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LITERARY REFLECTIONS ON POSTIMPERIAL VIOLENCE
IN EAST-CENTRAL EUROPE AFTER 1918:
WITTLIN – HAŠEK – VANČURA

There is an irony in Socrates and there is also a romantic irony, but the ‘World War’ gave birth to yet another kind of irony: the irony of history, the irony of events, the irony of things. Events themselves bring together and drag down into one space and maelstrom things so dissimilar and mutually exclusive as victory and defeat, the comic and the tragic, the elevated and the lowly.¹

The above are observations made by the philosopher Karel Kosík in the course of his remarks on Jaroslav Hašek’s *The Good Soldier Švejk*. In *The Vanquished*, a historian Robert Gerwarth comes soberly to the conclusion that in terms of the end of the World War I, the peace of 1918 remained an illusion in east-central Europe during the interwar years.² According to this view, the chaos and fighting continued and even the supposed winners should in fact be counted among the losers.

As such, Gerwarth contradicts a view of history in which the apparent losers (the supranational empires and their dominant ethnic groups) are contrasted with the apparent winners (the liberated nations in their newly established states).

According to Gerwarth, the reason for this disillusion lays in the structural impossibility of fulfilling national ambitions in regions shaped by the empire.

For one thing, every national project labours at a utopian surplus, that is, at impossible fantasies and rhetorics inflated to an eschatological degree of collective and individual redemption, of revolution and preservation.

For another, the historically evolved political geography of the multi-ethnic empires remained intact beyond nationalization. In this geography of cultural mixing and ambiguity, every national project was destined to be frustrated by a neighboring project, or to frustrate another in turn.

¹ Karel Kosík, “Švejk and Bugulma, or, the Birth of Great Humor,” in: idem, *Crisis of Modernity: Essays and Observations from the 68 Era*, 87–99 (London: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1995), 98–99.

² Robert Gerwarth, *The Vanquished. Why the First World War Failed to End, 1917–1923* (London: Penguin Books, 2016).

The result was violent conflicts around partitions in the post-imperial region; wars; civil wars; and ethnic cleansing, at whose always only temporary conclusions, unsatisfied ambitions remained – that is, everybody felt like they had lost. And, this is how large parts of east-central Europe finally became what Timothy Snyder convincingly called them – *bloodlands*.³

In his essay *Combat as an Internal Experience (Der Krieg als inneres Erlebnis)* written in 1922, Ernst Jünger clairvoyantly remarked: “War is not the end, but the beginning of violence. It is the hammer mill in which the world will be shattered into new borders and new communities”.⁴ Gerwarth, in his study, points out that the literature, in almost paradigmatic fashion, concurred with this reversal – from an initial euphoria and salvation prophecies into disillusionment and the promulgation of violence.

In the following paper, I would like to trace Kosík’s irony of the history, Gerwarth’s lack of illusions, and Jünger’s prophecy of violence in three classic World War I novels, by Jaroslav Hašek, Vladislav Vančura and Józef Wittlin, written in the decades after 1918: *The Fateful Adventures of the Good Soldier Švejk and his Fortunes in the World War (Osúdy dobrého vojáka Švejka, 1918–1922)* by Hašek; *Fields of Plough, Fields of War (Pole orná a válečná, 1925)* by Vančura, and *Salt of the Earth (Sól ziemi, 1935)* by Wittlin.

The novels have three aspects in common: first, the poetics of each is marked in a compressed way by the style of narrating the assassination in Sarajevo in 1918; second, three picaresque figures – Švejk, Řeka and Niewiadomski, respectively – stand at the centre of each novel; and third, in addition to the war itself, each novel looks proleptically at its consequences, even if the narrated time does not extend to the end of the war.

Based on Kosík, Gerwarth and Jünger, it seems to be indeed a literature of post-imperialist violence. The rhetorical figures of barbarization and self-barbarization, inversion of subject and object, and fragmentation of space are particularly significant in the books, demonstrating the aesthetic processing of the reversal from euphoria over the end of the war to frustration over the continuing violence. These figures correspond to a remarkable degree with the unfulfilled peace after 1918, and all can be found in the novels of Hašek, Vančura and Wittlin. In the remarks that follow, I would like to attempt a comparative synopsis of the novels with the aid of three quotes.

THE GOOD SOLDIER ŠVEJK, OR THE FRAGMENTATION OF SPACE

Hašek’s *The Good Soldier Švejk* notoriously employs rhetorical figures that can be understood as gestures of the fragmentation of space – that show, for example, devastated areas and interrupted routes. I would like to trace these

³ Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands. Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2010).

⁴ Ernst Jünger, “Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis,” in: idem, *Essays I: Betrachtungen zur Zeit*, 11–103 (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2010), 73.

gestures through Švejk's anabasis from Tábor to České Budějovice. The anabasis, and also, later, his journey on the Russian-Austrian front to Galicia, represent a reflection on an imperial mobility that prefigures the post-imperial mobility.

