

**The ethics of comedy in the representation of political  
violence in post-1945 European fiction**

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I, Grégoire Ming, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

L'humour, ou une distance prise avec les souffrances ou les torts subis, une fois l'épreuve passée. Une façon d'affirmer simplement et fermement : – Non, ce que vous m'avez infligé et que je n'oublie pas ne sera pas la ligne directrice de ma vie, ne la fera pas dévier.

Pierre Pachet. *L'Âme bridée : Essai sur la Chine aujourd'hui.*

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## **ABSTRACT**

This PhD in Comparative Literature explores the ethics of comedy in the literary representation of political violence. In bringing together comedy and readerly ethics, it addresses a neglected field of research in scholarly discussions around the representation of violence that privilege the tragic and melancholy. Drawing upon four major works of contemporary European fiction, the purpose of this PhD is to demonstrate that the comic provides an intellectual arena where various cultural norms can be articulated and negotiated. Understood as non-serious discourse, I argue that the comic disrupts taken-for-granted assumptions in the portrayal of violence and exposes readers to otherness. More specifically, I suggest that the comic shatters the readers' identification with characters, their interpretative framework and their perception of the character's subject position. Confronted with the comic representation of political violence, readers are challenged to engage with fiction in a dynamic way. For comedy, due to its inherent indeterminacy, does not provide any restorative counter-model. Instead, the comic prompts readers to face up to the contradictory aspects of fiction and negotiate their own responsibility in the fruition of literature.

In terms of methodology, this thesis rests on close reading of works of fiction in the original language, addressing comparatively and multilingually four different contexts of political coercion in the mid- and late 20<sup>th</sup> century. For each work, I analyse both how the comic occupies a crucial, if overlooked function in the text and how the significance of the comic inflects the ethical import of the novel. In conclusion, I suggest that the comic reinstates the individual response to political abuse and, ultimately, the power of literature to convey the ethical ambiguities of social experience.

## UCL IMPACT STATEMENT

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, Donald J. Trump held a political rally in Tulsa, Oklahoma, on 20<sup>th</sup> June 2020 in the run-up to the 2020 US presidential election. At this event, evincing his customary bravado and devil-may-care sense of logic, the President proclaimed he would demand that less COVID-19 testing be carried out across the nation in order to slow down the death and infection rates in the official statistics. Jettisoning scientific consensus, Trump's claims were met with immediate outrage. Pressed by journalists, the President's allies hastened to riposte that Trump's testing remark was all but a joke, that he was 'kidding' and that the liberal media outlets had no humour.

As is evidenced by this Trumpian joke of sorts cracked at the peak of an unprecedented health crisis, the issues raised by humour and its appropriateness have become ubiquitous in Western social culture. In suffusing the political sphere and the culture industry, in being commodified and extolled as the ultimate key to positive attitude, the current ascendancy of humour cannot be overstated: it features on the glossy pages of self-help magazines and interlard speeches of post-truth politicians on both sides of the Atlantic. In its current meaning, humour is commonly associated with sheer entertainment and self-deprecating distance from the demands of one's Self. Humour is also usually valued as a social lubricant that helps subjects navigate and reckon with the multiple constraints imposed by sociality. In fact, with a pinch of humour and a dash of wit, everything goes. However, there are limits to the acceptance of humour. As the bombing of the French satirical weekly newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* in 2015 showed, there is also in society a palpable anxiety around the use of the comic with regard to several issues, notably religion, suffering and certain events in history. Humour can be deemed suspect, even sacrilegious. For running through the hilarity of canned laughter and the impromptu popping-up of LOLs, comedy reflects and probes social norms. Humour can shock or amuse; it can reinforce or shatter prejudice. It is therefore essential to understand how this ambivalence of humour works.

The purpose of this dissertation is to investigate the ethical potential of the comic ambivalence in literature. Inside academia, the benefit of this PhD is the clarifying of the vexed relationship between humour and ethics. More specifically, I engage with the centrality of humour in canonical works of European fiction that have rarely been read as comic. Outside academia, the dialogue between comedy and ethical issues can potentially contribute to the current rethinking of the comic in contemporary discourse. In sum, this dissertation is firmly in dialogue with some pressing issues in current affairs, whilst engaging with specific paradigms in literary criticism.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First of all, I would like to thank my two supervisors at UCL, Professor Stephanie Bird and Dr Peter Zusi. Whether in situ or online, we had numerous supervisions that I found rigorous, constructively critical and thoroughly enjoyable. Your comments on my many drafts were always most useful. Through the years, you have both been extremely responsive and caring. At every stage, I have felt in good hands.

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Dr Laura Shear Urbaszewski (University of Chicago) kindly emailed me a scanned copy of her article about the grotesque in Hrabal that was not available in the UK.

Cornelia Freidel from the *Reutlinger General-Anzeiger* archives provided a useful article about a reading given by W. G. Sebald in Reutlingen (Baden-Württemberg) in 1990. The piece by H. Berg is inspiringly titled ‘A ghoulish expert in literary conjuring’ [‘Ein morbider Trickspezialist der Literatur’].

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Weeks away from submission, my friend Perrine Labarthe gave birth to Pio Lévy Labarthe. Pio was born on 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2020 and this feels like a very good omen.

In a league of his own, I would like to thank Greg Cotton, my partner and prime interlocutor, for his loquacious encouragement, good humour and unflinching belief in me. Greg is quite adept at doing memorable impressions of some of the episodes discussed in this dissertation. Without you, completing this PhD would have been much more strenuous.

\* \* \*

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## ABBREVIATIONS

Primary texts are referred to throughout according to the following abbreviations:

<i>Appointment</i>	MÜLLER, H. (2011). <i>The Appointment</i> . Trans. by M. Hulse/Ph. Boehm. London: Portobello.
<i>AusterlitzE</i>	SEBALD, W. G. (2011). <i>Austerlitz</i> . Trans. by A. Bell. London: Penguin.
<i>AusterlitzG</i>	SEBALD, W. G. (2008). <i>Austerlitz</i> . Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer.
<i>Closely</i>	HRABAL, B. (1990). <i>Closely Watched Trains</i> . Trans. by E. Pargeter. London: Abacus.
<i>Cristina</i>	MÜLLER, H. (2009). <i>Cristina und ihre Attrappe</i> oder <i>Was (nicht) in den Akten der Securitate steht</i> . Göttingen: Wallstein.
<i>Crónica</i>	ANTUNES, A. LOBO (2002). Crónica para ser lida com acompanhamento de kissanje. In: A. Lobo Antunes. <i>Segundo Livro de Crónicas</i> . Lisbon: Dom Quixote. pp. 29-31.
<i>Cus</i>	ANTUNES, A. LOBO (2017). <i>Os Cus de Judas</i> . Alfragide: Leya.
<i>Double</i>	MÜLLER, H. (2013). <i>Cristina and Her Double: Selected Essays</i> . Trans. by G. Mulligan. London: Portobello.
<i>Eis</i>	SEBALD, W. G. (2011). „Auf ungeheuer dünnem Eis“: <i>Gespräche 1971 bis 2001</i> . Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer.
<i>Every</i>	MÜLLER, H. (2013). Every word knows something of a vicious circle: The Nobel Prize Lecture. Trans. by Ph. Boehm. [online] Available at: <a href="https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2009/muller/25729-herta-muller-nobel-lecture-2009/">https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2009/muller/25729-herta-muller-nobel-lecture-2009/</a> [Accessed 20 April 2020].
<i>Falle</i>	MÜLLER, H. (1996). <i>In der Falle</i> . Göttingen: Wallstein.
<i>Fremde</i>	MÜLLER, H. (1999). <i>Der Fremde Blick</i> oder <i>Das Leben ist ein Furz in der Laterne</i> . Göttingen: Wallstein.
<i>Herzwort</i>	MÜLLER, H. (2014). Herzwort und Kopfwort: Erinnerungen ans Exil. In: H. Roth (ed.). <i>Was hat der Holocaust mit mir zu tun? 37 Antworten</i> . Munich: Pantheon. pp. 119-130.

- Heute* MÜLLER, H. (1997). *Heute wär ich mir lieber nicht begegnet*. Frankfurt am Main: Hanser.
- Kamer* SEBALD, W. G./TURNER, G. (2006). Introduction and Transcription of an interview given by Max Sebald (Interviewer: Michaël Zeeman on Dutch programme *Kamer mit Uitzicht*). In: S. Denham/M. McCulloh (eds). *W. G. Sebald: History – Memory – Trauma*. Berlin/New York: De Gruyter. pp. 21-28.
- King* HRABAL, B. (2009). *I Served the King of England*. Trans. by P. Wilson. London: Vintage Books.
- krále* HRABAL, B. (2011). *Obsluhoval jsem anglického krále*. In: B. Hrabal. *Spisy 3: Jsme jako olivy: novely*. Prague: Mladá fronta. pp. 249-358.
- Land* ANTUNES, A. LOBO (2012). *The Land at the End of the World*. Trans. by M. Jull Costa. New York/London: W. W. Norton & Company.
- last* SEBALD, W. G. (2001). 'The last word': An Interview by Maya Jaggi. *The Guardian*, [online] 21 Dec. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2001/dec/21/artsandhumanities.highereducation> [Accessed 16 December 2019].
- Lebensangst* MÜLLER, H. (2013). *Lebensangst und Worthunger: Leipziger Poetikvorlesung 2009*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Ostře* HRABAL, B. (2011). *Ostře sledované vlaky*. In: B. Hrabal. *Spisy 3: Jsme jako olivy: novely*. Prague: Mladá fronta. pp. 53-86.
- Prescription* ANTUNES, A. LOBO (2012). Prescription to Read Me. Trans. by V. M. Souza. In: V. K. Mendes (ed.). *Facts and Fictions of António Lobo Antunes*. Dartmouth: Tagus P. pp. 15-17.
- Receita* ANTUNES, A. LOBO (2002). Receita para me lerem. In: A. Lobo Antunes. *Segundo Livro de Crónicas*. Lisbon: Dom Quixote. pp. 109-112.
- Rukověť* HRABAL, B. (1993). *Sebrané spisy Bohumila Hrabala, Svazek 8: Rukověť pábitelského učně*. Prague: Pražská imaginace.
- Wort* MÜLLER, H. (2013). Jedes Wort weiß etwas vom Teufelskreis. In: H. Müller. *Immer derselbe Schnee und immer derselbe Onkel*. Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer. pp. 7-21.

## **NOTE ON THE TRANSLATIONS AND TEXTS**

In this dissertation in Comparative Literature, all quotations from primary sources are given in English and their respective target language in brackets: German, Portuguese and Czech. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations in English are from published translations. Where necessary, I have taken licence to add notes.

Russian, Czech, Portuguese, German, French, Spanish and Italian works of critical commentary are given in English translation only. Wherever possible, I have sought to provide the published translation. Where not available, the translations are my own.

I have left the original italicised emphases as well as American English spelling unaltered.

Further notes pertaining to the individual texts are given at the start of each chapter.

## INTRODUCTION

'I clung to this refusal of understanding as the only possible ethical and at the same time the only possible operative attitude [...]. This blindness was for me the vital condition of creation' (Lanzmann, 1995, p. 204). In encouraging anti-representational 'blindness' and in denying any possibility of ethical representation, French filmmaker Claude Lanzmann voices two dictums around the representation of extreme violence. Indeed, excruciating suffering is customarily ascribed to an ineffable exteriority that defies both language and ethics.<sup>1</sup> Quoting Primo Levi's observation from *If This Is a Man* where '[h]ier ist kein Warum' (1979, p. 35), Lanzmann even identifies a sense of 'utter obscenity' (2011, p. 385) compromising any attempt to apprehend the genocide intellectually.<sup>2</sup> For Lanzmann, the Shoah is said to exceed semantically all means of artistic expression. Concomitantly, he implies a normative claim whereby art is not ethically equipped to convey the real extent of political violence. It is probably no exaggeration to suggest that Lanzmann's moral gravitas and his 550-minute-long documentary film *Shoah* have been highly influential in discourses on mass suffering, and that Lanzmann conveys the dominant idea of unspeakability in relation to genocides.<sup>3</sup> If anything, brutal violence must be depicted by means of mimetic distance and documentary approach. All other means of representation, ranging from the inventiveness of fiction to the playfulness of comedy, are deemed suspect. Fiction is held to exploit and obfuscate the victims' dehumanisation, whilst potentially exonerating the offending parties. By the same token, comedy is perceived as morally dubious, insofar as it is said to trivialise and deride the actual experience of suffering. In short, Nobel Prize winner Elie Wiesel, another well-respected Holocaust voice, encapsulates the prevalent anxieties around suffering with regard to fiction: 'Auschwitz negates all system, destroys all doctrines. [...] A novel about Treblinka is either not a novel or not about Treblinka' (1977, p. 7).

These reservations about the appropriate representation of suffering are not limited to the Shoah only. The adequation between real atrocities and their comic representation in

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<sup>1</sup> Recently, the question of the representation of suffering has been chiefly raised by debates surrounding photography and its indexical relationship to reality. Georges Didi-Huberman provides a fundamental analysis of the images documenting mass killing in Auschwitz that he calls the images of the 'unimaginable' (p. 83, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, no critic has questioned Lanzmann's problematic extrapolation of Levi's description of Auschwitz-Birkenau to any representation of the Shoah. Lanzmann does not do justice to Levi's fundamentally epistemologic query. Indeed, in his preface to *If This is a Man*, Levi suggests the intentionality of his book: 'it should be able, rather, to furnish documentation for a quiet study of certain aspects of the human mind' (1979, p. 15).

<sup>3</sup> Stuart Liebman is unequivocal in positing that '*Shoah* set imposing standards of seriousness and rigor for anyone who wished – or still wishes – to make a Holocaust film' (2007, p. 6).

literature is regarded as markedly problematic. As Berel Lang aptly argues, creative individualisation in relation to mass killing is generally lampooned as seductive and ethically dubious (1990, p. 145). By implication, the fictionalisation of extreme violence supposedly runs the risk of exonerating the violation of the victims. Faced with the idea of impersonal, abstract and boundless evil epitomised by Auschwitz, writers are held to misrepresent and kitschify the extent of pain and suffering. In the face of traumatising, heinous, and brutal violence, the only acceptable mode of reception would be serious affliction, outraged outcries, or silence. Irony and sarcasm are held to violate the victims' suffering. This scepticism towards the comic is not new. As early as Aristotle, the tragic hero, confronted with undeserved evils, recruits the audience's pity. Conversely, comedy 'is an imitation of persons worse than the average' (Aristotle/Hutton, 1992, p. 49). Within this binary compass, comedy implies the representation of the more ignoble ones, whereas tragedy resorts to virtuous and admirable characters. In this context, the comic representation of suffering is perceived as a paradox. As regards the representation of genocides and mass violence in particular, this intersection between suffering and the comic is fraught with a distinctive sense of profanation. Indeed, at its most basic level, the comic is a disruptive force that probes established norms and dominant modes of representation. What is most striking about the comic is the fact that it is both intellectually unsettling and pleasurable. It is this double tension and its ethical consequences for the readers that this dissertation explores in a set of texts. As a fundamental line of argument, this dissertation seeks to demonstrate that the comic in literature offers ethical instruments apt to allow readers to think about and engage with the literary negotiation of suffering.

Focussing on novels published in the late twentieth century, the aim of this PhD is to create a dialogue between two fields of Western thought that are rarely perceived as coextensive: the ethics of reading and the comic mode. As a conceptual framework, I identify three main tensions in the comic that prompt readers to reconsider their perceptions of identification, meaning and subjectivity in fiction, making comedy crucial for the texts' ethical import and its significance for exploring suffering. First, comedy is based on a tension between distance and proximity. This ambivalence has ethical implications since it unfolds in the social sphere. Second, comedy is semantically unstable. Although meaning can be ascribed to humour, it defies any intellectual approach. In this, the comic attacks our safe horizon of meaning. Finally, comedy is both universal and thoroughly subjective. In effect, there is a sense of acute subjectivity that seems irreducibly averse to any theoretical analysis. What connects these three strands of analysis of the comic is a sense of unexpectedness that

exposes readers to disarming otherness. As Peter L. Berger argues, ‘the comic typically appears as an intrusion. It intrudes, very unexpectedly, into other sectors of reality’ (1997, p. 6). Confronted with the comic other, I suggest that comedy ruptures the reader’s self-affirming apprehension of the diegetic world. Central, therefore, to the various types of the comic studied in this dissertation is the notion of disturbance. For the comic erupts into and disrupts our normal ethical responses. Far from being consolatory or optimistic, I am concerned with instances of comedy that are generally audacious and unsettling. It is the abrasiveness of the comic that lies at the core of my investigation. As a common denominator, this PhD pivots on the ‘miniature strategies of defamiliarization’ (Critchley, 2002, p. 18) inherent in the comic that get readers to interact more flexibly with the representation of political violence in literature. By means of the various comic strategies explored in this dissertation, the texts bring to the fore the negotiation of otherness.

These three tensions of the comic underpin my analysis of the use of the comic in four novels. Each novel explores one or a combination of these tensions, providing thereby a unique case study for the relationship between the comic and readerly ethics. In W. G. Sebald’s *Austerlitz* (2001), I investigate how patterns of stereotyping and parody complicate the ways readers generally understand the grand narrative of trauma and loss. In resorting to cultural clichés, I suggest that comedy provides a space where readers can interrogate their horizon of meaning with regard to the literary negotiation of trauma. In an altogether different vein, I explore another type of humour predominant in Herta Müller’s *The Appointment/Heute wär ich mir lieber nicht begegnet* (1997). Here I scrutinise how Schadenfreude and satire inform the narrator’s depiction of brutalisation under the Ceaușescu regime. Müller’s novel raises issues around the ways in which readers can identify with a cold and sardonic narrative point of identification in the portrayal of terror. By so doing, I explore how the comic in Müller questions taken-for-granted social interactions with suffering characters. This distanced type of humour continues to be a theme in my discussion of António Lobo Antunes’s *The Land at the End of the World/Os Cus de Judas* (1979). I look at the sarcastic dimension of this account of the repercussions of the Portuguese Colonial Wars. In oscillating between perceptual excess and comic distance, Lobo Antunes’s novel creates a dialogue between readers and the comic subject position of a victim. The question of how readers can relate to the comic subjectivity of a ludicrous narrator is further explored in the final chapter. In Bohumil Hrabal’s *I Served the King of England/Obsluhoval jsem anglického krále* (1974), I explore the ethical repercussions of the narrator’s regressive persona. For the farcical viewpoint of a fool raises issues about the ways readers can comprehend the comic viewpoint

of a narrator compromised both under the German occupation of Czechoslovakia and the subsequent Stalinisation of the Czech Lands.

This dissertation is firmly embedded within the renewed discussions of ethics and the comic in academia. Since the mid-1980s, Anglophone literary criticism has undergone what is commonly referred to as an ethical turn in privileging the issues of readerly responsibility and otherness. Concomitantly, there has been an increased scholarly interest concerning the manifold facets of humour and laughter. Interestingly, the intersection between these two spheres of enquiry has been relatively scant in scholarship. Except for a recent compendium of philosophical essays dedicated to the comic edge of Levinasian ethics,<sup>4</sup> there has been very little discussion of issues around the comic representation of violence in literature. This lacuna is problematic for a crucial reason. For I contend that the comic offers productive parameters in terms of ethics, as the comic probes limits, arises out of a shattering of customary reference frameworks and exposes readers to disarming otherness. This understanding of the comic as ethical is particularly striking in the context of the legacy of political violence. For the representation of political violence is an intellectual territory thoroughly charted by prescriptions around ethics, literary genre and reader perception. As Terry Eagleton forcefully sums up, '[a] good deal of humour is a question of transgression or deviation' (2019, p. 88). It is precisely this transgression that the comic explores and sustains.

Fundamentally, I understand the comic in literature as an intellectual arena where various cultural norms can be discussed and explored. More specifically, I argue that the comic rests on three main tensions that probe taken-for-granted assumptions around identification, meaning and subjectivity in fiction. In the first instance, I argue that the comic favours a tension in the reader between intellectual detachment and emotional closeness towards fictitious characters. The comic requires an acute attentiveness to the other, but it prompts simultaneously a sense of evaluative distance. This tension allows for readers to assess and rethink their identification with the various protagonists operating within the diegesis. Secondly, I suggest that the comic rests on a tension around meaning. Taking readers unawares, the comic emerges from the shattering of our horizon of meaning. The comic can intellectually unsettle readers, but, at the same time, it can reinforce their preconception and prejudice. This tension allows for readers to assess and rethink their intellectual apprehension of the diegesis. Finally, the third tension pertains to the character's

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<sup>4</sup> See the volume edited by Bergen-Aurand, 2017.

subject position. The subjectivity of a comic character is thoroughly unreliable. Readers can be tempted to adhere to the comic character's viewpoint, whilst being aware that this perspective is incongruous. This tension allows for readers to assess and rethink their adherence to the character's subject position. In these three respects, this dissertation re-evaluates the comic as ethically appropriate to discuss and play out issues raised by the representation of suffering, since it allows for a dynamic reflection on suffering and violence. In sum, in laughing at violence, the readers must assess their own ethics, for the comic is a mode that requires ethical elasticity. Compared to the traditionally tragic representation of violence, the comic provides a novel way to address the literary representation of a historical period characterised by comparatively 'exceptional violence' (Bloxham/Gerwarth, 2012, p. 1).

This analysis of the comic could attempt to end the cultural and ethical impasses surrounding the representation of extreme violence. Protected by the ontological distance of fiction, the reader need not feel responsibility for the victims and may safely sympathise with perpetrators. By definition, fiction provides a safe space as it suspends real-life responses. Susan L. Feagin sums it up most concisely: '[w]hy bother? – it's only fiction' (1998, p. 7). By the same token, Yvonne Leffler makes this point explicit: '[o]ur emotional response is only to a formal object, an imagined reality. We know that no action is demanded of us here, as opposed to a corresponding situation where that object appeared in real life' (2000, p. 261). Yet, this division is porous. A work of fiction rests precisely on one or more 'world visions', i.e. a set of signs including characters, values and identity that can be potentially available to readers in the real world. Therefore, the interplay between fiction and reality, that literature references, cannot be 'inconsequential "free play"' (Korthals Altes, 2005, p. 146). Crucially, the elasticity inherent in the readerly process complicates the clear-cut ethical boundaries, for fiction can channel empathy and explore societal prohibitions in a way that is ethically problematic. By means of the comic, I contend that literature provides parameters allowing readers to engage with and reflect on atrocity in ways that can be jarring. Indeed, the disjuncture between content and representation is central to literary creativeness: '[I]terature has always experimented with emotional deviations. In fact, literary modernism does that in such a fundamental way that the effects of emotional distance can be read as its most distinctive feature' (Koppenfels/Zumbusch, 2016, p. 9). Therefore I shall demonstrate that the use of the comic in the literary representation of suffering helps the readers broaden their understanding of human actions.

As regards the structure of this dissertation, the introduction and chapter 1 consider issues that are explored in detail in each subsequent chapter by means of close reading. In the introduction, I first present the four texts studied in the individual chapters whilst underlining their coherence in time, space and content. Concomitantly, I delineate my approach and my methodology. In Chapter 1, I situate my research question in wider scholarly debates. I define the three key terms used throughout this work, the representation of political violence, the comic mode as well as the notion of readerly ethics and demonstrate how these fields complement one another. My discussion of the comic will centre on three tensions that are integral to the comic and which privilege notions of indeterminacy. The correlation of comic indeterminacy with issues of readerly ethics will be at the heart of the textual analysis of the subsequent chapters.

In terms of corpus, the four texts studied in this doctoral thesis engage with the representation of political violence under dictatorship in Europe in the second half of the twentieth century. As Donald Bloxham and Robert Gerwarth lament, much discussion around the literary mediation of intra-European political violence has been confined to the two World Wars and the Shoah, with an implicit halt in 1945: '[t]he division of the history of Europe in the twentieth century into two halves has many disadvantages, not least of which is the simplistic tendency to contrast a violent first half of the century with a peaceful second half of the century' (2012, pp. 7-8). Mindful of these caveats, I have selected four texts that negotiate the continuation of violence well into the second half of the twentieth century: the long-term reverberations of National Socialist persecution, the moral abuse of the secret services in Ceaușescu Romania, the harm inflicted by the Salazar regime in Portugal as well as Angola in the context of the Colonial Wars and, finally, the perpetrations committed during the German Occupation and the post-war Stalinisation of Czechoslovakia. By so doing, I do not focus exclusively on Central Europe, but also include Western Europe (and, in fact, violence exported to Angola) and Eastern Europe. As regards their periodisation, the novels discussed here, published between 1974 and 2001, mediate historic events which took place from the 1930s up to the late 1990s. The limitation of this corpus to Europe presupposes a sense of homogeneity across the various literary and cultural traditions that developed on the Continent. Common to each vernacular culture is a certain amount of anxiety towards the

comic representation of suffering in literature and a shared understanding of post-Holocaust ethics.<sup>5</sup>

Albeit not explicitly labelled as comedies, I wish to demonstrate that these four novels integrate a comic edge into their negotiation of political coercion. Crucially, I am not suggesting that these texts necessarily trigger laughter in the reader, but they are all centrally concerned with humorous incongruity; they draw on narrative structures that disrupt our horizon of meaning humorously. Central to my enquiry is, therefore, the way comedy and suffering can cohabit in the representation of political violence and how this coexistence ultimately raises ethical issues. As for narrative strategies employed, common to the novels discussed in this doctoral thesis is the centrality of a monologic first-person narrator whose narrative and moral authority is highly questionable. Indeed, what brings these novels together is the uncustomary portraiture of political violence. For each text rests on a disjuncture from taken-for-granted expectations around the representation of political coercion. As shall be seen, the individual narrators are characterised by their cognitive shortcomings, their detached account towards violence, their perceptual overindulgence and the use of parody and stereotyping. Moreover, these novels are characterised by a distinctive lack of intradiegetic dialogue. This monologic element favours an unchallenged narrative pattern which reinforces the narrator's rhetoric power and their specific otherness. Within their individual contexts, these novels have been received as important accounts for the particular political experience thematised. Therefore, it would be productive to create a dialogue between canonical texts that are not usually read together. By so doing, this dissertation suggests a continuum of unconventional portrayal of political violence in the late twentieth century.

It is not my intention to write an all-encompassing history of the comic in the depiction of violence in European fiction. Rather, I intend to elaborate first on the theoretical compatibilities between the comic and ethics and explore this intersection in the novels discussed in this thesis. By means of close reading, I hope to demonstrate that the texts work as case studies for my core argument and that this specific convergence of ethics and the comic could be used as a prism to look at other works of fiction. Furthermore, I offer a summarising contextualisation of the respective historic periods which frame the notion of political violence and show how brutalisation is negotiated. As becomes clear, this doctoral

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<sup>5</sup> For a thought-provoking introduction to the distinctiveness of European literature and its relationship to world literature, see Cohen, 2017, pp. 1-14. For a discussion of the specific developments that took place in the twentieth century, see pp. 444-492.

thesis in Comparative Literature is not concerned with alleged national traditions of humour or lack thereof. In drawing upon four different national and literary contexts, my purpose is to offer the literary mediation of various experiences that converge on what Walter J. Slatoff coins ‘moral aerodynamics’, i.e. ‘the curious ways people have found to remain simultaneously together and apart’ (1985, p. 3). In terms of chapter sequence, I have opted to proceed retrospectively. My analysis will commence with W. G. Sebald’s *Austerlitz* (2001), the text that has drawn arguably most scholarly discussion around ethics amongst the novels scrutinised in this dissertation, not least because of its overt meditation on the repercussions of the Shoah. I will then turn to Herta Müller, the Romanian-born German Nobel Prize winner whose oeuvre is consistently hailed as the paragon of morality. Subsequently, I will discuss two novels by António Lobo Antunes and Bohumil Hrabal that, by comparison, have garnered less critical scrutiny. By so doing, I will expand my focus to non-German issues and analyse, comparatively, texts that cover various contexts.

The four novels discussed in this dissertation entail ‘the eliciting of a complex imaginative response whereby the speech acts are pretended to be as they seem to be (assertions or reports of “fact”), even in the knowledge that they are not’ (Lamarque, 1996, p. 200). In this, fiction invites the active involvement of the reader who does not base her appreciation on beliefs, but on imaginativeness. Faced with the scathing remarks of a culturally biased narrator in *Austerlitz*, readers are invited to engage intellectually with clichéd representation of trauma. The use of parody and stereotyping creates a fictitious world that readers have to elucidate for themselves. In adhering to the viewpoint of a detached observer rejoicing in other characters’ suffering in *Appointment/Heute*, readers are invited to reassess their enjoyment of the representation of suffering. This readerly complicity continues to be a theme in *Land/Cus*, where readers are confronted with the mental state of a sarcastic narrator deriving sensuous inspiration from trauma. By means of sarcasm and comic hyperbole, readers are forced to engage with the ludicrous viewpoint of a comically excessive character. Another type of ambiguity around subjectivity applies to the farcical viewpoint prevalent in *King/krále* that exposes readers to the regressive viewpoint of a protagonist escaping responsibility vis-à-vis political terror. As I hope to show in what follows, my intention is to demonstrate that the four novels discussed in this dissertation re-assess the literary representation of suffering by illuminating a fundamental lack of clarity regarding man’s ethical values. By so doing, I concur with David B. Morris for whom ‘one important function of literature is to challenge and stretch – even to transgress – the boundaries of a

moral community' (1997, p. 40). The conceptual implications of these humorous deviations from the moral community will be discussed in detail in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER 1

### Theoretical Parameters

‘Given the danger of commodification and the pleasure of academic melancholy – of those exquisite acts of mourning that create a conceptual profit – what are our responsibilities when we write about the dead?’ (Yaeger, 2002, p. 29). In mainstream academic discourse, writing about those who perished in the context of mass violence bestows an unmistakable sense of moral grandeur.<sup>6</sup> As Asma Abbas rightly suspects, ‘[i]t seems that the eager anxiety about the “perspective of the victims,” whether in hearing their voices, forcing them to speak, or speaking for them, is indulged as long as it completes “my” knowledge, “my” picture, or “my” sense of justice’ (2010, p. 12). The trauma of those who are no longer here to speak out is turned into a convenient vehicle for a series of ideological tenets. This appropriation was bewailed by Auschwitz survivor and Nobel Prize winner Imre Kertész in an essay from 1999 in which he wrote: ‘survivors look, helpless, at how they are being stripped of their only possession: their authentic experience’ (2009, p. 155). Unsurprisingly, within the safe confines of academia, the conceptual galaxy around the notion of trauma has become the bread and butter of entire departments in a way that is deeply problematic. Patricia Yaeger ponders the implications ‘of a world of words where we can channel-surf from trauma to pleasure and back to trauma again with so little cost’ (2002, p. 46). In fact, central to the dominant approach to trauma and suffering is the expectation that the representation of suffering offers a promise: suffering can eventually be transmuted into a redemptive spark either for the heroes in fiction and/or their virtuous explicator. In this paradigm, the comic has been consistently marginalised in scholarship. If comedy is mentioned at all, its ethical potential has been largely overlooked. In engaging with this scholarly disinterest, I argue that the comic interrogates fundamental issues around the notions of social interconnectedness, semantics, and the self. Due to its inquisitive impetus, the comic destabilises our taken-for-granted expectations, and exposes readers to otherness. This is precisely the dynamic analysed by Michel de Certeau in his piece on laughter in Michel Foucault: ‘[t]hrough the interstices of speech, something ludicrous, incongruous or paradoxical erupts, something that overflows the thinkable and opens up the possibility of “thinking differently”’ (1986, p. 141).

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<sup>6</sup> As Anne Rothe lucidly points out in her analysis of *Oprah Winfrey Show Special*, aired in 2006, featuring the celebrity TV host Oprah Winfrey perambulating around Auschwitz with Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel, issues around victimhood and the Holocaust are ‘anything but restricted to scholarship in postmodern trauma theory’ (2011, p. 4). Albeit mindful of this diagnosis, this dissertation is restricted to discourses in literary criticism.

The purpose of the present chapter is twofold. I first situate my line of argument within wider scholarly discussions, showing that the comic and ethics have only rarely been seen as being co-extensive. Subsequently, my aim is to discuss points of intersection and how a dialogue could be fruitful. More specifically, I outline how the main critical issues around the literary representation of political violence have been informed by discussions around the legacy of the Holocaust. What becomes apparent is a prevalent sense of reticence towards the use of the comic in the representation of political violence and suffering, extending to its repudiation in scholarly debates, in particular with regard to its ethical potential. In order to elucidate the suspicion of comedy in scholarship, I analyse some mechanisms of the comic and show how this mode undermines anesthetising discourses in scholarship. Subsequently, my definition of the comic suggests that it can be conceived of through the prism of three tensions, which combine differently in each text and which are productively brought together with ethical questions.

### Violence and readerly pleasure

The representation of violence raises various issues in terms of ethics. Indeed, the literary negotiation of violence implies an articulation between fictive agents of violence, their victims, potential bystanders and readers who perform an intellectual task in engaging with the diegesis.<sup>7</sup> As shall be seen, the organisation of these relationships is invested with clear moral predicates, given the general repudiation of violence in Western culture, the special status conferred to victims and anxieties around the pleasure derived from the representation of violence. By violence, I mean the deployment of physical force and psychological dissuasion aiming at hurting, damaging or killing an individual or a group. More specifically, Slavoj Žižek offers an interesting taxonomy, for he differentiates between three modes of violence typified as subjective, objective and symbolic (2008, p. 10). This dissertation will focus on subjective violence, i.e. ‘violence enacted by social agents, evil individuals, disciplined apparatuses, fanatical crowds’ (*ibid.*). As Žižek puts it, subjective violence is the most tangible phenomenon in this triad, as it involves clear agents inflicting pain. Mark Hewitson is right in signalling that ‘Žižek pays more attention to symbolic and structural

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<sup>7</sup> By ‘reader’, I refer to the useful parameters provided by J. A. Appleyard. In his classification, Appleyard defines one of the types of reading practices as ‘the reader as interpreter’, i.e. a reader ‘who approaches it [reading] as an organized body of knowledge with its own principles of inquiry and rules of evidence’ (1990, p. 14). John Beverley locates this type of ‘liberal intellectuals – Rorty’s “self-reflective individuals” – in the upper reaches of the American academy’ (2004, p. 3). Such is my understanding of ‘reader’ in this doctoral thesis.

violence than to actual ('subjective') acts of violence [...]. As a consequence, he gives little indication of how violent symbols or a violent system are translated into violent actions' (2017, p. 14). That being said, what is distinctive about subjective political violence is its deployment 'with the intention of influencing various audiences for affecting or resisting political, social, and/or cultural change' (Bosi/Malthaner, 2015, p. 440). In the light of these remarks, I concentrate on state-sponsored acts of violence whereby violence is politically motivated and is inflicted, on a large scale, by perpetrators operating in the name of an explicitly political cause. My understanding of political violence is intentionally broad as it encompasses actual perpetration and acceptance of violence at the macro-level as well as the reverberations of brutalisation on the individual at the micro-level. In terms of agents, my focus also includes non-state actors who are, to some extent, involved in the network of surveillance and coercion.

As part of the articulation mentioned above, victims constitute the receivers of subjective violence. Indeed Lorenzo Bosi and Stefan Malthaner point out that political violence is precisely aimed 'at inflicting physical, psychological, and symbolic damage to individuals and/or property' (*ibid.*).<sup>8</sup> Even though the repercussions of violence can be manifold, I am concerned in this doctoral dissertation with the representation of psychological damage as a result of politically motivated wrongdoing. As Cynthia R. Wallace is careful to suggest, a suffering individual can be broadly typified as 'undergoing – or actively allowing oneself to be affected by – some outside force, most often pain or distress' (2016, pp. 19-20). To this extent, Allan Young distinguishes between two kinds of suffering: one is associated with somatic pain, whilst the other one has a more social and psychological dimension (1997, p. 245). Overlaps are frequent whereby the cognitive-emotional aspect of suffering is often embodied, ergo 'somatised'. This doctoral thesis, albeit mindful of any essentialisation, is concerned with the comic representation of psychic suffering, as a distinctive feature of victimhood. This conceptualisation of suffering is firmly embedded within a specific social landscape: '[s]uffering, in short, is not a raw datum, a natural phenomenon, we can identify and measure, but a social status that we extend and withhold' (Morris, 1997, p. 40). Indeed, the literary transcription of suffering, its very translation into language is informed by a series of historic coordinates. Philosopher Arne Johan Vetlesen recalls that the World Health Organisation (WHO) defines 'health' as the complete absence of pain (2009, p. 9). Philosopher Emmanuel Levinas does not detect in pain the exact opposite of health, but a

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<sup>8</sup> For an insightful introduction into the various patterns of political violence in Europe, see Bloxham, et al, 2012.

perturbation from the norm. For him, suffering is ‘an excess, a “too much” which is inscribed in a sensorial content, penetrating as suffering the dimensions of meaning which seem to be opened and grafted on to it’ (1988, p. 156).

The resistance of suffering to language is something of a topos in cultural discourse. In her attempt to investigate the ethical repercussions of the unspeakable, Naomi Mandel evokes ‘the rhetorical invocation of the limits of language, comprehension [...] and a deferential gesture toward atrocity, horror, trauma, and pain’ (2006, p. 4). In other words, the discussion around the representation of suffering privileges the tropes of absence and incomprehensibility. An unspeakable void seems to be the only appropriate way of representing trauma. Thus, the classical representation of the traumatic experience seems to resonate quite fittingly with the unspeakability hypothesis. In its classic notion, trauma represents ‘a silent haunting or an absolute indecipherable’ (Balaev, 2014, p. 6). Indeed, amnesia, dissociation and repression are said to be the only correlatives of trauma that, as is evidenced by its Ancient Greek etymology, implies the notion of shattering and indelible scar. By implication, this focus on the unspeakable limits the compass of discussion to certain modes of representation. In this context, philosopher Gillian Rose is right in suggesting the notion of mystification: ‘non-representability is to *mystify something we dare not understand*, because we fear that it may be all too understandable, all too continuous with what we are’ (1996, p. 43). This over-prescriptive appreciation leads to the depreciation of the manifold experiences made by those who were actually exposed to subjective violence. This follows what Peter Haidu calls disconnectedness from history: ‘[e]xclusive stress on the uniqueness of the Event, combined with its sacralisation, results in its disconnectedness from history’ (1992, p. 291).

This claim of non-representability has been mobilised especially in debates around the legacy of the Holocaust. In the wake of Theodor W. Adorno’s much quoted ‘barbarity’ claim, discourses around the representation of extreme violence have been invested with a theological subtext amounting to sacralisation.<sup>9</sup> Posited as inassimilable and unique, trauma integrates a theological narrative. Giorgio Agamben is careful to note the ‘profoundly

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<sup>9</sup> As has been extensively commented in scholarship, Theodor W. Adorno, in an essay originally published in 1951, was adamantly sceptical about post-Auschwitz poetry: ‘[t]o write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today’ (1983, p. 34). However, at a later stage, in his *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno is careful to recognise his misconception: ‘[p]erennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream: hence it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems’ (1973, p. 362).

enigmatic' (1999, p. 11) nature of the Shoah that obfuscates any representation.<sup>10</sup> Wrenched from its historical and political context, Auschwitz has become the nadir of humanity where 'thanks to a Platonic "view from nowhere" [...] an Idea of the Holocaust' (Trezise, 2001, p. 50) prevails that probes the limits of representation. This privileging of the ineffable, of the uniqueness of this event is deeply problematic. As Agamben forcefully remarks, '[t]o say that Auschwitz is "unsayable" or "incomprehensible" is equivalent to *euphemein*, to adoring in silence, as one does with a god' (1999, pp. 32-33). This disconnectedness from history devalorises the specificity of experience and leads potentially to the gradual meaninglessness of suffering.<sup>11</sup> As Rose puts it, the place name 'Auschwitz' is transfigured into a void emblem standing 'for the breakdown of divine and/or human history. The uniqueness of this break delegitimises names and narratives as such, and hence all aesthetic or apprehensive representation' (1996, p. 43). Faced with the idea of abstract and boundless evil epitomised by Auschwitz, writers are held to misrepresent and kitschify the extent of pain and suffering. What is more, this fossilisation of models of representation tends to obfuscate the actual reverberation of extreme violence in present-day society. In Matthew Boswell's opinion, the current predicaments around extreme violence run the risk of 'casting the genocide into a pervasive, impenetrable silence that is treated as gospel, rather than positioning us, more properly, within a cycle of historical victimhood and predation in a manner that would allow us to discover our own fascist violence' (2012, p. 2).

In negotiating extreme violence, the genre of tragedy has been the privileged site for the representation of suffering. For tragedy is traditionally held to convey the full magnitude of pain resulting from a disaster that befalls a hero unwittingly transgressing norms or from a fatal flaw. Morris states the obvious in remarking that '[t]ragedy indeed is the one genre so basic to Western thought on suffering that newspapers still call almost any large misfortune *tragic*' (1997, p. 35). What is crucial about tragedy is the eschatology of the plot. Peter Lamarque's observation is quite telling in that regard: 'the person who suffers in this way must be worthy of our respect, must have morally admirable qualities, such as to elicit pity and sympathy at his or her demise' (1996, p. 136). Characters in pain are invested with a higher moral status, for they adopt what Todd McGowan calls 'a universal position' (2017, p.

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<sup>10</sup> The English translation does not do justice to the Italian original. The original text reads 'insondabile enigma' (1998, p. 7) that conveys the sense of 'unfathomable'. In other words, what is at stake is not the profundity of this enigma, but the more radical idea whereby this event cannot be fully apprehended.

<sup>11</sup> Kertész is one of the few that voiced clear reservations about the current state of Holocaust representation: '[i]t is not entirely surprising that, whereas the Holocaust is increasingly talked about, its reality – i.e. the everyday aspect of the annihilation of human beings – is growingly taken away from the realm of representation' (2002, p. 146).

62) usually at odds with their immediate context. In this, tragedy is functionalised and becomes ancillary to non-literary discourses. For Lamarque goes on to argue that ‘the dramatic portrayal of tragic events expresses, even epitomizes, metaphysical or religious views of the world which are of independent moral significance’ (1996, p. 137). The literary text engaging with suffering is, thereby, transmuted into a transcendent signifier. In the predominantly tragic representation of suffering, discourses around literature are highly redolent of Christian theology which values suffering as redemptive. According to the New Testament, human suffering is foreshadowed and lived out by the Passion of Jesus Christ.<sup>12</sup> This idea of sacrifice still reverberates around the scholarly discussions of suffering in literature. In fact, the tragic representation of suffering is ascribed a redemptive function which invests the narration with a higher purpose, be it moral or aesthetic. In short, the suffering hero, by dint of his sorrows, offers a promise: that of a cognitive clarification which leads to a personal or social change. For, as Wallace argues, implicit in Western conceptualisation of suffering is the idea that suffering ‘claims a certain goodness for the badness, a certain buying-back’ (2016, p. 20).

Most discourses surrounding the question of representation of suffering are informed by the specific status of victimhood in contemporary societies. In fact, philosopher Claudia Card contends that ‘victims have moral powers: to blame or resent, to forgive, and, if politically empowered, to punish or retaliate’ (2002, p. 167). If victims have specific rights, this does not automatically mean that they may be conferred a special ethical status. To this extent, writer Jean Améry, who, as a Jew and member of the Belgian Resistance, was tortured in Belgium by SS henchmen, provides a lapidary statement: ‘to be a victim alone is not an honour’ (1980, p. ix). However, as a result of the mass genocides that took place in the twentieth century, victimhood has acquired a distinctive redemptive function. In fact, Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman rightly diagnose the current moral status of trauma: ‘testimony of trauma [...] holds ethical truth that clinical practice can finally confirm: trauma is itself the proof of an unbearable experience’ (2009, p. 93). The idea of irrefutable proof in relation to trauma has been central to the analysis of literary testimony. In the face of traumatic events, victims need to transform their suffering into a matter that can be shared with others. Indeed, in bearing witness to wrongdoing, literary testimony aligns itself with other social institutions, such as retaliatory violence, and normative acknowledgement, which all seek to do justice to the victims of political coercion. In other words, literature is regarded as part of a theory of

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<sup>12</sup> See, for example, John. 2:2: ‘He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world’.

justice which takes into account a common understanding of fairness. This view is voiced by philosopher Margaret Urban Walker in her analysis of moral repair when one individual or a collective are confronted with wrong-doing: ‘*moral repair is restoring or creating trust and hope in a shared sense of value and responsibility*’ (2006, p. 28). This statement has aesthetic and ethical repercussions. Indeed, Abbas is right in denouncing present-day victim culture which polices responses to pain ‘by giving us readymade frameworks of action and sensual limits to our humanity’ (2010, p. 5). One of these sensual experiences is certainly the role of amusement with regard to pain.

In the light of the above remarks, it becomes clear that the actual experience of pleasure in the representation of violence is received, at best, as a paradox. Pleasure is commonly understood as the feeling of enjoyment and satisfaction: thereby, aesthetic pleasure is getting satisfaction out of the fruition of an artwork. As philosopher Gilbert Ryle remarks, pleasure is the obverse of pain, for ‘all purposive actions are motivated by the desire for a net increase in the quantity of the agent’s pleasure or a net decrease in the quantity of his pain’ (2015, p. 48). Within this axiomatic framework, the experience of readerly pleasure in the representation of pain is striking insofar as the uplifting feeling of readerly pleasure originates from the actual increase of pain in the characters operating within the diegesis. The intersection between aesthetic pleasure and representation of suffering is not new. Eighteenth-century philosopher David Hume evoked the ‘unaccountable pleasure’ (1965, p. 441) that ‘spectators of a well-written tragedy receive from sorrow, tragedy, anxiety [...] that are in themselves disagreeable and uneasy’ (*ibid.*). Hume eventually posits the specularity between represented suffering and actual enjoyment in the audience, for viewers ‘are pleased in proportion as they are afflicted, and never are so happy as when they employ tears, sobs, and cries to give vent to their sorrow, and relieve their heart’ (*ibid.*). Reflecting the humoral psychic theories prevailing at the time, Hume suggests that pleasure functions as a purgative which releases the ‘heart’ from a surplus of emotions. Building upon this view, Sigmund Freud devoted a brief study to the representation of what he calls ‘psychopathic characters’ on stage. Interestingly, Freud claims that tragic drama rests on a promise: ‘[s]uffering of every kind is thus the subject-matter of drama, and from this suffering it promises to give the audience pleasure’ (1953, p. 306). In his view, in watching a character suffering on stage, viewers experience a cathartic moment which eventually results in a pleasurable discharge. Thus, viewers are torn between conflicting psychic energies which, like joking, are transfigured into catharsis: ‘[i]n this connection the prime factor is unquestionably the process of getting rid of one’s own emotions by “blowing off steam”’ (1953, p. 305). This

homeostatic process allows the viewer's psyche to regain a relative equilibrium. Freud's view in relation to drama has been extrapolated to fiction. As Jeffrey Alexander argues, '[w]e seek catharsis because our identification with the tragic narrative compels us to experience dark and sinister forces, that are also inside of ourselves, not only inside others' (2012, p. 61).

This specific feeling of pleasure is determined by its fictiveness. As Kendall L. Walton recalls, '[i]t is true that the pleasure [...] we take in tragedies depends, not infrequently, on its being *only* fictional that we feel sorrow or terror' (1990, p. 256). For after all, as Freud goes on to argue, 'it is only a game which can threaten no damage to his [the viewer's] personal security' (1953, p. 306). This game is an emotive and cognitive simulation which bears no consequences, for 'the very fact that the experience is a simulation makes possible a greater imaginative venturesomeness. The environment is risk-free' (Asher, 2017, p. 46). To this extent, Roland Barthes remarks that, if fiction is a game, the rules that govern the enjoyment of fiction are precarious: '[e]veryone can testify that the pleasure of the text is not certain: nothing says that this same text will please us a second time; it is a friable pleasure, split by mood, habit, circumstance' (1990, p. 52). Echoing Barthes's conceptualisation of readerly pleasure, Fredric Jameson rightly points to the fact that Barthes, ultimately, does not engage with 'pleasure', but with 'the libidinal body itself, and *its* peculiar politics, which may well move in a realm largely beyond the pleasurable in that narrow, culinary, bourgeois sense' (1988, p. 69). In this, Jameson is right in commenting on the unsettling potential of the pleasurable which often takes readers unawares.

In sum, central to this dissertation is the interaction between text and reader, as scrutinised by Wolfgang Iser, insofar as 'the study of a literary work should concern not only the actual text but also, and in equal measure, the actions involved in responding to that text' (1978, p. 21). In this nexus, identification plays a crucial role, as this process implies a sense of active involvement on the part of the reader. For identification presupposes that readers are in agreement with the character's worldview, however distorted it may be, and that they share some values with the protagonist. As Yvonne Leffler puts it, '[i]nstead of imitating the character by our actions, we try in our minds to simulate, make a model of, the character's mental and emotional processes' (2000, p. 169). In clarifying this process, Feagin is right to stress that the appreciation of reading 'involves interacting with an external object, a verbal text, and it entails doing something successfully. What one does successfully, however, is not to produce a product or end result; one *performs an activity* successfully' (1998, p. 23). More precisely, this activity entails the crucial aspect of playfulness for '[a]ppreciating requires trying things out, experimenting, doing things whose effectiveness is not assured in advance'

(pp. 57-58). This continuous trying on new perspectives represented by unreliable narrators is akin to a mental shift, change of “gears” (p. 60). If Feagin conjures up the automotive image of a gearbox, Walton, on his part, spells out the idea of ‘spectator sport’ (1990, p. 274) in relation to readerly appreciation. In his view, a discerning reader’s stance ‘is more akin to that of an onlooker than a participant in games of make-believe [...]. We step back and examine the prop, contemplating the games it might inspire and the role it would have in them’ (pp. 274-275). Norman N. Holland gives identification a further definition as ‘a complicated mixture of projection and introjection, of taking in from the characters certain drives and defences that are objectively “out there” and of putting into him feelings that are really our own, “in here” (1968, p. 278). Therefore, fiction can facilitate the exploration of mind-sets and viewpoints in ‘holding our attention, making a situation vivid for us, and generally drawing us along in the wake of the narrative’ (Currie, 1998, p. 164).

### The comic and transgression

If ‘[t]he comic mode [...] is the belated approach to catastrophe, the most viable sequel to what Salo Baro called the “lachrymose conception of Jewish history”’ (DeKoven Ezrahi, 2001, p. 288), then this intersection between suffering and the comic would need urgent recognition in scholarship. Indeed, few scholars have examined the ways in which irony, laughter, and sarcasm mediate the experience of devastating pain in literature. In general, studies have concentrated on the legacy of the Holocaust.<sup>13</sup> Liat Steir-Livny rightly summarises this general reticence in scholarship: ‘[t]he combination of the Holocaust and humour [...] was seen as a threat to the sacredness of the memory of those who perished in the Holocaust, and a disrespectful provocation’ (2017, p. 22). In 1983, Annette Insdorf published a pioneering chapter about comic strategies in the filmic treatment of the Holocaust in which she identified ‘Nazism as the most outrageous and tasteless subject for comic and musical treatment’ (p. 51). Interestingly, even those who venture to engage with these topics are careful to remind the stipulations around the representation of the Holocaust. Terrence Des Pres, in reporting aesthetic dictums around the representation of the Shoah, reiterates that ‘[t]he Holocaust shall be approached as a solemn or even a sacred event’ (1998, p. 217) which precludes the comic. In a tongue-in-cheek comment, Bernard Gendrel and Patrick Moran

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<sup>13</sup> As Jeffrey C. Alexander argues, the Shoah has come to represent the nadir of humanity. Thus, ‘as a metaphor for radical evil, the Holocaust provided a standard of evaluation for judging the evility of other threatening acts’ (2012, p. 85). It is not surprising that scholarly discussions have focussed on the Shoah. For a comprehensive bibliography on the intersection between the Holocaust and laughter, see Eyal Zandberg, 2006.

rightly wonder: '[i]t is curious that the concept of humour, so strongly associated with phlegmatic distance and detachment, triggers responses of such outrage' (2020).

In fact, Roberto Benigni's Holocaust comedy-drama *Life is Beautiful/La vita è bella* (1997) represented a watershed in the reception of humour in the context of trauma studies. In the wake of the worldwide success of Benigni's comedy, scholarly debates have concentrated on films, more specifically on the use of humour under total power understood as a bond-forming stratagem of resistance amongst victims.<sup>14</sup> The first collection of essays on the encounter between laughter and the Holocaust in literature was published in French in 2009. Its editor, Andréa Lauterwein, points to the 'laughter of helplessness provoked by the horrors of history [...]'. There are many examples. Some of them are undoubtedly funny, albeit in a way which is profoundly unsettling' (2009, p. 7). It is precisely around this cultural anxiety that Stephanie Bird's study of the comic in the representation of trauma in post-war German and Austrian texts revolves. Central to Bird's analysis is 'the question of whose suffering is privileged, and how [...], particularly with reference to the controversial issue of how German and Austrian suffering is depicted' (2016, p. 6). Shifting the focus from debates around the representation of German suffering towards cultural contexts where the question of perpetration and its cultural responsibilities is less salient, I intend to look at the ways in which different types of humour are employed in the portrayal of acute suffering, not only in Central Europe but also during the Liberation War in Angola. By so doing, I hope to avoid the densely explored field of Holocaust studies and to engage with more diverse material.

In the light of these comments, it comes as no surprise that the ludicrous depiction of suffering is deemed fundamentally problematic.<sup>15</sup> As Boswell puts it, these qualms in scholarship are akin to 'a basic misreading of human psychology: enigma, mystery and the inexplicable tendency to feed human curiosity, inspiring scientific exploration' (2012, p. 8). What is unsettling about comedy is its intrinsic indeterminacy as well as its aggressive impetus which both probes and seduces the reader's perspective. In what follows, I will present succinctly the main strands of theorisation on the comic focussing on three tensions on which the three dominant theories of comedy, the superiority, the relief and the incongruity

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<sup>14</sup> For thought-provoking discussions of Benigni's blockbuster, see Sander L. Gilman, 2000, Millicent Marcus, 2000 and Slavoj Žižek, 2000. Benigni's film prompted an important collection of essays on the mixture between comedy and the Holocaust in the German-speaking context (Frölich, Loewy and Steinert, 2003). Hanno Loewy (2003) provides a useful filmography of all comedies dealing with the Shoah. Finally, Steir-Livny draws on a vast array of Jewish plays, performances and books that incorporate an often outrageously comic edge into the representation of the Shoah (2017, pp. 21-27).

<sup>15</sup> My understanding of humour is unequivocally Western. For a very short, if fully-referenced foray into non-Western comedy, see Nilsen/Nilsen, 2019, pp. 13-27.

theories, converge.<sup>16</sup> Although most commentators concur that humour can be thought of through the prism of the three theories, the incongruity theory is largely predominant in present-day scholarship.<sup>17</sup> Rather than being ineffable, I argue that the comic is a mode whose elusiveness can be demonstrated. At issue is, thereby, an approach to literary texts that privileges playfulness, and semantic ambivalence. This focus reverberates with Robert C. Roberts's illuminating comment: 'humour, since it invites a *perceiving* of incongruities, is a way of moving people into a moral perspective whose propositional legitimation they may already endorse' (2002, p. 304).

It is customary to present the comic as hardly definable. Ágnes Heller's assessment is indicative of this research commonplace: 'the comic is entirely, absolutely, hopelessly heterogeneous' (2005, p. 6). McGowan puts the matter in a nutshell: '[t]heory explains, and comedy makes it its business to defy explanation' (2017, p. 49). Given its elusiveness, the comic is a mode which scholars have defined by delimiting its boundaries negatively. William Hazlitt famously declares that '[t]o understand or define the ludicrous, we must first know what the serious is' (1998, p. 5). In line with this postulate, contemporary critics operate a clear-cut distinction between the discursive principles prevailing in humour and those in serious discourse.<sup>18</sup> In the main, serious discourse, aiming at adherence and authority, is defined as coherent, unitary and predictable. More specifically, as Hazlitt goes on to remark, the serious is akin to 'the habitual stress which the mind lays upon the expectation of a given order of events, following one another with a certain regularity' (*ibid.*). Eagleton speaks of 'insistence on congruence, coherence, consistency, logic, linearity, univocal signifiers' (2019, p. 89) when listing the distinct features of the serious mode. By contrast, the comic is usually inconsistent, paradoxical and ambiguous. It is what Hazlitt calls 'the unexpected loosening or relaxing this stress [...] as taking the mind unawares' (1998, p. 5).

