

# LUDVÍK VACULÍK

## *The Guinea Pigs*

New York: Penguin Books, Writers from the Other Europe.

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In the spring of 1972 Philip Roth made a pilgrimage to Prague, Czechoslovakia, the city of his spiritual mentor Franz Kafka. Roth had started reading Kafka in his early thirties when he felt himself "drifting away" from his goals as an artist. No wonder, then, that he recognized a kindred soul in the Czech writer Ludvík Vaculík, who, in *The Guinea Pigs*, has his own Kafkaesque tale to spin.

*The Guinea Pigs* assumes the form of a children's story that spirals wildly, strangely, and suddenly out of control, producing a total effect not unlike that of Mark Twain's *The Mysterious Stranger* in which young boys are entertained by a seductive stranger. Philip Traum (Traum=dream) who creates a tiny people for the boys' amusement and then crushes them underfoot like ants.

On the surface, the plot is simple. A clerk at the State Bank in Prague buys a guinea pig as a Christmas gift for one of his two sons. One guinea pig leads to another, as the boys seek to breed the little animals. Meanwhile, however, the father, Vasek, begins to experiment with the guinea pigs, moving from disinterested observation to active manipulation and cruelty. At one point he places a guinea pig on a record turntable to discover that its favorite speed is 45 rpm.

His wife affords a clue to the novella's theme when, discovering the hapless animal spinning on the turntable, she cries out to her husband, "What are you turning into? A beast?" (p. 110). In fact, the entire novella is rooted in a role reversal which never quite, however, becomes the Ovidian or Kafkaesque metamorphosis of Philip Roth's *The Breast*. Vasek is never actually transformed into a guinea pig, but he empathizes strongly with their helplessness and conditioned passivity. He becomes, in fact, both tormentor and victim. When he places the larger male, Ruprecht, in a filling bathtub and finally intervenes, with his "miraculous power," to rescue it, he whispers to himself, "We're saved," as if he and the beast had become one (p. 118). At times Vasek so immerses himself in the life of the animals that he speaks of his hands as "paws," of his hair as "fur" (p. 32).

It soon becomes evident that, on the microscopic level, the guinea pigs present a paradigm of the human condition. If we are at the bottom of the social structure, Vasek intimates, we collect animals not out of love, but so that we can exercise power over another living creature: "The peasant is fond of his cow because he feeds her even though he could, if he so desired, break her back with a club" (p. 11).

We move through three parallel or analogous levels of experience in this book. The widest realm is Vasek's work world, where all the bankers are thieves and all the guards even worse (they confiscate and keep the money the bankers steal). The bank becomes a metaphor for the political and economic structures that run Czechoslovakia, and one is reminded of Kafka's *The Trial* or of Dickens's Court of Chancery in *Bleak House*. Above all, the bank epitomizes authoritarian, totalitarian structures. As Vasek comments, we raise stupid people "humanely" in the expectation of equality. When they attain power, they "flatten everything out down to their own level" (p. 104).

But *The Guinea Pigs* is more than a satirical political parable. It explores the contradictory needs of the human psyche both to bow to authority and to exercise it over others. For example, in the second realm of experience, the family cell, the father tries to exert the power he lacks at the bank, where rumors are flying of mysterious shortfalls and disappearing money prefiguring total catastrophe. His sexist diatribes against little girls, his assertion of the male role as decision-maker, reflect his drive to compensate for his impotence in the mechanical work world, where his job seems to consist of turning paper money so that the heads all point in the same direction.

Prague is the technologized modern metropolis, its rivers awash with "lazily floating feces and rubber contraceptives" (p. 4). Vasek and his wife come from the country and are always looking back at it nostalgically. The guinea pigs represent their attempt to turn their sons' attention away from a subterranean cables and pipes to living things. But Eastern Europe, like Western, is witnessing the death of the small farm and the movement to the city of the peasant, now detached from his roots. Vasek's wife is named Eva, and there is a serpent in the Garden of Eden. Early in the novel, Vasek rescues a viper from drowning, and he is later *not* to rescue a guinea pig, and the Edenic image is tainted.