But, before delving into the destruction of space, let me consider the fragmentation of Hašek's character. Sylvie Richterová has posited, among other things, that Švejk is less a literary character or a real popular hero than a principle that structures the text; she understands Švejk as a character that functions as a reflection: "In Hašek's novel, the architecture of mirrors, in which stupidity itself is reflected without ever recognizing itself, is simply precise and absolute".⁵ Similarly, Zdeněk Mathauser interprets Švejk by reading him as a mask: "Švejk cannot be divided into a mask of appearance and the essence of his being hidden behind it. If he is a mask, then he is nothing else than a mask. Before us stands not Švejk's mask, but a *Švejk-mask*".⁶ For Mathauser, Švejk is, thus, both a mirror and a realizer figure, through which the novel's plot is executed. Daniela Hodrová also attests to a certain marionette quality in Švejk, as well as, again, a clown mask.⁷ Ute Rassloff calls Švejk a "protean text constant",⁸ and Hans Dieter Zimmermann analyzes him as a "destructive discourse".⁹ I could go on with these patterns of interpretation – but in each case, Hašek's character remains largely shapeless and characterless. He disintegrates almost accommodatingly into witty splinters.

Considering the fragmentation of space, I understand Švejk as a sounding box that functions like a cavity resonator and amplifies the vibrations of the catastrophes that took place in east-central Europe. This becomes especially clear in the initial scene, which reflects the assassination of the archduke Franz Ferdinand, in which the charwoman Müllerová states: "And so they've killed our Ferdinand".¹⁰ At that, Švejk unleashes a torrent of speech, referring to two more Ferdinands: one of them – a street cleaner who collects dog excrement, the other – a hairdresser who accidentally poisons himself with hair tincture.

Peter Zajac interprets the passage as a transition from the simple statement that the archduke Ferdinand has been slain into a performative act that Švejk executes: "At the beginning of the novel, there is a stereotype of journalism that transforms narratively into a performative act, however banal and inferior".¹¹ Zajac identifies this point, at which the story machine "Švejk" starts up, as the

⁵ Sylvie Richterová, "Jasnozřivý génius a jeho slepý prorok: Haškův Dobrý voják Švejk," in: idem, *Slovo a ticho*, 126–141 (Praha: Československý spisovatel, 1991), 137.

⁶ Zdeněk Mathauser, "Švejková interpretační anabáze," in: idem, *Estetické alternativy. Jazyk vědy a jazyk poezie*, 70–83 (Praha: GRYP, 1994), 71.

⁷ Daniela Hodrová, "Postava člověka-stroje v české literatuře," in: idem, *Průmysl a technika v novodobé české kultuře*, 172–179 (Praha: Ústav teorie a dějin umění ČSAV, 1988), 176.

⁸ Ute Rassloff, "Wer oder was ist Švejk? Der 'brave' Soldat als proteische Textkonstante," in: *Osteuropäische Lektüren*, ed. Mirjam Goller et al., 193–207 (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2000).

⁹ Hans Dieter Zimmermann, "Jaroslav Hašek. Leben und Legende. Ein Nachwort," in: Jaroslav Hašek, *Der Urschwejk und anderes aus dem alten Europa und dem neuen Russland*, 359–387 (München: DVA, 1999), 380.

¹⁰ Jaroslav Hašek, *The Good Soldier Švejk and His Fortunes in World War*, trans. Cecil Parrott (London: Penguin Books, 2005), 3.

¹¹ Peter Zajac, "Schwejk und die Erhabenheit des Banalen," in: idem, *Ästhetik des Schwingens*, 219–240 (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2015), 227.

moment of the transformation of the sublime into the banal, which is constitutive of the text.

Frau Müllerová's simple statement feeds on the conventional authority of writing; the event was officially made known through announcements, dispatches, and the press. Already with his first appearance in the novel, Švejk infects this official authority with his stories, but he also infects the novel as such – and, in fact, the entire genre of a “novel”.

It is in this sense that I understand Přemysl Blažíček's observation: “The text remains constantly behind the author's design, for it gushes uncontrollably into the distance”.¹² However, Blažíček continues, the reader does not have the impression that the plot will advance to the same extent. This finding leads us to the chapter on the anabasis of Budějovice. Here, Švejk has accidentally pulled the emergency brake of the train taking him and Lieutenant Lukáš to their regiment. Švejk, thus, remains behind, alone, in the station at Tábor, and tries to make it through to his regiment by his own wits. In the meantime, he turns west rather than south, convinced that all routes lead to Budějovice. He wanders around in a circle, ends up with the gendarmes, where he is taken for a Russian spy, and in the end is put onto a train to Budějovice.

