Fictionalized Autobiography and the Idea of Central Europe
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Chapter 4

After Babel the Tower of Ulm

1. From an actual to a metaphorical lingua franca, from linguistic to literary multilingualism

Before Péter Esterházy said farewell in 1991 to his Central European brethren in the novel Hahn-Hahn Grófnő Pillantása (The Glance of Countess Hahn-Hahn. Down the Danube), he wrote a novel which can be considered in many ways the twin book of his Danube novel. The Book of Hrabal (1990) also presents Central European colleagues and themes, but this time from the perspective of language, multilingualism, as opposed to the travelogue-pastiche in Down the Danube. A rather short and highly playful novel, it makes abundant use of parody and quotations, bringing together a character who as a writer is commissioned to write an essay on Bohumil Hrabal and his wife who falls secretly in love with the Czech author; all of them are watched by a God-character and his two angels disguised as pre-1989 secret police officers; to which are added the Kafka-Milena letters as well as Julio Cortazar’s tribute to Charlie Parker, who again teaches God to play the saxophone. The novel may be somewhat “noisy” and “a little blurred”, to repeat the phrases Esterházy used in his introduction to Kosztolányi’s Skylark, yet a good opportunity to pick up various themes that have been running through this thesis.

From the various narratives of Esterházy’s Hrabal novel I chose here the legend of Babel to force my way into the last thematic sphere of fictionalized autobiography I shall discuss: Central European multilingualism, by which I mean a condition of writing in a language that co-exists with other (national) languages in the same regional literary culture. The designation Central European points here to a specific historical circumstance: a multilingual consciousness after the disappearance of German and Germanophone (and somewhat different - Yiddish) culture as a lingua franca. As Esterházy’s Hungarian characters all in their own way contact the Czech writer Hrabal by either writing about him, as the writer does, or writing letters to him and dreaming about him, as does Anna, his wife - an I, a first person narrator is slowly ascending the tower of Ulm. This narrator remains anonymous throughout the novel. He often poses as the author, much in the way eighteenth-century novelists made their appearance among their own fictional characters; he comments upon the various plot lines and is in this respect akin to the first person narrator in Esterházy’s Danube novel. His ascension of the tower of Ulm is a pastiche on the story of Babel in Genesis. Although Claudio Magris distinguished two sources of the Danube in his Danubio (one in Donaueschingen, the other in Furtwangen), Ulm for Esterházy is the German starting point for what rapidly turns into a Central European, or East-Central European, a Danubian journey:

The legend that man is closest to God at the top of the church tower of Ulm must have originated from this. (At any rate, I did my bit and climbed up; of the 768 steps mentioned by the guide books, I counted 761, then, with trembling knees sat for a long time by the bank of the Danube, trying to imagine a water molecule, a particle of water, reaching Budapest, and even beyond…) (149, page references are to the English edition)

The Tower of Ulm allows him an overview (through the eyes of the God-character) of the landscape of his own novel. Thus it not just opens the thematic sphere of the later Danube
novel but also spots the figure of Hrabal and so establishes literary ties that transgress linguistic borders, here the Hungarian-Czech linguistic border. The I’s gaze is both ironical and tragic. He watches from outside Central Europe: German and Germanophone culture are no longer present inside East-Central Europe. Esterházy needs a deity who is unlimited both in time and space to restore a gaze that encompasses the historical multilingualism of the region.

The obscure legend of the Ulm tower awakes another, archetypal legend: Babel. No narrative has given rise to so many uses and interpretations: as a story that grants spatial dispersal and migration an origin of linguistic diversity, it is in the Central European context predominantly associated with the oeuvre of Franz Kafka, and beyond, to those writers who were not firmly rooted in the national literary cultures of the region; Joseph Roth and Ödön von Horváth are certainly not less relevant names in this respect. Since the story in Genesis is as short as it is abstract, giving rise to all sorts of allegorical interpretations, let me recall its events here and thus present a working version on the basis of which we can formulate our questions as to the specific meaning of the legend for historical East-Central Europe – questions which shall lead us back in the end to Esterházy’s dialogue with Hrabal.

The New English Bible (Cambridge & Oxford University Press, 1970) renders the story as follows: “Once upon a time”, it says, “all the world spoke a single language and used the same words” (13). Drifting in space man decides to settle: “let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and make a name for ourselves; or we shall be dispersed all over the earth.” God sees the human endeavour and decides to “go down there and confuse their speech, so that they will not understand what they say to one another” an intervention motivated by fear that “now they, (…), one people with a single language, have started to do this, henceforth nothing they have a mind to do will be beyond their reach” (13). So God disperses man all over the earth; the unfinished city they leave behind is called Babel, “because the Lord there made a babble of the language of all the world; from that place the Lord scattered men all over the face of of the earth” (13).

Both the initiative to build the tower and to “create a name for ourselves” stems from fear of being dispersed. Man’s final faith, scattered and thus no different from before their enterprise, having lost their common tongue, seems a punishment for their ambition. When transferred from myth to history, the story not just looses the deity (and the moral implication of the story – punishment); time too looses its absolute point of beginning. As a result, the nomadic life of the community before its settlement becomes historical: there is no longer a definitive point of departure or arrival. Each community can apply the myth at will to its own history of migration and settlement. Both before and after the enterprise, man led a nomadic life: the Babel story records a failed attempt to fixate one’s position in the world both by settling down and by creating a common name. The sedentary life is equated with monolingualism.

The discourse community of Central Europe presented its history of multilingualism first and foremost as one of loss. It experienced its own linguistic life as one scattered over several national languages; in the absence of a lingua franca it sought coherence and unity on the level of metaphor, in a shared “tone and sensibility”. The competing histories of the national languages are often triumphant accounts of establishing one’s own tongue, or, in the words of Genesis, of “making a name for ourselves”, even though the triumphant tone veils agony over the historical fate – the freaks of history could have easily preferred one’s neighbour to rise out of its ashes – and over the arbitrary nature of one’s national language, visible in the diversity of dialects and a spastic denial of a multilingual past. Seen in terms of the Babel legend, the national perspective selects the first part as its founding myth, where successful settlement and linguistic unification coincide; the regional perspective of the
Central European discourse community frames its historical experience in terms of the second half of the legend: theirs is a myth of dispersion after having once been united.

Thus Esterházy's Hrabal novel, with its double-edged irony, enables us to discuss these two myths in detail, to lay bare their rhetorics and compare them to their historical circumstances. The chapter shall start with a comparison of the linguistic life of Franz Kafka, a writer whose multilingual experience, according to George Steiner, has become iconic of "the impossibility of genuine human communication as such" (*After Babel* 65), to that of Miroslav Krleža, a Croatian writer firmly rooted in national consciousness who left a memoir unique in kind: a linguistic autobiography. Kafka is part of the intertext of Esterházy's novel, Krleža is not. However, since the latter's reflections on multilingualism can be related to matters of language and narrative form, specifically to a historically determined relation between author, narrator and their stories, it is highly relevant here. Because — and this leads me to my last introductory remark — *The Book of Hrabal* not just thematizes multilingualism, it also poses fundamental questions about the central topic of this thesis: blurring of autobiographical and fictional narrative strategies, the meaning of the proper name in autobiography and in fiction, and — central in Esterházy's novel — the question whether or not the author should represent someone else's consciousness, and the effects of his choice upon matters of genre. The device of presenting a person's inner life, making his or her mind transparent, is in Esterházy's novel ironized, ridiculed and yet applied as the dominant narrative technique. As the novel is about marital issues — writing husbands with wives discontent about their double role as muse and mother — the implications of the narrative device which lays bare the mind of a real, genuine fellow human being, shall be brought here to a head.

2. Multilingualism and the nation and multilingualism beyond the national communities

Probably the first profound encounter through direct translation between Germanophone culture and one of its eastern neighbors are Jakob Grimm's translations of South-Slav epic poetry and Goethe's inspired reviews (Goethe refers to "Serbian" poetry). To be sure, Goethe himself had early on in his career been engaged in translating the famous *Hasanaginica* (Hasan Aga's Wife, or: "Klaggesang von der edlen Frau Asan-Aga", as Goethe renders the original) which Johann Gottfried Herder published in his *Volkslieder* (1778) as a specimen of *Naturpoesie* under the heading "Morlackische Lieder", using the name the Venetians gave to the inhabitants of the Adriatic coast of the Balkan peninsula. Goethe's source text was Alberto Fortis' collection of folk poetry *Osservazioni sopra l'isola di Cherso ed Osero* (Observations on the islands of Cherso and Osero, Venice, 1771). The abbot Fortis again based his renderings on Andrija Kačić Miošić's *Razgovor ugodni Slovinskoga Naroda* (The Pleasant Conversation of the Slovene People, Venice, 1756) which had presented highly stylized versions of oral folk poetry. When Goethe many years later wrote his reviews of Grimm's *Serbische Lieder* (Serbian Songs), direct translations from the Serbian were available. It is here that Goethe, besides simply informing his Germanophone audience about the cultural and historical context of Serbian folk poetry, comes to some sort of a translator's aesthetic. He admits that his indirect rendering of more than forty years before displayed obvious shortcomings: "weder konnte ich einen Hauptbegriff fassen noch die Abteilungen charakterisch sondern" (416). But now that a direct German translation is available, he praises German for its ability to adapt to the strangeness of these songs. Moreover, reflecting on the universal and the specific in a nation, he implicitly formulates what translation should aim for: "Das Besonderste aber eines jeden Volks befremdet nur," he writes, "es erscheint seltsam, oft widerwärtig, wie alles Eigentümliche, das wir noch nicht in einen Begriff auffassen, uns noch
Goethe’s vision is open and tolerant, in that it makes its mother tongue subservient to the original. There is a qualitative difference between the German and Serbian literature and languages, in that it is hard to imagine that the latter would provide the same openness as the former, but this is a Herderian difference between Kunst- und Naturpoesie, and not necessarily a relation of dominator and dominated. What is clear however is a rather strict distinction between nations, between which poetry serves as a channel of communicating, the genre par excellence that rephrases the specific into the universal. Weltliteratur, world literature, is the stage where the nations meet and communicate, in Goethe’s view, on equal basis.

