ARTICLE

Writing Prague

Philip Roth's and John Updike's Literary Takes on the Czech Capital

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ABSTRACT. This essay establishes a productive critical dialogue between Philip Roth's and John Updike's representations of Prague under communism in *The Prague Orgy* (1985) and "Bech in Czech" (1987), respectively. Focusing on two central threads in both works—the intertwining of literature and politics, on the one hand, and Prague as a Jewish city, on the other—this essay argues that in mapping Prague, Roth and Updike revisit their protagonists' emblematic concerns, as well as reflect on the role of the writer and literature under different political systems, questioning George Steiner's conception of literature in the process.

Philip Roth once said that he and John Updike were "friends in a distance" ("My Distant Friend").[1] The sentiment was mutual. When an interviewer inquired whether the two writers were friends, Updike's answer resembled Roth's: "guardedly," he responded (Brown). The two authors first met in 1959, following their respective literary debuts: Roth's *Goodbye, Columbus* and Updike's *The Poorhouse Fair*. From the start, there was a competitive edge to their distant friendship. As two fiercely ambitious men of letters, Updike and Roth "remained neck and neck in the American author sweepstakes, both repeatedly hailed by critics as the leading talent of their generation" (Begley, ch. VI). In an interview conducted shortly before Updike's death, the author of *Rabbit, Run* (1960) admitted that he and Roth had indeed been rivals, although Roth eventually "got the upper hand in the rivalry" (Brown). Two years after Updike's death, Roth praised Updike's precision and versatility, calling him "our contemporary colossus" and a "giant" ("John Updike").

Both authors have been credited with spanning the magnitude of post-war America, complete with suburban dramas and socio-political upheavals. In his 1985 comparative study, George J. Searles classified them as social realists, or novelists of manners, whose works chronicle and comment on American society. Despite coming from different social backgrounds, "they have been shaped by a number of common influences and are writing in and about the same moment" (Searles 3).

Searles's comment certainly applies to the present essay, which analyzes works where time, place, and the authors' concerns converge to a large extent, inspiring a productive critical comparison: Roth's *The Prague Orgy* (1985) and Updike's "Bech in Czech" (1987).[2] Not only do these works offer narrative explorations of Prague under communism, but they also problematize Western intellectual fascination with the Other Europe, which the city symbolizes, by establishing a polemic with Western "loose, romantic talk" about "the muse of censorship" (Roth, *Shop* 52). Although neither of the works mentions George Steiner explicitly, the critic's division of literature into political and inconsequential, which both Updike and Roth publicly diverged from, seems to be questioned and ultimately debunked in "Bech in Czech" and, particularly, in *The Prague Orgy*.

In addition to reflecting on the role of the writer and literature under different political systems, both works portray Prague as a palimpsestic *city-text* "in which history and imagination, memory and forgetting [are] impossible to disentangle" (Thomas 1). Out of the numerous texts that form the tissue of Prague, the city's Jewish imprint is by far the most pronounced. Since both protagonists, Nathan Zuckerman and Henry Bech, are Jewish, Prague's "historical fullness" (Updike, *Complete* 330) affects them on different planes, catalyzing fears, memories, and self-reflections that are emblematic throughout Roth's Zuckerman trilogy and Updike's Henry Bech stories.

In this essay, I use vocabulary derived from imagology to refer to the ways in which Prague is represented in both works.[3] Terms such as "mapping" point to the practice of representing alterity in such a way that it always reflects back on the *spectant* (the one that imagines), reasserting their location and reinforcing their sense of self. Accordingly, by bringing Roth's and Updike's visions of the city together, this essay considers their shared investment in the uneasy relationship among literature, politics, and identity, which the city incarnates, as well as traces the ways in which Prague resonates with the authors' respective concerns and agendas. As a consequence, an inter-textual dialogue is established, with Prague serving as both the fulcrum and the subject itself. Although Roth's and Updike's portrayals of the Other Europe have been tackled previously, to my knowledge no study has focused specifically on the representation and significance of Prague in the writings of both authors. This essay hopes to fill this gap.

The city of Prague has been the subject of innumerable critical studies. Like Venice or Paris, it has captivated authors and travelers with its dreamy architecture, Old-World charm, and illustrious inhabitants, whether real or imaginary. The literary patron saint of the city is, undeniably, Franz Kafka, but Prague is also celebrated for its posterior literary voices, particularly that of Jaroslav Hašek, Milan Kundera, Václav Havel, or Bohumil Hrabal, to name a few. According to the legend, it was in Prague that Golem, the man-made clay creature, was created and in-spirited to protect Prague Jews from anti-Semitic persecutions and pogroms. Unlike other capitals of Eastern Europe,[4] Prague hardly bears any visible scars from World War II, yet "in spite of its physical intactness, Prague is a ghostly city from which many of its citizens have vanished: its long-standing Jewish population [. . .], its German population [. . .], and many of its leading intellectuals" (Thomas 1). These tensions between presence and absence, and thus between memory and oblivion, also permeate the literary images constructed by Updike and Roth.

Like a number of writers before them, Updike and Roth both traveled to Prague to find inspiration for their fiction. However, their encounters with the Czech capital took place under very different circumstances, which, in turn, influenced their fictional mappings of the city. While Updike's account of Prague is grounded in the context of American cultural diplomacy, as he visited Prague on two occasions under the auspices of the American State Department, Roth traveled to Prague privately—first in the spring of 1972 and then every spring until 1977, when he was denied a visa. The authors' visits to Czechoslovakia formed part of their respective "grand European tours." Updike's, which took place in 1964, took him through the capital cities of the Soviet Union, Romania, Bulgaria, and Czechoslovakia. Roth's private, 1972 itinerary, by contrast, included Venice, Vienna, and Prague. Interestingly, even though Updike's original tour of the Eastern Bloc included a visit to Czechoslovakia, it was not until 1987 that he dramatized Prague in his fiction. It is hard to determine how much, if any, of this first trip there is in "Bech in Czech," for in 1986 Updike visited the Czech capital again. He went there as a guest of William Luers, the American diplomat who had taken care of him in Russia, and at least two events from this second trip are chronicled in "Bech in Czech" (Begley, ch. VII).

