

Words and/without Bodies: The Incorporation of the Word as Poetological Imagery in Texts by Bohumil Hrabal and Jáchym Topol

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1.

As many studies have shown, the history of images of incorporation in literature is as long as the range of their metaphorical usage is wide. From antiquity to the present day, images of absorption, of imbibing or devouring, of sexual intercourse, of consuming oneself or the other, be it out of hunger, hate or love, desires of complete material possession or intellectual apprehension cover the whole spectrum from ‘community to cannibalism’ (cf. Kilgour 1990). By dwelling on a point that can be defined as an interface, a topos of contact and interchange between the Self and the world it is surrounded by and situated in, they address the body specifically with regard to antithetical conceptions prevailing within or alongside established understandings of corporeality. Indeed, by focussing on the point of transgression of the boundaries between the inside and the outside of the body, they touch, so to speak, on the primal image of all binary oppositions.¹

A special place therein is occupied by literary images of the incorporation of the written word. While exhibiting all the features mentioned above, they add an additional notion of self-referentiality. They specify the binaries that are addressed by focusing on the differentiation and the boundary between *soma*² and *logos* in particular, and, on a more figurative level, of the relationship between the interior and the exterior of the text (also in the sense of intertextuality).

Hence, in this paper, I will suggest reading images of incorporation of the word as a poetological metaphor, in which texts visualize the prerequisites, conditions, and consequences of their own narration and/or of their *écriture*. And therefore, as this term (bor-

1 In *La dissémination*, Derrida writes: ‘Pour que ces valeurs contraires (bien/mal, vrai/faux, essence/apparence, dedans/dehors, etc.) puissent s’opposer, il faut que chacun des termes soit simplement extérieur à l’autre, c’est-à-dire que l’une des oppositions (dedans/dehors) soit déjà accréditée comme la matrice de toute opposition possible’ (Derrida 1972, p. 117).

2 Here this is understood as both the body in the sense of the anatomical system as well as the body as equally the subject and object of sensational experience. Neither Czech, nor English nor French semantically differentiate between the two, while German (*Körper/Leib*), for example, or Russian (*telo/plot*) do. For the lack of this differentiation in Czech, see Vojvodík 2006, p. 31.



rowed from Roland Barthes³) already indicates, images of the incorporation of the word also implicitly embrace a reflection on the intertextual historicity of their own imagery.⁴

If one understands of the body as a medium of orientation *in* and of experience and apprehension of the world as Josef Vojvodík has suggested,⁵ literary corporeality cannot be studied as an isolated textual element, but has, in general, to be considered within a wider range of what Vojvodík calls ‘antropological-ontological categories’ [‘antropologicko-ontologické kategorie’].⁶ This has to be taken into account, even more for images of bodily absorption of the word. Their very poetological constitution is comprised in not being spontaneous and singularly constructions, but in them generally referring to the broader textual discourse itself (cf. Kohl 2007, p. 3). This, consequentially, leads to the fact that the study of poetological metaphors cannot be limited to the very image itself, but has always to be considered as hyperonymous, so to speak, for the text as a whole.

In this paper, I will consider such imagery in texts of two authors, namely Bohumil Hrabal (1914–1997) and Jáchym Topol (* 1960), whose relationship has been (somewhat questionably) described in terms of familial kinship.⁷ And while the elder of the two died shortly after the younger’s debut novel was published, and there is no evidence (or at least none that I am aware of) that it was ever read by Hrabal, Topol openly acknowledged his perceived indebtedness to the other, albeit with some delay (cf. Topol 2014). But even beyond such extratextual claims, the proximity of their *ways of writing*, of their *écritures*, to use Roland Barthes’ term, has been noted numerous times (see for instance Kliems 2010, p. 221, Zand 2013, p. 29), but surprisingly still has yet to be made into the object of closer investigation.⁸ On top of that, Topol’s *Sestra* and, to

3 In this paper, I will use the original French term, since, at least in my opinion, the English translation as simply *writing* is too ambiguous and can be also understood as in reference to an author’s work or body of texts in general.

4 In *Le degré zéro de l’écriture*, Roland Barthes explicitly defines his concept of *écriture* in terms of literary historical verticality. See e.g. the following passage in which he confronts *écriture* with language and style: ‘Langue et style sont des forces aveugles; l’écriture est un acte de solidarité historique. Langue et style sont des objets; l’écriture est une fonction: elle est le rapport entre la création et la société, elle est le langage littéraire transformé par sa destination sociale, elle est la forme saisie dans son intention humaine et liée ainsi aux grandes crises de l’Histoire’ (Barthes 1993, p. 147).

5 In the introduction to his voluminous study on images and conceptions of corporeality in Czech avant-garde art and literature, Vojvodík, by drawing especially on Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, Vojvodík addresses the body as a specific means to explore and conceive the Self’s ‘being-in-the-world’ (cf. Vojvodík 2006, pp. 9–43).

6 He especially points out the triad ‘tělo — čas — prostor’ [‘body — time — space’] (ibid., p. 22).

7 Topol’s German publishing house, Suhrkamp, labels him as Hrabal’s ‘literary grandson’ [‘literarischer Enkel’] <http://www.suhrkamp.de/buecher/die_teufelswerkstatt-jachym_topol_42144.html> [7. 10. 2015]. Besides raising the question of who, if one would take this claim seriously, would actually have to be considered the missing *father* in this lineage, it must be suspected that, in the late 1990s, this was rather an attempt to improve the commercial prospects of an author still unknown to the German readership than a serious critical statement.

8 The same must be stated for the work of a third author, namely Jaroslav Hašek. While the crucial role of Hašek’s writing for Hrabal’s work can probably be considered to be bomem-

a lesser extent, his short story *Waffen aus Tolmin* (2011, *Zbraně z Tolminu / Weapons from Tolmin*),⁹ toy with the idea of literary history and personal canon formation as a matter of biological genealogy — including all oedipal connotations that might come along with such a conception (see also Förster 2014).

