

**The Formation of the Female Self in Czech Literature,
1890–1945**

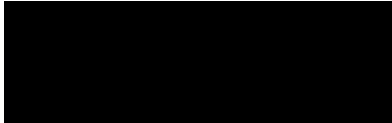
Katri Ilona Pallasvuo

UCL School of Slavonic and East European
Studies

Master of Philosophy in Czech Literature

September 2013

I, Katri Ilona Pallasvuo, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

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Signed: Katri Ilona Pallasvuo

30 September 2013, San Mateo, USA.

Abstract

At the end of the nineteenth century, a debate about women's position in society and cultural life evolved in Czech press, periodicals and literature. Woman's sense of self had long been dependent on her marital status and her family's social standing, and it is this dependency that Czech authors of the *Fin de siècle* began to reevaluate in their works.

In my thesis, I study the concept of the female self in works of five Czech authors from the 1890s to the 1940s, namely Růžena Svobodová, Božena Viková Kunětická, Božena Benešová, Vítězslav Nezval and Jarmila Svatá. I argue that in the hands of these authors, the concept of female self transforms from a self that relies on outer stories (society) to a self that is formed by inner stories (mind). The female self of Svobodová and Viková is based on creativity, procreation and a sense of emancipation from man. Thus, there are connections to be drawn between fiction and the Czech women's movement. By the 1910s, however, in the fiction of Benešová, the freedom of the female self is revealed to be only apparent, and the formation of female selfhood relies heavily on the relationship between individual and community. Finally, in the 1930s and 40s, Nezval and Svatá portray a self that is at its strongest when looking inward and harnessing strengths from within, rather than attempting to fulfil the expectations of others.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr Peter Zusi, for his unwavering support and guidance, without which this thesis would not have been completed.

I am also grateful to Professor Robert Pynsent for our indispensable discussions on the themes and authors presented in this thesis.

I would like to extend my appreciation to my examiners, Dr Rajendra Chitnis and Dr Katarzyna Zechenter, whose invaluable comments during the viva helped me to complete the final version of this thesis.

Finally, and most of all, I would like to express my gratitude to my family and friends for their unfailing support and encouragement.

I would like to dedicate this work to my grandmothers, Mrs Eila Oksa and the late Mrs Sirkka-Liisa Pallasvuo, ardent readers of fiction and great supporters of education.

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Introduction

There is no such thing as an isolated man or woman... What do you call one's self? Where does it begin? Where does it end? It overflows into everything that belongs to us – and then it flows back again.

- Henry James, *Portrait of a Lady*, 1881

Until the rise of the women's movement in the 1890s, women had not been considered individuals in terms of their legal and social position; they were more often than not dependent on their husbands or fathers. Women were always a part of a collective and to an extent, women aspired to treat themselves as a collective, with the same desires and needs even within the women's movement. Yet the women's movement, along with other cultural developments, sparked an interest in female selfhood in literature. In this thesis I will argue that the female self became a topic of interest in Czech women's writing much before Modernism and the arrival of psychoanalysis or, indeed, the Avantgarde. Czech women writers of the *Fin de siècle* brought forth the theme of female self-realisation in their works, due to the social changes prompted by the Czech women's movement but also because of their reading of Scandinavian authors like Henrik Ibsen and Ellen Key. My chosen time frame (from 1890 to 1945) pertains to not only the publication dates of the works I have chosen to examine in this thesis but also the wider cultural landscape that influenced these works.

One of the main themes that run through my thesis will be female self-realisation. The beginning of my period, in the 1890s, is when the theme of female self-realisation became ever more evident in Czech literature, as women writers began to challenge the national stories (which can be understood as a form of 'outer story') and replace them with individual women's inner stories. Here I will take up Jonathan

Glover's concept of 'inner story', which is a story of our lives that we tell ourselves.¹ The 'inner story' links inevitably with self-creation: as Glover puts it, 'My view of myself affects what I do, and is bound up with how I see my story so far.'² As a contrasting concept I employ that of 'outer story', which is not a part of Glover's conceptual framework, but a concept devised to serve the purposes of this thesis. The 'outer story' denotes the kind of stories that uphold traditional female roles and stereotypes, but which necessarily do not, as the authors analysed in this thesis will show, correspond to the individual woman's notion of her self. Thus, the development in the notion of the female self gradually nears a balance between the inner story and the outer story as the heroines become more self-aware.

My hypothesis is, then, that the female self begins as a predominantly collective self: the roles of a daughter, wife and mother are considered more pertinent to a woman than any other roles or identities. Female characters are mostly portrayed as stereotypes of the *femme fatale*, the angel in the house or the sick, dying woman. This changes little by little, and by the 1890s women are starting to be seen as individuals. But this does not completely save them from their conventional roles but lays more challenges before them. My analysis of the works of five Czech authors who are key in this context, namely Růžena Svobodová, Božena Viková Kunětická (hereafter Viková), Božena Benešová, Vítězslav Nezval and Jarmila Svatá, will demonstrate that the female self is constantly portrayed as balancing between different influences: creativity and tradition, self-affirmation and self-obliteration, self-awareness and self-deception, inner story and outer story, essential self and social self, unchanging self and fluid self. We can see these different influences affecting the way Viková places motherhood on a pedestal and Svobodová sets one of her heroines

¹ Jonathan Glover, *I the Philosophy and Psychology of Personal Identity* (London: Penguin, 1989), p. 139.

² *Ibid.*, p. 153.

in up in a convent as the self-sacrificing woman, even though both authors clearly believe that women should create a life for themselves outside the restricting views of womanhood that society readily presents them with. In Benešová's works it becomes ever more clear that the self is narratorially constructed, and that in order to have a fully functional self, the heroine must be able to balance the inner story and the outer story, that is, the demands she has for herself and the demands that society lays down for her. By the time of *Svatá* and *Nezval*, the female self, separated from stereotypes, is more pronounced than ever before, but even this self is linked with family histories and fairy-tales, that is, tales that support collectivism. Nevertheless, *Svatá*'s and *Nezval*'s heroines are ready to question these stories and influence the ending of their own stories. Their selves are not tied to the role of the housewife or mother, nor do they have hopelessly idealistic views on life. One can detect, then, a change in the way female characters are portrayed from the 1890s to the 1940s: female characters become more and more curious about self-exploration as well as exploration of the world. By the 1940s, their stories no longer revolve around their immediate surroundings or the immediate community but the characters attempt to reconcile themselves with their own psyches and the world that needs to be discovered and explored. Indeed, 'exploration' is the key word here: from *Svobodová* to *Svatá*, the heroine refuses confinement at home, in a convent, in a village community, in the restricted view of femininity. Her self is no longer based solely on the expectations of others but on her free explorations of possibilities in life. The development of the female self traced in this thesis offers, then, a view of a self that turns inwards, that harnesses strength from her inner story, but also a self that turn outwards at the same time: a self that is ready to explore the inner world of her mind as well as the outer world of her surroundings.

Svobodová's and Viková's works represent the challenge of balancing between creativity and tradition, and they are amongst the most prominent Czech *fin-de-siècle* women writers who concentrated on portraying the challenges of woman's life but also the ways in which women could harness their creativity and live independently of men. It is indeed their linking of female self with creativity, and not marriage or romantic love, which makes the works of Svobodová and Viková unparalleled in Czech literature of the time. Benešová, on the other hand, serves as the counterpart to Svobodová's and Viková's idealism, as she explores the difficulties of self-affirmation and holds that being true to one's self can come at the cost of one's life. Finally, the Avantgardists Nezval and Svatá show that, unlike Benešová suggests, one does not need to hold on to only one version of one's self but that a fluid understanding of the self is the most constructive of them all. Thus, with the help of these five authors we are able to see a development from a sense of self which struggles with comporting herself (her inner story) with society's demands (outer story) to a self which does not subjugate itself outright to social molding but is able to blur productively the boundaries between herself and society. In addition to this, my thesis explores the themes of motherhood, marriage as prison, female creativity as a source of empowerment and the relationship between man and woman portrayed as the relationship between the subjugator and the subjugated. This means that I will employ material from various disciplines, including social history, psychology, art history and literary studies to name a few.

In order to analyse the works of my chosen authors as comprehensively as possible, I have chosen to employ the method of close reading, in which the interpretation of a particular text is formed by paying close attention to vocabulary and ideas that emerge from the text itself. That said, I will also connect each analysed text

to its historical and cultural context, as well as to ideas supplied by other, both Czech and non-Czech, authors. I will also draw connections between my conclusions about the five authors and other studies regarding their works. Literary scholars like Libuše Heczková and Robert B. Pynsent have written a great deal about Czech women writers, notably about Svobodová, Víková and Benešová. Heczková's commentary on these authors concentrates mainly on their cultural influences and includes only little close reading of their works. Pynsent, however, has decidedly included profound textual analyses in his articles on these authors but he has not treated them together and contrasted them with each other. In addition to these recent accounts on Svobodová, Víková and Benešová, I will also look at the contemporary literary critic F.X. Šalda's take on the forementioned three authors. Thus far these three authors' works have not been studied together, even though, as I will demonstrate in this thesis, they share and discuss similar ideas about womanhood in their works. Nezval's writing, on the other hand, belongs to the best and most studied in the area of Czech literature, although one of his most intriguing prose works, *Valérie a týden divů* (*Valerie and Her Week of Wonders*, 1945) has not aroused as much interest as his poetry. In comparison to the other authors, Svatá is certainly the least known and her works have not received any mentions in works on the Czech Avantgarde or Czech women's literature. Her novel *Sedm kamarádů slečny Vivian* (*The seven friends of Miss Vivian*, 1938) has not been studied before in connection to Nezval's *Valérie* even though there are striking similarities in the way these two authors of the same Prague Avantgarde circle treat a young woman's journey to adulthood.

As can be seen above, my chosen methodology for this analysis is that of literary comparison and contrast. Svobodová and Víková both demonstrate a different side of *Fin-de-siècle* feminism and its aftermath, and comparing these two authors

will help to clarify certain aspects in their works; for example, Svobodová's take on the character of the female artist will shed a new light on Vlková's preoccupation with motherhood on the ultimate form of female creativity. Benešová continues to study the theme of women in society in their footsteps. Nezval and Svatá complement each other through their similar, yet not completely identical themes and motifs. In my selection of writers, Nezval is the only male author. This is not to claim that no other male author before or during his time would have been able to examine the many aspects of the female self.³ However, Nezval's *Valérie* is quite exceptional in its portrayal of a heroine as assertive as Valérie is, a heroine whose transition from adolescence to adulthood is not thwarted by a tragic ending or an ending that places her right back in her traditional place in society. This makes Nezval stand out in the midst of other male authors who set out to portray female suffering in unjust society but do not necessarily make their female characters other than victims of their circumstances or of male obsession with power.

Although the development of the female self in literature from the 1890s onwards is often linked with the story of emancipation and greater freedom for women to decide for themselves, I will show that in the Czech case, the deceptively straightforward story of female emancipation becomes tangled with many other, often more profound themes; for example, ideas of self-preservation and self-deception, insecurity in regard to an uncertain future, and disappointment with one's self as well as with one's lovers and friends. The main question will not be whether the heroines are emancipated at the end of their stories, but whether they are able to strike a balance between their own expectations of life and others' expectations of them. All the heroines examined in this thesis strive towards different degrees of self-fulfilment

³ For example, the portrayals of women in the works of Alois and Vilém Mrštík, Ivan Olbracht, Jan Neruda and Karel Hynek Mácha will be discussed later in this thesis.

and not all these degrees are linked to emancipation. I will argue that true selfhood lies in the productive relationship between the inner story and outer story, and not in the one specific way individual women end up finding self-fulfilment. Thus, my approach differs fundamentally from the brand of feminist literary criticism which concentrates mainly on the emancipatory or ‘writing against the grain’ aspect of women’s literature or literature about women (a Czech example of which would be, for example, the work of Jan Matonoha⁴). This does not mean, however, that I would disregard the feminist aspects in the works of my chosen authors or reject the women’s movement as a cultural context for those works; I only wish to take the discussion a step (or indeed, several steps) further from those aspects and demonstrate that positive literary representations of a female self do not necessarily go hand in hand with feminism, feminist literary theory or the aspirations of the women’s movement. An example of such a study which questions the common emancipatory narrative is Marea Mitchell and Dianne Osland’s thorough and well-presented study, *Representing Women and Female Desire from Arcadia to Jane Eyre* (2005), which shows that even though at different periods in literary history there were groundbreaking literary portrayals of female desire, this does not mean that these portrayals would have necessarily formed a unified emancipatory narrative with a consistent, shared view of female desire.⁵ This is what I wish to underline in my analysis, too; although my chosen authors’ works do draw up a certain development in the portrayal of the female self, they still display significant differences in portraying that self, and understanding this development simply as a tale of woman’s journey to a particular brand of self-fulfilment would be a distortion and a reductive

⁴ More precisely, I am referring to Jan Matonoha’s *Psaní vně logocentrismu: diskurz, gender, text* (Prague: Academia, 2009), in which Matonoha assesses mainly French feminist discourses in relation to a selection of contemporary Czech authors.

⁵ Marea Mitchell and Dianne Osland, *Representing Women and Female Desire from Arcadia to Jane Eyre* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005).

interpretive framework. Yet I do not hesitate to treat the women's movement as a source of my authors' inspiration for their works. For example, Viková is profoundly influenced by the Woman Question even though she attempts to set herself apart from women's clubs and underlines the importance of one woman's determination to live an independent life outside active women's movement.

The Czech Women's Movement, Self-Realisation, and the Inner Story

On a par with other European women's movements, the Czech women's movement constructed their the agenda around woman's self-fulfilment, either through conventional roles or outside them, attempting to encourage women to become more involved in politics and public life. Yet there were many opinions and views on how far women's self-fulfilment should be taken. As the cultural historian and literary critic Chris Weedon argues about German *fin-de-siècle* feminism:

At the turn of the century and whatever their political persuasion, all women interested in emancipation shared a common humanist aspiration to realize themselves fully as individuals. There was, however, no consensus in the bourgeois women's movement on whether the realization of full humanity for women implied difference from men. The general political climate was intensely hostile to women's emancipation and conservative bourgeois feminists were content to accept dominant assumptions about gender difference and to argue that women needed access to education and the professions in order to better to fulfil their primary roles as wives and mothers.⁶

In the Bohemian lands, too, the question of whether marriage should be viewed as a sort of prison became one of the main concerns of the women's movement. The literary critic Andrea Fischerová claims that in the early nineteenth century, a balance

⁶ Chris Weedon, 'The Limits of Patriarchy: German Feminist Writers', in Helena Forsås-Scott (ed), *Textual Liberation – European Feminist Writing in the Twentieth Century* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 74–99 (p. 75).

of a kind between woman's self-realisation and family life had already been struck, at least for a short time and at least for a very specific group of women writers, namely the patriots: 'The first half of the nineteenth century [...] becomes an island of a kind in Czech literature, when the female patriot was given a room of her own for writing, when it did not occur to the male patriot to shut woman into the attic and when woman, [...] was allowed to perform two roles in life, [those of] a writer and a housewife.'⁷ Needless to say, a woman's self-realisation was allowed space within marriage only when it was considered to benefit the nation, to create great literature that would help to build Czech culture. This stance towards women's literature changed, however, shortly before the turn of the century.

This theme of female self-realisation and its potential problems is prominent in the works of the two renowned Czech female authors of the *Fin de siècle*, namely Růžena Svobodová (1868–1920) and Božena Viková Kunětická (1862–1934), who wrote extensively on women's life, or, what I would be tempted to call 'the female condition' – a condition which restricts woman's access to public life, confining her to become the angel in the house in one way or another. To an extent, Viková supports the female condition by promoting the idea of sacred motherhood as both woman's duty and privilege in her works. Her writing also fits the category of patriotic writing described above, since her views on motherhood supported the view of woman as the mother of the nation, or, more concretely, the mother of the nation's future citizens. On the other hand, Viková was critical of bourgeois marriage, which did not make her a good role model for bourgeois women. Both Svobodová and Viková questioned the housewife ideal as a stifling and suffocating role for women, but both in their individual ways, as we will see in the first chapter of this thesis. Both

⁷ Andrea Fischerová, 'Ženská literatura a teorie genderu v první polovině 19. století', in Jan Matonoha (ed), *Česká literatura v perspektivách genderu* (Prague: Akropolis/Ústav pro českou literaturu, 2010), pp. 67–77 (p. 75).

authors are idealistic in their portrayal of female emancipation; they believe that if an individual woman gathers all her strength and decides to live differently from all other women, she will also succeed in this. Svobodová's and Víková's heroines are inherently non-conformist and this sets them apart from other women in their immediate surroundings.

Svobodová and Víková were, naturally, not the only women writers of their time to shake up traditional views of women, and a counterpart to Víková's joining together nationalist and feminist ideas can be found, for example, in Gabriela Preissová's (1862–1946) works. As the feminist literary critic Iveta Jusová notes, 'most of Preissová's characters represent disadvantaged groups – the orphaned, the poor, ethnic or religious minorities [and] single mothers'.⁸ As we will see, Víková's characters in her loose trilogy *Cesta světla* (The journey of light) are also single mothers, but Víková does not treat them as a disadvantaged group. According to Jusová, Preissová excelled in portraying unsuccessful attempts at changing the social arrangement and the double standard: '[Preissová] would frequently choose to sympathetically portray female characters striving to escape the roles prescribed to them by the social arrangement, but would rarely let them succeed.'⁹ The most prominent difference, then, between these two nationalist-feminist authors of the same period, Preissová and Víková, is that the latter would let her heroines get away with transgression of the social order, the sexual double standard and becoming a single mother. Thus, Víková presented a new hope for women in her works; they are not a part of a disadvantaged group which never succeeds in building a life of their own but they are more or less individuals to be respected and not pitied. As we will

⁸ Iveta Jusová, 'Gabriela Preissová's Women-Centered Texts: Subverting the Myth of the Homogenous Nation', in *The Slavic and East European Journal*, 49, 1 (2008), 63–78 (p. 65).

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

demonstrate later, Viková is rather an optimist than a pessimist in regard to woman's ability to change her life.

In the second chapter, we see this challenging of woman's social role change in the works of Božena Benešová (1873–1936), who shows us the influence of the conflict between the feminist ideals that refuse to disappear and the society that refuses to change, on an individual young woman. Whereas in Svobodová's and Viková's works change is always for the better, in Benešová, change, and the uncertainty that goes with it, is frightening. In Benešová's works, the realisation of a female self is challenged by social conventions as well as idealistic views on human nature. In this world, there is not much hope for the intellectual young woman, whose ideas about self-fulfilment do not fit the general description of family life. In contrast to Viková's and Svobodová's idealistic treatment of the theme of female emancipation and self-fulfilment, Benešová's works serve as a reminder of the fact that not all women in the times of the strong women's movement could hold their ground when it came to standing against gender inequality or social expectations. She points out the inherent contradictions in female existence at the beginning of the twentieth century; the awareness of possibilities at hand and the fear to take up these possibilities and strive for the fulfilment of one's self. Benešová's heroines are essentially fatalist, which sets them sharply apart from the heroines of the third and final chapter, which examines the works of the Avantgardists Jarmila Svatá (1903–1964) and Vítězslav Nezval (1900–1958). Svatá and Nezval take us to the very depths of the human mind and show that, perhaps, a consistent sense of self, or personal destiny, is not even possible in a world that confuses human beings with competing and contradictory life stories, fairy-tales and other narratives. Svatá and Nezval also demonstrate that young woman's initiation into the adult world can be hampered by

the fact that she has been living in a fairy-tale world, without any knowledge of anything else. On the other hand, they also show that change and fluidity of boundaries between dream and waking, girlhood and adulthood can bring something positive with it; a self which is not bound to particular roles or expectations.

The Female Self Before 1890: Housewives and Fallen Maidens

This thesis concentrates on the female self after 1890, but this is not to claim that authors before the *Fin de siècle* would have neglected the theme of female self, or rather, its obliteration. In fact, the history of literature teems with female characters prone to lose their selves: through marriage, abuse, physical or mental illness and suicide. Such obliteration of the female self will be studied in this thesis, too, namely in chapter one (Svobodová) and chapter two (Benešová), and the fluid self will be discussed at more length in chapter three. One can, to be sure, point to examples from earlier Czech literature that exhibit a female character's wavering sense of self, or even 'non-self'. For example, one of the most famous of nineteenth-century Czech novels, Božena Němcová's *Babička* (The Grandmother, 1855) has a female character, Viktorka, who loses her mind (and her self) when she runs away with an unknown soldier – her lost self is the punishment for her abandoning convention and her community. The only female character in *Babička* who has a strong sense of self and her place in the world is the eponymous main character, the matriarch Grandmother. On the other hand, Němcová also treats marriage as a loss of identity, a step towards 'non-self' in her short story 'Čtyry doby' (The four seasons, 1855). In contrast to the rural idyll represented in *Babička*, the short story takes a critical stance towards marriage and thus contributes to the idea of marriage as a prison, which was later taken up by Svobodová and Víková in their works. Indeed, the way Němcová brings

down the illusion of romantic love in marriage reminds one greatly of Svobodová's short stories.

Apart from Němcová, also other writers of the early and mid-nineteenth century portrayed female characters with a wavering sense of self. The main female character of Karel Hynek Mácha's epic poem *Máj* (May, 1836), Jarmila, is more a part of Nature than a human being and mainly constituted by her love for the robber Vilém and by the painful experience of being seduced by his father. It seems that Jarmila is also being punished for her impermissible love for an outcast and her unwillingness to let go of this love, which has turned into an obsession and is making her an outcast too. Women who step out of their role as wives and mothers are destined suffer, but suffering also takes place in those restricted roles, as Karolína Světlá demonstrates in her *Vesnický román* (A Village Novel, 1867), in which the unhappy wife slowly loses her mind in a loveless marriage into which she has forced herself. Světlá constructs the main female character, *rychtářka* ('reeve's wife' as she is called throughout the novel) as an example of a woman whose status in society is only determined by her marriage. The *rychtářka* is painfully aware of this unjust female condition and this awareness contributes to her unhappiness (which springs originally from the fact that her husband does not love her), thus demonstrating that the story of her inner self is in a radical conflict with the outer story of her surroundings and this conflict eventually leads her to insanity. In this, the ending of Světlá's novel can be compared to the ending of Benešová's short story, 'Hladina' (The Surface, 1917). Female insanity or emotional instability is also present in Jan Neruda's short story, 'U tří lilií' (At the Three Lilies, 1878), in which the young female character attempts to dance the death away, and the erotic tension between the narrator and the young woman is based on the fact that she is half-deliriously

mourning the death of her mother – but the young woman remains an enigma, a character which neither the male main character nor the reader fully understands. In these works, then, woman is linked with mental illness, fluidity of the self and change of moods – woman is as volatile, unstable and changing as Nature herself. The art historian Bram Dijkstra confirms this idea of woman as a part of Nature in his study of the *Fin-de-siècle* art and connects it to the common view of woman as imitator and Nature as something that man could easily mould and cultivate according to his will:

Woman in general was heading for another cultural ‘fall’, which, toppling her from her place among the household gods of bourgeois society, would first drive her out of the window of domesticity into the trees and the dubious freedom of “nature” and, finally, by the end of the nineteenth century, straight into the primordial lair of the devil.¹⁰

Once she had been taken by force, she was likely to submit dutifully, for it was part of woman’s nature to imitate incessantly. Her passive nature made her incapable of original thought or action, but she had a protean capacity to take on whatever form she was given to imitate.¹¹

This common notion of the time of woman as imitator is challenged by Svobodová and Vlková in their works where they set up their own versions of woman as creator as opposed to their mothers’ generation of selfless angels in the house.

Yet woman’s selflessness was a notion that was difficult to strike down, since it was also connected to the rise of modern psychiatry in the nineteenth century. The literary critic and historian Elaine Showalter has studied what she calls the ‘female malady’, a general view of madness or mental illness as being more often a part of women’s life than men’s, a view that Showalter sees as prevailing in English culture from 1830 to 1980. According to Showalter, the linkage between women and madness was not merely considered a medical fact, but it was part of an overarching

¹⁰ Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity – Fantasies of the Fin-de-siècle Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 4.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

cultural framework that also influenced not only social policies but art and literature, too. Showalter's argument is that female madness was associated with the sexuality and essential nature of women.¹² Women as the weaker sex were seen to be more vulnerable to mental illness. Male mental illness was only discovered on a large scale after the First World War and the studies on shell shock. On the other hand, Showalter does not see confinement in a medical institution entirely as a negative circumstance: 'Sickness presents a tempting escape from the contingency of the feminine role; it offers a respectable reason to be alone, and real, if perverse, opportunities for self-development.'¹³ This would fit in what I am going to argue about the 'inner story' vs. 'outer story' dynamic, since sickness or confining oneself in a quiet location could be seen as an attempt to separate oneself and one's inner story from the restricting outer story of one's surroundings. Accordingly, the main character Olga's confinement in a convent in Svobodová's short story 'Přetížený klas' (The burdened ear of corn, 1896) could be seen as an escape from the 'contingency of the female role' although her confinement quickly leads to death rather than to any positive self-development. Yet Showalter's theory that a woman's excluding herself from society could constitute an extreme act of self-preservation and an attempt to solve one's social situation points to the fact that women had begun to take lives to their own hands, in however awkward manner.

The Fin-de-siècle Self, Creativity and the Decadents

The first chapter of this thesis, which discusses the works of Svobodová and Víková, weighs the relationship between the self and creativity. For Svobodová, creativity is

¹² Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady – Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830–1980* (London: Virago, 1987), p. 7.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

conventionally linked to the artist, whereas in Viková, creativity is mostly exhibited in motherhood. Both authors, though, carefully avoid or, indeed, write against the idea of the (predominantly male) artist as introduced by the Czech Decadents at the turn of the century. Decadents were unconventional individualists, as the art historian and theorist Petr Wittlich argues: ‘The newly discovered modern “individual” fought against the sexual taboos of bourgeois liberal society and tried to resolve the social problems of contemporary industrial society by echoing anarchist doctrines.’¹⁴ One could argue that Svobodová and Viková, too, fought against sexual taboos, but they clearly separated themselves from the cultural pessimism and hedonism of the Decadents. Neither did they take in the *fin-de-siècle* catastrophism that Decadents were so fond of. In a sense, both Svobodová and Viková were idealists who liked to believe that, especially in regard to women’s emancipation, society was advancing towards a better future.

