Translating Topol: Kafka, the Holocaust, and humor

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In the mid-nineties, Alex Zucker began translating Jáchym Topol's *Sestra*; it was published in English in 2000 by Catbird Press as *City, Sister, Silver*. At the same time, Topol revised the initial 1994 version of *Sestra*, and published a slightly edited second edition in 1996. Meanwhile, Topol gave Zucker free rein in editing the novel as he translated and, by the end of the process, Zucker was surprised that most of the cuts he had made were 'almost identical to Topol's' for the second edition. One of the major edits was a section from Chapter Six, in which the protagonist, Potok, recounts a vision in which he and his gang visit Auschwitz on a flying carpet and are guided around by a cheery skeleton called Josef Novák. Novák presents them with virtuoso, and unreliable, monologues about the camp and its victims; in the 1994 first edition, he presents them with an alternative history of Franz Kafka, 'Franci / Franzie', an annoying friend of 'Broďák / ole Brodster' who writes callow, angst-filled stories because he cannot get laid. Topol removed the section in the second edition because it was too long; at the same time, Zucker also removed the section, but for a different reason. Both he and the publisher Robert Wechsler, worried that the references to the German, German-Jewish and Czech writers who hang out with 'Broďák' and whose names Novák mauls, would be too obscure for English-language readers. However, Wechsler uploaded all the material that was edited out of the book onto the Catbird website, where readers could access the 'storees' Novák the skeleton told about 'Franci'.

The context of the editing of the passage is instructive in thinking about translation, especially of a writer like Topol who pushes the limits of the Czech language to the extent that his Czech publishers, Atlantis, appended a note to Czech readers that the liberties Topol was taking were not a result of his own bad grammar but part of his poetics. Zucker produced a dazzling translation over several years and was encouraged by Topol to 'make it up like I did', in other words, to produce a version that did the same to the English language. In his *Translator's Preface* to the translation, Zucker wrote:

> *Despite the Czech edition's assertion that 'valid rules are present in the background of the text', it was often hard to discern a pattern to the constant shifting and mixing, and in my exchanges with the author he repeatedly described his choices as a* pocitová věc *— 'a matter of feeling'. Inevitably then, my translation too is less about*

> *mechanically reproducing the thousands of individual twists on and departures from conventional Czech than about capturing the feeling, the jarring, the dislocation they were meant to convey* (Zucker 2000, p. viii).

The edited Kafka section on Catbird's website shows Zucker's engagement with the linguistic pyrotechnics of Topol's prose, but also why Zucker and Catbird decided to edit it from the final translation. In his *Translator's Preface* Zucker tells his readers that he edited material out of the translation, including 'material that would have meant nothing to English speakers without a labored explanation, thereby ruining the effect' (Zucker 2000, p. ix); the magnificent run-on verbiage of Novák's 'storees' would have to be stopped and started by footnotes or endnotes, explaining who the referenced writers were and, essentially, what was so funny about these avant-garde writers speaking and gossiping in the street-Czech narrative Novák provides. Zucker was also aware that reviewers might baulk at the cultural specificity and was proven right: 'so many reviewers claimed not to understand [*City Sister Silver*] because of the foreign setting, foreign history, etc.' (Zucker — Topol 2013). Sudip Bose in a positive review in *The Washington Post* wrote:

> *The novel is also frustratingly opaque, at times as difficult to penetrate as Kafka's castle. To fully appreciate Topol's web of allusions, the ideal readers must be proficient in at least the basic facts of modern Czech history: the horrors of the Soviet era, the purges, the Prague Spring of 1968 and its aftermath, the brutalities of the StB (the Czech secret police), the consequences of lustrace (which prevents those who had ruled in Communist Czechoslovakia from securing positions in the government), not to mention the betrayals, collaboration and intimidations that were all too familiar in the period. While Czech readers will nod their heads in recognition, many Americans will feel like scratching theirs* (Bose 2000, p. 6).

Bose also suggested that despite Zucker's 'wonderfully fresh and raw English prose' readers would find the experimental language difficult, 'the necessary linguistic hurdles' to jump might prove tough — though rewarding — for 'non-Czech readers' (ibidem). The implication is that it is the mixture of the foreignness of context and the foreignness of the language that might make the novel 'as difficult to penetrate as Kafka's castle'. The mention of Kafka is key, since it is one 'Czech' reference Bose knows his readers will know, but again Kafka is connected with difficulty to 'penetrate' and master; it is also an iconic Kafka, one not connected in fact at all to his Czech context (something that Topol playfully but seriously addresses in the Kafka section in Chapter Six of *Sestra*).

In an interview with Topol, Zucker expressed surprise that although reviewers found the cultural context too strange, 'nobody said a thing about the one event probably every serious critic here is familiar with', that is the Holocaust (Zucker — Topol 2013). Zucker added that he felt it was 'one of the most powerful texts ever written about Auschwitz, and yet almost nobody in this country even commented on it' (ibidem). Given the widespread interest in the Holocaust and Holocaust Studies in the US, it is surprising indeed that only one review mentioned the Auschwitz chapter: *Kirkus Review* briefly noted the 'brilliantly described dreamlike "visit" to

