



Journal of International Women's Studies

Volume 4 | Issue 3

Article 7

May-2003

“Word Made Flesh”: Czech Women’s Writing From Communism to Post-Communism

Madelaine Hron

Recommended Citation

Hron, Madelaine (2003). “Word Made Flesh”: Czech Women’s Writing From Communism to Post-Communism. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 4(3), 81-98.

Available at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol4/iss3/7>

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

“WORD MADE FLESH”: Czech Women’s Writing From Communism to Post-Communism

By Madelaine Hron

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...
And the Word became flesh and lived among us...” (John 1:1; 1:14 *NRSV*)

I begin with a rather “revelationary” quote, perhaps because my endeavor in this essay appears rather apocryphal: I will attempt a synoptic account of the transition of Czech women’s fiction from the communist to the post-communist era. At the outset I faced with three seemingly eschatological dilemmas. First is the difficulty I find in establishing a body of “Czech women’s fiction” in the corpus of Czech literature when my belief is that good literature transcends all gender categorization, as it speaks of the desires driving one’s being and therefore tends towards the universal human condition. Second, however, I am also convinced that, asymptotically, good writing is derived from an individual experience, which is gendered indeed, and so I must allow for a gendered “women’s experience” which could be shared collectively. Finally, while oscillating between individualism and universalism, I must somehow take into account the diversity of women fiction writers that have contributed to the Czech literature over fifty year period but at the same time positing a fundamental change revolving around the “post” of the 1989 Velvet Revolution: communism and post-communism.

Taking into account these dilemmas, I offer this “revelationary” parabolic parable: that from communism to post communism Czech women’s fiction transformed from “word to flesh.” The bare-bone skeleton of this argument may be structured as follows. In communism, language, both in its oppressive and resistant form, established the Word as paradigm defining Czech governing economy and the resistant literary economy – “the Word was God.” In the pre-revolutionary summer of 1989, Václav Havel drew from the same Bible passage as I: “words can be said to be the very source of our being, and in fact the substance of the cosmic life form we call human... one thing would seem to be obvious: we have always believed in the power of words to change history.” (WW 377-378) Havel illustrates how under communism, the power of words formulated itself in collective and generic terms, either as the totalizing communalism of the totalitarian system or in dissident denunciation advocating universal human rights. Conversely, in post-communism, “the word became flesh:” the shift to a market economy, private property and democracy favored a turn to individualism, material concerns, and emphasis on the body. In the summer of 1991, in the newly-formed Czechoslovak Federation, Havel’s cautions against the harmful effects of post-communism, which he submits are most saliently felt in the flesh: “the catastrophic decline in the general cultural level, the level of public manners, related to the economic decline... impinges on one “physically”, as it were.” (SM, 14). Here is a world-view more akin to Western capitalism: more material and self-oriented, thus perhaps less generically abstract and more gender-embodied.

What about women and gender in such a metaphorical transformation from “word to flesh”? In Czech women’s literature, the movement between these two different political systems might be fleshed out thus: in communism, women were seemingly ‘incarcerated’ by the word – their gendered, individual and concerns were erased by the language of the universal human rights; in post-communism, women are apparently seeking to regain their gendered identity, their individual agency, and their personal subjectivity – symbolic abstractions are localized, individual particularity becomes “flesh incarnate.” I will argue, however, that this transformation is not wuite so transparent; it is not merely an import of Western feminism, but rather suggests an intriguing permutation from the singular notion of subjectivity into a plural incarnation of women-as-subjects.

Clearly, my “word to flesh” paradigm is merely an alluring allegory. Yet neither allegory nor facile binaries – communism or post-communism, universalism or materialism, word or flesh –

can fully capture the complex matrix that is the Czech Republic today, a convoluted network of threads in today's global economy. My paper then does not seek to legitimate this reductive motto, but rather attempts to understand how the legacies of communism are enmeshed in the definition of women's writing in the contemporary Czech Republic. Yet, I do not want to offer the reader either a simplified review of Czech women's fiction or mere close readings of certain exemplary Czech woman writers contrasting those from the communist and in post-communist eras. Rather, driven by a metaphorical journey from "word to flesh," my paper attempts to interpolate all these approaches to offer the reader a three-dimensional perspective on Czech women's writing and a panoramic overview of the changes in its landscape. In so doing, I will not cease to problematize a horizontal view of Czech literature, pointing to the many discrepancies which disturb this stereotypical gaze -- be it the landscape of Czech politics or Czech feminism of the times, or the topoi-graphical features of voice/ language and universalism/ individualism of the Czech women writers I describe. Specifically, I will zoom in on the work of two women writers, Eva Kantůrková and Iva Pekárková, whom I consider to be representational in many ways of the concerns of communism and post-communism respectively, but whom I will not specify as types but differentiate in their individuality. In all, I wish to probe what it means to be marked as "a Czech women writer" today: incarceration in a gendered, fictional, body-figure or incarnation into the corpus of a women's community.

"In the beginning was the Word..."

First perhaps, a word on my chosen parable: "in the beginning was the Word." It reveals a turn to language and discourse, different in many ways from contemporary feminist analysis of Czech women. I did not choose to allude to the relations between Adam or Eve, or the cultural difference between the Samaritan and Jewish women, even though the two salient features of contemporary gender analysis on post-communist Czech Republic are 1) its sociological emphasis, in a man/woman differential, and 2) its criticism of Western feminism, in an East /West distinction. Czech feminists such as Věšínová, Kalivodová and Čermáková¹ as well as others outside the Czech Republic, such as Rosemary Crompton or notably Alena Heitlinger,² have written numerous articles about the status women in Czechoslovakia or the Czech Republic, focusing on such issues as gainful equality, political representation, or abortion. Renowned Czech feminist sociologist Jiřina Šiklová, is known to her English-speaking public for such articles as "Are Women in the Czech Republic More Conservative?" or "McDonalds, Terminators, Coca-Cola Ads and Feminism," which focus on "imports from the West."³ Given my own training as a theorist of comparative literature, the parable I choose points to a different viewpoint – a literary one – for the same feminist questions. It privileges the role of language and the literary word in the communist economy, and takes a narrative approach towards post-communism, operating diachronically. I do not wish discredit these reputed feminists in any way; on the contrary I want to engage them in a dialogue which might show how a literary outlook complements many of the issues already raised in criticism. These theorists have been instrumental in showing the specificities of Czech women and those in many post communist nations. They have especially identified the structure of "equality" or "pseudo-emancipation" which led to the "new woman's fate" (Navarová) in communism, which required women to work. In many ways, this egalitarian work experience is radically different from that of Western women, and results in a distinctive attitude in post-communism: women reject the assumptions and presumptions of Western feminism and its ideology in general. I would like to show how this dismissal reflects a deep-seated disillusion with

the language of discourse itself, be it theoretical or political discourse— as all too often such discursive language presumes a certain collective universalism.