The Decadents’ attitude to women was ambiguous, as Robert B. Pynsent notes: ‘Decadent man appeared to be frightened of the emancipation of women and so distorted the conception of the liberation of woman into a conception of the dominance of woman. For the *fin-de-siècle* man female sexuality became more and more an object of revulsion, but also fear. At the same time, however, men supported “free love”, votes for women and degrees for women at the universities.’¹⁵ Perhaps one of the most illustrative Czech examples of this ambiguous view of women is the Decadent poet Karel Hlaváček’s (1874–1898) *Mstivá kantiléna* (Vindictive cantilena, 1898), which borrows the character of Manon from Abbé Prévost, exploring the

¹⁴ Petr Wittlich, ‘The Self: Destruction or Synthesis, Two Problems of Czech Art at the Turn of the Century’, in Robert Pynsent (ed) *Decadence and Innovation – Austro-Hungarian Life and Art at the Turn of the Century* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1989), pp. 82–7 (p. 85).

¹⁵ Robert B. Pynsent, ‘Conclusory Essay: Decadence, Decay and Innovation’, in Robert B. Pynsent (ed) *Decadence and Innovation – Austro-Hungarian Life and Art at the Turn of the Century*, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1989), pp. 111–248 (p. 112).

female erotic from both sides, Manon as both a subject and object of sexual desire.¹⁶ Decadent art was also self-centred, and as Pynsent argues, Decadent literature was essentially art for the artist, the great creator and experimenter.¹⁷ Svobodová and Viková set their works against this selfish and hedonist view of an artist; to them, the true artist is a woman who does not reach for the fulfilment of her creativity by trampling other people. Especially for Viková, true creativity is the complete opposite of the hedonistic and egoistic creativity of the Decadents whom she outright mocks in her trilogy *Cesta světla* (The journey of light). Moreover, Svobodová's and Viková's works are aimed at the artist, or written for their fellow female writers: their main readership is predominantly, although not limited to, the Czech middle class. Their works are a compelling study of the modern individual who can be altruistic as well as true to her self; let the Decadents keep their dandies and other hedonists. At the same time, Svobodová and Viková aspire to discover their own feminist ideal world, a world in which female creativity would be as highly valued as male creativity.

Of the two authors, it is Viková who opposes Decadent thinking most strongly in her works: although she places high value on motherhood, she does not make her women into sexless Madonnas. As Showalter asserts, 'women reappear as objects of value in decadent writing only when they are desexualised through maternity or thoroughly aestheticized, stylized, and turned into icons or fetishes.'¹⁸ Svobodová and Viková both write against this way of reducing female characters into icons or stylized pictures although this does not mean that they would not mould their characters according to certain ideas about womanhood. While Svobodová's ideal woman seems to be the unmarried, independent female artist, Viková's ideal woman

¹⁶ As it happens, also Nezval acquainted himself with the character of Manon, since he adapted Prévost's novel for Emil František Burian's theatre in 1940.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 143.

¹⁸ Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy – Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (London: Bloomsbury, 1991), p. 170.

may be independent of men but she still cherishes the idea of (single) motherhood. Yet both authors' ideas of womanhood may be contrasted with the idea of the New Woman, which began to emerge in English and American literature at the turn of the century. Originally an invention of the feminist writer Sarah Grand, the New Woman had multifarious guises according to the literary critic Sally Ledger: the wild woman, the glorified spinster, the advanced woman, the odd woman, the modern woman, Novissima, the shrieking sisterhood and the revolting daughters.¹⁹ Like their fellow women writers in England and America, Svobodová and Víková were interested in the character of a wholly untraditional woman who attempted to break free from the patterns that society had set out for her. In this, Svobodová and Víková approached the theme of 'society versus individual', which was later taken more meticulously on by Benešová.

The Social Self and the Essential Self

Chapter two discusses the works of Benešová and explores the relationship between the social self and the essential self in her works. As a working definition for these two types of selves I use the distinction made by the Danish philosopher Dan Zahavi, who argues thus about the social self: 'we achieve self-awareness by adopting the perspective of the other towards ourselves [...] one cannot be a self on one's own, but only together with others.'²⁰ On what I would like to call the essential self, Zahavi notes: 'The sense of self is an integral and fundamental part of conscious life, which

¹⁹ Sally Ledger, *The New Woman – Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de siècle* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), pp. 2–3.

²⁰ Dan Zahavi, *Subjectivity and Selfhood – Investigating the First-Person Perspective* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006), p. 2.

the infant is already in possession from birth onward.²¹ To make the distinction clear: the social self is born through interaction with other(s), whereas the essential self exists from the very beginning and is born outside or without human interaction. In Benešová's works, these two selves attempt to survive in a world that does not necessarily support the idea of a female self to the very end: in this world, it is suitable for a young woman to gain knowledge about herself and life in general, but in the end, she is supposed to sacrifice all that upon the higher altar of family life. It is no wonder, then, that in their quest to avoid the trap of quiet, self-sacrificing family life, Benešová's heroines fall into the trap of self-deception; this is an example of a clash between the inner story, clouded with self-deception (which the heroines tell themselves about themselves) and the outer story (society's demands).

This theme of 'self versus society' or 'individual versus community' has, according to the sociologist Norbert Wiley, dominated the history of humanity. In Wiley's understanding, 'The power balance between self and society has been one of alternation. Society dominated at the phylogenetic birth. The self became considerably stronger in classical Greece. Society (and god) took back much of that power in the Christian Middle Ages. Early industrialization produced another enlarged self. And later industrialization again gave the dominance to society.'²² Indeed, Benešová renegotiates this power that society has over individual lives, asking whether it is worth belonging to such unity that allows so little freedom to its members and expects them to succumb to rigid models of life.

Benešová's two short stories from the 1910s, which I will discuss in the second chapter, do not uphold the feminist ideal in such a manner as Svobodová's and Víková's works do, since, as argued above, she is more conscious of the unyielding

²¹ Ibid., p. 2

²² Norbert Wiley, 'The History of the Self: From Primates to Present', in *Sociological Perspectives*, 37, 4 (1994), 527–45 (p. 543).

power of the repressive side of society. Benešová's works exhibit a distinct sense of human psychology and she sculpts her characters according to her understanding of the realities of human life. While Svobodová and Víková showed their female characters advancing towards emancipation and perhaps even winning the battle with the constraints of society, Benešová does not believe that ideals could conquer traditions, or the essential self could overcome the social self. As Glover argues, the governing principle of self-creation is that we keep to the material we have: 'Self-creation is not like the instantaneous transformations of magic, but more like sculpting a piece of wood, respecting the constraints of natural shape and grain.'²³ Like Benešová some seventy years earlier, Glover also makes the distinction between our personal identities and the social role, the social self that we assume in order to be a part of society, claiming that personal identity (or the essential self) is not completely lost even when it is covered by a social self: 'it is an illusion to think that we are utterly malleable, submitting entirely to social moulding.'²⁴ Sometimes, though, as in the works of Benešová, the individual has to pay the price for not submitting entirely to social moulding.

In a sense, Benešová's notion of the self fits the literary critic Irving Howe's argument about one of the ways of depicting the self in literature: 'The self becomes a lens of scrutiny with which to investigate psychological states, and is especially helpful for the study of anxiety, a condition that grows in acuteness as awareness of self increases.'²⁵ As we shall see later, Benešová's characters do become more anxious when their self-awareness reaches a certain level of pertinence. They may also become more emancipated, yet this is not a positive brand of emancipation but rather a negative brand, which removes them from the surrounding world completely.

²³ Glover, p. 136.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

²⁵ Irving Howe, 'The Self in Literature', in *Salmagundi*, 90/91, 1991, 56–77 (p. 59)

This offers a sharp contrast to the optimism exhibited in, for example, Svobodová's and Viková's works, and points to the fact that discovering one's self does not always result in only discovering the strengths in one's self but also the weaknesses. And it is Benešová's portrayal of this, one could even say, 'existential' anxiety that her works so essential for this study of the female self. In this, Benešová's works anticipate the next phase in the portrayal of the self, namely the works of Nezval and Svatá that take their readers towards an even more introspective way of writing out the self.

Freud, the Self and the Unconscious

Freud's ideas gained prominence in Czech cultural life only in the 1930s, mainly through the Czech Surrealist movement. As we will see in the third chapter, Nezval's works exhibit a clear understanding of the power of the human mind; the way our minds tell us stories about ourselves whether we are awake or asleep. Nezval's works confirm what the literary critic James McFarlane wrote about the foundations of Modernism some forty years after Nezval had written *Valérie a týden divů* (Valerie and Her Week of Wonders, written in 1935, published only in 1945), his perhaps best-known prose work: 'human nature is not to be contained by vast and exhaustive inventories of naturalistic detail arranged and sorted under prescriptive heads but instead is elusive, indeterminate, multiple, often implausible, infinitely various and essentially irreducible.'²⁶ Nezval indeed sees the self as a meeting point of various influences and sketches, never completely rational components; fairy-tales and other literary traditions, family stories and desires that only our dreams reveal to us. In this, his ideas about the self exhibiting itself fully only in dreams comes close to what

²⁶ James McFarlane, 'The Mind of Modernism', in Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane (eds.), *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature 1890–1930*, 5th edn (London: Penguin, 1991), pp. 71–93 (p. 81).

Pynsent writes about the Decadent self: ‘As dreams are for Freud always egoistic, so for the Decadents they are expressions of the complete self unrestrained by the bourgeois.’²⁷ Moreover, Nezval lets his female main character in *Valérie* grow and develop during the story, thus hampering the Freudian view of woman, as described here by the feminist writer Betty Friedan: ‘Freud saw women only in terms of their sexual relationship with men. But in all those women in whom he saw sexual problems, there must have been very severe problems of blocked growth, growth short of full human identity – an immature, incomplete self.’²⁸ Perhaps the most famous of Freud’s female patients, Dora, and Freud’s account of her treatment, proves that putting too much weight on sexual problems will sometimes let other problems remain uncovered.²⁹ While sexuality is a prominent theme in *Valérie*, Nezval is not Freudian enough to let it dominate over other self-related themes; discovery of one’s sense of self, sense of belonging, sense of one’s (family and personal) history. Thus, *Valérie* is essentially a novel about growing up, a story of initiation to the adults’ world instead of a story of a young woman staying forever as a *femme enfant* or an immature self. In Nezval, a fundamental part of adulthood (or selfhood) is the skill to construct one’s own story from already existing stories; to become an adult is to become aware of one’s powers of self-creation, self-invention.

Svatá, another Avantgardist writer, also asserts in her novel *Sedm kamarádů slečny Vivian* (The seven friends of Miss Vivian, 1938), that stories, whether fiction or fact, are a significant part of human life, and help to construct the self. On the other hand, the conventional teachings of these stories and tales have to be taken with a grain of salt since they are often employed to show young women their place in

²⁷ Robert B. Pynsent, *Questions of Identity – Czech and Slovak Ideas of Nationality and Personality* (London: Central European University Press, 1994), p. 146.

²⁸ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* [1963] (London: Penguin, 2010), p. 92.

²⁹ Freud’s case history of Dora was written already in 1901, but published only in 1905 under the title ‘Fragment to an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria’.

society. Indeed, Svatá's and Nezval's fiction marks the ending of the era of the 'self-sacrificing' woman who will lose her self to become a building block for her family. Even though the female characters of Svatá and Nezval grow out of their essential selves, they do not submit to the social moulding.

My analysis of Svatá's and Nezval's works broadens the concept of the inner story. This is manifold; on one hand, Glover appears to believe that the inner story is 'the truth' about an individual's life, but, on the other hand, the inner story is about self-interpretation, and interpretation is always an affected activity. If the inner story is about personal truth, conforming to expectations is, according to Glover, a false activity, since 'we feel that, in conforming to what people expect, we are acting out a piece of fiction'.³⁰ Conforming to expectations is giving control to others and being false towards one's self, whereas constructing the inner story is an individual's way of controlling and building his/her own life. Thus, the inner story becomes the 'truth' to whoever is constructing, or writing, it about him/herself. This realisation helps us to understand the dynamics of Svatá's and Nezval's fiction and the way in which Valérie and Vivian challenge the stories that others are expecting them to assume without question. Yet, by doing this, they are not exactly uprooting themselves from tradition or losing their sense of belonging altogether: it is as if their sense of tradition and belonging changes into a new version that does not control their lives as much as the previous generations' lives were controlled.

It would seem, then, that the conflict between inner story and outer story, waged between the 1890s and the 1940s in Czech literature, requires a balance of demands: on one hand, all the heroines in the works discussed in the following chapters are

³⁰ Ibid., p. 148.

demanding towards themselves; their inner stories often aim at a self-fulfilling life or at least a life which they could call their own. On the other hand, the heroines are also weighed down by society's demands and they find themselves negotiating the boundaries between their own aspirations and those aspirations which society holds over their heads. The main question is whether it is worth struggling against the outer demands, the outer story, even at the cost of one's wellbeing? Can independent, creative life satisfy the need for romantic love (as prescribed by society)? And finally, is tradition worth bringing down for something new one does not fully comprehend? These questions come up again and again in my chosen authors' works, and are fundamental to their notion of the female self.

Chapter 1: '*Passion is like acid*' – The Self and Strong Emotion in the Works of Růžena Svobodová and Božena Viková Kunětická

By the turn of the century, the Woman Question had become a target of debate both in the Czech press and literature. The debate pulled in different directions, ranging from criticism on contemporaneous form of marriage and the double standard to prostitution as the sign of moral decay.³¹ Women's emancipation, not surprisingly, formed a large part of the debate, and especially the view that women should be

³¹ For literature on the subject, see Libuše Heczková, *Příšící Minervy – Vybrané kapitoly z dějin české literární kritiky* (2009); Marie L. Neudorfllová, *České ženy v 19. století* (1999) and *Reflexe a sebereflexe ženy v české národní elitě 2. poloviny 19. století*, ed. by Milan Vojáček (2007). Also Robert B. Pynsent's 'The Liberation of Woman and Nation: Czech Nationalism and Women Writers of the *Fin de Siècle*' (in *The Literature of Nationalism – Essays on East European Identity*, ed. by Robert B. Pynsent [Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996], pp. 83–155), sheds light on the various treatments of the Woman Question in the late nineteenth-century Bohemia.

economically independent and that they should have the right to their own social status, independent from man, was discussed in magazines like *Ženský obzor*, *Ženské listy* and *Ženská revue*. The question of woman's emancipation was also strongly present in the works of Růžena Svobodová (1868– 1920) and Božena Viková Kunětická (1862–1934, hereafter Viková) who connected this question with female creativity. They considered creativity or procreation the only way through which a (predominantly middle-class) woman could construct a resilient sense of self. In order to do this, woman had to free herself from man and from distracting strong emotions connected to that relationship.

Of these two authors Viková was more radical a feminist. In fact, she was a well-known feminist in turn-of-the-century Bohemia, a writer for whom the lot of women was the chief 'social question'. Apart from writing plays, novels, essays, short stories, travel books and usually polemic essays, she was also active in politics. Viková was the first female deputy to be elected to the Bohemian Diet in 1912 though she was never able to take her seat, and in the new Czechoslovakia she was a senator for the right-wing National Democrats. The historian Melissa Feinberg asserts that this was because the Bohemian governor declared Viková's election invalid although she is not able to give any more details about reasons behind the governor's decision.³² Nevertheless, Viková was the most influential representative of their brand of Czech feminism that put motherhood at the centre of their politics of the right of women independently to fulfill themselves. As the literary critic Libuše Heczková notes, 'In her speeches and articles, [Viková] links biological motherhood with its symbolic patriotic content and with (at least verbally) avowed sacredness, and, thus, creating a woman who can be independent of man merely by her sex; her biological,

³² Melissa Feinberg, *Elusive Equality – Gender, Citizenship, and Limits of Democracy in Czechoslovakia, 1918–1950* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006), p. 28.

social (gender) determination with motherhood, which until then had determined woman's social status, becomes her individual seal.³³

Svobodová, on the other hand, did not assume as straightforward an attitude towards the Women Question or, indeed, motherhood, as Viková. According to the literary critic and historian Jarmila Mourková, Svobodová's first two works *Přetížený klas* (The burdened ear of corn, 1896) and *Jíva/Ztroskotano* (The sallow/Wrecked, 1896) demonstrate that the author was not impressed by the women's movement's attempt to become the mouthpiece for 'all women': 'as long as woman herself is not aware of the reasons for her lack of freedom, as long as she does not aspire to become an equal member of society, a real companion of man also in the spiritual world, then all external efforts for equality fall flat.'³⁴ We will come back to Svobodová's aspiration for 'true roots' of feminism later in this chapter.

Despite the differences in their attitudes to women's movement, the most recurrent themes in these two authors' works were the wrongs that society imposed on women, criticism of marriage and the sexual double standard. A predominant theme is the interconnection between woman's sense of self and strong emotions. Both authors consider strong emotions harmful to the self, that is, to the unity of woman's self (with the exception of love for art or for one's child, as we will establish later). This is because both authors view the relationship between woman and man as a power relationship, in which one party (usually the woman) is subjugated to the other. In their works, both authors question the concept of romantic love, as well as the idea of love as positive merging of two selves. Their criticism of romantic love anticipates the thinker Irving Singer's claim, made a hundred years later, that love leads one to distorting one's self rather than merging it with the lover's self: 'As a result of their

³³ Libuše Heczková, *Píšíci Minervy – Vybrané kapitoly z dějin české literární kritiky* (Prague: Univerzita Karlova, Filozofická Fakulta, 2009), pp. 21–2.

³⁴ Jarmila Mourková, *Růžena Svobodová* (Prague: Melantrich, 1975), p. 45.

desire to merge – and it is a feeling that some people find attractive – men and women distort themselves in one respect or another. This alone justifies the doubt that love can ever be an actual merging.³⁵ Singer's 'actual merging' presupposes ideal conditions and no adjusting one's self to any expectations. In Svobodová's and Víková's fiction, such conditions only exist in one's relation to art or to one's child. The relationship between man and woman is always tainted by society's expectations and the dominant role that the man assumes. Like their contemporary, the Czech writer Helena Malířová (1877–1940), Svobodová and Víková do not believe in happy marriage. Malířová's novel *Právo na štěstí* (Right to Happiness, 1908) criticises both marrying for love and marrying for wealth and security, deeming both as inadequate basis for a successful and lasting marriage: marrying for love is foolish since love wanes away, and marrying only for wealth and security makes woman too dependant on man. Like Svobodová and Víková, Malířová does not believe in relying on other people to realise one's happiness.

It is indeed woman's dependence on man that interested Svobodová and Víková. Heczková, who has written a great deal about Czech *Fin-de-siècle* women writers in her meticulous work *Píšíci Minervy* (2009), considers both Svobodová and Víková prominent feminist writers of their time, albeit in different ways. According to Heczková, the two writers' works share a similar view of the relationship between man and woman:

The reality of conditions in which women were living, quite considerably clashed against the philosophico-aesthetic concepts which women – as modern individuals – wanted to follow. They often lived in mistrust of their own bodies, in bewilderment of sexuality which followed after wedding. There are not many examples of artistic treatment of women's fear of men in Czech literature. The fear was explicitly

³⁵ Irving Singer, *Philosophy of Love* (Cambridge, Mass; London: MIT, 2009), p. 19.

expressed in Božena Viková Kunětická's novel *Pán* and also partly by Jiří Sumín and also in a stylised manner by Růžena Svobodová.³⁶

Yet it is not only this expression of women's fear of men that brings Svobodová and Viková together – it is also the kind of female characters they create. Both writers aspire to portray 'přechodné ženy' ('transitional women') which is Svobodová's concept, and, according to Hecková, describes women who do not want to live like their mothers but do not yet know how to change their lives.³⁷ They are often confused, as Heczková notes, and do not have much knowledge of sexual matters. The concept of 'transitional women' is linked with Svobodová's feminism, as illustrated here by Heczková:

She created in her fictional work a new type of woman who was mainly inspired by Ellen Key, whom she considered a unique 'feminist' philosopher. The hyperbolic stylisations of Svobodová gave shape to a new type of feminism, which is characterised by the search for a 'more original, primary', if one could borrow the words of Šalda, 'psychic' sources for its ideas, other than can be found in progressive political realism or cultural liberalism.³⁸

This passage offers a link between Svobodová, Viková and the so-called 'difference feminism' that emphasizes a fundamental biological, spiritual and psychological difference between the sexes. The passage also mentions the Swedish feminist Ellen Key as a source of inspiration for Svobodová which provides yet another link between Svobodová and Viková, as the latter was also inspired by Ellen Key, although for different reasons than the former: Key was an ardent advocate of single women's right to motherhood and saw it as the ultimate goal of woman's life. Key also advocated state child support, on which mothers and their children could rely, making the support from a husband unnecessary. Svobodová, who was not as interested in

³⁶ Heczková, *Píšíci Minervy*, p. 244.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 251.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 223.

motherhood as Key and Viková, probably ignored this side of Key's 'philosophy' and concentrated more on the other sides of her feminist thought, namely the fact that women and men were fundamentally different, not only from biological perspective, but from a spiritual one, too. It also seems that Key's criticism of marriage and advocacy of personal freedom and individual development responded to Svobodová's views on what woman's life should ideally entail.³⁹

Heczková's account of Svobodová's 'stylised' fiction and 'primary sources' may give the impression that Svobodová does not concern herself with women's everyday life, but, in fact, her fiction assesses the wrongs that society imposes on women in a straightforward manner that nears pragmatism. Her women do not feel comfortable in their skin, in their life and they often strive to change the conditions they live in – often without any help or inspiration from women's movement or politics, or literature. Perhaps this is what Heczková means by 'original, primary' sources; Svobodová's women aspire to establish conditions under which they have the same freedom, same human rights as men. For this to happen, female characters in Svobodová's fiction first need to become self-aware, conscious of what they want to pursue in their life. This process of self-recognition is often started by strong emotions of love or sexual desire. The 'primary' or 'psychic' sources Heczková describes could then stand for knowledge of one's self – of one's dreams, goals and aspirations in life.

While Svobodová connects woman's sense of self with the realisation of dreams and aspirations, Viková's notion of womanhood, or what could be also

³⁹ One of Ellen Key's most influential works, *Love and Marriage* (English translation appeared 1911, originally published in Sweden under the title *Kärleken och äktenskapet*, 1903) shattered the grounds of bourgeois marriage as well as her work on education, *The Century of the Child* (The Swedish original *Barnets århundrade* was published in 1900, English translation appeared in 1909) had done with bourgeois education a few years earlier. It is also possible that Svobodová already read Key's works in the 1890s in which she concentrated on personal freedom.

described as her notion of woman's 'true self', is linked with desire for motherhood, as is demonstrated in the novels of her trilogy *Cesta světla*. Motherhood is the single most profound experience in a woman's life – in Viková, romantic love and sexual desire are most often symptoms of self-delusion or merely fleeting emotional states, whereas maternal love is the only real, sustainable emotion that woman can ever have. The most significant element in motherhood is that through giving birth, woman becomes a creator. Men only perceive themselves as creators in Viková's fiction but they all turn out to be liars and manipulators. True creation takes place in childbirth. This quite a turn from the contemporaneous idea that took women as decorators (or decoration), and not creators.

Woman as a creator is also found in Svobodová's fiction, but in a more direct manner – in Svobodová, one of the ways woman can build a life for herself is to become an artist, like Emma Stradenová does in *Milenky* (Lovers, 1902). In fact, for Svobodová as well, the only long-lasting and most rewarding emotion for woman is that of love for art, and artistic creation. Art is also what helps woman to discover her self – the relationship between creativity and self-recognition is not a dangerous relationship like that between man and woman, in which woman's self often gets wiped away or merged with the predominant self of the man.⁴⁰ The strong emotions connected to female creativity are not as harmful as those connected to a relationship between man and woman: woman may get carried away by creativity and motherly love, but she is always herself, and not merging into anyone else. Both Viková and Svobodová, then, criticise the predominant position of man as a creator: while Viková's notion of true creativity is dominated by her concept of sacred motherhood,

⁴⁰ The view of creativity being healthy and romantic relationships unhealthy can be also found in the Czech author Julius Zeyer's (1841–1901) works, especially in his semi-autobiographical novel *Jan Maria Plojhar* (1891). In the novel, both the eponymous main character and his lover, Caterina, are eventually so consumed by their love that they decide to die together (Jan Maria Plojhar of his illness and Caterina by taking poison).

Svobodová's model of true creativity consists of a female artist who channels her passion to art, which becomes a larger part of her life than any human relationship could ever be.

'Passion is like acid': Svobodová's 'Přetížený klas' (1896)

'Přetížený klas' is Svobodová's first published short story. The story deals with the troubled life of a young woman who seeks her place in the world and ends up confining herself in a convent. It introduces an intelligent and witty female main character, reminiscent of New Woman characters in English and American literature. At first, the main character Olga is ambitious and headstrong, not wanting to marry. Olga is also sardonically self-critical and exhibits a coolly ironic awareness of the limited options for a woman of her background: 'I am not going to stay at the conservatory! Why should I? If I do not have a phenomenal talent, what does it matter? I am pretty, I know how to chatter, I am not stupid either, so perhaps I shall get married.'⁴¹ Olga has a habit of ridiculing her suitors, calling them 'medvědi' ('bears'), that is, clumsy and dull, but this is largely to cover up her fear of marriage. She is also too well-educated to take her suitors seriously. For Olga, marriage represents intellectual death: 'I felt horror and anxiety at all those bears. They had hands like paws. For them it is enough to have a body, a straightforward woman, a cook, a housekeeper, a healthy mother for their children.'⁴² Marriage is thus seen by Olga as a repertoire of different roles which society sees fit for a woman. Olga's witty

⁴¹ 'Nezůstanu v konservatoři! Nač? Nemám-li fenomenálního nadání, tak co je po tom? Jsem hezká, povídat umím, hloupá taky nejsem, snad se vdám.' Svobodová, 'Přetížený klas' (Prague: Vilímek, 1940), p. 203.

⁴² 'Bylo mi hrozno a úzko ze všech těch medvědů. Ruce mají jako tlapy. Stačí jim tělo, žena prostá, kuchárka, hospodyně, zdravá matka jejich dětí.' Ibid., p. 226.

and intelligent character does not naturally fit any of these roles and, thus, marriage would mean self-obliteration to her.

Olga's realisation that men do not want her intellect, but an 'angel in the house', results from a discussion with one of her suitors, Balsen, who warns her: 'If you offer beautiful friendship, they will consider it eccentricity and coquetry, where you offer your soul, they will want your body.'⁴³ Here Balsen is giving critical expression to the view of the time on the impossibility of opposite-sex friendships, a view that was criticised by feminists like Svobodová and T.G. Masaryk.⁴⁴ Balsen's account intends to put Olga back in her place, to discourage her from turning against the conventional role of woman, because there is no way she can win this battle.

