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Death as a Semiotic Event
(In the works of Mácha, Němcová, Neruda, Čapek, Hrabal and Kundera)

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This essay is a part of my general endeavor to look at Czech literature in terms of the human values it reflects. Some of the previous issues analyzed involved reflection on gender issues, sexuality, anger and love, race and nationalism, as well as guilt and innocence, responsibility and Euro-centrism, relationship between the private and public sphere, escape and vision. These are represented in my book *A Feminist's Semiotic Odyssey through Czech Literature.*[1] I followed this up with a paper on Václav Havel and Bohumil Hrabal,[2] which concerned itself with the similarity between two seemingly opposing types of protagonists, the taciturn Vaněk and the palavering uncle Pepin and his relatives, who represent parallel ways of dealing with the world by keeping silent about any deeper personal feelings, thus taking no responsibility for their truncated personal lives.

My current essay, as the title suggests, delves into the attitudes toward death represented in some prominent works of both 19th and 20th century Czech Literature. Is death represented as a tragedy or a commonplace? What is the effect of death on the surrounding survivors? Does it bring out compassion, humility, guilt, fear or indifference? How does it relate to the issue of communication? Is it fortuitous or necessary, horrible or liberating? How does it relate to responsibility, glory, happiness or beauty? How does the author define its counterpart, namely life? What about unnatural deaths, such as suicides or murders? Is there a difference between the murder of people and killing of animals? Those are the questions I am posing in this essay.

I will start by comparing *May* by K.H. Mácha[3] and *Granny* by Božena Němcová[4] in this respect. Mácha and Němcová represent opposite attitudes in 19th century Czech literature in respect to the issue of death. For Mácha, life only has value in terms of death, while for Němcová death is a rather insignificant part of it. Mácha, being a romantic, represents naturally an extreme. Death in his works is represented as a *tragedy* and in his most prominent narrative poem, it is depicted as a drastic event. The hero, Vilém, gets executed for killing the seducer of his beloved, who turns out to be his own father. The attitude corresponding to this is one of *fear*. If we fear something, it appears to us as a tragedy and therefore we dress it sometimes in frightening clothes, making it appear even more drastic and worthy of fear. This is only understandable, as the European civilization since time immemorial is based on fear and on cruelty to fellow man. The sensitive romantic poet naturally sublimates this attitude and adds a tinge of tragedy to it, which actually humanizes this event, making it not merely fearful, but also meaningful and thus *honorable*. Death appears in his work as a constant metaphor and is hidden in his figurative language: "sama k sobě láskou mřela (she was dying of love for herself[5], p. 18),

"Vřelé ty jiskry tváře chladné / co padající hvězdy hynou; / kam zapadnou, tam květ uvadne." ("The hot sparks of cold face/perish like falling stars;/ where they fall, the blossom fades", 20), "myšlenka myšlenkou umírá" (the thought dies of a thought, 30, 32,), "hrůzou umírá vězně hlas" (the voice of the prisoner dies of horror, 33), "u tichu vše umírá" (in silence everything dies, 34), "a dálné trouby sladký zvuk / co jemný pláč umírá" (and a far bugle's sweet voice / dies like a gentle cry, 35), "ta slova strašná ničím zas - / jakž byla vyšla – hynou." (those terrible words again - / as they have come out - of nothing perish, 40).

Mácha, however, does not stop at that. Death, in his masterpiece *May* appears also as a *revenge, punishment and* a damnation (22, 33) in accordance with his frightened attitude. In Intermezzo I, we find out that after death there are spirits, who welcome Vilém amongst themselves. This is somewhat inconsistent, because it implies that life does not end. In the concluding passages, death is a pretext for *humbling* oneself before God "V modlitbě tiché stál (he stood in a quiet prayer, 62) and for *reflection* about life (the famous monolog of the prisoner about the beautiful time of childhood and the disappointed love, 84-85).

As a true mystic, Mácha treats the transcendental side of the phenomenon. He expresses this transcendence masterfully and with pathos through the narrative poetic passages of his poem and thus not only opens the eyes of the reader to a new dimension, but also transcends his own fear through a noble and fearless *leap into the unknown.* Thus, through celebrating death, Mácha also ascribes a heightened *value to life* itself. The verses, in which Mácha sings his love to the flower, because it must wilt are well-known in the Czech literary tradition. In here, Mácha displays yet another quality or attitude toward death, namely, death gives him an *opportunity for compassion.* On the other hand, this type of glorification of death could be seen almost as morbid; life is valued only as far as it has to end tragically. Thus it is this tragedy again, that makes life valuable to Mácha, not life itself. Were life not tragic (through having to inevitably come to an end), Mácha might not be able to love it. It would be too flat, too banal for a person like him. Let us not forget that Mácha was a very young poet when he composed *May*, who did not have much first hand experience with death in his real life. This may also have a lot to do with his tragic gestures.