Švejk's advance to Budějovice stands for the aesthetics of space in Hašek. The text itself goes in circles, continually missing its own, or its putative, centre: the front and the war raging there. The war is the novel's starting point, to be sure, but in no way is it its goal. On various occasions, the narrator renders this invisible war visible to the reader – but just briefly; an example is the scene at the station in Tábor:

Before the arrival of the passenger train the third-class restaurant filled up with soldiers and civilians. They were predominantly soldiers of various regiments and formations and the most diverse nationalities whom the whirlwinds of war had swept into the Tábor hospitals. They were now going back to the front to get new wounds, mutilations and pains and to earn the reward of a simple wooden cross over their graves. Years after on the mournful plains of east Galicia a faded Austrian soldier's cap with a rusty Imperial badge would flutter over it in wind and rain. From time to time a miserable old carrion crow would perch on it, recalling fat feasts of bygone days when there used to be spread for him an unending table of human corpses and horse carcasses, when just under the cap on which he perched there lay the daintiest morsels of all – human eyes.¹³

Here, Hašek's narrator teaches us everything we need to know about the centre, about the war. Švejk himself cannot do so, because he has never been there. As in the novels of Vančura and Wittlin, Hašek's narrator also imagines the end of the war with a graveyard scene and shows, proleptically, the area emptied of humans after the war. This rendering-visible, however, has factored in Švejk's own failure from the start, for the war and its dead are so cursorily alluded to that the reader is practically programmed to overlook them. Especially since these spots in the text, like everything in the novel, are overrun by Švejk's torrent of words. As such, the novel disrupts not only the observation of the war, but with it, the official powers standing behind it – decenters and provincializes them. Consistently anti-hierarchical, the novel also dispenses with a counter-hierarchy or utopia, which is implicit within any dystopia.

¹² Přemysl Blažíček, *Knihy o epice. Naši / Švejk / Zbabělci* (Praha: Triáda, 2014), 152.

¹³ Hašek, *The Good Soldier Švejk and His Fortunes in World War*, 230.

Zdeněk Mathauser saw the character of Švejk linking reflection and emptiness into an ideally typical unity.¹⁴ At the same time, the proleptic scene of the dead in Tábor is a reflection of emptiness itself. Preceding this scene, a “whirlwind” had blown in all the future dead in Tábor. This evokes the pertinent desert associations of penetrating winds and accumulating sands, emptiness, ephemerality and evanescence. In addition, the novel addresses the fate of the region directly by crossing presentist, horizontal imagery with historical, vertical imagery. The future dead emerge from the spatially horizontal to gather in a train station restaurant; this location condenses their evolved diversity – the various regiments, cultures, languages, places of origin – but, tellingly, not their social differences. The aristocratic officers remain aloof; the multicultural cannon fodder mix among themselves. A hostel of peoples *en miniature*. But, unlike Švejk, who is sitting next to them and drinking beer with them, the others must go on; he can remain in the carefree surroundings of his stories, but they, unlike Švejk, must continue on to the center, to the battlefield – where they will perish.

Jurij Lotman sees the periphery as “the area of semiotic dynamism”.¹⁵ The centre is normative and prioritized, but ultimately lacks original creative impulses. Radical creativity occurs in the marginal zones. This Lotmanesque overlay of centre and periphery is also reflected in Hašek’s train station scene. The emptiness of the post-imperial realm is experienced as painful in this downfall fantasy also because it seems to remain untouched by Švejk’s talk. This attests to the almost poetic, but also sobering, narrative style that is fundamentally differentiated from Švejk’s polyphony. Švejk’s narrative approach can reach the centre of his story as little as he himself can. Without Švejk, meanwhile, the centre becomes monophonic, because his sounding box fails to resonate in the space in front of him. What will remain from this reading after the war is east-central Europe as a minus-representation, an emptied-out realm with a crow as its only witness.

Similarly, to how Hašek lets his hero circle around a centre, his language is also not oriented toward the centre, but around colloquial Czech (*obecná čeština*) and spoken Czech (*hovorová čeština*), both of which phonetics and morphology depart from the standard language. At the same time, his novel is sprinkled with multilinguality, Germanisms and Russianisms, with obscene sayings, ribald curses, and the jargon of the lower classes, constituting an incessant subverting of linguistic norms. Bohumil Hrabal wrote that “Hašek is living proof of a downward shift”, through which he attains “a certain sublimity”. “Like a magician”, his Švejk conquers “the degenerated world with his speech”.¹⁶ This links up to Peter Zajac’s observation on the tension in the novel between the sublime and the banal.

Thus, the area between Galicia and Tabor, between Prague and the front, can be described not only as a constellation of centre and periphery, but also as a *rhizome*, after Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guatarri. This means that in *The Good*

¹⁴ Zdeněk Mathauser, *Na cestě ke smyslu. Poetika literárního díla 20. století* (Praha: Torst, 2005), 24–25.

¹⁵ Jurij M. Lotman, *Universe of the Mind. A Semiotic Theory of Culture* (London – New York: I. B. Tauris & Co. Publishers, 1990), 134.

¹⁶ Bohumil Hrabal, “Na struně mezi kolíbkou a rakví,” in: idem, *Sebrané spisy Bohumila Hrabala 15: Domácí úkoly*, 9–12 (Praha: Pražska imaginace, 1995), 12.