Today, almost two hundred years after Goethe wrote his reviews (between 1820-1826), the linguistic situation has profoundly changed. The English language has taken over the mediating role of German. What occurred in between Herder and Goethe’s reconnoitering of the literatures east of their own linguistic realm and the post 1989-situation is the appearance and disappearance of German as a lingua franca. To be sure, to mediators like Jernej Kopitar and Vuk Stefanović Karadžić, German was already a lingua franca, what Latin had been for ages. At the time, Grimm’s rendering of Serbian epic poetry into German was not just a translation into another European language, but into a universal Kultursprache. But with the emancipation of Jewish citizens in the Habsburg Monarchy German became a different kind of lingua franca. For the first time after the Central European landscape was transformed into a patchwork of national communities, citizens appeared whose language of modernity was German but who did not necessarily identify with national identity as such. This new form of bilingualism added up to the already existing multilingualism in the Habsburg Monarchy of emancipated national minorities like the Slovak, the Czech, the Hungarian and the Croatian who lead a (at least) double linguistic life, combining their national language with German.

Although often characterized as oppressive, Vienna’s language policy had complied to some degree with the striving for national emancipation. In the beginning of the 20-th century only one fourth of the population of the Double monarchy had German as its first language. As of 1849 the policy had been to appease the self-emancipating vigor of the non-German national languages. Announcements in the Reichsgesetzblatt in Croatia and Bosnia were published in ten languages, among them German, Italian, Hungarian and also “Serbo-Illirian”, the latter both in Latin and Cyrillic script. The prevailing response to multilingualism up to the 20-th century seems to have been negative. And not only politicians disapproved: writers too had second thoughts. Motives of language purism were very strong. Krleža was a case in point. And also Ivo Andrić, whose early career was typical of young Slav intellectuals in the Double Monarchy: he studied in Vienna, Prague and Krakow and had a fairly good knowledge of Slovene and Czech besides the languages of the classical gymnasium. In his novella Prokleta Avlija (Devil’s Yard, 1953), the central character Ćamil, born in Smyrna (Izmir) and a child of a mixed Turco-Greek marriage, mistakes his own identity for that of an old Ottoman pretender to the throne from a distant age. As a token of his madness, he “speaks in tongues”. His case, it is suggested, seems a combination of racial impurity and social intolerance; multilingualism is the symptom. The multilingual Ödön von Horváth explained in a number of interviews and autobiographical sketches that as a school boy he had not mastered any language in full (183); that when he came to Germany for the first time he could not read the newspapers because he did not know the Gothic script, although his mother tongue was German (183). He implicitly responds to ideas about language purity and racial identity when he writes that his case is proof that “auch ein nicht
‘Bodenständiger’, nicht ‘Völkischer’, eine heimatlose Rassenmischung, etwas ‘Bodenständig-Völkisches’ schaffen kann, - denn das Herz der Völker schlägt im gleichen Takt, es gibt ja nur Dialekte als Grenzen” (185). And he goes even as far as to speculate that his lack of early childhood recollections results from the language chaos that surrounded him as a child.

After World War II with racial theories discredited, the attitude toward language purism changed as well. At least on an international level. In the extreme versions of the national communities it still prevailed, for instance in Tito’s Yugoslavia as a subversive political discourse that challenged Tito’s federalist, supranational community. Thus Danilo Kiš once said following the attacks on A Tomb for Boris Davidović that nationalists in Belgrade considered him a Fremdkörper who’d better write his things in Yiddish. Another relatively recent case of language purism are the stances of the 13-th century monk and chronicler Gjon, narrator in the Albanian Ismail Kadare’s The Three-Arched Bridge (1978). The novel is strangely anachronistic: the monk distinguishes between “eleven Balkan languages” (5), a number reached only when one includes the recently established (disputable) standards of Serbo-Croat. Here too, strangers are identified by their language mishmash (“numbers in Latin, the verbs mostly in Greek or Slavic, and the substantives in Albanian and sometimes in German” 12). They have no identifiable country or region of origin; they build bridges and bridges bring evil (the novel concludes with the arrival of Ottoman forces).

Let me conclude this historical introduction with a downright political example of multilingualism’s internationalism on the one hand and its nationalist response on the other. Not so long after young Ödön von Horváth left Belgrade, another child arrived in Belgrade with her diplomat parents, her father being assigned the Czechoslovakian ambassador to the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Madeleine Albright, the later US secretary of state in the Clinton administration, learned children’s songs in Serbo-Croat, which she in 1998, during negotiations with a Yugoslav delegation on the eve of the Kosovo war, reproduced as a token of her good will to the Serbian nation. She added to the surprised delegation that her father always said that if he had not been Czech, he would have preferred to be a Serb. Talk in the streets of Belgrade the following day revealed that Mrs. Albright’s good intentions had produced the opposite effect: her knowledge of Serbo-Croat (“our language” is the common phrase) enabled her to spy on the Serbian delegation, and, it was now commonly assumed, Mrs. Albright was one of those ex-Europeans whose sole intention in international affairs could only be revenge for the fate of her own people. Her initiative by no means tempered the paranoia of the Yugoslav delegation.

3. The nostalgia of the Central Europeans and their actual linguistic situation

What does the Central European discourse community of the 1980s refer to when it laments the loss of lingua franca? What was the actual linguistic situation in which Kiš, Konrád, Milosz and the others found themselves? Grief on the disappearance of German from the Central European realm did not automatically mean that one tried to establish literary connections with Germanophone contemporaries. The rather perplexed A.C. Hartmann, at one of the Central European roundtables is a case in point: if there was a sense of loss, it was by no means connected to a renewed interest for Austrian contemporaries. In fact, when Kiš writes about Peter Handke that “his work owes more to Faulkner and Parisinian experiments in prose than to any writer on the cultural horizon of Central Europe” (“Variations on Central European Themes 107”), he really continues the blunt negation of any artistic meaning Vienna might have had for Central Europe which Krleža showed when he wrote about Rilke that “if he had written in French, literary historians might have placed him somewhere between
Samain and Jammes” (“Madžarski lirik Andrija Ady” 159). There is thus a certain political continuity, albeit for different reasons, between pre-WWII writers like Krleža who rejected Vienna and the Central Europeans who ignored Vienna. But then again, Kundera finds much of his own novelistic aesthetics expressed in The Art of the Novel in the work of Hermann Broch. I would say: nostalgia, yes, but selective. It was in fact a highly complex situation, where it is difficult to sketch more general tendencies. Let me try to state the linguistic facts of the 1970s and 1980s. Although the Central Europeans held multilingualism, and a specific artistic consciousness derived from that, in high esteem, not one of its members wrote multilingual works. As a reader, the bilingual Kiš comes probably the closest to a full bilingual consciousness. As a writer however, his work is a monolingual Serbo-Croat (although to call “Serbo-Croat” monolingual could be seen as problematic from a sociolinguistic point of view). Konrád wrote and writes monolingual Hungarian work. So does Esterházy - leaving aside his attempts at a dialogue in Czech between Hrabal and God at the end of The Book of Hrabal.

A common language of the Central European discourse community did not exist. The two round table conferences were held in the presence of interpreters. English of course was the language of Cross Currents: in that respect it seems to have replaced the role of German as lingua franca of internationalists. The literary career of Czesław Milosz illustrates the shift away from the European continent - in his case mostly French - to the English tradition. After he chose the United States as his place of writing, he created a parallel oeuvre in English next to the Polish originals. Most of his poetry in translation (almost all by now), is authorized. His main poetic dialogue, beside with his Polish colleagues, has been with English and American poetry, the earlier mentioned encounter with Seamus Heaney being a case in point.

Thus there was praise of multilingualism and a simultaneous dependence on one’s mother tongue. Exile proved death. Danilo Kiš’s “Variations on the theme of Central Europe” contains two passages on exile and the loss of the mother tongue. The passages are rather restrained, they apply the word “trauma” but do so in a discussion of Vladimir Nabokov, in order to highlight the specific situation of the Central European writer: coming from a literary tradition that is largely unknown in the West, his trauma is double. It is not just the loss of the mother tongue. Unlike the Russian’s, his tradition is not familiar in the West. In an earlier version of the essay, Kiš intended to include a “portrait of the Central European writer”, “not a type, not a montage, but a literary character, like in a novel (...) What does the Central European writer look like? Kafka? Broch? Musil? Krleža? Kosztolányi?” (Skladiste 385). The ensuing fragment describes highly emotionally how Central European multilingualism is inextricably bound up with a rootedness in the mother tongue:

He is about fifty years old now - certainly not younger, perhaps older - he lives in exile (like Kundera), writes in his Czech, Slovak, Polish, Hungarian, Serbo-Croat (Serbian or Croat) mother tongue, perhaps in Yiddish (although for that he seems too young to me), as if he wrote in some dead language, as a result of which it is all the dearer to him; he also speaks and reads French, German, Hungarian, Russian, he is bilingual from the day he was born and learned another two or three languages afterwards, and still they ask him, the sole guardian (as he sees himself) of that distant and nearby mother tongue, they ask him why he does not write in French, German, English - to which he answers for the thousandth time that one does not write with language alone, but with one’s whole being, myth, tradition, consciousness and unconsciousness, entrails, memory, with all this, which is transformed into the automatic, into an accidental metaphor, in associations, in literary allusions, in idiosyncrasies, in an unintended or intended quotation. Because - and that is what makes him a Central European writer - he drags with him the terrible burden of verbal and musical melody;
he drags along a piano and a dead horse, and everything that was ever played on that piano, and everything that horse carried in battles and defeats (...), words and melodies no one outside that one language understands, realia which in other languages require explanation in long footnotes (...) (315-16, my trans.)

Although insightful for the long (here not quoted) praise of his Serbo-Croat, Kiš does idealize his Central European writer. Limited to a generation - which means that only those born before WWII are Central Europeans, which would be in line with Kiš's difference in stance as compared to the younger Esterházy - and yet even those older than fifty do not fully qualify. Milosz and Kiš did not know German, whereas both of them had in their own traditions (partially) Germanophone writers with whom they felt strong affinity. Bruno Schulz was bilingual and wrote a novel in German, now lost; Ödön von Horváth, Joseph Roth and later Elias Canetti wrote only in German, as of course did the Austrians Broch and Musil. Thus the loss of German did present a serious and painful void among national languages where a bilingual writer was already an exception. This then seems to be the situation after the disappearance of German: an increasingly intense regional dialogue of writers among whom real multilingualism was an exception. But so was real monolingualism: traces of common vocabularies were everywhere, for instance in discourses reminiscent of the Double Monarchy. All of these writers read each other's work, either directly or in translation. Moreover, they all referred to the pre-WWII generation that either wrote in or was able to read German. As said before, the common response to the loss of German was one of nostalgia. At the desk, however, the mother tongue proved irreplaceable as the first and sole writing instrument.

