Between Paris and Moscow: Sexuality and Politics in Interwar Czech Poetry and Film

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Abstract

This essay seeks to place interwar Czech poetry and film in a comparative context by exploring its liminal location between and ambiguous debt to the French and Russian avant-garde movements of the time. It argues that in addition to embodying a political tension between Moscow as its ideological teacher and Paris as its teacher on art, the Czech avant-garde also bears witness to a concomitant crisis of sexual identity. Personifying the young Soviet state as virile and masculine and French modernist culture as female and feminine, the inability of the Czech Left to realize their political goal of transforming society into a socialist utopia is depicted in the personal terms of sexual ambiguity and erotic anguish. In the Proletarian phase of Czech poetry this incipient sense of crisis is expressed in terms of male impotence and sterility. Although in the Poetist phase of the mid 1920s the new-found confidence of the Czech avant-garde translates into the imagery of potent female sexuality, by the late 1920s a renewed sense of political crisis is expressed in terms of sexual loneliness and death, a process that reaches its most acute and poignant expression in the melancholy depiction of Prague in Nezval's poems 'Edison' and *Prague with Fingers of Rain*.

In memoriam Karel Brušák (1913-2004).

According to standard accounts of modern Czech culture, the devastation caused by World War I (1914-18) brought an end to the decadent depoliticization of literature. Literature now became a vehicle of protest and satire aimed against the conservative forces that had brought the conflict into being in the first place. In France Henri Barbusse, in Germany Erich Maria Remarque, and in England Siegfried Sassoon directed their moral fury at those leaders and members of the European establishment who had allowed the devastation to take place; and poets like Wilfried Owen and Georg Trakl eulogized the loss of a whole generation. The inter-war generation of European writers and artists was deeply scarred by the spiritual and biological consequences of this massive loss of human life and was forced to confront the nightmarish question: could the human race destroy itself and cease to exist entirely? This fear had far-reaching implications for the male imaginary of modernism. The crisis of masculinity is characteristic of much modernist literature between the wars. Well-known examples are Virginia Woolf's novel *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), Fritz Lang's Weimar film *Metropolis* (1926), and Franz Kafka's story 'Brief an den Vater' ('Letter to the Father,' 1919).

After 1918 there was a notable shift to the Left by Czech politicians and writers. In part this was a reaction to the futility of the Great War and the utopian desire to forge a new, fairer society on the ruins of the old Habsburg Empire. The frustration of the younger generation with the failure of the new republic to cure all social ills also led many members of the intelligentsia to seek solutions to social ills like poverty and unemployment in radical, left-wing politics modelled on the example of Soviet Russia. The creation of the Czechoslovak Communist Party in 1921 was mirrored in the cultural sphere by the formation of new literary movements like the Brno Literary Group and the Prague-based Artistic Union Devětsil.[1] Devětsil was founded in Prague on October 5, 1920. It was the product of a number of student writers at the Café Union in Prague. Their first venture had been the journal *Orfeus* for which they cooperated with more established writers such as Josef Hora and Karel Čapek. After only three issues the journal petered out and the young writers decided to branch out on their own. The Literary Group was tepid in its political views, but the Devětsil group was convinced that Communism should determine the nature of Czechoslovak society. It drew its inspiration principally from writers such as Vladimir Mayakovsky, Demyan Bedny and Anatoly Lunacharsky in Soviet Russia and from the Dadaist movement in the West. Its main theorist was Karel Teige (1900-51). Both the Literary Group and Devětsil made a conscious break with the prewar trends in Czech poetry and art. Writers rejected the creed of the art-for-art's sake movement as exemplified by cosmopolitanist Otakar Theer and the political program of the right-wing nationalist Viktor Dyk. Like many of their contemporaries in Germany, France and Russia, they began to espouse a politically engaged view of art.

The principal representative of this new 'proletarian poetry' was the middle-class Moravian Jiří Wolker (1900-24). After his premature death from tuberculosis in 1924 the Proletarian movement in poetry lost momentum and fellow proletarian poets soon turned away from the narrow tendentiousness of their previous verse to embrace the exhiliration of poetism, founded by Karel Teige and Vítězslav Nezval in 1924.[2] If Wolker was the quintessential proletarian poet, Nezval was the bard of poetism with its consciously hedonistic cultivation of modern pleasures such as film, radio, and jazz. Rejecting the tendentiousness of Wolker's proletarian poetry, poetism was to emulate the intoxicating spirit of everyday life for its own sake as exemplified by Nezval's long poem 'The Wondrous Magician' (1922). Later Nezval was to turn to surrealism, inspired by the French surrealist movement. Yet, as we shall see, all three phases of the avant-garde were relatively brief, and ultimately yielded to the dominance of socialist realism by the later 1930s.

It would seem that the interwar development of Czech culture was characterized by a conscious break with prewar subjectivism and individualism in favor of engaged left-wing politics. That, at least, is the accepted wisdom. So Alfred French states in his book *The Poets of Prague*:

> Post-war political creeds put much emphasis upon the solidarity and discipline of the group, and in art the problem of the individual's relationship to the mass became an important motif. Whereas the artist of the 1890s had stressed his aloofness and shunned the vulgar herd, the writer of the twenties tended rather to identify himself with the crowd.[3]

A close analysis of Czech interwar culture, however, suggests that the opposition between personal and political constructions of identity can never be as straightforward and clear-cut as this statement suggests. Just as the decadent poets of the 1890s did not totally repudiate Czech national identity but reinvented it to reflect their inner, subjective world, so the avant-garde artists of the interwar period found it impossible to distinguish between their private and public selves. By offering an analysis of selected avant-garde poetry and cinema I shall argue that Czech culture of the interwar era reproduced a familiar tension between the personal and political dimensions of selfhood. The way this tension is played out in Czech poetry is as a sexualized and gendered struggle between the 'feminine' and 'masculine' polarities of identity. This struggle also assumes a cultural form, reflecting the Czech avant-garde's double allegiance to Moscow as its ideological teacher and Paris as its teacher on art.[4] Thus the revolutionary fervor of Soviet Russia is associated with masculinity while Paris is identified with femininity and female sexuality. In some ways the masculinization of art characteristic of the first phase of the Czech avant-garde- proletarian poetry- is reminiscent of high European modernism in general, for example, Ezra Pound and Wyndham Lewis's vorticism, with with its imagery of power and domination.[5] But as in Anglo-American modernism, contrary instances of male feminine identification can also be found in avant-garde Czech poetry, especially in its poetist and surrealist phases. That is not to say, however, that the male identification with the feminine is necessarily positive. Female imagery is often ambivalent and even at times downright misogynistic in interwar Czech poetry. Of course, this tendency was hardly peculiar to the Czech avant-garde. André Breton's surrealist novel *Nadja* (1928) is fraught with ambiguities in its characterisation of its eponymous heroine and of women in general. These kinds of ambivalencies, needless to say, say more about male than about female subjectivity. Underlying the political crisis of the Left is a prevailing crisis of masculinity; and this sense of crisis is reflected in the imagery of sterility and castration that permeates poems by all the Czech writers concerned, regardless of their affiliations and the way their work was subsequently categorised. If men are seen as sexually inadequate, women's sexuality is more often than not depicted as threatening, an emphasis that fully comes to the surface in the surrealist phase of the Czech avant-garde. Proceeding largely from the depths of subjectivity, such imagery serves to highlight the continuity rather than the differences between the three major phases of the Czech avant-garde (proletarian poetry, poetism, and surrealism).

A highly influential study which was at once symptomatic of the crisis of masculinity, and fuelled it in others, was Otto Weininger's controversial book *Geschlecht und Charakter: Eine prinzipielle Untersuchung* (*Sex and Character: An Investigation of Principles*, 1903).[6] This misogynistic and anti-semitic work by a young Viennese Jewish intellectual exemplified the crisis of masculinity and the perceived threat of (proto)-feminist activism in Central Europe. Thus the crisis of masculinity was hardly a novel phenomenon in European modernist culture; but it assumed a new and heightened form after the devastation of the Great War. The poets, photographers and filmmakers of the avant-garde were pulled in opposite directions at once: on the one hand, they were fascinated and attracted by the potential and excitement of modern technology**,** yet at the same time were anxious about its deleterious consequences for the future of humanity. While the Neue Sachlichkeit ('New Objectivity') movement in Weimar Germany, futurism in Italy, and constructivism in Russia celebrated the glories of the machine in terms of masculine power and strength, certain expressionist currents in interwar Germany explored the negative psychological effects of male sexual fears and fantasies: here Fritz Lang's classic film *Metropolis*, with its destructive vamp-machine and its neurotic male hero, is exemplary. Lang's film dramatizes a conflict between the utopian optimism of the New Objectivity movement and the bleak pessimism of expressionism. In its convoluted and at times incoherent filmic narrative**,** the modernist city becomes a psychological rather than a realistic space where these irreconcilable tensions are played out, culminating in the breakdown of the male protagonist. In this essay I shall be showing how in interwar Czech poetry and film Prague functions in a similar fashion to Lang's futuristic city as a site of unconscious male fears and fantasies. However, I shall be concerned less with the fears of technology in the Czech construction of masculinity (although that too will play a part) than the correlation between the crisis of masculinity and the crisis of the political Left. Fascinated by the recent revolution in Russia and disappointed by the failure of the new Czechoslovak state to create a fairer society, the poets and filmmakers of the Czech avant-garde represented their enthusiasm for Soviet Russia in terms of youthful energy and masculinity. But this cult of masculinity rapidly becomes subject to deep-seated anxieties and inadequacies, partly because most of the proletarian poets came from middle-class backgrounds and partly because the revolution simply did not materialize in Czechoslovakia. After the demise of proletarian poetry the negative preoccupation with masculinity yields to an increasing obsession with female eroticism and especially with woman's symbolic function as a commodity fetish. Thus in Nezval's surrealist poems of the 1930s Prague is personified as a woman and depicted as a place in which sex and capitalism become deeply implicated in each other. By this time Prague's other has become Paris, the capital of the surrealist movement and the supreme icon of modernity.