Soldier Švejk there is neither centre nor periphery, no regulatory, ordering force, only a proliferating interior space. This corresponds to the figure of Švejk, whose performative speech acts aim at delay, interruption, and accumulation. And, that is how, according to Joseph Vogl, the “syntagma of the text” falters, “because the paradigms of his sentences bifurcate and accumulate and in ongoing displacement or permutation constantly amount to ‘the same thing.’ The disjunctive syntheses stop the text’s progress, and transform even him into that in-between thing: an endless oscillation”.¹⁷

Discrete, originally separate, and incommensurable elements are continually rearranged and brought into a new complex of meaning in Hašek’s novel: places, events, persons, and objects. The result is a hyper-encoded rhizomatic fabric of signifiers, although Švejk, as “discourse” remains invariably enigmatic enough to guarantee his creator a kind of mild smile of knowing authority.

THE BAD SOLDIER ŘEKA, OR, THE INVERSION OF SUBJECT AND OBJECT

Vladimir Vančura’s 1925 expressionist novel *Fields of Plough, Fields of War* is a text in which “everything is part of a highly symbolic *mise-en-scène*”.¹⁸ Kristina Kallert describes the novel, newly retranslated into German, as an “explosive compression [...] also on the level of sound, rhythm, and syntax”.¹⁹ If that description can be applied to expressionist poetics as a whole, it is particularly fitting for the poetics of Vančura’s novel.²⁰

According to Zuzana Řihová, in the postwar Czech literature, the programmatic texts of the avant-garde might appear charged with euphoria, but the artistic texts are marked by melancholy: “In contrast to the ‘heroism’ of the utopian programmes, Czech avant-garde prose uncovered the overlooked melancholy of the post-war world and humanity. The binary opposition of man / thing is in fact the hidden common denominator to the two groups”.²¹ The proclamatory, collective enthusiasm of the manifestoes is contrasted with the feeling-world of figures in which fear, misery, confusion, and alienation prevail. According to her, a “revolt of inanimate objects”²² dominates in post-1918 literature. The anthropomorphized objects – streets, buildings, windows, ceilings – threaten and aggrieve people. The most striking features of this in early avant-garde prose are the anthropomorphizing of things and the objectification of living beings. In Vančura’s novel, this is performed via the death scene of one of the protagonists.

¹⁷ Joseph Vogl, *Über das Zaudern* (Zürich-Berlin: Diaphanes, 2007), 78.

¹⁸ Kristina Kallert, “Sich verkehrende verkehrte Welt,” in: Vladislav Vančura, *Felder und Schlachtfelder*, 217–233 (Wuppertal: Arco Verlag, 2017), 228.

¹⁹ Ibidem, 231.

²⁰ Rajendra A. Chitnis, *Vladislav Vančura: The Heart of the Czech Avant-Garde* (Praha: Karolinum Press, 2007), 105–107.

²¹ Zuzana Řihová, “‘Nothing is Certain.’ Czech Postwar Literature between the Avant-Garde and Expressionism,” *Central Europe 2*, 125–140 (2016), 139.

²² Ibidem, 138.

The novel begins in the fictitious manorial village Ouhrov, from where František Řeka joins the World War I. But, before Řeka enlists, he murders a day laborer, simply because he feels like this. In contrast to Hašek's character, the servant Řeka does make it onto the battlefield. And first, the novel lines up the classical sites of the Great War literature *in extenso*: train stations, bordellos, hospitals, bars, and barracks. Vančura's narrator introduces Řeka to us right from the start, explicitly, as an idiot, and so in this way he is certainly related to Švejk, who calls himself an "official idiot". Řeka has a foolish spirit; he is a sucker who always orients himself on others' opinions. Like Švejk's torrents of speech, Řeka's seems never to dry up, although it occurs primarily in his own head. In the end, Řeka is wounded on the battlefield and buried ceremoniously as an unknown soldier – though it is unclear whether at that point he is really dead:

Frantisek Řeka was lifted up and carried away, unconscious. He couldn't drink, for he had no mouth, [...]. I would give [...] any amount of money for a single cry: Ouhrov. For he who is speaking knows me, he would rush over, take me by the hand and would recognize that I am Frantisek Řeka, the servant from Ouhrov. [...] He is not a man any longer, but rather a mystery with a wound for a face. His name lies forgotten in the heaven of the impoverished. He is nothing but a wound. [...] The nameless one was lifted above all names and all heads, as it must be in war, the fool was lifted up. [...] The last soldier of the world war, eavesdropping on murderers who have not been condemned. His face is striped with worms, and the weeping wounds look up and wait for the honorable mound to be scattered over the grave.²³

The "fury of war",²⁴ according to Vančura, shattered his face and ripped out his tongue; instead of a mouth, he was left with a "crater" (*nálevka*). The illiterate man becomes not only language-less, but also nameless, for which, since he can neither say nor write down his name or where he comes from, he remains unidentifiable. He threw away the capsule containing his credentials at the start of the war out of a deep mistrust of writing as a symbol of the authorities. It is his own fault that he is nameless, and no one listens even as he knocks out the rhythm of his name on the frame of the stretcher. The crater form of his face mirrors the craters of the bombs and explosions at the front – the bombed earth, into which Řeka, as unknown soldier, goes – which he becomes. He has long since become an object of the "God of slaughter",²⁵ the dead object or death's object. Rajendra Chitnis writes, "the novel ends [...] with a macabre image of degeneration, of a dead face waiting for resurrection".²⁶

Vančura's Řeka is only the most prominent of his figurations in which the subject declines into an object. As such, it seems to be a paradigm, and is also to be found in Hašek and Wittlin, the latter of whom's protagonist is nameless from the start, as per his name: Piotr Niewiadomski. Coming from the Polish adjective "niewiadomy" the name Niewiadomski means "unknown". Conversely, in his stories, Švejk lists name after name with an obsessive naming mania – with the result that the names are immediately forgotten again.

