


## Article

# The Prague Orgy: The Life of Writers in a Totalitarian State According to Philip Roth

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**Abstract:** This paper deals with the way Philip Roth depicted writers in Czechoslovakia in the 1970s in his novella *The Prague Orgy*, the final part of the *Zuckerman Bound* tetralogy. Researchers often read *The Prague Orgy* in the context of the entire tetralogy and accentuate the contact with Jewish topics. The primary focus of the paper is how Roth views Czech writers and their lives through the eyes of his long-term hero (and fictional alter-ego) Nathan Zuckerman and how he perceives life in a totalitarian state. *The Prague Orgy* is discussed as a somewhat abstract story about the writer's freedom and responsibility of their work. There are three types of writers in *The Prague Orgy*: The émigré (Sisovsky), the dissenter (Bolotka), and the pro-regime (Novak). Each of them, in an interview with Roth's hero, formulates his attitude to the regime. Zuckerman is fascinated by the life of opposition artists, their experience of freedom (realized in the private sphere), and the social response to their work. Although the reality of life in Czechoslovakia under communism is not the main topic of the novella, the paper concludes that the depiction of life of Czech underground intellectuals interested mostly in sex is in consonance with the picture of Czech dissent in official regime propaganda.

**Keywords:** Philip Roth; *The Prague Orgy*; *Zuckerman Bound*; Philip Roth and Czechoslovakia; totalitarian regime

## 1. Introduction

In August 1968, the invasion by the Warsaw Pact troops ended the “Prague Spring”, an all-society movement that aimed to reform socialism. The period that began after the invasion and ended in 1989 (when communist regimes in Central Europe gradually collapsed) is generally referred to as “normalization”. The expression originally referred to large-scale purges of the Communist Party's opponents and reformists in the state administration, mass media, schools, and universities from 1969 to 1971, but the term gradually started to be used to refer to the entire period. Restrictions primarily affected freedom of speech as well as writers, filmmakers, etc. Leading writers whose works related to the reformist movement in the 1960s either emigrated or were forbidden from publishing, and their books were removed from public libraries. Czech literature was divided into three groups: Official, illegal (works published in the form of samizdat—self-published and self-distributed books, which were often copied by readers on typewriters and passed on to other readers), and exile. This division had been in place since the Communist Party had seized power in Czechoslovakia in 1948. However, the proportions changed significantly in the early 1970s: Mass bans on publishing (e.g., Václav Havel, Ludvík Vaculík, Ivan Klíma) and many writers' flights to exile (amongst the best known are Milan Kundera, Josef Škvorecký, and Pavel Kohout) led to many significant writers finding themselves outside the limits of legality.

Each of the three literary directions existed in completely different conditions and focused on different readers; each developed its own circle of authors and aesthetic values. Of course, official

literature had the best position. Writers did not face existential problems, and their books could be published in large numbers. However, the authors did not have the freedom of speech: The content and language of their works was affected by censorship and self-censorship. Samizdat authors were continuously persecuted, and their works reached very few readers. On the other hand, they were considered representatives of independent and free culture. Literature written in exile had similar characteristics; however, exiled writers were not politically persecuted and mostly did not have to deal with existential uncertainty. In contrast to official literature, samizdat and exile literature both dealt with the social novel and the role of an individual in society. They also seamlessly built on the previous literary development. While samizdat and exile literature interacted, official literature was rather isolated.

“Normalization” in Czechoslovakia represented a powerful world with a special, unmistakable atmosphere and a distinctive way of thinking—with “semantic emancipation” of meanings. Through this language, the official regime attributed meanings to words and phenomena which would be incomprehensible outside the socialist block. The aspects of life and thinking in communist society were completely beyond the experience of Western writers and intellectuals.

Philip Roth visited Czechoslovakia for the first time in May 1972. He came to Prague because he was interested in Franz Kafka. Kafka had featured in Roth’s works in the early 1970s: The essay “‘I Always Wanted You to Admire My Fasting’; or Looking at Kafka” (1973), the novella *The Breast* (1972), and the novel *The Professor of Desire* (1977). Kafka fascinated Roth as “a creator who knows how to reflect his most personal experiences deeply and truthfully also touches the suprapersonal or social spheres.” (Roth 2017, p. 237)

He met with his translators, Luba and Rudolf Pellars, who introduced him to the local political situation. After his return to the USA, he met Antonín Liehm (a significant Czech journalist and writer of the 1960s who went into exile after the Soviet invasion) in New York and he began to attend Liehm’s lectures on Czech history, literature, and film at the College of Staten Island (City University of New York). From then, Roth regularly visited Prague every year in spring until 1977, when the Czech authorities refused to grant him an entry visa. In 1973, he met several banned authors, including Milan Kundera, Ivan Klíma, and Václav Havel. His interest in the situation of writers in Czechoslovakia became evident in the official forum: He prepared a report on the situation in Czechoslovakia for PEN America (literary society and human rights organization) and initiated the establishment of the “Writers from the Other Europe” series at the Penguin publishing house which he himself managed. (For a detailed account of Roth’s contacts with Czech writers, see (Roth Pierpont 2013, pp. 86–99).)

