

TRAUMATIC HISTORIES: REPRESENTATIONS OF  
(POST-)COMMUNIST CZECHOSLOVAKIA IN  
SYLVIE GERMAIN, DANIELA HODROVÁ, AND  
JEAN-GASPARD PÁLENÍČEK

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## **Abstract**

Through a study of the work of three important writers, this thesis engages with the traumatic memories of the second half of the twentieth century in Czechoslovakia in order to highlight the value of literature in widening critical understandings of the continuing legacy of this complex era, which was dominated by totalitarian regimes under the Communist governments which gained control after the upheaval of the Second World War. Whilst these years were not unilaterally traumatic, many lives were dramatically affected by border closures and by the experience of living under a regime that maintained control through methods including confiscation of property, surveillance, arbitrary imprisonment, show trials, and executions. Many of the stories of this era could not be published openly because of censorship, and the persecution of intellectuals led to a wave of emigration, during which a number of writers moved to France. Using theories of trauma, exile, illness, and of self and other, this thesis opens up a dialogue between the work of three writers who engage, albeit from very different perspectives, with this little-explored intersection between Czech and French. The first chapter explores Daniela Hodrová's translated Prague trilogy as a first-hand witness to her nation's dispossession and as a form of resistance to the deletion of memory. The second chapter considers the painful transgenerational legacy of the era as it plays out in the work of bilingual writer Jean-Gaspard Páleníček. Chapter Three considers the ways in which the Prague novels of established French author Sylvie Germain negotiate the fine line between an appropriation of the stories of the other and a moral responsibility to bear witness. By bringing these authors together for the first time and locating their work within French Studies, my work foregrounds the need for Western criticism to pay attention to other valuable voices who can contribute to our understandings of the traumatic experience that has shaped modern history.

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## Abbreviations

Footnoted references to primary texts will be made using the following abbreviated forms:

- BR* Sylvie Germain, *Bohuslav Reynek à Petrkov: Un nomade en sa demeure* (St-Cyr-sur-Loire: Christian Pirot Éditeur, 1998).
- ES* Sylvie Germain, *Eclats de sel* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996).
- Imm.* Sylvie Germain, *Immensités* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993).
- LB* Jean-Gaspard Páleníček, *Les Bouleaux* (Paris: Revue K, 2008).
- LP* Sylvie Germain, *La Pleurante des rues de Prague* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992).
- RO* Daniela Hodrová, *Le Royaume d'Olsany*, trans. by Catherine Servant (Paris: Laffont, 1992).
- VP* Daniela Hodrová, *Visite privée: Prague*, trans. by Catherine Servant (Paris: Chêne, 1991).

## Introduction

### Widening Understandings of a Traumatic Totalitarian Legacy

Although Daniela Hodrová, Jean-Gaspard Páleníček, and Sylvie Germain occupy diverse writing positions, each engages with the stories and memories of the Communist era in Czechoslovakia and, in different ways, the work of each author forges a perhaps unexpected relationship between Czech and French.<sup>1</sup> The sociohistorical context in question is a troubled and complex period of history which spanned a half-century, from the Czechoslovak Communist Party (Komunistická strana Československa, or KSČ) coup of 1948 until the Velvet Revolution ended the regime in 1989. Having been occupied throughout the Second World War by Nazi forces, Czechoslovakia was assigned (along with other countries in the region of Central and Eastern Europe) to the Soviet Bloc at the Yalta Conference at the end of the Second World War, and for the next four decades was subjugated to a regime of Soviet-led totalitarian law. Borders were closed, routes of communication with the West were shut down, and the all-powerful Party maintained control over almost every aspect of political and domestic life by means of a system of intrusive surveillance and punitive measures, including the show trials, imprisonments,

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<sup>1</sup> Note that I use 'Czechoslovakia' when referring to the period between 1918 (which saw the political formation of the First Czechoslovak Republic (*První Československá Republika*) after the collapse of Austro-Hungary during the First World War) and 1991, when the country split into two independent republics, Czech and Slovak, two years after the end of the Communist regime. When referring to the post-Communist period, I therefore use the terms 'Czech' and 'Czech Republic'. Questions relating to either language or culture are discussed in this thesis as 'Czech', since the case-study texts focus on Czech rather than Slovak characters, events and locations.

and executions that dominated the early years of the regime as the Party sought to establish total power.

During this period, the arts were subjected to state censorship so that writers who did not follow the Party line had to choose between silence, publishing underground ('samizdat') or abroad ('tamizdat'), exile, or, in extreme cases of dissidence, imprisonment or death. Echoing a wave of de-Stalinization across the region (following the Soviet leader's death in 1953 and denunciation by Khrushchev in 1956), a short period of relative political and creative freedom during the Prague Spring of the sixties was crushed in 1968 by invading Warsaw Pact troops in scenes of violence across the country. The next decade was dominated by a series of repressive reforms known as 'normalisation', in which the country was brought to heel by its Soviet masters; a wave of exodus ensued during which a number of writers and intellectuals moved to the West in order to escape the 'inner emigration' in which, as critic Veronika Ambros has noted, many were forced to live.<sup>2</sup> Throughout this thesis, my analysis will foreground the ways in which the texts selected are marked by the traumas of this period, and particular attention will be paid to the ways in which they externalise the themes of 'intellectual suffocation',<sup>3</sup> of subjugation and lack of agency, of dispossession, and of isolation from the non-Communist world.

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<sup>2</sup> Veronika Ambros, 'Czech Women Writers after 1945', in *A History of Central European Women's Writing*, ed. by Celia Hawkesworth (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 201-19, here p. 208.

<sup>3</sup> I have borrowed this description from the Czech writer Patrik Ouředník, who himself moved to France in order to escape the restrictive Communist environment. My thesis refers comparatively to his work, and that of a number of fellow exiles to France, in order to further contextualise my analysis of the primary corpus. See 'Interview with Patrik Ouředník' by Céline Bourhis, in *Context No. 17* (London: Dalkey Archive Press, 2011).

The legacy of pain of this era has left its mark not only on those who lived through the oppression of the regime, but also on those who have inherited the difficult memories of these years, both within the regions of Central and Eastern Europe that were directly affected and indeed beyond these geographical boundaries. The body of work selected for this study allows us to consider the Czech novelist Hodrová's first-hand narrative of her nation's experience alongside the younger French-Czech writer Páleníček's retrospective story of living with the transgenerational legacy of the traumas experienced by his parents' and grandparents' generations. Meanwhile, the French novelist Germain's retelling of Czech stories provides a third and more externalised insight into this context.

Hodrová's trilogy, *La Cité dolente*, refers to many of the ways (including torture, surveillance, imprisonment, exile, and executions) in which the Communist state persecuted individuals and so maintained control over the nation by instilling a widespread atmosphere of fear.<sup>4</sup> *Les Bouleaux* by Páleníček tells the story of two protagonists, a young woman who has been persecuted and imprisoned by the state because of her family's affiliations, and a man whose fears for his own safety and status lead to his failure to help her and ultimately make him complicit in her death.<sup>5</sup> Through the vehicle of this story, the text engages retrospectively with the mechanics of state control over individual subjects. The lives of the central figures of three of the four texts that Germain locates in a Czech setting are also irreparably affected by the regime and their encounters

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<sup>4</sup> Daniela Hodrová, *La Cité dolente* trilogy, publ. in three separate volumes, publication details given below at first reference to each text.

<sup>5</sup> Jean-Gaspard Páleníček, *Les Bouleaux* (Alfortville: Revue K, 2008). Hereafter abbreviated in footnotes to *LB*.

with its cruelties and constraints. Prokop (*Immensités*)<sup>6</sup> loses his job and suffers a crisis of identity brought on by his alienation from his environment; Ludvík (*Éclats de sel*)<sup>7</sup> flees his troubled homeland and, returning after the Velvet Revolution that ended the Communist regime, battles a persisting sense of exile; Reynek (the Czech poet who forms the subject of Germain's *Bohuslav Reynek*)<sup>8</sup> loses his home in the confiscations of property implemented by the regime.

Although memories of socialist regimes are not traumatic for all citizens,<sup>9</sup> it is clear from this brief overview that the texts that have been selected for examination in this thesis are marked with the scars left by a regime of manipulation, constraint, and persecution. The Communist era in Central Europe saw many dramatic events, including torture and executions, which clearly coincide with the definition of traumatic events given by the fourth edition of the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-IV): 'an event or events that involved actual or

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<sup>6</sup> Sylvie Germain, *Immensités* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993). Hereafter abbreviated in footnotes to *Imm.*

<sup>7</sup> Germain, *Eclats de sel* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996). Hereafter abbreviated in footnotes to *ES.*

<sup>8</sup> Germain, *Bohuslav Reynek à Petrkov: Un nomade en sa demeure* (St-Cyr-sur-Loire: Christian Pirot Éditeur, 1998). Hereafter abbreviated in footnotes to *BR.*

<sup>9</sup> Whilst my thesis highlights the need to recover and acknowledge memories of the painful and, I shall argue, traumatic aspects of the Communist era in Central Europe, it is clear that there were a multitude of ways of experiencing and coping with the realities of the Communist regime. The fact that for many citizens the era in question was not traumatic is evidenced, for example, by the phenomenon of 'Ostalgie' relating to the former East Germany that has been well-documented in scholarly debate. See Mia Lee's discussion of East German post-unification resistance to the destruction of monumental or architectural evidence of GDR sociopolitical structures, in 'GDR Monuments in Unified Germany', in *Memorialization in Germany Since 1945*, ed. by Bill Niven and Chloe Paver (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 308-17, esp. p. 309. Similarly, in relation to the former Soviet Union, Catriona Kelly's volume on childhood memory demonstrates that negative memories of the Communist era are often either countered by or tempered by more positive memories. See Kelly, *Children's World: Growing Up in Russia, 1890-1991* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008). Furthermore, as James Mark shows, many citizens found it necessary to accommodate themselves variously to the wide-reaching restrictions of the regime without being traumatised by this experience. See Mark, *The Unfinished Revolution: Making Sense of the Communist Past in Central-Eastern Europe* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010).

threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of self or others'.<sup>10</sup> Clinician and trauma theorist Judith Herman terms such events (which include an encounter with extreme violence, rape, physical abuse, military combat, and torture) 'atrocities', and occurrences such as these do indeed feature in the pages of the case-study texts.<sup>11</sup> *Les Bouleaux*, for example, refers to the executions of the 1950s, and recounts the female protagonist's escape from political imprisonment; Hodrová's trilogy includes descriptions of the violence of the Soviet invasion of 1968, as well as frequent references to imprisonment, torture, and death.

My concern in this thesis, however, is also with the textual representation of the repeated experience of events and circumstances, under the Communist regime, which may not appear to fit the DSM-IV's definition of traumatic events. These often prolonged and commonplace experiences included loss of property, employment, or social status; surveillance; sustained uncertainty about who could be trusted due to the extensive nature of the informant network; and the necessitation of complicity with the regime in order to maintain one's status or indeed freedom. Moreover, whilst these constraining experiences are not explicitly included in the DSM-IV's definition of traumatic events, there has been much debate about the need to reconsider and expand clinical descriptions of trauma, both in terms of the events which induce symptoms, and of those symptoms themselves. This debate eventually resulted

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<sup>10</sup> American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders Fourth Edition* (Washington: Amer Psychiatric Pub Incorporated, 1994), 309.81. This publication is widely recognised as the reference standard of the mental health profession. Hereafter abbreviated to DSM-IV.

<sup>11</sup> Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, 4<sup>th</sup> edn (London: Pandora, 2001), p. 1.

in the inclusion of a new category, DESNOS (Disorders of Extreme Stress Not Otherwise Specified), into the updated version, DSM-5, in 2013.<sup>12</sup> Herman notes that a system of seven diagnostic criteria was used in extensive research trials that were carried out in order to determine the definition of this 'complex' form of PTSD.<sup>13</sup> The first criterion states that 'the individual must have suffered a history of subjection to totalitarian control over a prolonged period', and examples of such situations include 'hostages, prisoners of war, concentration camp survivors, and survivors of some religious cults'.<sup>14</sup> The language of the criterion invites comparison with the experience of political 'totalitarian control', even if the list does not extend explicitly to citizens of such regimes. Without intending to suggest that all citizens of totalitarian regimes are clinically traumatised, my thesis nonetheless explores the possibility that some of the traumatising experiences sustained by 'hostages, prisoners of war, concentration camp survivors, and survivors of some religious cults' are comparable to the experience of those who live through regimes of political 'totalitarian control', and may therefore be expressed in terms of trauma in literary accounts such as the case-study texts.

I therefore use a broad framework of clinical, theoretical, and critical writings drawn from the field of Trauma Studies to direct my analysis of these three very different writers, whose work is brought together by a common sociohistorical context and intersects with many of the contemporary issues surrounding the

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<sup>12</sup> American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: Fifth Edition* (Washington: Amer Psychiatric Pub Incorporated, 2013). Abbreviated to DSM-5. Note that the inclusion of the new category of DESNOS is the result of more than a decade of work by clinicians including Herman, who identified the need to recognise '[t]he syndrome that follows upon prolonged, repeated trauma'. Herman, p. 119.

<sup>13</sup> Herman, p. 119, proposed the term 'complex post-traumatic stress disorder' for this new grouping of symptoms.

<sup>14</sup> Cited in Herman, p. 121.

nature of traumatic experience and the way it is remembered. The overarching framework of trauma theory will, however, be complemented within each author-based chapter by my use of a different critical angle (respectively silencing and memory, transgenerational pain, and the relationship between the self and other) intended to emphasise the fact that each writer represents a different relationship to the context.

I will insist that literature is a valuable memorial to the traumatic Communist years, and can facilitate our need, formulated by Herman, to ‘understand the past in order to reclaim the present and the future. [...] An understanding of psychological trauma begins with rediscovering history’.<sup>16</sup> A number of factors have contributed to a forgetting or, rather, suppression of the Communist past in Central Europe. Drawing on a number of studies of Central and Eastern European histories (including work by James Mark and Richard S. Esbenshade), my thesis engages with the context underlying the chosen texts in order to draw attention to the fact that this silencing was implemented in a number of ways by the regime but that it also continued in a different manner after 1989, when for about a generation there was very limited public discussion or commemoration of the losses and impact of Communism. My thesis aims to show how the texts selected enact a ‘rediscovery’ of history, and thus constitute a ‘reclaiming’ of the present as envisaged by Herman.

One way in which the traumatic past manifests itself, particularly in the texts by Hodrová and Páleníček, is in the appearance of ghostly figures, whether in the flashback of the dead woman that returns to haunt the male protagonist of *Les*

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<sup>16</sup> Herman, p. 2.

*Bouleaux*, or in the walking dead who inhabit Hodrová's Prague. The central, sorrowful figure of Germain's *La Pleurante des rues de Prague* also appears in ghostly form to the French narrator at locations throughout Prague.<sup>18</sup> Since each of the writers returns repeatedly to the events of the Communist past, and to the way that its legacy plays out today, Cathy Caruth's understanding of the ways in which the victim or witness experiences trauma as a 'repeated possession'<sup>19</sup> will also be central to my analysis of the 'ghosts' of the past that haunt each of these texts. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub conceive of trauma 'not as an event encapsulated in the past, but as a history which is essentially *not over*, [...] whose traumatic consequences are still actively *evolving*',<sup>20</sup> and this description of trauma as an unfinished history forms a starting point for my analysis of the ways in which the traumatically oppressive and often brutal totalitarian regime is made manifest in the works selected, as I seek to shed light on the ways in which the continuing legacy of the era is inscribed into literatures emanating from the region. My analysis of the 'ghosts' of the past may also invite comparison with the phenomenon of hauntology, which developed within French Studies after the publication of Jacques Derrida's

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<sup>18</sup> Germain, *La Pleurante des rues de Prague* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992). Hereafter abbreviated in footnotes to *LP*.

<sup>19</sup> Cathy Caruth (ed.), *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), p. 4.

<sup>20</sup> Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, 'Foreword', in Felman and Laub (eds), *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. xiv. Note that Felman and Laub refer specifically to the traumas of the Second World War, and particularly to the Holocaust. Without making any comparison between the events of the Holocaust and the Communist era in Central Europe, this thesis nevertheless extends Felman and Laub's description of massive social trauma as an ongoing and unfinished event to the context of totalitarianism in order to analyse the continuing legacy of that era. Furthermore, whilst this thesis focuses most closely on the Communist period in Czechoslovakia, as my analysis of each author progresses it will become evident that this period is inextricably associated in Central European memory with the aftermath of the Second World War and indeed of the events of the Holocaust in this region.

*Spectres de Marx*.<sup>21</sup> Derrida's work in this field also has implications for the study of the Communist era as an unfinished period of history, a stance which strengthens my argument about the importance of 'rediscovering' this legacy.

If one of the central tenets underpinning this thesis is a conviction that we need to further our understandings of the 'evolving' or 'unfinished' legacy of Communism, then it is important to deal with the question of why Western critical debate should engage with literatures emerging from the former Eastern Bloc. In her edited volume of essays on the subject of 'Writing Europe', Ursula Keller comments on the persistent sense of an East-West divide in terms of European literary culture:

Even today West Europeans are still far more interested in cultural developments in America than in the literary exploits of their European neighbours. The continuing unequal distribution, on the literary map of Europe, of the scarce resource attention, and the extent to which mutual perceptions are still distorted by ignorance, prejudice, misplaced expectations, and clichés are matters dealt with in many of the essays.<sup>23</sup>

One of the intentions of this thesis is to redress in part this 'unequal distribution' of attention paid to the literary achievements of lesser-known authors such as Hodrová or Páleníček by casting light on the way in which their work intersects with authors such as Germain who, perhaps at least partially owing to her claim to a major European language and identity, has received a larger share of critical attention. My work therefore aims to challenge 'mutual perceptions [of] ignorance, prejudice, misplaced expectations' by placing a greater critical emphasis not only on the literary value of these so-called 'minor literatures'

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<sup>21</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Spectres de Marx* (Paris: Galilée, 1993).

<sup>23</sup> Ursula Keller, 'Writing Europe', in *Writing Europe: What is European about the Literatures of Europe? Essays from 33 European Countries*, ed. by Ursula Keller and Ilma Rakusa (Budapest & New York: Central European University Press, 2004), pp. 1-20, here p. 11. Essay trans. by Andrew Gane. Volume originally publ. in German (Hamburg: Körber-Stiftung, 2003).

emerging from Eastern Bloc contexts, but also on their role in helping us to better understand the legacy of an important era in modern European history.

Keller further describes the East-West inequality as an 'open wound in the body of Europe', and this image of the pain resulting from cultural and political marginalisation intersects with my analysis of Hodrová's sense of being 'cut off' by political events from Europe, a sense that is expressed in the images of deletion and death used in her work. Páleníček's debut novel, *Les Bouleaux*, is also scarred by such sociopolitical 'wounding' and by the historical silencing of marginalised stories. *Les Bouleaux* ends by demanding why Eastern Bloc histories (in the form of the semi-fictional family saga at the heart of this text) must be denied: 'moi qui suis déjà doublement déraciné, me faudra-t-il le renier pour pouvoir vivre?'<sup>24</sup> My analysis will examine Páleníček's description of 'déracination' as an effect of totalitarianism, and will consider the ways in which silencings of painful memories relating to the era contribute to the perpetuation of that divorce from history. I will discuss Páleníček's text as an attempt to break the trend of silence and, interacting with clinical and critical theories about the articulation of trauma (by Felman and Laub, Herman, Caruth, Suzette Henke, and Kathryn Robson amongst others), I will consider the importance of speaking out as a part of the process of recovering from a wounded identity. The denial of totalitarian traumas (whether by the Communist regime itself, by post-Communist narratives formulated within the former Eastern Bloc, or by the lack of Western attention) is, moreover, a key theme in all of the works analysed, and one with which I will engage as a part of that 'open wound' that Keller denotes as characteristic of the East-West relationship. Germain's work

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<sup>24</sup> *LB*, p. 47.

engages with notions of Western responsibility, since this is a legacy of pain in which the West is politically complicit, both through the Munich Agreement of 1938 which revoked promised Western support against the advances of Hitler's army towards Czechoslovakia, and through the Yalta Conference between America, Britain and the Soviet Union in 1945, when the countries of Central and Eastern Europe were effectively assigned to the Soviet Bloc. Drawing on theories about the relationship between the self and other (including work by Emmanuel Levinas, Colin Davis, and Arthur Frank), my analysis will therefore consider Germain's Czech writings as a response to a 'moral responsibility'<sup>25</sup> to end the silencing and to listen to the stories that emanate from this 'wound'.

This thesis will, however, avoid the assumption that listening to stories of Communist-era trauma is by any means an easy task. Writing before the collapse of Communism, George Steiner drew attention to the difficulties inherent both in representing and in interpreting the effects of this era, since 'totalitarian schooling can falsify the entire world image and reflex system of a nation or generation' to the extent that 'the resumption of dialogue' between those inside and outside such a system may seem to pose insuperable barriers of understanding.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, the divorce between Eastern and Western Europe that resulted from the totalitarian shutting down of systems of communication is an integral part of the trauma resulting from that era, and is present in each of the works that make up the primary corpus for this thesis. In addition to the

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<sup>25</sup> I use this term in the sense in which it is deployed by Emmanuel Levinas and Arthur Frank, whose writings will be discussed at length in my chapter on Germain. See Levinas, 'Useless Suffering', in *Entre nous: On Thinking of the Other*, trans. by Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (London: Athlone Press, 1998); Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

<sup>26</sup> George Steiner, 'Out of Central Europe', in *Language and Silence: Essays 1958-1966* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1985), pp. 379-86, here p. 380.

specific difficulties of 'dialogue' relating to the disparity noted by Steiner between Communist and Western modes of discourse (which will also be examined in the light of Judith Butler's emphasis on the 'public sphere' as a site of manipulation of discourse and thought),<sup>27</sup> my analysis will also draw attention to the 'incomprehensibility' of trauma, whether political, domestic, physical or emotional, when viewed from a non-participant view point. In response to recent debates about 'secondary witnessing and vicarious trauma', Colin Davis points out that '[w]e should not have the arrogance to assume that we can share some part of what happened to the victims. [...] we do not participate in or co-own the other's trauma'.<sup>28</sup> As Davis concedes, however, to refuse to listen would be 'an act of barbarity in itself, hideously complicit with the forces which sought to eliminate [victims' stories]',<sup>29</sup> and my analysis will attempt to highlight ways in which we can approach texts such as these in order to bring to light a forgotten or suffocated history without 'assum[ing] that we can share' trauma experienced by others. In examining the texts, I will therefore foreground the questions of alterity variously flagged up by Steiner and Davis as I consider ways in which the alienation between East and West is manifested as symptoms of traumatisation in the work of the three authors, taking into account the different relationship of each author (in generational and national terms, as described above) to that traumatic division.

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<sup>27</sup> Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London & New York: Verso, 2006). See e.g. p. xx.

<sup>28</sup> Colin Davis, 'Trauma and Ethics: Telling the Other's Story', in *Other People's Pain: Narratives of Trauma and the Question of Ethics*, ed. by Martin Modlinger and Philipp Sonntag (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2011), pp. 19-42, here p. 20.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

My thesis is not the first study to use trauma theory as a means of analysing the narration of former Eastern Bloc experience. My research draws on work by critics who have explored literatures emerging from other former Communist countries, and particularly that of Lyn Marven, who has written extensively on the manner in which national trauma may be inscribed in literature through the trope of the individual body. Marven points out that the concept of trauma is useful as 'a structure which characterizes the experience and continuing effects of the Eastern Bloc',<sup>30</sup> a position which is borne out by my analysis of the effects of trauma in the case-study texts. Much of the work to date on the narration of former Eastern Bloc experience has been done within German Studies,<sup>32</sup> but there has been far less academic discussion of the ways in which the totalitarian context has been voiced in the vehicle of French despite the existence of a smaller but exciting group of writers from Central Europe and the former Czechoslovakia who now write from France.<sup>33</sup> My intention, therefore, is that this thesis will open up further discussion of literature in French about Central Europe, and that by establishing this small but, I shall argue, important

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<sup>30</sup> Lyn Marven, *Body and Narrative in Contemporary Literatures in German: Herta Müller, Libuše Moníková, Kerstin Hensel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), p. 8.

<sup>32</sup> Including work by Marven, Haines, and Helga G. Braunbeck, all of whose analyses will be considered in this thesis. The prevalence of literature in German emerging from the Eastern bloc, and the consequent wealth of critical enquiry into this context under the ægis of German Studies, is owing in part to the historical relationship between this region and the Germanic Hapsburg Empire, so that German-speaking minorities existed in many of the Communist countries. Many dissident or exiled writers, including the German-speaking Romanian Herta Müller, therefore gravitated naturally towards Germany and adopted German as their writing language.

<sup>33</sup> The work of the exiled Czech novelist Milan Kundera provides a notable exception. Kundera fled in 1968 to France and has written predominantly in French in recent years. A wealth of academic studies into his work exists, including his use of French, of self-translation, and of authorised translations. I have deliberately excluded the work of Kundera from the primary corpus for this thesis with the intention of placing the focus on lesser-known writings of Czech provenance, which I shall argue are similarly worthy of critical attention within the field of French Studies. I will, however, refer comparatively to the work of Kundera where deemed relevant, and especially in relation to the work of Daniela Hodrová, since like Kundera she experienced the regime at first hand, although unlike him she remained in her country throughout.

canon, which represents an intersection between major and minor European languages, new perspectives can be opened up on the 'experience and continuing effects' of traumatic histories that, as I shall argue, have significance beyond their specific Czech context.

### **Three Writers, One Traumatic Context**

The fact that the texts to be examined in this thesis proceed from a common sociohistorical context (which is, widely speaking, that of twentieth-century Czechoslovakia) calls for reflection at this point on the nature of the relationship between text and context, and for clarification of the stance that I adopt towards that relationship. Since one of the primary aims of this thesis is to illuminate the human impact of a particular historical era as it has been depicted through the filter of a diverse selection of literary texts, it will be essential to draw attention to the nature of that sociohistorical environment and to the particular relation of each writer to it. My readings of these texts therefore take into consideration their very specific backgrounds, and in so doing I subscribe to the theory that the individual subject is indelibly bonded to its formative milieu, as Butler explains: '[g]iven over from the start to the world of others, [the individual] bears their imprint, is formed within the crucible of social life'.<sup>34</sup> Helen Vassallo has described the way in which the individual is marked by this 'crucible of social life' as a process of 'embodied memory',<sup>35</sup> a term which she elaborates on the basis of Elizabeth Grosz's claim that '[e]very body is marked by the history and

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<sup>34</sup> Butler, p. 26. Cited in Helen Vassallo, *The Body Besieged: The Embodiment of Historical Memory in Nina Bouraoui and Leïla Sebbar* (Lanham, MA: Lexington Books, 2012), p. 152.

<sup>35</sup> Vassallo. See especially pp. 10-13, where Vassallo develops her concept of 'embodied memory'.

specificity of its existence'.<sup>36</sup> The ineradicable 'imprint' of social context is transferred onto the work of literature that is produced from the immersion of the subject in the formative 'crucible of social life', so that personal and social memory are inextricably interwoven in the text that emerges. In relation to her study of French-Algerian writers, Vassallo notes that the 'marking' of the body by the 'specificity of its existence' results in 'the impossibility of disconnecting the personal story from history'<sup>37</sup> so that the text that emerges, through the vehicle of the individual body, bears the 'mark' of the social history. My reading of the body of writing selected for this study will also be inflected with an awareness of this process whereby historical memory – personal or collective – is externalised through the act of writing. Key points of relevant sociohistory will therefore be introduced during the course of my argument in order to illuminate the imprint these histories make in the texts, and to question how they both shape and constrain the narrative mode of each text.

The thesis is structured around three main chapters, each providing an extended analysis of selected texts by one of the case-study authors, starting with the work of Hodrová, followed by a chapter on Páleníček, and ending with a study of Germain's Czech texts. The focus of my analysis thus progresses from the first-hand, immediate experience of Hodrová to the retrospective point of view of the bilingual Páleníček, and widens out eventually to the externalised, albeit empathetic, transnational perspective adopted by Germain. Each chapter opens with a full examination of the writing position and relevant biographical details of the author in question. However, a brief overview of each author, and

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<sup>36</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 142 (cited in Vassallo, p. 10).

<sup>37</sup> Vassallo, p. 152.

of the particular way in which they engage with the period of history in question, will be given now in order to elucidate my reasons for selecting this primary corpus and to support my use of critical concepts relating to trauma, illness, and alienation as a theoretical framework for the analysis of these works.

### **Daniela Hodrová and 'A Crisis that is Not Yet Over'**

Daniela Hodrová was born in Prague in 1946 just after the Second World War and lived through the Communist regime; her work narrates many of the political and personal oppressions and constraints experienced by her nation, and will accordingly be examined in this thesis as a first-hand witness to the era in question. Hodrová graduated from Prague's prestigious Charles University (*Univerzita Karlova*) with a degree in comparative literatures including French, and my analysis of her work will foreground the way in which she employs her awareness of French and European literature and culture in an attempt to resist the dogmas and restrictions that set up barriers between Czech literature of her era and literary developments in the West. After graduating, Hodrová started to write fiction but the subversive nature of her work meant that she was unable to publish until after the revolution owing to the strictures of political censorship in Communist Czechoslovakia. Since 1989, however, Hodrová has published a total of seven novels and two reflective and semi-autobiographical works of prose. She is also a respected academic and literary scholar, is employed as a researcher by the national Institute of Czech Literature (*Ústav pro českou literaturu*), and has published a large number of critical essays and volumes in addition to her fiction.

For inclusion into the primary corpus for this research project, I have selected Hodrová's Prague trilogy, which was written during the Communist years although it could not be published until after the Velvet Revolution, when the three volumes appeared in quick succession between 1991 and 1992. It was published in French translation in trilogy form as *La Cité dolente*,<sup>38</sup> almost immediately after being released in its original Czech; its appearance in French can be interpreted as a part of the process of placing the painful experiences sustained by her nation back in the spotlight of international scrutiny, from which it was long removed by the closure of borders and lines of communication. The translation of the trilogy into French was in fact triggered by the publication, in French translation, of a slim volume by Hodrová about her native city, *Visite privée: Prague*.<sup>39</sup> This is a literary 'guidebook' to Prague as it seen through the eyes of the author, and was commissioned as part of a series of such volumes on capital cities. Its popularity in France can be explained by the surge of Western interest in the newly visible countries that had so long remained out of sight behind the borders of the Iron Curtain; this circumstance further paved the way for the rapid publication of the trilogy in French. *Visite privée* is included in my primary corpus alongside *La Cité dolente* because it refers repeatedly to the trilogy and to its time of writing, and thus provides a useful source of retrospective and self-reflective insight into that work.

The trilogy itself engages with the constraints of Communist life and with the fear of 'deletion' of both creativity and of life itself that resulted from the censorship and punitive atmosphere of the regime. It sets these constraints and

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<sup>38</sup> Throughout this thesis I cite from the individual volumes, referenced below.

<sup>39</sup> Daniela Hodrová, *Visite privée: Prague*, trans. by Catherine Servant (Paris: Chêne, 1991). Hereafter abbreviated in footnotes to *VP*.

fears in dialogue with events in earlier Czech history, including the region's periods of domination by larger foreign powers, namely the Hapsburg Empire and the Nazi occupation of 1939 to 1945. For centuries the once-powerful and autonomous Bohemian lands were subsumed into the Hapsburg Empire, only to regain independence briefly during the First Czechoslovak Republic (*První Československá Republika*) of 1918 to 1938. This 'Golden Age' of Czech history instilled a national sense of pride that is both extolled and ironized in Hodrová's work, which uses a series of complex images relating to sacrifice, sleep, drowning, and deletion to expose Czech enslavement to a succession of foreign masters. The trilogy's ambivalent treatment of the aspirations of the First Republic is echoed in Hodrová's constant probing of Czech national identity and of the detrimental effects of their enforced complicity in painful episodes of history including the Holocaust as it was played out in Prague: the Czechs again emerge here alternately as victims, unwilling bystanders, and perpetrators. By emphasising the repeated episodes of independence, revolution, and subjugation that have overwhelmed Czech history over the centuries, Hodrová's trilogy presents time as a cyclical force in which the past is embedded firmly in the Communist present, so that the texts are haunted by the ghosts not only of the Communist era but also of previous periods of national trauma.

Of all of Hodrová's work, the trilogy is perhaps the most immediate account of the experience of living through the Communist years (since her other novels were written after the revolution), and I will therefore examine it as (in the words of Caruth) 'an address that attempts to speak out from a crisis that is not yet

over'.<sup>40</sup> I will accordingly use a body of work drawn from the field of Trauma Studies (including texts by Caruth, Herman, Henke, and Anne Whitehead) to examine the ways in which Hodrová confronts and attempts to overcome the difficulties inherent in speaking about traumatic histories from the heart of the 'crisis'. My analysis thus responds to Caruth's call for more attention to be paid to the 'difficult task of this historical listening' as I demonstrate not only the difficulties that reside in the attempt to speak out, but also the difficulties in 'listening' that may assail us as we read and attempt to understand not only from a place external to the trauma, but also from a different national and historical perspective. As Celia Hawkesworth notes in her survey of women's writing from the Central European region, '[t]he intrusion of politics into everyday life and the interference of governments in the work of creative artists are hard to imagine from the outside';<sup>41</sup> a sensitivity towards this difficulty of understanding, strengthened by my use of theories relating to the self and other, underpins my analysis as I seek to show how Hodrová's trilogy at once exemplifies widely familiar elements of traumatic experience and yet provides a unique account of a specific trauma.

### **Jean-Gaspard Páleníček and a Legacy of Traumatic Memory**

Hodrová's younger compatriot Jean-Gaspard Páleníček was born in Prague in 1978 a decade before the Velvet Revolution that brought about the fall of the

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<sup>40</sup> Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, p. 156.

<sup>41</sup> Hawkesworth (ed.), p. 200. Hawkesworth's volume provides an overview of literature by women from Central Europe dating back to the Middle Ages, but the citation here refers to the period from 1945 to 1995, which she deals with in Part IV, pp. 199-311; of particular interest in relation to my thesis are the introduction to that section (pp. 199-200), and Ambros's chapter, 'Czech Women Writers after 1945', pp. 201-19.

Communist regime in Czechoslovakia. I argue that the difficult legacy of traumatic memory inherited by his post-Communist generation is firmly embedded in his writing, which provides insight into the alienating experience of living with the loss of historical and personal memory that is attendant on the multiple silencings inflicted on Central European history. Páleníček is of dual Czech and French heritage and grew up bilingually, living in Prague during his early years but able to visit France regularly for holidays. This unusual freedom to travel beyond the still-closed borders of Communist Czechoslovakia is a circumstance that will be discussed in the course of my analysis of the ways in which Páleníček's work provides a more distanced perspective on the events of the regime in comparison to Hodrová's inside account. Páleníček has published four works to date, three of which were written in French, and all were published after he left his homeland to live and work in Paris in 2001. His French oeuvre includes one short novel (*Les Bouleaux*), a collection of poems (*Mater dolorosa*)<sup>42</sup> and a play (*Le Ménage de Balzac*).<sup>43</sup> For comparative reasons, since the other works selected for inclusion in this thesis are limited to the genre of the novel, my chapter on Páleníček's work will centre on the complex and multi-layered *Les Bouleaux*, which is his sole novel to date. At the centre of the story lies a graphically described traumatic encounter between a woman who has been persecuted by the State and the male protagonist, who is her former lover (as well as being the narrator's grandfather and a composer, an identity which will be discussed in the light of the author's own heritage). The body of the woman reappears to the protagonist in the terrifying form of ghostly flashbacks, haunting him to his death. A body of clinical and theoretical work on

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<sup>42</sup> Páleníček, *Mater dolorosa* (Alfortville: Revue K, 2009).

<sup>43</sup> Páleníček, *Le Ménage de Balzac* (Alfortville: Revue K, 2009).

the manifestations of trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder (hereafter referred to as PTSD) allows me to examine these fictional figures as embodiments of the complex effects of political brutality and of the manipulative power of everyday oppression on a nation and on its individual citizens.

My analysis of *Les Bouleaux* will further draw on theories of exile (and particularly work by Julia Kristeva) in order to emphasise the potential of French (as opposed to Czech) as a vehicle for the expression of difficult truths or perceptions relating to Central European experience. Kristeva points out that 'ceux qui n'ont jamais perdu la moindre racine vous paraissent ne pouvoir entendre aucune parole susceptible de relativiser leur point de vue',<sup>44</sup> and I shall argue that the adoption, in Páleníček's case, of France as a place from which to write about the troubles affecting his childhood home in Czechoslovakia brings a certain liberty to his point of view. This is a liberty that, again, can be examined in the light of Kristeva's insight that the position of exile is accompanied by conflicting perceptions of pleasure and pain, when she claims that, '[l]'aliénation à moi-même, pour douloureuse qu'elle soit, me procure cette distance exquise ou s'amorce aussi bien le plaisir pervers que ma possibilité d'imaginer et de penser, l'impulsion de ma culture'.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, my argument is borne out by Páleníček's description of being 'doublement déraciné',<sup>46</sup> and the nature and effect of his double linguistic and geographical distancing from his roots will be explored in terms of the images of alienation that, I shall demonstrate, pervade the case-study novel.

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<sup>44</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Étrangers à nous-mêmes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 30.

<sup>45</sup> Kristeva, p. 25.

<sup>46</sup> *LB*, p. 47.

Furthermore, unlike his compatriot Hodrová, the younger Páleníček experienced only the final years of the regime and therefore the memory of the era enters into his writing through a filter of the uncertainties of childhood memory and of the stories, anecdotes and rumours transmitted through familial and social channels. The linguistic alienation that I have identified in relation to Páleníček's work is, I shall posit, therefore also compounded by the estrangement from their own history that is experienced by this young writer's generation as a result of their chronological separation from the traumatic events that plague their history. This is a separation that I will analyse in terms of a body of work on transgenerational trauma including Marianne Hirsch's concept of 'postmemory',<sup>47</sup> whereby she posits that transgenerational access to the experiences of previous generations (as in the writing of Páleníček) is differentiated from first-hand experience (as exemplified here by the work of Hodrová) by 'its basis in displacement, its vicariousness and belatedness'.<sup>48</sup> This 'displacement' emerges in Páleníček's work, I will argue, in a series of textual gaps that will also be analysed in terms of psychoanalyst Nadine Fresco's description of the 'black hole' of traumatic memory.<sup>49</sup> It is both the more dramatic 'flashbacks' of the past (in the form of the woman's body) and the 'black hole' of knowledge about the past that constitute this text's return to a national history which, as I have claimed, 'is essentially *not over*'<sup>50</sup> and so refuses to be forgotten. In the light of the way in which the text is 'possessed' by the past, and bringing together key themes of trauma and exile, I will draw on

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<sup>47</sup> See Marianne Hirsch, 'Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory', *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, 14:1 (2001), 5-37.

<sup>48</sup> Hirsch, 'Surviving Images', p. 9.

<sup>49</sup> Nadine Fresco, 'Remembering the Unknown', in *International Review of Psychoanalysis*, 1984: 11, 417-427 <<http://www.anti-rev.org/textes/Fresco84a/>> [last accessed 16/10/2014].

<sup>50</sup> Felman and Laub, p. xiv.

Erin McGlothlin's understanding that those who experience trauma only through childhood memory or the transmitted experience of previous generations exist in 'a sort of epistemological state of exile',<sup>51</sup> a state in which they are driven to recover the lost past. As I engage with the conflict between knowing and unknowing, between silence and speech, that lies at the heart of Páleníček's text, my argument also intersects with writings relating to both the unspeakable nature of trauma and to the cathartic potential that analysts such as Henke claim resides in the act of articulating trauma.<sup>52</sup> Although Páleníček's novel does not, I argue, offer any facile solutions to this painful and multi-layered 'epistemological [...] exile', I contend that it is in part his use of French that creates the distance from which he can confront, engage with, and begin to assimilate this legacy of pain.

### **Sylvie Germain and a Transnational Perspective**

The prolific and prize-winning novelist French novelist Sylvie Germain spent an extended period of time in Czechoslovakia before, during and after the Communist period, and has produced four texts that are imbued with the painful stories and memories she encountered during her time in Prague. Although Germain did not experience totalitarianism either at first hand (like Hodrová) or indeed as a part of her familial and national heritage (like Páleníček), I will show that the four texts that emerged directly from her stay in Prague are nevertheless also 'possessed' by images of the suffering that plagued Central

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<sup>51</sup> Erin McGlothlin, *Second Generation Holocaust Literature: Legacies of Survival and Perpetration* (Rochester, New York: Camden House, 2006), p. 229.

<sup>52</sup> See Suzette A. Henke, *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women's Life-Writing* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000).

Europe throughout the twentieth century. Despite Germain's more externalised non-Czech perspective, which means that her work represents the traumas of Central European history in a very different manner, I will draw on Geoffrey Hartman's notion of 'witnesses by adoption', and on Hirsch's exploration of the possibilities of postmemory, in order to argue that these texts nevertheless constitute a valid and important form of transnational testimony to this difficult era of history.<sup>53</sup> Although Germain is writing in her native French, theories of exile and of self and other are once again useful to discuss the way in which her sense (which appears throughout her œuvre and not only in her Czech texts) of human marginalisation and dispossession from history by acts of evil, violence and injustice, or through misfortune, shapes her writing position towards the Czech nation, whose dispossessed she perceives to be 'relégués dans la très poussiéreuse salle d'attente de l'Histoire'.<sup>54</sup> Whilst it is clear that each of these three writers represents a very different relationship both to the vehicle of the French language and to the traumatic alienation from history and from Europe experienced in Communist Central Europe, I shall show that, like the other two writers, Germain nevertheless also inhabits a space of dispossession and of deracination that relates to Kristeva's descriptions of the bittersweet nature of '[une] aliénation à moi-même'.<sup>55</sup>

Before moving to what was then Czechoslovakia in 1986, Germain had already published a number of novels which are set across a range of sociohistorical contexts including rural impoverishment in France, the brutalities of the World Wars, and the persecution of the Jews in particular. During and immediately

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<sup>53</sup> Hirsch, 'Surviving Images'.

<sup>54</sup> *Imm.*, p. 20.

<sup>55</sup> Kristeva, p. 25.

after the six years she spent in Prague, Germain published three novels that are all set in late twentieth-century Czechoslovakia, as well as a prose reflection on the life of Bohuslav Reynek, a Bohemian poet whose life of peaceful spiritual quest in the face of political persecution and dispossession Germain, whose entire œuvre has a marked tendency towards spirituality, greatly admired. All four of these works are included in the primary corpus for this thesis, although of the two novels closer attention will be paid to *La Pleurante des rues de Prague* and *Éclats de sel*, since the middle novel to be published, *Immensités*, echoes many of the themes dealt with in the other two and, as such, does not offer the same opportunity for contrast. All of these works refer not only to the privations of the Communist era but also to the ravages of the Holocaust in Central Europe and to earlier Czech history and indeed legend. My analysis makes use of a rich existing body of academic writing on Germain's work (particularly by Isabelle Dotan, Toby Garfitt, and Alain Goulet), but is the first study to bring all of the Czech texts together in a systemic study and so to examine the ways in which these texts interact with the themes of Germain's wider œuvre. Furthermore, by setting these texts in relationship for the first time with other writings in French about the Czech context, I am able to make comparisons and draw conclusions about the ways in which Germain's writing position affects the way in which she engages with the Central European context of suffering.

Since Germain's Czech texts are haunted by images not only of corporeal suffering (in, for example, the body of a weeping woman figure who represents the sorrowful history of Prague), but also of disease and illness, my argument in the chapter on her work will be further underpinned by theories of illness and of

its narration (by Frank and Susan Sontag in particular) as I explore Germain's use of sickness as a complex metaphor for individual, national and human affliction. Despite the fact that illness is not clinically categorised as traumatic, it has often been used as a literary trope for the narration of the damaging effects of traumatic experience. Perhaps the best-known example is still Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *Cancer Ward*,<sup>58</sup> but we should note that Hodrová's *Le Royaume d'Olsany* also incorporates images of disease to convey the Czech nation's experience under totalitarianism. The images of pain and illness in Germain's work constitute, on the one hand, an inscription, onto the Czech sociohistorical context, of her own perceptions of alienation and dispossession, which arise in part from her own personal circumstances. However, I will move beyond an interpretation of these texts as purely self-reflecting as I argue that, in line with Frank's understanding that, '[a]ll illness stories share a common root in suffering as "an existential universal of human conditions,"'<sup>59</sup> Germain uses the structures of sickness to call on a sense of shared human pain, inviting comparison with Frank's claim that by telling and listening to stories of sickness the individual participates in a 'brotherhood of pain' which in turn engenders a 'moral responsibility' towards the suffering other.<sup>60</sup> Whilst I am careful to avoid suggesting that the experience of reading Germain's Czech stories of metaphorical illness is likely in any way to provoke 'secondary trauma' of the type described by Felman,<sup>61</sup> I nevertheless draw on Dominick LaCapra's

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<sup>58</sup> Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *Cancer Ward*, trans. by Nicholas Bethell and David Burg (London: Bodley Head, 1968).

<sup>59</sup> Frank, p. 170, citing Arthur Kleinman, 'Pain and Resistance: The Delegitimation and Relegitimation of Local Worlds', in *Pain as Human Experience: An Anthropological Perspective*, ed. by Good et.al. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 169-97, here p. 174.

<sup>60</sup> Frank, p. 35.

<sup>61</sup> See Felman, 'Education and Crisis, or the Vicissitudes of Teaching', in Felman & Laub (eds), pp. 1-56. I refer here to Felman's much-discussed pedagogical experiment whereby, after

position that 'desirable empathy involves not full identification but what might be termed empathetic unsettlement in the face of traumatic limit events, their perpetrators, and their victims'.<sup>62</sup> I will engage with both Davis's position that 'we do not participate in or co-own the other's trauma',<sup>63</sup> and Levinas's understanding of the 'I bearing *responsibility* for the other'<sup>64</sup> as I negotiate the concepts of 'identification' and 'empathy' in relation to Germain's portrayal of Czech traumas.

### **Outlining a Critical Context for the Analysis of the Primary Texts**

I have shown that whilst the three authors are differentiated in terms of writing position and language, and their position within literary canons, they are nevertheless brought together by their common interest in the Central European themes of dispossession and trauma, justifying my discussion of these works within an overarching framework of theories relating to trauma and exile. Before moving on to discuss the different ways in which their work forges associations between French and Czech, it remains to outline my use of two other bodies of secondary work, namely secondary criticism of each author, and Holocaust writings. Whilst a substantial body of secondary criticism exists in relation to the oeuvre of both Hodrová (although much of this is in Czech) and Germain, the work of Páleníček has to date met with a lack of critical attention. This may, in part, be owing to his marginal position in between the worlds of French and

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viewing Holocaust video testimonials, her class suffered secondary or vicarious traumatised. See esp. pp. 49-50.

<sup>62</sup> Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), p. 102.

<sup>63</sup> Davis, 'Trauma and Ethics', p. 20.

<sup>64</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Mortality, Immortality, and Other Life Strategies* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), p. 42, provides this succinct summary of Levinas's philosophy of the self bearing moral responsibility for the other. Cited in Frank, p. 14.

Czech; even though he both writes and publishes in French, his preoccupation with Czech themes of historical alienation and dispossession aligns his work with minor literatures that, as I have noted above, tend to receive a lesser portion of critical attention than works that can be more clearly categorised within so-called major literatures. One of the intentions of this thesis is, therefore, to redress this balance by setting Páleníček's work against that of the more established Hodrová and Germain. The lack of secondary criticism in relation to Páleníček's work will be mitigated in part by my reference to a body of personal correspondence with the author: this will be used to create a contextual framework of reference within which to better locate the novel, and can be found in full in the Appendix to this thesis. In addition to this correspondence and to the body of criticism relating individually to Hodrová and Germain, I will also draw upon a number of more general studies of Czech and Central European literatures in order to situate the work of each author and to draw out pertinent points of comparison.

Another element which unites the writings of these three authors is the presence of the Holocaust, whose horrific losses across Central Europe haunt each of the works examined here in different ways. Whilst the losses of the Holocaust are of course quite distinct from those of the Communist era, it is nevertheless difficult to write about totalitarianism in this region without referring to the threat and losses associated with Fascism. Indeed, Mark points out that Communism was initially seen by some in Central Europe as a defence against Fascism and the failures of the West (as at Munich) against the Nazi onslaught. In terms of post-Communist memory work as it has played out across European borders, Mark further points out that, whilst 'Western European political elites

considered remembering the Holocaust a vital part of “being European”, and accordingly demanded that the newly democratised countries of the former Eastern Bloc undergo memorial processes to recover and integrate Holocaust stories into their identities, there was a parallel ‘failure of western Europeans to reciprocate with an understanding of the brutality of Communism’.<sup>65</sup> My analysis throughout the thesis will accordingly draw on a diverse body of secondary work relating to Holocaust testimony (by authors such as Felman and Laub, Fresco, Hirsch, and Gabriele Schwab) as I endeavour to show how the two traumas affected the region and are not only individually embodied but also historically interconnected through the body of work examined here. Whilst ‘the brutality of Communism’ has become increasingly well documented since the immediately post-revolutionary years to which Mark refers, one of the aims of this thesis is also to contribute to the processes of broadening Western critical understandings both of the interrelationship between Holocaust and Communist memory in this region, and of the gravity of our ‘failure’ to validate Eastern Bloc experience.

## **The Intersection between the Central European Context and the French Language**

Whilst there has recently been an abundance of exciting research into the francophone literature emanating from former French colonies, far less research has been conducted into literature in (and translated into) French from Central and Eastern Europe. The relationship between the historical context of the

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<sup>65</sup> Mark, pp. xvi & xvii.

Communist era in Czechoslovakia and the critical field of French Studies does indeed require some comment as it is perhaps not immediately evident; as I have noted above, this context tends to be given attention rather within German Studies or Slavic Studies, with which there is a more obvious historical alignment. The association of Czech and French that lies at the heart of this thesis emerges from my discovery, during a period spent living in the Czech Republic, of a number of unexpected and intriguing connections between French and Czech histories and cultures. After a brief summary here of the way in which the relationship between the two countries has developed in recent history, I will go on to discuss the body of literature that has emerged from this transnational exchange and to indicate how I later refer to other works drawn from that body to support my analysis of the primary corpus.

Political relationships between the historical lands of the countries known today as France and the Czech Republic date back to a number of marriages between the royal dynasties of the Middle Ages, a time at which Bohemia was at the height of its economic and cultural affluence and had not yet fallen from its position of power within Europe. After the rise of the House of Hapsburg in 1526, the lands of the Bohemian Crown were subsumed into the evolving Hapsburg Monarchy, so that the Czech peoples suffered a loss of independence and an assault on their national identity as German became the official language. This fall from autonomy is particularly represented in the work of Hodrová in, for example, a series of images relating to sleep and sacrifice, and as such will be considered in the course of my chapter on her work. Political sympathies between the Czechs and France appeared to be consolidated in the period leading up to the First World War when the future

president of the First Czechoslovak Republic, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk (who was married to a wife of partly French heritage), obtained French support in his quest to dismantle Austro-Hungary and win Czechoslovak independence.<sup>66</sup>

The political friendship between France and Czechoslovakia was, however, thwarted by the French co-signing of the divisive Munich Agreement of 1938, an event whose impact on the position of Czechoslovakia within Europe reverberates in the works of each of the writers examined in this thesis.<sup>67</sup> The Agreement, signed between Germany, France, Britain, and Italy, but without a Czechoslovak presence, allowed Germany to invade and annex the historically disputed Sudeten borderland area of Bohemia. The Czech government, which had been relying on French military support under the *Petite Entente*, was given the choice to agree to the terms or to defend itself alone against Germany.<sup>68</sup> The Munich legacy is particularly prominent in Páleníček's *Les Bouleaux*, which is set in the Sudetenland. Whilst Páleníček does not at any point in the narrative name Munich or elaborate any political details relating to the Sudeten, its stories of violent dispossession, occupation, retributions and resettlement are

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<sup>66</sup> The French initially voiced support for the *Petite Entente*, a series of bilateral agreements signed in 1920-21 between Czechoslovakia, Romania and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes; the French government formalised its backing by signing military treaties with each of the signatories to the *Entente*.

<sup>67</sup> Britain, France and Czechoslovakia were multilaterally allied at that time by means of the Franco-Czech alliance of 1924 (signed as a result of *Petite Entente* negotiations, see previous footnote), and the *Entente Cordiale* of 1904 between France and Britain. The Czech feeling of betrayal when the terms of these alliances were not upheld at Munich is evident in the different names given to the political events that took place between the French, British, Italians and Germans at Munich on September 21-29, 1938. Whilst the French use the term 'les Accords de Munich' and British refer to the 'Munich Agreement' or 'Munich Pact', suggesting that agreement was reached by all parties, the Czechs generally refer to the same event as the 'Mnichovský diktát' (Munich Dictate), which encompasses the general national feeling of resentment at having been excluded from the negotiating and signing of a document that gave away part of the Czechoslovak territory to the Germans and facilitated Nazi invasion, annexation, and eventually occupation of the whole country for the duration of the war.

<sup>68</sup> After initially refusing to accept the terms of the Agreement, the Czechoslovak government under Edvard Beneš eventually ceded. For the duration of the Second World War, Beneš led a government in exile initially in France and then in London.

embedded in the text, and my analysis will foreground the uneasy nature of this crossroads in European relationships. We will see that Munich and the part played by the French government is also inscribed into Germain's work in a series of intertextual references to Czech writers of that period (including Nobel-winning poet Jaroslav Seifert) who collectively immortalised the betrayal many Czechs felt; Germain's interaction with this body of references will be scrutinised as part of my analysis of the relationship between self and other in her work. Furthermore, the work of all three writers selected explores the wider pattern of national subjugation that started during the Hapsburg Monarchy and Austro-Hungary, was echoed in the Nazi invasion and occupation, and compounded during the Communist era when Czechoslovakia was widely perceived to be a Soviet puppet state. The themes in these works of loss, domination, complicity, and collaboration that arise from this historical context also resonate with the complex legacy of the German invasion and occupation of France during the Second World War, thus creating further grounds for studying the literature emerging from the Czech context within the field of French Studies.

Owing in part to these historical circumstances, the region has also been the source of a comparatively small but rich body of literary material in French. Monique Mangold's survey of writing in both French and Czech emerging from the historical interchange between the two countries looks as far back as the dynastic marriages of the fourteenth century but stops at about the time of the revolution in 1989.<sup>69</sup> Mangold's volume sets out to provide a commentated

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<sup>69</sup> Monique Mangold, *Regards croisés entre France et République Tchèque* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2011).

anthology of such writings rather than a critical account, but is nevertheless a useful source and points to the wealth of texts existing in a variety of genres (ranging from the poetry of Apollinaire to the memoirs of Masaryk) that variously celebrate or critique the French-Czech relationship.<sup>70</sup> Mangold's collection, however, omits the majority of contemporary works of note emerging from this context in the second half of the twentieth century and beyond. My thesis aims to address this gap since this period has given rise to a number of writers who merit attention; this is a body of work that includes but is not limited to the three selected for my primary corpus. Just as a number of Czech-speaking writers (including Hodrová) have referred to both the perceived political friendship and failures of France and the French, so we can identify a group of writers who have moved to France and in some cases adopted French as their writing language, often, however, as an acquired rather than (as in the case of Páleníček) a bilingual language. This migration to the West can be explained in part by the restrictions upon freedom of expression during the Communist past which led dissident writers, including the much-discussed Czech novelist Milan Kundera, to initiate a flow towards France as one of the countries where *tamizdat* literature could be published freely.<sup>71</sup>

Beyond Kundera, however, there are a number of other poets and novelists who have received less attention but whose work is often illuminating in relation to the Central European context and the way in which it is inscribed into the French literary canon. Like Kundera, the poet Petr Král moved in exile to Paris and now publishes in French; his description of the Prague he had escaped as

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<sup>70</sup> See Mangold, pp. 175-6 on Apollinaire or pp. 135-37 on Masaryk.

<sup>71</sup> 'Tamizdat' denotes literature that was 'published elsewhere' because of the constraints of censorship at home.

'plong[ée...] dans ce temps hors du temps où elle semble condamnée à somnoler'<sup>72</sup> resonates particularly with the lack of agency and frustration expressed in Hodrová's intertextual use of the Sleeping Beauty story to give voice to her experience of confinement in Prague. The novelist Patrik Ouředník also lives in Paris but continues to write in his native Czech, and his depictions of the 'intellectual suffocation'<sup>73</sup> suffered by artists and free thinkers in the Communist Bloc are helpful in creating better understandings of the constraints with which Hodrová had to contend, and which shape the fate of characters in Páleníček's work. As my analysis of each case study develops, I will therefore incorporate references to these and a number of other writers who have spoken out from the margins between French and Czech in order to locate the work of Hodrová, Páleníček, and Germain within this small canon that, despite its diversity, is defined by its relationship to one specific historical context.

### **The Embodiment of the French-Czech Relationship in the Primary Corpus**

Some of the historical and literary international connections that I have introduced here will be further discussed as I explore the way in which the Czech context is expressed in the vehicle of the French language (either directly or through the means of translation); some of the historical links between the two nations are indeed made explicit in the lives and works of the three authors I have selected. In addition to the framework of trauma theory that I employ throughout the thesis in order to shed light on the representations of traumatic experience and memory in these works, in each chapter I will also

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<sup>72</sup> Petr Král, *Prague* (Seysse: Éditions du Champ Vallon, 1987), p. 20.

<sup>73</sup> Bourhis.

make use of theories of the relationship between the self and the other as I discuss the various ways in which these works help us to understand the nature of the French-Czech relationship in particular, and the human relationships that are challenged and shaped by our different positions in relation to traumatic memories in general.

Hodrová studied French at university, and we shall see in the course of this thesis that, as well as making a number of references to French history and cultural memory, her writing also draws widely on the work of a range of French and other European writers, philosophers and artists. These references to French memory and intertextual resonances will be examined as part of Hodrová's attempt to resist being cut off from history by the contemporary divorce of her homeland from Europe. In Part II of my chapter on her work, I will show that the pain of this divorce and subsequent isolation is embedded into Hodrová's writing by means of images of deletion, the fear of death (and especially drowning, a form of death whose resemblance to the totalitarian environment of intellectual suffocation will be explored), sleep and sacrifice, haunting, and of the city of Prague as a labyrinth. I will consider Hodrová's attempt to resist such deletion and loss of identity by inscribing her personal and national memories into a 'narrative web of memory', a term that was coined by the author herself and that will form the basis of my examination (in Part III of Chapter One) of writing as a means of escape from the traumas of deletion and forgetting. One strand within this 'web of memory' is woven out of the network of allusions to French history in her Prague trilogy, as exemplified in a complex series of metonymical references to the traumatic massacre of 'la nuit de la

Saint-Bartélemy' in 1572 in France.<sup>74</sup> Not only do these references foreground the themes of political violence and death that pervade *La Cité dolente*, but they also forge associations between French memories of this brutal historical event and the contemporary Czech national trauma of the Communist regime, since Hodrová repeatedly points out that the headquarters of the much-feared Secret Police (the *Státní Bezpečnost* or 'StB') was located at 'Bartolomějská ulice'. By juxtaposing this infamous Czech street name with references to the French massacre of the same name, Hodrová foregrounds the commonality of traumatic experience shared by the French and Czech nations at different times and places in history. Even as her writing expresses the unique and incomprehensible nature of specific Czech experience, it simultaneously forges a bond of suffering humanity that transcends difference since, as Frank has pointed out, 'th[e] commonality of suffering cuts across worlds of race and gender'.<sup>75</sup> If, as Ouředník notes, 'the absence of otherness is the principle per se of totalitarian regimes', then I shall argue that by weaving her 'narrative web of memory', Hodrová creates a textual relationship with the other that (to use Frank's words) 'cuts across worlds' and so provides her with a means of figurative escape from the insularity and consequent 'intellectual suffocation' of enclosure in such a regime.<sup>76</sup>

Páleníček's relatively little-known debut novel, *Les Bouleaux*, also foregrounds the complexities of the relationship between France and Czechoslovakia, albeit in a very different manner. Both the historical friendship between the two countries and his homeland's twentieth-century divorce from Western Europe

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<sup>74</sup> RO, see, for example, the chapter titled 'La nuit de la Saint-Bartélemy', pp. 14-16

<sup>75</sup> Frank, p. 170.

<sup>76</sup> Bourhis.

are mirrored in the details of Páleníček's own life, since he was born in Prague to a French mother and a Czech father, has been bilingual since childhood, and writes about Czech traumatic memories in French. Although Páleníček describes himself as feeling 'at home' in both countries ('j'étais chez moi dans les deux pays'),<sup>77</sup> my analysis of *Les Bouleaux* will examine the sense of alienation from his country of birth that, I propose, is reflected in Páleníček's embracing of French rather than Czech to tell painful Czech stories. As I have already noted, after the fall of the regime a generation-long silence seemed to surround the Communist past, and the process of exploring the past and uncovering some of its painful stories continues even now to be fraught with political and personal difficulties, although Páleníček's generation has more recently been assailed by the need to uncover the past.<sup>78</sup> In my analysis of his work, I will show that this need is manifest, for example, in a passage set in the 1970s, when the protagonist's son is driven to pose his father a set of searching questions about the past. Those questions are not answered by the protagonist and so demonstrate the difficulty of speaking about recent pasts, and I will use Kristeva's understanding of the liberation of linguistic distance to explore Páleníček's use of French in this difficult process of speaking out. Kristeva tells us that, '[p]rivé des brides de la langue maternelle, l'étranger qui apprend une nouvelle langue est capable en elle des audaces les plus imprévisibles'.<sup>79</sup> Even though, for Páleníček, French is a bilingual language (rather than 'une nouvelle langue'), nevertheless its use, and his removal to France, offers him a

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<sup>77</sup> Personal correspondence with Páleníček. See Appendix.

<sup>78</sup> This delayed need to explore the Communist past has resulted in recent developments such as the Museum of Communism in Prague, est. 2001; the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes, est. 2007.

<sup>79</sup> Kristeva, pp. 48-49.

comparably liberating distance from the traumas that are associated with his country of birth, and so allows him to begin to break the taboos and silences that I have suggested are bound up with Czech.

Just as Hodrová reaches beyond her national context by incorporating elements of French culture into her writing, Germain developed a comparable love of Czech culture and literature during her time in Prague that is richly evident throughout her four 'Czech' texts. Each contains a wealth of allusions not only to episodes of Czech history ranging from the prehistoric to the contemporary, but also to Czech legend, culture and literature. The chapters of her novella *La Pleurante des rues de Prague*, for example, each open with an epigraph consisting of a citation from a Czech writer; almost all of the writers thus cited represent 'des voix tues depuis un demi-siècle, des mots perdus',<sup>80</sup> each having been either marginalised or silenced in some manner by the oppressions of Czech history. I propose that Germain's inclusion of their words and of Czech stories of loss and suffering within the body of her French text constitutes an encounter with the Czech other and, moreover, demonstrates a desire to return a voice to the victims of history, a voice that can be heard beyond the confines of their homeland. Beyond this wealth of references that enriches Germain's writing about Czechoslovakia and establishes a relationship between the vehicle of her French writing language and its Czech subject, these four texts also return insistently to different periods throughout Czech history. Most emphatically, Germain dwells on the losses suffered in Central Europe during the Holocaust; on the ceding of Czechoslovakia to Germany by France and Britain at the Munich Agreement; and on the sense of dispossession that she

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<sup>80</sup> *LP*, p. 42.

perceives to have been central to Czech experience during the Communist era. Once again, these are episodes of history which foreground a complex historical relationship between France and Central Europe that has, however, been little explored in comparison to the more obvious relationships that exist between France and its former colonies, such as Algeria or Indochina. One of the aims of my research, in bringing together this particular body of work for the first time and in locating my investigation within the field of French Studies, is to begin to shed light on a context that merits attention beyond the critical context of Slavic Studies for the reasons set out here.

I will consider Germain's French encounter with Czech stories and memories in the light of critical understandings of the relationship between the self and the other, as I discuss whether her retelling in French of Czech stories avoids the charge, levelled by Davis against a number of writers who speak of the pain of others of an 'appropriative assumption of authority' in relation to other people's stories.<sup>81</sup> I will refer to Frank's understanding of a 'brotherhood of those who bear the mark of pain'<sup>82</sup> as I consider a range of ways in which Germain draws on her own experience of dispossession as she attempts 'not to speak for [the other], but to speak *with* them as a fellow-sufferer' without, however, 'assum[ing] authority' by assimilating Czech stories.<sup>83</sup> Hirsch's suggestion that 'postmemory need not be strictly an identity position' is also useful in examining Germain's representations of Czech memory as a valid form of transnational

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<sup>81</sup> Davis, 'Trauma and Ethics', p. 31.

<sup>82</sup> Frank, p. 35. Note that Frank is drawing here on ideas expressed by the medical missionary Albert Schweitzer, in *Out of My Life and Thought: An Autobiography*, trans. by Antje Bultmann Lemke (New York: Henry Holt, 1990), p. 195.

<sup>83</sup> Frank, p. 132.

witness.<sup>84</sup> My chapter on Germain therefore responds to Hirsch's challenge that further investigation is needed into the ways in which memory can be represented by those whose familial, generational, or even national identity would not appear to qualify them to participate in the legacy of particular traumatic memories.<sup>85</sup> Indeed, I shall argue that Germain's French retelling of Czech stories of pain and loss constitutes an ethical 'interhuman'<sup>86</sup> response to the suffering other, reflecting the influence on Germain's work of Emanuel Levinas's thought with regards to the relationship between self and other in terms of the 'I bearing *responsibility* for the other'.<sup>87</sup> Furthermore, by drawing attention to Germain's Czech writing as a means of 'bearing responsibility' for the marginalised other, my thesis subscribes to Claire Kramsch's position that the study of other languages and cultures should 'diversify meanings, point to the meanings not chosen, and bring to light other possible meanings that have been forgotten by history or covered up by politics'.<sup>88</sup> By setting up a dialogue between Germain's work and that of Hodrová and Páleníček, it is precisely my intention to 'bring to light other possible meanings' in relation both to the traumatic context that unites these writings and to the ways in which that context can be expressed in French.

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<sup>84</sup> Hirsch, 'Surviving Images', p. 10.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

<sup>86</sup> I use the term 'interhuman' as it is used by Levinas to refer to the ethical relationship of responsibility towards the other that is invoked by our response to their pain: 'The interhuman, properly speaking, lies in a non-indifference of one to another, in a responsibility of one for another'. Levinas, 'Useless Suffering', p. 100.

<sup>87</sup> Frank, p. 14.

<sup>88</sup> Claire Kramsch, 'The Traffic in Meaning', in *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, 2006, 26:1, p. 103.

## **'Understanding the Past in Order to Reclaim the Present and the Future':**

### **The Importance of Reading 'Other' Stories**

In this introduction I have provided a preliminary overview of the authors, of the painful context from which their work collectively but variously emerges, and of the ways in which they engage with that context. Ultimately, as I have shown, an awareness of the context informs my method of interpreting the texts, for as Kathryn Robson (drawing on Caruth) points out in her volume on the expression of trauma in recent women's writing in French, the specificity of the traumatic context calls for adjustment to our 'mode of reading'.<sup>89</sup> However, Robson also expresses concern at the way in which, in her view, literary scholarship (and recent American feminist criticism in particular)<sup>90</sup> has tended to assume a direct and uncomplicated relationship between text and life whereby '[t]he literary text is implicitly treated like any other kind of first-person account of trauma, as unmediated "testimony" to lived experience'.<sup>91</sup> This leads, she claims, to the problematic assumption that the relationship between text and context, or life, is 'fixed and stable' and therefore may be unequivocally decoded by the reader. There is a need, according to Robson, to counter this assumption by cultivating a critical awareness of 'the devastating effects of traumatic experience on identity, memory and narrative, which prevent us from positing a straightforward relation between text and writing subject'.<sup>92</sup> This thesis takes up the challenge posed here by Robson to prioritise the fundamental instability in the relationship

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<sup>89</sup> Kathryn Robson, *Writing Wounds: The Inscription of Trauma in Post-1968 French Women's Life-Writing* (Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2004), pp. 183-90, here 186. Robson is drawing on Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), esp. p. 9.

<sup>90</sup> Robson, p. 23. Robson is referring specifically to the work of feminist critics including Rosaria Champagne (1996), Kalí Tal (1996) and Henke (1998).

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

between text and context that is wrought by the processes of trauma, as I seek to highlight the fact that these writers' very different writing positions emerge through a number of important differences in the ways in which trauma is embedded in each text.

I have also stated that one of the aims of this thesis is to redress a lack of research within French Studies into literature in (and translated into) French emerging from the former Eastern Bloc. By bringing together for the first time these three writers and their different perspectives, I am able to explore the points at which recent French literature and the literatures of Central and Eastern Europe meet and interact as I seek to widen critical understandings of the 'evolving' impact of a traumatic period of history whose effects are still not fully understood. I have indicated that Hodrová's concept of her own writing as a means of inscribing herself into a European 'narrative web of memory' will be central to the way in which I draw out relationships between the works selected for my primary corpus, and it is further worth noting that a number of circumstantial details exist that create a 'web' of association between them. In his 'Préface' to the third part of Hodrová's trilogy, the Czech poet Václav Jamek comments on 'une ressemblance de poétique' that he had noticed between the writing of Hodrová and Germain, and on the basis of which had orchestrated a meeting between the two of them whilst Germain was living in Prague.<sup>93</sup> Despite this meeting and Jamek's comments on the similarities between their respective portraits of Prague (to which he refers as 'l'origine et le centre, voire le personnage principal' in their writing), their work has not to date been studied

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<sup>93</sup> Václav Jamek, 'Préface: Un cercle avancé de l'enfer', in *Thêta*, pp. 7-13, here p. 8. No written record of that meeting appears to have been published.

comparatively, and my thesis responds to this gap by drawing out this thread in the 'web' of European literature. Perhaps as a result of this meeting, Hodrová's essay, 'Woven into the Web', refers to Germain's *La Pleurante*, saying that it 'is written in an almost medium-like contact with Prague's narrative aura'.<sup>94</sup> A further thread of connectivity between the writers can be seen in the circumstantial fact that, during Germain's stay in Czechoslovakia, she also met the young Páleníček as his teacher at the French school he attended in Prague.<sup>95</sup> Although coincidental, this set of circumstances nonetheless points to the relationship that I argue is created between these three writers by their engagement with the 'personnage principal' of Prague. Keller has suggested that we need to 'sharpen our awareness of the harm the new Europe will do to itself if it ignores the great literary wealth on its doorstep',<sup>96</sup> and my intention is that this study, by drawing attention to the 'web' that is woven between East and West by these three writers and the ways in which they engage with the relationship between their countries, will constitute a step towards a greater awareness of this 'wealth'.

Throughout this introduction I have emphasised my intention to examine this body of writings in the light of understandings of the relationship between self and other. The importance of the 'interhuman' element (as described by Levinas) will be emphasised in each chapter of this thesis as I argue that we need to embrace a more multilateral approach to literatures emerging from 'other' national contexts. Frank also points out that '[d]istinctive local worlds

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<sup>94</sup> Hodrová, 'Woven into the Web', trans. by Alex Zucker, in Keller and Rakusa (eds), pp. 143-51, here p. 148. I cite from the English version as to my knowledge this essay has not yet been translated into French.

<sup>95</sup> Personal correspondence with Páleníček, see Appendix.

<sup>96</sup> Keller, p. 12-13.

elaborate stories, but stories and their interpretation also integrate local worlds',<sup>97</sup> and by paying attention to the specificity of each writer's response to one period of history, my thesis aims to illuminate the ways in which listening to the traumatic stories of the other can strengthen human bonds even across national or geographical boundaries. At the same time, however, it is important to take into account Caruth's warning about the 'crisis of listening' that is posed by narratives of trauma:

The difficulty of listening and responding to traumatic stories in a way that does not lose their impact, that does not reduce them to clichés or turn them all into versions of the same story, is a problem that remains central to the task of therapists, literary critics, neurobiologists, and filmmakers alike.<sup>98</sup>

There is a danger, then, that the process of examining the 'local' stories of three very different writers within one critical framework in the manner proposed here may 'reduce them to clichés' and so eliminate difference rather than respect the diverse and unique experience of trauma, social 'illness', and alienation (whether of the individual or of a social group). By deploying theories of trauma alongside theories of the self and other, my analysis of the chosen texts nevertheless aims to bring these 'local' stories of suppressed memory to wider attention and to explore the possibility that listening may demonstrate solidarity for the suffering other.

In the next chapter, I will explore the unique account given in Hodrová's trilogy, *La Cité dolente*, of the traumatic experience of living through a period of national and personal oppression, before turning in Chapter Two to the retrospective narration of national traumas in the highly individualised family tale

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<sup>97</sup> Frank, p. 170. Note that Frank draws the term 'distinctive local worlds' from the work of Kleinman on social suffering, in Kleinman, 1994.

<sup>98</sup> Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, p. vii.

in Páleníček's *Les Bouleaux*. Chapter Three then considers Germain's four Prague texts as a form of external but engaged transnational witness to the traumas variously experienced by Hodrová and Páleníček. In each chapter, I shall attempt to shed light on the ways in which the texts contribute to the important process of 'understand[ing] the past in order to reclaim the present and the future',<sup>101</sup> as the writers return again and again to the 'ghosts' of a painful past that has affected us all in different ways.

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<sup>101</sup> Herman, p. 2.