As usual, only Péter Esterházy went as far as juxtaposing Central Europe to his mother tongue: "I think a writer belongs to a language and not to a region" (Budapest Roundtable 27). The others, aware that the mother tongue was primordial, persisted in their belief of a shared language in the metaphorical sense. The irony is (as so often with this writer) that only Esterházy presented an (attempt) at a multilingual work: The Book of Hrabal. Thus once again one has to distinguish between programmatic beliefs and the reality of writing. Before plunging into a discussion of older models of Central European multilingualism, one should take note of the paradox, for instance, between Kiš and Krleža. The former praised multilingualism and wrote monolingual works; the latter (as so many of his contemporaries) considered multilingualism a threat to (linguistic, racial, national) purity, though his fiction is a veritable tower of Babel - or rather: tower of Ulm. The first task is now to refine the pre-WWII national and the supranational position by means of a discussion of Kafka's and Krleža's stance toward their mother tongues and the other languages in their linguistic reality.

4. Pre-WWII multilingualism (1): Kafka's linguistic borderland

Unlike his peers Max Brod and Franz Werfel, Kafka grew up to become an almost fully bilingual, German-Czech speaker. Biographer Ernst Pawel notes that Kafka, who had first close contact with the Czech language as a young child through his slěčna, the Miss Marie Werner, "always made it a point [at work] to have his letters to the director edited and corrected (...) he [Kafka] never trusted himself with the fine points of Czech grammar and spelling" (386), especially so after 1918, when the Republic of Czechoslovakia was founded and command of the Czech language became a sensitive political issue. The year 1918 proved another turning point after decades of turbulent debates on language. The first German-Jewish school in Prague was opened on May 2, 1782. In the following decades, these schools underwent a profound transformation from Jewish into German institutions. At the same time
the Czechs strove for language equality. When, for instance, in 1898 prime minister Badeni promulgated language reforms that gave Czech equal status with German, riots followed on the part of the German population which forced the emperor to fire Badeni and abrogate the new laws (Paweł 150), which again triggered violent response on the part of Czech nationalists. As for the Jewish citizens, when a first language census was held in 1880, two-thirds of the Prague Jews registered as Germanophone. Ten years later over fifty percent registered as Czech-speaking, a choice reflecting a pragmatic response to the rapidly growing economic and political power of the Czech nation. As for Yiddish, the former language of the Jews in Bohemia and Moravia: it was almost completely replaced by German. Underneath its officially professed language preferences, the Jewish community prottered a German-Czech bilingualism, with traces of Yiddish. As Zionism, Theodor Herzl’s national model of Jewish identity, gained popularity, serious and devoted study of the Hebrew language evolved.

Such was Kafka’s linguistic environment in which he launched his Germanophone work. Kafka seems to have been uneasy about his multilingualism. Interpretations tend to emphasize his negative attitude. Often quoted in this respect is a letter to Max Brod from 1921 where Kafka writes:

Weg vom Judentum, meist mit unklarer Zustimmung der Väter (diese Unklarheit war das Empörenende), wollten die meisten, die deutsch zu schreiben anfangen, sie wollten es, aber mit den Hinterbeinchen klebten sie noch am Judentum des Vaters und mit dem Vorderbeinchen fanden sie keinen neuen Boden. Die Verzweiflung darüber war ihre Inspiration. (337)

Kafka’s saw his Jewish contemporaries as attempting to get away from their milieu without succeeding in really cutting off ties, whereas the connection in the new milieu did not materialize, at least not satisfactorily. The attitude toward the new milieu, Prague German, and through Prague German contact with the literary centers of Berlin and Vienna, is also problematic. Witness Kafka’s statement that his German is “a stranger’s child snatched from the cradle.” Related to this is his notorious difficulty with writing as such. In the same letter to Max Brod from 1921 he writes about

drei Unmöglichkeiten, (die ich nur zufällig sprachliche Unmöglichkeiten nenne, es ist das Einfachste, sie so zu nennen, sie könnten aber auch ganz anders genannt werden): der Unmöglichkeit, nicht zu schreiben, der Unmöglichkeit deutsch zu schreiben, der Unmöglichkeit anders zu schreiben, fast könnte man eine vierte Unmöglichkeit hinzufügen, die Unmöglichkeit zu schreiben […].” (337-338).

No wonder that the legend of Babel fascinated Kafka. Twice, in “Das Stadtwappen” (The City Arms) and “Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer” (The Great Wall of China), he offered specific commentaries in the style of Talmudic exegesis. George Steiner even goes as far as to read in Kafka’s confessions to Brod, as well as into his tales, “a continuous parable” of a belief in “the impossibility of genuine human communication as such” (After Babel, 65). In a separate essay from 1992, entirely devoted to Der Prozess, Steiner interprets the strangeness Kafka felt within the German language in terms of borrowing and interest. “The translucency of Kafka’s German, its stainless quiet, suggests a process of borrowing at high, very nearly intolerable interest. Kafka’s vocabulary and syntax are those of utmost abstention from waste: as if every German word and grammatical resource had been drawn from an unforgiving bank. To write in German was to be in debt” (“A Note on Kafka’s Trial” 242).

The tendency has thus been to stress what Eva Ziarek has called Kafka’s rhetoric of failure, efforts to communicate that are doomed from the outset. But just as the Croat Krleža
was by confession a language purist and a multilingualist in practice, so one can distinguish between Kafka’s rhetorics, his intention and the actual effect his texts had on the reader. There is, for instance, a paradox in that someone who expressed so many agonies over the impotence of his language, could prove to be such a fertile correspondent. Some of his epistolary tactics and strategies are beautifully described in Elias Canetti’s Der andere Prozess (1968), a reading of Kafka’s Der Prozess in the context of Kafka’s correspondence with his fiancée Felice Bauer. When correspondent Kafka found himself in a bilingual situation, corresponding with Milena Jesenska, language became a central issue. For instance when Kafka asks Milena in one of his first letters to write in Czech: “Schon einigemal wollte ich Sie fragen, warum Sie nicht einmal tschechisch schreiben. [...] tschechisch wollte ich von Ihnen lesen, weil Sie ihm doch angehören, weil doch nur dort die ganze Milena ist (die Übersetzung bestätigt es), hier doch immerhin nur die aus Wien oder die auf Wien sich vorbereitende” (9). A rhetoric of failure, or “impossibility of genuine human communication” may read into these bilingual issues a gap between two writing beings, yet in Kafka’s eyes Milena in her mother tongue is obviously closer to herself than in German. The closer his partner in dialogue is to herself, the better chances for genuine contact: “Liebe Frau Milena [...] ich habe niemals unter deutschem Volk gelebt, deutsch ist meine Muttersprache und deshalb mir natürlich, aber das tschechische ist mir viel herzlicher, deshalb zerreissst Ihr Brief manche Unsicherheiten, ich sehe Sie deutlicher, die Bewegungen des Körpers, der Hände, so schnell, so entschlossen, es ist fast eine Begegnung [...]” (17).

The consensus about Kafka seems to be that he wrote in a linguistic borderland. Much has been made in this respect of a short passage from the diaries of 1911, in which Kafka reflects on what he calls kleine Literaturen, minor literatures. An unresolved issue to Kafka’s notion of minor literature is Kafka’s own stance toward it. Did Kafka consider himself and his Prague German, to be part of a minor literature? Or did he consider his own authorship as adhering and responding to the major German literature? Or should we look for a third position, one in between? What would that look like? The fragment from the diaries gives an ambivalent answer. Kafka’s examples here are Czech literature and the Yiddish literature of Warsaw introduced to him by his friend Yitzhak Löwy. In a page-long enumeration Kafka singles out “der Mangel bedeutender Talente” as one of the main characteristics of a minor literature as a result of which “der literarische Streit bekommt in größten Ausmaß eine wirkliche Berichtigung” (207). The enumeration lists twelve “advantages” of a minor literature. The majority of these address the relation between literature and the nation. The list reaches a rhetoric yet strangely intimate climax in the phrase “dieses Tagebuchführen einer Nation” which brings Kafka’s writing at the moment he wrote down these reflections very close to the notion he seeks to describe - that of minor literature. Kafka’s own summary of his reflections is ground for more ambiguity. His key words are “Lebhaftigkeit”, “Entlastung” and “Popularität”. He hastens to point out the feebleness of this description (“Wie wenig kräftig ist das obere Bild”) as opposed to “tatsächliches Gefühl” - which leads the reader to conclude that there is really an experience of a minor literature at the core of these reflections. But the exact nature of this experience, whether it is actual participation or merely a desire for participation, remains ambiguous. From this fragment it is therefore hard to tell whether Kafka’s perspective is from within a major or from within a minor language. It has been pointed out that Kafka’s conception of a minor literature is idealized. If it does refer to the literatures of the Central European nations, as his example of Czech literature suggests, then this contrasts sharply to the actual situation in Czech literature, which had a liking for myth rather than the small scale art Kafka imagined (Robertson 23). Idealization would suggest that Kafka was speaking from a position outside minor literature.

This is denied by Deleuze & Guattari’s Kafka. Toward a minor literature. They read in Kafka’s reflections on “kleine Literaturen” a theory of subversity, “deterриториализация” is
their term. They consider Kafka’s oeuvre to be minor literature par excellence. But nowhere does Kafka say that his work belongs to a minor literature. Deleuze & Guattari are also not clear about how in Kafka’s reflections the notions of literature, language and nation are interrelated. From their resumé of Kafka’s ideas on minor literature it appears that they equate ethnicity and language. Their own examples, the Jewish literature of Warsaw and Prague (16) are inconsistent with Kafka’s: the literature from Warsaw in Yiddish and literature from Prague in Czech. Still, Deleuze & Guattari are categorical about the politics of Kafka’s oeuvre. They consider it a minor literature meaning that it intensifies the strangeness, the unfamiliarity and yet closeness inherent in Prague German, resulting in a “determinitorialization” of German literature. By this they seem to mean that within German the dominance of center over periphery is contested and subverted. They take Kafka as a starting point for a discussion of how a minor literature establishes its literary and linguistic space. For them Kafka’s linguistic experience is a model for all those “who write in a language that is not their own” (19):

This is the problem of immigrants, and especially of their children, the problem of minorities, the problem of a minor literature, but also a problem for all of us: how to tear a minor literature away from its own language, allowing it to challenge the language and making it follow a sober revolutionary path? How to become a nomad and a gypsy in relation to one’s own language? Kafka answers: steal the baby from its cradle, walk the tightrope. (19)

But in spite of these imprecisions: how different is Deleuze & Guattari’s reading of Kafka compared to those who adhere to the rhetoric of failure! This is its great merit: they have torn the oeuvre of Kafka out of its abstract context of religion-like exegesis and proposed a historical reading that addresses Kafka’s multilingual surroundings, from which they seek to formulate more general patterns between minorities and the language of the majority. Still, their representation of Prague’s linguistic environment, and therefore of Kafka’s, asks for correction. I would argue that Prague was not just a bilingual German-Czech environment, but a multilingual. Kafka wrote German not only against the background of the German tradition on the one hand and Czech on the other. Prague surrounded him with more than two languages: Yiddish and Hebrew were prominent, although politically and culturally marked. Kafka’s himself might have considered his German minor as opposed to Goethe’s German. But in the eyes of the Prague Czechs, his German was major, in spite of his own reservations. And: Kafka describes Czech as a minor literature, but this would certainly not hold from a Slovak point of view. In fact, it is problematic to entitle any language in East-Central Europe as unambiguously major or minor.