Not so Božena Němcová, who was older when she wrote her masterpiece and went through various serious trials in her lifetime, including the death of her beloved son. Němcová is a very different type of a writer. Her novel, *Granny*, while displaying many romantic features, actually celebrates the simplicity of life and focuses on a realistic detailed description of it. Němcová likes simple people, folk customs and has a special love for her grandmother whom she remembers fondly, even if in idealized ways. While Mácha's attitude toward life is individualistic, Němcová takes over some of the thinking of the simple villagers whom she so diligently focuses on. Part of this thinking is not dwelling on issues of death very much at all. Every reader of Czech literature remembers her famous heroine Viktorka (a woman who went mad after

she fell in love with and was abandoned by her foreign lover, got pregnant, supposedly killed her child and eventually was struck by lightening). However, Viktorka is almost an anomaly in Němcová's work. The story of Viktorka is presented as something that was not a part of regular life, but something very unusual and on the margins of life. While the reader remembers Viktorka as the most colorful part of *Granny*, *Granny* is primarily about something else. It is about the education of children; it is about family values (idealized as they may be); it is about a life lived to its fullest in a very simple and uncomplicated way, leading to a non-glamorous, *peaceful death* at a ripe age. It is almost as if Granny is rewarded by a long life for her wisdom. Thus wisdom is what Němcová puts forward as a primary value and death in that context is almost meaningless. It is just something that falls into place in its rightful time, in its rightful way. Death is not feared in this author's work, it is not drastic, it is not analyzed, being almost a *fleeting moment*, not examined in any transcendental way. There is no substantial mourning, only a sweet memory remains of a life well lived "mně ale neumřela" (but she never died for me) are the last famous words. Death becomes something like a *coda at the end* of the novel celebrating a very particular type of life, namely the village life of people uncontaminated too much by the current civilization and differences between the rich and poor, variety of lifestyles and values, horrors of war, cultural differences between nations and races etc. The novel especially celebrates Granny's life, making her death insignificant.

Just like in Mácha, Němcová's strength and weakness are interrelated. The wisdom and peacefulness with which she addresses the death of her beloved grandmother are unique, yet the simplification and idealization of the mono-national and mono-racial village and family life, attributing any disturbances to strangers, make her vision weaker and less compelling.

Němcová knew the rough side of life, yet in her novels, she succumbs to dreaming in order to relieve herself of it. This dreaming quality gives her work the light touch so many admire. Nevertheless, as accepting as Němcová is, there is a certain implied judgment: while Viktorka is subjected to an untimely and in a way violent death, Granny is given the blessing of a long and productive life. Viktorka is a fallen woman, who seems to have trespassed against the laws of the society of the time: she has had premarital sex, gotten herself pregnant and moreover with a stranger. Even in this liberated woman novelist's work, she ended up struck by lightening. Thus we could conclude that Němcová does not display a fear of death, the way Mácha does, but she subconsciously reflects some of the *trauma* that has been imposed on her by the society of her day and projects it into the outcast heroine Viktorka. This brings us to an unexpected similarity between Mácha and Němcová, namely the relationship between death and sex. Both Mácha's protagonist Vilém and Němcová's Viktorka perish violently in the end due to a misguided sexual relationship, betrayed by their lover. Death in both authors is thus directly associated with the *absence of love*. The only difference is that Mácha is critical of the society's role in this paradigm, while Němcová passively accepts it.

Jan Neruda presents us yet with a different portrait of death in his *Tales from* the *Little Quarter.*[6] As a later generation, city oriented writer, his focus is more on the social implications of death and in the stories dealing with death; this event is portrayed through the eyes of the bystanders. Death in his stories carries an additional burden apart from the usual awesome transition that it constitutes, namely the burden of *guilt*. This is especially strong in Mr. Vorel's story. Even though Mr. Vorel is a heavy smoker and clearly contributes himself to his untimely death in that manner, the story leads the reader to believe that nothing has contributed to his demise as strongly as the animosity of his new neighbors, their narrow-mindedness and stubborn refusal to accept him, due to his difference, thus depriving him of his material livelihood and leading to his resignation and death. Thus, again as in Mácha, death is caused by the fellow man. The younger the person dying, the more tragic their fate appears to be, even though an older person's death is sometimes accompanied by feelings of guilt as well.

In the city, people no longer live idyllically, surrounded by family, but die alone, without any help from their neighbors like the old Žanynka in "Týden v tichém domě" (Week in the Quiet House,). The landlord and landlady are mostly concerned that this would not create any expense for them, that they wouldn't catch anything from her dog, whom they immediately throw into a box and probably have him put down. Nobody in the house has any relationship to the old woman and nobody knows anything about her except that she had a dog. Emerging as a function of urbanization, is the main feeling accompanying this and most other deaths in Neruda's stories. Indifference and suspicion kill the kind Mr. Vojtíšek.

Mrs. Ruska, who is obsessed by funerals mostly from a feeling of inner emptiness rather than compassion, considers death to be a *thief,* who robs the dead of their possessions and the survivors of the dead (118). Here, death becomes also a *spectacle* which can help pass the time and the attitude toward it is practical. To these kinds of stories, Neruda adds a jocular one, "Dr. Kazisvět," in which during the typical platitudes accompanying the funeral procession of Mr. Schepeler, the corpse falls out of the coffin and it turns out that he is not dead, but merely stiff (136). Only in one story, which is written in first person, the author stops to think about the indifference with which the death of a mother of the dancing girl with beautiful eyes is handled ("U tří lilií," At three lilies, 155). But even here, the author himself becomes an accomplice to the indifference by succumbing to the cold girl's seduction.

