

# The Beauty of Compacting Human Heads. Metaphors of Writing and the History of Book Destruction in Bohumil Hrabal's *Too Loud a Solitude*

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## THE PRAGUE PAPER PROCESSING PLANT AND THE HISTORY OF BOOK DESTRUCTION

In Bohumil Hrabal's *Příliš hlučná samota* (*Too Loud a Solitude*), the protagonist Haňta, having been evicted from his beloved paper collecting point, where he worked at the press, strolls through Prague, ending up — unsurprisingly — in a bar where he encounters a giant 'reeking of the river'. The giant's appearance frightens the guests, who watch him grab a chair as if to smash it against the wall. Suddenly, however, he is revealed as a gentle giant, using the chair leg not as a weapon but rather as a baton to conduct his own sentimental tune: 'Gray Dove, Where Have You Been', before introducing himself as 'the hangman's assistant' (Hrabal 1990, p. 93) and leaving the venue.<sup>1</sup> The giant is a beautiful intertextual reference to François Rabelais, whom Hrabal considered to be one of his most important sources of inspirations, in particular his *Gargantua and Pantagruel*.

In this article, I want to take up the track of Rabelais and his notion of corporeality for a reading of *Příliš hlučná samota* that understands the novel as a commentary on the history of book destruction as an integral part of 20<sup>th</sup> century history in Central Europe, shaped by different forms of totalitarianism. It's line of argument is twofold: ethical or political on the one hand, but also aesthetic. Because the decline of literary culture the book destruction indicates is, to an equal degree, seen both in the practice of censorship in totalitarian regimes and, on a more general level, in the decline of the culture of reading in society. Destruction of books is perceived and represented in a media-historical perspective as a revision of book printing. Thus, the excesses of destruction presented in *Příliš hlučná samota* become apparent as a grotesque critique of the written word.

In his work, Hrabal links the notion of the corporeality of literature, letters and books directly to book destruction. It is common knowledge that in *Příliš hlučná samota* Hrabal artistically explores and reproduces his experience of working at a pa-

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<sup>1</sup> 'obr plný vůně říčního vzduchu'; 'sivá holubičko, kdes byla?'; 'katův pomocník' (Hrabal 1994, p. 76).

per processing plant in Prague, at which he compacted wastepaper and banned literature, which had been officially declared to be nothing more than wastepaper. Hrabal had worked there for more than four years, from October 1954 until February 1959. Some time between 1954 and 1957, he wrote the first fictional account of this period, featuring Haňta, the abundantly palavering protagonist, so talented in beautifying and transcending his immediate surroundings through storytelling. In 1976, Hrabal returned to this topic and revived Haňta in three versions of *Příliš hlučná samota*, the third of which became an immediate success in the underground *samizdat* network for distributing banned literature, and was printed in Czech in the Federal Republic of Germany and translated into several languages.<sup>2</sup>

In this version, we observe an extreme extension of the narrative timeline: Haňta recounts that he has been working at the wastepaper press for 35 years. During this time, he has experienced and participated in three historic waves of book destruction: That initiated by the fascists after the invasion and declaration of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia during World War Two; the Stalinist one following the end of the war; and a third wave in the era of post-Stalinist normalization.<sup>3</sup> Haňta consistently subverts his own job by taking home piles of books in order to save them from destruction; and, on the other hand, staging peculiar burials of books by constructing bundles of pressed wastepaper, in the centre of which he places a single book taken from the piles to be destroyed. As this work is very demanding and takes a lot of his concentration and time, Haňta is an inefficient worker, who is repeatedly reprimanded by his supervisor. Nevertheless, he hopes to be able to keep up his work, until one day, he visits a new, modern hydraulic paper compactor. Haňta immediately understands that this efficient machine will inevitably render him superfluous. Ultimately, in a scene resembling a dream, Haňta lies in his own paper press to become composted himself.

Zuzana Stolz-Hladká has rightly noted that the interrelation between body and world was one of Hrabal's most favourite themes throughout his oeuvre, and has given an insightful elaboration of some important sources and means of this artistic strategy, including that of endlessly repeating metamorphosis, a core idea of Hrabal's poetics that unites the fictional hero with the author: 'Like Haňta, Hrabal transforms reality into paper and paper into life. One becomes the other and the distinction between a concept and its transposition, the original and its transformation, is obliterated' (Stolz-Hladká 2004, p. 44).

Taking up this approach, I would like to implement a decidedly historical perspective. My argument is, that in *Příliš hlučná samota*, the paper press is an ambivalent *Chronotopos* in the sense of Mikhail Bakhtin (1981), representing history as the progression of techniques for book destruction. In this context, obviously, Haňta is characterized as a reader who resists the relentless devaluation of the culture of

2 For a comprehensive account of the publication history and a comparison of the different versions, see Roth 1986, p. 139.

3 See Heftrich 2008, p. 230, who pointed out, that if we accept the date of 1976 given in the manuscript and equate the end of the story with the end of Haňta's life, then we can assume that he began his work in 1941, the year in which Reinhard Heydrich became Reich protector of Bohemia and Moravia.

reading in 20<sup>th</sup> century Bohemia or, respectively, Czechoslovakia. Thus, he can be considered an anachronist, because he fails to keep up with the times. Anachronism is indeed a core concept of *Příliš hlučná samota*, but not just in the sense of outdateness. I rather suggest to apply Georges Didi-Huberman's notion of anachronism as a subversion of linear narratives of history (Didi-Huberman 2000). This idea of anachronism helps us to understand how, in this short novel, we are told of a quite long, chequered history via a unique method of radically contracting the narrative time and of introducing metaphors that represent synchronicity. From this point of view, it becomes apparent that by working in the paper press the way Haňta does, he operates with different time scales. Thus, he becomes the embodiment of multiple discourses and traditions of material-based use of writing and books, which are closely intertwined with the topic of book destruction.