In this linguistic context, a writer’s choice for one language (although Danilo Kiš would say it is not a matter of choice but of fate) means therefore not only the exclusion of a second, but also of a third and sometimes a fourth language. Where there are constantly three or four languages present, whether active or passive, whether as national languages or local dialects, one could speak of a surplus of signifiers. In combination with the lexical similarities between several languages the result is a unique – Central European – mode of multilingualism with its own, specific mode of untranslatability.

It is in this revised multilingual context that I would like to reconsider Kafka’s stance toward his linguistic situation. As a starting point I propose another well-known diary entry of Kafka, about the failure of the German language to name those near to him:

Gestern fiel mir ein, dass ich die Mutter nur deshalb nicht immer so geliebt habe, wie sie es verdiente und wie ich es könnte, weil mich die deutsche Sprache daran gehindert

Kafka wrote these sentences in October 1914 during the time of his close acquaintance and friendship with Yitzhak Löwy. Confronted with what proved to be a rather short-lived but intense and important experience, the Yiddish theatre from Warsaw, Kafka complains about the same time in his diary: “Die Schauspieler überzeugen mich durch ihre Gegenwart immer wieder zu meinem Schrecken, dass das Meiste, was ich bisher über sie aufgeschrieben habe, falsch ist.” (113). But only a few weeks later, on 18 February 1912, Kafka appeared as a public speaker in the auditorium of the Jewish Town Hall of Prague and delivered a speech on the Yiddish language which shows self confidence and the same skilled, perhaps even slightly manipulative tone he displays in many of his letters. The “Rede über die jiddische Sprache”, was delivered to an audience of assimilated Jews, whose language was that of the major literature German. With obvious pleasure, Kafka assumes the role of a guide to a bewildered public (as he supposes) into the unknown domain of Yiddish verse and introduces the Yiddish language: “Der Jargon ist die jüngste europäische Sprache, erst vierhundert Jahre alt und eigentlich noch viel jünger” (422). Reasons for its strangeness might be found in the high coefficient of loan words:


Kafka’s sympathy is obviously with the “Jargon” he is introducing. Time and again he teases his audience by referring to their alleged “Angst”, “dass man es fast auf ihren Gesichtern sieht” (422). Fear of strangeness, fear of the known and yet unknown that sneaks in through the back door into the German language. On a linguistic level, known and unknown elements take turns, with the expected result that “Mit all dem denke ich die meisten von Ihnen, sehr geehrte Damen und Herren, vorläufig überzeugt zu haben, dass sie kein Wort des Jargon verstehen werden” (423). Kafka gives the summaries of the three poems Löwy will recite, but this won’t help the audience in understanding Yiddish literature. The ground for the misunderstanding is the specific untranslatability of the “Jargon” into German: “Man kann nämlich Jargon nicht in die deutsche Sprache übersetzen” (425). The reason seems, as Kafka insists, the extreme closeness of Yiddish to German, and also the nature of their relation, that of a standard language and one of its “dialects”: “Die Verbindungen zwischen Jargon und Deutsch sind zu zart und bedeutend, als dass sie nicht sofort zerreißen müssten, wenn Jargon ins Deutsche zurückgeführt wird, das heisst es wird kein Jargon mehr zurückgeführt, sondern etwas Wesenloses. […] ‘Toit’ zum Beispiel ist eben nicht ‘Tot’ und ‘Blut’ ist nicht ‘Blut’” (425). He continues by saying that the “Jargon” can however be conveyed (“vermittelt”) in French, as opposed to German.
I gather that, for Kafka Yiddish is untranslatable with respect to those languages that are close to it, which would mean not only German but also the other “Eastern European”, Romanian, Hungarian, Lithuanian and Slavic languages it borrows its lexicon from. Deleuze & Guattari seem to overlook this. For them, the loss of referentiality, of the “proper sense” of the word, takes place in between two languages: “There is no longer any proper sense or figurative sense, but only a distribution of states that is part of the range of the word. […] There is no longer man or animal, since each deterritorializes the other, in a conjunction of flux, in a continuum of reversible entities” (D&G 23). To Deleuze & Guattari the loss of the figurative is irreversible. Once the signifier receives a Doppelgänger, once “Tot” is doubled as “Toit” there is no return to the earlier state. But what happens when one more signifier is added, or even two or three? Then Kafka’s reflections lead to an understanding of Central European multilingualism as a field where many languages meet and enter into a complex whole of double and threefold relations. Here, boundaries between languages change depending on one’s position in language and this position is never univocal. Prague German as the language into which the Prague Jews had migrated and settled was minor in relation to German. Seen however from the Czech national perspective, Prague German was certainly part of a major literature. In this multilingual field, the speaker never relates unambiguously to one language and one literature; nor can the author’s stance be univocal.

5. Pre-WWII multilingualism: Krleža’s linguistic restlessness

Hardly anyone today doubts Kafka’s stature as a major author. To the Croat Miroslav Krleža, however, this was not self-evident. He once said that for him, Kafka was a provincial phenomenon, more folklore than literature. To understand his statement, one has to take into account Krleža’s linguistic environment: for him, Kafka was first and foremost part of the Jewish Germanophone culture of Central Europe. Like Prague, Krleža’s Zagreb buzzed with German at the turn of the century, but also with Hungarian and with “Küchenkroatisch”, the local Croatian dialect with a corrupted German lexicon. This multilingualism, which Krleža referred to as a “linguistic chaos”, was an issue that had dominated the development of a national Croatian literary language from the first half of the nineteenth century onwards. Krleža tended toward language purism. In 1942 he wrote: “Our main stylistic problem up to today is: how to dispose of Turkish, German and Italian influences” (Childhood in Agram 169; my trans.). At the same time, his writing teems with German and Hungarian dialogues and represents no less than a linguistic caricature of the Double Monarchy.

What is the Croatian language? This is today as much of a political issue as it was at the turn of the 19th and 20th century. The identity of the Croatian language entails much more than the differences with the Serbian language. For Krleža, the main issue is the creation of a national standard language out of an extremely diverse linguistic and historical situation. Krleža's position is far from univocally national. In Djedinjstvo u Agramu (Childhood in Agram, 1942), he polemizes with the whole of Croatian nineteenth century literature, but most of all with the so called Illyrians, the Croatian national movement from the first half of the nineteenth century that had standardized the Štokavian dialect as the literary language of the Croatian nation. Thus they brought together the renaissance and baroque literatures of Dubrovnik with South Slav oral literature. Illyrian Štokavian became the carrier of a national Croatian literature. As elsewhere, standardization was first a national and a linguistic project and only then a literary matter. Beside the new standard, there were at least two other dialects, the Čakavian coastal dialect, and the Kajkavian, the Northern-Croatian dialect. Standardization, although it had succeeded, did not entirely silence the dialects. Aleksander Flaker notes in a discussion of Croatian dialect literature (327) that the choice for Štokavian
not only cut off literary traditions in the other dialects, but resulted, for instance in realist fiction, in a gap between the local speech of a region and its representation in the literary text. Kajkavian or Čakavian speakers were often represented as Štokavian, their speech interspersed with words from the original dialect, inserted as exoticisms. As Krleža writes, the result around 1900 was a “language chaos” on all linguistic levels, from the lexicon and the syntax even to the accent system. In *Childhood in Agram*, he distinguishes as many as five dialects or unofficial standards in the linguistic environment of the Zagreb of his youth (167).

It was to one of these dialects, the Kajkavian dialect of Northern Croatia, that Krleža turned for an alternative to the national Štokavian tradition. By the beginning of the nineteenth century Kajkavian, close to Slovenian, had been a fully developed literary language with dictionaries as well as high and low genres. By the time of Krleža’s childhood, the local elite of Northern Croatia used Štokavian. Kajkavian was no longer a language, it had effectively become a dialect. Listening to the speech of “domobrani”, Croatian soldiers in Habsburg service, Krleža wrote in 1916:

This dying language [Kajkavian] has its own special sense of humor, and not one of our poets has a ready ear for these details. It has its own way of expression, its irony elevates it above reality, not by shooting into the sky like a rocket, but by blurring everything, all notions and all authority, slowly and stubbornly up to the point of meaninglessness. This language of ours, its corrosive phrases, kills all illuminated and heroic ideals, all notions and efforts, by decomposing them. It is a serf’s language. Always in a minor key. It spits at the boots of the lords that trample it. It neither carries away nor elevates, does not believe in anything except in a kind of Roman Catholic pessimism ending in the unavoidable equalizing of all life in death […] Its sarcasm […] is lethal, ridicules everything, vulgarizes and degrades everything above it, and is therefore disastrous for its own emancipation. (*Diary*, 16 March 1916, my trans.)

Kajkavian haunted Krleža throughout his life. It appears in direct speech in fiction, the WWI novellas *Hrvatski Bog Mars* (The Croatian God Mars, 1921), in the monologue of Valentin Žganec in the novel *Na Rubu Pameti* (On The Edge of Reason, 1938), in the dialogue of some of his plays, and most prominent, it is the major and only language of a cycle of poems Krleža wrote in the thirties, *Balade Petrice Kerempuh* (The Ballads of Petrica Kerempuh), grotesque carnivalesk poetry dealing with a peasant uprising in the sixteenth century.

