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The Memory of Central European Emigration and Exile: A Comparative Interpretation of the Novels of Louis-Philippe Dalembert, Lenka Horňáková-Civade and Véronique Mougin

1. Introduction, Methodology and Corpus

The reflection on the memory of the 20th century, the trauma of wars and conflicts, and geopolitical changes and the related interruption and renewal of cultural, national or ethnic identities on a collective and individual level is very often associated in contemporary literature with the space of Central or Eastern Europe; in recent years, this thematic area has been saturated with several novels that turn to the memory and fate of protagonists of Central European origin. Our corpus includes three recent works by authors of different generations, poetries and nationalities: *Avant que les ombres s'effacent* (Before the Shadows Dissipate) by the Haitian writer Louis-Philippe Dalembert, *Où passe l'aiguille* (Where the Needle Fits) by the French author and journalist Véronique Mougin and *Symfonie o novém světě* (Symphony of the New World) by the Czech writer Lenka Horňáková-Civade.¹

The works that are the subject of our transcultural analysis, interpretation and comparison are chosen, however, with the intention of capturing a common and recurring theme – all these prose works similarly reflect the life of the protagonist (or other characters) whose fate is overturned by the

¹ The original texts cited were translated into English by the author of this study. The surname of the author Véronique Mougin is also given in the Czech translation in the adapted form Mouginová, as it appears in the book.

rise of the dominant totalitarian ideologies of the 20th century, i.e. Nazism or Communism. Escaping from the inevitable cycle of World War II and the Holocaust is a common theme in them; a framework that demonstrates a certain universality of this theme and cultural experience across national literatures, even if the narrative strategies can be different in each case, as we will describe below. Another reason for selecting the aforementioned books for comparative interpretation is the temporal proximity of their publication, at the end of the second decade of the current century, which is characterized by the passing of the last direct witnesses of the events of the 1930s and 1940s – a typical case of the so-called floating gap stage, in which communicative memory is necessarily reduced and transformed into cultural memory.²

Although these are stories of a fictional universe, it should be emphasised at the outset that literature plays a significant role in relation to society and participates in the creation and preservation of collective memory of the traumatic events of the 20th century, as Astrid Erll points out:

Literature thus takes up versions of the past and concepts of memory from other symbolic systems (psychology, psychoanalysis, neuroscience, religion, historical science, sociology, discourses of the everyday, etc.), preserves cultural knowledge about memory in aesthetic forms (narrative structures, symbolism, metaphors), and thus allows us to view memory accurately. (Erllová 2015: 198)

At the same time, the contemporary political and cultural situation seems to have made the role of stories, of artistic narrative, even more prominent:

By creating semantic forms in the sign system of literature, the formal and aesthetic aspects of literature (e.g. metafictional techniques, narrative situations, space-time, tropes) become increasingly important. Literary texts offer diverse interpretative and identificatory readings and understandings of society and history that can enter into collective (historical) memory. (Kratochvíl 2013: 13)

² In other words, according to Jan Assmann (2015: 52–53), the figures and means of remembering are changing from the living narratives of direct participants to the fixation of collective memory through organizations, institutions and art, including literature. This is a period in which collective memory undergoes a distinct selection; as a rule, only what is constitutive of a given society and its identity remains.

These reflections and remarks provide the theoretical basis for interpretive keys to reflect on forced or violent emigration, expulsion and uprooting, which logically become trauma alongside other powerful historical experiences: “This notion is of fundamental importance in history and... must take its place among the basic forms of historical discontinuity: major events (revolution, conquest, defeat) are perceived as ‘collective traumas’” (Le Goff 2007: 155).

Finally, the literary reflection and representation of memory can also be interpreted in the context of Pierre Nora’s famous concept of places of memory (*lieux de mémoire*), which are not only places in the physical and geographical sense – the author understands them more openly, in a broader and symbolic sense. Nora’s interpretations further remind us that the existence and search for places of memory is an expression of the deep-seated human need for national narratives and a symptom of nostalgia for a common past and the identity that springs from it:

Following the example of ethnic groups and social minorities, every established group, intellectual or not, learned or not, has felt the need to go in search of its own origins and identity. Indeed, there is hardly a family today in which some member has not recently sought to document as accurately as possible his or her ancestors’ furtive existences.