Auschwitz' in the 'difficult and challenging read, and indisputably major contemporary novel' (*Kirkus Review*, 1. 4. 2000). No scholarly work in English, even fifteen years later, has yet addressed it. Bose's concern that the complexity of approaching Topol's novel in English was the double difficulty of a strange context and a transgressive prose style applies here with critics perhaps unsure of how to address the postmodern style and comedy of the chapter. Topol was perhaps ahead of his time (in the English-language sphere); it is only since the turn of the millennium that much attention has been paid to the postmodern and 'postmemory' Holocaust narrative thanks to Robert Eaglestone's seminal 2004 work, *The Holocaust and the Postmodern*, and the publication and canonization of postmodern Holocaust-related works, such as Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything is Illuminated* (2002) and W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* (2001). Eaglestone argued that postmodern approaches to narrativizing the Holocaust not only provided a history, or memory of the event but were self-reflexive, they 'stress[ed] their own textuality' (Eaglestone 2004, p. 99). In this way, they actively engaged with how memory and identity were formed 'in the post-Holocaust context', thinking about and enacting a '"Memory shot through with holes"' (ibidem, s. 80). In light of the acceptance of non-factual and ludic approaches to retelling the Holocaust that focuses on the telling itself, *City Sister Silver* might in fact be better understood in this 'really different environment now' as Zucker suggested (Zucker 2014).

What might still be difficult, though, is the humor; in a review of Zucker's 2013 translation of Topol's other novel that deals with memory and the Holocaust, *Chladnou zemí* [*The Devil's Workshop*], Jane Housham described it as a 'strange, twisted novel' she suggests because of Topol's 'distinguished record of writing from within a repressive regime' which is why 'the humor turns so treacly black it almost chokes you' (Housham 2013, p. 18). Eaglestone, though he mentions briefly the humor in Safran Foer's novel, argues that 'the aesthetics of postmemory literature are exilic, mournful, diasporic [...] They are texts of mourning, but this mourning leads to a dynamic, a movement' (Eaglestone 2004, p. 99). The repetition of the words 'mournful' and 'mourning' underscore Eaglestone's exegetical and aesthetic point; we can hear the dynamism and movement in his own statement. However, he neglects to connect the form of the ludic, postmodern text with the possibility of humor as an ethical means to interrogate memory and identity. In his 1988 essay, *Holocaust Laughter*, Terrence des Pres argued that the comic could be an effective way of thinking about the Holocaust; 'a comic response' might be 'more resilient, more effectively in revolt against terror and the sources of terror than a response that is solemn or tragic' (des Pres 1988, p. 280). Laughter is 'hostile to the world it depicts', jarring and shocking; it evokes an 'active response' from the reader (ibidem); breaching 'Holocaust etiquette' (ibidem, s. 278) might be an effective way to shake us from our stereotypes and desensitization. For Topol, it was the humor he discovered in Holocaust survivors and their works that signaled a path to investigate memory and horror, specifically Jiří Pick (a theatre friend of his father's) and his novella *Spolek pro ochranu zvířat* [The Society for the Protection of Animals], 'a raw black comedy set in Terezín, where the children, in the midst of this deluge of death, set up a Society for the Protection of Animals, only the animals they're protecting are mice, cockroaches, and fleas'. 'My fourteen-year-old eyeballs almost popped out of my head', Topol said when

he read it, and suggested it sowed the seeds of the 'black humor' in his own writing on the Holocaust in *Chladnou zemí* as well as *Sestra* (Zucker — Topol 2013). Topol, though, worried this humor might be 'too irreverent'; he 'was shy and respectful' of authors of Jewish descent who survived the Holocaust (Zucker 2014). Before he published *Sestra*, Topol sent the Auschwitz chapter to 'the harsh literary critic' and survivor of Sachsenhausen, Sergej Machonin, for approval 'and I was so agitated about it, thinking what have I done, that I was ready to take it out, scratch it, bury the whole thing. But he gave me the thumbs-up' (Zucker — Topol 2013).

Topol's humor in this Kafka section (as elsewhere) is connected to style, and, as such, also connected to the way humor works in Kafka's own writing. Milan Kundera suggested that Kafka brought a new form of humor to the novel, 'a joke is a joke only if you're outside the bowl', Kundera writes

> *by contrast, the Kafkan takes us inside, into the guts of a joke, into the horror of the comic. In the world of the Kafkan, the comic is not a counterpoint to the tragic* [...] *it's not there to make the tragic more bearable by lightening the tone; it doesn't accompany the tragic, not at all, it destroys it in the egg and thus deprives the victims of the only consolation they could hope for: the consolation to be found in the (real or supposed) grandeur of tragedy* (Kundera 1988, pp. 104–105).

This very human notion of the comic offers recognition rather than easy — or in Kunderian terms, lyrical — redemption. Yet it does offer redemption if not consolation, a redemption in the very recognition of fallibility, ridiculousness and absurdity as the *ne plus ultra* of humanity. Kafka's characters, which were so often read through tragic lenses because they were caught in static and inconsolable infinities actually pulse with vitality and humor because of the mobile and vital language with which Kafka describes these apparent trap-like worlds. Adorno famously noted how Kafka's texts deny the reader 'a contemplative reading'; instead, he wrote, 'the narrative will shoot towards him like a locomotive in a three-dimensional film' (Adorno 1981, p. 246); what Beckett called, with some fear and loathing, Kafka's 'steamroller' style. Kundera focused on the precise and beautiful mechanics of this style in his essay *A Sentence*, in which he looked at three French translations of one sentence from *The Castle* (in which K. and Frieda make love below the bar counter) and showed how Kafka's use of repetition had a semantic, aesthetic and melodic purpose (Kundera 1996, pp. 111–117); but in many instances, repetition and propulsive clauses in Kafka's work has a humorous and vital effect even in the most apparently miserable circumstances (for instance, Karl Rossman's memory of being forced to lose his virginity by the maid, Johanna, in Kafka's *Amerika*).

