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, oceanliners, 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

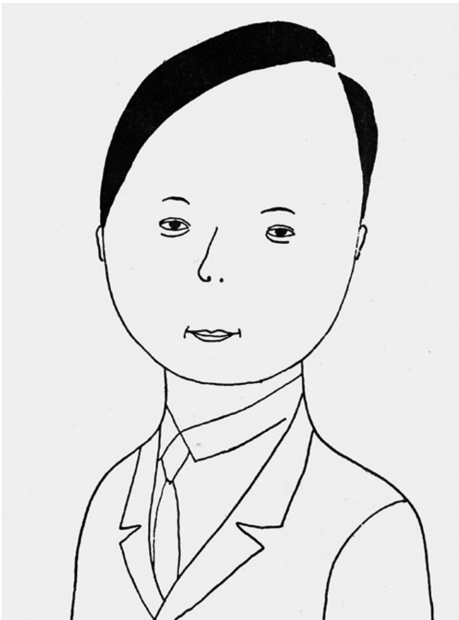

Figure 1. František Muzika, *Konstantin Biebl*, 1927.

in private verses that speak about and to Death, written before his suicide in 1951. Finally, just before and after his death, his journey to Java, mostly judged in line with Zhdanovist ideology of socialist culture, figures prominently in assessments of his work.

However outlandish, Biebl's poetic travel also grew from and into the history of Czech poetry. With a focus on the association between travel and poetry, images of faraway lands and peoples, representation of foreigners, and various kinds of exoticism, with a view intoxicated by Biebl's poetry, this book looks anew at the writings of prominent 19th century poets Karel Hynek Mácha and Josef Václav Sládek, as well as the work of Biebl's contemporaries, especially Seifert, Nezval, Teige and Karel Schulz. With the same focus, or in the same daze, the book also examines the broader visual culture of the 1920s, especially as manifested in the magazine where the photos from Biebl's trip were published.

Biebl's journey grew from and into Biebl's life; and from and into a broader history and a literature. I trace the poetic journey's roots and rhizomes, some of them hair-thin and nearly invisible, its branches, creepers and lianas in the jungles of his homeland, in order to richly hear the resonances and overtones of his images of the tropics, travel and colonialism. In turn, Biebl's poetry is an entry point into the Czech jungle. Like when "two mirrors look at themselves in each other," through Biebl's travels and poetry I hope to show something of his larger world and longer history, including a particular relation to tropics, travel and colonialism. Rather than presenting either a survey or a grand argument, I work with fragments and glimpses, and try to listen closely to the manifold resonances and overtones of each image or word.

This book revolves around Biebl's life and work, but it is neither his biography nor a comprehensive study of his work or personality; nor is it limited to his poetry. One might rather think of it as an account of my cosmic travels through a constellation of certain motifs, dreams, sensations, and poetic acts.

ON THE PARTICULAR: "OUR LITTLE CITIZEN" AND THE EMPIRE

This book reflects on particularly Czech and particularly modern reincarnations of age-old desires and displacements at the crossroads of travel and writing.

"So you are from Czechoslovakia? That's a good one! And how come you are so black? Forgive me, I thought that you were a mestizo."[14] Thus speaks a

14 Biebl, *Cesta na Jávu*, 47.

Dutchman to Biebl aboard a ship bound for Batavia. In his travelogue, Biebl tells about a series of his transgressions against colonial etiquette and racial and class distinctions. "We are not able to behave, as soon as we leave Europe," he writes. When he mentions his nationality, it is to articulate this position of an awkward stranger in the colonial society.[15] He is Švejk-like[16] in the way his comic "ignorance" and transgressions make particular sense of (colonial) propriety and correctness. He is a "*Pierot lunaire* . . . who fell from the moon and who feels somewhat unsure on this wildly spinning planet,"[17] in the words of a critic. Biebl writes:

