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Guilt without crime: anomalies of fault in interwar Central European prose

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Abstract: This article examines representations of crime in interwar Central European prose in which the causal link between a determinate act and culpability is broken or inverted. Drawing on Milan Kundera's reading of Kafka and Paul Ricoeur's typology of fault, it analyses four cases in which crime is represented as absent, manufactured, phantom or misrecognised, asking whether this reversal is unique to *The Trial* or belongs to a wider mesoregional repertoire. In Weiner's "The Empty Chair," an objectless offense is pursued and then withdrawn, leaving only a relationless offense. In Gombrowicz's "A Premeditated Crime," the narrator-judge constructs a murder from appearances and forces the son to mime it on an already dead body. In Hostovský's *The Arsonist*, a village assembles a phantom arsonist from disparate acts and inscriptions. Finally, in Cholnoky's *Prikk's heavenly journey* and *Thomas*, the protagonists invent or misrecognize a homicide. Ricoeur's distinction between realist sin and phenomenalist guilt supplies the analytic grid: who accuses, whether the named act occurs, and whether the resulting affect seeks amendment or only self-punishment. What is found recurring is a distinctly Central European reflection on the representation of crime as something to be sought, manufactured or misrecognized rather than simply punished – an interwar repertoire later displaced, in postwar absurdism, from interior imputation onto the institution.

Keywords: *guilt without crime; autoculpabilisation; Milan Kundera; Richard Weiner; Witold Gombrowicz; Egon Hostovský; László Cholnoky; Franz Kafka.*

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Introduction: the anomalies of guilt and crime

The representation of crime has a substantial critical genealogy, moving from a structural analysis of narrative to legal and philosophical interrogations of culpability. Tzvetan Todorov's structural analysis treats plot movement as a syntax of transformations. In his account, a narrative begins in equilibrium, is disrupted by an unforeseen event, and seeks a new equilibrium through recognition and repair. The elementary verbs of this syntax are transgression and punishment: a violation of order necessitates a corrective action that restores, or at least re-establishes, balance. On this model, crime is not an optional theme but the disruptive predicate that sets the sequence in motion; without it, the plot lacks the causal force that drives the reader from one state to the next (Todorov 70–6). A. J. Greimas's actantial grammar presses the same insight further into the deep structure of narrative. The prohibition–violation pair is one of the fundamental oppositions that organize the performance of the actant; the narrative advances only when a prohibition is breached and a new relation of force is established. In both models, the deed is presupposed: the grammar of the plot requires that something has been done, so that something else may be done in response (see *Structural Semantics*).

In the law-and-literature field, scholars examine this structural presupposition through its juridical consequences. María José Falcón y Tella's recent study, *Guilt and Punishment in Law and Literature* (2026), places Cervantes, Dostoevsky, and Kafka on a single axis because each stages the migration of legal categories of guilt and punishment into fictional form. The book's opening chapters establish a theoretical frame drawing on psychology, religion, and positive law before turning to the literary works in which those categories are tested, distorted, or left without their expected object. Ritchie Robertson's chapter "The Intricate Ways of Guilt" in *Kafka: Judaism, Politics, and Literature* (1985) situates *The Trial* within the genre of the metaphysical crime novel, whose greatest nineteenth-century exemplar is Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. Robertson argues that Kafka reintroduces elements of Gothic fantasy into the form Dostoevsky had adapted to verisimilitude, so the proceedings against Josef K. retain the outward shape of a criminal trial while emptying the charge of determinate content. The novel remains legible as crime fiction, yet it never produces the crime itself (90–3).

Barbara Chyrowicz's philosophical essay "Unwarranted Guilt and Illusory Innocence" (2022) formulates the relation that the fiction examined here enacts. She argues that guilt need not follow the commission of an act for which someone might be blamed; believing one is guilty is not the same as actual guilt. The innocent may feel guilty for an evil s/he only involuntarily caused, or over which they had only minimal influence. The guilty, conversely, may inhabit an illusion of innocence produced by a misunderstanding of moral standards or by a loss of moral sensitivity. The essay thus separates the feeling of guilt from the fact of a deed, and in doing so supplies a precise conceptual counterpart to the anomaly that runs through the interwar texts (35–64).

Within Central European studies, Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer's four-volume *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe* (2004-2010) mapped the region's shared and divergent formations across political junctures, topographies, institutions and stereotypes. The volumes drew the regional map without tracing, though,

the broken link between crime and guilt as a connective thread. Adriana Babeti et al.'s *Dictionary of 20th-Century Central European Novels* (2025), a monumental dictionary of the twentieth-century Central European novel, goes further in its introduction with a single diagnostic sentence. Writing about the identity crisis that marks the region's literature amid historical and social uncertainty and anxiety, they observe that evil is surrounded, guilt is delimited, and the scapegoat, the source and carrier of every disturbance, is found and eliminated like a contagious pathogen. In times of crisis, the social corpus produces imaginary culprits, usually drawn from marginalized groups or minorities.

