

An interview with Pavel Brycz

originally published in *Host*, 10, 2004

When you won the Orten Prize in 1999 for *I, City* you mentioned that after the initial euphoria had worn off you became disillusioned that the award actually meant very little: the book got no press and bookstores weren't interested. Now that you've become the youngest recipient of the State Prize for Literature for your novel *Patriarchátu dávno zašlá sláva* [2003; *The Waning Fame of Our Fathers*] is this still the case?

History repeats itself. I received a lot of text messages and e-mails from friends, acquaintances, former colleagues, etc., congratulating me on winning the prize. That was the nice thing. But then I was bombarded with messages that bookstores weren't carrying the book and when asked, the shop attendants irately claimed that no author of my name even existed, and everyone wanted me to do something about it. I was unhappy with the situation but the only thing I could do was to refer them to the distributor. Go to the professionals, I told them.

Now I'm writing a new book, and if I'm going to pop into a bookshop it's for something like Hitler's biography and not to see if my prizewinners are on the shelf.

Do you take any satisfaction from winning the State Prize since the two books that preceded *The Waning Fame*, *Miloval jsem Teklu* [2000; *I Loved Tekla*] and *Sloni mlčí* [2002; *Silent Elephants*], generally got very little attention?

Yes, it's definitely gratifying for a writer. Though I still don't know if it will actually mean anything in terms of sales or reviews. I used to think that a negative review was death for an author, but now I understand it is far worse to have nothing at all written about your work. After winning the Orten Prize I seriously thought that I had finally broken through the silence, but the opposite was true. So now I learn that after having published six books everyone's surprised that a beginning author has been awarded the State Prize.

Where were your "literary beginnings"?

There was no particular beginning. I liked to read, that's all. I always had my nose buried in a book. Our neighbors in the building never really got to know me because I never left the apartment. I did play hockey and mess around with the other boys, but

what interested me most was what would happen next in a Verne story. For me this was where the world of absolute reality began, and I became completely absorbed by these stories. When I realized later that actual people were behind these books, that actual people had written them, it spurred me to try it as well. My grandfather used to take me on hikes through the Bohemian Highlands and he would tell me that whoever was born under Mt. Říp must become a poet. He had an extensive library and this is where I discovered Konstantin Biebl, Karel Konrad, and Vitezslav Nezval’s *Manon Lescaut*, which my grandfather bought with his first wages under the Protectorate. He never claimed to have any literary ambitions himself. He only wrote speeches for May Day celebrations and would deliver them at the Red Army memorial because he was a district deputy chairman. But thinking back on it years later, it seemed to me he did have literary ambitions and transferred them onto me.

***The Waning Fame* is actually a family saga. To what extent were you inspired by your own family?**

When I write emotions are always autobiographical, that is, they’re always authentic. I laugh and cry and react emotionally, but everything else is invented. I’d much rather mystify and exaggerate. It’s like what Zdena Salivarova said: When ˇkvorecky pricks his finger, by the time he’s finished taking his walk he’s blown the whole thing so out of proportion that friends are calling to ask if his hand’s been amputated yet. I was genuinely emotionally drained when in one story I had my brother immolate himself in the bathtub. And then it’s a good feeling when a reader offers me condolences on my brother’s death, though of course I don’t have a brother. Still, the feeling is genuine.

In *The Waning Fame* there are a few real stories, such as the episode when the hero wants to bring his war-veteran uncle to school to speak to the class. This actually happened to me. The teacher asked us if any of our relatives fought on the front during World War II or with the partisans or were in a concentration camp and if so, would they come speak to the class about their experience. No one had anyone! Well, I wanted to be a big deal so like an idiot I told the teacher I would bring my uncle to class because he fought in the war. My uncle had just come on a visit from Germany and it occurred to me only later that he’d been on the wrong side, even if he was from the “East.” So because I was afraid to tell them the truth I nervously told the class that I’d just made the whole thing up.