“...And The Word Was God”

In the beginning then, in communist Czechoslovakia (and in most other communist Eastern European states) the Word was God. This omnipotent Word, of course, was first and foremost that of the Law, the oppressive totalitarian communist regime, founded on the writings of Marx and Lenin and controlling all government, legal and social institutions. However, in this authoritarian system, the literary word also attained godly if not redemptory dimensions, since it embodied a deliberate resistance to the communist state. Through the written word, writers were able to express themselves independently of the regime, and often, as dissidents, oppose this regime. As Václav Havel summed up, “we have believed in the power of words to change history... I do live in a country where a writer’s congress, or a speech delivered at it, is capable of shaking the system. Could you conceive something of the kind in the Federal Republic of Germany?” (1989: 378-379) Indeed I believe this to be an important distinction between the discursive formations in the East and West: in communist states, the power of language bore the same effects as the material body does in capitalist democracies. Much like Nietzsche, who proposes that we “start from the *body* and employ it as guide,” (WP 289) I would argue that in the West, the material body represents the primary vehicle of self-identification and social construction. Again referring to Nietzsche: “I am body entirely and nothing beside... behind your thoughts and feelings, my brother, stands a mighty commander, an unknown sage—he is called *Self*. He lives in your body, he is your body” (Z, 61, 62). Furthermore, I would contend that it is the sexualized body that drives much of Western social discourse; from Freud to Foucault, it has been argued by numerous theorists that in Western society, sex is the formative factor in defining normativity and that normativity is the determining process in institutionalizing power. Communist states attempted to control normative behavior by maintaining its power of the word – regulating freedom of speech – only to be persistently opposed by dissidents. In like vein, today in the West and the US especially, I would say that the normative discourse constantly attempts to regulate normative bodily – and by extension sexual – behavior, which is also consistently being opposed by heteronormative practices. If we were to think of an example of an incident “capable of shaking the system,” we might remember Clinton’s affair rocking the political scene or Jane Gallup’s sexual harassment case perturbing the academe. Though the individuals in question protested their bodily affairs in language (Clinton’s parsing of the term “sexual relations” or Gallup’s controversial book), in the land of free speech, it was still a “matter of sex” -- licit and illicit sex. By contrast, under communist censorship, no such “sex scandal” would have shaken the Czech political or academic scene; however, a misplaced word could have easily imprisoned an academic or a politician.

That is not to say that the power of words is not theoretically understood in the West. Certainly, De Man’s critique of ideology with his emphasis on the “materiality of language” comes to mind: “one could approach the problems of ideology and by extension the problems of politics only on the basis of critical-linguistic analysis, which had to be done in its own terms, in the medium of language.” (121) Or with relation to gender, we might refer to Butler’s notion of “discursive heterosexuality,” (GT 30) the “poststructuralist rewriting of discursive performativity as it operates in the materialization of sex” (BTM 12) or her emphasis on the fact that the material body can only be apprehended, interpreted and performed through discourse:

“As a locus of interpretations, the body is a material reality which has already been located and defined within a social context... “existing” in one’s body becomes a personal way of having to take up and interpret that set of received gender norms.” (SG: 45)

Nevertheless, a salient difference must be made clear: in the West, discursive theories of knowledge remain abstracted concepts, while under communism, the power of discourse in social construction was a self-evident reality, understood and practiced by everybody in their everyday life. To clarify, under communism, the quip “you’re born naked, the rest is drag,” had little to do with Butler’s notion of gender performance, however it did speak volumes about the basic, fundamental understanding that everyone had to play-act almost all the time within the system in order to save their skin. Furthermore, such “discursive drag” was practiced and performed by everybody in daily life, thus becoming a collective experience and a crucial paradigm to remember in the move towards post communism.

In recent years, enthusiasm for discursive theories of knowledge has been on the decline in Western theory, partly because it is difficult to foresee an effective, engaged and constructive approach in this “discursive performativity” of “poststructuralist deconstruction”. As Kristie Fleckstein puts it “Reducing materially to signifiers limits our ability to formulate, recognize and challenge cultural truths and material conditions.” (248) Butler’s theories on materiality for example, have been challenged by such theorists as Carrie Hull who claim that rejecting materialism precludes any socio- cultural, political or economic analysis, and are insufficient to address what “ the real basis of suffering.” (33) Thus a better understanding of the discursive formations in communist countries and their move towards capitalism and democracy might yield significant input on how discourse might be manipulated effectively in the material construction and gendered performance – a valuable insight for feminism indeed.

In the communist system then, unlike in Western society, valorization of the written word, established the Word – discourse – as the axiomatic paradigm of power that was practiced and performed by all. That this was a collective experience is crucial in understanding this system, as tended towards a shared communal world-view: one of sameness. Either one performed ideals of egalitarianism and sameness as a communist, or opposed them as a dissident. Yet even dissidents espoused the rhetoric of universalism and sameness. Dissidents essentially fought for human rights, a struggle of global dimensions, written in a common, internationally understood language. Even while eliciting intense accounts of concrete individual experience, such writers nonetheless pointed to the universal essence of life. In Western discourse, theorists – notably feminists and post-colonialists – have shown that power operates on social ‘differentials’ like that of sex, of the normal/deviant, of the marginal/central, or of East/West in this case, thereby operating on a praxis of difference. By contrast, under communism the discursive formation operated on a praxis of sameness, a crucial paradigm of to remember in the move towards post-communism.

The legacy of communism within post-communism may be characterized as disenchantment with social discourse: much skepticism is projected at any “ideological dressing” or any “ism,” feminism included. Feminism in particular, “mistaken for a condensed ideological symbol,” has acquired “demonic connotations” as Čermáková explains:

Gender discourse is unilaterally burdened with misunderstood concepts of 'feminism' and 'feminist sociology' to the point that the notions have nearly demonic connotations. Comparable demonization can only be found in the darkest period of the 1950's when notions like 'capitalism' and 'western sociology' were refused with similar vengeance. Whenever feminism and feminist sociology, which in reality exist as part of the pluralist stream of thinking and theory, are mistaken for a condensed ideological symbol, no discourse is possible. (1-2)

However, post-communism must also contend with the ideology of “sameness” that characterized communism and dissident writing and that even stemmed back to the nationalist period and the emergence of Czechoslovakia as a nation. Even while he included women in all national issues,⁴ Thomas G. Masaryk, considered by many as the father of the Czech nation, advocated human and civic issues above any national or particular interests, such as those of women, bluntly stating that “there are no women's issues, there are only human issues.” As we have seen, communist official discourse enforced a negative form of equalization, as Havelková puts it, “where differences were removed by being suspended and ignored, prevented from becoming public, or bought off.” (65) Yet, this same form of equalization was re-appropriated as positive liberating rhetoric by intellectual dissident writers – the heteronormative counter-power to the state – who sought to promote universal human rights in which gender was subsumed in general, existential, humanist problems. Because in all these discourses, gender identity is naturalized and personal subjectivity is neutralized, there are, of course, serious consequences on the recognition of ‘women’s issues’, as Havelková indicates here:

“ The lack of interest in women’s problems originates in the syndrome of putting general human problems above particular issues of sex-related identity, an attitude strengthened by the pre-revolutionary political dissent, which focused on issues of political freedom. An assumption that sexual identity is natural, as well as the conviction that women's emancipation has been accomplished and that no one has really benefited from it, all discourage attention to women's issues.” (65)

Aside from the general mistrust of feminism as mere ideology, perhaps the most difficult yet critical ideological obstacle the women’s rights movement in the Czech Republic faces in advocating gender difference, is the tradition of viewing men and women as an undifferentiated collective whole when furthering common goals – human rights or national rights, and now universal EEC rights.