Historically, comedy was conceived of in opposition to tragedy. For tragedy aims at the catharsis, i.e. at the moral elevation of the audience, whereas, conversely, comedy is

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<sup>16</sup> Since most studies of comedy usually reiterate the three theories, it is not my purpose to provide a survey in this dissertation. For good accounts of the three theories, see Peter L. Berger (1997, pp. 15-37), John Morreall (1983, pp. 4-37) and Matthew M. Hurley, Daniel C. Dennett and Reginald B. Adams Jr. (2011, pp. 37-55). G. B. Milner offers a more succinct, bird's-eye view of the issues around laughter up to the early 1970s (1972, pp. 1-11). Furthermore, Marcel Gutwirth propounds a somehow differentiated approach to the phenomenon of laughter, as he concentrates on three 'distinct avenues of enquiry', i.e. the functionalist, the intellectualist and the psychological (1993, pp. 2-28). Finally, Christopher P. Wilson provides interesting schemes to illustrate the theories (1979, pp. 19-31).

<sup>17</sup> Tomáš Kulka suggests that '[t]he Incongruity Theory is the most popular of the three at present' (2007, p. 321). Eagleton stresses the centrality 'of the incongruity theory, which remains the most plausible account of why we laugh' (2019, p. 67).

<sup>18</sup> Jean-Marc Moura offers a detailed analysis of this divide (2010, pp. 116-126).

egalitarian. John Morreall is careful to underline that '[i]n general, comedy is more physical and active, and tragedy more intellectual and contemplative' (1998, p. 436). Moreover, as Heller maintains, 'tragedy homogenizes the tragic event by melting together the tragic heroes and the tragic plot' (2005, p. 5), whereas comic characters are often funnily alien to the plot. A great deal of comedy theorising follows a rather rebarbative line of argument. In general, contemporary commentators concur that the comic has been denigrated whilst they reiterate 'the neglected comic phenomenon' (Heller, 2005, p. 3). Critics usually start off pointing out the rejection of laughter in the history of Western thinking. They then deploy a diversity of approaches to rehabilitate the comic as a phenomenon worthy of intellectual scrutiny. Speaking for quite a many humour scholars, Berger argues that 'few philosophers have bothered to think seriously about the funny' (1997, p. xiv). Reacting against this alleged repression of comedy, academia has shown a growing interest in the comic over the last fifty years.<sup>19</sup> Don L. F. Nilsen suggested in 1993 that 'all over the world, scholars seem to be discovering that humor studies is an important and neglected area of research' (1993, p. 1). What is distinctive about this recent academic scrutiny is the fact that comedy is largely valorised. In this, academia seems to reflect wider tendencies in society. Alenka Zupančič is right to posit that 'freedom and free will, humor, "a positive attitude," and a distance towards all ideologies have become the principal mode of the dominant ideology' (2008, p. 4). Moreover, pop psychology hails the therapeutic, and life-enhancing benefits of laughter.<sup>20</sup> As becomes clear, my understanding of comedy is, in fact, not that of well-meaning benevolence. Rather, I see comedy as a disruptive mode that probes ethical limits and anxieties.

### The three tensions of the comic

In the light of these comments, I have devised three tensions that inhere in the comic and that inform my reading of the novels. The first tension pertains to readerly identification. For, more generally, the comic rests on the complex articulation between distance and proximity. Indeed, the comic is firmly embedded in the social world, for it abides by the customary assumptions around language and sociality. At the same time, the comic disrupts the rules of sociality. Indeed, social transgression is instrumental to understanding the comic. Humour usually offends norms, since it challenges the predictable rules of what Michael Mulkey calls

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<sup>19</sup> In a feat of scholarly endurance, Don L. F. Nilsen (1993) has documented the entire body of English-speaking scholarship on humour (up to the early 1990s).

<sup>20</sup> Amongst the wealth of books that stress the positiveness of humour, see William F. Fry (2010) who expounds a clinical viewpoint on humour in psychiatrics.

‘ordinary, everyday reasoning about the world’ (1998, p. 22). By extension, when occurring between two individuals, the comic creates a double dynamic of proximity and distance. When one laugher notices something funny or ludicrous in another, her laughter indicates both distance and closeness. She is distant because amused observation necessarily requires a sense of detachment. Simultaneously, she feels close to the other, since she is precisely alert to the other person. Put differently, this ambivalence is best exemplified by Ronald de Sousa, as he writes that ‘we tend to associate cold detachment with alienation, and identification with empathy. But these are no more than associations. The two dimensions are independent’ (1987, p. 289).

The comic is, therefore, closely intertwined with the social. One of the most visible traits of the comic in sociality is laughter. Historically, commentators detected in laughter a feature that was distinctively human. In his foreword to *Gargantua*, Rabelais famously declares that ‘Laughter’s the property of Man’ (2006, p. 203).<sup>21</sup> By extension, philosophers have resorted to laughter as a way to differentiate humans from animals. Hazlitt, for instance, posits that ‘[m]an is the only animal that laughs and weeps’ (1998, p. 3). At the same time, writers see in the playfulness of the comic an alarming force that can imperil human society.<sup>22</sup> These competing views illustrate the uncertainties about the nature of the comic. On the one hand, the comic seems firmly anchored to human sociality. Concomitantly, comedy represents a suspension of social interaction. Therefore, central to laughter is the issue of its acceptability. In this respect, otherness is central to laughter. Indeed, several commentators have insisted on the experience of alterity underlying the comic experience. For Alain Vaillant, ‘[t]o laugh means experiencing otherness: the otherness of those who I laugh with, but also of those I laugh at’ (2016, p. 91). Crucially, laughter stems from the encounter with utter otherness. In other words, the comic is an oscillation between distance and proximity that illuminates the ambivalence of the comic towards social life. In fact, laughter rests on the presence of another human being. As Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen puts it, humour is dependent on heterogeneity and on the recognition of the otherness of the other (1998, p. 64).<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Recent zoological experiments have queried this research topos. Indeed, Jaak Panksepp and Jeff Burgdorf, drawing on affective neuroscience, demonstrate that, under certain circumstances, rats produce ultrasonic patterns that could be associated with human laughter (2003, esp. pp. 535-537). For a clear, fully-referenced overview of the debates in biology and zoology (up to the early 1990s), see Gutwirth (1993, pp. 8-13).

<sup>22</sup> Charles Baudelaire argues that ‘the comic is one of the clearest marks of Satan in man, and one of the numerous pips in the symbolic apple’ (1972, p. 145).

<sup>23</sup> In fact, ‘[w]hat is needed is the other [...] in order to communicate laughter to me; what is needed is this flashing and suspended passage in which I *am* the other – *that I am not*’ (Borch-Jacobsen, 1998, p. 164).

If otherness is a prerequisite for the comic to occur, the latter implies, simultaneously, a sense of distance. This detachment unfolds on two planes. On the one hand, the comic produces an inner detachment in the realm of the body. On the other hand, the comic generates distance in terms of sociality. In the first place, Bergson underlines the ‘absence of feeling which usually accompanies laughter’ (1911, p. 4). Moreover, his position is unequivocal: laughter is akin to ‘a momentary anaesthesia of the heart. Its appeal is to intelligence, pure and simple’ (p. 5). In this, Bergson’s view is reminiscent of a tradition that, in the wake of Hobbes, locates laughter in the realm of the intellect.<sup>24</sup> This notwithstanding, it is widely accepted that laughter is a sensible reaction to external or internal stimuli. Indeed, Kant posits that laughter is ‘an affect resulting from the sudden transformation of a heightened expectation into nothing’ (2002, p. 209), that conveys an inner reaction to external stimuli and experiences. Laughter is distinctively visceral, compulsive, even uncontrollable.<sup>25</sup> In this, laughter is commensurate with weeping, since ‘when laughing and crying, human beings lose their self-control, but they remain human, and, in fact, the body takes over’ (Plessner, 1950, p. 43). At the same time, the comic is largely cerebral. For Simon Critchley, this dualistic tension between the body and the intellect is central to laughter: ‘[w]hat makes us laugh is the return of the physical into the metaphysical’ (2002, p. 43). Thus, the joker is disengaged from the world. In fact, laughter displaces the customary assumptions around social interaction. This covalence between distance and closeness recruits a sense of philosophical attitude towards life’s vicissitudes. As Morreall puts it, ‘[t]he person who looks at his life philosophically does not let his emotions color his view; he is distanced [...] from the practical aspects of his situation’ (1983, p. 103).

The second tension underlying the comic in literature is semantic. The comic is a distinctively individual response to a specific context. By definition, humour systematically questions ordinary meaning. Eagleton sums this aporia up quite vividly: ‘comedy represents a momentary respite from the tyrannical legibility of the world. [...] The literally meaningless sound of laughter enacts this haemorrhage of sense’ (2019, p. 27). At the same time, Bakhtin famously argued that the comic allows the laughter to access to some distinct forms of knowledge: ‘[c]ertain essential aspects of the world are accessible only to laughter’ (1984a, p. 66). Thus, responses to humour are highly unpredictable, since they vary according to many factors ranging from gender, class, education, language, and/or ethnicity. Some readers may

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<sup>24</sup> For Hobbes, laughter is triggered ‘by the *apprehension* of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they [the laughers] suddenly applaud themselves’ (Hobbes and Tuck, 1991, p. 43 [emphasis mine]).

<sup>25</sup> In fact, de Sousa is careful to point out that ‘hysterical laughter is not laughter, nor are the happy noises and cries of infants, nor is “laughing with pleasure”’ (1987, p. 276).

find a passage funny, others may not. Some might find a pun hilarious, whereas others may barely chuckle. Therefore, Roberts is right in arguing that ‘it is clear that finding humorous what they [other people] find humorous depends on having access to their perspective on human attitudes and behaviour’ (2002, p. 299). The implications of this semantic elusiveness have been discussed in scholarship. Indeed, Michael Billig is sceptical about the potential of humour: ‘laughter communicates meaning. Rhetorical meaning is always potentially contestable’ (2005, p. 192). However, despite its fundamental volatility, the comic has been consistently used and misused in the political sphere. In fact, the mechanisms and the response to humour can be analysed and put down. For Morreall, ‘perhaps the easiest place to see the liberating effect of humour is the political sphere’ (1983, p. 101). In scholarship, there is no agreement on the political circumstances that are more hospitable to comedy. It is customary to argue that jokes thrive under dictatorships. Moura argues in a nutshell that ‘[t]he more hierarchical a society is, the less one can openly laugh (as is evidenced by numerous political regimes)’ (2010, p. 38). If dictatorships strive to instrumentalise comedy as a tool reinforcing pro-regime propaganda, individuals in autocratic societies seem to use humour and comedy as a subversive device.<sup>26</sup> Whilst being a universal phenomenon, laughter and humour are context-specific. In this respect, commentators usually hail the intrinsically subversive nature of humour as attacking the mechanisms of serious discourse. For Morreall, a key feature of comedy is that it encourages disrespect for authority. Indeed, he contends that humour is an apt device to question the dominant ideology, notably ‘respect for authority, duty, honour, single-mindedness, courage, and a capacity for hard work’ (1998, p. 436). In this respect, as Morris convincingly argues, the Aristotelian model of tragedy is compromised by ‘implicit ideological assumptions’ (1997, p. 35) mirroring Classical Athenian class structure, as ‘it holds at its core the values of aristocratic privilege, whereas ordinary suffering and people lie beyond its scope, pushed to the margins or personified in a passive, hapless chorus’ (*ibid.*). If tragedy reproduces the dominant modes of society, the actual implications of comedy are not clear. In fact, comedy is often exclusive, directed at those marginalised. Thus, humour can be both an instrument implementing repression and defying authority. This semantic covalence casts light on the intrinsic adaptability of humour. Being both meaningful and unintelligible, the comic ruptures the readers’ expectations and homogenising knowledge.

The social and the semantic tensions converge on the third tension that I call the comic ‘subject position’. For Zupančič, comic subjectivity can be defined as a ‘very incessant and

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<sup>26</sup> For a comparative analysis of the use of jokes in the Soviet Union and democratic societies, see Davies (2011).

irresistible, all-consuming movement’ (2008, p. 3) punctuated by moments of attachment and fixations. Being equally inscrutable and demonstrable, universal and subjective, the comic subject calls into question the readers’ perception of her identity. This movement is twofold. On the one hand, the comic subject presupposes ‘an interiority capable of standing outside itself, of manipulating itself’ (Wickberg, 1998, p. 78). For a fictional character, this stepping outside the self can be evaluative, self-deprecating and/or self-amusing. By means of this dissociation, a character can scrutinise their own self from the outside and engage imaginatively with other people’s perspectives on themselves. In this, comedy allows for characters to navigate the strictures of society and to seduce readers. Concurrently, as far as readers are concerned, this dissociation of the self unfolds in a different way. A reader can adhere to a character’s comic viewpoint without sharing their beliefs. By means of our ‘capacities of self-transcendence’ (Roberts, 2002, p. 308), we can apprehend and take on the sets of values of a fictional character to appreciate their idiosyncrasy. This insight into and this taking-on of another character’s self can be most unsettling, especially in the context of malicious comedy. Thus, humour, Gilles Deleuze argues, fosters flexibility and plasticity of the mind: ‘[h]umor is the art of the surfaces and of the doubles, of nomad singularities and of the always displaced aleatory point [...] with every signification, denotation, and manifestation suspended, all height and depth abolished’ (2004, pp. 159-160).<sup>27</sup> This ‘nomadic’ quality is central, since it indicates the impermanence of the comic. In sum, the comic results in ‘a profound transformation [...] – of the universality of the Idea, of the form of subjectivity, and of the model of language as function of the possible’ (p. 157).

In resting upon these three tensions, this dissertation echoes Hazlitt’s eloquent definition of the comic whereby the comic emerges out of a contradiction between our customary expectations and ‘some deformity or inconvenience, that is, [...] its being contrary to what is customary or desirable’ (1998, p. 5). Incongruity is, therefore, key. However, Roberts is right to suggest that ‘not all enjoyment of incongruities as such is amusement’ (2002, p. 294) before giving examples of unhumorous paradoxes (nonsense could be certainly added to the list). Indeed, incongruity is not simply a distancing device signalling a clash between an ideal and its actual manifestation. In fact, the comic phenomenon is characterised by an amount of enjoyment precisely for its incongruity. This amusement element distinguishes the comic from other distancing devices that discourage the readers from being involved in the plot. Michael Clark’s definition of amusement is most productive:

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<sup>27</sup> For an introduction to neuroplasticity, see Costandi, 2016. Moheb Costandi expounds with great clarity the adaptability of nerve cell function and structure in the adult brain.

‘amusement is *the enjoyment of (perceiving or thinking of or indulging in) what is seen as incongruous, partly because it is seen as incongruous*’ (1987, p. 150). Therefore, my understanding of the comic implies the enjoyment of seeing a clash between incompatible frames of reference.<sup>28</sup>

### The ethics of reading as an arena

In this dissertation, I understand the comic as an inquisitive mode that prompts readers to re-evaluate their perception of various aspects of fiction. This conception of the comic resonates with the ethics of reading. Indeed, this dissertation engages with the current significance of ethics in literary criticism. The upsurge of academic interest in ethics, that has been in continuous expansion since the mid 1980s, can hardly be overstated.<sup>29</sup> Probably due to its distinctive ‘protean ductility’ (Buell, 2000, p. 4), ethics in contemporary discourse has become something of a catchphrase embracing a variety of issues, ranging from debates around artificial intelligence to PhD theses in Comparative Literature and beyond. Historically, in the wake of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, ethics was understood as the prescription of moral tenets intended to guide one’s conduct in the context of social constraints. Consequently, ethical discussion revolved around the tenets of ‘goodness’ and ‘evilness’. Indeed, as Andrew Hadfield, Dominic Rainsford and Tim Woods rightly suggest, the re-appreciation of ethics in contemporary thinking means a radical bifurcation from its Aristotelian matrix: ‘[t]he famous question on which Aristotle based his ethical philosophy, how shall we live life, has been transformed into the question, how can we respect the other’ (1999, p. 9). Thus, this new understanding of ethics is not concerned with predicaments and codes determining how one should act justly in social environments. Indeed, Wallace recalls that this renewed interest in ethics can be essentially divided into two main strands. On the one hand, ‘moral criticism’ sees in literature ‘an exemplary source for ethical reflection in its representation of human particularity and complexity’ (2016, p. 13) insofar as literature mimeticises moral dilemmas available in the material world. Literature is thereby defined as part of a moral enquiry that hones the reader’s ethical understanding of the world.

At the same time, the so-called ‘new ethical criticism’, informed by poststructuralist

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<sup>28</sup> For the sake of clarity, I use humour, comedy, and the comic interchangeably, as this dissertation is not concerned with taxonomy.

<sup>29</sup> Geoffrey Galt Harpham offers a thought-provoking analysis of the cultural and academic debates that were instrumental in shaping the ethical turn (1999, pp. 30-69). For a fully-referenced and crystal-clear discussion of the emergence of ethics in scholarship, see Buell, 1999.

thinking, addresses ‘the formal features of literature and the relationship between the reader and the text-as-other’ (*ibid.*), encouraging a reading practice that is attentive to otherness and difference. In the wake of this new ethical paradigm, debates have been articulated around the role of the reader faced with the alterity of fiction. As J. Hillis Miller puts it in his *Ethics of Reading*: ‘[i]t begins with and returns to the man or woman face to face with the words on the page’ (1987, p. 4). The ethical turn is centrally concerned with the notion of relationality between the reader and the text. Thus, the nexus ‘ethics and literature’ explores the relationship and its attendant obligations of a reader faced with a literary text. This represents the point of convergence between literature and ethics, as Lawrence Buell remarks: ‘[c]learly literature and ethics have to do, among other possible things, with relationships between texts and readers’ (2000, p. 6). Far from providing a moral education in the pursuit of just behaviour, literature exposes the reader to radical otherness. Within this paradigm, the figure of Lithuanian-born French philosopher Levinas is of paramount importance. Critchley fêtes Levinas as ‘the hidden king of twentieth-century French philosophy’ (2002a, p. 5), for one can speak of a Levinasian turn in literary criticism.<sup>30</sup> In brief, Levinas tries to overcome what he sees as an ontological tradition in Western thinking, articulated by ‘a specifically Greek lexicon of intelligibility’ (1995, p. 184). In his critique of Western ‘ontotheology’, Levinas prioritises ethics as first philosophy in postulating the ethical responsibility for the other that transcends the ‘same’ (dismissed as ‘egology’). In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas maintains that ‘[t]he relation with Being that is enacted as ontology consists in neutralizing the existent in order to comprehend or grasp it. It is hence not a relation with the other as such but the reduction of the other to the same’ (1969, pp. 45-46). By so doing, Levinas substitutes ontology with an ethical encounter with the irreducible otherness of the Other that precedes the freedom of the subject.

In prioritising the ungraspable other that disrupts the self’s freedom in the world, Levinas postulates that the Other places an exorbitant responsibility on the subject without any prior commitment and mutuality. The relationship to the Other rests, thereby, on absolute responsibility for the Other’s vulnerability to which the subject is irremediably bound. Within the compass of Levinasian ethics, reading involves, therefore, an attentiveness to the Other’s alterity. This is akin to listening to the Other’s singularity. Derek Attridge even invokes the idea of ‘disposition’: ‘[t]he ethics of literary reading is less a matter of the exercise of a

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<sup>30</sup> As Robert Eaglestone is careful to recall, Levinas’s thought is characterised by a ‘deep-seated antipathy to art’ (1997, p. 98). There is something of a belated irony about the fact that Levinas’s philosophy has now become so central to aesthetic debates.

certain kind of effort on each reading [...] than a disposition, a habit, a way of being in the world of words' (2004, p. 130). Thereby, literature presents the otherness of the world in the figure of the irreducibly ungraspable text. This exposure to otherness occurs at a cost, that of the exorbitant obligation placed on the reader. In this, reading implies responsibility on the part of the reader. As Attridge goes on to argue, '[t]o be responsible for the other as it comes into being (and thus bring it into being) is to be under an obligation to it' (p. 126). The comic disposition allows for the reader to see otherness in literature. Indeed, the comic, due its elusiveness, can destabilise readers and challenge their ethical response to the text. Thus, the comic prompts readers to assess their own ethics afresh.

There has been some reticence in current scholarship to define ethics. It is as if literary theorists were mindful of the potential risk of assimilation inherent in definition. Furthermore, Buell suggests that '[p]erhaps a certain desultoriness is to be expected of an emerging, or congeries of discourses, struggling with self-definition' (1999, p. 11). Harpham rightly posits that contemporary ethics has little to do with moral guidance, insofar as 'ethics can never hope to resolve its internal difficulties and offer itself to the world as a guide to the perplexed' (1999, p. 27). Centred on the encounter with otherness, ethics therefore constitutes a scene that probes and disrupts the reader's self-affirming knowledge of the world. To this extent, Harpham's definition of ethics is most productive: '[e]thics is the arena in which the claims of otherness – the moral law, the human other, cultural norms, the good-in-itself etc. – are articulated and negotiated' (p. 26). By so doing, Harpham identifies literature as a scene enacting and eliciting responsibility for the Other. Reading provides the space for concepts that rupture the reader's safe perception of the world. In being a sphere of transaction, the literary work compels readers to be exposed to the unpredictability of fiction. Within that sphere, readers are embedded in relationality with the other. In fact, Harpham speaks of a materialisation of ethics in an experience of feeling and understanding: '[e]thics is where thought itself experiences an obligation to form a relation with its other – not only other thoughts, but other-*than*-thoughts' (p. 37). In this respect I argue that the comic in fiction allows for the reader to experience a relation with the other.

The other polarity of ethics is morality. Indeed, morality in literature understands texts as vehicles of values. Morality warrants principles and predicaments that are worked out in fiction, whilst ethics probes and questions them. Harpham suggests that 'ethics includes within its internal structure a "nonethical" element. The traditional name for this transgressive element is "morality"' (p. 29). In fact, challenged as to whether his ethics can apply to historical subjects entangled in systems of social organisation, Levinas makes the following

distinction. He first defines morality as ‘a series of rules relating to social behaviour and civic duty’ (1995, p. 194) whilst stressing that ‘ethics cannot itself legislate for society or produce rules of conduct whereby society might be revolutionised or transformed’ (*ibid.*). This distinction is commented on further by Levinas who posits judiciously that ‘[m]orality is what governs the world of political interestedness, but the norm which must continue to inspire and direct the moral order is the ethical norm of the inter-human’ (1995, pp. 194-195). Levinas insists that the inter-human is an ‘interface’ (p. 186), i.e, ‘a double axis where what is “of the world” *qua phenomenological intelligibility* is juxtaposed with what is not “of the world” *qua ethical responsibility*’ (*ibid.*). In the realm of discussions around the comic, this distinction is crucial, for the comic essentially ruptures and unsettles our taken-for-granted expectations around the material and the cognitive world. In this way, the comic is consubstantial with ethics, as both provide a scene where the other, social and cultural norms can be investigated. On the other hand, morality, understood as a set of predicaments, is constantly threatened by the comic. This is manifest in the various instances of social anxiety with regard to caricature and satire that have flared up across Europe over the last decade. However, underlying the morality-ethics dyad lies the actual realisation of ethics, its confrontation with the material world where human beings have to make decisions and answer to them. Harpham insists that ‘[t]he moral moment is necessary and inescapable, however, not just because decisions must be made, but also because mere choice has, by itself, no ethical value whatsoever; without decision, ethics would be condemned to dithering. It is morality that realizes ethics, making it ethical’ (1999, p. 30). Literature, whilst being a game without effectuating responsibility, can offer a space where in the end choices are enacted by characters. Faced with these unreliable figures, the reader can make their own decision without any ontological responsibility.

## Conclusion

‘Articulating perplexity, rather than guiding, is what ethics is all about’ (Harpham, 1999, p. 27). In the following chapters, I demonstrate how the comic provides an arena where this ethical perplexity is articulated in each chapter. More specifically, in Sebald’s use of parody and stereotyping, I detect a narrative strategy that questions the reader’s perception of normative orders. In playing with different strands of meaning, the narrative subverts the way readers conceive of cultural markers associated with victimhood. In Müller’s novel, the use of Schadenfreude and satire interrogates the way we think of emotive distance. The text, indeed, undermines the notions of readerly empathy by means of a detached and cold narrator. In

Lobo Antunes's novel, the dissociation of subjectivity is centred on the readers who can adopt the narrator's scathing viewpoint, as it is unclear what the narrator's viewpoint consists of. In the novel, it is in fact enjoyable for the reader to adhere to the highly sensuous mediation of political violence. In Hrabal's text, the narrator interrogates the way we think of the subjectivity of victimhood. The narrator's comic foolishness arises from the dissociation of his worldview, for it is thoroughly unclear whether the narrator is aware of the extraordinary circumstances of political brutalisation he is exposed to.

In looking at the comic in the following texts, this dissertation investigates the discursive formations shaping the reception of suffering. By so doing, this project follows Morris's conceptualisation: '[l]iterature clearly plays a significant role in orchestrating the language that validates or invalidates certain experiences as suffering' (1997, p. 40). The intersection between suffering and literary comedy is certainly one of the experiences that still need validating. The facetious, sarcastic, ironic representation of violence opens up a more dynamic appreciation of the experience of brutalisation. Indeed, this mechanism is twofold. For the comic sheds light on social anxieties in probing the limits of what is ethically permissible. Alongside this critique, the comic also addresses imagination, since it elicits inventiveness, playfulness and pleasure. Crucially, the elusiveness of the comic allows a less generic and prescriptive engagement with dehumanisation. By means of their complex participation in laughter, readers are permitted to take on certain moral situations in fiction that are usually prohibited in social life. Indeed, the process of adopting, reflecting on and finally rejecting another's mental state favours ethical elasticity and, ultimately, can activate fundamental questions around the vicarious experience of suffering. This mechanism can offset the 'obvious failure of the holocaust tragedy' (Žižek, 2000, p. 26). Beyond the specific concerns of the representation of the Shoah, the comic attacks the hegemonic representation of suffering. In sum, at the core of my doctoral project is the sense of bifurcation, insofar as each text explores a disjuncture from established norms. At a time characterised by a growing historic amnesia and cultural saturation in the face of suffering, the comic offers a way to activate a complex response to violence. As critic Peter Barnes rightly remarks in an essay on Lubitsch's black comedy *To Be or Not to Be*, '[t]ragedy makes the unthinkable appear to have some meaning. It becomes transfigured, without the horror being removed, and so justice is denied to the victims. Comedy does not tell such pernicious lies' (Mullarkey, 2013, p. 137). For the comic sensitises readers to a more dynamic approach to the representation of mass violence. Both seduced and unsettled, readers have to adjust to comic characters on their own terms. In this, comedy shatters the safe predicates of tragedy and prompts us to engage

intellectually and individually with the representation of brutalisation. In the following chapter, I will present my first case study in exploring the tension between pleasant prejudice and unsettling parody in W. G. Sebald's novel *Austerlitz*.

## CHAPTER 2

### **Pleasant Parody: W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz***

#### **Note on the Texts**

The original does not follow the German Orthography Reform of 1996.

Joyful episodes are not legion in *Austerlitz*. This, however, does not exclude flashes of comic transgression and the use of stereotypes. Towards the end of the novel, Jacques Austerlitz recounts how he probably felt happiness for the first time in his life. Whilst in Paris ‘one Saturday afternoon when a cold mist hung low in the air’ [‘an einem nebligen Samstagnachmittag’] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 380; *AusterlitzG*, p. 386), he embarks on one of his usual peregrinations around derelict industrial areas, accompanied this time by his confidante, the architectural historian Marie de Verneuil. The pair suddenly catch sight of a travelling circus set in an open space near Austerlitz railway station. Entering the venue, Austerlitz is careful to note that the stage is actually so tiny ‘that even a pony could hardly have trotted round it in a circle’ [‘daß darin kaum ein Pferdchen hätte im Kreis traben können’] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 381; *AusterlitzG*, p. 387). Inside the marquee, the atmosphere is markedly intimate: a few stools are scattered around the small ring; the circus is family-run; lights are pleasantly dimmed. In fact, de Verneuil and Austerlitz arrive just in time for the last performance, as a conjurer takes out of his top hat ‘a bantam cockerel with wonderfully coloured plumage’ [‘einen wunderbar buntgefiederten Bantamhahn’] (*ibid.*). The bird then performs a series of curious acts: skilfully tamed, it runs, jumps over obstacles, and even knows how to do a sum ‘such as two times three or four minus one by clattering his beak when the conjurer showed him card with figures written on them’ [‘wie zwei mal drei oder vier weniger eins, die der Zauberer ihm mit verschieden beschrifteten Pappdeckelkarten zeigte’] (*ibid.*).

Once this prodigious cockerel number is over, the atmosphere takes on melancholic hues. The circus lights are gradually dimmed and, right above the audience, artificial stars start shining on the top of the tent. The ringmaster of sorts appears again, surrounded by his family. The tableau is ludicrous: one child carries a lantern and is followed by a white goose; the men don pale-green turbans; the family eventually start playing a melody with a bandoneon, a fiddle and a transverse flute. This air causes Austerlitz to be deeply moved: ‘I still do not understand [...] what was happening within me as I listened to this extraordinarily foreign nocturnal music conjured out of thin air, so to speak, by the circus performers with their slightly out-of-tune instruments’ [‘[w]as in mir selber vorgeing, als ich dieser von den Zirkusleuten mit ihren etwas verstimmtten Instrumenten sozusagen aus dem Nichts hervorgezauberten, ganz und gar fremdländischen Nachtmusik lauschte, das verstehe ich immer noch nicht’] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 383; *AusterlitzG*, p. 389). He concludes that this heart-wrenching conundrum is symbolised by a goose: ‘it seems to me as if the mystery which touched me at the time was summed up in the image of the snow-white goose standing

motionless and steadfast among the musicians as long as they played' ['kommt mir vor, als sei das Geheimnis, von dem ich damals angerührt wurde, aufgehoben gewesen in dem Bild der schneeweißen Gans, die reglos und unverwandt, solange sie spielten, zwischen den musizierenden Schaustellern stand'] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 384; *AusterlitzG*, p. 390).

A character identifying with a snow-white goose; the curious venue of a pocket-sized circus topped off by a tangible firmament; the farce of a bird well versed in arithmetic: all these elements illustrate the general grotesque imagery prevailing in W. G. Sebald's novel.<sup>31</sup> This grotesquerie is heightened by the clichéd vision of Oriental-looking and potentially child-exploiting vagrants who epitomise, to Austerlitz's mind, the moving ideal of otherness. The white-goose episode is emblematic of the grotesque aesthetics of *Austerlitz*. Indeed, I argue that Sebald's novel capitalises on several comic devices which intersect with the grand narrative of trauma and loss. More specifically, I identify three strands of comedy in *Austerlitz*. First, the novel exhibits an unsettling sense of continuity between humans and animals. In Sebald's zoopoetics, the animal world is ascribed certain mental predicates that resemble human behavioural patterns. I suggest that this comic anthropomorphism functions as a parody of the main issues tackled by Austerlitz in his ruminations about the detrimental dynamics threatening human society. By means of the distance provided by the portraiture of animals, readers can relish the depiction of issues without any uneasiness. Second, the narrative rests on a great number of tendentious remarks that chiefly target the body and various continental cultural contexts, all of them recruiting the reader's amused participation in the narrative. Characters consistently draw attention to odd-looking physiognomies and curious couplings, such as dwarves and giants. Analogously, the representation of three sites of European memory is mediated by stark stereotypical beliefs: Socialist Czechoslovakia as drab and dysfunctional; post-unification Germany as crypto-Nazi and ominous; France as bureaucratic and grandiose. Finally, the narrative is distinctively concerned with materiality in a way which trivialises the main issues explored by the novel. This is particularly visible in the two episodes where Austerlitz and the narrator engage with the remnants of the Holocaust directly.

Therefore, the central concern of this chapter is the comic deviation from expected norms in terms of representation of trauma. Far from being a figure exclusively haunted by his past, Jacques Austerlitz also revels in the humorous spectacle of human and animal

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<sup>31</sup> It is notorious that Sebald jibbed at calling *Austerlitz* a 'novel' for he considered his book 'a prose book of some kind' ['ein Prosa-buch unbestimmter Art'] (*Eis*, p. 199) because of its distinctive lack of dialogue. There is something of an unchallenged affectation in this statement. Therefore, in agreement with dominant scholarship and for the sake of clarity, this chapter typifies Sebald's text as a novel.

curiosities. In concentrating on the comic in the novel, I hope to show that this focus could contribute to the current discussion of ethics in his work. My fundamental argument is that the text challenges the reader's interpretative framework. More specifically, I suggest that the comic functions as an interpretative barrier that disrupts the hegemonising appropriation of the diegesis on the part of the reader. For comedy does not vouch for univocal meaning, but pivots precisely on ambivalence. In fact, comedy in Sebald's novel is articulated at the crossroads between meaning and its immediate undermining. The various instances of humour both work with and disrupt tropes in the representation of trauma and the reverberations of the Second World War. This lack of clarity is manifest in the use of grotesque elements, i.e. in the use of comically hybrid creatures, as well as the prevalence of cultural stereotypes and parody. Both stereotyping and parody offer a satirical mimicry of accepted norms. In *Austerlitz*, the comic shatters the readers' safe perception of the diegesis whilst addressing cultural preconception. In privileging the grotesque antics of anthropomorphic animals, the prejudice of a culturally biased observer, and the materiality of the present-as-past, both the narrator and Austerlitz engage with issues around sense-making in the novel. Presented with this distorted narrative vision, readers are exposed to the disarming otherness of Austerlitz's viewpoint. This line of argument will, I hope, qualify the rather orthodox approach to Sebald's writing whereby *Austerlitz* 'continuously addresses and explores the limits of communicability without ever affecting identification with the victims' position' (Schmitz, 2004, p. 312). Given the focus of this doctoral project, I do not consider intermediality as a site of comedy. Indeed, Sebald's use of pictorial elements has drawn consistent scholarship, and *Austerlitz* is, at places, characterised by stark contrasts between the text and the presence of pictorial elements.<sup>32</sup> However, the analysis of this relationship would mobilise other interpretative paradigms and draw upon an altogether different tradition. Therefore, I will resort to textual evidence only. To this extent, I am not interested in intertextual irony either, as Sebald's playful engagement with other texts has already been discussed elsewhere at length.<sup>33</sup> Received as the hallmark of Sebaldian humour, this *recherché* dialogue with other works of literature does not fit with my focus on the comic in Sebald which privileges comic strategies that are more immediately perceptible.

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<sup>32</sup> There are many instances of gallows humour in Sebald's use of pictorial elements, such as the shop sign 'IDEAL' standing out in the picture accompanying Austerlitz's account of Terezín, the Austro-Hungarian garrison city transformed into a National Socialist detention camp where his mother was probably murdered (*AusterlitzE*, p. 267; *AusterlitzG*, p. 275).

<sup>33</sup> Martin Klebes's essay on the role of Kafka (2004) as well Russell J. A. Kilbourn's study of cinema and architecture in *Austerlitz* (2004) are thought-provoking treatments of intertextuality.

What brings the three strands of comedy together is the narrative's rupture of meaning. There is a tension running through the novel between the seriousness of Austerlitz's life story and the sheer amount of ludicrous details and stereotyping. In *Austerlitz*, the comic can intellectually unsettle readers, but, simultaneously, it plays with their prejudice. What emerges from my reading is the fact that the reader is forced to question her meaning-making of the diegetic world. By so doing, I hope to demonstrate that the comic opens up a less easy ethics around *Austerlitz*. This tension is mirrored in the use of grotesque hybridity and of cliché, both of which are readily indulged by the reader. Elizabeth Barry defines cliché as 'a judgement felt to apply to borrowed, lazy and banal forms of thinking' [...]. "[T]hrown out into the public arena", a clichéd expression is felt to represent the lowest common denominator of thought' (2006, p. 3). Moreover, she adds that verbal cliché is 'a figure of speech felt to be repeated to the point where the original image has ceased to be striking' (*ibid.*). Central to these two aspects is what she calls 'a discourse of loss. The trope is felt to have degenerated, its language losing its fluidity, and the speaker's apprehension of the world becomes similarly inflexible in submitting to it' (pp. 3-4). For a writer so alert to the potential of literature, this inflexibility to reality can be understood either as a playful, self-conscious reworking of literary tropes, or as a blatant narrative shortcoming.

'[T]he slipperiest of aesthetic categories' (Harpham, 1976, p. 461), the grotesque seems to eschew any serious attempt of typification. Nevertheless, critics agree that the notion of intermingling is central. Philip Thomson suggests that the grotesque could be defined as 'the unresolved clash of incompatibles in work and responses' (1972, p. 27) before adding that 'this clash is paralleled by the ambivalent nature of the abnormal' (*ibid.*). Thomson's analysis harks back to the notion of decorative ornament covering picturesque Roman caves [in (Renaissance) Italian: *grotte*] that were discovered in the Early Modern Period. Of paramount importance to the original idea of Renaissance *grottesco* is the interweaving of morbid elements and audacious themes fused into an ornate artistic style. Thus, compared to other comic devices, the grotesque still retains its immediately detectable abnormality, its aberrant departure from expectations, for it is primarily concerned with hybrid and/or monstrous appearances. In other words, Frances S. Connelly states that 'the grotesque is a boundary creature and does not exist except in relation to a boundary, convention, or expectation' (2003, p. 4). Abnormality has a double meaning, for it presupposes a deviation both from customary representations and from usual physical traits. In *Austerlitz*, the exceptional array of grotesque characters, scenes, and objects question the pleasure we derive in the narrative. Central to my enquiry is the clash of suddenness, estrangement and pleasure

which is inherent in the grotesque. Geoffrey Harpham rightly stresses that, by means of the grotesque, ‘the familiar and the commonplace must be suddenly subverted or undermined by the uncanny or alien’ (1976, p. 462). The grotesque can easily tip into the absurd, unless it contains ‘certain aesthetic conventions which the readers feel are representative of reality as it knows it’ (*ibid.*). In other words, the grotesque exploits and defamiliarises taken-for-granted expectations around representations.

As regards the question as to whether meaning can be ascribed to the grotesque, critics recognise the shock-function of the grotesque insofar as it undermines some of the familiar perceptions of the beholder. For Thomson, the grotesque ‘may also be used to bewilder and disorient, to bring the reader up short, jolt him out of accustomed ways of perceiving the world and confront him with a radically different, disturbing perspective’ (1972, p. 58). In contrast to the view that the grotesque aggressively challenges pre-established norms, Elisheva Rosen is, unequivocal in claiming that it ‘does not convey either meaning nor overriding clarifications’ (2010, p. 878). This apparent impasse could be potentially circumvented by the fact that the grotesque draws the reader’s attention to its very constructedness for two reasons: the grotesque is both constitutively hybrid in its aesthetic construction and degrading in its effect. In fact, for Wolfgang Kayser, the grotesque is akin to ‘a frightful mixture of mechanical, vegetable, animal and human elements [which] is represented as the image of our world which is breaking apart’ (1981, p. 33). In disorienting the reader and in attacking our safe representations of the world without any redemptive framework, the grotesque allows for a more active perception of the world. In sum, as Thomson puts it, by means of the grotesque, ‘[s]omething which is familiar and trusted is suddenly made strange and disturbing’ (1972, p. 59). It is up to the reader to disentangle the abnormal from the normal.

*Austerlitz* rests on various encounters between the unnamed first-person narrator, a UK-based German scholar, conversant with continental letters, and Jacques Austerlitz, an architectural historian specialising in the history of European modernity. Spanning between 1967 and the mid-1990s, these encounters facilitate what the narrator calls Austerlitz’s ‘apocryphal stories’ [‘apokryphe Geschichten’] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 41; *AusterlitzG*, p. 49), that is, page-long digressions that embrace a vast array of Austerlitz’s knowledge, ranging from botany to warfare architecture. As the narrative unfolds, readers are told that Austerlitz’s erudition functions as a defence mechanism, ‘a substitute or compensatory memory’ [‘ein ersatzweises, kompensatorisches Gedächtnis’] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 198; *AusterlitzG*, p. 206). In fact, the plot is redolent of an archaeological dig whereby Austerlitz gradually excavates

layers of psychic repression. Austerlitz was born in Prague in the mid 1930s into a Jewish *Bildungsbürgertum* family. His mother, Agáta Austerlitzová is a Czech-speaking aspiring actress, and his father Maximilian Aychenwald, a Russian-born senior official in the Czechoslovak Social Democratic Party and a French republicanism aficionado. Following the German invasion of Czechoslovakia, Agáta arranges for her son to be sent on a *Kindertransport* to Britain in the summer of 1939. This decision saves Austerlitz's life, for both his parents are eventually interned and presumably murdered during the war. Once in Britain, Austerlitz is raised by foster parents, a loveless Calvinist couple living in a remote corner of Wales, and is given a new name, Dafydd Elias. Thanks to his intellectual curiosity and hard work, Austerlitz manages to run away from this alienating environment and embarks on an idiosyncratic academic career. However, in his late fifties, he is confronted with the resurgence of his past, when he catches sight of his deceased parents in the Ladies' Waiting Room of Liverpool Street Station. Pension age does not help either him ward off 'an illness that had been latent in me for a long time' ['eine seit langem in mir bereits fortwirkende Krankheit'] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 173; *AusterlitzG*, p. 182). What is distinctive about *Austerlitz* is the sinuous multilayering of reported speech, as Austerlitz reports what Věra, his then Czech nanny, tells him, which is, in turn, reported by the narrator. To this extent, Laura García-Moreno is right in remarking that '*Austerlitz* ironically has something monumental and overbearing about it in terms of its sheer length, the complexity of its syntax and structure [...]. And yet, Sebald clearly shares a preference for the precarious and the smaller scale with his character, as indicated by the careful attention to seemingly banal, minor objects' (2013, p. 369). Finally, another compositional feature is the presence of pictures that are meant to corroborate or complicate Austerlitz's ruminations and the verisimilitude of this work of fiction.

### Scholarship

In the guild of Germanists, it has become something of rhetorical posturing to upbraid the current inflation of scholarly attention to Sebald's work. Numerically, as Uwe Schütte recalls, over 50 monographs, dealing with Sebald directly or obliquely, were published between 2009 and 2016 (2017, p. 3). Schütte does not specify whether this figure entails German-speaking and Anglophone works of criticism only, but suffice it to say that a quick glance at Iberian and Francophone library catalogues confirms Scott Denham's diagnosis: '[i]t is a

phenomenon' (2006, p. 1).<sup>34</sup> Since Sebald's untimely death in 2001, artists and scholars alike have lionised his work almost unanimously, displaying an unprecedented interest in a contemporary author. With rare philological meticulousness, commentators have scrutinised many aspects of his prose, poetry, and scholarly work, including a sedulous exegesis of Sebald's MA dissertation. By general admission, critics are laudatory.<sup>35</sup> In the mid 1990s, American Europhile Susan Sontag was amongst the first intellectuals to set the tone in fêting 'the preternatural authority of Sebald's voice: its gravity, its sinuosity, its precision, its freedom from all-undermining or undignified self-consciousness or irony' (2002, p. 41). In extolling Sebald's gravitas, Sontag is swift to stress 'the passionate bleakness of Sebald's voice' (p. 46). Under her aegis, critics have consistently underlined the ethical quality of Sebald's literary project. As for the themes covered by scholarship, Schütte bewails a '*tunnel vision*' (2017, p. 6) which consists of 'a small number of issues always related to the same themes, which can be reduced to the keywords trauma – Holocaust – intermediality – memory – melancholy' (p. 3). In fact, Richard Sheppard does not jibe at 'grumpy reflections' (2009, p. 82) in indicting current Sebald scholarship for its 'wordiness' (p. 80) and its 'rebarbative idiom which Sebald thoroughly disliked' (*ibid.*). Within the limitations of this doctoral dissertation, it is, of course, not my purpose to sketch out the tentacular debates in scholarship that 'has abstrusely degenerated' (Schütte, 2017, p. 3).<sup>36</sup>

As regards *Austerlitz*, a central concern in scholarly discussions is the ethical import of the novel. For Sebald's text is usually held as a careful negotiation about how a narrator from within the perpetrator collective can engage with the reverberations of German responsibility for the destruction of European Jews without appropriating the Jewish other. This Sebaldian alertness to the suffering other has been rightly commented on by Anne Fuchs when she signals Sebald's 'precarious positioning as a second-generation German author' (2004, p. 28). Defining the ethics of memory in his work, Fuchs points to a self-reflexive narrative

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<sup>34</sup> It would not be idle to engage with the socio-historic reasons that account for such a vivid academic interest in Sebald's work. To my knowledge, almost twenty years after his demise, the spectacular academic popularity of this scholar-cum-fiction-author is unprecedented. The apparent encyclopaedic knowledge of this sophisticated connoisseur of European culture is surely one of the rewarding incentives in an age of hyperspecialisation. To this extent, Deanne Blackler's appraisal is illuminating when she fêtes 'the subjectivity that is Winfried Georg Maximilian Sebald (1944-2001), the richly cultivated mind and very human voice' (2007, p. 2). That being said, scholars have shown the many (intentional?) inaccuracies in Sebald's reworking of historic events. In keeping with academic castigation, I have identified 14 misspellings in Sebald's use of French and Czech in *AusterlitzG* which have been partially rectified in *AusterlitzE*.

<sup>35</sup> Except for the British novelist Adam Thirlwell who, in quite acerbic an article, is intrepid enough to conjure up the notion of 'ugliness' in relation to Sebald's 'otiose' prose (2013, p. 37).

<sup>36</sup> For forays into Sebald scholarship, J. J. Long provides a precious subdivision of themes into categories (2007, pp. 11-29). Sheppard's trenchant observations are most useful for they invigorate would-be scholars not to regurgitate the same farrago about Sebald (2005, pp. 419-463).

apparatus which buttresses the distance between the Self and the other ‘in order to undermine the identification of the first-person narrator with the protagonists’ (p. 32). She suggests numerous narrative techniques which gesture towards self-reflectivity, such as Sebald’s perisopic layering narrative, redolent of Thomas Bernhard, as well as the precisely contextualised rendering of each of the protagonists’ utterances (*ibid.*). In an interview released shortly prior to his demise, Sebald claims to be aware of the ethical dangers inherent in writing about mass suffering: ‘[i]t was also clear you could not write directly about the horror of persecution in its ultimate forms, because no one could bear to look at these things without losing their sanity. So you would have to approach it from an angle’ (*last*). Essentially, the narrative angle that Sebald opts for is the conglomerate of life stories of different Holocaust survivors merging into a composite character, Jacques Austerlitz, whose meandering narration is conveyed by a UK-based German scholar conversant with European letters.<sup>37</sup>

It is generally recognised that this layering of reported speech constitutes a safe barrier that does not compromise Austerlitz’s integrity. In the first place, this alertness to victimhood materialises by means of the narration. As Elizabeth Baer remarks, ‘Sebald could simply have had Austerlitz narrate his own story to us, the readers, but instead he inserts a narrator that performs the crucial act of listening’ (2010, p. 188). As a consequence, Baer argues that the very act of paying heed to Austerlitz’s monologue favours what she calls ‘the social responsibility of the non-Jewish narrator/observer to bring into being the stories of the victims’ (*ibid.*). Whether the unnamed narrator engages with Austerlitz empathically, remains a moot point.<sup>38</sup> What is, nevertheless, widely acknowledged is the sense of confusion generated by the conflation of narrative voices (Chandler, 2003, p. 251). Mary Cosgrove aptly suggests with regard to *Austerlitz* that ‘much is made of the ethical drive behind his narrative aesthetic of emphatically not speaking for the Jewish victim other’ (2006, p. 234). She then argues that ‘the desired ethical effect of carefully choreographed narration is often reversed by the narrator’s near adulation of Austerlitz’ (*ibid.*).

Alongside Sebald’s narrative strategies, commentators are concerned with the novel’s investigation of ‘the “archival consciousness” of the modern subject’ (Long, 2007a, p. 149) as ethics of memory. In Jacques Austerlitz, Nina Pelikan Straus detects ‘a moral compulsion to repeat, return, to see again in order to evoke and stock his memory. His vision of the ethics of

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<sup>37</sup> Elisabeth Baer (2010) provides an interesting discussion of Sebald’s (mis)use of the memoirs of Susi Bechhöfer, one of the *Kindertransport* children, and the ensuing debates in the print media.

<sup>38</sup> Mark M. Anderson rightly queries the narrator’s apparent dispassionateness: ‘[o]ffering neither apologies nor expressions of shame, he seems neutral, even impassive’ (2003, p. 106).

memory requires revisitation and accumulation of painful material evidence' (2009, p. 47). The attentiveness to the material world and its attendant engagement with the minutiae are understood as a self-conscious mediation of suffering by means of the particular. In fact, Helmut Schmitz regards this stratagem as crucial in the novel's negotiation of suffering: '[i]n its extremely detailed focus on the particularities of the lives of survivors, Sebald's work is a concentrated effort to speak in the name of Hitler's victims without appropriating them' (2004, p. 292). Martin Swales is, however, careful to apprehend materiality from another angle: 'that world, detailed though it is (and Sebald, like the writers he cherishes, loves detail) is not there simply in and for its materiality. Rather, it is informed and expressive of a particular mentality' (2004, p. 26). As shall be seen, this mentality is that of ambivalent comedy and playfulness.

Sebaldian humour has been discussed to some extent in recent scholarship. This interest was long overdue, for in 2007 Jonathan J. Long suggested that 'Sebald's comedy is one significant aspect of his work that remains largely unexplored' (2007a, p. 86, n. 4). Schütte aptly identifies the main reason why the comic has been occluded in criticism: '[w]hat is deliberately ignored in labelling Sebald as a hardened pessimist is his very own sense of humour and his great enjoyment of recondite satire and comedy. [...] To put it bluntly: there can be no such thing as Sebald the humourist' (2019, p. 259). In other words, the themes of Sebald's project, notably the haunting remnants of the Holocaust, the destructiveness of modernity as mediated by the melancholic gaze, seem to be alien to comedy. Eric L. Santner probably speaks for many a scholar when he muses: '[o]ne rightly wonders whether there is room for humor in the bleak world of historical suffering his work seems to live and breathe' (2006, p. 146). Interestingly, first-hand testimonies show that Sebald was anything but a stern and humourless recluse. But even there, commentators are eager to establish a difference between the everyday man and his literary persona. Sheppard's assessment is symptomatic of this chasm: 'Max had a many-sided sense of humour, but when it came to fiction dealing with such weighty issues as exile, Holocaust survivors, childhood trauma and the state of European civilization, he was no games-player, except [...] in the most recondite ways' (2005, p. 421). A youth friend of Sebald's, Reinbert Tabbert has published three letters, sent between 1968 and 1974, all of them exhibiting Sebald's wit and playfulness in his private correspondence. In his introduction, Tabbert notes, however, that Sebald's 'published work characterises him as an unmistakable melancholic. Humour and comic role play [...] appear only in his correspondence' (2004).

If one is to believe Sebald's appreciation of his work, he was thoroughly irritated by the way critics tended to overlook the comic in his books. In 1990, after a reading of *Vertigo/Schwindel. Gefühle*, hosted in Reutlingen, he deplored that 'the odd bits of humour' went missing in scholarship (Berg, 1990, p. 8). As the journalist reports, "[n]one of the scholars got that", he claimed smugly' (*ibid.*). A few years on, interviewed on Dutch TV, Sebald reiterates his point: 'the reverse of melancholy is always irony. One is amused about one's distress occasionally and they are two complementary moods and you can't really have the one without the other' (*Kamer*, p. 25). He goes on to claim that he uses irony on purpose to seduce the readers: 'if you happen to get into this profession of writing, you need the irony to keep your readers by your side because unmitigated melancholy is not consumable [...]. All melancholic writers had a very funny side to them' (*ibid.*). Reacting against this relative omission in scholarly debates, critics have recently engaged with the comic in various ways.<sup>39</sup> Two general foci stand out: playful materiality and the more recherché intertextual irony. A pioneer in this field was Thomas Kastura who in 1996 spoke of 'wry humour, operating on the margin [...]. Its irony is not intentional, but resigned. Sebald's laughter is hollow for it is aware of the apparent ridicule of its object, which he acknowledges precisely for this reason' (pp. 209-210). Kastura discusses *The Rings of Saturn/Die Ringe des Saturn*, but his assessment of Sebald's playful dissection of objects can be fruitfully extrapolated to *Austerlitz*. This line of argument is developed further by James Wood in a recent *New Yorker* article where he discusses the 'playful side of Sebald's originality' (2017). For him, a major feature of Sebaldian humour arises out of the odd materiality that abounds in his texts. Focussing on how Sebald presents the so-called 'teas-maid' in *The Emigrants/Die Ausgewanderten*, he concludes that 'Sebald approaches this cozy English object with mock-solemn gingerliness, as if he were an anthropologist presenting one of his exhibits' (*ibid.*). In other words, Wood points to the complex negotiation between the forensic look of the spectator and the immediate irritation harboured by the narrator.

Another distinctive feature of Sebald's comic is his use of intertextuality. Indeed, Sebald's literary project created a discursive space in conversation with other authors, notably 19<sup>th</sup> century Southern German prose, and 20<sup>th</sup> century Austrian fiction. During the Reutlingen reading mentioned above, Sebald is reported to claim: "I've lifted 15 % of my texts from

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<sup>39</sup> In her published doctoral thesis, Mandana Covindassamy briefly discusses the functions of humour in Sebald. She rightly observes that 'Sebald's melancholy is not conterminous with sadness or depression' (2014, p. 310). Instead, she posits that 'the Sebaldian comic arises out of the brevity of some observations which suddenly illuminate the general tone of the text' (p. 315).

elsewhere”, [...] from Kafka, Weiss and many others’ (Berg, 1990, p. 8), before the journalist hastens to add: ‘at the end of that dubious evening’ (*ibid.*). This intertextuality, which can be extended to intermediality, such as photography and the moving image, has been identified as a powerful comic device. Deane Blackler who essentially argues that Sebald’s idiosyncratic fiction form prompts the reader to engage disobediently with the apparatus of meaning, suggests that Sebaldian humour disrupts the act of reading: ‘Sebald’s oneiric melancholy tone, seductive as it is, is very often subverted by its own excess, undercut by a play of humorous irony that distances the reader from the lugubrious by means of a playful intertextuality or some self-reflexing theorising’ (2007, p. 31).

There has been scant discussion of the comic in *Austerlitz*. Even those critics willing to acknowledge the comic in Sebald are in agreement that humour is distinctly absent from Sebald’s last novel. Ivan Stacy, in his analysis of carnivalesque elements in Sebald, makes his point quite clear: ‘by *Austerlitz*, these elements had almost disappeared’ (2019, p. 50). For Bird, compared to *Rings/Ringe*, ‘in *Die Ausgewanderten* and *Austerlitz* there is noticeably less comedy’ (2016, p. 135), whereas Sheppard laments that ‘sadly, after *Die Ausgewanderten*, that affirmative and distancing sense of humour rarely entered the foreground of his literary work’ (2005, p. 441). In Bird’s extensive discussion of comedy and trauma, Sebald’s ‘comedy of melancholy’ (2016, p. 108) is generated by what she calls ‘melancholy hyperbole’ (*ibid.*). This means that ‘a limiting moral universe sustained by idealization of lost wholeness is relativized and surpassed by one that, whilst narrating loss, takes pleasure in language and image’ (*ibid.*). Building upon Bird’s argument, my aim is to show that *Austerlitz* predominantly resorts to a wealth of comic and tendentious stratagems that complicate the engagement with suffering. As regards Jacques Austerlitz, Bird argues that his characterisation is informed by ‘an unbounded melancholy through which the world is understood in terms of loss and decline, and which sustains a moral hierarchy in which the experience of melancholy suffering is privileged and perpetuated’ (p. 126). I wish to qualify that statement in suggesting that Austerlitz, far from being uniquely tormented by gloom and melancholy, is actually responsive to the grotesque spectacle of reality as displayed in the diegesis. Finally, Bird rightly draws attention to the questionable representation of women in Sebald insofar as she argues that male narrators and protagonists alike ‘[set] themselves apart from the banal world that is also strongly associated with materiality and the feminine’ (p. 127). On the contrary, I argue that both Austerlitz and the narrator are drawn to materiality in a way that problematises the main issues of loss and trauma. For materiality functions as a comic stratagem that ruptures Austerlitz’s and the narrator’s relatively secure space of the

pre-war and post-war periods. This focus on bizarre details in the material world disengages the reader from the actual representation of suffering. In her discussion of *Austerlitz*, Bird suggests that satire is intended to split suffering into that worthy of note and that which is dismissed.