Neruda characterizes his heroes, however, in mere vignettes and does not delve deeper into psychological reasons for their behavior. For example, in the story "U tří lilií," the author does not ask questions about the possible reasons of this strange behavior of the dancer, he merely points to her "evilness." Her real situation is covered in mystery, like Mr. Vorel's or Žanynka's. We do not find out much about the personal life of the heroes of Neruda's tales. In the story "Mr. Ryšánek and Mr. Schlegel," the possible death may lead to *forgiveness* of a long hostility caused by assumed wrong-doing. In general, death is in *Tales from Little Quarter* a mere vignette, a curiosity, similarly as other life

events. It is a common, *everyday event* accompanied mostly, like other life events, by indifference of the bystanders and sometimes caused by their cruelty. It has no hidden symbolic value like in Mácha or Němcová. The author presents death as an external, realistic observer.

Karel Čapek is an author of yet a different era. Writing after WWI, during which he had witnessed countless horrible deaths and in the preWWII period, he makes death actually a topic of his three novels, *Hordubal, Meteor* and *Ordinary Life*[6] Čapek thus has much more to say about the topic of death than any of the previous 19th century writers. Death for him in these novels is not a byproduct of life, but actually something that plays *a* role *equal* to *life itself*. It is something by which life is actually measured and expressed in a very specific way. The three novels are philosophical novels. This, too, allows a much deeper treatment of the subject.

All three main heroes of his trilogy are people condemned to death. Hordubal has been dead to his wife due to his departure for America and lack of communication for a long time when he appears on the scene. Hordubal goes through a period of effort to resuscitate his dead life, but does not succeed. He becomes a burden to his wife, something like a living dead and so she decides most likely together with her new lover to get rid of him. There is an alternative possibility, namely, that he dies on his own from a broken heart. This situation is far more psychologically complex then anything that we have witnessed in the 19th century Czech literature. First of all, Čapek introduces the element of a mystery or criminal story, so characteristic for 20th century literature and film. But he masterfully leaves open for consideration whether a crime has actually occurred. This has a further implication. He closes his novel with the words: "Hordubal's heart got lost somewhere and was never buried" (126). In reality, it is irrelevant that Manya and Polana were condemned for murdering him. Hordubal was condemned to death one way or another. He returned to a situation that offered him no love, no respect, no room to operate. His death was therefore inevitable. He already left once in order to improve his life and the life of his family. He spent many years working hard in an isolating atmosphere. He lacks communication skills. This is what made his life in America sheer hell, and this is what alienated him from his wife and condemned him to death after his return. Hordubal is truly a living dead. Where was he to go now? But most importantly, we find a new hidden metaphor, which is according to my opinion relevant in Čapek's work, the metaphor of communication. The *absence of communication* is a type of death. It is possible that this metaphor is not intentional in Čapek's work; however, for me as a semiotician, it is not negligible.

Nobody knows for sure what happens after death. One thing is certain, however, namely, the dead cannot communicate easily with the living and vice versa. Love does not die, but it can no longer be effectively communicated. In Hordubal's case, where love is not present on a physical plane, death is a gift of freedom. His heart is symbolically lost and the author expresses this way a compassion for the hero, for whom no one had compassion during his life.

Not so *Meteor*. The hero of *Meteor* receives plentiful compassionate treatment and thought from everybody around him. Everyone knows he must die. No one knows him personally. All the protagonists are exemplary in their imaginativeness and concern when they weave their histories about the mysterious patient. Death once again serves here as a catalyst for human compassion. The major cognitive and intuitive efforts of the protagonists bear witness to death being able to raise people to higher levels of functioning and love. Death serves to Čapek in these novels as a wonderful *vehicle* for establishing *the meaning of life*. Death also serves as a *cruel agent,* which interrupts this search. While Hordubal would not have been able to realize the meaning of his life, had he remained alive and death was thus beneficial for him, the hero of *Meteor* most likely stood on the verge of his life's fulfillment when death surprised him and is thus presented as a tragic figure. It is perhaps in those circumstances that people display more compassion towards the dying.

The reader is forced to wonder here about why would God create a situation like this. Lead a person towards self-knowledge and knowing what needs to be done, yet interrupt him in the very moment of doing precisely that. There are two ways of looking at this. Either the hero was punished for his previous lack of awareness and for taking so long to come to his senses, or the mere fact that he did come to his senses is enough in God's eyes. The physical realization is no longer important. There may be also a third and more prosaic answer, namely none of the above. The hero was merely too eager to do whatever he was going to do (perhaps in view of all the time he has wasted previously) and got caught in the storm. However, one thing remains certain, nobody will ever find out about his intentions, which creates another communication failure and thus a double death.