That story says a lot about your novel. Next to the “small history” of the Berezinko family there is the “large history” that proves so fateful for them: the First and Second World Wars, February 1948, 1968, etc. This conflict between large and

small histories has a tradition in Central European writing. What authors do you feel close to?

Without a doubt my experiencing large history in a very personal way is close to Bohumil Hrabal: *Closely Watched Trains* and *I Served the King of England* are two of my favorite books. And I also like this oft-cited line from Kafka's diary (and I'm just going to paraphrase it because I can't remember it exactly), "in the morning the war began, in the afternoon I went for a swim . . ." I think this seemingly offhanded way of connecting small and large history is typical of the psychology of those who don't live *à la these* and have no critical distance from their own experiences. They just live life at full tilt. I had a wonderful grandmother. She was a folksy storyteller of sorts and was perfectly capable of saying things like: "And Dad was sitting on this sofa and he got up and went off to die in the world war, though he was tall as a mountain he banged his head against that stupid chandelier."

When I encounter something like this I'm moved but it also makes me laugh. And the same goes for reading. For example, I learned more about the Holocaust and about people caught up in it from Ota Pavel's *The Death of Beautiful Deer*, just as Věra Sládková's tender family history in *Poslední vlaku z Frývaldova* [Last Train from Fryvald] revealed to me what the generation of my maternal grandparents lived through in the Sudetenland.

Reviewers of *The Waning Fame* have generally pointed out that it was incredibly courageous, and for Czech literature of the last decade atypical, to undertake such a sprawling historical novel . . .

First of all, I don't consider it a historical novel. I wanted to invent a legend which would have at the very outset its martyr and would be about how I came into this confused, tragicomic, infinitely interesting world of today and how I experience it. I had two inspirations. When I was young some relatives from the Soviet Union wrote my father that they would like to keep in touch with him, and his reply was that he didn't care about any relatives. I cared because meeting a foreigner from a completely different world, and what's more, someone who just happened to be family, was very exciting for me. Well, my father informed me that relatives only make you angry because they're always wanting something from you. As proof he produced a photograph some villagers had sent my Ukrainian grandfather. It showed some ridiculous looking bearded men in weird clothes and on the backside was a request to their successful countryman in the West to send them money for a new well.

A second inspiration I can point to was when the borders were opened and I hitchhiked around Spain and on the way back I stopped in at my German relatives in Pforzheim, who had seen me last when I was three. The émigrés I met there still clung to fragments of their former homeland by telling anecdotes and stories that at times were completely outlandish. And I was stunned to find that some of these stories affected me viscerally and told me who I was. I decided then and there that when I returned I would begin to mythologize these two sources.

Still, after the revolution in 1989 Czech authors have largely avoided “historical” themes. Do you think that after having experienced the ideological deformation of history they are “afraid” to interpret historical events?

It’s hard to say. It’s just so awfully difficult to write about what keeps changing from year to year when new sources are always coming to light and archives are being opened. And then one is influenced by witnesses, and they aren’t always completely reliable, because no matter what we say, no two people will have the same opinion about this or that historical event. I mean their own reflections, not what comes from the newspapers, TV, or books, which have formed these individual opinions into a kind of consensus. People influence a number of things, from social standing and education to general temperament . . .

I needed a hero for my novel who had gone through the Jáchymov gulag, so I collected a lot of firsthand accounts, books by Karel Pecka and others, but I couldn’t find the material that really interested me, whether contemporary or historical. People generally wrote that the gulag was just as bad as the Nazi camps, and this was freely repeated in the media. But no matter how hard I tried I couldn’t feel any of the emotion in this information that is so apparent in the very human stories of Solzhenitsyn, Remarque’s *The Spark of Life*, or in Nadezhda Mandelstam, who interests me as a storyteller.

I went to my father — he spent three years in Jáchymov as a political prisoner from 1949 to 1952 — and I asked him: “Was the gulag as bad as the Nazi concentration camps?” And he replied: “No. It was disgusting work — work, work, and more work. But you can’t even compare it to the Nazi death camps! And don’t ever ask me again.” And with this he was done with the topic, and it was something he had never spoken about before. He didn’t even use it as an excuse to bitch about the Communists, which was his favorite pastime. As a Sudeten German he felt guilty about the concentration camps and I suppose he was trying to be objective.

