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Liberation and the Authority of the Writer in the Russian, Czech and Slovak Fiction of the Changes

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Abstract

This dissertation represents the first comparative study of works by the 'writers of the Changes', those Russian, Czech and Slovak writers who, in the late 1980s and 1990s, presented themselves as 'liberators' of literature from its traditional function in Russian, Czech and Slovak culture as the ultimate authority on how to live. The 'fiction of the Changes' at once asserts the surrender of this position of authority and contemplates its consequences.

In the introduction, the 'fiction of the Changes' is placed in the context of a longer retreat from this position of authority in sanctioned fiction. Chapter 1 compares novels by Venedikt Erofeev, Hrabal and Vilikovský which reflect the defeat of literature's attempts to perfect the human being and the writer's desire no longer to be implicated in such attempts. In the works by Evgenii Popov, Placák and Pišťanek discussed in Chapter 2, the writer ceases to be the voice of the collective, instead asserting his freedom to 'give shape to his fate'. Writing which no longer seeks to perpetuate the accepted shape of the external world, represents for Ivanchenko, Tolstaia and Mitana, discussed in Chapter 3, a futile but necessary escapism from existence. However, for Ajvaz, Hodrová, Kratochvil and Jáchym Topol, discussed in Chapter 4, it represents the energy of being as it passes. In Chapter 5, the aspiration to meaning in writing is, for Kolenič and Litvák, futile, and for Sorokin, indicates a harmful desire for power that must be thwarted. Chapter 6 argues that, while Pelevin and Balla reject this defeat of creativity, Kahuda rejects the sentimental attachment to writing as to being in other Czech fiction of the Changes. The conclusion divides the writers of the Changes between those who 'fear speaking' and those who 'fear stopping speaking', and suggests how the writers of the Changes have sought to reconcile these positions.
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Introduction: The Fiction of the Changes

In 'Má lásko, Postmoderno' (Postmoderna, my love), the title story of a 1993 collection by Jiří Kratochvíl (b.1940), the narrator, a middle-aged writer, frees Postmoderna, the little girl he loved when he was a little boy at school, from a prison where she has been kept for forty years, and carries her out into the world on his shoulders. The story constitutes a mythicisation of the role of Czech writers like Kratochvíl, published for the first time following the fall of Communism in November 1989, who, according to Kratochvíl, liberated literature from its perceived manipulation for ideological purposes during the forty-one years of Communist rule. In the story, Kratochvíl portrays literature as eternally young and innocent, despite what human beings have tried to do to it. His use of 'postmoderna' is therefore ironic, suggesting that what fashionable contemporary critics like to call 'postmodernism' is simply literature, released from the 'extra-literary' functions imposed on it by human beings.

Kratochvíl’s story represents one expression of a trend in Russian, Czech and Slovak literature of the late 1980s and 1990s, in which certain writers presented themselves in their fiction or critical articles as ‘liberators’ of literature. In this dissertation, I attempt to characterise and compare the principles, strategies and techniques underlying their work. This dissertation by no means represents a survey of all the Russian, Czech and Slovak fiction published in the late Communist and early post-Communist period, most of which may be said to reflect and respond to the changing circumstances arising in society and the literary process. Rather, the label ‘the fiction of the Changes’ refers specifically to writing published in this period in which the author foregrounds the attempt to change conventional perceptions about why literature is written and how it is read.

A chronological thread runs through the six chapters, based on when works were first published in their author’s native country, but I have not stuck rigidly to this, given that the year of writing often differed substantially from the year of publication in this period. Throughout, I emphasise the comparison between the three literatures.

Chapters 1, 2 and 6 examine works by a Russian, a Czech and a Slovak writer. In Chapters 3 and 5 I focus on Russian and Slovak writers, and in Chapter 4 on Czech writers, reflecting not only the similar way in which the leading Czech writers of the Changes enact their ‘liberation’, but also the contrast between their approach and that of their Russian and Slovak counterparts. Given the limits of space, I have chosen to concentrate on what I consider paradigmatic works, and therefore some writers may appear under-represented. I have tried to reflect the views of some of these writers in this introduction, in which I seek to characterise the ‘fiction of the Changes’ and its reception in general terms and in its literary-historical context.

In early 1989, Literaturnaia gazeta published two articles reflecting on recently published Russian fiction, prefaced by a reader’s letter, worth quoting since it typifies the perception of the role and nature of literature challenged by the writers of the Changes. Citing works she has just read by Valeriia Narbikova (b.1958), Viacheslav P’etsukh (b.1946) and Tat’iana Tolstaia (b.1951), the (female) reader remarks:

It seems to me that some of the writers (and especially female writers – which surprises me most!) have exploited glasnost’ in order to display for general inspection only what is filthy and disgusting. There you go, they say, take that!... Can there be anything gained from such ‘truth’? Can writers have forgotten that literature should elevate and enlighten the human being, and not bend him to the ground?²

The very title of the second article, ‘Plokhaia proza’ (Bad fiction), by Dmitrii Urnov, left the reader in no doubt about its author’s views.³ However, the first article, by Sergei Chuprinin, entitled ‘Drugaiia proza’ (Other fiction), constituted an early attempt to define the emerging ‘new’ writing.

Chuprinin dates the origins of ‘other fiction’ back to the late 1970s, when literature that failed to commit itself to the service either of the regime or of its opponents ‘really felt itself to be other, that is to say emphatically and provocatively alternative in its relationship both to the reigning morality and, in fact, to all that was considered

³ See Urnov, D., ‘Plokhaia proza’, Literaturnaia gazeta, 1989, 6, p.4. The transition in critical method is reflected in the uneasy contrast between Urnov’s fierce attack on Narbikova, and his anxiety to point out that, though he found this type of writing more or less unreadable, he was not seeking to deny its right to exist.
literature in Russia'. The first collective expression of this position came, according to Chuprinin, with the abortive attempt in 1978 by Vasilii Aksenov (b.1932), Andrei Bitov (b.1937), Viktor Erofeev (b.1947), Fazil’ Iskander (b.1929), and Evgenii Popov (b.1946) to secure the uncensored publication of an anthology of ‘non-committed’ literature called *Metropol’* (Ann Arbor, 1979). *Metropol’* united writers from different generations who had difficulty publishing in Brezhnev’s Soviet Union, including prominent figures from the height of the Thaw, like Aksenov, Bitov and Iskander, whose major post-Thaw works did not appear until the *glasnost* period, and those, like Erofeev and Popov, who would be considered central to the ‘new fiction’ of the late 1980s.

Despite this continuity, critical discussions of ‘other fiction’ - while noting precursors - focused almost exclusively on writers whose work was not associated with an earlier period, even though it had often been written in the 1970s or early 1980s. The major anomaly was *Moskva-Petushki* (Paris 1973, Moscow 1989, dated as written 1969) by Venedikt Erofeev (1938-90, no relation of Viktor), which was widely known or known about, having already been published and reviewed abroad and in *samizdat*, but became for critics a defining example of the ‘new’ aesthetic. The core names listed by Chuprinin or other critics included both Erofeevs, Narbikova, P’etsukh, Popov, Tolstaia, Zufar Gareev (b.1955), Aleksandr Ivanchenko (b.1945), Liudmila Petrushevskiaia (b.1938) and Vladimir Sorokin (b.1955). In the peculiar situation of Soviet literature at the height of *glasnost*, some, like Ivanchenko and Tolstaia, had first been treated by critics as a continuation of the development of sanctioned literature, others, like the Erofeevs, Petrushevskiaia, P’etsukh and Popov,

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4 Chuprinin, ‘Drugala’, p.4.
6 Popov had published some short stories in journals in the early 1970s, and, like Erofeev, had been admitted into the Writers’ Union but was expelled after *Metropol’*. Short stories by Popov, many of which had been published abroad earlier in the 1980s, began appearing again in journals in 1987, culminating in the first publication of his novel *Dusha patriota* (The soul of a patriot, dated as completed 1983) in early 1989. That same year, Erofeev published his first collection of stories, *Telo Anny, ili konets russkogo avangarda* (Anna’s body, or the end of the Russian Avant-garde), which also dated from the 1970s and early 1980s. Aksenov’s *V poiskakh zhannya* (In search of a genre) was sanctioned for publication in 1978, but, after his emigration, *Ozhog* (The burn, Ann Arbor 1980) and *Ostrov Krym* (The island of Crimea, Ann Arbor 1981) were both only published abroad until the *glasnost* period. Bitov’s *Pushkinskii dom* (Pushkin house, Ann Arbor 1971) did not appear in the Soviet Union in full until 1987, the same year as Iskander’s *Kroliki i udavy* (Rabbits and boa-constrictors, Ann Arbor 1982). Iskander’s *Sandro iz Chegema* (Sandro of Chegem, Ann Arbor 1983) was published in 1988.
were accepted as 'delayed' arrivals who had either not been able to publish, not submitted their work for publication or published only rarely, and yet others, notably Narbikova, were seen as new writing reflecting the liberalisation of literary themes and method.

In his attempt to delineate what unites these writers and distinguishes them from other contemporaneous writing, Chuprinin focused on their characters, 'almost exclusively wretched, luckless, damaged people'. Whereas, Chuprinin argued, similar types, when they appeared in sanctioned fiction of the 1970s and early 1980s, represented a deviation from the norm, in 'other fiction' they suggested that a 'distorted, rotten, phantasmagoric reality' had become the norm. Chuprinin considered the 'other fiction' writers as the 'artists-diagnosticians and naturalists [estestvoispyatateli] of this reality. Writing in 1991, Mikhail Epshtein similarly concentrated on characterisation, contrasting the 'eccentrics' ('chudiki') depicted in the fiction of the Thaw and early post-Thaw writer, film-actor and director, Vasili Shukshin (1929-74), with the 'freaks' ('mudaki') of Popov, Viktor Erofeev and P'etsukh. For Epshtein, while the 'chudik' represented an 'individual deviation from the over-constricting norms of social life', the 'mudak', the 'worn face of social madness', 'also deviates from the norms of common sense, but this is the characteristic not of an individual, but of a collective being that has rolled off the rails of reason and history.'

Both Chuprinin and Epshtein focus on the 'taboo-breaking' in 'other fiction', exemplified by Epshtein's use of the taboo word 'mudak' and regarded by Robert Porter as its 'most salient characteristic'. However, the flouting of prohibitions concerning the type of language or subject matter appropriate to literature, and the way a human being should be portrayed, occurred in a broad range of 'new' Russian writing in the period, in particular the grim social realism of writers like Sergei Kaledin (b.1949), which more closely fits Chuprinin's perception of 'other fiction' as

7 Chuprinin, 'Drugaia', p.4.
8 Ibid. The echoes in 'other fiction' of Zapiski iz podpol'ia (Notes from underground, 1864) by Fedor Dostoevskii (1821-81) are discussed further in Chapter 2.
10 Porter, Alternative, p.19. Porter points out that mudak may also be translated as 'prick', 'prat' or 'wanker'. (Ibid., p.13.)
a form of social criticism. Moreover, this type of taboo-breaking is not really relevant to writers like Tolstaia and Ivanchenko. A more effective means of differentiation was proposed by Vladimir Potapov, who defined ‘other fiction’ as ‘literature which feels and acknowledges itself as only and nothing more than a phenomenon of language’, or, in other words, breaks the convention that literature is the source of truth about how to live. In Potapov’s view:

‘Other fiction’ is least inclined to consider itself a collective organiser or propagandist, a mouthpiece or transmitter of ideas, hence its refusal to manoeuvre in any way, hence the unusual character of its dialogue with the reader [...] ‘Other fiction’ writers almost never set themselves the task of creating a substantial, multi-coloured, plastically perfect world, existing as it were independently of the author. A ‘mediator-voice’ is always present between reader and author, evoked to remind the reader that all that is being communicated is merely ‘words, words, words’, merely literature.

This point of view was expressed in a less analytical, more belligerent way by Viktor Erofeev, in his controversial essay, ‘Pominki po sovetskoj literature’ (A funeral feast for Soviet literature), first published in Literaturnaia gazeta in July 1990, which announced the death of Soviet literature. In his essay, Erofeev asserted:

In Russia the writer was often called upon to carry out several duties at the same time: to be a priest, a prosecutor, a sociologist, an expert in questions of love and marriage, an economist and a mystic. He

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11 Chuprinin’s account of the type of reality portrayed in ‘other fiction’ is attributed by Natal’ia Ivanova to a much wider spectrum of fiction written in the period. Noting the ‘literary hegemony of the catastrophe genre’, she writes: ‘Motifs associating the end of the century and the millennium with the end of the world – fatal illness, collapse, death, madness, doom – are concentrated in the image of the hospital and the madhouse, the place where a contemporary novel’s hero is likely to be found, since he is characterised by a sick imagination and morbid fantasy (including historical fantasy), by the collapse of consciousness.’ (Ivanova, N., ‘On the Mound of Returned Tickets: The Newest Russian Prose’, translated by Julian Graffy, Artes, 5, 1998, p.80. Hereafter Ivanova, ‘On the Mound’.) The topos of the mental hospital, which appears in Russian works like Do i vo vremia (Before and during, 1993) by Vladimir Sharov (b.1952) and Chapaev i Pustota (Chapaev and Pustota, 1996) by Viktor Pelevin (b.1962), also recurs in Czech fiction of the period, beginning with Hra na slepo (Playing blind, 1982) by Ludvik Nëmec (b.1957), and subsequently, for example, in Daleko od stromu (Far from the tree, Cologne 1987, Prague 1991) and Zlodéjina (Thievilry, 1995) by Zuzana Brabcová (b.1960).


13 Ibid., p.254.

14 As well as evoking Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault on the passing of the author, Erofeev also alludes to Francis Fukuyama’s The End of History?, published in Russian in Voprosy filosofii in early 1990, which, often misunderstood as a programmatic rather than speculative statement, greatly influenced intellectuals in former Communist countries in the early Changes period. At the same time, his notion of artistically compromised literature recalls Abram Terts’s essay ‘Chto takoe Sotsrealizm?’ (What is Socialist Realism?, Paris 1959), itself titled in imitation of Jean-Paul Sartre’s Qu’est-ce que c’est que la littérature?, in which Terts, the pseudonym of Andrei Siniavskii (1925-97), sarcastically condemns Socialist Realism as a ‘half-classicist half-art’. (See Terts, A., The Trial Begins and On Socialist Realism, translated by George Dennis, Berkeley, Los Angeles, 1982, p.214.)
was so much everything that he frequently turned out to be nobody as a writer, unable to sense the peculiarities of literary language and figurative paradoxical thinking. Erofeev considered the focus of writing in this dominant understanding to be directed outwards, towards shaping a notion of the human being. By contrast, the focus of the ‘new’ literature was, in his view, directed inwards, towards words. Erofeev writes: ‘In a novel it is important to create not so much a definite human image or character, as something about which I would simply say literature’. Whereas Erofeev presents this shift of focus as a new beginning, for Epshtein, however, it was symptomatic of what he perceived to be a recurring ‘aesthetic’ stage in Russian literature, in which literature surrenders or loses all other functions and drifts into self-contemplation. He writes: ‘What is left for a literature that is no longer either politics, religion or philosophy? It is left with language, a kind of minimum and a final bridgehead on which to set the conditions for its capitulation.’

The notion that literature is suffering from a loss of purpose also formed the basis of Pavel Janoušek’s assessment of Czech literature in the early post-Communist period. In his view, under Communism, readers and critics had judged a work above all on the extent to which it told the truth about the reality of life in contemporary Czechoslovak society. In the post-1989 period, however, that truth-telling function had passed to the media, leaving literature, according to Janoušek, uncertain of what to say instead. This ‘pause for thought’ reflected Janoušek’s earlier assertion, a year after the fall of the Communist regime in November 1989, that Czech literature was, in basketball parlance, taking a ‘time-out’ to come to terms with its past, and not only with the works which had not been sanctioned for publication before the Changes, but also with the works which had.

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16 Ibid., p.433.
18 See Janoušek, P., ‘Dejte mi pevný bod aneb Za společenský román krásnější’, Tvar, 1994, 12, p.3. Janoušek developed this notion in a later article, in which he argued that with the loss of the enemy (Communism), Czech literature had lost the ‘need to communicate’, with the result that ‘individual works are interpreted only as the personal plaisir of the author’. (Janoušek, P., ‘Proměny literární atmosféry v době postlistopadové’, Tvar, 1996, 18, p.10.)
19 See Janoušek, P., ‘Time-out aneb Zhroucená tradice’ in his Time-out, Brno, 2001, pp.69-79. (This article was first published in Tvar in 1990.)
In her survey of Russian literature in the period under discussion, Galina Nefagina pinpoints 1986 as the ‘opening of the floodgates’ to previously unsanctioned literature in the Soviet Union, following the announcement of the policies of glasnost’ and perestroika in 1985. However, particularly as far as ‘new’ writing was concerned, the liberalisation was at least initially gradual and controlled, with Soviet critics repeatedly attempting to link newly published works with the emphasis on ‘truth-telling’ and morality in official policy. 1986 also appeared to bring a change in atmosphere in Czech literature, with the publication of works like Simulanti (Maligners) by Milan Pávek (b.1941), delayed since 1983, Jak potopit Austrálii (How to sink Australia) by Petr Šabach (b.1951) and Knizka s červeným obalem (A little book with a red cover) by Alexandra Berková (b.1949), which combined relatively strong political satire with an inventive, comic approach to narrative. In an article about new Czech writing published in Dotyky, the leading Slovak periodical devoted to the work of young writers and critics, in August 1989, Ivo Slávik suggested that the short-story collections by Šabach and Berková were more or less the only new works worthy of note, commenting: ‘The literary vivaciousness and the vitality of the heroes of these debuts, like the flexibility and range of expression of the authors, form the basis for the emergence of an antithesis to the schematicism in which part of the literary production of younger writers who entered literature in the 1970s drowned.’


The increasing tenuousness of this linkage culminated in 1988 with the publication, during the period of prohibition, of a censored version of Erofeev’s Moskva-Petushki, an intertextual stream-of-consciousness delivered by a drunk on a train, in the journal Trezvost’ i kul’tura (Sobriety and culture), accompanied by an article presenting the work as a cautionary tale about the psychological effects of alcohol.

Slávik, I., ‘Náčrt súčasnej situácie mladej českej prózy druhej polovice 80. rokov’, Dotyky, I, 1989, 8, p.22. His remarks reflect the altogether more liberal situation in Slovakia, to which I shall shortly return. The ironic, playful, female perspective of Berková’s collection in particular appeared refreshingly unusual in the context of Czech sanctioned fiction in which humour was frequently limited to adolescent sarcasm, reflecting the age of its central characters. (For a discussion of the prominence of the adolescent in Czech fiction of this period, see Pynsent, R.B., ‘Adolescence, Ideology and Society: The Young Hero in Contemporary Czech Fiction’ in Wallace, I. (ed.), The Adolescent Hero, Dundee, 1984, pp.65-86. Hereafter Pynsent, ‘Adolescence’.) In the second edition, published in 1988, Berková supplied a typically quirky account of her method which looked back to the 1960s as much as forward to the fiction of the Changes: ‘Working with television has taught me (oh it has, yes, it has) above all to build a whole through the association of situations according to their internal homogeneity, without explanation, without justification and without the hopelessly boring strings of monotonous informative narration which I don’t like reading and which manage to ruin even the liveliest subject.隐含的内容。
The impact of *glasnost*, however, only began to be felt in Czech literature in late 1988, when the Union of Czech Writers began in earnest to seek a way of ‘reuniting’ sanctioned, *samizdat* and *tamizdat* literature. Representatives of the regime hoped to achieve this reunification in the manner of their Soviet counterparts a few years earlier, as Janoušek indicates in his discussion of this process:

though they admitted the necessity of coming to terms in some way with the disowned, they imagined it as a gradual and painless integration of ‘minor’ branches into the ‘main’ branch, as an ‘opening of doors’ to books which were not entirely in conflict...let’s say, with Communist ideals (more precisely, with the definition ordained by their higher organs at the time).  

This Party-led liberalisation of literature, ultimately overtaken by the events of November 1989, was highly unpredictable. On the one hand, *Literární měsíčník*, the mouthpiece of official literature in the 1970s and 1980s, made a great virtue of its serialisation in the summer of 1989 of *Rozhovory s útěkem* (Conversations with escape, 1990) by the superficially non-conformist rock singer Bára Basíková (b.1963), which described a lesbian affair. On the other, the same year, Daniela Hodrová (b.1946), a leading literary theorist and novelist in the post-Changes period, could publish her theory of the novel, *Hledání románu* (In search of the novel), only in censored form. She did, however, secure agreement for the publication of her novels *Podoboji* (In both kinds) and *Kukly* (Pupae), completed in the early 1980s, which were then paradoxically delayed by the fall of the regime until 1991. The most significant event of this period was the sanctioned publication in early 1989 of two novels by Bohumil Hrabal (1914-97) - *Obsluhoval jsem anglického krále* (I waited on the King of England, Cologne 1980) and *Pnlis hlucna samota* (Too loud a solitude, Cologne 1980) - both completed in the early 1970s and previously published abroad and in *samizdat*. Associated with the liberalisation of literary method in the 1960s, when he first came to prominence, Hrabal was not permitted to publish following the collapse of the reforms process until 1975, when he gave a ‘self-critical’ interview to the Party cultural weekly, *Tvorba*, declaring his support for Socialism.  

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Fear and humour belong together’. (Berková, A., *Knizka s červeným obalem*, Prague, 1988, back cover.)

Janoušek, P., ‘Česká literatura v bodě nula aneb Literatura bez dveří’ in his *Time-out*, Brno, 2001, p.60. (This article was originally published in *Kmen* in early 1990.)

Susanne Roth argues in her monograph on Hrabal that the text of the *Tvorba* interview, which she reproduces, was amended before publication. (See Rothová, S., *Hlučná samota a horké štěstí Bohumila Hrabala*, translated by Michael Špirit, Prague, 1993, pp.163-65. Hereafter Rothová, *Hlučná.* At the time, the interview provoked dismay, prompting students to burn Hrabal’s books in
that, however, those works sanctioned for publication were stylistically and thematically his least challenging. As Vladimír Novotný pointed out in his survey of Czech literature since 1989, Hrabal, as the most popular writer in each branch, effectively embodied the unity of Czech literature on his own.\(^{25}\)

The first attempt to end the ‘time-out’ following the ‘opening of the floodgates’ in Czech literature after November 1989 came with Jiří Kratochvíl’s ‘Obnovení chaosu v české literatuře’ (The renewal of chaos in Czech literature), published in \textit{Literární noviny} in November 1992, which in its provocative assertions closely resembled Erofeev’s earlier ‘Pominki po sovetskoi literature’.\(^{26}\) Like Erofeev, Kratochvíl emphasised that, in his view, the Marxist-Leninist understanding of literature is merely an example of the conventional understanding of literature in Czech culture as a collectivising tool, demonstrated also by the use of literature by the dissidents in the 1970s and 1980s:

After a long time Czech literature is not only once again free and rid of all social ties and national expectations, but also has its ‘generation’, which is turning its back on both the literature of the 1960s and the official and unofficial literature of the twenty years of occupation. It is a literature which with relish scorns all ideologies, missions and services to the people or to anyone.\(^{27}\)

As far as fiction is concerned, the writers of the literature to which Kratochvíl refers came essentially from two distinct groups, who together make up the Czech counterpart to what Soviet critics in the late 1980s called ‘other fiction’. The first was drawn from Kratochvíl’s own generation, and consisted of writers born during or shortly after the Second World War, for whom the Thaw had ended before they could


\(^{26}\) In his response to Kratochvíl’s essay, Milan Jungmann notes the similarity of its concerns to those of Erofeev, whose essay was published in Czech in the periodical \textit{Světová literatura} in 1992. (See Jungmann, M., ‘Kudy kam z chaosu’, \textit{Literární noviny}, IV, 1993, 4, p.7.)

make a substantial impact. They included Hodrová and Michal Ajvaz (b.1949), to whom Novotný added, amongst others, Berková, Vladimír Macura (1945-99), Ivan Matoušek (b.1948) and Václav Vokolek (b.1947). Of these, only Berková and Macura had had fiction sanctioned for publication before November 1989. Some, like Hodrová and Macura, had pursued careers in literary studies during the 1970s and 1980s, but most had been not only completely excluded from the sanctioned literary process, but also, while publishing in samizdat and tamizdat, peripheral to major dissident activities. The second group was made up of underground writers who emerged in the 1980s, particularly those, like Vít Kremlička (b.1962), Petr Placák (b.1964) and Jáchym Topol (b.1962), associated with the samizdat journal Revolver Revue, to whom Zuzana Brabcová (b.1960), though not strictly ‘underground’, was frequently added because of close stylistic similarities.

In his brief survey of Czech fiction of the early 1990s, first published in Literární noviny in 1995, Aleš Haman identified two main tendencies:

[...] one aimed for authenticity, the instant expression of bare, existential transience, the demystification of all illusions and demythicisation of all ideals which could provide something to hold on to in the flow of time; the other tendency was formed of fiction which bet on the destruction of histoire by means of a refined game of imaginary associations and the merging of fantastic visions and realistic ideas.

Haman’s division of writers into one or other tendency is over-simplified, since in practice they were not necessarily mutually exclusive. However, Czech literature in the 1990s, to a greater extent than either Russian or Slovak, was dominated by explicitly or implicitly autobiographical works seeking to give an ‘eye-witness’

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28 See Novotný, V., ‘Nová česká literatura (1990-1995)’, Tvar, 1995, 16, p.24. Novotný reveals the influence of Soviet literary categories, referring to this grouping as ctícátíntici (‘forty-somethings’ or ‘those born in the 1940s’) in imitation of Soviet critics who, in the late 1970s, began to refer to certain writers as the sorokaletnie (see below).

29 Like Berková’s Knížka s červeným obalem, Macura’s short story collection Něznymi drápky (With tender claws), published in 1983, scarcely conformed to ideological expectations.

30 Revolver Revue, founded in 1985 as Jednou nohou, but re-named after five issues, became legal after the Changes, and remains one of the most respected Czech literary periodicals.

31 In his study of the Czech literary underground in the post-war period, Martin Pilař describes Martin C. Putna’s account of the four ‘steps’ which make a writer ‘underground’: ‘1) hostility to the official world and its culture; 2) departure from it; 3) forming a group with like-minded people; 4) creating another, parallel world with another culture and other values.’ (Pilař, M, Underground: Kapitoly o českém literárním undergroundu, Brno, 1999, p.14.) In the context of Russian literature in the period, this definition would apply most to the Conceptualists like Prigov and Sorokin. Pilař’s book draws
account of the experience of the 1970s and 1980s, and at the same time to assert the writer's own anti-Communist credentials. These works were often either written by formerly controversial sanctioned writers like Zdeněk Zapletal (b. 1951), or had been published previously in *samizdat* or *tajmizdat*, like, for example, the novels of émigré writers like Iva Pekárková (b. 1963) or Jan Pelc (b. 1957). This tendency may therefore be seen to represent a continuation of what Janoušek describes as the 'truth-telling' approach called for by both official and dissident establishments – for diametrically opposed ideological reasons – in the preceding period. What Kratochvil presents as the 'new' Czech writing, though it rarely dissented from the characterisation of the 1970s and 1980s as a 'traumatic' period, nevertheless represented an attempt to break with this approach, to cease the perpetuation of shared versions of reality and foreground instead their constant disintegration and recreation. For this reason, Kratochvil describes this writing as the 'literature of chaos, that is, of the beginning', the writers of which

are not only consciously and systematically returning to artistic and 'artificial' literature (and logically at the same time to its opposite, Gellnerian literature and aesthetic brutalism), but, above all, aim to create some kind of individual myths, replacing the collective myths which have thus far dominated in Czech literature from the time of the Revival through the left-wing avant-garde to ideologized literature and literature of the 'political opposition' of the 1960s.\(^{32}\)

The assertion of Erofeev and Kratochvil that what they consider the 'new writing' represents a complete break with the principles and techniques underpinning in particular sanctioned fiction in the preceding period is reflected, albeit less programmatically, throughout the Russian and Czech fiction of the Changes. This emphasis arose essentially from a sense among these writers that they and their way of thinking had been egregiously excluded both from mainstream sanctioned and from unsanctioned literature during the 1970s and 1980s. In his critique of Kratochvil's theoretical writing, Haman comments:

In Kratochvil's opinions, the experience of the time of Normalisation, which shut creative personalities (of his type) in 'internal emigration' on islands of loneliness far from the madding crowd, is mixed with euphoria at the freedom after November 1989.

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\(^{32}\) Kratochvil, 'Obnovenf', p.84. By 'artistic' and 'artificial', Kratochvil appears to mean literature which focuses on the processes of its own creation. František Gellner (1881-1914), uncle of Ernest Gellner, was an early twentieth-century anarchist poet.
The confinement of non-conformist isolation was transposed into a notion of the absolute autonomy of artistic creation rid of all secondary functions.\(^3\)

In a conference panel discussion in Tampere in July 2000 on the work of the sanctioned but hardly conformist Russian writer Vladimir Makanin (b.1937), Natal'ia Ivanova described the late 1980s in Russian literature as the 'revenge of the underground', during which writers like Makanin were swept aside by the 'new' writers and often could not or chose not to publish. Ivanova further noted that while the 'new' writers were soon generally perceived by critics and readers to have run out of ideas, writers like Makanin had returned to prominence. Perhaps, then, more than it heralded the future of Russian, Czech and Slovak literature, the Russian and Czech fiction of the Changes represented the culmination of a period of disinformation and misrepresentation, when not only writers, but also critics served 'extra-literary' purposes, the 'final' caricaturing of the recent and distant literary past necessary to liberate writer and critic from this service.

Nowhere is this caricature more apparent than in Erofeev and Kratochvil's accounts of the recent literary past, which provoked the greatest criticism at the time. Both writers' characterisations of that period curiously reflect a total acceptance of the official presentation of literature, in which, on the one hand, the canon of acknowledged literary classics was absorbed into 'official culture', while writers who could not be 'assimilated' were quietly excluded, and on the other, as the mainstream dissidents also contended, all new writing was understood to serve the cause of either the regime or its enemies, depending on where it was published.

Kratochvil's use of the phrase 'official literature' implicitly to refer to everything sanctioned for publication in the 1970s and 1980s reflects the prevalent Czech dissident view that all sanctioned literature was artistically compromised and, moreover, complicit in the maintenance of the autocratic regime. Milan Jungmann, the editor-in-chief of Literární noviny from 1964 to 1967, at the height of the Czech Thaw, argued in an article published soon after the Changes that the policy of Normalisation, as it applied to literature, constituted the regime's 'revenge' on writers

\(^3\) Haman, A., 'Vyznání s puncem generačního programu', Tvar, 2001, 9, p.4.
for the prominent role they had played in calls for reform. In a later article, Jungmann drew attention to the infamous 1972 speech by Jan Kozák (1921-95), the chairman of the Union of Czech Writers, in which he named all the writers whose work was no longer acceptable to the regime, including those, like Věra Linhartová (b.1938) and Josef Škvorecký (b.1924), who had already emigrated, Milan Kundera (b.1929), who emigrated in 1975, and mainstays of the emerging dissident establishment like Václav Havel (b.1936), Eva Kantůrková (b.1930) and Ludvík Vaculík (b.1926). In the aftermath, those few writers most closely associated with the literary experimentation of the Thaw who continued to publish, like Vladimír Páral (b.1932) and Ladislav Fuks (1923-94), or later returned to sanctioned publication, like Alena Vostrá (1938-92) were perceived by Jungmann and others to have irretrievably compromised their techniques and reputations. As for attempts to establish a new generation of writers to replace that which had been discredited, Jungmann commented:

With each book, signs of the creative uncertainty of these [...] writers began to appear. Their lyricism became increasingly rigid, their generational confessions got bogged down in intricate description, and their minor verbal and narrative abilities were obscured by inhibited expression and obfuscating details which were supposed to suggest to the naive reader the challenging complexity of “modernity” [...] The vehemently asserted new wave thus broke up in the face of hard reality; the realisation that the will to create may, in artificially formed conditions, arouse the impression of an extraordinary talent, but is no substitute for it.

The only sanctioned writers about whom Jungmann wrote positively were Vladimír Körner (b.1939), who continued to publish his historical fiction after the Thaw, and writers of essentially one controversial sanctioned book like Pávek or Jana

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36 Of Páral and Fuks, Jungmann writes: ‘it was evident that the writer no longer vouched for his work, that he had failed in that most fundamental thing; literature for him was no longer a struggle for a deeper knowledge of the human being and society, it was a means to the end of profitable self-realisation’. (Jungmann, ‘Česká’, p.148.) (For similar remarks on Vostrá and further evidence of Jungmann’s rejection of sanctioned fiction, see Jungmann, M, ‘Hromádka českých románů’ in his Cesty a rozcestí, Purley, 1988, pp.299-310.) The key exception to this rule was Hrabal, though his works sanctioned for publication were considered inferior to those published in samizdat and abroad.
37 Jungmann, ‘Česká’, p.146. This same characterisation of artistic weakness may be found in ostensibly more analytical surveys. See, for example, Bock, I., ‘Jedna česká literatura? K některým tendencím “oficiální”, samizdatové a exilové prózy’, Česká literatura, 40, 1992, pp.67-84. (Bock at least puts ‘official’ in quotation marks.)
Červenková (b. 1939), to whom many other names could be added. In his response to the blanket rejection of sanctioned literature in Kratochvil’s essay, Věroslav Mertl (b. 1929), however, defended writers like himself, whom sanctioned critics described as the ‘grey zone’ because their work, though sanctioned for publication, lacked the overt optimism and commitment which Party ideologues demanded. These included, for Mertl, the older generation of poets like Ludvík Kundera (b. 1920), Oldřich Mikulášek (1910-85) and Jan Skácel (1922-89), as well as writers of historical fiction like Körner and Jiří Šotola (1924-89). To this so-called ‘grey zone’ might be added, using labels derived from Soviet literary categories which Czech sanctioned critics sought to impose on Czech literature, writers of ‘rural fiction’ like Zeno Dostál (b. 1934) and Jiří Navrátil (b. 1939), writers of ‘urban fiction’ like Václav Dusek (b. 1944) and comic writers like Miroslav Skála (1924-89). Perhaps, however, it is sufficient to quote Janoušek, who, in an article surveying the literary situation nearly a year after the fall of the Communist regime, commented:

The consequences which the subjugation of official literature to politics had on its quality are undeniable. I strongly object, however, to the blind partiality of apostles of the new faith casting judgements without reading books, or having read books, but through ‘aprioristic’ glasses. I am convinced that worthwhile works emerged in all branches of Czech literature, as well as trash and junk.

In contrast to Kratochvil, Erofeev provides a more detailed survey of the main trends which emerged in Russian literature during the Thaw, criticising on the one hand the chauvinism and extreme conservatism of ‘official’ and ‘Village’ literature, which in

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38 Červenková’s Semestr života (A term in life, 1982) described the gradual destruction of the idealism of a young pro-Communist teacher who takes up her first post in the ideological ‘virgin lands’ of the south-western Czech border. The work, set in the early 1960s, was actually completed in the early 1970s, and therefore provided a link between the novels of disillusion by formerly committed Communists in the 1960s and the increasingly dominant theme of disillusion in sanctioned fiction of the 1970s and 1980s.


40 For a sanctioned attempt to articulate the concerns and strategies of writers like Dušek which provoked considerable controversy on publication, see Jan Lukeš’s collection of articles, Prozaická skutečnost (1982). For a similar survey in English, which earned a highly critical samizdat review from Jungmann for a perceived lack of discrimination between major (‘grey’) and minor (‘official’) writers, see Pynsent, R.B., ‘Social Criticism in Czech Literature of 1970s and 1980s Czechoslovakia’, Bohemia, 27, 1986, 1, pp.1-36.

41 Perhaps aware of the dullness of being ‘sensible’, Janoušek enlivens his article with a reading of a classic of genuine official literature, Kozák’s Adam a Eva (Adam and Eve, 1982), as a work of opposition. By the 1980s, Czech sanctioned literature was criticising the incumbent regime not only from a liberal, but also from a hard-line Marxist-Leninist implied authorial perspective, with the distinction in perspectives often blurred.
his view enjoyed its heyday serving the ideological positions of the Brezhnev period, and on the other, the ‘hyper-moralising’ of ‘liberal’ literature, which took centre-stage with the officially approved ‘truth-telling’ of the glasnost period. This greater detail, and in particular his differentiation between ‘official’ and ‘liberal’ trends reflects the fact that, to a far greater extent than in Czech sanctioned literature of a comparable period, literary scholars in both East and West were able to find enough continuity from the artistic approaches of the Thaw in sanctioned Soviet literature of the 1970s and 1980s for it not to be completely discredited. \(^{42}\) By ‘official literature’, Erofeev means only that sometimes called ‘secretarial’ literature, since its most prominent exponents were members of the Secretariat of the Writers’ Union. By ‘liberal’ literature, at least until the glasnost period, Erofeev appears to mean sanctioned urban realist writing – so-called bytovaia proza – epitomised in the 1960s and 1970s by Trifonov, and subsequently by the so-called sorokaletnie (the ‘forty-year-olds’), a loose category invented by critics to take in disparate writers like Makanin, Anatolii Kim (b.1939), Ruslan Kireev (b.1941) and Anatolii Kurchatkin (b.1944). \(^{43}\) Deming Brown comments of their fiction: ‘About all of these writers there is an absence of dogmatism, an ideological tentativeness and lack of doctrinal certainty. They do not fear ambiguity and ambivalence, and in some cases they in fact cultivate such attitudes. To a great extent they seem to feel that as artists their task is investigative and cognitive, not didactic.’ \(^{44}\)

This type of writing, which may be said to correspond to the so-called ‘grey zone’ of Czech sanctioned fiction, only irritates Erofeev, who mocks what he perceives as its ‘obtrusive reliance on allusions’, commenting: ‘readers grew addicted to a “treasure hunt” for hints, to seeking out places where the writer had his tongue in his cheek. The result was that writers got carried away with all this tongue-in-cheek parody and forgot how to think’. \(^{45}\) As in Czech reactions to Kratochvil’s essay,

\(^{42}\) Since the qualities of writers like Chingiz Aitmatov (b.1928), Valentin Rasputin (b.1937), Vasili Shukshin (1929-1974), Iuri Trifonov (1925-81) and others have already been well-documented in Russian and Western criticism, I shall not go into as much detail in my description of Soviet literature in this period as in my preceding account of the Czech situation.

\(^{43}\) In the period before glasnost, Erofeev may also have in mind those writers of rural fiction who emphasised the plight of the individual (conventionally the concern of urban fiction) more than the plight of the traditional Russian collective. In the glasnost period, his category of ‘liberal literature’ expands to include works, mainly written but unpublished during the Thaw, and subsequently published abroad.


Russian commentators responding to Erofeev’s essay were most exercised by his treatment of these writers, whom readers and critics perceived to have striven in difficult circumstances to resist what Igor’ Dedkov terms the ‘degradation of reality’ in ideologised literature. Dedkov, who cites Trifonov and the Village fiction writer Viktor Astaf’ev (1924-2002) as examples, closely resembles Janoušek in his approach, and displays a weariness with the trendy apocalyptic view of the literary situation expressed by commentators like Erofeev and Epshtein.

Following the implication of both Erofeev and Kratochvil that official and dissident writers, in their shared perception that the function of literature is to serve political aims, are two sides of the same coin, one might also argue that writers employing strategies like the sorokaletnie belong to the same currency as the writers of the Changes. In Barthes’s account of the ‘death of the author’, understood as a figure imparting a ‘single “theological” meaning (the message of the Author-God)’, that death is accompanied by the ‘birth of the reader’, which may be said to be reflected in the explicit appeals to the reader and the heavy use of allusiveness, irony and parody found in the fiction discussed in this dissertation, including Erofeev’s own. However, the origins of this ‘birth of the reader’ may be also be sought in the withdrawal of implied authorial judgement and the ‘obtrusive reliance on allusions’ found in sanctioned fiction of the 1970s and 1980s. Indeed, as I shall describe throughout this dissertation, the fiction of the Changes is far more overtly didactic about - or confident in its understanding of - the nature not only of art, but also of human existence than much ‘liberal’ literature of the preceding period.

In contrast to the prevailing Russian and Czech view of their literary histories since the death of Stalin as a series of ruptures, of which the ‘fiction of the Changes’ is, for now, the last, Slovak writers and commentators emphasise the continuity in their literary development in the same period, which a brief ‘freeze’ in the early 1970s

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47 In fairness to Erofeev, the anthology of ‘new’ literature which he edited, Russkie tsvety zla (Russian flowers of evil, 1997), included Astaf’ev and a broad range of unsanctioned writers from the 1970s, including Sergei Dovlatov (1941-90), furii Mamleev (b.1931) and Varlam Shalamov (1907-82).
could not disrupt. As a result, the Slovak fiction of the Changes produced no comparable statement to those of Erofeev and Kratochvil, seeking to dissociate post-1989 Slovak literature from that of the preceding period. The concerns of the Russian and Czech fiction of the Changes are presented in a Slovak context from the outset as the expression of the sense of the ‘exhaustion of literature’ consuming Western culture as a whole. For example, the short story collection Chliev a hry (A pig-sty and games, 1990) by Pavel Hruž (b.1941), his first publication since 1968, included a note from the author reflecting on how the writer should respond to the long-drawn-out decline in the importance of literature as the bearer of absolute truth. Hruž writes:

With each generation the human being is wiser and has learnt his lesson better, his descendants no longer burden themselves with thoughts about the inflation of words, knowing all too well about the growing disorder of informatics, in which for them belles-lettres is an inferior, indeed negligible part. What should the incorrigible man of letters do with himself now? [...] From the bottom of my heart I think that the poor old writer (though clearly now no more than a graphomaniac) should not give up his gift of negative entropy. He should give up only his omniscience and didacticism, he should mask all fictions and give the reader the greatest possible chance of co-creation. (And deeply conceal the insistent feeling that he is striking up a dialogue with a blank face.)

In the early 1970s, as in Czech literature, many of the most prominent Slovak writers from the generation which had emerged in the mid-1960s, including Hruž, Ján Johanides (b.1934), Vincent Šikula (b.1936-2001) and Pavel Vilikovský (b.1941) were similarly not permitted to publish. During this period, however, works by two other members of this generation, Peter Jaroš (b.1940) and Rudolf Sloboda (1938-95), continued to appear, alongside the first publications of Dušan Dušek (b.1946) and Dušan Mitana (b.1946), who continued in the spirit of the literary experiment of the Thaw. In their discussion of contemporary Slovak literature, Eva Jenčíková and Peter Zajac perceived the turning-point to be the return of Šikula with Majstri (The master carpenters) in 1976, followed by the widely admired Pomocník (The butcher’s assistant, 1977) by Ladislav Ballek (b.1941), a rising functionary in the literary establishment, and Jaroš’s Tisíce ročná včela (The thousand-year-old bee, 1979).

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49 This perspective may be found, for example, in Jenčíková, E. and Zajac, P., ‘Situácia súčasnej slovenskej literatúry’, Slovenské pohľady, 105, 1989, 2, pp.45-71. Hereafter Jenčíková, Zajac, ‘Situácia’.
50 Hruž, P., Chliev a hry, Bratislava, 1990, back cover.
Johanides published for the first time in twelve years in 1978, and in 1983 came perhaps his most complex and ambitious work, the historical novel Marek koniar a pápež uhorsky (Marek the Master of Horse and the Hungarian Pope), the same year as Vilikovský's only publication between 1965 and 1989, the detective novel Prvá veta spánku (The first movement of sleep, 1983). Though all these writers at times encountered difficulties - for example, distribution of Sloboda's novel Rozum (Reason, 1982) was temporarily halted in 1982, while Mitana had to alter the ending of his novel Koniec hry (The end of the game, 1984) - they undoubtedly enjoyed greater artistic freedom than their Czech counterparts. Consequently, though writers like Ivan Kadlečik (b.1938), Martin Šimečka (b.1957), and Dominik Tatarka (1913-89) were closely associated with the leading Czech dissidents, Slovak samizdat and tamizdat, unlike its Russian and Czech counterparts, could never claim either in quantity or significance to represent the 'real' Slovak literature in this period.

Nevertheless, writing in early 1989, Jenčíková and Zajac pointed to an 'urgent need to release the human creativity blocked up by the stigma of the previous decades', noting that the 'detabooisation' of certain subjects, a central element of glasnost', was one way of achieving this. By linking their article back to a discussion in 1965 in the same journal, Slovenské pohl'ady, about a perceived 'crisis' in Slovak literature, they perhaps deliberately suggest that, as at that time, new works had already appeared indicating the direction Slovak literature would take. The emergence of a new generation of writers began with the publication of collections of verse by Jozef Urban (1964-99) in 1985 and Ivan Kolenič (b.1965) in 1986, together with the appearance in periodicals of verse by poets including Tat'jana Lehenová (b.1961), Ján Litvák (b.1965), Andrijan Turan (b.1962) and Kamil Zbruž (b.1964). This liberalisation may be said to have culminated in the publication in 1988 in Dotyky of Lehenová's poem 'Malá nočná mora' (A little nightmare), parodically describing female penis fascination, which begins: 'S neutičajúcim úžasom / dôverčivo pozorujem, ako rastieš. / Chcem to. / Chcem, aby si bol veľký a mocný, / chcem, aby si bol kráľ.' (With unquietening amazement / I intimately observe how you grow / I

52 Vilikovský was, however, a prominent translator and editor, and in 1976 joined the editorial board of the leading sanctioned periodical Romboid, ensuring its increasingly liberal direction in the 1980s.
want it. / I want you to be big and powerful / I want you to be king.) The poem provoked enormous debate, with some critics condemning it as ‘no longer literature’, rather as Urnov condemned Narbikova in his ‘Plokhia proza’, but its appearance, and that of Lehenová’s first collection the following year, suggested that meaningful literary censorship in Slovakia was at an end.

Sanctioned poets in all three literatures in the 1980s were the first to explore – or be permitted to explore – the themes and techniques which would later typify the ‘fiction of the Changes’, but their impact was greatest in the Slovak context, not least because several of the new generation, in particular Urban, were also prominent critics. In their reviews, published, for example, in the literary supplement to the daily newspaper Smena, the journal Romboid and its supplement for young writers, Dotyky, which was established in 1987 and became a separate periodical in 1989, Urban and others attacked manifestations of what they perceived as unthinking literary conformism, provoking often unmeasured reactions from establishment critics. The launch of Literárny týždenník in September 1988, explicitly to support the Slovak literary establishment’s ‘own programme of perestroika’, merely cemented the

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54 In the 1990s, these last three, with the writer and painter, Robert Bielik (b.1963) and, initially, Kolenič, formed the self-styled ‘Barbarian Generation’, but their collective contribution, though provocative, was ultimately slight.


56 For a range of reactions, see Literárny týždenník, II, 1989, 4, p.5. Urban pointed out that Lehenová’s work was not unprecedented in the context of recent Czech and Slovak poetry, recalling the earlier controversy in Czech literature caused by the collection Ríkaji mi poezie (They call me poetry, 1987) by Svatava Antošová (b.1957). (See Urban, J., ‘O psoch a karavàne’, Literárny týždenník, II, 1989, 12, p.4.) The polarised reactions to Antošová and Lehenová, as indeed to Narbikova, reflect the extent to which their portrayals of sexually aware women challenged the contemporaneous stereotype of the female.

57 For a discussion of Czech sanctioned poetry in the 1970s and 1980s, see Bilek, P.A., ‘Generace osamìléh bùcù, Prague, 1991; for its Russian counterpart, see Epshtein, M., ‘Pokolenie, nashedshe sebia’, Voprosy literatury, 1986, 5, pp.40-72; and Postnikova, T.V., ‘Estì ty nosìsh’ nachalo vremen v ushakh’ (Avangardnaiapoëziia 80-kh-90-kh gg.), Moscow, 1995. Postnikova begins her study by describing how, in the early 1980s, young poets working in the traditions of poetry in the 1920s and 1930s broke into sanctioned publication, and noting the ‘unconventionality and boldness of artistic imagination, open épatage with regard to embedded literary tastes, the complexity of their poetic vision of the world, and the incorporation into poetry of the clash of different cultural and historical layers.’ (Ibid., p.5.)

58 In the first issue of Literárny týždenník, Urban wrote a short piece pointing out how often his mental state had been questioned and asking for the views of psychiatrists. (See Urban, J., ‘Ço na to psychiatriù’, Literárny týždenník, I, 1988, 1, p.4.)

59 Solovič, J., ‘Nezostat’ v závètrí’, Literárny týždenník, I, 1988, 1, p.1. (Ján Solovič was the head of the Slovak Writers’ Union during the Normalisation.) Readers perceived Literárny týždenník as the symbolic revival in all but name of Kultúrnì život, one of the most widely read pro-reform cultural weeklies of the 1960s, which ceased publication in the autumn of 1968, but briefly returned between 1990 and 1993, as Literárny týždenník came increasingly to reflect the agenda of the conservative/nationalist camp in post-1989 Slovak literature.
process of liberalisation which had been taking place. As far as fiction was concerned, the decisive moment was the publication in the spring of 1989 of Vilikovský's satire *Večne je zelený...* (Forever green is..., 1989) and two other volumes of his fiction, all dating from the early 1970s.\(^{60}\)

In the 1990s, formerly sanctioned writers like Dušan Dušek, Johanides, Mitana and Vilikovský remained central to new Slovak fiction, alongside new writers like Kolenič, Pišťanek, who had published stories in *Slovenské pohľady* since 1988, Jana Bodnárová (b.1950), the feminist Jana Juráňová (b.1957) and Tomáš Horváth (b.1971), the first to emerge of the writers whom Robert Pynsent later labelled the Genitalists. These writers, who also included Vlado Balla (b.1967), Tom von Kamin (b.1971) and Marek Vadas (b.1971), had studied Slovak literature and aesthetics at Bratislava University and, like the slightly older Urban/Barbarian 'generation', were often critics too.\(^{61}\) Pynsent notes that their writing is marked by an 'ironisation of male genitalia and an explicit concern in their fiction with modern Theory, especially French varieties'.\(^{62}\) This ironising of the phallus, as a symbol of the Slovak stereotype of male potency, already present in Lehenová's verse, may be seen as a unifying motif in the Slovak fiction of the Changes, with male sexual impotence reflecting the impotence of the writer in works by Johanides and Kolenič, as well as the Genitalists.\(^{63}\) Though Juráňová does not explicitly refer to the phallus in her fiction, she repeatedly sets an explicitly Slovak coarse masculinity, often expressed as a latent threat of violence, against a wise, playful, somewhat melancholy femininity reminiscent of Berková's *Knížka s červeným obalem*. In Juráňová's work, the 'victories' of that masculinity, achieved through verbal or physical violence, are illusory compared to the resilient independence of that female perspective.

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\(^{60}\) Parts of *Večne je zelený...* had appeared in Vilikovský's first collection *Citová výchova v marci* (A sentimental education in March, 1965), while an excerpt from the finished novel was published in *Literárny týždenník* in November 1988.

\(^{61}\) The respect and interest accorded to the earlier generation by the new generation is reflected, for example, in Horváth's study of Mitana, published in 2000.


\(^{63}\) Johanides's *Trestajúci zločin* (Crime that punishes, 1995) takes the form of a monologue by a former police archivist to a young man who has come to discover the fate of his parents during the 1950s. It transpires that the archivist himself had been tortured in that period and castrated. The empty scrotum in the novel symbolises not only his submission to the regime, but also the writer's inability ever to tell
The Slovak emphasis on the continuity between the writers of different generations reflects the emergence of a more urgent confrontation in Slovak literature between those writers who had a liberal, pluralist understanding of culture, and those who propagated a conservative nationalist view. This confrontation was scarcely evident in mainstream Czech culture, which was dominated by a ‘politically correct’, anti-Communist, pro-Western perspective, but certainly manifested itself in Russian culture of the period, though in literature less fiercely than in Slovakia because the ‘literals’ were in power rather than in opposition. Under the premiership of Vladimír Mečiar, who took Slovakia to independence and remained in power for much of the 1990s, the nationalists forcefully promoted a very specific, chauvinist understanding of Slovak culture and history, creating or re-creating publications, publishing houses and cultural institutions in their image. The major periodicals, with the crucial exceptions of Romboid and Dotyky (augmented by Vlna and the newly established RAK in 1996) and the daily newspaper SME, simply excluded all writers who failed to fit this understanding, while their books sometimes carried warnings to the reader from the Ministry of Culture, indicating that they had been deemed ‘not suitable for Slovak readers’. In Russia in the 1990s, periodicals merely divided along liberal (Druzhba narodov, Iunost’, Novyi mir, Znamia and the newly established Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie) and conservative lines (Nash sovremennik, Molodaia gvardiia), with each set, but particularly the latter, by turns ignoring or attacking the work of writers and critics associated with the other.

Though, like their Czech counterparts, the Russian and Slovak writers of the Changes frequently satirised the West and the process of economic and political ‘westernisation’ in their countries, their commitment above all to creative freedom meant that they could not but be associated with the liberal camp. Writing preoccupied with the examination of its own limitations, understood as a metaphor for the limitations of the human being, was, moreover, plainly at odds with the nationalist

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a truth uncompromised by allegiance to one perspective or another, a theme in Johanides’s writing since the 1960s.

64 In the 1990s, Dotyky, though notionally a forum for the work of young writers and critics to present their work, in an implicit gesture of solidarity between like-minded writers of different generations, often included interviews, reviews and articles by or about writers like Dušek and Mitana.

65 The attempted coup by Communist hard-liners in August 1991, and Boris El’tsin’s subsequent conflicts with the Communist/Nationalist-dominated Russian Parliament in 1993 and 1995 indicate the seriousness of the confrontation, which was perceived to have been won with El’tsin’s re-election in 1996, but has re-surfaced in the arts since Vladimir Putin’s election.
view of culture as a shaping, collectivising force. In an essay comparing the perception of literature in Russian and in Western European culture, translated in an early issue of *Literárny týždenník*, Lotman argues: ‘In Western European culture, no bridge connects how a human being writes and how he lives. In Russian culture, however, this link is very close.’ The comments of Hrtíz, Kratochvil and others quoted above indicate that this link was also perceived to be very close in Slovak and Czech culture. The attempt by the writers of the Changes to sever this link and focus on what Lotman calls the ‘problem of the relativity of the word’ thus represented for both its advocates and its opponents an attempt to ‘westernise’ literature.

Writers and critics reflected their ‘westernising’ allegiances most demonstratively through their interest in Western post-Structuralist and postmodernist theory, which is much more overt in Russian and Slovak literature and criticism than in its Czech counterpart. In his book surveying new Czech fiction in the 1990s, Lubomír Machala comments:

The high frequency with which the term [postmodernism] occurs in texts of the most varied provenance indicates that postmodernism became very fashionable in Czech circles in the first half of the 1990s, but a retrospective glance also reveals that still today Czech literature lacks a systematic reflection of the problems of postmodernism comparable to that found even in neighbouring Slovakia.

Timothy Beasley-Murray argues of writers overtly engaging with post-Structuralist theory in Mečiar’s Slovakia:

The import of theory is the passport to the cosmopolitan zone of pan-European culture. Put in specific terms: using literary theory means not being a nationally-oriented writer such as Andrej Ferko [b.1955], Štefan Moravčík [b.1943] or Rudolf Čižmárik [b.1949], but rather putting oneself in the same arena as, say, Salman Rushdie.

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67 Ibid.
68 Machala, L., *Literární bludště: Bilance polistopadové prózy*, Prague, 2001, p.20. The chapter in Machala’s book devoted to postmodernism in Czech literature constitutes the first serious Czech account of such a trend. Though Machala presents the lack of much serious engagement with postmodernist theory in contemporary Czech literary studies as a shortcoming, one might equally argue that Czech ‘post-Structuralists’ like, for example, Hodrovič and Macura, simply found the term impossible to use meaningfully.
Discussion of postmodernist theory in sanctioned periodicals in this period began earliest in Slovakia, with Peter Zajac asserting in *Romboid* in the spring of 1989 the relevance of postmodernism to Slovak culture as an aesthetic associated with times of transition, thereby seeking to return Slovak literature to the currents of Western culture where, in his view, it belonged.\(^7\) Later the same year, Tibor Žilka published an article in which he traced postmodernism in Slovak literature back to writers of the 1960s like Hruž, Jaroš, Johanides, Vilikovský and Sloboda.\(^7\) Similar efforts in the early 1990s to ‘reconstruct’ a canon of Russian postmodernism by Russian critics including Epshtein, Mark Lipovetskii and Viacheslav Kuritsyn culminated in Lipovetskii’s *Russkii postmodernizm*, published in 1997, and Irina Skoropanova’s *Russkaia postmodernistskaia literatura*, published in 1999.\(^7\) Both dated postmodernist fiction back to works written but unsanctioned for publication in the 1960s by Bitov, Venedikt Erofeev and Terts, through émigré writers like Iosif Brodskii (1940-96) and Sasha Sokolov (b.1943) to the ‘other fiction’ writers of the late 1980s.\(^7\)

On the one hand, as Lipovetskii argued in his contribution to a discussion of postmodernism in Russia published in *Voprosy literatury* in late 1991, commentators found in Western postmodernist theory a new critical framework in which to explore recent writing.\(^7\) On the other, however, by tracing postmodernism in Russian or

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\(^7\) Zajac, P., ‘Postmodernizmus’, *Romboid*, XXIV, 1989, 6, p.102. Zajac’s comments come in a foreword to an essay introducing the term ‘postmodernism’ by the German theorist Wolfgang Welsch, whose work greatly influenced Slovak and also Czech writers and critics in the subsequent period.

\(^7\) See Žilka, T., ‘Postmodernizmus v próze’, *Romboid*, XXIV, 1989, 9, pp.18-24. The extent of the liberalisation in Slovakia by this time is evident in Žilka’s reference to Kundera’s *Nesnesitelná lehkost byti* (The unbearable lightness of being, Toronto 1985). In the 1990s, Žilka became the most prolific analyst of postmodernist theory in literature not only in Slovak, but also in Czech periodicals.

\(^7\) The ‘westernising’ inclinations of both Epshtein and Lipovetskii are reflected in the fact that both are now based at universities in the United States.

\(^7\) Lipovetskii’s book also includes a chapter on Vladimir Nabokov as an ‘ancestor’ of Russian postmodernism, which was omitted in the abridged English translation of the volume, entitled *Russian Postmodernist Fiction: Dialogue with Chaos*, published in 1999.

\(^7\) See Lipovetskii, M., ‘Zakon kružny’, *Yoprosy literatury*, 1991, 11-12, p.4. A more sceptical slant on this assertion in the context of Slovak culture is provided by Beasley-Murray, who points out that conformist Slovak intellectuals espoused either nationalism or Western theory apparently in an attempt to fill the ideological vacuum left by discredited Marxist-Leninist theory. Beasley-Murray cites an example of the Genitalists’ parody of this phenomenon from the novel *Univerzita* (University, 1996) by Eman Erdélyi (b.1972) and Marek Vadas (b.1971), in which a female lecturer decides in the lift one evening after work that she will give up being a Marxist and become a phenomenologist, radically transforming her whole demeanour. (See Beasley-Murray, ‘Contemporary’, p.80.)
Slovak literature back to the 1960s, when it supposedly appeared in Western literature, critics implicitly sought to demonstrate that Russian or Slovak literature had not, as suspected, fallen behind the dominant currents in Western literary culture. Other commentators from Russia or former Soviet Bloc countries, indeed, went as far as to suggest that the ‘postmodern condition’, which comes about, according to Jean-François Lyotard, as a result of the ‘decline of the unifying and legitimating power of the grand narratives’, found a unique expression in those cultures which had experienced the disintegration of Marxism-Leninism.

The accounts of Russian postmodernism by Lipovetskii, Skoropanova and others, while overcoming the ‘extra-literary’ division between unsanctioned literature written inside or outside Russia, do not include a single work sanctioned for publication in the Soviet Union before 1986. In his *Early Soviet Postmodernism*, Raoul Eshelman rejects this perspective as a perpetuation of what he calls the ‘deformation model’, which ‘assumes that Soviet [i.e. sanctioned] literature was twisted and turned by political pressures to such an extent that it set out on a history of its own, independent of Western epochal development.’ Eshelman continues:

There are, of course numerous differences between Western and Soviet literature. These differences arise not because Soviet literature functioned in an essentially different way from Western literature, but because Soviet writers were not allowed to experiment with style or express their political opinions openly. These restrictions did not, however, prevent Soviet writers from taking recourse to the same postmodern figures of thought as their Western counterparts. Eshelman suggests that mainstream sanctioned fiction, by failing in its attempts to repair or reconstitute the Marxist-Leninist ‘grand narrative’, constitutes the first stage in the development of a peculiarly Russian ‘postmodernism’. These writers’ concern for the integrity of units like the individual or the collective in later stages gives way to authorial self-irony about the attempt to repair these notions and culminates in the foregrounding of their fictionality. By describing how the principles and techniques claimed as their own by the writers who came to prominence in the late 1980s can be traced in their development in sanctioned fiction since the Thaw, Eshelman not only

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undermines conventional accounts of ‘Russian postmodernism’, but in effect reveals the sheer arbitrariness of the term ‘postmodernism’.  

The term ‘postmodernist’, whether it is used to refer to the contemporary period itself or to the dominant artistic approach of that period, implies a linear chronology in which ‘postmodernism’ represents a new stage, despite the frequent, serious objection to the term that its defining features may be identified in literature of many other periods. For example, Lipovetskii asserts that postmodernism marks a new stage in culture, in which art enters into a ‘dialogue with chaos’. He writes:

Postmodernism demonstrates a major artistic and philosophical attempt to overcome the binary opposition of chaos and cosmos, which is fundamental for classical and modernist types of culture, and to redirect the creative impulse toward a compromise between these universals [...] Rather than resolving contradictions, [postmodernist compromises] lead to a new intellectual space for the constant interaction of binary oppositions. Of course, such a space cannot help but be the source of new conflicts and new contradictions; yet such constant interaction is also the inexhaustible source of new artistic and philosophical meaning.  

In ...na okraji chaosu..., her poetics of the twentieth century literary work, however, Hodrová, in effect seeking to overcome problematic terminological distinctions like ‘modernism’ and ‘postmodernism’, coincidentally argues that the quintessential twentieth-century work, which need not necessarily be the most numerous type, is based throughout the century on this ‘dialogue’. She writes: ‘[the work is a] creation and manifestation of chaos. It is a construct that sometimes appears to succumb to chaos; however, at the same time, by finding elements of its hidden other order, the work shapes and overcomes chaos’.  

By opening itself up to chaos and change, rather than reaffirming and perpetuating the existing notion of the cosmos, the twentieth-century work, in Hodrová’s view,  

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77 Ibid.
78 Eshelman’s approach – without the reference to postmodernist theory – finds an echo in the Czech context in an article by Vladimír Macura on Zeno Dostál, who began publishing his cycle of novels describing life in the central Moravian countryside in 1981. All the novels in the cycle were to be named after a sign of the zodiac, but three titles had to be changed before publication. Macura argues that these difficulties arose because of Dostál’s implicit rejection of the ‘binding image of the movement of history’ in favour of a mythological – in this case, astrological – structure. (Macura, V., ‘Případ Zena Dostál a někdo Roman ve zvěrokruhu’, Tvar, 1995, 14, p.10.)
epitomises what she terms an 'aesthetics of otherness'. This notion is derived from Lotman's contrast between an 'aesthetics of identity', which Lotman associates with Classicism, and an 'aesthetics of confrontation', emerging with Romanticism. According to Hodrova, whereas in the 'aesthetics of identity', 'the most highly valued features in a work were those held in common with paradigmatic works, "identity" was a pre-requisite of value and whether a work could be considered ideal',\(^{81}\) in the 'aesthetics of otherness':

> the source of aesthetic value is declared to be variability, deviation, the foregrounding \([\text{aktualizace}]\) and deformation \([\text{of methods}]\), and defamiliarisation, which are in fact different terms for more or less the same phenomenon and principle. The value of a work, if it is mentioned at all, is connected above all with the features which run counter to the norm and emphasise its uniqueness, newness and originality [...]\(^{82}\)

The attraction of the model advanced by Hodrova on the basis of Lotman's theory is that it posits in place of the notion of a linear movement forward, implied by 'postmodernism', a notion of literature 'swinging' between two extremes. This movement is, however, accompanied by a notion of movement forward in which what went before is not really supplanted, but remains preserved. In her theory as in her fiction, Hodrova resists the notion that, as time passes, concepts are replaced by other concepts, instead presenting words as masks through which the patient and careful observer may perceive its previous guises. In her poetics of the twentieth century, she writes: 'development is never the mere substitution of types; in the new stage, the preceding state remains preserved as a possibility, so that the variety of possibilities (types) in fact grows constantly and in a relatively unlimited way, because little in literature perishes entirely and forever.'\(^{83}\)

The fiction of the Changes exemplifies this simultaneously cyclical and accumulatory understanding of literary development, displaying a heightened awareness on the one hand of the 'preceding state', understood as an apparently alien

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81 Ibid., p.115.
82 Ibid., p.116. Hodrova refers in the passage quoted to concepts advanced by theorists like Viktor Shklovskii and Jan Mukarovsky, whose approaches strongly influence her study.
83 Hodrova, ...\textit{na okraji}, p.243. The twin notions of masking and of the preservation of early stages in later stages of development are encapsulated in the title of Hodrova's second novel, \textit{Kukly} (1992), which may be translated as both 'masks' and 'pupae'. The semantics of the title and the novel are discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.
aesthetics which the writer seeks to subvert in the text, and on the other of previous manifestations of the ‘aesthetics of otherness’, recalled, for example, through intertextual references. As precursors to the Russian fiction of the Changes, Sergei Chuprinin lists the philosopher Vasihi Rozanov (1856-1919), and twentieth-century non-conformist writers like Andrei Belyi (1880-1934), Vladimir Nabokov (1899-1977), Konstantin Vaginov (1899-1934), and Evgenii Zamiatin (1884-1937), to whom other critics added other Symbolists, other members of the Oberiu avant-garde movement, particularly Daniil Kharms (1905-42), and so-called ‘fellow-travellers’ of the Revolution, particularly Iurii Olesha (1899-1960). The Czech writers of the Changes owe much to the Decadents, while the Czech and Slovak writers of the Changes exhibit the influence of the early twentieth-century philosopher and fiction writer Ladislav Klíma (1878-1928), the Poetist Avant-garde, and experimental fiction writers of the late 1930s and 1940s like Milada Součková (1899-1983). Though writers in all three literatures seek to associate themselves with an international ‘canon’ including, for example, the Comte de Lautréamont, Franz Kafka, Jorge Luis Borges, Samuel Beckett, and French ‘nouveau roman’ and ‘nouveau nouveau roman’ writers, this appeal to a supranational culture is most evident in the Slovak fiction of the Changes. This may be attributed not only to the contemporary political situation already described, but also to a certain sense of a lack of what Beasley-Murray calls an ‘Urbanist’ tradition to counter the ‘Ruralist’ ‘aesthetic of identity’.  