### Anthropomorphism and parody

Racoons and moles, moths and quails, owls and geese: animals are ubiquitous in *Austerlitz*. As Hans-Walter Schmidt-Hannisa claims, '[d]ifferent types of animals appear in almost all works by the author which may well be amongst the most species-rich biotopes in contemporary language literature' (2007, p. 32). In the wake of the eco-critical turn, scholars have shown an increasing interest in the functions of Sebaldian animal life and its relation to the narratives. There is much scholarly consensus around the function of animals that are said to be victims of human exploitation. Thus, animal life is understood as a foil for the main issues of displacement, uprootedness and loss thematised in human society. J. M. Bernstein, for instance, argues that animals in Sebald 'have lost their natural place, lost the possibility of living an animal life in becoming subject to the demands of culture, subject to forces beyond their controls' (2009, p. 31) whilst Schmidt-Hannisa goes on to suggest that 'it cannot be denied that animals generally appear in the role of the victim as objects of human violence' (2007, p. 33). Consequently, scholars concur that Sebald is positively attentive to the suffering of animals. More recently, this view has been challenged by Emily Jones who detects a latent human supremacism in Sebald, for she claims that animals are often functionalised 'as extensions, expressions, or projections of the human condition, an approach to understanding them that situates the human squarely in the centre of the universe' (2018, p. 104). With a hint of sarcasm, Thirlwell sums up this trend forcefully: '[i]t is sad, being a W G Sebald animal. You are always oddly human, oddly Jewish. You are always depressed, or in agony. You are never a happy pigeon, or a contented herring' (2013, p. 41).

What has been overlooked in these discussions so far is the parodic potential inherent in Sebald's use of animals. Aligned with human beings, endowed with reasoning, these hybrid animal figures offer a parodic alternative to the main narrative. In possessing certain human dimensions, animals in *Austerlitz* are characterised by a clear sense of anthropomorphism. To this extent, Eileen Crist suggests that 'the use of ordinary language of actions reflects a regard for animals as acting subjects' (1999, p. 2), insofar as 'a fundamental consequence of the use

of the vernacular of action is to render the animal world immanently meaningful' (p. 6). These hybrid creatures address the question of otherness in the novel, for, by means of the playful construction of half-human, half-animal narrative figures, the text complicates the way readers can comprehend the narrative. In fact, this continuity between human society and animals favours parody, as animals play out some of the main issues tackled in the main, human-based narrative, notably the notions of exile and banishment. However, due to their ontological otherness, animals cannot be incorporated by homogenising knowledge. As Joseph A. Dane, in his seminal discussion of parody, suggests, 'these worlds and the texts that create them are parodic or satiric only if the reader himself constructs another world to place in direct comparison to the fictitious one' (1980, p. 147). Thus, anthropomorphism offers a destabilising narrative plane where readers are exposed to the incongruities of human-like animals.

The parodic use of anthropomorphism is particularly noticeable in Austerlitz's description of the avian world during his stay with the Fitzpatrick's in Northeast Wales. At the invitation of his school friend Gerald, Austerlitz spends a summer at Andromeda Lodge, the secluded family residence where he marvels at the grotesque involvement of animals. Prior to his arrival, Jacques Austerlitz is told about Gerald's affection for his 'three homing pigeons who would be expecting his return, he thought, as eagerly as he usually awaited theirs' ['von den drei Brieftauben, die dort, so meinte er, nicht weniger sehnlich seine Rückkehr erwarteten als er sonst die ihre'] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 109; *AusterlitzG*, p. 117). The three birds are not only endowed with the psychic ability to feel his absence, but Gerald also equates his feelings with those of the animals. Furthermore, from the pigeons' companionship emerges an odd sense of familiarity. For Gerald usually sends his three pigeons to be released at a distance before they fly back to their owner's residence, except for 'Tilly the white pigeon' ['die Tilly, die weiße'] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 110; *AusterlitzG*, p. 118),<sup>40</sup> who goes astray for an entire day before finally returning 'on foot, walking up the gravel drive with a broken wing' ['zu Fuß über die Kiesbahn der Einfahrt herauf, mit einem angebrochenen Flügel'] (*ibid.*). Not only does the pigeon Tilly have a two-syllable name, like Jacques Austerlitz's childhood nickname Jaco, and the two other main protagonists Věra and Marie, but the pigeon also anticipates Austerlitz's longing to go home. Although Tilly is scarred, she eventually manages to find her way back to her origins, as does Austerlitz later in the novel in returning to Prague.

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<sup>40</sup> The use of the definite article in German before the pigeon's name, which is not reproduced in English, conveys a bizarre sense of childish familiarity.

On arriving at his friend's demesne, Austerlitz notes that Andromeda Lodge enjoys remarkably mild temperatures fostering the outgrowth of huge plants and the development of a curious colony of 'white cockatoos which flew all around the house within a radius of up to two or three miles' ['die weißgefiederten Kakadus, die bis zu einem Umkreis von zwei, drei Meilen überall um das Haus herumflogen'] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 115; *AusterlitzG*, pp. 122-123). These birds are essentially akin to human beings as Austerlitz is careful to underline: '[i]n fact they were very like human beings in many ways' ['ü]berhaupt glichen sie in vielem den Menschen'] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 116; *AusterlitzG*, p. 123). In this way, the white cockatoos' society functions as a grotesque reflection of broader issues at work in the novel. These spectacular creatures occupy oddly constructed dwellings, 'in small sherry casks that had been stacked on top of each other in a pyramid against one of the side walls' ['in kleinen Sherry-Fässern, die man an einer der Seitenwände zu einer Pyramide übereinandergestapelt hatte'] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 115; *AusterlitzG*, p. 123). This pyramid-like layout is arranged in a way which recalls Austerlitz's compartmentalisation and interest in archives. The cockatoos are looked after with the greatest care by the Fitzpatricks, as if they were human beings: Adela, Gerald's mother, regularly heats the conservatory in order to protect the birds from frosty winters. Grotesquely, these birds are given a sense of agency, for Austerlitz notes that they are 'always active and always, or that was the impression they gave, intent upon some purpose or other' ['immer geschäftig und, so hatte man den Eindruck, immer auf irgend etwas bedacht'] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 116; *AusterlitzG*, p. 123). This sense of volition entails aspects of malevolence. Speaking in their very 'own cockatoo language' ['in ihrer Kakadusprache'] (*ibid.*), they take on a wealth of human behavioural traits, for they are said to be 'alert, scheming, mischievous and sly' ['aufmerksam, berechnend, verschmitzt und verschlagen'] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 116; *AusterlitzG*, p. 124). Belligerent and sectarian, they seem to hold sway over human beings as they harass whomever they hate. During a scene displaying traits of *schadenfroh* comedy, the cockatoos torment the Welsh housekeeper: 'they lay in wait to screech at her in the most obnoxious way' ['lauerten ihr [...] jedesmal auf, um auf das unflätigste hinter ihr herzuschreien'] (*ibid.*).<sup>41</sup> In addition, this 'human society' ['der menschlichen Sozietät'] (*ibid.*) manages its own cemetery 'with a long row of graves in a clearing surrounded by strawberry trees' ['[a]uf einer von Erdbeerbäumen umgebenen

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<sup>41</sup> The translation does not do justice to old-fashioned German 'unflätig' which implies the utterance of obscenities only. The comic here also arises from the impossibility for birds to screech indecent abuse on their own accord. Admittedly, cockatoos can parrot human language, insofar as these birds simply reproduced the abuse they have been exposed to. Such a mirroring effect can be understood as parodying the various layers of enunciation in the novel.

Lichtung [...] mit einer langen Reihe von Gräbern'] (*ibid.*). In his customary way, Austerlitz then focuses on one particular element to which he feels drawn: that is Jaco, his namesake, the vaguely Ptolemaic and most graceful parrot, grandiosely lying in his 'cardboard sarcophagus' ['Pappdeckelsarkophag'] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 117; *AusterlitzG*, p. 125). As stated in his obituary, Jaco, who had reached the age of 66 years, had the unpleasant habit of scraping the furniture spitefully if he was not fed enough apricot kernels. The extensive involvement of anthropomorphic cockatoos is arresting, because these birds form a functioning sub-society, at the crossroads between the human and the animal world. Gathering in groups, showing care for each other, they stand out in a narrative world dominated by alienation and the idea of 'a world turned upside down' ['einer falschen Welt'] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 243; *AusterlitzG*, p. 251).

Alongside the specific group of cockatoos, Austerlitz is also interested in entomology which he calls 'the mysterious world of moths' ['die geheimnisvolle Welt der Motten'] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 127; *AusterlitzG*, p. 135) for which Austerlitz posits that 'of all creatures I still feel the greatest awe for them' ['noch heute bringe ich ihnen unter allen Kreaturen die größte Ehrfurcht entgegen'] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 132; *AusterlitzG*, p. 140). Andromeda Lodge hosts a plethora of moth species which are, to Austerlitz's amazement, kept in boxes. Austerlitz is concerned with the most minute details, for the main protagonist and his friend Gerald are allowed to look at 'the endless variety of these invertebrates which are usually hidden from our sight' ['die Mannigfaltigkeit dieser sonst vor unseren Blicken verborgenen wirbellosen Wesen'] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 128; *AusterlitzG*, p. 136). Presented with a vast collection of moths, Austerlitz is swift to make odd comparisons, for some of the moths are so elegant as to have 'collars and cloaks, like elegant gentlemen on their way to the opera' ['Halskragen und Umhänge, wie vornehme Herren, [...] auf dem Weg in die Oper'] (*AusterlitzE*, pp. 128-129; *AusterlitzG*, p. 136). Like the cockatoos, moths constitute human-like societies insofar as they gather to form visible clouds chasing for water, but they unmistakably drown in large numbers in trying 'to settle on the flowing water' ['auf dem fließenden Wasser sich niederzulassen'] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 130; *AusterlitzG*, p. 138). Austerlitz is, in fact, quick to invest these creatures with psychological features, for he does not see why human beings are the only mammals endowed with the ability to dream. Following a curious logic, he argues that actually, mice and moles can dream too, before ending his thinking concatenation as follows: 'and who knows, said Austerlitz, perhaps moths dream as well, perhaps a lettuce in the garden dreams as it looks up at the moon by night' ['und wer weiß, sagte Austerlitz, vielleicht träumen auch die Motten oder der Kopfsalat im Garten, wenn er zum Mond hinaufblickt in der Nacht'] (*AusterlitzE*, pp. 133-134; *AusterlitzG*, pp. 141-142). Here, the comic arises out of

the conflation between the parody of romantic topoi (the moon; the nocturnal setting; nature) and the incongruous presence of a lettuce, endowed with a psyche. What emerges from Austerlitz's treatment of these parallel 'societies' is a series of hybrid societies that disorient readers and rupture their intellectual perception of the novel. For parody prompts readers to engage inventively with the narrative in drawing on ambivalence and hybridity. In fact, compared to human travails explored in the novel, these pigeon, cockatoo and moth nations seem well functioning.

Austerlitz's visit to the French National Veterinary School Museum provides an interesting case study of how the comic use of animals intersects with, and reflects on, the issues of trauma and loss prevalent in the novel. Readers are first told that the museum's founder and keen dissector Honoré Fragonard used to revel in 'the sweet smell of decay' ['von dem süßen Geruch der Verwesung'] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 374; *AusterlitzG*, p. 380) produced by the countless corpses he dismembered. Fragonard's daily confrontation with death prompts him to contemplate the so-called post-mortem vitrification of his body 'by translating its so readily corruptible substance into a miracle of pure glass' ['durch die Umwandlung seiner in kürzester Frist korrumpierbaren Substanz in ein gläsernes Wunder'] (*ibid.*). This transformation of putrescible material into crystal-clear matter resonates with the novel's sublimation of political violence into stylistic classicism. Scrutinising the most diverse exhibits, Austerlitz singles out some exceptional items such as 'the pale-blue foetus of a foal, where the quicksilver injected as a contrast medium into the network of veins beneath its thin skin had formed patterns like frost flowers as it leached out' ['der blaßblaue Fötus eines Pferdes, unter dessen dünner Haut das zur besseren Kontrastierung in das Netzwerk der Adern gespritzte Quecksilber durch Aussickerung eisblumenähnliche Muster gebildet hatte'] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 371; *AusterlitzG*, p. 378). Here, the injection of a highly toxic liquid metal is not only lethal to the unborn animal, but it is also conducive to a delicate graphic pattern. In other words, the technical destruction of life generates a frangible and crystallised artwork which onlookers can admire. What is more, Austerlitz is attracted to all kinds of pseudo-mythological monstrosities such as 'Cyclopean beasts with outsized foreheads' ['Zyklopen mit überdimensioniertem Stirnbein'] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 373; *AusterlitzG*, p. 378) and 'a ten-legged sheep' ['ein zehnbeiniges Schaf'] (*ibid.*). Austerlitz picks up what is probably the apex of the abject curiosity: 'a human infant born in Maisons-Alfort on the day when the Emperor was exiled to island of St Helena, its legs fused together so that it resembled a mermaid' ['ein in Maisons-Alfort am Tag der Verbannung des Kaisers auf die Insel St. Helena geborenes menschliches Wesen, dessen zusammengewachsene Beine das Ansehen

einer Meerjungfrau gaben’] (*ibid.*).<sup>42</sup> In this passage, the comic emerges from the mixture of the aversion triggered by deformity with the positive image of mermaids, as mermaids symbolise grace and voluptuousness. Furthermore, the use of that abject creature gestures towards the leitmotif of the Napoleonic Wars in the novel. In sum, animals provide a narrative arena where readers can easily escape the moral righteousness of the novel.

### Stereotyping and tendentious jokes

Whilst on the Parisian metro, on his journey back from the French National Veterinary School Museum where he had just revelled in the observation of various malformations, Austerlitz suffers from a sudden nervous collapse and swoons. He later claims that, to the best of his recollection, he can only remember ‘a gypsy playing the accordion, and a very dark Indo-Chinese woman with an alarmingly thin face and eyes sunk deep in their sockets’ [‘einen Zigeuner, der Ziehharmonika spielte, und eine sehr dunkle Frau aus Hinterindien mit einem zum Erschrecken schmalen Gesicht und tief in den Höhlen gesunkenen Augen’] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 375; *AusterlitzG*, pp. 381-382). This episode exemplifies how the narrative draws upon tendentious remarks revolving principally around the body and cultural stereotypes. It is not implausible that, in a global conurbation such as Paris, Austerlitz would travel with these fellow passengers. What is, however, questionable is his insistence on these two figures. Despite his amnesia, he is nevertheless able to recollect two vivid elements: the folkloristic image of Romani instrumentation and the ‘alarmingly’ [‘zum Erschrecken’] hideous traits of a South-Asian woman. Clichés around the representation of otherness and the use of deformed physiques are common comic devices for they rest on taken-for-granted prejudices and imply cultural or aesthetic hierarchies. Whilst tendentious remarks are often successful in their comic potential, they tend to perpetuate derogatory attitudes. In other words, there is something fundamentally unsettling about the remarks of a culturally biased observer in the novel. In fact, these remarks, due to their brazenness, rupture the readers’ safe identification with the protagonist in signalling Austerlitz’s otherness. Readers find themselves in a conflicted situation. For the preconception voiced by the protagonist is an estranging narrative mechanism that takes readers aback. Concurrently, Austerlitz’s humorous focus on odd-looking physiognomies and on cultural clichés draws on comic devices that reinforce self-affirming knowledge. Underneath these overused tropes, one can detect a cultural and

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<sup>42</sup> The ludicrous inherent in ‘Wesen’ goes missing in Anthea Bell’s translation for ‘Wesen’ is much more indeterminate than ‘infant’.

physical hierarchy that delegitimises certain experiences and reinstates a sense of conservative outlook on reality.

In *Austerlitz*, the general penchant for aberrant details largely focuses on the body. Through the novel, characters – whose very physicality is kept out of the narrative – like to comment on strange physiques and odd human pairings. There is, in fact, a narrative investment in the depiction of odd anatomies, the effect of which is inevitably the cruel ridiculing of the characters. De Verneuil recounts, for instance, how a paper mill in the Charente is run by two brothers ‘one of whom had a squint and the other a crooked shoulder’ [‘von denen der eine ein schielendes Auge und der andere eine hohe Schulter hat’] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 367; *AusterlitzG*, p. 374). Similarly, in the late 1930s, when Austerlitz’s family go for a three-week-long stay in Marienbad/Mariánské Lázně,<sup>43</sup> Agáta observes with amusement that the spa resort hosts principally ‘[t]he overweight or underweight spa guests, moving at a curiously slow pace through the grounds with their drinking glasses’ [‘[d]ie schwergewichtigen und die allzu mageren Kurgäste, die sich mit ihren Trinkbechern sonderbar langsam durch die Anlagen bewegten’] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 289; *AusterlitzG*, p. 297).<sup>44</sup> Here, what is humorous is the coordinated antics of two opposed physiques. Gender distinctions are also conducive to comic episodes. Marie de Verneuil explains that middle-class couples would flock to Central European spas for completely different reasons. Men are presented as portly banqueters: i.e. ‘a set of very corpulent men disregarding their doctors’ advice and giving themselves up to the pleasures of the table’ [‘von sehr dicken Männern, die sich, der ärztlichen Ratschläge ungeachtet, den Freuden der damals auch in Kurorten reichlich gedeckten Tafeln hingeben’] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 296; *AusterlitzG*, p. 304) that underline their social status by dint of prodigious quantities of food. In contrast to this gargantuan characterisation, women walk around ‘rather pale and sallow already, deep in their own thoughts’ [‘bleich und etwas vergilbt schon, tief in sich gekehrt’] (*ibid.*) observing the fleeting clouds from a vantage point. The grotesque is here triggered by the overt dissimilarity between male physicality and the humdrum abstractedness of women absorbed in mundane matters. Men devour their meals just as their wives look at the sky.

Comedy is also deployed by means of abnormal individual physiques insofar as Lilliputian and strange-looking characters abound. The caretaker of the Alderney Street

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<sup>43</sup> As with many Central European toponyms, there are two forms: one in German and the other one in the respective local language, here Czech. English usually adopted the Germanised toponyms. I will stick to the way they are used in the original text.

<sup>44</sup> Bell’s version, whilst playing with the English symmetrical antonyms ‘overweight’/‘underweight’, does not translate the extreme thinness conveyed in German (‘allzu mageren’).

Jewish cemetery is presented as ‘a very small, almost dwarf-like woman of perhaps seventy years old [...] in her slippers’ [‘eine vielleicht siebzigjährige, auffallend kleinwüchsige Frau [...] in Hausschuhen’] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 409; *AusterlitzG*, p. 415). Here, the narrator stresses the slightly unkempt deportment of a woman. The interest in dwarves is particularly prevalent in the Czech Republic. Whilst at the National Archive on Karmelitská Street, Austerlitz has to stoop in order to talk to the porter who ‘appeared to be kneeling on the floor of his lodge’ [‘der allem Anschein nach in seinem Verschlag auf dem Fußboden kniete’] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 205; *AusterlitzG*, p. 213). Whilst walking around the archive, Austerlitz reaches one of the upper floors from where he looks at a man walking across the ground floor who appears to be ‘one of the archive’s grey-coated porters, whose right leg flexed slightly inward as he walked’ [‘einem Archivdiener, der einen weißen Laborantenkittel anhatte und dessen rechtes Bein beim Gehen etwas nach innen knickte’] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 211; *AusterlitzG*, p. 219). From his upper position, Austerlitz establishes a clear narrative hierarchy whereby he relishes the porter’s physical impairment whose repetitiveness and incongruity are comic. Finally, whilst walking around the Czech garrison town Terezín, he literally runs into ‘a mentally disturbed man [wearing a shabby suit]’ [‘einem Geistesgestörten in einem abgerissenen Anzug’] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 266; *AusterlitzG*, p. 274)<sup>45</sup> who gesticulates whilst uttering snippets of words in broken German. This episode exploits the customary representation of the lunatic (unkempt looks aligned with the inability to speak) in a grotesque way. The comic appearance of a madman contrasts with the general portrayal of Terezín. Indeed, the town, full of boarded-up doors and squalid gates, is transformed into the paradigm of the repressed past. In this, the lallation of the Czech character is presented as a scurrilous occurrence, a comically distraught remnant of the Nazi occupation.

Automata constitute a central motif of the novel which provides several comic episodes. Simulation of automated movements has a long tradition, as it parodies a wide range of social interaction. Already in the first pages, whilst walking around the Antwerp nocturama, the narrator notes in particular ‘the racoon. I watched it for a long time as it sat beside a little stream with a serious expression on its face, washing the same piece of apple over and over again’ [‘der Waschbär, den ich lange beobachtete, wie er mit ernstem Gesicht bei einem Bächlein saß und immer wieder denselben Apfelschnitz wusch’] (*AusterlitzE*, pp. 2-3; *AusterlitzG*, p. 10). By means of that mechanical gesture, the racoon seems to pursue a

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<sup>45</sup> German ‘in einem abgerissenen Anzug’ is missing from the English translation.

never-ending chore as a way to ward off his baneful fate.<sup>46</sup> Analogously, whilst waiting at Liverpool Street Station, Austerlitz notes that a railway employee, donning ‘a snow-white turban’ [‘einen schneeweißen Turban’] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 188; *AusterlitzG*, p. 196), would sweep litter up and down the platform. This repetitive chore reminds Austerlitz of ‘the eternal punishments’ [‘die ewigen Strafen’] (*ibid.*), for the dustman ‘oblivious of all around, performed the same movements again and again’ [‘der in tiefer Selbstvergessenheit immer dieselben Bewegungen vollführende Mann’] (*ibid.*) which consist of sweeping some garbage again and again. This automation is also touched upon by Marie de Verneuil who is concerned about Austerlitz’s mental health, for she complains about his cold inaccessibility. Imagining herself wishing him all the best, she claims: ‘it will be like telling a machine working by some unknown mechanism that I hope it will run well’ [‘als wünschte ich einer Maschine, deren Mechanismus man nicht kennt, einen guten Gang’] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 303; *AusterlitzG*, p. 311). Oddly enough, Austerlitz, a couple of pages later, comments on slot machines which are endowed with psychic life. At Prague Central Station/the Wilsonovo nádraží, he remarks that these appliances ‘were arranged in several batteries, idling to no purpose and chanting inanely to themselves’ [‘in mehreren Batterien gewiß an die hundert, in debilem Leerlauf vor sich hin dudelnde Spielautomaten standen’] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 306; *AusterlitzG*, pp. 314-315).

These strands of comedy are particularly discernible in the three sites of memory which Austerlitz visits during his erratic journeys around Continental Europe. In August 1972, Austerlitz sets foot on Czechoslovak soil for the first time since he was let out of the country as part of the *Kindertransport* rescue convoys. His first confrontation with his homeland privileges a clichéd representation of Eastern Europe as drearily dull and dysfunctional. In the early 1970s, Czechoslovakia started experiencing its so-called normalisation [‘normalizace’], i.e. the restoration of the socio-political conditions prevailing in the country prior to the Prague Spring in 1968. The reinstatement of political terror as well as the sense of general stagnation in the country are mediated by grotesque details in *Austerlitz*. In fact, after landing at Ruzyně airport in Prague, Austerlitz and his travel companion Marie de Verneuil are picked up by ‘an enormous Tatra limousine’ [‘eine enorme Tatra-Limousine’] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 290; *AusterlitzG*, p. 298). Not only is this limousine grotesquely extravagant for two scholars, but this sense of exaggeration is enhanced by the

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<sup>46</sup> J. M. Bernstein in his discussion of the creaturely in Sebald’s *Rings/Ringe* conjures up the notion of the ‘slightly comic exhibition of the compulsion to repeat’ (2009, p. 32). He, however, goes on to claim that Sebald’s ‘text moves in a sea of unspeakable sadness’ (p. 53).

fact that they are followed by two policemen. Whereas Austerlitz is growingly worried about the riders donning ‘black goggles’ [‘schwarze Schutzbrillen’] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 291; *AusterlitzG*, p. 299), Marie de Verneuil finds herself amused, for she says laughingly that ‘the two shadowy riders were obviously the guard of honour specially provided by the ČSSR for visitors from France’ [‘es handle sich bei den beiden Schattenreitern offenbar um die in der ČSSR eigens für Besucher aus Frankreich aufgebote Ehrenkavalkade’] (*ibid.*). Subsequently, what emerges from Austerlitz’s account is a series of episodes purportedly characteristic of Eastern Europe where drab appearance and unkempt uniformity prevail. In fact, Austerlitz’s observations are characteristically unimaginative for he indiscriminately conflates various Eastern European countries as ‘the East’. Wondering at the antics of elderly pensioners that walk in single file, Austerlitz is at a loss: ‘[t]hey were the sort of visitors sent to the spa because of their failing health by some Czech enterprise or other, or perhaps they came from one of the neighbouring Socialist countries’ [‘die aus irgendeinem böhmischen Kombinat oder vielleicht aus einem sozialistischen Bruderland zur Erholung hierher geschickt worden waren’] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 305; *AusterlitzG*, p. 313). For a character apparently so alert to European history and culture, this generic claim is arresting. This crass generalisation seems to be designed to recruit the reader’s complicity precisely for its prejudice.

Arrived at the Palace Hotel in Marienbad, de Verneuil and Austerlitz focus on the grotesque traits of the Czech personnel. The hotel clerk, reluctant to check them in, is presented as a ‘remarkably thin man’ [‘ungemein magere[r] Mann’] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 292; *AusterlitzG*, p. 300). Probably in his forties, he comes across as a valetudinarian man, ‘wrinkled in fan-like folds above the root of his nose’ [‘seine Stirne gegen die Nasewurzel fächerförmig’] (*ibid.*) holding a register in ‘the squared paper of a school exercise book’ [‘in ein kariertes Schulheft’] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 292; *AusterlitzG*, pp. 300-301). Odd-looking physiognomies, especially those involving abnormal ageing, are a trope in satire. This is increased by the infantile element of the notebook used as a hotel register. In fact, things are going slightly wild in the hotel. Austerlitz notes that the reception clerk’s voice is barely perceptible, whereas the porter finds it manifestly excruciating to carry two lightweight suitcases. Toiling up the staircase, the porter is presented as ‘a mountaineer negotiating the last difficult ridge before attaining the summit’ [‘ein Alpinist, der sich über einen schwierigen Grat dem Gipfel nähert’] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 293; *AusterlitzG*, p. 301). The strenuous difficulties faced by a character to negotiate a manageable obstacle are a common device in comedy. For we are told that this alpine peak is the hotel’s third floor, and Austerlitz adds that both Marie

de Verneuil and he have to wait at intervals to give the porter some time to rest between each floor.

Going for a saunter around the spa, the pair walk past heaps of rubble and rows of decrepit houses with boarded-up windows. This general sense of dilapidation and bleakness materialises in a dimly lit café where they sit under an odd ‘picture of pink water-lilies measuring at least four square yards’ [‘einem wenigstens vier Quadratmeter großen rosaroten Seerosenbild’] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 299; *AusterlitzG*, p. 307), whose kitschiness seems to corroborate the tastelessness of Czech culture. Whereas critics have analysed the comic fish and chips scene in Lowestoft in Sebald’s earlier *Rings of Saturn/Ringe des Saturn* (Wood, 2017; Stacy, 2019, pp. 65-66; Schütte, 2019, p. 264), the curious ‘mass’ that Austerlitz is served in the *kavárna* has gone largely unnoticed (except for Bird, 2016, pp. 125-126). Once sitting in the virtually empty bar, Austerlitz orders ‘a confection resembling an ice cream’ [‘ein eisähnliches Konfekt’] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 299; *AusterlitzG*, p. 307), tasting like potato starch, which does not melt even after an hour. This scene perpetuates the stereotyped representation of Eastern Europe as uninspiring and bland. The atmosphere in the *kavárna* is equally unsettling, as characters take on grotesque features. Czech reality is apparently unglamorous, for Austerlitz’s phantasies privilege a more alluring representation of the waiter as a socialite ‘in deep-black, well-cut tails, with a velvet bow-tie above a starched shirt front radiant with supernatural cleanliness, wearing shiny patent-leather shoes which reflected the lamplight of a grand hotel lobby’ [‘in einem tiefschwarzen, tadellos sitzenden Frack, mit einer samtenen Masche über der steifen, in überirdischer Reinheit leuchtenden Hemdbrust und blitzenden Lackschuhen, in denen die Lampenlichter einer großen Hotelhalle sich spiegelten’] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 300; *AusterlitzG*, pp. 307-308). Not only is starch equally used for shirt ironing and food processing, but the comic emerges from the blatant disjuncture between the allegedly bleak reality in the Czechoslovak provinces and Austerlitz’s fantasies about a luxury hotel guest (or employee). This comic exaggeration is enhanced by the waiter’s ‘elegantly executed gesture’ [‘in formvollendeter Art’] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 300; *AusterlitzG*, p. 308) as he proffers some cigars to Marie de Verneuil. It is not clear whether the *kavárna* is something of a provincial public house or whether it still retains its bygone grandeur. The waiter’s old-fashioned courtesy, the odd amenities (such as cigars) grotesquely contrast with the surroundings. In sum, Austerlitz’s attention is primarily drawn to clichéd details of a Socialist world which is otherwise dismissed as dreary as the nationwide pseudo-uniforms.

The representation of post-unification Germany is heavily compromised by a clichéd distortion which instils a sense of continuity between some aspects of National Socialism and

present-day Germany. In other words, the narrative seems to suggest the persistence of a social culture that Austerlitz diagnoses as amnesiac, ominous and potentially National Socialist. More specifically, Austerlitz's disarming claim whereby Germany is more alien to him than Afghanistan and Paraguay (*AusterlitzE*, p. 313; *AusterlitzG*, p. 321) functions as a narrative stratagem to expose the alleged reverberations of Nazi Germany on the present. This pseudo-naïve gaze is particularly discernible during Austerlitz's stopover in Nuremberg, the Bavarian city where his father Maximilian Aychenwald had witnessed the National Socialist Party mass rallies in the mid-1930s. In getting off the train at Nuremberg in the 1990s, Austerlitz makes this connection quite clear: 'I remembered what Věra had said about my father's account of the National Socialist Party rally of 1936 and the roars of acclamation rising from the people who had gathered here at the time' ['kam mir wieder in den Sinn, was Věra erzählt hatte von dem Bericht meines Vaters über den Parteitag der Nationalsozialisten im Jahr 1936, von der brausenden Begeisterung des damals hier zusammengeführten Volks'] (*ibid.*). In both periods, Germans are presented as an indistinct mass. Walking down Nuremberg High Street, Austerlitz is, in fact, put off by the 'huge crowd of people who were streaming down the entire breadth of the street, rather like water in a river bed' ['einer unübersehbaren Menschenmenge, die, nicht anders als Wasser im Flußbett, über die gesamte Breite der Straße dahinströmte'] (*ibid.*). Whereas frenzied masses cheered Hitler in 1936, today's 'crowds of shoppers' ['die Scharen der Einkäufer'] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 315; *AusterlitzG*, p. 323) flock in dead silence to their new paradises: the consumerist 'Fußgängerparadiese' (*AusterlitzG*, p. 322).<sup>47</sup> Crucially, in post-unification Germany, the 'Volk der Deutschen' (*AusterlitzG*, p. 323)<sup>48</sup> borders on crass caricature. For Nurembergers wear predominantly 'grey, brown and green loden coats and hats' ['grauer, brauner und grüner Jägermäntel und Hüte'] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 314; *AusterlitzG*, p. 322). In other words, Germans are represented as a homogeneous people of hunters and shooters. Murderous violence has, thereby, shifted from the National Socialist destruction of the Jews and other minorities to the killing of animals. Petrified, Austerlitz avoids any contact with the local populace. He only has one interaction with a German woman who wears a curious hat. This elderly shopper, donning 'a kind of Tyrolean hat with a cockerel's feather' ['eine Art Tiroler Hut mit einer Hahnenfeder'] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 315; *AusterlitzG*, p. 323), mistakes Austerlitz for a tramp because of his old

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<sup>47</sup> Bell's translation 'pedestrian zones' (*AusterlitzE*, p. 314) misses Austerlitz's scathing irony about these mass consumption shopping malls, christened as 'paradises', that flourished all over West Germany from the 1960s onwards.

<sup>48</sup> The allusion to National Socialist *völkisch* ideology goes missing in the English translation as Bell opted for the plain 'Germans' (*AusterlitzE*, p. 315).

rucksack. '[W]ith arthritic fingers' ['mit gichtigen Fingern'] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 315; *AusterlitzG*, p. 323), she eventually gives him a one-mark coin. This confrontation with a potential member of the perpetrator collective is mediated by Austerlitz's attention to repulsive physicality.

The continuity of German efficiency and functional rationalism is also commented on by Austerlitz. In 1936, his father Maximilian Aychenwald reported that Hitler and other Nazi grandees were driven around Nuremberg in 'the motorcade of heavy Mercedes limousines' ['die Motorkavalkade der schweren Mercedeswagen'] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 238; *AusterlitzG*, p. 246), a carmaker which, incidentally, continues to source the German State Cars. The centrality of German technology is made visible as Austerlitz's train crosses the border. Whereas the train on the Czech side makes barely any progress, as soon as it touches the German soil, it 'was now suddenly racing along with almost improbable ease' ['eilte nun plötzlich mit einer ans Unwahrscheinliche grenzenden Leichtigkeit'] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 312; *AusterlitzG*, p. 321). While Czechoslovak reality is represented as dismally malfunctioning, Germany emerges as the lodestar of orderliness. After crossing the Czech-German border in Bavaria, Austerlitz observes 'trim towns and villages [...], lovingly tended gardens, piles of firewood tidily stacked under cover' ['saubere Ortschaften und Dörfer [...], liebevoll gehegte Gärten, unter den Vordächern ordentlich aufgeschichtetes Brennholz'] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 312; *AusterlitzG*, p. 320). The use of 'lovingly' ['liebevoll'] is here striking, as the narration ironically incorporates the petty-bourgeois values of these provincial garden-owners. Newly-built railway stations; well-managed woodland; cars racing on impeccably asphalted lanes: Germany rests on logic and the power of knowledge. This ethos of expediency is equally conducive to the general streamlining efforts detected by Austerlitz in Germany to erase the signs of the Second World War. Walking around the old town of Nuremberg, which was heavily bombed during the war, he is at a loss: 'I was troubled to realize that I could not see a crooked line anywhere, not at the corners of the houses or on the gables, the window frames or the sills, nor was there any trace of past history' ['es beunruhigte mich, daß ich [...] nirgends, weder an den Ecken, noch an den Giebeln, Fensterstöcken oder Gesimsen eine krumme Linie erkennen konnte oder sonst eine Spur der vergangenen Zeit'] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 314; *AusterlitzG*, p. 322). Amnesia and the repression of recent history materialise in the fully-fledged reconstruction of the Federal Republic, presided over by the German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer. To this extent, Austerlitz keeps in his hand a Deutschmark coin minted in 1956 precisely with the head of the post-war statesman as a way to stress the continuity of Adenauer's cultural legacy (*AusterlitzE*, pp. 315-316; *AusterlitzG*, p. 324).

In the final section of the novel, Austerlitz's quest for his family's past leads him to Paris. France represents the third site of memory in the novel, as Aychenwald, Austerlitz's father, was arrested by the French police and deported to Gurs, an internment camp in the south-western part of the country. What emerges from Austerlitz's account of Paris is the prevalence of gigantic complexes and the vexatious rigmarole of French bureaucracy. The stereotyping of both these elements favours playful episodes that stand in stark contrast with the customary reading of the novel. Austerlitz devotes his attention to one of two National Library complexes, the François-Mitterrand elephantine building erected on the Parisian West Bank. Central to Austerlitz's observations is the rigid division of labour and the vast nexus of power-knowledge matrices embodied by French mammoth organisations. This correlation between power and the grotesque is not novel, as Rune Graulund and Justin Edwards put it: '[p]ower is fluid. As such, it is itself a sort of *monster*, an organism that can exceed the control of individuals or groups of individuals. Power is a force that eludes boundaries and controls as regularly as the deviants it is meant to regulate. In this, power is often grotesque' (2013, p. 27). As with other buildings in Sebald's novel, such as the Antwerp railway station and the Palace of Justice of Brussels, the Mitterrand Library is meant to materialise the crushing monumentality of power, for Austerlitz considers it being the epitome of 'the Cartesian overall plan' ['dem cartesischen Gesamtplan'] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 392; *AusterlitzG*, p. 398).<sup>49</sup> First, the gigantic premises of the National Library provide a playful episode. Grotesquely compared both to a Mesopotamian temple and a football pitch, the Library piazza is so vast that Austerlitz imagines it to be a cruise liner crossing the high seas. A sense of comic exaggeration is here discernible: playing with the idea that the grandiose library esplanade is actually the deck of Berengaria during a stormy day, Austerlitz imagines that, to the sound of a foghorn, passengers 'having unwisely ventured on deck, were swept away over the rail by a gust of wind and carried far out into the wastes of the Atlantic waters' ['die sich unklugerweise an Deck gewagt haben, von einer Sturmböe über die Reling gefegt und weit über die atlantische Wasserwüste hinausgetragen würde'] (*AusterlitzE*, pp. 387-389; *AusterlitzG*, p. 393). Comedy here arises from the inventiveness of Austerlitz's imagination insofar as he fantasises about a vessel emerging in the middle of Paris, as if the French capital were a seaside resort. Crucially, the choice of a transatlantic liner is not an innocent choice in

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<sup>49</sup> In Austerlitz's opinion, the library was 'evidently inspired by the late President's wish to perpetuate his memory' ['offenbar von dem Selbstverewigungswillen des Staatspräsidenten inspiriert[']'] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 386; *AusterlitzG*, p. 392). In fact, this new library site was commissioned by former French head of state François Mitterrand who, as it transpired in the 1990s, had compromised himself with the pro-Nazi Vichy regime during WW2.

the context of the novel, given the fact that Austerlitz arrived in the United Kingdom by boat via Hoek van Holland. Exaggeration and playfulness also intersect with *Schadenfreude*, for Austerlitz indulges in the image of ‘unwise’ [‘unklugerweise’] passengers hit by a wave.

Whereas the outside of the library stands out for its vastness, the internal functioning of the complex proper is characterised by vexatious petty-narrowness. In Austerlitz’s account, what is distinctive about the National Library is its literal anthropomorphism and its caricaturing of French government administration. In fact, he has already voiced his prejudice vis-à-vis the Parisian authorities in lamenting ‘the proverbially unhelpful attitude of Parisian officials’ [‘der sprichwörtlichen [...] Widerwärtigkeit der Pariser Beamten’] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 356; *AusterlitzG*, p. 364)<sup>50</sup> as if their alleged recalcitrance were taken for granted. First, the major characteristic of the National Library is its sheer impracticability, for the building is said to be ‘unwelcoming, if not inimical to human beings’ [‘menschenabweisenden’] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 386; *AusterlitzG*, p. 392). Crucially, the Mitterrand Library seems to disregard its users as Austerlitz posits that it ‘runs counter, on principle, one might say, to the requirement of any true reader’ [‘den Bedürfnissen jedes wahren Lesers von vornherein kompromißlos entgegengesetzte[s] Gebäude’] (*ibid.*). Austerlitz detects in the whole building the intent ‘to instil a sense of insecurity and humiliation in the poor readers’ [‘eigens zur Verunsicherung und Erniedrigung der Leser’] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 389; *AusterlitzG*, p. 395). This slightly paranoid claim is then substantiated by the description of a series of transactions imposed on the readers: Austerlitz indicts security checks performed by the half-uniformed personnel and he bemoans the presence of user-unfriendly low seats and chairs of sorts ‘where visitors to the library can perch only in such a way that their knees are almost level with their heads’ [‘auf denen die Bibliotheksbesucher nur so hocken können, daß die Knie ungefähr genauso hoch sind wie der Kopf’] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 390; *AusterlitzG*, p. 396). The comic here emerges from the physical deformity imposed by the library impracticality. Austerlitz’s irritation intersects with his amused gaze: in the vastness of the atrium, he believes that the half-bent library users are some members of a tribe migrating through the desert. In keeping with the clichéd representation of the Kafkaesque civil service in France, Austerlitz details how it is actually impossible to reach ‘the inner citadel of the library’ [‘die innere Bastion der Bibliothek’] (*ibid.*). In fact, readers have to put up with a series of tedious stations before being let ‘into a separate cubicle, as if you were on business of an extremely dubious nature, or at least had to be dealt with away from the public gaze’ [‘in eine separate

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<sup>50</sup> ‘Unhelpful attitude’ does not render the idea of frontal opposition intrinsic in ‘Widerwärtigkeit’. ‘Recalcitrance’ or ‘defiance’ would be better choices.

Kabine [...] als handle es sich um ein höchst zweifelhaftes und jedenfalls nur unter Ausschluß der Öffentlichkeit abzuwickelndes Geschäft'] (*ibid.*). This passage is humorous, as it implies that harmless readers have to act as if they had the most incriminating plans in mind. The pleasure of playfulness is here blatant, for Austerlitz comically exaggerates the irritating protocol of the library services.

Once allowed into the reading rooms, readers are placed in one of the rooms that are situated in the underground. This sense of displacement is enhanced by the presence of caged trees planted in the basement. In fact, an open-air nature reserve has been built three storeys deep and it hosts pine trees, rooted out from the French countryside. As Anne Whitehead observes, such dislocation is 'symptomatic of the almost unbearable pressure that humans place on the natural world' (2004, p. 118). However, this criticism seems compromised by some grotesque observations made by Austerlitz, as he conjectures that 'the trees [...] perhaps are still thinking of their home in Normandy' ['der vielleicht noch an ihre normmanische Heimat denkenden Bäume'] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 391; *AusterlitzG*, p. 397). Swayed by the wind, these trees remind Austerlitz of 'waterweed in an aquarium' ['Wasserpflanzen in einem Aquarium'] (*ibid.*). In other words, the development of a nature reserve within the library building sheds light on the fully-fledged control apparatus materialised by the National Library. In fact, this nature reserve-cum-basement is home to some circus artists who would be 'climbing the cables slanting up from the ground to the evergreen canopy, placing one foot in front of the other as they made their way upwards with the ends of their balancing poles quivering' ['die sich mit ihren an den Enden zitternden Balancierstangen Fuß vor Fuß in die Höhe tatsteten'] (*AusterlitzE*, pp. 391-392; *AusterlitzG*, p. 397). Alongside this playful imagery of circus artists, the National Library garden is concomitantly an ominous trap as birds get lost in the library forest before striking the vast expanses of glazing of the reading rooms. Knocked out, they plummet and cover the ground with their dead bodies. The National Library episode demonstrates the comic transgression characterising *Austerlitz*. Indeed, if Austerlitz is manifestly irritated by what he says as the display of authoritarian power, the National Library also favours moments of great amusement involving the playfulness of fiction and the reworking of clichéd representations.

### The disruption of materiality

In browsing through the antique shop in Terezín, Austerlitz wonders: '[w]hat secret lay behind the three brass mortars of different sizes' ['[w]elches Geheimnis bargen die drei

verschieden großen Messingmörser'] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 275; *AusterlitzG*, p. 283). Paradigmatically, Austerlitz's open question refers to his interest in matter, which translates as an extensive engagement with paraphernalia, collectable objects and countless appurtenances. Santner has typified Austerlitz's keen interest in objects as 'an index of their participation in the violent histories of human history' (2006, p. 114). In contrast, I suggest that objects have their autonomous function which unsettles the narration. In fact, by means of its stark contrast with the grand narrative of loss and dehumanisation, the object world offers numerous moments of comic transgression. This comic attention to materiality culminates in two crucial episodes where the narrator and Austerlitz are directly confronted with the reverberations of National Socialist violence. Materiality either reminds the narrator of his sheltered post-1945 childhood in West Germany or it disrupts Austerlitz's terrifying depiction of the sham leisure resort called Theresienbad. In both cases, the insistence on materiality shifts the focus away from trauma. Objects function as impediments to the readers' apprehension of the narrative, since this focus on matter playfully invites readers to engage and reflect on otherness.

Austerlitz's conspicuous attentiveness to detail dates back to his childhood. This salient trait of his characterisation is encapsulated by what he calls his 'curious love of such observations' ['seltsam[e] Beobachtungskunst'] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 221; *AusterlitzG*, p. 229). In fact, his stay at Věra's in the 1990s facilitates his recollection of specific details from his early years, such as 'the course traced by the hairline cracks in the tiles of the tall stove' ['den Verlauf der Haarrisse in den Kacheln des hohen Ofens'] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 222; *AusterlitzG*, p. 230). In Věra's account, Austerlitz as a child was an untiring observer of the spectacle of human activity that was taking place around her protector's flat, peeping on their neighbours, such as the tailor Moravec. Austerlitz derived great pleasure in scrutinising the neighbour's meals 'which varied according to the season and might be curd cheese with chives, a long radish, a few tomatoes with onions, a smoked herring or boiled potatoes' ['das abwechslungsweise und je nach Saison aus etwas Weißkäse mit Schnittlauch, einem Rettich, ein paar Tomaten mit Zwiebeln, einem geräucherten Hering oder aus gesottenen Kartoffeln bestand'] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 220; *AusterlitzG*, p. 228). There is something arresting about this listing of foodstuffs. Due to their extreme particularisation, these culinary details stand in stark contrast with the grand narrative of trauma and genocide explored through the novel. What is more, the selection of these specific gastronomic details conjures up the alluring atmosphere purportedly typical of a Central European microcosm. This seducing involvement of food is also evidenced in the description of the pillaging of Jewish possessions. As Věra

recounts, all of the family's belongings were looted, 'even the bottled pears and cherries which had been standing forgotten in the cellar for years' ['die seit ein paar Jahren schon im Keller vor sich hindämmernden eingeweckten Birnen und Kirschen'] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 255; *AusterlitzG*, p. 263).<sup>51</sup> The comic dimension here arises out of various elements: state-sponsored German pillaging sweeps across the most secluded recesses of Czechoslovak domestic reality in getting hold of forgotten items. The singling-out of homemade fruit preserves can be understood as referring to the frozen world represented by a 'bottled' past.

This interest in materiality also suffuses the novel's engagement with the deictic present. This unfolds on two planes. On the one hand, both the narrator and Austerlitz cast themselves as irreducibly alien to present-day Europe, a conservative posturing which favours moments of comedy precisely due to the defamiliarisation of everyday phenomena. On the other hand, the novel works on dissonances between various shapes and sizes: the dwarfish intertwines with the elephantine. Listening to Austerlitz in a café in Terneuzen, the narrator remembers 'the panoramic window, which was framed by the tentacles of an ancient rubber plant' ['das von einem Gummibaum umrankte Panoramafenster'] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 41; *AusterlitzG*, p. 49) overlooking the misty estuary of a Dutch river. Crossing the Channel, the narrator calls the blocks of flats, spread along the seaside, 'Wohnburgen' (*ibid.*)<sup>52</sup> characterised by the flickering of TV screens which he finds 'curiously unsteady and ghostly' ['sonderbar unstat und gespensterhaft'] (*ibid.*). This pseudo-estrangement to modernity is also made explicit in the narrator's grotesque depiction of airplanes flying over Greenwich into Heathrow airport as 'strange monsters going home to their dens to sleep in the evening' ['Ungetüme, die abends zu ihren Schlafplätzen heimkehren'] (*AusterlitzE*, pp. 144-145; *AusterlitzG*, p. 153). At the same time, the narration works with various odd couplings. Being an architectural historian, it is no surprise that architecture is Austerlitz's starting point for his thinking about European history. Thus, comparing human society with birds, he maintains that birds are content with their small nests, whereas we human beings are inclined to 'to forge ahead with our projects far beyond any reasonable bounds' ['unsere Unternehmungen voranzutreiben weit über jede Vernunftgrenze hinaus'] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 23; *AusterlitzG*, p. 31). Subsequently, he claims that small abodes, such 'the lock-keeper's lodge, the pavilion for viewing the landscape, the children's bothy in the garden' ['das Häuschen des

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<sup>51</sup> The use of the reflexive in German 'vor sich hindämmern' engenders a grotesque anthropomorphism of the jars as if they were deliberately decaying. This comic element goes missing in the translation.

<sup>52</sup> The compound 'Wohnburg' is a *hapax legomenon* whose comic goes missing in Bell's translation ('apartment blocks'). German noun 'Burg' conveys the meaning of medieval castle which, here, stands in contrast with the technological world and present-day living standards.

Schleusenwärters, der Aussichtspavillon, die Kindervilla im Garten'] (*ibid.*), at least give the impression of peace, whereas superstructures and gigantic edifices are terrifying.

Austerlitz's interest in materiality also encompasses some idiosyncratic types of clothing insofar as they supply information about their wearers. This attention to outward features is remarkable, for it denotes Austerlitz's shallow sense of psychologisation. Whilst sitting in the Czech state railway dining car, Austerlitz notes that the waiter is 'a curly-haired, slight little man in a check waistcoat and yellow bow-tie' ['*einem kraushaarigen, schwächtigen Männchen in einer Pepitaweste mit gelber Fliege*'] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 310; *AusterlitzG*, p. 318) chatting away with another civil servant, the chef, 'his toque at an angle on his head' ['*die Mütze schief auf dem Kopf*'] (*ibid.*) who is careless enough to smoke whilst on duty. This atmosphere of deviant negligence is materialised by the presence of pinkish lampshades, 'the kind of thing one used to see in the windows of Belgian brothels' ['*von der Art, wie sie früher in den Fenstern der belgischen Bordells gestanden sind*'] (*ibid.*). Similarly, this clownish attire characterises the Czech station masters who individually, one after the other, steps onto the platforms of each small station of the Bohemian province 'in their red uniform caps, most of them, it seemed to me, sporting blond moustaches' ['*mit ihrer roten Kappe auf dem Kopf und, wie ich zu erkennen meinte, mit blonden Schnurrbärten*'] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 311; *AusterlitzG*, p. 319) in order to salute Austerlitz's intercity. Here, a sense of comic homogeneity is enhanced by the repetitiveness of their actions, and the sheer sequence of the railway stations. For Austerlitz is careful to list these allegedly bizarre station names, such as Holoubkov or Rokycany. Similarly, Austerlitz's grandfather was a milliner running a hat factory in Sternberg in Moravia. Thanks to the rise of Italian Fascism, his grandfather's business had been flourishing 'since Mussolini's men had taken to wearing that semi-Oriental item of headgear the fez' ['*seit die Mussolinileute diese halb morgenländischen Kopfbedeckungen trugen*'] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 235; *AusterlitzG*, p. 243). From today's perspective, there is a sense of disturbing irony in this remark as it is likely that, within years, Jewish-owned capital in Moravia was to be looted by Germans and their collaborationists.

Within the compass of the discussion of materiality, the description of Terezín, the concentration camp in the German-occupied Czech lands, represents a crucial episode in the novel. For it constitutes Austerlitz's frontal encounter with the destruction of the European Jews and certainly with his mother's killing. More precisely, Austerlitz's engagement with Terezín concentrates on the preparation work carried out by the camp inmates, at the Germans' behest, to deceive the delegation of the International Committee of the Red Cross commission that was to inspect the camp. These preparations are also the backdrop of a Nazi

propaganda film, *The Führer Gives a City to the Jews/Der Führer schenkt den Juden eine Stadt*, which was meant to cast Terezín as a quaint holiday resort. For Will Stone, the coupling of the film and the display of bogus happiness are the ‘the pinnacle of Nazi deception [...] that elevates Terezín from a purely functional death camp anteroom to something even more disturbing (if such a thing is possible), a freakish hybrid poised over the abyss midway between ersatz normality and murderous depravity’ (2008, p. 97). In *Austerlitz*, the extensive description of the camp is, in fact, not devoid of outrageously comic episodes which complicate the ethical import of the passage. Indeed, Austerlitz is concerned both with the grotesque of the material world on display and with the very theatricality of the episode. What is more, the unsettling aspect of the episode arises from Austerlitz’s attempt to document, with forensic distance, the masquerade put up by the Nazi regime.

Both these elements favour a sense of distancing in the reader. Crucially, the narration incorporates documentary evidence from the historic events, as is evidenced by the reproduction of H. G. Adler’s study that lists several thirty-letter-long German compounds exhibiting the nomenclature of bureaucratized German (*AusterlitzE*, p. 332; *AusterlitzG*, p. 340). In what represents the nadir of the camp universe, the narrative focuses on material curiosities, and on the desperate attempts to mimic normalcy in the extraordinary context of a German *KZ*. First, Austerlitz lists the number of goods produced in the camp by the prisoners, amongst which he singles out ‘the making of such board games as Nine Men’s Morris or Catch the Hat’ [‘bei der Herstellung von Unterhaltungsspielen wie Mühle, Mensch ärgere dich nicht und Fang den Hut’] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 333; *AusterlitzG*, p. 341). The sheer presence of entertainment boards, made in a concentration camp, is both ridiculous and unsettling because of its apparent and childish innocuousness which contrasts starkly with the fact that ‘much of the load carted round Theresienstadt every day was made up of the dead’ [‘ein beträchtlicher Teil von dem, was in Theresienstadt tagtäglich befördert werden mußte, waren die Toten’] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 334; *AusterlitzG*, p. 342).

With scathing irony, Austerlitz reproduces the official parlance praising ‘some tale about a pleasant resort in Bohemia called Theresienbad, with beautiful gardens, promenades, boarding houses and villas’ [‘von einem angenehmen böhmischen Luftkurort namens Theresienbad mit schönen Gärten, Spazierwegen, Pensionen und Villen’] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 335; *AusterlitzG*, pp. 342-343). To become Theresienbad, Terezín has to undergo a ‘general improvement campaign’ [‘die sogenannte Verschönerungsaktion’] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 339; *AusterlitzG*, p. 347). This extensive ‘beautification’ programme favours the striking dissonance between the horrid reality of the camp and the successful attempt to cover up

atrocities. The camp is, in fact, redesigned into ‘a Potemkin village or sham Eldorado’ [‘ein potemkinsches [...] Eldorado’] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 341; *AusterlitzG*, p. 348) in order to give the wrong impression of a fanciful holiday resort. This substantial dissimulation requires several physical modifications of the camp which Austerlitz is careful to note: ‘signposts were set up, the latter adorned in the German fashion with jolly carvings and floral decoration’ [‘Wegweiser, die in deutscher Manier mit lustigem Schnitzwerk und Blumenschmuck verziert waren’] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 339; *AusterlitzG*, p. 347). The carvings are scrupulously chiselled in a way to recall a German rural setting. Crucially, the grotesque emerges from the purported impression of leisure, since Austerlitz remarks on entertainment facilities or advertisement thereof, such as shops, theatres and libraries. The idea of unwinding holiday is even conjured up, as Austerlitz refers to the impression that the inmates are actually ‘passengers [...] on the deck of an ocean-going steamer’ [‘wie Weltreisende auf einem Ozeandampfer’] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 341; *AusterlitzG*, p. 349). After watching the film *Der Führer schenkt den Juden eine Stadt*, Austerlitz notes that at the end of the film, there is a music performance at an indeterminate venue in the camp. By means of a magnifying technique, he believes he can see his mother amongst the audience members. This crucial moment in the novel is, however, mediated by an unsettling detail. In fact, Austerlitz notes that in that pseudo-venue, the audience are sitting on traditional tavern chairs which he describes as follows: ‘chairs, probably made specially for the occasion in the carpentry workshop of the ghetto, are of pseudo-Tyrolean design with heart shapes sawn out of their backs’ [‘auf wahrscheinlich eigens in der Ghettoschreinerei hergestellten quasi alpenländischen Stühlen, aus deren Rücklehnen ein Herz ausgesägt ist’] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 350; *AusterlitzG*, p. 357). The grotesque emerges from the local flavour of pseudo-Alpine furniture, for the heart shape contrasts with the destruction of the European Jews shockingly.

