

“WHERE IS MY HOME?”

Some Notes on Reading Josef Skvorecky in “Amerika”

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1. TRANSLATION, in one form or another, has always been an issue in the reading of Josef Skvorecky's fiction. Because of his nearly life-long fascination with jazz, Hollywood films, and American literature, his writing has been marked from the start by the English language and the Anglo-American cultural tradition to the point that it is tempting to see the work of his Czech period (1945-1969) as pointing West, and that of his exile (1969-1988) as written with one eye on the anticipated English translation. In a manner of speaking, Anglo-American culture is the tacit sub-text of his novels when they are published in Czech, while Czech culture is the sub-text of the translations. In both cases, we have fiction oscillating between two languages and two cultural traditions to the point that doubleness can be said to be a constitutive element in Skvorecky's vision: East/West; Czechoslovakia/America; Czech/English; socialist realism/Hemingwayan realism; politics/jazz; Marxism/Catholicism and so on.¹



2. THE COWARDS (*Zbabelci*, 1958, 1970)² Skvorecky's first novel, anticipates the presence in later work — *Miss Silver's Past*, *Miracle*, and *The Engineer of Human Souls* — of intertextual material drawn primarily from sources other than contemporary Czech or even European ones. Similarly the novel's formal, stylistic, and thematic assumptions, including its choice of Skvorecky's version of Hemingwayan realism over socialist realism as well as its modernist mix of formal and demotic Czech (*spisovna cestina* as opposed to *obecna* or *hovorova cestina*),³ all point west. At a time when most Czech and Slovak novels were cautious weathervanes turned east, Skvorecky's remarkably mature first novel — written in 1948 at the age of 24 though published a decade later — already indicated an opposed set of linguistic

and cultural preferences, a choice not without political implications. Milan Kundera emphasized this “American” aspect of Skvorecky’s career when he told an interviewer that

Skvorecky is an author who was oriented towards America. . . . Skvorecky is one of those who were fascinated by American literature due to, I believe jazz itself. He was a jazz musician as a young man and therefore from an early age an Americanist. He has done marvelously good translations of William Faulkner. So Skvorecky’s personal originality, for a Czech, is that he is a connoisseur of American literature.⁴

In other words, if Skvorecky is now a Czech presence in Anglo-American culture, before 1968 he was perceived as an “Americanist” in Czechoslovakia.



3. SKVORECKY’S semi-autobiographical hero, Danny Smiricky, is as apolitical as Huck Finn, Frederic Henry, or Holden Caulfield, and *The Cowards’* melancholy ending reflects his essential lack of interest in the momentous historical events taking place around him.

Still, a novel can be political even if its hero is uninterested in politics and if political and ideological discussions do not figure explicitly in it. The category is an elastic one and can include works as different as Alfred Döblin’s *November 1917*, Arthur Koestler’s *Darkness at Noon*, and George Orwell’s *1984* at one end — the more explicitly political — and Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and Skvorecky’s *The Cowards* at the other. The last two raise questions of a political nature even while seeming not to be directly engaged in political ideas and issues or, perhaps more accurately, while leaving one with the impression that their protagonists don’t consider political concerns to be especially important. Political judgments in these novels are usually generated ironically when the reader perceives the gap between the quality of the response of the adolescent apolitical hero, on the one hand, and the implied responses of the controlling narrative voice and his own, on the other. In other words, whatever politics we perceive in the novel belong more often to the author and the reader than they do to the character. (This comment doesn’t apply to Skvorecky’s later more explicitly political and historical novels such as *Miracle* and *The Engineer of Human Souls*, where the viewpoints of the first person narrator and the author are almost identical.)

But *The Cowards* is also tacitly political in a simultaneously more obvious and more complex way by the very fact that it seems to refuse complicity with political issues in a state — neo-Stalinist Czechoslovakia — in which every aspect of social

being is shaped by politics. A significant part of what, following Sartre, we could call Skvorecky's political contestation in this novel comes from his obvious refusal to offer the usual socialist realist hero or to adhere to the formulaic, optimistic inanities of the socialist realist plot. In other words, the very fact of writing apolitically in a culture that insists on the politicization of literature constitutes a political gesture. Even as small a detail as the title of Skvorecky's first novel sounds a resistant note different from the titles of the standard Soviet and Czech classics of the period — many of which create expectations of a happy story or optimistic ending: Semyon Babaevski's *Light over the Earth* or Marie Pujmanova's *Life against Death*.



