

## UNDERSTANDING THE OTHER EUROPE: PHILIP ROTH'S WRITINGS ON PRAGUE<sup>1</sup>

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### **KEYWORDS**

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### **PALABRAS CLAVES**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The aim of this essay is to explore the representation and significance of post-war Prague in the works of one of the finest contemporary American authors, Philip Roth. Kafka's hometown is the locale of *The Prague Orgy* (1985) and one of David Kepesh's stops on his summer tour of Europe in *The Professor of Desire* (1977). It also features prominently in the interviews and conversations conducted with and by Roth at the time when the Iron Curtain still separated Eastern Europe from the rest of the world. This essay analyzes Roth's take on the complex Czechoslovak reality and discusses how the writer's travels to Prague and his friendship with dissident authors shaped his views on the nature of literature and the position of the writer in society. The author also argues that through his writing Roth challenges certain Western stereotypes about cultural life under communism.

### **RESUMEN**

El objetivo de este trabajo es explorar la representación y el significado de la Praga de la posguerra en la obra de uno de los más destacados autores norteamericanos contemporáneos, Philip Roth. La ciudad natal de Kafka es la localidad de *The Prague Orgy* (1985) y una de las paradas de David Kepesh en sus viajes por Europa en *The Professor of Desire* (1977). También ocupa un lugar destacado en las entrevistas y

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conversaciones realizadas por Roth en la época en la cual el Telón de Acero todavía separaba la Europa del Este del resto del mundo. Este ensayo analiza la perspectiva de Roth sobre la compleja realidad checoslovaca y estudia cómo los viajes del escritor a Praga y la amistad con los autores disidentes influyeron en su concepción sobre la posición e importancia del escritor y de la literatura en la sociedad. La autora argumenta que Roth, a través de sus escritos, desafía ciertos estereotipos occidentales sobre la vida cultural bajo el comunismo.

When one of Philip Roth's Czech friends was asked by the secret police what the writer was looking for in Prague, he answered ironically: "Haven't you read his books? He comes for the girls"<sup>2</sup> (Gray 4). In *Deception* (1990), Philip, an American author, says that he goes to communist Czechoslovakia "for the jokes" (Roth 142). In fact, Philip Roth first went to Prague searching for traces of Franz Kafka (Roth, "In Search" 6). Roth's Czechoslovak experience had a considerable influence on his personal and creative life. The visits resulted in literary inspirations most visible in *The Prague Orgy* (1985) and *The Professor of Desire* (1977), as well as long-lasting friendships with some of the proscribed writers. Roth's profound interest in the literature of post-war Eastern Europe<sup>3</sup> materialized in the project of introducing the American audience to the works of the best authors of the region. Roth became the chief editor of a Penguin series meaningfully entitled "Writers from the Other Europe," containing nineteen books by the leading writers of Poland, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, etc. This singular contribution earned him a comparison to Max Brod, Franz Kafka's friend and biographer responsible for making his literary oeuvre known posthumously to the general public (Koy 180). Recently, Roth has received the PEN/Allen Foundation Literary Service Award in recognition not only of his works but also of his advocacy for writers from Czechoslovakia and other countries of the Eastern Bloc. This essay studies Roth's representation of communist Prague in *The Prague Orgy* and *The Professor of Desire*, as well as his views on the significance of writer and literature in the post-war era in the United States and in Eastern Europe. The author argues that Roth's understanding of the Czechoslovak cultural landscape transcends stereotypes perpetuated by some Western intellectuals, and does justice to its complexity. Unconvinced by the romanticized vision of Eastern European writers suffering in the name of literature, Roth took the time and effort to penetrate the outer shell of

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<sup>2</sup> In his speech on receiving the PEN/Allen Foundation Literary Service Award (April 30, 2013), Philip Roth said that it was his friend, the writer Ivan Klíma, who was questioned by the police regarding Roth's visits in Prague. In 1977 Roth had been denied a visa to Czechoslovakia and did not return to Prague until 1989.

<sup>3</sup> Even though nowadays the term *Eastern Europe* is often considered geographically incorrect and even derogatory, I have chosen it for the sake of its political undertones. During the Cold War, it was used in the West with reference to countries which, like Czechoslovakia, remained under the Soviet Union's sphere of influence.

general impressions and explore the country's cultural reality in depth, without succumbing to clichés and “common truths” about life behind the Iron Curtain. In particular, the author addresses Roth's polemic with George Steiner on the subject of the role of writer and literature in society, which so far has received little scholarly attention. The essay examines also the connection between Roth's fiction, the figure of Franz Kafka and the communist era. Philip Roth is commonly regarded as an acute observer of contemporary American society. By focusing on the transatlantic connection in his life and fiction, the author hopes to demonstrate that Roth remains his usual perspicacious self even far from his home ground.