The academic literature contains two prevailing notions of book destruction as a cultural practice. The first tends to equate books with culture and, accordingly, the destruction of books with an attack on culture. From this perspective, book destruction is always considered an act of brutality. Naturally, in this context, the burning of books in 1930s Nazi Germany represents the epitome of vandalism. Additionally, it is precisely those events that link the destruction of books with the fate of human beings. The quotation from Heinrich Heine's 1821 play *Almansor*, engraved near the Bebelplatz memorial to the Berlin book burnings of 1933, gives this link its ultimate formula: 'Das war ein Vorspiel nur, dort wo man Bücher verbrennt, verbrennt man am Ende auch Menschen'.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, history has proven Heine right, and recent literature has reacted by coining the term 'libricide' to describe 'ideologically driven, systemic destruction of books and libraries', which emerged in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as patterned behaviour, thereby pointing out the parallels between the destruction of books and homicide (Knuth 2003, p. 13).<sup>5</sup> Thus, the gradual perfection of methods of book destruction during the 20<sup>th</sup> century represents a sort of negative guiding principle of modernity.

The second line of research attempts to avoid a unilateral perspective from which book destruction can only be understood as a violation of culture. Instead, the connections between destruction and creativity become the focus of attention. Practices of destruction like burning, mutilation, devaluation, recycling as de- and reshaping are inevitably connected to the concept of a certain idealistic and materialistic value of the book. Therefore, destruction can always be considered as a revaluation. Artistic and literary practices offer explorations into the creativity of modes of book destruction that enable us to come to a deeper understanding of its respective contexts and implications and resist its destructive power.<sup>6</sup> Hrabal's *Příliš hlučná samota*, obviously, deals not only with the horror of book destruction, but also with its beauty.

Additionally, literary imaginings of the destruction of letters and books are canonic topoi of self-reflective criticism of the written word. Since the Enlightenment, the culture of writing and books has been accompanied by an inherent self-critique

4 'Where they have burned books, they will end in burning human beings'.

5 Another term, used by Baéz 2008, is 'bibliocaust'. For further discussion, see Knuth 2007, Bosmajian 2006, Fishburn 2008.

6 See for example, Partington and Smyth 2014, Körte 2012, Strätling 2005.

that gave rise to biblioclastic scenarios (Körte 2012, p. 17). Starting with Plato's *Phaidros*, writing has continuously been regarded as the mortification of the vital oral word. The literary motif of book destruction embodies this mortification.

Against this background, the topos of book destruction contributes to a critique of the tradition of hermeneutics, which is orientated exclusively to the spiritual meaning of words, thereby abstracting from its material substance. Such a notion of literature neglects the fact that, historically, in many practices, the materiality of books and their handling (as objects in rituals, vessels, toys, collectables, etc.) outweighed the importance of their content (Körte 2012, p. 9f.). In the course of history, material-based use of books becomes gradually marginalized and devaluated as 'secondary use' in the course of constructing a narrative of cultural progress along a continuum from magic to religious rituals to modern, enlightened practices (Körte 2007). Thus, a focus on book usage that includes acts of actual physical use of books, up to their damaging, shredding, tearing and bending, implies a critique of a simplistic understanding of modernity as an abstraction of the corporeality of words, letters and books and an exclusive focus on their transcendent meaning, as well as reevaluation of traditions preserving a corporeal perception of knowledge, represented in this novel most notably by Rabelais.

## METAPHORS OF INCORPORATION: HRABAL READS RABELAIS

In his account of the culture of books, reading and literature, Hrabal in no way limits himself to the historical timeframe of 35 years representing the narrated period. Instead, he constantly transgresses those frames. Thus, the practice of the mechanical and industrialized destruction of books is interpreted as an integral part of the culture of the printed book of the Gutenberg era, which brings us back to Rabelais. His pentalogy, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, published between 1532 and 1564, about 80 years after the invention of letterpress printing, recounts the adventures of the giant Gargantua and his son Pantagruel. The work is obviously a fictional dialogue with this epochal media revolution and an exploration of changing media (Schneider 2008). Those changes, obviously, are mainly reflected in the use of metaphors. During the transition from the Medieval Era to the secularized Renaissance, metaphors for incorporation of letters and books, which were originally used primarily in official and popular religious contexts, gradually became used as means of self-reflexive critiques of language in other contexts as well (Schmitz-Emans 2005, p. 37f.). In *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, Rabelais explores the different notions of incorporation by means of an 'examination of the qualities of the eatable and drinkable book' (Körte 2012, p. 89), using the giants' insatiable appetites and their unrestrained consumption to form the core motifs of the reception, production and reproduction of knowledge.<sup>7</sup>

Accordingly, Rabelais' poetics on the corporeality of the world can be understood as a fundamental exploration of the shifts and changes in thoughts and ideas, cultures of production of knowledge and education, caused by the transition from the Medieval Ages to the Renaissance. In this context, the literary game with the co-

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7 'Untersuchung der metamorphotischen Qualitäten des ess- und trinkbaren Buches, [...]'.

existence and concurrence of the corporeal, sensual, synaesthetic culture of orality and the logics of literacy plays a central role.<sup>8</sup> In *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, Rabelais develops a critique of writing that consists not of a pessimistic account of the loss of immediacy and sensuality in letters, but rather of experiments with the materiality and corporeality of the written word in order to revive its sensual notion of literature.