Even though at the beginning, Olga seems like a passionate woman and independent enough to make her way, her disappointment with her suitors makes her careful with strong emotions. She makes a clear distinction between love and passion: 'High, purified love is a work of art, like recognition of a supreme god without a face, without malice and without retribution, a god of thought and beauty. But passion is like acid. It pours over and corrodes [one].'⁴⁵ This statement makes it clear that in the world of 'Přetížený klas', strong emotions like passion will not lead anywhere; instead, they will 'corrode' or obliterate one's self. Olga's description of love as pure and god-like makes love seem something that is unattainable for human beings, or at least only meant for the relationship between human and God, not between two human beings. It is also remarkable that Olga compares love to a work of art, to something created by human being, an artist. Yet artists' works at their best often earn

⁴³ 'Tam kde nabídnete krásné přátelství, porozumějí mu jako přemrstěnosti a koketnosti, kde budete dávat duši, budou chtít tělo.' Ibid., p. 222.

⁴⁴ Masaryk wrote a great deal about the importance of companionship between man and woman. For a collection of his writings on the Woman Question, see *Masaryk a ženy*, ed. by F.F. Plamínková et. al (Prague: Ženská národní rada, 1930).

⁴⁵ 'Láska vysoká, očištěná, jako poznání nejvyššího boha bez tváře, beze zloby, a bez trestů, boha myšlenky a krásy, je umělecké dílo. Ale vášeň je jako kyselina. Polije a rozleptá.' Svobodová, p. 228.

the praise of ‘being out of this world’, which would again emphasize the connection between art and God in a similar manner as the quotation above does.

Marriage is, however, not Olga’s only option. Displeased with her daughter’s rejection of all her suitors, Olga’s mother demands she become a music teacher, a profession which Olga herself does not want to pursue. The death of her father results in Olga’s decision to become a Little Sister of Mercy and eventually she dies when nursing a fatally sick woman. In the end, then, Olga becomes a version of the ‘angel in the house’, a self-sacrificing woman. However, this is not a ‘natural’ state of hers, as the common belief about women at that time dictated, but Svobodová makes it clear that she turns this way because of her limited options.

Thus, Olga’s story becomes an inverted *Bildungsroman* of a kind; instead of going out to the world, she turns inside and chooses the life of a quiet sacrifice. As the literary critic Jane Eldridge Miller observes, the nineteenth-century *Bildungsroman* rarely had female main characters, since ‘women in the nineteenth century did not really attain maturity, as it was defined for men; rather than becoming economically independent and self-determining, maturity for women meant marriage, and thus merely moving from one state of dependence to another.’⁴⁶ Olga does not really become mature, because she hands herself over to the convent, following the rules of the closely knit community. Thus, Miller’s commentary fits Svobodová’s fiction, but does not necessarily hold true in the case of other writers: one could, for example, see

⁴⁶ Jane Eldridge Miller, *Rebel Women – Feminism, Modernism and the Edwardian Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), p. 115. It is worth noting that in Miller’s view, *Bildungsroman* is primarily a narrative of hero(ine) becoming economically independent. Only after becoming economically stable, does (s)he become socially independent or mature. What is more, Miller’s argument on Edwardian novels being ‘novels of transition’ (rebellious heroines, sexual frankness, unconventional morality etc.) fits my argument on Svobodová’s and Vlková’s fiction and their ‘transitional women’ although their some of their novels were published shortly before the Edwardian era in England began.

Viková's trilogy, discussed in the next section, as a sort of feminine *Bildungsroman* of the late nineteenth century.

In 'Přetížený klas', Svobodová goes directly against the conventions of romance, where the heroine finds self-fulfilment through love. Although Olga's story begins with her in the process of being married off, she does not become a romantic heroine. Catherine Belsey outlines the relationship between a woman's self and romance: 'The story of popular romance recounts is most commonly one of triumph, not only over outward impediments but also over merely sensual desire. The heroine finds her identity confirmed, her self-control rewarded or her values realized, as she recognizes the hero's passion and at the same time responds to his attention and care.'⁴⁷ Belsey's representation of the romantic genre takes an opposite view to Miller: marriage or at least romantic love becomes the confirmation of the heroine's identity (or self) instead of being merely her prison, hindering the heroine from becoming mature. As we can see, Olga's story opposes the plot of popular romance: her identity (or self) is not confirmed because she never finds a hero, a suitable husband. She excludes passion from her life altogether. Neither does she become an independent woman who would pursue a career as an artist or a teacher. Instead, she confines herself in a convent and makes herself a part of a larger structure, a Little Sister of Mercy whose only purpose in life is to serve others. Because Olga's story ends in her death (as reported by the narrator), it also ends with complete obliteration of her already blurred self.

It would seem, then, that Olga's story does not follow either of the two prominent genres of nineteenth-century literature: she does not attain maturity by going out to the world (*Bildungsroman*), neither does she expect to find self-

⁴⁷ Catherine Belsey, *Desire – Love Stories in Western Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), p. 22.

fulfilment in romantic love (romance). Olga wishes to avoid strong emotions like love or desire because she finds them impossible to attain or deal with, but it is another strong emotion, grief (after her father's death) that in the end takes her down the path that eventually leads to her own death. It is, then, suggested that all strong emotions are to be avoided; after all, Olga subjugates herself to convention since she cannot fight her fate of arranged marriage or other conventions of society. At the beginning of the novel it seemed that Olga's story would be a story of liberation; yet, this is all quickly turned around. Olga's story works as an inverted parallel to Viková's trilogy, discussed in the next section, which offers its readership three different versions of the story of woman's liberation. Yet Viková also avoids subjecting her heroines to strong emotion and shows how the relationship between man and woman cannot compete with the relationship between woman and her child, or, indeed, woman and creativity.

The Transitional Woman as Single Mother in Viková's Cesta světla

In the preface to her novel *Pán* (Lord and Master), Viková claims that it is not a feminist work, even though it portrays the sufferings of a woman who marries a man completely unsuitable for her. In this, Viková is being a bit devious; after all, she was a well-known Czech feminist, for whom writing was a feminist act, too.

Viková's loose trilogy, *Cesta světla* (The journey of light) consists of the following novels: *Medřická* (the name of the main character, 1897), *Vzpouza* (Revolt, 1901) and the above mentioned *Pán* (1905). The trilogy follows the paths of three distinct female characters towards their personal light, that is, towards an emancipated life. The story arch in all three works is the same: a woman becomes infatuated with a

man and loses herself in him, yet only momentarily, since at the end of the story she gains self-awareness through motherhood and abandons the man. In a sense, Viková's main characters, apart from being 'transitional women', represent a Czech version of the New Woman. The New Woman signified a departure from the model of the 'angel in the house' that had its equivalent in Czech culture, especially in the writings of Venčeslava Lužická, whose works were aimed at young women, who were to become good housekeepers and helpmates to their husbands.⁴⁸ In the light of her trilogy, Viková was certainly not against the companionship between man and woman, but she clearly did not believe that this companionship could be easily attained in a period when woman was seen as inferior to man.

Viková's ideas appear to connect sexual desire loosely with maternal desire, so convincingly she portrays the transformation of a passionate or even romantic love to a love for a child. Her ideas on the connection between emancipation of women and sacred motherhood may seem contradictory and to an extent, she may be called a bio-essentialist. Viková's views follow closely the ideas of two famous sexologists, Richard von Krafft-Ebing and Havelock Ellis. Krafft-Ebing writes about woman in his enormously influential *Psychopathia sexualis* (1886) thus: 'As a mother she divides her love between offspring and husband. Sensuality is merged in the mother's love.'⁴⁹ Ellis develops the idea of sensuality and maternity further in his *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* (1899): 'A woman may not want a lover, but may yet want a child [...] A desire for reproduction, as soon as the desire becomes instinctive, necessarily

⁴⁸ Venčeslava Lužická (1835–1920) was a Czech writer, who, apart from writing educational books for girls, also worked as an editor for magazines like *Ženský svět* and *Tetín*. Although she may have had a conservative catholic view of family life, she did take part in the endeavours of the Czech women's movement. Lužická was most likely inspired by a female educator of a previous generation, namely Magdalena Dobromila Rettigová (1785–1845) who is mainly known in Czech households because of her legendary cookbook from year 1826, but who also advocated good domestic skills for girls to make them ready for marriage and life as housewives.

⁴⁹ Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia sexualis*, rev.ed, (London: W. Heinemann, 1931), p.14.

takes on the form of the sexual impulse, for there is no other instinctive mechanism by which it can possibly express itself.⁵⁰ In Krafft-Ebing's view, sexual desire and maternal love may co-exist, whereas in Viková's and Ellis's view maternal desire is likely to dominate over sexual desire – woman's sexuality is, in their view, predominantly based on mere biological need to reproduce rather than on anything else, for example, the need for sexual pleasure. This view is clearly demonstrated in the first novel of Viková's trilogy, *Medřická*.

In *Medřická*, the young main character is a schoolmistress in a small village where she, an educated woman, is an oddity. Soon Medřická becomes involved with a young bourgeois, Bohuslav Dašek, and their relationship is disapproved of by the villagers and especially by the young man's family. At the time, schoolmistresses legally had to be celibate and they were to resign if they married. Dašek's family disapproves of Medřická, because she is from a poor clerical family and her position in the village is a mere 'učitelka' (schoolmistress). Nevertheless, Dašek's father appears to understand why his son, who has travelled and seen the world, likes her as a 'modern woman'. The young Dašek has a view similar to his father's on why Medřická appeals to him: 'He had known for a long time that he could never love Medřická other than in the way she appeared to him to be, not dependent on him, and not wishing to limit his life.'⁵¹ Medřická's independence from the village community and her refusal to act according to convention are, indeed, her main character traits. Moreover, the fact that Medřická appears in the text mainly by her last name (her first name Eliška is used only by her sister, mother and occasionally by the young Dašek) demonstrates her position as an outsider in the village community, but also her

⁵⁰ Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, 6 vols., (New York: Random House, 1942), p. 20.

⁵¹ 'Již dávno věděl, že mohl Medřickou milovati jen takovou, jakou se mu jevila, a nikdy ne jinou, která by byla od něho závislá a která by chtěla obmezovati jeho život.' Viková, *Medřická* (Prague: F. Šimáček, 1897), pp. 313–4.

equality with men (at the time, in literature at least, men were talked about by their surname, women by their forename or by surname preceded by Miss or Mrs).

Eventually, however, Dašek realises that he has been having a sexual affair with a schoolmistress who desires him but clearly does not want to marry him, and he leaves for Prague. Little does Dašek know that Medřická is pregnant: she decides not to tell him and she leaves the village, determined to find a way of living as a single mother. The novel ends here, leaving the reader to wonder how Medřická could possibly manage to lead her life as an independent, modern woman with a child. The transition from sexual desire to maternal love becomes clearer towards the end of the novel, as Dašek's character is portrayed as weak and selfish, while Medřická becomes stronger and stronger as her impending motherhood draws nearer.

Medřická resembles the ideal of an emancipated woman because she has a continuous, resilient sense of self. She does not think that marriage to Dašek could be the main purpose of her life: 'For her he was an aid to life, but not life itself. Perhaps he was light, warmth, air for her, but he was not her blood, her breath, her life-force.'⁵² In having Medřická compare Dašek to light, Viková suggests the meaning of the trilogy's title, *Cesta světla*. Light is what one sees when waking up, the illumination of self-awareness, being independent of man. Medřická's description of Dašek as 'an aid to life' turns the contemporaneous view of the relationship between man and woman upside down, since it is usually woman who is given the task of being man's appendage and not the other way around. This demonstrates the way Viková has assigned the power in the relationship of the two main characters to Medřická; she is not a weak, clinging woman who would want to marry Dašek merely for the sake of having a bourgeois family. Indeed, Medřická has more experience of

⁵² 'Byl jí pomůckou k životu, ale nebyl pro ni životem samým. Byl pro ni třeba světlem, teplem, vzduchem, ale nebyl její krví, jejím dechem, její životní silou.' Viková, *Medřická*, p. 286.

the realities of life than the spoilt Dašek who is from a wealthy family and does not need to work for his living. At the beginning of the novel, Medřická's mother dies and thus she has no parents, only a sister, who is also used to fending for herself. Against this background, it is not strange that Medřická decides to bring the child up by herself; she is well-equipped to be an independent woman, and, judging from her indifference towards her position as an outsider in the village community, does not mind living on the margins of society.

It is evident that in Viková's thinking, Medřická's motherhood is associated with heightened self-awareness, divorced from selfishness. This becomes clear in the preface to the second novel of the trilogy, *Vzpoura*, in which Viková condemns male self-centredness and associates motherhood with finding one's own way outside marriage. This was revolutionary for the times, indeed shocking for the bourgeois reader, since, according to the literary critic and historian Lynn Abrams, 'the unmarried mother was held up as the archetype of the sexual woman; a woman who was not subject to a man within marriage.'⁵³ Indeed, the female characters of Viková's *Medřická* and *Vzpoura* are sexual, since they have sexual affairs with men, but these affairs do not dominate their lives but become unnecessary when the female characters become mothers.

The main character of *Vzpoura*, Milča, resembles Medřická: she, too, is from a poor family (only this time working class) and since her father's death she has supported her family together with her mother, by mending bed linen for a nearby laundry. In order to escape her hard life Milča begins to go out with Emanuel Meliš, who calls himself 'moderní proletář' (a modern proletarian). Meliš is self-taught, and he sees Milča as a 'project': a poor young girl whom he can educate and whose

⁵³ Lynn Abrams, *The Making of Modern Woman* (Edinburgh: Longman, 2002), p. 118.

character he can shape according to his ideals. In the character of Meliš, then, Viková alludes to male egoism and the idea of man being a creator, woman an imitator: ‘No, [Milča] did not have a lover. [For] Meliš was a creator.’⁵⁴ Milča becomes more and more fascinated by Meliš, and ends up having to make a choice between her family and her lover. The modern man Meliš wins Milča’s affection and she goes to live with him. Meliš continues his project of intellectualising Milča according to his notions of women: ‘He believed that a woman too must become single-minded, untouched by and independent of generic ideas, [she must] think of a world which does not merge with others in the stream and [she must] seek solutions to all questions and the whole meaning of life in herself.’⁵⁵ However, Meliš does not in fact allow Milča all this intellectual freedom; he expects that his truth and his answers to the most important questions in life will also become her truth and her life philosophy. This is demonstrated in the way he persuades Milča to move in with him; the way he sees it, Milča’s role as the second breadwinner in her family, mainly earning her living as a laundry worker, is of too low a standard if she truly wants to become an intellectual. In fact, Meliš does not appreciate family at all and does not waste any time convincing Milča of the fact that family is an outdated form: ‘There is no family. There is only a patinated, old form, into which man, woman and children are crammed, so that they would absorb each other and languish in joint weakness. For the sake of the form, so that they would not tear it into pieces!’⁵⁶ Meliš also has a negative view of motherhood: ‘Mother is a victim of nature, which humanity let drain

⁵⁴ ‘Ne, neměla milence. Meliš byl stvořitel.’ Viková, *Vzpouřa* (Prague: F. Šimáček, 1901), p. 78.

⁵⁵ ‘On věřil, že musí i žena vyjít tak soustředěná, nedotknutelná a nezávislá od ideí všeobecných, pokládati se za svět, jenž nesplyvá s ostatními v proudu, a sama v sobě že bude hledati rozřešení všech otázek a všeho smyslu života.’ Ibid., p. 70.

⁵⁶ ‘Není rodiny. Jest jenom mēděná, stará forma, do které jsou nACPány muž, žena a děti, aby pili jeden z druhého a hynuli společnou slabostí. K vůli té formě, aby neroztrhla na kusy!’ Ibid., p. 120.

itself in the name of God.⁵⁷ In Meliš's view, then, an intellectual person does not need family or even community around him/her, but functions best when left by him/herself, without the energy-draining relationships. Meliš's ideal human being is purely an intellectual, mental entity who does not have any biological or physical needs such as the need to reproduce. Even if there is a need to reproduce in order to sustain humankind, there is no need for family as a unit; children should be separated from their mothers at birth and brought up without the restrictive, outdated form of family.

This project of intellectualisation through sheer brainwashing is, however, brought to a halt when Milča becomes pregnant. Motherhood is certainly not part of Meliš's plans: he seems to detest Milča's pregnancy since it shows that she is becoming a creator instead of an imitator, in other words, usurping the male's natural rights. Milča, however, feels the power of motherhood seeping into her, as if it were the most natural form of self-fulfilment: 'Milča had already been a mother [had been pregnant] for more than a month, but only today the idea of her motherhood entered her mind for the first time. [...] Milča became aware that she is carried along. She did not know herself when she had reached this boundary that had been separating her from his domination, but suddenly, without all the earlier battles, she felt that she was voluntarily letting herself be carried along.'⁵⁸ After this realisation, instead of becoming the egoistic individual that Meliš was making her into, Milča concentrates ever more on becoming a mother. Only motherhood makes her think for herself, instead of being Meliš's puppet, a passive creature who nevertheless was told by her master that she is intellectually free.

⁵⁷ 'Matka jest obět přírody, kterou lidstvo uvolilo se vyssávat ve jménu Boha.' Ibid., p. 135.

⁵⁸ 'Milča byla matkou již více než měsíc, ale dnes poprvé její mateřství vstoupilo jí myšlenkou do duše. [...] Milča si uvědomila, že je vlečena. Nevěděla sama, kdy dospěla až k této mezi, která dělila ji od něho panství, ale najednou beze všech předchozích bojů pocítila, že se dobrovolně nechává vléci.' Ibid., pp. 211–7.

Vzpoura is thus a *Bildungsroman* in which a young girl grows to become a woman, and not through just any life experience, but particularly by becoming a mother. As in the earlier novel *Medřická*, motherhood is the most meaningful lesson in life for a young woman. It also appears that maternal desire overrides sexual desire, and maternity gives woman true freedom. This freedom through creation is something we will come back to in Svobodová's *Milenky*. On the other hand, the main characters of *Medřická* and *Vzpoura* are free because they never enter the prison of bourgeois marriage.

The concept of freedom becomes ever more evident in the last part of the trilogy, *Pán*, in which the middle-class main character, Zdena, is childless and married to a philandering, egoistical man. At first Zdena resembles a radical feminist of her time: she is critical of the conventional notion of love and appears to abhor men altogether, ironically calling them 'lord and master', which to her means 'the exploiter of woman's powers, the subjugator of her abilities and the enemy of her development.'⁵⁹ Unlike Milča in *Vzpoura*, Zdena is well-educated and knows of the potential dangers of life, at least on a theoretical level: 'And then came various theories garnered in the course of life. Erotic theories that emerged in my subconscious; theories of emancipation which I learnt at school, and self-defensive that were a result of my father's letter.'⁶⁰ Zdena's father had written her a letter in which he warned her of male lust, and the letter had humiliated Zdena greatly. Robert B. Pynsent writes that after receiving the letter, 'Zdena feels that her private self has been violated'.⁶¹ Zdena's private self is not asexual, on the contrary; but her father's

⁵⁹ 'vykořist'ovatel ženinych šil, podmaňovatel jejich schopností a nepřítel jejího vývoje.' Viková, *Pán*, 2nd edn (Prague: Unie, 1922), p. 46–7.

⁶⁰ 'A pak přišly různé theorie životem sebrané. Erotické, které vznikly v mém podsvětí, emancipační, jimž naučila jsem se ve škole, a obranné, jež byly výsledkem otcova listu.' Ibid., p. 75.

⁶¹ Robert B. Pynsent, 'The Liberation of Woman and Nation: Czech Nationalism and Women Writers of the *Fin de Siècle*', p. 128.

attempt at sexual education leaves her humiliated. Here Viková is not opposing sexual education but would rather see it coming from other women than from one's father. Despite her father's warnings and her own 'theories', Zdena falls for the first man, Staněk, who shows interest in her and marries him in what appears to be an impulsive decision to make something out of her life. At the end of the novel, Zdena's marriage has fallen apart and she must decide what to do with herself and her child.

Viková's portrayal of the failure of a bourgeois marriage does not differ too much from those of other feminist writers of her time, for example, of Svobodová or Helena Malířová. But whereas Svobodová and Malířová show marriages that fall apart through time and because of the restrictive institution of marriage as such, Zdena's marriage is already bound to fail from the very beginning; it is based on deceit, and it is this deceit that finally ends the marriage for her. The fact that Zdena catches her husband with his regular prostitute in central Prague, points to one of Viková's main concerns, prostitution, a concern of large number of feminist writers at the time, notably, of J.S. Machar and T.G. Masaryk. As Pynsent points out, *Pán* clearly demonstrates Viková's abhorrence of prostitution as a part of her nationalist feminism:

Prostitution offers another means of man's psychological oppression of woman. A threat to the sanctity of the marriage bed, it is also a threat to the nation; in threatening the self-expression of the wife, it is also threatening her emancipation, her ability to take part in the life of the nation.⁶²

In Viková's mind, then, the prostitute's profession is a mere continuation of men oppressing women. This underlines once more Viková's notion of motherhood being the main channel of self-fulfilment and self-awareness.

⁶² Pynsent, 'The Liberation of Woman and Nation: Czech Nationalism and Women Writers of the *Fin de Siècle*', p. 97.

The fear of the prostitute took almost mythical forms in the Bohemian Lands, as Kathleen Hayes asserts: ‘The “infected” prostitute threatens to destroy the family, presided over by the “sexless”, self-sacrificing mother, and, by corrupting the health of “innocent” women and their unborn children (through syphilis) to destroy society and the “nation”’.⁶³ Prostitutes also clearly threatened the position of the respectable woman who could not even take a solitary walk without being arrested or molested as a prostitute. This is what happens in *Pán*, too. Zdena’s situation becomes ever more desperate when she discovers that her husband has had, and probably still has, affairs with, amongst others, all the servants and female labourers on his farm. When she confronts Staněk with this new knowledge, he responds by saying that he had only done what other men were also doing, and that, in fact, when Staněk first met Zdena on the Vltava embankment, he had thought that she was a prostitute: ‘Remember, in which suspicious circumstances I met you – you gave the impression of a street girl, you know, a bit too cheap, so I assumed that a little silver is enough.’⁶⁴ This rough talk leaves Zdena horrified and she begins to think of herself as legalised prostitute: ‘He was a criminal, which was not his fault, but it was due to his manhood, exactly like my being sold was not due to me but my womanhood. And I was sold, because he gained me through marriage which was a new privilege to him. A unit for sale!’⁶⁵ At the end of the novel Zdena is pregnant and she has found herself driven to leave her husband. Pregnancy makes Zdena think of herself, or her self, as different from her husband’s mistresses. She is not only a body anymore, but someone who is responsible for another human being, her child. This is how Zdena ironises her

⁶³ Kathleen Hayes, ‘Images of The Prostitute in Czech Fin-de-siècle Literature’, in *Slavonic and East European Review*, 75, 2 (1997), 234–58 (p. 237).

⁶⁴ ‘Vzpomeň si, za jakých podezřelých okolností jsem s tebou setkal – dělala si dojem děvčete z ulice, víš, tak trochu příliš laciný, takže jsem se domníval, že stačí na to trochu stříbra.’ Viková, *Pán*, p. 182.

⁶⁵ ‘Zločinec byl, ne svou vinou, ale vinou svého mužství, právě tak jako jsem já nebyla prodaná svou vinou, ale vinou svého ženství. A prodaná jsem byla, neboť získal mne manželstvím, jež pro něj bylo novým právem. Prodejný celek!’ Ibid., pp. 186–7.

husband when she has realised that the best thing for her and the child is to leave him: ‘My wife, since I have lent her my name, my prosperity and my child. At the cost of harmony, privileges and victories. I have raised her as high as I only could and rewarded her with the gift of motherhood.’⁶⁶ It is clear that Zdena does not feel any gratitude towards her husband, not even for making her a mother. Motherhood is seen as mostly Zdena’s own achievement, something that is going to save her from miserable life, her failed marriage.

Motherhood, thus, is what prevents woman from becoming selfish, which is something that Viková sees as a male disease. She does not, however, consider the contemporaneous form of marriage sacred, but she regards maternity as sacred. In her trilogy, maternity overshadows the relationship between man and woman, since the male characters are not what one could think of as ideal husbands or lovers. Dašek in *Medřická* is in love with the main character primarily because of her independence and the fact that she is not entertaining any idea of his marrying her. Dašek is portrayed as an aesthete; after he has had his fill of Medřická’s body, he abandons her. Later he commits suicide. By that time Medřická had also had her fill of his body. Meliš in *Vzpouza* is largely similar to Dašek: he is against marriage and does not care about Milča’s reputation amongst the conventional populus: here Viková is criticising the radical notion of free love rather than unfree marriage. Rationalised free love is shown as Meliš’s intellectualisation of his getting rid of Milča when their life together becomes too inconvenient for him. This demonstrates once more Viková’s tendency to mix radical and conservative ideas.

While the male characters are vile or at least cold towards their mistresses or wives, Viková’s female characters do not match the contemporaneous feminine ideal

⁶⁶ ‘Má žena, neboť jsem ji propůjčil své jméno, svůj blahobyť a své dítě. Za cenu souzvuku práva a vítězství. Nejvýš, kam jsem sám mohl, vyšvihl jsem ji a daroval jí mateřství, aby byla odměněná.’ Ibid., p. 200.

of a housewife either. Medřická's desire for absolute independence causes her to be immensely relieved when her dominating mother dies. Milča, although she is quite young when she meets Meliš, does not appear to be exactly the paragon of naive innocence: 'It was not the face of an eighteen-year-old girl, but of a dangerous coquette who offers her soft, translucent body for kissing.'⁶⁷ Milča's sexual awakening is echoed in a later work of Viková's, the play *Holčička* (The Little Girl, 1905), in which a teenage girl has prematurely learned, to her elder suitor's disgust, about sexual matters by spying and eavesdropping on him and his mistress. Neither *Holčička* nor Milča's sexual behaviour suggests that she actually is mature: Meliš's and her relationship is not equal, and Meliš manages to manipulate her to abandon her family. Manipulation of a similar kind is going on in *Pán*, although Zdena is, at least presumably, more educated than Milča and has been told about the evils of the world. It appears that both Milča and Zdena are ready to be subjugated to the way of life that the men choose because they are physically and mentally attracted to their men. Both of the women find out only later that they are involved with egoistic, manipulating individuals, and maternity is the only way they can resume or construct their selves. Milča and Zdena fit the paradigm of the New Woman since they grow to recognise their need for independence and so they refuse to have anything to do with the men who abused them. Naturally, they falter at first, but even the ambiguous ending of *Pán* suggests that Zdena is leaving her husband and finding the strength to make her own life. Medřická differs from the other main characters because of the clear sense of emancipation as independence that is evident even during her affair with Dašek.