Why was Kajkavian that attractive to Krleža? He often praised its authenticity, but the language of the *Ballads* is partially taken from seventeenth century Kajkavian dictionaries and is not identical to the living speech. It is a stylized version. When imbedded in a text situated in the contemporary world, Kajkavian is always a character’s speech, not the narrator’s. Krleža’s position outside Kajkavian is confirmed by his stance in *A Childhood in Agram*, where he sings the praise of the Kajkavian in the Štokavian Croatian standard. Part of its fascination, beside the attraction of its (quasi) authenticity, is perhaps that it is a language that failed to become the discourse of a nation. “A Vates that would make the Kajkavian resurrect from its grave was not predestinated.” (*Agram*, 162) To Krleža, Kajkavian reminds the community of its pre-national linguistic past.

*A Childhood in Agram* is an intellectual, literary and linguistic autobiography. Instead of mentioning the parents, this rather long, winding essay restricts the experience of the autobiographical self to examples, lists of impressions and memories that illustrate a more general line of thought. I discuss it in length here because its description of the experience of multilingualism resembles in some respects Kafka’s engagement with Yiddish. Kajkavian, as a dialect, contests the national Štokavian Croatian much like Kafka’s Yiddish challenges the
German of Prague’s assimilated Jews. In both cases, the dialects are presented as a remnant of the community’s past before the settlement. Indeed, both Kafka and Krleža approach the linguistic home established by their previous generation from an older perspective and thus lay bare a sense of inauthenticity, the artificiality of the linguistic home. At the same time, the challenger is not an alternative and the challenge results in an intermediate position, a borderland. If Kafka’s German is a “stranger’s child snatched from the cradle”, then Krleža’s empathy is with a disowned child, which at his intercession is re-accepted into the national cradle of Štokavian.

Krleža’s autobiographical prose contains also a description of Zagreb’s specific multilingualism, both among the competing national languages and among the dialects within the national Croatian standard. Krleža relates this to a specific artistic consciousness, which can be translated, as I will suggest, into a specific Eastern Central European notion of linguistic identity: the linguistic self as a ventriloquist, so to speak, whose self-portrait is not drawn by a linguistic act of naming directly, but by repeating and quoting speech surrounding the self, from personal to collective discourses, from parents to institutions in society. This specific attitude of the autobiographical self toward its language shall pave the way back to the genre of fictionalized autobiography, to Bohumil Hrabal and Péter Esterházy. It will render a narrative counterpart to the experience of homelessness; together with the borderland, it can be linked up with the more dispassionate idea of the intermediate position.

_A Childhood in Agram_ opens with a search for the first impression. The speaker makes an attempt at disengaging the first image from subsequent thought and language. This, however, distances him only further from his “direct”, his “unmediated” (“nesposredan”) gaze. Subsequent lists of childhood impressions (images from bourgeois life, from the Roman Catholic church, early aesthetic impressions and also the first experiences of the political agony over Croatia’s national past), are represented as irrevocable losses: words cannot retrieve these impressions. The next question introduces the figure of the artist and the stance he takes toward his own past and contemporary reality. Krleža criticizes academic painters as imitators; on the other hand, artists who present a political message in a work of art do not understand that true artistic inspiration has nothing to do with actual politics. The latter statement implicitly responds to the Charkov-doctrine of socialist realism: _A Childhood in Agram_, written in 1942, echoes Krleža’s fierce and ferocious debate with dogmatic socialists in the 1930s. His response to the Charkov doctrine is individualist. His alternative to either mimeticians or political artists is the artist as a player, in line with the child that does not distinguish between reality and play.

As the adult artist hovers between politics and autonomous art, so the child is also in an intermediate position. As an altar boy, young Krleža participates in an official, institutionalized rite and reproduces its discourse. Antithesis to Catholic metaphysics and Christian ideals about a martyr’s death, resurrection and ascension, is the folkloristic world of the grandmother. Her world is thoroughly Kajkavian. Her ideas are superstitious, to be sure, but powerful enough to contest Catholic metaphysics: “The Kajkavian baroque atmosphere in the surroundings of Čakovec and Varaždin, which in our peculiar circumstances, at the time, the turn of the century, was already vegetating, showing all signs of a hybrid threatened with extinction, after the Illyrian patriots had sentenced it to death sixty years earlier” (161, my trans). But Kajkavian remains a mere antithesis. Krleža quotes his grandmother but his own narrative is set in the Štokavian, national standard. The Kajkavian dialect always remained a secondary language in Krleža’s work. When it came into the foreground, in _The Ballads of Petrica Kerempuh_, it was highly stylized, Krleža’s own standardization based as much on 17th century dictionaries as on his grandmother’s speech. From Kajkavian, Krleža goes to the general linguistic situation of his childhood, which he describes as a “Babylonian mishmash” (164). Among the various dialects and jargons, Kajkavian is the hybrid powerful enough to
contest 19th century attempts at a standard language, yet never a candidate for a true, authentic language. Thus the autobiographical prose diagnoses the need for an authentic language, but fails to provide one. It does not conclude with epiphany, nor with the topos of the invention of an authentic style or an individual voice. It ends with a quote, an anathema banning the boy from the Catholic world he grew up in: “Conscious of my weakness, I carried my burden in sin about which the holy Theresa once said: un peccado mortal de los mas abominables, and on which the following verdict was pronounced: Ligatis manibus et pedibus mittite eum in tenebras exteriores!” (181)

This then seems Krleža’s answer to his own initial question. Closely related to his multilingual environment where various national languages, dialects and jargon co-exist, the artistic self is much like the ventriloquist who impresses young Krleža in the circus: made up of other’s voices that it reproduces ironically, or in denial. These voices reflect the diversity of the linguistic environment: in the literary text, they merge: Bakhtin’s “raznojazyöie” (polyglossia) becomes “raznore&e” (heteroglossia). This specific artistic consciousness, just like the self as a speaker never fully identifies with one of the available languages and dialects, develops no style of its own; if one can speak of a style, it is the style of the collage, of bric-a-brac, or, to stay with linguistic terms, that of the quotation.

6. Bohumil Hrabal’s bilingualism

Bohumil Hrabal’s Libeň-trilogy Svatby v Domě, Vita Nuova, Proluky, (Weddings at Home, Vita Nuova, Vacant Lots), published in 1986-87, runs from the aftermath of World War II until 1968, specifically in the linguistic wasteland after the extermination of the Jewish population and the deportation of Sudetes from Czechoslovakia. A significant number of the more than 700 pages deal with the painful memory of this lost multilingual world. However, the act of remembering is not straightforward: whenever there is lament, it is embedded in the text’s peculiar narrative situation. Let us recall: the author Hrabal presents as a first-person narrator his wife Pipsi (Eliska), who tells her own life as of the moment when she met the author – “Doctor Hrabal” as he is called in her text. Thus he himself, or rather his alter ego, is a dominant character in her account.

The only earlier instance of this device I know of, is Gertrude Stein’s Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas. First published in 1933, Stein makes her partner Alice tell her life as of the moment she met Stein. These are Stein’s Paris years: Alice’s naive style is at times hilarious, for instance when she describes their acquaintance with famous artists, like Picasso, Braque and others. The Autobiography was translated into Czech in 1952, so Hrabal might have read it. Though always generous with allusions and openly grateful whenever a device or an idea inspired him, Hrabal does not refer to Stein. The quasi-naive tone of the narrative is identical in both texts. But at a closer look, the two texts differ profoundly. Stein makes sure to carefully distinguish the naive comments of Alice from the sophisticated, “writerly” comments of her own fictionalized self. At the end, she discloses the illusion: “About six weeks ago Gertrude Stein said, it does not look to me as if you were ever going to write that autobiography. You know what I am going to do. I am going to write it for you. I am going to write it as simply as Defoe did the autobiography of Robinson Crusoe. And she has and this is it” (268).

Hrabal never discloses the illusion. Moreover, whereas the distance between Stein’s and Alice’s speech is fixed, that between Pipsi and Dr. Hrabal is not. Likewise, in Hrabal’s trilogy the sharp distinction between author and narrator is mitigated by a constant and smooth shifting of speaking figures: Pipsi as a narrator literally reproduces the discourse of
the other characters; she does not represent them by quotation or direct speech. As a result, the first person shuttles between the characters. Narrative form is not identical in the three parts of the trilogy. Part I and III are as described above, part II goes further and refrains from using interpunction. This author justifies this “diagonal reading” of his characters in his foreword to *Vita Nuova*:

I have not permitted myself this luxury like Joyce, who wrote Ms. Molly Bloom's morning monologue without interpunction only because Ms. Molly represented to him the Earth Gea who does not have grammar or interpunction herself... I have permitted myself this luxury of diagonal reading not only to appear where nobody expects you as Mr. Barthes says but also because I as an old man have the right to resist everything and everyone who wants to deprive me of my right to make mistakes or to accomplish that which I did not expect from myself I have allowed myself this luxury of diagonal reading because it is by the same method that I choose buried images from the past which surprise me just like those dadaist sentences and words were conjured from the surrealist hat [...] (181-182, my trans.)

Hence the author’s intention in making Pipsi tell her life story in the first person; diagonal reading, “this skew probe”, shall lead him to his own “semi-conscious and subconscious” (9). Starting with the moment she met the author right after World War II, Pipsi’s account relates Hrabal’s rise to fame as a writer, and the simultaneous fall – in her eyes – of this man who by no means displays the behavior appropriate for a well-known author. She describes her husband as a case of “formlessness”, suffering a complete lack of style, ranging from his clothing to his literature. Her mother-in-law attributes this formlessness to the socialist system, which, having rejected the old world, failed to create a new style.

But Pipsi gets to tell her own story too. She is a Sudete or a *Sudetendeutsche*, and as such, although a minor during the war, she spent time in a camp during the purges after the war. During discussions with her husband, walking through Prague and visiting the Jewish cemetery, she changes from a German victim into someone, whose narrative remembers more than just the suffering of her own people. She develops beyond national consciousness: she feels the loss not just of her own nation but of the others as well. Her development takes place in constant interaction with “doctor Hrabal” whose provocations she counters and with whom she quarrels. Even their first kiss has a political taste to it:

It suddenly occurred to me that the doctor was really tactful and that he loved me, because he didn’t say anything, whatever he would have said or would have liked to say, however he would have justified himself, it would only have made me more sad, because to the doctor I was a German and then I suddenly said... But doctor Hrabal, I went to Czech schools and my parents were expelled as Germans to the West but I stayed here, because I went to Czech schools like my brother Heini, because of those Czech schools they gave us Czech passports and that's why I'm here... The doctor leaned towards me, put a finger on my lips, I closed my eyes and he kissed me. (*Svatby*: 149-150 My trans.).

