

The Poet in a State of Emergency: Ivan M. Jirous*



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SYNOPSIS

This article examines *Magorovy labutí písně* ('Magor's swan songs'), a collection of poems by political prisoner Ivan M. Jirous, and an important example of Czech prison poetry from the second half of the 20th century. It was during his imprisonment in Litoměřice, Ostrov, and Valdice (1981–1985) that Jirous wrote the poems, which were smuggled out as *motáky* (clandestine notes written on rolls of paper) by his friend and fellow prisoner Jiří Gruntorád. The article first characterises the situation of Jirous and the Czech underground during the 1970s and 1980s. It then proceeds to analyse how *Magorovy labutí písně* represents a form of literary creation whose aesthetic specificity arises from the situation of extreme hardship — the 'state of emergency' — in which it was written. This specificity can be found in the authentic and even documentary aspect in which the poems reflect the time and place of the prison, as well as the broader, timeless, and more spatially expansive awareness of life that the poems express. What is essential here is not the contingent aspects of the writing, the fleeting influence of inspiration, but more broadly the conscious use of specific means and methods of poetic composition. It is thus a form of literary expression that confronts the characteristic aspects of prison time and spatial confinement by consciously exceeding the limits of the walls, reaching out into the diverse and varying temporal planes and shifting reality of the surrounding world — an experience that is only intensified by its juxtaposition to the daily life of the prisoner from which these dimensions have been brutally stripped. This context-based interpretive analysis demonstrates, in conclusion, that the prison poetry in question here aims to define the effects of confinement and the prison environment by means of a complex gesture, one that is unified by a range of interrelated poetic devices: aural (sound and metre), figural, metaphorical, compositional, stylistic, etc. Prison poetry thus facilitates the survival of its creators and fellow (not only political) prisoners — referred to colloquially as '*muklové*' (an acronym for *muži určení k likvidaci*, or 'men destined for liquidation') — not only in the physical sense, but above all spiritually, as integral, unbroken personalities.

KEYWORDS

Ivan M. Jirous; 'Magor's swan songs'; Czech prison poetry of the 20th century; communism; normalisation; the underground; poetry.

DOI

<https://doi.org/10.14712/23366680.2021.3.6>

* This work was supported by the European Regional Development Fund project 'Creativity and Adaptability as Conditions of the Success of Europe in an Interrelated World' (reg. no.: CZ.02.1.01/0.0/0.0/16_019/0000734).



*Through all forms of suffering
the poet becomes a seer
at least that's what Rimbaud once claimed
Maybe it's not quite like that
if it's true, all I know
is that I'd just as soon do without writing¹*

This is one of 183 poems written by Ivan M. Jirous in the early 1980s while serving time at Valdice Prison near Jičín — also known as Kartouzy, or *Kartáč* ('brush') in prison slang² —, and smuggled out as *motáky* (clandestine notes written on rolls of paper) by his friend and fellow inmate Jiří Gruntorád. The poem was originally to be published along with the others in his collection *Magorovy labutí písně* ('Magor's swan songs'), but Jirous ultimately cut it from the final manuscript. We can speculate on his motivations. He may have felt, for instance, that the text failed to capture the purpose and meaning of 'writing' in the context of his confinement, an experience which we could undoubtedly describe as a 'state of emergency'. Yet even the brief assemblage of tropes that make up the poem — the figure of the poet, suffering, self-identification —, as seen in relation to one of the key books of Czech prison poetry of the 20th century, suggests a number of interesting connections. In the article that follows, we will try to understand what it means and under what circumstances the poetic work may transpose such extreme life experiences when it is produced in an environment of continuous hardship ('How long can I still bear God / that I live in constant stress'³; p. 317). To describe this kind of imprisonment as a 'state of emergency' is not mere hyperbole, not in any case for a political dissident sentenced to prison during the period of 'normalisation', which lasted from the Soviet Occupation of August 1968 to the Velvet Revolution of November 1989, and which was characterised by strict control over the population by the Communist Party (KSČ) leveraged on a widespread network of collaborators. To work as a poet under such circumstances, which meant effectively to transpose these experiences through the creative act to the level of artistic reflection, should also be seen as a way of ensuring one's own spiritual and psychological survival — an act of self-preservation as much as a confirmation of one's identity and human dignity.

