History's Loose Ends:
Imagining the Velvet Revolution
By Peter Zusi

In the prologue to Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883), Zarathustra stands before an uncomprehending crowd and presents to them the apotropaic image of 'the last man': a human type characterized by uncritical contentment, satiated desire, and utter absence of motivation to initiate change or strive towards a goal. The last men represent an endstate precisely because they are so readily satisfied with their lot: '"We invented happiness," say the last men, and they blink.' This stasis of self-satisfaction represents for Zarathustra a form of live mummification, a movement toward death barely energetic enough to reach that seemingly inevitable destination. Putting words into the last man's mouth, Zarathustra says: 'a bit of poison once in a while: that makes for pleasant dreams. And much poison at the end, for a pleasant death.' This drawn-out process of death by gradual anaesthetization grants the last man extreme longevity. As Zarathustra says: 'the last man lives longest.'[1]

These contented, blinking last men have indeed lived long. At the beginning of the 20th century Max Weber described the type of person who would thrive in the 'steel-hard casing,' the 'mechanized ossification' of bureaucratized modern society as 'the "last men" in this long civilizational development: "narrow specialists without minds, pleasure-seekers without heart; in its conceit this nothingness imagines it has climbed to a level of humanity never before attained"' (Weber 2011: 177-78). The inevitable mode of social organization for these 'herd-like' last men would appear to be the impersonal, hyper-administered society that frightened so many twentieth-century social thinkers. The conservative, Adenauer-era sociologist Arnold Gehlen described this as a post-

historical social 'crystallization,' and the coldness and rigidity expressed in this image is already detectable in Zarathustra's description of the last men: 'There is ice in their laughter' (Nietzsche 2006: 11). Towards the end of the 20th century, Francis Fukuyama titled his controversial work of political philosophy inspired by the decrepitude of the European Communist regimes *The End of History and the Last Man*.[2] These three thinkers can be seen as marking the trajectory of one of the last man's most influential incarnations: as icon of a discourse on the end of history, best known under the French-sounding term of German coinage, *Posthistoire*. This discourse engendered a wide range of intellectual and political positions during the previous century: from critique of the triteness and conformity of modern consumer society to triumphant declaration of the final victory of liberal democratic capitalism, with a variety of inflections in between. Whether lamentation or celebration, however, posthistorical thought has always begun from the postulate that historical development has reached its final stage and we are now free to enjoy—or forced to endure—a social paradigm that permits no further evolution.[3]

By now *Posthistoire* has become all too historical. Passé among philosophers, the discourse appears inextricably entwined with a specific moment of recent history: the fall of the Berlin wall and the subsequent changes in Eastern Europe after 1989. *Posthistoire* lives on in journalistic commentary on these momentous events; upon the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, an editorial in the *The New York Times* revived Fukuyama's posthistorical thesis, replete with its triumphalist pageantry: 'Never has so great a revolution been accomplished so swiftly and so peacefully, by ordinary men and women rather than utopians with guns.' The author concludes that though Fukuyama's thesis has been much contested, 'it holds up remarkably well' (Douthat 2009). The

'revolution' of 1989 thus overthrew not only undemocratic regimes and an oppressive

ideology, but history itself.

Yet here lies a catch. The fall of real-existing socialism in Europe, which had

seemed impossible until it was already unstoppable, was an utterly unexpected social and

political drama that, none the less, assumed comfortingly familiar form.[4] That

archetypical modern form of historical action, revolution, had returned. For Europe in the

four decades before 1989, 'revolution' had been at best an abstraction, thinkable only at a

temporal remove (an historical category descriptive of social shifts in the past) or at a

spatial distance (a form of upheaval possible only in far-away places still 'catching up'

with European modernity). But by making revolution once again present, the events of

1989 appeared to make history tangible. That the transformation from bloodless

abstraction to lived reality was for the most part achieved bloodlessly made the

excitement of this European revolution all the more palpable. The sense of historical

movement was not merely quantitative—that is, that 1989 was 'significant enough' to be

regarded as revolutionary in the nineteenth-century tradition—but also qualitative.

Western commentators observed with fascination the tangible temporal layering that

resulted when the always already obsolete form of the Trabant car confronted the

McDonald's drive-in, and wrote with anticipatory nostalgia about the interwar-design

Mitropa coffee cups still used (but sure to disappear soon) in the East German

Reichsbahn. The heat of events had melted the post-historical freeze of the Cold War,

and finally, it seemed, we truly felt the flow of time. Next to Fukuyama's *The End of

History*, bookshop windows displayed Misha Glenny's *The Rebirth of History* (Glenny

1990).

