

Diverse Voices: Czech Women's Writing in the Post-Communist Era

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ABSTRACT

This essay offers an overview of the diversity of women's prose writing that emerged on the Czech cultural scene in the post-communist era. To that end it briefly characterizes the work of eight Czech women authors who were born within the first two decades after World War II and began to create during the post-1968 era of 'normalization'. In this broad sense they belong to a single generation. With rare exception their work was not officially published in their homeland until the 1990s. The writers included are: Lenka Procházková, Tereza Boučková, Alexandra Berková, Zuzana Brabcová, Daniela Hodrová, Sylvie Richtero-ová, Iva Pekárková, and Eva Hauserová. The overview is followed by a concise comparative analysis of texts by three very different writers (Procházková, Pekárková, and Hodrová), using a feminist critical approach. There is also an appendix of works by these writers available in English translation.

KEYWORDS

Czech culture, women's writing, feminist literary criticism, feminism, gender, post-communism

OVERVIEW

In this essay I will offer an informal overview of the range of diverse voices in women's writing that emerged on the Czech cultural scene in

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the post-communist era.¹ My observations are based on research I began in Prague in the second half of the 1990s and have been pursuing since then.² For my larger purpose, which is to better acquaint Anglophone readers with an important, yet somewhat neglected aspect of Czech literature, I have chosen writers who work in different styles and may appeal to a varied audience.³ While I would categorize all of them as ‘serious’ authors, in contrast to the large number of women who in the 1990s began to publish popular, more commercially viable books, I recognize that the prose of these writers represents a broad generic spectrum — from quite traditional realistic narratives to complex postmodern texts, from travel narratives that blend fiction with non-fiction, to excursions into feminist sci-fi fantasy. I will first briefly characterize eight of the women writers who belong to the post-89 generation, and then provide a short comparative feminist analysis of works by three of them (Procházková, Pekárková, and Hodrová). My aim is to highlight the latitude of commonalities and differences in the fiction of these contemporary Czech women writers whose work first became available to the general reading public in the early 1990s.⁴ Although I occasionally refer to works published after 2000, my emphasis is on those that appeared before the end of the twentieth century.

All the authors I examine here were born within the first two decades after World War II; they grew up and were educated in communist Czechoslovakia and began to write in the 1970s and 1980s, the years coinciding with the oppressive era of ‘normalization’ that prevailed after the Warsaw Pact invasion of August 1968 (negating the liberal period of the Prague Spring earlier that year). With a small exception, these writers did not publish at home until after the fall of communism, the so-called Velvet Revolution of November 1989. If simply taken chronologically by date of birth, these women might be seen as belonging to more

¹ An earlier, shorter version of this work was presented at the international symposium *Generation and Transformation in Women’s Writing* held in Krakow in May 2010. All translations from the Czech are mine, unless otherwise stated.

² My research to date has included personal interviews with all but one (Richterová) of the writers whose work I am studying. See Czech entries in *Who’s Who in Contemporary Women’s Writing* (MILLER 2001). Cf. also *Czech Literature Portal* at <http://www.czechlit.cz/authors/> (accessible in English).

³ For some general discussion in English see AMBROS 2001: 201–219; HOLÝ 2008; SEGEL 2008.

⁴ Unfortunately, to date only a small part of this work has been translated into English (see Appendix); some is available in other European languages. For a representative English-language sample of prose by contemporary Czech women, with an introduction offering a broader historical context, cf. BÜCHLER 1998.

than one generation — those who came of age before or at the time of the Prague Spring and those somewhat younger. However, if we look at the context in which they began their creative careers we may consider them members of a single larger generation. They all sooner or later developed their identity as writers during the era of 'normalization'. Viewed collectively, the distinct individual voices of these women offer readers a fascinating and richly varied narrative world.

Although it is largely Czech men writers of an older generation who became famous as dissidents, both at home and abroad, there were also several younger women writers who formed their creative consciousness in the illegal literary underground after 1968.⁵ Prominent among those who began writing in that context are two women whose early biographies not only share similar moments, but whose families were well-acquainted: Lenka Procházková and Tereza Boučková. Both entered the literary scene as daughters of well-known writers (and dissidents), and as young women signed the human rights document Charter 77, a deed that destined them to dissident status and menial jobs as cleaning women until the end of communism. For Procházková (b. 1951) it might have been a bureaucratic fluke that allowed her to complete a university degree; she began her studies at Charles University in the School of Journalism and finished in the School of Arts and Letters (*Filosofická fakulta*) in the Department of Cultural Theory, with an emphasis on film. In addition to narrative prose, Procházková, along with several of her fellow writers,⁶ has published numerous journalistic essays (or *feuilletons* as the Czechs call them). Although, like many of her generation in former Eastern Europe, she at first resisted openly identifying herself as a feminist,⁷ she is a strong woman who has relentlessly pursued a determined and energetic path as a single mother of three children, a committed civic activist with a courageous social conscience, a persevering writer of both fiction and non-fiction.