The fact that Pipsi is a Sudete is not just of political significance: it is a linguistic fact too. She receives German letters from her family in Vienna and her discourse is interspersed with German words. This alerts the reader to the artificiality of her discourse: she speaks and thinks in Czech, the interjected German words suggest bilingualism but it might very well be possible that in reality, Eliška thought in German. There is thus a certain inequality between the author and his narrator, narratively as well as linguistically, which Pipsi’s attentiveness to
the weaknesses of the Hrabal figure only partially compensates. In a long scene at the heart of *Vita Nuova* the tension between the two erupts. Here, language (its hidden bilingualism), narrative form (the author Hrabal presenting his wife as a first person narrator) and style (absence of interpolation) all come together. Who identifies here with what language? And what is the role of narrative form and style?

Once I spent a week with my husband in Krkonoše. We stayed in the Jilemníčka Hut in Upper Míšeky. Because as a student my husband had been in Lower Míšeky and there as he pointed out he had stayed in Dreihäuser (*Tridomi*) with Herr Scharf [...]. And then my husband showed me the Waldheim Café [...] but this all happened after forty-five when there was not one German left here in the Krkonoše. Some had died in the war others had been killed with pickaxes and the rest had been heavy-handedly expelled [...]. (254-5 My trans.)

Pipsi relates how her husband during their walks in the mountains told her about his acquaintance with Sudetes; about the rise of nazism and the growing tension between Czechs and ethnic Germans. “My husband told me”, “My husband showed me” etc. are phrases which distinguish his speech from her’s. In their absence utterances have no definite speaker, as in “But this all happened after forty-five [...]”, which evokes the violent treatment of the Sudetes after the war. Not accidentally: “Dr. Hrabal” fulminates against the Sudetes and this one sentence, which describes their suffering, suggests that there was suffering on more than one side. This opens the comparison, who started the suffering, suggests that there was suffering on more than one side. The Sudetes. He also holds them responsible for the loss of bilingualism. When it comes to language, his sympathies are no longer purely national Czech (as when he referred to “our republic”). He laments the loss not just of Prague German but of “this even greater crime they committed [...]” Because of their betrayal the beautiful German slang from Brno and Opava and Jihlava and the beautiful German dialect had also disappeared from the Slovakian Spišetel-valley the so-called Zipserdeutsch that they used to speak there and the Egerländerdeutsch nearby Cheb. And my husband lamented the loss of this bilingual consciousness” (256).

The author Hrabal decides what Pipsi relates about their private German-Czech quarrel: whereas the doctor a few lines later gets to speak in the first person (“and I found it a shame and I was embarrassed about those Germans” 257), Pipsi keeps silent about her part in the discussion. Her first person returns only when she, still in the mountains, suffers an attack of vertigo – her dizziness as much a result of the alpine heights as of the fierceness of her husband’s discourse. In a scene sliding from the real into the symbolic, she stumbles, her husband falls and it is only because “my eyes at once hung on my husband’s eyes” (260) that she manages to reach the valley. From this one could conclude not only that the author Hrabal prompts Pipsi’s thoughts and speech but that the character “Dr. Hrabal” too restrains her: for it is his speech, his “monologue” which dominates their discussion. However “tactful” he may be (but this is the author putting his narrator words into the mouth!), he considers her faith during the purges, the humiliation she suffered (114), to be in full compliance with a slogan the Nazi’s themselves invented, “Jedem das Seine”; he repeats it over and over again.

Later on in *Vita Nuova*, however, Pipsi gets too speak freely about the German-Czech conflict, about the fate of the Jews and about her own role, as a member of a family that sympathized with the Nazis, and as a victim of the post-WWII purges. Of course, nobody ever
speaks directly in the trilogy, and especially in *Vita Nuova*. When, for instance, doctor Hrabal gets to speak in the first person (as above) it is still the narrator Pipsi who imbeds her husband’s speech in her own first person speech by quoting. Perhaps not in free, but in her own speech Pipsi describes at the end of *Vita Nuova* her visit to the Jewish cemetery in the Prague quarter Libeň, then to the central cemetery of the old town in Prague. Let me quote in full:

I couldn’t understand why the Germans but also the Czechs, hated the Jews and why I kept on hearing that Hitler had killed too few of them [...] I repeated to myself all those girls’ names... from Lea to Miriam and Rifke and Chave and Ciperle and Golde and Muskat and Liebele and Rehle and Guendl and Blumele and Telze and Nette and I understood that these little words just like the boys’ names like Jekeff and Marek and Elias and Chaje and Jehuda and Mendl and Gadl and Zalkind and Süsskind and Smaje and Menachem and Ascher and Sander and Manasse -- all these were actually like German names and I felt that this cemetery with all the names was much dearer to me than all the other cemeteries and the tombstones were dear to me because nobody took care of them nobody stopped by here to poor fresh water and to bring fresh flowers this Libeň cemetery was completely deserted just like everyone and everything had deserted me and my father too and in fact what we had done to the Jews was done to us when they got even with us and so we had to leave our houses in ’46 just like the Jews before us [...] *Jedem das Seine* as it said on the gate of one of those concentration camps. (408)

Pipsi’s sympathy with Jewish victims stems from the language, from the closeness of the German and Jewish proper names, and from identifying her own faith with that of the Jews. The binding logic is the Nazi slogan, frequently quoted earlier by her husband.

Thus part of the development of her consciousness is suggested by her husband. A large part, however is not. When she visits the central cemetery in Prague she reads the names on the gravestones: “I read the names insofar as they were not in Hebrew and again it astonished me why the Germans had to be the avowed enemies of the Jews whereas Jews often had German names as proper names perhaps slightly corrupted but precisely this slight corruption was much dearer to me than classical German the corruption made Yiddish pleasantly melodious like the Viennese dialect or the one spoken in Jihlava or Brno” (409). This time it is Pipsi who laments the loss of bilingualism. Although her text is in Czech, her lament stems from a Germanophone perspective. It is the perspective of the German victim who has lived through the ferociousness of Czech hatred and revenge, which makes her, while watching old photographs of the demolition of the Prague ghetto at the turn of the 19th and 20th century, “realize” that “Like Hitler liquidated the Jews, the Czechs too hated the Jews just as much as the Germans, if the Czechs had the opportunity, even today they would liquidate the Jews” (410).

Thus Pipsi not only gets to express her German perspective on the loss of bilingualism, but in the absence of her husband she reaches a “supranational” perspective. It is based on her painful personal experiences and her observation that only names engraved in the wall of the cemetery commemorate the vanished lives at Prague’s empty spots. Who identifies here with what language? And how does the ambiguous genre of the text affect the act of remembering the lost bilingualism?

Both Pipsi and Dr. Hrabal identify with bilingualism; both lament its loss. Hrabal blames the Sudetes, Pipsi agrees but she also blames the Czechs. In the clash, Dr. Hrabal dominates. Pipsi can deal with her experiences and her observations only when she is alone. This is where the peculiar narrative form of *Vita Nuova* (and the other parts of the trilogy)
comes into play: what the author Hrabal in his foreword announced as a “probe” cutting into the subconscious, turns out to be a double-edged narrative technique. The proper names force the reader to read the text as an autobiography, but this is complicated in two ways. First, the author Hrabal and the character Hrabal should still be distinguished, for the narrator Pipsi always mediates between the one and the other. Secondly, although much of Pipsi’s account quotes other voices that also speak in the first person, her speech goes beyond reproducing her own speech and that of others. Her reflections, memories and thoughts make up a considerable part of her account. Furthermore, there are the hybrid sentences, utterances that cannot be ascribed to him or to her alone. Where both tend to identify and sympathize with the victims – albeit with different victims – intermediate sentences fill the interpersonal space between them. On a few occasions Dr. Hrabal takes his wife pars pro toto for the Sudetes, thereby politicizing her personal space. It is Pipsi who introduces a nuance between the personal and the political: the reader knows her experience and thus follows her when she distances herself from her husband’s views. In the trilogy, this is the point at which the distance between Dr. Hrabal and the reader is the largest. Here, the effect of fictionalizing autobiography can be felt most acutely. But all this takes place within the Czech language: the specific artistic consciousness of multilingualism is only suggested “between the lines”, in the tension between author, narrator and character.

7. Looking back at Central Europe from the tower of Ulm

In Esterházy’s The Book of Hrabal (1990), The Lord, after a chat with Bohumil Hrabal, looks down at Ulm to see how the tower is progressing. His gaze is timeless and so he can see both the original and the contemporary state of the tower, as well as the Central European hinterland. He towers over the figure of the first-person narrator of the novel, “he sees what I’m thinking, everything that I have forgotten by now and do not wish to conjure up in my fantasies” (164):

he saw everything simultaneously, the sea of space, the current of time, the branches of a rose bush, the Black Forest and the Black Sea, John Hus and a fatal typo in a grade B novel, the battle of Thermopylae, the flames of Jan Palach and the birth of a little boy called Marcel [...], he saw the entry of Soviet tanks into Prague, Budapest, Moscow and San Diego, he saw a traveling salesman from Harry Karel Klofanda and Co., an industrious ovule, a corpse with a fly in the public cemetery in Munich, a complex sentence about man’s defiant solitude, a lock-jaw, a hammock “with zero-mileage on it”, a wicker chair in a garden, a deckchair that’s been left outside, he sees me standing in the sun, Fermi’s nuclear reactor [...] (164-65)

And He sees a lot more: the Mann family, Beethoven, John Coltrane’s long fingers, the speeches of János Kádár, Rudolph II. And so forth. Péter Esterházy in his The Book of Hrabal fuses his protagonists, an anonymous writer from Budapest and his wife Anna with the Czech writer Bohumil Hrabal and World History. The boy Marcel is the son that Anna will bear at the end story. The list seems random. Next to a vague hint at the post-WWII Soviet occupation of Eastern-Central Europe it also allows for other story lines. The deity with an ardent ambition to play the saxophone leads to Julio Cortazar’s story “El Perseguidor” which pays tribute to the “God” of jazz, Charlie Parker. The deity and his angels are perhaps taken from Wim Wenders’ farewell to the Berlin of the 1980s in Der Himmel über Berlin.

