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AFFIRMING AND QUESTIONING NATIONAL IDENTITY IN ALTERNATE HISTORIES

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Abstract: **The study examines the Polish journalist Marcin Wolski's *Jedna przegrana bitwa* [*One Lost Battle*] (2010) and the acclaimed Czech writer Josef Nesvadba's *Peklo Beneš – o šťastnějším Československu* [*Beneš's Hell – A Happier Czechoslovakia*] (2002) to argue the science fictional subgenre of the alternative history or uchronia more prominently reflects issues of cultural identity than other science fiction and to examine the posited critical function of SF in general.**

Keywords: **alternate history, nation, science fiction, Czech, Polish**

To rephrase the title of Philip K. Dick's novel of 1968, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, one may ask, whether other nations dream of similar futures in their science fiction and literary utopias or do their different cultural backgrounds and literary traditions make their dreams, like those of Dick's androids, quite different from those of dominant American SF. Answers to the role of nation in SF have varied. Many have discounted or even precluded distinct national differences in SF, viewing SF as a distinctly international genre, "global in practice and universal in aspiration"(McCracken-Flesher 1) and whose "symbols and archetypes [...] have become a shared language for understanding the new world."(Walter) Advocates of an international SF frequently turn to Istvan Csicsery-Ronay's seemingly clear claim that SF overcomes the nation and national specifics to support their arguments:

> For most of the twentieth century, sf has absented nations from future history — not only the possible heirs of our present's nations, but any imaginary variant of a community with a claim to cultural distinctiveness and political sovereignty in a system of related communities.[...]. [SF's] globalizing imaginary is based on a notion of history and historical innovation that systematically, though unconsciously, ignores the role of nationality in the development of individual consciousness, to the extent that sf cannot imagine a future society in which nationality has any significance. This "post-nationalist" — or anti-national — orientation forms the basis for some of the most powerful world-construction models in the genre's treasury, models that disavow national particularity and bypass the cultural tensions that might emerge in

the relationships of self-distinguishing national cultures in the future.(Csicsery-Ronay 218)

Csicsery-Ronay seems to propose SF as a new type of developing "world literature," which Franco Moretti viewed as "texts, whose geographical frame of reference is no longer the nation-state, but a broader entity – a continent, or the world-system as a whole."(Moretti 2) Indeed, this evaluation reflects many readers own experiences with Slavic SF. Stanisław Lem's SF writing hardly reflects his Polish nationality, one need only recall *Solaris*, and he himself illustrates his theory of futurology and science fiction in *Fantastyka i futurologia* using examples from anglophone literature such as Philip Dick. The borrowings of Verne's captain Nemo in Czech and Russian literature, for example in Jan Troska's *In Nemo's Realm* and Josef Nesvadba's *Last Adventure of Captain Nemo*, the Slavic voyages to the Moon modeled after Verne's *To The Moon and Back* as well as Russian and Czech film adaptations of Polish, American and French novels further suggest the decided internationality of SF. Yet despite this evidence, this is not a complete view of SF or Csicsery-Ronay's study of SF and nation.

Overlooked in his assesment of nation in connection with empire and anglophone and French SF is his remark regarding the SF of small nations: "We must wait to see whether the nations who think they are nations will imagine different futures."(Csicsery-Ronay 237) He thus opens the door for a distinct national SF, which others such as Andrew Milner have not only seen as a possibility, but rather, as established fact. Milner turns to the past, stating "[...] nineteenth- and early-mid twentieth-century European SF tended to imagine its future worlds in distinctly national terms,"(Milner 162) this study turns to the present to claim the specter of nation is to be found in contemporary Polish and Czech SF.

Nation is not excluded from SF, it does not, however, cast an equal shadow on all of SF's subgenres. While the mainstream SF of the Czech writer Josef Nesvadba merely reflects Czech culture by Nemo's new predilection to drink slivovica, nation and national themes figure more decidedly in the SF subgenre of alternate histories. This study shall visit both a Polish and a Czech alternate history published after the millennium to demonstrate how alternate histories transcend the bounds of the fabula, setting and language to imagine and reimagine a future with nation as well as to question alternate histories as a "specific of Polish SF"(Parowski) and examine the postulated critical function of SF in general.