Here subjectivity, as it is understood in Western feminism, is foreign to the majority of Czech people, and even more so is the feminist model of “woman as a gendered subject,” a notion propagated by de Beauvoir to Butler⁵. As outlined above, questions of “woman as a gendered subject” were dismissed in the name of universal solidarity: in the nationalist period, men and women united for the cause of an independent Czechoslovakia; and in communism, the totalitarian regime propagated communal relations and at the same time the dissident movement urged men and women to ally against the state. Moreover, it should be mentioned that unlike Western women, Czech women never had to fight for some of rights of their Western counterparts, such as suffrage or maternity leave, for example. The former was granted to them automatically when Czechoslovakia became a state, and the latter came along with many socialist reforms. So in one respect, Czech women, well acquainted with the concept of united action, both in the negative sense of egalitarian sameness but also in terms of solidarity, remain dismissive of the idea of a differentiated or gendered subjectivity.

Lastly, I would argue that during communism, becoming a writer – either a conformist or a dissident – intimated a further renunciation of embodied subjectivity. Writers seemed to have a choice: either conforming to communist propaganda and relinquishing all attempts at original and independent thought, thus submitting to expurgation and enforced silence, or defying the totalitarian authorities, thus becoming a non-person and risking physical annihilation. In both cases, the writers’ engagement with the written word signified a renunciation of their physical selves, their gendered bodies. On one hand, conformist writers, in their silence and acquiescence to the communist regime, accepted the doctrine that all men and women are equal- the community of the working proletariat- and therefore not sexed or divided. On the other hand, dissidents subsumed

their sexuality in favor of promoting universal human values. Can there be a third choice, that of gendered writing, women's writing, in such a system?

... and women's sentence?

The question of women's writing becomes particularly problematic in such an economy. Like most writers, women writers struggle with the difficulty of advocating universal human rights, while at the same time, describing their everyday locus in society as women, be it wife, mother or worker. Most importantly, women face the difficulty of inscribing their bodies, sexed and gendered, into a system which has supplanted the economy of the flesh and desire to that of word and idea. In many respects, the presence of women was erased in the writing economy itself; many chose not to write for a variety of reasons. For example, only 20% of the signatories of *Charta 77*, the Czech writers' anti-communist manifesto, were women. As theorists such as Hrabík-Šamál have pointed out that women represented the "whited-out" "blank" spots of the dissident writers economy (81), not because they did not directly participate in the production of the written word as writers, but because, on the contrary, they represented the physical, corporal reality by which the written word was brought into being. Hrabík-Šamál's work on Czech women's "unofficial" literary production cogently illustrates that many women (such as Anna Šabatová, Olga Šulcová, Zdena Škvorecká, Zdena Brodská, Ruth Tosková) became the editors and publishers of various samizdat magazines or émigré publications. Others (such as Zdena Erteltova-Phillips, Bronislava Müllerová, Ludmila Piatková, Klára Pokorná) spent countless hours typing and typesetting such unofficial dissident writing. Still others (such as Ruth Klímová, Eva Šimecková) translated the works of these dissident authors. Finally, we must mention the immeasurable efforts of countless women who supported their husbands or friends, often imprisoned or persecuted, (such as Olga Havlová, Jolana Kusá, Kamila Bendová) who opened their homes as meeting places or shelters for various dissidents, who hosted conferences and seminars, who communicated information, and finally, who distributed the dissident publications. There were nonetheless women writers, many of them engaged both in the process and creation of literary works, and a number of them were imprisoned for these contraband activities. In the communist period then, the written word overshadowed women's presence though their materiality itself was vital to its production.

Notwithstanding, the women's literature that was written under socialism sought to explore women's themes, especially those of women's role in society, at work and at home, essentially probing the whole notion of "woman's identity." However, given the dominant discourse, such women's voices were erased:

"It is only in sociology and women's literature that one begins to find the female contours behind the anonymous, universal work force, a discussion of contemporary women in nontraditional situations, and the necessity of new criteria for assigning value to socially useful work by women. Several female authors, including V. Hanzová, V. Švenková, E. Farkagová, G. Rothmayerová, L. Hajková, and J. Bodnařová have in short stories, novellas, and poems made the daily struggle against time of their female protagonists the major theme. The lack of time for herself, for the children, for the husband she loves; the lack of deep, quiet, or shared experiences; and the feeling of estrangement are often described as the characteristic themes of our female literature. Literature written by women has also dealt with the theme of women's identity, contributing to "revealing" that identity and helping thematize the world of women anew. It has been oriented toward private life, toward the emotional sphere, toward the plane of interpersonal relationships in the circle of the family, and has often stayed far away from the "great and heroic themes of the building of socialism." These authors have endeavoured to define a social role for women that corresponds to their bio-psychological and sociocultural constitution... Such literature has often been characterized as "escapist" literature by a literary critical apparatus dominated by men." (Kicková and Farašková 87)

Kicková and Farašková's succinct summary of Czech women's writing in socialism points to the greatest difficulty facing women of the communist period: translating their gendered subjectivity in the language of humanist universalism. I would now like analyze the work of the most engaged women writer of the time – Eva Kantůrková – whose work epitomizes this ideological quandary in many ways, a double-bind nicely captured in this portrait of her by Alena Heitlinger:

“One of the three rotating spokespersons of the main dissident organization Charter 77, was always a woman. The documents of Charter 77 reveal that they did not devote much attention to women's issues, but to the extent that they did they reaffirmed the principles of women's equality and women's right to work. However, the dissident writer Eva Kantůrková urged women to reject the Marx ideal of emancipation, which in her view communism transformed into a new form of women's slavery: obligatory employment. Instead of seeking emancipation through paid work, Kantůrková urged women to rediscover their “authentic traditional feminine qualities of compassion, love, and tolerance.” Like most other dissidents who took some interest in women's issues, Kantůrková found universalist concepts of human rights and human liberty more relevant to women's circumstances than the ideas of Western feminism.” (Heitlinger 1993, 105)

Indeed, as Heitlinger points out Kantůrková certainly understands women's problematic situation – forced “equal” emancipation, meaning cheap labor – yet her solution is perplexing indeed. She turns to the language of universalism to intimate some essential type of “authentic feminine,” which she defines in humanist terms. For are not “compassion, love and tolerance” to be espoused by the men and women? How to speak as a woman when one is only read as human? The difficulty of women writing under communism paradoxical indeed: to find a voice not out of a minoritized and discriminated position, but rather outside one of presumed equality.

Incarceration

Eva Kantůrková's most successful book, perhaps one of the most famous piece of “woman's writing” under communism, *My Companions In The Bleak House* (1987), divulges, albeit implicitly, the I would posit, however, that the novel also offers a particularly effective rhetorical strategy of resistance, perhaps the only one possible in this economy. In many ways, *My Companions* deviates from other women's novels of the time. First, it is not a novel but an autobiography, an unusual one in that it does not seek to construct authorial subjectivity, being rather the object of a multiplicity of subject authors. More importantly, unlike other women's fiction, it does not concern itself with the domestic sphere, work, or even the question of equality: it is literally incarcerated – the book details Kantůrková's 1981 stay in the Ruzyně prison, where she is detained for a year with women from different walks of life. Yet despite the erasure of the question of “emancipation” and “equality,” it focuses almost exclusively on the meaning of “woman” and the pluralist community of “women.” This feminist message is conveyed, I argue, precisely because it so successfully translates these feminist concerns into the humanist grammar of the times.