So I also asked other gulag survivors who unlike my father had a lot to say about Jáchymov. One man had both his parents murdered by the Nazis and he spoke openly of

his fears, telling me that his greatest comfort came from Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain*, which he read after his shift [in the uranium mine] was over. Though what he told me was key to my novel's plot, at the same time he kept repeating that he was there later than my father and it wasn't as hard as it was right after February '48 when the Communists took power, and he admired my father for having come through it.

At that moment I realized that it wasn't possible to take up such a sensitive topic with any sort of patent on the truth. If the accounts of even the two eyewitnesses that were closest to me differed in so many ways, what could be expected of the historical sources? So I wrote the novel conscious of the fact that I know myself, at least a little, and I know my father, and although we're not the most reliable historians and many people will say that this was not the way it happened at all, skating on such thin ice is something I enjoy.

It almost seems as if your novel has influenced your opinions and attitudes. Is that the way it is, that what you write influences you in return?

Almost always. Actually, I write because some question bothers me and by telling a story I'm able to answer it for myself. So I give my characters complete freedom and they live their own lives for me. In the process I change and learn a lot about myself.

So you write in order to learn about yourself?

Yes. When I came to Prague at the beginning of the nineties I had a completely banal experience. I sat at someone's table in a café and there was a sugar bowl on the table. The other guy at the table, who was sitting closer to the sugar bowl than me, asked me to pass it to him. And since I was full of myself and ready to conquer Prague, I gave him a nasty look as I hadn't the faintest idea what he wanted from me. And these attempts at making contact were happening so often that it made me think about what was going on here, and it occurred to me that these people must be terribly lonely. I had always been perfectly happy in my own company, my ego was enough for me. But then after six months I started doing this, too. All at once I began losing myself in the big city.

The early '90s was when we also started experiencing information overload. Suddenly everything changed and I gradually lost my footing. So I had to look for my identity: male identity, national identity, historical identity. A story has always been an imperative for me. It helps me find my bearings in time and space. When I was staying in Geneva for a short time on a stipend I was so lost and depressed that I even went to drown myself in Lake Geneva. But looking back now, I really like Geneva because I

wrote a story there and that has helped me understand the city. I orient myself through stories. Cities like Rome, Vienna, or Paris are only legends today whether created by contemporary poets or the poets of the 19th century. Berlin only interests me because of the story Peter Handke and Wim Wenders gave it in *Wings of Desire*. This is why I decided that I had to introduce a story into my family history so that I could find my bearings in it.

So the book *I, City*, where the narrator is the city of Most, is your way of giving a story to where you were born?

Exactly, even though I wasn't born there, just grew up there. There was a time when I hated Most. I used to call it "the capital of Chile." But then I had a reconciliation with the city once I was living in Prague, which I called "enemy territory" because I always felt like I was negotiating a minefield. Because I had these two extreme feelings about Most — love and hate — and because I had a bit of distance from it, I decided to write a book for the people I liked who still lived there. I didn't want to repeat the clichés about Most being a black hole of high unemployment and crime, the Lidice of the north etc. It came fairly easy to me because I wanted to show its kind side.

So what of Most's "kindness" is still with you?

We liked to go to the pub The Partisan next to our Gymnasium. We called it "Parti's," and we had our liars' bench there where you could tell any outrageous story you wanted. And what I discovered is that no matter how unbelievable these stories were, they were actually more truthful than any sort of "objective" report. It was a paradise for psychoanalysts and listeners. All of these storytellers — and there were girls as well as guys — truly had their fates marked by both heaven and hell.

One morning the pub exploded. The owner had gotten into a little hot water with a creditor and tried to pay off his debt through an insurance fraud. The pub's walls disappeared, nothing was left, but the people I had met there stayed with me.