The protagonists of both works travel to communist Czechoslovakia with a sense of mission. In *The Prague Orgy*, an American novelist, Nathan Zuckerman goes there in order to recover the manuscripts of an unpublished Jewish author who perished in the Holocaust, the father of Zdenek Sisovsky, a banned Czech writer living in New York. During his stay in Prague, Zuckerman trades places with Sisovsky and learns what his life would be like if he were a writer in communist Czechoslovakia rather than in the United States of America. *The Professor of Desire* features David Kepesh, a literature professor, who visits the Czech capital with his current girlfriend, Claire Ovington. Travelling to Prague, Kepesh hopes to have overcome his recent predicament—impotence—which in the novel is symbolized by Franz Kafka's works about individuals struggling against invisible enemies. The Czech writer who had been famously fearful of marriage represents also Kepesh's commitment phobia. Thus, Kepesh's ultimate mission in Prague is to confront Kafka's ghost and get *de-Kafkafied*, in other words, come to terms with his obsessions.

Roth came to Prague looking for Kafka, but what he found was, to cite Kundera, “Kafka forbidden in a country whose culture had been massacred by the Russian occupation” (“Some” 160). Like many other Western intellectuals, Roth must have been fascinated by the political dimension of cultural life in Czechoslovakia. The *Other Europe* was for them a place “where people care, passionately, about ideas [...] where intellectuals matter” (Garton Ash 105). Here culture seemed to be a mighty weapon in the war against the system, while intellectuals were raised to the level of heroes. One Czech writer compared the impact and popularity of writers and literature in the sixties to that of a national hockey team or rock singers (Holý 115). Indeed, the role that writers and intellectuals played in the famous Prague Spring reform movement cannot be overestimated. Since the 1960s the Czechoslovak Union of Writers pushed for greater freedom and relaxation of censorship “helping to generate a tremendous expansion of cultural life, the likes of which had not been seen since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century” (Falk 66). New self-reflexive literature emerged, there was an increase in independent theatrical productions (among them Havel's famous “theatre of the absurd”) as well as development of innovative musical currents and Czech “new wave” cinema. The process reached its climax in 1967 at the Fourth Congress of the Czechoslovak Union of Writers, which is regarded as the

turning point in the Prague Spring. The event served as a forum for writers like Havel, Kundera and Klíma who openly voiced criticism of the political system and its detrimental social and cultural policy. Historians agree that the writers' opposition inspired the reform movement, and gave it moral justification (Beneš 106; Falk 67). Nevertheless, it must be remembered that the literati could not have played that role if they had not "largely funneled their energies toward working with and then reforming the regime" (Falk 67). Many of them were socialists and believed that the system could be reformed and improved from within; in a word, they were still fighting for socialism but one "with a human face."

The unprecedented liberalization of social, political and cultural life was brought to an abrupt end on August 20, 1968 when Warsaw Pact tanks entered Czechoslovakia and within thirty-six hours occupied the whole country. The invasion initiated a period of hardline communism, rather ironically called "normalization." Roth's visits to the Czech capital coincided with the "grotesque abnormality of normalization" (Garton Ash 212). Power was returned to the communist old guard and reforms were annulled. Censorship was reinstated, and the authorities made every effort to nip any liberal-minded initiatives in the bud. About two thirds of Writers' Union members lost their jobs, nine hundred university teachers were fired, twenty-one academic institutions were closed, and no literary journals were thenceforth published (Falk 83). Thousands of people emigrated and were forbidden to return. Among them was Milan Kundera, who in 1975 moved to France.

In Prague, Roth was confronted with a dismal cultural reality and a nation that had sunk into apathy. In this journey of discovery, he was accompanied by the writer Ivan Klíma, who became his "principal reality instructor" (Roth, *Shop* 44). Klíma would take him to street kiosks, public buildings, and construction sites where Czech writers and intellectuals were doing menial jobs. They had been dismissed from their posts, and their works, as was the case with Klíma, had been banned as a consequence of their involvement in the Prague Spring. In fact, Klíma's novel, *Love and Garbage* (1986) tells the story of one such proscribed writer-turned-street-sweeper. The book is based on the author's life; he was blacklisted and prevented from working except in low-status jobs. *Love and Garbage* faithfully reflects the predicament of Czech writers at that time. The protagonist has been socially degraded and his connections with the outside world have been severed: his phone has been disconnected and his passport removed. He is surrounded by people who speak in *Jerkish*, the language invented to communicate with chimpanzees, which in the novel symbolizes the distorted, packed with lies communist propaganda, daily fed to the mass media.