Proletarian Poetry

The group of Moravian writers who formed the Literary Group had a more equivocal attitude to Communism than Devětsil but were attracted to the ideal of socialism, even if they were not prepared to support violent measures to attain that ideal. Lacking a firm resolve of their own, the members of the Literary Group waited for the Prague Devětsil to be formed in September 1921 before holding their own inaugural meeting on October 15, 1921. The journal of their group became *Host*, named for Wolker's first collection *Host do domu* (*A Guest into the House*, 1921).

The philosophy of the Literary Group expressed a belief in man's innate goodness and in human progress, yet lacked a metaphysical system of values to justify their humanist beliefs and inevitably fell back upon conventional Christian themes and images derived from their memories of childhood religion. Eclectic by its very nature, the Literary Group was influenced by many postwar European strands of humanist thought. In Germany they looked to Alfred Döblin with his belief in a new social order; and in postwar France Henri Barbusse, Romain Rolland and the iconoclastic tenets of dadaism were powerful influences. Above all their ideas were indebted to the French unanimism centered around Jules Romains, René Arcos, Georges Duhamel, Charles Vildrac and Luc Durtain. The Literary Group was especially influenced by the unanimists' belief that alone man was nothing but in the collective everything.

Wolker's *A Guest into the House* reveals the special influence of the French unanimist poets Vildrac and Duhamel, both of whom visited Prague in 1920, and whose idealistic belief that collective love could cure mankind's social ills is reflected in many of Wolker's poems written around this time. A good example from *A Guest into the Home* is the poem 'The Mail Box' with its charming tone of naïveté and its implicit trust in human love as a force capable of establishing an organic and inseparable bond between man and his world. Like the image of pollination at the heart of the poem, this love is genderless and sexless:

> The mail box on the corner of the street
> Is not just any old thing.
> It blossoms in blue,
> People respect it a great deal,
> They trust it completely,
> Throwing letters in from two sides,
> One for the sad, the other for the happy.
> The letters are white as pollen
> And wait for trains, boats and people

To carry them like bumble-bees and wind
Where hearts are,
Red stigmata
Veiled in rose blossom.

When the letters reach their destination,
They burst into fruit,
Bitter or sweet.[7]

In the poem entitled 'Things,' inanimate objects like the mail box are invested with a deeply spiritual and asexual affinity with human beings, providing an idealistic harmony between man and his social environment:

I love things, silent comrades
Because everybody treats them
As if they were not living,
But they are alive and look at us
Like faithful dogs with concentrated looks
And suffer,
Because nobody speaks to them.
They are too ashamed to speak first,
They remain silent and wait,
And yet
How they would love to chat!
That’s why I love things
And also why I love the whole world.[8]

The final poem in the collection *A Guest into the House*, entitled 'Holy Hill,' marks a transition in Wolker’s philosophy from unanimism to a more explicit struggle for social justice. About the same time Wolker lost his faith in traditional religion, and he would leave the Roman Catholic Church in 1921, the same date his collection of poems was published. After coming to

Prague as a student of law in 1919, he had been exposed to greater urban poverty and hardship than he had ever witnessed in his native Moravia. He had begun to associate with Prague café revolutionaries with whom he founded the short-lived journal *Orfeus* in Café Union, only three issues of which appeared. A major source of influence on Wolker's development were Karel Čapek's translations of modern French poetry (published in 1916).[9] This collection included translations by Duhamel and Vildrac as well as Apollinaire's poem 'Zone' (1913) whose influence has been discerned in 'Holy Hill' in its stylistic freedom from formal rhythm and syntax and its thematic rejection of the old world and its glorification of the new.

After the publication of a *A Guest into the House* the politically galvanized Wolker began to repudiate his former work, which he associated with French effeminacy, and began to cultivate a tough, masculine persona. In a letter to his fellow-poet Konstantín Biebl he dismissed his earlier verse as 'satanic verses full of sodomitical sins and soda water.'[10] If this unexpected reference to deviant sexuality marks a determined effort to espouse a new kind of objective and 'virile' poetry, it also reveals the extent to which Wolker's political posture on behalf of the proletariat was suffused with subjective anxieties about his own masculinity and his poor health. He increasingly identified the cause of Marxism with his own physical and sexual maturity. In 'Holy Hill,' for example, Russia and Lenin become symbols of male courage, health and virility. Having rejected the 'sexless metaphysics' of his Brno colleagues, Wolker now identifies his former vitalism with old women and his new political radicalism with masculinity:

> The sun is a wild revolutionary, it demolishes the day and reconstructs it over
> night;
> we prefer ruddy maidens to grasping, old widows;
> we will tell each other stories about great Russia and brave Lenin,
> our thoughts are as green and as high as trees in a forest.[11]

Wolker's association of Soviet Russia with youthful virility can be partly explained as a reaction against the prevalent view of liberal democracy as ageing and effete. But this identification can also be explained with reference to the cult of masculinity in Soviet art and propaganda. For example, in Dziga Vertov's film *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), Moscow is identified with masculine power and strength symbolized by the shot of an accelerating train entering a tunnel. John Malmstad has even identified a cult of masculinity in the pre-Soviet period. In his study of Russian self-portraiture before the Revolution, Malmstad discerns a fascination with the masculine pursuits of weight-lifting and wrestling in the work of the artists reacting against the perceived effeteness of the symbolist 'World of Art' movement.[12] This cult of masculinity reached its culmination with the October Revolution of 1917. Yury Olesha's novel *Envy* (1927) parodies the new 'homo sovieticus' through the figures of Andrei Babichev and his protégé, the virile soccer player Volodya Makarov, who envies the machine and wants to achieve physical perfection.[13] In the 1930s there was a utopian attempt in Soviet Russia to merge gender and sexual identities into an undifferentiated androgyny, as can be seen in El Lissitzky's German exhibition poster of the fused faces of a Komsomol boy and girl (1932). This was, however, a later aspiration to transform an already established socialist society into a perfect communist state. In Czechoslovakia, where socialism was still an unrealized dream in the 1920s, the prevailing model of left-wing political identity remained unequivocally masculine.

Characteristic of this desire to strip away all vestiges of French-associated femininity, Wolker's next (and last) volume of verse- *The Heavy Hour* (1922)- repudiated the influence of Apollinaire and French poetry altogether. Yet for all its sense of political resolve, *The Heavy Hour* strikes an overall melancholy, even fatalistic, tone and continues to be pervaded by the subjective anxieties about sexual potency and ill health already apparent in 'Holy Hill.' The introductory poem is particularly revealing on account of the funereal metaphor used to convey the end of Wolker's youthful dreams: 'Today is my heavy hour/My youthful heart has died and alone I carry it out in its coffin.'[14] The poet's earlier trust in the innate bond forged by love between man and the external world has seemingly suffered a devastating blow. Now he needs the reassurance that 'the lover's letter, the lamp, a friend's book/ things born of love, light and faith' will remain steadfast and true. The overall feeling evoked by the poem is one of disenchantment with material things and the loss of the simple Catholic faith the poet enjoyed as a boy. But neither has the poet succeeded in achieving the masculinity for which he yearns: 'I still do not have a man's heart,/I am alone at the heavy hour;/And therefore I do not believe.'[15]

In spite of the tone of subjective hopelessness evoked by the opening poem, this collection represents the apotheosis of Wolker as the major proletarian poet of Czech literature. The mawkish sentimentality of the earlier work is much less in evidence. Many of Wolker's new poems possess a hard, decisive edge and an impassioned political message. With this new collection Wolker repudiated the influence of Apollinaire and French poetry in favour of the realism of the nineteenth-century Czech writers Karel Jaromír Erben and Jan Neruda. In a letter to his friend, A. M. Píša, dated February 21, 1921, Wolker paves the way for his new creed:

