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When doing my PhD on the literary image of Eastern Europe in the American Cold-War imaginary, I went to Prague one summer, just like Philip Roth did via Vienna, to follow in the footsteps of Franz Kafka. What I actually did was to follow in the footsteps of Roth tracing the steps of Kafka. Whenever I think back to that trip, I am reminded of this evocative sentence from Angelo Maria Ripellino's *Magic Prague* (1973): "To this day, every evening at five, Franz Kafka returns home to Celetná Street (Zeltnergasse) wearing a bowler hat and black suit" (3). In my mind, I follow Ripellino's lead: as Kafka's dark silhouette recedes into the distance, another figure materializes on an otherwise empty street hazed in golden afternoon light. That other man is of a similar height (they say Kafka was tall!)[1] but of a more athletic build than Kafka. By contemporary standards, the man is dressed in a somewhat old-fashioned but still fairly modern manner. If these were the seventies, he would be pinpointed as a Westerner. Kafka never turns around, and the other man never manages to reach him, but they are linked by an invisible bond that transcends time and place that only literature, with its infinite possibilities for imagining other lives in different places, is capable of accommodating.

For a long time, I was not aware that Philip Roth had a meaningful connection to Kafka and my part of Europe. As a teenager, I read bits of *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969), which, per Roth himself, was inspired by Kafka's stories of "spiritual disorientation and obstructed energies" ("In Search"). At the time, however, I would simply reach for whatever my older brother was reading, and *Portnoy* must have found its way into my hands somewhere between Polish modernism, which we were studying at school, and Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* (1934).

Roth's fiction was not on the syllabus when I was a student of English Philology at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków, Poland, but I remember devouring several

novels by Milan Kundera after my translation theory professor recommended *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984). The mind likes to detect patterns in seemingly unrelated occurrences, so, in hindsight, there seems to be something augural about my reading of Kundera, who had been friends with Roth and whose works I would be rereading several years later for my Roth-inspired PhD. However, when I was an undergraduate, the events of the Prague Spring, Soviet "normalization," and the Velvet Revolution were to me, born in 1983, little more than history book entries vaguely related to Poland's own struggle against communism epitomized in the red clumped letters of the Solidarity logo and Lech Wałęsa's mustachioed profile.

My earliest association with the former Czechoslovakia must have been the rubber squeaky toys, including the little mole Krtek—the Mickey Mouse of the Eastern Bloc—my father once brought me from Prague for Christmas. Since we lived close to the border with eastern Slovakia, in the summer we would take short trips to Svidník, Bardejov, or the adjoining spa town, Bardejovské Kúpele, where the empress Sissi once took her water treatments. Whenever we crossed the border between Poland and Slovakia, following a routine wait and search at customs, I was amazed at the jarring contrast between the lush greenery of the Slovakian forests and the ugliness of World War II tanks and planes exhibited along the road in a manner of giant art installations.

I was reminded of this intrusion of history and politics into the landscape of everyday life when as a teenager I was introduced to the East-Central European canon: Hašek, Kafka, and Hrabal. However, it was Kundera who brought Czechoslovakia into light for me, even if at the time I was reading him mostly for the titillating intertwining of politics and eroticism. In comparison to Kraków in the early 2000s, the Prague of the 1970s seemed tragic and romantic at the same time, while Kundera's fiction evoked the kind of moral dilemmas that seemed absent from the post-privatization Poland, which had just been allowed into the European Union and was marching towards what seemed like a bright Western future.

Eager to be part of that great European excitement myself, I applied to participate in the Erasmus exchange program. Ironically, there was just one place available at an English-speaking university, and most of us English Philology students were sent out to locations which, splendid as they were, were not necessarily ideal for mastering English: Germany, Italy, and Spain. No one complained, though. I got Italy, and my own private grand European tour of Padua, Venice, Milan, Rome, and Florence whetted my appetite for more Europe: once I had graduated from university, I moved to southern Spain where I have been based ever since.