In a world filled with Jerkish, relief can be found only in literature. The narrator of Klíma's book looks for it in Kafka's fiction. The novel is interspersed with his reflections on Kafka's life and writing. Also Soska, a degraded university teacher from *The Professor of Desire*, finds solace in books. When Kepesh, baffled by the

Czech's composure and impeccable appearance, asks Soska what gets him through each day of his bleak Prague existence, he smiles and says: "Kafka, of course" (169). But by that he does not mean only Kafka's novels, but rather the entire universe created by the Czech writer; the absurd, bureaucracy-ridden world where one is bound to lose against a larger-than-life enemy, be it the court, the castle, or the communist system. In *The Professor of Desire*, the nightmarish world devised by Kafka becomes a metaphor for communist reality and a handy shortcut to talk about it. "Many of us survive almost solely on Kafka," confides Soska to his American peer, "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'" (169). The symbolic meaning of Kafka is reinforced by the fact that in the communist era his works were removed from bookstores, libraries and universities throughout Czechoslovakia. According to Klíma, the communist regime sought to silence Kafka because of his honesty: "A regime that is built on deception, that asks people to pretend, [...] a regime afraid of anyone who asks about the sense of his action, cannot allow anyone whose veracity attained such fascinating or even terrifying completeness to speak to the people" (Roth, *Shop* 66). In Roth's novel, Soska and Kepesh are scholars of Kafka, and as Kundera observed, to both professors Kafka speaks of impotence; the inability to exert control. For Kepesh it is sexual powerlessness, whereas for Soska political impotence. "These two interpretations do not contradict each other," says Kundera, but are "complementary, marking two opposing faces of man's essential impotence" ("Some" 160-161). Therefore, Kafka and his oeuvre provide a nexus between two seemingly opposite worlds. "To each obstructed citizen, his own Kafka" says Soska to Kepesh (173) pointing to the universal nature of Kafka's works and literature in general—the reasons which brought Roth to Prague in the first place.

But besides the world of harsh restrictions, Kafkaesque bureaucracy and political impotence, there existed also a world which Timothy Garton Ash compared to a lake permanently covered with a thick layer of ice, where apparently nothing moves but actually much goes on under the surface (57). Dissident writers and intellectuals strived against the regime of forgetting, as Kundera called it, by creating a parallel world of culture, independent of the system and the official channels of communication controlled by the communist establishment. I am referring here to clandestine literature known as *samizdat* publishing. The term denotes a laborious process of typing and then printing out manuscripts in editions of ten to twenty copies. This form of publishing constituted an integral part of the underground artistic movement aimed at undermining the regime; the so-called Czechoslovak "second culture" (Renner 129). Soon more and more readers wanted to get hold of the dissident literature, and samizdat grew in strength and importance. The secret police tried to suppress it but, as Klíma observed, it "started to resemble [...] the many-headed dragon in the fairy tale, or a plague. Samizdat was unconquerable" (Roth, *Shop* 52). Equally important were the efforts made by Czechs abroad.

Samizdat works were smuggled out of Czechoslovakia and then published officially in the West, often by publishing houses owned by Czech émigrés—a phenomenon that bears the name of *tamizdat* (Benatov 109).

The role which writers and intellectuals played in communist Czechoslovakia goes far beyond Philip Roth's experience of being a writer in the United States of America. When Hermione Lee asked him how he influenced the culture as a novelist, his matter-of-fact answer was: "Not at all" (Roth, *Reading* 144). Roth claims that in America, where culture is no threat to the system, the task of a writer is to give people something to read, *not* influence politics (145). He poignantly portrays the chasm between writers in the U.S. and Czechoslovakia of the time in *The Prague Orgy*. During his stay in Prague, Zuckerman is faced with an absurd but at the same time frighteningly real upside-down world where "The menial work is done by the writers and the teachers and the construction engineers, and the construction is run by the drunks and the crooks" (60-61). However, Roth is not merely recreating what he saw during his journey of discovery. He goes a step further and proposes to play what Timothy Garton Ash termed the "if game" (148). Zuckerman imagines himself and some of the best American authors stepping into the shoes of the blacklisted writers and living Prague-like counterlives in New York City. In this extravagant daydream, William Styron washes glasses in a bar, Susan Sontag wraps up buns, while Nathan Zuckerman himself becomes a floor sweeper. However, the question "what if?" remains, and the reader is invited to imagine what he/she would do in similar circumstances: cooperate with the state and thus continue publishing officially, or rather swallow one's pride and become a road sweeper.

