, as we have seen earlier in the narrator's discussion of the national subject's multiple "characters" (30). As Sass argues, "The normal citizens of Kakania [...] imagine this murderer as a pure incarnation of all that is primitive and instinctual, a man whose violence supposedly attests to the utter immediacy and wholeness of his being" (145). Ironically, this means that the Kakanians are narcissistically projecting their wishes for coherent subjectivity onto Moosbrugger, but in doing so, they do not realize that he embodies their own subjective conditions *in extremis*.

The Divided Empire

If Part I of the novel establishes the effect on individual subjectivity of the anomie gripping Kakania, Part II begins to show the effect on the state. At the end of Part I, Ulrich's father has used his influence to procure Ulrich an audience with Count Stallburg, an important figure within the Habsburg bureaucracy. Count Stallburg appears to be a stand-in for the Emperor Franz-Josef himself: "Count Stallburg had his office in that Imperial and Royal citadel the Hofburg, and the Emperor and King of Kakania was a legendary old gentleman[...] and the voices of millions vowed that they loved him as a father" (83). This interview therefore represents Ulrich's momentary penetration to the true center of power in Kakania. The experience, however, leaves Ulrich critical of the imperial center; he "ascertain[s] that he [is] walking through a vast shell with little

content; the great public rooms [are] almost unfurnished” (84). Connecting this image with the streets radiating outward from the Viennese city center in the novel’s second chapter, one can see that the center itself is essentially hollow, an association developed further when Ulrich “[is] received by His Excellency inside a great hollow prism of the best proportions, in the center of which [stands] this unpretentious, bald-headed man” (84).

Looking at the Count, Ulrich has a revelation: “Suddenly there could be no doubt as to whom he reminded one of; Count Stallburg became transparent, and Ulrich realized that a man who has been for seventy years the All-Highest Center of supreme power must find a certain satisfaction in retreating behind himself and looking like the most subservient of his subjects” (84-5). However, if the Count/Emperor resembles any of his subjects, then he, too, is fundamentally “hollowed out.” As the emperor, he *is* the master-signifier of the Habsburg lands. This episode reveals the (soon-to-be) dead “father” whose residue nevertheless haunts the empire as it careens headfirst into modernity. Indeed, even as Ulrich silently remarks on the fundamental emptiness of the palace, he “[has] no recourse but ironic protest and bourgeois criticism” (84), ultimately “deciding even now that he was unimpressed by it” (87). Whatever his ironic posturing, however, Ulrich is an example of what Lacan would call “*le non-dupe erre*.” With this term I understand Lacan as meaning someone who intellectually and rationally recognizes the arbitrary nature of society’s power relations, but who nevertheless behaves precisely as if these relations are in fact not arbitrary. In this case, Ulrich recognizes the Count as just another man, albeit an aged one, but despite his better judgment, he psychologically invests the Count with the status of the master. As he leaves the Hofburg Palace, Ulrich

wonders: “But still, what [is] that strong, peculiar quality it [makes] him feel? Damn it all, there [is] hardly any other way to put it: it [is] simply amazingly real” (87). Ulrich is thus unable to follow through on the logical consequences of his own intellectual position, and instead of rejecting the job offer that he receives from Count Stallburg, he takes the position.

The job Ulrich takes is significant because it moves him into a social milieu where he is able to witness firsthand the attempt to rejuvenate the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the face of its obsolescence. Ulrich becomes the secretary of a patriotic movement called the Parallel Campaign. Both in name and in stated mission, the Parallel Campaign is reactive, since it explicitly responds to plans within Germany to celebrate the thirtieth anniversary of the reign of Kaiser Wilhelm II, its stated mission to “bring to bear the full weight of a seventy-year reign, so rich in blessings and sorrows,” against a jubilee of a mere thirty years” (87). The Parallel Campaign is the invention of Count Leinsdorf, an Austrian noble whose own wealth comes, for the most part, from the nascent industrialization spreading throughout Habsburg lands. Although the use of the descriptor “parallel” to describe this patriotic campaign shows that there is nothing authentic in this display, for Leinsdorf the campaign is structured around “four points: Emperor of Peace, European Milestone, True Austria, Capital and Culture” (88).⁵³ The “four points” thus contain an irony sure to be understood by the reader, in the contrast between the seemingly pure points Leinsdorf advocates and the campaign’s actual

⁵³ In her translation of Musil’s novel, Sophie Wilkins here translates the German “*Besitz und Bildung*” as “property and culture.” However, she elsewhere translates the expression as “capital and culture.” I use the latter rendering because Arnheim, who is an industrialist, represents *Besitz*, thus making “capital” a better choice than “property.” Furthermore, the English words “capital” and “culture” fortuitously reproduce the repetition of hard Cs that leads Musil to refer to the *kaiserlich-königlich* empire as Kakania.

motives. Moreover, there is historical irony in Franz-Josef's status as "Emperor of Peace," given that his life will end during the "War to End All Wars."

Unlike Ulrich, Leinsdorf is utterly lacking in cynicism and irony directed toward the Empire and its figurehead: "his allegory of the aged ruler held the thought both of his Fatherland, which he loved, and of the world to which it should be a model" (89). Thus, Leinsdorf models the Parallel Campaign on highly conservative principles, hoping to impress upon the world the necessity of submitting to a kindly old father-figure. In Leinsdorf's view:

[T]he nations of Europe [are] hopelessly adrift in the whirlpool of materialistic democracy. What hovered before him was an inspiring symbol that would serve both as a warning and as a sign to return to the fold. It was clear to him that something had to be done to put Austria in the vanguard, so that this 'splendorous rally of the Austrian spirit' would prove a 'milestone' for the whole world and enable it to find its own true being again. (89)

Leinsdorf, then, adheres to a vision of *Mitteleuropa*, albeit one centered in Austria rather than in Germany. The nationalist movements and the nascent democracies of the early twentieth century represent for him a perversion of the natural order. Of course, in the persistence of an imperial figurehead during the age of rising nationalism, Austria is anything but the vanguard; rather, that place of pride belongs to the materialistic democracy Leinsdorf loathes. The narrator continually portrays Leinsdorf as the most comical character in the novel, the unknowing victim of ironic ridicule. Because of this, the reader is expected to see throughout that Austrian subjectivity and the concept of *Mitteleuropa* are equally fragmented and untenable.

Emphasizing the ridiculousness of his vision, Leinsdorf's mansion shares the same spatial quality of emptiness that also describes the Hofburg Palace: "A high-ceilinged room [stands] around him, and this in turn [is] surrounded by the huge empty spaces of the ante-room and the library, around which, shell upon shell, further rooms [stand]" (91). Unsurprisingly, since he moves in roughly the same sphere, Leinsdorf is just as "hollow" as Count Stallburg. If the pane of glass that creates an irreducible distance from Viennese life is Ulrich's objective correlate, the hollow chamber is Leinsdorf's; the narrator thus uses space to comment ironically on the ideological state of the novel's characters. Although he does not take note of the physical description of Leinsdorf's mansion, Stefan Jonsson's discussion of the Oedipal drama as it appears in psychoanalytic theory provides a useful way of understanding this imagery. As Jonsson notes:

[T]he Oedipal drama provides the *male* subject with a way to deny his lack [...] The male subject [...] comes to identify with the position of power and agency that psychoanalysis names 'the phallus.' [...] By internalizing images of patriarchal authority as parts of his own ego, and by simultaneously projecting his own lack onto the image of femininity, the male subject will 'misrecognize' himself as the source of social power and historical agency [...] The internalization of the 'phallus' allows the male subject to deny the lack and emptiness at the center of his psyche. (187, author's italics)

Following from Jonsson's explication of psychoanalytic theory, we can interpret the novel's unique spatiality in psychoanalytic terms. The glass that separates Ulrich from full identification with Kakanian life also prevents his identification with the phallus,

hence Ulrich's idolization of "all the villains and monsters of world history" (309).

Leinsdorf, however, is so central to the Habsburg (and thus Central European) power apparatus that his identification with the father/phallus—the emperor—is precisely what veils his recognition of the emptiness of his ideology. Thus, his loyalty is so great that "he [hopes] in his heart that his great work would render politics superfluous by bringing it all down to the common denominator of 'our fatherland,' from which he subsequently intended to subtract the 'land,' leaving the fatherly ruler as the only remainder" (148). This creates an image of the empire founded on a false universality, as Leinsdorf's image of "the people" in this multi-ethnic, multi-national empire is reduced to "a cheerful, colorful throng, like an opera chorus" (90). He is thus able to project the unhappy and alienated members of the empire onto an other: "Anything that did not fit in with [Leinsdorf's idealized] image he attributed to 'subversive elements'" (90). The problem is that, as the Kakanians' fascination with Moosbrugger and the general hostility in the air show, on a fundamental level the Kakanians themselves are not representative of this idealized image.

The cast of the Parallel Campaign becomes representative of the Kakanians' own alienation from their ideology. The character who is at least as important to the Parallel Campaign as Leinsdorf, if not more so, is Frau Ermelinda Tuzzi, otherwise known as Diotima. Although it is Ulrich who christens her Diotima, presumably because of her beauty and the fact that her hair is wound into a Grecian knot (94) when he first meets her, she is referred to as Diotima throughout the novel. Her famous namesake is the priestess who initiated Socrates into the mysteries of love (corresponding to what we call "Platonic" love). Diotima is a high-minded woman whose ideals for Austria should

presumably inspire the “great men” around her. However, the narrator continually uses the contrast between her ideals and their vicissitudes to ironize the validity of the principles she proffers. Like Leinsdorf, her vision is grounded in *Mitteleuropa*. When she expounds on the necessity of the Parallel Campaign, Ulrich notices: “what [comes] from Diotima’s lips [are] [...] such cultural code words as ‘soulless age, dominated only by logic and psychology’ or ‘the present and eternity’” (96). Although her utterances are full of “code words,” Diotima represents the “culture” in the capital-culture (*Besitz und Bildung*) equation. In this role, Diotima also represents subjective feelings, against the objective conditions that she condemns. However, her high-minded ideals are thus formulaic phrases received from the collective storehouse of cliché and which, as products of the dissatisfaction with modernity, are themselves modern. The eternal verities that she presumes to champion are revealed by modernity to be historically contingent, thus rendering them the products of a bygone era.

Indeed, traditional culture will come to appear hopelessly naïve and quaint when faced with the discourses of modernity. As the Parallel Campaign gets underway in Diotima’s salon, its hostess is struck by the utter incomprehensibility of culture. In a passage in which the use of free indirect discourse makes it difficult to distinguish between Diotima and the narrator, the former eavesdrops on the conversations around her and thinks:

Even questions of such immediate concern as the noble simplicity of Greece or the meaning of the Prophets dissolved, in conversation with specialists, into an incalculable multiplicity of doubts and possibilities. Diotima found that even the celebrities always talked in twos, because the time had already come when a

person could talk sensibly and to the point with at most one other person [...] At this point Diotima had discovered in herself the well-known suffering caused by that familiar malady of contemporary man known as civilization. It is a frustrating condition, full of soap, radio frequencies, the arrogant sign language of mathematical and chemical formulas, economics, experimental research, and the inability of human beings to live together simply [...]. (105)

In this passage, dissolution, which was discussed earlier in relation to the national subject (30), is here reproduced in the realm of culture. As soon as one engages in a discussion with someone whose disciplinary discourse differs from one's own, "sensible talk" becomes impossible.

Thus the second term of the *Besitz* and *Bildung* ("capital and culture") couple is inadequate as a patriotic symbol. However, if culture is an inadequate standard around which to rally the Austrian people, capital hardly picks up the slack. The Parallel Campaign has an important interloper who forms a counterpart to Diotima. Paul Arnheim, a German industrialist, is the novel's representative of *Besitz*, or capital, the first term in the "capital and culture" coupling. In addition to his wealth, Arnheim is a public intellectual whose books "[proclaim] nothing less than the merger of soul and economics" (111). Arnheim, however, is well into his forties and still unmarried, so his proclamation of any kind of union may be wishful projection on his part. He and Diotima fall in love with each other, but neither is able to express their feelings and thus the union of capital and culture, which would be represented by the erotic union of these characters, never happens. Indeed, while Diotima's name references history's first teacher of love, the mythical priestess who educated Socrates, it is clear that Arnheim is

fundamentally incapable of learning any lesson she might be able to teach. “His growing infatuation” with Diotima, the narrator tells us, “[seems] to threaten him with disgrace. When at such moments he resumed his business activities with the icy superiority of a spirit that had died to the world and been reborn to it, then the cool rationality of money, immune to contamination, seemed an extraordinarily clean force compared with love” (426). Because love is a contamination to capital, Arnheim and Diotima often look longingly at each other during their conversations, but the forces they represent are fundamentally incompatible.⁵⁴ Moreover, because Arnheim is from Prussia, he is hardly the figure to help the Parallel Campaign instill the spirit of the “True Austria.” Indeed, other members of the Parallel Campaign distrust him precisely because of his origins. Moreover, as the figure who represents capital, Arnheim is doubly problematic because not only is he frequently abroad, but as an industrialist, he also deals in arms. Given the historical events to come, then, Arnheim is as responsible for the war as the reactionary nationalists.

Ultimately, Arnheim’s platform boils down to the same ideals as Leinsdorf’s. Arnheim champions “the simple virtues of courage, chivalry, and self-discipline [...] In a word, the idea of the Master! I have learned to value the principle of the Master more and more in my business life as well” (350). This statement shows that Arnheim’s discourse advocating the union of soul and economics is essentially equivalent to the discourse of the university. Whereas Leinsdorf’s discourse explicitly begins with the

⁵⁴ While Arnheim and Diotima fail to consummate their relationship, their servants succeed. Arnheim’s manservant is a “blackamoor” named Soliman, an African Muslim, while Diotima’s servant is a Polish Jew named Rachel. In a storyline that remains underdeveloped, these two *do* enter into and sexually consummate their relationship, suggesting that a multiracial/multiethnic cosmopolitanism has a vivacious capacity, in contrast to the sterile “Platonic” love of the masters.

idea of the master, Arnheim's accomplishes the same result through a roundabout manner. Nevertheless, the "truth" of his discourse is another master signifier.

Thus, as the Parallel Campaign gets underway, its membership is comprised of representatives from all areas of Kakanian life: the nobility (Leinsdorf), high multinational capital (Arnheim), culture (Diotima), intellectuals (Ulrich), the military (General Stumm von Bordwehr), the civil service (Diotima's husband, Herr Tuzzi), and others. All of these representatives argue, of course, for their own interests; thus, the general feels that the Parallel Campaign should privilege the military. With all of these factors involved in the task of restoring Austrian patriotism, it is small wonder that the collisions of objects and interests described in the novel's first pages are reproduced in this rarefied sphere of activity. Diotima, who is one of the driving forces behind the campaign, is quickly "swept along by a rising tide of incoherent activity" as "every day the mail [brings] heaps of letters and press clippings [...] and the telephone never [stops] ringing" (244). This incoherent mess of activity shows that just as the Parallel Campaign is comprised of irreconcilable differences, so too, is the populace that begins to make demands on it. As the Campaign's secretary, Ulrich is in a special position to relate the content of the volume of correspondence addressed to it. As he tells Count Leinsdorf: "I have already [...] two folders full of general proposals, which I've had no previous opportunity to return to Your Grace. One of them I've headed: *Back to—!* It's amazing how many people tell us that the world was better off in earlier times and want the Parallel Campaign to take us back there" (251). Ulrich continues, "I had to head the second one *Forward to—!*" (252). The directional heading of these two folders indicates that what is at stake in the direction the Parallel Campaign will ultimately take (or not

take, as it turns out) is precisely the problem of a clearly delineated narrative line and its teleology. Phrased in narrative terms, the citizens of Kakania want a clear endpoint—represented orthographically by the period at the end of a sentence—that retroactively “binds” the metonymic chain of signifiers and provides meaning. The promise of narrative simplicity is especially appealing in a world in which “nobody [knows] where time [is] headed” (7). As Lacan writes:

[T]he enigmas that desire [...] poses for any sort of “natural philosophy” are based on no other derangement of instinct than the fact that it is caught in the rails of metonymy, eternally extending toward the *desire for something else*. Hence its “perverse” fixation at the very point of suspension of the signifying chain at which the screen-memory is immobilized and the fascinating image of the fetish becomes frozen” (“The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious” 158, author’s italics).

That is to say, any suspension of the metonymic signifying chain at an arbitrary temporal point (the idealized past or future implied by “*Back to—!*” and “*Forward to—!*”, respectively) can become a fetish that allows one to deny the fact that subjectivity and meaning are *always* sliding in metonymy. However, man believes that if time has a clear forward or backward thrust with a definite *telos*, he becomes able to locate himself in it.

Unfortunately for these advocates of either stripe, the ability to locate oneself as the subject of a coherent narrative is fast disappearing. Despite his conservative zeal, Leinsdorf recognizes that “*Back to—!*” is no longer possible. He blurts out that “in the history of mankind there is no voluntary turning back!” (251). Although Leinsdorf himself is surprised by this statement, its logical consequences are far more unnerving,

“[f]or one assumed that if there was indeed no voluntary going back in history, then mankind was like a man driven along by some inexplicable wanderlust, a man who could neither go back nor arrive anywhere, and this was a quite remarkable condition” (252). Thus, Leinsdorf’s utterance shows not only the inability of mankind to reverse the train of history, but an inability to even pull the brake or determine where the rails will take it. History then becomes a narrative with no clear direction, and no seeming end, and mankind no longer has a secure place in it. According to the narrator, in this situation “experiences [make] themselves independent of people” (158), leading to “the dissolution of the anthropocentric point of view” (159). This means that the historical incoherence in Kakanian on the eve of war is paradigmatic of the human condition, and lends an ironic meaning to Diotima’s pronouncement that “the True Austria [is] the whole world” (185). The novel thus ironically undermines the illusory subjectivity of the Kakanian people. Indeed, these national subjects are not subjects at all, either in the grammatical sense or in the sense of possessing agency. The major difference between Austrians and Czechs, then, is that, as we have seen in *The Good Soldier Švejk*, the Czechs know it, while the Austrians’ “central” position veils this reality.

Without a clear narrative line in which to situate oneself as subject, self-definition itself becomes impossible. This is demonstrated through the narrator’s ironic commentary on Count Leinsdorf’s belief that the seventieth anniversary of Emperor Franz-Josef’s reign “will be celebrated by the grateful people of Austria in a manner to show the world not only our deep love for him, but also that the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy stands together, grouped firm as a rock around its Sovereign” (180). The narrator, however, dispels this patriotic fantasy, explaining the nature of the Dual

Monarchy in following passage, which is worth quoting at length for its connection to the mass psyche of the Austrian people:

The inhabitants of this Imperial and Royal Imperial-Royal Dual Monarchy had a serious problem: they were supposed to feel like Imperial and Royal Austro-Hungarian patriots, while at the same time being Royal Hungarian or Imperial Royal Austrian patriots. Their understandable motto in the face of such complexities was ‘United we stand’ (from *viribus unitis*, ‘with forces joined’).

But the Austrians needed to take a far stronger stand than the Hungarians, because the Hungarians were, first and last, simply Hungarians and were regarded only incidentally, by foreigners who did not know their language, as Austro-Hungarians too; the Austrians, however, were, to begin with and primarily, nothing at all, and yet they were supposed by their leaders to feel Austro-Hungarian and be Austrian-Hungarians—they didn’t even have a proper word for it. (490)

As citizens of a multinational empire, the Austrians reject a monolithic national identification. However, Hungary used the concessions it had won from Austria in 1867 to entrench its ethnic chauvinism, becoming both anti-Slav and anti-German (Jonsson 222). Magyar policies caused the other subject peoples of the Empire to fall back upon their own national identification. For example, the Hungarians enacted oppressive policies toward the Slovaks, thus alienating the Czechs, who were ethnically and linguistically (Czech and Slovak are essentially mutually intelligible) closer to the Slovaks than to any other ethnicity in the Empire. “If you asked an Austrian where he was from,” the narrator continues, “he preferred to say: I am a Pole, a Czech, an Italian,

Friulian, Ladino, Slovene, Croat, Serb Slovak, Ruthenian, or Wallachian—and this was his so-called nationalism” (491). By contrast, the well-meaning cosmopolitan self-definition of an Austrian— “national of the Kingdoms and lands of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy as represented in the Imperial Council” (180)—collapses under its own weight. Austria may have entered into the unhappy imperial marriage of Austria and Hungary in good faith, but the Hungarians have no interest in returning the favor. The result, for the collective psyche of the Austrians, is a compound (*k. und k.*, Kakanian) identity that cuts them free from the national master signifier (S_1) of Austrian-ness. Therefore, when Diotima argues that “the world [will] find no peace until it [is] as permeated by a universally Austrian spirit as the ancient Austrian culture that embraced all the peoples, with their different languages, within the borders of the monarchy” (215), she is speaking of an illusion, since there is not even an Austrian spirit to begin with.

Diotima speaks more accurately to the conditions of modernity when she argues that “nothing less [is] at stake than the need to recover that unity of mankind that had been lost because the disparity of interests in society [has] grown so great” (189). However, since a clear narrative with a clearly defined place therein is absent, the Kakanians “no longer [know] what their smiles, their sighs, their ideas, [are] for [...] The scheme of things seemed to be hanging in midair [...] and there was nothing to do or leave undone with all one’s heart, because there was no unifying principle” (576). Anticipating Lacanian psychoanalytic categories, the narrator remarks, “What is missed is something imaginary” (576). In this case, however, the loss of an imaginary is due to the convoluted discourse that sustains the Austro-Hungarian Empire. While it has a

certain political efficacy, it fails in providing Austrians with a point of identification, rendering them schizoid.

From the Subjective Schizoid Condition to the Objective

The novel depicts the pervasiveness of the schizoid condition when a drunken blue-collar laborer overhears talk of the Parallel Campaign and loses his temper. The fact that this laborer remains unnamed suggests (as it did in the case of the pedestrians in the novel's opening chapter) that he is an Everyman figure. As a crowd gathers around to hear the laborer's yelling, the laborer begins "an impassioned struggle for self-assertion [...] A heightened sense of self had to contend in him with the uncanny feeling that he was not settled inside his own skin" (Musil 166). This anonymous character is thus emotionally homeless, and his schizoid self-alienation begins to affect his perception of the world around him: "The world, too, was unsettled; it was a wavering mist continually losing and changing shape. Buildings stood slanted, broken out of space; between them people were ridiculous, swarming, yet fraternal ninnies" (166). This character comes close to a schizophrenic break here, manifesting the loss of a sense of reality that is similar to Ulrich's condition described earlier in the novel.

The laborer even begins to feel alienated from the invective he is hurling at his fellow passers-by: "An amazing stream had begun to pour from his mouth; words came from somewhere deep inside; there was no comprehending how they had ever got in there in the first place; possibly they were abusive" (166). This passage reminds one especially of Moosbrugger, for whom language seems somehow alien, even when it is one's own. "The anger," the narrator explains, "[is] not an inner anger, but only the physical shell of anger roused to frenzy" (166). Finally, "the face of a policeman came very slowly

forward to meet a clenched fist until it bled” (166). These descriptions are all indicative of a schizoid personality bordering on disorder. “Seldom” Sass writes, “do [schizoid people] feel in harmony with their bodies or with the environment” (77). Here, the laborer is so out of sync with his body that he is not even sure that he is the one who has punched the policeman trying to calm him. While it is entirely possible that in his drunken fury, this laborer has experienced a schizophrenic break, at this early stage of the novel his outburst is understood as subjective violence. For the narrative, the ruckus caused by this character is important only insofar as it lands Ulrich in jail when he protests the policemen’s rough treatment of the laborer. It is only when this acting out explodes into a mass demonstration that the objective violence motivating this behavior is even hinted at.

In Musil’s novel, the loss of narrative order precipitates a schizoid condition in the Kakanian populace that can even affect their perception of their own bodies. While Kakanians are capable of acting out in response to their alienation, they do not do so in a coherent manner, indicating that the general anomie caused by the Austro-Hungarian Empire’s entry into modernity can only be resolved by catastrophe. Importantly, the laborer’s outburst is not unique. Late in Part II of the novel, a demonstration arises against the Parallel Campaign, thus revealing that the Campaign has so far failed to imbue the Austrian people with a unified patriotic spirit. Ulrich’s childhood friend Walter comes across a crowd massing in the street, and when he attempts to discern the cause of it, “Some said that there was a great patriotic parade; others thought they had heard of a protest march against certain dangerously nationalistic activists, and opinions were equally split as to whether the general uproar was caused by the Pan-Germans

protesting against the government's coddling of the Slavic minorities" (683). There is, then, no clear purpose—no narrative line—behind the march. The longer the demonstration lasts, however, "the more everyone seemed to be in agreement that it was high time *something* was done, though no one volunteered to tell him just what that should be" (Ibid.). This demonstration, then, reveals confusion about the genuine objective conditions that allegedly need redress. Although the demonstration reveals widespread dissatisfaction with Viennese life in the year prior to the outbreak of war, suggesting that there is something objectively amiss, the fact that nobody can agree on the exact cause of this dissatisfaction shows that the objective conditions remain hidden from subjective comprehension. Therefore, this demonstration is another manifestation of the subjective violence that obscures objective violence.

As with the laborer, however, the crowd's rage lacks a clear object. Interestingly, this anticipates the Marxist critic Fredric Jameson's description of the postmodern condition, who writes in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* that the loss of a centered subject brings with it a "waning of affect" (15). Affective relationships become replaced, according to Jameson, with "intensities" that "are now free-floating and impersonal and tend to be dominated by a peculiar kind of euphoria" (16). Affect implies a desiring relationship between a subject and her object, but here, desire toward anything—even a "back to—!" or "forward to—!" is absent in favor of a euphoria with no defined object. The crowd "[makes] a serious show of being enraged, but it [is] not the kind of seriousness that drives men into a line of fire" (687). That is to say, despite the crowd's anger, there is no principle of identification that generates this outrage.

Similarly, in his book *Critique of Cynical Reason*, the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk identifies an atmosphere “charged with schizoid tensions and ambivalences to the point where it is no longer tolerable” as one of the key markers of a prewar period (120). This demonstration’s schizoid nature, then, helps to foreshadow the enthusiasm for war that will overrun the Austrians in less than a year’s time. It also foreshadows an unfortunate, if ironic, end to the Parallel Campaign, which was based on pro-Empire sentiments and a jealous rivalry with Prussia that indicated a lack of pan-German fervor before the war. Once war breaks out, pan-German sentiments will be pitted against pan-Slavism.

This demonstration will soon precipitate a schizoid experience in Ulrich himself. Present at the drunken laborer’s outburst, Ulrich is also a witness to the mass demonstration. The demonstration approaches Leinsdorf’s mansion, where Ulrich watches from behind a pane of glass. The first volume of the novel is thus roughly bookended with Ulrich witnessing Viennese life, but separated from it by a pane of glass. The crowd mistakes Ulrich for Count Leinsdorf and begins to yell at him, causing Ulrich to laugh. Soon, however, “all at once he [breaks] off in disgust” (688) and realizes that his intellectual distance puts him at a remove from everyday life. Ulrich becomes “keenly aware of the room behind him with the large paintings on the wall, the long Empire desk, the stiff perpendicular lines of draperies and bell ropes, like another, smaller stage, with him standing up front on the apron, in the opening between the curtains, facing the drama running its course on the greater stage outside” (689). The window and its curtains thus serve to highlight the voyeuristic relationship between Ulrich and the world outside; he is a spectator to the world around him rather than a

participant. But suddenly, “[Ulrich’s] sense of the room behind him contract[s] and turn[s] inside out, passing through him or flowing past him as if turned to water, making for a strange spatial inversion, Ulrich thought, so that the people [are] passing behind him. Perhaps he [is passing] through them and [arriving] beyond them at some zero point [...]” (Ibid.).

Whereas the loss of narrative order—and therefore subjective identity—for the Kakanians leads to the schizoid behavior Ulrich and Leinsdorf have just witnessed, for Ulrich the progression works in reverse, and his momentary shift in perception makes him painfully aware of his own condition. Leaving Leinsdorf’s house, he walks home and realizes “that when one is overburdened and dreams of simplifying one’s life, the basic law of this life, the law one longs for, is nothing other than that of narrative order, the simple order that enables one to say: ‘First this happened and then that happened...’” (708). Applying this to himself, “It now [comes] to Ulrich that he had lost this elementary, narrative mode of thought to which private life still clings, even though everything in public life has already ceased to be narrative and no longer follows a thread, but instead spreads out as an infinitely interwoven surface” (709).