As already mentioned, their *kinship* plays out above all on the level of their respective *écritures*. In a way quite similar to Hrabal, Topol's beginnings as a writer are rooted in poetry, a foundation that both author's works never really abandon, even though later primarily producing prose works.¹⁰ Both authors' writings attribute great significance to oral speech and both are highly attentive with regard to historical, social, or communal shifts in register, and are verbally excessive in one way or the other, if not in fact of a certain verbal hyperactivity often creating its own rules. Texts by Hrabal as well as Topol place their wager on a stream of speech (to which I will return again later) which is ideally not interrupted by conventional punctuation, but only by techniques imitating the intonation and rhythms of spoken discourse, if at all.¹¹

Putting aside all those similarities, the greatest discontinuity between Hrabal's and Topol's writing can be best observed in their very use of poetological metaphors. In doing so, Hrabal's texts as well as Topol's early prose works¹² draw particularly on images of in- and decorporation. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that even though the images are very similar, their usage is not. In the case of Hrabal's works, it clearly is approving and affirmative, while, with regards to Topol's texts — and, again, particularly in *Sestra*¹³ — it reveals itself as being hesitant, if not righteous denial.

istic common knowledge, especially due to the early studies of Emanuel Frynta and Václav Černý, its meaning for Jáchym Topol's writing has, much like that of Hrabal's, been often stated, but never thoroughly analyzed. Thereby, especially in *Sestra*, the roles of Hašek as an author, of his Švejk figure as sort of an archetype of the Czech national character and his *écriture* itself, are even more prominent than Hrabal's.

9 As far as I know, this text has been published only in German (Topol 2011).

10 In fact, Jankovič has talked about much of Hrabal's prose works as an intertwining of the lyrical and the epical, constituting a peculiar 'lyrical-epical' ['[l]yrickoepick[é]]' writing alternating epical narration and conceptions of time with retarding passages he described as lyrical 'crystallizations' ['krystalizace'] (Jankovič 1996, pp. 79–98).

11 In addition to the fact that a great number of other areas and levels could be pointed out on which the *bond* between their works articulates itself, for example their oscillation between a peculiar 'absence of history' (Josef Kroutvor) on one hand, and a hyperbolization of certain historical events and motifs on the other hand, the fact that Topol's writing (and at the risk of making it sound redundant, especially *Sestra*) works off the entire genre-memory of Hrabal's *écriture* (besides Hašek's work, especially French as well as Czech surrealism and diverse avant-gardes), or, for instance, their respective self-fashioning as 20th century 'proklet[í] básní[ci]' as well as their self-representation of their writing as an ecstatic *écriture automatique*, or as 'psaní alla prima', as Hrabal calls it, or an *écriture du premier mouvement*.

12 With this I refer to his works written in the 1990s, i.e. *Sestra*, *Anděl [Angel Exit]*, *Výlet k nádražní hale [A Trip to the Train Station]* and exclude his later novels and stories as well as his collection of American Indian legends *Trnová dívka [The Thorn Girl]* (1997).

13 The fact that *Sestra* places by far more emphasis on both metapoetical and meta-linguistic reflexion so to speak and consequentially attributes greater significance to metapoetic metaphors than any other text written by the same author might be solely due to the fact

In the following, I will first attempt to provide an exemplary insight into how two selected texts — Hrabal's *Příliš hlučná samota* [Too loud a solitude] (1977)¹⁴ and Topol's *Sestra* [City, Sister, Silver] (1990)¹⁵ — establish and use metaphors of in- and decorporation, and second, reflect on their consequences for the respective narrative discourse as a whole.

2. 'SUCKING WORDS' — BOHUMIL HRABAL'S *PŘÍLIŠ HLUČNÁ SAMOTA*

In Hrabal's prose text, *Příliš hlučná samota*, the first-person narrator named Haňta has been working in Prague's subterranean central wastepaper storage for 35 years. His days have consisted of the pressing and bundling not only dirty wrapping materials and newspapers, but also mass reproductions of famous artworks, and above all, books. In the flow of his speech, Haňta speaks about the knowledge he has gathered over the years by reading books before throwing them into the hydraulic press, and by 'rescuing' others from suffering the same fate by taking them home to his apartment. His narrative discourse thereby not only incorporates innumerable and eclectically juxtaposed references to and quotes from books, Haňta destroys or which he remembers having destroyed in the past. But in the context of this meditation on the written word and its use as well as deliberate misuse by the protagonist, the text also reflects on the relationship between *soma* and *logos*. Hrabal not only lets his narrator muse about how the very objects, in whose destruction he is partaking, become part of his own body. In one passage, the narrator speaks about orally consuming the written word, sucking it like a candy drop until it dissolves into his bodily fluids and, thereby, reaches even the remotest cell in his body:

když čtu, tak vlastně nečtu, já si naberu do zobáčku krásnou větu a cucám ji jako bonbón, jako bych popíjel skleničku likéru tak dlouho, až ta myšlenka se ve mně rozplývá tak jako alkohol, tak dlouho se do mne vstřebává, až je nejen v mém mozku a srdci, ale hrká mými žilami až do kořínků cév (Hrabal 1994, p. 9).¹⁶

that it is his first prose text and his first large-scale work (all told, the first edition consisted of more than 480 pages).

¹⁴ Having been written in 1976, at least according to the author himself, the text was first published in the *inofficial edice Expedice* in 1977, and a first official edition was published in 1987 (Pražská imaginace). It exists in three different versions, one of which is in verse form, and on top of that, as it is the case with many of Hrabal's texts, each variation exists in several different version. For more details on the complicated publishing history, see Milan Jankovič's editorial commentary in *Sebrané spisy Bohumila Hrabala* (sv. 9. Pražská imaginace, Praha 1994, p. 7-78). I will quote from the same edition. The English quotes refer to the translation by Michael H. Heim (Hrabal 1990).

¹⁵ In the following, I am quoting from Topol [1994]/2008. The English translations of the Czech quotes are taken from Alex Zucker's translation (Topol 2000).