Somewhat malicious readers might detect in this novel, first published in 1990, the blessings
of a freshly introduced market economy where an abundance of supply from world literature may have overwhelmed the demand. As a novel that attempts to establish a dialogue with the Czech Hrabal and that from the perspective of Ulm, near the sources of the Danube, it is both a coda to the pre-1989 era and a prelude to Esterházy’s own Down the Danube. Much more than the latter novel however, it takes dialogue literally: it incorporates the figure of Hrabal into its text and allows its Hungarian protagonists to engage in correspondence with the Czech writer.

Esterházy, more than any other writer of the Central European discourse community, attempted to establish a common, regional discourse. Whereas Esterházy’s encounter with Kiš, both in his necrology and in his subsequent Danube-novel, resulted in smooth texture, a style of intertextuality where the quoted text is seamlessly embedded into the new text, the encounter with Hrabal is marked by ruptures and tension. Whether it played a role in this that Esterházy and Kiš shared Hungarian is a matter of speculation. In any case, the encounter with Hrabal takes place under the sign of a Babel legend, where the tower is in Ulm and the linguistic confusion is Central European: Esterházy seeks to establish dialogue in his national language with Hrabal who writes in Czech. The encounter takes place in the absence of a lingua franca, and this is underlined by repeated references to the work and figure of Franz Kafka.

In an interview with Marianna Birnbaum published in Cross Currents, Esterházy mentions an encounter with Hrabal in Prague. Here too we have a textual and a real life encounter. The latter took place “in the company of mutual acquaintances […] a prearranged meeting in a Prague pub” (Birnbaum 166). The initial contact is awkward: “When László Szigeti wanted to show him [Hrabal] the Czech translation of my story ‘Want to see golden Budapest?’ he threw it back as if it were shit. ‘I have no glasses with me,’’ he screamed… Nevertheless, we gulped down a couple pints of beer” (Birnbaum, 166). The conversation switches to the topic of translation and Hrabal changes his attitude. Esterházy approaches Hrabal by referring to Kafka, telling how “it is a hopeless task to translate Kafka’s sentences because ‘the menacing’ is built into the word order” (166).

Agreement on untranslatability thus creates mutual understanding; and when Esterházy admits that Hrabal’s portrait has been on his desk for a year already, Hrabal begins to “grumble amiably”. When Esterházy reads the three pages from his novel The Book of Hrabal that are in Czech, Hrabal “utters the most outrageous words of praise” (167). Whether Hrabal was actually as impressed as Esterházy’s rendering implies, is unclear. There is no record whatsoever of the encounter in Hrabal’s work. Hrabal was somewhat of a celebrity in those days and Esterházy faced severe competition from other guests in Hrabal’s Stammlokale: a well known photograph shows him flanked by presidents Václav Havel and Bill Clinton.

Hrabal’s reaction is not that important: what concerns me here is how Esterházy’s novel rewrites Kafka, and through this rewriting “contacts” Hrabal. Hrabal’s own engagement with the work of Kafka is intense but problematic: he often mentions his fellow townsman but quotes him only superficially. The Dr. Hrabal in his fictionalized autobiography identifies, as we saw, with Czech-German bilingualism and especially with Prague German. The narrative travesy of this autobiography suggest, however, that the reworking of the bilingual heritage was painful. Literal identification with Kafka occurs in Hrabal’s dream-like story “Kafkaarna”, where the first person’s identity hovers between Hrabal and Kafka. Kinship is also sought in a prose poem Hrabal dedicated to the memory of Franz Kafka, “Adagio Lamentoso” written in 1976 as a post scriptum to the novella Příliš Hlučná Samota (Too Loud a Solitude). The relation to Kafka is rather obscure here in this text that evokes the grimness of post-1968 Prague. The speaking voice addresses a woman figure. The poem is highly erotic and echoes Hrabal’s other references to the Prague brothels Kafka frequented. This eroticism fuses with
the humanist belief that literature is the instrument par excellence of cultural survival: “the future of mankind is a bookstore” (“budoucnost lidstva je knihkupectvi” 87).

Precisely this combination of male sexuality and humanist mission preoccupies Esterházy in his literary game with the figure and the work of Hrabal. The title, *The Book of Hrabal*, indicates this doubleness: the book is about Hrabal, but is it also his book in the sense of classical authorship (a notion that Esterházy’s abundant use of foreign texts challenges)? Or is it rather a book by the woman behind the writer, as Hrabal’s own Libeň-trilogy is largely “Pipsi’s Book”? The writer in *The Book of Hrabal* is commissioned to write about Hrabal, but remains mostly mute whereas his wife writes secret love letters to her husband’s subject.

In the interview with Marianna Birnbaum Esterházy revealed his method. He took from the Kafka-Milena correspondence “the Czech inclusions, because Milena wrote in Czech and when Kafka referred to some of her statements he of course wrote in Czech. And I have used those. It was rather exciting because not even I knew, while writing, how it would all end” (166). In the end, Esterházy took altogether 33 of the Czech inclusions from the Kafka-Milena letters. In 2/3 of the cases Kafka quotes Milena’s words; in other cases he quotes a nurse diagnosing his tuberculosis, or a friend; sometimes, Kafka himself writes a line in Czech. Kafka’s sensitive eye scrutinizes Milena’s words, it seeks their connotations and what Milena may have meant.

As Milena’s letters to Kafka are lost, we do not know how she responded to this. Esterházy stresses Milena’s part in the correspondence, but does not emancipate Milena’s language from Kafka’s. He simply tears the phrases out of their context and starts to play with them, using characters of his novel as actors. To the literal quotations he adds a narrative text in Hungarian, which translates the Czech, rephrasing the original in third- instead of first-person. The Hungarian gives a popular tone to the Czech quotes and adds the responses of the two characters – The Lord and Hrabal – who speak the Czech phrases. The actors are unsure about their part in the dialogue:

**THE LORD:** Pane doktore, s Vámi to dlouho nepotrvává, i.e., you can’t last much longer, doktore.

**HRABAL:** Já jsem ten, který plati, i.e., he’s the one who will have to pay up, on his face reelni hruza, real terror.

**THE LORD:** We got your text mixed up. It’s you, sir, who should be saying, I won’t last much longer, at which I, reelni hruza, and pay up! (162)

The resulting nonsense dialogue can still be said to conform to the aesthetics of Hrabal, who was fond of ready-mades and accidental texts, like the hero in *Too Loud a Solitude* who rejoices in the creations of the press that recycles waste paper and produces collages of old and censored books. But the two figures who perform the dialogue have their white life as narrative characters behind them. The Lord has been instrumental in the plot from the very outset of the story; Hrabal has been passive, a subject of all the other characters who write about him or to him. The dialogue is the only passage where Hrabal is made to speak. As in the real encounter of Esterházy with Hrabal, Kafka stimulates the dialogue.

The text embeds Milena’s phrases in a highly ambiguous narrative that plays with the possibility of autobiography. The novel as a whole is an attempt to communicate with Hrabal and therefore also flirts with offering a biography. The contrast with Hrabal’s fictionalizing technique in the Libeň-trilogy where his wife’s consciousness is laid bare from the first to the last page, is then the central irony of Esterházy’s play with both authors. This question, who can represent whose consciousness? is closely related to the issue of sex and nationality: male
authors enter the consciousness of their wives, and one national language enters the other. Where are the borderlines here? Who watches from which locus?

Esterházy's *The Book of Hrabal* is narrated by an anonymous internal narrator who enters through the agency of several characters into a dialogue with Hrabal's texts concerned with the theme of the author and his family. The family as a frame shapes the experience of history, both temporally by means of generations, and sexually by means of gender. The history is recent: in 1989, when Bohumil Hrabal is seventy-five years old, a writer in Budapest is commissioned to write an essay on him. But the novel's principal character is the writer's wife, Anna, who tells the histories of her family and that of her husband. What emerges is a balancing of individuals' experiences and traumas. Which were worse, the German or the Soviet camps? Which invasion was more cruel, more unjust, that of Budapest in 1956 or that of Prague in 1968? Who suffered more, I or you? Answers to these questions are complicated by their narrative context. Anna does not pose the questions what stories are, what history is, and how one should cope with the problem that "to see a story, and to be in that story, is a contradiction". History with a capital H is the business of males – like her husband, the writer; Anna and her Bohumil, with whom she falls in love, would "make the Danube Confederation of States a reality", but her husband "would never notice; he'd be tickled pink that the problem of the small nations had been solved" (102).

The deity identified as The Lord is the principal character to cope with these philosophical questions. Anna lives through history and the Lord observes her, for he, ironically, needs a mortal's experience in order to grasp a world he has himself created. The question as to the nature of history is posed only at the end of the novel, and the immediate cause is rather banal. Out of sympathy for Anna, the Lord feels the urge to play her the saxophone, but he is said to be an epic creature and has no idea whatsoever about timing. And timing, it becomes clear, is again crucial for the understanding of history. God's final blast on the saxophone, after a short course taught by Charlie Parker, which concludes the novel, is preceded by the previously discussed three-page dialogue between The Lord and Hrabal based on the Kafka-Milena letters.

Milena's discourse is the third female discourse in the intertextual dialogue of Esterházy's novel and Hrabal's family texts. The first is Pipsi's in Hrabal's trilogy, the second is the second chapter of *The Book of Hrabal*, entitled "A chapter of unfaithfulness", which consists in fact of Anna's love letter to Hrabal. What these three female discourses have in common is the role of the wife behind the "great writer", a theme that is interconnected in Esterházy's novel with Hrabal's peculiar narrative device in the Libeň-trilogy. What Dorrit Cohn has called the transparency of the fictional mind (the narrator's ability to present a character's consciousness) was the hidden means by which Hrabal fictionalized his autobiography. Hrabal's narrator was identified as the author's wife; she again behaved like a true autobiographer and had no access to the consciousness of the other characters. Where does Pipsi's ironical depiction of Hrabal as character leaves Pipsi herself? Doesn't she, a fictional character caught between her real and fictional husband, confirm rather than ironize the God-like writer?

The narrative structure of Esterházy's *The Book of Hrabal* addresses this second question and is one of the novel's entries into the work of Hrabal. Esterházy's novel has three basic plots. The first, the story of Anna, is generically ambivalent: in the course of the novel, it becomes clear that Anna's husband, the writer might be the same person as the author Esterházy. This mirrors Hrabal's trilogy, but not exactly: with the exception of Anna's love letter, Anna is a third-person fictional character - and treated as such by the anonymous first-person narrator. The second level is fantastic as well as fictional for depicting The Lord and two angels. But Anna and her husband deduce from the license plate on the angels' Lada that they are members of the ÁVO, the communist Hungarian secret police. The third dimension is
represented by the anonymous first-person narrator, who becomes a character at the end of the novel. He may be Anna’s husband, the writer who is commissioned to write about Hrabal and remains mute throughout the novel.