Updike called "Bech in Czech" a "leftover story" that came to him in 1987, five years after *Bech is Back* had been published, and served as the nucleus from which *Bech at Bay* (1998) evolved (Updike, "Questions"). Nevertheless, it is tempting to wonder why Updike waited almost two decades before he fictionalized Czechoslovakia. Could it be that this belated interest had to do with the wave of Western fascination that swept over Czechoslovakia and other countries of Eastern Europe, particularly Poland, in the 1980s? Roth himself dramatized Prague first in 1977 in *The Professor of Desire*, and then again in *The Prague Orgy* in 1985, while Updike's good friend Joyce Carol Oates published a series of short stories based on her travels to Berlin, Warsaw, and Budapest in 1984. Suffice it to say that when Updike wrote "Bech in Czech" Czechoslovakia had been on Western lips for some time. The counterculture that emerged following the brutal pacification of the Prague Spring reform movement inspired those unencumbered by the Iron Curtain, earning Czechoslovakia a prominent place in the Western intellectual imaginary.

Roth played an important part in familiarizing the American public with the best authors from behind the Iron Curtain. As the editor-in-chief of a Penguin book series *Writers from the Other Europe*, Roth "not only reprinted the novels but also commissioned, edited, and promoted them. He arranged for writers of international renown to contribute introductions to the works in order to place them within their proper literary and historical contexts for an American readership" (Ivanova 4). One of them was John Updike, who penned an insightful and appreciative introduction to Bruno Schulz's *Sanatorium under the Sign of the Hourglass* (1979). Meanwhile, Roth also helped the Czech writers financially. He set up a bank account named the "Ad Hoc Czech Fund" to which he and fourteen other American authors, including Updike, contributed a hundred dollars a month. The money was then exchanged for coupons that could be redeemed for currency in Czechoslovakia (Pierpont 91). Roth's involvement with the cause of the Other Europe was officially acknowledged in 2013, when he received the PEN/Allen Foundation Literary Service Award for his advocacy for writers in Czechoslovakia and other Eastern European countries.[5]

Like Roth, Updike was one of those American writers "engaged in an ongoing battle on the human rights front" during the Cold War (Miller 130). He was actively involved in various initiatives aimed at helping dissident writers, but, most of all, he remained attuned to literary voices from the Other Europe. In addition to the introduction to Bruno Schulz's work, he wrote the foreword to a 1983 edition of Kafka's stories and penned numerous reviews and essays dealing with the works of Eastern European authors, such as Milan Kundera, Ivan Klíma, and Witold Gombrowicz.

Since the relationship between literature and politics formed the basis of Prague's representation in the American intellectual imaginary in the 1970s and 1980s, it is no coincidence that *The Prague Orgy* and "Bech in Czech" feature authors as protagonists and revolve around the question of what it means to be a writer under different political systems. Another significant similarity between the two works is the ethnicity of the Jewish American protagonists. Accordingly, before I discuss Henry Bech's and Nathan Zuckerman's respective mappings of Prague, I will briefly address the characters themselves, for the narrative baggage they bring to the Czech capital is as important in the process of imagining the city as the places they visit and the people they meet.

UPDIKE'S AND ROTH'S AMBASSADORS IN PRAGUE

In a sense, Henry Bech is a literary by-product of Updike's Eastern European travels, as the novelist created him upon returning from his state-sponsored tour. As a character, Bech is rooted in Updike's experience as a writer but also exotic enough to let the novelist explore new territories. Bech is thus a man of letters who has had his share of critical and popular success, but who is suffering from writer's block, an affliction that had never affected Updike during his long and prolific career. Unable (and unwilling) to write, Bech takes up other related commitments, one of them being the role of a US cultural ambassador. Clearly the most striking difference between the character and the creator is their ethnic background. Much has been said about Updike's decision to make Bech into a Jew. Perhaps most famously, Cynthia Ozick criticized Bech for not being *imagined* enough to be "brought up into truthfulness." Bech, says Ozick, is a repository of stereotypes and sociological references regarding Jewishness, rather than a flesh-and-blood Jewish character, for "as Jew [Bech] is pathetically truncated, like his name." Ruth Wisse also saw Bech as a stock character. In her call for fresh air in Jewish American fiction, she expressed her frustration with predictable Jewishness, stating bluntly that "John Updike's parody of the type in Bech is a gentle hint that even the goy has the formula, so enough already" (Wisse). Updike playfully asserted his right to make his character Jewish in the interview with none other than Bech: "It is my American right to give it a try, even in today's strident climate of defensive diversity" ("Questions").

According to Sanford Pinsker, Updike's decision to endow Bech with a Jewish background may be at least partly explained by "curiosity and a dash of healthy competitiveness" (98). That said, in exploiting the "major force in American fiction, the Jewish novelist" (De Bellis 54), Updike was less concerned with Jewishness than with the distractions and perils of being a novelist. Indeed, in the abovementioned interview with his Jewish alter-ego, Updike made it clear that Bech's chosen walk of life was more important to him than the character's ethnicity: "I don't see you as a *Jewish* writer. I see you as a Jewish *writer*" ("Questions"). In Pinsker's words, "Henry Bech provided Updike with a vehicle for talking about the current literary scene from the safe distance that a persona provides" (99). In a similar vein, Derek Parker Royal argues that the Bech narratives explore "the relationship between author and creation, the obligations of the contemporary writer, and the responsibilities inherent in representing another's subjectivity" (33). Interestingly, Roth had not been impressed with Updike's Bech stories. "I'm not convinced by them," he stated matter-of-factly but without explaining what it was that he found implausible about Bech; his Jewishness or his writerly exploits ("The Updike").

Convincing or not, Bech's Jewishness acquires major importance in the context of his diplomatic travels, relayed in the first three stories of *Bech: A Book* (1970), as his background is his liaison to the Old World. By venturing behind the Iron Curtain, Bech travels back in time to revisit his long-forgotten Jewish heritage and to map the area as part of the past (Bryla, "Under"). In his seminal work on the invention of the mental rubric of Eastern Europe, Larry Wolff observes that each traveler undertaking a journey to Eastern Europe in the Age of Reason was equipped with a mental map ready "to be freely annotated, embellished, refined or refolded along the way" (6). Bech's cartography of the European East is to a large extent based on the preexisting maps of alterity, both cultural and personal, which in turn tell us more about Bech than about the places he visits. Thus, he is comfortable in Russia because it *feels* familiar and reminds him of his Jewish childhood, whereas his stay in Romania, the country that he knows very little about, causes him to "question his definition of himself" (Miller 121), arousing unpleasant memories and latent fears, including that of anti-Semitism. That said, it is not until "Bech in Czech," two decades following Bech's debut, that Updike engages with the cultural memory of the Holocaust, making the historic past of the region as significant in the representation of the Other Europe as its communist present.