> The ship in a storm is another land, quite another planet than our earth: it is Mars! It has different natural laws, before which our little citizen [*náš občánek*] lies prostrate, and foreign and salty water revives him. Inhabitants of Mars cackle, obviously amused by the miserable and disobedient earthling, who doesn't want to go to his cabin, where he, a little dove, should have long been. He wants to act as a Martian! Hahahaha![18]

The eminent American historian Paul Fussel writes in the preface of his seminal work *Abroad: British Literary Travelling Between the Wars*: "Because the most sophisticated travel books of the age are British, I focus largely on them, although now and then I have considered an American example as well."[19] "Rich Americans and Englishmen, for whom our Earth is becoming tiny" (in the words of a Czech writer who traveled to Java before Biebl),[20] may also have been particularly sophisticated travelers. It is the very weakness, strangeness, and lack of particular sophistication of "our little citizen" (experienced and performed) that, alongside the confusion and intoxication that he already felt at the Prague train station, help him to perceive in a particular way—sometimes with the vision of the child who does *not* see the Emperor's new clothes.

The comic light in which "our little citizen" shows himself illuminates also the Czech nation. After one of his transgressions—talking to an Indian passenger "camping" on the open deck, socially below the fourth class—Biebl describes the "awe" with which Englishmen from the first class look at him,

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15 This is an experience that other Czech travelers at that time, too, have written about. Jan Mrázek, "Returns to the Wide World: Errant Bohemian Images of Race and Colonialism," *Studies in Travel Writing* 21, 2 (2017): 135–155; and Jan Mrázek, "Czechs on Ships: Liners, Containers and the Sea," *Journal of Tourism History* 13, 2 (August 2021): 111–137.

16 See Jaroslav Hašek, *Osudy dobrého vojáka Švejka* (Prague: Cesty, 2000). For an English translation, see Jaroslav Hašek, *The Good Soldier Švejk*, trans. Cecil Parrott (London: Penguin, 2005).

17 F. X. Šalda, *O poezii* (Prague: Klub přátel poezie, 1970), 160.

18 Biebl, *Cesta na Jávu*, 25.

19 Paul Fussel, *Abroad: British Literary Travelling Between the Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), vii.

20 J. V. Daneš and Karel Domin, *Dvojím rájem*, 2nd ed. (Prague: J. Otto, 1925), 1:6.

and he addresses his nation, alongside the first ruler and the patron saint of the Czech state:

> Saint Wenceslas, what have I done again? They [the Englishmen] looked at each other, at me, at the Indian in rags, again at each other, and they burst into laughter entirely openly. They realized that I was a Czech. You nation around Vltava and Labe rivers, if only you saw how because of me you were lowered in the eyes of foreign lands. It's because we do not have the sea.[21]

The landlocked position of Bohemia has made the sea particularly seductive and the dreams and images of distant oceans particularly poignant and exhilarating. The small country—Czechs, at least, tend to think of it as small—lies in the geographic middle of Europe, yet never quite at the center: on the western periphery of the Slavic East, in the eastern margins of the imperial West. It is surrounded—north, west, and south—by German(ic) territories. Not only did the Czechs never have a colony in Asia, but throughout long periods of their history, they were in a position in some ways not unlike that of a colony. These historical and geographical circumstances—and the way they have been variously represented, poetized, and/or ideologized—have shaped Czech attitudes, although neither uniformly nor predictably.

For some three hundred years (symbolically, from 1620 to 1918), Bohemia was ruled by the Habsburgs from Vienna, and during the first centuries of this rule, German largely replaced Czech as the language of education, science, and politics.[22] During the "national rebirth" (beginning in late 18th century), whose central aim was the cultivation of Czech language and culture, German was ironically the initial medium, and works of German arts and scholarship continued to inform and inspire Czech "rebirth"—rather like in the case of the Javanese, Chinese and mestizos to whose land Biebl traveled, and for whom the language and concepts of European colonizers were key in decolonization.