As a fiction writer, Procházková is still well-known for her early stories and novels, for which she drew heavily from her life experience. Her first prose, *Tři povídky* [Three Stories] (1980), appeared in the *samizdat* se-

⁵ One woman writer of an older generation stands among the men — Eva Kantůrková (b. 1930), known to an anglophone audience for her fictionalized prison memoir (KANTŮRKOVÁ 1987).

⁶ Berková, Boučková, Hauserová, and Pekárková have all contributed publicistic essays to the press, some later published as books.

⁷ By now the complex reception of feminism in former Eastern Europe in general and Czech Republic in specific has been widely discussed by Western and Czech scholars alike. See VĚŠINOVÁ-KALIVODOVÁ 2005.

ries Padlock Editions (Edice Petlice), produced by Ludvík Vaculík. After her debut, Procházková published three more collections of stories: *Přijed' ochutnat* [Come Have a Taste] (1981),⁸ *Hlídač holubů* [Pigeon Guard] (1984), *Zvrhlé dny* [Perverse Days] (1995), and three novels: *Růžová dáma* [The Pink Lady] (1980), *Oční kapky* [Eye Drops] (1982), *Smolná kniha* [A Black Chronicle] (1989). All but the last book of stories first appeared in *samizdat*, then in the exile press in Toronto and Cologne, and only after 1989 in editions published in Prague and Brno. Her first novel, *Růžová dáma*, won the prestigious North American *émigré* book award, the Egon Hostovský Prize, and soon appeared in German and Swedish translation.

Procházková's writing is marked overall by her evident talent for storytelling. In her early prose, both stories and novels, she deals predominantly with the dynamics of personal relationships, often marked by thwarted or failed love. Especially striking in her first novel, *Růžová dáma*, set in a small town in North Bohemia, is the rape of the main female protagonist as a teenager early in the narrative and the consequences that traumatic experience has on her subsequent life. At the time Procházková's fiction first appeared in the 1980s, and again when it was officially published in the 1990s, some Czech critics categorized it as 'women's writing' (*ženské psaní*), a pejorative term suggesting light romantic fiction meant exclusively for a female audience. In my view, however, they neglected to appreciate the subtle connection between the thematics of Procházková's prose and the repressive conditions in which she was writing. Although it is only in *Smolná kniha* that the dissident milieu and the nefarious role of the secret police are explicitly depicted, the underlying oppressive atmosphere of normalization contributes significantly, to the subtext of most of her stories and the other novels. (I will return to *Smolná kniha* in my comparative analysis of three works below.)

If Tereza Boučková (b. 1957) had been allowed to continue her education beyond the secondary level, she would have studied acting. Instead, as the child of a dissident and herself at age twenty a signatory of Charter 77, she was limited to attending a language school, unofficial home seminars (*bytová univerzita*), and some informal training in drama under the tutelage of an older actress and fellow dissident, Vlasta Chramostová (b. 1926). Needless to say, she could only pursue menial jobs. In part to distance herself from the secret police, Boučková moved

⁸ All publications of the Czech writers referred to by the present author, both original titles and English translations, are listed in the Bibliography at the end of this paper.

with her husband to a family cottage some distance from Prague, where she lives until today.

Boučková's earliest prose work, *Indiánský běh* [Indian Run] (1988), first appeared in *samizdat* near the end of communism; soon it was published officially (1990), and won the Jiří Orten Prize for best book of the year. In its final version *Indiánský běh* is a loosely linked tryptich (plus epilogue), whose fragmentary text reflects not only some distinctly autobiographical motifs, but also a boldly gendered perspective. The Czech cultural scholar Libora Oates-Indruchová offers an excellent feminist analysis of *Indiánský běh* in English:

[...] the private, the political and the female/feminist facets are all highly visible in the narrative. It is the simultaneous occurrence of the specificity of women's experience within the political context that made the book stand out from other literary productions by women at the time of its publication, when questions of women's identity and their different experience of political issues did not belong to a general public discussion (OATES-INDRUCHOVÁ 2002: 141).