For Hodrová, the exceptional periods in twentieth-century literature have been those when the work has closed itself off to chaos and become preoccupied with the ‘reinforcement of composition and everything connected with it (reinforcement of genre, a return to histoire and to a single Meaning)’. As far as Czech literature is concerned, this occurred before and during the Second World War, when, in Hodrová’s view, it reflected an attempt to withstand the ‘total destruction of values’, then in the 1950s and again in the Normalisation period, when it was fundamentally

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84 See Chuprinin, ‘Drugaia’, p.5.
85 See Beasley-Murray, ‘Contemporary’, p.81. As Peter Darovec indicates in his comparative study of Vilikovský’s Večne je zelený... the Slovak writers of the Changes do allude to earlier Slovak writing. (See Darovec, P., Násmešné rozmlávanie, Levice, 1996. Hereafter Darovec, Násmešné.) However, this allusiveness is most evident in the new generation of writers in the 1990s, notably Balla and Jurášová, engaging with the works of the generation which emerged in the 1960s but remained prominent in the Changes period.
motivated by political expectations. Despite her insistence that her poetics make no value judgements about different approaches to the creation of literature, by asserting the ‘aesthetics of otherness’ as the ‘natural’ aesthetics of the century, and the ‘aesthetics of identity’ as ‘unnatural’, she, like Erofeev and Kratochvil, ultimately reveals the bias of those sidelined in the 1970s and 1980s. Perhaps, however, rather than the triumph of one aesthetics over the other, literature is constantly seeking not a compromise, but an equilibrium between them. The swing perceived by the writers of the Changes in Russian, Czech and Slovak literature towards an extremely fixed model of the world and an extremely self-confident view of the capabilities of the human being results in a comparable swing to the opposite extreme. That swing forms the subject of this dissertation.

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86 Hodrová, ...na okraji, p.103. Like Erofeev and Kratochvil, Hodrová suggests that the so-called ‘literature of dissent’ in the 1970s and 1980s mirrors its sanctioned counterpart, since it too was founded on an ‘aesthetic of identity’, in her view connected ‘not only with its latent inclination towards ideologisation, but also with its emphasis on the importance of the reader, for whom the “aesthetic of otherness” sets greater obstacles to understanding the text than the “aesthetic of identity”’. (Hodrová, ...na okraji, p.116.)

87 Hodrová associates the ‘aesthetics of identity’ with utopian writing, ‘doctrines of totalitarian regimes and times of stability’, and perceives the ‘aesthetics of otherness’ to be ‘thriving and reflected in works arising from and considered outside “official” art, being born on the joins between eras, in unsettled times’. (Hodrová, ...na okraji, p.116.) The ‘aesthetics of otherness’ may be associated with the figure whom Lotman describes in the essay mentioned earlier, who ‘stands on the margins, talks nonsense, says unexpected things or speaks in paradoxes, who likes the things that no one likes’. Lotman associates this figure with the author of paradoxes, the jester, and, echoing Zamiatin, the heretic and the martyr. (Lotman, ‘Myslenie’, p.9.)
Chapter 1

Deaths of Authors: Venedikt Erofeev, Bohumil Hrabal, Pavel Vilikovský

In the early months of 1989, three novels written in the early post-Thaw period - Venedikt Erofeev’s Moskva-Petushki, Hrabal’s Příliš hlučná samota and Vilikovský’s Večne je zelený... - were sanctioned for publication in full for the first time in the country of their writers’ birth.¹ In the case of Moskva-Petushki and Příliš hlučná samota, the significance of their publication rested on the fact that they were well-known to critics, having already been published and reviewed abroad and in samizdat. Similarly, although Večne je zelený... itself was known to a far narrower circle,² Vilikovský’s failure to publish more than one book of fiction during the Normalisation period constituted a particular reminder of the restrictions facing Slovak writers.³

The enthusiastic reception which critics accorded Večne je zelený... reflected a sense that, with the work’s publication, the authority of these restrictions had essentially gone. Milan Resútký, noting the work’s exceptional popularity among critics, wrote: ‘against the background of our good old, calm and to some extent stagnant fiction, I would say that we could speak of a break-through book.’⁴ In terms similar to those used didactically, rather than analytically, by Viktor Erofeev and Kratochvil in their articles declaring the liberation of Russian and Czech literature respectively, Darovec takes Resútký’s comment to mean that

¹ The text of Večne je zelený... is undated, but according to Darovec, in his book devoted to Vilikovský’s novel and its relationship to three works of nineteenth-century Slovak comic literature, it was written in 1972. (See Darovec, Násmešná, p.10.) Excerpts from Příliš hlučná samota were sanctioned for publication in a ‘collage’ with excerpts from another unsanctioned work, Něžný barbar (The gentle barbarian, Cologne 1981 [as Něžný barbar], Prague 1990) called Klub poezie in 1981. Earlier variants, one in verse, were published alongside the final prose version (which forms the basis of discussion here) in the ninth volume of Hrabal’s collected works in 1994. (For comparisons of the three versions see Rothová, Hlučná, pp.117-22; and Jankovič, M., ‘Čas Příliš hlučné samoty’ in his Nesamozřejmost smyslu, Prague, 1991, pp.171-89. (Hereafter Jankovič, ‘Čas’.)


³ Milan Štítovec’s suggestion that Vilikovský’s failure to publish more regularly may be blamed on writer’s block smacks of political pragmatism. (See Štítovec, M., ‘Umenie nosit bremená’ in Vilikovský, P., Ėštalícia citu, Bratislava, 1989, p.258.) The more common view, expressed by Darovec, is that Vilikovský was not prepared to tailor his work to prevailing political expectations in order to be published. (Darovec, Násmešná, p.31.)

[Večne je zelený...] plays with the very essence of the understanding of literature rooted in the broad mass of the Slovak reading public, brought up on texts which were always dominated by a clear ethical or moral objective. That purpose may have changed according to socio-political requirements (texts of national awakening, texts building the nation or Socialism), but the principle of “using” literature for an extra-literary purpose remained.5

From the earliest reviews, Večne je zelený... was presented by Slovak critics as a defining example of postmodernism in Slovak literature.6 Similarly, Moskva-Petushki was initially presented by critics as a defining example of the emerging category of ‘other fiction’, in time becoming conventionally considered one of the first works of Russian postmodernist fiction. In contrast, Czech critics placed Příliš hlučná samota in the context of Hrabal’s own literary development, which was perceived not only to culminate, but also to be questioned in Příliš hlučná samota. Jiří Holý, however, notes the proximity of the novel’s themes and motifs to the works of writers from the 1980s underground.7

Moskva-Petushki and Příliš hlučná samota have both been associated by critics with the mood of despair among intellectuals following the Warsaw Pact intervention in Czechoslovakia in August 1968, which Mark Lipovetskii and Konstantin Kustanovich, following a general tendency, suggest marked the symbolic end of hope not only in Czechoslovakia, but also in the Soviet Union.8 For example, Andrei Zorin writes: ‘if we are interested in the social state of mind following the collapse of the illusions of the Sixties, Moskva-Petushki is an invaluable source’,9 while Radko Pytlík comments: ‘Příliš hlučná samota is one of the most convincing expressions of the

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5 Darovec, Nášmešné, p.34.
6 See, for example, Halvovník, A., ‘Figový list výřečnosti’, Literárný týždenník, II, 1989, 26, p.4 and Zajac, ‘Incognito’. The novel is extensively used by the leading Slovak postmodernist theorist Tibor Žilka in, for example, ‘Recepčné relácie súčasnej prôzy’, Romboíd, XXV, 1990, 1, pp.83-91 (Hereafter Žilka, ‘Recepčné’). For a discussion of the novel in English in the context of postmodernist theory, see Beasley-Murray, T., ‘Postmodernism of Resistance in Central Europe: Pavel Vilikovský’s Večne je zelený...’, Slavonic & East European Review, 76, 1998, 2, pp.266-78. (Hereafter Beasley-Murray, ‘Postmodernism’.) In contrast to all the above, however, Darovec uses the term ‘postmodernist’ sparingly in his study, on the contrary indicating the similarity between Vilikovský’s techniques and those, in particular, of the nineteenth-century satirist Jondš Záborský (1812-1876) in his comic novel Faustídaa (excerpt published in 1864, abridged version in 1912, in full 1953).
situation at the time of the entry of the Soviet occupation forces and subsequent events'.

In *Moskva-Petushki*, Erofeev suggests that August 1968 marks the end of history, understood as linear progress towards an ideal world. In the novel, which, like *Příliš hlučná samota* and *Večne je zelený...*, takes the form of a monologue, the narrator, Venichka, is making what appears to be a regular journey on a suburban train from Moscow to Petushki, where both the woman he loves and his young son live. Each week he avoids paying for his ticket by recounting part of the history of the world to the conductor, but this week he has reached the last part of his account: ‘vsiakaia istoriia imeet konets, i mirovaia istoriia - tozhe... V proshluiu piatnitsu ia doshel do Indiry Gandi, Moshe Daiana i Dubcheka. Dal’she etogo idti bylo nekuda...’ (every story has an end, and world history too... Last Friday I got as far as Indira Gandhi, Moshe Dayan and Dubček. There was nowhere to go beyond this...) Since the text of *Moskva-Petushki* is dated 1969, Venichka’s remark is factually true, but in the context of the work it acquires apocalyptic significance. At the end of *Moskva-Petushki*, Venichka is murdered by four thugs who, according to Svetlana Gaisershnitman, simultaneously represent the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse and Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin, thus equating the failure of the Communist ideal with the final defeat of human attempts to perfect themselves. The conductor’s reference to Venichka as Sheherezade strengthens the implication that the intellectual has sought to ward off the inevitability of death with a fairy-tale about the teleology of human history which can no longer be sustained.

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10 Pytlík, R., *...a neuvěřitelné se stalo skutkem: O Bohumilu Hrabalovi*, Prague, 1998, p.93. From a purely literary perspective, linking the ending of the Thaw with the events of August 1968 is inaccurate. In the Soviet Union, the liberalisation of literary method and the literary process began following the death of Stalin in 1953 had, with intermittent ‘re-freezes’, reached its peak in 1962. Media attacks on liberal writing were renewed in 1963, and led to the imprisonment of Brodskii in 1964 and Siniaiovskii and Iuli Daniel (b.1925) in 1966. In the 1950s, the gradual liberalisation of Slovak literature, comparable to that in the Soviet Union in the same period, contrasted with a much more hesitant process in Czech literature. The warmest, most prolonged period of Thaw in Czech literature began in 1963, coinciding with the emergence of the most experimental generation in Slovak literature of the period. Though conditions steadily worsened for liberal-minded writers after August 1968, lingering hopes of reform were finally ended only with the Soviet-imposed change of Party leadership and the formal institution of the policy of Consolidation, later labelled Normalisation, in April 1969.

The linear perception of history is also disrupted in *Příliš hlučná samota*, reflecting the fact that the narrator, Haňťa, has retreated from the ‘outside world, the world of history’ into a cellar where he has spent the past thirty-five years pulping books. The reader infers that the action of the work takes place in the period following the events of 1968 from references to university teachers and others who have been expelled from their jobs, but the dating is never made explicit. The resulting uncertainty draws attention to the fact that, after 1939, 1945 and 1948, this is the fourth time since Haňťa has been in his cellar that people in Czechoslovakia have been forcibly removed from their jobs. In this way, not only are the particular socio-political circumstances shown to be irrelevant, but also the notion of linear time as an indicator of progress is exposed as illusory, since in the pursuit of a perfect world, human beings simply repeat themselves. At the end of the novel, Haňťa indulges in an apocalyptic fantasy in which he pulps the whole of Prague, which is, like Moscow in *Moskva-Petushki*, a metaphor for history, before dreaming of pushing himself through his press.

In the novels under discussion, Erofeev, Hrabal and also Vilikovský seek simultaneously to express sympathy with and to question the desire of the intellectual to retreat from the external world of everyday mortal existence into a private paradise of ideas. As Gaiser-Shnitman points out in her analysis of *Moskva-Petushki*, Moscow, represented by the Kremlin, is ‘the symbol of secular reality and history’, while Petushki is an ‘Eden on earth’, of which Venichka says: ‘Petushki - eto mesto, gde ne umolkaiut ptitsy ni dnem ni noch’iu, gde ni zimoi ni letom ne ottsvetaet zhasmin. Pervorodnyi grekh - mozhet i byl - tarn nikogo ne tiagotit.’ (Petushki is a place where day or night the birds never fall silent, where winter or summer the jasmine never ceases blossoming. Original Sin may have existed, but it does not weigh heavily on anyone there.) In *Příliš hlučná samota*, Haňťa’s cellar, his ‘too loud a solitude’, is similarly described in terms of Eden:

[...] mûj vedoucí se nêkdy hákem probořuje starým papírem a otvorem volá na mne dolû obličejem brunátým zlostí: Haňťo, kde jsi? Proboha nečum do knížek a délej! Dvûr je zasypanej a ty si tam

14 Gaiser-Shnitman, *Venedikt Erofeev*, p.45.
15 Erofeev, *Ostav'te*, p.56.
Hanta feels guilty not because he has been caught shirking, but because he is reminded of his enduring existence in the terrestrial world. Reading, for him, has the status of transgression, since what he seeks in books is forbidden knowledge, a 'message from the heavens' about the meaning of existence. In Moskva-Petushki, Venichka stubbornly ignores the entreaties of angels who warn him that Petushki is not open to him or them, indicating that his journey is also an act of transgression.

Mark Al'tshuller describes Moskva-Petushki as the 'symbolic journey of the soul from darkness to light, along which Gogol’ wanted to lead Chichikov, and which Dante completed'. As Gaiser-Shnitman shows, from the beginning of Venichka’s journey Erofeev’s text contains references to Christ’s Passion, suggesting that his journey through torment may end in resurrection in Petushki. In contrast, Hanta’s retreat into his cellar signifies his movement away from physical existence towards re-absorption in the universe. The contrast between Venichka and Hanta is encapsulated in the scene in Příliš hlučná samota in which Hanta dreams that he is visited by Christ and Lao T’se. While the old man, Hanta, identifies with the passive resignation of Lao T’se, Christ, like Venichka, is the embodiment of hope for the future:

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(I saw the bloody corporeality of all Jesus’s ciphers and symbols, while Lao T’se was standing in a shroud and pointing to a beam of uncarved wood [...] I saw how romantic Jesus is, while Lao T’se is classicist. Jesus as the high tide, Lao T’se as the low tide, Jesus as spring, Lao T’se as winter, Jesus as effective love for one’s neighbour, Lao T’se as the peak of emptiness, Jesus as progressus ad futurum, Lao T’se as regressus ad originem)\(^\text{18}\)

As Hanř’a later indicates when he muddles up the two Latin phrases, the outcome of human hope and human resignation is the same, all that differs is the philosophical approach (and perhaps the age of the human being).

Venichka and Hanř’a may be seen, in the context of several commentators’ discussion of Venichka’s similarity to the ‘holy fool’ (iurodivyi) of Russian medieval society,\(^\text{19}\) to represent, respectively, the active and passive aspects of the holy fool’s behaviour. Both Venichka’s drunken antics in the railway carriage, and Erofeev’s text itself in the context of late 1960s Soviet literature and society recall the holy fool’s attempts to shock people from their absorption in the ‘vanity’ (sueta)\(^\text{20}\) of the terrestrial world and think of the salvation of their souls. Early in the work, Venichka rejects society’s fixation with heroic concepts and terminology in language which parodies exhortative Soviet rhetoric, but calls instead for human beings to consider their weakness:

О, если бы весь мир, если бы каждый в мире был бы, как я сейчас, тих и боязлив, и был бы так же ни в чём не уверен: ни в себе, ни в серьёзности своего места под небом — как хорошо бы! Никаких энтузиастов, никаких подвигов, никакой одержимости!— всеобщее молодушье. Я согласился бы жить на земле целую вечность, если бы прежде мне показали уголок, где не всегда есть место подвигу. «Всеобщее молодушие» — да

\(^{18}\) Hrabal, Samota, p.36.

\(^{19}\) See Gaiser-Shnitman, Venedikt Erofeev, pp.116-20; Epshtein, M., ‘Posle kamevala, ili Vechnyi Venichka’ in Erofeev, O斯塔vъte, pp.9-10; Lipovetskiĭ, Russian Postmodernist, pp.70-75.

\(^{20}\) Gaiser-Shnitman draws attention to the semantics of sueta, which means both ‘hustle-and-bustle’ and ‘vanity’ in a Biblical sense. See Gaiser-Shnitman, Venedikt Erofeev, p.46.
Venichka’s advocacy of ‘universal faint-heartedness’ is matched by Haňď’a’s affection for the *Tao Te Ching*. In the *Tao*, things are understood to be in a constant state of imperceptible growth and change, and human beings are discouraged from acting since this may interfere in the spontaneous development of things and hasten their return to nothingness. The human being should rather sit in contemplation, constantly making peace with the universe for the harm his existence inevitably causes. Haňď’a is troubled by the fact that he inadvertently crushes mice in his press when he pulps packages of paper. Another of Haňď’a’s favourite works is *In Praise of Folly*, in which Erasmus argues for the Christian way of life, though it may seem madness to those absorbed in the values of earthly life. In contrast to Venichka, Haňď’a represents the passive aspect of the holy fool, remaining awake in contemplation of the wretchedness of humankind.22

In calling for humility, both Venichka and Haňď’a express their anxiety that concern for the soul is being effaced in contemporary life, as manifested for both of them by the drinking habits of young people. Venichka declares that because they do not know how to drink alcohol, they do not care about anything. Throughout the work, alcohol and the ability to grieve at the state of the world are intimately linked with the soul. At the beginning, Venichka comments that everyone knows the burden which he carried up the steps of the entrance hallway where he spent the night. In the context he is referring to his hangover, but later the grief he feels at the state of the world is

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also described as a burden. Moreover, Viacheslav Kuritsyn notes that the forty steps of the staircase correspond to the forty days before the soul leaves the body in the Orthodox tradition,\textsuperscript{23} giving credence to Al’tshuller’s suggestion that the whole text takes place inside Venichka’s head as he staggers up the staircase from the moment of his stabbing to his death, thus representing the passage of his soul from his body.\textsuperscript{24} The inability to drink, indicating an inability to feel sorrow, thus represents an absence of soul, reflected in the empty, expressionless eyes of Venichka’s fellow passengers on the train. Towards the end of the work he rails against those responsible for this loss of soul, implicitly those who imposed Marxist-Leninist ideology on Russia: ‘O pozorniki! Prevratili moiu zemliu v samyi der’movyi ad — i slezy zastavliaiut skryvat’ ot liudei, a smekh vystavliai napokaz! O nizkie svolochi! Ne ostavili liudiam nichego krome ‘skorbi’ i ‘strakha’, i posle etogo smekh u nikh publichen, a sleza pod zapretom!’ (Oh the shameful people! They’ve turned my earth into the shittiest hell — they even force us to hide our tears from people and show off our laughter! Oh the vile bastards! They’ve left people with nothing except ‘sorrow’ and ‘fear’, and then after this, laughter for them is public, and tears are banned!)\textsuperscript{25}

In \textit{Příliš hlučná samota}, the young workers who operate the enormous new hydraulic press which will put Hanť’a out of work drink milk, not beer, reflecting the fact that the process of modernisation in the novel is the pursuit of whiteness, the eradication of stains. The epigraph to Hrabal’s novel is taken from Goethe, ‘Only the sun has a right to its spots.’ Stains in the work indicate the inherent imperfection of human beings, symbolising the sin which caused them to be cast from Paradise. On two occasions Hanť’a’s sweetheart discovers that she has excrement on her clothes, first at a village dance and secondly at a fashionable ski resort, reminding them both in a moment of happiness and personal pride of the wretchedness of the human condition. Hanť’a refers ironically to Nietzsche, ‘to, co se jì stalo, bylo lidské, příliš lidské’ (what happened to her was human, all too human), and suggests that while Goethe, Schelling and Hölderlin would have forgiven their lovers this revelation of their humanity, Leibnitz, who suggested human beings lived in the ‘best of all

\textsuperscript{24} Al’tshuller, \textit{’Moskva-Petushki’}, p.85.
possible worlds' would not. The removal of stains, the pursuit of perfection through rational progress, is the eradication of humanity. The huge new hydraulic press can transform huge numbers of books into blank paper. The blank paper equates with the blank faces of the new generation of workers, unlike Haňta uninterested in those who worked to produce the books they are destroying. The erasure of the print in the books is the erasure of their human element. The effacement of the spiritual dimension to existence is reflected in the treatment of Haňta, who, with the advent of the new machine, is sacked from his job in the cellar and given the task of packing the blank paper. The process of modernisation invades and destroys his 'too loud a solitude', leaving him to contemplate suicide.

Vilikovský’s fiction is also marked by what Pynsent calls ‘despair at the contemporary lack of spirituality’. Vilikovský’s treatment of the theme in Večne je zelený..., however, differs from that of Erofeev and Hrabal in Moskva-Petushki and Příliš hlučná samota in that this lack of spirituality is not opposed, but rather embodied by the narrator, an old man recounting his adventures as a spy in Central Europe before and after the First World War. Peter Zajac, whose early review of the novel expresses the most overt disgust of any towards the narrator, suggests that Vilikovský’s narrator bears witness to the fact that the ‘human being is definitively becoming an animal’.

The title of the novel is taken from the scene in Goethe’s Faust in which Mephistopheles is asked for academic advice by an especially earnest student, consumed by a thirst for knowledge. The bored Mephistopheles tells the student: 'My friend, all theory is grey, and green the golden tree of life'. By only quoting the line partially, Vilikovský in effect defines the implied reader as an intellectual for whom familiarity with the quotation has perhaps bred contempt for its meaning. Večne je zelený... may be read as a parody of the encounter in Faust, not only at the level of the narrator and his listener, who, never given his own voice, is characterised by the

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26 Erofeev, Ostav’te, p.124. The passage somewhat recalls the pleasure Haňta takes in pulping the cheering faces on Nazi propaganda after the war. His Gipsy sweetheart dies in Auschwitz. The implied reader may infer a link between these cheering faces and those on Communist propaganda.

27 Hrabal, Samota, p.27.


narrator as an earnest, naive young man who has come in search of knowledge, but also at the level of author and reader. In his discussion of the novel as a literary game between author and reader, Darovec writes: ‘Vilikovský’s *Večne je zelený*... is not a game in which the reader is given many opportunities to co-operate with the author. Rather, he is constantly surprised by him and mercilessly mocked for his clumsiness and slowness, thanks to which the text, directed by the author, is always one step ahead of him’. In this respect, the text represents the human experience of reality, which, according to the narrator, is ‘often harsh, implacable and takes little care of us’. At the beginning of the work, the narrator, apparently referring to his attempted seduction by – or of – an Austrian Colonel, but at the same time reflecting the human response to this ineffable reality, comments: ‘v tejto hre, ktorej pravidlá som nepoznal, ba čo viac, ktorej pravidlá mi zámerne mali až do konca zostat’ záhadou, rozhodol som sa vytvoriť si pravidlá vlastné.’ (In this game whose rules I did not know, and which, moreover, were deliberately to remain a mystery to me until the end, I decided to invent my own rules.) To survive, Vilikovský suggests in the novel, the human being may either learn to adapt endlessly to the rules of others, or, as Beasley-Murray argues, constantly strive in vain to ‘create individual, provisional rules’ of his or her own. The narrator embodies the former approach, while Vilikovský advocates the latter as the only authentic way of being.

In an implied authorial parody of the spy persona, the narrator presents himself as the essence of life, a devastatingly handsome and potent lover of danger, women and, if necessary, men; at one point, he comments, implicitly referring to himself in contrast to his listener: ‘Človek, ktorý vie vychutnávať život vo všetkých jeho podobách, možno sice nežije dlhšie, ale rozhodne intenzívnejšie.’ (The man who knows how to taste life in all its forms, though he may not live longer, undoubtedly

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30 This encounter between the Devil and the intellectual is made explicit in Mitana’s *Hľadanie strateného autora: Rozhovory s Luciferom* (In search of a lost author: Conversations with Lucifer, 1991) (See Chapter 3).
31 Darovec, *Násmešné*, p.41. In *Faust*, the student says to Mephistopheles: ‘I’m so confused by all you’ve said / It’s like a millwheel going round in my head’ (Goethe, *Faust*, p.59.)
33 Ibid., p.10
lives more intensively.) On the one hand, throughout his monologue, he asserts the superiority of his life experience over what his listener may have read in books. For example, after apparently citing the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski’s account of the dominant role of women in sexual intercourse in Oceania, he comments: ‘Ja, ktorý som v spomínanom odbore pôsobil skôr prakticky než teoreticky, môžem na základe svojich skúseností jeho pozorovanie iba potvrdiť.’ (I, who have worked in the aforementioned field more practically than theoretically, on the basis of my own experiences can but confirm his observations.) On the other, however, his ability to escape from the most precarious situations appears to rest not so much on heroic actions, as on his own mastery of language, specifically his ability to tell stories:

(The basic rule for the person who enters that form of human intercommunication called an interrogation in the role of the interrogated is: the interrogator must get what he’s after. He must be amused and entertained, he must enrich himself with new information, and he must enjoy himself sensually. Indeed, there are even individuals – I’d call them geniuses of interrogation – who manage in the course of an interrogation to educate the interrogator.)

_Vécne je zelený..._ does not, however, simply constitute a reiteration of Hrabal’s technique in works like _Taneční hodiny pro starší a pokročilé_ (Dancing lessons for

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35 Vilikovský, _Večne_, p.41. In effect, in _Večne je zelený..._, Vilikovský identifies the two literary types which will dominate Slovak fiction in the 1990s. On the one hand, the narrator represents the amoral, self-seeking potentate epitomised by Rácz in Pišťanek’s _Rivers of Babylon_ trilogy (see Chapter 2) and also the narrator of _Kníha o cintorme_ (A book about the cemetery, 1998) by Samko Tále (the pseudonym of Daniela Kapitaňová), which might be considered a _Večne je zelený..._ for the post-Meciar period. On the other, his listener represents the sexually and scriptorially impotent intellectual portrayed by Kolenic and the Barbarians (see Chapter 5) or the Genitalists (see Chapter 6). Indeed, the contrast is expressed phallically in _Večne je zelený..._ , in which the narrator, before referring to his own resplendent erection, comments: ‘neskoro začínajúci intelektual – ale to nebude vaš prípad – pri prvom neúspešnom pokuse o koitus byva psychicky otrávený. Precitlivosť dnešných mužov nadobúda hrozivé rozmery.’ (The late-starter intellectual – but this won’t be your case – after his first, unsuccessful attempt at coitus is often psychologically traumatised. The over-sensitivity of today’s men is acquiring terrifying proportions.) (Vilikovský, _Večne_, p.51.)

36 Ibid., p.33.

37 Ibid., p.44. Vilikovský perhaps alludes playfully here to the Czech pre-war journalist and literary critic and post-war Communist hero, Julius Fučík, who, imprisoned by the Germans in occupied Prague, sabotaged their pursuit of the Communist resistance and delayed his own execution by feeding his interrogators false information.
the older and more advanced, 1964), where the stream of language pouring from the narrator's mind represents life and resistance to the positivist use of language which seeks to restrict that life. In *Taneční hodiny*, where the narrator is also an old man reminiscing about the period before and after 1918, Hrabal constructs the narrator's monologue from what Susanne Roth calls a 'literary montage' of quotations and allusions, outside of which the narrator has no existence. This strategy is replicated by Vílikovský in *Večne je zelený...,* in which the narrator's monologue is a patchwork of quotations not only from works of 'high literature', but also from political and advertising slogans, psychoanalytical and political texts, 'manuals, travelogues, recipe books, popular science and even rhetorical declamations, in which our hero so clearly delights'. However, in *Taneční hodiny*, the use of the montage technique does not express the loss or impossibility of originality or authenticity, but rather constitutes an attempt to locate that originality and authenticity not in the meaning of what is said, but how it is put together. The narrator, rambling to a certain Kamila as she picks cherries, conveys his individuality through the fleeting uniqueness of composition, just as the sound and rhythms of his narration convey being itself. His wholly innocent objective is, according to Hrabal, to gain Kamila's 'acknowledgement and respect and admiration', and he is rewarded at the end when she takes her clothes off and washes in front of him.

38 According to Roth, in contrast to 'literary collage', exploited by Hrabal in his earlier and also later work, in literary montage the 'selected elements are used more as preparatory building material [which] is often changed according to the structural characteristics of the emerging composition. [...] The montage is more a loan than a quotation: "A loan differs from a quotation in that it does not have the character of a reference; it is not intended to be placed in relation to its original source, and that is good, because although a return to the source has a philosophical explanation, it does not enrich semantically and does not provide any aesthetic surplus value." (Rothová, *Hlucná*, p.81. The quotation at the end of the passage cited comes from Meyer, H., *Das Zitat in der Erzählkunst. Zur Geschichte und Poetik des europäischen Romans*, Stuttgart, 1971, pp.13-14.) See also Žilka, *'Recepčné*, especially pp.87-91.

39 Richterová writes: 'The characters in Hrabal's stories live to speak, because they speak, to the extent that they speak and thanks to the fact that they are spoken about.' (Richterová, S., 'Totožnost člověka ve světě znaků' in her *Slova a ticho*, Prague, 1991, p.76. Hereafter Richterová, 'Totožnost'.) Zajac, *'Incognito'*, p.5.

40 In her poetics of the twentieth-century literary work, Hodrová suggests, with particular reference to Hrabal, that this 'stream' type of composition constitutes a 'means of expressing the maximum interconnectedness of speech and the world, pulsating in the same rhythm.' (Hodrová, *...na okraji* p.37.) Of the writers discussed in this dissertation, this type of composition is practised above all by Jáchym Topol in his novel *Sestra* (Sister, 1994), the narrator of which, who is a dancer by profession, is called Potok, meaning 'stream'. (See Chapter 4.)

41 Quoted in Rothová, *Hlucná*, p.152. The ending may be seen as a parodic return to Eden, granted to the old man in reward for a lifetime in the shade of the tree of life, reflected by his narration.
In contrast, Vilikovský’s narrator is a comic Frankenstein’s monster, a ‘dummy put together from language which signifies nothing but is none the less a real force’.

Early in his monologue, explaining his motivation for being a spy, he declares: ‘naozaj jedinou odmenou je vedomie, že ste pomáhali otácať koleso dejín; či už sem alebo tam, to je úplne jedno, hlavná vec, aby sa hýbalo.’ (The only reward really is the awareness that you helped to turn the wheel of history; whether here or there, it doesn’t matter, the main thing was to make sure it moved.)

Like Erofeev and Hrabal, Vilikovský thus rejects the notion of history as an inexorable process towards an ideal, positing instead an ‘understanding of historical development as an irrationally connected sequence of events which unwind from a multitude of coincidences working against each other’.

In practice, the narrator has not moved the wheel, but has moved with it, endlessly adapting to the prevailing doctrine, adding it, in effect, to his repertoire, in order to survive. Through the consequent mixture of nationalist, anti-nationalist, Fascist and Marxist-Leninist rhetoric in his monologue, he becomes, in Zajac’s view, the embodiment of ‘central European consciousness’.

Zajac writes: ‘The adoration of “the best of all possible worlds” at every instant of its existence no longer has the appearance of masochism [as in Candide] but has become total, generally acceptable and accepted opportunism.’ In this respect, Vilikovský’s narrator resembles the amoral, chameleon-like Dítě, the central character of Hrabal’s Obsluhoval jsem anglického krále, which was being written at a similar time to Večne je zelený...

Whereas so much sanctioned and unsanctioned fiction not only of the Thaw, but also of the 1970s and 1980s, reflected on the failure of people to live up to ideas and the

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44 Vilikovský, Večne, p.10. Though Vilikovský makes no explicit reference to the narrator’s collaboration with the Communist regime, apart from incorporating into his monologue quotations from standard works of Marxism-Leninism, the reference to the ‘wheel of history’ recalls the passage in Milan Kundera’s Zert (The joke, 1967), in which the central character, Ludvík, explains his motivation for becoming Communist: ‘to, co mne na hnutí nejvíce okouzlovalo, ba omamovalo, byl volant déjin, v jehoz blízkosti (ať už opravdu nebo zdánlivě) jsem se octl.’ (what enchanted, or rather stupefied, me most about the movement was the steering-wheel of history, in whose proximity (whether really or apparently) I found myself.) (Kundera, M, Zert, Brno, 1996, p.75.) Vilikovský’s implicit suggestion that the Communist period constitutes only an instance in a longer process of ideologisation is typical of the fiction of the Changes, which seeks to avoid becoming part of the narrow political opposition of much dissident writing.
45 Darovec, Násmešný, p.39.
47 Roth suggests that Hrabal wrote the novel in 1971. (See Rothová, Hlučná, p.22.)
failure of ideas to live up to people, in all the three novels under discussion the notion that ideas and people should ever be expected to live up to one another is presented as a grotesque confusion, embodied by Vilikovský’s narrator. A product of the attempt to impose theory on life, he represents not the spirit of life, but the soullessness of ideologised life, as empty as what Valér Mikula calls the ‘desemanticised’ quotations of which it is compiled. His monologue constitutes, in effect, the revenge of that ideologised life on the minds which created it. At the end of the novel, the narrator, ostensibly demonstrating a series of knots, ties his listener up, the literal representation of what has happened metaphorically through the work, before sarcastically remarking: ‘teraz vidíte, kam vás priviedla bezhlavá tůžba po poznání.’ (Now you can see where your reckless desire for knowledge has brought you.)

The same remark might have been uttered to Venichka by the thugs who murder him. Through Venichka, Erofeev parodies himself as the epitome of the sentimental Russian intellectual, moved by sorrow at the condition of the world to drink and to dream. Liviia Zvonnikova suggests that in Moskva-Petushki, Erofeev satirises the Russian intelligentsia’s ‘revolt against God’, whom they blamed for the plight of the human being. The repeated identification of Venichka with Christ, culminating in his late, despairing cries of ‘Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani’, reflects how this revolt ultimately resulted in the intellectual taking the salvation of humanity upon himself. Like the listener-intellectual in Večne je zelený..., however, his quest fails. Instead of reaching Petushki, Venichka falls into a drunken stupor, and when he awakes, apparently on the way back to Moscow, his journey is plunged into chaos. The chapter titles, which throughout the novel break into Venichka’s monologue to indicate stations on the train’s route, start to merge Moscow and Petushki. Venichka’s return to Moscow not only indicates the impossibility of perfecting human existence, but also suggests that the result of the attempt to create heaven on earth is 1960s Communist Moscow.

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48 Vilikovský, Večne, p.85. The position of the listener at the end of the work might be compared to the *nouveau roman*-influenced portrayal of the writer in Johanides’s *Nie* (No, 1962) as a helpless observer, unable to supply causality to what he sees.

49 See Zvonnikova, L., “‘Moskva-Petushki’ i pr. Popytka interpretatsii’, *Znamia*, 1996, 8, p.220. This revolt is reflected by Venichka’s refusal to buy a ticket on the train, which parodically evokes Ivan Karamazov’s respectful refusal of a ticket to God’s future in Dostoevskii’s *Brat’ia Karamazovy* (The Brothers Karamazov, 1880).
Venichka’s journey represents the culmination of the Russian intellectual’s yearning for the celestial, which Erofeev implicates in the establishment of Communism through his use of literary montage. As Gaiser-Shnitman and other critics have documented, Venichka’s monologue is, like that of Vilikovsky’s narrator, composed of quotations and allusions, in this case to the Bible, Greek myths, slogans, popular songs, films, fairy tales, children’s literature and scientific and political texts, but above all the canon of world and, particularly, Russian literature. In Moskva-Petushki, Erofeev expresses his intention to resist the temptation to follow those writers who have gone before him by dispatching an alter-ego who bears his name in his stead. By killing Venichka at the end, Erofeev kills off the ‘writer-visionary’ in himself, as he makes clear through Venichka in an obliquely self-referential passage concerning Goethe:

‘A для чего он (Goethe) заставил Вертера пусть себе пулю в лоб? Потому что — есть свидетельство — он сам был на грани самоубийства, но чтоб отделаться от искушения, заставил Вертера сделать это вместо себя. Вы понимаете? Он остался жить, но как бы покончил с собой. И был вполне удовлетворен. Это даже хуже прямого самоубийства. В этом больше трусости и эгоизма, и творческой низости...’

('But why did he (Goethe) make Werther put a bullet into his forehead? Because — there’s evidence — he was himself on the brink of suicide, but in order to remove himself from the temptation, he made Werther do it instead. Do you understand? He remained alive, but in a sense committed suicide. And he was entirely satisfied. It’s even worse than straightforward suicide. In this there is more cowardice and egotism, and creative baseness...')

Erofeev’s implication of the whole of Russian culture, understood as the bearer of ultimate authority and ideology, in the brutality of Stalinism, a notion fundamental to Sorokin’s writing, discussed in Chapter Five, recalls the position taken by Theodor Adorno in his essay ‘Cultural Criticism and Society’. Adorno writes:

The more total society becomes, the greater the reification of the mind and the more paradoxical its effort to escape reification on its own. Even the most extreme consciousness of doom threatens to degenerate into idle chatter. Cultural criticism finds itself faced

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51 Erofeev, Ostav’te, p.84.
with the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism. To
write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the
knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today.
Absolute reification, which presupposed intellectual progress as one
of its elements, is now preparing to absorb the mind entirely.\(^\text{52}\)

Moskva-Petushki constitutes not only, as Lipovetskii points out, a coincidental
dramatisation of Roland Barthes’s ‘death of the author’, in which the writer no longer
represents a source of truth, but a weaver of texts,\(^\text{53}\) but also a declaration of the end
of literature, which Erofeev, with nostalgic melancholy, suggests cannot now recover
its innocence.\(^\text{54}\) In Příliš hlučná samota, in contrast, books are not implicated in the
positivist march of progress, but rather represent for Haňťa not only a refuge from it,
but a source of resistance, a constant reminder of the gap between the aspirations and
capabilities of human beings. Books in Příliš hlučná samota embody the search for
the meaning of existence, which will always be curtailed by death. Milan Jankovič
links this ‘asking questions about oneself’, which he considers the over-arching theme
of the novel, back to the end of Obsluhoval jsem anglického krále, when Dítě has
abandoned his quest for social acceptance and begun, stumblingly, to show concern
for his soul:

[... ] vlastně já jsem v tom hostinci vždycky zjistil, že podstata života je ve vyptávání se na smrt, [...] že vlastně smrt, ne, to vyptávání se sebe sama, je hovor pod zorným úhlem nekonečná a věčnosti, že už řešení té smrti je počátek myšlení v krásném a o krásném, protože vychutnávat si nesmyslnost té své cesty, která stejně končí předčasným odchodem, ten požitek a zážitek svého zmaru, to napišuje člověka hořkosti, a tedy krásou [...]


\(^{53}\) See Lipovetskii, Postmodernist Fiction, pp.81-2. Barthes writes: ‘a text is made up multiple
writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody,
contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as
was hitherto said, the author.’ (Barthes, R., ‘The death of the author’ in Image-Music-Text, translated
by Stephen Heath, London, 1977, p.148.) Barthes’s essay was first published in Paris in 1968, and
exerts great influence of Russian and Slovak writers discussed later in this dissertation. The expression
of similar ideas to Barthes by the writers discussed here appears, however, to reflect a coincidence of
viewpoints, rather than a deliberate act of reinterpretation.

\(^{54}\) In this context, Moskva-Petushki may be compared with another patchwork text, Viktor Erofeev’s
Russkaia krasavitsa (A Russian beauty, 1990, dated as written 1980-82), which describes a high-class
prostitute, Irina Tarakanova (Irene Cockroach), who has had countless abortions, but considers herself
the saviour of Russia. (Her name alludes to the Princess Tarakanova, a pretender to Catherine’s throne
whom Catherine had thrown into prison, where she died.) Erofeev’s Tarakanova may be seen as a
metaphor for the traditional Russian understanding of literature as leading the people to salvation. Her
abortions represent the many failed ideas of how salvation might be achieved, of which Marxism-
Leninism is the last, since at the end of the novel she commits suicide.
[... in fact in that pub I always found that the essence of life is in asking questions about death [...] that actually death, or rather, that asking questions of oneself is a conversation from the perspective of infinity and eternity, that just the examination of death is the beginning of thinking in the sublime and about the sublime, because to taste the meaninglessness of one's path, which will in any case end in premature departure, that enjoyment and experience of one's ruin fills the human being with bitterness, and therefore beauty [...]

From Taneční hodiny to Příliš hlučná samota, the work of the imagination shifts from being an externally to an internally directed activity. Taneční hodiny exemplifies Mikhail Bakhtin's conception of the relationship between self and other in his essay 'Avtor i geroi v esteticheskoi deiatel’nosti', in which he argues that because the self experiences itself as 'unconsummated', constantly moving forward in space and time, it is only the other, from its privileged position outside the self, that can give the self form and wholeness. Since the other is also a self seeking 'consummation', the relationship is reciprocal. This 'consummation' does not, however, result in the imprisonment of the self, which continues to move forward. Richterová writes: 'All of Hrabal’s “natterers” (pábitelé) may be seen as people who create themselves in speech in such a way that they cannot be contained within any known and established system.' However, writing on Příliš hlučná samota, Roth comments: 'In the external world, in the world of history, Haňta would be reduced to an object, whereas in his “loud solitude” he remains a creative subject, defending the remains of his freedom.'

Seeking acknowledgement of the self carries too great a risk that the self will be trapped in an externally imposed definition, in Richterová's terms, 'become transformed into a sign'. The experience of the self as dynamic, existing, must be acquired without recourse to the external world. This implicitly endless internal self-creation underpins key works of unsanctioned fiction in the 1980s like Brabcová’s Daleko od stromu, Placák’s Medorek (Little Medor, 1990), and Kremlička’s Lodní deník (Ship’s log, 1990).

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56 Richterová, 'Totožnost', p.68. The word 'pábitelé', the title of Hrabal’s second collection of short stories, published in 1964, has been frequently used to denote Hrabal’s narrators and other narrators who use a similar style. For Hrabal’s own account of the origin of the word, see Jankovič, M., Kapitoly z poetiky Bohumila Hrabala, Prague, 1996, pp.26-27.
57 Rothová, Hlučná, p.151.
In *Příliš hlučná samota*, however, this attempt at self-preservation results in another form of objectification. Near the beginning of his monologue, Haňťa declares: ‘jsem proti své vůli vzdělán, a tak vlastně ani nevím, které myšlenky jsou moje a ze mne a které jsem vyčetl.’ (I’ve been educated against my will, and so I don’t really know which ideas are mine and from inside me and which I got from something I read.) Instead of seeking the meaning of life in communication with the benevolent other described by Bakhtin, Haňťa seeks it in books, and thus, like Venichka or Vilikovsky’s spy, becomes an amalgam of the texts he has read, the embodiment of their futility, identical to the packages he carefully puts together for pulping. Towards the end of the work Haňťa comments: ‘knihy proti mně spikly a nedostal jsem ani jediné poselství z nebes.’ (The books conspired against me and I didn’t receive even a single message from Heaven.) Roth places the blame for Haňťa’s fate on a society bent on eradicating its soul, a society which had itself come to perceive him as a book no longer wanted. In this context, while Venichka’s death may be seen as a form of divine punishment, Haňťa’s dream of his own death at the end of *Příliš hlučná samota* represents martyrdom. As *Taneční hodiny* indicates, for Hrabal the writer was always a humble weaver of texts, endlessly hoping, in Hodrová’s phrase, for a ‘glimpse of being’. It is this type of author whom the world above ground has declared dead. Roth writes of Haňťa: ‘His last message is not without hope, but is bequeathed to another time, which will perhaps have more understanding for this message.’ That time could perhaps be the Changes, when Czech writers, as discussed in Chapter 4, sought to reassert the writer-as-seeker, precariously positioned between solipsism and absorption in a hostile other, and between the terrestrial and the celestial. As indicated by Jiří Kratochvíl’s ‘Má lásko, Postmodernó’, discussed in the Introduction, unlike their Russian counterparts, these writers retain Hrabal’s perception of the innocence of literary creation, and the guilt of human beings who misuse it.

The tragic fates of the narrators of *Moskva-Petushki* and *Příliš hlučná samota* contrast with the the absurdity of the fate of the listener at the end of *Večne je*.

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59 This distancing of the self from life occurs in a different sense in Kremlička’s *Lodní deník*, in which the author effectively loses contact with the reader through the incomprehensibility of the text.  
60 Hrabal, *Samota*, p.63.  
61 Hodrová, ...*na okraji*, p.780.
zelený..., which reflects Vilikovský’s altogether less melodramatic perception of the plight of the intellectual. Like Erofeev, he suggests that the intellectual is to blame for his own predicament. Vladimir Petřík writes: ‘We have got used to formulating (literature has got used to formulating) very unequivocally what is ambiguous, indefinite and difficult to grasp; we make absolute what is relative and has only limited validity. The criticism of language [in Večne je zelený...] is a criticism of the superficial acquisition of knowledge.’

However, where Erofeev suggests that the intellectual should fall silent, allowing the herd instinct to take over, as takes place in Příliš hlučná samota, Vilikovský seeks in his novel to overcome this conventional distinction between the intelligentsia and the masses in culture, by showing both narrator and listener to be tied up in the relativity of signs and the impossibility of absolute knowledge. As Darovec writes, this ‘understanding of the impossibility of speaking wholly and objectively does not, however, mean scepticism and resignation, but is, paradoxically, encouraging [...].

The ending of Večne je zelený... asserts the futility of conformity, of which both narrator and listener are guilty, opening up the possibility that the whole of each human being’s life might be a private, unique process of creating a version of the world. At the end of the novel, the narrator, perhaps speaking in unison with the implied author, says:

Zanechám vás teraz vašmu osudu. Čoskoro sa predsvedčíte, že poznávací proces nie je električka, do ktoréj môžete vstupovať a vystupovať, ako sa vám zachce. Neberte to ako vyhráčku. Čakajú vás vzrušujúce chvíle. Rozšírite si obzor o nové zázatky, rozptylíte sa, poučite... A ak sa náhodou proces poznávania nebude uberať smerom, ktorý ste predpokladali, nenechajte sa tým znechutniť, lebo ešte vždy platí [...] že šédá je teória a veľké je zelenéy... ‘...kôň života!’ zvolal plukovník, naširoko rozvráťajúc dvierka na skrini, a keď si povýštiel zmeravené údy, bujaro zaeržal.

(I’ll leave you now to your fate. Soon you’ll realise that the process of acquiring knowledge is not a tram which you can enter and exit as you please. Don’t take this as a threat. Exciting times await you. You’ll expand your horizons with new experiences, you’ll be amused, you’ll learn... And if the process of acquiring knowledge does not take the direction you supposed, don’t let yourself be discouraged, because it still always applies [...] that theory is grey and ever green is... ‘...the horse of life!’ cried the colonel, opening

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62 Rothová, Hlučná, p.156.
64 Darovec, Násmešné, p.35.
the doors of the wardrobe wide, and when he had stretched his stiffened limbs, neighed joyfully.\textsuperscript{66}

In this respect, \textit{Večne je zelený...} is closer than either \textit{Moskva-Petushki} or \textit{Příliš hloučná samota} to the spirit of Barthes's declaration of the 'death of the author', since Vilikovský, like Barthes, perceives that death to be accompanied by the birth of all human beings as reader-creators of life. In his discussion of Vilikovský's work, Pynsent quotes a passage from Vilikovský's short novel 'Kôň na poschodí, slepec vo Vrabľoch' (A horse upstairs, a blind man in Vrabľe), also published for the first time in 1989: 'Jediná sloboda, ktorú máme, je uchovať si svoju predstavu a nedovolit nikomu, aby nám do nej fusoval.' (The only freedom we have is to preserve our idea about things and not allow anyone else to interfere in it.)\textsuperscript{67} This view in different ways may be said to inspire the works of each of the three writers discussed in the next chapter.

\textsuperscript{66} Vilikovský, \textit{Večne}, p.86. On the one hand, the sudden interjection of the Colonel may be read as a device designed to distract the reader, undermining the seriousness of the preceding message to prevent it too becoming a dogma. On the other, it reflects the travestying of high-flown notions about the nature of human existence - like Goethe's 'golden tree' - which takes place in the work.

\textsuperscript{67} Quoted in Pynsent, 'Ballek a Vilikovský', p.125.
Chapter 2

Giving A Shape to One’s Fate: Evgenii Popov, Petr Placák, Peter Pišťanek

In *Příliš hlučná samota*, one of Hant’á’s favourite works is Albert Camus’s essay ‘Le mythe de Sisyph’, in which Camus argues that the human being, liberated from the ‘illusion of another world’, is, like Sisyphus pushing his rock up the mountain, no longer concerned about the outcome of his efforts, but about how the efforts themselves ‘give a shape to one’s fate’.¹ In the novel, Hrabal suggests that the new society, apparently concerned only with outcomes, has no time for this perspective; in *Moskva-Petushki*, Erofeev questions whether such a perspective can ever be more than a pose concealing less modest aspirations. Only *Veče je zelený...* contains any conception of a ‘literature’ after ‘Literature’, which, rather than seeking to give a final, ideal shape to the world, would only seek endlessly to give shape to the self. This shift may be compared to that in sanctioned fiction of the 1970s and 1980s, in which what Nadya Peterson terms the ‘ultimate reconciliation of the individual and society’² of conventional Socialist Realism, already tempered by the Thaw, becomes instead merely a perhaps life-long quest for the right path. Describing Soviet fiction of the late 1970s in terms which might equally be applied to Czech and Slovak sanctioned fiction of the same period, Geoffrey Hosking writes:

>[the] process of self-discovery (or failure in self-discovery) has something in common with the quest for inner meaning traversed by many Socialist Realist heroes: only now there is no certainty and no social utopia at the end of the path. Modern Soviet man must be content with fragmentary insights, must renounce any ultimate goal, and must become accustomed to the idea that the way is more important than the Purpose, the spirit than the result.³

Where, however, this type of fiction is preoccupied essentially with the morality of actions, the fiction of the Changes is preoccupied with the morality of uses of language.

In this context, the Russian work closest to the perspective of *Veče je zelený...* is Popov’s *Dusha patriota*, which, like the works discussed in the first chapter, was

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published for the first time in 1989 and constituted a defining example of the emerging critical category of ‘other fiction’.\(^4\) *Dusha patriota* takes the form of a monologue made up of individually dated missives to a certain Ferfichkin, written in the period before and immediately after Brezhnev’s death in the autumn of 1982.\(^5\) As Porter points out, the narrator’s rambling style owes much to Laurence Sterne,\(^6\) and is used to assert the aimlessness of life in the face of the conviction, arising from the ideologisation of living, that life must have a purpose. Whereas, however, in *Moskva-Petushki* and *Příliš hlučná samota*, the quest for a meaning to life results in tragedy, and in *Vecne je zelený...* absurdity, in *Dusha patriota* Popov presents not only the inevitable failure of such quests, but also the restatement of their futility in literature, as banal.

This banality is encapsulated in the single-word epigraph, ‘...garden...’ (sad), the last word of Voltaire’s *Candide*. Through this epigraph, Popov seeks to bring writers and literature down from the pedestal of authority they occupy in Soviet and mainstream dissident culture, implying that the only wisdom which literature is capable of imparting about the world is that asserted at the end of *Candide*: that human beings, rather than pursuing the ‘best of all possible worlds’, would do better to devote themselves, as Haňťa does, to a lifetime of self-cultivation for its own sake. Indeed, Popov’s own version of the message lacks even this high-minded dimension, seeking instead to demystify the spiritual wanderings of the intellectual, most obviously in the second part of the novel, when he and the poet Dmitrii Prigov roam around Moscow on the day of Brezhnev’s funeral, trying to get close to where the body is lying in state.

Just as Vilikovský quotes only half of the quotation from Goethe in the title of *Večne je zelený...*, Popov uses only the last word of the quotation from Voltaire to indicate

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\(^5\) In the foreword, Popov explains that, although he and the author of the missives have the same name, ‘ia – ne on’ (I am not him). (Popov, E., *Dusha patriota ili Razlichnye poslaniia k Ferfichkinu*, Moscow, 1994, p.8. Hereafter Popov, *Dusha.*) While Popov may here be seeking to assert the distinction which must be observed between the implied author of a text and the biographical writer, for whom the text represents at best a past self, the remark might also be seen as a parodic reference to Erofeev’s narrative strategy in *Moskva-Petushki*.

\(^6\) For a brief comparison of *Dusha patriota* and *Tristram Shandy*, see Porter, *Alternative*, pp.114-16.
that the message of the novel is well-known, but adds three dots after the word 'garden' to reflect that people none the less still go looking for some other, more uplifting message. For Popov, however, as for Voltaire at the end of Candide, the only uplifting aspect of life is that the process of preserving one's humble, private individual existence may be conducted with a few good friends. The work contains frequent, playfully disguised references to Popov's friends in the Moscow underground of the 1970s and 1980s, including Viktor Erofeev and Dmitrii Prigov, and while Skoropanova grandly describes the novel as a 'postmodernist hymn to the fraternity of non-conformists (inakomysliashchikh), the creators of unofficial culture, those wandering stars of the national underground', it is as much a straightforward celebration of friendships formed between these 'wandering stars'.

Throughout the novel, Popov's narrator parodies the attempt to make existence meaningful by repeatedly setting himself objectives which he fails to realise. In the second part of the work, Popov satirises the Soviet planned economy as a model of progress. The narrator commits himself to writing a certain number of pages by a set date, adopting the rhetoric of Andropov's 'discipline at work' drive, which called upon workers to show greater enterprise and initiative and 'fight slackness' (borot'sia s raskhliabannost'iu). The narrator panics whenever he falls behind and has to recalculate his plan, all of which becomes part of the word count, leading the narrator to refer to his own text as 'self-multiplying, ever increasing nonsense' (samorazmnozhaiushchuiu uvelichivaiushchuiusia erundu). Popov here implicitly satirises those writers, frequently senior members of the Writers' Union, who expressed their commitment to the Soviet goal, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s, by writing enormous works of fiction, usually on historical or Second World War themes, which Popov playfully implies must be the result of a personal production plan.

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8 In this respect, Popov's novel bears comparison with Ludvik Vaculík's near-contemporaneous Český snář (A Czech dream-book, Toronto 1983, Prague 1990), a patchwork of diary entries, essays, autobiographical and fictional writing set in the Czech dissident community following the failure of the Charter 77 petition. The underlying mood of despair in that work is also somewhat apparent in Dusha patriota, which contains frequent references to the collapse of attempts to secure the sanctioned publication of the Metropol' anthology.
9 Popov, Dusha, p.147.
10 Ibid., p.86.
His failure to meet his target mirrors the collapse of his attempts in the first part of the novel to preserve the memory of deceased relatives by committing his recollections of them to paper, which founded not only because Brezhnev’s death interrupts them, but also because he has no memories of certain relatives and therefore cannot complete the task. In frustration he demands of his reader: ‘Nuzhno li VOSKRESHAT’ otsov, Ferfichkin?’ (Must we resurrect our fathers, Ferfichkin?), a reference to the philosopher Nikolai Fedorov’s ambition to resurrect the dead and create an immortal fraternity of human beings. Fedorov’s ‘common task’, which aimed to tame the physical world through science, serves as a metaphor for all the ‘grand plans’ devised by human beings, all of which in Popov’s view, rather like his own attempt to deny the transience of human life by ‘resurrecting’ his ancestors in text, go totally against the nature and capabilities of the human being. This satirisation of the pursuit of perfection culminates in an apparent outburst of optimism prompted by Brezhnev’s death which, according to Porter, Popov considers ‘perhaps the most important moment in the book’. The passage concludes:

[…] и можно будет думать [...] о бессмертии души, о том, что все люди, как братья, начнут заботиться друг о друге, забудут толкаться локтями, и пойдет алмазный век, и плоть соединится с духом, и новые формы плотодуши укрепятся, происхождение новых видов укоренится, и да, да, все мы будем счастливы, счастливы, счастливы. Давайте наконец все мы СТАНЕМ СЧАСТЛИВЫ, давайте забудем раздоры и обратим все высвободившиеся силы в совместную оборону против ТЕМНО, против дьявола, антропии, исчезновения. А если и исчезнем, то так, чтобы как-нибудь всё-таки одновременно и остаться. Давайте, а? Я готов к этому. Я готов стать братом каждому, кто хотя бы изредка посмотрит в сторону счастья, мира, покоя.

([...] and we’ll be able to think about [...] the immortality of the soul, about how all people, like brothers, will begin to worry about each other and will forget how to shove with their elbows, and a diamond age will come, and flesh will unite with spirit, and new forms of ‘somatopsyche’ will be consolidated, the origin of new species will take root, and yes, yes, we will all be happy, happy, happy. Let’s all finally BECOME HAPPY, let’s forget discord and apply all our liberated strengths to the common defence against THE DARK, against the devil, entropy, disappearance. And if we do disappear, then in such way that somehow we’ll also

11 Ibid., p.44.
12 Quoted from a letter in Porter, Alternative, p.126.
simultaneously remain. Come on, eh? I'm ready to do it. I'm ready to become the brother of anyone who at least occasionally looks in the direction of happiness, peace and quiet.)

The whole passage, quoted by Porter in full, places Popov's own hopes, which somewhat resemble Venichka's call for 'universal faint-heartedness' in *Moskva-Petushki*, at the end of a chaotic catalogue of 'grand narratives', including Marxism-Leninism, Freudism, Darwinism, Pan-Slavism and Fedorov, all of which have sustained a teleological model of history as progress towards the ideal. In this way, Popov casts doubt on the innocence of his own optimism, suggesting that any form of hope for the future, however banal, is ultimately a delusion of grandeur.

In his afterword to the first publication, Sergei Chuprinin associates the narrator's lack of a sense of purpose with the particular relationship (or lack of relationship) between the individual and the state in Brezhnev's Soviet Union, arguing that *Dusha patriota* 'principally speaks about the alienation of the human being, the citizen, from politics and ideology and from the history of his native country.' Chuprinin's interpretation suggests that life might become more meaningful under a different system, betraying not only the tendency amongst readers and critics to regard works of literature as social commentary, but also the social democratic aspirations of liberal critics in the period. However, when the narrator plaintively remarks: ‘ochen' khochetsia osushchestvit' kakuiu-nibud' funktsiju na zemle, no sovershennno netu nikakoi tochki prilozhenüa' (‘I really want to fulfil some sort of function on earth, but there is absolutely no point of application’), he expresses an existential, rather than a political problem, echoing in effect the Oblomov-type ‘superfluous man’, whom he somewhat resembles.

The relationship between the individual and the state is exemplified for Chuprinin in a scene in the second half of the work in which, in another example of a purposeful venture thwarted, the narrator and Prigov are turned back with a friendly smile by a policeman close to the place where Brezhnev is lying in state. The narrator is amazed:

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13 Popov, *Dusha*, p.121.
14 In *Do i vo vremia*, Sharov shows the kinship between these various grand aspirations for the human being by suggesting that Stalin was the illegitimate child of Fedorov and Madame de Staël.
16 Popov, *Dusha*, p.71.
'ved' esli by on deistvitel'no ne puskal, to otvechal by grubo, vesomo, zrimo, rezko, tochno, a to'ne puskal, kak puskal. Kazalos', vot-vot i pustit. A na samom dele deistvitel'no sovershenno ne puskal, kak puskal, to est' vezhlivo, pochti snishkhoditel'no.' (after all, if he were really not letting us through, he would have answered rudely, heavily, visibly, sharply, precisely, but in fact he wasn't letting us through as though he were letting us through. It seemed that at any moment he might just let us through. But in fact he really didn't let us through at all as though he were letting us through, that is, politely, almost indulgently.)\(^7\) Chuprinin comments:

we would dearly love to be citizens in the full sense of the word, but they won't let us, they shuffle us off into side-streets, a little further away from the activities of the state machine. They politely but unbendingly remove us from participation – even through the right to a consultative voice or the ‘bird-seed’ \([ptich'ikh]\) rights of an eyewitness – in the resolution of problems which are not without interest to all of us.\(^8\)

On the one hand, Popov’s narrator does express a feeling of unjust exclusion for political reasons, making frequent references to the Metropol’ affair, to editors who have rejected Popov’s work and to theatres which will not perform his plays. However, a contrast may be made with another essentially autobiographical satirical work, Ivan’kiada (The Ivankiad, Ann Arbor 1976) by Vladimir Voinovich (b.1932), in which Voinovich, who under Writers’ Union rules is entitled to a larger flat for his growing family, loses it to another writer, Ivan’ko, who wants the larger flat as a lavatory. At the end of the work, Voinovich reflects on the number of honest and talented people who have been forced to emigrate from the Soviet Union because of the system. Whereas in Voinovich’s satire the emphasis is on the absurdity of the Soviet system and how silly people can be, especially when caught up in the system, in Popov’s satire the emphasis is on the inevitable absurdity of structures created by human beings.\(^9\) In Dusha patriota, as in his next novel, Prekrasnost’ zhizni (The splendour of life, 1990), whenever state power has intervened in someone’s life, Popov uses the phrase ‘through circumstances not dependent on anyone’ (‘po ne

\(^7\) Ibid., p.193. Lipovetskii discusses this passage as an example of Soviet absurdity. (See Lipovetskii, Russian Postmodernism, pp.192-3.)

\(^8\) Chuprinin, ‘Prochitannomu’, p.79.

\(^9\) The contrast between Popov and Voinovich is exemplified by comparing Popov’s grotesque short stories, often set in rural Siberia, some of which were sanctioned for publication and in which the Soviet system rarely appears, with Voinovich’s satirisation of the Soviet myth of the Second World War in Zhizn’ i neobychayne prikliuchenia soldata Ivan Chonkina (The life and unusual adventures of the soldier Ivan Chonkin, Paris 1975), also set in rural Russia.
zavisiaščim ni ot kogo obstoiatel’stvam’), presenting the event as a stroke of misfortune interrupting the normal situation, in which the two exist independently of each other. The scene with the policeman is not portrayed as a confrontation either between oppressor and victim or between the absurd and the reasonable, but as a meeting of the equally absurd (or the equally reasonable); the state feigns friendliness to the individual just as the individual feigns obedience to the state, but both are conducting a private existence to which the other has no access. In contradiction to Chuprinin’s statement that ‘one cannot live in a society and be free of society’, Popov shows in the work how he and his acquaintances take from the state what they need to survive and then retire to their private activity.

The understanding of literature expounded in *Dusha patriota* casts further doubt on Chuprinin’s interpretation of the work as an expression of socio-political protest. In an attempt to dissociate his novel from precisely this sort of reading, the narrator declares:

(My missives to Ferfichkin are of a private, peaceful nature and do not pursue political, ideological, religious or any other aims. They are entirely distant from literature, these missives of mine, as distant as they are, in their turn, from real life. They are in general as distant from everything as I am myself.)

