

THE BITTER FRUIT OF THE GARDEN OF DELIGHTS

BOHUMIL HRABAL: HIS LIFE AND WORK

BY

MONIKA ZGUSTOVA

Sample extracts in English

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Above all else, this book is the end result of my conversations and interviews with Bohumil Hrabal. Over the four year period which it took to prepare this text, I talked with him either at his country house in the middle of the Kersko woods, or, more frequently, in the beer halls in the Old Town of Prague. Most of the quotes and dates have therefore been taken from Hrabal himself, in person. Other quotes are taken from the Complete Works of Bohumil Hrabal in 19 Volumes. Other useful sources have been included in the bibliography at the back of the book.

Apart from thanking Bohumil Hrabal, I would like to acknowledge my debt to those who have provided me with information and unpublished material which have proven especially valuable: Vera Sykorova-Marysko, Susanna Roth and Jirina and Josef Zumr; also to Josef Hirsal, Vladimír Karfík Karel Siktanc and Tomás Mazal, who I would like to add to the list for having read the text through and - thanks to their corrections and suggestions as regards both factual events and style - for having helped produce the final version of the this book; to Jirí Kolár, Jan Vladislav, George Gibian Marie and Vladimír Vodicka, Claudio Poeta, Václav Kadlec and Madla and Ludvík Vaculík for their varied and invaluable assistance in preparing this text; and to Jirina and Josef Zumr, Vera Sykorová-Marysko and Tomás Mazal for supplying me with photographs from their archive.

M.Z.

Introduction to Hrabal:

THE MAN WITH THE BUCKET OF MANURE

It is May Day, sometime in the early 'Fifties. The little town of Nymburk - like all the towns and villages in that area of Europe which converted to Communism a few years earlier - is celebrating May Day. The factory workers, the employees of state-owned companies, all of them in their Sunday best, are marching in neat rows along streets decorated with paper flowers and Czechoslovak and Soviet flags. The schoolchildren and students are to the rear of the procession, all dressed up in Communist Youth uniforms: blue or white shirts and red three-pointed scarves tied around their necks.

The march goes up the main avenue and then turns right; and then, all of a sudden, a strange disturbance breaks up the strict order of the rows; the crowds murmur, they point at somebody, they smile, the children and students start to laugh and jump up to get a better view: from one of the sidestreets a middle-aged man has emerged, wearing a check shirt, dirty overalls and a worker's cap; on the end of a long stick that is resting on his shoulder, there hangs a bucket which is giving off an unbearable smell: the man has been cleaning out the diposit of his toilet and is carrying the excrement to the nearest dunghill. Slowly but surely, the bucket comes up to the level of the spruced-up citizens, swinging hither and thither, and the people taking part in the procession forget to wave their little flags and paper flowers; wide-eyed and open-mouthed, they stare at the source of the stench and, dizzied, fumble in their pockets for a handkerchief. As if dead to the world, the man with the bucket turns the corner and walks away, majestically, carrying his clanking burden to the fields. Like the train that stretches behind a King's ceremonial robes, a stinking veil trails behind the man with the bucket. He too is celebrating his public holiday: cleaning out the toilet and carrying off the manure

is, for him, a kind of philosophical Mass; he is the presiding priest rendering an annual homage to the cycle of life, bearing away that which is human to the place from which it first came. He delights in the beauty of his ritual, and while it lasts, even the human condition itself, and all its metamorphoses, strike him as being sublime. He carries off bucket after bucket to the fields, unhurriedly; ceremoniously, he pours their contents over the earth, fertilising it.

The man who chooses the first of May of each year to clean out the deposit of his toilet and carry stinking excrement in a bucket through the festive, bedecked streets, is Bohumil Hrabal.

FIRST PART (excerpts)

The Pierrot and the Harlequins

Perdition, misfortune, death... Despite everything, this was his fundamental vision of the world at that time. A sad young man who didn't have the courage to fight for love because he preferred sorrow and disgrace... This is the image of his youth. A sad clown who drinks without pleasure, a woebegone Pierrot whose Columbines have been snatched away by Harlequins. And if they weren't taken from him, girls would leave him under their own steam, because he was a lad who did nothing all day long except long for impossible things, think about his poems, run away from home and run away from his loves. His first texts are tender, fragile poems - a few of them were published in the Nymburk newspaper "Obcanské listy", in 1938/39 -; he wrote them when in love with Jirinka, a sixteen year-old girl from a working-class family, a girl who was so pretty that he grew ill at the thought of her beauty. He was head over heels in love with her, her beauty frightened him, and when in the company of Jirinka - whom he admiringly called by the French version of her name, Georgine - it would take very little for him to turn red and stammer and stumble and have sleepless nights, to the extent that there were times when they had to call a doctor. As a law student at Charles University in Prague - (he never set much store by his chosen subject; according to him, he ended up studying Law quite by chance and thanks to a disastrous mistake, and it was quite by chance that he finished his studies and got his degree) - he would catch the midday tram from Prague and return home so as to spend the afternoon with Georgine, going for walks along the Elba with her. He adored solitary walks, just him and Georgine; if he happened to find his beautiful girlfriend among a larger crowd, he felt afraid and vaguely ashamed of himself.

He behaved in a similar fashion with his early verse, the first collections of poems inspired by his love for Georgine: he showed them to his friends reluctantly, shyly, he went red and felt ashamed, just as he did whenever he introduced Georgine to a friend: he was ashamed of the love he felt for her, of that need to fall in love what he had inherited from his mother; according to him, he was a son born out of wedlock, the result of her first love; so that he held love to be a both a great blessing and yet also a sin. For Georgine, he spruced himself up and dressed well, but found himself unable to behave like the young actors he so admired, like the good-looking young men who knew how to converse in society, who would sit and smoke with unbeatable self-assurance and elegance. When he tried to imitate them, he went as red as a beetroot and said ridiculous things, and would soon hurry off to his room, stand in front of the mirror and insult himself, angry with his own image, telling himself it would be better if his existence came to an end; he identified with the main character in his favorite novel at that time, Goethe's *Suffering of Young Werther*.

"What use are words", he wrote in one of his early poems, "when the language of the heart is so simple; because words and thoughts sit on the same branch together like flocks of white owls. Your soul gives me your reply before a word leaves your lips. Even deserted places may become Kingdoms."

[...]

He wanted to do something surprising, like Baudelaire, who dyed his hair green and then went to the Paris Opera House: Bohumil had his head shaven. He went off to the dance hall with his face tanned brown by the sun and his pate as white as death. He was the centre of attention wherever he went, but that gave him little satisfaction, since Georgine refused to dance with him. He left the hall and watched through the window as the beautiful Georgine danced with a young engineer who was the best tennis player, the best athlete and the best volleyball player in town; this young man held the girl firmly in his arms while she smiled sweetly; Bohumil, leaning against the window-pane, staring at the couple, was eaten up by jealousy. Later, there came a day when Georgine went on her own to

dance in the neighboring town of Pobebrady: there she fell in love with a young man with a big freckle on his forehead and never passed by the Hrabal household again. Bohumil fell ill, suffered from insomnia for six months, and lost a few kilos; he felt as if somebody he knew had died.

Closely Watched Trains

The Law faculty... One morning as he was walking to it, as he did every day, he turned the corner of Bílkova Street and froze on the spot. He watched as the Heereswaffe and Eseswaffe forced his fellow students out of the faculty building; beaten by rifle butts, his fellow students were forced to climb into a tarpaulin-covered army truck. He remained rooted to the corner of Bílkova Street, watching as the trucks moved off, and heard his fellow students sing the Czech anthem Where is my Country... If he hadn't turned up late for class that day, as usual, the Germans would have taken him away as well.