As Justin Quinn aptly remarked, it is a paradox of Czech poetry that many of the poets who worked so diligently on their international presentation have come to be 'known' abroad, without, however, their poetic works significantly influencing the

1 'Všemi způsoby utrpení / činí se básník vidoucím / aspoň to kdysi tvrdil Rimbaud / Možná to tak je možná není / je-li to pravda já jen vím / že bych se na psaní radši vybod.'

2 The prison was originally built as a Carthusian monastery (hence the name 'Valdice Carthusian'), founded by Albrecht von Wallenstein as part of the extensive reconstruction of Jičín and its surroundings, which was considered capital of the Duchy of Friedland (Frýdlant). Wallenstein was briefly buried here after his assassination in Cheb on 25 February 1634.

3 'Jak dlouho Bože ještě snesu / že žiju v ustavičném stresu.' All references to *Magorovy labutí písně* are based on the reprinted edition in the comprehensive volume *Magorova summa* (Jirous 1998); page numbers refer to this edition.

main trends in the Czech poetry of their time; on the contrary, many of the key innovators remain unnoticed in the wider international consciousness (Quinn 2014). Our poet belongs to this second group. It might therefore be apt to provide some basic information.⁴

Ivan Martin Jirous, known by his nickname Magor (meaning ‘weirdo’ or ‘idiot’), was born on 23 September 1944 in Humpolec. He studied art history at the Charles University Faculty of Arts, 1963–1969, before going on to work as an editor at the arts bimonthly *Výtvarná práce* (‘Fine arts’). It was at that time that he began taking part in the rock music scene and related alternative cultural spheres, which he considered — and practically developed — as a space of cultural and political autonomy from the totalitarian regime. He would often reflect on its cultural and aesthetic origins and objectives from a theoretical point of view.⁵

Initially collaborating with the music group The Primitives Group, in 1969 he became the (non-performing) leader of the music group The Plastic People of the Universe. However, this sphere of cultural activities was suppressed after the Soviet occupation in 1968, but especially after the intervention of the reactionary wing of the domestic communists, who invited the Soviet bloc armies to the republic in August 1968 and then leaned their power on them. This was done within a series of repressive measures and the overall setting of the social situation after 1969, for which the concept of ‘normalisation’ was adopted — as we have already mentioned above. In 1971, the publication of the magazine *Výtvarná práce* was stopped. Jirous then worked in the labor professions.

During the 1970s and 1980s, Jirous spent a total of eight and a half years in the communist prisons.⁶ He served his first prison time in July 1973 after he was found guilty of singing anti-Soviet songs in a pub, together with Eugen Brikcius, Jiří Daníček, and Jaroslav Kořán.⁷ They were also charged with slandering ‘bald-headed Bolsheviks’ and symbolically destroying a copy of the communist newspaper *Rudé právo* (the court

4 Basic biographical information is taken from a variety of sources, mainly including *Slovník české literatury po roce 1945* (‘Dictionary of Czech literature after 1945’), accessible online at <http://www.slovníkceskeliteratury.cz/showContent.jsp?docId=1038> (accessed 28.06.2021), materials held at the Memory of Nations, accessible online at <https://www.pametnaroda.cz/cs/jirous-ivan-20091001-0> (accessed 28.06.2021), and the *medailon* (short biographical note) by Michael Špirit (Špirit 2014), and drawing as well from Marek Švehla’s biography of Jirous (Švehla 2017).

5 Cf. the remarkable recollection of translator, publicist, and musician Paul Wilson (born 1941) — who also appears as one of the many figures in Jirous’s prison poetry — on their joint efforts during the late 1960s to translate Sontag’s term ‘camp’ into Czech (Wilson 2014, pp. 57–62).

6 See Roman John’s detailed reconstruction of Jirous’s prison time and other information regarding his imprisonment (John 2016).

7 Eugen Brikcius (born 1942) is a poet, novelist, fine artist, and performer who emigrated to Austria in 1980 and worked after 1989 as a freelancer; Jiří Daníček (born 1948) is a poet, playwright, and translator who became Chairman of the Federation of Jewish Communities in the Czech Republic after 1989; Jaroslav Kořán (born 1940) was a playwright, screenwriter, and translator who after 1989 became the first democratically elected mayor of the capital city of Prague and has been working as a publisher and gallerist since 1995.



