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
University of West Bohemia, Plzen, Czech Republic
June 23-30, 2002

Edited by
Jan P. Skalny and Miloslav Rechcígl, Jr.

VANĚK AND PALAVERER – TWO SONS OF THE SAME FATHER

(The Protagonist as an Axiological Semiotic Device)

Bronislava Volková
Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana, USA
volkova@indiana.edu

Panel: Czech Literature - 20th Century Issues

I have chosen for the topic of my paper the comparison of the general semiotic gestures represented by such prominent protagonists, as Havel's Vaněk and Hrabal's palaverer. It is obvious that these protagonists are not just individual people, but types. This fact is confirmed by the fact that in Hrabal's case, the palaverer moves through his books from the early *Little Pearl at the Bottom* (1963) through his late works like *I Served the King of England (1980).* In Havel's case, it concerns the three famous plays of the 1970s (*Audience, The Unveiling and The Protest)*, however, Havel's character/type is even picked up by a whole number of other authors, who create their own Vaněk plays, such as Pavel Kohout's *Permit (1987), Morass (1982) and Safari (1986),* Pavel Landovský's *Arrest (1987)* and Jiří Dienstbier's *Reception (1987).* It is as if both Hrabal and Havel invented a communicative or semiotic principle which carried them through many creative adventures and in Havel's case was even adopted by a series of other authors among whom we count such a prominent and prolific playwright as Pavel Kohout, certainly not someone in need of borrowing.

Thus these two types of protagonists, Vaněk and the Palaverer (česky pábitel) carry the same line of semiosis through many works, the same so to speak "attitudinal stance". While they are strikingly unlike each other, I would say practically opposites – one cannot stop talking, while the other is extremely taciturn, they express equally well the general "feeling" of the Czech people living under the totalitarian regime, while at the same time each expressing a very different attitude to life as such.

A lot has been said about Hrabal's connection to Jaroslav Hašek's *Good Soldier Švejk.* It is immediately evident that Hrabal's palavering has an intimate relationship to Švejk's famous endless digressions and stories that everything "reminds him of". It is much less obvious and has in fact not

been acknowledged to my knowledge, that Švejk has a profound similarity to Vaněk of a different kind. What is then, indeed underlying these three types of protagonists?

It is clear that both Hašek and Hrabal are driven in their writing by a similar energy: creating endless stories which have little to do with the current event or non-event under description. It has been pointed out, most recently in my *A Feminist's Semiotic Odyssey through Czech Literature* (Edwin Mellen Press, Lewiston, New York, 1997) that the main underlying reality of Švejk's digressions is covering up of an anxiety or an escape from it. This is, indeed, a very effective device, which has been also used prominently and explicitly in Vaculík's *Guinea Pigs* (1973) where this principle has been laid bare when the banker switches from stories about the bank to stories about the guinea pigs and vice versa any time he starts feeling uncomfortable with what is either happening around him or what he himself is creating. In this post-modern narrative, Vaculík bares his device by explicitly referring to it and to his discomfort leading to its usage.

The extreme nature of Švejk's and palaverer's storytelling of unrelated events, however, expresses also other characteristics of the protagonists and other content of the author's relationship to the world, which is twofold: it expresses what we could call a joi de vivre, through the ongoing inventiveness of clearly exaggerated events, linguistic creativity which goes hand in hand with it and remains entirely undaunted by the oppressive weight of events under which it takes place. In one case on the military front of a vastly destructive war and idiotic Austrian bureaucracy, in the other case during an oppressive regime which was preceded by an even more oppressive regime of the Nazi Germany – the hero is forced to deal with realities even more inhuman and cruel, like sadistic Nazi tortures of prisoners in the concentration camps, dire poverty, physical abuse of women and animals, all of which finds a naturalistic expression especially in earlier Hrabal's works, however, it is quickly released almost as if it was some comic event of little consequence. While ethically, this is a rather problematic way of dealing with the given events, esthetically it is very effective through the juxtaposition of the horrible and the joyful energy which springs forward from the narrator regardless of these cruelties he has been witnessing.

The other content this semiotic gesture refers to, is a sense of extreme self-centeredness of the protagonist. Indeed, both Švejk and the palaverer (be it uncle Pepin, be it Hanťa or Emánek or Dítě or the narrator of *Dancing Lessons for the Advanced in Age, 1965*) are totally unaware of

and disinterested in the interlocutor and their world, while persistently and relentlessly imposing their own world on them without letting them put in a word sideways. If the reader happens to share an interest in the particular world the palaverer or Švejk portrays, he may adopt an amused or even admiring attitude to the imaginativeness of the linguistic activity displayed, however, any dialogue is totally denied and if we detach ourselves from the playfulness which is the main attraction of this discourse, we find that it lacks any substance. It bubbles on the surface, producing poetic moments of pleasure, however, playfulness, indeed, is the main value here, it is the one allowing for the joi de vivre regardless of the sad background which can be thus disregarded as something one can get easily over and "live on". The discourse is, however, a closed system, which does not allow a real interlocutor or dialogic partner, it is thus a rather "totalitarian" discourse.