Czech writers attracted Roth’s attention owing to their completely different experience of freedom, both personal and artistic, different living conditions, historical experience, as well as their different readers’ reception. Under the totalitarian regime, writers had to concentrate on the extraliterary role of literature and simultaneously were living with a well-defined, recognizable, objective kind of evil, and their writings were embedded with moral habits (see Roth 2017, p. 234). As Roth said in conversation with Ivan Klíma: “It always seemed to me that there was a certain amount of loose, romantic talk in the West about ‘the muse of censorship’ behind the Iron Curtain. I would venture that there were even writers in the West who sometimes envied the terrible pressure under which you people wrote and the clarity of the mission this burden fostered: in your society you were virtually the only monitors of truth. In a censorship culture, where everybody lives a double life—of lies and truth—literature becomes a life preserver, the remnant of truth people cling to.” (Roth 2017, p. 226) The meaning of *muse of censorship* “should be interpreted as a belief that only those oppressed by the system are capable of creating worthy and relevant literature.” (Bryla 2013, p. 18)

In his opinion, forbidden Czech intellectuals were people who felt a strong affinity with Kafka. Moreover, these authors lived in a society which somewhat embodied the world of Kafka’s novels. In Roth’s own words: “His fiction keeps insisting that what seems to be unimaginable hallucination and hopeless paradox is precisely what constitutes one’s reality.” (Roth 2017, p. 235) His shared interest in Kafka helped Roth to understand the different social and life situations. Kafka became a

symbol of the era of “normalization”, and his symbolic meaning was “reinforced by the fact that in the communist era his works were removed from bookstores, libraries and universities throughout Czechoslovakia.” (Bryla 2013, p. 17)

Roth sums up his Czech experience in an interview with the Paris Review in 1983: “When I was first in Czechoslovakia, it occurred to me that I work in a society where as a writer everything goes and nothing matters, while for the Czech writers I met in Prague, nothing goes, and everything matters. This isn’t to say I wished to change places. I didn’t envy them their persecution and the way in which it heightens their social importance. I didn’t envy them their seemingly more valuable and serious themes.” (Roth 2007, p. 145)

Roth’s interest in Czech culture followed two lines. The first was represented by the Czech Jewish authors; the second was the interest in the fate of oppressed writers. Ivan Klíma remembered the importance of Roth’s support: “He had a great understanding for everyone who opposed the regime. He was a great reassurance to us. By visiting us, sitting with us, he provided some kind of patronage because he was a world-renowned writer.” Roth also offered financial aid to Václav Havel, but that was not necessary, as Havel received fees for publishing and staging his plays abroad.

The closest contacts were established with Milan Kundera and Ivan Klíma, with both of whom he published interviews (which was more of a dialogue between writers rather than the traditional interview). Ivan Klíma remembers Roth in his memoirs *Mé šílené století* (*My Crazy Century*) as a person who did not like social conversation, only a debate on topics which he was interested in—primarily the topic of Jewish identity. “Philip Roth,” Klíma wrote, “[...] strived to understand also our problems. His interest in the Jewish fate could naturally not omit one of the basic Jewish experiences: persecution. Although he himself avoided it, living in a free country, he felt solidarity with those who were somehow persecuted in a country that was deprived of its freedom. In my opinion, no other American writer wrote about the gloomy fate of Czech writers and Czech culture the way Roth did. This was also the reason why the Czech authorities refused to grant him another entry visa.” (Klíma 2010, pp. 169–70)

## 2. Previous Studies

Roth wrote *The Prague Orgy* novella in 1985 as the final part of the *Zuckerman Bound* tetralogy. *Zuckerman Bound* deals with ethical and artistic conflicts faced by a post-war American Jewish writer. The four works reflect the way Roth is regarded by American critics but, at the same time, it is an imaginary metaphor of the Jewish fate—of the fact that the Jews judged and were judged by themselves as well as by others (Brauner 2007, pp. 7–8). *Zuckerman Bound* is united through the theme rather than the plots, and today it is regarded as one of the keys to understanding Roth’s poetics and a good demonstration of the basic features of the author’s creative method. All four pieces of prose are primarily thematically oriented towards the issues of the status of a writer in society, on the cost which an author must pay for his or her work, artistic freedom, and talent.