²³ Vladislav Vančura, *Pole orná a válečná* (Praha: Československý spisovatel, 1953), 166–175.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, 150.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, 164.

²⁶ Rajendra A. Chitnis, *Vladislav Vančura: The Heart of the Czech Avant-Garde* (Praha: Karolinum Press, 2007), 110.

In contrast, the reader watches Vančura's protagonist *en detail* as he desperately tries to get someone to pay attention to him, as he tries to escape his own objectification. From the start, the novel denounces the hope, expressed by the narrator, of a victory of the disenfranchised after the end of the war. For ontological evil has been present since before the outbreak of war – when the pathologically envious Řeka murders his fellow servant Hora for no reason. Hora, not least through the telling name “mountain”, embodies the “nameless uplands”.²⁷ The landscape that Vančura depicts is poor, its inhabitants tired and silent; all they know is deprivation. But unlike Řeka, the peaceful Hora submits to his fate, continues to live and work even after his wife dies giving birth to their child. One way of interpreting the novel is that the war, at best, upgrades the evil by infecting everyone with it.

In Vančura's text, Řeka's namelessness and homelessness become united with lack of order and loss of order. It begins with the news of the death of the heir apparent, which, as in Hašek, shapes the contours of the novel's poetics. But, whereas Hašek, in order to show fate's grotesque aspect, turns the sublimity of the death announcement into the banal sphere of Švejk's stories, Vančura resorts to hyperbole:

The stupid journalist, who metamorphoses three times before it will be granted to him to croak under a splendid blow, noisily toots and heralds, announces and spreads a death that means nothing to anyone, and that even the *kaiser* won't cry over. Chaff, burned in the fire, a name, lowly and unknown, forgotten including its title, in the hour of death. [...] An undeserved end, a small bit of news so unfortunately repeated in the daily papers. A tiny sigh and a moment of abiding at this much too distant disaster. Where is Sarajevo, where is this country?²⁸

Language, as here with the proclamation of the assassination of the heir apparent, is never innocent, and cannot ever be so – this is a reflection that recurs throughout the novel. The narrator seems not to want to come to terms with this, and makes two prophecies to the journalist that reported the news of the archduke's assassination. First, his name will be lost to history; he won't even be an unknown soldier – at best, an unknown prophet of war. Second, the narrator is desirous of his death – as though the messenger himself were guilty of the war's outbreak.

Vančura also links the murder of Hora to the announcement of the assassination, as Rajendra Chitnis explains: “Řeka's killing of Hora is equated in the novel with Gavrilo Princip's assassination of the archduke Ferdinand, news of which reaches Ouhrov at the same time, entirely eclipsing Hora's death. The news means little to the peasants and less to Řeka, who in his confusion thinks his action has caused the war”.²⁹

While Hašek's poetics casts its lot with the bitter irony of history in Kosík's sense, Vančura lets his language proliferate malignantly from the start, in order to wake the dead to ghostly life – to release the living, made desperate by the perversion – literally – of war. Analogously, Vančura's elementary spatial constructions do not prefigure the utopian visions of freedom described by the

²⁷ Vančura, *Pole orná a válečná*, 7.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, 81.

²⁹ Chitnis, *Vladislav Vančura: The Heart of the Czech Avant-Garde*, 98.

narrator; rather, they allude to the unavoidable fragmentation of space beyond the war. In that sense, they are similar to Hašek's statement in the train station scene in *Tábor*: "Two rivers, like a world divided into two, like east and west, that rubbed against each other at their edges, that pulled against each other. As if forests had marched off".³⁰

Vančura's conflict of alleged cultural areas "east" versus "west" is here figured as elemental, as forces of nature; is imagined as a struggle of fire, rivers, woods. It enters like a naturalist-romantic vision of annihilation as hope of salvation. The motifs are intimately interwoven with the topos of an empire that is cracking up, the result of which is an aggressiveness that seizes everything, including the text itself. The elapsing imperial centre becomes a site of dis-order, beyond any order: "The imperial armies have transformed into gangs, and in the outskirts of the city the mob goes around and jeers at the grim scarcities".³¹

To Vančura's battlegrounds appertain the unmaking of the natural space of the steppe, an existential power of de-differentiation, of entanglement and annihilation: "Let the old world go under, let it go belly-up, so that something new can be founded in the wastelands of the cities, and the wide pathless space of the steppes might narrow down to a single street".³²

The novel doesn't just hint at the apocalypse, but is an apocalyptic work, a "fever dream of peoples", as Arne Novák, disturbed, found.³³ For him, the work resembles a fatalistic "savage, expressionistic grimace".³⁴ Here, Novák is alluding not least to Řeka, to whom only a bloody mask remains. And, in the announcement of the "new" he saw, at best, "a millenarian hope for a future better world".³⁵ For where the foundations for this better world – or the single street – are supposed to come from, remains completely unclear; there is not a single character in the novel who survives the war uncorrupted. Which is probably why F. X. Šalda called Vančura's dark vision of the end times an "epic myth",³⁶ thus, placing the war epic in proximity to the avant-garde epics of Alfred Döblin and James Joyce.

