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The Czech Émigré Experience of Return after 1989

MADELAINÉ HRON

Here at home, we hold no love towards émigrés. We didn't like them before, and we don't like them now. Not that we don't concern ourselves with them, we just simply really don't like them. Seemingly it's some kind of tradition here [...] They can go ahead and complain, but since they have no political rights, let them whine, they pose no threat, as long as at home all is quiet.¹

THIS comment by Jiří Bigas, made in his 1998 opinion column aptly titled 'The Relationship with One's Own Émigrés is a Test of National Maturity', encapsulates some of the problematic perspectives on the return of Czech émigrés after 1989. Under the Communist regime of 1948 to 1989, an estimated 550,000 people, or 3.5 per cent of the population, emigrated from Czechoslovakia.² After the Velvet Revolution, thousands of these émigrés returned, with high hopes of returning 'home'. Now, fifteen years later, relatively few of these individuals remain in the Czech Republic; they have left again, disappointed by the disillusionment or discrimination they encountered. The negative attitude towards returning Czechs, ranging from dismissal to latent xenophobia, has been characterized as the 'anti-émigré trauma of Czech politics'.³ For a long time, Czechs were neither willing nor ready to express themselves on this sensitive issue. For example, Jiří Gruntorád, director of the samizdat archive Libri Prohibiti, saw himself as archiving painful memories which could not be adequately articulated in the contentious political climate of the 1990s:

Every generation has its trauma. Your mother remembered February [1948], your grandfather, the battle of Piava, and now we transmit stories of dissidents. I guess it doesn't interest people now, it irritates people. I have the feeling that it is unfitting, immoral even, to talk about it yet.⁴

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¹ Jiří Bigas, 'Vztah k vlastním émigréům je zkouškou národní zralosti', *Mlada fronta dnes*, 4 May 1998, p. 7. (This and all subsequent translations are mine — MH.)

² Jiří Pehe, 'Uprchlíci v moderních českých dějinách', in UNHCR, *Útěk a exil v umění*, Prague, 2002, pp. 22–24 (p. 23).

³ Milan Uhde, 'Vztahy mezi Čechy doma a Čechy v zahraničí', *Denni Telegraf*, 12 December 1994, p. 3.

⁴ Alena Ježková, 'Mukl, kterej nekecá', *Reflex*, 5 May 1995, p. 28.

Almost a generation has passed since the fall of Communism. Perhaps it is now time to address some of the contentious issues of recent history and revisit the traumatic subject of returning Czech émigrés. Drawing on Czech opinion of the 1990s and the statements of émigrés, I will briefly sketch out the main issues of the experience of the émigré return. My analysis however, will explore an aspect that has been almost completely overlooked in this debate: literature, both the literature of exile and more recent ‘fiction of return’. I turn to literature in order to better understand the experience of Czech émigrés, before and after 1989, in its complex cultural, psychological and socio-historical dimensions. In particular, I focus on the ‘painless’ representation of the émigré experience by émigrés that largely informed their reception by Czechs in the Czech Republic after 1989. I posit that the suffering of emigration and return has been repressed in Czech exile literature and I examine the effects of this seeming absence of pain. What happens when the suffering of emigration is kept silent? How does one interpret the muted distress in Czech exile literature? When Czech émigrés could safely return home, was the hardship of emigration erased? How did émigré writers return home in their fiction? These are but some of the questions driving this retrospective reflection.

1. *The Return of the Czech Émigré*

Opustíš-li mne, nezahynu/opustíš-li mne, zahyneš.⁵

Should you leave me, I won't perish/should you leave me, you will die.

This nationalist verse by Victor Dyk is well known by most Czechs. It represents the poetic political imagination adopted by the former Communist Czechoslovak regime: Mother Nation's warning against emigration and exile. The explicit threat has acquired further resonance after the fall of Communism in the context of returning émigrés.

Until 1999, commentators observed that an ‘undeclared war was being waged’⁶ between Czech émigrés and Czech citizens, a conflict that was reflected even in the highest political echelons. For instance, in 1990, Václav Klaus, later president of the Czech Republic (and then chairman of the Civic Forum party), was asked about the country's future relationship with Czech-Americans, and he reputedly replied: ‘Czech-Americans annoy me’⁷ (‘krajané mně zlobí’).⁸ In 1993, Peter

⁵ Viktor Dyk, ‘Země mluví’, in Milan Blahynka (ed.), *Česká poezie dvacátého století*, Prague, 1980, p. 69.

⁶ Thomas Pecina, ‘When Czechs fight Czechs’, *Central European Review*, 19 July 1999, <<http://www.ce-review.org/99/4/pecina4.html>> [accessed January 2005] (hereafter, Pecina, ‘When Czechs fight Czechs’).

⁷ Petr Bísek, ‘Are Czechs Outside of the Country Foreigners?’ *New Presence*, 2, 2000, 3, p. 35.

⁸ Jaromír Marek, ‘Petr Bísek: Klaus nás netěší, ale držíme mu palce’, *Český rozhlas*, 8 March 2003, <<http://www.radio.cz/cz/clanek/38345>> [accessed December 2005].

Payne, chairman of the Legislative Assembly, explained in an American interview that émigrés have a 'bad reputation' because 'the public's logical feeling is that they are people who made their life better and easier by emigrating' and opined that they should 'improve their image in the Czech Republic'.⁹ Payne's remarks sparked an outraged debate among many Czech intellectuals, and prompted many articles and editorials on the subject.¹⁰

In the heated media response during the mid-1990s, the debate about Czech emigration revolved around two issues: material rights and symbolic representation, both of which were inextricably linked. In his analysis of diasporic communities, William Safran describes the key features of expatriate minority groups which he defines as diasporas: dispersed from their homeland, partially alienated from their host societies, they retain a collective vision or 'myth' of their homeland.¹¹ Similarly, it may be argued that the Czech nation under totalitarianism also held an idealized vision of *krajané*, their Czech compatriots abroad in the West.

In 1989, with the possibility of return after more than forty years of mystification and idealization, all such illusions were shattered. As émigrés returned home, they became material persons, claiming national rights such as citizenship, the vote and restitution of their property. The Czech 'home' was disrupted by the return of Czech foreign nationals: it became necessary to transform émigrés into national citizens, to translate their past into current events, or transfer exile culture to national archives and museums. The émigrés' return forced Czechs to contemplate the meaning of Czechness itself, to define Czech nationhood, to re-evaluate their past, and forge a relationship with otherness in their present. The return coincided with a great move forward, towards a future democratic 'civil society', capitalism and a market economy, just as the past was being erased, repressed, rectified and rewritten.

Material rights

Ostensibly, antagonism towards returning émigrés stemmed from their claims for national and material rights: namely citizenship, the vote and restitution. When Czechoslovakia itself disappeared in 1993 with the formation of the Czech and Slovak Republics, so did the hyphenated position of the Czech abroad; dual citizenship became increasingly

⁹ Jirí Payne, 'Vzkaz krajanům', *Československý týdeník*, 29 July 1993, reprinted in *Listy*, 23, 1993, 5, pp. 89–91.

¹⁰ For example, most of *Listy*, 23, 1993, 5 is devoted to this issue, as is *Český dialog*, 3, 1993, 21.

¹¹ William Safran, 'Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return', *Diaspora*, 1, 1991, pp. 83–99.

problematic. Czechs living abroad could not acquire Czech citizenship other than by the means accorded to any foreigner (via a work permit, residency requirements, etc.). A similar resolution accorded voting and restitution rights, reserved only to those holding permanent residency or those who had left before 1948. On the whole, returning Czech émigrés were not particularly interested in reclaiming their lost land (only about 250 cases were heard by Czech courts).¹² Rather, they were upset by the requisite permanent residency provision that restricted restitution and the vote to people living in the Czech Republic. They considered it of symbolic¹³ or psychological¹⁴ value that they be included and recognized by the Czech state.

Ironically, while Czech émigrés abroad were stripped of rights within the Czech Republic, they were expected to help the country financially and politically, by financing Czech institutions and lobbying for Czech causes in other governments.¹⁵ It was considered their 'duty', rather than actions deserving of *quid pro quo* rights or privileges.¹⁶ Such attitudes angered many émigrés: as one put it, 'at first we were welcomed with open arms to later be told to stay out of Czech politics, while the Communist party, at first rebuffed as criminals, were later allowed to participate in democracy'.¹⁷

Throughout the 1990s, Czech émigrés continued to vocalize their complaints about these issues, both at home and in the international forum. In 1997, for example, during the US congressional debate on NATO expansion, a number of Czech émigrés vociferously sided against the Czech Republic's entry into NATO, including the group calling itself the IAS, the International Association of Czechs for Dual Citizenship, Restitution and Voting Rights.¹⁸ With its projected entry into NATO and the EU, the Czech Republic was forced to reconsider its treatment of minorities, be they Czech émigrés, or the Roma and Sinti who, because of the 1993 citizenship law, had become stateless individuals. For example, a significant portion of the EU Commission's 1998 report was devoted to the situation of the Roma.¹⁹ By the fall of

¹² Martin Kontra, 'Pozor na emigranty', *Respekt*, 6 March 1995, p. 4.

¹³ Jana Bendová, 'Klikaté cesty k srdci krajanů', *Mlada fronta dnes*, 5 February 1994, p. 6.

¹⁴ Petr Nováček, 'Je načase integrovat náš exil do národa', *Mlada fronta dnes*, 7 June 1994, p. 6.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Mojmír Povolný, 'Exil a české politické instituce', *Lidové noviny*, 28 June 1995, p. 8.

¹⁷ Jaroslav Vrzala, 'Paní profesorce Jiřině Šiklové', *Český dialog*, 9, 1995, pp. 20–21 (hereafter, Vrzala, 'Paní profesorce Jiřině Šiklové') (p. 21).

¹⁸ Andy Shah, 'Czech-Americans Seek Return of Homeland Citizenship', *Daily Bruin*, 19 November 1997, <<http://www.dailybruin.ucla.edu/DB/issues/97/11.18/news.czech.html>> [accessed January 2005].