When taking into account that the dichotomy of orality and literacy is traditionally represented by the metaphor of ‘flowing speech’ (fließende Rede) and ‘frozen text’ (gefrorener Text, Wenzel 1997), it becomes clear, that the metaphor of a book being drunk is a very strong one in the context of the literary project of a revitalization of letters. It is amongst the most important metaphors in *Gargantua and Pantagruel* and obviously one that closely links Rabelais to Hrabal. Already in Rabelais’ prologue to the first book, the readers are metonymically addressed as drinkers:

*Most noble and illustrious drinkers, and you thrice precious pockified blades (for to you, and none else, do I dedicate my writings), [...] Be frolic now, my lads, cheer up your hearts, and joyfully read the rest, with all the ease of your body and profit of your reins (Rabelais 1894).<sup>9</sup>*

In the fifth book, Pantagruel’s companion Panurge consults multiple prophets on the question of whom to marry. Finally, together they take a sea voyage to consult the priestess Bacbuc and her oracle of the ‘Divine Bottle’, having many adventures and overcoming multiple obstacles en route. When approaching the oracle, the holy bottle utters the word *trink* (*drink*). Bacbuc’s interpretation of this prophecy is the mimetic realization of the metaphor of the drinkable book, as she instils in him the ultimate truth — that truth is in wine:

*There she took out a hugeous silver book, in the shape of a half-tierce, or hogshhead, of sentences, and, having filled it at the fountain, said to him, ‘the philosophers, preachers, and doctors of your world feed you up with fine words and cant at the ears; now, here we really incorporate our precepts at the mouth. Therefore I’ll not say to you, read this chapter, see this gloss; no, I say to you, taste me this fine chapter, swallow me this rare gloss’ (Rabelais 1894).*

The transition from a metaphorical notion of the corporeality of the book to a mimetic one we see here, is best interpreted with regard to the Eucharist. Rabelais’ writing reflects the conflicting interpretations of the sacrament in the early stage of the Reformation. In 1520, Martin Luther had first attacked the idea of transubstantiation as incorporation in favour of a symbolical interpretation (Kilgour 1990, pp. 79–84). Rabelais, attempting to reunite those dividing views, aimed at establishing ‘an ideal

8 For further discussion of the configurations of orality and literacy in Rabelais see Rommel 1997, pp. 36–47, 87–124.

9 ‘Beveurs tres illustres, et vous, Verolez tres precieux, — car à vous, non à aultres, sont dediez mes escriptz, [...] Or esbaudissez vous, mes amours, et guayement lisez le reste, tout à l’aise du corps et au profit des reins!’ (Rabelais 1962, pp. 5–9).

of an incarnational and Eucharistic poetics that unites both physical and spiritual levels of existence' (Kilgour 1990, p. 85).

Precisely this logic of the transition from a metaphorical notion of the corporeality of the book to a mimetic, sensual, even erotic one is taken up by Hrabal in *Příliš hluchá samota* and expanded it into the specific context of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The opening lines of the story make direct reference to the Rabelaisian metaphor:

*For thirty-five years now I've been in wastepaper, and it's my love story. For thirty-five years I've been compacting wastepaper and books, smearing myself with letters until I've come to look like my encyclopedias — and a good three tons of them I've compacted over the years. I am a jug filled with water both magic and plain; I have only to lean over and a stream of beautiful thoughts flows out of me. My education has been so unwitting I can't quite tell which of my thoughts come from me and which from my books, but that's how I've stayed attuned to myself and the world around me for the past thirty-five years. Because when I read, I don't really read; I pop a beautiful sentence into my mouth and suck it like a fruit drop, or I sip it like a liqueur until the thought dissolves in me like alcohol, infusing brain and heart and coursing on through the veins to the root of each blood vessel (Hrabal 1990, p. 1).<sup>10</sup>*

The particular refinement of Hrabal's game of metaphors lies in the fact that, having introduced two different images of embodiment of script (eating and composting), he then amalgamates them in order to create a new, very strong anachronistic image, which symbolizes the synchronicity of various notions of scripture that are usually assigned to different eras. He combines the media-historically old notion of the incorporation and internalization of reading and knowledge with the new, modern image of a printed book as a vessel of printed and thus externalized thoughts. By doing so, Hrabal imagines the revision of the externalizing effects of book printing. This comes with a strong sense of genealogical consciousness, which makes *Haňta* himself appear to be the medium of the history of reading in Czechoslovakia:

*For thirty-five years now I've been compacting old paper and books, living as I do in a land that has known how to read and write for fifteen generations; living in a one-time kingdom where it was and still is a custom, an obsession, to compact thoughts and images patiently in the heads of the population, thereby bringing them ineffable*

10 'Třicet pět let pracuji ve starém papíře, a to je moje love story. Třicet pět let lisují starý papír a knihy, třicet pět let se umazávám literami, takže se podobám naučným slovníkům, kterých jsem za tu dobu vylisoval jistě třicet metrů, jsem džbán plný živé a mrtvé vody, stačí se maličko naklonit a tečou ze mne samé pěkné myšlenky, jsem proti své vůli vzdělán, a tak vlastně ani nevím, které myšlenky jsou moje a ze mne a které jsem vyčetl, a tak za těch třicet pět let jsem se propojil sám se sebou a světem okolo mne, protože já když čtu, tak vlastně nečtu, já si naberu do zobáčku krásnou větu a cucám ji jako bonbón, jako bych popíjel skleničku likéru tak dlouho, až ta myšlenka se ve mně rozplývá tak jako alkohol, tak dlouho se do mne vstřebává, až je nejen v mém mozku a srdci, ale hrká mými žilami až do kořínků cév' (Hrabal 1994, p. 9).