The paradox that the end of history could simultaneously be the rebirth of history has two levels. The first centers on the politological question: Did the events of 1989 truly constitute a 'revolution'? The Communist regimes of Europe fell not in the name of any bold new social vision but rather under pressure from the model of democratic consumer society well established in the West. And the political elites who took charge of this transformation of Eastern Europe to market-economy 'normalcy' were often enough the same as those that shortly before had been busily building socialism. Conversely, the excitement that 1989 generated in Western observers was due not only to the spectacle of political liberation but also to fatuous self-congratulation: 'the Western eyes that perceive this post-revolutionary landscape […] are full of self-love. […] The youthful desire of New Europe to become even more Western than the Old appears to be proof that the West was right all along: that its moral values are superior, and that its liberal political and economic order are natural, normal and necessary'.[5] Such considerations have led many commentators to prefer more cautious labels over the grandiloquent 'revolution'.

But the second level of the paradox concerns more than ambiguities in classification or terminology. For the conflicting conclusions of *Posthistoire* do not show that modern society has brought about the 'loss of historical agency' but rather that the very idea of historical agency has lost coherence. Modern historical consciousness casts 'agency' and 'loss of agency' as structurally identical: thus possession of historical agency cannot be distinguished from its loss. This deeper, possibly more disturbing paradox—a paradox of which *Posthistoire* is symptom rather than explanation—already lay hidden in Nietzsche's figure of the last men and later emerged openly in the

postmodernism debates of the decades before and after the fall of the Wall. The following

sections of this essay will explore these two stages of the paradox before turning to a

monumental novel by the Czech author Jáchym Topol (1962-) entitled *Sestra* (*Sister*,

1994). Topol's novel, set in Czechoslovakia in the immediate post-1989 period,

represents the Velvet Revolution as neither recovery nor loss of historical agency but as

both simultaneously. Historical agency is thus cast in the image of 'coherent

incoherence'.

I

Nietzsche's last men may not be able to engender progeny, but they do have a

predecessor. The very tropes of barrenness and infertility Zarathustra used echo the trope

of impotence so prominent in Nietzsche's earlier text 'On the Use and Disadvantage of

History for Life', the second of his *Untimely Meditations* (1874). There Nietzsche had

accused contemporary German society of a similar inability to create original forms of

expression, and had similarly linked this impotence to a faulty libido, too easily satisfied

and immune to the motivating force of desire. He wrote of the German educated class:

'this is a race [*Geschlecht*] of eunuchs, and to the eunuch one woman is like another,

simply a woman, woman in herself, the eternally unapproachable' (Nietzsche 1997: 86).

The result: paralysis, inability to take action [*Handeln*], or, to use one of the text's major

terms, the suspension of 'life'. Both the cultivated eunuchs of Nietzsche's earlier text

and the blinking last men of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* exist in suspended animation that

precludes productive action. Further, in both texts Nietzsche invokes the bitter and biting

image of a herd society, composed entirely of timid followers with no leaders. Their

passive uniformity produces an only apparently contradictory cultural defect: eclecticism.

The curious name of the city of the last men in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* expresses the

paradoxical simultaneity of herd-like uniformity and eclecticism: The Motley Cow ('Die

bunte Kuh'), a name that not only expresses eclecticism in the image of the clashing

colors of a jester's motley but that also enacts eclecticism by attaching this adjective to a

most unlikely noun. The mutual reinforcement of uniformity and eclecticism is spelled

out more clearly in Nietzsche's earlier text. There Nietzsche describes eclecticism as

resulting from the inner emptiness of modern 'herd society': 'For we moderns have

nothing whatever of our own; only by replenishing and cramming ourselves with the

ages, customs, arts, philosophies, religions, discoveries of others do we anything worthy

of notice, that is to say, walking encyclopaedias.'[6] Precisely the uniformity of this

modern inner emptiness gives rise to the outer appearance of eclectic variety. That

apparent variety is produced only by incessant borrowing and imitation, and thus

constitutes a mask hiding the creative poverty of modern society and the lack of a strong,

original personality or identity.

In the face of such parallels one confronts a quandary. For in the second of the

Untimely Observations Nietzsche had found the ills of contemporary German or

European society to reside in the hypertrophic historical consciousness: in an unhealthy

'excess' of history. He writes that 'for modern man "educated" [*gebildet*] and

"historically educated" [*historisch gebildet*] seem so to belong together as to mean one

and the same thing and to differ only verbally (Nietzsche 1997: 79). The eunuchs whose

description was quoted earlier are the figures who most clearly embody the modern

impotence for Nietzsche: the objective historians, who immerse themselves in knowledge

of the past but have no libidinous interest in it. Thus the 'oversaturation of an age with

history [that is] hostile and dangerous to life' and that 'weakens the personality' of the

modern (Nietzsche 1997: 83). So one confronts the question: How can the thesis of a

'surfeit of history' coincide with the diagnosis of the last men as posthistorical? Are we

simply dealing with a volte-face in Nietzsche's thought over the ten years separating

these texts—or is the static condition of *Posthistoire* somehow connected to hyperactive

historical consciousness?