## Chapter One

### Daniela Hodrová: (Re)Writing Czech History into the 'Narrative Web' of Memory

#### Part I. Writing from a Context of Traumatic Silencing

The Czech novelist and literary scholar Daniela Hodrová was born in 1946 in the unsettled years after the end of the Second World War and before the Czechoslovak Communist Party seized power in the coup of 1948. Of the three writers examined in this thesis she is therefore the only one to have first-hand experience of living through the Communist era of which all three write, since Jean-Gaspard Páleníček was born in 1978 towards the end of the regime and Sylvie Germain stayed in Czechoslovakia only during the final few years of its Communist period. A significant number of Hodrová's fellow Czech writers and intellectuals (including Kundera, Ouředník, and other writers I have referred to in my Introduction) chose or were forced to leave the country after 1968 in order to escape the conditions described by Ambros: 'Even more than in the 1950s, most of the renowned artists were pushed into the margins; some were isolated and lived in a state of "inner emigration"'.<sup>102</sup> Hodrová, however, remained in her home country throughout the four decades of Czechoslovak Communism, and the experience of living through this troubled time is deeply inscribed in her fiction, which becomes a record of her struggle with the 'suffocation' and 'absence of otherness' spoken of by Ouředník.<sup>103</sup> We shall see that the

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<sup>102</sup> Ambros, in Hawkesworth, p. 208.

<sup>103</sup> Bourhis, passage cited in full in my Introduction.

inscription of these conditions and constraints takes place both explicitly in her account of the traumatic historical events perpetrated by the regime, and implicitly at a deeper level in the predominant narrative structures of cycles and movement, fragmentation and multiple layering, as well as in the complex metaphors of deletion and death, sacrifice, sleep, and confinement. I shall argue that these narrative tropes constitute, on the one hand, an embodiment of the trauma of living inside an isolated and repressive regime and, on the other hand, a form of literary resistance to the constraints and silencings of Hodrová's sociopolitical environment.

Furthermore, although Hodrová's fiction is contextually anchored in the small country to which she was confined by sociohistorical circumstance, I shall argue that it is spun into a 'narrative web',<sup>104</sup> to borrow Hodrová's own words, within which her own twentieth-century Czech experience is woven into the context of wider Czech histories and indeed of European memories and mythologies. The stories that we encounter in the case-study trilogy, *Cité dolente*, are interconnected with more familiar stories within this web of human memory since 'stories flow along invisible threads over and around one another, even within the same work, which itself in small form mirrors the larger web',<sup>105</sup> and it is this interconnectivity that lends these stories a contemporary relevance to readers outside Central Europe which transcends the specific time and place in which they are nevertheless anchored. By setting Hodrová's work (in its translated French form) in dialogue for the first time with the writings of the French-speaking authors Páleníček and Germain, who are writing from different

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<sup>104</sup> Hodrová, 'Woven into the Web', p. 146.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 146.

and less internal perspectives about the events experienced at first hand by Hodrová's generation, my study aims to widen critical understandings of the diverse ways in which traumatic experience may be inscribed in fiction, and of the importance of taking writing position into account in any study of the fiction emerging from a specific traumatic context. As well as extending existing scholarship on the relationship between recent French literature and the literatures of Central Europe, this chapter provides new insights into the possibilities that writing offers those who are trapped in traumatic conditions and whose only means of agency or voice is the written word.

Hodrová and her contemporaries spent much of their lives in a totalitarian environment, not only living through the rise and fall of the regime between 1948 and 1989 but also experiencing the intermediary phases of heightened or more lenient Party control. Her childhood was played out against a backdrop of turbulent political events including a series of trials, imprisonments, and executions that were carried out by the regime in the late 1940s and early 1950s, and these cast a shadow over Hodrová's work, which is preoccupied with death, confinement, and a sense of loss which verges at times on despair; equally, the traumatic environment of fear and mistrust created by political surveillance (which also plays a key role in the work of Páleníček as discussed in the next chapter) is played out in the actions and fates of her characters. As adolescents and young adults, her generation experienced a comparatively unrestricted cultural and intellectual environment during the Prague Spring of the 1960s, culminating in the liberalising political reforms of Alexander Dubček's

government of 1968,<sup>106</sup> a period which tends to be collectively remembered as a 'golden era'.<sup>107</sup> The idealised position in Czech cultural memory occupied by the Prague Spring can be compared to that held by the First Czechoslovak Republic, the two decades of political independence from 1918 to 1938 which stand out in the country's long history of dominance by its more powerful neighbours. Hodrová's writing expresses the Czech sense of hope for a return of political independence, but we shall also see that such hope coupled with a national history of subjugation can engender passivity, a symptom of totalitarian oppression that will be examined particularly in relation to the image of sleep in the trilogy.

The promise of the Prague Spring was brought to a sudden end by the Soviet invasion of 1968, an event that is connected by the threads of Hodrová's fiction to the various other invasions, occupations and uprisings that have played a vital role in the shaping of Czech history. The events of 1968 were followed in the 1970s and 1980s by a series of punitive measures, known as 'normalisation', intended to tighten up Soviet control of the country; this was a period that dominated much of Hodrová's adulthood and is again an important concern in her fiction, perhaps most explicitly in the first part of *Cité dolente*, the trilogy that forms the case study for this chapter. Hodrová's representation of this significant era of repression will be the focus of my discussion (in Part II of

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<sup>106</sup> Dubček was elected First Secretary of the Czechoslovak Communist Party in January 1968; Soviet and Warsaw Pact troops entered Prague on 21 August, 1968. During the intervening period of liberalization known as the Prague Spring, Dubček oversaw measures including reforms related to the media, censorship, freedoms of speech and rights to travel. These reforms were seen by Soviet leadership as a challenge to their control and centrality, which they sought to re-establish firmly after August 1968 in a series of regulatory restrictions and punitive actions known as 'normalisation'.

<sup>107</sup> Indeed, Páleníček has spoken of 'les années 1960, cette décennie que tant de Tchèques considèrent comme une sorte d'Âge d'or'. Personal correspondence with Páleníček, see Appendix.

this chapter) of the location of trauma, exile, and the fear of death in her work. In the final part of this chapter, I will then consider the extent to which the trilogy constitutes a narrative refusal to be circumscribed by the dogmas, strictures and silences imposed by the regime during those difficult years. Normalisation, furthermore, had a material impact on her publishing trajectory, since her trilogy was written during these years but, because of censorship, could not be published until after the end of the regime, a silencing that will be discussed as I probe the complex implications of the relationship between sociopolitical context and literary expression.

Hodrová's trilogy explores the destabilising effect on Czech identity of the cyclic movements of history between these binaries of freedom and repression (which are made manifest in the title of the first volume, *Podobojí*, meaning 'two kinds'), and my analysis will examine how Hodrová exposes both the sorrows and shames played out by a 'puppet' nation trapped in the cycles of history. The elements of Czech history are, moreover, woven into the wider human 'narrative web' of memory through extensive use of intertextuality and of rewritings of myth, in which Hodrová reveals points of convergence as well as difference between the historical experience of the Czechs and that of other nations. This is a technique that can be compared to Germain's use of intertextuality and cultural referencing to forge textual links with writers whom she perceives to be forgotten or marginalised. We shall, moreover, see that the threads that link Czech and French historical memory are at times prominently drawn in Hodrová's own literary web, reflecting her university education in French literature, and these threads will be closely examined as I make the case for the relevance of these texts to French Studies today.

On the other hand, however, my analysis will also foreground the fact that the case-study texts illuminate the specific constraints imposed upon the Czechs at times of historical trauma such as the above-mentioned periods of invasion and occupation and of normalisation. Whilst Hodrová's work has not to date been examined in the light of trauma theories,<sup>108</sup> my analysis in Part II of this chapter uses a body of work drawn from the field of Trauma Studies to justify situating these novels as a form of trauma narrative and to draw out ways in which they embody the painful experience that so clearly shapes them. Ever since its origins in early twentieth-century theories and applications of psychoanalysis, contemporary trauma theory has drawn attention to the manner in which the traumatised individual (or group) is haunted by the unassimilated past, a state which is prevalent in Hodrová's trilogy. As Caruth explains, 'the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it'.<sup>109</sup> Her formulation of trauma as a 'return of the past' derives from Sigmund Freud and his contemporaries' early twentieth-century investigations into the way the past quite literally but belatedly returned to haunt 'shell-shocked' war veterans, often in the form of flashbacks in which the unassimilated memory of the traumatic event intrudes upon the present.<sup>110</sup> This crucial understanding of the latency of trauma has given rise to much critical examination in recent years of the relationship between trauma and memory, so that, as Anne Whitehead points out, '[t]he rise of trauma fiction in recent decades is inseparable from the turn to memory in literary and

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<sup>108</sup> To the best of my knowledge, no critical study of the primary texts by Hodrová, undertaken in either French or English, has to date used trauma theory in this manner, neither am I aware of any such study available in the larger body of Czech criticism relating to Hodrová's work.

<sup>109</sup> Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, p. 4.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 4-10, for Caruth's discussion of her use of Freudian theory.

historical studies',<sup>111</sup> and this is a relationship that will be foregrounded throughout my discussion of the ways in which Hodrová engages with traumatic experience.

Perhaps inevitably in the light of this relationship between trauma and memory, the focus of much recent analysis of trauma narratives has been on the manner in which they allow us to gain access to the finished but unassimilated past and, arguably, to integrate that unassimilated past into the present in a potentially curative manner that has been likened by some critics to an 'exorcism' of ghosts,<sup>112</sup> and that has given rise to therapeutic methods such as Henke's 'scriptotherapy'.<sup>113</sup> In Chapter Two of this thesis, my discussion of the retrospective work of Páleníček intersects with this focus on the trauma narrative as a means of attempting to integrate into the present a difficult past, which may make itself felt through the classic symptoms of flashback and other intrusive forms of 'haunting'. However, Caruth has also pointed to the necessity of attending not only to such accounts of more distant traumatic *pasts* but also to the 'difficult task' of listening to accounts that emanate from the very heart of the site of ongoing trauma and that constitute 'an address that attempts to speak out from a crisis that is not yet over'.<sup>114</sup> In placing the emphasis of this chapter on the writing done by Hodrová *during* the Communist regime, and in applying insights relating to the nature and narration of trauma that have more commonly been applied to narratives that have emerged after the event rather

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<sup>111</sup> Anne Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), p. 81.

<sup>112</sup> See, for example, Whitehead, p. 7.

<sup>113</sup> This focus on the reconstruction and curative assimilation of the past underlies many therapeutic methods including Henke's system of scriptotherapy, which she describes as a means of 'writing out and writing through traumatic experience in the mode of therapeutic reenactment'. This concept will be further scrutinised in the course of this chapter. Henke, p. xii.

<sup>114</sup> Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, p. 156.

than during ‘a crisis that is not yet over’, my analysis here seeks to enlarge critical understandings of the immediate experience of living through traumatic times and of the ways in which such a crisis may impact on narrative modes. I will also address the question that arises as to whether such immediate accounts from within the ‘crisis’ can have a curative effect comparable to the ‘exorcism’ of the past that many theorists and practitioners have claimed for the generally retrospective activities of the ‘talking cure’<sup>115</sup> techniques of psychoanalysis and of ‘scriptotherapy’. Before moving on, however, to engage more closely with the texts in Parts II and III, the remainder of this introductory section will locate Hodrová’s writing within Czech and European literary and critical contexts, and provide an overview of the primary corpus to be examined.

### **Literary Context and Criticism**

Hodrová was awarded the Czech State Award for Literature (*Státní cena za literaturu*) for her latest novel in 2011,<sup>116</sup> and achieved wider international status in 2012 when she received the Franz Kafka Award for her fictional oeuvre to date.<sup>117</sup> Her work has been recognised by a significant number of Czech, French and English-speaking critics as occupying a prominent position amongst the wave of authors who started writing during the normalisation period and

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<sup>115</sup> The ‘talking cure’ that underpins Henke’s scriptotherapy as well as much of modern psychotherapy was first described by Joseph Breuer and subsequently developed by Freud. See the case study of Breuer’s patient ‘Anna O’ (real name Bertha Pappenheim) in Breuer and Freud, *Studies on Hysteria*, trans. from the German under the general editorship of James Strachey, in collaboration with Anna Freud (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1955).

<sup>116</sup> Hodrová, *Vyvolávání* (Prague: Malvern, 2010).

<sup>117</sup> For the Czech State Award for Literature (Czech language only), including a link to a list of laureates, see <<http://www.mkcr.cz/cz/literatura-a-knihovny/ceny-a-oceneni/statni-cena-za-literaturu-a-statni-cena-za-prekl-adatelske-dilo-129503/>> [last accessed 1/04/2014]. For the Franz Kafka Award see <<http://www.franzkafka-soc.cz/clanek/the-franz-kafka-prize-2012>> [last accessed 1/04/2014].

whose work was freely published only from the 1990s onwards after the Velvet Revolution saw the end of four decades of restrictions on publishing. The Bohemian Studies scholar Robert Pynsent draws attention to Hodrová by including her amongst what are, for him, 'the contemporary writers who are most highly regarded by educated Czechs',<sup>118</sup> and this view is echoed by the Anglophone Czech scholar Jiří Holý in his recent survey of postwar Czech literature, in which he considers Hodrová's work to be 'outstanding'.<sup>119</sup> In his introductory survey of twentieth-century Czech fiction, Robert Porter takes a similar stance on Hodrová's position amongst her contemporaries. He notes that because of the newly relaxed commercial environment after 1989 the Czech market for fiction was flooded, but predominantly with 'low brow fiction, down market foreign imports and pornography'.<sup>120</sup> Amongst this new market, however, he singles out a number of 'new voices' worthy of more serious critical attention, and Hodrová is the first author of his trio of case studies.<sup>121</sup> Her work stands out for Porter because of its use of metaphor and of circular narrative structure to encode her literary 'agenda',<sup>122</sup> a view which will be borne out in my analysis of the trilogy as a subversive counterbalance to the regime's promotion of literature and the arts as tools of propaganda, although I will also consider her use of circularity as a device to convey the nature of traumatic times in the specific context of totalitarianism. Hodrová is also included in a group of five

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<sup>118</sup> Robert Pynsent, 'A Handbook of Czech Prose Writing 1940-2005, by Bohuslava Bradbrook', in *The Slavonic and East European Review*, 87:2 (2009), 346-347, here p. 346. The authors Pynsent lists alongside Hodrová are Jan Balabán, Jáchym Topol and Petra Hůlová.

<sup>119</sup> Jiří Holý, *Writers Under Siege: Czech Literature Since 1945* (Brighton & Portland: Sussex Academic Press, 2008), p. 233.

<sup>120</sup> Robert Porter, *An Introduction to Twentieth-Century Czech Fiction: Comedies of Defiance* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2001), p. 162.

<sup>121</sup> Porter. I refer here to the final chapter of this volume, 'New Voices?', pp. 162-83; the other two case-study authors selected here are the novelists Michal Viewegh (b. 1962) and Jáchym Topol (b. 1962).

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 168.

foremost Czech writers analysed by Rajendra A. Chitnis in his chapter on the Czech fiction of the era in question, which he terms 'the fiction of the changes' not only because of the historical moment at which their work was born, but also because of their innovative and challenging response to the end of an era in which literature had primarily been promoted as a tool of propaganda:

the 'new' Czech writing, though it rarely dissented from the characterization of the 1970s and 1980s as a 'traumatic' period, nevertheless represented an attempt to break with this approach, to cease the perpetuation of shared versions of reality and foreground instead their constant disintegration and recreation.<sup>123</sup>

Taking this description as a starting point, this chapter will further investigate Hodrová's work not only as a first-hand testimony to that traumatic period of the 1970s and 1980s, but also as a 'break' with Communist 'versions of reality', a means of resisting Communist political agendas and restrictive interpretations of the function of literature, and an attempt to fictionalise the 'disintegration' of realities experienced in the twentieth century not only by Czechs but by much of Western humanity. The comparisons that I draw with the work of Páleníček and Germain particularly serve to elucidate the value of Hodrová's work in this latter respect by emphasising the fact that her writing position from the inside gives us direct access to the troubling uncertainties of living within a recent regime of oppression.

Hodrová has also been associated with a number of literary movements and trends, which may be of use in locating her fiction within contemporary Czech and European literature, and in relation to the French canon, although it should be emphasised that she herself has preferred to resist categorisation. By

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<sup>123</sup> Rajendra A. Chitnis, *Literature in Post-Communist Russia and Eastern Europe: The Russian, Czech and Slovak Fiction of the Changes, 1988-1998* (London and New York: Routledge Curzon, 2005), p. 12.

choosing neither to publish officially during the regime nor to involve herself in dissident literary movements by publishing in either *samizdat* (underground publishing at home) or *tamizdat* (publishing abroad),<sup>124</sup> she appears to have consciously avoided aligning herself either with official propaganda or dissident movements, a circumstance that will be further discussed later in this chapter in relation to the notion of resistance in her work. Nonetheless, in order to understand the relevance of Hodrová's work beyond the borders of the Czech Republic, it is useful to note that critics have tended to interpret her work by drawing a variety of comparisons with wider European literary trends. Firstly, then, the location of her fiction firmly within Prague has led critics to situate her work within a tradition of Prague novels, and this is a useful comparison for the purposes of this thesis, emphasising as it does the way in which the geographical and historical context has shaped the selected case-study texts. Chitnis, for example, notes, in his introduction to the English translation of Hodrová's literary 'guide' to Prague, that the topology and intertextuality of this text make it 'a conscious addition to the tradition of Prague literary texts', and this is a description that can equally be applied to the trilogy, the narrative of which revolves around the city.<sup>125</sup> He points out that like a number of other Prague writers of Czech heritage or association (of whom the most widely known beyond Czech circles are perhaps Franz Kafka and Gustav Meyrink),<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> See Holý, pp. 138-80, for a survey of *samizdat* and *tamizdat* publication during the 1970s and 1980s.

<sup>125</sup> Chitnis, 'Introduction', in Hodrová, *Prague, I see a city...*, trans. by David Short (London: Jantar Publishing, 2011), p. v.

<sup>126</sup> Gustav Meyrink (1868-1932) was the German-speaking author who lived in Prague from 1883 to 1903 and set many of his novels in Prague, most notably *Der Golem*, his version of the age-old legend of the Prague Jewish ghetto; Meyrink's portrait of Prague is like Hodrová's later representation in exposing Prague as a maze of alleys and dark places in which the unexpected and improbable may happen. For an English translation see *The Golem*, trans. by Mike Mitchell (Sawtry: Dedalus, 1995). Meyrink's better-known contemporary Franz Kafka is also comparable

Hodrová's work envisages Prague as a labyrinthine site 'in which the individual human being may easily get lost';<sup>127</sup> and this is an aspect of her writing that will be brought to the fore in my discussion of textual place as a location of memory and identity. I would add, however, that, perhaps remarkably given her limited opportunity for travel outside Prague and her homeland, Hodrová's vision of the city also bears comparison with evocations of Prague by not only the Czech emigrés Kundera and the lesser known poet Petr Král and novelist Ouředník (all of whom live and write in Paris), but also by a number of recent and contemporary European writers including the emerging French novelist Laurent Binet, and of course Germain.<sup>128</sup> In this chapter, I therefore also examine literary devices used by Hodrová to enable her to view the city from *outside* its geographical confines, and suggest that through these means the text becomes a place of internal escape from the 'cité dolente' in a way that may be compared to the physical distancing from the city experienced by Kundera, Král and Ouředník. My situation of Hodrová's work alongside the better-known names of Germain, Kundera and, more recently, Binet, also serves to reinforce her importance within a wider literary context.

Secondly, Hodrová has been compared to magical realist authors. Porter, for example, makes the comparison but goes on to highlight the fact that the

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to Hodrová in his representation of Prague as a labyrinthine and often incomprehensible place of magic and myth.

<sup>127</sup> Chitnis, 'Introduction', in *Prague, I See a city*, p. v.

<sup>128</sup> Kundera, see especially *Le Livre du rire et de l'oubli* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987); Petr Král, *Prague* (Seysse: Éditions du Champ Vallon, 1987); Ouředník, *Case Closed*, trans. by Alex Zucker (London: Dalkey Archive Press, 2010); Laurent Binet, *HHhH* (Paris: Éditions Grasset & Fasquelle, 2009). Kundera, Král and Ouředník are united by their emigration to Paris and subsequent return to Prague in their texts; Binet and Germain both write about Prague from the outside perspective of the visitor who becomes drawn in by Prague's mysterious appeal and sorrowful histories. In all of their works, as in Hodrová's, Prague appears as a powerful place in which one may become both entrapped and enthralled; the text itself becomes a place of either escape from or appeasement of Prague's lure.

process of ludic metaphorisation that endows her work with a quality of magical realism is first and foremost a means of encryption at a time of censorship and silencing of individuality;<sup>129</sup> this is a view that supports my argument that Hodrová's fiction functions as a mode of resistance to the establishment. The comparison can also, however, be used to highlight certain similarities between her work and that of Germain, who has often been classified as a magical realist. It should be recalled here that the comparison between these two writers has also been made by Jamek, whose description of the work of each also intersects with understandings of magic realism.<sup>130</sup> As I bring the work of Hodrová and Germain into critical relationship for the first time, we will see that both authors use Prague as the setting in which to bring together the extremes of the everyday and the fantastic or dreamlike in order to pursue their vision of a world in which the material and spiritual realms overlap in unexpected ways to challenge conventional versions of reality.

A similar association has been made between Hodrová's fiction and postmodernism as it is understood by critics including Holý, who emphasises Hodrová's invention of a 'world that is incomplete' and her use of fictional techniques that rely on self-interpretation and a lack of linear progression.<sup>131</sup> However, as Chitnis demonstrates, whilst Hodrová's fiction certainly displays these and other features that, for Holý, tend to be coupled with postmodernism, in her own theoretical work Hodrová does not view these features as confined to postmodern works but traces them back to earlier eras where they can especially be seen in works that existed on the margins or outside of 'official'

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<sup>129</sup> Porter, pp. 167-68.

<sup>130</sup> Jamek, 'Préface: Un cercle avancé de l'enfer', in *Thêta*, p. 8.

<sup>131</sup> See Holý, pp. 164-65 & 188-89.

art. For Hodrová, art 'swings' (as Chitnis phrases it) between on the one hand an 'aesthetics of identity', which insists on stability and norms and prevails during periods of political dogmatism such as that of the totalitarian regime of Hodrová's time, and on the other hand an 'aesthetics of otherness', which arises from the margins and places of instability and foregrounds paradox, uncertainty, mystery and openness to the new.<sup>132</sup> In the course of this chapter, rather than attempting as some critics have to classify Hodrová's work as 'postmodern', I will instead pinpoint ways in which Hodrová's fiction incorporates what she terms the 'aesthetics of otherness' and argue that it is by resisting classification and 'identity' that her writing opposes both the dogmas of twentieth-century totalitarianism and the 'suffocation' of being exiled from the outside world.

Finally, Hodrová's work has also been examined from the critical perspective of Gender Studies and women's writing. In his introduction to the French edition of the trilogy, Král includes Hodrová in his list of important emerging women writers in the field of Czech literature in the two decades leading up to the Velvet Revolution; the work of these writers, he notes, 'a pris l'ampleur d'une douce offensive' in that period, and this is an image that is particularly pertinent to my analysis of Hodrová's writing as a form of covert resistance.<sup>133</sup> Alongside Hodrová, Král lists Sylvie Richterová and Zuzana Brabcová, who have indeed been categorised by other critics together with Hodrová as some of the most

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<sup>132</sup> Chitnis traces Hodrová's development of the aesthetics of 'identity' and of 'otherness' in her volume *...na okraji chaosu...*, pointing out that Hodrová draws on the work of eminent Russian scholar and critic Iurii Lotman to shape her theory. Chitnis, *Literature in Post-Communist Russia and Eastern Europe*, pp. 21-24, citing Hodrová, *...na okraji chaosu...* (Prague: Torst, 2001), pp. 115-16 & 134, and referring to Lotman in Slovak translation, 'Myslenie kritiky', in *Literárny týždenník*, I (1988), 9:9.

<sup>133</sup> Petr Král, 'L'Art de la fugue', afterword to *Le Royaume d'Olsany*, Hodrová, 1991, pp. 245-49, here p. 245.

important Czech women writers to emerge from this period; both Holý and Chitnis draw similar parallels.<sup>134</sup> Although Gender Studies is not the principle field informing my approach in this thesis, this view of Hodrová's work is nonetheless important to my analysis because of the particular situation of women and feminism in postwar and Communist Czechoslovakia, and because of the ensuing intersection between women's identities and the national identities with which I engage more specifically here. As Alfred Thomas notes in his study of modern Czech gender and sexuality in fiction and film, the 'derivational status of femininity is further complicated by the woman's position in a small-nation culture' as well as by the Communist regime's rejection of feminism as an 'anachronism' in the socialist utopia that had supposedly been achieved.<sup>135</sup> What is important is that women writers had to 'negotiate between a traditional [national] master narrative and a subjective female rescripting of that narrative to create a complex, multi-layered palimpsest',<sup>136</sup> and my analysis will identify ways in which Hodrová similarly departs from the 'master narrative'. My analysis of the trilogy will therefore maintain a sensitivity towards gender issues in order to take into account this dual constraint on Hodrová as a woman writer living under a Communist regime in a small nation. This awareness will help me to bring to the fore motifs that express the double subordination of Czech women and in particular of the series of female protagonists, from Alice to Anne Bolet to Eliška, who as we shall see can be identified with the author herself. I will, moreover, draw attention to ways in which the constraints of being

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<sup>134</sup> Holý, p. 164, compares Hodrová to Richterová; Chitnis, *Literature in Post-Communist Russia and Eastern Europe*, Chapter 5, selects Hodrová and Brabcová as the outstanding women writers of their time.

<sup>135</sup> Alfred Thomas, *The Bohemian Body: Gender and Sexuality in Modern Czech Culture* (Wisconsin & London: University of Wisconsin Press, 2007), pp. 200 & 202.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 201.

a woman (writer) during the Communist regime intersect with the dialectics of power and submission that are embedded in Hodrová's portrait of the historical sense of dispossession experienced by the Czech nation as a historical prey to greater neighbouring national powers, a relationship that will be examined in the light of Kristeva's understanding of the states of exile and marginalisation.<sup>137</sup>

Before moving on to a more detailed analysis of Hodrová's texts themselves, it is pertinent to conclude this overview of the evaluation made of Hodrová in previous criticism by adding that, with the exception of work done by Chitnis, the majority of studies (in English and French) of Hodrová's novels have tended to constitute an introductory overview of her writing and major themes rather than taking the form of extended textual analyses. The scope of this chapter, in focussing on her work and indeed in drawing out new points of comparison with work by authors that have not to date been critically considered alongside Hodrová, allows me to extend the valuable work done by the critics referred to above into a more detailed examination of her account of the experience of living under the physical and intellectual restraints of totalitarianism.

### **A Novelist and Scholar of Literary Theory**

Whilst Hodrová's reputation as a novelist dates back only to the publication of the trilogy after the Velvet Revolution, she has long been established as a scholar of literary theory in her home country. Her father was the actor Zdeněk Hodr, and after graduating from secondary school Hodrová herself worked for a brief period as an assistant at Prague's Jiří Wolker Theatre. She studied Czech,

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<sup>137</sup> Especially in Kristeva, *Étrangers à nous-mêmes*.

Russian, French, and comparative literatures at Charles University in Prague, and her ongoing interest in other European literatures and mythologies is played out in her fiction in an extensive network of intertexts that that will be discussed as an important element in Hodrová's weaving of silenced or forgotten Czech stories into the wider web of European memory. After graduating, Hodrová worked as an editor for the Czech publishing house Odeon from 1972 to 1975, and since then has been employed as a literary researcher at the Institute of Czech Literature,<sup>138</sup> a role that as we shall see she shares with her protagonist of the third part of the trilogy, Eliška. Hodrová's indirect inscription of herself into the text through the figure of Eliška will be discussed later in this chapter as a form of what Henke has called scriptotherapy, or 'the process of writing out and writing through traumatic experience in the mode of therapeutic reenactment';<sup>139</sup> LaCapra's concept of 'working through' trauma will also be deployed in this argument.<sup>140</sup> Throughout her career, Hodrová has published prolifically in the fields of the theory and classification of the novel, and critics of her work have generally acknowledged the necessity of reading her fiction in conjunction with her theoretical texts (which include books, essays, and articles) since the fiction tends to incorporate many of her scholarly ideas about the shape and meaning of the novel. Chitnis emphasises this close

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<sup>138</sup> The Institute of Czech Literature (*Ústav pro českou literaturu*, until 1993 known as the Institute of Czech and World Literature of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences) is the national body for research into Czech literature. Hodrová is currently employed as Senior Researcher and her profile can be viewed on the Institute's website at: <<http://www.ucl.cas.cz/cs/pracovnici/vyzkumni-pracovnici/81-hodrova-daniela>> [last accessed 25/03/2014]. One of the functions of the Institute is to provide accurate bibliographic and referencing materials pertaining to Czech literature and writers. I have therefore sourced publication data relating to Hodrová's own work (both fictional and theoretical) from the bibliography made available by the Institute via a link from the profile cited above, since there is occasional disagreement in other academic sources, perhaps owing to complications arising from the particular publishing circumstances of the Communist period.

<sup>139</sup> Henke, p. xii.

<sup>140</sup> LaCapra, see pp. 65-70. My understanding of the concept of 'working through' will be introduced when I turn to this theory in Part III of this chapter.

relationship between her fiction and theory, citing the Czech critic Zdeněk Heřman's description of Hodrová's first novel as the 'artistic realization of what she declared in her theory', and this observation can be extended to her other works of fiction.<sup>141</sup> For this reason, although it is beyond the scope of this thesis to make a comprehensive survey of Hodrová's theoretical work, my analysis refers where relevant to a number of her key works of theory in order to illuminate the structures and devices used in the novels.

Hodrová's theoretical work includes three texts that form the backbone of her thinking about the novel and are frequently cited in studies of her work. *Hledání románu* ('In Search of the Novel') surveys the history of the genre and, together with her survey of literary use of place, *Místa s tajemstvím* ('Places with Mystery'), sets out Hodrová's sense that the development of the Western novel oscillates constantly between two extremes, one (as Chitnis paraphrases) which 'strives to eradicate mystery, [...] while the other [...] endeavours to preserve it'.<sup>142</sup> Hodrová's understanding of the significance of these literary extremes, and more specifically of the sociopolitical origins of the 'oscillation' in world literature between didacticism and the preservation of mystery, was perhaps engendered by the emerging cultural milieu of Communist doctrine into which she was born; as such, the particular relationship between literature and Communism merits attention at this point. Within the context of Central European literature of the twentieth century, then, the type of literature which 'strives to eradicate mystery' can be associated particularly with the didacticism

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<sup>141</sup> Chitnis, *Literature in Post-Communist Russia and Eastern Europe*, p. 92. Chitnis cites Zdeněk Heřman, 'Ambiciózní próza', in *Tvar*, III, 4: 14. Citation trans. by Chitnis.

<sup>142</sup> Hodrová, *Hledání románu* (Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1989); *Místa s tajemstvím* (Prague: Koniasch Latin Press, 1994). Chitnis, *Literature in Post-Communist Russia and Eastern Europe*, p. 92, here paraphrasing Hodrová's argument in *Místa s tajemstvím*, pp. 10-11.

that became the ideal of Social Realism, which was the officially approved and therefore dominant form of literary expression during much of Hodrová's adulthood until the changes of 1989. Social Realism developed in the Soviet Union during the thirties and became influential in Czechoslovakia before the Second World War; at this stage in its development, the often avant-garde literature of Social Realism embraced the revolutionary ideals of Marxism, offering artists the scope to express the urgently felt need for social change, a need that is reflected, albeit sometimes in parody, in Hodrová's return in her novels to the theme of revolution or hope. By the time Hodrová was growing up in the forties and fifties, however, the emphasis of the movement had radically altered so that any individualism was suppressed as the current political agenda of social reform became the sole justification for art and literature, which in turn became increasingly propagandist and didactic in tone. In the processes of normalisation during the seventies, any literature which did not conform to Social Realist norms was entirely removed from the cultural arena through the mechanisms of censorship, the mass closure of all non-conforming publishing houses, the replacement of all literary reviews with one single official journal (*Literární měsíčník*, or 'Literary Monthly'), and the removal of non-approved texts from public libraries and bookshops.<sup>143</sup> The erasure of the individual and the curtailing of freedom of expression that I have described here as inherent to the literature of the regime explains Hodrová's abstention from any attempt to publish during those years as well as her development of a literary style that, in Chitnis's words, refuses to 'eradicate mystery' but rather 'endeavours to preserve it'; and this is an endeavour that lies at the heart of the complex and

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<sup>143</sup> See Holý, pp. 19-25 for a commentary on the early years of Social Realism, & pp. 131-37 for a description of the impact of normalisation on literature.

multi-layered metaphors and binary images that pervade her fiction, constituting a part of her resistance to the unilateral dogmas imposed by the regime.

Whilst critics have rightly asserted that Hodrová's fiction can be aligned with literature that 'endeavours to preserve' mystery and particularly with postmodernism,<sup>144</sup> her work in fact demonstrates the very *oscillation* or tension between, on the one hand, traditional linear understandings of the world and, on the other hand, the fragmented, circling and complex questioning that is also associated with trauma narration. The Czech title of the first part of her Prague trilogy, *Podobojí*, which is translated into a phrase which recurs throughout the French edition as 'deux espèces',<sup>145</sup> echoes this notion of dualism or pluralism as opposed to unilateralism, and provides the impetus to the movement of the novel, which (like her other novels) is structured around a series of dualities and paradoxically overlapping oppositions (such as good and evil; life and death; movement and stasis; memory and forgetting). This leads me to examine her writing as a means not of embracing one form of ideology (whether the dogmatism of Social Realism, or the uncertainty of postmodernism as described by critics including Holý) over another, but rather as an expression of constant, oscillating movement between two poles. This textual movement, arising from Hodrová's own experience of the cycles and extremes of Czech history

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<sup>144</sup> Chitnis, *Literature in Post-Communist Russia and Eastern Europe*, p. 92 (drawing on the work of the Czech critic Martin Ryšavý), points out that Hodrová 'pointedly' distances herself from Realism; Holý refers to what he describes as Hodrová's 'postmodernist' tendencies in his chapter on 'The Eighties Generation and Postmodernism', pp. 181-97, esp. pp. 188-90.

<sup>145</sup> Although this phrase can be found on numerous occasions throughout the volume and so underpins the theme of duality suggested in the original title, it should be noted that it is absent from the translation of the title into its published French version as *Le Royaume d'Olsany*, which refers instead to the Jewish cemetery in Prague that forms the backdrop to much of the novel's action.

described above, in turn underpins the portrayal in her work of the experience of human life as fragmentary and pluralist.

Before moving on to introduce the fictional works which form the primary focus of this chapter, mention should be made of one further text which occupies a position between the theory and the fiction. This is Hodrová's literary 'guide' to Prague which was originally published in 1991 in French as *Visite privée: Prague* and only appeared in Czech the following year.<sup>146</sup> The French version was commissioned as part of a series of literary guidebooks to cities and consists of Hodrová's narrative 'wandering' around the city together with a selection of photographs, a map, and some practical information for visitors. The author herself is explicitly present in the text as the narrator, as we learn from the very opening words, in which Hodrová recalls her childhood in Prague. The text reveals the autobiographical and emotional significance of the city for the author and reinforces the importance of critically locating her work as a whole within the city of Prague, which here as in her novels takes on a life of its own as a labyrinthine site of both mystery and torment, and as the location of collective and individual 'embodied memory'.<sup>147</sup> Viewed in this text through the lens of the stages of Hodrová's own life, the city becomes a place where different moments in the course of the nation's troubled history converge:

Et le jour où, pour la première fois, je me tiendrai sur mes jambes  
dans mon parc de bois, au milieu de la chambre d'enfant, des

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<sup>146</sup> Hodrová, *Visite privée: Prague*, trans. by Catherine Servant. (Paris: Chêne, 1991). Published in Czech as *Město vidím...* (Prague: Euroslavica, 1992). Title abbreviated to *VP* hereafter in footnotes.

<sup>147</sup> Hodrová's interest in the collective memory embodied in the city is also explored in a second text, *Spatřené hlavy* (Prague: Malvern, 2007), meaning 'heads beheld' (deriving from the fact that the text takes the form of an extended prose reflection on the memories of the city, illustrated with the author's own photographs of the gargoyles and 'heads' of the city's façades). This text, however, is not available in French (or English) and for this reason my examples will be drawn solely from *Visite privée*.

chasseurs apparaîtront dans le bassin pragois [...]. Les arbres sacrés frémissent au-dessus des flammes qui montent des bûchers des morts [...]. L'odeur du sang roussi des victimes pénètre dans le landau, jusqu'à l'enfant.<sup>148</sup>

Memory is thus embodied, here and in the novels, in place and in the sights and smells that a particular place engenders and that create a collapse of time so that the baby Hodrová is witness to (and as an adult will later write her testimony to) both those hunters of prehistoric times and the sacrificial victims of Prague's past and future. With this conflation of time, place and memory in mind, *Visite privée* will take a central place alongside my study of Hodrová's fictional trilogy as I explore the way personal and national memory is embodied in place in general, and in Prague specifically.

### **The *Cité dolente* Trilogy and Other Fiction**

To date Hodrová has published seven novels,<sup>149</sup> of which the first three form a trilogy which has been published in French and which constitutes the primary corpus of fiction for this study. The trilogy as a whole is known in Czech as *Trýznivé město*, a meaning which is literally translated into the published title of its French version, *Cité dolente*; this is a title which finds its source in Dante's *Divine Comedy*,<sup>150</sup> but also clearly relates to the personal significance of Prague as a site of troubled memory for Hodrová and will therefore be further examined in relation to the location of traumatic memory. It could be noted with reference to Hodrová's title that her use of intertextuality to both situate her own fiction

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<sup>148</sup> *VP*, p. 8.

<sup>149</sup> Although some critics (including Chitnis in his introduction to the English translation of the volume) have also classified *Visite privée* as a novel, I would argue that it was not written as such but rather as a literary and autobiographical reflection inspired by Prague.

<sup>150</sup> This association is pointed out by Chitnis, *Literature in Post-Communist Russia and Eastern Europe*, p. 95, and is made explicit in the trilogy itself which draws on the *Comedy* as an intertext.

within a wider European literary tradition and to forge new meanings through a reconfiguration of recognisable stories constitutes an element in her weaving of a 'narrative web of memory', and will furthermore be compared in this chapter to Germain's extensive use of intertextuality to create links between her own fiction and Czech literature.

Before providing a synopsis of the trilogy, a brief summary of the circumstances surrounding its publication indicates the impact of totalitarian regulations on the author's writing career and serves to strengthen my contextualisation of her work and its situation within Czech literature. The trilogy was predominantly written during the Communist years but owing to the political environment and the strictures of censorship during the normalisation period it remained in manuscript form and unpublished until after the Velvet Revolution. Because of its non-conformist nature, the trilogy would have been unsuitable for official publication, yet as I have already pointed out Hodrová was unlike the numerous literary dissidents of her generation in that she did not choose to publish during the regime through the unofficial channels of *samizdat* or *tamizdat*. During the latter part of the 1980s there was a movement in Czechoslovakia towards liberalisation that belatedly echoed the advent of Gorbachev's *glasnost* in the Soviet Union;<sup>151</sup> during this period a substantial number of writers who had previously been able to publish only unofficially, or who had not published at all,

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<sup>151</sup> Chitnis, *Literature in Post-Communist Russia and Eastern Europe*, p.4, explains that Soviet and Slovak literature began to move away from realism and 'less overtly dogmatic' writing as early as the mid-1950s (after the death of Stalin in 1953), eventually culminating in the new freedoms of speech and press granted under *glasnost* in the 1980s. The Czechoslovak Communist Party, however, was hesitant to support Gorbachev's reforms because of the fact that the liberalisation of *glasnost* constituted an uncomfortable reminder of the Prague Spring movement of 1968.

were able to begin to publish through official channels once more.<sup>152</sup> In keeping with this trend, Hodrová finally started the process of initiating publication of the first part of her trilogy in the late 1980s, although this was interrupted by the upheaval of the Velvet Revolution. The first two parts finally came out in Czech in 1991, titled respectively *Podobojí* ('In Two Kinds') and *Kukly* (which can be translated as both 'Puppets' and 'Chrysalides'), closely followed in 1992 by the third part, *Théta* (referring to the symbol used in editing to denote text 'to be deleted', the significance of which will be examined at a later stage in this chapter in relation to the silencings of Communism).<sup>153</sup> Porter tells us that *Podobojí* was written across the years of 1977 to 1984; *Kukly* from 1981 to 1983, and *Théta* from 1987 to 1990.<sup>154</sup> The three volumes were published in French in 1992, 1995, and 1999 as *Le Royaume d'Olsany*, *Les Chrysalides* and *Théta* respectively, and it will be to the French editions that I refer throughout this chapter.<sup>155</sup>

A brief introduction at this point to the structure and content of the trilogy serves to highlight the central motifs that will be discussed in the following analysis, as well as to draw attention to some of the points of intersection in the way in which the three case-study authors variously engage with the common context of twentieth-century Czechoslovakia. Whilst the main events of Hodrová's trilogy are played out during the period of the Holocaust and Second World War

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<sup>152</sup> Holý, pp. 181-97, provides an overview of poets, novelists, playwrights, and indeed musicians who benefitted from the newfound publishing freedoms of these years.

<sup>153</sup> Hodrová, *Podobojí* (Ústí nad Labem: Severočeské nakladatelství, 1991); *Kukly* (Prague: Práce, 1991); *Théta* (Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1992).

<sup>154</sup> Porter, p. 162.

<sup>155</sup> Hodrová, *Le Royaume d'Olsany* (Paris: Laffont, 1992), hereafter abbreviated in footnotes to *RO*; Hodrová, *Les Chrysalides* (Paris: Laffont, 1995); Hodrová, *Théta* (Paris: Laffont, 1999). All three volumes trans. by Catherine Servant. Note the diacritic difference between the French version, *Théta*, and the original Czech *Théta*; this distinction is maintained throughout this thesis in order to differentiate between the original and translated texts.

in Prague and the ensuing Communist regime, each volume also delves into early Czech national legend, the nineteenth-century Czech National Revival and other significant eras of Prague's history that will come under scrutiny in this chapter as I demonstrate that Hodrová's interpretation of disruptive twentieth-century events is underpinned by her wider understanding of the recurrent cycles of history. Structurally and thematically, *Cité dolente* is an immensely complex work in which a multitude of devices combine to create a distinctive synthesis of form and meaning, a literary labyrinth through which the reader must wander in search of elusive meanings in a manner that I shall argue mirrors the traumatically claustrophobic and disorienting experience of totalitarianism. The complex structure of Hodrová's work, moreover, invites comparison with the quite different structural devices used by Páleníček and Germain to convey the experience of Communism from their own perspectives, and these differences will be scrutinised to show that the elements of complexity and fragmentation in Hodrová's work reflect her particular experience of living through the constraints and confines of Communism at first hand. The textual labyrinth of the trilogy is, moreover, created in the image of the city of Prague itself, since the streets of Hodrová's *Cité dolente* correspond to their geographical counterparts to form a mystical space in which a series of characters, places and even objects reappear throughout the three volumes at different points in the city's long history, metamorphosing and merging into one another in a manner which raises questions of personal and national identity that will be the subject of analysis in the course of this chapter.

It should be noted that the majority of my analysis will focus on *Le Royaume d'Olsany* and *Thêta* in order to facilitate a closer reading of these long and

dense texts, and thus to maintain a balance between this chapter and the other two, since Germain's texts are far shorter than Hodrová's, and Páleníček has published only one novel to date. My selection of the first and last volumes allows me to draw attention to a progression from trauma to catharsis which will be discussed in terms of a movement from forgetting to memory, from death to life. *Le Royaume d'Olsany* revolves around the lives (and deaths) of the inhabitants, neighbours and visitors of an apartment overlooking the Jewish cemetery, Olsany.<sup>156</sup> Characters include: Alice Davidovic (also appearing as Anne Bolet who goes to her death 'par une cheminée, en Pologne')<sup>157</sup> and her Jewish grandparents who had lived in the apartment before the Holocaust; Herr Hergesell, an officer of the occupying Nazi forces who lives in the apartment after Alice kills herself when her fiancé Paul Santner is deported; Boisdorman, the informant concierge of the apartments, who changes his allegiance as often as the country falls under a new regime and who sends a string of victims to their deaths or imprisonment over the decades, which themselves roll into one; and a procession of characters who, usually in pairs, represent the successive forces that occupied, liberated or ruled Czechoslovakia during the course of its history, from the Austro-Hungarians to the Nazis, and from the American liberators at the end of World War Two to the Russian invading troops who quelled the Prague Spring of 1968. The main storyline of *Thêta*, which is also set in Prague, tells the story of Eliška Beránková (meaning 'lamb'), who is an editor and writer like Hodrová, and onto whose character Hodrová inscribes herself in a variety of ways which will be examined in Part III. This volume, like

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<sup>156</sup> Note that the French translation does not maintain Czech spellings or use of diacritics in names of places, characters, etc, as in the use of 'Olsany' for *Olišany*. This thesis will follow the translator's usage throughout.

<sup>157</sup> *RO*, p. 46.

*Visite privée*, draws heavily on European myth, including the stories of the Fates, Arachne, and Ariadne, as well as on literary texts, including Dante's *Divine Comedy*. It also contains a number of apparently autobiographical details which will be considered as a part of Hodrová's resistance to the Communist erasure of memory.

My principal reason for choosing to focus on the trilogy lies in the fact that its three volumes were written during the Communist years and so correlate most closely to the author's first-hand experience of the era in question in this thesis; although the novels she subsequently published continue to engage with the Communist years, they were nonetheless written after the revolution and therefore from a more externalised and retrospective position. Indeed, Hodrová notes that she found herself compelled to stop writing *Théta*, the third volume of this case study, after the revolution in November 1989 because 'il deviendrait un autre texte, un texte étranger'.<sup>158</sup> This suggests that, for Hodrová, the end of Communism would transform not only the city ('car la ville cessait alors, ne fût-ce qu'un moment, d'être une cité dolente'),<sup>159</sup> but also the need to write. Felman draws attention to the feeling of some writers that their written testimony to lived traumas is too early ('precocious') and yet they are compelled to speak.<sup>160</sup> She cites the case of Paul Celan, who said of his experience of the Holocaust that 'there remained, in the midst of the losses, this one thing: language. This, the language, was not lost but remained, yes, in spite of everything'.<sup>161</sup> For

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<sup>158</sup> *VP*, p. 26.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>160</sup> Felman, in Felman and Laub (eds), p. 52.

<sup>161</sup> Paul Celan, 'Bremen Speech', given on accepting the Literature Prize of the Free Hanseatic City of Bremen, 1958, trans. by John Felstiner in 'Translating Celan's Last Poem', in *The American Poetry Review*, July/August 1982, p. 23. Cited by Felman, in Felman and Laub (eds), p. 50.

Hodrová, it would appear that her need to write from her position in the 'cité dolente' was similarly linked to language as a means of survival, something that 'remained' when other certainties were crumbling. As such, my analysis engages with the trilogy as a testimony which somehow speaks out from the heart of the traumatic events to insist on survival despite the difficulty inherent in speaking from such a position.

## **Part II. A State of Pain: The Trauma of Being Cut Off from the Body of Europe**

In an essay translated into English as 'Woven into the Web', Hodrová describes a well-known woodcut of 1537 by the Hapsburg artist Johannes Putsch, which depicts the body of the virgin Queen Europe as a corporeal map of her countries 'in a bizarre pattern', in which, significantly, Bohemia lies 'at the very center of the Queen's torso, in the solar plexus region'.<sup>162</sup> The position of Bohemia at the heart of Putsch's map is seen by Hodrová in her essay as a symbol of the 'unique status' of her homeland in European history, a reminder of its geographic centrality and the prominent economic position held for centuries by the powerful and affluent Kingdom of Bohemia. Although the Bohemian lands were incorporated into the Hapsburg Empire in 1526 (shortly before Putsch made his Queen Europe woodcut), until the outbreak of the Thirty Years War in 1618 they continued to enjoy great religious and intellectual

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<sup>162</sup> Hodrová, 'Woven into the Web', p. 145. The woodcut referred to is *Europa Regina* by the Hapsburg cartographer Johannes Putsch. Various versions are documented but the image known today and referred to by Hodrová dates to an original print published in Paris in 1537. See Peter Meurer, 'Europa Regina. 16<sup>th</sup> century maps of Europe in the form of a queen', in *Belgeo: Revue Belge de Géographie*, 3/4 (2008), 355-370.

freedom as well as economic stability. The vision of Bohemia at this prominent site at the heart of Europe, whilst recalling the former glories of Hodrová's homeland, is also, however, an unflinching reminder of the painful process by which the country was removed from that position during its fall from power and subsequent suffering as a pawn at the hands of successive empires and regimes, from the Austro-Hungarian Empire that evolved from the Hapsburg dynasty, to the occupying Nazi forces, to the Soviet-controlled Czechoslovak Communist Party. I will take this image as a starting point from which to consider the impact on Hodrová's writing of her homeland's painful divorce from this body during much of the twentieth century owing to the isolating effects of Communism, using descriptions of exile and marginalisation to argue that much of the trauma of Hodrová's textual 'cité dolente' can be located within this schism.

As Hawkesworth notes, the inclusion of Czechoslovakia by Western Allies at the Yalta Conference of 1945 into the emerging Eastern Bloc would equate to a state of exile and exclusion from its former position at the heart of the body of Europe:

The dominance of communist ideology throughout the region established a new homogeneity that bound it into a coherent bloc, disastrously cut off from developments in the West [...] as though the countries of Central Europe had been shifted several hundred kilometres to the east. Whereas the Czech and Polish lands, and Hungary as a partner in the powerful Hapsburg Monarchy had once been at the heart of Europe, they were now thrust outside its mainstream political and economic developments. The region became the 'other Europe', increasingly invisible to its 'Western' counterpart'.<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> Hawkesworth, p. 199.

My analysis of Hodrová's trilogy will draw on this insight in order to emphasise the fact that her fiction reflects (but also, as we shall see, furthermore reflects *upon*) the Czech sense of dispossession and of being 'disastrously cut off' from their former place at the 'heart' of Europe, a sense that is conveyed in the trilogy in a language of wounding and traumatising that gives voice to the pain of exile and marginalisation, of being 'thrust outside' a 'mainstream' culture to which the nation had formerly belonged. Even though Hodrová, unlike many fellow writers such as Kundera or Král (or, a generation later and for transgenerational reasons that will be discussed in Chapter Three, Páleníček) was not physically exiled or distanced from her geographical homeland, this displacement of Bohemia from the heart of Europe and its invisibility behind newly closed borders means that she is writing from a place of dispossession that, I propose, can be compared to that of the exile. Kristeva has enlarged traditional understandings of the foreigner or exile to include '[c]elui qui ne fait pas partie du groupe, celui qui n'"en est" pas, l'autre',<sup>164</sup> a position which corresponds both to that of Czechoslovakia (as described by Hawkesworth above) during the Communist era, and to that of Hodrová as an intellectual deprived of her publishing voice by the regime. Drawing on Kristeva's insights into the nature of the pain experienced by the exile, I will examine the trilogy for symptoms of this 'cutting off' from the body. In the Introduction to this thesis, I noted that Keller also described this process as 'an open wound in the cultural body of Europe', and these corporeal images of cutting and wounding resonate strongly with the removal of Bohemia as the heart of the body. The pain caused by this wound runs throughout the trilogy in a network of stories of violence,

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<sup>164</sup> Kristeva, p. 139.

death and injustice, and more specifically in the fears of death and of becoming lost or 'deleted' (a term that will be scrutinised below), and in the tropes of sleep, sacrifice, and haunting. In the final part of this chapter, however, I will also use theories relating to the cathartic or curative properties of storytelling in order to discuss whether the text can be considered a site of healing of that wound.

### **The Fear of Deletion as a Symptom of Being Cut Off from the Body**

Hawkesworth's perception of the effects of the 'cutting off' of East from West in terms of a sense of being 'invisible' relates to the fear, experienced by many of those within the newly isolated Eastern Bloc, of being marginalised and forgotten; this is a state which, when we are engaging with the case of writers or storytellers, could perhaps be phrased more pertinently in terms of a fear of not being heard, or of becoming voiceless. As we can see from the work of Caruth, this fear lies at the heart of the experience of the trauma victim, since '[t]rauma can be experienced in at least two ways: as a memory that one cannot integrate into one's own experience, and as *a catastrophic knowledge that one cannot communicate to others*'.<sup>165</sup> In the case of the writer living inside a Communist regime, the traumatic inability to communicate that is emphasised in the latter part of this citation can be attributed to two main factors. The first of these is somewhat specific to this context, and lies in the fact that the citizens of such a regime were physically 'cut off' from the outside world by closed borders, bans on external communication and travel, and the numerous other restrictions to

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<sup>165</sup> Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, p. 256, my italics.

personal liberties implemented by the regime. Such physical obstacles to communication are manifest in the trilogy in repeated references to physical barriers and walls (for example, of the cemetery and of the apartment) and in the related notion of confinement, which will be examined in my discussion (in Part III of this chapter) of Prague as a labyrinth. The second factor contributing to the experience of being unable to communicate from inside a Communist regime is more widely experienced by trauma sufferers, and is discussed in Caruth's volume as the 'incommensurability' of the victim's experience with that of the outsider who has not lived through the same or comparable events, and who is thus either unable or unwilling to 'hear' or understand.<sup>166</sup> These two factors come together so that the survivor of the totalitarian conditions of the 'other Europe' (as Hawkesworth has termed it) has to contend with the feeling of being doubly 'cut off' from normal means of communication.

The resulting fear of not being heard and of being accordingly lost or removed from the 'narrative web' of memory can be traced throughout Hodrová's trilogy, and is manifested in the title of the third volume, *Thêta*, which I shall take as a starting point for my analysis of the trope of deletion. At its first appearance in the text, we learn that 'la letter grecque θ', the eponymous 'thêta', is 'le signe correcteur signifiant *deleatur*',<sup>167</sup> the symbol used by editors to denote text or material 'to be deleted', and so embodies the fear of being erased that runs

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<sup>166</sup> See "'The Aids Crisis is Not Over": A Conversation with Gregg Bordowitz, Douglas Crimp, and Laura Pinsky', in Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, pp. 256-71. The participants in this conversation discussed the notion of 'incommensurability' of traumatic experience (raised by Crimp, p. 256), whereby the onlooker cannot understand the specificity of the victim's experience, even though they may be aware of it: 'They know, and they do not want to know' (Bordowitz, p. 257). This 'incommensurability' adds to the isolation of those in a community of trauma in ways that are addressed in this chapter, and which will also underpin my discussion of the relation between self and other in Chapter Three, where I will consider the ethics of speaking about the trauma of the other.

<sup>167</sup> *Thêta*, p. 221.

throughout the trilogy.<sup>168</sup> The symbol would have been familiar to Hodrová owing to her own work as an editor and manuscript researcher, a link which is made explicit in the figure of the protagonist Eliška who, like Hodrová, is also an editor and works at the 'Institut de la littérature tchèque et mondiale', where she is engaged in '[l]a correction d'épreuves', using 'fluide blanc' to carry out her task of deleting material that is thus marked.<sup>169</sup> It should be noted at this point that the parallel between Hodrová's profession and that of her protagonist Eliška is just one element of similarity between the two, and that Hodrová appears to be inscribing herself into the text in the figure of Eliška ('celle en laquelle je me suis camouflée').<sup>170</sup> The development of this 'camouflage' will be explored later in this chapter as I discuss the text as a place of escape from a regime that threatens the writer's identity. In the context of censorship in which Hodrová was writing, the task of deletion with which Eliška is charged can be associated with the processes of manipulating the freedom of speech and memory that, in his discussion of Central European literary memory, Richard S. Esbenshade has termed 'state-managed forgetting'.<sup>171</sup> This was a process which involved (amongst other methods) the alteration of official records, such as the editing of textbooks or the removal of so-called traitors' names from historical records, in order to create ideologically acceptable versions of history.<sup>172</sup> Whilst neither Eliška nor Hodrová are in any way aligned with

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<sup>168</sup> Note that the relationship between deletion and death as it is contained within the symbol  $\theta$  will be further discussed in the following section.

<sup>169</sup> *Thêta*, pp. 208, 210, & 230-31.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 229.

<sup>171</sup> Richard S. Esbenshade, 'Remembering to Forget: Memory, History, National Identity in Postwar East-Central Europe', in *Representations*, 49 (Winter 1995), 72-96, here p. 74.

<sup>172</sup> An extreme example of the official processes of alteration of history can be seen in the removal of statues of the former hero of Soviet Socialism in the de-Stalinisation that was implemented by Khrushchev after Stalin's death in 1953. Another well-known example, immortalised by the Czech novelist Kundera, was the removal from official photographs of the

Communist Party doctrines, and indeed Eliška feels herself unsuited to her job at the state-run 'Institut' and eventually resigns,<sup>173</sup> yet through their work they are nevertheless brought into uncomfortable proximity to these processes of alteration of history. (We could note that the strain of living with this proximity led many into collaboration or complicity, as we shall see later in this chapter and indeed again in Chapter Two in my discussion of Páleníček's protagonist.) If Eliška's protest against this manipulation is demonstrated by her resignation, Hodrová's protest is embedded in the pages of her texts as she records those parts of history that might otherwise be deleted from the 'narrative web' of memory.

The trilogy accordingly contains a wealth of fictional examples of the processes, perpetrators, and victims of the erasure to which the Communist Party administration subjected Czech historical memory of that era: Monsieur Boisdorman is perhaps the most vilified agent of this alteration of history in the trilogy. In his role as concierge of the Olsany apartment in the first volume of the trilogy, Boisdorman is ideally placed to survey the comings and goings of its many inhabitants and visitors, and abuses this position of observation to become 'Cerbère Boisdorman' as a secret police informant in a contemporary recasting of the mythological keeper of the gateways of hell. The inscription of the myth of Cerberus into Hodrová's record of Communist experience will later be further examined in terms of her portrait of Prague as a city haunted by the

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face of Slovak leader Vladimir Clementis after his execution at the Slánský trial of 1952 (an event that will be further discussed in Chapter Two of this thesis in the context of the tension between silence and speech in memories of Czechoslovak Communism). See Kundera, *Le Livre du rire et de l'oubli*, p. 3. It can be noted that similar practices are still employed in North Korea today, and have been the subject of recent media interest.

<sup>173</sup> *Thêta*, p. 208.

memory of its restless dead; at this stage in my argument, I shall focus on the manner in which Hodrová's portrait of Boisdorman constitutes a record of the ways in which memory was perverted or erased by the Communist system. It is contextually useful to note that positions such as doorman, gatekeeper or concierge were often associated with the despised role of secret informant to the regime; Kundera, for example, satirizes this abuse of power in his portrait of an obtuse but sinister gatekeeper in *Le Livre du rire et de l'oubli*.<sup>174</sup> In her projection of the identity of the gatekeeper Cerberus onto the informant figure, Hodrová is similarly drawing attention to the corruption of those who collaborated with the system. As concierge, Boisdorman's duty is to keep a record of business relating to the tenants of the flats, and accordingly writes into his book a maintenance request made by the German officer Herr Hergesell, whose acquaintance Boisdorman treacherously cultivates during the Nazi occupation. However, after the liberation of Prague in 1945 by Soviet troops (who were welcomed at that point in history as heroes), Boisdorman hurriedly erases the written evidence of his earlier collaboration with the Germans: 'le concierge Boisdorman reprend le cahier d'entretien et en arrache soigneusement l'avant-dernière page' (the page on which Hergesell's name was to be found).<sup>175</sup> Later again, in the Prague Spring of 1968, at the height of the brief national attempt to overthrow Soviet control, Boisdorman attempts to remove from his record book all signs of his friendship with the Russians.<sup>176</sup> His bids to erase the evidence firstly of his collaboration with the Germans, and secondly of his submission to Soviet influence, through the literal effacement of

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<sup>174</sup> Kundera, *Le Livre du rire et de l'oubli*, p. 8.

<sup>175</sup> *RO*, p. 57.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 131.

the written word, serves a twofold purpose. Firstly, it highlights and condemns the hypocrisy of the processes of collaboration to which he, along with others of his nation, subscribed; and secondly, it exemplifies the falsification and erasure of history that poses a threat to national and individual memory in the processes of 'state-managed forgetting'.

Furthermore, the fear of deletion that is embodied in the symbol  $\theta$  can be explicitly associated with the role of the writer of fiction, since the 'state-managed forgetting' that saw the alteration of official records also led to the persecution and imprisonment or exile of so many writers in the region and indeed had the material impact of preventing Hodrová herself from publishing and so removing her voice from narrative memory. We should recall that Hodrová and Eliška are both writers as well as editors, and therefore subject to having their own words or voices deleted, a fear which is evident in the following passage: 'Et ne risque-t-elle pas alors [...] d'être recouverte de blanc, *deleata* [...], par la simple adjonction d'une lettre auprès de son nom, dans la marge du manuscrit, une lettre qui tue?'<sup>177</sup> Whilst the subject of this passage is Eliška, the overt inscription of the author's identity onto that of her protagonist Eliška supports my interpretation of this passage, and indeed of the trilogy, as an account of the author's own fear of being silenced.

Despite this evident fear of 'deletion', nonetheless we can also see that the state processes of falsification are resisted by Hodrová in examples such as her portrait of Boisdorman as she subversively insists on recording the weaknesses of her compatriots in their changing alliances and even her own unwilling

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<sup>177</sup> *Thêta*, p. 231.

implication, discussed above, in the processes of 'editing' texts. As Esbenshade points out, the unreliability of official history that is exposed in Hodrová's portrait of Boisdorman meant that '[f]iction and poetry rather than documentary history as such came to be seen as the guardians of the national heritage',<sup>178</sup> and this insight highlights the importance of fictional chronicles of history such as Hodrová's trilogy in defying the fear of deletion of individual and national memory by recording the individual stories that were suppressed in official documents. In response to Eliška's fear (in the passage cited above) of being 'recouverte de blanc, *deleata*', the narrator-author exclaims that 'expédier [Eliška] hors de ce monde, comme elle le ferait d'une faute de frappe, ne posera aucun problème à l'auteur!',<sup>179</sup> both giving credence to Eliška's fear of deletion and at the same time asserting the writer's power in the face of that threat. If the regime wields the power of deleting stories, then the writer opposes this threat with the weapon of writing. 'Thêta', or the symbol  $\theta$ , then, embodies on the one hand Hodrová's fear of being silenced or deleted, of being removed from the 'narrative web' of literary memory, just as manuscript editors remove material marked  $\theta$  and as Communist era editors perverted that process in the manipulation of memory to which Hodrová was a witness. The symbol also, however, embodies her resistance to deletion in ways that have been suggested here and that will be further explored in conjunction with my later analysis of the text as a place of resistance.

Another example of Hodrová's writing as a means of resisting the forgetting and deletion that have pervaded Czech politics can be found in the trilogy's

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<sup>178</sup> Esbenshade, p. 74.

<sup>179</sup> *Thêta*, p. 231.

numerous references to the Czech national habit of changing place names. In a central passage describing the Soviet invasion of Prague in 1968, for example, we read that ‘[l]eurs chars [...] vrombissent déjà dans l’avenue Staline (à présent avenue de Vinohrady, à vrai dire)’.<sup>180</sup> The change from ‘avenue Staline’ to ‘avenue de Vinohrady’ is a symptom of the state attempt to erase the undesirable memory of each previous regime or era; in this case the street name was changed to dilute the memory of the brutal Stalinist policies of the fifties to the more neutral ‘Vinohrady’ (simply meaning vineyards) of the more liberal early sixties. Many other passages similarly refer to the multiple changes of political allegiance and periods of subservience to other powers: the same volume refers to ‘la place Lobkowitz (qui deviendra place Tchapaïev)’ and, in *Visite Privée*, we read that ‘[e]t puis nous apprendrons que Vyšehrad s’appelle de nouveau Gottwaldová’.<sup>181</sup> Indeed Hodrová is not the only writer to draw attention to this feature of Czech social memory; as Esbenshade points out, in his novel *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* Kundera lists ‘the five different names in this century – before 1989 – of a single street in Prague: “They just kept changing its name, trying to lobotomize it”’.<sup>182</sup> This enforced forgetting of the previous cycles of Czech history can be related to the experience of trauma, which entails the loss of memory of the traumatic event. Kundera’s use of the word ‘lobotomy’ in the citation above specifically points to the pain inherent not only in the source of the memory which is (at least superficially) effaced in the

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<sup>180</sup> RO, p. 151.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid., pp. 51-52 & p. 50; VP, p. 25. The changes of power in the region can be traced through these names: ‘Lobkowitz’ is one of the oldest Bohemian noble families; ‘Tchapaïev’ refers to the Soviet hero Čapajev; Vyšehrad is the castle whose name derives from ancient Czech legend; Gottwald was the country’s first Communist President, who presided over the purges and trials which will be discussed in Chapter Two as part of the painful Communist legacy.

<sup>182</sup> Esbenshade, p. 74, citing Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, trans. by Michael Henry Heim (New York: Penguin, 1981), p. 158.

process of name-changing, but also and more significantly relocates that pain within the actual process of (attempting to) forget, which through his choice of surgical terminology becomes a painful operation. As Herman has pointed out, it is this *loss of memory* that troubles the traumatised individual, whose healing process revolves around the recovery and integration of that traumatic experience into the narrative memory processes that order the rest of their experience.<sup>183</sup> We can see a similar process at play in the official 'lobotomy' of national memory, exemplified in the name changes repeatedly alluded to by Hodrová and in the erasure of records as perpetrated by Boisdorman, so that her insistence on recording these changes and deletions may be interpreted as a step towards the recovery and reintegration of denied memory.

The fear of the loss of collective historical memory can also be seen in an episode in *Le Royaume d'Olsany* where Denis returns to the site of the Pioneer Camp that he had attended as a child. The Pioneer youth organisation is a symbol of socialist education and propaganda, one that is instantly recognisable to Czechs as an integral part of a childhood spent during that era; we could indeed speculate that Hodrová was almost certainly obliged to attend Pioneers herself since membership was compulsory from the age of six. When the adult Denis returns to this significant childhood memory site, he finds that 'le camp a été rasé depuis maintes années',<sup>184</sup> and this disappearance has a two-fold significance. The destruction of a symbolic site of Communism during the regime seems puzzling, and could lead us to conclude that Hodrová's textual

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<sup>183</sup> See Herman, p. 1, for a summary of this concept, which underpins the argument of her volume: 'Remembering and telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisites both for the restoration of the social order and for the healing of individual victims'.

<sup>184</sup> *RO*, p. 92.

erasure of the camp is simply a parody of the Communist practice of manipulating memory as examined above, and perhaps, moreover, an expression of hope for a future from which the material trappings of Communist indoctrination might be absent. This is indeed one layer of meaning contained within the destruction of the camp but, as is usually the case with Hodrová's textual images, further possible interpretations can be revealed through a process of contextualisation and consideration of the relationship between memory and identity.

An alternative and more complex interpretation of the disappearance of the camp does indeed begin to emerge when we realise that, when he comes across the ruins of the camp in the sandy Bohemian forest, Denis feels that he has lost or been cut off from his childhood self, which remains '[r]aidi dans le sable comme dans la lave pompéienne'.<sup>185</sup> The image of petrification here resonates with the Sleeping Beauty intertext that runs through the volume to reinforce the deadening experience of living in a regime cut off from the rest of Europe not only geographically by the closure of borders but also temporally; this is a motif that will be further explored in the next section in relation to the stasis of time which constitutes a part of the trauma of the experience of Communism. In the light of the image of Pompeii, the loss of the memory of the camp can be aligned with the fear of being deleted from history, just as Eliška (and, through her self-inscription onto the character, Hodrová) fears being 'recouverte de blanc, *deleata*'.

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<sup>185</sup> Ibid., pp. 92-93.

If we further take into account the evolution of the Pioneer movement, it becomes apparent that the destruction of the camp is a textual warning of the danger inherent in suppressing memory, even painful memory. The movement started life as a vehicle of the Marxist-Leninist ideals of social reform and equality but over the decades became the channel of certain controversial activities, of which perhaps the most extreme example was the practice of encouraging children to denounce their parents or teachers.<sup>186</sup> It could be argued that the summer camp in *Le Royaume d'Olsany* therefore exemplifies the ambivalence felt by many Czechs even now towards the Communist era: symbols of the bureaucratic framework, such as the Pioneer camps, may be a reminder of indoctrination and of the harsh political realities of living in a totalitarian regime, but they may also evoke nostalgic memories of an era of innocence that for some was not necessarily tainted by its Communist framework. This suggestion is supported by Catriona Kelly's recent exploration of memories of childhood in Soviet Russia, which highlights not only the traumatic and painful aspects of that era but also a host of more fondly remembered traditions and images.<sup>187</sup> Seen in this light, the Pioneer camp with its complex associations with revolutionary aspirations and childhood holidays as well as indoctrination and dogmatic practices, becomes a site of the 'deux espèces' or concomitant binaries that run throughout the trilogy. As I suggested in my Introduction to this chapter, these conflicting but coexistent binaries

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<sup>186</sup> This ideological practice exploited the propagandist story of the legendary figure of a young Soviet Pioneer, Pavlik Morozov, who supposedly denounced his father for anti-socialist activity; the historical basis of the story is disputed, and has been used to discredit core Soviet values. For an account of the story and its changing role in understanding Communist propaganda, see Catriona Kelly, *Comrade Pavlik: The Rise and Fall of a Soviet Boy Hero* (London: Granta, 2005).

<sup>187</sup> Kelly, 2008. Although Kelly's book, which contains interviews with Russians and extracts from a wide variety of Russian historical sources, does not engage directly with the satellite states, many of the practices and traditions that are described are relevant to Czechoslovakia.

constitute a part of Hodrová's 'aesthetics of otherness' or refusal to subscribe to the prescriptive totalitarian understanding of life by insisting on the plurality of experience and memory. What is threatened in the textual disappearance of the camp, then, is the loss not only of the camp itself, or even the memory of Communist propaganda which it rerepresents, but also the memory of the past, distilled here into Denis' childhood, which through the vehicle of the camp becomes a complex intersection of conflicting memories of the 'deux espèces' that were experienced during the regime. Whilst the camp as an ideological symbol does incorporate the negative aspects of Communism, the possibility of its disappearance from the records of history nevertheless entails the loss of (childhood) memory of an entire nation and highlights the importance of preserving memory in all its complexity even when it is of a painful or challenging nature. Hodrová's inclusion of a plurality of memories such as the Pioneer camp or the role of the secret informer thus ensures that, even if the 'lave pompéienne' or 'fluide blanc' of forgetting threatens the integrity of memory, these images are not erased permanently from the 'narrative web' of history but remain available to future generations.

The destabilising effects produced on identity by the gaps in individual and national memory that were created by the processes of 'enforced forgetting' (as Esbenshade has described it) can be further understood in the light of work done in the field of trauma theory on the importance of remembering. Herman has emphasised that, '[r]emembering and telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisites both for the restoration of the social order and for the healing

of individual victims'.<sup>188</sup> The situation experienced by inhabitants of totalitarian regimes, and recorded here by Hodrová, is one in which both individual remembering and social commemoration (or 'telling the truth') were, as we have seen, strictly controlled. This suppression of memory equates to what Herman has described as the experience of being 'cut off from the knowledge of our past', and results in an inability to integrate the traumatic event into narrative memory.<sup>189</sup> A parallel process is at play here in Denis's sensation of losing his childhood memory 'dans la lave pompéienne', in that the disappearance of the camp threatens to cut Denis off from his past in a manner that lies at the core of the disintegration of self that is experienced in cases of traumatising. Eliška's (and Hodrová's) fear of being deleted from the web of narrative memory stems from the same traumatic erasure of parts of their national and individual histories in the name of Communist ideologies. A central part of the trauma of living through a totalitarian regime, then, is the loss of identity that results from the inability to be able to integrate remembered events into official versions of history, so that the individual (whether Denis, Eliška or Hodrová herself) is unable to own their story. The costs of such manipulated memory loss will be further examined in the next chapter of this thesis when I discuss the death of the protagonist of *Les Bouleaux* as a consequence of his inability to integrate his Communist past into his post-Communist present; but in terms of Hodrová's writing, I shall next explore the effect of this erasure of memory on social and individual order as it is externalised in the motif of sleep as a metaphor for the loss of agency produced by the silencing analysed above.

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<sup>188</sup> Herman, p. 1.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

## Sleep and Sheep: The Dual Traumas of Submission and Sacrifice

Denis's sensation, in response to the loss of his childhood memory, of being buried 'dans la lave pompéienne' is an image of petrification or stasis which resonates, as I have suggested, with the intertextual references to Sleeping Beauty that run throughout the first volume of the trilogy, and that will be examined now as a metaphor for the experience of living in a Communist regime. Before scrutinising further examples in the trilogy, we can turn to other writings emerging from the same context in order to better understand the sleep metaphor as it is deployed by Hodrová. A number of writers of Hodrová's generation who fled the censorship and stifling intellectual atmosphere created in Czechoslovakia in the seventies and eighties by normalisation have spoken and written of the sense of suffocation and stasis caused by the cutting off of Czechoslovakia from the body of Europe. These descriptions of the effects on writing of such an environment are illuminating in terms of the context within which Hodrová continued to write, albeit secretly. My Introduction to this thesis refers to the Czech novelist Ouředník, who moved to Paris in 1984 and has spoken of the stifling impact on the creative process of the isolation experienced in Czechoslovakia, saying that, '[t]here was a feeling of weariness, of intellectual suffocation, of the fear that my brain would not work at its full potential year after year'.<sup>190</sup> Similarly, his fellow exile, the francophone poet Petr Král, describes the Communist Prague that he left behind as 'plong[ée...] dans ce temps hors du temps où elle semble condamnée à somnoler'.<sup>191</sup> The 'weariness', 'suffocation', and perpetual somnolence described by Ouředník and

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<sup>190</sup> Bourhis.