> In my view Erben is closer to proletarian and modern art altogether than all those gadfly-like young Frenchmen who in my opinion are ingrained subjectivists, literary salon wits and incomprehensible in a refined and sentimental kind of way.[16]

In spite of his elaborate disclaimers, Wolker was unable to shed completely his debt to French and modernist literature. In fact the more he displayed his proletarian sympathies and asserted himself as a poet of the ordinary man, the more his bourgeois origins seemed to get in the way. The fact was that Wolker had remained a bourgeois idealist, but instead of expressing his idealism in the vitalist terms of universal love between men, he now channelled it into the cause of the working-class. Characteristic of these sustained tensions within Wolker's poetry are three ballads from *The Heavy Hour*: 'The Ballad of the Unborn Child,' 'The Ballad of the Dream,' and 'The Ballad of the Stoker's Eyes.' In all these ballads we can discern sublimated sexual imagery which undermines rather than reinforces the poet's masculine persona. In 'The Ballad of the Unborn Child'- about a working-glass girl who becomes pregnant with her lover's child and is forced to get a back-street abortion- sex between the girl and the boy is seen in the displaced terms of male castration rather than penetration:

> Love is woman and a man,
> Love is bread and a knife.
> I have cut you open, my love,
> Blood flows through my hands from the white loaf.[17]

Not only is the image emblematic of masculinity in crisis, it also reifies the girl’s body as a commodity item (a loaf of bread). After she has undergone an abortion, the girl refers to herself as a 'wound':

Give me your hand my love,
While we walk down the steps.
I am no longer brave and shall weep
That from all the riches
Have remained only a bottle of eumenol,
That I am only a wound
Embraced by the dead hands of a child.[18]

The notion of a wound underscores the preceding male anxiety about castration. The reference to a dead child also evokes postbellum fears of sterility created by the threat of technology to the survival of the human race. In his poem 'Grodek' the German expressionist poet Georg Trakl was similarly haunted by the prospect of humanity’s violent self-destruction:

And the dark flutes of autumn keep playing softly in the reeds.
O prouder grief. You, brass altars,
Today the hot flame of the spirit is fed by a more violent pain-
The grandsons yet unborn.[19]

In Wolker's poem, the girl’s grave-like womb- now articulated through her own voice rather than that of her lover- becomes the displaced embodiment of this male-centered anxiety about the gradual extinction of the human race, signalled, as in Trakl’s poem, by the seasonal motif of autumn:

I am not a woman,
I am a grave.
Two eyes stand on it like two candles
Burning in the autumn for the souls of little ones.
No one will pray over my body.[20]

Wolker’s sexual anxieties also correlate with political doubts about his working-class credentials. His middle-class origins remain to haunt him as a source of social guilt and sexual self-disgust. These anxieties colour the language of the ballad, distorting it as a poem of social protest. In fact, the ballad tells us far more about Wolker's subjective state of mind than it does about the actual social conditions of the working-class: legal abortion, for example, was universally available in Czechoslovakia in the early 1920s. The doctor's reference to 'broken things' in the following lines of the ballad recalls Wolker's earlier idealistic belief in the curative bond between man and his physical environment evinced by the poems 'Mail Box' and 'Things' as well as his residual nostalgia for such innocence. And the doctor’s line 'I don’t know how to cure women' ventroliquizes the male poet’s fears about his health and fears of impending death:

> The doctor’s hands breathed carbolic soap
> And his words were cold as ice:
> 'I don’t know how to cure women;
> I can only mend broken things.'[18]

In 'The Ballad of the Dream,' Wolker appears to strike a more optimistic tone when the workers Jan and Marie resolve to realize their dream of a classless society and, in the final lines of the poem, arm themselves with hammers and swords in the fight for the Revolution. Yet in spite of its resolute ending, this poem also betrays a sense of melancholy fatalism in deploying the subjective imagery of male castration symbolized by Jan's wounded and scarred eyes. The Freudian association of blindness with male castration is more fully developed in 'The Ballad of the Stoker’s Eyes,' in which the alienation of the proletariat from society is personified by the plight of the worker Antonín who has labored for twenty-five years by stoking coal to generate electricity. In the course of that time he has begun to lose his eyesight as a consequence of his terrible working conditions. As in the previous poems, the harmony between man and nature has been ruptured by ruthless capitalism. Every time Antonín stokes the oven with coal to provide the city with electrical power, he sacrifices a 'piece of his eyes.' What is striking about this ballad is the way in which the socialist affirmation of technology as a positive means of transforming the conditions of modern life is undermined by the personal imagery of growing blindness. Far from being a celebration of socialist optimism, the poem demonstrates the opposite: the impotence of the working class in the face of unrestrained capitalism. In distinction to Vertov's Moscow, pulsating with male energy, Wolker's Prague is a city in which masculinity- embodied by the stoker- is weakened and ultimately emasculated by technology:

With each piece of coal he throws in a bit of his eyes,
And these eyes bright and blue as flowers,
Float through the wires over the cities,
The cafés, theatres, above all the family table
And create a joyous light.[21]

Addressing his fellow power-station workers, Antonín tells them that his wife now weeps when she looks at him and says that he is cursed. In contrast, when the couple first walked down the church aisle together, his eyes were big and beautiful:

'When she went with me to the altar,
They were two big and beautiful loaves,
But now only two crumbs remain
On my face as on an empty plate.'[22]

What is curious about the lines that follow in this poem is how Antonín's alienated labour is seen in terms of his alienated relationship with his wife. Here the image of the oven ('pec') draws upon an ancient metaphor of the oven as a symbol of the female genitalia.[23] A Freudian counterpoint to the female-connoted oven is Antonín's phallic spade which- heavier with his increasing age and growing infirmity- is unable to perform its function effectively:

But Anthony once more, as twenty-five years before,
Only opens the oven with a heavier spade.
It is always difficult to understand a woman,
She has another truth yet truthful nonetheless.[24]

The correlation between sex and labour implicit in these lines culminates in the stark image of a 'flaming knife' whereby the female genitalia, associated with the oven and the furnace, become the instrument of male castration. What began as an ostensible celebration of Soviet constructivist principles- the transformation of modern life by technology and labour- ends as an expressionist articulation of abject masculinity:

> At that moment Anthony, the calloused stoker,
> Recognized the twenty-five years at the stove and the shovel,
> In which a flaming knife was cutting his eyes,
> And having recognized that it suffices a man to die like a man,
> Began to shout across the entire night and the entire world:
> 'Comrades, electrical workers,
> I am blind—I cannot see.'[25]

Like the Literary Group, the members of Devětsil could not break away entirely from the subjective legacy of nineteenth-century poetry in spite of their espousal of radical, left-wing politics. Jaroslav Seifert's first collection of poetry *Town in Tears* (1921) is particularly striking on account of the continuity it displays between personal and political sentiments. In 'The Monologue of the Handless Soldier,' political protest is expressed through the personal experience of a soldier maimed in the Great War. As in Wolker's ballads, an imagery of impotence and frustration replaces sentiments of working-class strength and optimism. In fact, the lyrical language of Christian resurrection implicit in the opening stanza is entirely at variance with the conventional language of a political protest poem:

> Two days I slept in the cold grave,
> But on the third
> I rose again gloriously from the dead,
> my face like lightning,
> my garment like fallen snow,
> I lay naked on the pillow
> and the sun,
> the sun above my head
> was my halo...[26]

The young man's initial hopefulness evaporates when he realizes that without his hands he cannot embrace a pretty girl's waist. This handicap also prevents him from taking part in a demonstration against the police. Here sexual inadequacy and political impotence dovetail in a poignant anti-war poem:

> Only then did I regret for the first time,
> my hands, my little hands,
> that you had once been taken away from me
> by a fiery grenade.[27]

Politics and sexuality are equally intertwined in the poem 'Sinful City' from the same collection, but here the tone is quite different, optimistic and celebratory rather than fatalistic and despairing. Initially, the Old Testament theme of divine revenge for human sin (the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah) is invoked to express revolutionary indignation against the excesses of capitalism. But, in the final couplet of the poem, political anger is unexpectedly tempered by the redemptive love of a courting couple in the city park:

> The city,
> The city of factory owners, rich men and coarse boxers,
> The city of inventors and of engineers,
> The city of generals, shopkeepers and patriotic poets
> With its black sins has transgressed the limits of God's wrath:
> And God was enraged;
> A hundred times he had threatened vengeance on that town,
> A rain of sulphur, fire and thunderbolts,
> And a hundred times he had forgiven it.
> For he always remembered what once he had promised
> That even for two just men he would not destroy his city,
> And it would be hard for God not to keep his word:
>
> Just then two lovers walked through the spring garden,

Breathing in the scent of a flowering hawthorn bush.[28]

In spite of his apparent commitment to the Communist Revolution, the language and sensibility of Seifert's first collection of poems is deeply suffused with the sensibility of late nineteenth-century symbolism and decadence. In the poem 'Revolution,' for example, the rebellious proletarians compare themselves in their struggle against their capitalist masters with the turn-of-the-century homosexual renegade Oscar Wilde in his defiance of British moral hypocrisy: 'Ardent,/ in the midst of life,/we stand like Wilde before his judges.'[29]

The intermingling of sexual desire and political frustration is also apparent in Seifert's next collection of verse *Nothing but Love* (1923). But in distinction to the poems considered so far, an alternative perspective is provided by the hedonistic allure of the modern city. Now the city is no longer identified with abject masculinity but with potent femininity. In the opening poem, 'The Electric Lyre,' the everyday pleasures of modern technology (cinema, sport, modern American architecture) are personified by the poet's female-associated muse invoked to guide and strengthen the feeble poet:

Muse, my modern muse of today,
who with a timid motion at eight in the evening unveils
the red curtain on the white screen of the cinema,
come to me today, the creative hour is heavy;

Muse, you who soar in amazing haste
over the helmet of the cyclist, who at a sprung pace
sweeps boldly along the stadium's track.