The strange affinity between possession and loss of historical consciousness

indeed forms the subterranean link between these texts. The last men of *Thus Spoke

Zarathustra* exhibit the jadedness of historical hyper-awareness. Zarathustra says of

them: 'One is clever and knows everything that has happened, so there is no end to their

mockery' (Nietzsche 2006: 10). Conversely, the historicizing eunuchs of the earlier text

are zealous guardians of historical knowledge so as to ensure that no 'truly' historical

action will emerge from or be motivated by that knowledge. Nietzsche writes: 'For it

almost seems that the task is to stand guard over history to see that nothing comes out of

it except stories [*Geschichten*] and certainly no real events [*Geschehen*]!' (Nietzsche

1997: 84, translation modified). Here Nietzsche invokes the familiar distinction between

historical knowledge (*Historie*) and historical action or events (*Geschichte*, simply the

compound of *das Geschehene*) to connect the condition of totally actualized historical

knowledge and the condition of being oneself banished from historical development and

standing at its end: objective knowledge of history makes it impossible to become a

subject that creates history. In contrast to the Hegelian version of this tale, historical

consciousness does not mean one has arrived at a long-awaited destination but rather that

one has simply run out of steam; the result is not historical adulthood but eternal

adolescence; not authority but aimlessness. 'True' historical agency thus becomes for

Nietzsche sheer paradox: neither possession nor loss of historical consciousness, agency

requires an elusive, indefinable act of escape from the only alternatives that are possible.

II

Nietzsche's counter-intuitive contact point between historical consciousness and

posthistorical existence subtly marked academic discourse on postmodernism in the

1980s and early 1990s. As many commentators claimed at that time, at least one major

strand of postmodernism involved the return to a historical sense as a corrective to the

excesses of the high modernist or avant-gardist temporal paradigm. As Matei Calinescu

formulated it: 'abandoning the strictures of the avant-garde and opting for a logic of

renovation rather than radical innovation, postmodernism has entered into a lively

dialogue with the old and the past.'[7] Andreas Huyssen traced this development closely,

describing how in the 1960's postmodernism first 'revitalized the impetus of the

historical avant-garde and subsequently [in the 1970s] delivered that ethos up to a

withering critique.'[8] This shift was widely regarded as having two causes. The first was

simply the success and subsequent exhaustion of the avant-gardist temporal model, the

sense that, as Irving Howe once commented, the 'search for the "new" […] has become

the predictable old'.[9] In this view it would appear that the avant-garde logic of incessant

innovation and reinvention inevitably had to reach a stage where the most radical

reinvention possible was the complete inversion of the very logic of innovation itself.

Huyssen referred to this as 'the novelty of no longer fetishizing the new' (Huyssen 1995:

6); Gianni Vattimo termed it the 'dissolution of the category of the new' (Vattimo 1988: 4). Some commentators took this observation one step further and referred to an increasing sense of, in Linda Hutcheon's words, the 'naiveté of modernism's ideologically and aesthetically motivated rejection of the past' (Hutcheon 1998: 30). The exhaustion of the avant-garde paradigm could then be viewed as at least partly due to the sheer destructiveness of the logic of innovation: rather than leading to the promised cleansing fire of aesthetic renewal it simply impoverished contemporary experience. And this impoverishment could plausibly be described through the vocabulary of *Posthistoire* as the result of a degraded form of temporality.

The second cause commonly pointed to was the enormous development of media and communications technology, especially in the early 1990s. The ever-increasing ease with which temporal and spatial boundaries were actually or apparently overcome in the *Gründerjahre* of the Internet, CNN, and mobile telecommunications networks narrowed the temporal register within which many people lived their lives. As a result, contemporary history could appear as 'the history of that era in which, thanks to the use of new means of communication (especially television), everything tends to flatten out at the level of contemporaneity and simultaneity, thus producing a de-historization of experience' (Vattimo 1988: 10); postmodernism, consequently, marked 'the emergence of a new kind of flatness or depthlessness' (Jameson 1991: 9). For Huyssen, the 'synchronicity' brought about by new communications technology produced a backlash in the 1990s in the form of renewed concern with memory and 'extended structures of temporality', which he identified in the surge in popularity of the museum as a mass medium:

The museal gaze thus may be said to revoke the Weberian disenchantment

of the world in modernity and to reclaim a sense of non-synchronicity and

of the past. In the experience of a transitory reenchantment, […] this gaze

at museal things also resists the progressive dematerialization of the world

which is driven by television and the virtual realities of computer

networking. […] the museal gaze expands the ever shrinking space of the

(real) present in a culture of amnesia, planned obsolescence and ever more

synchronic and timeless information flows, the hyperspace of the coming

age of information highways. (Huyssen 1995: 34)

The strain of postmodernism these commentators are concerned with thus appears more

or less the inverse of the critique of historicism associated with Nietzsche's 'On the Use

and Disadvantage of History'. Huyssen makes this explicit: 'Nietzsche's polemic

addressed the hypertrophy of historical consciousness in public culture, while our

symptom would seem to be its atrophy. […] Thus our fever is not a consuming historical

fever in Nietzsche's sense, which could be cured by productive forgetting. It is rather a

mnemonic fever that is caused by the virus of amnesia that at times threatens to consume

memory itself' (Huyssen 1995: 6-7). In other words, where Nietzsche was criticizing the

overly magnified historical consciousness, postmodernism confronted the historical

vacuum created by triumphant modernism and the advance of communications

technology.