After being a student for four years, the fact is that Bohumil was getting bored. As if by design, it was then - 1938 - that German troops occupied two Czechoslovak regions - Bohemia and Moravia - and proceeded to close down many Czech institutions, including the university. War was in the air, and workers were needed to work for the Germans and their war machine, to the extent that the vast majority of Czech university students were forced to work as laborers, railway workers or tram drivers. Whereas the Czech population as a whole was thoroughly dispirited at having lost its independence, the 24-year-old Hrabal was happy to have to leave off studying the laws he hated so much. He then took a training course to be a railway worker. This was to become the first of a series of difficult, bizarre jobs - which he nonetheless imbued with a certain romanticism - which he was to take on throughout the rest of his life and which were to prove a major influence on his work.

Since the Germans had put an end to his studies, he found work in a notary's office, where he spent his time copying notes concerning plots of land. It was then that he became a witness to the successful assault on Reichsprotektor Heydrich, in Prague, and of everything that followed: the execution of large numbers of Czech citizens, and especially of patriots... Later he became a clerk at the Railway Cooperative. Once he had completed his work, he sat, pen in hand, and stared or looked out of the window or took naps, and learnt to keep a careful track of footsteps: if somebody entered his office, he immediately made it look as if he was busy checking numbers. When he got tired of being a clerk, he became a railway worker and - together with other workers - replaced wooden sleepers and put gravel under the rails; and above all he listened, as always, to the conversations around him and took in the scenery, observing the fields, rivers, meadows and hills on either side of the Poricany-Nymburk line. Once a fortnight he placed an inspection wagon on the station rails and travelled the stretch between Nymburk and Poricany together with another employee and the inspector; while the inspector checked the condition of the tracks, Bohumil, aged twenty-four, enjoyed the beautiful countryside along the Elba river; soaking up the sun, radiantly happy, he would wave his tanned hand at the people he saw by the tracks. One day he let off a banger and as a punishment was assigned as a clerk to Nymburk station; he was very proud of his new job. And then his dreams came true: he began attending a training course for railway workers at Hradec Králové. He felt like a prince the day he first tried on his uniform, with its cape and markings; it was around this time that he went out one day, dressed in his brand new uniform, to take a stroll round the main square: barefoot.

[...]

In 1942, the ex-law student was given a job as a railway worker at a small station in the village of Kostomlaty, not far from Nymburk.

During this period, Bohumil was proud of his uniform; he loved working with trains and would have liked to have spent the rest of his life doing just that, and dreaded the time when the American and Russian armies - which were getting closer and closer - would free his country and re-open the universities, thus obliging him to finish the studies he loathed.

More than once, he was almost killed. One day, right by his station, Czech guerillas blew up a munitions train. On another day, towards the end of the war, they de-railed a section of track; by coincidence, the SS officer in charge ordered him - the railway worker who knew what the guerillas had done - to climb up onto the locomotive with the Germans, and it was only after a fair while, when they were getting dangerously close to the place in question, that the SS officer fortunately gave the order to let him off.

Today, when he reflects on this episode and the wartime period in general, he is well aware of the fact that, despite everything, he never grew to hate the Nazis and the soldiers of the SS; he saw them as they gave orders at the train station and paid special attention to their human characteristics. And Hrabal is incapable of hating a person he knows personally or by sight, even if he or she is a potential or declared enemy: in everybody he always sees first and foremost a human being. In the Seventies, when the Communist authorities summoned him to frequent interrogations, Hrabal was certainly afraid of his interrogators; but, unlike most of the people who found themselves in a similar situation, he was incapable of feeling hatred.

Once the war was over, unlike most people, Bohumil looked back on the years of conflict - with a certain irony - as his years of glory, years of wearing a beautiful uniform with golden buttons which marked him out, in his imagination, from other mortals.

The Clown's Hat

After the Second World War, Hrabal joined the Communist Party, not for political reasons but rather out of admiration for his Surrealist idols, who were members of the French and Czechoslovak Communist Parties. While appreciating the aesthetic values and visual imagination of Surrealism, Hrabal saw it above all as a movement that represented a spirit of rebellion and insurrection. Nonetheless,

he remained a Party member for barely a year; when he left, he submitted the following explanation in writing: "Those same reasons which led me to join the Czechoslovak Communist Party are those which have led me to abandon it". Hrabal went on believing in the political and aesthetic ideals which the Communist Party and the Surrealist writers had ceased to represent. Here, however, his political activity came to an end, although not for one moment did he lose touch with events past or present, or with the questions to which they gave rise, or with the problems and aesthetic dilemmas involved. He remained firmly convinced that a writer cannot "unstitch himself from the fabric of the period" in which he lives. And from each period he took what he found interesting, and no matter that what was interesting was often painful. All events were to him a lesson, they were reflected in his work, but he never made any active attempt to alter the political reality in which he lived.

He always considered himself a witness to his times, as opposed to being their voice of conscience, because - and this is one of the essential features of Hrabal's personality, and therefore also of his work - since his childhood he has been enamoured of reality, "which I have not created, which existed before me, I, who have never wished for anything but to reflect it; I found that events of the most diverse kind were so full of beauty. I had always been the Jack of Diamonds walking in the sun, a bell in my hand, and on my head a clown's hat which is with me still." Hrabal can say, like his much-admired James Joyce: "I am only a clown, a great mocker of the universe".

SECOND PART

Capital Collage

So it was that the day came when he realised that he could no longer go on living as he had done until then; he had come to a standstill in his little town and no longer knew what to do.... and he felt that, while there, he could neither go forward or backward. It was then that Prague struck him as being his means of salvation. He said goodbye to the Nymburk brewery and to the rest of the little town where, for him, time had come to a standstill, leaving him unable to get it moving again.

When he arrived in the capital, he rented a room on Old Town Square, in the Bell House. What excited him, more than the romantic walks through Gothic, Baroque and Art Nouveau Prague, was the fact that he could see modern art in all its different phases right there on the street. He strolled through early-Fifties Prague, he took the tram and the bus and everything he came across struck him as being there in order to save him, each pedestrian was a precious stone for him, each shop-window, each lowered blind, each heap of scrap iron and junk was, for him, a beautiful combination. He walked through Prague and gawped at the scaffolding, climbing it in his mind's eye right to the top floor from where he could look out over Prague, which, throughout the Fifties, was becoming ever more crowded with scaffolding; he looked out over dozens and dozens of steeples and towers, covered from head to foot in scaffolding... In the winding sidestreets he understood why poetic garbage had excited Rimbaud, why Lautréamont invented his own metaphor for beauty: a sewing machine unexpectedly coming across an umbrella on an operating table. In the streets of Prague he came to see why Marcel Duchamp - in his Paris exhibition - had placed a bottle-stand next to a bicycle wheel and signed the result; in the squares of Prague he began to understand why Duchamp had sent a run-of-the-mill chamberpot as a work of art to his New York exhibition. It was on Prague's busiest streets that he came to understand "trash art", those famous pictures created with found objects. A few years later he

imagined Rauschenberg roller-skating through the streets of Prague as they spilled over with every conceivable kind of junk and garbage and rubbish. He wandered at random through Prague, dazzled by all the juxtapositions and collages and montages, which had ended up on the streets of Prague through accident and neglect and which could be considered as objective happenstance, capable of evoking simultaneous poetry.

He took special note of the many-faceted appearances of this disorder - which was not without a certain style - in order to try and give it some kind of shape, once home, through the horizontal current of live speech, in extracts which expressed the thunder of the streets and the noise of loneliness, and of the old legends, of Prague humor and the Oriental mystery behind the destinies revealed in chess and the Tarot, destinies which were also human, and the poetry of the statues of the saints, of those curves and vertical lines which added to the city's beauty. All this was to become the basis for his long free-verse poems - published in the Sixties with the titles "Love and Psyche", "Schizophrenic Gospel" and "Bambino di Praga" (1950; rewritten with the title "Kafkarade" in Advertisement for a House Where I No Longer Wish to Live) - as well as the basic material for his stories and long narratives: "Cain, an Existentialist Narrative" (1949; the first version of Closely Observed Trains), The Sufferings of Old Werther (1949; later rewritten and given the title Dancing Lessons for Adults and Advanced Students), "Jarmilka", later entitled "The Mistress of the Foundry" (1952; rewritten again and published under the original title of "Jarmilka" in the collection The Chatterers), a narrative written under the influence of André Breton and his novel Nadja, although the text itself shows that Hrabal had discarded his surrealist influences.