As Oates-Indruchová reminds us: "the strong issue underlying the entire narrative is the woman-narrator's place in the world and her search for her female identity". Locating Boučková's writing in a broader tradition, Alfred Thomas points out an interesting "parallel between the suffering female body and the oppressed nation" (THOMAS 2007: 203).

Boučková soon published two more short prose texts, *Křepelice* [The Quail] (1993) and *Když milujete muže* [When You Love a Man] (1995), in which she unabashedly explores complex, yet typical issues of individual women's lives, employing irony and at times sarcastic humor. The author's laconic, often brutal, style is well reflected in a childbirth scene in *Křepelice*:

Once there were some straps. Hands and legs tied down by these straps. Light. Green face masks. The murmur of water, rubber gloves. And pain and fear. IV drips above her head. Fear. Once there was a woman named Hana under anesthesia. There was a slice from hip to hip, there was hurrying, there was blood. Out of the blood, a son (BOUČKOVÁ 1997: 70).

Here through the syntactic evocation of a folktale, the author adds an archetypal allusion, subtly linking a modern cesarean birth to women's age-old experiences of motherhood.

Boučková's challenging experience with two adopted Romany boys is central to both her fictional and nonfictional writing and is also reflected in the scenario she wrote for the feature film *Smradi* [Brats] (2002), directed by Zdeněk Tyc. Her most recent novel, *Rok kohouta* [Year of the

Rooster] (2008), which became a best-seller (unique among the writers in this study) is also frankly confessional, reflecting the narrator's complex midlife journey, dominated by the trials her family experiences in connection with their now adolescent adopted Romany sons. Although the text is much longer than any of her previous work (more than 300 pages), like her earlier prose, it too is highly fragmentary, incorporating, among other things, letters and dreams.

The untimely death of Alexandra Berková (1949–2008), shortly before her sixtieth birthday, came as a shock to her friends and readers. The daughter of a journalist mother who wrote fiction for women's magazines and a father who was a symphony orchestra conductor, Berková was an intensely active and creative woman throughout her life. Her childhood dream of becoming a painter led instead to a secondary education in glassmaking at an applied arts school in Northern Bohemia. After that she went on to study Czech and art education at Charles University in Prague, graduating in 1973, and eventually earning a doctorate (1980). Initially Berková worked as an editor for publishing houses (1973–1981) and later wrote scenarios for Czechoslovak Television (1983–1991). After 1989 she helped organize the new Writers' Council (Obec spisovatelů) and was a founding member of the Czech branch of Pen Club; she also responded favorably to the overtures of Western feminists who descended upon Prague in the early 1990s. From the time of its founding in 2000, until her death, she was a very popular teacher of creative writing at the Josef Škvorecký Literary Academy.

Of the writers I am considering here, Berková is the only one who managed to have her first book officially published in Prague before the fall of communism, when Gorbachev's *glasnost* echoed slightly in Czechoslovakia. A small volume of loosely connected stories, *Knížka s červeným obalem* [The Book with a Red Cover] (1986) presents the fate of a woman from birth to death in a fragmentary, ironically playful manner, emphasizing absurd, at times even surreal aspects of life. The beginning of the first story, *Miniromán* [Mininovel] may serve as an apt sample of her thematics and style, albeit here still in a relatively realistic mode:

When Mum and Dad ran into each other they said, it's been ages, what have you been up to all this time. And Mum said, I guess I'll have to get married. And Dad said, why have to and why guess, and Mum said, have to because I don't want to, and guess because I guess I'll do it. And Dad said, marriage is an outdated institution, let's go to the cinema. And Mum said, thanks but I don't have time. So they went (BERKOVÁ 2006: 15).

Berková's ironic, even sceptical interpretation of gender relations would persist into her later writing. In her three subsequent novels, Berková continued to create highly original narratives. Her second book, *Magorie aneb příběh velké lásky* [Magoria: Land of Fools or Looneyland, or A Tale of Great Love] (1991), a grotesque parable or 'satirical fairy tale' (BÜCHLER 1998: xii), rejecting the degenerate society of pre-89 Czechoslovakia, won the Egon Hostovský prize for best book of the year when it was first published. It was followed by yet another innovative narrative, *Utrpení oddaného Všiváka* [The Sufferings of a Devoted Scoundrel] (1993), which is a more universal contemplation of the human condition through the adventures of a picaresque protagonist, the "humorous ramblings of a fallen angel" (BÜCHLER 1998).