In the preface, Havel summarizes the book as “an account of women in marginalized situations- that is, an account which is universally *human*” (CB, x). Rather than admitting to any gendered specificity, Havel stresses its portrayal of the human condition. He claims that though it occurs in a prison, it magnifies in microcosm the oppression and limitations inherent to the communist state, which Havel aptly relates to the existential life situation of the individuals: The plotlessness and non-happenings of life in a prison-cell cast a new and very peculiar light on the stories and events that have happened to us before, on the outside. This is a moment of truth- the truth of my fellow prisoners, my truth and the truth of the world in which it has been given us to live. (CB, xi)

In Havel's opinion, all the themes in the novel are universal, including time, which rather than being political, is linked appositely to the "outside" and reflects the peculiar "in betweenness" of time in general:

Another theme of this book which is *prison-time*, which is that strange "time/non-time" which offers sharp insights into a more far-reaching enigma, one which touches all of us, that is, the enigma of human time in general. (CB, xi)

Given that Kantůrková's novel may be read with overreaching universalist themes, which indeed mark communist writing, her novel also presents us with a situated perspective that makes a reader such as Havel uneasy-

There are situations in this book about which I have a very special feeling. They interest me, the surprise, touch irritate and intrigue me. Sometimes they make me bristle inside, but at the same time, I'm fascinated. I can only explain this particular aspect of my own feelings about Eva Kantůrková's book by the very specific and undisguised femininity of the author's personality and the way she sees the world. (CB, xii)

For Havel, not only does Kantůrková's work reflect a women's point of view, but also that of a woman *of the word*, an intellectual woman. Havel signals her status as a writer in the difference between her and the other inmates, explaining "they're simply *different* – unhappy in different ways, good and bad in different ways." (CB, xii) Yet at the same time, Havel lauds her egalitarian treatment of these women, such democratic egalitarianism being the trademark of human rights writings of that era. Ironically, Havel remarks that Kantůrková "sees each one of [these women] separately, as concrete autonomous individuals" (CB, xii), yet he himself reduces her to the generic epitome representing the universal human condition vying for freedom.

Despite its clearly universalist tendencies, Kantůrková book focuses on women in particular. Temporally for example, the account begins and ends on March 8th, International Women's Day. The warders attempt to take this day away from the women, by raiding their cells, tauntingly claiming "You're criminals and Women's Day's got nothing to do with you." (CB, 14) In this way, they wish to reduce the women to sub-humans where the categories of men and women no longer apply. Nonetheless, the women resist this dehumanization, precisely by celebrating not their humanity but their womanhood. The tenor of the celebration is interesting, because it is conducted without word, or more precisely, without Czech words that the other women in the cell understand. It is an obstinate Hungarian Gypsy, Fanny, who organizes the celebration; she rearranges the furniture, and teaches everyone in the cell to dance Hungarian *czardas*, while she sings along Gypsy folk-tunes.

This celebration, one of the most jovial scenes in the novel, points directly to the question of language elicited in the novel. Language functions as a means of survival, as a form of pleasure and release for the "prisoners [who] must amuse themselves as best they can. And they need contact with other human beings." Reading is not a possibility, for "the sort of reading available aroused derision rather than interest." It is primarily through narration, writing and speaking, that these women recreate another reality. "Sign language, the morse code clapped or tapped on the heating pipes, the toilet phone, messages on horseback, banging on the floor- these were all substitutes for conversation." In these lapidary conversations, women do not attempt to convey information, but rather communicate with lovers, spread gossip, and create new personae for themselves. "Intrigue was the breath of life in the women's cells: the prison would seem to be heaving with repressed passion. Lies, excuses, courtship, persuasion, assurance and promises fed both love and jealousy, the only two things that could keep boredom at bay." (CB, 32) The spoken word is associated with shame: in order to communicate most directly, women have to squat on hands and knees and yell through the toilet pipe: "the very idea symbolized the hell of prison." (CB,27) Notwithstanding,

women challenge the silence imposed on them, and subvert the dominant language of the system, a language which defines them as criminals and subalterns. One of Kantůrková's companions, Helen, for example, continues to write to the authorities, even to the President of the Republic, despite the fact she cannot spell simple words. Though imprisoned multiple times, this criminal's harshest swear word is the word "elephants".

Language directed outside the cell is thus a deceiving diversion, which resists the oppressive order by both reappropriating and subverting it. This inversion is evident in the "messages on horseback," notes that the women pass through the barred windows, which resemble traditional letters in content and form: they have an address, a recipient, and a sender, and contain formulaic expressions of love, often plagiarized poetry. Yet these idealized letters have little to do with the women's everyday reality, they are mere resistance to silence and boredom. For example, Maddy, a Gypsy foundling, spends the whole day writing and drawing such transcendental letters, "every piece of toilet paper that we got into the cell was covered by her writing, and she was always begging the trustees for the packets of sanitary napkins that came in." (CB, 19) Though she writes about abstract values in her letters, Maddy's character is much more prosaic, her main preoccupation being the acquisition of cigarettes, paper and money to get a few necessities. Inside the cell, among women prisoners, language functions on another level, to create a community of women bonded by a common sadness: "what you live with is sadness; and sadness becomes a bond, a bond as strong as that of the humiliations you have suffered together." (CB, 17) "I *must* tell you Eva dear," (CB, 23) the refrain of the novel, consists mainly of the stories of Kantůrková's fellow prisoners in their common cell, stories of survival. Through these stories, Kantůrková realizes that literature is not the only written word: many women who cannot write recount lovely fables, many who cannot read sing their lives. Fanny, the Hungarian Gypsy who speaks no Czech, expresses herself through her body language. Thus, in the prison, through dialogue, Kantůrková is inextricably linked with women of all walks of life, by a common bond – sadness and helplessness – and a common struggle – waiting and questioning. In her final passage, she, mostly a listener in these conversations, expresses solidarity with these women; in a touching passage, she simply asks her lost friends question upon question. And leaves us waiting for their reply.

Indeed, in her poignant depiction of imprisonment, characterized by waiting and questioning, Kantůrková deftly allegorizes the incarcerating atmosphere of communist Czechoslovakia. In her focus on language, she privileges it as a means of liberation from such incarceration. Yet, she refuses the abstract language of stereotype and ideology, such as that of the "messages on horseback," pointing out it served only to amuse or to deceive, and conveyed no real messages. The code that does translate meaning for these women is that found among them in the intimacy of their cell: the language of fable, song and dance whose syntax is that of women's memory and women's body.

Not only does Kantůrková deconstruct the axiomatic paradigm of the communist and anti communist discourse – the notion of discourse itself – in order to posit a feminine language, she does so in a particularly revealing manner, an approach certainly worth noting with respect to a feminist subject position. Nowhere, in this autobiography, does Kantůrková assume the locus of the authorial or authoritative subject; rather, her work is an intricate heterotopia of different women's voices, positions and stories. Unlike her Western feminist counterparts who adopt the traditional hero narrative all too often, in which the a woman protagonist "empowers" herself, and "asserts her subjectivity, agency and voice," simply by replacing the traditional male hero with a female heroine in the patriarchal narrative model of acquisition of power and evolutionary progress, Kantůrková

avoids any such role reversal or any such facile formulae. Instead, she offers us a different model, in which she does not create an individual woman as subject, but recreates a complex matrix of a plurality of women-as-subjects. Such a feminist perspective is worth noting, especially given contemporary Western criticism of East European women's subjectivity in post-communism, which some claim is its "suppressed subjectivity" (Havelková 68). At the same time however, these same Western feminists, in addressing post-modernism, are only delving into the positive concept of "woman as subject... outside the age long set of binaries of man and woman" (Braidotti 119). Perhaps Kantůrková's work, and indeed that of many women writers under socialism should be re-evaluated along these lines, not because they lack the "woman as gendered subject" paradigm, but rather because they operate within a framework where women are, in their most plural sense, already subjects.