In the meantime, however, Bech continues to travel, shift mistresses, and pursue literary activities in both American and international settings. There is often a sense of displacement and confusion to Bech's travails, as his creator not only pits him against others' definitions of Henry Bech but also subjects him to identity dilemmas, which Bech attempts (unsuccessfully) to assuage by such varied means as globetrotting or marrying his ex-mistress's sister. Nevertheless, Bech "seeks travel and love merely as stimuli, quick fixes for a sagging ego that provide expressive satisfaction yet divert him from art" (Luscher 67). At the core of all Bech tales, there is an incisive commentary about the condition of Bech as a contemporary American writer who, despite being "conspicuously fortunate" in "shar[ing] in the affluence of his society" (Updike, "Cultural Situation" 19, 21), spreads himself too thin, squandering his talent and energies on literary pageantry.

Like Updike, Roth chooses an established literary character as his emissary in Prague. Nathan Zuckerman, a Jewish American writer with his own share of issues, first appeared in *My Life as a Man* (1974), but his literary existence as a protagonist through the mid-1980s spans three works: *The Ghost Writer* (1979), *Zuckerman Unbound* (1981), and *The Anatomy Lesson* (1983). In 1985, they were published together with *The Prague Orgy* as *Zuckerman Bound*. Although the novella first appeared as the epilogue to the Zuckerman trilogy, Roth asserted that the story about a Jewish American novelist traveling to Prague was in fact a seed from which the whole series grew. Having realized that he compressed too much material into the story, Roth decided to extend it over several books (Pierpont 109).

Zuckerman Bound has been said to offer a "full-scale portrait of the artist" at different stages of development (Kartinger 35). As David Brauner points out, all Zuckerman books share the "trope of the Jewish writer on trial both as a writer and as a Jew" (43). Focusing on the legalistic elements in the tetralogy, both in terms of content and aesthetics, Brauner argues that from the very beginning of the saga Zuckerman is persistently placed on trial by his fellow Jews who find fault with the way he approaches ethnicity in his fiction. At the same time, *Zuckerman Bound* is also concerned with the process of becoming a writer and the various trials and ordeals this involves. Thus, in *The Ghost Writer* young Zuckerman struggles to remain faithful to his own voice, even though this entails forsaking his family ties, while simultaneously searching for the right mode of living for the kind of writer that he wishes to be. Although the choice between loyalty to one's community and artistic freedom is resolved in favor of the latter, Zuckerman is faced with the consequences of his decision in *Zuckerman Unbound*, where he suffers from unwanted notoriety following the publication of *Carnovsky*, a work whose reputation resembles that of *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969). More importantly, he also has to live with the knowledge that *Carnovsky* has been the final nail in his father's coffin. If, following Brauner's trial metaphor, Zuckerman's charge in *Zuckerman Unbound* is mainly psychological, as he suffers from notoriety and guilt, then in *The Anatomy Lesson* he is made to repent with his own flesh and bone. The novel's predominant theme is pain: "Pain and writing. Pain and not writing. Real physical pain that has taken over your life and that has no explanation and apparent remedy," but also "pain of having written a book that killed your father and made your innocent mother's life a hell" (Pierpont 128). Zuckerman's way of assuaging the pain, in all its configurations, is to reinvent himself as a medical doctor: an obstetrician who delivers babies to the happiness of the world, instead of novels to the contempt of Jewish critics and relatives. However, the solution will not do, for in *The Prague Orgy* Zuckerman returns as a novelist, albeit with a serious mission of his own. Unlike David Kepesh, who wishes to see the city of Kafka, Zuckerman travels to Czechoslovakia to recover the manuscripts of an unpublished Jewish author who perished in the Holocaust. Therefore, Zuckerman's ultimate trial is to venture behind the Iron Curtain to redeem himself in the eyes of the community that he has persistently defied through his works. It is this noble, and as it turns out quite strenuous, task that forms the axis of Zuckerman's exploits in *The Prague Orgy*. Into the bargain, he gets to know a universe that, despite being an ocean away from his own, resonates with his sensibilities as an author.

MAPPING PRAGUE IN "BECH IN CZECH" AND *THE PRAGUE ORGY*

Bech's and Zuckerman's biographies, most notably their shared ethnicity and profession, feed into their perceptions of Prague and thus the themes that both "Bech in Czech" and *The Prague Orgy* set out to explore. There are two central threads that run through these works: one has to do with the intertwining of literature and politics, whereas the other with Prague as a Jewish city whose palimpsestic history resonates with the protagonists, shaping their impressions of the Czech capital. Although almost a decade lies between their respective trips, Zuckerman's and Bech's itineraries share certain similarities, such as meeting authors from both sides of Prague's literary spectrum, dissidents and apparatchiks, which in turn leads them to (re)consider their roles as writers in America.

Steiner's contentious essay "The Archives of Eden" (1981) provides a backdrop for understanding Updike's and Roth's take on what Updike calls "The Cultural Situation of the American Writer," in both works. In the essay, this prominent literary critic and, privately, John Updike's good friend, favors works produced behind the Iron Curtain over American literature:

> It is not the "creative writing centres," "the humanities research institutes" [. . .] we must look to for what is most compelling and far-reaching in art and ideas. It is to the [. . .] samizdat magazines and publishing

> houses [. . .] of Kraków and of Budapest, of Prague and of Dresden. Here [. . .] is a reservoir of talent, of unquestioning adherence to the risks and functions of art and original thought on which generations to come will feed. (Steiner 299-300)

Both Updike and Roth were familiar with Steiner's argument and openly challenged it. In the interview with *The Paris Review*, Roth wondered "why all the writers I know in Czechoslovakia loathe the regime and passionately wish that it would disappear from the face of the earth. Don't they understand, as Steiner does, that this is their chance to be great?" ("Interview" 146). Roth's irony is channeled here at Steiner's dichotomized vision of literature as either serious or trivial and the critic's preference for the former. In challenging his spectacular vision of the writer as a martyr to truth, Roth defends American literature, assuring that "[t]o write a serious book that doesn't signal its seriousness with the rhetorical cues or thematic gravity that's traditionally associated with seriousness is a worthy undertaking too" ("Interview" 145). A similar standpoint can be detected in Updike's reaction to Steiner's comparison between dissident literature and American fiction:

> George Steiner [. . .] harks to this point often in his writing, saying how frivolous, how *domestic* and trivial American, Free World writing is and how *admirable* is this stuff which the giants of the Soviet culture have squeezed out and around censors and the commissars. I find this a horrendous point because it does imply that we'd all be better off if we were oppressed. ("An Evening" 48)

Updike's stand converges with Roth's in that both authors refuse to celebrate the *muse* of censorship and oppression as instrumental in producing superior works of literature. Through their critique of Steiner's reasoning, Updike and Roth defend American literature and the American writer's (or any writer's for that matter) indelible right to reflect life as they see it, even if it "is *not* blatantly shocking and monstrously horrible [and] does *not* elicit universal compassion, or occur on a large historical stage, or on the grandest scale of twentieth-century suffering" (Roth, "Interview" 145). Updike even went as far as to proclaim that he preferred reading Bellow to Solzhenitsyn: "I must say that I don't find Solzhenitsyn all *that* readable—I'd rather read Bellow, even if he *is* only writing about a kind of disturbed, philosophical guy who keeps getting into run-ins with cops and former wives" ("An Evening" 48). Interestingly, Roth made a similar comment, except that he substituted Bellow for Louis L'Amour ("Interview" 147).

Steiner's reasoning must have truly struck a chord with Roth and Updike, for both writers subjected their protagonists to confrontations with dissident writers and samizdat literature, thus exposing their "tamizdat mentality," i.e. a persistent reading of the Other Europe as the land of suffering and oppression (Benatov 121). For Zuckerman, the impulse to travel to Prague comes from a meeting with Zdenek Sisovsky, a Jewish Czech writer whose political satire cost him the right to publish in Czechoslovakia. In *The Prague Orgy*, Sisovsky is cast in the role of a prototypical émigré writer who escaped the regime by abandoning his country and settling in the West. His dramatic narrative of an uprooted artist is further reinforced by the presence of his companion, actress Eva Kalinova, who has been degraded by the regime for political and ethnic reasons and forced to perform a menial job. Although Eva refuses to be defined by her émigré status, Sisovsky prevents her from reinventing herself in the West by perpetuating stories of communist oppression. In doing so, he deliberately locks himself and Eva in the stereotype of repressed Eastern European intellectuals whose lives have been shattered by the communist regime.

As if political repression of the kind suffered by him and Eva were not enough, Sisovsky dramatizes the Other Europe in Zuckerman's eyes even further by weaving the region's tragic past into its dismal communist present. This is done through the story of his late father: a Jewish writer who had been shot by a Gestapo officer before the world had a chance to discover his remarkable short stories written in "the Yiddish of Flaubert" (22). Fortunately, the stories have outlived their author, but Sisovsky cannot retrieve them because he is not allowed to return to Prague. Furthermore, the manuscripts remain in the possession of Sisovsky's ex-wife Olga, who refuses to hand them back in revenge for the writer's numerous infidelities. What then is Zuckerman's role in this Eastern European imbroglio? A lover of women and books, the novelist commits to carrying out a scheme that involves both: he is to seduce Olga and convince her to give up the precious manuscripts. So captivated is Zuckerman with Sisovsky's story that it takes him less than a month to arrange a trip to communist Prague.

A reader expecting Zuckerman's first destination in Prague to be a "samizdat party" where instead of "flowers or wine, the guests bring twenty copies of their latest text" (Ash 146) is in for a surprise. Roth challenges Western preconceptions about Eastern European oppression by sending Zuckerman to a fully-fledged orgy at a palazzo belonging to Klenek, a Czech film director of dubious political loyalties. Although one would expect Zuckerman, the audacious and scandalous writer that he is at home, to be in his element, he seems to be disconcerted, even shocked by the whole affair. However, what he finds most disturbing are not the salacious scenes he witnesses at Klenek's but the fact that it is the oppressed authors that indulge in them (Bryla, "Understanding" 21). Surprisingly for himself and the reader, the controversial and outspoken author of *Carnovsky* is reduced to the role of a quiet, polite and respectable observer of the "witty, stylish comedy of manners" that the "have-nots of Prague make out of their unbearable condition" (*Prague* 37). By reversing the roles, Roth defies Zuckerman's tamizdat mentality: the novelist comes to Prague equipped with a mental map drawn along Steiner's lines, which he is continually forced to re-chart and, in doing so, question his role as an American writer in Sisovsky's transatlantic scheme.

In contrast to Zuckerman, whose stay in Czechoslovakia has a private character, Bech travels to Prague under the auspices of the State Department, which means that his forays into the city are orchestrated by an outspoken American ambassador. Although Bech has never actively sought contacts with his international counterparts, the ambassador assumes that the Western intellectual in him will be delighted to experience *real* samizdat. At first sight, the dissident party that he is taken to by the ambassador and his wife resembles the one described by Timothy Garton Ash. Not only does Bech get an opportunity to meet banned Czech authors, but he is also initiated into the mysteries of clandestine publishing, including an almost transcendental experience of holding a preciously hand-bound volume. Echoing George Steiner's argument, Updike exploits Bech's "bad conscience" about writing politically insignificant fiction. Since, like Zuckerman, Bech partakes in tamizdat mentality, his encounter with the persecuted dissident authors leads him to question his comfortable position as an American writer: "How would Bech, Bech asked himself, stand up to having his fingernails pulled? He could think of nothing he had ever written that he would not instantly, gladly recant" (Updike, *Complete* 316). When set beside Czech works, Bech's books seem "petty and self-indulgent," while his idea of being a writer: "to indulge himself, to amuse himself, to get his books into print with as little editorial smudging as he can" (314), is a far cry from the conception of art as a political statement.