*joy and even greater woe; living among people who will lay down their lives for a bale of compacted thoughts. And now it is all recurring in me (Hrabal 1990, p. 2).*<sup>11</sup>

The anachronistic image of composted thoughts and books becomes explicitly connected with the practice of book destruction in its historical dimension. From the perspective of the modern era of book printing, which Haňta experiences primarily from its dark side of book destruction, he projects the image of modern book destruction practice back onto a state of genuine orality. As this implies the imagination of a corporeal notion of literature, it strikingly reveals the analogy between the destruction of books and of human beings, notably in the metaphor of burning books as the archetype of the book destruction paradigm, which suddenly complements the image of composted paper:

*[My burnt black head resembles a Cinderella-nut, and I know,]<sup>12</sup> How much more beautiful it must have been in the days when the only place a thought could have its mark was the human brain and anybody wanting to squelch ideas had to compact human heads, but even that wouldn't have helped, because real thoughts come from outside and travel with us like the noodle soup we take to work; in other words, inquisitors burn books in vain. If a book has anything to say, it burns with a quiet laugh, because any book worth its salt points up and out of itself (Hrabal 1990, p. 2).*<sup>13</sup>

This vision of corporealistic book destruction unfolds throughout the plot in the two interdependent treatments of production and reception of literature.

11 'Třicet pět let balím starý papír a knihy a žiji v zemi, která patnáct generací umí číst a psát, bydlím v bývalém království, kde bylo a je zvykem a posedlostí trpělivě si lisovat do hlavy myšlenky a obrazy, které přinášejí nepopsatelnou radost a ještě větší žal, žiji mezi lidmi, kteří za balík slisovaných myšlenek jsou schopni položit i život. A teď všechno se to opakuje ve mně, [...]' (Hrabal 1994, p. 10).

12 The passage in parentheses is missing from the English translation, thus, for the sake of completeness, I added my own translation.

13 'Popelčín oříšek je moje hlava, které vyhořely vlasy, a já vím, jak ještě krásnější musely být časy, kdy všechno myšlení bylo zapsáno jen v lidské paměti, tenkrát, kdyby někdo chtěl slisovat knihy, musel by presovat lidské hlavy, ale i to by nebylo nic platné, protože ty pravé myšlenky přicházejí zvenčí, jsou vedle člověka jako nudle v bandasce, takže Koniášové celého světa mamě pálejí knihy, a zdali ty knihy zaznamenaly něco, co platí, je slyšet jen tichý smích pálených knih, protože pořádná knížka vždycky ukazuje jinam a ven' (Hrabal 1994, p. 9). Possibly, the metaphor of noodles can be read as an allusion to Macaronic verse as a mixture of languages, notably Teofilo Folengo's *Opus Maccaronicum*, which served as a pretext for Rabelais. Mona Körte assumes that Folengo's poetry established the tradition of the 'gastronomic paradigm' in literature (Körte 2012, p. 90), as the poet produces 'Macaronic verse' as a mixture of Latin and Italian, having been fed macaroni and gnocchi. The technique of mixing languages that characterizes macaronic verse is here transferred onto the mixture of different ideas of literature.

## DYSTOPICAL IMAGES OF BOOK DESTRUCTION BETWEEN MEDIA HISTORY AND POLITICS

Firstly, as mentioned above, the histories of Bohemia and Moravia are told as the media history of literacy and book printing, which is present only from the perspective of post-war communist Czechoslovakia's perfidious practices of censorship and book destruction. In *Příliš hlučná samota*, the paper composting machine represents an inverted version of the letterpress, thus equalling the production and destruction of books. In the academic literature, the latter is usually understood as an instrument promoting a loss of corporeality in the notion of books by means of abstracting from manuscriptural texture and originality and introducing standardized typescripts, as well as by separating producers and recipients in space and time (McLuhan 1962). Hrabal takes up this notion of a gradual loss of corporeality in book printing, transfers it onto the practice of book destruction and subverts it by constantly implementing the corporeal dimension in this process. This is how Haňta's actions at the paper press are to be read, where he spends most of the time creating paper packages from various types of waste paper, reprints of classical paintings and selected books that he adores, which he places in the packages' centre, thus shaping sculptures that resemble paper bodies with a paper heart. It has been rightly noted that, through this creative practice, Haňta opposes the work of destruction in which he himself is involved (Heftrich 2008, p. 230). In this context, it is important to notice that Haňta's actions at the paper press by no means represent attempts to prevent the book from being decomposed. His actions rather symbolize resistance in a media-historical sense. Haňta is unable to understand the destruction of books as a purely mechanical act. This is why, when watching the cremation of his mother, Haňta compares this event to his own work at the paper press, describing the sound of breaking bones he hears and the corporeal resistance he feels when shredding books and compiling packages (Hrabal 1994, pp. 16–17).<sup>14</sup> Transgressing the abstract, metaphorical notion of book destruction, he mimetically sees, hears and feels their corporal existence. As he is unable to prevent destruction altogether, Haňta tries to at least save the books from anonymous, industrialized and abstract destruction by re-implementing the notion of corporeality. This is the fundamental meaning of his unique paper packages, consisting of art prints, shredded paper and books. By composing those bundles, he returns to them a synaesthetic body — uniting image, text and sculpture. These acts of reformation symbolize both destruction (he himself perceives them as urn burials, Hrabal 1994, p. 17), and creativity.<sup>15</sup>

14 For further examination of the analogy between the destruction of books and the extermination of human beings, see Heftrich (2008). Heftrich focuses on the ethical dimension in order to work out the treatment of the Holocaust, particularly the genocide of Sinti and Roma in *Příliš hlučná samota*.