¹⁶ 'Because when I read, I don't really read; I pop a beautiful sentence into my mouth and suck it like a fruit drop, or I sip it like a liqueur until the thought dissolves in me like alcohol, infusing my brain and heart and coursing on through the veins to the root of each blood vessel' (Hrabal 1990, pp. 1-2).

In doing so, he, not only incorporates incredible amounts of knowledge¹⁷, but he also, after all those years, starts to turn into the written word himself: ‘umazávám se literami, takže se podobám naučným slovníkům’ (Hrabal 1994, p. 9).¹⁸ The endangerment of his operation of the hydraulic press constitutes to the written word becomes mutual — when the amount of books he takes home to save them from being destroyed starts to exceed the storing abilities of his apartment he puts them away on shelves under the ceiling, where they constantly threaten to slay him while he is sitting on the toilet or sleeping in his bed.¹⁹ As his destructive work progresses, he eventually realizes that the weight of the books piled up above his head has compressed his very body and remarkably reduced his height.²⁰

By completely abolishing the difference between intellectual, hermeneutical reception and material absorption, the novel establishes a nearly textbook-like case

17 He describes himself as being ‘proti své vůli vzdělán’ [‘educated against my will’]. Haňta addresses the incorporation of the word as a total internalization of knowledge (Hrabal 1994, p. 9; Heim translates this as ‘My education has been so unwitting’, Hrabal 1990, p. 1].

18 ‘[I have been] smearing myself with letters until I’ve been come to look like my encyklopedias’ (Hrabal 1990, p. 1).

19 ‘[T]ak jsem vytvořil baldachýn a postelová nebesa na kterých do stropu jsou vyrovnány knihy, [...] a když usínám, dvě tuny knih jako dvacetimetráková měra tlačí moje snění, někdy, když se neopatrně otočím, nebo ze spaní zakřičím a hodím sebou, v hrůze naslouchám, jak knihy se sesouvají, že stačí jen lehký dotyk kolena, třeba jen výkřik, a jako lavina se na mne všechno z nebes zřítí, roh hojnosti plný vzácných knih se na mne vysype a rozplácne mne jako veš [...], naslouchám, jak knihy nade mnou snují pomstu a možnosti mne ohrožují na klidu duševním natolik, že raději spím vsedě stoličce u okna, docela zděšen tou představou jak zřícené knihy napřed mne rozmáznou v postelích a pak prorazí podlahou prvního patra a pak do přízemí a nakonec do sklepa tak jako zdviž’ [‘I pushed my twin beds together and rigged a kind of canopy of planks over them, ceiling high /.../ and when I fall asleep I’ve got all those books weighing down on me like a two-ton nightmare. Sometimes, when I’m careless enough to turn in my sleep or call out or twitch, I am horrified to hear the books start to slide, because it would take little more than a raised knee or a shout to bring them all down like an avalanche, a cornucopia of rare books, and squash me like a flea. /.../ I hear the books above me plotting their revenge, and I am so terrified by the prospect of having them flatten me and then crash through each floor all the way to the basement, like an elevator, that I prefer sleeping in my chair by the window’] (Hrabal 1994, pp. 19–20, Hrabal 1990, p. 17f.).

20 ‘A když jsem se vrátil domů, odstavil jsem v kuchyni stovky knih od futra dveří do pokoje a tam jsem našel znamení inkoustovou tužkou a čáry s datumem, kolik jsem k řečenému dni měřil. Vzal jsem knihu, přistoupil zády k futru dveří, shora jsem přitiskl knihu na temeno hlavy, pak jsem se na místě otočil, udělal čárku a už pouhým okem se viděl, že jsem se za těch osm let, kdy jsem se naposledy změřil, srazil o devět centimetrů. Pohlédl jsem vzhůru na baldachýn z knih nad mojí postelí a usoudil jsem, že jsem se nahrbil tím, že pořád jako bych nesl na zádech ta dvoutunová nebesa z knížek a knih’ [‘When I got home, I pushed a couple of hundred books away from the kitchen door and found the lines I used to draw on the frame with an indelible pencil to show how tall I’d been on a given date, and I picked up a book, stepped back against the doorframe, and pressed the book on my flat head, and when I turned in place and drew another line there, I could tell with the naked eye that in eight years I had shrunken four inches, and I decided I must have shrunk under the weight of that two-ton canopy of books’] (Hrabal 1994, p. 22, Hrabal 1990, p. 20).

of *bibliophagy*, or, given the fact, that he doesn't devour books as a whole, but talks about sucking words and sentences, of '*grammatophagy*' (Butzer 1998). Images of the eating and devouring of books or the licking and swallowing of the written word have often been looked at from a wide range of perspectives (see for instance Körte 2012). For instance, as manifestations of the grotesque²¹ and sometimes even as cases of metaphorical cannibalism (see Hansen-Löve 1987); they have been studied under the premises of media theory (see Wenzel 1997), but also with emphasis on their presumably cultic and religious origin.²²

Therefore, it is not surprising that the imagery of incorporation established in *Příliš hlučná samota* bears traces of religious reference, be it to Judaism or to biblical images and the Eucharist.²³ Thus, the text admittedly lays the groundwork for a potential reading as a metaphor of transcendence or, more specifically, of transubstantiation (cf. Zuzana Stolz-Hladká 2004, pp. 39–44). This seems obvious, especially since on one hand, a couple of chapters later, Jesus himself makes an appearance, and on the other hand, the text explicitly refers to Holy Communion when the narrator reflects about what exactly happens during his incorporation of the word:

Když očima se dostávám do pořádný knihy, když odstráním tištěná slova, tak z textu nezůstane taky víc než nehmotné myšlenky, které poletují vzduchem, spočívají na vzduchu, vzduchem jsou živeny a do vzduchu se vracejí, poněvadž všechno je koneckonců vzduch, tak jako současně krev je a současně není ve svaté hostii (Hrabal 1994, p. 10).²⁴

21 I would (somewhat ironically) call this the 'Bachtinian' tradition of reading images of incorporation since literally all studies dealing with this with regard to the grotesque draw on Bachtin's work on Rabelais.