In her works, Viková challenges the conventional view of woman being nothing but an appendage to man. Her New Woman is not a selfish Decadent,

⁶⁷ 'Už to nebyla tvář osmnáctiletého děvčete, ale nebezpečné kokety, která své tělo hebké, průsvitné nabízí k polibkům.' Viková, *Vzpouza*, p. 7.

although she is able independently to fulfill herself. How these women survive in the Czech society of that time is not, however, shown by Viková since she ends all the three novels shortly after the main female character's realisation that she must change her life. The reader may only imagine what this change means, and how it is going to come about. What is clear, however, that Viková gave more importance to individual choices than to women's clubs and societies (which she outright ridicules in *Pán*). As Pynsent argues, Viková was a 'declared individualist' and also an optimist, who believed that since women could now see that romantic love was 'a confidence trick', women's emancipation would take big steps forward.⁶⁸ Yet there is an inherent paradox in Viková's thinking; while she celebrates the radical ideas of woman's emancipation from man, she bestows her female characters the responsibility of becoming a mother. Viková seems to think that being a wife can be a thankless duty, but being a mother is always rewarding. This is demonstrated in a passage in *Medřická*, in which the main character's desire and motivation for becoming a mother is suddenly stirred: 'In this distress of future, a woman was awakened in her, a woman who yearns to become a mother in order to be loved all of her life. A woman, for whom love is bread, necessity, purpose of life.'⁶⁹ Viková appears to cherish both sides of motherhood; the mother's love for her child and also the child's love for her mother, which is more long-lasting and reliable than romantic love. Even though in the passage above, *Medřická* seems like a character who is addicted to love, this is shown as a good thing because she does not yearn for the unreliable, unrewarding love between man and woman, in this case, Dašek and herself.

⁶⁸ Pynsent, 'The Liberation of Woman and Nation: Czech Nationalism and Women Writers of the *Fin de Siècle*', p. 86 & p. 114.

⁶⁹ 'Probouzela v ní žena v té úzkosti před tím přístím, žena, která touží býti matkou, aby po celý svůj život byla milována. Žena, které jest láska chlebem, nutností, účelem života.' Ibid., p. 29.

While Viková claims that motherhood constitutes a possibility for woman to be independent from man, some of the female characters portrayed in Svobodová's *Milenky*, examined in the next section, are quite the opposite type of mothers: their happiness is highly dependent on their husbands or lovers, or on the narcissistic feeling of being adored – they are the mothers of the ‘transitional women’, both physically and figuratively.

The Female Artist, the Dying Woman and the Ageing Woman in Svobodová's Milenky (1902)

The female artist was long seen as an anomaly; woman was usually the muse, the mediator. As de Beauvoir asserts: ‘Soul and idea, woman is the mediator between them; she is the Grace that leads the Christian to God, she is Beatrice guiding Dante to the beyond, Laura beckoning Petrarch to the highest peaks of poetry.’⁷⁰ The independent, artistic New Woman is central to Svobodová's *Milenky*, first published in 1902 and re-written as a two-volume novel, published in 1916. Also the archetypes of the dying woman and ageing woman are exhibited in both versions of the novel, mostly as the self-destructive opponents of the thriving female artist. The story in the two versions of *Milenky* is largely the same: it concentrates on a friendship between two girls, Emma Stradenová and Marie Benešovská, that starts when Emma's promiscuous mother indirectly causes the death of Marie's mother (also called Marie) and both girls are sent to the same convent school. Emma Stradenová, the embodiment of an artistically ambitious New Woman, becomes the main character in both versions of *Milenky*, whereas Marie turns into a picture of a dying woman such

⁷⁰ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2009), p. 202.

as was typical in *fin-de-siècle* literature and art. The two Maries, mother and daughter, portray female suffering as the common state of the contemporaneous woman, as Abrams writes: ‘The lifestyle of some middle-class women almost predisposed them to sickness, and their sickness determined their way of life. Deprived of education, mental stimulation and economic independence, and forever exhorted to conform to an ideal of femininity which exalted a pale, sickly, languid beauty, illness became both vindication and a cry for help.’⁷¹ Moreover, the two Maries are betrayed by the men they love, because the men love someone else: Malva Stradenová seduces the first Marie’s husband and Emma becomes, though first unwillingly, the beloved of the second Marie’s betrothed Felix Valter.

Emma hopes to become a world famous singer, but simultaneously she tries hard not to become like her mother, Malva Stradenová, whose ambitions are materially productive relationships with rich men. At the time, psychological characteristics and proclivities, especially madness, were assumed to be hereditary (in literature especially Naturalism and Decadence were preoccupied with the hereditary), and Emma is afraid of her mother’s genes, although she knows that she does not have her mother’s weaknesses. The story of the novel revolves for quite a long time around the fact that Emma wishes to separate herself from her mother, while Marie becomes more and more like her mother, the elder Marie Benešovská.

Emma does believe in the existence of love, but she also believes that one can find self-fulfilment as much in love for high culture as in the erotic. Malva, on the other hand, displays sexual desire openly (a desire that women were not supposed to have), and she is reproached by Felix Valter for that: ‘Erotic love at that age, if it is

⁷¹ Lynn Abrams, *The Making of Modern Woman*, p. 25.

not a silent, unselfish marital love, is just a bad addiction like gambling'.⁷² Valter connects the middle-aged Malva's sexual adventures to unhealthy addiction, and finds her behaviour particularly disgusting because she is an ageing, unmarried woman. In fact, Malva could be seen as a 'transitional woman' in a physical sense: as Showalter asserts, the *fin-de-siècle* view of menopausal women's sexual life as 'ludicrous or tragic'; female sexual desire was only seen to be useful for reproduction and not as something that women of all ages could experience.⁷³ There is something hopelessly tragic in the aging woman, as de Beauvoir notes in her *The Second Sex* (1949):

The ageing woman well knows that she has ceased being a sexual object, it is not only because her flesh no longer provides man with fresh treasures: it is also that her past and her experience *make a person of her* whether she likes it or not; she has fought, loved, wanted, suffered and taken pleasure for herself: this autonomy is intimidating; she tries to disavow it, she exaggerates her femininity, she adorns herself, wears perfume, she becomes totally charming, gracious, pure immanence.⁷⁴

As the aging woman of de Beauvoir, Malva would rather not be her *own person*, she would rather be a *tabula rasa*, a woman without history, a woman who lives in permanent pleasure. Being a person, being self-aware means that one has great responsibility for one's actions, whereas Malva would want to be a young woman forever, a young woman without a history, without experience and responsibility that come with it.

Svobodová employs Valter as the voice of bourgeois society, which considered those women who were exceptions to the feminine norm as a threat to social order. Apart from Malva, Valter also criticises the object of his affection, the ambitious Emma Stradenová: 'That is not a woman. She is that kind of a modern,

⁷² 'Erotická láska v těchto letech, není-li to tichá, obětavá láska manželská, je jenom ošklivý návyk jako karban'. Svobodová, *Milenky*, 4th edn (Prague: Unie, 1918), p. 305.

⁷³ Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady – Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830–1980* (London: Virago, 1987), p. 75.

⁷⁴ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 635. My emphasis.

sleek "übermenschel" [*sic*]. She only thinks of herself, her pride, her fame. [...] And even if she put a stop to it, even if she loved me, I would never believe her. [...] Oh, a woman with ambition is like a book with a purpose.' ⁷⁵ Here Svobodová shows self-irony by making Valter talk about women with ambitions and comparing them to a book 'with a purpose'; Svobodová's books tend to be didactic, that is, exactly the kind of books that Valter seems to despise. While Valter condemns Emma's ambition and pride, it appears that he has an axe to grind: as long as Emma is pursuing her singing career, she will not become Valter's wife, or, rather, take on the role of the homely bourgeois wife of Valter's dreams. He ridicules Emma's determination as something unnatural and pretentious. In a passage in the second version of *Milenky*, Valter compares Emma to Marie's little sister Aglaja: "Aglaja is a mix between a passionate woman", said Valter, "and an unawakened child. She burns fast and possibly in vain, like a candle in a draft. But Emma ponders and reasons, whether to fall in love with a man or fame."⁷⁶ It seems that Valter ridicules the child woman, the passionate Aglaja and the rational woman Emma. Yet there is something that makes Valter long for Emma, and not for the fragile, sick and melancholic Marie Benešová who considers him the love of her life: for Valter Emma is a 'dárc' (giver, provider) and Marie is a 'žebráček' (beggar). In the second version of *Milenky*, the difference between the two young women is even sharper, since for Valter, Emma is both 'krása a síla (beauty and force) and 'pohrdání' (contempt) and Marie both 'obět' a milosrdenství' (sacrifice and mercy) and 'obdiv' (admiration). It may be

⁷⁵ 'Není to žena. Je taková moderní ulítaná "übermenschel" [*sic*]. Myslí jenom na sebe, na svou chloubu, na svou slávu. [...] A kdyby se i zastavila, kdyby i promluvila, kdyby mne i milovala, neuvěřil bych jí nikdy. [...] Ach, žena se předsevzetím je jako kniha s tendencí.' Svobodová, *Milenky* (Prague: Vilímek, 1902), pp. 272–73.

⁷⁶ ' "Aglaja je směs vášnivě ženy", řekl Valter, "a neprobuzeného dítěte. Hoří spěšně a snad marně, jako svíce v průvanu. Ale Emma myslí a usuzuje, ma-li se zamilovat do muže nebo do slávy." ' Svobodová, *Milenky*, part II (Prague: Unie, 1918), p. 239. Svobodová's naming of this passionate, alluring child woman as Aglaja is most likely to be a deliberate allusion to the character of Aglaja in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* (1869), since the name Aglaja was not otherwise a common name at the time.

argued, then, that Emma is the one of the two main female characters who has a more defined self and place in the world, whereas Marie represents the women of the old world, the women who do not define a place for themselves but who wait for someone else to give them a purpose. Emma's passion for art supports her selfhood, her identity as an independent woman. Marie, on the other hand, sees herself mainly through relationships, especially through Valter; she only exists in relation to Valter. When she realises that Valter prefers someone else to her, she no longer has any reason to live.

This analysis of *Milenky* reveals that Svobodová does not consider romantic love worth trusting, or building one's life on. This echoes what Pynsent writes about the concept of lasting love in Svobodová's fiction:

Lasting love is a paradox for Svobodová. [...] On the whole, *Márné lásky* [a collection of short stories from 1906] suggests that Svobodová considers that the individual will normally destroy the possibility of lasting love through his or her selfishness or mistrust; having failed in love, the individual is destined for a life of sterile emotional exile, or for suicide.⁷⁷

Pynsent argues that lasting love is paradox for Svobodová, because she denies the existence of eternal love but still exhibits experience of it in her works. This can be seen in *Milenky*, too; even though it is clear that Emma's great love is art, she agrees to marry Valter, perhaps for the sake of securing herself a proper social status (that her mother Malva never had). In a sense, Emma has destroyed the possibility of lasting love with a human being because of her love for art and career, and her life with Valter is going to be based on a companionship than filled with any great, omnipotent love.

⁷⁷ Pynsent, 'The Liberation of Woman and Nation', p. 135.

Artistic ambitions, or ambitions in general in a woman were seen as threatening at the time. In Svobodová's fiction, artistic talent is also linked with some kind of dark pleasure; she created a few young female characters that exemplify sexual behaviour of the kind that would lead to trouble (and, sometimes, death). This is especially true of the stories in Svobodová's *Černí myslivci* (Dark huntsmen, 1908) in which young women often pay a heavy price for their mistakes or their breach of the social code. The stories of this collection deal with an affair between a *černý myslivec* (a member of the 'Dark Huntsman' group consisting of young unmarried men) and a girl who is on the verge of sexual awakening. There is always a threat of some kind looming over the relationship. This is also the case in the short story 'Maryčka tanečnice' (Maryčka the dancer), in which Maryčka's passion for dancing is killed by *černý myslivec* Jan, whose pride was hurt when the girl did not show any affection for him, but dedicated herself to dancing. Jan considers Maryčka's dancing as flirting and evil witchcraft; he refuses to understand that dancing might be a form of self-expression for a girl whose means of expressing herself are otherwise limited. Maryčka's dancing is thus likened to woman's expression of sexual desire, something that is seen dangerous and threatening. Maryčka's dancing is also a solo activity; as she dances, she ceases to care about the people around her. The literary critic Sharon Rose Wilson notes this connection between solo dance and individualism: 'Long an ideal image of female beauty and therefore, the epitome of "the feminine", the ballerina is also an artist, married to her art instead of to a man and thus a "failure" as a conventional woman. [...] Dancing as a ballerina is individualistic and self-expressive, therefore "selfish" and "unfeminine".'⁷⁸ On the other hand, the girl's dancing could also be likened to the physicality of sexual arousal. Maryčka herself is

⁷⁸ Sharon Rose Wilson, *Margaret Atwood's Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993), p. 129.

referred as a blood-hungry vampire by the embittered *myslivec*: ‘you have drunk up my blood’.⁷⁹ This echoes what Mario Praz calls the ‘final metamorphosis of Fatal Woman’⁸⁰, established by Baudelaire in his poem ‘Métamorphoses du vampire’, in the collection *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857), in which a sensual woman is portrayed as a vampire. The stories of *Černí myslivci* turn this relationship around; as in ‘Maryčka tanečnice’ it is often the *myslivec* who drains the young woman’s life force and not the other way around. The stories of this collection are yet another warning example of strong emotions taking over; the young women usually end up living unhappily or committing suicide.

It could be argued, then, that for Svobodová, the true survivor of the misogynous *Fin-de-siècle* society is the female artist, whose relation to art saves her from becoming a non-person in marriage, the convent or pursuit for productive relationships with rich men. In contrast with the dying woman and the ageing woman she is the only one who can stand on her own feet, thanks to her questioning of the concept of romantic love. Even though she is often headstrong and independent, Svobodová’s female artist is not ruthless or cold, like the Italian artist Flavia Santini in Zeyer’s short story ‘Inultus’ (Name of the main character, 1892), in which the ambitious and sadistic artist ends up killing a young man called Inultus by making him stand the pain of the crucified Christ. Flavia is much like a vampire, her hands are cold, eyes have a cold expression and there is something stony and hard in her striking beauty. When she realises that only killing Inultus will help her to attain the highest level of creativity, she does not hesitate even a little. Like she tells Inultus, she does not believe in God, only in fame and art. Compared to the cold and immoral

⁷⁹ ‘krev jste mi po léta vypíjela’, Svobodová, ‘Maryčka tanečnice’, in *Černí myslivci*, 9th edn (Prague: Unie, 1939), p. 137.

⁸⁰ Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony*, 3rd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 281.

Flavia, all of Svobodová's female artists are compassionate and display a sense of moral conscience. They do not sacrifice everything on the altar of highest, pure art.

Conclusion

Through this analysis of the relationship between the self and strong emotions in Svobodová's and Viková's works, one could argue that there are many ways in which strong emotions may obliterate woman's self. The most common threat to the self is taking the concept of romantic love seriously; as Svobodová's novels and short stories demonstrate, romantic love is a trick, a trap that is supposed to lead the young woman to the prison of marriage. In Svobodová, art is mostly the answer; the only true way of self-expression, only true way of retaining one's self, whether it is through singing, writing or dancing. In Viková, however, the most valuable experience for woman is to become a mother. Through motherhood, one reaches self-respect and self-fulfilment without becoming selfish. In addition, a woman who becomes a mother, also becomes a true creator. Men like Dašek who have ideals, or like Meliš, who considers himself a Pygmalion-like genius, are merely emblems of false creativity – they do not truly create anything other than empty ideas and justifications for their selfish behaviour.

Both Svobodová and Viková, then, write female creativity into their works in their own ways. Yet both authors insist that creativity offers the only safe channel for woman's strong emotions. When connected with other (romantic) relationships, strong emotions like love or grief, or even greed that fuels Malva Stradenová, will result in woman's abandoning her self and becoming only a hollow shell or even worse, a puppet in an unhappy marriage. It is not as if Svobodová and Viková would like to reject emotions altogether; it is more likely that they merely want women to

separate themselves from the prescribed notion of romantic love and from the ‘fact’ that women feel more, and more strongly than men.

While Svobodová’s female artists are creative in the more conventional sense of the word, the creativity of Viková’s heroines lies in their biology. On the other hand, the connection that Viková draws between creativity and motherhood can also be seen as a wider metaphor for female writing, anticipating a time when female writers would not necessarily take influence from male authors or even male muses but ‘give birth’ to their own material. As the literary critic Susan Gubar argues, twentieth-century writers like Margaret Drabble and Sylvia Plath imagined a bond between female creativity and child birth, much like male writers link their creativity with the appearance of a muse: ‘Like Drabble’s heroine [in *The Waterfall*, 1977], whose creativity is released by giving birth to a second child, Plath begins *Ariel* [1965] with a relatively cheerful poem about childbirth that seems to promise a more positive way of imagining creativity for women.’⁸¹ Although being a ‘mother’ of one’s own text does indicate a more ‘natural’ way of female creativity, this notion of creativity still contains a sense of bio-essentialism and exclusiveness. While the creativity of Svobodová’s heroines is not tied to their biology, Viková’s heroines only truly begin to exist, to find their selves when they realise that their bodies are the only true source of creativity and self-awareness. One could argue that both authors’ views on creativity as the only source of self-fulfilment are essentially exclusive: if a woman is not an artist or a mother, she has no chance to fulfil her self. The uncompromising Olga in *Přetížený klas* is a prime example of this exclusion: she does not become an artist because she cannot believe in her own talent. Her self, then, is utterly lost in strong emotion, the grief of her father’s death, and in the hard work in the convent.

⁸¹ Susan Gubar, ‘“The Blank Page” and the Issues of Female Creativity’, in *Critical Inquiry*, 8, 2 (1981), 243–63 (p. 256).

Chapter 2: Under the Surface – Self-Deception and Suicide in Božena Benešová's Works

Božena Benešová's (1873–1936) works consist primarily of novels and short stories that often examine the relationship between individual and community. Benešová's work explores the idea of woman's self, and how different experiences in life help to form a self that would, depending on the experience, either follow convention or abandon it. While Svobodová and Víková tend to build their characters on ideas or broad conceptions of woman's life, Benešová builds characters with consistent psychology. Svobodová and Víková portray women who have begun to realise that life is more than becoming somebody's wife, while Benešová's female characters grow up in a world that allegedly gives them freedom of choice, freedom to become what they want, to build themselves a life. In the end, however, they realise that much of that freedom is merely apparent.

Even though Svobodová and Benešová had different styles as writers, Svobodová proved to be significant for Benešová's career as a writer; in fact, it was the already established writer Svobodová who encouraged the younger Benešová to publish her poems and later short stories. The literary historian Dobrava Moldanová treats Svobodová as a kind of a guardian angel for Benešová who, since her unfortunate marriage to Josef Beneš had shown its true colours, had slowly begun to fall into apathy: 'Svobodová, even though she is portrayed as an aesthete living in an ivory tower, was a practical and pragmatic woman: she knew what being a woman writer in Czech circles was like, [and] she understood that for Benešová, literature has to be not only a possibility for self-realization but also a contribution to the poor

family finances, so that she could stop being completely dependent on her husband and tormented by qualms of conscience.⁸² It seems, then, that Svobodová truly believed that women could be fully themselves when being creative, a notion which we established in her fiction in the previous chapter. It is uncertain whether Benešová herself thought of writing as ‘self-realization’, but in her works, ‘finding one’s self’ is one of the stock themes. As Moldanová notes about Benešová’s short stories: ‘[The theme of Benešová’s short stories] is the futile agony, leading to suicide, of a young person about his surroundings and himself, agony about positive qualities of life, searching for one’s identity that ends with neither victory nor defeat, but with an overwhelming recognition: recognition of one’s self.’⁸³ This is indeed one of the main themes in the two short stories analysed in this chapter, namely ‘Hladina’ and ‘Myšky’ – although, differing from Moldanová, I would be inclined to argue that in both stories, the recognition of one’s self leads to a certain kind of defeat.⁸⁴ Recognition of one’s self can only take place when self-deception ends, which in ‘Hladina’ and ‘Myšky’ takes place when it is too late; self-deception has become their route to survival and it has become difficult for the main characters to truly surrender themselves to the outer world. Benešová is not idealist enough to think that mere recognition of one’s self would open the gates to heaven; woman must also reconcile that self with the outer reality in some productive way. Unlike her predecessors Svobodová and Víková, Benešová does not believe in the omnipotent force of creativity or procreation; in this sense, her notion of a woman who is capable of building a life for herself is more balanced. In Benešová’s world, society changes its

⁸² Dobrava Moldanová, *Božena Benešová* (Prague: Melantrich, 1976), p. 21.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

⁸⁴ ‘Hladina’ was first published in the periodical *Novina* in 1907/1908, later it was re-published in the collection of short stories, *Kruté mládí* (Prague: Vilímek, 1917). ‘Myšky’ was first published in *Novina* in 1910/1911 and was published later in the collection *Myšky* (1916).

values slowly and not always to positive direction. In fact, even her two heroines, Dagmar and Jenička, resist change; not changes regarding social and gender equality, but changes that turn people into selfish social players. Social players in Benešová's fiction are people who are self-made in a way that makes them fake and motivated entirely by their self-interest. This is the kind of individualism that Benešová opposes and it reminds us of Viková's charge against individualism in the character of Meliš in *Vzpouza*. Although both Viková and Benešová believe in giving women more possibilities to become their own persons and while they consider the ideal, independent woman to have a resilient sense of self, they do not support individualism in the form of egoism or blatant manipulation of others to one's own ends.

The way in which Benešová's characters are set against social players, leads us to believe that they are not particularly strong-willed, successful individuals. As Robert B. Pynsent writes: 'She is a master of detailed psychological vignette, and even after the war, when she began allowing her main characters to find their way, to discover in themselves a positive contribution to their community, her human beings as a whole remained fragile failures.'⁸⁵ Pynsent also emphasizes the fact that Benešová's narratorial tone is often ironic, observant and not sentimental. In this, his comments comport with those of Benešová's contemporary, the critic F.X. Šalda, who wrote of Benešová's first collection of short stories, *Nedobytá vítězství* (Unwon victories, 1910) thus: 'Mrs Benešová is – and this is something rare in women writers – a natural artistic talent: she has active, sharp and inquisitive male intellect'.⁸⁶ How Šalda defines 'male intellect' and in what ways Benešová fits the bill, are not

⁸⁵ Robert B. Pynsent, 'Czech Feminist Anti-Semitism – The Case of Božena Benešová', in *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe*, ed. by Marcel Cornis-Pope & John Neubauer (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishers, 2010), pp. 344–66 (p.353).

⁸⁶ F.X. Šalda, 'Božena Benešová', in *Kritické projevy* 8 (Prague: Melantrich, 1956), p. 194.

explored in the text, but the term ‘male intellect’ could relate to the fact that her characters have versatile psychologies, are not simply embodiments of ideas. Šalda seems to think that mostly only male writers have a tendency to create rounded characters, whereas the characters of female writers are more bogged down by ideology. This goes against the general opinion that women are more adept at understanding emotions and that they have a greater sense of empathy. The literary scholar E.J. Clery describes the alleged differences between female and male writers dating back to the eighteenth and nineteenth century:

The argument goes that women writers chose to specialize in the depiction of personal relations in realistic settings, rather than attempting to represent more exotic locale or great public events like their male contemporaries, and that they employed a language of refined moral sentiment and feeling rather than attempting abstract ideas or grand flights of imagination. Their forte was miniaturism, attention to detail.⁸⁷

Even though Šalda praises the psychological aspect in Benešová because he deems it rare in female writers, he was a great admirer of Svobodová, whose (frequently melodramatic) style resembled more that of neo-Romanticism than of psychologically analytical novels. Viková, however, was not a favourite of his, since he saw her writing as popular and even crude or vulgar, not the kind of literature that women should be writing. Most likely Šalda could not stand the feminist streak in Viková, which was more strongly present in her writing than in Svobodová’s or Benešová’s works. Perhaps Viková’s female characters lacked the traditional female version of virtue, which is something that Šalda clearly placed high in his reading of women’s literature, as can be seen in this later, admiring account of Benešová: ‘Božena Benešová loves the life of women, but without sentimentalisation: she loves life and therefore knows [...] that love is virtue and first and foremost demands self-

⁸⁷ E.J. Clery, *Women’s Gothic: From Clara Reeve to Mary Shelley*, 2nd edn (Horndon/Tavistock: Northcote House Publishers, 2004), pp. 1–2.

discipline. She is a poet of women's modesty and women's pride. Therefore her women are able to punish themselves'⁸⁸. Šalda's portrayal of Benešová's women is accurate – as far as it goes. One gets the impression from Šalda that the only thing Benešová's women are passionate about is building somewhat austere lives for themselves, and that they are a new, emancipated brand of nuns. Her female characters are generally more complex than, for example, the many female victims of Svobodová; choices and decisions in life of an individual character are not just given but grounded in the character's psychology and, as Šalda pointed out, Benešová's characters are not sentimentalised even though she deals with demanding themes such as suicide and loneliness.

One of the main themes in Benešová's works is deception, and especially the relationship between external and internal deception; the society and other characters deceive Benešová's heroines, but they are also rendered powerless by self-deception; when both ways of deception come to an end, the characters are led to suicide. The first brand of deception is the cynical individual's way of deceiving others who are not as fluid in changing selves as (s)he is. The second brand of deception, self-deception, is the less fluid individual's way of dealing with outer influences and protecting his/her fragile self. Self-deception is, in a sense, self-preservation; something that shields the self from outer threats. But in Benešová, not taking the outer world into account is much more a threat to the self than anything that the outer world or, indeed, society, could impose on one's self. As the literary critic Frederick Garber notes, the society (outer) and the individual (inner) cannot always exist together in a harmonious relationship: 'if there are aspects of the self with which the shaped world cannot match, then the self is likely to end up feeding off itself rather

⁸⁸ F.X. Šalda, 'Božena Benešová', in *Šaldův zápisník*, part 8 (Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1991), p. 267.

than off a productive relationship of inner and outer.’⁸⁹ This is certainly true of the two short stories by Benešová, ‘Hladina’ (The Surface, 1917) and ‘Myšky’ (The Mice, 1911), discussed in this chapter. In both stories, the female main characters are led towards self-destruction because they fail to form a meaningful relationship with the outer world. Their inner worlds dominate them, giving the two heroines the impression that they are not compatible with the world, the society that surrounds them. They are not as capable of carving a place for themselves as many of the female characters in Svobodová and Viková. In addition, Benešová is more prone to portray the pitfalls of woman’s emancipation than are Svobodová and Viková; her woman does not emancipate herself overnight and expect society to accept it.