THE UNKNOWN SOLDIER NIEWIADOMSKI, OR, SELF-BARBARIZATION

Józef Wittlin's 1935 novel *Salt of the Earth* (*Sól ziemi*) is the first part of a never-completed trilogy, which Wittlin had originally conceived with the title *Tale of a Patient Infantryman* (*Powieść o cierpliwym piechurze*), referring directly to Hašek's *Švejk*. His protagonist is the illiterate Hutsul Piotr Niewiadomski, who

³⁰ Vančura, *Pole orná a válečná*, 169.

³¹ *Ibidem*, 171.

³² *Ibidem*, 172.

³³ Jiří Poláček, "Dvoji pohled na Vladislav Vančuru. Arne Novák a F. X. Šalda," in: *Sborník Filozofické Fakulty Brněnské Univerzity* 5/6, 73–78 (2002/2003), 74.

³⁴ *Ibidem*.

³⁵ *Ibidem*.

³⁶ *Ibidem*.

lives in the Carpathian Mountains – a train lineman who is conscripted during the Austrian mobilization. Similarly, to Švejk and Řeka, Niewiadomski is a fool: naive, overly sensitive, and innocent. But, he is not a classic trickster figure, like Švejk; instead, he is rather a kind of “godly child”. He is not a chatterbox, but rather a quietly participating observer with a childlike disposition.

Wittlin also poetically addresses the war-inciting assassination in Sarajevo, but stages it, according to Thomas Grob, as an “empty space” in Jurij Lotman’s sense.³⁷ The absence of “an element that is not used” in a text is, according to Lotman, always “meaningful”, for it represents an “organic component of the graphically located text”.³⁸ In Wittlin’s prologue, the *kaiser* is annoyed by the murder of the heir because even after his death he will not leave him in peace, and he thinks with a trace of pride that, if nothing else, he has outlived him.

Wittlin places the war preparations of Austro-Hungary along the train routes of the eastern-central Europe at the centre of his story, while the war itself remains in the background. The novel ends as actual hostilities begin in Galicia, in August 1914. The good-natured Hutsul Niewiadomski derives his self-image from his service to the imperial centre, as signified by his train lineman’s cap with imperial emblem – not like the cap that, in Hašek, lies over the grave of the unknown soldier. At the same time, for Niewiadomski letters are evil, which means he represents a more innocent pendant to Vančura’s Řeka. Niewiadomski lives with Dietlind Hüchtker,

according to other rules of significance and value categories than the world of modern nationalism, war logics and political power relations. [...] The place on the borders of civilization has become a place on the periphery, from which perspective the center appears as irrational and illogical. And it is precisely the hopelessness of being heard in the center, a fact that is becoming ever clearer, that turns into a modern critique of the logic of progress. For this perspective is not to be confused with a backward-looking nostalgia. Galicia is no Arcadia, but represents further possibilities of modernity, beyond dominant norms and modes of thought.³⁹

Wittlin’s irony is not that dissimilar to Hašek’s. For Thomas Grob, both aesthetics prefigure a “decidedly peripheral perspective”. For him, Hašek’s Švejk is “socially peripheral”; Wittlin’s Niewiadomski, on the other hand, is “regionally and culturally” marginal.⁴⁰

Hüchtker’s reflection can also be applied to Švejk’s “advance”, in which he in fact continually circles around the centre of the war, which is for him irrational and idiotic, without both, Švejk and the centre, having a language for each other. In a qualified sense, echoes of Vančura’s post-imperial loss of order are also recognizable, with the result that the mob goes marauding through the cities.

³⁷ Thomas Grob, “Der huzulische Blick. Der Ausbruch des Ersten Weltkriegs und die Wahrheit der Peripherie in Józef Wittlins *Salz der Erde (Sól ziemi)*,” in: “*The Long Shots of Sarajevo*” 1914: *Ereignis-Narrativ-Gedächtnis*, ed. Vahidin Preljević, Clemens Ruthner, 471–489 (Tübingen: Narr Francke Attempto, 2016), 475.

³⁸ Ibidem.

³⁹ Dietlind Hüchtker, “Der ‘Mythos Galizien.’ Versuch einer Historisierung.” *Kakanien Revisited* (2003). Accessed August 28, 2018. <http://www.kakanien-revisited.at/beitr/fallstudie/DHuechtker2, 10>.

⁴⁰ Grob, “Der huzulische Blick. Der Ausbruch des Ersten Weltkriegs und die Wahrheit der Peripherie in Józef Wittlins *Salz der Erde (Sól ziemi)*,” 483.