22 In this context, most authors point out biblical sources, such as Ezekiel 2:9–3:10 or Revelation 10:2–10:10. But as demonstrated by Wolfram Drews, for instance, they themselves to be very likely to draw on even older cultic images and practices, such as the antique Egypt tradition of the dissolution of papyrus in water that was later drunken by priests (cf. Drews 2004, esp. pp. 127–132).

23 In one passage, the text not only explicitly refers to the Talmud, but consecutively parallels the destruction of books and knowledge with the destruction of Jewish culture, a link that one also comes across in other passages of the text alluding more or less overtly to the Holocaust: 'když lis zacinkal v poslední fázi a drtil knihy silou dvaceti atmosfér, slyšel jsem drcení lidských kostí, jako bych na ručním mlýnku šrotoval lebky a kosti v lisu drcených klasiků, jako bych presoval věty talmudu: Jsme jako olivy, teprve když jsme drceni, vydáváme ze sebe to nejlepší' ['whenever my hydraulic press entered its final phase and crushed the beautiful books with a force of twenty atmospheres, I would hear the crunch of human skeletons and fell I was grinding up the skulls and bones of press-crushed classics, the part of the Talmud that says: For we are like olives: only when we are crushed do we yield what is best in us'] (Hrabal 1994, p. 17, Hrabal 1990, p. 14).

24 'When my eyes land on a real book and looks past the printed word, what it sees is disembodied thoughts flying through air, gliding on air, living off air, returning to air, because in the end everything is air, just as the host is and is not the blood of Christ' (Hrabal 1990, p. 2).

But if one takes a closer look at this passage, one can see that Haňta's 'tak jako [...] je' ['as it is'] does not compare his incorporation of the word with the oral reception of the Host itself, but that it rather refers to the suspension of the difference between the material and the immaterial that the sacrament of Communion claims to occur to the wine and the Host through consecration.²⁵

Through Haňta's comparison, the text links this underscoring of the difference between the material and the immaterial to the written word, and consequently, to the binarity of the sign as medium and meaning. But as Hans Blumenberg pointed out in his study on metaphors of reading and the 'readability of the world', when the difference between the signifier and the signified is suspended, one can read no more (cf. Blumenberg 1986, p. 35). Thus, it is absolutely consequent that the narrator doesn't speak about reading *as if* he was sucking the words and sentences, but as, in fact, not reading at all ('protože já když čtu, tak vlastně nečtu', Hrabal 1994, p. 9).²⁶ Or, as Haňta himself hints at with his references to Communion, his peculiar practice of reception does not necessarily suspend or transcend the written word's materiality, but consists in receiving it as a co-presence of the material and the immaterial, thus, of the body and the word.

3. TOPOL: DISSOLVING THE WORD IN SEMEN

Jáchym Topol's *Sestra* also unfolds its relationship between body and word in a metaphor of incorporation. But as is revealed by a closer reading, the fact that Topol's text employs the same imagery as Hrabal's *Příliš hlučná samota* does not necessarily mean that it establishes a comparable relationship between *soma* and *logos*. In fact, in the following pages, I will argue that it does quite the contrary and uses an almost identical metaphor to constitute a major shift between the *écriture* of Hrabal's texts and its own poetic stance, yet to be defined in his prose debut.

25 With the apparition of Jesus and Lao-tze becomes clear that the suspension of binary opposition goes much further. The narrator reflects about the importance of their age for their respective thinking. While he sees Jesus as young, energetic, and eager to revolutionize the world, Lao-tze appears as an old man, who has withdrawn into himself to meditate about the emptiness of eternity. The narrator associates the first case with optimistic progression, the latter with the regression to the origin, cf. Hrabal 1994, p. 31 (Hrabal 1990, pp. 33–34). In this way, the text does not limit the suspension of binarity to the opposition of the carnal and the intellectual, but extends it into a reflection on different conceptions of temporality. First, the narrator associates Jesus with a winding, but still rambunctiously spiral moving forwards and upwards and the old Lao-tze with a solemnly recurring circle, and thereby establishes an antithesis of a teleological with a circular conception of time. But then, a couple of pages later, their opposition is blurred, if not abolished, when he talks about how 'spirála a kruh si [...] odpovídají a progressus ad futurum splývá s regressem ad originem [...] a začal jsem si teď snít o tom, že progressus ad originem si odpovídá s regressem ad futurum' ['my professional spiral and circle come together and progressus ad futurum meets regressus ad originem /.../ I /.../ ruminates on progressus ad futurum meeting regressus ad originem'] (Hrabal 1994, p. 46, Hrabal 1990, p. 48).

26 '[W]hen I read, I don't really read' (Hrabal 1990, p. 1).

In the novel's first chapter, after a few introductory sentences, the narration takes off with a sudden flashback in which the narrator (or more precisely, the voice presented as a narrator — a differentiation I will return to later) recalls his adolescent years in 'normalized' Czechoslovakia of the late 1970s and early 1980s. He especially reminisces on his then-girlfriend, who, as the text suggests, introduced him to the pleasures of sexuality. In this context, the text introduces an image of absorption, a reading I would like to keep in mind with the aforementioned sucking of the word in Hrabal's text. Here, the reference to Holy Communion is even more explicit since absorption is not only compared to the reception of the Host, but the image deals with a Communion wafer itself:

Na jazyk mi dává oplatku, to znamínko boží, a já tam mám ještě semeno, kde sou tvý děti, třeba všechny neumřely, jak sem rychle běžela. Později tu chuť mazala, už to nepotřebovala, moskytiéru v džungli, povlak na jazyku, kterým jsme tolik lhali, rodnám, škole, knězi, všem ostatním, všem mimo společenství, to už potom jablka [sic], nebo se alespoň napila vody a měla jiný, složitější masky a převleky (Topol 2008, p. 10).²⁷

Even though the comparison with the fruit drop the text draws might be unexpected in Hrabal's text, Haňta still speaks of his sucking words with a somewhat buoyant solemnity; here the encounter of the consecrated Host with the semen left on the tongue from a previous sexual encounter clearly reveals a travestying effect. The very fact that the Host is not dissolved in salivary and later in gastric juices, as it is supposed to be, but in spilled seminal fluid clearly is a case of the 'profanation' ['profanace'] Vladimír Novotný has posited as a central figure for Topol's debut novel (Novotný 2000).²⁸

But while absorption is employed to blur or even abolish the border between the word and the body in Hrabal's text, here the very image results in the opposite — namely in the reinforcement of the binarity between *soma* and *logos*. It is, in fact, employed to exclude the body from the narrative discourse. Above all, this is due to the fact that while in case of Hrabal's text incorporation is successfully finalized, here it is intermittently, if not righteously denied in various ways.

