Searching for the 'Other' Orphan and the Traces of Postwar Imagery in Contemporary Czech Fiction

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This project is entitled "Strangers in a Strange Land: The Returns of Orphans in Czech Literature of the 2000s", and as such, I focus on the figure of the orphan in a selection of contemporary Czech novels. My project is a qualitative study of five novels published between the years 2001 and 2016, and investigates the conspicuous number of orphan protagonists in critically acclaimed and well-received fictional novels. The principal task of the study is to tease out the orphan protagonist from 21st century fiction aimed at an adult readership, through close reading. The novels are: *Noční Práce* [*Nightwork*] (2001) and *Kloktat dehet* [*Gargling With Tar*] (2005) both written by Jáchym Topol, *Peníze od Hitlera. Letní mozaika* [*Money from Hitler*] (2006) by Radka Denemarková, *Vyhnání Gerty Schnirch* [*Gerta*] (2009) by Kateřina Tučková, and finally *Jezero* [*The Lake*] (2016) by Bianca Bellová.

This project will increase our knowledge of the literary orphan as it relates to contemporary fiction and link the figure to notions of totalitarian, fascist and communist regimes. This is a topic that thus far has not been explored, and the intention is to draw attention to a body of literature that is not widely read outside of its homeland. The main corpus considers second generation and affiliative memory discourses in a Czech context and allows us to further our understanding of how World War II and the Holocaust is remembered in the Czech Republic today, what clichés may be present and what narratives attract particular attention.

In *Noční práce* we meet Ondra, the child of an alcoholic mother and a persecuted scientist father who is left to contend with the 1968 Warsaw pact invasion while protecting his little brother

in a Czech countryside village, where ghosts of German Nazis and dead Jewish children reside. Ilja in *Kloktat dehet* exemplifies a series of orphan-clichés, from the gothic orphanage he grows up in, to the picaresque adventure the 1968 invasion transforms into, mimicking World War II narratives such as Valentin Kataev's *Son of the Regiment* (1946), Tarkovský's *Ivan's Childhood* (1962), Elem Klimov's *Come and See* (1984) as well as Günther Grass' *Die Blechtrommel* (1959). In Denemarková's *Peníze od Hitlera* we meet the Holocaust orphan Gita, who is twice victimized, first as a Jew, then as a German, and who in old age returns to her Czech childhood village to rehabilitate her family's memory. In *Vyhnání Gerty Schnirch*, Kateřina Tučková explores the life story of a Czech-German girl who grows up during the Second World War, and is expelled from her native Brno in the wake of the Beneš decrees at the end of the war. Here the reader is made to engage with a painful memory of Czechoslovak history, were the lines between perpetrator and victim became increasingly blurred. The most recent of the corpus' novels, *Jezero,* tells the tale of Nami, who lives on the edge – of a disappearing lake and of systemic and ecological collapse. Despite the surrounding world falling apart, all Nami desires is to reconnect with his mother.

Each of these novels have been translated into many languages and won esteemed literary prices such as the Magnesia Litera Award and the EU Prize for literature. Sudden political upheaval may indeed lead both to feelings of abandonment, fear, nostalgia for the former political system, and yet also a sense of new beginnings, self-definition, and adventurous opportunity (Pehe 2020). The interest in the orphan as protagonist may well be a product of this. The aim of this study is to explore the reasons behind the orphan's presence in the contemporary Czech literary scene, to draw attention to the tropes and models embedded in the character, as well as point towards its transgressive and/or conformist potential.

At the outset of the study I did comprehensive research into texts with orphan protagonists published in Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic from the 1940s onwards, finally settling on this corpus of books published in the 2000s with an aim to investigate the contemporary trend of orphans. Each novel contends with the recent past, allowing an investigation of mnemonic aspects of the texts, showcasing intentional engagement with historical trauma and tension treated through the lens of the 2000s.