By contrasting freewheeling Bech with the persecuted writers, Updike seems to endorse Steiner's polarized vision of contemporary literature. However, a closer look at the dissidents renders some fine yet perceivable cracks to the spectacular if simplistic image of the Other Europe. If Zuckerman is surprised by the audaciousness of the officially silenced authors, Bech registers quite the opposite. Instead of romanticized rebels, the American author meets people who "had grown middle-aged in protest, in dissidence, and moved through their limbo world with a practiced weariness" (315). Granted, their stories have the power to plunge Bech into self-doubt, but they seem to be tired of their condition and of the tamizdat narrative they keep being forced into: one of them even admits that he spends so much time giving interviews to sympathetic Western media that little is left for writing. Notably, this gentle complaint echoes those voiced by real-life Czech authors, who wished to be appreciated by the West for their literature rather than their predicament (Roth, *Reading* 239).

Not only does Updike inject a dose of skepticism into the tamizdat narrative, but he also offers a veiled commendation for American fiction. Although Bech, with his writer's block and his meager *oeuvre,* is no Bellow and may not be set against the Solzhenitsyns of Prague, the readers flock to see him and have his books autographed, even though the police are taking photographs of those who have risked meeting the American author. Arguably, given Bech's modest achievements, they come not so much to see Bech as to show their support for a country where literature is unobstructed by the burden of politics. That said, Bech's American fiction is also celebrated for what it is, albeit in a less likely context. Soon after coming to Prague, Bech is taken by the ambassador and his wife to see Kafka's grave, a flagship literary monument of Prague. As it turns out, a couple of young men working at the cemetery are familiar with Bech's writing, particularly his bestselling novel, *Travel Light*, written in the manner of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957). So taken are they with Bech's larger-than-life American story that they compare him with Kafka. Clearly partial to Bech, they credit his fiction, which they find to be quintessentially American, with "primitive energy" and "raw love of life" (312), inadvertently assuming the role of defenders of American literature, and America as a literary focus—not unlike Updike himself, who called America, in its expansive and contradictory totality, "a mighty subject at [the American writer's] back" ("Cultural Situation" 21).

In a manner similar to "Bech in Czech," the subject and the setting of *The Prague Orgy* allow Roth to pass a caustic commentary on that "loose, romantic talk in the West about 'the muse of censorship' behind the Iron Curtain" (*Shop* 52). However, where Updike is more interested in acknowledging American literature for what it is and shunning prejudicial comparisons, Roth focuses on "shining his flashlight" (Plante) into literary Prague and listening to its polyphonic complexity. In the process, he confounds Western preconceptions about the Other Europe, subjecting Zuckerman to situations that force him to redraw his mental map, not just of the city and its inhabitants, but also of himself as a Jewish American writer and son. The first blow to Zuckerman's ego comes already at Klenek's, where he is compelled to revisit his conception of the oppressed writers, but the deeper he penetrates Prague, the more cultural and mental baggage there is to relinquish.

George Steiner's conception of the artist as a martyr to truth seems to resonate ironically in the background when Roth introduces the character of Rudolf Bolotka, Ivan Klíma's fictional counterpart and Zuckerman's guide to Prague's cultural underground. Bolotka possesses a unique ability to adapt to the surrounding environment, which allows him to remain a vivid storyteller in the midst of debilitating normalization. Bolotka is certainly not one to be locked in the narrative of oppression. Instead, he seems to make the most of the dismal political situation: to him Prague is a stage and Zuckerman a keen if somewhat guileless American spectator for the sake of whom he exposes the regime's absurdities. The primary role of this unapologetically ribald dramatist-turned-janitor is to pour "a little cold water" on Zuckerman's "free-world fantasies" (26) and thus to complicate the American's binary vision. When Zuckerman is upset at the sight of Bolotka's miserable lodgings, he quickly reassures him that the room used to be "his hideaway from his wife long before his theater was disbanded" (39). With the same wry humor, he throws Zuckerman's herringbone suit onto his large, stoop-shouldered silhouette to feel like a *rich American writer* and demeans the secret police by likening them to literary critics, who "of what little they see, they get most wrong anyway" (65). Nevertheless, not everybody shares Bolotka's sardonic resistance. Zuckerman visits Prague a few years before Bech, yet he too finds the cultural life of the city to be heavily burdened by normalization. In this sense, *The Prague Orgy* illustrates Roth's thesis, endorsed by Ivan Klíma, about the toll that normalization, which entailed not just a ban on publishing but also any work that writers were qualified for, put on the Czech authors (*Shop* 53).

At the eponymous Prague orgy, sexual and verbal extravagances conceal boredom and despondency. Olga, Sisovsky's ex-wife and the keeper of his father's manuscripts, turns out to be a foul-mouthed hysteric whose "rawness of expression matches the rawness of feeling" (Versluys 316). Ironically, just like her ex-husband's lover, Eva Kalinova, Olga seems to be a prisoner in an oppressive narrative she is unable to leave. Spiritually stifled, she is the antithesis of a heroic dissident. Although she used to be a popular author, Olga seems to have given up literature for good; she is a displaced person in her own country, spending her days in an alcoholic haze and masking desperation with vulgarity. Her anguished attempts at wooing Zuckerman expose the vulnerability of a victim of the system where, as she bluntly declares, the only freedom left is "to fuck and to be fucked" (73). Yet, as in the case of most characters in Roth's Prague, there is more to Olga than meets the eye. For all her wretchedness, she turns out to be a much sharper observer of reality than Zuckerman is. Thus, Olga is instrumental in casting off the veil of idealism from Zuckerman's eyes by exposing Sisovsky as a liar and a narcissist. As it turns out, Sisovsky appropriated the story of another Jewish writer to lure Zuckerman into salvaging his father's manuscripts, hoping to publish them under his own name in America. So much for literary idealism and Zuckerman's (self-imposed) reputation as an "American gentleman abroad [. . .] playing a worthwhile, dignified, and honorable role" (37). So much for the tamizdat narrative.

But Sisovsky's tale is also important for a different reason. Narratively, it acts as a nexus between two threads, which are also present in "Bech in Czech": Prague as the epitome of literature grown in the interstices between art and politics, and Prague as a Jewish city. In Roth's work, these narratives interlock in the representation that shapes Prague into a palimpsestic city-text where the communist present is superimposed upon indelible layers of the region's history, with recent traumas hovering under the hard surface of the regime of forgetting. Although the name of the actual writer is never mentioned, the story belongs to Polish Jewish author Bruno Schulz, whose phantasmagorical work Roth included in the Penguin collection. The dramatic life story of a Jewish writer murdered out of sheer callousness by a vengeful Nazi officer, told by a Jewish Czech political émigré to a Jewish American author in the midst of the Cold War, is Roth's way of connecting the past with the present, the Other Europe and the US. At the same time, it is also a way of adding Bruno Schulz to his collection of father-figures (Ravvin 53), alongside Franz Kafka, and, in doing so, acknowledging and incorporating Jewish cultural heritage into his literary identity (Kensky).