Furthermore, Kantůrková also broaches certain issues specifically crucial to later post-communist concerns: the materiality of the body and capital. Kantůrková's emphasis on the word is founded on the weakness of her own flesh. She is ill throughout her stay in Ruzyně, confined to bed. For her, the abyss of the exercise room: "is the blackest of Black Holes, one of the assholes of the world." (CB, 6) According to Kantůrková, the pernicious and ultimate destruction is achieved quite simply, by the lack of oxygen. In harrowing passages, she describes the all-encompassing, overwhelming prison smell: the unwashed bodies, the stench of sicknesses, the toilet and the bad food, the fetid, moldering smell of air breathed over and over again. "Then you are left with half your strength- and that is what your interrogating officer is out to destroy." (CB, 5) This prison smell is compounded by stale cigarette smoke, which brings us to the material capitalist economy thriving in the prison. In a number of passages, Kantůrková emphasizes ultimate value placed on this merchandise, describing the efforts women go to have paper and cigarettes, the bitter fighting among the women derived from both the presence and absence of these items.

"And the Word became flesh..."

Kantůrková's work advances many of the key concerns in post-communism and so one can hardly argue for a radical revolution around the marking "post" of 1989. Generally speaking, just as communism privileged the Word, post-communism is marked by a return to the flesh. Post-communist Czech society is marked by a distancing from great ideas and universal values, and a move towards the self, material reality and local knowledge. In the transition to a Western-style democracy and market economy, the literary merits of many intellectuals lost their aura, as the ordinary Czech people were now required to adapt themselves to their new conditions of freedom of choice, expression, and purchase. The lofty humanist ideals of the dissident, anti-communist writer seem incongruous with the newly acquired values of individualism and social mobility. With hindsight, it now appears that the task of the dissident, anti-communist writers was simple: it is always easier to fight against oppression than to unite to support any constructive program. And indeed the problems of "creating a civil society" which Havel announced in on the opening speech of the new republic, are the main difficulties facing the Czech Republic right now.

... and feminist fiction?

Above all, as in Kantůrková's text, there is a general disillusionment with discourse itself – skepticism with any "isms" as Czech like to term it, including "feminism." (Šiklová 77). As Šiklová points out, feminism, as defined by Western feminists, is "allergenic" or even "nauseous" to many Czech women:

"The ideological character of feminist trends makes us feel some nausea, which in the past we used to experience with references to "class struggle"... We have unfortunately become certain that someone who has previously been

exploited or oppressed is not necessarily the best leader of society. Socialism was a failure... We are beyond doubt, captives of our past. I am afraid, however, that at the same time West European and American feminist intellectuals are captives of their own ideology... our feminist movement is going to develop not on the basis of taking up some great ideologies, but rather on the basis of solving concrete non-political tasks." (Šiklová, 78-79)

What of woman's fiction in this economy? Though a freer, more democratic system, with its concern with the self, the body and material realities does privilege a more individualized, gendered-specific subjectivity ostensibly reflected in Czech women's writing, this turn nevertheless has not necessarily rendered Czech women's fiction more trendy or popular. Indeed, women's fiction has considerably increased in the last decade; however, it remains an unappreciated genre as such. Why is that? The answer to this perplexing question lies in the composition of the novels themselves and in the constitution of women in Czech society.

Wary of all-encompassing, universal themes, post-communist women's fiction has dispersed into subsidiary themes, with each individual author concentrating fixedly on specific aspects of women's life experience. Teresa Boučková for example, much like most women writers under communism, directs undivided focus on women's local materiality; she relates the mundane, everyday life of women as mothers, lovers, and wives ((*Indiánský běh* (1991), *Křepelice* (1993), *Když milujete muže* (1995), and *Krákorám* (1998)). In her terse, pithy style, Boučková poignantly illustrates the banal, wearisome, and often overwhelming lives of ordinary women, characterized by work and repetition, and often unfulfilled by love or excitement. Her novels offer no easy solutions or escape from drudgery, yet in so doing lack intrigue, interest, and, above all, hope. By contrast, Iva Herciková, in her sensationalist pulp-fiction novels *Hester: aneb O čem ženy sní* (1995) *Rady mladému muži* (1996) or *Vášeň* (1998), rivets the readers attention on the intense devouring passions, desires and loves of women. This pulp fiction should not be dismissed however; it represents an equivalent of the contemporary "best-sellers" in the Czech Republic, largely translations of American pulp fiction by authors such as Jackie Collins. Moreover, it is crucial to note that feminist authors such as Iva Pekárková or Eva Hauserová translate these novels to supplement their income – the income from their own feminist novels insufficient to support them. An ironic situation indeed, not unlike under communism where dissident women writers sacrificed their own writing in order to type, translate and circulate the work of others, which sustained the hegemonic economy in many ways. This is not to say that these novels are bereft of allusions to women's economic and social realities; however, the resolution of these issues is utopic and problematic. In *Vášeň* (Passion) for example, Herciková recounts the erotic encounters of Pírko, an expatriate Czech woman in the US who leaves husband and child for a Czech lover in New York, who soon abandons her there. Without a viable job, family, friends, Pírko succumbs to despair, until, *deus ex machina*, she is handicapped in a tragic accident, whereupon she is rescued by her husband. The novel leaves the reader troubled; women are portrayed as alone and without agency: safe only in the hands of their husbands, incarcerated in their bodies and their gendered realities.

Daniela Hodrová's work offers yet another model of women's writing: a return to the Word in a much more intellectual vein. Her novels, *Kukly*, *Theta*, and *Perunův den*, reinscribe traditional overarching narratives, which she terms "myths of initiation"- the Orphic myth, the Thesean myth, the Christian myth, in the lives of contemporary women in the Prague. In *Perunův den* for example, Hodrová takes up the Christian myth in a highly apocalyptic tone, designating each of her female characters as the gospel evangelists, who narrate the experience of their daily lives. Though she intricately weaves a dazzling array of symbols from the Bible and mystic history as well as Prague realia from the 1990s, her text remains opaque and void of meaning – her apostles bear no good

news. On the contrary, Janů, the apostle of the Word,⁶ dies, or rather ‘reincarnates,’ praying these last words “*ile ele nusom veset ilson elson.*” It is not a prayer but the conjugation of the verb to be in French. She conjugates the verb in the past tense, the future – *nous serons, vous serez, ils seront, elles seront* – and then dies and is heard no more.

Indeed, this contemporary women’s fiction illustrates not only the difficulty of conjugating the verb “to be” in the present tense, but even more importantly the obscurity of “re-incarnation” in the future tense. For me however, it reveals a more fundamental problem, that of creating a community of women. Janů’s apocalyptic last words, “*nous serons... elles seront,*” are not meaningless: here is a group of women, who, though they have known each other since childhood, cannot express a common goal but only reminisce about their idyllic past. Similarly, in Herciková and Boučková, the women, be they wives, mothers or lovers, are fundamentally alone.