The nameless hero of *Meteor*, however, reaches wisdom concerning life and death when he says to the nurse: "And I began to understand, that just like death, life, too, is made of durable material, that in its own way and with its small means it has the will and courage to last forever. Yes, it is so: only a meager and incidental life is devoured by death, but life that is whole and substantial, is complemented by it. Two halves, which close eternity" (158). Here, death is defined as a *function of life*. Death does not determine the value of life like in Mácha, life determines the value of death instead. Death may, but need not absorb life and the two together create eternity. Eternity and immortality (see below in Kundera) are categories of different kinds.

In the clairvoyant's story, the author expresses the second part of this thought, or perhaps its narrower specification: "We should depart from the last breath of a man, in order to understand what kind of life he had and what kind of value should be ascribed to anything he experienced. Only death finishes the youth and birth of a man" (177). Because a man in a certain way creates his death, only through it we can understand what his life was about.

At the same time, Čapek expresses through the words of the clairvoyant his systemic attitude to life, which is exactly opposite to Kundera's attitude: "There are no chances. It was necessary for him to move so fast and ur-

gently. He leaves a fiery line behind himself like a meteor" (190). Čapek believes in *inner necessity,* which determines the flow of life and death.

The *Ordinary Life* hero is also a dying man. He, however, has the time to prepare for his death by examining his way of living, which he does with a diligence. There is nothing tragic about this hero except perhaps the ways in which he failed to live his life to the fullest. He is an older man; he has had the life of his choice, and he now contemplates its meaning as well as all the alternative lives he could have had but didn't. This man, unlike the others, communicates really well with himself and thus fulfills his purpose. No big bang, no tragedy, just an ordinary elderly person leaving physical dimension. While this person is the least exciting from the three, he is the most authentic of them all. He actually bothers to face the truth about himself without any particular help from the outside world. There are no hurricanes or murdering wives, no investigators, no nurses, doctors, poets, clairvoyants or nuns to contemplate his life and to express compassion with him. He is completely alone, while he responsibly deals with the forthcoming transition. He was once married, true, but the reader does not get a sense of a particular closeness with his wife. He is writing a diary, but most likely the diary will not interest anyone. Most likely, he will take his truth to his grave with him. And yet, it is this man who is the only one who has fulfilled his purpose. From the point of view of this novel, communication with oneself is sufficient, his life has a closure and it is in order for him to die. Death here is an opportunity for the protagonist to *fulfill his purpose.*

In this novel, Čapek throws still another light on the question of death: "So he died, thought the old man longingly. So that means that it has to be a very ordinary thing to die, if even such a regular man can do it" (270). Death, unlike in the other novels, is presented as a completely *regular and ordinary thing*. At the same time, death appears as a *surprise*: "So here we have it, here it is now. But there was no horror, only a surprise, an awareness that I have to take care of it somehow". This awareness leads the man to a need for responsibility and at the same time to a *heightened appreciation of life:* "How beautiful the garden seemed to me, like never, like never..." He further continues in this emotion, which transforms itself into *longing regret*: "I felt sorry about it, I felt sorry about many things; I was somehow softly moved by the idea that I am supposed to leave" (271).

Thus this protagonist takes *responsibility* for his life, for its shortcomings as well as victories, for all the things undone, for all his failings. He is making an effort to bring his matters in order. Death becomes a part of *housekeeping* (272). Death is also seen as a *sleep*:

> I think that people talk about death as a sleep or rest to give it a familiar face; that is why they hope in encounters with their dear departed, in order not to be so afraid of this step into the unknown; perhaps the reason they also make last wills is to make death into something like an important economical matter. See, there is nothing to be

> afraid of, what is ahead of us has the quality of things we know well and intimately (272).

Čapek expresses himself here as a realistic atheist. This attitude to death is further developed when the narrator mentions the death of an old lady: "Now I know that she, too, was putting things in order in her life and that this is the sanctity of the dying" (274). Responsibility here appears as a *sanctity*.

The next piece of wisdom that the dying man discovers is the nonsense character of action: "That day, I no longer looked left or right, what people are doing. Why always do this or that? *To simply be* and nothing more. That is such a wise and quiet death. I know, it was a type of life denial; that's why it does not form a part of any other relation; it simply was and it was not happening, because there are no events, where everything is vanity" (378). The narrator here struggles with the paradox that *true life* in reality is death.

In Bohumil Hrabal's work, death is present insidiously. Most obviously, we find it in *Closely Watched Trains,*[7] where the author juxtaposes personally motivated, comical and nonsensical death with death that is a result of social sacrifice, even if unintended. The hero's intention was not to sacrifice his life in the fight for his country, yet he longs for something important he lacks in his life. His life is cut unexpectedly short by his death, which is deheroicized. At the same time, Hrabal masterfully humanizes death in this little book when he narrates through his protagonist about the death of his adversary. He succeeds in this humanization of death by completely deideologizing it and by focusing on the details of the enemy's dying. Moreover, he closes the novel by the semi-humorous announcement of his hero: "You should have sat at home, on your ass...." (85).

At the same time, Hrabal repeatedly mentions the killing of animals in very cruel ways. But because such is the custom in his country, he simply accepts it as a given (16). Sometimes, however, we find passages of compassion with animals that are treated inhumanely. This inhumane treatment of animals had nothing in common with the war between the Czechs and the Germans (41, 43), which constitutes the main topic of the novel, yet it was equally inhumane. These drastic scenes appear as if by the way; however, they are not negligible. Similarly, the author/hero is emotionally affected by the death of his German shepherd, which was killed by the villagers (*I Served the King of England,*[8]181-182) simply in order to have the hero come more often into the pub to socialize with them.