"The gold of life's mud-like matter"

Baudelaire

Hrabal has always felt close to the poètes maudits, indeed he even found them in the bars. He saw reflections of the lives of Baudelaire and Verlaine in his

own adventures. He was aware that his intellectual horizon was on a level with that of those who were on the lowest levels of society. He identified with Baudelaire in many ways; like him, he observed street girls, and old men and women. Just as Baudelaire shared a significant part of his life with the mulatto Jeanne Duval, so did Hrabal have a gypsy girlfriend for a time; Baudelaire lived through the banality of daily life with what he called spleen, and Hrabal often fell prey to depressions: endogenous depressions and depressions induced by hangovers. Just as Baudelaire felt tremendous compassion for the poor of the working-class districts, with Hrabal the paintings of the Impressionists - which depicted street people and details taken from the to-ing and fro-ing of everyday life - taught him to celebrate the banality of the day-to-day.

The Gypsy girl came to see him from time to time with her youngest daughter, who used to sleep in a drawer of the sideboard. This young mother and her daughter brought home bundles of wood taken from broken-down huts. Hrabal and the Gypsy girl filled the purring metal stove with the firewood; they watched the flames and the Gypsy girl sang in her deep mezzo-soprano voice - like that of Bizet's Carmen, thought Hrabal - Gypsy songs, melancholy and intoxicating; they cooked horsemeat stew and stared in rapture at the snapping tongues of the flames reflected against the ceiling through the cracks in the stove. "I was happy then..."

In the early Fifties, in Liben, in the room next door to Hrabal's, lived Vladimír Boudník, a graphic artist who was also fascinated by the outlying districts of Prague; he didn't need a workplace any more than Hrabal needed a study. Every day they got up, he and Boudník, at the crack of dawn, and went to work, each in his respective factory, after having spent entire nights walking along the old sidestreets of Liben, discussing art and literature into the small hours. Vladimír Boudník taught Hrabal not to feel pity for the fleeting, for things which are on the way out, which are being torn down; he taught him to love the sight of the

bulldozers flattening the walls of the old houses, or of whole blocks of houses, he taught him to enjoy the visual spectacles of devastation and demolition.

The flames had the colors of Asian butterfly wings...

For four years (from the end of 1949 until the beginning of 1954) Hrabal worked in the industrial town of Kladno, at the Martin blast furnaces, in the huge Poldi iron and steel foundry; for four years, morning and afternoon, he made the forty kilometre trip from Prague to Kladno, for four years he lived in the atmosphere of a steel plant, among the workers there, hard men; four years of being surrounded by fire and showers of sparks, by the fantastic, ever-changing shapes into which the flames would change without warning, and by infernal colors; he felt as if he were living in a Hieronymous Bosch painting. Four years; over that period he changed not only his writing and aesthetic outlook, but also himself, as if he had thrown himself into the furnace along with all the old, useless scrap iron, in order to be transformed into steel, "a vulgar, everyday steel, of the kind used to build bridges over the river". He, the Law degree student, "professor" as his friends and workmates called him, worked at the Poldi steel foundry, and alongside him worked many ex-university professors, a considerable number of ex-bankers and industrialists, scientists and shopkeepers, who were destined, by way of "punishment" - after the change of régime - to forced labor in the iron and steel foundries, alongside workers and non-political prisoners. This meeting-place of the most varied sets of values and of a wide range of backgrounds and attitudes, and the concomitant loss of a conventional scale of values, at first made a huge impact on Hrabal, then came to fascinate him, and ended up by dazzling him to the point where he ended up by discovering his voice as a writer, as well as his subject matter. His childhood and youth, and this period from the Fifties, together form the most important source of inspiration for his work.

Daily, for four years running, he passed through the gate over which hung the huge medallion of the foundry: the beautiful profile of a woman "whose locks had burnt a shining star". For four years he watched as the heaps of scrap iron, of

worn-out, useless metal objects, were turned into noble steel in the Martin blast furnaces, - using precise working procedures - and then poured into the pig iron moulds and stamped with the factory hallmark: the medallion showing a woman's head, the hairs of which were scorching a star. Four years watching slag being poured over waste, the sky turning pink, the morning horizon marking out the city's livid skyline. Four years in which he fell in love with the Martin blast furnace chimneys, which rose up against the background of the city, with a tender blue flame edged with amber emerging from the central one. Four years of moving around in a universe full of pink light and orange flames that licked eagerly at metal, transforming it into a purple mass, like the sun as it sank into the belly of the Earth, only to explode later in a blinding firework display..

Four years of hectic romanticism, of the scrap iron turning into steel, a process in which he saw the end of an era and the beginning of another, the transformation of the past into the present and future, changes not only in the turns of phrase and the tools current at the time, but also in the people, because not only steel was produced at Poldi, but also a handful of human destinies, with the man of the old era being thrown into the furnace so that later he would emerge, fired and forged into the new man of a new era.

The manual work at Kladno, with pick and shovel, guarding the pig iron, hauled by cranes as it glowed gold and pink - like a tea rose lit by lightning - gave him a chance to dream and reflect on what he saw and heard, to arrange it in his head and to begin to write poems - both in verse and prose - as he daydreamed. His favorite time there was when he had the afternoon shift, because, all through his life, he has written best in the mornings, when his night-time dreams merge with his daydreams. It was then that the atmosphere of the blast furnaces projected itself: that Hieronymous Bosch-like garden of delights, where, in an atmosphere loaded with transparent, silvered steam, creatures moved who had great globes instead of heads - it was necessary to wear helmets at the blast furnaces -, and these bizarre beings disappeared into fantastically colored, strangely shaped holes

and then, a moment later, came back out and took hold of phantasmagorical objects that were flying over their heads like the curious fruit of chimerical trees growing in a garden of infernal colors, in a garden that could come only from the mind of a lunatic poet, fruit of the tree of an artificial paradise.

The laurels

Hrabal left off doing what were, in the last analysis, his romantic jobs, in order to become - almost "despite himself" - a professional writer... A little later, in 1963 - in other words, when he was forty-nine - he finally saw the first of his books in print, the short story collection *A Pearl in the Depths*, which won the Best Book of the Year award from the Ceskoslovensky spisovatel publishing house. The book was well received by the general public, and reviews were mainly favorable. A year later the second edition came out, and a year after that the most prestigious Czech film-makers (Menzel, Nemec, Schorm, Chytilová, Jires) adapted these stories for the cinema, entitling the film *Pearls in the Bottom*.

After *A Pearl in the Bottom*, as has already been mentioned, he published *Pábitelé* [*Chatty Tales*] and *Dance Lessons for Adults and Advanced Students*; all of these books soon had to go into further editions. After he had been given the Ceskoslovensky spisovatel award, the Mladá fronta publishing house gave him their Best Book Award in 1964. Whenever one of his books was published, long queues appeared in front of bookshops around the country and the books were sold out on the spot; Hrabal had to wave goodbye to his dream of wandering through the lit-up city by night and contemplating his books in the bookshop windows, because soon there were none left to see...

He got many letters from his readers and his friends, some of them flattering and others indignant. "Dear professor," wrote Vladimír Boudník; Hrabal's friends had a habit of calling him "professor", partly as a joke but with serious undertones.. "Yesterday I saw the film version of one of your stories; the short was called *Collectable Brutalities*. I liked it so much that I didn't have the

patience to sit through the main feature and left. I think of you always. I don't want to visit you because I know how happy these "visits" make you. What satisfaction it gives me to see a dream of yours come true, when at one time it seemed to us that nothing would ever come of those dreams! Above all I wish you health, may you enjoy your successes to the full, and, most important of all, may your head be always as clear as it has been up until now!... Love to you and your wife. Ever yours, Vladimír."