On the one hand, on a metaphysical level, so to speak, it is precluded by the non-completion of the sacramental act. The text remains unclear if the person receiving

²⁷ 'He put a wafer on my tongue, the sign of God, she said, and I still had semen in there with your kids, they might not all've been dead yet, I ran the whole way. Later she wiped off the taste, no longer needing that mosquito net in the jungle, that coating on the tongue we lied with so often, to our families, teachers, priests, to everyone outside the community, and instead she ate an apple, or took a sip of water, using other, more elaborate masks and disguises' (Topol 2000, p. 18).

²⁸ Even though I do not necessarily agree with the conclusions Novotný draws in his paper, or with his decision to label this phenomenon as specifically 'postmodern', I agree with him to the extent that in Topol's texts I see de-sacralisation as a central gesture. In my opinion this is neither restricted to *Sestra* nor to the depiction of religious objects or the use of religious imagery, but also extends to secularized areas such as national mythology or historiography.

the Host actually swallows it (which, according to the idea of Communion, is essential for the incorporation of the word, the body of the believer). In fact, the text uses the somewhat odd and at the very least ambiguous expression of the person 'wip[ing] off the taste' ('chuť mazala') which could mean that the mixture of sperm and Host has been swallowed and only the after-taste has been gotten rid of. But it could also refer to the contrary and be read as the receiving person having spat out the mixture. Even more so, as, in the same sentence, it is referred to as 'povlak' ['coating'] on the tongue, which, after all, suggests that something remained unswallowed.

On the other hand, on a physical level, incarnation is excluded by the denial of a potential conception, a reference that far exceeds this short passage. The text not only places the sperm not inside the body, but solely on the tongue, but also refers to the spilled semen as 'unborn (or rather unconceived) children' dying on the tongue ('tvý děti, třeba všechny neumřely'). A couple of pages later, the narration jumps forward to the events of the summer of 1989 and the arrival of thousands of East German refugees in the West German embassy on Prague's *Malá Strana*. The narrator and his girlfriend break into neighboring houses to have sex in damp basements and dirty coal cellars. In this context, the non-completion of incorporation becomes even more acute since the text links the potential conception of a child to a series of horrific visions in which the narrator sees his own sperm inseminating his partner's eggs and a rapidly growing fetus inside her body who threatens to consume him.²⁹ Right in his arms, the young woman starts to morph into an ugly old hag, raddled by age as well as by pregnancies and births.³⁰ The fear of losing his bodily integrity to an uncontrol-

29 'V těch soumracích jsme stárli a každá buňka našeho společného těla už byla veteránem bitev... a síla mojí Psice se obracela proti ní, protože ona nežila jen pro sebe, už ne, chtěla dál... i se mnou. Ale já se bál... být na světě tak, jak ona chtěla, dát jí to, být tu v někom dalším... ztrácel jsem svou sílu tím, že jsem hrál, v různých převlecích a postavách jsem si ohmatával svět, protože jsem byl plný strachu pro přímý dotek' ['We aged in those twilights, by now every cell of in our shared body was a combat veteran... and She-Dog's power was turning against her because she wasn't living just for herself anymore, she wanted to go farther... and take me with her. But I was afraid... to be in the world the way she wanted me to, to give it to her, to be inside someone else... I was losing my power by acting, feeling out the world in assorted costumes and character because I was fearful of direct contact'] (Topol 2008, p. 17, Topol 2000, pp. 25–26).

30 'V mých očích, které byly upřené do usmívajících se očí Psice, jsem viděl svou hrůzu, když jsem putoval po kůži stařenina břicha, a poslala mě ještě dál, a teď i v čase, tělem jsem se dotýkal vlhkých zárodků a už to nebylo moje tělo, stal jsem se jednou z látek embrya a byl jsem v něm, čas se náhle otočil a já byl s nimi, když zralý v břiše té ženy a šly na svět v krvi a pláči, cítil jsem, jak se čas zastavuje, když přišla bolest, a jak vytváří skutečnost a pak mne Psice znovu vyslala do stařeniných vnitřností, které se mi otvíraly, a znovu jsem byl na cestě ven a pak v Psici a cítil jen tlak v ptáku. Když jsem stříkal, přál jsem si už jít do dne, ven, ale Psice držela pevně... teď jsem cítil, jak nás čas života, ten starý čas ve sklepeních, který jsme vyhledávali, začíná strhávat, sesmekli jsme se z výklenku a letěli vzduchem, tělo Psice v mém objetí těžko, viděl jsem, jak se jí propadá tvář, vlasy jí šedivěly. Měla hrubou kůži, dotýkal jsem se jejího břicha, zjizveného po porodech, a tebe ti neukážu! dala mi větu' ['In my eyes, fixed on the smiling eyes of She-Dog, I saw my horror as I travelled along the skin of the old woman's belly, and then she sent me farther, now through time

lable division of cells not only inhibits the narrator to bring the sexual act to an end, but also leads the narrator to separate himself from his very body ('už to nebylo moje tělo' ['it wasn't my body anymore']).