The complexity of Benešová’s characters also comes from the fact that they are highly capable of deceiving themselves as well as being deceived by others. This finally sets them apart from the typical female victim of patriarchy: certainly there are circumstances in their lives that are brought forth by social and gender inequality, but Benešová’s aim is not to establish her characters as victims of society, but as fragile failures of their own accord. Her characters confuse self-protection with self-deception, high ideals with naivety, and generally refuse to see the world and themselves as they are. On the other hand, it is understandable that in a world where young women rarely wield power over their own lives, self-deception offers a way of becoming the creator of one’s own world. In this sense, Benešová’s handling of the theme of self-deception touches on the way Svobodová and Viková see creativity as woman’s only true way to emancipation. The main difference is, of course, that while Svobodová’s and Viková’s women place their creativity against a productive relationship between inner and outer (to borrow Garber’s words), Benešová’s women

⁸⁹ Frederick Garber, *The Autonomy of the Self from Richardson to Huysmans* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), p. 274.

deceive themselves to the extent that any relationship between inner and outer becomes impossible to establish.

Going Under the Surface: 'Hladina' (1917)

In 'Hladina' (1917), Benešová writes a tragedy reminiscent of Svobodová's *Přetížený klas*: the main character Dagmar drowns herself, because she cannot reconcile herself with the vile world around her. The story follows her falling deeper and deeper into self-deception, which only ends when she recognises the fact that she has been, almost willingly, deceived by others. As the title of the short story suggests, the main motif of the story is the 'surface' (*hladina*): the surface, the outer shell, the mask that society upholds. It is also clear that Dagmar does not approve of that mask, which she sees as cynicism and lie. In addition, Dagmar sees other people as disappointments, because they lied to her or failed to live up to her expectations. The reader learns from the start that Dagmar is taught to sustain high moral principles: 'They had taught her from a young age that a lie is the heaviest sin that a person who wants to be truly good and live a good life can commit.'⁹⁰ Unfortunately for the high-principled Dagmar, other people around her do not consider lying much of a sin, but an unavoidable part of life. This is especially true of her fiancé Ludvík, who had an affair with a Jewish girl named Dora, with whom Dagmar becomes acquainted in Prague, without knowing about their affair. Ludvík prefers the sexual Dora to the innocent Dagmar, although he tries to cover this up by referring to Dora's racial background when he learns that Dagmar has made friends 'with an unknown Jewess! Aren't all your racial

⁹⁰ 'Učili ji od malička, že je lež nejtežším hříchem, který může spáchat člověk, jenž chce být opravdu hodným člověkem a žít opravdu dobrým životem.' Benešová, 'Hladina', in *Rouhači a oblouzení a jiné povídky*, ed. by Jiří Honzík (Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1956), pp. 302–59 (p. 302).

instincts protesting? And anyway, those girls from the conservatory, who live alone...'⁹¹ Dora's allure is based both on the fact that she is a Jew (and thus, in antisemitic thinking, sexually voracious), and on the fact that she is an artist, the archetype of a modern woman. It is not clear, however, whether Dora is supposed to exemplify an independent, New Woman, or rather, a sexualised object of Ludvík's (and other men's) desire, and this makes Dora a deeply ambiguous character. On one hand, Dora helps Dagmar to discover urban life, on the other hand, Dora's (and Ludvík's) betrayal makes Dagmar wary of other people altogether. After getting to know Dora and her modern way of living, Dagmar has difficulties in going back to the little town where she comes from, and living a life similar to her mother's: 'It was those small-town women [...] there was something impersonal and final in their fates that deadened relations to them.'⁹² Here Dagmar's character bears resemblance to Svobodová's female characters, whom the author herself called 'přechodné ženy' (transitional women), that is, women who could not imagine living like their mothers but did not yet know how to make the necessary changes to their lives. The small-town women's 'impersonal fate' alludes to the fact that Dagmar sees them as copies of each other: all these women have had very little to choose from and they have ended up having the same quiet life.

Dagmar knows that she will not be satisfied with quiet provincial life. She is troubled by the unknown: ' "Do not let me yearn in this empty way. Send me something great and real..." But her youthful yearning did not take flight for love. It only took flight for the severe distraction of this stillness, for some great clarification

⁹¹ 's neznámou židovskou! Nebouří se ve vás všechny rasovní instikty? A vůbec holky z konservatoře, které žijí samy...' Ibid., p. 325.

⁹² 'Byly to vesnický maloměst'ácké ženy [...] bylo cosi neosobního a skončeného v jejich osudech, co umrtvovalo vztahy k nim.' Ibid., p. 337.

of her own soul, for a possibility of happy development.’⁹³ In this passage, Dagmar is being quite passive; instead of finding a way to build a life for herself, she asks life to deliver something meaningful at her door step. At least in this passage, she is, then, behaving according to the feminine stereotype of the time; the passive, subservient child-woman.

On the other hand, Dagmar has a model of a modern woman whom she can look up to. While Dagmar considers women in the countryside uninteresting beings without striking personalities, she idolises Dora as the perfect, independent woman with a strong character, although she is also scared of Dora’s independence from convention. Dora tries her best to educate Dagmar:

“Child from another world”, she said maternally, “understand finally that life is only one big sell-out, that we have to surrender ourselves ever more cheaply. Every protest is in fact a sin against life, all yearnings for revolt are disruptive, they are terribly dangerous to whoever has them and can only be destroyed with a smile.”⁹⁴

As it turns out, it is Dora’s (and Ludvík’s) modern view on life, and her and Ludvík’s deception that make the naive Dagmar eventually commit suicide. Unable to go back to her life in her hometown, or to become a full-blown modern, urban woman, Dagmar sees suicide as her only option. She has seen what lies under the *hladina*, the surface of society: deception, selfishness, moral weakness and corruption. In fact, when Dagmar’s mother took her to a girls’ school in Prague, the head mistress warned that disillusion of this kind could take place and that it could have dire consequences:

‘ “It seems that the world is becoming an ever worse place for women,” she said

⁹³ ‘ “Nenechávej mne tak toužit do prázdna. Pošli mi něco velikého a pravdivého...“ Její mladá touha však neletěla na láskou. Letěla jen za prudkým vyrušením z této nehybnosti, za nějakým velikým ujasněním vlastní duše, za možností radostného rozvoje.’ Ibid., p. 311.

⁹⁴ ‘ ”Dítě jiného světa”, promluvila mateřsky, ”pochop konečně, že život je jedno jediné slevování, že se mu musíme oddávat stále levněji a levněji. Každý odpor je vlastně hříchem proti němu, všechny touhy po odboji jsou rozvratné, jsou strašně nebezpečné tomu, kdo je má, a dají se zahubit jenom úsměvem.” ’ Ibid., p. 332.

elegantly, “the times are becoming ever more brutal, life more and more ruthless. And at an immature age, at which your daughter is, each impression of crudity can directly lead to destruction.”⁹⁵ The head mistress is giving a direct prediction of what can happen to Dagmar, and, in the end, her prediction comes true. Apart from being at an ‘impressionable age’, Dagmar has a tendency to self-deception, which is linked to self-preservation: she does not want to see any aspects of the world that do not fit her perception of the world. In order to achieve this, Dagmar has to keep the boundary between herself and the outer world intact: exposing herself to the outer world would threaten her carefully constructed inner world and her sense of self. This is especially pronounced in the opening scene of the short story, which introduces the River Morava as everything that threatens Dagmar’s secure, self-contained world; her morals, her singular self as opposed to the various social masks of Dora and Ludvík. To adapt Walt Whitman, Dagmar does not contain multitudes; she has only one, morally upright self.⁹⁶

Dagmar has only very little tendency for self-doubt until the very end of her story. This, and her upholding even the most impossible ideals would make her a perfect example of a melancholic individual described by psychologists thus:

Self-doubt remains impossible for the individual with melancholia because she identifies her very being with the ideals she strives to realize. Any threat to these norms is a threat to her being. [...] For the person with melancholia, her own being is the self who constantly realizes the values she deems absolute, values she believes to be society’s “true values”, however much society may in fact deviate from them.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ “Zdá se, že je na světě ženám hůře a hůře,” řekla vytepaně, “stále brutálnější, život stále bezohlednější. A v nezralém věku, v jakém je tvá dcera, může býti každý dojem ze surového života přímo záhubou.” Ibid., p. 308.

⁹⁶ Whitman’s poem *Song of Myself*, reads thus: ‘Do I contradict myself? Very well then I contradict myself, (I am large, I contain multitudes).’ (Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, section 51, 1855).

⁹⁷ Michael Alan Schwartz & Osborne P. Wiggins, ‘Pathological Selves’, in *Exploring the Self*, ed. by Dan Zahavi (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishers, 2000), pp. 257–77 (p. 272).

Since Dagmar has been defeated by city life and she has realised that other people do not aspire to live up to ideals such as hers, she decides to drown herself in the River Morava, which has been introduced at the very beginning of the novel thus: ‘Outside the big garden flowed Morava, a wide, lazy, insidious river. Dagmar was quite small when they built a batten fence along the river and she had to give her word to never try to open the small hatch with a lock.’⁹⁸ But when Dagmar goes to the river bank, having decided to take her own life, the lock turns out not to be much of an obstacle: ‘It was not necessary to open the lock, it was so rusty that it gave in with first touch.’⁹⁹ The rusty lock, then, becomes the emblem of Dagmar’s idealistic worldview and her vulnerability which causes her parents to protect her from the world but cannot not stop her from being disappointed. The lock also represents an emotional lock in Dagmar herself, which hinders her from developing in life. The lock stops Dagmar from developing her own version of the relationship between inner and outer, leaving her to cope with her vulnerability alone.

The river, for its part, stands for a metaphor of the world, of all things enchanting and threatening. The river is the emblem of what Dagmar fears the most; it tempts her with the non-existence which she yearns for, the otherness that she constantly carries inside her and which eventually will separate her from the world for good. Right from the start, the river is set up as a solution for Dagmar’s confusion about life, other people and her own conflicting emotions.

Water and drowning are often associated with emotions, and especially with feminine despair and the final stage of losing one’s mind (and, consequently one’s self). Classics from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (1603) to Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss*

⁹⁸ ‘Za velikou zahradou tekla Morava, široká, líná, zrádná řeka. Dagmar byla docela maličká, když podél břehu postavili vysoký lat’ový plot a musela čestným slovem zavázati, že se nikdy nepokouší otěvřítí malá dvířka s visutým zámekem.’ Benešová, ‘Hladina’, p. 302.

⁹⁹ ‘Zámku nebylo třeba otvírat, byl již tak rezavý, že povolil při prvním doteku.’ Ibid, p. 359.

(1860) to the Czech classic romantic poem *Máj* (May, 1836) treat drowning as a characteristically female method of suicide. Benešová introduces drowning as the end result of woman's disillusionment that leads into despair and (a partial if not complete) loss of life force. However, Dagmar's suicide does not surprise the reader, because there has been something odd in her character throughout the story: 'An emptiness languished in her, not yet clarified, and agony that clearly distinguished her from other children.'¹⁰⁰ Also her attraction to death is demonstrated at the beginning of the story, here embedded in another elaborate description of the River Morava:

The river tempted her, river full of colours, water eternally restless, of which she saw a wide swath and the opposite shore eroded, tall. Gray verdure faintly shone amidst shadows and the shadows were quite still and evil, although a whirl of small waves played around them. Sometimes a long, bloody swath lay on the surface and sometimes it was as if small flames radiated from its core. And other times water swelled in large waves.¹⁰¹

In this passage that the river takes in Dagmar's emotions; it reflects them. Dagmar, like the river, is never content, never un-restless with her life. The shadows that are described as 'still and evil' predict Dagmar's fate: her eventual suicide that takes place calmly and quietly. Also the 'bloody swath' suggests to the reader that, although drowning rarely involves a large flow of blood, there is death to come. The constant movement, the fluidity of the river is threatening: Dagmar is frightened of psychological fluidity, the changing selves and roles that society expects its members to be capable of juggling. The portrayals of water 'swelling in large waves' and the general restlessness of the river also have a sense of violence in them: it is as if the

¹⁰⁰ 'Jakási prazdnota tesknila v ní, dimá, neujasněná ještě, a bolest, která ji zřejmě odlišovala od jiných dětí.' Ibid., p. 305.

¹⁰¹ Řeka lákala, řeka plná barev, voda věčně neklidná, z níž viděla široký pruh i protější břeh vymletý, vysoký. Šedá zeleň mdle svítila mezi stíny i stíny byly docela nehybné a zlé, ač hrál kolem nich vír drobounkých vlnek. Někdy ležel na hladině dlouhý krvavý pruh a někdy jako by plaménky sálaly z jejího nitra. A jindy se dmula všechna voda širokými vlnami. Ibid., p. 303.

river is engaging in some battle against itself. This also serves as a reflection of Dagmar's mind: even though she believes herself to be largely in the right, at the end of the story she has to come in terms with the collision of her inner world and the world outside, and with the fact that her inner world was not strong enough to carry her through life. All in all, the river Morava serves as the emblem of change in 'Hladina'; the threatening change of everything that Dagmar holds dear.

Although the river in 'Hladina' is generally depicted as threatening, it also signifies the long-desired closure to an unhappy life through drowning. A passage which emphasises this part of the drowning theme, and which shares the mood of the ending in 'Hladina', can be found in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899), when the main character of the story, Edna Pontellier, drowns herself after realising that her life as been empty and false and that she cannot go on the way she has lived until that moment: 'She walked out. The water was chill, but she walked on. The water was deep, but she lifted her white body and reached out with a long, sweeping stroke. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace.'¹⁰² Here Edna feels that the sea takes her in, finally gives her the closure that she requires. Dagmar's drowning is similarly quiet and determined, exhibiting a similar sense of calm closure, a sense of finally letting go, surrendering herself to death in a way in which she never surrendered herself to life since she was too busy holding up her ideals. In both *The Awakening* and 'Hladina', then, drowning is portrayed as liberation from self-deception. The literary critic Helen V. Emmitt's view, 'For Maggie Tulliver [George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860)] and Edna Pontellier, the only escape from the images others thrust upon them is to recreate their childhood world of illusions. They always want too much because to want at all is to ask too

¹⁰² Kate Chopin, 'The Awakening', in *The Awakening and Selected Stories*, ed. by Sandra M. Gilbert (New York: Penguin, 1986), pp. 43–176 (p.176).

much, unless what they want is a traditional marriage, the happy ending the novel allows for a woman.¹⁰³ Like Maggie and Edna, Dagmar cannot survive long in the crossfire of her own desires and society's expectations. Emmitt also states that suicide is taking one's life into one's own hands – but neither Maggie's nor Edna's suicide seems like a conscious choice. In Dagmar's case, suicide is at least a half-consciously chosen act although committed in despair after learning how many of her friends had actually worked against her. Emmitt also continues to argue that, at least, in Maggie's case, suicide signifies the heroine giving in to her desires and reaching for self-fulfilment from the embrace of water.¹⁰⁴ Maggie's fate coincides with the river, as Eliot writes in the novel: '[Maggie's destiny] will reveal itself like the course of an unmapped river: we only know that the river is full and rapid, and that for all rivers there is the same final home.'¹⁰⁵ Dagmar's fascination with the River Morava, the fact that the story has been suggesting drowning as Dagmar's fate from the beginning, and her last thought suggest that Dagmar, too, finds self-fulfilment in drowning, after she realises that she always wanted too much and left too little for compromise: 'I thought too much, I wanted [to reach] too high... Everyone deceived me but I deceived myself the most...' ¹⁰⁶ There is also an element of retribution and forgiveness in Dagmar's suicide; she forgives herself for her idealism but still decides to take her own life because she cannot see any other way out of her unfulfilling life, or any other way of reaching self-fulfilment. While destroying one's self to find self-fulfilment may seem like a nonsensical thing to do, Dagmar's suicide is shown as the only way she can hold on to her 'true' or 'essential' self. Had she continued on living

¹⁰³ Helen V. Emmitt, '“Drowned in the Willing Sea”: Freedom and Drowning in Eliot, Chopin and Drabble', in *Tulsa Studies of Women's Literature*, 12, 2, 1993, 315–32 (p. 329).

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 317–8.

¹⁰⁵ George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), pp. 514–5.

¹⁰⁶ '“Příliš jsem soudila, příliš vysoko jsem chtěla... Všichni mne zklamali, ale nejvíc já sama sebe...” Benešová, 'Hladina', p. 359.

in her community or the city, she would have eventually had to sell out her principles, like the ever more practical Dora had suggested. Unlike Dagmar, Dora is the ultimate city-dweller; she appears to change herself and adapt into to different surroundings like a chameleon. This is something that Dagmar cannot and will not do; her singular, essential self is too precious for her.

During the course of ‘Hladina’, Dagmar learns to accept the fact that she is not allowed to make decisions about her own life. She is given the privilege of educating herself, but she is not expected to do anything with it. Her relationship with Ludvík is strained by the fact that Dagmar sees it as a beginning of an arranged marriage and cannot shake the feeling that her life choices are not, and have never been, in her hands. Dagmar is already an individual with strong, although sometimes wavering, personal values but her problem is that she cannot relate to the society she lives in and she cannot deal with the expectations that pile up on her. She tries hard to accommodate Ludvík in her life, partly because of her strong sense of responsibility, partly because she is afraid of cutting her ties to conventional life. This becomes ever more evident, when Dagmar tries, in vain, to feel passionate love for Ludvík, who appears to have strong feelings for her. This makes Ludvík think of her as cold-hearted, giving preference to her principles rather than to other people, concentrating on herself rather than reaching out for others: ‘You undermine yourself and you destroy others. In childhood you never believed in the water sprite, but you still did not have the courage to swim in the [River] Morava. But you took pride in yourself and you always will. Perhaps you cannot lie but you have impossible ideas about truth.’¹⁰⁷ Ludvík’s comment on Dagmar’s avoidance of the river strengthens the view that the Morava acts as the mirror of Dagmar’s emotions and especially of her fears.

¹⁰⁷ ‘Podrýváte sebe a ničíte jiné. V dětství jste nevěřila v hastrmana, ale k Moravě jste se jakživa neodvážila. Vypínala jste se však a budete se vždycky vypínat. Lhát, možná, neumíte, ale o pravdě máte nemožné představy.’ Benešová, ‘Hladina’, p. 316.

In Ludvík's statement, the Morava becomes the emblem of Dagmar's self-deception; even though she was afraid of swimming in the river, but she did not recognise this as a defeat; on the contrary, she was still proud of herself and, according to Ludvík, placed herself high above other people.

'Hladina' becomes a story of a naive young woman who is unable to find her place in life, because she is not able to connect with other people. When she eventually does get to know Ludvík and Dora's true characters, she is unable to deal with the fact that they had lied to her all along, because in her world, lying is the greatest sin of all. It seems that Dagmar is most afraid of having to become one of society's façades, part of the surface that conceals the true characters and desires of people, although, paradoxically, she has turned this façade against herself and refused to recognise the world as it is. However, this feminine fear of becoming a part of a larger structure without having any meaning on one's own, was still a topical subject amongst women writers some fifty years, as described acutely by the author's alter-ego in Simone de Beauvoir's short story 'Age of Discretion' (1967):

I know these with-it young married women. They have some vague kind of a job, they claim to use their minds, to go in for sport, dress well, run their houses faultlessly, bring up their children perfectly, carry on a social life – in short, succeed on every level. And they don't really care about anything at all.¹⁰⁸

This is exactly what Dagmar is afraid of: that she would also become someone's wife with no meaningful life of her own. She would have to play a cynical role instead of being earnest. Unlike Vlková's heroines, she would not see motherhood as a fulfilment but as a superficial duty that would merely give her a functional everyday life but not a life that could provide her with a sense of purpose.

¹⁰⁸ Simone de Beauvoir, 'Age of Discretion', in *The Woman Destroyed*, trans. by Patrick O'Brian (London: Harper Perennial, 2006), pp. 5–71(19).

‘Myšky’ (1911) – Of Mice and Women

The short story ‘Myšky’ (1911) relates to the life of a working woman and discusses the problems of woman’s independence. It was first published a couple of years after ‘Hladina’, and the two short stories are connected on a thematic level. Both display female characters who have idealistic assumptions about life and whose education has given them only little knowledge of life outside their immediate circle. Both female characters are prone to deceive themselves in order to keep to their ideals about life, or, in Jenička’s case, to her idea about romantic love. To Jenička, self-deception through romantic love becomes her lifeline in a village that considers her an outsider; in her love affair, she perhaps for the first time experiences an acute sense of belonging.

Jenička is a young woman who educates herself as a schoolmistress and is ready to come back home when her father more or less drives her out of their home after his second marriage to a woman of Jenička’s age. Jenička, who used to be her father’s favourite, is distressed about the situation and especially that her father had already got her a job in the small village of Lučiny: ‘At this time she also thought about her future completely seriously for the first time. It is as if she had only fully realised then and there that another life is about to begin, that her familiar world will end and familiar people will leave, that everything will change, work and rest, thoughts and interests.’¹⁰⁹ As in ‘Hladina’, so in ‘Myšky’, change is not a positive but a negative matter; something that will lead the heroine astray from her familiar path

¹⁰⁹ ‘V této době také po prvé zcela vážně myslívála na budoucnost. Jako by teprve nyní pochopila, že nastane jiný, docela jiný život, že skončí známý svět a odejdou známí lidé, že se promění všechno, práce i pohova, myšlenky i zájmy.’ Benešová, ‘Myšky’, in *Rouhači a oblouzení a jiné povídky* (Prague Československý spisovatel, 1956), pp. 150–232 (p. 156).

and threaten her sense of self. This imminent change makes Jenička so nervous that she has a breakdown just before her final exams:

‘If a miracle does not happen, if God himself does not have mercy on me, tomorrow will be my last day! At home no one cares about me and my journey to the world will be barred. And shame will become my companion. I will fail, hopelessly fail in the four most important subjects... But at least I will not know about that shame. I will drown myself, drown...’¹¹⁰

That Jenička contemplates drowning herself connects the story once again with ‘Hladina’, but whereas Dagmar physically drowns herself, Jenička’s drowning is of a mental kind. Jenička is so overwhelmed with her emotions that she connects this feeling with actual physical drowning which she does not, however, carry out. Despite her dramatic outburst, Jenička survives her exams and leaves the school to take up the post her father had arranged. However, this short-lived breakdown predates the more serious one that Jenička has later in the village and which leads to her suicide attempt. It is clear from the start that Jenička is a fragile character, prone to melodrama, but also keen to please people around her, and afraid of shame, of being a disappointment.

In the village Jenička soon realises that she is seen as an outsider: no one speaks to her and the children she is supposed to teach soon begin to treat her with stubborn indifference. The only companions she has are the three mice that her predecessor, Urban, had been keeping alive for the sake of company. The description or, rather, a song of praise, that Urban gives Jenička on the three mice is rather the funniest part in the otherwise melancholic short story. The infatuated school master cherishes the mice as much more ‘beautiful and interesting domestic animals’ than

¹¹⁰ ‘Jestli se zázrak nestane, jestli se Bůh sám nesmiluje, bude zítra můj poslední den! Doma o mne nikdo nestojí a cesta do světa bude zatarasena. A hanba půjde s mou pámatkou. Propadnu, beznadějně propadnu ze čtyř nejdůležitějších předmětů... Ale já alespoň o této hanbě nebudu vědět... Utopím se, utopím...’ Ibid., p. 158.

canary birds, dogs or cats.¹¹¹ According to Urban, mice are even more loyal than any other animals. At first, Jenička is horrified at the prospect of living with mice, but slowly they become her only true companions, the only ones that see her desperation and finally, witness her suicide attempt. It is the mice, then, that see Jenička as she is, a lonely young woman who attempts to build a life for herself through trial and error. The mice are the only creatures in Jenička's life who are as earnest as she is. Unlike her father, the mice do not abandon her, neither do they attempt to deceive her or take advantage of her like her future lover Veleta does. By humanising the mice, by giving them the good characteristics of empathy and kindness, Benešová underlines the fact that the world outside Jenička's self-deception is too cold and harsh for a young woman to handle on her own.

Despite the quiet companionship with the mice, Jenička grows desperate for at least some human friendship and she becomes involved with a married man, Veleta, whose wife is a jealous and difficult personality. Jenička and Veleta fall in love and are planning a future together when she learns from Veleta's wife that he had had a great many illegitimate children by poor women in the village. Veleta's wife is tired of his promiscuous behaviour, but at the same time she considers it typical of men: 'All those girls, that was nothing. Man is a man. He is bored, he languishes here.'¹¹² Even though Veleta's wife appears to suggest that Veleta actually loves Jenička (she is not one of 'those girls'), the news of his promiscuity makes Jenička want to get away, especially when she finds out that everyone in the village knows about her and Veleta's affair and that they are coming to castigate her. Delirious with sorrow and despair, Jenička carries out an attempt to poison herself: 'In that wrecked state, she knew clearly and for certain only one thing without thinking about it: she

¹¹¹ 'Myšky jsou nejhezčí a nejzajímavější domácí zvířata'. Ibid., p. 170.

¹¹² 'Ty všechny holky, to nebylo nic. Muž je muž. Nudí se, teskno je mu tady'. Ibid., p. 218.

knew that she had to die. Die of shame and grief.¹¹³ Again, as before her final exams at the teacher's college, all Jenička can think is shame. In this, she comes again closer to Dagmar's character: both are young women who appear to be suffocated by their high ideals to which they constantly aspire. However, Jenička's suicide attempt fails and the next morning she leaves the village after apologising to Veleta's wife and returns to her father who receives her with open arms (by this time it is clear that his second marriage was a failure). The desperate Veleta follows Jenička and attempts to persuade her to come with him, but she refuses, finally making an independent decision on her own.

The ending of the story suggests that it is likely that Jenička will remain a spinster after her disappointment with Veleta, but at least she refused to compromise her ideals for him. When she came to the village, she was innocent and naive, but her affair with Veleta made her a grown woman, who departs the village because she is convinced that it would be wrong to stay. 'Myšky' reminds one of Viková's *Medřická*, in which the main characters are also a young schoolmistress and her lover. Whereas Viková's novel ends in the schoolmistress's pregnancy, 'Myšky' leaves many options open for Jenička. Additionally, in both stories it is the relationship with a wrong man (and in Viková, motherhood) that makes the young woman grow as a human being, and in the end, she has gained heightened self-awareness and independent thought. One cannot set aside the impression that in this part, 'Myšky' also takes its cue from perhaps the most famous novel on the life of a school mistress (governess) who falls in love with an older man, namely Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847). Like *Jane Eyre*, Jenička is infatuated by the charismatic, melancholic older

¹¹³ 'V tomto trosečném zmatku věděla jasně a bezpečně pouze jedno, aniž o tom přemýšlela: věděla, že musí umřít. Umřít studem a zármutkem.' Ibid., p. 219.

man, only to find herself in a situation in which she has trusted her deceitful lover more than her own initial instincts.