¹⁹ European Commission Regular Report from the Commission on Progress towards Accession, Brussels, 1998.

1999, the Czech Republic, eager to be part of the global economy, yielded to international pressure, émigré grievances and their financial strangleholds and enacted law 193/1999 which revoked the statutes of 1989 and 1993 and granted dual citizenship to former émigrés and citizenship to stateless Roma minorities, to all those who had been Czechoslovak citizens at some time between 1948 and 1989.

Symbolic representation

The resentment and animosity returning Czech émigrés experienced had a particularly potent symbolic dimension. The inhospitality, ill-will and resentment towards émigrés stemmed from ‘tradition’ (*Bigas*): certain socio-historical structures — or ‘myths’ (to cite Barthes)²⁰ — propagated under Communism which continued to persist long after 1989. Perhaps the most basic of these myths was the belief that émigrés had betrayed the state. As one commentator sums up: ‘exiles were considered either as deserters or traitors by the former Communist regime. Perhaps it is the only thing that Communists accomplished successfully.’²¹ Along with this rhetoric, the Communist state often took punitive action against émigrés’ relatives if these ‘traitors’ or ‘defectors’ left: their families were denied such privileges as the right to secondary school education or travel abroad.

Another misconception concerning émigrés was perhaps more banal, but much more wide-spread: that émigrés chose a ‘better life’ by leaving and that they enjoyed the ‘good, easy life’ abroad. This myth was not so much perpetrated by the state, as by émigrés themselves. In their letters back home, as well as in Czech exile literature, it appeared that the life of Czechs abroad was comfortable and prosperous. As a result, ‘serious misunderstandings arose’, as commentator Thomas Pecina put it: ‘If there were a million émigrés, there were a million success stories.’²² Czechs at home contributed to this myth, often being completely seduced by the myth of the American dream, and firmly believing that life was rosy beyond the Wall.

After 1989, further misapprehensions arose. Many guilt-ridden or well-meaning émigrés fostered the image of poor, victimized, deprived Czechs at home, and rushed to assist or even rescue them. Many Czechs resented this paternalistic ‘big brother’ or even ‘missionary’ attitude, as well as the denigrating stereotypes of Czech natives as *chalupáři*²³ (a ‘bit greedy’ or ‘dumb’).²⁴ Children of Czech émigrés, the

²⁰ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, Paris, 1957.

²¹ Mojmir Povolný, ‘Exil a české politické instituce’, *Lidové noviny*, 28 June 1995, p. 8.

²² Pecina, ‘When Czechs fight Czechs’.

²³ *Chalupáři* refers to those people who, in Communist times, took up dilapidated country houses (*chalupy*) and spent years renovating them, using them as weekend retreats.

²⁴ Jiří Hanák, ‘Exil, emigrace a my domáci’, *Český dialog*, 7/8, 1995, p. 8.

second and third-generation Czechs born abroad, earned the reputation of being 'spoiled brats' who lacked cultural or linguistic skills, who only visited relatives during their vacations simply to shop or party. Compounding this, the return of Czech émigrés also coincided with an influx of other foreigners to the Czech Republic in the early 1990s — European tourists or YAPS (Young Americans in Prague). By 1993, an estimated 7,000 to 30,000 American expatriates were living in Prague,²⁵ often as business entrepreneurs or as artistic bohemians; many of these foreigners viewed Prague as either an investment opportunity or a cultural commodity.

Returning Czech émigrés were doubtless unprepared for the resentment and even antagonism they would experience at home. Perhaps the greatest fantasy émigrés cultivated was the illusion that, when they returned, they would face a triumphant, happy homecoming, a hope they had harboured for decades. This dream of an exultant return was shattered in the face of stereotyping, hostility and discrimination.

The value of suffering

In the post-Communist Czech Republic, as Jan Drábek incisively points out, 'the term émigré does not designate a geographical dimension but a moral one'.²⁶ The returning émigré was either a traitor or a faithful patriot, either a self-indulgent charlatan entrepreneur or a do-gooding humanist intellectual. If émigrés abandoned their Czech homeland for 'a better life', they deserved to remain émigrés. Only if they remained faithful to the afflicted Czech collective could they be considered citizens.

At the crux of this moral judgment lie relative interpretations of hardships suffered. As Sasha Goluboff observes, 'the mythic charter for belonging in the Czech Republic [became] collective suffering'.²⁷ The pain of 'native' Czechs, who had suffered under the totalitarian Communist regime, was weighed against the seemingly 'painless' experience of émigrés, who had supposedly lived happy, free lives abroad. No longer merely symbolic, suffering became a politically-charged, material issue when émigrés started claiming restitution for the pain they had suffered through loss of their citizenship, homes and property. 'Justified suffering' became a question of legitimacy, national rights and the key to national belonging.

²⁵ '(Young) A(mericans in) P(rague)', *New York Times Magazine*, 12 December 1993, p. 671.

²⁶ Jan Drábek, 'Émigré není označení morální, ale geographické', *Mlada fronta dnes*, 9 May 1994, p. 6.

²⁷ Sasha Goluboff, 'Discussant Remarks: Mobility, Labor and the Ties that Bind', *Anthropology of East Europe Review (AEER)*, 20, 2002, 2 <<http://condor.depaul.edu/~rrotenbe/aer/v20n2/Goluboff.pdf>> [accessed June 2005].

Problematically, however, many émigrés chose to suppress the suffering they experienced during emigration. One (anonymous) émigré suggested in an interview that ‘The first years in exile were cruel, but we had chosen it, therefore we did not want to write home about our pain and hardship and today it “returns” to us in the form of accusations’.²⁸ In the post-Communist Czech Republic, the apparent lack of pain experienced caused further misery for returning émigrés. Many Czechs refused to believe that former émigrés experienced any hardship abroad, because many émigrés failed to express it. As Jiří Pehe, a former exile who worked as President Havel’s chief political advisor, explains: ‘The whole of society believed that they had suffered, while we in the West lead a comfortable life. The people here simply don’t understand that we lost everything and basically had to start from scratch.’²⁹

The émigrés’ suppressed suffering is a much misunderstood and yet fundamental part of their experience of exile. As sociologist Jiřina Šiklová elaborates:

Most of them [émigrés] wanted to justify their departure and so most of them never wrote home about their difficult beginnings, their despair and hard work. They remained silent about it, and maybe it was a mistake. If people here only realized how really difficult were the beginnings of those who emigrated, they would not envy them. Today, we can no longer fill that gap.³⁰

This article will attempt to examine that ‘gap’ and explore some of the reasons that may have compelled émigrés to be reticent on the subject of their negative experience of emigration. Consideration of this silent and repressed past may help to reveal the true nature of the contemporary Czech émigré experience.

2. *The Silenced Suffering of Exile*

Most contemporary psychologists or sociologists agree that in emigration, exile or immigration, individuals experience various degrees of psychological and emotional distress.³¹ In the case of Czech émigrés, it seems that the experience of hardship was either suppressed or silenced, both in the public forum and in exile literature, especially compared to other immigrant groups. In stark contrast, for example, Maghrebian

²⁸ Anonymous source cited in Milan Horáček and Jiřina Šiklová, ‘Introduction to conference “Home/Exile”’, *Listy*, 22, 1992, 6, p. 9.

²⁹ Nicole Hughes and Simon Pardek, ‘Coming Back or Coming Home?’, *New Presence*, Summer 2005, pp. 27–29 (p. 27).

³⁰ Jiřina Šiklová, ‘O exilu pro Český dialog: Rozhovor s Jiřinou Šiklovou’, *Český dialog*, 3, 1994, pp. 10–11 (p. 11).

³¹ León Grinberg and Rebeca Grinberg, *Psychoanalytic Perspectives on Migration and Exile*, New Haven, CT, 1989.

immigrants in France rioted in the autumn of 2005, publicly contesting their alienation and disenfranchisement in French society and rendering their adverse experience of immigration explicitly and agonistically visible. Analogously, Maghrebian immigrant writing is characterized by considerable reference to immigrant suffering; some writers even somatize their psychological suffering by describing their estrangement, isolation or negative emotional states with bodily metaphors, and metaphors of disability or disease.³² Comparatively, no explicit agonistic rhetoric is manifest in Czech exile literature. Clearly, these differences may be attributed to these immigrants' disparate racial and ethnic backgrounds, their socio-economic status and, saliently, their relationship to the host country, given historical factors, such as colonialism, for example. Furthermore, in some cultures, it is considered polite to conceal one's hardships, while in others, they are more readily verbalized. In the following section, focusing on the specificity of the Czech émigré experience, I examine some of the socio-historical, psychological and literary reasons that might account for the suppression of the expression of pain in Czech exile literature.

Historical concerns

Historically, it is important to account for the different generational experiences of emigration. In the Czech case, there were three discrete émigré waves, each driven by different political motives or philosophical beliefs: 1) the 1948 generation, the *utíkali*, who 'ran away' — 60,000 in two years — for what they imagined would be only a short while, as they firmly believed that democracy would be reinstated in the Czech lands; 2) the 1968 wave, the *vycestovali* (104,000 within two years to a total of 225,000 until 1970) who 'travelled out' forever, as they believed that the Soviet occupation to be permanent,³³ and 3) the last wave, the *se vypařily*, who 'evaporated' during normalization.

Saliently, the 1948 generation of émigrés, often known as exulants, firmly believed that Communism would soon fail, and thus saw themselves as carrying out the important mission of safe-guarding Czech national identity abroad. As such, they had to remain strong and vibrant — any acknowledgement of suffering was viewed as a sign of weakness. Pamphlets and articles by these early émigrés often celebrate the 'tragedy of exile' and warn exiled writers not to succumb to despair.³⁴ For example, Ladislav Radimski devotes a chapter of his

³² Madelaine Hron, 'Pathological Victims: The Discourse of Disease/Dis-Ease in Beur Texts', *French Literature Studies*, 32, 2005, pp. 159–74.