The East was not only the distant Orient, but more immediately, the space of another exoticism, a fantasy of homeland—the origin of Slavs. Sometimes, as Czechs gazed toward the East, borders between the Pan-Slavic homeland and more distant Asia became indistinct. The Habsburg Empire itself was, from the German and Western European perspective, the "Eastern Empire" (*Österreich*, Austria in German), and consisted of multiple easts, sharing shifting, porous borders with the Ottoman and Russian empires. Seen from the distance of time, the Czech national awakening—which was also an emancipatory struggle—has something of the charm of voyage narratives. There

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21 Biebl, *Cesta na Jávu*, 47.

22 For a Czech history in English, see Derek Sayer, *The Coast of Bohemia: A Czech History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

were campaigns propagating the use of ancient Indian poetic meters in the revival of Czech literature; claims that Czech was closely related to Sanskrit;[23] and expressions of the sense that the Czechs shared a common fate with other subjugated peoples, such as the Irish, the American "Indians" or, indeed, the Acehnese of Sumatra in their struggle against the Dutch colonial army.[24] Yet Czechs also felt or fantasized to be "Europeans," variously adapting/rejecting "Western" views of "the East." Travel—crisscrossing Bohemia on foot as well as journeys to other countries or continents—played an important role in the national awakening: in emancipatory efforts at a Czech vision of homeland and its place in the larger world, in navigating Czech, Slavic, and/or European identities, but also, as Wendy Bracewell writes, "not least, travel writing's range of registers allowed the Slav travel account to mock absurdities and overturn ideological orthodoxies."[25] Feelings of being a stranger in one's own land, as well as figures of wanderers, exiles, and peoples without a homeland, such as the Jews and the Gypsies (both were associated with the East), are at the origins of modern Czech literature, as I explore in this book in the cases of Mácha and Sládek. Biebl's poetry is *a* summation of this history.[26]

In the Great War, Czechs were sacrificing lives for the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which many saw as their own nation's oppressor. They were in a position to perceive particularly sharply the imperial war's absurdity. Few works in world literature expose it better than *Osudy dobrého vojáka Švejka za světové války* (The fortunes of the good soldier Švejk during the World War) by Jaroslav Hašek.[27] In Czech poetry, no other work shows the "darkness and emptiness" of the World War more powerfully than Biebl's *New Icarus*, a

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23 Vladimír Macura, *Znamení rodu: České národní obrození jako kulturní typ*, 2nd ed. (Prague: H & H, 1995), 36–39, 48.

24 For Czech images of the "brave Acehnese," see Jan Mrázek, "Czech Tropics," *Archipel* 86 (2013): 179–88.

25 Wendy Bracewell, "Travels through the Slav World," in *Under Eastern Eyes: A Comparative Introduction to East European Travel Writing on Europe* (Budapest and New York: Central European University Press, 2008), 159.

26 A particular summation, which resonates with some and differs from other Czech writers. In another mirror, we might see a different mien. See my "Czech Tropics" and "Returns to the Wide World" for a sense of how Biebl's attitudes figure among those of other Czech traveler-writers to the Malay Archipelago. The case of the ethnologist Pavel Šebesta / Paul Schebesta, who traveled to Singapore, Malay peninsula and Sumatra just before Biebl (in 1924–1925), contrasts revealingly with Biebl. Compared with Šebesta, Biebl comes across as "Czech like a log of wood" (as one says in Czech). Šebesta's origin in a small borderland Moravian community, his broader Slavic allegiance, the fact that he spent most of his adult life in Austria and much of his writing is in German (his second language), and his complicated relationship to borders, states and empires—including Czechoslovakia—are mirrored in his representations of the nomadic "forest people" in Malaya, their homeland, and their difficult relationships with "invading" Malays, Chinese and Europeans. See Jan Mrázek, "Primeval Forest, Homeland, Catastrophe: Travels in Malaya and 'Modern Ethnology' with Pavel Šebesta / Paul Schebesta," 2 parts, *Anthropos* 116 (2021), no. 1: 29–54; no. 2: 345–365.