(Nora 1996: 51)

2. Central Europe Between Political and Cultural Concepts

The definition of the concept of Central Europe and the perception of Central Europeanism derived from it is burdened with strong interpretive divergence and conceptual ambiguity across cultural, political and social science disciplines, which may also be influenced by prevailing ideological concepts and influences. With some simplification, then, three tendencies can be identified in the discourse beginning in the 19th century, which include narrow, expansive and negative conceptions – the complicated identity of a group of generally smaller nations was described by Milan Kundera in his canonical 1980s essay *The Tragedy of Central Europe* through the prism of cultural traditions and development:

It would be senseless to try to draw its borders exactly. Central Europe is not a state: it is a culture or a fate. Its borders are imaginary and must be drawn and redrawn with each new historical situation... Central Europe therefore cannot be defined and determined by political frontiers (which are inauthentic, always imposed by invasions, conquests, and occupations), but by the great common situations that reassemble

peoples, regroup them in ever new ways along the imaginary and ever-changing boundaries that mark a realm inhabited by the same memories, the same problems and conflicts, the same common tradition. (Kundera 1984: 35)

Central Europe is reflected in the analysed novels (similarly to the intentions of Kundera's quoted text) in the form of a region with a distinct discontinuity and unstable character. This representation, it should be noted, is far from being specific to recent prose, but follows a strong tradition of 20th century literature. Moreover, the question of Central European identity is now more strongly accentuated in the context of the geopolitical changes of the last two decades or so, not only in a cultural sense but also in a social or political sense, which has been noted by a greater number of contemporary scholars across disciplines. This question became relevant at the turn of the millennium in connection with the integration of the post-communist part of the region into the European community on the part of both liberal and conservative cultural and social science currents – authors such as Erhard Busek, György Konrád, Maria Todorova and many others (cf. Trávníček 2009: 193–300).

Furthermore, it should also be mentioned that the use of some interpretations and concepts of the region can be ideological or purposeful, as the following comment illustrates:

The concept of Central Europe has been widely criticized as a political tool of the Visegrad countries to dissociate themselves from other lands 'in between' Germany and Russia. Indeed, debates largely exhausted by the mid-2000s. Those scholars from the Humanities who kept an interest in the concept as an analytical tool aspired to relate reflections of former icons of Central European thought to current matters (e. g. Csaba Gy. Kiss, Jan Křen, Martin C. Putna, Ziemowit Szczerek, Andrzej Stasiuk, Simona Škrabec and Jiří Trávníček), either by emphasizing the similarities and parallels of past and contemporary situations or by expressing, often ironically, their distance and scepticism towards the very concept they employ. The Visegrad idea, however, still kept some of its appeal and, significantly, public funding. (Šidáková Fialová, Scheibner, Németh Vítová 2020: 13)

In the light of the above quotation, Central Europe may appear as a shifting field of interpretation, depending on which political representations in one or another country in the region promote one or another interest and orientation.

3. Unintelligible Home, Unintelligible Identity

In the perspective of the authors, the complexity and intricacy of the concept and situation of Central Europe, including the phenomenon of migration,³ is clearly and repeatedly brought to the fore in our corpus of prose. If we now briefly consider their basic biographical information, we find, as mentioned in the introduction, different empirical backgrounds: Véronique Mougin (born in 1977 in Paris) is an observer without any experience of exile or emigration. In contrast, Lenka Horňáková-Civade (born in 1971 in the former Czechoslovakia), only a few years older, moved permanently to France at the end of the 1990s, where she deals with, among other things, Czech-French relations, including in her journalism and essays. The third author, Louis-Philippe Dalembert, is a native of Haiti (born 1962), but he has also worked as an academic at a number of universities in Europe (e.g. France, Germany, Switzerland), which have inspired the intercultural themes of some of his works.

This deliberate plurality of our sample is also reflected in the individual accents and focalizations of specific motifs, which will be further compared and developed. It is clear, however, that while the bulk of the novel *Symfonie o novém světě* is based on the theme of the search for the fate of Czechoslovaks who, thanks to the help of an ambassador in France, were able to escape the Nazi-occupied country to a limited extent, the novel *Où passe l'aiguille* focuses on the figure of a boy, who is a concentration camp survivor, and his father, as well as finding a new life and reconciliation in post-war free France. The theme of Central European emigration (from Poland via a brief stay in the Buchenwald camp to Paris) and then, through asylum, to the exotic environment of Haiti in the case of Dalembert can be considered quite unique (and also justifying the author's selection for the corpus of prose);⁴ however, as the authors of the study

³ It could certainly be argued that Central Europe is far from being the only region of Europe or other continents to have experienced such massive population movements, depopulation or emigration in the 19th century; however, statistically, it is an absolutely crucial experience for tens of millions of people. By comparison, in 1944–1948 alone, i.e. at the very end of the war and in the immediate aftermath, over 31 million inhabitants were displaced, the vast majority of them involuntarily (cf. Bibó 2009: 21). The exact numbers of the previous war years will probably never be fully documented, but this is not the subject of our paper.