It is at this point in the novel that Ulrich begins to actively seek a way out of this crisis of meaning. That the novel continues for several hundred more pages (as well as over 700 pages of posthumously published drafts) without Ulrich finding a solution suggests, as many critics have argued, that the unfinished novel is in fact unfinalizable. This is in part because of the historical irony that structures the novel; the Great War actually happened. There is thus only one “solution” to the novel: faced with the irreconcilability between subjective and objective modes of existence, the people of

Kakania give in, as does most of Europe, to “the simple and unadulterated longing for a leader sent to put *everything* to rights with his strong right arm” (567). Indeed, the mobilization for war, according to Musil, produced an alarming fervor in the Austrian populace because the war effort promised a reprieve from the isolation and alienation endemic to modernity. He was later to write that the war allowed for “the intoxicating feeling of having, for the first time, something in common with every German. One suddenly became a tiny particle humbly dissolved in a suprapersonal event and, enclosed by the nation, sensed the nation in an absolutely physical way” (*Precision* 103). The oceanic feeling manifested by war, then, provides the kind of belonging and place that cancels out the pre-war feelings of schizoid alienation.

In its presentation of pre-war Viennese life, *The Man without Qualities* indicates that the Austrian people will fall into precisely the trap that its leaders hoped to avoid by means of the imperial project. While Leinsdorf sees the small nations’ nationalists as “subversive” elements—both the political suffering of the small nations and the schizoid condition endemic to Austrians in the waning days of the Habsburg Empire—will leave people clamoring for reactionary nationalist identification upon the outbreak of war as a refuge from the isolation of modernity. In the historical irony that helps us generate meaning from this unfinished text, the “large” nation of Central Europe loses its false claim to universality and is swept up in the same currents of history that enable the region’s “small” nations to finally achieve political independence. Indeed, in the greatest irony of all, at war’s end Austria will itself have become one of the small nations of Central Europe, no greater or of less importance than its former satellite nations. This

newfound equality caused by the dissolution of *Mitteleuropa* will last until 1945, when Austria will remain in the West while its neighbors are dragged into the East.

Chapter 3

“The Second Time as Farce”: The Irony of Displacement in Witold Gombrowicz’s *Trans-Atlantyk*

“Hegel remarks somewhere that all facts and personages of great importance in world history occur, as it were, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce.” –Karl Marx⁵⁵

“The rubbish heap. The point is exactly that I come from your rubbish heap. All that you cast off through the centuries as refuse is now speaking out through me.” –Witold Gombrowicz⁵⁶

Perhaps no nation’s history and literature emphasize the locus in *genius loci* than those of Poland. We have seen that Bohemia provided the literal and figurative ground of the *genius loci* in *The Good Soldier Švejk*, its material conditions generating both prosaic existence and prosaic meaning as subversive of geopolitical and structural hegemonies. However, the role of Poland’s *locus* in the cultural imaginary could hardly be more different. Poland became one of the largest and most powerful countries of Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but then suffered a century-long decline culminating in its division among three multinational empires after 1792. After its partition, the Polish nation became an imagined community in the most literal sense of the word, its flame kept alive by exiled writers and patriots until the arrival of political independence in 1918 and again during the Nazi occupation from 1939 to 1944. With Poland’s political independence, power, and reputation still fresh in collective memory, Polish authors clung to a Romantic vision of their nation as equal to or perhaps even better than Europe’s powers, even though Poland now lacked a geopolitical locus. In lieu of a nation-state, Polish elites carried the idea of the nation with them into exile in France during the nineteenth century. There is thus a displacement at the core of nineteenth and

⁵⁵ Marx, Karl. *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*.

⁵⁶ *Diary I*, p. 36.

early twentieth-century literary expressions of Polish nationalism; the nation is paradoxically kept alive by a diaspora that by the twentieth century reached from Paris to Buenos Aires.

Because the imaginary dimension of Poland's existence depended on the patriotic fervor of its exiles and émigrés, it rigidly codified the behavior of Poles around the world, who regarded their own behavior as reflecting the inherent nobility of "martyred Poland." The absent nation thus imposed a significant obligation on its exiles and émigrés regardless of distance, turning them into particular manifestations of a collective martyrdom. As we saw in *The Good Soldier Švejk*, however, he who does not wish to become a martyr must become a clown, which in such a context becomes not only subversive, but also threatening to the collective identity. In this regard, Witold Gombrowicz's short novel *Trans-Atlantyk* can only be regarded as the most heretical of broadsides against Polish national ideology. A semi-autobiographical account of his self-imposed exile in Argentina in the days immediately following Hitler's invasion of his homeland, *Trans-Atlantyk* does not privilege the noble Pole returning to defend his homeland. Gombrowicz remarks that "it is not a coincidence that precisely at the moment when we desperately need a hero, up pops a clown" (*Diary I* 36). Ridiculing nationalist fidelity even as they vacillate between nationalist obligation and petulant hysterics, Gombrowicz and his fictional alter ego (hereafter Witold⁵⁷) subvert a Polish nationalism that is confining, inauthentic, myopic and parasitic. Gombrowicz does so, however, not with a contemporary transnational genre that follows established Western European literary models, but with an obsolete form, the *gawęda* narrative, that is almost

⁵⁷ *Trans-Atlantyk*'s protagonist is called Gombrowicz throughout, but despite the novel's semiautobiographical subject matter, for reasons that will soon become clear I think it is important to maintain a clear distinction between the author and the protagonist.

exclusively local to rural Poland. By employing a local form which flourished during Poland's decline in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to describe the twentieth-century exilic experience, *Trans-Atlantyk* turns the tragedy of Polish history into literary farce, and by undermining rigid Polish cultural practices in favor of new hybrid identity formations, the novel establishes a strategy by which Poles may adopt a more modern, cosmopolitan identity.

In what follows I will describe both Poland's geopolitical topography and the changing representations in the cultural imaginary that mirrored Poland's fortunes. This task is initially genealogical because Poland's position in relation to both Western Europe, on one hand, and Asia, on the other, changed rather dramatically. Each political era in Polish history, and the corresponding cultural manifestation, has its own imaginary topography, each of which manifests a different attitude toward the West. The novel's imaginary space is a topographical palimpsest, making the first task of my analysis the unpacking of the relevant manifestations of Polish political power, national ideology and cultural production implicitly referenced in Gombrowicz's novel. The second task will be to relate the history referenced in the novel to the narrative functions of irony. Like *The Good Soldier Švejk*, *Trans-Atlantyk* uses subaltern particularity as a form of ironic resistance to hegemonic and homogenizing cultural and linguistic trends. However, like Musil, Gombrowicz uses irony to undermine nationalism and national subjectivity. Thus, in *Trans-Atlantyk*, Polish particularity becomes simultaneously a site of resistance *and* an object of ridicule. Finally, anticipating Kundera, Gombrowicz utilizes the theme of the Central European exile as the other of (self-identified) European culture.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ See my discussion of the confrontation between Gombrowicz's fictional alter ego and the Argentine "Gran Escritor" on pages 207 – 209.

The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth

Neither *Trans-Atlantyck* nor indeed the nature of nineteenth and twentieth-century Polish nationalism can be understood without reference to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Formed in 1569 by the last Jagiellon⁵⁹ monarch, the Commonwealth comprised present-day Poland, Lithuania, and Ukraine. The inclusion of the latter territory is important because while Poland and Lithuania were aligned with the Roman Catholic Church, the inhabitants of Ukraine were Orthodox, making Poland not simply the Eastern border of Western Europe but even a hybrid zone where Eastern (Orthodox) and Western (Roman-Catholic) Christianity meet. Encompassing multiple ethnicities, religions, social classes and languages, then, the Commonwealth was full of contradictions that provide Gombrowicz a wealth of associations to take as points of attack against the imaginary homogeneity of Polish national culture.

Several years after the Commonwealth's formation, King Zygmunt II August died, paving the way for an elective monarchy voted upon by the nobility, commonly called the Republic of the Nobility (*Rzeczpospolita szlachecka*; *szlachta* = nobleman). Entry into the nobility was comparatively easy in Poland and affected approximately ten percent of the population—in addition to ethnic Poles, Lithuanians, and Ukrainians, even Jews could join the nobility. Thus, in comparison to its Western neighbors, the nobility was comprised of aristocrats who represented wide variations in wealth and political power as well as a diversity of ethnicities. Indeed, this led to a fairly strong degree of democracy in an era when it was but a speck on the West's horizon. The early years of the Commonwealth era were referred to as the "Golden Freedom," but this designation was something of a misnomer for Polish peasantry, as the nobility used its control of the

⁵⁹ The Jagiellons ruled Poland and parts of surrounding countries from 1377 until 1572.

legislature to press its advantage, leading to oppressive conditions for the peasant class. As a result, the peasantry distrusted national consciousness, viewing it as representative of only the nobility's interests. Thus, despite the hopes of nineteenth-century Romantics like Adam Mickiewicz that Polish nationalist epics would be read "under thatched roofs," Polish nationalism retained a distinctly aristocratic flavor. Rather than the robust, unpretentious rustics emblematic of Czech nationalism, the Polish nationalist ideal was that of a noble country lord.

In order to overcome the possibly fractious multiethnic character of the Commonwealth, the nobility sought a unifying trait. "This was done," the Polish intellectual historian Andrzej Walicki notes, "by claiming that the entire gentry of the Commonwealth constituted a 'Sarmatian nation,' descendants of the ancient, powerful, and famous Sarmatians" (10). Any connection between the Polish Sarmation nobility and ethnic Sarmatians is highly dubious; the Sarmatians were a Persian race who migrated only as far as the Balkans. Nevertheless, despite its dubious historicity, the gentry's self-identification as Sarmatian had a political efficacy, allowing them not only to differentiate themselves from the ethnicities outside the Commonwealth's borders, but also to disguise their internal class distinction under the veneer of ethnic difference by claiming that *all* of the nobility was Sarmatian while simultaneously claiming that all of the peasants were Germanic in origin. Thus, despite the nobility's relative inclusivity, it nevertheless relied on racism in order to sustain itself. Moreover, Sarmatian mythology allowed the imposition of a cultural homogeneity on the multiethnic gentry; any member of the newly ennobled had to dress as a Sarmatian, grow a moustache, carry a sabre, and ride a horse (Walicki 11). Privileging the cultural values of the rural gentry, such as

horseback riding and gallantry, Sarmatian normative behavior unified the gentry culturally and created an ideal that allowed the nobles a common identification in spite of differences in religion, ethnicity, and language.

Contradicting the modern stereotype of Poles as militarily poor, the Commonwealth enjoyed a number of military successes that profoundly affected nationalist ideology. While the Commonwealth was not without expansionist tendencies, even invading and occupying Moscow for a time, it was isolationist enough to avoid the Thirty Years' War and other devastating conflicts in the first half of the seventeenth century. However, Poland fought several wars against the Ottoman Empire, which attempted for years to expand into Central Europe. The Poles fought successfully in the Balkans in 1621 and, in perhaps their most glorious triumph, laid siege to occupied Vienna in 1683 and routed the Ottomans completely, ending their ambitions in the region. Combined with their relative isolationism toward the West, these successful military campaigns against the Muslim, Asiatic Empire led Poland to regard itself as the "rampart of Christianity," the final line of defense against heathen invaders lying to the East (Tartars) and South (Ottomans). Thus, despite its relative centrality on the European continent, the nation's ideological border status granted it a religious mission that in turn gave the post-partition nationalist strivings an explicitly religious character, leading directly to the messianic nationalism of the nineteenth century. At the same time, "the expansion to the East and the Eastern-oriented politics of the Commonwealth weakened the Western character of Polish national consciousness" (11). Although Poland still saw itself as geographically attached to Europe, it developed an ideological distance from

Western Europe that soon became apparent not only in gentry fashions, but also in a political isolation from the West.

The Commonwealth's isolation from Western Europe intensified after Sweden invaded in 1655. The Swedes were able to occupy a large part of Poland until they were driven out in the following year. The occupation, however, devastated Poland's urban centers, and their inability to recover caused a massive exurban migration. As the Polish poet and literary historian Czesław Miłosz points out, "The depressed condition of urban areas remained a constant factor in determining the direction of Polish cultural history for the next two centuries" (114). The increasingly rural nobility extended their domination of the Commonwealth's government and their mentality became, seemingly in direct proportion to their distance from the cities, increasingly parochial, chauvinistic, and xenophobic. Distrustful of government, the Polish Diet (Sejm) established the *liberum veto*, with which any member could singlehandedly call off any session in progress and invalidate all laws passed during that session. Despite the painfully obvious shortcomings of the Rzeczpospolita, the Polish gentry nevertheless regarded it as a political system so great that they had nothing to learn from other nations (Miłosz 116). Complacent in their chauvinism, the Sarmatian nobles elected to the Sejm ignored the rising strength of Western European nations—a strength that seemingly rose in inverse proportion to the Commonwealth's—and treated the West with hostile condescension. As Ewa Ziarek notes, "the self-righteous gentry was opposed to anything Western, in fact to any foreign influence" (219). Ironically, however, the Sarmatians were in denial as to their cosmopolitanism, at least in terms of fashion, which was heavily influenced by eastern, Asiatic trends. Miłosz writes that the Sarmatian nobles "were fond of pomposity

in both oratory and dress. The displays of luxury at that time, the fascination with glittering fabrics, with jewels, and with richly decorated arms were, in large part, the result of Eastern influences” (116). Despite being a unique cultural formation in both Polish and European history, to later generations “the Sarmatian gentry [...] became the stereotype of anarchy, drunkenness, religiosity, narrow-mindedness, and unruliness” (Ziarek 219). Sarmatian ideology thus displayed profound self-ignorance and startling contradictions of thought that made it ripe for satire; it had pretensions to noble grandeur even though it was intensely provincial, it considered its government advanced when it was profoundly unequal, and yet it was unconsciously cosmopolitan even though it was officially opposed to outside influences from both West and East.

Sarmatian Culture and Polish Prose: *Gawęda*

Perhaps most importantly, the Sarmatian opposition to foreign influence helped to generate a period of unique cultural production. This is due in large part to the exurban movement of the seventeenth century; as Miłosz notes, “The date 1655-1656 marked the end of bourgeois literature” (114). To be sure, the courtly centers of Warsaw and Krakow produced Baroque art and literature consistent with that found in the West (and which met with Vatican approval). However, lacking viable urban areas and an attendant rising bourgeoisie, conditions that form what literary historian Michael McKeon calls the “enabling ground” of the novel in countries like France and England during the eighteenth century, Polish culture developed an extraordinarily local form that is one of the most unusual of the early modern period. While Western Europe began to witness the rise of the novel, the Sarmatian gentry developed the *gawęda* (literally “story” or “tale”) form. *Gawęda*, composed by country squires and typically performed

orally before family and friends, was the composer's exaggerated recounting of his picaresque exploits. Because it was performed orally, the *gawęda* narrative is typically episodic in nature. The performative nature of *gawęda*, combined with his audience's knowledge of the material to be presented, required the performer to use shorthand references, a colloquial ease, and rhetorical flourishes in a constant attempt to keep the audience entertained. The most obvious way to do this, as Miłosz notes, was to employ "a style sometimes graceful but often hair-raising in its combination of the most disparate and contradictory elements" (119). This style has come to be known as the Sarmatian Baroque. *Gawęda*'s Baroque stylings, absurd juxtapositions, and performativity ensures some level of ironic distance from the speaker's own thoughts and beliefs, so no matter how self-important the Sarmatian yokel playing the room, the narrative itself tended to exhibit a rhetorical playfulness that kept it from becoming a straightforward vehicle for the isolationist and chauvinist sentiments held by its practitioners. That is to say, the requirements of *gawęda* narrative have an inherently ironic distancing effect because they turn the *gawędziarz* into a jester or fool.

Despite this playfulness, the most famous example of seventeenth-century *gawęda* displays some of the negative features associated with Sarmatism. Jan Chryzostom Pasek's *Memoirs* show an unrepentant, alcoholic, amoral, xenophobic rogue, fully consistent with Pasek's own biography. Miłosz informs us that after Pasek enlisted in the army, "Battles, duels, drunken brawls, boasting and joking in good company were his life for eleven years. But even after his retirement from the army [...] Pasek could not settle down. Undisguised hatred for his neighbors, lawsuits, acts of scarcely concealed banditry finally caused him to be condemned by a tribunal and sentenced to exile" (145).

However, due to the general anarchy in Poland at the time, this sentence was not carried out. Pasek recounts many of these episodes in his *Memoirs*, albeit in a more favorable light than his contemporaries or, indeed, later generations would be inclined to see them; Miłosz notes that Pasek's self-portrait "produces a doubly humorous effect: while contriving to provoke our laughter, he is himself unintentionally amusing" (146). Finally writing his *gawędy* down on paper late in life, Pasek "applie[d] the doubtful stylistic training received at his Jesuit school" (146) such as rather awkward Latinisms ("Straszowski grasped the offer *et consensit*, seeing that this would not be any bother and he would be able to tell the king about her *qualitates*").⁶⁰ However, the narrative was written in the everyday language of seventeenth-century Poland—rudimentary yet pretentious Latinisms were characteristic of seventeenth-century Sarmatian nobles—making the fast-paced narrative more accessible. In the absence of the novel's firm foothold in Poland, Pasek's *Memoirs* is an important and influential development in Polish prose-writing.⁶¹ In employing the *gawęda* form, Gombrowicz is implicitly referencing Pasek, but he goes where his predecessor could not. While Pasek avoided exile, Gombrowicz embraced it, and while Pasek was at times "unintentionally amusing," Gombrowicz clearly intends his *gawędziarz*, who is simultaneously the novel's narrator and protagonist, to be taken for a fool. As I shall argue, it is Gombrowicz's comic intentionality that makes *Trans-Atlantyk* a full-fledged assault on Polish nationalism.

Nationalism and Literature in Exile

⁶⁰ Jan Chryzostom Pasek, *Memoirs*, in Michael J. Mikoś, ed. *Polish Baroque and Enlightenment Literature: An Anthology*. Pp. 164-169.

⁶¹ Katarzyna Jerzak notes that Pasek was one of Gombrowicz's favorite authors. Pasek documented the military campaigns of Stefan Czarniecki, which inspired Gombrowicz's short story "Stefan Czarniecki's Memoirs" (205).

Had the Sarmatians been reflective enough to look for the cause of their culture's demise, they need have looked no further than their political system, allegedly the height of freedom but in reality a guarantee of decadence. The aforementioned *liberum veto* was exploited by the Commonwealth's neighbors (Austria, Prussia, and Russia), who manipulated individual nobles into constantly vetoing legislation. As a result, the Commonwealth was seized in a decades-long paroxysm during which the Alliance of the Three Black Eagles intensified its influence and presence within Commonwealth borders.⁶² This eventually led to the complete loss of independence in the final decade of the eighteenth century and the beginnings of a mass exodus of Polish elites to the West, especially France. As a result, in contrast to the dominant trend in Western Europe of the time—the rise of the modern nation-state and its attendant ideology—Polish nationalism ironically enters the nineteenth century lacking a nation. While many contemporary nations cannot be found on early nineteenth-century maps, Poland had gone from the height of its political power to non-existence in just over a century. The precipitous nature of Poland's fall meant that Polish cultural memory retained the most glorious epoch in the nation's history as a recent phenomenon. In contrast to the Czechs, who came to view themselves as a “small” satellite nation within a larger empire, the Poles continued to regard their partitioned nation as at least the equal of Europe's powers. Thus, while the memory of the Commonwealth fueled nationalist sentiment during a dark era in Polish history, the fact of the nation's non-existence (in geopolitical terms, at least) ensured that chest-puffing Polish nationalism appeared to an outside observer as something of a collective Napoleon Complex. Over a century later, this national self-

⁶² So named because the three partitioning countries used a black eagle in their emblem, in contrast to Poland's white eagle.

regard is still entrenched in the Polish imaginary, and Gombrowicz duly savages it in his novel.

In the nineteenth century, refuge in France was a logical conclusion for Polish nationalists because France's enemies included all three of the partitioning powers. A year after partition, Napoleon summoned Jan Henryk Dąbrowski to Paris and commissioned him to create Polish legions for the army. Thousands of Poles enlisted, and the Polish Legions, as they came to be known, fought effectively in French military campaigns and alongside Italian nationalists trying to win independence from Austria. The Polish Legions expected that their service would eventually lead to Poland's liberation as well. While fighting in the Polish Legions under General Dąbrowski during Napoleon's Italian campaign, Józef Wybicki penned a song that begins:

Jeszcze Polska nie umarła,
Kiedy my żyjemy
Co nam obca moc wydarła,
Szablą odbijemy.

Marsz, marsz, Dąbrowski
Do Polski z ziemi włoskiej.
Za twoim przewodem
Złączym się z narodem

(Poland has not perished yet,
So long as we still live.
That which alien force has seized,
We shall retrieve with sabers.

March, march Dąbrowski
To Poland from Italy
Under thy command
Let us now rejoin the nation.)

"Dąbrowski's Mazurka," has been the official national anthem of Poland since 1926, and even this simple verse and chorus suggest the peculiarities of Polish nationalism

throughout the nineteenth century, if not the twentieth as well. A perfect example of what Benedict Anderson calls the imaginary quality of the nation, the mazurka explicitly changes the nation from a geopolitical entity to something portable, broken apart, and carried beyond its borders in the hearts of exiles, who are responsible for both the nation's continued survival and also its reestablishment as a political entity. The wording of this song imputes a messianic quality to the exilic experience and displaces the nation spatially and temporally; the nation at present is hijacked, but because its exiled patriots still live they carry its past, which is simultaneously its future, with them wherever they may roam, and it is up to the foreign legions to resurrect it.

A failed uprising in the Russian-controlled part of Poland in 1830-31 spurred mass emigration, leading almost 10,000 of the defeated insurgents to go into exile in the West, especially France. These exiles were the political and cultural elite of Poland (Walicki 17). Soon, Paris had become the *de facto* center of Polish literature and culture. The three nineteenth-century writers considered Poland's "national bards"⁶³—Adam Mickiewicz, Juliusz Słowacki and Zygmunt Krasiński—all wrote their major works while living in France. Although poets rather than soldiers, the bards are no less responsible than the Polish Legions for keeping the nation alive, but they do so through what Azade Seyhan, a scholar of comparative diasporas, calls the process of commemoration, the process of inscribing a specific idea of the nation within the cultural memory that persists across distances. Commemoration (co-memoration) is especially necessary for émigré and exilic communities as a strategy for maintaining their specificity within and against the new linguistic, ethnic, and national communities in

⁶³ The Polish "Wieszcz" can also mean "prophet" or "soothsayer," so these writers had a messianic quality in the popular imagination.

which they find themselves. Seyhan writes, “The work of commemoration is often the only means of releasing our (hi)stories from subjugation to official or institutionalized regimes of forgetting. Remembering is an act of lending coherence and integrity to a history interrupted, divided, or compromised by instances of loss” (3-4). While I agree with Seyhan, the notion of “lending coherence and integrity” is problematic, for as Lacan has argued, imaginary coherence is always illusory, on the national level no less than the individual.⁶⁴ That is, the “act of lending (imaginary) coherence” attempts to fix something that is irretrievably broken; I would argue that the practice of commemoration is inherently conservative, tending toward a profound cultural and political nostalgia idealizing a past whose actual existence is a far cry from its commemorative representation. Where messianism converges with nostalgia, the sentimentalized past becomes a vision of future utopia that sweeps all traces of the original dysfunction under the proverbial rug. In the case of Polish national poets, this means re-presenting the Poland of the *rzeczpospolita szlachecka* as if the national tragedy of partition was simply a result of Poland’s hijacking by foreign empires. The vision of the country as a noble and integral nation veiled the Polish gentry’s unintentional complicity-by-dysfunction.

It was the specifically commemorative aspect of Adam Mickiewicz’s poetry combined with a messianic national vision that elevated him to the rank of the greatest Polish author. By combining the simultaneously backward- and forward-looking aspects of the Polish nationalism that we have already seen in Dąbrowski’s *Mazurka*, Mickiewicz lent an imaginary coherence to Poland’s destiny that began to look prophetic to Poland’s exiles once Poland regained independence in 1918. Although the messianism of Mickiewicz’s later work is not yet explicit in his most famous work, the epic *Pan*

⁶⁴ See Jacques Lacan, “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function” in *Écrits*, pp. 3-9.

Tadeusz (1832-4), his nostalgic remembrance of the nation presents an idyllic picture of Sarmatism. Set in the Lithuania of Mickiewicz's childhood, the brawling tendencies of the local gentry are mentioned, but smoothed over with reason, in curious contrast to the irrationality their real-life models exhibited. Although the completed work is an odd mixture of epic poetry and vaguely prosaic work, *Pan Tadeusz* commemorates the Polish gentry with an idyllic portrait that completely avoids the looming political implications of the Sarmatian isolationism. Similarly, Mickiewicz's tendency to smooth over Sarmatism's rough edges presented an imaginary coherence to a body politic that was fractious even on good days. Thus, inspired by his exile in France, Mickiewicz's nostalgia is uncomplicated by the dissonance so typical of the novel, which arises from the "urban corruption" (Eile 84) of the bourgeoisie. Modern social classes are not represented in *Pan Tadeusz*, and peasants only briefly; the epic is almost solely a portrait of the rural gentry. Indications are that despite his wish that both peasants and nobles would read *Pan Tadeusz*, Mickiewicz did not intend it to be an explicitly political work. No matter, for his works were always read as political provocations, and as Polish literary critic Stanislaw Eile notes, Mickiewicz's fame rested less on aesthetic principles and more on patriotic commitment (53). This status has led Mickiewicz to an unassailable position within the Polish imaginary; as recently as 2000, Eile wrote that "[Mickiewicz's] views on the national past and future, often treated as revelations by the older and many more recent scholars, rarely invite criticism, for anything that transcends deferential exegesis of his works is regarded by many as petty and deplorable" (46). Whatever Mickiewicz's talents as a poet—and they were not inconsiderable—his belonging to one

of the larger ethnicities in the former Commonwealth and his nationalist commitment are the source of his exalted status, the ultimate criteria of his aesthetic value.

As the exemplar of aesthetic value subordinated to nationalist concerns, Mickiewicz finds his most strident critic in Gombrowicz, who found Polish literature's obligation to be patriotic stultifying. However, Gombrowicz also takes issue with Mickiewicz's actual aesthetics, finding the latter's sentimentality too limiting for his liking. It is Mickiewicz's inability to confront the seamier side of Polish culture with anything other than warmth that so enrages Gombrowicz, who blames his predecessor for stymieing Polish cultural development: "Perhaps we would have made important discoveries, perhaps we would have arrived at fertile, new ideas if... if not for Mickiewicz!" (225). According to Gombrowicz, Mickiewicz "was the greatest revelation of that Polish aesthetics which does not like 'to dabble' in dirt, or cause anyone any pain" (225). Gombrowicz's harangue is clearly sympathetic to the larger modernist aesthetic that railed against classical standards of beauty throughout Europe, and yet he sees the imperative to expunge ugliness from an aesthetic work as even more dangerous for the small nation: "the weaker and more threatened a nation is, the more painfully it feels the need for beauty, which is a challenge to the world: look, don't persecute me, love me!" (223). Part of Gombrowicz's charge against Mickiewicz, then, is that his sentimentality, which views the more unsavory aspects of Polish history through a sentimental, sepia-toned lens, is an appeal to other nations on the basis of a shared humanity expressed in their love of beauty, but because it is done in the latter's aesthetic terms, it is also inherently self-limiting and imitative.

Mickiewicz's work exercised an enormous influence on Henryk Sienkiewicz, who wrote novels based on triumphant moments in Polish history. These novels reached popular consciousness by "unit[ing] the Baroque Sarmatism of pre-Partition Poland with Romantic nationalism" (Eile 119). Sienkiewicz's prose narratives, although not formally *gawędy*, were written in the seventeenth-century Sarmatian style, but by virtue of being written in prose, they were more accessible than Mickiewicz's half-Lithuanian poetry; Miłosz remarks that "schoolboys, after reading [Sienkiewicz's] *Trilogy*, would speak among themselves in its peculiar seventeenth-century Polish" (311). Their easy appeal and nationalist overtones gained Sienkiewicz a place in the Polish pantheon next to Mickiewicz, even resulting in a Nobel Prize in 1907. It is striking that the two most famous post-partition Polish writers wrote in a style that arose and flourished in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Instead of responding, like so many other nineteenth-century authors, to changing modes of perception, their respective aesthetics changed very little from the Polish literature of two centuries earlier. The only difference is that while the earlier writers of *gawęda* appealed solely to their close friends and relatives, Mickiewicz and Sienkiewicz tried to appeal to the sensibilities of Western Europeans, for whom there was little love lost on Poland's oppressors. By the time of Gombrowicz's writing, then, a nationalist strain born of collective humiliation had come to infect Polish aesthetics and arrest its development; it was necessary for literature to glorify the nation, provide sentimentalized role models, and appeal to Western readers in their own aesthetic terms. In response to this ideological demand, Gombrowicz ridicules the most nationalist of the Polish émigrés in *Trans-Atlantyka* in an attempt to break the collective identification with an illusory ideal.