<sup>191</sup> Král, *Prague*, p. 20.

Král are echoed in the innumerable references to the ‘bois qui dort’, ‘le sommeil olsanyien’, and the host of slumbering characters that make an appearance in Hodrová’s trilogy (and most particularly in the first volume, which will accordingly form the focus of this section of analysis).

Just as we have seen in Král’s recollections of his home city, in Hodrová’s rewriting of the classic fairy tale of Sleeping Beauty the inhabitants of Prague are ‘condamnée à somnoler’ in a place that is cut off from the linear progression of time, as well as from the geographical body of Europe in ways that we have already seen. It should be noted that the concierge, Boisdorman, takes his name from the French title of the fairy tale, ‘La Belle au bois dormant’; his metamorphosis into ‘Cerbère Boisdorman’ guarding the door to the Olsany apartment recasts the building as a more hellish version of the fairy tale palace. Pico (the son of Boisdorman)<sup>192</sup> is the one who pricks Alice with a pin so that ‘*le poison du bois qui dort s’est propagé dans tout le corps*’.<sup>193</sup> In a subversive twist of the original fairy tale, Pico himself falls asleep: ‘Pico s’est endormi depuis longtemps, la tête dans le giron de Kostia’.<sup>194</sup> Kostia is the Soviet soldier who represents both the Soviet liberation of Czechoslovakia after the war, and their invasion in 1968. By falling asleep in Kostia’s lap, Pico is representative of the Czechs who for the most part more or less passively accepted Soviet totalitarian rule; the reference to the legend of the unicorn (which traditionally falls asleep in a maiden’s lap) once again problematises the margins between

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<sup>192</sup> Note that the name Pico is an instance of translational compensation for loss of connotation or layers of meaning at other places in this highly complex and dense text; the meaningful echo of the verb ‘piquer’ and the fairy tale pricking is not to be found in the Czech original, where the character is given the popular boy’s name Jura.

<sup>193</sup> RO, p. 40. My italics.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid., p. 57.

good and bad, victim and perpetrator, thus casting doubt as to who is to blame for the Soviet era. The *Sleeping Beauty* intertext is, moreover, reinforced with a host of other examples that invoke sleep as a metaphor for the experience of living in a Communist regime and the effect on national identity of submission to external powers. Not only the Boisdormans' apartment is infected with the 'poison du bois qui dort', since the cemetery (through which almost all of the characters in the first volume pass at some stage) is also a place of 'sommeil olsanyien', in which a succession of characters are afflicted by a numbing weariness and fall asleep. So, for example, the character Nanette 's'endort sur ses genoux, parce qu'elle est très fatiguée',<sup>195</sup> whilst in the apartment overlooking the cemetery grand-mère Davidovic 's'est tue, la tête couchée sur la nappe de sabbat, elle se sera endormie à cause de cette attente, trop longue pour elle'.<sup>196</sup> These characters personify the 'feeling of weariness, of intellectual suffocation' that Ouředník and Král escaped by leaving the country; by remaining, Hodrová's mode of escape from the 'sommeil olsanyien' becomes the inscription of experience into the text, an act that (as I shall discuss further in Part III of this chapter) becomes a means of agency in the face of the disempowering environment in which she was living.

Once again, trauma theory can be deployed to further illuminate the way in which these sleep images convey the Communist experience of passivity. Herman has clinically examined the well-known 'fight or flight' response to show that, in situations of danger or threat, ordinary human responses create adrenalin to 'mobilize the threatened person for strenuous action, either in battle

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<sup>195</sup> Ibid., p. 141.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

or in flight'; conversely, in situations 'when action is of no avail', these adrenalin-based responses are repressed and traumatisation occurs.<sup>197</sup> This insight into the mechanics of trauma has been used to explain the severity of symptoms in situations of enforced and prolonged passivity in the face of danger such as those infamously experienced in trench warfare. Hodrová's sleep imagery shows that it can, however, equally be applied to totalitarian contexts in which large numbers of people are physically confined by closed borders (textually represented here in the prominently featuring walls of the apartment and of the cemetery) within repressive circumstances and thus deprived of action or agency. Sleep, then, is the metaphorical symptom of what Thomas has termed 'the plight of the individual in a totalitarian state',<sup>198</sup> representing in bodily terms the numbing effects of intellectual and political repression and of living in an isolated state described by Král as 'hors du temps', disempowered in the present by enforced passivity, cut off (like the characters of *Sleeping Beauty*) from the past thanks to the political suppression of memory, and from the future thanks to the severing of links with the outside, progressive world. Sleep as it is deployed by Hodrová is both a metaphorical expression of the disempowering sensation of temporal stasis experienced by the hapless citizens of a country that is represented as a perversion of *Sleeping Beauty's* palace, and a corporeal embodiment of the symptoms of trauma induced by this state.

The passivity of Czech response to the totalitarian conditions imposed in the second half of the twentieth century can in fact also be associated with their submission to other national powers in the course of history since their

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<sup>197</sup> Both citations taken from Herman, p. 34.

<sup>198</sup> Thomas, p. 172.

incorporation into the Hapsburg Empire. A number of images of sacrifice are closely bound up with the sleeping imagery to explore the identity of a nation thus subjected. On one level, the nation is accordingly presented as the sacrificial lamb, although as my analysis develops we will also see that this image is one which is nuanced with complexities emerging from Hodrová's sensitivity towards the plurality of human experience, and thus resists a unilateral reading of the nation (or its individual inhabitants). We will also see that Hodrová conflates a number of different meanings associated with sheep and lambs that we might not expect to find sustained within one extended metaphor. Nonetheless, the wealth of examples of lamb and sheep imagery presented by the trilogy does suggest that the Czechs can be read as the victims of the bids for political power that have led to the painful removal, examined above, of their homeland from the heart of Europe. In *Le Royaume d'Olsany*, in terms of individuals, Nanette is 'humble comme une brebis'; Alice is repeatedly associated with 'un manchon d'astrakan' made from '[la] peau [...] d'agnelets persans non encore nés'; her own unborn baby Benjamin, whose name of course makes him a vehicle of the story of the Jews, is an 'agnelet persan' who becomes 'la vie par deux fois sacrifiée' since he is a symbol not only of the ancient history of the Jews but also the modern-day fate of the Czechs.<sup>199</sup> In *Thêta*, Eliška is surnamed Beránková, which is retained in the French translation since the text makes it explicit that the Czech means 'lamb', although on occasion she is in fact also referred to as 'Elise Agneau' (in a continuation of the fragmentation of identity that afflicts so many of Hodrová's traumatised characters). I have argued that Hodrová has projected her identity

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<sup>199</sup> RO, pp. 105, 139 & 126 respectively.

onto Eliška, and it is possible that Hodrová also identifies with this sacrificial aspect of Eliška's identity. On one hand, then, the experience of the Czechs under Communist rule is likened to other historically disempowered social groupings including the Jews, women and children, to whom much of the lamb imagery is applied; these parallels emphasise the plight of the Czechs during the totalitarian rule and supports my reading of the trilogy as an embodiment of the traumatic symptoms of enforced passivity.

In what would initially appear to be a reinforcement of the victim-predator imagery inherent in the notion of the Czechs as sacrificial lamb, the Nazi predator Hergesell is variously 'l'aigle' and 'le loup'. However, in the following extended passage which draws on the biblical Parable of the Good Shepherd,<sup>200</sup> we can see that there is in fact a degree of conflation between the identities of Czech 'lamb' and predatory foreign 'wolf':<sup>201</sup>

Laissez venir à moi les tout-petits. La porte du Seigneur est grande ouverte, ouverte à tous, les ouailles du père Paskal la franchissent les unes à la suite des autres, et parmi elles, la brebis noire Herr Hergesell. Peureuses, les ouailles s'écartent à son passage. Ce n'est pas une brebis, c'est un loup en habit de brebis. Voyez le loup qui vient au temple recevoir le corps et le sang du Seigneur, il mange le pain et boit le vin avec les ouailles.<sup>202</sup>

Once again, Hodrová's image of the sheep draws on a variety of biblical and other sources and a number of meanings can be attributed to this passage.<sup>203</sup>

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<sup>200</sup> See John 10, in *The Holy Bible. New International Version* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2001).

<sup>201</sup> Note that this example concerns the Czech relationship with the Germans; elsewhere in the trilogy the Soviets or the Hapsburg forces take on the predatory image, for example in *RO* in the phrase 'les sbires de la peste', which is applied in turn to all three national groups listed here.

<sup>202</sup> *RO*, p. 44.

<sup>203</sup> 'Laissez venir à moi les tout-petits' is drawn from Luke 18.16, whilst the image of 'un loup en habit de brebis' originates in Matthew 7.15; the Parable of the good Shepherd, which provides the framework of this passage, is found in John 10. This conflation of sources is echoed in the complexity and indeed apparent contradictions which, as I discuss here, can be seen in the extended metaphor of the sheep, lamb, and wolf in the case-study text.

Whilst Hergesell's deceitful and predatory nature has been previously emphasised in his portrait as 'un loup' or 'un aigle', here he metamorphoses into 'la brebis noire'. Whilst there is a degree of inconsistency in this change of imagery, the transformation perhaps also points to the fact that the German Hergesell is not only a dangerous outsider but that as an informant he attempts to insinuate himself into Czech society (attending church here with 'les ouailles'). The conflation of wolf and sheep imagery, then, may suggest the difficulty of living in an informant society where neighbours may be treacherous informers and identities are brought constantly into question. Furthermore, in this passage 'père Paskal' subverts the role played by the Good Shepherd in the parable by failing to protect his 'ouailles' from the wolf; indeed in a further biblical resonance later in the same passage, he admits to himself that in giving the sacrament to Hergesell he has behaved like Judas: 'j'ai livré le Christ à Pilate'. His treachery is complete when, in a clear reference to the collaboration of some Czechs with the Nazis during the war, he accepts an invitation to dine with Hergesell. On that occasion, Hergesell 'prépare de l'agneau pour le dîner' and so re-enacts the sacrifice not only of the Jews but of all those groupings that are represented by Hodrová as disempowered by history, including the Czechs.

In a further nuance that can be detected in relation to the passage cited above, however, Paskal's Czech congregation ('les ouailles') cannot be exempt from culpability of collaboration or at the very least of turning a blind eye, since they passively 's'écartent à son passage' and allow Hergesell to take communion with them. Indeed, Chitnis has responded to the images we have seen of somnolent national passivity with the observation that Hodrová is criticising 'the

response of the majority, who, by closing their eyes to what is happening, appear more dead than the dead',<sup>204</sup> and there is indeed an element of guilt at play in the application not only of the sleep metaphor but also, as I have shown, of the extended and complex sheep image.

We have seen that the metaphors of sleep and sacrificial lambs reflect the trauma of being passively disempowered and condemned to play the eternal victim in a power relationship that echoes that of the slave and master dialectic. If we probe these images further, however, we cannot ignore the fact that, once again, Hodrová's reading of Czech (victim) identity is complicated by her understanding of the 'deux espèces' that characterise life and direct her resistance to unilateral social or political meanings. In its deployment of the wolf and sheep metaphor, Hodrová's text accordingly insists on probing the complex power politics at play in her social environment in ways that refuse to ignore the co-existence of innocence and culpability in history. If we return to the Sleeping Beauty parallel, we can see that it too holds further significance in terms of the complex effects of historically enforced passivity on Czech identity. Pico's position 'endormi [...] dans le giron de Kostia' confirms that there are elements of both innocence and culpability in the behaviour of the Czechs. On the one hand, he is the one who treacherously wields 'une épingle' to wound Alice, who had befriended him; on the other hand he himself falls asleep, prey to the Soviet invaders, so that when he is portrayed elsewhere as 'l'enfant éternel' he demonstrates the vulnerable and childlike aspect of Czech passivity in trusting to yet one more foreign master.

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<sup>204</sup> Chitnis, *Literature in Post-Communist Russia and Eastern Europe*, p. 99.

In a further subversion of the original fairy tale, Alice herself does not fall asleep but dies, and in death is condemned to an eternal wandering in which she never finds her lost lover Paul and so suffers perpetually in a personal parallel of the political fate of the Czechs, but also of the fate of women as doubly subordinated by their gender and by their membership of a small nation subjected to the absolutist rule of a larger power; this reading of Alice intersects with Thomas's observation that the 'derivational status of femininity is further complicated by the woman's position in a small-nation culture'.<sup>205</sup> We should further recall here that as a Jewish woman, Alice's fate can also be read as a rewriting of the exile of the Jews from Egypt in a reminder of the fate of nearly 80,000 Czech Jews who were murdered in the Holocaust. If we remember that Alice's death can be attributed to the treachery of the Czech Pico who pricked her when she had befriended him, we realise that her fate is another reminder of the collaboration of some Czechs with the Nazis, and perhaps also of a later period of Stalinist-inspired anti-Semitism in Czechoslovakia that emerged most dramatically in the Slánský show trial of 1952, in which high-level Jewish members of the Czechoslovak Communist Party were scapegoated and executed.<sup>206</sup> My reading of the complexities of the characters of Alice and Pico brings to the fore the ways in which Hodrová (like, as we shall see, Páleníček in his portrait of his protagonist) refuses to reduce or simplify the questions of passivity and guilt that are raised by her portrayal of Czech experience, but rather opens them up to pluralist understandings that are in line with her 'aesthetics of otherness'.

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<sup>205</sup> Thomas, p. 200.

<sup>206</sup> The Slánský trial will be further discussed in my chapter on Páleníček in terms of his representation of the political traumas of the 1950s.

Another image that uses the state of sleep to represent the passivity of the Czech nation is to be found in Hodrová's retelling of the well-known Czech legend of the hill of Blaník, where the Bohemian king's once-glorious knights are said to be slumbering, waiting until the nation's hour of greatest need when they will awaken. In Hodrová's cynical version, the treacherous character Jean Paskal brings the young Nora a gift of venison caught on Blaník, but she finds that it is rotting and useless:

Car sa chair n'était pas bonne à manger [...] Et il en serait sans doute ainsi des chevaliers s'ils en sortaient, le jour où la Bohême serait au plus mal, avec saint Venceslas sur son cheval blanc trottant à leur tête. Tous seraient des vieillards dont on n'aurait que faire.<sup>207</sup>

The parallel between the rotten meat and the slumbering Bohemian knights inverts the national legend of hope in order to expose the folly of the Czechs in waiting passively to be rescued from their fate, which is to be continually oppressed by other powers, whether Soviet, Nazi or Hapsburg. We cannot ignore the echoes of the Sleeping Beauty story that are present in Hodrová's subversive re-writing of the Czech legend of the slumbering knights, and I suggest that this blending of Czech and international folklore is an element in Hodrová's weaving of a 'narrative web' of European memory and part of her attempt to secure a place for her stories within European literature. We could also note retrospectively that this strategy, drawing as it does a parallel between Czech history and the more familiar Sleeping Beauty fairy tale, has the effect of helping the contemporary non-Czech reader to understand the significance of

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<sup>207</sup> RO, p. 43. Note that the legend is one that is immediately recognisable to Czechs as a symbol of national hope and pride, and that it has been portrayed in innumerable works of art and literature. The 'Venceslas' is incidentally the same Good King Wenceslas of the eponymous English carol, which also perpetuates the image of Czech hope of being rescued from need by a superior power.

the redundant, sleeping knights of Bohemia and the predicament of the Czechs as hapless victims of European history.

The complex relationship examined here between guilt and passivity or complicity is also present in both Páleníček's *Les Bouleaux* and Germain's portrait of the Czechs (and particularly in her use of vocabulary related to blindness). In Chapter Two I consider ways in which Páleníček's two protagonist figures at once perpetuate and challenge stereotypes of victimhood and guilt. My analysis will bring to the fore the retrospective legacy of incomprehension and even anger that is left to the descendants of Hodrová's generation, who often do not have direct access to memories and understandings of the damaging impact of the experience of coping with the 'weariness' and 'suffocation' of the confinement of the regime. In Chapter Three, I also explore the ways in which Germain's transnational perspective of distance, coupled with her use of a language of sickness and wounding, allows her to engage with the concept of Czech national passivity without assigning blame. In the examples I have examined here, we have seen that on one level the metaphor of sleep expresses the experience of living in the state of temporal stasis and petrification imposed on the individual by an absolutist regime. We have also seen, however, that Hodrová uses the images of sleep and of the humble sacrificial lamb to expose the duality or 'deux espèces' that are at play in human nature and determine the course of any relationship, even the unequal power balance between the individual and the totalitarian society, or between the small Czech nation and the larger powers oppressing it. In exposing these pluralities and the troubling effects of enforced social passivity in a succession of historical contexts, the trilogy also constitutes a confirmation

of the impossibility of escaping the complex power dialectics that have repeatedly dictated relationships between master and slave, man and woman, adult and child, Jews and Gentiles, or Czechs and larger national powers.

### **Death by Drowning?**

If, as Chitnis has observed, some of the characters of the trilogy appear in their somnolent state to be 'more dead than the dead',<sup>208</sup> so death itself is a prominent motif throughout the entire trilogy. The fear of (physical) death is constantly in evidence and can of course be associated with the fear of deletion from the 'narrative web' of memory that has been examined above. Death will therefore now be considered as a bodily symptom of totalitarian conditions. The difficult relationship that exists in the trilogy between physical death and the paradigm of memory and 'state-managed' forgetting in the Communist context examined above is explicitly embedded in the symbol  $\theta$ . The notion of 'thêta' reminds the narrator of a beetle she has seen: 'J'examinais le cadavre tors du coléoptère [...] Il me rappelait quelque chose..., mais oui: la lettre grecque  $\theta$ ',<sup>209</sup> and the association is reinforced shortly afterwards in the words, '[I]a lettre  $\theta$  (thêta), qui m'est apparue sous la forme d'un coléoptère noyé'.<sup>210</sup> What is important here is that the beetle is dead (and more specifically by drowning, a significant manner of death in relation to the Communist context, to which I will shortly return). In the light of the way in which the shape of the beetle's body

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<sup>208</sup> Chitnis, *Literature in Post-Communist Russia and Eastern Europe*, p. 106.

<sup>209</sup> It should be noted that in Ancient Greece,  $\theta$  was the abbreviation of death (thanatos, θάνατος), used on ballot papers when voting upon a sentence of life or death. See OED *theta* 1a.

<sup>210</sup> *Thêta*, pp. 221 & 228.

foregrounds the theme of death, it is not surprising to discover a few lines later that,

[θ] ne fut pas toujours un signe correcteur. À l'origine [...] il existait une autre signification, étroitement apparentée, certes, à la nouvelle acceptation. Les copistes médiévaux inscrivaient cette lettre auprès des noms des moines morts: θ signifiait thanatos – la mort, mort.<sup>211</sup>

The citation makes an explicit correlation between, on the one hand, the loss of immortality through deletion from the annals of history that is implied in the 'nouvelle acceptation' of the '*signe deletur*' (in its use by editors examined earlier in this chapter) and, on the other hand, physical death, which is represented by both the medieval and Ancient Greek uses of the symbol θ. Death in both senses was of course a very real threat in the context in which Hodrová was writing. As Steiner points out, the occupation of writing is a dangerous one in a totalitarian regime, since '[w]riters were persecuted and killed precisely because literature was recognised as an important and potentially dangerous force'.<sup>212</sup> Those who gave voice in writing to subversive ideas promoting individualism over and above what Steiner describes as 'the life-denying determinism of the Communist ideology' would be silenced or quite literally 'deleted', either through censorship or indeed death, as is evident from Steiner's account of the many writers who were executed or committed suicide in desperate response to a regime governed by such 'life-denying' principles.<sup>213</sup> For Hodrová, the fear of physical death posed by the constraints of the regime and the brutalities experienced by her nation is therefore intimately linked,

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<sup>211</sup> Ibid., p. 228.

<sup>212</sup> Steiner, 'The Writer and Communism', in *Language and Silence: Essays 1958-1966*, pp. 387-95, here p. 388.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid., p. 389.

through the symbol  $\theta$ , with the fear of deletion from literary memory, or from what she has described as the 'narrative web' of literature.

If we return to the embodiment of death in the theta-shaped beetle, it is also important that the beetle has drowned. This is a form of death that is deployed not only by Hodrová in both the trilogy and *Visite privée* but also by a number of other Czech writers to represent the particular form of intellectual suffocation or metaphorical death imposed by totalitarian conditions. For example, Thomas points out in his analysis of a novel from that era by Czech writer Zuzana Brabcová that, '[t]he diluvian image of water is introduced to convey the Czech nation's submergence under Communism, its regression to the Paleozoic age of flooded continents'.<sup>214</sup> Similarly in *Visite privée*, Hodrová invokes a number of Prague legends about drowning and flooding to give weight to her fear of Prague disappearing under the metaphorical waters of oblivion invoked by Communist deletion of memory. Emerging one day from the City Museum, she says, 'Je jette un dernier regard en arrière, avant de quitter cet îlot de mémoire et de redescendre sous terre [...]. L'eau monte'.<sup>215</sup> We should note that in its disregard for the trappings of the past, the Communist Party administration destroyed many architectural and archaeological treasures and consigned others to oblivion in the dusty halls of the City Museum, which during the regime was allocated little budget and generated little public interest.<sup>216</sup> For Hodrová,

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<sup>214</sup> Thomas, p. 203. Zuzana Brabcová's novel was published in Czech as *Daleko od stromu* (Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1991); an extract has been published in English in *Allskin and Other Tales by Contemporary Czech Women*, ed. by Alexandra Buchler (Seattle: Women in Translation, 1998), extract translated by James Naughton, pp. 15-28.

<sup>215</sup> *VP*, p. 38.

<sup>216</sup> For an example of this erasure of the physical evidence of historical memory, see *VP*, p. 26, where Hodrová relates the removal of a giant head that used to project from the famous Charles Bridge but was relegated to the Museum during the Communist era. We should also note that the legend surrounding the head is also related by Hodrová and constitutes another significant

the museum – the depository of memory – has symbolically become the only island of memory in a city disappearing under the flood waters of socialist memory loss. The image of drowning or flooding is perhaps, moreover, not unique to Communist-era writing, as its use in work by the French crime fiction writer Didier Daeninckx suggests. Alan Morris has drawn attention to the fact that, in his novel *Missak*, Daeninckx deploys the historical image of the floodwaters of the Seine rising above the statue of the *Zouave* on the pont d'Alma in Paris, using it as a metaphor for the importance of refusing to allow cultural memory to be swamped.<sup>217</sup> Daeninckx's work particularly engages with memories of the Second World War in France, and the similarity between his image and Hodrová's metaphorical use of flooding points to an intersection between French experience of Occupation, collaboration and resistance and the Czech context of forgetting which is in question here, and this transnational comparison strengthens my argument for the importance of the recovery of memory.

Death by drowning is, furthermore, often associated in Czech literature with the Biblical story of Noah and the Great Flood,<sup>218</sup> as, for example, in the choice of the word 'diluvian' in the above citation from Brabcová's novel, and this association once again evokes the difficult relationship between death and memory. In a dream in an episode of *Le Royaume d'Olsany*, Nora's father appears to her seated in 'le pavillon de jardin' where, as a child, she had so

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reference to death by drowning since the legend has it that, if the head were to be submerged in the waters of the Vltava river, then the Old Town Square (which is at the heart of Prague) would be under water.

<sup>217</sup> I am indebted to Alan Morris for bringing Daeninckx's use of flooding imagery to my attention during his paper entitled 'An Ever-Present Past: Didier Daeninckx and the Manouchian Resistance', given at the conference 'Occupation/Liberation: Cultural Representations of 1944-45 and its Legacy', University of Bristol, 11 September 2014.

<sup>218</sup> Genesis 7, in *The Holy Bible*.

often seen him.<sup>219</sup> Earlier in the volume, it is implied that Nora's father, who is an ominous character and a symbol of traditional patriarchal structures, has in some way abused his daughter. Now, in her dream, her father (who cannot swim) is drowned and the 'pavillon' in which he was sitting is washed up 'comme les flots diluviens rejetèrent l'arche de Noé'.<sup>220</sup> Hodrová's use of the metaphor of the Ark is complex and may be interpreted on a number of levels. In the biblical version, the patriarch Noah survives with his Ark when it is washed up on dry land. Here, however, the father figure is drowned and the Ark or 'pavillon' appears to be destroyed, since '[u]ne fois que l'eau a baissé, Nora Paskal retrouve [...] quelques planchettes du pavillon'.<sup>221</sup> Whilst in the biblical story, the patriarch and his vessel are the only elements of the old, sinful order that are worth saving, here they perish whilst the (female) Nora survives. Her dream of the drowning of her father, who as patriarch may also represent the structures of the regime, would, then, initially seem to be a confirmation of the possibility of regeneration through destruction of the old, patriarchal order, and so not only an exorcism of Nora's oppressive father but also a sign of Czech hope for a new order to replace the Communist regime.

If we look more closely, however, at the effect of the dream on Nora we realise that, however painful the past may be, nevertheless its loss in this drowning of the patriarch figure does not for Nora represent regeneration but sickness since, directly following this dream, 'une tumeur de la taille d'un coquillage finit de mûrir dans la tête de Nora Paskal'.<sup>222</sup> The imbrication of personal and national

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<sup>219</sup> *RO*, p. 95.

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>222</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 95-96.

memory in the allegorical drowning of the father carries through to the image of Nora's cancerous sickness, implying that the 'drowning' of memory, however painful, has comparably detrimental effects on the health of society as on the individual. It should also be noted here that Nora's sickness echoes other literary examples of the debilitating effects of Communism on social and individual identity, including Solzhenitsyn's *Cancer Ward*, but can also be compared with Germain's use of illness metaphors to empathise with the Czech condition. In my chapter on Germain, I will refer more widely to a body of work on illness narratives in order to probe her use of disease metaphors to explore the effects of Communist repression and to consider whether such imagery is used to mark out a position of blame or empathy in relation to the Czech nation. It can be noted here that Hodrová's own use of disease points to the dangerous, 'cancerous' effects of the suppression of memory, even in cases such as Nora's where that memory may be painful or challenging. In the following section, I will move on to discuss how such suppressed memories of the past may return to 'haunt' the present in the form of textual ghosts.

### **Haunted by the Ghosts of the Past**

The Prague of Hodrová's trilogy is inhabited by more dead characters than living ones, and it is clearly important that one of the most prominent geographical locations within the city is the cemetery, although the dead are not confined within its walls but move freely around the city, mingling with the living. This disturbing freedom of passage between the worlds of the living and the dead may be associated with the myth of Cerberus, which as we have already seen is introduced into the trilogy in the figure of 'Cerbère Boisdorman', the

concierge who observes and abuses the other characters' movements in and out of the Olsany apartment and indeed of the adjacent cemetery: 'Le concierge Boisdorman garde l'entrée de la maison comme l'entrée des enfers'.<sup>224</sup> The presence of Cerberus in the trilogy reinforces the parallel that is drawn between Prague and the underworld. In Greek mythology, the job of Cerberus is of course to guard the gates to Hades, allowing the dead to pass in but not leave, and preventing the living from entering, thus maintaining a separation of the worlds of the living and the dead. Although the mythological Cerberus, who is most commonly represented as a fierce dog with three heads and sometimes a serpent tail, is a fearful presence, he only presents a threat to those who try to transgress the boundary between life and death. In the trilogy, however, Boisdorman is feared by almost all of the characters and is indiscriminate in his incriminations, successively sending characters including the Czech Paskal, the Jewish Bonamy, and the German Hergesell to their fates of prosecution, imprisonment, or death. In appointing this important job to the informant Boisdorman, then, Hodrová is drawing attention to the perversion of the natural order that was brought about by the regime as innocent victims were sent to untimely deaths, often through the mediation of the army of informants who are represented here by 'Cerbère Boisdorman'.

The mingling of the living and the dead is an effect that would, moreover, seem to be heightened at moments of particular trauma, as we can see in a scene in which Hodrová depicts the 1968 uprising against the regime in Prague:

Dans la confusion générale provoqué par l'arrivée des sbires de la peste à Olsany (ainsi que dans la salle espagnole), il s'avère

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<sup>224</sup> RO, p. 117.

malaisé de distinguer où se termine le monde des vivants et où commence celui des morts [...]. Tous deux ont commencé à s'interpénétrer plus que de coutume.<sup>225</sup>

The disruption of the normal distinction between life and death is therefore another symptom of the trauma of living under totalitarian control, and the persistent presence of the dead amongst the living also suggests that the inhabitants of Prague are haunted by their pasts in a way that bears comparison with the disturbing recurrence of the past in cases of unresolved trauma. In a passage in *Visite privée*, the narrator reflects that 'the dead of the novel live on, nothing in it ends once and for all, everything that happens comes round again and again in one way or another',<sup>226</sup> suggesting that the memory of these dead returns to haunt the living (and the reader of the novel). As this section develops, clinical and theoretical insights into the mechanisms of traumatic memory are used in order to better understand the role of the living dead in the trilogy.

An example of the unusual movement between the worlds of the living and the dead can be seen in the story of Alice, one of the protagonists of the first volume. It is clear from the very first pages that Alice is already dead as a result of her jump from her apartment window, yet she wanders constantly through the novel in search of both her lover, Paul Santner, and her lost unborn baby. The beginning of Alice's story is grounded in a tragic memory from the author's own childhood, since, as we learn in *Visite privée*, a Jewish girl had avoided being deported only by jumping to her death from the balcony of the real-life

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<sup>225</sup> Ibid., p. 152.

<sup>226</sup> *VP*, p. 12.

apartment near Olsany Cemetery where Hodrová herself was brought up.<sup>227</sup> The textual Alice is therefore a figure for all of the Jewish suffering of Prague that is represented by her leap to death. She is reincarnated in the text only to die once more in the fictional re-enactment of this historically representative death, yet within the pages of the volume she moves constantly between life and death as the text circles from one chronological moment to another. A similar movement between death and life is experienced by many of the central characters in the trilogy, including the dead *Monsieurs Turk and Bonamy* who 'live' in the Olsany cemetery; Paul Santner, Alice's betrothed, who was sent to his death by transportation, is also constantly reincarnated as he moves between the worlds of the living and the dead; the living *Marinette*, who like Alice is destined to lose a child,<sup>228</sup> also comes into contact with the world of the dead when she hears the cries of her 'bébé non-né qu'elle avait prénommé François et couché dans une boîte à chaussures'.<sup>229</sup> When the living character *Denis* passes the cemetery one 'dimanche des Morts', he observes 'le va-et-vient des gens qui vont sur leurs tombes et s'en retournent de leurs tombes';<sup>230</sup> we are unsure whether he is seeing the living as they visit the tombs of the dead, or whether these are in fact the dead themselves who seem to move around Prague in this text as freely as the living. The reference to All Souls' Day is in itself a significant reminder of the need to remember and honour the dead, a responsibility which will be further examined below.

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<sup>227</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>228</sup> Note that the loss of a child is a repeated image in Hodrová's work, and can be related to fear for the future and for the next generations.

<sup>229</sup> *RO*, p. 160.

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64.

Denis, who grapples constantly in the text with the surreal movement between life and death that he perceives around him (as, for example, he repeatedly glimpses Alice, whom he knows to be dead), gradually comes to understand that 'les morts continuent à mener au milieu de nous leur vie ordinaire'.<sup>231</sup> This presence of the dead amongst the living signifies a disruption of linear time which can be equated to the state experienced by trauma victims whereby the past is perpetually re-enacted because, as Caruth observes, 'the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it'.<sup>232</sup> Indeed, the long-dead characters who reappear throughout the trilogy can be likened to the flashbacks that haunt trauma survivors in what Herman has described as the 'intrusion'<sup>233</sup> of the unassimilated past, a parallel which suggests that, just as in the case of the flashbacks experienced, for example, by war veterans or Holocaust survivors, the constant presence of the dead in the trilogy 'stubbornly persists in bearing witness to some forgotten wound'.<sup>234</sup> In the case of Hodrová's Prague, the 'forgotten wound' is not the symptom of a single, individual trauma, but the wounding experienced by a city whose inhabitants have been cut off repeatedly from their past in the manner we have seen above. Trauma is configured here as a social affliction as well as an individual phenomenon in a way that bears out Herman's position that, '[d]enial, repression, and dissociation operate on a social as well as an individual level',<sup>235</sup> and this supports my argument that

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<sup>231</sup> Ibid., p. 101.

<sup>232</sup> Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, p. 4.

<sup>233</sup> See Herman, pp. 37-42.

<sup>234</sup> Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, p. 5.

<sup>235</sup> Herman, p. 2.

Hodrová's trilogy seeks to 'bear witness' not only to a personal trauma but to a national experience of being 'cut off' from memory and identity.

If, as we have seen above, the living inhabitants of Prague are caught in perpetual stasis from which there is no escape, then the dead are equally caught in 'une vie comme limitée à ce qu'elle avait de plus essentiel, qui se répète et tourne en rond après la mort. Comme si l'on montait sur un étrange manège dont il s'avérait impossible de descendre'.<sup>236</sup> Because their memory has not been assimilated into publically acknowledged national narratives at the time of Hodrová's writing, her dead seem frozen in time, condemned to 'tourner indéfiniment à la manière d'une toupie' as if in a state of limbo.<sup>237</sup> Thus Alice repeatedly leaps from the window in a re-enactment of the horrors of the Holocaust, and the minor character Monsieur Hamza constantly waves his white silk handkerchief in a symbol of perpetual surrender, embodying over and over the shame of Czech subjection to other powers.<sup>238</sup> The behaviour of the textual dead can be compared to the 'repetitive', 'static' and 'intense' nature of the traumatic flashback that returns to haunt the traumatised victim, as described by Herman.<sup>239</sup> Herman explains that these flashbacks arise from a disruption of the normal, linear course of time by the shock of the traumatic event. This insight is underpinned by Pierre Janet's understanding of the biological difference between narrative and traumatic memory, which Whitehead has usefully reformulated as follows: 'Traumatic memory is inflexible

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<sup>236</sup> *RO*, p. 101.

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>238</sup> See, for example, the chapter entitled 'Le Mouchoir de Thomas Hamza', *RO*, pp. 152-56. The handkerchief also reappears on various other occasions and in different historical contexts, reminding us at each time of Czech surrender.

<sup>239</sup> Herman, pp. 37-42.

and replays the past in a mode of exact repetition, while narrative memory is capable of improvising on the past so that the account of an event varies from telling to telling'.<sup>240</sup> This 'inflexibility' and repetitiousness of traumatic memory helps to explain the way in which the ghosts of the past haunt Hodrová's texts, re-enacting the repressed past over and over in a manner that appears to correspond to LaCapra's notion of 'acting out',<sup>241</sup> whereby the narrator of traumatic events engages in 'an arrested process in which the depressed, self-berating, and traumatized self, locked in compulsive repetition, is possessed by the past, faces a future of impasses, and remains narcissistically identified with the lost object'.<sup>242</sup> In my later analysis of Páleníček's novel *Les Bouleaux*, we will see that the protagonist suffers a similar case of 'compulsive repetition' of the past in the form of flashback memories of a woman whose death implies his complicity with the regime; I shall argue that the protagonist is unable to free himself of that 'possession by the past' and so, unable to move towards a future, remains 'locked' in the past in the manner described here by LaCapra. In the case of Hodrová, however, I will now go on, in Part III of this chapter, to explore the processes by which her writing moves from a place in which she is 'arrested' or 'locked' into the 'compulsive' images of the past, to a place of detachment or distance from that past in which she can look towards a future

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<sup>240</sup> Whitehead, p. 87. Herman and Whitehead both refer to Pierre Janet, *Les Médications psychologiques*, 3 volumes (Paris: Société Pierre Janet, 1919-25).

<sup>241</sup> LaCapra, see especially pp. 65-70. LaCapra's concept of 'acting out' is related to, but not identical to, Freud's understanding of the processes of 'melancholia'; furthermore, 'acting out' is associated with LaCapra's term 'working through', which is in turn comparable to Freudian 'mourning', whereby the victim may engage with and in some manner move beyond the 'repetition compulsion' of trauma. 'Acting out' and 'working through' should not be understood as mutually exclusive, and in Part III of this chapter I will consider whether Hodrová's 'acting out' of trauma through the articulation of the ghosts of the past allows her to begin to engage in the processes of 'working through' that possession by the past. Note that LaCapra draws on Freud, 'Remembering, Repeating, and Working-Through (Further Recommendations on the Technique of Psycho-Analysis II)', 1914, and 'Mourning and Melancholia', 1917, both in *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 12:145-56 and 14:237-60 respectively.

<sup>242</sup> LaCapra, p. 66.

and, in the final pages of the last volume of the trilogy, proclaim herself 'en vie!'<sup>243</sup>

### **Part III. Spinning a 'Narrative Web' of Memory**

In her essay 'Woven into the Web', Hodrová reflects on the nature of memory and of the related activity of storytelling in terms of the extended image of spinning a 'narrative web', an image which I have referred to briefly above and which will underpin the following discussion of the function of writing as it is both implicitly embodied and explicitly reflected upon in the case-study texts.

Hodrová couches this image in the following terms:

I imagine Europe as a living thing cloaked in an aura, an invisible mental substance woven out of every thought, memory, notion, illusion, dream, anxiety, obsession, and trauma that has ever passed through the head of this maiden, or rather lady, of an uncertain age. She has experienced every one of these and spun them into stories, individual and collective, ancient and contemporary. And it is in this narrative web of literary Europe that the writer is caught. No sooner does he touch it with his own lived and written story than he spins a new loop and radius, a new cocoon.<sup>244</sup>

The image of the 'maiden' Europe cloaked in an aura of spun memory into which the writer can inscribe her story is closely associated with Hodrová's response, discussed in my opening to Part II above, to Putsch's woodcut of Queen Europe. We recall that Putsch's depiction of Bohemia at the heart of the body of Europe not only represents the former glory of Hodrová's homeland, but also constitutes a painful reminder of Bohemia's subsequent exile from that position. In the previous sections of this chapter, I have demonstrated how the *Cité dolente* trilogy embodies the trauma of that exile or 'cutting off' (as

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<sup>243</sup> *Thêta*, p. 283.

<sup>244</sup> Hodrová, 'Woven into the Web', pp. 145-46.

Hawkesworth described the plight of Communist Central Europe).<sup>245</sup> During the course of that discussion I indicated, however, that the trilogy not only reflects but also resists the trauma of being removed from the 'narrative web' of Europe by physical exile and by political manipulation of the freedom to remember or record social and individual histories. In this section, I shall move on to develop the notion that Hodrová resists these traumatic dislocations and restrictions by using the act of writing itself to reassert memory and survival of the individual in the face of forgetting and of (physical and metaphorical) death.

My argument will be underpinned by the image of spinning that runs through the passage cited above, since the concept of a spun web of memory is used to mediate Hodrová's understanding of the relationship between storytelling and memory. The image of the spinner-storyteller is one that, furthermore, is played out in the case-study texts in ways that demand attention in the context of this examination of the way in which memory is externalised in literature. I shall investigate the interplay between traditional representations of spinning, particularly in mythology, and the image of spinning as it is deployed in the case-study texts as I shed light on the way this metaphor is used to forge a relationship in Hodrová's work between storytelling, memory, identity, and resistance. Issues relating to the fields of gender and identity, collective memory, intertextuality, and trauma narration will be considered as I seek to show that Hodrová's writing 'spins' a 'narrative web' that resists deletion by reconnecting 'every thought, memory, notion, illusion, dream, anxiety, obsession, and trauma' with the collective body of memory from which Hodrová and her nation were 'cut off' by history.

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<sup>245</sup> Hawkesworth, p. 199.

Spinning and weaving are of course traditionally associated with women, not only as a domestic activity but also in mythology, where spinners are often endowed with powers of magical creation or influence; this is indeed the case in the myths of Ariadne, Arachne, and the three Fates, all of which are reconfigured in Hodrová's writing. Although the diversity of authors studied means that this thesis does not position itself within the critical field of Gender Studies, it is nevertheless important to note here that all of the spinner-storytellers who appear in Hodrová's work are women. This is important because these female spinning figures are instrumental in the processes of storytelling within the texts and thus become agents of the restoration of memory; conversely, it is almost invariably the male figures within the trilogy who are active in the deletion of life or memory, as we have seen in the cases of Hergesell, Pico, and Cerbère Boisdorman.<sup>246</sup> During the course of my analysis of the (female) spinner figures, I draw attention to the significance of this gendered perspective in terms of Hodrová's stance of resistance towards a power structure (or 'master narrative', to recall Thomas's words cited above)<sup>247</sup> that is perceived to be largely patriarchal. It should also be noted here that, in my analysis of the act of storytelling as portrayed by Hodrová, I refer to the writer as 'she' not only because in this case we are specifically dealing with a woman writer, but also to emphasise the manner in which Hodrová plays on the traditional association of spinning with the domain of women in order to

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<sup>246</sup> Note, however, that not all male characters are perceived to be destructive, as, for example, in the case of Denis, whose fear of the loss of childhood memory is treated sympathetically, as we have seen in my analysis above. Hodrová's work thus seeks to destabilise dogmatic or hegemonic social paradigms and oppose oppressive patriarchal structures without necessarily positing men as the sole perpetrators of such paradigms.

<sup>247</sup> Thomas, p. 201.

emphasise the contrast she is drawing between dominant patriarchal powers and the often overlooked role of women in resisting these powers.

As I have just suggested, Hodrová's use of the spinning image to explore the nature and function of storytelling relies heavily on figures from mythology. As is usually the case with Hodrová, however, her texts play with and on occasion subvert elements in these familiar stories in order to challenge established perceptions of human nature or of the prevalent social order and thus to create new meanings relating to her particular sociohistorical context of oppression. This transformative power of literature can also be better understood in the light of Hodrová's comments, in 'Woven into the Web', regarding the role played by 'archetypal stories' (including the Greek myths) in our evolving understanding of ourselves. 'Archetypal stories', she claims, are present in collective memory ('tucked away in our unconscious'), and as such can be accessed and reworked by writers so that their 'repeated retelling effect[s] a transfer of primal epic information, of the initiatory human experience that is encoded in these stories'.<sup>248</sup> As I consider the ways in which Hodrová retells 'archetypal' stories, and particularly those revolving around the role of the spinner-storyteller such as the myth of Arachne, I will demonstrate ways in which Hodrová reconfigures well-known structures and motifs in order to locate her own Czech experience within a wider framework of 'primal information [and] human experience' and thus once again resists deletion by spinning her 'own lived and written story'<sup>249</sup> into the 'narrative web'. Furthermore, this section considers the use of intertextuality in trauma fiction in order to shed further light on the way in which

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<sup>248</sup> Hodrová, 'Woven into the Web', pp. 149-50.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid., p. 146.

Hodrová uses both ancient myth and stories from her own nation's past to explore the traumas of the present and to insist on memory despite the context of deletion in which we have seen that she was writing. As Whitehead points out, intertextuality and memory are closely allied, since the resonances of past stories that resurface in a text may be a means of 'allow[ing] formerly silenced voices to tell their own story',<sup>250</sup> and I will consider the way in which Hodrová uses myths as a vehicle to map out her own national experience and so tell stories that had hitherto been silenced. This also leads me to consider whether Hodrová's writing has the function of 'healing' (which implies closure or reconstruction) that is claimed for the act of storytelling in much recent trauma theory,<sup>251</sup> or whether in fact her storytelling is rather a means of accepting the complex and fragmented landscape of (post-)Communist identities through a process which can be compared to LaCapra's notion of 'working through'<sup>252</sup> trauma.

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<sup>250</sup> Whitehead, p. 85. Note that Whitehead draws on Barthes' theory regarding the presence of multiple voices in a text, whereby a range of 'citations, references, echoes, cultural languages [...] antecedent or contemporary' converge in the medium of the new text. Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), p. 160, cited in Whitehead.

<sup>251</sup> Henke, for example, says that the aim of scriptotherapy is 'to reassemble an organized, detailed, verbal account' and thus to 'reconstruct a fragmented ego', pp. xvii & xix. Without refuting the power of writing out trauma claimed by Henke, my argument focuses on the process of change or transformation wrought by 'working through' trauma, whereby the survivor remains marked by their experience, in ways which I shall make clear as this thesis develops.

<sup>252</sup> As I have noted above, LaCapra associates 'working through' with Freudian understandings of mourning, suggesting that it 'brings the possibility of engaging trauma and achieving a reinvestment in, or recathexis of, life which allows one to begin again'. LaCapra, p. 66. I use the term in this chapter to emphasise the manner in which Hodrová's writing allows her to move on, through and beyond the 'acting out' of traumatic images of the past examined in Part II above, towards a new embracing of life, yet without the sense that the past has been 'healed' or the wound 'closed over'. This argument intersects with Frank's concept, to which I will turn in Chapter Three, that through the narration of illness, '[t]he teller returns as one who is no longer ill but remains marked by illness'. Frank, p. 118.

## Writing as Preservation of Memory

Hodrová's idea that there is a 'narrative web' surrounding Europe and deriving from 'an invisible mental substance woven out of every thought, memory, notion, illusion, dream, anxiety, obsession, and trauma' is rooted, as she herself acknowledges, in understandings of the nature and processes of memory developed both by Czech psychologist Břetislav Kafka in the 1920s and by the French Jesuit priest Pierre Teilhard de Chardin in the first half of the twentieth century. Their thought is evident in Hodrová's theory and fiction, both explicitly (in her named references to each of them)<sup>253</sup> and implicitly, in the way her fiction engages with individual and collective memory. It is from the work of Teilhard de Chardin that Hodrová appears to have borrowed the term 'web', which Teilhard de Chardin uses as a metaphor to describe his complex concept of the 'noosphere' which, he proposes, consists of the sum of human thinking, a sphere in which the thought of individual minds merges over time into a network of collective consciousness.<sup>254</sup> Kafka, whose primary field of research relates to the parapsychic, developed a similar theory of 'protonation' which describes a special layer (or 'invisible mental substance' as it is reformulated by Hodrová) surrounding the earth and 'imprinting and retaining, recording in some fashion, every one of our mental processes, deeds and thoughts... every action

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<sup>253</sup> Kafka is referred to in Hodrová, 'Woven into the Web', p. 145; in *VP*, p. 15; and in *RO*, p. 69.

<sup>254</sup> See Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Le Phénomène humaine* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1955). For direct reference to the thought of Teilhard de Chardin, see Hodrová, 'Woven into the Web', p. 151, where she refers to the similarity between his work and that of Břetislav Kafka (see below) in the field of collective thought and memory; Hodrová also names Teilhard de Chardin in *RO*, p. 69, where she uses the image of 'un coquillage [...] qui s'enroule en lui-même et sur lui-même' to represent his notion of the interconnectivity of memory; in *Thêta*, pp. 181-82, Hodrová again refers to Teilhard de Chardin in explication of her perception of the interconnectivity between people.

whatsoever... There is a record of all that has happened'.<sup>255</sup> In 'Woven into the Web', Hodrová reconfigures these theories of the 'sphere' or 'layer' of collective memory as the 'cloak' of memory spun by the 'maiden' Europe, so that the action of spinning is inextricably linked with the act of recording memory. Through this transformation of the writer into spinner, the writer is charged with creating a record 'of all that has happened' and the responsibility to record memory is simultaneously embedded into the act of writing. This notion that the preservation of memory constitutes a fundamental function of writing-as-spinning intersects, in ways that we will now see, both with the context of the particular nature of writing out resistance from inside a totalitarian regime, and with theories regarding the responsibility to witness trauma.

The image of the spinner as the preserver or guardian of memory recurs in various guises in the texts as, for example, in *Visite privée* when, on her perambulations through Prague, the narrator (who in this overtly autobiographical text is explicitly identified as the author herself) comes across an old woman at the door to the city's museum:

À l'intérieur du Musée, une vieille femme est assise, elle tricote. Je songe à celle qui livrait passage au Marlow de Conrad sur le chemin du Cœur des ténèbres. Le tricot n'est-il pas doté, comme le filage, d'une signification ésotérique, ne symbolise-t-il pas la structure et le mouvement du monde, le mouvement de la création? N'est-il pas encore le symbole du destin? La Moira qui préside peut-être à la création du monde, ou bien ourdit le destin de cette ville, me livre passage avec bienveillance.<sup>256</sup>

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<sup>255</sup> Břetislav Kafka, *Nové základy experimentální psychologie* (Olomouc: Poznání, 2011), no page reference given, cited in Hodrová, 'Woven into the Web', p. 145. Kafka's concept of protonation is developed in his chapters 52 ('Citlivci a protonace', meaning 'Emotions and protonation') and 76 ('Prostor - Čas – Protonace', meaning 'Space – Time – Protonation'); this work has not been translated into French or English.

<sup>256</sup> *VP*, p. 34.

The link between memory and spinning is confirmed here in the conflation of the two activities of spinning and '[g]uarding the entrance to the city's memory'. In a further reference to spinning, the old woman is also identified with Moira, the collective name for the Three Fates of Greek mythology who controlled the threads of destiny. A similar figure appears in *Thêta* at the hospital where the narrator is visiting her father; at 'la loge du portier' she encounters 'une vieille femme en blouse blanche. Elle tricotait'.<sup>257</sup> Although in this case the woman is not named, she can be identified as another Moira figure not only by her knitting but also by her 'blouse blanche', since the Fates are typically depicted in white. We can compare these figures of the old women guarding the museum and hospital doors to Cerbère Boisdorman, the more sinister (male) gatekeeper discussed above. Whilst we have seen that the informant Boisdorman abuses his position of power, deleting the stories of the living from history by sending them to their deaths, these female Fates have a more constructive influence on the narrator's story. The Fates allow the narrator to pass on into two sites of memory, namely the museum, which as we have already seen became the repository in which relics of the nation's past were consigned to oblivion during the regime, and the hospital, where in the course of her novel Hodrová will revisit her childhood as she visits her father. In this way, the Fates become an inversion of the role played by Cerbère Boisdorman (who is associated with the regime of deletion and so with death) as they facilitate the quest for the recovery of memory, which as we will later see is intimately linked with survival.

Before moving on to consider that quest further, it is worth noting that there is also a reversal of the gender of the gatekeeper which I propose can be

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<sup>257</sup> *Thêta*, p. 26.

interpreted as a bid to challenge the dominant patriarchal structures, in that the female Moira figures allow the narrator to progress in her quest and thus defy the destructive role played by the male Cerbère Boisdorman. This re-gendering exemplifies the claim made by Thomas that women writers during the Communist era had to 'negotiate between a traditional [national] master narrative and a subjective female rescripting of that narrative'.<sup>258</sup> As such, Hodrová's 'rescripting' of the 'master narrative' of subjugation (in terms of both national and gender identity) also conforms to Henke's understanding of the manner in which writing or 'scriptotherapy' can become a tool of agency for the disempowered or marginalised:

Because the author can instantiate the alienated or marginal self into the pliable body of a protean text, the newly revised subject, emerging as the semifictive protagonist of an enabling counternarrative, is free to rebel against the values and practices of a dominant culture and to assume an empowered position of political agency in the world.<sup>259</sup>

I will later discuss the inscription of authorial identity onto that of her narrator (Eliška) as a further way in which the text supports the liberating 'revision' of the writing subject posited here by Henke. At this stage in my argument, what is important is to note that Hodrová's 'rebellion' against the 'values and practices of a dominant culture' (as we have seen, for example, in the subversive parallel drawn between the malignity of the male gatekeeper's role and the benign female figures of the Moira) confirms Henke's claim for the empowering nature of writing. This empowerment takes on particular significance in the totalitarian context of repression of the individual, a context in which we may conclude that writing (albeit in secret because of the impossibility of publishing subversive

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<sup>258</sup> Thomas, p. 201.

<sup>259</sup> Henke, p. xvi.

work such as Hodrová's) is one of the few means of self-expression available to the dissenting subject.

In each of the scenes referred to above, the old woman at the doors can also be said to play out the archetypal role of the Fates in that, by 'condescending' to let the narrator enter the building in question, she is instrumental in allowing the narrator to fulfil her destiny, which is to tell her story and so oppose the historical deletion that threatens her national and personal identity. As always in these texts, we can see that the personal and the national are closely interwoven in terms of Hodrová's quest for memory, as is evident in the parallel drawn between the doorway to the museum and the doorway to the hospital. By passing through the door of the museum, the narrator enters the realms of national memory and commences her quest to resist the 'state-managed forgetting' examined in my analysis above of the theme of deletion. By entering the hospital to visit her father, she is similarly and simultaneously in search of her own past, which is inextricable from the figure of her father since we learn that the novel which commences with the visit to her father will become '[r]oman de la quête du père', but also that '[j]'écris un roman pour ne pas me métamorphoser – en oiseau, marionette, fantasmagorie de quelqu'un d'autre'.<sup>260</sup> We should note that the trope of the 'marionette' is deployed throughout the trilogy (and especially in the second volume), and also in *Visite privée*, to express the experience of the Czech nation as powerless puppets in the hands of other powers including the Soviet-controlled Czechoslovak Communist Party; in the latter text, for example, Hodrová comments of Prague

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<sup>260</sup> *Thêta*, p. 203.

and of its castle that 'qui y demeure un long temps se change en marionette'.<sup>261</sup> By writing a novel, Hodrová is telling us, she is resisting this process of metamorphosis into something other than herself, into a puppet that will do as it is bid by the regime. The preservation of individual identity and of national memory that takes place explicitly through the 'quête' of writing the novel (that commences as she passes through the symbolic doorways) is therefore essential to the act of resisting the falsification of memory and deletion of stories that we have seen to be perpetrated by the Communist regime. This interweaving of the mythological role of the Fates with Hodrová's personal story of her quest to resist political forgetting exemplifies Hodrová's own stance that '[n]o sooner does [the writer] touch [the narrative web of literary Europe] with his own lived and written story than he spins a new loop and radius, a new cocoon'.<sup>262</sup> In this manner, writing-as-spinning becomes a self-affirming act of 'working through' trauma in order to map out identity and, as I shall explore further in the concluding section of this chapter, an act of survival in the face of deletion.

The passage from *Visite privée* cited above about the door to the museum in Prague leaves us in no doubt, however, that the quest for memory is a dangerous mission, comparable to Marlow's journey into '[le] Cœur des ténèbres'<sup>263</sup> in Conrad's famous fictional voyage. Once she has passed Moira and so begins her journey into the realms of memories that we have seen to be buried in 'la lave pompéienne' or covered over by 'fluide blanc', the narrator of *Thêta* takes on the identity of Arachne: '*Dans le noir, elle tisse, Arachné tisse le*

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<sup>261</sup> *VP*, p. 42.

<sup>262</sup> Hodrová, 'Woven into the Web', p. 146.

<sup>263</sup> *VP*, p. 34. Hodrová is clearly referring to Joseph Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness*.

soie'.<sup>264</sup> In Greek mythology, Arachne is the mortal who competes with the goddess Athena in a weaving contest.<sup>265</sup> Once again, then, the activity of spinning or weaving is associated with that of the recovery of memory, and once again the difficulty of this task is apparent in the fact that Hodrová's Arachne, again like Marlow, must carry out her mission '[d]ans le noir'.

The perilous and difficult nature of the writer's quest to preserve memory is also equated throughout the trilogy to Dante's journey through the circles of hell, and this intertext (from which, we recall, the title of Hodrová's trilogy is drawn) is used to reinforce the difficulty of the writer's task. At the opening of *Thêta*, for example, the narrator passes through a dark wood in which she loses her way. If we compare the opening lines of *Thêta* to those of the first canto of Dante's poem, entitled (in English translation) 'A Dark Wood', the similarity is striking:

Je me retrouvai dans une forêt obscure. Je ne saurai dire comment  
j'entrai dans cette forêt, ni quand je perdis la bonne voie et me mis à  
errer de par ces lieux sauvages, inconnus de moi.<sup>266</sup>

In the middle of the journey of our life I came to myself within a dark  
wood where the straight way was lost. Ah, how hard a thing it is to  
tell of that wood, savage and harsh and dense, the thought of which  
renews my fear!<sup>267</sup>

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<sup>264</sup> *Thêta*, p. 26. Original italics.

<sup>265</sup> Note that in Ovid's version of the contest between Arachne and Athena, Arachne weaves the pictorial story of the ways in which the gods betrayed the mortals, and in particular of Zeus's abuse of mortal women. Whilst this thesis is not primarily concerned with the inscription of Hodrová's personal relationships and stories into the text, it should nevertheless be emphasised here that the trilogy, and *Thêta* in particular, contains many references to the narrator's father, which may be interpreted as a mission to separate herself from the overbearing influence of the patriarchal figure. The identification of the narrator with Arachne, who found victory in her depiction of Zeus's corruption, is another element in Hodrová's interweaving of personal and national stories of subjugation to more powerful 'master' figures.

<sup>266</sup> *Thêta*, p. 15.

<sup>267</sup> *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: Inferno*, 'Canto I', trans. by John D. Sinclair (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 23. For comparison, the Italian reads: 'Nel mezzo de cammin di nostra vita/mi ritrovai per una selva oscura/che la dirrita via era smarrita./Ah quanto a dir qual era è cosa dura/esta selva selvaggia e aspra e forte/che nel pensier rinnova la paura!', *ibid.*, p. 22.

Hodrová's Czech 'forêt obscure' clearly draws on Dante's 'dark wood', and the emphasis on darkness echoes the references to both Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness* and to Arachne's mission '[d]ans le noir'.<sup>268</sup> This cumulative intertextual insistence on the darkness of the writer's journey also resonates with the image of sleep that, I have argued, reflects the Communist environment of forgetting in Hodrová's work. The difficulty of breaching that darkness of forgetting becomes apparent as the narrator of *Thêta*, continuing through the wood despite the fact that '[l]a terreur m'accable', finds herself at yet another door, on which she reads the words of the Florentine poet: 'Par moi, l'on va dans la cité dolente, par moi l'on va dans l'éternelle douleur'.<sup>269</sup> At the sight of this warning, the narrator again evinces fear at the task ahead, which is specifically that of writing since '[l]'étroite porte *des mots* m'étreint le cœur'.<sup>270</sup> The task of writing out her resistance to the 'darkness' that has befallen her country and buried its memory 'dans la lave pompéienne' is equated here by Hodrová to the perilous journey undertaken by the exiled Dante as he voyages through the 'étroite porte' into 'l'éternelle douleur' of the inferno that is depicted in the first book of the *Divine Comedy*. Hodrová's 'étroite porte' through which the writer must travel also resonates with the biblical image of the 'narrow gate' that leads to heaven,<sup>271</sup> so that the network of references created by this image reinforces the arduous nature of preserving memory.

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<sup>268</sup> The parallel is reinforced throughout the trilogy, and most explicitly in this final volume in a series of direct references to the work of Dante, with whom Hodrová evidently feels an affinity since she writes, 'J'ai la plus haute estime pour ta *Comédie*, maître', *Thêta*, p. 15.

<sup>269</sup> *Thêta*, p. 16.

<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.*, my italics.

<sup>271</sup> Matthew 7.14, *The Holy Bible*.

The notion that Hodrová's quest to write out memory is a journey into a dark wood in which 'the straightforward pathway' cannot easily be found brings us to another metaphor used throughout the trilogy both to represent the disorienting experience of living in a Communist regime and to demonstrate the difficult and perilous nature of the writer's mission to preserve memory. This is the image of the labyrinth, which is not only comparable to the Dantean 'forêt obscure' in that it is a place in which one can 'perd[re] la bonne voie', but also intersects with the image of spinning through the myth of Ariadne. This is another 'archetypal' story in which the image of thread plays a central role, since Ariadne helps Theseus in his quest to slay the monstrous Minotaur by giving him directions to the centre of the labyrinth but also a thread with which he finds his way out of the labyrinth. In the trilogy, the labyrinth is relocated from Crete to Prague, which is repeatedly pictured as a place in which both mystery and danger may confront one at every turn, a place in which, as Chitnis has pointed out, 'the individual human being may easily get lost'.<sup>272</sup> Thus, street names change in the manner discussed (in Part II) above, so that we struggle to negotiate the labyrinth of Prague's history as we stumble across shifting topological references such as 'avenue Foch (anciennement avenue Jungmann, puis avenue Schwerin)';<sup>273</sup> such signposts disorient us not only geographically but chronologically by insisting on bringing together 'deleted' moments of Prague's history. Hodrová explicitly draws attention to this disorientating and labyrinthine nature of Prague, in which, '[d]es ruelles de cette sorte, qui ne mènent de nulle part vers nulle part, sont toujours suspectes, n'importe quel danger peut s'y

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<sup>272</sup> Chitnis, 'Introduction', in *Prague, I See a City*, p. v.

<sup>273</sup> *RO*, p. 50.

caler'.<sup>274</sup> The 'danger', it would appear, is that of voyaging into the forbidden past of Prague, which the regime sought to cut off from memory by processes such as the changing of street names; as I have noted above, the consequences of entering these forbidden areas of the past could be severe during this punitive Communist regime.

The preservation of memory through writing, then, is transformed, through the images of the doorway, of darkness and the Dantean 'forêt obscure', and of the labyrinth, into an ordeal which is confirmed explicitly in the epilogue to *Visite privée* as the author reflects on the act of writing about her past: 'Cité dolente! [...] je parcours les lieux abandonnés de ta mémoire, je lis et écris sur toi des livres. J'ai subi les épreuves du feu, de l'air, de la terre et de l'eau'.<sup>278</sup> This understanding of the painful and dangerous nature of the 'épreuve' of writing out memory is of course intimately bound up with the context of heightened trauma and politically enforced silencing, as we have seen in the course of my discussion of Hodrová's work as a record of the stories and memories that were deemed subversive during the Communist regime. The pain that is so evidently central to the 'épreuve', however, calls us to reflect further upon the motivation driving the writer to persist in her ordeal. Despite the dangerous and difficult nature of this journey into the 'labyrinth' of personal and national memory, Hodrová nevertheless insists on the necessity of going through those 'ordeals by fire, air, earth and water' as she persists in writing out the traumas of the present through the vehicle of the painful memories of the past: 'En serré dans

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<sup>274</sup> Ibid., p. 209.

<sup>278</sup> *VP*, p. 124.

mon propre manuscrit, je descends'.<sup>279</sup> Writing here is a 'descent' into the underworld, and so becomes an answer to Marinette's plea to remember the forgotten dead ('[q]uoi d'étonnant à ce qu[e les morts] aient besoin de nous, à ce qu'ils appellent notre reconfort').<sup>280</sup> The compulsion to write, to undertake the 'épreuve', derives then in part from Hodrová's sense of responsibility towards the memory of the 'ghosts' of the past which haunt her, and in part from her own need to 'spin' a 'record of all that has happened'<sup>281</sup> in order to ensure that her story, and the stories of her nation, are not permanently deleted from the 'web of memory'.

### Writing as 'Fugue'?

Hodrová's observations about the 'ordeals' she has undergone as she voyaged into the 'torment' of the past may seem to call into question her claim, in 'Woven into the Web', that 'once a person can tell his story – in other words, can conceive of and view his life with detachment – he is nearly, if not fully, cured'.<sup>282</sup> This is a stance that, as Hodrová herself acknowledges, intersects with understandings forged in the fields of psychotherapy and trauma theory about the cathartic power of storytelling, whereby 'narrative recovery' of the traumatic past releases the 'potential for mental healing', as Henke has formulated it.<sup>283</sup> In view of the prevalence of images of confinement and entrapment that we have seen in the trilogy, it is important to note that

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<sup>279</sup> *Thêta*, p. 289.

<sup>280</sup> *RO*, p. 162.

<sup>281</sup> Kafka, *Nové základy experimentální psychologie*, cited in Hodrová, 'Woven into the Web', p. 145 (no page reference given).

<sup>282</sup> Hodrová, 'Woven into the Web', p. 150.

<sup>283</sup> Henke, pp. xii & xxii.

Hodrová's interpretation of the curative powers of storytelling relies specifically on the narrator or writer reaching a place of 'detachment', explicitly through the means of language, from the trauma that is being recounted. I will therefore now draw on theories relating to 'narrative recovery' in order to consider whether the 'épreuve' of writing out memory, as perceived by Hodrová, above and beyond responding to the responsibility to remember the dead that I have already indicated, may in fact allow the writer to access a place of curative 'detachment' or escape from the painful 'labyrinth' of traumatic memory.

In his afterword to Hodrová's *Le Royaume d'Olsany*, Král observes that the text is written 'à la manière d'une fugue',<sup>284</sup> a description that demands attention in the light of Hodrová's statement that storytelling is a means of reaching a place of detachment. Král applies the term 'fugue' to Hodrová's work because, he says, it is pervaded by 'le vertige du mouvement et de la dissolution'.<sup>285</sup> This sense of motion derives from the fluidity of the interchangeable identities that inhabit the text and from the constant textual shift between past and present, so that the text is composed of 'une succession de vagues et de couches de mémoire se recouvrant sans cesse les unes les autres'.<sup>286</sup> Král appears then to be using the term 'fugue' in the artistic sense, in which it describes a musical composition of interwoven resurfacing elements,<sup>287</sup> and this is indeed an understanding that is borne out in my analysis of the way the text allows the past to resurface by means of repeating motifs. The textual motion observed by

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<sup>284</sup> Král, 'L'Art de la Fugue', p. 247.

<sup>285</sup> Ibid., p. 248.

<sup>286</sup> Ibid.

<sup>287</sup> See *OED*: 'fugue 1. A polyphonic composition constructed on one or more short subjects or themes, which are harmonized according to the laws of counterpoint, and introduced from time to time with various contrapuntal devices'. For this entry and the following see:

<<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/75270?rskey=EBCAa2&result=1#eid>> [last accessed 23/07/2014].

Král functions as a means of breaking out of the sociopolitical stasis and confinement that I have argued are embedded in the motifs of sleep, drowning, death, and the labyrinth. The resurfacing of recurrent elements may, moreover, have an abreactive effect, since Whitehead suggests that '[r]epetition can also work towards memory and catharsis',<sup>288</sup> and this is an observation that merits further attention here. We should recall that LaCapra also discusses the repetition of traumatic images in relation to the different processes of 'acting out' and 'working through' trauma; the former, as discussed in my section on 'haunting' in Part II above, involves a 'compulsive repetition' of static, unchanging images of the past, such as we have seen in Hodrová's fugue-like use of recurring motifs such as the window from which Alice repeatedly leaps, or the white handkerchief which is waved over and over in constant surrender by Monsieur Hamza. Such repetition alone, however, LaCapra argues, does not constitute a processing of the past but rather leaves the traumatised individual 'locked' into that past,<sup>289</sup> and this is a concept that may appear to contradict Whitehead's statement that repetition can be cathartic. In her work on the recurrent images (the chimney, the mass grave, the gates of the camp) that characterise much Holocaust testimony, Hirsch's work reinforces this understanding, saying that 'repetition is not a homeopathic protective shield [...], it is not an anesthetic, but a traumatic fixation'.<sup>290</sup> Hirsch's position, along with LaCapra's notion of 'acting out', seem to directly contradict the possibility that repetition may bring 'healing' or 'detachment' of any kind.

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<sup>288</sup> Whitehead, p. 87.

<sup>289</sup> LaCapra, pp. 65-66.

<sup>290</sup> Hirsch, 'Surviving Images', p. 29.

We need to trace LaCapra's argument further in order to understand that 'working through' trauma, as opposed to 'acting out', offers possibilities of 'engaging trauma and achieving a reinvestment in, or recathexis of, life which allows one to begin again'.<sup>291</sup> For Hirsch, this kind of 'reinvestment' tends to take place not in first-hand testimony (at least in the case of Holocaust memorial, with which her work is specifically concerned), but rather in transgenerational memory work, where the static images referred to above 'are redeployed, in new texts and new contexts [so] that they regain a capacity to enable a postmemorial working through'.<sup>292</sup> Hirsch's theory is based on the assumption that some form of distance, such as that of time, is required between the traumatic event and the individual undertaking what she calls 'memory work', to the extent that she claims that '[p]erhaps it is *only* in subsequent generations that trauma can be witnessed and worked through, by those who were not there to live it but who received its effects, belatedly, through the narratives, actions, and symptoms of the previous generation'.<sup>293</sup> Whilst I will turn again to Hirsch's understandings of the 'belated' nature of postmemory in my analysis in Chapter Two of Páleníček's transgenerational writing, I propose here that a comparable 'redemption' of the images of the past in fact also takes place in Hodrová's first-hand testimony to the traumas of Czech history. In the remainder of this chapter, I will therefore consider the narrative devices by which Hodrová attains a degree of 'distance' from the traumas of which she writes, and which allows her to move from a 'compulsive repetition' of traumatic images towards a position corresponding to her

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<sup>291</sup> LaCapra, p. 66.

<sup>292</sup> Hirsch, 'Surviving Images', p. 29.

<sup>293</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

statement that ‘once a person can tell his story – in other words, can conceive of and view his life with detachment – he is nearly, if not fully, cured’.<sup>294</sup>

The term ‘fugue’ also of course denotes escape, and I propose that this further meaning can be usefully applied to my discussion of Hodrová’s writing as a means of reaching a place of detachment from which to tell her story. In psychiatric discourse, the state of fugue is defined as ‘a flight from one’s own identity, often involving travel to some unconsciously desired locality’.<sup>295</sup> Such a ‘flight’ can be observed in Hodrová’s admission, in the closing pages of *Thêta*, that ‘[l]e roman m’a été une porte par laquelle je suis entrée, durant plus de deux années, dans l’espace des lettres, pour m’y préserver du monde – de la réalité dolente d’une ville qui court à sa perte’.<sup>296</sup> The image of passing through ‘la porte’ into the world of the novel becomes an image of escape from ‘le monde’, and suggests, moreover, that writing has protective powers, offering a place of self-preservation (‘pour m’y préserver du monde’). This ‘fugue’ space of the novel, entered through the doorways of both personal and national memory (if we recall the parallel doorways to the hospital and to the museum), becomes a place in which the writer can ‘tell his story – in other words, can conceive of and view his life with detachment’. Hodrová’s sense of writing as a place of flight from ‘la réalité dolente’ of her world also corresponds to the painful yet liberating distance that Kristeva has observed to proceed from the exile’s physical removal from the homeland when she speaks of, ‘cette distance

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<sup>294</sup> Hodrová, ‘Woven into the Web’, p. 150.

<sup>295</sup> See OED: ‘fugue 2. *Psychiatry*. A flight from one’s own identity, often involving travel to some unconsciously desired locality. It is a dissociative reaction to shock or emotional stress in a neurotic, during which all awareness of personal identity is lost though the person’s outward behaviour may appear rational. On recovery, memory of events during the state is totally repressed but may become conscious under hypnosis or psycho-analysis. A fugue may also be part of an epileptic or hysterical seizure. Also *attrib.*, as fugue state’.

<sup>296</sup> *Thêta*, p. 288.

exquise où s'amorce aussi bien le plaisir pervers que ma possibilité d'imaginer et de penser, l'impulsion de ma culture'.<sup>297</sup> In the state of exile as understood by Kristeva, the detachment of 'cette distance exquise' is achieved through the loss and alienation of physical deracination. Hodrová's observations about the sense of curative detachment that can be reached through 'telling [one's] story' leads me to suggest that 'l'espace des lettres' can afford a similar 'distance exquise' from which to 'view [one's] life', as Hodrová has phrased the liberating perspective of the exile described by Kristeva. This figurative distance, reached through 'la porte' of the novel, may well provide the only means of escape to a writer confined within the walls of a totalitarian regime, 'cut off' from the past by the political deletion of memory examined above, and from the present by a sense of sociopolitical alienation equal to the painful yet liberating alienation of physical exile that Kristeva has described.<sup>298</sup>

We should also note that, in the definition cited above, a 'fugue' consists of 'a flight from one's own identity', and this may initially seem to be at odds with my claim that Hodrová's writing can be interpreted as a form of 'fugue' in this sense, since I have repeatedly demonstrated throughout this chapter that her writing insistently probes her own identity through the means of her national and personal memories. If, however, we consider the function of character in the trilogy, and particularly the development of the narrator of *Thêta*, we can see that a 'flight' from self (as well as from the traumatic external context) does indeed take place, although I shall go on to demonstrate that this 'flight' is necessary in order to facilitate a subsequent 'return'. As I indicated earlier in my

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<sup>297</sup> Kristeva, p. 25.

<sup>298</sup> See Kristeva's chapter 'Toccata et fugue pour l'étranger', pp. 9-60, especially pp. 12-25, for a description of the paradoxical 'bonheur brûlé' experienced by the exile.

synopsis of each volume, the presentation of character in the trilogy is subject to a great degree of instability and fracture. One character will accordingly metamorphose almost seamlessly into another, as in the case of Alice Davidovic who meets her death by leaping from a window to avoid being deported to the concentration camps, but reappears elsewhere as Anne Bolet, another Jewish victim who disappears from life and from the text 'par une cheminée en Pologne' in an obvious Holocaust reference: <sup>299</sup> the instability of the boundaries between such characters reflects the precarious status of individual lives and stories during much of the twentieth century in Central Europe. Alice also fears that her fiancé Paul will marry Marinette without anyone even noticing that the bride is not Alice: 'Et si Paul Santner allait prendre l'autre pour elle [...], grand-père et grand-mère qui eux non plus ne s'apercevraient pas de la substitution?'<sup>300</sup> Alice's fear of losing her identity is a reflection of the traumatic context of living, dying, and being forgotten in the Holocaust, whilst her potential replacement by the Czech Marinette can be read as a further comment on the lack of memorial (at the time at which Hodrová was writing) to the 80,000 murdered Czech Jews. Other characters appear in barely distinguishable pairs, such as the Soviet soldiers Kostia Suchorutchkov and Platon Lvovic Glinka, or two apparently interchangeable characters who variously recur in a procession of identity pairings including the torturers 'Mortier et Sanglier' and the mountaineers 'Cornard et Richard'. The dissolution of

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<sup>299</sup> *RO*, p. 46.

