

Demystifying the Logic of Tamizdat: Philip Roth's Anti-Spectacular Literary Politics

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Abstract Shortly after Nikita Khrushchev delivered his 1956 “secret speech” at the Twentieth Congress of the Soviet Communist Party, the text of the report reached the United States by way of Poland and was published in the *New York Times*. The first secretary’s denunciation of Stalinism thus ironically becomes one of the earliest and best-known specimens of the phenomenon of tamizdat—defined as writing from Eastern Europe illicitly smuggled out and published abroad. This essay critically examines the West’s and specifically the United States’ fascination with tamizdat as symptomatic of the broader politics of representing life behind the iron curtain. It argues that Philip Roth’s sustained professional engagement with the Czech socialist experience can be read as his critical refusal to take part in the dominant U.S. narrative of Eastern European suffering and oppression. The essay analyzes Roth’s 1985 novella *The Prague Orgy* and the theoretical implications of the book’s central plot device—the narrative of a failed tamizdat mission. The article argues that Roth’s work exposes the patterns in which tamizdat, together with the fate of the Eastern European political émigré, becomes a homogeneous, metonymic image for the totality of life under Communism. In *The Prague Orgy*, Roth situates himself in stark opposition to the representational practices of Milan Kundera by resisting the easy sensationalism of such “writing for the West.” Roth prefers to give voice to an array of internal Czech positions, central among which is that of the dissident author Ivan Klíma. Ultimately, Roth’s resistance to stereotypical discourse on the socialist Other comes at an important sociocultural moment in the 1980s, when other American intellectuals prefer the security granted by the narrative of tamizdat.

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Introducing Tamizdat

In John Updike's (1998: 6) story "Bech in Czech," the main character, Henry Bech, a distinguished contemporary Jewish American novelist, is on an official visit to Czechoslovakia, delegated by the State Department to serve as a "cultural icon." The year is 1986, and Bech's Prague tour begins with the obligatory pilgrimage to Franz Kafka's grave, followed by staple experiences for the Westerner in Communist Prague. Czech policemen photograph the people standing in line for Bech's autograph, and the rebellious Prague Spring of 1968 and signing of Charter 77¹ find their almost obligatory mention. Dissidence comes up in the story yet again when the U.S. ambassador takes Bech to "a party of unofficial writers" (ibid.: 12), where he meets members of Prague's underground intelligentsia. At one point, the ambassador urges the local hosts to let Bech see an example of their clandestine publishing efforts: "Show Bech a book! Let's show our famous American author some *samizdat!*" (ibid.: 15). Obliging, a "sexy female dissident" (ibid.: 12) presents the American literary guest with a material sample: "'We type,' she explained, 'six copies maximum; otherwise the bottom ones [*sic*] too blurred. Xeroxing not possible here but for official purposes. Typewriters they can't yet control. Then bound, sometimes with drawings. This one has drawings. See?'" (ibid.: 15-16). Earlier at the party, Bech finds himself musing over the fate of other Czech literary outlaws—those living in exile—and realizes that they too participate in a very similar kind of officially proscribed creative effort: "There was, beyond this little party flickering like a candle in the dark suburbs of Prague, a vast dim world of exile, Czechs in Paris or London or the New World who had left yet somehow now and then returned, to visit a grandmother or to make a motion picture, and émigré presses whose products circulated underground; the Russians could not quite seal off this old heart of Europe as tightly as they could, say, Latvia or Kazakhstan" (ibid.: 13). Important to note here is that, for Bech, the world of domestic samizdat he witnesses sparks the instinctive association with the "world of exile," of "Czechs in Paris or London or the New World." The latter mental image is in fact much more familiar to him and, from Bech's perspective, larger in importance and scope. Updike is obliquely referring here to the overseas literary counterpart of illicit domestic samizdat literature, tamizdat: a Russian neologism that loosely translates as "published there," that is, abroad.²

1. A petition against the Gustav Husák regime signed by Czech intellectuals in January 1977.

2. Of the two terms, *samizdat* is the one that has gained much wider circulation in the English-language world. Indeed, in its general usage it often refers to any illicitly printed writing from Eastern Europe. But in its more technical sense, *samizdat* denotes self-published

During the cold war, samizdat and tamizdat were not only closely connected but were often aspects of one and the same subversive phenomenon. Both in the Soviet Union and in Czechoslovakia, it was common for works initially circulating in samizdat to be subsequently published in the West. Conversely, manuscripts first smuggled overseas later made their way back into Eastern Europe and circulated through established samizdat channels, becoming de facto samizdat material.³ As one critic writes, “*Gosizdat*,⁴ *samizdat* and *tamizdat* are not separate phenomena isolated from one another” (Pospielovsky 1978: 44). The fact that Bech feels the need to contextualize his encounter with Czech domestic dissent by appeal to a more familiar framework of émigré activity in the West assumes symptomatic centrality in my study. His instinctive, unwitting privileging of tamizdat as larger in both proportion and significance bears much deeper resonance. Bech’s move, I suggest, is psychologically instigated by what I term a pervasive Western tamizdat mentality.

In order to delineate the characteristics of this social mind-set, I argue in the following pages that the phenomenon of tamizdat goes well beyond the strictly historical circumstances of its production and dissemination. A distinct Western fascination with its producers and proponents comes to function as mental shorthand for interpreting the larger Eastern European socialist experience. Beyond the scope of its specific practice, tamizdat serves the broader role of encapsulating a set of cultural, ideological, and political positions toward the Communist cold war Other in the bipolar geopolitical divide. The West’s fervent embrace and perpetuation of the dismal narrative of oppression, suffering, persecution, and forced emigration may not be purely instigated by feelings of humane compassion and outrage; a closer scrutiny will elucidate some underlying motivations.

In the analysis below, I read Philip Roth’s novella *The Prague Orgy* (1996 [1985]) as a discerning critique of this Western tamizdat disposition: the novella’s central structuring plot device of a failed tamizdat mission embodies Roth’s resistance to the appeal of a homogeneous image of Eastern Europe. My reading also demonstrates the degree to which the figure of the political émigré is closely intertwined with this tamizdat discourse.

writing behind the iron curtain (hence its domestic nature), while *tamizdat* refers to the official printing and publication in the West of proscribed writing from the socialist world. As the discussion in this article makes clear, tamizdat assumes a “double life,” as printed copies are both distributed in the West and smuggled back East.

3. The fate of Boris Pasternak’s *Doktor Zhivago*—its rejection and denunciation in 1956 in the USSR and its subsequent publication in Italy the following year—is an early apposite example. See also the following pages for additional cases.

4. Officially sanctioned and published Soviet literature. For the possibilities of using gosizdat subversively, see Stiliana Milkova’s essay in this issue.

In the Czech case, Milan Kundera looms large as the most prominent figure in whom physical and literary life abroad coalesce. If Kundera is one of the most prominent molders of a foreign tamizdat mentality, I maintain that Roth prefers instead to give voice to a range of domestic Czech perspectives on life under Communism. Finally, I will show that, even if Roth himself does succumb, in an interview, to the allure of the Western narrative of intolerable suffering in Eastern Europe, he remains on balance a perceptive critic of the dangers of easy stereotypical cold war discourse.