"With his two books Hrabal not only made a name for himself, he left his readers astonished and enraptured." wrote Josef Hirsal, referring to *A Pearl in the Depths* and *Closely Observed Trains*. "Now he is going full steam ahead, as his *Closely Observed Trains* show... While reading this novel voraciously, I remembered the time when he read it out to Kolár, Frynta and myself, at his house on Dock Street. That day he cooked a fabulous dinner for us based on a traditional Czech recipe: hare with onions. And we brought along a couple of bottles of excellent French wine."

"Yesterday I didn't so much as glance at my writing desk, and I threw a tablecloth over my typewriter", wrote the writer and translator Bohumila Grögerová in her diary. "I opened *Advertisement for a House in Which I No Longer Wish to Live* and promised myself that yesterday and today I would do nothing except read." [...]

Round tables, debates, symposiums, media interviews, and contributions to the Press meant that he [Hrabal] was bombarded with all kinds of requests from different sources, making it impossible for him to find the peace of mind he needed to write. That which until recently had been part of his normal way of life - dreaming, imagining things, inventing images, experimenting, taking risks, that is to say being a pábitel - was finished now, thanks to his participation in a variety of different public events. Nonetheless, people's interest and the company of his

readers was something he greatly appreciated. "I am now learning to write with a pencil in the beer halls, in the wonderful loud solitudes. But I cannot be alone any more. Even here someone comes along every few moments and takes me out of my literary anonymity in order to interview me or invite me to a round table... But deep down I know that people's interest cheers me up. I have even thought at times that giving yourself to people is better than writing. Writing is something secondary." [...]

Withdrawing, retiring

[...] As a consequence of the changes in the political situation following the Soviet occupation, the following year - 1969 - the authorities refused to authorise the première of Menzel's recently finished film based on the short story collections *Advertisement for a House in Which I No Longer Wish to Live* and *Larks Hanging From a Wire* (the film was not to reach the cinemas until the collapse of the Communist régime, in 1989); a year later the entire print-run of a collection of articles and essays by Hrabal, entitled *Homework*, was pulped, along with that of another book of stories, called *The Buds*, illustrated by Vladimír Boudník. However, a certain number of copies managed to escape destruction: as chance would have it, Eliska, Hrabal's wife, was working at the time for the paper recycling depot where many copies of *The Buds* were sent.

After *The Buds*, which brought together Hrabal's early texts - that had been kept at the bottom of the drawer from which he took work in order to rewrite it, doing new versions and preparing them for publication - he no longer had any texts left to rewrite: the drawer was empty. And once the print-runs of *Homework* and *The Buds* had been liquidated, a whole era came to an end for Hrabal. As was the case with most writers, the authorities banned him from publishing, so that he had to resign himself once again to keeping his writings in a drawer, allowing the manuscripts to circulate exclusively among friends, resigning himself to samizdat editions, to the other culture, the parallel one, the unofficial one, which, however, was not accessible to everybody.

It was then that Hrabal closed in on himself, withdrawing from Prague and the world of his friends and companions, of literary discussions and round tables, which were now taking on a very different political hue when compared to their predecessors. Like a monk retiring to his cloister in order to live alone with himself, Hrabal retired to a small house deep in the heart of the forest.

THIRD PART

Prague Spleen

A fifty-six-year-old man with thinning hair, with eyes blue as flowers, remarkably expressive eyes which are dreamy and determined by turns, is walking along a street in Prague's Old Quarter; his back is straight, surprisingly straight. This man - who has had seven years of success and glory, seven years of national and international literary awards, seven years of theatrical and cinematographical adaptations of his works, is heading, as usual, for the Golden Tiger; he has nothing better to do. This fifty-six-year-old man is condemned to a life of leisure, of *dolce far niente*, because, as a consequence of the year nineteen sixty-eight, the "revolutionary" year, he now finds himself - in this era of renewed repression - without work and unable to obtain any, given that he is now a "politically suspect subject"; unable to earn a living, he depends on his wife's salary. He can no longer be published. Books carrying the name Bohumil Hrabal have been withdrawn from the bookshops and libraries. The time of forced forgetfulness has come, the dark time, of obligatory blindness, the period of having to walk blindly in the darkness.

After 1968, the fall was that much harder because in less than a decade Czech culture had proved itself to be of outstanding quality, on a level with the rest of Europe. The new Communist authorities, the Neostalinists, still needed a few years, until the mid-Seventies, to set Czech culture back twenty years, back to the depths of the 'Fifties. Many Czech writers chose voluntary exile abroad at this time: Milan Kundera left for Paris, Josef Skvorecky and his wife set up an important publishing house specialising in Czech literature in Toronto, and other Czech exiles founded Czech language cultural magazines and newspapers in America and Europe. Hrabal refused to leave. He knew that exile, for him, as for Ovid, would be a bitter pill that, once swallowed, would be with him forever. And what did Socrates do? "Before forcing him to drink a cupful of poison for having offended the local deities, they offered Socrates the possibility of exile. The philosopher insisted that he preferred to abide by the laws of his country; only then did he

become an exile, leaving through the Greek sky, heading for the cosmos, where he has lived until today, like a citizen of the world." Hrabal believed that "you have to do your dirty washing at home".

The man with bluebell-colored eyes and a face lined with wrinkles - especially around the eyes and the mouth - stares at the head on his beer, he takes the jug from time to time and raises it to his lips, he listens to the conversations going on around him, he listens to his friends and companions, banned authors like himself... He listens to them, but often does not hear them, he is alone in his world, with his spleen and nostalgia, from out of which a spark flies, very occasionally; and then a fleeting smile crosses the man's lips, only to be replaced at once by the seriousness of before; this man has been struck down by the situation in which he finds himself, by what is happening within himself, the endless melancholy, the eternal spleen... The feeling of guilt, as if had done something wrong, as if he had killed somebody. This anguish, this depression and this anxiety is his zero situation... The zero has become his credo, the zero is his motto, he is like an oil lamp with the wick turned down. Zero, nothing, tabula rasa.

During this period, he often rereads his worn, battered volumes of Seneca, he enjoys reading over and over those passages in which the philosopher teaches people how to die, in which he says that there are many different ways of approaching death, but only one aim, which is that Man must die as he chooses... He likes the phrase in which Seneca declares when writing to his friend Lucilius that you cannot make a living out of robbery, but that nothing is so beautiful, on the other hand, as robbing death from life.

He thinks about Vladimír Boudník, about the nail his friend tried to kill himself with so many times, until he finally succeeded; he has the feeling that that nail is sinking into his head, little by little, that it is perforating his skull, entering his brain.... And the curtain falls and the world is left behind.

"La nature est un temple où de vivants piliers..."

Charles Baudelaire

And at this time, when he reflected so often on not-being and not living, Eliska found an advertisement in the newspaper for a house in the woods, in Kersko, a village about thirty-five kilometres from Prague, very close to Nymburk, the little town where time had stood still. Hrabal dreamt of the Elba plain, with its open horizon and milky light, so typical of that region, and of a house deep in a pine forest, in which he could live all week, all month, all year... Now, when Prague had to some extent lost its meaning for him, he dreamt of having a heater in every room, of going to search for firewood in the forest and feeding it to the fire and watching the flames, for long periods of time... And he planned the addition of another floor to the tiny house, on which floor he would install his study; on top, he would place a tin roof and listen to the sweet pitter-patter of raindrops, just as he had used to listen to them in the Nymburk brewery. He looked forward to wandering through the forest and admiring the trees, embracing the most beautiful trunks, those which would move him the most...

They bought the house, and a car to take them there, and Hrabal went out into the countryside with a will, into the forest full of towering birches and even taller pines, which grew out of a strange sandy soil, consisting of sand which the wind had brought from the Sahara. He made friends with the red-barked trunks of the pines and the smooth white bark of the birches; they had a few of these in their garden, in front of the house. He fell madly in love with that countryside and its stream, along which, when he was young, he used to walk with the beauties of Nymburk.