According to the narrator, just as the human being loses 'something crucially and originally human' by becoming absorbed into a ideological model of existence, as suggested by the novels discussed in the first chapter, so literature is damaged by becoming the means by which such a model is propounded. Popov’s narrator complains:

глупо, Ферфичкин, когда идеология делает ставку на литературу, принимая её всерьёз. Ведь литература - хрупкая, нежная, она, не выдержав перегрузки, ломается, чахнет, но потом всё равно прорастает, злобно укрепившись страшными

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20 Chuprinin, 'Prochitannomu', p. 79.
21 Popov, *Dusha*, p. 90.
The weakness of literature corresponds to the weakness of the human being; placing unrealistic expectations on either results in their deformation.

At one point the narrator asserts that the only purpose of writing is ‘self-characterisation’ (avtokharakteristika). In Dusha patriota, the narrator’s self becomes the plot, defined by Peter Brooks as a ‘kind of arabesque or squiggle toward the end […] that suggests the arbitrary, transgressive, gratuitous line of narrative, its deviance from the straight line, the shortest distance between beginning and end, which would be the collapse of one into the other, of life into immediate death’. Brooks takes the notion of the plot as arabesque from Balzac, who took it from Tristram Shandy. In Dusha patriota, Popov implicitly suggests that the text, instead of attempting to move ahead of the self, ordaining its destination, should, as in Sterne’s novel, strive to follow the self, tracing the unique twists and turns of its passage through life, ‘giving a shape to its fate’. In this way, the text is transformed from being a metaphor for the end of life, its final goal, to a metaphor for life in progress, understood as constant resistance to the end. This resistance is reflected in the narrator’s dislike of change, which recalls Hant’a’s Taoist assertion of inaction in Příliš hlučná samota: ‘Ia, možhet, reshil KONSERVATOROM stat’, a možhet, uzhe i stal im […] a možhet i vsegda im byl.’ (I have, perhaps, decided to become a CONSERVATIVE, or perhaps I have already become one […] or perhaps I always was.) By opposing change, he hopes to ‘conserve’ life.

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22 Ibid., p.119.
23 Ibid., p.70.
25 Popov, Dusha, p.158. His desire to preserve life is reflected in his attempts to sustain the memory of his ancestors in the first part of the work.
This notion of narration as endless self-creation, the constant assertion of the independence of the narrating self from a final, externally imposed definition, recalls Dostoevskii’s *Zapiski iz podpol’ia*, a connection suggested by the name of Popov’s addressee, Ferfichkin, which is the same as that of the smirking social climber in the second part of Dostoevskii’s novel, whom the Underground Man challenges to a duel. Critics such as Porter, Skoropanova and Lipovetskii have perhaps been too hasty in declining to read much into the link between the two works,^{26} which arises initially from a pun on the word ‘underground’. Like Dostoevskii’s Underground Man, Popov’s narrator has rejected the rationalist model of human existence dominating society and therefore finds himself in the literary ‘underground’, rather like Hant’a in his cellar. Whereas, however, Hant’a retreats further and further from the external world until his physical existence becomes irrelevant, Popov’s narrator asserts his independence from the external world through his meandering narrative. Mikhail Bakhtin argues that the Underground Man uses narration to resist final definition by what he experiences as a hostile external world, distancing his present self from any earlier selves which his readers may have defined, hence his frequent claims that he has just been lying or joking, or that he does not believe what he has just said. Bakhtin writes:

There is literally nothing we can say about the hero of ‘Notes from Underground’ that he does not already know himself: his typicality for his time and social group, the sober psychological or even psycho-pathological delineation of his internal profile, the category of character to which his consciousness belongs, his comic as well as his tragic side, all possible moral definitions of his personality, and so on – all of this, in keeping with Dostoevsky’s design, the hero knows perfectly well himself, and he stubbornly and agonisingly soaks up all these definitions from within. Any point of view from without is rendered powerless in advance and denied the finalising word^{27}

*Dusha patriota* exemplifies the ‘struggle against a reification of man’^{28} which Bakhtin perceived in Dostoevskii’s work. Popov’s narrator lacks the self-pity or malevolence of Dostoevskii’s Underground Man, and he regards his Ferfichkin with considerably more affection. However, he does become irritated when he suspects

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Ferfichkin of seeking aims or imposing definitions on his text: ‘ia tebia chitat’ ne
zastavliau, i chitatelia mne takogo sovershенно ne nuzhno, kotoryi tainstvenno
morshchitsia potomu chto – chto khochu, to i pishu, kak khochu, kak umeiu.’ (I’m not
forcing you to read; the last thing I need is a reader like you, who secretly frowns
because...I write what I want to write, the way I want, the way I know how.)

For Popov, as for Vilikovsky, all that the literary text can express is the enduring,
charming but ultimately futile freedom of the human being to create his own version
of himself and the world.

The link between the notion of self-narration as a means of resisting self-reification
and Zapiski iz popol’ia is also made in the fiction of Liudmila Petrushevskaia
(b.1938), who is mentioned in Dusha patriota. The opening of her short story ‘Svoi
krug’ (A closed circle, 1987) echoes the opening of Dostoevskii’s novel: ‘Ia -
chelovek zhestkii, zhestokii, vsegda s ulybkoi na polnykh, rumianykh gubakh, vsegda
ko vsem s nasmeshkoi.’ (I am a hard, cruel person, always with a smile on my full
red lips, always approaching everyone with ridicule.)

Her short novel Vremia-noch’ (The time is night, 1992), nominated for the first Russian Booker Prize, is subtitled
‘Zapiski s kraia stola’ (Notes from the edge of the table). Like Dostoevskii’s
Underground Man, the cold, aggressive narrative voices of these works are products
of a society founded on rationalism, residents of anonymous blocks of flats in which
individuality is being steadily effaced, as Petrushevskaia reflects through the absent,
unmemorable or easily confused names of her characters.

The title of Vremia-noch’ is, however, ambiguous, since it not only suggests the ‘twilight’ of humanity, but also
the time when the narrator has time and space to write, and thereby commune with
herself. Her account of the cycle of psychological tyranny she plays out with her
daughter may be seen as a confession, the expression of a sinner’s longing for
redemption. The editor’s note which prefaces the main text, explaining that the notes

28 Ibid., p.62.
29 Popov, Dusha, p.53.
31 Much of the fiction which Petrushevskaia first published in the late 1980s was written in the 1970s
and early 1980s, during the period of the so-called ‘Nauchno-tekhnicheskaiia revoliutsiia’ (Scientific
and technical revolution) (NTR), which Petrushevskaia satirically associates with the ‘rationalisation’
of the human being, notably, for example, in ‘Svoi krug’, in which the intellectuals portrayed all work
in scientific research laboratories. In this respect, and in her naming technique, her writing resembles
that of Pâral, whose novels reflect the ‘rationalisation’ of the human being in Czech Socialist society,
in the late 1970s and the 1980s increasingly through lightweight science fiction satires.
were brought to her by a woman who found them among her mother's things after she had died, indicates that the narrator at least won the forgiveness of her daughter.

Alla Latynina used the opening of 'Svoi krug' to label the works of writers like Petrushevskaia, Kaledin and Makanin 'harsh fiction' (zhestkaia proza), since it was marked by what Latynina perceived as an implied authorial coldness towards the fates of characters.32 The removal of implied authorial judgement in Petrushevskaia's fiction on the one hand reflects the impossibility of normal expressions of compassion in the world she portrays, and on the other, indicates a desire in a judgemental world not to become an 'author-judge', but to leave the moral judgement to the reader. Somewhat like the Czech fiction of the Changes, Petrushevskaia's 'liberation' of literature is not a humbling of its pretensions, a reduction of the literary text to words, as in the work of so many of her Russian contemporaries, but an elevation, in which writing is presented as a communion with the soul, a fleeting experience of redemption from the horror and misery of everyday life.

The influence of Zapiski iz podpol'ia may also be seen in Placák's Medorek, one of the most widely discussed works of fiction to emerge from the 1980s generation of Czech underground writers. In the novel, Placák distinguishes between language as used by society to impose external limits on the self, and language as used by the self to express its freedom from such limits. Whereas the former is that of clichés, formulae and conformity to existing models, the latter represents the freedom of literary creation, understood as constant resistance to 'normalisation'.33 The collision of these two types of language is brought about by the basic plot of the novel, which František Kočka suggests is essentially autobiographical34 and describes two years in the life of the central character, Karel Medor, from the time when, aged sixteen, he starts work in a factory. On the one hand, Medorek strives to avoid becoming absorbed into society. On the other, however, he fears either being identified as a sick

33 Ondřej Hausenblas notes the contrast between these two uses of language on the basis of the distribution of literary and non-literary Czech in the novel, where, perhaps unexpectedly, non-literary Czech is presented as the more limited. Hausenblas writes: 'literary Czech here is unambiguously associated with higher values, spiritual or creative activity, whereas non-literary Czech belongs to the everyday reality of work.' (Hausenblas, O., 'Placákův Medorek jako čin lingvisticky', Naše řeč, 77, 1994, 1, p.12.)
animal that must be culled in the interests of the herd, or going mad, that is to say, becoming lost in the language of imagination and, like Haňta, losing all relationship with his physical existence. His struggle to preserve an intermediate position, absorbed in neither type of language, recurs in the Czech fiction of the Changes (see Chapter 4).

In the case of Medorek, which appeared in various samizdat versions between 1985 and 1989, this struggle was generally understood by critics in its political context, as an account of the psychological turmoil experienced by the individual under extreme social pressure to assimilate. Karin Pohánková describes Medorek, along with Brabcová’s Daleko od stromu and Kremlíčka’s Lodní deník, as an ‘irreplaceable confession about the formation of part of a generation which felt itself pushed to one side and limited by the political system, a generation which grew up surrounded by barbed wire, a generation without a future.’ However, as the diminutive in the title suggests, it may also be seen as the account of the passage of the child from the fluid world of its own imagination to the fixed notion of the world asserted by adults. Writers like Tolstaja, Pelevin, Hodrová and Kahuda repeatedly assert the preferability of the child’s way of perceiving reality, which they seek or yearn to restore through their writing. Finally, Medorek’s struggle may be seen as that of the writer, characterised by Hodrová in her theoretical work ...na okraji chaosu... as precariously engaged in an implicitly unending movement between the stable, accepted model of the world and the chaos of the unstable and unknown.

Medorek marks a change in the use of the adolescent perspective in Czech fiction of the period. In the 1970s and 1980s, the social assimilation of an adolescent central character formed a common plot for sanctioned writers. As Pynsent points out, the adolescent constituted a ‘natural outsider’, who could be used as a critical device to

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35 Pohánková, K., ‘Směřování mladé generace v próze osmdesátých let’, Česká literatura, 44, 1996, 2, p.181. Pohánková’s socio-political interpretation of various motifs of imprisonment and submersion in the three works somewhat recalls Chuprinin’s reaction to Dusha patriota. As the scenes written in dramatic dialogue depicting Medorek’s interviews with the StB (State Security) indicate, the political context is central to the work. However, as I try to argue throughout this dissertation, that context leads the writers of the fiction of the Changes to an understanding of the relationship between language and the human being not restricted to the specific political circumstances and therefore not ameliorated by political change.

36 See Hodrová, ...na okraji, p.129. This movement is explicitly dramatised by Ajvaz as that between Cosmos and Chaos (see Chapter 4) and by Balla as that between the conscious and unconscious (see Chapter 6).
expose the problems of contemporary society like corruption, hypocrisy, consumerism and lack of idealism. In works like *Dzínový svět* (Jeans world, 1980) by Radek John (b.1954), the narrator's decision to settle down in contemporary society implied the harnessing of his inner moral strength and demanding idealism to the cause of eradicating these social ills. At the same time, however, the assimilation was frequently low-key, suggesting that the struggle to avoid total absorption into society had been lost. In other works, notably *Lovec štěstí* (The happiness hunter, 1980) by Václav Dušek and *Už není návratu* (No way back, 1981) by Bedřich Hlinka (b.1951), the death or imprisonment of the central character indicates that oblivion is the only alternative to assimilation.

Just as the Party literary ideologues, in common with their Russian and Slovak counterparts, called on writers to document the problems facing contemporary Socialist society, the dissident establishment also expected that unsanctioned fiction would report the social and above all moral failure of the Czechoslovak regime. The literary sensibilities of older Czech dissident and émigré generations were, however, shaken by the appearance of Jan Pelc's *...a bude hůř* (...the worst is yet to come, Cologne 1985, Prague 1990), a novel set in north-west Bohemia, in which the narrator rebels against his conformist father, falling into petty crime, hard drinking, drugs and sexual promiscuity. Pelc much more unequivocally than his sanctioned counterparts blames the repressive regime for the behaviour of his characters, though hinting also at the excessively normative environment of Bohemia under any regime. For him, the human being, given the freedom to be himself, is essentially good; his narrator, who becomes an increasingly positive character as the work develops, eventually finds that freedom in emigration. Although Pelc's novel, with its portrayal of underage sex, lesbianism and incest, broke literary taboos established in the post-war period, as Martin Machovec points out, it merely represented an extreme of the social realist methods employed by writers like Dušek and John, and also bears comparison with the distorted morality depicted by Petrushevskaia. By the time of its first publication

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38 When part of the novel was published in the émigré periodical *Svédečtí*, one reader declared the work to be as dangerous as *Mein Kampf*, since it appeared to encourage young people to imitate Olin’s bid for freedom and thus, like him, become enslaved in a totalitarianism of physical desire. (See *Svédečtí*, XIX, 1985, 75, p.766.) Both the content of and the reaction to Pelc’s novel may be compared to *Eto ia – Edichka* (It’s me, Eddie, 1979) by Eduard Limonov (b.1943), also written and published in emigration.
In post-Communist Czechoslovakia, alongside Medorek, in 1990, it already appeared outdated; Pavel Janáček contrasts what he considers the ‘anti-Normalisation didacticism’ of Pelc with the ‘light pen’ of Placák.\(^\text{40}\)

In her typology of the novel, *Hledám románu*, Hodrová denotes works in which the central character seeks knowledge of the ways of the world in order to find his or her place in it, as ‘novels of lost illusions’.\(^\text{41}\) In Hodrová’s account, this type reverses an earlier teleological model found in the ‘novel of initiation’, in which the protagonist leaves the terrestrial world in search of esoteric knowledge. This type, exemplified by *Moskva-Petushki* and *Příliš hlučná samota*, dominates in Czech fiction of the Changes as a reaction to the assimilation type asserted in the Communist period. Medorek, however, like *Dusha patriota*, corresponds to the third type identified by Hodrová, the ‘novel about a misfit’ (*román o bloudovi*).\(^\text{42}\) According to Hodrová, the misfit ‘does not himself change […]', nor does he abandon the world, but he lives in a state of constant tension with it because, unlike the practically-minded character, he is unable or unwilling to adapt to it, but at the same time does not seek to escape it through mystical initiation.\(^\text{43}\) While the protagonist in the ‘novel of initiation’ or ‘novel of lost illusions’ pursues self-definition, the ‘misfit’, exemplified by the adolescent, seeks to preserve himself undefined. Eva Kantůrková describes Medorek as ‘alive and ineffable in his lifelike-ness, an artistic likeness of the quiet, inward defence of an entirely unprotected human being against destructive power’.\(^\text{44}\)

The style of Medorek’s refusal to fit in is encapsulated in the opening passage of the chapter entitled ‘Medorek, nový soudruh’ (Medorek, a new comrade), which satirically describes how society anticipates his first day at the factory:

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\(^{40}\) Janáček, P., ‘Kulatá ouzkost. Tři prozaické debuty ve zkoušce ohně’, *Lidové noviny*, 10 July 1991, p.7. In contrast, however, Josef Alan, writing at about the same time, praises the ‘peculiar authenticity’ which Pelc achieves, indicating that for other critics, Pelc’s method continues to retain importance in the post-1989 period. (See Alan, J., ‘Počkám, až naskočí červená, a spokojene přecházm’, *Tvar*, 1991, 6, pp.1-4.)

\(^{41}\) Hodrová’s negative-sounding term, in contrast to *Bildungsroman* or *Erziehungsroman*, reflects her perception that the subject cannot experience social assimilation without a sense of defeat.

\(^{42}\) See Hodrová, D., *Hledání románů*, Prague, 1989, pp.215-6. (Hereafter Hodrová, *Hledání.*) Hodrová elaborates on the meaning of the word ‘bloud’, which denotes an ‘unreasonable, foolish, preposterous person unable to adapt to reality’, but has the same root as ‘bloudění’, meaning ‘aimless wandering’. Key examples for Hodrová include both *Tristram Shandy* and *Zapiski iz podpol’ia*.

Maminka mu vyžehlila šaty, ráno mu dala do tašky sváčinu a mazliček se sám vydal do nového, nepoznaného světa, do labyrintu dospělých, do světa opravdových starostí, vážných tváří bez lehkomyšlných řečí, do světa, kde si bude již provždy sám za vše odpovídat, sám o vše starat, s ostatními bude jednat jako rovný s rovnými a společně s nimi bude řešit důležité problémy (...)


Byl nemocný a do fabriky nastoupil o měsíc později.

(The evening before Mummy ironed his clothes, in the morning she put a packed lunch in his bag and her little darling set off by himself into a new, unknown world, into the labyrinth of adults, into the world of real worries, serious faces without frivolous chatter, into a world where he himself would forever be responsible for everything, would take care of everything himself, would deal with the others as an equal with equals and together with them would solve important problems [...] A new citizen, a new comrade is entering the world, who with full responsibility is coming to build his fatherland and the happy and joyful future of all mankind. Enormous fields of golden com, newly painted combine harvesters, there will be no hunger, no war, just joyous work. A little soldier with his red scarf round his neck marching triumphantly over all the roads of the world. The whole universe, to meet the sun! Little Medorek happily smiling to welcome those millions of kind-hearted people! Watch out, Medorek’s coming.

He was ill and started at the factory a month later.)

Placák’s ironic crescendo of Socialist imagery and rhetoric culminates not in a grand gesture of revolt from Medorek, but in a bathetic ‘wrong note’ which also reflects the contrast between the great expectations which Marxism-Leninism has of human beings and their actual physical weakness.

Throughout the novel, Medorek strives to prevent his responses to the external world becoming predictable, thereby sustaining the state of confusion on which his survival depends. In a scene comparable to the encounter between Popov, Prigov and the Kantůrková, E., ‘Karel Medor, hrdinanaSi doby’, Kritický sborník, 8, 1988, 2, p.50. Hereafter Kantůrková, ‘Karel Medor’.


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policeman in *Dusha patriota*, Medorek is asked by the factory’s personnel officer why he refuses to join the Party youth movement. Medorek explains: “co svět světem stoji, ještě žádné Indián nebyl v nějakém svazu.” (since time began, no Red Indian has ever been in any movement.) After a moment’s amazement, the personnel officer decides it must be a joke and bursts out laughing. Medorek is in turn stunned by his reaction: “Čemu se směje ten blboun?” zakabonil se Medor. “Von si snad mysli, že sem si dělal srandu.” (“What’s that idiot laughing at?” scowled Medor. “Does he think I was taking the mickey?”)

Whereas the scene in *Dusha patriota* depicts the chance meeting of two worlds, in *Medorek* it constitutes the confrontation of two different games. The mutual confusion which results indicates that Medorek has won. His victory is emphasised when a fellow worker subsequently advises him to sign up just to get the bosses off his back, in terms of Hodrová’s analysis of the ‘misfit’, to reduce the ‘state of constant tension’ and begin to ‘fit in’. Medorek’s furious reaction to this suggestion provokes a twinge of guilt in the fellow-worker which reveals his awareness that he has become part of someone else’s game.

This episode somewhat recalls the contrast made by Václav Havel (b.1936) in his 1978 essay ‘Moc bezmocných’ (The power of the powerless) between those who ‘live in truth’ and those who ‘live in falsehood’ under the Normalisation regime. Havel describes the human being who tolerates the approved ‘rituals’ of the existing power structure as ‘living in falsehood’, since he has ‘accepted “appearance” as reality and acceded to the given “rules of the game”. By acceding to them, however, he has himself entered the game as a player and made it possible for the game to continue’. In Havel’s view, the path to ‘living in truth’ begins in rebellion against such rituals and exposure of the game as a game, and continues in work for the creation of a society in which all may ‘live in truth’. However, Medorek cannot be straightforwardly pigeonholed as an opponent of the system; in fact, the narrator comments, he was quite happy to join the youth movement, but just could not be bothered to fill in the form. He wipes his bottom with the form during a visit to the lavatory not in protest, but because it was the nearest paper to hand. Placák reveals here how the external world seeks to define the individual human being by imposing

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46 Ibid., p.15. Medorek’s response reflects the Czech fondness for the ‘Wild West’ stories of Karl May, to which Topol also alludes in *Sestra*.
47 Ibid., p.16.
its own interpretations on his or her actions. Medorek’s refusal to join the youth movement reflects his refusal to be part of any crowd, whether pro- or anti-regime; this is the only consistent aspect of his behaviour. For example, he likes the ‘Internationale’ precisely because no one else does. In an outburst in a pub which strongly recalls *Zapisky iz podpol’ia*, he argues: “‘Třeba někdo by chtěl tvrdit, ňáká liška podšitá, že 1+1=2! Já bych to zas tak neviděl, víbvec bych to tak neviděl, už jen proto, že to tak všichni viděj a množství, to je blbost a tupost.’” (“Maybe someone would like to argue, some wily old fox, that 1+1=2! I, on the other hand, wouldn’t see it like that, I wouldn’t see it like that at all, just because that’s the way everyone sees it and quantity, that’s just stupidity and dim-wittedness.”) For Medorek, as Vilikovský also implies in *Večne je zelený...*, there is no alternative to the ‘game’, only the choice between submitting to the rules of others, or striving endlessly to retain the freedom to make one’s own rules.

*Medorek* thus marks a key shift from the perception of the Havel/Vaculík dissident generation that the human being ‘gives a shape to his or her fate’ by his actions. Karel Vaca comments: ‘at the centre [of *Medorek*] is not the description of the event itself, but its literary experience, how it is captured in language, how it appears in “codes”.’ In the novel, Placáč presents the world as a chaos of these codes.

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48 Havel, V., ‘Moc bezmocných’ in his *O lidskou identitu*, Prague, 1990, p.64.
49 Placáč, *Medorek*, p.34.
50 The contrast in *Medorek* between adolescence as a game of identities and adulthood as the acceptance of an identity imposed by society bears comparison with Němec’s controversial sanctioned novel *Hra na stelo*, published in 1982, in which the central character is treated for schizophrenia apparently brought on by the pressure to surrender his adolescent games and commit himself to the responsibilities of adult life.
51 The attempt to break free of the influence of this generation is reflected in *...a bude hůř*, in which the narrator suggests that the Charter 77 signatories are just Communists in disguise, a reference to the Communist past and essentially left-wing views of the most prominent post-Thaw dissidents. In *Medorek*, Placáč seeks to re-mythicise the ‘underground’ generation, not as a practically minded and courageous opposition, but as disparate gangs engaged in mysterious enterprises and cultivating alternative lifestyles. In this respect his novel recalls *Invalidni sourozenci* (Invalid siblings, Toronto 1981, Prague 1991) by Egon Bondy (b.1930), a dystopian allegory in which Bohemia is depicted as an island slowly being submerged. (In *Medorek*, Placáč also half-heartedly suggests that the action of the novel is taking place in the distant future in an island city threatened by an apocalyptic flood.) In *Invalidni sourozenci*, the dissidents, whose high-minded intellectualism Bondy affectionately parodies, are paid invalidity benefit by the state because they are ineffective workers, and live in a hippie commune at the highest point of the island. Bondy and Placáč are also linked through the 1970s underground rock band, The Plastic People of the Universe, who set some of Bondy’s poems to music and feature in *Invalidni sourozenci* and *...a bude hůř*, and for whom Placáč wrote and played during the 1980s.
52 -kv- [Karel Vaca], ‘Boži prostota?’, *Kritický sborník*, 8, 1988, 3, p.56.
53 In her detailed linguistic analysis of *Medorek*, Karen Gammelgaard comments: ‘Tending towards diversity, uncertainty and chaos, [the text] blends a multitude of narrative modes. Moreover, the
between which the individual must strive constantly to slip in order to preserve his subjec
tivity, defined as the continued capacity of the mind to project 'red herring' selves upon the external world. The novel may be described as an account of the mind of Medorek as he observes the various selves he projects in the company of others. Throughout the novel, the reader, like those who encounter Medorek, cannot pin down the sullen factory worker who is also an aggressive loner in pubs, a fervent lover of literature and writer of poetry, an obsessive football fan and a mysterious underground activist to a single definable self. Kantůrková writes that the latter part of the work merely contains 'variations on Medorek', though such an interpretation would require an identifiable 'original Medorek' earlier in the work. Placák thus presents the disintegrated personality not as a consequence of particular political circumstances, but as the actual nature of social existence.

The awareness of this disintegration in Medorek is not a source of horror, but on the contrary, evidence of the continued mental health of the individual. Medorek’s ability to perceive life, understood as one’s social existence, as a linguistic game of identities implicitly renders him superior to the other characters in the novel. His behaviour recalls the description by the Czech Decadent Arthur Breisky (1885-1910) of the dandy as a ‘victor over life’, ‘an artist of life, a lover of artificial paradises and new, personally differentiated sensations, and a despiser of all that is natural, self-evident and general. The narrator repeatedly notes how the world fascinates and amuses Medorek, who, like Breisky’s dandy, or Popov’s flâneur in Dusha patriota, observes the life around him as though he were not involved. For Medorek, the mind absorbed in the external world adopts an active relationship with all that surrounds it, seeking to explain, understand or supply causality; in contrast, Medorek’s mind takes a passive, descriptive role: ‘Jdeš a popisuješ věci. Pozoruješ je a necháváš zapadnout bez odezvy, bez komentáře. Jen tak je hodiš do hlubiny močálu duše. Jdeš a svými smysly jako velkými sběráči saješ vše kolem, zatímco úvaha spi.’ (You go along and describe things. You observe them and let them fall without an echo, without comment. You throw them just like that into the depths of the swamp of your soul.

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Kantůrková, *Karel Medor*, p.50.
You go along sucking in everything around you with your senses like enormous ladles, while considered reactions sleep.\textsuperscript{56}

The ease with which Medorek becomes bored by physical and social reality and drifts into vivid and intense daydreams reflects his refusal to be restricted by the physically manifest world, which for Medorek does not constitute the maximum space within which the mind can operate, as in Realism, but rather the minimum required for flights of fantasy. Towards the end of the work, prefiguring in particular Kahuda’s fiction, discussed in Chapter 6, Medorek appears able to separate himself from his body, which learns to conform to the work process, and abandon the notion of a discrete individual self altogether: ‘Putoval cestickami vědomí lidi okolo něj, aniž by netušili. Putoval nekonečnými prostorami věcí kolem sebe. […] Všechno se neustále větvilo a ubíralo do nekonečna. Každá další myšlenka vyvolávala tisíce jiných a těch tisíc tisíckrát tolik.’ (He travelled around the little paths of the consciousness of people around him, without them suspecting anything. He travelled through the infinite spaces of things around him […] Everything constantly forked and headed off into infinity. Every new thought evoked a thousand others and those thousand a thousand times more.)\textsuperscript{57} In these moments, as Placák describes at the end of the work, Medorek escapes the ‘anti-Christ’ of Socialist industry-worship and becomes a ‘knight of God’: ‘Naposled se na fabriku zadival. Stála tam, obrovská, šedivá, s pobledlou hvězdou na čele. […] Medorek popohnal koně. Jeho meč se ve světle vycházející slunce zlatě třpytil. Orlové kroužili ve výšinách nebeského království a lvi ho vítali pozdravným řvaním. Medorova písnička se nesla mezi skalami, stoupala k nebesům.’ (He looked back at the factory for the last time. It stood there, huge, grey, with a fading star on its brow. […] Medorek urged on his horse. His sword glittered gold in the light of the rising sun. Eagles circled in the heights of the kingdom of heaven and lions greeted him with a welcoming roar. Medor’s song floated among the cliffs and rose to the heavens.)\textsuperscript{58} In imitation of the bathetic finale to the novel’s opening rhapsody, quoted above, the reader is returned abruptly from Medorek’s fantasy to an image of him sleeping soundly on the bus home from work. On this occasion, however, the preceding passage is not undermined; rather, through

\textsuperscript{56} Placák, \textit{Medorek}, p.104.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., p.120.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., p.162.
the juxtaposition of the spiritual and physical worlds, Placák indicates the continuing success of Medorek's battle not only to survive, but above all to preserve the freedom of his imagination, and therefore, implicitly, his soul.59

The notion that, under extreme pressure to assimilate in Czech Normalisation society, the personality must repeatedly disintegrate to prevent itself from becoming fixed and dependent recurs in Brabcová's Daleko od stromu. The narrator, Věra, comments:

[...]

Whereas, however, in Medorek, the experience of psychological disintegration is presented merely as a game of words, in Daleko od stromu it constitutes a loss of control over language, a sense of impotence and a fear of speaking, ultimately intended, as Pohánková indicates, as an expression of the alienation of the generation which grew up in the post-1968 period. Věra comments early in the novel: 'náša generace, autistická, alkoholická, proležlá dluhy, východně teskná a neambiciózní, západně věcná a zrychněná, náša generace bez kotvy, neboť bez moře.' (our generation, autistic, alcoholic, up to its neck in debts, orientally melancholy and

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59 In 'Starcovy zápisky' (An old man's notes, 1995), an essay reflecting on the continued decline of spirituality in the Czech Republic after the fall of Communism, Placák writes: 'Kostra je největší složkou člověka – je to sama duše, která zvěřatí a katolici dobře vědějí, že uchovávají ostatky svatých. Blahoslavení kostlivci, mrtví, tiší, pokojná, neznatelné radostí a hlavně důstojnosti a hrdů. Nesnásím pokoutné spalování lidských kostí.' (The skeleton is the most noble part of the human being – it is the soul itself, which has become calcified – and the Catholics do well when they store the relics of saints. Blessed skeletons, dead, quiet, peaceful, imperceptibly joyful and above all dignified and proud. I can't stand the surreptitious burners of human skeletons.) (Placák, 'Starcovy zápisky' in his Medorek, p.175.)

60 Brabcová, Z., Daleko od stromu, Prague, 1991, p.120.
unambitious,occidentally matter-of-fact and accelerated, our generation without an
anchor because it is without a sea.\textsuperscript{61}

A key theme of the novel is the alienation, as opposed to continuity, between
generations, reflected in the title, which alludes to the saying ‘The apple never falls
far from the tree’. Věra’s father, a 1960s reformer turned dissident, cannot understand
his daughter’s inability to act or commit herself.\textsuperscript{62} Her retreat into herself
paradoxically mirrors that of her grandfather, a fervent Communist after the war, who
similarly inhabits his own private world, crippled by an awareness of the absolute
relativity of human action and alienated from his son. Věra’s identity crisis is
prompted by her refusal to commit herself to the identity imposed by her father, and is
reflected in her fear of putting pen to paper. The origin of these difficulties lies in an
episode in childhood when, in front of a group of children, she was unable to fulfil her
father’s request to draw a flash of lightning. Later she covered the walls of his study
with lightning flashes, indicating how her inability and unwillingness to accept an
externally imposed identity become blurred in an absurd, destructive but vital act of
rebellion. The flash of lightning is, according to Věra’s teacher, the oldest example of
cave painting and therefore marked the end of pre-history and the birth of civilisation.
Věra’s longing to return to a pre-literary, prehistoric world reflects the longing for
silence found in the fiction of Kolenič. However, where, for Kolenič’s narrators, the
process of writing represents the utter pointlessness of existence, in Daleko od stromu,
by writing the narrator ultimately ‘gives shape to her fate’, and thereby achieves her
ambition stated at the beginning of the work to write a novel.

The strength arising from this achievement, shared by the narrator and implied
author, is reflected in Brabcová’s less neurotic, more playful second novel, Zlodějina,
in which the third-person narration creates distance between the implied author and
her two central characters, whose discrete, alternating stories nevertheless suggest
once again a split personality. In one narrative thread, which focuses on the

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., p. 10. As in Medorek, Příliš hlučná samota, Invalidní sourozenci, Lodní deník and Kratochvil’s
Medvědí roman (A bear novel, 1990, dated as written 1985), the Normalisation is represented by rising
floodwaters, the imminent erasure of identity and the destruction of civilisation.

\textsuperscript{62} Brabcová is the daughter of the academic and literary critic Jiří Brabec (b. 1929), who lost his
function in the Writers’ Union in the 1970 purges and subsequently published prolifically on Czech
literature and thought in samizdat and tamizdat. Unlike in Kratochvil’s novels, however, the
autobiographical reading of the father-child relationship in Brabcová’s fiction is suppressed.
fulfilment of Věra’s other ambition - to have a child - a woman, Matějů, trapped in a lift gradually becomes aware of the child growing inside her, in the context of Daleko od stromu, a hesitant, but undeniable signal of commitment to the future. The notion of her child as a sign of hope is reflected in her name, understood as an allusion to Matthew the Evangelist, the first to report the Good News. This link is intensified by the name of the central character in the other narrative thread, Eman, from ‘Emmanuel’, the name used by Isaiah for the Messiah and recalled by Matthew in his Gospel. Brabcová’s travestied messianism, as in Medorek, and also in novels by Hodrová, Kratochvil and Topol, reflects the ‘holy-foolish’ nobility of the social outsider similarly asserted by Venedikt Erofeev and Hrabal. In Eman’s story, which might be described as a carnivalised Daleko od stromu, Eman has a mental breakdown when asked what he did on November 17th 1989. On that day, rather than participate in the protests, he tried to run away from a student demonstration and was beaten up by police, a reflection of his situation ‘outside’ the two opposing sides. The title of the novel plays on the Czech for ‘thievery’ (zlodějna) and ‘history’ (dějiny), a plural noun made singular perhaps to denote the single historical event which steals Eman’s fragile identity from him. Like Věra, he yearns to return to a time before history, which he achieves at the end of the novel when he flees from Prague with a Gipsy woman to a cave by a lake, perhaps in Romania, thereby reversing the journey taken by his father from the ‘prehistoric’ Carpathians to ‘civilised’ Prague.

In her first two novels, Brabcová, like Popov and Placák, rejects the use of literary creation to impose a shape on the world, and asserts its use to give shape to the self. Whereas Popov, however, explicitly emphasises the weakness of literature, and Placák suggests that its power is not of this world, Brabcová presents writing as a means by which the self can be reconciled with the world on its own terms. This hesitant assertion of the enduring potency of writing finds more robust expression in Pišťanek’s fiction, in which the satirisation of the attempt by intellectuals to impose their illusions on human beings does not preclude the ever more extravagant exploitation of the capacity of the self to impose itself upon reality through writing. In his best-known work, the Rivers of Babylon trilogy, his ironic celebration of the excess and total disregard for limits which marked the amoral, barbaric world of post-Communist gangster capitalism mirrors the utterly unironic celebration of the ferocious, limitless ambition of the imagination. Vilikovský wrote in one review:
our life, says Pisť'anek, is banal and rests on the principle of crass pleasure. Luckily, we still know how to suffer and dream; it's a pity, though, that our suffering is narcissistic and sterile [...] and our dreams are vulgar and without imagination [...] However, as long as a human being is capable of writing this sort of fiction, the situation cannot be completely hopeless.

Rivers of Babylon, Pišť'anek's first novel, described by Igor Otčenáš as a 'breakthrough work' in contemporary Slovak literature, signalled that Pišť'anek's intention was not merely épater le bourgeois, but also, above all, épater l'intelligent by ironically glorifying all that the intelligentsia reject, and degrading all they hold dear. A parody rags-to-riches tale, the novel recounts how Rácz, cheated of his inheritance and bride, leaves his village to seek his fortune in Bratislava, where he rises from apprentice boiler-man at a city-centre hotel to become head of his own business empire centred on the same hotel. According to Marta Součková, Pišť'anek's description of an amoral cartoon world in which every character is motivated only by personal gain relieved Slovak literature of its seriousness, hyperbolically breaking taboos on sexual motifs, restoring parody, black humour and the grotesque and introducing characters about whom it had previously not been possible to write, including 'prostitutes, lesbians, homosexuals, greedy intellectuals and venal female students'. Moreover, in his narration, frequently made up of the reported speech and thoughts of characters, Pišť'anek not only replicated, but also embellished the vernacular of the world he portrays.

Pišť'anek's use of 'low' registers and literary forms, repeatedly noted by critics, represents a rare example in Russian, Czech or Slovak fiction of the Changes of a successful attempt, in Leslie Fiedler's phrase, to 'cross the border, close the gap'. In his 1970 essay, which has come to be seen in both West and East as a core text of postmodernist theory, Fiedler essentially attacks the elitism present in contemporary

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66 Whereas in ...a bude húť..., Pelc seeks to replicate the coarse register of his characters in an attempt to assert the authenticity of his account, in his fiction, Pišť'anek uses, for example, highly literary Slovak, urban and rural non-literary Slovak, the Americanised Slovak of a returning émigré (in Rivers of Babylon 2), archaic Slovak and grammatically and idiomatically correct Czech (in Rivers of Babylon 3) not for verisimilitude, but to assert the capacity of his imagination to make these different 'languages' its own. A similar strategy is employed by Topol in Sestra (see Chapter 4).
literature, which appears divided between experimental works which critics praise and analyse and books which people actually want to read. He notes from his recent reading that writers are turning to ‘pop forms’ like the Western, science-fiction or pornography, producing works which are ‘less serious, more frivolous, a form of entertainment.’ The result is a ‘closing of the Gap which aristocratic conceptions of art have opened between what fulfils us at eight or ten or twelve and what satisfies at forty or fifty or sixty.’ Of the writers discussed in this dissertation, however, only the reception which greeted Pelevin’s fiction in Russia in the early 1990s can match Pišťanek’s combined commercial and critical impact in Slovak literature (see Chapter 6), while no comparable cross-over has been made by a writer in post-Changes Czech literature. The general absence of a Fiedler-esque, anti-élitist ‘postmodernism’ may reflect the perceived homogeneity of sanctioned fiction under Communism, when fiction was expected to be accessible to a wide readership. As may be evident from the works discussed so far, the Russian, Czech and Slovak writers of fiction commonly described as ‘postmodernist’ seek, in essence, to diversify contemporary literature by restoring rather than overcoming an uncompromising élitism.

Of crucial importance for Fiedler was the closing of the gap between critic and audience, ‘if by critic one understands “leader of taste” and by audience “follower”’. In the case of Pišťanek’s fiction, these roles are reversed, to the evident discomfort of some critics. Stanislava Chrobáková wrote: ‘the thematicisation of the decay of values, also reflected in lowness of genre and language, brings too many questions (and indeed too much violence) for the cultivated reader to be able to submit unequivocally to the talents of the author as observer and story-teller’. Rather as Chuprinin’s afterword to the first publication of Dusha patriota sought to delineate the ‘moral message’ of the work, Chrobáková’s lukewarm review of Rivers of Babylon, together with that of Ladislav Čúzy in the same issue of Romboid, revealed

68 Ibid., p.472.
69 Topol remains a writer more known than read, while Michal Viewegh, whose fiction combines satirisation of contemporary society with literary allusion and self-reflexivity, nevertheless repeatedly returns in interviews to his failure to match commercial success with critical approval. (See, for example, his interview in Rock&Pop, July 2002, pp.46-51.) The best Czech example is probably Páral in his fiction from the late 1960s, culminating in Profesionální žena (A professional woman, 1971).
70 Fiedler, ‘Cross’, p.478.
Slovak critics’ enduring expectation of clear implied authorial guidance, on which their enjoyment of a literary work apparently depended. While Chrobáková is dissatisfied with Pišťanek’s ‘incompletely defined position [resulting from] premeditated semantic ambiguity’, Čuzy writes: ‘aesthetically it did nothing for me, and philosophically it told me almost nothing.’

Pynsent writes: ‘If Pišťanek does have a [morally self-conscious] goal, he manages to hide it, whatever we as readers impose on the white between the lines.’ The world portrayed in the Rivers of Babylon trilogy bears such a teasingly close relationship to the reality of the gangster capitalism which overtook former Communist countries after 1989 that the reader cannot but interpret the novels as a comment on the period. Although, like Petrushevskaia’s stories, Pišťanek’s works lack any explicit indication of the implied author’s moral position, the contrasting use of hyperbole by each writer does provide some indication. As, for example, in the reference in Vremia-noch’ to a woman who left her unwanted baby on the ledge by an open window and waited for it to freeze to death, Petrushevskaia buries incidents of apparently inhuman behaviour, purporting to be realistic accounts of hyperbolic reactions, in the middle of dense passages of narrative, cramming a wealth of detail into a very few words. Petrushevskaia thus demonstrates in miniature her aim in so much of her short fiction to give a voice to the unheard cry of pain, forcing the reader to notice and consider an individual’s plight. Indeed, one may even argue that the implied author hopes – rather than ensures – that the reader’s initial condemnation may be followed by pity and – perhaps – a concern to know how the individual reached this state and a desire to help. In contrast, the purpose of hyperbole in Pišťanek’s work is to make the reader laugh, to demonstrate the immutably absurd nature of the human being. Pynsent writes: ‘[Pišťanek] enjoys what he abhors and seeks to lead his readers to the same enjoyment, at the safe distance of literariness […] The human race is risible for Pišťanek; he enjoys, perhaps even secretly admires, the species for its very risibility.’

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72 Ibid.
In this way, Pišťanek fundamentally rejects the conventional understanding in Slovak culture, of which the Marxist-Leninist period represented only an example, that literature should ‘improve’ the human being, both by seeking to educate, and by providing examples of ‘better’ human beings. Součkova argues that Rivers of Babylon did not represent the ‘culmination of all previous literature, but rather its radical denial. In this lies its greatest value. For her, this radical denial is epitomised by Pišťanek’s short story ‘Mlády Dôňč’ (Young Dôňč, 1993), which is set, like most classic Slovak literature, in the countryside. However, Součková writes, Pišťanek ‘does not find charm in the family idyll, he is not moved by social misery in the village or town, caused, after all, by dim-wittedness and stupidity. He looks on the common people with neither benevolent humour nor affectionate distance, but rather parodies the sentimentality of previous fiction on this theme.

In ‘Mlády Dôňč’, a parody Bildungsroman, Dôňč, a naive, sensitive youth from a mountain village, is sent by his mentally deficient and physically deformed family to work in the nearby factory to earn money for alcohol, which in the story appears to be the last requirement for keeping a Slovak peasant biologically alive. At the factory, Dôňč hears rumours about prostitutes in the ‘City’ and begins to contemplate going there, to the horror of the other men from his village, for whom the very mention of the City is apparently taboo. Dôňč, however, attacks them for not having first-hand experience of what they are talking about: “to len my tu sedíme na zadkoch a sme samé vraj, vraj! A nič nevieme naozaj [...] Možno dakde vo svete je i lepšie, len tam treba ist’.” (We just sit here on our backsides and all the time it’s ‘they say’, ‘they say’! And we don’t know anything for sure [...] Maybe somewhere in the world it’s even better, and we only have to go there.) The response of one, Nagy, is scathing: “Lepšie?” pohrdavo sa spýta Nagy, “To len takým môže byť inde lepšie...voľnomyšlienárom! Čo ich nič k dedovízni nepúta!” (‘Better’, asked

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75 Pynsent, ’Video Nasties’, p.91.
76 Součková, ‘Slovenský’, p.63.
77 Ibid. Zoltán Rédey describes ‘Mlády Dôňč’ as a ‘morbid caricature’ of T'apákovce (The T'apákov family, 1914) by Timrava (pseudonym of Božena Slančíková, 1867-1951), one of the best-known literary treatments of the modernisation of Slovak rural life. (Rédey, Z., ‘Mlády Dôňč - starý syndrom’, Romboid, XIX, 1994, 4, p.56.)
78 Pišťanek, P., Mlády Dôňč, Levic, 1998, p.68. The volume contains three short stories, one of which is ‘Mlády Dôňč’. 
Nagy scornfully, ‘It can only be better elsewhere for those...free-thinkers! Nothing ties them to the village.’)\textsuperscript{79}

Nagy embodies the crass Slovak chauvinism which dominated the early post-independence period under the government of Vladimir Mečiar. However, Pišťanek’s satire is not simply that of the urban intellectual, mocking rural backwardness. In his reference to ‘free-thinkers’, Nagy already identifies Dônc with the cosmopolitan intellectuals who betray all that is good and Slovak. After their argument, Dônc reflects how he has become estranged from his family, and he sets off for the City, where, however, he can only afford manual relief from a prostitute who takes pity on him. On his return home, he finds his father declaring that time has stopped, and exhibits his greater knowledge of the world by pointing out that in fact only the kitchen clock has stopped. Unable to stomach the stagnation, Dônc sets off once again. At the end of the story, Dante’s metaphor for sinful existence, a ‘dark wood’, looms before him, Pišťanek’s ironic indication that he has abandoned the Slovak nationalist Eden of the village for the venal, alien City.

Though the reader who knows Rivers of Babylon may infer from the conclusion that Dônc will become another Rácz, Dônc is a different type. Through Dônc’s ‘sentimental education’ and his chastening return to his family, Pišťanek satirically documents the transformation of the dim-witted, self-absorbed village boy into the apparently equally dim-witted, self-absorbed urban intellectual who will write about his roots, any criticism suffused with nostalgia. In the context of the period, Pišťanek may be understood here to be attacking the writers who lent support to Mečiarite nationalism, but the satire is much broader, as indicated by the subtitle of Rivers of Babylon 2 alebo Drevená dedina (1994), a reference to the Socialist Realist novel, Drevená dedina (A wooden village, 1951) by František Hečko (1905-1960).\textsuperscript{80} In Pišťanek’s view, writers like Hečko, but also Timrava and the contemporary nationalists, whose fiction implicitly or explicitly subscribed to a belief in the human being’s capacity to redeem and be redeemed, simply lost sight of what Součková terms the ‘biological’ in the human being, which in Pišťanek’s work carries none of

\textsuperscript{79} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{80} Ibid.
the positive connotations of the ‘natural’ or ‘authentic’. In encouraging his readers, as Pynsent suggests, to share his enjoyment of what he perceives as the innate risibility of human beings, Pišťanek seeks, with irony, to make the intellectual reader love the physical human being from whom he or she recoils.

Rather as Peter Zajac interprets Vilikovský’s narrator in Večne je zelený..., Otčenáš suggests that the ‘moral devastation’ of Pišťanek’s characters, reflected in his choice of literary form and language, represents the outcome of intellectuals’ imposing their ideas on human beings: ‘Rácz and so on are the real product of this historical flatulence: an over-sensitive intelligentsia, bastardised workers, a corrupted nation. Long live non-literature! A non-period cannot be written about otherwise!’

Pišťanek, however, does not even credit literature with the ability to deform the human being, suggesting instead that human beings are immune to efforts to tamper with them. Whereas writers like Popov and both Erofeevs, and also Prigov and Sorokin, perceive ideas and ideals as inherently dangerous, Pišťanek, in common with other Slovak writers of the Changes like Vilikovský and Kolenič, considers them as ineffectual as the people who conceive them.

The weakness of Slovak writers, according to Pišťanek, derives from the fact that they have worked only to perpetuate a particular notion of the human being, imposing illusory limits not so much on human beings in general (as Russian and Czech writers imply), but on themselves. Throughout his fiction, Pišťanek portrays characters who invent arbitrary psychological limits for themselves, essentially by seeking to limit their aspirations, an approach which is often reflected in their attempts to secure a circumscribed autonomous physical space. For example, in Rivers of Babylon, that space corresponds for the head boiler-man, Donáth, to the confines of the boiler-room. Donáth preserves this space by being a reliable provider of heat, thus retaining the good-will of those who work in the hotel complex, and by accepting the restrictions placed on him by the hotel manager, excluding from public areas of the

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80 In Rivers of Babylon 2, the ‘wooden village’ refers to what Pišťanek implicitly suggests is the new national symbol of Slovakness, the grim buffet-bar outside Rácz’s hotel, run by Rácz’s former sweetheart and the man who stole her from him, now wretchedly aspiring to match Rácz’s wealth.

81 Otčenáš, ‘Nech’. Defending Pišťanek’s use of vulgarisms and low literary forms, Rudolf Sloboda writes: ‘the most vile people were heroes who in fine literary Slovak, without disgusting words, hanged, tortured, blackmailed and tormented the Slovak nation.’ (Sloboda, R., ‘Niekoľko poznámkov k Riekam Babylonu’, Dotyky, IV, 1992, 2, p.40.)
hotel. The modest dimensions of the space are reflected by his aspirations in life: ‘jemu, Donáthovi, stačí trocha lásky, trocha sa porozprávať.’ (it’s enough for him, Donáth, to have a little love and a little chat.)\(^82\) His apprentice, Rácz, however, reflects: ‘Donáth bol nimand. Nie ako on, Rácz. Rácz žije plným životom.’ (Donáth was a nobody. Not like him, Rácz. Rácz lives life to the full.)\(^83\) In contrast to Donáth, Rácz marches straight into the hotel foyer and, when his pay is docked for this offence, he turns off the heating, extorting money from hotel guests and local tradesmen and forcing a striptease dancer to sleep with him in return for restoring the heat. Only the hotel manager refuses to comply with Rácz’s demands, but the limits of his power have been exposed, and those formerly in his power transfer their allegiance to Rácz: ‘vedia, že Rácz nenávidí riaditeľa, a tak sa riaditeľovi všetci vyhýbajú. Alebo sa tvária, že ho nevidia. Nik sa nechce kompromitovať stykmi s odsúdencom.’ (They know that Rácz hates the manager, and so everyone avoids him. Or they pretend not to see him. No one wants to compromise himself through contact with a condemned man.)\(^84\) The hotel manager, trapped in his freezing office, slowly becomes convinced that he really belongs among the Eskimo, and eventually flees the hotel on a sledge pulled by kidnapped dogs (perhaps to join the oppressed Slovaks in the Arctic Circle, described in Rivers of Babylon 3 alebo Freddyho koniec (Rivers of Babylon 3 or Freddy’s end, 1999.))\(^85\)

Characters who seek to enclose their existence within fixed limits are motivated by self-preservation in the face of the daunting, apparent limitlessness of the world around them. They perceive that they can best shield themselves by accepting their humble position in a social, spatial hierarchy and being complicit in whichever power is most likely to maintain that hierarchy undisturbed. This willingness to collaborate is given an explicit political context in Pišťanek’s Skázky o Vladovi (Tales of Vlado, 1995), a buoyant satire on the Mečiar period, in which Pišťanek playfully conceals prominent figures like Mečiar’s Minister of Culture, Dušan Slobodník, and the


\(^{83}\) Ibid., p.100. Rácz’s remark recalls the comment of the narrator in Vilikovsky’s Večné je zelený...: ‘všetko, čo som v životе robil, robil som naplnо.’ (Everything I’ve done in life, I’ve done to the full.) (Vilikovsky, P., Večné je zelený..., Bratislava, 1989, p.47.)

\(^{84}\) Pišťanek, Rivers 1, p.75.

\(^{85}\) Pišťanek’s numbering of his sequels owes more to cinema, especially low-grade commercial films, than literature, as the title of this second sequel, reminiscent of the Nightmare on Elm Street series, indicates. (In 1995 and 1996, Pišťanek contributed a series of survey articles on cinematic genres to Dotyky.)
Speaker of Parliament, Ivan Gašparovič, behind epithets such as ‘slobodnik z Vladovej stráže’ (The Lance-Corporal of Vlado’s Guard) or ‘Vladov gašpar’ (Vlado’s Clown). The collection, followed by further volumes in 1997 and 2002, parodies the tradition of exemplars, describing episodes from the lives of saints or folk heroes or, indeed, as Pavel Matejovič points out, Lenin. However, the target of Pišťanek’s satire is not Mečiar himself, but those who protect his position in order to preserve their own including, as Pišťanek makes clear, supposed opponents of Vlado, notably leaders of opposition parties like Ján Čarnogurský or Peter Weiss, and the Czech president, Václav Havel. The narrator frequently reveals that Vlado’s followers have not understood his teachings, but none the less fall to their knees in the presence of such wisdom. In their eyes, the logic is not that of meaning, but of power. Vlado and his followers appear to do nothing but tour the country making speeches, while Vlado’s one heroic act is to fix his official car, yet the reader, like Vlado’s followers, accepts the reality of his power, which, like that of the Emperor in Hans Christian Andersen’s story, is based on nothing but the complicity of others.

Pišťanek rejects the complicity and compromise inherent not only in the socio-political collective, but also in literary circles, which become beholden to their collective theories. In Rivers of Babylon 2, Pišťanek explicitly expresses his disdain for the self-styled Barbarians, Bielik, Litvák, Turan and Zbruž, depicting them as drunken long-haired hooligans who spend their summers cleaning lavatories in the West, before returning to make an exhibition of themselves in the Writers’ Club until their hard currency runs out. Pynsent argues that, in Rivers of Babylon 3, Pišťanek also responds to the Genitalists, commenting: ‘The vulgarity of the action had by then intensified, the breadth of Pišťanek’s satire extended – like the penis of one of the “characters”, Zongora, which is thirty-two centimetres long when erect. Probably consciously, Pišťanek had out-genitalized the Genitalists’. Above all an ardent individualist, Pišťanek seeks in this way to dissociate himself from any identification with what he implicitly presents as the mediocrity of the ‘herd’ of post-1989 writers.

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87 Pelevin similarly mocks trendy young postmodernist poets in his novels in order to distance himself from any perceived connection with them (see Chapter 6).
88 Pynsent, ‘Video-Nasties’, p.89.
For Pišt’anek, then, as for Popov, literature fundamentally represents ‘self-characterisation’. For Pišt’anek, however, this definition carries no sense of loss or weakness; on the contrary, Pišt’anek’s fiction expresses the energy and potency of liberation from obedience to any collective. In his fiction, Pišt’anek seeks, like Rácz, to ‘live life to the full’, to expand constantly the limits of the imagination. In his review of *Rivers of Babylon*, Daniel Ucháli identifies Pišt’anek with the wheedling, sexually perverted car park attendant Fredy Meštánek; apart from the similarity in names, the plump, unshaven Fredy, wrapped in an anorak, physically resembles photos of the author on the jacket. While, for Fredy, Rácz represents a model of personal success to be emulated, for Pišt’anek he represents a model of unfettered imagination. Rácz features only sporadically in the sequels to the first *Rivers of Babylon*, but his constant presence in the reader’s mind gives him the status of a muse. The sequels recount how not only Fredy, but also Pišt’anek radically expands his horizons, culminating in his most spectacularly ambitious novel, *Rivers of Babylon 3*, which, comparable perhaps to Pelevin’s *Chapaev i Pustota*, undoubtedly achieves its aim to outstrip not only Pišt’anek’s own other work, but also all contemporaneous Slovak fiction. In the novel, written in a mixture of modern and archaic Slovak and Czech, Fredy is at first a tyrannical producer/director of hard-core porn films starring his wife, then a wanted sex pest. He flees to the Arctic Circle, where, through absurd good fortune and despite exceptional cowardice, he assists in liberating a Slovak minority in an oil-rich region from a Russian-backed khanate and is crowned their king. Significantly, however, at the end he remains the puppet of Rácz, indicating that the limits of the imagination can never be reached. In his portrayal of Fredy, Pišt’anek, in contrast, for example, to Placak and other Czech writers of the Changes, removes all nobility from his voyages in his imagination, which ultimately for Pišt’anek represent nothing more than the essence of every writer’s work.

In the fiction of Popov, Placák, Pišt’anek and indeed Petrushevskaya, literature is presented no longer as a means of enclosing the human being within definitions, but rather as the expression of, in Camus’s view, the only freedom given to the human being, to ‘give a shape’ to his or her fate. In effect, instead of asserting what these
writers perceive as the unreasonable aspirations which human beings harbour for their existence, literature becomes the expression of that existence in progress, its transient energy, emphasised by Placák and Pišťanek, and its ultimate impotence, emphasised by Popov. The varied expression of this perception among Russian, Czech and Slovak writers of the Changes forms the subject of the next three chapters.
Chapter 3

The Rejection of Realism: Aleksandr Ivanchenko, Tat’iana Tolstaia, Dušan Mitana

The assertion of literature as ‘self-characterisation’ represents an attempt to eradicate what the writers of the Changes perceive as the collectivising voice inherent in realist writing. In their view, realist techniques seek to establish and perpetuate a fixed, shared version of the world into which the reader is drawn. In ...na okraji chaosu..., Hodrová comments:

[The ‘open work’] does not suggest to the reader a single, undoubted meaning, but some radiating network or field of possible meanings. This conception of meaning is not only a general reaction to the conception of meaning aspiring to unambiguousness in works with a Realist poetics, still surviving and indeed dominant in the twentieth century, but sometimes (in Czech literature in the 1960s and subsequently in the 1990s) it has unquestionably also constituted a very concrete reaction to the single and unerring Meaning dictated to literary works by totalitarian ideology.¹

This apparent synonymity of realism and socio-political didacticism is also reflected in Viktor Erofeev’s conflation of the two in a single paragraph of ‘Pominki po sovetskoi literature’. According to Erofeev, ‘hypermoralism’, the defining feature of Russian literature, has all too often caused Russian writers to ‘deviate from aesthetic tasks into the realm of unambiguous prophecy’. He continues: ‘Literature has frequently been measured by the degree of acuteness and social significance of problems. I am not saying that there should not be social realism – let there be everything – but to imagine the national literature only as literature with a social bias is nothing short of hard labour and anguish.’²

On the one hand, the pointedly over-simplified, often caricatured notion of realism presented by writers like Hodrová and Erofeev may be seen as arising from the particular literary situation pertaining in the Soviet Union and Communist Czechoslovakia. On the other, however, it closely corresponds to the presentation of realism in works by British and American ‘metafictional’ writers of the 1960s and 1970s, who also question the unselfconscious creation of a fictional illusion in realist writing. Of these writers Patricia Waugh comments:

¹ Hodrová, ...na okraji, p.164.
Contemporary metafictional writing is both a response and a contribution to [a] thoroughgoing sense that reality or history are provisional: no longer a world of eternal verities but a series of constructions, artifices, impermanent structures. The materialist, positivist and empiricist world-view on which realistic fiction is premised no longer exists. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that more and more novelists have come to question and reject the forms that correspond to this ordered reality.\(^3\)

The Czech writers of the Changes, whose fiction I examine in the next chapter, equate the abandonment of realism with the release of literature from ideologisation into freedom. In this chapter, however, I shall discuss works by Ivanchenko, Mitana and Tolstaia, who present the realist approach as a hubristic misdirection of human efforts, but consider the alternatives not as a liberation, but as an acknowledgement of human impotence. In the case of Mitana’s post-1989 fiction, this impotence is reflected less in the subversion of realism, a feature of Mitana’s writing since his first collection of stories, and more in the disintegration of the story, understood as an expression of the human being’s capacity to give order or shape to his existence.

Tolstaia and Ivanchenko bridge the transition from Soviet to post-Soviet literature, rather as Mitana bridges the transition between pre- and post-Changes Slovak literature. The fiction of Tolstaia and Ivanchenko, who first came to wider critical attention in the mid-1980s, was initially viewed as the continuation of the development of Soviet urban fiction in the 1970s and 1980s.\(^4\) Indeed, Evgenii Shklovskii’s 1988 discussion of ‘new’ fiction by ‘young’ writers, including Tolstaia and Ivanchenko, begins with an expression of disappointment that it appears to offer nothing new. He places Tolstaia in a meaningless category of writers ‘in their thirties’ (tridtsatiletnie), presumably expected to follow on from the ‘sorokatiletnie’ (see Introduction).\(^5\) However, despite adopting the appearance of urban realism, the fiction of both Tolstaia and Ivanchenko in fact seeks not only to subvert realist

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techniques, but also to reject the principles perceived to underlie them. It thus typifies the approach of what critics in 1989 began to call 'other fiction'.

Ivanchenko’s best-known work is *Monogramma* (Monogram, 1992), which was nominated for the first Russian Booker Prize in 1992. However, writing that same year, Mark Lipovetskii considered it inferior to Ivanchenko’s earlier novel, *Avtoprotret s dogom*, which he described as ‘quite exceptional in the context of the “new wave”’.° Perhaps because of its superficial resemblance to a typical work of urban realism from the late Brezhnev period, the novel received less critical attention in the late 1980s than fiction that was more overtly ‘other’. However, perhaps uniquely, through the contrast of two perceptions of the nature and purpose of art – one which seeks to absorb the human being completely into a fixed physical reality and one which strives to free the human being from that absorption – the novel encapsulates the transition from Soviet urban realism to the rejection of that method.

The novel focuses on the relationship between the narrator, Robert Mameev, and his ex-wife, Alisa. The fact that they are divorced but still living together might suggest the standard urban realist themes of marital breakdown (because of suspected infidelity) and the lack of living space. However, Ivanchenko does not use their unusual living arrangements as a means of expressing and exploring social and moral breakdown, but as a metaphor for the simultaneous detachment and dependence that mark the relationship between the self and other. This simultaneous detachment and dependence is reflected in a series of oppositions in the novel which suggest simultaneous identity and non-identity: the self and its mirror image, the object and its artistic representation and the word and what it names. When Mameev first hears Alisa’s name, he is struck by how much it suits her: ‘kak v detstve, ia ispytal znakomoe, radostnoe i nikogda bol’she ne ispytannoe potom chuvstvo absoliutnoi adekvatnosti zvuchashchego i sushchnostnogo mira, sootvetstviia imeni i predmeta, polnogo sliianiia nazvaniia veshchi i ee oblika, imeni i obraza, sushchnosti i formy.’ (As in childhood, I experienced a familiar, joyous feeling, which I had never felt again, of the absolute synonymity of the audible and essential world, the correspondence of name and object, the total merging of the name of a thing and its

The tantalising possibility of overcoming this intermediate state of detachment and dependence motivates both Mameev’s and Alisa’s use of artistic creation, Alisa by seeking total absorption in the external world, Mameev by seeking total detachment.

This distinction in their approach is reflected in the fact that, while Mameev is an embittered outsider, hiding himself in a ‘niche of demonstrative non-participation’, Alisa is a typical insider not only embodying the pretentiousness, pettiness and banality of provincial intellectual society so frequently satirised in sanctioned fiction of the 1970s and 1980s, but also conforming to the norms of that society, above all in the area of creative art. By setting Alisa’s artistic approach against Mameev’s in the novel, Ivanchenko in effect seeks to analyse the dominant understanding of the nature and purpose of art (Alisa’s) from the ‘other’ perspective, represented by Mameev, who narrates. Throughout the work, Ivanchenko is concerned that the implied reader does not interpret Mameev’s comments on Alisa’s artistic method solely as an attack on politically motivated compromise and dissimulation, but rather as a criticism of a particular way of perceiving and representing the world in art. For this reason, Mameev comments of people like Alisa: ‘oni nikogda ne otmetiat nichego ne aprobirovannogo, ne zamechennogo, ne sanktsionirovannogo drugim, i delo zdes’ ne v trusosti, ne v intellektual’noi ill esteticheskoi robosti, a prosto oni etikh veshchei ne vidiat.’ (they will never mention anything which has not been approved, noticed or sanctioned by someone else. It is not a question here of cowardice, or intellectual or aesthetic timidity, but simply of the fact that they do not see these things.)

The contrast between Mameev’s and Alisa’s approaches to art is encapsulated in their different occupations: as a successful journalist and photographer, Alisa does not doubt the capacity of her words and images to capture the reality they seek to represent, while as a portrait painter, Mameev’s constant preoccupation is the discrepancy between the object and its artistic representation. Early in the work he criticises the way that words spoken by Alisa and her friends appear to consume the

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reality they describe: ‘slova, skazal ia ei, dolzhny kak by robet’ pered sobstvennym soderzhaniem, tol’ko priblizhat’sia k nemu. Osobenno eto kasaetsia slov, kotorye vyrazhauit naibolee znachitel’nye poniatia.’ (Words, I told her, should, as it were, quail before their own content, they should only come near to it. This especially applies to words which express the most significant concepts.) Alisa’s use of words reflects her use of art to assert the substantial and lasting nature of the world and thus the substantial and lasting nature of her self within it. This artistic method is reflected in her constant accumulation of possessions. Ivanchenko here subverts the critical depiction of bourgeois consumerism in Soviet urban realism, implicitly suggesting that the desire for a ‘full’, concrete, nameable world motivates and underpins the activity of realism. Just as Alisa’s purchases encroach further and further on the living space available to her, so the self becomes absorbed into and restricted by the ‘already-named’ world.