Notwithstanding Roth's personal and literary interest in the plight of the proscribed Eastern European authors, he remained wary of the idea of the *muse of censorship*, which should be interpreted as a belief that only those oppressed by the system are capable of creating worthy and relevant literature, as opposed to allegedly trivial fiction produced by writers in countries where "everything goes and nothing matters," like America (Roth, *Reading* 145). Says Roth: "It always seemed to me that there was a certain amount of loose talk in the West about 'the muse of censorship' behind the Iron Curtain [...] there were even writers who envied the terrible pressure [...] and the clarity of the mission this burden fostered" (*Shop* 53). Roth might be referring to intellectuals like George Steiner, an eminent literary critic, guilty of celebrating the creative power of communism and denouncing Western literature as inconsequential (*Reading* 145). Indeed, Steiner's 1981 essay "The Archives of Eden" is built on the premise that America produced little that can stand up to the artistic achievements of Europe, and Eastern Europe in particular:

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 (299-300).

Steiner suggests here that the quality of literature depends mostly on the circumstances under which it is produced. Thus, *real* literature is created where *real* life is and that in Steiner's language means persecuted and crushed by the totalitarian regime rather than free-wheeling, that is, trivial and meaningless. "To arrest [a man] in Prague today because he is giving a seminar on Kant," says Steiner, "is to gauge accurately the status of great literature and philosophy." And he adds rhetorically: "What text [...] could strike the edifice of American politics? What act of abstract thought really matters at all? Who *cares*?" (303). In the critic's view, American literature is politically insignificant, and cannot stand the comparison with the works from behind the Iron Curtain, whose authors had to risk their lives for, what he calls, "the obsession that is truth" (303).

Roth mocks this black-and-white dichotomy in *The Prague Orgy*. Bolotka, Zuckerman's Virgil in Prague and a fictional version of Klíma, tries on Zuckerman's expensive tweed suit to at least for a moment feel like a rich American writer. Meanwhile, a Czech student wants to discuss with the writer a paper entitled tellingly: "The Luxury of Self-Analysis As It Relates to American Economic Conditions" (51). However, the critic's stance is probably most poignantly ridiculed when the communist culture minister lectures Zuckerman that Czechoslovakia "is not the United States of America where every freakish thought is a fit subject for writing, where there is no such thing as propriety, decorum, or shame" (81).

Roth admits that dealing with trivial subjects is a fact of life for American writers, but refuses to condemn American fiction as *trivial* just because it does not display the same thematic seriousness as the literature from behind the Iron Curtain: "To 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," he assures (*Reading* 145). He also questions Steiner's definition of a writer as a martyr to truth ready to pay even the highest price to make his voice heard. Here is his ironic reaction to the critic's words: "I wonder [...] 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?" (146). Roth insists that the totalitarian system does not produce great works of art, but damages the authors both physically and spiritually, especially if it prevails as long as it does in Czechoslovakia. Actual Czech writers seem to share his stance. Klíma admits that physical work may provide thought-provoking experience and inspiration for a writer; however, if it lasts too long it affects one's personality, exhausts their creative powers and breaks them down (*Shop* 54). Others, like Ludvík Vaculík, a novelist and editor of the first samizdat publishing, or Miroslav Holub, a poet and immunologist, object to the way Western readers judge Czech literature not by its quality, but the biographies of the