³³ Estimates from Česká tisková kancelář in 'Historie české emigrace se píše téměř čtyři století', *Mladá fronta dnes*, 4 May 1998, p. 7. Actual figures remain unknown.

³⁴ František Listopad, 'Z Referatu na sjezdu kulturních pracovníků v Paříži', *Sklizeň*, samizdat, 4 (8), August 1956, 44, pp. 6–7 (p. 6).

treatise on how to be an exile to 'Healthy and Sickly Exile' and scathingly condemns 'people who are nervous, unsure, scared, unconfident, fearing denunciation; they are the adepts of the insane, candidates for suicide, unhappy people of the Kafkaesque type'.³⁵ Ferdinand Peroutka, perhaps the most notable exile of the 1948 generation, repeatedly emphasizes in his classic text, 'Jak být exulantem' (How to Be an Exile) that 'it is necessary to consciously defend oneself from illness of the spirit'.³⁶

Later generations of émigrés who left after the Soviet invasion were convinced of the fact that Communism would never fall, and that their exile was permanent. Their self-reflections on exile, though varied, also share a common theme: that of justifying their decision to leave Czechoslovakia and legitimizing their exile. An exemplary case in point is Jan Lukas's article, 'Why I chose exile only in 1966'.³⁷ Some, like Ivan Jelínek, validate their exile as a 'loss and a gain',³⁸ while others, like Jan Vladislav, perceive it as a 'responsibility and a freedom'.³⁹ Others even defend their Czechness despite their emigration; Zdena Salivarová for instance, explains, 'I'm a Czech and never can be anything else, because it's impossible. Even if I lived two hundred years in Canada, and even if I liked this country as my own'.⁴⁰ In these defences of exile there is little mention of any suffering of exile. As writer Jaroslav Vrzala explains, many writers intentionally chose not to dwell on their hardships because they wished to resist Communist rhetoric: 'Should we have complained crying about them? To write home about our difficulties and our fears meant playing into Communist propaganda'.⁴¹

Psychological factors

At this point, it is perhaps crucial to consider the psychological factors particular to Czech emigration. Like other immigrant groups, Czech émigrés will undoubtedly have experienced various psychological conditions traditionally associated with immigration, such as culture shock, isolation, anxiety or alienation. However, they will have also experienced problems peculiar to their socio-historical condition.

³⁵ Ladislav Radimski, *Sklonuj tve jméno exulante!*, samizdat, 1967, p. 39.

³⁶ Ferdinand Peroutka, 'Jak být exulantem', *Skutečnost*, 2, 1950, 11/12, pp. 213–16 (p. 213).

³⁷ Jan Lukas, 'Proč jsem zvolil exil až v roce 1966', *Svědectví*, 8, 1966, 30, pp. 207–12 (hereafter, Lukas, 'Proč jsem zvolil exil až v roce 1966').

³⁸ Ivan Jelínek, 'Ztráta a zisk', *Proměny*, 104, 1973, pp. 6–10.

³⁹ Jan Vladislav, 'Exile, Responsibility, Destiny', in John Glad (ed.), *Literature in Exile*, London, 1990, pp. 14–27.

⁴⁰ Zdena Salivarová, 'Rozhovor před oceanem', in Karel Hviždala (ed.) *Benefice*, Toronto, 1990, pp. 84–101 (pp. 87–88).

⁴¹ Vrzala, 'Paní profesorce Jiřině Šiklové', p. 21.

Here I refer to the only two book-length studies concerned specifically with Czech emigration: Jiří Diamant's *Psychologické problémy emigrace* (Olomouc, 1995) and Jacek Adolf's 1977 doctoral thesis.⁴² Though these studies examine different immigrant groups in disparate contexts, (Diamant's study examines Czech immigrants to the Netherlands in the 1980s, while Adolf surveys Czech and Polish political refugees to Toronto in the 1970s), both investigations offer strikingly similar observations, as well as discerning insights into Czech exile writing.

First, both Diamant and Adolf stress the importance of 'the decision' to emigrate and the rationalization thereof. Diamant theorizes that at the root of most of his patients' psychological problems was the inability to cope with their decision to emigrate. Likewise, Adolf summarizes the many interviews he conducted with émigrés as characterized by the exile's 'motivation to emigrate; the validity of his [*sic*] perceptions of the circumstances that led to his decision to escape and the validity of his perception of the circumstances that motivate him to persist in exile'.⁴³ As outlined above, the individual's justification of their choice to emigrate is also a pervasive theme in émigrés' autobiographical texts.

More importantly, both Diamant and Adolf emphasize that Czech emigration can only be understood within the context of totalitarianism, which conditioned the behaviour of the second and third waves of émigrés. Both analyses expatiate on the oppression, dehumanization and ruthlessness of the regime to the Western reader in their attempts to convey its damaging effects on émigrés' psyches. Adolf describes it as 'a prolonged crisis in which [the émigré's] identity has been in doubt and in which there has been a painful dissonance between his values and his overt behaviour'.⁴⁴ Both psychologists stress that many émigrés were forced to repress their negative emotions under totalitarianism, a society characterized by suspicion, lies and betrayal. While in the West, émigrés were free to express themselves, they continued to suppress their past experience, because it was generally misunderstood by the host society as 'idiosyncratic, exotic or completely irrelevant'.⁴⁵ Many émigrés found this reception frustrating, and so ceased to allude to their past altogether, as one of Adolf's respondents explains:

At first I used to become exasperated and infuriated anytime I tried to explain my decision to the leave the country to anyone in Canada [...]. Then I gave up. I came to understand that they have never experienced anything even remotely similar to what we had to go through.⁴⁶

⁴² Jacek Adolf, 'Adaptation of East European Refugees and Political Émigrés in Toronto with Special Reference To Immigrants From Poland and Czechoslovakia', unpublished PhD dissertation, York University, 1977.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 212.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 220.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 211.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 212.

Again, this tendency is also apparent in émigré autobiographies. Jan Lukas's defence of exile, for example, is primarily concerned with elaborating upon the evils of the Communist regime; his only remark on his present life in New York is his statement that, 'What we have lived through under totalitarianism is to a certain extent incommunicable to Western audiences'.⁴⁷ Adolf theorizes that, as a result of this duality, many émigrés experienced a state of 'cognitive dissonance': on the one hand, they knew totalitarianism to be dangerous, a world-view upheld in their émigré community; on the other, they were compelled to dismiss it as a mere inconvenience in their receiving society.

Finally, both Diamant and Adolf broach a problem that is perhaps more difficult to discern in written texts: the guilt that émigrés experienced as a result of their decision to emigrate. Both researchers point to the mixture of shame, self-reproach and remorse that Czech émigrés felt at having abandoned their friends and relatives to a precarious fate under totalitarianism. Diamant explains that his patients' inability to cope with their rational decision to emigrate was often their shameful view of it as an escape, a breach of solidarity or an act of betrayal.⁴⁸ Their ambivalent feelings were further exacerbated by any accusations of betrayal by their families or the Communist regime. As one of Adolf's interviewees explains:

The most painful and unfair accusation directed at escapees is that they are like rats deserting a sinking ship. That is not true. I believe that one can do more for one's country as a political émigré than as a political prisoner. [...] Still, while accepting this on a rational level, I can never really get rid of a feeling of uneasiness, you might even call it guilt or something very similar, about the fact I left people who used to be close to me to their own devices and very likely I shall never see them again.

Interestingly, referring to literature, Adolf characterizes the émigrés' guilt as the 'Lord Jim complex'. The hero of Joseph Conrad's novel, *Lord Jim* (1900), deserts his sinking ship and all of its passengers; the resulting guilt-complex is the main driving force of the novel and the hero's actions. Similarly, although émigré writers rarely elaborate on their guilt, it could nevertheless be the force driving them to repeatedly explain and justify their motivations for exile in their personal essays.

Literary considerations

In the fiction of exiled Czech writers, the adversities of emigration are even more elusive than in their autobiographical or essayistic reflections. Stylistically, in fictional texts, the expression of suffering brought about by emigration is indirect or indefinable, connoted by allusion

⁴⁷ Lukas, 'Proc jsem zvolil exil až v roce 1966', p. 210.

⁴⁸ Jiří Diamant, *Psychologické problémy emigrace*, Olomouc, 1995, pp. 33–34.

or intertextuality or appearing in the guise of humour or satire. Such stylistic tendencies differ drastically from the rhetoric of identity politics that characterize much of contemporary Western discourse, immigrant writing included. US minority discourse in particular has been criticized by feminists as being governed by the 'politics of feeling', a discourse in which there is an overwhelming tendency to dramatize suffering, injury and 'wounded attachments'.⁴⁹

Czech exile literature may perhaps be best characterized by its nuance, variety and resistance to categorization. Even in the 1950s, Peter Den (pseudonym for Ladislav Radimski) bemoans the fact that Czech exile literature from 1938 to 1950 was all too often subsumed under the rubric of 'literary escapism', because it refused to throw everything into the [Western] melting pot — be it atom bombs, the UN, Iron Curtains, the latest crop statistics or American poll results — and did not 'nicely mix everything up according to the latest political trend, the five-year plan and or the exile problem'.⁵⁰ In his defence of Czech literature, Den describes it as nomadic rather than hege- monically settled, one that resists cultural definitions by its flexibility, irony and experimentation.