In the final scene, when The Lord oversees the tower of Ulm and the landscape of the novel, he spots the I ascending the tower, and he also spots the writer: “He saw the writer, he saw Anna and the sentence that except for him no one saw, which contained the words writer and Anna, and he saw himself” (166). Meanwhile the I is waving at the Lord, trying to get his attention: “One last glance at our favourite Ulm, hey, there I am! There! There! At the top of the tower, dizzy, I lean against the wall, the strong gusts of wind beating against my hair […]” (166). The I may be the writer, Anna’s husband. The writer is on several occasions identified as an heir of the Esterházy family. Not directly, however. But there is reference to Joseph Haydn, who was in the service of the Esterházy family, and to the family’s fate, rich before the war, expropriated after the war. The father, Anna’s father-in-law, “the prince” (36) is detained and when he is released “he’ll trample home in the heavy night, covered with dust, his son will be waiting for him at the gate, a whining two-year old towhead whose name, for Anna, is the most precious among all men’s names” (37). A name, we may add on the basis of our discussion in chapter two, that is “too well known to be mentioned”. Anna watches her husband sleep at night and we watch over her shoulder: “He is sleeping next to me, happy; I love to be in bed with him, my husband. He looks contented, tired, exhausted from work, like an animal. I look at his face, spent, wasted, I look at the deep furrows on his brow, his beehive head of hair, he is calm, he is sleeping calmly. And I am restless” (134). The “beehive head of hair” obviously plays with the looks of the author, Esterházy. But here, as in the subsequent Danube novel, the autobiographical pact is never confirmed by the proper name. In the Danube novel, the I will say: “I could say, I am Madame Bovary, I could say, calling for attention, P.E. – c’est moi, or I could say, this I is not a fictitious character, but the novelist, an erudite, bitter, disappointed man” (138-39). The Lord precedes the anonymous I in the Danube novel: “Any creature can say Ego, but only God can say sum – I Am,” said the Lord, casting his moody eyes upon the writer from a great distance” (64).

Who then addresses Hrabal? The Lord, the writer or Anna? The Lord and the writer may be the same figure as the anonymous I, who is the only one not to address Hrabal. Anna writes letters to Hrabal that remain unanswered. To her, there is no difference between Hrabal as a historical person and Hrabal as he appears as either first-person narrator or character in his own texts: she falls in love with the writer on the basis of what she knows from his books. Anna is said to “live the life of a widow of literature”, and part of her initial aversion to her (fourth) pregnancy seems to be related to the inevitable male line of descent and the reduction of her task to mere preserver of the husband’s family name. She resists to the role of the silent other behind the male author. The irony is obvious: a writer keeps silent throughout the story, while The Lord has no understanding of time.

Esterházy’s response to Hrabal’s way of narrating is playful. He parodies Hrabal’s fusion of the male sex with the omniscient fictional eye and the humanist mission of remembering the past through literature. At the same time, if one follows the faint suggestion that Anna’s husband is the author Esterházy, then a narrative hybrid emerges. From this point of view, Anna and her family are hybrid characters, for their minds are accessible to the first-person narrator. Esterházy’s text never treats Hrabal as a fictional character, but his texts are read “diagonally” by Anna. The I, the only character operating at all levels, applies fictional devices to the fictional characters, but factual modes of communication to Hrabal. He seems therefore the main source of ambiguity in the novel. His name is never stated in full, and precisely this indeterminacy allows him to move freely between a factual and a fictional narrative. His fictional detours do lead him, however, into the presence of Hrabal, in the final scene of the novel, when The Lord observes both of them. However ambivalent – the reader is
at a complete loss by now in deciding who watches whom – this final view of a Central European hinterland gives a clue as to where this post-lingua franca of Central Europe might be.

8. And the Lord tore down the Tower of Ulm

Engaged in a Czech-Hungarian dialogue that explicitly excludes Kafka’s German but is watched by The Lord, Esterházy’s The Book of Hrabal leads us in the midst of a Central European rewriting of the Babel legend that may already be post-Central European. Let’s recapitulate. First we contrasted the stance of the national community and the Central Europeans: the former usually highlights that part of the Babel legend that describes the establishment of one’s own tongue, or, in the words of Genesis, of “making a name for ourselves”; the latter identified with the loss of the common language and therefore with the second part of the Babel legend, according to which God created linguistic confusion and dispersed the nations over the face of the earth. Two pre-WWII writers, Kafka and Krleža, illustrated that individual cases may be more complex. Kafka in his speech on the Yiddish language provoked his audience of assimilated Jews, reminding them of the nomadic past they can relive in the Yiddish language. But Kafka himself did not become a linguistic nomad. He wrote in German, the language of the settlers, and in the actual presence of Czech, Yiddish and Hebrew. His was an intermediate position between the two parts of the Babel legend, a constant hovering between the nomad and the sedentary. Krleža felt uneasy about the national Croatian language. Of course, unlike the German of the Prague Jews, the language of the Croats was self-fashioned. It was a product of cultural and political emancipation. Krleža took refuge in one of the older dialects, but only temporarily: he wrote literary texts in it but never fully accepted it. So he too wrote while remembering an older dialect by means of which he challenged the national language and its triumphant account of its own settlement. In his case, the uneasiness about this intermediate position evolved into a specific fictional narrative form, in which none of the voices is authentic and in which a central, organizing narrator appears only as mere suggestion.

Hrabal writes in the linguistic situation after the destruction of the Jewish and Germanophone culture in Central Europe. The national positions survived as Pipsi’s Sudete-German stance and Hrabal’s Czech stance shows in the Liben-trilogy. The two stances clash, both claim kinship with the third party which has disappeared. Before the war, this third party was on the margins, after the war it is in the center of linguistic consciousness, but as a void, a memory of loss and guilt. From now on, any regional dialogue takes place between national languages, without mediation of the third party.

Esterházy’s novel transgresses the post-WWII era and leads into the year 1989. The past is complicated, painful, a continuous source of conflict and of Familienunglück (family disasters, Kiš after Heine). The present is amorphous and the future is uncertain. The vision from the Ulm tower suggests that one can map the present as Central Europe and the lives of its inhabitants as Central European biographies. But each mapping that writes itself into the Central European tradition, faces the absence of a lingua franca, and therefore confusions and misunderstandings that are local and historical. Local means that one draws on the experiences of a past and lost bilingualism; historical means that this local experience is cumulative. The lingua franca of German had its own ways of seeking for meaning (Kafka scrutinizing Milena’s phrases) and the national languages were from the individual point of view far less powerful instruments of literary communication than the advocates of national reawakening imagined it to be (Krleža’s discontent). More recently there is post-lingua franca writing that confronts the limitations of the national languages. What remains is the memory
of a shared language, and the proponents of Central Europe located their sense of community, of “shared tone and sensibility” in this memory. When Esterházy puts this metaphorical lingua franca to the test, its nostalgia becomes immediately apparent. But one also comes to understand the need to communicate one’s own past, even if this is a history of misunderstanding.

Esterházy’s *The Book of Hrabal* creates a new lingua franca by letting understanding and misunderstanding interact. The novels shows that like the memory of multilingualism, the genre of fictionalized autobiography is extremely sensitive to its own generic history. It crosses national borders and so becomes a regional genre; and it celebrates as much the possibilities of fiction as it is aware of the limitations of facts. To fictionalize means here to detach other voices, viewpoints and perspectives from that of the autobiographer. Its representation of the autobiographer’s life is therefore intersubjective - some of the subjects who focalize are factual, other fictional; sometimes the distinction cannot be maintained, when the narrative means are blurred beyond classification.

The discourse on Central Europe was intersubjective in a similar way. There too, one crossed national and linguistic boundaries in order to see the similarities between one’s own and someone else’s experience. What distinguishes the genre of fictionalized autobiography and the lives it presents, from the Central European discourse, is its constant awareness and use of, and play with genre. In short, when the Central European discourse claims it crosses national borders, it expresses an intention. Fictionalized autobiography is located at the border and always speaks from a borderland.

A last example. Both Péter Esterházy and Claudio Magris in his travelogue *Danubio* travel the Danube landscape; both explore the idea of Central Europe and contemplate whether there is a common history. Both also climb towers. We have seen Esterházy ascending the Ulm tower but we did not know whom we were following as we ascended, nor did we know whom we watched from the ensuing bird’s eye perspective. How different in kind is Magris’ climbing. In Sighișoara (Schässburg/Segesvár), Transylvania (part of Magris’ “Pannonia”, the section title of his travelogue), Magris climbs the local tower “Torre dell’Orologio” (338). From within the tower, from within the very clockwork, he contemplates:

> From this observatory, life seems just a waste of time […]. Conviction, inner peace, resistance against the general mobilization of everyday life, is love for something else, something more than life, something that emerges only during the break, during intermissions, when the mechanisms take a rest, when the government and the world are on vacation in the literal sense of *vacare*, being empty, absent, when only the high and strong light of summer exists. (340)

Magris expresses his longing after having traveled more than 300 pages along the Danube. At this point one can understand and even sympathize with his craving for a “vacation” from history. But if we read his passage with Esterházy’s parody in mind, his intention slightly changes: Esterházy’s rewriting reminds us that Magris speaks like a traveler in a travelogue. It also reminds us that Magris speaks from within the Italian, though as a Germanist he also focalizes via the German language. In contrast to the endemic Central European gaze, his is a fresh look at the region: his sees history though his speech is not burdened with it. But his wish for a place from which one can speak independently, which echoes György Konrád’s longing for a political locus amoenus, produces a counter-effect. This wish, beside literary and philosophical, is also deeply political: Magris gives in fact a rather utopian resumé of the Central European project. His wish is to transcend his - spatial, political, historical and linguistic – perspective and to reach a supranational perspective. I am not sure that he
succeeds. Esterházy’s climbing, on the other hand, departs from a narrative that is so blurred when it comes to genre, so deeply drenched in the multilingual memory from the region that when the I reaches the top it no longer matters whether his perspective fulfills this wish for objectivity. The reader has shared from the very outset Esterházy’s multi-focal perspective.