Muse, who guides the hand of the engineer,
as he draws a plan of an American skyscraper,
come to me today, my strength is waning
and I take hold of my pen with fear...[30]

The signature poem of the collection *Nothing but Love* is 'Paris.' The poem opens with a sad evocation of Prague as a joyless provinical town where the police snoop with their flash-lamps upon courting couples in the park. The alienated conditions of the Prague working-class are contrasted with the Rousseau-esque joys of the 'natural man' in Africa and the sexual pleasures of the city on the Seine. After painting a melancholy picture of provincial Prague, the setting switches to the Africa of the poet's imagination. Then, half way through the poem, the setting shifts again, unexpectedly, to female-connoted Paris:

There are beautiful actresses and famous detectives,
naked dancers dance in a suburban variété,
and the perfume of their lace confounds your reason with love,
for Paris is seductive and one cannot get over her.[31]

For Seifert, Paris (a city he had never visited) becomes the embodiment of all things modern and appealing, including the popular entertainment of American cinema:

Of all the poets there I greatly respect Ivan Goll,
For he, like me, likes going to the cinema,
And considers the saddest person to be Charlie Chaplin.[32]

In spite of his proletarian identification with the cause of revolution and Soviet Russia, Seifert was by the early 1920s more enamoured of Paris than Moscow. By 1922 the proletarian phase of Czech literature had lost momentum. The Czech workers had not risen in revolutionary revolt against the capitalist order and there was general disenchantment among the proletarian poets.

Fig. 1: Vítězslav Nezval, 1924.

Poetism

The turning-point in Czech literature was provided by Vítězslav Nezval (1900-58), who joined Devětsil in April 1922 (fig. 1). The crucial experience for Nezval, who had arrived two years earlier from his native Moravia, was a student meeting in Prague at which Seifert read a paper entitled 'The New Proletarian Art,' an essay written by Teige in the spring of 1922. It proposed that the artist should bridge the gulf between art and the working class by turning to modern popular western culture. In his autobiography, Nezval describes the invigorating experience of hearing this lecture.[33] The next day he sought out Teige in order to show him his long poem 'The Wondrous Magician' which he regarded as an exact expression of the tenets of Teige’s theory.

The Devětsil attachment to popular western culture like jazz and film brought the movement into conflict with the Czechoslovak Communist Party for whom it smacked too much of a reversion to western bourgeois influences. In fact Devětsil failed to interest the proletariat in their work and supplant the popularity of traditional art forms. The writers themselves came mostly from the middle-class and turned to Communism on personal subjective grounds. They developed a new form of social mysticism in which a future society would be based on love. For them the Communist revolution was an engaging idea, which stimulated the imagination. It was above all based on ethical grounds and in this sense betrayed its attachment to the social values of the past. At the same time it could never quite shake itself free of a fascination with capitalist hedonism and western technology. Amidst essays and poems extolling the proletariat, the first major collective work of Devětsil (1922)- entitled *The Revolutionary Anthology of Devětsil* - included images of up-to-date motorcars, hardly commodity items that the working-class could afford.[34]

The Revolutionary Anthology of Devětsil consisted of an eclectic mix of articles, poems and short stories, including Seifert's poem 'Paris,' Wolker's 'The Ballad of the Stoker's Eyes,' Nezval's 'The Wondrous Magician,' and an essay by Teige with the title 'Art Today and Tomorrow,' which sought to sum up the preceding contributions.[35] The *Revolutionary Anthology* paved the way for a new direction in Czech literature: in July 1924 Teige published his manifesto of poetism. In it he moved away from the belief that art was merely an instrument of political change and widened the scope of the group to encompass the whole of modern life. In Teige's view individual freedom was identified with collective freedom, and personal happiness with social happiness. If Teige was the chief theorist of poetism, Nezval was its main practitioner. In his collection *Pantomime* (1924, fig. 2), he defined a poetist poem as a 'miraculous bird, a parrot on a motorcycle.'[36] A new vision of language was the key to poetism. In order to achieve this new vision, images had to be liberated from the bonds of convention through the replacement of logic by the free play of associations and images. Nezval stated his own version of the poetist creed in the following way:

> When words were new, they shone next to one another in their unremitting, inherent intensity. But soon, through their frequent use, phraseology was created. No-one imagines in an everyday greeting the lips on the white hand of a woman. It was necessary to dislocate this phrase if I was to evoke its original sense.
>
> Logic is precisely that which makes shining words into phrases. Logically, the glass belongs to the table, the star to the skies, and the door to the stairs. That is why we do not see them. It is necessary to place the star on the table, the glass near the piano and the angels, the door next to the ocean. Our

> aim was to unveil reality, to give reality the shining form it had on the first day of existence. If I did this at the expense of logic, it was an attempt at heightened realism.[37]

Vítězslav Nezval

[redacted]

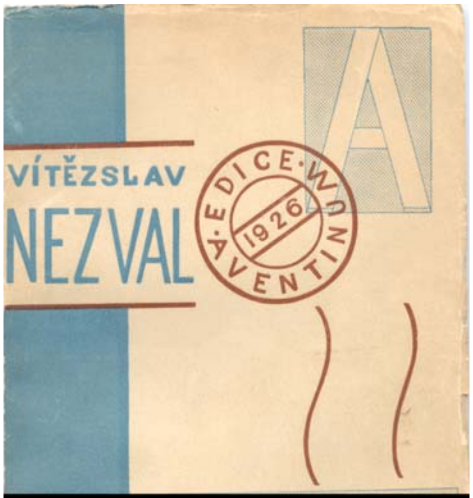
Fig. 2: Nezval, *Pantomima*, 1924, cover design by J. Štyrský.

Nezval's emphasis on a juxtaposition of unfamiliar things represented nothing less than an attempt to reinvest through a new language the harmonious relationship between human beings and their environment, which Wolker had celebrated in his early poem 'Things.' In the later poetry of Wolker, this relationship had broken down because of the alienating effects of modernity; ruthless industrialism and total war having sundered the organic bonds between man and the natural world. For Nezval and Teige, poetism was intended to reconstruct an idealistic bridge between the human subject and the external, social world. Poetist language aspired to restore the mythic harmony between man and his environment not by turning to the real world as such but by exploiting the imaginative resources of the unconscious. If the disastrous consequences of modern technology had driven a deep wedge between man and society, the new language was intended to repair that rupture and restore the freedom of the individual. Hence the aims of poetism were as political as those of proletarian poetry- to ensure man’s freedom- but its methods were different. Political freedom was to be achieved through the subjective imagination, and through personal interaction with reality as a necessary prelude to the wholesale transformation of society. In this sense proletarian poetry and poetism were not at variance with each other’s interests but were dialectically intertwined and aimed toward the same idealistic resolution.

Poetism had an enormous impact on the development of Czech modernism, an influence reflected not only in Czech poetry but also in the collage and montage techniques of Czech painting, photography and film. Indebted to Guillaume Apollinaire's interest in cubism and the dynamic relationship he established between the visual arts and poems- especially his innovatory use of typography to make calligrammes and postcard-poems sent from the Front- poetism in turn influenced Seifert's *On the Wireless Waves* (1925), Nezval's *Poems on Postcards* (1926, fig. 3) and his *ABC* (1926) with its incorporation of photography into the aesthetic framework of the whole composition. The artistic confidence and social optimism of poetism are reflected in the bold imagery of female sexuality and the female body in the visual and literary experimentation of the time. Typical of this continuity between political optimism and sexual hedonism are the photographs of the female dancer and acrobat Milča Mayerová in Nezval's *ABC*. Notable also are the advertisement photographs of Jaroslav Rössler from the late 1920s and early 1930s in which images of the female body are juxtaposed with commodity items such as perfume, toothpaste and washing powder. Seifert’s poetry of the early 1920s is also typical of this congruence between social optimism and sexual hedonism, as exemplified by the charming picture-poem 'Abacus' from the collection *Honeymoon* in which the beads on an abacus frame figure as the breasts of the beloved:

Your breast
is like an apple from Australia.
Your breasts
are like two apples from Australia.