Another comic element emerging from the description of the Terezín embellishment campaign is related to the adherence to National Socialist discourse in Austerlitz’s account, as a way to convey the actual successful outcome of the cover action. Evoking the atmosphere in the camp on the day of the Red Cross delegation visit, the text anticipates the reaction of the commission members who ‘could see for themselves the friendly, happy folk who had been spared the horrors of war and were looking out of the windows, could see how smartly they were all dressed, how well the few sick people were cared for’ [‘mit eigenen Augen sehen konnte, was für freundliche und zufriedene Menschen, von den Schrecknissen des Krieges verschont, hier bei den Fenstern herausschauten, wie adrett sie alle gekleidet waren, wie gut

die wenigen Kranken versorgt wurden'] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 341; *AusterlitzG*, p. 348).<sup>53</sup> This passage is marked by destabilising irony since it gives the impression of integrating and validating the SS commander's speech, whose oral quality is rendered here by the use of indirect interrogative clauses. Reproducing the official parlance, Austerlitz reports that 'seven and a half thousand of the less presentable inmates had been sent east' ['man [...] siebeneinhalbtausend der weniger aussehnlichen Personen sozusagen nach Osten geschickt hatte'] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 340; *AusterlitzG*, p. 348). The crass euphemism is striking here since by 'less presentable', the text probably refers to those inmates that were on the verge of death from starvation or exhaustion.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, it is common knowledge that the euphemism 'sent east' actually means 'sent to one of the extermination camps' in Eastern Europe. In sum, the depiction of the Terezín concentration provides moments of comic transgression that destabilise the reader's safe enjoyment of the narrative. For the text incorporates the voices of National Socialist perpetration and focuses on grotesque details.

Another passage is suffused with the same type of narrative irony. When walking around Breendonk, the narrator catches sight of the fort mess where the walls are covered with German adages in Gothic lettering. This vision prompts him to 'imagine the sight of the good fathers and dutiful sons from Vilsbiburg and Fuhlsbüttel [...] sitting here when they came off duty to play cards or write letters to their loved ones at home' ['das waren die Familienväter und die guten Söhne aus Vilsbiburg und aus Fuhlsbüttel [...], wie sie hier nach getanem Dienst beim Kartenspiel beieinander saßen oder Briefe schrieben an ihre Lieben daheim'] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 29; *AusterlitzG*, p. 37). The antiphrasis is striking since these SS henchmen were anything but generous-hearted, but the narrator adopts the exonerating perspective of their local communities and the trivialising comment about their 'duty' ['nach getanem Dienst'] which actually consisted of torturing and tormenting. This stratagem also applies to Austerlitz's depiction of German looting in Paris, as Austerlitz recounts how National Socialist grandees would flock to 'Les Galeries [sic] d'Austerlitz' in Paris 'with their wives or ladies, choosing drawing-room furniture for a Grunewald villa, or a Sèvres dinner service, a fur coat or a Pleyel piano' ['mit ihren Gemahlinnen oder anderen Damen, um sich eine Saloneinrichtung auszusuchen für die Villa im Grunewald, ein Sèvres-Service, einen

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<sup>53</sup> It is noteworthy that the original passage is narrated in the imperfect tense of the indicative mood ['waren'; 'wurden'], and not in the subjunctive I mood, as would be expected in standard German to mark reported speech. The indicative mood here implies a declarative statement which seems to vouch for the enunciation. Whereas the subjunctive I mood is used throughout in *Austerlitz*, this narrative decision to stick to the indicative reinforces the unsettling integration of National Socialist speech into the text.

<sup>54</sup> The unsettling comic also emerges from the word choice in the original, for old-fashioned 'ansehnlich' refers to someone's looks and could be rendered as 'comely'.

pelzmantel oder einen Pleyel'] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 403; *AusterlitzG*, p. 409). Here again, the ironic tone goes missing in the English translation, for German 'Gemahlin' usually implies a sense of courteousness on the part of the utterer (which could be loosely translated as 'consort'). Moreover, the use of the definitive article in 'die Villa' suggests that this is a known concept in German cultural landscape, as the residential area Grunewald, home to the pre-war Berlin intelligentsia, had been entirely appropriated by the National Socialist elite. Finally, Sebaldian humour has recourse to particularising in evoking the types of commodities coveted by the Nazi ruling classes.

The narrator's direct confrontation with the legacy of National Socialist violence both starts and ends in Fort Breendonk, a Belgian military fortification requisitioned by the German occupiers, where Belgian dissidents and Jews were imprisoned and subjected to torture during the Second World War. Due to its metre-thick concrete walls and its crab-like shape, there is something monstrous about Breendonk. As Schmitz puts it: '[i]ts dark walls harbour an unintelligible and incomprehensible history of human history' (2004, p. 302). However, the specific use of materiality prompts in the narrator a series of childhood recollections which disarm and trivialise the poignancy of the episode. This conflation is made explicit when at the end of his operose excursion, stuck under meters of concrete, he posits that '[n]o one can explain exactly what happens within us when the doors behind which our childhood terrors lurk are flung open' ['[g]enau kann niemand erklären, was in uns geschieht, wenn die Türe aufgerissen wird, hinter der die Schrecken der Kindheit verborgen sind'] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 33; *AusterlitzG*, p. 41). Whilst wandering around the fort, the narrator is constantly reminded of his youth in post-war Germany. Facing the fort, the narrator sees in this 'monolithic, monstrous incarnation of ugliness and blind violence' ['einzige monolithische Ausgeburt der Häßlichkeit und der blinden Gewalt'] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 26; *AusterlitzG*, p. 35) the curious image of a deep-sea mammal emerging from the ground. This hybrid creature is, in fact, 'the broad back of a monster, I thought, risen from the Flemish soil like a whale from the deep' ['der breite Rücken, [...] eines Ungetüms, das sich hier, wie ein Walfisch aus den Wellen, herausgehoben hatte aus dem flandrischen Boden'] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 25; *AusterlitzG*, p. 33). Oddly enough, this cetacean reminds him of his mainland upbringing in Southern Germany.

Perambulating around the fort premises, he comes across objects that look familiar, such as the 'handcarts used by farmers where I lived as a child for clearing muck out of the stables' ['die der sogenannten Scheibdrucken, mit denen bei uns die Bauern den Mist aus dem Stall führten'] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 28; *AusterlitzG*, p. 36). The use of 'bei uns' ('where I lived as a

child’) already signals the uncanny sense of community.<sup>55</sup> Thereafter, making his way into the concrete mass, he ventures into what seems a pit which recalls ‘a picture of our laundry room at home in W.’ [‘das Bild unseres Waschhauses in W.’] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 32; *AusterlitzG*, p. 41). This prompts him to the following recollection: ‘the image of the butcher’s shop I always had to pass on my way to school, where at noon Benedikt was often to be seen in a rubber apron washing down the tiles with a thick hose’ [‘das der Metzgerei, an der ich immer vorbeimüßte auf dem Weg in die Schule und wo man am Mittag oft den Benedikt sah in einem Gummischurz, wie er die Kacheln abspritzte mit einem dicken Schlauch’] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 33; *AusterlitzG*, p. 41). Here, the comic emerging from the use of the definite article in ‘den Benedikt’ goes missing in the English translation. The South German tendency of employing definite articles before people’s names emphasises here the odd idea of a small-town community, insofar as it implies that the readers are familiar with that specific butcher. This fosters a comic disjuncture between the horror of the place depicted in the deictic present and the narrator’s familiar environment. This sense of provincialism is also enhanced by the use of ‘Metzgerei’ which is predominantly South German, Swiss and West Austrian. Finally, the use of the definite article also conveys a sense of child talk that appears in stark contrast with the context of Breendonk.

The disruption here emerges from the incongruous presence of an eerie memory from the narrator’s childhood in the context of SS perpetration. Undoubtedly, butchers can potentially frighten young children, as this occupation implies slaughtering animals and cutting up meat. However, this violent scene is not directly evoked by the narrator; rather, it is the consequences of slaughtering (the apron, protecting against blood, as well as the thick hose probably used to rinse the tiles off the animals’ remnants) which are conjured up here. Moreover, the comic arises out of the repetition of scene, for the butcher is said to be always wearing his apron, whenever the narrator would go to school. Finally, walking around Breendonk, another recollection is triggered by what the narrator calls ‘some strange place in my head’ [‘an einer irren Stelle in meinem Kopf’] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 33; *AusterlitzG*, p. 41): the stench of soft soap which he associates with his father’s preferred word ‘Wurzelbürste’ describing a kind of brush. This visit to Breendonk illustrates the different patterns of comic stratagems employed by the narrator. Whereas the scene purports to bear witness to dehumanisation, the centrality of materiality in the episode shifts the narrative focus away from the attention to Holocaust victimhood to the narrator’s childhood memories. In sum, the

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<sup>55</sup> It is not my intention to provide a running commentary to Bell’s translation. However, the succinct ‘bei uns’ in German could be rendered by ‘back home’ in English

narration plays with the immediately tangible whilst engaging with the grand narrative of mass killing. This tension disorients the reader who has to interrogate the meaning they derive from the narrative.

## Conclusion

Walking around present-day Nuremberg, Austerlitz is reminded of the large Nazi rallies that his father had witnessed in the 1930s. The trope of exultant National Socialist crowds gives way to an analogy between an overpopulated, certainly decimated Jewish ghetto and enraptured Aryans cheering Hitler's cavalcade. Austerlitz, in fact, reports that a convoy of Mercedes was parading 'down to the Old Town, where the houses with their pointed and crooked gables, their occupants hanging out of the windows like bunches of grapes, resembled a hopelessly overcrowded ghetto' ['in die Altstadt hinunter, deren spitz- und krummgieblige Häuser mit den traubenweise aus den Fenstern heraushängenden Bewohnern einem hoffnungslos überfüllten Ghetto glichen'] (*AusterlitzE*, p. 238; *AusterlitzG*, p. 246). This episode is emblematic of the comic tone of the novel, for humour challenges the readers' interpretative approach of the text. It is thoroughly unclear whether this comparison is potentially outrageous because of its jarring juxtaposition between a Jewish ghetto and fanatic German crowds. In *Austerlitz*, the ethical challenge emerges from the complex tension around the interpretative framework with regard to the reverberations of trauma. In Sebald's novel, the comic functions as an interpretative impediment which destabilises the reader's safe intellectual perception of the diegesis. By means of humour, the narration dismantles the ways we conceive of the traumatised other. Central to the various types of the comic in the novel is the playful oscillation of meaning which attacks the conceptualisation of the representation of suffering. For comedy operates precisely with ambiguity and playfulness. The parodic representation of human suffering through anthropomorphic animals signals its self-reflective distance. By means of the clichéd depiction of different sites of memory, the text engages with the reader's preconception towards cultural tropes. In using materiality in relation to the present, the narration signals its constructedness. All these elements perturb the ways readers can understand the text. This results in the readers being torn between the pleasant reinforcement of prejudice and, concurrently, exposure to disarming otherness. This tension does not warrant any stable meaning in the text. Ultimately, it behoves readers to face the contradictions of fiction and assess their own ethical response to the comic representation of trauma. This sense of comic negotiation is further explored in the next chapter where I

analyse the ethical implications of a *schadenfroh* narrator mediating the strictures of political terror.

## CHAPTER 3

### **The Charm of Schadenfreude: Herta Müller's *The Appointment*/ *Heute wär ich mir lieber nicht begegnet***

#### **Note on the Texts**

The original does not follow the German Orthography Reform of 1996.

After one of her countless appointments with the Romanian secret services, the unnamed narrator of *Appointment/Heute*, worn out by her interrogator's mendacious accusations, wanders around the streets in her provincial town. Forlorn, recollecting the treacherous allegations made up by the *Securitate* accuser, she suddenly feels the urge to buy a slice of poppy-seed cake from a shop. Taking her purse from her handbag, her hand touches on an unidentified piece of paper that has, inexplicably, turned up in her bag. What she finds is a 'yellow-gray paper, the ends [...] firmly twisted as if around a piece of candy' ['Packpapierbonbon, gelbgrau, seine Enden fest zuge dreht'] (*Appointment*, p. 141; *Heute*, p. 160). But appearances deceive, since the narrator is careful to note: '[w]hat I saw was not a cigarette or a twig, it wasn't a parsley, and it wasn't a bird's claw' ['[w]as ich sah, war keine Zigarette und kein Ast, keine Petersilie, kein Vogelz eh'] (*ibid.*).<sup>56</sup> For, rather than a bunch of parsley, the 'sweet' turns out to contain 'a finger with a bluish-black nail' ['ein Finger mit schwarzblauem Nagel'] (*ibid.*). This finger looks like an ominous forewarning or a bad joke devised by her *Securitate* officer, Major Albu. Unruffled, the narrator adds laconically that '[f]or me even that one little piece was too much, and so was the fact that I didn't know whose it was. Nor whether the whole person was dead, or just his finger' ['[m]ir war das eine Stückchen zu viel, und daß ich nicht wußte, wem es gehört. Ob der ganze Mensch tot war, oder nur sein Finger'] (*Appointment*, p. 143; *Heute*, p. 161).

The disjuncture between the horrific image of the severed finger and the protagonist's detached observation is both unsettling and comic. Indeed, brutality and political violence are manifest in the so-called 'candy' wrapped in 'Packpapierbonbon' since it means that a man's finger was hacked off. Yet the main protagonist's reaction does not seem commensurate with her horrifying find. Cold-blooded and unabashed, she hastens to swallow down her cake before getting rid of the severed finger. When flinging the 'sweet' into the river, the narrator, noticing that the finger is still floating, observes forcefully: '[t]he river would have preferred a whole person' ['[e]in ganzer Mensch wär dem Fluß lieber gewesen'] (*ibid.*). What is referred to throughout as the 'the parcel wrapped like candy' ['Packpapierbonbon'] (*Appointment*, p. 199; *Heute*, p. 222) or even Major Albu's 'package' ['Päckchen'] (*Appointment*, p. 144; *Heute*, p. 163) exemplifies the main comic structures of the novel: in *Appointment/Heute*, emotive distance and the lack of compassion are instrumental in the depiction of political terror. This tension between horror and emotional frigidity is best manifested in the centrality of *schadenfroh* humour in the novel. In a diegetic world characterised by widespread

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<sup>56</sup> Michael Hulse and Philip Boehm mistranslated the original 'Petersilie' as 'parsnip'. I have amended the translation accordingly.

deprivation and ubiquitous surveillance, the narrator does not convey any sense of moral indictment. Rather, she rejoices in other people's misfortunes and satirises the muddle of idiocy and envy prevalent in a left-behind province. This wry, grimacing humour represents a significant aspect of the novel which has gone virtually unnoticed in scholarship.

What is distinctive about *Appointment/Heute* is the narrator's lack of warmth, the presence of gruesome jokes and the sheer gamut of evil actions. At the most basic level, the representation of brutalisation in the novel rests on the interplay between distance and closeness. This fundamental mechanism in Müller's text resonates with the tension that I have identified as unfolding in the social realm of humour. In fact, the narration articulates a complex negotiation of various emotive responses to the egregious context of the Romanian regime, since the narrator is both acutely alert to her environment whilst, concurrently, exhibiting distance and detachment. Thus, readers are confronted with a narrative largely engaging with ambivalent affective responses to violence: nastiness and vice are hospitable to moments of bewildering Schadenfreude; deprivation and envy foster amusing satire. Moreover, the narrator does not distinguish between victims and perpetrators clearly. Both are equally laughable and bizarre. In fact, *Appointment/Heute* raises issues about how readers can adhere to and relish the comic perspective of an intrepid character. This line of argument opens a new perspective onto the novel. Indeed, scholarship has consistently commented on the centrality of morals in Müller's oeuvre. Dagmar von Hoff's view is indicative of this scholarly consensus: 'she [Müller] asserts the role of morality in literature' (1998, p. 107). Challenging this topos, my purpose is to demonstrate that Müller's use of Schadenfreude and satire in *Appointment/Heute* shifts the focus away from moral discussions to the realm of ethics.

The narrator's use of satire and Schadenfreude defies the vocabulary of empathy towards the victims of abuse. In fact, the comic does not sustain the moral universe upheld by the often-evoked term of 'morality' in relation to the novel. Instead, the trenchant type of comedy prevalent in *Appointment/Heute* ruptures the safe binarism between wrongdoers and their victims. By means of their aggressive impulse, both Schadenfreude and satire disturb the reader's identification with suffering characters and the attendant rejection of malevolent agents of power. In other words, the cold and distanced humour suffusing the novel calls into question the ways readers relate to the suffering other. In resorting to shock, humour in the novel works as a disturbance of our assumptions around how characters should show empathy towards victims and outrage towards coercion. In attacking the customary representation of political abuse, the comic illuminates the reader's ambivalent, and less easy appreciation of

the representation of political violence in the novel. For I contend that the comic in Müller's text offers an arena where the notions of sympathy for, and identification with, suffering characters are questioned and negotiated. Given the constitutive negativity of satire and the ambivalence of *Schadenfreude*, I argue that the comic in the novel does not provide any consolatory counter-model within the diegetic world. By means of the narrator's satirising point of view, the intrinsic falsity prevailing in Ceaușescu Romania is laid bare throughout. What is more, *Schadenfreude* does not vouch for any moral clarification either. On the contrary, *Schadenfreude* leads precisely to a crisis of identification in readers, as they are torn between the pleasure derived from *schadenfroh* moments and the sheer impudence of some of the comic scenes in the novel. Thus, rather than buttressing the ascendancy of morals in the novel, I suggest that the comic fractures the polarisation between good victims and bad perpetrators. Instead, the comic allows for the emergence of the alterity of an abrupt and impetuous other.

In this chapter, my intention is twofold. On the one hand, I hope to qualify the general strand of Müller scholarship which privileges the themes of trauma, *Heimat*, and totalitarianism. In the light of the significance of the comic in the novel, I hope to show that humour plays a central role in Müller's engagement with political violence in *Appointment/Heute*. On the other hand, I wish to explore the ethical implications of this comic representation of violence for the reader. In presenting readers with henchmen that are both repugnant and accessible, in satirising the portrayal of victims, Müller creates a fictional locus encouraging a multiplicity of perspectives that destabilise the way readers assimilate the representation of suffering. To this extent, *Appointment/Heute* resonates with Lisa Zunshine's assessment whereby 'our enjoyment of fiction is predicated – at least in part – upon our awareness of our "trying on" mental states *potentially* available to us' (2006, p. 17). Since a great deal of scholarship on Müller concentrates on the theme and representation of suffering and trauma, this focus would mean a significant bifurcation. In the following, I give a brief summary of current scholarship on Müller and show that the comic has been virtually overlooked in criticism, despite Müller's comments on the centrality of the comic in her oeuvre.

'Marry me, *ti aspetto*' ['Ti aspetto'] (*Appointment*, p. 46; *Heute*, p. 57).<sup>57</sup> These two innocuous words cause the protagonist to be arraigned on a charge of prostitution. In her attempt to get out of Communist Romania, the unnamed main character, working as a

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<sup>57</sup> The Italian sentence in the original means 'I am waiting for you' only.

seamstress in a clothing factory, writes harmless notes with her name and address which she slips into pockets of linen to be shipped for export to men's stores in Italy. However, in a country crushed by ubiquitous secret services, her endeavour is doomed to fail. In fact, as she bluntly remarks, '[i]nstead of an Italian I landed the Major' ['[s]tatt einen Italiener bekam ich den Major'] (*Appointment*, p. 48; *Heute*, p. 59). Caught by the secret services, she is accused of prostitution and treason. As a consequence, she is summoned periodically to an appointment with the Romanian secret services personified by her investigator, Major Albu, who, in an odd move, covers her hand in a wet kiss each time before starting his interrogation. At its core, the novel explores the tension between the narrator's attempt to leave the country and the ensuing incrimination by the secret police. This basic pattern creates a dynamic tension between the narrative point of view and its mendacious misinterpretation by the agents of power in the novel. In terms of narrative structure, during the course of a single morning, the narrator, travelling by tram to the *Securitate* headquarters, recalls the breadth of her existence under Ceaușescu. This core story, focussing on the present, is regularly swamped by flashbacks addressing the themes of persecution and victimhood. She evokes her best friend, Lilli, shot while she was trying to escape to Hungary with her elderly lover. She recollects how her first father-in-law betrayed her own grandparents. Most importantly, she describes her frequent appointments with Albu. She remembers how, following the note scandal, she gradually became marginalised and how Nelu, her factory superior, took revenge for his sexual advances being rejected. Ceaușescu Romania, as described in the novel, is a world of corruption, destitution and brutality. In this context, the protagonist's husband, Paul, an alcoholic, seems to represent a sense of moral rectitude. However, at the end of the novel, the protagonist finds out that her husband potentially compromised her. Distraught, she gets off at the wrong tram station and misses her appointment with the *Securitate*. The plot ends enigmatically, since the main character conjures up the notion of insanity: '[t]he trick is not to go mad' ['[h]a, ha, nicht irr werden'] (*Appointment*, p. 214; *Heute*, p. 240). Since all places, most characters, and the political regime are unnamed, a sense of timelessness emerges from the plot. In Müller's own words, at the heart of the novel is "the experience of dictatorship" ["die Erfahrung in der Diktatur"] (in: Nubert, 2014, pp. 226-227). In fact, the experience of political brutalisation is of paramount importance in the novel insofar as '[o]f all Müller's novels it [*Appointment/Heute*] illustrates most strongly the power of the state to invade the private sphere and the near impossibility but absolute necessity of offering resistance' (Haines, 1998, p. 119).

## Contextualisation

It is no surprise that scholars concentrate on the deleterious effects of Ceaușescu Romania on Müller's oeuvre, given the historic uniqueness of the regime under which most of her characters strive to survive.<sup>58</sup> Coining the phrase 'real Kafkaism' ['real existierender Kafkaismus'], the poet and dissident Mircea Dinescu conveys the sense of singularity characterising Communist Romania.<sup>59</sup> More than any other East European despot, Nicolae Ceaușescu, ruling over the country between 1965 and 1989, was intent on radically transforming society at all levels.<sup>60</sup> This entailed several spectacular decisions, such as an uncompromising pro-birth policy, internal dislocations of entire populations, gigantic projects and forced urbanisation. In his attempt to typify Ceaușescu's regime, Vladimir Tismăneanu states that 'Stalinism and Byzantinism culminated in a synthesis of exacerbated ambition, megalomaniac tyranny, and apocryphal nationalism' (2003, p. 208). Compared to other regimes, three concomitant elements distinguish Ceaușescu's Romania. Firstly, Ceaușescu could draw on arguably the largest Communist Party in the world in proportional terms (Tismăneanu, 2003, p. 19). Moreover, Romanian society was, to a great extent, controlled by the secret police, the *Securitate*, which plays an important role in *Appointment/Heute*.<sup>61</sup> Secondly, Romania was presided over by a peculiar duumvirate whereby a couple, Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu, brought about an unprecedented personality cult. Such an extensive concentration of power of a clan, unique in Europe, was paralleled only in North Korea (Abraham, 2017, p. 53). As a result, this caused political dissidence to be particularly weak due to 'the extreme, almost unparalleled rigor with which the Ceaușescu regime maintained its grip on Romanian society' (Mungiu-Pippidi, 1999, p. 82).<sup>62</sup> In the main, this political regime impacted directly on the people's dignity. Indeed, the dissident Richard Wagner, Müller's former husband, points out the fundamental traits of dictatorship: 'collaboration,

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<sup>58</sup> Prior to being let out of the country, Herta Müller herself fell victim to the abuse of the Romanian secret services. She has recounted this experience on different occasions (see her testimony in the piece she co-authored with Richard Wagner and Helmuth Frauendorfer, 1990, pp. 64-69 as well as in *Double/Cristina*).

<sup>59</sup> Dinescu hints at the Soviet catchphrase whereby the Eastern Bloc's states had attained the stage of advanced socialism.

<sup>60</sup> Florin Abraham provides a bird's-eye view of current research in historical sciences on Ceaușescu's autocracy up to 2017 (2017, pp. 1-2).

<sup>61</sup> For a good introduction to the ubiquity of the *Securitate* under Ceaușescu, see Dennis Deletant's wide-ranging analysis of political coercion in Communist Romania (2006).

<sup>62</sup> Compared to other East European countries, such as Czechoslovakia and Poland, the relative weakness of political resistance in Romania has been regularly commented on in scholarship. Both Anamaria Dutceac Segesten (2013) and Alina Mungiu-Pippidi offer interesting accounts of the marginality of opposition under Ceaușescu. More specifically, Deletant (2008) offers thought-provoking insights into the situation of dissident writers in Communist Romania.

opportunism, recklessness, corruption, fear: these were all the factors which sustained the regime' (1990, p. 58). In the face of corruption and evil, thriving in dictatorship, Herta Müller's oeuvre is said to offer an alternative of moral stature.

### Scholarship

In scholarship, Herta Müller's literary output is said to be centrally concerned with the repercussions of power. Karin Binder's assessment, for example, is typical of this research commonplace. In fact, she posits that 'Herta Müller's prose and language are informed by the experiences she made under the Ceaușescu regime' (2013, p. 469). Brigid Haines adds that Müller's work conveys 'a resistance to inhuman and deadly social and political orders, a resistance practised by means of attending stubbornly to the particular, the individual, the local, the detail' (1998, p. 109). Summarising the research trends on Müller up to 2016, Martina Wernli suggests that 'scholarship has so far concentrated on the issues of dictatorship, of representation of the German-speaking minority in Romania and on the child's perspective' (2016, p. 17).<sup>63</sup> In the main, scholarship reiterates two research topoi. On the one hand, scholars point out the political quality of Müller's work as a constant engagement with power. On the other hand, they identify Müller's idiosyncratic use of language, in particular its concentration on minutiae. Put differently, what is distinctive about her literary project is the specific use of language mediating the experience of political and social repression. The so-called 'Herta Müller German' (Kormann, 2016, p. 282), blending sinister reality with poetic stylization, surrealistic details with distanced narration, is, in fact, one of the hallmarks of her artistic production.

By general admission, critics are fundamentally positive about Müller's work. There are very few dissenting voices. John J. White, in his discussion of *Appointment/Heute*, challenges Müller's 'all-purpose term "Diktatur"' (1998, p. 80) which he dismisses as a failure 'to differentiate between unlike forms of repressive demagogic rule and various

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<sup>63</sup> Within the restrictions of this work, it is not my intention to discuss the current status of Herta Müller's oeuvre in scholarship. However, Eva Kormann is apt to stress the 'outsider status of Müller's texts' (2016, p. 280) in German Studies. Norbert Otto Eke propounds a thought-provoking genealogy of Müller reception in the wider context of 'the precarious position of German-speaking minorities in Eastern Europe' (1991, p. 108). More generally, for a comprehensive overview of scholarly discussions on Müller's oeuvre in German and English, see Owen Evans (1998). Wernli offers a valuable discussion of recent debates up to 2016 (2016, pp. 17-19). Schulte provides a comprehensive literature review (2015, pp. 9-24). Scholars Paola Bozzi, Herta Haupt-Cucuiu and Jacques Lajarrige (2014) offer a useful selected bibliography as well as an overview of available translations up to 2014. More recently, Wiebke Sievers has engaged with the reception of Müller's work in the context of the Nobel Prize (2017) in an interesting discussion which questions her outsider status.

totalitarian forms of collective government' (*ibid.*).<sup>64</sup> With regard to *Atemschaukel*, *Die Zeit* reviewer Iris Radisch criticised Müller's ornate style that she lambasted as 'excruciatingly chintzy' and as 'sugar-coated prose [...] which sweetens suffering with its out-dated pathos' (2009). In line with Radisch, discordant critics have often commented on Müller's bombastic use of language. However, as Wernli aptly remarks, the Nobel prize meant a watershed: '[a]fter Herta Müller had been often criticised for her highly metaphorical style verging on affectation, this award seems to have silenced any such charges' (2016, p. 9). Except for Radisch's criticism, Müller is now regarded as a major author with moral stature. Von Hoff's assessment is symptomatic of Müller's reception both in German-speaking and Anglophone scholarship: 'my point is that this writer, like almost no-one else in contemporary German literature, has a moral standpoint that should be of great interest to those who regard themselves to be free' (1998, p. 96). Müller's typification as a 'moral author' echoes the author's comments on her own work. In fact, at the very end of her Nobel Prize Lecture, she expresses the main preoccupations of her artistic project: 'I wish I could utter a sentence for all those whom dictatorships deprive of dignity every day, up to and including the present' ['[i]ch wünsche mir, ich könnte einen Satz sagen für alle, denen man in Diktaturen alle Tage, bis heute, die Würde nimmt'] (*Every; Wort*, p. 21). In general, she suggests that her writing is fundamentally reminiscent of the experience of the Romanian regime: 'I suspect that, had I not grown up under Ceaușescu's dictatorship, I would have written on other subjects. [...] There are extreme experiences that force you to write about them' (Dutceac Segesten, 2013, p. 35). More precisely, she argues that this experience honed her alertness to the vulnerability of human beings. In fact, having been let out of Romania in 1987, she declares that 'I got over Romania a long ago. But not over the state-sponsored dereliction of the people in a dictatorship and its on-going legacy' ['[v]on Rumänien bin ich längst losgekommen. Aber nicht losgekommen von der gesteuerten Verwahrlosung der Menschen in einer Diktatur, von ihren Hinterlassenschaften aller Art'] (Predoiu, 2007, p. 317). This concern with ethics and power can be traced back to her early texts. In *Falle*, one of the lectures Müller gave on her poetics, she engages with three authors, Inge Müller, Theodor Kramer and Ruth Klüger, whose oeuvres are distinctively informed by the experiences of exile and political violence both under National Socialism and the GDR. Analysing the status of these writers, she argues that these works are subordinate to a higher moral integrity. Written under extreme

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<sup>64</sup> White's charges are probably not entirely ludicrous. However, his criticism of Müller's failure to typify correctly the different political regimes she writes about is rather perplexing. In fact, she is a writer and not a political expert. On a side note, White seems oblivious to the plot as he keeps referring to a 'Major Alba' [sic] (1998, p. 78).

circumstances, these texts are not ‘just *literature*, that is the customary definition of working with language’ [‘bloß *Literatur*, in der für gewöhnlich so genannten Bezeichnung des Arbeitens mit Sprache’] (p. 6). Far from being an experiment with language, literature is indicative of the moral rectitude of the writer. For she adds that her texts ‘without pointing a finger, make readers aware of ethical principles which were not abandoned [...] despite immense political pressure’ [‘stellen ohne Fingerzeig moralische Maßstäbe vor Augen, die unter drastischem, politischem Druck [...] nicht aufgegeben worden sind’] (*ibid.*). Tellingly, the press release of the Swedish Academy, announcing Müller’s award, articulates this moral integrity: ‘[t]he Nobel Prize in Literature for 2009 is awarded to the German author Herta Müller “who, with the concentration of poetry and the frankness of prose, depicts the landscape of the dispossessed”’ (2009).

### Comic deflagration

In overemphasising the legacy of the Ceaușescu regime on Müller’s work, scholars have neglected the comic edge of her literary output.<sup>65</sup> This lacuna is problematic, since Müller frequently mentions the significance of laughter in interviews. Analysing her personal situation as a writer in Communist Romania, Müller identifies laughter as one of the central experiences of living under dictatorship. Crucially, what emerges from her various autobiographic accounts is the fact that her sense of humour was anything but generous and altruistic. In *Double/Cristina*, where she overtly recounts her experience of political violence, Müller recalls that ‘[w]e laughed to the point of exhaustion [...]. We cracked jokes about the secret service types and their harassment, crass, vulgar jokes. It was laughter at all costs, a close companion of fear’ [‘[m]an lachte sich müde. Über die Geheimdienstfiguren hat man Witze gerissen, über die Schikanen, drastische, vulgäre Witze. Es war ein Lachen um jeden Preis, angewachsen an die Angst’] (*Double*, p. 54; *Cristina*, p. 12). Humour is understood here as aggressive, insofar as laughter targets the agents of repression specifically. Content-wise, her experience of humour is presented as merciless and cynical. What is more, hilarity seems to be literally intertwined with suffering. For, on another occasion, Müller suggests that gross jokes are devices that alleviate the ubiquity of political coercion: ‘[y]ou have to enjoy

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<sup>65</sup> In relation to Müller’s texts, White speaks of ‘their deliberate combination of estranging focalizer and grotesque imagery’ (1998, p. 75). In German-speaking academia, two pieces engage, rather marginally, with comedy in Müller’s work. Katharina Molitor (2014) applies the Bakhtinian notion of the grotesque to *Reisende*. Roxana Nubert, in her brief discussion of *Appointment/Heute*, is careful to note that ‘[p]rovocation and shock are the distinctive traits of this satirical-ironic aesthetics’ (2014 p. 230). However, Nubert does not expatiate on the implications of this narrative stratagem.

yourself too, as a way to overcome fear' ['[m]an amüsiert sich ja auch, weil man den Schrecken verpacken muß'] (*Lebensangst*, p. 47). Humour allows for the victims to navigate the obnoxious structures of political coercion.

In Müller's own words, humour is firmly embedded within the context of political violence. Indeed, laughter is not only the response of an individual to the harrowing impact of a surveillance society. Humour also fosters a sense of belonging between outcast individuals as a way to escape the daily persecution and harassment of state-sponsored violence. In *Lebensangst*, she explains that laughter, occurring within the private space, is posited against the dangers of a morally corrupt world: 'at home you're private [...] and you can unwind with crass, cynical jokes' ['in der Wohnung ist man privat [...] macht sich Luft durch drastische, zynische Witze'] (p. 10). More specifically, she locates humour within the safe confines of the domestic space. Humour is the last remnant of privacy and untouched intimacy against the stricture of political violence: '[i]n those private niches where harassment had not yet infiltrated – or even in opposition to the harassment there were erratic moments of fleeting and therefore wild, even passionate happiness' ['[i]n den privaten Nischen, wo die Schikanen noch nicht eingesickert waren – oder sogar gegen die Schikanen hat es sprunghaftes, eiliges und deshalb überspanntes, ja entfesseltes Glück gegeben'] (*Double*, pp. 53-54; *Cristina*, p. 12). Thus, jokes are instrumental to surviving life under extreme circumstances: '[s]ometimes I say to myself: "Life is a farty sputter of a lantern". And if this still doesn't help, then I tell myself another joke' ['[m]anchmal sag ich mir: "Das Leben ist ein Furz in der Laterne." Und wenn das nicht weiterhilft, erzähle ich mir selber einen Witz'] (*Fremde*, p. 29). By so doing, she resorts to Freud's conceptualisation of the comic whereby humour helps the psyche withstand the attacks of the outer world. Thus, within the realm of Freudian psychic economy, humour is akin to a discharge of excess energy which eventually mitigates psychic tension. In fact, Müller argues elsewhere that laughter is also testament to her sense of inner despair, for she claims that laughter is very much akin to crying. She writes that 'after years of harassment by the *Securitate*, my nerves were such that I began to mistake laughter for crying' ['von den jahrelangen Schikanen der Securitate war ich mit den Nerven so fertig, dass ich das Lachen mit dem Weinen verwechselte'] (*Herzwort*, p. 119). In other words, Müller's comments on laughter illuminate the fundamental intersection between suffering and the comic. Furthermore, her use of humour underlines her refusal to comply with the Ceaușescu regime. Finally, humour reflects and negotiates the centrality of political violence. Current scholarship, in adopting a rather sombre reading of Müller's texts, does not do justice to this central concern in her work.

Language assumes a conspicuous role in Müller's engagement with the comic. In numerous interviews and essays, she evokes the ubiquity of the official parlance under Ceaușescu. Official legalese and propaganda echo symbolically the ubiquity of political violence. In *Lebensangst*, Müller voices the linguistic disjuncture between reality and propaganda: '[a]s far as our everyday life was concerned, the official parlance was in every single word cynical, a blatant provocation. And it was everywhere, like a stench in the air' ['[i]n bezug auf die Wirklichkeit der Tage war die Staatssprache doch in jedem Wort zynisch, eine Provokation im ganzen. Und die war ja überall, wie faule Luft'] (p. 13). In the face of propaganda, Müller is careful to note that '[y]ou had to make sure that this vicious and ridiculous language didn't even crush your lips' ['[m]an hat aufgepaßt, daß die Gewalt und Lächerlichkeit dieser Sprache einem nicht auch noch in den eigenen Mund hineinrutscht'] (p. 14). Put differently, given the ridicule of Romanian bureaucratese, her own idiosyncratic language is presented as a stratagem to resist power. In fact, Müller speaks of the sheer necessity to articulate a language 'which the State cannot take away from me, because it is fiction' ['das mir der Staat nicht wegnehmen kann, weil es fiktional ist'] (p. 18). Thus, the straightforward utterance of words is posited as a way to challenge the notion of realism: 'I simply go within [language] to find the surreal' ['[i]ch gehe einfach ins Innere, um das Surreale zu finden'] (pp. 35-36). This paradox is interesting, for Müller suggests that language is by itself defamiliarising. To this extent, Eke is right in identifying the radical otherness of Müller's aesthetics: '[t]his "other" perspective shows reality in the light of an *un-real* experience, which defamiliarises our perception with the purpose of generating in the reader what Herta Müller calls "mental wandering": "wild" (wayward) thinking beyond normative preconceptions' (2016, p. 68). Müller's estranging aesthetics is also expressed by the comic. Describing her own poetics, she argues: 'you need to have a terse sense of linearity, patient descriptions – and then "bam", you burst in, you jump in unexpectedly' ['es muß das knarztrockene Lineare geben, das geduldige Beschreiben – und dann "bumm", dann der Schnitt rein, der unerwartete Absprung'] (*Lebensangst*, pp. 53-54). This sudden deflection of expectation, the surprise (what Müller terms precisely as 'bam' ['bumm']) is, in fact, one of the central characteristics of the comic. For the comic emerges from unexpectedness. In *Appointment/Heute*, this deflagration takes place when the narrator coldly depicts other characters' despair by means of quick-witted remarks or when she satirises the disastrous living standards prevailing in Communist Romania.

Decrying the moral turpitude of Ceaușescu Romania and indistinctly ridiculing the shortcomings and pettiness of her relatives and friends, the first-person narrator assumes the

role of a satirising, *schadenfroh* spectator. Compared to other types of humour, Schadenfreude and satire are particularly prevalent in *Appointment/Heute*. Not only is the narrator's point of view characterised by emotive frigidity, it also relishes the misfortunes faced by those surrounding her. Even though they draw on distinct traditions in Western culture, these two aspects of humour converge on a sense of emotive distance vis-à-vis suffering and destitution. For both Schadenfreude and satire depart from a compassionate and altruistic representation of the evils of the world, transmuting mishaps and adversity into a comic subject matter that readers can safely enjoy. These two aspects of comedy have different implications for the reader. For satire is generally more cognitive, and usually plays with a perspective on society. At the same time, Schadenfreude has more to do with emotive distancing and tends to be located in the realm of social interaction.

Schadenfreude can be defined as 'the joyful feeling you may experience when someone else suffers a mishap, a setback, a calamity' (van Dijk/Ouwerkerk, 2014, p. 1). I will follow this broad definition of Schadenfreude, as it encompasses the sense of obtaining satisfaction in return for someone else's discomfiture with the direct involvement of those wronged.<sup>66</sup> As is suggested by the phrase 'in return for', central to the idea of Schadenfreude is the notion of symbolic transaction between those who wrong and those who suffer. Indeed, traditionally, Schadenfreude is closely aligned with a desire for revenge. Underlying revenge, there is the sense of 'restoring equity in suffering. Offenders should pay for what they obtained in offending the victim and for the suffering caused to the victim' (Seip, et al., 2014, p. 233). Schadenfreude is related to the idea of deservingness insofar as the offender ultimately suffers from a deserved outcome.<sup>67</sup> This ultimately restores our sense of justice. This definition of Schadenfreude is manifest in the novel when the narrator rejoices, for example, in the humiliating mishaps experienced by Nelu, her lecherous and abusive superior in the factory. However, things are less morally clear-cut when someone derives a pleasurable feeling from the reverses faced by someone who does not deserve to be punished. In other words, Schadenfreude does not occur exclusively within a pattern of symbolic retribution. In fact, Schadenfreude is all the more striking when it implies a moral transgression, when it is undeserved.

As John Portmann suggests, the feeling of Schadenfreude can be heightened by its

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<sup>66</sup> The latter element is crucial, for, otherwise, the feeling of Schadenfreude can tip into sadism. Schadenfreude emerges precisely from this passive position of the observer who relishes the negative impact of a third agent on those who fall victim to that misfortune.

<sup>67</sup> As Agneta H. Fischer notes, the idea of deservingness is often symbolic and does not necessarily presuppose a direct causality between immediate harm and deserved punishment. The public rejoice in the evils befalling high-ranking politicians and celebrities, as they embody the symbolic order of social oppression (2014, p. 305).

undeservingness: '[i]n the event that we feel pleasure, that sense of uplift rises from knowledge that it is gratuitous, free, something we have not paid for or earned' (2014, p. 21). In disentangling this feeling of pleasure from the received codes of justice and morality, Schadenfreude exposes the more ambiguous motives of human social interaction. This is especially manifest in the representation of political violence when victims face perpetrators, because a *schadenfroh*, sneering victim disrupts the taken-for-granted characterisation of victims as well-meaning and just. In adopting the perspective of a character who rejoices in other people's mishaps, readers can try on the unsettling mental state of an intrepid character. What is more, in the novel, the main character does not discriminate between perpetrators and victims, blurring the safe boundaries of representation between the agents of perpetration and those wronged. For, as Portmann goes on to argue, in feeling Schadenfreude, 'when we respond with joy, our role is still passive' (p. 24). In other words, Schadenfreude illuminates two unsettling elements for the reader: complicity in the adherence to the character's ill-will as well as the lack of moral clarity on the part of the *schadenfroh* character. For, essentially, Schadenfreude is an exercise of injustice. Thus, I detect in *Schadenfreude* a type of comedy that exposes the limits of altruism and care, promulgated by Biblical humanism.<sup>68</sup> Faced by *schadenfroh* characters, readers find themselves in a conflicted position, torn between the pleasure in seeing other characters suffering and the cultural anxiety around that feeling. Moreover, Schadenfreude does not contribute to an immediate moral clarification in the context of political violence. For Schadenfreude often operates precisely against the borders of compassion and benevolence. It is this aggressive impetus which allows for the reader to probe her own ethics. Schadenfreude illuminates the complexity of human sociality without providing a clear moral framework.

To this extent, satire also assumes an aggressive function. Barbara Meyer is right in postulating that, at its most basic level, '[s]atire aims at the deriding destruction of its object' (1985, p. 10). Traditionally, satire assumes an association with guardianship of moral values.<sup>69</sup> In attacking conformism, vanity and laughable *mores*, the satirist is conceived of as combining moral rectitude and pointed irreverence. In the main, commentators concur that

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<sup>68</sup> See, for example, the Seventh Commandment: 'You shalt take care of your parents'.

<sup>69</sup> For a thought-provoking history of satire in European literature, see Werner von Koppenfels (2007). As regards the status of satire in cultural discourses, Paul Simpson is right in arguing that satire has become central in contemporary culture (2003, pp. 4-5). Furthermore, in the wake of the Charlie Hebdo attacks in January 2015, the question of satire has drawn increasing scholarship in France (see, for example, Serna (2015)). For a general discussion of scholarly debates around satire, see Daniel Bowles who provides a useful view of the main strands of scholarship (2015, esp. pp. 1-3) in his introduction. Moreover, Dustin Griffin maps out the major currents of satire scholarship which he seeks to challenge (1993, pp. 5-34).

satire features three constituent elements. First, aggression is said to be instrumentalised for wider moral purposes. Indeed, in distinguishing between satire and irony, Northrop Frye is adamant that '[t]he chief distinction between irony and satire is that satire is militant irony: its moral norms are relatively clear' (1971, p. 233). Usually, satire is thought of as lacking any autonomy, since it is subordinate to the writer's moral agenda. Second, in its customary conceptualisation, satire necessarily oversimplifies reality. Driven by scorn and indignation, the satirist reduces the world to grotesque and malignant figures. Alvin B. Kernan's statement is typical of this approach in scholarship: 'in no art form is the complexity of human experience so obviously scanted as in satire' (1971, p. 265). Furthermore, satire is usually presented as economic. Drawing upon brevity, and panache, '[s]atire has always a specific business to do, and it does it' (Paulson, 1967, p. 4). As for its final characteristic, wallowing in indiscriminating judgements about the world, the satirist is perceived as one-dimensional. Satire seems to follow what Dustin Griffin aptly calls a 'bipolar praise-and-blame pattern' (1993, p. 37). In this binary conception of satire, satirical aggression is conceived of as opposed to a positive counter-world.

Such a moralising polarity risks obfuscating the real potential of satire. Indeed, Griffin goes on to argue that 'we should resist reducing the satirist to the kind of single-mindedness and tunnel vision that we expect to find in no other writer' (p. 39). Given its intrinsic open-endedness, satire both recruits and thwarts repulsion and laughter, visceral participation and distance. More precisely, Griffin adds that 'satire is problematic, open-ended, essayistic, ambiguous in its relationship to history, uncertain in its political effect, [...] more inclined to ask questions than to provide answers' (p. 5). In line with Griffin's remarks, two tensions underpinning the question of satire can be identified. At the core of satire is the satirist's relation to reality. The comic emerges from the tension between reality and its aggressive representation. Thereby, distortion and exaggeration are key to satirical representation. In satire, the representation of reality is ceaselessly negative and grotesque. Satirists concentrate on corporeality, bestiality, and folly. What underpins the satirist's output is, therefore, a sense of negative enquiry. As for the second tension, I suggest that satire is centrally concerned with the playfulness of language. Given the formal brevity of the satirical episode, its constitutive impetus, the satirist is interested in powerful verbal invectives. This is what Paul Simpson calls the 'intellectual function' (2003, p. 3) of satire 'because it relies upon linguistic creativity' (*ibid.*). In other words, the wry, grimacing humour of satire emerges from the tension between formal elaboration and blunt representation.

Moving the emphasis away from a moralising approach, '[t]he modernity of satire, then, lies less in a particular moral, religious or philosophical set of *values* [...] than in a kind of temperament or outlook, a satiric *sensibility*' (Greenberg, 2011, p. 9). Indeed, concerned with negativity, intent on unmasking evil, the satirical sensibility complicates any sense of identification. Traditionally, satire is said to impede identification, as Patricia Meyer Spacks puts it: 'in satire, as in the Brechtian theatre, one is not allowed to identify with the characters; one does not *wish* to identify with them' (1971, p. 364). In satire, the world is presented as a negative continuum. In its traditional definition, this very negativity is said to presuppose a positive counter-world.<sup>70</sup> Running counter to this argument, I suggest that satire provides a fictional locus where ethical distinctions are temporarily suspended. Indeed, in its harsh derision of human shortcomings, the satirical gaze indistinctly condemns both victims and perpetrators. I argue that this destructiveness is central to the satiric sensibility. Devoid of any ethical import, the satirist limits herself in pointing out a sense of ethical hopelessness. Far from being a guardian of moral stature, the satirist merely indicates where evil resides. Indeed, if anything, 'both satirist and tragic hero suffer an agonized compulsion to appraise the ills of the world and cure them by naming them' (Frye, 1971, p. 263). By means of their sharp eye, the satirist points to vice without seeking to restate a better world. In this, satire illuminates the type of distanced and harsh humour predominant in *Appointment/Heute*.

### Analysis of the comic

*Appointment/Heute* is a novel about the experience of dictatorship as recounted by an individual who falls victim to *Securitate*'s boundless arbitrariness. If the novel articulates the theme and representation of victimhood, the narration resorts to a wealth of comic devices that mediate precisely the experience of dictatorship. In the main, social interactions in the novel are characterised by a general tone of malevolence. Nastiness distinguishes not only Major Albu's cross-interrogations, but it is also pervades most of the dialogues between the various characters in the novel. Thus, at first sight, *Appointment/Heute* seems to abide by Eke's assessment whereby Müller's texts convey 'the images of the inner life of a society which is emotionally cold, downright "loveless", materially famished and socially destabilised' (2016, p. 55). In the novel, however, the narration invests this bleak world with comic structures that challenge this one-dimensional assessment. In the first place, laughter

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<sup>70</sup> Wolfgang Preisendanz, in fact, reports that 'the satirising attack against a repulsive reality has to foil on a counter-model' (1976, p. 413).

occurs on repeated occasions in the novel. Simultaneously, three phenomena seem to be particularly productive in terms of funny malevolence. First, unabashed vulgarity is closely intertwined with the extensive economic deprivation in Ceaușescu Romania. Second, political arbitrariness is often conducive to gross remarks. Finally, the particular gender relations predominating in the novel foster a type of nastiness directed both at women and men. On the whole, social interactions rest on a complex interweaving of ludicrous quips, sheer impudence and witty remarks.

In the first place, the significance of diegetic laughter in *Appointment/Heute* has been virtually overlooked in scholarship. Throughout the plot, characters laugh, giggle, and make harsh jokes. As a whole, laughter and amusement occur under two circumstances. In the first instance, laughter conveys a sense of contempt aimed at authority. On repeated occasions, the narrator experiences a distinctive joy precisely when her ghastly investigator and her factory superior suffer misfortunes. In this, her laughter is typically *schadenfroh* insofar as it expresses a desire for revenge. In the face of ruthless oppression, *Schadenfreude* is evident because ‘[i]t is not the suffering of others that brings us joy, but rather the evidence of justice triumphing before our eyes’ (Portmann, 2000, p. xiii). This is made explicit by the narrator, when she declares: ‘[b]ut the contempt I felt for Nelu was important, my laughter was sheer schadenfreude’ [‘[d]och war mir bei Nelu die Verachtung wichtig, es war Schadenfreude von Anfang an’] (*Appointment*, p. 94; *Heute*, p. 108). In this, the relationship between the protagonist and Nelu is characterised by a great sense of contempt directed at her superior’s cowardice. The protagonist’s scorn is usually conveyed by outbursts of laughter. The narrator is careful to underline that ‘[a]nd [I would] laugh until he left me with my contempt and skipped out to the factory yard, where he still counted as somebody in the eyes of others’ [‘[l]achte, bis er aus meiner Verachtung hinaus in den Fabrikhof lief, um vor anderen wieder etwas zu gelten’] (*ibid.*).

Concomitantly, laughter is a reaction to the grotesque manifestations of power. Indeed, laughter is neatly delimited by the constraints of Ceaușescu’s dictatorship. From the very onset, the narrator describes the bizarre ritual whereby Albu kisses her hand whilst crushing it with his signet ring wilfully. Reacting against this curious ceremonial, the narrator and her partner mimic the Major’s hand-kissing at home. They make a pseudo-signet ring with ‘a strip of rubber and a coat button’ [‘aus einem Stück Gummi und einem Mantelknopf’] (*Appointment*, pp. 21-22; *Heute*, p. 29). This is cause for hilarious laughter: ‘[w]e took turns wearing it, and we laughed so much we completely forgot why we were going through the exercise in the first place’ [‘[w]ir haben ihn abwechselnd getragen und so viel gelacht, daß

uns der Grund des Übens abhanden kam’] (*Appointment*, p. 22; *Heute*, p. 29). Another scene, also occurring in the private sphere, is imbued with comedy. In the attempt to unlock Paul’s fly, his pubic hair happens to get caught in the zip. Simultaneously, his trousers are already at his ankles’ level. This ridiculous scene causes the narrator to burst out laughing: ‘I laughed and laughed until I finally got over it’ [‘[w]ieder solange lachen, bis ich darüber hinaus war’] (*Appointment*, p. 93; *Heute*, p. 107). In both cases, laughter is distinctively precarious, as the protagonist makes it quite clear: ‘I laughed in my befuddlement’ [‘[i]ch lachte verwirrt’] (*Appointment*, p. 45; *Heute*, p. 55). Laughter proves rebellious as it attacks the strictures of the regime: ‘[t]o dance to the rhythm of laughter. And to snap the short leash that otherwise kept us tied’ [‘[d]aß man aufs Lachen tanzen konnte, daß die kurze Leine riß, an der wir ständig angebunden waren’] (*Appointment*, p. 93; *Heute*, p. 107).

This ambiguity of laughter is forcefully echoed in the original title of the novel. The English translation opted for the matter-of-fact, if ominous *The Appointment* which probably refers to Kafka’s *The Trial*. The literal translation of *Heute*, however, reads: ‘I wish I hadn’t met myself today’. The German title conjures up a sense of splitting of the first-person narrator whose emotive distance is brought to the fore. The title itself is unsettling because of its intrinsic aberration insofar as the unity of subjectivity is questioned. Moreover, the use of the past conditional [‘Konjunktiv-II’] in the title enhances the sense of comic impossibility, for this verbal tense implies that the narrator looks back at the day in the course of which she did not manage to avoid herself. Detachment is therefore central to the narrative, for the original title presupposes that the narrator wishes she had avoided an encounter with herself.<sup>71</sup> The gloomy mental landscape of the title is disrupted by the incongruous perspective opened up by this self-dissociation. For, as has been noted in scholarship, mental suffering assumes a crucial function in the novel.<sup>72</sup> Indeed, the title points to the magnitude of the narrator’s suffering which seems so enormous as to cause a fragmentation of her self.

In the face of the brutalities of the secret police, the narrator articulates the experience of suffering in different ways. Latent insanity is touched upon with considerable frequency. Repeatedly summoned to the *Securitate* headquarters of her provincial town, she is eager not to break down psychologically. However, this experience of distress and intense suffering takes an incongruous turn. As expected in the first instance, her first encounters with her

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<sup>71</sup> In line with her other novels, Müller devised a memorable title that reads like an odd saying literally translated from Romanian. See, for instance, *The Fox Has Always Been The Hunter* [*Der Fuchs war damals schon der Jäger*]. In one interview, Müller expatiates on the significance of sayings and adages in her work, loosely translated from Romanian (Aguilera/Müller, 2008).

<sup>72</sup> Sanna Schulte, for example, signals that ‘[l]ong-lasting fear and its impact on psychic life are the fundamental themes of those texts of hers that are set in Romania’ (2015, p. 280).

interrogator Albu are cause for intense psychological distress in the protagonist, for she depicts her despair with vivid images denoting the idea of self-dissociation. Crushed by excruciating anguish, she sees herself vaporised: '[m]y nerves were razor wire. [...] When I was running around town I had to be careful that I didn't turn into smoke and leave my body, the way my breath did in winter' ['[d]ie Nerven, die wurden Glitzerdraht. [...] Ich mußte in der Stadt auf der Hut sein, mir nicht zu entwischen wie im Winter der Atem'] (*Appointment*, pp. 126-127; *Heute*, p. 144). This dissociation reaches an apex during one of the most harrowing episodes of the novel. On her way back from her third interrogation, she throws herself onto the lawn in a park, she fantasises about being buried. Yet, this sense of hopelessness is invested with an acute sense of hilarity: 'I couldn't have cared less if I'd been lying below the grass, dead, I would have welcomed it, and at the same time, I liked living so damned much. I wanted to have a good cry and instead wound up laughing myself silly' ['[i]ch wär so gleichgültig gern tot darunter gewesen und lebte so verteufelt gern. Ich wollte mich ausweinen und kriegte meinen Lachanfall statt Tränen'] (*Appointment*, p. 127; *Heute*, p. 144). The conflation between the contemplation of death and the urge to live gives way to a paradox whereby laughter is predominant. But laughter in this episode is anything but hysterical. As the narrator makes clear, her laughter mediates conflicting forces: that of intense suffering, represented by her afflicted position lying on the lawn, and her 'damned' ['verteufelt'] appetite for life. For she adds, '[g]ood thing the earth sounds so dull and hollow, I laughed until I was tired' ['[g]ut, daß die Erde dumpf klingt, ich lachte mich müde'] (*ibid.*). The earth does not echo back her sorrow. She eventually stands up and makes her way back to her flat. But, whereas the soil was apparently devoid of substance, she notices that a beetle had crawled into her left ear: '[t]he buzzing was loud and clear, my whole head was echoing with the sound of stilts clattering in an empty hall' ['[d]er Lärm war klar und laut, im ganzen Kopf klapperten Stelzen durch einen leeren Saal'] (*Appointment*, p. 127; *Heute*, p. 145). The unexpected presence of the insect reveals the extent of her inner distress. For her brain resonates like an empty public space, as if her inner self had been entirely confiscated by the political police.