And this became my parable of Most. In my imagination I had long ago demolished the concrete housing blocks, but my eccentric friends who lived there and nourished me on their wild tales stayed with me. Now I'm looking forward to seeing one of them in a completely different setting. He lives in Mexico City and teaches at the university. He got married there and now has a family, and I can already see how we'll try to outdo one another with the most outrageous stories, as if nothing has changed between us. We were seventeen, in Most, and the dream has to go on.

Another theme in *The Waning Fame* concerns men losing their former role, that they have stopped being “men.” How do you see this in yourself?

I consider it a huge problem. In fact, any partner I’ve had has expected me to be a man and I don’t know what this role entails. All the upbringing that has had an impact on me was from a female perspective so that I’m pretty confused by the whole thing. I was talking to Jáchym Topol about this once and he told me that in his family he didn’t have a strong male role model either. It seems to me this absence of male role models is a general characteristic of my generation. So my idols became Old Shatterhand and Winnetou, who really don’t offer any sort of guidance for how one should conduct a relationship with a woman.

A number of books and films have addressed this issue, like *Fight Club* and *The Full Monty*. You either give in to resignation or try to come to grips with it and find or acquire a male role. This second option creates more conflict of course, so it’s the more intriguing for a writer even if it ends with men becoming striptease artists like in *The Full Monty*.

In your opinion, what is behind today’s confusion of male and female roles? Isn’t it ultimately connected to our relationship to history whereby it seems we have lost our knowledge of tradition and live only in the present?

I like the story of the Indian who is watching the white farmer plowing up the prairie. The Indian is amazed that this white man is churning up the earth and tearing out the grass. The farmer explains that what he’s doing now will result in a far greater yield come summer. So the Indian taps his head to show he thinks the white man is a little crazy as he scatters the seeds. And then a tornado comes and carries the earth and the seeds and the ripped-out grass away. All that remains is desert.

The Indian represents tradition, which for centuries had its herds of buffalo, and the white man represents the present.

And this is sort of the way I looked at things as a teacher right after the Revolution. In the high schools, the old order that required discipline and respect for authority was replaced by something more liberal that eventually degenerated into pure anarchy. As many of my classmates ended up teaching like me, I had firsthand knowledge of what was going on. Students were on a first-name basis with the teachers and could say whatever they wanted and even got their own smoking-room so they wouldn’t have to resort to telling transparent lies about not smoking. There wasn’t a whiff of authority anywhere; it had just been assumed that listening to the wisdom of your elders, let alone respecting tradition, was passé. For a few months everyone was

enthusiastic about these new conditions. But after a while the poor teachers and students became disenchanted with the whole idea and looked for ways to reinstate some order and return things to the way they were. Teaching students is sometimes like breaking a horse: if you don't have their respect and they know your weaknesses, they'll end up breaking you.

For me the refutation and confusion of male and female roles and the search for a more modern accommodation is somewhat similar. Everyone is now all over the place like that plowed up earth because we've broken all our traditional bonds for the feeling of momentary freedom, and only now will we be able to tell if it has settled down and something will grow from it.

Actually, I have no idea who's the Indian in this and what he sees when looking at us.

But in the short clip that introduced you for the State Prize for Literature you appeared in the role of a father. What sort of model do you present to your sons?

Naturally I try to raise them in a way that alleviates any problem they might have with their identity and the gulf between the ideal and reality. But of course I cannot guarantee it's going to work. Like Nezval said, "the poet is a man with the soul of a little girl." So they can't expect me to be a true man in everything. I'm a loner because I write stories, and I have to write them and live them on my own. That's why I'm always trying to get away from people and closing myself off to them, or have to go away somewhere on a stipend so I can write. But when I'm with my children I try to play the male role even though in my interpretation it is more Old Shatterhand and Winnetou than an actual patriarch like Jefim Berezinko in my novel.

When you talk about the stories that help you to orient yourself in the world isn't this the principle of advertising but just on a different level? Aren't commercials micro-stories that help us to "orient"? I ask because for many years you worked for an advertising agency.