dissident authors (*Reading* 239). Behind such an attitude to banned writing there is an underlying assumption that all censored literature is good literature, and vice versa; absolutely no officially published work can be worthwhile—a view which is as idealistic as it is reductionist. Suffice to mention the case of Bohumil Hrabal who after expressing a degree of loyalty towards the regime was allowed to have some of his works published by the state, albeit with serious corrections. Curiously, most Czech writers did not condemn Hrabal's self-criticism, claiming that an author should be judged mainly on the literary value of his/her work (Holý 144). Steiner's anti-hero in *The Professor of Desire* is professor Soska, who instead of creating a literary masterpiece winds up in hospital with bleeding ulcers; a dire consequence of his involvement in the intellectual opposition and all the stress and pressure it has had on him. There is hardly anything heroic or enviable about Soska when he hastily says his farewells to Kepesh and Claire and rushes down the underground stairs to mislead the secret police spying on him. Instead of a Mandelstam-like oppositionist, Roth portrays somebody who has been denied personal freedom and stripped of dignity and privacy, quite unlike David Kepesh who thinks of himself as "safe and inviolable, [...] with the passport in my jacket and the young woman at my side" (Roth, *Professor* 174). However, even if professor Soska fails to live up to some Western standards of what an Eastern European writer should be like, he still represents unrelenting, if much less spectacular, spirit and a belief in the power of literature. Unable to publish and exhausted by struggling against the system, he devotes himself to translation; an activity often taken up by those Czech writers who could not or did not wish to publish officially (Holý 62). The work he chooses is an American masterpiece: Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851), in which Soska finds energy, will and rage that he wishes to translate into Czech. His decision to translate rather than write may be regarded as futile and inconsequential, but it should be remembered that translation has always been an important part of Czech literature propelling cultural development and sometimes even helping to subvert the status quo—as when the famous Shakespearean quotation "there is something rotten in the state of Denmark" was rendered as "there is something rotten in this country," in a clear reference to political situation in communist Czechoslovakia (Holý 61). Therefore, translating *Moby-Dick* may be read as an act of courage and faith in literature's influence on people's minds. The choice of novel is also significant. For Soska, Melville's work and American society at large are infused with qualities which are lacking in his home country and which the translator would like to inject into Czechoslovak society. American literature is thus endowed with political significance and potential to boost the stagnant cultural reality.

In *The Prague Orgy*, Roth continues to challenge the discourse of heroic suffering for great art. Nathan's first destination in the Other Europe is not a meeting of samizdat writers, but a fully-fledged orgy. Zuckerman, who is hardly a paragon of virtue himself, seems to be quite shocked by the whole affair. However, what disturbs him most are not the bizarre sexual practices he witnesses, but the fact that

it is the oppressed authors that indulge in them. The scandalous author of *Carnovsky* feels uneasy because what he sees clearly goes against his preconception of the Prague writers as silenced and humiliated: "They, silenced, are all mouth. I am only ears" (37), he says incredulously. Zuckerman falls victim to what Joseph Benatov terms the "pervasive tamizdat mentality," i.e. Western conceptualization of Eastern Europe as a land of perpetual suffering and oppression (121). According to Benatov, in *The Prague Orgy* Roth resists this one-sided perspective and gives voice to different personal narratives. Bolotka, for instance, accepts his fate and adapts to the new situation. When Zuckerman seems deeply upset at the sight of the Czech's "dank room at the top of a bleak stair well," Bolotka reassures him that he shouldn't feel too bad about it, as the place "was his hideaway from his wife long before his theatre was disbanded" (39). Unlike émigré Sisovsky who perpetuates tamizdat narrative with his stories about communist oppression, his girlfriend Eva Kalinova refuses to be defined solely by her Czech background: "I do not care to be an ironical Czech character in an ironical Czech story" (12), she says. In fact, it is Sisovsky's urge to sensationalize her life for the sake of Westerners like Zuckerman that prevents Eva from starting a new life away from Czechoslovakia.

A variety of vantage points shown in both novels reflect the Czechoslovak reality and Roth's personal relationship with the proscribed writers. As mentioned earlier in this essay, many native intellectuals were initially party members who idealistically believed in socialism. As a matter of fact, the Prague Spring reform movement sprang from within the party, and was aimed at transforming the existent system into a more humane, pro-citizen "socialism with a human face." Roth himself befriended authors who pursued extremely different personal and professional paths: Kundera chose the life of an émigré writer in France (he was later criticized by his compatriots for writing with a Western reader in mind), whereas Klíma decided to stay on in occupied Prague.