⁴ The historical connection between Poland and this Caribbean state is only one level of the narrative; in the field of non-fiction, the topic is addressed, for example, in the latest work *To nie jest kraj dla wolnych ludzi. Sprawa polska w rewolucji haitańskiej* (This Is Not a Country for Free People. The Polish Cause in the Haitian Revolution) by Zbigniew Marcin Kowalewski (2025).

Le Sud global et la Shoah: perspectives littéraires de Michèle Maillet, de Nathacha Appanah et de Louis-Philippe Dalembert observe, the view of the Holocaust and the Second World War through the eyes of the so-called Global South is gradually becoming more and more represented and relevant in modern literature (Borst, Ueckmann 2021: 237–256).

But let us now return to the aforementioned question of literary reflection on the very identity of Central Europe, which at a certain point in history is necessary or desirable to abandon. This is commented on by the narrators and subjected to reflection, as in the case of the adolescent narrator of *Où passe l'aiguille*. The memory of the political and ethnic transformations of the region is evoked in the model of her hometown of Beregszász:

The fact is that we used to live peacefully together with the Christians, and for quite a long time... Our region often changed masters, it belonged to Hungary, then to Austria-Hungary, then to Czechoslovakia, the official charters changed every now and then, but there was not much difference in concrete terms, it was always fine between us. And then in 1938 the Hungarians became masters again. (Mouginová 2019: 32–33)

As can be seen, however, despite the frequent differences in official nationality, the local community perceived the town as their unproblematised home, a function it lost only with the onset of the pro-Nazi regime in the late 1930s. The notion of a Central European “home” is also captured more explicitly in Dalembert’s novel: the Jewish Schwarzberg family, also from Łódź, Poland, moves to Berlin; both cities are constantly torn between cosmopolitan coexistence of nationalities and cultures, and racial or ethnic tensions. The narrator recalls the multicultural character of his birthplace right at the beginning of the novel: “a Polish town under Russian administration, built on the banks of the River Lodka, where the expansion of the textile industry had attracted floods of immigrants from Central Europe and Germany” (Dalembert 2018: 21). The latter is also the case in Lenka Horňáková-Civade’s Czech, where the plurilingual situation and the coexistence of several languages (here German and Czech) characteristic of the centre of the continent is accentuated.

4. Alterity and Literary Strategies of the Image of the Other

One of the frequent narrative and thematic strategies of our corpus, then, is the reflection on a new home; represented here, to use Yuri Lotman’s (1990: 250–262) term, is the polarity of the space of “home”, “our”, “the familiar”; and the

semantically opposed target space of emigration, the second, but thus initially alien “home.” It is not primarily about objective evaluation, analytical and descriptive narrative passages, but the personal experience felt by the characters in the novels is accentuated. Moving through the border of both worlds fulfils fabulosity, as Pavel Šidák (2013: 85) also points out. Here, the considerations inspired by Russian semiotics could be further modified and shifted – for Central Europe itself is also a thematized border or dividing zone between two cultural and geopolitical (and regularly hostile worlds), whose competition, rivalry and conflicts precisely cause the necessity or choice of emigration.

The consciousness of difference with which the emigrant characters find themselves in a foreign environment (either temporarily or permanently) naturally allows us to see social or cultural differences through their eyes. The thematization of the country of exile is frequent in the case of Dalembert’s prose: exotic Haiti is the most culturally distant and, compared to the other two books, it is the only non-European destination of exile. In addition to the reflection on society, descriptions of nature and confrontations with exotic landscapes form not insignificant passages in the novel:

The violent tropical rains were one of the most beautiful discoveries for Dr Schwarzberg, who was used to the slow, dull autumn sputters. These abundant vertical curtains, opaque with the thickness and interweaving of the drops, aroused troubling feelings in him that sometimes left his eyes misty with tears. (Dalembert 2008: 205)

Mougin chooses a completely opposite strategy; in her novel, the protagonist Tomi in Paris is dazzled by the possibilities of the big rich city, which is in direct contrast to the town of his childhood. He thus faces the challenges of cultural adaptation, language barriers and integration; however, the role of bridge between nations and cultures is assumed by the tailoring trade – his father passes on his professional knowledge to his son, which not only provides a livelihood but also helps to overcome the aforementioned differences. From his previously despised job, the protagonist is introduced to the world of high fashion, with France and Paris repeatedly depicted as a place of opportunity and unprecedented luxury, oppositional to his Hungarian home, thus compensating for the traumatic experience of war and uprooting.