These initial instincts tell Jenička another story than her instincts for love; that she is doing something wrong, even evil, by having an affair with a married man, or even by thinking about him: ‘She was convinced that with every such thought she lives through something exceedingly difficult and sinful, and that only complete solitude may protect her from evil and a horrible fate.’¹¹⁴ However, Jenička soon begins to be taken in by Veleta’s charm and begins to think of their relationship as a new kind of fate: ‘She had lost her home in order to find a lover. It was deemed so and that is how it had to be.’¹¹⁵ This is where Jenička sinks further into self-deception, which is partly formed by her lack of experience and partly by Veleta’s charm and friendship in a community that otherwise tries to isolate her:

She thought of her love as an enchanted forest, in which one could walk not for days but for years and years under the rustle of gently hanging branches. She knew that she cannot lose her way, for she is led by the hand of her dearest. But also her hand leads her most loved one. [...] Life beyond love has lost its meaning, death has lost its horror.¹¹⁶

This passage exemplifies Jenička’s naivety, but also her lack of self-preservation: the fact that ‘Life beyond love has lost its meaning, death has lost its horror’ suggests she will not have difficulties in resorting to suicide if love fails her. This also underlines the inherent ambiguities in the story, regarding self-deception as self-preservation or self-protection. Initially, Jenička’s self-deception works as a means of protecting her self, but when she finally surrenders herself to Veleta, self-deception begins to slowly

¹¹⁴ ‘Byla přesvědčená, že každou takovou myšlenkou žije něco nesmírně těžkého i hříšného a že jen úplná samota může jí být záštitou od zla a strašného osudu.’ Benešová, ‘Myšky’, p. 198.

¹¹⁵ ‘Ztratila domov, aby našla milence. Bylo to souzeno a muselo tak být.’ Ibid., p. 210.

¹¹⁶ ‘Myslila na svou lásku jako na čarovný les, kterým možno chodit ne dny, ale léta a léta za šumění laskavě skloněných větví. Věděla, že nemůže zbloudit, neboť ji povede ruka nějdražší. Ale i její ruka povede člověka nejmilovanějšího. [...] Život mimo lásku pozbyl významu, smrt v ní ztratila hrůzu.’ Ibid., p. 215.

destroy Jenička's self. Unlike, for example, the eponymous main character of Viková's *Medřická*, or, indeed, Dagmar in 'Hladina', Jenička does not have a resilient sense of self, but she assumes others' views on herself. When in love with Veleta, she refuses to question this love: 'She did not want to think, she did not want to see too clearly.'¹¹⁷ In Veleta's eyes she is a desirable young woman, while the village community sees her as an outsider, a mouse until she becomes the evil woman when the community finds out about her affair with Veleta. Only her suicide attempt frees Jenička from Veleta's power and from the community's opinion; only after she has nearly destroyed her self, she finds the strength and self-awareness necessary to build a life for herself.

In 'Myšky', the reader's attention is also drawn to the way Veleta is portrayed. While Ludvík's deception, and, indeed, character in 'Hladina' is not given much ground, Veleta's character is made to stand out as an example of a man lost in personal crisis. In a sense, he is shown as Jenička's counterpart: an individual who is trapped in a narrow village society and whose aspirations could give him so much more in life. Veleta is an ultimate example of what happens to a human being who lets self-deception to get the better of him; he let himself think that quiet family life in a small village would suit him and make him happy. Initially, Veleta is indeed shown as being a good father to her little daughter, and a distinguished member of the village community. But then the reader is also supposed to feel sorry for him because of his pitiful circumstances, of his 'gnawing grief over wasted talent, terrible wasteland of Lučiny, joyless household, a ridiculous and stupid wife'.¹¹⁸ In the end, though, the reader finds out that Veleta's marriage is far more complicated and that his wife is miserable rather than 'ridiculous and stupid'. While Jenička is not victimised, the

¹¹⁷ 'Nechtěla přemýšlet, nechtěla vidět příliš jasně.' Ibid, p. 215.

¹¹⁸ 'hlodavý smutek ze zničeného talenty, děsnou poušť v Lučinách, neutěšenou domácnost, směšnou, hloupou ženu'. Ibid., p. 266.

victims of male promiscuity are Veleta's wife and the poor women with their illegitimate children. Veleta's wife has been embittered by her gloomy life with a man who married her when she was young and beautiful, but soon got tired of her and began to lead a private life outside their marriage. Here Veleta comes to resemble the male characters in Viková's novel trilogy, that is, the novels *Medřická* (1896), *Vzpoura* (Revolt, 1901) and *Pán* (Lord and Master, 1905) in which the male characters use women's bodies as long as they can get any pleasure from them, and when their infatuation for them is gone, the men retreat to their private lives and leave the women behind. Even though it seems that Veleta's feelings for Jenička are stronger than his feelings for any of the poor village women (after all, he was desperate enough to come to her father's house to force her to come with him), Jenička has no guarantee that Veleta would choose only her for the rest of their lives. Jenička's future could have been that of becoming as bitter as Veleta's wife, if she had chosen to follow his lead. Like the main heroines of Viková's *Medřická* and *Vzpoura*, Jenička is thus saved from miserable bourgeois marriage.

Conclusion: Self-Deception and Suicide

In both 'Hladina' and 'Myšky', self-deception is presented as the road to self-destruction, to suicide, especially when self-deception ends and the main character notices that she is alone, isolated from the community that she used to be or aspired to be a part of. It is the feeling of being an outsider in one's own life that leads both Dagmar and Jenička to suicide. While Benešová appears to believe in a 'true self' or an 'essential self', she believes that woman's fate is to hide her self, to be deceitful, since her 'true' self does not necessarily match the society's ideal woman. Dagmar's

and Jenička's true selves are incompatible with the society to the extent that collision of the self and society is inevitable. As Benešová observes in her works, woman's self is expected to easily merge with or be shadowed by man's self. The intelligent Dagmar returns to her hometown only to realize that her intellect is not a desired quality in a petty bourgeois housewife, a future doctor's wife, whose fate is to live in the shadow of her husband. The sensitive and gullible, romantic Jenička is fooled by a married man who uses her innocence as a way of revitalizing his own life. In this, Benešová's notion of the relationship between man and woman agrees with the notion which Svobodová and Viová uphold in their works; in order to truly build a life for herself, woman must stay away from bourgeois marriage, or men altogether. Yet Benešová does not support retreating from society altogether even though conflict between her heroines and society is imminent and unavoidable.

Even though the two stories are similar in their treatment of the theme of self-deception, there are still profound differences in the way, for example, romantic love is connected with self-deception. In 'Hladina', Dagmar proves to be a fragile failure because of her inability to love, which would essentially mean giving up her protective wall of self-deception. As Moldanová notes about the character of Dagmar: 'Her inability to love and, on the other hand, her demands on the absoluteness of love destroyed her relationship with Ludvík and brought about her death. She did not know that love is an emotion, which forces a human being to overcome and renounce himself'.¹¹⁹ While Dagmar is, then, brought down by her refusal to let go of the control she has established on herself, in Jenička's case, love becomes too much to handle. Dagmar's self-deception is built on the fact that she can only trust herself, whereas Jenička's self-deception is based on her strong emotions about Veleta, a

¹¹⁹ Moldanová, p. 49.

powerful desire to belong to someone or some community, and her strong conviction that Veleta is the only person who has her best interest in his mind. In their treatment of love, these two characters become, then, each others' mirror images: in order to avoid conflict between herself and the world, Dagmar should learn to let go of her control, whereas Jenička should practice more caution and not let herself go so easily. Self-deception works against these characters in different ways: in Dagmar's case, self-deception turns her inwards and isolates her from the world outside and from the people close to her. In Jenička's case, however, self-deception turns her outwards and opens her up for Veleta and a relationship that is based on dishonesty and illusion.

Despite the differences in their ways of deceiving themselves, both female main characters in 'Hladina' and 'Myšky' end up solving the imminent conflict between themselves and the community with self-destruction. Dagmar chooses suicide because she cannot compromise or lower her expectations. Jenička attempts suicide because she is utterly ashamed of herself and desperate to solve her situation quickly. In the end, Jenička's apology to Veleta's wife and her leaving Lučiny behind changes her into a grown woman, who is ready to take responsibility for her own actions. It is evident that Jenička is more of a survivor than Dagmar; she attempts to deal with her changed situation, or, indeed, her changed self, and accept the fact that she is not the only one to blame for her unhappiness, that others have deceived her. Whereas Dagmar has an absolute and unforgiving view of her self, Jenička's self turns out to be flexible enough to survive humiliation and disappointment.

To Benešová, then, there is a part of the self that is not unchangeable but changing. We could call this the 'social' self. Although the social self has to be like a chameleon, Benešová also sees a danger in attempting to fuse one's 'essential' self with another person's self (as happens with Dagmar and Dora in 'Hladina' and

Jenička and Veleta in ‘Myšky’) and in attempting to build one’s self only according to something that is prescribed by society. While Benešová is not idealist enough to believe in the full exhibition of woman’s ‘essential’ self, she does not advocate a full-scale self-deception as a survival strategy either. Her female characters may be, to borrow Pynsent’s expression, ‘fragile failures’, but they are still a product of a world that was becoming more and more tolerant of aspirations not connected to the sweet domestic life.

In the world of Benešová’s short stories, then, the successful individuals play a cynical role, changing their views and hues according to what is best for them in their current situation. These individuals are portrayed as abhorrent since their ability to change is seen as a lack of moral backbone. Benešová’s heroines, however, have moral backbone, which resists change but eventually leads them to perdition. In the next chapter we will see another, positive way of dealing with the changing individual; the fluid self is no longer borne out of cynicism but of imagination and dreams.

Chapter 3: Turning Inwards – Self-Discovery, Gothic Fiction and Fairy-tales in Vítězslav Nezval’s and Jarmila Svatá’s Works

As we have seen in the previous chapters on the *Fin-de-siècle* and early twentieth-century Czech literature, self-discovery is a difficult journey. In Svobodová and Víková, self-discovery was interwoven with female creativity and criticism of marriage. In Benešová, female characters attempted to unmask the ugly side of both

the whole society and their closest people, thus bringing themselves to destruction. This chapter will show that, in the works of the Avantgardists Jarmila Svatá (1903–1964) and Vítězslav Nezval (1900–1958), the self finally attempts to find a productive balance between inner stories and outer stories.

Nezval was a member of the Czech Avantgardist circle Devětsil ('Nine forces', also the Czech name for butterbur) and the founder of the Poetist and Surrealist movements in Czechoslovakia. He was mainly known as a poet although he wrote a few prose works as well, of which *Valérie* is perhaps the best known. The literary critic Milan Blahynka calls Nezval 'básník noci' ('poet of night'), an epithet which he takes from Nezval's collection of poems called *Básně noci* (Poems of the night, 1930).¹²⁰ The epithet describes Nezval well as an author since he shows a special interest for night-time in his other works, too. Night-time for Nezval connotes something magical, something uncanny: simultaneously familiar and frightening (we will discuss Nezval's usage of Freud's uncanny later in this chapter). As he writes in his memoir *Z mého života* (From my life, 1959), Nezval saw night-time, and especially nocturnal Prague, as a source of inspiration: 'It is no wonder that the first great enchantment was given to me by nocturnal Prague. Darkness hid in the night everything that could depress a human being, and [darkness] with its lights showed an atmosphere, in which there was a great deal of seductiveness.'¹²¹ Nezval's view of night as enchanting and seductive also comes across in *Valérie*: at night people, places and animals become something completely different, as the night blurs their boundaries and makes them look anew.

¹²⁰ Milan Blahynka, *S Vítězslavem Nezvalem: Kapitoly o životě a tvorbě* (Prague: Mladá Fronta, 1976), p. 48.

¹²¹ 'Není divu, že první veliké okouzlení mi dávala noční Praha. V noci zakryla tma všecko, co by mohlo deprimovat člověka, a svými světly vodila ho atmosféru, na níž bylo mnoho svůdného.' Vítězslav Nezval, *Z mého života* (Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1959) p. 86.

While Nezval was one of the leading artists in the Avantgarde circles and is still one of the key figures studied in the field of Czech literature, Svatá is little-known in contemporary Czech literary studies. She does not even gain one mention in the otherwise thorough study on the Czech Avantgarde, namely *Český surrealismus 1929–1953*. Neither is she mentioned in the art historian Karla Tonine Huebner's thesis on Toyen, another female member of Devětsil.¹²² Yet Svatá is mentioned by the architect and writer Karel Honzík in his memoir, when he recalls her presence in *café Slavie*, one of the main meeting places of the Avantgarde circles in the 1920s: 'far and wide from the neighbouring table rattles the voice of Jarmila Svatá, an actress at the Liberated theatre [Osvobozené divadlo] and later an author, an inventor of new words and phrases. She came up with, for example, the word "mindrák" or the saying "dělat na někoho vévodu (-dkyni)". [In Slavie, Svatá] amused everyone present (also in other tables) with her dada-tirades. They left exhausted from laughing and Teige took the marvellous Jarmila from *café* to *café* to show her off as a phenomenon.'¹²³ Honzík's portrayal of Svatá sets her up as an quick-witted personality and completely undermines the impression that she was left out of all studies of the Prague Avantgarde because she was not striking enough a character compared to the likes of Nezval or Toyen. The literary critic Susan Rubin Suleiman offers a likely explanation to Svatá's absence from studies in the Czech Avantgarde movement in her work on women artists in Surrealist circles: 'If it is clear, historically and sociologically, what women brought to Surrealism, it remains to be asked what Surrealism brought to women. In a negative perspective, one could argue that it brought them nothing, since

¹²² Karla Tonine Huebner, 'Eroticism, Identity, and Cultural Context: Toyen and the Prague Avantgarde' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Pittsburgh, 2008).

¹²³ Karel Honzík, *Že života avantgardy: zážitky architektovy* (Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1963), p. 62.

by the time they came to it, the movement's truly dynamic movement was over.'¹²⁴ Suleiman also makes the point that Surrealist movements all around Europe were dominated by male subject position and women were mostly underdogs when it came to producing and elaborating 'an imagery and a script that involved neither a masquerade of femininity nor male impersonation'.¹²⁵ Against this background, it is no wonder that female artists like Toyen who played with the 'femininity versus masculinity' setup in their works as well as in their own personalities, survived in a circle that was predominantly male. Svatá may have been further away from the core of the Prague Avantgarde altogether, but her writing shows an appreciation of male companionship against female friendships that were doomed to failure.

In fact, both Nezval and Svatá's female characters strive for self-discovery and recognition through a web of stories and relationships that they cannot truly trust or understand: fairy-tales, family relations and the 'inner story'. In Nezval's *Valérie a týden divů* (*Valerie and Her Week of Wonders*, 1945), the main character receives the final encouragement from her family, while the main character of Svatá's *Sedm kamarádů slečny Vivian* (*The seven friends of Miss Vivian*, 1938) learns from the warning example of a community of women. Both appear to learn from other people's stories: Valérie's true identity is based on various versions of the story on her father's identity and Vivian escapes the blurry world of fairy-tales just to find herself again in a world of tales. This idea of finding ourselves in stories anticipates Jonathan Glover's concept of 'inner story', which is a story of our lives that we tell ourselves.¹²⁶ The 'inner story' links inevitably with self-creation: as Glover puts it, 'My view of myself affects what I do, and is bound up with how I see my story so

¹²⁴ Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avantgarde* (Cambridge, MA & London, England: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 32.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

¹²⁶ Jonathan Glover, *I: The Philosophy and Psychology of Personal Identity* (London: Penguin, 1989), p. 139.

far.¹²⁷ Both Valérie and Vivian are at first protected by a shell of innocence but as their life stories continue, they have to let go of that innocence. True self-discovery, as we shall see, involves self-exposure: finding out new things about oneself and others and letting go of one's established set of beliefs. In contrast to Benešová in the previous chapter, self-exposure is here seen as a positive step towards enlightenment about one's self (or possibly, selves). Thus, the way in which Nezval and Svatá deal with self-exposure becomes the counterpart of the destructive loss of self-deception in Benešová. As Glover notes, to abandon beliefs is to re-create, to rewrite one's inner story, and this is exactly what Nezval and Svatá set their female characters to do. Instead of being afraid of the world and hiding from it, like Benešová's characters do, Nezval's and Svatá's heroines travel both out to the world and inside themselves, fully exploring outer and inner stories.

Self-discovery in Nezval's Valérie a týden divů (1945): The Uncanny and the Doppelgänger

Valérie is both a novel about sexual awakening and finding a way to self-fulfilment. Even though the main plot in the novel is finding out the truth about Valérie's family, and especially about her father, the mysterious Polecat, the main search of identity takes place through blurring boundaries and showing that one's self can be fluid as well as stable. Valérie's story is also about growing up but not about compromising one's sense of self for the sake of becoming a member of a community, like happens in Ivan Olbracht's *Anna Proletárka* (Anna the Proletarian, 1928), which equates the main character Anna's sexual awakening with political awakening. Compared to

¹²⁷ Ibid., p. 153.

Olbracht's novel, *Valérie* is decidedly a Modernist novel, more concerned with the innermost developments of its main character than her budding social or political awareness. Furthermore, Nezval's associative style in portraying imagery ensures that revealing of family secrets is not the only intriguing part in the novel. Not only the main motifs and themes, but also the construction of *Valérie* shows markedly modern, Freudian characteristics: most of the action in *Valérie* takes place in a teenage girl's sexual dream that she has during the first night of her menstrual cycle. Valérie's menstruation is symbolised by the full moon that also functions as a bridge from 'real' world to dream world. These worlds are not completely disconnected from each other: what Valérie finds out about her family in her dream continues to make sense in the 'real' world, too. Nezval's treatment of dream agrees with what Freud writes in his *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899): 'dreams are often at their most profound when they appear to be at their craziest', and, further on: 'the affects that we live through in dreams are by no means inferior to the affects of similar intensity we feel when we are awake; and it is with the affects it contains, far more strongly with the imagined ideas it contains, that the dream stakes its claim to be accepted as one of the real, formative experiences of our soul.'¹²⁸ Thus, both Nezval and Freud treat dreams as representations of something relating to our lives in the 'real' world. This emphasizes the blurring of boundaries that occurs on many different levels in *Valérie*: the boundaries between dreaming and being awake, between selves, between Gothic and Modernist traditions slowly disappear. Since Nezval was also influenced by French Surrealism, it is worthwhile considering André Breton's conception of dream that also directed at the way in which reality and dreams overlap. Breton asks the following question in his *Manifesto of Surrealism* (1924): 'Can't the dream also be

¹²⁸ Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. by Joyce Crick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 285 and pp. 298–9.

used in solving the fundamental questions of life?’¹²⁹ In this light *Valérie* seems like Nezval’s answer, in fiction, to Breton’s question: the fundamental question that the novel’s heroine asks is ‘Who am I?’ and she herself finds out the answer after breaking down all the forces that resist her.

The novel is set up as a Surrealist variant of the Gothic novel genre where the action takes place in a rambling, murky house (or a castle) and the surrounding village. The set of characters also follows the example of the Gothic novel: it consists of a demonic monk, a vampire/a mysterious paternal figure (the Polecat), a young man/the heroine’s twin brother (Orlík), and an innocent maiden, Valérie. These are clear features of a Gothic novel, but there is also something else that joins the Gothic novel genre, the Surrealist preoccupation with the dream world and Nezval’s novel together. As the literary critic Kari J. Winter describes: ‘Like Romantic poetry, Gothic fiction characteristically represents *boundaries between self and other, psyche and world as remarkably fluid*. This fluidity of boundaries is expressed in the instability of individual identities and the common device of narrative frames in which the central themes and plots of the novel occur repeatedly through subplots.’¹³⁰ Nezval has taken ‘the fluidity of boundaries’ between self and other a step further in his way of setting the story in a young woman’s dream: as in ‘real’ dreams, so in *Valérie*, identities are constantly in flux, since familiar people are met in different circumstances and odd occurrences take place. This fluidity of boundaries also means that the self is constantly exposed to novelties; there is no boundary that would separate the self from others with certainty.

¹²⁹ André Breton, ‘Manifesto of Surrealism’, in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. by Richard Seaver & Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan, 1972), pp. 1–47 (p. 12).

¹³⁰ Kari J. Winter, *Subjects of Slavery, Agents of Change: Women and Power in Gothic Novels and Slave Narratives, 1790–1865* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1992), p. 19. My emphasis.

Uncertainty is what characterises Valérie's dream world as a whole; it is at the same time familiar and unfamiliar, suggesting the familiar Gothic device of 'relocation'. As the literary critic John Paul Riquelme asserts: 'Early in its history, the Gothic is structurally and implicitly a negative version of pastoral because of its turn to foreign locales that are threatening and bizarre. It later relocates the anti-pastoral setting and its implications much closer to home: on native soil, on board ship, in the sanitarium, in the library, in the house, in the bedroom, in the schoolroom, in the mind, and in language.'¹³¹ This fits Nezval's novel, since Valérie's story is located in her dream, that is to say, her mind. Nezval thus makes the mental space literal, brings it out in words. This creates a setting that is governed by her Unconscious, which releases her urges and impulses, some of which are of a sexual nature, while some deal more generally with the formation of her self.

The most remarkably fluid boundary between two selves is that between Valérie and her twin brother Orlik. Indeed, the literary critic Giuseppe Dierna argues that the characters of Valérie and Orlik are constructed as two parts of an androgyne that is 'after a number of swerves, anxieties, and ordeals [...] once again made whole.'¹³² Rather than a part of an androgyne, Orlik could, in fact, be best characterised as Valérie's *Doppelgänger*: after all, they are twins who can sense each other's strong emotions, for example, fear and frustration. Orlik also functions as a mirror to Valérie's self, as it is he who tells her the story of their family, albeit in many competing versions. He tells Valérie what she at that point in time wants to

¹³¹ John Paul Riquelme, 'Introduction: Dark Modernity from Mary Shelley to Samuel Beckett: Gothic History, the Gothic Tradition, and Modernism', in *Gothic and Modernism: Essaying Dark Literary Modernity*, ed. by John Paul Riquelme (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), pp. 1–23 (p. 5).

¹³² Giuseppe Dierna, 'On Valerie, Nezval, Max Ernst and Collages: Variations on a Theme', in *Valerie and Her Week of Wonders* (Prague: Twisted Spoon Press, 2005), pp. 199–226 (p. 218). Previously published under the title 'O Valerie, Nezvalovi, Maxi Ernsti a koláži: variace na téma jednoho románu', in *Český surrealismus 1929–1953: Skupina surrealistů v ČSR: události, vztahy, inspirace*, ed. by Lenka Bydžovská & Karel Srp (Prague: Galerie hlavního města Prahy/Argo, 1996).

hear; after all, it is Orlik, who, at the end of the story, assures that Valérie is safe with her newly found family. Yet we do not find out much about Orlik, except for the fact that his relationship to his father is more like the relationship between master and slave than that of two family members. Thus, Orlik's only role is to support Valérie to find her self, or the way she would like to build a life of her own.

The fact that Valérie and Orlik were separated in birth and grew up separately also contributes to the significance of doubles in the story. Andrew J. Webber describes the *Doppelgänger*'s relation to family thus: 'The *Doppelgänger* is typically the product of a broken home. It represents dysfunction in the family romance of structured well-being, exposing the home as the original site of the "unheimlich".'¹³³ The concept of 'unheimlich' or 'uncanny', along with the *Doppelgänger* motif, helps us to explore what is happening with the self in *Valérie*. As Freud wrote in his essay 'The Uncanny' (1919):

a person may identify himself with another and so become unsure of his true self; or he may substitute the other's self for his own. The self may thus be duplicated, divided and interchanged. Finally there is the constant recurrence of the same thing, the repetition of the same facial features, the same characters, the same destinies, the same misdeeds, even the same names through successive generations.

[...]

The factor of unintended repetition that transforms what would otherwise seem quite harmless into something uncanny and forces us to entertain the idea of the fateful and the inescapable, when we should normally speak of 'chance'.¹³⁴

Indeed, the identity of Valérie's father, the Polecat, is characterised by this concept of 'uncanny': in the dream world, many competing versions of the father's identity come to light and hinder her from finding out the truth; the stories change and double

¹³³ Andrew J. Webber, *The Doppelgänger: Double Visions in German Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 5.

¹³⁴ Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny', in *The Uncanny*, trans. by David McLintock (London: Penguin, 2003), pp. 121–62 (pp. 142–4).

themselves, and the truth becomes ever more uncertain. Also Orlik's true identity is under suspicion many times in Valérie's dream: Orlik himself acts like a potential lover of Valérie and the grandmother is convinced that he is a member of a theatre company visiting the village.¹³⁵ In one scene, Orlik confesses his love to Valérie:

“Don't you know that I love you?”

“You mustn't love me.”

“I suspected your thoughts were with another.”

“That's not why.”

“Why then?”

“So are we not brother and sister?”¹³⁶

Orlik's blood relation with Valérie does not become clear until she has woken up from her dream and her grandmother has told her the truth. In her dream, though, Orlik changes identities as often as clothes. In one scene, Orlik even asks Valérie for help in dressing like a woman, so that he can hide from the Polecat. Thus, both Valérie's father and brother switch identities at will: the father in order to be able to gain better control of what is going on in the village, and Orlik in order to become invisible to his abusive father. The only one Orlik wants to be close to, is Valérie, as he tells her in a letter: ‘I wanted to be your protector, friend, and husband.’¹³⁷

In fact, as Dierna argues, incest is a recurrent motif in *Valérie*: he sees incestuous gestures between Polecat and Orlik (father and son), Polecat and Valérie (father and daughter), and Elza and Valérie (grandmother and granddaughter). The theme of incest invites Freudian interpretations (e.g. the Oedipal setting between Polecat and Orlik) but incest is also another form of doubling: the two family

¹³⁵ The company is performing a version of *Joan of Arc*, which underlines the idea that Valérie is the sole heroine in the story, fighting for the good of her community.

¹³⁶ ‘“Nevíte, že vás miluji?” “Nesmíte mne milovat.” “Tužil jsem, že myslíte na někoho jiného.” “Ne proto.” “Proč tedy?” “Což nejsme bratr a sestra?”’ Vítězslav Nezval, *Valérie a týden divů* (Prague: Kentaur, 1994), p. 79.