In the stories from the 1960s, "Death of Mr. Baltisberger"[10] (33) or "Automat World," death appears as a chance or absurdity, or as something that happens on the margins. In "Dancing Lessons," death is commonplace and *absurd* (303).

Absurd in Hrabal is always on the verge of humorous. In the novel *I Served the King of England*[9] it is the hero's wife, who dies first (137). Her death appears here, too, as if in passing, without a commentary, except that the hero is fixating on her head which was probably torn off and never found. Horror and absurdity here, typically for Hrabal, are intimately connected. Only at

the end of this novel, the author suddenly changes his tone and starts to obsess about death. This obsession is, however, more with external circumstances of death than death itself. Toward the end of the novel, the hero says:

> actually I have always found out in that pub that the essence of life is in questions about death, how will I behave when my time comes, that actually death, no, this questioning of oneself is talking from the angle of infinity and eternity, that already solving of death is a beginning of a beautiful thought and thought about the beautiful, because to enjoy the nonsensical character of one's own journey which ends anyway in premature departure, this enjoyment and experience of one's ruin, fills one with bitterness and therefore **beauty**. So I was in that pub a laughingstock for everyone and so I asked every guest where would he like to be buried? (178)

Then he starts dreaming:

> ..that I want to be buried so on the crest of the cemetery, that I wish that my coffin on that dividing line would break with time and that what was left of me would flow with the rain in two world directions, that the water would take part of me into the Bohemian brooks and the other part of me through the barbed wires of the border with the brooks into Danube, that I desire to remain a world citizen even after my death, that I would get by way of Moldau and Elbe to the Northern Sea and with the second part by way of Danube to the Black Sea and through both seas into the Atlantic Ocean… (178).

These passages about death are highly poetic and yet focused purely on the physical reality of the dead body and the grave as if one could consider those the essence of being, even though we can consider this decomposed body to be a symbol of author's dream of world citizenship. A little later, the author again talks about death, this time from a cat's perspective: "…during the death of her friend, she preferred to close her eyes and buried her head in the dog's fur in order not to see that, which she was afraid of, but what she desired" (182). This "cat opinion" of death has a special emotional and instinctive depth to it. Finally, the author paraphrases and concludes about a Christian opinion the following: "The right Christian should look forward to death. Dead are only those who went before us. So death is a certain joy" (268). Further the pastor continues: "All the real stuff is on the other side of the things," he said and pointed to heaven. Then he continues: "Death is a fantastic comforter. We owe one death to receive eternal life… I am looking forward to death, what would I give for it if I could stand before it even now… I won't have to get up in the morning, brush my teeth, I will only look forward to how I will look into the face of God Himself…" (p. 269). And so, once again, a deep spiritual deliberation changes in Hrabal's work into a superficial thought about the fact that after death, we no longer have to get up and brush our teeth. As if this was all

an imaginative play for him. Death in Hrabal resembles a light *dance between the physical and the unknown.*

In his later work, *Who Am I*,[11] which is more an autobiography than a book of stories, Hrabal for the first time starts to think a little bit more seriously about responsibility, especially in connection with the death of the animals. At the same time, he tells us, sometimes unintentionally, about his unbelievably cruel treatment of them. So he stops to think about the cruel treatment of the animals in the slaughterhouse (109), then he tells us about his own cruel execution of kittens (120), which will haunt him for life. On the other hand, he idealizes his relationship to the cats. This poetic idealization, however, does not prevent him from kicking them out, leaving them in freezing weather, he does not offer them the humane act of castration, which in the time he writes about was possible for him. He cruelly and repeatedly murders the superfluous kittens again (122). He lies about the way he executed them to his wife – he says he gave them chloroform (128). In reality, he brutally beats them to death in a mail sack, which he thrashes against the ground or against a tree. His feelings of guilt start to grow, and he starts to understand that there is no big difference between him and a Nazi SS man (129, 130). He mentions that he did not take his beloved cat to a veterinarian (131; it seems he does not even possess a pet carrier) and he lets her die in terrible convulsions. Before that he beats to death another ill cat together with the kittens. The remorse continues (131, 137). He mentions how he leaves cats outside in - 5°F (139); he kills again an old and a young cat (146-7); he runs away from his conscience from Kersko, where he cultivates the cats, to Prague. He gets rid of his guilt feeling for a while (155-6) when he watches cats to kill birds. He talks about unbelievable torture of live animals for the sake of scientific knowledge of the students (158). He closes his observations with a thought that in killing the cats that loved him so much, he, in reality, killed love (159). He fancies himself to be absolved from his guilt due to an automobile accident. He considers the accident to be a sufficient punishment for his murderous activity, and he concludes that even a cat cannot be killed without a punishment (162-3). He tries to save the life of a swan caught in ice, but unsuccessfully. This he considers to be an atonement for the cats (169-70). The extensive autobiographical story "Autíčko" is thus a remarkable negative testimony about the author's relationship to animals and yet his insistent obsession betrays the deep humanizing influence they have on him. A reader can almost experience these innumerable deaths and cruelties described in this story as an unbelievably humble and self-sacrificing humanizing service of animals to people, the more sensitive of whom might be able to ponder the unbelievable arrogance and cruelty of humans. Hrabal's contribution toward the evolution of human values here is especially in that he states in this story directly the thought that there is *no difference between the murdering of people and the murdering of animals*. That animals were put into this world by God to be our brothers and not material for abuse.