4. FROM ONE POINT of view, *The Cowards* is a meditation on the systems of values or philosophies governing the lives of European man in the twentieth century. The theme is dealt with more explicitly in the extended, often theoretical dialogues of the novels of exile but it is already subtly adumbrated here in the novel's engagement with humanism, fascism, Catholicism, and communism. Although Danny Smiricky's frame of reference is still residually Catholic, the novel's universe or world view is fundamentally secular and post-Christian with no system of belief or ideology either metaphysically privileged or prioristically authoritative. Christianity, like the liberal humanism of the older generation, is shown in the novel — as it was in history — overwhelmed by fascism and communism respectively. And although Danny, like his country, century, and author, is still on occasion a sentimental Christian longing for the emotional and spiritual satisfactions faith once provided, he recognizes that, in essence, he believes neither in it nor in the equally holistic systems claiming to have supplanted it.



5. IN AN INTERVIEW that took place in Prague in December 1966, Skvorecky told Antonin Liehm that he wrote *The Cowards* "shortly after the February events [of 1948], filled with a kind of socialist enthusiasm (although I must admit that I was never a political thinker)."⁵ Whatever may have been the intensity of that momentary enthusiasm — and the setting of the interview makes the declaration slightly

suspect — it wasn't sufficiently fervid to leave its mark on *The Cowards*, in which the arrival of the Soviet army and the promise (or perhaps threat) of a communist society leave Danny Smiricky more anxious than enthusiastic. At best, one could say, that having no real choice or voice in the matter he is willing to suspend judgment and give the Communists the benefit of the doubt. Skvorecky's next novel, *The Tank Corps* (*L'Escadron blindé*, 1969; *Tankovy prapor*, 1971), takes Smiricky into the Stalinist fifties and shows both character and author radically alienated from the new social order. Written in 1954 and set in the autumn of 1952, *The Tank Corps* deals with the last two weeks of Smiricky's compulsory military service. The events are clearly based on Skvorecky's own term of duty between 1951 and 1953 with the élite Tank Division posted at Mlada, near Prague. Whatever hopes and illusions may have been generated by May 1945 and February 1948 — and we need only read Kundera and Pavel Kohout to feel their intensity — have long disappeared for Smiricky and his fellow soldiers, with the result that the novel's attitude to the society it depicts is almost completely ironic and negative.

That the novel is ultimately more concerned with Czechoslovak society than with Smiricky is indicated by the then provocative sub-title, "Fragment z Doby Kultu" — "A Fragment from the Period of the Cult." Writing in a country more Stalinist than Stalin's and before Nikita Khrushchev's midnight speech to the Twentieth Party Congress in February 1956, Skvorecky must have realized that everything from his sub-title on was being written for the drawer. One of the few advantages of the drawer, however, is that one can write about anything in one's society, including the unmentionable though pervasive cult of personality. The book's focus, then, is a satiric critique of a particular period of a particular society — its distinguishing attitudes, assumptions, values, and contradictions.



6. THE OFFICERS and men in the occasionally Svejikian world of *The Tank Corps* may be equal in theory, but in practice the first group or class is predictably more equal than the second. This is particularly obvious in the scene in which the enthusiastic Lieutenant Prouza claims, as he tries to persuade the unenthusiastic men to take their exams, that "In our people's democratic army examinations take the form of a dialogue. . . . We will discuss our work and our experiences and we will show how our reading helps better our preparation for combat and for politics" (*TP*, 86; *EB*, 93).⁶ The Lieutenant and his soldiers function in the scene rather like a traditional comedy team: he plays the straight man — Oliver Hardy, Bud

Abbott — whose claims and stories are deflated by the seemingly simpler soldiers — Stan Laurel, Lou Costello — who, for the most part, are too canny either to believe their officers or to let them know that they disbelieve them. The examinations reveal the inequality between the officer and his men — an inequality based ultimately on the social power of the former and the powerlessness of the latter — and although they take the form of a dialogue, it's a dialogue of unequals in which the leading questions are designed to produce the desired answers. The examination described by Prouza at the start of the scene bears no resemblance to the examination we witness. As the discrepancy between the two grows wider and wider during this long but always lively episode, the humour and absurdity increase.