Berková's fascination with language and style is most successfully reflected in her fourth novel, *Temná láska* [Dark Love] (2000), which provoked lively critical debate when it appeared. From the perspective of a middle-aged female narrator, the reader experiences the painful process of separation and divorce from a husband of many years. Through brutally non-realistic imagery and incidents, this work represents a non-traditional portrayal of the acceptance and then the rejection of society's patriarchal expectations. Berková was in the small vanguard of Czech intellectuals who engaged actively in the promotion of feminist attitudes in the 1990s. Her early death was a distinct loss to Czech literary culture.

Zuzana Brabcová (b. 1957) is yet another writer whose course in life was directly affected by the fact that her parents, both literary scholars, were dissidents. After completing her secondary education, instead of studying at university she too ended up laboring as a cleaning woman. After 1989 she began working as a literary editor for publishing houses, a profession she has pursued to the present. Her debut novel, *Daleko od stromu* [Far from the Tree], first circulated in a *samizdat* edition (1984), then was published in exile (1987), winning the Jiří Orten émigré prize for young writers, and finally came out officially in Prague (1991). A dense, non-linear text, with abundant intertextual references that draw upon history and myth, *Daleko od stromu* is narrated from the point of view of a young woman, Věra, coming of age in the repressive atmosphere of post-68 Czechoslovakia. From the novel's onset, the personal (feminine) is connected with the political:

Soon after conception, amidst the waters of the womb, I experienced something [that] might without hyperbole be called an anticipation of the world. And indeed: shortly before birth I knew for sure what light and darkness were like, a nuclear warhead, or the post-war population statistics (BRABCOVÁ 1998: 15).

Alfred Thomas goes so far as to assert that most Czech women writers of this period “experienced femininity as an extension of their political dissidence, which tends to be expressed in terms of personal suffering and self-sacrifice”, with the body becoming “the most common and resilient metaphor for the experiential suffering of women” (THOMAS 2007: 203). I would add that the feminine transcends political dissidence in the narrator’s striking statement (still on the novel’s first page) that the only two things she wanted to do in life were to write a novel and give birth to a son.

Brabcová’s third and last published novel to date, *Rok perel* [A Year of Pearls], appeared in 2000, the same year as Berková’s *Temná láska*. Both incorporating elements of autobiographical testimony, these two novels have often been compared.⁹ *Rok perel* depicts the story of an apparently happily married professional woman and mother of a talented, emotionally stable 19-year-old daughter, who unexpectedly discovers and quickly acts upon her same-sex desires. Even more than Berková’s *Temná láska*, Brabcová’s book enjoyed a kind of *succès du scandale* when it appeared, labeled by some as the first Czech lesbian novel. It too was quickly translated into several languages, perhaps into more than any other work by a contemporary Czech female author (but, unfortunately, not into English).

The best-known Czech woman writer of what may be called postmodernism, is Daniela Hodrová (b. 1946) who has pursued a dual literary and scholarly career, reminiscent of Umberto Eco.¹⁰ The daughter of an actor at the well-known Vinohrady theatre in Prague, she spent one year as an assistant in a small theatre before engaging in literary studies at Charles University. After completing graduate work in comparative literature in 1980, and working briefly as an editor for a publishing house, she embarked on a productive career as a research scholar at the Academy of Sciences Institute of Czechoslovak and World Literature (Československá akademie věd, ČSAV, today the Institute of Czech Literature), with a specialty in theory of the novel. Although Hodrová began writing fiction in the second half of the 1970s, none of her work circulated in samizdat, nor was it published abroad. Instead, she waited for the demise of com-

⁹ Cf. SOKOL 2008.

¹⁰ Although Hodrová herself eschews the term postmodernist, I use it to convey the non-linear, playfully self-conscious, markedly intertextual, and open-ended style of her prose, which can also be characterized as experimental. Another literary concept that helps describe her prose is magical realism, which according to the scholar Martin Travers “brought the mythopoetic logic of fantasy into worlds that were historically and socially recognizable” (TRAVERS 1998: 219).

munism to share her novels with an audience beyond her closest friends. In the early 1990s her first three novels came out in quick succession; in 1999 she published them as a trilogy in one volume, *Trýzlivé město* [City of Torment], a direct allusion to *città dolente* from Dante's *Inferno*. All her novels (eight to date) are very specifically set in Prague, each in some sense a continuation of the previous ones. Her fiction is highly self-conscious and self-referential; every one of her narrative texts is in its way a complex network of character, spatial, and temporal interrelationships interwoven with literary, mythological, and historical allusions — sophisticated texts that make serious demands on the reader, at the same time that they quite magically captivate the reader.¹¹ In October 2011, Hodrová was awarded the prestigious State Prize for Literature, honoring her specifically for her latest novel *Vyvolávání* [Invocation] (2010), as well as for her oeuvre overall; in 2012 she was awarded the distinguished Franz Kafka Prize as well¹² (I analyze one of her novels at greater length below.)