Before proceeding with the analysis of Roth's novella, however, some historical background on the phenomenon of tamizdat is in order. The classical trajectory of a tamizdat text goes through its smuggling out of its home country, its publication in the West, and usually its eventual return to its place of origin in order to circulate through unofficial, underground channels. Tamizdat's beginnings, of course, trace back to the Soviet Union, where the phenomenon falls into two distinct historical periods. Its prehistory, a proto-tamizdat of sorts, spans the years of early Soviet rule (mostly the 1920s), when works were smuggled out of the country to be published abroad. Among the most notable examples are Yevgeny Zamyatin's *My (We)*, which was first published in the United States in English translation in 1924, then in Russian in 1952, and did not officially appear in print in the Soviet Union until 1989; Boris Pilnyak's *Krasnoe derevo (Mahogany)*, issued in 1929 by an émigré publishing house in Berlin; and volumes of Sergei Esenin's poetry, also published in Berlin in 1922 (see Woll 1978). Literature from the early postrevolutionary decades continued to appear abroad in the second half of the 1950s and especially in the 1960s and 1970s, when works by Anna Akhmatova, Osip Mandel'shtam, Marina Tsvetayeva, Mikhail Bulgakov, and Daniil Harms came out in tamizdat and then circulated clandestinely within the USSR (see Skarlygina 2000).

In the post-Stalinist era, Boris Pasternak's *Doktor Zhivago*, first published in Milan in 1957, is probably the earliest example of tamizdat fiction proper. Ironically, just a year before, Nikita Khrushchev's "secret speech" denouncing Stalin was leaked to the West, by way of Warsaw and Israel, and appeared on June 4 in the *New York Times*, thus constituting an even earlier specimen (albeit nonfictional, political) of tamizdat (see Taubman 2003: 284).⁵ Following the Pasternak affair, Andrey Sinyavsky and Yuly Daniel published pseudonymously abroad, and their 1966 Soviet

5. In a different context, the centrality of nonfictional, political samizdat writing in the Soviet Union is analyzed perceptively in Oushakine 2001. For additional perspectives on the wide range of both fictional and nonfictional underground production in Eastern Europe, see the contributions to this issue.

trial and sentence attracted much international attention.⁶ Naturally, the post-Stalinist decades also saw fervent samizdat activity, but as historian Dimitry Pospelovsky (1978: 53) notes, in the Soviet Union of the 1970s it was becoming increasingly “more practical for *samizdat* authors to resort to the growing possibilities of *tamizdat*,” a phenomenon closely tied to Radio Liberty’s broadcasting back east of the materials it received. Confirming *tamizdat*’s preeminent role in uncensored Russian culture, Georgii Vladimov in 1977 wrote a letter to the Soviet Writers’ Union in which he announced his withdrawal from it: “The *Samizdat* epoch is now being replaced by the more long lasting one of *Tamizdat*” (ibid.: 59). Vladimov is referring here to the fate of his own anti-Stalinist novel *Vernyi Ruslan* (*Faithful Ruslan*), which had initially circulated in samizdat during the 1960s, to be followed by publication abroad in Germany in 1975 and in English in 1979. As a result of his association with and defense of Soviet dissidents Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Andrey Sakharov, Vladimov was ultimately forced to leave for Germany in 1983, thus following an increasingly common itinerary from *tamizdat* to political exile (see McMillin 2005).

Other prominent *tamizdat* works of the same period include Solzhenitsyn’s *The First Circle* and *Cancer Ward* (1968), *August 1914* (1971), and the first volume of *The Gulag Archipelago* (1973), the last published by the Paris-based YMCA Press; Andrei Bitov’s *Pushkin House* (1978), issued by the Ardis Press in Michigan; Venedikt Erofeev’s *Moscow to the End of the Line* (1977), in France; Aleksandr Zinovyev’s *Yawning Heights* (1976), in Switzerland; Vladimir Voynovich’s *The Life and Extraordinary Adventures of Private Ivan Chonkin* (1975), in France; and Vasily Grossman’s *Life and Fate* (1980), in Switzerland. Finally, the direct relation between *tamizdat* and physical exile—evident in Vladimov’s personal fate—was more the norm than an exception. Following the same trajectory from *tamizdat* to what one might call *tamzhit*’ (“living there”) were figures such as Sinyavsky, Solzhenitsyn, Joseph Brodsky, Victor Nekrasov, Vladimir Maximov, Voynovich, Vasily Aksyonov, and Zinovyev. Therefore, for these members of the Brezhnev-era third wave of Russian emigration, the practice of literary *tamizdat* is only one part of a larger personal fate of PHYSICAL *tamizdat*, a forced life in exile.⁷ But one can only draw this parallel between the fate of authors’ works and their own lives up to a point: it is equally important to bear in

6. Sinyavsky published the essay “On Socialist Realism” and *The Trial Begins* under the pseudonym Abram Tertz. Daniel’s *Govorit Moskva* (*This Is Moscow Speaking*) (1962) was published in Paris under the pseudonym Nikolai Arzhak.

7. For details on authors of the third wave, see McMillin 1989. For a good overview of *tamizdat* practices in the Soviet Union from the early decades of the twentieth century to the late 1970s, see Pospelovsky 1978.

mind that the smuggling back of tamizdat works to the Soviet Union did not apply to the tamzhit' émigrés themselves.

The post-Stalinist period also saw the flowering of unofficial literary production—in both samizdat and tamizdat—in non-Soviet Eastern Europe. Besides de-Stalinization, however, a variety of local factors contributed to the specific developments of uncensored literary output in each country. In Czechoslovakia, it was the period following the suppression of the 1968 Prague Spring and the reimplementing of austere measures that produced the fertile soil in which unofficial literature thrived. The decade of 1970s “normalization” (i.e., renewed cultural oppression) was thus the period of the most fervent subversive activity.⁸ A central outlet for Czech samizdat practices in the 1970s was dissident Ludvík Vaculík's publishing establishment Edice Petlice (Padlock Editions), while Václav Havel brought out his own series, Edice Expedice (Dispatch). Abroad, major sources for Czech tamizdat publications were the Toronto-based Sixty-Eight Publishers, run by Czech émigré author Josef Škvorecký and his wife after they arrived in Canada in 1969, as well as publishers such as Index (Cologne, West Germany) and Konfrontationsverlag (Zurich, Switzerland) (see Volek and Volek 1983: 23; Skilling 1989). Among the most representative works are Škvorecký's own novels *Tankový prapor* (*The Republic of Whores*, 1971) and *Mirákl* (*The Miracle Games*, 1972); Zdena Salivarová's *Honzlová* (*Summer in Prague*, 1972); Kundera's *Život je jinde* (*Life Is Elsewhere*, 1979 [1969]), composed in 1969 but not allowed publication in Czechoslovakia; and Vaculík's *Morčata* (*The Guinea Pigs*, 1977). The last was written by Vaculík in 1970, then published in samizdat as part of the author's own Edice Petlice series, and subsequently issued as tamizdat by Škvorecký's Sixty-Eight Publishers. In fact, the republication in Toronto of samizdat Padlock titles was common practice in the 1970s, attesting to the close interconnectedness of Czech samizdat and tamizdat (see Volek and Volek 1983: 23–30). Finally, in Czechoslovakia too tamizdat and exile were strongly correlated. Besides Škvorecký, other prominent émigrés included Kundera, Pavel Kohout, Jiří Gruša, Jan Drabek, Arnošt Lustig, Jan Novák, and Daniel Stroj. But as will become clear in the discussion below, there exists a significant difference of positions between internal dissident voices, on the one hand, most perceptible in Ivan Klíma's exchanges with Roth, and the Czech émigré view of life under Communism, on the other hand, embodied by Kundera's work in exile.