Form and Chaos

The problem of external norms is central to Gombrowicz's entire artistic *oeuvre*, which must be understood in relation to his philosophical conceptions of Form⁶⁵ (*Forma*) and Chaos (*Chaos*). Form is the key concept in Gombrowicz's philosophy and aesthetics. The sense with which Gombrowicz most frequently uses the term refers to any externally imposed patterning to which humans must submit. Form, thus felt as an obligation, has many manifestations, from familial structures to national and ideological formations. Language itself is a kind of Form insofar as it is a structure that precedes our entry into the world and shapes our encounters with other people and things. Form is thus necessary in order for us to communicate with others, and failure to submit to Form carries the risk of being deemed psychotic by the human community. Understood in this manner, Form is analogous to the Lacanian Other, a radical alterity constitutive of human subjectivity. For example, the Oedipus Complex is resolved through the subject's submission to familial Form. The problem is that because Form precedes us, its rigidity stifles our natural creativity, forcing us into ever more predictable patterns of behavior and thought. Nevertheless, Form is necessary for anyone who wishes to have a place in what Gombrowicz called the "interhuman church." Importantly, Gombrowicz writes, "My attitude to Poland is a consequence of my attitude to form" (*Diary* 36). That is to say, Gombrowicz finds Form—of any variety, not just the national—too confining. This does not mean, however, that Form is escapable. Gombrowicz writes, "To start with let us say that the deformation produced between men is not the only deformation, if only because man, in his deepest essence, possesses something which I would call the 'Formal Imperative.' Something which is, it seems to me, indispensable to organic creation"

⁶⁵ Following Gombrowicz, I distinguish Form as a philosophical category by capitalizing it.

(*Testament* 73). Form is thus analogous to Freud's notion of Eros, the desire of life to form ever larger, more coherent wholes. Just as Freud had to go beyond Eros and the pleasure principle, however, so, too, does Gombrowicz, who suggests that we have "an innate need to complete incomplete Form: every Form that has been started requires a complement" (73). Form, then, is also associated with the death drive, which aims at the imposition of an arbitrary but essential stop to the process of creation. In its linguistic manifestation, Form aims at the final word that stops the sliding of meaning. Despite his striving to exceed both his country of origin and Formal constraints, Gombrowicz can do neither, and must be content with a continual subversion of both.

Gombrowicz's specific quarrel with Mickiewicz (and Sienkiewicz as well) is that the author of *Pan Tadeusz* forces life to submit to national Form. Of Mickiewicz's *oeuvre* Gombrowicz writes, "It is characteristic that in the poetry of the creator of 'Ode to Youth' the beauty of the youth is still subordinated to a 'mature' beauty—one could say that this is still a literature of the fathers and it is not the young man that fascinates Mickiewicz" (*Diary* 226). Youth here is analogous to Gombrowicz's philosophical category of Immaturity. That is, Mickiewicz does not exalt the potential or creativity inherent in the still not-fully-Formed youth. Rather, Mickiewicz looks to Formal fulfillment as the source of beauty. Gombrowicz writes, "a Polish young man [...] could be beautiful only as a romantic son of defeat, or as a Pole, or as someone whose beauty, the beauty of virtue, merit—begins only after thirty" (226). Gombrowicz, then, accuses of Mickiewicz of championing a hardened, crystalline beauty of eventual submission to Form. The paean to the fresh content of youth disguises the inherited form that it reproduces. Leaving aside the question of the effect of such an ideology on actual Poles,

an aesthetic grounded in beauty as Formal fulfillment forecloses the possibility of literature as well; beauty does not exist outside of national Form. While innovative literature continually mines the past for its subject matter, received tropes usually receive a creative reimagining that puts them to new ends; while perhaps the most famous example is Joyce's use of Homeric motifs in *Ulysses*, Gombrowicz is effecting exactly this unworking/unForming on *Trans-Atlantyka*'s formal level when he lifts *gawęda* from its century and place of origin and unceremoniously dumps it in a faraway time and place. Like Sienkiewicz, whom Gombrowicz considers a "second-rate Homer, a first-rate Dumas" (223), nationalist literature falls short of being truly great because it is shackled by nationalist Form extrinsic to the work's aesthetics.⁶⁶

Opposed to Form is Chaos. Chaos is an un-Formed potential, vaguely analogous to Freud's concept of libido. Because it is initially free from Form, Chaos is highly individualistic and particular, and is repressed whenever one inevitably submits it to Form. For Gombrowicz, Chaos connotes a state of being unfinished (that is, literally infinite, open-ended), which allows for spontaneity and creativity. To break free from the constraints imposed by Form liberates Chaos to find and create new identities and combinatory possibilities. Even if one can never fully elude Form, then, one can push static Form to its breaking point to liberate the potential of Chaos, which will in turn begin the process of Form again. In Gombrowicz's novels, Chaos appears as immaturity, frequently represented by the youth, whose vivacity and energy are both threatening and fascinating to the representatives of Form, portrayed by fathers and other authority figures such as schoolteachers.

⁶⁶ This is presumably because Dumas is known more for his contribution to *national* literature than to any aesthetic innovation. Compare Kundera's similar opinion of Victor Hugo in *The Curtain*, pp. 40-43.

Gombrowicz's Self-Imposed Marginality

Gombrowicz sees his own history as an intensification of Poland's liminal status. Born in Maloszyce 200 kilometers south of Warsaw, the son of a landowning industrialist, Gombrowicz writes, "in that Proustian epoch at the beginning of the century, we were a displaced family whose social status was far from clear, living between Lithuania and the former Congress Kingdom of Poland, between land and industry, between what is known as 'good society' and another, more middle-class society. These were the first 'betweens', which subsequently multiplied until they almost constituted my country of residence, my true home" (*Testament* 28). Gombrowicz is not geographically accurate here, as Warsaw lay between Maloszyce and Lithuania, so he was born on what have historically been Polish lands. This passage therefore suggests a willful marginality on Gombrowicz's part, a desire to avoid full identification with any nation. As soon as Gombrowicz moves into a clearly defined space, he becomes displaced; he appears more comfortable in the interstices that lie between nations, ideologies, and indeed, all identifications. For reasons that will become apparent in my discussion of the novel, it is important to note that "in-between-ness" is not the same thing as "outside-ness; to be between is to be identified by polar coordinates. This is important, for in order to find his place as an artist, Gombrowicz writes that he "had to break with Poland and turn against it [...] Well, it was absolutely necessary to state that Poland, that intermediary creature between the East and West, was doomed, by its geographical position and by its historical development, to imperfection, to a minor role, and that Poland must be passed over because it could not guarantee any fully authentic value for the Poles" (*Testament* 60). Geography and the weight of history exercise too

great a burden on Polish life, play too decisive a role in identity formation in contrast to France, for example, where Enlightenment ideals created a condition for individual development. “The writer, the artist, or anyone who attaches importance to his spiritual development,” he continues, “must feel no more than a resident in Poland” (61).

Gombrowicz may turn against Poland, but he is never fully outside it, as evidenced by the fact that he continued to write in Polish during his quarter-century exile in Argentina.

(By the time he wrote *Trans-Atlantyk*, Gombrowicz was fluent in Spanish and he could also have written in French had he so desired.) In addressing himself to the Polish émigré communities of Buenos Aires and Paris, Gombrowicz maintains his investment with them. By claiming nothing more than “residency,” however, Gombrowicz accepts Poland as the ground of his lived experience and ability to generate meaning while rejecting the obligatory nostalgic, triumphalist, patriotic discourse of Polish nationalism.

Gombrowicz left Poland for South America in 1939. Invited on a cruise as part of a cultural delegation to the sizable Polish émigré community in Argentina, Gombrowicz arrived a mere two weeks prior to Hitler’s invasion of his native land. Despite his portrayal of his fictional alter-ego as a deserter, the real Gombrowicz “presented [him]self at the Polish Embassy in Buenos Aires immediately after the leaving the ship. Later, when a Polish army was being formed in England, I appeared naked before the recruiting commission at the Embassy” (91). Wojciech Karpinski recalls that when it came time for the ocean liner that brought Gombrowicz to Argentina to depart, “Gombrowicz could not make up his mind. Finally Stempowski accompanied him to the liner. They said goodbye and the porter carried the suitcases on board. In a few minutes the whistle blew. At that very moment Gombrowicz came running down the ramp with

his two suitcases” (vii). Gombrowicz’s profound ambivalence about whether or not to leave Poland behind and stay in Argentina is important in understanding the aesthetics of his novel, for while the novel does ruthlessly satirize Polishness as an externally imposed obligation, it also portrays the nation as a source of great emotional investment for its subjects.

Indeed, I shall argue that *Trans-Atlantyk*’s explicit play on and against national literary stereotypes is matched only by its engagement with the nationalist ideology that shapes Polish literature, and vice versa. The novel has a repetitive circular structure, each comprising almost exactly one third of the novel’s pages. Each narrative arc precipitates a crisis of national subjectivity that culminates in a duel. The first arc stages the narrator’s break with Poland, the second stages the threat to national subjectivity posed by hybridity, and the third stages the oedipal drama overlaid onto national concerns.

A *Trans-Atlantyk* Displacement

Trans-Atlantyk’s opening lines mark it as a literary return of the repressed. The first-person narration begins:⁶⁷

I feel a need to relate here for Family, kin and friends of mine the beginning of these my adventures, now ten years old, in the Argentinian capital. Not that I ask anyone to have these old Noodles of mine, this Turnip (haply even raw), for in the Pewter bowl Thin, Wretched they are and, what is more, likewise Shaming, in the oil of my Sins, my Shames, these Groats of mine, heavy, Dark with this black kasha of mine—oh, better not to heave it to the Mouth save for

⁶⁷ Because Gombrowicz’s biography differs in important ways from his fictional persona’s, it is necessary to distinguish between Gombrowicz and the narrator even though they share the same name.

eternal Curse, for my Humiliation, on the perennial track of my Life and up that hard, wearisome Mountain of mine. (3)⁶⁸

While the seventeenth-century style was somewhat out of place even for nineteenth-century authors like Mickiewicz and Sienkiewicz, this displacement was mitigated somewhat by the former's overtly nostalgic reminiscences and the latter's historical subject matter. However, *Trans-Atlantyk*'s narrator is describing his first decade in Argentina, giving a decidedly anachronistic air to his description of the twentieth-century exilic experience. While the narrator's apparent motivation for writing—a "need to relate" to his familiars—is consistent with *gawęda* narrative, the "wretched" and "shaming" nature of the tale seems inappropriate given the form's history of braggadocio. Moreover, a shameful narrative is especially unacceptable to an émigré community whose demand is for a "commemorative" work providing uplifting stories and strong role models. This opening thus effects several displacements: the twentieth-century experience into a seventeenth-century mode of expression, an extremely local literary form that arose in the eastern border of Western Europe (perhaps East-Central Europe is an appropriate designation here) into South America, and the shameful and humiliating experience of the narrator into a form known for its inherent braggadocio. These startling formal juxtapositions mark *Trans-Atlantyk* as Sarmatian Baroque, while the culinary descriptions culminating in a "heav[ing] into the mouth" suggest the motif of the grotesque that will appear throughout the novel.

After the perfunctory opening the narrative opens with the narrator as part of the delegation still sailing en route from Europe to South America aboard the *Chrobry* liner. The brief description highlights the importance of the relationship between location and

⁶⁸ Translated by Carolyn French and Nina Karsov.

cultural practices. The narrator recollects, “Exquisitely pleasurable the sail from Gdynia to Buenos Aires, and somewhat loathe was I to go ashore, for twenty days a man between Sky and water, nothing remembered, bathed in air, melted in wave, through-blown with wind” (3). A specific national space is marked by cultural practices that give the nation its specificity but also impose a commitment on its national subjects to maintain them. Between his country of origin and his destination as a cultural representative, he is free from obligation and can forget his social position and the obligations it entails. The voyage literally displaces Witold, who experiences an oceanic feeling and the absence of Form. Using Deleuzian terminology, the Lacanian critic Hanjo Berressem writes, “In between these two heavily striated cultural structures, the fluid expanse of the ocean symbolizes the utopia of a free, acultural, and formless plane of consistency, or body without organs” (105). While I agree with this interpretation, I want to shift the emphasis to Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of “minor” literature, which opens up lines of flight. The line of flight here is quite literally the voyage, for reasons that will soon become apparent, and I find it useful to transcode “line of flight” as displacement in order to emphasize the problem of location—establishing the motific repetition of motion as flight/displacement in the novel.⁶⁹

The sense of displacement is immediate when the narrator, along with his friend Czesław and the Senator Rembieliński, “w miasto zapuściliśmy się, a całkiem na oślep, jak w Rogu, bo żaden z nas tu nigdzie nogą nie stąpił” (“in the town ourselves immersed, wholly in the dark as in a Horn for none of us had ever set his foot here”) (34, 4). The visual metaphor carries over to the linguistic realm as the narrator “afisy, na którym

⁶⁹ Gombrowicz writes that “walking” is one of the leitmotifs of *Trans-Atlantyk* (he mentions “emptiness” and “stallion” as two others) (*Diary I*, 79). I read walking as a particular form of the broader motif of motion vs. stasis.

słowo ‘CARAVANAS’ wypisane. Zobaczyłem i mowie do pana Czesława w ten dzień jasny, Zgiełkliwy, gdyśmy to tak sobie chodzili, chodzili: Ii... widzisz pan, panie Czesław, te Caravanas?” (“saw a poster on which the word CARAVANAS was written, and say I to Pan Czesław on this bright and Tumultuous day as we were strolling along: ‘Oooh, Pan Czesław, markye, mark here Caravanas!’”) (34, 4). As a footnote in the English translation helpfully explains, the Polish words *karawan* and *karawana* mean “hearse” and “caravan,” respectively, while the Spanish *caravanas* means “mobile homes” (4). Argentina is marked here as an uncanny place where the signifier is displaced onto a different yet familiar signified. Like Jacques Lacan’s arsenal of puns, Gombrowicz’s play on this trans-linguistic homophone has a purpose. In separating this particular signifier from its signified, thus suggesting that *all* signifiers may have come unmoored in this faraway land, the narrator paints Argentina as a place where a Polish master signifier is inadequate, and he is more interested in Argentina as the negation of Poland than as a particularity of its own.

The comic confusion of linguistic signifiers produced in this travel narrative illustrates Michel de Certeau’s distinction between “place” and “space” that informs my use of the term displacement. For de Certeau, place is “the order (of whatever kind) in accord with which elements are distributed in relationships of coexistence. It thus excludes the possibility of two things being in the same location (*place*). The law of the “proper” [*propre*] rules in the place: the elements taken into consideration are *beside* one another” (117, author’s italics). Place is the visual equivalent of “to each his own,” denying the possibility of hybridity. A map with clearly delineated borders and the

absence of migratory patterns is thus of the order of place. By contrast, de Certeau continues,

A *space* exists when one takes into consideration vectors of direction, velocities, and time variables [...] Space occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it, and make it function in a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs or contractual proximities. On this view, in relation to place, space is like the word when it is spoken, that is, when it is caught in the ambiguity of an actualization [...] In short, *space is a practiced place*. (Ibid, author's italics)

De Certeau's category of space, as I understand it, is clearly marked by the intersection of cultural practices. When "vectors" begin to establish relationships that cross (ethnic, linguistic, national, etc.) borders, we move to the order of space. Space thus manifests a level of hybridity. By this logic, the term "displacement" that I use throughout this chapter implies not simply the movement out of one place, but the collision of places that can be generative of the playfulness the narrator exhibits above.

In the episode just discussed, the Poles' apparent intrusion into Argentine place renders it spatial, but it is important that for de Certeau the cultural place is something of a myth, "push[ing] away into its prehistory or into its posterity [...] the operations of which it is the result" (121). National place, then, is always the result of cultural practices rather than an intrinsic connection between its inhabitants and location. For example, the old Polish-Lithuanian *rzeczpospolita* appears in the cultural imaginary as *place*, a clearly defined border against the East but simultaneously resistant to influences from the West it considered inferior. However, the Commonwealth was ethnically and

linguistically and even culturally heterogeneous insofar as multiple groups comprised the nobility and the fashions bore an Eastern influence. Even at its most isolationist, then, the country was always a conflictual space, even if official ideology denied this fact. By contrast, the “CARAVANAS” sign becomes the *space* of cultural intersection.

Although *Trans-Atlantyk* is a novel about space (both in a de Certeauian sense and otherwise), or rather because of it, space is necessarily caught up in the symbolic network of language, so displacement is also a linguistic phenomenon. These intersectional spatial operations, for which de Certeau uses the metaphor of a vector, recall Lacan’s four discourses, each of which depicts agency with a vector leading from the “agent” to the “other” of the discourse. The vector of the discourse of the master, for example, is $S_1 \rightarrow S_2$, and each successive discourse has a different vector (the discourse of the analyst has the vector of $a \rightarrow \$$). The imposition of place, in which clear demarcations are drawn in a similar fashion to the way the Lacanian *point de capiton* arrests the sliding of meaning in language, is thus analogous to the discourse of the master. In *Trans-Atlantyk*, however, the spatial confusion caused by the titular voyage subverts the notion of Polish place. The irony of displacement that structures the novel thus begins from the impossibility of place-ment, and in beginning from this impossibility the novel operates in the discourse of the analyst ($a/S_2 \rightarrow \$/S_1$). In my reading, then, the “CARAVANAS” episode is the novel’s “primal scene” that demonstrates the way displacement undermines the master signifier by instituting a comic instability.

The Narrator vs. the Nation

Because the narrator is in Argentina as part of a delegation, he “needs return to the ship where the Captain was to entertain the Chairmen and Plenipotentiaries of our Polonia here” (4). The novelty of the unfamiliar country has already begun to affect him, however, distancing him from his compatriots. At the reception, “In the maelstrom of declarations and discourse, in the lifeless glare of lamps, as through a Telescope I observed it all, and Foreignness Novelty and Quiddity seeing everywhere, beset by vanity and greyness, my Friends and Comrades I summoned up” (4). The linguistic defamiliarization that previously occurred has begun to affect the narrator’s relationship not only to language, but culture as well. This passage is exemplary of de Certeau’s category of space-as-practiced-place. Polish cultural practices have evolved and been practiced in a Central European place (*lieu*), and in South America they are clearly *out of place*. The narrator, already attuned to the relation between place and the Formal practices that turn it into cultural and national space, becomes aware of how the new place—Argentina—undermines the veneer of self-evidence of Polish cultural practices, rendering them arbitrary, contingent, and more than a little bit vain. In contrast to the space of Europe, Argentina appears as a foreign place for the Poles, ripe for new spatial practices that may transform both space and the subjectivities who inhabit it.

Although the novelty of Argentina is exciting, the impending war soon brings the distant nation back to everybody’s mind, as “in the streets the annoying clamour of newscriers ‘Polonia, Polonia’ would catch our ears” (*Trans-Atlantyk* 5). The narrator’s aggravation suggests that the earlier novelty with which he saw his homeland is quickly turning into dislike, preparing his initial break. However, when news of Hitler’s invasion of Poland finally breaks out, Witold and his friend Czesław “into each other’s arms in

Tears did fall and anon to our knees did fall, God's help invoking and ourselves unto the Lord tendering" (5). This is the first demonstration of the effect of Form on subjectivity, the interpellation of the subject by national ideology. Here, the imperative to cry and fall to their knees in supplication to God suggests an automatic manifestation of national obligation. However distant the narrator may feel geographically and ideologically from his homeland, it nevertheless in-sists within the national subject, forcing his supplication.

Despite this paroxysm of nationalist feeling, Witold is already resolved not to return to Europe. He implores Czesław, "Sail, sail you with God" (5). Like Gombrowicz, the narrator waits until the last second to leave the ship, not from ambivalence but because if his countrymen learn of his intentions, he "would haply be burnt alive at the stake, pulled apart by horses or tongs, deprived of good fame and credit" (6). Once the narrator has left the ship, however, his apparent concern for his own well being gives way to outright vitriol. He curses:

Sail, sail, you Compatriots, to your People! Sail to that holy Nation of yours haply Cursed! Sail to that St. Monster Dark, dying for ages yet unable to die! Sail to your St. Freak, cursed by all Nature, ever being born and still Unborn! Sail, sail, so he will not suffer you to Live or Die but keeping you for ever between Being and Non-being. Sail to your St. Slug that she may ever the more Enslime you [...] by Torturing torture you, Children of yours, wives, to Death, to Agony [...] (6)

In this startling imprecation, the repetition of "sail, sail" ("A pływajcie wy, pływajcie...") recalls the "march, march" ("marsz, marsz") refrain of the Polish national anthem. Here, however, the Polish patriots are not marching from France but sailing from South

America, and only a transatlantic ocean liner can effect the desired homecoming. While Dąbrowski's Mazurka expresses solidarity with the national cause through the use of the first-person plural ("my"), Witold employs the second-person ("wy") to heighten the distance between himself and the departing Poles. The conflation of national ideology and Catholicism is mocked here by the combination of saints and insults ("St. Monster Dark," "St. Slug"). Rather than forecasting a messianic future, the nation has been "dying for ages" but is "unable to die," suggesting that the Patriotic fervor by which the Poles sustain the nation is interfering with its true destiny and is therefore unnatural. And finally, in inverting the positive aspect of this sustenance, Witold's harangue presents the nation as a parasite vampirically feeding on the Poles and children and keeping them shackled "between Being and Non-Being." The phrasing here recalls the narrator's earlier utopian liminal status, but widens liminality to include all Poles, who cannot come into their own so long as they are displaced from the historical nation to Argentina yet consider themselves responsible for sustaining it.

Having left the ship and having turned his back on his homeland, the narrator nevertheless quickly discovers that he cannot fully break with the nation. He takes a room in a pension and wakes up the next morning to "groans and lamentations" coming through the wall, from which "only 'guerra, guerra, guerra' I understood" (10-11). Ostensibly free from Poland, he goes for a walk in Buenos Aires—"In the crowd lost, my Lostness I was enjoying," (10)—, and he wanders down to the river, enraptured by the relatively un-Formed nature. However, he then says, "my eyes falls on a tiny Insect that was climbing up a grass blade and I can see that this Insect in this place and Time, at this very moment on that Shore, on that side of the Ocean, is likewise climbing and climbing,

climbing and climbing, and then the most terrible fear overwhelmed me and methinks I had better go to the Legation” (10). The narrator doesn’t understand Spanish, and this moment serves to reinforce his isolation; without the Polish émigré community he is unable to communicate. This episode demonstrates the necessity of Form, for in its manifestations such as language, Form allows us to participate in a social network, and it is comforting to have others to turn to when one is down and out. If Witold’s paroxysms of national anguish showed Form’s inevitability, this episode reveals that Form is not necessarily a bad thing.

This necessary submission to Form does not, however, eradicate the narrator’s individuality, and his vacillation continues at the Legation. “Having reached this edifice,” he recalls, “I stopped there, and methinks go or not go as why should I go to the Bishop if from the Faith I am a backslider, a heretic, blasphemer” (10). Despite his heresy toward Poland, he is ethical enough to acknowledge the contradictions of turning his back on the nation in its hour of need and then asking its representative for assistance. This implies at least a respect for the nation even if, in contrast to the Polish legions whose goal was to rejoin the nation, the narrator sees his destiny as divergent from Poland’s. More than his qualms about hypocrisy, his pride also becomes an obstacle. Again using religious imagery, he protests that “not for this my Mother gave birth to me, not for this my Mind, Sublimity, my Art and the incomparable flights of my Nature [...] so that I would in this homely Church, Worse, Littler, serve at Mass, oh haply Worse, Shabbier, in a shabbier paltrier Choir, stupefy myself with paltry, middling incense along with other homely Homefolk of mine!” (42, 11). The narrator’s language shows that he regards himself as an individual genius whose art elevates him above local

identifications, a protest that is all the more ironic given its Sarmatian form of expression. Moreover, his balking at the idea of servitude suggests a reluctance to bend his art to national concerns. Had we not seen his curse several pages earlier, this passage could be interpreted as merely arrogant on the narrator's part. However, because he has already suggested that national obligation acts as a retardant to the development of his fellow Poles as well, he appears instead as cognizant of how his personal encounter with nation and national Form is symptomatic of a larger phenomenon, namely the way in which national Form limits all its subjects. Throughout the novel, then, the narrator's personal failings—in this case, pride—do not detract from his critique of nationalist Form (and indeed, this Form becomes an outlet for the expression of even darker impulses than the narrator's).

The narrator's reluctance to visit the Legation proves to be justified, for the minister offers him a mere sum of fifty pesos, adding "But if you fain would go to Rio de Janeiro and hold to the Legation there, then I'll pay your fare and even add something to be quit of your hold as I would have no Writers here: they just Milk you and Bark at you" (12). What the narrator had only moments ago depicted as his overweening pride is recast as unappreciated genius when the minister judges him based on his choice of profession without any firsthand knowledge of his work. Unsurprisingly, given his official stature, the minister here speaks in the discourse of the master ($S_1/\$ \rightarrow S_2/a$), assigning an *a priori* meaning to the narrator and his literary output. The truth of this operation is the split subject, in this case, the narrator, who encounters in the minister's words a refusal to recognize the "sublimity" of his mind and art. He protests, "I am not just a writer but Gombrowicz!" (13), to which the minister replies, "Well, if Gombrowicz

have 80 pesos here and come no more—the War and Pan Minister is busy” (Ibid).

Construable as pride, the narrator’s protest stems from the demand for recognition of one’s particularity, in this case his literary genius.

Structurally, then, this protest is analogous to the protest of the hysteric, a discursive structure that Lacan calls the discourse of the hysteric ($\$/a \rightarrow S_1/S_2$). In this discourse, the hysteric interrogates the master signifier with the question “why am I what you say I am?” The hysterical outburst is a protest against the social order’s inability to recognize the subject’s particularity; here, the narrator’s dire personal situation, his abilities as a writer (any gap between his self-regard and the quality of his art notwithstanding), and his existential self-worth mean nothing to the officials who hold his prospects in their hands.

The minister’s caustic dismissal makes it clear that he has little regard for the narrator’s particularity, but at the same time it provides an opening for the latter, who responds to the minister’s dismissal with the words “the War.” This phrase has the same effect that it earlier had on the narrator and Czesław, catalyzing a behavioral automatism in both the narrator and the minister: “[The minister] took fright in earnest so that his cheeks went white, flashed his eye: ‘What? Have you any tidings? Has anyone told you aught? Any news?’ ... but checked himself [...] ‘Naught, naught, be not worried, we will vanquish the enemy!’ And he instantly cried more loudly: ‘We will vanquish the enemy!’ Then he cried more loudly still: ‘We will vanquish the enemy!’” (13). The triumphant tones required of nationalist discourse in wartime immediately override the minister’s entirely understandable fears, his increasingly voluble expressions of inevitable victory anticipating the way in which Arlo Guthrie’s “I wanna kill!” precipitates a bombastic

repetition in his draft doctor several decades later. Emphasizing that this belligerent shouting is more obligation than firmly held belief, the minister adds, “I say this so you cannot say that I was saying we would not Vanquish” (13). National Form produces a cognitive dissonance in its subjects as patriotic bombast overrides reason.

The reminder of national obligation wins the narrator a benefactor, but at the cost of a re-implication with national Form. His nationality suddenly gains precedent over his occupation; the minister, forgetting what he just said about writers, says, “I am aware of my duty towards our National Literature and as Minister needs must come to your aid. Ergo, as you are an author, I could have you write for the papers here some articles, the which would praise, glorify our Great Authors and Geniuses [...] You can praise Copernicus, Chopin or Mickiewicz [...] we have to praise our own or else we will be swallowed!” (14). The minister’s suggestion again ignores the particularity of Witold’s artistic output, putting it and him back into the service of a nation he has recently rejected.

The idea that Chopin is Polish must appear strange to a foreigner. Although *Trans-Atlantyk* has already thematized the idea that national Form travels poorly, Gombrowicz expands on this problem in his *Diary*, where he writes “Poland forces [the Pole] into such a cramped state—he wants to help it too much, he wants to elevate it too much” (*Diary* 6). Gombrowicz continues,

I recall a tea in one Argentine home, where my acquaintance, a Pole, began to speak about Poland. Again, naturally Mickiewicz and Kościuszko together with Sobieski and the Siege of Vienna came riding onto the table [...] It occurred to me then that if someone were to praise himself or his family in this way, it would

be considered quite tactless. I thought that this auction with other nations for geniuses and heroes, for merits and cultural achievements, was really quite awkward from the point of view of propaganda tactics because with our half-French Chopin and not quite native Copernicus, we cannot compete with the Italians, French, Germans, English, or Russians. Therefore, it is exactly this approach that condemns us to inferiority. (6)

Enumerating a nation's victories and geniuses fails precisely because they are so numerous in the "great" nations that they do not require counting, so the small nation's "auction"—claiming as their own artists of dubious ethnicity and nationality⁷⁰—is rightly perceived as stemming from an inferiority complex.