But a final example illustrates how this simple reversal of terms hardly avoids the paradox inherent in Nietzsche's own formulations. James Clifford, in an influential book on ethnographic and literary theory, *The Predicament of Culture* (1988), demonstrated how the standard representational practices of anthropology typically served to locate tribal cultures in a de-historicized, mythic time. In his fascinating cultural analysis of the exhibition Hall of Pacific Peoples at the American Museum of Natural History in New York, Clifford noted how photographs taken recently of aboriginal cultures often bore captions in the past tense, while photographs or artifacts from the turn of the century would be described in the present tense (see Clifford 1988: 202). By thus relegating these cultures to a mythic time—either 'a vanishing past or an ahistorical, conceptual present' (ibid.: 201)—such anthropological discourse preserved the image of a 'pure' culture that could not be touched by Western modernity without vanishing or losing its essential identity. As he put it: 'At the Hall of Pacific Peoples […] the actual ongoing life and "impure" inventions of tribal peoples are erased in the name of cultural or artistic "authenticity"' (ibid.: 202). Clifford proposed an alternative to this practice. He challenged this anthropological discourse with an alternate model of ethnography, which would return such cultures to a truly historical temporal register in which change, adaptation, and advance would not be perceived as impurities but rather as evidence of the continuing life and vitality of such cultures. As he described it: '[…] one can at least imagine shows that feature the impure, "inauthentic" productions of past and present tribal life; exhibitions radically heterogenous in their global mix of styles; exhibitions that locate themselves in specific multicultural junctures; exhibitions in which nature remains "unnatural" […]' (ibid.: 213). Clifford found an example of something akin to this in a

particular exhibition on Asante art and culture which displayed not only 'pure' cultural

products but also 'evidence of the twentieth-century colonial suppression and recent

renewal of Asante culture […], along with color photos of modern ceremonies and newly

made "traditional" objects brought to New York as gifts for the museum'. A striking

photo he included to illustrate this point shows a New Guinea girl dressed in a manner

generally fitting usual Western notions of tribal attire, with one major exception: she is

wearing a necklace made of eight bulky, burnt-out photographers' flash bulbs. For

Clifford, the result of this image, with its jarring contrasts and properly 'impure'

eclecticism, is that '[t]he tribal is fully historical' (ibid.: 210-11).

Thus for Clifford the return to a historical register of ethnology is largely

synonymous with recognizing and welcoming traces of the present. In another passage

Clifford comments that '[…] in most of the Hall of Pacific Peoples history has been

airbrushed out. (No Samoan men at the *kava* ceremony are wearing wristwatches;

Trobriand face painting is shown without noting that it is worn at cricket matches.)'

(ibid.: 202). Precisely the objects that would seem to reveal a *tristes tropiques* and the

homogeneity of a globalized, posthistorical culture (wristwatches, cricket matches) are

for Clifford the sign of ongoing life and historical development: 'The historical contacts

and impurities that are part of ethnographic work […] may signal the life, not the death,

of societies' (ibid.: 201). Clifford celebrates impurity and eclecticism with a Nietzschean

vocabulary of vitality, creative appropriation of foreign elements, and the ability to digest

outside stimulae and turn them into impulses for original self-expression. Indeed,

Clifford seems to be moving within the same ambiguous area marked out between the

two Nietzsche texts examined in section one above. Radically eclectic historical

consciousness wraps around and comes ever closer to the cultural whitewash of posthistorical amnesia, like a cat biting its own tail. But Clifford celebrates this situation: where Nietzsche bemoaned that the most highly developed historical consciousness in fact devolved into the condition of *Posthistoire*, Clifford hints that the deepening shadows of *Posthistoire* just might be dispelled by the light from old flashbulbs.

III

When the Berlin Wall collapsed into these muddied waters of academic reflection it appeared to confirm, belatedly yet more tangibly than theory ever could, the triumphant ascendance of postmodernism. The temporal stasis of real-existing socialism, with its outdated iconography of factory smokestacks and combine harvesters, had been dispelled by a forceful gust of history.[10]

Indeed, during the 1990s the literature and culture of the former Eastern Bloc witnessed an efflorescence of self-consciously or recognizably postmodern production. This did not emerge out of a vacuum, to be sure, as many of the important figures had been active in the 1980s or even earlier. But in general such writers had limited opportunities to distribute their work, unless, like Milan Kundera (who emerged as a global star of postmodernist literature in the 1980s) they had emigrated and were publishing abroad. Thus the confluence of cultural and historical currents in the 1990s gave postmodernism fresh impetus, as well as caché, in post-socialist Europe right at the time when the term was losing its aura in Western Europe and the United States. In Czech literature the paradigmatic work in this regard is Jáchym Topol 1994 novel *Sister*.[11] This long, dense, frequently opaque yet enigmatically engaging novel (the first

by its young author) was an immediate and unparalled success: Topol received the

prestigious Egon Hostovský prize, and *Sister* was the only post-1989 book included in a

list compiled by Czech writers and critics at the end of the millennium of the one hundred

greatest Czech prose works of the twentieth century (indeed it placed ahead of all of

Kundera's novels on the list except *The Joke*). *Sister* sold briskly, and translations into

major European languages soon appeared.[12]

      The extraordinary reception the novel received may have been due in part to the

social need to have a political milestone enshrined in a cultural monument—an

intermingling of political and cultural discourses with a long tradition in Czech culture.