<sup>300</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.

identity in the trilogy can be ascribed to the effects of trauma, a state which, as Henke observes, leads to the 'shattering' and 'fragmentation' of the subject.<sup>301</sup>

More specifically, the identity crisis that is embodied in the fragmentary presentation of character in the trilogy can be attributed to the particular trauma of living in an informant society since, as Brigid Haines notes in her analysis of the work of Herta Müller, the trauma of being constantly watched can lead to a 'disintegration of [one's] selfhood'.<sup>302</sup> The trilogy is rich in references to the police surveillance state in which Hodrová grew up: the informant 'Cerbère Boisdorman', analysed above, is just one example. Other characters are also tainted by their involvement, however reluctant, with the secret police; those informed upon at different stages in Czech history meet with exile, imprisonment, or death (as in the various cases of Monsieur Havlíček, Monsieur Bonamy, and Anne Bolet). There are also frequent references to Bartolomějská ulice, the street in which the notorious headquarters of the secret police and torture chambers could be found.<sup>303</sup> Marven, who also engages with the work of Müller and other writings emerging from the totalitarian context, says that the trauma of living under surveillance can lead to a fracturing of identity whereby '[s]plitting oneself in two is a form of psychological defence, a way of gaining

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<sup>301</sup> This is the fundamental premise of Henke's volume, which is of course titled *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women's Life-Writing*.

<sup>302</sup> Brigid Haines, 'The Unforgettable Forgotten', in *German Life and Letters*, 55:3 (2002), 266-81, here 274.

<sup>303</sup> Since this thesis is situated within French Studies, it should be noted here that Hodrová merges the memory of this significantly traumatic Czech national site with the memory of that other infamous political act of treachery, the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre, which took place in France in 1572. A web of connections is spun between these two sites of memory in a manner that both creates a link between Hodrová's homeland and France, and foregrounds the context of historical oppression that underpins the novel.

distance from what is happening'.<sup>304</sup> Such a 'splitting in two' is reflected in Hodrová's character pairings (of Alice and Anne, Mortier and Sanglier, and the many others), and helps to explain the illusory and elusive sense of identity expressed by Cornard and Richard: 'Je suis Cornard. Je suis Richard. Ce ne sont pas là nos seuls noms. Nous nous présentons rarement sous notre véritable identité'.<sup>305</sup> Duality of identity is then both a symptom of the informant society, and a means of taking refuge from it, since concealing one's identity offers protection from the dangers of a surveillance state.

Furthermore, the disintegration and splitting of identity observed by Haines and Marven helps to explain the way in which Hodrová manipulates narrative voice throughout the trilogy. In the first volume, there is no single voice but rather, in addition to the (unidentified) third person narrator, there is a myriad of first person voices which identify themselves as a succession of people ('Je suis Jean Paskal [...] Et je suis aussi Denis Paskal'), objects ('Je suis le manchon, le manchon d'astrakan'), events ('Je suis la révolution'), and even places ('Je suis le cimetière d'Olsany').<sup>306</sup> Whilst both Chitnis and Porter point out that this multiplicity of voice reinforces the themes of collective memory and the plurality of life that run through the trilogy,<sup>307</sup> it can be argued that the fracture of identity conveyed by the shifting narrative voice is, moreover, a further example of the psychological 'splitting' described by Marven and thus a symptom of Hodrová's context of political trauma. In Chapter Two, I will demonstrate that this traumatic

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<sup>304</sup> Marven, 'An Alien Gaze', in *Red Pepper*, February 2010 <<http://www.redpepper.org.uk/an-alien-gaze/>> [last accessed 25/07/2014].

<sup>305</sup> *RO*, pp. 87-88.

<sup>306</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 171, 105, 50, & 32 respectively.

<sup>307</sup> See Chitnis, *Literature in Post-Communist Russia and Eastern Europe*, p. 105; Porter, pp. 162-71, esp. 166.

fracturing of identity as a result of living in an informant society also contributes to the tragic fate of Páleníček's protagonist, who commits suicide. We should, however, also note here that Marven claims that this phenomenon of 'splitting' can provide 'a way of gaining distance from what is happening', and this intersects with my argument that Hodrová's writing is a form of self-protective 'fugue' or 'flight from one's own identity'. By adopting this rapid succession of narrative personæ, Hodrová is able to step out of her own identity, away from her entrapment in 'la réalité dolente d'une ville qui court à sa perte', and give voice to the unfolding story of that pain.

We have already seen that the figure of the narrator of the final part of the trilogy, Eliška, merges with the identity of the writer herself, so that, for example, 'Eliška Beránková et moi nous rendons au cimetière de Načeradec'.<sup>308</sup> I propose that this pairing of author and narrator is an extension of the character pairings examined above, and thus another way in which Hodrová distances herself from her own story by 'splitting [her]self in two'. This assumption of a (semi-)fictive persona also corresponds to Henke's claim that '[w]hat cannot be uttered might at least be written – cloaked in the mask of fiction or sanctioned by the protective space of iteration that separates the author/narrator from the protagonist/character she or he creates'.<sup>309</sup> Henke's image of a 'cloak' corresponds of course to Hodrová's description of the 'cloak' of memory spun by the writer.<sup>310</sup> In the case of Hodrová's trilogy, we should note that the 'cloak' of fiction that protects or distances the writer from the reality about which she is writing becomes increasingly transparent as the trilogy progresses and

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<sup>308</sup> *Théta*, p. 216.

<sup>309</sup> Henke, p. xix.

<sup>310</sup> Hodrová, 'Woven into the Web', p. 145.

becomes more overtly self-referential. Accordingly, in the first volume the narrative voice is fractured into dozens of assumed identities; the dominant female protagonist of the second volume (Sophie) merges on occasions with Alice and Anne whose voices reappear from the first volume; by the third volume, the number of first person narrative voices is reduced to two (Eliška and the authorial 'je'), and as the volume progresses we see an increase in the number of references Hodrová makes to herself ('je'). By the end of that volume, Hodrová separates herself out from the fictive Eliška, consigning her back to the world of fiction as Hodrová herself experiences a form of regeneration through her fictional persona: 'Moi, Élise Agneau [...], je sens chaque nuit un délicieux engourdissement au bout de mes doigts [...]. Le sang de Daniela Hodrová commence à circuler dans mes veines'.<sup>311</sup> As I indicated earlier in this section, the flight from self in which Hodrová takes refuge in the fictional persona of Eliška ('celle en laquelle je me suis camouflée')<sup>312</sup> is in fact succeeded by, and indeed makes possible, a *return* to selfhood in which the author can identify herself within the world of the novel as 'Daniela Hodrová'. She insists, moreover, on her own vitality ('[Mon] sang [...] commence à circuler dans mes veines'), and this return to life through writing is central to my argument regarding Hodrová's textual resistance to forgetting and deletion.

If we now return to the myth of Theseus and Ariadne, we note that the role of Ariadne is emphasised by Hodrová in a manner that reinforces my argument about the role of the spinner-storyteller not only in resisting forgetting by entering the labyrinth of traumatic memory, but also in finding a way out of that

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<sup>311</sup> *Théta*, p. 236.

<sup>312</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 229.

labyrinth towards the place of 'detachment' that I have discussed. In the mythological version, although Theseus is celebrated as the victor, it is a woman, Ariadne, who bestows upon him the means to find his way out of the labyrinth in which he could so easily become lost and overpowered by the monster. Ariadne herself, however, is effectively removed by history from her position of agency in this story since it is almost invariably referred to as the myth of 'Theseus and the Minotaur'. In Hodrová's version, the focus is transferred back to the female spinner-storyteller figure: 'aussi longtemps que j'écris, il reste une étincelle d'espoir de refaire le chemin en arrière, de revenir à la vie et à la conscience, à la volonté, au visage humain. Aussi longtemps que j'écris...'<sup>313</sup> Here it is the (woman) writer herself who, by spinning her stories, is able to 'refaire le chemin en arrière', and in so doing creates a path out of the labyrinth of the traumatic past in a manner that corresponds to the notions discussed above of writing as 'fugue' or detachment from 'la réalité dolente d'une ville qui court à sa perte'.<sup>314</sup> These reconfigurations and returns that take place through the quest of (re)writing history and identity allow Hodrová to 'revenir à la vie et à la conscience' in a way that can be compared to Vassallo's claim for the affirmative power of writing when she suggests that,

just as writing represents an important journey of self-discovery or of self-affirmation, so literal and imagined journeys can contribute to the recognizing and re-claiming of the self, [...] a rediscovery not only of the land, but of its history, of the self, and of the immutable connection between the two.<sup>315</sup>

Whilst Vassallo is discussing the negotiation of self by the Algerian writers Nina Bouraoui and Leïla Sebbar, we can equally see the affirmative power of

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<sup>313</sup> Ibid., p. 204.

<sup>314</sup> Ibid., p. 288.

<sup>315</sup> Vassallo, p. 154.

Hodrová's 'rediscovery' of the 'immutable connection' between history and the self in her trilogy as she insists on undertaking that 'imagined journey' past the doors of the museum, past the doors of the hospital, and so into the forgotten or 'lobotomised' past both of her country and of her own self. What is important to note is that writing allows Hodrová to make that journey not only into the labyrinth, but also to 'refaire le chemin en arrière', to return 'à la vie et à la conscience'. Writing, then, has provided Hodrová not only with a means of escape from 'la réalité dolente', but a means of 'travel to some unconsciously desired locality' (to recall the definition of fugue cited above), a place which I will discuss in the following and final section of this chapter as a place in which 'la vie' and 'la conscience' ultimately triumph over the politically imposed death and 'intellectual suffocation'<sup>316</sup> that are nevertheless firmly embedded in these texts.

### **Writing as Return to Life**

If, as I have argued, forgetting and deletion are tantamount to death, then so the 'narrative web of memory' leads back to life, since Hodrová comments about her novel that 'je relis sans cesse certains passages, pour connaître mon passé, pour être'.<sup>317</sup> This understanding of the regenerative power of written memory exemplifies Herman's claim that

[L]ike traumatised people, we have been cut off from the knowledge of our past. Like traumatised people, we need to understand the past in order to reclaim the present and the future. Therefore, an understanding of psychological trauma begins with rediscovering history.<sup>318</sup>

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<sup>316</sup> Bourhis.

<sup>317</sup> *Théta*, p. 236.

<sup>318</sup> Herman, p. 2.

By entering through 'la porte étroite' of the novel and insisting on memory, Hodrová has embarked on a voyage of 'rediscovering history' and so is able to 'reclaim the present and the future' in a process that refutes death and deletion and allows her to live: 'Dans la plupart des légendes sur la descente aux Enfers, celui qui est entré dans le royaume des morts trépassé. Mais moi je suis en vie!'<sup>319</sup>Hodrová has passed the Fates at the door to 'le royaume des morts', has followed the 'thread' woven by her writing to find her way out of the labyrinth of forgetting, and has reached a place of safety from which she can 'reclaim' and celebrate life. In the context of historical trauma and violence from which Hodrová is writing, however, it is perhaps inevitable that life is nevertheless intimately bound up with death in a manner that confirms Caruth's understanding that stories of trauma move between the 'crisis of death' and the correlative 'crisis of life'.<sup>320</sup> Accordingly, if we return to the symbol  $\theta$ , we recall that the descent into the underworld is a condition for the return to life, since ' $\theta$ , dans ce roman, signifie descente vers un mort, vers les morts de cette ville'.<sup>321</sup> However, in the same symbol we can also see a counter-assertion of life since the beetle image within which the symbol is embedded becomes a meeting place of the apparent binaries of death and life at the moment when 'le coléoptère noyé' transforms itself in front of the narrator's eyes into 'un scarabée, un hiéroglyphe égyptien animé signifiant "être"'.<sup>322</sup> Life and death are therefore co-existent within the symbol  $\theta$  in a manner which affirms Caruth's understanding that trauma moves between the two 'crises', and reinforces

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<sup>319</sup> *Théta*, p. 283.

<sup>320</sup> Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, p. 7.

<sup>321</sup> *Théta*, pp. 228-29.

<sup>322</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 230.

Hodrová's message that the return to, or 'reclaiming' of, life after traumatic experience is dependent on a 'descent' into the world of the dead.

The image of life that now allies itself to this symbol of death is, moreover, dependent on memory, as the following extended passage relating to the Egyptian use of the scarab shows:

Dans l'Égypte ancienne, on déposait entre les bandelettes de la momie un cœur de pierre en forme de scarabée. Il devait faire office d'organe de mémoire de rechange pour le défunt. Car les anciens Égyptiens croyaient, et je le crois aussi, qu'un mort qui perdrait la mémoire et se retrouverait privé de nom mourrait pour la seconde fois, sombrerait dans le non-être, définitivement cette fois-ci.<sup>323</sup>

The deletion of memory that, through the machinations of 'state-managed forgetting' discussed earlier in this chapter, threatens to leave Hodrová's nation similarly 'privé de nom' by removing it from the 'narrative web' of Europe, can be reversed through the act of writing, which amounts to an act of naming: 'Voilà pourquoi je lutte moi aussi pour une mémoire, pour un nom menacé de se dissoudre en d'autres noms'.<sup>324</sup> Once again, the national and personal are inseparable if we recall that Hodrová has 'named' not only a wide range of fictive representatives of the painful events that have traumatised her nation, but also a host of actual figures from Czech history and indeed also members of her own family (her father, her grandfather), childhood friends, and finally herself: 'Daniela Hodrová'. This act of naming, then, is an act of ensuring that these figures will not 'mou[r]r[ir] pour la seconde fois, sombr[er] dans le non-être, définitivement cette fois-ci', and thus an act of resistance against the deletions of Communism and an affirmation of life ('je suis en vie!').

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<sup>323</sup> Ibid., p. 237.

<sup>324</sup> Ibid.

The refusal to remember, we have seen in the case of Nora (whose unwillingness to engage with the painful past causes ‘une tumeur de la taille d’un coquillage’),<sup>325</sup> leads to a cancerous state, a state of disease which will be further examined in my work on Germain later in this thesis. It is only, then, by undertaking the ‘épreuve’ of writing out memory and so travelling back through the painfully ‘lobotomized’ past that we can acknowledge the source of the pain and accept what has happened as part of one’s identity, moving on towards the future and ‘la vie’ (which, in my work on Germain, will be equated with a state of ‘health’). Writing-as-spinning insists on re-connecting not only the past to the present, but also the ‘cut off’ nation to the body of Europe by re-charting Czech stories onto the more widely recognisable maps of Greek mythology (in the stories of Arachne, Ariadne and many others) and of European literature (in the intertextual connections Hodrová makes to the stories of Dante or Conrad, for example). Thus writing-as-spinning becomes a process of resisting the painful lobotomy of Central Europe from its historical place at the heart of ‘Queen Europe’ (as depicted by Putsch), and of re-situating ‘Bohemia’ within the ‘narrative web’ of literary memory. Through this quest, the text becomes a place where not only the writer but future generations are able to access the past, which would otherwise be erased from the pages of history books in the manner that Boisdorman removed the names of firstly the Germans and then the Russians. In addition to providing Hodrová herself with a way out of the ‘underworld’, her writing also ensures that the past does not remain buried ‘dans la lave pompéienne’ of ‘state-managed forgetting’.

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<sup>325</sup> RO, p. 95.

If, however, Hodrová's writing has allowed her to reassert memory and life in the face of forgetting and death, then it is only because she has come to understand the insight into trauma provided by Caruth that 'trauma is not simply an effect of destruction but also, fundamentally, an enigma of survival [...], a paradoxical relationship between destruction and survival' that points to 'the legacy of incomprehensibility at the heart of the catastrophic experience'.<sup>326</sup> It is this 'paradoxical relationship' that structures the trilogy as it fluctuates between the binaries of confinement and escape, life and death, memory and forgetting, unity and plurality of identity. Whilst writing her way out of the labyrinth of the forgotten past has brought Hodrová to a place of 'detachment' from which to tell and reclaim her story, the healing reached (whereby 'once a person can tell his story – in other words, can conceive of and view his life with detachment – he is nearly, if not fully, cured')<sup>327</sup> is not one of 'the reconstruction of a fragmented analytic subject', since the author's textual naming of 'Daniela Hodrová' rests upon her understanding that this identity incorporates the plurality of 'Daniela Hodrová, enfin, plutôt Daniela Rajská, Daniela du Paradis [...] Élise Agneau'.<sup>328</sup> The following passage from Hodrová's essay 'Woven into the Web' confirms that for Hodrová storytelling is an affirmative means of renegotiating identity by resisting forgetting, but simultaneously a process of accepting both the 'fragmentation' caused by traumatic histories, and the 'enigma' and 'incomprehensibility' that Caruth has shown to lie at the heart of survival:

Europe certainly acquires its identity [...] through the stories it rescues from forgetting, shaping and relating them. None of this is

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<sup>326</sup> Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, p. 58.

<sup>327</sup> Hodrová, 'Woven into the Web', p. 150.

<sup>328</sup> *Théta*, pp. 235-36. Note that the name 'Rajská', meaning 'paradise', refers to the author's family history, and is yet another example of the dualities of the trilogy, juxtaposing 'paradis' with the underworld she has entered and from which she has escaped.

changed by the fact that in the postmodern situation the story is diminished, breaking down, fragmenting, called into question [...] Nevertheless it is precisely this story that best corresponds to today's changing conception of the world, to the nature of knowledge [...] It becomes part of my memory, contributing to my self-knowledge [...].<sup>329</sup>

My analysis has shown that part of the '(self-)knowledge' passed on to us through the embodiment of trauma in Hodrová's trilogy is the understanding that 'the legacy of incomprehensibility at the heart of the catastrophic experience' is an inseparable part of 'today's changing conception of the world', and indeed of ourselves. The 'épreuve' of writing out her resistance to the deletions of the regime has brought Hodrová towards a place which corresponds to LaCapra's understanding that '[t]hrough memory work [...], one is able to distinguish between past and present and to recognize something as having happened to one (or one's people) back then which is related to, but not identical with, here and now'.<sup>330</sup> Ultimately, Hodrová's trilogy works through her traumatic Communist experience to accept that in this 'postmodern' world, 'les sphères qui figurent séparément dans la *Comédie* – l'enfer, le purgatoire, le paradis – s'interpénètrent ici, dans la cité dolente, dans ce roman qui lui est consacré'.<sup>331</sup> The process of writing, of reinscribing herself into the text, has taken Hodrová on a journey into the underworld of the past and out again, to a place where she can acknowledge that 'l'enfer, le purgatoire, le paradis' co-exist in Prague's past and present, and that this plurality of experience is central to understanding post-Communist, 'postmodern' identity. The next chapter will explore the ways in which those apparently irreconcilable binaries of life and death, memory and forgetting, silence and speech that we have seen, in Hodrová's work, to be

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<sup>329</sup> Hodrová, 'Woven into the Web', p. 149.

<sup>330</sup> LaCapra, p. 66.

<sup>331</sup> *Thêta*, p. 282.

brought together in twentieth-century Czech experience continue to have an impact on today's generation as I consider how this difficult legacy of memory is negotiated in the work of the young writer Jean-Gaspard Páleníček.

## Chapter Two

### Jean-Gaspard Páleníček: Tracing the Ghosts of a Painful Past

#### Part I: History or His Story?

This chapter engages with the bilingual French-Czech writer Jean-Gaspard Páleníček's first published work of fiction, and only novel to date, *Les Bouleaux*.<sup>332</sup> This short text was published in 2008 in the early post-Communist years and explores not only the traumas of twentieth-century Central European history such as those observed at first hand by Hodrová, but also the traumatic legacy of this era that has been inherited by the author's generation. The novel engages with Czech national memory through the vehicle of a semi-fictional account of the traumatic impact of the Communist regime on the life of the narrator's grandfather, who eventually commits suicide as a result of his inability to come to terms with his relationship to the regime. The text is haunted by images of the Communist past in ways that bring Páleníček's work into relationship with that of Hodrová, who as we have seen engages with the 'ghosts' of traumatic memory. Páleníček's writing position, however, differs significantly from that of Hodrová as he was born in 1978 at the dawn of the last decade of the regime, meaning that the subject of this text is an era that the author's parents and grandparents (like Hodrová) lived through, but that the author himself experienced only as a child. I therefore approach the text as a transgenerational testimony to the largely overlooked legacy of national traumas

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<sup>332</sup> Jean-Gaspard Páleníček, *Les Bouleaux* (Alfortville: Revue K, 2008). The text of *Les Bouleaux* first appeared in print in 2003 in the university journal *Cahiers slaves*, Hors serie 5 (Paris: la Sorbonne), and subsequently in 2006 in *La Nouvelle Alternative*, 68.

that have been passed on wordlessly down the generations in the form of unmourned ghosts that still trouble today's generation and that inhabit the text. My interpretation of *Les Bouleaux* as an imprint of the traumatic memories of a nation invests this slim volume with a greater significance than its plot (occupied as it is with the story of one family) and its provincial setting in the borderland forests of Bohemia would initially seem to suggest. As such, I propose that this as yet little-known text merits critical attention within contemporary discourses of trauma, identity and memory that are currently predominant in literary and cultural studies.

Moreover, the author's choice of French, as opposed to Czech, as a writing language situates this text within the critical context of French Studies. As I have noted in the Introduction to this thesis, Western criticism has to date tended to engage primarily with the larger and better-known body of work in German that has emerged from the Eastern Bloc context in the past two decades. This chapter therefore draws on the valuable work of scholars in this field, and in particular on the work of Marven and Haines, who have written extensively on German-speaking writers emerging from this context. Both examine this body of literature within the critical framework of the trauma narrative, and my work on *Les Bouleaux* extends and develops their ideas within the context of French Studies for the first time, thus opening up new avenues of scholarship. It should also be noted at this point that, since Páleníček is a young author at the beginning of his writing career and there is not yet a body of critical work relating to his writing, my analysis of the novel is supported by references to the correspondence I have established with the author, which provides insight into his writing position in relation to the traumatic

historical context from which *Les Bouleaux* arises. In order to locate Páleníček's work within wider trends, my analysis will also continue to refer comparatively to the small body of other writers, indicated in the Introduction to my thesis, emerging from the French-Czech context.

After providing an overview, in the remainder of Part I, of Páleníček's life, his oeuvre to date, and the specific historical context from which he is writing, the chapter will be divided into three main analytical sections. Part II will use descriptions of the nature and symptoms of trauma, as observed both by clinicians (including Herman and Laub) and by theorists and critics (such as Felman, Caruth, Henke, and Robson), in order to uncover the ways in which the characters and behaviour of the two protagonists of *Les Bouleaux* both textually embody the memory of national traumas, and simultaneously unsettle established notions regarding this traumatic era of history. The analysis will also refer to work done on the Central European sociohistorical context by theorists and critics (including Steiner, Marven, and Haines) in order to examine how *Les Bouleaux* as a literary text enlarges our understanding of social patterns of behaviour under oppressive regimes. This will lead into Part III, which explores the ways in which the tension between silence and speech in the novel reflects the desire to deny or erase the past that has been noted by a range of historians and critics writing on the Central European context (including Mark and Helga Braunbeck), and that was examined in Chapter One in relation to Hodrová's contemporary experience of such silencings. I apply work carried out by Butler on the power of the 'public sphere' as I consider how the silences of the text reflect the social environment enforced by the regime, which dictates what can be said, by whom, and how. Finally, in Part IV, a body of work on

transgenerational trauma and the transmission of memory (including work by Hirsch, McGlothlin, Schwab, and James E. Young) will be used to open up a discussion of the need experienced by second and third generations to challenge the legacy of silence that they have inherited. As the chapter develops, I will also discuss Páleníček's particular position of distance – given his choice to live in France and to write in the medium of the French language – in the light of Kristeva's writings on the paradoxically painful liberation that lies in alienation from the homeland. Intersecting with critical understandings of the 'epistemological exile'<sup>333</sup> that alienates members of subsequent generations from the memory of the traumatic past lived by their parents or grandparents, I will open up the question of whether Páleníček's writing position has resulted in a perpetuation of or a challenge to the silences surrounding his country's traumatic past.

### **Occupying a Position between Two Countries and Two Languages**

Páleníček was born in Prague in 1978 to a French mother and a French-speaking Czech father; his paternal grandparents were also Francophiles. He describes a childhood experience of growing up between two languages and two cultures and acknowledges that, in the contemporary political circumstances that restricted travel abroad and curtailed interaction with the West, his family situation set him apart from his peers:

Si j'ai grandi à Prague, nous allions souvent passer nos vacances en France, auprès de la partie française de la famille. Dès le début, j'ai donc baigné dans les deux langues. (...) Ma réalité n'était certes pas celle de mes amis tchèques: il n'était pas courant dans la

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<sup>333</sup> McGlothlin, p. 229.

Tchécoslovaquie d'alors de fréquenter une école française, de pouvoir voyager librement au-delà du rideau de fer, d'avoir facilement accès à certains produits – vêtements, jouets, aliments... – considérés rares pour l'époque.<sup>334</sup>

I propose that this early French schooling and linguistic duality, enhanced by the unusual degree of freedom to travel away from the enclosed environment of a totalitarian society and to experience another cultural mode, has shaped the writing perspective Páleníček has since adopted with regard to his homeland in ways that correspond to the painful yet liberating 'distance exquisite' experienced by the foreigner as observed by Kristeva.<sup>335</sup> Furthermore, Páleníček made the decision in 2001 to move to Paris where he is currently the assistant director of the Centre Culturel Tchèque, a professional situation which mirrors the position he has occupied since childhood of being at once between two cultures and at home in each.

Páleníček's writing language is also central to my discussion of his position between two countries. Páleníček's primary writing language has from an early age been French, and he attributes this tendency to his schooling, saying, '[j]e crois que je me suis mis à écrire en français parce que, du fait de ma scolarité, c'est majoritairement en français que j'ai commencé à constituer ma culture livresque'.<sup>336</sup> He considers, moreover, that his attempts to write in Czech were, for a long time, unsatisfactory, and as my analysis develops I will return to the difficulty he experienced in writing in the language more closely related to the site of traumatic memory.<sup>337</sup> Páleníček's first three published works were

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<sup>334</sup> Personal correspondence with Páleníček, see Appendix.

<sup>335</sup> Kristeva, p. 25.

<sup>336</sup> Personal correspondence with Páleníček, see Appendix.

<sup>337</sup> Ibid.: 'Et quand j'ai commencé à écrire des textes à caractère littéraire, cela a d'abord, et pour bien longtemps, été en français. [...] L'envie d'essayer d'écrire en tchèque est venue plus

accordingly all written in French despite the fact that they predominantly engage with Czechoslovak themes, as in the case of *Les Bouleaux* which is set in the countryside beyond Prague and tells the troubled story of a Czech composer during and after the Communist years, and of the ways in which the memorial legacy of that era makes an impact upon his sons and grandsons. Similarly, his second publication, a play entitled *Le Ménage de Balzac*, transposes an anecdote from the life of the eponymous French Master to a contemporary Czech context, but again written in French.<sup>338</sup> This cultural transposition, combined with the continuing use of French in his third work, a collection of poetry entitled *Mater dolorosa*, reinforces the argument that I develop in this chapter that the interplay and tension between the two sides of the author's heritage is central to his work.<sup>339</sup> Páleníček has also said that although the idea for *Les Bouleaux* germinated in the Czech Republic, it was not written until after he left Czechoslovakia to live in France.<sup>340</sup> This circumstance, combined with the use of French, would suggest that a geographical and linguistic distance was prerequisite to the writing of the (allegorical) history of his childhood homeland in a manner that intersects with Kristeva's claim that a second or acquired language can provide a space of liberation from '[les] brides de la langue maternelle',<sup>341</sup> and as such merits further attention here.

The relationship between the author and his birth land, then, gives rise to two interconnected ideas regarding the ways in which it is expressed in the text.

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tard, notamment après la découverte de la poésie de Zbyněk Hejda. Mais je n'ai pas été satisfait de mes quelques poèmes écrits en tchèque à l'époque'. See Appendix.

<sup>338</sup> Páleníček, *Le Ménage de Balzac* (Alfortville: Revue K, 2009).

<sup>339</sup> Páleníček, *Mater dolorosa* (Alfortville: Revue K, 2009).

<sup>340</sup> Personal correspondence with Páleníček, see Appendix.

<sup>341</sup> Kristeva, p. 48.

Firstly, and despite the close ties that the author has maintained with his country of birth,<sup>342</sup> we can observe an alienation from that homeland which is reflected in the choice of a writing language other than Czech. We shall see the pain inherent in that alienation in my analysis in this chapter of Páleníček's representation of the landscape of the Bohemian borderlands and of the painful events played out against that backdrop. Secondly, as Kristeva notes, however painful it may be, alienation often engenders a liberation of perspective regarding one's roots: 'l'aliénation à moi-même, pour douloureuse qu'elle soit, me procure cette distance exquise où s'amorce aussi bien le plaisir pervers que ma possibilité d'imaginer et de penser, l'impulsion de ma culture'.<sup>343</sup> It may be, then, that the distance gained by his choice to live in France and to write in French has afforded Páleníček an imaginary space where he is free to revisit the homeland and its difficult past in a manner that would not otherwise be available to him, and this is an idea that will underpin much of the analysis in this chapter.

It should also be noted here that, after the publication of *Les Bouleaux* and the two other French texts referred to above, Páleníček wrote and published a short work, *Jedna věta*, his first to be published in Czech.<sup>344</sup> This short text takes the form of a diary, in which each day of one year is represented by one single sentence (as suggested by the title, which means 'one sentence'). The majority of the work is written in Czech, although two months (April and September) are

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<sup>342</sup> Personal correspondence with Páleníček, see Appendix.

<sup>343</sup> Kristeva, p. 25.

<sup>344</sup> Páleníček, *Jedna věta: Jean-Gaspard Páleníček 2012* (Prague: Revolver Revue, 2013). The volume was commissioned by the Czech journal *Revolver Revue* as one in a series of similar works to be composed by a number of Czech writers, and following the same principle of one sentence per day; each was published as a supplement to one volume of the journal. *Jedna věta* accompanied *Revolver Revue*, 92 (autumn 2013).

in French. Kristeva has observed that the mother tongue and its associated memories are never lost: '[p]orter en soi comme un caveau secret, ou comme un enfant handicapé – chéri et inutile –, ce langage d'autrefois qui se fane sans jamais vous quitter',<sup>345</sup> and I will later consider her insight in terms of the significance of *Jedna věta* as a mark of the author's (partial) return to Czech as a writing language.

### **Reading *Les Bouleaux* as 'Un Tableau Métaphorique de l'Histoire Tchèque'**

Páleníček has described *Les Bouleaux* as 'un tableau métaphorique de l'histoire tchèque depuis les années 1950 jusqu'aux années 1990',<sup>346</sup> suggesting that an awareness of the events that dominated this period of Czechoslovak history is integral to the act of interpreting the significance of this novel. This was a difficult and traumatic period for the Czech nation, encompassing not only the Second World War, during which Czechoslovakia was occupied by the Germans and suffered great losses in the Holocaust, but also the rise and fall of Communism between 1948 and 1989. As I have noted in relation to Hodrová's work, it is difficult to separate out the events and legacy of these two eras in Central European history. More specifically, the events of *Les Bouleaux* take place against the backdrop of the historically disputed Sudeten borderland region between Germany and Czechoslovakia; an overview of the recent history of this era is therefore useful at this stage to ground the following synopsis of *Les Bouleaux*, which then leads into the textual analysis.

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<sup>345</sup> Kristeva, p. 27.

<sup>346</sup> Personal correspondence with Páleníček, see Appendix.

Before the Second World War, the Sudeten was under Czechoslovak jurisdiction but was inhabited by a wealthy German majority. It was annexed by Nazi forces after the Munich Agreement of 1938, which facilitated the invasion and occupation of the rest of the country from 1939, a circumstance which as I have already suggested invites comparison with the French experience of Occupation during the war; the themes of complicity, collaboration, and resistance in *Les Bouleaux* arise from both this occupation and the country's subsequent subjection to Communist rule. During the Holocaust, Bohemia and the Sudeten suffered losses of their populations not only of nearly 80,000 Jews, whose names are recorded in the Jewish Cemetery in Prague's former Jewish Ghetto, but also of other ethnic minorities including almost all of the Bohemian Romany (or Roma) people.<sup>347</sup> The Potsdam Conference of 1945 led to the subsequent postwar expulsion of large numbers of Sudeten Germans by the Czechoslovaks; many of these expulsions were violent and there was a significant death toll.<sup>348</sup> It is also worth noting that the Czechoslovak government subsequently embarked on a repopulation program, which involved the deracination of large numbers of Slovak Roma who were sent to live in the Sudeten. Three years after the Potsdam Conference, Czechoslovakia was

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<sup>347</sup> Although there is little documentation relating to the history of the Romany population in Czechoslovakia, it is thought that the Romany Holocaust was responsible for the loss of nearly ninety percent of Czech Roma; in an interview in 2003 on Radio CZ, the deputy director of the Museum of Roma Culture in Brno (in Moravia) cites a reduction from about 7000 to 583 Roma at this time; it can be assumed that losses in and near Prague and the Sudeten were probably even more acute. Dita Asiedu, 'The Roma Holocaust', on Radio CZ, see <<http://romove.radio.cz/en/article/19060>> [last accessed 17/03/2014].

<sup>348</sup> A German survey in 1958 put the death toll at about 270,000. See *Die deutschen Vertreibungsverluste. Bevölkerungsbilanzen für die deutschen Vertreibungsgebiete 1939/50*, ed. by the Statistisches Bundesamt - Wiesbaden (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1958). However, a joint enquiry undertaken by Czech and German authorities in 1996 gives much lower figures of approximately 15-30,000 based on a number of varying sources. See 'Stanovisko Společné česko-německé komise historiků k odsunovým ztrátám'/'Stellungnahme der Gemeinsamen deutsch-tschechischen Historikerkommission zu den Vertreibungsverlusten', in *Soudobé dějiny*, 3:4 (1996), 600-603 (Czech and German parallel publication), see <[http://www.dt-ds-historikerkommission.de/startseite\\_3.html](http://www.dt-ds-historikerkommission.de/startseite_3.html)> [last accessed 30/10/2014].

taken over by the Czechoslovak Communist Party in the coup d'état of February 1948, so that for the following four decades the country was subject to varying degrees of Soviet control. The half-century that is represented in *Les Bouleaux* was therefore a time of multilateral hostility, brutalities, losses, and resentments. These historical conflicts and alienations echo variously through Páleníček's text from the very first page, when the protagonist arrives in a small town in the Sudeten borderlands where, in a reference to the repopulation of the region and the ensuing hostilities between residents and incomers, we learn that 'les attroupements exagérés de Tsiganes gesticulant des cris en slovaque lui avaient fait resserrer les cuisses'.<sup>349</sup> The protagonist himself is a successful composer from Prague, a fact which requires some consideration since Páleníček's own grandfather was the composer Josef Páleníček.<sup>350</sup> It is important to note that the author responds to the question as to whether the text of *Les Bouleaux* can be considered autobiographical with a resounding 'non', so that we can assume that the stories of the actual and fictional composers do not coincide on a factual level.<sup>351</sup> Whilst we should be wary, then, of assigning too great a significance to the identity of the protagonist, the choice of composer-figure nonetheless lends support to the argument in this chapter that the story indirectly externalises the author's early experience and memory.

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<sup>349</sup> *LB*, p. 7.

<sup>350</sup> Josef Páleníček (1914-1991) was a successful concert pianist and composer and was appointed Professor at the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague in 1963. It should be noted that he became a member of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, although this may not be an indication of his political allegiance since many people chose to join the Party nominally rather than to jeopardise their careers and indeed freedom. The convergence of circumstantial detail in the real and fictional composers' lives will be examined in the course of this thesis.

<sup>351</sup> Personal correspondence with Páleníček, see Appendix.

The fictional composer has benefitted from his status as 'fonctionnaire' under the early years of the Czechoslovak Communist Party regime to buy an abandoned house. This is one of many in the Sudeten that were originally owned and then abandoned by the prewar German population; such houses now stand 'oubliée là comme une épine au fond de l'œil',<sup>352</sup> symbols of the painful histories of displacement and alienation in this historically traumatised borderland region. In this setting, the composer re-encounters a childhood love who has apparently escaped from a nearby internment camp, so that her story intersects with the memory of the political victims of the postwar Communist era. Despite an initial rekindling of his love for the woman, the composer fails to save her in a dramatic turn of events during which she is gravely injured. Indeed, he becomes complicit in the guilt surrounding her victimisation and death by burying her alive in order to save himself from the consequences of harbouring a political undesirable in the context of a regime that relied heavily on surveillance, fear, and reprisals. In this way, the woman's story embodies the silenced suffering of many Central Europeans of the era, whilst the protagonist is confronted by the questions of identity faced by so many citizens of totalitarian societies who were (and of course in parts of the world still are) forced or cowed into complicity with the atrocities committed by the regime. The remainder of the novel portrays the long-term effects on the protagonist – and consequently on his family – of this awful event, and of the lifelong veil of silence and secrecy he draws over it by attempting to deny its occurrence both to himself and to his family, never speaking of it even when questioned by his son years later. Finally, unable to confront or acknowledge the role he has

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<sup>352</sup> *LB*, p. 8.

played in the trauma, and haunted by ghostly flashbacks of the woman whose story and memory he has betrayed, he kills himself, taking his secret to his grave. An epilogue of just over a page, and entitled '1990', concludes the tale by moving on to the aftermath of the Velvet Revolution, reflecting on the inability or unwillingness of many Czechs to deal with the painful and complex memory of those years. The epilogue is narrated in the first person voice of the fictional composer's grandson, a fact which will be discussed later in this chapter in conjunction with the significance of the composer's identity.

Structurally, the text is divided into three main sections entitled '1950', '1970', and 'Épilogue – 1990'.<sup>353</sup> '1950' and '1970' are further subdivided into short chapters (I-IX); the epilogue consists of just over one page. The 1950s section is significantly the longest part of the text, containing as it does the encounter with the woman that is not only central to the composer's story but also to the themes of power, conflict, and traumatisation that underpin the text. Structurally, this section and the following ('1970') are separated by an original poem of four pages, titled 'À l'Étang au deux soleils',<sup>354</sup> which as we shall see plays a role in conveying the intervening and silenced years between the encounter and the composer's breakdown; the way in which this poem conveys the silencing and the traumatic rupture of time experienced by the composer will later be discussed in terms of the latency of trauma. It should be noted that each dated section refers not to one concrete year but, as Páleníček confirms, to 'une certaine idée de ce que ces décennies représentent pour les Tchèques'.<sup>355</sup> In my Introduction to this thesis, I set out the dominant events of these decades,

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<sup>353</sup> The sections commence respectively on p. 7, p. 35, and p. 46 of the text.

<sup>354</sup> *LB*, pp. 31-34.

<sup>355</sup> Personal correspondence with Páleníček, see Appendix.

but to resume briefly here in the context of Páleníček's work, the 1950s were overshadowed by the show trials and executions intended to root out dissenters to the increasingly Soviet-influenced party leadership; the 1970s saw the harsh measures of 'normalisation', discussed at length in my chapter on Hodrová; and, following the Velvet Revolution, the decade of the 1990s saw a conflict between a need to understand the legacy of Communism and a reluctance to probe that still-open wound, as we shall see in the course of this chapter. My analysis sets out to explore the interplay between the events of the protagonist's life that are depicted in each time frame and the events being played out in the corresponding era on a national level, which tend to be present in the text implicitly (as in the reference to the 'Tsiganes', which is not explicated within the narrative).

This brief overview of the plot and structure of *Les Bouleaux* highlights key points of convergence between the fictional family story and the wider historical events that both shape that story and determine how it can be narrated. In narrative terms, however, *Les Bouleaux* makes little explicit reference to the historical events of these years, a fact which recalls Páleníček's own description of *Les Bouleaux* as 'un tableau métaphorique',<sup>356</sup> and indeed points to the important theme of silencing that will be further discussed in this chapter. Rather than being narrated openly, the nation's history resonates instead through a series of implicit references within the framework of the fictionalised tragic tale of the narrator's grandfather. This chapter therefore draws on theories of the embodiment and articulation of trauma in order to explore the ways in which, without engaging directly with the events of the Communist era,

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<sup>356</sup> Personal correspondence with Páleníček, see Appendix.

*Les Bouleaux* uses the fictionalised tale of one family as a vehicle to give voice to the wider traumas experienced and subsequently largely silenced by the inhabitants of Central Europe. In a continuation of the methodology used in Chapter One, I will employ a process of contextualisation throughout this chapter, whereby markers of time and place will be identified and implicit references to sociohistorical features will be elucidated where pertinent in order to draw out the historical significance of the story's key events and their painful impact on the characters' fate and sense of identity.

### **Reading *Les Bouleaux* as a Trauma Narrative**

As I have indicated that I will use the composer's story to shed light on the national traumas of Communist Czechoslovakia, it is useful to highlight at this point the basic tenets of trauma theory that will underpin the analysis in this chapter. Clinical studies of traumatisation have shown that the structures of traumatic memory are biologically distinct to those of ordinary, narrative memory. This biological difference results in what Freud termed the 'latency' of trauma, whereby trauma cannot be processed as it takes place; Caruth has succinctly described this phenomenon as the 'very unassimilated nature [of trauma] – the way that it was precisely not known in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor'.<sup>357</sup> If trauma cannot be 'known in the first instance', then we must assume that it cannot easily be articulated, so that this fundamental difference in the mechanics of traumatic memory is one factor contributing towards the difficulty that lies at the heart of the act of narrating trauma.

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<sup>357</sup> Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, p. 4.

Furthermore, the 'return' of trauma referred to by Caruth may take place in the manifestation of symptoms which have been collectively classified as 'post-traumatic stress disorder' (hereafter 'PTSD'), and which Herman has described in terms of three umbrella categories (hyperarousal, constriction, and intrusion). Perhaps the most comprehensive and widely referenced clinical volume dealing with the psychosomatic manifestations and effects of PTSD is the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Health Disorders*, which has been widely used by theorists and literary critics in recent studies of the manifestation and narration of trauma.<sup>358</sup> In my examination of the composer's traumatisation, I therefore draw on these clinical resources as I seek to demonstrate that his behaviour can be related to the ways in which the political traumas and environment of fear has affected national identities in the chosen context.

Moreover, one of Herman's key contributions to the recent field of trauma theory is the parallel she draws between the reactions of victims of domestic abuse on the one hand and combat or political terror on the other hand. These had previously been seen as distinct clinical categories, but Herman's work illuminates the 'commonalities' of experience and of symptoms suffered by these different groups of survivors.<sup>359</sup> This discovery is revealing in relation to the political threats and oppressions that I argue are narrated in *Les Bouleaux* through the vehicle of personal, domestic lives: the clinical relationship

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<sup>358</sup> American Psychiatric Association (APA), *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Health Disorders* 4<sup>th</sup> edn (Washington DC: APA, 1994), often abbreviated to DSM-IV. Note that the DSM has been the subject of controversy and that the definition of PTSD is an area of particular discussion. Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, p. vii, draws attention to this debate, noting that there is still a need for further research into the distinction between long-term trauma as opposed to short-term trauma.

<sup>359</sup> Herman, p. 2.

established by Herman between symptoms of domestic and political trauma strengthens my argument about the use of private or domestic stories as a vehicle to narrate otherwise unspeakable political or national traumas. Whilst a politically traumatic event or era is by definition widely different from an event of either domestic or sexual abuse, the comparability of *symptoms* gives credibility to the transference that takes place in *Les Bouleaux* between the political and the personal. The ‘commonality’ between the trauma symptoms observed in victims by the clinicians cited, and those suffered by the composer (in the light of my argument that his story incorporates the complex experience of a nation living under Communism) throws the wider human significance of *Les Bouleaux* into relief by aligning the specific Czech experience it narrates with wider understandings of the experience of trauma.<sup>360</sup>

The validity of this transposition between the collective and the personal in *Les Bouleaux* is further borne out by Schwab’s observation that ‘[t]he processing of trauma and transgenerational haunting, even after collective histories of war or genocide, is always mediated through intensely private histories’, of which *Les Bouleaux* is clearly an example in its ‘mediation’ of Czech national experience and memories through a personal (albeit semi-fictional) family history.<sup>361</sup>

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<sup>360</sup> It should be noted in this context that Haines speaks of the ‘danger’ of ‘los[ing] sight of the historical specificity of each context in which trauma is experienced by an individual’, saying that Herman’s ‘blanket statements’ regarding the commonality of symptoms or experiences are ‘troubling’. However, whilst I follow Haines in providing thorough contextualisation throughout this thesis in order to bring to the fore the specificity of the Central European Communist era, I contend that Herman’s observation, cited above, regarding the commonality of traumatic *symptoms* (as opposed to experience) is useful in that it validates the transposition made by fiction between the collective socio-political context and the private, mediating story. Haines herself notes that ‘[t]rauma is [...] caught up in a dialectic of historical specificity and timeless universality’, and it is this dialectic which allows us to interpret *Les Bouleaux* as a story of wider ‘universal’ and ‘timeless’ significance than its context would initially appear to suggest. See Haines, p. 268.

<sup>361</sup> Gabriele Schwab, *Haunting Legacies: Violent Histories and Transgenerational Trauma* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), p. 13.

Schwab's notion of the mediation of painful collective memory by means of the private also intersects with Henke's position that the devices of fiction (the narrator, the characters, even the presence of the reader) act as a 'safety net', creating a distance between the writer and the text and thereby facilitating the expression of the 'unspeakable'.<sup>362</sup> This helps to explain the difficult relationship between the underlying collective (and silenced) histories that are, as Páleníček has confirmed, the 'métaphorique' subject matter of *Les Bouleaux*, and the fictional, individual story which, although not autobiographical in any strict sense of the word is, as I argue throughout, constantly threaded with strands of the author's own history and writing position. As such, *Les Bouleaux* becomes significant as a narrative of painful and alienating national experience in its use of the private to speak to us about collective experience. The idea that collective trauma can only be 'mediated' through the filter of the personal also opens up questions regarding the cathartic function of such stories, which I will return to later in my discussion as to whether *Les Bouleaux* functions as a space of acknowledgement or healing with regard to the past. As I work towards that discussion, my argument in Part II of this chapter will take as a starting point an examination of the figures of the two protagonists, which will centre on the traumatic events of the encounter scene referred to above in my introduction to the text.

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<sup>362</sup> Henke, p. xix.

## Part II. The Embodiment of Trauma

In introducing this chapter, I have drawn attention to Páleníček's description of *Les Bouleaux* as an allegory of Czech history because this concept is useful in guiding my approach to the novel as an embodiment of traumatic historical memory. However, it should not be assumed that the relationship between the text and the memories it embodies is a simple allegory, as the full context of Páleníček's comment reveals:

Ce que je peux dire au sujet des Bouleaux, c'est que le texte constitue en effet un tableau métaphorique de l'histoire tchèque depuis les années 1950 jusqu'aux années 1990, mais plus encore sans doute, il évoque le regard porté par – certains – Tchèques sur cette histoire.<sup>363</sup>

As this section sets out to analyse the ways in which the text encodes national experiences in the guise of a personal story, Páleníček's comment about 'le regard porté par – certains – Tchèques' will be central to the interpretations and conclusions of this chapter. As my analysis progresses, I bring to the fore the inconsistencies, referred to here by Páleníček, between official or widely accepted memories of the era, and the ways in which such understandings are challenged by this text. Trauma theory is helpful in the process of revealing the story of the unnamed woman and the composer as a 'tableau métaphorique' for the traumatic years of twentieth-century Czechoslovakia. Throughout my analysis, however, I also emphasise the ways in which the text both unsettles what James E. Young has described as 'petrified' views of history, and inscribes alternative readings of the era into this story.<sup>364</sup> In thus foregrounding the

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<sup>363</sup> Personal correspondence with Páleníček, see Appendix.

<sup>364</sup> James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 4, citing Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Use and Abuse of History*, trans. by Adrian Collins (New York: Macmillan, 1985), pp. 14-17. Young uses the

plurality of experience and of memory relating to one era of history in one small region, this chapter draws on Young's premise that it is important to 'preserve the complex texture of memory – its many inconsistencies, faces, and shapes – that sustains the difficulty of our memory-work, not its easy resolution'.<sup>365</sup> The 'difficulty' of this memory work will indeed be seen in my analysis even of this one slim volume, engaging as it does with the many 'inconsistencies' and indeed contradictions that are embedded within this period of history.

An understanding of pertinent issues relating to Communist discourse will be useful in underpinning this process of shedding light on the subversive nature of Páleníček's 'tableau métaphorique', and Steiner's insight into the difficulty of representing and of interpreting the totalitarian era (even as it was being lived out) is paramount to my analysis:

The process of insulation of consciousness – of the way in which totalitarian schooling can falsify the entire world image and reflex system of a nation or generation – is one which is grimly characteristic of our time and which we do not yet fully understand. But obviously it makes the resumption of dialogue immensely difficult. The words no longer refer to the same underlying experiences; they may continue to sound alike, but have contrary definitions.<sup>366</sup>

Steiner highlights both the importance and the paradoxical difficulty of widening our understanding of the complex ramifications of 'totalitarian schooling', which profoundly 'falsifies' the ways in which the world is both perceived and described. The following analysis of the embodiment of traumatic memory in *Les Bouleaux* therefore seeks to expose the social context that shaped national and individual responses to the pressures of the era. I will demonstrate that

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term 'petrified history' in his interpretation of Nietzsche's criticism of 'monumental' conceptions of the past, pointing to the need to open up history to pluralist interpretations.

<sup>365</sup> Ibid., pp. x-xi.

<sup>366</sup> Steiner, 'Out of Central Europe', p. 380.

initial understandings of the woman as victim and of the composer as perpetrator (and as such a potential metaphor for the state) are unsettled by other ways of understanding the composer's behaviour in the light of trauma theory. This will then lead into a reading of the manner in which the text provides an insight into the painful structures of political trauma which were experienced by, and shaped the identity of, the nation.

### **Unsettling History in the Figure of the Woman Protagonist of *Les Bouleaux***

A brief summary here of the central encounter scene between the two main figures in *Les Bouleaux* will lead into an analysis of the textual function of this scene and its effects upon the protagonists, firstly (in this section) of the woman, and then (in the remainder of Part II) of the man. The woman, a former lover of the composer, appears one evening in his outbuilding in a pitiful state. From the series of veiled references she makes regarding her history, it appears that she has fallen victim to the regime, been incarcerated and then escaped from 'un camp de travail'.<sup>367</sup> She has suffered political persecution ('[e]lle parla de sa mère qu'elle n'avait plus jamais revue. D'un interminable procès et d'interrogatoires'),<sup>368</sup> although the specific details of her story remain veiled, and her situation can therefore be read as an echo of the many stories of political victims of the era and indeed of the way that many such stories of persecution were covered up. She appeals to the composer for help, but although his passion for her is briefly rekindled ('Oui, c'était Elle. [...] C'était la

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<sup>367</sup> *LB*, p. 27. Note that there were a number of such camps in Bohemia, such as the one based at the uranium mine at Jáchymov in the Sudeten.

<sup>368</sup> *Ibid.*

Madone'),<sup>369</sup> he seems to disbelieve her story ("Tu mens").<sup>370</sup> His disbelief so distresses her that they come to blows ('[d]es coups plus violents que des baisers [...]. Comme des chiens qui se chamaillent'),<sup>371</sup> and as a result of the violence the woman suffers a near-fatal injury. In fear for his life if the authorities discover him to be helping or harbouring her, the composer buries her alive rather than take her to hospital, and resolves to 'faire comme si de rien n'était', thus denying all knowledge of the event and carrying on with his life as if nothing had happened.<sup>372</sup>

In this scene, the woman and the composer are initially presented in terms that correspond to recognised stereotypes not only of submissive female as opposed to dominant male but also, in the light of clinical descriptions of traumatisation, of victim and perpetrator, and these binaries will be explored as this section unfolds. Further binaries are set up in terms of their characterisation in the course of the encounter scene. The two protagonists thus appear to personify two opposing sides of the traumatic histories of Central Europe, and therefore to support widely established understandings (as exemplified in Mark's survey of post-Communist memorial trends) of the Communist regime as perpetrator and of society (in this case, Czech society) as its largely innocent and powerless victim.<sup>373</sup> The account I have given here of the behaviour of the

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<sup>369</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>370</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>371</sup> Ibid.

<sup>372</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>373</sup> See Mark. Chapter Three, 'Criminalizing Communism? History at Terror Sites and in Statue Parks and National Museums', pp. 61-92, emphasises the fact that immediately after the fall of Communism in Central Europe, very few public memorials were constructed by the left; 'Rather, it was anti-Communist groups consisting of former political prisoners, dissidents and exiles who founded the vast majority of sites that dealt with the Communist past' (p. 61); Chapter Six, 'Victims' Stories', pp. 165-93, opens with a discussion of the fact that much memorial discourse centred on 'individuals and groups who were victimized and excluded', p. 165.

two protagonists appears, then, to invite analysis both of the woman as a figure of victimisation, and of the composer as an apparent symbol for the transgressions of the era, and my analysis will start out by pursuing this line of enquiry. However, it should also be pointed out at this stage that after the woman's death the character of the composer is developed in a way that, by unsettling the apparently dichotomous presentation of the two protagonists, challenges these initial perceptions, and this overturning of expected or 'petrified' images will be explored in detail as my analysis develops.

The following passage describing the woman after her flight from the detainment camp, clearly presents her as a victim of the regime:

Sa figure, plus radieuse que celle des anges, était couverte de traînées obscures, comme si elle avait longtemps couru et que les branches des hêtres l'avaient tant flagellée qu'elles en avaient déteint de terre en son visage.<sup>374</sup>

By likening her to 'des anges', which implies her innocence, the description sets her in a sacrificial role ('tant flagellée'), which as we shall see is heightened as she later suffers at the hands of the composer to whom she has turned for protection. As the scene develops, use of animal imagery increases our perception that she is a figure of sacrifice: 'son effroi continuait de la rapprocher des souriceaux, des lapins et de ses frêles frères les faons'.<sup>376</sup> The predatory image of 'un loup' aligns the composer with established images of perpetrators (which will be discussed further below in the context of his actions), and stands in stark contrast to the vulnerability attributed to the woman by the comparison to the 'frêles' creatures of the fields, so that this binary depiction serves to compound the victim-perpetrator paradigm.

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<sup>374</sup> *LB*, p. 25.

<sup>376</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

It should also be noted here that the two protagonists of *Les Bouleaux* remain unnamed. In the woman's case, this renders her anonymous or indeed invisible as a victim, an effect which, as we shall see, is later reinforced in her unmarked and unmourned burial. This anonymity reflects the namelessness of the many victims of Communism in Central and Eastern Europe in a manner which intersects with my discussion in the next chapter of Germain's use of the unnamed female figure of *La Pleurante* to commemorate the unremembered and unnamed dead of the twentieth century. The woman's unnamed position also corresponds to the situation of powerlessness in which victims of domestic or social violence are typically placed by society's 'tendency to discredit the victim or render her invisible'.<sup>377</sup> Herman explains this stance of disbelief, which appeases 'the universal desire to see, hear, and speak no evil',<sup>378</sup> as the easiest course open to bystanders in the face of atrocities. The woman's namelessness recreates the composer's desire to close his eyes to his wrongdoing, and places us in an uncomfortable position of partaking in his ensuing complicity with the forces of history that shaped and then concealed the fates of many victims of this era. Similarly, the lack of a name for either of the two protagonists indicates the attitude of 'certains Tchèques' (to recall Páleníček's observation, cited earlier)<sup>379</sup> who wish to erase the memory of the traumatic past since confronting that past opens up questions regarding their own (or their forefathers') unwillingness to 'share the burden of pain'<sup>380</sup> by witnessing the other's trauma. This unwillingness to face the past will be analysed in more detail later in this chapter in the course of my discussion of

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<sup>377</sup> Herman, p.8.

<sup>378</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>379</sup> Personal correspondence with Páleníček, see Appendix.

<sup>380</sup> Herman, p. 7.

silence and speaking out, but it is worth noting here that Páleníček's work, written two decades after Hodrová's trilogy was published, suggests that the national forgetting explored by Hodrová is being perpetuated even after the Revolution.

Having established an understanding of the woman as an embodiment of the victims of the era, I will now go on to apply clinical descriptions of trauma symptoms in order to justify an interpretation of her behaviour as traumatised, and thus expressing all the more powerfully the experience of the victims of an oppressive regime. To support this interpretation, we can return firstly to the description of the woman's reactions to the entrance of the protagonist:

Il entreprit d'ouvrir le portail, tout doucement, pour ne pas la faire tomber. Piteusement, elle croisa, en un mouvement brusque, ses bras sur sa figure, eut un sursaut et se mit à ramper maladroitement vers l'arrière de la grange.<sup>381</sup>

The composer's appearance here does not in itself pose any grave danger to the woman; on the contrary, he is careful to avoid disturbing her by opening the door 'tout doucement'. Her defensive reaction, as she instinctively protects her face and then tries to distance herself from the threat of physical danger, therefore seems all the more extreme, suggesting that she has suffered some form of traumatisation which has put her on guard against any further threat. A consultation of Herman's description of the symptoms of PTSD can help us to understand this behaviour in the clinical context of traumatisation. She divides symptoms into three primary categories: 'Hyperarousal reflects the persistent expectation of danger; intrusion reflects the indelible imprint of the traumatic

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<sup>381</sup> *LB*, pp. 23-24.

moment; constriction reflects the numbing response of surrender'.<sup>382</sup> Symptoms belonging to these categories can be observed in the behaviour not only of the woman but also, as will later be discussed, of the composer.

Hyperarousal is described as the state following trauma whereby the sufferer 'startles easily, reacts irritably to small provocations, and sleeps poorly'.<sup>383</sup> Herman's survey of a range of psychiatric studies of diverse trauma victims leads her to conclude that such a state is induced by the sufferer's nervous system being permanently and detrimentally altered by the traumatic event, so that, '[a]fter a traumatic experience, the human system of self-preservation seems to go onto permanent alert, as if the danger might return at any moment'.<sup>384</sup> These clinical observations on the nature of hyperarousal shed light on the reactions of the woman as she is observed in the passage above, startling at the opening of a door, protecting her face with her hands, shying away from the least movement in fear of the return of danger. We can deduce from her behaviour that the woman has suffered trauma during her detention in the 'camp de travail'. Additionally, the symptom of constriction, which Herman tells us 'reflect[s] the numbing response of surrender', can be used to explain the woman's eventual defeat as, after the accident that injures her, the composer prepares to bury her alive: 'Elle n'y objecta rien, en aucune façon'.<sup>385</sup> Although her surrender may of course be due to her wounds and a physical inability to defend herself, nevertheless it is a symbolic moment of passive acceptance of defeat. In the end, her surrender comes not in the face of the

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<sup>382</sup> Herman, p. 35.

<sup>383</sup> Ibid.

<sup>384</sup> Ibid., pp. 35-36, here p. 35.

<sup>385</sup> *LB*, p. 30.

abuses of the regime itself (from whose clutches we must recall she has escaped), but in the face of the failure of her old friend and lover. The final blow to her resistance is dealt by the composer in his denial of her story and in his own fear of the regime, which shapes his failure to help her. It is the betrayal by a friend or loved one, rather than by the faceless power of the regime, that Páleníček shows to cause the greatest pain.

In the light of Herman's description of PTSD symptoms, then, the woman can be 'diagnosed' as clinically traumatised, which supports my reading that the presentation of the woman conforms to stereotypes of victimhood and traumatisation, thus giving rise to one interpretation of her as a textual representative of the countless victims of the twentieth century in this context. Her burial by the composer and his effort to forget her and her fate (as he attempts to 'faire comme si de rien n'était')<sup>386</sup> remind us of the attempt by the Czech nation to forget and move on, which is a theme to which I will later return in the context of transgenerational memorial. On one level, then, the text becomes an acknowledgement of, and a memorial to, the unnamed, unremembered victims of this era. This feature of the text, which intersects with Schwab's understanding of the need to write out the 'haunting legacies' of transgenerational memory, will be examined at more length later in this chapter.<sup>387</sup>

If we return to the animal imagery cited above in relation to the woman, however, a rather more complex view emerges of the woman as representative

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<sup>386</sup> Ibid.

<sup>387</sup> The premise that writing has a healing function in terms of the processing of traumatic histories by second (and third) generations underlies Schwab's work; see, for example, pp. 20-25.

of the (Czech) nation as victim. The image we have seen of the woman as 'frêle faon', the vulnerable object of prey, also suggests that there is a parallel between the victimised woman and the Czech nation which, over the centuries, has been preyed upon and dominated by more powerful surrounding nations during its incorporation into the Hapsburg Empire and Austro-Hungary, and more recently by the Czechoslovak Communist Party (itself generally recognised to be a puppet of the Soviet Union). If we accept this parallel, whereby the nation's loss of identity is manifested in the flagellated and buried body of the woman, then the choice of vulnerable animal imagery combined with the language used to portray the woman as a flagellated, sacrificial creature creates a sense of the nation as a sacrificial lamb at the hands of more powerful political forces of history. This interpretation of the woman resonates with Hodrová's use of lamb imagery in her trilogy to portray characters such as Nanette and Alice as 'des agnelets' or Eliška as 'Elise Agneau'. Through the imagery and associations I have examined here, the woman in Páleníček's 'tableau métaphorique' becomes a symbol of the collective sacrifice of the Czech nation, in a way that we can better understand if we recall the descriptions, cited earlier in this thesis, of the post-Munich sense of abandonment of Czechoslovakia by France and Britain, and of the 'invisibility' suffered by the 'other Europe', as described by Celia Hawkesworth.<sup>388</sup>

Such a parallel between the woman and the nation is reinforced but also complicated by the description we have seen of the woman's final, hopeless surrender to the composer. The brutality of the regime and the innocence of so many of its victims are beyond contestation, and are textually grounded in *Les*

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<sup>388</sup> Hawkesworth, p. 199. Cited in full in Chapter One, Part II of this thesis.

*Bouleaux* in the image of the woman as flagellated angel. Nonetheless, even as the final passivity of the woman arouses sympathy for her plight, it simultaneously raises the question as to whether she is unequivocally blameless in her passivity. Furthermore, at the start of the encounter scene the woman evidently has a hope that the protagonist might offer her sanctuary and, once she has ascertained his identity, she places her trust in him accordingly, as her behaviour in the following passage shows: 'Ce n'étaient plus les sanglots convulsifs de tout à l'heure, quelque chose s'était relâché [...], elle avait presque un air apaisé. [...] Elle posa alors la tête sur son épaule'.<sup>389</sup> Her attitude of trust, marked by her relative emotional tranquillity ('apaisé') and her body posture ('la tête sur son épaule'), is similar to that of the trauma victim who takes the first step towards recovery by seeking a safe place and a figure of trust, as described in Herman's analysis of the recovery process.<sup>390</sup> Her trust in him is, however, swiftly and brutally dispelled, as within a page he has abandoned her to her death. The woman's misplaced trust could be interpreted as a reflection of the trust placed by the Czech nation, firstly in their official allies, the British and French, who (as discussed in the Introduction to this thesis) failed to protect them in their appeasement policy towards Hitler at the Munich Agreement of 1938; and secondly in their acceptance of the implementation of Communism by Soviet-led powers in 1948. This parallel, combined with the woman's surrender, echoes the image of the nation as a sleeping body, or as a flock of sheep (Nanette is 'une humble brebis'; Paskal's

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<sup>389</sup> *LB*, p. 27.

<sup>390</sup> See Herman, chapters 8-10, for a comprehensive discussion of the three basic stages that she claims to be necessary to the process of recovery from traumatising. She summarises these as follows: 'the establishment of safety [...] remembrance and mourning [...] reconnection with ordinary life', p. 155.

congregation are 'les ouailles'),<sup>391</sup> that Hodrová uses to draw attention to the passivity that has historically shaped the actions and attitudes of the Czech nation during their long history of submission to neighbouring powers. We will see in Chapter Three that Germain also draws attention to the passivity of the Czechs, and that like Páleníček she treats this theme with some ambivalence. This portrait of the woman in *Les Bouleaux* similarly contributes to critical understandings of the unsettling and complex ways in which political oppression affects individual and national behaviours and identities. Her dual association with images of both victimisation and passivity challenges the trend, identified by Mark to have dominated public memorial discourse immediately after the Velvet Revolution, of positing all those who did not openly assent to Communism as 'victims' of the regime.<sup>392</sup> In this way, Páleníček again invites us to consider plural or alternative readings of history, and in the following section I will continue to bring this trend to light in my interpretation of the figure of the composer.

### **Reading the Composer as an Embodiment of the National Identity Crisis**

As I have signalled above, the second area of interest arising from the encounter scene in terms of 'figures' of national trauma concerns the presentation of the composer. If the woman is to be interpreted as the forgotten victim of the traumatic histories of this era, then we might expect to see a corresponding figure of perpetration in the composer at whose hands she meets her death. Indeed, his actions during the encounter scene appear to endorse

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<sup>391</sup> See my analysis in Chapter One, Part II of this thesis.

<sup>392</sup> See Mark, especially pp. 165-67.

that expectation. Firstly, he is overcome by a return of his youthful lust for the woman, which is played out here in terms of power: 'Oh! doux moment de répit. J'ai gagné, j'ai gagné! Mon Dieu, la voilà [...] enfin dans mes bras, entièrement dans mon pouvoir'.<sup>393</sup> In the light of my reading of the woman as a figure for the Czech nation as prey both to other national powers and to the ruling Communist regime, the vocabulary of conquest ('gagné'; 'dans mon pouvoir') in the citation here identifies the composer as a figure of threat; this potentially aligns him both with the powerful nations that have historically oppressed their smaller Central European neighbours, and with the formidable Czechoslovak Communist Party (of which, we recall, he was a 'fonctionnaire').<sup>394</sup> His predatory nature is further evoked in the following passage, when he recalls the games he had played with the woman as a girl when she was the object of his childhood love: 'On jouait au loup et il avait des bottes en caoutchouc qui claquaient lorsque, à grandes enjambées, il lui courait après'.<sup>395</sup> The image here of the boy as 'loup' throws the later picture of the woman as 'lapin' (as cited above) into stark relief and, in drawing on gender stereotypes, crystallises their respective roles as predator and preyed-upon. The burial alive of the woman by the composer further sustains this interpretation, so that this initial reading of *Les Bouleaux* seems to suggest that the composer's treatment of the woman can be interpreted as a symbol for the atrocities committed by the powerful regime and as a perpetuation of established patriarchal structures. As such, the text would appear to constitute a unilateral affirmation of post-1989 ideas regarding the culpability of the State and the innocence of the oppressed citizens, a stance

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<sup>393</sup> *LB*, p. 27.

<sup>394</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>395</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

which, as Mark has noted, dominated memorial discourse immediately after the fall of the regime.<sup>396</sup> In the ‘absence of justice for the victims of Communism’ that was felt across the region owing to the lack of systematic judiciary processes, cultural memory tended towards a ‘criminalization’ of the state which reinforced binary representations of the brutality of the Communist perpetrator as opposed to the suffering of innocent victims.<sup>397</sup>

Without questioning or invalidating the reality of the atrocities that were committed under the regime across the region, I nevertheless question whether this is the sole interpretation possible of the composer figure. I will therefore now explore the possibility that in fact *Les Bouleaux* uses the character of the composer to blur the line drawn between victim and perpetrator, and that in doing so the novel challenges the ‘petrified’ versions of history that Young has warned against. As I open up a discussion of the ways in which the composer may be a more complex figure for the effects of the events of the regime, I show that both his behaviour and the presentation of the woman challenge unilateral representations of victims and perpetrators in conditions of political repression. I argue that *Les Bouleaux* can be interpreted in the light of Mark’s understanding of certain one-dimensional tendencies within post-Communist memorial discourse whereby, ‘people’s lives could be reduced to their suffering, which was now instrumentalized and turned back against the individual’s former persecutors. [...] the complexity of lives could be forgotten; they simply became

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<sup>396</sup> See Mark, Chapter Three, pp. 61-92.

<sup>397</sup> Mark, p. 64. See also pp. 46-58 for a case study of the failures of a national system (Poland’s Institute of National Remembrance) to redress public desire for post-revolutionary restoration and justice.

brutalized objects of the ousted regime'.<sup>398</sup> This position is substantiated by Páleníček's own comment that the text is in fact more than a simple allegory for the events of the era, in that 'plus encore sans doute, il évoque le regard porté par – certains – Tchèques sur cette histoire'.<sup>399</sup> I interpret this to mean that by overturning established views of history and its players, the text adds to our understanding of the complexities and paradoxes of social behaviour under traumatic and constrictive totalitarian conditions. Focussing on the period entitled '1970' which follows the tragic burial scene, I continue to use trauma theory in order to elucidate the composer's behaviour and fate, showing that he too suffers from severe traumatisation as a result of his encounter with the woman. This trauma eventually leads him to commit suicide, and so his fate exemplifies the identity crisis experienced by many survivors of the Communist era. The reading I offer thus widens and realigns an interpretation of the composer to show that he is not in fact unequivocally a symbol for the regime itself but rather for the homeland or nation as it was forced to adapt and survive in an oppressive and manipulative regime.

After the encounter scene, which is situated at the end of the 1950s section of *Les Bouleaux*, the timeframe of the story abruptly leaps forward to the 1970s. In the twenty years between the burial of the woman (and the painful memory that she represents) and the next episode in the narrative, time in the composer's homeland has indeed moved on from the postwar expulsions from the Sudeten and the political show trials and imprisonments in which the woman has apparently been implicated during the 1950s, to the period of Soviet-imposed

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<sup>398</sup> Ibid., pp. 65-66.

<sup>399</sup> Personal correspondence with Páleníček, see Appendix.

normalisation of the 1970s which, as we have seen, was the context of 'deletion' and suppression from which Hodrová was writing. These momentous socio-political events, however, enter the fabric of the text in the 1970s section merely as whispers; a word or two overheard here or there in a local inn, or a rumour spreading around the village. These information 'gaps' will be explored further in Part III and IV of this chapter in the course of my discussion of the transgenerational effects of the silencings. To return to the composer, however, time seems to be measured not in political or national terms (to which, as I have said, the narrative rarely refers explicitly), but in the small, daily events of his own life, so that the time of the 1950s encounter is truly divorced from that of the 1970s when he is next seen. No further reference is made to the night of the encounter, and it seems that the composer has fulfilled the desire, expressed to himself immediately after he had quite literally buried the evidence of his actions, to continue life the next day 'comme si de rien n'était'. Indeed, at our first sight of him at the opening to the 1970s passage, he appears to have achieved this intention in metaphorically burying the memory so deeply that it has left no mark, so that the first paragraph of the 1970s section ends on an upbeat note as the composer enjoys a balmy evening, apparently untroubled by his conscience:

Et il fait bon. Il fait cette grande et profonde solitude où l'on se sent flotter d'un amour pour toute la nature, où le temps semble avoir suspendu son train, où la vie même est oubliée, et la mort est bien loin.<sup>400</sup>

The buoyancy of this passage seems to suggest that the composer is entirely at ease both with himself and the world ('l'on se sent flotter d'un amour pour toute

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<sup>400</sup> *LB*, p. 35.

la nature'), and that all memory of the tragic encounter scene (which nonetheless is obliquely referenced here in the evocation of 'la mort') has long been erased. The composer's apparent insouciance can be interpreted as a reflection on those who seek to evade the memory of the past and the implications that it inevitably has on the present. However, we should also consider whether the 'cover-up' silence that is embedded in the composer's burial of the body and his denial of the encounter scene actually stands up to scrutiny, by asking whether the twenty years in question have really been unaffected by the traumatic encounter scene, or whether his life does in fact bear the scar of the trauma he has witnessed.

This narrative ellipsis is mimetic of the disruption to time that is caused by traumatic experience, so that the very structure of the text recreates the experience of trauma. Caruth points out that '[i]n its general definition, trauma is described as the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur'.<sup>401</sup> This repression of traumatic memory, known as 'latency', arises because the devastating and unforeseeable nature of the traumatic event creates 'a break in the mind's experience of time' so that the experience cannot be processed at that time, and I suggest that this phenomenon explains the time rupture in *Les Bouleaux*.<sup>402</sup> Caruth also points out that 'the event becomes fully evident only in connection with another place, and in another time', and that this belated 'return' of the suppressed event causes symptoms such as the well-known flashback, which we can therefore understand as the mind's attempt to know or reclaim the experience that it had

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<sup>401</sup> Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, p. 91.

<sup>402</sup> For a comprehensive discussion of the latent nature of trauma see *ibid.*, esp. p. 16.

'missed'.<sup>403</sup> This 'unknowability' and the resulting 'latent' nature of the processing of trauma helps to explain the time rupture in *Les Bouleaux* between the traumatic encounter of the 1950s and the eventual onset of symptoms that we will see in my analysis of the events of the 1970s passage. We can deduce that, for twenty years, the composer was able to 'faire comme si de rien n'était' because of the mind's failure to process trauma at the time of its occurrence and to suppress its memory. By extension of this logic, the silences maintained by ordinary citizens across Central Europe with regard to the traumatic events they had survived or witnessed proceed in part from the unknowability that lies at the heart of such events, and this impact on later generations of the latency of trauma and the resulting silences surrounding the events of Communism will come to the fore in Part IV of this chapter.

Before turning in the next section to an examination of the way in which the effects of the traumatic encounter make themselves felt later in the composer's life, we should note that, situated between the 1950s and 1970s sections, there is a four-page-long poem, titled 'À l'Étang aux deux soleils'.<sup>404</sup> This poem is of particular note because it is written in the first person, unlike the majority of the body of the text, and appears to assume the composer's voice, thus offering an insight into his state of mind during that uncharted period between 1950 and 1970. The poem relates the composer's daily swim in a pool in the forest near his cottage, where he goes 'Afin de démanteler/Les lourdes boues du sommeil/Et laissant glisser mon corps/Dans son eau claire et gelée/Tout

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<sup>403</sup> Ibid., pp. 61-62.