Mameev argues that, by allowing herself to be absorbed within an ‘already-named’ world, Alisa sacrifices not only the detachment necessary for artistic creation, but also her awareness of her self. In contrast, Mameev attempts through art to lose all attachment to the external world and thus to come to a perfect knowledge of himself: ‘vsiu zhizn’, besoznatel’nno ili soznatel’nno, ia stremlja k unichtozheniu razlichnykh sviazei s zhizn’iu, spramit’, sgladit’ sebe put’, vyiti na priamuiu liniiu svoego sushchestvovaniia, ni ot kogo ne zavisia.’ (All my life, unconsciously or consciously, I have striven to destroy all kinds of connections with life, to straighten and smooth a way for myself, to find the straight line of my existence, not depending on anyone.) In Monogramma, this use of art acquires an explicitly Buddhist meaning. Alla Latynina and Martin Dewhirst over-simplify Monogramma when they comment that ‘despite its postmodernist devices, it rests firmly on the realist tradition’, since, rather as Mameev’s and Alisa’s artistic methods oppose each other in Avtoportret s dogom, in Monogramma Ivanchenko mixes a densely written historical account of the accumulated suffering that has shaped the identity of the central character (and implicitly Russia) in the late twentieth century with descriptions of Buddhist

10 Ibid., p.11.
11 Ibid., p.223.
meditation exercises in which the central character contemplates physical objects in order to rid herself of her attachment to them.\(^{13}\)

In this context, the process of writing in *Avtoportret s dogom* may be understood as Mameev’s contemplation of Alisa in an attempt to rid himself of his attachment to her. His efforts, however, merely reveal the extent and intensity of his dependence on her. After giving an account of his life before and with Alisa, Mameev appends a short story describing an affair he has with a schizophrenic girl during a business trip to Moscow. Mameev then tries to show the reader how this short story arose out of a real affair he had with a married woman, but this affair also turns out to be fictional, with the character of the married woman, like that of the schizophrenic girl, inspired by Alisa. Mameev wrote the stories while waiting in vain in a Moscow telegraph office for Alisa to contact him, convinced she was having an affair, when, in fact, she was having an abortion. The repeated, potentially endless re-contextualising of sections of narrative from fact to fiction reflects the interminable, inescapable nature of the relationship between the self and other.\(^{14}\)

Mameev’s experience of existence constitutes a negative experience of Bakhtin’s model of the relationship between the self and other and between author and hero, discussed in the context of Hrabal’s fiction in Chapter 1. Bakhtin’s essay, ‘Avtor i geroi v esteticheskoi deiatel’nosti’ (Author and hero in aesthetic activity), written in the 1920s, first appeared in the volume *Estetika slovesnogo tvorchestva* in 1979 and may well have directly influenced *Avtoportret s dogom*. In the essay, Bakhtin repeatedly returns to the difficulty of self-portrayal, on one occasion referring specifically to the problems of the artist creating his self-portrait from a mirror.\(^{15}\)

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\(^{13}\) The pursuit of emptiness in both *Avtoportret s dogom* and *Monogramma* closely resembles Pelevin’s Buddhist-influenced novels, discussed in the final chapter of this dissertation. In contrast to Pelevin’s pop Buddhism, however, Ivanchenko’s intense theoretical expositions are more for the committed disciple.

\(^{14}\) As in Koleniš’s *Mčat* (Be silent, 1992), discussed in Chapter 5, it is the narrator’s own inability to fall silent, to cease communicating with the external world, that prevents the attainment of silence. Mameev miserably declares: ‘kak mozno byt’ svobodnym, ezhehodno istorgaia iz sebia stol’ko slov?’ (How can one be free, daily expelling so many words from oneself?) (Ivanchenko, ‘Avtoportret’, p.223.)

\(^{15}\) See Bakhtin, M.M., ‘Author and hero in aesthetic activity’ in his *Art and Answerability*, trans. Vadim Liapunov, Austin, 1990, p.34. (Hereafter Bakhtin, ‘Author’.) Andrei Gimein and Ellen Chances have both noted the influence of Bakhtin’s notions of authorship, as described in *Problemy poetiki Dostoevskogo* (Problems of Dostoevskii’s poetics,1963), on Bitov’s *Pushkinskii dom*, the archetypal example of this ‘author-seeking’ type of Russian metafiction. (See Gimein, A., ‘Nulevoi chas’,...
Bakhtin compares the relationship, in which the self repeatedly gives form to the other’s self in an open-ended exchange, to an embrace and to the love between a mother and a child. However, for Mameev its infinite, inconclusive nature is intolerable, and he feels himself trapped. Alone in his studio at the end of the novel, Mameev smashes the mirror he has been using unsuccessfully to paint his own face into the self-portrait. The shattered reflection indicates the nature of self-knowledge without, in Bakhtin’s terms, the form bestowed by the other.

Throughout the novel, Ivanchenko’s satirisation of Mameev as perhaps the most pretentious, obnoxious and feeble member of the suburban intelligentsia depicted in the work indicates that the character of Mameev is not to be identified entirely with the implied author, but serves as a vehicle for the implied author’s message. Mameev fails not so much because he is unable to accept the ‘unconsummated’ nature of the self as the self perceives it, as in Bakhtin’s account, but because he cannot cease clinging to the very notion of the discrete self, reflected in his continued preoccupation with the other. The desire for self-preservation thus results in the same petrification which Mameev rejects in Alisa. Ivanchenko perceives this petrification of the self in the way that writers allow themselves to become identified with a particular style; in contrast, his own works differ radically from each other in style and content, without any sense of the parody inherent in the writing of Vladimir Sorokin or Viktor Erofeev. Questioned by Kuritsyn about the lack of similarity between his works, Ivanchenko comments:

> Most writers mature stylistically ahead of their experience and artificially overtake it. That is, having developed a style in some externally determined way, they then impose it upon experience and thus experience is distorted by style [...]. I try to write in another way, so that the seed and the watermelon ripen together and are, in essence, inseparable from each other. For me, having many styles (mnogostil’nost) is a sign of spiritual movement, of spiritual self-definition.\(^\text{18}\)

\(^{16}\)This ‘agony of intermediacy’ represents the bittersweet essence of human existence in Hodrová’s fiction, discussed in the next chapter.

\(^{17}\)Bakhtin writes of this situation: ‘The only thing left for me to do is to find refuge in the other and to assemble – out of the other – the scattered pieces of my own givenness, in order to produce from them a parasitically consummated unity in the other’s soul using the other’s resources’. (Bakhtin, ‘Author’, p.126.)

\(^{18}\)Kuritsyn, V., ‘Skuchno pisat’ odinakovo’ in Ivanchenko, A., *Golos bezmolviia*, Ekaterinburg, 2000, p.616. (Hereafter Ivanchenko, *Golos.*) In addition to the interview, this volume contains...
For Ivanchenko, the implied authorial self is a vessel to be emptied, rather than filled, through the process of writing, which is therefore not so much the accumulation of words, but the attainment of a new empty space, as he suggests at the end of Monogramma: ‘Pustota smotritsia v Pustotu a sgushchaetsia v prozrachnuiu t’mu.’ (Emptiness gazes at itself into Emptiness and thickens into a transparent darkness). For Mameev, at the end of Avtoportret s dogom, this reconciliation with emptiness remains an impossible aspiration.

As with Ivanchenko’s fiction published in the 1980s, it is perhaps unsurprising that Tolstaia’s stories were at first regarded as no more than a continuation of prevailing trends in Soviet urban fiction, given that they frequently exploit the topoi of bytovaia proza, including flat-swapping, marital infidelity, urban ‘rabbit-hutch’ squalor and the embourgeoisement of the suburban intelligentsia, represented by their pretentiousness, hypocrisy and social climbing. Although the implied authorial voice in contemporaneous urban fiction had become increasingly withdrawn and distant from the characters and events described, Tolstaia’s work was repeatedly criticised for its apparent absence of implied judgement or sympathy, thus betraying the Soviet reader’s ingrained expectation of implied authorial guidance. While recognising Tolstaia’s rejection of all illusions about the nature and power of human beings, however, these early critics failed to see compassion in her abundant use of words, her assertion of the limitless possibilities of combination and meaning which sustain and enrich human existence even as they painfully remind human beings of the actual poverty and impotence of that existence.

Tolstaia in effect agrees with Popov’s narrator in Dusha patriota that ‘fragile and tender literature’ has been deformed by the unreasonable expectations of human beings.

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Monogramma, the early short novel, ‘Tekhnika bezopasnosti-I’ (Safety techniques 1, dated as written 1979) and a new work, ‘Kupanie krasnogo konia’ (The bathing of the red horse).

[19] Ivanchenko, Golos, p.424. This personification of Emptiness – as the only phenomenon which can truly be personified – recurs in Pelevin’s Chapaev i Pustota, in which the central character’s surname is Pustota.

beings, above all by the belief that words can shape and change reality, that truths declared definitive in language may become so once and for all in fact. Tolstaia’s stories encourage the reader to unlearn these expectations by warning of the consequences of believing in the reality of human fictions. At the same time, however, they retain a melancholy faith in the creative process, understood as a source of comfort, a gift to human beings rather like Hope at the bottom of Pandora’s box.  

Helena Goscilo, who published a monograph on Tolstaia in 1997, argues that the manipulation of perspective is essential to the rejection of didacticism in Tolstaia’s writing: “Tolstaia’s narratives both embrace philosophically and offer a concrete instance of perspectivism, which presupposes that if there is an objective reality, humans lack the cognitive equipment to apprehend it accurately, without bias.” However, as Hosking points out in *Beyond Socialist Realism*, writers of post-“Thaw” Soviet literature in general, and urban fiction in particular, had long questioned the ability of human beings to discover the ‘objective reality’ of existence. By complicating narrative strategy, writers like Trifonov or Makanin sought to create a plurality of perspective and suggest the subjectivity of truth. Character, implied author and reader were thus united in a quest for meaning which itself, as Hosking argues, implicitly defines the meaning of existence. Tolstaia’s stories do not simply represent a continuation of this approach, but, on the contrary, present the use of fiction to articulate the meaning of existence as the corruption of art. The ‘objective reality’ of existence in her stories is represented by *byt* itself, understood as the circle of time from dust to dust which renders all human lives indistinguishable, banal and meaningless. Her use of the themes and settings of *bytovaia proza* parodically draws attention to the futility of writing that attempts to give an accurate portrayal of daily life in the hope of discovering its essence. The search for meaning is portrayed as the

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21 In *Dusha patriota*, Popov questions the importance of truth by juxtaposing Karamzin’s account of a battle with the Tartars with an extract on defence spending from *Pravda*. As Robert Porter has pointed out, Karamzin’s account once aspired to the status of truth, but is now read for its literary merits, while the implied reader does not expect to find the truth in *Pravda*. (See Porter, *Alternative*, p.117.) Popov thus shows the notion of truth not only to be relative, in the sense that different times and different people define what constitutes truth differently, but also to have no lasting importance in the assessment of a piece of writing.


24 Ibid.
vain attempt to assert the truth of products of the imagination. Lipovetskii writes:

"those illusions by which all [Tolstaia's] characters live are not at all designed for
realisation, but for another purpose entirely; so that the circle does not lead to despair,
so that there is at least some kind of meaning in life. A theatre for oneself? Yes, if
you like […], but without it life in the circle conclusively becomes dust and decay."25

In this context, the 'perspectives' which Goscilo describes do not constitute relative or
partial truths, hinting at a greater, as yet undiscovered meaning; rather, they are
merely competing fictions which conceal, but cannot eradicate or replace the passage
of time.

The image of the circle of time is encapsulated in the very structure of the story
'Krug' (The circle, 1987). The story begins with the depiction of a sixty-year-old
man, Vasilii Mikhailovich, as he sets off on a walk round the block while his wife is
at the hairdresser's, then passes retrospectively through accounts of Vasilii
Mikhailovich's various extra-marital affairs before returning to him on his walk just
before he suffers a heart attack and dies. Through Vasilii Mikhailovich, the narrator
shows how the oppressive awareness of the inevitability of life provokes the search
for a way out other than that for which he is destined: 'trekhmernost' bytiia, final
kotorogo vse pribljalsia, dushila Vasiliiia Mikhailovicha, on pytalsia soiti s rel'sov,
provertet' dyrochku v nebosklone, uiti v narisovannuu dver'. 'The three-
dimensionality of being, the finale of which was coming closer and closer, was
stifling Vasilii Mikhailovich. He tried to come off the rails, drill a hole in the horizon,
leave through a door drawn in the air.')26

Vasilii Mikhailovich's domesticating and domesticated wife symbolises his
imprisonment in the circle of passing time, while his other women represent potential
escape routes. Like the 'door drawn in the air', however, the 'escape routes' are
created through the magic of imagination. Vasilii Mikhailovich finds one woman by
transforming seven digits printed on a sheet at the launderette into a telephone
number, but she turns out to be exactly the same as his wife. He is then drawn

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26 Tolstaia, T., Liubish' - ne liubish', Moscow, 1997, p.56. In keeping with the earlier Na zolotom
kryltse sideli..., the title of this definitive collection of Tolstaia's fiction published between 1983 and
1992, also the title of a story, refers to the 'loves me, loves me not' rhyme uttered while tearing petals
off flowers. Hereafter Tolstaia, Liubish'.
towards another woman for whom he begins creating personality traits from the moment he glimpses her at the market. Vasilii Mikhailovich even appears to have invented her name, Yseult, in his effort to elevate their affair to the status of timeless romance.\(^\text{27}\) Yseult, however, bores him, and he returns to his wife, and to the circle. On his fortieth birthday he receives a poem from Yseult which reveals that, like him, she saw their affair as a potential way out of the circle. By this time, however, Vasilii Mikhailovich considers her dead; the attempt to merge his imaginary notion of her with reality destroyed her for him. However, the suggestion that the characters scarcely differ either in the way they live or in the way they attempt to deal with life emphasises that the act of invention itself is vital, since it creates the impression of individuality. For Vasilii Mikhailovich, in his final moments, these invented episodes appear to be the most significant and the most ‘real’ in his life.

The distinction in ‘Krug’ between bleak, inevitable reality and the bright, endless possibilities of invention reflects the rejection of the pursuit of verisimilitude in favour of fictionalisation in Tolstaia’s work as a whole, and recalls the separation of Art and Life in Oscar Wilde’s ‘The Decay of Lying’. In her stories, Tolstaia implicitly shares the views of Vivian, Wilde’s spokesman in the essay, that human life is ‘poor, probable, uninteresting’\(^\text{28}\) and that the quest to depict it as accurately and realistically as possible is entirely unsuitable for art. Vivian’s account of the nature of art is worth quoting at length because it closely resembles not only the view expressed in Tolstaia’s fiction, but also her expansive descriptive style, which frequently exploits mythological and fairy-tale images and gives objects and natural phenomena lives of their own:

Art finds her own perfection within, and not outside of, herself. She is not to be judged by any external standard of resemblance. She is a veil, rather than a mirror. She has flowers that no forest knows of, birds that no woodland possesses. She makes and unmakes many worlds, and can draw the moon from heaven with a scarlet thread. Hers are the ‘forms more real than living man’, and hers the great archetypes of which things that have existence are but unfinished copies. Nature has, in her eyes, no laws, no uniformity. She can work miracles at her will, and when she calls monsters from the


deep they come. She can bid the almond-tree blossom in winter, and send the snow upon the ripe cornfield. At her word the frost lays its silver finger on the burning mouth of June, and the winged lions creep out from the hollows of the Lydian hills. The dryads peer from the thicket as she passes by, and the brown fauns smile strangely at her when she comes near them. She has hawk-faced gods that worship her, and the centaurs gallop at her side.

The contrast between Art and Life resembles the distinction in Venedikt Erofeev’s *Moskva-Petushki* between the celestial paradise of Petushki and linear terrestrial existence, represented by Moscow. Just as Venichka’s attempt to find Petushki on earth ends in disaster, so Tolstaia’s stories repeatedly describe the dangers inherent in trying to realise one’s inventions in life. Whereas the awl plunged into Venichka’s throat at the end of *Moskva-Petushki* indicates the silencing of literature as a means of creating paradise on earth, in her stories Tolstaia posits the restoration of literature as a means of escape from everyday reality.

In ‘The Decay of Lying’, Vivian describes how the attempt to bring Art and Life together destroys Art:

Art begins with abstract decoration, with purely imaginative and pleasurable work dealing with what is unreal and non-existent. This is the first stage. Then Life becomes fascinated with this new wonder, and asks to be admitted into the charmed circle. Art takes life as part of her rough material, recreates it, and refashions it in fresh forms, is absolutely indifferent to fact, invents, imagines, dreams and keeps between herself and reality the impenetrable barrier of beautiful style, of decorative or ideal treatment. The third stage is when Life gets the upper hand, and drives Art out into the wilderness.

Tolstaia in effect dramatises this process in the story ‘Fakir’ (The fakir, 1986), in which the ‘fakir’, Filin, represents Art. Filin holds impromptu parties in a bright, warm, fabulously decorated flat in the centre of Moscow, at which he serves unheard-of delicacies, shows off new objects he has acquired and new people he has discovered and recounts the stories which lie behind them all. Life is represented in the story by a married couple, Galia and Iura, who live with their daughter on a dingy, cold housing estate beside the Moscow ring road. Galia’s desperate desire for an

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29 Ibid., p.73.
30 Ibid., p.68.
invitation to Filin’s flat reflects what Goscilo terms her ‘yearning for culture’. Goscilo reveals the contrast between Art and Life when she writes: ‘If Filin’s domicile is a repository of art, culture and civilisation, those far removed from its caressing lights dwell in the brutal darkness of ignorance.

Galia fails to recognise that the values of the everyday world do not apply in Filin’s world; on the contrary, she believes she can be, in Vivian’s terms, ‘admitted to the charmed circle’ of culture through social climbing. She curses the arbitrariness of Fate, which has placed Filin and his various women in a central flat and herself on the outskirts, and when Iura’s efforts to find them a better flat fail, she decides to leave him and become Filin’s mistress. At this point she unexpectedly sees Filin, almost unrecognisable in the setting of a crowded Metro station, small, anxious and in a hurry. That evening she learns that he is only renting the flat from a polar explorer and is in fact registered to live in a socially unacceptable suburb, even further from the centre than her own estate. When she goes to the flat for the last time, as Goscilo puts it, ‘although Filin and his authorial practices remain unchanged, Galia’s perspective has irrevocably altered, unavoidably affecting her reception of his work’.

What has changed is the intervention into Filin’s world of the alien notion of truth, a category which is shown to belong to the everyday world through its close association in ‘Fakir’ with Galia’s husband, Iura, who is unmoved by Filin’s charms. Early in the story, Iura inadvertently exposes Filin when he points out that the pâté about which Filin has begun to tell a fabulous story may be bought in the nearby supermarket. Later, Filin recounts how he acquired his Wedgewood china from a peasant who had taken it as booty from a German aircraft he shot down during the Second World War. Iura at once exclaims that the peasant is a liar, but Filin is unhappy with Iura’s response and comments: ‘Konechno, ia ne iskhuchaiu, chto nikakoi on ne partizan, a prosto vul’garnyi vorishka, no, znaete... kak-to ia predpochitaiu verit’. (Of course, I don’t exclude the possibility that he wasn’t a partisan at all, but merely a vulgar little

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32 Ibid.
33 Ibid., p.83.
thief, but, you know... somehow I prefer to believe.) Filin is taken aback not because he is afraid of being found out, but because the notions of true and false are absent from his world.

Galia seeks an art which will take the place of the existence she has; Filin, by contrast, does not assert the truth of his inventions, which merely serve to conceal the wretched reality of his life. It is Galia, not Filin, who is guilty of self-delusion, since self-delusion depends upon the notion of truth. By questioning the truth of Filin’s world, she causes it to vanish, but she is left with the ‘wilderness’ of reality: ‘Vpered – novaia zima, novye nadezhdy, novye pesni. Chto zh, vospoem okrainy, dozhdi, poserevshie doma, dolgie vechera na poroge t’my. Vospoem pustyri, burye travy, kholod zemliianykh plastov pod boiazlivoi nogoi, vospoem medlennuiu osenniuiu zariu […]’ (Ahead a new winter, new hopes, new songs. Well then, let’s sing in praise of the outskirts, of the rain, of houses gone somewhat grey, of long evenings on the threshold of darkness. Let’s sing in praise of waste ground, brown grass, the chill of layers of earth beneath a nervous foot, let’s sing in praise of the slow autumn dawn [...]).

As Galia’s experience of Filin’s flat indicates, ‘pure’ art conceals the passage of time, creating a radiant eternal present. Once contaminated by the notion of truth, it loses this power and the bleak reality of existence is exposed. Tolstaia demonstrates the distinction between ‘pure’ and ‘impure’ art through the contrast of two types of invention in ‘Plamen nebesnyi’ (Heavenly flame, 1987). In the story, a humbler version of the ‘fakir’, Korobeinikov, who is recovering from an ulcer at a

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34 Tolstaia, Liubish’, p.213.
35 Ibid., p.226. In rejecting the notion of truth as the fundamental aspiration of art, writers like Tolstaia break not only with the dominant view in sanctioned fiction, but also with that of the dissident establishment of the 1970s and 1980s. This break may be demonstrated by the coincidental contrast between ‘Fakir’ and Havel’s unsanctioned play, Vernisaz (A private view, 1976), which also describes a visit to a beautifully decorated flat. In Havel’s play, however, the implied authorial criticism is directed towards the embourgeoisment of the couple who are showing off the flat, who criticise their dissident-visitor (implicitly Havel himself) for his failure to have children, to decorate his home properly and keep up with fashion. Their superficiality and their unthinking complicity with the Normalisation regime contrast with the sacrifices made by the dissident, who cannot give up ‘being true to himself’, a possibility which is entirely absent in Tolstaia’s stories. In its criticism of ‘resurgent bourgeois values’, Havel’s play is entirely in keeping with sanctioned literature of the same period. However, contrary to the assertions of Soviet critics in the late 1980s who perceived ‘other fiction’, like Tolstaia’s, to be anti-didactic, a comparison of ‘Fakir’ with Vernisaz reveals that Tolstaia’s didacticism is no less strong, but implicitly directed against the pretensions of both the official and dissident establishments.
convalescent home, pays regular visits to a certain Ol’ga Mikhailovna and her husband at their nearby dacha, bearing tales of extra-terrestrial aliens and the supernatural. As the narrator indicates, the notions of true and false initially bear no relevance to Korobeinikov’s stories: ‘Ol’ga Mikhailovna i verit, i ne verit.’ (Ol’ga Mikhailovna both believes and does not believe.)36 This happy equilibrium is, however, disturbed by the arrival from the city of Dmitrii Il’ich, a sculptor who tells Ol’ga Mikhailovna and her husband that years previously, while Dmitrii Il’ich was in prison, Korobeinikov apparently published some of his poems under his own name. Dmitrii Il’ich asks Ol’ga Mikhailovna not to judge, lest she be judged, but she is unable to comply: ‘No pust’, pust’ ona budet sudima, no zato osudit sama. Ona liubit pravdu, tut uzh nichego ne podelaesh’, ee organism tak ustroen.’ (Well, let her be judged, but at the same time she will herself condemn. She loves the truth, nothing can be done about that now, her organism has been made that way.)37 On his subsequent visits, Korobeinikov is treated with barely concealed hostility, while Ol’ga Mikhailovna and Dmitrii Il’ich begin an affair. When Dmitrii Il’ich at last confesses to having made up the story, Ol’ga Mikhailovna’s search for truth is shown to be pointless; faced with a choice between two fiction-makers, she opts for Dmitrii Il’ich, reflecting that Korobeinikov bored her with his patently ridiculous tales.38

In ‘The Decay of Lying’, Vivian comments: ‘the only form of lying that is absolutely beyond reproach is lying for its own sake, and the highest development of this is, as we have already pointed out, Lying in Art’.39 Deliberately or subconsciously, Dmitrii Il’ich seeks to usurp Korobeinikov’s place in Ol’ga Mikhailovna’s affections. His story is therefore not ‘lying for its own sake’, but can only have its desired effect if it is believed. The implication of Dmitrii Il’ich’s story is that he was a political prisoner, while Korobeinikov attempted to gain by deception. In fact, the reverse is true; Dmitrii Il’ich gains by deception, while Korobeinikov is imprisoned by the imposition of truth. Dmitrii Il’ich effectively subjects Korobeinikov to a show-trial, and Tolstaia thus implicates Soviet power in the destruction of ‘pure’ art.

36 Ibid., p.117.
37 Ibid., p.121.
38 Tolstaia’s conclusion is therefore anti-moralising, since Ol’ga does not choose the morally pure man who had been slandered, but the man who appears more suited to the world in which she lives.
The innocence of Korobeinikov's inventions is reflected in the image of a 'heavenly flame' which, he says, once came down from the sky over Petrozavodsk, and to which he is repeatedly linked. Once the notion of truth has intervened, however, the 'heavenly flame' is extinguished and the act of invention, embodied in the story by Korobeinikov's tales, cannot regain its purity and power. Instead, Korobeinikov's celestial purity is replaced by the terrestrial notion of innocence, which merely heightens Ol'ga Mikhailovna's feeling of guilt. Just as Galia is left with the bleak inevitability of byt when she destroys Filin's world, so Ol'ga Mikhailovna is left only with the awareness of her sinful, mortal state.

The notion of truth creates a discrepancy between reality and invention which children in Tolstaia's work do not know and which adults seek to erase. As Lipovetskii points out, Tolstaia's child characters do not differentiate between real and make-believe, but inhabit a 'play reality', confident in what Mikhail Zolotonosov calls 'their potential as demiurges'. Referring to J.M. Barrie's Peter Pan, Petr Vail' and Aleksandr Genis comment: 'the author is a person who refuses to grow up. It is for this reason that her main enemy is the unstoppable course of time'. The implied author in Tolstaia's stories wishes in vain that she could restore this child-like perception, itself a victim of the passage of time. While child characters are unaware of time passing, adult characters attempt to use their creations to bring its passage to an end, in other words, to give their creations the status of truth. Just as, in Peter Pan, whenever a child says it does not believe in fairies, a fairy dies, when the notion of truth is imposed on a human invention, its magic is destroyed, and characters such as Galia and Ol'ga Mikhailovna are abruptly returned to the everyday, mortal world.

Art can only sustain the illusion of an eternal present when a character makes no distinction between real and make-believe, as Tolstaia demonstrates in the story

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40 Lipovetskii, 'Svobody', p.12.
41 Zolotonosov, M., 'Mechty i fantomy', Literaturnoe obozrenie; 1987, 4, p.60.
42 Vail', Genis, 'Popytka', p.126.
43 The child's inability to differentiate between real and fictional and its perception of itself as the creator of its world are dogmatically asserted as a more authentic way of perceiving the world in Medorek, and also in the works of Pelevin and Kahuda discussed in the final chapter of this dissertation.
‘Sonia’ (1984), which contrasts the effect of a single act of invention on two characters. The story recounts events which take place in Leningrad before and during the Second World War, framed by the narrator’s reflection on the insatiability of time, which absorbs human lives, leaving almost no traces. The first two sentences establish the contrast between the transience of human existence and the timelessness of Art: ‘Zhil chelovek – i net ego. Tol’ko imia ostalos’ – Sonia.’ (There once lived a person, and now they’re no more. Only a name remains – Sonia.)

Tolstaia implicitly presents the very giving of a name as an act of invention which draws an individual life out of the homogeneity of human existence and the passage of time.

Sonia, an unattractive spinster, falls victim to a practical joke played on her by a group of friends, led by a certain Ada Adol’fovna, who begin sending her letters which purport to come from a secret admirer. The joke gets out of hand; Sonia unwittingly becomes part of her own epistolary novel, while Ada Adol’fovna, who is eventually left to continue the correspondence alone, fears the likely effect on Sonia of bringing the exchange of letters to an end either by telling Sonia the truth or by killing off the admirer. For Sonia, endlessly rejuvenated by this love affair so reminiscent of her favourite type of literature, the exchange of letters constitutes an infinite cycle sustaining her in a joyful, eternal present. In contrast, continuing the correspondence appears to exhaust Ada Adol’fovna as much as the privations of the German blockade, with which she is intrinsically linked through her patronymic, since for her the correspondence represents a vain struggle to hold back time, which is moving relentlessly towards the moment when the truth will be discovered. The hellish connotations of her name (ad being the Russian for ‘hell’) initially mark her as a personification of evil, but ultimately indicate the Sisyphean nature of the task she has set herself. At the end of the story, the narrator speculates that Sonia may eventually have gone to the address to which she had been writing and found Ada Adol’fovna lying semi-conscious in bed. For Sonia, the power of Art holds, and she sees not Ada, but her beloved. She then goes out to fetch water and is killed in an air

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44 Tolstaia, Liubish’, p.9. In this edition, the first lines of ‘Sonia’ are the first lines in the volume, thus acquiring particular resonance.
raid. The passage of time is suspended in Art, but none the less continues in the everyday world.45

Tolstaia gives her most comprehensive explication of her perception of the nature and limitations of human beings and their creations in one of her later, longer stories, ‘Somnambula v tumane’ (Sleepwalker in the fog, 1988), in which she satirically portrays the hubris inherent in the attempt to bring an end to the passage of time. The central character in the story, Denisov, is haunted by the memory of how, as a child, he sold a glass powder compact belonging to his Aunt Rita, who died in the siege of Leningrad, and thus caused her to be forgotten. Moved by this feeling of guilt, which constitutes a displaced fear that he will also be forgotten when he dies, he seeks a way of achieving immortality and at the same time forgiveness from his dead aunt.

The theme of passing time is introduced in the first sentence of the story through the parodic quotation of the opening line of Dante’s Inferno: ‘Zemnuiu zhizn’ pridia do serediny, Denisov zadumalsia’ (Having reached the midway point of life, Denisov fell to thinking.)46 The incongruity of the two clauses, which establishes the implied author’s satirical attitude to Denisov, is created by the discrepancy between Art and Life, which Denisov, in his desire to preserve himself permanently, seeks to eliminate. Art can transform a banal mid-life crisis like that confronting Denisov into the timeless account of the Poet’s pursuit of higher being, but the transformation takes place in Art, not in Life. Tolstaia demonstrates the absurdity of Denisov’s ambition through her comical description of his increasingly furious efforts to rearrange the map of the world, an attempt to impose his own inventions upon existing reality which parallels his pursuit of immortality. Tolstaia’s description of how Denisov uproots Australia dramatically demonstrates how the products of the human imagination acquire a far greater appearance of reality than everyday existence ever could:

45 Tolstaia uses the name Sonia, which also means ‘sleepy-head’, to indicate that she lives her life in a dream. This meaning of the name is coincidentally also exploited by Liudmila Ulitskaia (b.1943) in her short novel Sonechka (1992), in which the central character escapes the unpleasantness of life by retreating into classic literature. Only during what she perceives as a fairytale marriage – too good to be true – to a returned émigré intellectual does she emerge from literature, but she returns to it once again after his death. Ulitskaia contrasts the innocence of Sonia’s approach to literature and life, which rewards her with the perfect happiness of ‘another world’, with her husband’s judgemental intellectual approach, which renders him constantly disappointed.
46 Ibid., p.330.
Denisov abolished Australia, tearing it out by the root like a molar. He leant with one leg on Africa and the end broke off. He leant more firmly — that was fine. With the other leg he leant on Antarctica; cliffs crumbled, snow filled his boot, he should stand up more firmly. He grasped the errant continent more firmly and shook it this way and that. Australia sat firmly in its sea nest, his fingers slipped in the underwater slime, corals scratched his knuckles. Oomph! Again — there! He tore it out and broke out in a sweat. He held it in both hands and wiped his brow with his elbow. Water dripped from the root, from the top trickled sand — some kind of desert. The sides were cold and slippery — it had been completely embedded.

Denisov decides to secure his reputation for all time through the apparently selfless act of establishing a monument to a certain Makov, who froze to death while climbing a mountain. The monument shows the human being to be substantial and lasting; it removes him from the ordinary passage of time and places him in an eternal present, turning him into a god. Given the Soviet passion for building monuments, Tolstai’a portrayal of Denisov clearly represents a satirisation of the eschatological pretensions of Marxism-Leninism. Through the implicit equation of Denisov’s monument with

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47 Ibid., pp.344-5. Denisov’s battle to remove Australia coincidentally recalls the title story of Petr Šabach’s collection Jak potopit Austrálii, in which two schoolchildren play a practical joke on their geography teacher by removing Australia from the map of the world. For both writers, Australia appears to possess a sufficient air of unreality for their purpose, comparable perhaps with Timbuctoo for the British reader. Whereas in ‘Somnambula v tumane’, Denisov’s efforts to re-order the globe reflect his desire to resist what he experiences as the oppressive certainty of existence, the pupils’ action in fact rescues their teacher, who had long lacked confidence in the rational explanations which he is expected to teach. By depicting the uncertainty of such a notionally authoritative figure, Šabach implies, like Tolstai’a, that human knowledge may be only invented, though his teacher is not even sure about this.

48 Denisov’s plan constitutes a hyperbolic version of Alisa’s perception of the use and capacity of art in Avtoportret s dogom. Indeed, according to Mameev, the ‘organising idea’ of Alisa’s creative work is a belief in the ‘monumentality’ (monumental’nost’i) of human beings, their creations and their achievements, which Mameev rejects as a delusion which conceals what he calls ‘nichtozhestvo i porochnost’ cheloveka [...] da ia by i ne nazyval eto porochnost’iu i nichtozhestvom, a prosto
Makov’s body, still petrified on the mountainside, Tolstaia suggests that the desire to preserve oneself permanently is morbid and unnatural. Unable to participate in the normal process of decay, the monument becomes a grotesque anachronism which time gradually buries without trace:

(There, in the mountains, the snow piled up, thicker and thicker, throwing up snowdrifts, covering Makov, his sprawled legs, his face turned to eternity. He is not decomposing, he is not rotting, not rusting, not decaying!.. The snowdrifts rose higher and higher; the mountain crackled under the weight of snow; it moaned and snapped, then with the thunder of an engine, an avalanche came down, and nothing remained on the summit. A snowy puff of smoke floated up and settled on the crags.)

The monument typifies the static images which characters like Denisov conjure up and then expect to exist in reality. When he goes to discover more about Makov from his family, he is disappointed not to find them in a tableau vivant of mourning and remembrance. Makov’s family take the view that life goes on – exactly what Denisov fears – and are rather bemused by his plans. Makov’s mother suggests that if Denisov would like to help them, he could try to acquire a certain type of wardrobe which Makov’s sister has long wanted. This request signals the collapse of Denisov’s proud scheme into farce, culminating in his public humiliation by a Party bigwig and his friends in a restaurant named ‘Skazka’ (Fairy-tale) in recognition of the unreality of his plan. Hiding beneath the table under which he has been forced to crawl, Denisov finally recognises the extent of his self-delusion: ‘da i chto za glupost’ – muchit’sia vospominianiiami ni o chem, vyprashivat’ u mertvetsa proshcheniia za to, v chem, po Hudskomu schetu, ty nepovinen, lovit’ gorstiami tuman.’ (What stupidity to torture yourself with memories of nothing, to ask forgiveness from a dead person for

\[\text{chelovechnost’ in cheloveka.’ ([...] the imperfection of the human being [...]) indeed, I wouldn’t even call it insignificance and imperfection, but just the humanness of the human being.) (Ivanchenko, ‘Avtoportret’, p.80).\]

\[49\text{Tolstaia, Liubish’, p.365.}\]
something of which, by human reckoning, you aren’t guilty, to try to grasp handfuls of fog.)\textsuperscript{50}

Goscilo suggests that the title of the story constitutes a metaphor for modern humanity ‘roaming in a fog of metaphysical uncertainty, groping for clues that will shed light on the meaning and goal of life’.\textsuperscript{51} However, Denisov’s remark suggests that the fog signifies the inventions of the human mind. In ‘Somnambula v tumane’, scientific research, witchcraft, Oriental religion and, implicitly, Marxism-Leninism are all relativised as human creations, which are designed to give life a meaning other than the certainty of oblivion, but which cumulatively form nothing more than an elaborate overlay to the banal reality of existence. Tolstaia’s stories themselves mirror this model of human existence through her technique of submerging self-consciously ordinary plots in an abundance of imagery and detail, as Vail’ and Genis point out: ‘Upon the fleetingly sketched out, minor siuzhet [the author] sews countless arabesques, until suddenly, amid the ornamental twists, capricious patterns and whimsical flourishes, the simple and rather unimportant story of the hero which Tolstaia had apparently intended to tell cannot be found’.\textsuperscript{52} Human beings cannot quarrel with the inevitable circle shaping their lives, only with each other’s inventions.

In this situation, the quest to discover or assert the truth undertaken by many of Tolstaia’s characters, including Denisov, equates with ‘sleepwalking in the fog’ of competing fictions. Denisov’s father-in-law, to whom the title of the story ostensibly refers, appears in his sleepwalking to be trying to re-discover a truth he once knew. His nocturnal world appears rather less dream-like than the world of natural history in which he writes his articles for popular magazines and which soothes rather than

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., p.367. The image of clutching at fog recalls the vain attempts of the title character in the story ‘Peters’ (1986) to conjugate the verb ‘to conquer’ (pobedit’) in the first person singular, which epitomises his failure to force life to match up to his imaginary worlds. As John R. Givens points out in his discussion of the story, this verb has no first person singular form in Russian. (See Givens, J.R., ‘Reflections, Crooked Mirrors, Magic Theaters: Tat’iana Tolstaia’s “Peters”’ in Goscilo, H. [ed.], Fruits of Her Plume: Essays on Contemporary Russian Women’s Culture, Armonk, N.Y., London, 1993, p.260.) Tolstaia appears here to show that the inability of human beings to have any impact on life is not only expressed, but also ordained by language itself. The notion that human attempts to explain merely create a fog occurs in an episode in Pelevin’s Chapaev i Pustota, in which a character wanders through fog produced by CNN’s live broadcast of the 1993 bombing of the Russian Parliament, which obscures rather than clarifies the situation.

\textsuperscript{51} Goscilo, Explosive, p.149.
disturbs, in other words concealing rather than exposing the truth. His daughter calls him her ‘Turgenev’, not realising that this implicit reduction of scientific research to the status of belles-lettres reminds him of his own defeat. As a zoologist, he once gave a paper proposing a link between birds and reptiles, which was taken as an insult by a certain Ptitsyn (the name derives from ptitsa, meaning ‘bird’), and he was sacked. Tolstaia’s particular choice of theory is mischievous because the evolutionary relationship between birds and reptiles has been scientifically proven; her point is to assert that all products of the human mind are inventions, upon which various interpretations may be imposed, and all or none may attain the status of truth. The subsequent writings of Denisov’s father-in-law are read rather as the stories of Filin and Korobeinikov are heard, without their truth being an issue.^^ His flight into the forest at the end of ‘Somnambula v tumane’ will not, as the narrator playfully suggests, take him to the light he has been seeking for so long; it merely reflects his inability to live any longer in a world given over to absolute relativism.

In Tolstaia’s conception of the world, the inability of human beings to make their inventions substantial and lasting removes all possibility of a meaningful way of living. The only alternative to the futile pursuit of truth represented by Denisov and other ‘truth-loving’ characters is the story-telling of Filin, like Venichka in Moskva-Petushki, the embodiment of the exhaustion of literature. Filin’s creations are not equivalent to the illusory utopia constructed by Soviet ideology, as Natal’ia Ivanova suggests, but rather stand in opposition to it. In ‘totalitarian’ art, typified by Denisov’s monument, the notion of truth is central to the work of art; to ideologise is to seek to merge Art with Life. In contrast, the notion of truth is alien to the ‘absolute’ art practised by Filin, who perceives the world as a surface of competing fictions to be constantly rearranged and decorated anew. Lipovetskii writes: ‘Filin proves to be an exemplary postmodernist, who perceives culture as an endless series of simulacra, and who constantly pokes fun at their conventionality’.^^ However, despite, or indeed because of the extravagant verbal colour of Tolstaia’s fiction, the feebleness of words provokes an air of disappointment deriving from the apparent

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53 Consequently, the work of literature is judged no longer on its verisimilitude, but on its capacity to divert the reader, as Goscio indicates when she comments, referring to Barthes: ‘Tolstaia, like Pushkin, makes her readers luxuriate in “the pleasure of the text”’. See Goscio, Explosive, p.119.
54 Lipovetskii, Russian Postmodernist, p.133.
defeat of grander ambitions for literature and the human being. This disappointment, which recalls the more overt grief and nostalgia expressed in Venedikt Erofeev’s Moskva-Petushki and is implicit also in the feigned nonchalance of Popov’s narrator in Dusha patriota, dominates the Russian fiction of the Changes.

Tolstaja’s description of the writer as a ‘fakir’ may be compared to Mitana’s implicit definition of the writer as ‘editor’ in his first publication following the fall of Communism, Hľadanie strateného autora (Rozhovory s Luciferom). As the subtitle indicates, Mitana’s novel shares with Vilikovsky’s Večne je zelený... a central allusion to Faust’s encounter with Mephistopheles, parodically re-enacted in a series of dialogues between Lucifer and a writer, Tomáš Eliáš, whose name reflects the writer’s contradictory desires to be a doubter and a prophet.\(^\text{55}\) The ironic tone of the opening, however, indicates the far greater emphasis in Hľadanie strateného autora not only on the absurd banality of the writer’s desire for knowledge, but also on Lucifer’s weariness of these encounters, understood as a metaphor for the exhaustion of literature (Lucifer speaks first):

- Čo si želáš?
- Poznáť pravdu a zjavit ju...ľuďom. Slovom...
- ...spisovateľ... Nie si prave najskromnejší.

(What is your desire?
- To know the truth and reveal it...to people. In words...
- ...a writer... You don’t ask for much, do you?)\(^\text{56}\)

In both Hľadanie strateného autora and Večne je zelený..., in the pursuit of knowledge the writer becomes tangled up in the texts of others, previous attempts to discover the truth which appear to block the way. In his conversations with Lucifer, Eliáš attempts to discover the truth about the origins of human existence, but each time he is merely told another version drawn from the history of literature on the subject. For Vilikovsky, the existence of potentially infinite versions affords the self-creator infinite possibilities of individual expression, a means of endlessly resisting absorption in the dogma of others. In Hľadanie strateného autora, however, the

\(^{55}\) The question of influence is difficult to resolve. An extract from Mitana’s novel appeared in Literárny týždeník in January 1989, a few months after an extract from Večne je zelený... and a few months before that novel’s first publication. However, Mitana may have previously read Vilikovsky’s novel in manuscript.

weight of existing versions on the contrary devalues the process of writing, which becomes a process not of self-discovery, but of self-dissolution in the texts of others.

This shift from writing as self-discovery to writing as self-dissolution is reflected in Mitana’s abandonment in *Hľadanie strateného autora* of what Tomáš Horváth describes as the ‘classical epic structure’ of his earlier writing in favour of the ‘textual collage’. Comparing Mitana’s methods of subverting realist techniques with those found in the 1960s fiction of Johanides and Jaroš, Horváth argues that while the latter instantly unmask the ‘reality effect’ of fiction as illusory, Mitana, from his first collection of stories, *Psie dni* (Dog days, 1970), exposes that illusion more gradually and ambiguously. According to Horváth, ‘on a thematic level, Mitana’s unvarying prosaic model rests in escalating everyday situations to absurd ends using elements of deviation. This escalation requires that the text first of all attains the “effect of reality”, of monotonous mundanity, and then re-encodes it or causes it to come to a head.’ His rejection of the story-telling structure in *Hľadanie strateného autora* marks in effect a shift of interest from the reader’s experience of reality as mediated by text to the writer’s experience of writing, for which Eliáš’s conversations with Lucifer are a metaphor.

The novel purports to be a collection of Eliáš’s unpublished papers, put together following his disappearance, and is therefore composed of diary entries, notes, fragments of works-in-progress, interviews, correspondence, medical reports from his time in a psychiatric hospital, a curriculum vitae, letters written by his wife, extracts from reviews of his work, passages quoted from fiction, philosophy, religious texts and various works of specialist literature, and the commentary of the editor of the papers. Guided by the title, the reader may expect that these texts will somehow

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57 Horváth, T., *Dušan Mitana*, Bratislava, 2000, p.146. (Hereafter Horváth, *Mitana.*) Horváth quotes an interview with Mitana in which he declares that ‘traditional belles-lettres, the traditional story has said nothing to me for a long time.’ (Quoted in Ibid.) The interview, given in *Dotyky,* not only demonstrates Mitana’s enduring relevance to new Slovak writers, indicated by Horváth’s monograph, but also perhaps his desire to assert that relevance by implicitly indicating his long-standing interest in fashionable theoretical positions much loved by Horváth and his fellow Genitalists.

58 Horváth, *Mitana,* p.9. (All italics are Horváth’s.) This description might also be applied to Evgenii Popov’s short stories sanctioned for journal publication between 1971 and 1977.

59 Mitana’s oscillation between the integrated and disintegrated story structure is reflected in his next collection of short stories, *Slovenský poker* (Slovak poker, 1993), subtitled ‘Holé príbehý’ (Sheer stories). As in *Hľadanie strateného autora,* however, Mitana casts doubt on the notion of story as an expression of its creator’s individuality, by ‘borrowing’ and mixing different linguistic registers.
provide clues to Eliáš’s disappearance and lead to his re-discovery. However, the reader in fact merely repeats the writer’s quest for self-discovery to the point where he disappeared, to be replaced by an editor. In effect, Mitana enacts in the novel a version of Barthes’s ‘death of the author’, wherein the writer, no longer able in good conscience to put his name to a text produced from an infinite body of pre-existing texts, becomes instead an arbitrary editor of the world-as-text. The editor of Eliáš’s notes suggests that they be prefaced with a quotation from Jorge Luis Borges’s story, ‘The Utopia of a Tired Man’: “Okrem citátov nám už nič iné nezôstáva. Jazyk je systémom citátov.” (“We have nothing else left now except quotations. Language is a system of quotations.”)⁶⁰ In Mitana’s conception, the ‘death of the author’ simultaneously represents the ‘death of the subject’, since the self at any point appears only to be an arbitrarily isolated fragment of that same body of text. As a representation of the ‘true’ nature of the self, the collage may thus be compared to Mameev’s shattered mirror at the end of Avtoportret s dogom.

In the novel, the notion of personal identity in general and the identity of Eliáš in particular, stable at the beginning, becomes increasingly problematic as the work progresses. Rather as Tolstaia foregrounds in ‘Sonia’ the way in which the ‘illusion’ of the individual self is created by a name, Mitana suggests that the arbitrariness of the name, which may be adopted and discarded at random, indicates the arbitrariness of the notion of the self. Early in Hl’adanie strateného autora, the reader learns that Eliáš writes under the pseudonym Dušan Mitana, on the one hand rendering the work implicitly autobiographical, and on the other destabilising the identity of the biographical author. The publication of Eliáš’s first story under this pseudonym (Mitana’s short story ‘Oáza s jabloňami’ (An oasis with apple trees), which appeared in the journal Mladá tvorba in 1965) had the effect of ‘killing’ a man called Dušan Mitana, who had begun to seek himself through writing, but, after he discovered that a writer called Dušan Mitana already existed, was hospitalised suffering from an identity crisis. With more rueful irony, resembling the tone of Popov’s satirical references to his problems after the Metropol’ affair in Dusha patriota, Mitana implies that he has come to this understanding of identity because of the way it could

⁶⁰ Ibid., p.23. Borges’s assertion is reflected in the collage-title of Mitana’s novel, which merges Proust and Pirandello, but alludes also to Barthes and Foucault, and perhaps to Hodrová’s Hledání románu.
be granted and taken away in the Normalisation period. Eliáš’s writer-friend, Pišta Abraham, ‘dies’ as an author and becomes a non-person when he is prevented from publishing in the 1970s and 1980s because of his association with the reformers in 1968. His ‘non-existence’ is sealed when, in an episode coincidentally reminiscent of Tolstoa’s ‘Plamen’ nebysnyi, his book is published by his friend, Nikolai Mojžiš, who disingenuously claims that ultimately the text itself, and not its author, is more important. Eliáš’s own disappearance may have come about because his identity has been changed by the fall of Communism; readers no longer see him as a heroic writer, striving to write ‘truthfully’ in oppressive times, and have begun to suspect him of collaboration.

Mitana’s description of the writer as merely the editor of text mediated, rather than created, by his mind, may be linked to a recurring perception in Slovak fiction of the 1990s of the futility of writing as nothing more than a word game. However, whereas, for example, writers like Kolenič, discussed in Chapter 5, wrestle inconclusively with the simultaneous awareness of the need to write and the pointlessness of writing, Mitana seeks in Hľadanie strateného autora to understand the enduring human need to create. As the title, and the content of Eliáš’s conversations with Lucifer, suggest, Mitana seeks his answer in God. On the one hand, the dissolution of the self through writing may be compared to Ivanchenko’s use of writing as a means of meditation, resulting in a loss of attachment to the notion of the discrete self and, in Monogramma at least, a reunion with the source of creation. The God discovered in Hľadanie strateného autora, however, is not the ultimate authority whose death, Mitana implies, pre-figured the ‘death of the author’. Rather, according to Lucifer, this God, somewhat resembling Tolstoa’s ‘fakir’, created the human being out of a desire to escape loneliness and know Himself:

61 Through the two writers’ names, Mitana suggests that this activity has been going on in Judeo-Christian culture at least since, Mitana playfully implies, Moses ‘usurped’ Abraham.
62 This shift in perceptions may also be attributed to the normal passage of generations. In Hľadanie strateného autora, Mitana includes his own introduction to an extract from the novel, described as an extract from Eliáš’s new work, published in Literárny týždeník in January 1989. The novel’s protagonists are said to be ‘representatives of a generation which is surprised that yesterday they were rebels and today they have their own children growing up who are rebelling against them. One of the characters says: “I went to bed as an emerging prose writer and woke up as a writer of the middle generation.”’ (Mitana, Hľadanie, p.166.) In this respect, Mitana may be compared to Makanin, whose work from the late 1980s and 1990s more overtly expresses a fear that he, and the type of the writer he represents, are not only being forgotten, but also unfairly included with writers perceived to have compromised their work to suit the regime.
‘Ocitol sa pred dilemou: ako môžem byť sám sebou a nebyť sám, keď okrem méňa nieč iné neexistuje. […] Áno, Boh musel stvoriť človeka, ak sa chcel narodiť, ak chcel vystúpiť z Ničoty, ak chcel Žiť.’ (He found himself faced with a dilemma: how can I be alone and not be lonely, when nothing else exists around me. […] Yes, God had to create the human being if he wanted to be born, if he wanted to emerge from Nothingness, if he wanted to Live.)^53 Made in the image of this God, human beings cannot help but strive to imitate him, writing in a vain attempt to fill the void of existence and come to knowledge of themselves.

For Mitana, as for Hrabal in Příliš hlučná samota, and also for Venedikt Erofeev or Sorokin, the pursuit of knowledge cannot be stopped, though it brings human beings only harm, as he indicates in an interview with Josef Chuchma published in the Czech magazine Mladý svět in 1988 and incorporated within the text of Hladanie strateného autora. Asked what most attracts and worries him about the human psyche, Mitana replies:

> The desire for knowledge, which is at once ennobling and disturbing. Without it we would not be human beings, but the question is: where does this desire lead? Have we overdone it? The human being longs for truth, but is it necessary at any price? How will we pay for it? And at the same time it’s quite clear: we cannot avoid truth. Anyone who limits the desire for knowledge acts inhumanly. Truth is essential for the human being, even if he recognises what it brings him.⁶⁴

As Chuchma indicates in the interview, from his earliest fiction Mitana suggests that absolute truth will forever elude the human being. Whereas, however, Tolstaja’s juxtaposition of different ‘versions’ of the world constitutes a melancholy celebration of the charm of human creations which result from the pursuit of truth, Mitana’s relativisation of accounts drawn from Christian and Gnostic mysticism, Buddhism and Hinduism resembles a form of private mysticism which, together with the ostentatious dilettantism also found in the writing of the Barbarians, is reiterated in much of Mitana’s subsequent fiction and poetry.

In Hladanie strateného autora, the assertion of the inconsequentiality of writing undermines the attempt to say something of consequence and vice versa. In contrast,
Tolstaia's satirisation of human attempts to impose themselves on existence, by its very repetitiveness in her stories, possesses the same awareness of its own banality contained in the partial quotations of Goethe in the title of *Večne je zelený...* and Voltaire in the epigraph to *Dusha patriota*. Like other writers of 'other fiction', Tolstaia seeks in her work to liberate literature from the Russian cultural tradition, which Goscilo, opening her discussion of 'Fakir', describes as 'a myth that rescues art, and especially literature, from the jaws of inconsequentiality by restoring it to its medieval stature; that of literature as a sacred phenomenon, of its production as epiphanic process and voluntary self-abnegation, and of the writer as prophet, martyr, rebel, and hero'.

Like Denisov's monument, the myth, at least in its Soviet incarnation, asserts the potency of human beings, while its deflation in Tolstaia's writing corresponds to the reduction of Denisov's monument to a piece of popular furniture. As Aunt Rita's glass powder compact also indicates, the individual human life is better symbolised by something apparently insignificant than by something as grandiose as a monument.

Such items appear insignificant, however, only from the perspective which expects deeds of substance, significance and longevity from human beings, the same perspective which, to Tolstaia's irritation, led some critics to describe her characters as contemporary manifestations of the Gogolian 'little man', rather than typical human beings. The value of such items rests in the fact that, like a name or a story, they create the impression of an individual life which would otherwise be swallowed up by time. In her analysis of the enamel dove in 'Sonia', which is all that survives of the title character, Svetlana Boym comments 'Sonia's little brooch suggests the infinite powers of poetic metamorphosis', in other words, the transformation of Life in Art.

Boym's article examines Tolstaia's role in the restoration in contemporary Russian culture of *poshlost*, best translated in this context as 'kitsch', which also forms the theme of an article by Natal'ia Ivanova named after Sonia's 'little inflammable

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Both critics detail the history of the notion of poshlost', in particular the early Soviet campaign against what was perceived as bourgeois vulgarity, and the converse attack of the 1960s intelligentsia on what they perceived as Soviet poshlost'. This cycle, in which the anti-kitsch becomes kitsch, may be explained using Milan Kundera's assertion in Nesnesitelna lehkost byti that kitsch represents the absolute denial of shit, understood as any aspect of human existence which human beings find unacceptable. For the early Soviet cultural ideologues, bourgeois kitsch was unacceptable, but its eradication merely resulted in another kitsch, which in turn proved unacceptable. The incorporation of kitsch into Tolstaia's writing, as Boym suggests, 'challenges cultural hierarchies', reflecting an attempt to, in Fiedler's phrase, 'cross the border, close the gap', to end the cycle which turns yesterday's high culture into today's kitsch through the relativisation of all human creations.

As the contrast between the monument and the fashionable wardrobe in 'Somnambula v tumane' indicates, the restoration of kitsch in Tolstaia at the same time indicates another turn in the cycle, whereby what official culture and the intelligentsia considered kitsch apparently reflects the 'true' humility of the human being which both official culture and the culture of the intelligentsia sought to disguise. The presentation of art in Tolstaia's stories as deliberate fictionalisation which appears to suspend the passage of time and thus hide the meaninglessness of existence closely resembles Matei Calinescu's description of kitsch as a 'specifically aesthetic form of lying', 'a pleasurable escape from the drabness of modern quotidian life', 'a reaction against [...] the meaninglessness of chronological time' and an attempt to assuage the 'fear of emptiness'. What stands in opposition to this understanding of art in Tolstaia's stories is an understanding of art which, like Soviet art, seeks not to conceal, but to replace the bleak reality of human existence. Thus contaminated with the notion of truth, it is no longer capable of resisting the passage

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69 Boym, 'Banality', p.81.
of time and, in keeping with Nabokov’s equation of *poshlost* with a tin of lobster that has been left open, starts to smell.\textsuperscript{71}

\textsuperscript{71} Quoting Nabokov’s metaphor from his *Nikolai Gogol*, Calinescu suggests that it offers ‘one of the closest approximations of what kitsch really smells like’. (Ibid., p.261.)
Chapter 4

Writing as Being: Michal Ajvaz, Daniela Hodrová, Jiří Kratochvil, Jáchym Topol

Like the writers discussed in the last chapter, prominent Czech writers of the Changes like Ajvaz, Hodrová, Kratochvil and Topol reject what they perceive as the misuse of literature to assert and defend fixed notions of the nature and limits of the world. However, for them, the incapacity of language to name definitively, which underlies the ‘defeat’ of literature in Tolstaia and Popov and presents such a problem to the narrator of Kolenič’s Mlčat’ (discussed in the next chapter), constitutes its essential virtue, since in this way language resists fixedness and finality, permitting a dynamic perception of the nature of existence. For the Czech writers of the Changes, writing does not constitute a feeble substitute for being, but represents being itself, the vigorous preservation of what Bakhtin terms the ‘loophole’ in each definition, typified by Placák’s Medorek, which enables the self to resist ‘reification’, and which characters like Ivanchenko’s Alisa and Tolstaia’s Denisov seek to deny. Popov’s notion of literature as ‘self-characterisation’, presented in Dusha patriota as the doggedly aimless and pointless spouting of words, thus becomes in Czech fiction of the Changes an earnest and vital function. These contrasting perceptions of the potency and impotence of literature are encapsulated in a passage from Hodrová’s ...na okraji chaosu...:

[...] the novel is created through a number or a whole series of lines, which run in parallel or become interwoven and merge (polyperspectivism or polyphony). Though this type of composition may be linked to a destructive relativism that rejects the significance of cognition, this need not be the case at all. On the contrary, this type of composition frequently serves as an instrument of cognition from many perspectives, through which the author attempts to ‘capture being in all its internal complexity and ambiguity’.

In the works by Ivanchenko and Tolstaia discussed in the last chapter, the contrast between the bleak suburban landscapes and the feverish inner mental activity of the central characters, and the mood of melancholy and despair which repeatedly

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1 As in the case of Ivanchenko’s Avtoportret s dogom, reference here to Bakhtin reflects the direct influence of his theory on the works in question. Hodrová translated Bakhtin into Czech (Román jako dialog, 1980) and stresses the importance of his approach to her analysis in ...na okraji chaosu...

2 Ibid., p.166. The quotation in this passage comes from Eva Le Grand’s study of Milan Kundera’s novels. (See Le Grand, E., Kundera aneb Paměť touhy, Olomouc, 1998, p.128.)
triumphs, unmistakably constitute an attempt to characterise the atmosphere of the Brezhnev period, described in the Soviet Union (and, indeed, in Czechoslovakia) in the late 1980s as *zastoi* (‘stagnation’). However, the link with this personal and collective experience remains essentially implicit, a minor theme in both writers’ works, in keeping with the attempt to break away from the urban realism most associated with the examination of that experience. In contrast, however, in Czech fiction of the Changes, resistance to fixedness and the pursuit of openness is repeatedly associated with the experience of the Normalisation period, which, unlike in Russian and Slovak fiction, has remained a painful, urgent subject in Czech fiction even in the late 1990s.

This question of the relationship between the form of expression and experience arose above all in Czech fiction of the Changes in the context of Kratochvil’s first novel, *Medvëdi román*, which, in Milan Jungmann’s euphemistic terms, ‘through its narrative experimentation provoked a great deal of unease among critics and readers’. In the epilogue to the novel, in terms subsequently borrowed by Hodrová in *...na okraji chaosu...,* Kratochvil describes the work as ‘a novel as an open system, a novel as a living organism, growing, living and moving before the reader’s eyes, and its modes of expression are, for example, story variants and some kind of – how to call it? – finely chiselled improvisations.’

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3 In *Hľadanie strateného autora*, Mitana self-parodically depicts the predicament of the writer in this period, trapped in his kitchen, tormented by his wife, who wants him to earn more money, and his daughter, who wants him to be less evasive about the political situation in his books. In reflecting the notion of ‘stagnation’ in their work, however, these writers were effectively acquiescing to a Marxist-Leninist euphemism, rather as their predecessors in the Thaw period implicitly acquiesced to terms like ‘errors of the past’ and the ‘cult of personality’, in an attempt to whitewash the current regime and, above all, the system itself. This preoccupation remains evident, for example, in two of the most widely discussed, and very different, works of the late 1990s: *Pestré vrstvy* (Diverse layers, 1998) by Ivan Landsmann (b. 1949) and *Sedmikostel* (Sevenchurch, 1999) by Miloš Urban (b. 1967). Pynsent contends that the virtual disappearance in mid-1990s Slovak fiction of the theme of the 1970s and 1980s, arguably least traumatic in Slovak culture, reflects continuing political uncertainties there, a suggestion which might equally be applied in the Russian context. (See Pynsent, *‘Video-Nasties’*, p. 107.)

poménovat, cizelované improvizace?') In response to Antonín Brousek’s assertion that the work could be of interest only to literary theorists, Kratochvíl argues:

[I wrote in this way] to compensate for the anxious experience of the closed world of a totalitarian society in which I lived. So you may ask: Is it a novel which emerged from the consolatory formal idea of creating an open literary space capable of resisting the oppressive experience of the closed systems which surrounded me, or did it emerge as a story depicting that oppression and the search for a way out of it? [...] And I would say that, with the best will in the world, it really is impossible to excise either content or form from my novel.  

The question of whether the structure of Medvědí román seeks to mirror or to offer an escape from the social experience from which it arises is symptomatic of the general ambiguity underpinning the novel and Kratochvíl’s work in general. In the context of the fiction discussed in this chapter, Medvědí román serves as a point of transition where the pessimism about writing expressed in Ivanchenko and Tolstaia meets the optimism which characterises their Czech counterparts. Moreover, as Klára Lukavská has pointed out, Medvědí román is also the ‘key source novel for Kratochvíl’s fiction’, establishing the themes and techniques developed in his later writing.

Kratochvíl’s exploration of the writing process in Medvědí román (and the other works which make up his first trilogy of novels) may be compared to Mitana’s approach in Hladanie strateného autora, to the extent that it also arises not so much from a general literary-theoretical concern as from the specific problem of expressing his own life experience through writing. As Kratochvíl outlines in his defence of Medvědí román, he grew up in Communist Czechoslovakia not only without a father, but ostracised because his father had emigrated after the Communist takeover. Having begun to gain acceptance as a writer and critic in the 1960s, he lost his job in the aftermath of August 1968 and spent the 1970s in unskilled manual jobs familiar to unsanctioned writers, once again alienated because he was not counted among the prominent political dissidents, and perhaps because of a letter sent to Brno dissidents

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from West Germany by his émigré uncle suggesting that he was a police informer.\(^{10}\)
The writer-narrator of Medvědi román resisted the temptation to write a 'great family novel', as Jungmann points out, because the form did not seem adequate to his situation: 'mám pocit, jako kdyby skutečnost, v níž žiju, měla teď už nějaký čas zaráz dvě až tři alternativy [...] skutečnost nabyla charakteru libovolnosti, a nebo jsem já pozbyl nějaký smysl, který je nezbytný při jejím vnímání, rozlišování a zpracování.' (I feel as if the reality in which I live has for some time now had two or three alternatives at once [...] reality has acquired the character of arbitrariness, or I have lost some sense which is essential in perceiving, differentiating and working with it).\(^{11}\)

Or, as Kratochvil comments of his childhood, 'I found myself at the centre of some unspeakable secret'.\(^{12}\) In his attempt to transform his personal experience of the totalitarian period in Czechoslovakia into a metaphor for what he presents as the 'genuine' condition of the human being, denied absolute knowledge of or influence over reality, Kratochvil in effect marks a transition between the sentiments of the fiction of the Thaw generation and those of the fiction of the Changes. While sanctioned and unsanctioned works by writers like Kundera, Ivan Klíma and Ludvík Vaculík are preoccupied with the choices made and their consequences in the post-1948 period, and permeated by a sense of personal betrayal, not so much by the system or individuals, but by ideas, in Kratochvil's work that sense of betrayal is replaced by a sense of exclusion, but expressed with the same combination of self-justification, indignation and despair.\(^{13}\)

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\(^{10}\) In the eighth chapter of Kratochvil's third novel Avion (1995), the narrator, Hynek, accuses his uncle of this action, suggesting it was motivated by jealousy because the uncle thought Hynek was a better writer than he, and anger that Hynek was not prepared to compromise his literary principles in support of the dissidents. The passage cannot, however, be read as anything other than a scarcely veiled attack by Kratochvil on his uncle, Antonín, who emigrated in 1952, the same year as Kratochvil's father. In emigration, Antonín Kratochvíl (b. 1924) wrote prolifically, particularly on Catholic writers whose existence was not acknowledged by the Communist regime. His work culminated in a three-volume documentary account of Communist oppression, Žalují (J'accuse, 1973-77 abroad, 1990 in Czechoslovakia), which Kratochvil evidently parodies in the accusatory tone of the chapter.

\(^{11}\) Kratochvil, Medvědi, p.130-31.

\(^{12}\) Kratochvil, 'Neproslovený', p.192.

\(^{13}\) In Dusha patriota, Popov's narrator, while sympathising with the 'men of the Sixties' (shestidesiatniki), seeks to dissociate himself from their worldview when he argues that the key to understanding their work is the theme of 'betrayal' (predatel' stvo). (Popov, Dusha, p.144.) Like Kratochvil, Popov presents himself as a victim, excluded through no fault of his own, though with far greater self-irony.
In *Medvědi román*, Kratochvíl attempts to convey this experience of reality to the reader through what Waugh terms a ‘Chinese-box structure’, encapsulated by the writer-narrator’s description of the work as a ‘novel about how I am writing a novel about someone who is writing a novel’ (‘[...] román o tom, jak pišu román o někom, kdo piše román’). This layering of text is intensified by Kratochvíl’s dense use of literary allusion, which simultaneously implies both the positive and negative interpretations of the notion of the ‘world as text’, on the one hand suggesting imprisonment in pre-existing text, as in *Moskva-Petushki* or *Příliš hlučná samota*, and on the other, liberation into the interconnectedness of text through the eradication of the borders established between them.