Some thirty years later, Mojmír Grygar made similar observations when comparing Russian and Czech writing in exile: in contrast to its Russian equivalent, Czech exile literature seems less personal and defensive in tone and, notably, much more critical and comparatively global in scope. Furthermore, as Grygar explains, Russian exiled writers often articulate their exile as a 'pain-filled uprooting and homelessness', while Czech writers generally do not describe exile as 'a degradation, punishment or a pathological state', citing the writer Milan Kundera, who viewed his years in France as the best years of his life.⁵¹ Grygar ascribes some of these differences to those of 'big nations' as opposed to 'small nations', claiming that citizens of small nations such as Czechoslovakia adapt more easily to changing cultural contexts. He elaborates his argument by referring to the 'dual-perspective' of such authors as Milan Kundera, Josef Škvorecký, Jaroslav Vejvoda, Jan Beneš or Sylvie Richterová. Yet he points out that certain works, such as the 'wild', vulgar or anarchistic texts of Jan Pelc, Jiří Svoboda or Jan Novák, may only be understood in the context of resistance to

⁴⁹ Lauren Berlant, 'The Subject of True Feeling: Pain, Privacy and Politics', in Sara Ahmed (ed.), *Transformations: Thinking Through Feminism*, New York, 2000, pp. 33–48; Wendy Brown, 'Wounded Attachments', *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, Princeton, NJ, 1995, pp. 52–77. Most of the selections in Ahmed's collection provocatively explore the politics of emotions in minority discourse in various contexts.

⁵⁰ Peter Den, 'V Zamyšlení nad tak zvanou únikovou literaturou', *Sklizeň*, samizdat, 3 (1), January 1955, 25, pp. 6–7 (p. 6).

⁵¹ Mojmír Grygar, 'Proměny spisovatele v exilu', *Listy*, 13, 1988, 3, pp. 93–101 (p. 94).

totalitarian ideologies. He also notes that some writers, such as Ota Filip or Karel Michal, express their pain, frustration or anger with 'maximally expressive and opinionated forms' such as 'caricature, satire or hyperbole'.⁵²

In his bibliography of the varied spectrum of Czech literature, Jan Čulík offers perhaps the best characterization and explanation of Czech exile literature:

[Czech exile literature] is unusually sceptical to all systems of thought that offer a simplified and stereotypical interpretation of life [. . .] It is not only a criticism of 'socialist realism' but also of many aspects of life in Western societies.⁵³

Here Čulík points to perhaps the most important factor affecting Czech exile literature: its scepticism to all forms of ideology, including Communist and Western rhetoric.

In their opposition to Communist rhetoric, Czech exiled writers were resisting the main literary genre championed by the Soviets: Socialist Realism. Socialist Realism was defined as art that was socialist in content and realistic in form; it sought to depict reality as it should be, not necessarily as it was. Usually, socialist works depicted the heroic struggles of proletarians in the face of capitalist oppression or happy life in collectivity. In many ways, the Socialist Realist narrative resembles the traditional immigrant model of 'poor-boy-does-good'. For this reason perhaps Czech exiled writers avoided the generic immigrant hero model in their works. They viewed with scepticism any heroic, sentimental or emotional depictions in the Socialist Realist mode, and with cynicism any self-pitying, tragic victim heroes, because these were the characteristics of the genre espoused under Communism.

However, Czech exile literature also markedly resists generic Western literary models, most saliently the American 'immigrant novel' and, by extension, much of diasporic or minority literature. William Boelhower defines the immigrant novel as one in which 'An immigrant protagonist, representing an ethnic world-view, comes to America with great expectation and through a series of trials is led to reconsider them in terms of his final status'.⁵⁴ The structure of the traditional immigrant novel follows the immigrant hero's departure from his/her native land, and follows his/her problematic experiences in the host country. The plot is developed by 'a series of trials' or pericopes of immigrant hardships, which are usually resolved by some form of cultural assimilation or adaptation. Very few Czech émigré novels take up the genre of

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 97.

⁵³ Jan Čulík, *Knihy za ohradou: česká literatura v exilových nakladatelstvích, 1971–1989*, Prague, 1991, p. 39.

⁵⁴ William Boelhower, 'The Immigrant Novel as Genre', *Melus*, 8, 1981, 1, pp. 3–13 (p. 3).

the immigrant novel,⁵⁵ and thus perhaps dismiss any facile models of cultural integration or assimilation. Saliently, Czech exile writers avoid the genre of 'immigrant autobiography' prominent in other diasporic literatures, and typified by memoirs by such exiled intellectuals as Eva Hoffman, Andre Aciman or Edward Said.⁵⁶

Reading the hardships of exile

Clearly, however, in the vast spectrum of Czech exile literature, some authors do describe the pain they experienced as émigrés. Karel Michal, for example, characterized his exile as 'a loss of the greater part of a person'; Ivan Diviš, as a 'death penalty';⁵⁷ Antonín Broušek as 'almost a suicidal step into the void'.⁵⁸ However, rather than connoting the trials of immigration, exile for Czech writers signalled an existential plight of universal humanist dimensions, as Ivan Pfaff illustrates here when self-reflexively citing a famous passage by Milan Kundera:

You ask: *Heimweh*? Depression? Disillusion? Lack of adaptation? Giving up the fight? Stepping away from exile? No way. Just the simple credo of a person, to whom the dogged delusion of love and anger returns again and again: 'from the moment they expelled me from the circle, I am constantly falling, falling now, and then since they pushed me to it then, falling further, deeper, from my country into the empty space of the world.'⁵⁹

The reader-response to Czech exile literature similarly translated the suffering with e/immigration as a state of universal existential alienation. To cite but one example, Blanka Kubešová's *Romance pro Žoržínu* (Romance for Georgina, Zürich, 1985) represents a standard immigrant text in which a young foreign Czech adapts to her new environment in the United States. Instead of reading it as a typical immigrant novel however, Czech readers seemed to understand it from a more general perspective. The Czech reviewer transforms the 'trials' specific to emigration as the generalized feeling of estrangement, querying 'Did we not all feel this state of being as adults or at least the vast majority of us?'⁶⁰

⁵⁵ Some notable exceptions include Jan Novák's *Striptease Chicago*, New York, 1983 and *Willy's Dream Kit*, New York, 1985; Iva Pekarková's *Gimme the Money*, New York, 2000 and *Gang zjiyvených*, Prague 1998, and Jan Beneš's *Zelenou Nahorou*, Toronto, 1977. Note that the former texts were published in English.

⁵⁶ Eva Hoffman, *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language*, New York, 1990; Andre Aciman, *Out Of Egypt: A Memoir*, New York, 1996; Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, New York, 2002.

⁵⁷ Citations taken from interviews in Karel Hvížd'ala, *České rozhovory ve světě*, Cologne, 1981, pp. 132, 224.

⁵⁸ Cited in Ivan Pfaff, 'Zmatky kolem růžového paloučku', *Svědectví*, 19, 1984/85, 76, pp. 855–59 (p. 856).

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 859. In his description of being 'outside the circle', Pfaff cites Milan Kundera, *Kniha smíchu a zapomnění* (*The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*), Toronto, 1981, p. 84.

⁶⁰ Jan Surnad, 'Exil jako nemoc — Blanka Kubešová: romance pro Žoržínu', *Proměny*, 23, 1986, 1, pp. 180–81.

Problematically, the condition of exile was often re-appropriated by writers living in Czechoslovakia to describe their own condition. For example, Václav Jamek polemicizes that all should live in a state of 'inner exile', 'separate from society', 'at its margins', so as to be 'true to our convictions', 'not handicapped by the demands of society'.⁶¹ Similarly, Věra Linhartová, in her 'Ontology of Exile', concludes that everybody should live as in exile, 'out of one's place', 'unsettled', 'open in all directions' — as a nomad.⁶² Though she admits there is 'voluntary' and 'involuntary' exile, she urges everyone to view exile not as 'suffering' but to invite exile as a 'metamorphosis', a transformative cathartic process.

By thus also taking up as a theme the metaphysical state of exile, writers within Czechoslovakia moved to negate the particular experience of those writers living outside it as exiled émigrés. The latter's suffering became relativized and rendered equivalent to the pain of people living under totalitarianism. Such an equivalence is made poignantly clear in this statement by Eva Kantůrková, penned shortly before the Velvet Revolution:

I do not consider exile as a state, as a plight, trauma, as an uprooting from the roots and rights of home; those are perhaps the feelings of an *exulant*. [...] It seems irrelevant to me whether one bears this burden at home or across the border. The only difference is the advantages of the living space.⁶³

In general, as far as their Czech readership was concerned, the struggles of Czech émigrés were comparable to a universal existential condition; in some cases, exile was even viewed as analogous to the realities of living in a totalitarian state. Little critical attention was paid to the specific hardships associated with emigration or immigration, or to the particular psychological, socio-cultural or historical dimensions of Czech émigré experience.

3. *Reading the Suffering of Return*

The sufferings of Czech émigrés were not only silenced upon their departure from Czechoslovakia, but were similarly stifled upon their return after 1989. In the numerous commentaries about returning émigrés⁶⁴ there is barely any mention of the painful adaptation that émigrés might have faced upon their return home — be it isolation, alienation, discrimination or difficult cultural adjustments. While some

⁶¹ Václav Jamek, 'Pěkně divný exil', *Literární Noviny*, 5, 1994, 12, pp. 1, 3.

⁶² Věra Linhartová, 'Za ontologie exilu', *Literární Noviny*, 9, 1998, 49, pp. 1, 5.

⁶³ Eva Kantůrková and Ota Filip, 'Rozhovor na dálku s Evou', *Listy*, 19, 1989, 2, pp. 79–81 (p. 79).

⁶⁴ Here I refer to the various sources from the 1990s indicated in these notes.

journalists have remarked that for émigrés, 'the spell of home was broken',⁶⁵ referring to their disillusionment and disappointment, they have failed to consider any of the psychological problems or socio-economic hardships émigrés might have encountered upon their return. Yet, in my private conversations with returning authors, issues of cultural readjustment, culture shock and, in particular, relational and financial problems were the main topic of conversation.