In both works, Roth offers a complex, multi-layered image of the Czech capital in the grip of the regime. By sending his protagonists to Prague, he juxtaposes the position of an intellectual in a democratic society and under communism. However, Roth is far from glorifying "the muse of censorship" and castigating his heroes for being American. Instead, he exposes the damage the regime inflicts on his characters' private and professional lives. At the same time, he makes sure to avoid sensationalizing communism and idealizing the dissident intellectuals instead. Bolotka "pours some cold water" on Zuckerman's "free-world fantasies" (*Prague* 26) when he plays down the secret police by comparing them to literary critics: "of what little they see, they get most wrong anyway," he contends (65). In a similar vein, Olga, Sisovsky's ex-wife and the guardian of his father's manuscripts, urges Zuckerman to shed his sentimentality and idealism and see through Sisovsky's intentions. As it turns out, the émigré writer, whose sad fate has won Zuckerman's heart, has lied to him about his father's tragic death in order to recover and then appropriate his short stories.

Those who, like Steiner, wished to see Eastern European dissidents as unwavering heroes struggling for great literature might have found Roth's representation of Prague somewhat inconvenient, even problematic. Indeed, his Czech characters do not quite fit into George Steiner's mould of what a "real" writer should be like, but this, I would say, makes them only more authentic. As this essay has, hopefully, demonstrated, despite Roth's appreciation and even fascination with banned writers and their unique political role, the author did not succumb to clichéd and reductionist division of literature into "serious" and "trivial." Roth's aversion to simplistic categories is reflected in his depiction of Prague as puzzling and marked by contradictions. As much as the city is captivating, it is also intangible and leaks through the fingers of those who, like Zuckerman, try to pin it down and judge according to narrow, ready-made standards. Nevertheless, Roth manages to capture and convincingly represent some of its many shades. Furthermore, I would argue that through his writing Roth pays tribute to literature from the Other Europe. In *The Prague Orgy*, an attentive reader may find echoes of works and biographies of Czech writers like Kafka, Klíma, Kundera, Hrabal, or the Polish Jewish author Bruno Schulz. In this polyphonic novella, a mosaic of situations is used rather than traditional modes of narration, while different, often contradictory, voices are brought to the fore. Interestingly, similar qualities are the trademark of Milan Kundera's fiction. In a spirit akin to Bohumil Hrabal's works, dialogues and events are often tragic-comic, absurd, and divorced from reality. Roth weaves the tragic history of the region and especially its Jewish population into contemporary communist reality; the story about Zdenek Sisovsky's father murdered during the World War II is in fact that of Bruno Schulz who died at the hands of a Nazi officer in 1942. Schulz's excellent works, *The Street of Crocodiles* (1934) and *Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass* (1937) form part of the "Writers from the Other Europe" series edited by Roth for Penguin. Even though the Czech capital plays less prominent role in *The Professor of Desire*, which is predominantly a study of David Kepesh's narcissist obsessions, the spirit of Kafka looms heavily over Kepesh's sojourn in Czechoslovakia, especially in the final, surrealist dream in which the American scholar conjures up a meeting with Kafka's aged prostitute. The way Roth depicts Prague in both works brings to mind Sabina's paintings in Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. On the surface, they show one thing, but underneath lurks something else, forcing the viewers to revise their first impressions of the artifact (60). In Roth's Prague, nothing is what it seems, and both Kepesh and Zuckerman have to verify their preconceptions of the place and themselves. As a result, their respective missions end in a fiasco. Zuckerman learns that he cannot play the free-world emissary and smuggle the forbidden manuscripts to the West when the police confiscate them and drive him to the airport as a "Zionist agent." After the encounter with Soska and a symbolic farewell to Kafka at his Prague grave, Kepesh is convinced that he has finally gotten rid of Kafkaesque demons and is ready to embark on a journey of domestic happiness on Claire's side. However,

for a man that obsessed with sensual pleasure, such a metamorphosis is hardly possible. Kepesh's disturbing dream shakes his intentions of living a blissful life of monogamy, and makes him realize that it will not be at all easy to get de-Kafkafied. Unlike Zuckerman's and Kepesh's, Roth's own mission did prove successful. He found inspiration for his fiction, befriended some of the proscribed authors, and introduced them to the American public. His Eastern European experience enriched his fiction and served as the "thoroughgoing education" about cultural life under communism (Italie). In his writings and reflections on Prague, Roth managed to strike a difficult balance between compassion and admiration for dissident writers, on the one hand, and genuine appreciation for their literary work irrespective of their complicated biographies, on the other. Finally, as though in defiance of George Steiner's views, Roth once again proved that a work of fiction does not have to be deprived of quality and authenticity just because it treats "non-serious" themes. As Roth's Czech friend, Ivan Klíma put it: "Literature doesn't have to scratch around for political realities or even worry about systems that come and go; it can transcend them and still answer questions that the system evokes in people" (Roth, *Shop* 67).

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