15 With regard to the paintings, Hrabal implies a critique of the standardization caused by the printing press, analogous to that he develops with regard to literature. He regularly receives deliveries of huge numbers of reproductions of a single painting, e.g. Rembrandt. When using them for his work, he overcomes the loss of originality inherent in the serial printing. Note the parallels between this practice and artistic montage, which played an



While this situation basically represents the reality of the Gutenberg era, Hrabal adds another state of perfection of book destruction in order to expose the degree of anti-literacy in communist Czechoslovakia. Over the years Haňta had adapted well to his situation, assuming that he would continue to live like this forever. However, his visit to a new paper-compacting facility in Bubny marks the turning point in his life. The gigantic machine represents an entirely new era in the destruction of books. Here, brigades of young, neat and healthy socialist workers file along the conveyor belt in a clean and modern glass hall the size of a railway station. Instead of drinking beer while working, like Haňta does, they have milk. This is the point at which the motif of book destruction with its realistic references to post-war communist Czechoslovakia becomes ultimately dystopic. Here, the principle of the Gutenberg printing press is united with the socialist shockwork principle, with its obvious Tayloristic components. Thus, the logic of disembodiment inherent in both the practices of book printing and book destruction is taken to its logical conclusion. The workers operate in an entirely sterile setting; they have absolutely no relation to the work they are doing; for them, it makes absolutely no difference what they are processing. Thus, instead of interrupting their work in order to leaf through a book they are about to shred, or to read a couple of lines, they simply unpack the delivered books, rip the spines from the covers and process them. Only Haňta is incapable of such an abstract, detached attitude and, as usual, blinds in corporeal image. Observing the work process, he is reminded of a visit to a poultry farm in Libuš, and thus the view of the paper conveyor is overlaid with the image of slaughtered chickens, hung in line to be carried off for further operations.

## FIGURALITY OF READING: THE BIBLIOMANIAC AND THE ILLITERATE

The line of argument dealing with book destruction as the inversion of printing is complemented by a second, focused on reading, with respect to the reader as a literary figure.<sup>16</sup> The treatment of the cultural practice of reading clearly reflects the changes occurring in the culture of the printed book.

Throughout the story, Haňta as a prototypical reader is opposed by two types of anti-readers. The first type, obviously, is the socialist *new man*, as encountered by Haňta at the press in Bubny. For him, those brigadiers represent the ultimate lack of culture. When Haňta learns that the brigade is planning a vacation to Greece, he is gripped by pure desperation because he understands that they are entirely ignorant of all the Greek philosophers that he himself reads. To him, those socialist workers

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important role in Hrabal's own literary work. The creative moment of Haňta's destruction work has already been acknowledged in the research literature, mostly in relation to Hrabal's aesthetics of montage and collage (e.g. Slavíčková 2004, James 2013).

<sup>16</sup> In her fundamental analysis, Susanna Roth has rightly pointed out, that, when considering *Baron Prášil* (the outrageous *Baron Munchausen*) as a precursor of *Příliš hlučná samota*, a metamorphosis Haňta's metamorphosis from a talking protagonist (in fact, a prototypical practitioner of *pábění* (palaver) to a reading one in *Příliš hlučná samota*; see Roth 1986, p. 191.

represent a new breed of illiterates who have forgotten how to read properly. This is exacerbated by Haňta's awareness that the next generation is being taught such attitudes to reading and knowledge from an early age, as he understands when watching a class of schoolchildren being introduced to the paper compactor. The real horror of the perfect paper-compactor is that it represents a closed cycle of book production and destruction, in which production basically equates to destruction. Here, once more, Haňta's imagination serves as a highly perceptive sensor, revealing the ambivalent effects of a corporeal notion of literature. When observing the destruction at the paper compactor, he adds material book printing to this process, thereby hinting at both the material sensuality inherent even in printed books, and to the fact that destroying books is a form of physical torture:

*[...] they just went on working, pulling covers off books and tossing the bristling, horrified pages on the conveyor belt with the utmost calm and indifference, with no feeling for what the book might mean, no thought that somebody had to write the book, somebody had to edit it, somebody had to design it, somebody had to set it, somebody had to proofread it, somebody had to make the corrections, somebody had to read the galley proofs, and somebody had to check the page proofs, print the book, and somebody had to pack the books into boxes, and somebody had to do the accounts, and somebody had to decide that the book was unfit to read, and somebody had to order it pulped, and somebody had to put all the books in storage, and somebody had to load them onto the truck, and somebody had to drive the truck here, where workers wearing orange and baby-blue gloves tore out the books' innards and tossed them onto the conveyor belt, which silently, inexorably jerked the bristling pages off to the gigantic press to turn them into bales, which went on to the paper mill to become innocent, white, immaculately letter-free paper, which eventually would be made into other, new books [...]* (Hrabal 1990, p. 66).<sup>17</sup>

This dystopic vision, in which the censor is the only remaining reader, has a devastating effect on Haňta. He understands that his days at the paper compactor are num-