There is still another important aspect of Švejk's gesture which we did not touch upon so far and which will bring us to the semiotic gesture of Vaněk. This is the other side of Švejk's stories, namely his silence. Švejk, indeed, is silent about everything one might think of as important in his existential situation – the nature of the war, tragic loss of life, the wasted time, the war injuries, the separation from the loved ones or even their existence, sexual life, family (parents, children, siblings), relationship to women, dreams, goals – none of this is ever mentioned, none of this is deemed even important in Hašek's narrative discourse. In fact, the only thing that appears important is the entertaining quality of the stories which manage to poke various levels of comic relief or sarcasm at the surrounding world and thus become one huge silence about anything meaningful in life. If we observe Vaněk, who is well known primarily through his silence vis a vis his interlocutors and through his all encompassing understanding attitude, we find that in Vaněk, the narrative principle of endless verbal stream is laid bare from the opposite direction, suddenly the protagonist becomes a recipient of such stories rather than their perpetrator. He is continuously exposed to them while passing a silent judgment/non-judgment on them by not responding to them or only responding with his proverbial "I understand". Indeed, Vaněk understands the underlying feelings, motives and lies, he understands people's need to relieve themselves by subjecting their partners to their 'visions', experiences or opinions, which are predominantly based on avoidance of what really matters in life, as that would require more effort, more pain to turn around than creating an acceptable world of imagination. In such a world a person can feel in control, a person is not subjected to judgments by others or even

by oneself, a person can feel important (if for no other reason, than just because someone is willing to listen to them). Why else do we witness an absurd hysterical scene of Věra in the *Unveiling* when Vaněk decides to stop the abuse and leave. She is suddenly rendered completely useless and worthless and her nothingness is laid bare.

It is not by chance that Hašek and Hrabal found in a way a tragic end. Daily drinking to drown the painful side of life never really expressed in their writing, where everything always somehow comes out right even if wrong, gave countless readers a much desired relief and an illusion that by participating in the hilarious stories told, they, too, are O.K. It is not by chance that *The Good Soldier Švejk* is the most translated book of Czech literature and that Hrabal is the most popular writer of contemporary Czech literature. They are both true masters of artistic verbal discourse. I would say that Hrabal even more than Hašek, precisely by keeping silent about the raw nature of pain behind the realities described. In his best works, Hrabal manages to bring in the reality by the back door (like in *Closely Watched Trains*, 1965, *Too Loud a Solitude, 1980* and *I Served the Kind of England, 1980*), but even in these, the black reality is somehow wonderful. Concentration camp is a better pioneer camp, a nursing home is a wonderfully playful place, dying is not so bad, impotence is kind of comical, steeling Jewish property is just part of life, becoming involved with the Nazis is just a naiveté and highly excusable through the insufficient height of the protagonist, mutilation is funny, beating of women and abuse of animals, broken heart is all just part of life, in other words – none of it is a "big deal". Life, in the end, is beautiful. We get over it without making a tremendous effort, or such is the illusion that the author insinuates. All we need to do is to see life through the prism of his vision. What could be so bad?

Vaněk, on the other hand, as we know, is viewed as the conscience of the nation. He has made the decision between collaborating with the Communists and resisting while silently suffering their oppression. Thus Vaněk's gesture is an ethical one. Vaněk refuses ultimately to give in. He is a willing silent listener, but only up to a point where he is asked by the brew-master in the *Audience* to participate in the immoral practices creating this false camaraderie. He knows how to say "no". Similarly when he gets up and decides to leave the bragging couple in the *Unveiling*. However, he is so eager to be a part of the larger whole that he eventually gives in and takes part in the unrewarding and unappetizing interaction with others. Thus while the life escaping palaverer imposes his stories and thus mildly abuses his

interlocutors, Vaněk is a willing participant in self-abuse. He is paradoxically not willing to stand up for himself. He might be willing to stand up for a political cause as in the *Protest,* but not for the worth of an individual. It is therefore again that we do not find anything about his private life (as if that was an unimportant issue), or about his attitudes to life situations other than the oppressiveness of the political system or bureaucracy. This seems to totally absorb him as the only reality relevant to him. Everything else becomes less than relevant. The considerable success of the Vaněk plays abroad is given by the fact that the plays touch upon a general reality that modern man is exposed to all around the so-called civilized world, namely the oppressive and absurd impact of large bureaucracies on life. The absurd touch presented in the Vaněk plays and taken over by Havel's successors gives the work a liberating humor, similarly as in Hašek and Hrabal. "We are able to laugh about the oppressiveness of modern life, therefore we are O.K." In any case, these works help us to deal with the oppressive phenomena they bring up. They bring us the relief we sometimes cannot find in real life. Yet the relief through such gestures is only temporary and not an answer. We know that Havel has seriously put himself on the line during the Communist system apart from playing with it and poking fun at it in his plays. As a result of his ethical stance displayed at the time, he became the president of the new democratic state. This event placed him as if into a new cycle of life and issues he needed to deal with. The old accomplishments were in the past. What was his next deed? Did he succeed in the "new" system as he did in the old? This question transcends the framework of our current inquiry.