I did not know then that being an exchange student had little to do with the actual experience of migration, which necessitates hundreds of small and big life choices, the most important of which being perhaps the question of what I should do now

that I am no longer living at home. A migrant, especially in the early stages of settling in, tends to develop nostalgia for home and looks for ways of keeping in touch with the pre-migration life. For me, the realization that Philip Roth had a meaningful connection to my part of Europe was a turning point in the process of reconciling my East-Central European background with my new place in the world and my ongoing interest in literature, which I was reading almost obsessively during my first years in Spain to alleviate the loneliness and displacement I experienced being away from home.

When Roth reappeared in my life, this time as the author of that intricate and multi-layered masterpiece *The Human Stain* (2000), which I was assigned to read in the MA program at the University of Málaga, I dived into his writing with no second thoughts, starting with the American Trilogy and then moving backwards to discover a Nathan Zuckerman who was very different from the solitary and detached narrator of Coleman Silk's astonishing life story. When I finally got to *The Prague Orgy* (1985) and then *The Professor of Desire* (1977), I was happy to discover a readerly connection between Roth and myself, for neither of these works would have probably been created without the joint influence of Kafka and Kundera, whose works had been formative for me, and of others, like Ivan Klíma, whom Roth would inspire me to read.

Most importantly, reading Roth made me think about other people's ideas about my part of Europe, or what historian Larry Wolff has called a "rubric" of Eastern Europe (15): a geopolitical designation and a mental category which, by virtue of Yalta settlements and the imposition of the Iron Curtain, stood apart in the Western imaginary as a peculiar liminal entity that was neither Soviet Russia nor Europe "proper." In turn, these reflections spurred an idea for a paper kindly included by Professor David Brauner in the "International Roth" panel held by the Philip Roth Society in Boston in 2011, and then a PhD on the literary image of Eastern Europe in the works of those American authors who, like Roth, had a first-hand experience of visiting the region and getting to know its literary cultures. This image, as I found out, is fraught with ambiguity, as it encompasses a number of representations oscillating between admiration and pity, fascination and fear. As a result of its liminal location—"[b]oxed in by the Germans on one side and the Russians on the other" (Kundera 34)—Eastern Europe has been the subject of contradictory mappings in Anglo-American culture, while at the same time being contested by the thinkers and writers of the region.

The term "Eastern Europe" already intimates the ambiguity embedded in these representations, which became more pronounced during the Cold War, but which Wolff traces back to at least the Age of Reason. For Roth's friend Kundera, the label "Eastern Europe" expresses the enforced association between Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary, and Soviet Russia. Kundera reads the term as a semantic manifestation

of the political immediacy and violence underlying the imposition of the Soviet dominion on the countries that had traditionally been tied to Western Europe but suddenly "woke up to discover that they were now in the east" (34). Kundera counters the inadequacy of "Eastern Europe" with that of "Central Europe," a potent imaginary category in itself, which does not rest on political frontiers but rather on "the great common situations that reassemble peoples, regroup them in ever new ways along the imaginary and ever-changing boundaries that mark a realm inhabited by the same memories, the same problems and conflicts, the same common tradition" (35). As such, this collective cultural identity, memory, and struggle that Central Europe is to Kundera can never accommodate Russia.

If "Eastern Europe" is a mental rubric—a marked category in the biased imaginative geography of the postwar world—then "Central Europe" is an intellectual counter-narrative, which in appealing to the shared cultural legacy of the region (and thus highlighting its *centrality* within Europe) projects a reality beyond the Iron Curtain, pointing towards a more hopeful common *European* future. In Roth's fiction, the two mappings exist alongside each other and, semantically, manifest in an alternative designation, that of "the Other Europe," which the novelist incorporated into the title of the book series, *Writers from the Other Europe*, he edited for Penguin. On the one hand, the adjective "other" underscores the region's marginal status within Europe; the fact of it having been relegated to the recesses of Western consciousness. On the other, it connotes uniqueness and potentiality: what the Other Europe lacks in more conventional attractions typical of the free Europe/Europe proper, it makes up for in moral dilemmas and the uneasy yet captivating entanglement of politics and culture.[2]