The ambiguity in the character's emotive response to brutalisation is paralleled in the narrative's engagement with the social world. In fact, one graffito, which the protagonist comes across in the toilet cubicle of a flea market, could rightly stand for the general social context depicted by the novel: '[I]f life is really full of shit, | There's no choice but to piss on it' ['[d]as ganze Leben ist beschissen | darauf kann ich nur noch pissen'] (*Appointment*, p. 148; *Heute*, p. 167). Satire is, in fact, instrumental in the depiction of destitution under Ceauşescu,

for rapacious acquaintances, prurient relatives, and spiteful neighbours are legion in the novel. This is forcefully summed up by the protagonist: ‘[n]obody covets the fear that others make for themselves. But with luck it’s just the opposite, which is why good fortune is never a very good deal’ [‘niemand giert nach der Angst, die sich ein anderer macht. Mit dem Glück ist es umgekehrt, daher ist es kein gutes Ziel, für keinen Tag’ (*Appointment*, p. 19; *Heute*, p. 27). In this, *Appointment/Heute* resonates thematically with Ronald Howard Paulson’s assessment of satire: ‘if tragedy explores the upper range of man’s potential in relation to the limitations of society, custom or his nature, satire explores its lower potentials’ (1967, p. 8). Indeed, Müller’s novel abounds in sexual and bodily details. Far from favouring solidarity, the tactics of surviving recruits resentment: ‘[s]hoes polished or dusty, heels new and straight or worn down to an angle, collars freshly ironed or crumpled [...] every single detail provokes envy or contempt’ [‘[g]eputzte oder staubige Schuhe, schiefe oder gerade Absätze, ein frischgebügelter oder verhutzelter Kragen [...], alles pocht auf Neid oder Verachtung’] (*Appointment*, p. 9; *Heute*, p. 15). More precisely, her pointed remarks ridicule the ideological sense of mass unity: ‘[t]he working class ferrets out the differences: in the cold light of morning there is no equality’ [‘[d]ie Arbeiterklasse sucht Unterschiede, es gibt keine Gleichheit am Morgen’] (*ibid.*). In fact, human gaze and social aspirations seem reduced to the mere appraisal of heel types and unkempt collars. What is more, the working class does not exhibit any sense of class consciousness and solidarity, contrary to what is extolled by Communist state propaganda.

These dire economic circumstances are conducive to great verbal imaginativeness. Far from being demoralised, characters show a sense of detachment vis-à-vis everyday life. With ironic disdain, Paul, the narrator’s husband, whose clothes are repeatedly purloined at his factory, declares: ‘[s]ocialism sends its workers forth into the world unclad [...]. Every week or so it’s as if you were born anew. It keeps you young’ [‘[u]nser Sozialismus läßt seine Arbeiter nackt aus der Industrie hervorgehen, [...] alle paar Wochen ist man wie neugeboren, sowas hält jung’] (*Appointment*, p. 85; *Heute*, p. 99). This comic approach enables the narrator and the other characters to negotiate the political and economic constraints imposed on them by the Ceaușescu regime. Finding an explanation for the frequent thefts at the factory, the narrator notes: ‘[s]tealing isn’t considered such a bad thing in the factory. The factory belongs to the people, you belong to the people, and whatever you take is collectively owned, anyway’ [‘[i]n der Fabrik ist Stehlen keine schlechte Tat. Die Fabrik gehört dem Volk, und man ist aus dem Volk und nimmt sich sein Volkseigentum’] (*Appointment*, p. 84; *Heute*, p. 97). Ridiculing the official parlance, the narrator plays with the sense of the verb ‘to

belong' ['gehören'] whereby the logical order of Communist ideology apparently justifies petty crimes. By the same token, destitution in Communist Romania is also conducive to bizarre details. Lilli, the protagonist's best friend, who is aware of the severed finger mentioned above, explains that she once bought pickled gherkins. After having devoured most of them, she remarks that 'when I pulled the fork out it was holding one pickle and one mouse. Isn't that more horrible than a finger' ['auf der Gabel war eine Gurke und dann eine Maus. Ist das nicht gräßlicher als ein Finger'] (*Appointment*, p. 144; *Heute*, p. 163). The unexplainable presence of a mouse in a jar, the pseudo-similarity between gherkins and mice, as well as the incongruous equation with the severed finger conjure up a sense of utter strangeness which is funnily incommensurate with the horrific finger episode. Moreover, the narrator's best friend seems to be shockingly unresponsive to the protagonist's confrontation with death. For Lilli seems much more absorbed with her own unpalatable gherkin than the ominous forewarning addressed to her best friend.

Far from being non-humorous, the representatives of the regime articulate a malevolent irony directed at their victims. This complicates the characterisation of these evil agents of power, for the narration present perpetrators that evince a certain sense of humour and comic originality. In other words, the narration forces the reader to adopt the perpetrator's malicious imaginativeness. This is explicit in the ambiguous characterisation of the obvious agent of political surveillance, Albu, who is both repulsive but also funnily imaginative. In the very first pages of the novel, Major Albu observes gratuitously: 'I think you've got a moustache coming. A little young for that, aren't you' ['[m]ir scheint, dir wächst ein Schnurrbart, in deinem Alter ein bißchen früh'] (*Appointment*, p. 3; *Heute*, p. 9). This comment is arresting, for this personal observation has nothing to do with the criminal charges against the protagonist. Indeed, the character's appointments with Albu, resting on biting dialogues, are anything but bleak. Determined and audacious, the protagonist shows a sense of comic repartee. Describing the interrogations she frequently endures, she recounts that Albu usually starts off asking: '[y]ou don't mean you're losing your nerve already – we're just warming up' ['[w]ozu die Nerven verlieren, wir fangen erst an'] (*Appointment*, p. 16; *Heute*, p. 23). Albu's ironic distance, pretending to overlook the protagonist's defencelessness, is incongruous. Yet, the main character's reply is as laconic: 'I'm not losing my nerve, not at all: in fact, I'm overloaded with nerves' ['[i]ch verlier die Nerven ja nicht, sie werden ja nicht weniger, sondern zu viele'] (*ibid.*). This pun with the polysemous verb 'to lose' ['verlieren'] is amusing, since it denotes a sense of distanciation with her fate in a helpless situation. Moreover, Albu nastily accuses her of outrageous behaviour damaging the

image of Romania internationally, as he suggests: '[y]our behavior makes foreigners think all our country-women are whores' ['[d]urch dein Verhalten werden alle Frauen unseres Landes im Ausland zu Huren gemacht'] (*Appointment*, p. 48; *Heute*, p. 59). Albu's blatant lie and his overt exaggerations are comically far-fetched, since it is absolutely nonsensical that the narrator's mundane notes should account for the country's moral reputation at global level.

Vulgarity, jokes in a bad taste, and rude comments pervade the whole text. As a rule, offensive jokes and observations revolve around corporeality, especially graphic sex and defecation. In fact, whereas the diegetic world chiefly revolves around the ugliness of living under a political regime, characters are surprisingly blunt and outspoken in their spiteful utterances. In the face of an obnoxious political system, characters seem to take many liberties in their ways to negotiate the political constraints limiting freedom of speech. This room for freedom is conveyed by the use of satire. For, as Kernan suggests, satire flourishes precisely on the unabashed depiction of sex and decay: '[g]ross, sodden, rotting matter is the substance of the satiric scene' (1971, p. 256). In *Appointment/Heute*, this crudeness is satirically conveyed. Indeed, verbal inventiveness stands out against the extreme minimalistic characterization of most protagonists. For instance, one tram driver, presented as uncouth and boorish, is imaginatively offensive. In his attempt to counter the stings of a mosquito, he loses his composure: '[y]ou son of a whore, he shouts, go bother somebody else, I'm not dead yet, and I'm not a pile of shit, either' ['[d]u Leichenhure, schreit er, such dir einen anderen, ich bin noch nicht krepirt, und ein Haufen Scheiße bin ich auch nicht'] (*Appointment*, p. 114; *Heute*, p. 130). In fact, whereas his characterization is extremely limited, the tram driver's existence is incongruously reduced to the utterance of mere vulgarity. The shallow portrayal contrasts with the accumulation of imaginative insults. In uttering abusive remarks indiscriminately, the tram driver is grotesque insofar as he seems to be a mechanistic puppet. This upsurge of vulgarity contrasts with the limited amount of depictions of the novel.

On another occasion, after having been regularly spied on by two plain-clothes *Securitate* agents safely sitting in their car, the narrator summons the courage to stand up to them. A fierce argument ensues, as one of the agents brutally sets upon her: '[h]ey, miss, she said, in case you haven't gotten fucked today because your husband's banging whores after work, why don't you go to the bar and get yourself one of those guys with a big cock. He'll knock those fancy ideas out of you' ['[h]e, Madame, sagte sie, falls du heute ungefickt bist, weil dein Mann nach der Arbeit rumhurt, hol dir einen mit einem langen Rettich aus der Bar. Der treibt dir die Flausen aus'] (*Appointment*, p. 98; *Heute*, p. 113). The comic effect arises from the disjuncture between the shallow characterization and the graphic language used by

the spies. Whereas the whole scene is described in a rather distant manner, this abrupt outbreak of obscenity is hilarious. The dissonance between ‘miss’ [‘Madame’] and ‘one of those guys with a long radish’ [‘einen mit einem langen Rettich’] is grotesque.<sup>73</sup> The accumulation of insulting qualifiers, such as ‘fucked’ [‘ungefickt’] or ‘banging whores’ [‘rumhurt’] creates a sense of comic exaggeration. These agents of political abuse are more ridiculous than evil-intentioned. In fact, far from being deterred, the narrator snaps back sharply: ‘[f]rom what I hear, the ones who aren’t getting any are all wearing seashell necklaces this summer, or is that just dried pigeon shit’ [‘[m]ir scheint, die Ungefickten tragen diesen Sommer Muschelketten, oder ist das getrocknete Taubenscheiße’] (*ibid.*). This outspokenness contrasts vividly with the general climate of political terror that silences criticism. Not only does the narrator have the final word, but repression is presented as ineffective. By the same token, intent on getting married to the narrator, Paul faces the general hostility of his colleagues and superiors at work, since his future wife is socially outlawed. At one point, Paul’s superior urges him to break up with the narrator: ‘[y]ou’ve really landed one there. That lady thinks you’re one of her Marcellos. You’ve still got time to pull out’ [‘[d]a hast du dir etwas gefischt, diese Dame verwechselt dich mit ihren Marcellos. Noch kannst du zurücktreten’] (*Appointment*, p. 89; *Heute*, p. 103). Instead of submitting to his superior’s suggestion, Paul has a witty rejoinder: ‘I wanted to marry Stalin’s daughter, but unfortunately she’s already spoken for’ [‘[i]ch habe mich um Stalins Tochter beworben, sie ist leider schon vergeben’] (*ibid.*). Paul’s disconcerting remark offers a mode of resistance to the political pressure exerted on him. His repartee offers a welcome way out from the stifling atmosphere of social surveillance.

Imaginative remarks frequently revolve around the theme of defecation and corporal needs in a way that privileges the depreciation of individual identity. For, in what seems the epitome of underdeveloped living standards, a crucial scene takes place in a roofless public convenience, by a flea market, used by various characters. The narrator reports snippets of conversation, characterised by outspoken malevolence and dark humour. Exposed to the sky, shaky on two sullied planks, the narrator notes that ‘heaven sent down its meddlesome green flies’ [‘der Himmel schickte seine grünen, zudringlichen Fliegen’] (*Appointment*, p. 147; *Heute*, p. 166). The reference to heaven is developed further. In fact, whilst the door is getting opened, a character, sitting in the loo, draws a comic parallel between places of worship and lavatories: ‘[h]ey, not while I’m at my devotions, not so fast, the fat man said, inside the

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<sup>73</sup> The English translation opts for the actual translation of male genitals, whereas the original uses a vegetable metaphor.

shithouse you're communing with God, and outside you find that all hell's broken loose' ['[h]e, nicht mitten in der Andacht, nicht so schnell, sagte der Dicke, in dem Scheißhaus da drin wird man von Gott empfangen, und da draußen ist der Teufel los'] (*ibid.*). This observation is satirical for two reasons. On the one hand, the man establishes an unexpected correlation between the religious sphere and latrines whereby the act of passing urine or defecating is equated with worshipping. Moreover, toilets are depreciated as 'shithouse' ['Scheißhaus']. On the other hand, 'the fat man' ['der Dicke'] subverts the customary delineation between public conveniences and the outer world. Suddenly, latrines become a welcoming place, whereas the outer world is literally devilish. Moreover, because of its paratactic style, this narrative construction rests on surprising contrasts. In fact, commenting on the social deprivations affecting Romanian citizens, the narrator, sitting in the cubicle, suggests that '[i]n here it was safe. You can't become any less than the stuff that stinks beneath your feet. [...] Not until I was back outside did I become a piece of human filth' ['[h]ier drin war man gut aufgehoben. Weniger als da, was unter den Füßen stinkt, kann man nicht werden. [...] Erst draußen war ich ein Stück Menschendreck'] (*Appointment*, p. 148; *Heute*, p. 167). The narrator's account rests on a funny polarity between the nauseating environment and human identity. Reversing the customary repudiation of loos as a cross-society equaliser, the narrator suggests that the enclosed space of public facilities reinforces a sense of human decency and individualism. However sullied it may be, the cesspit offers a more welcoming abode than the outer world. The fact the narrator feels in better hands in a putrid latrine than outside shows the extent of alienation prevailing under Ceaușescu. At the same time, the narrator evinces a sense of disillusioned distance. The interweaving between gloomy circumstances and disabused perspective generates a comic tone.

In one of the most grotesque episodes in the novel, a frenzied crowd foregathers around a toilet cubicle on the flea market. As a pregnant woman seeks to jump the queue, a brief argument breaks out between her and an old lady: '[w]here are you pregnant, an old woman asked [...]. Maybe in your ass, because you sure don't have much of a belly' ['[w]o bist du schwanger, fragte eine alte Frau [...], trägst du das Kind im Arsch aus, du hast doch gar keinen Bauch'] (*Appointment* pp. 146-147; *Heute*, p. 166). The sudden conflation between the womb and the rectum, the sheer impudence of this insult, is both nasty and comic. The incongruous linking of fecality and motherhood is another mechanism of unexpected contrast. The harshness of this incident and the extent of destitution prevailing in Communist Romania complicate the ways readers can relate to the diegesis, for they are both taken aback by the

sheer harshness displayed in the scene, whilst being invited by the comic to engage imaginatively with the old lady's malevolent perspective.

Although the female body is the butt of trivialising jokes, women are portrayed as anything but submissive. In fact, dialogues have a peculiar satirising tone. Women, even though falling victims to male domination, never hesitate to fight back vigorously, often with a funny outcome. In *Appointment/Heute*, masculinity is actually in crisis and men's grotesque shortcomings are derided throughout. In fact, the protagonist casts a detached look on the world of social relationships, as she maintains an unapproachable distance to men throughout. She laconically notes: '[w]hether ten days or three years, men were always demanding a reason' ['[z]ehn Tage oder drei Tage, Männer brauchten immer einen Grund'] (*Appointment*, p. 159; *Heute*, p. 179). In depicting how she ends up engaging in sex with her abusive superior, the narrator exhibits a shocking sense of distance. In giving in to Nelu's advances, the protagonist merely depicts the various gestures performed by Nelu: 'Nelu panted, clutched at my breasts [...], and he talked of feelings, of love. I let him talk' ['Nelu keuchte, hielt sich an meinen Brüsten fest [...], und er sprach von Liebe. Ich ließ ihm das Wort'] (*Appointment*, p. 157; *Heute*, p. 177). The protagonist withdraws emotionally and coldly lets her petty-minded boss talk. She goes on to recount how he would come to her room every night to have sex on a business trip. Her account of these nights is arresting due to the lack of feeling or emotive investment: '[h]e wanted me all night long [...]. I looked at the station clock and it gazed back. Inside my skull everything stayed as bright as that segmented dial on the gable' ['[e]r wollte mich die ganze Nacht [...]. Ich sah zur Bahnhofsuhr, und sie schaute zurück. Ich blieb hell im Schädel wie das eingeteilte Zifferblatt am Giebel'] (*Appointment*, p. 158; *Heute*, pp. 177-178). The contrast between Nelu and the main character is flagrant. Whilst the male protagonist shows his physical attraction, the narrator is disconcertingly absent-minded. This emotional splitting seems indicative of her experience of a traumatic event, for she appears to be forcibly engaging in sexual intercourse. This shocking episode does not preclude the singling-out of a comic element. In fact, whilst there seems to be absolutely no interaction between the two characters, the narrator detachedly notes that a station clock in the distance is actually looking back at her. Her emotive distance is not caused by some kind of numbness, as she stresses that she is acutely aware of the scene. Her distance is, thereby, intended to ward off Nelu's excessive closeness. Emotionally withdrawn, the protagonist is reluctant to engage with her surrounding environment.

In places, there is a palpable sense of solidarity between Nelu and the protagonist. Although Nelu comes across as a malevolent superior who abuses his position in the factory

to engage in sexual encounters with his female subordinates, the narrator is, nevertheless, drawn to him. In fact, he comes to Lilli's funeral manifestly 'on orders' ['im Auftrag'] (*Appointment*, p. 63; *Heute*, p. 75). But the protagonist is intrigued, even finds him endearing. Carrying an umbrella on a bright day, as the narrator puts it, makes him different, '[a] little like an aimless idler, but also like a practiced scoundrel with crooked ways' ['[e]r glich einem Flaneur, aber auch einem Gauner mit routinierten krummen Wegen'] (*ibid.*). Here, Nelu is not portrayed as a repulsive agent of authority. In fact, he seems 'dignified or affected' ['vornehm oder hochstaplerisch'] (*ibid.*). It goes without saying that the narrator is well aware of the extent of Nelu's actual ill will. Most dialogues between the narrator and Nelu are characterised by cutting, quick-witted replies in a way which defies the strict hierarchy of the work relationship. As Nelu pulls out one moustache hair every day, the narrator, in observing this singular habit, bitingly suggests: '[i]f you pull out one a day, pretty soon your face will look like a cucumber' ['[w]enn du dir jeden Tag eins ausreißt, sieht dein Gesicht bald wie eine Gurke aus'] (*Appointment*, p. 50; *Heute*, p. 62). By means of the degrading analogy with a cucurbit, the narration attacks the authority of the narrator's corrupt superior. However, Nelu fights back in retorting that '[d]on't get too excited. You're obviously thinking of pubic hair' ['[s]ei ruhig, man sieht dir doch an, daß du an Schamhaar denkst'] (*Appointment*, p. 51; *Heute*, p. 62). The transition between the whimsical image of a cucumber-like hairless face tipping into the blatant allusion to sex is both unsettling and uncanny. Moreover, Nelu's authority is, through and through, pilloried by the narrator. Responding to her supervisor, the narrator is nevertheless distinctively insubordinate: '[h]e talked about the production schedule, I said: | Um-hmm. | Um-hmm, and Oh, and Ah' ['[e]r redete vom Plan, ich sagte: | Aha. | Hmm und Jee und Aha'] (*Appointment*, p. 50; *Heute*, p. 61).<sup>74</sup> This audacity culminates in the episode in which the protagonist's marriage proposal notes are deemed as evidence for prostitution at the place of work. As a result, one of her superiors coerces her into signing an incriminating document. This causes a humorous moment to occur: 'I had to sign the original for the records, the copy remained on my desk. | I'll frame it, I said' ['[d]as Original mußte ich ihm zur Kenntnisnahme unterschreiben, die Kopie blieb auf meinem Schreibtisch. | Zum Einrahmen, sagte ich'] (*Appointment*, p. 46; *Heute*, p. 57). By the same token, in a scene which would usually be conveyed with great pathos, the narrator exhibits a surprising sense of distance. When forced by her accuser to report all the Italian men she has ever encountered,

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<sup>74</sup> The translation does not take into account the context of the so-called command economy in Socialist societies whereby the means of production and the allocation of resources were carried out according to a central plan ('der Plan' in German). The narrator's lack of appreciation is thus all the more striking.

she replies that she does not know any (*Appointment*, p. 139; *Heute*, p. 157). However, further pressed by her interrogator, she ends up picking a random Italian-sounding name: Marcello. Thereafter she scathingly adds: ‘I was biting my lip. I couldn’t think of any other name apart from Mastroianni and Mussolini, and those were names he knew as well’ [‘[i]ch biß mir auf die Lippen, außer Mastroianni und Mussolini fiel mir kein Name ein, und die kannte auch er’] (*Appointment*, p. 140; *Heute*, p. 158). It is arresting that in incriminating herself by giving away the name of an unknown Italian man, she thinks of a Neorealist cinema star actor and the Fascist dictator. There is something incongruous about the alliteration in listing famous Italian surnames. In resorting to comedy, the narrator manages to defy sarcastically the political decision thrust upon her.

If women are largely trivialised by the agents of Ceauşescu’s dictatorship, masculinity is equally ridiculed by the narrator by means of various *schadenfroh* remarks. Inveighing against the protagonist’s marriage proposals bound for Italy, Major Albu dismisses Italian men as effeminate gangsters, donning jewels, with ‘pimps with pockmarked faces and long teeth and – he held up the nibbled pencil – pricks no bigger than that’ [‘mit eitrigen Pickeln, langen Zähnen und – er hielt den zerknabberten Bleistift vors Gesicht – und so kurzen Schwänzen’] (*Appointment*, p. 138; *Heute*, p. 156). However, whereas Albu goes on disparaging Italians’ virility, the narrator caustically imagines for herself: ‘[s]o maybe Albu’s own prick is like that and the pencil stub serves as a measure of the world’ [‘[h]at Albu so einen, ist der Stumpf das Maß’] (*ibid.*). This image is ludicrous, since it inverts Albu’s obnoxious remarks. The protagonist’s humorous remark deconstructs Albu’s political jingoism since it directs Albu’s remark against himself. Startlingly, the protagonist seems to engage with Albu’s crass viewpoint. This is crucial, as it indicates that the protagonist somehow adheres to Albu’s mind-set in a way that blurs the safe boundaries between perpetration and victimhood. What emerges, in fact, from the protagonist’s depiction of Albu is an eerie sense of superior solidarity with her interrogator. For, on the whole, men are presented as weak and incapacitated. This gender dynamic is also conveyed by women’s cheeky and impudent responses to male shortcomings. For instance, Paul’s health-damaging consumption of alcohol is regularly touched upon. When the narrator expresses her concerns about his addiction, this generates a curious dialogue: ‘[d]on’t fret, I’m not drinking out of desperation. I drink because I like it. | That may be the case, I say, since you seem to think with your tongue’ [‘[m]ach dir keine Sorgen, ich trink nicht aus Verzweiflung, sondern weils mir schmeckt. | Das kann sein, sage ich, du denkst mit der Zunge’] (*Appointment*, pp. 10-11; *Heute*, p. 17). Not only does the narrator have the last word, but her satirical verdict is curt

and *schadenfroh*. After all, she objectifies her partner, since his intellectual agency is substituted by a mere ‘thinking’ tongue. Her metonymy is uncharitable, but it also ensures that comic mechanisms mediate their gruesome social situation. Similarly, there is a comic edge to the following remark: ‘[y]ou could paint this entire kitchen with what you put away yesterday’ [‘[d]ein Rausch war gestern größer als die Küche hier’] (*Appointment*, p. 10; *Heute*, p. 17). Here again, the protagonist does not show any sense of empathy towards her husband’s addiction issues. Quite the contrary, she humorously transmutes her partner into one room.

Similarly, the narrator, looking back at her first marriage, recollects snippets of the dialogues she had with her former husband. In the main, her first husband is presented as a broken man, passionately in love with the protagonist. After coming back from the army, he presents himself to her with a new tattoo. Since the tattoo represents a rose adorned with the protagonist’s name, she asks in no uncertain terms: ‘[w]hy in the world have you gone and ruined your skin. The only place that rosy heart might possibly look right is on your gravestone’ [‘[w]eshalb hast du deine Haut vershandelt, diese Herzrose paßt höchstens auf deinen Grabstein’] (*Appointment*, p. 28; *Heute*, p. 37). In this brief sentence, the *schadenfroh* potential of language is fully used. The husband’s affection is unabashedly derided by the narrator insofar as roses, a trope for love, are abruptly paralleled with those engraved on tombstones. Moreover, the narrator in her lack of emotive warmth, refuses to recognise this slightly naïve sign of her husband’s affection. The sudden conflation of two opposed acts of engraving (love on the skin; remembrance on a plaque) is emblematic of the emotional frigidity and the attendant use of cold, distant humour in her appreciation of her surrounding world. The relative cheekiness of women is also evident in another scene. Willing to get rid of her former wedding ring, the narrator goes to a second-hand market where she tries to sell her souvenir. Paul, who later becomes her future husband, suggests the price she should fix: ‘[a]sk for six thousand, he said, and don’t go below five’ [‘[s]echstausend verlangen, sagte er, und nicht unter die Fünftausend gehen’] (*Appointment*, p. 135; *Heute*, p. 153). The narrator’s answer is arresting, since she equates the value of this object with her actual commitment: ‘[m]y marriage wasn’t worth that much’ [‘[s]oviel war meine Ehe nicht wert’] (*ibid.*). This quick-witted repartee presents her as a combative woman. This characterisation contrasts with scholarly consensus which presents the protagonist as exclusively submitted to power mechanisms.

In *Appointment/Heute*, the narration rests to a large extent on dark humour. This perspective revolves around two mechanisms. On the one hand, the narrator displays a great

sense of distance vis-à-vis the dire political, economic circumstances prevailing in the country. On the other hand, characters and the narrator draw on blunt bon mots and witty sayings. In both cases, stylistically, Müller's language is distinguished by a great sense of brevity which fosters a funny, satirical response to her environment. Readers are taken aback by the narration. For instance, after an eventful night, her husband scathingly declares: '[i]f we're in each other's way, at least, it means we each have someone. The only place you sleep alone is your coffin, and that'll happen soon enough' ['[w]enn man einander stört, dann hat man jemand. Nur im Sarg schläft man allein, das kommt noch früh genug'] (*Appointment*, p. 14; *Heute*, pp. 20-21). This pseudo-proverb creates a sense of ludicrous absurdity. Such maxims, startlingly preposterous, are a hallmark of Müller's style. One of the numerous precepts suggested by the narrator's grandfather is typical of this comic mechanism: 'Grandfather said: | You go out for a walk and the world opens up for you. And before you've even stretched your legs properly, it closes shut' ['[d]a sagte der Opa: | Ein Mal die Beine strecken, dann geht die Welt auf. Noch einmal, dann geht sie zu'] (*Appointment*, pp. 79-80; *Heute*, p. 93). In her grandfather's words, existence is grotesquely reduced to two mechanistic gestures. Here, comedy arises from the discrepancy between the complex reality of life and the grandfather's tongue-in-cheek sayings. Indeed, he then adds that '[f]rom here to here it's all just the farty sputter of a lantern. And they call that having lived. It's not worth the bother of putting on shoes' ['[v]on da bis dort ein Furz in der Laterne, das nennt sich dann gelebt. Es lohnt sich nicht, dafür die Schuhe anzuziehen'] (*Appointment*, p. 80; *Heute*, p. 93). This maxim encapsulates one of the central satiric mechanisms of the novel insofar as it reduces life to basic needs. There is something utterly trivial in this saying, which seems at odds with the grand interpretations of the novel. In equating life with a fart, this saying challenges the moral import of the novel, as existence seems to be nothing else than a brief sputter.

Throughout the novel, the narration resorts to microscopic details. The narrator identifies minutiae such as 'a little of the moist fuzz left from the green husk' ['feuchte Fäden von der grünen Schale'] (*Appointment*, p. 16; *Heute*, p. 23), she dwells on salt and sugar grains (e.g. '[n]ow the driver has scratched the salt off his second crescent roll' ['[d]er Schaffner hat von seinem zweiten Kipfel die Salzkörner abgekratzt'] (*Appointment*, p. 27; *Heute*, p. 36)) and she notes that '[g]rains of sugar stuck to his thumb, he rubbed them off with his index finger' ['[a]n seinem Daumen klebten Zuckerkörner, er rieb sie mit dem Zeigefinger ab'] (*Appointment*, p. 60; *Heute*, p. 72). This narrative device has been

commented on in scholarship.<sup>75</sup> In fact, she is clear about the centrality of objects in her perspective: ‘[b]ut the reason I’m shy of objects is because I like them’ [‘[b]ei Gegenständen fremdel ich aber, weil sie mir gefallen’] (*Appointment*, p. 169; *Heute*, p. 190). Crucially, the narrator calls her approach to objects a response to ‘the irreversibility of things’ [‘die Unumstößlichkeit der Dinge’] (*Appointment*, p. 212; *Heute*, p. 238). Indeed, walking into a chemist’s, she pauses on the following details: ‘[e]ach of the boxes was jammed with wads of cotton wool, and inside each was one glass eye’ [‘[i]n den Schachteln der Apothekerin war je ein Wattebausch und in jedem Wattebausch ein Glasauge’] (*Appointment*, p. 117; *Heute*, p. 134). This eerie, hostile atmosphere, emerging from those dehumanised glass eyes, placed one next to the other, creates a sense of alienation. In another episode, walking on the street, the main character remarks that ‘[a] squashed plum was lying on the pavement, the wasps were eating their fill, the newly hatched ones as well as the older wasps’ [‘[a]uf dem Gehsteig lag eine zerquetschte Pflaume, Wespen fraßen sich satt, neugeschlüpfte und alte’] (*Appointment*, p. 120; *Heute*, p. 137). A swarm of wasps, devouring a plum, is indicative of a more general, unfavourable social atmosphere in which hostility and danger prevail. This accumulation of details creates an unsettling narrative, since it invests the narration with a sense of hyper-realism. To this extent, Nubert is right when invoking the notion of ‘surreal distortion’ (2014, p. 230) with regard to Müller’s oeuvre. However, in *Heute*, the narration invests this perspective with bizarre and funny structures. Indeed, the narrator draws repeatedly upon ludicrous analogies. She seizes, for instance, ‘a rock that looked like a child’s foot’ [‘nach einem Stein, der einem Kinderfuß ähnelte’] (*Appointment*, p. 18; *Heute*, p. 25) in a way which parallels the finger she found in her handbag. Moreover, she observes that ‘[t]he tips of his [Nelu’s] mustache flapped around his mouth like swallow wings’ [‘[a]n seinem Mund bewegten sich die Schnurrbartspitzen wie Schwalbenflügel’] (*Appointment*, p. 45; *Heute*, p. 56) and, when going past a church, she notes that ‘[e]veryone who lived near St. Theodore’s church was carrying a little dust from Jesus’ toes on their lips’ [‘[j]eder, der im Umkreis der Heiligen-Teodor-Kirche wohnte, trug ein bißchen Staub von Jesu Zehen auf den Lippen’] (*Appointment*, p. 163; *Heute*, p. 183).

This focus on minutiae and this dissection of reality are equally conducive to amusing moments. Whereas the house is infested with ants, her mother-in-law pretends that those insects are nothing else than ground pepper: ‘[d]on’t get so excited. It’s just pepper’ [‘[r]eg dich nicht auf, das ist Pfeffer’] (*Appointment*, p. 150; *Heute*, p. 169). Whereupon her son

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<sup>75</sup> See, for example, Haines (1998, pp. 118-122).

replies that '[i]f that's just pepper, then I'm a nightingale. | It's ground pepper, my dear. | Since when does pepper have legs, he asked' ['[w]enn das Pfeffer ist, dann bin ich eine Nachtigall. | Es ist gemahlener Pfeffer, mein Liebling. | Und seit wann hat der Pfeffer Füße, fragte er'] (*ibid.*). The slightly nonsensical lie made up by the mother, her obdurate recalcitrance to face reality, are comic, since, surprisingly, it juxtaposes two cognate elements that do not belong together. The same mechanism applies to the substitution of the glass for alcoholics: '[d]rinkers recognize each other right away, from one table to the next, by their looks, the way the glasses speak to each other' ['Trinker kennen sich momentan von einem Tisch zum andern durch Blicke, die Gläser reden miteinander'] (*Appointment*, p. 209; *Heute*, p. 234). The sudden metonymy between the human subject and an object is amusingly odd, since it challenges the reader's expectations. On another occasion, the narrator uses cutting irony to depict the couple's insalubrious housing conditions: '[t]he brandy-like smell of fermenting garbage somehow eases his guilty conscience, so he does an about-face and orders his first brandy of the day in the bar' ['[d]er Schnapsgeruch der gärenden Abfälle erleichtert sein schlechtes Gewissen, er kann umkehren und in der Bar den ersten Schnaps bestellen'] (*Appointment*, p. 26; *Heute*, p. 34). The putrid stench of rotten refuse is funnily presented as a justification for his addiction. Moreover, this focus on details is central to episodes characterised by power mechanisms. The biting dialogues between Nelu and the protagonist are interspersed with sexual double-entendres, showing how sexuality is generally represented as subordinate to power mechanisms. In a scene marked by an intricate complex of comic strategies, the narrator recounts how Nelu lays one pubic hair on her desk on a daily basis. As the narrator is careful to specify, the hair is put every day 'right in the middle of my desk, too, where there was a nick in the mood' ['genau in die Mitte, wo mittlerweile eine Kerbe im Holz war'] (*Appointment*, p. 51; *Heute*, p. 62). This initiates a strange ritual, as the protagonist is intent on getting rid of Nelu's hair: '[s]o once again I wound up doing something he really enjoyed seeing, I blew the hair away. The sight of me pursing my lips gave him something to laugh at. I had to blow three or four times before the hair flew off the table. He made me obscene' ['[s]o tat ich mal wieder, was er am liebsten sah, ich blies das Haar weg. Er konnte lachen, weil ich den Mund spitzte. Erst nach dem dritten, vierten Mal Blasen fiel das Haar vom Tisch. Er machte mich obszön'] (*ibid.*). The text evinces an eerie sense of scopophilia, for readers are confronted with Nelu's amusement at seeing the unnamed character subjected to humiliation. In having to blow the hair away, the narrator notes that her superior delights in the blatant allusion to fellatio. In fact, there is something thoroughly disturbing about the scene as it refers to oral sex. Despite his effort to belittle or even humiliate the main character,

the scene is invested with comic mechanisms that mediate this tormenting ritual. Rather than denouncing vindictively her superior's wrongdoing, she playfully distances herself from the event.

Alongside this concentration on detail, the narration largely revolves unexpected transitions, juxtaposing disparate elements, and senses. On the one hand, the narrator moves abruptly between different narrative lines, creating amusing moments. On the other hand, the narration is often synesthetic. In both cases, the result is a funny deflection of expectation. Recounting how her grandfather survived a forced labour camp in the Soviet Union, the narrator writes that '[m]y grandfather told me that in the camp they used salt from evaporated water to clean their teeth. They would take it in their mouth and rub it over their teeth with the tip of their tongue' ['[m]ein Opa hat erzählt, daß sich Leute im Lager mit dem Salz von verdunstetem Wasser die Zähne geputzt haben. Sie haben es in den Mund genommen und mit der Zungenspitze über den Zähnen zerrieben'] (*Appointment*, p. 27; *Heute*, p. 36). This episode conjures up the experience of extreme destitution to which Romanian-born Germans were subjected. The focus on physical elements (teeth, and tongue) suggests the state of vulnerability to which they were reduced. The description of this extreme situation is, however, suddenly interrupted by a comic transition. In line with the description of famine, the narrator goes back to the present and observes the tram driver: '[a]fter the driver finished his first roll he swigged something from a bottle. Water, I hope' ['[d]en ersten Kipfel hat der Fahrer gegessen und dann aus der Flasche getrunken, hoffentlich Wasser'] (*ibid.*). This sudden shift is absolutely incongruous, since it juxtaposes a tragic event in Romanian history with the mundane habit of an individual. Similarly, a distinctive feature of Müller's prose is her playful use of synesthetic devices. In one episode, the narrator disparages official parlance 'devoid of smell and taste, hearing and sight' ['in der es nie ums Riechen und Schmecken ging, nie ums Hören und Sehen'] (*Appointment*, pp. 86-87; *Heute*, p. 100). In reaction to this unambiguous, aseptic language, the narration articulates a complex juxtaposition of senses. Depicting a windy day, the narrator indicates: '[i]n the wind the nettles rose and fell, a sea of blackish green you had to swim across' ['[d]er Wind, schwarzgrün ging es auf und zu, als müßte man schwimmen'] (*Appointment*, p. 154; *Heute*, p. 173). This sentence, typical of Müller's style, blends the distinctions between the elements, for wind is invested with colours, it even becomes liquid. In sum, this narrative stratagem is indicative of the sense of general sensory disorientation at the core of the novel.

## Conclusion

A humanist reading is predominant in Müller scholarship. Graziella Predoiu's assessment is indicative of this scholarly consensus: 'Herta Müller's novels represent a chronicle of survival in dictatorship, whose distinctive features are freedom, friendship, humanism and justice' (2007, p. 334). There is, in fact, a rather binary analysis of Müller's work: a morally uncompromised narrator, recruiting the readers' identification, falls victim to a corrupt world. In detecting vice, Müller's narrators uphold and restate truth. In this context, critics are unequivocal in suggesting that this narrative world is fundamentally resistant to the comic. For publisher Michael Naumann, '[w]hat nowadays comes across as the oddities of a nonsensical bureaucracy was then no joking matter, but an example of a nation-consuming, all-pervasive lie' (2010, p. 220). Yet, this statement does not do justice to the permanence of comic and satirical episodes in *Appointment/Heute*. Perpetrators prove clownish, while malevolent characters make funny jokes at the victims' expense. Droll episodes exist alongside and intersect with political violence. Therefore, satire, in its ceaseless negative enquiry, does not warrant any clear delineation between morally impeccable characters and a false world. By the same token, Schadenfreude is all the more striking in this context, since the narrator's *schadenfroh* gaze at the expense of suffering characters destabilises identification in the reader. Whereas the use of parody and the grotesque prevalent in *Austerlitz* shatters the reader's horizon of meaning, at the core of Müller's novel, there is an ethical enquiry that probes the way readers think of emotive distance and proximity with characters. By means of comedy, the novel calls into question the self-affirming apprehension of social interaction in fiction. In this fictional welter of indiscriminate acts of violence and amusement, readers are invited to engage with ambivalent emotive responses. Due to their intrinsic ambivalence, Schadenfreude and satire do not vouch for any moral conclusion to be drawn from the novel.

Philosopher Lars Svendsen is careful to warn against the sublimation of wrong-doing in artworks. Should this aestheticisation become prevalent, 'we lose sight of the *horror* associated with evil. For the purely aesthetic gaze, there is no actual *victim*' (2010, p. 9). In *Appointment/Heute*, however, this horror is experienced precisely through the use of the comic. Repugnant and amusingly odd, abhorrent and ribald, nastiness permeates every single episode of the plot. Rather than denouncing the extent of wrongdoing, the narration shatters the safe boundaries between the polarities of bad and good in social interaction. In prompting readers to laugh with perpetrators and mock victims, the comic ensures that conflicting

emotive responses cohabit in the novel. By means of this juxtaposition, the comic disrupts the assimilation of the other's experience. In fact, the comic invites the readers to negotiate and reconsider their identification with fictional characters. By means of her sharp eye and terse style, the satirist does not assume a meliorative function, but she merely indicates the extent of corruption and wanton abuse. The novel is certainly an indictment of political violence. However, the comic, being intrinsically indeterminate, does not propound any redemptive counter-model. In this, readers are invited to question their own ethical response towards the representation of political violence. This is precisely what makes this novel so disturbing. In chapter 4, I will engage further with this ambivalent response to violence as personified by a narrator that draws sensuous pleasure from his traumatising experience during the Portuguese colonial war in Angola.

## CHAPTER 4

### **The Sarcastic Survivor: António Lobo Antunes's *At the End of the World!* *Os Cus de Judas***

#### **Note on the Texts**

The following refers to the so-called *ne-varietur* version of the original text of *Cus* that antedates the Portuguese Language Orthographic Agreement of 1990.

A trained medical doctor, António Lobo Antunes issued his readers with a curious prescription in which he suggests that ‘the only way it seems to me to approach the novels that I write is to catch them in the same manner that one catches an illness’ [‘[a] única forma | parece-me | de abordar os romances que escrevo é apanhá-los do mesmo modo que se apanha uma doença’] (*Prescription*, p. 15; *Receita*, p. 109). Illness is usually uninvited and it often leads to some sort of incapacitation of the subject. In other words, what is at stake in Lobo Antunes’s injunction is the demand that readers relinquish their agency and succumb to his writing. Reverberating with the notion of contamination, the author also establishes a clear-cut hierarchy: readers are invited to be unresisting recipients of his powerful narratives. In addition, he states that his literary project aims at the cathartic regeneration of the reader. For he first warns critics and readers alike from focussing on ‘the most shallow and least important aspects of the books: my country, the male-female relationship, [...] Africa and the brutality of colonial exploitation, etc. themes perhaps very important from a political, or social, or anthropological point of view, but they have nothing to do with my work’ [‘aspectos mais parcelares e menos importantes dos livros: o país, a relação homem-mulher, [...] África e a brutalidade da exploração colonial, etc. temas se calhar muito importantes do ponto de vista político, ou social, ou antropológico, mas que nada têm a ver com o meu trabalho’] (*Prescription*, p. 15; *Receita*, pp. 109-110).<sup>76</sup> Rejecting this thematic reading of his fiction, Lobo Antunes contends that his books have instead a revelatory dimension: ‘[i]t is necessary that our trust in common values dissolve page by page, that our deceptive interior cohesion gradually lose the meaning that it does not possess [...] in order that another order be born from that shock, perhaps bitter but inevitable’ [‘[é] necessário que a confiança nos valores comuns se dissolva página a página, que a nossa enganosa coesão interior vá perdendo gradualmente o sentido que não possui [...], para que outra ordem nasça desse choque, pode ser que amargo mas inevitável’] (*Prescription*, p. 16; *Receita*, p. 110).

Lobo Antunes’s injunction is instrumental in understanding the basic narrative pattern of *Land/Cus*. Indeed, his second novel is disorientating because of its stylistic exuberance and its narrative impetus. The most striking feature of Lobo Antunes’s text is arguably its constant over-exaggerating aesthetics which privileges audacious imagery, bizarre metaphors and grotesque clichés. This narrative powerfulness is further enhanced by the narrator’s monologic dominance. Indeed, at first sight, the narration in *Land/Cus* seems conducted by a

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<sup>76</sup> I have amended Valéria M. Souza’s translation that tones down Lobo Antunes’s aggressive claim in the original. On a side note, Maria Micaela Ramon recalls that the author, on another occasion, claimed that his themes could be summed up as follows: “‘life, death, the absence of love, breakdown of communication” [“a vida, a morte, a ausência de amor, a incomunicabilidade”] (2004, p. 188).

strong monologic point of narrative identification, as the soliloquising first-person narrator resorts to numerous rhetorical and narrative devices. The narrator's unchallenged status is further bolstered by his double status as a witness to war crimes in Angola and as a victim of the brutalising policies of the Salazar regime. In other words, the narrator casts himself as a victim of the deleterious reverberations of war and dictatorship. This elevating status of the tragic hero has been consistently commented on by scholars who are swift to bestow a special moral position on the narrator. As a result, the absence of actual conversation and the sheer magnitude of the narrator's monologic account have led one of the major Lobo Antunes scholars in Portugal, Maria Alzira Seixo, to claim that 'the text presupposes a dialogue without effectuating it' (2002, p. 40). The aim of this chapter is to demonstrate that, by means of the comic, the text manages to create a dialogic space where the reader can interact with and reflect on the narrator's monologue and subject position. The comic, therefore, makes for an ethical encounter with the narrator's otherness, for comedy disrupts the way readers perceive the protagonist's subjectivity.

The comic is indicative of the reader's intellectual and sensuous participation in the plot, as the comic can only occur if the reader is acutely alert to the narrator's viewpoint. Simultaneously, the comic unfolds by means of emotive distance from the narrative. This evaluative posture creates a readerly practice which mitigates the narrator's monologic dominance. In this, the comic helps reorganise the rigid bipartite structure between the narrator and the reader demanded by the author. To this extent, Alfie Bown is right in suggesting that 'laughter is threatening to *existing* hierarchies not because it is anti-hierarchical but because it creates new hierarchies' (2019, p. 33). In Lobo Antunes's novel, readers are not compliant receptacles. On the contrary, I suggest that in *Land/Cus*, the analysis of the comic helps re-instate the agency of the reader as a discriminating subject compelled to reflect on and to consent to the narrative power exercised by the monologising narrator. This consent is ultimately materialised within the diegesis, as the unnamed female protagonist agrees to spend the night with the narrator. Moreover, the pervasive comic tone of the novel undermines the narrator's authority. This dialogic relationship could open up the reader to the experience of trauma made by the narrator. In engaging in a dialogue with the text, readers show understanding for the protagonist's position. But, ultimately, due to its intrinsic ambiguity, the comic disarms understanding.

Mikhail Bakhtin's conceptualisation of ethical dialogue is helpful here. Essentially, Bakhtin posits that '[m]onologue is finalized and deaf to the other's response [...]. Monologue manages without the other and therefore to some degree, materializes all reality. Monologue

pretends to be the ultimate word' (1984, p. 293). In reaction to what he diagnoses as the constitutive ossification of monologism, Bakhtin postulates that dialogue is fundamentally dynamic, i.e. that human life is articulated around an open-ended interpenetration of voices, languages and cultures.<sup>77</sup> If he orients his epistemology towards empirical reality, his concept of dialogue has profound ethical consequences. Indeed, dialogue implies a relation between the self and otherness, as manifested in textuality. Michael Holquist puts it in a nutshell: '[i]t cannot be stressed enough that for him [Bakhtin] "self" is dialogic, a *relation*' (1990, p. 19). In Bakhtin's view, this situates dialogue on an ethical plane, for dialogue implies to some extent understanding on the part of the addressee. As Eskin rightly suggests, 'Bakhtin notes that understanding the other's world involves its appropriation and assimilation within my own "field of vision"' (2000, p. 92). But this integration does not lead to an appropriation of the other. Rather, each interlocutor keeps their self-contained entity whilst being mutually enriched. This exposure to otherness is crucial, because a dialogic relationship implies a form of understanding and, therefore, the possibility of ethical encounter with the other. Indeed, this ability to engage in a dialogue with the text suggests that the reader is not only able to answer the dialogic injunction posed by the text, but also to answer to its moral challenges. As Eskin continues, '[m]y answerability is indeed based on my ability to answer, that is, on my dialogic make-up, which in turn is grounded in my semethical response-ability' (2000, p. 91). In recognising the other, the Bakhtinian dialogue reveals the '*assertion* of the otherness of the other, preliminary to even the possibility of a recognition of his otherness' (de Man, 1983, p. 102). As shall be seen, the comic in literature allows for an ethical dialogue between the reader and the text.

In the light of the above remarks, my intention in this chapter is twofold. In the first instance, I identify the main narrative features enhancing the magnitude of the monologising first-person narrator in the novel. What will emerge from my discussion is the position of the martyr-like narrator standing embattled against the world. This will echo my analysis of the relatively one-dimensional reading of Lobo Antunes's novel prevailing in scholarship. For scholarly discussion has consistently occluded the comic dimension of the novel, in privileging the issues of trauma, tragedy and the shattering of the self. In other words, scholars tend to fête the noble solemnity of Lobo Antunes's narratives thematising the harrowing experiences of warfare and Salazarist dictatorship. To this extent, the assessment of

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<sup>77</sup> Michael Eskin has usefully given defined the five basic constituents of Bakhtinian dialogue: 'a human being's orientation towards the other(s); the interlocutors' respective situations; mediated or unmediated (in a broad sense) modes of contact; (one or more) communicative media (e.g. voice, body, paper); and the dynamics of sign' (2000, p. 2).

Margaret Jull Costa, the American translator of *Cus*, is emblematic: '[f]or the narrator, there is no liberation from the horrors he has experienced, no Carnation Revolution' (2012, p. 15). Second, and in response to that consensus, my hope is to demonstrate how the comic interplays with the representation of suffering. In concentrating on the notions of comic excessiveness and unexpectedness, my aim is to show how a dialogic space unfolds between the reader and the text. By so doing, I hope to demonstrate how this focus helps us revalue the subject-position of the reader confronted with a text that scholarship usually labels as 'totalising' (Seixo, 2002, p. 37). Subsequently, I wish to qualify the victim status of the narrator. The focus on the novel will lead to a reappraisal of the novel whereby *Land/Cus* actively presents readers with a unique and unsettling negotiation of state-sponsored atrocities.

*Land/Cus*<sup>78</sup> is an all-night monologue of a former Portuguese army doctor who was sent to south-eastern Angola in the early 1970s during the Portuguese Colonial Wars. This first-person narrative follows a consistent narratological device, for the narrator addresses a nameless and voiceless female interlocutor throughout the novel. As the protagonist puts it, both are condemned to 'a thick, dense, despairing, endless night, with no refuge and no way out, a labyrinth of anguish on which the whisky casts an oblique, turbid glow' ['uma noite sem fim, espessa, densa, desesperante, desprovida de refúgios e saídas, um labirinto de angústia que o uísque ilumina de viés da sua claridade turva'] (*Land*, p. 152; *Cus*, p. 147). This narrative setting propels a sustained flow of memories and thoughts, favouring what Seixo aptly identifies as a 'sort of occluded direct speech' (2002, p. 40). In the main, *Cus/Land* unfolds on two spatial, and temporal levels. Chronologically, the novel is structured around the various stages of a one-night-stand in the deictic present: a middle-aged man chats up a woman in a Lisbon bar late at night in the late 70s. Both put away a few bottles of spirits, before going to his flat where they have sex. In the small hours, the woman eventually leaves. Thematically, for over two hundred pages, the narrator vituperates against his status as a Colonial War survivor, an heir to a pro-regime family, a disillusioned Portuguese citizen in the aftermath of the Carnation Revolution, and an ageing lover. Indeed, interwoven with the

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<sup>78</sup> The original title *Os Cus de Judas* (literally 'Judas's Arses') has been cause for some confusion in English. Its first translation was, in fact, *The South of Nowhere*. Unlike French or Italian, the new version by Margaret Jull Costa still opts for a prudish rendition of the Portuguese idiom. In European Portuguese this slang expression means 'the end of the world'. In addition, Maria Alzira Seixo recalls that 'beyond the notion of distance which this idiom conveys in standard Portuguese, it also refers to the designation given by the Movement for the Liberation of Angola to traitors and informers' (2002, p. 42, n. 2). By means of its reference to the biblical figure of Judas, the title also conjures up the notion of betrayal (see Moutinho, 2008, pp. 24-25). Finally, for a discussion of the scatological aspect of the novel, as signalled in the title, see Madureira, 1995 and Pires, 2009 (p. 333).

deictic present are the constant recollections of his past as a descendant of an upper-middle-class family, a young man growing up under Salazar's dictatorship, and his experience of war vicissitudes. This second plane is formally less linear and coherent, since it engages with what Luís Madureira calls in his discussion of the novel 'the return of a (historiographical) repressed' (1995, p. 21). Indeed, the second narrative level offers a more complex contemplation of what it means to grow up in an authoritarian context, to bear witness to political abuse, colonialist policies, and war crimes. The tension of the novel also emerges from the conflicting narrative tones. On the one hand, the narrator seems utterly shattered by his harrowing past. But, simultaneously, this experience is conveyed in a highly florid and exciting prose. This tension is made explicit in one of the rare moments of joy in the novel where the narrator describes his infatuation with Sofia, an Angolan woman, who ends up being tortured and executed by the Portuguese secret service PIDE.

### Contextualisation

Central to *Land/Cus*, the historiographical issues around the legacies of Salazar's dictatorship and the colonial wars continue to reverberate with present-day Portugal in a tangible way. 'His enemies compared him with Mussolini or Franco, but this west European dictator had more in common with pre-Vatican Council pontiffs or the Dalai Lama of Tibet' (Gallagher, 1983, p. vii). Whether Tenzin Gyatso would countenance this comparison with dictator António de Oliveira Salazar (1889-1970) is a matter of speculation. Tom Gallagher's account is indicative of how the figure of Salazar is still cause for controversies in scholarship and in contemporary Portugal.<sup>79</sup> Indeed, central to scholarly debates is the question of whether Salazar can be aligned with other Fascist dictators or whether his regime constituted an authoritarian idiosyncrasy.<sup>80</sup> Emerging in the late 1920s, ruling over Portugal for 36 years, Salazar is the longest-serving dictator in Europe. This economics professor, astutely casting himself as a stern and devout traditionalist, founded a staunchly anti-Communist, corporatist, and nationalistic political order, called the New State ['o Estado Novo'] in the early 1930s. Characterised by its adaptability and exceptional longevity, Salazar's New State skilfully

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<sup>79</sup> In his Salazar biography, Filipe Ribeiro de Meneses recalls that, importing a BBC programme, the Portuguese public broadcast RTP organised in 2007 a public vote contest which crowned Salazar 'the Greatest Portuguese' in history, polling first with 41 % with a lead of 20 % over his major opponent, the Communist leader Álvaro Cunhal (who was, incidentally, jailed for combined 15 years at Salazar's behest) (2009, p. xi). There have been serious doubts about the validity of the voting system.

<sup>80</sup> It is not my purpose to sketch out this immense historiographical territory here. For an introduction to the issues around the typification of the New State, Yves Léonard's study is a clear starting-point (2003).

arbitrated between conflicting interests in society: the Catholic Church, the armed forces and the conservative elite. Unflinchingly, the New State held to the myth of Portuguese exceptionalism in its vigorous reluctance to decolonise its overseas territories. Crucially, in order to implement its isolationist policies and to subdue opposition, the regime drew on ‘a thoroughly repressive atmosphere and a comprehensive system of control over the population’ (Raby, 1988, p. 3). Indeed, ubiquitous censorship, the introduction of the compulsory youth movement *Mocidade Portuguesa* and paramilitary organisation *Legião Nacional*, the extensive deployment of the secret police PIDE aimed at undercutting dissidence and instilling fear.<sup>81</sup> Yves Léonard estimates that approximately 40,000 citizens were imprisoned or deported to detention camps during the dictatorship (2018, p. 95). For D. L. Raby, ‘[t]he number of those killed in the notorious Tarrafal concentration camp in the Cape Verde islands, in gaol or police custody, in the repression of strikes and popular protests, and in armed uprisings against the dictatorship does not exceed 1,000 at the outside’ (1988, p. 2).<sup>82</sup> However, Fernando Rosas underlines that violent repression was only one aspect of a multifaceted nexus of violence that involved intimidation, control and paralysis (2018, pp. 196-202). After Salazar’s demise in 1970, weakened by its international isolation, destabilised by upheavals in Africa, and eventually bled dry by colonial wars, the regime was overthrown overnight by a coup staged by young army captains on 25<sup>th</sup> April 1974.

The fall of the New State was essentially pacific and bloodless, but historian Raquel Varela rightly emphasises that ‘the celebrations in the metropolis were at a cost: 13 years of horror in the colonies’ (2014, p. 24). In fact, in the early 1960s, Portugal, the poorest country in Western Europe, still subjugated vast swathes of southern Africa that totalled 22 times its size.<sup>83</sup> This huge empire was testament to Portugal’s maritime supremacy in the early Modern period. As Isabel Ferreira Gould suggests, the blatant imbalance between the colonised territories and Portugal informed key moments in recent Portuguese history, notably the collapse of the monarchy in 1910 and the end of the New State (2008, p. 183). Despite

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<sup>81</sup> The vivid account of Communist resister Margarida Tengarrinha (2020) offers an extraordinary case study of how individuals and left-wing organisations fought against the strictures of the regime in its later phase.

<sup>82</sup> Irene Flunser Pimentel discusses in detail the import of political crimes in Salazar Portugal (2007, pp. 387-412).