Autumn

It is the month of November, the birches have yellowed and turned ochre, and have lost their leaves, darkness now falls at four in the afternoon and dawn breaks at eight in the morning; it is All Saints' Day, the time of the dead, of last sighs, of death. November. Hrabal adores its melancholy charm, but mentally he is looking forward to Spring.... "Dear Karel," he writes to his friend Marysko, "Once again the colors and smells and sounds of Autumn have reached their peak, every tree and every thicket becoming more and more puffed up, so much so that one day this beauty made up of colors and sounds will not be able to take it any more and will pop off the branches and twigs, and the naked chassis of the trees will go on trembling in the garages of hibernation, dreaming of buds and shoots and a Spring as beautiful as last year's..."

His thoughts of nothingness do not leave him even amid the mists of Kersko, amid the nostalgic beauty of November and December, when rags of mist drag themselves over the muddy ground, and the air is grey and dark, unbroken by any ray of sunlight: when an icy rain falls that turns into slush after a few days and finally becomes a milky whiteness which melts away at once and adds to the shadowy heaviness of the naked trees; it is now that everything hurts, that everything is sadness and pain... And in his correspondence, Hrabal explains to Marysko that in order to cheer up both himself and his wife, he has bought Eliska a plot in the cemetery of the neighboring village of Hradisto. Behind the cemetery there is a beautiful wood, he writes, at the end of an avenue of lime trees where nightingales sing in July.... "I have a vivid impression that someone else other than myself will listen to that singing..."

Since he was a child he had adored water, and had loved submerging his face in it; in riverwater, fountain water, water from a spout or from a dirty stream. Flowing water was an elixir for him. Behind his home in Kersko, there where the wood ended and the fields began, there was a stream into which he would dip his face, splashing himself with its water in winter and summer and then letting it dry, and when he did so he felt that there was something of the dead on his face, he imagined that the rich soil had distilled their remains into the water, that it could turn disappearing bodies into crystal-clear water which he would splash across his

face, and perhaps many years hence somebody would wash their face with the metamorphosis of his body... When he splashes his face with water he imagines that in all the trees and flowers and in every blade of grass and every leaf there is a resurrection of those who have died, that the earth and all that grows in it is nothing other than the ancient remains of people and trees and flowers and animals. He dreams of being buried in a cemetery, from the higher ground of which part of the waters flow into a river and the rest to another river, and that both rivers run into the Elba, so that he will one day form part of the sea into which the Elba flows... He never dries his face when wet, he lets the water full of the ancient dead dry on his skin, this is his magic potion, his mask of immortality. Then he crosses the wood and the garden and feels that all eternity is flowing through his blood...

A solitude full of sparks

He likes getting out of the house, and of himself, into the garden or the wood, and once he is surrounded by Nature, he distances himself from the world in order to sink back into himself. "Whoever lives in Nature and with Nature, has a daft smile forever on his lips", he says. "First he throws away the suit and tie, then he gets rid of films and TV, and finally he loses his watch. The loss of his watch is a sign that he has walked onto Nature's canvas." Once in the wood or garden he leans against a pine or crouches next to a birch, resting his chin in his hand, elbow on knee, and spends hour after hour in this position, like a Hindu meditating. Crouched down, he smiles before everything he sees inside himself, often he half closes his eyes and a film is projected from behind the lids... And in this spleenful mood, which is one of profound melancholy, of being at rock bottom, he suddenly feels himself growing extremely fertile, because when he is in this condition of tabula rasa, when he abandons himself to dreams of nothingness and of ceasing to exist, he becomes more accessible than ever to what he describes as the certain apparition. Then he makes Leibniz's phrase about the eternal melancholy of construction his own, as he does Jaspers' definition of melancholy as an extreme state. In silence, in solitude, in the very depths of melancholy: only there does he find his true ideas, his valid thoughts.

It is at such a moment, when - submerged in this deep melancholy - he feels the closeness of death and senses the imminent collapse of the firmament, that he suddenly realises that eternity is everlasting and that he forms part of it, he, himself, just as he is. This is a feeling of clairvoyance, like those experienced by epileptics, like those feelings which took over Dostoyevsky for fifteen, twenty seconds at a time. This state of depression, of nostalgia, of collapse, helps him to purify himself, to clarify him and his thoughts to himself, and, little by little, by bit, he begins to think of writing.

And once the clouds had passed by, once the hail had fallen and the sun had started to rise inside his head, he allowed himself to leave the floor and float; as if on a magic carpet he flew over the fields and woods and paths and meadows, floating like a soap bubble over the Elba until he reached Nymburk, where he often flew over the monument commemorating the Plague, like the elderly Jews with sacks on their shoulders in paintings by Chagall....

...in order to come back down to earth later and suffer once more, because he was as he was and he continued to suffer from feelings of guilt. Nonetheless he was always aware that after his shame and obstinacy, emotions would follow, the emotion of seeing the natural world, the softening of his feelings when he met up with his wife, the shock of realising that he had good friends. For this reason, he often repeated that being a loser was his triumph.

Summer

When the footpaths were dry, he would take his bicycle and cross the plain through the fields and meadows and woods, occasionally dropping in at the odd bar, where, covered in sweat, he would down a beer so cold it was shedding tears of humidity down the side of a jug which looked as if it was about to melt. Sometimes he ordered a shot of liquor, gin o vodka, but beer was what he liked best... And then he would get back on his bike and go travelling through the countryside lining the Elba; he would visit the cemeteries, reading the names of the

deceased engraved on the tombstones, and afterwards bathe in the Elba in honor of their memory; refreshed, he would then cross a field, pick out the nicest looking haystack and stretch himself out on it with his hands folded under his head, like a detail from a painting by Brueghel or Goya. He didn't sleep; with wide eyes he would stare at the transparent sky which would reflect itself back in his eyes... He would spend whole hours like this. Afterwards, he would suddenly jump up, hop onto his bike and, once home, slip a sheet of paper into his machine, there on top of the tin roof, and then type away dazzled by the sun which was eating him alive, burning him up, but which he adored. The rays of the sun gave him energy. According to him, he wrote the novel *I Served the King of England* "...under a hot summer sun; the typewriter was hot to the touch and jammed or stammered several times a minute. As I couldn't see the white sheets of paper - which were dazzling me - I lost all control over what I was writing, so that I ended up working in a state of inebriation produced by the light, using the automatic writing method, the sunlight blinded me so much I couldn't see anything except the outline of the typewriter, and the tin roof was red hot, so the typed sheets curled up on their own until they looked like wafers". Once he had finished writing, once that state of interior and exterior dazzlement and drunkenness was over, he went out and fortified himself with a cold jug of beer and then went back to the fields.

One day he followed the tracks left by a tractor until he reached a haystack, where the tracks suddenly stopped, as if the tractor had vanished into thin air... He sat there, where the tracks left by the wheels came to an end, thinking of all the enigmas which had never been solved, such as this....

The Underground Garden of Delights: the novel *Too Loud A Solitude*

Hant'a, the main character of the novel, spends thirty-five years in his basement cellar, where he presses scrap paper. He lives for thirty-five years in his catacomb, during which time it has turned into an unusual paradise. Thirty-five years of solitude with only the mice for company, together with the blowflies which come in swarms chasing the strips of bloodsoaked paper that are waiting to be pressed. For the old press operator, the mice are sensitive companions; he sees

them as tender little creatures with their pink muzzles and nervous, playful eyes. The blowflies fascinate him: their shiny, metallic, blue-green bodies, which tirelessly trace images in the air, image after image, drawings of all kinds, like the brush of an abstract painter with an endless source of inspiration. And from time to time two Gypsy women with the swaying walk of nomads - the turquoise Gypsy and the fire-red Gypsy - invade Hant'a's solitude, a solitude of magical beauty which the old man has managed to create from the stench and humidity and mould and from everything which is repulsive, disgusting and nauseous.