Eda Kriseová, a writer before and after the 1989 Revolution perhaps best identifies this need for community in her latest novel: *Kočičí životy: román* (1997) (*Cat Lives’: A Novel*). Before 1989, her work, *Křížová cesta kočárového kočího* (1979), *Klíční kůstka netopýra a jiné povídky* (1982) and *Arboretum* (1987) consisted mostly of short stories told in a fairy-tale style, treating such overarching themes as love, friendship, jealousy and betrayal. *Kočičí životy*, while in keeping with her formal style, which includes lyrical love passages and stylized character portraits, nonetheless attempts to describe a new world full of unfathomable potential, will and movement, as her epigraph from Hesse suggests:

What is to come we cannot imagine. The soul of Europe is an animal, who, for too long, has lain chained. When it will be free, its first movements will not necessarily be pleasant... Then it will be our day, then we will be needed, not as leaders and new lawmakers- mere as those who are willing, to are able to go and stand there, where destiny calls them. (KZ, 6)⁷

In order to reach this potential, Kriseová delves into the past, when Czechs were forced to emigrate to Volýň in Ukraine, traing the genealogy of a Czech family who settled there. In order to elicit intrigue and passion, she reaches for episodes when the existence of the Czech community was menaced, true to her second epigraph from Vladimír Holan: “Being is multiplied when threatened” (KZ,6), which could equally apply to the situation of Czechs under communism. In her depictions of the Czechs in Volýň, from the devastation of the war to the disaster at Chernobyl, as well as their family struggling in communist Czechoslovakia, Kriseová portrays a close-knit community which celebrates the heroism of its members and endures its betrayals. However, a noteworthy shift occurs as Kriseová concludes the novel with the account of the last member of this family, Líza, who lives in a free Czechoslovakia. Líza, who had devoted her life to the service of others as a doctor, remaining chaste all her life, is at the end visited by the love of her youth, who emigrated to the US in the interim. She cannot forgive her former flame for leaving, and scorns his success in that materialist world. He dedicates his last book to her, titled *My First Love*. Líza laughs as receives it and notices the cover, that of a carefree young woman standing before the Jewish ghetto burning in the distance; she cannot reconcile this image with that of her true self, a weathered old hag (324). In the same way, Líza is disturbed by a photograph herself in a famous café, representing the three-generations that have defined who she is; she has difficulty recognizing the woman she used to be (KZ, 340). She has become a legendary image, a literary figure (KZ, 325), she realizes, for those who want easy answers (KZ, 327). Yet there are no easy answers; her friends and family dead or far-away and the new government policies transitory and uncertain, Líza continues to question why she is so resigned to go on, to suffer and to remember the past (KZ, 335). The book closes on Líza alone in her solitary apartment with only her cats for company.

And lived among us...

In many ways, Czech women are faced with the same problem as the Czech society itself creating a viable community. In the communist period, women seemed both liberated and incarcerated by the Word made God. And now in the post communist period, their incarnation seems possible. However, incarnation means consolidation, not only of the individual body, but also of the whole, in community. Jiřina Šiklová describes the difficulty of Czech women to embrace a definable women's movement or political entity or community as defined by Western feminism:

"We have not demonstrated; we do not revolt as women. In this country, the political struggle for women's rights has not been included in our program. Czech women were obligatorily organized for too long; hence they connect liberty with the liberty to not be organized in any way." (Šiklová, 79)

How to assume both freedom and community? In order to explore this question I now turn to the work of Iva Pekárková. My choice of Pekárková as a final and exemplary model of Czech women's writing may appear controversial to some, given that she is an 'emigrant' writer. Pekárková lived ten years in New York, from 1984-1994, and yet though this exile was relatively short-lived, she is now and forevermore to be a "half-foreigner," especially in the eyes of academic critics, who like to categorize her as a unique exception – of feminist émigré "post-exile" subjectivity for example (Heitlinger 1999). "Post-exile" places her in an "amorphous positionality" and "intellectual modality – always contingent and subject to revision" "which must be disentangled from a one-dimensional and one-directional conception of history" but "which emphasizes the inextricable presence of the past, in this case the continuities of the conventions of exilic subjectivity." (Manicomb 41) I do not want to challenge her emigrant position in any way, but I would argue that in its "amorphous positionality," "intellectual modality," and "inextricable presence of the past," Pekárková's work also best captures and characterizes the transition from communism to post-communism as a fluid and hybrid one in which Western encounters and former communist experiences are constantly being re-evaluated and questioned. Though set in radically different contexts – from communist Czechoslovakia (*Pera and perutě*) through an intermediary refugee camp (*Kulatý svět*) to independence in New York (*Dej mně ty prachy, Gang zjízvených*) – her novels take up similar themes, and thus depict this transition as a transformative shift from a totalitarian system to a market economy rather than as a revolutionary rupture. Moreover, her novels only intimate what is to come for the Czech Republic – migratory movement towards a global, multicultural economy – in which again the referent to the individual subject's voice and agency may be lost in deference to a more wordly universal one.

Incarnation

I wish to focus precisely on this moment of modulation between communism and post communism, best characterized in Pekárková's second novel, *Kulatý Svět* (*The World Is Round*). There is no clear-cut distinction between the "word to flesh" in this novel; the transition may be characterized a movement, a process of parody, performance and peril towards a new paradigm. Set in a refugee camp, *Kulatý Svět* allegorically symbolizes the in-between, liminal locus of transformation between her two worlds, or rather the hybridization or all-worldness of her experience, implied in the all-encompassing circulatory reference of the novel's title: "The World Is Round". The novel follows the account of Jitka, who, after years of dreaming of free countries beyond Czechoslovakia, crawls under a barbed wire fence to Italy, only to find herself incarcerated

in another limbo – waiting for a visa in an Austrian refugee camp – incongruously set among picturesque grape fields. The refugee camp is a space of both liberation and incarceration. Refugees must live in a filthy, crowded, and dysfunctional camp, waiting to be accepted in a host country, while at the same time they are surrounded by a flourishing environment, a prosperous society, whose benefits they can enjoy, if they dare, as illegal labor. The refugee camp reflects the process an individual and a society itself must endure as it proceeds from a repressive authoritarian regime to autonomy.

The camp, an “international small town” (*WR*, 83), is described as a “a confusion of tongues” (*WR*, 90), a cosmopolitan Babel of sorts, with refugees from all over the world who only seem to arrive and never leave. As in Kantůrková’s book, camp life is concerned with the quotidian – washing, cleaning and others’ snoring– and likewise fizzles “with small loves and passions and hatred and an incredible amount of time to be killed” (*WR*, 83). As with Kantůrková, conversation functions as a fundamental feature characterizing camp life: this “killer time” is spent learning languages, especially those of the countries to which they wish to emigrate. Language is crucially important in this setting; in order to leave, the refugees must master the art of making up a good enough story to be granted asylum in a foreign country, preferably Australia, Canada or the US. Those who have suffered must translate their experiences into legal language, acceptable both on political and humanitarian grounds. Others who have no story to tell must create one: either an absurd, tear-wrenching narrative, or a convincing, plausible argument. In their endeavors, many of the Czech refugees turn to the Charterists, the famous human rights movement of 77 for inspiration; they think that most of these dissidents are now living safely in the West. Divided as to whether these writers are heroes or traitors and thieves (*WR*, 56), the refugees nonetheless model their accounts on these forerunners’ narratives, which clamor for human rights. Thus, in a critique of the power of the word, Pekárková ironically questions the language of great ideas espoused by former dissent anti-communist writers, particularly as it relates to women. For the camp is also a gendered space; men outnumber women 1800 to 17. The men in the camp, “dozens of horny lechers” lived in the “dangerous, mysterious Hilton that could envelop you with its dozens of suckers and tentacles, bring you to nirvana through its throbbing pulse.” (*WR*, 95) Moreover, the camp is visited by numerous foreign men, who come in the search of wives, offering them a foreign visa from abroad for their ‘services.’ (*WR*, 92) The camp crackles with horror stories of women who were raped, or some who washed away all their inhibitions, and just ate and ate, and had sex and more sex, or yet others, who became sex-slaves for lodgings outside the camp. In the confinement of the quarters sex becomes public, roommates can hear couples lovemaking, and finding a clean mattress becomes almost impossible.