Witold refuses on the grounds that he is "exceeding full of shame," causing the minister to erupt, "Why are you ashamed, sh.t! [...] If we do not praise Our Own, who will?" (*Trans-Atlantyk* 14).⁷¹ However, he quickly comes up with a new idea, elevating Witold to the status of national genius, remarking that "Zaszczyt to dla nas! Zaszczyt, bo my Wielkiego Pisarza Polskiego gościemy, może Największego! Wielki to Pisarz nasz, może i Geniusz! Co sie gapisz, Sroka? Powitaj wielkiego g..., to jest te... Geniusza naszego!" (47). ("Tis an honour for us! An honour since we are hosts to the Great Polish Author, perchance the Greatest! A great Author of ours, perchance even a Genius! Why are you gaping, Podsrocki? Greet the great Sh... that is... eh... Shining Genius of ours!") (15). The minister's Freudian slip reveals two things about national literature. First, the designation of "national" authorial genius is almost wholly arbitrary, dependent

⁷⁰ Even Mickiewicz is not a Pole, but an ethnic Lithuanian, and *Pan Tadeusz* is written in a dialect that combines both Polish and Lithuanian words.

⁷¹ The Polish *gówno*—"shit"—is cognate with the Czech *hovno*. Gombrowicz uses "g..." presumably out of fidelity to seventeenth-century print custom rather than out of any prudery. The English translation follows Gombrowicz by using "sh.t."

only on national identification and the fact of being an author. The quality of Witold's writing is irrelevant, so even a terrible author could aspire to "greatness" provided that he is willing to identify completely with the national interest. Second, and here the unintentionality of the minister's utterance is truthful, the garlands of national fame are equivalent to an excrement bath, or as the narrator puts it, he feels "A też to ja jak śliwka w g... wpadłem!" (47) ("Like a plum dropped in shit!").

The narrator begins the search for financial support anew. An acquaintance directs him to the grotesque trio of the Baron, Ciumkała and Pyckal, who "have a Partnership in Horses and likewise in Dogs" (9). As their professional interests show, these three, forever in each other's presence, are parodies of the Sarmatian gentry, each representing an aspect thereof. As might be expected, given that he goes by his title, the Baron is the Sarmatian gentry in the imaginary register, "a magnificent, magnanimous, manly, noble Man" (19). He generously offers Witold employment, only for Pyckal to refuse. Pyckal represents the less pleasant aspects of Sarmatian culture; "as if pulled from a dog's throat or from behind a barn," (19), he is the ever-quarrelsome, belligerent noble, who in the seventeenth century would have undoubtedly exercised his *liberum veto* frequently. Finally, Ciumkała represents the Sarmatian gentry in the twentieth-century cultural imaginary. Ruddy, provincial, and hopelessly simplistic, he is on the receiving end of the Baron and Ciumkała's constant disdain. This trio holds up a mirror to the Polish émigré community in Buenos Aires for, as we shall see, despite their embodiment of various aspects of seventeenth-century culture, they are not too dissimilar to their more modern fellow Poles.

Gombrowicz dramatizes the “auction for geniuses” mentioned above as the hilarious bickering of adolescents trading insults. Upon returning to the pension he has rented, Witold finds a large bouquet of red and white flowers—the colors of the Polish flag—along with an invitation to a soirée at which local artists and writers will be present. Witold has misgivings about attending, complaining, “To gdy ja przycupnąć chcę, oni mnie na świecynek!” (“When I am for crouching, they would light me high with candelabra!”) (60, 27). Nevertheless, he attends, where he is introduced as “Mistrza Wielkiego Polskiego Geniusza Gombrowicza Glośnego” (“the Master Great Polish Genius Glorious Gombrowicz”) (63, 30). The situation initially seems to be awkward for the Poles, who stand around and say little, and it becomes clear that their purpose here is to show off on behalf of Poland. Despite the awkward inactivity, the Polish counselor advises, “Hold [...] we’ll shew them” (30), casting the event in almost military terms. For the émigré community, public events entail performing the nation’s inherent nobility. The stakes are suddenly raised when the Argentine “Gran Escritor,” a fictional stand-in for Jorge Luis Borges, enters the room. The counselor orders the narrator, “Sick him, else Shame for he is their most Famous Author and it cannot be that they Celebrate him when the Great Polish Author, Genius is in the room! Bite him, you chitsh.t” (32). Again, the particular genius of both the fictional Gombrowicz and the Gran Escritor is irrelevant; it is simply a matter of who can best “bite” the other in their nation’s name. The Poles manifest here an inter-subjective aggressiveness that is a by-product of imaginary identification.⁷² The imperative to “bite” the Argentine represents an imaginary short-circuit that regresses from subjectification, and this aggressiveness is easily read as an attempt to mask certain feelings of (national) inadequacy.

⁷² See Lacan, “Aggressiveness in Psychoanalysis.” In *Ecrits: A Selection*, pp. 10-30.

Because the Gran Escritor is “*Inteligentniej jest Inteligentnym*” (Intelligently Intelligent) and “*subtelniej Subtelnym*” (subtly Subtle) (66, 32), the opening salvo of the narrator’s aggression attempts to unwork this adjective-noun correspondence. As we have seen, his initial delight in Argentina stemmed from the severing of the one-to-one correspondence between signifier and signified. The “intelligently intelligent” Gran Escritor is therefore identified as an agent of Form, the negation of linguistic play for which Argentina initially served as the enabling ground. Seeking to unbind the re-imposition of quotidian meaning embodied by the Escritor, the narrator comments loudly enough for all to hear, “*Nie lubię ja gdy Masło zbyt Maślane, Kluski zbyt Kluskowe, Jagły zbyt Jaglane, a Krupy zbyt Krupne*” (“I don’t like Butter too Buttery, Noodles too Noodly, Millet too Millety and Barley too Barley”) (66, 32). Although the narrator’s comment appears nonsensical on its surface, its content is an aggressive attack on the Escritor’s intelligence and subtle subtlety. The necessary countermove is to evacuate the content of the narrator’s utterance and make it appear as Form. The Escritor responds, “Here they say that butter is buttery... The thought interesting indeed... an interesting Thought... Pity, not quite new for Sartorius already said it in his *Bucolics*” (33). The narrator’s line of attack, seemingly original and new, is deflected by the Argentine’s encyclopedic knowledge. By referencing an earlier author who said the same thing, he reduces the narrator’s outburst to a mere repetition, turning Immaturity into Form. The Pole’s replies, “What the devil do I need to know what Sartorius said if I say?!” but this outburst, too, is referenced by the Escritor, who says, “this is not a bad Thought, indeed it could be served with Raisin sauce, but the trouble is that Madame de Lespinasse said something like it in one of her Letters” (33). Unable to respond, the narrator finally

shouts, “Sh.t! Sh.t! Sh.t!”, but even his cursing is for naught, as the Escritor responds, “alas, it has already been said by Cambronne” (34). The Gran Escritor’s mania for referencing reveals two things. First, although Argentina functions in the novel to reveal the contingency of Polish Form, it has its own national Form, here expressed in the figure of its most famous national author. Second, Argentine culture is itself dependent on precedents of European Form, as evidenced by the names the Escritor references. Hanjo Berressem suggests that we can read the Gran Escritor’s rejoinders as manifestations of what Lacan called the discourse of the university (117). In this discursive situation (graphed by Lacan as $S_2/S_1 \rightarrow a/\$$), knowledge, represented by the figure of the Argentine laureate, is directed at the seemingly absurd utterances of the narrator (a), the effect of which is to further divide him from his own speech ($\$$); instead of being recognized as a unique creative force, the Polish author is reduced to an unoriginal hack repeating European predecessors. The truth of this discourse is the institution of another master signifier, which the narrator stayed in Argentina to escape. Therefore, Argentina does not provide a suitable alternative to the provincial Polish Form from which the narrator is trying to free himself.

The *Puto* vs. the Pole

If the narrator’s compliance in this literary contest results from a demand that is a manifestation of an imaginary projection of collective autonomy, then he must break from his identification. The novel effects an unworking of this by several steps. Initially, the narrator’s imaginary coherence must be broken. In his confrontation with the Escritor, he can say nothing that will free him from the grip of Form, so he begins to storm out, but “having walked almost to the door in my open escape, the Devil, the Devil, I think, why

the Devil am I fleeing! Why escape? I turned back and return. Through the whole salon I go and all give way to me!” (34). Similar to Švejk’s walking before the medical experts, the narrator’s walk stages a resistance that seems successful; as the audience stares, his walk “strengthens, becomes Mightier” (35). Suddenly he notices that he has acquired a partner: “And now I look and there by the Fireplace someone likewise goes walking, and Walks and Walks. And he so Walks and Walks that when I Walk he likewise Walks. So I from wall to wall and he there from Fireplace to Window... and when I walk, he Walks too” (35). Importantly, this stranger’s walk is a response to the narrator’s own; ping-ponging back and forth between two endpoints in the room, the narrator and the stranger are mirror images, doubles.

The double is important for several reasons. First, because the narrator’s walk stages a break from the Polish émigré community, he needs an other with whom to identify or his rejection of the émigrés becomes a complete regression to the imaginary as well as utter isolation. Moreover, Polish nationalism itself represents a collective imaginary state, the braying of the minister and posturing of the salon’s attendees manifesting the desire to identify with a national coherence that is illusory; were the narrator to simply fall back into the imaginary as a posture against his compatriots, his rebellion would perpetuate the collective condition on an individual level. Within the context of Gombrowicz’s philosophical opposition of Form and Chaos, moreover, the narrator cannot deny the Formal imperative any more than the author. Having been interpellated by Polish Form, the narrator remains profoundly ambivalent toward it, as evidenced earlier by his despair over the war and by the automatism of kneeling as an

expression of nationalist sympathy. The narrator's double is not a Pole, so he does not need to display ambivalence toward Polish Form.

Importantly, the double's appearance prevents the narrator's full identification with him, thus allowing the latter to maintain his newfound fragmentation. As the two figures continue their walking, the narrator recounts, "Przyjrzałem się i widze: człek słusznego wzrostu, Brunet silny, a nawet nietępego, owszem, dość szlachetnego oblicza... Ale czerwone ma wargi! Wargi ma, powiadam, Czerwone, Uczerwienione, Karminowe!" ("more intently I look him over... I look him over and see a man of seemly height, very Dark, and of not at all dull, indeed quite noble visage...But red lips he has! Lips he has, I say, Red, made Red, Carmined!") (70, 36). The horror at the stranger's makeup causes Witold to blush in turn, and he storms out of the reception, gasping, "Indeed that one who Walked there, with whom I Walked, was no Bull, but a cow! A Man who, being a Man, fain would not be a Man but after Men chases, and after them Flies, admires, oh, Loves, Heats for them [...] him folk hereabouts give him the contemptuous name 'puto'" (36).⁷³ The narrator's double is an effeminate pederast named Gonzalo, who is "Metys chyba, Portugalczyk, z perskiej tureckiej matki w Libii urodzony" ("perchance Mestizo, Portugese, of a Persian-Turkish mother in Libya born") (71, 37). Gonzalo is rich, but his effeminacy renders him fearful, so he pretends to be a lackey in his own house (39), so he is also a figure who collapses, or at least confuses, hierarchies. The respective trisyllabic appellations beginning with the letter "g" reinforce the doubling of these two characters who, despite their marginal status vis-à-vis their respective cultures, could not be more dissimilar. While Gombrowicz cannot escape the crutch of his nationality, Gonzalo has none and all. The narrator is clearly masculine,

⁷³ Puto is the Spanish equivalent of "fag" or "queer."

while Gonzalo is a male wearing makeup, rendering him androgynous if not outright feminine. The narrator is a Pole; Gonzalo's ethnicity and nationality are uncertain. These differences—Polish, heterosexual vs. multiethnic, multinational, multigendered homosexual—foreclose the possibility of another strictly narcissistic identification, allowing the narrator to maintain an ideological distance from both his own culture and Gonzalo. Nevertheless, while Gonzalo's sexuality and queer demeanor may cause the narrator to hold himself at a distance, the puto's hybrid identity in terms of race and place of origin offer a way out of Witold's own cultural and national impasse. Gonzalo is the narrator's mirror image, but a shattered one that reflects a multiplicity of imaginary fragments coexisting, rather than a unitary identity that excludes all other options.

Like all doppelgangers, Gonzalo tests the narrator's mores. Gonzalo is infatuated with a young boy, but before he can approach the lad, an older man comes up to him. Gonzalo asks the narrator to eavesdrop on their conversation, and when he obliges, he hears them speaking in Polish (41). He refuses to play the panderer when his fellow Poles are involved, telling Gonzalo, "Do as you will. But I'm off and naught I'll have with it since they are my Countrymen and belike Son with Father!" (41). At this stage, the narrator may feel distant from his fellow Poles, but he is content to let them follow their own customs. That is to say, his protest against Polish Form is wholly individual, lacking an ethical component. The narrator is profoundly ambivalent here; he is still tied to his fellow Poles by residual feelings of shared nationality, and yet he also feels solidarity with Gonzalo because they walked together at the reception.

The narrator and Gonzalo follow the Polish duo to the Japanese Park, a carnivalesque place where "trains with a roar from behind a Cliff, yonder Harlequins or

empty Bottles, else Carousels or See-saws, or Trampolines, further on a-circling on wooden horses, a-shooting at target [...]" (41-2). On one level, this carnivalesque atmosphere provides a perfect environment for Gonzalo to drink to excess while the narrator makes the Polish couple's acquaintance. The narrator introduces himself to the pair, a retired major named Tomasz Kobrzycki and his son Ignacy. Tomasz tells the narrator that "to the army he is dispatching his Only Son, the which, if unable to reach our Country, would enlist in England or in France, so that from this side he could wrack the enemy" (49). Having left Poland for the hopes of a better life, Tomasz would send his son back to a likely death. Although the narrator does not immediately voice any objections, in part because he is impressed by Tomasz's decency, the latter's plan for his son recalls Gombrowicz's thoughts on Mickiewicz. If Poland was almost immediately overrun by Germany, what chance can Ignacy and his compatriots have? Like Mickiewicz, who only saw in youth what it could become when fully Formed, Tomasz has Ignacy's destiny planned.

Meanwhile, Gonzalo is continually raising his glass of beer and toasting in the narrator's direction, leading Tomasz to mistakenly believe that Gonzalo is toasting to him. When he asks why the stranger does so, the narrator tells him the truth: "Hie thee hence with thy Ignasio for 'tis Ignasio he is chasing after" (50), thus betraying Gonzalo to the Pole. Tomasz refuses to leave because it would create the wrong impression, so he stands up and confronts Gonzalo, who drunkenly hurls his beer mug at Tomasz, hitting him in the temple. The following morning Tomasz comes to the narrator's pension and asks him to challenge Gonzalo on his behalf. Although the narrator tries to dissuade him,

arguing that a duel occurs between men, “and how to challenge [Gonzalo], how to duel with him but a Cow” (53), Tomasz’s mind is made up.

Perhaps predictably, the narrator feels that Gonzalo’s violation of sexual norms is also a violation of gender categories, but that by virtue of crossing this boundary, Gonzalo should be disqualified from participating in the duel. Tomasz, however, is less concerned with this technicality than with the insult to his pride: “Cow or not a cow, [Gonzalo] wears Breeches and the insult was publick, and it cannot be that I come out of this as a poltroon, and moreover in front of Foreigners!” (53). Tomasz thus displays the chauvinism that Gombrowicz finds so unbecoming in Polish émigrés, overly concerned with reputation over even life. Tomasz continues, “to be sure, I will make a Man of him that it cannot be said that a Puto is after my Son! Ergo, if he does not stand up to me, I will shoot him as a Dog, and you tell him so, so that he knows. He must stand up to me!” (54). Tomasz’s remedy for the border-violating Gonzalo is to force the latter to reestablish clear normative gender and sexual borders, or else be shot. So long as Gonzalo submits to heteronormative Form, he stands a chance of survival, but the prospect of life as a hybrid figure is apparently off-limits. Tomasz represents the extreme of Polish Form which, conflated with Catholicism, also necessarily entails strict gender and sexual categories, against Gonzalo’s utter lack of national Form (and absence of clear distinctions in the other categories as well). This passage also demonstrates an opposition between Form and life, as Tomasz’s rigid adherence to Form threatens the survival of Ignacy and Gonzalo, the former full of unfinished potential, the latter representing the possibility of more cosmopolitan formations.

When Tomasz's challenge is relayed to him, Gonzalo refuses to stand up to the retired major. However, he beseeches the narrator: "I know that you hold me a Monster. Albeit I will give you cause to be on my side against that Father and acknowledge such ones as I the Salt of the Earth. Tell me: do you not acknowledge Progress? Are we to step in place? And how can there be aught New if just to the Old you give credence? Eternally then is Pan Father to hold a young son under his paternal lash?" (56). Although the narrator earlier admired Tomasz for his decency, Gonzalo presents a completely different viewpoint on the matter, arguing that the father is actually tyrannical, always bending the son to predictable ends. Gonzalo does not represent Immaturity here, for he has a clearly defined outcome intended for Ignacy, but his suggestion opens up possibilities for Ignacy, who represents the pole of Immaturity's potential against the father's Form.

This argument highlights the manner in which the transatlantic voyage creates possibilities for throwing off the yoke of Polish Form. The narrator protests, "Milcz, zaprzestań Namowy swojej, bo nie podobna rzecz abym ja przeciw Ojcu i Ojczyźnie, a jeszcze w takiej jak obecna chwili!" ("Be still! Cease that Importuning of yours as 'tis impossible for me to be against Pater and Patria, and what's more, in a moment such as the present!") (94, 57).⁷⁴ Here he parrots the other émigrés' demand for absolute patriotism in times of national trial. The introduction of the terms "father" and "fatherland" at the same time he does so conflates these paternal signifiers with Form. Gonzalo recognizes the narrator's hypocrisy and reproaches him, "Syn, Syz, to mi dopiero, to rozumiem! A po co tobie Ojczyza? Nie lepsza Synczyzna? Synczyzną ty Ojczyznę zastap, a zobaczysz?" ("The Son, the son's the thing, I know! But wherefore

⁷⁴ *Ojczyzna* literally means "fatherland."

need you Patria? Is not Filistria better? You exchange Patria for Filistria and then you'll see!" (94, 57). The neologism *Synczyzna*—"son-land"—here represents the pole of immaturity, and to the narrator "this word so unwise to my ear sounded that at that Sick and haply Mad man laughter overtook me" (57). Here, Form and Immaturity are given not only their avatars in the father-son duo, but also topographical designations, thus emphasizing the themes of place and displacement; to exchange Patria with Filistria is to move from one (imaginary) place to another. Additionally, as evidenced by the narrator's mad laughter, *Syndzyzna*/Filistria/Immaturity is equivalent to the comic—and perhaps more darkly, the temptation to madness—unworking stable formations of nationality, sexuality, and gender and their attendant obligations.

In spite of his better judgment, the narrator agrees to help by acting as Tomasz's second in the duel and, slipping the bullets from the gun into his sleeve while his compatriot is not looking, he ensures that the duel will be fought without ammunition. However, in the meantime the Polish legation has got wind of the duel and summons the narrator to their office, where the minister proclaims that "that Manliness of ours," which Tomasz is expected to display in the duel should not be "hidden under a bushel, and indeed is to all four sides of the world trumpeted to the greater fame of our name, and chiefly at the time when we at Berlin, at Berlin, to Berlin!" (64). Never one to miss an opportunity to display Polish superiority, the minister decides to lead some Argentine guests on a hunt that will "accidentally" happen upon the duel. However, they have not thought their plan through carefully enough, and when a Polish colonel makes arrangements to borrow hounds and horses, the minister exclaims, "I'faith, you are mad but there are no Hares, no Hares! Are you Mad? How make you a hunt for Hares if here

is a great city and not a single Hare to be found, even with a candle!” (66). The novel’s location again negates the attempt to impose Polish cultural practices insofar as the urban setting renders an authentic hunt impossible, exposing the emptiness of the endeavor. A rabbit-hunt with no rabbits will ride by a duel fought without bullets in order to send a message of aggression to Berlin when German armies have already occupied Poland and taken Warsaw. Complicating matters further, the narrator meets the Baron and Pyckal who, despite their reluctance (“At no price will I be a Puto’s witness” [61] the Baron claims), agree to serve as Gonzalo’s seconds in the duel. At this meeting, they establish that the duel will last until first blood is drawn. Without bullets in the guns, however, it is impossible for either man to wound his opponent, so the duel cannot end. This farce represents the logical extreme of Form, where all activity is subject to pre-established and unchangeable rules without room for improvisation. Blind adherence to Form reduces people to automatons incapable of breaking rigid patterns of behavior.

The intrusion of Chaos is necessary to break Form’s hold on the duel. Indeed, it is only by chance that the duel is resolved when, after Tomasz and Gonzalo have fired blanks at each other several times, the farcical hunt happens upon the farcical duel. Pyckal and the Baron’s bickering apparently carries over to their steeds as well, for when the former’s horse bites the rump of the Baron’s horse, it causes a stampede and the greyhounds begin to attack Ignacy. As Tomasz fires his empty pistol at the dogs, Gonzalo heroically throws himself into the pile and pulls the dogs off Ignacy, saving his life. Within the context of Tomasz’s quarrel with Gonzalo, this action is sufficient to re-situate Gonzalo within gender norms. Tomasz’s stated intention of killing a cow in order to bring out a bull is fulfilled not through the duel, in which Gonzalo’s displays of

gallantry are false since he knows that he's not facing live ammunition, but the pederast's unthinking defense of Ignacy is both outwardly heroic and inwardly authentic, leading Tomasz to proclaim, "Oh, now not an enemy but a Brother, Friend you will be to me since you have rescued my Son at the risk of your own Life!" (78). Ignacy then "embraces [Gonzalo] and as a Brother hugs" (78). Although the interminable duel has ended with a minimum of bloodshed, its outcome is more favorable to Tomasz and Form, for while Gonzalo has saved Ignacy's life, it is only so that he may lose it anyway should he return to Europe to fight against Germany. Thus Gonzalo's courage has the consequence of (r)emasculating him, giving him a masculine identity but frustrating his desire by denying the possibility of a homosexual relationship and precipitating instead a fraternal (and hence sexually normative) relationship with Ignacy.

The duel's outcome also threatens to overcome the effects of the transatlantic displacement because the Polish envoy uses the opportunity to familiarize the landscape. The envoy proclaims,

"Ergo, gentlemen, charming Ladies, you could see the apparent sign of God's Grace the which a son for a Father has rescued. Regard these groves! Regard herbs, bushes, Nature all, the which under the vastness of Heaven rests; and regard how the Pole before all Creation forgives the rescuer of that Son of his! God's Grace. The benevolence of all Nature! Oh, since 'tis certain, most certain, that a Pole is dear to God and Nature for those Virtues of his, and chiefly for that Chivalry of his, for that Courage of his, that Nobility of his, for that Piousness and Faith of his!" [...] All then cried: "Viva Polonia Mártir." (78)

In reducing the location to a manifestation of “all Nature,” the envoy’s blessing effaces the Argentine particularity of the pastoral setting. As soon as the location has become universalized, Polish spatio-cultural practices no longer appear displaced and contingent and the ridiculousness of Polish chauvinism is transformed into an expression of the inherent nobility of the martyred nation’s subjects. The duel has a regressive effect for the Poles—including Ignacy and the narrator—insofar as they are bound even more tightly by Form. By praising nature—an ideological conception of nature, to be sure—the Poles hope to turn this Argentine grove into the objective support for their own ideological vision of what is “natural”: masculinity, nationalism, and heteronormativity. The rustic setting now conforms to Polish nationalist ideology, undoing the novel’s transatlantic spatial displacement. The elevation of nature as a manifestation of this ideology also negates Gonzalo’s particularity because once the “natural” order is restored, Argentina becomes the site of Patria and Gonzalo’s hybrid identity again becomes “unnatural” even as its threat has seemingly been negated.

Father vs. Son

In order to unwork this latest instantiation of Form—nature as the ground of ideology—Gonzalo will have to disrupt the natural order itself. Gonzalo appeals to social convention in order to lure the Poles to his estate, proclaiming, “methinks that [Tomasz] will not refuse me the gracious acceptance of the hospitality of my home, and he together with his Son for Carousing to that friendship to my home will betake himself, where we will Carouse!” (79). Gonzalo here manipulates his newfound normative status and Tomasz’s code of honor to ensure the latter’s compliance.

“Hard that Mountain of mine,” the narrator begins the next section, repeating a phrase from the novel’s opening paragraph. This repetition marks the beginning of the novel’s final narrative arc. Gombrowicz continues, “yet Empty, Empty as if ‘twere naught” (79). After the duel fought with empty pistols, the leitmotif of emptiness becomes more prevalent in the remainder of the novel, providing a commentary on national Form. For his part, Tomasz is reluctant to go; sharing a carriage with the narrator, he frets, “Oh, we’d best not go!” (79). Now cognizant of the emptiness of Form, the narrator rebukes Tomasz: “You Miserable Man, why to his very home do you bring your Son! ... you’d do better to take Ignacy from his chaise and flee as from Pestilence!” (Ibid.). However, these words only cause Tomasz to spur the horses faster toward Gonzalo’s. Tomasz tells the narrator, “Even if ‘twere as you say I would not from him flee with Ignacy, for my Ignacy is not such as to be afeard of his suit!” (80). Tomasz’s excessive pride is such that, just as he would have sent his son to be slaughtered in Europe, he will not turn away from a looming, if uncertain danger.

If the site of the duel reestablished the natural order for the Poles, Gonzalo’s estate, an overwhelming multiplication of grotesque juxtapositions, is both the apotheosis of the Baroque and the epitome of the unnatural. That is to say, Gonzalo’s palace simultaneously represents both stylistic heterogeneity and a perversion of the natural order. The palace itself is stylistically confused, “heavily gilded, of Moorish or Renaissance, Gothic and likewise Romanesque architecture” (80). The décor is completely haphazard, with “a Cupid next to a Goblin, and here in an Armchair a Madonna, there on a Runner a Vase” (80). Gonzalo’s mansion is full of Titians, Raphaels, and other masterpieces that Gonzalo “did gather, did pile that they might

Cheapen for me a bit” (80). The clutter renders treasures as trash, a fact Gonzalo demonstrates by shattering an expensive Persian flagon. More significantly, the animals in Gonzalo’s mansion are impossible disruptions of the natural order: “an imp, Pekinese, but with brushtail, and the other Shepherd (but as if with a rat’s tail and Bulldog’s muzzle) [...] This one belike a Setter, but a meager lop-ear ‘tis for as if a Hamster’s Ears had whelped” (81-82). Gonzalo, of course, is perfectly at home here, but for the narrator and his fellow Poles, the palace “which perchance not so much with any rank Oddity but with an aggregation of many disturbing particulars was causing our heads to ache” (82).

Ensconced in his estate, Gonzalo drops the pretense of the masculinity imposed upon him earlier and changes into androgynous clothing: “In sooth he had put a skirt on, white, made of lace, but its cut was somewhat like that of a Dressing Gown; and a Blouse, green, yellow, pistachio, perchance a Blouse, perchance a shirt. On his head a Hat large, straw, with flowers adorned; in hand a Parasol and on bare feet Sandals or perchance Pumps” (83). The ambiguity of Gonzalo’s fashion here suggests a return to a hybridity that cannot be encapsulated in Tomasz’s more rigid binaries of masculine/heterosexual/Bull vs. feminine/homosexual/Cow. Nevertheless, precisely because this ambiguity hints at a violation of the newly-established natural order, Tomasz, reddens with embarrassment and anger (83). However, seeing the Poles’ surprise, Gonzalo assures them, “let it be known to you that in my native country, due to the excessive Heat, in skirts they commonly at home go about; so there is nothing wrong or strange in this [...] A Country—a Custom!” (Ibid.). Where the Polish minister has tried to establish Argentina as the natural ground for Polish culture, Gonzalo demonstrates that the Argentines’ interaction with the climate’s specificity—in this case,

the excessive heat—has already generated spatial practices that undermine the Poles’ attempt to make it the site of their own cultural practices (hetero- and gender normativity).