In public interviews, however, returning émigré writers were reluctant to express their feelings about their return; their replies were usually curt and flippant. The following declaration by Ota Filip is an exemplary case in point; while he grants that life in exile can lead to 'chronic sickness', like other writers of his generation he refuses to expose his private pain publicly:

I suppose all of us who live in exile are infected in some way with this sickness, manifest in outbreaks of tears, nostalgia, sentimental longing, even with self-destructive cynicism, as well as ordinary fits of sadness [...] But I am not willing to exhibit my wounds of my twenty-year exile to my foreign close ones, with reproaches and tears.⁶⁶

In their reflective writings, returning authors also seem to avoid their personal issues of return, let alone lament or vindicate their hardships of return. Some make light of their return, such as Jan Drábek in *Po uši v post-komunismu* (Neck-Deep in Post-Communism),⁶⁷ who satires his experiences as a cultural attaché, or Benjamin Kuras who, in *Češi na vlásku* (Czechs on a String),⁶⁸ parodies the founding myths of the Czech Republic.

As far as fiction is concerned, it quickly becomes evident that émigré authors rarely directly address the experience of return in their novels. Interestingly, several authors have adopted different topics or genres upon their return, such as Josef Škvorecký, who writes detective stories,⁶⁹ or Iva Pekárková, who writes travelogues.⁷⁰ Others, such as Jan Novák in *Samet a pára* (Velvet and Vapour),⁷¹ describe the time of the changeover in 1989, and then never write about it again, whilst some, such as Jan Beneš, continue to comment on life in America, alluding to the Czech Republic only in passing.⁷²

⁶⁵ Jan Troják, 'Image domova', *Český dialog*, 3, 1993, 23, pp. 18–19.

⁶⁶ Ota Filip, 'Identita v cizině', *Tvar*, 6, 1995, 17, p. 13.

⁶⁷ Jan Drábek, *Po Uši v postkomunismu*, Prague, 2000.

⁶⁸ Benjamin Kuras, *Češi na vlásku*, Prague, 1996.

⁶⁹ Josef Škvorecký, *Dve vraždy v mém dvojm životě*, Prague, 1996, or his series with Zdena Salivarova, *Krátké setkání, s vraždou*, Prague, 1999; *Setkání po letech, s vraždou*, Prague, 2000; *Setkání na konci éry, s vraždou*, Prague, 2000.

⁷⁰ Iva Pekárková, *Do Indie kam jnam*, Prague, 1998; *Třicet dva chvanu*, Prague, 2000; *Najdža hvězdy v srdci*, Prague, 2003.

⁷¹ Jan Novák, *Samet a pára*, Brno, 1992.

⁷² Jan Beneš, *Americká Causerie*, Prague, 1997; *Americký pitaval*, Prague, 1997.

Nonetheless, in private interviews, such as this one with Iva Pekárková, authors admit that returning 'is not easy', and even liken it to a 'personal grief'. Pekárková explains that the problems of post-Communism often cannot be written about, because they are 'too difficult' or 'boring' for the reader:

Yeah, sure, it's not easy to be back [...] The thing that bothers me the most? Perhaps the racism or the closed-mindedness. I came back because my husband wanted to live in Europe. But he doesn't really understand Czech. He's lucky. I sometimes wish I didn't understand what was being said! [...] Writing about it? It's too difficult maybe. [...] No, there is nothing to write about in the Czech Republic — the Czech Republic is boring. Besides, it's not a topic that interests people; it's not what they want to read, not what they want to buy.⁷³

In Pekárková's most recent books, composed upon her return to the Czech Republic,⁷⁴ any explicit expression of the returnee's unhappiness is absent. The difficulties of belonging give way to the adventures of travelling, be it to India, Thailand or Nigeria. Nonetheless, reading these texts closely, one realizes that the notion of return is there, referred to indirectly, in digressive allegorical detours.

In *Třicet dva chvanu* (32 Khwan), for example, set in Thailand in 1983, travelling and cultural assimilation relate thematically to the fate of the returning émigré. The plot revolves around Iva's attempts to visit a refugee camp, in order to understand and share the pain of 'real refugees'. Despite her efforts, she never makes it to one of the camps; a pass is denied her every time. However, she experiences personal pain when her friend Dao dies. Yet she is forbidden to grieve this loss openly, because for the Buddhist Thais mourning or crying over deceased people suggests that they did not live a worthwhile life. It is with great effort that Iva learns to mask her pain so as to conform to Thai cultural norms; later she escapes it by travelling some more. Such is perhaps also Pekárková's fate: she is denied her suffering of emigration and return, she must learn to forget it, escape it or set it travelling.

Like exiled writers, then, returning émigré writers often allude to their difficulties in abstract asides, humorous satire, figurative language or allegorical detours. The problems of the returnee are suppressed for similar reasons as the émigré's suffering remains silent, most notably because of the demands of the Czech readership. In all, few returning writers 'return home' in post-Communist novels; most avoid commenting on the socio-political situation of émigrés in the 1990s in their fiction.

⁷³ From a personal interview with the author, Prague, 2000.

⁷⁴ For references, see note 50.

Novels of return

I know of only four post-Communist Czech novels that address the return of the émigré: *Návraty* (Returns) by Josef Beneš, ... *a výstupy do údolí* (... and ascents into the valley) by Jan Pelc, *Beze Stop* (Without a Trace) by Jaroslav Formánek and *Opilost hloubky* (Drunkenness of Depths) by Lubomír Martínek,⁷⁵ intriguingly all written by former Czech émigrés living in France. Set in post-Communist times, they indirectly reveal these returning émigrés' observations on life in the Czech Republic in the early 1990s. Furthermore, all of them also adopt mythical structures wherein suffering becomes a central, migrating motif. I will examine these four texts to show how the pain of return is represented. To conclude my analysis, I will turn to Milan Kundera, a Czech émigré who has remained in France, but who clearly comments on the myth of return in his latest novel, *Ignorance*.⁷⁶

Beneš's exultant return

The only novel that depicts the émigré's return as a triumphant success is *Návraty* by Joseph D. Beneš. In this final novel of Beneš's émigré trilogy, which also includes *Dospívání: Smutek domu* (Adolescence: Sadness of Home) and *Útěky* (Flights), the émigré's return represents the positive resolution of the émigré story. Immediately upon crossing the Czech border, protagonist Běďa experiences a spiritual reunion with the natural beauty of his homeland, which has supposedly remained unchanged during Communism.⁷⁷ As Běďa explains, his arrival is seemingly acknowledged by the nation itself: 'That is what they call a country. A place that recognizes you and talks to you.'⁷⁸ Běďa's return is heralded as perpetual rebirth and rediscovery; he is likened to a phoenix, 'arising from the ashes of his scepticism, again and again'.⁷⁹ Idealistic in tone, *Návraty* hardly mentions any of the émigré's material problems. Běďa's restitution claim is resolved in a matter of minutes⁸⁰ and his books are published almost as soon as he arrives in the Czech Republic, thus quickly restoring an engaged, recuperative dialogue with his lost compatriots.⁸¹ The novel then focuses on Běďa's hard work as he strives to rebuild his country-house, as well as his many attempts to educate his friends and family, who remain obsolete in their ways.

⁷⁵ Josef Beneš, *Návraty*, Olomouc, 1998 (hereafter, *Návraty*); Jan Pelc, ... *a výstupy do údolí*, Prague, 2000; Jaroslav Formánek, *Beze Stop*, Prague, 2001 (hereafter, *Beze Stop*), and Lubomír Martínek, *Opilost hloubky*, Prague, 2000 (hereafter, *Opilost hloubky*).

⁷⁶ Milan Kundera, *Ignorance*, trans. Linda Asher, New York, 2002 (hereafter, *Ignorance*).

⁷⁷ *Návraty*, p. 7.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 20–26.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

A Christ-like figure, Bědřa looks with pity at the man in his cave, who is still Communist⁸² or remains 'patient' as he travels through towns where they hurl stones at him, insulting him as an 'economic migrant'.⁸³

The animosity that Bědřa faces upon his return is, however, referred to repeatedly. At one point, our hero asks one of the Czech 'natives' the reason for the hostility against him. In reply, incredibly, his Czech interlocutor actually bites into his wrist and hisses, 'Because you lived while we suffered!'⁸⁴ Yet despite this, our optimistic hero does not feel insulted or hurt; on the contrary, he wraps his wounded wrist, and explains to his readers that his attacker is merely an 'innocent victim of the unfortunate circumstances of our history, baleful propaganda and doubtful interpretations of our flight'.⁸⁵

The plot culminates in the townsfolk's decision to construct a shopping mall over a cemetery. Bědřa, firmly resisting such nihilistic commercialization, secretly exhumes the dead before the cemetery is razed to the ground and deposits them in his basement, which he converts into a chapel, thus completing, in a way, a second, personal 'exile'. As one erudite townspeople explains, the term 'exile' was first employed in medieval Europe to refer to graves that were transported from inside the church far out into the cemetery.⁸⁶ Here, our hero performs this ritualistic transport of the past alone, into the depths of his own home.

In all, there is little that is credible in Beneš's melodramatic story of return; one wonders if the hero actually returned to a real Czech Republic. Even more implausible than Bědřa's return home is his lover Myriam's successful entry into Czech society. Myriam is a black Haitian who integrates without a single problem amidst the white country-folk, and learns to speak Czech fluently, simply by eagerly correcting all her mistakes.⁸⁷

Aside from its many flaws, *Návraty* nonetheless offers a valuable commentary on the return. In many ways, Bědřa's return represents the dream of the exultant return of the Czech 1948 generation, who until 1968 believed themselves to be saviours of the Czech nation in exile. Yet, émigré Bědřa remains essentially in exile when he returns home to the Czech Republic, as he refuses any viable otherness, or any actual change. His sanctimonious behaviour elevates him to the status of classic hero — harbinger of the modern and protector of the past — yet, in so doing, it also necessarily distances him from his Czech

⁸² Ibid., p. 47.

⁸³ Ibid., p. 55.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 56.

⁸⁶ Ibid., pp. 152–53.

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 105.

community. In the end though, the central plot — the desecration and erasure of the past coinciding with rapid modernization and commercialization — points to one of the central problems that the Czech Republic faced in the 1990s. Beneš nicely points to the fact that Czech émigrés are guardians of much of the Czech past, in this case symbolically located in their restituted yet modernized homes.