The main corpus of this study are instructively *not* examples of testimonial literature. However, as we look back at the previous century, the question of the interest in the orphan figure outside of biographical texts might answer itself: violent times generate orphans, and orphanhood generates orphan stories. In the Czech lands a particular intersection of historical traumas compound: the decimation of the Jewish and Roma people during and after World War II, the expulsion of ethnic Germans (including German speaking Jews), the communist putsch of 1948, the political thaw and subsequent strike down of the 1960s and finally the period known as 'Normalizace' with its heightened censorship and inertia. The contested memory of the 'children of Lidice' (Frankl 2013; Zahra 2015) became a rallying cry for family reunification in Czechoslovakia's immediate post war years, and Czech Jewish author and Holocaust survivor Jiří Weil in response wrote the short story "Lidická ovce" (1966) (published after his death). We find children's books such as Bezděková's *Říkali mi Leni,* [*They called me Leni*] (1948) a sentimental story of a Czech girl, displaced during the war, who lives with a Nazi German family only to be reunited with her mother(land) – a text ironically echoed in Topol's work.

That the orphan inhabits certain features that differentiates it from other narrators seems overwhelmingly convincing, and deserves attention, as it can enrich the field of literary studies – both in the Czech context and beyond. The orphan is in its nature a transitional being: in its unbelonging it also belongs everywhere. It knows no boundaries and yet is often bound. The fear

or sorrow we may experience at the thought of orphanhood ultimately arouses something deep within ourselves: a fear of abandonment, and the stirring sense of unbelonging many grapple with. Also, as Julia Kristeva points out, an intoxicating notion of liberation lies within orphanhood (1991, 21-23). Oftentimes freed from the shackles of paternalism, of conformity and rule-following, the orphan becomes an subject of envy and desire. This inherent dichotomy charges the orphan with potential for exploring the past in fiction – the author is liberated in the orphan form, allowing their protagonist adventures and possibilities, as well as horrors and exploitation – how does one recapture a sense of self after experiencing a family annihilation? In these novels, the orphan provides the reader with deep-seated questions of identity and abandonment, of nationality, ethnicity and belonging. The notions of mother- and fatherland, of displacement, attachment, unattachment, the collective and the individual are all present in the various textures of the orphan figure. A certain desire to dislodge the protagonist from hierarchies, ideologies and norms can be traced, yet at the same time we can discern a sense of loss and sorrow that may be lodged in the traumatic pasts that are described.

Two of the novels clearly belong under the genre of World War II narratives, while the others in different ways consider World War II and the Holocaust intertextually, through references, clichés and recycled motifs as they pertain to the depiction of abandoned and displaced child figures. My claim is that the legacy of the Holocaust can be felt also in texts about orphans that do not directly deal with the topic of the Holocaust or the Second World War. These strategies have lead in some cases to fruitful reuses of the past, but inherent in this recycling is also the danger of *kitschification*, an aesthetic strategy that entails trivializing and reifying tropes and imagery of the Holocaust.

The study engages with three main points: First, the orphan is investigated as a marginal being. The separation from family renders the orphan uncanny, unsettling notions of stability and the place of children in larger society. All of these novels take place in different eras of the recent past, at various moments of upheaval in Czech 20th century history. Two of the novels engage with the second world war and the aftermath of this, two others with the 1968 Warsaw pact invasion of Czechoslovakia and finally, the last one takes place during the 80s and 90s and the political transformation from socialism to capitalism. Orphanhood in the shadow of totalitarian regimes as such becomes a focus, which may illuminate the place of family in different time periods and public and state responses to orphanhood. In the case of the novels dealing with the direct aftermath of the Second World War, we may observe orphans marginalized by virtue of their heritage, that is as both German-speaking Jews in Bohemia and as German-Czechs, who were expelled from the Czech lands following the war. To these orphans, their heritage and family background becomes a cross to bear, a silent reminder of both what they have lost but also the reason for their marginalization and victimization both during and after the war.