8. For a fascinating firsthand account of the origins of Prague samizdat, see Klíma 2001 [1990]: 50–52. See also Martin Machovec's contribution to this issue, offering a detailed typology of Czech samizdat.

Roth in Prague

It is in this general climate and context that Roth began traveling to Prague on a regular basis between 1970 and 1975, when he spent “about three weeks each spring” in the Czech capital (Rothstein 1985). Roth’s visits to Prague were ultimately terminated by the Czech authorities in 1975, when he was denied a visa, presumably due to the authorities’ growing suspicion about his activities in Czechoslovakia (Shechner 2003: 97; Roth 1990: 141).⁹ The novella *The Prague Orgy*, set in Prague in 1976, thus constitutes the summation and encapsulation, in fictional form, of Roth’s formative encounter with Czech socialism. He eventually returned to Prague in 1990, immediately following the country’s Velvet Revolution, and conducted an important interview with former Czech dissident author and longtime personal friend Klíma (Klíma 2001 [1990]).

The early 1970s were also the period when Roth launched (and served as general editor of) the Penguin series *Writers from the Other Europe*, which brought out English editions of works by authors such as Danilo Kiš, Tadeusz Borowski, Kundera, Bruno Schulz, Bohumil Hrabal, and Klíma.¹⁰ The purpose of the series was to introduce English-language readers to the works of little-known authors from the Soviet bloc countries. Significantly, the very title of the series—the *Other Europe*—is highly suggestive of the psychological process of cultural conceptualization that I explore in this essay through a reading of Roth’s Prague novella. It is also worth noting from the outset that my analysis differs substantially from existing critical approaches to the novella (Brown 1993; Ravvin 1991; Shechner 2003; Tintner 1985; Versluys 1995): I contextualize it in, and interpret it as a commentary on, the sociocultural period of tamizdat’s most intense production.

The Prague Orgy comes as the epilogue to Roth’s Zuckerman trilogy—consisting of *The Ghost Writer*, *Zuckerman Unbound*, and *The Anatomy Lesson*—which, together with the Prague novella, was collected in the single volume *Zuckerman Bound* in 1985, the de facto publication of *The Prague Orgy*.¹¹ The novella follows Roth’s most steadfast alter ego, Nathan Zuckerman, as he spends two tumultuous days in Prague in 1976. The book opens in Zuckerman’s New York apartment, where he is visited by two Czech political émigrés, Zdenek Sisovsky and Eva Kalinova. Sisovsky is Czecho-

9. Although the account in *Deception* is a fictional one, it may not be too far removed from the true facts surrounding Roth’s denial of a visa after 1975.

10. For a full list of titles through 1984, see Rodgers 1984: 21–22.

11. The novella, structurally and conceptually self-sufficient within the trilogy, was later published separately by Vintage, and all page references are to this edition. Because it was independently reissued, I render the title in italics.

slovakia's most famous exiled writer, expelled from his homeland together with Eva, his lover and a renowned theater actress, because of a "harmless little satire" he published "in Prague in 1967" (Roth 1996 [1985]: 6).¹² After recounting the horrors of their persecution at home, Sisovsky reveals his true reason for visiting Nathan. Sisovsky's father, a Czech Jew, wrote masterful existentialist short fiction about his suffering during the Nazi occupation before he was killed by a gestapo officer. The senior Sisovsky's stories, written in the "Yiddish of Flaubert," never saw the light of day in the 1940s and now stand no chance of ever being published in Communist Czechoslovakia (22). Zuckerman's secret literary mission is to travel to Prague and smuggle out the coveted manuscripts, currently held by Zdenek's estranged wife, Olga. Unable to resist the temptation of discovering for the West a literary gem possibly more precious than Kafka himself, Zuckerman accepts.¹³ He arrives in Prague, as his dated diary entry informs us, on February 4, 1976. There he quickly finds himself immersed in a circle of dissenters, including filmmakers of the Czech New Wave who are no longer allowed to direct movies, journalists fired from their jobs, outcast abstract painters, and experimental writers unable to publish. Among the latter is Bolotka, who serves as Zuckerman's guide through Prague's dissident underground.

In Prague, Sisovsky's wife, Olga, desperately tries to seduce Nathan and force him to marry her. During his brief stay, he attends a sexually uninhibited party, experiences firsthand the state's surveillance of Westerners, and after much persuading, finally manages to secure the precious stories from Olga. Within minutes, however, the manuscripts are confiscated by the authorities—thwarting Nathan's tamizdat mission—and he is speedily deported from Czechoslovakia, personally escorted to the airport by the minister of culture himself.

Sexing the Other

The Prague Orgy does not live up to the promise of its raunchy title, particularly with respect to its protagonist. Zuckerman, otherwise notorious for his sexual exploits, is curiously abstinent in Prague despite the possibilities open to him. Sisovsky's assurance that, upon meeting him, Olga will be most "compliant" and Nathan's only worry will be "not to lay her too soon" proves presciently accurate, but he resists her advances throughout

12. Hereafter page numbers of the novella are given parenthetically in the text.

13. One cannot help drawing a parallel here to I. B. Singer's statement in a 1976 interview with Roth that Schulz's talent is possibly superior to Kafka's: "When I read him, I said he's better than Kafka" (Roth 2001: 79).

(23, 24). Bolotka too confirms his country's reputation: "Since the Russians, the best orgies in Europe are in Czechoslovakia" (25). Naturally, Zuckerman himself is surprised to find himself assuming such a nonparticipatory status. He is also well aware that his "American readers" would find his behavior equally perplexing, were they able to see him:

I am not fucking everyone, or indeed anyone, but sit quietly on the sofa being polite. I am a dignified, well-behaved, reliable spectator, secure, urbane, calm, polite, the quiet respectable one who does not take his trousers off, and *these* are the menacing writers. All the treats and blandishments, all the spoils that spoil are mine . . . an American gentleman abroad, with the bracing if old-fashioned illusion that he is playing a worthwhile, dignified, and honorable role. (36–37)

Zuckerman's curious behavior, I suggest, has much deeper significations for the position Roth assumes in the American intellectual debate over Eastern Europe. His character's abstinence ultimately operates to express Roth's opposition to what Sisovsky's loaded representation of Czechoslovakia comes to stand for. Together with the novella's botched tamizdat mission, Roth's refusal of the rhetoric trading on Eastern European lascivious sexuality becomes the other main narrative device through which the dominant Western logic of tamizdat is defied.