Milan Kundera, perhaps the most frequently cited author in Central European studies, a Czech immigrant and Francophone writer, examined the anomalies of the relationship between guilt and crime in Central European society, without limiting it to the communist era. In the fifth part of *The Art of the Novel* (2005), Kundera reads Kafka against Max Brod's allegorical interpretation: in Kafka, those in power evoke a pseudo-theological language. He argues that the cause-and-effect relation illustrated by Raskolnikov is reversed in Josef K.'s case: the crime does not seek punishment; instead, "the 'autoculpabilization' machine goes into motion. The accused seeks his offense" (Kundera, *The Art*, 103). Meanwhile, at the Castle, Amalia is punished for something for which no verdict has been handed down: "The father begs the Castle to state his daughter's crime. So, it is not enough to say that the punishment seeks the offense. In this pseudo-theological world, the punished beg for recognition of their guilt!" (Kundera, *The Art* 103)

What follows examines works by Central European authors in which the causal relation among crime, punishment, and guilt is disturbed: punishment finds the crime; a missing act underpins guilt; or guilt arises from false consciousness. The corpus is confined to the interwar years. Effect without cause, and guilt without crime, are often taken to characterise the absurdism that developed after the Second World War, yet they already appear, alongside Kafka – so frequently named that movement's forefather – in the work of several other Central European writers. The question is whether guilt without crime belongs to a wider East-Central European repertoire of fault.

Under Kafka's overcoat in Central Europe?

The motif of guilt without a corresponding crime – whether framed as false conscience, unfounded self-accusation, or the interiorisation of an uncommitted transgression – occupies a distinctive place in modern European literature. At its theoretical core stands Sigmund Freud's account of the superego and the unconscious sense of guilt. In *The Ego and the Id* (1923), Freud argued that the superego, formed through the internalisation of parental and cultural prohibitions, can generate feelings of culpability that remain inaccessible to consciousness (52).

Franz Kafka's *The Trial* (1925) offers one of the most concentrated fictional explorations of this structure. Josef K. is arrested without ever learning the nature of the charge against him; the proceedings follow an opaque institutional logic that never discloses a concrete offense. Yet he gradually internalises the presumption of guilt, culminating in an almost voluntary submission to execution. The novel thus dramatises what Freud termed an unconscious sense of guilt and what later theorists would describe

as persecutory guilt in pure form: culpability without crime, accusation without content, and a conscience that operates independently of any identifiable moral failing (see Freud, *The Ego*). Walter Benjamin read this condition as a prehistoric, quasi-original guilt imposed by an inscrutable paternal Law, while Theodor Adorno emphasised its social and administrative character, seeing in Kafka's figures the creaturely subjects of a system that produces guilt as a structural given rather than as the consequence of any particular act (see Benjamin; Adorno).

Benjamin's 1934 essay on Kafka is decisive precisely because it refuses to treat Josef K.'s culpability as a psychological accident ("Franz Kafka" 796–7). For Benjamin, Kafka's world is a primeval world (*Vorwelt*) or an indifferent, swamp world (*Sumpfwelt*): a prehistorical swamp in which right and wrong have not yet been differentiated, and in which every creature is at once guilty and a victim of the Law (796-7; 808-9). Guilt here is not the residue of a forgotten deed but the mark of an immemorial paternal order that has survived only as distortion, as the 'Haggadah' to a missing Halakhah, a narrative clinging to a commandment whose content can no longer be stated. The court does not discover an offense; it reactivates guilt already in force (795-7).

Adorno, writing two decades later in the "Notes on Kafka," secularises this diagnosis without dissolving it (243–71). What Benjamin still names in theological and mythic terms, Adorno relocates in the administered world: Kafka's figures are 'creaturely' subjects of a system that produces guilt as a structural given, independent of any particular act. The religious apparatus – law, accusation, judgement, shame – survives, but as an 'inverse theology', emptied of redemption (248; 252).

In this sense, Adorno and Benjamin converge on the same structural claim that Freud had formulated inwardly: culpability need not follow crime; it may precede it, outlast it, or replace it altogether (Freud, *The Ego* 52; "Some Character-Types" 332–3). Milan Kundera, reading Kafka from the vantage of Central Europe, would later formulate this inversion with polemical clarity. Where Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov still moves from offense to punishment, Kafka reverses the sequence: punishment goes in search of a crime. Unable to endure an unmotivated penalty, the accused begins to rummage through his own life for a fault that might justify it, an operation Kundera calls 'autoculpabilisation.' The Prague engineer under police surveillance who finally 'commits' the emigration of which he had been falsely suspected is, for Kundera, the historical counterpart of Josef K.: the penalty finds its offense after the fact. Between Freud's unconscious sense of guilt, Benjamin's prehistoric Law, Adorno's administrative production of culpability, and Kundera's Central European 'punishment in search of a crime,' a single theoretical figure comes into view, one that subsequent interwar prose in the region, from Weiner and Hostovský to Gombrowicz, would recast in psychological, communal and formal rather than strictly juridical terms.

The writers under discussion are linked by more than this motif. Literary histories usually place them within psychological prose; yet their narratives are strongly parabolic, treat the events they recount as models, and press ontological and moral dilemmas with unusual force. Their protagonists' solitude is not merely abandonment but existential alienation. In their reception, comparison with Kafka is routine, with almost no exception, as if they had stepped from beneath his overcoat. Their biographical situations, too, overlap:

several move with ease in Jewish culture, as Kafka did.

Witold Gombrowicz was placed beside Kafka by one of his first interpreters. Bruno Schulz (1988), reviewing *Ferdydurke*, already noted the kinship. The comparison is significant precisely because it precedes any claim of genetic influence and registers a shared preoccupation with the subject's incomplete formation under an opaque authority. A later monograph by Małgorzata Klentak-Zabłocka (2005) reads *Ferdydurke* in parallel with *The Trial*, concentrating on generational conflict, the likeness of Josef K. and Józio, and the problem of immaturity. This focus matters for both writers: the accusation arrives before the capacity to commit or justify a determinate offense. What Schulz registered, and Klentak-Zabłocka analysed, is therefore not merely a formal resemblance but an early recognition of the structure this study examines: guilt that precedes, or outruns, the crime.