The title and foreword to *Jedna przegrana bitwa* or *One Lost Battle,* the Polish author Marcin Wolski's alternate history, suggest the nationally specific character of his work from the start and prove the selection of historical events to rewrite is itself influenced by national values. The battle of Wolski's title refers to what is known elsewhere as the Battle of Warsaw, but in Poland exclusively as "Cud nad Wisłą" – "The Wonder on the Vistula." What other nations perceive as a historical battle, in which outnumbered Polish army led by Josef Piłsudski stopped the Red Army's advance into Poland after it had defeated Piłsudski's campaigns in Ukraine, is part of Polands cultural memory, celebrated in Poland's earliest films (*Dla ciebie, Polsko* [*For you,* Poland] (1920) and *Cud nad Wisłą* (1921)). The battle is a legend of Polish service to Europe rivaling that of Jan Sobieski's saving Europe from the Turks before Vienna, a point the text repeats

and which the critic Maciej Parowski embellishes, noting Piłsudski saved both Poland and Europe.(Wolski cover) Wolski, previous author of two positive alternative histories, *Alterland* and *Wallenrod*, explains his goal in his foreword entitled why. Rather than the typical SF question, "what would be if," he states he strives to captures the importance that a few Poles played in 1920, a role just as important as that "[of] those workers forming Solidarność in Gdansk who led to the fall of the Empire of Evil."(Wolski 8) The book is intended as a homage to the heroism of these few in a negative alternate history without pathetic patriotism and also to celebrate his family history: three of his uncles and his father either fought the Bolsheviks in 1920 and during World War II, only his father survived.(Wolski 8) This combination of historical fact and literary fiction resurfaces in the similarity of the protagonist's name to the author's own: Marcin Wolak, Wolski's fictional double in a world in which Piłsudski was defeated.

Against this cultural background, it comes as no surprise that one lost battle does not simply have ramifications for Marcin's life in Poland in 1968, but for all of Europe as two maps included in the book show. In an alternate history lacking the miracle on the Vistula, the socialist revolution starting in Russia expands across most of Europe, save for Scandinavia and the British Isles, to establish a Union of Soviet Socialist States or Eurosoc, a reminder of Orwell's Ingsoc of 1984. Opposed to this Soviet power are the United States, France (still existing independently in its African colonies), the UK as well as Japan and China, where Mao's revolution failed. Despite the narrator's awkward initial prolepsis to judge Eurosoc in advance, readers only slowly become familiar with the he make-up of the world hidden to Marcin, raised entirely in the new society and knowing nothing of our more positive history, in a narrative fashion typical to dystopias, a first person narrative of the protagonist. *One Lost Battle* showcases many of the images and clichés of the real socialism of our own history, for example Stalinist gothic inspired sky scrapers adorning the regional capitals of Eurosoc, two in Berlin and five in Warsaw, those of MGU and in Warsaw in our world. These pinnacles of socialist victory boast escalators, an image of progress, which, however, are in need of repair. Marcin's description of free public transportation that is hopelessly overcrowded at rush hour and not available during the day, economical goods which are consistently unavailable and bemoaning of a lack of great art such as that of Sienkiewicz repeat common criticisms of socialism and utopianism. Despite his remarks, Marcin lives well in this world, himself writing a poetic ode to the party dictator, reminiscent of the odes to Stalin of our history, which earns him a place in the young communist Nadia's bed. All seems well until an alternative narrative of the past is revealed to him in his father's diary which makes his life impossible as he knew it before.

The diary begins with an indictment of this socialism in particular and all secular utopian projects in general, claiming change does not come about due to historical, class conflicts, but rather as a result of laziness, heartlessness and stupidity and argues:

> In our pride we, as a species considered both God and the Ten Commandments to be unnecessary to build a brave new, better world, pure reason suffices. After leaving the living hell of the gulag

today I repeat to myself: even if there were no God, he would need to be imagined!

W swojej pysze uznaliśmy, my jako gautnek, że aby zbudować nowy, wspanialiszy świat, niepotrzebny jest ani Bóg, ani dekalog; wystarczy czysty rozum. I cóż z tego, że dziś po wydostaniu się z łagrowego piekła powtarzam sobie: Jeśliby nawet Boga nie było, to należałoby go sobie wymyślić!(Wolski 25)

The father's diary changes Marcin's view of the great liberation of Warsaw to one of Polish defeat while simultaneously introducing and rewriting our own known history. On the one hand, the historically accurate execution of Polish officers in 1939 and their martyrdom in Soviet gulags flows seamlessly into the alternate history despite the changed chronology. On the other, Hitler is killed in his first putsch attempt, there is no Second World War and Einstein works for the Soviets to create the first atomic bomb and thus stop the capitalists' advance on Europe. More central for discerning nation and Polish specificity, are, however, the values ascribed to the exemplary character of Marcin's father as well as the recurring indictments echoing throughout the plot. One of these postulated Polish values is, as the diary's opening suggests, religious faith and morals, which will feature prominently among other key values.