We should notice, however, that here, as in the plays of Vaclav Havel or in the novels of Tadeusz Konwicki, Milan Kundera, and Vassily Aksyonov, the origins or causes of absurdity are *social* rather than metaphysical. Our sense of the absurd — and of the humour implicit in it — arises when we perceive the chasm between an account of reality (a character's) and reality itself (the narrator's), and when we recognize that the essential terms of the character's account either have no referents in the latter or else are being used in a sufficiently novel way to make them incomprehensible from the point of view of common or traditional usage. In Prouza's speech, for example, we remark his use of the phrase "our popular democratic army" and realize over the length of the scene as well as from what we have already read that this army is neither democratic nor popular — at least not in any of the shades of meaning these adjectives possess in Czech, English, or French. We also note that this official expression is never used by the draftees whose vocabulary and topics of discussion belong to a world that doesn't seem to overlap with that described by their officers. Prouza is also representative of his class in his insistence on what could be termed a "grammatical" or "semantic" classlessness, indicated by his repeated use of the first person plural, which has no basis in the daily life of the army. Like his repeated use of "soudruh" or "soudruzi" ("comrade" and "comrades"), his emphasis on the plural pronoun describes a non-existent set of social relationships and states of affairs, the unreality of which is implicitly indicated by his reliance on the future tense.

Prouza's relatively innocent statements are related to the more monitory exhortations of his various superiors. These, when not threatening the men with some punishment, try to encourage them to greater efficiency by evoking for them a socialist Czechoslovakia menaced by traitors at home and imperialists abroad — both dedicated to destroying this best of all possible societies. The speakers draw on a common formulaic vocabulary: duty, responsibility, honour, nobility, self-sacrifice, and hard work are emphasized; "soudruzi" is reiterated obsessively and mechanically; and every concern is related to the new "popular democratic government and its Soviet supporters." Most statements begin and end at a level of abstraction that never connects with quotidian social and historical particulars.

Buzz words, meaningless set phrases and official clichés — “firm and at the same time comradely” (*TP*, 93) — replace the language actually spoken by ordinary people. And the streams of official nonsense remain unchallenged — and therefore tacitly pass for sense — because everyone realizes that despite the claim that there are no barriers between officers and men, the speeches have the status of dogma.

Equally noticeable is the way in which the official speeches (whether dealing with cultural, social, political, or military topics) are punctuated by allusions and references to Soviet examples as well as by the occasional use of Russian.⁷ The overall force of this rhetoric of power in *The Tank Corps* is to make the reality of army life disappear in discourses whose referents are either in Leninist-Stalinist political theory or, in what amounts almost to the same thing since party literature is subordinate to party ideology, in exemplary official discourses about the Soviet revolution and Soviet life. The language is still Czech but its contents are foreign in crucial senses to the experiences of the soldiers.



7. THE BACKGROUND and genesis of *Miss Silver's Past* (*Lvice*, 1969, 1974) are dealt with in Skvorecky's preface to the American edition. There he explains that

. . . I began spinning the yarn of *Miss Silver's Past* as a sticking-out of the tongue at both the turncoat aesthete and the censor. *Epatez le snob marxiste, dupez le censeur staliniste!* was my credo, when I decided to tell about my *Dies Irae* experience [between 1959 and 1961 over *The Cowards*] in the form of a sort of detective story, a genre I loved, because it had helped me survive some of the worst times in my life. I decided to make it look like light literature, like an entertainment, although the subject matter was so bloody serious. To make it a melodrama, a debased genre, so that it would escape the attention of the man with the rubber stamp and make the aesthete wonder why the author of *The Cowards* and *The Bass Saxophone* was writing a crime story about such an improbable sexbomb as Miss Silver. . . . Was it because he wanted to please the crowds?, the former preachers of “art for the masses” would ask contemptuously.⁸