Hant'a has been living in his hideaway for thirty-five years, pressing old books, reading the most essential parts of them first, sucking them as if they were sweets, and then preparing a smooth, beautiful tomb for those books full of wisdom: that is his melancholy daily ritual. Pressing books and making packets from them is never a dull job, for him: each batch that he presses is different from the preceding one and from the one which comes after, and so they appear to him as unique works of art, a mix of surprising colors. Hant'a's work, which might appear - and is - similar to that of Sisyphus, thus becomes the sole activity of a serene Sisyphus, for whom the stone which he must continually push is no burden, because he thinks of his activity as being as unfinishable as a work of art. And although the author is aware that an artist's work is like the labor of Sisyphus, because the artist's destiny - in most cases - is to fall into oblivion, he also knows that above all it is this work which, through its uniqueness, can give mankind satisfaction.

Hant'a has been bringing valuable books back home for thirty-five years, his shelves are collapsing under the weight of the volumes, and this beautiful burden of wisdom could bury him alive at any moment. For thirty-five years Hant'a has lived in his crypts and catacombs, in which he continues to create his own personal paradise, his garden of delights in which only the bitter fruit ripen.

With a jug of beer he moves from one cellar to the next, reeling through the basement; Hant'a, of all Hrabal's characters, is the one who is closest to the author himself; he is almost his alter-ego, his self-portrait as an old man, one of the many self-portraits to be found in Hrabal's works, very similar to those of Goya or

Rembrandt, with a spongy face that looks out, to a place somewhere beyond this world.

Paradise is in the basement; the surface of the Earth is Hell, because it is there that the people live who order the destruction of the books and wise messages in the form of books, the possible key to life and the meaning of life. The director of the deposit where Hant'a works also lives on the surface world, a man who spoils Hant'a's life with his shouts and threats. For this reason Hant'a, when he comes up out of his underground lair for air, "leaves at odd times and drops into other underground places", to see his friends, the lads from the boilers in the factory basements, "all of them educated people, who had been to university, tied down to their work like a dog to his kennel, who are taking advantage of their work in order to write the history of their times, based on sociological research". These university teachers have also created their own paradise in the sewers and cesspools full of town rats and sewer rats.

Just as in many early Renaissance paintings the image is divided into two halves, the upper, golden part, which represents the heavenly, and the lower, earthly part, painted in realistic colors, so in *Too Loud A Solitude* there is an inverted order: Heaven does not exist, Heaven has collapsed, because it is not human, as Hant'a never tires of repeating. The upper part of the painting, depicted in the novel by means of meticulous brush strokes, is the earthly half, which has become a kind of Hell - like the Hells of Hieronymus Bosch or Pieter Brueghel - a Hell from which there is only one escape: that which leads further down, to the basement in which Heaven has collapsed, to the cosy refuge wherein lie the demolished ruins of Heaven. It is there that the angels live, they who have been expelled from the surface of the Earth by the political authorities to this no-man's-land where each has managed to create his modest personal paradise.

For thirty-five years Hant'a has lived in his underground solitude, for thirty-five years he has lived far from the socio-political hell which has been raging above his head, and, after his fashion, he moves with a certain freedom among the catacombs. A freedom in which - educated little by little by the classical and modern philosophy which he presses daily - he questions himself and the world, and his questions and his vague intuition of the answers cause him tremendous

suffering. After thirty-five years he is asked to learn the new system for pressing old paper, up there, in the other world. After thirty-five years spent in the damp, dark and fusty cellar, in that grotto full of unusually beautiful stalactites and stalagmites, next to the little press which has become Hant'a's companion and has helped him create extraordinary collages and combinations with pressed paper, Hant'a is horrified when he sees the same work done with large, impersonal and squeaky-clean machines. Young men are happily pressing whole print-runs of books in them, books which have been banned by the censor in the successive waves of political repression and which have been sent to be swallowed up by these shining, depersonalised machines which can take print-runs of fifty thousand in one go, without anyone having read so much as a single line of a text which somebody once wrote only to have the end product of their thoughts destroyed as quickly as possible. Horrified, Hant'a flees from this new hell of ignorance, which is depersonalised, cheerful, immaculate. He quickly goes back to that paradise which is his and only his, but from which they will expel him in a trice: after thirty-five years they give him a job outside his cave, above ground, on the surface of the Earth, a job pressing white paper "unstained by any thought".

After this banishment from paradise, Hant'a prefers to die according to the model laid down by Seneca, following Socrates' example. (In another version of the novel, Hant'a merely "dreams" of suicide without actually killing himself). The final image which appears to him before his death is that of the face of a Gypsy girl with whom he had lived a long time ago; in silence, wordlessly they had lived in the cave full of books which was also their home, happy enough with their jugs of beer and with the pictures made by the dancing flames, reflected from the stove onto the ceiling. They watched them, stretched out on the bed like two dumb creatures. This was their daily ritual. With all the books he read in his basement, Hant'a was never able to find an answer to the questions which had been echoing in his head all his life. In the last fraction of a second of his life he realises, however, that the most important thing in his life has been love, and that what really matters does not come from books but is experienced directly. In the last moment of life he sees himself as a kite blown by the wind, a kite which is climbing rapidly up towards another one, the Gypsy girl's, far away, way way up in the sky.

As above, so below, states Hrabal, in agreement with Lao-Tse. Through the death chosen by himself, pressing himself together with the books which have helped him live, Hrabal manages to reach his second paradise.

Censorship, self-censorship

When his original texts appeared uncensored, published by the clandestine house Petlice, he began to have further problems with the authorities. Under pressure (as can be seen from both the style of the letter and the confession which followed it) he wrote to Petlice's publisher-in-chief, Ludvík Vaculík, that he was not in agreement with the publication of his works in samizdat editions. "I went on living in fear not only in Prague, but also in Kersko," he explains. "Nonetheless, I had gone ahead and written my samizdats... One afternoon, in Belvedere, the hard men who were watching me, that blonde one above all, recommended - and I knew in advance that I would do what they asked of me - that I write a letter not only to Vaculík, but also to Václav Havel's brother, saying that I did not want my texts to be published or copied in his samizdats...and I wrote them - these letters which were such a hard and disagreeable task - and as I am fearful by nature, I brought them to Belvedere, and afterwards I accompanied the blonde man and the other one to the post office at the end of Belcredka, and the blonde one watched while I wrote the address on the registered-letter slip, the address which they gave me... And afterwards they personally handed the letters which I had written over to the girl at the window... And after that I staggered off straight to the Sojka tavern, I had some beer there, and in the evening my wife, who was watching television, told me off for having come back home drunk and in such a terrible state.... And she was right. She said: Why are you so afraid of them? And for the first time I cried because the fault lay in myself..."

Vaculík answered with a brief but friendly letter in which he informed Hrabal that he would bear the latter's disagreement in mind, but that, for the sake of his country's readers, he found himself obliged not to act upon it.

Unhappy with his own behavior, Hrabal fled to the woods and his two cats. He had to sacrifice a few of the others because his little house in the forest was gradually turning into a zoo. When he had finished, he suffered from it, his feelings of remorse refused to leave him and he was unable to work; he sold his Renault 5 and bought a dark brown Ford Escort 1.3, because that was the car which most reminded him of a hearse. He was pursued by terrible apparitions, day and night he was terrified by monstrous visions like the one in Füssli's "Nightmare" painting. And then a day came when his "hearse" had an accident with a large truck and a van, and was knocked over and smashed to pieces. Hrabal and his wife were extraordinarily lucky, emerging from the accident as they did with nothing worse than a few broken ribs. From this experience came "Autíčko", a long, sad and disconsolate narrative in which he describes in detail first the death of the cats and then his accident, which he saw as fitting punishment for a crime committed.

"Love must be active"

Meanwhile, his popularity and appreciation of his work was on the increase, especially abroad: in 1990 he was awarded the "Prix Laure Bataillon" in Nantes and the "Premio Capri" on the Italian island. In his own country, the Prazská imaginace publishing house began the publication of The Complete Works of Bohumil Hrabal in 1991....