*The Prague Orgy* is most frequently interpreted within the context of the whole *Zuckerman Bound*; researchers also often accentuate its intertext context and the contact with Jewish topics: Eitan Kensky reads the novella within the context of the whole “trilogy with epilogue” which announces its themes of literary apprenticeship, patrimony, and Jewish identity. The novella’s many allusions to Kafka (the Prague setting, explicit references, the novel’s Kafkaesque parody of freedom), as well as its frequent borrowings from the life and other fiction of Philip Roth uphold *The Prague Orgy* as a paragon of intertextuality (Kensky 2014, p. 199). He relates his construction of the novella to the relationship of *The Prague Orgy* to Yiddish literature, and he comes to the following conclusion:

“Yiddish literature is not just another influence or allusion alongside those to James or Kafka in a story playing with literary history and topoi. Rather, Yiddish literature is a necessary third referent and counterweight to these two poles in a story about literary identity: James is the transatlantic gentile author, Kafka the Jewish writer who writes in the gentile language, and Sholem Aleichem the Jewish author writing for Jews in a Jewish language. By the end of the novella, however, Yiddish fiction has been deprivileged. [...] “Yiddish” literature is multilingual and also wordless: it is written in Polish

and English but also in the act of visiting lost spaces or in the moment of understanding between writers who speak different tongues. Perhaps it is best to say that Roth proposed an essentialist meaning of Yiddish literature in order to deessentialize it, to reveal it as a construction. *Zuckerman Bound* is Jewish fiction not because it focuses on the clash of generations but because of the way it relates self-consciously the idea of speaking to the Jewish community through stories. Roth cannot write literature in Yiddish, but he can write novels that express what he values in Jewish culture and civilization, novels that represent his quintessence of the tradition." (Kensky 2014, p. 210)

Harold Bloom interprets the novella and the whole of *Zuckerman Bound* as the work that marks Roth's acceptance of the title Jewish writer:

"*Zuckerman Unbound* makes clear [ . . . ] that Roth indeed is a Jewish writer in the sense that Saul Bellow and Bernard Malamud are not, and do not care to be. Below and Malamud, in their fiction, strive to be North American Jewish only as Tolstoy was Russian, or Faulkner was American Southern. Roth is certainly Jewish in his fiction, because his absolute concern never ceases to be the pain of the relations between children and parents, and between husband and wife, and in him this pain invariably results from the incommensurability between a rigorously moral normative tradition whose expectations rarely can be satisfied, and the reality of the way we live now." (Bloom 1986, p. 2)

Eric Sandberg also uses intertextuality as a key to his interpretation and reads *The Prague Orgy* as a meditation on intertextuality, as a story on the relationship between the written word and the surrounding world (Sandberg 2014, p. 190). One of the possibilities of entering an intertextual dialog with readers is misinterpretation. Zuckerman's own work has always encountered misreading. In *The Prague Orgy*, misreading becomes a function of the relationship between the individual and the state. This is shown in the way in which Zuckerman's work is regarded by the police state, where the highest arbiter of police criticism is the Czech Minister of Culture, who believes that *The Egg and I* by Betty MacDonald (a book that openly advocates the propriety of the individual's submission to social norms) is a masterpiece (Sandberg 2014, p. 181). *The Prague Orgy's* intertextual relationship to *The Aspern Papers* and *The Metamorphosis* is based on inversion: "whereas Samsa moves from the social to the isolated, from everyday to the exceptional, Zuckerman's imagined metamorphosis takes him from the private world of the writer into the public world of the worker." In this context, the closing of *The Prague Orgy* follows up the closing of *The Anatomy Lesson*, where "Zuckerman wants to leave behind the loneliness of writing for the imagined sociability of medicine. Zuckerman's metamorphosis into a victim of political oppression involves not only exposure to the genuine forces of historical suffering but also "a stranger brand of freedom" derived from his very powerlessness" (Roth 1998, p. 502).