27 This is the original title, often variously abbreviated in different editions and translations.

poem permeated by images of tropical islands and seas, mestizos and colonial armies.

The youngest soldiers in the trenches belonged to Biebl's generation (Biebl was sixteen when the war began, eighteen when he enlisted). After a peaceful childhood in Bohemia, one of the most prosperous lands of Austro-Hungary, the World War was for them a powerful, different experience of the empire in which they grew up—an experience both of imperial violence, of an unprecedented darkness, and of the colorful wide world outside Bohemia, within and beyond the Eastern Empire's borders. During the Great War, hundreds of thousands of Czechs travelled as soldiers out of their land: many, Biebl among them, to the "Orient," as he and others saw southeastern Europe (the "Turkey in Europe," as it was known), and the Mediterranean Sea; and the differently exotic eastern fringes of the Austro-Hungary in Galicia, on the Russian front. They experienced various orients that were part of the same empire as Bohemia; the Eastern Empire that was, among European empires the most ethnically diverse—in this it was like European empires in Southeast Asia. Other Czechs, especially the Czechoslovak Legions, in the tens of thousands, travelled across Russia to northeastern Asia, sailing then home either across the Pacific or through Southeast Asia.

Czechoslovakia came into being as an independent state in 1918. Questions were asked with a renewed urgency about national identity, the nation's position in the international community, social justice, as well as national ethics and culture. Particular, multiple modernities were dreamed and lived with a fresh intensity in 1920s Prague. It was a busy time for travel and modern forms of fantasizing it, and perhaps the most exciting decade for Czech poetry. Poets and artists—each differently, and to different degrees—were enchanted as much by photographs of New York skyscrapers and gigantic ocean liners as by old buildings in Prague and Bohemian villages; as often by jazz and African music as by local folk songs and fairy tales.

The artists with whom Biebl associated looked for salvation to the East, to the rising star of communism and the recent revolution in Russia, which dreamed to unite the world—this was also the orientation (or *kiblat*, the direction toward Mecca, as one might say in Indonesian) of leftist anti-colonial writers, Javanese and others, who were influential in the Dutch East Indies at this time. Most of the leftist Czech artists were at one time or another linked with the artist collective Devětsil. Pervading their poetry was a certain constellation of attitudes to social reality, imperialism, and "people of all lands"; figuring in their art, well before Biebl's trip, were poverty, greed, "justice" as a weapon of power, violence, workers and capitalists, in Czechoslovakia but also in European colonies on other continents—and all this was also in and behind a poetry/*poesis*/production of new life, a life as poetry, full of "all the beauties of the world" (in the words of one of their mottos, taken from

the most national of Czech operas, Bedřich Smetana's *Prodaná nevěsta* [*The bartered bride*]). Artistically they turned especially to Paris as the center of international avant-garde, although inspiration was also found in Soviet and German avant-garde art; their manifestos, even more than their poetry, had much in common with international interwar avant-gardes elsewhere in Europe. In terms of poetic imagery, they looked to the whole world—faraway lands, people of all continents and all skin colors, sailors, as well as ships, airplanes, and trains, appear frequently in their poetry and paintings.

However, so do Czech villages, grain fields, low hills or the streets and cafés of Prague; so do evocations of Czech fairy tales, folk art, and folk songs. "We were much more national than we thought or wished," reminisced Nezval, one of the poets we met at the platform at Biebl's departure.[28] In the extent and depth of linguistic abilities and international connections, each artist was different; visual artists and architects tended to travel and connect rather more easily than poets. Biebl's archives contain a notebook from his later years containing a large number of French poems that he copied, and it is telling that they are all in Czech translation. The avant-garde's infatuation with Paris and France was passionate and formative, but the sweet dream sometimes bordered on delusion when poetry slipped into theory (I am thinking of Teige), or a smiling, melancholy burlesque (as with Seifert). For poets, France was desirable but distant, even exotic, and an object of poetic tourism, just as streaks of Orientalist and touristic exoticisms are a feature of French poets' views of Prague.[29] Prague would never become Paris, despite some fantastic attempts to make it so,[30] just as Czech poetry and culture, the fantasies and tensions notwithstanding, would never quite become French—this was true for the Czech interwar avant-garde poets as much as for their predecessors.

