JAN MRÁZEK

# ON THIS MODERN HIGHWAY, LOST IN THE JUNGLE

## TROPICS, TRAVEL, AND COLONIALISM IN CZECH POETRY

KAROLINUM

**On this modern highway, lost in the jungle**
Tropics, travel, and colonialism in Czech poetry

**Jan Mrázek**

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*For my father*

*Na druhé straně světa jsou*
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*In the glow of the headlights we pass lengthening arabesques of escaping snakes, among whom some, the stronger and bigger ones, assume the fighting pose of titans and perish in an unequal battle, dying with the poison of hate on their tongues, dying like the brains of calmly sprawled frogs, bluntly crushed like gravel on the road by the ever rising car; and we drive . . . where? One cannot finish that thought on this modern highway, lost in the jungle . . . we ride into the mysteries of disturbing details, visionary clearings, which only the lightning can accomplish, the teacher of philosophers and poets. It shows the jungle in a forceful and unusual light. It shows only a part and you must imagine the whole, ever veiled in darkness.*

—Konstantin Biebl, "Ing. Baer"

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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I remember my father, sitting in the bed in our sumptuous bridal suite in a hotel in Merauke, the easternmost town of Indonesia, in the Papua province. The overwhelming pinks and purples of the cavernous room's hyper-rococo interior decoration were punctuated by dark stains (tea or coffee, one hopes). I recall thick decorative curtains, a plentitude of dusty plastic fruits and flowers and the stench of stale cigarette smoke. It was the only available room in the whole town, because of an ongoing Pan-Papuan congress of government administrators. My father was reading an early draft of this book, scribbling on it with the fierce determination of an attacking Gathotkaca (the powerful airborne warrior of the Javanese shadow puppet theater), crossing whole paragraphs with sweeping arm movements, under the bed's plasticky pink canopy. We would then talk and argue about my text, Biebl, Czech history, Papua and prison camps (his topic then) over deep-fried prawns, of which he became enamored in a small food stall on the main road, and in our bridal suite.

My mother's knowledge of Czech poetry and history might be mistakenly thought to be encyclopedic, but it is something else. I utter a name or try to share a confused, prematurely born thought—and she is already reciting this and that poem, this and that poet's life, with the passion and force of a late-Romantic symphonic orchestra, with the all-conquering joy of a massive chorus of peasants in Smetana's operas, sweeping me away and into her world, as poems and lives interweave in an unstoppable Amazon of consciousness that carries me the closest I would ever get to an erupting Javanese volcano, as we eat our breakfast of scrambled eggs and some ham (as her Moravian grandmother said, "you must eat lots of bread and just a little bit of meat"), somewhat homeless in a short-term rental flat in Pankrác, as at home as it gets.

With my brother, we watched cockfights in the backstreets of Semarang, had been endlessly interrogated by the ranking army officer before we were commanded to take a picture with him and then allowed to climb an old Dutch lighthouse in the Semarang harbor, almost froze to death on the Dieng Plateau, sailed from Singapore to Sumatra, travelled in search of our grandfather in Aceh, and told our stories and recited Konstantin Biebl's poems in Prague cafés.

Precious has been unquestioningly with me as we keep each other awake with our questions and stories, as we crisscross Southeast Asian archipelagoes on all manners of ferries, sailing boats, and kayaks, as we eat and work in hawker centers. Her unsettled, unexpected, derailing ways of thinking have been forever pushing me off, or to the edge of, any established, accepted route of thought I might settle on, any route that I have mistaken for being mine. And when I helplessly burst into laughter or tears or both at once while reading an untranslatable Czech poem, she is closer to me and understanding me more than ever, more directly and plainly than I can understand myself.

Such were the most precious moments of writing this book.

But there were others, moments and people, such as: In the grand baroque study hall of the National Library in Prague or in the little *badatelna* of the archive of the Museum of Czech Literature, I often felt grateful for, and somehow humbled by, the care of the librarians and archivists—what would scholars, those ego-centric, spoiled babies forever asking for new toys, do without them?