Undoubtedly, the status of *Sister* as a milestone in contemporary Czech literature cannot

be separated from its conscious status as literary testimonial to the immediate post-

Communist experience. That experience is thematized from the start of the novel as the

consequence of 'the moment time exploded, bursting out of that locked-up city'.[13]

Prague post-1989 is where the novel's narrator, named Potok (Czech for 'stream'), felt

that 'time took on taste and color'; this time-made-tangible is 'reckoned from the moment

the first crack in the concrete showed' (14 and 15). Yet alongside this figuring of 1989 as

the explosion of time, critics have emphasized the linguistic explosion the novel both

announces and enacts.[14] Potok himself reflects: 'It hit me that Czech had exploded along

with time' (41), and Topol's mixture of formal, archaic, and vulgar linguistic registers

lends the novel much of its disorientating energy.

      The mysteries of temporal flow, the fracturing of language: One might be

forgiven for thinking this familiar. Indeed these are *the* archetypal modernist topoi. One

hardly need look further than to Joyce or Eliot for linguistic fracturing of the highest

order. Regarding reflection upon temporality within modernism Fredric Jameson has

observed archly:

> After the end of history, what? No further beginnings being foreseen, it can only
>
> be the end of something else. But modernism already ended some time ago and
>
> with it, presumably, time itself, as it was widely rumored that space was supposed
>
> to replace time in the general scheme of things. At the very least, time had
>
> become a nonperson and people had stopped writing about it. The novelists and
>
> poets gave it up under the entirely plausible assumption that it had been largely
>
> covered by Proust, Mann, Virginia Woolf, and T. S. Eliot and offered few further
>
> chances of literary advancement. The philosophers also dropped it on the grounds
>
> that although Bergson remained a dead letter, Heidegger was still publishing a
>
> posthumous volume a year on the topic. (Jameson 2003: 695)

So defining the postmodernism of *Sister* through its representation of the double

explosion of time and language may prove problematic. But Jameson's implicit reference

here to the discourse of *Posthistoire*—or more precisely, post-*Posthistoire*—returns us to

the paradox raised at the outset of this article in relation to the political events of 1989.

And this paradox, more than re-hashed modernist dogma, is fundamental to Topol's

literary representation of that moment.

There is no question that *Sister* consciously attempts to reinvent the structure and

language of the Czech novel after the experience of dizzying historical change in 1989.

The Velvet Revolution itself does not appear in the novel; in this Topol adheres to a

venerable tradition of regarding revolutionary action as inherently unrepresentable.[15] But

the novel begins with crowds of East Germans lining up outside the West German

embassy in Prague to take advantage of the sudden possibility of emigrating west.

Remarkably, this influx of Trabants that are then simply abandoned on the streets

transforms what would otherwise be a familiar sight in Prague (after all, tens of

thousands of Czechs owned Trabants): the Trabant is de-familiarized, its low value

exposed, and it becomes a sight as strange to the novel's Czech protagonist as it would

have been to contemporary Westerners, a sign of encroaching change and otherness. The

plot then jumps to and moves within the nebulous period of the first years after the fall of

Communism. And while the 'revolution' is indeed the absent inception of the novel, it is

hardly velvet: Topol describes the explosion of time not only as liberation but also as

sending forth broken shards that are as dangerous as they are fascinating.

At the beginning of the novel in particular Topol seems to share the enthusiastic

sense of historical rebirth. Even the danger of not knowing whether riot police will

suddenly overrun both the German refugees and the mesmerized Czechs watching on

sharpen Potok's perception of the importance of the moment. He writes: 'So how did it

all begin? If I'm going to retrace my footsteps … back then in the Stone Age … I have to

talk about the time me and Bára walked through the square full of Germans, and I will,

because that was the place where I began to feel the motion, where time took on taste and

color, where the carnival started for me' (14). A classic case of *Verfremdungseffekt*: the

phantasmagoric sense of unreality in watching the socialist state apparatus play caretaker

to its own dismantling transforms into a heightened awareness of reality. Details of

physical perception come alive. Not by coincidence are the opening scenes of the novel

interwoven with the theme of sexual exploration: Potok and his girlfriend Bára leave the

Germans on the square and duck into a dark cellar: 'Here it smelled of wood, another

place it was the septic tank, we searched out cellars because we longed for that hole in the

ground where she had taught me, where for the first time the world had been real […].

There was also time preserved in those cellars, intact and compacted, in corners and

under vaults, in every nook and cranny, even in the spiderwebs that served as the delicate

dress for our wedding, our intercourse' (25). Potok and Bára experience the reawakening

of time, the movement of history, as something both intimate and visceral.