<sup>404</sup> *LB*, pp. 31-34. This is an original poem by Páleníček.

endolori encore/Par les heures de la veille'.<sup>405</sup> These lines suggest that the composer feels the pain of the encounter anew each morning ('Tout endolori encore'), as if it had taken place just the night before ('la veille'). The composer relives the hope, 'tous les matins', of cleansing himself of the 'lourdes boues du sommeil', yet the poem closes with the lines 'Puis le gouffre s'en allait/Vite me trancher le souffle', thus exposing the futility of his hope as he is drawn back into 'le gouffre', which we may equate with despair. The poem therefore belies the insouciance of the opening of '1970', and suggests that the trauma of the encounter is in fact lying deep below the surface, and can be expressed only in the intimate and introspective language of poetry. This possibility is supported by Elaine Scarry's claim that poetry may be one of the rare media in which pain can be expressed, since, she tells us, the nature of (physical) pain 'resists and destroys language' in a manner which defies expression.<sup>406</sup> If it is true that poetry is more able than other linguistic forms to articulate pain, then I propose that this poem reveals the pain that is destroying the composer's life and which, as I will show in the following section of analysis, will return to haunt him.

### **The Intrusion of the Traumatic Past**

In the course of the 1970s section of *Les Bouleaux*, the composer moves from a position of apparent tranquillity ('il fait bon [...] la mort est bien loin')<sup>407</sup> to a terrible suicide scene. I will discuss this development in the light of the return of

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<sup>405</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>406</sup> Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 3. Drawing on Roman Jakobson, Scarry posits that 'poetic language' rather than language which has a referential function may be more capable of expressing the physical pain of torture, bodily trauma etc; my thesis suggests that the poetics of physical pain can be extended to psychological pain.

<sup>407</sup> *LB*, p. 35, cited in full above.

the traumatic memory of his encounter with the impact of Communist persecution, and of his own failure to 'share the burden' of the woman's pain.<sup>408</sup> In the course of this analysis, I will again use Herman's descriptions of PTSD symptoms, this time focussing on the category of 'intrusion', which Herman describes as the 'indelible imprint of the traumatic moment',<sup>409</sup> in order to show both that the composer has not been able to successfully repress the memory of the past, and that this intrusion of the past into the present has terrible consequences. 'Intrusion', or the unwelcome return of the memory of the trauma, is manifested in a number of symptoms including recurring nightmares and waking recollections of the event, often referred to as 'flashbacks' (a term which was made infamous as part of the syndrome that came to be known as 'shell-shock' in Second World War veterans).<sup>410</sup> The flashback, in which the suppressed traumatic memory returns to haunt the survivor, often in the form of graphically corporeal visions, is widely regarded as one of the most distressing symptoms of the disorder; as the pioneering American psychoanalyst Abram Kardiner concluded after his extensive work with First and Second World War veterans, this symptom is also 'one of the most characteristic [...] phenomena we encounter in the disease'.<sup>411</sup> The familiarity of the flashback means that its use in *Les Bouleaux* as a device to represent trauma is instantly recognisable. In *Les Bouleaux*, we shall see that the composer's suicide is a response to a return of the memory of the part he played in the woman's death, a memory which returns to him in a series of flashbacks which will now be scrutinised.

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<sup>408</sup> Herman, p. 7, cited above.

<sup>409</sup> Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>410</sup> Drawing on the DSM-IV, Henke has also used Herman's categories of PTSD symptoms in a similar manner in her analyses of trauma narratives.

<sup>411</sup> Abram Kardiner and Herbert Spiegel, *War, Stress, and Neurotic Illness* (rev. edn *The Traumatic Neuroses of War*), (New York: Hoeber, 1947), p. 201. Cited in Herman, p. 37.

Before moving on to a close analysis of the flashback scene, however, it is worth noting that the episode is provoked by the protagonist's reactions to a set of questions about the past, posed during the 1970s by his son: "Papa? Tu savais pour les procès? Tu savais pour les camps de travail? Pour les prisonniers politiques? Toi, tu faisais quoi à l'époque?"<sup>412</sup> Herman notes that intrusive symptoms such as the flashback may be 'triggered' by 'small, seemingly insignificant reminders',<sup>413</sup> and this seems to be the case here when, after twenty years, the son's questioning sets off a train of memory that drives the composer to his death. Later in this chapter, I will further examine the manner in which these questions evidence the need experienced by later generations to break the silences imposed on the past by those who, like the composer, experienced the Communist era at first hand. The composer initially responds calmly to his son's questioning, making no reference to the encounter scene whatsoever, and so perpetuating the twenty-year silence he has maintained about his past. Once he is alone, however, he completely breaks down, a collapse which we can interpret as a consequence of his inability to face the past.

The breakdown scene plays out in the outdoor latrines, which is of course the site of the burial of the woman and so it is significant that this is where the composer returns to finally relive the traumatic memory of that evening. Here he sees the birch trees (of the title) surrounding his cottage come to life: 'La lune déverse son lait sur les bouleaux. On les voit rire dans le vent'.<sup>414</sup> The birches gradually transform before his eyes, taking on a human likeness with 'cheveux

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<sup>412</sup> *LB*, p. 38.

<sup>413</sup> Herman, pp. 36-37.

<sup>414</sup> *LB*, p. 40.

de vieille sur un visage ridé' that cannot fail to recall the woman who, had she lived, would now be ageing like the composer. The enumeration of body parts attributed to the birches gives them a life of their own which is emphasised shortly afterwards: 'Ces bouleaux sont les os de tes doigts mon amour, reserrés contre moi, contre moi!'<sup>415</sup> Clinicians have commonly observed the intensely vivid, sensory or bodily nature of the flashback,<sup>416</sup> which is reflected in the very corporeal nature of the composer's visions as cited above, when he details her 'cheveux', 'visage ridé', 'yeux', 'bouche' and even imagines he can feel the clutch of 'les os de tes doigts mon amour'.<sup>417</sup> The composer not only sees but *feels* the touch of the woman, so real to him are the reproaches of this vision, and this corresponds to Herman's observation that '[r]eliving a traumatic experience, whether in the form of intrusive memories, dreams, or actions, carries with it the emotional intensity of the original event. The survivor is continually buffeted by terror and rage.'<sup>418</sup> Herman further explains that this corporeality is caused by the distinct biological processes of the brain's adrenaline-driven reaction to trauma, whereby 'traumatic memory' (such as that of the encounter scene) is neurologically very dissimilar to the verbal, 'narrative memory' that encompasses more commonplace experience.<sup>419</sup> Traumatic memories are 'not encoded like the ordinary memories of adults in a verbal, linear narrative',<sup>420</sup> but are of a far more visual, sensory nature, as in the graphic and disturbing portrait of the composer's flashbacks, when the woman appears

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<sup>415</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>416</sup> For example, see Herman, pp. 37-38.

<sup>417</sup> *LB*, p. 41.

<sup>418</sup> Herman, p. 42.

<sup>419</sup> Herman draws on work by Janet, who formulated the distinction between traumatic and narrative memory. Herman, p. 37 drawing on Janet, *Psychological Healing*, vol. 1, trans. by E. Paul and C. Paul (New York: Macmillan, 1925), 661-63.

<sup>420</sup> Herman, p. 37.

so real to him that he sees her face in 'les fèces' in the latrines and can feel her fingers 'reserrés contre moi, contre moi!'<sup>421</sup>

As Marven notes in her study of recent German trauma narratives emerging from the era of (post-)Communism, '[t]he experience of trauma is thus one of simultaneity, of living in two worlds (past and present) at the same time, and of continually re-experiencing the event'.<sup>422</sup> In the context of *Les Bouleaux*, this 'simultaneity' helps to explain the intensity of the composer's reactions to his flashbacks. Having attempted for twenty years to 'bury' the evidence and memory of the traumatic encounter (symbolising, as I have proposed, the awful reality of the regime with which he has become complicit), the belated 're-experiencing' of the past in the present constitutes quite literally a return to the unacknowledged horrors of that encounter. This recalls Herman's key observation that, whilst it belongs to human nature to react to traumatic events by attempting to 'banish them from consciousness', ultimately '[a]trocities, however, refuse to be buried. [...] denial does not work'.<sup>423</sup> The eventual resuscitation of 'buried atrocities' in the flashback form of the woman's ghostly but insistently real body suffices to haunt the composer to his death, a phenomenon to which my analysis will now turn.

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<sup>421</sup> *LB*, p. 41.

<sup>422</sup> Marven, *Body and Narrative*, p. 44.

<sup>423</sup> Herman, p. 1.

## The 'Existential Crisis' of Twentieth-Century Communist Experience in Czechoslovakia

Further aspects of the flashback scene can be used to deepen our insight into the complexity of the composer's behaviour as an embodiment of the 'existential crisis'<sup>424</sup> that Herman claims to be experienced by those who are called to witness trauma or suffering. The understanding gained through this analysis helps in turn to shed light on the 'crisis' of living in a Communist nation, and particularly of coping with the strains of surveillance, which as I have noted in the Introduction to this thesis was one of the many measures by which the state created an environment of fear and so maintained control. In her study of the Romanian writer Herta Müller, who like the writers examined in this thesis engages with the traumatic legacy of the Eastern Bloc's totalitarian era, Marven identifies three motifs that represent the 'effects of trauma' in Müller's work, namely: 'the collapse of boundaries between the self and the world'; 'the representation of the self as alienated, other, or double'; and 'fragmentation, the experience of the body in parts'.<sup>425</sup> I will show that these structures are present in *Les Bouleaux*, and scrutinise the ways in which they further our understanding not only of Communist experience, but of its legacy. Marven notes that '[t]raumatic events in Müller's texts are caused by, and rooted in, physical experience: torture and interrogation, threat of violence, and, ultimately, death',<sup>426</sup> and we have seen that this is also the case both in the encounter scene and the composer's flashbacks. This underlying physicality relates to the graphic, sensory nature of the flashbacks as analysed above, and

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<sup>424</sup> Ibid., p. 51.

<sup>425</sup> Marven, *Body and Narrative*, p. 54.

<sup>426</sup> Ibid., p. 53.

is, furthermore, a symptom of the relationship between the totalitarian state and the individual subject, a relationship which is played out in bodily terms.

If we turn to a passage describing the onset of the flashback scene, we can find evidence of the 'existential crisis' that the composer is undergoing owing to the return of the past as a result of his son's questioning:

Il écarta les bras et appuya les mains contre les planches en balançant la tête. Ou peut-être est-ce le monde au-dehors qui se balance? La lune déverse son lait sur les bouleaux. On les voit rire dans le vent à travers les fentes. Ils n'étaient pas là lorsque je suis arrivé. Silence. Et pourtant mille bruits. Sueur. Yeux.<sup>427</sup>

His feeling of disorientation and loss of distinct selfhood ('balançant la tête. Ou peut-être est-ce le monde au-dehors qui se balance?'); the sense that the birches are alive and mocking him ('On les voit rire'); the physical symptom of 'sueur' which is conventionally attributed to the experience of trauma victims; and the sensations of hearing voices in the silence and seeing eyes in the darkness (examined further below): all correspond to the wide range of descriptions of traumatisation described by clinical observers cited in this chapter including Herman and Felman and Laub. This comparability of symptoms supports my position that the state of angst into which the protagonist has been thrown by the intrusion of traumatic memory corresponds to the experience of traumatisation that can be described as a crisis of identity.<sup>428</sup> Furthermore, the physical disorientation and emotional turmoil experienced by the composer specifically echoes the first of the structures of trauma noted by Marven in Müller's writing, namely 'the collapse of boundaries

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<sup>427</sup> *LB*, p. 40.

<sup>428</sup> For a full description of the unravelling of identity attendant on traumatic experience, see Herman, Chapter Three, pp. 51-73. Also see Henke, whose entire volume is predicated on her understanding of the 'shattered' identity suffered by the traumatised subject.

between the self and the world'.<sup>429</sup> Haines, who like Marven has written extensively on German-speaking writers emerging from this context, similarly notes that Irene, the protagonist of Müller's *Reisende Auf Einem Bein*, suffers a 'disintegration of her selfhood' and 'near collapse' as a result of her traumatic experience in 'das andere Land', the unnamed totalitarian 'other country' that she has left.<sup>430</sup> This loss of a distinct sense of 'selfhood' is seen most clearly in the spinning sensation the composer experiences when he is unable to distinguish whether it is himself 'ou le monde au-dehors qui se balance', a sensation which clearly denotes the 'collapse of boundaries between the self and the world' noted by Marven. In my previous chapter, we saw that the 'disintegration of selfhood' also pervaded Hodrová's work (and most persistently in the first part of the trilogy which engages most closely with the punitive period of 1970s normalisation), where it emerges in the form of fragmentation of characters, whose 'boundaries' blur into each other, as in the case of the interchangeable character pairings, or the camouflaging of authorial identity in the persona of Eliška. For both Hodrová and Páleníček, then, the impact of coping with totalitarian experience is comparable to the 'shattering' of the self that Henke and others have observed to result widely from trauma.

The second significant feature of the latrines passage is the composer's sensation of being watched, both by the birches ('[o]n les voit rire dans le vent') and by anonymous '[y]eux'. This sensation corresponds to Marven's second motif for the embodiment of trauma, namely 'the representation of the self as

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<sup>429</sup> Marven, *Body and Narrative*, p. 54.

<sup>430</sup> Haines, p. 274, referring to Herta Müller, *Reisende auf einem Bein* (publication details not given, see volume publ. by Rotbuch Verlag, 1989).

alienated, other, or as double'.<sup>431</sup> The motif of eyes and the sensation of being watched runs throughout the text in relation to the composer and his actions, and thus merits further attention in the context of his (and by extension, the nation's) reactions to the traumatic events of Communism that are represented in the woman's fate. For example, when he buries the woman, he is witnessed by '[l]a lune, ce gros œil (...) figée sur lui'.<sup>432</sup> This image of being watched replicates the experience of living under the kind of 'Big Brother' state surveillance that was an everyday part of life for the composer's generation in Central Europe at this time, described by Marven as the experience of 'someone who returns to their flat and suspects that objects have been moved or tampered with, or who puts the phone in the fridge to avoid being overheard'.<sup>433</sup> In *Les Bouleaux*, the fear of surveillance which is symbolised by the 'gros œil' of the watching moon acts as an instinctive brake to the composer's initial human impulse of sympathy for the suffering woman, and helps to explain his ultimate failure to help her. His fear is seen most clearly in his reactions to her injury in the passage that leads up to his decision to bury her alive. At the beginning of that passage, we are again reminded of the composer's fear of being watched, as 'le ciel béant regardait de par le trou', and again, 'les étoiles apparurent. C'était mille yeux qui regardaient là', and more concretely, '[e]spérons que les voisins n'aient pas entendu'.<sup>434</sup> One of the effects of surveillance, then, is to instill fear to the extent that ordinary human reactions and behaviours are distorted and ethical human relationships are disrupted (as seen in the failure of the composer to help a dying woman he had

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<sup>431</sup> Marven, *Body and Narrative*, p. 54.

<sup>432</sup> *LB*, p. 30.

<sup>433</sup> Marven, 'An Alien Gaze', 2010.

<sup>434</sup> *LB*, pp. 28 & 29.

once loved): this shattering of individual identities and of normal communities is one of the aims of a totalitarian regime.

The legacy of the fear of prying eyes and informants also infiltrates *Les Bouleaux* more widely in the undercurrent of implicit references to indeterminate and unnamed others that runs through the text. For example, in the passage cited above relating the composer's paralysis when faced with the need to help the woman, the state is referred to simply as 'ils' ('ils vont vouloir [...] non ils vont tout de suite'), which strengthens the comparison with the 'Big Brother' paradigm of anonymous power. In a number of other references and anecdotes to be found scattered throughout the text, no names are named and no concrete details or explanations are given. An example can be seen in a reference to the Sudeten Germans who previously inhabited the area but are also identified in the text only as 'ils' and by their function as the makers of 'ces verroteries' that this wealthy and industrial ethnic group historically manufactured in the region.<sup>435</sup> In each such case, the references are highly allusive and implicit, so that the tone replicates that of the often-dangerous rumours that were rife during the era and served to create suspicion and destroy community and trust in the manner I have noted above. The indeterminacy in the text thus mirrors the shifting, often dangerous, relationship to reality which characterised the regime of disinformation and surveillance that was created by the state in order to manipulate and disempower. By this means of information 'gaps', the text reproduces the process referred to in Steiner's observation (cited earlier in this chapter) that totalitarianism 'can falsify the

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<sup>435</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

entire world image and reflex system of a nation',<sup>436</sup> so that the act of reading *Les Bouleaux* becomes an act of experiencing the disempowerment and disorientation experienced by and shaping the actions of the composer's generation.

Both Marvin and Haines also observe that the disturbing effects of surveillance are embedded in the writer's particular perspective, described by Müller herself as 'der fremde Blick' (meaning 'the alien gaze').<sup>437</sup> This refers to a detached mode of viewing the world which has been, according to Haines, 'not adopted but forced on the individual by powers that are beyond his or her comprehension'.<sup>438</sup> These incomprehensible 'powers' are represented in *Les Bouleaux* by the fact that the watching 'eye' is attributed *not* directly to the state but rather, variously, to the moon, the stars or the sky. This renders the state all the more fearful by establishing a model of omnipresence, which in turn further accounts for the composer's failure to stand up against its threat. Haines points out that the 'alien gaze' created by the experience of surveillance results in Müller's protagonist Irene's sensation of being distanced from her self, rather as if she were viewing her life 'like a play'.<sup>439</sup> In *Les Bouleaux*, I propose that the fear of the 'alien gaze' ultimately leads the composer to a similar place of detachment from himself which is made manifest in the striking use of narrative voice in his death scene, when he commits suicide by hanging himself in a passage which merits further scrutiny at this juncture.

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<sup>436</sup> Steiner, 'Out of Central Europe', p. 380.

<sup>437</sup> Herta Müller, *Der Fremde Blick oder Das Leben ist ein Furz in der Laterne* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 1999), cited in Haines, p. 272.

<sup>438</sup> Haines, p. 272.

<sup>439</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 275.

This final episode of his life begins when he has fled the visions of the woman that were haunting him in the latrines (which we recall is the memorial site of her death), and is possessed with an uncontrollable rage, which is initially directed against his family, since he appears to feel that his son's questioning demonstrates their lack of understanding of his past and the pressures he has faced. The scene opens in a defiant first person voice: 'Je vais vous montrer moi!'<sup>440</sup> The use of the first person is conspicuous, since the narrative has so far been in the third person, and I propose that it indicates an attempt by the composer to return to his 'self' from which he has been distanced by his experience of trauma. His tirade, however, is articulated only to himself, and perpetuates his denial of guilt ('C'est bien pour vous que j'ai peiné toutes ces années!'),<sup>441</sup> and so yet again fails to 'exorcise' the trauma in the manner of the 'talking cure'. The failure to integrate the trauma results in the resumption of the 'alien gaze' and of the third person voice for the remainder of the death scene. The abrupt shift from first to third person narrative implies that the composer is viewing his death as something unrelated to himself, over which he seems to have no agency, rather as if it were happening to someone else or 'in a play', to recall Haines's assessment of Irene in Müller's novel. It should also be noted that the first person voice resurfaces at sudden, brief intervals through the scene, so that the struggle between voices replicates the battle between the composer's will and the fate that has been imposed on him, on the nation, by the 'power' of the regime. The tension between narrative voices thus not only reflects the distancing effect of the 'alien gaze', but also brings to life the

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<sup>440</sup> *LB*, p. 41.

<sup>441</sup> *Ibid.*

'existential crisis' and 'psychological fragmentation' of trauma as described by trauma theorists including Herman and Henke.<sup>442</sup>

The combination of surveillance and the 'alien gaze' through which the composer distances himself from his actions now succeed in suppressing the composer's natural empathy for the injured woman as an individual in need of help, so that he comes to view her as an object, a body to be dealt with, much as the state dealt with unwanted individuals;<sup>443</sup> this is a theme to which I will return in my later discussion of the woman's body as it appears to him in the flashbacks. We see this process of objectification in his perception of the injured woman as a series of body parts: 'il fixait *cette tête, la tête* de celle qu'il avait aimée. La poutre avait creusé un angle dans *le crâne, le front* n'était plus rond'.<sup>444</sup> The conflict between the composer's instinctive impulse to help and the fear incited in him by the watchful but anonymous regime culminates in the following passage describing his dilemma as to whether he should take her to hospital:

Et que faire à présent? Si je ne l'emmène pas immédiatement à l'hôpital, elle va. Mais si je l'y emmène, ils vont me demander, ils vont vouloir que je rende des comptes, savoir pourquoi je la défends. (...) Et si je l'y emmène et que je non ils vont tout de suite. Mais je pourrais peut-être dire que je n'avais pas de voiture et que les voisins merde qu'est-ce que je vais faire maintenant?<sup>445</sup>

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<sup>442</sup> Herman, p. 51; Henke, p. xii.

<sup>443</sup> 'Unwanted individuals' were variously submitted to surveillance, imprisoned, tortured, executed (as in the Slánský Trial, which will be referred to in more detail below), or forced into exile. A parliamentary investigation undertaken in 1992 details StB methods of persecution. See 'Závěrečná zpráva vyšetřovací komise Federálního shromáždění pro objasnění událostí 17. listopadu 1989', <[http://www.psp.cz/eknih/1990fs/tisky/t1236\\_01.htm](http://www.psp.cz/eknih/1990fs/tisky/t1236_01.htm)> [last accessed 24/10/2014]. Although there is inevitably dispute over exact numbers of human lives lost as a direct result of Communism in Central Europe, a set of figures displayed as part of the public 'Memorial to the victims of Communism' (*Pomník obětem komunismu*) in Prague gives an indication of the scale of loss: 205,486 arrested; 170,938 exiled; 4,500 died in prison; 327 shot whilst trying to escape; 248 executed.

<sup>444</sup> *LB*, p. 29, my italics.

<sup>445</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 29-30.

The circling logic ('que faire [...] si [...] Mais si [...] Et si [...] Mais je [...] qu'est-ce que je vais faire?'), heightened diction ('merde') and collapsing syntax of his internal monologue ('Et si je l'y emmène et que je non ils vont') reflect a complete collapse of logical thought that again expresses the 'existential crisis'<sup>446</sup> suffered by those implicated in trauma. Through the motif of being watched, then, the text once again refutes a simplistic judgement of the composer as unequivocally guilty of the woman's sorry fate, by insisting on exposing the national context that traumatised him and helped to shape his actions.

In my analysis of the composer in Part II, I have noted certain parallels between Páleníček's portrait of the composer and works by other writers (such as Müller) who engage with the Central European legacy of Communism. We have seen a parallel between the collapse of identity experienced by Müller's character of Irene and by the protagonist of *Les Bouleaux* as a result of their experience of living under the regime. My analysis has drawn attention to some of the specific manifestations of totalitarian experience and memory in terms of trauma, and this attention to the specific has responded to Caruth's call, cited in my Introduction, to seek out ways of 'listening and responding to traumatic stories in a way that does not lose their impact, that does not reduce them to clichés or turn them all into versions of the same story'.<sup>447</sup> At the same time, the common occurrence of these motifs in *Les Bouleaux* and works by other writers with similar backgrounds reinforces my location of Páleníček's work within a tradition of Central European political trauma narrative, and lends weight to my

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<sup>446</sup> Herman, p. 51.

<sup>447</sup> Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, vii, cited in full above.

insistence that the crisis embodied by the protagonist of *Les Bouleaux* has a wider significance than the provincial and little-known geographical setting of the tale would initially suggest. Páleníček's narration of the experience of twentieth-century totalitarianism mirrors the 'existential crisis' that is widely attributed to trauma survivors by Herman, which substantiates the claim made in the Introduction to this chapter that my discussion of this text, intersecting as it does with the work of critics and theorists in other critical contexts, opens up new fields of enquiry within the context of French literary studies.

The reading I have offered here has used trauma theory to align the figure of the composer with the nation, showing that he symbolises the effect of the complex network of relationships and conditions which forced ordinary citizens to interact with and indeed often comply with the regime on a daily basis in order to survive. This understanding of the composer allows us to interpret him not only as a perpetrator of a personal crime that does indeed echo the atrocities committed by the state, but simultaneously as a figure for the oppressed and traumatised nation in that he has been made unwillingly complicit in the crimes perpetrated under the strictures of the regime. His experience reflects that of many citizens who became complicit (whether actively or passively) with atrocities or injustices through fear of political repercussions. By examining the composer not only as a perpetrator but also as a victim, I have responded to the importance, indicated by Young, of opening up pluralist discussions of the past rather than readily accepting or endorsing 'petrified' versions. In Part III below, I will move on to consider whether the composer's attempt to erase this traumatic past from his mind equates to a

refusal to bear witness to the atrocities of the past, opening up questions regarding the nature and wider impact of his denial.

### **Part III. Silencing and Forgetting**

We have seen that the traumatic encounter between the two protagonists of *Les Bouleaux* ends as the composer buries the woman alive and resolves to 'ne pas pleurer, le lendemain, éloigner les chiens, faire comme si de rien n'était',<sup>448</sup> thereby concealing all evidence of her fate and erasing her memory to the extent that, twenty years later, he feels that 'la mort est bien loin'.<sup>449</sup> I have shown that the effects of that encounter and of its suppression on the composer both embody the experience of traumatisation and more particularly locate that trauma within a totalitarian context, and in the course of this section I consider how the chronological ellipsis, in which the composer's denial of the past is embedded, reflects the national trend towards forgetting the past. The remainder of the text of *Les Bouleaux* also incorporates a number of other significant silences that either obscure or modify the past as it was experienced by the composer, and these cumulatively refer us to the widespread national phenomenon of 'collective forgetting'<sup>450</sup> of the traumatic Central European totalitarian past. These multiple silences will therefore form the focus of analysis in this section as I seek to establish a fuller understanding of the reasons for this desire to deny the past and of the effect that such denial had on the composer's generation who, like Hodrová, lived through the regime. This will

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<sup>448</sup> *LB*, p. 30.

<sup>449</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>450</sup> Helga G. Braunbeck, 'The Body of the Nation: The Texts of Libuše Moníková', in *Monatshefte* 89: 4 (1997), 489-506, here p. 501. See the Introduction to this thesis for a fuller discussion of this phenomenon in the context of Communist Central Europe.

lead into the final section of this chapter, which will examine how *Les Bouleaux* demonstrates the ways in which the second and third generations continue to grapple with the legacy of silence handed down to them by the survivor generation.

The desire to erase or modify the past has been noted by a number of scholars of this era in relation to Czechoslovakia and indeed much of the former Eastern Bloc, as discussed more fully in my Introductions both to this thesis and to this chapter. My previous chapter considered the fictional record made by Hodrová of the 'state-managed forgetting'<sup>451</sup> relating both to previous cycles of the past that took place during the Communist era, and to the practice during the regime of 'deleting' individual stories; the section of analysis that follows now will engage with the manner in which Páleníček's work represents the way that both the state and its individual inhabitants 'managed' this forgetting both during and, more particularly, after the Communist regime.<sup>452</sup> The reading I offer of the textual silences in *Les Bouleaux* will therefore be underpinned by an examination of the contextual reasons for the historical silencing experienced at this juncture in history, as I seek to illuminate the relationship between the fictional silences and the effect of historical silencing on the nation that, I argue, is embedded in Páleníček's characters and narrator.

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<sup>451</sup> Esbenshade, p. 74.

<sup>452</sup> It could be noted that 'state-managed forgetting' in Czechoslovakia bears some resemblance to the 'Pact of Forgetting' ('el pacto de olvido') which was adopted by Spanish political parties in order to avoid having to deal with the legacy of Franco. The pact formally underpinned the processes of democratisation in the 1970s, so that difficult questions about the recent past were suppressed in the name of facilitating national reconciliation between different factions. However, forgetting as discussed here in the Czech context was an unofficial but widespread practice during Communist regime, which continued in a number of ways after the 'unfinished revolution', as Mark terms it.

There are many complex and interwoven contextual motivations for the 'national forgetting' that has afflicted much of post-Communist Central Europe. Three factors are particularly helpful in allowing us to reach an understanding of the Czech silencing. Firstly, both silencing and alteration of historical 'truths' were implemented on a wide-scale basis by the Communist regime, which relied on a range of judicial and social punishments to instil fear and maintain control. Punitive measures characteristically employed will be discussed below as they punctuate the woman's story and determine her fate in *Les Bouleaux*. Secondly, work done within trauma studies on the fundamental concept of the 'unknowability' of trauma that gives rise to the difficulty of articulating traumatic memory, is useful in further scrutinising the composer's inability to speak out about the disturbing events that lie at the heart of the novel. Finally, I will consider the ways in which the mechanisms of guilt and complicity play a significant role in the processes of denial that eventually lead to the protagonist's suicide as he proves unable to confront his involvement in the realities of the traumatic Communist past.

### **A 'Total' Silence: Negotiating Silence and Speech in a Totalitarian Context**

In the aftermath of the terrorist events of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 in the United States, Butler scrutinises the power politics of public discourse, saying that,

One way a hegemonic understanding of politics is achieved is through circumscribing what will and will not be admissible as part of the public sphere itself. [...] To produce what will constitute the public sphere, however, it is necessary to control the way in which people see, how they hear, what they see.<sup>453</sup>

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<sup>453</sup> Butler, p. xx

Butler's insight into the powers that shape the public sphere can also be applied to the context of understanding the power held by Eastern Bloc governments in the twentieth century. Such 'control' over what could be seen, heard and, moreover, said was also exerted by the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia on two levels. Firstly, a range of political tools was deployed, including political purges, interrogations, trials, imprisonments, executions, widespread use of informers, and exclusions from education and other social systems. The cumulative effect of these measures was to construct an environment of fear in order to maintain political allegiance and social submission, thus 'circumscribing' behaviours within the 'public sphere' in the 'hegemonic' manner described by Butler. Secondly, the regime created a distinct and powerful discourse, 'a consensus on what certain terms will mean, how they can be used, and what lines of solidarity are implicitly drawn through this use',<sup>454</sup> thereby controlling not only the way people behaved and reacted to the realities of Communist daily life, but even the way in which they perceived these realities and were able to express them. The power of this discourse helps to explain the 'insulation of consciousness' noted by Steiner in his description (cited above) of the political manipulation of 'the entire world image and reflex system of a nation' under Communism.<sup>455</sup>

The effects of this manipulation of public discourse can be seen in the silencing of the woman's story of suffering, which takes place on a number of levels in *Les Bouleaux*. The composer's dilemma over whether to help the injured

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<sup>454</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>455</sup> Steiner, 'Out of Central Europe', p. 380.

woman is dictated by Communist control of the 'public sphere', as we see in the following passage which leads to his decision *not* to help her:

Ils vont me demander, ils vont vouloir que je rende des comptes [...] comment vais-je expliquer de ne pas l'avoir dénoncée tout de suite? [...] il faudra que je justifie la présence d'un condamné en fuite chez moi [...] et que je non ils vont tout de suite.<sup>456</sup>

The loss of language he experiences as his syntax breaks down ('et que je non ils vont tout de suite') can be explained in relation to Scarry's concept that pain resists and destroys expression, returning us to 'a state anterior to language'.<sup>457</sup> The composer's fragmented speech here is the start of such a journey back to the 'cries of infancy',<sup>458</sup> rendering uncomfortably tangible his fear of the physical pain of the repercussions of being caught harbouring a political undesirable. Moreover, the power of the public sphere in dictating the 'way in which people see, how they hear, what they see' can be detected in the Communist terms the composer uses to describe the woman to himself, transforming her from the 'ange [...] flagellée'<sup>459</sup> (as she first appeared to him) into 'un condamné en fuite' who should be 'dénoncée tout de suite' (in the passage above). As he comes to perceive her through the lens of the prevalent public discourse, the woman is dehumanized and he is thus able to commit the morally abhorrent action of burying her alive. Indeed, he justifies his crime with the reflection that '[s]ils l'avaient soignée à l'hôpital, ils l'auraient renvoyée au camp et là, ç'aurait été bien pire'.<sup>460</sup> My reading of this passage highlights the importance of understanding the power of the Communist 'public sphere' in dictating both 'the way in which people see' and indeed the way in which they act, so that

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<sup>456</sup> *LB*, pp. 29-30.

<sup>457</sup> Scarry, p. 3.

<sup>458</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>459</sup> *LB*, p. 25, cited in full above.

<sup>460</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

ordinarily immoral or unacceptable courses of action come to be seen as inevitable or even politically justifiable.

The Communist tools of manipulation are, moreover, referred to only implicitly throughout *Les Bouleaux* in a series of whispers, rumours, and hints that in themselves collectively recreate the disorienting and frightening experience of 'falsification' (to return to Steiner's description of the language of totalitarianism) that controlled the lives of citizens of this region. Accordingly, little is directly narrated about the background of the woman protagonist of *Les Bouleaux*. We do learn that, during the course of her earlier relationship with the young composer, 'un jour, elle avait disparu', and this disappearance aligns her against the state since it is attributed to the rumour that 'son père avait quitté le pays d'une façon déloyale'.<sup>461</sup> The substance of her story from that time is left untold until the moment when the composer is confronted by her 'figure [...] flagellée'; the textual silence about what has reduced her to this state again reflects the fear of the unknown experienced by citizens of a regime that relied so heavily on disinformation.

During the encounter between the two protagonists, the woman does, however, attempt to articulate her story: 'Elle lui parla d'un camp de travail et de puits miniers, [...] de sa mère qu'elle n'avait plus jamais revue. D'un interminable procès et d'interrogatoires [...] Puis à nouveau ce camp situé non loin'.<sup>462</sup> Some detailed contextualisation is useful at this point to fully reveal the significance of the veiled references in this particular passage. During the early years of Communism in Czechoslovakia, a wave of purges resulted in a series of show

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<sup>461</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>462</sup> Ibid., pp. 27-28.

trials, of which the most notorious was probably the Slánský Trial of 1952.<sup>463</sup> On Stalin's orders, fourteen Czechoslovak Communist Party members were accused and convicted of conspiring against the Soviet-led regime. Eleven were executed and the others sent to internment camps.<sup>464</sup> Many other trials followed on a smaller scale, affecting a wide cross-section of the Czechoslovak public, with many citizens being executed, and an even larger number imprisoned in the many labour or detention camps and prisons. Significantly, one of the most infamous internment camps of this era was at the uranium mines in Jáchýmov, which is in the Sudeten region which forms the backdrop to the woman's story in *Les Bouleaux*. The references to 'un interminable procès [...] ce camp situé non loin' cited above thus locate the woman's experience firmly within the national history of punishment and terror brought to bear by the state against those who, like the woman's father who evidently defected, failed to maintain an appearance of allegiance.

The woman's endeavour to tell her story to the composer can be read as an attempt to bear witness to the realities of life under Communism, and thus as a bid to defy the silencing imposed by the regime of fear. However, with a curt "[t]u mens", the composer dismisses the woman's story of persecution, labour camps and trials.<sup>465</sup> His disbelief perpetuates the 'state-managed' deletion of victims' stories that we have seen in my analysis of Hodrová's work in the

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<sup>463</sup> It could be noted that the show trials implemented by the Communists across Central and Eastern Europe can be compared to the 1944 Paris show trials by Nazis of resistant elements including the Manouchian group; this comparison points to a further intersection of Czech and French experience.

<sup>464</sup> For an account of the Slánský Trial, see Igor Lukes, 'The Slánský Affair: New Evidence', in *Slavic Review*, 58: 1 (1999), 160-187. For an autobiographical account by the English wife of Otto Šling, one of the men sentenced to death in the trial, see Marian Šlingová, *Truth Will Prevail* (London: Merlin Press, 1968).

<sup>465</sup> *LB*, p. 28.

previous chapter; this perpetuation, moreover, makes the composer complicit as he refuses to heed her voice, transforming him at this point from an innocent 'bystander'<sup>466</sup> to a perpetrator. In burying the woman alive, he commits the ultimate act of silencing, so that her fate becomes painfully symbolic of the suppression of truths that has afflicted the nation. Moreover, the composer's submission to the fear, which he enacts in the burial, of political reprisals is further evidence of the power that Butler attributes to hegemonic political control of the public sphere, which as I have argued was maintained by the Communist regime of terror. Butler notes that such control 'is also a way of establishing whose lives can be marked as lives, and whose deaths will count as deaths',<sup>467</sup> and it is indeed the case that, in the composer's refusal to hear it, the life story of the unnamed woman of *Les Bouleaux* is not 'marked', whilst her death is not 'counted' as she lies in her secret grave. Her grave, indeed, could be said to symbolise the countless and uncounted graves of the Holocaust and the Communist era that form the historical background to this Sudeten tale. This parallel brings to mind Hirsch's description of photographic images of mass or unmarked Holocaust graves as 'the epitome of dehumanization, the inability, even after the liberation, to give victims an individual burial'.<sup>468</sup> Although Hirsch is concerned with the specific context of the Holocaust, I propose that her concept of 'dehumanization' can be extended to the fates suffered by many victims of Communism, as embodied by the burial of the woman in the latrines.

This reading is supported if we recall the corporeal terms used to depict the woman. Firstly reduced to '[u]n pied. Nu' in the composer's coal pile at the

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<sup>466</sup> I follow Herman's use of this term. See Herman, p. 8.

<sup>467</sup> Butler, pp. xx-xxi.

<sup>468</sup> Hirsch, 'Surviving Images', p. 19.

beginning of the encounter scene, she is then described primarily in physical, animal-related terms (she is 'accroupie par terre' and they fight like 'des chiens qui chamaillent').<sup>469</sup> Finally, she returns to haunt the composer in the corporeal flashbacks in which she becomes merely 'cheveux [...] visage [...] yeux [...] bouche [...] doigts'.<sup>470</sup> This reduction of her subjectivity throughout the narrative to a list of bodily parts and attributes further illuminates the national context of Communist oppression whereby, as Marven notes with regard to the Eastern Bloc, the regime deployed a variety of tactics that amounted to an appropriation of the individual body, thus deriving power by a process of objectifying the subject.<sup>471</sup> Marven cites as an example, from the work of the Czech author Libuše Moníková, the mass spectacle of the '*spartakiáda*' (collective ceremonial sporting events to commemorate the liberation of Czechoslovakia by the Red Army),<sup>472</sup> which symbolically and physically 'enacted the subsumption of the individual in the state',<sup>473</sup> since the individual body moved in synchronisation and was lost amongst the masses. In a similar manner, both the reduction of the woman whilst alive to a series of body parts, and the subsequent manner of her death and burial in the latrines, equate to the disregard of Eastern Bloc regimes for their victims, which is evidenced by the regular incarceration of subjects, summary executions, and, most pertinently, the disposal of bodies in unmarked graves. Far from perpetuating this disregard in his corporeal portrait of the woman, however, Páleníček (like the three writers surveyed by Marven)

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<sup>469</sup> *LB*, pp. 23-28.

<sup>470</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>471</sup> Marven, *Body and Narrative*, pp. 17-27.

<sup>472</sup> These were held at the huge Strahov stadium in Prague every five years from 1955 until 1990, with 750,000 people participating in the 1960 event. The effect of these co-ordinated and synchronised sporting spectacles, in which hundreds or even thousands took part, can be compared to the processional displays sometimes seen in footage of North Korean public or military ceremonies; the individual body is lost in the mass movement of so many.

<sup>473</sup> Marven, *Body and Narrative*, p. 22.

is 'protest[ing] against the erasure of bodies from the history of the state'<sup>474</sup> by resurrecting the woman in the flashback scenes, so that in her textual resurrection from her terrible grave, past atrocities 'refuse to be buried'<sup>475</sup> quite literally, and the silence which, for the reasons I have discussed here, has surrounded her story begins to break apart.

### **A Failure to Witness the Traumatic Past**

In my earlier analysis of the composer's belated reaction to the trauma of the encounter scene, I drew attention to the 'latent' nature of trauma, which we recall derives from an incompatibility between 'narrative memory' and 'traumatic memory' that in turn gives rise to the mind's inability to integrate traumatic events, which, in Caruth's words, 'are not fully grasped as they occur'.<sup>476</sup> It is largely owing to this latency and the ensuing biological discrepancy between narrative and traumatic memory that trauma is widely claimed to be fundamentally inexpressible; as Herman tells us, '[t]he ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness. Certain violations of the social compact are too terrible to utter aloud: this is the meaning of the word unspeakable'.<sup>477</sup> Clearly the composer's failure towards his former lover constitutes a 'violation of the social compact' and is therefore 'banished from consciousness', becoming 'unspeakable' as he carries out his resolve to 'faire comme si de rien n'était' in the total silence imposed on him by the constraints of trauma. This 'unspeakable' nature of trauma thus further elucidates the

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<sup>474</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>475</sup> Herman, p. 1.

<sup>476</sup> Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, p. 91, my italics.

<sup>477</sup> Herman, p. 1.

personal and national silences that are conveyed by *Les Bouleaux*. The ‘unspeakability’ of trauma as envisaged by Herman does not, however, fully explain why the composer’s silence ultimately leads to his suicide, and this is a question that I will pursue further in the context of guilt, since it relates to the state of the nation as portrayed in this novel.

The dilemma and consequences of the ‘national forgetting’ observed across Central Europe are crystallised in *Les Bouleaux* into the metaphor of the suicide. A brief summary of the chain of events leading to his suicide grounds the following analysis of the way this death reflects the national context. We have seen that the apparent security afforded by the silence with which the composer has for twenty years distanced himself from the horror of his past is challenged when his son, growing up in the shadow of the traumatic regime and its events, poses him a series of searching questions.<sup>478</sup> The composer answers his son with a dispassionate speech about the historical course of political events during the 1950s trials, thus avoiding speaking about his own past actions and failing yet again to testify to the woman’s fate. However, the next scene shows the composer alone in the latrines, haunted by the traumatic flashbacks of the past that I have discussed above. Immediately after this, the composer commits suicide, thus releasing himself once and for all from the challenge of testifying to his past. The son’s probing thus serves to trigger the recurrence of the traumatic memory in a manner which corresponds to Herman’s description of the way the past returns to haunt survivors:

[T]raumatic events ultimately refuse to be put away. At some point the memory of the trauma is bound to return, demanding attention.

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<sup>478</sup> *LB*, p. 38.

Often the precipitant is a significant reminder of the trauma [...] that brings [the survivor] back to the unfinished work of integrating the traumatic experience.<sup>479</sup>

As we have seen, at the 'precipitant' of the questioning, the 'memory of the trauma' does indeed 'return, demanding attention' in the form of flashbacks, revealing the extent to which the 'work of integrating the traumatic experience' is 'unfinished'. The ultimate consequence of the refusal to 'integrate' the past by testifying to it is, for the composer, death, and this causality indicates the close link between testimony and survival that has been a central concern of experts in the field of trauma. Writing about Holocaust testimony, Laub observes that 'survivors did not only need to survive so that they could tell their stories; they also needed to *tell their stories in order to survive*',<sup>480</sup> and this understanding of the life-affirming power of the articulation of traumatic experience conversely roots the composer's suicide directly in his silence. The association between silence and suicide here echoes the paradigm between silence and death versus life and writing that I explored in the previous chapter in relation to Hodrová's work. Both Hodrová's and Páleníček's texts affirm the deathly consequence of maintaining silence about traumatic pasts.

The relationship that emerges in these texts between testimony and survival intersects with the widely held belief that articulation of (traumatic) experience is cathartic and indeed, as many scholars and clinicians accept, restorative; this is the underlying premise of Henke's scriptotherapy, which she claims offers 'potential for mental healing'.<sup>481</sup> The recurrent motif in the novel of tears, or,

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<sup>479</sup> Herman, p. 174.

<sup>480</sup> Laub, 'Truth and Testimony: The Process and the Struggle', in Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, pp. 61-75, here p. 63, my italics.

<sup>481</sup> Henke, p. xii.

more precisely, an inability to shed tears, also contributes to the idea that the protagonist's denial of the past rules out the possibility of 'healing'. Tears are generally acknowledged to be a functional sign of normal grieving processes; inversely, they tend to be absent in PTSD, where the victim is afflicted by numbing or 'emotional anaesthesia', which is often marked by an absence of tears.<sup>482</sup> The following passage, taken from the suicide scene, demonstrates the composer's perpetually frustrated desire for the relief of tears:

Il sentait ses larmes mouiller ses yeux mais sans qu'elles se décident à couler [...] parfois il tentait de s'aider en poussant un sanglot [...] en vain. Les larmes ne venaient pas, les larmes n'allaient pas venir, et il s'en doutait bien: les larmes ne venaient presque jamais.<sup>483</sup>

I interpret this lack of tears as a comment on the impossibility of healing without articulation or the relief of formal mourning which the composer denies himself. His inability to shed tears, together with his silence, amounts to a symbol of the nation's unwillingness to acknowledge and mourn the past, supporting the notion that a state of healing with regard to the past has yet to be reached. In Chapter Three, I will discuss the presence of tears in the figure of 'la Pleurante', the weeping woman who wanders the streets of Prague and whose presence ushers in a host of memories. Her passage through Prague is silent apart from the sound of tears, which thus come to embody memory. Unlike 'la Pleurante', Páleníček's composer is unable to cry, locked in silent denial of the past, and so cannot move towards a place of healing.

Further insight into the dangerous power of silence that is associated with the protagonist's death can be drawn from Laub's statement that, for survivors,

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<sup>482</sup> See Herman, pp. 42-47, for a detailed account of 'constriction', which is the name given by Herman to the set of PTSD symptoms that includes 'numbing'.

<sup>483</sup> *LB*, pp. 42-43, my italics.

'while silence is defeat, it serves them both as a sanctuary and as a place of bondage [...] To *not* return from this silence is rule rather than exception'.<sup>484</sup> Both the security implied by the 'sanctuary' of silence, and its power in terms of 'bondage' can be detected in the composer's death scene. His first sensation as he contemplates hanging himself is one of pleasure: 'Il se sentait excité comme un petit garçon à l'idée qu'il était sur le point de passer à l'acte, que cette fois c'était pour de vrai'.<sup>485</sup> His excitement can be interpreted as relief at the possibility of finding 'sanctuary' in the final silence of death, and this is reinforced in his sensation that the rope that he passes round his neck is a 'ceinture de sécurité',<sup>486</sup> protecting him ironically not from death but from the need to confront his past by breaking his silence. As he orchestrates his death by stepping down one stair at a time, tightening the noose that he has attached to the top banister, the language of the passage increasingly echoes his mounting excitement so that he is overcome by 'joie'; 'il exultait'; he feels 'le bonheur' and a 'euphorique grandeur' as he steps towards the 'sanctuary' of silence.<sup>487</sup> However, the contrasting image of silence as 'bondage' is present in the following instant as the finality of death strikes him. The 'ceinture de sécurité' is now simply 'le nœud' which defies him in a relentless diction of bondage: 'le nœud n'avait pas relâché'; '[c]ette maudite corde s'était coincée'; 'le nœud tint bon'.<sup>488</sup> At the very moment when the 'sanctuary' of death (which comprises a release from the obligation to speak) seems possible, he realises that such silence is in fact 'defeat' in that it signals the final destruction of the

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<sup>484</sup> Laub, 'Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening', in Felman and Laub (eds), pp. 57-74, here p. 58.

<sup>485</sup> *LB*, p. 43.

<sup>486</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>487</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>488</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

possibility of reintegrating the past, or remembering the woman's life, through testimony. Ultimately, then, in conforming to the pattern noted by Laub that '[t]o not return from this silence is rule', the composer's fictional fate symbolises the silence that has surrounded much of the Communist past.

Moreover, Herman points out that '[t]he goal of recounting the trauma story is integration, not exorcism. [...] The fundamental premise of the psychotherapeutic work is a belief in the restorative power of truth-telling'.<sup>489</sup> The composer's failure to 'truth-tell' reflects the nation's lack of open discussion of, or public memorial to, the Communist past so that the past remains uncomfortably unintegrated into public memory. Just as the composer fails to reach personal 'restoration' and as a consequence takes his life, the nation (as observed by scholars in diverse disciplines including history, politics, culture, and literature) equally failed to reach a state of social 'restoration'. The specific effects of this uneasy relationship with the past will later be examined in relation to the post-Communist era as it is narrated in the epilogue to *Les Bouleaux*.

### **Dying of Guilt?**

The tension between silence and speech in *Les Bouleaux* is also closely related to the concept of the power of guilt and complicity in ways that I will now examine in the context of the composer's actions. Herman cites studies of veterans of Vietnam which expose the correlation between 'unresolved guilt' and extreme PTSD symptoms, to the extent that '[t]hree of the men died by

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<sup>489</sup> Herman, p. 181.

suicide during the course of the study'.<sup>490</sup> My discussion of Páleníček's depictions of the composer and woman has already exposed the manner in which citizens of totalitarian societies can experience a blurring of the traditionally perceived boundaries between victim and perpetrator, and are accordingly torn between innocence and guilt. I have resisted an interpretation of either figure as unequivocally representative of either side of this dichotomy, positing that within the context of politically oppressive societies, 'normal' patterns of socially or morally acceptable behaviours are put under pressure. Indeed, part of the trauma of Communist experience lies in the fact that many individuals, who may have been in other regards 'tout à fait correct'<sup>491</sup> were, like the composer, cowed or coerced by the power of the 'public sphere' into actions (or failures to act) which, when viewed from outside that 'sphere' or context, it seems difficult to justify ethically. The composer is consequently both the perpetrator of an atrocious crime *and* the victim of the trauma of being made complicit with the crimes of the regime through his fear of being associated with the woman, whom he perceives as 'un condamné en fuite'.<sup>493</sup>

The composer's initial reaction to his son's questioning is to maintain the veneer of ignorance that he has successfully created over the past twenty years. In fact, he deflects the personal nature of the questioning by referring not to himself but to his friend, the judge who had 'présidé à ce terrible procès où il y a eu des morts'.<sup>494</sup> The choice of syntax in this phrase indicates the refusal to

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<sup>490</sup> Ibid., p. 50, referring to H. Hendin and A. P. Haas, 'Suicide and Guilt as Manifestations of PTSD in Vietnam Combat Veterans', in *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 148 (1991), 586-91.

<sup>491</sup> *LB*, p. 40. This is the term used by the composer to describe an old friend, a judge whose condemnation to death of the accused at a show trial was later heavily criticised. Note that the trial referred to here, namely the Slanský trial, is discussed later in this chapter.

<sup>493</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>494</sup> Ibid., p. 40.

accept personal responsibility for Communist-era crimes, since the words 'il y a eu des morts' avoid acknowledging that there was an active agent behind these deaths. The composer is also conceding that, to varying degrees, the constraints of living under a totalitarian regime put pressure on individuals to ignore the events unfolding in plain view, which in turn made them complicit. Even the judge, he says, claimed to have known nothing: "Ma foi, je n'en savais rien. J'ai cru ce que j'ai vu et je n'ai rien vu de suspect".<sup>496</sup> In referring to his friend's profession of judge, the composer is, moreover, alerting his son to the difficulties of understanding the past since, he tells him, '[ê]tre juge n'est pas un métier facile'.<sup>497</sup>

This apparently calm response to his son's questioning seems to suggest that the composer has worked through the past and recovered from the guilt from which, as we saw earlier, he felt the need to cleanse himself in his daily bathes in the forest. However, immediately after this passage, we see the composer alone, privately venting his fury at the notion that he might have been in some way implicated in the criminality of the regime in the following self-righteous terms: "C'est comme ça qu'on me remercie? [...] J'ai construit un empire, moi! Aux prix d'un grand nombre de compromis! [...] Pour qui ai-je fait tout cela, hein, pour qui? Oh, pas pour moi!"<sup>498</sup> This attempt to re-cast himself as a victim of the era closely correlates to Mark's understanding of the way that many Central European citizens had 'assimilated themselves into the system and felt morally compromised as a result' to the extent that after the end of the regime, there was a tendency to re-cast their life stories by assuming a self-absolving

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<sup>496</sup> Ibid.

<sup>497</sup> Ibid.

<sup>498</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

'victim identity'.<sup>499</sup> Without in any way questioning or diluting the horror of the traumas suffered during this era, my interpretation of the composer as an embodiment of this crisis of identity allows us to consider anew the national dilemma surrounding the issue of remembrance. Like the composer who fails to bear testimony to the woman's fate, a part of the surviving generation (of the Czechoslovak Communist era, and indeed of totalitarian regimes more widely) is perhaps suffering from the traumatic guilt of complicity in that they have become passive 'bystanders'<sup>500</sup> to crimes committed by (or under the 'sphere' of influence of) the regime. This position is supported by Herman's insight into the dilemma between silence and speech faced by witnesses to unpleasant events, when '[w]ithout a supportive social environment, the bystander usually succumbs to the temptation to look the other way'.<sup>501</sup> As I have shown in my earlier discussion of the 'public sphere', for citizens of Communist societies the 'social environment' is in no way conducive to the act of standing up or speaking out against atrocities.

In this section, I have argued that, ultimately, the composer is driven to take his life because, as Laub claims, 'one has to know one's buried truth in order to be able to live one's life';<sup>502</sup> his inability, dictated as I have shown by both socio-political and personal factors, to either acknowledge or confess to his 'buried truth' eventually renders his life intolerable and entails a return of the

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<sup>499</sup> Mark, p. 187. Mark cites, amongst others, the example of a Czech interviewee (referred to as 'Jiří') whose brother-in-law inscribed himself into the story of victimisation because he was unable to reconcile himself to having toed the party line in order to thrive socially and professionally.

<sup>500</sup> As the term is used and defined by Herman, p. 8.

<sup>501</sup> Herman, p. 8.

<sup>502</sup> Laub, 'Truth and Testimony', in Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, pp. 61-75, p. 63.

suppressed trauma in the flashbacks. The analysis I have made of his silence and consequent suicide reflects Herman's insight that,

Folk wisdom is filled with ghosts who refuse to rest in their graves until their stories are told. Murder will out. Remembering and telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisites both for the restoration of the social order and for the healing of individual victims.<sup>503</sup>

Like the 'ghosts' of folklore, the unremembered ghost of the woman has indeed refused to rest in her grave, returning to haunt the composer in the form of the corporeal flashbacks he experiences. Laub's claim that '[r]emaining frozen in guilt not only sustains a culture of silence but also induces defences that prevent working through the past'<sup>504</sup> is upheld by the way in which his failure to testify to the 'terrible' past has made 'healing' impossible for the composer, as his suicide proves. In the next section, I will consider the extent to which remembering the past is essential not only to 'individual victims' such as the fictional composer (who, as I have argued is both victim and perpetrator), but also to 'the restoration of the social order', envisaged by Herman, as it is manifest in Páleníček's retrospective return to the 'buried' past through the fictional vehicle of *Les Bouleaux*.

## **Part IV. Remembering and Speaking Out**

In her study of a series of video testimonies given by Holocaust survivors, Felman refers to one particular account by a surviving victim named Menachem

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<sup>503</sup> Herman, p. 1.

<sup>504</sup> Schwab, p. 13.

S. Menachem recalls how he never spoke of his experiences as a child survivor of Plashow; how indeed he drew a veil over the entire subject of the Holocaust, denying its existence even in his own memory in his assertion that '[i]t just wasn't there'.<sup>505</sup> By eradicating history, he was able to persuade himself that he has not been affected by it in any way, likening the process to 'walk[ing] under the rain without getting wet'.<sup>506</sup> The mantra of denial by which the composer lives after his experience during the encounter scene – '[s]urtout, ne pas pleurer, le lendemain, éloigner les chiens, faire comme si de rien n'était'<sup>507</sup> – resonates clearly with Menachem's denial of history; like Menachem, the protagonist appears to have survived 'without getting wet'. What is particularly illuminating here in the context of the legacy that is passed on, via these silences, to the next generation, is the fact that, when Menachem eventually and reluctantly does decide to testify to the horrific events he had suffered and witnessed, the process of speaking out causes him to reflect on the damages done to later generations by the *denial of its memory* by the survivor generation:

The thing that troubles me right now is the following: if we don't deal with our feelings, if we don't understand our experience, what are we doing to our children? [...] Are we transferring our anxieties, our fears, our problems, to the generations to come?<sup>508</sup>

Menachem's fear that the act of silencing the past transmits to future generations a state of unresolved 'anxieties [and] problems' intersects with and extends the theory that the articulation of trauma is essential to the processes of healing: his story suggests that the absence of healing experienced by his generation is transmitted, through their silences, to the next generation(s). This

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<sup>505</sup> Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale, T. 152, Menachem S., cited by Felman, in Felman and Laub (eds), p. 46.

<sup>506</sup> Ibid.

<sup>507</sup> *LB*, p. 30.

<sup>508</sup> Menachem S., cited by Felman, in Felman and Laub (eds), p. 47.

process of transference of survivor 'anxieties [...] fears [...] problems' to future generations will form the focal point of my analysis here in Part IV as I consider how *Les Bouleaux* externalises not only the experiences sustained in twentieth-century Czechoslovakia, but equally the post-1989 generation's struggle to come to terms with that legacy.

I will apply theories regarding the concepts of 'transgenerational legacy' and the creation of 'postmemory'<sup>509</sup> (with reference particularly to Hirsch's work in this area) in order to expose the need experienced by subsequent generations to 'remember and tell the truth' (to return to Herman's words)<sup>510</sup> about the events obscured by what Fresco has termed the 'black hole' of silenced memory. My argument is underpinned by an awareness that, since, as Schwab observes, the fabric of postmemory is intrinsically 'shot through with holes and gaps',<sup>511</sup> in ways that I have demonstrated above in relation to the composer's silence and the 'information gaps' that pervade this text, the processes of the 'recovery' of memory are inevitably fraught with difficulty. As I consider whether *Les Bouleaux* reaches a place of resolution of the tension between silence and speech that continues to be experienced by today's post-Communist generation, I therefore take into account not only the factors that enable the younger generations to speak out about the past, but also the obstacles that constrain this process. Mark's reading of the lasting impact of the Communist legacy continues to be useful here in shedding light on the difficulties post-Communist generations have experienced in formulating a voice in which to

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<sup>509</sup> The term 'postmemory' was coined by Hirsch and is expounded at length in 'Surviving Images', esp. pp. 9-13.

<sup>510</sup> Herman, p.1.

<sup>511</sup> Schwab, p. 14.

break the silences surrounding the past.<sup>512</sup> As I conclude this chapter, I will open up the question of whether *Les Bouleaux* may be considered to be part of the ‘restoration of the social order and [...] the healing of individual victims’ envisaged not only by Herman, but also by Henke and other critics (cited in the course of this chapter) in their evaluations of the power of the articulation of trauma to reconstitute ‘shattered identities’.

### **‘Unearthing’ the Past**

In her account of eight interviews with the descendants of Jewish victims and survivors of the Holocaust, Fresco describes the descendants’ inheritance of silence and aporia of knowledge about the past as ‘the gaping, vertiginous black hole of the unmentionable years’.<sup>513</sup> In the context of Central European Communism, this ‘black hole’, embedded in *Les Bouleaux* both in the composer’s silences and in the textual indeterminacies and gaps described above, functions as a ‘hole of memory’<sup>514</sup> whereby Páleníček’s generation is divorced from a knowledge of the past. Schwab also engages with the impact of this ‘black hole’ on subsequent generations in a manner that can help us to better understand the way in which *Les Bouleaux* continues to be haunted by the corporeal ghost of the woman despite the lapse of half a century between the events of the fifties and the writing of the story. Drawing on the theories of psychoanalysts Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, and on Jacques Derrida’s subsequent concept of cryptonymy, she outlines her interpretation of the way

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<sup>512</sup> Mark, 2010.

<sup>513</sup> In his article in Felman and Laub (eds), Laub refers to the article by Fresco. Citations here are from the original article.

<sup>514</sup> Laub, in Felman and Laub (eds), pp. 64-65, uses this term with reference to Fresco’s analysis.

the past returns to haunt later generations, telling us that ‘Nicolas Abraham envisions a crypt in which people bury unspeakable events [...]. It is as if in this psychic tomb they harbour an undead ghost’.<sup>515</sup> We can see one such ‘undead ghost’ in the corporeal return of the woman in the flashback scene; we recall that she appears so alive to the composer that he can feel ‘les os de tes doigts, mon amour, resserrés contre moi, contre moi!’<sup>516</sup> Unable to mourn and integrate these ghosts, the direct survivors of mass trauma pass them on to the next generations in the processes of silencings and denials reviewed in Parts II and III above so that, as Schwab tells us, ‘[i]t is the children or descendants [...] who will be haunted by what is buried in this tomb [...]. It is almost as if these children become the recipients not only of their parent’s lived memories, but also of their somatic memories’.<sup>517</sup> Although Páleníček’s writing is not overtly or factually autobiographical, his preoccupation with, and need to write about, the experience of the previous generations confirms the inheritance of memory described here by Schwab. The transmission of ‘somatic’ memory can be seen in the fact that the ghostly memory of the woman does not ‘die’ with the composer but continues to haunt his sons and indeed his grandson-narrator (as we shall further see in my analysis of the epilogue), emerging finally through the narration of *Les Bouleaux*.<sup>518</sup> The text therefore becomes a place of mourning

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<sup>515</sup> Schwab, p. 1, drawing on Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis*, vol. I, trans. by Nicholas T. Rand (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

<sup>516</sup> *LB*, p. 41, cited in full above.

<sup>517</sup> Schwab, pp. 4 & 14.

<sup>518</sup> The processes, described by Schwab, of non-verbally passing ‘somatic’ memory (as opposed to ‘lived memories’ which are passed on verbally) from one generation to the next could be compared to recent investigations in the field of behavioural sciences into the transmission of traumatic memory on behavioural and neuroanatomical levels. Brian G. Dias and Kerry J. Ressler conducted a clinical trial on mice into the effects on subsequent generations of olfactory conditioning of the parental generation, and found that the offspring of the mice were genetically altered by the experience of the parents (in that the offspring

for the unacknowledged and ‘unquiet’ ghosts of the past in a manner that I will further consider as my chapter draws towards a conclusion.

Schwab goes on to describe the vicarious nature of the ensuing relationship with the past that the inheriting generations (represented in *Les Bouleaux* by the composer’s son and grandson) must contend with:

While victims of trauma live with the scars of memory so to speak – gaps, amnesia, distortion, revision, or even fugue states or intrusive flashbacks – the recipients of transgenerational trauma live with a “postmemory” that comes to them secondhand. Like the memory of the parental generation, it is fragmentary and shot through with holes and gaps, but in different ways.<sup>521</sup>

Living with this ‘secondhand’, or transmitted, form of memory that is ‘shot through with holes and gaps’ is in itself a traumatic experience, one that latently wounds the younger generations just as the original trauma (in this case, that of the political troubles of the twentieth century) damaged the surviving generation. The pain of this position has been described by McGlothlin as ‘a sort of epistemological exile’ in which the inheriting generation is ‘left stranded on the other side of a history it does not know by an event it did not experience, cut off

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continued to avoid and fear a certain smell to which the parents had been exposed, despite never having previously encountered that particular smell themselves). The conditioning to which the parental generation was subjected resulted in both physiological and neurological changes in the next generations: ‘The experiences of a parent, even before conceiving, markedly influence both structure and function in the nervous system of subsequent generations’ (Dias and Ressler, p. 95). The discovery that ‘somatic’ (in this case, olfactory) memory is passed between generations on a genetic level strongly supports my argument that traumatic experience passes from the first generation to subsequent generations in such a deeply embodied manner that it becomes an integral part of the memory of that generation, and as such cannot be ignored. Whilst more investigation is clearly required into the cross-fertilisation that is possible between the field of neurogenetics and critical enquiry into the narrative formulation of trauma, Dias and Ressler themselves indicate the potential of their study to ‘contribute to the etiology and potential intergenerational transmission of risk for neuropsychiatric disorders, such as phobias, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder’ (p. 95). Dias and Ressler, ‘Parental Olfactory Experience Influences Behavior and Neural Structure in Subsequent Generations’, in *Nature Neuroscience*, 17 (2014), 89–96.

<sup>521</sup> Schwab, p. 14. Schwab takes the term ‘postmemory’ from Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1997).

from the essential knowledge of what happened to their parents or what their parents did'.<sup>522</sup> If we accept that Páleníček and his generation have been 'cut off' from the past in this way, then McGlothlin's concept of an 'epistemological exile' compounds the position of distance from his homeland from which, as I pointed out in the Introduction to this chapter, Páleníček is writing, and which is embedded in the narrator's perception of himself as 'déjà doublement déraciné'.<sup>523</sup> Writing out the past, as we see it in *Les Bouleaux*, is then a means of reclaiming a lost inheritance by re-establishing a connection with the source of the transmitted memory.

The psychological damage caused to those living with the 'fragmentary' legacy described by Schwab and McGlothlin can be seen in *Les Bouleaux* in the failing relationship between the composer and his sons, which is characterised by 'disputes [...] sans aucun cri, faites de tensions uniquement'.<sup>524</sup> The sons are reeling from the effects of this strained relationship, which is characterised by an absence of speech, intimacy, or openness: the eldest is an alcoholic with a failing career despite a degree of brilliance; the second escaped the family home at the age of seventeen; the third has sacrificed his passion for botany in order to pursue a career as a pianist in a futile attempt to please the father; and the youngest has enjoyed a successful musical career 'au seul prix de deux divorces'.<sup>525</sup> The sons' lives have been damaged in a manner which recalls Hirsch's observation that many descendants of survivors or victims experience a transfer in the effects and symptoms of trauma such that their own 'belated

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<sup>522</sup> McGlothlin, p. 229.

<sup>523</sup> *LB*, p. 47.

<sup>524</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>525</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 38-40.

stories are displaced by the powerful stories of the previous generation, shaped by monumental traumatic events that resist understanding and integration'.<sup>526</sup> In the case of the composer's sons, their lives have in fact been 'displaced' by the 'powerful' *absence* of knowledge about their father's story: their generation is aware of the 'monumental' nature of the events that took place in the 1950s (as embedded in that section of *Les Bouleaux*), and yet they do not know the individual story of their father's involvement. The latency of trauma, which I have identified earlier in this chapter as an underlying reason for the composer's (and nation's) inability to process the traumatic past, appears, then, to assail the next generations in an equally powerful manner, and I will now turn to the way in which they may respond to this 'exile' from their parents' stories.

Hirsch posits that '[p]erhaps it is *only* in subsequent generations that trauma can be witnessed and worked through, by those who were not there to live it but who received its effects, belatedly'.<sup>527</sup> I have earlier argued in my analysis of Hodrová's work that, through the act of writing out the traumatic images that resurface from the past, a degree of 'working through' trauma can in fact be undertaken by those who 'live[d] it'.<sup>528</sup> However, it is clear from the traumatic return of the unknown past in *Les Bouleaux* that 'those who were not there to live it' are nonetheless left with a legacy that must be 'worked through' on their own terms, and integrated into their own, changed, 'post-traumatic' identities. Hirsch has described this need to know about the past as the work of

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<sup>526</sup> Hirsch, 'Surviving Images', p. 12.

<sup>527</sup> Note also that Hirsch makes the point that the inherent latency of trauma gives credibility to the belated or transgenerational nature of the processing of trauma, saying that '[t]he notion of postmemory derives from the recognition of the belated nature of traumatic memory. If indeed one of the signs of trauma is its delayed recognition [...], then it is not surprising that it is transmitted across generations'. 'Surviving Images', p. 12.

<sup>528</sup> See this thesis, Chapter One, 'Writing as Fugue?'

'postmemory', which, in the context of the Holocaust, she says is rooted in a need to 'uncover the pits again, to unearth the layers of forgetting, to go beneath the screen surfaces that disguise the crimes'.<sup>529</sup> Whilst the imagery employed here by Hirsch is shaped by memories such as those of the mass graves that covered up the horrors of the Holocaust, I would suggest that this notion of 'uncovering' the past is equally pertinent to the need to expose the sinister Communist past that is embodied in *Les Bouleaux* in the image of the woman's burial alive in the latrines (a burial which reinforces my argument earlier in this thesis that it is difficult to separate out the painful memories of the Second World War and the Communist era in this region of Europe).<sup>530</sup> As we have seen, her burial embodies the surviving generation's attempt to draw 'layers of forgetting' over the past; as a result of this interment of the past, the children of the Communist years (like Hirsch and Schwab and their peers growing up in the wake of the Holocaust)<sup>531</sup> are tormented by a need to 'uncover [...], unearth' the horrors of the 'pits' of the past.

It is unsurprising, then, that the late 1960s in Central Europe should be characterised by a determination on the part of the children of the survivors and witnesses of the events of the 1940s and 1950s to expose the traumatic events of those early years of Communism. This determination culminated in the momentous events of 1968, which in Czechoslovakia emerged as the Prague

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<sup>529</sup> Hirsch, 'Surviving Images', p. 20.

<sup>530</sup> As discussed in the Introduction to this thesis, the histories of the Second World War, the Holocaust, and Communism are intrinsically intertwined in much of the Central European region in question, and nowhere perhaps more so than in the Sudeten borderlands and North Bohemia, where the concentration camp Terezín as well as the detention camps used by the regime were clustered.

<sup>531</sup> Note that Hirsch was born in Romania after the Second World War and moved to the United States as a teenager; Schwab was born in West Germany and also moved to the United States in early adulthood.

Spring uprising.<sup>532</sup> This 'need to know' is embedded in the 1970s passage of *Les Bouleaux*, as the composer's third son eventually broaches the question of the past in the series of direct and searching questions to which I have already referred: "Papa? Tu savais pour les procès? Tu savais pour les camps de travail? Pour les prisonniers politiques? Toi, tu faisais quoi à l'époque?"<sup>533</sup> His questions demonstrate a desire to understand the politically criminal past, and particularly his familial position in relation to its events.

However, the desire for more open speech about past events in Czechoslovakia was crushed by the Soviet invasion and the ensuing period of restrictive and censorial normalisation that continued into the 1970s, prohibiting any further move towards freedom of speech or the quest for openness regarding the past.<sup>534</sup> In *Les Bouleaux*, the repression of the second generation's need to 'unearth' the past is demonstrated in the way in which the son's curiosity is thwarted by his father's continuing denial. Unlike Menachem S. (whose story is cited above), who belatedly finds some degree of relief in the process of giving testimony to the past,<sup>535</sup> the protagonist of *Les Bouleaux* is never able to articulate his past, and the ultimate silence of his consequent suicide definitively divorces his offspring from the knowledge of their familial past, thereby perpetuating the 'black hole' of memory. The legacy of silencing and the consequent urge to 'unearth' the horror of the past is thus passed on to the next

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<sup>532</sup> Protests against dictatorial past and present atrocities affected not only Central and Eastern Europe, but also took hold on a worldwide scale, in countries including Mexico, Northern Ireland, and Brazil; this supports my claim for the wider-reaching relevance of critical enquiry into this specific context.

<sup>533</sup> *LB*, p. 38.

<sup>534</sup> Schwab notes a similar course of events in West Germany relating to memories of the Holocaust and the second generation's struggle to come to terms with their parents' past. See Schwab, p. 5.

<sup>535</sup> Felman, in Felman and Laub (eds), p. 46.

generations, represented in *Les Bouleaux* by the narrator, who is revealed in the epilogue to be the composer's grandson. There is therefore an increasing chronological distance between those who seek to understand the past, and the actual events themselves. This is a distance that corresponds to Maurice Halbwachs's understanding that:

le besoin d'écrire l'histoire d'une période, d'une société, et même d'une personne ne s'éveille-t-il que lorsqu'elles sont déjà trop éloignées dans le passé pour qu'on ait chance de trouver longtemps encore autour de soi beaucoup de témoins qui en conservent quelque souvenir.<sup>536</sup>

The 'epistemological exile' experienced by the second generation is not only heightened by increasing chronological distance, but complicated by the fact that the chance of recovering memory through 'de témoins qui en conservent quelque souvenir' is increasingly threatened as time passes. The unresolved pain of this legacy, as we see it embedded in the plot, imagery, and textual structure of *Les Bouleaux*, does not abate with the increasing distance and complications of time, but rather crescendos to a climax in the angry tone of the epilogue to *Les Bouleaux*, which will be analysed in the concluding section of this chapter.

## **Negotiating the Distance between Communist and Post-Communist**

### **Versions of Life Stories**

As well as the growing difficulty in recovering the past that comes from this chronological distancing, we should not forget that Communist discourse and the conditioning of the 'public sphere' (in the manner analysed above in relation

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<sup>536</sup> Maurice Halbwachs, *La Mémoire collective* (Paris: PUF, 1968), pp. 68-69.

to Butler's work) also has an ongoing impact on the process of 'unearthing' the past. As Mark has pointed out, current generations have had to contend with the way in which 'new public memories altered what could, and could not, be said after 1989':<sup>537</sup> they experienced, in other words, a disjunction between established modes of discourse that were acceptable to the Communist regime and newly emerging discourses in the post-Communist 'public sphere'. Mark's analysis of the reverberations of the 'unfinished revolution' in Central Europe is useful in framing an understanding of the specific difficulties surrounding the process of negotiating a new voice (or voices) in which the story of the Communist past might be articulated. In particular, we can turn to Mark's description of the Communist ideological practice of 'autobiography', or 'životopis',<sup>538</sup> which consisted of using an 'intensely political conception of the life story'<sup>539</sup> as a means of validating one's personal experience in a manner that was politically acceptable to the regime. After the revolution, as a newly democratic society negotiated the 'clashes between past experiences and new ideas of what is politically or morally appropriate',<sup>541</sup> many had to realign their 'autobiographies' so that a prolific re-writing of history ensued.<sup>542</sup> We have seen this process in my analysis of the composer's belated re-invention of himself as a compromised victim of the regime: 'J'ai construit un empire, moi! Au prix d'un

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<sup>537</sup> Mark, p. xxiv.

<sup>538</sup> In Czechoslovakia, the 'životopis' (which literally translates as 'written life', and to some extent resembled the Western practice of curriculum vitae) was an essential requirement for any career progression or social advantage (such as entry to higher education). This document was intended to demonstrate one's family history and credentials in such a manner as to prove one's political suitability, even when this required substantial distortions or concealments of the 'truth'. Although Mark uses the term 'autobiography' to designate this practice, his use of the term is designed to highlight the difference between Communist autobiographical practices and autobiography as it is more traditionally understood in the West.