In other words, the novel concerns not only Lenka Silver's revenge against Emil Prochazka, the man responsible for her sister's death in a concentration camp, but also Josef Skvorecky's implicit settling of accounts with the Czech literary establishment that had censored and banned his books. The “turncoat aesthetes” were those literary critics who (after the “rehabilitation” of Franz Kafka at the Liblice Conference in 1962) abandoned “sorealism” for the more fashionable “isms” of Robbe-Grillet, Michel Butor, and Roland Barthes. The same critics who had at-

tacked *The Cowards* in 1959 for not being socialist realist, now attacked it for not being sufficiently modern. He found himself dismissed condescendingly as only “a good story-teller.”⁹ “Deeply discouraged by adverse criticism,”¹⁰ Skvorecky responded with his two great novellas, *Emoke* (1963), *The Bass Saxophone* (1967), and, most decisively, *Miss Silver’s Past* (1969), which although made to “look like light literature, like an entertainment,” is nevertheless ultimately closer to “the serious line” among Skvorecky’s works than to the underrated Boruvka detective stories with which it seems to belong generically.



8. THE TANK CORPS and *Miracle* (*Mirakl*, 1972; *Miracle en Bohème*, 1978) were written almost twenty years apart, years in which Skvorecky wrote screenplays, mystery novels, novellas, essays, short stories, and *Miss Silver’s Past*. His interest in Danny Smiricky was confined to some stories and *The Bass Saxophone*. It’s conceivable, therefore, that but for “the fraternal help” of the Soviet invasion of August 1968 and Skvorecky’s emigration, the Smiricky series would have ended with *The Tank Corps*, *The Swell Season*, and a few stories about the war years. Instead, a national tragedy which resulted in Skvorecky’s permanent exile from Czechoslovakia served, paradoxically, to resurrect Smiricky and to stimulate Skvorecky into writing his most ambitious novel. *Miracle* was begun almost immediately upon arrival in the West in 1969, almost as if Skvorecky had not stopped looking over his shoulder from the moment the decision to leave had been made; he returned almost immediately in memory and in writing to the very place he couldn’t return to in fact — with the crucial difference that, liberated by exile, he was able to write about Czechoslovakia more openly than ever before. The result is his single greatest work and a national masterpiece.¹¹

Though it is obvious that *Miracle* is written by the same writer as *The Cowards* and *The Tank Corps*, it is equally evident that there is an almost qualitative difference between it and its predecessors. Responding to the private and public emotional and intellectual pressures generated by exile, Skvorecky expanded his palette and his conception of the novel in order to deal with a more complex set of historical events, giving expression, in the process, to a more profound and comprehensive vision of life. Without the fact of exile, therefore — without, that is, the pressure of the need to justify his decision to leave, as well as to settle accounts with history — it is conceivable that Skvorecky would not have become the important novelist that he is.

The continuities between this first novel written abroad and its predecessors are clear enough: comic realism and a common sense view of language; the tell-tale references to Hemingway; the often invisible, skeptical, camera-like hero; the interest in jazz; the residual and problematic Catholicism; and the almost reflexive concern with how reality is described (or, more accurately, misrepresented when put to ideological uses). All of these appear in *Miracle* but with a difference: the medium of Skvorecky's message has changed. *Miracle* is not only the first novel of Skvorecky's exile, it is also the first of his works to be obviously innovative in form. It is a generic hybrid, something immediately indicated by the unusual sub-title — "Politická detektivka" or "political detective story." Its chronologically earlier narrative (set in 1949) is an occasionally autobiographical comic love story as well as a political and religious detective novel; the narrative dealing with 1968 is a *roman à clef*, a superb novel of ideas with a trenchant critique of Marxist-Leninist theory and practice, and a politico-historical novel about the fate of the generation of 1948, the same generation that is at the heart of Kundera's fiction. The vision of this sprawling novel is still basically that of a comic realist, but Skvorecky now interweaves the comic and the tragic to an extent greater than before, implying that at its most comprehensive the comic vision not only intersects with the tragic but also embraces it.