Wolski's alternate history presents family ties and cooperation as a hallmark of Polish identity. In the alternate Warsaw, three generations of Marcin's family live together under one roof, spanning from Marcin's grandmother, to his mother, the family's housekeeper, Nastia, and Marcin himself. In addition to caring for Marcin's physical well-being, Marcin's grandmother still holds a prayer book in her hands despite the official disdain of religion, while Nastia reads to Marcin in his early childhood from the bible, preparing him for his later religious awakening. Although Marcin's mother does not share the religious values of the others, making the best of her life by having an affair with the Russian commander Igor, whom she intends to marry against the other Poles' reproaches, she does so to protect family interests. She will take every mean necessary to protect her son, a fact even her estranged husband recognizes and praises even as he condemns her complicity in state socialism. Marcin finds similarly strong family bonds among the Poles in capitalist America. Despite never having met him, Marcin's cousins pay his fare to the United States after he illegally escapes from Eurosoc and take him in to their homes without further questions. Despite his own ineptness at making a career and earning money, the humble relatives never cease to support him, though they have difficulty shouldering the financial burden. To accentuate the Polish specificity of these traits, several non-Poles appear in the text, who do not share these values, both socialist apparatchiki, as well as business minded Americans. The most prominent of all is Marcin's first lover, Nadia, whose disregard for morals, family and solidarity make the Polish values shine most clearly.

As the ties between family and religion suggest, *One Lost Battle* approaches a celebration of the stereotype Polak-Katolik. The most straightforward of these plot lines is Marcin's discovering his faith in God, which is quickly followed by a recognition of his nation's true religious history and the realization that despite official persecution of religion he has been surrounded by Christianity continuously, both in the prayers of Nastia

and his Grandmother and by the secret meetings of the faithful in Warsaw. But Marcin's new-found Catholicism is only a portent of much more. Faith in God and the Pope, as in the messianic tradition of the nineteenth century, was intertwined in Poland with the belief that, to summarize Brian Porter-Szücs, Satan was out to destroy both God and the Polish fatherland.(Porter-Szücs) This belief elevates Poland above the other nations of the world and, in this fictional world, even above the so-called free world of North America to which Marcin escapes. For the chapters "American Dream" depict an America of McCarthyism, a populace fearful of immigrants and a police state of curtailed freedoms, in which only money and power rule. Unlike the spirituality even prevalent in the fictional world's socialist Poland, worth is measured here only by an individual's material possessions and earnings. Even in a purely materialist regard, America appears poor – only bad coffee is available, reflecting an older stereotype of the U.S. It is against this backdrop Polish salvation becomes particularly clear in the figure of John Paul.

In Wolski's alternate history, John Paul is initially not the Pope, or at least not the only one, but a radio evangelist, reaching out to the Poles of the world by radio by preaching faith, solidarity and hope. As to be expected in the role ascribed to Catholicism, it is above all John Paul's teachings that cause the socialist world concern as an uncontrollable transformational power, an estimation of power the reader is intended to share. Indeed, as John Paul's spreads his word, the belief in him causes competing evangelists to willingly give up their positions so that he is poised to unite the church across international borders, a threat Eurosoc intends to eliminate by a second assassination with the help of a Polish double agent, Barczyk, who previously assassinated the U.S. President. The agent's nationality is crucial: Barczyk discovers faith in God and Catholicism and reveals the complot to Marcin, John Paul's coworker, after making his own death seem an accident to save his family, thus displaying both Polish traits of faith and family values. The symbiosis of faith and nationalism reveals itself in Marcin's reading of Barczyk's poetry:

> There are many paths, many contents and the shared dreams of three generations. We don't have tanks or ships, our hearts shall suffice as compasses, and before our troops return to the Vistula, Warta Niemen and Prut, where we are is Poland, where we are is Poland, so help us God.
>
> Dróg wiele, wiele kontynentów, i wspólnych marzeń trzech pokoleń, nie mamy czołgów ni okrętów, serce ma starczyć za busolę, I zanim wrócą nasze wojska nad Wisłę, Wartę, Niemen, Prut, gdzie my – tam Polska, gdzie my – tam Polska, tak nam dopomóż Bóg.(Wolski 316–317)

The converted agent's last words show the Polish cultural message of the novel like no other, firmly placing Poland in a positive, eutopian third space outside of the dichotomy of West and East.Though Marcin cannot prevent the attack, he does aid the Polish cause in another way; by taking the Pope's microphone after the attack to praise both God and Poland. After placing the importance of solidarity, faith, helping one another, he points to the power of transformation: "It is not true that we can do nothing. […] Sixty-one years ago one lost battle near Warsaw proved to be key for the destiny of the world [Nieprawda, że nic nie możemy […]