In the story "Dandy in Overalls"[12] about the outstanding visual artist and Hrabal's friend Vladimír Boudník, Hrabal also admits to some of his own

less attractive features, especially when he tells about the situation when he abandoned his friend during his art exhibit opening and thus partially caused his suicide (197-8). So in the late work, Hrabal reaches an ethical and philosophical attitude to the issue of death through this self reflective thinking about his life, while in his earlier work, death had predominantly a character of an absurd event.

We find a different structure of thought about death in Kundera's work. Perhaps the most famous is the death of Theresa and Thomas due to the automobile accident. Chance is Kundera's favorite device, as well as theory. In the *Unbearable Lightness of Being*,[13] we find out that everything important in life happens by *chance*. Also *The Farewell Party*[14] is based on the principle of a chance. Love happens by chance and so does death. According to Kundera, life thus lacks a deeper meaning. The author does not carry through certain presuppositions he posits, like the thesis about the happy life of Theresa and Thomas in the country. Theresa and Thomas experience a fun night out followed by lovemaking and then they die. They are not given a long life and the reader is not given the opportunity to find out if they were capable of finding long-term happiness in their country life or just a momentary one. Did they arrive at a real maturity or just at a momentary relief from Thomas's philandering and a happy weekend?

In Kundera's earlier work *Life is Elsewhere*,[15] the author expresses himself about death when he compares the grief of a Jewess, whose relative perished in the concentration camp, with the grief of hero's mother, whose husband was unfaithful to her precisely with this perished Jewess. The old Jewess's grief gives her "glory" (= greatness and importance), while his mother's grief is without glory (122). Death here receives social interpretation and Kundera shows how differently it can be experienced.

Further, Kundera speaks about hero's verses, in which death is a frequent guest. However, it is an abstract construct, a dream which is designed to offer the hero a sense of *vastness and escape* from the pettiness of his life:

> His life was hopelessly small, everything around him formless and grey. And death is absolute, it cannot be halved nor pulverized. [W]hen he imagined the girl buried in the field, he suddenly discovered the nobility of grief as well as the greatness of love. But he didn't look only for the *absolute* in his dreams of death, but also for happiness" (123).

Death thus makes grief possible and grief expands love and thus makes *happiness* possible. This consistent conception of death in this work of Kundera is original and this thought is deeper than his later theory of chance, which is a type of cynical attitude to the world from the point of view of a person who perceives life as something he has no responsibility for and over which he has no power. The poet in *Life is Elsewhere*, however, moves even further, toward almost a morbid comparison of love and death: "He dreamed of the body

slowly dissolving in the earth and he felt that this was a fabulous act of love, in which the body sweetly and slowly turns into earth" (124).

The most eloquent on the topic of death is Kundera's novel *Immortality*,[16] which is devoted to it in great detail, similarly as Čapek's trilogy *Hordubal, Meteor and Ordinary Life*. *Immortality* contains a number of commentaries about death as the *antipode of immortality*, as well as about what comes after death. Right at the beginning, Kundera says the following about the afterlife:

> She was curious about what kind of being the computer programmed after death. There are two possibilities. If the Creator's computer has our planet as his only field of action and if we depend only and solely on Him, we cannot expect anything else after death than some kind of permutation of what we have known during our lifetime; we shall meet similar countryside and similar beings there. Shall we be alone or in a crowd? Oh, solitude is so unlikely, there was little of it in the lifetime, there will be even less of it after death! After all, there are so many more dead people than alive! In the best case, being after death will resemble the moment that she is now living on the cot in a resting room: she will hear from everywhere the *incessant chatting*; honestly, one could imagine much worse things, but even the fact that she would have to hear the voices of women forever, always, without interruption is a sufficient reason for her to cling to life with all her might and do everything so she would die as late as possible. However, there is another possibility: above the computer of our planet, there are still others, which supercede him. Then, of course, being after death needn't resemble life on earth at all and man could be dying with a sense of unclear, yet still justifiable *hope*" (21).

Right at the beginning thus Kundera sets the tone of his attitude toward death as well as life as a *computer calculation.* This contemplation fully engages the reader's brain, but it remains a purely intellectual game, which bears witness to an intellectual detachment from life experiences and to a skeptical, speculative and even condescending approach to them. The next problem Kundera places in front of the reader through this passage is the problem of *boredom.* In fact, life appears as something not very valuable and the heroine is determined to stay in it only because the boredom after death could be even worse.

There are further surprising angles on death that Kundera uses in his novel. Human relationships appear here as difficult burdens. The Father of Agnes after the death of her mother immediately moves into his bachelor apartment, and it is obvious that his wife's death was a *liberation* for him (24).