record alleges that Jirous tried to eat it⁸), which had brought them into conflict with retired Major K. Holub, an agent of State Security (*StB*). The trial took place in November of 1973, which sentenced Jirous to ten months' imprisonment under Article 202 for disturbing the peace and defaming a nation, race, or belief (this section was widely used to persecute and punish opponents of the regime, especially in the cultural sphere). He was sent to the first correctional group (for the least serious offenders), and given outpatient psychiatric treatment; together with his pre-trial detention, he was held at prisons in Ruzyně and Pankrác (Prague), as well as Nové Sedlo, which had been established in the late 1950s as a branch of the Vykmanov labor camp in the Jáchymov region. Brikius, Daníček, and Kořán were similarly given unconditional sentences, which they carried out at the prison in Oráčov in the Rakovník region, and at Dřín near Vinařice. Jirous was released at the end of May 1974.

The rock music scene that Jirous joined after his release and that he helped to organise was also made a target of the regimen of political control that developed at the beginning of the period of normalisation. Rock groups who wanted to perform in public were first required to play their sets before an official committee and gain their approval. The Plastic People of the Universe, of which Jirous was the artistic director, refused to concede to this measure, so they brought their activities and their music underground. In the first half of the 1970s, Ivan Jirous co-organised a number of illegal concerts, and in 1975, he published his first collection of poems, *Magorův ranní zpěv* ('Magor's morning song'), in samizdat. He also wrote several theoretical texts, which strengthened his position as one of the key organisers of the Czech cultural underground. In particular, it was his 'Zpráva o třetím českém hudebním obrození' ('Report on the third Czech musical revival'), which he presented at an illegal cultural event in Přeštice, in the Plzeň region. It was not long before State Security established a special unit to keep tabs on Jirous (cf. Blažek 2012). In 1976, he helped to organise another unauthorised festival in Bojanovice dedicated to the 'second culture of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic', following which, on 16 March, a number of underground musicians were arrested, including The Plastic People (and Jirous with them). By early September, the defendants had been narrowed down to Jirous, Pavel Zajíček, Svatopluk Karásek, and Vratislav Brabenec⁹, who were eventually found guilty of disturbing the peace (Article 202) for their part in a musical production that, according to the judge, expressed disrespect for society and contempt for its moral principles, especially by the repeated use of vulgar expressions. Jirous was given the longest sentence: eighteen months in the second correctional group. In addition to his pre-

8 Cf. ABS (f. Svazky kontrarozvědného rozpracování — Centrála, svazek a. č. 722220 MV, Upozornění dle par. 164 odst. 2 trestního zákona, VV-318/73; cited by John (2016), p. 38.

9 Pavel Zajíček (born 1951) is a poet, musician, and artist; he first emigrated to Sweden in 1980 before returning to Prague in 1995 (he has lived there since). Svatopluk Karásek (1942–2020), an evangelical clergyman and songwriter, emigrated from Czechoslovakia to Switzerland in 1980; in 1997, he began working again as a pastor in Czech Republic, and as a member of Parliament in 2002–2006; Vratislav Brabenec (born 1943) is a poet and musician, and a member of The Plastic People of the Universe, as saxophonist, since 1973. In 1982 he emigrated to Austria, then lived in Canada, and moved permanently to the Czech Republic in 1997; he continues to work as a professional musician.



trial detention to Ruzyně, he served his time at Mírov, a famous prison originally built in the 13th century by Bishop Bruno of Schauenburg as his hunting castle, and converted into a prison in the 16th century. The building has been in continuous use as a prison since then, and remains the oldest prison in the Czech Republic today (cf. John 2016, p. 41). Jirous was released from Mírov in September 1977.

A number of other high profile cases were brought against cultural activists around this time. (František Stárek, for example, together with Karel Havelka and Miroslav Skalický were tried in Plzeň during the summer of 1976.¹⁰) In response, various opposition groups were formed for the first time in support of cultural activists who found themselves detained as political prisoners (cf. Machovec et al. 2012), prefiguring such notable initiatives as Charter 77, which Jirous signed immediately upon his release. On 23 October 1977, after only 37 days as a free man, Jirous was arrested again, this time charged with sedition and sentenced to eight more months for disturbing the peace. The pretext was a speech Jirous had given at the opening of an exhibition of paintings by Jiří Lacina. When he appealed the case, this was used as pretext for extending his sentence by ten months, again in the second correctional group. He was detained at Ruzyně, Pankrác, Stráž pod Ralskem, and Ostrov nad Ohří. This last had been constructed directly adjacent to the ‘liquidation’ or ‘L’ camp, including the famous Red Tower of Death, where prisoners of the Stalinist regime were sentenced to forced labour (specifically, the sorting of uranium ore without the use of protective equipment).