Faraway seas and jungles, too, were painted with the shades and brushstrokes of Czech language and Czech imagery, sometimes with a poetic rhythm evoking Czech folk songs and nursery rhymes, even as tropical dreams—and, in some cases, actual travels (most often to France and Italy)—expanded the range of colors in which poets felt and painted homeland.

Recent English (and French) language scholarship has contributed to locating the Czech avant-garde, particularly Devětsil, in a larger picture of Europe, with an attention to both its links with other European avant-gardes

28 Vítězslav Nezval, *Z mého života* (Prague: Československý spisovatel 1959), 116.

29 Images of Prague in Apollinaire's "Zone" is the most famous example. On French modernist visits to and representations of Prague, see Sayer, *Prague* and Sophie Ireland, "Paris-Prague: regards surréalistes croisés; Naissance poétique d'une ville" (PhD Diss., L'Université Paris Ouest Nanterre La Défense, 2016).

30 The grand project to build a Paris-style boulevard, later named the Paris Street, and the dwarf version of Eiffel Tower, are emblematic of these efforts.

and its specificity.[31] Teige is a dominant figure in this discourse[32]—understandably, as he was the loudest voice defining and prescribing the ideological direction of Devětsil. "But I kept silent. I was afraid that Teige might send me to . . . ," Seifert writes in his memoirs about his emotions that did not conform to "things that Teige strictly decreed for us."[33] There was (mostly) more camaraderie than fear of Teige, and his enthusiastic theorizing, organizing, and visual art (mostly) contributed to, rather than stifled, diversity and individuality (despite the decreed collectivism). Teige plays an important role in my story, both as a theorist and as a visual artist: he was the graphic designer of several books by Biebl, including *With the Ship*, which the poet dedicated to him. Biebl's poetry is in conversation with the work of other writers and artists, and with programmatic manifestos and theories, rather than conforming to or exemplifying them. Listening to this conversation, we get a *particular* impression of the Czech avant-garde's many voices, harmonies and dissonances, contradictions and unlikely affinities, which are sometimes obfuscated in larger pictures today, just like in manifestos then. A case in point: recent works that locate the Prague avant-garde in an "international" context ("international" tends to mean European) nonetheless lack any discussion of Biebl and his journey to Asia.[34] A view intoxicated by Biebl's poetry, travels, and solitude lets us see his friends and the larger picture in a different light. "I shave Karel Teige's face a few times and then let him grow a beard again."

Biebl has been, variously at different times, considered one of the most important modern Czech poets. When Seifert was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1984, the novelist Milan Kundera wrote: "There were five of them: Vítězslav Nezval, Jaroslav Seifert, Konstantin Biebl, František Halas, and Vladimír Holan . . . the greatest constellation in the entire history of Czech poetry." Kundera "adored" Biebl.[35] Biebl is typically included in histories and textbooks of Czech literature as an important poet. Yet this book's perspective, intoxicated by his travel, also brings out that even among his own, in Prague

31 See especially: Sayer, *Prague*; Meghan Forbes, "In the Middle of It All: Prague, Brno, and the Avant-Garde Networks of Interwar Europe" (PhD Diss., University of Michigan, 2016); Ireland, "Paris–Prague."

32 This is true, for example, about Forbes, "In the Middle of It All," but also a number of English-language books have been specifically dedicated to him, including Dluhosch and Švácha, *Karel Teige*.