Gonzalo draws his net ever tighter by preventing mobility that has emerged as a theme connoting freedom and resistance. Gonzalo calls one of his servants, a *Bajbak*⁷⁵ named Horatio, whose job is to stand at parade when his master is entertaining guests. The standing position Horatio maintains reintroduces the motif of immobility, albeit at Gonzalo’s estate, suggesting that the *puto*’s plans for the Slavic youngster are not free of a controlling Form. Immobility is reinforced when Tomasz protests that they need to leave on account of the late hour. Gonzalo replies that he has ordered the wheels to be taken off the carriages (85). Thus trapped, the guests retire to their bedrooms, where the narrator is overcome by misgivings and goes to Tomasz to confess the truth about the duel. As soon as he tells Tomasz the truth, the narrator falls to his knees in repentance (87), a detail that makes it clear that the narrator’s confession is the product of Form’s interpellation of the subject.

Tomasz’s reaction initiates the darkest movement of the novel. This time, his humiliation requires a sacrifice: “Says he: ‘I needs must my ignominy cleanse ... I will with blood cleanse it ... but not with the womanly blood of that caitiff ... Here another, a little Weightier blood is needed ... the blood will be weighty, fearsome, since that Son’s of mine!’” (88). Although the father’s sinister response again shows that the victims of Form are the young, it also depicts this oppressive, sacrificial impulse as the product of humiliation. The narrator remarks, “But paltry that Sacrifice of his. Not fearsome his

⁷⁵ “*Bajbak* (pronounced BUY-bahk, derived from the Ukrainian *bobak*, meaning idler, lazy fellow) is an obscure Polish word, probably chosen by Gombrowicz partly because its very obscurity allows it to suggest more than the literal meaning would imply” (Karsov and French xxvi).

grey hair. Vain the Old Man's affection! For he, from an empty barrel at a Puto having popped, empty has become, and perchance a childlike Gaffer [...] And he, feeling this Impotence of his, would fain kill it in himself his Son killing" (89).

Gonzalo, however, has been eavesdropping on the conversation, and he accosts the narrator in the hallway, telling him that he has plans to make Ignacy murder Tomasz. Gonzalo has been using the *bajbak* as Ignacy's double, so that when Ignacy performs an action, Horatio performs a counteraction. For example, when riding horses, "when the Mule threw Ignacy off, off the mare Horatio likewise fell, ergo the one and the other scrambled up; their bones they tend, with laughter rent, and thus their Laughter, Falls they blend" (97). The two youths thus become mirror images of one another, so that when Horatio attacks Tomasz from one side, Ignacy will be forced to reproduce the action: "Ignacy, although perchance as well has marked what and how, and Gonzalo's wicked design in all this has sensed, cannot prevent his own capers, noisings, with like capers, noisings of Horatio's from being fused into one, as if they were already comrades or brothers" (Ibid.). Regardless of Ignacy's volition, then, Gonzalo's plan involves interpellating him with an automatism similar to that which the narrator and fellow Poles exhibited earlier. This development also thematizes the familiar modernist trope of oedipal violence, but critically, insofar as the intended patricide is the product of manipulation and the interpellation of Form rather than the free individual rebellion in the manner of James Joyce's Stephen Daedalus.

Before the narrator can resolve the dilemma of patricide vs. filicide, the novel takes a sinister detour. The narrator encounters the Baron, Pyckal, and Ciumkała. Ostensibly out for a ride to test newly-purchased horses, suddenly Pyckal thrusts his spur

into the narrator's calf "[f]rom which Painful Pain so that a flickering in my eyes, and I swooned" (98). When he awakens, he is trapped in a cellar with the trio, who are forced to sit quietly lest one of them receive a spur in his calf. Affixing a spur to the narrator's boot, they induct him into the Order of the Chevaliers of the Spur, a secret society whose members must constantly watch each other for the slightest sign of betrayal. The Order was established by the horse-trading trio's "accomptant" (accountant). While watching the Baron and Pyckal argue, "a small Insect happened under [the accomptant's] foot, the which he squashed. The squashing of that Insect a cherished Rabbit recalled to him, the which he in his childhood tried to strangle since a Saint he wished to be and for Martyrdom was preparing himself" (103). This precipitates a series of associations in which the accomptant committed sadistic violence toward various animals in order to overcome his personal weakness. The religious connotations of the accomptant's recollection recall both the narrator's portrayal of the nation as a "Saint Monster Dark" and of the émigrés' cry of "Viva Polonia Martir," highlighting a sadomasochistic brutality underlying the Poles' religio-nationalist ideology. Moreover, it again shows nothing more than weakness at its core, for, as the narrator relates, "The Accomptant told me that when War surged and the Clap of Firing, Thunder of canons, and Moaning and Crying and Killing, Cracking, his own gentleness and likewise the Weakness, Smallness of all compatriots became so loathsome to him that he wished to found an Order of Anguish and Suffering, Agony and Awe, viz. that these flames might sear redemptively!" (103). The Order, then, exemplifies Freud's dictum that ontogenesis recapitulates phylogenesis; Tomasz's intended filicide and the Order's mutual torture of its members both stem from weakness and humiliation and both punish not the original cause of their

respective humiliations, but simply themselves and their offspring. This last point is made apparent when the narrator conceives of an escape plan using the logic of the Order itself. He excoriates them, “You poltroons! A deed I demand, a dready Deed, and one most Dready!” (107), insisting that the Order murder Ignacy. The Order agrees, and when the narrator and the accomptant leave the cellar to scout the terrain of Gonzalo’s estate, the narrator kicks the accomptant’s horse with his spur, causing it to run off. Thanks to the narrator, however, the aims of the Order now coincide with that of the tyrannical father, the familial drama reproduced in the national.

Returning to Gonzalo’s estate, the narrator shows a profound ambivalence about whether to side with father or son, or Patria or Filistria. He goes to Ignacy’s room and observes the boy sleeping, initially deciding to break Gonzalo’s hold on him: “But if from the paternal home the Puto entices him into Dark, Black Ways, this will him haply into a Freak transform!!! ... Oh no, never, never ever!” (114-5). Here, falling into Gonzalo’s clutches is a decidedly negative thing, but the term “freak” implies that the narrator regards it as such because of the social ostracism it invites, an ostracism he has already felt. However, the narrator ponders, “if I tell him this and out he Gonzalo, Horatio drives, to his Father’s legs in tears falls, what then? Again all as of old, as it was [...] Still on and on, over and over, again the same?” (115). The image of Ignacy kneeling at his father’s feet reproduces the immobility of the “nationalized” subject and projects the national neurosis into the future as eternal repetition. The narrator articulates his dissatisfaction in terms of stasis vs. motion, saying, “Yet the desire of my soul this: viz. that something will have Become. Oh, come what may, just to make movement ...” (Ibid.). Instead of the national subject remaining in one place, breaking free from this

condition requires opening vectors into uncharted territory, the consequences of which the narrator and his fellow émigrés may not be prepared to accept. The narrator inwardly proclaims, “May he murder that Father of his, may he be Without a Father, may he go from home to a Field, to a Field! Let him sin! May he into whatever he Would transform himself, even into a Murder, a Patricide! And even into a Freak! May he Couple with whomever he would!” (Ibid.). These thoughts produce a visceral reaction in the narrator: At such a Thought within me, seized by strong queasiness, I almost threw up, and as if something was Breaking, Bursting in pain, in the most terrible dread” (Ibid.). This reaction is perhaps unsurprising given the earlier depictions of automatism (such as falling to the knees) that characterize ideology’s interpellation of the national subject in the novel. The narrator’s queasiness results from the collision of the powerful repression and the force needed to finally break with national Form.

Before the narrator can act on his epiphany, the Polish émigré community arrives for a kulig, a Polish custom during Carnival in which a large party would roam from manor to manor. Their arrival has been planned: Gonzalo with a lamp dashes out of the house, makes the sign of the cross to feign being out of sleep awakened” (115-116). Dancing commences, and Gonzalo’s plan to bind Ignacy and Horatio appears to have worked; their dancing provides counterpoints to each other—“Ignac[y] Boomed, whereupon Horatio Bammed, Bam, Bam, Boom, Boom [...] Other dancers there still tried to dance, to complement, as this is a Kulig, a Kulig, Mazurka, Mazurka, but not a chance! No more a Kulig, just Boombam Boombam” (120). Amid the dancing, Tomasz takes a knife and begins to move toward his son. Before he can commit the deed, however, “Boom into a Lamp Horatio, Bam into a lamp Ignacy, but Boom bam

Horatio into a vase, Ignacy bam into a vase, and boom Horatio into Tomasz!” (Ibid.).

Ignacy begins to swoop on his father even as the “arch-hellish cavalry” of the Order of the Chevaliers of the Spur arrive and begin their charge. At the last moment, however, as Ignacy is “swooping down” upon his father, “upon him Laughter, oh, on him Laughter, Laughter, God, God, he into Laughter perchance, oh, he into Laughter” (121). This laughter becomes infectious as the entire audience, including the minister, the Baron, and Pyckal begin to guffaw. The novel ends in the middle of this carnivalesque orgy of laughter, as characters “boom” into each other and the murder is averted.

The novel ends with the following sentence: “And so from Laughter into Laughter, they with Laughter Boom, with Laughter bam, boom, boom, bam Boom! ...” (122). Such a conclusion fails to resolve the conflict while ending, interestingly enough, on an ellipsis, suggesting that closure has either been deferred or is simply impossible. Ziarek argues that the novel’s ending “function[s] more as an opening toward the unknown future than as a closure [and] suggests that the contestation of homophobia and national identity does not follow the model of dialectical conflict” (238). I cannot see how this is the case, given Gombrowicz’s nonfiction writings on Form. However, the novel’s ironic use of the Sarmatian Baroque *gawęda* form suggests what William Egginton calls the “minor strategy,” after Deleuze and Guattari, of the Baroque.⁷⁶ In contrast to the “major strategy,” of the original Sarmatian Baroque, which veils the emptiness at the heart of national Form, the minor strategy affirms the original representation ironically. In *Trans-Atlantyk*, this means identifying fully with national Form until its contradictions become manifest through the farcical behavior exhibited in the novel. Here we return to the epigraph by Karl Marx with which I began this chapter.

⁷⁶ See Egginton, pp. 146-147.

Although the sense of Marx's words in reference to Napoleon III was indisputably perjorative, he nevertheless makes a distinction between old forms that smuggle new content and new forms that merely reproduce old content (the rise of Napoleon III is the latter) (16-19). In *Trans-Atlantyk*, Gombrowicz employs the obsolete form in order to intensify the contradictions of the national culture it represents, showing the primal humiliation on which it is founded and presenting an alternative of hybridity and cosmopolitanism. Gombrowicz's irony of displacement attacks stable Form/ideologies not just of Poland, but also of national hegemonies while positing cosmopolitanism insofar as he avoids privileging allegedly more enlightened nations in favor of individual creativity. Gombrowicz resurrects the detritus of Poland's national tragedy and transforms it into comedy. Furthermore, by displacing this history spatially and temporally, he establishes new vectors of interaction that undermine the fixed gender, sexual, religious and national categories that oppress his compatriots.

Chapter 4

Variations on a European Theme: Milan Kundera's *Book of Laughter and*

Forgetting

“Irony means: none of the assertions found in a novel can be taken by itself, each of them stands in a complex and contradictory juxtaposition with other assertions, other situations, other gestures, other ideas, other events. Only a slow reading, twice and many times over, can bring out all the *ironic connections* inside a novel, without which the novel remains uncomprehended.” —Milan Kundera, *Testaments Betrayed* (author's italics)

“Only after setting aside the geopolitical pipe dreams, the special interests and alliances, the local antagonisms, conflicts, and wars, the complex historical backdrop woven of mutual attraction and repulsion, do we begin to see Central European culture in a modern perspective—as a kind of ‘nostalgia for Europe.’” --Danilo Kiš, “Variations on Central European Themes”

The genealogy of Central European modernist irony I have thus far traced indicates that its manifestations arise in conjunction with and cannot be understood apart from historical developments in the region, including the twentieth-century phenomenon of mass emigration and exile. Hašek's *The Good Soldier Švejk*, written in a nation (re)born from the Habsburg Empire's ashes, undermines nationalist ideology and literature and marks narrative structure itself as suspect. Musil's *The Man without Qualities* shows that even power can be centrifugal to itself, and that totalizing impulses continually unravel in the irony of history (what Kundera calls a “terminal paradox”). Gombrowicz's *Trans-Atlantyk* shows how the exilic experience undermines nationalism as well as the assumed cultural superiority of the West. Now I turn my attention to the author who synthesizes many of these themes, Milan Kundera. Like Hašek, Kundera writes after a period of flowering national culture, but like Gombrowicz, he also writes immediately after his country's invasion and his own exile. Like Musil, Kundera engages with the leading philosophical lights of his time, but like the other authors, he is equally adept at playing the merry prankster.

Despite this last aspect of Kundera's authorial temperament, his comic novel *Kniha smíchu a zapomnění* (The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, 1978, hereafter *Kniha*) is almost staggering in its ambition. In *Kniha*, Kundera creates a grand opus synthesizing realist fiction, allegory, philosophical essay, parallel semiautobiographical narratives, and even musical theory, all the while connecting them to the binary themes of laughter and forgetting, the latter two themes acquiring existential status. This status is important; broadly speaking, existential philosophy focuses on the individual and how he generates meaning and value through his emotions, thoughts, decisions and actions. As such, existentialism is not reducible to either a particular political system or a critique thereof. In other words, the themes of laughter and forgetting in *Kniha* cannot be tied down to particular national concerns, and the grand philosophical relevance of these themes is entirely consistent with the formal ambition mentioned above. That is to say, Kundera's ambition far exceeds local national and political concerns.

However, *Kniha* is Kundera's first novel written after he went into exile, having settled in France. Still writing in Czech, Kundera is nevertheless fully aware, as my reading of *Kniha* will show, that he is writing for a foreign audience, and during the height of the Cold War. For this reason, he is concerned that the grand ambitions and supranational themes of his novel will be effaced in favor of a reading of his novel as merely dissident literature. Therefore, in addition to the formal aspects of his novel listed above, Kundera also employs irony on nearly every page in an effort to undermine just such a reductive reading. The novel's heterogeneity reinforces the narrator's irony, creating connections between the novel's disparate elements that undermine simplistic interpretation. For this reason, *Kniha* does not—indeed, cannot—represent Central

Europe in a straightforward manner. Instead, the novel interrogates what value the region has in relation to the West. Central Europe emerges in the novel as the ambivalent site of both the West's forgetting and its memory. With multiple references to the Western literary and cultural tradition throughout the novel, Kundera's novel acts as a *j'accuse* to a West that has forgotten its own history. Central Europe stands in this formulation as the remaining site of the West, the return of its repressed. In his essay "Variations on Central European Themes," the Serbian novelist Danilo Kiš suggests that Central European culture may be understood as "a nostalgia for Europe" (98). A nostalgia for both Central Europe and Europe taken as a whole pervades Kundera's novel, but insofar as Kundera eschews regional or even national identification in *Kniha*, the interplay between laughter and forgetting is precisely a European theme.

What is Europe?

Central Europe is composed of numerous small nations, including the relatively small nation of Austria that used to be a large multinational empire. As the appearance of nation-states and nationalism increased throughout the late eighteenth century and nineteenth century, the prevalence of small nations agitating for statehood led to Central Europe becoming a region defined, in the Serbian novelist and critic Danilo Kiš's words, as *centrifugal* (Kiš 97). That is, despite the political dominance of Vienna over the region, Central Europe's non-Austrian peoples opposed their culture to the Habsburg sensibilities. As the emphasis of this study on irony as a distancing phenomenon should make clear, I also regard the region as centrifugal. The novels in this study continually mock and subvert centripetal power structures, both on the narrative level and, as I have discussed, by virtue of their form. At the same time, however, these authors are

conscious of individual works, if not a tradition, emanating from Europe's large nations, and their novels contain references to these works. For example, Hašek references Boccaccio and Rabelais as influences, while Gombrowicz's fictional persona meets Borges's persona, the "Gran Escritor." These authors therefore draw on a larger European context even as they distance themselves from the Central European one.

For all his formal innovation, Kundera's early career as a novelist and critic is very heavily influenced by the local context. In his early novel *The Joke* (*Žert*, 1967), the narrative line is extremely local, and late in the novel one of the characters embarks on a long discussion of the uniqueness of Slavonic folk music. In this period, Kundera also published his first book of criticism *The Art of the Novel* (*Umění románu*, 1960) about the Czech novelist Vladislav Vančura.⁷⁷ In contrast, his later novels and critical essays deal extensively with major European authors and with the novel as a transnational phenomenon. Nevertheless, his experience as a native of a small Central European nation has shaped his thinking about Europe as a whole. He writes, "[A]longside the large nations Europe contains small nations, several of which have, in the past two centuries, attained or re-attained their political independence. Their existence may have brought me to understand that cultural diversity is the great European value [...] I worked out my own ideal of Europe thus: *maximum diversity in minimum space*" (*Curtain* 31). For Kundera, then, Europe itself is a kind of centrifuge, which, despite its relatively limited geographical space, accommodates a plethora of cultures and languages. To be sure, naming diversity as Europe's principal value is a controversial position, for then how does one account for the imperial tendency among not only Europe's great powers,

⁷⁷ Kundera would later reuse this title in his first book of criticism written in French, *L'art du roman* (1986).

but also nations that are now “small?” (Even Moravia, the part of the Czech Republic containing Brno, the town where Kundera was born, was itself an empire—Great Moravia—in the ninth and tenth centuries.)

By his own concession, Kundera’s definition of Europe only makes sense when considered in the realm of culture. Although his discussion of spheres of influence often deals with music, I will restrict myself to discussing the vectors that Kundera establishes between European nations in the tradition of the novel. “[I]f we consider just the history of the novel,” Kundera writes, “it was to Rabelais that Laurence Sterne was reacting, it was Sterne who set off Diderot [...] it was through his reflection on Joyce that Hermann Broch developed his own poetics of the novel, and it was Kafka who showed García Márquez the possibility of departing from tradition to ‘write another way’” (*Curtain* 35). Here a novelist’s sphere of influence is transnational—indeed, these authors may have had greater influence abroad than at home—and the development of the Central European novel (Broch) is influenced by an Irish novelist writing in English while another Central European writing in German (Kafka) in turn influences a South American novelist. In any part of Europe, including places where national consciousness began while its peoples were part of a large multinational empire, the local novelistic tradition is inseparable from the European tradition.

Nevertheless, national chauvinism, to say nothing of linguistic limitation, obscures how a novel both takes inspiration from and in turn contributes to this very tradition. On one hand, it is not always apparent how a work responds to and is influenced by an earlier work written in another language, and on the other hand, national concerns tend, Kundera argues, to elevate works in the national canon that are relatively

unimportant in the European canon. As evidence for this claim, Kundera cites a Paris newspaper poll listing “the most notable books in the whole history of France” (*Curtain* 40), in which a novel whose aesthetic impact was fairly limited—Hugo’s *Les Misérables*—came in first, while a writer whose work Kundera sees as far more influential in the European tradition as a whole—Rabelais—came in fourteenth (40-1). In this distinction, a writer whose aesthetic impact influences novels in other countries surpasses a writer whose concerns are limited by the national sphere. For Kundera, the transnational history of the European novel is continually “forgotten” by the isolated specialization of university disciplines and by provincialism both large and small. Provincialism, nationalism, and imperialism all embody the principle opposite Kundera’s Europe. That is, they are manifestations of *minimum diversity in maximum space*. Thus the cosmopolitan European novel is centrifugal while the national novel is centripetal, as is hegemony.

The Shifting Boundaries of Central Europe

If the threat to Central Europe’s culture had earlier stemmed from the universalizing tendencies of the Austro-Hungarian and other multinational empires and nationalist sentiment coming from the small nations themselves that indulged in mimicry of imperial posturing, the middle of the twentieth century brought new threats. Neville Chamberlain’s decision to hand Czechoslovakia over to Hitler only encouraged the latter’s imperial ambition, and it was only after Germany invaded Poland that the Allies declared war. If World War I shattered the geopolitical configuration of the region, resulting in a proliferation of new countries, World War II produced, after a delay of several years, a realignment of Europe. While I have argued that Central Europe should

be conceived as Western in terms of its cultural and political development, in the geopolitics of the postwar years the region's status was indeed liminal. Sandwiched between Germany, which had invaded the region's countries (even annexing Austria, the former regional power), and the Soviet Union, which had helped to liberate them, Central Europe was seemingly able to choose between two drastically different destinies. To the West lay the defeated, invasive, discriminatory ideology of Nazism. To be sure, the privileging of Germans over Slavs was commonplace during the Habsburg days, but Nazism's Aryan ideals intensified this bias to an unsettling degree. Meanwhile, to the East lay the rising ideology of Communism, exemplified by the Soviet Union, the vast majority of whose citizens, including Russians and Ukrainians, were fellow Slavs. Moreover, Communism promised the region's smaller nations a chance to seize their future by the reins. For the "small nations" of Central Europe, whose destiny had so often been not of their own choosing, the appeal of Communism was clear. The countries of Central Europe, including Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary, and Romania, chose Communism in the years after the end of World War II.

It did not take long for the Communist dream to dissolve into Stalinist terror, and many countries in the region attempted to distance themselves from the Soviet Union politically. Hungary, for example, temporarily withdrew from the Warsaw Pact during their 1956 revolution. In Yugoslavia, Tito espoused a "third way" political program that attempted to navigate between the Scylla of liberal capitalism and the Charybdis of authoritarian Communism, and in Czechoslovakia the gradual political and cultural liberalization of the 60s became known as the "Prague Spring." A simultaneous relaxation of state control and continuation of state support for culture led to such

explosions of culture like the Czechoslovak New Wave, which had an impact on world cinema wholly disproportionate to the country's small population size. Unfortunately for the Czechs, the Prague Spring reforms promising "socialism with a human face" threatened the Soviet Union's hegemonic plans for the region, and in August 1968 the Soviet-led Eastern bloc army invaded and silenced the reformist voices, demanding the retraction of then-President Dubček's liberal reforms and spurring a wave of emigration. The participation of Eastern bloc armies and the refusal of Western Europe to intervene meant, in effect, that this was the second time Czechoslovakia's fate had been delivered by the West into the hands of invaders, but the difference was that this deliverance shifted, as Kundera puts it, the border of Western Europe several hundred kilometers to the West. This cultural, ideological, and above all topographical shift turned Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Hungary from satellites of Vienna into satellites of Moscow. Furthermore, travel restrictions and border closures exoticized the nations in the eyes of the West and reduced them to pawns in the Cold War waged between the world's superpowers. The West condemned the invasion and offered sympathy to the oppressed Czechs, the elite of whom had taken refuge in their countries, but were seemingly content to let Central Europe come under the domination of Moscow.

In the 1970s, Milan Kundera, too, left Czechoslovakia for the West, settling first in the Breton capital of Rennes and then eventually in Paris. Although by this point he was an internationally renowned author, his readership no longer consisted of Czechs, save for émigré communities (such as in Canada, where Josef Škvorecký's Sixty Eight Publishers printed the Czech edition of *Kniha*), and Kundera appears to have become

acutely aware of his status as an exiled writer from “Eastern” Europe.⁷⁸ His book is attuned to the particularity of Bohemia and yet also at pains to situate itself as Western. At the same time, he appears to have chafed at such a pigeonholing description carrying no small amount of ideological baggage. Kundera’s first novel written as an exile in France, *Kniha*, originally written in Kundera’s native tongue, addresses these themes, yet simultaneously builds on the Central European tradition that makes up the bulk of this dissertation. The only author in this study to have read all three of his predecessors (Hašek, Musil, and Gombrowicz), Kundera shares many of their concerns, and there is an especial affinity insofar as he, too, is modernist rather than postmodernist. Other thematic issues linking Kundera to the trio above include a critique of hegemony and the effect of power on the national subject’s psyche. Also, like the other authors in this study, Kundera links these concerns to the problem of narrative closure.

The historical events that inform Kundera’s novel are thus situated firmly in the twentieth century, in contrast to the cultural and historical remainders to which the previous authors in this study respond. Not simply as monolithic as 1939, 1948, and 1968, the rise and gradual disillusionment of the Czechs with communism and their subsequent attempts to reform it must be considered, too. Indeed, other world events, such as the U.S.-backed coup in Chile in 1973 inform this novel; *Kniha* leaves the strain of nationalism peculiar to the Czechs, and which he developed in *The Joke*, behind and moves into the broader arena. There are two primary reasons for this. The first is that Kundera does not take a widespread knowledge of the events in his homeland for

⁷⁸ In *The Curtain* Kundera writes, “In the nineteen-sixties I left my country for France, and there I was astonished to discover that I was ‘an East European exile’” (43). Actually, Kundera did not emigrate until the early 1970s; I do not know why he gives the wrong decade here, but it does serve to distinguish the author’s biography from the narrator’s.

granted. The ever-increasing debris of history, reminiscent of Benjamin's "Angel of History," means that catastrophic events in small nations quickly recede from memory: "The assassination of Allende quickly covered over the memory of the Russian invasion of Bohemia, the bloody massacre in Bangladesh caused Allende to be forgotten, the din of war in the Sinai Desert drowned out the groans of Bangladesh, the massacres in Cambodia caused the Sinai to be forgotten, and so on" (9-10). History is a continual onslaught, and each of these events has no more importance than the next.

The second reason that Kundera leaves the national problem behind is his philosophical leaning; his existentialism simply exceeds national boundaries. To be sure, existentialism often rears its head when Kundera's narrator discusses politics because hegemonic nations have an interest in making sure these events are lost to memory. Kundera has one of his characters, Mirek, say in 1971, "The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting" (4). Although the narrator attributes this thought to a character from whom he maintains no small ironic distance, the identification of power and motivated forgetting, on one hand, and that of memory with the repressed, on the other, occurs throughout the book, often in the narrator's discourse.

Organization and Structure

Kniha is difficult to discuss as a coherent work because it is so stylistically heterogeneous, composed almost like a seven-part musical piece, with each part's primary narrative featuring characters who do not appear in other parts, save for the character of Tamina, who appears in Parts Four and Six. The narrative lines are interrupted by semi-autobiographical anecdotes of the narrator, a stand-in for Kundera, and philosophical digressions by the same. Indeed, the choice of the word *kniha*—

book—instead of *roman* (“novel”) suggests that Kundera does not think of this as a novel in the conventional sense. (At the same time, the word *kniha* gestures toward the “books” of the Hebrew and Christian Bibles, respectively, which inform much of the symbolism in this work.) In many ways *Kniha* marks a departure for Kundera. His three earlier novels—*Život je jinde* (*Life is Elsewhere*), *Žert* (*The Joke*), and *Valčík na rozložení* (*The Farewell Waltz*), were divided into five- or seven-part “movements,” but always held together by a common narrative thread. Themes appear throughout all seven sections of this book, most apparently those of laughter and forgetting, but there are six different narrative lines that do not overlap except thematically. *Kniha* therefore disrupts narrative coherence, but at the same time, multiple readings of this novel continually open up new associations and meanings, precisely as the epigraph to this chapter promises.

Although the narrator named Milan Kundera is a presence in *Kniha*, the reader must be cautioned against equating this narratorial presence with the views of Kundera himself. For starters, the narrator’s knowledge is limited and he is no less a victim of General Irony than his characters. Indeed, his characters may even get the drop on him at times, as an episode with Mirek shows (30). Second, Kundera’s narrator is a *persona* in the truest sense of the word, a mask (in this case a joker/demon), and he explicitly calls attention to this fact in the work itself.

A Question of Central European Perspective

In Part Two of *Kniha*, a couple named Karel and Markéta are enduring a prolonged visit from Karel’s mother, whose eyesight is failing in her old age. On a walk in the countryside, Mama mistakes boundary stones for a village. Although this is

partially a function of old age, Karel realized that his mother's perspective has always been at odds with that of people around her. In mid-August 1968, the pears in Mama's garden were ripe, and she had invited the local pharmacist to come pick them. However, in the days immediately after the Eastern Bloc invasion of August 21 in the same year, the pharmacist "neither came nor apologized" (40), infuriating Mama. Initially outraged by what he considers to be Mama's pettiness, Karel "began to feel a secret sympathy for Mama's perspective, which had a big pear tree in the foreground and somewhere in the distance a tank no bigger than a ladybug, ready at any moment to fly away out of sight" (41). *Kniha*'s structure mirrors this shift in perspective, as political conditions in Czechoslovakia, looming large in the novel's early parts, either become less important or are universalized in the later parts.

Kundera's nostalgia for his lost homeland is manifested in a shift of geographic perspective. Like Mama, for whom Russian tanks are unimportant while pears assume heightened importance, the narrator writes specifically about Prague, but refuses to identify the locations in the West where parts of the novel take place until, living in the Breton capital of Rennes, he has a tear in his eye that acts as a microscope that allows him to see all the way back to Prague. The Bohemian capital thus looms in *Kniha*, as its famous castle does in Kafka's *The Castle*. However, the paradox of *Kniha* is that the focus on Central Europe never becomes a cry for Western intervention in his homeland or a mere condemnation of the Soviet Union. Rather, this focus allows Kundera to attack the politically motivated forgetting of the West.