Josef Novák's monologue about 'Franci' in the Kafka section of *Sestra* has this same propulsive, and trangressive, energy, both in his deliberately slang-filled Czech and in his complete and blithe steamrolling (in style and substance) of Kafka's 'real' story. In presenting such a ridiculously unbelievable version of Kafka's life among the bones of Auschwitz, Topol allows us to think about memory and unreliability, memory and identity and memory and sanctification of a figure like Kafka, who has been reduced often to a simplistic, kitsch, representative of suffering and, specifically, Jewish suffering. This iconicization, ironically, leads to some desensitization of

a sense of that suffering whereas bringing back the notion of 'Franci' as a human — and rather insufferable — figure makes us reflect on the process of iconicization and history- and memory-making. Importantly, in Novák's narrative, Kafka is reinserted into a generational and cultural context, surrounded by other writers who were important in Czech literary history, and important, too, because of their diversity: they write in German, Hebrew and Czech; some are Jewish, some are not; indeed, the gang question Novák's verity because of his lack of language skills; they don't believe he spoke to these writers because 'jste nerozuměl německy, ani, éé, židovsky, ale literáti, které jste zmiňoval, přece hovořili…' (Topol 1994, p. 103; 'you didn't understand German, or, err, Jewish, but the literati you mentioned spoke…', Topol 2000 online). They, too, of course, don't have the language or the historical-literary context to challenge him: they don't know what the name of the 'Jewish' language is, nor can they complete the sentence; they themselves are unsure of what languages 'the literati you mentioned spoke…'; they are literally lost for words when they reach the verb for 'speaking'. The gang is the corrective to Novák's fake historical fantasies, but they themselves are unclear on the history with which to challenge him. Novák admits he is only joking with them, but when he's asked which parts he's joking about, he asks them to guess. The intangibility of memory is funny and frightening.

Topol destabilizes the notion of the Czech language, especially literary Czech, with Novák (among most of the other characters in the novel); Novák speaks in Protectorate-era Žižkov slang, an idiom that is not generally regarded as appropriate for speaking about the 'literati' or, indeed, the Holocaust. When the gang first see Novák they think he is 'Death. The Grim Reaper' (Topol 2000, p. 100), a skeleton with his 'empty eye sockets' and 'claws' (ibidem); Bohler, the priest-like figure starts spewing out Latin and Greek; Sharky Stein starts speaking a form of Hebrew, but nothing moves Death. They wait: 'A pak hlas, šeplavej a tichej: Ráčej prominout, vašnostové, ale bylo mi sděleno, že tu sou ňáký mladý páni z Čech. A tak dyby bylo libo menší prohlídečku… sem k službám, Josef Novák, méno mé, příjemné, he' (Topol 1996, p. 89).

The horror of Auschwitz is suddenly propelled into an unexpected realm; a cheery, blithe Žižkov denizen speaking in slang, with the contracted pronouns (jsou, jsem — sou, sem), other contracted words (dyby — kdyby; jméno — méno; nějaký — ňáký), and different forms: (Radši — Ráčej). Unsurprisingly, given the way he uses language, and his sly servility, Novák tells them he was baptized in Žižkov, the infamously working-class district of Prague. Yet, the slang-like, lower-class language also contains its own beauty, in the way that it is used, for instance, in the alliteration toward the end: 'dyby bylo libo menší prohlídečku… sem k službám, Josef Novák, méno mé, příjemné', and in the rhythm of the syntax. The Žižkov argot immediately divests Death of the sense of solemnity and grandeur his figure initially inspires, brings humor and lightness to the devastating surroundings, but it is a subversive and daggered linguistic sleight of hand: Novák's cheery monologue as they move through the camp seems to be of the school of Švejk or Hrabal, but with blithe anti-Semitism and racism, he recounts horrors and, though ultimately a victim of the camp, his complicity with them.

Alex Zucker beautifully captures the tone of Novák's voice; he used various slang dictionaries to translate, and uses different Englishes to do so: American, English

and Irish and hybrid versions (Zucker 2014). What he focuses on most, though, is the poetic sound of this 'low' Czech, the assumed worst version of what Potok calls a 'dog's tongue' (Topol 2000, p. 34). He translates Novák's self-introduction as follows:

> *An then a voice, soft an raspy: Beg pardon, yer worships, but I was advised some young gents from the Czech lands were here. So in case ya'd fancy a little tour... at cher service, Josef Novák's ma name, sightseein's ma game, heh.* (Topol 2000, p. 101).

Potok's voice — 'An then a voice' — is already colloquial; in the Czech, this is evident from the 'ej' ending on the adjectives (something the editor's note warned Czech readers about), which Zucker translates by changing the form of the conjunction: 'And' to 'An' and keeping the repetition, 'An then... an raspy', as well as a lovely assonance 'An... a... an raspy'. Topol's alliteration at the end: 'dyby bylo libo menší prohlídečku... sem k službám, Josef Novák, méno mé, příjemné', is translated by Zucker with the use of assonance and alliteration and equivalent rhyme: 'in case ya'd fancy a little tour... at cher service, Josef Novák's ma name, sightseein's ma game, heh'. A real voice emerges in English that uses some obvious Britishisms, 'yer worships' and American inflections, 'ma name... ma game' but, through this hybridity and sonic dexterity, works.

Among other stories, Novák tells them about the world of the dive bar, Mincík's, where he worked, and where all these Jewish, German Jewish and German writers hung out boozing and telling stories and they're still up to it in perpetuity:

> *a voni tam furt píšou, kucí židovský, i ten Ervín, i starej Broďák... no vono je to baví, ty humory... a všický, co byli krutě pobitý a nestihli ty svý historije napsat po lágrech... nebo dyž se schovávali... a tak... tak maj spousta času... teda času, u nás je to jiný! ale to se vydává akorát u nás...* (Topol 1994, p. 99).