The work begins with a parody of a science fiction allegory of Czechoslovakia under Normalisation, which in its images of an island-state surrounded by water and ecological themes recalls Egon Bondy’s already parodic dystopian novel, *Invalidní sourozenci*. This part, narrated by a Sancho Panza-like character called Ursinus (sic), turns out to be a novel being written by a certain Ondřej Beránek, who, after losing his job in the aftermath of 1968, initially finds employment as a crane-operator through an old friend from military service, Riša, who remains grateful for the love letters which, in the manner of Cyrano de Bergerac, Ondřej wrote for him to his wife, Helenka. At the end of this part, Kratochvíl encourages the reader to perceive Beránek’s story as a version of Kratochvíl’s own by showing how Beránek, now working as a night-watchman on a battery farm, realises the extent to which his allegorical novel, its characters, setting, names, themes and motifs, have been influenced by his immediate environment. The voice of Beránek and the implied

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16 The parody in Kratochvíl’s allegory, as in Bondy’s, derives from the hyperbolic transparency of its source. Vladimír Piša’s comment that in this part of the novel “numerous details [...] unmistakably point not to the utopia turned on its head of Orwell’s island system, but to the concrete, sometimes even banal reality of the Normalised 1970s” reveals how Czech critics failed to recognise that Kratochvíl’s purpose here was not to produce another allegory, but to satirise the unsanctioned writers who repeatedly produced such works. (See Piša, V., ‘Medvědi nevědí…’, *Tvorba*, 1991, 26, p.15.)
17 This episode typifies Kratochvíl’s use of literary intertext throughout his writing. Riša and Helenka are the names of the sweethearts in a classic work of Czech fiction, *Pohádka říje* (The fairy-tale of spring, 1897) by Vítězslav Nezvěsek (1843-1912). Whereas in that novel, the Moravian countryside near Brno represents an idyllic escape from urban life, in *Medvědi román* it is portrayed as a stinking industrialised place of exile.
18 The name Beránek, meaning ‘lamb’ or ‘young ram’, suggests that Kratochvíl was not only the scapegoat for the sins of his father, but also, unlike Isaac, was sacrificed by his father when he went into emigration.
author apparently merge in the comment: ‘nejde jen o podobnosti, shody a analogie, ale vypadá to, […] že už mě zajímá jen taková skutečnost, která je podobnostmi zavšivena’ (It is not just a question of similarities, coincidences and analogies, but it looks as though I am only interested in a reality which is infested with similarities), which not only indicates Kratochvil’s rejection of straightforwardly Realist poetics as inadequate to the task of conveying his experience of reality, but may also be interpreted as an assertion that texts only ever function as metaphors for reality, and that a ‘reality which is infested with similarities’ is the only kind of reality which can be known. In other words, Kratochvil’s experience of exclusion from full, unmediated knowledge of reality constitutes an initiation into how human beings ‘know’ reality, denied to those, like Alisa in Ivanchenko’s Avtoportret s dogom, who prosper in the material world.19

The problem of textual representation is confronted in the third part of the novel, in which a new narrator, apparently the ‘real’ writer of both the first and second parts, and identified as ‘Mr Kratochvil’, having expressed his delight at finally being able to speak for himself in his own voice, rather like Mitana with his proliferating selves in Hladanie strateného autora, casts doubt on his assertion:

[...]
jestliže lze predpokládat, že v osudu Ursinově zrcadlí se nejen osud Beránků, ale třeba trochu i můj, stejně jako osud Beránkův obráží nejen osud Ursinův, ale znova trochu i můj, musím pak počítat s tím, že já coby vypravěc nesu teď s sebou něco z osudu Ursinova, ale třeba i Beránkovu a z tří vedle sebe vedených útků je už nerozpletitelné tkani jako kapej já? jakej vůbec já? a proč se tím ještě zabývat?

([...] if it can be assumed that in Ursinus’s fate is mirrored not only Beránek’s fate, but perhaps also mine a little, just as Beránek’s fate reflects not only Ursinus’s fate, but again also mine a little, then I have to take into consideration that I, the narrator, as it were, now carry in myself something of Ursinus’s fate, and perhaps also of Beránek’s, and so from the three wefts arranged next to each other is now a web that cannot be disentangled, so which I? what I can there be? and why bother about this any longer?)21

19 Kratochvil, Medvědí, p.157.
20 Alena Vrbová notes that the heroes of Kratochvil’s trilogy (as indeed in his subsequent work) may be regarded as mere variants on a single character, essentially an authorial self-characterisation which becomes implicitly a definition of what it is to be a human being, a ‘passive observer or even a victim of different external influences and events […] some kind of closed spiritual island in an aggressive, superficial and “worldly” world.’ (Vrbová, A., Koncepty prostoru v románových trilogiích Daniely Hodrové a Jiřího Kratochvila, supplement to Tvar, 2001, 2, 3, p.53. Hereafter Vrbová, Koncepty.)
21 Ibid., p.168.
The narrator's problem resembles that of the painter-narrator Mameev at the end of Ivanchenko's *Avtoportret s dogom*, trapped in an implicitly infinite series of texts which cannot be differentiated in terms of truth or fiction, and unable to break through to a discrete self. However, in place of the mirror shattered in despair, which serves as a metaphor for the self in Ivanchenko's novel, Kratochvil offers the patchwork of text, and in place of the impossibility of distinguishing between truth and fiction, Kratochvil offers the notion of ‘story’, a concept which recurs throughout his work. In his 1994 essay ‘Příběh příběhu’ (The story of the story), Kratochvil describes post-war Czech history as the undesirable exchange of reality for an ‘improbable story’, which has led people away from stories in the belief that reality is more exciting. He comments: ‘Literature is not doing well, but because, despite everything, the human need for stories is undying, stories still remain here with us, only in their most degraded form, teeming like fish.’ Unlike Mitana, who rejects the story outright in *Hladanie strateného autora*, Kratochvil’s preoccupation with the story and storytelling in the 1990s appears to be motivated by a desire not only to represent stories in their contemporary form, indicated by his use of countless fragments and variants of stories and references to other stories, and his mixing of ‘high’ and ‘low’ forms of story, but also to protect and preserve the story as it goes through troubled times.

In effect, Kratochvil’s conception of ‘story’ constitutes a more optimistic version of the comforting but ultimately vain activity of Tolstaia’s writer-‘fakir’. In a reproach to the reader similar to that made by Popov’s narrator in *Dusha patriota*, and likewise seeking to evoke Sterne, the narrator of *Medvědi román* expresses sentiments implicit in Tolstaia’s writing:

> [...] načpak dopředu vyzvídáš a proč chceš všechno tak rychle pochopit a obsáhnout? proč na mě tlačíš? proč naléháš a tumluješ? co tě kam žene a nač vůbec spěcháš? vždyť už je dneska jasné, že to, co nás čeká, je vposledku vždycky jen katastrofa, ale není tu snad příběh od toho, aby ji pozdržel? vyprávět, anebo naslouchat, obojí jako by na chvíli bralo náš život do útěšných dlani, příběh je poslední útočiště, poslední milost, kterou nám Ten-co-nakonec-všechno-sebere ještě ponechal.

22 Many of Kratochvil’s short stories from the 1960s and 1970s, finally published in the collection *Orfeus z Kénigu* (The Orpheus of Königs, 1994), feature the word in their titles, as do his fourth and fifth novels, *Siamský příběh* (A Siamese story, 1996) and *Nesmrtelný příběh* (An immortal story, 1997).

([...] why on earth do you ask questions in advance and why do you want to grasp, comprehend everything so quickly? why do you put pressure on me? why are you so insistent and pushy? what’s driving you where and what on earth’s the hurry? after all, it’s already clear now that what is awaiting us is ultimately always only catastrophe, but isn’t the story here to delay that a bit? telling a story or listening to one, it’s as if both took our life into comforting hands for a moment, the story is our last refuge, the last grace which has been left us by Him-who-takes-everything-away-in-the-end.)

Whereas Tolstaia emphasises the illusoriness of stories, and their feebleness in the face of time, in his essay on the story, Kratochvil asserts not only the importance of the story as a means by which people can orientate themselves in their own history and thus defend themselves against existential angst, but also the importance of the author who supplies the causality: ‘human life and the human world are not composed of stories, but only of situations connected by mere chronology. Structuring the sequence of situations into a story is only a matter of authorial invention, which does not, however, have any prototype in reality.’ The potentially infinite number of stories – of variants, versions and narrators – indicated in Medvedi roman is therefore a ‘good infinity’ for Kratochvil, as in Dusha patriota, since it demonstrates the continuation of life.

In the conclusion of ‘Příběh s telefonem’ (A story with a telephone, dated as written 1977), quoted by Jungmann, Kratochvil writes: ‘Všechny mé příběhy jsou jen příměry k lepším příběhům. Takže jsou to vlastně takové náhradní příběhy [...] Příběhy místo příběhů, které neumím – nechci? – napsat.’ (All my stories are merely correspondences to better stories. So they are really substitute stories... Stories instead of the stories which I don’t know how to – or don’t want to? – write.) Kratochvil’s apparently self-effacing comment in effect corresponds to Venedikt Erofeev and Mitana’s actions in sending an alter ego on the writer’s messianic journey in place of themselves. Like these writers, Kratochvil rejects the notion that

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26 Kratochvil’s perception of writing as the sustenance and extension of being may be linked to Květoslav Chvatík’s insubstantially argued contention that Kratochvil has restored a sense of the epic by reminding the reader that ‘the epic is above all the art of time, the ability to allow the reader to feel the passage of time’ and ‘the art of slowness; it does not hurry, it can expand itself at each individual thing, it can recall, dream, rewind, return again and again and see the human being always from a new perspective’. (Chvatík, K., ‘Medvedi roman anebo Nezmičitelnost epiky’, Tvar, 1992, 6, p.6.)
human beings have the power to create paradise on earth, and therefore his stories are, like Moskva-Petushki, substitutes for that story. In his first three novels, and indeed in his subsequent work, Kratochvil plays with the longing of both writer and reader to restore wholeness, to re-discover Eden. Jungmann’s description of Medvědi román as a ‘dream about a father, some kind of anti-Oedipal quest for family roots and personal identity, a longing to overcome human incompleteness and the mystical paralysis caused by the loss of the paternal element’, which might be even better applied to Kratochvil’s next two novels, in which the paternal theme figures more strongly, fails to take account of the ironisation of that search.

In Uprostřed nocí zpěv (Singing amid the nights, 1992) and Avion, the narrator’s quest for reunion with his father parallels the reader’s search, as in Medvědi román, for a unified explanation or single origin for the disparate layers of texts, encouraged by hints, clues, coincidences and similarities. This strategy operates at its simplest in Uprostřed nocí zpěv, of which Kratochvil writes:

> This time I decided to write a novel about the miserable fate of the children of post-February [1948] émigrés, and thus provide a testimony about them. In the thrall of this noble mission, I tried to write the novel in a way that would find it the greatest number of readers, and subordinated the means of literary expression to this communicative consideration, too.

In Uprostřed nocí zpěv, the chapters alternate between ostensibly different boy-narrators seeking lost fathers, with the two narrators’ stories and characters gradually coming closer until, in the final chapter, they appear to merge. Lukavská, noting the general disappointment among critics regarding this conclusion, comments that it seems to be a ‘mere mechanical, unsurprising drawing-to-an-end of a method for which Kratochvil had decided in advance’.

27 Kratochvil, J., Orfeus z Kénigu, Brno, 1994, p.84.
28 Jungmann, ‘Hazardér’.
29 Kratochvil, ‘Neproslovený’, p.193. Elements of Uprostřed nocí zpěv resemble ‘truth-telling’ fiction published in the Soviet Union during the glasnost’ period, and officially in Czechoslovakia after November 1989, in particular the chapter in which one of the narrators finds terrifying photographs depicting prisoners in a 1950s Communist camp, including his father. However, through the hyperbolic description in this passage, Kratochvil seeks to assert not only the dreadfulness of the experience, but also that this form of ‘authentic’ writing is only one way of telling the story, thus distancing himself from the conventional dissident perception of the nature of literature. Like Kratochvil, however, both Hodrová, with Perunův den (Perun’s day, 1993) and Topol, with Andĕl (Angel, 1995), have published novels which endeavour to simplify their normal style in an attempt to reach a wider audience without abandoning their poetics.

30 Lukavská, Navrať, p.19.
of Medvědí román, and given the details drawn from Kratochvil’s own biography shared between the narrators, the ending may be perceived not so much as a neat resolution, but rather as the emergence once again of the implied author from amid various versions of his story. That no version should be considered definitive is reflected in the act of ‘posting’ the text to an address in Rio de Janeiro where the father may be living, which constitutes a sanitised imitation of the ending of Medvědí román, where the narrator urinates away the characters. As in Ivanchenko’s work, writing is shown as a process of emptying, in Kratochvil’s case to create space for new stories, rather than an attempt to fill space once and for all.\(^{31}\)

The reasons for Kratochvil’s resistance to resolution become clearer at the end of Avion, when the narrator and his father, as adults, are apparently reconciled beside a huge watering can. The scene links back to one of the narrator’s few memories of being with his father as a little child, when the watering can did appear enormous, but in fact subverts the sincerity of the search for reunion with the father in the latter two books of the trilogy, since it is equated with a longing to return to childhood, described in Medvědí román as ‘ten jediný dokonale jednotný univerzální a mytický svět’ (the only perfectly unified universal, mythical world), and equated there with the totalitarian state.\(^{32}\) In Medvědí román, Kratochvil includes an essay playfully attributed to one of the characters, a psychiatrist, in which he asserts that, on the one hand, totalitarianism is a form of collective schizophrenia and, on the other, schizophrenia is a form of individual totalitarianism. According to Kratochvil, both arise out of a ‘fear of freedom understood as the variegated face of chaos and also a subconscious desire for infantile dependence,’ and manifest themselves through the creation of ‘closed systems’ which mean ‘giving up on life and the world in the name of a unifying idea, and in practice therefore only total isolation and a reality built from a few thoroughly logically developed ideas’.\(^{33}\) The consequence, Kratochvil claims,

\(^{31}\) In this context, the title Urmedvèd (Urbear, 1999), for Kratochvil’s publication of the unedited version of Medvědí román, is also ironic, since no ‘original’ can exist.

\(^{32}\) Kratochvil, Medvědí, p.253. The equation of totalitarianism and infantilism also appears in the work of Sorokin, discussed in the next chapter. Like Kratochvil, Sorokin also encourages the reader’s expectations of comforting resolution before subverting them, in his case with violent twists which reflect his implicit assertion that all culture is necessarily – rather than by choice, as in Kratochvil’s work - complicit in barbarism.

\(^{33}\) Ibid., p.251. Kratochvil alludes here unironically to Erich Fromm’s The Fear of Freedom, a Marxist Freudian analysis of why people accepted Nazism which greatly influenced Czech intellectuals in the 1960s.
is not, however, wholeness or stability, but the disintegration of the personality in schizophrenia and of society in totalitarianism.

Kratochvil’s description of schizophrenia closely resembles a personality disorder described by R.D. Laing as the ‘shut-up self’, an ‘attempt to create relationships to persons and things within the individual without recourse to the outer world of persons and things at all’. The consequence, however, according to Laing, is that:

[The ‘shut-up self’] is unable to be enriched by outer experience, and so the whole inner world comes to be more and more impoverished, until the individual may come to feel he is merely a vacuum. The sense of being able to do anything and the feeling of possessing everything then exist side by side with a feeling of impotence and emptiness.34

This condition, which may be compared with Denisov’s efforts in Tolstaiá’s ‘Somnambula v tumane’ to turn himself into a monument, also appears in Avtoporțret s dogom through the schizophrenic girl with whom Mameev has a fictional affair. Although Mameev later claims that her character was inspired by his wife, Alisa, who attempts through her art to enclose and incarnate the self, she also represents the potential outcome of Mameev’s own efforts to preserve his self detached from the external world. While Tolstaiá asserts the inevitable transience of the self, which leaves only traces of its presence in fragments of memory and apparently worthless trinkets, and mocks those who attempt to preserve it, Ivanchenko, most strongly in Monogramma, asserts the need to lose one’s attachment to the self.35 In contrast, Kratochvil’s work, in common with that of Czech contemporaries like Hodrová, Placák and Topol, retains a notion of the individual self which, in his view, is best preserved not by closing itself off, but by opening itself to interaction with the unknown, in which it finds its being.

35 In Chapaev i Pustota, Pelevin portrays the schizophrenic condition described by Laing not only as a positive state, but also as the ‘true’ way of seeing, the perfect expression of what Peter Harvey, in his analysis of early Buddhist texts, terms the ‘selfless mind’. Harvey notes how the quest for self-knowledge in the Upanishads is a quest to ‘attain liberation from the age-old round of re-births’, to come to knowledge of the Universal Self, defined as a ‘transcendent, yet immanent reality that was a person’s true nature.’ (Harvey, P., The Selfless Mind, Richmond, 1995, p.1. Hereafter Harvey, Selfless.) The same desire to abandon the notion of the individual self appears in Czech fiction of the 1990s only with the work of Kahuda, in particular Houština.
As in Ivanchenko’s portrayal of Alisa in *Avtoportret s dogom*, the attempt to preserve the self by enclosing it is associated in *Medvédi román* with materialism, and with characters who are utterly embedded in terrestrial existence and seek to impose their influence upon it. Kratochvil uses the image of the bear, trained to infiltrate the powers-that-be only to supplant them, as a metaphor for the desire for power which becomes oppressively normative, which applies not only to the Communist regime. In the first part of the novel, Kratochvil gives an account of the change of power in the allegorical state of Ostrov, parodic because of its hyperbolically transparent resemblance to the Communist takeover in Czechoslovakia, with the symbol of the bear passing from the adherents of Kloboučník (Hatter), a reference to the shoe manufacturer and symbol of Czech First Republic capitalism, Tomáš Báťa, to those engaged in the ‘reconstruction of the world’, who start to write history with a ‘bear’s claw’. In this way, the desire to take control of history and bring it to a happy ending is directly connected with bear-like activity.

The image of the bear contrasts in the novel with the image of the lamb, reflected in Ondřej Beránek’s name. In the third part of the novel, the narrator is given a lift by a prominent local Communist functionary with a secret fondness for Masaryk, whose name, Pes (Dog), indicates his evolutionary link with bears, and who apparently inspires the whole novel by mentioning a man called Beránek in conversation with the narrator. As a gift in return for the name, the narrator invents a story about a seventeenth-century religious sect called the Lambs, traces of whom remain in the surname Beránek, common in the area of southern Moravia where the sect lived. The narrator admits that his story derives from the depiction of a sect called the Abrahamites in *Děti čistého živého* (Children of pure living, 1909) by Teréza Nováková (1853-1912), a connection illuminated by Vladimír Forst’s description of Nováková’s sect:

> Though they want to live joyfully and usefully according to reason, they are actually incapable of bringing about anything, and even their most discerning head ultimately commits suicide for petty reasons. Though the story sounds pessimistic, a tension remains

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36 See Kratochvil, *Medvédi*, p.80. The bear may be associated with the Russians, the ‘anonymous’ motivation behind Czech Communist tyranny, but Kratochvil, while encouraging such an association through the recurring image of a stuffed Russian bear, typically does not allow the association to become identification, leaving space open for other interpretations.
between characters striving for spiritual elevation and those who content themselves only with material prosperity. In a burlesque version of the Abrahaimites, the eccentric descendants of the Lambs are likewise incapable of dealing competently with the demands of everyday life, and repeatedly meet their ends tragicomically, often through suicide. As a result of their incompetence, they are easily tyrannised by ‘bears’, to the point of turning into bears themselves, or made scapegoats – sacrificial lambs – like Ondřej’s father František, who, in a comic passage intended to recall Jaroslav Hašek’s Osudy dobrého vojáka Švejka za světové války (The fortunes of the good soldier Švejk during the Great War, 1921-23), is falsely accused of collaborating with the Germans during the Second World War and imprisoned in a barn. In one version of the outcome he is shot, in the other, he escapes to the West inside a stuffed Russian bear; in the context of the trilogy, these represent the first variants on the possible fate of Kratochvíl’s own ‘vanished’ father.

The narrator explicitly discourages the reader from perceiving the Lambs as an allegory of a nation like the Jews, while at the same time linking them with the Czechs, in particular in his description of the mass transformation of Lambs into bears in the late 1940s and 1950s. Indeed, in keeping with the Czech messianic myth, the Lambs, who as a religious sect perceive themselves as the collective embodiment of the Lamb in the Book of Revelation who rids the world of the Anti-Christ, aim to save the world through their suffering, underpinned by their ‘nevýslovná pokora’ (unspeakable humility). The simultaneous association of the Lambs with the nation as a whole and with only a tiny section of it, however, prevents the metaphor from becoming conclusively ‘national’.

The Lambs, like the bears, perceive themselves as instruments of salvation, though passive rather than active. František’s escape in the bear-skin, described in a chapter entitled ‘Beránek v rouši medvědí’ (Lamb in bear’s clothing), indicates his refusal to be either an active or a passive instrument of salvation, a Communist bear or a Christian lamb, being instead an instrument of self-preservation through resistance to

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37 Opelík, J., (ed.), Lexikon české literatury, 3, I, Prague, 2000, p.587. The Abrahaimites, a sect combining Protestant Christians and Jews, appeared in Moravia in the early 1730s. In the 1780s, those who refused to be circumcised were deported to Transylvania.
external definition. For Kratochvil, one must be a ‘lamb in bear’s clothing’, like Ursinus in the first part of the novel, infiltrating the bear-like ‘powers-that-be’ only to undermine them, without oneself actually becoming a bear. In the epigraph to the first part of the novel, which describes the types chosen to dress up as bears during the last three days of Lent, Kratochvil indicates that disguising oneself as a bear is connected with a time of carnival, a word which, like ‘story’, repeatedly appears in Kratochvil’s writing. In his 1994 essay on Czech sanctioned fiction of the late 1940s and 1950s, ‘Literatura kamevalu’, he points out the similarity between Bakhtin’s theory of carnival and the first manifesto of the Poetists, the Czech Avant-garde of the 1920s, written by its chief theorist, Karel Teige (1900-51), which presented life itself as carnival. According to Kratochvil, however, what happened during and after the Communist takeover of Czechoslovakia obliterated the symbolic nature of carnival as a substitute for reality, playing out ‘for real’ the carnival ritual of enthroning and then dethroning a ‘king’, described by Bakhtin, with what in Medvědí román would be described as the ‘bear-like’ objective of establishing a new order once and for all. Kratochvil writes: ‘while carnival only plays at being reality, a theatricalisation of reality with a strict time limit, the carnivalisation of the 1950s was played out “for all time”. Through a grotesque “metaphor” brought to life, it was supposed to squeeze out reality and also to rid literature of all its life-giving functions.’

In a literary context, Kratochvil’s image of the ‘lamb in bear’s clothing’ serves on the one hand as a metaphor of the danger inherent in literary creation, however apparently innocent its intentions, as in the case of the Poetists, a theme developed further in the discussion of Sorokin and Prigov in the next chapter. Kratochvil writes: ‘As the literature of a small nation, Czech literature has repeatedly been in danger, and perhaps continues to be in danger, of falling victim to its own messianism, just as soon as it is given the opportunity again to enter the suggestive space of “playing at reality” [hra na skutečnost]’. On the other hand, however, the image seeks to reassert the carnivalistic function of the story, understood as an act of rebellion by someone oppressed by authority which seeks only to assert the relativity of all authority. Chased away by Pes and his dogs, the narrator of the third part of Medvědí román comments: ‘ucítí jsem, jak ve mně začíná pomalu zvedat hlavu beránčí (medvědí

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In his fiction and essays, Kratochvil characterises his own writing and that of his contemporaries as the rescue of the story – of literature - from its complicity in tyranny. The confrontation which takes place in the fiction of both Hodrová and Ajvaz is, however, not so much political as aesthetic, contrasting different ‘ways of seeing’ and thereby placing itself not only in opposition to prevailing trends, but also within a long alternative tradition. In her fictional and theoretical writing, Hodrová explores and exploits themes and motifs from early Christian, Jewish, medieval, Renaissance and Baroque esoteric texts, and subsequent works which adopt the same approach. In this way, she seeks in unfavourable circumstances to sustain the memory of understandings of the nature and purpose of literature other than that not only propounded in doctrines like Marxism-Leninism, but also perceived in Western society as ‘normal’, or essential for facilitating the conduct of everyday life. The close relationship between Hodrová’s fiction and her research has frequently been noted by critics: for example, Zdeněk Heřman describes her first novel, Podoboji (In both kinds, 1991, dated as written 1977-78 and 1984), as the ‘artistic realisation of what she declared in her theory’, while Vladimír Macura comments on the particular

39 Kratochvil, Medvědi, p.166. Kratochvil appears here to paraphrase the title of Dostoevskii’s socially concerned novel Unizhenny i oskorblenny (The humiliated and insulted, 1861).
40 In the context of Tolstaiia’s ‘Plamen’ nebesnyi’, Kratochvil’s perception of story-telling coincides with that of Korobeinikov and the implied author, and counters the bear-like use of story-telling to gain advantage practised by Dmitrii Il’ich.
pleasure derived from reading her novels and her theoretical work 'in one go'. This approach is applied in the following discussion, which concentrates on her trilogy of novels comprising Podoboji, Kukly (1991, dated as written 1981-1983) and Thêta (Theta, 1993, dated as written 1987-1990). The proximity of Ajvaz's artistic position to Hodrová's, and the didactic clarity of its articulation in his fiction, are reflected in her frequent use of his images and metaphors in her analysis of the poetics of the twentieth century literary work. This section therefore also contains discussion of Ajvaz's fiction, in particular his first collection of prose pieces, Nâvrat starého varana (The return of the old Komodo dragon, 1991) and his first novel, Druhé město (The other city, 1992), both of which essentially take the form of thinly disguised allegories of the creative process, as much to illuminate Hodrová's work as to provide a point of comparison.

In her study of literary topology, Místa s tajemstvím (Places with a mystery, 1994), Hodrová asserts the co-existence in Western literature of two approaches, one of which, broadly associated with types of Realism, strives to eradicate mystery, while the other, associated with the types of writing she prefers to study, endeavours to preserve it. As Ryšavý has pointed out, Hodrová's pointedly excessive shift away from Realism puts into practice her own assertion in her typology of the novel, Hledání románu, that the novel 'renews and reconstitutes itself' through the endless 'movement' between these two approaches. Hodrová's own fiction, however, may be seen not only as a reflection of a temporary sense that Realism has exhausted itself, as Ryšavý suggests, but also as an attempt to restore the balance upset by the aggressive shift towards Realism to the exclusion of all other modes in the Communist period.

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42 Thêta, described by Martin Ryšavý as the most 'anti-illusive' of Hodrová's novels, straddles the boundary between fiction and theory and may be read as much as a commentary to the first two novels as a novel in its own right. (See Ryšavý, M., 'Zasvětenci do textu', Tvar, 1993, 37-38, p.18. Hereafter Ryšavý, 'Zasvětenci'.)
44 Ryšavý, 'Zasvětenci', p.18. According to Ryšavý, Marxist editors objected most to this notion of movement, contained in the work's original title, which was not dialectical, but rather implied cyclical or oscillation. The need for sharp or heavy shifts in one direction to be matched by similar shifts in the other to restore equilibrium is fundamental to Topol's use in Sestra of the 'wheel of the world' motif as a model of history.
Hodrová dramatises these two contrasting approaches in *Théta* through the characters of Comrade Midas and Mr Chaun, the leaders of a children’s theatre group, whose preferred titles give the account an obvious political subtext: ‘Pan Chaun miloval tajemství, měl smysl pro všelijaká drobná překvapení a hříčky, kterými nás neustále okouzloval, - soudruh Mídas neměl tajemství rád, snad v nich spatřoval něco d’ábelského, co se takto převlečeno může větrít do života a zásadně jej proměnit.’ (Mr Chaun loved secrets, he had a flair for all sorts of little surprises and games, with which he constantly enchanted us. Comrade Mídas didn’t like secrets; perhaps he used to see in them something of the devil, which, thus disguised, might creep into life and change it fundamentally.) Mídas eradicates mystery by making the children confess their secrets to him, rewarding them with chocolate. One day, however, Eliška Beránková, explicitly an implied authorial alter-ego, instead takes a piece of orange from Mr Chaun, which represents for her not only the exotic, linked to Mr Chaun, but also the forbidden: ‘Tím, že přijímá krev pana Chauna, a nikoli tělo soudruha Mídasa, stává se od toho okamžiku vyznavačkou jiného kultu, toho zapovězeného – pohanského.’ (By taking the blood of Mr Chaun, and not the body of Comrade Mídas, she becomes from that moment a follower of a different cult, one that is forbidden, pagan.) The communion metaphor reflects Eliška’s rebellion and her desire, contrary to conservative Roman Catholicism, in which communion is received only ‘in one kind’, to live ‘in both kinds’, to participate fully in the ‘sacred mysteries’. From this point, Hodrová implies, she will be a writer who seeks not to adapt reality to existing models, but to see it simultaneously from both points of view. Kratochvíl found himself ‘at the centre of an unspeakable secret’; Hodrová chooses to depict reality as a ‘place with a mystery’.

In ...*na okraji chaosu*..., Hodrová describes the activity of the writer as the ‘movement between a recognised context, which is given the appearance of order, and

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45 Hodrová, D., *Tržnívě město*, Prague, 1999, p.392. Hereafter Hodrová, *Tržnívě*. On the one hand, Hodrová’s playful use of the name Mídas links the character’s approach to life with materialism and valuing most highly a solid, substantial world, through the myth about gold. On the other, the name may allude to the myth about the music competition between Apollo and Marsyas, in which Mídas judged Marsyas, rather than the God, the winner. In this case, Mídas is associated with hubris and finding beauty in implicitly the wrong kind of art.
46 Ibid., p.393.
47 Eliška’s surname links her not only with Kratochvíl’s ‘lamb’, but also with the Paskal family who form the subject of *Podoboje*. In each case, it reflects the divine element in the human being, and the desire to know God.
all-consuming emptiness'. This activity is effectively dramatised by Ajvaz in *Návrat starého varana* in the story ‘Sochař’ (The sculptor), which Milan Exner considers, along with ‘Nic’ (Nothing) and ‘Koncert’ (The concert), the ‘most successful expression of the author’s poetics, text as meaningful as it is artistic’. In the story, the sculptor-narrator lives in a house built into a cliff, behind which bubbles an underground lake. The sculptor takes up a position on the threshold between the ‘recognised context’, the cosmos of the house, and ‘all-consuming emptiness’, the chaos of the lake, using a valve fitted into a crack in the back wall to fire lumps of magma into the room which he then sculpts. The sculptor does not try to make the material match a pre-conceived idea, which represents a movement back to cosmos, but rather allows himself to be led by the shapes of the lumps, ‘realising the strange underground dreams of matter, dreams which I don’t understand’. He refutes, however, the suggestion that he is too passive, maintaining that what is usually considered ‘active’ is merely the ‘comfortable assimilation of reality to a ready-made model’. In the same way, to those who claim to know from his sculptures what he was trying to say he remarks:

> Převádět skutečnost na něco, co je předem hotové v záměru, podle mne znamená vyměnit živý organismus za odumřelou skořápku život, znamená to jít cestou smrti, obětovat budoucnost minulosti a jemný, nepostřehnutelně vládnoucí řád-rytmus represivnímu pořádku.

(Imposing reality onto something, the design of which is ready in advance, in my view means exchanging a living organism for a withered shell of life. It means walking the path of death, sacrificing the future to the past and the subtle, imperceptibly dominant harmony-rhythm to a repressive notion of order.)

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48 Hodrová, *...na okraji*, p.129.
50 Ajvaz, *Návrat*, p.112. In ‘Nic’, the narrator expresses ironic admiration for those people with ready-made opinions on any subject, who often take up writing in order to lend weight and permanence to these views. Having no opinions of his own, he tried borrowing those of others, but found they dissolved into nothing in his hands, and so he decided to work with this ‘nothing’ instead: ‘Je nic skutečně ničím? Jak málo si něčeho všimáme. Vidíme jen to, co jsme blahoškonné uznali za ‘něco’, ztvární, hotové tvary; ‘nic’ je pro nás temnou sférou za hranicemi tohoto ‘něco’. Ale je tato opomíjená sféra skutečně prázdnotou? Nesetkáváme se v těchto přehlížených koutech bytí, na zadních dvorcích existence s podivuhodným pestrým životem, jehož je ‘něco’ jen odumřelou skořápkou, s životem, který v pulsaci svých sil skrývá tajemství něčeho, natolik zapomenuté, že už se po něm ani neptáme?’ (Is nothing really nothing? How little we notice nothing. We see only that which we have patronisingly acknowledged as ‘something’, hardened, ready-made shapes; for us, ‘nothing’ is the dark sphere beyond the borders of that ‘something’. But is this neglected sphere really emptiness? In these overlooked corners of being, in the backyards of existence with their wondrous, varied life, of which ‘something’ is merely a withered shell, do we not meet with a life which in the pulsation of its forces conceals a secret of something so forgotten that we do not even ask about it?)
The not altogether satisfying paradox of Ajvaz’s fiction, however, is that the rejection of fixed opinions becomes itself in effect an *idée fixe*.

As Ajvaz’s metaphor of the sculptor reflects, the essential characteristic of existence in ‘reality with a secret’ is a constant sense of intermediacy which may not be overcome. To sustain this experience of reality, Hodrová repeatedly uses motifs and devices from mainly early Christian, medieval and Baroque literature which present terrestrial existence as a form of intermediate state from which the human being yearns to escape. In the trilogy, the sense of lost completeness or a lost chance to restore completeness is expressed through stories of unrequited love, unhappy marriages and aborted or miscarried children. The pain of this yearning is reflected in the title of the trilogy, *Tryznivé město*, an allusion to Dante’s description of Florence in *Inferno* as ‘città dolente’, represented in Hodrová’s fiction by Prague, the name of which, according to legend, derives from *práh*, meaning ‘threshold’, the embodiment of intermediacy. Hodrová’s references to Prague, or more specifically the Olšany cemetery and its surroundings which form the setting of her trilogy, as a labyrinth also recall *Labyrint světa a Ráj srdce* (The Labyrinth of the world and the Paradise of the heart, 1623) by Jan Amos Comenius (1592-1670), in which the labyrinth, as in Hodrová’s fiction, is connected with ‘a city-world in which all is marked with vanity and death’. Comenius’s labyrinth constitutes an example of the *theatrum mundi* convention, in which, as Hodrová writes in *Místa s tajemstvím*, ‘the world and history are perceived as the product of illusion, an illusory manifestation […], as an allegory of reality, a dream from which the pilgrim should awaken and see it for what it is’. According to Hodrová, *theatrum mundi* recurs through literary history as a motif in works written at times of sudden social change, when ‘reality has acquired chaotic features and its visible boundaries have disappeared’, and corresponds to a ‘sense of being in exile (in a Neo-Platonist, Gnostic sense), a sense of unreal being which separates the individual on his journey from his spiritual

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51 The loss of a child as a metaphor for the loss of completeness and the destabilisation of identity is central to Hodrová’s fifth novel, *Ztracené děti* (Lost children, 1997), in which the style and techniques developed in the trilogy appeared utterly worn out.


Comenius’s novel forms the key source of intertextual parody in Berková’s *Utrpení oddaného všiváka* (The sufferings of a devoted scoundrel, 1993).

mission, from finding his true identity. Hodrová’s own use of the device is parodic, most obviously in her fourth novel, Perunův den, which presents November 1989 and its aftermath as such a period of change, since she rejects the suggestion that the limits and nature of reality are ‘normally’ stable, and satirises the majority who prefer to believe that they are.

In Podoboji, Hodrová suggests that the sense of intermediacy arises from the fact that terrestrial existence is governed by the number ‘two’:

Je-li jednotka podle číselné kabaly zřídlem a původem všech čísel, vylučuje jakoukoli mnohost, je vždy táz a neproměnná, násobena sama sebou dává opět samu sebe, je bez začátku a vztahuje se k Bohu, pak dvojka, která následuje hned po ní, je číslem stvoření, projevem prvního pohybu, ze dvojky vyplývá veškeré ztělesnění, dvojka je principem dělení, mnohosti a rozdílu, hmoty a proměny, je číslem vědy, paměti a světa, číslem člověka, číslem sváru a nečistoty.

(Where the number ‘one’, according to the numerical cabala of Cornelius Agrippa of Nettesheim, is the source and origin of all numbers, rules out any kind of multiplicity, is always the same and unchanging, multiplied by itself it gives only itself again, is without beginning and relates to God, the number ‘two’, which follows immediately after it, is the number of creation and the manifestation of the prime movement. All embodiment flows from ‘two’; ‘two’ is the principle of division, multiplicity and difference, matter and metamorphosis, it is the number of science, memory and the world, the number of the human being, the number of discord and impurity.)

Implicitly, ‘one’ is associated with Edenic unity, while ‘two’ denotes post-Edenic existence, tormented by the awareness of paradise lost. In Podoboji, Mr Turek, an explicator of Hodrová’s conception of the world in her first two novels, comments: ‘Dva jsou světy – předolšanský a olsanský.’ (There are two worlds: the pre-Olsany and the Olšany.) The Olšany cemeteries were built on vineyards following an outbreak of plague, and thereafter, whoever touches its soil, like Diviš Paskal in Podoboji, is condemned to die. Hodrová’s description of the Olšany earth as ‘vinná země’, meaning both ‘viticultural’ and ‘guilty’, links with Diviš’s name, merging Dionysus with the Paschal Lamb, to reflect the duality of human existence, existing in

54 Ibid., p.18.
55 Hodrová, Tryžnivé, p.125.
56 Ibid.
both body and soul. Through these plays-on-words, Hodrová indicates that her characterisation of the world is not intended to depress, but rather represents a playful statement of what she perceives as the obvious. At the same time, the double meanings reflect how Hodrová’s writing celebrates ‘two’, the number of creation and change, of continuing survival, but also of endless intermediacy, and resists ‘one’, the number of stasis, but also of the release from intermediacy into unity, which most human creative activity, in her view mistakenly, seeks to achieve.

As in Tolstaia’s short fiction, characters in Hodrová’s trilogy believe they can ‘invent’ or dream their way out of intermediacy. Whereas Tolstaia’s characters make up stories to deny the passage of time, in Hodrová’s trilogy, characters attempt to conceal their inherent sinfulness beneath ‘skins’ they stitch for themselves. The metaphor of skin for identity recurs in Podoboji, indicating that, for human beings, identity functions as a border which proves and protects their psychological individuation just as skin proves and protects their physical individuation. Skin remarks of itself in Podoboji: ‘Nebýt mne, byl by člověk ve své pošetilosti s to nechat své tělo rozplynout ve světě. Jsem mezí, která tělo drží v jeho tělesnosti. Dokud jsem, tělo trvá, rozpadám-li se, i tělo je odsouzeno k rozpadu.’ (Were it not for me, the human being would, in his foolishness, be capable of letting his body dissolve into the world. I am the boundary which keeps the body in its corporeality. While I exist, the body endures; if I disintegrate, then the body is also condemned to disintegration.)

In Podoboji, Jan Paskal becomes a Lutheran preacher to ‘hide’ his expulsion from a Catholic seminary for making a woman pregnant, ‘proving’ his Protestant credentials by claiming to be descended from a Huguenot aristocrat who escaped the Massacre of St Bartholomew and fled to Bohemia, where, significantly, his descendants became weavers, throughout Hodrová’s fiction a metaphor for storytellers. However, the identity which he believes he has acquired for himself appears, on the contrary, to have acquired him. Paskal is terrified of being ‘flayed of his skin’,

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57 Ibid., p.38.
58 Hodrová does not seek here simply to remind the reader, after Barthes, of the origins of the word ‘text’, but also evokes the medieval Czech dispute-cum-novel Tkadleček (Weaver, c.1408, author unknown), based on Der Ackermann aus Böhmen, in which the Weaver, representing Emotion, and Misfortune, representing Reason, debate the extent to which a human being is able to dictate his fate, and the Weaver loses. In its patchwork of intertextual references which serves as a metaphor for the labyrinth of terrestrial existence and its playful assertion of the impotence of the human being in general and the writer in particular, Tkadleček shares much with works of the Changes period and supports Hodrová’s preference for locating her work within a tradition, rather than asserting its novelty.
an allusion to the martyrdom of St Bartholomew, but within the novel a reference to a bloody sheepskin coat hidden in a wardrobe which will expose Paskal as the murderer of a local S.S. man. When Paskal’s guilt is discovered, by two policemen from the station on Bartholomew Street, he acquires a new ‘skin’, that of a hero of the Liberation, though in fact he murdered the German for having an affair with his wife and conceiving Diviš, who is thus born ‘in both kinds’, a ‘utraquist’. After the Communist take-over, however, Paskal is made to work in a factory cleaning and preparing fleeces, which he regards as penance for his crime, but which really constitutes the author’s playful punishment for a character who has spent his life changing ‘skins’ to save his own.59

In Podboji, the intermediacy of existence governed by the number two is linked specifically to Czech historical experience through the ‘in both kinds’ motif, which refers to a key demand of the Hussites that all should receive communion in both kinds. In 1436, the Council of Basle gave this right to the Czechs, who therefore became unique within the Roman Church. This anomalous position ‘on the edge between orthodoxy and heresy’, between an autonomous identity and absorption into a larger identity has, Hodrová implies, consistently defined the fate of the Czechs. As she indicates through characters like Mr Turek’s friend, Mr Klečka, throughout their history, Czechs have oscillated endlessly between fervent optimism that this intermediacy might be escaped, and deep despair when every attempt fails. In the latter part of Podboji, the joyful atmosphere of the period of liberalisation which culminated in the so-called ‘Prague Spring’ merges at the Olšany cemetery with the heyday of the Czech National Revival, with figures from that period emerging from their graves to share in the atmosphere of hope.60 In Hodrová’s depiction, the Warsaw Pact intervention of August 1968 mirrors the suppression by Habsburg troops of the

59 Similarly, in Kukly, Dr. Sysel’s itching eczema reflects his vain desire to change the course of events in April 1945, when, while his fellow students rushed to Prague Castle, said to be on fire, and were massacred by Germans burning documents there, Sysel was in the arms of his future wife.

60 Hodrová connects the periods using Máj (1836), best translated as ‘Spring’, by Karel Hynek Mách (1810-36), subsequently the most celebrated work of literature written during the Revival. Significantly, however, Máj describes the human being’s exclusion from the annual rebirth of Nature, which in the context of Hodrová’s novel reflects the futility of any attempts by human beings to ‘regenerate’ their existence. The Communist period, the Revival and the Hussites are linked through the figure of Karel Sabina (1813-77). A political Revivalist imprisoned after 1848, on his release he remained a nationalist writer while working as a police informer for Vienna. The street in Prague named after the theologian of Hussitism, Jacobellus de Mies (?-1429), who called in his teaching for
Prague Whitsun Troubles of June 1848, with the military action in each case preceding a period of ‘neo-absolutism’, in the 1850s under the Interior Minister Alexander Bach, in the 1970s and 1980s under Gustáv Husák. The blurring of the distinction between the ‘revolutions’, or radical shifts in power, of 1939, 1945, 1948 and 1968 indicates that this cycle of hope and despair simply repeats itself endlessly.

Mr Turek, conspicuous in his refusal to join in the optimism, comments: ‘každá doba naplnuje stará podobenství po svém a ke svému obrazu. Tak kupříkladu podobenství o třech mladencích v peci ohnivé, i to má svou dnešní podobu.’ (Every time completes old allegories in its own way and in its own image. So, for example, even the allegory of the three young men in the fiery furnace has its own form today). Mr Turek is referring here to the suicide by fire of Jan Palach in January 1969 in protest at Czechoslovak acquiescence to the Soviet Union, imitated soon after by Jan Zajíc.

Rumours of further imitators (there was another in the countryside) are lost amid the recurrence of another allegory, the captivity of the Israelites in Egypt, as the Normalisation, overseen by foreign troops, sets in.

On the one hand, given that Podoboji deals more explicitly with the experience of the Normalisation than any of Hodrová’s other novels and is permeated with a mood of melancholy and despair indicative of the time of writing, the cyclical model of history may be interpreted as an attempt to comfort the implied reader, since, by disrupting the reader’s sense of linear chronology, the experience of each period individually is tempered – without being belittled – while the suffering witnessed and endured by Prague in the twentieth century as a whole is emphasised. On the other, however, Hodrová is also critical of the response of the majority, who, by closing their eyes to what is happening, appear more dead than the dead. The hope of overcoming intermediacy results not in a restored Eden, but in acquiescence to a fixed reality, equated with death. Hodrová more or less aligns herself with Mr Turek, who appears more alive than the living, never optimistic, but never reconciled, but always trying to see further and differently:

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61 Hodrová, Tryznivé, p.100.
62 Unperturbed by previous failures, the Olšany dead fleetingly invest their hopes of redemption from this captivity in the promising-sounding Benjamin, the unborn child of Alice Davidovičová, and therefore born of the ‘House of David’. Similarly, in Topol’s Sestra, people briefly place their hope in
Uviděl, co druzí neviděli, uslyšel, co druzí neslyšeli, neboť tady na Olsánech všechno vystupuje v mnohem jasnějších rysích, a kdo chce, kdo se odváží, může se tu stát vidoucím. Jenže mnohem víc je těch, kteří raději zabločí hlavu do svých krtičích hrobečků, ryjí se ve svých hřbitovních zahrádkách a nedívají se nalevo ani napravo. A v tom také tkví smysl olšanské konsolidace, aby všichni byli právě takoví a o nic jiného aby se nezajímali.

(He had seen what others had not seen, and heard what others had not heard, for here in Olšany everything emerges with much clearer features, and whoever wants to, whoever has the courage, can become a visionary. The only thing is, there are many more of those who prefer to bury their heads in their little mole-hills, who dig in their cemetery plots and look neither left nor right. And herein lies the meaning of the Olšany consolidation: that everyone be just like this and take no interest in anything else.)

In this way, Hodrová in effect defends her own form of intellectual, as opposed to political, ‘eternal dissidence’, constantly resisting the imposition of a single, fixed model and asserting openness, multiplicity and fluidity, which in her fiction becomes the definition of the writer under any circumstances.

Throughout her trilogy, Hodrová plays with the reader’s desire to simplify or organise reality, not only, as Alena Vrbová points out, through the frequent references to locations in Prague which ‘encourage the reader’s desire to make reading easier by using a map’, but also through her disorientating depiction of several generations of families, which might inspire the reader to draw a family tree. The use of maps or family trees, however, merely further complicates the novels, highlighting Hodrová’s

the potential offspring of a character called David in a comparable ironisation of people’s unrelenting search for a Messiah.

Hodrová, Tryznivé, p.128. ‘Consolidation’ was the original term used by the Husák regime (before ‘Normalisation’) to denote the new Party line following the defeat and subsequent removal of the reformers in 1969.

Hodrová’s assertion of writing as resistance to stasis recurs in the prose piece Rozzhavená kra (A white-hot ice floe, 1993) by Jaromír Typlt (b.1971). Typlt argues that the poetic image, as indicated by his title, represents not ‘fixedness’ but ‘action caused by the fact in the image itself, the image is opposed by DISINTEGRATION, the unceasing destroyer of manifestations and meanings’. (Typlt, J., Rozzhavená kra, Olomouc, 1996, p.35.) (This notion may be compared to Kratochvíl’s metaphor of the ‘lamb in bear’s clothing’.) In the piece, which he describes as a ‘vratifest’, returning the blow struck by the manifestos of the Avantgarde, and in his much discussed article, ‘Devadesátá léta mezi zátišísm a bojištěm’, Typlt criticises the modest aspirations of contemporary poets and poetry critics, whom he accuses of ‘neo-classicism’. (See Typlt, J., ‘Devadesátá léta mezi zátišísm a bojištěm’, Tvar, 1993, 16, p.1.) Instead Typlt calls for, and attempts to enact, a return to the energy of the Avantgarde combined with an awareness of the inevitability of defeat.

rejection of the attempt to simplify through cognition. A similar strategy is employed by Hodrová’s husband, Karel Milota (1937-2002), who, in his novel *Sud* (Barrel, 1993, dated as completed 1980) uses recurring motifs and characters to persuade the reader of a hidden pattern underlying the work. The reader’s search for this pattern corresponds to the central character’s attempts to avert the course of Fate (*osud*), whose constant presence is represented in the work by the sound of barrels rolling, also perhaps indicating the imminence of the Last Judgement (*Poslední soud*).

At the beginning of the novel, a man is apparently sent to a Prague suburb to warn a girl that she is mortal danger, but regardless of which of the various plot-lines is followed, the outcome is always death. At one point, the central character remarks: ‘*přijel jsem, abych zabránil neštěstí [...] místo toho jsem nějaké neštěstí zapůsobil.*’ (I came to prevent a misfortune [...] instead I have caused one.)^67 Like Hodrová, Milota frequently uses medieval and Baroque motifs, like Holbein’s painting of the *danse macabre*. However, he does not merely seek to remind the reader of the inevitability of death and the guilt inherent in human beings, but rather plays with the eternal human hope that this situation might be changed. Like Topol subsequently in *Sestra*, by mixing various myths of repentance and salvation, particularly the quest for the Holy Grail and the Book of Revelation, Milota seeks to show how human creativity devotes itself endlessly to dreaming of redemption from terrestrial existence, and how the myriad of texts which result do no more than represent the confusion of that existence, in the midst of which the ‘fakir-like’ writer plays.

In the fiction of both Hodrová and Ajvaz, however, the rejection of writing as mapping constitutes not an assertion of the futility or comic absurdity of writing, but rather the rejection of writing as a one-way act of definition in favour of writing as wandering, understood not simply as a metaphor for the aimlessness of existence and the impossibility of knowledge, as in Popov’s *Dusha patriota*, but as a non-positivist approach to cognition. In *Kukly*, Mr Turek asserts: “*Některá místa [...] se musejí obcházet v kruhu, aby vydala své tajemství, jiná napříč, křižem krážem. A na některá*

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^67 For Hodrová, the process of mapping should not simplify a place, but make it more mysterious, as she indicates in *Kukly* through her reference to the writer Karel Ladislav Kukla (1863-1930), who, according to František Kautman, is an ancestor of Hodrová’s, and in the novel is an ancestor of the central character, Sofie Syslová. (See Kautman, F., *‘Skica Daniely Hodrové’, Literární noviny*, 1993, 9, p.6.) In the course of writing his tetralogy of novels, collectively titled *Praha neznámá* (Unknown Prague, 1894-1927), Kukla mapped the city’s sewers, and in *Kukly* Hodrová implicitly suggests that his approach is hereditary.
se musí vystupovat a zase z nich sestupovat.’” (‘Some places [...] must be gone round in a circle for them to disclose their secrets, others must be gone across, criss-cross. And some must be ascended and then descended again.’) In the context of Hodrová’s extensive study of the ‘novel of initiation’, notably in Román zasvěcení (1994), this notion of wandering corresponds to the movement of the pilgrim in search of initiation. This novel type is reflected in the accounts of Diviš Paskal’s coming of age in Podobojí and Sofie Syslová’s sexual awakening in Kukly, which, in the context of Théta, explicitly about writing, may be seen as metaphors of the writing process. The actual wandering of characters like Diviš Paskal and Sofie Syslová mirrors the wandering of the writer through her memory, as well as that of the reader through the work, uniting all in an endless quest for meaning which, in keeping with the tradition of the novel of initiation, serves as a metaphor for terrestrial existence.

Ajvaz’s first novel, Druhé město, also takes the form of a novel of initiation which transforms Prague into a labyrinth, and indeed bears out Hodrová’s assertion in Román zasvěcení that in the twentieth-century initiation novel, ‘the space of initiation becomes a library (publishing house) and the object of initiation a book’. The novel began as a poem, ‘Město’ (City), from Ajvaz’s collection Vražda v hotelu Intercontinental (Murder at the Intercontinental Hotel, 1990), in which the narrator looks for the remnants of an ancient civilisation on which Prague was built, but only finds what he seeks when he has ceased looking, in the place where he least expects it.

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67 Milota, K., Sud, Prague, 1993, p.31. The novel is prefaced with a quotation from Tkadleček.
68 Hodrová, Trýznivé, p.265.
69 This work was submitted for her Habilitation and rejected, apparently for ideological reasons, in 1973, and therefore pre-dates Hodrová’s trilogy.
70 For example: ‘Sofie Syslová vyjde z náměstí Komenského do Rokycanovy ulice. Z Rokycanovy ulice zahne do uličky Sabinovy, která vede na Havlíčkovo náměstí. Pak stoupá ulicí Lipanskou [...], přetne ulici Táboritskou a stoupá ulicí Bořivojovou. A pak jde Sofie Syslová ulicí Kubelíkovou a potom ulicí Čajkovského, která vede do Přemyslovska, kde bydlí Hynek Machovec, jen skok. [...]’ (Sofie Syslová leaves Comenius Square and goes into Rokycana Street. From Rokycana Street she turns into Sabina Street, which leads onto Havlíček Square. Then she goes up Lipany Street [...], cuts across Taborit Street and goes up Bořivoj Street. And then Sofie Syslová goes along Kubelík Street and then Tchaikovsky Street, from where it is only a stone’s throw to Přemyslid Street, where Hynek Machovec lives. [...]’ (Ibid., p.277.) Most of the street names refer to heterodox figures who shaped the labyrinth of Czech history, within which Sofie finds herself and from which she is formed: for example, the coming of Christianity under Bořivoj, Hussitism (Rokycana, the Utraquist archbishop of Prague, the defeat of the radical Hussites at the Battle of Lipany), and Comenius, Havlíček and the conductor Kubelík, all forced to leave under different regimes. Hodrová’s autobiographical connection to the settings described in the trilogy emerges in Théta, and is further explained in her stylised ‘guide’ to Prague, entitled Město vidim... (I see a city..., 1992), the first words of Libuše’s prophecy about the founding of Prague in Czech legend.
71 Hodrová, Román zasvěcení, p.133.
In the novel, the narrator becomes aware of the ‘other city’, existing parallel to Prague, through the chance discovery in a second-hand bookshop of a book written in an outlandish alphabet. The book opens a crack in his previously solid, stable perception of the world, recalling the fissure in the cliff face in ‘Sochar’: ‘Pořád ještě bylo snadné minout škvíru, ze které na mne zavanul znepokojuvý a lákavý dech, nechat trhlinu zarůst sít’ovím obnovujících se souvislostí.’ (It was still easy to pass by the crack from which a disturbing and seductive breath had wafted on me, to let the fissure become overgrown by a web of self-renewing connections.) The narrator refers to the book as a ‘door elsewhere’, but unlike the ‘door drawn in the air’ in Tolstai’a story ‘Krug’, which offers an explicitly fictional, ‘daydream’ escape from the grey banality of everyday life, the crack opened by the book in Druhé město exposes the arbitrariness of what has been demarcated as the ‘real world’, revealing the equally real or unreal possibilities which such an act of definition seeks to exclude. Once the mysterious book has awoken the narrator to the partial nature of the reality in which he lives, this awareness spreads like an infection to all aspects of existence, including, for example, speech: ‘tech několik hlasek, které používáme, je obklopeno neznámým pralesem zvukù.’ (Those few phonemes which we use are surrounded by an unknown jungle of sounds.) In an essay first published in 1995, Ajvaz retains this metaphor of the book as a ‘tear in the web of meaning’, a means not of perpetuating an existing understanding of the world, but, on the contrary, of undermining it and turning the world once again into a ‘place with a secret’.

In his account of primeval religious thinking, Mircea Eliade writes:

Every territory occupied for the purpose of being inhabited or utilised as Lebensraum is first of all transformed from chaos into cosmos; that is, through the effect of ritual it is given a ‘form’ which makes it become real. Evidently, for the archaic mentality, reality manifests itself as force, effectiveness and duration. Hence the outstanding reality is the sacred; for only the sacred is in an absolute fashion, acts effectively, creates things and makes them endure. The innumerable gestures of consecration – of tracts and territories, of objects, of men etc. – reveal the primitive’s obsession with the real, his thirst for being.

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72 Ajvaz, M., Druhé město, Prague, 1992, p.8. (Hereafter Ajvaz, Druhé.)
73 Ibid., p.29.
In Druhé město, the discovery of the book awakens in the narrator a dormant awareness that the world in which he lives – in ‘Město’ explicitly the ‘timelessness of the seventies’ (‘bezčasí sedmdesátých let’) – has become desacralised, a ‘withered shell’ that lacks the reality and vitality indicative of being. He therefore travels beyond the boundaries of his world into the ‘other city’ in search of the origin of his own civilisation, which is simultaneously the key to its re-birth. Jaroslav Kříž comments: ‘Ajvaz’s hero longs to penetrate to the centre of the world, which reveals something of itself to him, evidently because in his normal world there is no longer any centre, everything is merely periphery or surface.’

However, the quest for initiation does not lead to the discovery of the origin or centre as the narrator envisages. On the contrary, the ‘other city’, most prominently represented by a figure resembling an American television evangelist, proves as rigid as the ‘first city’ in its perpetuation and defence of its limits, treating the narrator with intense hostility since he appears to represent a greater threat to its order than he does to his own. The description of the narrator’s encounter with the young man who is the principal deity of the ‘other city’ not only indicates the messianic nature of the narrator’s mission, through his identification with the young man, but also the distinction between the eternal uncertainty of the wanderer, as in Hodrová, and the tyrannical rigidity of the cosmos he ordains, a theme also treated by Kratochvil in Medvědí román and Avion: ‘He was not the proud and cruel deity depicted by the statues. His face was the face of a stranger hounded to exhaustion, who wanders like me through the lands of exile. It seemed that his divine being was only one infinitely great suffering which could never end.’

The initiation at the end of the narrator’s quest in Druhé město consists in learning that what he seeks does not exist: ‘Žádný poslední střed neexistuje, za maskami se

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77 In Román zasvěcení, Hodrová points out that the basis of the quest for initiation is ‘the myth of rebirth – the rebirth of the pagan nature deity, of the Christian people or of the neophyte’. (Hodrová, Román zasvěcení, p.11.)

neskrývá žádná tvář, není žádné první slovo v tiché poště, není žádný originál překladu. Je jen neustále se otácející šnůra proměn, rodicích další proměny.' (No final centre exists, no face is concealed behind the masks, there is no first word in the game of Chinese whispers, no original of the translation. There is only the constantly winding string of metamorphoses giving birth to further metamorphoses.)

In ...na okraji chaosu..., Hodrová writes: ‘rather than talking about the loss of the centre, in connection with the twentieth century work, we could talk more about a new centring. The essence of this new centring appears to be the idea of many centres.’ The ‘other city’ is in fact only a ‘second city’ – both meanings are covered by the word druhé - after which a third, fourth and so on must be sought. With this outcome, Ajvaz asserts in place of the notion of the book as a means of circumscribing existence, and therefore, in Ajvaz’s view, denying being, the notion of a book which contains all the possibilities of transformation and thus possesses the openness and uncertainty that guarantee being. In Druhé město, this shift in the perception of the book is represented by the jungle which is slowly enveloping the shelves of the library, and the outlandish alphabet which infests the narrator’s other books, images of a chaos which grows, moves, lives and transforms.

Ajvaz’s writing, like Kratochvíl’s, owes much to Borges, as Jan Malura, amongst other critics, points out, suggesting that the two writers are fundamentally united by the notion of the book as ‘an end in itself, an independent world’. Ajvaz, however, appears much more optimistic than Borges about the capacity of words and the book to communicate the experience of being. In the conclusion of Druhé město, Ajvaz implicitly links Borges’s notion of the universe as a book (in “The Library of Babel” (1964)) with Jacques Derrida’s assertion that signs refer only to other signs, central to

79 Ajvaz, Druhé, p.135.
80 Ibid., p.148.
81 Hodrová, ...na okraji, p.133.
82 In Ajvaz’s earlier story, ‘Koncert’, the narrator plays an organ which starts to melt, making it increasingly hard to differentiate between keys and notes, until the organ is emitting only a single tone, a ‘noise which contains all other tones’. The narrator comments: ‘v šumění, které vychází z klavíru, jsou obsažené všechně hudební skladby, jež byly a budou napsány, i nikdy nenapsané skladby geniálních skladatelů, které zemřeli v mládí.’ (The humming coming from the piano contains all the musical compositions which have ever been and will ever be written, and the compositions never written by genius composers who died young.) (Ajvaz, Návrat, p.138.) The image of the organist recalls the seventh poem of the key Czech Decadent cycle Mstivá kantiléna (Vengeful cantilena, 1898) by Karel Hlaváček (1867-1898), where the organist is also perhaps linked to the abbé-narrator, and implicitly plays while waiting for the barbarians – a favourite symbol of impending chaos and renewal in the period - to come and sweep away the ‘withered shell’ of European civilisation.
the satirisation of language's inability to mean in the work of Prigov, Sorokin or Kolenič, only to reject them both:

Četl jsem kdesi, že knihy pojednávají jen o jiných knihách, že znaky poukazují zase k jiným znakům, že kniha nemá nic společného se skutečností, že spíš skutečnost sama je kniha, protože je vytvořena jazykem. Toto učení bylo melancholické v tom, jak nechávalo skutečnost mizet za našimi znaky.

(I read somewhere that books speak only about other books, that signs refer to other signs, that the book has nothing in common with reality, that rather reality itself is a book because it is created by language. This theory was melancholy in that it let reality disappear beneath our signs.)

In *Druhé město*, Ajvaz suggests that reality, or the experience of being, symbolised by the burgeoning chaos of the ever expanding jungle in the library, has become closed off by the contemporary preoccupation with language’s inability to represent reality, and the consequent assertion that what is called reality is only a product of language, leading to imprisonment in language as a ‘withered shell’. For Ajvaz, however, the experience of being is conveyed in language by the ‘movement between an established context’ and the sign which remains unincorporated in that context. Hodrová considers a typical example to be the title of Ajvaz’s next work, *Tyrkysový orel* (The turquoise eagle, 1997), which contains two separately titled stories, in the second of which a character reads of a woman who owned a brooch in the form of a turquoise eagle, an object which has no apparent importance and does not reappear elsewhere in either story. Hodrová comments of such ‘things’ in Ajvaz’s work:

Even though they are found, their purpose is not discovered, or they are ultimately used in an entirely trivial way, as though they were here only in themselves and for themselves. It only seems like this, however; in reality, it is precisely in the thing that the character glimpses a flash of being and encounters that ‘single shining and strange being’ of which these things are a symbol.

As the narrator of *Druhé město* in effect points out, the tension between the context and the unincorporated sign derives not from the imminent, inevitable incorporation of the sign into the context, perceived as the substitution of being by language, but

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84 Ajvaz, *Druhé*, p.140.
85 Hodrová, *...na okraji*, p.716. (In this passage, Hodrová quotes Ajvaz, M., ‘Zenonovy paradoxy’ in *Tyrkysový orel*, Prague, 1997, p.106.) The turquoise eagle brooch may in this interpretation be seen to function in the same way as the apparently inconsequential but indestructible enamel dove in Tolstaja’s ‘Sonia’.
from the constant threat that being ‘will once again swallow [our meanings] and
dissolve them in itself.’\textsuperscript{86} For Ajvaz, this threat constitutes a guarantee of continued
change, continued being. As the title of the novel suggests, this continued being may
be understood as a product of the relationship between the self and the other, which
the narrator of \textit{Druhé město}, unlike Mameev in \textit{Avtoporctet s dogom}, seeks not to
overcome, but to sustain: ‘skutečný rozhovor je možný jen mezi těmi, co odešli, a
těmi, co zůstávají. Rozmluvy se soukmenovci jsou vždy jen nudným nasloucháním
echu vlastních slov.’ (A real conversation is possible only between those who have
left and those who stay. Discussions with fellow-clansmen are never anything more
than the tedious reception of the echo of one’s own words.)\textsuperscript{87} However, whereas
Bakhtin, in his essay on the author and hero in aesthetic activity, emphasises the
other’s role in completing the self, the other in Ajvaz’s perception acts beneficently
by constantly opening up the self, preventing the self from becoming a ‘withered
shell’.