Dissident Literature or Examination of the Human Condition?

“All my life in Czechoslovakia I fought against literature being reduced to a mere instrument of propaganda. Then I found myself in the West only to discover that here people write about the literature of the so-called Eastern European countries as if it were indeed nothing more than a propaganda instrument, be it pro- or anti-Communist. I must confess that I don’t like the word ‘dissident,’ particularly when applied to art.” —Milan Kundera, “Comedy is Everywhere”

The novel’s tour-de-force opening establishes two sides to the theme of forgetting that lends itself to the title.⁷⁹ The narrator recounts how, in 1948, Klement Gottwald stepped out onto the balcony of a Prague palace in order to speak before the Czech people. It was snowing, and Gottwald was bareheaded. In a comradely gesture, Gottwald’s friend Clementis removed his fur hat and placed it on Gottwald’s head. This event was photographed and widely distributed, but four years later, Clementis was charged with treason and hanged. The propaganda section airbrushed Clementis out of reprints of the photograph. “Od té doby stojí už Gottwald na balkóně sám. Tam, kde býval Clementis, je jen prázdná zed’ paláce. Z Clementise zbyla jen čepice na Gottwaldově hlavě” (9). “Ever since, Gottwald has been alone on the balcony. Where Clementis stood, there is only the balcony. Where Clementis stood, there is only the bare palace wall. Nothing remains of Clementis but the fur hat on Gottwald’s head” (3-4). Although this fictional scene will reappear with tragic overtones much later in the novel, here it appears as darkly comic. Forgetting here is clearly motivated, entrenched interests preferring to erase anything that appears as a crack in the edifice of their power structure. In its political manifestation, forgetting is a form of repression in *Kniha*. Nevertheless, despite the official “forgetting” of Clementis, he cannot be fully erased from the photograph. As in psychoanalytic theory, the repressed is not annihilated but *returns* in

⁷⁹ In the first Czech edition of *Kniha*, part one of the novel was titled “Clementisova čepice” (Clementis’s hat), but in later editions this title has been changed to “Lost Letters” in order to highlight the thematic similarity with part four.

unexpected ways. The propaganda section has not effaced all traces of Clementis because the fur hat remains on Gottwald's head in the photos. Thus, a ghostly remainder always persists in spite of repression, creating a tension between repression and this remainder. This tension is manifested in the juxtaposition of the remainder's innocuous, banal appearance and its actual signification for the historically astute.

Because the first section of Part One ends abruptly, the story of Clementis' hat appears as a political allegory, a reading that is further reinforced by the beginning of the second section: "Je rok 1971 a Mirek říká: Boj člověka proti moci je boj paměti proti zapomnění" (9). "It is 1971, and Mirek says: The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting" (4). If we take Mirek's utterance at face value, forgetting will function in the novel as nothing more than political repression. This interpretation would reduce *Kniha* to a dissident novel about life behind the Iron Curtain and collapse the distance between the author and his fictional characters. Indeed, in order to suit a reading of this aphorism to Kundera's own position, critics like Herbert Eagle have argued that "Kundera moves in and out of the minds of his characters, blending his own discourse with their represented discourse" (153). Eagle claims that "Mirek is a *privileged* character (privileged by the author with certain understandings which are very close to the author's own)" (Ibid). Even, however, within the immediate context of the quotation, such a reading cannot withstand scrutiny. The narrator immediately and ironically undermines Mirek's statement by showing it to be mediated by ulterior motives. In the very next sentence the narrator informs us: "With this [comment] he is trying to justify what his friends call carelessness: meticulously keeping a diary, preserving his correspondence, compiling the minutes of all the meetings where they

discuss the situation and ponder what to do” (4). The meticulousness of Mirek’s note-taking shows quite clearly that he is anything but careless; he has an immediate and self-interested reason for making this claim, and indeed, his statement will come to seem increasingly hypocritical over the course of part one of the novel. I will return to Mirek shortly, but the ironic distance the narrator establishes from Mirek’s point of view suggests that Clementis’s hat is not simply reducible to a strictly political allegory.

The comic pathos of the hat—its reminder of Clementis’s existence despite his official effacement from both history books and photographs—suggests that memory persists in the material world, provided one knows what to look for, and also suggests that this materiality contains a counter-narrative to institutionalized forgetting. That the persistence of the material against ideology produces a comic effect is explicitly shown several pages later, when Mirek stops at a mechanic’s shop in order to have a defective starter fixed. While looking under the hood, the mechanic tells the following joke: “Na Václavském náměstí v Praze stojí člověk a blije. Kolem něho jde jiný muž, dívá se na něho a smutně kývá hlavou: Kdybyste věděl, jak vám rozumím...” (13). “In Wenceslaus Square, in Prague, a guy is throwing up. Another guy comes up to him, pulls a long face, shakes his head, and says: ‘I know just what you mean’” (9). The material returns here (in the form of vomit) as something that communicates more succinctly and effectively than anything the man can say.⁸⁰ By appearing within the form of a joke, the material’s function as a vehicle for the return of the repressed is linked explicitly to the laughter in

⁸⁰ That both the hat and the vomit are material suggests that we can read them as occupying the position of the Real, in which case perhaps both a “reading” of the hat’s presence and the man’s vomit are exemplary of the discourse of the analyst, in which the *objet petit a*, representing the Real, serves as the agent of the discourse.

Kniha's title. The comic moment thus contains a kind of truth, albeit one that does not function in the service of a particular ideology.

While the material "remembers," forgetting, in the sense that Kundera means it, is not simply the process by which a repressive regime removes traces of those with whom it disagrees. Rather, forgetting is a symptom of modernity. The fifth section of Part One begins: "The assassination of Allende quickly covered over the memory of the Russian invasion of Bohemia, the bloody massacre in Bangladesh caused Allende to be forgotten, the din of war in the Sinai Desert drowned out the groans in Bangladesh, the massacres in Cambodia caused the Sinai to be forgotten, and so on" (9-10). The agency in this sentence belongs to the rapid succession of catastrophic historical events that flit into and out of the collective memory of mankind, suggesting that the problem of forgetting is less one of specific political repression than one of man's incapacity to process such an onslaught of tragedy. Recalling Frankfurt critic Walter Benjamin's meditations on the *Angelus Novus* painting, in which the "angel of history," propelled into the future, looks backward and sees one single catastrophe while the rest of us see a chain of events, Kundera's formulation of forgetting suggests that the same process is at work in *Kniha*. "At a time," the narrator muses,

when history still made its way slowly, the few events were easily remembered and woven into a backdrop, known to everyone, before which private life unfolded the gripping show of its adventures. Nowadays time moves forward at a rapid pace. Forgotten overnight, a historical event glistens the next day like the morning dew and thus is no longer the backdrop to a narrator's tale but rather an

amazing *adventure* enacted against the background of the overfamiliar banality of private life. (10)

In the premodern era, life was still isolated from the rest of the world, and there were thus simply fewer events that had historical significance beyond their own spatially-delimited origin. News of an event like the invasion of Bohemia or an assassination in a small South American country would have likely remained within its immediate vicinity, but with the growing interconnectedness of nations and news, an early version of what we now call globalization, these events are reported all over the world and their sheer volume undermines and overwhelms our ability to grasp the significance of any one of them. Forgetting is endemic to the modern condition, equally the result of the increased pace of history and humanity's incapacity for full understanding.

Although forgetting is a force identified with historical progress that humans are too weak to withstand, forgetting is also the result of interests on the personal, rather than the political level. This is clear from the story of Mirek, which is the primary narrative line of part one. Mirek is driving to a town several hundred kilometers outside of Prague, where a woman named Zdena, Mirek's lover a quarter-century earlier, now lives. Mirek wants to retrieve some love letters he wrote to Zdena in the heady days of their relationship, when they were both zealous communists. Mirek's aphorism about the contentious relationship between man and forgetting stems from the same motive as his visit to Zdena. In Mirek's self-fashioning, he is a proud dissident who has done nothing against the constitution, and therefore has nothing to fear from the authorities. However, on his drive out to the town where Zdena lives, he "[thinks] he should already have moved the papers compromising him and his friends" (13), revealing that Mirek is

disingenuous. His excuses to his friends ring hollow and his behavior, which lands both him and his friends in prison, is all the more irresponsible. Mirek is constructing a narrative about himself, intentionally leaving behind evidence that will portray him as a principled man of resistance.

Far more damning of Mirek, in his own eyes, are the letters he once wrote. “It is an inviolable right of the novelist to rework his novel,” the narrator asserts. “If the opening does not please him, he can rewrite it or delete it. But Zdena’s existence denied Mirek that author’s prerogative. Zdena insisted on remaining on the opening pages of the novel and did not let herself be crossed out” (15). In attempting to erase Zdena from his autobiographical narrative, the dissident Mirek shows himself to be as susceptible to motivated forgetting as the regime he opposes. Motivated forgetting thus becomes symptomatic of inauthenticity insofar as it is directed at gaining the approval of the Other, in this case his imagined audience.

Because Mirek cannot erase Zdena from his narrative, he tries to rationalize her presence therein. Interestingly, these explanations reveal limitations on the narrator’s knowledge. The narrator asks why Mirek was ashamed of her, and suggests that the easiest explanation is because Mirek quickly turned against Communism while Zdena remained faithful to the Party. However, the narrator himself doesn’t believe this explanation, suggesting instead that Zdena’s homely physical appearance is the real reason for Mirek’s shame. He offers this explanation instead: “Zdena se na něm provniila něčím mnohem horším. Byla ošklivá” (17). “Zdena was guilty of something even worse. She was ugly” (15). Further calling into question Mirek’s motives, the narrator argues that having an ugly mistress in one’s personal history condemns a man’s

chances with beautiful women. In order to be desired, Mirek must identify what beautiful women want, and beautiful women “look for men who have had beautiful women” (16). The explanation he offers up—men want beautiful women as a means to get other beautiful women—*is* sexist. Like any generalized stereotype, it mistakes a particular position for the universal, assuming that since Mirek is a man, he must feel a certain way about any and all unattractive women, let alone Zdena. Passages like this are occasionally cited as evidence of Kundera’s sexism, if not outright misogyny, but I disagree with this interpretation. Whether Kundera the author shares these views or not, they are the views of the narrator, whose speculation about Mirek’s thoughts reveals his own limitations and makes him immediately problematic.

Indeed, the reader will shortly discover that the narrator is again wrong about Mirek. As he is returning to Prague, Mirek is stopped at a railroad crossing, and notices that “the railroad station’s windows are decorated with flowerpots filled with begonias [...] From a long-forgotten time the image comes to him of another white house with the red glow of begonia petals on its windowsills [...] At the window, among the flowers, a very big nose appears. Mirek is twenty; he looks up at that nose and feels immense love” (29). The immense love is of course for Zdena. Like Clementis’s hat and the Prager’s vomit, Zdena’s nose, here grotesquely contrasted with the more conventionally beautiful flowers, is the return of the repressed, providing a more “real” counternarrative (Mirek is ashamed of Zdena neither because of his political leanings nor because of his womanizing, but because he had loved her). Mirek immediately “wants to step quickly on the gas so as to escape that memory” (29-30). “But this time,” the narrator interjects,

“I am not going to let myself be fooled” (30).⁸¹ Here the narrator has explicitly acknowledged making a mistake in imputing his own sexist explanation to Mirek. This passage serves to undermine attempts to equate the narrator’s position with Kundera’s own. Every word and thought of both the characters and the narrator must be read in context, and *Kniha*’s context frequently undermines any definitive “key” that might be proposed for the novel.

Mirek’s revisionism highlights the question of narration and narrative status in *Kniha*. Seduced by his own celebrity during the years of the Prague Spring, “he appeared on television more and more, becoming well known” (14). After the Soviet invasion, the secret police hound Mirek for his outspoken views, but Mirek “was in love with his destiny, and even his march toward ruin seemed noble and beautiful to him” (14). The narrator employs a familiar Czech word, *osud*,⁸² in order to comment ironically on Mirek’s ambitions. The narrator of Hašek’s *Osudy* employed the term in its rarely-used plural form in order to subvert narrative convention and its drive toward totalization of meaning (what Peter Brooks calls metaphor through metonymy⁸³). At the same time, the use of *osudy* commented on modernity insofar as Švejk’s “fortunes” possessed an agency that Švejk did not and were external to him. *Kniha*’s narrator is using this second aspect of *osud*: “It is as if his life had freed itself and suddenly had interests of its own, which did not correspond at all to Mirek’s. This is how, I believe, life turns itself into destiny. Destiny has no intention of lifting a finger for Mirek [...] whereas Mirek is ready to do everything for his destiny (for its grandeur, its clarity, its beauty, its style, its intelligible

⁸¹ “Chce rychle šlápnout na plyn a uniknout té vzpomínce. Ale já se nenechám tentokrát ošidit” (*Kniha* 27).

⁸² See my discussion of the significance of *Osudy* in chapter 2 of this dissertation, p ____.

⁸³ See my discussion in chapter 1.

meaning)" (14). Of these parenthetical modifiers, "intelligible meaning" strikes me as most important. Whereas one's life is complicated, contradictory, and inconsistent, the possibility of a single overarching destiny creates, through its repression of contradiction, a singular narrative line that effaces a person's particularity in favor the creation of a conventional (in this case, heroic dissident) narrative. While Mirek's *osud* appears in the much more commonly used singular, we learn that it is in fact an illusion that can only be sustained by the operation of plotting,⁸⁴ the emphasizing of certain elements of his biography and the simultaneous subordination of others. Mirek's *osud* as a dissident is hardly singular. Like the best and brightest of his generation, he became an ardent communist in the 1940s, and like many who later came to regret their earlier zeal, he spoke out against the excesses of communism twenty years later. However, his autobiographical mythmaking is itself a lie because it excludes the more banal considerations that motivate his actions. Mirek's stories of a confrontational break with his landowning father are made up, as are his weak justifications for his relationship with Zdena. Ultimately, Mirek's self-mythologizing is the consistent theme of his life. The obverse of this mythologizing is motivated forgetting, and Mirek's conflation of forgetting with power intentionally obscures his own constant intentional forgetting.

In order to make clear that Mirek's story is not simply specific to life under totalitarianism, the narrator explains: "Mirek rewrote history just like the Communist Party, like all political parties, like all peoples, like all mankind" (30). The last group here clearly includes *Kniha*'s narrator, who, however problematic he may be, is not writing only about Czechoslovakia. Part One of *Kniha*, then, in addition to establishing the basic themes of the novel (laughter and forgetting), provides evidence of the

⁸⁴ See my discussion of plotting/emplotment in chapter 1.

following: first, we should *not* equate the pithy observations of each part's protagonist with those of the narrator. Contra Eagle, Mirek is not a privileged character. The narrator continually retains an ironic distance that allows him to be critical of his characters even when he empathizes with their plights. Second, the narrator ("Milan Kundera") is not to be confused with Milan Kundera the author. They may share similar biographies, but as the narrator's mis-identification of Mirek's motivation shows, he too, is fallible. Third, *Kniha* is not merely a novel about laughter and forgetting as the dominant phenomena that allow us to understand totalitarian (Communist) society, but a novel about laughter and forgetting as existential themes.

Part Three of *Kniha*, titled "The Angels" in both the original Czech and the English editions, is a departure from Parts One and Two in that it contains two parallel narratives and two more conventionally philosophical sections. Overall "The Angels" has nine numbered sections. The first narrative line is that of two American schoolgirls studying abroad in a coastal French town. The second narrative line involves the narrator himself—Milan Kundera—writing a horoscope under a pseudonym in the early 1970s. Finally, two sections are philosophical treatises on laughter, the first a criticism of the laughter Kundera opposes, the second a delineation of how he understands laughter. If we designate the sections on the American schoolgirls with the letter A, the philosophical sections with B, and the parallel narrative of Kundera in Prague with C, we get the following sequence: 1-A, 2-B, 3-C, 4-B, 5-A, 6-C, 7-C, 8-A, 9-C. The separate narrative lines are thus divided, appearing almost as notes in a musical movement. "The Angels" begins with a lighthearted tone, only to become increasingly tragicomic as the section wears on. If one separates this nine-section part into three triads, the first three

movements are fairly light in tone; even the cynical opinion of angelic laughter in section two finishes in a comic note in the laughable behavior of the schoolgirls. The second triad, however, begins to turn more serious, and each section ends with the protagonists (even the devil) having suffered a loss, while the third triad finally combines the motifs of these three separate strands, as the schoolgirls become angels (linked to the philosophical sections) and float off in a ring dance (linked to the Prague sections). The narrator expresses a solidarity (and even a familial kinship) with one of the characters in the A narrative line.

“The Angels” begins with two American students studying Eugene Ionesco’s *Rhinoceros* for a summer course “in a small French town on the Mediterranean coast” (77). The students, named Gabrielle and Michelle, are the favorite students of the teacher, Madame Raphael. Each of these details is important here. First is the play the girls are studying. The Romanian-born Ionesco hails from Central Europe, and yet found his greatest literary fame living and writing in France. The second detail that attracts attention is that the names of both students and their teacher are the (feminized) names of archangels—Gabriel, Michael, and Raphael, respectively. It is significant that the girls are American, and it is also striking that while the small town is located on the French coast, it nevertheless remains unidentified. In what follows, the geographical specifications of both the students and the town in which they are studying suggests that the West is as guilty of forgetting, especially in relation to Central Europe, as the totalitarian regimes of the latter region.

The girls’ conversation is a parody of structuralist discourse. Gabrielle begins, “I don’t really get what it means, that they all turn into rhinoceroses,” and Michelle

responds that “You have to see it as a symbol” (77). Gabrielle agrees: “Literature is made up of signs” (77). Although the girls clearly do not understand the significance of structuralism’s insight—a problem that plagues much more sophisticated scholars as well—this answer proves unsatisfactory: “[B]ut even if you assume they don’t really turn into rhinoceroses, but only into signs, why do they become just that sign and not another one?” Michelle asks (77). Michelle’s question is incisive, penetrating to Kundera’s argument against structuralist platitudes.⁸⁵ If all literature is reduced to “signs,” not only is it severed from its real-world referent, but *all* real-world referents are reduced to mere signs and their import and specificity are “forgotten.” The forgetting of any text’s specificity in favor of an overarching theoretical blanket-statement is an example of what Lacan calls the discourse of the university. In *Kniha*, this discourse is literally taught in the French academy, but the nationality of the students reveals it to be a transnational phenomenon endemic to the West.

The explanation that the rhinoceros is a phallic sign intended to create a comic effect gives the girls adequate satisfaction that they have fully comprehended the material. They “looked at each other, and the corners of their mouths quivered with pride. Then, all of a sudden, they emitted short, shrill spasmodic sounds very difficult to describe in words” (78). Anticipating Kundera’s elaboration of “categorical agreement with being” in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, the girls’ laughter expresses an unearned self-satisfaction because it shows that they believe they’ve unlocked the secret of Ionesco’s play even though it is clear to the reader that the opposite is true. This laughter creates a thematic bridge into the next section of Part Three, which begins with a

⁸⁵ Although structuralism had its origins in Prague, from where it spread to the West, by the time of *Kniha*’s writing it was a decidedly Western theory insofar as literary theory behind the Iron Curtain had devolved into a kind of “vulgar” Marxism.

lengthy quotation from the feminist philosopher Annie Leclerc's *Parole de femme* (1976). In this quotation, the female narrator inquires whether people care about laughter, which she then qualifies by distinguishing "real" laughter as that which is "beyond joking, mockery, ridicule" (79). For Leclerc, the comic is inauthentic when it is tendentious and takes an object—that is, when it distinguishes subjects from one another. On the other hand, the narrator suggests that the moment one assumes that people possess a primordial unity, one has fallen into the trap of mysticism.

By contrast, Leclerc's real laughter is "total laughter, taking us into its immense tide. Bursts of repeated, rushing, unleashed laughter [...] Laughter of sensual pleasure, sensual pleasure of laughter" (79). As the narrator notes, this laughter "exalts [...] female *jouissance*—gentle, pervasive, and continuing sensual pleasure" (79). Rather than differentiating between subject positions, this laughter creates an oceanic sensation that effaces differences in favor of a return to undifferentiated *jouissance*, pure pre-linguistic sensual pleasure. For French psychoanalysts, this return to *jouissance* is always already impossible—the subject is voided of his *jouissance* once he enters the symbolic order—but in this parody of Leclerc's mystical vision of laughter, which identifies the social with patriarchy, it becomes a utopian move that merely detaches laughter from the real situations that generate it.

The narrator avers, "Jenom pitomec bz se posmíval tomuto manifestu rozkoše" (65). "Only a fool could laugh at this manifesto of joy" (80). The narrator himself, presumably, is the one to play the role of the fool here. The jester is typically the only one who can ridicule the king and other nobles without fear of retribution, so in adopting this role, the narrator is not calling himself stupid for criticizing Leclerc's argument, but

rather establishing his role as the representative of tendentious laughter. Someone bursting out in ecstatic laughter, the narrator argues, “is without memory and without desire, for he is emitting his shout into the world’s present moment and wishes to know only that” (81). Leclerc’s laughter, then, is itself a willed forgetting, a willed ignorance that feigns to delight in sensuousness. The narrator exposes the sinister side of this laughter, noting that “All churches, all underwear manufacturers, all generals, all political parties, are in agreement about that kind of laughter, and all of them rush to put the images of the two laughing runners on the billboards” (81). For the narrator, then, mystical laughter is inauthentic, as evidenced by the frequency with which its appropriated by capitalists and tyrants alike.

The third section of “The Angels” introduces the parallel narrative of Milan Kundera the narrator, who has been driven from his job after the Soviet invasion of 1968. Because of his fame, the blacklisted Kundera is offered numerous jobs by friends. Kundera declines most of them because the ever-vigilant police are watching his associations, and he does not want to endanger his friends. However, one friend, a woman identified only as R., offers him a job writing an astrology column at a magazine. Kundera’s acceptance is doubly humorous, first because official socialist doctrine rejects astrology and religion, and second because a blacklisted author is writing the horoscopes. Kundera notes: “The only amusing thing about it all was my existence, the existence of a man erased from history, from literary histories, and from the telephone book, of a dead man now returned to life in an amazing reincarnation to preach the great truth of astrology to [...] young people in a socialist country” (84). Kundera’s existence thus functions in the same manner as Clementis’s hat. His horoscope is the return of the

repressed, but because his “death” is figurative rather than literal, he can continue to write. This begins to produce a positive change in the real world because the magazine’s editor-in-chief asks for a personal horoscope, and Kundera, who knows the man, writes an eerily accurate horoscope that causes the editor to improve his behavior. Although the editor believes “that the stars merely promise him suffering” (85), he is the victim of a practical, rather than cosmic, joke. This section thus shows the comic moment as the return of the repressed. Like the two previous sections, this one ends on a more comic note. While in the first two sections the comic situations were more critical, perhaps unfairly so, in the third section the comic has a subversive function.

Things begin to change in the fourth section of Part Three, an essay on two different kinds of laughter. Not surprisingly, Kundera’s idea of what constitutes authentic laughter is diametrically opposed to Leclerc’s. For Kundera, the devil—history’s original fool—“is the one who refuses to grant any rational meaning to that divinely created world” (86), in contrast to the angels, “the partisans not of good but of divine creation” (86). In this model, divine creation is meaningful in itself, all questions explained away by reference to God’s will just as, in Gabrielle and Michelle’s literature class, all questions are explained by reference to literature’s status as a system of signs. Both ignore real referents and use metanarratives to construct a rational understanding of the world. For Kundera, however, the world is full of things that simply defy rational explanation, for example a Marxist who believes in horoscopes. Whenever “things suddenly [turn] out different[ly] from what they pretended to be,” the comic results. The devil’s laughter merely signals acknowledgment of these phenomena.

Because the devil's laughter acknowledges the obscene (from the Greek *ob-skene*, "offstage"), it provokes a response. The first angel to hear the devil's laughter "understood that such laughter was directed against God and against the dignity of his works. He knew that he must react somehow. Unable to come up with anything of his own, he aped his adversary. Opening his mouth, he emitted broken, spasmodic sounds in the higher reaches of his vocal range" (87). In contrast to the overtly tendentious laughter of the devil, the angel's laughter disguises its tendentiousness as agreement with being itself. The angel's laughter is also imitative. The angel's laughter serves to provoke further laughter from the devil "because the laughing angel [is] infinitely comical" (87). However, these two opposed figures create a stalemate. The narrator writes that the angels "have tricked us with a semantic imposture" (87). Because the angel's shrill laughter is virtually indistinguishable from the devil's, we become unable to distinguish the fundamental ontological/epistemological attitudes that each form of laughter connotes. The angel's non-comic laughter, then, is not merely disingenuous, but dangerous because it blunts the comic edge of real, subversive laughter opposed to regimes of forgetting.

Having distinguished comic laughter from its angelic counterpart, the narrator begins the fifth section with the description of a photograph in which a row of riot police, arms at the ready, watch a group of young people dancing in a ring before them. "Je to zřejmě chvíle čekání před střetnutím s policií, která hlídá bezpečnost atomové elektrárny, vojenského cvičiště, sekretariátu nějaké politické strany nebo okna nějakého vyslanectví" (71). "It is plainly an interlude before a clash with police guarding a nuclear power plant, a military training camp, the offices of a political party, or the windows of an embassy"

(88). What is immediately striking about this photograph is its contrast with the photograph of Gottwald that began the novel. The photograph of Gottwald depicts a specific place and time, and in addition to being a photograph of a historical event, the photo has its own repressed history, as Clementis has been airbrushed out of the photo. In contrast, this photograph “plainly” (zřejmě) depicts the *interlude* before a clash, while the specific circumstances of the clash are in doubt. The important thing in the photograph is the contrast between the row formation of the riot police and the ring dance of the youth. The narrator “thinks” he understands these young people: “[T]heir chests swell with an intense feeling of innocence: they are united not by *marching*, like soldiers or fascist formations, but by *dancing*, like children” (88). Although this childlike innocence will take on sinister overtones much later in the novel, the image of the ring dance becomes immediately important in Part Three. Madame Raphael, the girls’ schoolteacher, has clipped the photo and gazes at it dreamily because she wishes to dance in a ring. The ring dance symbolizes for Madame Raphael a reprieve from her loneliness, a perfect union with others, and she has joined various movements,

[...]at first in the Methodist Church (her father was a religious fanatic), then in the Communist Party, then in the Trotskyist Party, then in a Trotskyist splinter party, then in the movement against abortion (a child has a right to life!), then in the movement to legalize abortion (a woman has a right to her body!), then she looked for it in Lenin, in Zen Buddhism, in Mao Tse-tung, among the followers of yoga, in the school of the *nouveau roman*, and finally she wishes at least to be in perfect harmony with her students, to be at one with them, meaning that she always compels them to think and say the same things she does[...] (89)

The perpetual nature of Madame Raphael's search suggests that these movements fail to provide the unity she so desperately seeks. At the same time, the narrator seems to be implying that these movements (or at least people's interest therein) arise in response to the isolation of modern life. The differences in the nature of the movements Madame Raphael has joined and the narrator's sarcastic parenthetical asides, especially those elucidating her contradictory positions on abortion, suggest that the narrator views participation in these movements as having very little to do with the stated purposes of the movement itself. The narrator is downright Nietzschean in his attitude toward mass movements. Perhaps the darkest aspect of this description lies in the way Madame Raphael, once in a position of relative power, bullies her students into a false agreement.

While Madame Raphael "forlornly roam[s]" the streets of the unnamed Mediterranean town, her American students, sitting in their residence hall, again indulge in their reductive reading of Ionesco's play and begin to laugh. The narrator repeats the quotation from Leclerc's *Parole de femme*, this time directly describing the girls' laughter. This moment conflates 1970s feminist criticism, literary reductionism, and angelic laughter, but Kundera is not finished. Alone in the streets, suddenly Madame Raphael "raise[s] her head as if a fragment of melody carried on the wings of a breeze were reaching her from afar [...] It seemed to her that somewhere nearby a flame of great laughter was blazing, that perhaps somewhere nearby people were holding hands and dancing in a ring..." (90-91). This scene adds the ring dance to the constellation of angelic laughter and 1970s criticism. While this scene foreshadows the eventual climax of Part Three, the narrator indulges in a final critical aside as the girls stop laughing and "suddenly they looked wearied by the prospect of a night devoid of love" (91). This

moment finds a resonance at the end of Part Five of *Kniha*, where the poet that Kundera calls Lermontov espouses socialist realism as compensation for his “hypercelibacy” (212).