In Updike's Prague, there are no such "strange presences" (Ravvin). Kafka, Roth's reason for coming to Prague in the first place, fascinated Updike but did not haunt him the way he did Roth and his characters—particularly, David Kepesh in *The Professor of Desire*. Whereas for Kepesh, Kafka stands for the epitome of and the key to understanding his personal predicament, to Bech the visit to Kafka's grave is but a reminder of human mortality and the banality of death. That said, Prague's Jewish imprint is as important to Bech's mapping of Prague as the city's communist present. The dark shadow of World War II looms large over Bech's sojourn in Prague from the very beginning of the story. If Moscow in "Rich in Russia" was redolent of the glorious Jewish presence, Prague is a living symbol of the void left by those who perished in the Holocaust. Significantly, nowhere else has Bech been so acutely aware of his Jewishness as in the Czech capital, though he realizes that "[f]or a Jew, to move through post-war Europe is to move through hordes of ghosts, vast animated crowds that, since 1945, are not there, not there at all—up in smoke" (307). Prague is thus mapped as a haunted city within a mutilated body of the war-ravished Europe, where the Jewish absence "makes a great hole that no one mentions" (307).

If juxtaposed with the stories of Bech's exploits in Moscow, Bucharest, and Sofia, "Bech in Czech" seems more somber in tone, as if the protagonist's customary wry humor were improper in the face of Czechoslovakia's dismal fate. As in *The Prague Orgy*, the Holocaust forms part of a thick palimpsest of the Other Europe's turbulent history, except that in "Bech in Czech" it is more explicit. While Roth writes the Holocaust into contemporary Prague through Sisovsky's tale, Updike treats it as one of the defining historical facts along with the Thirty Years' War, the dominium of the Habsburg Empire, or the Prague Spring. The long record of historical wounds lives on in the tissue of the city, determining its current place within Europe, which, despite its geographical or even metaphorical centrality ("this old heart of Europe" [315]), remains painfully peripheral. Updike verges on the spectacular when, in the midst of Bech's exploits in the Czech capital, he inserts a plea for Prague and for the Other Europe to be "part of Europe" (315), which translates into making people's lives more Westernized, "with a few glass skyscrapers" and "a currency that [isn't] a sham" (316). This is Updike taking over and speaking from the perspective of a Westerner, rather than an intellectual infatuated with dissidence, who is, quite unashamedly and perhaps somewhat patronizingly, pleading for some Western "normalization" in the city normalized along the Soviet lines.

But where Updike sees historical realities, his character is more attuned to Prague as a ghostly *locus magicus*, where historical truth blends in with fairy-tales and legends and where Hitler, who "kissed the princess and made all her bad dreams come true," is now "becoming a myth, like the Golem" (321, 319). Bech's usual ironic distance is to no avail, since it cannot shield him from the uncanny effect the city exerts on him. Not only does he feel unworthy and inadequate next to the dissident authors whose politically minded art towers over his "trivial" American fiction, but he is also overpowered by the "historical fullness of Prague" (330). Bech might have felt fearful in Romania, but it is not until his visit to Prague that his subliminal fear of the Shoah comes to the surface, revealing a different type of anxiety, albeit one that "Updike deftly instills [. . .] with ethnic import" (Royal 44). In an almost gothic fashion, Prague is imagined as a monster lying in wait for Bech's life, as "[t]he huge bowls in his palace bathroom" turn out to have "voracious drains" (331) while the city's architecture, hiding layers and layers of history, "afflict[] Bech like a void, a chasm" (330). Unexpectedly, Bech's defense strategy is to hold on to America. Although Bech's feelings for his homeland have never even come close to Harry Angstrom's "almost religious, fervent belief in America" (Wilson 201), Updike uses him as a mouthpiece for voicing a comparison which seems as blunt as if it came from Rabbit: "America has its rough spots—if the muggers don't get your wallet, the nursing homes will—but it's still a country that never had a pogrom" (330). This is again Updike's voice speaking with the benefit of hindsight—for two decades have passed since his visit to the Soviet Union and one since the end of the Vietnam War—that for all the malaise and turmoil of the second half of the twentieth century, America remains nonetheless "a distinctly better mousetrap" ("On Not").

Nevertheless, even this consoling vision of the homeland, imagined as slightly mischievous but basically trustworthy and good-natured, is not enough to appease the visceral fear that Bech feels in Prague. This fear, which appears already in *Bech: A Book*, is emblematic of the protagonist's "omnipresent theological/sexual preoccupations" (Pinsker 100). In "Bech Panics," Bech experiences a mixture of "pasty" panic and shame that reveal his fear of death, which, in turn, conceals "his fear [. . .] of something narrower, more pointed and printed" (93). Bech is terrified that the critics have been right all along, that his stories are indeed "flimsy, unfelt, flashy, and centrifugal" (94). This is exactly the same category of fear that sweeps over Bech on his last day in Prague, where "[h]is panic felt pasty and stiff and revealed a certain shape. That shape was the fear that, once he left his end of the gentle arc of the Ambassador's Residence, he would, like millions up in smoke before him, cease to exist" (334).

As Royal observed, Bechiana is concerned with the construction and representation of identity. Throughout his travels around the Eastern Bloc, Bech has carried along a number of selves which, like a piece of clothing, he would put on or shed depending on the circumstances. Now, however, more than twenty years since his debut as John Updike's second-best literary creation, Bech senses that the garment is becoming increasingly threadbare, and his author might want to "set him aside, to get him off the desk forever" (331). Bech's dread of the Shoah is thus revealed as the protagonist's fear of becoming disposable, and, given Bech's double role, of turning into "an anachronism, a writer living in a thin cultural moment" (Pinsker 105) bound to be annihilated by history. In "Bech in Czech," history has, given the milieu, an ethnic dimension, but Bech's fears are of a more universal nature. Even though "Updike directly links his protagonist's sense of being, or the lack thereof, to his Jewish ancestral past" (Royal 44), the story dramatizes the dilemmas that run through the whole Bech saga and, as such, are related to Updike's principal concern: Bech as a writer who happens to be a Jew, and not the other way round.