Often considered in proximity with Hodrová, is Sylvie Richterová (b. 1945), another writer of what many call 'experimental' prose;¹³ she is also known for her poetry and literary essays. After first studying languages and interpretation in her hometown of Brno, she embarked on literary studies at Charles University in Prague, where she met and married an Italian student, with whom she moved legally to Italy in 1971. Although they subsequently divorced, she and their daughter remained in Italy. After completing further study of Czech literature in Rome (greatly inspired and encouraged by the charismatic well-known Slavist, Angelo Mario Ripellino, Richterová went on to pursue an accomplished career as a professor and scholar of Czech and comparative literature in Italy.

Having written most of it while still in Prague, Richterová finished her first prose work, *Návraty a jiné ztráty* [Returns and Other Losses] in Rome; the text circulated in *samizdat* (Padlock Editions) and was then published in Toronto (1978). In that slim volume we are introduced to the style and concerns Richterová would pursue with variations in her subsequent fiction. Here, in what may loosely be characterized as a diary-like memoir, she employs a highly self-conscious first-person female narrator, creating

¹¹ Some of her novels suggest comparison with Virginia Woolf; see SOKOL 2011.

¹² For a fuller introduction to the writing of Hodrová, especially her understanding of 'feminine writing', see SOKOL (forthcoming); for a gender-neutral analysis of Hodrová's *Trilogy*, see PORTER 2001: 162–171.

¹³ Richterová is above all indebted to the older writer Věra Linhartová (b. 1940, emigrated to Paris 1968).

a fragmentary, non-linear, syntactically rhythmic text. Memories from childhood conveyed with ironic humor are intercut with scenes from life in Italy. She cleverly reveals the conundrum of the woman writer in a patriarchal culture:

My original intent was to write a book about my mother. Actually not, my primordial intent was to become a writer (not a woman writer). Only my mother never let me hope that I could become a writer. She advised me instead to choose a husband someday who would be a writer or literary critic, so that I could at least get into the milieu (RICHTEROVÁ 1991: 71).

In her first work Richterová already introduces the question of gender identity of the narrator — an issue that she develops intriguingly in her later texts, not only thematically but also on the level of morphology (which can be done in Slavonic languages due to grammatical gender, non-existent in English). Richterová has published four other prose texts, three of which first came out in *samizdat*, as well as exile editions: *Rozptýlené podoby* [Fragments and Likenesses] (1979), *Místopis* [Topography] (1981), and *Slabikář otcovského jazyka* [Primer of the Father Tongue] (1985). Those three texts include further recollections from the author's past and present life complexly interwoven; and continue to problematize the question of the narrator's gender identity. Only in her last book, *Druhé loučení* [Second Parting] (1994) does Richterová appear to use a more traditional narrative form with a masculine authorial subject; yet here too, she continues to thematicize the gender identity of the authorial subject (STOLZ-HLADKÁ 1996: 15).

The youngest of the writers I have included in this generational study is Iva Pekárková (b. 1963). She is also the one best known to an Anglophone audience, since her first three novels appeared in English translation soon after their publication in Czech. The daughter of two scientists, Pekárková abandoned her university study of microbiology after four years, and in 1985 chose to defect from 'colorless' normalized Czechoslovakia to the West. After ten months in a refugee camp in Austria, she was granted permission to settle in the United States, where she began to write seriously. She took whatever work she could find to support herself, including her well-known six-year stint as a night-time taxi driver in New York City. Her first novel, *Péra a perutě* [Truck Stop Rainbows] came out in Czech in Toronto in late 1989 (Sixty-Eight Publishers), just as the authoritarian system she had fled was collapsing. Since then her novels (six to date), four travel narratives, and several collections of stories, have all been published in Prague. In contrast to a writer like Hrodová, who is keenly dependent on her native city for inspiration,

Pekárková, with the exception of her first novel, finds her creative motivation outside her homeland. Multiculturalism is an essential part of her existence, of her writing, of her very identity. Although she did return to Prague for a while in the late 1990s and early 2000s, she has been living in London since 2006, making only occasional short trips to the Czech Republic.¹⁴ (See below for an analysis of one of her novels.)