¹³⁷ ‘Chtěl jsem být vašim ochráncem, přítelem a chotěm.’ Ibid., p. 98.

members involved in incest are at the same time identical and non-identical. Elsa in her younger form is set out as Valérie's rival who seeks to kill her in order to secure her own eternal youth. Valérie is exhausted when her 'cousin' Elsa (in fact her grandmother) embraces her, taking Valérie's last strength with her, as if she was a vampire like Polecat:

Valerie offered her cousin her lips. Elsa first touched her lips lightly. Then she pressed her own to them with such fervor that Valerie's head felt dizzy. She tore herself from her cousin's arms and walked limply down the corridor to her own room. She was so exhausted she didn't even have the strength to undress. She lay down and fell into a deep sleep.¹³⁸

Even though the relationship between Valérie and her grandmother becomes muddled and violent when the grandmother turns into a younger version of herself, the positive outcomes of this connection between the women in the family is underlined in one of the final scenes in Valérie's dream, which involves the demonic monk and the villagers attempting to burn Valérie as a witch. Valérie is saved by the magical earrings that her grandmother had given to her as inheritance from Valérie's mother: they contain pellets that when bitten, release a cloud of invisibility around Valérie and let her walk unnoticed amongst other people. The cloud is an essential plot device in the story; it helps Valérie to eavesdrop on other characters' conversations and even observe a bride and a groom on their wedding night. The cloud represents the theme of fluid identities; it helps Valérie to blur herself out of view and observe other people in her dream without being seen herself. Thus, she becomes an unseen seer. The earrings and the cloud of invisibility also alludes to erasure of one's identity; when

¹³⁸ 'Valérie nastavila sestřenici svá ústa k polibku. Elza se dotkla nejprve lehce jejích rtů. Pak se k nim přisála tak horoucně, že se Valérii zatočila hlava. Vymkla se své sestřenici z náruče a brala se malátně chodbou ke svému pokoji. Byla tak unavena, že neměla sil ani svléci šat. Ulehla a usnula hlubokým spánkem.' Ibid., p. 69.

the invisible Valérie observes others, she does not expose herself to their gaze, but only takes in what others experience. The earrings become a device for self-protection and encourage Valérie to voyeurism. Additionally, the earrings themselves work as a metaphor for the line of women in Valérie's family and emphasize the fact that she is a part of a continuum, not truly an independent, unique individual. On the other hand, being a part of a continuum can be reassuring to one's sense of self: this way, one has a role, a place in the family line.

Against the background of reassuring idea of the family line or the continuum, the role of Valérie's father, the main villain of the story, Tchoř (Polecat), is that of a master of disguise and he lurks in every other character Valérie meets in her dream. Polecat is clearly set up as the omnipotent father figure of the Gothic novel; a character that has to be brought down in order to resolve the mystery. Polecat represents authority: he is first called konstábl (Constable), then Polecat and finally, Richard (that is apparently his true first name), the name of kings. The names Constable and Richard carry a reference to authority, while Polecat is the odd one out. Polecat represents destruction or consumption, since Valérie is made to feed all her grandmother's chickens to him in a scene linking consumption of food with consumptive sexuality:

“I have no strength for crime. My jaws have grown weak. I am condemned to die.” With those words, Valerie, acting like a madwoman, grabbed the neck of a chicken, bit through its throat with her little childish teeth and pressed her bloodstained mouth to the mouth of her dying father, who accepted it gratefully and started sucking at it with feverish motion. [...] The revulsion Valeries had felt at first contact with the old man's mouth gave way to a strange sensual delight such as she had never known before. She grew ever more numb and looked, as if hypnotised, into his eyes, to which as the mist departed the fire was returning.¹³⁹

¹³⁹ “Nemám síly k zločinu. Mé čelisti zeslábily. Jsem odsouzen k smrti.” Valérie uchopila na ta slova jako šílená krk slepice, prokousla jí svými dětskými zoubky hrdlo a přitiskla svá zakrvácená ústa na ústa umírajícího otce, který je vděčně přijal a který je sál horečnými pohyby. [...] Odpor, jež pocítovala zprvu Valérie při styku se starcovými ústy, ustupoval zvláštní rozkoši, kterou dosud nikdy

All in all, Valérie is simultaneously afraid of, repulsed and attracted by Polecat. The strange authority has great power over Valérie's grandmother, too, who becomes a driven by a desire for eternal youth. The grandmother is transformed into a younger version of herself and, instead of coming to Valérie's support in the name of the family line of women, she becomes somewhat Valérie's rival for the attention of the Polecat, who is revealed to have been the grandmother's lover. This state of rivalry between women, in addition to the grandmother's transformation, suggests elements from a fairy-tale amongst the Gothic features. As Marina Warner writes:

In many variations on 'Beauty and the Beast' and 'Donkeyskin', the enemies of love are patriarchs, but in many fairytales the tyrants are women and they struggle against their often younger rivals to retain the security that their husbands or their fathers afford them.¹⁴⁰

Apart from being rivals, Valérie and her grandmother have something else in common, too: the grandmother's sexual desire occasionally reflects on Valérie as well, thus blurring the boundary between these two characters. When she eavesdrops on her grandmother and the evil monk in a secret sexual encounter, she wishes that she could experience something similar, too:

“Quiet, quiet, so no one hears us.”
 “It doesn't matter anyway...”
 “You're wonderful.”
 “And you are marvellous...”
 Valerie could hear the groans. Her head was spinning. She said quite loudly:
 “I want to live too!”¹⁴¹

nepoznala. Byla stále malátnější a malátnější a hleděla jako hypnotizovaná do očí, jež opouštěla mlha a do nichž se vracel znovu oheň.' Ibid., p. 85.

¹⁴⁰ Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1994), p. 217.

¹⁴¹ “Tiše, tiše, at' nás nikdo neslyší.” “Ostatně je mi to jedno...” “Jsi báječná.” “A vy jste nádherný...” Valérie slyšela vzdechy. Zatočila se jí hlava. Řekla docela hlasitě: “Chci také žít!” 'Nezval, *Valérie a týden divů*, p. 73.

Curiously, this eavesdropping scene takes place after Valérie has managed to escape the monk's sexual assault. This emphasizes the impression that even though Valérie is threatened with sexual violence, she is still not frightened by sexuality in general. A more ominous treatment of a young woman's introduction to sexuality can be found in *Marketa Lazarová*, a 1931 novel by Vladislav Vančura (1891–1942), Nezval's fellow writer from Devětsil. In the Middle Ages story set in the Bohemian countryside, Marketa, a devout young woman has been intended to confine in a nunnery when she is captured and raped by a rival family's son. Even though Marketa is thoroughly shaken by the rape, she soon falls in love with her capturer and begins to enjoy *tělesná láska* (carnal love) so much that she eventually becomes pregnant and gives up her destined life in the convent. Even though Nezval's *Valérie* is not as crude as some bits of Vančura's medieval tale, both stories contribute to the idea that young women can enjoy sexuality as much as men can. Neither of the stories, however, disregard the sinister, even sinful view of sexuality: for a long time, Marketa feels that she has sinned when her soul 'falls into pleasure like the sun to the sea.'¹⁴² Also Valérie's curiosity about sexuality is two-fold: on one hand, she is eager to enter the adults' world and gain experience, on the other, her dream warns her against the sinister side of sexual experience. This transitional stage between girlhood and adulthood furthermore underlines the theme of blurring boundaries in the novel, as there is no clear indication whether Valérie has already stepped over the boundary to adulthood or not; at least she seems to endure well the different manifestations of horror that the Polecat puts in her way. Nezval also makes a great deal out of blurring innocent maidenhood and sexually charged womanhood. This is demonstrated in the

¹⁴² 'zapadá do rozkoše jako slunce do moře.' Vančura, *Marketa Lazarová*, 1st online edn (Prague: Městská knihovna v Praze, 2013), <http://web2.mlp.cz/koweb/00/03/79/96/18/marketa_lazarova.pdf> [accessed 25 September 2013], p. 42.

scene in which a preacher with the head of Polecat locks young women in a church to give them a sermon: ‘Oh virgin, do you know what you are? You are an alabaster hand extended in a house of plague, full of flies. You are a vessel whose neck I bless with my thumb. You are an as yet unleft pomegranate. You are a shell in which the future ages will ring. You are a bud which will burst when the time is ripe. You are a little rose-petal boat floating on the tempestuous ocean. You are a peach oozing red blood...’.¹⁴³ The preacher is thus portraying the young women as outwardly innocent but inwardly sinful; sexuality that lurks inside them will eventually destroy their innocence and potentially bring destruction to the paternal authority, in this case, Polecat, as well. Nezval then sets Valérie and Polecat as opposite forces of destruction; while Valérie attempts to free herself from Polecat’s authority, Polecat continues to destroy the village and its people.

The atmosphere in *Valérie* is ominous: although Valérie’s brother Orlik is occasionally there to help her, it is clear that she is supposed to face all the challenges, put forward by Polecat, all by herself. No one else (except Orlik) sees anything extraordinary taking place in the village: in a sense, then, Valérie is fighting against convention. This setting involving a heroine fighting against a whole ensemble of shadowy characters resembles the one in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), to which the title of *Valérie* directly alludes. Both Alice’s and Valérie’s stories are stories of leaving adolescence behind and making sense of the adults’ world, which first appears to them non-sensical and even hazardous. On the other hand, the mixing of the extraordinary and ordinary is what usually governs dreams: in Valérie’s case, however, there is no escape, no chance of waking up until

¹⁴³ ‘Ó panno, víš co jsi? Jsi alabastrové podání ruky v morovém domě plném much. Jsi nádoba, jejíž hrdlo žehnám palcem. Jsi dosud nerozpůlené granatové jablko. Jsi ulita, v níž budou znítí budoucí věky. Jsi poupě, které rozpukne, až dozrá čas. Jsi lodičkou z listu růže na rozbouřeném oceánu. Jsi broskev krvácející červenou krví...’ Ibid., p. 19.

she manages to save herself and her loved ones from Polecat. The final confirmation of the fact that Valérie is safe takes place when she wakes up from her dream, recovers her family and leaves her home castle. The castle comes crumbling down as a sign of the destruction of the paternal authority.

On the other hand, when Valérie wakes up and is reunited with her family, she is still unsure what to believe, in whom to trust: ‘You must have experienced many things, Orlík. I don’t know the world, I don’t even know myself. I’m forever daydreaming and often can’t tell dreams from reality.’¹⁴⁴ It seems, then, that Valérie is not entirely sure of herself although she is happy with the fact that she found her family again. The same sense of not being able to entirely let go of world of dreams or fairy-tales is also present in Svata’s *Sedm kamarádů slečny Vivian*, as we shall see in the next section.

While the ending of *Valérie* is dominated by a sense of success and finding one’s place in life, the ominous atmosphere that largely characterises the whole novel, is still present when Valérie is brought to a hunting lodge in which her family has been living ever since they left her with her grandmother. The atmosphere is homely, but there is something threatening and unfamiliar in it, too: while in the background Valérie’s grandmother plays the piano, Valérie and Orlík watch the landscape from the lodge windows and hear a clap of thunder; ‘And with that thunderclap Valerie’s week of wonders came to an end.’¹⁴⁵ This final sentence gives an impression that even though Valérie is awake, she is still somehow connected to the dream world. This signifies the existence of fluid boundaries; dream and the ‘real’ world come together to form a fuller picture than neither of them could form by itself. Thunderstorm may be a predictable to a novel which takes its influence from the murky world of Gothic

¹⁴⁴ ‘“Prožil jsi už mnoho, Orlíku. Ja neznám svět, ba neznám ani sebe. Stále jen sním a mnohdy nerozeznávám sny od skutečnosti.”’ Ibid., p. 136.

¹⁴⁵ ‘A tímto zahřměním se skončil pro Valérii týden divů.’ Ibid. p. 138.

novels, but it may also be as a warning sign of things to come, of Polecat, of destruction that was not completely defeated. Thunder is also a sign of uncontrollable forces, of packed tension in the air, and in the context of Valérie's attempt to find herself, it could also signify the Unconscious – a part of the mind that cannot be controlled. The ending then suggests that the fluidity is not completely gone, but it has become a part of Valérie's existence. This is supported by the fact that Orlik is to stay with Valérie; her *Doppelgänger* did not disappear when she woke up from her dream, and thus, she will always have her mirror image, her alternate self by her side. The way the novel begins with uncertainty and ends with uncertainty, suggests that the power to write the 'inner story' is in Valérie's own hands. She did not receive definite answers about her father or her family story, but she began to understand the power of stories.

The Power of Fairy-Tales: Svatá's Sedm kamarádů slečny Vivian (The seven friends of Miss Vivian, 1938)

Even though one cannot know how much Svatá and Nezval interacted and changed influences in the Avantgarde circles, their novels on the maturation of a young woman are strikingly similar. Svatá's novel asks fundamentally the same questions as Nezval's *Valérie*: Who am I and how did I become this way? As in *Valérie*, so in *Vivian*, the self is fluid, and the boundaries between individual selves are blurry. In *Valérie*, it is the boundaries between dream and waking that begin to blur away, whereas in *Vivian*, the blurring takes place between fairy-tale world and the 'real' world. In addition, one could argue that *Valérie* and *Vivian* form an inverted parallel: while Valérie discovers the family that she has been literally dreaming of, Vivian

abandons hers and turns to the outside world for self-fulfilment. The same insistence on young women's innocence that is evident in Valérie can be detected in *Vivian*, too: Vivian's mother does not let her leave their home (also a castle) and only offers books and role-play as a means of gaining knowledge about the world. For a long time, Vivian believes that literature and role-play convey the world as it is, but a young journalist Jiří, who has come to the castle to hunt a ghost, convinces her otherwise. Vivian then attempts to take up the matter of her entrance into the world with her mother, but she is not successful:

“I, I,” the unhappy, miserable miss stuttered, “I just that, I am, I do not have anyone to converse with.”

“A young lady to-be does not need to converse.”

“But, I sometimes do not even have anything to think about.”

“A young lady does not think. Whatever for, may I ask? A young woman marries, takes someone who has a castle, horses, dogs, vehicles and who plays a role in the world of industrialists. There is no other world nowadays. Unfortunately, princes do not have money these days. You, like me, will marry an industrial magnate and you will become a LADY like me.”¹⁴⁶

Here Svatá mocks the aristocratic pretensions and bourgeois affectations in a manner similar to Svobodová, Víková and Benešová, caricaturing the idea that woman's greatest deed should be a good, profitable marriage. Apart from mocking typical expectations of woman's life and creating a sense of threat, there is more to the passage above. It is evident that in order to have a resilient sense of self, Vivian has to leave the world of fairy-tales and her mother's insistence of lady-like behaviour behind, or else she will become a part of the long line of 'ladies', that is, women of comfort and luxury but nothing much else. In the first sentence, in which Vivian

¹⁴⁶ “Já, já,” koktala nešťastně ubohá miss, “já jenom, že jsem, že si nemám s kým povídat.” “Budoucí mladá dám si nepotřebuje povídat.” “Ale, když já někdy už nemám ani na co myslet.” “Mladá dáma nemyslí. Také, prosím tě, k čemu? Mladá dáma se provdá, vezme si někoho, kdo má zámek, koně, psy, vozy a hraje roli ve světě průmyslníků. Jiný svět dnes není. Princové, bohužel, dnes nemají peníze. Ty si vezmeš průmyslového magnáta, jako já a budeš DÁMA jako já.” Jarmila Svatá, *Sedm kamarádů slečny Vivian* (Prague: Václav Petr, 1938), p. 89.

repeats the pronoun 'I' several times, one can also detect doubling, an act of repetition that, like in Nezval, is supposed to create an unsettling (uncanny) effect: something in Vivian's world begins to break down as she realises that she needs to leave the familiar, the family home behind. The familiar is becoming frightening, threatening to Vivian: her mother insists that she subjugate herself to a restrictive life and let her own personality be merged with those of other bourgeois women – in other words, she insists that Vivian abandons her imagination and childish games before long, only to lead a passive life. On the other hand, shortly after forcing Vivian to accept the facts of life, the mother insists that Vivian go back to her play-acting. This creates the impression that Vivian is expected to live a double life of a kind; she is to remain innocent as a child but simultaneously to accept her predetermined place in life like an adult.

The mother's comment on princes being poor nowadays strengthens the impression of a connection between Vivian's story and children's stories or fairy-tales. After all, it is not Vivian who is introduced to the reader at the very beginning of the novel, but the princely journalist Jiří whose car breaks down in the middle of a country road when he is on his way to do a story of a ghost in the castle of Vivian's family: 'the face, which pensively followed the circles and circlets of cigarette smoke, was surely attractive. Tanned, youthful, clean-cut, with grey-blue eyes and dark brown hair. With the air of definite fearlessness, non-sentimentality, [the face was] manly and agreeable, beautifully set on wide, solid shoulders.'¹⁴⁷ Attributes like 'attractive' or 'charming, as well as 'fearless' are certainly something that fairy-tales employ when portraying princes or heroes. Heroes also need a sidekick. With him,

¹⁴⁷ 'tvář, která zamyšleně sledovala kroužky a kolečka cigaretového kouře, byla jistě půvabná. Opálená, svěží, pevného stříhu, s šedomodryma očima a tmavě kaštanovými vlasy. S výrazem pevně nebojácnosti, nesentimentality, statečná a příjemná, pěkně posazená na širokých, pevných ramenech.' Ibid., p. 9.

Jiří has his photographer colleague Pepík, who plays the role of the squire (or Sancho Panza to Jiří's Don Quixote, so absurd a turn their adventures in the castle take), nicely complementing the princely Jiří by not being as handsome as he is: 'The almighty hand of Nature that created [Pepík] was probably in a very bad mood at the time.'¹⁴⁸ The fearless Jiří indeed catches the ghost who turns out to be Vivian, doing her play-acting, and advises her to study life outside the castle. This is where the story actually begins; Jiří and Pepík disappear from view and Vivian's adventure takes the centre stage. The fact that the infamous ghost in the castle was Vivian emphasizes the state that she had been letting herself sink to; the state of non-identity, invisibility, even horror at her own passivity.

By convincing Vivian to leave her home behind, Jiří makes her take action and at the same time, quite traditionally fulfils one of his princely duties: saves the princess in distress from her evil mother. The author portrays Vivian through the archetype of an innocent maiden in order to place her story in the context of fairy-tales or other stories that depict the trials of a young naive woman. The seven 'wise' women whom Vivian meets during her journey also suggest a fairy-tale-like construction. It seems, then, that Vivian's sense of self is tied to fairy-tales, although by escaping home, she also attempted to escape this false world of fairy-tales.

Vivian's escape marks the point where the story begins to adopt elements from other genres as well, as if to suggest alternative ways in which Vivian's story may be worked out. As soon as Vivian leaves her childhood home, the novel turns into a *Bildungsroman*: the stories of the seven women she meets during her journey are each characterised by a skill or a characteristic that she is supposed to learn about: lying (instead of sloth), pride, envy, depravity (instead of gluttony), wrath, greed, and

¹⁴⁸ 'V den, kdy mocná ruka přírody ho tvořila, měla pravděpodobně velmi špatnou náladu.' Ibid., p. 13.

lechery. All seven women have had to find a way to fend for themselves. Vivian spends only a short period with each woman and she does not exactly become friends with them, as each of them plays only a minor role in her story. At the beginning of the novel, Svatá alludes to this impossibility of a real friendship between women when she describes the friendship between the journalist Jiří and the photographer Pepík: ‘Both young men were tied together by effortless friendship, consistent, real, masculine companionship without those underlying streams of malice that dominate [in friendships] between women.’¹⁴⁹ It could be that Svatá is being ironic here, mocking companionable masculine friendships, but Vivian’s experiences with women and the women’s stories suggest that the author observes a world where female friendships are neither encouraged nor valued. This could be the result of Svatá’s affiliation with the Avantgarde circles, where male companionship predominated against female friendship. Yet, as Warner argues, this ‘female versus female’ setting is prominent in story-telling traditions: ‘All over the world, stories which centre on a heroine, on a young woman suffering a prolonged ordeal before her vindication and triumph, frequently focus on women as the agents of her suffering.’¹⁵⁰ For example, the story about Lakota (Greed) involves two sisters of which the older sacrifices everything for the younger but does not receive any gratitude. The teaching of the story reinforces the portrayal of the world as cruel and harsh in *Vivian*: ‘Life belongs to the heartless and the selfish.’¹⁵¹ Some of the other women’s stories also suggest a teaching of similar kind: one can get by in life by only helping oneself. On the other hand, ‘heartless’ and ‘selfish’ are usually considered male traits, especially those who are deemed successful in life. In a way, then, Vivian is encouraged to leave behind

¹⁴⁹ ‘Oba mladíky pojilo samozřejmé přátelství, pevné, věčné, mužské kamarádství, bez spodních proudů zloby, jaká vládne mezi ženami.’ Ibid., p. 15.

¹⁵⁰ Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde*, p. 202.

¹⁵¹ ‘Tvrdým a lakomým patří život.’ Ibid., p. 248.

not only her innocence but also most of her feminine traits: compassion, tenderness, and the will to please others. In return, she is expected to assume more harsh and self-centered view of life.

The ending of the novel suggests that Vivian has taken all these lessons seriously. Vivian is on her way to becoming a famous actress when the reason for her leaving her childhood home is revealed: she meets the journalist Jiří again and confesses that she had been in love with him and had left her home to seek him out. However, during her adventures in the world she fell out of love with Jiří. After all, the women who advised her during the journey had all had difficulties with love and especially with the expectations of romantic love, since they did not quite believe in the narrative of ‘all-encompassing love’ fulfilling their lives. As an unknown girl tells Vivian: ‘You have to pass by love, compassion, self-humiliation, in other words, by dead bodies. You have to be able to lie like a professional, be envious like a pack of devils, because envy will bless you with a burning scourge, you must have pride of hell in the right place and in time, you have to know the finesses of vices.’¹⁵² This passage emphasizes the way the ideal self is seen as a chameleon: a self, which can change characteristics at will and survive most situations. It is also revealing that the girl is calling love, compassion and self-humiliation ‘dead bodies’, possibly meaning that these emotions will hinder Vivian’s way to successful and fulfilling life. After all, love, compassion and self-humiliation expose the self and place it in a vulnerable position; they are weaknesses in otherwise a strong mind. On the other hand, Vivian has already placed herself in a vulnerable position by escaping the comfort of her privileged and pampered life; by opening the castle gates, she has opened her way into a Pandora’s box.

¹⁵² ‘Mušíš jít přes lásku, přes soucit, přes sebeponížení, prostě řečeno, přes mrtvoly. Mušíš umět lhát jako profesionál, závidět jako smečka d’áblů, protože závist tě požene žhavým bičem, mušíš mít na pravém místě pýchu pekla a včas mušíš znát finesy neřestí.’ Ibid., p. 219.

The revelation of love as an incentive for Vivian's adventures is a surprise to the reader since right up till the end the narrative had been emphasizing Vivian's curious mind and her feeling of being a prisoner as the main motivation for her to escape from home. This makes her affection for Jiří seem more like an afterthought, although it does underscore the fairy-tale qualities of Vivian's character: she is partly cast an innocent maiden who escaped her home to find her prince, partly as an independent and adventurous woman. This is quite a change to the portrayal of Vivian at the beginning of the novel, when she is depicted as a princess or a nymph-like character: 'a young girl descended down the stairs. Willowy, tall, with the most beautiful and most distinctly modelled figure, which Jiří had ever seen. [...] As she stood there in a pink dress, in a pale blue knit jacket, her marvellously shaped feet in English pumps, she conveyed a perfect spectacle of beauty, youth, tenderness and charm. She looked like a lovely nymph who had mistaken the hall for a meadow.'¹⁵³ Vivian is often called a nymph when she meets new people during her journey, but most often it is not meant as a well-meaning description but as a mocking one.

This depiction of Vivian as a innocent nymph is only conclusively shattered in the end scene of the novel in which Vivian comes clear of her true identity, showing mental strength that she had not demonstrated before: ' "I am not miss Vivian", the woman in a blue lace dress screamed, "I am Aglaja Klementová, daughter of a millionaire, the future star of your sordid, tacky, miserable sky." '¹⁵⁴ This announcement makes the reader doubt everything that had taken place in the story: whether Vivian actually learned anything new from the seven women in the first

¹⁵³ 'se schodů sestupovala mladá dívka. Štíhlá, vysoká, s nejpěknější, nejpřesněji modelovanou postavou, jakou kdy Jiří viděl. [...] Jak tam stála v růžových šatech, bleděmodrém, pleteném kabátku úžasně formované nožky obuté do anglických střeviců, poskytovala dokonalý pohled krásy, mládí, něhy a půvabu. Vypadala jako líbezná rusalka, která si spletla palouk s halou.' Ibid., p. 42.

¹⁵⁴ ' "Nejsem miss Vivian", vykřikla žena v bílých krajkových šatech, "jsem Aglaja Klementová, dcera milionáře, budoucí hvězda na vašem špinavém, uváleném, mizerném nebi." ' Ibid., p. 284.

place, or whether she possessed all those qualities from the beginning and merely wanted to get to the city to become an actress. The innocent maiden is not that innocent any longer, and as it turns out, the reader's trust was played with throughout the story: the story that was set up as a *Bildungsroman*, a story of a girl going out to the world and learning about life, is at the end revealed to be a fairy-tale, that is a story with magical elements, imagination and self-inspection. In a way, Vivian does not travel out in the world, but inside herself: what is supposedly an 'outer story', becomes an 'inner story'. Vivian announcing her own name also fits the fairy-tale motifs Svata has been playing with throughout the story; by making her name known she finally reveals her true identity, her true self as it is. However, whereas in fairy-tales announcing the heroine's name often ends the mystery and leads to a happy ending, in Svata's novel it merely causes more confusion. Who is Vivian/Aglaja exactly; an innocent maiden, an actress, or a charlatan? Moreover, by making Vivian/Aglaja a riddle, Svata makes a strong allusion to the character of Aglaja in Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*. As Bruce A. French argues in his study of Dostoevsky's novel, Aglaja is meant to be a mystery: '[Aglaja's] beauty is unreadable, unknowable. Nothing can be said about it: it is indescribable, it is a riddle. In Greek mythology, Aglaja, one of the Three Graces, was the personification of splendor and brightness. Dostoevsky's Aglaja has such radiant and splendid beauty that one is afraid to look at her.'¹⁵⁵ Svata's Aglaja certainly manifests a similar kind of splendid beauty that blurs her character and makes her a riddle to most people she meets on her journey (as happens to Jiří when he sees her for the first time in the castle).