From the imagological perspective, Updike's representation of Prague is, particularly at the end of the story, lugubrious, with the city portrayed as alien and oppressive. Bech finds no Jewish spirit in Prague, for the city, like the rest of postwar Europe, is inhabited by ghosts who keep reminding Bech of his own mortality. Thus, since Prague has been turned into a void, there seems to be no material for Bech/Updike to mine. Then again, Bech has few Jewish stories of his own, and for Updike there is no personal "useful fiction" (Roth, *Reading* 92) to speak of. In this sense, Prague's palimpsestic text, with its "historical fullness," only serves to entangle Bech even further in the web of his fears and complexes.

At the same time, the city, with its historical and political burdens, provides a narrative space for Updike to voice his stance on the various antitheses that animate "Bech in Czech": America vs. Europe, American literature vs. Eastern European literature, and the situation of the American writer as opposed to that of his Eastern European counterpart. Several such glimpses of Updike can be caught throughout the Bech stories, with Updike's voice usurping Bech's persona, but in "Bech in Czech" they are particularly vibrant when the abovementioned questions are brought to the fore. As much as Updike makes his character suffer from bad conscience of writing inconsequential works, the story bears out his well-known refusal "to compromise the significance of his own carefully wrought works" and American fiction as such (Miller 129). In other words, Updike is hardly apologetic about his home turf: he fosters respect for the (literary) other but never at the cost of devaluating oneself.

As for Zuckerman, Prague resonates with him in ways that go beyond the city's traumatic memory of the Holocaust. Unlike Bech, for whom Prague is an oppressive space haunted by Jewish presence-in-absence, Zuckerman apprehends it as familiar, much like his creator did when he first arrived there. If one of the major themes of *Zuckerman Bound* is "the artist's need to be nurtured by his own culture" (Cooper 206), then the city provides Roth with a potent "source of usable myth" (Shechner 102). The streets of Prague remind him of "those neighborhoods in Austro-Hungarian Lemberg and Czarist Kiev" where his Jewish family lived at the beginning of the twentieth century (Roth, "In Search"). The novella explores this extraliterary connection to Prague. For Zuckerman, the experience of walking through Prague is equivalent to a metaphorical return to his Newark childhood, where he would dutifully solicit money for the Jewish National Fund. In his private imaginative geography, nine-year-old Nathan would picture a city that "the Jews would buy when they accumulated enough money for a homeland" (62). The city would resemble Prague and, like Prague, would be abuzz with stories and jokes because beneath any ordeal, "a joke is always lurking somewhere" (63). The comic-mordant stories bind Zuckerman's/Roth's Pragues together, spawning a phantasmagoric city-text where the Poland of their ancestors and “the Jewish Atlantis of an American childhood dream” are superimposed upon contemporary Prague (64). In likening the Jewish Prague, made of ruined cobblestone streets and narratives woven “out of exertions of survival” (63), to the dissident Prague driven by the tragicomic stories of Bolotka, Sisovsky, and Olga, Roth maps a transatlantic cultural space in which Europe is merged with America, Prague with Newark. It is indeed the culmination of Roth’s “long odyssey from Newark to Prague” (Wirth-Nesher 31)—the inscription and consolidation of his Jewish American culture into a European literary tradition that not only includes Kafka, but also Schulz, Kundera, Klíma, Gombrowicz, and others featured in the Penguin series edited by Roth.

Milan Kundera said that while Roth came to Prague looking for Kafka, what he found was “Kafka forbidden in a country whose culture had been massacred by the Russian occupation” (160). In Claudia Roth Pierpont’s words, “here, as far from Newark as Roth could get, he found another living moral subject, complete with historical weight, threats of exposure, and difficult claims of loyalty” (88). Scholars agree as to Prague’s transformative potential for Roth’s literary career: Mark Shechner speaks of “a Europeanization of outlook and deepening of his fascination with the intractable, the perverse, and the unattainable,” (97), while Hana Wirth-Nesher sees Roth’s movement from Newark to Prague as a turning point not only for Roth, but also for Jewish American fiction, marking “the passage from a literature of immigration and assimilation into a literature of retrieval, of the desire to be part of a Jewish literary legacy” (31).

The word “passage” seems to be crucial here, and I would like to qualify it further by preceding it with “rite of.” If Roth’s literary path were perceived in terms of a rite of passage, then his engagement with Prague served as a *liminal* stage within it, a laboratory of his creative energies which generated *The Prague Orgy,* the work which Harold Bloom proclaimed in 1985 “the best of Roth, a kind of coda to all his fiction so far.” Indeed, Roth’s on and off travels to Prague stimulated his writing in addition to providing a hands-on knowledge on the dangerous liaisons between literature and politics. Simultaneously, they opened up a gateway to a rich literary universe of the region, which brought about the Penguin series—a palpable proof of Roth’s interest in the literature of the Other Europe—not just because of its political dimension but rather due to its literary quality. On a more personal level, Prague provided something of a missing link between the author and his Old-World Jewish heritage. Thus, extending the liminal metaphor a bit further, Roth’s Eastern European rite of passage brought about creative renewal and new maturity, acting as "the catalyst for the direction that Roth's career would next take" (Gooblar 61).[6]

What about Zuckerman, though? The text of the novella seems to warrant the "liminal" reading I have applied to Roth's engagement with the Other Europe. At one point, Zuckerman starts to question his motives in rescuing the manuscripts by drawing a parallel between his quest and a spiritual journey of a hero who, in completing a mission, hopes to achieve some kind of transcendence. The parable rings true for Zuckerman, who views the mission as more than an altruistic deed committed for the sake of world literature. Instead, it offers him the possibility of achieving, if not transcendence, then at least redemption in the eyes of his community by "contribut[ing] to the saving of the Jewish narrative patrimony, the only fatherland left" (Versluys 319).