Richard Weiner spent most of his life in Paris, and domestic criticism discovered him late. "The Empty Chair," published in the 1919 collection *The Grimace*, at the moment of his departure for France, has since become the story most often singled out. Reception describes him as a Jew, homosexual, immigrant, a figure of foreignness. Attention to the work was delayed until after the Second World War and became central only after 1989. Comparative studies reading Kafka in parallel with Weiner are now numerous; those by Filip Charvát, Hans Dieter Zimmermann and Peter Zusi are among the most consequential.

Of particular importance for reading Weiner and Kafka together – and Egon Hostovský with both – is Vladimír Papoušek's monograph (1996), which places these writers, alongside Jan Čep, Jakub Deml, Ladislav Klíma and Jan Weiss, within a Central European existentialism read through Camus, Sartre and, in Hostovský's case, Dostoevsky (see Papoušek, *The existentialists*). Hostovský's life, like the others', was shaped by emigration. American critics compared him to Kafka during his lifetime, but Hostovský rejected the comparison (Kautman 89). By his own account, he, like Gombrowicz, came to Kafka late. As with Weiner, genetic influence can therefore be excluded. Some interpretations have traced the resemblance to Jewish origin. The claim is too simple, yet it is not empty: existential alienation and the sense of belonging nowhere can be referred to modern Jewish identity – and, in Weiner's case, to homosexuality – even where neither organised the writers' self-presentation.

The Kafka parallel also appears in the reception of László Cholnoky. One important interpreter stresses not only his isolation within the Hungarian literary tradition but his place in a wider twentieth-century constellation: "It is precisely the visionary motifs of László Cholnoky's works that are more directly connected to a completely Kafkaesque circle of 20th-century world literature, and that it was precisely in vision that the writer was able to build into his prose elements of life, even if only episodically, that Hungarian prose otherwise resisted" (Bori 61).

Like Gombrowicz, Cholnoky was not Jewish. He was, however, keenly interested in questions of Jewish identity. A philo-Semitic member of the gentry, he argued for the cooperation of these two social groups and thematised Jewish identity in a number of writings, as a later thematic selection makes clear (see Cholnoky, *Ear of Wheat*). Kundera's influential essay *A Kidnapped West: The Tragedy of Central Europe* ascribes to Jewish genius a founding role in the culture of the region: "Aliens everywhere and everywhere at home, lifted above national quarrels, the Jews in the twentieth century were the principal

cosmopolitan, integrating element in Central Europe: they were its intellectual cement, a condensed version of its spirit, creators of its spiritual unity" (43). A specific sub-aspect of this study of the reversed relationship between crime and guilt may thus arise from alienation stemming from Jewish identity, exclusion, and the particular relationship to the (religious) Law, but we can state in advance that this cannot explain the problem.

The early comparison of Gombrowicz with Kafka is not an isolated observation. It points to a structural feature that reappears under different conditions in Weiner, Hostovský, and Cholnoky. In each case, the Kafka parallel was either unavailable at the time of composition or explicitly rejected by the author, so that genetic influence can be ruled out. What remains is a shared narrative situation: an accusation or disturbance whose content is never fully disclosed, and a subject required to furnish a fault in response. Papoušek's existential reading of Weiner and Hostovský, and Kautman's record of Hostovský's refusal of the Kafka comparison, confirm that the resemblance is not biographical but structural, whereas in Cholnoky the typological parallels appeared. The four writers are linked not by a common source but by a common anomaly: the causal sequence in which a determinate crime precedes and justifies guilt is interrupted, and the interruption itself becomes the object of representation. Treating the comparisons as mere reception history misses the point; they point to a problem the present study seeks to isolate and distinguish.

Dostoevsky's famous assertion that we all come out of Gogol's "Overcoat" does not apply to Kafka. The authors analysed in this study did not develop under Kafka's literary influence. They either did not know his writings at the time, or discovered them only long after they had already written their own texts.

The four writers are therefore linked not by a common source but by a common anomaly: the causal sequence in which a determinate crime precedes and justifies guilt is interrupted, and the interruption itself becomes the object of representation. The initial hypothesis is therefore the more pressing. The anomalies in the relation of crime, guilt and sin appear across the region's interwar prose, yet they are not the property of a single authorial origin, nor – as the reception of Kafka, Weiner and Hostovský has sometimes suggested – of Jewish identity alone.

What the comparisons register is a recurrent situation rather than a shared lineage: an opaque tribunal, an alien measure, a subject required to furnish an act for a charge that precedes him. To derive the motif from origin would collapse a structure of fault into a single myth of who "we" are. Instead, the task is to map its variants.

Guilt without crime: Ricoeur's typology of fault

The motif of guilt without a corresponding crime rests on a distinction that ordinary usage collapses: crime as a determinate act, guilt as a structure of self-relation. Ricoeur's typology of fault keeps that distinction open. He separates defilement, an external stain and contagious burden; sin, the subject's ontological situation before a covenant or summons, whether or not it is known; and guilt, the subjective moment when conscience becomes the measure of evil (*The Symbolism of Evil* 25–150). Sin is realist and qualitative. Guilt is phenomenalist: "man is guilty as he feels himself guilty; guilt in the pure state has become

a modality of man the measure" (Ricoeur 104). The motif arises where phenomenalist guilt detaches from realist sin yet still speaks the language of stain, weight and accusation. It is not metaphysical guilt, survivor's guilt, or tragic entanglement with a wicked god. It is the ascription to the self of a particular deed that the narrative withholds, displaces, or never permits to occur.