9. IN *Miracle*, as in *The Engineer of Human Souls*, the novel's open or fragmented form should be seen as reflecting on the level of structure one of the novel's central thematic concerns: the author's profound doubts both about whether history is meaningful and about systems of thought — faiths, ideologies, philosophies — claiming to understand it. Skvorecky would agree with Iris Murdoch's comment that since "reality is incomplete, art must not be too afraid of incompleteness."¹² In his case, however, this is not just an aesthetic or philosophical position — it has political implications as well. The novel's fragmented form and Smiricky's commitment to "details" — his version of Gunter Grass's "snail's viewpoint" — are both aspects of its resistance to the authoritative and often authoritarian claims of all systems of thought claiming completeness (*M*, II, 261; *MB*, 384).¹³ Analogously, almost all the information gathered in Smiricky's private and casual work of detection into the religious miracle of 1949 — a church statue moved — and the political miracle of 1968 — the Prague Spring — is either absent from or contradicts official accounts of events. The optimistic homogeneity of state history,

state literature, and ideology is achieved only by a calculated amnesia about anything contradicting the official point of view. The incomplete stories, rumours, newspaper clippings, and letters Danny Smiricky encounters are all fragments retrieved, so to speak, from Winston Smith's tube and, therefore, untrue as far as the state is concerned. Gathered and reassembled by Danny — and the reader following in his tracks — they constitute an alternative social and political history, an authentic, fragmented, and “incomplete” totality challenging the factitious totality of the state.



10. AT ISSUE in both *Miracle* and *The Engineer of Human Souls* is the question of the status and function of the writer — one of Skvorecky's central concerns throughout his career. In a society whose media are state-controlled, the writer, when choosing to dissent, obviously has a different function — one that includes a heightened sense of moral responsibility — than he normally does in a society whose media are not state-censored. To choose one example: if history books either misrepresent or are silent about certain people and events, then history can become a necessary subject of fiction and the novelist the chronicler of what Solzhenitsyn has called “a nation's lost history.” Thus *Miracle*, Skvorecky's first novel of exile, shows him more openly concerned not only with the question of the writer's role but also with the lacunae of Czechoslovak history and, inescapably, the political ideas and practice of Soviet Marxism, none of which could be discussed openly in Czechoslovakia.

One of the results of this new concern with history and politics is the deliberate blurring of the discursive and cognitive boundaries separating autobiography, history, political discourse, and fiction. Any novel which like *Miracle* includes historical figures like Antonin Novotny, Gustav Husak, and Alexander Dubcek (chapter nine) among its characters, refers to specific political and historical events, and includes discussions of contemporary political ideas challenges our assumptions about the definition of fiction, the truth claims of fictional discourse and the status of fictional “facts.”



11. IF SOME OF THE GREAT East European artists of the nineteenth century — Mickiewicz, Petoffi, Dvorak — can be said to have established their national cultures, then Skvorecky, like Milosz, Kundera, and Solzhenitsyn, can be seen as preserving in exile a certain ideal of a nation and a national culture at a time when that ideal is threatened with extinction. These writers, however they differ in their aesthetics and politics, nevertheless recognize that there is a dimension of mission in the writer's vocation. For the East and Central European exiles, this "mission" involves a dimension of national proprietorship and salvation.¹⁴



12. THE COMPLEXITY and ambiguity of Skvorecky's attitude toward 1968 is reflected in *Miracle* in the fact that although Smiricky's position is presented as preferable because more clear-sighted than that of the idealistic students and second-time-around revolutionaries, it is not offered as normative. The attractiveness of the more "romantic" and historically un-Czech stance of rebellion — the "Polish" response — is clearly and strongly registered by the rhetorical force of the prose describing the student speeches and the report of Jan Palach's suicide by burning. As well, as the novel recognizes, there is the problem that Smiricky's position also represents a surrender, however reluctant, to the corrupt status quo which he despises as much as anyone. Each stance involves a catch-22 situation: if you challenge the Soviet Union, you will lose; if you don't challenge it, you simply continue the present losing situation. The choice, as all of Skvorecky's Czech readers would instantly recognize, repeats the situations of 1938 and 1948: to fight or to surrender without resistance. One of Skvorecky's larger concerns is to show the emotional and political *impasse* of the contemporary Czechoslovak situation for anyone not completely co-opted by the state. Smiricky's apolitical skepticism and irony, for example, seem to offer some degree of independence and self-respect, but ultimately the position is another form — though a more honourable one — of acquiescence. It can make the *status quo* tolerable but it cannot help change history. In addition, there is always the dangerous possibility that the detached stance of an ironic observer will become an end in itself, an Epictetan *modus vivendi* with the world as it is — as it does in the slightly sinister, though dangerously attractive figure of Smiricky's friend Doctor Gellen.