In the novels dealing with 1968 and the political upheaval that resulted from this, we can observe politically motivated displacement and separation. All the orphans are simultaneously marginalized by society both by not belonging to traditional nuclear families, by the reminder of the loss and trauma they represent, and by the otherness imposed on them as they become societal problems to solve. They are marked by their alterity both from a national, ethnic and political standpoint, and forced to the margins of society, often pushed to the countryside or into group homes or living precariously without any adult protection.

The second key point investigates the spaces of orphanhood, and looks into notions of this aforementioned displacement, biopolitics and formally, into genres and clichés that permeate orphan narratives. The spaces and/or heterotopias of orphanhood often coincide with

landscapes of fear and displacement, but also opportunities of self-definition, ingenuity, play and curiosity. Through intertextual repetition of motifs and narrative schemes, we may similarly observe clichés of literary orphanhood that are also echoed in these contemporary texts.

The final and third part of the study reckons with memory and heritage from a different angle. Orphanhood facilitates new ways to consider heritage and loss, trauma and displacement, at the same time as it utilizes the defamiliarizing and disarming gaze of the child or youth. This is investigated trough the figure of 'the return'. As a motif in the texts proper, the orphans of this corpus all tend towards returning to their place of origin in order to better understand *what happened* – a trend that we may also observe in postmemory Holocaust and World War II narratives at large (Hirsch & Miller, 2011). The difficult, even impossible reconciliation with the past and the attempt at reconstituting family and self-understanding is also seen in the characters' tendency to search for parental surrogates throughout. The trauma of orphanhood further compounds the difficulty of the return, with fewer voices and people to lean on with a shared history. In this sense, the repercussions of family destruction and annihilation becomes an urgent point of discussion in these texts.

In the study's main corpus, we can observe questions dedicated to the notion of heritage and identity be explored especially through the characters Gita Lauschmannová from *Money from Hitler* and Gerta Schnirch from *Gerta*. In these two characters we observe a compounding of identities that become severely problematic for these two teenage girls, as they fall between several identity markers and have little to no autonomous power in correcting any narrative forced upon them. These protagonists are both touched by the consequences of the Second World War, but in very different ways. Gerta is a German-Czech girl who grows up in Brno during the 1930s and 40s. Her Czech mother dies when she is young, and she is forced into an incestuous relationship with her tyrannical German father. After the war, Gerta is labelled as a German and

is chosen among all those who were expelled from the Czech lands in the aftermath of the war, according to the controversial Beneš decrees. The Beneš decrees, issued mainly in 1945, were intended to secure a de-Nazification of Czechoslovakia, and subsequently enforced the expulsion of nearly three million Germans and Hungarians living on Czechoslovak soil (Čapková 2013, 348-349). While Gerta herself considers her plight unfair (she was under her father's coercion, she considers herself more Czech than German), she is unable to escape the collective persecution the German population of Brno endured. When she returns to Brno after many years in servitude in the Czech countryside (never having been ousted beyond the country borders) she returns to Brno, but never has the chance to escape the legacy her German father imposed on her, or the trauma suffered in the aftermath of the expulsion.

German-speaking-Jewish Gita Lauschmannová is sixteen years old in 1945 when she returns to her home village Puklice after surviving the turmoil of concentration camps. Her family has been annihilated, and as the youngest and now sole survivor of her family she returns to her childhood home. To her great confusion, she finds her home occupied not by strangers, but by Czechs who used to be in the employ of her father. She is immediately dismissed by her former neighbors as an intruder, as a kraut, underlining the complexity of identity markers for German-speaking Jews in the Czech lands. Following the implementation of the Beneš decrees, families who had lived there for centuries were removed from their homes with little ceremony, including many Jewish families who narrowly escaped the Holocaust and who, because of their former declarations in the census as German-speaking were considered questionable, "[They, Germans] should be treated like the Jews during the war" (ibid.). This first homecoming of Gita's ends exactly with that – while narrowly escaping starving to death in a barn, she is sent to a relocation camp for Germans. The story then makes a temporal jump, and the remainder of the novel takes place in contemporary times, in 2005, shortly after the now esteemed Dr. Gita Lauschmannová has

been informed that her parents have been rehabilitated. Gita then returns again to her childhood village and starts her agenda to restore the name of her family.