33 Jaroslav Seifert, *Všecky krásy světa* (Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1982), 419.

34 For example, Sayer's comprehensive *Prague, Capital of the Twentieth Century*, which presents a diversity of Czech modernisms and their European interconnections; and Meghan Forbes's dissertation "In the Middle of It All: Prague, Brno, and the Avant-Garde Networks of Interwar Europe," in which international travel is one of the main topics.

35 Originally published in *Le Nouvel Observateur* in 1984. Republished in English as "A Lesson in History" in Jaroslav Seifert, "A Tribute to Vladimír Holan," *Index on Censorship* 4 (1985): 5.

or in his village, he was like among Martians; or among "antipodes," which is how he sees Europeans from Java in a poem by that title.

Biebl's journey was just one of numerous literary voyages of 1920s Europe. Everywhere on the continent, the tropics were dreamt in the trenches of the Great War and in the euphoria or emptiness of peace-at-last. Images of ocean-liners and tropical islands did not appear just in Czech poetry.[36] Only when one reads closely does one realize the differences.

Some French, British, or Dutch also at times felt like being among Martians on ships or in the colonies, even among their own people, just like Biebl sometimes "walked around Prague like in a foreign land."[37] Yet, as one reads, for example, about the lives of the French avant-garde poets who travelled extensively to other continents, and with whom one would expect Biebl to have much in common, such as Blaise Cendrars, Philippe Soupault, Robert Desnos, and Paul Éluard, one realizes how their experiences must have been in some basic ways *also* different. While Biebl travelled the farthest among the Czech modern poets, his journey was brief compared to the far more extensive travels and sojourns of the French poets. Biebl set off from a place remote from the sea, from where Paris and, even more, the seashores of southern France, were distant and exotic with their palms and ships. The French, like the British and the Dutch, sailed from their own ports, often on their own ships or on vessels where they met their own people, and among the most frequent destinations were their own colonies. In the 1920s, many people on ocean liners and in the colonies were not even aware of the existence of the Czech language and Czechoslovakia, the newly created country.[38] Some of the Czech travelers—and certainly those of earlier generations—were comfortable in German, and often several other European languages. Not so Biebl, whose archives show him as essentially monolingual. He used mostly German to communicate, a language he probably didn't speak well. On the ship on his way to Java, as well as when he reached there, he was learning conversational Malay as well as some Javanese words—which must have come in handy (especially because he did not know Dutch), and which shaped the way he was making sense of what he saw, as his notebooks show. One can only imagine how he, as a traveler and as a poet, felt so much more like among Martians, or

36 This also applies to certain characteristics of Biebl's poetic travel, such a sense of intensified interpenetration between imagination and actuality, to links between travel and childhood, etc. On modernist travel and writing, see e.g. Kimberley Healey, *The Modernist Traveler: French Detours, 1900–1930* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2003); Robert McNab, *Ghost Ships: A Surrealist Love Triangle* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004); and Fussel, *Abroad*.

37 Konstantin Biebl, *Nový Ikaros* (Prague: Aventinum,1929), 54.

38 See, for example, B. M. Eliášová, *Rok na jižní polokouli: Jáva, Australie, Afrika* (Prague: Českomoravské podniky tiskařské a vydavatelské, 1928), 24.

like a *Pierot lunaire*—perhaps like this book would feel on a bookshelf among publications on great French, British and American writers.

In Javanese jungles, Biebl hears the requiem for Arthur Rimbaud, he is touched by a matchbox deep in the jungle recalling Paul Gaugin's painting, and he repeatedly evokes Jules Verne. French avant-garde authors, too, kept returning to Rimbaud, Gaugin, and Verne. This suggests a connection between the French poets and Biebl, but also an asymmetry. French was not just one of the most widely spoken languages on ships and in hotels, but also the original language of the poets of travel closest to Biebl's heart. This displacement was the poetic ground on which he moved.