Sześćdziesiąt jeden lat temu jedna przegrana bitwa pod Warszawą okazała się kluczowa dla losów świata]."(Wolski 335) The protagonist, much like the author Wolski in his foreword, connects the Battle of Warsaw to the fight against socialism and an understanding of Poland as savior of the world. However, the author's double does not rest with an overthrow of socialism as the following words show:

> There, under occupation, you sometimes idealize democracy. But democracy is the right to choose evil. The World of the West has achieved many wonderful things, but also many created many menaces. In order to oppose evil, it had to borrow many of the methods of this evil. It is therefore not unlikely that when the world awakens, that not only they will be able to help us, but that we must help the West.
>
> Tam, pod okupacją, bywa, że idealizujecie deomkrację. Ale deomkracja to prawo wyboru również zła. Świat Zachodu ma mnóstwo wspaniałych osiągnięć, ale równie wiele zagróżeń. Aby przeciwstawiać się złu, musiał przejąć wiele z metod tego zła. Niewykluczone więc, że kiedy nastąpi przebudzenie, nie tylko on będzie mógł pomagać nam, lecz także my będziemy musieli pomóc jemu.(Wolski 336)

This is more than a return of Polish messianism, expressed verbatim in the phrase "For yours and our freedom" earlier in the text, it brings messianism into the twenty-first century, celebrating Poland and Poles as a moral power above and beyond that of the previously both intratextually and extratextually envied West. Unlike earlier messianism, Poland will not only suffer for humanity but shall help it as well as a nation with a higher moral standing.

If the former posited Polish characteristics show the nation from its best side, the next is problematic. The diary's account of Polish history singles out Jews for playing a particularly detrimental role in destroying the more positive history of our world. The narrative explains Jews always looked out for themselves, leaving Poland for Germany where conditions were better, maintains Marxism was a natural religion for Jews and repeats a commonly held view today that members of the Jewish faith were very active both in the party and the secret police. The father's dim view of Jews expressed in his diary are substantiated by the sole Jewish character of the plot, Marcin's first love, Nadia. Openly promiscuous, alternately sleeping with seven boys at a time, Nadia is keen to promote her own political career, altering her views and friends to this end. When the Soviets begin a campaign against Zionism and implicate her parents as Western agents, little more than a ploy to free their desirable house for a Russian party boss, Igor, she quickly denounces them as well to save herself, leaving Marcin quite literally speechless. In addition, the success of Jews in an American police state of McCarthy's dreams seems to imply a general Jewish conspiracy. Regrettably, the Polish alternate history portrays Jewish characters singularly negatively and subscribes to common Jewish conspiracy theories, both in keeping with Polish messianism and even more so with negative stereotypes of the Polish being antisemitic, without critically examining them. As in the former supposed positive traits, *One Lost Battle* propagates existing stereotypes and myths rather than challenging them.

This can certainly not be said of Josef Nesvadba's posthumously published *Peklo Beneš (o šťastnějším Československu)* or *Beneš's Hell* (*About a Happier Czechoslovakia)* in regard to Czech stereotypes. Drawing on his psychiatric training, Nesvadba explores the depths of the Czechoslovakian President Edvard Beneš's and also Czechs' psyche with the help of the SF-novum Indinet, a machine allowing alternate, parallel histories to be created by examining subjects' minds. The alternate history of *Beneš's Hell* diverges from our own shortly before the Second World War, a time of particularly importance to the Czechs since it marked the beginning of the end of the first Czechoslovak Republic at the hands of its foes and allies. Thanks to careful, secretive planning on the part of Czechoslovak legionnaires and Beneš for open and under-cover resistance, Hitler's illness, an uprising in Vienna of all the non-aryan Slavic citizens and the support of Mussolini, the Munich agreement is not signed in the form known to our history. With Czech and Italian support of the Austrian insurgents, Germany's annexation (Anschluss) of Austria is undone and a neutral Bohemian-Austrian state arises in the middle of Europe under Mussolini's protection. Despite attempts from both the West and the Soviet Union to draw Czechoslovakia/Austria into the Second World War, it remains neutral, and under the benevolent dictatorship of Edvard Beneš, carefully guided in his policies by the narrator's mother, a strict Czech school teacher, prospers until the end of the twentieth century.