But, above all, Hüchtker's remark makes clear that interpreting Niewiadomski as a "noble savage", as a representative of a naively comprehended, idealized pre-Modernity, would be wrong. Instead, in his character we can perceive the rhetorical strategy of barbarization and self-barbarization. Since early modern times, notions such as "barbarian" have been aimed as derogatory invectives at various eastern European communities. This external discourse, however, did not occur without a response from those thus categorized; negative hetero-stereotypes have been adopted by the communities in question as self-descriptive metaphors. How does this paradox work? Dirk Uffelmann pointed out that self-barbarization draws on strategies of mimicry to build subaltern identities that, after adapting to imported cultural models, perform a gesture of conciliatory self-assertion. The alienated or estranged entity turns a negativized alterity into an affirmation of the ostracizing *cliché*.⁴¹ Though self-barbarization refrains from constituting a positive identity through self-description, it does reflect and enact experiences of decomposition and deterritorialization.

Wittlin uses this strategy of individuation, in which he sets the barbarian Niewiadomski's own "pure" culture against a corrupt civilization in order to invert the originally normative relationship between centre and periphery with the help of an emphatically displayed marginality. Namely, before Niewiadomski is sent to the front, he must pass the army's physical examination. Naked among other naked men, he looks around:

Some [bodies] were intimate with the sun, the earth and the wind, making their nakedness seem entirely natural; in fact, they would have appeared unnatural when fully dressed. Others were pale and their nakedness was alien to them, because they had never come into direct contact with the earth and the atmosphere, communicating with it only through animal skins, wool, cotton and linen. The bodies of the Jews were especially pale and unaccustomed to the earth. [...] On seeing so many bodies, so many physical defects, disabilities and signs of obvious strength, Piotr felt as though he was sitting among those savages who go around naked and live in caves. He had heard that somewhere, beyond America, there existed such people. [...] Piotr Niewiadomski fell to pondering about nudity and clothing. He recalled the first human being in the Holy Scriptures, who was a gardener in the Garden of Eden. He moved unconcernedly among the wild animals, among lions and tigers, who were as naked as he was.⁴²

The naked men are the barbarians, and clothing is civilization. Naked, people in all their differences are equal in at least one way – in their defenselessness, and in the sinful innocence of Adam: "Nearly all the toes were vulnerable, innocent and bashful, like little girls, even those of people whose hands looked as though they were tools for crime".⁴³ Thus, all the men sitting next to Niewiadomski step up as barbarians, in order to be "clothed". This occurs in an act of civilizing, which is to say the appropriation of their bodies by the *kaiser* – with the final goal being their destruction. Accordingly, the civilizing act turns out to be a literal perversion: health becomes a deadly malady, and infirmity becomes a saving grace that helps one avoid getting sent to the front.

⁴¹ Dirk Uffelmann, "Konzilianz und Asianismus. Paradoxe Strategien der jüngsten deutschsprachigen Literatur slavischer Migranten," *Zeitschrift für Slavische Philologie* 2, 277–305, (2003).

⁴² Józef Wittlin, *The Salt of the Earth* (London: Pushkin Press, 2018), 86–87.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, 86.

Some of the men, in their healthy barbarism, are still “intimate with the sun, earth, and wind”; others are already ailing from civilization. For Niewiadomski, the most civilized (in a negative sense) of them all – those who, stripped of their clothing, are the most distanced from themselves – are the Jews. Niewiadomski himself stands somewhere in the middle. Civilization begins with him as a perverting force: in his barbaric nakedness, he slowly begins to feel ashamed. Soon, of all things, he uses the instruments of power of the *kaiser* and the church to cover his shame: he holds up the order of conscription and his certificate of baptism in front of his nakedness. And, it is no accident that once again civilization’s power is signaled by the writing he finds so suspect.

But, although Niewiadomski tries to cover his nakedness with writing, he remains a representative of a naive trustfulness understood as anti-civilizing. Unlike the all-knowing narrator, he does not even consider the option of ensuring his own safety by dissembling. And that, although his body is actually worn out by honest and hard (barbarian) work. However, he does not comprehend the reversal of values that war brings with it: “What had been evil before the 28th of July – for example catarrh of the lungs, heart disease, chronic gastroenteritis or a hernia – was after the 28th of July not only a source of joy but something akin to a cast-iron defence against death”.⁴⁴

In the wake of the exam, Niewiadomski receives a number and a uniform. On his way to the barracks, he is stripped of his identifying name, which has already long since been revealed to the reader by the Polish name Piotr Niewiadomski. Even his origin is unknown: his mother was a Hutsul, his father apparently an aristocratic Pole – a classic topos of romantic barbarian-ennoblement.