For the purposes of this paper, the recent studies of Bryla, Sabatos, and Benatov were important. Martyna Bryla explores Roth's representation of communist Prague in *The Prague Orgy* and *The Professor of Desire* and examines "the connection between Roth's fiction, the figure of Franz Kafka and the communist era" (Bryla 2013, p. 15) and Roth's fascination with the political dimension of cultural life in Czechoslovakia. Charles Sabatos writes about the way Roth portrays Czech female dissidents and draws a comparison between Roth and Slovak writer Dominik Tatarka. (Sabatos 2017).

Joseph Benatov reads *The Prague Orgy* as a critique of the Cold War values in the Soviet era and as Roth's guilty plea for lapsing into thinking that good and evil are aligned in some carefully outlined way. Benatov made a detailed case for seeing Roth's novella take on Czech literature as a useful corrective for those who think in terms of freedom and oppression, democracy, and censorship. Benatov's view is also intertextual, as it seeks real models for individual characters in Roth's novella.

In my construction, I partially proceed from Bryla's and Benatov's conclusions and primarily focus on how Roth views the life of Czech writers, especially the oppressed ones, through the eyes of Nathan Zuckerman and how he perceives life in a totalitarian state.

### 3. The Prague Orgy

*The Prague Orgy* novella takes place in 1976, and it is a fictional summary of Roth's experience with the totalitarian regime. The story begins in Zuckerman's flat in New York, where he is visited by

two Czech exiles—a writer Zdenek Sisovsky and his partner, an actress Eva Kalinova. Sisovsky relates to Zuckerman the story of his father, a Czech Jew who wrote exquisite existential stories in Yiddish about his life during the Nazi occupation. The father was eventually shot by a Gestapo officer; his stories were preserved, unfortunately, however, never being read by anyone. The stories were left in Czechoslovakia with Sisovsky's wife, Olga, without any hope of being published, and Sisovsky asks Zuckerman to go to Prague to get them, take them with him to America, and publish them.

In Prague, the writer Bolotka becomes Zuckerman's guide, a dissident working as a stoker in the National Museum. He introduces him to dissident circles where Zuckerman meets Olga at a party; she tries to seduce him and force him to marry her. Zuckerman finally manages to obtain Sisovsky's father's stories from Olga; they are, however, almost immediately confiscated by the Secret Police, and Zuckerman is deported to the airport by the Minister of Culture himself, the writer Novak.

A reader who expected Roth to give an accurate account from Prague would be disappointed. Roth's novels from the 1980s—in addition to *Zuckerman Bound*, we must also count the novel *The Counterlife*, written directly after *The Prague Orgy*—built upon the ideological clash of life attitudes and their bearers rather than upon the plot. In *The Prague Orgy*, Roth used the novel to think out the theses. The dialogue of characters served him as an ideal form for presentation of different perspectives. *The Prague Orgy* stands on the thesis Roth wants to demonstrate through it. The conduct of characters is strongly hyperbolized; rather than human beings, they are depsychologized types, bearers of certain ideological attitudes. It therefore makes no sense to inquire about the authenticity of Roth's picture of Prague in the era of "normalization", since such an inquiry is irrelevant for the interpretation of *The Prague Orgy*.

Zuckerman's views on the lives of Czech writers remind readers that he is capable of reading everything as a creative exercise, as a complex kind of storytelling (Rampton 2014, p. 222). Zuckerman meets three writers in the novella, each of them telling him his story. The three stories are essentially model ones—each of the writers chose one of possible fates of a man dragged by history. In the twentieth century, there are only three resorts in how to cope with the pressures and external twists of history so devastating to the life of an individual. Adaptation and two kinds of emigration come into account—an external and an internal one. Sisovsky chose the external emigration and Roth understands it as an act of resignation. Sisovsky was not able to cope with the pressure and lack of freedom, and he simply ran away from it.

Bolotka chose an internal emigration, a proud defiance of the life in the dissident movement. Such internal emigration is the purest solution for Roth—it is a form of adaptation to the new circumstances without sacrificing your own personal moral integrity. The writer Novak, on the other hand, completely adapted to the new regime and achieved the highest position. He is successful, and he was also appointed the Minister of Culture. Zuckerman fears Novak, admires Bolotka, and is at a loss with Sisovsky.