The reference to Holy Communion in the text, even though a travesty, allows for the Host to be read as an equivalent for the word itself. Therefore, it is not simply a wafer that is dissolved in spilled semen and later (possibly) spat out, but also the very idea of a potential mediality between *soma* and *logos*, as it is seen in the sacrament of Communion. In this, the novel is very consistent: at the very end of the novel, when the possibility of a return of the narrative instance to its lost corporeality is at least hinted at,³¹ it can consequently only happen to the detriment of the word: 'bylo to za slovy, za branou ve zvuku dechu bylo to konečně za slovy [...]'³² Not only does the desire for worldly completion that manifests itself in the narrator's quest for the eponymous female the text refers to under various names and denominations³³ and that is in a way motivating the whole plot of the novel remain unsatisfied, the longing for metaphysical redemption that plays a crucial role throughout the text (cf. Putna 1999) also never becomes fulfilled. Here, in contrast to Hrabal's text, body and word remain ununited.

4. (NON-)INCORPORATION OF THE WORD AS POETOLOGICAL IMAGERY

As I pointed out in the introduction, in both cases images of incorporation, or as I hope to have shown in Topol's case, rather *decorporation*, have wide-reaching con-

as well, I felt the moist cells of an embryo, and it wasn't my body anymore, I felt become one of the embryo's tissues, I was inside it, time suddenly turned in the other direction, and I was with them as they matured in the woman's belly and went out into the world in blood and tears, I felt time come to a stop as the pain came, shaping reality, and then She-Dog sent me off again, into the old woman's innards, and as they opened up I made my way out, and then I was in She-Dog, feeling the pressure build inside my cock. I spurted, hoping to get to the bottom and out, but She-Dog held me firmly... now I could feel the time of life, the old time we searched out in the cellars, beginning to carry us off, sweeping us out of the alcove, we went soaring through the air, She-Dog's body growing heavy in my embrace, I saw her face sag, her hair turning grey. She had rough skin, I touched her belly, scarred from giving birth, but I won't show you! was the sentence she gave me' (Topol 2008, pp. 17–18, Topol 2000, pp. 26–27).

³¹ In the very last chapter, the text comes up with a scenery that almost alludes to national mythological topoi such as the *chalupa*. The narrator sits in front of a shack on the periphery of Prague, his deceased friend Bohler's son is playing on the ground in front of him. Next to him sits Bohler's highly pregnant Vietnamese girlfriend. The texts very much suggests that the unborn child is, in fact, the narrator's (Topol 2008, pp. 454–455, Topol 2000, p. 498).

³² '[I]t was beyond words, it was finally beyond words...' (Topol 2000, p. 498).

³³ 'sestra' [the Sister], 'Malá Bílá Psice' [which Alex Zucker translates as 'Little White She-Dog'] and the, of course, symbolically opposed 'Černá' ['The Black', but this could also stand as a proper name and refer to the female form the Czech surname 'Černý'], but also the mysterious Black Madonna of Częstochowa whose picture, besides being on the cover of the novel, plays a crucial in the book's third and last part.

sequences for the narrative discourse of the respective texts. Through this, they become poetological metaphors.

As I have shown, in Hrabal's text the incorporation of the word abolishes the difference between the inside and the outside of the body, as well as of the material and the immaterial side of the sign. In his comparison of *Příliš hlučná samota* with two earlier versions (one of which is, as mentioned above, written in verses) of the text, Milan Jankovič has shown that, while all three versions are heavily concerned with rhythm, the two earlier variations mainly rely on the segmentation provided by the graphical structure and the line breaks of the lyrical text, the third version, *Příliš hlučná samota*, tends to realize its rhythmicity mainly by intonation.³⁴ By eschewing most of the syntactical inversions of the earlier variations, by clearing the way for long sentences, and replacing conventional punctuation by mere commas,³⁵ *Příliš hlučná samota* increases the fluidity the text so to speak and brings it closer to what Jankovič has called a 'tekoucí poetika' ['flowing poetics'], or a 'psaní proudem' ['writing with the stream'],³⁶ with regard to Hrabal's 'autobiographical trilogy'³⁷ (*Svatby v domě*, *Vita nuova*, and *Proluky*).³⁸

From this perspective, the fact that instead of eating or devouring words or books in the literal sense, in *Příliš hlučná samota*, the narrator Haňta sucks them until they dissolve in his mouth like a fruit drop³⁹ and disseminate through his veins like alcohol. In that regard, *Příliš hlučná samota* goes a step further than some other of Hrabal's texts, which despite their parallelization of the *production* of the word (be it spoken or written) with the flow of liquids,⁴⁰ never go as far as to expand this figure to the *reception* of the word,

34 It is interesting that, according to Jankovič's observations and in comparison to the first of versions, this paradoxically goes along with a decrease in semantically and morphologically marked orality. While the two versions of *Hlučná samota* draw heavily on the colloquial variety of Czech language, the so-called 'obecná čeština' ['common Czech'], *Příliš hlučná samota* constitutes a clearly recognizable shift towards the written standard (cf. Jankovič 1996, pp. 108 and 110).

35 In others of Hrabal's works, this very function is accorded not the comma but to a repeated and almost exclusive use of ellipses, a phenomena that Jankovič investigates in his paper *Tři tečky v Prolukách Bohumila Hrabala* (cf. Jankovič 1990, and later also shortly addresses in Jankovič 1996, pp. 38–144).

36 First in Jankovič 1994, with certain variations also Jankovič 1996, pp. 115–144.

37 On the topic of autobiographicity with regard to those three texts see Meyer in this volume.

38 The trilogy has been fully translated into English by Tony Liman and published by Northwestern University Press, Evanston (*In-House Weddings*, 2007, *Vita Nuova*, 2010, and *Gaps*, 2011).

39 In this particular passage, in the first version of the text, the verse-form *Hlučná samota*, is even more precise and not only speaks of sucking the word like a 'bonbon', but like a 'hašlerka' (Hrabal 1994, p. 83), a traditional Czech cough drop.