Following the instructions of Naďa, Jitka attempts to stay away from these men, yet as she does she feels gradually reduced to nothingness, as the name of Nada suggests. Jitka feels increasing erotic desire, not for any man in particular but the “male essence that had no name and every name...I wanted to populate it with the bed to be private, I wanted it to be populated.” (*WR*, 94) At first, she becomes attracted to men who are defined by their bodies - a Pole with burn scars (*WR*, 57), and an Afghani with a bullet wound (*WR*, 106). These men, wounded, don’t know what to do with her body, not even able to successfully perform *coitus interruptus* (*WR*, 109). So Jitka lives dissatisfied, with a series of short-lived one-night stands.

Then Jitka meets Mirek. She is lured to him precisely “by the thin ribbon of his voice” (*WR*, 128). He does not try to seduce her with his body, but rather with his voice: “he wrapped [her] in his voice as if in a cloak, a silkworm cocoon in a mulberry bush” (*WR*, 128). In this way he manages to neutralize the black hole in her soul (*WR*, 128). Through him, Jitka feels connected to

the camp itself, identifying herself as part of that community: “I suddenly felt myself touch the camp through him” (*WR*, 141). Paradoxically, Mirek himself does not live in the camp (*WR*, 149), as by his narratives he lives in “the boundless after and sweet before, in the bewitching elsewhere and memorable there” (150). It is through him that Jitka is also introduced to the mysterious Hilton, a male space, evident from the décor: “Pink everywhere. The boys had papered the walls, wardrobes and ceilings with naked crotches cut out of porno magazines”. (*WR*, 135) Increasingly, Jitka feels unhappy in their relationship, as Mirek converses more with her body than he does with her: “and so, night after night, as soon as the lights went out, Mirek conversed with me. He conversed with my cunt, whispering sweet nothings to it... Oh- yes those two understood each other all right. Unfortunately, they left me out of the picture.” (*WR*, 153)

And so it happens that Jitka is raped. Taken prisoner in the Hilton by a group of Albanians, she and another girl, Mira, are tied spread-eagle on a bed and gang raped during two days. Mirek sees her there and does nothing. While on the bed, Jitka finally realizes her situation:

So I'd had the time to realize the symbolic value of the fact I was lying here, in all my glory, naked only below the waist, legs spread wide, my bare, yes, *womanhood*, yes that's the word, on full display... Nevertheless we were not women. We functioned here only as the female principle, as the idea of woman, like close-ups depersonified by their accessibility. We were the three-dimensional cut-outs from magazines, hung as decoration. (*WR*, 181)

Thus, though her rape, Jitka suffers a transformation from word to flesh, where in the end she is immolated as sacrifice representing the function of womanhood as mere body. This return to the flesh is no choice; it is violence.

Problematically though, Jitka offers no resistance to it, almost even enjoying it: “And I know that my turn will come, too, but the strange thrill still will not leave me. The thrill of the hunt.” (*WR*, 178) She states that in order to ward off pain, there is little point in her fighting the inevitable, so she fully assumes the “function” of her womanhood:

“I wince from fear and wait... beneath his touch I am conscious that I am a woman. ... I know perfectly well that my body happens to offer a lot - alluring curves, discoveries, surprises, which make us interesting for them My body- When I shut off my thoughts like a water faucet, the huddling of the man seems almost pleasant. I know that the only thing I know is I don't want pain. I don't want pain.” (*WR*, 177)

Inadvertently, when confronted with violence, Jitka participates in own reification. She has no alternative; she sacrifices her gendered body as well any scream of resistance in order to survive.

After the rape, Jitka feels overwhelmed: “a sense of release: the consciousness that I was no longer in anyone's power, that I was responsible for all of my actions. It was the same feeling I experienced in Italy: you are alone with all your freedom and you don't know what to do with it ... my sudden freedom lay upon me like the weight of centuries” (*WR*, 183). Yet, at the same time, while seemingly reborn, Jitka realizes that “something seemed missing.” (*WR*, 183)

I suggest that Jitka's “missing link” is the one she had created for herself through language – community. Through Mirek's words, Jitka believed to have found understanding, comfort, and security in the Other, the essentialized other. However, in her traumatic rape experience, she realizes that this sense of belonging was merely an illusion; her identity was unequivocally founded on her biologically gendered identity – womanhood.

In *The World Is Round*, Pekárková questions the ability of language to effectuate political change or create community, reverting to the body as the locus of identity formation. However, this ‘embodied’ transformation is not so transparent. After her rape, which was seemingly “squeezed out by [her] rational mind” (*WR*, 185), Jitka continues to be haunted by nightmares, in which her body becomes language, transforming into a bell which speaks to her (*WR*, 176). Yet, the more she attempts to live alone, through her body, the more alienated she becomes:

“the more I touched things, stroking rocks, cornerstones, cathedrals, tires of semis, the more I tried to do this.. the more the tactile skin on my hands eroded. ...it seemed to me that I actually left my skin on touched objects, that I was spreading the skin of my fingertips all over Europe, and through its nerves, I could still feel the pain in the distance.” (*WR*, 203)

Yet Pekárková does not advocate a return to the body to generate the sense of belonging or of community either. In a later novel *Scarz*, Pekárková describes Božena, a woman disfigured by a similarly horrific rape, who attempts to fashion a community by alliance with equally wounded people. One day, Božena chances upon another like her: a scarred, victimized woman, who bears the same wound on her cheek. For the first time, she euphorically feels that she belongs somewhere, and, in her mind, in a great spirit of solidarity, she forms a gang for people like herself: the SCARZ. “For only in a gang, can you *do something*,” (180) she explains. Unfortunately, Božena is brutally betrayed by this woman, and, having placed all her faith in her, loses her friends and lover in the process. She thus realizes that “for two years I have been living in that disgusting, private fissured landscape right inside my cheek. Somewhere along the way, I had stopped hiding it. On the contrary: *I* had been hiding behind it. My face, my body, even my thoughts themselves were hidden behind this grotesque, but well-known deformity.” (236) Thus, for Pekárková, finding a community through language or flesh alone seems elusive. Her fiction begs the question: is community possible in today’s post-communist world? If so, how is it created – in the incarnation of word and/or flesh? Or are both language and body mere illusions? Can community be determined by such essential paradigms?

In all, Pekárková’s work brilliantly exemplifies the process of “incarnation,” that of the Word becoming flesh – as a painful and violent sacrifice. Clearly the Words, or power of discourse did not vanish in post-communism, but was still necessary for institutional and interpersonal relations. Though she parodied and performed the language of petitions or love, Jitka was also deceived by the Word. Like many in Czechoslovakia and post-communist Czechoslovakia, she was deceived into believing the promise of universal discourse, as projected in the language of love or human rights, or, for Božena, as imagined in the wounded union of victims in solidarity for a common cause. Nothing but words, fictions, ideological abstractions – lies. It is only when about to be raped that Jitka understands her gendered identity and, from then on, her gendered body, which speaks to her, alone. Indeed, before incarnation, in totalitarianism, the Word was mysterious, intangible, invisible, and untouchable, existing beyond oppression. It is only in post-communism that the Word, liberated, became solid, real, visible, and touchable, literally pieced into the flesh. Alas, this incarnation only seems possible through violence, marking the individual, alone.