The strange mixture of Protectorate-era slang Czech: 'voni... vono... všický' that, in its alliteration and repetition, becomes poetic, with a humdrum tone 'no vono je to baví' and with the implausible magic realism of the writers still publishing 'u nás' is beautiful: irreverent but strangely full of hope and a question: who comprises 'u nás'?

Zucker translates this as:

> *they're still writing away up there, those Jewboyz, Ervine too, an ole Brodster... yep, comedy, that's their thing... an alla them that got brutally slaughtered an never got a chance to write up their storees back in the lagers... or in hidin... an whatnot... wull notw they got lotsa time... course time, things're diffrent out our way! course only place it gets published is out in the wild blue yonder...* (Topol 2000, online).

To replicate the poetics, Zucker uses both alliteration and assonance, for instance in the 't' alliteration that begins with a defiant tone of strange pride 'they're still [...] there [...] those [...] Brodster [...] that's their thing [...]' and intensifies when it turns back to history 'them that got brutally slaughtered [...] their storees'. Likewise, his use of assonance 'th**o**s**e** J**e**wb**o**yz, **E**rvin**e** t**oo**, an **ole** Br**o**dst**e**r [...] y**e**p, c**o**m**e**dy' propels Novák's language and gives it a rhythm that exists albeit by different means, in Czech, where Topol uses a conjunction 'I ten Ervín, i starej Broďák' and assonance, 'no vono

je to baví, ty humory'. Even though Novák is irreverent and veering towards a kind of blithe racism, the poetics of the passage forces the reader to read well, to ask questions, to laugh but to be jolted into some kind of introspection.

One day, 'starej Broďák' / 'old Brodster'] drags his pal 'Franci' / 'Franzie' into the bar Mincík's, 'ale tahle parta byla z tohodle Franciho nešťastná' (Topol 1994, p. 100; 'an this bunch was not happy wid Franzie'), and Novák the skeleton says,

> *voni řádili a pak psali ty svý humory... a von ten Franci se taky snažil... von hrozně chtěl bejt jako voni... a psát pořádný histórije... ale von byl takovej traumatyzovanej, jo... a starej Longen a Broďák a Ervín a Paul a Richard a Gustav a všickni to nemohli číst... ty jeho truchlohry... blbý, furt blbý, mračil se starej Broďák, nuda, povídal Artur a Ervín taky... byli z toho kuka na větvi* [...] *a proto, že ty jeho stojej za nic, he he... ani do žádnýho kalendáře mu to nevzali... vo ňákejch zámkách, do čtení pro služky to strkal... a nic... a Longen, kerej měl furt strach z policejního řiditelství, mu povidá: Na ňáký zámky a ňáký tarantule a ňáký lovce Krachy do čtení pro hochy se vyflajzni, Franci, popiš ňákej proces, nebo jak to chodí v ňáký trestanecký kolónii, to ty vydaj, ty troubo!* (Topol 1994, pp. 100–101).

There is a real beauty to this passage; it is immediately funny because of its content; the idea that these writers just cannot, for the life of them, understand what Franci is writing about and get it wrong anyway ('lovce Krachy') and even give him advice as to what to write about ('some trial, or what it's like in some penal colony'). In some ways, the joke is on us; Novák is blightly ignorant of Kafka and just repeating what 'Longen' says, but, of course, mirrors the vague knowledge many people have of Kafka's work (aware more of the writer Kafka than his work). Although Novák is describing this ribald bar scene in his Žižkov argot, there is real poetic beauty to the language and its rhythm; we can see the use of alliteration and assonance and repetition: '**voni** řádili **a pa**k **p**s**a**li ty svý humory... a **von** ten Franci se taky snažil... **von** hrozně chtěl bejt jako **voni** ... a **psá**t **p**oř**á**dný histórije...'; the list of writers, a generation linked together with the repeated conjunction: 'a', the lovely alliteration in 'blbý, furt blbý, mračil se starej Broďák' and the repetition of the slang contraction, 'ňáký' /'ňákej'. The humor is connected to the style and language with which the passage is written and Novák's subsequent propulsive linguistic force. The incantatory rhythm of the writers names links these writers as a group but of course it is a slightly mauled version of their names, i.e., 'Longen' instead of Langer (and perhaps mixed in with Emil Artur Longen). In this linguistic act, Novák remembers these writers but it is a partial remembrance — the adumbrated names, partial or first names require a certain cultural and readerly knowledge.

Zucker translates this as:

> *they'd go out raisin hell, then come home an write their comedies... an Franzie he tried too... wanned so bad to be like them... an write bona fide storees... but he was sorta like traumatyzed, yep... an ole Longen an Brodster an Ervine an Paul an Richard an Gustav, none of um could read a word a his stuff... those killjoy storees a his... lousy, all of it, lousy, frowned ole Brodster, boring, said Artur, an Ervine too... kid drove um up the wall* [...] *an since those dramas a his weren't worth a squat, heh, heh... even*

> *the almanacs wouldn't take um… all that castle stuff an whatnot, stuck it in some series for maids, hired help… an nothin happened… an Longen he says to im: Chuck alla those castles an tarantulas an Jackass hunters, all that stories-for-boys stuff, Franzie, do a piece on some trial, or what it's like in some penal colony, that they'll publish, you blockhead!* (Topol 2000, online).