40 Naming only two examples: 'Jsem ctitel slunce v zahradních restauracích, piják luny zrcadlíci se ve vlhké dlažbě, kráčím zpříma a rovně, zatímco moje manželka doma, ač strážlivá, dělá chybné výkony a vrávorá, humorný výklad hérakleitovské panta rhei mi protéká hrdlem [...]' (Rukověť pábitelského učně, Hrabal 1993, p. 179); 'píšu vesele dál, dokonce se usmívám, protože jsem si vědom toho štěstí, že to ze mne teče, že vytahuji stránky, které jsou dokladem toho, že to myslí ve mně, že jsem zachytil všechno to, co ve mně bylo,

as well. Thus, Haňta's sucking and dissolution of words into his bodily fluids accomplish much more than establishing images of bibliophagy or the Eucharist. Most importantly, they expand Hrabal's metapoet(olog)ical field and establish an inseparable continuum of body and word, as well as of the fictional character and his verbal discourse.

As for Topol's novel, the image of (non-)absorption and the incompatibility of body and word therein established mark the very moment in which the narrative authority begins to shatter. In my considerations above, the semantic as well as metaphorical vicinity of the spilled semen on the tongue in which the Host is dissolved to Derrida's *dissémination* was, indeed, quite intentional. As is well known, Derrida links the scattered, i.e. non-inseminating seed, with the dispersal of referential meaning.⁴¹ The dissolution of the Host in spilled semen is paralleled with the decomposition of the integrity of the narrator as a humanlike persona, thus, as a corporal character. If one examines the narratological constitution of the concerned passage more closely, it becomes obvious that this is the point at which the narrator's discourse starts to blur and multiply. Allow me to quote it again:

Na jazyk mi dává oplatku, to znamínko boží, a já tam mám ještě semeno, kde sou tvý děti, třeba všechny neumřely, jak sem rychle běžela. Později tu chuť mazala, už to nepotřebovala, moskytiéru v džungli, povlak na jazyku, kterým jsme tolik lhali, rodinám, škole, knězi, všem ostatním, všem mimo společenství, to už potom jablka, nebo se alespoň napila vody a měla jiný, složitější masky a převleky (Topol 2008, p. 10).⁴²

While in the midst of the discourse of a male first person narrator, the passage starts with another first person speaking about having semen on the tongue and being given the Host (*Na jazyk mi dává oplatku*), the phrase ends with a feminine participle (*běžela*). But in the following sentence, the grammatical female is once again addressed in the third person (*chuť mazala, už to nepotřebovala*), and apparently included

co jsem donutil pod dojmem chvil, aby ze mne vyteklo, tak jako krev z podříznutého te-
látku' (Commentaries and unpublished material belonging to *Adagio Lamentoso*, in Hra-
bal 1993, p. 314).

⁴¹ 'La sortie hors de l'unité "primitive" et mythique (toujours reconstituée à retardement dans l'après-coupure), la coupure, la décision — décidante et décidée — le *coup* partage la semence en la projetant. Elle inscrit la différence dans la vie [...] la multiplicité numérique ne survenant pas comme une menace de mort à un germe antérieurement un avec soi. Elle, fraye au contraire la voie à "la" semence qui ne (se) produit donc, ne s'avance qu'au pluriel. Singulier pluriel qu'aucune origine singulière n'aura jamais précédé. Germination, dissémination. Il n'y a pas de première insémination. La semence est d'abord essaimée. [...] Si par là ils voulaient dire quelque chose, c'est qu'il n'y a rien avant le groupe, aucune unité simple et originaire avant cette division par laquelle la vie vient à se voir et la semence d'entrée de jeu se multiplie [...]' (Derrida 1972, pp. 337-338).

⁴² 'He put a wafer on my tongue, the sign of God, she said, and I still had semen in there with your kids, they might not all've been dead yet, I ran the whole way. Later she wiped off the taste, no longer needing that mosquito net in the jungle, that coating on the tongue we lied with so often, to our families, teachers, priests, to everyone outside the community, and instead she ate an apple, or took a sip of water, using other, more elaborate masks and disguises' (Topol 2000, p. 18).

in another person's third person plural (*jsme tolik lhali*). To make it as clear as possible: In the context of the passage, nothing indicates a change of the speaker. In fact, the notoriously chaotic and polyphonic disorganization of voices and speech instances *Sestra* has become famous for, or, to quote Květoslav Chvatík, it's 'zběsilost' (Chvatík 1994) does not prevail throughout the very first pages of the text and in fact only starts at this point.⁴³

At the beginning of the second chapter one can witness the final shattering of the narrator as a humanlike, integral, and bodily character. The narrator is seen looking into the remains of a broken mirror:⁴⁴

Nic mi nevypálí ani dobu Kanálu, protože ten mi dělal srdce. Šlo kličkovat po ulicích a zkoumat tíhu budov, který nosíš na zádech, a můžeš se svýho zrcadla optat: pověz mi, kdo je na světě nejkrásnější? a zrcadlo chvíli mlčí a je to strašidelný a z tý chvíle čerpáš napětí pro svůj pohyb a pak je zrcadlo jen předmět a: rozbitý zrcadlo jsou rozsekaný momentky, koukám se a příjemný by bylo propast se do třetí osoby, ale ne mluví Potok: [...] (Topol 2008, p. 24).⁴⁵

When text speaks of the multiplication of ankles and perspectives here, the text not only acknowledges that it aimed to create a third person narrative but failed, but for the first time and with the delay of one chapter, also introduces his narrative authority by its name. Put somewhat pathetically: here the narrative voice is born out of the remnants of a shattered mirror, so to speak, which is indeed an image almost begging for a psychoanalytical reading. Returning to Derrida's terminology, this is the final moment of dissemination. While the first sentences of the second chapter still use the first person singular, the grammatical numerus suddenly shifts twice, first to the second person (*Šlo kličkovat po ulicích a zkoumat tíhu budov, který nosíš na zádech*) and then back to a first person perspective. This one is not identical with the one that is presented by the name of 'Potok' and that, after the double dot, starts to speak, again, in the first person.