In the end, *Miracle* seems to suggest that Smiricky's skeptical stance is safer though ultimately as futile as the reformers' revolution: neither can alter history. Much of the novel's near despair arises out of Skvorecky's clear-sighted and tough-

minded awareness of the claims of both positions as well as out of his inability to see any alternatives in 1968 beyond the usual choices — complicity, an inner anti-political emigration, a repeat of the “romantic” Hungarian Revolution of 1956, or the continuation of the “realistic” Yalta settlement. Without access to what Max Weber calls “the house of power,” Czechoslovaks need a real miracle to change their contemporary history.

Almost two decades later, George Konrad’s *Antipolitics* and Adam Michnik’s *Letters from Prison* would offer pretty much the same analysis of the East and Central European dilemma. The mention of Konrad should also serve to remind us that while *Miracle* may be about Czechoslovak history and the Prague Spring, its political analysis, like Skvorecky’s essays, points beyond 1968 and the borders of Czechoslovakia.



13. THERE IS LITTLE DOUBT that *The Engineer of Human Souls* (*Pribeh inzenyra lidskych dusi*, 1977, 1984) is a sequel of sorts to *Miracle*: both were written in exile and, as Skvorecky has pointed out, both share “the multi-level structure” he developed in order to overcome the formal problem of dealing with a warehouse of materials and events separated by decades. Up to a point, then, *Miracle* teaches us what to expect: there’s a new amplitude in approach; a more experimental attitude to construction; a greater frankness in dealing with recent Czechoslovak history; a continuing settling of accounts with socialist realism; and a new, more explicit engagement with ideas and ideologies. But a reading of *Miracle* can’t prepare us for the following: a novel more reflective than anything Skvorecky had written previously; a more intellectual Danny Smiricky actively engaged in discussions of ideas; an increased concern not just with an individual’s thinking but, as in the later fiction of Saul Bellow, with ideas themselves — to the point that the discussion of ideas becomes a primary focus (in *Miracle*, the discussion of ideas is more closely integrated to the historic events taking place around Smiricky); a subject matter more extensive and heterogeneous in scope; and a fluid first-person narration often associational in manner that shows Skvorecky has gone to school not just to Hemingway but also to Faulkner, Joyce, and Woolf, all of whom are mentioned in the novel.

Present as well is a more explicit, self-conscious, and extensive dealing with literature and aesthetic issues that seems intended as a summary of all previous discussions in Skvorecky’s work — from *The Cowards* to *Miracle* — about jazz,

poetry, fiction, painting, and sculpture. But *The Engineer* also offers another kind of summary which helps explain Skvorecky's use of a more elastic narrative structure. There is a possibility that the latest Smiricky novel may also be the last. If this is so, then I suspect that *The Engineer* may also be Skvorecky's attempt at a summary of the series and Smiricky's life and generation: the novel's war-time scenes recall *The Cowards*, *The Bass Saxophone*, and *The Swell Season*; the nearly three dozen letters Danny receives include many from the early 1950s, offering a new perspective on *The Tank Corps*, *Sedmiramenny svicen* (1964 [*The Menorah*, untranslated]), and the chronologically earlier scenes in *Miracle*; discussions of the Prague Spring and the Soviet Invasion recapitulate *Miracle*'s second plot; and, finally, the émigré sections take Smiricky into Canada and the 1970s, the world of some of Skvorecky's later stories and of his unpublished play *Buh do domu* (*God Help Us!*).