In Hodrová’s trilogy, this constant activity of opening-up is associated with the
notion of writing as endless wandering. Unlike ‘writing as mapping’, a caricature of
Realism as the deadening identification of sign and referent, an attempt to assert
existence governed by the number ‘one’, writing as endless wandering leads to
unstoppable proliferation, as in Ajvaz a motif of being, and the embodiment of
existence governed by the number ‘two’. In \textit{Tryznivé město}, Hodrová wanders
repeatedly over signifiers which gradually, each time they are encountered, reveal
more of the simultaneously existing, shifting signifieds within them and thus, in
effect, ‘come to life’. At the same time, as the signifier ‘acquires’ signifieds, it loses
substance, becoming increasingly abstract, or ‘multi-centred’, and decreasingly
‘fixed’. For example, the signifier in the title \textit{Kukly}, a reference to the family
portrayed in the novel, descended from the writer Kukla, alludes to the passive,
intermediate stage in the development of a larva into an adult insect, and thus serves
as metaphor for terrestrial existence. The impotence inherent in that existence is
reflected in the Russian meaning of \textit{kukla} (puppet), which, as Kautman and Ryšavý

\textsuperscript{86} Ajvaz, \textit{Druhé}, p.141.
\textsuperscript{87} Ibid., p.157. This remark coincidentally resembles that of the young writer in Balla’s short story
‘Večerná úzkost’. Pieseň plavecká’, who longs to be part of a nation of people who cannot make
themselves understood to each other. (This story is discussed in detail in the last chapter of this
dissertation.)
both point out, must be taken into account given Sofie Syslová’s job sewing puppets and Hodrová’s specialisation in Russian literary theory. The transient, ‘unreal’ nature of human existence is reflected in another possible meaning of the title, ‘masks’, referring to the impermanence and illusoriness of terrestrial identity. The title also evokes koukol, meaning ‘tare’ or, metaphorically, ‘goats’, as in ‘separating the sheep from the goats’, a recurring motif in Podoboji. On the one hand, this motif may refer to the separation of those implicitly more spiritual characters, aware of living ‘in both kinds’, from those who seek to impose notions of existence ‘under one kind’. On the other, however, it may suggest the separation the soul from the body, and its return to God. In Hodrová’s conception, the writer roams the space between the signifier and signifieds and between these signifieds, resisting the coalescence of a particular signifier and signified as the substitution of a relativity for the absolute which the writer hopes to glimpse. Hodrová writes in Théta: ‘právě o to prosvítání, o matný odraz skutečnosti, která textu neustále uniká mezi písmeny, mi běží.’ (I am interested precisely in that illumination, the vague reflection of reality which constantly escapes the text between its letters.)

This initiation into the nature of meaning is reflected in the trilogy also in the initiation into the nature of the self, which in Hodrová’s fiction is possessed by not only human beings, but also objects and places. The self, in effect, like the signifier, corresponds to the notion of ‘space’ in Místa s tajemstvím, defined as a ‘complex or network of places, which, like an individual place, only begins to exist through subjects and events’, where place corresponds to identity. Hodrová makes this correspondence all but explicit when she continues: ‘[The character] carries a place (places) within itself, it creates them for itself like a spider its web, or, put differently, the place comes to life through a particular character, it begins to exist through the character.’ In Kukly, Hodrová writes of the central character: ‘Sofie Syslová začíná chápat. Její vědomí je místem, v němž se sbíhají jako paprsky kruhu události minulé i budoucí. A tak jako v sobě Sofie Syslová postupně zahrnuje čas v jeho proměnách a trvání, zahrnuje v sobě různé bytosti.’ (Sofie Syslová is beginning to understand. Her

88 Hodrová may also be drawing attention here to the link between the Latin ‘pupa’, meaning ‘doll’, and the Slavonic ‘kukla’. The perhaps coincidental overlap indicates a ‘place with a mystery’ between the languages.
89 Hodrová, Trýznivé, p.528.
90 Hodrová, Místa, p.10.
consciousness is a place in which past and future events run together like the radii of a circle. And just as Sofie Syslová gradually absorbs into herself time in its metamorphoses and permanence, she comprises in herself different beings.\(^92\) In this context, Hodrová’s Prague may be seen as an actualisation of her self, understood as a place where different time periods, fates, mythologies, stories, works of literature, memories, the living and the dead come together and co-exist. In the same way as for space and the signifier, the limits of the self become increasingly vague, since the number of identities it may contain is notionally limitless. For example, in *Podobojí*, Hodrová describes how, at different points in history, the barricades go up on ‘Foch Avenue (formerly Jungmann, later Schwerin, then Stalin and finally Vinohradská Avenue)’ (‘na Fochově třídě (dříve Jungmannově, posléze Stalinově, nakonec Vinohradské’)),\(^93\) these different ‘identities’ combining with infinite previous and future identities to form the ‘self’ of the location in question.

For Hodrová, being is experienced precisely through the constant passage of these identities through consciousness. Hodrová presents the formation of the self as an essentially carnivallistic process, in which identities are constantly acquired and shed, like the renewal of skin or the life cycle of insects. The provisional, ‘mask-like’ nature of identity, and its relationship to post-Edenic, sinful existence, is encapsulated in the name of the tailor’s dummy in *Podobojí*, Kajn, apparently not only Cain, but also from the German ‘kein’, who ‘looks as though he is, but at the same time isn’t, or as though he isn’t, but at the same time is.’ (‘vypadá, jako by byl, a přitom není, anebo jako že není, a přitom je.’).\(^94\) The title of *Podobojí* may be understood as a pun on *podoba*, meaning ‘identity’, suggesting that the sense of eternal intermediacy derives from the fact that, at any moment, a character is ‘between identities’, the one being acquired and the one being shed, which becomes in effect a re-casting of the notion, fundamental to the Baroque worldview and central to Milota’s *Sud*, that ‘in the midst of life we are in death’.\(^95\)

\(^{91}\) Ibid.
\(^{92}\) Hodrová, *Tržnivé*, p.341. The same model appears in Kateřina Sternbergová’s analysis of time in Hodrová’s work, which she defines as a ‘saturation of moments, of the world of one human being, more people or even a mixture of time plans from many novels’. (Sternbergová, K., ‘Čas v Thétě Daniely Hodrové’, *Tvar*, 1993, 27-28, p.9. Hereafter Sternbergová, ‘Čas’.)
\(^{93}\) Hodrová, *Tržnivé*, p.33.
\(^{94}\) Ibid., p.16.
\(^{95}\) Hodrová actualises this notion in *Kukly* through the motif of the *tableau vivant*, in which the actors appear static, but are in fact moving in time. Sternbergová comments: ‘time and its passing are a vital
Death, however, in Hodrová’s fiction does not mean ceasing to exist, but rather becoming fixed, waiting for change. In a passage in *Kukly* which Macura considers crucial to Hodrová’s writing, Mr Turek comments: ‘V tomhle světě nic nezaniká. […] Všeho se jen neustále proměňuje.’ (In this world nothing ceases to exist. […] Everything just constantly metamorphoses.)96 This observation reflects what Ryšavý describes as Hodrová’s ‘consideration of the world as a text’,97 in which all words and combinations of words wait, cocooned, until the moment when they pass through a consciousness, bringing it to life and coming to life themselves. Words correspond in effect to the souls of the dead (*dušičky*), hovering in the ventilation shaft in *Podoboji*, who say of themselves:

_We are incarnated breath, our inhaling and exhaling gives rhythm to the course of the universe. In the opposition of life and death we are situated right on the border, on a border that is, alas, too vague. We are half-divine and half-human and in this composition of ours we resemble the heroes of myths, descending to earth to enlighten ignorant humanity. We are capable of endless metamorphoses and reincarnations in which we evade the prying eyes of mortals._98

While living characters in Hodrová’s fiction experience themselves as an ever-changing text, like Jan Paskal, unsure whether they write the text or the text writes them, dead characters, in life in the midst of death, find themselves trapped in a text which endlessly repeats itself and cannot be changed, the memory of them retained by the living. Hodrová writes in *Podoboji*:

_Divíš Paskal začíná chápát – mrtví žijí mezi námi dál svým obyčejným životem, životem divně oproštěným, životem jakoby omezeným na to, co v něm bylo nejzákladnější, a to se po smrti opakuje stále dokola. Jako by člověk usedl na zvláštní kolotoč, z kterého už nemůže slézt, a musí se na něm pořád točit jako káča._

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96 Ibid., p.347. See Macura, ‘Román’.
98 Hodrová, *Tryznivé*, p.43.

prerequisite for constant metamorphosis; however, we appear only to “glimpse” a certain phase, that “ever present moment” in which the past and future cross and permeate each other.’ (Sternbergová, ‘Čas’.)
(Diviš Paskal is beginning to understand: the dead continue to live their ordinary lives amongst us, lives strangely divested of their trappings, lives as if limited to what was most fundamental about them, and this goes on and on repeating itself after death. As though the person had sat on a strange roundabout from which he could not then get off, and on which he had to continue spinning like a top.)

What is most fundamental invariably proves to be each person’s worst memory; for example, the ‘utraquists’ Sabina and Čurda, the co-conspirator in the Heydrich assassination who turned informer (in Théta), cannot but endlessly repeat their treachery. Like cocooned words, they wait for the writer who may fleetingly breathe life into them again.

At the same time, however, cocoons of words and selves feel threatened by the writer who knows too much about them, because they fear that they may dissolve completely. In Podoboji, Diviš Paskal, in a coincidental link with Kratochvíl’s metaphor, is described by the dead as a ‘wolf in sheep’s clothing’, not only a reference to his German origin, hidden beneath his Paschal surname, but also to his position as one of the living moving among the dead. According to the souls in the ventilation shaft: ‘nejbezpečnější ze všech [smrtelníků] jsou blouznivci jako Diviš Paskal, kteří ve své pošetilosti a nezřízené zvědavosti překračují stanovené meze. […] Bráníme se mu zakuklením v konkrétní věc, ve jsoucno trvající a omezené.’ (The most dangerous of all [mortals] are zealots like Diviš Paskal, who in their foolishness and uncontrolled curiosity transgress established limits. […] We protect ourselves from him by cocooning ourselves in a concrete thing, in enduring, limited being.)

The characterisation of Diviš Paskal in Podoboji as clownish, irrepressibly curious and constantly in danger of over-reaching himself not only constitutes an authorial autostylisation, but also, as in Tolstaiä’s fiction, asserts the child-like nature of the writer, prepared to tolerate the co-existence of all kinds of explanations and contradictions and perceiving living ‘souls’ in all things, animate or inanimate, dead or alive. As his understanding of Mr Turek’s perception of the world grows, however, Diviš becomes convinced that he can intervene to alter the text of memory and release Alice Davidovičová from imprisonment in her failure to meet and ultimately to marry

99 Ibid., p.63.
100 Ibid., p.43.
the man she loved: ‘A Diviš Paskal si pripadá jako Herakles, jako Théseus, jako
Orfeus a jako Kristus a také jako básník Dante – tato samolibost bude Divišovi
osudná.’ (And Diviš Paskal sees himself as Hercules, as Theseus, as Orpheus and as
Christ, and also as the poet Dante. This conceit will be fateful for Diviš.)

This temptation remains ever present for the writer; in Thêta, Hodrová compares watching
her own past to watching her father acting in Tennessee Williams’s Night o f the
Iguana: ‘Také předem vím, jak dopadne a přece ve mně stále zůstává jiskřička naděje,
že do něj budu moci jednou vstoupit a dát mu jiný směr.’ (In the same way I know in
advance how it will turn out, and none the less a tiny flicker of hope still remains in
me that I will be able one day to step into it and give it a different direction.)

Diviš’s fate resembles that of Venichka in Moskva-Petushki; in his attempt to cross
the threshold into the realm of the dead in the last lines of the novel, he falls from the
same window from which Alice jumped in the opening lines. Diviš can only release
Alice from the text of his memory by cutting off the text of his own life, and thus
brings the novel to an end which, like Alice’s fall, may also be a beginning. The
circular form thus acquired by Podoboji, like Moskva-Petushki, corresponds to
Hodrová’s description of Time in the novel of initiation in Román zasvícení as
‘governed by the notion of return, but the origin which is being returned to is no
longer an origin, but an end,’ recalling the image of the Uroboros, the snake
swallowing its tail.

As a writer, Hodrová strives to remain on the threshold, from where she may trace
the ‘endless metamorphoses and reincarnations’ taking place in her consciousness,
hoping in vain not only to experience, but also to capture that instance of being. Like
Venedikt Erofeev in Moskva-Petushki, Hodrová substitutes characters for herself in
order to preserve herself and escape their fate, as she indicates in Thêta:

101 Ibíd., p.123. As Hodrová makes clear in Mesto vidim..., Alice Davidovičová was a Jewish girl who
had lived in the house where Hodrová spent her childhood, and who committed suicide after the
imposition of the Nuremberg Laws. On the one hand, Alice’s endless wandering in a dreamland evokes
Lewis Carroll’s Alice. On the other, as the bearer of Benjamin of the House of David, who dies with
her, and the owner of a muff made from the skin of unborn lamb, she is associated with the Virgin
Mary. The muff reappears throughout the trilogy, symbolising the hope of salvation from the
agonising duality of existence that passes from generation to generation. However, whenever the
hands of two different people meet inside the muff, they instantly recoil in pain, indicating that the
unity for which they long is forbidden to them.

102 Ibíd., p.449.

103 Hodrová, Román zasvícení, p.211.
Just as Diviš and Alice erase each other at the end of *Podobojí*, so towards the end of *Kukly*, Sofie Syslová becomes anxious about her next metamorphosis, suspecting that, like the puppets for whom she sews clothes and stories, she too is a puppet whose story is being sewn. In an attempt to perpetuate her existence, like the parasitic larva of the *Meloe violaceus* species to which Mr Turek compares her, she tries attaching herself to Diviš, but is rejected, and at the end of the work is left static, moaning softly, without the language that would prolong her metamorphoses.

Writing on *Thêta*, Alice Jedličková comments: 'the narrator writes the novel to keep herself alive, but also to bring the past and the dead out of oblivion, to bring out of it herself'. The two objectives appear incompatible, since the first demands that she keep herself outside the text, unlike her characters in the first two novels apparently unthreatened by erasure, represented in the novel by the Greek letter ‘theta’, the literary editor’s symbol for ‘to be deleted’, while the second demands that she become an actant in the text. Hodrová resolves this incompatibility, as Jedličková suggests, by trying to work ‘in both kinds’. In *Thêta*, to adopt the motif of theatre which recurs in the work, she abandons the ‘illusory’ perspective of a member of the audience, who ‘temporarily believes that what is being played out on the stage before his eyes is real life’, in favour of the intermediate position in the wings, where she used to watch her father act, and where ‘lines from the play, as though from reality, mix with the lines

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which the actors pronounce off stage'. This position is reflected in Hodrová’s frequent analysis of her reasons for writing sentences that the reader has just read, and her repeated indication that episodes from her own life have been or are being fictionalised, which seek to counteract the reader’s ‘suspension of disbelief’ and thereby prevent absorption in the text. Unlike Ajvaz, however, Hodrová fears that, just as she is writing her characters, so she herself is being written, and may at any moment be deleted. She none the less concludes that she can do nothing except write in the hope of slowing the process: ‘Pišu román, abych se neproměnila – v ptáka, v loutku, v něčí fantasmagorii [...] Pomalu se proměňuji. Dokud však píšu, zůstavá jiskřička naděje na cestu zpátky, na návrat k životu a vědomí, k vělé, k lidské tváři. Dokud píšu...’ (I am writing a novel in order not to metamorphose – into a bird, a puppet, into someone’s phantasmagoria [...] I am slowly metamorphosing. As long as I am writing, however, a tiny flicker of hope remains of a way back, a return to life and consciousness, to will, to a human face. As long as I am writing...)\textsuperscript{107}

Whereas in Podoboji, Hodrová implicitly characterises the activity of the writer who strives to remain on the threshold, without falling into the ‘fixed’ world or out into chaos, as comic, futile resistance to uniformity which nevertheless retains a certain heroism – ‘Ubohý pan Turek! Veliký pan Turek!’ (Poor Mr Turek! Great Mr Turek!)\textsuperscript{108} – in Thêta the same activity becomes more a compulsive struggle for survival typified by the passage quoted above. This attempt to rid the writer of his heroic status, accorded to writers by both official and dissident establishments, must be considered a defining characteristic of the fiction of the Changes, and goes furthest in Russian and Slovak fiction, where any notion of a higher purpose to writing is heavily ironised.

This lack of heroism contrasts, for example, with the portrayal of the writer in Makanin’s Booker Prize-nominated novel ‘Laz’, which otherwise shares many themes and motifs with the works discussed in this dissertation, and which may indeed be considered as a defence of the intellectual in the face of such apparently negative characterisations. In ‘Laz’, the central character, Kliucharev is similarly engaged in a

\textsuperscript{106} Hodrová, Tryznivé, p.449.  
\textsuperscript{107} Ibid., p.492.  
\textsuperscript{108} Ibid., p.129.
struggle for openness, constantly threatened by inundation, like Ajvaz’s sculptor or
the central characters of works like Hrabal’s *Příliš hlučná samota*, Brabcová’s *Daleko
od stromu* or Hodrová’s *Perunův den*. He inhabits a post-Soviet dystopia where it is
permanently twilight, but is able to dig down through a man-hole into a brightly lit
underground world of chattering intellectuals, which apparently represents
emigration. As his journey up and down the man-hole becomes increasingly
difficult, Kliucharev realises that the hole is filling up, and one day he will become
stuck and suffocate. In an interview, Makanin points out that the work was inspired by
the image of a man stuck in an hour glass. The émigrés, with their fixed
perceptions, are being steadily buried by passing time, like the youth on the mountain
in Tolstaia’s ‘*Somnambula v tumane*’. In contrast, Kliucharev, whose nearest
literary antecedent might be Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s Ivan Denisovich, persistently
travels and digs - a version of Hodrová’s wandering – which keeps him moving with
passing time, and renders his existence endlessly meaningful as a facilitator of
communication, the ‘keeper of the keys’ suggested by Kliucharev’s name.
Kliucharev’s role of keeping lines open is indicated near the beginning of the novel
when he discovers a telephone that is still working and, after using it, carefully leaves
the door ajar to make it easier for someone else to find it. At the end of the novel he
finds the shelter he has been building vandalised and his tools stolen, but rather than
giving way to despair, he regards the act as the beginning of a dialogue, evidence of
people’s continuing need to communicate, presented in the novel as the highest moral
value. Though Kliucharev’s activity is permeated with futility and the inevitability of
defeat, it also remains imbued with a consciousness of a higher meaning, to an extent
still present in Hodrová’s Mr Turek. The writer’s consciousness of a higher purpose
is, in contrast, satirised by writers like Erofeev, Tolstaia and, less convincingly,
Mitana. In the Czech fiction of the Changes, the characterisation of the writer falls in
between that provided by Makanin and that given by, say, Erofeev, Tolstaia and

109 As his name suggests, Kliucharev, who has appeared in Makanin stories before, may be considered
a ‘key’ to the author himself, gently ironised. His mediation between the worlds above and below
ground reflects Makanin’s perception of his own activity in the 1970s and 1980s as an officially
sanctioned writer with a broadly respected literary reputation, with Kliucharev’s loyalty to the world
above ground constituting an implicit criticism of those who, unlike Makanin, chose to emigrate.
111 Indeed, Makanin makes an implicitly nationalistic point by suggesting that those ‘underground’
have given up on the future. As Natal’ia Ivanova points out, like Venedikt Erofeev in *Moskva-Petushki*,
Makanin uses the passage from Dostoevskii’s *Brat’ia Karamazovy* in which Ivan Karamazov returns to
God his ticket to the future by depicting a public opinion poll in which those questioned are asked to
leave their tickets in a pile if they have no faith in the future. (See Ivanova, ‘On the Mound’, p.80.)
Kolenič, and is exemplified by Topol in his first novel, Sestra, which followed two collections of verse first published in samizdat in the 1980s.

Just as, in Hodrová’s fiction, characters invent in the vain hope of escaping their sinful skin, in Sestra terrestrial existence is shown to be inherently the preserve of evil, and freedom is defined, as in Kratochvil’s fiction, by the activity of resisting imprisonment in that existence. This freedom is represented not so much by the physical actions of the narrator, Potok, but, as his name, ‘stream’, indicates, by the incessant narration rushing out of him, a narration which, Daniel Vojtěch points out, ‘does not lose its integrated character even when the speaker changes’. The assonance between Potok and Topol indicates not so much the identity as the discrepancy between a circumscribed biographical figure and ever-developing being, as Topol playfully indicates through Potok’s acquaintance, Jicha, essentially, as Antonín Alenka points out, a self-parodic past incarnation of Topol who is killed off in the novel.


(Jicha had already been performing as a prominent young poet for about ten years, but because he had drowned his first works in samizdat, no one really knew what he wrote. He was only well-known thanks to his underground past. His only collection, ‘I love you beneath the astronomical clock of madness’, was bought up by stupid grammar-school girls and their perverted mistresses. Then he stopped writing poetry, having exhausted the romanticism of the former underground, and had to find something really bloody. In my head I dimly recalled journalistic articles about raids on lodging-houses for Gastarbeiter. Jicha based his career as a post-revolution journalist on them.)

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114 Topol, J., Sestra, Prague, 1994, p.156. (Hereafter Topol, Sestra.) The title of Jicha’s collection is a distortion of Topol’s Miluji tě k zblázňení (I love you to the point of madness, 1991), while the reference to journalism relates to Topol’s founding in 1990 of the liberal weekly Respekt, and his work
Potok’s narration, imbued with what Alenka aptly terms a ‘feeling of superiority over its less feisty surroundings’, absorbs within itself pre-existing accounts from sources as diverse as Jewish, Christian, Oriental and Red Indian mythologies, film, European Romantic literature and Czech children’s fiction, in order not to become absorbed into any one of them. On the one hand, the resulting chaos of incongruous types of narrative may, as critics like Vojtěch assert, be seen as an attempt to reflect the social and psychological experience of the world after, in Potok’s words, ‘time exploded’ in November 1989. On the other, however, it expresses the rejection of Realist modes of portrayal, not only because they are inadequate to the situation, but also because they imprison writer and reader within a concrete, ‘named’ world. Writing on Topol’s strategy in Sestra in the context of the shift in post-1989 Czech fiction away from the ideologically motivated requirement imposed by both official and dissident establishments in the preceding period to ‘tell the truth’, Pavel Janoušek comments:

The ‘mirror’ held up to the present by the writer did not come into being through the ideological distortion of a smooth reflective surface, but by smashing the image of external reality into thousands of pieces and putting them back together in a mosaic whose deconstructive order is ordained by the implied author. This author gives precedence, ahead of the quest for great Truth, to a free literary game, which does not allow itself to be tied down by the limits of our everyday present.\(^{116}\)

In Topol’s conception, to sustain freedom, the writer must strive to keep the world as fluid and provisional as possible. Pavel Janáček writes: ‘the fundamental punctuation mark in Topol’s fractured discourse is the ellipsis: like everything else, not even the sentence can have a sharply defined contour, everything is connected, the text just like good and evil, everything floats away or trickles through our fingers.’\(^{117}\) The lack of ‘sharply defined contours’, the lack of clear distinctions between speakers, types of

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\(^{115}\) Janoušek, P., ‘Dejte mi pevný bod aneb Za společenský román krásnější’, Tvar, 1994, 12, p.3.

narrative, dream and reality all serve to convey the impermanence and consequent ‘unreality’ of the terrestrial world.

Once again, as Alenka and others have pointed out, *Sestra* takes the form of a novel of initiation, in this case, specifically the sinner’s quest for absolution and redemption. Early in the novel, Potok is apparently abandoned by his childhood sweetheart, Malá Břlá Psice (Little White She-Dog) with the promise that she will send him a new ‘sister’, whom Potok subsequently takes to be a woman called Černá (Black).\(^{118}\) The circumstances of Psice’s departure remain unclear: at one point Potok is accused by former police spies of raping and murdering Psice, which seems possible when she appears to him in a dream, forgiving him for the pain he caused her; equally, however, she may have simply emigrated, in which case Potok’s pangs of conscience may derive from having deflowered her. In any event, her disappearance serves as a metaphor for Original Sin, awakening in Potok an awareness of guilt. Potok’s trials in a world of gangsters, conspiracies and savage violence, his circular wanderings round eastern Slovakia and his final stay in the depths of the underworld on an enormous rubbish dump may be understood as the sinner’s journey through the darkness of terrestrial life back to God. Throughout his journey, Potok wears a silver Our Lady of Częstochowa, a scarred statue of the icon of the Madonna that is said to bleed, perhaps a symbol of the sin he has committed against his ‘sister’, but also of her promise to lead him to salvation. Towards the end of the novel, in a merging of the *Omen* films, vampire legends and the Book of Revelation, Potok uses the silver Madonna to make a bullet with which he kills a demon child, apparently the Anti-Christ, and with this act, his own sin appears to be absolved. Soon after, he awakens in a convent which now stands on the site where he murdered or deflowered his ‘sister’, and is restored to health by a nun.

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\(^{118}\) In his pursuit of Černá, Potok thus finds himself between the white and the black, suspended between good and evil. Psice’s name is also suggestive of the Red Indian motif that recurs in the novel. In 1997, Topol published a book of translations of Red Indian legends entitled *Trnová divka* (The thorn girl). In *Sestra*, however, Topol draws more on not only children’s literature about the Wild West, like Karl May’s *Vinnetou*, but also Czech children’s literature about gangs of boys playing cowboys-and-Indians-type games, like *Bylo nás pět* (There were five of us, 1946) by Karel Poláček (1892-1944) or the newspaper cartoons *Rychlé šipky* (The swift arrows) by Jaroslav Foglar (1907-99). At one point, Potok becomes confused with Pátek, meaning not only ‘Friday’, in reference to Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, but also the ‘fifth one’, as in Poláček’s novel. By implicitly equating the activities of Potok’s gang, conducting a mixture of cut-throat capitalism and multi-cultural community building in post-1989 Prague, with the games of children, Topol provides an ironic characterisation of his own various ‘projects’ under and after Communism.
The pun here on the word ‘sister’ recalls Potok’s earlier attraction to the redemptive figure of Sonia in Dostoevskii’s *Prestuplenie i nakazanie* (Crime and Punishment, 1866), whom Potok describes as Raskolnikov’s sister. The link is, however, parodic, ironising the linear path from fall to redemption portrayed by Dostoevskii, and thereby undermining Potok’s apparent redemption in the novel. Instead, like Hodrová in her fiction, Topol presents a cyclical model of terrestrial existence in which the ‘wheel of the world’ turns endlessly to favour first one, then another, and sin is followed by atonement. In *Sestra*, Topol applies this model to national history, implicitly rejecting the perception of Czechs as victims of history, evident in the work of Hodrová and Kratochvíl, and suggesting instead that tribes suffer for the suffering they cause to other tribes. Like the individual, the tribe is also born into sin; the Czechs are portrayed as the product of Samo’s betrayal of his tribe, the Franks. Topol presents the Communist period as a punishment for Czech complicity in the mass murder of the Jews in the Second World War. For Potok, the average Czech, collaborating with the Communist regime in order to survive as he had with the Germans, is ‘Josef Vissarionovich Švejk’, an amalgam of Jaroslav Hašek’s amoral survivor and Stalin.

119 Topol retains this model of the cyclical recurrence of evil in his second novel, *Andél*, in which the absence of the stone angel at the crossroads in Prague which bears its name signifies a world which has lost its godliness and been given over to evil. The novel ends with the central character, Jatek, burning to death a group of gangsters and religious fanatics brought together by a wondrous drug he once created, thus apparently eradicating the evil he has brought into the world through a burnt offering. However, the threat of evil indicated in the first chapter of the novel in fact chronologically follows these events. The blood which appears in the corner of Jatek’s eye and fills the sky recalls the red darkness which Potok sees in *Sestra*, symbolising the cycle of evil and purification underpinning existence in this world.

120 In the *Mladá fronta Dnes* interview, asked about the renewed debate surrounding the Czech expulsion of Sudeten Germans after the Second World War, Topol expresses his satisfaction that the media have now made clear the extent of Czech brutality in that period: ‘We have a victim complex: the Russians are bad, the Germans are bad, whereas we, with our vesnička středisková, we’re really quite nice, we have clean hands and our Hrabalian beer.’ (Chuchma, ‘Jáchym Topol’.) Topol is attacking here not so much Hrabal himself as the Normalisation interpretation of his works in still enormously popular family films like Jiří Menzel’s *Postržiny* (Clippings, 1980), and films in a similar style, not based on Hrabal’s wórk, like Menzel’s *Vesnička má středisková* (My sweet little village, 1985). These films essentially reduced Hrabal’s style to a comfortable assertion of the harmless eccentricity of the good-hearted, bucolic Czechs. *Sestra* itself represents a rejection of this collectivising, levelling, potentially chauvinistic type of art. Topol directly satirises Czech nationalism in his later novel *Noční práce* (Night work, 2001).

121 This description echoes Hrabal’s characterisation of the endless adaptability of the Czechs in *Obsluhoval jsem anglického krále* and Hodrová’s portrayal of Jan Paskal in *Podobojí*, and may also be compared to Vilikovsky’s narrator in *Večne je zelený*...
Existence in Topol’s fiction, as in Hodrová’s, is governed by the number ‘two’, as Potok tells Černá in a passage which, like Hodrová’s exposition on the same subject, paraphrases mystical Christian teaching, in this case that of the tenth-century Bogomil:

(...) svět je objetí, vždy dvou, dne a noci, muže a ženy a tak dále, i nesmyslu, a že to je nepoznatelný, jako sen... a ty bojuješ proti všemu, ale seš součástí. A někdy, jen někdy zahlídeš... jen na okamžik zahlídeš kolo světa... a pak se vrátis projít další lapačky a pasti a mánění, procházíš šalbama... a de jen o to bejt svobodnej, sebou, vyhnout se otroctví... a my, kteří víme o tajemství, teda ale já miluji tebe!, miluji orly, protože ty vidíš... někde ešet sou... a de o to najít v slzavým údolí svou bytost, to znamená toho druhýho, aby byl člověk celej, aspoň na chvíli!

(The world is an embrace, always of two, of day and night, man and woman and so on, even of nonsense, and it is unknowable, like a dream...and you struggle against everything, but you are a part of it. And sometimes, only sometimes do you glimpse...just for a moment you glimpse the wheel of the world...and then you return to go through more snares and traps and delusions, you go through deceptions...and it’s only a question of being free, by oneself, avoiding enslavement...and we who know the secret, you know, I really love you!, we love eagles, because they can see...they are still somewhere...and in this vale of tears it is a question of finding your being, that is, that other, so that you can be whole, at least for a moment!)^{122}

Potok’s pursuit of Černá essentially parodies this perception of existence, since several times in the novel they are reunited, only to lose each other again, as Potok himself observes, like the bridegroom and bride in the Song of Songs. The equation of Potok’s yearning for Černá with Solomon’s longing for unity with God is, however, pure burlesque; in one episode, he becomes stuck inside her during sexual intercourse, and only the ringing of the doorbell separates them, drawing them back into the sinful earthly world, where they once again lose each other. The ringing door-bell at the end of the novel, which they refuse to answer in bathetic acknowledgement of their promise never to become separated again, nevertheless indicates that the cycle will continue.

Parody and burlesque act in Topol’s fiction to prevent the paradox I noted in Ajvaz’s work, where the rejection of opinions as fixative becomes itself a fixed opinion,

^{122} Topol, Sestra, pp.337-8.
halting the dynamism which equates in Hodrová and Ajvaz to continued being and in Topol to continued freedom. After including examples of his poetry, Potok comments of his method: ‘Takhle jsem michal starý a nový slova. Něco jsem myslel vážně, tak jsem to poschovával do dalších slov.’ (I mixed old and new words. Some things I meant seriously, so I hid them in further words.) Just as Hodrová perpetually resists the coalescence of a signifier with a particular signified in the hope of glimpsing an instant of being, so, in Sestra, Potok’s endless subversion of formulations, as for Dostoevskii’s Underground Man, provides fleeting experiences of freedom, before he once again falls into the imprisonment of words, synonymous with the evil of terrestrial existence. For Potok, this struggle, though vain, must nevertheless be sustained: ‘...jen předem prohraný války, jen ty jsou zajímavý.’ (only wars lost in advance, only those are interesting.)

This characterisation of the writer, constantly striving not to be pinned down, not to lose the possibility of movement, leaping free only to fall again to earth, is embodied in Potok’s professional activity as a dancer, which links him to Arthur Rimbaud, who, according to Potok, had to be constantly on the move because the earth hurt his feet. In Potok’s account, Rimbaud, who serves as a model for the understanding of the writer asserted in the novel, rejected work in a ‘department of culture’, where they apparently work only to make life comfortable by perpetuating existing versions of reality and meanings and combinations of words, and set about changing his language by inventing an alphabet. In Sestra, Topol attempts in effect to re-create Czech, mixing registers, dialects and languages, suggesting, however, that the process will never be completed, that language, like life, can never be mastered, but will always surprise and undermine those who possess it. Through this activity, the writer in fact serves his tribe, those who speak his language, by preventing them from becoming too embedded in their present existence and preparing them for the ‘snares and traps’ ahead.

Sestra represents the culmination of the artistic approach in Czech fiction of the Changes, in which the use of words to create and perpetuate a shared understanding of

123 Ibid., p.429. Potok’s ‘hiding’ of meanings in words recalls Hodrová’s ‘cocooning’ of herself in other characters.
134 Ibid., p.452.
the nature of existence, equated with death, is replaced by the use of words constantly
to undermine such shared understandings and thus sustain life; as Potok remarks:
‘Kdo si mysli, že už něčím je, trpí nedostatkem představivosti.’ (Anyone who thinks
they already are something suffers from a lack of imagination.) Writing on the
eradication of Gnosticism from the early Christian Church, Robert Grant comments:

The triumph of [Christian] orthodoxy meant the triumph of the
created world over the aeons, of collective experience over
individual freedom, of history over the freely creative imagination,
of objectivity over subjectivity. The creative freedom of the
religious imagination was more completely channelled in the service
of an institution.

In Sestn, Topol, like Ajvaz, Hodrová, Kratochvil, Milota and others, seeks to
overturn the triumph of orthodoxy in the context of post-Communist Czech literature,
to reassert the ‘creative freedom of the religious imagination’ as the essence of
literature. For this reason, so many of Topol’s characters are mystics and dreamers,
recounting their own mythologies, which mingle in the work with numerous ancient
and contemporary allegories of the nature of the world.

The ‘death of the author’, ordaining the nature and limits of the world, and the
emergence of the writer-‘fakir’, weaving and re-weaving these allegories anew, is also
accompanied by a ‘birth of the reader’. The effect and perhaps even objective of the
work of writers like Topol and Hodrová has been to make reading difficult, and thus
restore élitism to Czech literature. In Sestra, Potok criticises contemporary attitudes
to reading, nostalgically recalling more dangerous times when people had to read with
a knife in their hands, and not only to cut open the pages: ‘vždycky se v hospodě
ptám: Už si čet Vojnu a mir a Gilgameše nebo kupříkladu Muže bez vlastnosti a
Eskymo Welzla, to máš za večer...no, [...] to bys měl vidět ty ksichty, každěj prej: To
je tlustý! Nemám na to čas... v dnešní době! A není to zfilmovaný? Jako Bible?’ (I
always ask in the pub: Have you read War and Peace and The Epic Gilgamesh, or, for
example, A Man without Qualities and Eskimo Welzl, you’ll get through it in an
evening... Well, [...] you should see the faces they pull, everyone says: That’s a fat
one! I haven’t got time for that... these days! Haven’t they made a film of it? Like

125 Ibid., p.264.
Whereas the Russian and Slovak writers of the Changes discussed in Chapters 3 and 5 fear or morbidly celebrate the defeat of literature as a spent force, for the Czech writers of the Changes, literature was only a spent force when it was an ideological tool, but in their hands has been restored to life.

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127 Ibid., p.450. (Jan ‘Eskimo’ Welzl was a Czech Arctic explorer who became the chief of an Eskimo tribe, and whose adventures may be parodied by Pišťanek in Rivers of Babylon 3. Two books of Welzl’s memoirs were published by the journalists Bedřich Golombek [1901-61] and Eduard Valenta [1901-78] in 1932.) The longing for a time when reading was dangerous reflects a nostalgia for the illicit cultural activity of the 1970s and 1980s that sits paradoxically alongside the effort in the novel to break free of the type of writing – and reading – which dominated that period.
In an unpublished paper presented in Oxford in 1999, Lipovetskii divides Russian postmodernist fiction into two tendencies, which he calls ‘neo-Baroque’ and ‘conceptualist’. ¹ Lipovetskii writes:

While conceptualism replaces the authorial persona [litso] with a system of language images, neo-Baroque cultivates the authorial myth [...] While conceptualism features the deconstruction and demythologisation of authoritative cultural signs and whole languages, neo-Baroque, on the contrary, is aimed at the re-mythologisation of cultural ruins and fragments. While conceptualism stands on the border between art and ideology, performance and extra-aesthetic reality, the writers of neo-Baroque exhibit an insistent aestheticisation of everything that comes into view.²

Lipovetskii’s categories recall Mikhail Epshtein’s earlier division of new Russian poetry in the 1980s into ‘conceptualism’ and ‘metarealism’. Epshtein writes: ‘metarealism endeavours to return to the word the fulness of its figurative and transcendent meanings. To the same degree, conceptualism tries to wrench out of the word any meaning whatsoever, leaving an empty, echoing shell: a senseless cliché which says nothing.’³

Without wishing to advocate the more widespread use of either Lipovetskii’s or Epshtein’s particular terms, the distinction they identify in Russian writing of the late Communist and early post-Communist period may also be observed in Czech and Slovak fiction of a comparable period. The characteristics of ‘neo-Baroque’ and ‘metarealism’, epitomised in fiction by Tolstaia and Venedikt Erofeev, may also be

¹ Lipovetskii borrows the notion of ‘neo-Baroque’ from the Italian cultural theorist Omar Calabrese, who proposes it as an alternative to ‘postmodern’ which, rather than expressing contemporary culture’s relationship to ‘modernism’, would denote the formal qualities of certain phenomena in contrast to other phenomena considered ‘classical’, outside the specific historical periods to which the terms ‘Classical’ and ‘Baroque’ refer. In Neo-Baroque: A Sign of the Times, however, Calabrese identifies an ‘aesthetic of Nothingness’, which might be considered synonymous with Lipovetskii’s ‘conceptualism’, but which lies within, rather than alongside, his notion of ‘neo-Baroque’. (See Calabrese, O., Neo-Baroque: A Sign of the Times, Princeton, 1992, pp.169-70.)

found in abundance in the works of Czech writers discussed in the previous chapter, not only of those like Hodrová, Milota and Ajvaz, who frequently use Baroque themes and motifs, but also in, for example, the narrator’s ‘insistent aestheticisation of everything’ in Topol’s *Sestra*. This approach is typified in Slovak fiction by Pišťanek’s writing. Moreover, writers like Vilikovský, who implicitly share Popov’s notion in *Dusha patriota* of writing as ‘self-characterisation’, and Kratochvıl, who describes new Czech writing in the early 1990s as the creation of ‘individual myths’, may also be included. More or less explicitly, these writers perceive literature itself as innocent, an expression of vain spiritual longing which may become corrupted, but may once again be freed from this corruption. Their preferred theorists are those like Bakhtin, Barthes or Umberto Eco, for whom writing, as an endless process, remains almost sentimentally meaningful precisely as an expression of the enduring intermediacy of human life, as opposed to the finality of death. In contrast, the writers who form the subject of this chapter, whom Lipovetskii and Epshtein describe as ‘conceptualist’, prefer the more hostile questioning of the innocence of writing and the possibility of meaning in, for example, the theory of Jacques Derrida, Jean Baudrillard or Jacques Lacan. Unlike in Russian and Slovak fiction of this period, their theories have found very little coincidental or conscious expression in Czech fiction of the Changes, and therefore this chapter focuses only on Russian and Slovak writers.

Lipovetskii’s interpretation of the term ‘conceptualism’ marks an expansion from its conventional use in a Russian context to refer to the work produced by a group of underground poets and visual artists, including Prigov, Erik Bulatov (b.1933), Il’ia Kabakov (b.1933) and Lev Rubinshtein (b.1947), which emerged in Moscow in the early 1970s. In their so-called ‘sots-art’ (a ‘socialist’ version of ‘pop art’), the Moscow Conceptualists played with the visual images and verbal formulae of Soviet Socialist Realism to expose them as signs without referents, products of language.

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4 Kratochvıl, ‘Obnovení’, p.84.

5 In 1994, Ajvaz published an essay, *Znak a bytí* (Sign and being), in which he criticises Derrida’s theories of deconstruction and grammatology, in which he attempts to blur the distinction between writing which perceives itself as the expression of being (Lipovetskii’s ‘neo-Baroque’), and writing which perceives itself as nothing more than signs on a page (Lipovetskii’s ‘conceptualism’).
which aspire to the status of reality. In his article ‘The Origins and Meaning of Russian Postmodernism’, Epshtein suggests that Socialist Realism itself should be considered a postmodern phenomenon, on the one hand because it represents ‘an eclectic mixture of all previous classical styles, [...] an encyclopaedia of literary clichés’, on the other because it creates a ‘hyperreality that is neither truthful nor false, but consists of ideas that become reality for millions of people’. However, Epshtein here imposes a self-consciousness deriving from the position of the reader which Socialist Realism itself only acquires when the Conceptualists foreground these aspects of the Socialist Realist aesthetic in their work.

Epshtein takes the notion of ‘hyperreality’ from Jean Baudrillard’s theory that, in Western capitalist society, reality has been replaced by simulacra to such an extent that the awareness of the non-simulated behind the simulated is lost. Citing the Conceptualist Il’ia Kabakov’s essay ‘On the Subject of the Void’, Epshtein argues that the Conceptualists’ work foregrounds the notion that Russian civilisation has never amounted to more than a series of signs ‘borrowed from the West’ without the referents. As Epshtein’s comments indicate, the Conceptualists’ work displays their interest in cultural theory and their own work as cultural theorists more explicitly than that of writers like Venedikt Erofeev or Tolstaiia, whom Lipovetskii considers ‘neo-Baroque’. For Epshtein, Baudrillard’s theory constitutes the aspect of Western post-Structuralist theory most fundamental to understanding Russian postmodernism. However, as with the work of other French post-Structuralists, such as Derrida or Michel Foucault, it is difficult to know how much Moscow Conceptualism in the early 1970s was directly influenced by Baudrillard’s writings (published at about the same time), and how much it arrived at similar conclusions independently. Boris Groys, one of the earliest critics to embrace the Conceptualists, while noting the influence of French post-Structuralist theory on Moscow Conceptualism, points out that, for example, Il’ia Kabakov arrived at a notion of the self-sufficient text similar to

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Derrida's notion of *écriture* before he had read Derrida's work. In their own theoretical remarks, Conceptualists such as Kabakov and Prigov implicitly present themselves as Russian counterparts of the French post-Structuralists of the 1960s and 1970s, formulating or adapting theory for the late Soviet cultural situation. In contrast, in Slovak literature, the influence of French post-Structuralism has manifested itself most overtly in the much younger Genitalists who, unlike the Russian Conceptualists, treat post-Structuralist theory rather as the 'sots-artists' treated Soviet ideology, by simultaneously asserting and subverting its models.

The Russian writers whom Lipovetskii calls 'conceptualist' suggest that the guilt of the text is inseparable from the guilt of the reader, since for them the aspiration to the status of absolute truth is inherent in the work of art, and cannot be eradicated, but only acknowledged. Groys argues that the Moscow Conceptualists came to this conclusion not so much through their experience of traditional Socialist Realism, but through the art apparently conceived in opposition to it, of which Groys cites the rural nationalism of Solzhenitsyn and Village Fiction. Groys writes: 'the attentive observer of the Soviet cultural scene in the 1960s and 1970s gradually became aware that all attempts to overcome Stalin's project on either the individual or the collective level resulted in fateful reproductions of it'. Like the 'other fiction' of the late 1980s, Moscow Conceptualism used the Soviet cultural context to make a general statement about the nature of artistic creation, which Groys expresses thus:

> Russian postutopianism [...] has its roots [...] in the discovery of the will to power in the seemingly oppositional artistic project, and a realisation of the role the artistic project plays in the strategy of political coercion. For Russian artists and intellectuals this discovery has represented a loss of artistic innocence [...] The goal now is to analyse this aesthetico-political will to power, which artists acknowledge to be primary in all artistic projects, including their own.

Unlike writers such as Tolstaja and Hodrová, the Conceptualists repeatedly foreground the essential harmfulness of the text. As an expression of their fear of the consequences of the creative process, and a desire, in effect, to escape writing through writing, they retreat from the notion of the writer as 'weaver' of text into parody and

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simulation, with the result that their work frequently reflects Linda Hutcheon’s shorthand definition of postmodernism as ‘saying something whilst at the same time putting inverted commas around what is being said’.11

This retreat is mirrored in Slovak literature at the turn of the 1990s in the work of the Barbarians, Bielik, Litvák, Turan and Zbruž.12 Although they have produced more prose fiction than the Conceptualists, they too prefer verse, while Bielik also paints.13 Whereas, however, the older Russian Conceptualists, writing out of the memory of Stalinism and the failure of the Thaw, seek to empty signs of their capacity to signify in an attempt to disarm them, for the younger Barbarians, the emptiness of signs and the impossibility of making them signify marks the starting-point of their assertion of the utter meaninglessness of human existence. On the one hand, their view of language produces in fiction like Litvák’s Samoreč (Autospeak, 1992) and Kolenič’s Mlčat a type of impotent, malevolent outsider reminiscent of Dostoevskii’s Underground Man, subsequently satirised by Balla in his novel Outsideria (1997). On the other, however, it leads them, particularly in their 1998 anthology, towards the assertion of Eastern notions of emptiness, somewhat as Conceptualist techniques merge with Buddhism in Viktor Pelevin’s fiction, discussed in the next chapter. In this chapter, I shall focus on prose fiction by Litvák and Kolenič, but I begin with Sorokin, undoubtedly the most prolific and widely discussed fiction writer to emerge directly from Moscow Conceptualist circles.14

10 Ibid., pp.81-2.
12 Kolenič, once linked to the Barbarians, withdrew his contributions to their anthology of prose, poetry and interviews, Barbar(uss)ká ruleta (Barbar(uss)ian roulette, 1998) and is therefore singled out for particular mockery in the volume. In one interview, Kolenič is described, along with Pišťanek and Jozef Urban, as the ‘dried-up middle stream’ of contemporary Slovak literature. (Turan, A., Bielik, R., Zbruž, K., Litvák, J., Barbar(uss)ká ruleta, Bratislava, 1998, p.95.)
13 Zbruž’s novel Spiší imidž (Pissed image, 1993) (a pun on the British television programme Spitting Image) is written in the style of comic strip, also revealing his leanings towards visual art, considered central to 1970s Russian Conceptualism. The closest counterpart in contemporary Czech literature is the poet Jaroslav Pišť (b.1961), who often performs his verse accompanied by his own musical compositions, and who explores both Conceptualism and postmodernist theory in visual art in his essay K otázám nového expresionismu v české malbě 80. let (1995).
14 See Rasskazova, T., ‘Tekst kak narkotik’ in Sorokin, V., Vladimir Sorokin, Moscow, 1992, p.119. (Hereafter Rasskazova, ‘Tekst’.) Sorokin’s assertion of the importance of his encounter with the Conceptualists for the development of his writing has led many critics to identify Sorokin entirely with Moscow Conceptualism. Mikhail Ryklin, however, argues that Sorokin differs from the Conceptualists in his ‘romantic desire to shock, to be unacceptable, to embody in his writing the reverse of literature’, which, in Ryklin’s view, renders his relationship to the Russian literary heritage of equal importance. (See Ryklin, M., ‘Medium i avtor’ in Sorokin, V., Sobranie sochinenii v dyukh tomakh, Vol.2, Moscow, 1998, p.738. Hereafter, Ryklin, ‘Medium’.)
Sorokin’s work first became known in underground circles in the early 1980s in samizdat and particularly through live or tape-recorded performances. The publication in Paris in 1985 of Sorokin’s novel *Ochered’* (The queue, Paris 1985, Moscow 1998, dated as written 1982-83) aroused critical interest in his work in the West and prompted a moralising attack on the writer in Moskovskaia pravda in 1986. As Vladimir Novikov points out, Sorokin’s works have rarely appeared first in periodicals, with the result that his first publication in Russia, a collection of stories written during the early 1980s, did not come out until 1992. The publication of Sorokin’s work from the late Soviet period during the mid-1990s, culminating in the 1998 two-volume collected works that formally established the writing order of his works up till then, masked the fact that, for most of the 1990s, Sorokin abstained from writing fiction in favour of drama and screenplays. This shift in genre leads Mikhail Ryklin to suggest that there are two Sorokins, ‘first of all the non-writer creating superbly structured literature, and then the writer trying to create non-literature’. It is the former who constitutes the focus of the following discussion.

The Conceptualist perception of the ‘will to power’ in any work of art, articulated by Groys, finds an echo in the interview with Sorokin accompanying his first publication in Russia, in which he comments, citing Michel Foucault: ‘any text is totalitarian, since it pretends to authority over the human being. A text is a very powerful weapon. It can hypnotise, and sometimes it simply paralyses.’ In much of his writing from the late Soviet period, Sorokin attempts to draw the reader’s attention to this activity of the text through the use of some form of incongruous intrusion, which disrupts the predictable course of the narration. This technique is firmly established in the early short story collection ‘Pervyi subbotnik’ (First subbotnik, 1998, dated as written 1990).

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15 The immense critical interest in Sorokin in the West has frequently surprised Russian critics. Vladimir Novikov comments: ‘if [Sorokin] lacks [readers] in Russia, then abroad will help. Sorokin has been published there many times both in Russian and in translation, and he has there if not an army, then at least an elite guard of admirers among professional Slavists.’ (Novikov, V., ‘Ditia sovetskogo veka’ in his Zaskok: Esse, parodii i razmyshlenia, Moscow, 1997, p.272.)

16 Ibid., p.274.

17 Ryklin, ‘Medium’, p.748.

Here, most of the stories begin as a simulation of a particular style of Soviet fiction, before the narrative is interrupted by a sudden, unmotivated act of violence, swearing, defecation, vomiting or analogous occurrences. These interruptions correspond to what Patricia Waugh calls a ‘frame-break’ a device which ‘draws attention to the fact that life, as well as novels, is constructed through frames’, because they do not belong within the “frame” established by the preceding narrative, and thus show the apparently whole, harmonious world contained within that narrative to be incomplete.

Waugh contends that the analysis of frames in ‘metafiction’ has demonstrated that all knowledge of experience is ‘framed’, that ‘there is ultimately no distinction between “framed” and “unframed”. There are only levels of form. There is ultimately only “content” perhaps, but it will never be discovered in a “natural” unframed state’. In Sorokin’s first novel, Norma (The norm, 1994, dated as written 1979-84), as Peter Deutschmann graphically shows in his plan of its structure, the reader passes through frame after frame in a novel made up of texts-within-texts, written in different styles and literary or extra-literary genres, which function as a metaphor for the chaos of relativity which constitutes human knowledge. The outer ‘frame’ is formed by an account of how the text of the novel is confiscated during a police raid and given to a teenage boy to read, in effect simultaneously with the reader, apparently to assess the appropriate level of punishment. Sorokin thus seeks to demonstrate how the ‘frame’ – the ‘norm’ – through which the world is perceived is created by the interaction of reader and text. At the end of the work, following the total disintegration of the text into incomprehensibility, the return to the teenage boy-reader amounts in effect to a parodic recasting of the comforting phrase from children’s fiction, ‘but it was only a dream’ as ‘but it was only a novel,’ itself only a frame.

19 The definitive version of this collection, containing twenty-nine stories, appears in the 1998 collected works. Seventeen of these stories appeared in the untitled collection from 1992, but in the interview appended to this earlier edition Sorokin refers to a different, presumably samizdat collection called “Pervyi subbotnik”, the title of which may indicate that it contains some of Sorokin’s earliest work (see Rasskazova, ‘Tekst’, p.119.).

20 Waugh, Metafiction, p.29.

21 Ibid., p.31.

By dramatising the process of reading in *Norma*, Sorokin indicates that, though his comments in interviews frequently refer to the activity of texts, it is in fact the activity of the reader that his work seeks to define and subvert. Sorokin uses the ‘frame-break’ in place of the incongruous juxtapositions of images and slogans employed by Conceptualist visual artists to disrupt the unquestioned identity of sign and referent in the preceding text, exposing its formulaic nature and creating a sense of emptiness – of absent referents - fundamental to the Moscow Conceptualist aesthetic. The use of a single ‘frame-break’ in the stories in ‘Pervyi subbotnik’ disrupts the reader’s expectations, revealing how the reader becomes absorbed into the ‘frame’ of the text, establishing the limits of the reader’s perception of the world. In this collection, as Lipovetskii notes, Sorokin uses variations on the teacher-pupil relationship not only to reflect how, in Socialist Realism, an older, ideologically ‘conscious’ representative of the collective facilitates the integration of the younger, inexperienced individual, but also to stand as a metaphor for the relationship between text and reader. For example, in ‘Sergei Andreevich’, the first story in the definitive version of the collection, Sorokin depicts a trip to the woods made by a group of teenagers with their favourite teacher, Sergei Andreevich, to mark the end of their secondary schooling. At one point, Sergei Andreevich goes off to fetch water, accompanied by Sokolov, his most earnest admirer. On the way back, having sent Sokolov on ahead, Sergei Andreevich pauses to defecate. Sokolov, however, watches secretly, and when Sergei Andreevich has gone, he creeps up and with greedy reverence eats the excrement. In his interpretation of ‘Sergei Andreevich’, Lipovetskii describes how Sorokin’s short fiction exposes the rite of passage underpinning Socialist Realist texts: at a transitional stage, the end of secondary schooling, the neophytes are taken from their normal environment into the wild, where only one is permitted to undergo initiation. According to Lipovetskii, Sokolov’s consumption of Sergei Andreevich’s excrement corresponds to an act of ‘ritual incorporation’, symbolising the integration

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24 This device in its Socialist Realist incarnation is also parodied by Pišťanek in *Rivers of Babylon* and ‘Mladý Důně’, and by Pelevin, particularly in ‘Omon Ra’ (1992) and *Chapaev i Pustota*.
25 Strictly speaking, the first text in the 1998 version of the collection is the foreword, a parody of the ideological stamp of approval accompanying recommended works by unknown writers. Sorokin uses the less overtly political, moralistic tone of such forewords in the later Soviet period without obvious hyperbole, and thus the uninitiated reader may not appreciate the parody until he encounters the ‘frame-break’, which in the case of this first text is represented by the rest of the collection.
of Sokolov into the collective. However, the ritual of initiation depicted within the text also stands as a metaphor for the reading process, understood as the reader’s integration into the collective, with the text itself as the voice of collective authority.

The final act of coprophagy reflects the fact that, throughout Sorokin’s writing, the human being is characterised as fundamentally a consumer seeking satiation, which in the case of the reader equates with becoming part of a world as full, rounded and comfortable as the stomach after a good meal. Sorokin repeatedly uses the linear model of the pursuit of satiation within the text as a metaphor for the activity of the reader. For example, the novel *Tridtsataia liubov’ Mariny* (Marina’s thirtieth love, 1995, dated as written 1982-84), incidentally the only Sorokin novel to date (2002) to have been translated into Czech, describes the heroine’s quest for her first orgasm with a man. On the one hand, Sorokin here simulates the style of erotic fiction, going through each of Marina’s sexual encounters in detail, building up literally to the climax, equating the process of writing with masturbation, and the process of reading with voyeurism. On the other, however, the novel is a parodic reassertion of the Socialist *Bildungsroman*; Marina has various failed liaisons with dissidents, satirically portrayed as embourgeoisés, impotent, effeminate types, before finally achieving her orgasm with a factory *partorg*, at which point she abandons her promiscuous ‘cosmopolitan’ lifestyle and becomes an enthusiastic worker, and the text acquires the style of a Soviet economic report. According to Sorokin, the model used is that of the Russian ‘novel of salvation’, understood in *Tridtsataia liubov’ Mariny* as ‘salvation from individualisation’, understood, as in ‘Sergei Andreevich’, as satiation through absorption into the collective.

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27 Ryklin, noting the prominence of food and eating in Sorokin’s work, suggests that ‘it is difficult to name a greater gastronomist among contemporary Russian writers than Sorokin’. (Ryklin, ‘Medium’, p.750.)
28 Sorokin claims that he refrained from sexual contact for a month while writing the work. (See Shapoval, S., ‘V kul’ture dlia menia net tabu...’ in Sorokin, V., *Sobranie sochinenii v dvukh tomakh*, Vol.1, Moscow, 1998, p.18.) Kolenič characterises the reading (and writing) process similarly in his half-hearted pastiche of pornographic fiction, ‘Diletant 1’ and ‘Diletant 2’, in the collection *Porušení rajy* (The violation of paradise, 1993). The titles of these stories suggest that the object of parody in both is film, rather than literature.
30 The plot and themes of *Tridtsataia liubov’ Mariny* closely resemble Páral’s *Profesionální žena*; however, the contrast between them sharply highlights the distinction between what Lipovetskii calls the ‘conceptualist’ and the ‘neo-Baroque’. Like *Tridtsataia liubov’ Mariny, Profesionální žena* is at once a social satire and a literary burlesque in which the heroine, more Angélique than Emanuelle, repeatedly escapes the clutches of various corrupt, embourgeoisés gangsters successfully plying their
This model is reversed in Ochered', in which the hero is ultimately rescued from collective existence, symbolised by the queue, which Sorokin describes as a ‘single gigantic organism’, in which people are prepared to stand indefinitely despite not knowing what they will receive at the end. The novel is written in dramatic dialogue, without character indications, in Sally Laird’s description, ‘as if [Sorokin has] simply hung a microphone round the neck of the central character and transcribed the recording, unedited’. The effect, as Laird points out, is to make the reader part of the queue, to turn queuing into a metaphor of the reading process. Just as those queuing receive sufficient intimation of the goods awaiting them to remain interested, so the reader becomes aware of a hero, Vadim, and a plot, which culminates in Vadim being taken in from the queue during a rainstorm by an unknown woman who not only copulates with him, but also has access to the goods for which he has been queuing. As Sorokin points out, the novel ‘offers only an ironic kind of salvation, a pseudo-salvation if you like. Because even when the hero’s been granted this wonderful thing – this woman, and the goods he’s been dreaming of – he remains somehow pathetic and impoverished. He doesn’t fundamentally change’. For the reader-queuer too, the outcome is also only an ironic reward; consumer satisfaction, material or sexual, is not a transformation, but a temporary satiation of a need. In Sorokin’s work, the inevitable outcome of the process of consumption is not satiation, but excrement, representing a renewed emptiness needing to be filled. The first part of Norma consists of a series of short stories imitating different styles of Soviet fiction, all of which portray characters eating their daily packet of ‘norm’, some with

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31 Laird, Voices, p.149. One might say, in effect, that the soft-sign feminine noun ochered' stands for another soft-sign feminine noun, zhizn' (life).
32 Ibid., p.150.
33 Ibid., p.148.
varying degrees of enthusiasm or reluctance, most without thinking. The process of eating here becomes a metaphor for the process of reading; the reader easily consumes the bite-sized chunks of text, gradually coming to suspect the ingredients of what he is reading, before eventually being left in no doubt that the packets contain the faeces of small children.

By equating reading with coprophagy, Sorokin seeks to inspire revulsion in the reader towards the normative, collectivising activity of culture. As Viacheslav Kuritsyn points out: ‘poo [kakashki] is, after all, what unites us […] excrement in Sorokin is warm and festive’, reflecting the comfort of satiation. In Sorokin’s writing, the warmth of excrement is the warmth of the shared. For many critics, Sorokin’s writing reflects the distortion of human psychology under Soviet autocracy, a view sustained by Sorokin’s comments in his early interviews regarding the nature of ‘homo sovieticus’. David Gillespie interprets the first part of Norma as a criticism of the way most people learned to accept Soviet propaganda - ‘everyone is fed on shit, and the vast majority of people love it’ – a perspective shared by Skoropanova, who suggests that the long list of nouns preceded by the adjective ‘normal’nyi’ which forms the second part of the novel works by analogy with the ubiquitous and often incongruous use of the adjective ‘sovetskii’ in the Soviet Union. Serafima Roll, who details many of the Soviet topoi used by Sorokin in the first short-story collection, argues that the collection is aimed at ‘demystifying the Soviet myth of human happiness founded on one’s belief in sublimating and repressing the existential for the political and ideological’. In her view, the ‘frame-breaks’ serve to subvert sentimental or self-glorifying clichés about the human being which Socialist Realism has created or adopted, ‘exposing the “actual” life events

37 See Skoropanova, Russkaia postmodernistskaia, p.269.
hidden beneath the glossy pictures of social paradise'. However, Roll’s use of the contrast between ‘public’ and ‘private’, terms of particular importance in the analysis of the social realism of the Brezhnev period, where they implicitly corresponded to the distinction between ‘pretence’ and ‘truth’, misleadingly places Sorokin’s fiction at the extreme of a spectrum of contemporary Russian realist writing. The sudden, intense physical images which mark the ‘frame-break’ in many of the stories in “Pervyi subbotnik” may be seen to reverse the abrupt switches in conventional Socialist Realism, which Katerina Clark describes as ‘sudden, unmotivated transitions from realistic discourse to the mythic or utopian’. However, the switch is not from fiction to reality, but from metaphors of culture to metaphors of what culture excludes; as Lipovetskii points out in his analysis of ‘Sergei Andreevich’, ‘the symbolic code is forced out by a naturalistic code, conditional signals are replaced by unconditional ones, “culture” by “nature”’. The two parts of Sorokin’s stories might be better understood as metaphors for the psychoanalytical model of the human mind, a model which Sorokin regards as itself no more than a metaphor, with the first, simulated element representing the Ich and Über-Ich, and the collapse into the disorder of physical violence and sexual

39 Ibid.
40 Ibid., p.201. The distinction may be seen by comparing Sorokin’s work with a key example of contemporary Russian realist fiction, Kaledin’s Smirennoe kladbishche (The humble cemetery, 1987). The irony of the title, taken from a passage near the end of Evgenii Onegin (1833) by Aleksandr Pushkin (1799-1837), in which Tat’iana refers to ‘smirennoe kladbishche / Gde nynche krest i ten vetvei / Nad bednoi nianeiu moei...’ (The humble cemetery / Where there is now a cross and the shade of branches over my poor nanny...) (Ch.VIII, v. 46), derives from the contrast between the conventional idyllic, elegiac perception of the graveyard in Russian literature, which recurs, for example, at the end of Ottsy i deti (Fathers and children, 1862) by Ivan Turgenev (1818-1883), and the savage physical realities of daily life as a grave-digger portrayed in the novel, which may serve as a metaphor for decaying late Soviet society, on the brink of collapse into barbarism. Where Kaledin aspires to authenticity, Sorokin asserts the metaphorical nature of all text, and its desire to absorb the world into its metaphors.

41 Ibid., p.156. Ryklin, amongst others, has drawn attention to the psychoanalytical interpretation of Sorokin’s work, suggesting that the coprophagy in his work signifies regression to Freud’s oral stage, indicative of the infantilism of collective obedience. (See Ryklin, ‘Medium’, p.737.) In another interview, Sorokin, however, dismisses his interest in psychoanalysis as a fleeting adolescent fascination, and indeed pre-empts Ryklin’s reading in the story ‘Dorozhnoe priisshestvie’ (An incident on the road), in which the narrator’s recollection of pretending to be a sewage worker as a child is followed by a section marked ‘Interpretation’, where the narrator points out: ‘Obshcheizvesmo, chto v prepubertal’nom vozraste glavnoe eroticheskoe perezhivanie rebenka sviazano s aktom defekatsii, otsiu da i povyshenni interes detei k kalu kak k prichine ikh udovol’stviia.’ (It is well known that at a pre-pubertal age the main erotic experience of the child is connected with the act of defecation, hence the heightened interest of children in faeces as their source of pleasure.) (Sorokin, V., ‘Dorozhnoe priisshestvie’ in his Sobranie sochinenii v dvukh tomakh, Vol.1, Moscow, 1998, p.561.)
perversion representing the Es. In an article entitled ‘Cherez “Vtoroe nebo”’ (Through the ‘Second Heaven’), published in 1994, Sorokin writes:

Twentieth-century psychology has opened up the sphere of the lower psyche before us as some kind of abyss which is ready at any moment to swallow our ‘Ich’ – that which we call our identity [lichnost’] and in which God lays the foundation of our likeness to Him. It is easy to step into the abyss, but this step marks the end of our identity and, consequently, our likeness to God, and together with this, a return to pre-history.^^

This article indicates how Sorokin’s original starting-point, Soviet ‘official culture’, represents not an exception, but a culmination of the notion of culture, understood as the means by which, over time, the human being is gradually civilised. The ‘frame-breaking’ element in his short stories highlights not only the feebleness of this process’s achievements, the ‘ease of stepping into the abyss’, but also the barbarism which has been perpetrated in the name of the process.