<sup>539</sup> Mark, p. xxvi.

<sup>541</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xxv.

<sup>542</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. xxi-xxviii, for a detailed account of the ideological pressures that fostered this re-writing of history.

grand nombre de compromis! [...] Pour qui ai-je fait tout cela, hein, pour qui? Oh, pas pour moi! Si vous pensez que tout cela m'a été agréable?'.<sup>543</sup> This retrospective re-casting of history amounts to a perpetuation in the post-1989 era of the Communist ideological use of autobiography as a means of justifying involvement in a past which, in the changing political environment, was newly being perceived and openly discussed as shameful.

This perpetuation has created a dilemma for post-generations, who have also been confronted with a lack of appropriate discourse in which to explore the way the past has shaped their own life stories and identities.<sup>544</sup> Paul John Eakin points out in his discussion of the writing of life stories that 'testimony is necessarily mediated by available cultural models of identity and the discourses in which they are expressed';<sup>545</sup> it is therefore unsurprising that, in an era that has seen profound shifts in 'cultural models' of what constitutes morally and socially acceptable identities and autobiographies, the act of formulating one's life story should be fraught with difficulty. This difficulty is referred to in the epilogue to *Les Bouleaux*, which recounts the way in which recent history has produced conflicting versions of the composer's life story. The narrator points out that, depending on the political allegiance of the observer, and on the point in time at which his story is told, his grandfather has been variously reincarnated as 'un artiste véritable', a forgotten figure ('les gens ne savent plus qui il était') who is disdained for his Communist ties ('et ce seulement parce

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<sup>543</sup> *LB*, p. 41; see also my earlier section of analysis in 'Dying of Guilt'.

<sup>544</sup> My reading of the composer's perpetuation of denial when questioned by his son suggests that the wound sustained by the parental generation is too raw to allow the second generation to 'touch' it, resulting in a generation-long silence which again reflects the actual course of the recovery of memory in much of the former Eastern Bloc, as well as in other national contexts such as the experience of the Spanish nation after the Civil War.

<sup>545</sup> Paul John Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1999), p. 4.

qu'après la révolution, on a décrété qu'il était communiste'), and even a 'fasciste'.<sup>546</sup> This re-casting of history leads to a crisis of identity in the younger generations which, I shall argue as I draw towards a conclusion to this chapter, drives the need to speak out.

It should also be noted that the post-1989 lack of discourse within which to frame the recovery of memory helps to explain the marked absence of engagement with the recent past within Czech literature in the immediately post-Communist years;<sup>547</sup> it is only in the new millennium that this generation-long vacuum is gradually being filled.<sup>548</sup> This generation-long literary silence is again reflected in *Les Bouleaux* in the way the composer blocks his son's desire to know and speak out, so that it is left to the narrator-grandson to 'speak' through the text in the next generation. In the concluding section of this chapter, I will turn to the question that arises regarding factors that have enabled the current generations (and Páleníček in particular) to move away from this vacuum towards an articulation of the 'unspeakable' past, although such an articulation must also be a 're-invention', as noted by Hirsch, owing to the 'epistemological exile' that intervenes between the events and their belated retelling.

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<sup>546</sup> *LB*, pp. 46-7.

<sup>547</sup> It is worth noting that a similar vacuum in the processes of the recovery and formulation of public memory can be noted in the delay in terms of the erection of monuments or establishing of public institutions to commemorate the fall of the regime or start of independence. See Mark, 2010, esp. pp. 1-2, for an account of the belated evolution of commemorative public holidays in the Czech Republic.

<sup>548</sup> For a survey of prominent writers who have recently engaged with the Communist legacy, see, for example, Chitnis, *Literature in Post-Communist Russia and Eastern Europe*, esp. Chapter 5, pp. 80-114; also Porter, 2001, final chapter, pp. 162-83.

## **“Me Faudra-t-il le Renier Pour Pouvoir Vivre?” Páleníček’s Generation and the Reinvention of Memory**

Hirsch has spoken of the conflicting nature of the transgenerational need to know about the past, which is made up of, ‘their curiosity and desire, as well as their ambivalences about wanting to own their parents’ knowledge’,<sup>549</sup> and both the ‘desire’ and the ‘ambivalences’ can be seen in the urgent and angry tone of the epilogue to *Les Bouleaux*. The crisis of identity that is produced by the silences surrounding the past, and by the recent shifts in modes of ‘remembering’ the past, can be seen in the final words of the text, posed by the narrator in first person voice: “moi qui suis déjà doublement déraciné, me faudra-t-il le renier pour pouvoir vivre?”<sup>550</sup> The object of this demand (‘le’) refers to the grandfather figure whom the narrator has been discussing, but I shall argue here that there is a conflation between the narrator and the author in these final words of the text, and that we can therefore also interpret the (narrator-)author to be referring to the homeland from which he has been ‘doublement déraciné’ by the combination of language, physical geographies, and the ‘epistemological exile’ of time. McGlothlin has highlighted the painful nature of postmemory in her image of its processes as ‘the garment that the writer simultaneously rends and mends’,<sup>551</sup> an image which suggests that in order to reach a place of ‘mending’, it is necessary to go through processes of tearing down. I propose that the act of writing out the fictional version of the past in *Les Bouleaux* has been a process of ‘rending’, and, before concluding this

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<sup>549</sup> Hirsch, ‘Surviving Images’, p. 12.

<sup>550</sup> *LB*, p. 47.

<sup>551</sup> McGlothlin, p. 12.

chapter, will consider whether the process has indeed achieved the 'mending' envisaged by McGlothlin.

One factor that plays an important role in the third generational work of postmemory in *Les Bouleaux* is the self-referential nature of memory itself, exemplified by Israel Rosenfield's claim that '[e]very recollection refers not only to the remembered event or person or object but to the person who is remembering'.<sup>552</sup> As Eakin points out, this also means that memory is 'embedded in present consciousness';<sup>553</sup> memory, then, is integrally dependent on the personal, chronological, and social context of the individual (or group) who remembers. The argument that memory is inherently transformative in ways that depend on the time, place, and circumstances of *remembering* also intersects with the underlying position held by Caruth, Henke, and Robson that traumatic memory can only be narrated by means of 'a filtering of the original event through the fictions of traumatic repression'.<sup>554</sup> Much of their work is based on clinical research finding that, in the words of Bessel van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart, traumatic narrative modifies reality by 'soften[ing] the intrusive power of the original, unmitigated horror'.<sup>555</sup> In the context of trauma narrative, Henke says that this process of modification is played out through 'the protective space of iteration' that enables the author to utter the 'unutterable',<sup>556</sup> whilst Robson similarly posits that 'it may even be necessary to re-imagine and

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<sup>552</sup> Israel Rosenfield, 1992, p. 42, cited in Eakin, p. 19.

<sup>553</sup> Eakin, p. 19. See esp. pp. 10-25, for a review of theories regarding the self-referential nature of memory.

<sup>554</sup> Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, pp. 15-16.

<sup>555</sup> Bessel van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart, 'The Intrusive Past', in Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, pp. 158-82, p. 178.

<sup>556</sup> Henke, p. xix.

fictionalize a traumatic past in order to survive and deal with the past'.<sup>557</sup> In the case of the transgenerational remembering that takes place in *Les Bouleaux*, we have indeed seen that the past has been 're-imagined' and 'fictionalized', although it is clear that the graphic images of the woman's death, burial alive, and frightening 'return' cannot be described as a 'softening' the 'original' trauma, an apparent contradiction which I will discuss in the light of the specific nature of post-Communist memorial discourse.

This understanding of the transformative capacity of survivor memory also intersects with Hirsch's claim that *postmemory* is not recollection but 'representation, projection, and creation'.<sup>558</sup> On the one hand, survivors must modify their experience in order to render it speakable, as in the processes of repeating and 'working through' the images of trauma that we have seen in Hodrová's work. On the other hand, the postgenerations, for whom memory is transmitted 'by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up'<sup>559</sup> (and to this list we could add silences), must 'project' or 'create' memory in order to fill the gaps left by the 'black hole' of the obscured past, so that postmemory becomes a process of reinvention. Páleníček's fictional reworking of history in *Les Bouleaux* is an example of this process of retrospectively reconfiguring the past in an attempt to move towards the future, so that by the closing words of the epilogue the (author-)narrator has moved away from the possibility of renouncing the past ("me faudra-t-il le renier") towards staking out future identities ("pour pouvoir vivre?").<sup>560</sup>

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<sup>557</sup> Robson, p. 25.

<sup>558</sup> Hirsch, 'Surviving Images', p. 9.

<sup>559</sup> Hirsch, cited on her website <[www.postmemory.net](http://www.postmemory.net)> [last accessed 02/07/2013].

<sup>560</sup> *LB*, p. 47.

The process of transforming memories of the past that is integral to the ‘work of postmemory’ bears a superficial resemblance to the ideological reconfiguration of Communist life stories that I have discussed in the previous section. However, the function of these two processes is inherently different: whilst we have seen that the ideological recasting of life stories perpetuates the ‘burial’ of painful or self-implicating versions of the past, the transformational form of postmemory that we can observe in *Les Bouleaux* confronts the very *worst* that might be buried within the ‘pits’ of memory.<sup>561</sup> The fictional reinvention of the composer’s life story constitutes an acknowledgement of the worst that might conceivably have happened, in the guise of the woman’s tragic and grotesque fate at the hands of the narrator’s grandfather. Since the narrator-author refuses to deny this ‘worst-case scenario’, I propose that the ‘reinvention’ that takes place in the text can be considered a reversal of the lingering Communist autobiographical practices of ‘glossing’ the past to make it more palatable (both to oneself and in the context of the ‘public sphere’).

The pronouns used in those last words of the text (“*me* faudra-t-il *le* renier”) also demand closer inspection in the context of a tale which is predominantly written in the third person and which, as I pointed out in the introduction to this chapter, has been described by the author as non-autobiographical.<sup>562</sup> The shift in the epilogue to the first person calls me to examine ways in which the author inscribes himself into this text, thereby owning rather than denying the ‘worst’ of

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<sup>561</sup> Other contemporary Czech writers follow this pattern of writing out the ‘worst possible’ versions of the past; for one example, see Jáchym Topol’s horrific tale revolving around Terezín (the camp referred to in this chapter), and which (like his other novels) merges historical truths with fictional reinterpretations in a manner that can be compared to *Les Bouleaux*. Topol, *The Devil’s Workshop*, trans. by Alex Zucker (London: Portobello Books, 2013).

<sup>562</sup> Personal correspondence with Páleníček, see Appendix.

the national past that I have argued it suggests. I will therefore now consider the means by which the text uses self-referentiality to own the horrors of the past, thus defying the pattern of 'glossing' or disowning the realities of the past by locating authorial identity within the re-invention of the very worst case scenario regarding the past.

Páleníček's stance that *Les Bouleaux* is non-autobiographical would indeed seem to be borne out by its non-conformation to traditional definitions of the genre, exemplified by Phillippe Lejeune's 'pacte autobiographique' whereby autobiographical texts maintain a 'truthful' relation to an external world of reference and testify to the identity of 'une personne réelle' who tells his or her story objectively and in the first person.<sup>563</sup> Later scholarly discussion, however, has opened up the parameters within which autobiography can be considered, and indeed has led to the widespread use of the more recent and encompassing term 'life writing',<sup>564</sup> which I propose can be extended to *Les Bouleaux* in the light of the self-referentiality which I analyse below. Moreover, in his volume *Fictions of the Self: the End of Autobiography*, Michael Sprinker adopts a Nietzschean approach in order to expose the unstable relationship between the author, narrator and text, whereby the subject of the 'autobiographical' text is 'a creature of fiction'. The fictivity, or instability, of the textual autobiographical subject opens the way for a discussion of the complex textual relationship between the narrator, author, and protagonist of *Les Bouleaux*. I will examine three specific elements of self-referentiality in the text

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<sup>563</sup> Phillippe Lejeune, *Le Pacte autobiographique* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1975), here p. 14.

<sup>564</sup> Henke, p. xiii, notes that the term 'life writing' has been adopted by feminist critics (inspired by Virginia Woolf's use of the term) in order to challenge 'the traditional limits of autobiography' by encompassing a wide range of genres from memoirs to letters to 'other personally inflected fictional texts'. It is in this sense that I apply the term to the authors discussed in this thesis.

as I develop my argument that the process of inscribing himself into the text constitutes an owning of the past.

The first element of self-inscription into the text is the use of French anecdotal and cultural items and of course the use of French as a writing language to evoke a Central European geographical context. This can of course be attributed to Páleníček's bilingualism, and his own admission that '[m]es premiers plaisirs de lire sont venus en français [...] c'est majoritairement en français que j'ai commencé à constituer ma culture livresque'.<sup>565</sup> On one level, then, the use of French and of French items of reference in a Czech context testifies to the natural 'interpénétration des deux, ce qui contribue à brouiller les pistes'<sup>566</sup> often experienced by bilinguals who, like Páleníček, have grown up in the space 'in-between' two languages and cultures. Examples of such cross-cultural items in *Les Bouleaux* include references to Gide and to a 'Cortot',<sup>567</sup> who is mentioned in the epilogue as someone who had 'collaboré', which identifies him as Alfred Cortot, the successful but politically controversial French pianist and conductor.<sup>568</sup> These references to established French cultural figures reinforce the francophone credentials of *Les Bouleaux*, inscribing the novel more firmly into the French literary canon; this pattern can also be seen in the title of Páleníček's play, *Le Ménage de Balzac*, in which the context of the French playwright familiarises a Czech story to its French readers and reinforces the cross-fertilisation between the two milieus. The 'interpénétration'

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<sup>565</sup> Personal correspondence with Páleníček, see Appendix.

<sup>566</sup> Ibid.

<sup>567</sup> *LB*, both p. 47.

<sup>568</sup> For further information on Cortot, see Myriam Chimènes (ed.), 'Alfred Cortot et la politique musicale du gouvernement de Vichy', in *La Vie Musicale Sous Vichy* (Brussels: Éditions Complexe, 2001).

of Czech and French resulting from Páleníček's dual background can again be seen in *Les Bouleaux* in an anecdote incorporating a reference to fairy tales. An unnamed local recalls following a trail of glass shards (left over from the prewar German craft industries in the Sudeten)<sup>569</sup> which metamorphoses into the pathway of white pebbles laid through the forest by the French fairy tale character of le Petit Poucet. This trail eventually and incongruously leads the character (in his imagination) not to the ogre's house of the French tale but to the house of Baba Jaga, the child-eating hag of the popular Slavic fairy tale.<sup>570</sup> This blend of French and Slavic fairy tales constitutes a further inscription of the author's dual childhood heritage into the text. The co-presence of French and Czech has the effect of inscribing not only the author's identity onto the histories that are retold here, but also of making these stories appear 'closer to home' to the French reader: the appearance of familiar items such as Alfred Cortot or le Petit Poucet renders the stories of Central Europe more accessible to the French reader, suggesting that no one is immune to the kind of mass traumas that have plagued this region of Europe.

The second way in which the author inscribes himself into the text lies in the identity of the composer-grandfather. Whilst the events that blight the composer-protagonist's life are, as Páleníček has confirmed, purely fictitious and do not refer to the author's family history in the 'truthful' sense proper to autobiography according to Lejeune's conception, we should nonetheless recall the fact that the author's own grandfather was the successful composer Josef Páleníček. Some blurring of the line between the fictional and real-life composer

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<sup>569</sup> See the Introduction to this chapter for an account of the Sudeten-German historical context.

<sup>570</sup> *LB*, pp. 18-19.

figures can be detected, for example, in the fact that both became members of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, and that this position presumably allowed them to pursue their musical careers. (It is an established fact that Josef Páleníček joined the Party after the Second World War, whilst the fictional composer was a 'fonctionnaire' and his role as such is discussed in terms of his political activities, including, for example, a reference to 'la dernière usine qu'il avait visitée', and a list of the travel opportunities he has enjoyed in this privileged position.)<sup>571</sup> This blurring of fiction and autobiographical detail can be interpreted as part of the process by which *Les Bouleaux* refuses to disown the horrors of the past, instead staking out a place in the national history from which, as we have seen, the author has been 'déraciné' by the multiple distances of time, geography and language, but to which he is now returning through the act of 'reinventing' the past.

Finally, the separation between narrator and author, fiction and history, is at its most fragile in the epilogue, where the first person voice, in contrast to the third person that dominates the majority of the text, suggests an authorial closeness to the text in the manner described by Michel Butor when he discusses the functions of the three narrative positions.<sup>572</sup> The first person male voice of the epilogue refers to the (fictional?) composer as '[m]on grand-père', thus insisting on a fictional relationship that echoes the real-life relationship between author and grandfather Josef Páleníček. Within recent critical discussions of the genre of 'autobiography', Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson have claimed that 'it is through our autobiographical acts [...] that we give shape to, and remake

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<sup>571</sup> Ibid., pp. 7, 18, & 13-15 respectively.

<sup>572</sup> Michel Butor, *Essais sur le roman* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), p. 67.

ourselves through, memory, experience, identity, embodiment, and agency'.<sup>573</sup> Although we must not lose sight of the fact that the plot of this text is clearly fictional, I have nevertheless shown that the first four elements referred to by Smith and Watson as constituting the autobiographical act ('memory, experience, identity, embodiment') are present in the inscription of the author onto this story. I propose therefore that the elaborate and highly fictionalised form of life writing that we have seen at play in the text of *Les Bouleaux* constitutes an owning of the past, of all the very worst belonging to the past, which explodes the more comfortable practice of Communist self-validating 'životopis',<sup>574</sup> and thus constitutes a part of the process of remaking of post-Communist identities. In this manner, the writing of *Les Bouleaux* also fulfils Smith and Watson's fifth criteria for life writing, namely the deployment of 'agency', which is staked out in the narrator-author's refusal to deny the past ('me faut-il le renier [...]?').

We saw in my previous chapter on Hodrová that Henke puts forward the idea that life writing may free the traumatised subject to articulate that which is too threatening to be spoken, in terms that are recapitulated here:

What cannot be uttered might at least be written – cloaked in the mask of fiction or sanctioned by the protective space of iteration that separates the author/narrator from the protagonist/character she or he creates and from the anonymous reader/auditor she or he envisages.<sup>575</sup>

In the case of Hodrová, I demonstrated that the 'cloak' or 'mask' of fiction that separated the author from the textual world, and afforded her the distance from

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<sup>573</sup> Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), p. 81.

<sup>574</sup> See note 538.

<sup>575</sup> Henke, p. xix.

which to engage with painful memory, gradually dissolved as the author reasserted her identity. Whilst I concur with Henke's claim that fiction may function as a 'protective' safety net by distancing the writer from the traumatic events narrated, it should be added that, in the cases of both Hodrová's trilogy and Páleníček's *Les Bouleaux*, the withdrawal to that 'protective space of iteration', is in fact succeeded by a return to the self. In the case of *Les Bouleaux*, the painful 'reinvention' of the past, in which the narrator-author has acknowledged his familial and national proximity to the 'worst possible' scenario that he has inscribed into the 'black hole' of the past, does not, however, constitute a closure or 'healing' of the type envisaged by Henke. Rather, the indeterminacies, 'information gaps', and uncertainties of the narrative indicate an opening up of 'petrified' versions of history and a determination not to deny the painful nature of the past.

McGlothlin has likened the work of postgenerational remembering to sewing, because 'the act of sewing is itself also a form of marking, a repair that, with the stitches, leaves its visible traces'.<sup>576</sup> I have shown that, through the painful but liberating 'distance exquisite' afforded by the use of the French language to narrate memories of Czech pasts, and through the return to the self that is facilitated by the 'reinventions' of postmemory that nevertheless refuse to follow post-1989 patterns of 'glossing' the past, the text of *Les Bouleaux* opens up the 'visible traces' of the past for renewed consideration. My analysis has demonstrated that *Les Bouleaux* is a meeting place between, on the one hand, the need to commemorate accepted views of the past, whereby the established victims are resurrected in the figure of the persecuted and unnamed woman for

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<sup>576</sup> McGlothlin, p. 12.

whose fate the State is clearly culpable; and on the other hand, an acknowledgement that other, simultaneous understandings of the past are possible. Such understandings, however, are more painful and unsettling since they pose complex questions relating to the past in terms of complicity, guilt, or a failure to 'share the burden of another's pain', to recall Herman's observations on human fallibility when called to the difficult task of witnessing trauma.<sup>577</sup> We have seen how the 'burden' of the transmitted memory of the past is worked through in the transgenerational perspective of *Les Bouleaux*, and in the final chapter of this thesis, I will turn to the way in which the writing of the French novelist Germain approaches Czech stories in a manner that also stakes out, from her very different writing position, a place from which to 'share the burden' of the pain of others.

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<sup>577</sup> Herman, p. 7.

## Chapter Three

### Sylvie Germain: A Transnational Witness to ‘Other’ Stories of Pain

#### Part I. Writing from an Other Perspective

The critically acclaimed French novelist and essayist Sylvie Germain spent six years in Prague from 1986 until 1993 and produced four texts which will be examined in this chapter as her response to the traumatic twentieth-century events in Central Europe which, as we have seen, are also at the centre of both Daniela Hodrová's and Jean-Gaspard Páleníček's writings about their homeland. Germain's Czech writings include three texts that are often referred to collectively as her 'Prague Trilogy', comprising the novella *La Pleurante des rues de Prague* and the two novels *Immensités* and *Éclats de sel*.<sup>578</sup> The fourth text, a prose reflection on the life and works of a Bohemian poet and artist in whom Germain found a source of inspiration, is the eponymously titled *Bohuslav Reynek à Petrkov: Un nomad en sa demeure*.<sup>579</sup> Like *Les Bouleaux* by Páleníček, these texts are set in the traumatic years of twentieth-century Czechoslovakia, and collectively span the Second World War, the oppressions of the Communist era, and the Velvet Revolution that heralded the birth of a democratic nation. However, Germain's texts also incorporate references to earlier periods of history during which, as my discussion in the previous

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<sup>578</sup> Germain, *La Pleurante des rues de Prague* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992); *Immensités* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993); *Éclats de sel* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996). Abbreviated in footnotes to *LP*, *Imm.*, and *ES* respectively.

<sup>579</sup> Germain, *Bohuslav Reynek à Petrkov: Un nomade en sa demeure* (St-Cyr-sur-Loire: Christian Pirot Éditeur, 1998). Abbreviated in footnotes to *BR*.

chapters of this thesis has demonstrated, the Czechs had already suffered the traumas of subjugation to other national powers and an ensuing fragmentation of identity; this treatment of the cycles of time, in which the traumatic past is ever present and 'haunts' the text, sets up a comparison with the work of both Hodrová and Páleníček. There is also a continuity between Germain's earlier novels (which were set in France) and her Czech texts, since all of her work is preoccupied with themes of marginalisation, dispossession, and loss across a range of social and geographical contexts. As such, we can identify both contextual and thematic resonances between Germain's Czech work and that of the other writers examined here, and my analysis throughout this chapter will engage with work done in the field of the transmission of traumatic memory in order to argue that Germain's work is haunted by the ghosts of a painful past that I have shown to inhabit the work of Hodrová and Páleníček. Despite the similarities that I identify between Germain's Czech writings and the work of the other two writers, however, my analysis will maintain an awareness of her very different perspective, writing as she does about Czech suffering from a French position.

Critical studies of Germain's work to date are both numerous and highly varied in the direction of their enquiry, yet almost unanimously take as a starting point the premise that the trope of 'le mal' underlies and unifies her work,<sup>580</sup> a position that is borne out in Germain's own claim that '[a]ll my books are about the

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<sup>580</sup> See, for example, Alain Goulet, *Sylvie Germain: Œuvre romanesque. Un monde de cryptes et de fantômes* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2006); Isabelle Dotan, *Les clairs-obscur de la douleur: Regards sur l'œuvre de Sylvie Germain* (Namur: Les éditions namuroises, 2009); Toby Garfitt (ed.), *Sylvie Germain: Rose des vents et de l'ailleurs* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2003). These and other major critical works and articles on Germain's writing take this premise as a starting point.

problem of evil'.<sup>581</sup> Whether she is writing about France or Czechoslovakia, Germain is particularly preoccupied with the depravities of the twentieth century, to which she refers as 'un siècle de plomb et de crasse et de sang',<sup>582</sup> and with the consequent loss of meaning that has troubled humanity since Auschwitz. The incomprehensibility of the Holocaust (an event whose particular impact on Germain herself will be discussed later in this chapter) is a theme that runs throughout Germain's œuvre and, in the four Czech texts, intersects with the subsequent losses of the Communist era in Central Europe. Germain's understanding of the difficulty of separating out these two periods echoes the way in which we have seen that they overlap in the writings of both Hodrová and Páleníček. Germain's preoccupation with the recurrence of historical 'evil' is seen clearly in her first published novel, *Le Livre des nuits*, which is set deep in rural France and sites the losses passed down through the generations within the family of Victor-Flandrin during the course of the wars of 1870, 1914 and 1939.<sup>583</sup> The latter part of this novel relates the suffering of Victor-Flandrin as he witnesses the slaughter of his entire village by German forces and sees his last wife, Ruth, taken to her death at Sachsenhausen. I have shown in Chapter Two that Páleníček's work is driven by a need to reclaim the memory of the past that has been fragmented by the processes involved in the transgenerational transmission of memory, and I will argue here that Germain is comparably interested in the way that the memory of pain and 'le mal' are passed on, since

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<sup>581</sup> Elizabeth Young, 'Sylvie Germain – Interview with Elizabeth Young', in *The Weeping Woman on the Streets of Prague*, trans. by Judith Landry (Sawtry: Dedalus, 1993), pp. 7-13, here p. 13. Note that Young's Introduction to the volume is based on an interview she conducted with Germain, from which she cites in English; citations here are therefore in their published English form.

<sup>582</sup> *LP*, p. 63.

<sup>583</sup> Germain, *Le Livre des nuits* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985).

she has herself observed that her first novels engage with the way in which 'les souffrances passent clandestinement d'une génération à une autre'.<sup>584</sup> In the early works to which I have referred, the signs of both the sufferings and wrongdoings of previous generations are often corporeally imprinted onto their descendants;<sup>585</sup> this is a pattern that is also reflected in the central figure of her Prague story, *La Pleurante*, whose limping body we shall see bears witness to centuries of suffering in Central Europe. In this manner, Germain's entire œuvre, like Páleníček's, explores and bears witness to the impact of living with a legacy of painful or even shameful familial and national pasts. In her Prague novels, however, the 'souffrances' of the Czech nation are portrayed in terms of imagery relating to (both physical and spiritual or emotional) sickness, which becomes a trope in these texts for the way in which traumatic experience and memory affect both those who are directly involved, and those who become witness to such stories. Building on my analysis of Páleníček, this chapter draws on a critical framework relating to traumatic memory, but also uses a body of work describing illness and its narration as I explore the implications of Germain's use of the metaphor of sickness as a means of representing and bearing witness to the 'siècle de plomb et de crasse et de sang' which we have variously inherited.

Germain's early novels, then, introduce both the theme of dispossession that underpins Germain's work, and the context of the twentieth century (and

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<sup>584</sup> Marie-Hélène Boblet and Alain Schaffner, 'Sylvie Germain, *Le Livre des Nuits, Nuit-d'Ambre et Éclats de sel*' in *Roman 20-50*, 39 (Juin 2005), 110-111.

<sup>585</sup> An example can be seen in the case of Victor-Flandrin who fathers multiple sets of twins; their duality symbolically embodies his own father's schizophrenia, which itself was caused by the horrors he witnessed during the war and by his own wounding, which left his face divided by a scar. This is typical of the way in which the body is marked by suffering in Germain's work. See Germain, *Le Livre des nuits*.

particularly of the Second World War) that is used as a vehicle in much of her work to explore the ways in which dispossession is variously experienced, inherited, and remembered. This theme continues to underpin the texts that Germain wrote as a result of her six-year stay in Czechoslovakia at the end of the Communist era. All four of these texts present central figures who, like Victor-Flandrin, have been disinherited in some way by the events of history. Germain's Czech work thus creates a bond of humanity between the French victims of the twentieth century (as represented, for example, by Victor-Flandrin and his family) and the Czechoslovaks who, like both the poet Bohuslav Reynek and Germain's fictional protagonists, experienced bewildering loss during this era, both as a result of the Second World War and of the Communist regime which followed it. This Germainian vision of a shared humanity, united by its losses in spite of geographical boundaries, divisions and differences (such as those experienced between France and Czechoslovakia, as discussed later), will be scrutinised in the light of Frank's notion of a 'brotherhood of those who bear the mark of pain' which, he posits, emerges out of the act of acknowledging our shared condition of pain.<sup>586</sup> This chapter will examine Germain's particular textual response both to the ways in which humanity is 'marked' by pain, and to the 'brotherhood' that is created by our shared experience of pain. In order to explore these notions and the way in which they create an association between Germain's work and that of Hodrová and Páleníček, I will use a framework of intersecting theories regarding the relationship between self and other (including work by Davis, Kristeva, and Levinas); the transmission of traumatic memory across familial, national, and

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<sup>586</sup> Frank, p. 35, drawing on Schweitzer, p. 195.

transnational boundaries (and particularly Hirsch's concept of postmemory); and descriptions of illness and of the possibilities for its narration (by Frank and Sontag), since Germain uses metaphors of sickness as a vehicle to express the way that the Czechs have been 'marked' by suffering.

Germain's Czech texts constitute a departure from her own national context as she embraces the stories of suffering and dispossession that she encountered during her stay in Prague. Whilst Hodrová is recording the experience of her own generation, and Páleníček is writing about the painful legacy inherited from his familial and national past (albeit from the distance afforded by his adopted home in France and the French language), Germain differs in that, as a French writer with no claim to a Czech heritage, she is writing from an external viewpoint about the traumatic stories of *another* nation. This feature of Germain's perspective will be central to my discussion in this chapter, and raises the important question as to whether Germain's representation of Czech stories of pain constitutes an appropriation of someone else's story. This question calls into play a range of critical issues pertaining to the relationship between the self and others, which will be deployed as a framework for my consideration of the way in which Germain's work is haunted by images of the 'souffrances' of the (Czech) other. I shall accordingly insist throughout my analysis that Germain's writing position warrants a different approach (to recall Caruth's plea for attention to the differences in traumatic stories)<sup>587</sup> from that which I have adopted in the previous two chapters. Whilst I have analysed the work of Hodrová and of Páleníček as embodiments of their own trauma, in this chapter I examine Germain's Czech stories as a response to traumas

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<sup>587</sup> Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, p. vii, as cited and discussed in my Introduction.

experienced by others and yet to which she feels bound to witness for reasons which will be explored.

However, if Páleníček's work can be interpreted as a transgenerational response to a context of suffering and dispossession, then I shall use Hartman's concept of 'witness by adoption'<sup>588</sup> to argue that Germain's work equally merits attention as a transnational response to Czech pain. In her work on the transmission of the past, Hirsch draws on Hartman's concept to describe what she calls the work of 'postmemory' as 'an intersubjective transgenerational space of remembrance' which may transcend the confines of 'familial inheritance', and I have used this position in Chapter Two to argue that the (fictional) family story at the centre of Páleníček's *Les Bouleaux* can be interpreted as a metaphor for a national legacy of pain.<sup>589</sup> Hirsch calls, moreover, for closer investigation into the ways in which the transgenerational processes of 'identification with the victim or witness of trauma' may affect not only familial groups but also 'other, less proximate groups'.<sup>590</sup> In comparison to both Hodrová and Páleníček, Germain clearly occupies a 'less proximate' position both nationally and linguistically in relation to Czech histories, and yet I shall argue that her writing constitutes an empathetic 'identification' with these 'other' stories of a twentieth-century dispossession to which she nonetheless feels party for reasons which will be discussed as this chapter progresses. My analysis of Germain's Czech writings responds in this way to Hirsch's call to widen our understandings of the possibilities of 'witness[ing] by adoption' by

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<sup>588</sup> See Hirsch, 'Surviving Images', p. 10. The term is drawn from Geoffrey Hartman, *The Longest Shadow: In the Aftermath of the Holocaust* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996).

<sup>589</sup> Hirsch, 'Surviving Images', p. 10.

<sup>590</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

suggesting that the 'identification' of which Hirsch speaks can also transcend national divisions through this process of empathetic witnessing to the pain of others who may not be a part of our immediate familial or even social group. This is a form of witnessing that corresponds to Felman's understanding of the almost involuntary call or 'appointment' to witness that, she observes, is often felt by those who find themselves in a position of observing the pain or illness of others.<sup>591</sup> Felman writes that the event necessitating testimony is always in some way 'the scandal of an illness',<sup>592</sup> and I shall argue that Germain's Czech writings are a form of transnational witness to what she too terms 'le scandale'<sup>593</sup> of the twentieth-century events that have created a societal sickness.

Throughout my analysis, my argument for Germain's writing as a transnational 'witness by adoption' will, however, be inflected with an awareness of the dangers, of which Davis warns, of assuming that we can 'participate in or co-own the other's trauma' even though we may be 'bound to attempt' to respond in some manner.<sup>594</sup> Davis's position will underpin my argument as I consider the ways in which Germain's writing bears witness to Czech traumas without necessarily claiming them as her own. Beyond simply considering Germain's texts as an (albeit empathetic) third-party record of the stories of others, then, this chapter sets out to examine whether Germain attempts to inscribe herself (and perhaps, by implication, the reader) into the other's story of suffering. Goulet, who has published widely on Germain's work, has written of the

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<sup>591</sup> See Felman, in Felman and Laub (eds), pp. 2-4.

<sup>592</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>593</sup> *ES*, p. 73. Germain uses this term in a key passage describing a character's recollections of his visit to Auschwitz; this passage will form the subject of analysis in Part II of this chapter.

<sup>594</sup> Davis, 'Trauma and Ethics', pp. 20 & 22.

intersection of personal and collective sorrows in her texts, saying that in *La Pleurante*, 'les souffrances personnelles, intimes, de l'auteur [...] prennent leur sens et leur valeur à s'y trouver partagées avec celles des autres, par un jeu de transferts et de communion ouverte à tous'.<sup>595</sup> Taking Goulet's comment as a starting point, I will consider how Germain uses the very specific context of painful Czech histories as a lens through which to project both her own experience and the wider questions of pain and dispossession that preoccupy her throughout her œuvre. I will refer to a number of studies pertaining to the relationship between individual and collective memory (including critical work on Germain's engagement with the theme of memory, as well as the wider body of theoretical work on the nature of traumatic memory that underpins this entire chapter) in order to investigate the way in which Germain uses the process of writing itself to create a meaningful relationship between the memory of 'souffrances personnelles' and 'celles des autres'.

Since publishing her first novel, Germain has both conducted a number of interviews and spoken at conferences in a manner which (whilst maintaining a high degree of privacy regarding her personal life)<sup>596</sup> allows us to formulate a strong sense of her vision of herself as a writer. I will therefore draw on selected

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<sup>595</sup> Goulet, 'Cryptes et fantômes: À la source des fictions de Sylvie Germain', in *L'univers de Sylvie Germain: Actes du colloque de Cerisy, 22-29 août 2007*, ed. by Goulet (Caen: Presses universitaires de Caen, 2008), pp. 241-56, here p. 245.

<sup>596</sup> Germain is notably reticent about her personal life, saying in interview that 'on ne devrait presque rien savoir d'un écrivain'. See Dorothy Glaiman, 'Au service des mots: Interview de Sylvie Germain', in *Le Figaro*, 6/10/2005 <[www.evene.lefigaro.fr/livres/actualite/interview-de-sylvie-germain-204.php](http://www.evene.lefigaro.fr/livres/actualite/interview-de-sylvie-germain-204.php)> [last accessed 05/10/2014]. However, key biographical facts have been disclosed by the author in the course of interviews conducted in academic and media contexts, and such information is useful in contextualising my argument and particularly in illuminating Germain's choice of Czechoslovakia as backdrop to the selected texts. For the most comprehensive biographical account published to date, see Goulet, 'Annexes: Éléments biographiques' in *Sylvie Germain: Œuvre romanesque*, pp. 249-56. Note that the 'Annexe' consists of the transcription of a conversation between Goulet and Germain, from which Goulet draws in the course of his analysis, and which I shall use in tandem with other interviews with Germain to support my argument where relevant.

passages of these interviews since they both provide some initial insight into her choice of Czechoslovakia as subject and confirm my argument that Germain is compelled to write about the stories of pain she encountered there. The significance of the writing process itself becomes evident in her statement (in an interview with Michèle Magill) that writing responds to 'une nécessité intérieure profonde' and provides a way of coming to terms with her search for meaning by assisting her to 'mettre un peu d'ordre et de clarté dans son chaos intérieur'.<sup>597</sup> Her reference to writing as a way of pursuing 'une quête de sens', a quest which in her view is above all a personal one ('C'est avant tout pour soi que l'on écrit'),<sup>598</sup> opens up the question as to how the act of writing about the other (in the specific guise of Czechoslovakia and its histories) may be seen to fulfil this intimate quest. In order to shed new light on Germain's personal identification with the Czech trauma of being dispossessed from their own identity and history, I will turn to critical descriptions of alienation, and in particular to Kristeva's understanding of the 'distance exquise' of exile.<sup>599</sup> This concept will underpin my discussion of the way in which Germain's own distance from her homeland during her stay in Prague facilitates her ability to engage with 'son chaos intérieur' (and, particularly, with her own sense of dispossession) in the light of her experience in Czechoslovakia, a significant period in her life to which I now turn.

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<sup>597</sup> Michèle Magill, 'Entretien avec Sylvie Germain', in *The French Review* 73:2 (1999), 334-340. Here p. 336.

<sup>598</sup> In *ibid.*, p. 336.

<sup>599</sup> Kristeva, p. 25.

## Tracing Germain's Pathway Towards Czechoslovakia

In understanding Germain's attraction to the alterity of Central Europe and Czechoslovakia it should be noted that she has spoken in interview of a particular childhood interest in 'l'histoire du yiddish et [...] les mythologies scandinaves et slaves'.<sup>600</sup> This would later be heightened by a love of Slavic and Central European writers, including Dostoyevsky, the Austrian Georg Trakl,<sup>601</sup> the Czech novelist Bohumil Hrabal (whose work leaves its trace particularly on *Immensités*), and of course the Czech poet Bohuslav Reynek.<sup>602</sup> We shall see during the course of this chapter that each of her own Czech texts is based on meticulous research into Czech culture and history, and also constitutes an intertextual response to a wide range of works of Czech art and literature.<sup>603</sup> Although, as I have noted, the four Czech texts are contextually distinct from the rest of Germain's œuvre, their intertextuality ensures that they are nonetheless an integral part of her work since her other novels display the same tendency towards incorporating intertextual references, and indeed a number of the writers and artists referred to in the Czech texts reappear elsewhere in her writing. This web of cross-cultural referentiality is investigated in this chapter as part of Germain's appreciation of and encounter with what

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<sup>600</sup> Germain in interview with Anne Diatkine, 'Tobie or not Tobie', in *Libération*, 30 April 1998, p. lvi.

<sup>601</sup> Georg Trakl was born in Austria to parents of Hungarian and Czech nationality. Germain recounts her realisation that the poetry of Bohuslav Reynek reminded her of that of Trakl, and subsequently discovering that Reynek had in fact also translated Trakl into Czech and shared her love of that writer. See Václav Richter, 'Rencontres littéraires – Sylvie Germain: "On ne peut réduire le roman à l'art de raconter une histoire"', Radio Prague, 14/5/2005 <[www.radio.cz/fr/article/66454](http://www.radio.cz/fr/article/66454)> [last accessed 9/01/2013].

<sup>602</sup> For a more comprehensive list of literary influences acknowledged by Germain, see Magill.

<sup>603</sup> For studies of Germain's use of intertextuality, see Gérard Poulouin, 'Des voix singulières à Prague', in Goulet (ed.), *L'Univers de Sylvie Germain*, pp. 41-53; Anne Roche, 'Le Rapport à la bibliothèque', in *ibid.*, pp. 29-40.

Kristeva has described as 'la fertilité de l'autre'<sup>604</sup> (and in this case, of course, the emphasis is on the Czech other). My analysis emphasises Germain's inclusion of a large number of Czech writers (and artists) whose work was suppressed by censorship – or who indeed were themselves either imprisoned, marginalised or in a few cases lost their lives in the course of the 'deletions' of Czech history. This choice is not merely a means of sharing an appreciation of a country that Germain has come to enjoy but also a more profound attempt to address the historical silencings that lie at the heart of the trauma that we have seen in both Hodrová and Páleníček's work.

Germain's growing interest in alterity would again be nourished by her studies at the Sorbonne under the philosopher Levinas. We could surmise that Levinas's Jewish Lithuanian heritage may have been a point of interest in itself to a young woman evidently fascinated by distant places; far more important, however, is the nature of Levinassian thought. Since it is widely acknowledged that Germain has been significantly influenced by his ideas, and particularly by his work on the concepts of self and other, my discussion of Germain's work as an embodiment of her response to the Czech other will explore this influence.<sup>605</sup> In the course of this chapter, I will therefore examine his understanding of the ethical responsibility that is forged between the self and the other by their meeting, an event which Levinas variously describes in terms of 'le face à face'

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<sup>604</sup> Kristeva, p. 111.

<sup>605</sup> As Garfitt has pointed out, Germain's doctoral thesis was heavily influenced by the philosophy of Levinas, who was her teacher at the Sorbonne; many of her published essays refer to his work; and her novels are marked by his thinking on the concepts of self and other. See Garfitt, 'Sylvie Germain et Emmanuel Levinas', in Goulet (ed.), *L'Univers de Sylvie Germain*.

or 'la rencontre'.<sup>606</sup> I propose that this concept is embedded in the very structure of Germain's Czech writings and I will show that it is central to understanding her work as an encounter with the other.

Germain's interest in Central Europe culminated in her six-year stay in Prague, where she worked as a teacher at the *École Française*; there we recall that she taught the young Páleníček, a circumstance which extends the web of cross-cultural encounter that is discussed in this chapter as an important element of Germain's work and has indeed been a prominent theme throughout this thesis.<sup>607</sup> In an interview with Václav Richter for Radio Prague, Germain acknowledges that her stay in Prague was motivated by personal factors: 'Il y avait une raison très concrète, très incarnée, que je n'ai plus tellement envie d'évoquer, parce que c'était très personnelle. C'était liée à une personne que j'avais rencontrée'.<sup>608</sup> Without speculating too closely on the subject of Germain's private life, we can nevertheless note that the pain of a failed relationship makes itself felt in *La Pleurante* (which was the first novel written as a result of her Prague stay) in an extended passage that engages with the pain of human relationships: 'Et la douleur pénètre dans chaque pore de la peau, elle insinue partout [...] On se heurte à l'absence de l'autre'.<sup>609</sup> *La Pleurante* also engages with the narrator's sorrow at the loss of her father, and a failed relationship is, furthermore, the final trigger of the politically disillusioned Ludvík's exodus from his home city of Prague, whilst Prokop, the protagonist of

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<sup>606</sup> These concepts are defined in Levinas, *Totalité et infini: Essais sur l'extériorité* (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1971).

<sup>607</sup> Personal correspondence with Páleníček, see Appendix.

<sup>608</sup> Germain in interview with Richter, 'Sylvie Germain: Mon imaginaire s'est nourri de Prague et de la Bohême', Radio Prague 21/05/2005 <<http://www.radio.cz/fr/rubrique/literature/sylvie-germain-mon-imaginaire-sest-nourri-de-prague-et-de-la-boheme>> [last accessed 11/11/2013].

<sup>609</sup> *LP*, p. 90.

*Immensités*, struggles with the losses of divorce. These painful personal relationships add to the sum of suffering that pervades Germain's œuvre and adds a further dimension to her exploration of the ways in which relationships between self and other may be played out. Whilst I shall demonstrate that Germain also maintains an acute awareness of the particular traumas of living under an oppressive totalitarian regime, the intersection in these novels between specific Czech suffering and more widely recognisable human pain further contributes to the way in which her work identifies with a collective experience of suffering. Rather than diluting the experience of the other in an 'appropriative' manner, then, Germain's inscription of personal pain into a specific political context to which she does not nationally 'belong' is, I posit, part of the process by which her work witnesses to a 'brotherhood of those who bear the mark of pain'.<sup>610</sup>

However, we should also note that Germain insists on the fact that very quickly the city itself, which she describes in the interview referred to above as 'sublime', became as important to her as the individual who had motivated her visit there, so that by a process of gradual impregnation both the author and her work were increasingly touched by Czechoslovakia:

peu à peu il s'est passé un étrange mouvement, que je le veuille ou non, comme si quelque chose de la France se détachait de moi et par contre mon imaginaire, à force de vivre à Prague, a fini par être marqué par Prague et la Bohême, par l'histoire de ce pays.<sup>611</sup>

Accordingly, all four of the texts published after Germain's arrival in Prague reflect the fact that Germain felt herself to be 'marqué[e]' by this country which

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<sup>610</sup> Frank, p. 35, citing Schweitzer, as above.

<sup>611</sup> Germain in interview with Richter, 'Sylvie Germain: Mon imaginaire s'est nourri de Prague et de la Bohême', 2005.

appears to have rooted itself so firmly in the author's 'imaginaire' and insinuated itself in great detail into these narratives. If *La Pleurante* evokes the haunting beauty of the dilapidated yet enchanting city of Prague, its scenes of poverty and injustice counter any sense of romanticism, whilst *Éclats* and *Immensités*, with their descriptions of the turmoil of the Velvet Revolution, refuse to ignore the political realities that continued to unsettle the city during Germain's stay there. Germain also travelled extensively across Czechoslovakia, and the sense of home she experienced in the countryside beyond Prague makes itself felt in her lyrical evocation of rural sites in the novels, as we shall see in my analysis of Ludvík's travels in the novel *Éclats*.

We can, however, further posit that the 'étrange mouvement' of detachment from France, of which Germain speaks in the passage I have cited above, also contributes towards the perspective of dispossession or exile which underpins her writing in these four novels. If, as I have argued, Páleníček's writing emerges from a condition of being 'doublement déraciné' from his country of birth and from its past,<sup>612</sup> then Germain too finds herself in a marginal position between Czechoslovakia and her homeland, from which she finds herself increasingly removed. In conversation with Goulet, Germain has described in more detail the deep-seated sense of rootlessness she has felt since a child,<sup>613</sup> and I later discuss this as a further factor contributing to her sense of participating in (Czech) stories of alienation. Kristeva's descriptions of the painful yet liberating perspective of distance that is gained by the exile or 'étranger' give us an insight into the way in which Germain's alienation from

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<sup>612</sup> *LB*, p. 47.

<sup>613</sup> Goulet (ed.), *L'Univers de Sylvie Germain*, p. 315.

France and physical presence in Czechoslovakia provides her with a perspective that transcends national boundaries and helps her to identify with the experience of the other.<sup>614</sup>

#### **Four Texts about Czech Dispossession by a French Novelist**

Before moving on to explore the ways in which the context and the themes introduced here are embedded in the four published texts that derive directly from Germain's stay in Prague and that accordingly form the subject of this chapter, it will be useful to give a brief overview of the content of those texts here. The first of these to be published was the short novel *La Pleurante des rues de Prague*, which charts the twelve apparitions of a huge, limping female figure who reappears to the French narrator in different spots throughout Prague. Each of her apparitions evokes a sorrowful memory of the history of Prague, whose sufferings she encompasses in the tears that 'chuchotent'<sup>615</sup> within her body, which thus becomes a living memorial to the dead and dispossessed of the city: 'Elle recèle tant de noms dans les replis de sa robe effilochée qu'ils pourraient, tous ces noms, former un peuple. Comme les noms gravés sur les murs des mémoriaux'.<sup>616</sup> The figure of la Pleurante is silent, and this characteristic echoes the historical silencings of Central European history (which have been discussed at length in the previous two chapters).<sup>617</sup>

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<sup>614</sup> In Kristeva, 1988.

<sup>615</sup> *LP*, pp. 59 & 32.

<sup>616</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>617</sup> Note that the abbreviated title of the novel will be italicised but when referring to the figure of the weeping woman I will adopt this punctuation.

The city itself is described in some detail as *la Pleurante* limps on through a succession of streets, ghettos, slums, and grandiose ancient monuments, all of which Germain never fails to denote by their Czech names. In this way, the text maps out a very specific topography through which the reader is conducted in a form of ‘guided tour’ of Prague; this feature of the text bears comparison with Hodrová’s ‘guide’ to Prague, *Visite privée*. By means of this tour, the text brings much of the city’s long (and, to the Western reader, often little-known) history into the spotlight. The tour encompasses centuries of painful Czechoslovak memories, and so creates a vision of time as an unending cycle of trauma, rather as we have seen in Hodrová’s *Cité dolente* trilogy; this cyclicity further contributes to the intersection in Germain’s work between the traumas ‘belonging to’ one time and place and those of another, reinforcing my argument that Germain feels a sense of participation in the suffering of others. Along the way we take in, for example, the ancient legend of Libuše and the story of Jean Népomucène,<sup>618</sup> the Czech martyr who was drowned for his outspoken faith but whose tongue refused to decompose, testifying to his status as ‘[un] homme de foi et parole’, an image which, moreover, draws attention to the importance of testimony through ‘la parole’, which is clearly central to Germain’s mission as a writer.<sup>619</sup> The path of *la Pleurante* conducts us on into the twentieth century, past the horrors of the Holocaust, whose tens of thousands of Czechoslovak Jewish victims are represented here by the memory of victims including Franta

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<sup>618</sup> Note that Jean Népomucène is the Czech Saint Jan Nepomucký. Here as elsewhere in these four texts, Germain employs a francophone spelling of Czech proper nouns, a usage which will be retained throughout this chapter.

<sup>619</sup> *LP*, p. 76.

Bass, 'un petit garçon de Terezín';<sup>620</sup> through the losses of Communism (which are particularly represented in the epigraphs, citing marginalised and banned writers of that era); and on to the Velvet Revolution, when 'la ville s'ébroua de sa trop longue et amère torpeur',<sup>621</sup> in a reference to the national 'sommeil' we saw described by Hodrová.<sup>622</sup> The city of Prague in fact becomes a protagonist with a body of its own, since '[l]es villes, comme les corps, ont une odeur'.<sup>623</sup> This body, however, has been wounded by its history 'de plomb et de crasse et de sang',<sup>624</sup> and the language of wounding and sickness in this text is carried through into both *Immensités* and *Éclats*.

The second text in the Czech group, *Immensités*, reflects on the fate of dissidents and ordinary citizens living in the constrictive confines of the Communist regime, and moves on to record the events of the Velvet Revolution and its aftermath particularly as perceived by the protagonist, Prokop Poupá. I refer only comparatively to this text, since the themes which are central to this thesis are perhaps most consistently demonstrated in Germain's other Czech works. It is useful to note here, however, that Prokop and his friends have been alienated by the regime and occupy a position of dissidence which, as we shall see, resonates with Germain's empathy for the dispossessed. The protagonist of the third novel, *Éclats de sel*, is the equally disillusioned Ludvík, who unlike Prokop (who remains in Prague) leaves the city, the centre of the political and intellectual oppression that is apparently at the root of his emotional turmoil, and

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<sup>620</sup> Ibid., p. 50. Terezín was a concentration camp in Bohemia, referred to in Chapter II above.

<sup>621</sup> *LP*, p. 63.

<sup>622</sup> See this thesis, Chapter I, 'Sleep and Sheep: The Dual Traumas of Submission and Sacrifice'.

<sup>623</sup> *LP*, p. 23.

<sup>624</sup> Ibid., p. 63.

sets out firstly for France and then into the Czech highlands in search of spiritual enlightenment.

Ludvík thus embodies the concepts of exile and dispossession that preoccupy Germain, and his character provides a site for the exploration of these themes and for the way in which they interact with Germain's understanding of the relationship between self and other. His exile in France fails to free Ludvík from the sense of restriction experienced within the closed borders of Czechoslovakia and the confines of Prague, yet on his return after the Revolution we shall see that his dissatisfaction with life continues. Believing that it is his proximity in the city to other people, who begin to sicken him, Ludvík travels out into the mountains in search of peace and solitude. On this trip, however, he comes across a succession of unusual characters, and these encounters form a central part of the novel's exploration of 'la fertilité de l'autre'.<sup>625</sup> His experience of dispossession is portrayed in terms of a sickness, whose symptoms and causes will particularly be explored in Part III of this chapter. My analysis will also highlight the motifs of the journey, which will be analysed in terms of a movement from sickness to health, as well as the encounter theme, which will be explored in the light of Levinas's concept of 'la rencontre'.

In addition to the Prague 'trilogy' (as the three texts introduced above are often described),<sup>626</sup> Germain has also written a lyrical reflection on the life and works of Bohuslav Reynek, a twentieth-century Czech poet, artist and translator (from

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<sup>625</sup> Kristeva, p. 111.

<sup>626</sup> Although critics often refer to the three novels as Germain's 'Prague trilogy', it should be noted that there is no narrative coherence in the sense of character or plot; rather, the three works are linked by their common context which marks them out from Germain's other works.

French and German) whose work was suppressed during the Communist regime and so published for the most part posthumously. The title, *Bohuslav Reynek à Petrkov: Un nomade en sa demeure*, reinforces the centrality of the themes of home and of the loss of home in this text, whose structure revolves entirely around the poet's beloved home farm of Petrkov, which was confiscated firstly by the Nazis and then by the Communist Party. I consider this text to be an integral part of Germain's Czech œuvre for two reasons. Firstly, the text provides an insight not only into Germain's fascination with Czech history and culture, but also into her interest in the longstanding cross-fertilisation between French and Czech cultures, a relationship which was discussed in the Introduction to this thesis and that we have seen to be variously embedded in the work of both Hodrová and Páleníček. In Germain's work, this relationship is epitomised in the relationship between the Czech Reynek and his French wife, the poet Suzanne Renaud, but also in the political relationship between their two countries that culminated in the fateful Munich Agreement, whose divisive significance we have seen throughout this thesis. Secondly, in the concluding part of the chapter, I will examine the embodiment of health and sickness in the figures of Reynek and Renaud and demonstrate that this text can be used to support my interpretation of the three novels as illness narratives. Germain dwells on the elderly and frail Reynek's ability to face and even rise above his earthly dispossession by entering into a state of spiritual enlightenment, which I will compare to descriptions of 'health'. Renaud's staunch solidarity with her adopted and beleaguered country is echoed in Germain's own empathetic textual portrait of the dispossession experienced in Czechoslovakia.<sup>627</sup> We learn

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<sup>627</sup> For information about the life of Renaud, see Annick Auzimour, *Suzanne Renaud, Bohuslav*

of Renaud's emotional struggle and decline into ill health over the loss of her homeland, France, owing to the border closures of the Communist era which prevented her from visiting her country of birth. Renaud eventually dies, overcome it would seem by the tragic tension she experienced between her conflicting loves of France and Czechoslovakia, but also by her inability to reconcile her belief in a spiritual 'ailleurs' with her need for a physical home. The tensions, made manifest in Renaud and Reynek, between home and exile, and between health and sickness, helps us to understand the treatment in Germain's novels of twentieth-century suffering as a form of illness.

This text has been less frequently cited in academic studies of Germain's work than her three Czech novels, and has not yet been incorporated into a major systematic study of the relationship between Germain's work and Czechoslovakia.<sup>628</sup> My inclusion of the Reynek text in the primary corpus for this chapter therefore widens a field of study within analysis of Germain's work that is often limited to the 'trilogy'. The trilogy on the other hand has received a significant amount of critical attention to date, and critics have identified a number of tropes used by Germain to narrate painful histories. Marie-Hélène Boblet has discussed the 'pathologie de fracture' used to describe Ludvík's

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*Reynek* (Grenoble: Maison Stendhal, 1985), available at: <http://www.auzimour.com/pdf/SUZANNE%20RENAUD%20ET%20BOHUSLAV%20REYNEK.pdf> [last accessed 1/10/2013].

<sup>628</sup> A number of studies have analysed themes central to the Reynek text. See, for example, Garfitt, 'Sylvie Germain et la rencontre de l'Europe Centrale', in Pádraig Ó. Gormaille (ed.), *La Rencontre des cultures dans la littérature européenne contemporaine* (Paris: Association européenne François Mauriac, 2002.), pp. 53-68. Václava Bakešová acknowledges the Reynek text as an integral part of Germain's Czech work, but owing to the scope of the article only a couple of paragraphs are devoted to the text. Václava Bakešová, 'Sylvie Germain et son séjour en Bohême', in Miroslava Novotná and Colette Gauthier (eds), *Europe centrale, carrefour des cultures dans la tradition littéraire II* (Brno: MuniPress, Masaryková univerzita, 2012), pp. 7-14.

experience of disillusionment and loss of meaning.<sup>629</sup> Goulet has written extensively on the way Germain's texts are haunted by the 'ghosts' of their characters' painful pasts.<sup>630</sup> Mariska Koopman-Thurlings and others have explored the silent presence of God as a motif that helps us to understand pain in Germain's world.<sup>631</sup> Anne Roche and Gérard Poulouin have analysed Germain's use of intertextuality to give voice to suppressed Czech stories.<sup>632</sup> All of these approaches continue to provide useful frameworks for investigating Germain's engagement with painful memories, whatever her chosen context, and will be referred to in the course of this chapter as I build on existing work by focussing more specifically on the metaphor of 'sickness' in the Czech texts.

Whilst each of the three Prague novels has individually been the subject of a wide range of academic studies, to date only a small number of critics (notably Poulouin, Roche, and Garfitt)<sup>633</sup> have examined them as a unit with the intention of illuminating the close and particular relationship between the texts and their Czechoslovak context. The analysis that I will undertake here of the function of that context within these texts leads us towards a fuller understanding of the thematic interests that underlie not only the Prague works but indeed Germain's wider œuvre, since I will not only draw out elements of the Czech texts that are specific to their context, but also reveal areas of thematic continuity with her other writings. Furthermore, despite the wealth of imagery relating to illness that

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<sup>629</sup> See Boblet, 'Implication éthique et politique, d'*Immensités à Magnus*', in Goulet (ed.), *L'Univers de Sylvie Germain*, pp. 55-67.

<sup>630</sup> See Goulet, *Sylvie Germain: Œuvre romanesque*.

<sup>631</sup> See, for example, Mariska Koopman-Thurlings, 'Dire l'indicible: Sylvie Germain et la question juive', in *Sylvie Germain et son œuvre*, ed. by Isabelle Dotan and Jacqueline Michel (Bucharest: Samuel Tastet Éditeur, 2006), pp. 101-09; also Koopman-Thurlings, *La Hantise du mal* (Paris: l'Harmattan, 2007).

<sup>632</sup> Poulouin, in Goulet (ed.), *L'Univers de Sylvie Germain*; Roche, in *ibid.*

<sup>633</sup> Poulouin, in *ibid.*; Roche, in *ibid.*; Garfitt, in Ó. Gormaille (ed.).

they display, no study has yet been made of the use of metaphors of sickness in Germain's Czech texts to narrate the painful experience and memories they address. This chapter therefore contributes to the rich body of existing scholarship on Germain's work by emphasising the centrality of illness as a metaphor for historical pain in her Czech texts. My contextualised examination of Germain's four Czech texts also allows me to consider her writing in relationship with the texts of Hodrová and Páleníček for the first time, and thus to expand critical perspectives on the broad range of literature that has emerged from this context. By bringing Germain's work into dialogue with these lesser known texts emanating from Central Europe, my intention is to insist on the importance, set out in the Introduction to this thesis, of opening up understandings of the diverse range of responses to a history that, as Keller has reminded us, has too often been ignored as a result of the 'continuing unequal distribution' of attention between East and West.<sup>634</sup>

## **Part II. Germain's Czech Stories as a Means of Transnational 'Witnessing by Adoption'**

Germain's narration of the stories of twentieth-century Czechoslovakia has been described by Poulouin in the following terms, which raise a number of questions regarding her representation of the (Czech) other in these texts:

Il y a, dans la démarche d'appropriation de l'histoire récente d'un pays d'Europe Centrale par Sylvie Germain, la volonté de faire partager à des lecteurs français un certain éclairage sur un pays au cœur de l'Europe, qu'elle connaît parce qu'elle y a vécu, où elle a rencontré une culture reçue comme un don [...], où elle a ressenti

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<sup>634</sup> Keller, in Keller and Rakusa (eds), p. 11. Cited in full in my Introduction.

de l'empathie pour les acteurs de la dissidence et au-delà pour un peuple qui a souffert du nazisme, puis du communisme.<sup>635</sup>

Poulouin's description of Germain's Czech texts as 'la démarche d'appropriation de l'histoire récente d'un pays d'Europe Centrale' confronts us with the need to examine whether her representation of these traumatic histories 'de la dissidence [...], du nazisme [...], du communisme' constitutes an 'appropriation' (albeit laced with 'empathie') of stories 'belonging' to others, or whether we can accept as an ethical stance the idea that one can share in the experience of the other. In her much-cited study of Holocaust narratives, Felman has claimed that 'the testimony cannot be simply relayed, repeated or reported by another without thereby losing its function as a testimony'.<sup>636</sup> I have already drawn attention to the fact that, although they are inflected with insights drawn from her own experience, Germain's Czech writings constitute a narration of historical traumas ('de la dissidence [...], du nazisme, puis du communisme') that she cannot claim to have experienced at first hand. In the light of Felman's statement about the nature of testimony, and of Poulouin's assessment of Germain's writing mission, the following analysis considers the question of whether these four texts nevertheless constitute a valid 'testimony' to the painful experiences which they narrate, and if so, what it is that redeems them from falsity or, to return to Davis, from the 'arrogance to assume that we can share some part of what happened to the victims'.<sup>637</sup>

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<sup>635</sup> Poulouin, in Goulet (ed.), *L'Univers de Sylvie Germain*, p. 51.

<sup>636</sup> Felman, in Felman and Laub (eds), 1992, p. 3.

<sup>637</sup> Davis, 'Trauma and Ethics', p. 19. Davis applies this judgement to two of the three texts that form the basis of his criticism in this chapter, namely Giorgio Agamben's *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. by Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 1999), and Felman's 'Education and Crisis, or the Vicissitudes of Teaching', in Felman and Laub (eds). For Davis, Agamben's work is flawed by its attempt to assign comprehensible and homogenous meaning to the experience of the other; he similarly problematizes Felman's

In this section I therefore examine a number of elements of Germain's Czech writing which allow us to understand her work as a way of setting up a dialogue with the (Czech) other, of attempting to build what could be termed a 'bridge' between self and other by a process of finding points in common even whilst acknowledging that the specific experience of the other remains 'irreducibly' different. In order to understand Germain's representation of the Czech condition of dispossession that I have shown to lie at the heart of the traumas embodied in both Hodrová and Páleníček's work, we can turn firstly to the picture that Germain has given of her own childhood. Her descriptions in interview of this time and of the significant role of certain places that became important to her helps us to better understand her literary engagement with the concepts of 'home' and 'exile', and perhaps most importantly of the tension between the two.

### **Germain's Understanding of the Concept of Home and its Significance in a Context of Dispossession**

Germain was born in Châteauroux (in the Indre) in 1954 but because of her father's work as *sous-préfet* the family moved on when she was two. The rest of her childhood was spent in a number of different areas, including the Morvan, the rural, hilly area of Bourgogne that was the home of her paternal grandparents.<sup>638</sup> For Germain, the Morvan holds particular emotional

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account of the re-creation and subsequent resolution of trauma in her students, seeing in this process an authoritative assumption of the ability to identify with the other.

<sup>638</sup> See 'En guise de conclusion: Questions à Sylvie Germain', in Goulet (ed.), *L'Univers de Sylvie Germain*, pp. 309-20, here p. 315; also 'Échoes du silence: Propos recueillis par Marie-Line Jacquet; texte publié avec l'aimable autorisation de Sylvie Germain', in Garfitt (ed.), pp. 217-21, here p. 218.

significance as 'un des rares lieux [...] qui fut pour moi une référence, un socle',<sup>639</sup> and, as Goulet has pointed out, was to reappear as the backdrop in at least one of Germain's French-based novels, as is also the case with her birthplace.<sup>640</sup> This resurgence of the landscapes of Germain's childhood signifies a literary return to 'home' and, furthermore, intersects with her treatment of the concept of home in *Bohuslav Reynek*, a text which, as I have indicated, provides some insight into her engagement with Czech themes. This text places much emphasis on the peace and the sense of creativity that is nurtured and inspired by the physical home itself: for the reclusive but spiritually fulfilled Reynek, 'la maison' is 'le creuset' of creativity and subjectivity, and 'la cellule où l'on se recueille' in order to process one's understanding of both the 'étincelants bris de beauté' and the 'extrême indigence' of the world, which co-exist in both Reynek and Germain's work.<sup>641</sup>

That image of home as a 'cellule', as well as Germain's portrait of Reynek the poet as a hermit,<sup>642</sup> creates an association between the act of writing and the quest for spiritual enlightenment. Home as a place of withdrawal is necessary for the writer to be able to transcribe 'le monde': 'pour ensuite en transcrire le sens [...] à travers ses poèmes'.<sup>643</sup> Germain's portrait of home as 'un creuset' of creativity, and thus as a site of artistic fulfilment, draws on the philosophy of

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<sup>639</sup> In 'Annexes', in Goulet (ed.), *L'Univers de Sylvie Germain*, p. 315.

<sup>640</sup> Goulet, 'Sylvie Germain et son œuvre', in Dotan and Michel (eds), pp. 13-16, here p. 14. As Goulet notes, *L'Enfant Méduse* would be set in the countryside around her birthplace, whilst the Morvan appears in both *Jours de Colère* and *Magnus*. I would add that each of Germain's novels is set in or around a specific place that has played some significance in the author's life; the setting of the three Prague novels is a further example of this strong relationship between text and place. Whilst Germain has specifically claimed that her work is never strictly autobiographical ('Non, dans aucun de mes romans, il y a de part autobiographique au sens stricte', in Glaiman), this rooting of her fiction in sites that are autobiographically significant furthers my argument that the novels nonetheless carry the trace of her life in less evident ways.

<sup>641</sup> *BR*, pp. 111 & 29.

<sup>642</sup> See esp. *ibid.*, pp. 104-21.

<sup>643</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 110.

both Levinas and Gaston Bachelard, both of whom she cites, and whose concepts of home are useful in understanding the way in which home plays out in Germain's work in relation to her Czech writing. For Bachelard, '[I]a maison est le premier monde de l'être humain. Avant d'être "jeté au monde" [...] l'homme est déposé dans le berceau de la maison', whilst Germain draws on her understanding of Levinas when she observes that the individual subject ('la conscience') must be rooted ('localisée et habitante') before it can 'se mettre en route et explorer le monde'.<sup>644</sup> I will return to the notion of departure from home that is embedded in both Levinas's and Bachelard's thinking, but it is important to understand that Germain's strong sense of home as the source of subjectivity, understanding, and creativity (and therefore writing itself) underpins her 'empathie' for the Czech condition of dispossession and loss of home. This condition of exile from home may be deployed in her work in literal terms, as in the case of Ludvík who flees his country, or in a form of 'inner emigration' (to return to a phrase cited in Chapter One of this thesis in relation to Hodrová's condition), a state which can be seen in characters who remain confined in 'son petit pan de géographie restreinte', as is the case of Prokop or Reynek.

If Germain's return in her French-based novels to the landscapes of her childhood can be understood as a literary return to 'le creuset' or 'le berceau' of home, then we need to look further at the ways in which home is portrayed in the landscapes of the Czech novels. Goulet's observation that the French

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<sup>644</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *La Poétique de l'espace* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France), cited in *BR*, p. 32; Germain does not list an edition or page references, but for most recent edition see PUF, 2012. Germain draws widely on Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité et infini: Essais sur l'extériorité*, as here in *BR*, pp. 16-17.

stories deploy images drawn from Germain's home scenes can in fact be extended to her depictions of the rural Czech landscape, which also resonate strongly with her textual portrait of the Morvan. Speaking at a conference in Cerisy in 2007, Germain described this relatively remote area's features as 'austères, puissants', adding that the village in which her grandparents lived is to this day '[u]n village de paysans, aujourd'hui presque déserté'.<sup>645</sup> If we compare this description of the Morvan to the rural highlands of Czechoslovakia as they appear in *Éclats*, a marked similarity can be noted. Both the stark austerity and the sense of emptiness of the Morvan find an echo in Germain's description of a village visited by Ludvík in the Tatra mountains in rural Czechoslovakia:<sup>646</sup> 'Un village très haut perché dans le silence [...] Et tout le paysage alentour était mué par la neige en un désert étincelant, un territoire de songe et de patience'.<sup>647</sup> This similarity is further reinforced in Germain's description of the countryside around Bohuslav Reynek's home in the Bohemian-Moravian Highlands, a spot she describes as 'un lieu immuable, entouré de champs et de bois, troué de mares et d'étangs, et gardant sa mémoire en germe dans la terre'.<sup>648</sup> This image in turn recalls the Morvan as it is portrayed in Germain's *L'Enfant Méduse*, where the child protagonist Lucie explores a landscape that is also filled with fields, meadows, forests, marshes and a multitude of ponds which were dug in the days of 'le roi Dagobert'.<sup>649</sup> The physical and atmospheric parallel that can be observed here between the

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<sup>645</sup> In 'Annexes', in Goulet (ed.), *L'Univers de Sylvie Germain*, p. 315.

<sup>646</sup> Since the division of Czechoslovakia into the Czech Republic and Slovakia, which took effect at the beginning of 1993, the Tatras have belonged to the territory of Slovakia, forming part of its border with Poland to the north.

<sup>647</sup> *ES*, pp. 81-82.

<sup>648</sup> *BR*, p. 123.

<sup>649</sup> Germain, *L'Enfant Méduse* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991).

Czechoslovak landscape and that of the Morvan, which clearly had a formative influence on Germain, can be interpreted on one level perhaps as a factor in the affinity for Czechoslovakia that, as I argue throughout this chapter, is evinced in Germain's choice of that country as setting for these four texts. I posit, however, that this presence for Germain of 'home' within the Czech landscape has further implications since it seems to suggest that the Czech landscape fills the need for a home that we have seen to be articulated in the Reynek text, and it is to this textual relocation of home that I will now turn.

### **Germain's Identification with the (Czech) Experience of Exile and Dispossession**

Despite the importance that home assumes in her work, Germain has said that she does not feel rooted in one specific place, since her family comes from 'des horizons divers' and she herself has moved from place to place rather than settling in one particular spot.<sup>650</sup> It seems likely that the family's constant relocations were the source of this sense of rootlessness, which is reflected not only in her Czech stories but across her œuvre, since many of her protagonists are variously haunted by a sense of longing for a home, as exemplified in Germain's lyrical descriptions of Renaud in 'la mélancolie de son exil',<sup>651</sup> or in Ludvík's flight to France to escape the Communist regime, described as '[u]n exil sans héroïsme ni romantisme'.<sup>652</sup> We should note that Germain's understanding that physical exile (such as that experienced by Czech dissidents

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<sup>650</sup> In 'En guise de conclusion: Questions à Sylvie Germain', in Goulet (ed.), *L'Univers de Sylvie Germain*, pp. 309-20; here p. 315.

<sup>651</sup> *BR*, p. 97.

<sup>652</sup> *ES*, p. 24.

or alienated citizens) does not coincide with notions of 'héroïsme' or 'romantisme' intersects with Edward Said's description of the harsh reality of exile. Said acknowledges that exile is sometimes portrayed in 'literature and history' as episodically 'heroic, romantic, glorious', yet insists that its true nature is 'crippling', a choice of diction which eliminates any possibility of romantic or heroic perceptions of what he terms a 'terminal loss'.<sup>653</sup> This vocabulary of sickness and wounding, which is extended throughout Said's essay, illuminates Germain's portrait of the state of the dispossessed Czech nation as 'ill', and I will return to the complexities of the relationship between exile and sickness in Part III of this chapter when I discuss Germain's engagement with historically specific Czech losses as a narration of illness.

At this stage in my argument, however, it is important to point out that Germain's acknowledgement of her own state of 'rootlessness', and her textual relocation of 'home' to a Czechoslovak setting, indicate that her Czech stories constitute a point of intersection between her own experience and that of the Czechs. Furthermore, the literary reincarnation of the scenes of Germain's childhood prompts me to examine them in the light of Germain's insistence on the complex relationship between home and exile in an essay entitled 'Le Vrai lieu est ailleurs'.<sup>654</sup> In this essay she couches the concept of home in an image of the cradle which resonates with Bachelard's thinking, as cited above:

le berceau dodeline si délicatement l'enfant qui dort en lui que son remuement imprègne pour toujours le cœur, la chair, le mémoire de

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<sup>653</sup> Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Literary and Cultural Essays* (London: Granta, 2001), p. 173.

<sup>654</sup> Germain, 'Le Vrai lieu est ailleurs', in Dotan and Michel (eds), pp. 149-50.

l'enfant. [...] Le berceau, charpente invisible, accompagne tout au long de sa vie celui qu'il a ainsi mis en mouvement.<sup>655</sup>

This passage helps us to understand the tension underlying Germain's writing between on the one hand the life-long yearning for the comfort and security of home (as embedded in the image of 'le berceau', and in Germain's literary return to the landscapes of her childhood), and on the other hand her Christian understanding that spiritual fulfilment comes from the journey or 'mouvement' away from home. Germain's understanding of spiritual enlightenment is fundamentally linked to the notions of 'mouvement' and of exile in ways which correspond to the words of Hugo St. Victor (cited by Said in his essay on exile): 'The man who finds his homeland sweet is still a tender beginner; he to whom every soil is as his native one is already strong; but he is perfect to whom the entire world is as a foreign land'.<sup>656</sup> In Germain's essay, this concept of nomadism as the route to enlightenment (or 'perfection' to use Hugo St. Victor's term) is framed in terms of the story of Moses, whose 'vie entière fut une marche, une déambulation dans les sables, un exode hors de soi'.<sup>657</sup> Her choice of Moses indicates, moreover, her understanding of the painful nature of such an 'exode', and this is a theme to which I return repeatedly in this chapter as I seek to shed further light on Germain's representation of Czech experience as an 'illness'.