Two slippages must be blocked. Sin is not a name for collective panic, relief at a death, or existential unease; it requires the category 'before God', or a measure that is not the subject's own feeling (Ricoeur 50–4). Guilt is not simply self-accusation. It is the shift from "'against thee, thee only' to 'it is I who'" (103), and that 'I' may be produced by the subject or forced upon him by an alien conscience – an institution, a narrator-judge, a community. Once the emphasis shifts this way, conscience can become a solitary tribunal. At the limit, Ricoeur calls this impasse the guilt of an accusation without an accuser and a court without a judge (*The Symbolism of Evil* 139–50). Because guilt admits degrees, it seeks a named act by which the self can calibrate itself (Ricoeur 100–8). The fiction of an uncommitted crime answers that demand. The subject furnishes a concrete transgression so that an otherwise empty self-accusation can be narrated. Freud's guilt that precedes the deed is a related, inverted mechanism (see "Some Character-Types"); here the deed is more often withheld, misrecognised, or manufactured after the feeling. Ricoeur does not replace that account, but clarifies the semantic layers in which the mechanism is articulated. The corresponding affect is persecutory rather than reparative.

Crime and guilt fall out of alignment in several ways. An act may be named and never occur; a lesser or later act may stand in for the one named; traces may be supplied after the fact; or the charge may remain objectless and harden into a phantom the community can hunt. Defilement returns where the burden behaves like contagion. Sin is to be used only where the text itself moves 'coram Deo,' or names an offense unrelated to things and people, measured only by conscience. Intensity alone is still guilt.

The readings therefore ask five questions. Is a determinate act named, and does it take place – or does another act replace it? Who accuses: God, an institution, Form, a community, a narrator, or the subject alone? In which symbols – stain, tribunal, curse – is the missing deed carried? Does the guilt seek amendment or only self-punishment? Does the text leave conscience as a measure of realist sin, or does it only appear to do so? On that basis, the study turns to Kafka, Weiner, Hostovský, Gombrowicz, and Cholnoky, whose works force crime and guilt out of alignment.

Richard Weiner, "The Empty Chair": the accused seeks his offense

Richard Weiner's third collection, *The Grimace* (1919), is experimental prose in which the narrator treats the situation he recounts as a model. The conventional epic narration of events gives way to the act of utterance; plot is formed not by what happens but by what is said. In "Hands," the narrator is forced into the role of rival by remarks exchanged during a visit to a couple. In "A Voice on the Phone," a relationship with an unknown woman caller is constructed solely by speech; the meeting never takes place.

Reviewing the volume, Karel Čapek described Weiner's prose as "the intrusion of

something unknown and unknowable into the flow of life"[1] ("Richard Weiner" 63). Jindřich Chalupecký, reading the oeuvre through expressionism, made a related claim: "This concept is irrational as absolute beauty, but it has special consequences for Weiner's poetics" (*The Expressionists* 24). That unknown enters most sharply in "An Empty Chair," perhaps Weiner's most discussed story: a trivial incident opens onto a complete existential crisis.

The tale is built around an anecdotal core. The narrator meets an old friend in the street outside his flat and invites him in. The friend calls at a shop, saying he will follow, and never arrives. The incident is treated as a model, more precisely as a meta-narrative, since the narrator sets out to write a story about the event and fails. Narrative configuration is given not by plot but by reasoning, by investigation. The narrator works through each variation, searching for why the friend did not come. Narratability coincides with the discovery of a cause for the irrational event – or of its lack of cause – and the stake is existential: "...on the realization of the narrative idea depends all my existence," hence the horror ('úděs') that grows as the mystery remains unsolved (Weiner 372; 387).

The spiral culminates in a realisation that maximises that horror. When none of the variations can be proved, the narrator concludes that the friend stayed away because of some fault, a sin, unknown to him: "So it is my fault! But I ask further: When did it happen? [...] I have wronged a friend, gravely wronged him, being absent and unaware. Deeply unaware. And I see: one cannot live in a terror more dreadful than this one" (Weiner 388). Punishment follows from this guilt ('provinění') and is held to be just, though the crime is unknown. Peter Zusi, reading the story alongside Kafka's *The Trial* and likening the investigation to Titorelli's reasoning, argues that the horror which widens into a *horror vacui* is not merely described: "This mysterious Guilt does not simply describe psychic horror but rather instantiates it" ("States of Shock" 141). The closing twist is the genuine shock. When the narrator later meets his friend by chance, the friend knows nothing of the visit that never happened. "I understood that I was guilty of nothing on him, but of the punishment that overtook me, for that great crime that has no relation to things and people, that produces evil not through objects, but directly through themselves, secret and unfruitful, the curse of my life" (Weiner 390).

The climax is Ricoeur's guilt: the narrator seeks an act, the friend becomes the object of the accusation, and his own conscience becomes the measure (*The Symbolism of Evil* 100–8). The ending withdraws that imputation – the friend knows nothing – and places the punishment on a relationless "offense", which has "no relation to things and people". What remains is not automatically Ricoeur's sin, an ontological state before God. Papoušek's formula, "there is [...] an ostentatious transfer of metaphysical guilt...," names a transfer of guilt, but it misses the religious 'before God' (*The existentialists* 63). The case is better understood as an impasse of guilt (Ricoeur 139–50), tilting toward sin as a condition rather than an act: the accusation has no addressee in the world and therefore cannot be resolved. The absence of crime is not proof of metaphysical guilt – it is the condition under which the burden remains unanswerable.