Early in the book, Sisovsky suggests that his and Zuckerman's literary fates are surprisingly similar; to wit, each novelist has published a book that has generated controversy: "When we arrived in Canada from Rome, yours was the first book that I bought. I have learned that it had a scandalous response here in America. When you were so kind to agree to see me, I went to the library to find out how Americans have perceived your work. The question interests me because of how Czechs perceived my own work, which also had a 'scandalous response'" (5). Sisovsky purportedly does not wish "to compare our two books," and Zuckerman is equally modest about the suggested kinship: "Whatever the scandal, I have been profusely—bizarrely—rewarded. Everything from an Upper East Side address to helping worthy murderers get out on parole. That's the power a scandal bestows over here. It's *you* who's been punished in the harshest way. Banning your book, prohibiting your publication, driving you from your country—what could be more burdensome and stupid than that?" (6). Even in the face of these apparent disparities, Sisovsky's suggested professional affinity with Zuckerman bears powerful nonfictional resonance. The real-life prototypes of each author and novel in *The Prague Orgy* are readily apparent. Sisovsky's 1967 political satire alludes to Kundera's *The Joke*, published that very year. Like Zdenek and Eva, Kundera was subse-

quently forced to leave Czechoslovakia with his wife, Vera Hrabankova, in 1975 (Čulík 2001: 219).¹⁴ Zuckerman's own controversial novel, *Carnovsky*, stands for Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint*, which came out just two years after *The Joke* (cf. Shechner 2003: 79–80).

This earlier momentary alliance between Roth and Kundera, however, is not reaffirmed in the remainder of *The Prague Orgy*. Quite the contrary, the central thrust of Roth's argument in the novella is the articulation of an anti-Kundera representational position toward Eastern Europe. Kundera generated scandal from within Czechoslovakia through direct political dissent, but once abroad, Kundera's writing starts to rely centrally on the trope of sexuality in order to effect a similar critique (Sturdivant 1985). Indeed, in an interview with Kundera about his *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1980 [1978]), Roth (2001: 99) observes that "all the individual parts of your latest book find their denouement in great scenes of coitus," and Kundera confirms that for him "the erotic scene is the focus where all the themes of the story converge and where its deepest secrets are located" (*ibid.*). Much more than exhibiting a sheer literary fascination with the libidinal drive, then, the erotic content of Kundera's émigré novels acquires ideological significance, which we can infer through an analysis of Roth's character Sisovsky.

In Zuckerman's New York apartment, Sisovsky clearly perceives and presents himself as the repressed political émigré par excellence, whose responsibility it is to perpetuate for his Western audiences the horrendous tales of Communist repression. When Sisovsky dutifully goes into his oft-repeated accounts, which include tales of the injustice Eva was subjected to, she protests that she is "sick to death of these boring stories" and refuses to be "an ironical Czech character in an ironical Czech story" (17, 12). As Sisovsky makes clear, his set pieces about their suffering—especially the ones about Eva's cruel mistreatment—have been the cause of previous heated clashes as well: "There are dramatic scenes where she calls me a pimp" (17). Eva's odd accusation implies that Sisovsky's new status in the West resembles that of a promoter of ideological prostitution, and the analogy to sexual exploitation is by no means accidental. If indeed we can read here a critique of Kundera's own representation of his homeland from his newly found exile, the sexual overtones become consistent.

Eva's anger at Sisovsky's conduct can be interpreted, I suggest, as a broader critique of the reader's transitory encounter with the socialist other in Kundera's work. More specifically, Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of*

14. The fictional Eva is a persecuted theater actress, while real-life Vera is a banned television presenter.

Being (1984a)—possibly the novel in which sexuality and Czech oppression are thematized most extensively—was published in English in 1984, a year before *The Prague Orgy* came out. Bearing in mind Roth's continual professional interest in Kundera's work, as well as his familiarity with internal Prague intellectual debates, it can be safely assumed that he had read the book before or while writing his novella. Kundera's arguably most significant novel from exile revolves around the fate of its protagonist, Tomas, a sexually promiscuous Prague surgeon, who is expelled from Czechoslovakia for writing an article critical of the regime. The novel suggests that the rampant sexuality in Eastern Europe is intricately connected to and a substitute for individual political impotence—precisely the issue on which Kundera becomes most enraging for his compatriots (Klíma 2001 [1990]). Furthermore, his insistent depiction of life under Communism via the vocabulary of sexuality (cf. Scarpetta 1999: 190) is not too far removed from Western anti-Communist propaganda techniques of sexualizing the other, where ideological perversity and oppression result in sexual aberrations in the populace subjected to such psychological torment.¹⁵

If Kundera's sexually active alter ego Tomas carries an authorial message, Roth conversely invests in Zuckerman his own dissenting stance. In addition to being the central character of *The Prague Orgy*, Nathan thus also acts as Tomas's opposite in this intertextual collision of perspectives on Eastern Europe. The chronological proximity of publication, compounded by the shared thematics of Kundera's *Lightness* and Roth's *Orgy*, imply the intertextual relation that I am suggesting. Yet another piece of evidence provides further support. Precisely at the point when Zuckerman contemplates his newly discovered prudent self, amid a multitude of Prague dissidents, he exclaims: "And yet, what a witty, stylish comedy of manners these have-nots of Prague make out of their *unbearable* condition, this crushing business of being completely balked and walking the treadmill of humiliation" (37; emphasis added). Considering how meticulous a stylist Roth is, a single adjective pointing back to Kundera's title is a telling enough sign. By resisting and putting to critical scrutiny Kundera's artistic depictions of a reality unfamiliar to the Western world, Roth is centrally concerned with going against the hyperbolic narrative of a monstrous Communist other. Precisely because the discourse of sexual promiscuity is an integral part of what I term a Western tamizdat mentality, Roth's Zuckerman assumes his oppositional stance of sexual abstinence.

Furthermore, even if at first glance Zuckerman's Prague hosts seemingly corroborate the image of an orgiastic existence, their assertions can be

15. A classical example of such sexual Western propaganda at its basest is Stafford 1967.

read more accurately as ventriloquist parodic echoes of the image for the West. Bolotka, for example, tells the American guest: “Less liberty, better fucks. . . . Come to the orgy, Zuckerman—you will see the final stage of the revolution” (25). Olga too assures Nathan that “to be fucked is the only freedom left in this country. To fuck and to be fucked is all we have left that they cannot stop” (73). As I have attempted to show, however, Bolotka’s and Olga’s statements are better read as mocking Kundera’s sexualized depiction, and Zuckerman’s abstinence in Prague is accordingly a conscious statement of his refusal to join in this sexualized imaging of Eastern Europe’s famed allure.