As in psycho-analysis, Nesvadba's machine and setting in mental institutions suggest an emphasis on examining regrets troubling patients in order to heal them. These suppressed regrets and questions reveal themselves to be those concerning Czech understandings of their history, and as in psycho-therapy, Nesvadba offers a critical examination of several preconceived notions. First, *Beneš's Hell* questions the view that it was impossible for Czechoslovakia to act otherwise in 1938 in diplomatic proceedings known in Czech as "O nás bez nás [About us without us]" or the "zrada Západu [betrayal of the West]."Second, the text challenges earlier Czech nationalist views of Austria as the "Jailkeeper of nations." Thirdly, Nesvadba reevaluates commonly held views of Czech-German relations and the nation state itself..

Beneš's Hell challenges the first view in two ways. The text praises the achievements of the Czechoslovak legionnaires in the First World War, in which they defeated both Austrians on the eastern front and the Russian bolsheviki who tried to disarm them on their way to Vladivostok, and turns our attention to the crucial role most of these officers played in establishing the government of the First Czechoslovak Republic. Although well-known today, this history was suppressed after 1948 due to the legions' anti-bolshevism and its incompatibility with an official myth of defenselessness. In contrast to post 1948 national memory, *Beneš's Hell* advances the argument that the Republic was founded by action and could also have been saved by action. This is only partially in the form of military power, unlike Jan Drnek's *Žáby v mlíku* or *Frogs in Milk* (2007), a Czech alternate history in which Czechoslovak soldiers defeat Hitler outright. Nesvadba challenges the myth of no possible compromise apart from surrender by allowing his fictional Beneš to look beyond England or France to find allies of convenience in Austria and fascist Italy, and to involve himself in covert operations forbidden by diplomatic agreements,

thus implicitly questioning the historical Beneš's unwillingness to make concessions to his own ideals. Nesvadba suggests the existence of a third way, both without its traditional allies and avoiding a unilateral war, as the basis for the establishment of a happier Czechoslovakia in his fiction and as a treatment of Czech feelings of victimization.

Both the expulsion of Germans from Czechoslovakia after World War Two as a justified and necessary action due to German war crimes and continuing ethnic conflicts as well as the idea of Austria as Bohemia's natural enemy are myths embedded in Czech literature and histories which have been challenged elsewhere, but *Beneš's Hell* questions these both in its look to the past and in its unique vision of the future. In his recollections of the pre-1938 Czechoslovakia, the narrator gives an accurate portrayal of Czechs and Germans in the Sudety Mountains living if not together, then side-by-side in peace. This peaceful coexistence of German and Czech ethnicities is echoed in another character's report of how T.G. Masaryk, the first Czech president, spoke German as a child. More surprisingly, however, is how Moravec, a Czech government official, evaluates the German and Austrian role in Czech history: as natural allies against the invaders from the East, above all the Hungarians (a view Slovak historians in light of forced Magyarization would generally share). The narrator's exchanges with Bohemia's "German" nobility reveal that nationality was often merely a choice for the nation which was deemed more attractive and advantageous for an individual at the time, neither a question of blood nor of belief. With this premise, when the Czechoslovakia of the alternate history avoids the financial crisis that its German neighbors experience and continues to prosper throughout the twentieth century, it comes as no wonder that its ethnic German citizens praise their president Beneš with the same enthusiasm as their ethnic Czech compatriots. The jubilee surrounding the success of Czechoslovakia as a state, not a nation state, is accompanied by the historically accurate note that ethnic Germans had supported it in the twenties.(Nesvadba 165) This complements and completes the fictive Beneš's rejection of the historical Masaryk's belief in every nation's specific destiny, that of the Czechoslovaks' being humanity: Nesvadba's Beneš reduces the idea of nation to pragmatic rules of conduct for peoples to live in harmony. In challenging such central cultural myths, *Beneš's Hell* becomes a hell for a conservative Czech nationalistic reader.

This brief study of Wolski's *One Lost Battle* and Nesvadba's *Beneš's Hell* show that nation and national identity make themselves felt in alternate histories to a degree unthinkable in Stanisław Lem's philosophical SF and that SF is not purely international, but may indeed delve into nation and national self-perception. But the juxtaposition of these texts does more than support a claim of national specificity in the subgenre of the alternate history; it also questions the assumed subversive, critical quality of SF itself. For while *Beneš's Hell* uses the process of estrangement to challenge preconceived, accepted views of what nation is in general and Czech conceptions of their own history in particular, Wolski employs the same method to reaffirm and amplify such preconceived notions without critical evaluation. It can only be hoped that this is not the Polish specific of the alternate history of which Parowski spoke. The tools of SF, like the brushes of an artist, may just as easily paint a picture of the world

showing us what we expected to see as they can create a strikingly new way to see our world differently.

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