Eva Hauserová (b. 1954), who also grew up in a family of scientists, herself earned a degree in microbiology at Charles University (1978). In the early 1980s, while on maternity leave from her professional career in a genetic engineering lab, she began writing science fiction stories. Drawing on her scientific training, as well as personal experience, she introduced feminist and ecological motifs into the dystopian sci-fi genre. Her most compelling works are marked by an experimental and ironically playful approach. Nominated several times for the coveted 'Newt' (Karel Čapek Prize) for the best sci-fi story of the year, she finally won it in 1988 for her story *U nás v Agónii* [At Home in Agony]. After 1989 Hauserová became active in the international sci-fi scene, traveling to England, America, and Australia, where she first gained familiarity with western feminism. At that time, Hauserová gave up her career as a microbiologist in order to devote herself to writing. As a free-lance writer, she has supported herself with various jobs over the years, including the translation from English of women's popular fiction and editorial work for women's magazines. Currently she does part-time editing for a PR firm and directs creative writing workshops.

When the demise of communism made it possible for Western feminist activists and scholars (predominantly from North America) to engage in dialogue with women in Eastern Europe, an important destination for some of them was Czechoslovakia (soon to split into two countries), which, along with its socialist neighbors, had not experienced second-wave feminism.¹⁵ Thus the initial complex interaction of Western feminists and their Eastern colleagues in the early 1990s led not only to the creation of the Prague Gender Studies Centre and the gradual introduction of gender studies into university curricula, but also to a lively debate in the national media, involving women and men writers, scholars, and journalists, among others.

It was in this context that the broader public became familiar with Hauserová's name. Her first non-fictional work, *Na koštěti se dá i lítat*

¹⁴ See ELIÁŠOVÁ and FOJTOVÁ 2006: 155–169.

¹⁵ For further discussion, see, among others, HAVELKOVÁ 1993; BUSHEIKIN 1997; ŠIKLOVÁ 1997; VĚŠINOVÁ-KALIVODOVÁ 2005.

[Broomsticks Can Also Be Used For Flying] (1995), presented a characterization of Western second-wave feminism, attempting to counterbalance the uninformed reactions of many Czechs on that topic. A woman of strong social conscience, Hauserová became actively involved in the ongoing polemic for some time, gaining notoriety among her more traditional compatriots. She has, however, had a more broadly focused professional life, reflecting a strong interest not only in feminism, but also in ecological issues, above all permaculture. Enhanced by her commitment to environmental causes, her own self-identity is most strongly connected to her work as a writer of fiction. It is not surprising that her early sci-fi narratives have been recently republished, for they remain a notable achievement in a special genre of Czech women's prose.¹⁶

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

One of my central concerns in studying the work of this first post-communist generation of Czech women writers is to view their creativity in the context of a feminist poetics, seeking to identify in their writing important features of women's literary discourse. As my overview has shown, the authors I have introduced here represent a diverse body of prose fiction. Nonetheless, certain textual features, both thematic and stylistic, suggest an underlying commonality in their writing — one that would appear to have a gendered basis. Therefore, in this part of my essay I offer a brief analysis of novels by three distinctly different writers — Lenka Procházková, Iva Pekárková, and Daniela Hodrová — to demonstrate what I perceive as gendered similarities. Although my larger research on Czech women's writing is indebted to a broad range of feminist literary scholarship, for efficiency's sake, I largely base my argument here on the lucid presentation of a feminist literary poetics articulated by the American scholar Joanne Frye.¹⁷

In her feminist poetics of women's prose, Frye identifies as a prominent characteristic the frequent use of first-person narrative, which facilitates the direct, unmediated expression of experience, or what many critics designate 'confessional writing'.¹⁸ She contends that "In claiming the right to narrate their own lives, female protagonists thereby claim the

¹⁶ See, for example, *The Madwoman* (*Cvokyně*, 1992, rev. ed. 2009).

¹⁷ The title alone of Frye's book is well suited to the Czech writers I examine: *Living Stories, Telling Lives. Women and the Novel in Contemporary Experience*.