Yet it does not take long for very different perceptions to emerge. As the exodus

of Germans culminates and the refugees are driven in buses from the embassy to a new

life in the West, Potok observes:

> A hand reached out of one of the bus windows holding a can of Coke, a
>
> German no longer squatting on the cold cobblestones, handing down from
>
> on high the shiny greeting of capitalism. All of a sudden three boys were
>
> hopping up and down on the spot, jostling for position, the biggest one
>
> snatched the can, stuck it under his jacket, and bolted. The two who came
>
> away empty-handed wandered along the buses until someone tossed them a
>
> pack of gum, then stood there divvying it up until the driver of one of the
>
> buses honked, wrenching them out of their trance. In the quiet of that
>
> historical moment it sounded out of place, like a fart during Mass. (28)

The transformation of history into coarse physicality is no longer sublime and intimate

but instead farcical and all too public. The trance that overcomes these Czechs in the

streets as they frantically snatch at fragments of commercial culture no longer takes the

form of heightened awareness but rather numbing intoxication. Thus even in the opening

scenes Topol begins to interweave the triumphant sense of revolutionary rebirth with the

flatness of Western commercial culture. 'That silky-haired slut Barbie' (23), the

inevitable evil victress over the sad, forgotten Teddy Bears left behind in the Prague

streets by the Germans, receives a large share of Potok's animus. But in the end she is

only one of the legions of 'Toyfls'—a pidgin word combining the English 'toy' and the

German 'Teufel' into a term of disgust—against whom Potok and his companions

literally wage war. The tone of pejorative *Posthistoire* becomes unmistakable when

Potok claims: 'I mean everyone knows … back in today's central woman, Europe, there's

nothing but dogs, they wiped out the wolves' (36). Nietzsche would say 'cows' instead

of dogs, but the difference is not fundamental.

      After the initial explosion of time Potok bands together with a group of other lost

souls to maneuver through the chaos of the first post-revolution years. 'The company'

(as the group calls itself) sets out on 'the byznys path', which effectively means calling

on a network of contacts and using bribes and blackmail to construct a mini-para-mafia

organization. They set rules for themselves, limitations on their misconduct (no child

pornography, for example, and no dealing drugs to people who are not already junkies).

These rules, often arbitrary but treated as sacred ritual, do not just lamely soothe the

conscience but actively construct a tribal bond: symbolized by the wearing of silver, this

bond provides protection and creates at least some sense of order in the chaotic

wilderness of post-Communist Prague: 'It wasn't too wise, back in those days of today, to be on your own … the other reason for wearing silver was that in those fast times it was best to know right away who you were dealing with and who belonged to who, there were multitudes of muddled sects from all over the place' (52).

The company is remarkably successful. The previously unimaginable possibilities are heady: the 'byznys path' represents revolutionary potential in temporally extended form. Potok says: 'Clouds above, asphalt below, […] it was freedom and time out of joint was going mad. […] Human time had accelerated' (37). Their Byznys is an improvisational process of combining unlikely elements, as the very term expresses: Potok in fact uses the English word but with Czech spelling. The products of their hodge-podge machinations are similarly hybridized: as a result of random contacts and opportunities, the group at one point finds itself peddling 'Ukrainian-Vietnamese-Laotian-Czech samurai swords' (53). A creative eclecticism, to be sure, and with tangible social results as the company ends up employing ever more Laotian refugees, for whom they secure political asylum (through bribes, of course) and to whom they become increasingly attached: a mini-multicultural society stretching what Potok calls 'bastard Bohemia's hardened arteries' (53) and bringing them into violent conflict with Czech neo-Nazis. But, as with Nietzsche's historically eclectic Europe, the color and variety of these byznys deals conceals an inner uniformity, a Midas touch that turns everything into banality. At one point the group receives a crate of antique masks from Laos, 'magnificent, terrifying masks' (50) worn by 'warlike tribes [that] had come down from the mountains, slaughtering the French and hunting for slaves' (50). Clever business deals make the design of these masks the latest fashion trend in Prague's tattoo parlors.

Potok thus experiences the Velvet Revolution and its aftermath not as either

historical rebirth or entrance into uniform *Posthistoire*, but as both simultaneously.

Nietzsche's paradox has returned. The matter becomes even more complicated, however,

when one examines Potok's stock phrase for this period, an expression repeated almost

like a mantra in the early chapters of the novel: 'back in the years 1, 2, 3, etc. after time

exploded'. If we want to understand Potok's chronology, some arithmetic is in order:

Year One in his revolutionary calendar is 1990; counting through Year Three takes us to

1992; expanding the 'et cetera' takes us at least to 1993 if not 1994. But *Sister* was

published in 1994 (and written mainly in 1993). The mythical period of 'back then' is in

fact the present: indeed, Potok repeatedly uses phrases such as 'back in those days of

today's fast times' (52), calling them 'those magical, adventurous Klondike yesteryears

of today' ('v těch tehdejších dnešních kouzelních a dobrodružních letech Klondike') (54;

Topol, 1996, p. 44). Not just rebirth and end are superimposed here, but past and present:

the visceral experience of the passage of time has rendered that passage meaningless.