The fact that Roth perceives emigration as an act of resignation in the struggle with historic processes should not be understood as a manifestation of the writer's moral condemnation. Roth approaches the problem from a purely utilitarian point of view—from the position of the needs of a writer. An internal exile represents for him an ideal form that guarantees peace for writing—live in seclusion, devote your life to higher goals of artistic work, live only to write and have sex, this is Zuckerman's ideal state about which he dreams already in the first novel of the tetralogy, *The Ghost Writer*. This ideal state is represented by Bolotka—he can write, and he has sixteen mistresses in Prague; therefore, there is no reason for him to emigrate. Bolotka tells Zuckerman about a poet who had to work at a railway ticket office and, in order to make the police leave him alone, he had declared himself crazy: "They leave you alone if you can prove you are crazy. He is a perfectly reasonable person: he is interested in fucking women and writing poems, and not in stupid politics. This proves he is not crazy. But the police come, and they read the note and they take him to the lunatic asylum. [ . . . ] But he is happy where he is. In the lunatic asylum he is not required to be a worker all day in the railway office. There he has some peace and quiet and at last he writes something again. There he has the whole day to write poems instead of railroad tickets." (Roth 1998, p. 532) The story illustrates the nature of the



regime and the ways writers have to choose to survive. If the poet was diagnosed as a lunatic, he was not in danger of the regime, because the diagnosis could have discredited him at any time. On the other hand, if the poet admitted being a fool, the state authorities left him in relative calm.

Bolotka's account of the Czechoslovakian reality lead Zuckerman to the self-reflection of his lifestyle, the comparison between the situation with which the Czech dissident authors must cope versus Zuckerman's American colleagues. "The workmen at their beer remind me of Bolotka, a janitor in a museum now that he no longer runs his theatre. 'This,' Bolotka explains, 'is the way we arrange things now. The menial work is done by the writers and the teachers and the construction engineers, and the construction is run by the drunks and the crooks. Half a million people have been fired from their jobs. Everything is run by the drunks and the crooks. They get along better with the Russians.' I imagine Styron washing glasses in a Penn Station barroom, Susan Sontag wrapping buns at a Broadway bakery, Gore Vidal bicycling salamis to school lunchroom in Queens—I look at the filthy floor and see myself sweeping it." (Roth 1998, p. 552) Such vision diminishes his own sufferings of a writer depicted in the former novels of *Zuckerman Bound*.

Zuckerman owes his special position in the novella to this fact—he is only a silent listener to stories and an observer of unbelievable situations. His position is difficult: He undergoes a simultaneous double contradictory process—he is a victim of mystification and, at the same time, the Czech reality is demystified before him. He himself is unable to distinguish what is true and what is a lie. According to Brian K. Goodman, Zuckerman's silence is also caused by the nature of orgies held in Prague, which Zuckerman surprisingly does not take part in: "This is the larger function of sex, or its absence, in the novella: to signal how Prague has transformed Zuckerman as a writer and a narrator. Instead of the novelist's relentless self-expression and obsessive desires driving the action, the voice of the writers of the Other Europe are given free play." (Goodman 2015, p. 733)

Sisovsky represents the Czech reality in New York through an optic which must be appealing to an American—the life behind the iron curtain offers political suffering and conceals ingenious authors with a tragic, typically exotic Central European fate, the existence of which the West is unaware of. In Prague, however, Zuckerman learns a different version of Sisovsky's story. Sisovsky's extremely talented father hid in the bathroom during the whole war, and his Aryan friend brought him cigarettes and whores. He did not die by the hand of a Gestapo officer but after the war in a bus accident. The resulting picture of the expatriate Sisovsky thus becomes complicated—he becomes an opportunist, a hypocrite, a liar, and a manipulator who only followed his own interests at home and most likely, he will do so whilst in emigration.

Bolotka has a function of the demystification agent in the novella. He presents the Prague dissident life as unceasing copulation because sex is the last freedom that was left for the people deprived of all other freedoms. Zuckerman writes: "Bolotka may be having some fun exaggerating for his visitor the depths of Prague depravity—a little cold water on free-world fantasies of virtuous political suffering." (Roth 1998, p. 526)

The scribbler Novak brings about the third story. Just like Sisovsky at the beginning, Novak symmetrically relates the story of his father, who was loyal to all regimes—he honored Masaryk, Hitler, Beneš, Gottwald, even Dubček, and now he honors Husák. He lives a comfortable life—he has a wife, children, grandchildren, a little house, and he loves his country. Because the philosophy of a true Czech patriot is the philosophy of realism, ergo, a complete adaptation. Because these are the people "who know how to submit decently to their historical misfortune, [ . . . ] to whom we owe the survival of our beloved land . . . " (Roth 1998, p. 567)

The novella finishes with Zuckerman's reflections in which he is trying to process and utilize his Prague experiences. He perceives Czechs as a "nation of storytellers" with whom, however, he is never sure whether they are telling the truth or not. Sisovsky manipulated him with his fictive story of his father. "I also have to wonder if Novak's narrative is any less an invention than Sisovsky's. The true Czech patriot to whom the land owes its survival may well be another character out of mock-autobiography, yet another fabricated father manufactured to serve the purposes of a storytelling

son. As if the core of existence isn't fantastic enough, still more fabulation to embellish the edges." (Roth 1998, p. 569)

Zuckerman returns to New York disappointed that his mission failed and no new ingenious writer was discovered, but also relieved that his own frightful Kafkaian vision, in which Nathan Zuckerman woke up one morning from restless dreams and in his bed, he found he changed into a floor sweeper in a railway restaurant, did not come true.