Not fully written is the fact that this book is a reflection on my own life as a Czech in Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand and the Philippines. I think back with gratitude to the many people I have met and got to know here, with whom I have lived, cycled, sailed, played music, worked together, learned from and taught, and talked over tea and all sorts of other liquids and foods. Without them, and without what they have given me, this book would have been entirely different, or more likely it would not be at all.

My daughter Helenka Kopi O and I have journeyed through life together even when separated by oceans, sharing glimpses of the different worlds each of us is discovering. She was often on my mind as I was writing this book about artists creatively making sense of strange worlds and strange homelands.

I have received kind support from many people and institutions. Michala Tomanová, who has been researching and presenting Biebl in refreshing ways, has generously shared with me her discoveries and materials, which have been of a major importance for this book. I also thank her and Michaela Budiman for their supportive reviews of the book. I thank Guan Xinyu, then at NUS Press, who read and sensitively commented on the book manuscript. I thank Thow Xin Wei in Singapore for his careful copy-editing of my Czechlish, and for the hundreds of definite articles that he added to my text, along with a few indefinite ones; for his thoughts on the resonances between Dutch colonialism, as experienced by Biebl, and contemporary Singapore, as seen by him; and for the many years of playing gamelan together. I thank Peter Schoppert, the Director of NUS Press, for his advice and crucial support

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Singapore, 1st May 2021

# PREAMBLE

*Look the train of things is gaining speed*
*And from its windows it throws colors*[1]

In 1926, in Czechoslovakia, the train was the most common means of transportation, and the Wilson Station was the busiest in Prague. In its corridors, waiting rooms, and restaurants, travelers to and from Hamburg, Paris, Bucharest, and Istanbul mingled with "winding and unwinding yarn balls"[2] of passengers to and from small Czech villages and provincial towns. In waiting rooms and on trains, people's thoughts wandered near and far. One such passenger (who, like most, would never travel outside Europe) wrote in the 1920s about a train ride in Bohemia:

> And suddenly, touched, we recollect Batavia, the most beautiful city of our childhood dreams. . . . Oh, what do they mean, all the petty and indifferent names of cities, the apparent destinations of our journeys? Wherever we ride, we always ride to Batavia.[3]

International train number 29 was scheduled to depart daily at 11:15 in the morning. This was a branching line—west, southwest, and south—and there were direct carriages to cities in several European countries. Passengers on train 29 travelled to Czech towns, including Pilsen, Domažlice, and Cheb; but also across Germany, to Paris and on to Boulogne, with an integrated ferry/train transfer to London; southwest to Basel, Zurich and Geneva; and via Munich, Florence, and Rome, all the way south to Naples on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea.

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1 Konstantin Biebl, *Zrcadlo noci* (F. J. Müller: Prague, 1939), no page numbers. Also in Konstantin Biebl, *Dílo*, ed. Z. K. Slabý (Prague: Československý Spisovatel, 1951–1954), 3: 78.

2 Konstantin Biebl, *Cesta na Jávu*, ed. Jakub Sedláček (Prague: Labyrint, 2001), 11.

3 Miroslav Rutte, *Batavie* (Prague: Kvasnička a Hampl, 1924), 9–10. For more on Rutte, see the First Excursion. At least for some international passengers, Prague train stations already felt Oriental. "The Orient is already in evidence at the Masaryk railway station in Prague," wrote a Swedish rabbi in his travel book titled *The Soul of the East*, originally published in 1926. Like most travelers to any Orient, he complained about a loss of authenticity: it was "a crumbling Orient, a traitorous deserter from itself . . . an artificial, trumpery New Orient." Quoted in Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 125.