Like Venedikt Erofeev in Moskva-Petushki, Sorokin presents Soviet culture as the logical culmination of Russian cultural development. In the third part of Norma, a young man uncovers a case containing evidence that he may be a descendant of the Romantic poet, Fedor Tiutchev (1803-73). His awe and reverence, reflecting the conventional perception and reception of Russia’s literary canon, recall an episode in the first part of the novel in which two characters come across a packet of norm which had belonged to an uncle who fell at Stalingrad, and which had subsequently been returned to his wife by a close comrade-in-arms.^^ Skoropanova suggests that in the story of the young man, by simulating Soviet ‘village fiction’ of the 1960s and 1970s, Sorokin reveals the connection between that type of fiction, nineteenth-century Slavophilism and the literary styles of Turgenev, Anton Chekhov (1860-1904) and Ivan Bunin (1870-1953), in effect placing all within the nineteenth-century

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^^ Quoted in Skoropanova, Russkaia postmodernistskaia, p.281.
^^ This episode, which ‘breaks the frame’ of reverence through which Russian culture conventionally remembers the Soviet war effort, coincidentally resembles a scene in Quentin Tarantino’s 1994 film, Pulp Fiction, which similarly ‘breaks the frame’ of liberal righteousness through which the Vietnam War has come to be perceived by American cinematic culture in particular. In the scene, a general solemnly gives a little boy a gold watch, passed down through generations. In order to protect the watch while a P.O.W., the boy’s father had hidden it in his rectum, and when he died, the general ensured it reached his son by keeping it in the same place. Tarantino’s films, which attracted enormous critical interest as well as commercial success in Russia, reached the wider public in Russia shortly after Sorokin’s fiction, and the similarity in method has been noted by critics such as Petr Vail’ and Gillespie. (See, in particular, Vail’, P., ‘Konservator Sorokin v kontse veka’, Literaturnaia gazeta, 1995, 5, p.4.)
‘pochvennik’ (‘native-soil’) tradition. Sorokin then attempts to break free of this tradition by ‘desecrating’ it; the ‘pochvennik’ is transformed into a literal ‘lover of the soil’ through the depiction of the young man, overcome with his discovery, copulating with the ground.

By choosing Tiutchev as the figure to whom the young man is related, Sorokin indicates his sense of affinity with the poet, who is symbolically the first Russian writer to feel the burden of Russia’s literary past, which in Tiutchev’s case amounted to the figure of Pushkin. In Bitov’s Pushkinskii dom, a novel which expresses the impossibility of breaking free of this burden, Bitov appends an academic article ostensibly written by the central character, but in fact published separately by Bitov himself, which explores how Tiutchev and Mikhail Lermontov (1814-41) confronted the responsibility of following Pushkin. Bitov’s account of Tiutchev’s relationship with Pushkin – Tiutchev’s resentment at Pushkin’s apparent indifference to him, his sense that he was ‘not allowed’ to be a better writer – represents a characterisation of the relationship of Russian writers to the consecrated literary past. While such writers thus empathise with Tiutchev, they also reject him, because, as the successor to Pushkin, he brings the notion of a Russian literary tradition into existence.

Unlike Bitov’s novel, however, Sorokin’s dispute with Russia’s literary heritage derives not so much from a sense of disappointment at having been born ‘too late’, as from his perception of a link between the notion of a solid, continuous cultural heritage and the belief in progress towards the perfection of the human being. The Tiutchev story in Norma is immediately followed by a discussion, ostensibly between the writer and his editor, about how the story might be made more interesting. The passage in which the young man discovers the suitcase is then repeated, except that this time, instead of Tiutchev’s letter and signet ring, he finds a text which he and the

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45 Skoropanova, Russkaia postmodernistskaia, pp.270-1.
46 See Lipovetskii, Russian Postmodernist, p.57.
47 See Bitov, A., Pushkinskii dom, Moscow, 1989, pp.223-42.
48 Bitov suggests that Tiutchev’s greatest frustration is embodied in the fact that Pushkin had already written the story of their relationship in the play Motsart i Sal’ieri (Mozart and Salieri, 1830).
49 In effect, both Bitov’s and Sorokin’s perspectives on Russia’s literary heritage are contained in Erofeev’s Moskva-Petushki, with its nostalgic references to canonc Russian literature combined with the assertion that Communist Moscow is the inevitable outcome of all the aspirations to paradise on earth contained within that literature.
reader in effect read together, describing the brutal collectivisation of a village. Like *Moskva-Petushki*, Sorokin’s implication of the whole Russian literary culture in the violence of the Stalinist period may be seen as an attempt to apply Adorno’s arguments about Western culture’s complicity in Auschwitz to the Russian context. Ryklin argues that one of the most significant Russian cultural taboos broken by Sorokin is his equation of Russian atrocities in the twentieth century with those of the Germans, notably in his plays, but also in the prose piece *Mesiats v Dakhau* (A month in Dachau, 1994, dated as written 1990), the title of which parodies that of Turgenev’s idyllic *Mesiats v derevne* (A month in the country, 1850). Ryklin writes:

[Sorokin] questions the silently accepted uniqueness of ‘German guilt’, of German fascism as a conveyor-belt of crimes, the uniqueness of the racial vector of these crimes, and the necessity of passing the work of mourning on to subsequent generations. In all these aspects he has introduced important innovations: fascism as a system of violence is not unique; the work of mourning after the no less criminal Stalinist system has not yet even begun, having been substituted by unbroken euphoria; and the racial vector of the crimes as such is in no way worse than the class vector.  

Sorokin most explicitly shows the nineteenth-century Russian canon to be the agent of the notion of progress towards a better world in his simulation of the nineteenth-century novel, *Roman* (1995, dated as written 1985-89), the title of which may be translated as ‘Novel’, but is also the name of the main character. Though the work only supports an allegorical reading in a minor way, the ambiguity of the title is sustained within the text, with the epithet ‘Roman’ often appearing in the text to refer simultaneously to the character and the novel form itself. For example, at the beginning of the work, Roman returns to his native village after some years in the city to find little changed, rather as the work itself revisits familiar faces and places, the *topoi* of the nineteenth-century novel: ‘I’m here again. In this dear house. With these dear people.’

The fact that other characters frequently compare Roman to past literary heroes suggests that Roman, rather like Pushkin’s Onegin, embodies the whole preceding history of Western literature in his person; moreover, the characterisation of Roman appears also

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50 Ryklin, ‘Medium’, p.744. Topol breaks a comparable Czech cultural taboo in *Sestra* by suggesting that ordinary Czechs willingly collaborated in Auschwitz. The equation of German fascism with Stalinism occurred in Slovak fiction much earlier, in Bednár’s collection of stories *Hodiny a minuty* (Hours and minutes, 1956).

to be a characterisation of the novel itself. He is described as a dandy, dressed like an
English lord, yet is said to be incapable of being indifferent to anything, and possesses
an unusual desire to captivate his audience with stories: ‘Eshche v detstve on zametil,
chto emy dostavliaet bol’shoe udovol’stvie osveshchat’ interesuiushchie kogo-libo
sobytia tak, chtoby sil’nee vsego porazit’ slushatel’ia, dobit’sia v nem zhelaemogo
dushevnogo trepeta, otchego i samomu zatrepetat’.’ (While still a child he had
noticed that it gave him great pleasure to illuminate events which interested anyone in
a way that would completely stun the listener, provoking in him the desired
trepidation of the soul, at which he would start to tremble.)\(^\text{52}\) This desire for power is
implicitly presented as the motivation for Realist writing, which, in its efforts to
represent reality, may be seen to capture its subject and attempt to absorb it in words.

As a painter, Roman is impressed by his own ability to recreate landscapes, yet this
ability appears to be intrinsically linked with Roman’s impulsive greed: ‘Ne
vyderzhav, Roman protianul ruku, vzial iabloko, kotoroe, nesmotria na dolguiu,
tesnuui zimovku v prianom rassoie, ostalos’ krepkim, i otkusil.’ (Unable to restrain
himself, Roman stretched out his hand and took an apple, which, despite its long,
cramped wintering in the spicy brine, had remained firm, and took a bite.)\(^\text{53}\) At the
beginning of the novel, Roman is thirty-two, at the end, thirty-three, and the frequent
implicit identification of Roman with Christ reflects the attempted exploitation of the
novel by, for example, Gogol’, Dostoevskii and Tolstoi, as the means of leading
human beings to salvation.\(^\text{54}\)

What is most essential for Roman, and therefore for the novel, as he repeatedly tells
other characters during lengthy philosophical discussions about art, life and the
existence of God, is uncompromised personal freedom. Yet, as Sorokin seeks to
demonstrate in the gory conclusion of the work, this freedom is to be achieved
through subjugation and destruction. Roman culminates in Roman’s wedding feast, an
epitome of the satiation of all desires. However, during a quiet interlude with his
bride, Roman suddenly declares: ‘‘Ia znaiu, chto delat.’’ (‘I know what is to be
done.’),\(^\text{55}\) and proceeds to kill every villager one by one with an axe, the symbol of

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\(^\text{52}\) Ibid., p.51.
\(^\text{53}\) Ibid., p.22.
\(^\text{54}\) In Hrabal’s \textit{Příliš hlubná samota}, Haň’a also perceives Christ as an energetic dandy-figure seeking
change, in contrast to Lao T’s’e, who strives to resist change.
\(^\text{55}\) Ibid., p.289.
Raskol’nikov’s rebellion. In the context of the novel, which stylistically and thematically merges Turgenev, Dostoevskii, Lev Tolstoi (1828-1910) and Ivan Goncharov (1812-91), the implicit reference to the novel by Nikolai Chernyshevskii (1828-89) (and Lenin’s subsequent essay) suggests that Chto delat’ (What is to be done?, 1863) merely made explicit the question which all Russian nineteenth-century novels sought to answer, and thus, given the importance of Chto delat’ for the Bolsheviks, seeks to demonstrate their complicity in the barbarism of the Soviet period. Novikov writes: ‘In both the form of the [Cyrillic] letter ‘P’ [for Roman], and its disturbing, rolling rumble may be seen and heard that same axe to which the revolutionary democrats and powerful fiction, thirsting for a storm, summoned Russia; not for nothing did Heinrich Mann later call our literature of the last century “revolution before the revolution”’.  

Roman’s subsequent ritual of cannibalism, vomiting, defecation and masturbation with the corpses of his victims in the village church shows how attempted liberation leads merely to mechanised brutality. This is reflected in the way that the repetitive sentences become gradually simpler, from subject-verb-object to subject-verb by the end. At the same time, this stylistic change demonstrates the disintegration of the novel ‘frame’, with the visual appearance of the unparagraphed, repetitive text coming to match the semantic horror. In effect, the Romantic revolt against ‘frames’ carried out by successive Russian literary heroes culminates in Roman, who revolts against the ‘frame’ of the novel itself. As the final ‘Roman umer’ (Roman died.) indicates, however, Roman cannot survive this process; in destroying the ‘frame’ of the novel, he destroys what Sorokin calls his ‘I’, his ‘likeness to God’, and ceases to exist.

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56 Roman’s destruction not only of the entire village, but also of an entire way of writing at the same time evokes Chekhov’s Vishnevii sad (The Cherry Orchard, 1903), in which the sound of saws cutting down the orchard at the end signals the end of the gentry’s way of life described in the play.

57 Novikov, V., “Topor Sorokina: Komu on strashen i komu net?” in his Zaskok: Esse, parodi i razmyshleniia, Moscow, 1997, pp.276-77. Novikov suggests that Roman takes place in ‘Turgenevian-Goncharovian times’, but the references to the landscape artist Isaak Levitan and French Impressionism suggest that the setting is the 1890s. The emphasis on images of decay and twilight in the opening description of the graveyard in which Roman is buried, establishes the atmosphere of decadence. When Roman first enters his childhood home, the reader is told: ‘pol, na kotoryi stupil Roman, byl gnili i progibalsia, obeshchaia kogda-nibud’ provalit’ sia vose.’ (The floor onto which Roman stepped was rotten and buckled, promising at some time to fall in completely.) (Sorokin, ‘Roman’, p.18.) For Sorokin, it is not society which is disintegrating, but the novel form, the ‘floor onto which Roman steps’.

58 Ibid., p.356.
In *Roman*, Sorokin seeks to demonstrate that the freedom Roman desires cannot be attained in life, which is dependent on ‘frames’ for its continuation. The ‘frame-break’ in Sorokin’s work, which frequently appears in place of the moment of ‘salvation’, may thus be seen to reject the promise of liberation, to remind the reader not only that existence is always ‘framed’, but also that he or she is dependent on that ‘frame’. On the other hand, however, the ‘frame-break’ provides a *frisson* of the freedom that the individual desires but cannot possess by reversing the conventional linear path towards ‘imprisonment’ in the frame and exposing the absolute relativity of text. The reader’s notional horror at the ‘frame-break’ thus corresponds, in effect, to the flight of the elderly naturalist from this relativity at the end of Tolstaia’s ‘Somnambula v tumane’. Prigov, the Conceptualists’ most prominent spokesman, comments:

> [...] the main task of art, its purpose in this world, is to show absolute freedom, a freedom with all its dangers. Through the example of art, the human being sees that there is absolute freedom, though it need not be fully realisable in life. I took Soviet language as the most functional at that time, the most obvious and accessible, which was the representative of ideology and presented itself as the absolute truth, sent down from Heaven. The human being was oppressed by this language not from outside, but from within himself. Any ideology lays claim to you entirely, any language has totalitarian ambitions to seize the whole world, cover it with its terms and show that it is the absolute truth. I wanted to show that there is freedom. Language is only language, and not the absolute truth and, having understood that, we shall win freedom.

Sorokin’s writing may be understood as an attempt to restore to literature Roland Barthes’s notion of *jouissance*, almost by directly imitating Barthes’s description of de Sade. In *The Pleasure of the Text*, Barthes argues that the pleasure of reading de Sade ‘proceeds from certain breaks (or certain collisions)’ resulting from the redistribution of language. Barthes continues:

> [...] such redistribution is always achieved by cutting. Two edges are created: an obedient, conformist, plagiarising edge (the language is to be copied in its canonical state, as it has been established by

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schooling, good usage, literature, culture), and another edge, mobile, blank (ready to assume any contours), which is never anything but the site of its effect: the place where the death of language is glimpsed. [...] Neither culture nor its destruction is erotic; it is the seam between them, the fault, the flaw, which becomes so.62

Whereas satiation is comforting, jouissance constitutes a sudden experience of loss or emptiness which Sorokin frequently symbolises in his ‘frame-breaks’ through images of physical voiding, orgasm or violent death. As Sorokin demonstrates through his repetitive use of the ‘frame-break’ device in ‘Pervyi subbotnik’, however, the reader quickly becomes comfortable with the formula, and the moment of jouissance turns into a ritual of satiation, the self-confidence of knowing which forms the basis of conviction and action. By subverting his own method, Sorokin indicates that this resistance to the formulaic, to petrification in the manner of Denisov’s monument in ‘Somnambula v tumane’, motivates his writing. In effect, Sorokin suggests that by maintaining change in the text, the writer resists the momentum for change in life.63

For Lipovetskii, Sorokin’s simulation of styles exemplifies Fredric Jameson’s notion of ‘pastiche’, in essence a re-definition of the term to denote the ‘imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language [...] without parody’s ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse, without laughter, without that still latent feeling that there exists something normal compared to which what is being imitated is rather comic.’64 However, in Sorokin’s writing, through the ‘frame-break’, it is precisely the ‘normal’ which is shown to be comic. Henri Bergson writes: ‘we begin to become imitable only when we cease to be ourselves [...]. Our gestures can only be imitated in their mechanical uniformity and therefore exactly in what is alien to our living personality. To imitate anyone is to bring out the element

62 Ibid.
63 Sorokin demonstrates the fluidity, multiplicity and uncertainty of linguistic meaning, fundamental to the method of Pelevin and especially Hodrová by, for example, the anagrams of Norma and Roman, in which characters at one point listen to arias from Bellini’s opera Norma. The title of the novel Goluboe salo (1998), literally translated as ‘blue lard’, combines an allusion to Salò, Pasolini’s cinematic encyclopaedia of sexual perversions, with the most common pejorative adjective for ‘homosexual’. The novel, which contains passages written in a futuristic ‘new Russian’ exploiting such multi-lingual puns, is prefixed with a quotation from Rabelais in which Pantagruel rescues frozen words from the sea which melt into a barbarian language. (See Sorokin, V., Goluboe salo, Moscow, 1998, p.5.)
of automatism'. Sorokin’s ‘frame-breaks’ correct the ‘rigidity’ of the formulaic text, momentarily restoring life before themselves lapsing into formula. For example, in the story ‘Vozvrashchenie’ (The return), in which a young man takes his sweetheart home for the first time, Sorokin repeatedly interrupts the characters’ timid gestures and expressions of affection with vulgarisms. Near the end of the story the reader is told:

Они пересекли пустынную площадь с двумя яркими голубыми фонарями и свернули на улицу Вероники. «У тебя такая хорошая мама» сказала Вероника, поправляя волосы. «Мамы наверно все хорошие» засмеялся Владимир. «И брат милый. С ним хорошо наверно побиться до изжоги...» Владимир молча кивнул. Они вошли в сквер, молодые липы сомкнулись над их головами.

(They crossed the deserted square with two bright blue lamps and turned into Veronika’s street. ‘You have such a lovely mum,’ said Veronika, straightening her hair. ‘I reckon all mums are lovely,’ laughed Vladimir. ‘And your brother’s sweet. It must be good to fuck with him till you get heartburn...’ Vladimir nodded silently. They went into the garden, and the young linden trees closed over their heads.)

The vulgarity, by raising awareness of the banality it replaces, causes the reader to hesitate, perhaps even to recoil. Sorokin’s texts seek to teach this hesitation, a sudden awareness of helplessness, an extreme version of what Venichka in Moskva-Petushki calls ‘universal faint-heartedness’.

As Prigov indicates in the passage quoted above, the Conceptualists perceive the notion of language as a surface over reality, arising initially from their play with the ‘disembodied’ signs of Socialist Realism, as a liberation. Speaking in 1987 about the appeal of the Conceptualists, Sorokin comments:

In principle the conceptual artist doesn’t have his own language – he uses only the language of others [...] This idea seemed to me very natural; it had an obvious relevance to our situation here, to our attitude towards the language of our state, its literary language. I feel acutely that I can’t be inside this language, because to be inside it, to use it as mine, means that I’m inside this state – and that’s something that I’ve always feared. [...] [F]or me, the only kind of

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freedom there is is the freedom to choose different languages, make
use of them, and remain an outsider in the process.\textsuperscript{67}

This freedom is typified by the implied authorial ‘role-playing’ in Prigov’s poetry. Mary A. Nicholas writes: ‘In the place of a single lyric persona, Prigov relies instead on a variety of literary types, which he calls “images” (imidzhi). These images vary from the best known of his personages – the policeman or “militsioner” – to the civic poet, the writer of “women’s verses”, the journalist, the unofficial artist, the simple worker and so on’.\textsuperscript{68}

What Prigov and Sorokin, however, regard as freedom is presented in Kolenič’s first books of fiction and Litvák’s collection of prose pieces Samoreč as imprisonment in relativity. The narrators in Samoreč repeatedly assert ‘Všetko je rovnaké.’ (Everything is the same.)\textsuperscript{69} In the piece entitled ‘Zlost’ (Anger), the narrator says to the reader, or perhaps just to himself: ‘Až odkiaľ kam nechcete chapaf nepochopitel’ ne, ked’ všetko sa iba podobá sebe navzájom?’ (From where to where don’t you want to understand the incomprehensible, when everything merely imitates itself?)\textsuperscript{70} Like Sorokin, Litvák seeks to strip literature and human beings of their pretensions. Štefan Moravčík describes the work as a ‘report on the catastrophe of youth and humanity, and on the catastrophe of literature which cannot, does not want and does not know how to go on in the old way’.\textsuperscript{71} In ‘Chorobne l’ubim pisat’ (I morbidly love to write), the narrator defines what he is writing as ‘the purgatory of Slovak fiction’ (‘očistec slovenskej prózy’), purging Slovak literature of its sinful delusion of potency as it purges signifiers of any relationship to their signifieds. Like Mitana in Hľadanie strateného autora, though more savagely, Litvák rejects the notion of story and story-telling because they sustain the illusion not only that words can give shape and order to the world, but also that the accumulation of words, as memories or experiences, may give rise to the notion of a self: ‘Nenávidím príbehy. Sú to poprekrúcané spomienky a nič nie je obludnejšie ako epika. Je to niečo také strašné a nepoužiteľné ako moja skúsenosť.’ (I hate stories. They are distorted

\textsuperscript{67} Laird, \textit{Voices}, p.149. (Italics Laird’s.)
\textsuperscript{70} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{71} Moravčík, Š., ‘Pochutnal som si na svojej nicote’, \textit{Dotyky}, IV, 1992, 10, p.36.
memories and nothing is more monstrous that the epic. It is something as terrible and useless as my experience.)

In effect, Litvák replaces literature with ‘autospeak’, not language which gives shape to the self, but the incessant production of sounds, the futile accompaniment to futile existence. Whereas Hodrová, with her wandering motif, and Ajvaz, in his story ‘Sochář’, represent the activity of writing as a constant movement to-and-fro, through which meaning is endlessly revealed and reconstituted, in the first piece from Samoreč, ‘Zvyšný’ (Superfluous), Litvák’s narrator indicates that his revolt against meaning merely renders him as helpless as a tight-rope walker, stationary on his rope: ‘[...]zo svojho hendikepujúceho nadhľadu sa môže iba usmievať, svoje smutky šepkať prázdnú pod nebom, trpieť závratom: postaviť sa na spičky a vychutnať ten balans.’ ([...]from his disabling bird’s-eye view he can only smile, whisper his sorrows to the emptiness beneath the sky, suffer from dizziness, stand on tiptoe and enjoy the balancing.)

The impact of Samoreč was, however, eclipsed by that of Kolenič’s first novel, Mlčat’, in the context of which Samoreč could be compared to preparatory sketches. A decade younger than Sorokin, Kolenič established his reputation as the enfant terrible of contemporary Slovak literature at almost exactly the same time as Sorokin in Russia. In 1986, just as the foreign publication of Ochered’ was causing a scandal in official Soviet circles, Kolenič’s first collection of poetry, Prinesené bûrkou (Brought by the storm) was published in Slovakia, provoking much critical discussion. However, Pynsent argues that the appearance of Mlčat’, coincidentally in the same year as Sorokin’s first book publication in Russia, ‘did more [than his verse] to prepare the way for [the] new writing’ of post-Communist Slovakia. Whereas Sorokin and Prigov sought to evade absorption into the language of the Soviet state, Mlčat’ represents an attempt to escape from the relativity of language, which, as Kolenič scathingly contends in ‘Diletant 1’ (Diletante 1), from his second prose publication, Porušenie raja, renders the writer nothing more than a ‘dilettante’, as

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72 Litvák, Samoreč, p.21.
73 Ibid., p.10.
74 For a wide-ranging discussion of Prinesené bûrkou by the writer and leading critics, see ‘Legitimnosť zázitku, Z kritickej diskusie o zbierke Ivana Koleniča Prinesené bûrkou’, Romboid, XXIII, 1988, 5, pp.114-22.
superficial and superfluous as the language with which he is condemned to work. Pavel Minář writes of Mlčat: 'at the centre of the thematic action of Kolenič’s text are the human being as an instrument of language, and the trauma arising from the impossibility of escape, of eluding the clutches of “ever-present” language; that is to say, the fundamental non-existence of any condition outside language'. In Tolstaia’s writing, not to mention Hodrová’s or Topol’s, language is a gift; in Kolenič’s fiction it is a curse, since it constitutes the only means of expressing knowledge of reality, but proves inadequate to the task.

The title of Mlčat may be understood simultaneously as an imperative and an aspiration, denoting a piece of writing which paradoxically advocates an end to writing. It recalls Tiutchev’s poem ‘Silentium!’ (1832), where the first word is ‘Molchi’ (Be silent). In the poem, Tiutchev rejects externally directed language in favour of an inner language of thoughts, dreams and emotions. For Tiutchev, this inner language cannot be conveyed through externally directed language - ‘mysl’ izrechennaia est’ lozh’ (The thought uttered is a lie) - and therefore he exhorts the reader to fall silent and live inside himself: ‘est’ tselyi mir v dushe tvoei / Tainstvenno-volshebnykh dum’ (There is a whole world in your soul / Of secret magical thoughts). In ‘Diletant I’, the narrator virtually paraphrases Tiutchev’s poem when he comments: ‘v skutočnosti ide len o jediný problém: zrusíť prichynnost’ k prejavenému svetu – aj s jeho vabníčkami a mûtúcimi pocitmi. A ponoríť’ sa do nekonečných hlbin vlastného vnútra, do bezpríestranného a bezčasového pokoja’ (In fact there’s only one problem: to end one’s inclination towards the manifest world with its lures and confusing feelings. And to plunge into the endless depths of one’s own interior, into spaceless and timeless peace.)

Like Tiutchev, the narrator of Mlčat suggests at the beginning of the work that he has a choice between speaking and remaining silent. He mocks the high value traditionally placed on speech, describing it as ‘too primitive and limited’ to convey meaning, and concludes that it makes no difference whether one speaks or not, since speaking and being silent merely represent alternative ways of saying nothing: ‘reč je

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75 Pynsent, ‘What about the Slovaks?’, p.17.
organizované mlčanie’ (speech is organised silence). However, even as he writes this, he is aware of his dependence upon the presence of words for knowledge of his existence. His first words - ‘Nemusím nič hovoriť’ (I don’t have to say anything) are consciously ironic because he knows it is this utterance which brings him into being for the reader, while it is the sound of his thoughts which makes him aware of his own existence. The apparent distinction in Tiutchev’s poem between externally and internally directed language is therefore obscured in Mičat’, since as the narrator puts it, ‘aj myslenie ovládajú slová a vety’ (thinking too is controlled by words and sentences). Kolenič employs both the ‘stream of consciousness’ technique, reminiscent particularly of Samuel Beckett’s trilogy, and the diary form as types of communication that are directed neither entirely inwards nor entirely outwards, but constitute an incessant flow of language – ‘autospeak’ – upon which the narrator’s existence for both himself and others is conditional. The initial question of whether to speak or be silent is thus shown to be, in effect, a recasting of the opening of Hamlet’s soliloquy (Act III, Sc. I, 1.56f). Being equates with narration, and therefore silence represents an impossible aspiration during life.

The problem for the narrator of Mičat’ is that he experiences an intolerable discrepancy between himself and the words that give him being, which appears to him to emanate from an alien source: ‘nedokážem v sebe umlčat’ ten hlas, ktorý sa chce prejaviť.’ (I cannot silence within me that voice which wants to show itself). Timothy Beasley-Murray persuasively interprets the narrator’s estrangement in the context of Jacques Lacan’s notion of the Symbolic Order, within which the signifier only has meaning insofar as it differs from other signifiers, and therefore its relationship to the signified appears arbitrary. As a result, thinking and being can never be simultaneous; hence Lacan’s reworking of Descartes, quoted by Beasley-

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80 Ibid.
81 Ibid., p.89.
82 Ibid., p.28. This same Beckettian alienation is also expressed by Litvák’s narrator in ‘Zvyšný’, who demands: ‘Ako by som mohol slepo naletieť reči, čo zradne vyludzuje stony a podozrivé nimi napodobňuje hlas človeka (o ktorom som si nie celkom istý, či ma nepovažuje za seba)?’ (How could I blindly fall for speech which treacherously emits groans and suspiciously imitates with them the voice of a human being (about whom I am not entirely sure if he considers me as himself?)) Litvák, *Samoreč*, p.6.
Murray: ‘I think where I am not, and therefore I am where I am not thinking’. The result for the narrator is a constant, inescapable sense of inauthenticity.

Kolenič’s narrator conveys his sense of alienation from the words which create him by giving himself a name which he claims to have made up. The name, Jaroslav Varga, appeals to him because he claims that the repeated ‘v’ renders it impossible to pronounce properly, thus exposing the inadequacy of language. For the narrator, the invented name serves as a model for all words, which in his view do not represent, but rather replace what they signify. Through the narrator’s creation of Varga, Kolenič actualises the sense of estrangement which the writer experiences on looking back at words which he has just ‘uttered’. At the same time, Kolenič uses the narrator’s acknowledged untruth to demonstrate what he perceives as the futility and dishonesty of writers’ endeavours to tell the truth.

The relationship between Varga and the narrator of Mlčat cannot be understood simply as the relationship between a fictional and a ‘real’ narrator; Varga constitutes a ‘narrator-within-a-narrator’, neither identical to the narrator, nor entirely separate from him. Through the invention of Varga, Kolenič foregrounds what Waugh terms the ‘creation-description paradox’ in fiction, which arises because ‘all literary fiction has to construct a ‘context’ at the same time that it constructs a ‘text’, through entirely verbal processes. Descriptions of objects in fiction are simultaneously creations of that object.’ As she argues, the foregrounding of this paradox has implications not only for worlds in fiction, but also for the world outside it, which, if it can only be known through words, is similarly created as it is described. Through the ‘narrator-within-a-narrator’ device, Kolenič shows the self, in fiction and in life, to be a creation of words, and therefore suggests that each new utterance, though apparently emanating from a single physical source, may constitute a new self: ‘kto to teda hovoriť? Ja alebo vymyslené meno. Hovoríme spolu, pán varga, každý si povie svoje. Svoje mlčanie.’ (So who is speaking? Me, or an invented name. We’re speaking together, Mr Varga, each of us will say what he has to say. His own silence.) The self in Mlčat is a story (príbeh), one of a notionally infinite number which the teller

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84 Waugh, Metafiction, p.88. (All italics Waugh’s)
may tell without ever being able to convey his ‘real self’, the self which would establish a hierarchy of true and false. Whereas Prigov celebrates the freedom of ‘role-play’, near the end of Mlčat, Kolenić’s narrator furiously asserts the absurdity of the situation brought about by language by listing dozens of possibilities from an implicitly infinite list of what ‘Varga’ could be.

As in Dusha patriota, writing is thus shown to be a process not of self-discovery, but of self-creation. However, while Popov’s narrator feigns indifference to the consequent ‘emptiness’ of writing, Kolenić’s narrator is stricken with writer’s block: ‘Keby som vyrozprával aspoň príbeh, hocijaký vymyslený príbeh. Svoj príbeh.’ (If I could just get out a story, any invented story at all. My story.) He does not perceive his inability to write as a consequence of his own inadequacy, but of the inadequacy of language. His desire for a story with which to write himself out of his block therefore also becomes a desire to take revenge on language: ‘musím zahnat’ slová tam, kde nebdu moci’ prejavovat’ svoju tupu nadvládu.’ (I must drive words to a place where they will not be able to manifest their dim-witted supremacy.)

In the novel’s central episode – which the narrator subsequently calls his ‘story’ – the narrator describes how he rapes his mother, driving her insane, and murders her lover who disturbs them. On the one hand, the narrator’s assault on his mother may be understood as a metaphor for his attack on language in the novel, since, as the narrator demonstrates in the opening pages, it is language which gives him being. However, more immediately, like the various forms of violence in Sorokin’s writing, the assault constitutes an attack on the implied reader, whom Kolenić’s narrator considers complicit in the social codes and systems of organisation which perpetuate the hegemony of words. From the very beginning of the novel, the narrator rejects all

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85 Kolenić, Mlčat, p.30.
86 Ibid., p.29.
87 Ibid.
88 The mother’s madness manifests itself in her inability to use words, which are replaced by meaningless sounds. Beasley-Murray equates this situation with Lacan’s Imaginary, the infantile state in which sign and referent reflect each other, for which the narrator longs but which he is unable to attain. (See Beasley-Murray, ‘Jacques Lacan’, p.41.)
89 In Samorec, Litvák similarly uses ‘mother’ both as a means to shock the implied reader and as a metaphor for language or literature, notably in the piece entitled ‘Lútos’; in which the narrator physically and perhaps sexually assaults his mother, kicking her in the face to destroy his own resemblance to her. On the one hand, this act serves to complete his alienation from other human beings; on the other, it reflects his ‘defacement’ of the notion of literature in the work.
notions of the importance of the individual and the community, since he regards them, and the principles on which they are based, including the notion of the value of communication itself, to be mere linguistic inventions with no basis in reality: 'Nebudeme si nič nahovárať: sme si navzájom takí ľahostajní ako papier, ktorým si niekoľko utrel riť, a hovno čakúce na spláchnutie – prečo sa klamať rečami o nejakom úprimnom ľudskom porozumení?' (We're not going to make anything up; we're as indifferent to each other as the paper with which someone has wiped their arse and shit waiting for the flush. Why deceive oneself with talk about some kind of sincere human understanding?) The reader is implicated in the enduring credence given to such notions to the extent that he or she is offended by the narrator’s attitude to them.

As the narration progresses, the narrator increasingly attempts to rid words of their capacity to create hierarchies, in effect, to sanctify. His inability to empathise with other human beings in the novel gradually worsens, as though he has broken through the psychological attachment to others of his own kind and seen it as nothing more than a verbal formulation: 'zrazu som videl ľudí ako veci, ľudí v ich nerekonateľnej samote, ako sa v daždi potácajú jeden k druhému: chaos krokov, labyrint pohybov, mlčiaci mechanizmus, ktorý ktoşi uviedol do činnosti.' (suddenly I saw people as things, in their insurmountable solitude, as they tottered towards each other in the rain: a chaos of steps, a labyrinth of movements, a silent mechanism which someone had activated.) As Mária Bátorová points out, ‘ordinary words and names, for example the word mother, have lost their sense for him, have been emptied and mean nothing.’ In the pages leading up to the rape, he mentally strips his mother of the social and emotional significance that turns the word into a cultural concept, and is surprised how easily he can rid her of her taboo status and persuade himself of her sexual attractiveness: ‘neviem, prečo som tak dlho odkladal jej bytosť na perifériu všetkého nedotknuteľného […] Slová iba nudne a trpko pomenúvajú: pomenúvajú iba to, čo pomenúvajú. Vždy to tak bol. Prečo som si myšel, že mi uniká nejaký význam, nejaký zmysel? Nejaký tajný symbol?' (I don’t know why I pushed her being

90 Ibid., p.10.
91 Ibid., p.53.
92 Bátorová, M., 'Nekrižujte Krista, netetujte Máriu', Romboid, XXVIII, 1993, 3, p.58. Bátorová interprets Kolenič’s novel as a moralising attack on the contemporary human being. The ironic manner in which she criticises the work reflects the apparent difficulty experienced by critics in this period, particularly in Russia and Slovakia, who wished to object on moral grounds but did not want to be associated with the moralising of the former ‘official’ and ‘dissident’ critical establishments.
to the periphery of all that is untouchable for so long [...] Words merely tediously and bitterly name; they name only what they name. It has always been thus. Why did I think I was missing some meaning, some sense? Some secret symbol?)

In what follows, the narrator seeks to expose to the reader what he perceives as the exclusively linguistic basis of notions of human morality and decency, the dignity of death and the beauty of the erotic. After the rape and murder, the narrator describes how he chops up the corpse, stuffs it in a trunk and dumps it in a cellar. He then brings a girl to the flat and has violent sexual intercourse with her beside his stupefied mother. In these scenes, the reader is encouraged to ‘suspend disbelief’, as when reading conventional realism, allowing Kolenič to ‘break the frame’ by having the narrator declare that he has made everything up.

As, for example, in Sorokin’s short stories, the aim of the ‘frame-break’ is to reveal the reader’s helplessness, exposing both his willingness to accept the products of language as reality and the impossibility of doing otherwise. However, whereas in Sorokin’s writing, the ‘frame-break’ confirms the position of the author outside the ‘frame’, in Mlčat on the contrary it reveals the failure of the narrator’s attempt to defeat language, his own imprisonment in the relativity of language, represented by the potential infinity of frames. At the end of Mlčat, the narrator reiterates in terms reminiscent of Dostoevskii’s Underground Man what he knew at the beginning, that being is dependent on words whose content is irrelevant: ‘ved’ čo iné je hovorenie, ak nie surové bytie proti pôraznote?’ (After all, what else is speaking, if not raw being against emptiness?)

Whereas writers like Tolstaia, Popov and Kratochvil seek to free literature from expectations of its capacity to affect ‘reality’, and others, like Venedikt Erofeev or Sorokin, at least attempt to neuter its potential to do harm, in Mlčat Kolenič strives in vain to restore the potency of literature by resorting to shock tactics, which only

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93 Ibid., p.56.
94 Kolenič, Mlčat, p.115. The Underground Man remarks: ‘Pust’, pust ia boltun, bezvrednyi, dosadnyi boltun, kak i vse my. No chto zhe delat’, esli priamoe i edinstvennoe naznachienie vsemiago umnogo cheloveka est’ boltovnia, to est’ umyshlennoe peresypanie iz pustogo v porozhnee’. (Let’s say, let’s say I’m a chatterer, a harmless, annoying chatterer, like we all are. But what else is to be done if the real and only function of any intelligent man is chatter – that is, a deliberate pouring out of emptiness into void.’) (Dostoevskii, F.M., Sobranie sochinenii, Vol.4, Moscow, 1956, p.147.)
intensify the awareness of impotence. This approach is made explicit by the narrator of 'Diletant 1', who suggests: 'Mohol by som začať pisať novú knihu. Začiatok by bol takýto: “Zmizni už konečne do mindže, kto má furt počúvať tie tvoje čurákoviny...” To by ludí šokovalo.’ (I could start writing a new book. The beginning would go like this: “Just disappear up a cunt once and for all! Who the hell wants to listen to that bollocks of yours?” That would shock people.)

Porušenie raja, which includes half-hearted pastiches of ‘video-nasties’, erotic and pornographic fiction, lacks any of the inspiration or conviction of Mlčať, suggesting that the defeat of the narrator in that novel is also the defeat of the author. The narrator of ‘Diletant 1’ is suffering from writer’s block, a reflection of the unceasing desire to use words, combined with the debilitating awareness of its pointlessness. His artistic redundancy is matched by the physical redundancy of sexual impotence. In contrast, in the fiction of the Genitalists, especially Balla, sexual impotence is not equated with writer’s block, but, on the contrary, desire without fulfilment constitutes a necessary precondition for creative potency.

Whereas in the fiction by Sorokin discussed in this chapter, the adoption of ‘literary masks’, always exposed by ‘frame-breaks’, reflects a fear of the consequences of unself-conscious creative activity, in Kolenič’s case, the process of writing, understood as the arbitrary manipulation of meaningless symbols, serves as a metaphor for the futility of existence. Both writers, however, assert the impossibility of stilling the compulsion to write, Kolenič explicitly in his texts, Sorokin through his high productivity. In the latter half of the 1990s, both sought to change direction, in both cases away from parody or simulation and towards more conventional storytelling. Goluboe salo, Sorokin’s first novel since Serdtsa chetyrekh (Hearts of four, 1998, dated as written 1991), was described by Lipovetskii as his most ‘neo-Baroque’ work, a description which might also apply to Kolenič’s Surrealist-influenced Ako z cigariet dym (Like smoke from cigarettes, 1996), in which the implied author was more or less unrecognisable. Their shift towards a writing less hampered by its own self-consciousness is reflected in the work of many of the writers of the Changes as the 1990s wore on, and in the work of writers like Pelevin, Balla and Kahuda, who emerged in their wake and form the subject of the final chapter.

95 Kolenič, Porušenie raja, p.72.
Chapter 6
Learning to Live With Emptiness: Viktor Pelevin, Václav Kahuda, Vlado Balla

Irina Rodnińskaia begins her review of Pelevin’s third novel, *Chapaev i Pustota*, with a quotation from Blaise Pascal:

> Qu'est-ce donc que nous crie cette avidité et cette impuissance, sinon qu'il y a eu autrefois dans l'homme un véritable bonheur, dont il ne lui reste maintenant que la marque et la trace toute vide, et qu'il essaie inutilement de remplir de tout ce qui l'environne, recherchant des choses absentes le secours qu'il n'obtient pas des présentes, mais qui en sont toutes incapables, parce que ce gouffre infini ne peut être rempli que par un objet infini et immuable, c'est-à-dire que par Dieu même.¹

In the fiction of the Changes, the perception of human activity as a futile attempt to fill emptiness – in effect, to restore Eden – finds its metaphor in the act of filling silence with speech or putting pen to paper.² As I have discussed in the preceding chapters, all the writers of the Changes reject what they perceive as the use of writing to assert a fixed, substantial world designed to replace or deny the emptiness of existence. However, writers like Hodrová present the activity of writing as a metaphor for the unceasing dynamic struggle of being against emptiness, comic but not ignoble, resistant to the end, which will none the less come. This perspective is particularly associated with Czech fiction in this period. In contrast, for Russian and Slovak writers like Sorokin and Kolenič, the seemingly compulsive need for human beings to assert their presence through words serves as a metaphor for the futility or inevitable noxiousness of human existence. Their work reflects a paradoxical yearning to give way to silence and emptiness once and for all. The final chapter of this dissertation focuses on works by Pelevin, Balla and Kahuda, who, while employing similar strategies and techniques to those of their immediate predecessors, seek to reverse their perception of writing; Pelevin and Balla by restoring faith in the activity of creation, Kahuda by rejecting its sentimentalisation. In this way, each writer finds a way of living with emptiness.

² In Podobój, Hodrová uses the name of Jan Paskal to recall Pascal’s assertion of the insurmountable intermediacy of human existence ‘suspended between two abysses’ (‘soutenu dans la masse que la nature lui a donnée entre ces deux abîmes de l’infini et du néant’ (Pascal, *Pensées*, p.249.)) Hodrová’s suggestion that Jan Paskal has nothing in common with the philosopher is ironic. Paskal’s desperate
Kahuda’s third novel, *Houština* (Thicket, 1999), his longest and most widely discussed to date (August 2002), begins with a description of how the narrator, as a toddler standing on a river bank, is born into consciousness of himself from the ‘nameless timelessness’ (‘bezejmenné bezcasi’) of eternity, represented by the blue of the sky which ‘motionlessly floats away’ (‘nehybně odplouvá’). The narrator first describes how a town, a canoeists’ hut, a sugar refinery and his shoes emerge from the landscape, then comments: ‘Též já se vykresluji, vyděluji se z glycerinové, pestré prázdnoty. Díky svým ostrým zrakům, díky mladým očím.’ (I also sketch myself out, I separate myself from the glycerine, multi-coloured emptiness. Thanks to my sharp eyesight, thanks to my young eyes.) This coming to self-consciousness is not, however, presented as an instant of self-discovery, in which the child begins to become aware of the physical world and of itself as an object within that world, but as an act of self-creation, a fascinated realisation of the power of imagination. Kahuda here implicitly contrasts the reader’s ‘adult’ interpretation, based on a confident belief in the reality of the physical world, with that of the child, who requires no firm, lasting definition of reality, but perceives himself as the unceasing creator and dissolver of his world.

Pelevin makes a similar contrast in *Chapaev i Pustota*, through the narrator, Pet’ka, who, as the post-Revolution Civil War rages, notices some children skating and remarks:

[...] пока идиоты взрослые заняты переустройством выдуманного им мира, дети продолжают жить в реальности — среди снежных гор и солнечного света, на черных зеркалах замерзших водоемов и в мистической тишине заснеженных ночных дворов. И хоть эти дети тоже были заражены бациллой обрушившегося на Россию безумия [...] все же в их чистых глазах еще сияла память о чем-то, уже давно забытом мной; быть может, это было неосознанное воспоминание о великом источнике всего существующего, от которого они, углубляясь в

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4 Ibid.

5 This perception of the child dates back at least to the Romanticism of Wordsworth. In *The Prelude*, Wordsworth describes the infant as ‘an inmate of this active universe. / For feeling has to him imparted power / That through the growing faculties of sense / Doth like an agent of the one great Mind / Create, creator and receiver both, / Working but in alliance with the works / Which it beholds. [...]’ (Wordsworth, W., *The Prelude* (Book II) in his Selected Poems, London, New York, 1994, p.331.)
( [...] while all the idiot adults are busy reconstructing the world they have invented, children continue to live in reality – amid the snowy hills and sunlight, on the black mirrors of frozen reservoirs and in the mystical silence of nocturnal, snow-covered yards. And although these children were also infected with the germ of madness which had attacked Russia [...] all the same the memory of something I had long forgotten still shone in their clear eyes; perhaps it was the unconscious recollection of the great source of all that exists, from which they, while going deeper into the shameful desert of life, had not yet had time to become too distanced.)^6

Whereas the children have no fear of emptiness, indicated by the images of blankness – snow, black mirrors and darkness – which surround them and are equated with reality, adults are no longer able to accept the reality of emptiness, but seek repeatedly to fill it by asserting the reality of their own inventions. In Houština, the narrator presents this behaviour as the artificial limitation of the activity of the imagination through the random designation of certain of its products as ‘real’: ‘svět představ je živá ruka. Ruka, jež si navlékla na své čírě, průzračné prsty gumové rukavice reality.’ (The world of ideas is a living hand. A hand which has drawn over its limpid, transparent fingers the rubber gloves of reality.)^7 In common with writers like Hodrová, Ivanchenko and Tolstaia, both Kahuda and Pelevin aspire in their fiction to return to the child’s way of seeing, not only as a preferred artistic position, but also as a stage towards liberating the mind from its attachment to a substantial reality.

Kahuda’s second novel, Veselá bída (Merry misery, 1997) ends with the lines:

Skrze dítě uhadnes tajemství světa. A přehlédeš ho od obzoru k obzoru. Poznáš hluché prostory na konci vesmíru. A když se probouráš skrz poslední černou hvězdu, jež trpýti se hrůzou, ocíneš se na dně, v nejhlubší roklíně své duše. A budeš stoupat k hladině, k věčné přítomnosti. Jež je tak prostá jako pomněnka na břehu potoka, jako stvoření.

(Through a child you will guess the secret of the world. And you will look it over from horizon to horizon. You will come to know the remote spaces at the end of the universe. And when you crash through the last black star, which is twinkling with horror, you will find yourself at the bottom, in the deepest crevice of your soul. And

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^6 Pelevin, V., Chapaev i Pustoša, Moscow, 1998, p.88. (Hereafter Pelevin, Chapaev.) This idealised perception of the child’s imagination contrasts with Sorokin’s depiction of the Soviet human being’s submission to external authority as infantile.

^7 Kahuda, Houština, p.241.
you will rise towards the surface, towards an eternal present, which is as simple as a forget-me-not on the bank of a stream, as simple as creation.)

In ‘Ontologiia detstva’ (The ontology of childhood), from his first publication, the collection of short stories, *Siniifonar*’ (The blue lantern, 1991), Pelevin suggests that the moment of perceiving oneself as a physical object among physical objects, like that described by Kahuda in *Houština*, marks the beginning of the end of the happy creative innocence of childhood, and the gradual absorption of the child’s mind into the adults’ world of everyday terrestrial existence:

(...) получается, что просто видеть этот мир уже означает замараться и соучастовать во всех его мерзостях – а по вечерам в тупиках коридоров и темных углах камер бывает много страшного. И вот как из зыбкого тумана забывающегося детства выплывает – как при наведении фокуса – понимание того, что ты родился и вырос в тюрьме, в самом грязном и воючем углу мира. И когда ты окончательно понимаешь это, на тебя начинают в полной мере распространяться законы твоей тюрьмы.

(... it turns out that just by seeing this world one becomes sullied and participates in all its abominations – and in the evenings in the dead-ends of corridors and dark corners of cells there are many terrifying things. And just like that - like a magic trick - from the shifting mists of a childhood which is being forgotten emerges the comprehension that you were born and grew up in prison, in the filthiest, most stinking corner of the world. And when you finally grasp this, the rules of your prison begin to absorb you totally.)

In his second novel, *Zhizn’ nasekomykh* (The life of insects, 1993), the title of which is taken from Josef and Karel Čapek’s play *Ze života hmyzu* (From the life of insects, 1921), Pelevin with an uncharacteristic lack of originality compares this existence to that of insects. In the chapter entitled ‘Initiatsiia’ (Initiation), a young dung-beetle’s curiosity and imagination is steadily eradicated by his ‘slightly threatening’ father, who teaches him that the meaning of life is to push his gradually expanding ball of dung – his ‘Ia’ (*Ich*) – along in front of him. Whereas in the Čapeks’ play, the dung-beetle represents those human beings who devote their lives to material accumulation,

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9 *Siniifonar*’ was awarded the Little Booker Prize in 1994.
11 In *Kukly*, Hodrová uses the life-cycle of the insect as a metaphor for the constant metamorphoses of the self, and therefore the fleeting, illusory nature of any identity and the constant intermediacy of
in his chapter Pelevin turns that material accumulation into a metaphor for the notion that the human being should ‘make something of himself’, equating the resultant ‘self’ with a ball of dung. Rodnianskaia describes what happens to the dung-beetle as the ‘socialisation of the personality’, whereby the young dung-beetle learns to identify his self with a discrete physical object which, in accordance with the laws of physics, must follow a single specific path, thus permitting the continued smooth running of society. By the time the father has been trodden on, an indication from the implied authorial perspective of the actual ephemerality and expendability of the physically conceived self, the young dung-beetle’s training is complete, as his utterly clichéd eulogy over his father’s corpse demonstrates: ‘Ia vyrastu bol’shi, zhenius’, u menia budut deti, i Ia nauchu ikh vsemu, chemu menia nauchil papa. I Ia budu s nimi takim zhe dobrym, kakim on byl so mnoi, a kogda Ia stanu starym, oni budut obo mne zabit’sia, i vse my prozhivem dolguiu schastlivuiu zhizn’.’ (I’ll grow up big, I’ll get married, I’ll have children, and I’ll teach them everything my dad taught me. And I’ll be as kind to them as he was to me, and when I get old, they will take care of me and we’ll all live a long and happy life.)

The dung-beetle’s accumulation of self may be compared to Kahuda’s implicit perception of the conventional nature of autobiography-writing in Houština. Houština itself is implicitly autobiographical, describing the narrator’s life from early childhood in the late 1960s until the mid-1990s, but constitutes a reaction to the dominance of autobiography and overtly autobiographical fiction appearing in Czech literature in the 1990s. The sheer size of Houština – five hundred pages – mocks the ‘physicality’ of autobiographical writing, in which the experiences related steadily amount to a self, represented by the volume itself. In the novel, Kahuda uses autobiographical writing not to show the self which he has become, but in an attempt to rid the mind of the very notion of the self. Vladimir Novotný describes the novel as an ‘anti-
Erziehungsroman, an anti-novel of coming of age’. Like Pelevin, Kahuda perceives

human existence. In contrast, Pelevin focuses on the inevitability of this life-cycle as a metaphor for imprisonment in physical form.

13 Pelevin, V., ‘Zhizn’ nasekomykh’ in his Zhizn nasekomykh, Moscow, 1998, p.184. (Hereafter Pelevin, ‘Zhizn’.) (This edition also contains the novel ‘Omon Ra’.) ‘Ia’ is not only capitalised, but also written ‘Ha’ rather than ‘I’. This defamiliarisation satirises its mystical, quasi-religious significance to the dung-beetles and therefore, implicitly, to contemporary society.
14 Novotný, V., ‘Zdali nám bude dáno světlo v houstinách’, Tvar, 3, 2000, p.5. (Hereafter Novotný, ‘Zdali.’) This issue of Tvar contained seven reviews of the novel, others of which are cited below.
the imposition of the notion of the individual self by adults on children as an attempt to assert the civilisability of the human being; this merely serves to intensify homogeneity and encourage herd behaviour. In *Houšina*, the narrator comments of adults:

[... ] sami nevyrovnaní, nečekaně propadající výkyvům v pocitech, zatěžují slabé nezkušené dítě, aby žilo a řešilo tu závislost rodičů na své osobě. Aby neslo tíži jejich vylekaných instinktů. Dobře vědouc, že jeho živitelé ho vidi, ne jaký opravdu je, ale milují ten obraz, tu představu, kde se zrcadlí zdeformovaný obraz jejich světa, toho, co mají rádi, obraz jejich samých. Běda, když mládě odmítne hrát na kojence, hoštka a posléze jinocha.

([... ] themselves unbalanced, unexpectedly giving way to fluctuations in feelings, they burden the weak, inexperienced child so that it will live and fulfil this dependency of its parents on its person. So that it can bear the burden of their terrified instincts, well knowing that its guardians see it not as it really is, but love that picture, that image in which the deformed picture of their world is mirrored, of the one that they love, their image of themselves. Woe betide the offspring which refuses to play the nurseling, the little fellow and ultimately the young man.)

The narrator of *Houšina*, rejects the assertion, implicit in the notion of the individual self, that the physical individuation of the human being is matched by psychological individuation, declaring: ‘Co mám společného s tím masem? A co ty myšlenky? Jak si jen může to prochává vědomí, jež se ve vteřině rozfoukne do ztracená, jak si jen může říkat já? Ta hromada vzpomínek na tělo [...] Kde se vzala ta nesmírná pýcha a slepot až může nazývat já?’ (What do I have in common with this flesh? And what about these thoughts? How on earth can this fleeting consciousness which will be blown away into oblivion in a second, how on earth can it calls itself ‘I’? This pile of memories of a body [...] Where did this enormous arrogance and blindness that it can call itself ‘I’ come from?)

Throughout his fiction, in an altogether more aggressive way than Pelevin’s insect metaphors, Kahuda contrasts the activity of the mind with that of the body, which is shown to behave like a herd animal, in the thrall of biological functions and instincts; that is reflected in his

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16 Ibid., p.233. Kahuda appears in this passage to paraphrase David Hume, who writes: ‘I may venture to affirm to the rest of mankind that they are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement. [...] What then gives us so great a propension to ascribe an identity to these successive perceptions, and to suppose ourselves possest of an invariable and uninterrupted existence thro’ the whole course of our lives?’ (Hume, D., *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Oxford, 1978, pp.252-53.)
anatomical depictions of urination, defecation, masturbation, vaginal and anal penetration and ejaculation. In his first published work, the very short novel, Příběh o baziliškově (A story about a basilisk, 1992, dated as written 1988), Kahuda implicitly associates the veneration of the physical, equated in the story with filth and stench, with Marxism-Leninism, which engenders a homogeneous collective of deformed, sexually perverted physical selves. This is comparable to Sorokin’s depiction of Soviet human beings eating faeces and committing ritualistic acts of violence in works like Norma and ‘Pervyi subbotnik’. Kahuda’s story describes the life of Slezák, a retired guard from the Communist prison camp in Jáchymov who keeps a basilisk, repeatedly associated with the Devil, as a pet. Slezák is utterly beholden to the intense and exclusively physical experience of existence enjoyed by the basilisk, ultimately participating in sado-masochistic sexual intercourse with an apparently consenting youth. The first of several Kahuda characters to derive sexual pleasure from observing women defecating, Slezák is permitted to watch a certain Dr Eva defecate in return for fresh faeces, which Dr Eva hungrily devours. Dr Eva, perhaps the victim of a stroke, can only smile with one side of her face, an indication of the distorted and reduced nature of her existence.

In Příběh o baziliškově, Kahuda attempts to arouse the implied reader’s disgust for the ordinary, rank-and-file collaborator, whose perversion reflects the nature and effects of the autocratic regime in which he has become embedded. In the later novels Veselá bída and Houština, however, he departs from the conventional demonising of Marxism-Leninism in post-1989 Czech fiction, including that written by fellow members of the 1980s underground generation like Placák and Topol, implicitly

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17 In Exhumace (Exhumation, 1998), a collection of short fiction, much of it written in the 1980s, Kahuda does not, however, link this behaviour explicitly with the regime, looking forward to the more general rejection of physical existence, particularly in Houština, in which many episodes from the stories in Exhumace are re-used.

18 Slezák may be compared to Topol’s sarcastic reference in Sestra to the aggregate Czech as ‘Josef Vissarionovich Švejk’. He also somewhat recalls the central character, Zderad, another Czech everyman, in the novel Mrchopěvec (Toronto 1984, Prague 1990) by the émigré writer Jan Křesadlo (1926-1995). (The novel was published in an English translation by Křesadlo’s son in 1998 under the title Gravelarks, which does not do justice to the provocative effect of its Czech title, somewhat comparable to Sorokin’s Goluboe salo in Russian. The neologism mrchopěvec refers sarcastically to Zderad’s work, singing at funerals, since mrcha may mean ‘carrion’ or ‘worn-out nag’, but also evokes mrchozravec, meaning ‘scavenger’, and therefore necrophagy. At the same time, mrcha is also a common insult equivalent to ‘bastard’ or ‘bitch.’) Zderad consents to lick the anus of a Communist official whenever required to evade imprisonment for writing an anti-Stalin poem at school. His name, meaning ‘happy here’, indicates his complete submission not only to the regime, but also to terrestrial
presenting it as merely a stage in a process which began with the Czech national idea and continued with Masaryk’s liberal individualism, for which Kahuda reserves his strongest satire. The latest manifestation of this assertion of the individual self is political correctness. The narrator comments: ‘Míra humanity a potřeba ohleduplnosti k spoluobčanům dosáhla takové míry, že když se stane havárie, pouliční bouračka nebo jiná tragédie, jako první přijíždí na místo etická služba. Obklopi místo nehody neprůhlednou bariérou.’ (The level of humanity and the need to be caring towards fellow-citizens has reached such a degree that when an accident, a car accident or some other tragedy happens, the ethics service are the first on the scene. They surround the site of the accident with an opaque barrier.) Whereas in works like Topol’s Sestra, Brabcová’s Zlodějina, Hrabal’s ‘Listopadový uragán’ (The November hurricane, 1990) and Kobova garáž (Koba’s garage, 1992) by Zdeněk Zapletal (b.1951), the events of November 1989 are presented as a sudden, disorientating, liberating change, in Houština, they apparently have no impact on the narrator and thus are not mentioned at all.

The rapturous reception which Russian critics accorded Pelevin’s early works, especially his first novel, ‘Omon Ra’ (1992), was above all motivated by a perceived change in the treatment of the Soviet experience from that found in Conceptualism, which for many indicated decisively the transition to a genuinely post-Soviet period. In a review of new fiction in 1992 which betrayed the widespread critical weariness with the Conceptualists, Sergei Kostyrko argued: ‘Sots-art and postmodernism will appear to be independent, original trends until an artist is found who is capable of exploiting the material opened up by them precisely as material,’ before suggesting that Pelevin was just that artist. In Kostyrko’s view, which echoes Boris Groys’s decision to include the Conceptualists within his analysis of the ‘total art of Stalinism’, Conceptualist art could not be separated from the Soviet art and ideology

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19 In the final chapter the narrator refers to Masaryk as ‘Tuchcáč Žarig Masorád’, equating him with a forever pissing, meat-loving dog, and describes him as a ‘totem of banality’ (‘totem všednosti’) and, in another insect metaphor, a ‘beetle of hopes’ (‘chrobák nadějí’). (Kahuda, Houština, pp.412 and 419.)

20 Ibid., p.409. Pelevin similarly mocks the hypocrisy of the contemporary proclamation of justice in Zhizn’ nasekomykh, when the blood-sucking American mosquito-businessman, on hearing from the young Russian ant-girl with whom he has just slept about the horrors of crop-spraying, points out that at least she has ‘insect rights’ now. (See Pelevin, ‘Zhizn’, p.290.)

it sought to deconstruct. In contrast, Pelevin, though working with the same cultural context, had moved away from pure opposition to explore ‘metaphysical, eternal’ problems. Writing in 1995, following the publication of Zhizn’ nasekomykh, Genis concurred: ‘Pelevin does not destroy; he builds. Using the same fragments of the Soviet myth as Sorokin, he constructs both subject-matter and concepts’.  

In contrast to Sorokin’s first novels and short stories, written in the early 1980s, in ‘Omon Ra’, the Soviet system has lost its potency and becomes, like the deposed king in Bakhtin’s account of the medieval carnival, a figure of fun.  

Whereas writers like Hodrová and Kratochvil self-consciously and explicitly borrow Bakhtin’s notion of carnivalisation as a literary technique, Pelevin’s work resonates with the popular mood of liberation that infused intellectuals at the time of writing. In Rabelais and His World, Bakhtin writes that carnival feasts were ‘linked to moments of crisis, of breaking points in the cycle of nature or in the life of society and man. Moments of death and revival, of change and renewal always led to a festive perception of the world’. Writers like Sorokin and Prigov correspond, in effect, to Bakhtin’s description of the ‘satirist whose laughter is negative’, who ‘places himself above the object of his mockery; he is opposed to it. The wholeness of the world’s comic aspect is destroyed, and what appears comic becomes a private reaction.’  

In contrast, according to Sergei Chuprinin, Pelevin’s burlesquing of Soviet and post-Soviet reality ‘left no one feeling offended’, thus in effect reflecting Bakhtin’s assertion that ‘carnival laughter is the laughter of all the people […] it is universal in scope; it is directed at all and everyone, including the carnival’s participants. The entire world is seen in its droll aspect […] this laughter is ambivalent; it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives’.

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23 In this respect, ‘Omon Ra’ has more in common with the satirisation of the Soviet system in works like Voinovich’s Zhizn’ i neobychnye prikliuchenia soldata Ivana Chonkina than Conceptualist satire.  


Hereafter Bakhtin, Rabelais.  

25 Ibid., p.12.  

The universality of Pelevin’s laughter was reflected in his instant commercial success, which for many critics represented a final break with Soviet literary culture. Writing in 1993 on the problems facing literature with the introduction of market forces, Sergei Chuprinin identified Pelevin as the type of writer likely to survive in these new circumstances because of his ability to overcome the distinction between élite and popular culture, to win commercial success at the same time as critical acclaim and therefore, in Fiedler’s terms, ‘cross the border, close the gap’. In Chuprinin’s view, while the ‘postmodernists, Conceptualists and other “-ists”’ had followed a path to academic élitism, through Pelevin ‘the zone of artistic risk and of shocking innovation has moved closer to the line which divides (connects?) high art and the mass-market books which our critics loathe’. In effect, rather like Pišt’ anek in Slovakia, who ‘crossed the border and closed the gap’ in post-Changes literature there slightly earlier, Pelevin’s work became synonymous with the explosion of the market economy in 1990s Russia, and enormously popular with its actual and potential beneficiaries – the so-called ‘new Russians’ and the young – despite the fact that, particularly after ‘Omon Ra’, the central target of his satire, like Pišt’ anek’s, is precisely the amoral barbarism of the new consumer society.

In ‘Omon Ra’, Pelevin, rather like Kahuda, presents the Soviet system as a symptom rather than the cause of the belief in the identity of the self with the body. In the model of self-realisation that flows from this belief, the mind, in imitation of the body, must find and submit to a single direction forward, which at one point, for a great many people, proved to be the Soviet direction. Early in ‘Omon Ra’, the narrator and central character, Omon, articulates this understanding of the purpose of

27 Bakhtin, Rabelais, p.11.
28 Chuprinin, ‘Sbyvsheesia’, p.182. Nowhere was this shift more apparent than in the success of Chapaev i Pustota, which briefly returned the sales of the journal Znamia to glasnost’-period levels when it was published there in successive issues in 1996. Viacheslav Kuritsyn describes 1996 as the ‘year of the birth of the new Russia’, when, after several false starts, Russia voted decisively against Communism and proved it could survive while the President was seriously ill. (Kuritsyn, V., ‘Gruppa prodllennogo dnia’ in Pelevin, V., Zhizn’ nasekomykh, Moscow, 1997, p.12.) The national mood appeared to be reflected not only in the enthusiastic reception of Pelevin’s novel, but also in the extravagantly self-confident length and breadth of the novel itself. Kuritsyn identified Pelevin’s readers as ‘those whom we don’t have, but whom we need, the middle-class, rumours of whose existence are gradually beginning to be proven true, the layer which affords a society stability’. (Ibid., p.8.) Nikolai Aleksandrov, who himself found the work flawed, nevertheless described the novel as the ‘undoubted literary event of the year’. (Aleksandrov, N.D., ‘Novaia eklektika’, Literaturne obozrenie, 1997, 3, p.27. Hereafter Aleksandrov, ‘Novaia’.) The much-criticised failure of the 1997 Russian Booker Prize jury to short-list the novel, however, indicated the enduring resistance of Russia’s mainstream literary intelligentsia to any hints of commercialism.
life when he comments: 'v rannem detstve (kak, byt' mozhet, i posle smerti) chelovek idet srazu vo vse storony, poetomu mozhno schitat', chto ego eshche net; lichnost' voznikaet pozrze, kogda poiavlaetsia priviazannost' k kakomu-to odnomu napravleniu.' (In early childhood (as, perhaps, also after death), a human being moves in all directions at once, therefore one may consider that he does not yet exist; the personality emerges later, when an attachment to one single direction appears.)

This prescriptive notion of the development of the self is first encapsulated in Omon's name, in which 'om', the 'basic sound of the universe' in the Vedas, becomes 'on' ('he'), the concrete, individuated self, and, second, exemplified by the Socialist Realist Bildungsroman structure which Pelevin parodies in the work.