#### 4. Prototypes of Literary Character

The attempts to find true models of the acting characters in the novella are based on the interpretation usage with which researchers approach Phillip Roth as an "autobiographical author". The nature of Roth's texts makes it difficult to differentiate between the standpoint of the fictional characters or the implied author and the standpoints of the author himself. David Brauner considers the autobiographical aspects of Roth's prose to be the crucial topic for Rothian study; he emphasizes that it is difficult to distinguish between the autobiography and fiction, ergo, whether Roth uses autobiographical fiction or fictional autobiography (Brauner 2007, pp. 9–11).

In his analysis, Joseph Benatov seeks real persons who are the models for the individual acting characters, and he identifies Sisovsky with Milan Kundera and Bolotka with Ivan Klíma. When identifying Sisovsky with Kundera, he proceeds from how Kundera was perceived and accepted by Czech intellectuals in the 1980s who reproached him to that he understands sex as the key to the Czechoslovakian reality and at the same time, he trivializes the local experience in order to accommodate it to the perception of French and American readers. Such an interpretation would imply that Sisovsky's picture is negative because Roth identifies himself with the negative attitude of Czech intellectuals towards Milan Kundera. Benatov considers Olga Sisovska to be a genuinely Kunderian character for whom sex is the only possible response to the lack of political freedom (Benatov 2009, pp. 107–32).

The identification of Bolotka as the literary picture of Ivan Klíma has its sources in the writer's biography. During Roth's stays in Prague, Ivan Klíma and Roth became friends, and Klíma played the same role for Roth as Bolotka did for Zuckerman. Ivan Klíma is a very similar type of writer to Roth. What they had in common was their Jewish origin, the fact that their fiction was strongly autobiographical, and that it often depicted scenes from the writer's life with humor and irony. David Rampton highlights what the two writers have in common: "They are both prolific authors who have written about desire and transgression, fidelity and deception, authorship and self-perception, the counterlives people create from the stories they tell themselves about who they are and who they might be, and the links between private passions and social issues. They are practically coevals, born into Jewish families in which religion was not particularly important but was to become important. They are intrigued by politics, keen to represent political situations in idiosyncratic ways, and bemused by the craziness of their century. They are both metaphysical comedians of a sophisticated sort, capable of humor that ranges from black to wry to slapstick. Their fiction contains various autobiographical hints and echoes and often turns upon the meditations of an alter ego. They have both thought long and hard about Kafka and his meaning for their time." (Rampton 2014, pp. 215–16)

Bolotka and Sisovsky form two dissimilar, possibly even contradictory life approaches in the novella, and their contradiction is supposed to be (according to Benatov) an equivalent of a nonfictional antagonistic relationship between Kundera versus Klíma. The friendship between Zuckerman and Bolotka is then supposed to be an equivalent of the friendship between Roth and Klíma.

Benatov used the interview of Phillip Roth and Ivan Klíma from 1990 as an interpretation key. Benatov, however, does not find grounds for his interpretation in the novella itself but only in the interview. His interpretation procedure is therefore the opposite of what it should be; the interpretation is not based on *The Prague Orgy* (with the interview with Klíma used as verification): Rather, he takes the interview as the basis upon which he then grafts the novella text.

The Czech reception of Milan Kundera's work in the second half of the 1980s, which, however, is not used by Benatov, basically confirms Sisovsky's identification as Kundera. Kundera provided

Roth with the same opportunity for a dialogue as Klíma did later, before the origin of *The Prague Orgy*. This interview raised displeasure in the Czech cultural circles because Kundera slightly “embellished” his biography in it—just like Sisovsky did in the novella—to make himself attractive for American readers. He only told Roth what Roth wanted to hear.