As the bank plot increasingly threatens obscure violence towards Vasek, his sadism intensifies towards the guinea pigs, which encapsulate the third, microscopic realm of experience. The effect is similar to that of the scene in Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* in which Frederick Henry, staring at ants falling off a log into the fire, decides to save them by dousing the fire and instead only steams the ants to death. If Frederick Henry is to the ants as God is to Frederick Henry, then Vasek is to the guinea pigs as the bank is to Vasek: he aspires to play a godlike role with them. As Gloucester cries in *King Lear*, "As flies to wanton boys are we to th' gods./ They kill us for their sport" (IV, 1).

As the violence and brutality escalate, not only does Vasek forget that he is supposedly addressing an audience of children, but also the narrative voice shifts from first to third person, from "I" to "the banker." It is as though he had to dissociate himself from his moments of extreme cruelty. By the last page, however, we are ourselves totally disoriented, as we no longer have any idea who is telling the story. Vasek has, presumably, been killed by an assassin. In any event, "he never came and they never heard of him again" (p. 167).

Vasek has been playing his own cat and mouse game, like the black kitten with the guinea pigs. But he is never certain whether he is the predator or the prey, and his death coincides with the birth of a new litter of guinea pigs. He is responsible, however, for the death of both male guinea pigs in a manner which suggests he is also destroying himself. His obsession with self-destruction suggests that we may also be dealing with a parable of the alienated artist in an absurd, cash- and power-driven society.

Vaculík's work has affinities not only with the Kafka of *The Trial* and the Gide of *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* (the cash nexus, the haunted child), but most extensively with Edgar Allan Poe. The black cat could well be an echo of Poe's tale of the same name, as the trapdoor in the sinister colleague's cottage awakens echoes of "The Pit and the Pendulum." But most importantly, Vaculík quotes at length from Poe's tale of terror, "A Descent into the Maelstrom" (p. 38), and references to it are sprinkled liberally throughout.

To be sure, his hero assumes that the maelstrom is a metaphor for a classical economic depression written by a nineteenth-century American economist! The irony is trenchant on the part of Vaculík, who knows better than his hero. Poe is probably, to Vaculík, the classic type of the misunderstood artist, profligate, decadent, always in debt and in disgrace, a perpetual outcast from society. Vasek-Vaculík is evidently in search of a saving "barrel" of ratiocination, such as that which Poe's hero uses to extricate himself from the ultimate, return to land, and communicate the experience to others. Vasek's own private whirlpool image is reinforced by the turntable episode, the drowned guinea pig, and his own drowning fantasies.

Lest we miss the point, Vasek even editorializes about the writer's plight. He consciously resists the notion of art as neurosis or alienation from society: "Writing is healthy only when it is a pastime, a hobby, recreation for the writer or the reader, or a livelihood" (p. 27). But it soon becomes clear that he, as much as his American predecessor Poe, reflects the situation of the disprized, displaced artist. As Poe begins in ratiocination and ends in terror, so Vasek-Vaculík begins in pure enjoyment and ends in nightmare.

Like many Eastern European writers (Polish experimental dramatists, for example), Vaculík must tread carefully. He cleverly uses the stratagem of writing over bureaucratic heads by using an apparently safe American frame of reference. But the initiated reader is free to draw his own conclusions.

Philip Roth is to be applauded for a fellow artist's generosity and perceptiveness in bringing this pungent, often acerbic, but always humane little book to the attention of English-speaking audiences. Resembling the guinea pigs themselves, this "tale of the grotesque" is a well-crafted and chiseled miniature. Its serious purpose, however, is to remind us of our own littleness in the great scheme of things, and of the need for fellow-feeling and tolerance of even the smallest created beings. With Vaculík, in fact, we reach a state of empathy where we seem able to hear what George Eliot has called "that roar which lies on the other side of silence."

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## Literary Experiments in Elkhadem's *Tajarib Laylah Wahidah*

Following his remarkable works of fiction, *Ajniha Min Rasas* ("Wings of Lead") and *Rijal Wa Khanazir* ("Men and Pigs"), Saad Elkhadem (al-Khadim) has written a novel, *Tajarib Laylah Wahidah* ("Experiences of One Night") which he rightly describes as a "modernist" story.<sup>1</sup> The book clearly reflects what is now called "the tradition of the new." It is experimental, formally complex, elliptical and allusive, containing elements of decreation as well as creation. The author's striking technical innovation in Arabic modes of narrative expression indicates total rejection of chronological form and freedom