...In 1992, Hrabal was made a "Chevalier des arts et des lettres" in France and was awarded the "Premio Mondello" in Italy for November Hurricane; in 1995, in Turin, he received the Premio Grinzane Cavour for his work as a whole. In 1994, the French film of Too Loud a Solitude was shot in Prague, directed by Vera Caïs, with Philippe Noiret in the main role of Hant'a; Hrabal himself made a cameo appearance in the film.

In 1993, he received the most prestigious Czech literary award, the "Jaroslav Seifert Award". It was handed to Hrabal by Václav Havel, and in the course of the award ceremony the president of the jury dealt decisively with a controversy which was being hotly debated by Czech intellectuals at the time: did Hrabal sell out to the Communist régime in order to get published, or didn't he? In

his speech, Vladimír Karfík stated: "Bohumil Hrabal is a writer who has preserved his creative freedom in the most difficult of times. This was the case at a period when, during his first twenty years of dedication to literature, he wrote delicate, provocative texts which it was impossible for the authorities to accept (until he was nearly fifty years old)... And this was also the case later, in a different era - that of the Seventies and Eighties - characterised by a different set of problems, when Hrabal was writing his mature works, his most important novels." Stress was thus placed on the point of view which most people came to accept, and which ended up becoming their own.

Hrabal sent half of the money he obtained from the "Jaroslav Seifert Award" (about 8,300 dollars) to Bosnia "because when it snows, they need more things than we do. What they have awakened in me is Schopenhauer's *Alle Liebe ist Mitleid*, love is nothing if not compassion. It is this kind of love that we must feel, and it must be an active, effective love. All that I see fills me with a deep compassion and horror and makes it impossible for me not to feel this active and effective love."

"Il faut être de plus en plus sauvage"

Joan Miró

One of his most recent long journeys was to the Costa Brava for a week and then on to Barcelona for another, after a break of twenty years. Hrabal found this to be an island of happiness in an otherwise grief-ridden life, now that he was without his wife, without real friends, without a true home. An island of happiness: the olive trees and their fantastically twisted knot-filled branches that looked as if they had come out of a Miró painting -, twilight on the patio of the Miró Foundation in Barcelona, and the daily hubbub around the reception area and café: the waitresses, the receptionists, the ticket attendants, the formal smiles, the tired clacking of heels... Nothing, in its uniqueness, must go unnoticed, thought Hrabal; and everyday life, in his eyes, was transformed into a ritual, a ceremony, a

grandiose ballet session. Between beers he drank shots of vodka, and from time to time he made a gesture, just like that, just for himself, as if there was no one else there except himself and what he saw, while he watched what was around him and marvelled at the spectacle, picking out even the finest music, or the most hidden of looks from under the eyelids. Just as Degas revealed the human clumsiness and tiredness beneath the elegant movements of ballet dancers in his paintings, so Hrabal, doing the opposite, turns water into wine: the waitresses in the café, exhausted by the work, became for him elegant goddesses with marble bodies, priestesses of an ancient ritual: *la danse sacrée*; while the drowsy receptionists and uniformed ticket attendants of the Foundation became, in the eyes of the writer from Prague, the enigmatic and elegant men of Magritte's paintings: *la danse profane*. And he downed the coffee he had asked for, tired of observing a world which his eyes were forever turning into literature.

Upstairs, on the first floor, the doors of the lift swing open onto the photo-portraits. Miró, radiant, gentle, with his child-like eyes, his innocent smile. Rara avis, like one of those creatures that form part of the Mironian cosmology. The writer from Prague examined the photo-portrait closely.... And, suddenly, as if he had recognised something in that innocent smile, he, at eighty years of age, placed himself next to the ninety-year-old painter, both of them creators of their own universe, sensing intuitively the existence of another life under the surface of things... Yes, the writer's smile and that of the painter were equally child-like, their eyes were equally innocent.

"Il faut être de plus en plus sauvage, so Miró believed towards the end of his life", came the pensive voice of the writer at the threshold of the door which gives onto the terrace. "Il faut".... and the door closed behind his sore feet. Sauvage, the word slid under the railing of the terrace and went sailing over the city sunk in its mauve valley, up to the edge of a green ink sea. Suddenly, however, everything was drowned out by a racket that echoed round the Foundation terrace, which came mainly from behind the Miró sculptures, dotted about the terrace. And dozens of infantile hands appeared above the the green figure with a yellow plate for a head - a king? - and with a red pitchfork instead of a crown, and the children, as alive as Mironian insects, threw themselves noisily at the "Bird's Caress", which shows a

blue bird with a blue moon at its nape. "Cheese!", the teacher was trying to take a photo of the swarm of children, when the naughtiest child of them all hopped out of the middle of the group, ran over and took the Czech guest's hand, without knowing who he was, and dragged him over to the children who were jumping, shouting and yelling, delighted. Could it be that the children also recognised....? In the middle of the children the writer, moved, was a a clay shepherd, a Nativity figure like those which had inspired Miró. The teacher tried to make himself heard: "Children! This gentleman is a writer!", but did so in vain, because what did the children care even if he were the most famous writer in the world? And they held the moved gentleman with their little hands, and surrounded him just as they had a moment ago surrounded the creatures from Miró's universe, decorated with a star or a moon, and they shouted, screamed, laughed and fought over who would hold the gentleman by the hand when the time came to look at all the paintings.

"Il faut être de plus en plus sauvage", said the old man as tears started in his eyes and he leaned on the words as if on a stick, repeating them as if they were echoes of the painter. And the multicolored message went on its way, aimless and constant, like a lazy man wandering in the winter countryside.

Limit of Emptiness

Each morning he wakes up on the fifth floor of his "skyscraper", a tall house built with prefabricated panels. All mornings are the same to him: he feels as if he is awakening from a whirl, from a long collapse, and even though it is sunny, the bedroom strikes him as grey, just as his eyes see only grey beyond the window. He feels as if everything is opaque, dark, dirty. Men and women head with their briefcases to the offices where they work, old women drag themselves off with string bags to do the shopping, children, rucksacks on their back, are on their way to school. Everybody has somewhere to go, but not him. Mechanically he gets into his trousers and shirt, he shaves himself, trying not to come across his reflection in the mirror so as not to give himself a fright, he sits at table with a coffee and a packet of cigarettes, with the after-taste of alcohol in his mouth from the previous evening. He is tired, tired. He has achieved his aim, maximum emptiness, the peak

of emptiness, just as Lao-Tse has been teaching him all his life, and now he doesn't know what to do with it. From the fifth floor he looks down and something catches his attention. He remembers all those people who had thought about killing themselves - Kafka, Rilke and Malte Laurids Brigg -, and those who did so - Konstantin Biebl, Serguei Essenin, Vladimir Mayakovski, Arthur Schopenhauer's father, Seneca and Hrabal's friend Vladimír Boudník -. But he tells himself that he has to keep on living so as to get further to the bottom of himself, to go down one more floor of his basement, to the final source of his remorse. He takes the bus, then gets off and goes down the escalator into the metro, but avoids the looks of those who are coming up: he feels guilty, a constant feeling of metaphysical guilt is always with him. "I am afraid to look people in the eye", he says to himself, "I cross the palms of my hands and offer up my wrists so that people can arrest me and take me to the police station, because I even feel guilty about my solitude, which is now anything but loud."

Nonetheless he knows where to go: his salvation lies in the fourteen cats that live in his house in the woods. He buys milk, a few roast chickens and a pound of black sausage, and gets on the bus to Kersko. Sitting on the bus, he watches the countryside that he knows so well, tearing off bits of a roll, crushing them between his fingers; those which he doesn't distractedly let fall to the floor, he raises to his lips. Every day he takes the bus in Prague and goes to Kersko, every day, in the mid-afternoon, he comes back to Prague from Kersko; on the bus he gives himself up to gloomy dreams and bitter thoughts, marked by a merciless self-indictment; the bus is his confessional-on-wheels.