While Beneš's trilogy has never been reviewed, and despite its ubiquity in Czech bookstores, the literary journal *Prostor* recently published an autobiographical reflection by this little-known author, an evangelical priest who emigrated to Switzerland under Communism. In a piece also titled 'Návraty', Beneš again deliberates the issue of flight and return, apparently still consumed by these two dynamics. He confuses and conflates them, describing them both as the locus of originary otherness. For instance, departure is likened to 'point zero', 'a feeling of dizziness' and return is the 'great taboo', the 'cause of so much misfortune and tragedies'.⁸⁸ Unlike the protagonist of his novel, Beneš seems not to have come to terms with either his exile or his return. However, referring to Biblical and literary epics, Beneš asserts his faith and optimism in this process of change. His concluding remarks concern the new Europe that, much like the returning émigré hero, must learn to escape from its heritage of communism and fascism and return to its roots in Christianity.

Pelc's dystopia

In stark contrast to Beneš's utopian novel is Jan Pelc's dystopic ... *a výstupy do údolí*. In this semi-autobiographical text, the narrator crudely and often angrily works through the 'émigré schizofrenia' he experienced when the Velvet Revolution dramatically 'shredded' his Parisian life. Olin, the hero of Pelc's previous dissident text ... *a bude huře!* (... it'll be worse!),⁸⁹ has a prosperous firm in Paris, where he lives with a French woman. The fall of the Communist regime divides those who stay and those who leave. Olin, unsure which camp to belong to, travels back and forth from Prague to Paris to Prague, always attracting the worst types, swindlers and thieves, who take advantage of him, rob him and beat him up. To counter this chaos, Olin drinks himself to oblivion, falling into a hardened desperation, moving in his delusions from a sunny, colourful Paris to a Czech Republic of grey dirt and dilapidated walls, from a proud nation which had just won its freedom to one corrupted by Bolshevik fraud and theft. His private life falls apart as he cannot decide between his two loves, so in the end he

⁸⁸ Josef Beneš, 'Návraty', *Prostor*, 67/68, 2005, pp. 127–35 (p. 130).

⁸⁹ Jan Pelc, *A bude huře ...*, Cologne, 1985 (hereafter, Pelc, *A bude huře ...*).

remains alone with his pain, in a nauseating and oft revolting cycle of drinking and vaporous delirium of confessional digressions.

Czech reviews of the novel focus ostensibly on Pelc's 'alcoholic passages', his 'underground' themes and his style, considered 'shocking' under normalization.⁹⁰ However, reviewers seem ambivalent about the theme of return that drives the novel, describing it as the 'rough underside of the Velvet revolution'⁹¹ or as a 'document' of the 1990s,⁹² but never delving deeply into the meaning of Olin's despair. For example, unsure how to analyse Olin's hopeless final return at the 'optimistic' (*sic*) conclusion of the text, one reviewer simply reproduces it without further commentary:⁹³

I bought a bottle and sat by the river. I stare at the Rudolfinum and I know that I have lost. Lost terribly. All those dreams that I left with and returned with, vanished like snow. I should emigrate again, somewhere. [...] But I can't; I am too old. [...] Everything is fucked up. [...] Welcome home, Olin.⁹⁴

There is clearly some form of visceral suffering of return in . . . *a výstupy do údolí*, made explicit in Pelc's tough, raucous rhetoric. While Pelc's drunken harshness may be attributed to his anarchic style, it is also an expression of the pain of the returning émigré that, for Czech readers, cannot be soberly understood other than as a scream.

Formánek's anonymity

Standing against Pelc's vociferous violence is the subtle and almost transparent collection of stories *Beze Stop* by Jaroslav Formánek, formerly an émigré in Paris, now a resident of the Czech Republic. The only Czech review of the collection fails to pick up on the many themes subtly related to emigration; the reviewer is even unaware that Formánek had returned from France.⁹⁵ In *Beze Stop*, unknown émigré heroes err in Prague and in Paris, interrelating with the jobless, the homeless, the beggars, the drunk, the destitute, all those who, like the émigré, live outside time and space — 'without a trace' — as the title suggests. Exiled from the socio-economic sphere, these vagrants

⁹⁰ Petr Škrášek, '— a Olin se vrací', *Literární noviny*, 11, 2000, 13 (hereafter, Škrášek, '— a Olin se vrací'), p. 9.

⁹¹ Hana Hrzalová, 'Jan Pelc napsal další prózu o drsném rubu "něžného" sametu', *Haló Noviny*, 21 March 2000, p. 9.

⁹² Radim Kopáč, 'Pelcova próza je víc dokumentem než uměním', *Mladá fronta dnes*, 2 March 2000, p. 18.

⁹³ Škrášek, '— a Olin se vrací', p. 9.

⁹⁴ Pelc, *A bude huře . . .*, p. 143.

⁹⁵ Aleš Haman, 'Jaroslav Formánek je stopař prchavých okamžiků', *Lidové noviny*, 26 June 2001, p. 20.

bear no material presence at all: 'their bodies have passed the thin shell of the present and pass through the veil of time.'⁹⁶

Indeed, in some of the stories, these Czech émigrés are invited back home but are reluctant to return, even when offered money or contracts, so they only arrive by the night train and then depart at night again, afraid of any definition or permanence. Certainly, Formánek is wary of any identification or categorization of the binding kind: in 'Ved' ked' si zapísaný', for example, he compares these migrants with the Indians of North America who, once recorded, became lost, ghettoized and imprisoned in categorizations. In its deviations and detours then, this collection questions the possibility of returning to any fixed point of origin — i.e., 'home' — which, for the migrant, implies death:

The return home. A narrative about the return home [. . .]. Why in fact return? For whom and why? [. . .] The time of the past is a different time. The desire to live at home again, is barred by a minor detail — death.⁹⁷

In 'Jeden podzimní den', we return to Prague to observe this dead 'world of immobile marionettes and plaster cast angels'.⁹⁸ In 'Rasputin', the hero only feels comfortable with a drunk he does not know; both clearly '[do] not belong' in the Czech lands.⁹⁹ The hero's drunken companion is the only lucid person in the city. Yet, when the narrator gives him some extra cash, the drunk kills himself. In Formánek's sad stories, the émigré's suffering, effaced and muted, almost without a trace, is likened to endless anonymous wandering; the return home almost always signals death.

Martínek's global nomad

Opilost hloubky by Lubomír Martínek proffers the most complex and nuanced examination of the émigré return: it explores the problematic return of the cosmopolitan citizen of the world. As Martínek argues, for the global nomad, 'return' is an 'impossible notion'.¹⁰⁰ He clarifies that 'the return was much harder than departure. Departure was a momentary thing. Made easy by ugliness and disgust but also by the unknown and illusion'.¹⁰¹ Return, on the other hand, 'requires great strength and patience'.¹⁰² This philosophical text offers the reader no simplistic categorizations or easy answers, but rather delves into a stream of

⁹⁶ *Beze Stop*, p. 15.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

¹⁰⁰ *Opilost hloubky*, p. 215.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

intermingling perspectives and possibilities, pointing to the murky complexity inherent in the notion of return in our post-modern, global world.

Martínek's novel comprises four interweaving narratives of return: Tahita, a Polynesian native, returns to his island after years of wandering the world; Rebeka, a French woman, settles in Prague to escape French conservatism; Victor, a Czech photographer deals with his 'forced return' to the Czech Republic and Bol, an émigré-wanderer, travels to Polynesia to purge the bitterness he feels in the Czech Republic.

Each of the stories offers powerful reflections on the notion of return. Tahita's tale, for instance, lyrically explores the conflicting forces of nature and culture on the cosmopolitan individual. While Tahita finds peace in the tropical beauty of his native island, and is generally happy to return to menial labour and daily subsistence, he also grieves for the more urbane and savvy parts of himself, which he must relinquish on his home island. Rebeka's story, on the other hand, sceptically deliberates on the rapidly modernizing post-Communist Czech society and the return of Czech émigrés, from the perspective of a newly-arrived immigrant to the Czech Republic. Rebeka comfortably adjusts to Prague life, by accepting the fact that she will always be considered the outsider within Czech society. By contrast, as she observes, returning Czech émigrés seemingly cannot adjust back to a 'home' that has profoundly changed during their absence; the time and space of their youth no longer exist. Rebeka posits that her Czech émigré friends seem to have depleted 'their meagre supply of adaptability' when they left and now can no longer adapt to further change. According to her, the suffering of these émigrés stems from their attempts to 'halt change', they continue to '[abide] in [the] painful, but recognizably predictable situations' of their departure.¹⁰³

Finally, in Bol and Victor's accounts, we witness most clearly the difficulties of returning Czech émigrés. Both of them face a challenge shared by many post-1968 émigrés: they must come to terms with the fact that return home is now indeed possible. Unlike the 1948 generation of émigrés, émigrés after 1968 defined their lives by the impossibility of return. Trapped in the 'forever and never',¹⁰⁴ many of them considered the Wall to be the only point of stability in their lives. The Wall vindicated and justified their decision to leave, and accounted for their separation from their Czech community. When the Wall crumbled, many émigrés felt that the defining feature of their lives had

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 215.

also collapsed, and were reluctant to relinquish it, as the narrator explains:

The non-returnable, on which his friends had built their lives, that shaped them so deeply, was too difficult to give up. [...] Their private 'forever' expired and they missed it, for with it their only point of stability vanished. Non-return, the basis of their existence. On which they had built their lives, from whence unwound their position and sprung back again to it. Non-return, the axis on which all revolved.¹⁰⁵

Here Martínek points to a phenomenon that was never discussed in post-1989 émigré debates, yet which exemplifies many émigré experiences: the need to grieve the loss of a defining part of their world-view — 'the non-returnable' — that for so long determined émigrés' choices, their attitudes and their lives.