14. LOOKED AT POSITIVELY, exile or separation can be seen as conducive to the achievement of a detached and pluralistic viewpoint or of a stance tending toward an objectivity that is a privileged perspective on life. If this were all, then we could speak of exile primarily in positive terms as a situation in which the end gained, a deeper and more comprehensive experience and view of life, almost redeems the painful historical road traversed and what Edward Said has described somewhere as “the crippling sorrow of estrangement.” From this point of view, the exile is compensated with an originality of vision which, for the artist, may result in *The Divine Comedy*, *Pan Tadeusz*, *Guernica*, or *The Engineer of Human Souls*. These are among the paradoxical “pleasures” of exile, possible only for those who, while wounded by exile, have insisted on recalling the causes of the wounds, keeping the wounds open and writing about them. Milosz, who has described Dante as the “patron saint of all poets in exile, who visit their towns and provinces only in remembrance,” has also speculated that “it is possible that there is no other memory than the memory of wounds” (*Nobel Prize Speech*, 20). Whatever may be the specific nature of that wound in Skvorecky's case, we find traces of it in symbolic form throughout *The Engineer*. This is most obvious, I would suggest, in those moments when memories of the Czech past, described nostalgically and with great affection, pull Smiricky away from a Canadian present he claims to prefer but to which he is less deeply attached and about which Skvorecky can never bring himself to write as evocatively and with as great an emotional intensity as he can about his

homeland. Despite Smiricky's early avowal that "the Toronto skyline is more beautiful to me than the familiar silhouette of Prague castle" (4), the *quality* of his feelings towards Canada is closer to the description in Skvorecky's 1977 essay "Red Music" where, in a poignant passage, he refers to "the schizophrenia of the times" in which "you find yourself in a land that lies over the ocean, a land — no matter how hospitable or friendly — where your heart is not, because you landed on these shores too late" (*Bass Saxophone*, 29). Implicit in the "too late," of course, is a nostalgia not just for a homeland but also for a time when one was *young* in that particular homeland. This desire to return forces its way into the novel in a moving late scene in which Smiricky hears about Veronika's return to Czechoslovakia. The ending of the story of this very sympathetically presented Czech immigrant who admits to being "obsessed with Czechoslovakia" (148) allows Skvorecky to indulge, for a moment, the unrealizable dream of going home. The dream is unrealizable, incidentally, not simply for political reasons, but because ultimately the "home" longed for is something other than the Prague of today.

Not surprisingly, Skvorecky followed *The Engineer* with a novel — *Dvorak in Love* (*Scherzo capriccioso*, 1983, 1986) — about another Bohemian artist who also arrived "too late" in North America but was able to return to Prague.



15. PERHAPS THE SINGLE most important connection between Skvorecky and Antonin Dvorak is the fact that, in middle age, each travelled to "America." Skvorecky settled here in 1969, Dvorak made three crossings between September 1892 and April 1895. The America Dvorak visited was the America Skvorecky read about as a young man in Czech translations of Twain, Bierce, Harte, Howells, London, and Dreiser; in other words, it was the idealized "literary" America (Kafka's "Amerika") of his youthful dreams. It's even possible that had Dvorak not lived and worked in the United States, Skvorecky would not have written a novel about him. I'm not suggesting that Dvorak, without an American period, would not have been an interesting enough subject for a biographical novel, only that he would not have interested Skvorecky because one of the essential correspondences between their lives would have been missing. And without these correspondences, Skvorecky would not have been able to write a novel that is simultaneously fictionalized biography and a displaced autobiography.

The crucial difference between their journeys, however, is self-evident: Dvorak travelled freely back and forth between the two countries; Skvorecky, like Solzhe-

nitsyn and Kundera, took a one-way ticket from his native land. If one of the ways we can read *Dvorak in Love* is as a novel that is also in part an articulation of a complex of ambivalent wishes, then I would also argue that one of its profoundest desires — enacted in the historical fact of Dvorak's return to and death in Bohemia — is the author's impossible desire to return "home."

Dvorak in Love, I want to suggest, allows Skvorecky to dream simultaneously about arriving "on these shores too late" and, more importantly, about going home. To the question, "Where is my home?" (the title of the Czech national anthem), the exile always points in two directions.