Inside the station, several people and a few suitcases formed a circle around the neatly dressed, young man whom they were sending off. He was waiting for the 11:15 train.[4] His boyish face had a complexion a tinge darker than those around him. Among those gathered here as friends, almost like fellow performers, were poets and artists who would be known in later literary histories as the leading figures of the Czech interwar avant-garde. Now, they were mostly in their twenties and at the early stages of their careers. Vítězslav Nezval was on his way to become the most influential poet of the generation, "the Duke of Czech Poetry." In the 1930s, he led the Group of Surrealists in Czechoslovakia. After 1948, he took up high-ranking positions in the Communist government and was awarded a long range of awards, including the title of National Artist. Karel Teige, who worked closely with Nezval in the 1920s and most of the 1930s, was the avant-garde's theoretical spokesman and the author of their manifestos, which envisioned a future world of beauty and poetry for all, where "tourists are modern poets."[5] When Nezval became the official poet of the Communist government, Teige became the arch-enemy, decried as the agent of Trotskyism and "cosmopolitanism." In 1951, he was hunted down in a vicious campaign and died on a sidewalk, at night, alone. Jaroslav Seifert, another poet standing on the platform, lived longer than the others, and before his death he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, which he accepted on behalf of his generation, with a nod to the exciting times of the 1920s. Seifert, along with Teige, was a founding member, in 1920, of the art association Devětsil, which was at the center of the Czech leftist avant-garde of the 1920s; Nezval was another of its most influential members. Also on the platform stood Karel Konrád, who would become known as one of the most important writers of fiction associated with Devětsil; Josef Hora, a slightly older man, an eminent poet, literary critic, translator and the editor-in-chief of the Communist Party's official newspaper *Rudé právo* (Red right); as well as, among others, the much admired theater and cabaret actress Xena Longenová. A year and half later, she would commit suicide—but now, she stood on the platform with eyes "matte, darkly colored, yet glowing like on stage."[6]

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4 My account takes Konstantin Biebl's travelogue, *Cesta na Jávu*, as the starting point. Based on my examination of the 1926 train timetables, it is almost certain that he took the 11:15 train. *Jízdní řád železniční, paroplavební a automobilový republiky Československé: 1926–27* (Prague: Čedok [1926]), 96–8, 426, 428, 444–5.

5 Karel Teige, "Poetismus," in *Avantgarda známá a neznámá*, ed. Štěpán Vlašín et al. (Prague: Svoboda, 1971), 1: 558. Several manifestos by Teige are available in English translation in Eric Dluhosch and Rostislav Švácha, *Karel Teige: L'Enfant Terrible of the Czech Modernist Avant-Garde* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999).

6 This quotation, as well as those in the next two paragraphs, are from Biebl, *Cesta na Jávu*, 11–12.

The poet Konstantin Biebl, the man standing at the circle's center, is fond of theater and opera (many of the best-loved Czech operas are comic), and the first sentence of his travelogue brings travel and performance together: "Carriages and automobiles are parked in front of the Wilson Station, as if in front of a theater before the end of the opera."[7] Those who have become actors in the poetic comedy, those waiting for the train, are already transformed by a journey that has not even begun; they

> put on a face as if they have just become employed by the state railways . . . they intend to perform their duties conscientiously; each minute they check their watches, they are nervous and suspect in advance that the express train will be delayed. A soldier with a bandaged hand begins to swallow one cigarette after the other, obviously derailed.

Biebl, a spectator and an actor at once, is derailed as well, but that affords him another, more intense vision.

> Never, I think, do we observe our friends with such a sense of importance as at the moment of parting. . . . We are stunned: "You've never worn a hard hat before, have you?" He looks at me puzzled. "I have, always!" And Berta has grey-green eyes! I always thought they were black.

He boards the train, "confused" and "stunned" by these "discoveries," "as if intoxicated [*omámen*]." (*Omámen*: "intoxicated, dazed, stunned, carried away"; the adjectival form of the word is often used to qualify and intensify beauty and fragrance; in 1924, Teige—in the same manifesto where he wrote that "tourists are modern poets"—used it when he spoke of "intoxicating fragrance of life" in the "blossoms of new art"; Nezval used it when he spoke of "the intoxicating lyrical light" of Biebl's poetry.[8] When I write "intoxicated" or "dazed," I would like to evoke the intense, somewhat hallucinatory sensations of *omámen.*) As the train speeds through morning mist, the passenger struggles to remember how his friends look—yet the intoxicated images that emerge reveal each man and his work with a fresh incisiveness.