In the lush Polynesian landscape, Bol faces another obstacle that precludes his return home to the Czech Republic: the 'paralyzing and unsurpassable fear of boredom'.¹⁰⁶ In contrast to other countries he has visited, the Czech Republic triggers no feelings for Bol, be it wonder, pleasure or even disgust.¹⁰⁷ As Bol remarks, for him 'homesickness is not marked by nostalgia, frenzied emptiness or debilitating pain' but merely by 'lack'.¹⁰⁸ However, he also realizes that, given all his experiences, he will always feel lack somewhere.¹⁰⁹ At the end of his reflection, contemplating the 'forever and never' of the past, he still remains unsure whether in the future he can return home forever.¹¹⁰

Victor is Martínek's only protagonist who returns home permanently, ostensibly to seek medical attention for an injury. Thus for Victor, return bears connotations of failure, weakness and loss, and he must come to terms with his newly curtailed life. Like Bol or Tahita, Victor must adjust to the predictability, triviality and ordinariness of Czech life, which contrasts markedly from his worldly adventures. Likening his condition to that of a scuba diver adjusting to shallow surface depths,¹¹¹ or a tightrope walker learning to perform with a safety net, he must now adapt to a banal life, 'bereft of tension, robbed of risk, cheated of dizziness'.¹¹²

Saliently, Victor's narrative also offers a scathing portrait of Czech society in the early 1990s. He describes it as a sickened environment, scarred by past wounds and infected by present grievances:

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 205.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 215.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 202.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 214.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 215.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 86.

On every corner he heard regrets of shattered lives, lost youths, ruined careers, wasted talent. [...] Their faces were worn and their bodies deformed, as if they were plagued by an unidentifiable disease. The air was poisoned with all their surrendered dreams and beliefs. Shame turned into envy and hatred. The shipwrecked mobs saved themselves by dirtying others as much as they could. Because every weakness could be held against them, they cast themselves in harsh masks. They confessed to pig-headedness and took shelter in intransigence.¹¹³

Victor elaborates that the Czech Republic in the 1990s is a country in stasis, paralysed by its Communist past. Time paradoxically flows backwards¹¹⁴ as Czechs continue their past behaviours of either arrogance or servility.¹¹⁵ Victor's encounters with his former friends prove especially painful; he realizes that they have either become traitors¹¹⁶ or robots.¹¹⁷ He observes that the post-Communist environment is still characterized by 'eternal surveillance' which results in either a 'permanent charade' or 'complete numbness'.¹¹⁸

For Victor, there is no escape or release from this corrupt, contaminated space. Even lovemaking was a 'contentious struggle [...] because masks were not taken off even in bed'.¹¹⁹ Only in his dreams, and in his conversations with Rebeka about his past, is he able to find some relief. Increasingly, Victor feels himself physically affected by this deceitful environment, suffering insomnia, depression or neuroses.¹²⁰ He feels as if he is losing his individuality, becoming part of the featureless, apathetic Czech mob.¹²¹ More and more, Victor retreats to his darkroom, to find purpose and relief from torpor and numbness in his photography.¹²² However, his ultimate form of resistance is silence — 'by remaining silent on his situation, that others were incessantly autopsying, he was denying their right to exist'.¹²³ At the end of the story, we recognize Victor as the shadowy beggar on a street-corner, completely ravaged by his return home.

In all, Martínek's labyrinthine *Opilost hloubky* urges the reader to consider the return of Czech émigrés from both a global and national perspective. In meandering reflections and a plurality of perspectives, Martínek queries the possibilities of return for the cosmopolitan

¹¹³ Ibid., p. 125.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., p. 118.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., p. 91.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p. 153.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., p. 157.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., p. 87.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., p. 134.

¹²⁰ Ibid., p. 87.

¹²¹ Ibid., p. 90.

¹²² Ibid., p. 146.

¹²³ Ibid., p. 75.

nomad, the well-seasoned traveller or adaptable individual who, believing in the idea of the non-returnable, is evolving through yet further metamorphoses. Victor's rich life-experiences in particular contrast starkly with the narcissistic nationalism and stasis in the Czech Republic of the 1990s; it appears as a country immobilized by self-pity, past grievances, former Communist myths and behaviours. Return 'home' to this environment is difficult and draining, if not wholly destructive for the cosmopolitan individual.

Czech reviewers grappled with many of the complex themes in Martínek's text. Many concentrated mainly on his style, and most focused on the 'upheaval of the nineties' and the entrapment of 'the homo bohemicus' reflected in the text.¹²⁴ Some, however, fully engaged with the 'trauma of departure and return' exemplified in Martínek's work.¹²⁵ Interestingly, a few seemed disoriented by Martínek's global perspective; as one reviewer explains, 'we experience suicidal dizziness from all the emptiness and the feeling of absolute futility of eternal flight'.¹²⁶ In the end though, reviewers were most perturbed by Martínek's scathing comments about the Czech Republic, such as its 'stupidity beyond measure'; however they attribute this phenomenon to the 'Czech condition of the nineties' or as generally, to the post-modern, global condition.¹²⁷

The great return: the pain of ignorance

In my final analysis, I turn to perhaps the best-known Czech émigré writer, Milan Kundera. Like my previous examples, Kundera also emigrated to France, but notably chose not to return home after 1989. In his latest novel, *Ignorance*, Kundera directly addresses the 'Great Return' of the émigré, as he calls it, and attempts to destabilize the myths structuring this return, while also pointing to the possibilities open to the émigré in the light of these myths. Given the mystique surrounding Kundera as a Czech émigré writer, it may be clearly interpreted as his own defence of remaining in exile. Yet it is also another classic Kundera text, plaiting together myth and essay with a tragic-comic love story, interlacing such 'dualisms of being' as lyricism and kitsch, love and indifference, but most of all remembering and forgetting. The release of Kundera's novel garnered considerable attention in the Czech Republic. Since readers were not able to read it in the Czech version, reviews summarize the French reception of the book¹²⁸ or

¹²⁴ Viktor Šlajchrt, 'Bol na ostrově', *Respekt*, 11, 2000, 50, p. 21.

¹²⁵ Aleš Hamaň, 'Trauma odchodů a návratů', *Nové knihy*, 40, 2001, 47, p. 38.

¹²⁶ Vladimír Novotný, 'O bytostech, které neustále odkládají život na později', *Tvar*, 12, 2001, 2, pp. 20–21 (p. 20).

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

¹²⁸ Jan Šmíd, 'Francouzský návrat *Nevědomesti?*', *Lidové noviny*, 14 April 2003, p. 11.

elaborate the text's central Odyssean myth against the background of Kundera's work on emigration.¹²⁹ Very few reviews contextualize the novel's themes in terms of the return of émigrés to the Czech Republic in the 1990s.¹³⁰

Kundera's first intervention in *Ignorance* is to undermine the mythic meaning of nostalgia, the longing for return but also *nostos algia*, 'suffering' of 'return'. Marvelling at the manifold translations of this word (such as 'homesickness', *Sehnsucht*, *stýskat se*), Kundera points to the precariousness of this emotional state as purely affective, imaginary, and impossible to convey in language, least of all a national one. He himself takes pause at the Spanish *añoranza*, 'which comes from the Catalan *enyorar*, itself derived from the Latin verb *ignorare*',¹³¹ drawing the conclusion that, 'in that etymological light nostalgia seems something like the pain of ignorance, of not knowing'.¹³² For Kundera then, the 'suffering' of 'return' is indeed painful, most of all in its nescience, 'its lack or want of knowledge', both for the émigré sufferer and the host witnessing this suffering. Kundera intimates that all narratives of return are but imaginary, nostalgic constructions; there are no returns in either history or in one's own life story.

Kundera then turns to Homer's *Odyssey*, the pivotal Western myth of return, to critique how this epic symbolically informs our understanding of the émigré return. He scoffs at Homer, who 'glorified nostalgia with a laurel wreath and thereby laid out a moral hierarchy of emotions'.¹³³ For Kundera, what is most significant in Ulysses' journey, is not his symbolic return, which serves more as a pretext for the epic, or his emotional longing, a mere leitmotif in the text. Rather, it is the life of adventure and corporal pleasure that he and his companions lead on their journey. In particular, Kundera points to 'the genuine *dolce vita*' that Ulysses lived for six years with Calypso,¹³⁴ and wonders if he had any such deep loving erotic relationship with his wife Penelope. Kundera stresses that Penelope did not recognize her husband at first; it was only in a sexual encounter that she, the faithful wife, realized his true identity.¹³⁵ Nonetheless, in *The Odyssey*, it is still fitting 'to extol Penelope's pain and sneer at Calypso's tears'.¹³⁶

¹²⁹ Petr Fischer, 'Kunderovy marné návraty', *Lidové noviny*, 15 February 2003, p. 13.

¹³⁰ Madelaine Hronová and Zdena Brodská, 'Kundera a mýtus návratu: *La Ignorancia*', *Host*, 19, 2003, 4, pp. 36–38.

¹³¹ *Ignorance*, p. 6.

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

However, Kundera perceptively points out that Ulysses' final, successful resolution is only possible in the end because his fellow-compatriots in Ithaca insist that he tell them the story of his adventures abroad: '*Cuenta!!* (Tell the story!!)'¹³⁷ Only then is Ulysses able to re-member, publicly, his past and his present. This is certainly not the case in the present as Kundera transposes the myth into post-modern, post-Communist reality.

In counterpoint to this epic tale of return, Kundera describes the return home of two Czech émigrés after twenty years: Irena and Josef. This return, which Kundera epitomizes as 'The Great Return',¹³⁸ is shrouded in myth and offers only two roles for the actors: the oscillating polarities of 'The Great Victim' or 'The Great Traitor'.¹³⁹ Kundera shows how Irena is always pitied by the French, viewed as 'a young woman in pain, banished from her country'.¹⁴⁰ When they return to the Czech Republic though, Irena and Josef are charged with the two mythic 'sins': 1) treason to the nation, and 2) having enjoyed a *dolce vita*, an 'easy life'; Josef being the traitor; Irena, the opportunist.