The radical discordance between stories told from the outside for the Western listener and the less spectacular reality of things on the ground, seen from within, becomes in a sense Roth’s central message in the novella. More importantly, this process of demystification extends not only to the narrative of sexuality but to that of Eastern European suffering and oppression as well. One key scene in that respect is Olga’s scornful denunciation of Sisovsky’s most heartrending tale. Once Eva has stormed out of the room, enraged by Sisovsky’s unflinching resolve to keep on narrating their suffering, Sisovsky can proceed unperturbed with “another of my boring European stories” (19). He narrates for Zuckerman the account of his father’s protection by a gestapo officer and of the father’s subsequent spiteful murder by another German officer. Once in Prague, however, Zuckerman is quickly disabused by Olga:

“Well, that is another lie. It happened to another writer, who didn’t even write in Yiddish. . . . Sisovsky’s father was killed in a bus accident. Sisovsky’s father hid in the bathroom of a Gentile friend, hid there through the war from the Nazis, and his friend brought him cigarettes and whores.”

“I find it hard believing that.”

“Of course—because it’s not as horrible a story! They all say their fathers were killed by the Nazis. By now even the sixteen-year-old girls know not to believe them. Only people like you, only a shallow, sentimental, American idiot Jew who thinks there is virtue in suffering!” (59)

The story that the fictional Sisovsky claims as his father’s is, in actuality, that of real-life author Schulz, a hidden reference that critics have been quick to point out (see Brown 1993). Olga’s role in this scene is thus to dampen the West’s fascination with, and the awe inspired by, Kundera-type stories, and Roth himself similarly prefers to give voice to the internal discontent with the strong element of mythmaking in the tailoring of experience to Western consumption.

If Olga disabuses Zuckerman on one particular subject late in the story, this becomes Bolotka’s central mission throughout the book. Indeed,

despite references to his “sixteen girl friends,” he remains, above all else, a relentless demystifier of all Sisovsky-style stories for the free world (40). In this sense, Bolotka comes to stand for the harshest internal critic of the Western embrace of the standard tamizdat narrative. Mark Shechner (2003: 105) has pointed out that behind Bolotka hides the Czech dissident author Klíma, Roth’s close personal friend, important local guide and informant, and as will soon emerge, occasional critic. In fact, Roth (2001: 44) himself has openly described Klíma’s central role in his Prague visits:

During the early seventies, when I began to make a trip to Prague each spring, Ivan Klíma was my principal reality instructor. He drove me around the street-corner kiosks where writers sold cigarettes, to the public buildings where they mopped floors, to the construction sites where they were laying bricks, and out of the city to municipal waterworks where they slogged about in overalls and boots, a wrench in one pocket and a book in the other. When I got to talk at length with these writers, it was often over dinner at Ivan’s house.

Not surprisingly, then, Bolotka’s role as an anti-Sisovsky counterweight played itself out in nonfictional terms too.

Nonfictional Debates: Klíma versus Kundera

The real-life Klíma-Kundera juxtaposition of perspectives reached its most explicit enunciation during Roth’s return in 1990 to the newly democratic Prague. Early that year, just a few months after Czechoslovakia’s Velvet Revolution, Roth met again with his longtime friend and conducted an extensive interview. It appeared originally in the *New York Review of Books* and was later collected in a book of Roth’s interviews with writers he had talked to over the years (Klíma 2001 [1990]). The above quotation comes from Roth’s preamble to the interview with Klíma, and in that same introduction he makes a late attempt to reconcile his two Czech literary friends as the political partition dividing them has finally collapsed. After summarizing Klíma’s biography, including a period as a child at the Terezin concentration camp, the banning after 1970 of his work at home, and his publication in tamizdat, Roth initially acknowledges that Klíma is “Milan Kundera’s antithesis.” Nevertheless, indicating a “correspondence of preoccupations” and themes, he goes on to suggest an “odd, tense kinship,” even if both Klíma and Kundera will themselves certainly deem this literary alliance “unlikely” (ibid.: 43). In the same paragraph, Roth compares Klíma’s novel *Love and Garbage*, which has finally just come out in free Czechoslovakia, with Kundera’s *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and acknowledges that the two authors’ perspectives are “discordant, even adversarial” (ibid.: 44). Indeed, Klíma’s own statements in the interview testify to the degree to which his kinship with Kundera is, beyond all else,

Roth's own idealistic notion. Klíma sets forth the most extensive enunciation not only of his own but of the overwhelming Czech view of Kundera in his native land.

Roth's position in the interview is to defend Kundera and even to express his surprise at the fervor of the negative Czech reaction to Kundera. He reports the accusations he has heard during his present visit that Kundera has been "writing 'for' the French, 'for' the Americans" and thus betraying his home country. Roth attempts to be understanding about the choices that Kundera was forced to make when altering his novelistic practices in order to meet the exigencies of personal exile. For Roth, this "does not represent . . . a lapse of integrity, let alone a falsification of his experience, but a strong, innovative response to an inescapable challenge" (ibid.: 55). In the light of the preceding analysis, Roth's approach here may seem too defensive and at odds with his original *Prague Orgy* position. But this defense may in fact only be serving a necessary mitigating function, considering the acerbity of Klíma's extensive answer, which details the Czech intellectuals' resentment of Kundera. Portions of this answer, so central to what I have been discussing, are worth quoting at some length:

The reproach that he is writing for foreigners rather than for Czechs is only one of the many reproaches addressed to Kundera and only a part of the more substantive rebuke—that he has lost his ties to his native country. We can really leave aside the matter of quality because largely the allergy to him is not produced by the quality of his writing but by something else. . . . In my opinion the allergy is caused, in part, by what people take to be the simplified and spectacular way in which Kundera presents his Czech experience. . . . The totalitarian system is terribly hard on people, as Kundera recognizes, but the hardness of life has a much more complicated shape than we find in his presentation of it. Kundera's picture, his critics would tell you, is the sort of picture that you would see from a very capable foreign journalist who'd spent a few days in our country. Such a picture is acceptable to the Western reader because it confirms his expectations; it reinforces the fairy tale about good and evil, which a good child likes to hear again and again. But for these Czech readers our reality is no fairy tale. They expect a much more comprehensive and complex picture, a deeper insight into our lives from a writer of Kundera's stature. (Ibid.: 55–56)

Roth's apparent self-distancing from Klíma's lashing out may well be driven by personal diplomatic tact more than anything else. After all, Roth had a long-lasting personal relationship with Kundera (Kundera 2001), on which this interview, about to be published in the influential *New York Review of Books*, would undoubtedly have repercussions. Indeed, Klíma told me recently that the initial version of his Kundera critique was much more caustic than the published text. Upon reading the draft, Roth asked Klíma

to mitigate his tone, so that they might avoid generating a public scandal (Klíma 2006). Possibly out of similar concerns, Klíma (2001 [1990]: 57) ends his extended answer with a final paragraph defending Kundera against the Czechs' overzealous possessiveness over their suffering and concludes that Kundera is "without a doubt, one of the great Czech writers of this century."

It becomes clear from Klíma's position in the interview that he is not advocating a denial of the existence of authoritarian oppression behind the iron curtain. What he does seem to reject, however, is an inaccurate, simplified, black-and-white, two-dimensional, homogeneous image of absolute horror and suffering in the East—what I term the *tamizdat* mentality—contrasted with an idyllic paradise out West. Roth's own stance involves, by extension, a vigilant self-distancing from a large segment of the American intellectual community, who are all too willing to espouse and embrace the radical émigré story.