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<sup>17</sup> '[...] klidně pracují a dál vyškubávají jádra knih z desek a házejí zděšené a hrůzou naježené stránky na běžící pás, tak lhostejně a klidně, aniž by prožívali všechno to, co taková kniha znamená, přece někdo musel tu knížku napsat, někdo ji musel opravovat, někdo ji musel přečíst, někdo ji musel ilustrovat, někdo že ji musel vysázet, někdo ji musel korigovat, a někdo ji musel znovu přesázet, a někdo ji musel zase korigovat, a někdo ji musel definitivně vysázet a někdo ji musel dát do stroje a někdo ji musel znovu přečíst ve vývěškách už naposledy, a někdo ji musel znovu dát do stroje a vývěsku za vývěskou dát do dalšího stroje, který knihu svázal, a někdo musel brát ty knihy a sestavit z nich balík a někdo musel napsat za knihu a za všechnu práci na knize účet a někdo musel o knize rozhodnout, že není ke čtení, a někdo musel knihu zatratit a dát příkaz, aby šla do stoupy, a někdo musel knihy uložit do skladu a někdo musel knihy naložit znovu na nákladák a někdo musel přivést balíky knih až sem, kde dělníci a dělnice v červených a modrých a žlutých a oranžových rukavicích vytrhávají vnitřnosti knih a házejí je na běžící pás, který hluše, ale přesně trhavými pohyby odnáší zježené stránky pod gigantický lis, který je presuje do balíků, a balíky jdou do papíren, kde z nich se udělá nevinný, bílý, literami neposkrvněný papír, aby na něj byly natištěny další a nové knihy' (Hrabal 1994, p. 57).

bered, as he cannot compete with the rate of destruction achieved by the facility at Bubny although, in a desperate attempt, he tries to. It is not so much moral scruples with respect to the large-scale book destruction, which tortures him, but the fact that he will be deprived of the opportunity to recover and occasionally rescue beautiful books from amidst the waste paper. He manages to grab one last book, which he then presses so hard against himself that it literally *sinks* into his flesh, similarly to how the bible held by the statue of Jan Hus in Kolín sinks into the stone, and he is feasting on the warmth of the book body. Only then, when Haňta checks the book title, does he realize that he has found a book of interest — Charles Lindbergh's account of his first transoceanic flight; he flees the paper press to present his finding to his last fellow book lover, the sacristan František Šturm, who owns a collection on aviation.

The wish to present a book to a collector echoes Haňta's own book collection, which is part of his identity as an anachronistic reader. Hrabal's cynical version of the satire on scholars represents a bibliomaniac against his own will.<sup>18</sup> This motif is already introduced in the story's opening passage: 'such wisdom as I have has come to me unwittingly', which, ironically, reiterates Rabelais' vision of an enlightened hunger for knowledge, hinting at the fact that Haňta's education while at the paper compactor is determined by the state-implemented logic of censorship, that decides which books end up in his hands. Besides staging aesthetic burials for books, Haňta takes them home to store them. Thus, over the years, his small apartment has become grotesquely overloaded with stacked books, and at night he fears being 'squashed like a flea' (Hrabal 1990, p. 16; 'rozplácne mne jako veš', Hrabal 1994, p. 19) by the books, which are piled on a canopy above his head, a fate only too familiar to bibliomaniacs as literary figures (Košenina 2003, p. 149–150). For Rabelais, the library had represented creative chaos, a 'place, where the pleasure principle seems to dominate' (Dickhaut 2004, p. 191; 'ein Ort, wo das Lustprinzip zu dominieren scheint'). Here, this positive connotation is totally lost. In Hrabal, Haňta is still an admirer of books but he is deprived of any possibility of indulging his passion for books in his unintentionally created library.

As a literary figure, bibliomaniacs present specific attitudes toward literature as a source of knowledge, a status symbol, a source of aesthetic pleasure and so on. As such, historically, they have been the object of both ridicule and admiration (Desormeaux 2001, pp. 9–16), precisely because they collect books not necessarily to read but to gain pleasure from being surrounded by them. In Hrabal, one might suggest that, as a book collector, Haňta becomes an object of pity, as his collection represents what can no longer be read, or be read in future, in communist Czechoslovakia. Thereby, it is obvious that, eventually, his efforts will be in vain. His own ambivalent role contributes to that, as Haňta is a spoke in the wheel of state-enforced conformation of literature. Due to his impulse to resist by perceiving books as living objects, Haňta imagines that the books he stores are planning their revenge against him, punishing him for his destructive work, for which he tries to compensate but which does not entirely abandon.

As a reader, Haňta personally represents (even incorporates) the entire history of reading during a thoroughly anti-literate era in which real reading becomes out-

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18 For a detailed account on *Gelehrtsatire*, see Košenina 2012.

dated. Therefore, throughout the story, we encounter references to multiple notions of script and, respectively, to practices and notices of reading rooted in different historical times and cultures. In this regard, Eucharist, which is mentioned several times throughout the story, can be regarded a leitmotif, as the debate over substance and accidents in the Eucharist was in fact, 'an argument about the nature of metaphor' (Kilgour 1990, pp. 12–13), confronting figurative and literate notions of the world. Haňta is repeatedly torn between those two modes of reading.