In Roth's novel *Deception* (1990), the English lover of Philip, an American-Jewish author temporarily residing in the UK, is puzzled by Philip's interest in the Czechs and their dramatic stories of persecution and exile. Since *Deception* blurs the line between fact and fiction by liberally drawing from Roth's biography, there are reasons to suspect that the character's singular interest in the Czechs mirrors that of his creator. Indeed, on several occasions Roth spoke about an almost uncanny sense of affinity he felt when he first arrived in Prague in 1972, which soon solidified into a lasting fascination with the literary cultures of the region and a friendship with Czech dissidents.

In the beginning, however, there was Kafka—the primary reason why Roth visited the city on Vltava. Roth's fascination with Kafka is palpable not just in his fiction, most importantly in "'I Always Wanted You to Admire My Fasting'; or, Looking at Kafka" (1973), which reimagines Kafka's life beyond Bohemia, but also in his nonfiction projects. A case in point is *Shop Talk* (2001), a collection of interviews conducted by Roth with his fellow literati, which encapsulates Roth's concerns regarding the ins and outs of the literary profession, including the social role of literature and the

influence one's background and experience have on their writing. While it comes as no surprise that the author of *The Trial* (1925) is evoked in Roth's shop talks with Kundera and Klíma, both inspired by the Czech writer, Kafka's name resurfaces in almost all the pieces collected in the volume, including Roth's conversations with Primo Levi, Edna O'Brien, and Isaac Bashevis Singer. Kafka thus emerges as a crucial reference point not just for gauging the possibilities of literature but also for comprehending the many absurdities and incongruences of life itself, no matter whether that life unfolds under the regime's heavy boot or in a free America.

I like to imagine what that first trip to Prague must have been like for Roth. In his essay "In Search of Kafka and Other Answers" (1976), Roth acknowledges Kafka's formative influence on his fiction, crediting him with providing "any number of clues as to how to give imaginative expression" to Roth's own preoccupations. The essay is tinged with a disciple's devotion to his literary master, as well as a need to understand his life story as deeply as possible. Roth writes,

> Immediately upon arriving at the hotel on Wenceslaus Square, I dropped off my baggage and began walking. I walked for most of my four days there, quite consciously trying to look at whatever Kafka might once have looked at, seeking out the places where he and his family had lived, locating the streets and the sites that are mentioned in his letters and diaries, and in Max Brod's biography. ("In Search")

I can almost see Roth walking the cobblestone streets of Prague, tracing the path Kafka would take from home to his office. And since Roth was not one to waste a stimulating experience like that, a similar literary pilgrimage can be found in *The Professor of Desire*. There, David Kepesh, traumatized by an ill-fated relationship with his ex-wife Helen, finds solace in the loving arms of a no-nonsense high-school teacher, Claire Ovington, with whom he travels from Venice by way of Vienna to the city of Kafka. Once in Prague, Kepesh is attuned to the sites and sights that bear the imprint of Kafka. And like Roth, Kepesh senses an affinity between Kafka's obsessive preoccupations, most evident in his conflicted relationship with his larger-than-life father, and his own quandaries, particularly the irreconcilable conflict between his desire for bourgeois stability, on the one hand, and his reckless libidinal drive, on the other.

In *The Professor of Desire*, the struggles of Kafka's obstructed characters, banging their heads against the many walls of their claustrophobic, dehumanized worlds, come to symbolize Kepesh's private predicament—impotence—which befalls him following his marriage to Helen, whose narcissistic and erratic demeanor brings to mind Kafka's controlling father. Thus, Kepesh's inability to exert control over his body, which recalls Gregor Samsa's helplessness in the face of his terrible transformation,

and, in hindsight, foreshadows Kepesh's own metamorphosis into a mammary gland in *The Breast* (1972), symptomatizes a repression mechanism spinning out of control. And although the blockage is ultimately lifted and Kepesh is *de-Kafkafied* thanks to the lovely, level-headed presence of Claire, the cure proves to be as impossible to withstand as the poison that has produced the blockage in the first place. As Kepesh discovers towards the end of his stay in Prague, to become de-Kafkafied is to lose one's raison d'être, which for him resides in an unbridled pursuit of sexual pleasure—a far cry from the safe, monogamous relationship he has with Claire.