Despite the narrator’s critical distance from both Madame Raphael and her students, he is no less tempted by the impulse toward mass solidarity. The narrator returns to Prague in the next section, walking alone as his countrymen dance continuously in ring formation “nearly every month, because [they] always had something to celebrate, an anniversary or some other event” (91). The frequent ring dances in Czechoslovakia are the same as the confrontation in the photograph in that the specific occasion is not important, only the proclamation of solidarity with the self-evidence of the righteousness of creation. However, the narrator has been expelled from the party “and had to leave the ring dance” (92).⁸⁶ Importantly, the narrator “always retain[s] a kind of faint yearning for the ring dance, because we are all inhabitants of a universe where everything turns in circles” (92). The desire for this solidarity is thus as wholly authentic as the movements which capitalize on said desire are inauthentic. The ring dance embodies one of the fundamental contradictions of human existence, namely the striving toward union with the divine that can never be achieved. This is *the* existential paradox for Kundera, and as we have seen, it is responsible for a range of brutal practices, from those as innocuous as academic dogmatism to the severity of political totalitarianism. They are merely different spaces on the same continuum.

The final three sections of Part Three race toward a desultory conclusion, the victory of the angels. The fallen Kundera is contacted by a young man for a meeting with

⁸⁶ Kundera himself was expelled from the Communist Party, and this experience also forms the starting point for his novel *The Joke*, in which the protagonist Ludvik (the given name of Kundera’s father) is expelled for a bitter postcard that he sends to his girlfriend.

R., and he goes to an apartment to meet her. She has been interrogated by the police about her association with him. When Kundera cracks a joke about it, “[s]he laughed, and though the laugh lasted barely half a second, it rang in my ears like a tentative promise of salvation. For it was just this laughter I wanted to hear when I wrote those silly articles on Pisces, Virgo, and Aries, it was just this laughter I imagined as my reward” (99). R.’s laughter, no matter how brief, is welcome here precisely because it is unforced, in contrast to the forced laughter of Leclerc’s angelic sisters.⁸⁷ It is spontaneous and unexpected, even by R. herself, and its spontaneity gives it a ring of authenticity. While R. and Kundera plan what to do next, she gets up several times to go to the toilet: “Each time, she came back to the sound of water flushing and with a look of embarrassed panic. That brave girl was ashamed of her fear. That woman of taste was ashamed of her bowels raging in front of a stranger” (100). Where Kundera’s horoscope column was the comical return of the repressed, now it is the material embodiment of R.’s anxiety, her malfunctioning bowels. In the final section, Kundera recalls that meeting because, although he had never considered R. in a sexual manner before, “hearing the slosh of water refilling the toilet tank” causes Kundera to feel “a wild desire to make love to her. More exactly: a wild desire to rape her. To throw myself on her and seize her in a single embrace along with all her unbearably exciting contradictions [...] And it seemed to me that lying hidden in these contradictions was her very essence, that treasure, that nugget of gold, that diamond concealed in her depths” (105). The unexpected glimpse of a someone without their ego-armor is the source of the erotic; with memory comes desire. Nevertheless, the narrator admits, “It may be that the insane

⁸⁷ “I said to my sister, or she said to me, come over, shall we play laughter? We stretched out side by side on a bed and began. By pretending, of course. Forced laughter. Laughable laughter[...]” (79).

desire to rape R. was merely a desperate effort to grab at something in the midst of falling” (106). Although they share similar yearnings, Kundera and Madame Raphael are different in at least this one respect: Kundera refuses to exploit his power over R. at this moment, but we see the sadistic urge it produces.

When Gabrielle and Michelle have finally prepared their class presentation, they appear before the class with “an odd cardboard object fitted with a rubber band” (101). Michelle fastens the object, a paper rhinoceros horn, over her nose, and Gabrielle produces another “horn” and does the same. Even without the description of the class’s horrified reaction, it is clear that their presentation is producing an unwittingly ironic effect. In their adherence to silly platitudes about literature (they claim that Ionesco wants to produce “a comic effect,” as if that explains the significance of the play) that they do not fully understand, the girls are attempting to conform to prevailing academic dogma. By affixing cardboard horns to their heads, they literally become rhinoceroses themselves. Similar to the comic remainder of Clementis’s hat in Part One, here a material object—the cardboard horn—serves as a comic remainder/reminder of Ionesco’s allegory of conformity. While the meaning of *The Rhinoceros* is lost/forgotten in the girls’ simplistic application of structuralist theory to the play, this meaning “returns” in the form of the girls’ horns.

Their classmates’ horror is only alleviated by a moment of comic brevity as one of the students, “a Jewish girl named Sarah” (101) who dislikes the American girls intensely, gets up from her chair, circles the girls, and after a running start, delivers a kick to each of the girls’ behinds. The class bursts out in uproarious laughter (the same laughter Kundera hoped to provoke with his horoscope) and the girls begin to sob.

However, mistaking their sobbing convulsions for a dance, Madame Raphael puts her arms around the two girls and they begin a ring dance, eventually levitating through the ceiling and becoming archangels. When Part Three ends, Kundera states, “I know that Sarah exists somewhere, Sarah the Jewish girl, Sarah my sister, but where will I find her?” (106). Kundera is alone in the world, isolated in his battle with the angels.

However, the name and nationality of Sarah has other connotations that are relevant to Kundera’s efforts to undermine a localized reading of *Kniha*. In his book *Understanding Milan Kundera: Public Events, Private Affairs*, the literature professor Fred Misurella notes, the story involving Sarah refers to the book of Genesis (31). Sarah is the wife of Abraham, the first great patriarch of the Hebrews. However, during a time of famine, Abraham travels to Egypt. Because Sarah is beautiful, Abraham fears that the Egyptians will kill him in order to have his wife. Abraham asks Sarah to pretend to be his sister, begging her “Say, please, that you are my sister, so that it will go well with me on your count and I shall stay alive because of you” (Alter 52). If Sarah is Kundera’s “sister,” then he is also Abraham, patriarch of the nomadic Hebrews who is ordered by God to “Go forth from your land and your birthplace” (Alter 50). Kundera, a man from “Eastern” Europe, identifies with an important character from the Judeo-Christian tradition that has, through the centuries, spread across the face of Europe. By his own identification, then, Kundera is not a national but a transnational, nomadic figure. At the same time, his concerns also transcend the temporal frame of Communism’s sway over the geographical region from which he originally hails.

More importantly, Abraham and Sarah are the two biblical figures most associated with laughter. Abraham and Sarah are unable to conceive until, in his ninety-

ninth year, Abraham is visited by God, who tells him that Sarah will conceive by him. In response, “Abraham flung himself on his face and he laughed, saying to himself, ‘To a hundred-year-old will a child be born, / will ninety-year-old Sarah give birth?’” (Alter 75). Abraham’s laughter is thus of the spontaneous kind that nevertheless mocks God’s plan. In the next chapter of *Genesis*, God again tells Abraham that Sarah will bear his child, but this time Sarah is within earshot. “[L]istening at the tent flap,” Sarah “laughed inwardly, saying, ‘After being shriveled, shall I have pleasure, and my husband is old?’” (79). Like her namesake, Kundera’s Sarah is the silent listener who observes ironically the absurdity of the divine plan. Of course, God’s plan comes to fruition, and the couple has a child named Isaac, whose name means “he who laughs” in Hebrew. Both characters do become parents to laughter in *Kniha*, as they are the agents responsible for two of the novel’s funniest episodes, the horoscope and the kicking of the American girls, respectively. Kundera and Sarah represent the isolated forces of devilish laughter that are opposed to angelic laughter and hegemony, whether it is found in the Eastern Bloc or in Western Europe, and it is in this function that they exceed the limits of national identification.

This uncoupling of characters from national affiliation carries over into Part Four of the novel and is important for how we understand its eponymous protagonist. The original Czech title of Part Four is simply “Tamina”—the name of its protagonist—but in translations this part is now titled “Lost Letters,” in order to heighten the thematic similarity to Part One. Indeed, this section very much emphasizes the theme of speaking and writing. The aforementioned anamorphosis of Karel’s mother in Part Two is, of course, one example, but the narrator directly addresses this perspectival shift as well. At

the beginning of Part Four, the narrator baptizes a new character named Tamina, who is “krásná, vysoká. Má asi třicet let a pochází z Prahy” (89) “tall and beautiful, around thirty years old, and originally from Prague” (109). That is, she is *from* Prague, but the narrator does not identify her *as* Czech. “I see her,” he continues, “walking down a street in a provincial town in the west of Europe. Yes, you’re right to have noticed: I refer to faraway Prague by name, while leaving anonymous the town where my story takes place. That breaks all the rules of perspective, but you’ll just have to make the best of it” (109).⁸⁸ Such a statement speaks to the ambivalent nature of exilic literature because despite Kundera’s having written *Kniha* while living in France, he originally wrote the novel in Czech. Because of this, the “you” he addresses here may be an émigré audience living far from Prague, but at the same time, this address speaks to the ambivalence of the narrator’s exilic position, writing for a foreign audience in a language with only ten million native speakers. In calling attention to this aesthetic decision, the narrator invites comparison with the two photographs mentioned earlier. On one hand, the brief description of Tamina’s history suggests that Part Four of *Kniha* is to be read as exilic literature. And in a manner of speaking, it is, but whereas the expectation is of the experience of a woman who fled oppression in her homeland and then, arriving in an adopted country, overcame her difficulties, here her difficulties are directed back at her homeland, but reveal much about the West.

Tamina’s personality is initially withheld from the readers’ eyes. Tamina works as a waitress in a small café, and she is mysterious. Although “[e]veryone likes Tamina” because she is a good listener (110), the narrator is not so sure that she is really listening

⁸⁸ “Vidím ji v duchu, jak jde ulicí provinčního města na západě Evropy. Ano, všimli jste si toho správně: Prahu, která je daleko, nazývám jménem, kdežto město, v němž se děje můj příběh, nechávám v anonymitě. Je to proti všem pravidlům perspektivy, ale nezbyvá vám, než abyste se s tím smířili” (89).

to everybody else. Indeed, the following passage suggests that Tamina exists as a contrast to those around her. “What matters,” the narrator says, “is that she doesn’t interrupt anyone” (110). Whereas most people interrupt each other with the phrase “It’s absolutely the same with me, I...” (110), she refuses this struggle for dominance in a conversation. Interestingly, the narrator spends more time elucidating the meaning of this phrase, which despite its appearance as “an approving echo, a way of continuing the other’s thought,” in reality is “a brute revolt against a brutal violence, an effort to free our own ear from bondage and to occupy the enemy’s ear by force” (110). This passage suggests an environment in which the drive toward the assertion of power precludes the possibility of real dialogue. Neither participant in this struggle is actually listening to the other; the phrase “It’s absolutely the same with me” is a polite veneer. There are two ways, then, to understand the phrase. On the one hand, it may mean that it is decidedly *not* the same with everybody, and that they are simply wrong. On the other hand, it may mean that the common banality of their lives reduces everything to the same level, and therefore “it” really *is* the same. Far more intellectual than his countryman Hašek, Kundera here develops a manifestation of prosaic irony in which speakers are wholly unaware of what they are really saying in everyday conversations.

The characters around Tamina all talk excessively without having much to say. A woman in her early twenties named Bibi “has been talking to Tamina about herself, day after day” for almost a year (111). During the course of her endless diatribe, Bibi announces her intention to write a book. As she does this, her year-old daughter is “crawling around under her mother’s barstool, making a lot of noise” (111). Because her daughter’s cries threaten to interrupt Bibi’s talking, Bibi says “Quiet” (“*Ticho*”) in her

daughter's direction, causing the girl's cries to grow more shrill. Bibi intends to write "jak vidím svět" (how I see the world), but what is immediately apparent is that Bibi sees very little. The narrator notes that Bibi's order to be silent is directed at the floor, rather than specifically at her daughter. Bibi's solipsism precludes the possibility of listening to anybody else.

Moreover, Bibi is not terribly attuned to Tamina, either. Bibi's announcement that she's going to Prague causes Tamina to hope that she can pick up a parcel for her:

"Bibi, když *byste jeli* do Prahy, *mohli byste* se tam stavít u mého otce a přivést mi nějakou maličkost? Nic velkého! Jenom takový balíček, vleze se *vám* bez potíží do kufru" (90, my italics).

"Bibi, if you go to Prague, could you drop by at my father's and get something for me? It's nothing big, just a small parcel. It'll easily fit into your suitcase" (111).

Like most Indo-European languages, Czech distinguishes between the second-person singular (*ty*) and second-person plural/formal (*vy*). Although the use of the second-person plural could refer to both Bibi and her husband, her use of *vám* (*vy* in the dative case) to describe the suitcase suggests singular ownership. Bibi immediately responds with the second-person singular/informal "Pro tebe všechno" (90). Tebe here is equivalent to the French *toi*. Although she has been talking to Tamina nearly every day for a year, Bibi has not noticed that Tamina uses the formal *vy/vous*, taking Tamina's silence as indicative of friendship. Between this and her inattention to her daughter, Bibi apparently sees very little but talks a lot.

Tamina's parcel contains her private correspondence with her husband, as well as notebooks for their eleven years together. Because Tamina and her husband had fled Czechoslovakia illegally, they did not want to risk their letters and notebooks being confiscated by the authorities, so they packaged them in a parcel, wrapped it in tape, and locked it in a desk at her mother-in-law's apartment. Tamina and her husband are thus depicted as intensely private people fleeing a country where privacy is at a premium. The care they have taken to ensure that their correspondence remains unread by prying eyes provides a point of contrast with Bibi, who talks about herself constantly. However, Tamina soon discovers that her mother-in-law has read her notebooks, evidenced by her knowledge of their mere existence. When Tamina's mother-in-law accusingly demands, "What do you think I've done with your notebooks?" (113), she reveals that she has opened them, for Tamina had taken great care to seal the package with tape. The sacred privacy of Tamina's correspondence is violated, ironically, not by the Communist authorities but by Tamina's mother-in-law. For Tamina, her privacy is not simply a political issue—she is horrified that *anybody*, even family members, would read the letters. Although her letters and notebooks are associated with her life, the gaze of others is "like rain obliterating inscriptions on walls" (139). What gives her written memories their meaning and worth "was that they were intended for *her alone*" (139, author's italics). That is, the worth of these objects lies in their wholly private nature, and they become corrupted when they become public. The gaze of others obliterates the meaning of these words and finally severs her from her previous life. The degradation of value through making the private, public occurs both within this section in the form of an

author who talks excessively about his sex life, and in Part Seven, where the erotic is disappearing.

In order to gain Bibi's friendship, Tamina arranges a meeting with Banaka, an author who lives nearby. The hope is that Banaka will provide advice to Bibi about writing a book. At the meeting, Tamina, Banaka, and Bibi are joined by JouJou (a married Japanese woman) and a philosophy professor with whom JouJou is having an affair. Banaka counsels Bibi that "The novel is the fruit of a human illusion, that we can understand the other. But what does one person know about another?" (123-124, 99). Bibi's reply, "Nic" (nothing) may be true from a strictly solipsistic perspective. Banaka continues, "All anyone can do is give a report on oneself. Anything else is an abuse of power. Anything else is a lie" (124). From the narrator, we have learned that, in fact, constant interruption and giving "a report on oneself" is the true abuse of power, not least because in the banal existence of modernity, there is simply nothing to report. Bibi even acknowledges as much, exclaiming: "I don't really want to write a novel! I didn't make myself clear. I want to do just what you said, write about myself. Give a report on my life. But I don't want to hide that my life is absolutely ordinary, normal, and that I've never experienced anything special" (124).

The philosophy professor chimes in, claiming that "the greatest adventure of our lives is the absence of adventure [...] The islands, the seas, the sirens seducing us, Ithaca summoning us—nowadays they are only the voices of our interior being" (124-5). This comment is decidedly untrue for the narrator, and symptomatic of life in the West, as we soon discover. The narrator promises to "spare [us] the lecture on art of writing the two Socrateses gave the young woman" (125). This sarcastic aside leads into an anecdote the

narrator tells of a time he rode in a Parisian cab whose driver was a garrulous insomniac: “He was a sailor. His ship sank. He swam three days and three nights. Then he was rescued. He spent several months between life and death. He recovered, but he had lost the ability to sleep” (126). This basic framework of an adventure story, rendered in short, terse sentences, directly contradicts the professor’s claim that adventure is an impossibility.

Despite the fact that this cab driver has lived an adventure, the book he is writing is still a report on himself. Moreover, it is a decidedly public audience he seeks. The cab driver writes in part because—in contrast to Bibi, who doesn’t listen to her child—his children are uninterested in his story. This leads Kundera to label him a graphomaniac. Graphomania, defined by Kundera as a mania for writing books, is fully exemplified by both the cab driver and Bibi. As Kundera describes it, graphomania “takes on epidemic proportions when a society develops to the point of creating three basic conditions:

- 1) an elevated level of general well-being, which allows people to devote themselves to useless activities;
- 2) a high degree of social atomization and, as a consequence, a general isolation of individuals;
- 3) the absence of dramatic social changes in the nation’s internal life.

It is significant that graphomania results from isolation. While the provincial characters surrounding Tamina are talking constantly, they fail to understand one another in the slightest. Nevertheless, this social atomization is not particular only to the West, as we have seen with Mirek’s inability to understand Zdena in Part One. Graphomania is more symptomatic of modernity. The narrator appears to fully believe that it is possible to

understand others. He writes, “The invention of printing formerly enabled people to understand one another” (128), revealing Banaka’s attitudes about the novel’s illusory understanding to be temporal solipsism. Banaka lives “in the era of universal graphomania” (128). This temporal solipsism is yet another form of forgetting because it mistakes the particular for the universal, and in doing so, this writer “forgets” the history and tradition of which he is a part, his opinions on writing embodied in the photograph of Gottwald.

A young student named Hugo, who frequents the café where Tamina works, asks her out to lunch. During their lunch, Tamina mentions the parcel sitting in her mother-in-law’s desk, which Hugo guesses contains political documents. In order to move the conversation along, Tamina falsely confirms his assumption. Nevertheless, she “was afraid Hugo would ask for details about these documents” (131), again reinforcing Tamina’s private nature and her desire to keep her writings solely to herself. She needn’t have worried, for as the narrator notes, nobody asks Tamina questions. Rather, “People would sometimes tell her what they thought about her country, but they were not at all interested in her experiences” (131). The problem here is, of course, the will-to-knowledge that comes from living in a large nation that presumes to speak to a smaller nation from a higher vantage point, but also that this knowledge is wholly lacking in experience. Moreover, the Westerners do not actually ply Tamina for information, even though she actually has experiential knowledge of life behind the Iron Curtain.

Importantly, *Kniha* does not presume to give us the account or the experience of totalitarianism that the narrator claims we in the West lack. Tamina suddenly begins “talking excitedly and at length” (132) about Czechoslovakia. However, what she says is

not reported to the reader. Instead, the narrator claims that “as she knew the country inside and out, I can confirm that what she said was entirely right” (132). Kundera’s comment may come across as rather snide, but his withholding of the details of life in Czechoslovakia cautions the alert reader not to take Mirek’s plight in Part One as a realistic portrayal of everyday life in communist Czechoslovakia. Instead, this is the narrator’s reminder that *Kniha* is not reducible to an allegory of Communism. The narrator’s disinterest in providing this information accomplishes several things. First, it means that although Kundera is a Czech émigré, like Tamina, he is *not* giving a “report on himself,” further distancing himself from the pedantry of Banaka and the philosophy professor. Second, it harks back to his earlier comment that organized forgetting is a universal condition, not merely one of totalitarian regimes, by undermining the importance of Czechoslovak history in understanding the themes. Finally, the narrator mocks the reader for presuming to understand Czechoslovakia from a novel.

Tamina’s reticence in speaking about herself reaches its apotheosis in section 13 of Part Four. She is watching television with Joujou, Bibi, and her husband Dédé. In the apartment, there is a faint odor of urine (134)—a smell that we will discover is strongest next to Bibi’s daughter’s room—Bibi’s abrupt dismissals of her daughter’s cries are alarmingly negligent. The group is watching a man on television who has written a memoir in which he brags about his sex life. Having added up the number of orgasms in his life, the man concludes that he’s had almost seven hours of orgasm (135). Here the graphomaniac urge to report on himself is taken to extremes, as the most private of acts becomes a public spectacle. In contrast to Czechoslovakia, where people must fight to protect their privacy against state intrusion, in this anonymous Western country people

openly talk about their most intimate secrets. Tamina imagines the braggart author “racked by an unremitting orgasm: in contortions, he clutches at his heart, within fifteen minutes his denture falls out, and five minutes after that he falls down dead” (135). This image causes her to burst out laughing, putting her in the position of the fool/devil that the narrator has earlier occupied. Immediately, however, “Bibi call[s] her to order: ‘What’s so funny? Six hours and fifty-six minutes of orgasm is a pretty good total’” (135). Bibi’s comment places her in the role of thought-police, the phrase “call to order” suggesting authoritarian bullying. This passage sets Tamina as the lone laughter against her friends, whose seriousness regarding the orgasmic author is itself laughable. At this moment, then, Tamina is allied with Kundera and Sarah against the totalitarian forces of forgetting. The next guest on the television program is a pedant who believes that nobody can understand his work without knowing that the author was born in the village of Rourou (136), and adds that in his work, “a bicycle [is] a symbol” (136), thus reproducing the structuralist and psychoanalytic truisms that were popular in the 1970s. In the West, the distinction between public and private has been willingly erased. In enforcing this new status quo, Bibi occupies the position of one of society’s “angels.”

Contrasting Tamina with her constantly chattering companions, the narrator imagines Tamina with a golden ring in her mouth (142) without knowing why. A memory suddenly comes back to him of reading a story by Thomas Mann that had a particular phrase that stuck in the narrator’s memory. A small acoustical detail, “like a golden ring falling into a silver basin” (143), remains unexplained in Mann’s story, but the narrator believes that Mann used that tone to create silence. This memory also situates the narrator’s upbringing and unconscious in the Western literary tradition at the

same time as it attacks the West. Moving beyond the pure structuralist reduction of everything to signs, the narrator feels that Mann needed the ring as a tuning fork to calibrate silence. Despite the sound it makes in Mann's story, then, the ring symbolizes silence for the narrator, and thus Tamina's reluctance to talk about herself becomes an existential struggle for her right to be silent. In contrast, the ostriches, which symbolize all of humanity, have come "to tell her about [themselves]. Each one had to tell her how it had eaten, how it had slept, how it had run up to the fence and seen her behind it. That it had spent its important childhood in the important village of Rourou" (145). Just as the ring's audible sound became the foil for silence, Tamina here becomes the foil for graphomaniacs in the West who must reveal everything. Her nobility lies not in her émigré status, but in her distance from the West where she now lives.

Against Tamina's unique nobility, we should note Kundera's utter refusal to exalt the Czechs as a nation as inherently noble in their suffering. His vicious parody of his countrymen in Part Five of *Kniha* suffices to disabuse anybody who dares to think otherwise. In Part Five, Kundera turns his gaze back toward Prague. This part of the novel follows the erotic misadventure of a student whose married girlfriend is coming to visit him in Prague on the same evening that he is invited to a gathering of famous Czech writers. Watching from the top floor of a high-rise in Rennes, France, "from the great distance of two thousand kilometers," (176), Kundera has a nostalgic tear in his eye "which, like a telescope lens, brings me nearer to their faces" (Ibid.). While one of these writers is possibly Jaroslav Seifert, as Maria Nemcova Bannerjee has suggested, Kundera gives to the rest the names of famous European writers: Voltaire, Goethe, Lermontov, Verlaine, Yesenin, and finally, one whose brow remains unkissed by poetry (177) named

Boccaccio, possibly Kundera's persona in this particular gathering. Whether these poets are indeed actual Czech writers, the biographies of their respective pseudonyms is more important than those of the men behind the masks, for it is these biographical associations that become a shorthand for their characterization. The narrator's act of giving these writers the names and personalities of canonical European writers again undermines a reading of Part Five as being specifically about life in Czechoslovakia. Kundera is again calling attention to the fact that his themes transcend the boundaries of the nation, the political situation, and even of a particular era.

Part Five takes its title from a Czech word, "Lítost." The narrator claims that "[L]ítost is an untranslatable Czech word [...] I have looked in vain in other languages for an equivalent, though I find it difficult to imagine how anyone can understand the human soul without it" (166).⁸⁹ Of course, *Kniha* has thus far been concerned with humankind's inability, especially in Western Europe, to understand others, so perhaps it should come as no surprise that the West lacks a comparable term. On the other hand, the human soul is a metaphysical, even existential concept, so lítost is also a philosophical category. To illustrate lítost, the narrator tells an anecdote about Part Five's protagonist, who is known only as "the student." The student went swimming with his girlfriend, who was a better swimmer than he. Although she "tactfully swam as slowly as he did," toward the end of a swim she failed to hold herself in check and left him behind (166). The experience causes the student to recall his sickly childhood, and, "[w]ounded and humiliated, he felt an irresistible desire to hit her" (167). However, he needs a reason, so he claims that he is angry with her for risking drowning and that his slap is out of concern for her. The

⁸⁹ "Hledám pro něho rovněž marně obdobu v jazycích, i když si neumím představit, jak bey něho může vůbec někdo rozumět lidské duši" (130).

second example of *lítost*, from the student's childhood, occurs when he is forced to take violin lessons, but because he lacks talent, the teacher humiliates him. As a result, the student begins to deliberately play the wrong notes in order to exact revenge on the teacher by aggravating him (167). From these two examples, the narrator defines *lítost* as "a state of torment created by the sudden sight of one's own misery" (167). In both cases, a sadistic (or sadomasochistic) and infantile acting-out becomes the necessary consequence of *lítost*.

The unspoken assumptions behind this definition paint a pessimistic view of the human condition. Humanity is inherently miserable precisely because we are lonely and isolated, and self-reflection increases the possibility of our awareness of this condition. Graphomania in this regard connects authors to readers, providing an illusory solidarity. Nevertheless, our underlying misery is ever-present, waiting for occasions that may reveal it. Second, this sight of our own misery is also social; the attendant need for revenge means that we are angry at others for seeing us at the moment we see our own humiliation. Thus, while misery is an existential problem, *lítost* occurs because this condition becomes social, the sufferer occupying the subject-position of the joke's "butt" of a joke while the witness occupies the laugher's position.⁹⁰ The act of getting revenge brings the laugher down to the level of the sufferer, and the equivalence generated by this act reestablishes illusory solidarity. Later in "*Lítost*," a Czech writer given the pseudonym of Petrarch will tell the student that another writer (dubbed "Boccaccio" by the narrator) "is a jackass. Boccaccio never understands anyone, because to understand is to merge and identify with. That is the secret of poetry" (198-99). In this section, the

⁹⁰ See my discussion of the comic triangle in Chapter One. See also Freud and Flieger.

poetic impulse stems from the same drives that produce ring dances in earlier parts of the novel.

Poetry in “Lítost” is identified as a manifestation of the same desire that produces totalitarian regimes because it lacks a real referent. Boccaccio makes this very accusation when he equates poets with worshipers. For Boccaccio, poets are obsessed with feminine *principles* such as “feelings, the home, motherhood, fertility, sacred flashes of hysteria, and the divine voice of nature within us” (181-2). These are all concepts, rather than characteristics of actual women. In contrast to poets, Boccaccio says that misogynists are better men because they prefer real women to these concepts. By the term “misogynist,” Boccaccio here does not mean a dislike of women, but of the feminine principles of the poets.

Almost as a test case, the student begins to tell Goethe of his Kristyna, and Goethe promptly begins to inscribe a copy of his book for her. By the end Goethe’s poetry “had cast a cloak woven of the most sublime words over her ridiculous clothes. She had been turned into a queen” (192). While the student had been embarrassed to be seen with Kristyna earlier in the evening, he is now filled with desire, albeit for an abstraction. Indeed, she can only be an abstraction because Goethe’s inscription is addressed to a woman he’s neither met nor seen. The student himself becomes a worshiper here.