How I like this abacus of love![38]



[redacted]

Fig. 3: Nezval, *Poems on Postcards*, 1926, design by K. Teige.

For all its exciting innovations, poetism, like proletarian poetry, was ultimately an ephemeral phenomenon in the overall development of modern Czech literature. The main problem was that it wanted to go in two opposite directions at once- political and personal. Teige proclaimed Marxist historical materialism; yet at the same time his aesthetics were personal and anti-realist, an offshoot of the Romantic and French symbolist traditions which Czech literature had adopted in the nineteenth century. Thus there was an ever-widening discrepancy in the poetist movement between theory and practice. This attempted marriage of personal and engaged art is most successfully exemplified in Nezval's *Pantomime* in which revolution is not violent in nature but treated as an exciting adventure.

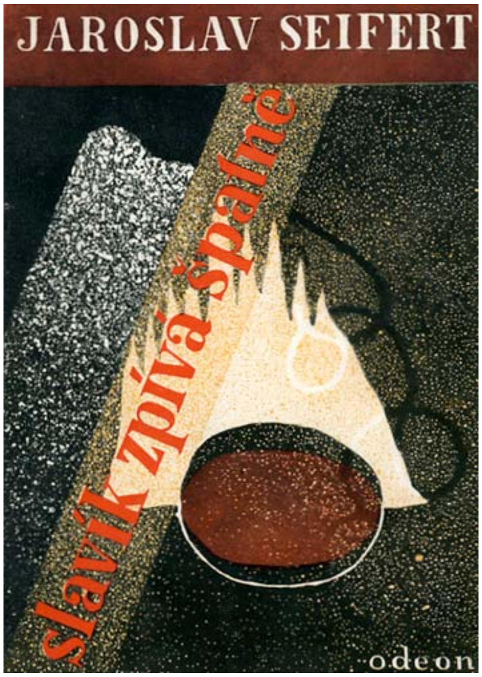


Fig. 4: Jaroslav Seifert, *The Nightingale Sings Out of Tune*, 1926, cover design by Štyrský and Toyen.

By 1925 Nezval wanted to free himself from the constraints of dogma imposed by Teige. He was not alone. Increasing disenchantment with Teige's dogmatism is reflected in Biebl's poem 'The Break' ('Zlom,' 1925) and Seifert's verse collection *On the Wireless Waves* with its attachment to western technology, lyrical individualism, and sexual hedonism. Seifert's poems from the mid to late 1920s are especially indicative of a reaction against Teige's tendentiousness. The highpoint of disillusionment with Teige's dogmatism came in Seifert's aptly named next collection *The Nightingale Sings Out of Tune* (1926). It was dedicated to Jean Cocteau (from whom the title of the collection was borrowed), with a cover design by Štyrský and Toyen (fig. 4). The abstract, non-representational nature of this cover signals a movement away from an attempt to forge an objective socially-committed poetry to a more subjective an introspective focus on the eternal themes of sex, death and decay. As the prospect of revolution in Czechoslovakia receded, the work of Devětsil became ever more elegiac and wistful. Whereas in Wolker's 'Holy Hill,' Lenin and the Revolution had been equated with sexual virility and the forces of nature, in

Seifert's poem 'Lenin' from *The Nightingale Sings out of Tune*, the leader of the Revolution is now feeble and close to death:

In a chaise longue
Already seriously ill and old,
Like a frail shadow and an old tree
Lenin reposed.[39]

For the proletarian poets, Soviet Russia and its leader had conjured forth images of masculine vigour and strength; now, in contrast to the optimistic technological vision of the future identified with Paris, Seifert’s evocation of Moscow is replete with imagery of the past and the decrepitude of the old feudal order. In spite of losing his main followers, Teige continued to regard Soviet constructivism as the basis for modern art. He even issued a second manifesto of poetism in 1928 in an attempt to reassert his control over the movement. But the momentum had already been lost. By the late 1920s a darker, less vigorous tone was emerging in the poetry of Seifert and Nezval. In Seifert‘s collection *The Carrier Pigeon* (1929), published four years after *The Nightingale Sings out of Tune*, the youthful *joie de vivre* of poetism had given way to a predominant imagery of sexual frustration and emotional disenchantment. In the poem 'Wedding Song,' the refrain 'How nice it is/ when someone gets married' at the end of the first two verses changes to the regretful 'How sad it is/ when someone gets married' at the end of the third and fourth. No sooner has the wedding taken place, than its freshness seems to have worn off:

The bouquet has withered
and falls apart,
how sad it is
when someone gets married.

The fan has closed,
kissing turns bitter;
how sad it is
when someone gets married.[40]

The year this poem was published, 1929, was the same year in which Seifert left the Communist Party and definitively rejected Teige's aesthetic and ideological influence. It is difficult not to read these expressions of rapid disenchantment with marriage as a veiled statement about Seifert's short-lived, if intense, involvement in the poetist movement and the Communist Party. A similar tone of valediction and loss informs many of the poems in the same collection. In the poem 'Wet Picture' the personification of Prague as a group of beautiful girls becomes tinged with the elegiacal sadness of emotional farewells:

Those beautiful days
When the city resembles a die, a fan, and a bird song
Or a scallop shell on the seashore
- goodbye, goodbye, pretty girls,
we met today
and will never meet again.[41]

By the end of the poem, the loveliness of female beauty has yielded to ugliness, decrepitude and death glimpsed in the skull-like bare knees of the thin girls in the bar. In the companion piece to 'Wet Picture,' 'Prague,' we find an even gloomier correlation between eros and thanatos. Already anticipating Surrealism, this enigmatic poem provides a quasi-baroque meditation on the futility of human desire. But its most startling quality is its sublimated imagery of sexual castration. In the opening stanza, Prague is evoked as a 'gothic cactus,' an image at once powerfully suggestive of the prickly spire of St Vitus Cathedral and the frustrated male libido.[42] The skull imagery which ended the previous poem recurs here in the phrase 'with royal skulls' ('královskými lebkami'), which links the previous phallic image of the cactus with the fear of death and extinction. The sexual imagery continues in the next stanza with the autoerotic line 'cannon-balls like seeds of wars/were scattered by the wind.'[43] The theme of castration is underscored later in the poem with the image of blindness- 'the telescopes have gone blind from the horror of the universe/and death has drunk the fantastic eyes of astrologers,' which recalls the castration image of blindness in Wolker's 'Ballad of the Stoker's Eyes.'[44]

Similar in tone to Seifert's *Carrier Pigeon* is Nezval's poem 'Edison' (1927), which may be said to mark an important point of transition from poetism to surrealism exemplified by the collections *Prague with Fingers of Rain* (1936) and *The Absolute Gravedigger* (1937). 'Edison' belongs to the collection *Poems of the Night*, a series of separate poems written between 1921 and 1929 with the overall theme of night and death. It signals a departure from the life-affirming exuberance of Nezval's earlier poetism toward a more melancholy and introspective meditation on the theme of sexual loneliness and the creative battle against oblivion and death. The eponymous hero of the poem is the famous American inventor and entrepreneur Thomas Edison. The choice of Edison as the hero of this dark, introspective poem is not as surprising as might at first seem the case. In the late nineteenth-century Edison had already become a modernist icon, embodying the split between the New World mass celebrity culture and the dandyesque European ideal of the remote and lonely genius. Edison is the ambiguous protagonist of Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's novel *L'Eve nouvelle* (*The New Eve*, 1876), 'the embodiment of America's recent grand-scale technological advances, but also a refined European spirit.'[45] This dichotomy is also apparent in Nezval's poem, but it assumes a somewhat different form in reflecting the Czech avant-garde's conflicted allegiance to both Soviet constructivism and French aesthetics. For Nezval, as for Seifert, America is intimately associated with modernity and technology- with cinema, skyscrapers, motorcars and aeroplanes. In this capacity Edison emerges as a dynamic hero of the new age akin to the 'homo sovieticus.' But such exuberance coexists with a profound sense of melancholy. Here Edison is the personification of the lonely Baudelairean flâneur, the *poète maudit* of modern city life. Mediating ambiguously between the Old and New World, the poem opens with a description of a solitary gambler's nocturnal return from a casino. The notion of the game ('hra') in the first canto suggests the world of casual sex and prostitution. But this is no longer a city of hedonistic excitement- as in Seifert's 'Paris'- but a melancholy urban landscape of sexual loneliness and alienation:

> Our lives are as mournful as a lament
> Once toward evening a young gambler left a casino
> Outside it was snowing over the monstrances of bars