43 Up to this point, even though not using conventional punctuation to indicate direct speech, the text has been fairly consistent in coming up at least with adequate formulas such as 'zeptal jsem se' (Topol 2008, p. 7) ['I asked'], 'odpověděl' (ibid.) ['he answered'] or 'řekli jsme si' (Topol 2008, p. 8) ['we told ourselves']. Even when eschewing explicit speech-inducing verbs, direct speech has been at least marked graphically by line breaks and/or indents.

44 It must be noted that mirrors, or more precisely, pieces of a broken mirror appear not only in this particular passage, but a several points throughout the novel and they often establish intertextual references, such as at the beginning of the second part of the text as a prologue to chapter 8, so to speak, to a mirror in the possession of a dubious Chinese, which one also encounters in Jaroslav Hašek's *Osudy dobrého vojáka Švejka* (cf. Topol 2008, p. 125, Topol 2000, p. 139).

45 'Nor can anything sear out the era of the Sewer, because that was what made my heart. You could zigzag through the streets and test the weight of the buildings on your back, and you can ask your mirror on the wall: Tell me, who's the fairest of them all? and the mirror takes a while to answer and it's scary, and you draw on that while for the tension in your motion, and then the mirror is just an object again and: the shattered mirror is cut-up snapshots, I look around and it would be nice to write myself into third person, but no, says Potok: I lived in carious flats and packs [...]' (Topol 2000, p. 33).

The question arising from all of this — who is speaking? — is not as simply answered as one might think, taking into account the scholarly work that already has been done on Topol's debut novel.⁴⁶ In one instance personalized, the next time not. Primarily masculine, but sometimes feminine or indiscernible, mostly singular, sometimes collective. Shattered, disseminated, bodiless much like the spilled semen meeting with the sacred Host on the tongue.

To sum it up: I do not take this narrative instance for a character in the narratological sense, but for a poetological metaphor assigned with the function of a narrator and furthermore, as a metaphor that clearly pays tribute to Bohumil Hrabal's *écriture* of *psaní proudem*. The Czech noun *potok* corresponds with the English *creek* or *stream*. Semantically, *potok* traces back to the verb *téct* [*to flow* or *to stream*], and at least acoustically it also invokes other verbs such as *potáčet* [*to reel* or *to sway*]. Thus, in my opinion, *Potok* is far more than a mere aptonym for a narrator, who is constantly evading and difficult to get hold of; it is in fact an inscription into the fluidity and the streaming of the poetological field outlined above with regard to Hrabal's writing.

In conclusion, let us return once again to the passage quoted above in which the texts presents its narrative authority and introduces itself to the reader. If one forgoes the capital *P* that secures its reading as a proper name, the reference to Hrabal's depiction of his own writing as a 'stream and flowing of phrases, such a creek of compound sentences' ('proud a tok vět, takový potok souvětí', Hrabal 1993, p. 314) becomes even more obvious:

Nic mi nevypálí ani dobu Kanálu, protože ten mi dělal srdce. Šlo kličkovat po ulicích a zkoumat tíhu budov, který nosíš na zádech, a můžeš se svýho zrcadla optat: pověz mi, kdo je na světě nejkrásnější? a zrcadlo chvíli mlčí a je to strašidelný a z té chvíle čerpáš napětí pro svůj pohyb a pak je zrcadlo jen předmět a: rozbitý zrcadlo jsou rozsekaný momentky, koukám se a příjemný by bylo propsat se do třetí osoby, ale ne mluví [p]otok: [...] (Topol 2008, p. 24, emphasis added).⁴⁷

The text fails to create a corporal word, a personalized narrative instance which, fails, as it is formulated in the text, to 'write myself into third person'. Instead, the one who speaks is *potok*, with a small *p*: the stream.

⁴⁶ As far as I can judge, the only attempt comprehend the peculiar nature of *Sestra's* narrative instance has been made by Petr A. Bílek, who tried to conceive the narrators desintegration by hinting at Paul Ricoeur's conception of the narrative identity as a mediator serving between the *self* (*idem*) and the *other* (*ipse*), thus two poles that are mutually dependent, and permanently defining themselves only in reference to each other — a concept that, in my opinion, might rather be fruitful with regard to the narrator's aforementioned quest for complementation (Bílek 1994, p. 18).

⁴⁷ 'Nor can anything sear out the era of the Sewer, because that was what made my heart. You could zigzag through the streets and test the weight of the buildings on your back, and you can ask your mirror on the wall: Tell me, who's the fairest of them all? and the mirror takes a while to answer and it's scary, and you draw on that while for the tension in your motion, and then the mirror is just an object again and: the shattered mirror is cut-up snapshots, I look around and it would be nice to write myself into third person, but no, says [p]otok: I lived in carious flats and packs [...]' (Topol 2000, p. 33, emphasis added).

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RESUMÉ

Slova a/bez těl: inkorporace slov jako poetologická metafora v textech Bohumila Hrabala a Jáchyma Topola

Příspěvek studuje vztah mezi tělem a slovem v textech Bohumila Hrabala a Jáchyma Topola. Zabývá se především obrazy inkorporace a zkapalnění slov, které chápe jako poetologické metafory. Navrhuje, abychom protagonistu a vyprávěče Topolova debutového románu *Sestra* chápali nikoli jako literární postavu v úzkém smyslu, nýbrž spíš jako alegorizovanou referenci k Hrabalově poetologické metaforice.

RÉSUMÉ

Words and/without Bodies: The Incorporation of the Word as Poetological Imagery in Texts by Bohumil Hrabal and Jáchym Topol

The paper studies the relationship between body and word in works of Bohumil Hrabal and Jáchym Topol. Attention is paid particularly to images dealing with the incorporation and liquifying of the written word, which are understood as explicitly poetological metaphors. It further suggests that we understand the protagonist and narrator of Topol's debut novel *Sestra*, Potok, not as a genuine literary character but rather as an allegorized reference to Hrabal poetological imagery.

KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA / KEY WORDS

Bohumil Hrabal; Jáchym Topol; intertextovost; poetologické metafory / Bohumil Hrabal; Jáchym Topol; intertextuality; poetological metaphors