More importantly though, Pekárková’s work questions the purpose of such incarnation in a materialist, individualist world: the idea of “living among us” through community. Pekárková challenges every individual, not only one emerging from communism, to question the process and purpose of their incarnation. She points to a fundamental feature of freedom in today’s global economy: its burden. Something is missing: “You are alone with all your freedom and you don’t know what to do with it.”

A slightly different version of this paper already appeared in *Spaces of Identity*, 2:1, April 2002.
http://www.univie.ac.at/spacesofidentity/lastissue/startprevious_2_1.html

¹ For English translations of Czech sociological theory, see for example, Kalivodová's "The Vision of Czech Women: *One Eye Open* (Gender Roles in Czech Society and Politics and Culture)," her Czech textbook "Gender životního stylu" srovnávací úvaha in *Společnost žen a mužů z aspektu gender*, Praha" o Čermáková's compilation of working paper "Women, Work and Society," which includes the work of many Czech sociologists, such as Hana Maříková's "The Spectre of Feminism or Feminism in Bohemia."

² Here see for example, Crompton's "Women, Employment and Feminism" or Heitlinger's "The Impact of the Transition from Communism on the Status of Women in The Czech and Slovak Republics" or her books *Women's Equality, Demography, and Public Policies: A Comparative Perspective*, 1993; *Reproduction, Medicine, and the Socialist State*, 1986; *Women and State Socialism: Self, Inequality in the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia*, 1979.

³ Aside from Šiklová, "McDonald's, Terminators Coca Cola Ads and Feminism?" or "Are Women in Central And Eastern Europe More Conservative" cited here, also see Susanna Trnka, Jiřina Šmejkalová-Strickland, Jana Hradilková or Laura Busheikin's articles in *Bodies Of Bread And Butter : Reconfiguring Women's Lives In The Post-Communist Czech Republic* Praha: Prague Gender Studies, 1993.

⁴ Under the influence of his American wife, Masaryk wrote and lectured at the university on women's issues and was considered a defender of women's rights. For more on Masaryk's role in feminism, see Šiklová, "Feminism And The Roots Of Apathy In The Czech Republic."

⁵ Here I am referring, of course, to de Beauvoir's *Second Sex* (see p.281) which spawned recent theory on subjectivity, such as Butler's reading of de Beauvoir, to her *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter*.

⁶ It is in the gospel of John (1:I) that one finds the reference to the "word made flesh", later interpreted by the Church to intimate the incarnation of Jesus. Jan is the Czech form of John.

⁷ All translations from Czech texts are mine, unless otherwise noted.

Works Cited

Boučková, Tereza. *Indiánský běh*. Bratislava: Fragment K, 1991.

_____. *Křepelice*. Bratislava: Fragment, 1993.

_____. *Když milujete muže*. Ostrava: Středoevropské nakl., 1995.

_____. *Krákorám*. Praha: Hynek, 1998.

Braidotti, Rosi "Patterns of Dissonance: Women and/ in Philosophy," in Herta Nagl-Docekal ed. *Feministische Philosophie*, Munich: Oldenbourg, 1990: 108-122.

Butler, Judith, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, New York, Routledge, 1993.

_____. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York, Routledge, 1990.

_____. "Sex and Gender in Simon de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*", *Yale French Studies* 72:35-41.

De Beauvoir, Simone, *The Second Sex*, trans. H.M Parshley, London: Everyman 1993.

De Man, Paul. *The Resistance to Theory*, Minneapolis, University of Minesota Press, 1982.

Fleckenstein, Kristie. "Writing Bodies." *College English* 61.3 (1999): 281-306.

Havel, Vacláv, "Politics, Morality, Civility in *Summer Meditations*," trans. Paul Wilson, New York, Vintage Press 1993.

_____. "Word on Words" in *Open Letters: Selected Writings 1965-1990*, trans. Paul Wilson, New York, Vintage Press 1992.

Havelková, Hana, "A Few Prefeminist Thoughts" in *Gender Politics and Post Communism*, eds. Nanette Funk and Magda Mueller, New York: Routledge, 1993, pp. 62-73.

Heitlinger, Alena. "The Impact of the Transition from Communism on the Status of Women in The Czech and Slovak Republics" in *Gender Politics and Post Communism*, eds. Nanette Funk and Magda Mueller, New York: Routledge, 1993, pp. 95-109.

_____. *Émigré Feminism: Transnational Perspectives*. Toronto; Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1999.

-
- Hercíková, Iva. Hester : aneb O čem ženy sní. Praha: Český spisovatel, 1995.
_____. Rady mladému muži. Praha: Nakl. Motto, 1996.
_____. Vašeň. Praha Nakl. Motto, 1998.
- Hodrová, Daniela. Kukly : živé obrazy. Praha: Prace, 1991.
_____. Perunův den : román. Praha: Hynek, 1994.
_____. Théta. Praha: Československý spisovatel, 1992.
- Hrabik-Šamal, Mary "Ženy a neoficiální kultura a literatura v Československu v letech 1969-1989" in Přítomnost minulosti, minulost přítomnosti, ed. Jolana Kusá and Petr Zajac, Bratislava; Nadácia Milana Šimečku, 1996, 81-95.
- Hull, Carrie, "The Need in Thinking : Materiality in Theodor W. Adorno and Judith Butler," Radical Philosophy 84, (July-Aug 1999): 22-35.
- Kantůrková, Eva. Přítelkyně z domu smutku. Köln: Index, 1984.
_____. My Companions In The Bleak House. Woodstock, N.Y.: The Overlook Press, 1987.
- Kicková and Farašková. "The Emancipation of Women : A Concept That Failed" in Gender Politics and Post Communism, eds. Nanette Funk and Magda Meuller, New York: Routledge, 1993, pp. 84-95.
- Kriseová, Eda. Arboretum. Novinky české prózy. Praha: Československý spisovatel, 1988.
_____. Klíční kůstka netopýra a jiné pouídky. Toronto, Ont.: Sixty-Eight Publishers, 1982.
_____. Kočí životy : román. Praha: Hynek, 1997.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. Thus Spoke Zarathustra, trans. Hollingdale Kaufmann, London: Penguin Books, 1978.
_____. The Will to Power, trans. Hollingdale and Kaufmann, London: Random House, 1987.
- Manicomb, Linzi. "Afastada Apprehensions: The Politics of Post-Exile Location and South Africa's Gendered Transition." Émigré Feminism: Transnational Perspectives. Toronto; Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1999: 30-67.
- Navarová, Helena "What Did Socialism Give to Women?" Praha: CSAV, 1990.
- Pekárková, Iva. Dej mi ty prachy. Praha: Nakl. Lidové noviny, 1996.
_____. Gang zjižvených. Česka radost ; sv. 2. Praha: Maťa, 1998.
_____. Kulatý svět. Praha: Společnost Josefa Škvoreckého, 1993.
_____. Péra a perutě. Toronto: Sixty-Eight Publishers, 1989.
_____. Truck Stop Rainbows. New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1992.
_____. The World Is Round. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1994.
- Šiklová, Jiřina "McDonald's, Terminators Coca Cola Ads and Feminism?" Ana's Land : Sisterhood in Eastern Europe. ed Renne, Tanya. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1997.