Yet, there is also another level to Kepesh's, and Roth's, interest in Kafka. In *The Professor of Desir*e, Kepesh discovers that his kinship with the Czech writer is shared by Professor Soska, who has been banned from university by the authorities as part of the repressions following the crushing of the Prague Spring movement. Soska's interest in Kafka has an existential dimension too, yet it is channeled more towards the socio-political condition of his country than the mind-body conflict that afflicts Kepesh. Thus, for Soska, an uncanny resemblance exists between the scarily absurd reality designed by the communists following the suppression of the Prague Spring and the world devised by Kafka on the pages of his works: "Many of us survive almost solely on Kafka, including people in the street who have never read a word of his. They look at one another when something happens, and they say, 'It's Kafka.' Meaning, 'That's the way it goes here now'" (*Professor* 169).

In addition to endowing Kafka with specific import ("to each obstructed citizen his own Kafka" [*Professor* 173]), Roth points to Kafka's universal symbolism in Czechoslovakia and indeed all of East Central Europe under communism and beyond. Arguably, no other author has ever captured the essence of totalitarian authority over an individual, and their resultant alienation, quite like Kafka did in *The Trial*, which may explain why Kafka's works were deemed unprintable by the communists. In this sense, in *The Professor of Desire*, Kafka is the ultimate *professor*, for he not only holds the key to, if not understanding, then at least illuminating Kepesh's affliction for him, but he also, through Soska, teaches him something about the nature of life under communism and the coping mechanisms that literature offers.

Yet the lesson does not end with Kepesh. A few years later, in *The Prague Orgy*, a slim volume from which the Zuckerman saga sprang up, Roth revisits the Other Europe, this time submitting the novelist Nathan Zuckerman to the kind of education in totalitarianism that he himself underwent under the expert guidance of Iván Klíma and other Czech dissidents. Although Kafka's name resurfaces several times, it is the ribald storytellers of Prague, the exiled confabulator Sisovsky, the Rabelaisian theater director-turned-janitor Bolotka, and the histrionic novelist and man-chaser Olga, that are Zuckerman's instructors in the novella. However, rather than enlighten Zuckerman as to what life under communism is like, they teach him what it is *not*

instead, mercilessly debunking his preconceptions about suffering, literature, and politics along the way, and making him question himself in the process.

Take the eponymous orgy to which Zuckerman is invited by the prankster Bolotka. Although the bacchanalia falls short of the Czech hosts' inflated promises (no fifteen-year-old girls show up), it nevertheless defies Zuckerman's expectations of what dissident suffering in Eastern Europe should look like: "what a witty, stylish comedy of manners these have-nots of Prague make out of their unbearable condition, this crushing business of being completely balked and walking the treadmill of humiliation. They, silenced, are all mouth. I am only ears" (*Prague* 37), wonders the nonplussed novelist. I am especially fond of this passage not just because it represents Roth's writing at its best—vibrant, perceptive, sophisticated—but also because I suspect that Roth might have channeled there something of his own preconceptions and the unexpected pleasure of finding the Other Europe to be so much more than he might have given it credit for. The rest is history. Roth turned out to be an attentive student of the Other Europe, which in turn rewarded him manifold, providing him with a sense of personal resonance ("Looking for Kafka's landmarks, I had [. . .] come upon some landmarks that felt to me like my own" ["In Search"]), moral purpose, and a weighty subject to explore, not least. To paraphrase memoirist Patricia Hampl (148) who, like Roth, yielded to Prague's allure in the Cold-War years, the Other Europe became for Roth his lost ancestry: an eloquent source of (hi)stories that satisfied his longing for a cultural continuum, which encompassed Europe and America rather than flowing from one to the other.