We can consider these return motifs as a reconfiguration of an original state of being, a "psychological reintegration, [...] a self-motivated self-analysis [..and] evaluation both of the interrelations of memories and the patterns they form [...]" in the face of a "dissatisfaction with an unstable present that, less and less, has a meaningful connection with authentic selfhood and authentic memory" (Perl 1984, p. 31). Certainly there is a fascination with understanding and engaging with origins, and the hope that a physical return may facilitate a spiritual, psychological return as well. The mnemonic function of such texts lies not in the actual remembrance of things past, but rather the impulse to "give concrete reality to [...] a narrated reality" (Miller 2011, p. 137); to have some congruence between the mental map and the terrain of reality. The need to return thus changes based on the experience of the returnee. In the case of Gita Lauschmannová, she remembers the concentration camps, and through the novel expresses no desire to return to this mnemonic landscape of horror, even if it is the last place she saw her family. Her reasoning for returning to Puklice, her childhood village, has to do with restitution of her local family memory and is much more complex than a merely nostalgic return.

Finally, the return is also analyzed on the level of the return to the past in contemporary fiction. In the turbulent 1990s, a reckoning with the immediate past, that is, the fall of the socialist regime and a wave of formerly repressed texts was at the forefront of literary production. But at the turn of the millennium it was also finally possible to write about the 20th century without the fear of censorship. As such, along with the memory boom that has been observed in the 2000s at large, Czech literary production engaged in this vested return to the past, by second and third generation, affiliative and familial postmemory literary production. The orphan emerging as a character that acts as a vehicle for memory is evident in this.

The remaining three novels in the main corpus deal with different iterations of past historical events. Both of Jáchym Topol's novels depict the 1968 Warsaw pact invasion of Czechoslovakia. However, his novels are rife with intertextual references to postwar art and imagery. In *Kloktat dehet* I argue that the past is in fact layered, concerning itself not only with 1968, but compounding historical moments from the early 1950s and onwards. As it stands, the literary references to narratives dealing with the Holocaust is echoed in the opening line of the novel, "Řikaly mi Ilja", "They called me Ilja", which refers to the title of the saccharine children's book previously mentioned. Similarly, in *Noční práce* the spectre of the Holocaust is evident. While Ondra and his little brother (in the English translation called Squirt) are hiding from the authorities in a village in 1968, another village boy informs them:

> We can hide you, said Milan. Look, the Ruskies will come. They'll arrest both you and Squirt. And they'll also ask you questions, don't think they won't. And they'll say: What are these boys doing here? *Whose are they?* And no one will say anything, get it? The people will be shit scared. Aha, the Ruskies will say to themselves. They haven't got papers? All right then, bam. *And into the transport train with both of you, mate. History repeated.* Ask Ploughman. And others. And then you're on the train for a week or two, the train keeps going, you don't know where. You drink your own piss. Ask anyone what it's like [emphasis added] (Topol 2014, p. 162).

This quote illustrates both the orphanhood of the boys, asking *whose are they* and the risks of their displacement and unbelonging. Later in the novel it is also indicated that the boy's mother in the past actually saved and hid a Jewish girl who was thrown off a transport headed for Poland, although this again upsets the timeline of the story, indicating a compounding of timelines also here.