<sup>83</sup> Given the restrictions of this doctoral project, it is not my intention to map out the manifold historiographical issues around Portugal’s empire and its collapse. Elizabeth Buettner offers a thought-provoking, fully-referenced introduction to what she calls ‘Portugal’s overseas amputations’ (2016, p. 190). Mateus/Mateus (2011) provide a discriminating discussion of the origins of the Colonial Wars in Angola. In the early 1960s, Angola and Mozambique constituted the substantial part of the Empire alongside other Portuguese colonies in Africa: Guinea-Bissau as well as the archipelagos of Cape Verde and São Tomé and Príncipe. In addition, Portugal still held sway over its so-called ‘Oriental Empire’, consisting of several outposts along the Malabar Coast in India, Timor-Leste in Southeast Asia and the island of Macau, whose return to China in 1999 spelled the end of almost six hundred years of Portuguese expansion.

reiterated condemnations from the international community, the New State regime continued to regard its so-called ‘overseas provinces’ [‘províncias ultramarinas’] as integral parts of Portuguese territory. In the post-war period, whilst all former imperial powers (including Francoist Spain) were withdrawing from Africa, Portugal waged an anachronistic colonial war, spreading over Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique and Angola from 1961 to 1974, in order to suppress incipient African liberation movements. Salazar, adamant that Portugal and Lusophone Africa formed one entity,<sup>84</sup> embarked on a military conflict that was to become ‘the longest war waged in the twentieth century by a European nation south of the Sahara’ (Medina, 1999, p. 149), even though it was globally overshadowed by conflicts in Vietnam and in the Middle East (Léonard, 2018, pp. 167-168). These wars marked the end of what Eduardo Lourenço calls Portugal’s ‘tragico-maritime history’ (2014, p. 347).

Rui de Azevedo Teixeira is right in pointing out that ‘[t]hat dictatorship [...] is characterised by a degree of oppression which increases from the centre to the periphery, from the metropolis to the colonies’ (1998, p. 32). During the wars, roughly 25 % of the Portuguese men in military age were sent to Africa (Clarke, 1995, p. 195). In terms of casualties, one million young men, generally ill-equipped and cursorily trained, were sent to Angola. Of these, 9,000 Portuguese fell in combat; over 30,000 were wounded (Medina, 1999, p. 149). As for the African rebels, the number of casualties and the extent of devastation inflicted on the civilian population are still under investigation. Varela suggests that up to 100,000 African civilians and rebels were killed (2014, p. 102). Scholars are agreed that the Colonial Wars, obdurately protracted by the regime, were a collective experience in the sense that the conflicts cannot be disentangled from Salazarism: ‘a literature against the war would, in the final analysis, be a literature against the regimes of Salazar and Caetano, against their perversity and their horribly repeated mistakes’ (Medina, 1999, p. 153). This direct causality is, in fact, made explicit in the novel, for the narrator claims he is one of ‘the involuntary occupiers of a foreign land, the agents of a provincial form of Fascism’ [‘ocupantes involuntários em país estrangeiro, agentes de um fascismo provinciano’] (*Land*, p. 105; *Cus*, p. 155).

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<sup>84</sup> João Medina reports Salazar’s statement from 1963 whereby he claimed that ‘we are as well and first and foremost and more than all others an African nation’ (1999, p. 151). Varela convincingly demonstrates the causality between political dictatorship in the metropolis and the extent of repression in the colonies (2014, pp. 24-48).

## Scholarship

A towering figure in contemporary Portuguese literature, Lobo Antunes has elicited extensive scholarly interest in the Portuguese-speaking world.<sup>85</sup> His work is also widely acclaimed abroad, especially by Anglo-Saxon critics. George Steiner's esteem is indicative of the general trend in criticism: 'António Lobo Antunes is an outstanding novelist. His ironic and markedly concentrated fictions address moral and political questions in a way that makes him the heir to Conrad or Faulkner' (in: Coelho, 2004 p. 225). Interestingly, as shall be seen, the ironic aspect of his oeuvre has been overlooked in scholarship. As regards Lobo Antunes's use of language, commentators are in agreement that his work stands out for its 'excessive' (dos Santos, 1996, p. 38) quality, i.e. 'a sort of rhetorical excess, reminiscent of Góngora, that allows for his work to be associated with the baroque tradition and, possibly, with expressionist currents' (*ibid.*). Sensuous metaphors, hyperboles, lexical flamboyance, and shocking analogies are the characteristic traits of Lobo Antunes's aesthetics. More specifically, Calafate Ribeiro detects the effect of twentieth-century Portuguese history in the author's experimenting with language: 'Lobo Antunes reacts to the rhetoric immobility of the New State [...] with a vivid, provocative language' (2004, p. 293). In fact, thematically, graphic depictions of physicality, bordering on obscenity, are intertwined with a vast reflection on the remnants of Colonial Wars, the transition to democracy in Portugal, and the advent of consumerism. In employing hypotactic sentences, juxtaposing visceral images with a vast nexus of intertextual references, transitioning from one sense to the other, the text offers a potent intellectual and sensory experience.

*Cus/Land* is the second novel by Lobo Antunes, published in 1979, in the aftermath of the Carnation Revolution and seven years after the author had returned from his actual service as a military surgeon in Angola.<sup>86</sup> To this extent, do Vale Cardoso suggests that Lobo Antunes is 'the only author for whom the Colonial War represented an extension or a continuity' (2011, p. 20), whereas, for Inès Cazalas, the narrative is akin to a '*via crucis* where each station is fully detailed and confirms the omnipresence of the deaths [...] claimed by the great Salazarist crusade' (2019, pp. 9-10). Voicing several topoi in the scholarly

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<sup>85</sup> Gina M. Reis (2011) offers an extensive bibliography of works of critical commentary in Portuguese and English dedicated to Lobo Antunes's oeuvre. Reis points to the comparatively high number of Master's theses and doctoral dissertations which are testament to Lobo Antunes's popularity with younger scholars (pp. 369-373). Margarida Calafate Ribeiro lists several works dealing with *Land/Cus* specifically (2004, p. 264).

<sup>86</sup> Norberto do Vale Cardoso stresses that Lobo Antunes regards this novel as "'a singular book", the "book of the books"' (2011, p. 21). More recently Felipe Cammaert rightly stressed that *Land/Cus* is one of 'the definitive works of twentieth-century Portuguese literature' (2019, p. 20).

response to the text, José N. Ornelas is adamant that '[t]he unnamed protagonist still lives the reality of the colonial war, which precludes any possibility of a positive narrative framework that will restore meaning to his life' (2011, p. 323). This claim can be broken down to three main traits characterising the current Lobo Antunes scholarship. It first points to the 'haunting past' and the attendant notion of PTSD. Then, it concentrates on the centrality of negativity as the valid epistemological framework to read his oeuvre. And, finally, it posits meaninglessness as instrumental to the appreciation of the novel. Ornelas adds that the protagonist is 'condemned to a life of unmitigated ontological insecurity and an endless voyage of anguish' (p. 327). Indeed, commentators have been willing to pathologise the narrator. Isabel Moutinho maintains that '[m]uch of the gloom and maladjustment the narrator of *Os Cus de Judas* displays seems symptomatic of certain disturbances linked with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)' (2008, p. 33). Tormented by the past, the narrator is said to 'to relive his traumatic memories of war' (p. 34). In other words, the past seems to be firmly intertwined with the notion of loss, as Eunice Cabral suggests: '[t]he novels of António Lobo Antunes hitherto published (15 to date) always have loss as the core of their narrative fabric' (2004, p. 363). The idea of loss is here to be understood broadly and encompasses the end of childhood and of mental sanity, but also the losses of war.

This scholarly insistence on trauma, and the shattering of the self, seems to echo some of Lobo Antunes's statements about the Colonial Wars. In interviews, Lobo Antunes has invoked the idea of shattering in relation to his experience of Colonial wars between 1971 and 1973.<sup>87</sup> Looking back at the years following his return, he admits that '[t]here was a part of me that was still alive. This is why I came back from there without, as far as I'm aware, considerable after-effects. Sure, I still carry them inside me. There are things that can't heal' ['[h]avia uma parte de mim que continuava viva. Isso fez com que viesse de lá, tanto quanto tenho consciência, sem grandes sequelas. Claro que as trago. Há coisas que não cicatrizam'] (in: Vaz Marques, 2013, p. 45). Nevertheless, the author recently made this surprising claim: '[t]he most beautiful thing I have ever seen so far is Angola, and, despite poverty and the horrors of war, I continue to like it with a love which does not falter' ['[a] coisa mais bonita que vi até hoje foi Angola, e apesar da miséria e do horror da guerra continuo a gostar dela com um amor que não se extingue'] (*Crónica*, p. 29). Ambiguity is here key. Thus, Víctor Escudero is right in stressing that the experience of brutalisation is recounted from a narrative

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<sup>87</sup> Lobo Antunes was sent to Angola as a lieutenant commanding a medical unit. He was stationed at the frontline, where he witnessed war perpetration and fighting at close quarters.

position which ‘does not occlude aspects that are obscure, ambiguous, or overtly contradictory’ (2012, p. 72).

The issues of war and suffering have drawn most debates in scholarship. That being said, Lobo Antunes has often stressed the occluded aspect of humour in his work. Lamenting the relatively one-dimensional approach to his work, Lobo Antunes is careful to stress that ‘my books aren’t sad. I couldn’t spend much time on a novel if it were sad or depressing. Cardoso Pires told me too that he did not understand why my books are said to be sad, because for him they were full of joy and humour, and I think so too, I do not understand why this sense has kept up’ [‘os meus livros não são tristes. I Não poderia conviver tanto tempo com um romance se fosse muito triste e deprimente. Cardoso Pires também me dizia que não entendia por que se diz que os meus romances são tristes, porque para ele estavam cheios de alegria e humor, e eu também penso nisso, não sei porque fica esse sentimento’] (in: Blanco, 2002, p. 65). Following these remarks, three critics have engaged in detail with the importance of comedy in Lobo Antunes’s oeuvre.<sup>88</sup> In her survey of the comic, Graça Abreu rightly signals the ‘caricatural hyperrealism’ (1998, p. 147) as one of the main comic features of Lobo Antunes’s work. For Abreu, this device is made explicit by several tropes, such as anamorphosis or hyperboles. Indeed, biting satire and distorted reality are prompted by what Abreu calls ‘the mismatch between expression and content, due to the incongruity, either elevating or deriding, of the former in the relation to the latter’ (p. 152). For Abreu, the privileged objects of Lobo Antunes’s scathing humour are the Portuguese upper middle class, their values and the grand luso-tropicalist narrative. Abreu does not mention *Cus/Land*, but her remark about the lack of ‘any moral preconception’ (*ibid.*) in conjunction with Lobo Antunes’s use of the comic resonates with the novel discussed here. Abreu’s remarks are most discriminating, but she does not address the repercussions of the comic, both in terms of narrative authority and ethics.

The engagement with Lobo Antunes’s politics through the prism of humour lies at the core of two recent works. An unpublished dissertation from São Paulo University revolves around the comic in Lobo Antunes. In *António Lobo Antunes’s Biting Humour*, Elizabeth Maria Azevedo Bilange aims to ‘understand the whole process of the meaning of humour and comicality’ (2007, p. 17) throughout his oeuvre. In her endeavour to identify the process of comedy in Lobo Antunes, Azevedo Bilange is right to recognise the significance of the

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<sup>88</sup> Commentators mention the notion of humour in relation to *Land/Cus* sporadically. Seixo speaks of ‘pleasant irony, but also at times, uncontrolled sarcasm’ (2002, p. 38), whereas Moutinho suggests moments of ‘humorous generalisation’ (2008, p. 17). In passing, Moutinho discusses how irony ‘heightens the pathos of a moment in war’ (p. 21) as a way to illustrate ‘the discrepancy between family expectations and ugly reality’ (*ibid.*).

‘fundamentals of that serious humour, full of irony, of the tragic, of exaggeration, of nonsense, often of difficult approach’ (p. 22). In order to elucidate this complex issue, she uses a novel theoretical framework, interweaving Roger Caillois’s game theory, Iser’s narratological systems and Bakhtin’s ideas of the grotesque. Comedy in *Land/Cus* is only once mentioned as an example of the author’s ‘critique of Fascism, the absurdity of war and the historical aberration of colonialism’ (p. 20). In her concluding remarks, Azevedo Bilange claims that his work ‘shows us that Antunes, albeit matured by the Angolan War, does not lose his humanity’ (p. 203). Getting back to the core argument of her thesis, she concludes that ‘[w]ith that biting humour of his, Lobo Antunes strips bare the stifling and blinding hypocrisy and prompts us to fight for a better world’ (*ibid.*). This assertion is crucial as Azevedo Bilange implies that humour in Lobo Antunes assumes a meliorative function and that it aims at cathartic transformation. This chapter does not suggest that Lobo Antunes pursues a humanitarian agenda in his use of the comic. On the contrary, I contend that in his use of biting satire and cruel sarcasm, the narrator subverts customary notions of ethics and narrative authority. More recently, Susana João Duarte Carvalho in her PhD from Coimbra University seeks to analyse the comic in the representation of Portugal in focussing on Lobo Antunes’s ‘style mobility’ (2019, p. 8) which she identifies as ‘an unstable compound, that generates expressive collisions and stimulates a hybrid of network of perceptions which, inadvertently, provoke laughter’ (*ibid.*). Duarte Carvalho’s doctorate, which alludes to *Land/Cus* at places, does not engage with the crucial notion of readerly participation and ultimately the ethical consequences for our understanding for the narrator’s ethics.

### Monologic dominance and seductiveness

‘You, for example, with your aseptic, competent, dandruff-free air of an executive secretary, would you be able to breath inside a painting by Bosch, overwhelmed by demons, lizards, gnomes hatching from eggshells, and staring gelatinous eyeballs?’ [‘Você por exemplo, que oferece o ar asséptico competente e sem caspa das secretárias de administração, era capaz de respirar dentro de um quadro de Bosch, sufocada de demónios, de lagartas, de gnomos nascidos de cascas de ovo, de gelatinosas órbitas assustadas?’] (*Land*, p. 66; *Cus*, pp. 56-57). An angry address to the female protagonist, the pathos-laden intertwining of sophisticated cultural references with the depiction of actual warfare and the very physicality of the imagery: this passage exemplifies the general tone of the narration in the novel. Indeed, the narrator moves from a satirical, frankly misogynistic indictment of post-industrial modernity

to the evocation of Early Netherlandish paintings, thronged with legendary creatures. Crucially, this passage is characterised by an assemblage of images that interweave the close observation of minute details with cultural history. In his discriminating analysis of the novel, Escudero coins the term ‘poetics of obliqueness’ (2012, p. 76) in order to define the exuberance of *Land/Cus*. For he posits that ‘[t]he unmediated access to the objective reality of experience seems impossible. It is only through a linguistic shift or through semantic, metaphorical short-circuits that one can sense the subject position of the individual’ (*ibid.*). It is evident that this narrative angle proves most effective. For in the diegesis, the female addressee, even though she stays silent throughout, decides to spend the night listening to the narrator and eventually sleeping with him. In other words, for all his talk about his hermetic reclusiveness, the narrator manages to cut through to the interlocutor and seduce her. Accordingly, this intradiegetic seductiveness reverberates with the readerly position, for the addressee could be assumed to stand for the readers. This raises the question as to what extent readers can relate to and derive pleasure from the exuberant tirade of a war veteran.

At first sight, what is distinctive about *Land/Cus* is the elevating power of the narrative voice. The narrator perorates in a torrential flow of great rhetoric vehemence: he is unequivocal about his personal disaster and the attendant fall of the world surrounding him. In other words, this text recruits the reader’s empathy for the narrator, for we are confronted with a man broken by war, having a broken marriage and having broken with his social background. In fact, the narrator sums up his existence bluntly: ‘[p]erhaps the war has helped to make me the person I am today whom I deep down reject: a melancholic bachelor whom no one phones and from whom no one expects a call’ [‘[t]alvez que a guerra tenha ajudado a fazer de mim o que sou hoje e que intimamente recuso: um solteiro melancólico a quem se não telefona e cujo telefonema ninguém espera’] (*Land*, p. 71; *Cus*, p. 62). Psychic suffering is, therefore, omnipresent in the novel. To this extent, in his comparative analysis of tragedy and comedy, Morreall rightly underlines the importance of the representation of suffering in the self-assertion of the tragic hero: ‘suffering prompts the hero to think about what is happening. [...] Suffering is the natural occasion for this self-affirmation and self-definition’ (1983, p. 10). What is crucial here for this chapter is the framework of tragedy which usually inflects most readings of the novel. In fact, Morreall adds that in tragedy, ‘[e]motions we feel with and feel for the hero are reaction to their noble suffering’ (p. 11).

The narrator’s gloomy outlook on life is highly seductive, as it recruits a sense of humbling engrossment and vicarious feeling of empathy in the reader. Crucially, the notion of seduction is actually played out in the diegesis as it provides the basic narrative setting for the

encounter between the narrator and his female counterpart: ‘if you don’t mind, [...] I’ll bring my chair a little closer and have another drink or two with you’ [‘se não vê inconveniente, aproximo um pouco mais a minha cadeira e acompanho-a durante um copo ou dois’] (*Land*, p. 39; *Cus*, p. 28). Whether the woman actually consents, is left unanswered.<sup>89</sup> These few words cause the narration to unleash the narrator’s torrential soliloquy. This aspect of the plot illuminates the vital questions of narrative seductiveness and readerly participation.<sup>90</sup> As shall be seen, narrative seduction is prompted by a wealth of narrative tools that encourage the reader’s involvement: the use of unchallenged monologic speech; the conflation between the nameless female protagonist and the reader; the sensual quality of Lobo Antunes’s writing (with an emphasis on graphic sex); the self-pitying status of the narrator (an outcast leading an apparently reclusive life) and, finally, the general binary system of values supported by an antagonising narrator.

In the first instance, the narrator addresses the speechless protagonist frontally in a way which prefigures a dialogue without ever effectuating it. The interlocutor is supposed to exist in the diegesis by means of the narrator’s validating statements. On the first page already, the narrator, apparently aware of his antics, addresses the reader/interlocutor directly: ‘I know it may sound idiotic’ [‘não sei se lhe parece idiota o que vou dizer’] (*Land*, p. 19; *Cus*, p. 9) before embarking on the first series of his idiosyncratic analogies.<sup>91</sup> But, his interlocutor is also the projection of his ebullient imagination. For, a few paragraphs in, the narrator mentions the gender of his conversation partner under a curious circumstance: ‘[i]f, for example, you and I were anteaters, rather than two people sitting in the corner of a bar, I might feel more comfortable with your silence, with your motionless hands holding your glass, with your glazed fish eyes fixing now on my balding head’ [‘[s]e fôssemos, por exemplo, papa-formigas, a senhora e eu, em lugar de conversarmos um com o outro neste ângulo de bar, talvez que eu me acomodasse melhor ao seu silêncio, às suas mãos paradas no copo, aos seus olhos de pescada de vidro boiando algures na minha calva’] (*Land*, p. 21; *Cus*,

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<sup>89</sup> With a hint of sarcasm, Phyllis Peres aptly points out that ‘[i]n fact, her jingling bracelets speak more than she does’ (1997, p. 200, n. 13), whereas Calafate Ribeiro speaks of ‘desencontro’ which could be loosely rendered as ‘un-encounter’ (2004, p. 263).

<sup>90</sup> Critics have analysed the narrator’s initial fascination with the black instructor’s ‘slow ellipses’ [‘elipses vagarosas’] (*Land*, p. 19; *Cus*, p. 9) and the female trainees’ ‘gauzy tones as those voices you hear at airports announcing the departure of planes, cotton syllables that dissolve in the air’ [‘vozes tão de gaze como as que nos aeroportos anunciam a partida dos aviões, sílabas de algodão que se dissolvem nos ouvidos’] (*ibid.*) as striking symbols of stylistic effectiveness (see, for example, Moutinho, 2008, p. 16).

<sup>91</sup> The direct address in the original went lost in translation. A literal (and infelicitous) translation would read: ‘I don’t know if what I am going say seems idiotic to you’. In the complex system of address in European Portuguese, the third-person indirect personal pronoun ‘lhe’ is genderless. Therefore, at this stage of the novel, it is not clear whether the narrator addresses his female interlocutor or a generic reader.

p. 11).<sup>92</sup> The narrator first points to the distinction between two self-contained individuals, before wishing both he and the voiceless, stolid woman were transformed into rummaging mammals. More generally, this passage can also refer to the silent, motionless, book-holding and observing reader. This is indicative of the narrator's yearning for visceral belonging and his attempt to seduce the reader. This narrative seductiveness draws on the centrality of rhetorical questions which give the impression of a lively conversation: '[t]ell me something: how do you sleep? Face down, thumb in mouth [...]?' ['[d]iga-me lá, como é que você dorme? Deitada de bruços, de polegar na boca [...]?'] (*Land*, p. 70; *Cus*, p. 61). These questions also refer to the direct diegetic level, insofar as they involve the various stations of their sensuous encounter: '[s]o what's it to be, your place or mine?' ['[p]ara sua casa ou para a minha?'] (*Land*, p. 105; *Cus*, p. 97). The same applies to the numerous interjections whereby the narrator addresses his interlocutor: '[l]isten. Look at me and listen. I so need you to listen' ['[e]scute. Olhe para mim e escute, preciso tanto que me escute' (*Land*, p. 72; *Cus*, p. 63). Similarly, many examples show the integration of the interlocutor's supposed speech. As the two protagonists are sitting in his car, the text incorporates the noise into the diegesis: '[w]hat? The war in Africa? Yes, you're right, I'm getting off the point, like an old man on a garden bench' ['[o] quê? A guerra de África? Tem razão, divago, divago como um velho num banco de jardim'] (*Land*, p. 108; *Cus*, p. 100). All these elements enhance the attraction of the monological narrative.

The narrator claims that he has been forced by war into a latent state of gloom and into his reclusive life. The deleterious repercussion of the Angolan war of independence element has been repeatedly commented on in scholarship. Escudero's statement is symptomatic of scholarly consensus: for him, the narrator 'is wholly impregnated with war, and everything revolves around war' (2012, p. 73). From this observation, scholarship usually infers that this necessarily leads to negative feelings. But a closer look at the narrative belies this assumption, insofar as the narrator is swift to transfigure the experience of war into a grand narrative. In a self-aggrandising gesture, the narrator claims he personifies the history of Portugal and of the Old World. Suffering from the scorching heat in Angola, he proclaims: 'I felt like the melancholy heir to an old country, moribund and ungainly, to a Europe replete with palaces like carbuncles and ailing cathedrals like bladder stones' ['sentia-me melancolicamente herdeiro de um velho país desajeitado e agonizante, de uma Europa repleta de furúnculos, de

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<sup>92</sup> Here again, English and Portuguese address systems differ considerably. In the original, the narrator addresses a female stranger on formal terms, whereas in Modern English, 'you' is the only and general form of address. For a succinct introduction, Richard Ashdowne offers a comprehensive, if not flawless, overview of the address system in European Portuguese (2016, pp. 903-904) in comparative Romance linguistics.

palácios e de pedras da bexiga de catedrais doentes’] (*Land*, p. 63; *Cus*, p. 51). Not only does his monologue convey the sense of individual collapse, but the narrator claims his fate actually personifies the fall of Western grandeur. A hermit really, he also wallows in melancholic meditations about the senselessness of life. He avoids mirrors lest he be confronted with his ‘sad smile’ [‘sorriso triste’] (*Land*, p. 105; *Cus*, p. 97), and he admits his self-hate: ‘[i]sn’t it the same with you? Don’t you ever feel the urge to vomit yourself up’ [‘[n]ão sucede o mesmo consigo? Nunca teve vontade de se vomitar a si própria’] (*Land*, p. 86; *Cus*, p. 78). It is therefore no surprise that the narrator finds himself unable to relate to other human beings. Verbal communication is reduced to ‘voices, like distressed bats looking for each other’ [‘vozes, morcegos aflitos que se procuram’] (*Land*, p. 68; *Cus*, p. 60). This bestows upon him the solemnity of the disengaged and wise man, perorating about the human condition in pointing to ‘the touching, inexpressible bitterness of our condition’ [‘a tocante e inexprimível amargura da nossa condição’] (*Land*, p. 41; *Cus*, p. 30).

Thematically, the powerful seductiveness of the narrative is conveyed by bold metaphors where distortion is key. Animals take on human features: ostriches are personified as spinster gym teachers (*Land*, p. 19; *Cus*, p. 9). Conversely, human beings are distorted into animals: summing up his experience of war, the narrator emphasises that ‘[w]e were fish, you see, in aquariums of cloth and metal, dumb fish, simultaneously fierce and tame, trained to die without protest’ [‘[é]ramos peixes, percebe, peixes mudos em aquários de pano e de metal, simultaneamente ferozes e mansos, treinados para morrer sem protestos’] (*Land*, p. 116; *Cus*, p. 109). When driving through Lisbon, he makes the following remark: ‘Lisbon, even at this hour, is a city as devoid of mystery as a nudist beach’ [‘Lisboa, mesmo a esta hora, é uma cidade tão desprovida de mistério como uma praia de nudistas’] (*Land*, p. 119; *Cus*, p. 19). This stylistic excess seems to accompany the actual mental state of the narrator in the diegesis. Indeed, the text indicates that the narrator, knocking back whisky one after the other, gradually loses touch with his immediate surrounding as he gets intoxicated: ‘well, you know how it is, vodka blurs time and cancels distance, your name is really Ava Gardner’ [‘sabe como é, o vodka confunde os tempos e abole as distâncias, você chama-se na realidade Ava Gardner’] (*Land*, p. 59; *Cus*, p. 48). All these elements show that one pole of the novel is firmly monologising. However, the primacy of the monologue does not rule out moments of playfulness, since the use of the name Ava Gardner introduces an incongruous comparison with the American star actress. It is, in fact, thoroughly unclear whether the narrator is suddenly confused about the addressee’s identity or whether he jocularly imagines sharing the star’s company.

## The comic and dialogue

In listing the leaflets he regularly finds in his letterbox, promoting anti-hair loss serums, anti-stammering cures and bad-breath treatments, the narrator ridicules the shortcomings of old age. However, what first comes across as the diagnosis of senility is suddenly undermined by the following remark: '[n]o, really, I'm only half-joking, mostly to disguise the humiliation of failure and the disappointment threading its way through your silence' ['[n]ão, oiça, só estou a ironizar em parte, sobretudo para disfarçar a humilhação do meu fracasso e a desilusão que atravessa de leve o seu silêncio'] (*Land*, p. 187; *Cus*, p. 184). In essence, this episode illustrates the general comic mode of the novel, as it abruptly shifts from the frankly grotesque enumeration of anti-age commodities to the narrator's tragic 'failure' ['fracasso']. In claiming he is 'half-joking' ['ironizar em parte'], the narrator signals his unreliability. The comic is enmeshed in the narrator's suffering in the sense that comedy is partly employed to camouflage his shame and to recruit the reader's sympathy. In what follows, I will argue that the comic favours both close participation and intellectual distance from the narrator's account. Revelling in despair, the narrator draws on self-parody and sarcasm in a way that forces readers to re-assess the moral solemnity of his torrential flow. First, the comic undermines the rigid monologisation of the narrative and the transcending function of suffering. In this, readers are prompted to re-evaluate the audacious hyperboles and the narrator's conflation of time and space into one continuum. Indeed, by means of its dialogic quality, the comic favours a distance allowing for a more dynamic appreciation of the text. Second, by means of its overindulgent gloom and its constant self-deprecation, the text casts doubts precisely on the monolithic authority of the narrative voice. Thus, by means of the comic, the text favours a dialogic space where readers can engage with the narrator's account. In this, the distinctive comic tone of the novel ruptures the reader's worldview and invites them to engage with the narrator's unsettling narrative. If the text sensitises readers to the experience of war and dictatorship, comic excess and the narrator's biting remarks impede a full appropriation of the narrator's viewpoint.

By means of hyperbole, the narrator transfigures the question of silence imposed on his generation of war survivors. Analysing the outbreak of the Carnation Revolution and the concomitant end of the Colonial wars in Africa, he makes his point quite clear: '[i]f the revolution is over, and in a sense it is, it's because the dead of Africa, their mouths full of earth, cannot protest, and hour by hour the people on the right are killing them again' ['[s]e a revolução acabou, percebe, e em certo sentido acabou de facto, é porque os mortos de África,

de boca cheia de terra, não podem protestar, e hora a hora a direita os vai matando de novo'] (*Land*, p. 74; *Cus*, p. 65). The ambiguity around the identity of those 'dead of Africa' (the Portuguese soldiers, the African mercenaries and/or the civilian population) sheds light on the general impact of the war on Portuguese society. Indeed, the narrator rightly detects the potential dangers that jeopardised the then fledgling democratic order in post-Revolution Portugal. As a matter of fact, the narrator transcends silence through his monologising impetus. To this extent, Moutinho pertinently evokes the notion of 'fundamental paradox' at the core of Lobo Antunes's work: 'this luxuriant, plethoric prose is most often used to narrate the dreariness of the lives of protagonists who share a somehow morbid taste for silence' (2011, p. 74).

Due to its comic excess, the novel equally questions narrative authority. On the one hand, the narrator assumes the role of the solitary satirist, i.e. a soliloquising authority driven by indignation and scorn. The narration, thus, assumes a distancing function. On the other, the narrator makes it absolutely clear that he yearns for a transformative interaction with other human beings. This tension interrogates the validity of the narrator's utterances throughout and is cause for comic episodes. In a novel which is usually interpreted as an indictment of Colonial wars, it is actually arresting that the narrator conjures up the metaphor of 'bulletproof vest' ['o colete à prova de bala'] to evoke the lack of interpersonal sincerity in peaceful Portugal: 'what if, for a few moments, we were to take off the bulletproof vest of world-weary guile and were, for example, to be sincere to each other?' ['[m]as suponha que havíamos despido, por minutos, o colete à prova de bala de uma maldade sabida, e éramos, por exemplo, sinceros?'] (*Land*, p. 155; *Cus*, p. 150). Love is not only to be thought of in terms of a battlefield, it is also a combat sport: 'we are like two judo experts who fear each other enough not to hurt each other' ['somos como dois judocas que se temem o suficiente para se não ferirem'] (*ibid.*). In many ways, this antagonising ethos reverberates with the readerly experience of the text, for readers are exposed to the narrator's belligerent narration. In fact, the reader of *Land/Cus* is not a passive receptacle, but is actually energised by the comic exuberance of the text to engage with the narrator confrontationally.

With some hilarious understatement, the narrator declares: 'I, by some miracle, still possess a residue of metaphysical disquiet' ['[e]u, que ainda conservo por milagre um ténue resíduo de inquietações metafísicas'] (*Land*, p. 130; *Cus*, p. 126). In line with the narrator's assertion, the text can be understood as the exploration of one status: the posture of a war-traumatised, sarcastic misanthrope. With a consistent sense of exaggeration, his testimony articulates the notions of failure and shattering. Speaking on behalf of all his former

Portuguese comrades sent to Angola, the narrator claims: ‘we, the survivors, are still so doubtful of our own existence that, given our inability to move, we fear that [...] we are as dead as they are’ [‘nos, os sobreviventes, continuamos tão duvidosos de estar vivos que temos receio de, através da impossibilidade de um movimento qualquer, nos apercebermos de que [...] estamos mortos como eles’] (*Land*, p. 74; *Cus*, p. 65). In so doing, the narrator voices some of the archetypal aspects of the survivor syndrome: the burden of a tantalising past, a sense of inertia and a general impossibility to relate to the present. At first sight, this statement seems to reinforce the elevating solemnity of the monologising survivor. However, the comic invigorates a more dynamic relationship between the reader and the text. Indeed, this is mentioned by the narrator as ‘my inexplicable need to destroy the fleeting, day-to-day moments of pleasure, crushing them with my acid comments and my irony’ [‘[a] minha inexplicável necessidade de destruir os fugazes instantes agradáveis do quotidiano, triturando-os de acidez e ironia’] (*Land*, p. 154; *Cus*, p. 149). Far from being relentlessly tormented by his past, the protagonist exhibits a sense of comic impetus that he calls ‘irony’. On another occasion, he makes clear that, as a result of the Angolan war, he has become ‘a kind of sad, cynical greed made up of lascivious despair’ [‘uma espécie de avidez triste e cínica, feita de desesperança cúpida’] (*Land*, p. 41; *Cus*, p. 30). This confusion, blending a sense of despair and sexual appetite, is made explicit in the following self-definition. For the narrator calls himself a ‘cynical, disenchanting creature, mechanically performing the act of love with the indifferent, distracted gestures of someone eating alone in a restaurant, gazing inside himself at the melancholy ghosts that inhabit him’ [‘[uma] espécie de bicho desencantado e cínico, procedendo mecanicamente ao acto do amor nos gestos indiferentes e alheios dos comensais solitários nos restaurantes, olhando para dentro de si próprios as sombras melancólicas que os habitam’] (*Land*, p. 170; *Cus*, p. 166). The comic emerges from the anamorphosis whereby the narrator is transformed into an animalistic figure and a self-estranged automaton. The humorous tone of the scene is heightened by the incongruous analogy between lonely figures in the public space and sexual intercourse. For all the narrator’s wretchedness, this does not exclude the comic enjoyment of the excessive depiction of solitude in this passage. This coexisting of feelings allows for an understanding of the text. If readers can show understanding for the narrator’s melancholia, they are, however, energised by the comic excess to notice the constructedness of the narrator’s display of feelings.

Claiming to have fallen victim to war, the narrator conjures up a series of archetypal images that are commonly associated with loss, destruction and gloom. However, these elements are compromised by audacious hyperboles or instances of the comic double. The

narrator first compares his life to a shipwreck, a literary trope symbolising impending catastrophe and unstoppable calamity. In his view, the bar, where most of the diegetic present unfolds, is apparently sinking: ‘the bar becomes a *Titanic* sinking fast, full of silent mouths singing silent hymns, opening and closing like the fat lips of fish’ [‘o bar é um *Titanic* que naufraga e as bocas caladas entoam hinos sem som, abrindo-se, fechando-se à laia dos beiços tumefactos dos peixes’] (*Land*, p. 83; *Cus*, p. 75). Here, the notion of disaster is mediated by two comic devices. The hyperbolic image of destruction resonates with the comic antiphrasis of silent choirs. In addition, the scene is grotesquely reinforced by the brusque transition between the grand idea of devastation and the detailed vision of fat fish lips. Even though the narrator signals the collective experience of drowning, readers are coerced from this over exaggerating image into stepping back and re-evaluating the narrator’s excess. Similarly when the narrator finally ends up engaging in sexual intercourse with the silent woman, he claims that ‘[t]his bed is an island adrift in Lisbon’s sea of buildings and rooftops’ [‘[e]sta cama é uma ilha à deriva no mar dos prédios e telhados de Lisboa’] (*Land*, p. 183; *Cus*, p. 180). If the bed is adrift, this does not prevent the female protagonist from walking away in the early hours. This calamity, however distressing it may be, favours a sense of grandeur in the narrator. The ship is sinking, but he is an alert and clairvoyant witness: ‘I feel as if I were on the deserted bridge of a sinking ship’ [‘sinto-me na ponte de comando deserta de um navio que se afunda’] (*Land*, p. 107; *Cus*, p. 99). Not only is the ship/protagonist sinking, it also has no destination. In-between-ness is, thereby, key for the narrator’s proclaimed uprootedness: ‘[r]ootless, I float between two continents, both of which spurn me, I’m searching for an empty space in which I might drop anchor’ [‘[f]lutuo entre dois continentes que me repelem, nu de raízes, em busca de um espaço branco onde ancorar’] (*Land*, p. 201; *Cus*, p. 199). Faced with such confusion, readers can discern that, on many occasions, this in-between-ness is transfigured by the survivor into a self-aggrandising subject matter. Alongside the sinking-drifting vessel, the text draws on another prototypal image of imminent destruction: a corpse. But, what complicates the tragic representation of death here is the actual circumstance under which this passage unfolds. In fact, the narrator claims he is able to foresee his own dead body. For he explains how, one day, sitting by the Tagus, he looks at his own body floating off the shore: ‘I discovered [...] that I was dead, as dead as the suicides who throw themselves off the viaduct and whom we sometimes pass in the street’ [‘descobri [...] que estava morto, entende, morto como os suicidas do viaduto que de quando em quando cruzamos na rua’] (*Land*, pp. 125-126; *Cus*, pp. 120-121). In fact, this passage shows the grotesque distortion of the narrator’s perspective, for he can see his own corpse floating adrift in front of him. This

sense of doubleness is enhanced by the parallels drawn between him and those suicides that still saunter around Lisbon. These three instances point to the image of fluctuation between various spatial and emotional vantage points. To this extent, the comic can accommodate the different tensions between the actual representation of suffering and the grotesque excessiveness of the narrator's account.

This sense of magnified aboulia is further developed by the narrator when he claims that his metaphysical turmoil is also literally palpable. Not only is his surrounding world devoid of substance, the narrator himself is also physically void. A medical doctor, he auto-diagnoses himself as clinically empty. In fact, after a one-hundred-page-long monologue, he is adamant to stress that 'no sound reached my ears through the rubber tubes of the stethoscope' ['nenhum som me veio, pelas borrachas do estetoscópio, aos ouvidos'] (*Land*, p. 133; *Cus*, p. 128). By definition, solitude implies a lack of interhuman activity and, in this passage, the narrator's inner silence signals the absence of dialogic relationship. This paradox reaches its apex in the narrator's audacious claim that he often loses the ability to speak. In fact, having compared his four-bedroom-flat to the barren and uninhabited image of a desert (*Land*, p. 144; *Cus*, p. 139), he adds that, when left alone for some time, he loses sense of any linguistic code: 'I try painfully to recall the Morse code of words, relearning the sounds like an aphasic having to start all over, with great difficulty, to use a code he has forgotten' ['tento penosamente recordar-me do morse das palavras, reaprendendo os sons à maneira de um afásico que recomeça, dificilmente, a usar um código que esqueceu'] (*ibid.*). This self-pitying assumes some ridiculous traits. It is, in fact, quite questionable that the narrator, otherwise particularly verbose, has to re-familiarise himself with language, every time he is left alone. The comic here emerges out of the sheer implausibility of the narrator's statement and out of his alleged illiteracy. In fact, readers are invited to enter into dialogue with and open up to the narrator's monologising loneliness. Faced with the narrator's grotesque speechlessness, the reader is invited to substitute for this silenced generation and speak on behalf of the war survivors.

To this extent, excessive melancholia is central to the protagonist's self-aggrandising account. In his recollections, he constantly revels in retrieving the past and in acknowledging the fleeting quality of time. On repeated occasions, the narrator evokes the former grandeur of Portugal and the destructiveness of time in focussing on photographs, weathered monuments, and ageing bodies. This insistence is also visible by means of melancholy-laden analogies. Depicting his impression of Angola, he says: 'I felt [...] as if I were floating, swaying about in my soldier's boots, in the unreal clarity of old photographs, where the iodine bleaches the

shapes of people and the expressions on their faces into one dazzling sunspot' ['era como se vogasse, de botas da tropa a baloiçarem, na claridade irreal das fotografias antigas, onde o iodo dilui as expressões e os contornos numa nódoa solar que nos afoga'] (*Land*, p. 158; *Cus*, p. 152). Here, the narrator becomes a spectral photography. This melancholic excess informs his perception of his own house where he apparently feels like 'a stranger in a strange apartment' ['um estranho numa casa estranha'] (*Land*, p. 135; *Cus*, p. 130). Accordingly, loneliness is key as it contributes to his position as a broken man: '[b]ecause you see, I was always alone, Sofia, during primary school, college, university, hospital, marriage, alone with the books I had read far too many times and with my own vulgar, pretentious poems' ['[p]orque sempre estive isolado, Sofia, durante a escola, a liceu, a faculdade, o hospital, o casamento, isolado com os meus livros por demais lidos e os meus poemas pretensiosos e vulgares'] (*Land*, p. 172; *Cus*, pp. 167-168).<sup>93</sup> Solitude is here presented as the stereotypical image of the intellectual recluse. The idea of poetic isolation is then associated with the notion of literary failure. Self-tormented, the narrator concedes that he is petrified by 'the longing to write and the tormenting fear that I couldn't' ['a ânsia de escrever e o torturante pânico de não ser capaz'] (*Land*, p. 172; *Cus*, p. 168). This self-commiseration reaches its apogee as the narrative draws to its close. 'I would desperately like to be different, to be someone capable of loving without embarrassment' ['[q]uereria desesperadamente ser outro, sabe, alguém que se pudesse amar sem vergonha'] (*Land*, p. 187; *Cus*, p. 184).<sup>94</sup> This self-imprisonment is deceptive, since the entire narrative succeeds in eliciting the reader's sympathy.

This excessive meandering also undermines the protagonist's reminiscences from Africa. Whilst in Angola, learning about his daughter's birth in the metropolis, the narrator sees in his new-born child the potential redemption 'for my mistakes, my defects, and my faults, for the failed plans and grandiloquent dreams' ['dos meus erros, dos meus defeitos e das minhas falhas, dos projectos abortados e dos sonhos grandiloquentes'] (*Land*, p. 85; *Cus*, p. 77). In this self-reflexive confession, the narrator exhibits a sense of atonement, materialised by the birth of another human being. However, this optimism is immediately ruptured by his anguished perception of his future. In fact, his future plans are suddenly compromised by the pervading effect of African dust. This menacing weather is not confined to Angola, it also overlaps with Lisbon: 'the diffuse, volatile, omnipresent, passionate clarity that you find in Matisse's paintings or in Lisbon afternoons, which, like the African dust, gets

<sup>93</sup> This pathos-laden passage is compromised by the fact that the narrator suddenly addresses the woman he loved in Africa 'Sofia' instead of the nameless addressee.

<sup>94</sup> A misunderstanding mars the English translation here. It overlooks the reflexive pronoun *se* which should be rendered by the passive mood as in 'someone that could be loved without embarrassment'.

in through every crack and crevice, through closed windows and the soft spaces between the buttons of a shirt' ['essa claridade difusa, volátil, omnipresente, apaixonada, comum aos quadros de Matisse e às tardes de Lisboa, que como o pó de África atravessa as frinchas, as janelas cerradas, os intervalos moles que separam uns dos outros os botões da camisa'] (*ibid.*). Here, the narrator artfully combines the past and the present, geographical distance and proximity, a cultural reference to European painting and a melancholic observation of Lisbon. Faced with this audacious juxtaposition of references, readers are taken aback and compelled to disentangle this synesthetic enmeshment. But, concomitantly, readers are seduced by the narrator's stylistic artistry. By means of the narrator's heightened sensuousness, readers enter in contact with the narrator, for they are physically touched by his account whilst recognising the highly constructed dimension of his narrating voice. This double dynamic allows for a dialogue with the text which both signals our understanding and our distance from the narrator's account.

This sense of personal torment is projected onto the world, for his surrounding environment is permeated with a distinctive gloom. A spectre really, he wonders around Lisbon, which he associates with 'sad family vaults' ['tristes jazigos de família'] (*Land*, p. 124; *Cus*, p. 119). This sense of illusion is made explicit by the narrator's familiarity with ghosts: 'I used to live surrounded by ghosts in an old house that was like a ghost of itself' ['sempre vivi rodeado de fantasmas numa casa antiga que era como que o espectro de si mesma'] (*Land*, p. 124; *Cus*, p. 48). Human transience is corroborated by his feeling of uprootedness. Comparing his life with the settled-down existence of his lower-middle-class neighbours, he voices his concerns about his lack of connection with society: 'there lingers in me the stubborn suspicion that they'll throw me out one day' ['existe sempre em mim a suspeita tenaz de que me vão expulsar'] (*Land*, p. 134; *Cus*, p. 129). Not only is the narrator presenting himself as a dead living, but, reaching the apex of self-disparagement, he sees himself as a dog: 'I feel, you see, like one of those dogs that sniffs away, intrigued, at the smell of his own urine on the tree he's just left' ['[s]into-me, sabe como é, como os cães que farejam intrigados o odor da própria urina na árvore que acabaram de deixar'] (*ibid.*). Notions of self-alienation and distortion are made explicit here. In intensifying his self-disparagement, he reduces himself to an amnesic animal. His excessiveness, however, dismantles the extent of dehumanisation.

This striking self-identification as a dog is at odds with what the narrator otherwise claims. In the only sequence in which the narrator admits he shares values with his social background, he mentions the 'terrible fear of looking ridiculous' ['o medo arrepiado do

ridículo'] (*Land*, p. 44; *Cus*, p. 32). Eager to prove his point, the protagonist says that, otherwise, he would love 'to wear a poof clown's outfit when I see my patients' ['de atender os meus doentes vestido de palhaço pobre'] (*Land*, p. 44; *Cus*, p. 33). This comic edge is at the centre of the novel. A middle-aged man, the narrator's privileged object of scathing remarks is his own ageing body, his reclusive life, and his unsatisfactory sex life. This disillusioned self-disparagement, often verging on cruelty and callousness, exhibits moments characterised by self-deprecating comedy. This comic stratagem puts the reader into an ambiguous position vis-à-vis the narration. If readers are made to sympathise with this suffering narrator, this is immediately disrupted by the emergence of comic excess. Wandering alone around his vast flat, the narrator says he feels like someone 'who coughs occasionally just to feel as if he had company' ['tossindo de tempos a tempos para se imaginar acompanhado'] (*Land*, p. 71; *Cus*, p. 62). Here, the comic arises out of the theatrical image of a man trying to cover silence with his cough. Put differently, this humorous mechanism gestures towards the doubleness of the scene, for the narrator is well aware that he is masking his loneliness by means of his coughing. Here, readers substitute for this absent counterpart and are prompted to engage critically with his monologue.

Not only does this comic outlook inform his perception of the world as a result of the war, but it also inflects his actual depiction of war and Colonial Africa. Upon his arrival in Luanda, describing his immediate environment, the narrator notes that white men are drinking champagne 'like dying whales stranded on a final beach' ['à maneira de baleias agonizantes ancoradas numa praia final'] (*Land*, p. 34; *Cus*, p. 23). This analogy is emblematic of his mediation of colonial exploitation. He privileges the distorted images of obese and dislocated bodies, the exaggerated sensuousness of Angolan women, and the grotesque antics of overwhelmed soldiers. In fact, for him, Angola is 'a false universe' ['um universo falso'] (*Land*, p. 39; *Cus*, p. 28). Perambulating around the city, he comments on the '[t]he colourful squalor of the slums' ['[a] miséria colorida dos bairros'] (*Land*, p. 36; *Cus*, p. 25) and 'the slow thighs of the women' ['as coxas lentas das mulheres'] (*ibid.*). All this is cause for 'a strange sense of the absurd that had been nagging me ever since we left Lisbon' ['um sentimento esquisito do absurdo, cujo desconforto persistente vinha sentindo desde a partida de Lisboa'] (*Land*, p. 36; *Cus*, pp. 25-26). In one of the few moments documenting his actual mission in Africa, he describes how he supplied medicine to Angolan civilians. Advancing towards him, the population takes on grotesque features: these 'Bosch-like larvae of all ages' ['larvas de Bosch de todas as idades'] (*Land*, p. 51; *Cus*, p. 39) act 'like the monstrous toads

of a child's nightmare' ['à maneira dos sapos monstruosos dos pesadelos das crianças'] (*ibid.*).

This nightmarish scene is immediately ruptured by the presence of an Angolan nurse, Senhor Jonatão, whose characterisation tips into grotesque caricature. Running around, the nurse 'smiled all the time like the Chinamen in *Tintin* stories' ['sorria constantemente como os chineses do Tim-Tim'] (*ibid.*). The audacity of this image is threefold: for it conflates the smiling Chinese subalterns of an overtly racist comic book, such as Hergé's *The Blue Lotus/Le Lotus bleu*, with a black nurse. Crucially, in referring to a book probably read by most readers in their childhood, the text dissolves the safe barriers between fiction and real-life experience, as it interpellates our fruition of comics as young readers and the attendant set of values conveyed by Hergé's comics. Interestingly, the narrator does not opt for the more obvious *Tintin in the Congo/Tintin au Congo* to describe the Angolans, probably as a way to signal the persistence of racist stereotypes in the portrayal of non-white characters. Finally, the outrageousness of the image is shockingly amusing, as it works as a collage of cultural stereotypes and various media. Alongside this intertextual comedy, the grotesque is commonly associated with odd-looking physiognomies. In fact, examining an Angolan woman in Cago Coutinho, he compares that patient to 'a vast ambulant gluteus maximus' ['um imenso glúteo rolante'] (*Land*, p. 53; *Cus*, p. 41). Pushing that narrative device to the extreme, he notes that her nose 'was like a painfully swollen haemorrhoid' ['se aparentava a inchaço incómodo de hemorróida'] (*ibid.*). There is something utterly outrageous, but not entirely un-comic about this detail. The inversion of body parts, especially the genitals, has a long tradition in grotesque comedy. What is unsettling here is the object of the narrator's grotesque remarks, a suffering woman. That nose is the striking evidence for dehumanising colonial policies, for it is probably indicative of medical malpractice or, simply, of absence of healthcare.

If Angola is presented in the novel as a gruesome and corrupt corner of the falling Portuguese empire, post-Revolution Portugal does not offer a place of solace to the narrator either. In many ways, the narrator does not differentiate between the Salazarist regime and the new democratic order. This sense of continuity is enhanced by the grotesque tone of the narrator's remarks. Faced with this questionable continuum between a dictatorship and post-Revolution liberal democracy, readers are coerced by the comic into re-organising the narrator's outrageous claims. His flat in Lisbon is presented as a ludicrous place of worship where the grandeur of a Gothic cathedral is conflated with petty-minded preoccupations: 'this Chartres Cathedral made for prosaic customs officers whose nightmares bristle with invoices

and balance sheets' ['esta catedral de Chartres à medida de despachantes de alfândega sem poesia de que os pesadelos se eriçam de facturas e livros de balanço'] (*Land*, p. 138; *Cus*, p. 133). Accordingly, his vast abode overlooks a cemetery (*Land*, p. 137; *Cus*, p. 132). Overdramatising his age, he makes an abrupt and incongruous transition between his healthy appetite, posited as testament to his vitality, and his actual health: 'I will remember the ardent, healthy young man I was many years ago, able to eat a second helping of chicken stew without getting heartburn, and for whom the horizon of the future was not limited by the Andean peaks of a threatening electrocardiogram' ['lembrar-me-ia do jovem saudável e ardente que há muitos anos fui, capaz de repetir sem azia o frango na púcara, para quem o horizonte do futuro não era limitado pelo perfil de cordilheiras dos Andes de um electrocardiograma ameaçador'] (*Land*, p. 97; *Cus*, p. 89). The juxtaposition of a chicken stew and Andine topology is ridiculous in its exaggeratedness. He casts himself as a valetudinarian and elderly man, whereas he is actually in his late thirties. In addition, he fantasises about withdrawing to his flat for a month in avoiding any human contact. This constant self-disparagement escalates to a comic episode. Indeed, the narrator claims that his future would take on Kafkaesque traits: 'I would gradually metamorphose into the perfect insect of a colonel in the army reserves or a retiree from a savings and loan, corresponding in Esperanto with a Persian bank clerk or a Swedish watchmaker, drinking lime tea on the balcony after supper, checking the unshaven faces of my collection of cacti' ['me transformaria, de metamorfose em metamorfose, no insecto perfeito de um coronel na reserva ou de um aposentado da Caixa Geral de Depósitos, correspondendo-se em esperanto com um bancário persa ou um relojoeiro sueco, e bebendo chá de tília na marquise a seguir ao jantar, verificando a barba por fazer da colecção de cactos'] (*Land*, p. 139; *Cus*, p. 134). The comic in this passage arises from the caricature image of retirement and sophistication. The narrator intensifies the idea of a diligent middle-class clerk, probably harmless, who shares his vain pursuits in a constructed language with distant interlocutors. The comic also emerges from the grotesque details and the final image of his 'unshaven' succulents. This episode also engages with the stereotypical image of melancholia. In fact, the comic is triggered by the archetypal vision of a melancholic old man (he appositely uses the adjective 'perfect' ['perfeito']), growing small plants, leading a solitary life, and having abstruse recreational activities.

A great deal of the comic in the novel is provided by the sarcastic observation of social mores in Portugal. Here again, the narrator seems both repelled by and drawn to domesticity. In *Land/Cus*, domesticity is usually understood as a social practice of belonging, which the narrator eventually rejects. With great exaggeration, he repudiates relationships as being

compromised by consumerism and modernity: '[t]hose who live together and reluctantly share the same duvet and toothpaste suffer a similar sense of isolation [...]. The evenings spent watching TV and plotting vengeful conjugal murders, the fish knife, the Chinese jar, a timely shove out of the window' ['[o]s que moram a dois, aliás, e dividem com má vontade o edredão e o dentífrico padecem de resto de um isolamento semelhante [...]. Os serões junto à televisão acariciando projectos vingativos de assassínio conjugal, a faca do peixe, a jarra da China, um oportuno empurrão pela janela'] (*Land*, p. 155; *Cus*, pp. 149-150).<sup>95</sup> What emerges from this depiction of marital life is the tension between the apparent union and the grotesque disruption of this relationship with a series of petty crimes. This ridiculous representation of domestic violence is also made explicit by the causative connection between murder and the Chinese deco object. The sheer audacity of his diagnosis of modern life is alluring. At the same time, his sarcasm is so exaggeratingly scathing that it gestures towards its self-reflexivity.

In the economy of the novel, there is a distinctive element of binarism. Seixo speaks of 'the basic narrative structure on two planes (Lisbon and Africa; the present and the past; mythical childhood and disillusioned youth [...])' (2002, p. 39). To this extent, *Land/Cus* is fundamentally articulated around the gender divide which runs between the male protagonist and the female character. What is more, the narrator draws on a strong ideological dialectics that polarises his world into clear-cut categories. In fact, the narration can be read as a relentless rejection of the narrator's social and historic background. This strong polarisation, often verging on the grotesque, does not alienate the reader. Quite the contrary, by means of its comic exaggeration, the text prompts the reader to engage in a dialogue with the antagonising narrator. Fallen victim to the narrative of the Luso-tropicalist empire, the narrator vituperates against the social values of his class, the debased morals informing his youth, and the pivotal notion of manhood. In other words, social, political, and cultural authorities are presented as stultifying and harmful. Under the actual bust of Salazar, pro-regime principles are uttered by 'false teeth of indisputable authority' ['dentaduras postiças de indiscutível autoridade'] (*Land*, p. 26; *Cus*, p. 15). More specifically, his male family members, whose pompous earnestness he always admired as a boy, are the object of the narrator's spiteful remarks. In fact, surrounded by paintings reinforcing the burden of the former generations, he finally understands that the elderly family members are vain sex maniacs when he works out that 'their whispered confabulations, as inaccessible and vital as

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<sup>95</sup> The translation does not do justice to the slight sarcastic tone suffusing the first sentence in Portuguese which could be literally translated as 'those who live in two'.

the gathering of gods, were about the merits of the maid's eminently pinchable bottom' ['os seus conciliábulos sussurrados, incessíveis e vitais como as assembleias de deuses, se destinavam simplesmente a discutir os méritos fofos das nádegas da criada'] (*Land*, p. 26; *Cus*, pp. 15-16). This is crucial, as the narrator's conscription into the military service is welcomed as a way to 'make a man of him' ['de torná-lo um homem'] (*Land*, p. 26; *Cus*, p. 15). In addition, beyond the specific paradigms of his family, the national history of Portugal is disparaged as a distinctive failure: 'I've always been in favor of erecting in some suitable square in Portugal a monument to spit, a spitting bust, a spitting marshal' ['[s]empre apoiei que se erguesse em qualquer praça adequada do país um monumento ao escarro, escarro-busto, escarro-marechal'] (*Land*, p. 35; *Cus*, p. 24). Seixo aptly remarks that the notion of polarisation is accentuated by 'the fact that the text is structured around "pub talk" in the context of "a confessional and a nightly seduction"' (2002, p. 38). Rejecting his milieu, the narrator assumes the role of the social outcast. In sum, an outsider in the military in Africa and in post-revolution Portugal, the male protagonist seeks validation on the part of the reader. In his oversentimentalising account, he skilfully resorts to a wealth of narrative and thematic devices that trigger the reader's identification with his overbearing monologue.