[1] My translation. Unless I refer to a specific edition, the English translations of the quotations that appear later are also my own.

Witold Gombrowicz, “A Premeditated Crime”: the accuser seeks the offense

In Witold Gombrowicz’s first collection, *Bacacay* (*Memoirs from the Time of Puberty*), “A Premeditated Crime” stages crime and guilt as a parody of detective fiction. The narrator, a judge, travels to Ignacy K.’s country house. There he learns that his acquaintance, K. has died in the night. He doubts that the death was natural; suspicion hardens into certainty that it was murder. The dramaturgy of investigation is not the discovery and reconstruction of a crime, as the genre would lead one to expect, but its invention. From signs gathered during his stay, the narrator builds a coherent order of proof: that no carriage was sent to the station; the family’s reserved mourning; that K.’s son, Antoni – like Meursault at his mother’s funeral in Camus – did not cry; that the wife has for some time slept in another room; a cockroach crushed in the bedroom; Antoni locking and then opening the maid’s room at night. “And I began with considerable perspicacity to link the chain of facts, to create syllogisms, spin threads, and search for evidence” (Gombrowicz 47). He continues this coherent structuring of the crime even though no mark is visible on the body’s neck. When Antoni confesses that he has no idea why he closed and then opened the door, and that he was in fact glad of his father’s death, the accusation drives him to a psychological extreme: he not only admits the deed but begins to strangle the corpse, leaving his fingerprints on it. Causality is reversed. K.’s death is not the effect of the crime; it becomes its cause.

Crime is therefore constructed not as an act but as a product of coherence. Guilt is a missing crime. Dapía puts the judge’s case exactly: there is no crime (the heart fails from natural causes), yet the judge produces one because the network of behaviour requires a murder (“Two Ways” 114–5). In Ricoeur’s language, guilt demands degrees and therefore a nameable act: the judge enforces that act. The starting point is not the boy’s false conscience; the boy is innocent, but an alien conscience that ascribes the deed to another. The crime is not an interiorized self-accusation; it is produced by Form, by narration.

Besides Dapía, several readings treat the story as a parody of detective fiction and attend to its use of genre. Kazimierz Bartoszyński argues that the poetics of crime fiction is governed by three principles: the indisputable fact of the crime, which can only be recognised; the false appearances that surround it and must be exposed; and an epistemological optimism that reconstruction is possible (“It doesn’t matter” 109–10). Classic detection reconstructs the indisputable against appearance; here, conversely, the fact is built from appearances. Bartoszyński contends that the narrator does not advance logical proofs but appearances that constitute the object of the solution and prelude a creative act. In detective fiction, crime is a remote exception. In Gombrowicz, it is an extreme negative tension among persons, possible everywhere. Despite the pious tone, crime is omnipresent and can always be called up (Bartoszyński 113–6).

Ricoeur holds that guilt has degrees and therefore requires a nameable act. Bartoszyński shows how that act arises here: not from the figure’s self-accusation, but from the mutual invocation of the detective’s role and the form of criminality. Antoni’s development is not a Weiner-like recognition of ontological guilt. The crime is written onto him: he plays the murderer by a subsequent mimesis of murder. Gombrowicz views offense not as internal,

empty self-blame, but as something the outside world inflicts and manufactures. What criticism has scarcely noticed is the problem of conscience. There are many signs that the family, the wife, and especially Antoni have a bad conscience: they feel guilty in their grief, apparently because they were relieved by K.'s death, because he had been a burden.

This is not Ricoeurian sin. It is not a state before God, only the discomfort of conscience. The judge translates that unaccused burden into guilt, because phenomenalist guilt demands degrees and a nameable act (*The Symbolism of Evil* 100–8). The coherent network of signs creates the act to which it can adhere. Crime is first absent, then appears in Antoni's later mimesis – the strangling of the corpse. The story is not a recognition of ontological guilt, but an extreme case of pure guilt: the judge's narration measures the offense as "the modality of man as measure" (104).

Egon Hostovský, *The Arsonist*: the community seeks an offender

Egon Hostovský's *The Arsonist* (1935) is both psychological prose and a parable about the nature of crime and guilt. A heterodiegetic narrator follows events over half a year, focalized through Kamil Šimon, the son of the innkeeper in a border village. Several fires break out, attributed to a mysterious arsonist whose identity is withheld until the end. The first blaze is blamed on an unknown stranger, a Prussian from across the frontier, seized after a quarrel in the tavern, who then escapes; the suspicion is unfounded. The fires are repeated. In time the unknown arsonist announces the next with a notice nailed up. Terror takes the village; the word that gives the novel its title becomes "a new word for fear" (46).