The air was moist since spring was approaching
Although the night trembled like the prairie
Under the blows of stellar artillery
Listened to by drinkers at tables soiled with drink
Over glasses of alcohol
Topless women in boas made of peacock feathers
Melancholics of late afternoon

There was something here heavy and oppressive
Sadness anguish and anxiety of life and death[46]

The split between the New and Old World, the intrepid American inventor and the melancholy European poet can be understood in terms of the crisis of Central European democracy and the Czechoslovak Left's double allegiance to French aesthetics and Soviet ideology. Like the French surrealists, the Czech avant-gardists entertained a great ambivalence toward America. On the one hand, they appreciated the popular culture it produced, principally, cinema, because of its undoubted appeal to the proletariat. On the other hand, they were critical of its reputation as the ruthless engine of capitalism. Karel Čapek's play *R.U.R.* (1920), which introduced the word robot to the languages of the world, is set on an island, far from Europe, that appears to resemble America.[47] In 'Edison' this ambivalence is reflected in the ambiguous character of the titular hero, who mediates between action and contemplation, burning ambition and melancholy fatalism. As the poem progresses, this split in the poet's identity translates into the personalized language of doubling and sexual ambiguity. When the narrator meets his suicidal shadow at midnight on the bridge in Prague, he takes him home where the latter disappears into thin air. The mysterious atmosphere of this scene, which recalls Dostoevsky's early St. Petersburg novel *The Double* (1848), is charged with homoerotic doubling. The Romantic motif of the *doppelgänger* also figures in Alexandr Hackenschmied's short film *Aimless Walk* (1930). An anonymous man takes a tram through the streets of Prague to the terminus in the outskirts of the city where he goes on an aimless walk. When he arrives at his destination he lies down and starts to smoke a cigarette. As he gets up to return home, he splits into two people, one taking the tram home, the other remaining behind in the periphery. This double motif mirrors an overall artistic split in the identity of the avant-garde artist: to what extent does the film assert the principle of art for art's sake (embodied in the *flâneur* motif) and to what extent is it a politically engaged art suggested by the background images of factory chimneys? As one critic has pointed out, the objectivist ideals of the film are undermined by the subjective and individual vision inherent in its imagery of splitting and reflections in water and shadow.[48] But are these ideals really 'objective'? In the city outskirts the emphasis is placed on the physical labor of the urban proletariat such as the shot of a factory chimney churning out thick industrial smoke and a worker shovelling piles of coal dust. In the shot of the aimless walker lying on the grass the vertical movement of the factory smoke replicates the rising smoke from the supine stroller's cigarette, as if we were being invited to compare the leisure of the bourgeoisie with the labour of the urban proletariat. This juxtaposition is reinforced by the alternating shots of the sleeping stroller and a sleeping worker, his grimy boots placed poignantly by his side. Such editing should not be seen as neutral or 'objective' but as expressing a political commentary on the working conditions of the proletariat. Yet there are also undoubtedly subjective moments in the film such as the sequences in the tramcar at the beginning where the hand-held camera assumes the perspective of the protagonist as he looks out and jumps from the moving vehicle. Complementing this subjective/objective tension, there is also an ideological ambiguity in the film. When the stroller divides into two people- one remaining on the grass in the working-class outskirts, the other returning to the city- the bifurcation appears to illustrate the avant-garde artist's conflicted allegiance to the working-class and to the capitalist pleasures of modern urban life.

Another film of Czech modernism in which left-wing politics and capitalist hedonism appear to conflict is *Ecstasy* (1933) directed by Gustav Machatý. Between 1929 and 1933 Machatý made a trio of films all linked by the theme of sexual passion: *Erotikon* (1929, silent), *From Saturday to Sunday* (1931, the first Czech sound film) and *Ecstasy*. The third film achieved instant notoriety at home and abroad on account of a fifteen-minute sequence of nudity. The film starred the young actress Maria Kiesler whose controversial nude appearance turned her into an overnight Hollywood star under the name Hedy Lamarr. The movie caused a scandal upon its release. Pope Pius XII censured it and Hollywood was full of gossip about it. The ban on showing the film in the USA was lifted as late as 1940.

The plot is ostensibly straightforward: a young bride named Eva (played by Hedy Lamarr) is frustrated by her marriage to an older, impotent man. When she meets the virile manager of a construction site, her repressed sexuality is suddenly awakened. She petitions for divorce from her husband. But when the latter finds out about his wife's affair, he tries to kill himself and her lover in a car accident**,** yet loses his nerve at the last moment. Eventually he takes his own life as the couple are celebrating their engagement. Stricken by remorse and grief, Eva abandons her lover. The film ends with the latter back at the construction site, sadly imagining unrealized married life with Eva and her new-born baby.

This narrative of an illicit love affair between a middle-class woman and a working man is familiar enough from D. H. Lawrence's novel *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, which only three years earlier in 1930 had been the subject of a controversial obscenity trial in England. Like the poems we have examined so far, the film appears to be split between western aestheticism and Soviet ideology. Stylistically, it has a polished, Hollywood look, especially in those scenes which focus on Hedy Lamarr's beauty and glamour. But the film also reveals its socialist credentials in the figure of the virile lover who is reminiscent both of the Lawrencian hero and the new Soviet man. Indeed the final sequence of the film is clearly indebted to Eisenstein's celebrations of working-class labour. Seen in the context of the left-wing avant-garde, the virile hero of *Ecstasy* becomes the embodiment not simply of a masculine ideal but also of a political vision: the realization of a new socialist society. Conversely, the middle-class husband is not merely the personification of masculinity in crisis- by this time hardly a novel theme in European modernism- but a symbol of the degeneracy of bourgeois democracy itself. Even on a stylistic level, the hyper-realist, at times almost expressionist, close-up shots of the distraught husband set him apart from the more heroic and detached half or full-body shots of his wife's lover.

If there is an obviously constructed opposition in the film's portrayal of masculinity, its treatment of femininity is no less contingent on tensions within the film's political ideology. On one level, female nudity is equated with nature and in this spirit is celebrated as an integral feature of the film’s socialist message. The famous scene in which Hedy Lamarr swims naked in the lake draws upon a common association of female sexuality with water. On the other hand, the correspondence between the female body and nature can be seen as the valorized image of an equally pervasive negative homology between out-of-control female sexuality and destructive technology. Perhaps the best-known filmic treatment of this male fantasy is the robot-woman in Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis*. In Lang’s movie the robot-woman’s sexuality signals a threat both to masculinity and the bourgeois capitalist system it subtends. The rather incoherent ending of the film seeks to put these anxieties to sleep in the wish-fulfilment reconciliation between the 'Master of Metropolis' and the worker, representing respectively capitalism and labor.

The denouement of Machatý's *Ecstasy* is equally fraught with unresolved tensions, in particular in its vision of female sexuality. Having celebrated its heroine’s sexual liberation yet unable to countenance that liberation beyond the framework of conventional respectability, the film proceeds to impose a moralistic ending by making Eva abandon her lover. Yet, as we have seen, this ending is tempered by a fantasy sequence in which the lover imagines that Eva has given birth to his child. In this way the demands of bourgeois subjectivity are reconciled with the exigencies of socialist optimism. The film’s ending is an attempt to straddle the contradiction between its ideological vision of a socialist brave new world of sexual liberation and its bourgeois moral scruples about how such a world may be realized.

Surrealism

By 1929 the Devětsil and its poetic branch of poetism were a spent force. The group had always been little more than a collection of very different individuals. Teige had contrived to present the group as an organic whole, but the camouflage had been transparent. Now he was still carrying the banner of poetism but with no followers. Attempts to revive the Devětsil in 1932 foundered. The dissolution of cultural unity was paralleled by political discord. Seifert left the Communist Party in 1929 although Teige and Nezval remained members. By the end of the

1920s dadaism had lost its popularity in Prague and a new form of western modernity emerged in the form of surrealism, one better suited to the personal and introspective quality of Czech poetry.

Czech surrealism did not resolve the ideological tensions we have discerned within the cultural Left. Rather these tensions become more submerged and thereby contribute to the pervasive image of abject masculinity in the poems of Seifert and Nezval. The temptation is to claim that Czech surrealist poetry is apolitical since there is little or no inherent ideological content; but this very turn away from political overtness in itself constitutes a profoundly political gesture. To appreciate the effects of this gesture one is required to look closely at the unconscious associations within certain surrealist poems and especially how these relate to similar imagery in the preceding phases of proletarian poetry and poetism. In other words, the political significance of Czech surrealism is illuminated by placing it within the larger context of the interwar avant-garde.