In the text, the gender divide assumes a distinctive function. At its most basic level, *Land/Cus* is constructed around an encounter between a man and a woman. Be it tantalising mothers, Salazar fanatics, or disappointing sexual partners, women are constantly presented as impulsive or strangely stolid. From his disillusioned perspective, his self-effacing and self-sabotaging interactions with all female characters verge on the ridicule. Describing his sensuous encounter with a TAP flight attendant in Luanda, the narrator draws on some curious details that complicate the scene. Devoid of her uniform in real life, the hostess had 'lost the coefficient of mystery that I stubbornly attribute to all angels – a leftover from the catechism – even those who walk down the aisle of a plane serving plastic meals' ['perdia o coeficiente de mistério que eu teimo em atribuir aos anjos por vício que me ficou do catecismo, mesmo aos que servem refeições de celofane num corredor de avião'] (*Land*, p. 111; *Cus*, p. 103). Here, the male gaze invests women with religious attributes. However, this rebarbative cliché is interrupted by the comic detail of flight meals. This compels readers into an ambiguous position where they are both seduced and perplexed by the outrageously misogynistic representation of this female character. Furthermore, the incongruous interweaving of spiritual images with plastic appliances is subsequently thematised by means of several items he comes across in the hostess's flat: he puts his glass on a bamboo coffee table where he notes that 'the navel of a Pantagruelian Buddha shook with ceramic laughter'

[‘o umbigo de um buda pantagruélico estremecia gargalhadas de loiça’] (*Land*, p. 112; *Cus*, p. 103). Under the gaze of the statue, petrified, he is unable to have an erection. His penis is reduced to ‘a wrinkled piece of tripe’ [‘uma tripa engelhada’] (*Land*, p. 113; *Cus*, p. 104). This breakdown in communication is also hyperbolically rendered in his dealings with his cleaning lady in Lisbon. For he recounts that ‘a woman from Cape Verde comes, I’ve never seen her and we communicate via polite messages that we leave stuck on the door of the kitchen cupboard’ [‘uma cabo-verdiana que nunca vi, e com quem comunico por intermédio de mensagens cerimoniais depositadas no armário da cozinha’] (*Land*, p. 106; *Cus*, p. 98). What is incongruously comic about this specific passage is the medium through which he avoids contact with the cleaner. Withdrawn from social life, his only relation with a human being happens by means of ceremonial notes.

In looking at his relationship with female characters, a great element of the novel’s rhetoric power rests on the use of sexualised images and corporeality. Indeed, in *Land/Cus*, sex is chiefly indicative of the narrator’s perception of the world, his (lack of) proximity with other human beings, and his politics. Masturbation is presented as symptomatic of a lack of sexual partners and of physical closeness. Auto-eroticism is associated with the void of existence: ‘do you know what it’s like wanting to make love but having no one to make love to, the misery of having to masturbate not thinking of anything’ [‘compreende o que é querer fazer amor e não haver com quem, a miséria de ter de masturbar-se a pensar em nada’] (*Land*, p. 119; *Cus*, p. 112). Other episodes are aimed at recruiting disgust. Describing how pro-regime fanatics would come to his military base in Santa Margarida in central Portugal to support young soldiers by offering them religious medals, the narrator disparagingly remarks: ‘I always imagined the ladies’ pubic hair to be like a fox-fur stole and thought that, when aroused, drops of Ma Griffe and poodle drool would dribble from their vaginas’ [‘[s]empre imaginei que os pêlos dos seus púbis fossem de estola de raposa e, que das vaginas lhes escorressem, quando excitadas, gotas de Ma Griffe e baba de caniche’] (*Land*, p. 30; *Cus*, p. 19). This passage is unsettling as it combines animalistic elements with sexualised ageing bodies and bodily fluids in an attempt to trivialise the regime values. It uses corporeality to shock and disturb in a powerful way. In other words, sexual relationships are equated with ‘that form of pagan gymnastics’ [‘essa espécie de ginástica pagã’] (*Land*, p. 153; *Cus*, p. 148). But alongside this analogy, the narrator also characterises his potential sexual intercourse as flaccid hatred: ‘sexual relations between you and me would be a kind of flabby violation, a hasty exhibition of joyless loathing, the damp defeat of two exhausted bodies on the mattress’ [‘as relações sexuais constituem entre nós, percebe, uma violação mole, uma apressada

exibição de ódio sem júbilo, a derrota molhada de dois corpos exaustos no colchão’] (*Land*, p. 154; *Cus*, p. 149). Here, breakdown in communication is mediated by comic devices. Contrasting and sordid elements create a sense of confusion. Sex is reducible to unsatisfactory exercise, to an interpersonal struggle. This is confirmed in the narrative that the main protagonist suggests that the copulation they perform is akin to a catastrophe: ‘[h]ow was it for you? Only so-so? Sorry, I’m not in shape today’ [‘[g]ostou? Assim, assim? Desculpe, não estou em forma hoje’] (*Land*, p. 186; *Cus*, p. 183).

This sense of disaster, of which the narrator is well aware, is cause for several grotesque episodes. Albeit overlooked in scholarship, *Land/Cus* exhibits a fair number of scenes in which the narration resorts to playfulness. Far from being an exclusively gloomy observant of war vicissitudes, the narrator also revels in the spectacle of human curiosities. His amused remarks directly involve the reader. He recalls, for instance, how an old upper-class friend of his mother’s, impoverished, sharing her bare flat with her pets, got evicted. Beset by ‘[a] crowd of impatient creditors, baker, milkman, grocer, butcher’ [‘[u]m enxame de credores impacientes, padeiro, leiteiro, mercearia, talho’] (*Land*, p. 81; *Cus*, p. 73), she had to give away her last possessions to a pawnbroker. The evictors, grotesquely described as ‘former foreground wrestlers in overalls’ [‘antigos lutadores de feira, de fato-macaco’] (*ibid.*), take down her ‘grand piano that occasionally emitted a discordant squeak of protest’ [‘o piano de cauda que soltava de tempos a tempos o ganido de protesto de um lá desafinado’] (*ibid.*).<sup>96</sup> In front of this disaster, his mother’s friend has a slightly incongruous reaction. Far from being outraged, she purports to show indifference, waiting for the eviction to be over, exhibiting ‘the proud pose of an exiled princess for whom the clocks go backward, marking only the hours that have been and gone’ [‘a postura soberba das princesas exiladas, para quem os relógios rodam para trás, marcando horas que já foram’] (*ibid.*). The comedy arises from the disjunction between the threatening mass of creditors and the debtor’s apparent detachment vis-à-vis her own bankruptcy. By means of its playfulness and of its abundance of bizarre details, the scene undermines the narrator’s moral pedestal. Instead, readers are invited to laugh both with him and at him. For it is plausible to detect in that lady’s personal disaster several parallels with the narrator. Both these embattled characters are at loggerheads with the present and both exhibit a pretence of detached solemnity in the face of adversity. Whereas the old aristocrat’s protest is voiced by a discordant piano, the narrator’s resistance is communicated by a no less jarring narrative. This sense of self-deprecating humour is echoed

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<sup>96</sup> The translator has opted not to specify that the piano is actually emitting squeaking As.

in a crucial scene. When told about his imminent departure to Angola, the narrator has a meltdown: ‘I locked myself in the bathroom and wept, a piece of Christmas cake lodged in my throat’ [‘tranquei-me no quarto de banho para chorar, um bolo-rei impossível de engolir entupia-me a garganta’] (*Land*, p. 76; *Cus*, p. 67). What seems to be the climax of despair is actually turned into a ludicrous episode that contrasts with the seriousness of the context. Again, the narrator is grotesquely silenced, in this case by an actual cake (‘bolo-rei’ [literally ‘king cake’]). This pivotal moment in the novel is turned into an anti-climax, for readers are at a loss as to whether feel pity for the terrible news or laugh at the incongruity of the cake.

Finally, the question of laughter is emblematic of the novel’s ethics. For the narrator claims that war has made him ‘a cynical, prematurely old creature laughing at himself and at others with the bitter, cruel, envious laughter of the dead, the silent, sadistic laughter of the dead, the repulsive, oily laughter of the dead’ [‘uma criatura envelhecida e cínica a rir de si própria e dos outros o riso invejoso, azedo e cruel dos defuntos, o riso sádico e mudo dos defuntos, o repulsivo riso gorduroso dos defuntos’] (*Land*, p. 175; *Cus*, p. 171). For him, laughter is not indicative of shared enjoyment and complicity. Instead, his conception of laughter is closely associated with the customary notion of laughter as derisive. In his own words, his laughter is both sepulchral and markedly physical (‘oily’ [‘gorduroso’]). This intermingling of what seems both viscid and dead is disquieting, and the narrator emphasises that his laughter is anything but generous. Faced with this unsettling laughter, readers are invited to re-evaluate the narrator’s account. Concomitantly, the narrator also evokes the idea of innocent laughter as a counter-model to adulthood. He feels he still aspires to ‘the fragile pleasure of childish joy, of open, unreserved laughter, embalmed in purity, and which at night, when I’m walking home down a deserted street, I still seem to hear echoing at my back like a mocking cascade’ [‘o frágil prazer da alegria infantil, do riso sem reservas nem subentendidos, embalsamado de pureza, e que me parece escutar, sabe, de tempos a tempos, à noite, ao voltar para casa numa rua deserta, ecoando nas minhas costas numa cascata de troça’] (*Land*, p. 41; *Cus*, p. 30). Here, laughter is part of the wider problematic of downfall in the novel, for the narrator ruminates on the loss of childhood. However, in this passage, the narrator subverts the positive value associated with innocence. After having praised the innocuous gaiety of childhood, he then suggests that this laughter eventually comes across as mockery. Both the temporal dimension (at night) and the spatial location (an empty space; at the narrator’s back) convey the idea whereby this laughter symbolises the return of a repressed past. Instead of that ‘mocking cascade’ [‘cascata de troça’], readers are eventually prompted to show understanding for the narrator’s suffering.

## Conclusion

Evoking the atrocities perpetrated by the *Estado Novo* in Africa, a black medical student presents the narrator with a picture of a famished woman ‘on whose face one could see generations and generations of petrified revolt. | “This is our *Guernica*. I wanted you to see it before I left”’ [‘em cujo rosto se adivinhavam gerações e gerações de petrificada revolta: | – É a nossa *Guernica*. Queria que a visses antes de me ir embora’] (*Land*, p. 161; *Cus*, p. 156). Confronted with this image documenting dehumanisation, the narrator is swift to assimilate this photograph into his retelling of the war: ‘so my friend’s *Guernica* gradually became mine too’ [‘de forma que essa *Guernica* se transformou a pouco e pouco na minha *Guernica*’] (*Land*, p. 162; *Cus*, p. 156). Not that he had fallen victim to slavery and exploitation, but he explains that he was simply rebuffed in no uncertain way by Angolan civilians, as he was trying to provide them with medicine. This scene is emblematic of the narrator’s outrageous hyperbole as he has no qualms about transgressing boundaries. In the face of this narrative audacity, the use of the comic provides clarity as it enables readers to step back mentally and to assess the actual import of the narrative. Not that readers are completely immune to the intoxicating flow of the narrative, but comic shock stimulates readers into rethinking their subject position.

This oversentimentalising account of loss and destruction invigorates a sense of distance in the reader for we are prompted by the very excessiveness of his monologue to a more responsive engagement with the text. In this, the text explores the radical otherness of the survivor’s account. The excess of archetypal tropes with regard to victimhood, the ‘Africans’ and post-Revolution Portuguese society lends itself to exposing discourses of domination and prejudice. As Margaret Anne Clarke puts it, ‘the narrator’s disjointed reminiscences [...] resist reduction to transparent, commonsensical understanding’ (1995, p. 200). Precisely due to its unique monologisation, the text induces the readers to reassess their own appreciation of otherness critically. Therefore, what emerges from *Land/Cus* is a sense of dialogue insofar as the novel recruits both visceral participation and reflective distance. Thus, the comic proves a judicious mode to approach the text for the comic arises out of the unexpected and it negotiates between critical distance and amused closeness. By means of the comic, the text creates a self-reflective space that mitigates the rhetorical magnitude of the narration. In the face of the protagonist’s comic loquacity, readers are encouraged to substitute for his silent addressee and to actively re-assemble the narrator’s ‘disintegration in space/time without borders, nor centres nor peripheries’ (Calafate Ribeiro, 2004, p. 295).

In laughing at and with the narrator, readers show a sense of understanding for the narrator's unsettling account. There is, in fact, a distinctive element of playfulness in the narrative. In this, the novel ultimately favours a dialogue between the narrator and the reader. For the comic elicits an emotive and cognitive participation on the part of the reader. This disrupts the easy compartmentalisation between readers and the narrator. In sum, the comic sensitises readers to the experience of trauma. It illuminates our complicity with the narrator's questionable subject position. By relishing his exuberant worldview, readers are made to adhere to and understand the ethics of a war survivor. In this way, the narrator by means of the comic manages to restore the voices of those who suffered from dictatorship in Portugal and from the colonial wars in Angola. In recruiting a dialogue by means of comic exaggeration, the text succeeds in exposing readers to the shattered mind of a survivor. This comic ambiguity around the protagonist's subject position is explored further in the next chapter in which I am concerned with the cognitive shortcomings of an escapist simpleton.

## CHAPTER 5

### **The Funny Fool: Bohumil Hrabal's *I Served the King of England!* *Obsluhoval jsem anglického krále***

#### **Note on the Texts**

Hrabal's idiosyncratic use of the Czech language has gained a name for itself, as his prose is now usually referred to as 'Hrabalese' ['hrabalština'] in Czech letters. I have left the original spelling unaltered.

‘[A]nd now it seemed my lucky star was shining’ [‘moje šťastná hvězda mi zazářila’] (*King*, p. 163; *krále*, p. 322). For Dítě, the Lilliputian protagonist of Hrabal’s novel *King/krále*, this stellar stroke of luck is the prospect of being, finally, deported to a National Socialist concentration camp. Arrested by the SS, he makes his desire quite clear: ‘[w]hat I really wanted, since the war was coming to an end anyway, was to be arrested and sent to a concentration camp’ [‘přál jsem si, protože válka už se stejně chýlila ke konci, přál jsem si, abych byl zavřen, abych byl v koncentračním táboře’] (*ibid.*). Behind the bars of Pankrác Prison on the outskirts of Prague, undergoing strong-arm interrogations, regularly beaten up by yelling SS, he is over the moon, rejoicing in his interrogators’ abuse. His reaction to dehumanisation is arresting: ‘[w]hen they tossed me back in the cell the SS men shouted, You Bolshevik swine! And the words were sweet and tender music to my ears’ [‘když mne tam hodili, tak na mne s hnusem křičeli ti esesáci, ty bolševická svině!, a mně to označení znělo v uších jako lahodná hudba’] (*King*, p. 163; *krále*, p. 323). The comic effect of this passage emerges from the light-hearted, almost amused experience of political violence. In the face of coercion, the narrator’s apprehension of the world seems thoroughly ambiguous, since it is unclear whether Dítě can be seen as a simpleton or whether he is a shrewd National Socialist collaborator eager to be covered up.

At the core of Hrabal’s novel, there is a tension around the narrator’s subject position. The blatant cognitive shortcomings of the protagonist’s worldview involve the reader in a conflicted appreciation of the diegesis. Dítě’s farcical inability to come to terms with his immediate environment shatters our taken-for-granted expectations around how people should intellectually process extreme circumstances. The protagonist’s apparent foolishness, conducive, at times, to shocking episodes, exposes the contradictory aspect of the narrative, as it is fundamentally unclear whether Dítě has any sense of agency. The narrator’s naive amazement and the sheer amount of implausible scenes in the novel undermine any sense of narrative authority. However, this basic narrative pattern does not rule out rare moments of lucidity in the narrator. Dítě’s apparent idiocy is further complicated by his sudden transmogrification in the final chapter whereby he withdraws from the world’s riches and engages in introspection. This unexpected move could be testament to some degree of agency in the protagonist. In *King/krále*, readers are presented with a fundamentally ambiguous character who seems able to manipulate his self. Prompted by relentless ambition, compromising himself both under the National Socialist occupation of the Czech Lands and the subsequent Stalinisation of the country, he seems both devoid of any consciousness and

very much aware of his trajectory. In other words, the novel explores the ambivalence of a subject negotiating extreme circumstances.

In *King/krále*, readers are allowed into a narrative borderland where the depiction of atrocities is mediated by a character, whose surname Dítě means literally ‘child’ in the Czech language. As a fundamental line of argument, my aim is to demonstrate that ethical ambivalence is sustained by the consistent use of comic devices that warrant a general openness in terms of the narrative and its ethical repercussions. Due to its intrinsic ambivalence, the comic makes for ethical indeterminacy in the novel. It is thoroughly unclear whether Dítě’s narration can be trusted at all, for a general sense of aberration predominates throughout. Dítě’s subject position is systematically queried, for it is markedly open to question whether he can be ascribed any sense of agency or whether he is intellectually incapacitated. The abundance of different types of humour questions the readers’ participation in reading a text dealing chiefly with Nazi racial policies, ethnic cleansing, Stalinist collectivisation and Capitalist greed. In the face of political, military, and domestic violence, the hero, rather than being appalled, seems quite reluctant to voice any indictment. Ultimately, this chapter raises the question of how readers can laugh with and at a fundamentally unreliable narrator that proves to be both a self-deceptive fool and a manipulative genius.

Given the intellectual status of the protagonist, commentators have discarded the question of ethics in the novel. In his discussion of *King/krále*, Jan Matonoha stresses that ‘with Hrabal we are in the paradigm of a language, not in the paradigm of consciousness’ (2018, p. 7). Polina Golovátna-Mora develops this argument further in stating that ‘[t]he I-narrative of the novel imitates a personal narrative typical of memoirs, turning it into an eye-witness account of the epoch it describes [...], thus removing moralization from the novel’ (2016, p. 568). In his extensive study of Hrabal’s oeuvre, Jakub Češka argues with regard to *King/krále* that ‘Díte does not realise what is going on around him. His behaviour is simply instinctive; he does everything he can to get over everyone’s mockery’ (2018, p. 36). This exculpating appreciation of Dítě’s deeds needs qualification. For I argue that the use of humour in the novel opens up an uneasy arena where readers can reflect on and reckon with regressive escapism in the face of political violence. Thus, my aim is to demonstrate that the comic accommodates the general indeterminacy of the novel. In the first instance I will show how the text is suffused with narrative ambiguity. Then, I will identify the main comic mechanisms, ranging from the grotesque depiction of authority to farce over transparently comic episodes. In resorting to the narrative and ethical functions of the comic in the

*King/krále*, my aim is to open up a new perspective to the elusiveness of Hrabal's text. My final purpose is to show that, in focussing on the comic, a sense of ethical suspension is made visible throughout the novel. Ultimately, it behoves readers to adjust to their own sense of responsibility and cognitive appreciation of the world.

In this 'rags to riches to rags story' (Roberts, 2005, p. 59), Hrabal's novel portrays the exceptional rise and fall of one man, Dítě.<sup>97</sup> Born into the lower echelons of the social order in the Czech province, short in stature, but prompted by an unquenchable ambition, the protagonist aspires to become a wealthy and coveted hotel-owner. Compared to other Hrabal narratives, *King/krále* turns out to have a fairly linear plot, for it follows the different stations of Dítě's spectacular career chronologically. Thanks to his good fortune and his tenacity, always in compliance with the dominant political order, the hero climbs all the rungs of the social ladder: starting as a frankfurter vendor, he ends up owning and running an opulent luxury hotel. However, his rise has a high cost in terms of moral clarity. Seeking validation, but concurrently prompted by genuine, and amoral desires, he sees in the National Socialist invasion of Czechoslovakia the occasion of overcoming his low stature in wooing Líza, a fervent Nazi supporter. After they get married, Líza gives birth to Siegfried, a diversely able child who keeps hammering nails into the floor. After the end of the war and with the Communists seizing power, his magnificent hotel is confiscated by the new regime, and he ends up, willingly, in a millionaire camp. After his imprisonment, he finds himself deprived of all his assets, getting by as a road-mender in the province, privileging the company of animals. In this picaresque novel, Dítě's demand for attention is also cause for hilarious moments.<sup>98</sup> After waiting on the Emperor of Ethiopia during a luxurious ceremony in Prague, he is suspected of embezzling a missing gold spoon. In the face of these accusations, he hails a cab that drives him to a nearby forest when he is intent on hanging himself. When Dítě realises that he has no rope, the cab driver pulls off, and gives him a rope from his trunk. Thereafter, pulling away, 'blinking his lights in farewell, and as he drove out of the woods, he honked his horn' ['ještě zablikal světly na pozdrav, a než vyjel za lesíček, zahoukal'] (*King*, p. 117; *krále*, p. 301). In the end, the missing spoon is retrieved in the elbow drainpipe of one of the kitchen sinks, and Dítě's life is safe. The distanced humour of the cab driver and Dítě's farcical suicidal thoughts illuminate the general comic tone of the novel.

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<sup>97</sup> Tomáš Mazal offers a succinct account of the genesis of Hrabal's novel (2004, pp. 311-321).

<sup>98</sup> Ulrich Wicks defines the picaresque mode as 'that of an unheroic protagonist, worse than we, caught up in a chaotic world, worse than ours, in which he is on an eternal journey of encounters that allow him to be alternately both victim of that world and its exploiter' (1974, p. 242). Without venturing into debates around typology, I will stick to Wicks's definition.

## Scholarship

Hrabal's flamboyant poetics, replete with graphic sex, scurrilous details and ludicrous similes, has garnered the critics' interest, both inside and outside the borders of Czech academia.<sup>99</sup> Commentators concur that the expressive possibilities of language are of paramount importance to Hrabal's project. For Milan Jankovič, Hrabal's 'text rests on the loosening of language, on the gestural expansion of thoughts and images freely proliferating, jotted down spontaneously' (2016, p. 99). Květoslav Chvatík adds that '[w]hen reading Hrabal's best texts, we are enraptured by their evocative poignancy' (1992, p. 189). In other words, for these critics, central to Hrabal's writing is the extent of rapture and powerfulness. Aleš Haman convincingly suggests that '[o]ne of the fundamental traits of Hrabal's fiction is [...] its tastelessness. It is manifest in the selection of creative motives and images that give rise to feelings of revulsion, disgust and horror in the reader' (2002, p. 418). Indeed, Hrabal's texts are profligate with crude jokes and obscene scenes where bodily needs and lavish food eerily unite. As Vladimír Svatoň puts it, Hrabal privileges the physiological which is 'always extreme, focusing on food, drinking, sex drives, intellectual ecstasy' (2002, p. 567).

In the light of these motives, it is probably no surprise that critics have sought to understand Hrabal through the Bakhtinian prism of carnival laughter and the grotesque. One of Hrabal's early commentators, Emanuel Frynta, signalled Hrabal's thematic indebtedness to Jaroslav Hašek, the author of the farcical *Good Soldier Švejk*.<sup>100</sup> In Frynta's view, 'the very centre of their literary artistry is the same constituent, i.e. a distinct genre of a small town's folklore: the pub story' ['hospodská historka'] (2016, p. 31). What is distinctive about Hrabal's 'verbal fête' (p. 34), he adds, is the significance of the grotesque: '[y]ou find a great number of instances reminding you of a very specific type of films: the filmic grotesque' (p. 39). Indeed, the idea of the grotesque has been central to the critics' engagement with Hrabal's work. Jaroslav Kladiva is unambiguous in stating that 'Hrabal's irony has Renaissance quality. It is of the Rabelaisian type' (1994, p. 58). More precisely, Josef Zúmr identifies an affinity between Rabelais's transgressive writing and Hrabal's experiment with

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<sup>99</sup> Compared to other authors addressed in this doctoral thesis, critical debates around Hrabal can be more easily apprehended. Annalisa Cosentino's (2016) anthology provides a useful overview of Hrabal scholarship in Czech covering a wealth of major issues in scholarship from the early 1960s up to 2005. Petra James offers a comprehensive Hrabal bibliography (2012, pp. 416-421). Moreover, Susanna Roth's compendium of essays in German (1989) is illuminating as it gathers mainly international responses to Hrabal's oeuvre.

<sup>100</sup> Voted by critics as the best Czech novel of the twentieth century (Roberts, 2005, p. 164), Hašek's text presents the farcical lifestory of Švejk, a Czech soldier serving in the Austrian army during World War I, exhibiting immense idiocy, but managing to survive despite all odds. Hašek's novel has had a lasting influence on Czech culture.

the literary avant-garde (1999, p. 566). Chvatík regards Hrabal's poetic starting-point 'in the *carnivalisation of the world*, in the destruction of its ideological desinterpretation, in the return to poetic ecstasy, where he combines the high-brow and the mundane' (1992, p. 195). Applying a 'Carnival model' (2000, p. 34) to *Closely/Ostře*, Laura Shear Urbaszewski has identified 'the opposition between authoritarian culture and carnival laughter' (p. 39) prevailing in the novella. She convincingly argues that Hrabal's short story engages with the Czechs' experience under German Occupation, 'while alluding to the position of the creative writer in the time of Czech Communism' (p. 45).

A few Czech critics have sought to investigate the use of the comic in Hrabal. Kladiva aptly suggests that Hrabal's 'comedy is based on contrasts' (1994, p. 51). Indeed, the close association of ideas, their abrupt transition is at the core of Hrabal's poetics. However, Kladiva tends to disregard the potential of comedy in Hrabal. More precisely, he understands the use of comedy in a twofold way. On the one hand, he analyses the use of jokes 'as a symbol for the people's stultification [...]. It is an allegory, ironically gesturing towards the estrangement and the destruction of interpersonal relationships' (pp. 53-54). In his opinion, this instrumentalisation of humour is paralleled by another mechanism thwarting any identification between the author and his characters. He writes: '[t]he author differentiates, by means of dark humour, his own relation to his characters' (p. 57). If humour necessarily implies a sense of distance, Kladiva is, however, swift to add that 'Hrabal's irony is exempt from any viciousness or envy. It sustains Hrabal's love of humanity and of life' (p. 59). Jankovič, in his perceptive study of Hrabal's poetics, suggests that '[a] considerable part in them belongs to humorous, entertaining narration, the tone of which is often scathing, and resolutely plebeian' (1996, p. 176). Vulgar language is indeed key to Hrabal's oeuvre. However, far from being a farrago of insults and crude jokes, he adds that Hrabal's fiction 'intertwines triviality or even vulgarity with playfulness, with linguistic inventiveness' (p. 177). In Jankovič's analysis, two strands of enquiry prevail. Central to his enquiry is the extent of exaggeration in Hrabal. Indeed, he is apt to contend that 'exaggeration, grotesquely intensified, belongs to Hrabal's expressive means' (*ibid.*). Moreover, he dwells on the intermingling of unrelated elements, i.e. the co-habitation of different strands of meaning. They all conjure up a 'blurred effect, mixing between the serious and the non-serious' (p. 178). The centrality of disconnected episodes gives way to what he calls a 'short circuit' (p. 179) in the reader.

Central to Hrabal's use of humour is the unsettling, the rupture of taken-for-granted knowledge. In fact, Jankovič goes on to suggest that '[t]o astonish, to prepare more or less

consciously, an epistemological short-circuit, and to turn, by means of these short circuits, the whole narration towards the corresponding epistemological setting, were certainly the author's purpose, or rather his innate gesture' (p. 179). Finally, in his discriminating essay, called 'The Questions of Hrabalian laughter', Haman alludes to the grotesque specularity running throughout Hrabal's oeuvre. Haman explains that 'it emphasises the simultaneousness and inseparability of one side and the other side of life as dialectical units, in which love can be reflected in evil and the other way round' (2002, p. 419). For him, this very associative character, as opposed to logical causality, harks back to the visceral: Hrabal's fiction 'has the quality of primitive, popular storytelling, the blah-blah, whose narrative structure lacks any logical connection and is kept together only by means of the narrator' (p. 420). This creates a 'narrative mosaic' (*ibid.*), i.e. a conglomerate of disparate sources, influences which 'reminds, by means of its fierce and spontaneous progress, more of the 1920s American grotesque than of literary epics' (p. 421).

The co-existence of disparate elements has been regularly commented on in scholarship. Susanna Roth, Hrabal's German translator, notes 'the apparent, carefree pub banter [...], replete with tragicomic humour and grotesque hyperboles, which prompt readers to laugh' (1989, p. 15). Hrabal rejoices in intermingling slang with philosophical parlance, strong language with pseudo-romantic imagery. Nonetheless, the abrupt collision of contrasting elements has been under researched. If anything, critics only allude in passing to the comic potential of unconnected elements in Hrabal's narration. But they fail to recognise the ethical implications of this 'blurred' ethical world. This is astonishing, for Hrabal had no scruples about pointing to the significance of humour and its entanglement with suffering. In one interview, he is adamant that '[w]e have reached the conclusion that the tragic sense of life and humour are like twins [...]. Humour and laughter provide the best cognition; a sad circumstance is turned into a grotesque one, into the overt and implied senses of an anecdote. Everything that horrifies me is turned into humour from the angle of the grotesque. Under the aspect of eternity, everything is a joke' ['[u]soudili jsme, že tragický pocit života a humor jsou dvojčata [...]. Humor a smích je největší poznání, tristi událost se mění v událost groteskní, nadtexty a podtexty anekdoty. Všechno, čeho se děsím pod úhlem grotesky se mění v humor. Sub specie aeternitatis je všechno žert'] (in: Jankovič, 1996, p. 180). By so doing, Hrabal aligns himself with the traditional conceptualisation of humour whereby a smile is the Janus face of suffering. Resonating with Hrabal's comment, the cohabitation of humour and suffering is usually regarded as one of the distinctive traits of Hrabal's fiction in the media. Monika Zgustová, Hrabal's biographer, lauded 'the man that succeeded in intertwining things

where others didn't: humour and the tragedy of life, man's ordinariness and grandeur' (2004). This intermingling between humour and suffering requires closer scholarly attention.

This interplay between suffering and the bizarre results in the question of responsibility. As Cosentino remarks, 'the question of responsibility and of how history permeates Hrabal's work by means of the individual characters and nations, would require a proper study' (2006, p. 49). This opens up two lines of enquiry. For Milan Kundera, Hrabal 'was absolutely apolitical. This was far from being innocuous in a regime where everything had to be political: his indifference to politics would mock the world replete with ideologies' (2014, p. 67). Analysing Hrabal's use of language in the context of Communist stultification, Helena Kosková argues that '[i]t is no surprise that in the extraordinarily rich range of the author's language, are missing not only the vocabulary of political parlance, but even political reality altogether' (1987, p. 57). German publisher Siegfried Unseld is, however, careful to recall that Hrabal was not immune from guilt and a sense of responsibility towards history. In fact, Unseld, narrating his encounter with the Czech author in Prague in the late 1980s, reports that Hrabal was acutely aware of the notion of absolution and exculpation in relation to his literary output: '[m]y texts [...] are somehow the sentence I serve for swaying between crime and impunity [...]. Just now I put my head in my hands, when I look back at my past. I cannot pardon myself, so I am at least consistent in the fact that I carry the sense of my guilt through and in my text' ['[m]eine Texte [...] sind vorläufig die Strafe dafür, daß ich zwischen Verbrechen und Schuldlosigkeit schwanke [...]. Erst jetzt schlage ich die Hände über mir zusammen, wenn ich mir meine Vergangenheit bewußt mache, ich kann mir keine Absolution erteilen, und so bin ich wenigstens standhaft darin, daß ich durch den Text und im Text das Gefühl meiner Schuld trage'] (in: Unseld, 1989, p. 12). Hrabal's statement is striking, for it contrasts with the image of apolitical escapist often imposed on him. It shows that the question of guilt is instrumental to his oeuvre.

### Contextualisation

Pierre-Laurent Cosset and Lenka Graffneterová rightly stress that 'Hrabal placed his hero in one of the most eventful periods of recent Czech history' (2008, p. 33). For the rise and fall of *Dítě* is intertwined with three major historical events that informed the Czech Lands between 1918 and 1948. In 1918, the First Czechoslovak Republic emerged out of the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and as the result of nineteenth-century intellectual movements championing the independence of a sovereign community for Czechs and Slovaks. By the

early twentieth century, culturally and economically, the Czechoslovak territory had come to occupy a status of exception within the Empire. As William M. Mahoney recalls, Czechoslovakia constituted ‘two-thirds of the industrial base’ (2011, p. 146) of the Empire whilst being home to a quarter of its population. Due to such a concentration of wealth, Czechoslovakia was firmly aligned with ‘the industrially developed European nations’ (Harna, 2011, p. 401). Despite disparities between the centre and the peripheries, the newly established Czechoslovakia, its first president Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk hoped at least, was to become ‘a second Switzerland, with different nationalities living harmoniously together’ (Crowhurst, 2015, p. 19). Indeed, under Masaryk’s aegis, Czechoslovakia revelled in the alluring image of ‘a peaceful, moderate, and stable democracy guided by a philosopher-president’ (Mahoney, 2011, p. 148). Crucially, at the moment of its creation, the Czechoslovak Republic was anything but an ethnically homogeneous state. As well as Czechs and Slovaks, the country was a home to an ethnic patchwork of substantial minority groups such as Hungarians and Ruthenic Ukrainians in the East as well as Sudeten Germans in the North and the West.<sup>101</sup> The latter group’s frustrations with the Czechoslovak First Republic were lent further impetus in the wake of the National Socialist seizure of power in Germany and the subsequent annexation of Austria in 1938. In fact, Nazi Germany had made clear its intention to incorporate all the German-speaking communities scattered around Europe into the Reich. Concomitantly, tensions between Sudeten Germans and Czechs mounted to such an extent that the four Great Powers sought to settle the matter by forcing on the Czechoslovak government the acceptance of the Munich Agreement in September 1938.

The Munich Agreement was a disaster. Due to Neville Chamberlain’s ‘ignorance of Czechoslovak affairs and his urgent desire to avoid war’ (Crowhurst, 2015, p. 215), immense concessions were made to Nazi Germany which was adamant in asserting its rights over the Sudeten Germans. It was agreed that sovereignty over territories with a majority German population would be transferred to the Reich, resulting in the German annexation of a third of the total area of the Czech Lands comprising of 3.4 million Sudeten Germans. As a matter of fact, this actual dismemberment of the Czechoslovak Republic did not thwart Hitler’s plans to wage war and expand the so-called German Lebensraum. On the contrary, a few months later, German troops eventually invaded the rest of the Czechoslovak state which was, then, fully absorbed into Greater Germany as a Protectorate. Under the Nazi rule, most spheres of intellectual and cultural life were suppressed. German occupiers carried out racial persecution

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<sup>101</sup> Josef Harna discusses with great clarity the underlying tensions between the various non-Czech communities and the Czech political representation (2011, pp. 395-400).

against the Jewish population and other minorities with ferocious brutality.<sup>102</sup> As part of German settler colonialism, Aryanisation was enforced across the country insofar as a great number of industries and vast swathes of land fell into German ownership.<sup>103</sup> The subjection of the Czech Lands was met with anti-Nazi resistance both at home and abroad, culminating in the spectacular liquidation of Reichsprotektor Reinhard Heydrich at the hands of Czech underground resisters. As the war was drawing to its close, Edvard Beneš, the head of the Czechoslovak government-in-exile, sought to win over the Allies' support for his idea of a sovereign Czechoslovak state restored within its pre-Munich borders whilst accommodating the Soviet plans for the future reorganisation of Europe.

The collapse of the Third Reich and the end of six years of brutal Nazi occupation were to have two long-lasting consequences on Czech society. First, Czechs, harbouring strong anti-German resentment after WW2, expatriated 2,250,000 Germans (Kocian, 2011, p. 472), whilst 19,000-30,000 Germans perished in the context of reprisals and political brutalisation (Mahoney, 2011, p. 195). Post-war president Beneš did little to contain the retaliating actions against minorities. Added to the loss of civilian lives during the war (400,000), the expulsion of the Sudeten Germans caused significant damage in terms of population for the Czech Lands. Second, with the Red Army taking control over the Czech Lands in 1945, the Soviet Union was intent on integrating the embryonic post-war Czechoslovak Republic into its sphere of influence. In the context of the nascent Cold War, the Czechoslovak government decided to turn to Moscow in joining the Comintern in 1947. To offset their dwindling support, the Communists, part of a coalition government, implemented drastic measures, such as extensive nationalisation and the so-called 'millionaire's tax' which, in fact, affects *Dítě in King/krále*. Nationalisation took place gradually whilst the Communist party slowly increased its control on the offices of state, especially the armed forces. Unable to withstand a nationwide general strike ignited by Soviet agitation, the democratically elected coalition stood down in February 1948. Soon after the coup, the Communists staged a rigged election which consolidated their hegemony. The seizure of power by the Communists meant a drastic reorganisation of the state and the economy, with Czechoslovakia becoming a planned economy and civil liberties being suppressed. By the late 1940s, the country was in for 'a complete remake of the society into a

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<sup>102</sup> Jiří Kocian stresses that '[i]n the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia alone, 80,000 Jews fell victim to Nazi persecution, along with 70,000 Slovak Jews [...]. Of the total of 19,000 of Roma murdered in the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp, nearly 5,000 were Czech nationals' (2011, pp. 472-473).

<sup>103</sup> German historian Detlef Brandes's gigantic study of the Protectorate (here in Czech translation, 1999) is something of a classic. For a discussion of Nazi settlement policies, see pp. 351-356.

Soviet-style totalitarian system' (Pernes, 2011, p. 501). In its process of Stalinisation, the regime targeted the liberal intelligentsia in staging purge trials. For many, there was a sense of continuum between the Munich agreement in 1938 and the Communist coup ten years later. Hubert Ripka, an advisor to Beneš, voices a consensus amongst many Czechs at the time: '[t]wice in ten years, Czechoslovakia fell victim to its neighbouring superpowers: in 1938, it succumbed to National Socialist imperialism, in 1948 to Soviet imperialism' (1995, p. 23). Dítě navigates the constraints of these two regimes with the same aplomb.

### The pleasure of narrative unreliability

In *Closely/Ostře*, arguably Hrabal's most famous novella in the Western world, the first-person narrator draws a curious parallel between politics and his sexual impotence. After having lost his virginity with a member of resistance, Miloš considers himself finally apt to rebel against the German occupiers of Czechoslovakia. Oddly enough, he consciously fuses his sexual activity with his political act of the resistance: '[a]s it was, in twenty minutes my train would be here, my train loaded with ammunition, and I should have the opportunity of achieving something great, for I was no wilted lily now' ['[z]a dvacet minut přijede můj vlak naložený střelivem a já budu mít možnost vykonat velkou věc, protože už nejsem zvadlé lilium'] (*Closely*, p. 80; *Ostře*, p. 81). In this short story, the narration is based on his anxieties around being a 'wilted lily' ['zvadlé lilium'], as paralleled by the ability to take up arms. Penile erection is equated with political empowerment. Crucially, this aberrant conflation between politics and autobiography is also one of the central motifs of *King/krále*. The protagonist Dítě is affected by a sense of physical, social, and intellectual inferiority. Starting his career as a waiter, he dreams of building a business empire. With disarming honesty, he is unequivocal in stating his life goal: 'I was determined [...] to be the equal of everyone else' ['jsem si umínil [...], že se všem vyrovnám'] (*King*, p. 119; *krále*, p. 302). Yearning for social prestige, he embarks on a (meteoric) career as an entrepreneur, but remains an infantile figure, unable to compete with grown-up millionaires.

In her attempt to define narrative unreliability, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan enumerates the main features characterising this narrative voice: 'the narrator's limited knowledge, his personal involvement, and his problematic value-scheme' (1983, p. 100). In other words, an untrustworthy point of narrative identification elicits a sense of distance between the reader and the narrative point of focalisation. However, Ansgar Nünning points to the comic quality of narrative inconsistency: '[u]nreliable narration can be explained in terms of dramatic irony

because it involves a contrast between a narrator's view of the fictional world and the divergent state of affairs which the reader can grasp' (1997, p. 87). In *King/krále*, the disjuncture between the narrator's self-narrativisation and the reader's perception of the diegesis is key to the general comic tone of the novel. Crucially, *King/krále* ends with the self-reflexive image of Dítě's jotting down 'this story of how the unbelievable came true' ['tenhle příběh... jak neuvěřitelné se stalo skutkem'] (*King*, p. 241; *krále*, p. 357). The notion of 'the unbelievable' is repeatedly invoked by the narrator as a way to explicate radical and unexpected shifts in the narrative. The centrality of the 'unbelievable' conjures up the idea of a life supposedly ruled by coincidence and wonder. In evoking the ascendance of the 'unbelievable', Dítě's life seems radically alien to free will. He welcomes natural disasters, for instance: 'I understood that the drought was in fact sent by my lucky star' ['doufal jsem, [...] že tedy to sucho mi poslala moje šťastná hvězda'] (*King*, p. 183; *krále*, p. 331). Moreover, after his brief encounter with Zdeněk (as result of which he would go to prison), he cannot help exclaiming: 'here it was again: the unbelievable was coming true' ['to bylo zase to moje, kterak neuvěřitelné se stalo skutkem'] (*King*, p. 162; *krále*, p. 322). By 'the unbelievable', the hero does not mean any kind of occult magic. On the contrary, this idea of wish-fulfilment seems ruled by coincidence. This phrase, in underlining the most improbable storyline, is indicative of Dítě's altered perception of reality. Crucially, it is apparent that countless circumstances befall him as if the hero were devoid of a real sense of agency. In other words, the recurrence of 'the unbelievable' raises a couple of important issues. The narration leaves open the question of whether Dítě is endowed with a real sense of subjectivity since he seems often under the sway of his 'lucky star'. As a consequence, the recurrence of the 'unbelievable', postulated as a central plot element, illuminates the general unreliability of Dítě's narration.

Dítě's torrential soliloquy presents readers with a narrative and ethical conundrum subverting any univocal value-scheme. This is manifest in the narrator's act of writing which concludes the narrative: 'suddenly the writing began to flow, and I covered page after page while the pictures in front of my eyes went by faster than I could write' ['najednou se mi to rozepsalo a já jsem popisoval stránku za stránkou, pořád ten obraz přede mnou míjel rychleji a rychleji, než jsem stačil psát'] (*King*, p. 239; *krále*, p. 356). In this self-reflexive *mise-en-abyme*, Dítě seems enraptured, as if the creative urge holds sway over him. A precondition to these issues is constituted by Dítě's actual soundness of mind. His never-ending flow of puns,

jokes, is very much self-centred.<sup>104</sup> In each chapter, he addresses an imaginary audience whereby his narration is located in the public realm, probably in a pub.<sup>105</sup> The narrative quality of this public speech informs the actual truthfulness of his testimony. To this extent, one of the final scenes of the novel is powerfully telling. Leading the life of a recluse, he is, however, fearful of being alone. To remedy this solitude, he decides to cover his house with mirrors. This prompts him to bow to himself in front of his mirrors and to wish himself a goodnight. This double-self is made quite explicit by Dítě: ‘[n]ow I wouldn’t be alone until I went to bed, because there would always be two of me here’ [‘do té doby, než půjdu spát, tak nebudu sám, budeme tady dva’] (*King*, p. 231; *krále*, p. 353). This dual personality is, however, cause for much concern: ‘I stood in front of the mirror alone and looked at myself, and the more I looked at myself, the more alarmed I became, as though I were with a stranger, with someone who’d gone mad’ [‘stál jsem před zrcadlem sám, díval jsem se na sebe a čím víc jsem se na sebe díval, tím víc jsem se lekal, tak jsem se lekal, jako bych byl u někoho cizího, u někoho, kdo se zbláznil...’] (*King*, p. 240; *krále*, p. 357). This worrying thought prompts a scene paradigmatic of the ambivalence of the novel. In fact, Dítě goes nearer the mirror and ‘I breathed on myself until I was kissing myself in the cool glass’ [‘dýchnul jsem na sebe, až jsem se políbil v tom chladném skle’] (*ibid.*). In suppressing his self-reflection, he is able to show some self-compassion. The decision to steam up the mirror is testament to some ambiguity around Dítě’s self-perception, since it is unclear whether he is willingly erasing any sign of self-exploration or this is just a whimsical impulse.

The narration starts off with Dítě’s first day as a busboy in a hotel in the Czech province. As shall be seen, the opening scene thematises the general narrative ambiguity underlying the novel. Dítě first recounts how his boss dictates his views about what is good practice in the hotel. On the one hand, Dítě is told to be the soul of discretion as to what he could potentially hear or see in the hotel. However, the boss is swift to demand that Dítě report anything to him. Dítě confesses that he is ‘taken aback’ [‘udiven’] (*King*, p. 1; *krále*, p. 250), but he also promises that he will abide by that odd practice. In other words, the first

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<sup>104</sup> This self-absorption is made visible by the distinctive lack of dialogue tags and the presence of unending paragraphs. The latter goes missing in the English translation that breaks down the page-long paragraphs into self-contained sections.

<sup>105</sup> This is missing from the English translation. Each chapter of *krále* is introduced by Dítě’s frontal address to an audience: ‘listen to what I’m gonna tell you’ [‘[d]ávejte pozor, co vám teďka řeknu’], see e.g. the incipit in *krále*, p. 250. To this extent, the oral quality of Dítě’s account, conveyed in the original by the use of non-standard Czech (‘obecná čeština’) in the diglossic language situation of the Czech Lands, is not rendered in the English translation. What is more, the enunciation of the whole narrative unfolds in a *hospoda*, a Czech pub, which Andrew Roberts humorously compares to ‘[t]he churches of the Czech nation’ (2005, p. 58) where strangers would ‘sit together and engage in the habit of *tlachání* (chattering)’ (*ibid.*).

sentence gestures towards the tension between forced omniscience and forced amnesia. By the same token, this narrative ambiguity is enmeshed in comic mechanisms. First, the boss's dictate shows an odd quality of specularity. Blatant self-contradiction is commonly held to be comic. Alongside this contradiction in terms, the scene also draws on gestural comedy. For, in order to underline his instructions, the boss heaves Dítě up by his ears. Whispering in Dítě's left ear, the boss asks his busboy to be oblivious to everything he hears, whereas the hotel owner uses Dítě's right ear in order to urge him to report back to him anything he could witness. In both cases, Dítě has to repeat what he has just been told. Two paragraphs on, the narrator is careful to show that he has fully understood the paradox: 'I began to keep my ears open and not hear anything and keep my eyes open and not see anything' ['tak jsem začínal neslyšet, avšak slyšet všechno, a začínal jsem nevidět a vidět všechno kolem sebe'] (*King*, p. 3; *krále*, p. 250). This close reading illustrates the central nexus between comic devices and the breakdown of authority. Indeed, Dítě's superior is keen to impose his absurd oxymoron on his new employee. But, far from being malign, the boss's dictates are pretty much laughable. This is reinforced by the wealth of binary elements (yes – no; right – left; up – down; employer – employee).

Narrative unreliability is signalled by a wealth of episodes that show Dítě's lack of any moral principles, his cunningness, and the general uncertainty about his agency. To this extent, the title of the novel is telling. Indeed, *King/krále* refers to his protector Skřivánek's prowess as a waiter which he is said to owe to the English monarch. This has nothing to do with Dítě's walk of life, as he never worked for the Royals. This title choice is quite arresting, given the fact that narration is entirely conducted in the first-person. On numerous occasions, the narration draws on his tricks, his shrewd behaviour whereby deceptiveness and ingenuousness coalesce into humour. After work, he goes to the railway station and sells frankfurters to passengers that are about to get on their trains. When given twenty-crown notes, he starts patting his pockets until the train starts moving. In the end, he pretends to try to give the change back, but too late, he is cunning enough to keep the note to himself. He even learns how to pretend to cry real tears at the station to recruit the customers' pity: 'the customers would wave their hands and tell me to keep the change because they thought I was an orphan' ['mávali nade mnou rukou a nechávali mi peníze, protože mysleli, že jsem sirotek'] (*King*, p. 5; *krále*, p. 251).

The mechanical duplication of human beings is central to the novel. The narration abounds in human-like balloons, inflated torsos, and clothing 'without a human body inside it' ['bez lidského těla'] (*King*, p. 41; *krále*, p. 267). This grotesque narrative leitmotif fosters a

sense of humorous estrangement intended to attack numerous authorities. Simultaneously, the centrality of this motif can be understood as a metaphorical reference to Dítě's position within the narrative, as he seems devoid of intellectual and moral substance. In the first instance, Dítě recounts how elderly businessmen, carousing as bar regulars, look at a new discovery, the inflatable doll Primavera, an 'artificial woman made of rubber' ['umělou gumovou pannu'] (*King*, p. 28; *krále*, p. 261), also referred to as the 'Widow's Consolation'. Primavera is 'practically alive, and she's approximately the size of a fully grown young woman' ['vždyť je skoro jako živá, je docela ve velikosti dospělého děvčete'] (*ibid.*). This odd reproduction of human beings is not only intended to assuage (or revitalise) old salesmen's sexual appetite. Indeed, Dítě relates how a tailor from Pardubice invented something even 'more beautiful and more practical' ['ještě něco krásnějšího, praktičtějšího'] (*King*, p. 29; *krále*, p. 262). Intended to save businessmen's time, this 'revolutionary technique' ['to je ta revoluce'] (*King*, p. 30; *krále*, p. 262) consist of pumping up tailor's dummies that get the exact shape of the client's bodies (which have been previously measured). Once the mannequins have been fully pumped up, 'your torso floats up to the ceiling of the room, permanently inflated' ['tak ke stropu pokoje vzlétne váš trup, napumpovaný navždycky'] (*King*, p. 31; *krále*, p. 262). Moreover, the representative for that Pardubice firm makes an odd analogy invoking the different stages of life: a cord is tied by the tailors to the floating torsos 'the way they do in the maternity wards so they won't get mixed up, or the way they tag the toes of corpses in the morgues of the big Prague hospitals' ['jako se dává dětem v porodnici, aby se nespletly, nebo ve veliký márnici pražský nemocnice se dává cedulička na palec mrtvoly'] (*ibid.*). What is more, the company replicates social hierarchy in dividing the floating dummies into ranks. Here humour functions on different levels. On the one hand, the very idea of floating salesmen seems to caricature time discipline in capitalism, as this business idea is designed to save time for industrious businesspeople. Moreover, the narration is clear that floating generals will not mix with floating headwaiters. This seems to ridicule the elite, since members of the ruling classes are literally uprooted. By so doing, the narration can be understood as a humorous attack against the establishment.

Not only is Dítě's narrative authority questioned on numerous occasions in the novel, but *King/krále* also engages with the breakdown of political, and cultural instances by means of the comic. The farcical representation of authority is best exemplified in the depiction of one of the visits that the fictional President of Czechoslovakia pays to one of the narrator's places of work. Indeed, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk regularly goes for short breaks to Hotel Tichota, a curious luxury hotel in the picturesque Czech Paradise region ('Český ráj'). Far

from the official image of a frugal and stern statesman, the fictional Masaryk indulges in pricey champagnes, expensive meals, and an elegant Frenchwoman's company. Masaryk's most bizarre behaviour is his frolicking with his travelling companion in piles of hay scattered around the hotel garden. Deviating from the common image of being a caring Father of the Czechoslovak Nation, Masaryk is presented as a mischievous and impulsive child. The narrator is careful to note the very infantile aspect of his behaviour when he glimpses the President's pastime: 'holding both hands like children when they want to dance ring-around-the-rosy' ['drželi se za ruce, jako děti, když chtějí tančit kolo kolo mlýnský'] (*King*, pp. 73-74; *krále*, p. 281). Hiring a cosy getaway, moments away from the main building, the president would abandon himself to sex with his French lover. Oddly enough, the President's abode is akin to a 'playhouse' ['dětském domečku'] (*King*, p. 75; *krále*, p. 282). In other words, the statesman seems reduced to a highly sexualised child playing in a dollhouse. Passing by the little shed, the narrator is careful to note the most bizarre details: 'I saw sitting on a little chair, among the toy drums and jump ropes and teddy bears and dolls, the President in a white shirt, and opposite him, on a chair that was just as small, the Frenchwoman, and there they sat, the two lovers, face to face, gazing into each other's eyes, their hands resting on a small table between them. The tiny house was lit by a lantern with a candle inside' ['viděl jsem, jak v tom dětském domečku, tam, kde visí bubínky a švihadla a medvídci a panenky, tam na malilinké židličce sedí v bílé košili pan prezident a naproti němu na zrovna tak malé židličce seděla ta Francouzka, a tak tam seděli ti dva milenci proti sobě a dívali se do očí, na stolečku měli položené ruce, a obyčejná lucerna se svíčkou ozařovala ten domeček'] (*ibid.*). Here, Masaryk becomes a miniature character, vulnerable, mesmerised by a foreign woman. The ludicrous variety of objects, such as 'skipping ropes' ['švihadla'] or 'teddy bears' ['medvídci'] abruptly contrasts with the official image of Masaryk as an austere head of state. The sheer implausibility of these episodes illuminates Dítě's highly questionable viewpoint. But, this vivid and distorted account recruits a sense of bewilderment in the reader. Dítě's evocative narration elicits both amazement and critical distance in the reader. In the face of this intermingling of historic figures and comic flamboyance, readers are left without any stable point of narrative identification. Rather, comedy confronts readers with the power of fiction.

## Comedy and ethical ambivalence

Be it the liberal democracy of the First Czechoslovak Republic, the repression of National Socialist occupation, or the harbingers of Stalinisation, the novel is a constant reflection of the changing systems of government and their impact on individuals. From his subaltern perspective, Dítě is both drawn to and highly sceptical towards authority. This narrative ambiguity is best manifest in the use of the general comic tone employed to describe the elite. Undoubtedly, as Shear Urbaszewski recalls (2000, p. 35), there is a type of Bakhtinian laughter in *King/krále* whereby the shortcomings of the ruling class are consistently exposed. However, this comic attack on social hierarchy is coupled with Dítě's reinstating of authority. At his first place of work, Dítě recounts how local grandees, still revelling in the freedoms granted by the First Republic, would spend hours arguing about pointless arguments and making perplexing jokes. For instance, he recalls a denture factory-owner, 'Mr Živnostek, who made false teeth, and was always dropping loose teeth or dentures into someone's beer' ['pan Živnostek, ten, který měl fabriku na umělé zuby, každou chvíli někomu hodil do piva pár zubů nebo kousek falešného chrupu'] (*King*, p. 27; *krále*, p. 261). These childish jokes subvert the social stature signalled by the actual ownership of factories. These gentlemen would have fun hiding condoms, playing with food, eating voraciously and living the high life in the company of prostitutes.

During a food fight, one guest found that '[o]ne dumpling remained on his head like a small cap, a yarmulke, the kind a rabbi wears, or a priest biretta' ['jeden knedlík mu seděl na hlavě jako čepička, jak jarmulka, jak ji nosil rabín, jako kvadrátek velebný pán'] (*King*, p. 92; *krále*, p. 290). Reduced to infantile figures wallowing in regressive jokes, the local elite does not live up to their reputation as being cunning. On the contrary, discussions are nonsensical. With amazement, Dítě reports a discussion about a poplar and a footbridge, akin to an odd parable: 'just outside the town there was a footbridge and right beside the footbridge, thirty years back, there was a poplar tree, and then they'd really get going. One of them would say there was no footbridge there at all, just a plank with a handrail. They'd keep this up, drinking their beer and talking about it and jeering and shouting insults at one another' ['za městem je lávka a tam u té lávky před třiceti lety byl topol, a teď to začalo: jeden říkal, že tam nebyla ta lávka, že tam byl pouze ten topol, a druhý, že tam nebyl topol, a že tam byla ne lávka, ale jen prkno se zábradlím... a tak vydrželi upíjet pivo a bavit se na tohle téma a křičet a nadávat si'] (*King*, pp. 3-4; *krále*, p. 251). This nonsensical argument, washed down with beer, illuminates the comic collapse of authority. In fact, this heated debate is actually intended 'to make the

beer taste better' ['aby jim líp chutnalo pivo'] (*King*, p. 4; *krále*, p. 251). Even though intellectual divergence is presented as a pretence, readers feel a sense of sympathy with these comical figures.