It seems that the answer to the question of the true character of Vivian/Aglaja lies in the relationship between Vivian and her seven acquaintances. The seven

¹⁵⁵ Bruce A. French, *Dostoevsky's Idiot: Dialogue and the Spiritually Good Life* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2001), p. 148.

women symbolise not just the different foul characteristics of mankind, but seven unpleasant characteristics of Vivian herself and suggest that her assumed innocence was merely a mask. The world in her story is depicted as something that threatens her, perhaps this drives her to take up a mask. As a part of this world, she also escapes her mother and the community of conservative women who would like to see her as tied up in the luxury of the bourgeois home as they are. This takes us back to the beginning of Svatá's novel and the author's appraisal of male friendships that, unlike female friendships or mother-daughter relationships, are not based on malice and manipulation. What characterises Svatá's portrayal of the female self is quite the opposite of Nezval's: here female self develops best outside society and its harmful, corrupting influence. All the seven women's stories are essentially stories of failure, women attempting and failing to meet society's demands. Vivian's becoming a star is represented as something that will set her free of these stories, she will become someone unusual, someone who will rather have influence on others than be influenced herself. On the other hand, the narrator maintains that Vivian has learned her lesson from the fairy-tales: 'Now you also understand the meaning and symbolism of the stories which they told you on the road. They are no longer merely fairy-tales in which ordinary people appear instead of kings and dwarves. They are enormous realities and you understand the conceptions, predictions and advice that are hidden in them.'¹⁵⁶ It seems though that Svatá offers another explanation for Vivian's transformation into Aglaja in a scene in which the film director, who is going to make her a film star, takes advantage of her sexually. In her naiveté, Vivian does not realise what is happening, and expects the director to tell her a story of 'Smilstvo' (lechery)

¹⁵⁶ 'Pochopilas ted' take smysl a symboliku příběhu, které ti cestou vyprávěli. Už to nejsou jenom pohádky, v nichž místo králů a trpáslíků vystupují všední lidé. Jsou to oblundné skutečnosti a ty rozumíš náznakům, věštbám a radám, které se v nich tajily.' Svatá, *Sedm kamarádů slečny Vivian*, p. 279.

as he said he would. The experience changes Vivian from the innocent nymph she once was to an ambitious and assertive young woman.

Yet the moon, that symbolises the gaze of the narrator/implied author, mourns the loss of the old Vivian: ‘the moon that peered through the cotton wool of the clouds will in vain look for the wandering fairy, dryad, nymph which in the evenings enjoyed lying on the divan, stargazing with a confused expression [on her face].’¹⁵⁷ This same loss seems to bother Vivian/Aglaja herself, too, when she sails away (perhaps towards England): ‘Sometimes cruel, cold drops splattered on her face. A nameless sorrow rose from the night, the wind, the dark sky and the ghastly endless waters. But the girl was not afraid. She was not alone. The seven friends, to whom the world belongs, were protecting her.’¹⁵⁸ This echoes a classic fairy-tale ending in which the heroine has found her place in the world and is ready to live happily ever after, although Svatá’s ending carries a mournful undertone.

In *Vivian*, Svatá attempts to write a new kind of fairy-tale. There are two main differences that make her fairy-tale stand apart from traditional fairy-tales. First, she chooses an ironic narratorial stance, which directly contradicts the earnest and unassuming narratorial voice in fairy-tales. This irony is, for example, ingrained in the way all the characters in *Vivian* have their own flaws or eccentricities and none of the characters are idolised. Irony also creates a certain distance between the omniscient third-person narrator of *Vivian* and the narratee; irony keeps the reader on his toes, wondering what to believe and what not, whereas an archetypical fairy-tale would

¹⁵⁷ ‘měsíc, který se vyplížil z vaty mraků bude marně hledat vílu, dryádu, nymfu na potulkách, která s večera se bavila tím, že ležela se zmateným výrazem snění na pohovce.’, *Ibid.*, p. 279.

¹⁵⁸ ‘Občas jí kruté chladní krůpěje pokropily tvář. Bezejmenný smutek stoupal z noci, větru, temného nebe a ze strašidelných nekonečných vod. Ale dívka se nebála. Nebyla sama. Sedm přátel, jimž nalezí svět, ji ohraňovalo.’ *Ibid.*, p. 295.

pull the reader right into its world.¹⁵⁹ Secondly, unlike in traditional fairy-tales, Svatá does not make a clear distinction between the good and the evil, rather flipping the two around and merging them as much as possible. As Warner notes, the good versus the evil -setting tends to lie at the very core of fairy-tales: ‘Fairy-tales often engage with issues of light and darkness – the plots represent struggles to distinguish enemies from friends, the normal from the monstrous and the slant they take is by no means always enlightened. The tales often demonize others in order to proclaim the side of the teller: good, right, powerful – and beautiful.’¹⁶⁰ In *Vivian*, the distinction between the good and the evil becomes ever more blurry the further Vivian wanders off from her family home. At the same time, Svatá consistently holds onto the construction of a fairy-tale, with the episodic structure and teachings that various characters offer Vivian. It is as if she is offering Vivian (and the reader) a smooth transition from the clear-cut world of fairy-tales to the world of blurring boundaries: Vivian needs to learn to be simultaneously resilient and flexible, passionate and cold, good and evil. This is also marked by the fact that she inspires to become an actress: a performing artist has to be a chameleon of a kind, changing from one mood to another. Chameleon is the ultimate survivor and so is Vivian/Aglaja.

What is remarkable in the character of Vivian, is that although the tales she hears from the seven women are mostly unsettling and sad, she does not lose her hope in building her own life. Whereas the heroines in Benešová were afraid of the uncertain future, in *Vivian*, uncertainty is not coupled with powerlessness but with

¹⁵⁹ Since Svatá’s time, the whole fairy-tale genre has grown to include tales, which are strongly ironic; these tales are not always rewritings of old fairy-tales but more often than not also new fairy-tales. These new fairy-tales or rewritings of old tales are aimed at both adults and children, which shows how pervasive irony has become in (popular) culture. Examples of these new fairy-tales would be the English author Neil Gaiman’s works and, depending on how we define the difference between the fantasy and fairy-tale genres, the works of the English author Angela Carter could also be included in this category.

¹⁶⁰ Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde*, p. 410.

imagination and the wish to mould one's own future. In a sense, then, Vivian's sense of self is also based on a degree of creativity reminiscent of female creativity in Svobodová and Víková. Yet Svatá's notion of creativity is much more expansive than that of Svobodová and Víková, since it is not limited to being creative in arts or procreation, but it is creation of one's own life as a whole. Vivian is an explorer as well as a creator who has finally harnessed the freedom many women in Benešová, Svobodová and Víková lacked.

Conclusion

Both *Valérie* and *Vivian* end in a situation in which the female heroine's self is at the same time confirmed and disputed. Svatá's and Nezval's novels form an inverted parallel in their outcomes: while Valérie returns to her family, Vivian abandons hers for good. There are also other intersecting points in the two novels: the way the young female main characters are portrayed as inexperienced at the beginning, but they are shown to mature throughout the story and become strong and resilient. However, it could be argued that by portraying Valérie and Vivian as innocent maidens, the authors are attempting to deconstruct that archetype: both young women throw aside their outer shell of innocence when circumstances so demand. The reader is, indeed, made to question the archetype altogether; it seems to be there only to mislead the reader and make him/her question the notion that young women are naturally innocent. In fact, it seems that it is only the kinds of Vivian's mother who would rely on innocence as a lucrative mask for a young woman. Svatá's Vivian and Nezval's Valérie are industrious and fearless young women who do not hesitate to satisfy their curiosity about the world. They are not inherently good nor evil, innocent or sinful,

but they demonstrate the blurring of boundaries that takes place on many levels in Svatá and Nezval. Both authors have interwoven many stories inside their novels, and in this sense, both *Vivian* and *Valérie* resemble dreams; both have the layered structure of a dream. Both novels emphasize the blurring of identities as richness rather than terror or a nightmare. Whereas in the works of Benešová, the social mask or ability to play the social game are seen as a sign of cynicism or moral decay, in Svatá's and Nezval's world, the social player, the chameleon and the actress are all seen as survivors, human beings well-equipped for life: when one does not know what or who one is, one can be anything. The fluidity of self makes many things possible at once and this, according to Nezval and Svatá, is one of the building blocks of life.

Yet, even though Svatá portrays Vivian as a curious world-traveller, she questions the need for life experience. After all, Vivian's fairy-tale and play-acting world was her buffer against the real world of the seven sins. When she leaves her world of fairy-tales, she lands in a world where not all stories end well. Here the author asks whether it is always worth experiencing disillusionment, and whether our 'essential' selves would be better off without 'teachings' from the world outside. As Nezval shows us, sometimes the world inside our minds (in our dreams) may be enough for self-discovery. Outer or unfamiliar threats may enter our dreams but we always have the possibility to conquer them, as happens with Valérie and the Polecat. Both authors demonstrate in their works how dependent on stories human beings are: we are first nurtured with fairy-tales and when we go out into the world, we are met by other kind of stories. As Glover has attempted to demonstrate, human beings construct and understand their world through stories, which then become the building blocks of 'inner stories'. In Valérie's and Vivian's case, it is often difficult for the characters to decide which ones of these competing stories come to construct their

selves. Nezval and Svatá have succeeded in blurring the boundaries between fairy-tales and life stories, dreams and the 'real' world, individual self and other selves, but all this is done in a manner that underlines a sense of adventure in their novels rather than a sense of terror in front of all that is strange and new. Whereas in Benešová it was quickly constituted that her female characters are only apparently free, the female characters in *Valérie* and *Vivian* are truly free, if they only have the capacity to orientate themselves in the jungle of stories. The inner and outer worlds of Valérie and Vivian expand to every direction since they are not based on a singular notion of the self, as the worlds analysed in previous chapters are. Although Svatá's novel takes its cue from medieval allegorical stories with didactic tendencies, she breaks down the often contradictory moral teachings her characters offer to Vivian and shows that these teachings on morality are not absolute; they are based on singular human experience rather than on something universal. In this, Svatá turns away from the moral absoluteness that Benešová bases her characters on; in Svatá, moral absolutes do not offer protection, but suffocation. Whereas in the previous chapter we saw Dagmar drown in her absolute goodness, which was supposed to protect her from all that is evil in the world, in Svatá and Nezval, the good and the evil are not absolute opposite forces that the individual needs to fully embrace or run away from. When Vivian and Valérie enter the adults' world, they notice that blurring of boundaries in every way, uncertainty and fluidity are an integral part of that world.

Conclusion: Finding Self-Awareness

There is no looking-glass here and I don't know what I am like now. I remember watching myself brush my hair and how my eyes looked back at me. The girl I saw was myself yet not quite myself. Long ago when I was a child and very lonely I tried to kiss her. But the glass was between us – hard, cold and misted over with my breath. Now they have taken everything away. What am I doing in this place and who am I?

– Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 1966.

All the authors discussed in this thesis have found their own ways of portraying the female self. Not all of these selves are strong enough to be able to build a life for themselves; the most extreme example of the obliterating self, of course, being Benešová's Dagmar. Yet the chapters establish a development towards a self that is capable of creating a productive relationship between inner and outer stories, between the mind and the world outside the mind. In this thesis I have shown that, at the *Fin de siècle*, portrayals of the female self were influenced by successful Czech feminist activity but also by the individual authors' take on 'primary sources' of feminism as something that is not only inspired by literary or social movements, but as something that originates within the individual woman herself, that is, her personal choices and views of life. I have also shown how Svobodová's and Víková's artistic choices were influenced by their view of creativity as the main route to female emancipation, and, more importantly to a full-fledged self. In the second chapter, however, this idealism was questioned by Benešová, who did not share Svobodová's and Víková's view of creativity as prerequisite to emancipation, but demonstrated that abandoning traditional female roles and social expectations was far more difficult than Svobodová and Víková had made it seem. In my analysis of Benešová, I also brought forth the fact that the self can feel so threatened by the outer world that shutting into one's inner world and illusions is the only way to protect that self. Finally, it was only in the

works of Nezval and Svatá when a productive relationship between inner and outer worlds of the heroine began to form. This was due to the interest in the mind and psychoanalysis in the Avantgarde circles, as well as their appropriation of the ‘fantastical’ genres, that is, the Gothic fiction and fairy-tales, that helped to connect the character’s inner world to the outer world.

The Self and Creativity

Svobodová and Víková introduced the creative woman as their ideal female self and questioned the tale of romantic love, which was being imposed on women as the way to live one’s life. One can see the beginnings of the ‘inner story versus outer story’ dynamics here; the inner story is what, according to Svobodová and Víková, emerges from creativity, whereas the outer story is, among social pressures, the story of romantic love between man and woman which would eventually lead to marriage and quiet family life. Svobodová and Víková consider romantic love a failure because it works with, and not against, the sexual double standard and the social inequality between man and woman. In their view, romantic love makes woman weak and makes her subjugate herself to man, becoming a self-sacrificing angel in the house. Thus, Svobodová and Víková appear to have thought along the same lines with the feminist writer Germaine Greer, who wrote thus in her 1970 classic, *The Female*

Eunuch:

Love is not possible between inferior and superior, because the base cannot free their love from selfish interest, either as the desire for security, or social advantage, and, being lesser, they themselves cannot comprehend the faculties in the superior which are worthy of love. The superior being on the other hand cannot demean himself by love for an inferior; his feeling must be tinged with condescension or else partake of perversion and a deliberate self-abasement. *The proper subject of love is one’s equal,*

*seeing the essence of love is to be mutual, and the lesser cannot produce anything greater than itself.*¹⁶¹

Svobodová's and Viková's characters find the ideal, equal love and support for the female self in creativity that eventually saves them from falling into the trap of sweet domestic life. Yet even creativity or creation invite the 'superior versus inferior' framework. After all, mother's love for her child can be selfish, authoritative and aware of the social advantage that derives from being a 'sacred mother of the nation'. Moreover, as Olga's statement in Svobodová's *Přetížený klas* evinces, the relationship between the self and art can equally be a matter of superiority and inferiority: 'High, purified love is a work of art, like recognition of a supreme god without a face, without malice and without retribution, the god of thought and beauty.'¹⁶² Here art and love are depicted as superior to human being, both as unattainable as god is. The female artist in Svobodová reaches for this 'recognition of a supreme god' as well as the recognition of her self, but it is not self-evident that she should ever be able to reach that far. The theme of unattainability of one's goals in life is what often predominates in Svobodová's works; the idea that one can see the goal and reach for it, but still cannot attain it, is her way of portraying female frustration at contemporaneous life in the *Fin-de-siècle* Czech society.

In Svobodová's and Viková's works, female creativity as an independent, ambitious activity may help to construct the female self, but in general it is too exclusive and too elusive to form the main constituent of all selves. Even Viková's notion of motherhood being the ultimate experience of womanhood and selfhood reflects this sense of exclusiveness. Not all women can be artists or mothers – not all women can be redeemed by the sense of creativity. Here we have to come back to the

¹⁶¹ Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch* [1970], London: Harper Perennial, 2006, p. 158.

¹⁶² Svobodová, *Přetížený klas*, Prague: Vílímek, 1940, p. 228.

'primary sources' as discussed in the first chapter; the 'more original, primary sources' of a new type of feminism (or even female selfhood) which Svobodová was keen to discover. Perhaps these sources are not the same sources from which creativity springs, but more universal sources of ambition, sources, which reflect the need for (self-) recognition or self-discovery. This more extensive understanding of 'primary sources' does not fall back on exclusiveness or emphasis on creativity which otherwise dominates in Svobodová's and Víková's works. All female characters in Svobodová, as well as in Víková, are constantly in danger of being reduced to traditional feminine qualities and roles and being denied recognition as fully functional human beings. Olga escapes the possibility of becoming the angel in the house as well as that of becoming a music teacher for children. She ends up doing herself a disservice when she becomes a Little Sister of Mercy, finally taking on the feminine role of the nurse and redeemer of the ill, essentially becoming the compromising, self-sacrificing woman she was attempting to avoid by rejecting marriage and life as a music teacher. Correspondingly, the women in Víková's trilogy avoid most traps, like the prison of marriage and loveless, unequal relationships, but they, too, fulfil a certain stereotype of the Madonna-like woman when they become mothers.

While Svobodová's and Víková's exclusive notion of traditional forms of creativity as the main tool of emancipation falls short, the idea of creativity is developed further by Nezval and Svatá in their works. Here creativity no longer lies merely in arts or procreation: it becomes a form of social game or survival. This notion of creativity is linked to a new notion of the self as fluid and flexible; true creativity lies in the ways in which the fluid self is able to change herself and the way in which this change affects her surroundings, too. Benešová, however, seems to fall

somewhere in-between these ideas; she does not prescribe the successful development of the female self to creativity, but her ideal self is an absolute unity of the essential self and the social self. Thus, she does not support the fluid self, but sees it as immoral or at least not affected by necessary moral conventions.

Obliterating the Self

Even though a certain moral foundation is essential to the ideal self in Benešová, she also shows her readers where the excess of such moral backbone, or tendency towards moral absolutes, may lead. Like Svobodová's and Víková's heroines, the heroine of Benešová's 'Hladina', Dagmar, is on a quest for self-recognition. But this recognition fails because Dagmar is not able to make her self coincide with the world as it is, but rather imagines a world that does not exist and bases her self on the existence of that imaginary world. Since Dagmar's imagination is not strong enough compared to the strength of the world outside, she ends up destroying herself.

Compared to the other authors analysed in this thesis, Benešová's heroines are decidedly ill-equipped for life. While the female characters in Svobodová, Víková and later, Nezval and Svatá, are ready to change their surroundings and their notions of life in order to become self-reliant, Benešová's heroines are trapped between their own expectations of life and society's notions of traditional femininity. Yet there is something that they share with Svobodová's and Víková's heroines: they, too, feel that life has disappointed them, or, more precisely, life has not offered them many chances to improve themselves. While the heroines in Svobodová and Víková battle this feeling of being let down, heroines in Benešová give up the struggle.

The hopeless atmosphere that Benešová portrays in her works serves as a contrast to the hopeful attitude towards life displayed in Svobodová and Víková as well as Nezval and Svatá. Although the women in Svobodová and Víková do not completely get away from convention, they still exhibit much more hope than Benešová's 'fragile failures'. The same goes for Nezval's and Svatá's heroines, who are not bogged down by convention or social pressure to settle with less than they have hopes for. Yet Benešová's works serve as a bridge between the worlds of on one hand Svobodová and Víková, on the other hand, Nezval and Svatá, since she attempts to show how social circumstances and the experience of growing-up affect her heroines' inner world, their inner story. By employing the theme of obliterating the self, Benešová demonstrates how fragile the connection between the inner world and the outer world can be, and more often than not, her heroines' state of mind oscillates between self-doubt and self-deception; in the end, they are not sure whether to trust themselves or the world outside.

Yet Benešová's attempt to portray the wavering link between the mind and the outer world also sets her works apart from the four other authors, since Svobodová and Víková are not as interested in the mind as she is, and Nezval and Svatá relocate their heroines to fairy-tale or Gothic surroundings in order to keep their distance from explicit social contexts. Still there is a theme which all the authors share in their works and which ends up linking the inner world of characters to the outer world of their surroundings, namely the theme of 'female versus female.'

Female versus Female

All the authors analysed in this thesis employ the same theme of ‘female versus female’ in their works, albeit to their own ends. Thus, the female self of these authors is not so much set against an oppressive male self, but a conventional and devious, competing version of the female self. This alternative or indeed, dominating female self is a self which upholds tradition and sees change as something that would unnecessarily disrupt her comfortable existence in the world. In Svobodová and Viková, the main female characters are alone in their quest to build a life for themselves since other women, especially their mothers with their old ways, often block their path (one may think of Olga’s domineering mother in *Přetížený klas*, Emma’s philandering mother in *Milenky* and Medřická’s sickly mother in *Medřická*). This attitude to female friendship fits in with both Svobodová’s and Viková’s rejection of the women’s movement as something that will not solve individual women’s problems; in the end, every woman must decide to change her life by herself and not expect any support from others. Svobodová and Viková both imply that women undermine each others’ quest for independence and cannot be trusted as companions in the pursuit of emancipation. The same kind of rejection of female friendship continues in Benešová, where women cause trouble for each other. In ‘Myšky’, Jenička half-consciously becomes a home-wrecker when she begins an affair with a married man (whose marriage is in a bad state to begin with). In ‘Hladina’, Dagmar is disappointed in her friendship with Dora, which was based on lies and deception. Perhaps the most clear-cut rejection of female friendship comes forth in Svatá’s *Vivian* and in Nezval’s *Valérie*, in which women from the same family compete with each other fiercely and are incapable of supporting each other.

With their rejection of female friendship and setting up their female characters in competitive situations with other women, all the authors buy in to the traditional view of women as rivals, a view, which is most familiar from fairy-tales. Usually the most formidable female rival is the heroine's stepmother, stepsister, or any other woman who enters the family from outside. This is also realized in Svobodová's *Milenky*, in which Emma and Marie, who have grown up as sisters, end up, albeit unwillingly, becoming rivals for Valter's affection. Also real, biological mothers in Svobodová and Viková are shown as hindering their daughters from developing a sense of self that would help them to build their own lives. In Benešová, all women, blood relations, friends and teachers turn out to be disappointments in the way they either stand in the way of the heroine's psychological development, are psychologically weak like Jenička's stepmother, or outright work against them like Veleta's wife in *Myšky* or Dora in *Hladina*. The mother in Svatá's *Vivian* and the grandmother in Nezval's *Valérie* are also prime examples of female rivalry and deceit, which thwart the heroine's development into an independent human being.

While Nezval and Svatá evidently allude to fairy-tales and other fantastical genres in their employment of female rivalry and use it as a dramatic device, it is odd that writers with feminist tendencies, like Svobodová, Viková and Benešová would question the importance of female friendship. The only apparent reason for such questioning is that they attempt to underline the specific, individual natures of their female characters and point out how alone they are in their struggle with self-recognition and emancipation from man or society as such. Thus, the 'female versus female' theme becomes a way of shedding light on the outer circumstances of the heroines in the works of these authors. The other rivalling women become a part of the outer story that is often set against the heroine's inner story as something that will

make her doubt herself and her choices. Thus, paradoxically, the female community is portrayed as a force working against any formation of a strong female self, a community that rather falls back on tradition than changes society for the better. This pessimistic view of female community is not present only in the works of the authors studied in this thesis, but is also exhibited in the works of their contemporaries. For example, Alois and Vilém Mrštík's play from 1894, *Maryša*, portrays the lack of female solidarity in a Moravian village community, a lack that together with a strong patriarchal culture brings drastic consequences on the play's eponymous main character and her family. This theme of woman being suppressed by a tight-knit village community is also present, as we have seen, in the works of Svobodová, Víková and Benešová.

Inner Story and Outer Story

As established early in this thesis, an inner story is a story that we tell to ourselves about ourselves. It is a story that consists of the most significant events in our life and essentially tells us who we are and how we got into the situation where we are now. By contrast, an outer story is a story that comes from outside and is socially and culturally more pervasive or all-encompassing than any individual inner story can be (for example, the story of female friendship as rivalry would be an example of this).

In the first chapter of this thesis, concerning the works of Svobodová and Víková, we see the first developments of the dichotomy between inner story and outer story. It is evident that the heroines of these stories work towards a different kind of life than their mothers had: a life independent of the traditional female role of the angel in the house. Yet they still take on some of the traditional expectations;

Viková's heroines become mothers and believe in the outer story that sets motherhood up as something sacred and more rewarding than romantic love.

Svobodová's heroines also break through the common outer story of romantic love and marriage, but with varying success. Both Svobodová's and Viková's novels show that the inner story only carries the heroines so far; they are still far too tied to social expectations and often sacrifice themselves too quickly to the traditional female role of a mother or a caregiver.

Benešová's works also demonstrate that outer stories and inner stories are difficult to interweave. In her two short stories, 'Hladina' and 'Myšky', inner stories are linked to self-deception and through that, self-preservation, which eventually leads to self-obliteration as we see in the case of Dagmar. While the heroines in Svobodová and Viková are not particularly adept at constructing inner stories for themselves, Dagmar and Jenička are too tied to one single version of their inner story. After all, inner stories are meant to be changing throughout our lives, they are not stories that will always be the same because our views of our selves are not always the same. Dagmar and Jenička hang on to their innocence so much that their view of the world becomes muddled, and finally, they do not have anything else to hold on to except their illusions about their unchanging selves. The fluid self is shown in an unfavourable light in Benešová's works; a fluid self is a social player who is not tied down by any moral conventions and blurs her/his self in order to achieve success in life at the cost of other people's happiness. Yet Benešová does not offer an example of a self which would be somewhere in-between the uncompromising, unchanging self and the fluid, immoral self. This may be taken as her claim about the weak position of women in society; either they are tied down by excessive moral standards or they are made to compromise each and every moral standard they have; no middle

ground, no successful social position is a real possibility for them to take into consideration.

A positive view of a changing, fluid self only comes forth in the works of Nezval and Svatá. These authors demonstrate that a balance between inner story and outer story is possible when one is not afraid of uncertainty and is ready to question readymade views of life. Here the inner story becomes merged with the outer story in a productive manner, which helps the heroine to come in terms with her self and her place in the world. This is especially evident at the end of Svatá's *Vivian*, where the main female character becomes an actress; a social chameleon whose self changes according to different roles and who fully enjoys that change.

All in all, by examining the works of Svobodová, Viková, Benešová, Nezval and Svatá, I have provided an analysis on how the female self in Czech literature does not fit the convenient, straightforward tale of women's emancipation. Instead, the development of this self has revolved around the theme of finding one's place in the world and establishing this in a way that does not require compromising one's self completely. The portrayals examined in this thesis have been closely tied to contemporaneous cultural and social contexts, such as the women's movement and the rise of psychoanalysis in Europe; as we have seen, the idea of the female self has developed through many different forms, from the ideal emancipated self of feminism to the changing, fluid self of psychoanalysis and Modernism. Yet these ideal female selves of the *Fin de siècle* and of the 1930 and 1940s are not so far apart. Indeed, Nezval serves as an example of the fact that even a central figure of the Czech Avantgarde, which was as male-dominated as any other European Avantgarde movement, can be interested in portraying a changing female self in a way that is

imaginative and inspiring rather than oversexualising or ridiculing. However, as I argued at the beginning of this thesis, it does not matter whether the heroines of the analysed period become emancipated or not; the main emphasis is on the development of their selves. Naturally some part of this mental development may lead to emancipation, but more often than not, the development is more weighed towards growing self-awareness than the complete rejection of tradition, society and (social and economic) dependency on other people, actions, which are often associated with emancipation. Rather than seeing heroines examined in this thesis abandon tradition as the paragon of inequality, we see these women taking that tradition and moulding it according to their will.

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