In the well-known review of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, “Kunderian Paradoxes”, Milan Jungmann wrote: “Kundera had to play a role of a sufferer among foreigners, the one who endured hardships of the communist power.” He also cites Kundera in interview with Roth: “Then they expelled me from university. I lived among workers. [ . . . ] Then I wrote poetry. I painted. Everything was just a folly. My first work which is worth mentioning is a story written when I was thirty... After that, my life of a writer began. I had lived half of my life as a relatively unknown Czech intellectual.” Jungmann qualifies Kundera’s summary of his own career as such a simplifying distortion that “it is not far from misleading of the reader.” (Jungmann 2005, pp. 321–22)

Of the three literary figures, the official writer Novak is the only one who is not based on a real person. His narrative is a study of an opportunist. Roth’s understanding of pro-regime writers as opportunists is based on his belief that artists just cannot believe in the regime. As Roth spoke a few years later: “The official, or officialized, writers are a bit of a mystery to me. Were they all bad writers? Were there any interesting opportunistic writers? I say opportunistic writers rather than believing writers, though there may well have been believers among the writers in the first decade or so after World War II, I assume that during the past decade the official writers were opportunists and nothing more.” (Roth 2017, p. 230) And he was deeply interested in the question: “. . . was it possible to remain a good writer and accept the official rules . . . ?” (Roth 2017, p. 230) Opportunism is a life choice not only for Novak but for his father and all of his family; Novak himself rose to the rank of the Minister of Culture.

As we said above: When analyzing the novella, we have to bear in mind that in the middle of the 1980s, Roth became “a novelist of ideas”. “He brought the spirit of the essay, the spirit of intellectual dialogue, into his fiction.” (Dickstein 1999, p. 307) His characters become representatives of a certain ideological attitude, and Roth also used this method in his novels *The Counterlife* and *Operation Shylock*. It means that reading *The Prague Orgy* creates a paradoxical situation: On the one hand, Roth creates the feeling of an austere diary entry, but on the other, his characters are not personalities but rather types upon which a certain statement is demonstrated.

## 5. Orgy in Prague: Rebellion and Sexuality

Zuckerman’s trip to Prague is more a model and a somewhat schematic story about writers and about the cost of artistic freedom than a report about life behind the iron curtain. In line with the novella title, Roth depicts the Czech dissident movement as an environment in which the dominant interest and activity is sex. Immediately after his arrival in Prague, Bolotka takes Zuckerman to a party at the director Klenek’s place whose visitors are only interested in erotic activities. “Since the Russians, the best orgies in Europe are in Czechoslovakia,” Bolotka informs Zuckerman (Roth 1998, p. 526).

Sexuality always played an important role in Roth’s fiction and constituted Roth’s reputation. As Roth later recalled, his “reputation” was used as an argument by Ivan Klíma when the secret police questioned him about Roth’s visits: “As Ivan later told me in a letter, he had only one answer to give them throughout their dogged nightlong inquisition about why I was hanging around the city every spring. ‘Don’t you read his books?’ Ivan asked the police.—As might be expected, they were stymied by the question, but Ivan quickly enlightened them.—‘He comes for the girls,’ Ivan said.” (Roth 2017, p. 370)

In his novels, beginning with *Portnoy’s Complaint*, Roth opened the theme of tension between a carnal desire and moral responsibility of an individual holding a public or academic office. Alex Portnoy realized that his public appointment (under which he presented ethical and altruistic attitudes) conflicted with his private life based on sexual debauchery. Paterson Jones and Nance call this type of character a rake-scholar, and they follow its evolution from Roth’s first work *Goodbye, Columbus* up to *The Ghost Writer*, which concludes their book (Paterson Jones and Nance 1981, pp. 87–127). David Kepesh from *The Professor of*



*Desire* novel is a model example of such a character: He found out that his intellect and his sexuality were in contradiction. All his life, he was fighting a battle between passion and sense, pleasure and responsibility, forced self-assertion and surrender to the discipline of his profession as a teacher and a scientist (Paterson Jones and Nance 1981, p. 87). Paterson Jones and Nance present this dilemma as a personal moral conflict from which Roth's heroes tried to escape in vain because they were determined by their own nature. However, this conflict may be extended, provided we have the perspective of knowledge of later Roth's novels (namely *Sabbath's Theatre* or *Human Stain*). Free human sexuality played the role of protest, a shout of freedom against the oppressive mania of the conservative power. Roth's hyperbolic usage of sex aimed to picture a man in his purest—natural situation, free from any civilization debris. It was a picture of a man in his primordial state where only natural, animal forces count. Sex in Roth is the final, conclusive rebellion, the last outpost of human freedom. It was, therefore, no wonder that sex played such an extremely important role in Roth's idea of political rebellion in a totalitarian state.