Back at his apartment, however, Kristyna refuses to allow the student to enter her. She is afraid of getting pregnant because her first pregnancy was complicated and a second could harm or even kill her, but the student does not know this. When she tells him, “[Pregnancy] would kill me” (202), he misinterprets her words as poetic expression,

believing that “[s]he loved him so much it would kill her, she loved him to the point of being afraid to make love with him because if she were to make love with him, she would never be able to live without him and she would die of grief and desire” (202). In his poetic reverie, the student mistakes Kristyna’s real reason for refusing him intercourse as a lyrical expression of fear of ultimate unity. He assures her, “I understand you! I’ll die with you!” (202), but even these words fail to achieve their intended effect. The student rolls over onto his back, and Kristyna “took hold of the scepter of her love standing up in her honor, and grasped it with all her splendid honesty: sincerely vigorously, ardently, maternally, sisterly, amicably, and passionately” (203). Among these adverbs we cannot help but notice that several of them have their root in feminine principles. She spends the rest of the night holding the student’s penis, “not thinking about substituting, with some simple movements, for the carnal act he desired, but holding it in her hand like something rare, something precious” (203). This hilarious image of a sexually frustrated student, lying there in abject misery while Kristyna lovingly holding his penis all night long, becomes a beautiful and poetic moment that Kristyna will keep in her memory when she returns to her small provincial town. The student, on the other hand, bemoans the fact that “It would have been enough to call things by their right names, and he could have had her” (205). This statement contains echoes of Boccaccio’s famous “Introduction to the Fourth Day” of the *Decameron*, in which Boccaccio’s narrator tells a story in which a father tries to prevent his son from feeling sexual desire by calling women “goslings.” In Boccaccio’s story, poetic substitution fails to stymie his son’s desire for the opposite sex, but in *Kniha* the situation is different. Here, the student’s poetic state of mind prevents

desire's fulfillment. Instead, the student has passed a night in celibacy, but achingly close to a woman who could have addressed his needs if he had merely named them.

The student goes to the Writers' Club and encounters Lermontov and Petrarch. Petrarch reads aloud a message Kristyna had written for the student, leading the narrator to suspect that poetry is the outlet for those who suffer from *lítost* with no hope for an outlet. While Petrarch admires the letter, Lermontov becomes bitter because he "detests happy lovers" (212). The narrator claims that Lermontov is suffering from "the terrible *lítost* that comes from hypercelibacy" (212). Given that Lermontov is the most communist of the assembled poets, this passage suggests that not only is poetry the product of *lítost* and hypercelibacy, but also Russian imperialism.

Kniha reaches a comic crescendo in "*Lítost*," only to begin Part Six in a much more somber tone. The original Czech edition of the novel names Part Six "*Taminina smrt*"—Tamina's death—but this title has been changed to "The Angels" in translation to emphasize the thematic similarity with Part Three. This shift de-emphasizes the importance of the theme of death in this section—personal, cultural, *and* political death. Part Six begins with a refrain of Clementis and Gottwald on the balcony. Both historical figures, the narrator claims, were unaware that on the ground floor of the same building, Franz Kafka's father Hermann had owned a shop. This immediately links the historical events of Czech history to Central European literature. For Kundera, Kafka intuited what was coming: "The time of Kafka's novel is the time of a humanity that has lost its continuity with humanity, of a humanity that no longer knows anything and no longer remembers anything" (216). As we saw in Part Three, Tamina's struggle to retain her past is not a struggle for beauty, but for life. Just as the loss of Tamina's past means the

loss of her life, so too, does humanity's loss of its continuity with itself mean the death of culture. In *Kniha*, Prague is the exemplary city for widespread cultural forgetting.

"Wandering the streets that do not know their names," the narrator writes, "are the ghosts of monuments torn down. Torn down by the Czech Reformation, torn down by the Austrian Counter-Reformation, torn down by the Czechoslovak Republic, torn down by the Communists; even the statues of Stalin have been torn down" (217). The narrator's description of Kafka's prosaic demiurgy again reinforces the narrator's argument that the events he describes in Czechoslovakia are a local refraction of larger trends regarding humanity's position in the modern world.

This widespread institutional forgetting takes on much more sinister overtones than in earlier sections because not only does it mean the death of a single, isolated character (Tamina), but even the death of a culture. The narrator's friend, the historian Milan Hubl, tells him: "You begin to liquidate a people [...] by taking away its memory. You destroy its books, its culture, its history" (218). Because this has happened in the wake of the Soviet occupation, "the Czech people can see the image of its own death near at hand. Neither as a fact nor as an inescapable future, but nonetheless as a quite concrete possibility" (219). Despite the collective implications of forgetting, for the most part it plays out on the personal level. The narrator Kundera recounts in a parallel narrative line that, in the early seventies, his father was slowly dying and suffered from increasing aphasia during the final years of his life. "The silence of my father," the narrator writes, "[and] the silence of [blacklisted Czech] historians [...] forms the background of the picture I am painting of Tamina" (221). Tamina's eventual death, then, anticipated by the title of Part Six in the Czech edition, is to be read as a manifestation of forgetting.

Tamina returns for the primary narrative line of Part Six, but the narrative itself shifts from the a background of banal realism of the first “Lost Letters” (Part Three) to a more allegorical style. Never receiving her package, Tamina’s last hope of arresting the process of forgetting is lost, and she sinks into depression. One day, however, a young man named Raphael appear at the café where she works, and offers to help her “forget [her] forgetting” (224). Raphael is the name of an archangel, establishing a sinister undertone to his conversation with Tamina. Raphael takes Tamina in a car to “a wasteland, with less and less green and more and more ocher” (227-8). At the bottom of a nearby slope, “a body of murky brownish water extended as far as the eye could see” (228). While the water recalls Tamina’s earlier suicide attempt, the entire landscape here clearly signifies death, suggesting in Part Six an environment of death that precedes the death of the individual.

Death is not simply disappearance. While this point may be obvious, it is worth remembering that Kundera wrote this novel during the Cold War, when the threat of nuclear annihilation—and thus the non-existence of humanity—was a looming possibility. Kundera is not writing about death in these terms. The narrator asserts: “Death has a double aspect: It is nonbeing. But it is also being, the terrifyingly material being of a corpse” (235). In *Kniha*, there is always a material *memento mori*, even after efforts to hide the evidence, as the example of Clementis’s hat shows. In Part Six, however, Kundera’s father and Tamina both become walking corpses whose respective deaths foreshadow the death of Czech culture on the small scale, but, on a larger scale, European culture itself. In a passage where it is unclear to what degree the narrator’s thoughts stand apart from Tamina’s, he writes:

It was an unbearable insult to become a corpse. One moment you are a human being protected by modesty, by the sacrosanctity of nakedness and intimacy, and then the instant of death is enough to put your body suddenly at anyone's disposal—to undress it, to rip it open, to scrutinize its entrails, to hold one's nose against the stench, to shove it into the freezer or into the fire. (236)

By the logic of this passage, the respective cultures of the West and Communist Europe are turning their inhabitants into corpses. While critical discourse on *Knihy* tends to regard the parallel narratives as referring exclusively to the communist world, the allegorical story of Tamina's death can just as easily take place in the West. The surveillance state of East-Central Europe ensures the loss of privacy, but as Part Four, in which Tamina was the main protagonist, shows, modesty has been lost to the West and nudity is far from sacrosanct, as Part Seven will show. Death allows for no modesty; Kundera's father is riding a metaphorical horse on his deathbed because he wants to go "somewhere far away, to hide his body" (237). However, this journey is in vain. Tamina cannot die before first doing so under public scrutiny.

Before Tamina's actual death, a boat arrives, rowed by a young boy who appears to be around twelve years old. Raphael orders Tamina into the boat and she departs with the boy for an island full of children. On the way, the boy pulls out a tape recorder and turns it on. As "the air was filled with rock music, with electric guitars and song lyrics, [...] the boy began to writhe in time to it" (231). For her part, Tamina finds his movements "obscene," but in its frank sexuality, lacking all modesty, the boy's behavior is hardly different from that of Bibi, Joujou, or even the bald author on television who bragged about his orgasms. The significance of the rock music is elucidated with

reference to the parallel narrative. Rock music is for Kundera the corpse of the European tradition of music.

The death of Kundera's father also represents the death of the grand European tradition of music. Ludvík Kundera suffered from aphasia during the final decade of his life, increasingly unable to write a book he was working on about Beethoven's sonatas. The narrator describes his father as "one who knew everything but not a single word" (220). This description of Kundera's father as a storehouse of musical knowledge, knowledge of the history of music, renders his battle with aphasia all the more poignant because he cannot pass his knowledge on to his son. The history of this music is already lost because the one person in whom it still resides cannot communicate it. In the shift from classical music to rock, music itself is undergoing a kind of forgetting. The narrator whines that although the history of music has ended, "There is more and more music, dozens, hundreds of times more than in its most glorious eras" (247). However, this music consists of "[s]tereotyped harmonies, banal melodies [...] that is music's eternity. Everyone can fraternize by means of these simple combinations of tones, for it is being itself that through them is shouting its jubilant 'I'm here!'" (247). While I would argue that Kundera is being patently unfair to the pop and rock music that rises above the banality he decries, the point is that music, like another realm of culture, has given way to a base announcement of presence, making it the equivalent of the universal graphomania of Part Four. The pronouncement "I'm here!" is equally at home in a pop melody and in Bibi's book. Similar to the death drive, rock music is a return to music's primeval state (248). This primeval state exists without reflections, or games with motif and theme.

Tamina undergoes a similar regression on the island of the children. Due to Tamina's athletic prowess, the children reward her by serving her for an evening. They begin in the bathroom, "where they all tried to wash her breasts and belly and were eager to see what she looked like between her legs and what it felt like to touch" (243). While the children's curiosity appears innocent enough—Tamina has a hard time pushing them away *because* they are children—one cannot help but notice that "the sacrosanctity of nakedness and intimacy" has been lost. The children are violating her body with their scrutiny. Afterwards they put her to bed, "and there they again found a thousand charming pretexts to press up against her and caress her entire body. There were so many of them she was unable to tell whose hand or mouth belonged to whom" (243), whereupon Tamina "closed her eyes again to enjoy her body, because for the first time in her life her body was taking pleasure in the absence of the soul, which, imagining nothing, remembering nothing, had quietly left the room" (244). Tamina has thus shifted from imagination (always trying to recreate her husband's face and imagining it in the place of other men's) and memory (always trying to remember her past) to lacking both, and as a result her soul has left. A body without a soul is a corpse; this passage therefore implies that Tamina is dead long before her drowning. Tamina represents the ability to look back, the process of memory and imagination—it was her sole *raison d'être*, and now that is lost. The future, for both Czechoslovakia and Tamina's West, is children. As Tamina drowns, children watch her, while Kundera's father hears President Husak proclaiming that children are the future. The death of Kundera's father represents the death of the European tradition of music, just as Tamina's represents the death of beauty.

The Czech children, who know nothing of European music, do not mourn the passing of one of its practitioners and theorists in Kundera's father.

With the two deaths in Part Six, history has crossed a metaphorical point of no return. We have witnessed the death of music and of silence. Part Seven of *Kniha*, "Hranice" (The Border) tells the story of a Czech émigré named Jan who lives in Western Europe but has recently accepted an academic position in the United States and is preparing to leave. As the title indicates, "Hranice" is the section of *Kniha* most obsessed with boundaries, both spatial and temporal. Although these boundaries are geographical, as seen in Jan's preparations to move to the U.S. from a Western European country, where he had moved from Czechoslovakia, the border that gives its name to the title is much more of a temporal, or even a historical border. The border is a point of no return; Jan conceives of this in terms of repetition, defining the border "for himself as the maximum acceptable dose of repetitions" (297). For Jan, an event may be thrilling, hilarious, etc., but once it has reached the acceptable number, it is no longer capable of generating (comic or sexual) arousal. The narrator, however, argues that "[r]epetition is only one of the ways of making the border visible. The borderline is covered with dust, and repetition is like a hand whisking away dust" (298). In the narrator's formulation, given his meditations on the finality of death—and the corpse-like persistence of the walking dead—from the previous section, the border is death as a point-of-no-return, as a material remainder that lives on without purpose.

Following the pattern of the historical's impact on the personal level, Jan's experience of the border is experienced sexually. Jan and his close friend Edwige are occasional lovers, but during their coition Edwige appears utterly placid and blank. This

torments Jan, for in lovemaking he sees a brief window into a woman's psychological interiority: "The movement of the two bodies seemed to be unwinding a large reel of film, projecting on the woman's face, as on a television screen, a captivating movie filled with turmoil, expectations, explosions, pain, cries, emotion, and evil" (265). This hidden interior is the source of arousal in that it represents that hidden infinitude of which the narrator speaks in Part Six. This infinitude is all the more arousing since the exterior world, as we have seen, has lost its capacity for adventure. Jan asks himself, "Was [Edwige], behind that immobile face, hiding sensations he had no inkling of?" (265). It is only during a conversation on eroticism that Edwige tells Jan, "Ultimately, making love isn't that important" (290). Because Edwige is not emotionally or psychologically invested in lovemaking, the act is light, meaningless, and superficial. Because Edwige makes love superficially, the placidity of her face is not a mask hiding her interiority, but rather an indication of the act's absent center. At this moment Jan has crossed the border with Edwige, and he declines further coitions with her. The border here has little inherent connection with repetition, as the narrator has noted. Instead, the border here is one of knowledge; Jan is able to sleep with Edwige because he is drawn time and time again to the mystery of what is behind her blank face, and the border crossing of enlightenment takes him to a position of enlightenment without arousal. Like Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*, once reduced to a symbol, sex is no longer a means of access to a hidden truth (the inner infinitude of which the narrator speaks in Part Six).

The gradual sexual enlightenment of humanity reverses the childish condition of arousal without climax into climax without arousal. Jan sleeps with a salesgirl at a rental shop who is "an orgasm fanatic." For the girl, "Orgasms were a religion to her, a goal,

the highest requirement of hygiene, a symbol of health” (278). Just like Edwige, the salesgirl has turned the sexual act into a symbol, but at the same time, it is her emphasis on the physical sensation of climax that the narrator disparages. This focus only on the physical aspect ignores the emotional or psychological aspect of the act and turns Jan into forced labor in his efforts to help her achieve her orgasm; the salesgirl and Bibi are both representatives of the West’s sexual totalitarianism. In this, the sexual act may be compared to the ecstasy of rock music the narrator so deplores in Part Six and even the graphomania of Part Three.

The modern condition of climax without arousal creates in Jan a nostalgia for a more innocent time. This is shown through his increasing fixation on the ancient Greek pastoral novel *Daphnis and Chloe*. The ancient novel tells the story of two young lovers who do not know how to consummate their love physically. Lying together naked, “They are aroused,” the narrator says, “their hearts are pounding, but they do not know what it is to make love” (269). This passage, which fascinates Jan, represents a world of possibility, a world in which the border has not yet come into view, a world in which the pleasant agitation of arousal has yet to be routed into a rigid set of pathways. *Daphnis and Chloe* also represents a prior state where the public and the private, and the interior and the exterior were separate realms. Jan accompanies Edwige to a nude beach, but this only serves to further convince Jan that society has crossed an invisible border. He thinks:

[I]t was [also] in a crowd and naked that Jews went to the gas chambers. He neither understood just why that image kept coming back to him nor just what it meant. Maybe it meant that at that moment the Jews had also been on *the other*

side of the border and thus that nakedness is the uniform worn by men and women on the other side. That nakedness is a shroud. (310)

The image of the shroud drives home the point that the nude beach represents the death of desire. Also, it questions the idea that open sexuality and public nudity are inherently liberating. In short, it questions the uncritical privileging of progress.

It is entirely possible to read this despair at the simultaneous uncovering/shrouding as a conservative turn on Kundera's part, but I argue that he is a frustrated humanist rather than a frustrated conservative. Walking along the beach, Jan sighs, "Daphnis, Daphnis..." (311), leading Edwige to assume that he's calling for a return to pre-Christian morality. As *Kniha* continues the theme of misunderstanding, a group of people walks up. One of them, "a man with an extraordinary paunch developed the idea that Western civilization is going to perish and that humanity will finally be liberated from the enslaving burden of the Judeo-Christian tradition" (312). Both Kundera the author and Kundera the narrator oppose the idea that losing the Judeo-Christian tradition is liberating. First, Jan compared the arduous chase for the salesgirl's orgasm as "forced labor," suggesting that "sexual liberation" brings its own constraints. Second, the Judeo-Christian tradition is the Western tradition itself, and its loss is a victory of the angels. The narrator had earlier posited himself as Abraham searching for his lost wife-sister Sarah, mother of "he who laughs." That she remains lost at novel's end attests to the loss of the comic.

Worse still, the world is experiencing the loss of desire. The overweight man's exposition on the Judeo-Christian tradition's death is composed of "phrases Jan had heard ten, twenty, thirty, a hundred, five hundred, a thousand times before" (312). In other

words, it has become a senseless repetition that shows the inability to break free from this tradition. Nevertheless, the repetitions indicate that a border has been crossed. Which border? The border of desire. While the man speaks, “all the others listened with interest, and their bare genitals stared stupidly and sadly at the yellow sand” (312). Although this is an image rife with comic potential, here it strikes a profoundly melancholic tone. The stupidity of the nudists’ genitalia corresponds to the stupidity of music in Part Six. More importantly, it represents the loss of desire, the “sad” posture of the genitalia indicating the absence of arousal or, indeed, even of the erotic. Without the drive of Eros, there is nothing to counteract and delay the competing drive of Thanatos, and thus *Kniha* depicts a West rushing headlong toward the very death that lent such a gray pallor to Part Six.

Despite the overwhelmingly pessimistic tone on which *Kniha* ends, Kundera depicts an alternative. It is forgetting—both motivated forgetting and the forgetting against which we, like Tamina, are helpless—that becomes equivalent to death throughout the novel. However, consistent with Kundera’s binary themes, memory is conflated with life just as forgetting is conflated with death; Tamina’s looking backward is expressly called a desire for life. The question becomes: where is memory (and therefore desire and Eros) to be found? Kundera locates it in the Western tradition, of which his novel must be considered a part. This act of remembering occurs in both the narrative, as Jan reminisces over the lost innocence of *Daphnis and Chloe*, and on the novel’s formal level. (It is interesting that the characters who do this all come from small nations. They’re either Czech, or, in the case of Sarah, Israeli.) For example, Tamina’s inner essence is explained not in itself, but as a continuation of ideas received from a

Thomas Mann short story. The West is not just a cultural tradition, but also the Judeo-Christian tradition, and thus it is no surprise that the very force responsible for the comic and its force of memory is the devil, a Judeo-Christian (specifically Christian) construct. Through its numerous references to both the Judeo-Christian tradition and the Western literary/cultural/musical tradition, the novel acts as a site of memory for a West that has forgotten itself. While the West is seized by various forms of forgetting (graphomania, structuralism, rock music, the sexual revolution), *Kniha* becomes the connection to Europe's cultural history in all its variety (the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, Thomas Mann, Eugene Ionesco, Goethe, Voltaire, Boccaccio, Beethoven, *Daphnis and Chloe*, etc.). In turn, Central Europe becomes the West's other. It is the repressed—forgotten—aspect of the West that serves as its remainder and its last link with its own history.

Conclusion: Europe's Other?

Four inextricably interrelated problems appear throughout this study of the Central European novel. Despite their inseparability, they can nevertheless be broadly labeled as problems of subjectivity, space, hegemony, and narrative and genre. The first three of these problems at first seem extra-literary in origin, but in a region whose space was dominated, fought over, liberated and conquered throughout the twentieth century, they become increasingly bound up with the last of these problems. In turn, the problem of narrative and genre spreads from a seemingly strictly literary origin outwards to encompass first subjectivity, and further outward to space and hegemony. Interestingly, these novels anticipate developments in psychoanalytic and postmodern theory, especially in their attempts to find a narrative structure that resists hegemonic tendencies and allows for desire to emerge in its subjective particularity. At the same time, and precisely because the novels in this study present these problems as interrelated, they utilize several literary tropes which both denote and generate the ambiguity with which the novels treat their problematics, namely the rhetorical trope of irony and the thematic tropes of either the marginal or the excessive figure, terms by which I denote figures who are either spatially outside a particular geographical locus (Gombrowicz's and Kundera's narrators respectively) to which they continually refer, or figures within a locus who cannot be contained within its definitional boundaries (Švejk and Moosbrugger). Both of these types of figures occupies a position that undermines certain hegemonic structures, thus allowing the reader the distance necessary to recognize these structures in their arbitrariness, but at the same time, these figures are affected in no small way by these

hegemonic structures, undermining the idea of a “pure” resistance. Their position is therefore ambivalent in the sense that even as they are the product of vectors of influence emanating from a hegemonic center, they also produce vectors that subvert that very center. We can see this ambivalence in quite clearly in all four of the novels. To take one example, even as he condemns Czechoslovakia’s young communists, for example, Kundera’s narrator admits his desire to rejoin them. Here ambivalent spatial and ideological position is manifested as emotional ambivalence. Because these characters seem, ironically, to be the most implicated in an ideological structure precisely at the moments when they consider themselves to be entirely marginal, I think it is entirely appropriate to call them ironic figures, by which I mean figures who embody the ironic tensions that structure each of these novels. In looking back over the novels of this study, we can draw some larger conclusions about the implications of the Central European novel for the further study of twentieth-century modern and postmodern literature.

Although I follow de Certeau in defining space as “practiced place,” an area in which the operations of daily life and language reveal the ambivalence that becomes a form of resistance because hegemony tries to impose a narrower conception thereof, I take space to be not simply a geographical phenomenon, but also a phenomenon in the much less visible and tangible realm of culture and ideology. This is especially important because pre-1918 Central Europe is at least politically dominated by the concept of *Mitteleuropa*, and also culturally overdetermined in part by this concept. *Mitteleuropa* implies de Certeau’s category of place, in which stable vectors emanating from the empire’s center shape the satellite nations, which are then regarded as mere deformations of the dominant culture. Such a viewpoint only acknowledges the particularity of the

satellite cultures to the degree that they are no coincident with the imperial discourse. However, the geographical space of Central Europe is also heavily influenced by Western and even Eastern Europe.⁹¹ That is to say, while Austria and later Austria-Hungary was the dominant power in the region, the cultures of region's small nations also responded to and reacted against political and literary currents originating from outside the region, a fact that increasingly appears in the post-1945 literature written by émigrés and exiles who left Central Europe for points West. This is equally true of Central European cultural space, which subverts a model of the region's literatures as what Danilo Kiš called a centripetal. To take an example: as I have tried to show, *The Good Soldier Švejk* is not simply a *sui generis* work that only reflects local concerns and which is only interesting within the context of Czech literature and culture. Rather, Hašek's novel finds influence in both the local and the European literary tradition, mobilizing it in his novel as a trope of resistance to *Mitteleuropean* ideology. Thus, although the novel is certainly not a manifestation of centripetal Viennese culture, neither is it centrifugal, a mere reaction against Vienna. The novel is the product of multiple vectors originating both within Central Europe and from the outside.

Moreover, just as the novels' protagonists occupy ambivalent positions, the novels in this study represent both Central and Western Europe (and even Argentina) as ambivalent spaces. Gombrowicz and Kundera import influences from Western Europe and thematize the vectors emanating from Central Europe toward the West as the physical departure of its protagonists from Central Europe. As a result, these novels "spatialize" the West. In the case of Kundera's novel, this means that the arbitrary

⁹¹ To this one could add the influence of Tartars and other groups from Asia, as well as the influence of the Ottoman Empire in the Balkans. The nations most directly affected by these influences, however, fall outside the scope of my study.

division of Western and “Eastern” Europe as separate cultural “places” is ironically undermined. By introducing the “foreign” element of the exile and/or émigré into the West, both authors undermine the illusion of Western European cultural homogeneity and simultaneously show that subaltern approaches (such as postcolonial theory) that use terms such as “eurocentrism” are guilty of overly broad generalizations, too. Although both academic specialization and Cold War geopolitical configurations tended to obscure these spheres of influence, this study attempts to emphasize both the local concerns to which these novels responded and the broader literary spheres of influence. It is my hope that this approach opens these works more properly into the broader sphere of World Literature as defined by the comparatist David Damrosch. Damrosch defines World Literature as, in part, “a form of detached engagement with worlds beyond our own place and time” (281). In considering Central Europe within a broader continuum that includes an era in which the region was considered “Western,” I am attempting precisely to detach scholarly engagement with Central Europe’s literatures from the geographical division inscribed in pre-1989 geopolitics and contemporary disciplinary divisions within academia.

The problem of hegemony can be viewed from at least three perspectives. The first and most obvious one is that of political hegemony; from the Austro-Hungarian Empire, to the Third Reich and the Iron Curtain, three imperial projects left their mark on the collective psyche of twentieth-century Central Europe. These novels all subvert the hegemonic structures represented in their pages and ideological structures that interpellate writers and readers alike. Even in *The Good Soldier Švejk*, the novel whose cynical characters appear entirely unaffected by military propaganda, we can see how

ideology functions, following Žižek, as the structural support of our *activity*, no matter how intellectually distant from it we pretend to be. We can also see evidence of it in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*'s Mirek, who is as guilty of "motivated" forgetting as the Communist authorities he so detests. Kundera shows a repressive politics founded in private frustrations, as in the case of the *litost*-suffering student. These novels, then, suggest the ways in which hegemonic and ideological interpellation is far less simple than it initially appears.

Hegemony is also manifested in nationalism, a problem that is crucial for a region whose small nations developed national consciousness long before achieving political independence. Although nationalism provides a form of resistance to hegemony, it can often become precisely what it opposes. This notion finds its most hilarious manifestation in *Trans-Atlantyk*, whose narrator "falls to his knees" in paroxysms of national fervor despite his better intentions. However, it also has sinister overtones in the murderous refusal of Tomasz to let his son develop on his own. Indeed, in Gombrowicz's novel, nationalism of the subaltern variety is as repressive and limiting as that imposed by imperial powers. Meanwhile, Robert Musil suggests that the imperial ideology of the Habsburgs creates an "Austrian" nationalism with no referent at its core. The result is an alienated populace clamoring for the tumult of the very war that will end their empire. In their ironic presentations of nationalism, the authors depicted in this study express a great deal of ambivalence about the national project and its ideological vicissitudes.

Finally, hegemony appears in all of these novels in the form of readerly genre expectation. Each of the novels in this study undermines genre expectations. In the case

of *The Good Soldier Švejk*, Hašek's use of lowbrow language and subject matter, on one hand, and a decidedly un-heroic protagonist on the other, undermines the patriotic expectations of the new Czechoslovak Republic's reading public, provoking a reaction that Hašek feels compelled to address in the Epilogue to Part I of his novel. Gombrowicz finds himself militating against similar restraints, something he explicitly thematizes in *Trans-Atlantyk* when the narrator complains about having to praise Poland's "national geniuses." And even Kundera anticipates his newfound audience's expectation that he is writing "dissident" literature, going out of his way to undermine such a reading. While Kundera does criticize the Communist regime (his Czech citizenship was revoked as a result), his novel's most ironic moments ridicule the imagined reader whose reading is ideologically suspect. In the cases of Gombrowicz and Kundera, I believe that this is a primary concern precisely because they were writing from a position of exile. In their use of irony to reject genre expectations that limit the potential meanings of their works, the authors of this study open up much richer and more ambiguous readings of "dissident" literature. Authors who have left one repressive situation for another are under no obligation to depict the world in terms of strict binary oppositions.⁹²

In addition to bringing irony to bear on the problems of space and hegemony, these novels are all concerned with the problem of narrative. The problem of narrative is ironically taken up in each of the novels, which are themselves narrative. Whether through the paratactic speech acts of Švejk, Moosbrugger's similar musings on language, Gombrowicz's confrontation with the Gran Escritor, or even Kundera's parody of psychobiographical and structuralist criticism, all of these novels explicitly thematize the

⁹² Indeed, in Kundera's subsequent novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, categories *turn into* their opposites.

tyranny of received narrative structures. These narrative structures are always analogous to either the discourse of the master or the discourse of the university. Additionally, these novels all resist narrative closure. Hašek and Musil do so by literally refusing to finish their novels, both of which are left incomplete at the time of their authors' deaths. Gombrowicz, on the other hand, abruptly disperses the climactic tension of his novel in a burst of laughter that defies narrative resolution even as it averts a patricidal tragedy. Meanwhile, the unique structure of Kundera's novel invites continual re-reading, a "working-through" of its themes that is seemingly never-ending.

Finally, these novels show that subjectivity is inextricably bound up in narrative. If narrative is fundamentally problematic, so is subjectivity. This is seen most clearly in the first two novels of this study, where Švejk's logorrhea renders him a cipher and Musil's protagonist Ulrich's schizoid condition is fueled in large part by his inability to find a narrative to call home. In this respect, the novels call into question precisely what it means to be a speaking/narrative subject. At least obliquely, these novels highlight their readers' own subjectivity as an arbitrary narrative construct and show that, whatever their conscious national and political affiliations, they, too, embody the polyphony represented in and generated by these novels.

Although the first three novels in this study belong more properly to the modernist era, and even Kundera is more modernist in tone than postmodernist, they anticipate the postmodernist suspicion of what Jean-François Lyotard calls "metanarratives." They thus support the view that postmodernism represents an intensification of trends inherent to modernism. If, as I have suggested in this study, they anticipate postmodernism as a result of their subaltern position upon entrance to

modernity, then Central Europe may be said to function as Europe's other, a creeping paranoia that apparently stable power dynamics are not what they seem, although the West will realize this only later.

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