The opening passage, which establishes the Rabelaisian ideal of reading as drinking, is followed by Haňta's first reference to the Eucharist, which becomes connected with the act of reading as transcending the scripture: 'When my eyes land on a real book and looks past the written word, what it sees is disembodied thoughts flying through air, gliding on air, living off air, returning to air, because in the end everything is air, just as the host is and is not the blood of Christ' (Hrabal 1990, p. 2).<sup>19</sup> And this again is followed by an account of him reading every rare book he finds amongst the flood of old paper at the paper press, of gluing his eyes to the text and reading out the first sentence like a Homeric prophecy (Hrabal 1990, p. 5). Thus, he is referring to a metaphor of reading as a unification of text and reader, an intertwining in which the corporal complements the rational.<sup>20</sup>

The hyperbolic, grotesque-realistic style in which Hrabal engages emphasizes the sensuality of the scenes related to reading, although they rarely depict the act of reading as detailed as in the opening passage. Thus, even the vision of literary imagination becomes ambivalent, as it is shaped by lust and estrangement:

*[...] And I huddle in the lee of my paper mountain like Adam in the bushes and pick up a book, and my eyes open panic-stricken on a world other than my own, because when I start reading I'm somewhere completely different, I'm in the text, it's amazing, I have to admit I've been dreaming, dreaming in a land of great beauty, I've been in the very heart of truth. Ten times a day, every day, I wonder at having wandered so far, and then, alienated from myself, a stranger to myself, I go home, walking the streets silently and in deep meditation, [...]* (Hrabal 1990, p. 7).<sup>21</sup>

As Hrabal explores Central Europe, respectively Prague, as a terrain of literary culture, naturally, the Jewish tradition of the written word cannot be missed. When reflecting on his mortifying preparation of the paper bales, Haňta remembers the

19 'Když se očima dostávám do pořádné knihy, když odstráním tištěná slova, tak z textu nezůstane taky víc než nehmotné myšlenky, které poletují vzduchem, spočívají na vzduchu, vzduchem jsou živeny a do vzduchu se vrací, poněvadž všechno je koneckonců vzduch, tak jako současně krev je a současně není ve svatých hostiích' (Hrabal 1994, p. 10).

20 For a detailed account of metaphors of reading, see Manguel 1996, pp. 163–175.

21 'A já se na úpatí hory papíru krčím jak Adam v křoví, s knížkou v prstech otevírám ustrašené oči do jiného světa, než jsem v něm právě byl, protože já když se začnu, tak jsem docela jinde, jsem v textu, sám se tomu dívám a musím provinile uznat, že jsem opravdu byl ve snu, v krásnějším světě, že jsem byl v samotném srdci pravdy. Každý den desetkrát žasnu, jak jsem se sám sobě tak mohl vzdálit. Tak odcizený a zcizený se navracím z práce, tíše a v hluboké meditaci [...]' (Hrabal 1994, pp. 12–13).

Talmudic analogy of crushed olives and humans; and, as Zuzana Stolz-Hladká has rightly pointed out, Haňta's perception of his desperate work to clean his book storage after his visit to Bubny bears a reference to the Jewish exegetic tradition and the notion of Adam, like a Golem, being created from clay and remaining a lifeless creation. In light of this, Haňta's remark that he 'worked as though shovelling a pile of lifeless matter' (Hrabal 1990, p. 70; 'Tak jsem pracoval, jako bych nakládal lopatou hromadu neživé hlíny', Hrabal 1994, p. 60) can be read as an attempt, in contrast to his usual attitude, to perceive the books that he destroys as inanimate matter (Stolz-Hladká 2004, p. 44).<sup>22</sup>

As manifold and rich as Haňta's notion(s) of reading may be, in the end, the knowledge that he gains causes him only trouble and pain. Thus, the pleasures of (corporeal) reading are opposed by literature's teachings. When reflecting on his reading, Haňta claims that, each night, he expects the books to 'tell me things about myself I don't know' (Hrabal 1990, p. 7; 'že se z nich něco sám o sobě dovím, co ještě nevím', Hrabal 1994, p. 13). In practice, however, he is aware (referring to Immanuel Kant) that the 'heavens are not humane' and that his work renders him a 'refined butcher' (Hrabal 1990, p. 3; 'nebesa nejsou vůbec humánní', 'Nejsem víc než něžný řezník', Hrabal 1994, p. 10). His education may help him to understand what is happening in Czechoslovakia and his own part in it, but this leads to nothing other than the weaving of an intertextual carpet of metaphors and metonymies. This becomes strikingly apparent in the above-mentioned inventory, which symbolizes Holocaust extermination practices. Haňta repeatedly interrupts his destructive work in order to step aside and read Immanuel Kant's *Allgemeine Naturgeschichte und Theorie des Himmels* (*Universal Natural History and Theory of Heaven*), which brings him to a state of epiphany in view of a transcendent idea of reason. Nevertheless, he continues with his work, playing down its barbaric character ('somebody's got to do it') by finding a pictorial motif to compare it with, namely Peter Brueghel's *Massacre of the Innocents*. Kant, Schopenhauer, Hegel and van Gogh form a layer of texts and interpretations that overlaps the real, seemingly unavoidable events.

In this depiction of the folly of a Renaissance bibliophile in communist times, a genuine illiterate is the ideal counterpart of the ever-reading Haňta. This role is assumed by Haňta's former lover, Mančinka. Throughout the story, Mančinka is remembered as representing pure, innocent corporeality without any connections whatsoever to education and scholarship. The scenes featuring Mančinka represent scatological satire in the spirit of Rabelais. While attending a gala, she accidentally drags her ribbons through faeces in the latrine, subsequently spraying the other guests when dancing polka; and when skiing, she leaves 'an enormous turd' on her skis (Hrabal 1990, p. 30; 'ohromné lejno', Hrabal 1994, p. 29). Thus, becoming the object of ridicule and not relinquishing the shame, Mančinka would disappear from Haňta's life.