NOTES

- ¹ Skvorecky's novels are published in Czech by Sixty-Eight Publishers (Toronto); in French by Gallimard (Paris); and in English by Lester and Orpen Dennys (Toronto). *The Cowards* and *Miss Silver's Past* were first published by Grove Press, and are now available in Penguin and Picador editions respectively. Unless otherwise noted, the English translations are by Paul Wilson. Date of publication for the books discussed is given in the body of the essay. When a title is followed by two dates, in almost all cases the first refers to publication in Czech, the second in English; thus *The Cowards* (*Zbabelci*, 1958, 1970). Of the books discussed, only *The Tank Corps*, *Miracle*, and *The Menorah* have not been translated into English; the first two are, however, available in French.
- ² *The Cowards*, trans. Jeanne Nemcova (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972).
- ³ For a good introduction to the question of the relationship between formal and informal Czech, see Henry Kucera's informative essay on Skvorecky and "The Language Dilemma of a Czech Writer," in *World Literature Today*, 54, 4 (Autumn 1980), 577-81.
- ⁴ Jordan Elgrably, "Conversations with Milan Kundera," *Salmagundi*, No. 73 (Winter 1987), 8.
- ⁵ Antonin Liehm, *The Politics of Culture* (New York: Grove Press, 1968), 170.
- ⁶ The translation is my own.
- ⁷ The Soviet references, made almost without exception by the officers, include Lenin, Stalin, Kalynin, the Komsonols, and the 1917 revolution, as well as such less significant names as Oleg Kochevoi and Pavel Morozov. The last, by the way, is incorrectly identified in the French editions as "Héros soviétique de la Deuxième Guerre mondiale" (104)! Morozov (1918-1932) was famous, if that's the right word, for having denounced his father for the latter's supposed Kulak sympathies. He was subsequently killed by a group of outraged peasants led by his uncle.
- ⁸ *Miss Silver's Past*, trans. Peter Kussi (London: Picador, 1980), xvi. Substantial portions of the Czech text are missing in the version. The French translation reproduces Skvorecky's text in full.
- ⁹ "I Was Born in Nachod" in *Talkin' Moscow Blues*, ed. Sam Solecki (Toronto: Lester and Orpen Dennys, 1988), 56-57.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*
- ¹¹ On the subject of the positive or beneficial aspects of exile, see the following sentence from Adam Michnik's essay "Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors (1973)": "[Pilsudski]

had been an exile himself for some time, and he knew that for a conquered nation emigration is a priceless treasure, an eye and an ear on the world, a mouth that can speak freely and breathe fresh air, absorbing it into the nation's body" (*Letters from Prison and other essays*, trans. Maya Latynski [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987], 204).

- ¹² Iris Murdoch, "Against Dryness," in *The Novel Today*, ed. Malcolm Bradbury (London: Fontana/Collins, 1977), 31.
- ¹³ The first page reference is to the two-volume Czech edition, the second is to the French translation: *Mirakl* (Toronto: Sixty-Eight Publishers, 1972); *Miracle en Bohême*, trans. Claudia Ancelot (Paris: Gallimard: 1978). Here as with *The Tank Corps* the translations into English are my own.
- ¹⁴ This seems to me true even in the case of Milosz who, even while resisting the enormous pressure and temptation to play Mickiewicz for the Poland of his time, has nevertheless fulfilled from abroad the role of national bard and national conscience. See Ewa Czarnicka and Aleksander Fiut, *Conversations with Czeslaw Milosz*, trans. Richard Lourie (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987), 324-25.

COVENANT

Seymour Mayne

The rainbow we were supposed
to behold the next day
or the day after
never appeared.
Our eyes grew strained,
our necks stiff,
and the heavy ashen clouds
settled over the hills and streams.
The fish rose to the top
and rolled over
like silver bombers in manoeuvres.

Who could believe it?
No rainbow, no
break of colour, no
sign? Someone's forgotten,
we reasoned.
And we began to pray
for the cleansing rains again
and the waves rising
to wash our cities —
friend's and foe's alike —
with the green tow of return.