Zucker catches the energy of the passage, again thinking about its poetics, its sound. For instance, he translates 'blbý, furt blbý, mračil se starej Broďák, nuda' with its 'b' and slight 'l' and 'd' alliteration in Czech into 'lousy, all of it, lousy, frowned ole Brodster, boring' keeping the repetition and alliteration, this time with the 'l' alliteration in 'lousy', 'all', and 'ole' and with the 'b' alliteration of 'Brodster' and 'boring'; it keeps the momentum and the tone of the Czech text. A similar momentum is kept in his translation of the repeated 'ňáký'; instead of translating the repetition of the word, Zucker uses sibilance and consonance:

> ***alla** **t**ha**t** ca**stl**e **st**uff an wha**t**no**t,** **st**uck **it** in **s**ome **s**erie**s** for maid**s,** **h**ired **h**elp… an nothin **h**appened… an Longen he says to im: Chuck **alla** tho**s**e ca**stl**es an **t**aran**t**u**l**a**s** an Jacka**ss** **h**unter**s,** **alla** **th**at **st**orie**s**-for-boy**s** **st**uff, Franzie, do a **p**iece on **s**ome **t**ri-a**l,** or what it'**s** **l**ike in **s**ome **p**ena**l** co**l**ony, **th**at **th**ey'**ll** **p**ub**l**ish, you b**l**ock**h**ead!* (Topol 2000, online).

> *vo ňákejch zámkách, do čtení pro služky to strkal… a nic… a Longen, kerej měl furt strach z policejního řiditelství, mu povídá: Na ňáký zámky a ňáký tarantule a ňáký lovce Krachy do čtení pro hochy se vyflajzni, Franci, popiš ňákej proces, nebo jak to chodí v ňáký trestanecký kolónii, to ty vydaj, ty troubo!* (Topol 1994, p. 101).

He captures the funny relentlessness of the passage, incorporating slang-like English (again both British and American): 'alla', 'an', 'nothin', 'im' but also the aural beauty, the revelation of a poetics in the sound and movement of the slang (funny in itself because it is what Novák claims comes from the mouth of a highly cultured writer, and because this writer dismisses what is now regarded to be some of the best literature of the twentieth century). 'Longen' also mangles the name of one the stories: Kafka's *Der Jäger Gracchus* [*The Hunter Gracchus*]: 'na… ňáký lovce Krachy', a joke since 'krach' means 'crash' or 'failure' in Czech, the humor emphasized by the alliterated 'k' sound. Zucker translates it as 'Jackass hunters' a nice euphonic play on Gracchus, but also part of a lovely passage that comes alive poetically and dynamically through alliteration, sibilance and assonance.

Given the dynamism of the passage, we can see here why Zucker worried about having to insert footnotes or endnotes, any 'labored explanation, thereby ruining the effect' (Zucker 2000, p. ix); he would have to explain who these writers were because few if any English-speaking readers would guess who they were, or their cultural import, from the first or mangled names, other than 'ole Brodster' and 'Franzie'. In addition, they might not be familiar with the Gracchus story. If a reader had to stop and start to read short explanations here, they might miss the 'effect' of the passage, both in its humor and its poetics. Nevertheless, it is important that Zucker chose to include this edited passage on the Catbird website, since in it Novák creates an inter-

locking world of German, Czech, and even Hebrew writing of the Prague interwar years in this dive: alongside Kafka and Brod (the icons of this era, to the exclusion of almost anything else for English-speaking readers), are 'Longen' Jiří Langer or Emil Artur Longen, the Czech poet who wrote in Czech and Hebrew; 'Ervine' or Egon Erwin Kisch; 'Paul', Paul Kisch or Paul Leppin; 'Richard', Richard Weiner; 'Gustav', Gustav Meyrink; 'Artur', Artur London. Many of these writers suffered at the hands of the Nazis, whether interred in concentration camps like London, through exile, like Langer and Kisch, arrested on suspicion of being Jewish like Paul Leppin, or having their graves desecrated because of their Jewishness, like Weiner. In the charnel house of Potok's Auschwitz vision, what is resurrected in Josef Novák's disreputable memory is a heterogeneous Czech canon of German, German Jewish and Czech Jewish writers, a heritage often only embodied in the figure of Kafka. It is also part of a 'Czech' literary patrimony, one being worked out after the Velvet Revolution and the division of the old Czechoslovakia, the latter producing a seemingly even more homogenous 'Czech' identity. The sense of the heterogeneity of this period is only now being brought into the English-language sphere thanks to very recent translations of the work of Paul Leppin, Richard Weiner, and Jiří Langer, albeit by small, independent publishers.