Zuckerman, however, is dumbfounded by the Other Europe, and he remains so until the end of his stay in Prague when the reality of the place finally catches up with him, thwarting the mission that has brought him there in the first place: to save the short stories written by Sisovsky's father, a gifted Jewish writer presumably murdered by the Nazis. Not only does Zuckerman fail to save the man from oblivion, and thus single-handedly change world literature forever by inserting his Yiddish-of-Flaubert stories into the Jewish literary canon, but he is also expulsed from Prague as a Zionist agent—a playful riff on Roth's own conflict with the Czechoslovak authorities over his meddling with the dissidents, which cost him the permission to enter the country again. Like Joseph K. and K. before him, Zuckerman is confronted with the forces larger than himself only to learn that an individual cannot outwit the system, even if that individual is "an American gentleman [. . .] with the bracing if old-fashioned illusion that he is playing a worthwhile, dignified, and honorable role" (*Prague* 37). There is much to infer from this lesson in humility to which Roth subjects Zuckerman. For those familiar with Zuckerman's travails in *Zuckerman Bound* (1985), his failed mission in the Other Europe comes as an ultimate confirmation that the novelist's attempts at redeeming himself only serve to envelop him even more tightly in his own

storyline. Seen from a broader perspective, which I dare to think Roth would appreciate, Zuckerman bows down to the inevitability—but also sheer randomness—of history colliding with an individual life. This theme will prove crucial to Roth's later fiction, resurfacing in such works as *The American Pastoral* (1997) or *Indignation* (2008).

In my academic work, I have read *The Prague Orgy* as Roth's meditation on the political dimension of art and his polemic with the idea of the muse of censorship (see Bryla, "Understanding" and "Writing"), and I stand by these interpretations. However, as a reader, I see this novella also as Roth's way of celebrating world literature, beyond the restrictiveness of national or regional canons, as well as laying claim to his own place within it, in defiance of what others might have said about his "thin personal culture." And I don't just mean Kafka, but also the Polish-Jewish genius Bruno Schulz, my personal favorite, whose tragic demise Sisovsky appropriates as that of his own father in his literary confabulation; Kundera, whose imprint can be felt in how Roth intertwines the sexual and the political; and, of course, Klíma whose relentless spirit and humor must have inspired the character of Bolotka, to name but a few literary influences.

Most of all, however, *The Prague Orgy* is Roth's way of having Prague, with its contemporary stories of laughter and oppression but also the bitter-sweet tales of yesteryear, speak to him and him speak back in a polyphonic conversation on the unbound possibilities of literature—Roth's favorite macro-theme—and the way it encroaches upon life itself. In my own modest way, I feel that I have been subject to that influence too: I credit Roth's Prague fiction for setting me on my own private search into the meanings of the Other Europe and for helping me to carve out a little space for myself, which felt meaningful and, in time, even homely, away from home.

NOTES

1. See Cynthia Ozick's speech delivered at the symposium celebrating a new translation into English of Kafka's *The Castle* (1926).

2. Kundera apparently disliked the rubric of "the Other Europe" as much as he did that of "Eastern Europe," both of which he considered to be misleading labels denoting an artificial political construct (see Nadel 278-79). Indeed, inasmuch as the term "the Other Europe" evokes the quality of being different and unique, it also suggests inferiority; coming second with respect to the "real thing." These words by Patricia Hampl, speaking from a Western perspective, seem to corroborate Kundera's objection: "'Europe' has shifted dramatically to the West. It does not include, to our minds, very much besides France, Germany (West), Italy, Scandinavia, Spain, Belgium, the Netherlands, Austria. Penguin Books has an Eastern European fiction series, edited by Philip Roth, called Writers from the Other Europe. Exactly" (185).

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