The starting point for Czech surrealism was André Breton's publication of his 'First Surrealist Manifesto' (1924).[49] According to Breton, surrealism was a pure psychic automatism by which it was proposed to express either verbally or in writing or in any other way the 'real function of thought.' The artist must subject himself to the dictates of thought in the absence of all control exercised by reason and outside all moral or aesthetic preoccupation. The flow of impulses from the unconscious mind had to be recorded automatically, without interference. Nezval and some of his friends were fascinated by these ideas but were wary of adopting Breton's ideas because they still professed their adherence to Marxism. This obstacle was removed when, in his 'Second Surrealist Manifesto' (1929), Breton proclaimed that the surrealists supported the principles of historical materialism.[50]

In 1934 Teige and Nezval founded the Czech surrealist movement. Its principal adherents were the poets Nezval, Biebl, and Mákovský and the visual artists Jindřich Štyrský, Teige and Toyen. In 1935 these poets and artists welcomed the founder of French surrealism, Breton, and Paul Eluard to Prague, where Breton delivered an important lecture on the political position of surrealism and paid flattering homage to his Czech followers.[51] However, soon afterwards, in August 1935, Breton issued yet another manifesto attacking Soviet Russia and

Stalin in particular. This was a bitter blow to the surrealist writers and artists who were members of the Communist Party. Nezval remained loyal to Breton for two more years but when surrealism was condemned by Marxist critics and he himself repeatedly subjected to attacks, he finally denounced surrealism, ironically soon after publishing his most surrealist collection of poetry, *The Absolute Gravedigger*, in 1937.[52]

The key to the appeal of surrealism for Nezval was that it wanted above all to combat individual loneliness and fear. Thus it reflected a very traditional Czech need for a strong sense of collective identity, which explains why it was not deemed to be in conflict with Marxism. Through the unconscious the poet could reach the collective solidarity he sought. The collection *Prague with Fingers of Rain* (1936) exemplifies Nezval's attempt to reconcile the personal and social dimensions of his identity. Prague is personified as a woman. In itself this gendering of Prague was hardly new but enjoyed a pedigree extending back into the nineteenth century and beyond.[53] New, though, was Nezval's treatment of the motif. In his collection of poems, Prague became a dream landscape rather than a real city in which unconscious sexual drives assumed their own peculiar logic. For Nezval to write about the city in terms of the unconscious was not particularly new in the context of European modernism. In Russia Andrei Bely had already introduced the idea of the dream-like city in his novel *Petersburg* (1913-16); and a few years later T.S. Eliot famously wrote of London in *The Waste Land* (1922) in similar terms. Nezval's Prague is very different from Eliot's London, however. His Prague is a sexualized space and a site of hedonistic pleasures rather than a Dantesque vision of urban alienation. The immediate cue for Nezval was provided by Apollinaire's story 'The Stroller through Prague,' in which a French visitor to the city meets Ahasuerus, the Eternal Jew.[54] This Ahasuerus is not the tragic figure of Christian legend but a modernist libertine and cosmopolitan, a fictional reflection of the rootless Apollinaire himself. Ahasuerus leads the narrator through the city, pointing out its landmarks and taking pleasure in its erotic distractions. At one point he has sex with a prostitute on the street. Nezval's initial encounter with Prague is equally synonymous with prostitution and anonymous sex. In his autobiographical poem 'The Walker through Prague**,**' the young poet arrives in the big city in April 1920. His first memories of the city involve an encounter with a prostitute in a brothel: 'You are sitting on the embankment/ It's past midnight we've come from a terrible cell/ It was beautiful with a naked woman on a leather sofa.'[55]

Significantly, the sexual encounter with the woman-city in Nezval's 'Walker through Prague' is not couched in terms of virility and masculinity but in terms of lost virginity. Moreover, it is not unequivocally pleasurable but characterized as nightmarish ('we've come from a terrible cell'). Generally speaking, sexual intercourse in the poems is presented as cold and alienating, a source of guilt and anxiety rather than unalloyed pleasure. In the poem 'Obscure Hotels,' sex between a hotel guest and a prostitute is expressed in the most impersonal terms. Unlike the promiscuous Jew of Apollinaire's story- a personification both of cultural modernism and international capital moving freely across frontiers and equally at home everywhere- Nezval's narrator is a provincial newcomer to the big city and is distinctly intimidated, albeit intrigued, by the commodity culture of anonymous sex he finds there. For him sex is less real than imaginary, the woman's body a source of masturbatory fears and fantasies. As in Teige's collages, Nezval's women are fetishized objects of a disaffected male libido. Moreover, they become indistinguishable from the commodification culture of the city itself. This impression is well illustrated in Teige's frontispiece to the first edition of *Prague with Fingers of Rain*, in which a woman's naked torso is juxtaposed with buildings, shoes and rings as if the female body and the commodity culture of the city were one and the same thing. At the centre of the collage is located an eye, an emblem of male voyeurism which reduces the female body to a fetishized commodity. One notices the same voyeuristic perspective in other collages by Teige which are dominated by images of women's bodies in various states of fragmentation. In the realm of cinema one might compare the short film *May* (1936), directed by Emil František Burian, which consists entirely of close-up shots of a young woman's body in which her mascara and lipstick are provocatively foregrounded. In Nezval's poems**,** women's eyes and lips are similarly a source of obsessive voyeurism: 'The magnolia blossoms are bursting now they are skirts/They are her eyes they are her lips.'[56]

In 'The Lilac by the Museum on Wenceslas Square,' flowers and women are also seen in terms of each other. But here female sexuality is differentiated from the naturalness of flowers.

Woman is rather identified with the artificial city. Typical of surrealist art in general, woman becomes an artefact, the very antithesis of the natural:

I don't love flowers
I love women
Yet I slept beneath the lilac
From afar a cellar breathed on me
Like stuffy flats on the high street under an artificial night
Of your artificial eyes
Of your artificial mouth
Of your artificial breasts and hair
I love you lilac spray[57]

In fact, the entire poem can be read as an auto-erotic fantasy, a reading which reinforces the status of the poet as a voyeur:

And a nameless rose
With breasts in the rose leaves
The town breathes through all the windows
A chilly twilight
And while I slept
A lilac bush blossomed by the Museum on Wenceslas Square

Another poem in Nezval's *Prague with Fingers of Rain* in which woman is associated with the artificiality of the city is the masterly 'Moon over Prague':

The decorator is mixing his plaster
He's lit an oil lamp on top of the stepladder
It is the moon
It moves like an acrobat
Wherever it appears it causes panic
It turns black coffee into white
It offers paste jewelry to women's eyes

It changes bedrooms into death chambers[58]

In Nezval's early surrealist poem 'History of the Six Empty Houses' (1932), the narrator describes a fairground waxworks (*panoptikum*) which includes a mechnical woman on a torture machine.[59] In 'Covered Market' this male sadistic fantasy is inverted when a mundane, everyday scene of a fish and meat market is transformed into a masochistic fantasy in which a market woman becomes a sinister dominatrix in a torture chamber:

There are vats of blood
Stylishly like an executioner a woman peels off her glove
Her coiffure trembles
Like some dreadful paper
A pheasant stares with desperate eyes[60]

This is a woman's world from which men are banished. The poet also has a feeling of enclosure and restriction; he imagines himself as a caged animal. This image recalls 'Walker in Prague' where the newcomer to the city finds himself in a brothel resembling a prison cell. But it is also reminiscent of Nezval's autobiographical narrative 'History of the Six Empty Houses' in which the unborn poet compares his prenatal life in the mother's womb to enclosure in a corseted cage: 'What strange clothes are worn in January 1900/ And why am I locked in a cage?/ It is a corset.'[61]

The city envelops the poet just as the baby is enclosed within the mother's womb. The child's intimacy with the mother within the Freudian scenario of the Oedipus complex here meshes with the topos of Prague as a mother. For Nezval**,** the mother-city is not simply nurturing and protective; she is also vicious and domineering. One might even conclude that Prague becomes the site of an oedipalized struggle within the Czech political unconscious between Moscow as father and Paris as mother. Karel Srp has discerned a similar obsession with the mother in Karel Teige's collages in which images of female breasts are especially prominent: 'In Teige's view, the breast was not an exclusive ambivalent object; rather, it reminded him of the return to his mother's breasts, which, according to Freud, is the first object a person ever encounters.'[62] As the most prominent theoretican of the Czech avant-garde, Teige never ceased to insist that art should be subordinated to politics. Yet, ironically, his own art work contradicts this precept in its exclusively subjective focus on female anatomy. And in so far as the female body is presented by him as a commodity fetish- and thus a capitalist signifier- his privileging of socialism over capitalism is here subject to reversal. In inverting the traditional male/female, active/passive, socialist/capitalist binaries, the Czech surrealists articulated in personal terms the political failure of the avant-garde to transform a capitalist society into a new one based on left-wing principles. In spite of their desire to embrace a new objective, masculine and socialist sensibility based on Soviet Constructivist principles, the Czech poets of the interwar avant-garde ended up regressing to a nineteenth-century subjectivism derived largely from French poetic models. In fact, one might go so far as to conclude that there was a conflict between art and ideology at the very heart of the European surrealist movement as a whole. Initially Breton, the theoretician and founder of French surrealism, argued that psychoanalysis and Marxism were perfectly compatible; and the Czech surrealists adopted the same utopian position. But this desire for synthesis turned out to be a futile pipe-dream, as confirmed by Breton's attack on Stalin and Soviet Russia in 1935. Throughout the 1930s a similar battle was being waged within the Czech avant-garde between the tenets of French surrealism and Soviet socialist realism. Although Teige thought that theoretically they could coexist, Czech poetic practice suggested otherwise.[63] And as we have seen in the poems and films analysed above, there was- and remained- a tension between French aesthetics and Soviet ideology through all three phases of the Czech avant-garde from the early 1920s to the later 1930s. After an argument between Teige and Nezval, the Czech surrealist group was dissolved in March 1938. But this crisis was in fact merely the culmination of a discrepancy between ideal and practice that had been apparent for the best part of two decades. Although Czech surrealist art did not die out in 1938- Štyrský was active until his death in 1942, Teige continued to make Surrealist collages until his death in 1951 while Toyen was making collages as late as 1970- it is fair to say that, as far as poetry and film were concerned, the first major phase of Czech surrealism came to an end before the outbreak of World War II. [64]