The literary fictional world of the protagonist and the reflection on his emigration thus corresponds to the remarks of historians Norman Davies and Roger Moorhouse about Jews being somewhat exclusive and re-closing themselves into certain elite groups in Western Europe; both scholars also remind

us that the strong presence of a Jewish minority is, or was, definable: “The Jewish settlement of Central Europe is, for some scholars, its defining feature” (Davies, Moorhouse 2009: 109). And indeed, the stories of the three books are dominantly stories of Jewish refugee memory – be it the aforementioned boy, the young doctor Dr Schwarzberg, or helping Jews at the Czechoslovak embassy in Marseille. The question therefore arises whether not to understand the books in the tradition of the story of Moses, where it is the text and its transmission (whether in spoken or written form) that is an absolute necessity in a stably dispersed community. In the case of the Israelites’ original biblical wanderings, the pages of Deuteronomy note this, among others, when Jan Assmann observes that the book remains, even after the end of the wanderings in a time of “catastrophe and utter oblivion... the only witness to an identity forgotten and changed beyond recognition” (Assmann 2001: 186).

5. (Non)returns and Memory

As we have seen above, home represents a constant for exiles in the realm of individual memory, spilling over within the family or group into collective remembering. However, the seemingly soothing possibility of return brought about by the end of the war rampage and the beginning of mass movements of exiles to their homelands represents only another stage of the ongoing traumatic chain. For the memory of home is only a reflection of the past – the memories that nourished the hope or will of the characters during the war are not transformed into a renewed reality. This experience corresponds with Cathy Caruth’s remark:

Freud’s complex thought offers us a disturbing insight into the mysterious relationship between trauma and survival: namely, that for those who experience trauma, it is not only the moment of the event that is traumatic, but also its survival; in other words, even survival itself can be a crisis. (Caruthová 2015: 129)

Attempts to return can be met with material devastation, which also becomes a metaphor for a destroyed life and the impossibility of continuously building on the previous stage after the trauma. Thus, for example, the ransacked house in the novel *Où passe l'aiguille* is a symbol: “We went straight for the nose, we rushed home, yes, home, but so what? The bridge is still there with its faithful stream, then you just have to cross two streets... We are home, only our home no longer exists” (Mouginová 2019: 224–225). The house as a place of residence and livelihood and family tradition thus becomes a memento:

“When the house is gone, no one will even sigh for them anymore. ‘I will think of them’” (Mouginová 2019: 225).

However, the return is also a turning point in the boy’s personal maturation – the passages before the war are still constructed as a carefree age (both old age and a peaceful home), similar to some of Josef Škvorecký’s works:

Of course, the stylization into a naive child’s point of view is a consistent literary work... In this sense, it is a hybrid technique, where the child’s point of view is subtly worked into a text whose addressee is not primarily a child. (Tomáš 2011: 263)

The return to the hometown is thus also accentuated by a change of perspective, where the loss of home goes hand in hand with a childhood lost forever.

Lenka Horňáková-Civade thematises the return of the emigrant character Božena towards the end of the war in a different way: “Three days later we arrived in Prague. Božena never let go of her vigilance and alertness, the instinct of a hunted animal. She often turned around in the street, just like that. For nothing” (Horňáková-Civade 2020: 219). In this case, then, it is not about the loss of home in the physical sense, but rather about the psychological effects, which are ongoing even after the return from exile and considerably dehumanizing when compared to game. The motif of exile and flight itself sounds similar, which is collective and reminiscent of the (irrational) behaviour of a herd; the author’s narrative strategy is interesting, with some passages presented in the narrative of a child’s doll, which is handed down in the family from generation to generation:

The crowd suddenly swallowed us, we go on, but without will, I mean that Božena and Standa suddenly move a bit like me, as if they were just dolls. They let themselves be swept along in the current of all the people rushing in all directions. And so we don’t know where we’re going, why, or when or how we’ll know we’ve arrived. Well, I don’t agree with that at all. I am the doll, they are here to know, to have their own will! (Horňáková-Civade 2020: 88)

The characters in all three prose works are thus confronted at some point with coping with the loss of home as a traumatic experience that requires a process of reconciliation. This is thematized as necessary, in the sense of the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur, the so-called phenomenon of *dévoir/travail de mémoire* (duty/work of memory), i.e. the necessity to actively work

with memories as opposed to the repression of memory, *mémoire empêchée* (cf. Ricoeur 2000: 83–111). The duty of memory is, however, a difficult process:

To do so requires opening up to the plurality of memories and uncovering unacknowledged wrongs. Ricoeur considers the pursuit of 'just memory' as a moral obligation that today's generation owes to the past and which is part of an ethics of responsibility. (Šubrt, Pfeiferová 2010: 23)

As Nathan Wachtel further points out, "history thus appears rational only to the winners, while the losers experience it as irrationality and alienation" (1971: 309). Recent literary works can thus be far more accurately described as media of memories than as media of memory, including those that are threatened with extinction and oblivion in society.

Thus, the theme of reconciliation and the overcoming of trauma can be found in the different motivational aspects of our sample, which takes place on several levels – for example, thematically, where the characters find new meaning by overcoming the existential anxiety of forced exile with the passage of time. Examples include the consciousness of generational continuity (symbolized by the baby doll in *Symfonie o novém světě*), professional success and anchoring in a new environment (*Où passe l'aiguille*), or the very possibility of telling one's story, sharing it with a distant relative whom the protagonist meets paradoxically after a tragic earthquake (the character Ruben in *Avant que les ombres s'effacent*). Last but not least, the work of memory also involves the remediation of stories and history itself; that is, it goes beyond the fictional world itself. It is Ricoeur's concept that brings to light the fact that the literary representation of the past itself, specifically the trauma of forced exile so common in the context of 20th century Central Europe, is an essential component contributing to the existence of collective cultural memory. The rehabilitation of Vladimír Vochoč, a diplomat persecuted by the communist regime and a forgotten personality of the 20th century Czech emigration until the publication of his novel *Symfonie o novém světě*, is a case in point. Here, narration comes into conflict with suppression and forgetting, since the fragility of individual (and, logically, collective) memory can lead to forgetting, which "makes both goals – truthfulness and fidelity – more difficult to achieve" (Šubrt, Pfeiferová 2010: 23).

6. Conclusion

As can be seen, all three prose works analysed reflect two poles of the experience of emigration. The first is the experience of trauma, the individual or collective

experience of loss and uprooting that comes at a time of extreme historical circumstances. The characters of the exiles are thus burdened with existential experiences that occur regardless of the destination; however, the second thematized pole is also the question of reconciliation through the work of memory. This observed plane becomes a universal link to the experience of emigration, regardless of the different narrative or stylistic aspects of the interpreted novels.

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| Abstract

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The Memory of Central European Emigration and Exile: A Comparative Interpretation of the Novels of Louis-Philippe Dalembert, Lenka Horňáková-Civade and Véronique Mougin

The paper deals with the topic of refugees in three prose works by the following authors: *Avant que les ombres s'effacent* (Before the Shadows Dissipate) by the Haitian writer Louis-Philippe Dalembert, *Où passe l'aiguille* (Where the Needle Fits) by the French author Véronique Mougin and *Symphonie o novém světě* (Symphony of the New World) by the Czech writer Lenka Horňáková-Civade. The study aims at a comparative and transcultural analysis of the key attributes with which exile and traumatic departure from the dynamically changing Central Europe of the

mid-20th century are associated. Further, attention is paid to representations of the trauma of wars and conflicts as well as geopolitical transformations in order to compare literary techniques and practices in the (re)mediation of cultural, national or ethnic identities and their memory. Finally, the paper deals with the construction of the image of the other, the alterity, the new exilic home through the individual perspectives of the protagonists of each novel.

Keywords: contemporary literature; Central Europe; individual memory; collective memory; World War II; emigration

| Bio

Karel Střelec – Ph.D., works as an assistant professor at the Faculty of Arts, University of Ostrava. His main areas of expertise are contemporary Czech, French and Spanish literature and comparative studies. His main research topics are collective memory in literature, the relationship between literature and ideologies, and literary onomastics.

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