Klíma makes clear that the attitude he is expressing toward Kundera is not merely his own but widespread among Czech intellectuals. The literary scholar Hana Pichova (2002) has usefully detailed the history of such Czech reactions to Kundera. In 1968 he was involved in a public polemic with Havel—Czechoslovakia's dissident playwright, philosopher, and future president—over the appropriate conduct for small nations like Czechoslovakia. As early as that, Kundera had already agonized over the inevitable destruction of his nation's political independence and cultural uniqueness at the hands of the Soviets, while Havel publicly opposed Kundera's deterministic pessimism. Kundera's two books in exile, *Laughter and Forgetting* and *Unbearable Lightness of Being*, developed these views in fictional form and in 1986 triggered another internal reaction, this time from dissident literary critic Milan Jungmann. Pichova goes on to examine the reception history of Jungmann's denunciatory article, "Kundera's Paradoxes," both at home and abroad. It generated a significant split between the communities of exiled émigrés and internal dissidents much along the lines I have presented here. After taking issue with Kundera's sexual themes and philosophical musings and after pointing out the implausibility of Tomas's professional demotion from surgeon to window washer in Kundera's second novel from France, Jungmann "openly reproaches Western criticism for lack of rigor, skepticism, and questioning in regards to Kundera" (Pichova 2002: 106). Finally, what is most interesting to note is that in each case the attack on Kundera—by Havel, Klíma, and Jungmann—does not come from establishment functionaries but from morally uncompromised dissident compatriots, themselves under attack at home.

Zuckerman Disabused

Several scenes in the novella present in fictional form a version similar to Jungmann's and Klíma's unmasking of Western stereotypes. In a desperate attempt to cajole Zuckerman into submitting to her advances, Olga informs him: "Now they will interrogate me about you. For six hours they will interrogate me about you, and I won't even be able to tell them we fucked" (37). If this prospect only confirms Sisovsky's description of a cruel surveillance state, Bolotka's explanation exposes Olga's hidden attempt to exploit Western misconceptions: "Their interrogations are not to be dramatized. . . . It is routine work. Whenever someone is questioned by Czech police he is questioned about everything that he can be asked. They are interested in everything. Now they are interested in you, but it does not mean that to be in touch with you could compromise anybody and that the police could accuse people who are in touch with you" (38). Later on, Bolotka repeats the point in a more lighthearted way: "Don't credit the secret police with so much . . . the police are like literary critics—of what little they see, they get most wrong anyway. They *are* the literary critics. Our literary criticism is police criticism" (65). Zuckerman quickly comprehends Bolotka's importance as a dispassionate local witness and commentator on the true state of affairs, and he offers a pungent description of his host's mission to pour "a little cold water on free-world fantasies of virtuous political suffering" (26). As previously stated, Zuckerman's deliberate sexual abstinence is one expression of self-alignment with this internal point of view. An additional demonstration of his openness toward alternative positions on the Eastern European experience, his desire for a more thoughtful and assiduous examination, involves another divergence from the Zuckerman in America with whom we are familiar from the earlier novels in the trilogy. Instead of the garrulous, all-knowing Nathan, here we encounter a curiously silent observer. Again, this oddity strikes Zuckerman himself, and he muses: "They, all silenced, are all mouth. I am only ears" (37). The narrator's unobtrusive silence is part of Roth's overall strategy to present a multiplicity of Czech stories and viewpoints, rendered as directly as possible within the inevitable limits of the overarching Zuckerman narrative.

Within *The Prague Orgy's* fictional world, Roth's strategy manages to bring together an array of contrasting voices, positions, and opinions. In a sense, this Bakhtinian dialogism is an expression of the complex presentation that Kundera is accused of lacking by only offering a monologic story of his own. Instead of speaking his mind throughout, Nathan prefers to record and transcribe as wide a sampling of insiders' voices as he can manage. And these also include standpoints (most notably, that of the

minister of culture) diametrically opposed to the Bolotka story of internal dissent. To his credit, Roth does not content himself with drawing a binary contrast between the Kundera-type émigré in the West and his internal Klíma-like dissident opponents.

Since in the Western worldview the only conceivable reality for the East is absolute suffering, oppression, and persecution, the natural alternative, as presented by Sisovsky and the émigré community more generally, is that of radical opposition. Sisovsky's account offers a binary model, in which these two extremes are the only options. The righteous, courageous path to follow is his own—to leave the country rather than recant. Indeed, when Zuckerman asks his Czech guest why he chose to leave, Zdenek answers that the sole alternative would have been to take “the way of resignation” (8). From Sisovsky's (and, presumably, Kundera's) point of view, resignation is an impossible choice because it is “out-and-out cowardly” (9). It is clear why such a position would embitter the internal Czech dissident community, and Zuckerman's interaction with Bolotka aims to provide a riposte that exposes the artificiality of Sisovsky's binarism of resignation versus emigration. On one occasion, Bolotka tells his guest the story of a Czech poet who, after declaring himself mad, was sent to an insane asylum. Prior to that, with his sexually explicit poetry banned, he had been reduced to selling tickets at a railway station. The poet's hospitalization was a smart ruse on his part in order to find a possibility to write at leisure once again. Shaken by the anecdote, Zuckerman asks, “How do you all live like this?” to which Bolotka trenchantly replies, “Human adaptability is a great blessing” (35).

Indeed, the theme of adaptability oddly becomes the moral answer to Sisovsky's accusation of cowardly resignation. It presents the insiders' anti-Kundera untold tale that it is Nathan's responsibility to make heard. Roth's emphasis here falls on the fact that the West's fascination with the fate of the Eastern political émigré is an obsession with an unrepresentative minority. Yet that minority's tamizdat story is virtually the only audibly dominant one, in which everyone else is morally compromised for not following their example of rebellion. Roth's aim, then, is to give voice to the internal dissident position, which is otherwise silenced. Bolotka, as an anti-Sisovsky figure, counters that one *can* adapt without sacrificing one's moral conscience, and his circle of Prague dissidents, he seems to suggest, practices the solution in their daily lives.

Roth's search for alternative Czech voices does not end here, however. After all, even Klíma's circle of Prague's dissident intelligentsia is ultimately a miniscule segment, equally unrepresentative. Thus, Roth takes his search for other perspectives to a new radical extreme at the novella's

denouement. When Zuckerman finally acquires the precious manuscripts from Olga and returns to his hotel room, state agents immediately show up and confiscate the stories. He is asked to pack his belongings and is escorted to the airport in a state limousine. In the car, he realizes that he is seated next to no less a person than the minister of culture himself, who has come to see him off. In the novella's last few pages, the *Kulturminister*, Novak, presents Zuckerman with the theme of human adaptability driven to its extreme end. In his version of the story, neither the Czechs in exile whom Zuckerman has met nor even the Prague dissidents he befriended are representative of the country's population. Had Zuckerman been more prudent in his choice of associates, he would have reached a different conclusion: "You would understand that the ordinary Czech citizen does not think like the sort of people you have chosen to meet. He does not behave like them and he does not admire them. The ordinary Czech is repelled by such people. Who are they? Sexual perverts. Alienated neurotics. Bitter egomaniacs. They seem to you courageous?" (79). The minister goes on to inform Zuckerman that if most Czechs had behaved as rashly as these dissenters, Leonid Brezhnev would have acted upon his threat to reform-minded Czech leader Alexander Dubček in 1968 to turn Czechoslovakia into a Soviet republic, eradicating not only all of Czech culture but even its very language: "Those Czechs who inflame the anger of our mighty neighbor are not patriots — *they are the enemy*. There is nothing praiseworthy about them. The men to praise in this country are men like my own little father" (81). Novak's father, it turns out, is the paragon of submissive self-adjustment: he successively adapts to each new shift in his native land's control of political power in a desire to preserve not only his own well-being but that of his whole nation. The minister's father is the truly laudable representative of the vast majority of Czechs, who "*know how to submit decently to their historical misfortune! These are the people to whom we owe the survival of our beloved land, and not to alienated, degenerate, egomaniacal artistes!*" (82–83; emphasis in original).