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[1] See Peter Hards, *The Concept of Revolution in Czech Writing, 1918-38*, unpublished PhD dissertation, Cambridge University 1975; Peter Drews, *Devětsil und Poetismus*, *Slavistische Beiträge* (89), Munich 1975; Alfred French, *The Poets of Prague. Czech Poetry between the Wars*, Oxford 1969.

[2] Vladimir Müller, *Der Poetismus*, *Slavistische Beiträge* (121), Munich 1978.

[3] French, *The Poets of Prague*, 5.

[4] Peter Hards, *The Concept of Revolution*: 'Poetism wanted to achieve a synthesis between Moscow and Paris, Moscow as its political teacher, Paris as its teacher on art,' 67.

[5] For masculinity and Vorticism, see Marianne Dekoven, 'Modernism and gender,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism* (ed. Michael Levenson), Cambridge 1999, 176-77. For an outline of Vorticism and the two issues of Lewis's magazine *The Blast* (1914-15), in which its main ideas were enshrined, see Peter Nicholls, *Modernisms. A Literary Guide*, Basingstoke 1995, 173-75.

[6] See Chandak Sengoopta, *Otto Weininger. Sex, Science, and Self in Imperial Vienna*, Chicago 2000.

[7] Jiří Wolker, *Spisy Jiřího Wolkra* (*The Writings of Jiří Wolker)*, vol. 1, Prague 1953, 16. The English translations in this essay are my own.

[8] Wolker, *Spisy*, vol. 1, 44.

[9] Karel Čapek, *Francouzská poezie nové doby* (*Recent French Poetry*), Prague 1981.

[10] Quoted in Hards, *The Concept of Revolution*, 67.

[11] Wolker, *Spisy*, vol. 1, 49.

[12] John Malmstad, 'Wrestling with Representation: Reforging Images of the Artist and Art in the Russian Avant-Garde,' in *Cultures of Forgery. Making Nations, Making Selves* (eds Judith Ryan and Alfred Thomas), New York and London 2003, 145-68.

[13] Yury Olesha, *Envy*, trans. T.S. Berzcynski, Ann Arbor 1975.

[14] Wolker, *Spisy*, vol. 1, 103.

[15] Wolker, *Spisy*, vol. 1, 104.

[16] Jiří Wolker, *Listy příteli* (*Letter to a Friend*), Prague 1951, 76.

[17] Wolker, *Spisy*, vol. 1, 106.

[18] Wolker, *Spisy*, vol. 1, 108.

[19] *Autumn Sonata. Selected Poems of Georg Trakl*, trans. Daniel Simko, New York 1998, 120-21.

[20] Wolker, *Spisy*, vol. 1, 108-9.

[21] Wolker, *Spisy*, vol. 1, 143.

[22] Wolker, *Spisy*, vol. 1, 144.

[23] See the example in the prose dispute *The Weaver* discussed in Alfred Thomas, *Anne's Bohemia. Czech Literature and Society, 1310-1420*, Minneapolis 1998, 139.

[24] Wolker, *Spisy*, vol. 1, 144.

[25] Wolker, *Spisy*, vol. 1, 144.

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[26] Jaroslav Seifert, *Dílo Jaroslava Seiferta*, (*The Works of Jaroslav Seifert*) vol. 1, Prague 2001, 15.

[27] *Dílo Jaroslava Seiferta*, 17.

[28] *Dílo Jaroslava Seiferta*, 51.

[29] *Dílo Jaroslava Seiferta*, 34.

[30] *Dílo Jaroslava Seiferta*, 75-76.

[31] *Dílo Jaroslava Seiferta*, 83.

[32] *Dílo Jaroslava Seiferta*, 83.

[33] Vítězslav Nezval, *Z mého života* (*From My Life*), Prague 1959, 88-89.

[34] *Revoluční sborník Devětsil* (eds Karel Teige and Jaroslav Seifert), Prague 1922, 200.

[35] Karel Teige, 'Umění dnes a zítra' ('Art Today and Tomorrow') in *Revoluční sborník Devětsil*, 187-202.

[36] Vítězslav Nezval, 'Pantomima,' Prague 1924, 32.

[37] Vítězslav Nezval, 'Kapka inkoustu' ('A Drop of Ink') in *Dílo*, vol. 24, Prague 1967, 184.

[38] Jaroslav Seifert, 'Počitadlo' ('Abacus') in *Dílo Jaroslava Seiferta*, vol. 2, Prague 2002, 55.

[39] *Dílo Jaroslava Seiferta*, vol 2 , 128.

[40] Jaroslav Seifert, *Město v slzách* (*Town in Tears*), Prague 1989, 174.

[41] Seifert, *Město v slzách*, 181.

[42] Seifert, *Město v slzách*, 183.

[43] Seifert, *Město v slzách*, 183.

[44] Seifert, *Město v slzách*, 184.

[45] Rhonda K. Garelick, *Rising Star. Dandyism, Gender, and Performance at the Fin de Siècle*, Princeton 1998, 79.

[46] Vítězslav Nezval, *Dílo*, vol. 2, Prague 1952, 83-84.

[47] Karel Čapek, *Spisy*, vol. 7 (*Dramata*), Prague 1992, 93-178.

[48] Jaroslav Anděl, *Alexandr Hackenschmied*, Prague 2000, 8.

[49] André Breton, *Les manifestes du surréalisme*, Paris 1947.

[50] See Karel Brušák, 'Vítězslav Nezval and the Czech Avant-Garde,' in *The Masaryk Journal* (2:1, 1998), 116-18.

[51] For Breton's visit to Prague at the invitation of Teige and Nezval, see Anna Balakian, *André Breton, Magus of Surrealism*, New York 1971, 164.

[52] Brušák, 'Vítězslav Nezval,' 117.

[53] For the nineteenth-century gendering of Prague as a woman, see Angelo Maria Ripellino, *Magic Prague* (trans. David Newton Marinelli and ed. Michael Henry Heim), Berkeley and Los Angeles 1994, 56. For the female personification of Prague in the Hussite tract *The Dispute between Prague and Kutná Hora*, see Thomas, *Anne's Bohemia*, 144-46.

[54] Guillaume Apollinaire, 'Le passant de Prague,' in *Oeuvres en prose*, ed. Michel Décaudin, Paris 1977, 83-93, translated as 'The Wandering Jew,' in *The Heresiarch and Co.* trans. Rémy Inglis Hall, Cambridge, Mass. 1991, 1-12.

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[55] Vítězslav Nezval, *Praha s prsty deště* (*Prague with Fingers of Rain*), Prague, 2000, 11. This edition is a facsimile reprint of the first edition (1936) with Teige's cover illustration and frontispiece. A selection of the poems is translated by Ewald Osers in *Three Czech Poets*, Harmondsworth 1971, 25-63.

[56] Nezval, *Praha s prsty deště*, 12.

[57] Nezval, *Praha s prsty deště*, 20.

[58] Nezval, *Praha s prsty deště*, 176.

[59] Nezval, 'Historie šesti prázdných domů' ('History of the Six Empty Houses'), in *Pět prstů* (*Five Fingers*), Brno 1932, 7-23.

[60] Nezval, *Praha s prsty deště*, 106-7.

[61] Nezval, *Pět prstů*, 9.

[62] Karel Srp, *Karel Teige*, Prague 2001, 21.

[63] Karel Teige, 'Socialistický realismus a surrealismus,' in *Socialistický realismus*, Prague 1935, 164.

[64] Karel Srp, *Jindřich Štyrský*, Prague, 2001. For Toyen's late collages, see the catalogue *L'Univers de Toyen. Exposition du 2 octobre au 15 novembre*, Paris 2003.

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