Suffice it to say that, unlike Roth's, Zuckerman's travails in Prague result in disaster. At the center of *The Prague Orgy* lies the question "what if?" What if I were to live like the dissidents of Prague? What if I were to rescue a potentially great Jewish writer from eternal oblivion? Roth allows Zuckerman to toy with the possibilities raised by these questions, yet, ultimately, he denies him what he is most looking for: the transcending of the narrative he is locked in. Zuckerman does not rescue the manuscripts—the moment he takes hold of them, they are confiscated by the secret police, whereas Novak, the communist Minister of Culture, escorts the novelist to the airport. The apparatchik's lecture on the benefits of social and political conformism is the ultimate undoing of Zuckerman's Prague fantasy. Together with the likes of Bolotka and Olga, Zuckerman is relegated to the position of the dregs of society: alienated neurotics and egomaniacs incapable of providing "moral leadership" as a writer is supposed to. There is some cruel irony to Novak's propaganda, for Zuckerman's mission in Prague consists precisely in compensating *moral* losses he incurred with his fiction by performing an act of ultimate atonement. This, however, cannot happen because of the "inescapability of history" that "prohibits action innocent of the past" (Shostak 234), both collective and personal. Like Joseph K. and K. before him, Zuckerman finds himself swallowed by a system larger than himself, unable to rewrite history and his place in it, for "one's story isn't a skin to be shed —it's inescapable, one's body and blood" (84). In a manner similar to Bech, at the end of his Prague adventure, Zuckerman remains encased in his text, which is also central to *Zuckerman Bound*: the story of a recalcitrant Jewish son and writer who "is neither at home in his art, nor at home, nor in the world where his art and his actions are misunderstood" (Novak 70).

CONCLUSIONS

It would not be an exaggeration to say that *The Prague Orgy* and "Bech in Czech" capture something of the era's *zeitgeist* by attesting to and problematizing Western intellectual interest and preconceptions about the Other Europe, as well as reflecting on the responsibilities of the writer and literature against the backdrop of the Cold War. As shown in this essay, Roth and Updike converge in their refusal to endorse Steiner's preference for politically minded literature over inconsequential fiction, fostering instead a conception of literature that responds to the circumstances under which it is created. That said, their respective engagements with Prague and the literary images they construct as a result are revealed to have different centers of "gravity," which, in turn, bespeak each author's particular concerns and interests.

In subjecting Bech to feelings of remorse for producing insubstantial American fiction, as opposed to dissident literature, Updike exposes the arbitrariness of favoring one culture over another without regard to the circumstances under which it develops. Regarding the latter, "Bech in Czech" also attests to Updike's confidence in America's superiority, not just as a place to live but also to write. Like "Bech in Rumania," this story too offers an implicit commendation of American literature in addition to Updike's gentle admonition against "romanticiz[ing] literary bravery at the expense of undervaluing American literature" (Miller 129).

Roth problematizes Steiner's dichotomy by confounding Zuckerman's expectations as to what *really* takes place in Prague. The stories that sustain Zuckerman's quest into the heart of Europe turn out to be either fabrications or appropriations, whereas the people he meets there elude clear-cut categorizations into dissidents and apparatchiks, the noble and the base.

By representing the city through diverse personal narratives, Roth complicates Zuckerman's, and thus the Western reader's, vision of the Other Europe, while at the same time exposing the absurdities of the system where "[t]he menial work is done by the writers and the teachers and the construction engineers" (*Prague* 60-61). The latter, however, does not serve, as is the case with "Bech in Czech," to imply the advantage of the West over the East, but rather to foreground the pointlessness of setting one culture against another. Zuckerman may momentarily trade places with Sisovsky and fantasize about sweeping floors in Prague, but, ultimately, his is a different world and a different story to tell, no matter how much more trivial and inconsequential it is than Sisovsky's.

In addition to exploring the uneasy relationship between politics and art, both works dramatize Prague as a Jewish city, which catalyzes the characters' introspection. In the case of Bech, Prague's Jewish imprint is distilled into Jewish presence-in-absence, symbolized by the void left in the city by its Jewish population murdered in the Holocaust. Thus, the Shoah becomes the main signifier or the lens through which Prague is apprehended by Bech. The character's response to the memory of the Holocaust is marked by his fear of annihilation, which Updike "thins out" by equating it with the fear that is omnipresent in Bech's stories: that of a writer afraid of not living up to the expectations of readers and critics alike, and thus of becoming superfluous.

The relationship between the writer and his identity dramatized in *The Prague Orgy* is more nuanced since Roth replicates there his original experience of arriving in Prague and finding it to be familiar in some uncanny, metaphysical way. Prague is mythologized as a quintessential Jewish city whose dilapidated exterior conceals the wealth of stories pulsating below the shabby surface, blending its "narrative" Jewishness with the tales spun by the storytellers of the present-day. In this sense, *The Prague Orgy* is "an obscene, elegiac homage to a lost culture" (Brauner 43), but also to the contemporary culture of Prague in all its polyphonic vividness.

For all the differences in tenor and mode, both *The Prague Orgy* and "Bech in Czech" testify to Prague as a "transhistorical and supratemporal phenomenon" (Thomas 3), where past and present, and history and imagination overlap. By turning Prague into the setting of their works and the backdrop against which their characters' actions take place, Roth and Updike incorporate the city into their respective bodies of work, and, in the case of Roth, also his life. In both works, Prague functions as a transnational space of reflection, allowing the authors to juxtapose their American authors with their Eastern European counterparts and inquire into their respective conditions. However, inasmuch as Roth and Updike integrated Prague into their literary territories, they also inscribed their protagonists onto the city-text of Prague, whose pages house some of the most memorable characters in world literature: from Kafka's Joseph K. to Milan Kundera's Tomáš and Tereza.

NOTES

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2. All subsequent quotations from the Bech short stories come from the Penguin edition, *The Complete Henry Bech* (2006).

3. Imagology, which emerged as a specialism of comparative literary studies in the mid-twentieth century, analyzes the processes of representing other nations and peoples through literature and, increasingly, other media.

4. Despite its political overtones and a complex imagological charge, including the quality of marginality, I have chosen to use the term "Eastern Europe" over a more neutral and geographically accurate "East Central Europe." This is due to the fact that the former term used to be (and still is) the designation of choice in the US during the Cold War and beyond.

5. For a discussion of Philip Roth as a political activist and a reluctant public intellectual, see Brühwiler and Trepanier.

6. For a very recent discussion of the generative impact of Roth's involvement with Eastern Europe on the narrative strategy in *The Prague Orgy* and Roth's later fiction, specifically, *American Pastoral* (1997), see Knowles.

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