Several pages later, Agnes desires the death of a strange girl just because she intrudes loudly beyond the boundaries of her consciousness: "Agnes looked at the fluttering hair of that noisy soul and she realized that she is intensely desiring the girl's death" (29). The motif of noise is used here again as something that devalues life and death here becomes *release from the imposed noise.*

Kundera quotes the famous poem by Goethe "Über allen Gipfeln is Ruh" (32) and the heroine suddenly realizes that the beautiful poetic words of this poem speak about death. Here, death appears as a *beautiful quiet and freedom*. After the death of her father, the heroine, too, feels this fabulous quiet of the birds in the crowns of the trees (34).

Agnes often thinks about afterlife and the decisive moment for her is when she realizes that in the next life (if it exists), she does not want to meet her husband again. This way she openly closes the door on the illusion of love (47). Life at the same time appears as worthless, as death appears as the *opportunity for a new choice*.

Kundera continues in his semi-philosophical ideas: "…death and immortality are like an inseparable couple of lovers" (54). On the following page, the author talks about the immortality of politicians, which appears as ridiculous, and he similarly evaluates the immortality of famous literary figures and composers, who are given immortality by their biographers, who are capable of ridiculing them anyhow (the scene about Goethe and Beethoven). Immortality thus appears as an "eternal judgment" (86), which is carried out by stupid teachers and not by wise judges. Immortality is therefore more terrible than death: "A person can take their own life. But a person cannot take their immortality" (87), says the author through words of Hemingway. Thus the author considers immortality to be an echo of a person or their work, which they truly have no power over, not just the duration of what is.

The author continues to develop his speculations about the meaning of death and the following dialog between Medvěd and Paul develops:

> "I have to admit," said Medvěd in an icy voice, "that I considered death to be truly a tragedy." "And you were wrong," said Paul. "A railroad accident is a **horror** for the one who is sitting in the train or has a son there. But in the news, death means exactly the same thing as in the novels of Agatha Christie, who is by the way the greatest magician of all times, because she knew how to transform murder into **entertainment** and not one murder, but tens, hundreds of murders, a conveyor belt of murders committed for our joy in the extermination camp of her novels. Auschwitz is forgotten, but from the crematorium of Agatha's novels the smoke raises toward the sky eternally and only a very naïve person could claim that it is a smoke of a tragedy" (123).

This is typical Kundera with his paradoxes and mixing of truth with clever lies, typical of his intoxicating distortion of reality. He is right in that people really make the image of death into an entertainment (suffice it to open any television program). However, the author omits the fact that they do so precisely out of fear of tragedy which death represents in personal life. We like to forget that which makes us horrified, or we change it into something ridiculous or meaningless. Auschwitz is not forgotten, but precisely because Auschwitz represents a monstrous tragedy, people hide from it and flee into meaningless, because

fictional, deaths. These facts, of course, do not sound as witty as Kundera's novels.

A little later, the author identifies with Paul and his attitude to death again. He says:

> in this mourning procession, which is glorification of death, is all the evil. If there were fewer mourning processions, perhaps there would be fewer deaths. Understand what I want to say: respect for tragedy is much more dangerous than the carefree children's babble. Did you realize, what is the eternal condition of tragedy? The existence of ideals, which are considered to be more valuable than human life. And what is the condition of wars? The same thing. They chase you to die, because supposedly there is something greater than human life. War can exist only in the world of tragedy; from the beginning of history, man did not know any other world than the world of tragedy and he is not able to step out of it. The age of tragedy can be ended only by the revolt of the frivolous.... Things will lose ninety percent of their meaning and they'll become light. In such a weightless air, fanatism will disappear. War will become impossible. (125)

Here we have another masterful Kunderian paradox. The quotation, again, contains a portion of truth and a portion of simplification. Cheapening and reduction of life will not bring peace. Man has and will have the need for meaning beyond individual life. The issue is where he will be looking for it. War will be cancelled by the change in what man will consider meaningful, not by abolition of meaning. Kundera forgets to distinguish between grief as a natural reaction of people to the death of a fellow man and tragedy, which is the result of ideologization of death and creating of unnatural death.

Another aspect of death covered in *Immortality* is suicide. Suicide appears to the author as an act which can fulfill two functions: *a way of disappearing* that everybody has a right to (Agnes), or, on the contrary, *a way of remaining*– embedding oneself into the memory of one's close ones (Laura, 177). We also find a third definition of suicide as "throwing away. *Throwing oneself away*" (248).

The next aspect of death, according to the author, is the *loss of all human rights:*

> And a dead man? Dead man is under the ground. That is, even lower than an old man. An old man is for now awarded all human rights. A dead man, on the contrary, loses them from the first second of his death. There is no law that defends him any more from gossip, his privacy stopped to be privacy; not even letters, written to him by his loves, not even the memory book from his mother, nothing, nothing, nothing belongs to him anymore (245).