We should also note that the passages in *Éclats* bearing the greatest resemblance to the Morvan of Germain's childhood relate to Ludvík's 'exil' (during his trip into the mountains in an attempt to escape the turmoil of post-

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<sup>655</sup> Ibid., p. 149.

<sup>656</sup> Said, p. 185, citing Victor St. Hugo.

<sup>657</sup> Germain, 'Le Vrai lieu est ailleurs', p. 149.

revolutionary Prague), and also bear comparison with traditional images of the desert, the site of Moses' 'déambulation': 'Et tout le paysage alentour était mué par la neige en un désert étincelant, un territoire de songe et de patience'.<sup>658</sup> This intersection of both Germain's own childhood 'berceau' and her descriptions of Czechoslovak landscapes with the story of Moses' exile in the desert points to Germain's own participation in the painful conflict between the need for home and the desire for spiritual detachment. This is a struggle that is embodied, I posit, in the physical or emotional 'journeys' undertaken by her central characters Prokop, Ludvík, and both Reynek and Renaud, and to which I will return in Part IV when I discuss Germain's writing as an attempt to move from a place of 'illness' or pain towards a place of 'healing' or enlightenment. It is, then, Germain's own understanding of rootlessness and of the conflict between home and 'ailleurs' that brings a sense of empathy to her textual portrait of the Czechs' alienation or dispossession, through political oppression, from their homeland. Davis, however, warns that we should not assume that we can understand the other's pain, pointing out that, "your story is never my story" [...] There is no [...] secure bridge between our experience and that of other people', and in my next section of analysis I will highlight ways in which Germain prioritises the incomprehensibility of the other's experience.<sup>659</sup> Nevertheless, Germain's inscription of her own understanding of the significance of home, as well as of the trials of the 'désert', into her textual response to the Czech 'exode' (as experienced, for example, by Ludvík) justifies my interpretation of her Czech writing as a process of building some kind of

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<sup>658</sup> *ES*, p. 82.

<sup>659</sup> Davis, 'Trauma and Ethics', p. 21, citing Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, trans. by Paul A. Kottman (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 92.

'bridge' between the self and the suffering other, and thus as a means of sharing rather than appropriating a story of loss with which she identifies.

### **'Propulsée dans un Monde d'Horreur': An Individual Awakening to a Universal Story of Exile through Evil**

The parallel between exile and sickness, to which I have drawn attention in relation to Czech dispossession as it is narrated in the story of Ludvík, is also present in Germain's portrait of the effects of the Holocaust in Central Europe. I have already pointed out that her work engages widely with the effects of the Second World War and of the Holocaust in France, and her preoccupation with the horrors of that era is extended into her Czech writings. All of the Czech texts engage in some way with the legacy of the Holocaust: *La Pleurante* summons up the memory of forgotten Central European victims and refers to specific Czechoslovak Holocaust memory sites, whilst *Bohuslav Reynek* depicts the loss of meaning that has assailed so many since that time: 'Pour beaucoup, en effet, à mesure que la terre se couvre de charniers et de fosses communes, le ciel leur semble se creuser en vertigineuse fosse divine'.<sup>660</sup> My analysis of the presence of the Holocaust in these texts suggests that Germain both includes herself in the experience of a collective 'sickness' caused by these depravities and the consequent perception of a 'vertigineuse fosse divine', and yet avoids assuming comprehension of the particular suffering and losses experienced by others. Once again, my analysis will take as its starting point some contextual

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<sup>660</sup> *BR*, p. 25.

detail regarding the circumstances of Germain's own position in relation to the memory of the Holocaust.

A key moment in Germain's early life was her visit at the age of eight or so to the concentration camp of Struthof-Natzweiler in Alsace, an event that she has spoken of in interview as 'un choc brutal, et très profond',<sup>661</sup> and in the face of which she found herself 'arrachée au monde et propulsée dans un monde d'horreur'.<sup>662</sup> Both Goulet and Koopman-Thurlings have linked this 'brutal' early awakening to evil with the pervasiveness throughout Germain's œuvre of 'la hantise du mal' (to borrow the title of Koopman-Thurlings' monograph).<sup>663</sup> The use of the term 'hantise' of course reinforces the comparison I am making with the haunting of the past in the works discussed earlier in this thesis, and is played out in Germain's work in the insistent and often graphic presence of the losses and horrors of the war. This haunting is exemplified in the apparitions of the dead that are summoned up by the passage of la Pleurante, as, for example, the Polish Jew Bruno Schulz, 'tué d'une balle dans le dos, en plein jour'.<sup>664</sup> Germain's sensation of being brutally impelled from a childhood world of innocence into an adult world of 'horreur' resonates, moreover, with the biblical story of the ejection of Adam and Eve from paradise, and so carries associations of exile from the presence of God, a theme which continually intersects with her exploration of dispossession. This early experience of the

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<sup>661</sup> In conversation with Goulet, 28/01/2006, cited in Goulet, *Sylvie Germain: Œuvre romanesque*, p. 251.

<sup>662</sup> Anne-Marie Pirard, 'Sylvie Germain', in *Indications* (1992), pp. 6-11.

<sup>663</sup> Koopman-Thurlings, *La Hantise du mal*. See also Koopman-Thurlings, 'Dire l'indicible', p. 101; here Koopman-Thurlings posits that the presence of the question of evil in Germain's work can be specifically traced to her visit to Struthof: 'Prenant sa source dans une visite à un ancien camp en Alsace que l'auteur a fait avec ses parents quand elle avait neuf ans environ, ce grand problème ne la lâche plus et s'intensifie lors de son séjour à Prague'.

<sup>664</sup> *LP*, p. 40.

pain of exile, I propose, motivates her textual engagement with the conflict between the love of home and the need to reach spiritual enlightenment, and, furthermore, contributes to her 'empathie' for the Czech experience of historical dispossession. The bodily terms ('arrachée [...] propulsée') in which Germain describes that moment of exile suggest, moreover, that her experience was felt not only emotionally but indeed through the body, and this corporeal awakening to the pain of others means that Germain feels bodily implicated in the stories of suffering that she would later write about. This corporeal participation in the pain of others gives rise accordingly to the language of wounding and of sickness that is used throughout her work to express emotional or spiritual suffering and that will be the subject of further analysis in Part III of this chapter.

I will turn now to a passage in *Éclats* in order to examine the way in which Germain's personal sense of exile through her awakening to the possibility of evil, coupled with her sense of the incomprehensibility of twentieth-century suffering, plays out in her writing. This passage takes the form of an encounter between the alienated Ludvík and 'un kiosquier' who recounts his visit to the site of Auschwitz-Birkenau. Despite previously feeling that he had understood the events that took place there ('je croyais déjà savoir, j'avais vu et lu beaucoup de choses à ce sujet'),<sup>665</sup> the man recalls being overwhelmed by incomprehension:

Mais quand je me suis trouvé physiquement sur les lieux déserts et silencieux, tout en moi s'est effondré, comme si une faux glissait au ras de ma raison, de ma mémoire, et y tranchait toutes les idées, réflexions et connaissances que j'avais pu accumuler. Un vide s'est

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<sup>665</sup> *ES*, p. 73.

ouvert en moi, j'étais la proie d'un désastre intérieur, d'un brutal accès d'idiotie.<sup>666</sup>

There is a strong parallel here between the man's physical experience of 'un désastre intérieur' when he was confronted with 'ce lieu très nu, très muet' and Germain's recollection of the bodily 'choc brutal' of her own visit to Struthof; the man's experience is also comparably framed in terms of exile: 'je me suis senti [...] irrémédiablement banni hors de la terre des hommes'.<sup>667</sup> It is also important that the passage insists on the impossibility of understanding 'la souffrance endurée en ce lieu': the man's emotional response is one of 'vide' and 'idiotie'.<sup>668</sup> This lack of comprehension intersects with Davis's position that it is ethically problematic to 'even try to understand'<sup>669</sup> the pain of others and particularly atrocity on the scale of the Holocaust. This in turn supports my argument that Germain's work avoids the 'arrogance' of appropriation, and this is a position which is carried through in the remainder of this passage as the man continues to relate his response to Auschwitz.

Confronted with this site of unimaginable horrors, the man, like Germain, undergoes a powerful bodily reaction that compels him to respond: 'je serais bien tombé à genoux, mais non pour embrasser le sol, plutôt pour y cogner mon front et y frapper des poings'.<sup>670</sup> Overwhelmed by incomprehension, the man is unable to articulate a response, and yet his body speaks for him. This immediate and corporeal reaction continues after he has left the site of the concentration camp and returned to the village, where he is overcome by an

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<sup>666</sup> Ibid.

<sup>667</sup> Ibid.

<sup>668</sup> Ibid.

<sup>669</sup> Davis, 'Trauma and Ethics', p. 19.

<sup>670</sup> *ES*, p. 73.

unwelcome and unexpected 'faim terrible' so that he gorges himself to the point of physical sickness: "Je suis revenu dans la ville d'Auschwitz et j'ai commandé à manger [...] du porc aux choux. Et puis un dessert [...] Encore du porc, et des patates [...] du poisson. Jusqu'à l'étouffement, la nausée".<sup>671</sup> Two points can be drawn from this involuntary corporeal response: firstly, as Davis observes, absence of response in the face of such suffering or its memory is not an ethical option, since,

not to speak for those who have been silenced, not to recall or to study what happened to them in the hope of learning something from their stories, would be an act of barbarity in itself, hideously complicit with the forces which sought to eliminate them.<sup>672</sup>

The line between an 'arrogant' assumption of another's pain and the 'barbarity' of ignoring it is undeniably a difficult one to negotiate, and one way in which Germain shows her awareness of this ethical difficulty lies in her emphasis on the bodily, instinctive nature of response. The involuntary nature of the man's response when forced to confront the horrors of Auschwitz resonates with Germain's own 'nécessité intérieure profonde' (as referred to in the Introduction to this chapter)<sup>673</sup> to respond textually, so that her writing is an expression of the desire to 'recall' and so to avoid the 'barbarity' of forgetfulness. This call to respond can be further understood in the light of Levinas's articulation, in an essay entitled 'Useless Suffering', of the nature of pain and of its potential to forge relationships between otherwise unconnected human beings.<sup>674</sup> Levinas tells us that '*[s]uffering in the other*, where it is unforgivable to *me*, solicits and calls me', demanding a response, which becomes in turn 'suffering in *me* [...] a

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<sup>671</sup> Ibid., p. 75.

<sup>672</sup> Davis, 'Trauma and Ethics', p. 19.

<sup>673</sup> Magill, p. 336.

<sup>674</sup> Levinas, 'Useless Suffering', pp. 91-101. The following citations taken from p. 94.

suffering for the suffering (inexorable though it may be) of someone else'. It is this elicited response in the self to the suffering other that gives meaning to suffering, says Levinas: 'It is this attention to the suffering of the other that, through the cruelties of our century (despite these cruelties, because of these cruelties) can be affirmed as the very nexus of human subjectivity'. Germain's call to write about the suffering other (as embodied in the stall-keeper's involuntary and corporeal reaction to Auschwitz) becomes, then, an 'attention' which, far from appropriating or assuming a position of 'arrogance', demonstrates a humility (a textual means of 'tomber à genoux' alongside her 'kiosquier' character) before the incomprehensible suffering of others.

The second point that I draw from the man's involuntary physical reaction to Auschwitz relates more closely to his desire to gorge himself, and his consequent sickness. His need to eat is perhaps a means of attempting to fill the emotional and spiritual 'vide' that opens up in him, and which, moreover, resonates with the images (referred to in *Bohuslav Reynek*) of the 'charniers et fosses communes' that covered the earth during the Second World War as well as with the image of the 'vertigineuse fosse divine' that Germain uses to express the attendant widespread sensation of spiritual void. Germain's configuration of this individual and collective loss of comprehension and meaning in terms of sickness is perhaps nowhere in her work more explicit than in the image of the man's nausea, the result of his self-gorging: 'j'ai été malade, bien sûr! J'ai dû descendre précipitamment du bus qui me ramenait vers la gare tant j'avais envie de vomir'.<sup>675</sup> These physical manifestations of the sense of exile created in Germain and in her characters by their encounter with the

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<sup>675</sup> *ES*, p. 76.

reality of the concentration camp can be interpreted in conjunction with Frank's understanding that stories of illness (which I have associated above with exile) 'are told not just about the body but through it'.<sup>676</sup> In the absence of words with which he can express his horror at 'la souffrance endurée en ce lieu', the man's story is told by his body: his vomiting is his involuntary testimony to the enormity of such suffering. I will return to this concept of telling stories of illness and pain through the body in Part III of this chapter, where I will engage more closely with the idea that Germain's writing about Czech histories, not only of the Holocaust but also of Communism, also comes 'out of the body' in an involuntary process of testimony.

### **Regarding the Pain of Others**

Germain has spoken of the importance of both familial and national participation in the transgenerational legacy of the Second World War, saying that '[j]e me rends compte que de par leurs parents, de nombreuses personnes de ma génération sont directement héritières de cette Seconde Guerre mondiale. Cette période représente toute la jeunesse de mes parents'.<sup>677</sup> Germain's sense of 'inheriting' the legacy of the war – generationally and personally – creates another 'bridge' between her position and the Central European traumas of which she is writing. Whilst, as I have pointed out, her early works engage with that legacy on largely French terms, the Czech works constitute an acknowledgement that this legacy extends beyond French or even Western European borders. These texts are accordingly not simply set in Czech

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<sup>676</sup> Frank, p. 3.

<sup>677</sup> Germain in Glaiman, p. 2.

geographical territories: in terms of twentieth-century traumas, they persistently draw attention not to French memories but rather to Czech and Central European losses, places, people, and events, many of which may be unfamiliar to Western readers. Thus *La Pleurante* refers, for example, to specific victims of the Holocaust in Central Europe, including ‘un petit garçon de Terezín, qui n’était plus depuis longtemps [...] qui ne devint jamais un homme, mais qu’on livra aux cendres, au vent, à la fosse, à l’oubli’.<sup>678</sup> Poulouin draws attention to the presence of Terezín in both *La Pleurante* and *Immensités*, pointing out that by retaining the Czech name in favour of the better-known German name of Theresienstadt, ‘[Germain] inscrit nettement ce camp dans le territoire tchèque’.<sup>679</sup> I would add that this pattern is repeated throughout the Czech texts, which insist on locating the Holocaust in Central Europe; not in any manner as a denial of the importance of French or Western European Holocaust memory (which of course receives attention in Germain’s other, French, stories), but rather, I suggest, as a means of once again signposting the immensity of the experience of the (non-Western) other and thus (to return to Kramsch’s words, cited in my Introduction) of ‘bring[ing] to light other possible meanings that have been forgotten by history or covered up by politics’.<sup>680</sup> As such, Germain’s work reminds us that this era and the way that it was played out across borders still demands our attention. By systematically drawing the attention of the French reader to ‘other’ possible experiences of the twentieth

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<sup>678</sup> *LP*, p. 50. Note that Terezín, better known by the German name of Theresienstadt, was the largest Nazi concentration camp in Bohemia. For a summary of its history, see Martin Winstone, *The Holocaust Sites of Europe: An Historical Guide* (London & New York: I.B.Tauris, 2010). Germain’s choice of Terezín, rather than one of the more widely known camps, focuses attention on the effects of the Holocaust within Czechoslovak territory.

<sup>679</sup> Poulouin, in Goulet (ed.), *L’Univers de Sylvie Germain*, p. 43.

<sup>680</sup> Kramsch, p. 103.

century as it was played out in what Hawkesworth (cited in my Introduction) referred to as 'the other Europe',<sup>681</sup> Germain's writing is not 'appropriating' a history that belongs to others but rather refusing to allow such stories to be 'covered up'; in this manner her work redresses in part the 'unequal distribution'<sup>682</sup> of attention to 'other' stories that has also been observed by Keller.

The refusal to allow such stories of the other to be 'covered up' is made specifically manifest, in *La Pleurante*, in the numerous evocations and namings of dead and forgotten victims of Czech history, whether of the Holocaust or of totalitarianism. One example of this process can be seen in Germain's practice of incorporating intertextual references to marginalised Czech writers, such as Jan Skácel, whose work was banned in the 1970s during normalisation and who could publish only in samizdat. The chapter entitled 'Quatrième apparition' cites as its epigraph a passage of his poetry: 'Parfois il arrive que l'âme humaine pue comme le poil d'un chien mouillé./[...] je veux que la douleur/ fasse vraiment mal et qu'une larme soit une larme'.<sup>683</sup> Germain takes up this motif at the end of that chapter in a reference to the multiple evils and suffering of the twentieth century: 'C'est que, sous ses grands airs, l'Histoire pue. Il conviendrait de le sentir, et il importe de le dire, pour que [...] l'on n'oublie pas qu'une larme pèse un poids gigantesque'.<sup>684</sup> The 'poids gigantesque' of sorrow is of course made overtly explicit in the size of *la Pleurante* herself, since '[e]lle

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<sup>681</sup> Hawkesworth, p. 199. Cited in full in my Introduction.

<sup>682</sup> Keller, in Keller and Rakusa (eds), p. 11. Cited in full in my Introduction.

<sup>683</sup> *LP*, p. 37. Note also that the lines of one of Skácel's poems have recently been inscribed into the pavement of the main square of the Czech Republic's second city, Brno. This is characteristic of the gradual opening-up of public discussion and memorial of the Communist era after a generation of near silence, as I have described in my chapter on the work of Páleníček, whose work I posit to be a part of the attempt to explode that silence.

<sup>684</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

est immense, une géante', so that the physical presence of her huge body makes it difficult to ignore the 'immense' weight of pain that she represents.<sup>685</sup> As well as insisting on the memory of Skácel in particular, and the losses of Czech Communism in general, this citation also provides us with a connection between, on the one hand, the embodied response to suffering, as discussed above and echoed here in the word 'sentir' and, on the other hand, the need to translate that bodily reaction into speech or writing since 'il importe de le dire': once again Germain is foregrounding the need not only to 'pay attention' to the pain of others, but also to respond.

We could also note that this naming of Skácel and perhaps twenty other persecuted writers and artists from the troubled centuries of Czech history corresponds to the use of roll calls or 'necrology', which Chloe Paver points out are frequently used in memorial-making in an attempt to 'restor[e] individuality' to those whom the Nazi regime sought to anonymize.<sup>686</sup> A further example of this process of bringing the memory of the lost other to wider attention by naming them and insisting not only on the 'poids gigantesque' weight of collective loss, but also on their individual lives is found in the 'ghosts' who are summoned before the (French) narrator of *la Pleurante*. These ghosts of memory are again all victims to Central European histories and their memory is generally invoked using personal detail about the lost life, as well as specifically Central European metaphors and cultural references. This attention to the

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<sup>685</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>686</sup> Chloe Paver, 'From Monuments to Installations: Aspects of Memorialization in Historical Exhibitions about the National Socialist Era', in Niven and Paver (eds), pp. 253-64, here p. 258. Note that Paver refers to the memorial context of National Socialism; necrology is also used in the Czech Republic in both Holocaust memorial (for example in the 80,000 Jewish names inscribed on the walls of the chapel in the Prague Ghetto, which is now a memorial and museum space) and memorials to the losses of the Communist era (as in the 'Memorial to the victims of Communism' in Prague, mentioned in Chapter Two).

individual can be seen, for example, in a passage describing the memory of 'une fillette aux yeux trop grands, trop sombre' whose impoverished father 'avait peint pour elle, son enfant aux pieds nus, quelques fleurs sur le mur derrière le lit'.<sup>687</sup> The child in the apparition is inspired by a photograph taken by the Jewish Latvian photographer Roman Vischniac, who himself was interned in a deportation camp as a 'stateless person', but released and then went on to secretly record on film images of the camps in an attempt to persuade the Western world of their reality, a mission which resonates with Germain's own writing mission to return a voice to the forgotten.<sup>688</sup> The flowers in his photograph, textually recreated in this scene by Germain, also reappear throughout the text in phrases highlighting the forgetting and silencing of such stories: 'les fades roses de l'oubli'; 'ces illusions de fleurs de cave'; 'les roses de personne'.<sup>689</sup> The child is named – 'Elle s'appelait Sarah' – so that she too takes her place in the memorial 'roll call' created by this text; by this means, Germain continues the work of Vishniac in identifying the forgotten, bringing their individual lives into focus, and bringing them to the attention of the Western world. Paver notes that, although necrology can be an effective means of encouraging the viewer or reader to contemplate the immensity of loss, there is nevertheless a potential danger in that the use of names in list form can sometimes result in a perpetuation of the 'loss of individuality that was part of the original victimization'.<sup>690</sup> I propose that Germain's intimate use of personal

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<sup>687</sup> *LP*, p. 68.

<sup>688</sup> Germain names Roman Vischniac but does not provide any further details about the photographer, *LP*, p. 69.

<sup>689</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 68, 69, & 70.

<sup>690</sup> Paver, p. 258. Paver notes that one method by which memorials may overcome the tension between individualization and anonymity entails the use of biographical detail to insist on the life story; this method is comparable to Germain's use of personal detail.

detail and anecdote, such as the flowers painted by the child's bed by her father, as well as the incorporation of the words of lost and persecuted writers such as Skácel, invites us to pause and reflect on the lives lost and so insists on individual identity. In this manner, Germain's writing can be aligned with what Paver notes to be a motivating factor of the use of necrology and other methods of memorial-making, namely 'to challenge the anonymization of individuals' in cases of mass murder or persecution.<sup>691</sup>

The flowers of Vishniac's work, recreated textually by Germain, also create a link with other works of Central European significance, and especially with Kundera's *Le Livre du rire et de l'oubli*, where 'les fleurs mélancholiques de l'oubli' spring up in the cities of Central Europe in the place of monuments and statues torn down in the various cycles of the 'state-managed forgetting' (discussed in Chapter One of this thesis) that has plagued the region.<sup>692</sup> The image is taken up yet again in Germain's *Immensités*, in a recurrent motif of 'la fleur du temps qui passe', drawn from a freedom song of the 1960s,<sup>693</sup> which relates to Prokop's sensation of being forgotten 'dans la très poussiéreuse salle d'attente de l'Histoire'.<sup>694</sup> The simple image of the 'fleur de l'oubli' thus takes on a growing weight of significance as it is woven through this multi-layered metaphor, but many of the layers of meaning may remain obscure to the Western reader, or are revealed only upon close scrutiny. The complexity of the image encourages us to contemplate and engage with its possible meanings in

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<sup>691</sup> Ibid., p. 257.

<sup>692</sup> Esbenshade, p. 74.

<sup>693</sup> Note that the phrase 'la fleur du temps qui passe', which is also the title of the first section of *Immensités*, is most probably drawn from a French cover version of a well-known freedom song by Pete Seeger. The French version, by Dalida in 1962, contains the line 'Que sont devenues les fleurs/Du temps qui passe'.

<sup>694</sup> *Imm.*, p. 20.

a manner that again intersects with Levinas's call to 'pay attention' to the other, even as we are compelled to admit that we may not comprehend the image in its entirety. Far from invalidating the process of individualisation noted above, this process of defamiliarisation again draws attention to the individual life lost by foregrounding the complexity and plurality of that life. Such defamiliarisation therefore fulfils Davis's manifesto that [t]he responsibility of the witness is [...] to regard the other's pain as something alien, unfathomable, and as an outrage which should be stopped'.<sup>695</sup> Defamiliarisation is an element of Germain's refusal to resist appropriating these stories with which, although we may empathise, we may not ever fully understand.

In bringing these stories to our attention, then, Germain is participating in a process that Sontag has described as the act of '[r]egarding the pain of others'.<sup>696</sup> There has been much critical consensus that the ethical difficulties surrounding the narration of the stories of others revolve around the speaker's adoption of viewpoint, or more precisely the positioning of the voice of the speaker in relation to the other, the one who is spoken about or 'for'. In her exploration of the morality and implications of '[r]egarding the pain of others', Sontag has exploded the concept of a unified 'we', arguing that '[n]o "we" should be taken for granted when the subject is looking at other people's pain'.<sup>697</sup> There is an inseparable divide between 'they' whose suffering is observed and 'I' or 'we' who look on, as Sontag writes (in response to Jeff

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<sup>695</sup> Davis, 'Trauma and Ethics', p. 30.

<sup>696</sup> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (London: Penguin, 2003).

<sup>697</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6. Whilst Sontag's argument centres largely on the medium of war photography, her argument has already been widely extended to the discussion of literary texts and, in the light of Germain's understanding of literature as a form of Levinassian 'regard' (discussed below) can be particularly pertinently applied to Germain's fiction.

Wall's photomontage response to an imagined scene from the War in Afghanistan, in which the re-animated dead and mutilated soldier victims appear to be talking companionably to one another, yet ignoring the viewer rather than 'speaking' or appealing for sympathy or in protest):

Why should they seek our gaze? What would they have to say to us? 'We' – this 'we' is everyone who has never experienced anything like what they went through – don't understand. We don't get it. We truly can't imagine what it was like. [...] Can't understand, can't imagine.<sup>698</sup>

The incomprehensible and unimaginable nature of the other's experience, which I have already argued to be central to Germain's engagement with stories of the other, creates a bond or community to which Wall's photomontage draws attention, and Davis takes up Sontag's argument to further insist that '[t]he reader – the non-survivor – is not and cannot be part of the community'.<sup>699</sup> Like the photographer Wall, Germain is working from 'outside' that community of sufferers whose pain she is picturing; like many of the viewers of Wall's 'Dead Troops Talk', those reading Germain's Czech works cannot be assumed to have experienced the traumas and difficulties represented within.<sup>700</sup>

And yet, as both Sontag and Davis insist, this precondition of non-comprehension, of non-identification with the victim, does not and must not preclude the act of witnessing, since we are all humanly and morally bound (in Sontag's words) 'to pay attention, to reflect, to learn, to examine the

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<sup>698</sup> Ibid., p. 113. Sontag is referring to Jeff Wall's 'Dead Troops Talk (A Vision After an Ambush of a Red Army Patrol near Moqor, Afghanistan, Winter 1986)', 1992. It is important to note that Wall, a Canadian photographer, had never visited Afghanistan and that the piece is an imagined scene.

<sup>699</sup> Davis, 'Trauma and Ethics', p. 38.

<sup>700</sup> Although some of Germain's texts have been translated into Czech, we must remember that they were written in French for a French audience.

rationalization for mass suffering offered by established powers'.<sup>701</sup> This thought intersects with Thomas Trezise's articulation of the possibility and indeed moral imperative of the existence of a community that acknowledges, upholds, and yet transcends the differences between survivor and non-survivor, or sufferer and observer.<sup>702</sup> For Trezise, the ethical responsibility lies with the reader, who is called on to become, through the act of reading, 'a second person capable of understanding that knowledge itself is not the horizon of listening'.<sup>703</sup> In other words, the possibility of an ethical relation or community between the other, whose pain we regard, and the self is enabled by the very act of 'regarding' (or 'paying attention to') that suffering which we accept we do not and cannot share in. Germain as a writer is thus impelled to respond to the pain of others by creating a transgenerational and transnational textual 'space of remembrance' (to recall Hirsch's words) in which we can acknowledge, if not comprehend, the pain of others. In her passage describing the corporeal reaction of the 'kiosquier' to Auschwitz, in her naming of the dispossessed and persecuted, and in the call to 'regard' the dying child in *La Pleurante*, the 'understanding that knowledge is not the horizon of listening' is played out, and the only ethical response seems to be to 'tomber à genoux'.

### **Germain's Self-inscription into the Czech Narrative of Suffering**

Before moving on in Part III of this chapter to consider the way in which Germain uses the trope of sickness to engage with the more specific national

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<sup>701</sup> Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, p. 104.

<sup>702</sup> Thomas Trezise, 'The Question of Community in Charlotte Delbo's *Auschwitz and After*', *Modern Language Notes* 117:4 (2002), 858-86.

<sup>703</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 886.

condition of alienation to which I posit that she became a transnational ‘witness by adoption’, I will firstly take a closer look at the manner in which she represents her own presence in Czechoslovakia in terms of narrative voice and of the introduction of French motifs. In her study of the narration of pain in *La Pleurante*, Isabelle Dotan considers the relative functions of the ‘je’ of the narrator and the ‘elle’ of the weeping figure who, she says, displaces the narrator as the subject of the text:

[l]e sujet manifesté devient un sujet effacé qui tente, en vain, de reprendre la maîtrise du texte. La Pleurante s’impose à elle et au fil du récit, le je n’est plus qu’un stylo, un médium qui se retire subjectivement du texte.<sup>704</sup>

Dotan uses this point to support her argument that the third person ‘elle’ of *la Pleurante* is the motivating force of the memories that surge up through the text, and therefore the instigator of the act of writing itself, in which process the writer becomes the ‘médium’ between the images in the writer’s memory and the recipient reader. This process of mediation is described by Germain herself in *La Pleurante*: ‘[l]e vent, le vent de l’encre qui souffle dans ses pas fait se courber, se balancer les mots, déracine des images qui demeureraient enfouies dans la mémoire à la limite de l’oubli’.<sup>705</sup> However, whilst the narrative ‘je’ is undeniably inspired and activated by the ‘vent de l’encre’ that is raised by the footsteps of *la Pleurante*, I propose that this ‘je’ does not in fact ‘se retire[r] subjectivement du texte’ but rather remains present and inscribes herself, in a variety of ways that will be examined here, into the wider collective body of memory that is represented by *la Pleurante*.

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<sup>704</sup> Dotan, ‘Narrer la douleur: *La Pleurante des rues de Prague*’, in Dotan and Michel (eds), pp. 141-46, p. 141.

<sup>705</sup> *LP*, p. 18.

Firstly, let us take a closer look at the appearance of a first person narrator in *La Pleurante*, which we can assume to be significant if only because this is to date the first and only time that Germain has used this device in her fictions, which are otherwise exclusively narrated in the third person. Butor discusses the difference between first and third person narratives, claiming that the former 'représente l'auteur',<sup>706</sup> which in the light of the unusual choice, for Germain, of narrative voice here suggests that there is a deliberately close association between the narrator and the author in *La Pleurante*. We should of course be wary of equating the two since, as Butor reminds us, '[l]e narrateur, dans le roman, n'est pas une première personne pure', but rather a point of confluence between the worlds of the fiction, the author and the reader.<sup>707</sup> However, the Butoresque presence of the author within the narrative 'je' of *La Pleurante* supports my position that Germain is inscribing herself through this work into the world of the text, that is, into the world of the figure of la Pleurante, who is inextricably associated with both the world of the Czech nation and the world at large. The author's presence in the textual world through the use of 'je' corresponds, furthermore, to Germain's actual, physical presence in Prague at the time of writing in 1992. Rather than withdrawing from the text, as Dotan phrases it, the first person author/narrator figure is surely insisting on a place within the text, within the worlds that it represents and that the author herself has gradually become absorbed into, as I showed in the introduction of this chapter in the citations about Prague drawn from interviews with Germain. This is a confluence of authorial and narrative voices that we have also seen in both the merging of Hodrová's first person identity with that of her character Eliška,

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<sup>706</sup> Butor, p. 67.

<sup>707</sup> Ibid., p. 63.

and in the epilogue to *Les Bouleaux*; in each case, I propose, the author is claiming a more visible place within the text in order to locate himself or herself within the trauma being narrated.

This position is supported by the precise physical manifestation of the 'je' who periodically reappears at different locations in Prague within the text, and most significantly in two passages referring to the narrator's father. The first of these occurs in the 'Sixième Apparition' when the figure of la Pleurante has appeared in the hillside district of Vinohrady, walking with a particularly pronounced limp ('[s]on grand corps plongeait profondément à gauche puis rebasculait vers la droite en un tangage régulier'),<sup>708</sup> perhaps presaging the immediacy of the painful memory of the narrator's father that is now evoked. It is significant here that the memory of the father appears to the narrator across the geographical divide that separates his home in 'le quartier d'Auteuil, à Paris' and the narrator's position in 'la rue Chorvatská à Vinohrady';<sup>709</sup> this bringing together of the two places on the page of the text again 'bridges' the geographical distance between the two countries in a manner that reinforces Germain's vision of the need for a meeting between 'altérités radicales'.

The narrator returns to the memory of her father in the very last lines of the 'Dernière apparition', a return which reasserts the personal presence of the author/narrator at the end of the text, as confirmed in the following lines taken from the end of the 'Épilogue': 'Il sera temps de consentir à la dépossession, à l'amour et à l'humilité, et de dire: "Me voici!"'<sup>710</sup> This takes place even as la

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<sup>708</sup> *LP*, p. 54.

<sup>709</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 56 & 54.

<sup>710</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 128.

Pleurante herself withdraws from Prague and from the text, since the epilogue opens with the words '[e]lle a quitté la ville',<sup>711</sup> and closes by confirming that '[e]lle est sortie du livre [...] rôder ailleurs, autrement.'<sup>712</sup> Far from 'withdrawing' from the text, then, the author/narrator (as I have defined the term in relation to Butor's usage) inscribes herself as a 'witness by adoption' into the narrative of Czech suffering. To better understand Germain's position as 'une étrangère' placing herself in proximity to Czech stories, we can turn to Kristeva's understanding of the biblical character of Ruth: 'Ruth l'étrangère est là pour rappeler [...] que la révélation divine nécessite souvent un écart, l'accueil de l'altérité radicale, la reconnaissance d'une étrangeté'.<sup>713</sup> Like Ruth, who chose to remain far from her homeland, Germain (during the time of her stay in Czechoslovakia) occupies a place of 'écart' (from her home) to which the textual presence of the French first person narrator in Prague draws attention. By insisting on her (French) presence in Prague and within her story of Czechoslovakia, Germain is once again highlighting her encounter with '[une] altérité radicale' and pointing to the wealth that can emerge from such an openness to otherness, since her writing resonates with Kristeva's position that 'la révélation divine nécessite souvent un écart'.

Her adopted proximity to Czech stories ('Me voici!') becomes an acceptance by Germain of the difficult task of opening oneself up to the other and listening to their stories of pain, a task whose difficulty Frank has set out in the following terms: 'One of the most difficult duties as human beings is to listen to the voices of those who suffer. [...] Listening is hard, but it is also a fundamental moral

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<sup>711</sup> Ibid., p. 113.

<sup>712</sup> Ibid., p. 127.

<sup>713</sup> Kristeva, p. 110.

act'.<sup>714</sup> My analysis has shown that, in line with Hirsch's statement that 'postmemory need not be *strictly* an identity position',<sup>715</sup> Germain's work takes the stance that, even if we cannot claim to comprehend, we are nevertheless morally called to listen and to bear witness not only to stories of our own familial or social group, but to stories emanating from the more distant other, the value of whose lives I argued earlier both collectively and individually weighs 'un poids gigantesque'. Germain does not 'strictly' have a claim to a Czech identity position and yet her writing shows that, like Ruth as understood by Kristeva, we can adopt a position of 'accueil de l'altérité radicale'. As such, the ways in which the traumas of the twentieth century were played out across borders impel Germain as a writer to respond by creating a transnational textual 'space of remembrance' (to recall Hirsch's words) in which we can acknowledge, if not comprehend, the pain of others. The creation of this textual memorial becomes a 'fundamental moral act' (as envisaged by Frank) in which the lost or persecuted lives of others are brought to our attention with humility rather than arrogance.

In Part II of this chapter, I have established that Germain's work is preoccupied with a sense of both personal and European alienation or exile deriving particularly from the 'atrocities' of the twentieth century, and have shown that this plays out in tropes of the body and sickness which are carried across into the response she is impelled to make to the pain of the (Czech) other. I have argued that, although her writing foregrounds the incomprehensibility of suffering in the other, Germain nevertheless takes points of common

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<sup>714</sup> Frank, p. 25.

<sup>715</sup> Hirsch, 'Surviving Images', p. 10.

experience (and particularly that of alienation) as a starting place from which to build a 'bridge' between herself and the other in a manner that conforms to Franks concept of a 'brotherhood of those who bear the mark of pain'.<sup>716</sup> Furthermore, Germain's detachment from her own country and the empathetic insight derived from her position as 'une étrangère' in Central Europe heightens her sense of the moral imperative of opening ourselves to alterity, of taking on the 'difficult task' of listening to the stories of others, and of responding in a manner that, in Levinas's wording, 'opens suffering to the ethical perspective of the interhuman'.<sup>717</sup> It is through this placing of her own self in a position of proximity to the suffering other that her Czech writing avoids the 'arrogance' of assuming authority over the other's story, and can be interpreted as a transgenerational and indeed transnational 'witness by adoption'. In Part III, I will move on to look more closely at the ways in which the Czech texts translate her understandings of personal and collective sickness into narratives of specific national illness.

### **Part III. Reading Germain's Czech Novels as Narratives of a National Illness**

Building on the understanding I have created of Germain's writing as a transnational witness to the general condition of dispossession experienced in Central Europe particularly as a result of the events of the Second World War

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<sup>716</sup> Frank, p. 35.

<sup>717</sup> Levinas, 'Useless Suffering', p. 94.

and the Holocaust, I will now turn to an analysis of the use of sickness to describe more specifically the collective and individual effects of the Communist era. It is, however, important to remember that these eras and their impact in Central Europe cannot easily be separated, as my analysis throughout this thesis of, for example, the Munich legacy and the themes of national subjugation makes clear. Although the emphasis in this section of the chapter is on the debilitating effects of totalitarianism, this insistence on the interconnectivity between the eras is maintained, as my analysis of the confluence of times and identities in the figure of la Pleurante will show.

Particularly prominent examples of sickness to be examined here include the presentation of the wounded, limping figure of la Pleurante; descriptions of the Czech nation as mute in *La Pleurante* and as blind in both *Immensités* and *Éclats*; the association in the former novel of Prokop and his dissident friends with illness; and Ludvík's symptoms of a figurative 'nausée' in the latter novel. My examination of these features will particularly intersect both with Frank's descriptions of the illness narratives of patients suffering or recovering from physical disease, and with Sontag's exploration of the metaphorical applications of the names, attributes, and effects of illnesses across the ages. Whilst the Germainian figures I shall refer to as 'ill' or 'wounded' belong, in the vast majority of cases, only figuratively to what Sontag has famously described as the 'kingdom of the sick', we will see that many of Frank's observations of the phenomenon of physical illness can also be applied to widen our understanding of Germain's presentation of these characters as afflicted. An exception can be found in a group of physically frail or ailing figures (including Reynek and the fictional characters of Brum, Ludvík's former teacher and mentor, and Prokop's

friend Jonáš), whose physical sickness but emotional wellbeing contrasts with the metaphorically sick characters such as Ludvík. In Part III, I will focus on the figurative manifestations of sickness in order to scrutinise Germain's understanding of the effects of the political troubles in Central Europe; in Part IV, my analysis will move on to consider the voyage towards health that is undertaken by characters such as Reynek.

### **Writing out Solidarity with the Suffering Czech Body**

We have seen that the writing of Germain can be compared to that of both Hodrová and of Páleníček in that all three writers are, from their different perspectives, preoccupied with the haunting of the present by the past, and in this section I will look more closely at the precise ways in which this haunting marks the body in Germain's work. Just as the body of the murdered woman, the problematic embodiment of a silenced national and familial past, returns to haunt the protagonist in Páleníček's *Les Bouleaux*, Germain's work as a whole engages with the notion that the 'buried'<sup>718</sup> truths of one era resurface to mark subsequent generations. In a passage bearing an uncanny resemblance to Páleníček's descriptions of the havoc wreaked in the life of his protagonist by the 'non-dits' of his own story and indeed of Czech history, Germain has demonstrated her understanding of the damage experienced by those who do not have access to the stories of their familial past:

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<sup>718</sup> I have used the term 'buried' in Chapter Two in conjunction with both Herman's understanding of the haunting of the present by silenced traumas, and Hirsch's application of the term to the specific images of the mass graves of the Holocaust as a trope for the need to work through, or 'unearth' the difficult legacy of that era. Herman, 2001, e.g. p. 1; Hirsch, 'Surviving Images', pp. 16-21.

Il en va de même avec les personnes auxquelles on cache certains secrets de famille, secrets trop honteux ou douloureux pour être dévoilés; elles ressentent un malaise, ont des intuitions, même si cela reste confus. Il y a toujours des fantômes embusqués dans les placards qui finissent par trahir ces secrets. On ne sait pas trop comment cela se passe, mais ça revient, ça suint des non-dits, de l'oubli.<sup>719</sup>

The mark left by these 'fantômes embusqués dans les placards' may take the form, in Germain's work, of either psychological or bodily damage. I have already pointed out that the protagonists of her early novels in particular bear the wounds of the past on their bodies, and we can interpret this bodily marking in the light of the young Germain's observation that her grandfather, veteran of the Second World War, bore the scars of that time on his body, a scarring which acts as a further link between Germain and the legacy of that era: 'Mon grand-père a fait toute la guerre 14-18. Il en portait des traces dans le corps'.<sup>720</sup> This trend of bodily marking-out of suffering is continued in Germain's depiction of the central figure of *la Pleurante* whose body, as we shall now see, is marked by the sufferings of Prague.

*La Pleurante* is immediately presented in a detailed language of wounding: 'elle boite fortement. Sa jambe gauche est beaucoup plus courte que la droite. Elle soulève ses pieds avec peine'.<sup>721</sup> This physically damaged body becomes a meeting place of time in a manner that echoes Hodrová's representation of the repeated cycles of trauma through history: 'Son corps était un lieu de confluence d'innombrables souffles, larmes et chuchotements échappés d'autres corps'.<sup>722</sup> Furthermore, as I noted in my synopsis of the text, her body

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<sup>719</sup> Germain, 'Pour une poétique de la mémoire: discussion', in Goulet (ed.), *L'Univers de Sylvie Germain*, pp. 235-40, here p. 240.

<sup>720</sup> Germain, in 'Annexes', in Goulet, *Sylvie Germain: Œuvre romanesque*, p. 249.

<sup>721</sup> *LP*, p. 19.

<sup>722</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

encompasses the memory not only of the Second World War and Holocaust and indeed even to earlier periods of Czech subjugation (which were referred to in my analysis of Hodrová's representation of Czech traumas), but also of recent traumas of the end of the twentieth century:

Elle est née des pierres de Prague [...]; elle a brûlé sur les bûchers [...] Elle est morte de mille morts au cours des guerres et des insurrections, des grandes épidémies et des pogroms. Elle a pris souvent la route de l'exil avec les bannis, la route des ténèbres avec les déportés.<sup>723</sup>

The weeping woman, then, is a symbol not only of the past suffering of the people of Prague, but also, since '[e]lle a pris souvent la route de l'exil avec les bannis', of the more recent losses of the Communist era; the reference to exile again stakes out an explicit connection between the troubles of that era and the themes of dispossession analysed above. This extension, in the form of *la Pleurante*, of the trope of corporeal marking (which she has already used to embody the effects of a legacy to which she feels 'directement héritière')<sup>724</sup> to encompass the effects of Communism suggests that Germain is beginning to mark out her empathy for the wounding caused by this latest era in the cycles of Czech traumas.

What is particularly interesting about the cases not only of *la Pleurante*, but also of the sick protagonists who will be examined in more detail in the following section, is that it is the *body* that is used to tell the story of these wounds and silencings in a way that corresponds to Frank's observation that, in the case of

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<sup>723</sup> Ibid., pp. 115-16. Reference is made to the onslaughts on Czech identity before and during the Austro-Hungarian Empire (represented by the burnings cited here); to the traumas of Czechoslovakia's marginalisation and suffering during the Second World War and especially of the fate of the Czechoslovak Jews ('des guerres [...] des pogroms'); and to the subsequent despotism of the Communist era ('les bannis [...] les déportés').

<sup>724</sup> In Glaiman, p. 2, cited in full above.

Judith, a sick woman he corresponded with, '[h]er story was not just *about* illness. The story was told *through* a wounded body. The stories that ill people tell come out of their bodies'.<sup>725</sup> This emphasis on the use of the body to create its own language of storytelling or witness recurs throughout Frank's account of the interviews and correspondence he held with a range of ill people. Frank uses this notion of a language of illness 'coming out' of the body to introduce the concept of illness narratives as testimony, whereby '[p]eople who tell stories of illness are witnesses, turning illness into moral responsibility'.<sup>726</sup> If we accept Frank's claim, then we can interpret Germain's Czech texts (since each tells 'stories of illness') as forms of witness, whereby both writer and reader are called to assume 'moral responsibility' for the traumas that lie at the source of the silencing and dispossession narrated in these texts.

I propose, however, that there is a shift from the way in which *La Pleurante* embodies the pain of the twentieth century in its entirety in Central Europe through the trope of wounding, to a use of illness to map out Communist era losses more precisely through the body in the other three Czech texts. It is possible that this change takes place as a result of that gradual process of 'detachment' from France (and Western preoccupations) of which Germain has spoken, whereby she felt that 'mon imaginaire, à force de vivre à Prague, a fini par être marqué par Prague et la Bohême, par l'histoire de ce pays'.<sup>727</sup> *La Pleurante* was the first Czech-based text to be published (in 1992) as a result of Germain's stay in Czechoslovakia, and I posit that the subsequent texts,

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<sup>725</sup> Frank, p. 2.

<sup>726</sup> Ibid., p. 137.

<sup>727</sup> Germain in interview with Richter, 'Sylvie Germain: Mon imaginaire s'est nourri de Prague et de la Bohême', 2005. Cited in full above.

published progressively from 1993 to 1998, are more *specifically* marked by the totalitarian era that was still playing out during the time of her presence in the country. In the latter three works, the past tends to rear its head in the inner struggles of the protagonist, which are manifested in symptoms of sickness which will be examined further below; this pattern first becomes evident in *Immensités*, whose protagonist Prokop (like Ludvík in the next novel) embarks on an emotional quest for internal resolution of the troubled state of mind in which his country's sociopolitical context has left him. This quest is played out in terms of a movement from sickness to health, a notion which will be more fully developed in Part IV of this chapter in relation particularly to the journeys undertaken by Ludvík.

This shift from graphic images of wounding (in the early French novels and in *la Pleurante*) to tropes of illness therefore constitutes a move in Germain's work from a largely transgenerational position of witnessing to a transnational form of 'adoption', and can be explored in terms of Germain's observations about the nature of the Communist era experience. Building on the concept of 'malaise' that is felt by those who do not have access to the 'fantômes embusqués dans les placards' of their family pasts, Germain goes on to describe more specifically her perception of this 'malaise' in terms of politically oppressive contexts, in which the past is officially manipulated or concealed from entire peoples or nations:

Quand on veut imposer l'oubli à un peuple, en éradiquant certains événements de son passé, en falsifiant son histoire, en essayant de lui mentir, de lui voler une part de son héritage historique, on le

fragilise, on le rend malade – et bien sûr plus facilement manipulable, ce qui est le but de la fraude.<sup>728</sup>

Germain's description of the effects of the 'fraude' perpetrated against the Czechs as a sickness ('on le rend malade'), helps us to understand the illness-related imagery in the Czech texts as part of her response to the Czech loss of 'une part de son héritage historique'. It is also important to note that the use of illness to portray the theft of memory intersects with the association, examined above, between exile and sickness, since the Czech illness, as expressed in Germain's latter three Czech stories, is a result of the exile of a nation from the past and from memory. We should further note that this understanding of the importance of memory and storytelling to a state of emotional health is comparable to Hodrová's depiction of the destabilising and potentially deathly effects of the 'deletion' of collective memory, as examined in Chapter One of this thesis. For all three authors examined in this thesis, then, the 'theft' of the past is worked out through the body: Páleníček's protagonist kills himself in the face of his inability to confront the secrets of the past; Hodrová's trilogy moves between the extremes of death and survival in an attempt to work through the traumatic experience of the past; and for Germain the Czech nation is infected with a sickness, whose symptoms will now be examined more closely.

### **'Une Plainte en Sourde': The Silenced Story of Prague**

Having aligned Germain's telling of stories of a Czech condition of figurative illness with Frank's understanding that stories of illness can be narrated through the body, I will now consider more closely the exact nature of the symptoms of

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<sup>728</sup> Germain, in Goulet (ed.), *L'Univers de Sylvie Germain*, p. 240.

illness that are used by Germain to map out her perceptions of the effect of the ‘theft’ of memory and identity during the regime. A recurrent theme throughout the Czech novels is that of muteness, which is manifested not only by individual characters, but also by the figure of *la Pleurante* and indeed by the city of Prague itself. The sorrowful history of Prague is manifest in *La Pleurante* firstly in the physical symptoms of an ailing city full of damaged buildings, such as ‘une maison désaffectée aux vitres cassées, à la façade décrépie et noircie’,<sup>729</sup> many of which are covered in ‘[t]ant d’échafaudages’<sup>730</sup> and shrouded in ‘la brume [...]. Les fumées [...], la poussière’.<sup>731</sup> These images, conjuring up notions of brokenness and dilapidation, reflect Germain’s awareness of the centuries ‘de plomb et de crasse et de sang’<sup>732</sup> suffered by the city, but also and more specifically recall descriptions (cited in my previous chapters) by Communist-era Czech authors of Prague being forgotten or neglected by history. (It is worth noting here that the material neglect of historical buildings, as representatives of memory, was one of the very tangible and obvious outcomes of the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia, and I will return briefly to that neglect when I discuss the significance of spa buildings in the context of images of sickness and health.) Beyond these tangible symptoms of the wounded history of Prague, the city and its buildings take on a corporeal, human quality. To cite just one of many examples, in a passage describing the buildings of Prague’s district of Malá Strana, one decrepit house ‘émettait un ultime souffle, une plainte en sourdine’,<sup>733</sup> and its sighing endows it with human

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<sup>729</sup> *LP*, pp. 39-40.

<sup>730</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>731</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>732</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>733</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

attributes of sorrow and suffering. It is important to note Germain's emphasis on the silence of the building's sorrow, expressed as 'une plainte en sourdine', and the fact that this silence is carried over into her portrait of la Pleurante herself. We have seen that she is the embodiment of Prague's history and of the pain of its inhabitants, whose tears can be heard within her body: 'Car il semblait que quelque chose pleurât en elle, et non pas qu'elle même versât des larmes'; 'C'était un pleurement très bas, un sanglot retenu d'une infinie douceur'.<sup>734</sup> Other than this sound of tears that emanates from her body, the weeping woman, like the buildings of Prague, is silent, never uttering a word. Her silence can be associated with Scarry's understanding of the inexpressibility of pain, which 'resists and destroys language';<sup>735</sup> this creates another point of comparison with Páleníček's *Les Bouleaux*, where we have seen that the only form of language in which the composer's pain could be articulated is poetry.

In *Immensités*, a similar metaphorical muteness emerges as a characteristic of those who are persecuted by the state. The novel opens with a description of Prokop and his fellow dissidents as 'relégués dans la très poussiéreuse salle d'attente de l'histoire',<sup>736</sup> a metaphor which frames Czech dissident victims of the regime as sick patients lacking hope of any imminent cure. In concrete narrative terms, each and every one of these friends has been stripped of their former employment and relegated to some insignificant, menial position: the jazz saxophonist Viktor now tends domestic central heating systems in the

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<sup>734</sup> Ibid., pp. 33 & 32.

<sup>735</sup> Scarry, p. 3.

<sup>736</sup> *Imm*, p. 20.

gloom of apartment basements,<sup>737</sup> whilst Prokop himself, a former teacher of literature, is now 'relégué dans la marge', reduced to sweeping the streets like 'un paria', an image which in itself carries inescapable associations of leprous disease.<sup>738</sup> Radomír, 'ancien documentariste chassé de la télévision', has been deprived of his public voice and must spend his days washing windows, '[à] défaut de décaper le regard de ses concitoyens par le biais de reportages d'une justesse acide'.<sup>739</sup> The relegation of these former professional and creative individuals to these positions, and thus to 'la très poussiéreuse salle d'attente de l'histoire', has variously removed their voice and political agency in a way that aligns them with Frank's vision of the voicelessness of the sick whereby '[s]eriously ill people are wounded not just in body but in voice'.<sup>740</sup> Although these individuals are not physically sick or wounded, the (figurative) removal of their voice reflects their powerlessness in a way that consequently qualifies them for inclusion into the 'kingdom of the sick'.

The muteness of these characters and even of the buildings of Prague also aligns Germain's embodiment of painful Czech histories with Páleníček's portrait in *Les Bouleaux* of his woman protagonist as the silenced victim of Czech history. In my discussion of that silencing, I argued that it is through articulation, or story-telling, that 'shattered'<sup>741</sup> identities (such as that of the post-Communist generation) can be reconstructed in a manner that corresponds with

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<sup>737</sup> Ibid., p. 26. Note that Jazz was an art form despised and banned by the regime because of its association with freedom movements. The repeated references to jazz in *Immensités* constitute another element of Germain's sympathy for the Czech dissidence movement as a form of resistance to oppression.

<sup>738</sup> Ibid., pp. 16 & 15.

<sup>739</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>740</sup> Frank, p. xii.

<sup>741</sup> My use of the term 'shattered' draws on Henke's understanding of the damaging effects of suppressed stories of trauma. Henke, 2000.

Frank's insight that the recovery of voice entails return of agency and thus brings healing, even if on psychological rather than physiological terms: 'ill people have to learn "to think differently". They learn by hearing themselves tell their stories, absorbing other's reactions, and experiencing their stories being shared'.<sup>742</sup> If story-telling is a restorative action in relation to the sick self, however, in the case of Germain's telling of the stories of an *other* ill subject (or nation), we need to consider the question of voice more closely. In the narratives examined by Frank, it is critically important that the narrator is the patient, the victim of the illness, and not an external observer (such as the doctor or medical expert, who Frank reminds us was the voice speaking on behalf of the mute patient during what he terms the 'modern' era of medicine).<sup>743</sup> This is because Frank understands the telling of the illness story in what he refers to as a 'postmodern' era as a means of reclaiming one's voice, a tool used by people needing to tell their *own* stories of 'what illness has imposed on [them] and seeking to define for [themselves] a new place in the world'.<sup>744</sup> Germain's Czech stories are of course narrated in French, by a French writer, and accordingly to a predominantly French readership. In the light of Frank's insistence on the importance of telling 'one's own' story, it could be assumed, despite the position of empathy that I have insisted she occupies, that Germain's stories of Czech 'illness' constitute a purely third party narration of someone else's suffering, and as such should be aligned rather with the

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<sup>742</sup> Frank, p. 1.

<sup>743</sup> For a discussion of what Frank terms 'the *modern* experience of illness', see Frank, pp. 5-6; pp. 4-7 set the notion of the 'modern' medicalization of illness in the context of the 'pre-modern' illness experience, which was dominated by folk tradition, and of the 'postmodern' experience, which Frank argues is characterised by a reclaiming of voice and agency, and thus responsibility, by the patient.

<sup>744</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

'modern' trend whereby the patient is displaced from their own story through its telling by another party (by the medical expert in the case of literal illness; in this case, by the author). However, the bodily nature of Germain's narration of the sufferings of Prague, corresponding as it does to Frank's understanding, confirms my interpretation of these texts as a form of 'interhuman' witnessing (to return to Levinas's term) to a story in which Germain inscribes herself through the bodily process of placing herself in a position to 'listen' and respond to the suffering other.

Furthermore, Germain's voicing of these stories of the ill and muted other intersects with the argument that I have set out for Germain's ethical mission to restore a voice to the marginalised and forgotten. Accordingly, *la Pleurante* repeatedly ushers in the memory and names of individual inhabitants of Prague (and beyond) who have themselves been marginalised, rendered mute and forgotten through the centuries, such as the Polish Jew Bruno Schulz, 'tué par une balle dans le dos, en plein jour', whose writings have been lost to posterity and who represents countless others who have had 'des voix tuées [...], des mots perdus' or '[la] voix volée'.<sup>745</sup> These lost voices also include those of many of the authors of the texts cited in the epigraphs to each apparition of *la Pleurante*, such as the banned poet Jan Skácel, referred to above,<sup>746</sup> or Bedřich Bridel, the Jesuit missionary who continued to write in and promote Czech despite the repressive Germanisation of the Hapsburg Empire. *La Pleurante* thus appeals, albeit voicelessly, to the narrator (and consequently to the reader)

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<sup>745</sup> *LP*, pp. 42-43.

<sup>746</sup> It is worth noting that in 2006 a plaque was placed in Svobodová náměstí ('Freedom Square') in Brno, citing a poem by Skácel, a sign of the very recent revival of these lost voices; this is another circumstance that reinforces the delayed public response to the silenced past, discussed in my two previous chapters.

for recognition on behalf of these variously silenced individuals and groups: 'Elle recèle tant de noms dans les replis de sa robe qu'ils pourraient, tous ces noms, former un peuple. Comme les noms gravés sur les murs des mémoriaux'.<sup>747</sup> Once again, this emphasis on naming recalls Paver's descriptions of the use of necrology in memorials to 'restor[e] individuality' to those who were rendered anonymous.<sup>748</sup> In the light of the lack of memorial (discussed in my analyses of Hodrová and Páleníček as well as earlier in this chapter) to the losses of the Communist era, the body of Germain's weeping woman – and, by implication, the body of the text through which she walks – becomes a living monument to those lost names ('Comme les noms gravés sur les murs des mémoriaux'),<sup>749</sup> some of which are brought back to our attention in the course of the apparitions and in the epigraphs, anecdotes, and intertextual references of this text.

In this insistent call for recognition and memorial of the unheard, the story that is brought to our attention by the limping body of la Pleurante, and by the other images of illness to which I have referred, becomes a vehicle for the reclaiming of voice and agency not only of the single narrating subject, but of others, if we accept that '[w]hen any person recovers his voice, many people begin to speak through that story'.<sup>750</sup> It is by opening up a textual space of memorial and discussion of muted histories that works such as Germain's constitute, I posit, an ethical response to the 'interhuman' that is best understood in terms of Frank's stance that,

[a]n ethic of solidarity and commitment is expressed when the storyteller offers his voice to others, not to speak for them, but to

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<sup>747</sup> *LP*, p. 59.

<sup>748</sup> Paver, p. 258.

<sup>749</sup> *LP*, p. 59.

<sup>750</sup> Frank, p. xiii.

speaking with them as a fellow-sufferer who, for whatever reasons of talent or opportunity, has a chance to speak while others do not.<sup>751</sup>

I have shown that, despite differences of familial, national, and historical identity, Germain's portrait of exile externalises her participation as a 'fellow-sufferer' in dispossession and thus avoids the danger of 'appropriation' of which Davis warns; the Czech texts are the manifestation of her moral 'commitment' to the suffering other with whom she, like Ruth, has come into proximity and to whom she offers her 'voice' in order to speak 'with them'.

### **Blindness and Blame?**

Muteness is not the only symptom of sickness that is prevalent in these texts, and I now turn to an examination of the use of blindness, which also affects the Czechs both individually and collectively in Germain's representation. We have seen that, like his dissident companions, the former journalist Radomír has been politically punished by his removal from his position and relegation to the job of washing windows. Like his dissidence, however, this is a futile task since 'les vitres citadines se réencrassent presque aussitôt': the perpetually dirty windows are indicative of the Czech nation's inability or unwillingness to 'see' the reality of their situation, so embedded are they in 'l'implacable médiocratie régnante'.<sup>752</sup> This portrait of the nation's blindness is carried through into a key scene in *Éclats* when the disillusioned protagonist Ludvík decides to flee the political situation in his country. The scene is set at a typically Czech open-air country dance, complete with an array of symbols of traditional Czech folk

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<sup>751</sup> Frank, p. 132.

<sup>752</sup> *Imm.*, p. 24.

identity including 'bière et saucisses' and waltz music;<sup>753</sup> this setting is indicative of the Czech national pride in its folk heritage and culture of country balls. It is in the midst of this representation of his country that Ludvík sees a couple waltzing wildly, apparent paragons of Czechness in their participation in this archetypal Czech scene. To his shock, however, Ludvík realises that the couple are blind, and their sightless whirling appears to him as the symptom of his nation's desperate, short-sighted bid to ignore the disease of Communism that is infecting their country:

ce couple de patauds qui venait de guincher sans rien voir alentour, de se dandiner dans une nuit toute poissée de bière et de glue musicante [...], ce couple somnambule lui était apparu comme l'incarnation même du mal dont souffrait son pays, – une asthénie du goût et de l'esprit, une anémie du cœur, une cécité de l'âme.<sup>754</sup>

The medical language of disease and symptoms in this particular passage constitutes one of Germain's most direct and impassioned invectives against the politically induced oppression and damage that she was witness to during her stay in Prague. As such, the passage intersects with Sontag's observation that '[i]llnesses have always been used as metaphors to enliven charges that a society was corrupt or unjust'.<sup>755</sup> What is less easy to explain, however, is that it is the couple themselves (rather than the political system or government) who appear to be the subjects of the metaphor, and this invokes the question as to whether Germain, despite the empathy for which I have argued, is nevertheless in some manner attaching blame to the Czech nation that the blind pair represents.

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<sup>753</sup> *ES*, p. 26.

<sup>754</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>755</sup> Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (London: Penguin, 1983), p. 73.

Sontag's discussion of perceptions of illness over the ages shows that notions of culpability have been attached as we would expect to the illness itself, as 'killer', but also to the patient: '[w]idely believed psychological theories of disease assign to the luckless ill the ultimate responsibility both for falling ill and for getting well'.<sup>756</sup> The question therefore arises as to whether Germain is similarly judging the fate of the Czech nation, and if so, what this means in the light of her status as an external, non-Czech observer. The key to answering the first part of this question lies in the particular nature of the illness imagery used by Germain to describe the sick nation. Sontag makes a distinction between on the one hand the 'relatively contentless' nature of traditional figures of illness (whereby 'no disease has its own distinctive logic')<sup>757</sup> used to metaphorise the 'body politic', and on the other hand the often 'virulent, preposterous, demagogic' language that invoked specific '[m]aster illnesses like TB and cancer' to polemicize social disorder in the modern age.<sup>758</sup> This distinction is useful in illuminating the nature and purpose of Germain's engagement with the 'body politic' of the Czech nation. Germain refrains in the passage cited above from naming a specific 'master illness', to borrow Sontag's term, which aligns her imagery with the type of language that Sontag identifies in pre-modern illness discourse, which is used to 'express concern for social order' or 'complain of some general aberration of public calamity' rather than to identify or blame a specific cause.<sup>759</sup> The language used by Germain in the passage cited above (and indeed throughout the four texts) is instead almost exclusively symptomatic: the nation is 'aveugle', 'somnambule', weakened by

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<sup>756</sup> Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*, p. 59.

<sup>757</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

<sup>758</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 75 & 73.

<sup>759</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 73 & 74.

'anémie' and 'asthénie'. This is important because it implies that the body of the nation is the suffering patient (which is confirmed by the metaphor in *Immensités* of 'la très poussiéreuse salle d'attente de l'Histoire'), rather than the root of the disease.

However, whilst Germain's treatment of the Czech nation as 'sick patient' is, as I have argued above, largely empathetic, we cannot ignore the fact that Prokop is described as a 'paria'; that the Czechs are apparently unwilling to figuratively 'clean their windows' and in doing so take responsibility for regaining their lost sight; or that the image of the blind couple is couched in the unattractive terms of 'pataud' and 'incarnation même du mal'. An answer to this apparent paradox lies partly in the comment made by Germain (and cited above) about the destructive effects on collective identity of the 'malaise' of totalitarianism: 'Quand on veut imposer l'oubli à un peuple [...] on le fragilise, on le rend malade – et bien sûr plus facilement manipulable, ce qui est le but de la fraude'.<sup>760</sup> An important if difficult part of Germain's insight into the trauma of totalitarian regimes is this understanding that the victims of such regimes are made vulnerable to subversive pressures, and as such may be 'manipulable'. This is an insight that coincides with Hodrová's portrait of Czech passivity and even the complicity of certain Czechs with both the Nazi and Communist regimes (as discussed in Chapter One in relation particularly to the characters Boisdorman and Paskal), as well as with Páleníček's engagement with the legacy left to a younger generation who do not know whether their parents or grandparents were compromised by such 'manipulations'. Furthermore, in the story of the 'kiosquier' to which I have referred above, Germain points out that

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<sup>760</sup> Germain, in Goulet (ed.), *L'Univers de Sylvie Germain*, p. 240.

the Czech blindness, as it is embodied in the dancing couple, is not just a national trait but is in fact a human attribute:

Il nous est facile de condamner tous ces crimes anciennement commis, de dénoncer le double silence, vertical et horizontal, qui a laissé le champ libre aux bourreaux et porté à l'extrême la souffrance des victimes abandonnées de toutes parts; il est beaucoup plus délicat de nous contenter d'une impuissante déploration face aux innombrables crimes en train d'être commis.<sup>761</sup>

In this extended passage, relating to the Holocaust, Germain draws attention to the phenomenon of disbelief, which could be described as a form of blindness, that caused many to turn their eyes away from the realities and suffering being perpetrated; she points out, moreover, that we continue to blind ourselves to 'innombrables crimes en train d'être commis'. In the light of this more widespread refusal to take ethical responsibility for the suffering of others (including suffering caused by oppressive regimes which of course continue to this day), the Czech inability to see is easier to excuse, since Germain is at pains to portray the political 'fraude' that is at the heart of their blindness. In this way, despite a certain occasional ambiguity in relation to the Czech inability to assume responsibility for their own 'sick' condition, Germain nevertheless maintains an empathetic position and, moreover, draws the reader's eyes towards him or herself rather than directing them to blame the (Czech) other.

### **'Une Nausée': Contaminated by a Regime of Sickness?**

If it is the case that, for Germain, the nation (both collectively and individually) is suffering from the symptoms examined above (namely wounding, muteness, and blindness), then the cause of the 'illness' underlying these symptoms also

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<sup>761</sup> *ES*, pp. 73-74.

merits further attention. In the following passage of analysis, I focus on the scene describing the blind couple, and particularly on Germain's description of its spa town setting. By their very nature, spas traditionally represent both physical and mental health, and accordingly their appearance here merits attention in any discussion of the dichotomy of sickness and health in Germain's work. I will provide some background information about the history of the spa in Central Europe in order to argue that the spa pictured here by Germain is not, as we might expect, a symbol of the restoration of health, but rather a metaphor for the contagious corruption of the regime, since it is in that setting that Ludvík becomes 'nauseated' at the sight of the blind dancers and fears being 'contamin[é]' by '[le] mal dont souffrait son pays'.<sup>762</sup>

The lands of Central Europe are rich in mineral spa waters and sources, which were promoted by Czech sovereigns as early as the Middle Ages and became internationally popular by the beginning of the nineteenth century. The spas in the Czech region reached the heights of success during the Art Nouveau era, culminating in the years of the First Czechoslovak Republic which is fondly remembered in Czech national memory as the Golden Age,<sup>763</sup> whilst the Communist era is now generally demonised as an era of failure and loss. It should also be noted that the spas were strongly supported by the Czechoslovak Communist Party's public health policies, although they fell into a state of dilapidation (reflected in the following citation) as a result of the

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<sup>762</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>763</sup> See, for example, a reference to the era as such in personal correspondence with Páleníček, Appendix.

regime's poor economic management.<sup>764</sup> It is indicative of Germain's broad understanding of Czech culture and history that her passage depicting a spa town captures the nation's sense of fall from the 'temps glorieux des curistes'<sup>765</sup> which is manifest in the trappings of the spa, now suffering from the general economic dilapidation that pervaded the Communist Bloc: 'De cette époque souveraine il ne restait plus désormais qu'un décor assez lépreux'.<sup>766</sup> The use of the adjective 'lépreux' creates an association between the Communist policies that are evident in this setting, and leprosy which, as Sontag points out, is an illness that historically carries particularly negative connotations: 'the leper was a social text in which corruption was made visible; an exemplum, an emblem of decay'.<sup>767</sup> In *Éclats*, then, the 'lépreux' spa setting becomes one such 'exemplum' of the 'decay' resulting from political corruption, and most importantly becomes the source of the disease that is contaminating the nation, infecting individuals (such as the blind dancers) with symptoms of 'asthénie [...], anémie [...], cécité'.

Furthermore, the spa setting is illuminating with regards to Germain's understanding of the difference between physical and emotional national wellbeing in the Communist context. As discussed in my earlier chapter on Páleníček, Lyn Marven has described how the regime maintained social control by implementing an appropriation of the individual body in such a way that it effectively becomes the property of the state. She lists methods used to

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<sup>764</sup> The dilapidation of the spa portrayed by Germain parallels her observation of the neglected buildings of Prague cited above. The state of disrepair was a result of Communist economic policies. The portrait of the physical decay of Communist Czechoslovakia recurs throughout Germain's Czech texts, reinforcing her sense of the diseased emotional state of the nation.

<sup>765</sup> *ES*, p. 25.

<sup>766</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>767</sup> Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*, p. 59.

perpetrate such an appropriation (including interrogation and torture; medical interventions such as abortion laws; and the use of collective sport) so that the 'individual body became a sign of the nation'.<sup>768</sup> We could note that the idea of the body as a 'sign of the nation' intersects with Germain's treatment of the limping and mute Pleurante as a 'sign' of national illness, or with the blindness of the dancers as a 'sign' of the passivity of some in the face of that sickness. To Marven's list of methods used by the state to subjugate the national 'body' in these ways, we could add the vigorous political promotion of spa visits as a means of creating an illusion of physical 'national health' that served to detract from the pursuit of individual emotional wellbeing. Germain shows her awareness of this disparity between the promotion of physical health and the absence of emotional health in the passage under analysis here, since the spa is filled with patients who, whilst presumably being treated for their physical ailments, are 'dénusés de joie, aux yeux inexpressifs, embués de somnolence [...] le cœur ne parvenait pas à battre, à flamboyer, à rire'.<sup>769</sup> I have shown that the spa is intimately linked to the corrupt power mechanisms of the regime and is a symbol of the perversion of national health. As such, the spa as Germain portrays it becomes a subversion of a quarantine enclosure, a site of infection rather than protection: 'La médiocratie au pouvoir avait inoculé cette maladie aux gens en prenant soin de les claquemurer dans l'étau des frontières afin d'en contaminer le plus grand nombre possible'.<sup>770</sup> In Germain's metaphor, the spa becomes a microcosm of the system of 'contamination' at play in this country that, as we saw earlier in my analysis of Hodrová's imagery, is 'cut off'

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<sup>768</sup> Marven, *Body and Narrative*, pp. 17-27, here p. 18.

<sup>769</sup> *ES*, p. 26.

<sup>770</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

from the rest of Europe. We should also note that the symptoms of 'cécité' and 'sommolence' with which the spa patients are infected in *Éclats* also bear comparison with Hodrová's image of 'le sommeil olsanyien' infecting the inhabitants of the cemetery of Olšany, which as we have seen is one of her key metaphors for the deathly experience of living under a totalitarian regime.

The ultimate symptom of the national sickness as it is portrayed here by Germain appears to be a state of passive or even complacent acceptance of the condition, epitomised in the final reference to the blind dancers: 'Ce couple était le parangon du citoyen modèle, – infirme de liberté, repu de leurres et de mensonges, et satisfait de l'être'.<sup>771</sup> We have seen that the already-disillusioned Ludvík's perception, during his visit to the spa, of this sickness of his nation provokes in turn 'une nausée'<sup>772</sup> in Ludvík himself, a condition which brings him to the decision to flee in an attempt to escape contagion: 'c'était par un souci d'hygiène mentale que Ludvík avait décidé un jour d'émigrer'.<sup>773</sup> Thus far, we might deduce that the disease inflicting both the nation and Ludvík is purely politically induced, related to the concrete geopolitical context of Communist Czechoslovakia, and this would also follow from my reading above of Germain's use of the spa as a metaphor for the corruption of the regime. If we were to accept such a reading of Germain's work as politically motivated, then she would appear to be embarking on a mission to create a utopian textual vision of a society cured of political (and perhaps specifically totalitarian) disease. We might therefore expect that the (figurative) illness from which characters such as the blind couple or Prokop and his dissident friends are variously suffering, and

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<sup>771</sup> Ibid.

<sup>772</sup> Ibid.

<sup>773</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

which fills Ludvík with 'nausée', would be 'cured' by the advent of the Velvet Revolution which put an end to Communist rule in Czechoslovakia. If Germain were indeed interested purely in envisaging a political 'cure', then we would accordingly expect to find a condition of collective as well as individual 'health' prevailing by the end of *Éclats* as the text moves chronologically beyond the Velvet Revolution which put an end to the Communist regime. However, if we trace the projection of the disease as it is manifested in Ludvík, it becomes clear that this is not the case, and I will now therefore examine the development of the symptoms of 'nausée' in Ludvík after the revolution, as well as the outcome of Prokop's condition, in order to determine whether the national state of illness is indeed cured by a new political order.

On his return from exile in France after the Velvet Revolution, then, Ludvík observes with disquietude the 'peau neuve'<sup>774</sup> now assumed by his increasingly Americanised country ('aux relents de marshmallow'),<sup>775</sup> and finds that he is still gripped by 'une nausée plus grave encore que celle qui lui avait fait fuir autrefois son pays'.<sup>776</sup> Although the country's sickness is undeniably associated with its oppression under Communism in ways that I have demonstrated to correspond to Sontag's understanding of the historical use of illness as a metaphor for 'corrupt or unjust' societies,<sup>777</sup> it now becomes clear that Ludvík's 'maladie' transcends the purely political context of Communism. In order to reach a better understanding of the perpetuation of this malady in Ludvík, we

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<sup>774</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>775</sup> Ibid.