Later, after Haňta has seen the Bubny paper press and anticipates his downfall, he sets out on a journey to find Mančinka. He learns that she had an encounter with an angel, had many lovers and finally settled with a sculptor, who was presently working on a statue representing her as an angel, thus 'continuing the Almighty's work'

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<sup>22</sup> Naturally, this vision is instinctively subverted by the fact that, after all, clay is the basic material of creation.

(Hrabal 1990, p. 74; 'staví a tesá v zastoupení Boha Mančinku jako anděla', Hrabal 1994, p. 63). With this encounter, the fate of the two protagonists is sealed. Haňta, the scholar against his own will, is ultimately disappointed and loses all faith in literature as a source of knowledge, as he had 'constantly read books in search of a sign' but 'never received a word from the heavens' (Hrabal 1990, p. 74).<sup>23</sup> Conversely, Mančinka, who 'had always hated books, who had never in her life read a book through except to lull herself to sleep, was ending her earthly days as a saint' (Hrabal 1990, p. 72),<sup>24</sup> thus achieving the salvation for which Haňta searched in vain.

Mančinka's metamorphosis from a representation of scatological vitality to that of a saint is highly ambiguous, as her canonization implies a loss of physical intensity. Consequently, for the first time in her life, her relationship with her partner is one of purely platonic love. Furthermore, the stone sculpture symbolizes the creation of memory as an act of mortification. This is emphasized by the idea that she could place the statue on her grave as a kind of coffin seal after her death. In the logic of analogies that structures the entire plot, this statue corresponds to the piles of books that Haňta stores on the canopy above his bed, which squeeze him until he shrinks, while Mančinka 'reaches her full height' (Hrabal 1990, p. 74; 'rozletěla se svými perutěmi z kamene', Hrabal 1994, p. 63).<sup>25</sup> However, in Haňta's imagination, this ambiguity is overcome by the belief that Mančinka's fate represents the ultimate canonization of illiteracy and scatological corporeality.

Haňta, on the other hand, having realized that he will be dismissed from the paper press, wanders aimlessly through Prague, where his encounter with the melancholic Rabelaisian giant helps him understand that the era of real book lovers has definitely come to its end. Having realized this, he finds himself back in his cellar at the paper composting machine. As he, Haňta the reader, is deprived the hope of heavenly salvation that Mančinka has found, his only escape is to become like his beautiful paper bales: He lies down in the drum, ready to be pressed himself. This suicidal act completes the transition from a metaphorical notion of the corporeality of books, presented in the opening analogy to reading and drinking, to a mimetic one. Thus, it might be considered inconsistent that, in the third text version, which became the canonical version, the motif of suicide was obscured by a dream-like vision and an open ending. The image of Haňta being buried like a book carries a cruel, ambiguous and grotesque beauty, taking the analogy of book destruction and the killing of human beings to the next level, just as Hrabal does several times throughout the story. Haňta's paradox vision of composted heads as a means of destruction of books in the oral era has — maybe — come true. Present and past, orality and literacy and their different notions of embodiment, are once again united.

23 'zatímco já, který jsem neustále četl a hledal z knih znamení, tak knihy se proti mně spikly a nedostal jsem ani jediné poselství z nebes' (Hrabal 1994, p. 63).

24 'že Mančinka, která měla hrůzu ze čtení, která nepřčetla jedinou pořádnou knížku, a když, tak jen proto, aby usnula, tak teď se na konec své životní cesty dopracovala svatosti...' (Hrabal 1994, p. 62.)

25 The English translation is insufficient here, a more literal translation would be: 'she had flown from the stone with her wings'.

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## RESUMÉ / RÉSUMÉ

### **Krása lisovaných lidských hlav.**

#### **Metafory psaní a historie ničení knih v *Příliš hlučné samoty* Bohumila Hrabala**

Článek podává rozbor Hrabalovy *Příliš hlučné samoty* jakožto literární reflexe historie cenzury a ničení knih v Čechách. Z hlediska teorie médií se jedná o protějšek historie knihtisku. Haňta je anachronický čtenář, který se vzpírá ničení knih tím, že trvá na tělesném, smyslném chápání literatury, inspirovaném především dílem François Rabelaise. Hrabal tak předkládá kritiku úpadku, kterým za socialismu prošla kultura čtení, přičemž se ale nejedná o čistě politický komentář, ale též o uměleckou vizi krásy ničení a o komplexní kritiku psaní a čtení.

### **The Beauty of Compacting Human Heads**

#### **Metaphors of Writing and the History of Book Destruction in Bohumil Hrabal's *Too Loud a Solitude***

The article offers an analysis of Bohumil Hrabal's novel *Příliš hlučná samota* (*Too Loud a Solitude*) as a literary reflection of the history of censorship and book destruction in Bohemia. In terms of media theory, this history is a counterpart to the history of letter printing. Haňta represents an anachronistic reader, resisting book destruction by insisting on a corporealistic, sensual notion of literature, which is inspired most notably by the work of François Rabelais. Thus, Hrabal offers a critique of the decline of reading culture in the Socialist era that is not just a political comment, but also an artistic vision of the beauty of destruction as well as a complex critique of writing and reading.

## KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA / KEYWORDS

Bohumil Hrabal; François Rabelais; ničení knih; tvořivá destrukce; cenzura; tělesnost psaní; dějiny literatury; dějiny médií / Bohumil Hrabal; François Rabelais; book destruction; creative destruction; censorship; corporeality of writing; literary history; history of media



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