> Now I have before me the head of Jaroslav Seifert. The color of his eyes is not his. I try to give him blue, violet, red, green, even black eyes, and I still don't know on which

7 One of the problems of moving between English and Czech languages concerns tense. In Czech, not only is present tense more common in accounts of the past—including in the passages quoted here—but frequent changes of tense within paragraphs and sentences are an accepted stylistic device. In my text, I try to compromise, which contributes to the strangeness of this text's "English."

8 Teige, "Poetismus," 554; Vítězslav Nezval, speech at the 2nd Congress of Czechoslovak Writers, 1956. < https://legacy.blisty.cz/art/58303.html >.

> I should decide. I shave Karel Teige's face a few times and then let him grow a beard again. . . . I have tried twelve striped jockey jackets on Nezval, but none of them are his. Josef Hora resembles himself, but has someone else's hat. Beethoven's, I think.

The text from which I quote is the beginning of Biebl's (unfinished) account, poetic and satirical, of his journey from Bohemia to Java in the Dutch East Indies. His train has only just left the station, yet some of the underlying questions of my book already begin to emerge: How, in the case of the long journey and the poet's whole life's work, did physical travel and poetic imagination come together like "two mirrors looking at themselves in each other"?[9] How did they "intoxicate" and intensify each other? And, taking Biebl's case as our point of departure, how is travel, the faraway, internationalism and all manners of (anti-)colonialism variously entangled with Czech poetry, during the turbulent decades of Biebl's lifetime (1898–1951) as well as before?

In the years preceding Biebl's 1926 journey to Java, Czech avant-garde writers and painters had travelled in imagination around the globe (like and unlike their predecessors in the nineteenth century, but perhaps with greater, modern, speed and lightness). Their imagery twinkled with palms, parrots, ocean-liners, busy harbors and tropical seas—colorful adventures written against the dark grey of Europe after the Great War. They looked with desire beyond Czech borders; and already colonialism was for them a symbol of oppression and a failed, old world order. They aimed to create (in the sense of *poesis*) not just new art, but new life—to make life into poetry. (It is in this originative, overflowing, far-reaching sense that I speak of poetry in this book—a poetry ever expanding, beyond verses and poetic prose, beyond words too, even as it keeps coming back to them.) For the avant-garde artists, poetizing travel, travelling poetically, was also a fulfillment of these ambitions. They adored the circus, cinema, Charlie Chaplin and the Marx brothers. Biebl's journey was a consummation of the avant-garde's defining tendencies and fantasies, yet it was also unique, even outlandish; it shows the avant-garde works and dreams in a particular light, highlighting their contours, their shallows and depths; it lets us see Czech poetry afresh, like when he saw his friends anew at the moment of his departure. For Biebl and for Czech modern(ist)[10] poetry, the voyage was both an enactment and a new, transformative experience. The intoxicating, intensifying collision of physical travel and poetic imagination, in an interplay with other experiences, inspired a poetry not with more monkeys and parrots, but with a different kind of movement and reach.

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9 Biebl, *Plancius* (Prague: Sfinx, 1931), 8.

10 In the texts by Biebl, as well as artists and art theorists of his generation, the distinction between modern (world) and modernist (art, poetry) is generally not made—poetry and the world were equally modern.

Derek Sayer, in *Prague, Capital of the Twentieth Century: A Surrealist History*, writes in the conclusion of the chapter on Devětsil artists:

> Who by the 1920s any longer expected art to confine itself to representing reality? On the contrary: it was the transformative power of the *imagination* that made Devětsil's art what it was. Had Prague's younger writers and artists not been marooned in the landlocked center of Europe, far from seas and skyscrapers alike, their work might well have been a good deal less adventurous than it was. . . . The kids at the intersection were ideally situated for dreaming.[11]

This is both illustrated and complicated by Biebl's case. His lone *actual* journey outside Europe, however brief and dream-like, destabilizes—like a disturbing detail seen in a flash from the train's window, or like "a door in the neighborhood of an ocean" —the reality-imagination logic as presented, perhaps not surrealistically enough, by Sayer.