<sup>776</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>777</sup> Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*, p. 73, cited in full above.

can compare the 'nouveau tempo'<sup>778</sup> that he observes in post-revolutionary Prague to a key passage in *Immensités* describing the vertiginous yet ultimately disappointing changes brought about by the Velvet Revolution as experienced by Prokop, for whom 'Prague était comme ces grands sabliers décoratifs emplis d'infimes grains minéraux de diverses couleurs; quand on les renverse tous les grains s'envolent [...]; on repose le sablier sur l'étagère et la vie continue'.<sup>779</sup> In short, the Velvet Revolution has failed to bring the sociopolitical healing or renewal hoped for by both Ludvík and Prokop. Although the new political state of affairs brings circumstantial improvements to some who, like the dissident Viktor who returns to playing the saxophone in a jazz band, are able to resume their chosen pathways in life, others (including Prokop and Ludvík) are disappointed or so unable to readjust to the new socio-economic realities (as in the extreme case of Prokop's friend Aloïs) that suicide seems the only solution, as Boblet has noted in her discussion of the ethical and political implications of Germain's work.<sup>780</sup> This is a somewhat anti-climactic vision of revolution that is diametrically opposed to more traditional French understandings whereby 'revolutionary violence would be justified on the grounds that society has a radical, horrible illness',<sup>781</sup> as Sontag points out in relation to Victor Hugo's work.

Although we have seen that Germain is portraying an ailing society that has clearly been 'contamin[é]' by a politically imposed 'radical, horrible illness', political revolution is nevertheless clearly not the cure proffered by these novels.

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<sup>778</sup> *ES*, p. 29.

<sup>779</sup> *Imm.*, p. 117.

<sup>780</sup> Boblet, in Goulet (ed.), *L'Univers de Sylvie Germain*, p. 59.

<sup>781</sup> Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*, p. 81, referring to Hugo's 1874 novel *Quatrevingt-treize* (Paris: Garnier, 1963).

In the following and final part of this chapter, I will therefore examine Ludvík's progress from his condition of nausea to a state of health. This progress is textually framed as a journey out into the Czech mountains, in the course of which a number of encounters are played out which, I shall argue, allow Ludvík to work through his disillusionment with the world. His journey will be examined in the light of Frank's concept of 'quest narratives', which, he claims, 'meet suffering head on; they accept illness and seek to use it'.<sup>782</sup> Alongside Frank's theory, I will also continue to deploy Levinas's philosophy of the relationship between self and other, and more particularly his understanding of the role of the 'rencontre', as I scrutinise the ways in which Ludvík's journey eventually allows him to 'accept' and 'use' his condition.

#### **Part IV. Encountering the Other: A Textual Voyage from Sickness to Health?**

I have pointed out that, on his return to Prague after the Velvet Revolution, Ludvík continues to suffer from a nausea deriving from a sense of exile not only from his physical surroundings, but also from both himself and other people, to the extent that 'les gens ne lui étaient supportables qu'à doses homéopathiques, la vie que par à-coups'.<sup>783</sup> By the end of *Éclats* (which is chronologically the last published of the three novels set in Czechoslovakia, and so perhaps the 'destination' of Germain's Czech journey), Ludvík has, however,

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<sup>782</sup> Frank, p. 115.

<sup>783</sup> *ES*, p. 30.

reached a state in which he feels 'la joie pure de se savoir en vie, et en paix souveraine. Et il riait, riait'.<sup>784</sup> In this section, I will consider the process of transformation that Ludvík has undergone in order to reach this place of reintegration with the world, in which (in the very last line of the book) he celebrates his discovery that '[u]n monde à découvrir, à questionner, respirait autour de lui, vivace'.<sup>785</sup> My analysis will focus initially on the central (and major) part of the novel, which relates a series of encounters during a journey Ludvík makes out into the Czechoslovak mountains in a renewed attempt to escape from Prague during its post-revolutionary upheaval. We should note that the very title of this section, 'Faces à faces',<sup>786</sup> derives from one of the terms that Levinas uses to denote the encounter between self and other, which for him is the source of our moral responsibility towards the (suffering) other and thus the impetus for the response we make to the other.<sup>787</sup> In the light of Germain's incorporation of Levinassian thought into her writing, his concept of this 'rencontre' between self and other will underpin my examination of the trope of the encounter in these texts. The encounter, moreover, is played out in a variety of ways, so that, in addition to Ludvík's life-transforming 'face à faces', I will also explore the text as a productive site of meeting between individual and collective memory.

In the course of this final part of the chapter, I also consider the metaphor of the journey, a trope for transformation or healing that appears not only in *Éclats* but also in *Immensités*, where Germain reinforces her portrait of Prokop's inner

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<sup>784</sup> Ibid., p. 185.

<sup>785</sup> Ibid.

<sup>786</sup> Ibid., pp. 37-153.

<sup>787</sup> Note that Levinas uses a range of almost interchangeable terms to denote the encounter between self and other, including 'face à face', 'rencontre', 'regard', and 'caresse'.

voyage with a number of references to physical voyages. Sontag's and Frank's understandings of the experience of illness as a form of voyage will be used as I explore the function of the journey motif as it is deployed by Germain as a figure for the process of self-transformation. Frank's articulation of that process as a time when sick people learn to 'construct new maps and new perceptions of their relationships to the world'<sup>788</sup> will be used to illuminate the process by which characters such as Ludvík move into a new space which transcends the pain of dispossession: 'délesté de toute rancœur et enfin désentravé de son indifférence, il débarquait en pleine nuit dans le matin du monde [...] il venait d'accéder à un espace autre, illimité'.<sup>789</sup> The structure of the 'quest narrative' (which is one of the three basic types of illness narrative identified by Frank) will be particularly useful in my analysis of the manner in which Ludvík's physical journey into the mountains facilitates and becomes a symbol of his spiritual journey from a state in which 'les gens ne lui étaient supportables qu'à doses homéopathiques, la vie que par à-coups',<sup>790</sup> to his embracing of '[u]n monde à découvrir'.

As I consider the journey made by Ludvík towards this renewed 'espace autre', it is important that we do not lose sight of the painful process inherent in the movement from sickness to health. Moving towards a conclusion, I will return to notions of exile and its relationship to the metaphor of illness in order to reconsider Germain's empathy with the Czech condition of dispossession in terms of Ludvík's voyage from nauseous disillusionment with his geographical 'home' towards a state of emotional health, in which he recognises that 'peu

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<sup>788</sup> Frank, p. 3.

<sup>789</sup> *ES*, p. 181.

<sup>790</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

importait désormais le lieu où il se trouvait, la ville où il habitait'.<sup>791</sup> Said has claimed that '[e]xile [...] is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and its native place, between the self and the true home',<sup>792</sup> and I will examine the notion of 'the true home' as it is embedded in Germain's work in order to argue that ultimately, and despite her evident engagement with and empathy for the political 'disease' that has infected and afflicted so many in Central Europe, Germain's real interest lies not in physical geographies or political solutions to national problems, but in exploring 'l'immensité' of the spiritual geographies that prove to be the central focus of her Czech texts, as of her œuvre in its entirety. Through a concluding comparison of the figures of Reynek and Renaud, I will discuss whether Germain's proposed 'cure' to the 'illness' proceeding from the earthly dispossession that afflicts nations such as the Czechs should be interpreted as an attempt to impose a facile or (in Davis's words) 'arrogan[t]' solution to traumatic Czech histories.<sup>793</sup>

### **The Encounter Motif: A Levinassian Philosophy of the Self**

In terms of my analysis of Germain's Czech texts, the importance of Levinas's thinking about the relationship between self and other revolves around his departure from the tenet of traditional Western philosophy whereby the self was believed to be privileged over the other, a position that has often been used to both explain and justify the tendency of the self towards the suppression and incorporation of the other. Kristeva also gives an account of this trend in Western thought and ethics, summarising that even in societies most open to

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<sup>791</sup> Ibid., p. 181.

<sup>792</sup> Said, p. 173.

<sup>793</sup> Davis, 'Trauma and Ethics', p. 19.

welcoming and hosting 'l'étranger', there is a requirement for that other to assimilate to the norm ('un homme différent qui, pourvu qu'il y adhère, peut être assimilé à l'alliance des sages').<sup>794</sup> Levinas's philosophy responds to this historical inclination towards the incorporation of the other by insisting, in a paraphrasing by Davis, that 'the Other lies absolutely beyond my comprehension and should be preserved in all its irreducible strangeness'.<sup>795</sup> This 'irreducible strangeness' of the other, moreover, corresponds to Kristevan thought that 'l'autre est tout simplement ... autre',<sup>796</sup> and also resonates in Sontag's and Davis's positions regarding the fundamental separateness of the observing, narrating 'I' and the suffering subject. The act of regarding the pain of others, for Germain, furthermore requires us to accept and embrace the Levinassian 'irreducible difference' of the other since, as Katia tells Ludvík, '[i]l est bon que les gens nous paraissent un peu bizarres, c'est le signe que nous avons posé sur eux notre regard [...] et que nous avons noté en eux quelque chose de différent'.<sup>797</sup> As I have already argued, one way in which Germain's work respects this 'irreducible strangeness' is by insisting on the impossibility of fully understanding the painful experience of the other, as demonstrated in my analysis of the reactions of the 'kiosquier' to Auschwitz.

According to Levinas, the self may nevertheless meet the other by means of a 'face à face' in which, ideally, neither self nor other dominates or is assimilated and thereby reduced; as Davis explains in his introduction to Levinas, '[i]f the

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<sup>794</sup> Kristeva, p. 10. Kristeva offers an interpretation of the history of society in terms of self and other, moving from Greek civilisation (Chapter 2) to contemporary French policies of assimilation (Chapter 9).

<sup>795</sup> In Davis, *Levinas: An Introduction* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1996), p. 3.

<sup>796</sup> Kristeva, p. 167

<sup>797</sup> *ES*, p. 127.

Other becomes an object of knowledge or experience (*my* knowledge, *my* experience), then immediately its alterity has been overwhelmed'.<sup>798</sup> Rather, through the encounter with the other some aspect of the self may be revealed to itself, an idea which intersects with Kristeva's conception of the encounter as 'le croisement de deux altérités', whereby the meeting with 'l'étranger' opens the individual to new understandings of themselves.<sup>799</sup> This reminds us again of the story of Ruth, who understood that it is through 'l'accueil de l'altérité radicale' that we can accede to 'la révélation divine'.<sup>800</sup> Germain clearly subscribes to the idea of the encounter between the 'deux altérités' of self and other as an enriching and enlightening possibility, as we can see in the words of a lecture she gave on the 'traces et réverbérations' of the work of Levinas in her own writing. Citing a passage from the poet Rilke about a moment of illumination or 'fulguration' attendant on an encounter with 'le visage' of a certain woman, Germain insists that '[d]'une telle rencontre du visage, rencontre impromptue, très insolite, violente, du moins bouleversante dans son extrême nudité, on ne peut pas sortir intacte'.<sup>801</sup> The 'rencontre' as envisaged by Germain not only leads us to 'pay attention' (to use Sontag's terms) to the presence and existence of the other in 'our' world, but also challenges us to reflect anew upon our self and our place in the world. Rather than a process of incorporation or reduction of the other, then, we have a process of change taking place within the self, which cannot 'sortir intacte'. Despite Ludvík's initial aversion to other

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<sup>798</sup> Davis, *Levinas: An Introduction*, p. 45.

<sup>799</sup> Kristeva, p. 21.

<sup>800</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110.

<sup>801</sup> Germain, 'Traces et réverbérations de l'œuvre de Levinas', 2006, Centre Pompidou, Bibliothèque publique d'information, Archives sonore. This passage can be heard at 16:20 minutes.

<[http://archives-sonores.bpi.fr/index.php?urlaction=doc&id\\_doc=2175&rang=1](http://archives-sonores.bpi.fr/index.php?urlaction=doc&id_doc=2175&rang=1)> [last accessed 28/01/2014].

people, this transformative encounter becomes the heart of Ludvík's quest for meaning in *Éclats*, where it is summarised by his one-time lover Katia in a close echo of Germain's own words in the passage cited above: '*On ne devrait jamais sortir indemne d'une rencontre, quelle qu'elle soit, ou du moins sortir inchangé; fût-ce d'un atome, on devrait chaque fois se trouver altéré*'.<sup>802</sup> It is this process of gradual change that Ludvík must undergo as he progresses, through a series of often challenging but enlightening encounters, towards a new space, that of 'la joie pure de se savoir en vie'.

The transformative result of the encounter, according to an ancient Hassidic legend recounted by Katia later in the passage cited above, is the birth of 'une nouvelle *lueur*, qui se nomme ange',<sup>803</sup> and this citation points us to the fact that the encounter entails a process that can perhaps best be described in terms of Germain's work as a process of *enlightenment*. Sabine Badré has explored this notion, pointing out that Ludvík's progression towards the resolution of his inner turmoil through a series of encounters with others is characterised by his movement from a place of darkness to one of light.<sup>804</sup> Goulet has described this movement in similar terms:

toutes les histoires de ses romans progressent de rencontres en rencontres, – événements qui se révèlent généralement épreuves, ouvertures, occasions d'une initiation ou d'une révélation de soi par l'autre, de soi avec l'autre. Et les héros successifs s'avancent dans ce qui constitue leur quête vers l'espérance d'une issue, vers une lumière.<sup>805</sup>

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<sup>802</sup> *ES*, p. 127, my italics.

<sup>803</sup> *Ibid.*, my italics.

<sup>804</sup> Sabine Badré, 2003. 'L'épiphanie ou la quête du visage dans *La Pleurante des rues de Prague* et *Éclats de sel*', in Garfitt (ed.), pp. 109-17. It should be noted that the movement from dark to light underlies a number of Germain's novels, including *L'enfant Méduse*, and is indeed a central occupation of much of her non-fictional prose.

<sup>805</sup> Goulet in Michel et Dotan (eds), p. 15.

The encounter with the other, then, is a point of light or 'révélation' in the existential darkness of the world 'after Auschwitz' shared by Germain (after her childhood visit to Struthof) and her variously dispossessed, marginalised and silenced protagonists. For Ludvík, the movement towards light is summarised in these words, found towards the end of the novel and after he has undertaken his journey into the mountains with its series of encounters: 'il débarquait en pleine nuit dans le matin du monde'; the light ('matin') is explicitly associated with the encounters with others that he has just experienced.<sup>806</sup>

Germain's emphasis on light and on the encounter between self and other as a process of enlightenment intersects with Sontag's understanding of the process of 'regarding' the pain of the other, since the very act of looking requires a source of light, and reminds us that for Sontag, as for Levinas, one outcome of the enlightening act of 'encountering' or 'regarding' is a transformation of 'useless suffering' in the other into 'meaningful suffering' in the observing self. For Levinas, '[t]he interhuman, properly speaking, lies in a non-indifference of one to another, in a responsibility of one for another', and this responsibility emerges out of the encounter, from which we have seen that the self should not emerge unchanged.<sup>807</sup> Levinas's understanding of the responsible 'interhuman' relationship has been rationalised by Frank in bodily terms when he speaks of the 'dyadic relation' between bodies that emerges from our condition of 'shared corporeality': '[t]he dyadic relation is the recognition that even though the other is a body outside of mine [...], this other *has to do with me, as I with it*'.<sup>808</sup> This translation of responsibility towards the other into bodily language helps us to

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<sup>806</sup> *ES*, p. 181.

<sup>807</sup> Levinas, 'Useless Suffering', p. 100.

<sup>808</sup> Frank, p. 35.

better understand Germain's response to the Czech other with whom she, like Ruth, came into physical community, and to whose suffering she expresses her response in the corporeal terms highlighted by my analysis.

Germain expresses this responsibility towards the other, who '*has to do with me*', as an imperative to combat the '*indifférence universelle*'<sup>809</sup> towards the (suffering) other that she identifies as one reason why evil and hardship are allowed to continue. The suffering other, she notes in *La Pleurante*, becomes invisible to us: '*Ceux qui ont froid [...] Ceux qui ont faim [...] Nul ne les voit, ils sont si légers, transparents [...] Et si par mésaventure nous les apercevons, nous détournons vite les yeux*'.<sup>810</sup> In this passage, Germain is referring to the impoverished of Prague, of Central Europe, of the world, and yet in her critique we can also recognise the invisibility of the Eastern Bloc that, as we saw in Chapter One, was reflected in Hodrová's portrait of being 'cut off' by a totalitarian regime from the narrative web of European memory and literature. It is through opening ourselves to the non-assimilative encounter with the other that we can move beyond our introverted '*indifférence*' towards the other, and this recognition of alterity is central to the journey from 'sickness' to 'health'. Having emphasised the transformative potential of the '*rencontre du visage*' (in the passage cited above from her lecture on the influence of Levinas), Germain extends the light metaphor to question why it is that '*la plupart du temps [...], on reste aveugle à cette fulguration du visage de l'autre*'.<sup>811</sup> The answer, her writing tells us, lies in Katia's reminder to Ludvík that we must '*rouvr[ir] enfin les*

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<sup>809</sup> *LP*, p. 69.

<sup>810</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88.

<sup>811</sup> Germain, '*Traces et réverbérations*', at 16:56 minutes.

yeux sur les autres',<sup>812</sup> corresponding to Sontag's belief (cited above) that we are morally bound 'to pay attention, to reflect, to learn'. If the encounter with the other engenders a moral responsibility to open our eyes and respond, then Germain's writing of Czech stories is her response to that call and a means of shedding light on the invisible, disregarded (Czech) other. In the following section, I will consider ways in which that response is externalised as a result not only of the physical encounter with the Czech other, but also of the encounter between individual and collective memory that, I shall argue, takes place in Germain's work.

### **Writing as an Encounter between Individual and Collective Memory**

The connectivity, or 'point de tangence' between 'soi et les autres, les vivants et les morts' in Germain's work has been thoroughly analysed by Koopman-Thurlings in her article on Germain's treatment of memory, in which she points out that Germain conceives of the memory of any individual not as a separate or self-delineating space, but rather as a fluid body which Koopman-Thurlings likens to the notions of 'la conscience commune, [la] mémoire collective' as described by Halbwachs.<sup>813</sup> This is an understanding that intersects with Germain's vision of the other-related self that I have examined above, and we could note that there is also a similarity with Hodrová's vision of a 'narrative web of memory' in which the individual is connected to the collective. Koopman-Thurlings highlights a key passage from an interview with Germain conducted

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<sup>812</sup> *ES*, p. 126.

<sup>813</sup> Koopman-Thurlings, 'Pour une poétique de la mémoire', in Goulet (ed.), *L'Univers de Sylvie Germain*, p. 225, drawing on Halbwachs, *La Mémoire collective* (Paris: PUF, 1950), especially pp. 2-3.

by Bruno Carbone et al that is useful to consider here because of its particular relevance to the questions of the relationship between self and other in the context of Germain's Czech texts:

La mémoire individuelle n'est pas une entité close et autonome, elle s'enracine et s'emboîte dans des mémoires plus larges et profondes: la mémoire familiale d'abord, elle-même greffée sur la mémoire collective laquelle porte toujours traces de souvenirs de guerres, de grands événements, de faits spectaculaires, de gloires et de hontes, et par-delà cette mémoire historique s'ouvre une mémoire plus vaste et ancestrale encore.<sup>814</sup>

It is this confluence of the memories of the individual and the group, of living and dead (and therefore of time past and present), that brings the Germainian self into community with the other in what Halbwachs referred to as 'la conscience commune'. In a further interview, Germain uses corporeal terms to describe the processes by which individual memory connects with ('s'enracine et s'emboîte dans') collective memory: '[n]otre corps, sous son apparente unité, est pluriel, comme ces poupées russes renfermant toute une série d'autres poupées de taille décroissante'.<sup>815</sup> The meeting between memory and the bodily centred 'interhuman' relationship is worked out in Ludvík's enlightenment at the end of *Éclats*:

il se reconnaissait simple et pluriel, zone mouvante traversée à la fois par le vide et par une multitude de voix, de visages, de gestes et de pas [...], un éphémère point de tangence entre soi et les autres, les vivants et les morts.<sup>816</sup>

It was only by embracing this 'point de tangence' between himself and others, and the memory of others ('les vivants et les morts'), and by responding to that 'multitude de voix, de visages' that he had for so long shunned in his 'nauseous'

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<sup>814</sup> Germain, in interview with Carbone et al, p. 14. Cited in Koopman-Thurlings, 'Pour une poétique de la mémoire', p. 225. For the original interview, see Bruno Carbone et al., *Sylvie Germain* (La Rochelle: Office du Livre en Poitou-Charentes, 1994).

<sup>815</sup> Germain, in Magill, p. 338.

<sup>816</sup> *ES*, p. 180.

exile from the world and its ever-present memories of pain, that Ludvík can discover, in the closing moment of his story, that ‘un monde à découvrir, à questionner, respirait autour de lui, vivace’.<sup>817</sup>

A similar vision of the rooting of collective memory in the body is evoked by the figure of la Pleurante, who at each of her appearances to the narrator, ushers in memory in the form of ‘un vrai corps de chair et de sang et de nerfs qui soudain se réveille à l’intérieur de notre propre corps. Corps des autres, corps de l’autre, étranger et si proche à la fois’.<sup>818</sup> This shared body of memory that is as physically integral to our bodies as ‘de sang et de nerfs’ bring individuals into a community of a kind that transcends difference (personal, familial, national) even as it maintains diversity, facilitating a relationship of the kind envisaged by Kristeva when she spoke of ‘une alliance de singularités’ and ‘la cohabitation de ces étrangers que nous reconnaissons tous être’.<sup>819</sup> This vision of an ‘interhuman’ body of memory that transcends difference further underpins my position that Germain’s Czech stories constitute a transnational ‘witness by adoption’ to memories that are accessed not only by the physical proximity gained by her position as ‘étrangère’ in Czechoslovakia, but by a participation in the ‘tangence’ that is created between humans by these processes of collective memory.

Whilst it has been clearly acknowledged in this thesis that the Czech ‘memories’ she is rewriting have not been directly experienced by Germain, they nevertheless become a form of ‘embodied memory’ as conceived of by

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<sup>817</sup> *ES*, p. 185.

<sup>818</sup> *LP*, p. 67.

<sup>819</sup> Kristeva, pp. 195 and 11.

Vassallo; the memory of (Czech) others becomes a part of her memory just as we have seen that the narrator of *La Pleurante* experiences an awakening of the memory of others like 'un vrai corps de chair et de sang et de nerfs' within her own body. The Kristevan 'alliance' facilitated by the common body of human memory is what allows Germain fictionally to inscribe herself into the stories of the other's pain that we see in these Czech texts. The text therefore becomes a site of externalised 'embodied memory' in a manner which again corresponds to the processes described by Vassallo and applied in my previous chapter to the writing of Páleníček.<sup>821</sup> Just as for Páleníček the memory of the dead of previous generations returns to haunt the text, so Germain's writing becomes a memorial to the lost, dispossessed and forgotten lives evoked not only by the figure of la Pleurante but in each of these texts: 'ce sont les autres, les vivants et les morts, qui constituent déjà le livre, tout livre'.<sup>822</sup> Writing, and the text itself, are thus directly implicated in the processes of memory that underpin Germain's vision of the ethical relationship between self and other.

Germain's externalisation of the 'embodied memory' of the other can be better understood in the light of her observations in a number of interviews about the act of writing, which she says is facilitated by a rich imaginative process of drawing on a collective memory bank of images which corresponds to the conception of memory I have described above: '[n]otre imaginaire est pétri par toute une mémoire sociale, collective et culturelle [...] Quand on écrit on puise plus ou moins consciemment dans un vaste fonds commun de références, de

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<sup>821</sup> See, for example, Vassallo, p. 8, for an introduction to the concept of the externalisation of 'embodied memory' whereby the text becomes a site of memory.

<sup>822</sup> *LP*, pp. 59 & 128.

valeurs, d'images'.<sup>823</sup> She has further said that '[l]e récit prend sa source au fond de l'imaginaire, dans l'inconscient, les profondeurs de la mémoire, réveillant des souvenirs, des sensations, des pensées qui sommeillaient et qui, sans l'écriture, seraient peut-être restées dans les limbes',<sup>824</sup> and this notion of dormant memory being carried in the body ('dans les limbes') before being 'réveill[é]' and externalised in the process of writing supports my comparison with Vassallo's understanding of the processes of writing out 'embodied memory'. This concept of the writing process as a means of drawing on 'toute une mémoire sociale, collective et culturelle' is made manifest nowhere more explicitly in Germain's fictional writing than in the text of *La Pleurante* when she describes, for example, '[l]e vent, le vent de l'encre qui souffle dans ses pas fait se courber, se balancer les mots, déracine des images qui demeuraient enfouies dans la mémoire à la limite de l'oubli'.<sup>825</sup> The writing of Czech stories, then, can be understood as an almost involuntary, bodily reaction to the encounter with the memory of the other that takes place during Germain's stay in Czechoslovakia, and is a fundamental part of her own journey towards 'un autre espace' through the encounter with the other.

### **A Journey from Sickness to Health: Reading the Czech Texts as 'Quest Narratives'**

Throughout this chapter, I have argued that as well as using structures and tropes which revolve around the notion of a productive encounter with the other, these texts can themselves be interpreted as the site of an ethical encounter

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<sup>823</sup> In Magill, p. 337.

<sup>824</sup> Ibid., p. 335.

<sup>825</sup> *LP*, p. 18.

with the (Czech) other and a means of returning an identity and a voice to the silenced and marginalised of this era of history. It is, however, important to note that the process of opening oneself up to the other, and to the change that may proceed from that encounter, may be a process of pain or conflict. In this concluding section, I examine this process as a journey from sickness to health in terms of Frank's categories of illness narratives. Frank recognises three primary types of narrative: the chaos narrative foregrounds the disease and 'imagines life never getting better'; the restitution narrative focuses on the cure and the expected outcome of return to health; and whilst quest narratives also move forwards towards a new state, unlike restitutions they do not ignore the suffering that is involved in both illness and the journey towards health: Frank claims that '[q]uest stories meet suffering head on; they accept illness and seek to use it'.<sup>826</sup> I propose that Ludvík's journey can be likened to the 'quest narrative' since we have seen that it both highlights his emotional turmoil and brings him to 'un espace autre'<sup>827</sup> in which he has recognised his interconnectedness with the world. I will start by exploring the way in which Ludvík's series of encounters, which take place on his physical journey and which also which form his spiritual 'quest', take the pain of his condition of 'illness' and transform (or 'use') it so that he can move beyond the enclosure of his introspection and reintegrate with the world.

Having fled from the city, Ludvík immerses himself in the isolated peace and silence of the countryside. However, the transmutation of the mountain

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<sup>826</sup> Frank, p. 115. In Chapter 6, pp. 115-36, Frank delineates the 'quest narrative' as opposed to his two other categories of illness narrative, the 'restitution narrative' (see Chapter 4) and the 'chaos narrative' (see Chapter 5).

<sup>827</sup> *ES*, p. 181, cited in full above.

landscape of his retreat into 'un désert étincelant', and the association (discussed in Part II in the context of exile) with the site of Moses' wandering in the wilderness, emphasises the fact that this period will also be beset with difficulty for Ludvík. This difficulty arises from his unwillingness to re-engage with the world so that, from his series of encounters with a range of characters, each of whom impels him to reflect uncomfortably upon himself, he initially emerges with a sense of unease equal to that which made him flee the city: '[un] malaise provoqué par ces rencontres importunes d'individus qui paraissaient chaque fois surgir de nulle part pour lui lancer des reproches, des moqueries ou de confus et pénibles sous-entendus'.<sup>828</sup> Gradually, and against his will, the encounters begin to transform Ludvík so that 'à mesure il sentait s'effriter la chape d'ennui qui depuis si longtemps s'était sédimentée en lui, se dissoudre le nœud de dégoût, de lassitude, qui enserrait son cœur'; eventually, even, Ludvík is infected with a desire to reintegrate with the world: '[il] prit conscience de sa négligence à l'égard de Brum et d'Eva'; [il] éprouvait le besoin de reprendre contact avec les gens, de discuter avec eux'.<sup>829</sup> If we return to Said's interpretation of the words of Hugo St. Victor, we can begin to better understand the process of change that I have traced in Ludvík. Whilst St Victor draws attention to the necessity of detaching oneself from one's earthly home in order to reach a place of spiritual enlightenment ('he is perfect to whom the entire world is as a foreign land'), Said emphasises the process by which this 'perfection' is reached: 'the "strong" or "perfect" man achieves independence and detachment by *working through* attachments, not by rejecting them'.<sup>830</sup>

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<sup>828</sup> Ibid., p. 104.

<sup>829</sup> Ibid., pp. 105, 106, & 113.

<sup>830</sup> Said, p. 185, referring to Hugo St. Victor, cited above, my italics.

Ludvík's understanding at the very end of the novel that 'peu importait désormais le lieu où il se trouvait, la ville où il habitait'<sup>831</sup> echoes St. Victor's belief that 'virtue' proceeds from detachment from the geographical home, but more importantly we should note that this position is reached only by 'working through' (rather than 'rejecting') that series of encounters in the mountains and indeed the 'attachments' of his life (exemplified in his return to visit Brum and Eva). Said's use of the term 'working through' recalls my claim in Chapter One that Hodrová 'works through' traumatic memory in the sense envisaged by LaCapra, whereby 'engaging trauma [results in] achieving a reinvestment in, or recathexis of, life which allows one to begin again'.<sup>832</sup> It is by 'engaging' with the other through his encounters that Ludvík can 'reinvest in' life once more (and so experience 'la joie pure de se savoir en vie').<sup>833</sup> This 'working through' can also be interpreted in the light of Frank's claim that '[t]he quest narrative tells self-consciously of being transformed; undergoing transformation is a significant dimension of the storyteller's responsibility'.<sup>834</sup> The 'transformation' is, furthermore, envisaged by Frank as an 'initiation through agony to atonement' and as a 'road of trials',<sup>835</sup> descriptions which resonate with Ludvík's struggle to come to terms with the need to reintegrate himself into the world.

I propose that, in undertaking this quest to 'return' to the world, Ludvík becomes a 'sign of the nation' (to recall Marven's phrase) not only in that his 'nausée' initially appears to be prompted by the political disease and corruption to which

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<sup>831</sup> *ES*, p. 181.

<sup>832</sup> LaCapra, p. 66.

<sup>833</sup> *ES*, p. 185.

<sup>834</sup> Frank, p. 118.

<sup>835</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 119 & 118; Frank borrows the phrase 'road of trials' from Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972, first publ. 1949).

he is exposed, but also in the course taken by his voyage towards (figurative) 'health'. To understand this notion, we can return to Hodrová's depiction of the Czech nation as cut off from the body of Europe.<sup>836</sup> Germain has shown that she is aware of the pain and indeed danger inherent in this situation of isolation from the 'other', as we saw in my analysis of her depiction of the spa as a subversion of a 'quarantine' zone, a microcosm for the 'unhealthy' enclosure of the nation behind the Iron Curtain. To recover a state of health, the nation must come out of quarantine, which entails a renewal of contact with the larger world (just as Ludvík must 'reprendre contact avec les gens'). This is nonetheless a difficult process, as we have seen in Páleníček's depiction in *Les Bouleaux* of the pain of the transition from totalitarian to democratic identity, and Germain acknowledges this in Ludvík's initial, troubled response to 'ces rencontres importunes d'individus qui paraissaient chaque fois surgir de nulle part pour lui lancer des reproches'.<sup>837</sup> The individual and national voyage from sickness to health becomes, through this image of the quest and the encounters, a journey not from one political regime to another, but rather from a state of dispossession to a condition of internal freedom in which (for Ludvík) 'peu importait désormais le lieu où il se trouvait, la ville où il habitait',<sup>838</sup> since he has recognised that the 'true home' (as envisaged by both Said and Germain) lies in the enlightenment I have described above.

The importance of the quest as motif not only for the journey, but also for the shift from sickness to health, can be further illustrated by a comparison of the central 'quest' character of Ludvík with other figures in the text. These are, most

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<sup>836</sup> See Chapter I, Part II of this thesis.

<sup>837</sup> *ES*, p. 104, cited in full above.

<sup>838</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 181, cited above.

notably, Bohuslav Reynek, as he is seen through the lens of Germain's eponymous text; Joachym Brum, who is Ludvík's former teacher and inspirational mentor; and Prokop's friend the reclusive photographer Jonáš. In physical terms, all three figures are either ailing (Brum is elderly and very sick when Ludvík revisits him in the course of *Éclats*, and in fact dies before the story ends);<sup>839</sup> physically frail or weak (Jonáš barely feeds himself and is 'petit, menu');<sup>840</sup> or marginalised (Reynek, whose self-portrait reproduced on the cover of Germain's text shows him as a frail, retiring figure, loses both his home, which is confiscated, and his voice since he cannot publish owing to censorship).<sup>841</sup> These attributes would appear to qualify them for inclusion in the 'kingdom of the sick' described by Sontag, and thus as subjects of Germain's illness narratives.<sup>842</sup> However, rather than these three apparent figures of infirmity, it is the physically healthy Ludvík and Prokop that we have seen to succumb to the (metaphorical) disease described by Germain, and who are accordingly the 'ill subjects' of these texts. In these characters, then, Germain is subverting expectations of sickness and health in order to posit that the real source of 'sickness' is not geographical dispossession, but rather that 'health' lies in the recognition of alterity and of our acceptance of an ethical responsibility to the other.

Each of these three is confined to a very narrow physical environment by current political circumstances, yet unlike Ludvík and Prokop they do not rail against their fate, but have found tranquillity despite the constraints and

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<sup>839</sup> See especially *ES*, pp. 140-54, for an account of Brum's funeral and his niece Eva's reflection on his last days of illness and death.

<sup>840</sup> *Imm.*, p.97.

<sup>841</sup> The cover of Germain's Reynek text shows *Autoportrait au chat*, by Bohuslav Reynek, 1940.

<sup>842</sup> Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*, p. 3.

strictures of their external world. The poet Reynek is unable to travel to his beloved France after the onset of the Second World War and throughout the Communist era, and is for many years reduced to the company of his farm beasts and to the small circle of warmth created by his kitchen stove; yet he finds beauty in the everyday minutiae that surround him. It is this quality that particularly draws Germain to him, seeing in him an answer to the apparently unbearable cruelty of the external world, as we can see in her reply to the question she poses herself:

... et pourquoi des poètes en un temps d'indigence? Pour arpenter les petits chemins délaissés par la plupart des homes, pour converser à mi-voix avec les éléments et les esprits des lieux [...], pour récolter à fleur d'invisible d'étincelants bris de beauté.<sup>843</sup>

The entire text is filled with evidence of these 'bris de beauté' both in the form of citations from Reynek's poetry and allusions to his engravings (both of which are largely concerned with the everyday world around him), and in the form of Germain's own lyrical response to the beauty of his 'demeure à Petrkov' (which she has in fact herself visited on several occasions since first discovering Reynek's poetry).<sup>844</sup> Similarly, in *Éclats*, Brum is 'un nomade, de la race des nomades immobiles'<sup>845</sup> who explores the world by constantly voyaging across 'les géographies du langage, des images et des formes' but whose external world is reduced to the home ('[a]insi avait-il passé sa vie à voyager en douce dans le silence de son salon').<sup>846</sup> The hermit-like Jonáš in *Immensités* barely ventures beyond his front door, as he explains to Prokop: '[p]lus ça va et moins

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<sup>843</sup> *BR*, p. 29. Germain is drawing here on the work of the poet Friedrich Hölderlin, whose response to the 'indigence' of poverty and misery she acknowledges to have influenced her, see *BR*, p. 25.

<sup>844</sup> Bakešová has pointed out that Germain returned to Petrkov on the occasion of her recent visit to the Czech city of Brno to participate in the city's Mois de Lecture d'Auteurs Français. See Bakešová, p. 12.

<sup>845</sup> *ES*, p. 18.

<sup>846</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

je fais de photos à l'extérieur. Tout à domicile. [...] je voyage sur ma table. On peut aller très loin, n'importe où, avec quelques grammes de papier'.<sup>847</sup> Each of these apparently ailing and marginalised characters conforms to the position that Germain stakes out in her essay, 'Le Vrai lieu est ailleurs', that '[l]e plus haut lieu, le seul vrai lieu, est celui où nous ne pouvons pas résider', and so represents the state of 'health' towards which Ludvík must travel.<sup>848</sup>

In the Czech context of sociopolitical dispossession and historical suffering, Germain's proposal that a true condition of 'health' transcends geographical or political realities may appear to be an 'arrogant' attempt to speak not 'with' but 'for' the dispossessed other, an attempt to displace the Czechs from their own history and to impose her own solution or 'cure'. I would counter this argument, however, by pointing out that Germain's 'quest' structure foregrounds the process of pain that, as we have seen in Ludvík's story, must be endured in order to reach the place of enlightenment occupied by Reynek, Brum, and Jonáš. Although Germain clearly aspires to the place of 'detachment' reached by these three figures, whose true home is in the spiritual 'ailleurs', nevertheless her sympathy lies with characters such as Ludvík who must undergo trials in the 'désert' before arriving at a place of 'health'. We can see a similar empathy for the dilemma of Reynek's French wife Renaud, who is central to understanding Germain's identification with the pain of dispossession. Germain firstly draws attention to Renaud's position of alienation and dispossession in Czechoslovakia. Despite the trials of its glacial winters,<sup>849</sup> Renaud had grown to

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<sup>847</sup> *Imm.*, pp. 104-05.

<sup>848</sup> Germain, 'Le Vrai lieu est ailleurs', 2006, p. 150.

<sup>849</sup> See *BR*, p. 45 for a description of Renaud's suffering during the long Bohemian winters; her response can also be found in her poetry, eg *Corbeaux*, cited in *BR*, p. 47.

love the country whose pastoral beauty she evoked in many of her poems.<sup>850</sup> However, she struggled bitterly in the political aftermath of the Second World War and upon the advent of Communism, as their much-loved home at Petrkov was first requisitioned by the Nazis in 1944, and then in 1948 was mandatorily incorporated into the collectivised state cooperative and they were forced to share it with another family.<sup>851</sup> Because of border closures, Renaud could no longer travel freely to France, which she visited for the last time in 1947. Just as, in Germain's words, '[l]e peuple tchèque est dans la nuit, frappé d'une violente solitude', so Renaud found herself 'trop déracinée, éprouvée, pour porter ce fardeau sans s'essouffler un peu',<sup>852</sup> and tragically died, perhaps as a result of her inability to overcome the struggle between her need for a geographical home and her desire for spiritual detachment. Unlike the fictional Ludvík, or indeed her own husband Reynek, Renaud's story thus becomes a 'chaos narrative' because the scale of her struggle is such that she is unable to overcome it and, in Frank's words, is 'sucked into the undertow of illness and the disasters that attend it',<sup>853</sup> and so dies without reaching a place of detachment, the 'vrai lieu' described above.

I propose, then, that Germain's empathetic response to the pain of Renaud's dispossession, and to that of the Czechs, emphasises her understanding of the possibility that 'chaos' may triumph over the 'quest' for enlightenment and for the 'true home', and indeed reminds us 'how easily any of us could be sucked

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<sup>850</sup> A posthumously published collection of Renaud's poetry is available. Renaud, *Nocturnes* (St. Cyr-sur-Loire: Christian Pirot, 1989); also a bilingual collection *Œuvres – D'ilo* (St. Cyr-sur-Loire: Christian Pirot, 1995).

<sup>851</sup> *BR*, pp. 49 & 52.

<sup>852</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 48 and 54 respectively.

<sup>853</sup> Frank, p. 115.

under'<sup>854</sup> (and since Renaud is French, this appears to be a particularly apposite address to the French or non-Czech reader). The proximity of 'chaos' to all of our lives intersects with Sontag's reminder that any one of us could cross the border between illness and health (whether figurative or literal), since '[e]veryone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick'.<sup>855</sup> Rather than imposing a judgement on those who, like Renaud, are unable due to their painful circumstances to reach the end of their 'quest', Germain's French retelling of Renaud's tragic story in some sense brings her 'home' to France, by returning her voice ('speaking with her', in Frank's terms) and so bringing her to attention. This retelling thus becomes another means of 'paying attention' and of showing 'solidarity' to the dispossessed, so that Germain's work answers Levinas's call to respond to the suffering other and reminds us not to turn our eyes away in 'indifférence universelle'.<sup>856</sup> The reminder is all the more powerful since Renaud's story, by insisting on the proximity between (French) self and (Czech) other that is also reflected in Germain's writing position in these texts, points out that we are all susceptible to the threat of 'chaos' that nearly overwhelmed Czech identity, and that we could at any time also enter the 'kingdom of the sick'.

I have shown that Germain's Czech stories can be interpreted as an ethical response to the journeying of a nation into the 'kingdom of the sick', a response that has been called up through her own (albeit 'other') experience of dispossession, and through her adoption of a bodily proximity to Czech stories of suffering. Frank claims that '[l]iving for others means placing one's self and

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<sup>854</sup> Ibid., p. 97.

<sup>855</sup> Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*, p. 3.

<sup>856</sup> *LP*, cited above.

body within the “community of pain”,<sup>857</sup> and we have seen that this position corresponds to Germain’s Ruth-like relationship to Czech stories and memories. I have argued that, although these stories do not ‘belong’ to Germain according to traditional understandings of ‘identity’ in familial or national terms, her writing transcends these boundaries to occupy a transnational position from which she writes out her solidarity with the suffering body of the Czech nation, so that we can understand Germain’s work as a ‘witness by adoption’. By repeatedly drawing attention to the importance of the ‘interhuman’, and to the intersections that she perceives between French and Czech histories, Germain’s work refuses to judge or to impose a solution on the Czech dilemma of dispossession. Her writing does nevertheless explore the journey from sickness to health in a manner that once again corresponds to Frank’s understanding of the quest narrative, whereby, ‘[t]he final stage [of the quest] is the *return*. The teller returns as one who is no longer ill but remains marked by illness [...]. This marked person lives in a world she has travelled beyond, a status well-described by Campbell’s phrase “master of the two worlds”’.<sup>858</sup> The position occupied by Reynek, Brum, and Jonáš, as well as the story of Ludvík, demonstrates this possibility of ‘return’, and thus perhaps is offered in the hope that the Czech nation, for whom Germain clearly evinces empathy, may also ‘travel beyond’ the ‘kingdom of the sick’, out of that ‘très poussiéreuse salle d’attente d’Histoire’ to which they had so long been consigned.

I have identified a shift in Germain’s writing, over the course of the period of time she spent in Czechoslovakia, from her earlier texts in which the painful

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<sup>857</sup> Frank, p. 37.

<sup>858</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118, again citing Campbell, 1972.

legacy of historical suffering is marked out on the body (as we have seen in the limping figure of la Pleurante), to a perhaps more nuanced embodiment of pain which is still told 'through the body' but in a language of illness and of travel which offers the possibility of health, even as it acknowledges the difficulty of the healing process. This shift in Germain's approach to writing out suffering suggests that her experience in Czechoslovakia has been a journey in itself and that her proximity to 'l'altérité radicale'<sup>859</sup> has wrought changes in the way in which Germain perceives and writes about the world. Germain's own journey is, I propose, embedded in the end of Prokop's textual journey, which is marked by a literal journey, by tram, into the night:

Prokop louvoyait dans la rumeur de la ville, dans les remous chatoyants du réel, avec la nuit en poupe et l'inconnu en proue [...]. Prokop se sentait pleinement le frère de cette enfant à tête folle, au cœur volage et aux pas trébuchants, – l'humanité, sa sœur prodigue.<sup>860</sup>

Ultimately, then, Germain's Czech novels posit that the voyage from (figurative) sickness to health is also a voyage out of the confinement of the self (whether that is understood on individual terms, or in terms of a totalitarian divorce of a nation from the world), to a renunciation of 'indifférence' and towards the 'immensité' of integration with the world, with the other, with 'l'humanité, sa sœur prodigue' in all its alterity and variety. We have seen that the work not only of Germain, but of each of the writers examined in this thesis, moves in various ways between, in Campbell's metaphor, 'two worlds', crossing and re-crossing the borders between France and Czechoslovakia, East and West, self and other, the kingdoms of the well and of the sick, and negotiating along the way the divides between forgetting and memory, silence and speech, pain and

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<sup>859</sup> Kristeva, p. 110.

<sup>860</sup> *Imm.*, p. 194.

recovery. For each author, then, the act of writing has in itself become a journey from a place of silence, alienation, or pain; in each case, the journey has involved a challenging process of remembering, of returning to the past, and of arriving (like Ludvík) at 'un espace autre'.

## Conclusion

The writers examined in this thesis have all voyaged, from their very different writing positions, into the painful histories of twentieth-century Central Europe, and through the act of writing each has 'worked through' the traumatic memories that centre on that context but that I have also shown to relate to their own diverse stories. Hodrová has travelled into the labyrinth of the painful past of her own nation, a place that is inhabited by the ghosts of the marginalised and persecuted, and has woven a 'narrative web of memory' between her own Czech story and 'archetypal' European stories in order to ward off the threat of deletion from history that was posed by her country's political circumstances. Páleníček has resurrected the ghosts of the past, entering the realm of the worst possible that might lie buried in the 'black hole'<sup>861</sup> of the complex and silenced past of his nation, staking out his place in that past through an inscription of his own identity into the fictional story of *Les Bouleaux*, and so tentatively moving towards a future which is envisaged in the final words of the text ('pour pouvoir vivre').<sup>862</sup> Germain's Ruth-like encounter in Czechoslovakia with 'la fertilité de l'autre'<sup>863</sup> has provided her with a site from which she has worked through the trauma of dispossession (embedded both in her own rootlessness and in her perception of Czech and European states of exile); her encounter has impelled her to respond as a 'witness by adoption' to those stories of loss.

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<sup>861</sup> Fresco, 1984.

<sup>862</sup> *LB*, p. 47.

<sup>863</sup> Kristeva, p. 111.

Whilst I have argued that the text has become a site of voyage and transformation, my analysis acknowledges at all junctures that, like the body of the woman in *Les Bouleaux*, the images of a painful past cannot easily be laid to rest. Through my reading of the multitude of painful tropes, including images of deletion and loss, sleep, death and ghosts, and wounded and sick bodies, that these writers have used to give voice to Czech histories, it has emerged that the journey of writing has constituted a 'road of trials'<sup>864</sup>, as seen, for example, in Hodrová's description of writing as an ordeal: 'Cité dolente! [...] je parcours les lieux abandonnés de ta mémoire, je lis et écris sur toi des livres. J'ai subi les épreuves du feu, de l'air, de la terre et de l'eau'.<sup>865</sup> In their different ways, Hodrová, Páleníček, and Germain have undertaken a textual quest and have emerged not 'healed' but transformed by their encounters with memory, with the worst possible that may be contained within memory, and by the imperative to respond to the memory of the dispossessed other.

For each of the writers, the journey into the space of fiction has provided a distance from the traumatic events narrated, although in each case that distance has been achieved by different means. The language of French combined with the physical distance from his country of birth, as well as the distance of time, have offered Páleníček a 'distance exquisite' (as described by Kristeva)<sup>866</sup> from which to engage with the past and with the stories that changed his parents' and grandparents' generations lives, and continue to have an impact on his generation. I have argued that it is from Germain's position as 'étrangère' in Czechoslovakia that she has been able to inscribe her own

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<sup>864</sup> Frank, p. 118, citing Campbell, 1972.

<sup>865</sup> *VP*, p. 124.

<sup>866</sup> Kristeva, p. 25.

identity into the narrative 'je' of *La Pleurante des rues de Prague* in a manner that confirms Kristeva's understanding that 'la révélation divine nécessite souvent un écart'.<sup>867</sup> For Hodrová, physical distance from the site of her nation's trauma was made impossible by political circumstances. The trilogy itself, however, offers a space of escape in which the fragmenting effects of trauma are initially manifest in the multitude of competing narrative voices, but over the course of the writing journey the self is reasserted so that 'Daniela Hodrová' takes her place in the first person narrative of the final pages of the trilogy. My analysis therefore concurs with Henke's vision of scriptotherapy as a means of returning agency to the 'shattered subject', but where Henke posits that the aim of scriptotherapy is to allow the traumatised individual to 'cling to [...] an enabling myth of coherent identity',<sup>868</sup> the texts analysed here show that the journey of writing has in fact enabled the writer to engage with and accept the plurality and contradictions of post-Communist identity.

Throughout my analysis, I have foregrounded the different relationships of the writers to one specific context, with the intention of bringing to greater attention both the context of Central European twentieth-century traumas, and some of the literature that has emerged from that context. This is a context that has received relatively little critical attention within the field of French Studies despite the existence of a body of work that has been defined and explored in this thesis, and despite the quarter of a century that has passed since the removal of physical East-West barriers in Europe. By bringing the work of lesser-known authors who are variously associated with a 'minor' Central

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<sup>867</sup> Ibid., p. 110.

<sup>868</sup> Henke, p. xvi.

European canon into dialogue with the work of a more visible French author such as Germain, this study has not only highlighted the individual merits of their *œuvres*, but has also insisted on the importance of responding to the continuing 'unequal distribution',<sup>869</sup> noted by Keller, of attention to 'minor' contexts and to 'other' literary voices. In today's increasingly globalised world of more permeable socioeconomic borders, this question of the other and of our ethical response to difference is perhaps more compelling than it has ever been, and Germain's own ethical 'interhuman'<sup>870</sup> response to the (Czech) other may serve as one model for communication in a post-Communist transnational forum. Such a forum is envisaged by Keller in her account of the 'Writing Europe' project, which brought together writers from 33 countries:

The writers and their various languages, experiences, thoughts, and discourse touched each other, intersected, jolted, and flowed together in a multivocal discussion that spanned many borders. The discussion became permeated by underlying and unexpected cross connections even between the most distant positions; an echo chamber of European resonance was formed. Alongside the multilingual moderators and translators, the writers joined together in a discussion of a common theme serving to highlight their differences of perspective. They formed, for a moment, something like a Europe in miniature [...] a brief glimpse of how things might look if the European project were to succeed.<sup>871</sup>

In my discussion of the work of Hodrová, Páleníček, and Germain, my aim has been to replicate, albeit on a very much smaller scale, 'an echo chamber of European resonance' in which different voices can be heard on equal terms. As my analysis has moved from one to the other, 'underlying and unexpected cross connections' have indeed emerged, pointing to commonalities and widespread responses to traumatic experience; but at other times we have seen that points

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<sup>869</sup> Keller, in Keller and Rakusa (eds), p. 11; cited in the Introduction to this thesis.

<sup>870</sup> Levinas, 'Useless Suffering', p. 100.

<sup>871</sup> Keller, in Keller and Rakusa (eds), p. 20.

of view have 'jolted' against one another in ways that underline the need to 'highlight [...] differences of perspective'.

The 'differences of perspective' represented by the three authors examined have given rise to some diversity in my findings about the ways in which literature can embody trauma, even when the traumas revolve around one common context. Whilst each writer uses metaphorical tropes to portray the effects of trauma, these tropes, and the textual structures in which they are embedded, vary in a manner that is contingent on the writer's relationship to the context. Hodrová's images of sleep, death, drowning, and sacrifice stem from her immediate personal experience of being confined within a 'Sleeping Beauty' regime, isolated from the body of Europe to which, as a writer, she feels herself related by a long literary heritage. Her tropes of deletion and erasure speak painfully of the 'lobotomy' to which she and her nation have been subjected. Páleníček's focus on bodily wounding and on the corporeal symptoms of PTSD, as well as the indeterminacies and narrative 'gaps' that punctuate his text, are evidence of the latency of trauma and of the way that it returns to haunt not only the survivor but also the next generations. His need to write about the experience of his parents' and grandparents' generations corresponds to Schwab's position that the children inherit the 'somatic memory'<sup>872</sup> of the traumatised generation in ways that I have proposed are confirmed by recent clinical research into the neurogenetic transmission of memory. The intersection between trauma narration and clinical studies into the biology of memory has been exploited since the early twentieth-century pioneers (including Janet, Josef Breuer, and Freud) began to shed light on the complexities of the tension

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<sup>872</sup> Schwab, pp. 4 & 14.

between the memory of trauma and its articulation; my research suggests that this continues to be a fertile area for further study as new clinical material is uncovered. Germain's imagery also proceeds from the body, but is framed in a language of illness which both articulates an empathetic solidarity and allows her to consider the vulnerability of the 'observer', who may cross the border between (figurative or literal) sickness and health at any time: in its familiarity, illness becomes a means of expressing the experience of the other without reducing it to banality. By bringing three different perspectives into close dialogue, and by 'paying attention' (in the manner envisaged by Sontag)<sup>873</sup> to the differences that have emerged, my study has responded to Caruth's call to seek out ways of listening to narratives of trauma without 'reduc[ing] them to clichés or turn[ing] them all into versions of the same story'.<sup>874</sup>

Perhaps one of the most important points of intersection emerging from these particular texts has been their various 'possession' by the ghosts of the past, and their common embracing of the need to acknowledge and 'work through' that past in order to reach 'un espace autre'.<sup>875</sup> This is a need that I have aligned with Herman's position that, '[l]ike traumatised people, we need to understand the past in order to reclaim the present and the future'.<sup>876</sup> In the context of (post)-Communist Central Europe, all of the works referred to in this study, whether primary texts or other works referred to comparatively (including work by Kundera, Ouředník, and Petr Král) have revealed the pressing nature of that need in the way in which they repeatedly return to the past in their quest for

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<sup>873</sup> Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*.

<sup>874</sup> Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, p. vii.

<sup>875</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4; LaCapra, pp. 65-70; *LP*, p. 181.

<sup>876</sup> Herman, p. 2.

understanding. Once again, however, the need to return to the past emerges in diverse tropes and structures that can be related to each writer's specific perspective. By recording stories that were officially 'deleted' or that contradict the dogmatic order that the regime sought to impose, Hodrová's trilogy resists the deletions perpetrated by the state, and insists on the plurality of memory; her work indicates that the suppression of memory, even painful memory as exemplified by the story of Nora's dream of her drowned father, induces sickness. Sickness is a motif that is taken up by Germain in her portrayal of the ways in which the traumatic past has afflicted the Czechs, manifesting itself in textual symptoms of blindness, muteness, and nausea. My investigation of the images and structures of illness and its narration in Germain's work opens up a new line of enquiry that could perhaps in future studies be extended to her other writings. For Germain, another way of responding to the losses of the past is by 'naming' the dead and by returning a voice to the marginalised through intertextual incorporation of works that have been lost through censorship or persecution. Páleníček's response to the past is worked out through the graphic bodily images and indeterminacies that represent the worst that could be buried within the past, from which his generation is cut off by the 'epistemological exile' described by McGlothlin.<sup>877</sup> In their different ways, however, all of the primary texts engage with the 'state-managed forgetting'<sup>878</sup> and other forms of silencing that have variously endangered the memory of that era, and each reveals the damage that transcends generational and even national borders when the traumas that affect one part of the 'body' of Europe are suppressed.

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<sup>877</sup> McGlothlin, p. 229.

<sup>878</sup> Esbenshade, p. 74.

The legacy of forgetting and 'deletion' (as it is configured in Hodrová's work) relating to the Czechoslovak postwar and Communist context continues to have an impact on social behaviours on both sides of the old Iron Curtain, as is perhaps exemplified in recent public and political debate over the way in which the Czech postwar expulsions of Sudeten Germans (discussed in my chapter on the work of Páleníček) should be remembered. As Páleníček's epilogue points out, many Czechs have been averse to the fact that 'les Allemands sont en train de reprendre les Sudètes peu à peu. Ils paient des Tchèques pour racheter leurs anciennes maisons'.<sup>879</sup> The epilogue thus foregrounds the difficulty of overcoming historical divisions and hostilities, and as I have argued points to the need for open and multilateral discussion of the past, as indicated by the narrator's realisation that to perpetuate denial of the past is incompatible with life ('me faut-il le renier pour pouvoir vivre?').<sup>880</sup> The presence of the past continues to resonate in both German and Czech politics, as brought to attention by conflict over a formal German request, in 2011, for an apology for the Sudeten evictions and deportations, a request that was refused by the then-President Václav Klaus, and to date has not been fulfilled.<sup>881</sup> A survey of Czech opinion in 2011 also indicates that the percentage of Czechs believing that the expulsions were fair was 42%, compared with 25% who felt they were unfair but that no apology should be made, and 10% who believed that an apology should

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<sup>879</sup> *LB*, p. 46.

<sup>880</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>881</sup> The request was made in June 2011 by Franz Pany, the Sudeten-German Association leader, at a reunion of deportees. See Andrew Fenwick, 'Should Prague Apologize to Sudeten Germans?', in *East of Centre*, 14/06/2011 <<http://eastofcenter.tol.org/2011/06/should-prague-apologize-to-sudeten-germans/>> [last accessed 26/10/2014]. Although an official apology has not yet been made, in February 2013 the Czech Prime Minister Petr Nečas made a speech in which he expressed 'regret' for the deportations and for the collective attribution of guilt. See 'The Sudeten German Question', in *The Economist*, 27/14/2014 <<http://www.economist.com/blogs/easternapproaches/2013/02/czech-politics-0>> [last accessed 26/10/2014].

be made.<sup>882</sup> My analysis of Páleníček's work has highlighted the fact that the past continues to create hostilities and resentments of this kind, and to demand our attention in a manner that confirms Felman's understanding of trauma 'not as an event encapsulated in the past, but as a history which is essentially *not over*, [...] whose traumatic consequences are still actively *evolving*'.<sup>883</sup> Indeed, in political terms, the ongoing legacy of twentieth-century divisions and traumas has had a concrete effect on twenty-first century Czech politics, since the closely run 2012 presidential election is widely believed to have been decided by the fact that the popular pro-European candidate Karel Schwarzenberg lost to the former premier Zeman Klaus when Schwarzenberg expressed his support for a public apology to the Sudeten Germans. Perhaps one of the biggest challenges in moving towards a more successful 'European project' (as envisaged by Keller) will continue to be the facilitation of cross-border discussion relating particularly to the 'actively evolving' consequences of traumatic points of our shared history, consequences which are felt in the public spheres of political and social relationships as well as in private lives. This is an area of cultural mediation in which we cannot ignore literature as a forum for facilitating and prioritising 'multivocal discussion' in which to acknowledge and negotiate our differences as well as our points of intersection, such as those which are variously revealed in my study of these narratives of European trauma.

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<sup>882</sup> Survey results available online. Lukáš Novotný, 'Dekrety, odsun sudetských Němců v historické paměti Čechů. Výsledky reprezentativního dotazníkového šetření'. The survey is available in Czech only.  
[http://cvvm.soc.cas.cz/media/com\\_form2content/documents/c3/a6968/f11/Dekrety,%20odsun%20sudetských%20Němců%20v%20historické%20paměti%20Čechů.pdf](http://cvvm.soc.cas.cz/media/com_form2content/documents/c3/a6968/f11/Dekrety,%20odsun%20sudetských%20Němců%20v%20historické%20paměti%20Čechů.pdf) [last accessed 26/10/2014].

<sup>883</sup> Felman and Laub (eds), p. xiv.

It is important too that differences such as these, and the traumatic events from which such differences emerge, are debated and examined on 'both sides' of the border, as my analysis of Germain's transnational position has shown. Much of the trauma of the Communist experience, as reflected in Hodrová's work, was the sense of being cut off from the rest of Europe, of being forced into an 'inner emigration', a position of isolation or deletion which Hodrová could only resist by writing out her 'narrative web of memory'.<sup>884</sup> Literature written either by the 'survivors' of collectively traumatic times (as in the case of Hodrová's trilogy), or by those who (like Páleníček) inherit the legacy of mass trauma, brings us 'face à face' (to use Levinas's phrase) with the realities of collective trauma, and highlights the importance of 'the survivors of the catastrophes of one culture addressing the survivors of another'.<sup>885</sup> As Caruth says in response to an essay by Kai Erikson on the impact of disasters on communities, '[p]art of the traumatic experience of the community as a whole was that sense that the catastrophe wasn't just an accident of nature, but that no one cared about what happened'.<sup>886</sup> This lack of 'caring' relates to the 'indifférence universelle'<sup>887</sup> noted by Germain and to which I have argued that she responds by placing herself in a position of transnational 'witness by adoption' to the sufferings of others. Whilst I have foregrounded the dangers, to which Davis alerts us, of 'imply[ing] that their experience can be understood or narrated by another',<sup>888</sup> my analysis has brought to the fore some of the ways in which, in the words of Hirsch, 'identification can resist appropriation and incorporation, resist

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<sup>884</sup> Ambros, in Hawkesworth, p. 258; Hodrová, 'Woven into the Web', p. 146.

<sup>885</sup> Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, p. 11.

<sup>886</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 257. Caruth is referring to Kai Ericson's essay, 'Notes on Trauma and Community', in her volume, pp. 183-99.

<sup>887</sup> *LP*, p. 69.

<sup>888</sup> Davis, 'Trauma and Ethics', p. 24.

annihilating the distance between self and other, the otherness of the other'.<sup>889</sup> As Davis notes, 'not to recall or to study what happened to them [...] would be an act of barbarity',<sup>890</sup> and through my analysis of these texts we have seen that literature can respond ethically to the 'encounter' with the suffering other in ways that transcend silence and form a mark of solidarity. In Germain's Czech writing, this ethical response stems from her bodily identification with the 'nausée' that is induced by the immensity of historical suffering; this is a sickness that is variously experienced by her characters from 'le kiosquier' who recoils from 'la démesure de la souffrance endurée en ce lieu'<sup>891</sup> at Auschwitz, to Ludvík who is infected by his nation's political circumstances but eventually comes to understand that 'healing' can only be reached through opening himself to the other. Sontag has spoken out for the act of 'regarding the pain of others', saying that we should be prepared to

[l]et the atrocious images haunt us. Even if they are only tokens, and cannot possibly encompass most of the reality to which they refer, they still perform a vital function. The images say: This is what human beings are capable of doing [...]. Don't forget.<sup>892</sup>

The 'atrocious images' of human acts of barbarity (in the Holocaust, in the postwar tensions in Central Europe, in the Communist years) haunt the pages of these texts in the form of resurrected ghosts which perform the 'vital function' of calling us to listen to the 'roll call' of the dead and challenging us not to forget.

This task of remembering, of opening ourselves to 'other' stories of trauma, and of finding what Caruth has called 'new modes' of listening, is one that continues

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<sup>889</sup> Hirsch, 'Surviving Images', p. 11.

<sup>890</sup> Davis, 'Trauma and Ethics', p. 19.

<sup>891</sup> *ES*, p. 73.

<sup>892</sup> Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, p. 102.

to raise complex questions and to indicate new areas for further research.<sup>893</sup> My study has brought two lesser-known authors into dialogue with an established author, and has sought to challenge the boundaries of what is included in French Studies by shedding light on its margins and examining ways in which the French canon intersects with one lesser-known body of literature. Whilst I have indicated that there are other voices speaking from these margins which merit attention, the scope of this thesis has not permitted an in-depth investigation of all of the writers whose work occupies this space of intersection between French and Czech, or indeed between French and other (post)-Communist Central European languages and cultures. Mention has been made of writers including Petr Král and Ouředník; the poetry of Věra Linhartová also emerges from her exile in France. Similarly, the work of the French writer Laurent Binet (who like Germain spent an extended period of time in Czechoslovakia) has recently come to critical attention, and merits further study. As time passes, the generation-long veil of silence that has been drawn over these traumatic histories will gradually but inevitably be lifted, and this thesis has shown that French Studies can provide a fertile arena for the exploration of the 'alterité radicale' of 'other' histories such as those of Central Europe.

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<sup>893</sup> Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, p. 9.

## Appendix. Personal Correspondence with Jean-Gaspard

### Páleníček.

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CH: Clare Horáčková; JGP: Jean-Gaspard Páleníček.

CH: Je m'intéresse à la confluence de deux langues, de deux cultures, dans un texte ou un œuvre, et également à la présence du passé dans le présent. J'aimerais bien alors vous poser quelques questions sur votre héritage linguistique et culturel. Je crois que vous êtes né à Prague en 1978 et que vous avez passé votre enfance en république Tchèque? Selon ce que j'ai lu au sujet de votre biographie, votre père est le violoncelliste tchèque Jan Páleníček, et votre grand-père paternel était le compositeur et pianiste Josef Páleníček. Est-ce que votre héritage français est donc du côté maternel ? Est-ce que vous avez toujours été bilingue ? Pouvez-vous décrire un peu l'influence des deux langues et cultures sur votre enfance ?

JGP: En effet, je suis né à Prague en 1978, d'un père tchèque et d'une mère française. Ma mère étudiait l'histoire de l'Europe centrale et avait appris le tchèque. Mon père, lui, parlait le français pour avoir étudié à Paris à la fin des années 1960. Il suivait là les traces de mon grand-père qui avait étudié à Paris dans les années 1930, avant le début de la guerre. Et ma grand-mère tchèque était elle aussi parfaitement francophone. Si j'ai grandi à Prague, nous allions souvent passer nos vacances en France, auprès de la partie française de la famille. Dès le début, j'ai donc baigné dans les deux langues. Par contre, mon père n'est pas le violoncelliste Jan Páleníček – mon oncle – mais le pianiste Zdeněk Páleníček, moins connu.

Il serait complexe de déterminer précisément l'influence qu'ont pu avoir sur moi la langue et la culture françaises, par opposition à celles tchèques. Il s'agit là d'un grand nombre d'éléments disparates qu'il m'est parfois difficile de départager. Souvent, il s'est probablement agi d'une interpénétration des deux, ce qui contribue à brouiller les pistes. Voici déjà quelques éléments, sans organisation bien réfléchie.

Mes parents ont commencé par m'inscrire dans une école maternelle tchèque, que j'ai dû fréquenter pendant un an et demi peut-être. Mais ils ont vite été effrayés – notamment ma mère – par l'encadrement idéologique qui y régnait, et j'ai intégré la maternelle de l'Ecole française de Prague. Toute ma scolarité s'est faite là par la suite. Ainsi, j'ai grandi dans un milieu tchèque, avec des amis tchèques, tout en recevant un enseignement français. C'est en français que j'ai appris à lire et à écrire – sachant lire et écrire, je me suis parallèlement appris à lire et écrire le tchèque (plus tard, au collège, mon père souhaitera que je prenne quelques cours privés pour renforcer mon assurance en orthographe tchèque). Mes premiers plaisirs de lire sont venus en français (je laisse ici de côté les textes de littérature enfantine tchèque entendus dans la petite enfance). Et quand j'ai commencé à écrire des textes à caractère littéraire, cela a d'abord, et pour bien longtemps, été en français.

Ma réalité n'était certes pas celle de mes amis tchèques : il n'était pas courant dans la Tchécoslovaquie d'alors de fréquenter une école française, de pouvoir voyager librement au-delà du rideau de fer, d'avoir facilement accès à certains produits – vêtements, jouets, aliments... – considérés rares pour l'époque. Cependant, la France était le pays des vacances, de la mer, un pays où j'allais passer quelques semaines, parfois quelques mois, avant de rentrer à la maison. Demeurant plus longuement en Bohême, tout ce dont on s'imprègne inconsciemment au contact de notre environnement – couleurs, parfums, réflex comportementaux... – devait chez moi être un peu plus majoritairement tchèque. Ma première relation amoureuse a été avec une Tchèque. Cela dit, il a toujours été clair que j'étais chez moi dans les deux pays, même si, pour le moment, il se trouvait que je séjournais plus en Bohême.

Un point important : j'ai, depuis mes six ans, suivi des cours de piano – en tchèque. J'ai poursuivi ensuite par des cours privés avec le compositeur – tchèque – Miloš Bok. Et cela a eu sur moi une influence importante. De même que le fait de fréquenter avec ma mère les églises catholiques de Bohême. Le baroque centre-européen correspond bien plus à ma sensibilité que le classicisme français.

CH: Vous habitez à Paris depuis combien de temps ? Est-ce que vous pouvez commenter la décision de se déplacer en France, et l'impact de ce déménagement sur votre écriture ?

JGP: J'ai emménagé à Paris en 2001. Après le bac, plutôt que de poursuivre mes études dans le système français, j'ai décidé de m'inscrire à la Faculté des Lettres de l'Université Charles à Prague pour combler un peu ce que je ressentais comme un déséquilibre entre mes connaissances de la culture française et de la culture tchèque. Parallèlement, j'ai travaillé pendant plusieurs années dans un théâtre pragois, ce qui a contribué fortement à me mettre définitivement à l'aise vis-à-vis de la littérature tchèque. Après quoi, j'ai pensé qu'il serait bon que j'expérimente ce que c'est que de vivre en France.

Je ne suis pas sûr que cela ait eu un impact particulier sur mon écriture. Cela faisait déjà plusieurs années que j'écrivais – en français. Plus concrètement, par exemple : si j'ai écrit *Les Bouleaux* peu de temps après mon arrivée à Paris (début 2012), l'idée à leur base m'est venue avant de quitter la Bohême.

CH: Dans votre œuvre littéraire, pourquoi est-ce que vous choisissez d'écrire en français ? Est-ce que vous n'écrivez jamais en tchèque ? Selon vous, est-ce que vous écririez différemment en quelque manière (au niveau de style, de sujet...) pour des lecteurs tchèques ? Quelles sont les difficultés, ou bien les avantages, d'écrire dans la langue d'un pays à propos d'un autre pays ou culture ?

JGP: Comme je l'ai décrit plus haut, il ne s'est pas agi à proprement parler d'un choix conscient. Je crois que je me suis mis à écrire en français parce que, du fait de ma scolarité, c'est majoritairement en français que j'ai commencé à constituer ma culture livresque. L'envie d'essayer d'écrire en tchèque est venue plus tard, notamment après la découverte de la poésie de Zbyněk Hejda. Mais je n'ai pas été satisfait de mes quelques poèmes écrits en tchèque à l'époque.

Ce n'est que l'année passée que j'ai écrit mon premier livre en tchèque, et il a fallu pour cela que j'y sois invité par des amis, directeurs d'une revue tchèque.

C'est peut-être une surinterprétation personnelle, mais il me semble que la même chose est arrivée à un autre écrivain tchéco-français – Patrik Ouředník. De père tchèque et de mère française lui aussi, il maîtrise les deux langues à la perfection, il vit en France depuis trente ans, et cependant, continue d'écrire presque exclusivement en tchèque. Est-ce parce que sa scolarité à lui s'est faite en tchèque ?

La chose curieuse est que je n'ai pas de mal à traduire en tchèque. Mais traduire le texte d'un autre n'est pas la même chose que d'écrire.

Je n'ai jamais pensé en termes d'avantages en lien avec l'écriture. Il arrive, parfois, qu'un texte demande à être écrit. C'est tout. Théoriquement, on pourrait voir plus de désavantages à écrire au sujet d'un pays dans la langue d'une autre culture. Le sujet traité ne concerne pas directement les lecteurs, le contexte culturel décrit constitue pour eux une simple coulisse plus ou moins exotique. Cela implique la nécessité de faire traduire le texte si l'on veut un jour être lu par les lecteurs du pays dont il est question. Mais encore une fois, je crois qu'au moment de l'écriture, on ne pense pas au lecteur.

CH: Selon votre interview sur Radio Prague avec Anna Kubišta (18/09/2012), vous avez séjourné à Prague pendant l'année dernière. Est-ce que vous y rentrez souvent ? Quelles sont vos impressions des changements récents dans le pays ?

JGP: Je retourne en Bohême autant que possible, plusieurs fois par an, pour les vacances ou en lien avec mon travail au Centre tchèque de Paris. Il faudrait préciser quels changements vous avez à l'esprit.

CH: Est-ce que vous considérez votre œuvre comme autobiographique ?

JGP: Non. Il y a certes des éléments pour lesquels j'ai puisé dans mes souvenirs ou dans ce que j'ai vu ou entendu autour de moi, mais c'est le propre de tout écrivain.

CH: Pour moi, vous engagez profondément avec l'histoire récente tchécoslovaque, surtout peut-être dans Les Bouleaux. Est-ce que vous pouvez commenter là-dessus ?

JGP: Ce que je peux dire au sujet des Bouleaux, c'est que le texte constitue en effet un tableau métaphorique de l'histoire tchèque depuis les années 1950 jusqu'aux années 1990, mais plus encore sans doute, il évoque le regard porté par – certains – Tchèques sur cette histoire. Cependant, il serait difficile pour moi d'interpréter mes propres livres. Ce que j'ai cherché à dire, j'ai tenté de le faire à travers le texte lui-même.

CH: Dans quelle mesure est-ce que vous pensez que la France est consciente de l'histoire tchèque, ou bien de l'Europe centrale, du vingtième siècle et après ?

Est-ce que vous croyez que la littérature, que vos livres, ont un rôle à jouer dans la conscience sociale ou politique ?

JGP: Assez peu, je dirais, mis à part quelques exceptions individuelles. Mais je ne crois pas que mes livres, ou que la littérature en général, aient un rôle social ou politique à jouer.

CH: Enfin, je trouve intéressant que Sylvie Germain a été un de vos professeurs au collège, comme vous me dites en votre email. C'était à Prague, pendant son séjour, ou à Paris ? Est-ce que vous diriez que votre écriture a été influencée par son travail ou sa pensée ? Ou est-ce qu'il y a d'autres influences importantes dans votre travail ?

JGP: Elle a été ma maîtresse pendant un an à l'Ecole française de Prague, en classe de 4<sup>e</sup>. Je n'ai lu qu'un seul de ses livres, et je ne vois aucun lien entre son œuvre et la mienne, ni même entre sa pensée, que je connais d'ailleurs très mal, et la mienne. Par contre, je me souviens qu'un jour, elle a demandé à ses élèves d'écrire une composition sur un thème libre, et que la composition que j'ai rendue était une nouvelle. Cela devait être fort naïf, mais Sylvie me l'a complimentée, ce que j'ai perçu, en gamin de 14 ans que j'étais, comme un encouragement. Je n'avais alors rien lu d'elle encore, mais nous savions qu'elle était écrivain, et ce seul fait avait suffi pour j'accorde plus de poids à ses paroles. Mais ce n'est là qu'une anecdote, bien sûr. Les influences que l'on subit ne sont pas toujours conscientes. Je peux vous dire qu'un temps, Gérard de Nerval a été important pour moi, puis Hejda, qui reste très important. Mais je ne saurais vous dire s'ils m'ont influencé, ni en quoi.

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