Kafka is all too recognizable as the ridiculous avatar of his kitschified image. Novák describes him as a 'kuka vykulenýho židovskýho vyjevenýho' (Topol 1994, p. 100; 'goggly-eyed Jewboy, wide-eyed kid') who the other writers are afraid will 'be a disgrace to Jewish Prague' because he's still pathetically a virgin ('jo, mladej Franc byl furt panic a voni se báli, že furt bude tý židovský Praze dělat vostudu', ibidem, p. 101); they tempt him with one of Mincík's ladies, but Franzie 'se poblil a blábolil něco vo tatíčkovi [...] A Longen povídá: Tak to je ten šlemazlník bude psát samý blbostě a do smrti bude v pojišťovně' (ibidem, 'puked all over an started babbling about his dad [...] an Longen goes: That shlemozzle's gonna be stuck in that insurance office, writin nothin but garbage, till the day he dies', Topol 2000, online). Immediately, Topol presents the iconic view of Kafka (suffering, father-obsessed, virginal, stuck in the insurance office, misunderstood) pushed to its limits, tipping it into humor; the poetics within the emphasized slang (the 'k', 'y', and 'ý' alliteration in 'kuka vykulenýho židovskýho vyjevenýho'; 'poblil a blábolil'; the 't', 'b' and 's' alliteration and rhyme in 'Tak to je ten šlemazlník bude psát samý blbostě a do smrtí bude v pojišťovně'; Zucker translates this with an 'n' alliteration, with repeated 's', 'd', and 'g' sounds) are undercut by Novák's irreverence; the steamroller style rushes us along, but also makes us question the basis of our own reverence of Kafka, the seductive legend of the suffering artist and our voyeuristic and obsessive speculation about his love life. Topol plays with this as the writers debate whether or not Franci is gay; Novák himself is sent to seduce Franci in a cottage; the writers hide (like us) behind curtains to view the seduction, Brodster (after decades of critics' hints) 'hides in the closet'. Franci

> *v tý chvíli zas začne mečet: Hermane, pročs tak krutý, Hermane... hned zítra ti napíši dopis... dlouhý dopis... ty máš svůj krám, ale mě jsi pořád zanedbával... jsem tak opuštěný, i když jsem si vymyslil Odradka... Odradku... kutálíš se, Odradku?* (Topol 1994, p. 102).
> *starts in wid his bleatin: Herman, why are you so cruel, Herman... first thing tomorrow I will write you a letter... a very long one... you've got your shop, but you've*

> *always neglected me… I'm so lonely, even if I did invent the Odradek… Odradek, my little spool… can you roll for me, Odradek?* (Topol 2000, online).

Again, Topol gives us an exaggerated version of the iconic Kafka, emasculated by his father, Hermann, isolated from humankind and finding relief only in one of his inventions, Odradek, the spool-like creature in his story, *Die Sorge des Hausvaters* [The Cares of a Family Man]. The pathetic nature of this 'Franci' is emphasized by the language: the repetition of 'Herman' and 'Odradek', the 'd' alliteration in 'hned zítra ti napíši dopis… dlouhý dopis' which Zucker translates with an 'l' and 'w' alliteration: 'first thing tomorrow I will write you a letter… a very long one'; he carries the 'l' alliteration in the Odradek part of the sentence: 'Odradek, my little spool… can you roll for me, Odradek?'. The two Kafka texts referred to are interesting choices, because his *Brief an den Vater* [Letter to His Father] has often been read so literally as the definitive proof of Kafka's feelings, but *Die Sorge des Hausvaters* [The Cares of a Family Man] is one of his many texts that deliberately eschews interpretation from its very opening when Kafka throws into doubt whether 'Odradek' is a Slavic or a German word, and underlines the 'uncertainty of both interpretations' (Kafka 1995, p. 160). Odradek seems a thing or creature that is both easy and impossible to define and in 'any case, closer scrutiny is impossible, since Odradek is extraordinarily nimble and can never be laid hold of' (ibidem). When asked where it lives, it replies 'No fixed abode' and 'and laughs, but it is only the kind of laughter that has no lungs behind it. It sounds rather like the rustling of fallen leaves' (ibidem, p. 161; 'und lacht; es ist aber nur ein Lachen, wie man es ohne Lungen hervorbringen kann. Es klingt etwa so, wie das Rascheln in gefallenen Blättern', Kafka 1946, p. 171). Kafka reproduces this appealing but strange kind of laughter without lungs that sounds like 'rustling of fallen leaves' through the sound of his language, the alliterated 'l's, the repeated 'n' sound at the beginning and the end of this short passage and the harder 'g' and 'k' alliteration in the middle that makes this laughter euphonic and both strange and reassuring. The uncertainty and beauty, the strange empathy and humanity (from an inhuman thing) stand in direct opposition to the kitsch Kafka; this is not the voice of an alienated, father-fearing, asexual virgin. With some affinity, Topol taps into the unsettling Kafkan laughter and the sound of it, in order to deconstruct the monumentalized Kafka.

Novák continues with Kafka's story in high melodramatic mode, giving him one happy ending after another: he is happily seduced by Adinka, stops writing, and he runs into Mincík's 'jednou takhle k Mincíkům dotáh kufr a hodí ho Brodovi a říká… tys mě zachránil a já začal žít… zpíjet se štěstím… žiju ohnivě a vášnivě… a tak to dodělej a tohle spal' (Topol 1994, p. 102; 'luggin this big ole trunk an he throws it at Brod an says… you rescued me, I have begun to live… drunk on happiness… living with fire and passion… so now finish the job an burn this!', Topol 2000, online). Brod and the writers toss it in the fire, Adinka and Franz dance on the tables and then disappear. Novák produces a TV Nova version of Kafka with all the attendant clichés, 'já začal žít… zpíjet se štěstím… žiju ohnivě a vášnivě' and here Topol uses this steamroller alliteration and assonance for Novák to try and hypnotize his audience, the 'z' and 'ž' and 'ě' sounds; Zucker using sibilance in the English translation for similar effect.

Even more impressively, Novák's Kafka becomes a war hero and names his airplane Odradek:

> *zdrh lesama do Anglie… a dal se k letcům… byl brzo pokrytej medajlema, jakož i vostatní naši a slovačský vorli i někerý židovský kucí… bitva o Anglii, kapišto? No to já už byl na prkně… teda na prkně… tady v Osvětimi to bylo jinak… no to jeho letadlo se menovalo Odradek… co s nim lítal… a ze zajateckýho tábora se dostal do Austrálie…* (Topol 1994, p. 103).