Potok is swept up in an experiential stream that carries away the basic temporal

orientation points as well.

This is not postmodernism in any of the usual senses. Or rather it is

postmodernism in too many of the usual senses, senses that are logically at odds: both the

return to temporal flow and the flattening or end of temporality. A solution to this

paradox might come through Jameson's distinction between the modern and the

postmodern through the degree of modernization they register. He writes that modernism

is to be grasped as a culture of incomplete modernization […]. [I]t will therefore

be in the area of an only partially industrialized and defeudalized social order that

we have to explain the emergence of the various modernisms. [T]he protagonists

of those aesthetic and philosophical revolutions were people who still lived in two

distinct worlds simultaneously; born in those agricultural villages we still

sometimes characterize as medieval or premodern, they developed their vocations

in the new urban agglomerations with their radically distinct and 'modern' spaces

and temporalities. The sensitivity to deep time in the moderns then registers this

comparatist perspective of the two socioeconomic temporalities. (Jameson, 2003,

p. 699).

By contrast, postmodernism for Jameson coincides with the complete disappearance of

such pockets of premodern experience, for then 'the very sense of an alternate

temporality disappears as well, and postmodern generations are dispossessed (without

even knowing it) of any differential sense of that deep time the first moderns sought to

inscribe in their writing' (ibid.).

Jameson's distinction just might provide an explanatory framework for Topol's

Sister. To be sure, we are no longer dealing with a move from rural to urban time, but the

situation of post-1989 Prague arguably sits somewhere in between two different 'worlds'

in a situation analogous to the one Jameson describes. A 'comparatist perspective of two

socioeconomic temporalities' is clearly present in the jarring contrast between the mobile

phone and the two-stroke engine of the Trabant. But real-existing socialism can hardly be

regarded as 'pre-modern'. So perhaps what we have here should be described as a sort of

'Second World postmodernism': if the First World has fully entered into Jameson's

postmodern condition of lost temporality, and the Third World remains stuck in partial

modernization that continues to co-exist with pockets of the 'pre-modern' (either in the

sense of 'traditional' or 'economically underdeveloped'), the Second World experienced

after 1989 a postmodern non-temporality that still co-existed with pockets of high or

'classical' modern industrial society—as embodied in what I earlier called the outdated

ideology of factory smokestacks and combine harvesters. Temporal layering remains,

although the pre-modern has vanished entirely. This median state might then explain why

Sister vacillates between the end and beginning of history, between temporal and

atemporal experience. Such a scheme is appealing because it allows one to fit Topol's

novel—and potentially other artifacts of post-socialist postmodernism as well—into a

typology of 'alternative postmodernisms' or variations on the paradigmatic form that

Jameson describes.

Perhaps. Yet the problem with leaving the matter here is that the vacillations at

work in *Sister* have, as we have seen, a pedigree extending well beyond the specific post-

socialist moment. Potok's paradoxes are closely related to Nietzsche's and Clifford's as

well. The structure of the Velvet Revolution as portrayed in *Sister*, therefore, is more than

a mere curiosity of the post-socialist transitions.

The structure in question here can, however, be understood through the 'logic of

the image' described by the Czech-Brazilian-German-French philosopher of

postmodernism and media culture, Vilém Flusser (1920-1991). (There is nothing

postmodern about this hyphenated identity: Flusser, a Jew, fled Prague during the Second

World War and was forced to live in adopted lands and languages.) Flusser was a

renowned thinker of the concept of posthistory, yet, surprisingly, the posthistorical stage

for Flusser has little to do with endings. Rather he understands it as a fundamental

change in mental paradigms that is deeply intertwined with the advance of media culture

since the invention of photography.   Until recently, he claims, we have lived with the

sense that history as action (*res gestae*) was inseparable from history as narration (*res

historiae*). To try to separate these two aspects is impossible. As Flusser puts it: 'The

Trojan War is a part of history, and it has *The Iliad* to thank for this. Moreover, *The Iliad*

is a part of history, and it has the Trojan War to thank for this' (Flusser, 2004, p. 143).

But theories of *Posthistoire* are founded precisely upon the identification of one or

another conclusion—put bluntly, either a happy ending or a sad one—to a narrative

posited as central to modern history: that liberal democratic capitalism is a form of

human organization that cannot be improved upon, and all we can do now is wait for it to

triumph even in the most distant places; or that uniform, Americanized culture will

eventually spread and wipe out even the most isolated cultural pockets. For Flusser, on

the contrary, posthistory is not about the end of any particular narrative: it is about the

end of narratability.   In this sense, his understanding of posthistory is less a variant of

Posthistoire and more a theory of post-*Posthistoire*. What is paradoxical when told as a

story, he claims, becomes perfectly comprehensible when understood as image or form:

'Thus, we proceed from the process to the form, from the historical into the formal'

(146). This paradigm shift expresses the ascendance of media culture, which has

gradually been training us to think in images rather than stories. Clinging to the structure

of narrative leads to paradoxes, such as that matter is composed simultaneously of waves

and of particles, or that the end of history is simultaneously its re-birth. But such

paradoxes can be coherently represented in the form of images.