¹⁸ See also, COWARD 1985: 232–235; GERRARD 1989: 111–15; MAROULA 2000: 104–124.

authority to name and construct their own experience" (FRYE 1986: 58). Another feature is the subversion of the traditional femininity text familiar from popular commercial fiction, with the anticipated conclusion being the heroine's happy marriage. Instead, in terms of plot we find "a refusal of narrative closure and of a determinate past [...] to show women's lives — like all lives — as ongoing process, not passive entrapment in romance or sexual destiny" (FRYE 1986: 40–41). A further quality characteristic of many novels by women is their fragmentary or collage-like structure, possibly reflecting the actual schedules of women's lives, offering shorter periods of time for writing.¹⁹

Among the works of this post-communist generation of Czech women writers, an obvious example of confessional writing is Lenka Procházková's third novel, *Smolná kniha*, in which the author vigorously claims the space of her narrative to portray her own subjective female experience. Drawn from Procházková's years together with the older, well-established writer Ludvík Vaculík (b. 1926), the novel's first-person narrator, Pavla, herself a young writer, as well as single mother of two small daughters, copes with the complexities of her relationship with Josef, a much older married man, well-known author, and now father of her second child, all in the ominous political setting of 'normalized' Prague. Although one might argue that there are some elements of the popular romance genre in Procházková's writing, I disagree with those unsympathetic critics who have dismissed this novel as mere melodramatic kitsch. In my view Procházková raises fundamental questions of gender relations and a creative woman's identity in the difficult context of anti-communist dissidence within 'normalized' Czechoslovak society.²⁰

The life of Pavla, the main protagonist of *Smolná kniha*, embodies the common dilemma of a working mother, trying to balance a professional life with the responsibilities of motherhood. Already a published author, Pavla is committed to her art (she does not really mind having to work as a mere cleaning woman because it leaves her free time for writing); yet she is also a very devoted mother, and even confides to a friend: "I will always believe that to give birth to and raise a child is more important than to write three good books" (PROCHÁZKOVÁ 1992: 77). The depiction of the relationship of Pavla and Josef also challenges the patriarchal double standard on at least two levels. First, men, it would seem, are allowed, even expected, to be unfaithful, but women are not. Pavla wish-

¹⁹ This is, of course, a much more complex topic; see SOKOL (forthcoming).

²⁰ For a brief foray into the literary-life relationship of the writers Procházková and Vaculík, see SOKOL 2005.

es they could get married, but Josef won't divorce his wife. In post-coital banter prompted by a TV film they had watched together, Josef utters: "All the mares must be rebranded in the spring. So they won't run away". And when Pavla asks what he would do if she ran away but then returned, he responds: "I would shoot you" (PROCHÁZKOVÁ 1992: 39). Not only married women, but single ones too are male property in the patriarchy. Second, the novel reminds us of the woman's double burden (work both outside and in the home) and the persistent perception that a man's career is more valuable than a woman's. Out of necessity, Pavla's household and family responsibilities invariably take precedence over her writing: "Josef's eyes are tired from proofreading, he sat doing that all evening; I was in the kitchen ironing" (PROCHÁZKOVÁ 1992: 382).

Although the plot of *Smolná kniha* unfolds in a linear chronology, the narrative itself is reminiscent of film through its use of short, rapidly changing scenes that center on dialogue. Further fragmenting the overall text, the three main parts are separated by short 'intermezzi', and five poems are also incorporated into the novel. Significant, too, is the open-ended conclusion that abruptly leaves Pavla alone: Josef is modern enough not to shoot Pavla when he deduces, by surreptitiously reading her book manuscript, that she has been unfaithful; nonetheless, he equally surreptitiously walks out on her and the children. The novel concludes with a lyrical poem reflecting the abandoned narrator's emotional pain.

If very different in style and content from *Smolná kniha*, Iva Pekárková's novel, *Třicet dva chwanů* [Thirty-two Chwan] (2000), is in its own way a confessional novel with autobiographical undertones. As a work that finds much of its inspiration and material in the author's memories of the eight months she spent in Thailand in the late 1980s, *Třicet dva chwanů* reveals a Czech refugee woman's search for self-understanding. Narrating in the first person, in the voice of a highly self-conscious traveler, the female protagonist relates her fascinating observations about exotic South Asian culture alongside references to her own earlier life. Allusions to an old boyfriend left behind in New York, as well as fresh sexual encounters in Thailand, recur as leitmotifs throughout the text. Yet also notable are the stories of young Thai women forced to come to Bangkok from their villages to work as prostitutes in order to help support their families. In a very different culture Pekárková's protagonist discovers variations on the age-old patriarchal double standard.

Most representative of the confessional mode is the central moment of the book, both literally and figuratively, which recounts the narrator's

travels in the hills of northern Thailand. Through opium-induced dreams, she returns to the emotionally traumatic years of her adolescence and early adulthood in communist Czechoslovakia — the death of her mother from breast cancer and her father's inability to understand his daughter, leading to their mutual alienation. Although some familiarity with the author's biography makes clearer the autobiographical allusions in this passage, such knowledge is not essential for an appreciation of the text.