Roth's ability to express convincingly what would normally sound like absurd positions is familiar from other novels as well. In *Operation Shylock*, for example, a Roth impostor defends passionately the need for an exodus of the intellectual, Ashkenazi Jews from Israel back to their true homeland of a culturally cultivated Europe. He terms his "Solution to the Jewish Problem" Diasporism and meets with Solidarity leader Lech Wałęsa to arrange the "resettlement of Jews in Poland" (Roth 1993: 18, 22). Even if the *Kulturminister*'s position ultimately remains similarly suspect, it serves an important concluding function in the narrator's gradual development. What is significant is that Zuckerman will pause for a moment to con-

sider this view of prudently submissive adaptability as enjoying a validity of sorts. Furthermore, its spurious logic serves yet another function as it reveals by analogy the West's own gullibility in its unquestioning adoption of a tamizdat mentality. Novak's speech is the final piece in a multilayered assortment of perspectives that Nathan has been absorbing during his forty-eight-hour journey of discovery. In the process, he has also become much less credulous and is quick to wonder whether "Novak's narrative is any less an invention than Sisovsky's" (85). He has finally reached the full realization that the novella has been moving toward, namely that "Sisovsky's stories, those told to me in New York, were tailored to exploit the listener's sentiments, a strategically devised fiction" (84).

A Momentary Lapse of Reason: Klíma versus Roth

At the end of the novella, then, Zuckerman has certainly learned the lesson of the dangerous falsity of stories of the East as told or heard in New York. But once in New York, Roth himself will, in some small measure, become guilty of Sisovsky's sin. At certain moments of his American public life, Roth avails himself of the conveniently simplified Western categories of martyred suffering that invites our compassion. And at one such particularly explicit moment of Roth's slippage into the Sisovsky formula, Klíma directs his anti-Kundera, anti-tamizdat logic toward Roth himself.

Immediately following *The Prague Orgy's* publication, Roth gave an interview to the *New York Times* which contains an interesting evaluation of the novella's crucial importance within the *Zuckerman Bound* trilogy cum epilogue: "This material—which in fact had inspired the whole enterprise—belonged at the very end. In order for Prague to have the impact upon the reader that it originally had on me, I had to write a 697-page introduction" (Rothstein 1985). This statement is an important testament to the significance of Eastern Europe in Roth's professional career. Roth himself points to the germinal, generative power of his Czech experience over the totality of the Zuckerman oeuvre. Indeed, he repeats time and again the topos of his Eastern European experience as personally transformative: "I met a lot of writers there, saw something of their misery, and saw very sharply the contrast to my own writing life. The gap was enormous between my professional opportunities and theirs, between the place my work and their work has in society, between the pressures crushing them and those impinging on me. All this got me thinking about a book" (ibid.). The theme of Prague as a catalyst for self-reflexive musing on the American literary experience is also briefly thematized in the novella itself. At a railway café peopled by ordinary workers, Nathan is reminded of one of

Bolotka's paradoxes of life in Czechoslovakia: menial labor is carried out by the highly skilled intellectuals in disfavor. Zuckerman tries to envision what such repression of creativity would mean in his own country: "I imagine Styron washing glasses in a Penn Station barroom, Susan Sontag wrapping buns at a Broadway bakery, Gore Vidal bicycling salamis to school lunchrooms in Queens—I look at the filthy floor and see myself sweeping it" (61). In Roth's professional life, as his nonfictional statements have confirmed, the Eastern European writers' experience serves as a constant yardstick by which Roth measures and puts into perspective his own status as a writer and that of the American author more generally.

According to Roth's most memorably felicitous aphorism on the subject—which has since become something of a catchphrase—in America "everything goes and nothing matters," while under a totalitarian regime "nothing goes and everything matters" (Lee 1992a [1984]: 184). The original context for this maxim was an interview Roth gave to the British critic and his personal friend Hermione Lee. The interview was conducted in the summer of 1983 and published the following year in the fall issue of the *Paris Review* as the eighty-fourth installment of the magazine's Writers at Work interview series. Most of Roth's answers concern his writing habits, creative practices, compositional mechanics, treatment of female characters, and so forth. Then, close to the end of the interview, Roth presents his views on the status of culture in the United States. In "commercial society," he claims, "culture is a maw," it is not granted any status or significance. In contrast, culture under totalitarian regimes is controlled and dictated by the state—by far the worse option in Roth's estimation. Roth goes on to add:

When I was first in Czechoslovakia, it occurred to me that I work in a society where as a writer everything goes and nothing matters, while for the Czech writers I met in Prague, nothing goes and everything matters. This isn't to say I wished to change places. I didn't envy them their persecution and the way in which it heightens their social importance. I didn't even envy them their seemingly more valuable and serious themes. (Ibid.)

Feeling bound to stand up for American literature and, by extension, his own work against an accusation voiced by George Steiner that such writing pales in comparison with the grave themes of literature written in the socialist East, Roth adds his most crucial statement:

I wonder then 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? Sometimes one or two writers with colossal brute strength do manage, miraculously, to sur-

vive and, taking the system as their subject, to make art of a very high order out of their persecution. But most of them who remain sealed up inside totalitarian states are, as writers, destroyed by the system. That system doesn't make masterpieces; it makes coronaries, ulcers, and asthma, it makes alcoholics, it makes depressives, it makes bitterness and desperation and insanity. The writers are intellectually disfigured, spiritually demoralized, physically sickened, and culturally bored. Frequently they are silenced completely. Nine-tenths of the best of them will never do their best work just because of the system. The writers nourished by this system are the party hacks. When such a system prevails for two or three generations, relentlessly grinding away at a community of writers for twenty, thirty, or forty years, the obsessions become fixed, the language grows stale, the readership slowly dies out from starvation and the existence of a national literature of originality, variety, vibrancy (which is very different from the brute survival of a single powerful voice) is nearly impossible. A literature that has the misfortune of remaining isolated underground for too long will inevitably become provincial, backward, even naïve, despite the fund of dark experience that may inspire it. By contrast, our work here hasn't been deprived of authenticity because as writers we haven't been stomped on by a totalitarian government. . . . If the choice is between Louis L'Amour and our literary freedom and our extensive, lively, national literature on the one hand, and Solzhenitsyn and that cultural desert and crushing suppression on the other, I'll take L'Amour. (Ibid.: 185–86)

At the moment of Roth's most extended enunciation of a tamizdat ideological position—his most significant departure from his stance in the novella—he is rehearsing almost verbatim key pronouncements by Kundera about the ineluctable annihilation of organic national cultures at the hands of Soviet oppression.¹⁶

Lee's lengthy interview with Roth might well have remained within the strictly Western circulation that it aimed for. As fate would have it, though, from the whole Lee-Roth exchange, *Harper's* magazine carefully chose to excerpt and reprint in its February 1985 issue only Roth's above-cited extended musing on literature and the Eastern European experience. The magazine's own ideological stakes in this tendentious selectivity, and its overall role in fashioning in the United States an image of life behind the iron curtain under Lewis Lapham's editorial stewardship in the 1980s, are important scholarly issues in their own right but beyond the scope of this essay. What is relevant to note is that this *Harper's* issue happened to fall into Klíma's hands and triggered his livid public reaction.