Topol's *Sister* embraces Flusser's logic of the image. Conflicting narratives of the

Velvet Revolution are melded into 'coherent incoherence': the story embodies paradox,

but the image holds true. The loss of narratability at issue here does not, it must be

emphasized, lead to the sort of linguistic density or concern with the materiality of

language that so occupied modernists such as Joyce and Eliot (as the critical emphasis on

the novel's linguistic experimentation often seems to imply). The novel stubbornly spurns

close reading: Topol's neologisms and linguistic oddities sneer at the sort of clever

exegesis the high modernists invite. As a result the reader is not pulled into textual

complexity so much as propelled forward along a smooth textual surface. Yet by

adhering to this logic of the image, by putting in the spotlight a principle that flickered

through the postmodernism debates of the 1980s and smoldered in Nietzsche's

discussions of the historical consciousness, Topol's novel is faithful to the structure of the

Velvet Revolution itself. The Velvet Revolution irresistibly called forth narratives of

Posthistoire, but such narratives of the end were obsolete even before they began.

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[1] Nietzsche 2006: 10. Recent translations generally render Nietzsche's term 'letzte

Menschen' as either 'last human beings' or 'last humans'. Here and throughout this

essay, however, I have substituted the earlier standard translation 'last men' in order to

maintain consistency among Nietzsche's texts and the other authors who refer to this

image. I am very grateful to Tim Beasley-Murray and to Jonathan Bolton for their

valuable comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

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[2] Fukuyama 1992. Countering Fukuyama's triumphalism was a major impulse behind Derrida 1994.

[3] For useful overviews on the discourse of *Posthistoire*, see Anderson 1992; and Niethammer/van Laak 1992.

[4] At least for most people the outcome of autumn 1989 was unexpected. Fukuyama's argument was first floated it in an article published in the summer before the Wall came down (Fukuyama 1989).

[5] Beasley-Murray 2007: 58. See also Beasley-Murray's discussion of 1989 as a 'revolution in the name of the normal' in the present volume.

[6] Nietzsche 1997: 79. A few pages later Nietzsche proclaims that if one tries to take hold of these superficial modern men one is left merely with a 'motley patchwork in one's hands' (Nietzsche 1997: 84, translation modified; German original: 'bunte Flicken in den Händen', Nietzsche 1988: 280-81).

[7] Calinescu 1987: 276. See also Berman 1988: especially 36 and 332-3; Hassan 1983; and Eysteinsson 1990: 121-2.

[8] Huyssen 1995: 17. Huyssen traces this development in greater detail in chapters 9 and 10 of Huyssen, 1986.

[9] Howe 1970: 259. It is worth noting that Howe's comment was made right around the moment Huyssen identified as the transition of postmodernism from a revitalization to a critique of the historical avant-garde

[10] I should emphasize that I have in mind postmodernism as a cultural paradigm rather than postmodernity as a sociological concept. Sociologists have generally been more

hesitant to identify the fall of Eastern European socialism as a mark of postmodernity; see, for example, Ray 1997.

[11] Thus Holý (2008: 184) discusses *Sister* in relation to the emergence of postmodernism in Czech fiction of the 1980s, despite the novel having been written and being set in the early 1990s.

[12] A second edition of the novel appeared in 1996, and an English translation (with the title *City Sister Silver*) four years after that (Topol, 2000). (These editions are not identical; in general each later version introduced further edits.) Wachtel's influential study of the role of the writer in Eastern Europe after 1989 contains an extended discussion of *Sister* (Wachtel 2006: 181-88).

[13] Topol 2000: 22. Further citations will be indicated by a page number directly in the text.

[14] See, for example, Foldyna (2008: 403-04), who states that 'in the first instance *Sister* is a linguistic event' (404); as well as Porter 2001:181-82.

[15] Eagleton, discussing the 'Marxist sublime', has given the aesthetic blueprint for the unrepresentability of revolutionary action. In contrast to the merely theatrical, costumed form assumed by earlier revolutions (which Nietzsche would have derided as 'eclectic'), Marx sees the radical nature of socialist revolution in its explosion of representational frameworks. Eagleton writes: 'What is in question here is the whole concept of a representational aesthetics. Previous revolutions have been formalistic, engrafting a factitious "phrase" or form onto their content; but the consequence of this is a dwarfing of the signified by the signifier. The content of socialist revolution, by contrast, is excessive of all form, out in advance of its own rhetoric. It is unrepresentable by anything

but itself, signified only in its "absolute movement of becoming", and thus a kind of

sublimity' (1990: 214). Thus one can portray the angry crowds assembling, the barricades

being stormed, but the incandescent moment of revolutionary change defies

representation. In his contribution in the present volume Beasley-Murray discusses

further examples where the events of 1989 have defied fictional representation.