Kamil, still a schoolboy, comes of age in a household whose members live in cold estrangement from one another. The mother is withdrawn and resigned to an unhappy marriage; Kamil's relationship with his sister Eliška is already fraught, and Dora's arrival sharpens it. After he meets Dora, his attraction is ambivalent, her behaviour capricious and destructive. When passion first overtakes him, Dora enters a metonymic relation with the fires that appear without warning: both figure irrationality. "Dora is fire. If you write those three words, you have written nonsense. However, if you silently repeat them with your closed eyes, you will understand their truth. Kamil closes his eyes. She is no longer quite out of the game. Dora is fire! Truth and nonsense. Truth in nonsense. Reality, which keeps slipping through your fingers. It is just as illogical and fantastic as real life" (Hostovský 71). Fire gathers several meanings. Kamil's friend, from whom he grows apart, is fascinated by it and treats destruction as the chance of a new beginning, echoing a nephew's revolutionary fervour: "the world must burn down and be rebuilt again!" (44)

Kautman's remark on the motif is to the point: "[a]lmost every work of Hostovský can be understood as a symbol that is broken down into other symbolic meanings, because for Hostovský, as for Kafka, the polysemy of their symbols is typical" (*The Polarity of Our Age* 114). The narrator is not omniscient. He does not disclose the arsonist, and the reader knows no more than the characters. The plot follows the outline of a mystery, but Hostovský's command of focalisation shifts the suspicion of arson – of the crime – from place to place, producing a succession of hypotheses as to the culprit. He does not pursue a detective reconstruction of the deeds; he tests guilt by interrogating motive. Suspicion finally settles on Kamil. The narrator's increasingly suggestive insinuations lead the reader

to distrust him and wonder whether Kamil has simply withheld the crime. The pressure is strongest when the mother, without speaking the charge, directly suspects her son, who denies it. The ending discloses the structure rather than a single perpetrator. Several characters, for several motives, have set fires; from these acts the village has assembled the phantom of the arsonist. Kamil did not light them. He did, however, write the two threatening inscriptions that gave the others the idea. His guilt is therefore ambivalent from the first: he committed no arson, at least not directly, yet he is not clear of guilt, since the messages opened the chain. Read as a psychological Bildung, the novel treats growing up, in Kamil's case, as an education in acts and their consequences. As Vladimír Papoušek writes, "[t]he arsonist is imagined as something almost insignificant, but still existing, like a smallpox virus or another epidemic. The arsonist is not important as a concrete figure, but as a phenomenon" (*Egon Hostovský* 71).

Papoušek's analogy invites comparison with Camus's *The Plague*, which Camus described as a figure for the absurdity of evil, Nazism displaced onto the epidemic. It is tempting to say that Hostovský wrote a parable of irrational sin: guilt does not arrive from across the border; the culprit is not the unknown stranger; the village, like Oedipus, hunts its own fault; crime seems collective and ubiquitous. Papoušek himself goes further: "[t]he guilt in Hostovský's works is metaphysical, belongs to each individual, is part of his existence and deepens with each awareness of responsibility for human society" (*Egon Hostovský* 93). The close, however, does not unmask the arsonist, but dissociates crime from guilt. The village phantom comprises several separately motivated acts and Kamil's two inscriptions. He is not the perpetrator named in the title, yet he can still be implicated – part of the chain of consequences. In Ricoeur's terms, this remains the phenomenalism of guilt: the offense has degrees. The measure is suspicion, the mother's accusation and the son's own conscience, not an ontological situation before God. Collective horror, the "a new word for fear" and the epidemic spread of fire speak the contagious language of defilement. The hunt for a scapegoat is the community's demand for an embodied culprit. Ricoeur's sin does not follow from either. What Papoušek calls "metaphysical guilt" – guilt belonging to each existence and deepening when responsibility for the community is refused – is, in the novel, guilt swollen to a totality, "the modality of man as measure" (Ricoeur 104), not the breach of a covenant. Kamil's coming of age is precisely the insight into that slippage: deed and guilt do not coincide, and the phantom is the product of the village's own measure.

László Cholnoky, *Prikk's Heavenly Journey* and *Thomas*: the self-accuser seeks the crime

The protagonists of László Cholnoky's prose are figures of split consciousness. Their duality is staged through the double and the mirror, through levels of imagination and the crossing of those levels. "A system of dualities and doublings can therefore be observed in László Cholnoky's works," writes Imre Bori, who, given the intensity of vision, dream, and reverie, also calls the heroes dual-lived (*Fridolin and his brothers* 49). In his account, Cholnoky moves from Art Nouveau towards a kind of pre-surrealism (Bori 33); because imagination is so fully staged, "we can also call him a writer of surrealist illusions, who,

however, manages to preserve his sense of reality throughout" (47). The balance Bori describes follows from a regular arrangement. The protagonist's consciousness constructs an alternative reality; the heterodiegetic narrator keeps his distance and withholds didactic explanation, so that only the reader sees the false consciousness take shape. What criticism has scarcely noticed is that this false consciousness produces not merely error but a false conscience, and that the latter motivates action and therefore plot.

In Cholnoky, false guilt is always tied to a particular event, a particular crime, which the character has not committed and yet believes – knows – himself to have committed. The two clearest cases are an early story and a posthumous novel, linked by the same motif: *Prikk's Heavenly Journey* (1918) and *Thomas: Story of a Struggling Life* (1929). Both title figures take themselves for murderers; in both, guilt rests on false consciousness. As with many of Cholnoky's characters, the split in the homeless, struggling Prikk is bound to drink: "...the whole thing was a painful Saint Vitus' dance of a struggling soul, which once, somewhere, lost its balance during its wanderings in some terribly faraway wilderness" (*Piroska* 51). He begins the day sober, with a confused sense of injury; intoxication loosens his consciousness. At night he sleeps under a bush on the edge of town. While Prikk sleeps, two students show up unexpectedly and make a bet. The loser leaves his money with the homeless man, who finds it the next morning. At first, he believes that Jesus has sent it. A "new" Prikk is born when he prays in church. The narrator marks the fracture of narrative identity by distinguishing the "old" from the "new" Prikk, as the hero vows to set his ruined life in order on the coins. Tibor Gintli has stressed the force of this narrative reinterpretation: "The motifs mentioned by the narrator, as well as some of the narrator's evaluative and judgmental statements, take on a radically new meaning or are rendered invalid in the course of reading" ("Cholnoky László" 662).