In the case of Nami from *Jezero,* references to the Holocaust or the Second World War are not overt as in Topol's oeuvre. Nami lives through several transformations, both from a young child to an adult, and from socialism to capitalism. The transformation-imagery connects his story

to a template related to these others through his alterity and the fact that he is a wanderer in search of a home. The novel itself is dedicated to "People on the road". It is made clear once Nami arrives in the mythical capital of the novel that the village he comes from is seen as different and containing occult traditions in the eyes of the majority. His continuous search for roots is underscored throughout, and the precarity of his situation is palpable. In Kristeva's *Strangers to Ourselves* (1991), she describes the orphan as a wanderer, a figure of abjection and the uncanny that belongs and simultaneously doesn't belong, a figure of nowhere and everywhere. Nami's unbelonging is finally treated in the ending of the novel, where he ventures to live a life of diving into the big lake the story revolves around, retrieving mementos and trash that people have lost in the water, making him a figure of memory and preservation who himself is completely marginalized.

These patterns and references create direct and indirect links between Ilja, Ondra and Nami as orphans under one totalitarian regime to orphans of another, connecting the precarity of orphanhood across totalitarianisms. As such, I argue that the Holocaust orphan functions as a template for the modern iteration of the literary orphan that separates it from the romantic/Victorian or fantasy orphan-type, and brings it into a new, contemporary form that underlines the distinct trauma of the Holocaust and World War II as it raged across Europe and links it with other narratives of displacement. However, this deliberate intertextuality and recycling of imagery risks the notion of *kitschification* of the past, and this study also endeavours to highlight such results from this form of literary production. The orphan is at times an inherently nostalgic character, driving discourses of longing that may consecrate notions of nationality and heritage that can be construed as both constructed and harmful.

The authors' choice to let their characters return to past places and events reveals a desire on part of the authors to facilitate a confrontation with particular aspects of the aftermath of the

Holocaust and other historical moments on a local as well as a global level. In that way these novels write themselves into a modern trend of cultural representations of memories of trauma (Erll 2011). The authors may be carriers of prosthetic memory – that is, carriers of stories that they have no direct personal involvement in, or purveyors of transgenerational memory where they disseminate memories based on handed-down stories between generations (Erll 2011, p. 3). Aleida Assmann writes in *Shadows of Trauma* that "[t]he dominant focus in memory research today is on understanding the past as a construction that responds to the needs and possibilities of the present" (2016, p. 5). 'The need and possibility of the present' in which these novels were written shows a moment in time in which the authors and the reading public were able to engage with these particular historical moments. The use of orphan protagonists, I contend, allows them to investigate and engage with these historical moments in a manner that opens up questions of identity on a specifically intentional level.

Orphan narratives and orphan literature is understudied, and has thus far mostly centered on the anglophone sphere, and typically novels from the 17 and 1800s, such as Charles Dickens and the Brontë sisters' work, or fantasy and young adult fiction. However, there is a vast and rich (post)war-orphan corpus from the 20th century that comprise diverse texts such as George Perec's 1975 *W or the Memory of Childhood* (*W ou le Souvernir d'enfance*), Kenzaburō Ōe's 1958 Japanese masterpiece *Nip the Buds, Shoot the Kids,* W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* from 2001, and even the autobiographical comic books by Carlos Gimenez (*Paracuellos* 1977-2003) about his childhood experiences of a Francoist orphanage. In addition there is a rich history of orphan texts from Czech literary history, with prominent authors such as Arnošt Lustig and Jiří Weil. These texts tell different stories of childhood, overcoming, heritage and postwar trauma than the classical orphan scripts that have thus far dominated the academic engagement with the figure.

Formal experimentation, commingling of fiction and fact, memoir and fabulation, all constitute new entry-points into understanding literary orphanhood as a vehicle for coming to terms with identity, nation, loss and memory. This intertextual web of orphanhood informs the referential intermingling between contemporary and former texts. The novels on my corpus draw from the vast trove of former orphan-texts, and as such, we can observe traces of imagery from the World War II orphan in texts not explicitly dealing with this era. This infuses the novels with shadows of the past inscribed in the texts, showcasing a layering of pasts that still haunts the landscape of the literary, contemporary Czechia.

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