The structure of *Třicet dva chvanů* is very fragmentary and collage-like. Six major parts are composed of many very short sections. Interwoven into the narrator's direct discourse are italicized extracts from her ongoing 'letter to papa' (a kind of stream-of-consciousness diary). Also interspersed among the pages are twelve striking black and white photographs taken by the author. When the novel ends with the narrator at the Bangkok airport, forced to return to America after being denied an extension of her visa, the reader feels no closure to the authorial narrator's search for meaning in her life.²¹

The very dense, erudite, at times even esoteric quality of Daniela Hodrová's texts, replete with intertextual allusions, has led some critics to call her a 'masculine' writer.²² In my understanding, however, her novels reveal important features of women's literary discourse. Although not so obviously autobiographical as *Smolná kniha* or *Třicet dva chvanů*, or even her own trilogy *Trýznivé město*, Hodrová's novel *Ztracené děti* [Lost Children] (1997) can also be characterized as a woman's 'fictional testimony'. In an interview Daniela Hodrová once commented, "writing represents the most meaningful way to intensely perceive my own self, myself in the world, and the world within myself" (DRAŽANOVÁ 1996: 99). She identifies this search for herself as 'an infinite process' and sees herself as writing one Novel that will come to an end only when she dies. *Ztracené děti* presents a complex web of family relationships, with a distinct emphasis on the ties among female members — especially those between mother and daughter, as well as between grandmother and granddaughter.

The primary narrative point of view in *Ztracené děti* is that of the main protagonist, Manuela, depicted as the mother of a 'lost' teenage daughter, Adélka, as well as a woman who has pursued traditionally female professions — first a schoolteacher and then a caregiver to elderly women.

²¹ For further analyses in English of Pekárková's writing, see SOKOL 1999; SOKOL 2006; see also ELIÁŠOVÁ 2006.

²² Hodrová has shared with me her assumption that such a gender stereotype comes from her being a well-known scholar of literary theory.

Manuela's voice is conveyed in third person, with the exception of her occasional notes and journal entries that introduce first person into the text. I would note, however, that the Manuela's voice so dominates both 'real' and dream situations that the reader gains the impression that the text is narrated in the first person. It is Manuela's self-reflection, her self-analysis, which draws the reader into the narrative. At times the narrator, and therefore we the readers too, cannot distinguish between dream and reality, which also contributes to our perception of her voice as first person. Other parts of the text that are actually conveyed in first person — above all, the daughter's dreams and the grandmother's memoirs — do enhance the overall feeling of a confessional narrative.

The autobiographical nature of *Ztracené děti* is less apparent on the surface of the narrative than in the novels of Procházková or Pekárková; instead the reader somehow senses a personal aspect intricately woven into the portrayal of Manuela's relationships with her mother and grandmother. Therefore, through the heroine's attempt not only to understand her lost daughter, but also to gain insight into her mother and her grandmother, we perceive a process that appears to be leading Manuela to new self-knowledge. Especially revealing here is the shift in narrative perspective that Hodrová introduces in the very last episode of the novel, where we rather unexpectedly encounter Manuela's voice in the first person: "When I once long ago gazed into grandmother's eyes, they were brownish-green, but as grandmother grew older, their color faded" (HODROVÁ 1997: 382). Or is this perhaps the authorial narrator speaking directly?

Similar to Hodrová's other novels, the narrative structure of *Ztracené děti* is insistently non-linear and open-ended. The text is composed of almost 300 short sections or mini-chapters, averaging one to two pages in length, each with a title. Hodrová once explained to me her own understanding of the interrelationship between the style of her fiction and her method of writing. She usually writes for about an hour and a half in the afternoon, in which time she composes a short chapter. Fit into a day of other responsibilities, such a schedule is not so unusual for women writers.

In this brief analysis of novels by Procházková, Pekárková, and Hodrová, I have attempted to demonstrate the range of commonalities and differences in their writing, focusing on some prominent aspects of feminist poetics. At the same time, I propose that the thematic and stylistic issues raised by their work is representative of a broadly conceived generation of Czech women writers whose stories and novels emerged on the Czech literary scene at the beginning of the post-communist era. As

the introductory part of this essay suggests, there are more than a few interesting contemporary Czech women whose fictional creation deserves closer attention. Therefore the ultimate goal of the larger study in which I am engaged is to help make better known outside the borders of the Czech Republic the rich diversity of these women's lively voices. Of course, greater availability of their work in English translation would also increase the chances of a broader dialogue among those interested in women's writing in Central and Eastern Europe. Potential projects abound.

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