The effort fails; the "old" Prikk returns and drinks again. In the night, under a sensory illusion, he stabs his reflection, is cut by the glass, and faints. Only then does he find the fifty-crown banknote in his pocket. Bloody clothes and a knife persuade him that he has killed and robbed someone. Fear of exposure and guilt now drive him. He dares not spend the money; obsessions gather, and he prays to Christ for "reparation", first for the murder, then as a name for universal redemption. At the height of the madness, leaving the church, he sees himself in a mirror and grasps that the guilt is false: "I thought I had killed a man, and he showed me that [...] I had killed myself, and this was true until he immediately showed me the way to resurrection" (Cholnoky, *Piroska* 97). By this, Prikk means suicide, the only act in which he can paradoxically realize himself, and with which the story ends. The text does not say so outright, yet redemption here is the undoing of crimes: particular "guilt" is totalised and tilted towards a metaphysical and ontological "sin".

In *Thomas*, the reader no longer encounters the hero's "dual life" as a split, but as a two-faced ambiguity. Fridolin, a sacristan once expelled from the seminary, is contradictory to the extreme: a "dreamy man" (Cholnoky, *Piroska* 634) who lives more in imagination than in the world, withdrawn and melancholy, yet in the tavern given to oaths and quarrels. He does not merely revisit what has happened to him; he fills it with invention. So, he falls in love with a countess who has not noticed him and weaves a story around it. This duality also stages the problem of doubt, figured in the novel's most distinctive device: the apostle Thomas in the church window, who comes to Fridolin as fantasy, dream and vision. At a

wedding he meets Matilda; attraction is mutual. That night, the frail, neglected Fridolin, in jealousy, strikes the peasant who has taken Matilda to dance. He believes that Imre Danka has fallen dead, and flees. Like Prikk, he takes himself for a murderer; the descent that follows is of another kind. He collects himself in the church. In a night dream the apostle Thomas speaks: "It was not you who did it, but the other one whom you think is your sweet brother" (Cholnoky, *Piroska* 659). He begins a new life, hides, and moves to kinsmen in the next county. He seems to have no need to test what he has done or to ask after those left behind. One night, Imre Danka stabs him in revenge; the wound vanishes, probably a delusion, yet the "invisible wound that the wandering soul inflicted on itself in its struggles remains" (669). Fridolin returns. In the church, Thomas speaks again in a dream; lightning shatters the window. In exaltation, Fridolin climbs the tower and, before he throws himself down, addresses the villagers, whom the text often calls marionettes: "I had to come back to you, because my patron saint, the apostle Thomas, the holy vessel of doubt, died this night, I have no more place among the living" (687). For Prikk, the true source of the money "lit up in his mind as a ghostly faint memory"; for Fridolin, even Thomas's revelation is useless. Both construct a false reality by means of an imagined murder. In Prikk, the false consciousness and the second life are motivated by guilt. In Fridolin, guilt folds into spiritual struggle, structuring it as a new life that begins with the supposed killing and the flight, and it culminates in the metaphor of the wound.

Fatal self-condemnation is not identical with Ricoeur's sin, and neither text crosses from particular guilt at the same point. For Ricoeur, guilt is the subjective, "phenomenalistic" aspect of the offense: the subject is as guilty as he feels, the burden has degrees, and it attaches to a punitive imputation, a named act (*The Symbolism of Evil* 100–8). Prikk and Fridolin enact that structure when they ascribe a homicide to themselves – though in Prikk there is no murder, and in Fridolin only the blow is certain, death presumed. Prisoners of false consciousness, they take their own conscience as the measure: the point at which, for Ricoeur, pure guilt becomes the modality of man as measure (Ricoeur 104). Internal imputation of the supposed crime organises the plot: as a motor in Prikk's case (he will not spend the money, he fears exposure), as a frame in Fridolin's (hiding is the form of a new life, the "invisible wound" is the mark the wandering soul inflicts upon itself). Sin is distinct from this. It is not the intensification of an identity crisis, nor the fact of suicide, but an ontological situation before God, in the category of the covenant, a qualitative break that cannot be measured in degrees (Ricoeur 47–54). For Ricoeur, guilt is the achieved internality of sin (*The Symbolism of Evil* 103).

The text moves towards sin only where the language of the supposed act rises into prayer, redemption and a universal 'undoing' (visszacsinálás). That happens in part in Prikk: money ascribed to Jesus, prayer in the church, the wish to unmake the murder, later enlarged into a demand for total redemption, tilt particular guilt towards the language of 'coram Deo.' The recognition in the mirror ("I killed myself") at once draws the burden back onto the subject: this is already the impasse of guilt, accusation without an accuser (Ricoeur 139–50). For Fridolin, the apostle Thomas represents doubt instead of a sacred covenant; consequently, the patron's "death" reflects a total loss of certainty rather than an address before God. In both stories, suicide is the impasse of guilt and the enigmatic structure of servile will: the will that at once rules itself and gives itself up (Ricoeur 151–

7). No human issue arises from false imputation, so the hero carries out his own judgment. Bad conscience does not automatically become Ricoeurian sin. Where the language of redemption speaks, the text moves towards it; where the mirror, the wound and doubt remain, it stays within the interior of a crime that has not taken place.