The "rake-scholar" motif also became a topic, an artistic problem for Zuckerman as a protagonist (and partially a narrator) of the series of novels *Zuckerman Bound*. He was trying to cope with it: He had written a sexually open novel which—as he believed—killed his father, and he suffered a sense of guilt. At the same time, society perceived him as a "bad boy" (he was the author of a sexually eccentric bestseller, *Carnovsky*, which in Zuckerman's world was the equivalent of Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint*) who irritated others with his indulgence in sexual excesses. And, suddenly, he met people in Prague who had solved the dilemma of his (and the dilemma of Roth's heroes in general), for whom experiencing sexuality was not a source of moral dilemmas but a spontaneous manifestation of personal freedom.

The relentless troublemaker Zuckerman was suddenly very tame in this context; he was an honorable, distinguished gentleman from the USA because his previous sexual provocations were suddenly meaningless here. Orgy in Czechoslovakia "make out of their unbearable condition, this crushing business of being completely balked and walking the treadmill of humiliation." (Roth 1998, p. 534) As Martyna Bryla suggests, "... what disturbs him most are not the bizarre sexual practices he witnesses, but the fact that it is the oppressed authors that indulge in them. The scandalous author of *Carnovsky* feels uneasy because what he sees clearly goes against his preconception of the Prague writers as silenced and humiliated." (Bryla 2013, pp. 20–21)

## 6. Conclusions

Roth depicted the life of the Prague dissident movement in quite a nonstereotypical form. He simply does not see Czech dissidents as noble and unwavering heroes. His view of the dissidents almost seemed to resonate with the official propaganda of that time, but while he admires them, propaganda denounced them.

The normalization regime was based on the passive support of citizens, called by Václav Havel the "social contract": The regime offered social and material security and an undisturbed private life; in return, it required public affirmation of loyalty. Although the normalization was characterized by the general decline of morality and the materialistic "cult of things", it was an extremely prudent era outwardly (Mervart 2017, p. 44). The communist regime, provincially puritanical by its nature, tried to discredit its opponents in the eyes of "working people", whose living standard was not high, by presenting them as profiteers, financed by the West, who indulged in luxury and perverse pleasures. It tried to turn public opinion against dissidents by emphasizing the aspects of life in dissent which raised envy on the one hand and, on the other hand, enabled to blame the opponents of the regime of hypocrisy because the dissident emphasis on morality appeared to be in contradiction with the sexual exuberance in which they indulged. In March 1977, Czechoslovak president Gustáv Husák described dissidents as "pitiful stooges who presented their own personal feelings of injustice or hatred towards the socialist system to be an all-society phenomenon ... " In another editorial of *Rudé právo* (the Red Right—a communist newspaper) of that time, we can read about megalomaniacs and exhibitionists who "are only kept active by their tenacious hatred towards workers ... " (Fidelius 1998, pp. 54–55)

The communist propaganda created deterrent profiles of renegades and perverts as part of the discrediting campaign against the Charter 77, which also included, among others, the notorious private (i.e., naked) photographs of Pavel Kohout or Ludvík Vaculík which were supposed to persuade the public about their luxurious and debauched life. Even in cases when the opponents of the regime were imprisoned, the propaganda emphasized that although in prison, they still received benefits which other prisoners did not have: e.g., packages with luxurious foreign foods and American cigarettes. The fact that the propaganda had been effective can be testified by the agitation of part of the public incited shortly after the fall of the communist regime and Václav Havel becoming president when the gutter press published information about Václav Havel's love life in the 1970s and 1980s. The regime thus created a picture of opposing intellectuals similar to the "scholar-rake" characters in Phillip Roth's novels, people whose public and private spheres were not in accord. Zuckerman therefore admired the participants of the Prague orgies not only for their "inner freedom" but probably also because they did not experience the same dilemmas as he did.

Roth manages to express compassion and admiration for dissident writers. His vision of life in a totalitarian regime serves primarily for thinking over the subjects of artistic freedom and the price which writers must pay for their independence. Roth is far from glorifying "the muse of censorship" (Bryla 2013, p. 21), but on the other hand, he has been fascinated by the kind of life of banned writers, and especially their public esteem. It was one of the paradoxes of *The Prague Orgy* that Roth basically gave us a similar picture of the dissident movement as the communist propaganda did. Even though it was for reasons that had their source in the very core of the author's poetics. In his case, it was a manifestation of admiration.

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