Writes Nezval:

> *Skutečnost* ["actuality", related to *skutek*, "act, action"] is the dictionary for the creation of poetry. . . . It was necessary to lay a star on a table, a glass near an upright piano and angels, a door in the neighborhood of an ocean. It was a matter of revealing actuality, to give it its shining form like on the first day. . . . It was an extremely realist [*realistická*] effort. . . . [A poem] will evoke . . . old, indifferent actuality so that it will bewitch you.[12]

Much later, Nezval wrote in an open letter to Biebl, with reference to his poetry about Java: "This art of handling actuality so that it would become a poem, allowed you to intervene also in social actuality, without using old, worn-out didactic methods."[13]

The relationship between actuality/action and free imagination was crucial for Devětsil artists, as glimpsed in this book with a view intoxicated by Biebl's interplay of poetry and actual travel to colonial Asia; and by his surreal credo that poetry—dreams, travel-intoxicated visions, surprising metaphors and associations, comedy—is a mode of *poznání* (cognition, knowledge) of *skutečnost*. "I have tried twelve striped jockey jackets on Nezval, but none of them is his." What a revealing picture of Nezval; of the clownery, of the exciting horse races and lonely hobby-horse play that is Nezval's poetry in the 1920s!

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11 Derek Sayer, *Prague, Capital of the Twentieth Century: A Surrealist History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 220.

12 Nezval, "Kapka inkoustu," *ReD* 1 (1927–28), 313.

13 Nezval's letter, for Biebl's fiftieth birthday, was republished in Biebl, *Dílo*, 5:7.

The chronology of the contact between travel and poetry is not simple: Biebl's journey to Java, however outlandish, grew from and into Biebl's whole life—his village childhood, his first long journey to the "Orient" (especially southeast Europe) as a teenage soldier in the Great War, his involvement with the avant-garde and its exoticisms in the interwar period, and with communism since the earliest 1920s until the end of his life, when it was the state ideology.

This book traces the manifold growth toward the Javanese voyage in Biebl's life and work, and follows how he continued to return to the journey, in ever new poetic, personal and political entanglements, in the tumultuous quarter century between his homecoming and his death. Coconut palms, jungles, and tropical seas appear in his poetry already before his trip, as do metaphors and dreams that bring the near and the distant together and allow them to blend or mirror each other, as does a concern with social reality and (perverted) "justice." His book of poems *S lodí jež dováží čaj a kávu* (With the ship that carries/imports tea and coffee), published a year after his return from Java, is a travelogue of sorts. It parallels his prose texts and collage-like photographic compositions published in a popular magazine. Tropical islands, jungles, steamers, oceans, Javanese, Chinese, Acehnese, and mestizos abound in his 1929 book-long poem *Nový Ikaros* (New Icarus), in his surrealist poetry written around 1930, in poems in which Bohemia under Nazi "protectorate" (1939–1945) mirrors the Dutch colonies, and, after the war, in poetry struggling uneasily for and with socialism and against imperialism, as well as

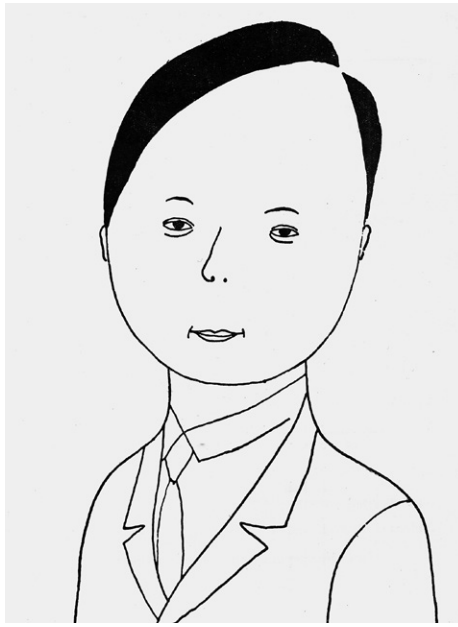

**Figure 1.** František Muzika, *Konstantin Biebl*, 1927.