It is tempting to imagine what Biebl would talk about with Dutch, British, or French traveling writers, and how such conversations would have shaped his work, had he met them on his ship. I think of Dutch like E. du Perron or Jef Last, British like George Orwell, or French like Philippe Soupault or Paul

Figure 2. "Head of a Clown," a painting by František Tichý, on a postcard sent by Konstantin Biebl to Vítězslav Nezval as New Year's greetings in December 1948. Tichý also illustrated the first posthumous edition of Biebl's *Cesta na Jávu* (Journey to Java; see Figure 18). Archive of the Museum of Czech Literature, Prague.

Éluard . . . But he didn't.[39] One is compelled to look for connections and kinships. Yet, it may be equally important to respect the absence of encounters, to take seriously the fact that many of the connections, which are so tempting to make, remained unrealized, or almost-realized; to sense the shades of tenuousness of those links, and the particularity of each case. The other side of these chance non-encounters is that Biebl, even though he may sometimes appear to us as just one man in a crowd, also always travelled almost alone.

ON METHOD

> *Method:* ancient Greek < *meta+odos; meta-* trans-, change, transformation; *odos* way, path, travel < the same Indo-European base as Sanskrit *sāda* seat on a horse, Old Church Slavonic *xodŭ* going, walk, journey, *xoditi* to go, [and Czech *chodit*, to go, walk][40]

"I love actuality but also dreaming," the poet wrote, "and so I like to move on the border between the two worlds, where actuality overflows into dream and dream into actuality. . . . I am a traveler of all eras and of the most various dreams."[41]

It is an ancient state of being, lived afresh in a way particular to an age, (dis)location, and a life experience, with particular speed, manner of movement, and vision. To write about Biebl's poetic method is to write about his travels, and vice versa. Already in letters from his student years, he sees his poetry as fundamentally modern. With the eye moving swiftly between icy winters and the tropics, between Czechoslovakia and Asian colonies, his is a poetry of trains, steamships, asphalt roads and airplanes, of modern wars and dissection rooms; it invokes the powers of photography and cinema, and it struggles with colonialism and capitalism. This Czech encounter with Java is also an encounter with modernity.

Like in a photographic double exposure, or "as if someone projected two films simultaneously,"[42] Bohemia and Java are superimposed and seen through one another. A Czech landscape is disclosed through jungles and seas; Java is seen anew, in its nearness and its distance, never simply exotic, as it blends into Bohemia, and as colonial and Czech history mirror each other. Biebl's imagination reveals at once the immensity of the world and a nearness of faraway places.

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39 Soupault and Éluard briefly visited Prague, but there is no evidence of Biebl interacting with them extensively. There is also no sign that he met on his trip (or even back home) any of the few Czech traveler writers of the 1920s who crisscrossed the world. See Mrázek, "Czech Tropics."

40 Compiled from the Oxford English Dictionary Online.

41 Biebl, *Cesta na Jávu*, 79–80.

42 Miroslav Rutte, *Doba a hlasy* (Turnov: Müller, 1929), 205.

Teige, in a manifesto of the "artists of life's unity," wrote that "no one comes up any more with proposals for modern art, but with plans of new life, a new organization of the world and its consecration."[43] *Skutečnost* (actuality), as the object of poetic, transformative creativity, and *poznání* (roughly "cognition," both the process and the resulting knowledge) were key words for contemporary theorists of modern poetry. Biebl wrote that "to poetize is a desire for *poznání*" and "poem is the poet's *poznání*."[44] His search for poetic words and images insists on being a search for knowledge of life, even as it is often through intoxicated fantasies that cognition operates. His politics and ethics, as this book tries to show, are indivisible from the inner workings and the silences of his poetry; his engagement with social actuality gains force and clarity from the freedom of his dreaming. The poetry of oceans and jungles reveals truths about homeland with a transformative force, while travel, distant lands, and colonialism are seen with a fresh clarity through his life experience at home: his childhood in a Bohemian village, the the World Wars, his own society and its "justice", his political convictions. Fantasy and actuality constantly overflow into each other; their liaisons are unveiled by the poet.