Omon devotes his life to becoming a Soviet cosmonaut, training for a mission to plant a radio beacon on the moon, after which he is supposed to shoot himself, because the Soviet Union cannot spare the fuel for his return journey. His discovery of his 'single direction' is indicated by the red line drawn on the map of the Moon to show the route of his moon-mobile. During a demonstration, however, a model of the moon-mobile rolls along the line, off the table and on to the floor, recalling the objections made when Columbus suggested the world was round. Pelevin here inverts the situation, poking fun at those who believe in the Bildungsroman model of existence by implicitly equating them with those who claimed the world was flat. Like the journey of the model moon-mobile, Omon's path to glorious self-realisation ends bathetically when his revolver malfunctions, a metaphor for the collapsing Soviet military-industrial complex, and he is torn out of the Socialist Realist fairytale and plunged, with the reader, into a Western science-fiction thriller, perhaps a metaphor for the sudden and chaotic westernisation of the late Soviet period. Utterly disorientated, Omon is pursued across the Moon by people trying to kill him, before

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30 Harvey, P., An Introduction to Buddhism, Cambridge, 1990, p.136. The desire to return to the 'basic sound of the universe' recalls Ajvaz's 'Koncert', in which the organist moves from a multitude of notes to a single note which apparently 'contains all other sounds' and therefore corresponds in effect to the Vedic 'om'. In contemporary Czech fiction, Ajvaz's writing exhibits the most serious leanings towards Oriental philosophy.
31 The explanation given for Omon's unusual name is that his father hoped that he would have a successful career in the police. (OMON is the acronym for the Soviet (and post-Soviet) Special Branch.) This satirisation of the use of naming to assist the assimilation of children is discussed further below.
32 This sudden eruption of chaos may be compared to the 'explosion of time' which represents November 1989 in Topol's Sestra and motivates the disorientating narrative style of that work.
finally escaping into what turns out to be the Lenin Library Metro station. Even then, however, Omon does not fully realise that the Soviet space programme appears to have taken place entirely in a disused Metro tunnel. In the final lines of the novel, he continues to think of himself in terms of a physical object. Standing in the Metro train, he comments: ‘ia podnial glaza na shemnu marshrutov, visiashchuiu na stene riadom so stop-kranom, i stal smotret’, gde imenno na krasnoi linii ia nakhozhus’. (I raised my eyes to the route-plan hanging on the wall beside the emergency-brake button, and began trying to see where exactly on the red line I was.)

In parodie imitation of Socialist Realist fiction, Pelevin dedicates the novel to the ‘Heroes of the Soviet Cosmos’. In the context of the conclusion, the dedication appears to refer not to the cosmonauts, who may not even have existed, but to all those who submitted their lives in the Soviet-ordered world, particularly those, like Omon, the implied author and reader, who by luck rather than by design managed to survive. Writing on the mass heroisation of the Soviet people under Lenin and especially Stalin, Rosalind Sartorti comments: ‘heroic behaviour had become a “civic duty”, not only for the few but for everybody. It was transformed into an “innate” characteristic of Soviets, as pronounced by official Soviet discourse.’ Parodying the allegorical function of the Socialist Realist plot, in which the hero’s rite of passage conventionally stood for the progress of the nation towards the Marxist-Leninist ideal, Pelevin uses Omon as a metaphor for the Soviet people, presented not as helpless victims of tyranny, but, as in Sorokin’s fiction, as participants in an act of collective self-delusion from which they have had a lucky escape. Omon reveals little of the ‘spontaneity’ supposed to mark out the Socialist Realist hero. On the contrary, unlike his clever, inquisitive and sceptical friend Mitek, who ‘disappears’ following a ‘reincarnation examination’ which suggests that he had been a subversive element in each of his many former lives, Omon resembles Voltaire’s Candide, dogged,

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35 Katerina Clark writes: ‘In Socialist Realist fiction, the Soviet “divine plan of salvation,” or Marxist-Leninist account of History, is condensed by means of highly codified conventions and told as a tale. This tale is of a questing hero who sets out in search of “consciousness”. […] On the one hand, he has before him a task from the public sphere. […] But his second, and more important, goal is to resolve within himself the tension between “spontaneity” and “consciousness”. Since the public and private goals are fused, the hero’s personal resolution becomes a historical allegory’. (Clark, K., The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual, Chicago, London, 1981, p.162. Hereafter Clark, Soviet.)
obedient, passive and incorrigibly naive. Early in the novel, an old man tells how he and his sado-masochistically named son, Marat, used to impersonate bears when leading Soviet and foreign dignitaries went hunting, until one day Kissinger stabbed Marat, who bled to death because his father, to sustain the pretence, could not go to his aid. Later, as he prepares to shoot himself, Omon is frustrated that all he can think of is Marat, unable to grasp that their fates, as men willing to sacrifice their lives to the deception of Soviet reality, are identical: 'Ia [...] popytalsia vspomnit' glavnoe v svoem nedolgom sushchestvovanii, no v golovu ne prishlo nichego, krome istorii Marata [...] Mne pokazalos' nelepym i obidnym, chto ia umru s etoi mysliu, ne imeiushchei ko mne nikakogo otnosheniia.' (I [...] tried to remember the most important thing in my short existence, but nothing came into my head except the story of Marat [...] it seemed awkward and offensive that I should die with this thought, which had nothing whatsoever to do with me.)

This episode exemplifies how Pelevin, in contrast to Sorokin, tempers his criticism with a certain implied authorial sympathy, and indeed empathy with 'those who were deceived and deceived themselves.' The shared sense of relief permits the grim absurdity of the Soviet period to become comic in Pelevin’s work. The implied author’s sympathy even extends to those knowingly engaged in perpetuating the illusion, like Omon’s military instructors Urchagin and Burchagin, who, instead of guiding Omon to ‘consciousness’ of the truth of Marxism-Leninism, repeatedly expose its disintegration. Sergei

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36 Popov also characterises the implied reader as Candide-like in the epigraph to Dusha patriota. Omon may also be compared to Ditě, the central character in Hrabal’s Obsluhoval jsem anglického krále, whose name means ‘child’. Hrabal uses Ditě’s increasingly absurd, amoral pursuit of social status as a satirical metaphor for the Czechs’ adaptability in order to survive.

37 The reference to Kissinger reflects a recurrent anti-Western attitude in the ‘fiction of the Changes’, which distinguishes it from other implicitly or explicitly anti-regime fiction in the late Communist and early post-Communist period. Pelevin suggests that Kissinger knew the bear was not real, and by stabbing it, indicated that he had seen through the Soviet illusion.

38 Pelevin, ‘Omon’, p.139. Omon’s reaction recalls that of Dostoevskii’s Makar Devushkin in Bednye liudi (Poor folk, 1846), who is unable to recognise himself in the character of Akakii Akakievich in ‘Shinel’ (The overcoat, 1842) by Nikolai Gogol’ (1809-52).

39 Rodnianskaia, ‘Bezumnaia’, p.215. Pelevin appears for the first time to break with his readers, becoming more of a ‘satirist whose laughter is negative’, in his fourth novel, Generation P (1999), his least successful with both critics and readers. On the one hand, the work expresses disillusion and despair, and thus perhaps once again reflects the national mood, but on the other it is permeated by implied authorial frustration at the unhinging adoption of Western capitalism and media manipulation in Russia and perhaps even at the failure of readers to heed his earlier assertions about the dangers of becoming imprisoned in a manufactured reality.

40 The instructors’ names recall that of Pavel Korchagin, the hero of the Socialist Realist classic, Kak zakalilas’ stal (How the steel was tempered, 1934) by Nikolai Ostrovskii (1904-36). However, taken together they also evoke the slapstick characters Bobchinskii and Dobchinskii in Gogol’s Revisor (The Inspector General, 1836), whose mistaken assertion that Khlestakov is the Inspector General sets the farce in motion.
Kostyrko writes: ‘We may speak here of the tragedy of people convinced of the impossibility of embodying their idea in reality and presenting society not with life, but with its TV version, a theatre of shadows’.  

Throughout ‘Omon Ra’, Pelevin characterises the effects of committing oneself to the ‘Soviet Cosmos’ as the replacement of the natural with the artificial. As Nikolai Shneidmann points out, the key intertextual reference in the novel is the best-selling hagiographic account of the Second World War pilot, Aleksei Mares’ev, Povest’ o nastoiashchem cheloveke (The story of a real man, 1946) by Boris Polevoi (1908-81), which was made into a hugely popular film in 1948. Sartorti describes how Mares’ev, a Soviet counterpart to Douglas Bader, survived being shot down by the Germans and crawled back to Soviet territory, where he was given artificial limbs which enabled him to take to the skies again. In ‘Omon Ra’, at the flying school named after Mares’ev, the new recruits are made into ‘real men’ by having their legs cut off and replaced with artificial limbs. This physical violence is equated with the attempts of ordinary people to adapt their children to the ‘new world’ by inventing names from Soviet phenomena, typified by the unfortunate Squadron Leader Pkhadzer Vladilenovich Pidorenko. Omon later adds the epithet Ra to evoke Amun-Ra, the Egyptian god with the falcon’s head, in an attempt to associate himself with the polar airmen, who were known as ‘Stalin’s Falcons’. The words of their anthem, ‘Vse vyshe’ (Ever Higher) - ‘Reason gave us steel wings for arms / And in the place of a heart they gave us a fiery motor’ typify the confusion of the symbolic and the material in Stalinism, satirically imitated by Pelevin in the novel.

41 Kostyrko, ‘Chistoe’, p.257.
44 Pidorenko, who apparently could do nothing about his surname, which suggests ‘pederast’, acquired his first name from the acronym of ‘Party Economic Activists of the Dzerzhinski District’, while his father’s name, genuinely used in the Soviet period, is a contraction of Vladimir I. Lenin. Moreover, the reader is told, taken together Pkhadzer and Vladilen have fifteen letters in Russian, corresponding to the number of Soviet republics.
45 For a discussion of the feats of the polar airmen, their leading role in the creation of Stalinist culture and the popular reaction to them, see McCannon, J., ‘Positive Heroes at the Pole: Celebrity Status, Socialist Realist Ideals and the Soviet Myth of the Arctic, 1932-1939’, Russian Review, 56, 1997, 3, pp.346-65. Omon’s Soviet dictionary condescendingly notes that the ancient Egyptians created the ‘poetic myth’ of Amun-Ra because they did not have the scientific knowledge to determine that the Earth orbits the Sun. On the one hand, the implied author here satirically assumes the condescending position with regard to the ‘poetic myth’ of Marxism-Leninism. On the other, through Omon, he suggests a subconscious yearning for other ‘ways of seeing’, effaced by the ‘Soviet cosmos’.
46 Quoted in Clark, Soviet, p.138.
Pelevin's presentation of the Soviet experiment as an attempt to reincarnate the physical through words recalls the vain attempts by Tolstaiia's characters in her 1980s stories to escape the bleak mundanity of daily life by imposing a brighter, invented alternative, an activity which implicitly refers to the aspirations of Soviet myth-making. The outcome, however, is the artificial ugliness of Denisov's monument or Pkhadzer's name. At the beginning of 'Omon Ra', Omon indicates that his desire to go into space is motivated by a desire to escape the oppressive homogeneity of terrestrial existence:

[…] я понял раз и на всю жизнь, что подлинную свободу человеку может дать только невесомость – поэтому, кстати, такую скучу вызывали у меня всю жизнь западные радиоголосы и сочинения разных солженицыных; в душе я, конечно, испытывал омерзение к государству, грозные требования которого заставляли любую, даже на несколько секунд возникающую группу людей старательно подражать самому похабному из членов, - но, поняв, что мира, и свободы на земле не достичь, духом я устремился ввысь […]

([…] I understood once and for all that only weightlessness could give a human being genuine freedom – that's why, incidentally, throughout my life Western radio voices and the works of various Solzhenitsyns aroused such boredom in me. In my soul I, of course, felt loathing for a state whose threatening demands forced any group, even if it only formed for a few seconds, to imitate assiduously the most obscene of its members, but realising that peace and freedom could not be achieved on Earth, I aspired in spirit to the heavens.⁴⁷

In Pelevin's subsequent works, this yearning upwards marks out those destined for enlightenment, like Dima, the moth seeking the light in Zhizn' nasekomykh, and Pet'ka, the Symbolist poet in Chapaev i Pustota. Omon's error is to believe that the physical can be reincarnated, that the ideal can be realised in the physical world. At the end of the novel, he finds himself sitting next to an old woman with her shopping, which Kostyrko describes as a ‘symbol of the fatal immobility and unchanging nature of the byt of Soviet human beings’.⁴⁸ The transformation of Omon's linear journey into a circle recalls Erofeev's Moskva-Petushki, the work with which this dissertation

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⁴⁷ Pelevin, 'Omon', p.27.
⁴⁸ Kostyrko, 'Chistoe', p.257. The image of the old woman as a symbol of the ugliness and transience of physical existence recurs in Pelevin's writing. In 'Khrustal'nyi mir' (The crystal world), the last story in Sinii fonar', Pelevin indicates that, in his view, Marxism-Leninism limits the human being to this existence by depicting Lenin disguised as an old woman.
began, except that where Venichka's journey is implicitly that of the Russian intellectual through history, Omon's is that of the masses. The fact that Omon's journey, unlike Venichka's, does not end in death, however, suggests a more optimistic mood in 1992 than in 1969. For Pelevin, as the cautionary nature of 'Omon Ra' indicates, the disintegration of the 'Soviet cosmos' offers the post-Soviet everyman the chance not to enthrone a new cosmos, but to free himself from his absorption in the physical once and for all.

Pelevin's subsequent fiction, set in the early post-Soviet period, suggests, however, that those who have survived the 'Soviet cosmos', while no longer having any ambitions to reincarnate the flesh, have instead embedded themselves in a way of life utterly subordinate to the limits and needs of the body. In her discussion of early post-Soviet literary conditions, Ivanova argues that Pelevin's writing typically reflects the 'triumph of the ideology of consumption, which corresponds to the biological nature of the human being (unlike all other ideologies)').⁴⁹ Whereas in 'Omon Ra', like Tolstaiia in her 1980s fiction, Pelevin satirises people's attempts to impose grandiose inventions on bleak reality, in his later fiction he mocks their lack of imagination. In the short novel 'Zheltaia strela' (The yellow arrow, 1992), Pelevin depicts post-Soviet Russia as a train hurtling inexorably towards a ruined bridge, a more disillusioned interpretation of Gogol's image in Mertvye dushi (Dead Souls, 1842) of Russia as a troika rushing forward, not fully certain of its direction but nevertheless charged with a mission. As Gerald McCausland points out, Pelevin only gradually makes the reader aware that the action of the work is taking place on a train, thus indicating that the people on board have become so embedded in this existence that they appear no longer aware that they are on a train, and equate leaving the train with death.⁵⁰ In this work, Pelevin explicitly distances himself from the Conceptualists through the character of the postmodernist painter, Anton. According

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⁴⁹ Ivanova, N., 'Peizazh posle bitvy', Znamia, 9, 1993, p.192. Rather as Kahuda places Marxism-Leninism on a continuum of 'official morality', in Chapaev i Pustota, one of the patients undergoing psychiatric treatment with Pet'ka blames both Marxism-Leninism and market economics on Aristotle, whom he perceives as the father of materialism. Pelevin indicates his own scepticism regarding Aristotle's theory of substance when, in the ensuing quarrel, Pet'ka is struck on the head by the bust of Aristotle which they have been painting. The bust turns out to be hollow, and Pet'ka reflects how much worse it would have been if the bust had been of Plato.

to the central character, Andrei, Anton’s work has become repetitious and therefore descended into kitsch. Anton, however, responds: ‘Est’ zhizn’ i est’ tam iskusstvo, tvorchestvo. Sots-art tam, kontseptualizm tam. Modern tam, postmodern tam. Ia ikh uzh davno s zhizn’iu ne putaiu. U menia zhena, rebenok skoro budet – vot eto, Andrei, vsere’ez.’ (There’s life and on the other hand there’s art, creation. Sots-art, Conceptualism, the modern, the postmodern. I stopped confusing them with life a long time ago. I’ve got a wife, a child on the way; that’s what’s serious, Andrei.)

Having exposed the complicity of art in Soviet oppression, Pelevin suggests, the Conceptualists appear happy now to co-opt art into consumerism, the new form of oppression, in order to make a living. In their hands, art has lost its capacity to express the spiritual dimension of existence; Pelevin asserts his intention to restore this through his account of Andrei’s passage from the train into Nirvana at the end of the work.

In her review of Zhizn’ nasekomykh, Rodnianskaia suggests that the secondary characters embody various ways of life adopted in the post-Soviet period to give life meaning, including business, home-building, prostitution and recreational drug use. All reflect the chaos of the Changes and represent individual attempts to find a refuge from that chaos. This creation of an illusion of ordered existence in an attempt to block out chaos is also satirised by Balla in his first collection of short stories, Leptokária (1996). However, here Balla refers not to the socio-political chaos prompted by the sudden absence of an officially-approved way of life, as in Pelevin, but the ever-present chaos of desire. Whereas in Houština, Kahuda associates attempts to deny or eradicate this desire with the imposition of an officially ordained notion of reality, Balla portrays such attempts as a private activity, in essence an act of self-denial. For example, in “Úzkost” (Anxiety), the central character’s life possesses a comforting rhythm through his regular seduction and abandonment of women, until one day he suddenly falls in love and is himself rejected. While wandering drunk in the countryside, he discovers a shed containing a mass of bleeding human limbs and penises, intertwined as though in the form of a hideous creature, the embodiment of the turmoil which has suddenly been exposed within him.

51 Pelevin, V., ‘Zheltaia strela’ in Zheltaia strela, Moscow, 1998, p.46. This volume also contains fourteen short stories taken from Sinii fonar’ and seven others.
The creature recalls Ovid’s description of Chaos at the beginning of *The Metamorphoses*: ‘a shapeless, uncoordinated mass, nothing but a weight of lifeless matter, whose ill-assorted elements were indiscriminately heaped together in one place.’\(^3\) Apparently unable to bear this vision, the drunken protagonist sobers up and reverts to his former life-style. At the end of the story, having once again erased desire from his life, he cannot comprehend the jealousy of the husband of one of his conquests, who sticks a pitch-fork in his unfaithful wife’s back.\(^4\)

In ‘Jaskyňa’ (The cave), Baša suggests that to try to blunt the pain of desire is to seek to reduce the experience of living.\(^5\) The story describes how a group of students travelling in the countryside hear of a secret cave which the locals believe has the power to ease the pain of living. One villager comments: ‘viem, že jaskyňa v skutočnosti iba otupuje. Lenže...lenže aj za takúto úľavu sme vdáční! Choroby ostali, to hej, lebo choroby sú kdesi velmi hlubo, ale už neboliá.’ (I know that the cave in fact just dulls the pain. Except...except even for that kind of relief we’re grateful! The diseases have remained, true enough, for the diseases are somewhere very deep, but they don’t hurt any more.)\(^6\) Those who visit the cave return with one finger missing, a reference to Tolstoi’s short story ‘Otets Sergii’ (Father Sergii, 1911), in which a hermit priest cuts off his finger to force himself to forget his desire for a woman. Unlike Tolstoi, however, Balla, who appears as an actant in the tale, finds nothing admirable in this self-mutilation, and alone of his companions refuses to visit the cave. On the one hand, his refusal to relinquish desire may be seen to do him no

\(^{32}\) Pelevin further asserts his perception of the uselessness of postmodernist artists by portraying them in *Zhizn' nasekomykh* as drug-addled hemp bugs who combust in an American’s spliff.  
\(^{34}\) The man’s incapacity for real emotion recalls Páral’s portrayal in his novels of men in technological, consumerist society, who have tailored their desires exactly to those which that society can satisfy. In his second novel, *Veletrh splněných prání* (Trade-fair of desires fulfilled, 1967), the central character, who exemplifies this type, cannot cope with falling in love with a young woman, ultimately raping her to death in order to restore his former routine.  
\(^{35}\) The pain of desire described by Baša may be compared with Hodrová’s notion of *tryžeh* in her trilogy, an unceasing longing to escape intermediacy which is inseparable from human existence. In *Kukly*, Mr Turek comments that only some people experience life as metamorphosis. Mr Turek does not wish to say whether this is good or bad for them, but remarks: ‘Jisté je, že jim okamžik proměny působí tryžeh, bolest hranicí se slasti, kterou ti druži neznají.’ (It is certain that the instant of metamorphosis causes them agony, a pain bordering on pleasure, which those others do not know.) (Hodrová, *Tryživé*, p.267.) Those who manage to shield themselves from this experience appear in *Kukly*, as in *Podoboji*, to be those most firmly embedded in day-to-day material existence, like the caretaker of the block of flats or the shopkeeper.  
good, because the object of his desire, Andrea, does visit the cave, and on her return, one finger short, she rejects his clumsy advances, apparently because she regards him as evil.\(^57\) On the other, however, he may have attempted to seduce her only because he knew she would refuse. Just as the narrator of the title story comments: ‘Príbeh, ktorý nie je nemožný, je triviálny’ (A story which is not impossible is trivial),\(^58\) asserting the need for the story not to preserve but to disrupt the existing order, so Balla is interested only in desire which is impossible, which cannot be satisfied, because such desire constitutes the source of creativity.

This contrast between the pursuit and the denial of satisfaction is expressed in ‘Odpocinok’ (A rest), in which the narrator scornfully observes how a young couple in a pub attempt to enclose themselves in a self-perpetuating shell of domesticity:

‘Ten mladík je demiurgom svojho sveta, do ktorého vezme Jana. Jana je tiež jen slovo. Urobia si kolobeh. Najprv boli detí, neskôr budú mať deti, ked’ sú zdraví tito dva, urobia si kolobeh. Do toho im zvonku ne zasiahne níč, lebo vonku nie je mladíkov svet.’ (That young man is the demiurge of his world, into which he will take Jana. Jana is also just a word. They will make a cycle for themselves. First of all they were children; soon they’ll have their own children. If those two are healthy, they’ll make a cycle for themselves. Nothing will touch them from outside, for the young man’s world isn’t outside.)\(^59\) In contrast to the young man, the narrator seduces married women, taking them to the point of penetration before feigning impotence. He says: ‘ide mi o implantáciu zla, rozkladu, hlavne vsak neistoty a nedôvery. Podstatou zla nech je hoci aj sloboda.’ (My concern is the implantation of evil, of decay, and above all of uncertainty and mistrust. Let the essence of evil at least be freedom.)\(^60\) The substitution of contentment for desire constitutes for Balla an act of imprisonment, whereas unfulfilled desire represents absolute freedom, in which all possibilities remain.

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\(^57\) In the title story, Andrea is rescued with her baby from a block of flats after a fire, apparently Balla’s comic revenge on a character who turned him down, and a dramatisation of how easily the apparently ordered world of the housing estate can be destroyed.

\(^58\) Balla, *Leptokária*, p.146.

\(^59\) Ibid., p.89. The notion that the establishment of a ‘normal’ family life is an act of fictionalising is emphasised by the comment that ‘Jana is also just a word’. The young man may ordain whatever self he chooses for ‘Jana’, but that has no basis in reality.

\(^60\) Ibid., p.93.
Before *Leptokária*, however, those writers like Tomáš Horváth, Marek Vadas and Tom von Kamin, labelled the Genitalists, wrote pointedly lightweight texts which sustained the assertion of the futility of writing expressed in Koleníč and the self-styled Barbarians, albeit more playfully. For example, Horváth’s doggedly intertextual collection of parody stories and essays, *Akózma* (Acosmia, 1992),\(^6\) regularly refers to Existentialist, post-Structuralist and Phenomenological texts, above all to demonstrate how the post-Structuralist attempt to liberate the text from dogma becomes itself a dogma which disarms the text. As a result, however, his writing suffers from the same dependency on its sources as Russian critics observed in the work of the Conceptualists.

Balla’s intention to break with this dependency is reflected in his use of the metaphor of sexual impotence in ‘Odpočínok’ and other stories in *Leptokária*. As discussed in the last chapter, Koleníč repeatedly uses sexual impotence as a metaphor for the impotence of the writer, for example in *Mlčať* the narrator compares communication to the slithering of a limp penis on the labia of a vagina. The Genitalists link this rejection of the traditional notion in Slovak literature of the ‘potent’, world-shaping writer with a general satirisation of the Slovak male stereotype, most obviously in von Kamin’s *I. alebo Žlty penis* (Volume One, or The yellow penis, 1996), in which writing is presented as a substitute for ‘real life’. Haunted by a yellow penis which appears at his window to mock him, the narrator, in playful imitation of Sheherezade (a favourite of post-Structuralist and feminist theorists), feverishly writes the parody picaresque text of the novel to delay the moment when he has to go into the bedroom next-door and satisfy – or fail to satisfy – the woman who is eagerly anticipating him there. In *Leptokária*, Balla very much continues the social satirisation of masculinity, but at the same time transforms sexual impotence from a condition of weakness into an ideal state for the writer, the endless promise of creation that is never finally realised. In the context of Balla’s writing, the outright assertion of potency or impotence constitutes a position of comfort or self-satisfaction, whereas the feigned impotence – or feigned potency - in ‘Odpočínok’ represents a position between potency and impotence from which, in Lipovetskii’s

\(^6\) The title is a pun on the Slovak for ‘like a viper’, a reference to venomous-tongued woman, or ‘like a snake’, a reference to the image of the Uroboros, understood here as a metaphor not for time, but for
phrase, a ‘dialogue with chaos’ may be interminably conducted. The nature of this location is expressed in the story ‘Pustovnîk’ (The hermit), in which the narrator’s friend refuses to sleep with the woman the narrator has made from sand, because, the narrator suggests, he was hoping for a threesome. The narrator comments:

[...] iste, z trojice by toho večera v žiadnom prípade nič nebolo, lebo ja by som sa aktu nezužil, ale on i ona si mohli prisť na svoje. Ja by som popíjal a prízeral sa dvojici a zámerne by som sa prisunul čo najblížšie a naklonil sa nad ních a vnímal ich telá, ich pohyby, vône, aby som si čo najzreteľnejšie uvedomil, aké je mi to cudzie, tá úprimná radost, tá odovzdanosť partnerovi, odovzdanosť bez falshe

([...] of course, under no circumstances would there have been any sort of threesome that evening, because I wouldn’t have taken part in the act, but both he and she could have got what they wanted. I would have had a drink and observed the pair and I would have deliberately moved as close as I could and leaned over them and watched their bodies, their movements and scents, to become most clearly aware of how alien it all was to me, this sincere joy, this surrender to a partner, a surrender without pretence.)^62

For Balla, writing constitutes the implicitly endless negotiation of this voyeuristic position, at once most intensely involved in the fulfilment of desire and most completely detached from it.63

Ball’a rejection of the dogmatic assertion of impotence may be compared with Juráňová’s satirisation of the male author in her novel Utrpenie starého kocúra (The sufferings of an old tom-cat, 2001), which responds to Vilikovský’s attempt in the story ‘Eskalácia citu 1’ (The escalation of emotion, 1989) to describe the experience of rape from the perspective of its victim, a wheelchair-bound woman. In her novel, Juráňová presents the story, in which Vilikovský seeks to relativise or at least problematise the question of authorial gender, as an attempt by the male author to absorb all perspectives within his own. The first part of Utrpenie starého kocúra describes how a conformist female intellectual is rendered helpless by the disappearance of her lover, a leading writer, who is immediately declared dead and

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^ This perception of writing as the fraught preservation of an intermediate position compares, in the context of this dissertation, not only to Ajvaz’s notion of the writer moving endlessly between Chaos and Cosmos, but also to Hodrová’s notion of the threshold in her trilogy and to Kratochvíl’s ‘lamb in bear’s clothing’, although in contrast to Kratochvíl Balla is concerned more about the text which lacks rather than wields power.
nationally mourned. Juráňová perhaps here suggests that the acceptance of the ‘death of the author’ represents merely another example of the subjugation of the female to male authority. In the second part of the novel, it transpires that the writer has merely been kidnapped by Zuzana, the wheelchair-bound woman whose rape, reported in the press, had inspired his story, in revenge for his claiming to know how she felt. Despite her appearance of vulnerability and powerlessness, Zuzana remains more potent than the ineffectual male writer with his satirised insecurity about identity. The male author, the ‘old tom-cat’ may be past it, suggests Juráňová, but the female is not.

Balia, likewise, suggests that rumours of the death of literature have been greatly exaggerated, implying that a literature which reflects on its own exhaustion need not be exhausted. Instead of a single swing from an extreme of integrated meaning, understood as the co-operation or complicity of author and reader in the manufacture of a shared world in realist writing, to an extreme of disintegrated meaning, Balia advocates a constant, unsettling oscillation between the two extremes, dramatised in the story ‘Večerná úzkost’. Pieseň plavecká’ (Evening anxiety. A swimmer’s song). Balia presents the writer here as a poor swimmer, struggling between the surface, the veneer of order obscuring what lies beneath, and the depths, the chaos of the unconscious, in which contradictions co-exist and everything is possible. One of the narrators declares:

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\begin{align*}
\text{let the talk be of the surface, for beneath it is the world: its energy, movement, events, multicoloured, blinding light... The calmer and darker the surface, the more mysterious the depths it hides: or rather, it does not hide: the depths are simply covered by the surface: the surface does not know about anything. Beneath the surface is everything – both the Bible and the impossibility of a god)\end{align*}
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As elsewhere in the collection, the story oscillates between the metaphor and its actualisation, creating an experience of uncertainty for the reader. The third-person

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64 The title itself gives an intimation of this oscillation, since it appears to be a disordering of the more immediately comprehensible ‘Večerná píseň. Úzkost’ plavecká’.
65 Balia, Leptokária, p.37.
narration in the piece describes a young writer who cannot resist repeatedly returning to a lake to swim, despite nearly drowning each time. The writer shows no signs of wanting to become a better swimmer, since knowing how to swim would keep him on the surface, making him a collectivising writer, a perpetuator of surfaces. On the contrary, in fact, the young man is drawn to the lake by the lure of the depths. At one point, in an implicit reference to the Slovak writer’s enduring duty to sustain the Slovak language as a guarantor of Slovak nationhood, he declares that he longs to be part of a nation of people who cannot make themselves understood to each other. The realisation of this longing, however, is equated with the drowning of the writer at the end of the story; Balla posits here an alternative ‘death of the author’, in which the author disappears in his exploration of the depths of his self and becomes lost to the reader. The writer cannot completely lose contact with the surface, but must seek constantly to penetrate and subvert it to avoid becoming a denier of desire, and therefore of life.

This position between the surface and the depths is reflected in the co-existence of the notion of the single individual self matching the body and its rejection in the narrative structure of the story. In the story, the third-person narration describing the young writer is interspersed with the first-person narration of a writer, and also with the commentary of an unmarked third narrative voice. The fluctuation between narrative voices does not simply represent an alternation of external and internal perspectives on the same character. Rather, the young writer is apparently the subject of what the first-person narrator is writing, while the first-person narrator may be the subject of the third narrative voice, and each represents a fictional self-characterisation of his narrator. The reader may therefore choose either to reduce these voices to identification with a single authorial self, or to accept them as a representation of the chaos inherent in selfhood. Balla essentially parodies here the altogether more earnest anxiety about the nature of the self expressed, for example, in Koleníč’s Mičal or Litvák’s Samoreč. At one point, one of the narrators comments: ‘Ktosi ma chytil za plece. “Spoznáváš sa? Si to ešte ty? Tvoje telo?” “Áno, ja... Moje telo.” Držim sa za plece.’ (Someone caught me by the shoulders. ‘Do you recognise

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66 The writer’s activity may be compared to that of the sculptor in the Ajvaz story, discussed in Chapter 4, who, despite the risks, continues to expose himself to the dangers of the underground lake in the interests of creation.
yourself? Is it still you? Your body?’ ‘Yes, it’s me... My body.’ I’m holding myself by the shoulders.)  Like Pelevin and Kahuda, Balla is untroubled by questions of self-preservation or self-discovery, presenting the notion of the individual self as part of the language of the surface, an invention designed to make life easier, and populating his collection with a series of alter-egos, sometimes unnamed, or sometimes called Balla, Martin Ajn, or just Ajn (the German *Ein*), which playfully suggests the existence of a prototype from which the other alter-egos develop.

Balla’s response to the techniques of his contemporaries closely resembles that of Pelevin to Conceptualism. Perceiving in the work of their predecessors an apparent effacement of the imagination, both seek out a threshold position from which writing may be seen again as a productive process, expressing the unceasing creative activity of the imagination. Citing a passage from Pelevin’s ‘Ontologiia deutstva’ in which Pelevin describes the child’s view from a window, Genis writes:

> In Pelevin’s stories everything takes place on the ‘windowsill’, the border between different worlds. Every border both underlines and creates difference. But a border not only divides, it also unites. The more numerous the borders, the more border zones proliferate. [...] The author of the new post-Soviet literature is a poet, a philosopher, and a physiologist of these border areas. He dwells in the zone where realities collide. The site of this contact generates expressive artistic effects: one picture of the world succeeds another, creating a third that is distinct from the first two.

This effect is epitomised by characters who are both human beings and insects in *Zhizn’ nasekomykh*; similarly, in the story ‘Živočich’ (Animal) in *Leptokária*, the narrator keeps a pet which appears simultaneously to be a mouse and a spider. Developing Genis’s argument, Gerald McCausland suggests that Pelevin, in effect, returns in his writing to the beginnings of Sots-Art in visual art. For McCausland, the ‘false perception set up in many of [Pelevin’s] stories derives not from language games, but from sensory, above all, visual tricks’. In contrast, Sorokin’s aggressive ‘frame-breaks’ may be seen as an attempt to prevent words from becoming an image in the reader’s mind by providing a counter-image which exposes both images as

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68 In *Outsideria*, Balla works with all the personal pronouns singular and plural in an attempt to assert their arbitrariness.
nothing but letters on a page. This fear of the consequences of any creative act, directly associated with the imposition of a single invented notion of reality in the Soviet period, is no longer present in Pelevin’s writing. Pelevin’s response to the attempt to impose a single meaning upon words is rather, somewhat like Hodrová, to assert the multiplicity of co-existing meanings which arises from this attempt.

This approach is typified in Pelevin’s work by his exploitation of the figure of Chapaev in Chapaev i Pustota. Historically a local Red Army leader during the Civil War, in the 1920s Chapaev became the subject of a Socialist Realist reportage by Dmitrii Furmanov, and then, in the 1930s, of a hugely popular film, in which Pet’ka was a clumsy but earnest peasant soldier. Following the film, Chapaev and Pet’ka became stock characters in Russian jokes. In Chapaev i Pustota, the writer of the parody foreword claims that Chapaev was ‘in fact’ a Buddhist teacher, and Pet’ka his disciple. However, as Nikolai Aleksandrov points out, noting Pelevin’s frequent use of ‘na samom dele’ (in fact), in Pelevin’s writing there is, in fact, no ‘in fact’, Chapaev exists equally and simultaneously in all these versions. In the novel, Pelevin implicitly extrapolates this situation to assert the absurdity of the human being’s efforts to identify his self with a single space, time and direction, as Omon continues to do at the end of ‘Omon Ra’. In Chapaev i Pustota, Pelevin seeks to teach the reader not to look for himself on the plan of the Metro, but to see himself represented by that plan, as the first stage in the reversal of the journey from ‘om’ to ‘on’. Chapaev i Pustota may be seen as sequel to ‘Omon Ra’, beginning at the point where that novel ends, with Russia still trying to establish exactly what it is. This

71 In the early 1990s, Chapaev was also the subject of a short story by the Riga-born Russian writer Andrei Levkin (b.1954), entitled ‘Chapaev: Mesto rozhdenia – Riga (Novoe o G.I.Gurdzhieve)’ (Chapaev: Place of birth - Riga (New findings about G.I. Gurdzhiev), 1993). In the manner of Borges, the story takes the form of a parody of a piece of obscure historical research. Chapaev here is portrayed as the product of a mysterious Georgian’s experiments during the First World War to produce a homunculus without sexual, high intellectual or high emotional ‘centres’, who could therefore be relied upon to function effectively in military situations, without unnecessary dissipation of energy. Rather like Kratochvil in Avion, which also describes the manufacture of a homunculus by an evil genius, Levkin satirises Stalin’s ‘engineering’ of human souls, but also, through his description of the homunculus’s character, the preferred Socialist literary type. At the same time, however, Levkin’s story provides further evidence, along with Pelevin, of how the Conceptualist assertion of the manufactured nature of the Soviet system may be rendered creative.

72 Aleksandrov, ‘Novaia’, p.27.

73 In the context of this dissertation, the Metro-plan image recalls Hodrová’s conception of the self in Kukly as a labyrinth or spider’s web, a ‘place in which past and future events run together like the radii of a circle’.
identity crisis is represented by the schizophrenic central character, Pet'ka, like Omon a metaphor for Russia. In the novel, Pet'ka believes he is a Symbolist poet in 1919, suffering a delusion that he is a patient in a Moscow psychiatric hospital in the early 1990s, while in the hospital the staff believe the reverse. Rodnianskaia notes that the periods ‘rhyme’ as times of turmoil in which Russia seeks a new direction. Similarly to Hodrová, Pelevin attempts to remove any sense of the uniqueness of a particular historical situation by presenting history as a kaleidoscopic repetitive cycle. While Hodrová, however, suggests that this cycle is inescapable, Pelevin blames it on a persistent belief that such periods of ‘crisis’ must be ‘resolved’ through the adoption of a single direction forward.

In Chapaev i Pustota, that single direction is advocated by Pet’ka’s psychiatrist, Timur Timurovich, who shares his patronymic with Egor Timurovich Gaidar, the architect of the ‘shock therapy' economic reforms of the early 1990s, through which Russia was to be transformed into a market economy. According to Timur, Pet’ka has created a highly developed false personality because he is unable to accept the new situation in which he and Russia find themselves. Seen from Timur’s perspective, Pet’ka’s condition corresponds closely to R.D. Laing’s description of schizophrenia in The Divided Self. Laing suggests that while most people identify themselves with their bodies, the schizophrenic experiences himself as ‘unembodied’. This denial of one’s physical existence in linear time and three-dimensional space corresponds to the persistent attempt to escape by typified by Omon’s flight into space, and also documented in Tolstaia’s stories. Laing contends that the ‘unembodied’ mind, unable to tolerate the vacuum resulting from its denial, indicated in Pelevin’s novel by Pet’ka’s surname, Pustota, meaning ‘emptiness’, creates a ‘false-self system’, made up of a number of partially elaborated fragments of what might constitute a personality if any single one had full sway. These fragments are depicted in the novel by the four patients in the hospital who, in Rodnianskaia’s description, represent various potential ‘ways out’ of post-Soviet circumstances, all tried by some, but none adopted to the exclusion of all others: the representative of the masses – described by Timur as a collision of ‘Mexican soap opera, Hollywood blockbuster

75 Ibid., p.73.
and unstable Russian democracy' — stands for grotesque westernisation, the down-and-out dreamer for the impossible marriage of the Russian and Japanese, the 'new Russian' for consumerist hedonism, and the intellectual, Pet'ka, for the restoration of the Silver Age. Timur's aim is to persuade the patients once again to accept their 'embodied' selves, to become re-absorbed in byt, like the passengers on the train in 'Zheltaiia strel'; by using a form of group therapy in which each patient, by hearing for a time the 'false personalities' of other patients, gradually comes to a realisation of the fictional nature of his own delusion.

Timur's counterpart in the Civil War period is Chapaev, who considers the cause of Pet'ka's illness to lie not in the fact that he appears to exist in two time planes at once, but in his desire to find out where he 'really' is, to return to an 'embodied' notion of the self. Whereas Timur equates this outcome with healing, for Chapaev and the implied author it simply represents the adoption of another 'false self'. In place of this notion of the single self, obedient to the laws of physics, Pelevin proposes a conception corresponding to the image of time as a labyrinth apparently conceived by one Ts'ui Pen, a Chinese provincial governor, in Borges's 'The Garden of Forking Paths' (1956). In Borges's story, a scholar of Ts'ui Pen's work comments: "in all fictional works, each time a man is confronted with several alternatives, he chooses one and eliminates the others; in the fiction of Ts'ui Pen, he chooses – simultaneously

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76 Pelevin, Chapaev, p.54. The instability of Russian democracy is represented by the character's confusion about his own gender.
77 See Rodnianskaia, 'Bezumnaia', p.214. In his 1919 existence, Pet'ka opposes the political direction taken by Malakovskii and is nostalgic for the monarchy. The co-opting of the Avant-garde into the revolutionary movement may be implicitly compared to the Conceptualists' descent into consumerist kitsch depicted in 'Zheltaiia strel'. As Rodnianskaia points out, however, the dominance of Pet'ka's perspective means that the two periods are not weighted equivalently; rather, the 1990s are presented as a hideous, trashy parody of the earlier period. Pelevin evokes here the ancient Chinese perception of time as an inevitable decline from an initial 'golden age', playfully linked to the conventional account of the development of Russian literature from the 'Golden Age' of Pushkin to the 'Silver Age' to the contemporary period.
78 In Houstina, the narrator scathingly describes his mother's mental illness, presenting it essentially as weakness brought on by dependence on the notion of a single, integrated self. Kahuda's outright rejection of this notion means that he does not experience its disintegration in the novel with any anxiety, in contrast, for example, to the treatment of the personality crisis in Brabcová's Daleko od stromu or Zlodějina, where characters seek ways to restore a sense of wholeness.
79 In the parody introduction to the novel, Pelevin makes the link explicit by suggesting that an alternative title to the novel might have been 'The Garden of Forking Pet'kas' (Sad raskholdiashchikhsia Petek). (Pelevin, Chapaev, p.9.)
all of them. He creates, in this way, diverse futures, diverse times which themselves also proliferate and fork.”

According to the scholar:

[Ts’ui Pen] believed in an infinite series of times, in a growing, dizzying net of divergent, convergent and parallel times. This network of times which approached one another, forked, broke off, or were unaware of one another for centuries, embraces all possibilities of time. We do not exist in the majority of these times; in some you exist, and not I; in others I, and not you; in others, both of us.

In Chapaev i Pustota, as the history of Chapaev’s ‘self’ indicates, these ‘times’ represent infinite selves, understood, as in Balla, as nothing more than verbal constructs of the mind. The belief in one particular construct does not eradicate the other constructs, but merely succeeds for a time in concealing them from the believer. Through his depiction of Pet’ka’s ability in the novel not only to pass freely between different time-planes, but also to enter the minds of other characters and experience their experiences as though they were his own, Pelevin seeks to expose the borders erected to delineate the individual mind as illusory and assert instead a collectively understood consciousness, like the child as portrayed in Pelevin’s work, endlessly dreaming up and dissolving the world. The novel may thus be seen as the most expansive, celebratory expression in Russian fiction of the Changes of the ‘death of the author’ as a liberation to wander amid the products of this consciousness; this activity contradicts the adoption of a ‘single direction’ and, like the ‘wandering’ in Hodrová’s fiction or the narrator’s rambling in Popov’s Dusha patriota, purports to represent the ‘true’ nature of terrestrial existence. In this respect, according to Sergei Kornev, Chapaev i Pustota constitutes the first example in Russian literature of what is regarded in Western criticism as ‘classical postmodernism’. Kornev writes: ‘The
ideal of postmodernism is the schizoid consciousness, a consciousness entirely splintered ideologically, the fragments of which peacefully co-exist among themselves. As Kornev points out, this position is necessarily amoral, since no one fragment may be advocated or rejected over any other. In keeping with the assertion of the impotence of literature, the irony in ‘classical postmodernism’ is not, arguably unlike in Sorokin’s writing, corrective, but may even serve as an alibi for continued immoral or amoral activity, hence Pelevin’s popularity amongst those he most strongly satirises.

To describe Pelevin’s writing as amoral would, however, represent a basic misreading, since as Kornev points out, following critics like Kostyrko and Genis, who note the nascent didacticism in Pelevin’s early writing, his work is ‘classically postmodernist’ only in form, concealing a very firm ideological position which he propounds with increasing confidence and vehemence. In this context, his exploitation of postmodernist techniques reflects Chapaev’s advice to Pet’ka near the end of the novel, understood as an implied authorial artistic credo: ‘Gde by ty ni okazalsia, zhivi po zakonam togo mira, i ispol’zui sami eti zakony, chtoby osvobodit’ sia ot nikh.’ (Wherever you find yourself, live by the laws of the

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83 Kornev, ‘Stolknovenie pustot’, p.248. Kornev alludes here to L’Anti-Oedipe (1972) by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, a key work of post-Structuralism whose influence is evident in the writing of not only Pelevin, but also Kahuda and Balla. In L’Anti-Oedipe, Deleuze and Guattari contend that psychoanalysis, by seeking to make human psychology conform to the Oedipal model, participates in the ‘work of bourgeois repression’, the circumscription of unconscious desire and the socialisation of the human being which begins, as Pelevin and Kahuda depict them, with the parent-child relationship. In place of psychoanalysis, they call for ‘schizoanalysis’, analysis of what psychoanalysts consider the pre-Oedipal phase, but which, according to Deleuze and Guattari, manifests itself in the schizophrenic as a form of progress or liberation from the ‘oedipalised’ state: ‘Wouldn’t it be better to schizophrenise — to schizophrenise the domain of the unconscious as well as the sociohistorical domain, so as to shatter the iron collar of Oedipus and rediscover everywhere the force of desiring-production [...]?’ (Deleuze, G. and F. Guattari, Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia, translated by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane, London, 1984, p.53. Hereafter Deleuze and Guattari, Anti-Oedipus.) Deleuze and Guattari’s descriptions of the schizophrenic mind, drawing particularly on Beckett’s The Unnameable, find their echo in the explicit rejection of ‘I’ in Kolenić, Kahuda and Balla. (See, for example, Deleuze and Guattari, Anti-Oedipus, p.23.)

84 This perception of Pelevin’s writing contradicts that of, for example, Chuprinin, who describes his work as ‘pure art’, defined as art which is neither burdened with an ideological message nor designed for mass entertainment, but is concerned only with telling stories, a view echoed by Dalton-Brown. (See Chuprinin, ‘Sbyvsheesia’, pp.182-83.) The debates about whether such art can ever exist will not be rehearsed here, but as Pelevin’s Buddhist didacticism becomes increasingly overt with each new work, the term proves decreasingly appropriate in his case.
world in which you’ve ended up, and use these laws to free yourself from them.)

Chapaev heals Pet’ka by teaching him to recognise the inherent emptiness of all phenomena, to cease clinging to phenomena which are impermanent and cause suffering, including what Peter Harvey, in his analysis of the understanding of the self in early Buddhist texts, *The Selfless Mind*, calls ‘the conditioned factors of personality, which are *not-self*.’ Pet’ka’s gradual recognition of the world as a series of competing fragments of text constitutes a rejection of the conventional implicit equation of words with physical objects, the first, critical stage on a journey towards the final abandonment of that world in the ‘eternal non-return’ of Nirvana, the ‘ultimate empty thing’.

Comparing Pelevin’s notion of emptiness with that of Foucault, Kornev writes: ‘The emptiness of Foucault and the emptiness of Pelevin are two different notions of being, each subject to its own separate internal law. Foucault’s emptiness is Western emptiness, Pelevin’s is Eastern. Western emptiness, unsatisfied and mocking, Eastern emptiness self-absorbed [samouglublennaia] and calm.’

Foucault’s notion of emptiness may be said to correspond to that represented by the blank pages and self-deleting ‘frame-breaks’ in Sorokin’s writing, since, according to Kornev, Foucault’s emptiness does not simply represent the absence of God, but ‘itself replaces Him, wielding ontological supremacy over everything else’. Where Foucault’s emptiness represents a disturbing, ever-present origin, Pelevin’s represents a happy ending, a longed for reunion with what Kahuda calls ‘nameless timelessness’.

Though Kahuda never refers explicitly to Eastern philosophy, in his writing, particularly *Veselá bída* and *Housťina*, he also, as Zuzana P. Krupičková points out, pursues the ‘liberation of the mind’ from its attachment to a finite physical conception of itself and the world. Rather as Kolenič mocks the reader’s suspension of disbelief in *Mlčat*, Kahuda toys with the reader’s need for a tangible experience of

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85 Pelevin, *Chapaev*, pp.324-25. In the context of this dissertation, this position recalls Kratochvíl’s notion in *Medvědí roman* of being accepted among the bears without becoming one.
86 Harvey, *Selfless*, p.43.
87 Ibid., p.52.
88 Kornev, ‘Stolknovenie pustot’, p.253. Kornev’s analysis coincidentally mirrors Pynsent’s contrasting of the Slovak Barbarians, with their Pelevin-like leanings towards Eastern philosophy, with the Genitalists’ gaze westward to post-Structuralism. (See Pynsent, ‘What about the Slovaks?’, p.22.)
89 Kornev, ‘Stolknovenie pustot’, p.252.
existence through his dense use of descriptive language, which acts upon the reader’s senses of smell and touch, producing an intensely physical experience of what are only words. Kahuda’s writing may be compared to a form of meditation, in which the mind attempts to rid itself of its attachment to an inventoried reality. Harvey writes: ‘Contemplation of phenomena as impermanent, suffering and not-self is a way of undermining craving for and clinging to such phenomena. By seeing things “as they really are”, attachment and its attendant suffering will be undermined.’ In Veselá bída, a narrating consciousness moves through Prague one night, documenting what it observes. The work cannot be reduced to the account of a man’s night-long walk through the city, though that appears to be its basis, because the narrating consciousness ‘sees’ and ‘knows’ far more than the human eye could. The consciousness both describes in fine detail and expands on its subjects, recording their feelings, motives, past and future actions. It is not witnessing, but creating, understood as the disgorging of products of consciousness. In Houština, this journey from dusk to dawn underpins the chronological account of a life, presented not as an accumulation or preservation of a Self, but as the redemption of the mind from this dark delusion. The language produced by this activity of human consciousness, working to fill the void of existence, constitutes the ‘thicket’ of the novel’s title.

Kahuda never refers directly to the work of writing in Houština, but many of the jobs which he describes serve as metaphors for his understanding of the writer: the night watchman as the observer, even the voyeur, of the products of his own consciousness, the gravedigger who traces decomposition and exhumes and buries the past, and the sewage engineer who gets rid of waste material. In the final chapter, the narration switches from the first- to the third-person, in Novotný’s view signalling an ‘escape from the prison of personal history’, and therefore some progress in the process of

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91 Jakub Šofar suggests that Kahuda’s mastery of Czech, frequently compared to that of Hrabal, is unmatched by any of his contemporaries. (See Šofar, J., ‘The Fool on the Hill’, Tvar, 2000, 3, p.1.)
92 Harvey, Selfless, pp.44-45.
93 At one point, the narrator disturbs the grave of the early twentieth-century Czech writer, Ladislav Klíma, a moment of self-conscious authorial irony, since the title of Klíma’s philosophical tract, Svět jako vědomí a nic (The world as consciousness and nothingness, 1904), encapsulates a central premise of Houština. Klíma’s work, the title of which parodies the title of Schopenhauer’s The World As Will and Representation, seeks to take to its extreme Schopenhauer’s suggestion that what is perceived as reality is the creation of the human mind. The heritage of subjective idealism is never far from Balla and Pelevin’s work either; Balla also quotes Klíma, while both, like Klíma, make reference to Berkeley, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche.
94 Novotný, ‘Zdali’.
emptying. In a manner reminiscent of Hodrová’s description of Sofie Syslová’s growing awareness of the nature of the self in Kukly, the new narrator comments of the former narrator: ‘Muž zažívá rozšířující se pocit, že je ho více. Je složen z mnohých. Výsledek minulých životů. Průchozí místo existenci nynějších.’ (The man is experiencing a spreading feeling that there is more of him. He is made up of many. The result of past lives. A transitional location for current existences.) However, as in Pelevin, this initiation into the nature of existence constitutes only a stage in the process of liberation, which culminates in the final pages with the declared intention to abandon language: ‘musí opustit ty vžité konfigurace, musí se vysvléct z potrhaných šatů slov.’ (He must abandon these hackneyed configurations, he must divest himself of the tattered garments of words.) The re-attainment of ‘nameless timelessness’ is reflected, as in Veselá bída, by the image of the dawn at the end of the work, a happy release from the meaningless activity of consciousness depicted over the previous five hundred pages.

In contrast to the fiction of both Kahuda and Pelevin, Balla’s fiction contains no prospect of escape, presenting writing as an endless process of emptying equated with being itself. As the very structure of Leptokária as a collection of discrete prose pieces suggests, to write is to take repeated dips into consciousness, understood as a chaos of language, which in ‘Vecerná úzkost. Pieseň plavecká.’ is described as an ‘unhealthy, poisonous environment’ where texts incubate and from which they are then expelled. The ‘unhealthy, poisonous environment’ of consciousness is reflected in the title of the first story in the collection, ‘Infekcia’. In the story, the narrator inherits his parents’ home, perhaps a metaphor for Freud’s Über-Ich, but, feeling infested by its contents, strips out the furniture and carpets and burns them. Each time he moves in new contents, however, he feels the infestation again, until the narrator comes to realise that he is the infection. Balla thus presents the self as an empty shell which consciousness constantly fills and the writer constantly seeks to empty.

In the final piece in Leptokária, the narrator describes how the road is blocked by burnt furniture, an old fridge, an acrid stench and foul weather. In the context of the piece, these items belong to the aftermath of a fire, but they all come from earlier

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95 Kahuda, Houština, p.424.
96 Ibid., p.499.
pieces in the collection, which the writer has already 'expelled' from himself. The narrator comments: ‘Zvnutra som zasvinený ešte viac, ako na povrchu. To nezmyje nič na svete! Vykýdám si hnoj, zrodí sa ho zasa plná hrud', plné telo...Tehotenstvo hnojom a zvratkami a étickými deviáciami, pl'uhavstvom poznania a degenerovanej etiky.' (From inside I'm even more filthy than on the surface. Nothing in the world can wash it away! I throw out my dung and another chestful, another bodyful of it is born...A pregnancy of dung and vomit and ethereal perversions, of the detritus of knowledge and degenerate ethics.)

Of the three writers discussed here, the emptiness portrayed in Balla’s fiction resembles most closely that explored by Foucault, but it is presented not as an ever-present abyss, as in Sorokin, but as a promise of eternal creation. In ‘Večerná úzkost’, pieseň plavecká’, a narrator remarks: ‘Pod hladinou nech sa hovori o veľkej láske k prázdnote ako o jedinej možnosti lásky. Prázdnota je miesto pre plodivú sílu.’ (Below the surface let the talk be of great love for emptiness as the only possibility of love. Emptiness is a place for fruitful forces.)

The Russian, Czech and Slovak writers of the Changes essentially seek to liberate the writer from his traditional function in each literature as a teacher of life, making him instead a demonstrator of art. In the context of this division running through all three literatures, Pelevin stands on the opposite side from Balla and Kahuda. Kornev writes that Pelevin is ‘in terms of ideas and content no postmodernist, but a bona fide Russian classical writer-ideologue like Tolstoi or Chernyshevskii’, in Balla’s terms a creator of a surface illusion of order. To return to the Pascal quotation with which this chapter began, whereas Pelevin implicitly asserts that the emptiness can be filled, the writing of Balla and Kahuda retains an awareness that all creation strives against that emptiness in vain. In both Leptokária and Houština, the writer is characterised as an impotent wanderer in the products of consciousness which constitute existence and which he is incapable of changing. It is only upon the quality of his work in recycling and waste-disposal that he can be judged.

97 Balla, Leptokária, p.144.
99 Kornev, 'Stolknovenie pustot', p.245.
Conclusion: To Speak or Not to Speak

The apparent abandonment of the 'principle of "using" literature for an extra-literary purpose' and the scorning of 'all ideologies, missions and services to people or anyone' provoked an intense self-consciousness in the writers of the Changes about the act of putting pen to paper, encapsulated in the question which Kolenič's narrator poses to himself at the beginning of *Mléč*: to speak or not to speak. Works particularly by Czech writers like Hodrová or Topol, but also, for example, by Petrushevskaja and Pišťanek express a 'fear of stopping speaking'. For these writers, in keeping with the implicit reference to *Hamlet* in *Mléč*, writing becomes a vital metaphor for the continuing presence - and often the preciousness - of being. At the same time, it also reflects a refusal to accept the defeat of literature expressed in works like *Moskva-Petushki* and *Příliš hlučná samota*. Hrabal, arguably the original source of this 'fear of stopping speaking' in contemporary Czech literature, and Venedikt Erofeev both suggest that the coming society has no understanding of the 'sacrality' of literature as an expression of being, indeed of the soul, and therefore feels no need for it. The 'fear of stopping speaking' often underlies an attempt to preserve or restore this awareness of the 'sacrality' of literature, and therefore of the individual human existence.

Writers like Petrushevskaja and Pišťanek are exceptions to the dominant 'fear of speaking' in the Russian and Slovak fiction of the Changes. At the end of *Moskva-Petushki*, Venichka is pierced through the throat, the Russian writer silenced to prevent his dreams of a perfect world causing further tyranny. The literary nostalgia

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1. This perception of writing reasserted itself in Russian fiction in the 1990s, for example in Ulitskaia's *Sonechka*, or in the monologue narrations *Trepanatsiia cherepa* (Trepanning the skull, 1995) by Sergei Gandlevskii (b.1952), or *Svoboda* (Freedom, 1998) by Mikhail Butov (b.1964). Gandlevskii's short autobiographical novel, ultimately an affirmation of life in the face of life-threatening surgery, which won the Little Booker Prize in 1996, may be considered a response to Popov's *Dusha patriota*, in which the ironisation of the 'underground' is replaced by its sentimentalisation. In contrast, Butov's novel, which won the main Booker Prize in 1999, was received as a 'sober' reflection on the socio-political and literary liberation of the early 1990s, lacking the extravagant euphoria of Pelevin's earlier works, but not entirely pessimistic.

2. The enduring faith of Czech writers in literature is reflected in their preference for very long novels (Topol, Ivan Matoušek [b.1948]), trilogies (Hodrová, Kratochvíl) and a tetralogy (Macura), which by their very nature assert that literature for them remains of consequence. In contrast, the frequent use of shorter forms by Russian and especially Slovak writers of the Changes, continuing a trend apparent in sanctioned 'urban' fiction since the Thaw, indicates the modesty of their aspirations in comparison with the 'big' official and dissident writers, a modesty which sometimes becomes more an expression of doubt that there is anything to say.
of the novel’s intertextuality reflects a hopeless yearning for a time before literature lost its innocence. Erofeev subsequently wrote only a few short pieces, and the slim single volume of his collected works consists mainly of unrealised fragments and notes. In contrast, motivated by a similar fear of the consequences of writing, Sorokin’s efforts to subvert the power of words produced a handsome two-volume set which amounts to an expression of the monolithic emptiness of accumulated culture, parodying the revered collected works of great writers which grace the bookshelves of Russian intellectuals.

The suggestion that words only affect the external world for the worse co-exists in the fiction of the Changes with the perception that literature has no influence on the world outside itself, often directly influenced by the post-Structuralist dislocation of signifier and signified. While this perception underpins the assertion that literature has been ‘misused’ in the service of various ideologies, in the works of writers like Tolstaia and Popov it is accompanied by a disappointed sense of the futility of writing and of human existence. This futility becomes hateful or at best ridiculous in works by Slovak writers like Kolenič, where the yearning to cease speaking is thwarted by the unceasing flow of language, a substitute for meaningful, as it were ‘god-like’ being.

Barthes and Foucault present the loss of the notion of Author as a happy release, a cause for celebration, promising a new approach to writing and a new way of interpreting earlier writing. In his essay, ‘What is an author?’, Foucault argues that ‘[the author] is a certain function by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses; in short, by which one impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition and recomposition of fiction.’ For those writers who ‘fear speaking’, however, the rejection of the belief that the writer could or should shape or instruct the world was experienced not as a liberation, but as a defeat, perhaps even a failed liberation from writing itself. In consequence, their models of the writer are, if not Erofeev’s corpse, then, for example, Tolstaia’s wretched ‘fakir’ or Kolenič’s morbid ‘dilettante’, like Popov’s narrator-flâneur in Dusha patriota wandering aimlessly amid the relativity which remains. Such metaphors perhaps
ultimately reflect the implicit difficulty that certain writers of the Changes had in reconciling themselves to the changed status of literature and the writer which they themselves propounded. Despite their claims to the contrary, these writers mourned the loss of the special place accorded to literature in Russian or Slovak culture. One might even argue that their didacticism about the role of literature, the writer and the limits of the human being suggested that, far from embodying the new literature, their work represented the last gasp of the old, a final chance for literature to ‘speak’, even if it was to call for silence. Though those writers who ‘feared stopping speaking’ often did express the sense of liberation, their fear of disappearance, which motivated their writing, could be equally neurotic, as, for example, in Hodrová’s Thêta, or in the endless, compulsive to-ing and fro-ing of Ajvaz’s sculptor or Balla’s swimmer.

In the early 1990s, Russian critics, who had embraced what they called ‘other fiction’ more loudly and exclusively than their Czech and Slovak counterparts in the first place, began to express weariness with its strategies. In an article tellingly entitled ‘A za prazdnik – spasibo!’ (But thanks for the fun!), published in 1992, Lipovetskii expressed disappointment that the inspiration of the ‘other fiction’ writers had apparently fizzled out so quickly: Liberation from illusions and dogmas, and from ideology of any sort, and, above all, the attempt to embody, or more precisely, to model a genuinely free relationship between the human being and the world through a playful relationship with culture; these are the elements which create the atmosphere in which the whole ‘new wave’ lived and breathed, and define its [...] historical meaning. But here too lies the source of weakness of this poetics.

Lipovetskii argued, for example, that in Tolstaia’s most recent stories, ‘Limpopo’ (1990) and ‘Siuzhet’ (1991), her style had appeared strained, while Popov and others had become ‘slaves to their own intonation’. In a later article, highly critical of

\[^{4}\text{In a conference paper presented at the Czech Embassy in London in January 2003, Petr A. Bilek makes a similar point about the Czech writers of the Changes period, noting that they too had been ‘brought up under the paradigm that literature means something and expected an immediate, serious reaction to their books’.}\]
\[^{5}\text{Lipovetskii, M., ‘A za prazdnik – spasibo!’}, Literaturnaia gazeta, 1992, 46, p.4. The title of Lipovetskii’s article coincidentally foreshadows the sentiments of a petition in the Czech Republic calling for the mass resignation of the political establishment which had overseen the first ten years of post-Communist transition, entitled ‘Děkujeme – odejděte!’ (Thank you, now go!).}\]
\[^{6}\text{Ibid. After the disastrous attempt to change direction in the overtly metafictional ‘Siuzhet’, Tolstaia produced no more new fiction until the publication of her first novel, Kys’ (2001, dated as written}\]
Russian 'postmodernist' writers, Pavel Basinskii contended that their work reflected Soviet man's sense of inferiority to the West, brought on by 'corrective' policies such as Egor Gaidar's economic 'shock therapy'. Having provided literature with its own 'shock therapy', however, these writers, according to Basinskii, had nowhere else to go. Rather like Lipovetskii, Basinskii blamed this apparent inability to develop on the eradication of all limits, or the assertion of their arbitrariness, which underpinned these writers' work, arguing that the 'limit is an essential category, without which the world cannot live'. His comments are coincidentally mirrored in Vihkovsky's review of Mlčat', in which Vilikovsky, arguing that Kolenič had pointedly denied himself any possibility of development, quotes the Czech poet Vítězslav Nezval (1900-58): 'In the yard a cry is heard / It's the cry of a little hysterical / He's put his head straight through a wall / And doesn't know now where to go at all.' Czech critics reacted similarly to Typlt, who appeared more or less to have burnt himself out with his Rozžavená kra, and warned against the danger of becoming repetitive in reviews of novels like Topol's Anděl or Hodrová's Ztracené děti.

Given that nearly all the writers discussed in this dissertation are still alive and still writing, to suggest that any are finished would be a mistake. However, whereas the tension in the fiction of the Changes initially stemmed from its subversive engagement with dominant conventions, as this dissertation seeks to show, once these had been transgressed, its writers faced the problem of being playful without becoming superficial. In effect, they, in common with like-minded newer writers like Mikhail Shishkin (b.1961) or Miloš Urban, had to try to turn their techniques from weapons of conflict into tools of the trade. Writers like Pelevin, Juráňová and perhaps also Topol have concluded that literature still has 'something to say' in an old-fashioned sense. The 'fear of speaking' and the 'fear of stopping speaking' are

1986-2000), which received mixed reviews from critics who had grown to regard her almost as an émigrée. The novel represented a far bleaker depiction of the futile dependency of human beings on literature than her earlier stories. Popov returned to critical favour with his parodic 'novel-commentary', Podlinnaiia istoriiia 'Zelenykh Muzykantov' (The true story of the 'Green Musicians', 1998).

8 Ibid., p.223.
10 This superficiality was epitomised by the pointedly aimless textual parody of, for example, Berková in Utření oddaného všíváka, many of the Genitalists, and younger Russian 'postmodernist' writers in the 1990s, whose work is encapsulated by the title of Beskonechnyi tupik (Endless dead-end, 1997) by
otherwise reconciled in approaches which might be called ‘sheer literature’. On the one hand, Kahuda asserts the relentless aestheticisation of reality in the face of a constant human tendency towards stability and fixedness, typified in different ways by Pištánek and Hodrová. On the other, Balla suggests that a literature which contemplates its own exhaustion is not necessarily itself exhausted.

In the Introduction, I quoted Epshtein’s comment: ‘What is left for a literature that is no longer either politics, religion or philosophy? It is left with language, a kind of minimum and a final bridgehead on which to set the conditions for its capitulation.’

Politics, religion, philosophy and all the other supposedly ‘extra-literary’ matters cited by Viktor Erofeev, Kratochvil and others can scarcely be said to be absent from the works discussed in this dissertation. The fiction of the Changes sought, however, to subordinate them once again to the activity of the imagination, an aspiration which, in itself, need not provoke such an apocalyptic tone.

Dmitrii Galkovskii (b.1960). (Parts of this sprawling pseudo-philosophical 'text’ were published in Novyi mir and Nash sovremennik in 1992.)

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