For the time being I no longer work in advertising but can't rule out doing so again. It's not possible to make a living by writing, and since I have a family to take care of I'm not in a position to reject a job out of hand because I might have certain expectations. But in general you're right, advertising gives a product or brand a certain story, the existential drama of someone who needs proof rather than promises to satisfy his desires, and the message needs to be positive and without going too deep. Not something Bergman could do.

Why then did Pavel Byrcz become a writer?

It's a mundane story. While I was studying at DAMU (the Drama Academy in Prague) I taught Czech language and literature at a high school. I was actually living with my girlfriend at the time in one of the schoolrooms — we slept in sleeping bags on mats. It wasn't the kind of room Michal Ajvaz imagined when I told him about it — he pictured us sleeping amid stuffed birds and embryos in formaldehyde, but there were only four tables for my colleagues and I. In the morning we had to roll up our sleeping bags and quickly disappear. When I finished my lessons in the evening I had to walk around the school twice to make myself feel like I was leaving work and going home. And the bells were always ringing there morning and night. I really like teaching but the pay was only enough to last me a week. My girlfriend's father then bought her an apartment in the Vršovice district and I had to take care of the rent, and that's when I became a copywriter for an ad agency.

What texts can you lay claim to?

I suppose my most successful was “damned good chicken” for KFC. If I had thought of this as a freelancer I probably wouldn't have to work anymore, but I was in the employ of an agency so I didn't get anything extra for it. The slogan works well in Czech but if the same phrase were used in English it wouldn't be considered “correct” enough for an ad campaign. These large multinational brands are so careful not to upset anyone, because everyone is a potential customer: men, women, heterosexuals, homosexuals, any and all races, the stupid and the clever — they don't want to piss anyone off, so it becomes this all-embracing love fest and this has to be incorporated into the ad's message. That's why advertising in today's world seems like walking on nails. In the U.S. the slogan is, “We do chicken right,” which isn't going to get anyone riled up, but not exactly excite anyone either. There is this constant battle between those who want to sell a product and those who want the ads they create to be a little film that can compete at Cannes. Of course, he who pays wins the argument, so the message has to be as plain as possible. In my naïve youth I had notions of breaking down all the boundaries between advertising and art, but these were quickly pushed aside by reality.

As you say, ads tend to unify and oversimplify. Do you think that this influences thought, in that it, too, becomes oversimplified, because these are the types of text that we encounter most often?

No, I don't think so. The slogan is a type of text that has to work immediately, subliminally. Rationality is not the objective. When your sneaker box says "just do it" you don't perceive this as a poem by Robert Desnos. You read that with a different part of the brain, at home after you've already gone for a run in these shoes. I mention Desnos on purpose because he also wrote ad copy.

Visual video-clip culture is of course something different. Action films, commercials jump-cutting all over the place naturally alter one's perception and generally do draw attention away from the culture of the text. But this is "progress" and I don't feel I have the right to judge it as positive or negative.

What sort of questions are you occupied with now? In other words, what's your next book about?

Solitude and how to overcome it is something that has always interested me and I find it fascinating that intelligent people sometimes make fools of themselves just not to feel alone. How all of us are driven by this dream of civilization to fulfill this one and only life we have; and at times this dream is a burning desire to hide from the world in one's own private place, safe, a heaven on earth where you can pull the blanket over your head and everyone who truly cares for you makes a temporary peace and sets aside all their demands so that you have the space finally to grow up, lose weight, study, have a career, raise your self-esteem, have sex or be celibate and take up meditation, stop drinking and popping pills, or overcome some obstacle, or get rich, simply become someone other than you ever wanted to be and master being it . . .

I'm also fascinated by the Czech dream, rather the acceleration of Czech society toward a neurotic mode of competing for social prestige, the results of which are tragicomic for both the winners and losers — my new book will be about this. I also mentioned my "lost paradise" when Parti's and our liars' bench were blown up, and I would like to incorporate this somehow into the book as well.