16. Kundera's best-known essay expressing his tragic philosophy is "The Tragedy of Central Europe" (1984b). The ideas he expresses there, however, are not new for him but had appeared prior to that, including in the above-cited Kundera-Havel debate as well as in his interview with Roth (Kundera 2001).

In an open letter titled “The Writer and Unfreedom” and published in the same magazine in December 1985, Klíma took his American friend to task for his statements. Klíma opens his letter with an argument surprisingly close to what he will later describe in his statement on Kundera as the Czechs’ xenophobic possessiveness over their own suffering. Roth, Klíma claims, is an author who has always based his writing on the intimate knowledge of his own life and society. Yet in the Lee interview he speaks authoritatively, and hence possessively, about someone else’s complex experience. His three-week-long visits to Prague over a period of just a few years cannot be equal to the locals’ lifelong encounters with reality in Eastern Europe. Klíma (1985: 30) is quite blunt in assuring Roth that “some of your categorical statements on the dark prospects of literature in unfreedom are based on insufficient, or rather one-sided, information.” Roth’s diametrical opposites of literary freedom versus stifling totalitarian oppression are, in reality, “not quite so clear-cut as you see it” (ibid.: 31). As evidence, Klíma adduces the fact that artists in the satellite countries *can* make the choice of whether to live and work at home or abroad. Understandably, Klíma (ibid.) takes particular offense at Roth’s suggestion that the majority of the dissident literature is “doomed to remain provincial, backward, and naïve” and suggests that, more than anything, it points to Roth’s lack of sufficient familiarity with contemporary literature in the Soviet bloc. Such unfamiliarity from a Western perspective stems not from any inherent qualitative inferiority but from the fact that this literature is “written in a minority language.” After all, the Russian giants of the nineteenth century, writes Klíma, all created their masterpieces at a time of strict state surveillance. Klíma (ibid.) then proceeds with other counterexamples to reach his final conclusion that “there is no direct link between political system and great literature.”

Klíma’s excoriation of Roth thus progresses along the very same lines of his elaboration of the Czech anti-Kundera sentiment. For him, both writers’ logic operates on a dramatically simplified view of life’s complexities. Indeed, the adjective *simplified*, modifying nouns like *version*, *outlook*, and *view* as well as on its own, is repeated in the letter with quietly implacable didacticism. The temptation to divide the world into diametrical binaries of “good and evil” or freedom and unfreedom is not only a hasty solution via the tamizdat route of stereotypes but a particularly unliterary mode of thinking. Klíma (ibid.: 32) underscores his conviction that “if literature has any mission at all, surely it must lie in its constant confirmation of life as it really is, as opposed to some simplified version of life and the world we live in.” According to him, Roth is thus betraying his responsibility as a serious novelist when, in a moment of reckless interviewee passion, he

so categorically asserts that in the East one will only find “ulcers, asthma, depression, and insanity” (ibid.). In short, Klíma’s admonition makes clear that there is a beaten path of stereotypes in the representation of life in the East, a so-called “conventional wisdom in the West”—or what I term a tamizdat mentality—and that Roth has succumbed to its temptations by availing himself of the quick rewards of this discourse. Concluding with his own more complicated summation of reality in Czechoslovakia as he has experienced it, Klíma (ibid.) suggests that “one can be free even while living in conditions of unfreedom. The creative act is only partly dependent on outside circumstances.”

Uncharacteristically for Roth, he never responded to Klíma’s 1985 letter, while *The Prague Orgy* came out somewhere in the interlude between the two *Harper’s* pieces. Even if this chronology places the novella’s composition and publication prior to Klíma’s acerbic missive, my reading of the *Orgy* suggests that it can be interpreted as Roth’s fictional mea culpa addressed to his Czech friend. The multilayered complexity of voices in the novella, coupled with its skepticism toward the urge in the West to sensationalize the representation of life under socialism, speaks to the fact that Roth’s more balanced and well-rounded perspective emerges in fictional form. In some sense, *The Prague Orgy* demonstrates a genuinely *literary*, unsimplified mode of thinking, as defined by Klíma. The lesson that Nathan assures us he has learned at the end of the novella is a lesson that Roth himself has momentarily preferred to forget but that he is otherwise well aware of and can masterfully dramatize.

Conclusion

Lee (1992b [1990]: 264) notes that the writers in whom Roth has a professional interest—Kundera, Klíma, Primo Levi—are all “writing about suffering”; it is their “obstructed imaginations” that fascinate him most. Lee goes on to add that in Roth’s 1990 novel *Deception* we hear once again the voices of those “obstructed Eastern European characters—used here, perhaps, for the last time?” (ibid.). If *The Prague Orgy* was importantly intertwined contextually with the concurrent 1985 written exchange between Roth and Klíma, *Deception* similarly coincides both temporally and conceptually with their 1990 conversation. Each of these two 1990 texts thematizes in its own way the implications of the end of the cold war. Lee’s conjecture that Roth’s Eastern European characters are making their final appearance gains validity precisely from the status *Deception* assumes after its publication. Even if Roth may not have been aware of it during the writing, his book becomes his final cold war Zuckerman novel. Significantly, in the late

1990s Roth wrote a second influential Zuckerman trilogy, which included *American Pastoral* (1997), *I Married a Communist* (1998), and *The Human Stain* (2000). The Nathan we encounter there reflects Roth's marked shift in the 1990s away from the obsessive psychology of the self toward a deeper and more mature historicity (cf. Parrish 2005: 209–11). If it is thus possible to distinguish two thematically and stylistically different moments in the total Zuckerman production, it may be worth considering the significance of the Prague novella and Roth's Czech experience for his professional transition into the postsocialist present.

Roth's work can be read as an assiduous examination of the process and sources of disseminating Western perceptions of Eastern Europe and the various sides involved in this venture. Even if Roth himself is sometimes tempted by the allure of this discursive mythmaking, the lion's share of his literary contribution shows a relentless determination to resist and expose stereotypical practices. Roth's stance in *The Prague Orgy* can thus be termed anti-spectacular. His work attacks the sensationalizing of the Other and demonstrates instead the possibility of treating Eastern Europe as complex reality rather than as tamizdat spectacle.

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