Again, Novák's unstoppable narrative, full of alliterated plosives from 'zdrh' to 'kapišto', cloaks the false story in melodramatic language, but something subtle changes when he briefly changes subject because 'tady v Osvětimi to bylo jinak'. The plosives are still present 'byl na prkně… teda na prkně… tady v Osvětimi to bylo' but the tone has changed; Novák knows he was a stranger to heroism in Auschwitz, that it was a much more morally grey place than the fancy heroic picture he paints of the Czech and Slovak 'eagles'. The quieter tone continues when a note of the ridiculous intrudes (connected poetically from 'No to já' to 'no to jeho'; Kafka, the war hero, still clings on to Odradek (naming his plane after his little spool), but he revs up again into the language of heroics, using the plosives again 'a ze zajateckýho tábora se dostal do Austrálie…'.

Zucker retains the melodrama through the use of assonance and alliteration, using some plosives 'the coop ta England… an joined up wid the fliers… kid was covered in medals' but also a mock-heroic assonance: '… so he flew the coop ta England' and use of a mock-noble 'l' alliteration that stops for a moment at 'Jewboyz' indicating Novák's reluctant inclusion of Jews as Czechoslovak fighters: 'like alla the rest those eagle a ours, plus the Slovaks an a couple of Jewboyz' (Topol 2000, online). After the aggressive, '… Battle of England, kapisch?' Zucker has Novák return to the 'l' alliteration: 'Wull an I was belly-up by then… belly-up' (Topol 2000, online) which beautifully connects the mock-noble use of it when he speaks about the fliers to the real story behind the idea of heroism and the hero. A note of melancholy intrudes with an 'r' alliteration: 'here in Auschwitz things were diffrent' and then he has Novák move back to a bombastic note at the end, again with the use of plosives: 'an he made it oudda that pee-oh-dubya camp to Australia…' (with an interesting play on 'POW', i.e., prisoner of war, 'pee-oh-dubya' that contains the nick-name of the incoming President, known for his simple, bombastic speaking style, at the time of publication: George W. Bush, *Dubya*):

> *so he flew the coop ta England… an joined up wid the fliers… kid was covered in medals soon, like alla the rest those eagle a ours, plus the Slovaks an a couple of Jewboyz… Battle of England, kapisch? Wull an I was belly-up by then… belly-up, what I mean is… here in Auschwitz things were different… yep, Odradek's what he called that plane a his… that he flew… an he made it oudda that pee-oh-dubya camp to Australia…* (Topol 2000, online).

Novák then realizes the gang are not believing the story and he hastens to an anticlimactic and absurd end for Kafka, and, as he does so, his language falls into nonsense:

> *Co mi tu, kucí, zas bučíte a mrmláte? Dyk ste chtěli vědět, jak to chodí v nebi, ne? No tak to teda vemu hopem tropem, máma meje mopem! Tam Franci rozjel hledání diamantů ve velkým… ale hrozně krad… tak ho bušmeni zabodli! A zazvonil zvonec! A juchu ejchuchu jedeme dál!* (Topol 1994, p. 103).
>
> *What cha all mooin an mumblin for now, boyz? Wanned ta know how it goes in heaven, dincha? Wull then here I go, galoop galorm, momma's moppin up a storm! Franzie got inda diamond prospectin big-time down there… but he was awways stealin… so the bushmen stabbed im! An the bell tolled! An yoohoo yodelayheehoo, movin right along!* (Topol 2000, online).

Here is an incisive example of Zucker 'capturing the feeling, the jarring, the dislocation' of Topol's text, as a 'matter of feeling' rather than 'mechanically reproducing' Topol's 'departures' from conventional Czech (Zucker 2000, p. viii). As Novák descends into a strange poetry, Zucker invents his own, thinking again about the euphony of the text, so 'hopem tropem, máma meje mopem!' becomes 'galoop galorm, momma's moppin up a storm!' with Zucker retaining both the plosive 'p' and the playful 'm' alliteration, and he transforms the similar soft 'j' alliteration and 'u' and 'e' assonance of 'A juchu ejchuchu jedeme dál!' to a 'y' alliteration and 'o' and 'e' assonance: 'An yoohoo yodelayheehoo, movin right along!'. The latter nonsensical iteration follows the melodramatic 'A zazvonil zvonec!' that rings alongside the means of Franci's death 'tak ho bušmeni zabodli!'. Zucker translates this with a more culturally loaded 'An the bell tolled' a famous reference to John Donne's *Meditation XVII*, 'never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee' (Donne 1972, p. 538) and Ernest Hemingway's appropriation of Donne's words for the title of his 1940 novel, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. It is an inspired choice, working euphonically with the means of Kafka's death, echoing the 'b' alliteration: 'so the bushmen stabbed im! An the bell tolled!' but also setting up a very noble and literary reference alongside the absurd death and Novák's slide into nonsensical yodeling.

In Novák's telling, Franci's stories were burned, but he claims that Broďák and Ervín recreated Franci's stories and published them under Franci's name. There is a kernel of truth here, given Brod's intrusive editing of Kafka's texts and his one-handed creation of Kafka's posthumous reputation, and it underlines the irony of Brod's fame that rests entirely on Kafka's rather than his own prose. Broďák and Ervín, suffering from writer's block:

> *si vzpomněli na ňáký ty Francovy poudačky… a chytlo se to! A dyž pak Franciho sestřelili i s ajrákem, tak to pak Broďák už rozjel ve velkým… s Ervínem… se Singerem… s ňákým Nabokovským i s jinejma… akorát ňákou tu Američku sepsal prej sám, povídal vohnehdá v kantýně… to napsal v Izraeli, prej ze msty, protože do Amerčky ho nepustili, dyž to byl komunista… a dal tam Franciho méno, dyž už mělo márku… vobchodní… aby to líp střelil, kapišto? No a v Izraeli se prej nudil, jinak by už nepsal… prachů měl z tý Franciho márky habaděj…* (Topol 1994, p. 103).