He gets off clumsily, his legs hurt, his gout never eases up. He turns onto the path that leads to his house and he sees three of his cats, Orange, Bitumen and, behind them, Cassius, who is coming to welcome him. Behind Cassius six more cats appear, and then more, and yet more. A whole procession of cats comes up to meet him. Before he used to stroke and caress each one separately, especially Cassius, he used to run his hand over his little black head, the cat would stretch out with pleasure and purr; but now the old man no longer caresses any of the animals, he simply runs an affectionate eye over all of them. Then he goes into the kitchen and warms up the milk, and cuts up the sausage and the chicken. But even in the

company of his cats he feels an emptiness; in the winter of his life he has realised these are not sweet, cute cats who could have their photographs taken with ribbons round their necks, for postcards. He can see that even his beloved cats, his only reason for living, can be cruel and wicked to each other, that at night they fight and bite and scratch each other, that, miaowing mercilessly, as if tormented, they will chase the weakest among them up a tree and then make it fall so as to keep on chasing it... And the next day they will spend the whole time screeching furiously, with faces like Chinese demons, with threatening fangs. Even newly-born cats screech with fury, they hate each other so much... And the old man's solitude grows more profound, his emptiness ever more vacuum-like, the more aware he becomes of the cruelty of his cats, his beloved ones... And he prefers to stay at home, watching the trees and the sky and listening to classical music on a small transistor radio.

The afternoon bus takes him to Prague and he heads straight for the Old Quarter, in front of Saint Jiljí's Church, to the inn of the Golden Tiger, or, if it is a Tuesday, he goes behind the Gothic towers of the Tyn church, to the U Hynku bar, or to Parížská Street, to the Journalists' Association. He sits down in what he effectively considers to be his home, his bar, a somewhat deafening and not especially welcoming place, the Golden Tiger, amid whose noisy silence he feels lonelier than ever, and he plays with a beer mat and stares wide-eyed at the logo, two black tigers that circle round his fingers; automatically he folds down the corners of the bill, first one, then the other, after having drunk his third jug of beer, the third. This is his ritual, and not only his but that of all those who come to drink beer so as not to be alone, who come to chew the fat for a while. The others exhaust themselves chatting around a table, they spit out their daily restlessness, their depressions, or they simply talk a blue streak: "...when you feel very bad, there is no better cure than a banal conversation about banal matters..." he says to himself. He always drinks the first beer in obstinate silence, making it clear that he has no wish to answer any questions for the time being; with a pleasure - which also torments him - he floats in his emptiness and for the umpteenth time he savors a phrase from his master, Lao-Tse: "To arrive at the greatest emptiness is to reach the calmness of safety." Calm now, he listens to the conversations, so many customers and so much chit-chat, it seems as if everyone wants the whole bar to

know what he's saying, everybody thinks that he what he is saying is more interesting than what anybody else is saying, so he delivers his message at the top of his voice, yelling his lungs off, assuming that not only his table, but the whole world, must listen to his banal message, as if it were the most essential thing imaginable. After the third beer, Hrabal too begins to take part in the chatter of the bar, in the prattle of the tavern; he talks about literature, he recites the poems that he knows by heart, the long poems of Serguei Essenin.

He always waits until the others have exhausted their subject of conversation so as to go straight to the point, to say exactly what he is thinking, what he considers to be essential, and which, he feels, the others present were not aware of until now. They are talking about old age and last things; when the excitement has subsided somewhat, he takes part in the conversation, quietly, and everybody shuts up and listens. His replies are more like prose poems than logical arguments. "Today I am a man from whom life is slowly taking its leave, so that I am amazed by everything which makes those around me suffer or which gives them pleasure", he says, his eyes glued to the wall and the smoke, which floats, marking out wavy figures. "It isn't that I want to be young, I'm not suffering from Goethe's complex, Jungwerden, becoming young, but I am becoming a lover of all that is young and beautiful, all those things which we wish to develop, all that is Greek in us. The Greeks lived their lives for over four hundred years through the young and beautiful bodies of their gods and heroes, the Greeks, for whom Youth was the measure of all things, the Greeks, for whom only a winning athlete, among all other mortals, was worthy of having a statue erected in his honor... With this opinion I give strength to my eighty-two years and have nothing to fear from death." Later, when the conversation is about youth and beauty, he lets all those present have their say, and, now too, it is only at such a moment that he takes part, as if he were talking to himself, as if he were noting down in his brain all those things which he had been thinking about for so long in his "mobile confessionary". "I look at children playing and I see exactly what will become of them when they grow up, I watch old people sitting on a bench and I see precisely what role they played in society when they were young. I spend whole hours next to the rushing stream in the wood at springtime and I see exactly what the birches and alders will look like in autumn and winter, I look through the wood in wintertime and I see

down to the minutest detail the appearance the birches and the alders will have in spring and summer. I see all the seasons of the flowers and the seeds until they become fruit and then I watch the process as it goes backwards, from the fruit to the bud or shoot on the branch of an apple tree... Now that I am in my eighties, I like to get ahead of myself on the path which leads to death so as to find my childhood and adolescence and adulthood there. Nature moves in a circular fashion and is thus always fixed at a given point and only appears to move, because when I move forward what I am really doing is returning, and when I celebrate these returns I watch myself from way up above, and watching myself from up there my features grow hazy; just as, seen from Skylab, a rotating planet bears no human traces. Not to have any human feature is a human inhumanity, inhumanity is transcendence, and this transcendence is a homage to the man who, having got lost, is no longer endangered by death because death is no longer his business."

He finishes his beer and gets up to go, he pays for all the customers at his table, and orders a taxi. On his way home he is calm, if not happy. He whispers to himself: "Repetition is the mother of wisdom, so they say. What wisdom does the repetition of my everyday actions confer on me? Repetitio est mater imbecilitatis, more likely. I am perfectly well aware that the aura with which I enveloped myself, for my own pleasure, has left me and dropped into the mud." At home he is restless, he reads, but remains unsatisfied; once more he feels his sense of metaphysical guilt. From the box labelled "Rohypnol" he takes a sleeping pill, and then a second one after a short while, and mumbles "Since my wife died, there is nothing left but... Suicide in the morning, beer in the afternoon, and another until I've had four.... And so on until the evening. Christmas Day: in the morning suicide....taedium vitae... In Central Europe the best thing you can do is keep yourself in a constant state of mild drunkenness and wait for the film to come to an end...."

Suddenly, two figures appear before him, a good-looking young man and an old man with a lined face, and he recognises them as Jesus Christ and Lao-Tse, and understands that both are himself; he is, or was, Jesus Christ, an exultant figure among elegant young men and pretty girls, and he has turned into Lao-Tse, an abandoned widower. He watches as Jesus raises his arm authoritatively and curses

his enemies with a lordly gesture while Lao-Tse, resigned, lets his arms fall to his side like the broken wings of a swan; he cannot take his eyes off himself-the-young-man and himself-the-old-man, and whispers to himself, doing little more than moving his lips, in fact: "Jesus is a romantic, Lao-Tse a classicist, Jesus the high tide, Lao-Tse the low tide, Jesus the spring, Lao-Tse the winter, Jesus an overflowing love of others, Lao-Tse the height of emptiness, Jesus is progressus ad futurum,, Lao-Tse regressus ad originem..."

He knows that the cats, the beer, his reading, the images of himself as Jesus and Lao-Tse, even the regressus ad originem, are nothing but a postponement of the night, when he will sleep, certainly, but will be woken in the morning by obsessive, persistent visions and manias, phantasms like Goya's, the victories of the forces of the night, as shown in his engraving "The Sleep of Reason Begets Monsters". He looks forward to these specters, despite his fear of them. But he knows that even these apparitions are nothing but a postponement of yet another night. Everything is postponement, a delaying of the inevitable. Even the greatest emptiness of all is nothing but postponement of the eternal night....