In Biebl's words, the poet's

> associations extend their hands toward each other across oceans. Poet, the promoter of polygamy, the promoter of polyandry, the implacable promoter of free love, unites the most distant and apparently the most unblendable images . . . because, in an instinctive mania to relate all things of this world, he had long ago intuited their liaisons.[45]

Not bound by conventional rationality, linear arguments, or any stable system, but through chains and clusters of free associations, sub- or half-conscious connections, metaphors, assonances, and surprising, often humorous, juxtapositions and displacements, Biebl's poetry gives glimpses of opposites only to destabilize their difference as they mirror each other and recognize themselves in each other—the sky and the ocean, dream and actuality, poetry and life, we and them. It topples conventional distinctions and conceptualizations, prejudices and stereotypes; it overcomes all sorts of distance and difference; it releases imagination into insecure heights and ventures into dark abysses of the unconscious.

The other side of this poetic "free love" and of these flights of imagination, or always underneath them, is silence—the poet's, of the dead, of the silenced "millions," in the Great War, in capitalist Czechoslovakia, or in Asian colonies.

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43 Teige, Karel. "Obrazy a předobrazy," in *Avantgarda známá a neznámá*, ed. Štěpán Vlašín et al. (Prague: Svoboda, 1971) 1: 97.

44 Biebl, *Dílo*, 5:262.

45 Biebl, *Dílo*, 5:263.

A consciousness of the violence of words, flights away from them and falls into silence, are—like flights of imagination—indivisibly poetic, ethical and political; and the journeys away from words into various silences intersect (other) physical and imaginary travels.

To converse with such poetry, by Biebl and other poets, I believe, one needs to think in a way that is more poetic than argumentative; and that resists enframing (in Heidegger's sense) the particular Czech case or any specific image in any powerful master-narrative, general theory, or argument. I hope the book will tickle readers engaged in different debates and fields (post/decolonial studies, travel writing studies, scholarship on Central European avant-garde, and so on). Some of these were unavoidably on my mind while writing this book, and this is occasionally reflected in the text. But faced with powerful theories, arguments and approaches, I think, too, of Seifert's silent emotions in the face of "things decreed" by Teige's theories; and I think again of "our little citizen" in face of the empire, or among the chuckling "Martians."[46] Uncertainty, confusion, failure to be "proper," self-ridicule, intoxication, or seasickness—at least a tinge of these, like a constant doubt—as a ~~method~~? Or can we rediscover *meta-* and *odos*— transformation, travel, horse saddle, walking, journey—in method? This is a difficult task for a scholar: to let images resonate freely with multiple meanings and impressions, to let oneself be unsettled and disoriented by them, and gather them gently, uncertainly, unheroically, in ways that are evocative and associative rather than orderly and controlling.

Translations of poetry punctuate this text, not merely as examples or objects of analysis, but as poetic moments that may loosen, derail, intoxicate, sharpen feeling and thought, even at the risk of jarring clashes between the two apparently unblendable opposites, poetry and scholarship. Some parts of this book are like fragments from a logbook record of the stormy journey of seasick reading and translating across different imaginaries, memories, histories, and linguistic musicalities.

If Biebl's journey is the entry point to a broader view of Czech poetic travels, his poetry is an inspiration for the method—the transformative journeying—of this book. In English about Czech texts, by an academic about a poet, on a tropical island about a landlocked Central European country: this book dreams to cross oceans and to move between languages, places, and forms of knowledge. It struggles to translate and bring what is distant and apparently unblendable together. Translation and travel are not merely ways to get from one point to another. I write in (Cz)English, and risk traversing the seas in

46 For a brief Biebl/Czech-centered critique of the master narrative of postcolonial studies, and how its appeal and dangers haunt my own thinking, see Mrázek, "Czech Tropics," 156–60.