"The living ones," claims Kundera by words of Agnes "have the need to devour the dead ones, their letters, their money, their pictures, their old loves, their secrets" (246). Finally, the author reaches a conclusion that: life is a conditional value, justified only by making it possible to live your love. The one you love is more for you than a God's Creation, more than life." And further, "if you are not given the opportunity to live with your beloved and submit everything to love, there is only one way left how to escape the Creator: to go to the monastery" (252). Here the author appears as a fatalist. Love, according to him is not something that we daily create, but something that is either given to us or not. Love, according to him, has also only one form, to live with the beloved. So he complains that the modern world no longer has that type of a monastery where one can find an *escape from this world*. This, however, never was the real function of monasteries, but that which we call service to God, and it is not clear why the author considers monasteries as nonexistent. However, his heroine still gets to know the happiness of being when she frees herself from her own ego. The author brings his idea to its consequences. Agnes does not find anything that would connect her with the world, so she leaves for solitude. Similarly, as in his previous novel, the author does not let her enjoy this newly found happiness, and she ends up dead. Thus closes Kundera's circle. Kundera believes that culture and wars are inseparably connected; he believes that the only way to live is with a beloved person, and yet even though he beautifully and truthfully describes the state of the heroine freed from her ego and finding happiness in solitude, he has to kill her in this very moment, because it is impossible for him to write a novel about peace. So he commits a literary murder for the same reasons people commit war: they cannot conceive of peace. Escape from death is not in frivolity and vulgarization of values, but in freeing oneself from egotistical way of life, in throwing away the so-called "ego" and yet sustaining life.

Kundera thus offers from the authors covered in this paper the most philosophical approach to death, even though his speculation turns in a circle of presuppositions not quite thought through. While Čapek offers a holistic and positive approach to death, Kundera's skeptical approach is an expression of broken values of modern man and his concentration on external aspects of life. Therefore immortality as an appropriation of life of the dead person by their heirs appears as the central topic of Kundera's novel. His approach is also characterized by intellectual exclusiveness – questions of appropriation of intellectual property, which are at the foreground of Kundera's interest, concern only a very small portion of the population. Hrabal, on the contrary, is obsessed by death and brings in his autobiographical novel *Who Am I* a systematic and terrible picture of the murdering of domestic animals. This theme is very contemporary, and it is admirable that an author of his generation treats it not only poetically, but also critically. On the other hand, the novel also reflects an unbelievable lack of imagination in how he treats his "beloved" cats. At the time of writing of this autobiography, ways of treating cats more humanely and more responsibly already existed. Thus, even though the approach to death is conditioned by individual as well as period poetics, the social sys-

tem of values of the time and place, social class, personal experience and even age of the author, we can never avoid completely the question of semiotics of the narrator's personal state of values.

NOTES

1. See Bronislava Volková, *A Feminist's Semiotic Odyssey through Czech Literature* (1997), Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press.

2. "Vaněk and the Palaverer – Two Sons of the Same Father (The Protagonist as an Axiological Semiotic Device)" (2004), in *The Transformation of Czech and Slovak Societies on the Threshold of the New Millennium and Their Role in the Global World. Selected Papers from the 21st World Congress,* Plzeň, Czech Republic, University of West Bohemia, June 23 -30, 2002, Jan P. Skalný and Miloslav Rechcígl, Jr. eds., Plzeň: Aleš Čeněk.

3. Mácha, Karel Hynek (1954). *Máj*, Praha: Státní nakladatelství. Tr. title: *May*.

4. Němcová, Božena (1987). *Babička*, Praha: Svoboda. Tr. title: *Granny*.

5. I am using my own literal translations throughout the paper; the page numbers refer to Czech originals.

6. Čapek, Karel (1984). *Hordubal, Povětroň, Obyčejný život*, Praha: Československý spisovatel, Spisy VIII. Translated title: *Three novels*.

7. Hrabal, Bohumil (1965). *Ostře sledované vlaky*, Praha: Československý spisovatel,. Tr. title: *Closely Watched Trains*.

8. Neruda, Jan (1948). *Povídky malostranské*, Praha: Orbis. Tr. title: *Tales from the Little Quarter*.

9. Hrabal, Bohumil (1993). *Obsluhoval jsem anglického krále*, Praha: Pražská imaginace. Tr. title: *I served the King of England.*

10. Hrabal, Bohumil (1966). *Automat svět*, Praha: Mladá Fronta. Tr. title: *Death of Mr. Baltisberger.*

11. Hrabal, Bohumil. *Kdo jsem* (2000). Praha: Hynek. Tr. title: *Who Am I.*

12. Hrabal, Bohumil (no date). *Harlekýnovy milióny,* Praha: Československý spisovatel.

13. Kundera, Milan (1985). *Nesnesitelná lehkost bytí*, Toronto: Sixty-Eight Publishers. Tr. title: *Unbearable Lightness of Being*.

14. Kundera, Milan (1979). *Valčík na rozloučenou*, Toronto: Sixty-Eight Publishers,. Tr. title: *The Farewell Party* or *The Farewell Waltz*.

15. Kundera, Milan (1979). *Život je jinde*, Toronto: Sixty-Eight Publishers. Tr. title: *Life is Elsewhere.*

16. Kundera, Milan (1990). *Nesmrtelnost*, Brno: Atlantis. Tr. title: *Immortality*.