But, even the prologue plays with the doubling of his namelessness, by, at the end, calling out the word “unknown” six times. This is an invocation of the unknown soldier, whom the narrator wants to exhume for the reader: “My word will raise him from the earth in which he lies; he will forgive me this exhumation. Unknown is the Unknown Soldier”.⁴⁵ Anna Frajlich described Wittlin’s work as “preoccupation, bordering on obsession, with the notion of the ‘unknown’”.⁴⁶ For Ewa Wiegandt, Wittlin is not least for that reason a “theoretician of pacifism”.⁴⁷ Wittlin’s description of the examination, writes Wiegandt, unfolds “dialectically” between the “alienation of the person and the sacralization of institutions”.⁴⁸ In a similar manner, the rampant phenomenology with which Wittlin’s narrator describes the variety of naked bodies through Niewiadomski’s eyes evokes what will become of them in the next step: a uniformly clothed, coherent mass – a stopover on the way to the de-differentiated pile of corpses somewhere in the vastness of Galicia, of which Hašek’s narrator speaks; or in the grave of the unknown soldier, as in Vančura.

⁴⁴ Ibidem, 90.

⁴⁵ Ibidem, 41.

⁴⁶ Anna Frajlich, “Two Unknown Soldiers,” in: Józef Wittlin, *Between Lvov, New York and Ulysses’s Ithaca*, ed. idem, 47–58 (Toruń – New York: Nicolaus Copernicus University, 2001), 47.

⁴⁷ Ewa Wiegandt, “Wstęp,” in: Józef Wittlin, *Sól ziemi* (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1991), xxv.

⁴⁸ Ibidem, lxxv.

CONCLUSION

All three of the World War I novels discussed here anticipate post-imperial violence, to some extent up to the later cataclysms of the twentieth century. According to Thomas Grob, it is in this way that they take into account central moments from the past century, including the “loss of culture, of individuality, of otherness”.⁴⁹ We could also include the loss of mature moral and political orders and social security. Grob points out the role that Galicia as region plays in the novels. This cannot be traced solely to the biographies of the respective authors or the reality of Galicia as theatre of war; it becomes rather “literarily possible only through the particular multi-ethnic demographic structure of east Galicia, and the semantic content that is built upon that. Since this came about not least through literature itself, the deployment of these Galician images always has an intertextual character. This world is characterized by its complex diversity, which was looked at very differently after World War I than before, since it was already well on its way to disappearing; the next world war would complete the elimination of this diversity”.⁵⁰

Building on Thomas Grob’s observations, I would like to point to the rhetorical figurations here introduced: barbarization and self-barbarization, subject-object inversion, and gestures of fragmenting space. I believe that in the prose of east-central Europe after 1918 and beyond they create an experience of the anti-political, of dystopia and an apocalypse.

When Anna Frajlich remarks that Wittlin “saw his own book as ‘a testimony to the war as seen, experienced, and suffered by simple soldiers’”,⁵¹ then within this testimony lies, if nothing else, the poetic prophecy of the subsequent violent ethnic segregation of east-central Europe. Here, more than elsewhere, pertained the dark vision of Ernst Jünger in *Combat as an Internal Experience*:

But the war is not dead when no more villages or cities are burning, when millions with clenched fists no longer bleed to death in the fire, when people are no longer strapped like whimpering bundles to bare tables in hospitals. It is also not born with a few statesmen and diplomats, as many believe. All that is external. The true sources of war spring deep in our breasts, and everything hideous that inundates the world at times is just a mirror image of the human soul, revealing itself in events.⁵²

More than a generation later, Czesław Miłosz and Milan Kundera would counter the post-1918 fatalism born of the war(s) with an enlightened vision that filled the catastrophic region once more with political desire. And, it is perhaps therein that the real significance of the debate around the central Europe lies.

⁴⁹ Thomas Grob, “Die huzulische Sicht der Dinge. Józef Wittlins Jahrhundertroman *Das Salz der Erde*,” *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, August 14 (2001), 55.

⁵⁰ Grob, “Der huzulische Blick. Der Ausbruch des Ersten Weltkriegs und die Wahrheit der Peripherie in Józef Wittlins *Salz der Erde (Sól ziemi)*,” 473.

⁵¹ Frajlich, “Two Unknown Soldiers,” 47.

⁵² Ernst Jünger, “Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis,” in: idem, *Essays I: Betrachtungen zur Zeit*, 11–103 (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2010), 43.

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LITERARY REFLECTIONS ON POSTIMPERIAL VIOLENCE
IN EAST-CENTRAL EUROPE AFTER 1918:
WITTLIN – HAŠEK – VANČURA

Summary

This paper discusses questions like the irony of history, the lack of illusions, and the prophecy of violence in three classic World War I novels by Jaroslav Hašek, Vladislav Vančura and Józef Wittlin, written in the decades after 1918. The novels have at least three aspects in common: first, the poetics of each is marked in a compressed way by the style of narrating the assassination in Sarajevo in 1918; second, three picaresque figures – Švejk, Řeka and Niewiadomski, respectively – standing in the centre of each novel; and, third, in addition to the war itself, each novel looks proleptically at its consequences, even if the narrated time does not extend to the end of the war. The paper tries to reflect on the novels as the literature of post-imperialist violence. Rhetorical figures of barbarization and self-barbarization, inversion of subject and object, fragmentation of space are particularly significant in the books, demonstrating the aesthetic processing of the reversal from euphoria, over the end of the war, to frustration, over the continuing violence. More specifically, these figures correspond with a remarkable degree with the unfulfilled peace after 1918.

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