In an aside, Kundera bluntly states that both the victimization and guilt they feel are perpetrated by nationalistic sentiments and popular propaganda. He even goes so far as to claim that such anti-émigré feelings reflect the birth of the nation-state itself. He refers to the French Revolution, and the genesis of the first modern nation state, where émigrés were viewed as traitors symbolically opposed to loyal citizens. He does not hesitate to relate these conditions to the Communist states: 'Loyal to the tradition of the French Revolution, the Communist countries hurled an anathema at emigration, deemed to be the most odious treason.'¹⁴¹

To counter stereotypical assumptions, Kundera reveals the individual suffering of these two immigrants, exemplified by the death of Josef's wife and Irena's husband and their ensuing grief and solitude. These personal experiences demonstrate that pain is private; the most agonizing times of one's life remain incommunicable to others and can only be endured in silence, alone. Indeed, in Kundera's portrait, both Irena and Josef are to be pitied, not patronizingly and universally as Great Victims but, rather, as individuals.

In Kundera's text, Josef and Irena figure as the twin translations of the figure of 'the émigré' in Czech society, both in its symbolic and material connotations. Yet, they also translate the antithetical responses

¹³⁷ Ibid., p. 34.

¹³⁸ Ibid., p. 45.

¹³⁹ Ibid., p. 30.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 24.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., p. 17.

to the pain of emigration, that of the pragmatist and the idealist; or the one who forgets and the one who is forgotten.

In Josef's story, deploying images of death, betrayal and denial, Kundera describes what remains materially for the émigré upon his return. The first place Josef visits upon his return is a cemetery, itself almost gone, overgrown by new buildings. He again sees death in the eyes of his brother when he meets him after twenty years. We learn that his brother considered Josef a deserter and a traitor, as dead to him. Like the Biblical Joseph, Josef is envied by his brother, who — in a clear comment on restitution¹⁴² — appropriated all of Josef's belongings except an old diary. Upon rereading his diary, Joseph realizes that he has lost and forgotten the introspective and passionate young man he once was: 'the diary did not outlive the author's virginity.'¹⁴³ Similarly in emigration, Josef survived because of his responses of loss and forgetting. He learned not to refer to his past or justify it,¹⁴⁴ and abandoned any emotion or attachment to it. Upon returning to the Czech Republic, he even pathologizes his condition, claiming he is 'suffering from nostalgic insufficiency' or from a 'masochistic distortion of memory'.¹⁴⁵ However, in a passage that reiterates Kundera's famous 'unbearable lightness of being', Josef realizes that such forgetfulness ultimately frees him from his pain:

Such is the law of masochistic memory: as segments of their lives melt into oblivion, men slough off whatever they dislike and feel lighter, freer.¹⁴⁶

Irena's fate is more tragic: in word and in deed she attempts to re-member the past with the present, recreating it anew. On the personal level, Irena realizes that Josef was the love of her youth (actually she is the addressee of Josef's discarded diary) and wishes to rekindle the love they once had. However, ironically, when the couple finally make love, Irena realizes that Josef does not know who she is. He was simply seduced by her because she used Czech swear words, turning herself into the basest of prostitutes.

Irena comes to symbolize the narrative role of the émigré, which is also denied and dismissed. Though Irena experiences 'unexpected joy' at speaking Czech,¹⁴⁷ she realizes that her deformed, weakened accent seems foreign to her listeners. More importantly, unlike in the case of Ulysses, no one is interested in listening to her odyssey; no one wants to

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 58.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

talk to her about her experiences in France.¹⁴⁸ The realization that no one cares about her past or present experience is clearly painful for Irena. For example, she somatizes her suffering as an amputation; it is as if ‘they amputated twenty years of her life’.¹⁴⁹ Accused of leaving for a better life, Irena attempts to justify her decision by narrating her personal story, her private pain:

You don’t know how hard it is to carve out a little place for yourself in a foreign world. Can you imagine, leaving your country with a baby and with another in your belly? Losing your husband? Raising your two daughters with no money?¹⁵⁰

Her interlocutor friend, both defence and prosecutor, judges her thus: ‘Everybody wants to be acknowledged as the victim.’¹⁵¹ In all, there is no position, neither hero nor victim, for the returning émigré in the narrative of the Czech nation. Irena begs the question: ‘Is the epic of return pertinent to our time?’¹⁵²

Ultimately, in Kundera’s novel, there is only one position possible in return: that of the prostitute, a position he sardonically also ascribes to his former homeland. Clearly, *La Ignorancia* is no idyllic epic, wherein the Czech Republic, like a faithful Penelope, weaves while waiting for her hero. On the contrary, Prague is a commodity to be shared by all, where everyone wears T-shirts asserting ‘Prague is my Town’.

4. *Re-Reading the Return of the Czech Émigré*

Now, more than fifteen years after the collapse of Communism, after the Czech Republic’s entry into the EU, it seems that the taboo surrounding returning Czech émigrés is finally being relaxed. In the past few years, Czech psychologists and sociologists have started to grant serious scholarly analysis to Czech re-emigration, as it is termed in sociology. For example, in her 2004 paper, ‘The Return from Emigration Is Not Painless’, psychologist Olga Marlinová analyses the various psychological factors returning émigrés may have faced, such as the shattered ‘fantasy of return’, the ‘shock of return’ or the resentment and ‘psychic splitting’ they may have experienced.¹⁵³ Similarly, in his 2005 sociological analysis, Zdeněk Nešpor examines the socio-economic conditions of returning émigrés, grounding his analysis firmly in

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 19.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 43.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 40.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., p. 41.

¹⁵² Ibid., p. 54.

¹⁵³ Olga Marlinová, ‘Návrat z emigrace není bezbolestný’, *Psychologie dnes*, 10, 2004, 1, pp. 16–17.

multiculturalism and globalization.¹⁵⁴ There is a renewed interest in exile culture, manifested for example by the focus on Czech exile film in film festivals in Jihlava or Plzeň. However, some grievances remain; the English-Czech magazine *New Presence* continues to echo, in translation, some of the critiques that were intimated in Czech journals in the early and mid-1990s.¹⁵⁵ Notwithstanding, these critiques also conclude with ‘moderate optimism’¹⁵⁶ since, in the new millennium, corresponding with the Czech Republic’s entry into the EU and its growing concerns with multiculturalism and immigration, there has been evidence of reconciliation between the Czech government and returning Czech émigrés.

Recent years also have seen an easing of the tensions between Czechs and former émigrés, as well as a renewed interest in their experiences, especially by younger generations. Exemplifying this trend is the documentary *Návrat Jana z parížského exilu do Prahy* (The Return of Jan: From Parisian Exile to Prague), by the young filmmaker Kateřina Krusová. Shot in 2003, it records the return ‘home’ of dissident Jan Vladislav,¹⁵⁷ opening with the scene of Vladislav’s bookshelf being moved into his new apartment, and then explores various aspects of Vladislav’s life and world-view, including insights into his exile and return.

In many ways, Vladislav’s reflections sum up some of the issues I have outlined in this article. Vladislav explains that, after 1989, he was not quick or keen to return to the Czech Republic: ‘he did not like the way things were going there.’ For instance, he mentions that dissident solidarity, which had been so strong and cohesive under Communism, altered and waned under post-Communism. More saliently, however, the main reason Vladislav did not return to the Czech Republic was a legal one. As a dissident, he was obviously stripped of his Czechoslovak citizenship by the totalitarian regime and, after 1989, he had no intention of ‘begging’ for its return. It was not until the law changed in 1999 that Vladislav’s citizenship was restored to him, albeit through the intervention of his Czech friends and advocates. Ultimately, however, Vladislav’s decision to return to the Czech Republic was not prompted by political reasons, but by a deeply personal one: his wife was suffering from Alzheimer’s disease and he, in his early eighties, was her sole

¹⁵⁴ Zdeněk R. Nešpor, ‘Reemigrace českých západních émigréů v 90. letech 20. století z hlediska ekonomické sociologie’, *Sociologický časopis*, 41, 2005, 1, pp. 31–55.

¹⁵⁵ See, for example, Bísek (note 7 above) or Hughes and Pardek (note 29 above), or the special edition, ‘Émigrés: Exiled at Home and Abroad’, in *New Presence*, Winter 2003.

¹⁵⁶ Milan Špaček, *New Presence*, Winter 2002, p. 11.

¹⁵⁷ Poet, translator and essayist, Jan Vladislav, was a renowned dissident, a signatory of Charta 77 and, importantly, the publisher of the samizdat paper *Kvart*.

caretaker. Now, after his return, Vladislav has settled back home with no regrets, indeed has even found himself welcome, especially among young people, such as Krusová. Vladislav's positive relationship with future generations is echoed by other returning émigrés; the cynical Jan Pelc, for example, proclaimed that 'I believe in the next generation, the current fifteen year-olds'.¹⁵⁸

Future generations want to understand the experience of Czech émigrés in its fullness. In this vein, this article has sought to 'reclaim' some of the more concealed and perhaps traumatic aspects of Czech emigration: the complexities of suffering in the Czech exile experience and their implications in the return 'home'. While seeking to offer a fuller, more nuanced perspective on the Czech experience, other comparisons also suggest themselves — to other post-Communist countries,¹⁵⁹ diasporic communities, and other minority groups. Ultimately, this analysis points to the problematic role of suffering in the representation and performance of minority rights, which in turn opens up a fundamental issue in contemporary discourse: how disenfranchised minorities might gain position, agency and voice in our increasingly multicultural and globalized world.

¹⁵⁸ Jan Pelc, 'Věřím příští generaci, dnešním patnáctiletým', *Právo*, 7 December 2000 (salon edition), pp. 1–2.

¹⁵⁹ Charles King (ed.), *Nations Abroad: Diaspora Politics and International Relations in the Former Soviet Union*, Boulder, CO, 1998.