The invasion of Czechoslovakia by the National Socialist troops in March 1939 marks a watershed in the novel both in terms of the diegesis and in the use of the comic. The narrator, left unemployed due to his pro-German sympathies, does not make any secret about the fact that 'the German army finally came and occupied not only Prague but the whole country' ['konečně přišla německá vojska a obsadila nejen Prahu, ale i celou zemi'] (*King*, p. 125; *krále*, p. 305). This dramatic event, eliciting much clamour at international level, is mediated by the narrator in quite a curious manner. At first, he seems to see in the invaders the opportunity to gain access to power and prestige. However, this proactive determination to collaborate with the German occupiers is not consistent. Dítě is, in fact, gradually degraded to the status of a sexual object. At first, eager to abide by the new order, Dítě starts taking German lessons and gets enthused about all things German. Tellingly, his perspective focuses on the new garments, and colours that have suddenly shown up in the city. Again, he does not hide his sympathy for the Germans: 'it didn't bother me that German students began walking around the streets of Prague in white socks and brown shirts' ['ani jsem se nedivil, že v pražských ulicích chodili v bílých punčochách a zelených kamizolách studenti'] (*King*, p. 120; *krále*, p. 303). Those SA are presented as innocuous 'students'.<sup>106</sup> In line with that curious worm's-eye view, the German occupation of Prague is equated with a sudden change of fashion. Tellingly, Dítě is swift to adhere to the new order. Eager to stand out from his otherwise hostile, anti-German colleagues, he is willing to serve the German officials in his hotel: 'I was practically the only one left in the hotel who would serve German guests, because all the other waiters started pretending they didn't understand German' ['a že jsem nakonec byl v hotelu skoro jediný já, kdo obsluhoval německé hosty, všichni naši číšníci si počínali s německými hosty tak, jako by neuměli německy'] (*ibid.*). Witnessing some acts of Czech resistance against these German 'students' strolling around Prague, the narrator feels mortified vis-à-vis those 'pitiful' German invaders. Exaggeratedly, he claims that 'I could see that all Czechs were being unjust to the Germans, and I even began to feel ashamed for being a dues-paying member of Sokol' ['protože jsem viděl a věděl, jak všichni Češi jsou nespravedliví k Němcům, tu chvíli jsem se začal i stydět za to, že jsem byl přispívajícím členem Sokola'] (*King*, p. 123 [translation amended]; *krále*, p. 304). Ashamed, he is quick to

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<sup>106</sup> In the Czech original, the comic effect arises from the location of the subject 'studenti' at the end of the clause. In Czech, the important element in speech (the so-called 'rheme') is usually placed in final position.

renounce his membership of the quintessentially Czech gymnastics movement Sokol. Attempting to label the Czech resistance movement to National Socialist occupiers, Dítě chooses the adjective ‘unjust’ [‘nespravedliví’], illuminating his intellectually limited perspective. For, in the face of catastrophic circumstances, the narrator grotesquely reduces his national identity to being a ‘dues-paying member’ [‘příspěvajícím členem’] of a Czech mass organisation.

These events cause the narrator to meet his wife, Líza, a National Socialist fanatic. Their encounter crystallises several thematic and comic mechanisms in the novel. In the midst of the anti-German tumult, Dítě is careful to appeal to her. He first notes that she is ‘attractively dressed’ [‘pěkně oblečená’] (*King*, p. 120; *krále*, p. 303), thus denoting his penchant for immediately visible details. But he makes no secret of the fact that he is intent on wooing her: ‘to get on the good side of her, and show her how grateful I was that she spoke German with me I said it was awful what the Czechs were doing to those poor German students’ [‘abych se jí zavděčil, že se mnou mluví německy, tak jsem jí řekl, že je to hrozné, co dělají Češi s ubohými německými studenty’] (*ibid.*). He does not mean what he says. On the contrary, he utters political views, on purpose, to seduce her. Commenting on his German language skills, the narrator then adds that ‘I spoke a little German and a lot of Czech, but I felt as though I were speaking German all the time, because what I said seemed to me in the German spirit’ [‘tak jsem mluvil trošku německy a hodně česky, ale pořád jsem měl dojem, že mluvím německy, v tom německém duchu’] (*King*, p. 121; *krále*, p. 303). Although Dítě barely speaks German, he has the curious impression of being fluent in German because of some bizarre pseudo-German spirit. The delusional chasm between his perception of his skills and his actual command of the language is amusing in the sense that Dítě’s self-absorption ridicules the prevailing ideology of the so-called ‘German spirit’ and its attendant genetic determinism.

Dítě’s pro-German leanings are cause for general outcry at his place of work. Opposing his colleagues’ resistance against German occupiers (in fact, in an infantile retaliating gesture, they all spit into the meals to be served to the German guests), he falls victim to his colleagues’ fierce animosity. With disarming honesty, he recounts how ‘everyone from the kitchen ran out, and all the other waiters gathered around and everyone spat in my face’ [‘a všichni z kuchyně přiběhli za ty dveře a všichni pinglové se seběhli a každý mi plivl do obličeje’] (*King*, p. 123; *krále*, p. 304). This generates the final severing with his national background. Running to Líza’s table, he renounces his Czech identity and embraces whole-heartedly the new order’s discipline. Overdramatising, pointing to himself

‘with both hands’ [‘oběma rukama’] (*ibid.*), he adheres whole-heartedly to the new regime. Líza’s reaction is as dramatic: ‘she looked me [sic], wiped my face with a napkin, and said, You can’t, you mustn’t expect anything else from those Czech jingoes’ [‘ona se na mne podívala a ubrouskem mi utřela tvář a řekla mi, že od české soldatesky se nic jiného čekat nedalo a nedá’] (*ibid.*). The Czech mob ends up beating Dítě and Líza up. But they manage to run away under farcical circumstances: ‘until they finally let us go and carried off Lise’s sock like a white scalp, a white trophy’ [‘tak dlouho, až nás pustili a ty punčochy slečny Lízy si nesly jako nějaký bílý skalp, bílou trofej’] (*King*, p. 124; *krále*, p. 304). The comedy arises from the incongruous imagery of the Líza’s sock, as if this item were awarded for their victory, at least in Dítě’s understanding. Moreover, Dítě fails to carry out the final step of his rebellion: ‘I felt like a big man as she held me tight. I was so livid, I looked for my Sokol membership card so I could tear it up, but I couldn’t find it’ [‘a já jsem se cítil velikým člověkem, ona se mne držela a byl jsem tak rozhořčen, že jsem hledal členskou legitimaci Sokola, ale nenašel jsem ji, abych ji roztrhal’] (*King*, p. 124; *krále*, pp. 304-305). This tentative bout of courage is ridiculous. Eager to break away from his Czech national identity, he is unable to perform his courage spectacularly.

The conflation of global politics with Dítě’s own life and his persistent naval gazing are major sources of comedy in the novel. Indeed, Dítě is convinced he is the centre of world politics. Self-content, he has the impression that ‘the German army had occupied Prague because of her white socks and because they had spit on me in the hotel’ [‘že vlastně kvůli těm jejím bílým punčochám a tomu, jak mne v hotelu poplivali, že říšská armáda obsadila Prahu’] (*King*, p. 125; *krále*, p. 305). Grotesquely, to Dítě’s mind, the Wehrmacht came to his rescue whilst the Czechs will have to atone for having manhandled him and stripped off Líza’s garment. His simplistic worldview informs his own perception of current affairs. Unable to differentiate between his personal situation and the dramatic events foreshadowing the Second World War, he is quick to draw dubious conclusions: ‘now here in the Prague of the Sokols, I could see with my own eyes what was happening to the poor Germans, and it confirmed everything they said about why Sudetenland had to be taken back’ [‘teď tady v sokolské Praze se děje s ubohými Němci tohleto, co jsem viděl na vlastní oči, což potvrzovalo všechno to, proč byly zabrány Sudety’] (*King*, p. 124; *krále*, p. 305). The comic rupture arises from different aspects, which all revolve around his misunderstanding of political reality. Feeling persecuted, he aberrantly implies that these pseudo-Sokolites, i.e. those who have attacked him, are arbitrarily swaying power in Prague. His exculpating sympathy for the ‘poor Germans’ [‘ubohými Němci’] is equally incongruous, as it contrasts

with the actual ruthlessness of German occupation. Finally, using ‘now here’ [‘ted’ tady’] and ‘with my own eyes’ [‘na vlastní oči’], he is eager to show that he is well-informed and apt to appreciate the general political climate in Prague. This leads him to justify the National Socialist invasion of Sudetenland as a way echoing his own experience in Prague. This schematic, one-dimensional depiction of a major political event is humorous since it presents the incongruous political appreciation of a simpleton as the only narrative authority in the novel.

The encounter between Dítě and Líza articulates a great deal of the narration. Indeed, their marriage explores the question of National Socialist racial hierarchy and how this racist doctrine is mediated by the narrator’s gaze. A physical education teacher of German descent, Líza is devoid of any characterisation. What readers know is that she is fundamentally indoctrinated by National Socialist racial hygiene. Indeed, during one of their very first exchanges, Líza’s coalescence with National Socialist ideology is made explicit: ‘[t]hen she told me that Germans from the Reich yearn for Slavic blood, for those vast plains and the Slavic nature’ [‘ona mi pak řekla, že Němci z Říše tak touží po slovanské krvi, že tak touží po těch rovinách a slovanských náturách’] (*King*, p. 121; *krále*, p. 303). This reported speech parrots the official parlance buttressing National Socialist expansionism. As a consequence, fair-haired Dítě is instrumentalised by a National Socialist zealot eager to procreate in the context of Aryan children breeding. As National Socialist racial hygiene gets gradually instrumental to the narration, its regulations are mocked throughout. When Líza asks him to proffer his family tree, he bluntly remarks: ‘I could only tell her that my grandfather’s name was spelled Johan Ditie on his tombstone’ [‘já jsem jí jen řekl, že můj děda má na pomníku napsáno Johan Ditie’] (*King*, p. 127; *krále*, p. 306). In the eyes of German bureaucracy, that ridiculously scant evidence is deemed sufficient for him to get married to a German woman. The entire process of marriage under racial laws is presented as a masquerade. Indeed, Dítě has to undergo several medical examinations, where the comic co-habits with the most intrusive procedures.

Líza’s birthing project is manifest in the ‘First European Breeding Station’ [‘První Evropská Stanice Ušlechtilého Chovu Lidí’]. This camp constitutes one of the most bizarre episodes in the novel. Perched on the mountains above Děčín, the Breeding Station hosts sensuous encounters between German citizens to procreate Aryan children. The narrator notes that sex is instrumentalised on the camp, in a way to legitimise historically National Socialist biopolitics. He first coins the term ‘National Socialist intercourse’ as if this were a generally recognised concept: ‘National Socialist intercourse was taking place here every day, nonsense

intercourse, as the old Teutons used to do it' ['nejen denně dochází k národně socialistickým souložím tak, jak souložili naostro staří Germáni'] (*King*, p. 132; *krále*, p. 308). Indeed, the camp revolves around the begetting of 'the New Man, the founder of the New Europe' ['toho nového člověka, toho budoucího zakladatele Nové Evropy'] (*King*, p. 145; *krále*, p. 314). However, in that environment which purports to be the cradle of a new civilisation, bizarre episodes are legion. Líza, after summoning Dítě to the camp, drives around in an 'army truck' ['ve vojenském automobilu'] (*King*, p. 127; *krále*, p. 308). A civilian, she suddenly becomes a militarised figure, symbolising her total identification with the Nazi state apparatus. He adds, in fact, that she 'walked around the place as though she owned it, smiling constantly' ['se tady procházela jako doma, pořád se usmívala'] (*ibid.*). Joyful, she guides him down 'the main colonnade, a long double line of statues of German kings and emperors wearing helmets with horns on them, all made of fresh marble, or white limestone that glistened like sugar' ['tím dlouhým stromořadím, ze kterého se sestávalo hlavní nádvoří. Takové německé rohaté sochy to byly, sochy králů a císařů, všechno z čerstvého mramoru nebo bílého vápence, který se třpytil jako cukr'] (*ibid.*). Here, the Thousand-Year pseudo-history of the German empire is ridiculed. These statues, albeit representing the linear continuity of time, have been freshly erected. The evident precariousness of their historical import is exemplified by the use of 'that glistened like sugar' ['který se třpytil jako cukr']. Grotesquely, these statues are part of the Aryan breeding project, since, walking along the colonnade, the would-be mothers would pause and stare at the statues, since '[t]he women were taught, Lise said, that the images of those heroes in their heads gradually percolated down through their bodies' ['protože to musely ty ženy vědět, jak říkala Líza, že ty obrazy v hlavách těch dívek zvolna prolínají celým jejich tělem dolů'] (*King*, p. 133; *krále*, p. 309). Describing how these Nazi women expect the statues to leave an imprint on their embryos, the narrator, however, makes a curious listing of the different stages of National Socialist gestation: 'reaching the thing that was just a blob at first, then something like a pollywog or a tree frog, then a tiny person, a homunculus, a dwarf that grew month by month until the ninth month' ['k tomu nejdřív jakoby jen plivanci, později pulci, potom jakoby rosničky nebo ropuše a pak už k maličkému človíčku, homunkulu, který z trpaslíčka zvolna vyrůstá měsíc po měsíci až do devátého měsíce'] (*ibid.*). Oddly, in this bulwark of National Socialist ideology, the future rulers of New Europe are compared to amphibians. Here, narrative ambiguity is intensified by the different levels of reported speech, since it is unclear whether the narrator endorses these methods or not. At any rate, Líza is determined to 'donate a pure-blooded offspring to the Reich' ['taky aby věnovala říši čistokrevného potomka'] (*King*, p. 134; *krále*, p. 309).

The narration invests the depiction of National Socialist power with ambiguous tones. Indeed, it is thoroughly unclear to what extent Dítě fully comprehends the nature of National Socialist power. Nevertheless, Dítě notes with unusual astuteness: ‘I stared down that row of columns and statues, I saw nothing but a tiny cloud of an enormous horror swirling around and enveloping me’ [‘takhle jsem se díval tou alejí sloupu a soch, a na konci jsem viděl, že tam nic nevidím, že to, co tam vidím, je k uleknutí, malý obláček velké hrůzy, která mne obešla kolem dokola’] (*King*, p. 134; *krále*, p. 309). Appalled by the Aryan breeding programme, in a rare moment of lucidity, Dítě is careful to appreciate the situation critically. However, this brief moment of clear-headedness is suddenly rejected in favour of his desire to gain social status and to compensate for his stature. National Socialism provides him with prestige and (homo)erotic attention. Comparing his life under democratic Czechoslovakia and German occupation, he finds himself opting for dictatorship: ‘then I thought – and this is what saved me – about how I was so small that they wouldn’t let me onto a Sokol gymnastics team [...], and now here was the commander of the socialist breeding camp himself shaking my hand, admiring my straw-coloured hair, and laughing pleasantly’ [‘když jsem si pomyslel – a tím jsem se zachránil – že jsem byl tak maličký, že mne nevzali v Sokole [...], a teď kdy mi podal ruku sám velitel šlechtického národně socialistického tábora, a viděl jsem, jak se mi podíval na moje slámové vlasy, jak se příjemně zasmál’] (*ibid.*). If he rightly identifies the inhumane aspect inherent in the breeding camp, he, nevertheless, seeks validation from the National Socialist apparatus. A further layer of indeterminacy is constituted by his confession in passing that his pro-regime thoughts eventually saved him. Ridiculed for his stature under the First Czechoslovak Republic, he deludes himself that the Germans find him attractive, a fact which, consequently, bolsters his appreciation of the regime. Oddly enough, in this camp centred on heterosexual futurity, he seems particularly alert to signs of same-sex desire, manifest in the fact that the commander seems titillated by ‘my straw-coloured hair’ [‘moje slámové vlasy’] whilst ‘laughing pleasantly’ [‘jak se příjemně zasmál’].

Notwithstanding the general lack of narrative truthfulness, the novel provides some rare moments of clarity about the political situation. Yet even there, the narration imbues the depiction with aspects of comedy that complicate Dítě’s criticism of National Socialist coercion. Indeed, the only episodes thematising explicitly National Socialist violence are related to Dítě’s penis. Drawing a ludicrous parallel between his medical appointment with a German doctor and execution squads, he notes: ‘while execution squads in Prague and Brno and other jurisdictions were carrying out the death sentence, I had to stand naked in front of a doctor’ [‘zatímco v Praze popravčí čtyř popravovaly, zrovna tak v Brně a u ostatních soudů,

kde měli právo popravovat, tak jsem já stál nahý před lékařem’] (*King*, p. 139; *krále*, p. 311). Whereas Czech partisans are slaughtered by National Socialist repression, Dítě is willing to embrace German laws. Hence, the manifold parallels he draws: both the Czech resistant members and he are standing in front of German authorities, both must offer their body liquids: ‘on the very same day that I was standing here with my penis in my hand to prove myself worthy to marry a German, German were executing Czechs, and so I couldn’t get an erection and offer the doctor a few drops of my sperm’ [‘jak ten samý den, zatímco Němci střílejí Čechy, tak já si tady hraju s přirozením, abych byl hoden toho moci se oženit s Němkou. Najednou na mne přišla hrůza, že tam jsou popravy a tady já stojím před doktorem s přirozením v hrsti a nemohu dosáhnout erekce a nabídnout pár kapek spermatu’] (*King*, p. 140; *krále*, p. 312). This parallel is developed further. His semen is equated with the partisans’ blood: ‘two beads of my sperm on a piece of paper, and half an hour later, they were pronounced first-class and worthy of inseminating an Aryan vagina with dignity’ [‘dvě krůpěje mého semene, které za půl hodiny byly označeny jako za výtečné, jako za jediné schopné oplodnit důstojným způsobem árijskou vagínu’] (*ibid.*). Thereafter, whereas he is issued his marriage license by the so-called Bureau for the Defence of German Honour, he notes that ‘[w]ith a mighty thumping of rubber stamps I was given a marriage license, while Czech patriots, with the same thumping of the same rubber stamps, were sentenced to death’ [‘mocnými ranami razítek jsem obdržel svatební povolení, zatímco čeští vlastenci těmi samými ranami s těmi samými razítky byli odsouzeni k smrti’] (*King*, p. 141; *krále*, p. 312). This parallelism is audacious because Dítě benefits from National Socialist policies, as he builds his multi-million business empire thanks to a few valuable stamps pillaged from a deported rabbi during the German invasion of the Ukraine.

Precisely because of his shallow characterisation, Dítě’s impotence is probably a testament to some scruples vis-à-vis the National Socialist policies. This bio-political dimension of the novel generates some comic episodes. On this breeding site, highly saturated with ‘National Socialist intercourse’ [‘z toho nacionálně socialistického souložení’] (*King*, p. 147; *krále*, p. 315), Dítě is unable to get an erection. He offers two reasons. Having impotency issues, in his constant comparisons between democratic Czechoslovakia and German occupation, he conflates his lack of sexual desire with the current political situation. At some point he is given some pornographic pictures by the doctor. But, he is careful to note: ‘now the more I looked at them the more I saw those headlines and the stories in the papers announcing that so-and-so and four others had been sentenced to death and shot’ [‘čím dál jsem se díval na ty pornofotky, tím víc jsem viděl ty nápisy a zprávy v novinách, oznamující,

že tihle a čtyři další byli odsouzeni a zastřeleni’] (*King*, p. 140; *krále*, p. 312). Although he cold-bloodedly acknowledges that he is part of a vast system of coercion, he, however, does not voice any indictment of the political regime. Indeed, what seems to upset him is the mere fact that sex has to be performed for the sake of the regime: ‘I had slept with all the women the way a mongrel dog would, whereas now I had a job to do, like a purebred sire with a purebred bitch’ [‘jak jsem se všemi ženami žil jako nějaký psí bastard, zatímco teď jsem postaven před úkol jako nějaký ušlechtilý pes s ušlechtilou fenou’] (*King*, p. 146; *krále*, p. 315). This passage is indicative of some of the comic structures of the novel. Thematically, it intertwines the sphere of sex with broader political implications. More specifically, the narration plays with the ambiguous imagery of ‘dog’, designating both sexual promiscuity and the actual practice of mating dogs. If he was sexually licentious before, now sex is determined by the fact that he has to ‘beget a beautiful New Child’ [‘abych mohl zplodit krásné nové dítě’] (*King*, p. 147; *krále*, p. 315). If he was very promiscuous prior the Occupation, now his sex is instrumentalised for Aryan purposes. In both situations, he seems to have relinquished his agency, by being dominated either by racist ideology or by his sexual drives. Moreover, incapable of getting an erection, he has to take ‘potency injections’ [‘posilující injekce’] (*ibid.*), so has Líza, as soon as she eventually gets pregnant. But, he adds that ‘[b]oth our behinds were so punctured by those dull needles that we spent most of the our time tending the wounds’ [‘Líza mívala od injekcí jako hřebíky tak rozpíchaný zadek, že jsme se raději věnovali ošetřování jizev’] (*ibid.*).

Dítě’s and Líza’s wedding ceremony is the epitome of farcical militarisation, orchestrated by ‘this political-minded young German’ [‘téhle uvědomělé Němky’] (*King*, p. 142; *krále*, p. 313). The scene is thematically and politically ambiguous, as it is not clear whether Dítě, blatantly despised by the German party guests, adheres or not to the values professed by the NSDAP. Under the scowling face of Hitler’s bust, the ceremony abounds in National Socialist over-sentimentalism, and pompous ceremonial. In fact, as Dítě rightly remarks, their wedding is ‘practically a historical event’ [‘skoro historická událost’] (*ibid.*). The hero, in fact, adds that it ‘was more like a state military ceremony than a wedding because all they talked about was blood and honor and duty’ [‘vůbec to nebyla ani svatba, ale nějaký vojenský státní akt, ve kterém se neustále hovořilo o krvi a cti a povinnosti’] (*King*, p. 141; *krále*, p. 312). The scene is characterised by a great number of grotesque details. Oddly enough, during this quintessentially Nazi ceremony, Dítě dons ‘a morning suit and the blue sash across my chest bearing the Emperor of Ethiopia’s medal’ [‘jsem byl oblečen ve fraku a zase s modrou šerpou přes prsa s tím řádem, co jsem dostal od habešského císaře’] (*ibid.*). By

contrast, next to him, Líza wears ‘her gamekeeper’s outfit, a jacket embroidered with oak leaves and a swastika on a red background in her lapel’ [‘nevěsta Líza byla zase v těch svých mysliveckých šatech s kamizolkou zdobenou dubovými ratolestmi, a na klopě měla hákový kříž v červeném poli’] (*King*, p. 141; *krále*, p. 312). The provincial PE teacher is fêted as if she were one of the party grandees: ‘[w]hen I looked round to see who was there, I saw army colonels and the top Party brass from Cheb’ [‘když jsem se podíval, kdo všechno je svědkem mojí svatby, byli zde i plukovníci a všichni vysocí pohlaváři strany v Chebu’] (*King*, p. 142; *krále*, p. 313). In this profusion of National Socialist splendour, Dítě, the Czech bridegroom, is literally ignored, as he is careful to notice that after all he is ‘a runty little busboy, [...] a Czech pipsqueak, a pygmy’ [‘ten pingl pikolo, ten český prcek, piňďa’] (*ibid.*). The wedding guests are anything but interested in Dítě. Trying hard to blend in, he is constantly reminded of being inferior to the Aryans. SS and Wehrmacht soldiers fling themselves on Líza, while Dítě is literally estranged: ‘I saw that [...] Lise was the center of attention, and that they put up with me as an Aryan but still considered me a dumb Bohemian despite my bright-yellow hair, the blue sash across my chest, and on the hip of my suit the medal shaped like a sunburst of gold’ [‘zase jsem viděl, [...] všechno se točilo kolem Lízy a já jsem se začal vžívat do úlohy trpěného sice árijce, ale pořád bémáka, i když jsem měl žluté světlounké vlasy, a přes prsa šerpu a na boku fraku ten řád ve tvaru rozprsklého zlata’] (*King*, p. 143; *krále*, p. 313). His insignia and his fashionable suit do not protect him against racial ideology.

Showing some sense of criticism vis-à-vis the wedding ceremony, Dítě is willing to exculpate himself, especially when he is negatively affected. Indeed, he is swift to note ‘the game he had been condemned to play by the Bureau for Racial Purity’ [‘že jsem přijal tu hru, ke které jsem byl odsouzen tímhle úřadem’] (*King*, p. 144; *krále*, p. 313). In his view, the wedding party is imbued with odd solemnity: ‘the officers watched us carefully, as if this was some kind of interrogation’ [‘ti důstojníci se dívali, aby líp viděli, zírali, uhadovali, jako bychom byli u nějakého výslechu’] (*ibid.*). In a curious moment, kissing her in front of all the guests, he notes that ‘everyone seemed abashed and looked at me with respect and curiosity’ [‘od té doby byli všichni jako zaražení, dívali se na mne už uctivě, dokonce mne pořád zkoumali’] (*King*, p. 144; *krále*, p. 314). This kiss, suffused with eroticism, focuses on Dítě’s impact on German women. To his mind, parodying National Socialist racial discourse, these guests end up ‘realizing that German blood has a lot more fun with Slavic blood than it does with other German blood’ [‘zjistili, že se slovanskou krví si ta německá krev užije daleko víc než zase s německou’] (*ibid.*). Infringing on racial segregation, he fantasises about his sexual capital in German women’s eyes: ‘[t]he women looked at me as if they were trying to imagine

what sorts of things I might do in bed' [‘i ženské se na mne dívaly tak, že zkoumaly, co bych asi tak mohl vyvádět v posteli a s nimi’] (*ibid.*). Even though German laws prohibit intercourse between Aryans and non-Aryans, National Socialist women seem drawn to Dítě’s otherness. Oddly enough, fantasising about his potential ‘rough behaviour’ [‘rabiátskostí’] (*ibid.*) in bed, they do not care about his poor German grammar, ‘even though I mixed up *der*, *die*, and *das* when I spoke’ [‘ač jsem si plet der, die, das’] (*ibid.*). It is unclear whether Dítě reports these women’s actual thoughts or whether this is just wishful thinking, but his clumsy German arouses their sexual desire. Indeed, his rusty conversational German ‘gave them a taste of the magic of the Slavic plains and birch trees and meadows’ [‘který do nich dával kouzlo slovanských rovin a bříz a luk’] (*King*, p. 145; *krále*, p. 314). Here, conjuring up the Teutonic imagery of the East, his assessment of the guests’ ideology is unclear. At any rate, he seems willing to incorporate the dominant ideology. This ambiguity is further developed by his analyses of Líza’s decision to marry him. Conforming to the National Socialist mindset, he confronts his so-called Slav bestiality with German orderliness: ‘she had chosen a beautiful, animal love over German honor and blood’ [‘proti německé cti a krvi dala přednost živočišné a krásné lásce’] (*King*, p. 145; *krále*, p. 314). Chosen over German SS and Wehrmacht soldiers, Dítě wallows in self-satisfaction, since he apparently satisfies Líza more than all the soldiers ‘plastered with medals and decorations from the campaigns against Poland and France’ [‘ač byli ověšeni řády a vyznamenáními z tažení proti Polsku a Francii’] (*ibid.*). This pseudo-rivalry between him and German troops testifies to his ambivalent apprehension of reality, for it is thoroughly unclear whether he takes pride in being the chosen one or whether he reports the then dominant discourse.

After the war, becoming the owner of the ‘Hotel in the Quarry’ [‘Hotel V lomu’] on the outskirts of Prague, Dítě builds a business empire and amasses wealth. In no equivocal terms, he is keen to take a spectacular revenge on his former bosses: ‘the Hotel in the Quarry represented the height of my powers, the pinnacle of my effort, and I had become the first among hotelkeepers’ [‘ten hotel V lomu byl vrchol mých sil, mého snažení, a já jsem teď prvním hoteliérem mezi hoteliéry’] (*King*, p. 180; *krále*, p. 330). Lying at the bottom of a quarry, the hotel became one of the most fashionable venues in post-war Czechoslovakia. Indeed, the Quarry features some spectacular amenities. An acrobat would come swooping down from the hill and, when over the pond, ‘with a spotlight on his phosphorescent costume, he’d go of [sic] the wheel, hang for a moment in midair, and then do a jackknife, straighten, and with his hands stretched out in front of him slip into the deep water’ [‘osvětlený fosforovým šatem se pustil a rolna sjela až dolů, on se chvíli zastavil, protipohybem udělal

pak sklopku, narovnal se a s nataženýma rukama se zasunul do hlubokého jezera’] (*King*, p. 178; *krále*, p. 329). Attracting celebrities, and Nobel Prize winners, the Hotel in the Quarry should seal Dítě’s social status as a millionaire. Yet, although he actually accumulates wealth, he is literally ignored by the well-off. In a bout of self-delusion, fantasising about a war raging between him and the Prague hoteliers, Dítě is convinced that these wealthy owners would welcome him to their club: ‘I decided that if these hotel owners were inclined to make peace, to take me among themselves and offer me a membership in the Association of Hotelkeepers, I would let bygones be bygones’ [‘umínil jsem si, že kdyby ti hoteliéři byli náchylní ke smíření a k tomu, že mne vezmou mezi sebe, že mi nabídnou členství v grémiu hoteliérů, zapomenu na všechno zrovna tak, jako by zapomenu i oni’] (*King*, p. 181; *krále*, p. 330). Self-delusional, believing that these people would beg him to join their organisation, he is completely taken aback when he notices that actually ‘they pretended not to see me’ [‘oni nejen že dělali, jako by mne nikdy neviděli’] (*ibid.*).

The dramatic experiences of collectivisation and the drastic implementation of Communist rule after 1948 are negotiated by Dítě through the prism of his yearning for social prestige. During a severe drought, the nascent Parliament of Communist Czechoslovakia decrees that land owners and millionaires should pay a tax to compensate for this natural disaster. Far from being appalled by this bill, Dítě expresses pleasure at this prospect: ‘I accepted their verdict with satisfaction, because I was a millionaire now too, and as a millionaire, I wanted to see my name in the papers’ [‘přijal jsem to usnesení s takovým uspokojením, protože já jsem také milionář, doufal jsem, že moje jméno jako milionáře bude v novinách’] (*King*, p. 183; *krále*, p. 331). At the height of collectivisation in February 1948, Dítě’s hotel seems spared by the Communist policies. Indeed, Dítě is aware that his wealthiest guests ‘had fallen, that they had been arrested and locked up’ [‘že padli, že byli zavřeni, zatčeni’] (*King*, p. 185; *krále*, p. 332). Undeterred, he is intent on sharing these millionaires’ fate in a farcical move. He’d rather be forcibly confined than lose his millionaire status. Grotesquely, since his wealth has been overlooked by the Communist regime, he gives himself up to the State. When told that the millionaires have to be deported to a camp, his behaviour contrasts, jarringly, with taken-for-granted expectations: ‘I was delighted, because I was a millionaire too, and I brought them my bankbook and showed it to them’ [‘já jsem se zaradoval, že jsem milionář taky, přinesl jsem spořitelní knížku a ukázal ji těm dvěma mým hostům’] (*King*, p. 186; *krále*, p. 332). With an unsettling sense of logic, Dítě gives himself up to the regime.

The millionaire camp, as depicted by Dítě, is anything but gruesome. In fact, his representation of the camp subverts the customary portrayal of Communist internment camps. Things are, in fact, ‘wonderful’ [‘krásné’] (*King*, p. 192; *krále*, p. 335) in the monastery turned into a camp, and people even ‘roared with laughter’ [‘řvali smíchem’] (*King*, p. 194; *krále*, p. 336). As Dítě observes, ‘life in the seminary of Svatý Jan was more like a movie comedy’ [‘tady v tom učilišti svatého Jana, to byla groteska’] (*King*, p. 188; *krále*, p. 333). In fact, Dítě, in assessing the food served in the camp, claims unambiguously, as if he were an expert on medieval history: ‘here was not the kind you’d normally find in a seminary, but more the way they used to cook in the rich monasteries – the way the Crusaders cooked, for instance’ [‘potom se tady vařilo asi tak, jako se vařilo ne v internátech pro budoucí kněze, ale tak jako se vařilo v bohatých klášterech, jako vařili třeba křižovníci’] (*King*, p. 190; *krále*, p. 334). Abundant food, and general cheerfulness are the characteristics of Dítě’s camp life. Indeed, as the narrator aptly puts it, life in the millionaires’ camp was akin to ‘real comedy, beyond Chaplin’s wildest imagination’ [‘groteska, kterou by nevymyslel ani Chaplin’] (*King*, p. 193; *krále*, p. 335), for the camp comes across as a playground for millionaires where they can happily vegetate and frolic whilst subverting the customary inmates-oppressors dichotomy. It is, in fact, the presence of gruesome details that trigger laughter in the narrator. Walking along the corridors of the monastery, he pauses in front of scenes depicting the martyrdoms of saints ‘with such loving detail that the idea of four hundred millionaires living in the seminary, four and sometimes six to a cell, seemed like a joke’ [‘s takovou přesností, že to, že čtyři sta milionářů bydlelo v kněžských celách po čtyřech nebo šesti osobách, bylo vlastně legrací’] (*King*, p. 188; *krále*, p. 333). Comedy imbues his entire experience as a prisoner, from actual instances of grotesque role-playing to a wealth of bizarre situations.

All the customary preconceptions around imprisonment are deconstructed by the narration. Inmates are not forced to labour; on the contrary, ‘[w]ithin a month, all the millionaires were tanned, because we would sunbathe on the hills’ [‘tak za měsíc všichni trestaní milionáři byli opálení’] (*King*, p. 191; *krále*, pp. 334-335). The monastery is unfenced, allowing the prisoners complete freedom. The breakdown of authority is regularly touched upon. The camp commander’s rifle is a ‘gun, which he carried as though it were a fishing rod’ [‘s puškou, kterou nesl tak jako rybářské pruty’] (*King*, p. 201; *krále*, p. 339). In fact, far from being an inhumane internment camp, this monastery camp even draws civilians seeking a break from their normal life. Allowed to go to Prague, the millionaires bring acquaintances back to the camp, such as ‘a good friend who wanted a vacation from his family’ [‘dalšího dobrého známého, aby si odpočinul od rodiny’] (*King*, p. 193; *krále*, p. 335).

Mimicking a pseudo-trial, the millionaires are sentenced to years of imprisonment, the duration of which corresponds mathematically to their fortune. Trials in the camp seem to be nothing more than a parody, as militiamen seem to mete out justice randomly. Indeed, if inmates are late, weighed down with jugs of beer, the militiamen would 'give each of them another sentence on top of his original one, depending on how many millions he had' ['tak je prohlásili za nově příchozí, a každý ten milionář dostal ještě znovu podle milionů, které nahlásil, o ty roky navíc'] (*King*, p. 189; *krále*, p. 334). Inverting the customary representation of internment, Dítě adds that actually 'a passerby who didn't know the real situation could easily have taken the visitors for the prisoners' ['kdyby někdo přišel a neznal ty poměry, tak by myslel, že zavření jsou ti, co přišli na návštěvu'] (*King*, p. 192; *krále*, p. 335).

Dítě develops this mechanism of subverting the camp representation further. Far from imposing a reign of terror on the camp, the militiamen are presented as lazy and innocuous alcoholics. Roll call is usually a constituent part of any customary representation of political terror. But here, roll call is 'a terrible problem' ['děsný problém'] (*King*, p. 189; *krále*, p. 334), for some inmates are off to get some beer in the vicinity. The main reason is, however, that the guards are heavily intoxicated and cannot count properly. Indeed, the guards 'couldn't even put together a proper list of prisoners: some names, like Novák and Nový came up three times' ['nemohli dát dohromady ani stav podle jmen, protože některá jména jako Novák a Nový byla tady třikrát'] (*King*, p. 191; *krále*, p. 335). Amateurish, these militiamen then decide to count by tens. This farcical procedure culminates in the way they literally count: 'one of the guards would clap, and another guard would drop a pebble, and after they counted the last man, they would tally up the pebble, add a zero to the result' ['vždycky jeden ze strážců zatleskal, a třetí strážce upustil kamínek, aby potom, když sečetli posledního, tak se sečetly kamínky, přidala se k výsledku nula'] (*King*, p. 189; *krále*, p. 334). Oddly, the guards' attitude does not trigger any rebellion amongst the millionaires. Rather, a sense of fraternity and trust prevails: both guards and inmates eat together and, subsequently, internees were even let out of the camp for errands, since 'a promise to come back was enough' ['stačila přísaha'] (*King*, p. 190; *krále*, p. 334).

This equivalence between prisoners and guards, between camp life and freedom culminates in the inmates' role-playing. The militiamen hand over their uniforms to the inmates. The inmates are split into two teams, one of which dons the guards' uniforms while the second plays the millionaires. The militia-millionaires enjoin the millionaires to leave the camp, 'telling them how wonderful it was outside in the world of freedom, how they'd no longer have to suffer under the scourge of the militia' ['líčili jim, jak je to venku na svobodě

krásné, jak nebudou trpět a úpět pod knutami milicionářů’] (*King*, p. 193; *krále*, p. 336). Despite these wonderful depictions, the latter refuse to leave the camp, even by force. Once expelled, the millionaires beg the militia-millionaires to be allowed back into the camp. This masquerade really, laying bare the actual performance of domination, is cause for general hilarity amongst the militia-millionaires.

### A redemptive narrative?

A central aspect of *King/krále*, that has gone virtually unnoticed in Hrabal scholarship, is the retrospective dimension of the narrative.<sup>107</sup> In looking back on his rise and fall, the storyteller attempts to demonstrate his metamorphosis. Such a turn in the narrative illuminates the mechanisms of ambivalence at the core of the novel, for it is thoroughly unclear whether his retreat from social life can be given any sort of plausibility or whether it is just a performance of redemption. Moving to the border lands, far from the humbug of his hitherto cosmopolitan lifestyle, Dítě rejoices in his newly-discovered solitude: ‘I didn’t want to be seen by human beings anymore, or praised for what I’ve done’ [‘[a]le já už býti viděn v lidských očích a dostat pochvalu, to všechno ode mne odešlo’] (*King*, p. 226; *krále*, p. 350). In effect, after having waited on several world grandees, he ends up living with a small horse, a goat and a German shepherd near a provincial hamlet. Compared to the first four chapters of the novel, the last one section of *King/krále* stands out for its distinctive tone, replete with religious imagery. The chapter is dominated by a (seemingly) inward-looking, resilient character eager to come to terms with life. The reasons accounting for his abrupt metamorphosis are unclear. The economic failure of his career as a millionaire certainly constitutes one of the causes. More importantly, the significant change of his lifestyle is prompted by his encounter with art: ‘[i]t may also have been because of everything I learned from the professor [...]. So perhaps the professor confirmed my feelings that it was best to be alone’ [‘tak snad ten profesor mne utvrdil v tom, že je třeba být sám’] (*King*, pp. 215-216; *krále*, p. 346). In a secluded corner of the Czech province, he regularly meets with an emeritus professor of French literature who happens to lecture Marcela, ‘a pretty girl who [...] used to hang around Prašná Brána’ [‘hezkou dívku [...], ta, které stávaly za Prašnou bránou’] (*King*, p. 209; *krále*, p. 343). In other words, literature seems to convey a sense of catharsis both in Dítě and in the

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<sup>107</sup> Matonoha rightly signals that ‘[t]he journey of main characters towards completion of their identity follows downward spirals that paradoxically take them back to or even prior [to] the very point of a departure’ (2018, p. 1).

Prague prostitute. Oddly enough, they are abused by their acrimonious teacher who keeps calling them ‘idiots and morons and spotted hyenas and squalling skunks’ [‘všichni jsme byli idioti a blbci, hyeny skvrnité a skunkové vřeštiví’] (*King*, p. 213; *krále*, p. 345).

Whereas Dítě repeatedly seeks external validation through the narrative, he abruptly changes his life goal. After having joined a forest labour brigade in the now ethnically cleansed Sudetenland, he comes to terms with his own life. Deprived of the apparently futile riches of modernity, he self-contently claims that in the end ‘I was happy with myself in a gloating sort of way, glad that I’d ended up as I had’ [‘jsem byl škodolibě sám na sobě rád’] (*King*, p. 206; *krále*, p. 341). Relinquishing the vanity of his past aspirations (he had, in fact, lost the million-worth stamps he had secretly kept in his shoe heel), he contemplates the idyllic idea of his solitary existence in the forests: ‘[t]omorrow I would leave for somewhere far away, far from people’ [‘zítra odjízďím někam daleko, daleko od lidí’] (*King*, p. 206; *krále*, pp. 341-342). This isolation prompts him to embark on a bizarre introspection. Indeed, he is looking forward to ‘wanting to know the most secret things about yourself, accusing yourself as if you were a public prosecutor and then defending yourself’ [‘chtít se sám na sobě dozvědět to netajnější, podávat na sobě jako prokurátor obžalobu, a hájit se’] (*King*, pp. 227-228; *krále*, p. 351). Emphasising his regressive metamorphosis, he resorts to a circular imagery: ‘[a]nd so the circle began to close and I started going back to my childhood and youth’ [‘kruh se začínal uzavírat’] (*King*, p. 199; *krále*, p. 338). This remark points to a regressive plot structure. In fact, after having risen from his provincial working-class background, he suffers numerous drawbacks that send him back to the province and his diminutive status.

Coerced into giving up all his aspirations, he is adamant to claim that ‘I stood face to face with myself’ [‘jsem stanul tváří v tvář sám sobě’] (*King*, p. 199; *krále*, pp. 338-339). This sudden introspection contrasts with his shallow characterisation quite forcefully. All of a sudden, Dítě, after having invoked his ‘lucky star’ and the ‘unbelievable’ as factors determining his life, is willing to come to terms with his existence. This process is apparently cause for much sorrow. For he claims he regurgitates ‘everything that had accumulated inside me, like tar and nicotine in a smoker’s lung’ [‘všechno to usedlé v člověku tak, jako dým a kouř v kuřákových plicích’] (*King*, p. 221; *krále*, p. 349). However, instead of a nervous breakdown, he transmutes this pent-up energy into the creative act of singing. This sudden change of mind-set is quite arresting. Far away from the social world, he sees the road as a symbol of his life: ‘[t]he road I maintained and patched with rock I had to crush myself – that road resembled my own life. It was filling up with weeds and grass in front of me’ [‘[c]estu,

kteřou jsem udržoval a kteřou jsem vyplňoval štěrķem, kteřý jsem si sám musel roztlouct, ta cesta, kteřá se podobala mému životu, za mnou zarůstala bejlím a trávou'] (*King*, p. 225; *krále*, p. 350). Eager to lead a monastic life, Dítě conjures up a wealth of religious images. In fact, in discovering his new self, his narration assumes an almost Christ-like posture. Indeed, he is swift to make several parallels between his destiny and that of Jesus Christ. Entering a new house, he self-importantly suggests: 'I also began to think of myself as someone who'd been chosen' ['[t]aky jsem sám sebe považoval za vyvoleného'] (*King*, p. 225; *krále*, p. 343). This idea of mission, systematically touched upon in the novel, is reinforced by the fact that he retreats to this no man's land. A hermit really, he engages in an internal maieutics: 'I felt that in the end I would have to speak only with myself [...], that teacher inside me with whom I was beginning to talk more and more' ['cítíl jsem, že nakonec musím mluvit jen sám se sebou [...] ten můj druhý já, ten můj pobádatel'] (*King*, p. 215; *krále*, pp. 345-346). The idea of metamorphosis is almost scripted since he seems very willing to distance himself from his past. In fact, he claims that, referring to his life that 'when I looked back on it, seemed to have happened to someone else' ['kteřý se mi jevil zpátky, jako by se stal někomu jinému'] (*King*, p. 226; *krále*, pp. 350-351). Going about his duties as a road mender, he is adamant to claim that 'as I used a grub hoe and a shovel on the road, I used memory to keep the road of my life open into the past, so I could take my thoughts backward to where I wanted to begin remembering' ['tak jako krumpáčem a lopatou, tak jsem vzpomínkou udržoval sjízdnou cestu svého života do minulosti, abych se mohl dostat myšlením nazpátek tam, kde jsem si chtěl zavzpomínat'] (*King*, p. 226; *krále*, p. 351). This very last sentence, centred around the use of 'wanted' ['chtěl'], shows that Dítě's vocabulary of redemption has limits, since he demonstrates a willingness to select his memories.

## Conclusion

*King/krále* is a striking reflection on the role of individual subjectivity under extreme political circumstances. Both a victim and a collaborator, a greedy opportunist and 'a weak human being' (Cosentino, 2006, p. 49), Dítě has to come to terms with the constraints of various regimes. Readers are presented with a first-person narrator bereft of psychological motivation and moral imperatives. His ridiculous, often buffoon-like antics are, however, complicated by the general context of political repression. In transgressing the customary boundaries in the cultural representation of perpetration and victimhood, Dítě is devoid of any firm stance. Both naïve and law-abiding, self-important and laughable, Dítě elicits a variety of feelings in the

reader. This general sense of indeterminacy is further sustained by the comic. In fact, the narration invests Dítě's characterisation with a wealth of comic devices that problematise our immediate rejection of his dubious point of view. Dítě's naivety recruits patronising sympathy, and acceptance on the part of the reader. For his understanding of historical catastrophes, mass execution, and political coercion is fundamentally informed by his alertness to comedy. Being a farcical character in tragic times, he analyses destruction and violence through the lens of comedy. Indeed, what emerges from the novel is a sense of ethical suspension. The comic devices help the reader adjust to and apprehend the general narrative unreliability and the ethical indeterminacy of this novel.

'My life to this point seemed like a novel, a book written by a stranger even though I alone had the key to it, I alone was a witness to it' ['[J]ako by celý můj život až sem byl román, kniha, kterou napsal někdo jiný, avšak k té knize života jsem měl jediný já klíč, jediný svědek mého života jsem byl já sám'] (*King*, p. 226; *krále*, p. 351). Dítě's stepping outside himself has many implications. His withdrawal from life in the final chapter and his retrospective narration reveal the ethical ambiguity running through the novel, since the final chapter shows Dítě's capacity for introspection and engagement with the world. Whether this transmogrification is plausible or not is left to speculation. What this unexpected turn, however, shows is the extent of ambiguity characterising Dítě's subject position. Even though he, self-reflexively, claims his fictitiousness, readers have to bear witness to his trajectory. By means of the comic, his life story shatters our perception of his subject position. In fact, the text can be understood as an attempt to atone for one's incriminating behaviour under National Socialist Occupation and Communism. Simultaneously, Dítě's ingenuousness, his amoral self-interest, his ridiculous parroting are too blatant to provide a convincing case for conscientious collaboration. In this, the comic does not vouch for any clear value stance. Rather, it presents readers with the emergence of an absolute other in literature that probes the ways readers relate to an ambivalent point of identification.

## CONCLUSION

‘In humour, as in anxiety, the world is made strange and unfamiliar to the touch’ (Critchley, 2002, p. 41). In invoking strangeness and haptics in relation to the comic, Critchley rightly addresses the fundamental ambivalence of comedy. For the comic emerges out of defamiliarisation, that is evaluative distance, in presenting readers with an alien and unexpected perspective on the diegesis. Simultaneously, comedy makes for immediacy and closeness, as the comic directly touches readers in a way that can be both amusing and revolting. In the act of reading, it is this interplay between evaluative appreciation and pleasurable immediacy that makes comedy ethical. Confronted with the comic in literature, the reader’s homogenising knowledge of the world is suddenly ruptured. In taking readers unawares, the comic resists the readers’ self-centred attempts to neutralise and assimilate the other. Comedy can target marginalised groups equally and rely on familiar expectations, but, based on my close reading, I contend that comedy addresses the reader’s intellect frontally. In being taken aback by humorous incongruities, readers are directly involved by the comic. This interweaving is what I call the abrasiveness of the comic, for it ruptures the limits of our consciousness, whilst touching us simultaneously. Within the compass of this dissertation, this tension has been circumscribed to three crucial elements in the readerly appreciation of literature: the ways characters relate to each other in the context of brutalisation, reflect on and situate themselves vis-à-vis terror.

Unlike puzzle and nonsense, the instances of comedy discussed in this dissertation involve a certain degree of plausibility. This cognitive reasonableness is pleasurable precisely because the resolution of incongruity results in an intellectual clarification on the part of the reader. As Kulka suggests, ‘[w]e tend to laugh only when these incongruities dissolve, when we suddenly realize how everything fits together, how it all makes sense after all’ (2007, p. 327). This element is crucial, because it implies that the comic addresses the reader immediately. Faced by the comic other, alien to the reader’s self but within the reader’s touch, the comic imposes an ethical obligation on the reader. This obligation consists of the urge to engage intellectually with a disarmingly other viewpoint. In engaging in comedy, the reader recognises the fundamental alterity of the other. This ethical obligation is all the more pressing in the narrative reconstruction of the legacies of political violence in European literature. For the literary negotiation of suffering is compromised by a high degree of saturation. Instead, by means of the comic, readers can engage flexibly in the representation

of suffering. Faced by the comic in fiction, readers are invited to adjust their ethical response to the other.

In W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*, I argue that the comic emerges from the disjuncture between a seemingly humourless narrator-cum-protagonist and the actual extent of parodic remarks through the novel. By means of the comic, I elucidate the actual pleasure that readers derive from Sebald's novel before discussing the ethical issues of the text. Fundamentally, I contend that *Austerlitz* plays with the notion of normative order and cultural expectations on different planes. I suggest that the narration privileges an incongruous displacement of meaning in a way that both reinforces cultural stereotyping and disrupts our horizon of meaning. This is manifest in three ways. Firstly, the novel exhibits a sense of continuity between humans and animals. In Sebald's zoopoetics, the animal world is ascribed certain mental predicates that resemble human behavioural patterns. I suggest that comic anthropomorphism functions as a parody of the main themes of the narrative. Through the distance provided by the portraiture of animals, readers can relish the depiction of terror and its after-effects with less moral uneasiness. Secondly, the narrative rests on a great number of tendentious remarks that deliberately target the body and various continental cultural contexts, both of them recruiting the reader's amused participation in the novel. Characters consistently draw attention to odd-looking physiognomies and curious couplings, such as dwarves and giants. Analogously, the representation of three sites of European memory is mediated by stark stereotypical beliefs: Socialist Czechoslovakia as drab and dysfunctional; post-Unification Germany as crypto-Nazi and ominous; France as bureaucratic and megalomaniac. Finally, the narrative is distinctively concerned with materiality in a way that can potentially trivialise the main issues explored by the novel. This dimension is particularly visible in the two episodes where Austerlitz and the narrator engage with the remnants of the Holocaust directly. What brings these different levels of the comic together is the emotive and cognitive distance provided by parody. For parody refers to an alternative fictitious world that readers have to construe for themselves.

*Appointment/Heute* considers the ethical implications of the use of Schadenfreude and satire in the literary mediation of terror. In scholarship, the narrators of Nobel Prize winner Müller are commonly understood as the custodians of integrity vis-à-vis moral corruption and political brutalisation. In this instance, the narrator is fundamentally cold and her satirising response to political abuse opens up a new perspective on the novel. Essentially, I argue that the comic arises from the disjuncture between the unnamed narrator's distanced gaze and the vivid portrayal of terror in Ceaușescu Romania. More precisely, the comic is manifested in

two ways. Firstly, readers are presented with a *schadenfroh* narrator whose lack of empathy in the face of victimhood and abuse is both unsettling and hilarious. In her detached account, the narrator does not distinguish between victims and perpetrators. For the impassive narrator, both are equally detestable and laughable. Thus, confronted with the narrator's point of view, readers have to negotiate the emotional distance sustained by the comic which is ultimately seductive. Secondly, the novel explores the ambivalence of readerly response to the representation of malevolence. Adhering to the first-person perspective, readers have to engage with a diegetic world where social interactions are chiefly mediated by nastiness and greed. Far from repudiating the values of this deprived community, the narrator delights in depicting its viciousness and moral despair. In this way, readers are made complicit with dubious jokes, offensive sayings and the depiction of base instincts. In other words, the comic in *Appointment/Heute* functions as a destructive force whereby the narrator evades any value judgement. Common to these two lines of enquiry is the fact that the aggressive aspect of the comic in the novel does not have any ameliorative function, for Schadenfreude and satire do not warrant any alternative point of identification. In sum, the focus on the comic demonstrates that the narrator does not suggest any moral conclusion to be drawn from the narrative.

My discussion of *Land/Cus* analyses the ethical repercussions for readers exposed to the seductive and comic account of a war survivor. The work of Lobo Antunes is informed both by the experiences of Salazarist dictatorship and the Angolan War of Independence. In concentrating on Lobo Antunes's semiautobiographical novel *Land/Cus*, I explore the ways in which readers can relate to an excessively sensuous account of war crimes and their repercussions on survivors. The comic emerges from the disjuncture between the depiction of the Colonial Wars in Angola and the narrator's perceptual overindulgence and sarcastic distance. I demonstrate how the comic dimension of the novel complicates the orthodox reading of the text that usually confines the unnamed narrator to the role of a passive war-traumatised veteran. Qualifying this dominant interpretation, I suggest that the narrator actively seeks to seduce the reader, by engaging with their sensuous faculties. This is paralleled within the diegesis, as the plot is fundamentally structured around the narrator's successful seduction of an unnamed female character. Thus, the comic in the novel is mainly visceral, centred on the body, privileging shock and outrageousness. The aggressive sensuousness of the narration has several implications. Firstly, instances of sensuous and narrative exuberance are so exaggeratedly tangible that they eventually undermine the narrator's authority. In other words, the analysis of comic structures in the novel mitigates the

power of the narration and opens up a dialogic space between the reader and the narration. Secondly, the intermingling between sensuousness and the portrayal of suffering proves unsettling for the reader. This aspect is particularly difficult for the reader to navigate, because the comic often assumes an audacious and aggressive function. This comic tone runs through the plot insofar as it does not distinguish between victims and perpetrators, between war-ridden Angola and post-Revolution Portugal. This horizontal aspect results in diminishing the moral import of the narrator's alleged condemnation of perpetration. Finally, the narrator's artful use of comic structures shows that the text does not aim at exposing war crimes, but at reinstating the narrator's self-righteousness. Thus, the analysis of the comic favours a more dynamic understanding of the novel, insofar as it encompasses both a reflective distance from and a visceral participation in the plot. In sum, the comic clarifies the primacy of the sensory experience in the novel that, ultimately, stands in conflict with ethics.

The final chapter investigates the ethical repercussions of the point of view of a fool negotiating the experiences of two major events in Central European history. In Hrabal's texts, a joyful, effusive first-person narrator describes disconnected events in an apparently never-ending narrative flow. In focussing on *King/krále*, I demonstrate how the experiences of National Socialist atrocities and Stalinist collectivisation are mediated by a fundamentally unreliable narrator who destabilises the boundaries between victimhood and perpetration. Dítě, the monologic narrator, is both a victim and a collaborationist, a self-centred idiot and a manipulative genius. The comic arises, in fact, from the disjuncture between the depiction of political violence and the narrator's apparent lack of discrimination. In other words, the novel explores the ways in which readers can identify with the farcical point of view of a self-deceptive simpleton. I contend that the novel offers a safe space where readers can enjoy the amoral, child-like portrayal of atrocities. Characterisation prompts a crisis of identification, as readers are torn between the seductive aspect of the prose and the manifest limitations of the narrator's worldview. To that extent, I suggest that the comic illustrates and complicates the readerly pleasure derived from the escapist depiction of atrocities. For the comic in this novel, both life-affirming and generous, is seductive. Concurrently, the narrator's account is characterised by various planes of ambiguity, for it is unclear whether his retrospective narration seeks to atone for his incriminating behaviour during German occupation or whether his narration is just the sequence of loosely connected events. Crucially, this ambiguity is best evidenced by the narrator's constant reference to 'the unbelievable coming true', as a way to question and discredit his agency. In fact, Dítě's account of German atrocities and of Stalinisation is fairly anecdotal, devoid of any tragic pathos. I argue that this narrative

mechanism is akin to an estranging focaliser that destabilises the reader's emotive participation. In sum, in concentrating on the comic, a sense of ethical suspension is made visible throughout the novel. It lies within the reader's responsibility to identify whether the narrator's amoral account can be espoused at all, or whether it eventually turns out to be simply immoral.

In the texts discussed in this dissertation, the comic functions as a point of intersection between readerly ethics and issues surrounding the representation of political violence. Due to its comicality, each text destabilises the ways readers can think of characters, their interaction with the social world, and their cognitive worldview. Humour in all the texts is not healing, for it attacks taken-for-granted representation. In fact, what emerges from my analysis of literary works across borders is a sense of continuity. In questioning the common assumption that privileges the tragic representation of violence, the novels analysed above suggest an alternative viewpoint in the portrayal of violence in late twentieth-century European literature. The texts map out an unwritten story about the legacies of state-sponsored brutalisation in various cultural and linguistic contexts across the Continent. As a common denominator, the comic offers an alternative representation of coercion that in no way kitschifies the extent of abuse or belies the imperative to denounce political violence. On the contrary, central to the novels reunited in this PhD is an ethical enquiry that invests the act of reading with playfulness and the negotiation of otherness. By means of the ambivalence of the comic, the humorous representation of violence subjects readers to less safe grounds, for they are confronted with their own ethical response to political violence. Ultimately, the comic corrodes our certainties and exposes us to the disarming strangeness of the other.

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