Topol humorously sends up Kafka's effect on post-war literature with Novák's suggestion that Isaac Bashevis Singer and Vladimir Nabokov were co-writers of Kaf-

ka's stories, but in some ways it speaks to Topol's own patrimony; at once sending up the Kafka industry and cementing the real effect of the influence of Kafka's prose, an influence that is apparent in Topol's own aesthetic style and poetics in his prose, certainly in this Kafka section. The trouble is that Kafka's name has 'márku… vobchodní…' ('recognition… brand name like' which means that (in Novák's anti-semitic swipe), Brod had 'prachů… z tý Franciho márky habaděj…' ('imself sacks a dough offa that brand name a Franzie's…'). How to engage with this patrimony, certainly as a Czech writer, without succumbing to the kitsch, commercial and monumentalized version of Kafka? Topol does it by deconstructing the Kafka myth and by resurrecting the writerly milieu of which Kafka was a part rather than being the only representative of this lost generation — lost, because of the war, communism, commercialism and lost (in the English-speaking world until recently) because of the lack of translated works. Kafka, in some ways, was enough.

In the Kafka passage Topol provocatively plays with his writerly patrimony, any nationalistic perception of a monolingual and mono-ethnic Czechness and Czech literature, the relationship between literary and spoken Czech language — a more radical move than might be supposed by English readers — and also how the Holocaust is remembered, mediated and relayed. His demystification of Kafka, or rather the iconic Kafka, is central to this: first of all, in challenging the idea of Kafka as *the* metonymic figure of a lost multilingual, multicultural Prague, and secondly, in the commercialized, kitsch figure of today, one representing 'Majikal' Prague. At one point the writers urge Paul Leppin to include more 'ghosts' and 'broads' and 'stiffs', 'insanity' and 'identity' like Meyrink because 'tourism's where the dough's at […] we gotta make filthy Praha out ta be some kina Majikal City! So the tourists'll come!… an spend!' (Topol 2000, online). The writers urging Leppin to be more commercial for Prague's sake speaks to the 'messy landscape of post-Communist Czechoslovakia' (Zucker 2000, p. vii), a newly capitalist Czech world that has to aggregate its 'brand-names', here associated in the immediate fall of Communism with suffering and mysticism (hence Kafka) and violent, murderous oppression (Auschwitz). Topol refuses to reproduce an iconic Kafka in a passage that deliberately re-writes, forgets and invents history, written in a street-Czech that is part of a wider language, one that the character Potok calls a 'dog's tongue': a language battered and almost disappeared by history and, in doing so, Topol challenges any reductive monumentalizing of Kafka, Czech history and the Czech language itself.

Zucker's translation is subtly attuned to Topol's vision but also to the poetics of the work and the connection between the two. Most importantly, Zucker's decision to allow the edits to be posted online for interested readers involves them in an ongoing discussion about who and what Czech literature is, and the impact of collective and writerly memory on that discussion.

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RESUMÉ

Překládání Topola: Kafka, holokaust a humor

Při přípravě druhého vydání románu *Sestra* (1996) Jáchym Topol vypustil pasáž konstruující v rámci halucinační vize Osvětimi komickou alternativní biografii Franze Kafky. Stranou ji poté ponechal také Alex Zucker, autor a vydavatel knižní verze anglického překladu (*City, Sister, Silver*, 2000). Přeložil ji nicméně a uveřejnil na webové stránce nakladatelství. V okolnostech tohoto překladu se setkává řada momentů podstatných pro úvahy o překládání české literatury a zvláště esteticky a tematicky náročných děl do angličtiny: obtížná povaha kulturně specifického materiálu, lingvistická hravost a — především — role a působnost překladatele. Ve snaze o reflexi těchto momentů studie analyzuje Topolův subverzivní humor, Kafku demytologizující, a Zuckerovy překladatelské strategie prostředkování Topolova humoru a vůbec poetiky do angličtiny.

RÉSUMÉ

Translating Topol: Kafka, the Holocaust, and humor

This article focuses on Alex Zucker's 2000 English translation and editing of Jáchym Topol's *Sestra* (1994): *City, Sister, Silver* (Catbird Press). In particular, the article analyzes a passage which Zucker edited out of the novel (and which Topol also edited out of the second Czech edition of *Sestra* in 1996), that presents a humorous alternative history of Franz Kafka retold in a hallucinatory vision of Auschwitz. The context of the editing of the passage is instructive in thinking about the translation of Czech literature into English, especially of aesthetically and thematically challenging work: the difficult nature of cultural specific material; linguistic playfulness; and, most importantly, the role and agency of the translator. Zucker's decision to post the edited passage online, on the publisher's website, suggests a possible path for future translations, allowing interested readers access to work that might be edited because of domestic norms. Finally, the article analyzes Topol's subversive humor in demythologizing Kafka, and Zucker's translation strategies in conveying both the humor and Topol's poetics into English.

KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA / KEYWORDS

Jáchym Topol; Alex Zucker; Franz Kafka; překlad; holokaust / Jáchym Topol; Alex Zucker; Franz Kafka; translation; holocaust.

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