Conclusion: from autoculpabilisation to a family of detachments

Kundera's contrast between Raskolnikov and Josef K. offered this study's opening hypothesis: that the Kafkian reversal, punishment in search of an offense; the accused in search of a crime, might describe not a single Prague novel but a wider Central European disturbance in the causal link between crime and guilt. Ricoeur's typology was introduced to test that claim without letting it harden into a regional essence. The readings show that the anomaly is real, recurrent and internally differentiated. It is not one mechanism.

Kundera's autoculpabilisation is a precise figure. An accusation or a penalty arrives first. Its groundlessness is intolerable; the subject therefore ransacks a life for an act that would make the penalty narratable. *The Trial* remains the purest instance: no offense is ever produced, yet K. accepts the necessity of the court. Among the texts examined here, only Weiner's narrator repeats that sequence with comparable rigour. The empty chair functions as an unmotivated blow; "So then it's my fault" searches for an offense against the friend; the final offense remains when even that offense is withdrawn. The accused has found a fault that "has no relation to things and people" – an offense that justifies horror without restoring a deed. This is Kundera's machine and, in Ricoeur's terms, the impasse of guilt: accusation without accuser, a court without a judge, conscience as the sole measure (Ricoeur 104; 139–50).

The other works displace the same misalignment rather than reproduce it. Cholnoky's *Prikk* does find a crime, yet he finds it not by answering a prior tribunal but by reading stains that accumulate around him – blood on his clothes, the knife in his hand, the fifty-crown banknote that appears in his pocket after he has stabbed his own reflection. In *Thomas*, Fridolin attaches a death to a blow he delivered against Imre Danka. In both cases phenomenalist guilt still requires a named act by which the self may be calibrated (Ricoeur 100–8), yet the act is misrecognised rather than sought under the pressure of an already imposed punishment, so that the false consciousness which the external narrator keeps at a distance becomes the motor of the plot. Hostovský's *The Arsonist* socialises the Kafkian reversal: the village's fear hunts an arsonist whose identity is withheld until the close, and a phantom is assembled from several separately motivated acts of fire-setting together with the two threatening inscriptions that Kamil himself has written, so that the accused does not seek his offense, but the community seeks an offender, the "new word of fear" spreading like the contagious burden of defilement while Kamil's coming of age consists precisely in recognising that deed and guilt do not coincide. Gombrowicz's "The Premeditated Crime" inverts the subject of the search. It is the judge-narrator whose professional role cannot tolerate a natural death and who therefore constructs a coherent order of proof from reserved mourning, an unsent carriage, a crushed cockroach and a locked door, Form manufacturing the crime and forcing the son to mime it by strangling the already dead father, so that the accuser seeks the offense. Antoni's late confession is

not K.'s self-examination but the internalisation of an alien measure that the narrative itself has produced.

Ricoeur's grid therefore does not confirm a single Central European 'false conscience'. It maps a family of detachments. Guilt may precede the deed, invent it, misread a lesser act as the deed, or have the deed imposed from outside. Defilement returns where the burden travels like rumour or fire. Sin, in Ricoeur's strict sense – the realist situation before God – is approached only where a text names an offense without object and a measure other than feeling, as Weiner's closing curse almost does, and as *Prikk*'s language of 'undoing' before Christ briefly does. Elsewhere intensity, collectivity or metaphysics do not convert guilt into sin. They totalise the phenomenalist moment: man, the measure, calibrating himself by an act the narrative withholds, displaces, or supplies too late.

The hypothesis survives in a weaker, but more useful form. What is characteristic is not that Central European prose repeats Josef K., but that it repeatedly breaks the Dostoevskyan sequence in which an offense finds its punishment. Sometimes, as Kundera describes, the punishment finds – or extorts – the offense. Sometimes the subject furnishes a crime in order that conscience may have a degree. Sometimes a community or a professional role does the furnishing. Kafka remains the limit case in which the search never terminates in an act and yet the sentence is executed. The neighbouring literatures of the interwar years show that this limit has variants, and that Ricoeur's distinction between a realist condition and a phenomenalist self-relation is what keeps those variants from collapsing back into a single myth of metaphysical guilt.

At the beginning of this study, a further question arose, left unsettled: whether the anomaly belongs in part to Jewish identity, as the reception of Kafka, Weiner, and Hostovský often implies, and as Kundera's remark about the Jews as the 'intellectual cement' of Central Europe might invite. The readings do not support that inference as a cause. Two of the five writers are not Jewish; in Gombrowicz, Form and a professional role produce the crime; in Cholnoky, a solitary conscience reads its own stains. Where Jewish authors are concerned, Hostovský refused the Kafka comparison in his lifetime, and Weiner's objectless offense is articulated as a curse of a life, not as a covenantal or communal Jewish fault. What the reception treats as an ethnic key is better described as a recurrent situation: an opaque tribunal, an alien measure, a subject required to furnish an act for a charge that precedes him. That situation could be historically denser for writers marked as outsiders, but it is not their property. To derive the motif from origin would repeat the very collapse this essay has tried to block – the collapse of a structure of fault into a single myth of who 'we' are.

In a further study, it would be worth asking how this reversal of causality is recast in the Central European absurdism that follows the Second World War. The plays and prose of Sławomir Mrożek, István Örkény and Ladislav Fuks may draw on the interwar repertoire mapped here, even as the machine moves outward – from interior imputation onto institution and role.

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