Both the varieties of the palaverer and the varieties of Vaněk are two sides of the same coin. Both keep silent about the personal side of life and about the existential and spiritual issues. In this respect, they are both equal sons of the great father of modern Czech literature, Jaroslav Hašek and his semiotic gesture of the *Good Soldier Švejk.*

While Vaněk serves in the following plays by Landovský, Kohout and Dienstbier primarily as a device illustrating further absurd situations of the totalitarian regime without undergoing a major qualitative change, the palaverer undergoes a certain development from his modest, but potent beginnings in *The Little Pearl at the Bottom* to the extreme palaverer of the *Dancing Lessons for the Advanced in Age*, who talks without stopping to make a sentence break pouring out in one breath the horrible and the enjoyable:

...once the priest gave me a picture of Jesus with the chalice, that used to be kind of fashionable in the Austrian days, they had their screenings

(prověrky) and their personal dossier interviews (kádrování), who is the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost? one priest was even hauled into court because the Ulman sisters could not say what the Holy Trinity was? and the priest made them sit on the heated stove on their bare behinds, and then them gals couldn't get married, nobody wanted nothing to do with them, Jesus, if they didn't even know what the Holy Trinity was, well nobody knew it nohow, but they all pretended that they knew, so them sisters raised sunflowers, in those days there were godawful many murders and robberies, everyone closed the windows at night on the farms and kept axes and shooting arms, and then one quiet night this miller sees in the moonlight as how someone starts to cut away at the door with a saw to stick in his hand and undo the latch and that miller steals quietly up with his axe, and when the hand begins to come through the crack of the door, bang! off comes the hand, then the gendarmes looked and looked, but couldn't find no one without that hand, then the priest got mad, because he had to bury the hand in the churchyard, he had to buy a tiny little coffin, Jesus-holy virgin (panenkomarjá)! a soldier stands guard in Olomouc and looks, something is burning in the churchyard, so he runs, opens the door to the dead-house, and what do you think he sees? the grave digger with a kettle, and from that kettle stick out human arms and legs, and the fat is burning, and there the gendarmes take him, they says he dug up dead corpses and cooked them as pigfood, and later the Prostějov kids used to sing a song, there are the little arms and legs of that little girlie... (Prague 1965 edition, pp. 60-62).

Hrabal's palaverer then transmutes into a more narratively and realistically oriented Dítě in *I Served the King of England* (Cologne 1980), whose motto is: "And the unbelievable came true.", a childlike statement which is, however, rooted in the narrated story. Dítě is truly a child thirsting after childish values and acting on instinct. His highest value is total abandonment, one of whose forms is a drinking and sexual orgy as described in the Chapter "Hotel Tichota":

"Then the musicians said it was over, they couldn't play anymore and had to go home, so the poet took a pair of scissors and snipped a gold medal off the general's tunic and tossed it to the musicians, who were gypsies or Hungarians, and so they played some more. Again the general went off with one of the girls, said on the stairs he was all washed up as a man, and fifteen minutes later came back, then the poet went up with the general's first girl, but before that the musicians started packing up to go home, so the poet took the scissors and cut two more medals off and threw them on a tray for

the musicians, and the general took the scissors and cut the rest of his own medals off and threw them on the tray with the others, just for those beautiful young women. We said it was the most audacious thing we'd ever seen, and Zdeněk whispered to me that the medals were the highest English, French, and Russian decorations from the First World War.

Now the general took off his tunic and began to dance, and he scolded the girl and told her to take it easy with him, because his lungs and his ticker weren't what they used to be, and he asked the gypsies for a czardas, and the gypsies started to play and the general started to dance. After he'd coughed and cleared his throat, he began to dance in earnest, and the girl had to dance faster, and the general let go of her and raised one arm up and let the other one drag along the floor like a rooster, and he danced faster and faster and seemed to grow younger and the girl couldn't keep up now but the general didn't slow down and he was dancing and kissing her on the throat at the same time and the musicians formed a circle around the dancers and you could see admiration and understanding in their eyes, you could see that the general was dancing for them and they were all joined together by the music, and they played faster or slower according to the dance and powers of the general, but he was still ahead of his partner, who was flushing red and gasping for breath, and the fat poet and the girl he'd been in the room with were standing above them, leaning on the balustrade. Then the poet took her in his arms, and the first rays of dawn appeared, and the poet carried the beautiful girl down the stairs, past the czardas dancers and through the open doorway, and he held out this half-naked, drunk girl with a torn blouse as an offering to the rising sun." (1989 edition by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, pp. 66-67).

After this peak of his narrative art of the 1970s, Hrabal moves to his famous trilogy of the 1980s, *Weddings in the House, Vita Nuova, Vacant Sites (Toronto 1987)* where his palaverer turns into his wife and acquires some more realistic attitudes, however, at the same time the extent of the trilogy causes a certain watered down version of this semiotic gesture, which has reached its limits here.

Thus two types of protagonists and two types of semiotic gestures came to an end in some of the best of 20th century literature. While forming the opposite extremes of each other, they both sprang from the well of the good soldier who knew how to tell stories to relieve his dreary and meaningless existence, as well as how to keep silent about anything important in life of an individual except about what is being imposed by others.