Released again in April 1979, Jirous first found employment as a stoker, then as a member of a construction crew for the JZD (socialist farm cooperative) in Stará Říše. He came there as the husband of Juliana Stritzková, granddaughter of Josef Florian, who had worked from the 1910s until his death in the 1940s as a publisher and translator, and was an organiser of alternative Christian culture. Jirous soon began participating once more in the Czech underground scene, publishing a number of texts in samizdat, and working on *Pravdivý příběh Plastic People* (‘The true story of the Plastic People’). He was arrested again on 10 November 1981, together with Milan Hýbek, Milan Frič, and František Stárek, for activities connected to the publication of samizdat magazine *Vokno* (‘The window’). He spent pre-trial detention at prisons in Litoměřice and Ostrov nad Ohří, and was sentenced in July 1982 (as a ‘dangerous recidivist’) to three and a half years in prison. The sentence was to be served at Valdice in the third correctional group. (The Valdice Prison facility was reserved for the most hardened criminals and repeat offenders. It is also the site where State Security, in the immediate aftermath of the communist coup d’état, brutally tortured its political enemies — or those it found convenient to frame as its enemies, such as the priest Josef Toufar.) The trial was a de facto show trial. The prosecution was not able to demonstrate that a single article in *Vokno* met the criteria for having ‘anti-social intent’. Instead, it called on Vítězslav Ržounek, a professor of Czech literature at Charles University, to provide the court with ‘arguments’ against the defendants (in reality

10 František Stárek (born 1952), who went by the nickname Čuñas in the underground community, has worked as an editor and commentator, and since 1990 for army and counter-intelligence; he is currently employed at the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes (*Ústav pro studium totalitních režimů*) in Prague.



they were no more than opinions based on his own ideological commitments). It is in Valdice, the harshest prison of its time, that Jirous composed the bulk of *Magorovy labutí písně*, a collection of poems that has come to be seen as one of the key works of Czech poetry (and specifically prison poetry) of the 1980s. It is also in Valdice that Jirous completed *Magor dětem* ('Magor for children'), a collection of poems written for his two young daughters, Františka and Marta. He was released from Valdice on 10 May 1985.

Once again, following his release, it was not long before Jirous began participating in anti-regime cultural activities. Even though he had been placed under two years' 'protective supervision' and was constantly monitored by State Security as an 'enemy person' (*nepřátelská osoba*, or 'NO'), Jirous established contact with the signatories of Charter 77, as well as the members of the Committee for the Defence of the Unjustly Prosecuted (*Výbor na ochranu nespravedlivě stíhaných*, or 'VONS'), and others representing similar organisations abroad. It was also at this time that he wrote the poetry collections *Ochranný dohled* ('Protective surveillance'; 1986), *Magorův Jeruzalém* ('Magor's Jerusalem'; 1987) and *Magorovi ptáci* ('Magor's birds'; 1987). On 20 October 1988, he was arrested again for co-authoring (with Jiří Tichý, a worker and opposition activist¹¹) the petition 'Tak dost!' ('That's enough!'), condemning the crimes of the communist regime in the 1950s, and the murder of the dissident Pavel Wonka, who died in the Hradec Králové prison on 26 April 1988.¹² The court convicted Ivan Jirous and Jiří Tichý on 9 March 1989, and Jirous was given an unconditional sentences of sixteen months. He spent his pre-trial detention and served his sentence in Brno-Bohunice, Ruzyně, and Stráž pod Ralskem. The President commuted the remaining months of his sentence on 25 November 1989, amidst the dramatic progression of social change that began with the 17 November demonstrations in Prague.

Jirous wrote a number of poetry collections in years that followed, and his complete works — poems, articles, essays, and letters — were published in a three-volume comprehensive book edition. He won the Tom Stoppard Prize in 1985 and the Revolver Revue Prize in 1987 for *Magorovy labutí písně*. In a *Lidové noviny* poll, he won the Book of the Year award twice in the years following November 1989. In 2006, he was awarded the Jaroslav Seifert Prize for his life's work (for his prison letters 1973–1985, published as *Magorovy dopisy*, or 'Magor's letters'; cf. Jirous 2005). Starting in 2008, he contributed regular columns to the bimonthly *Divadelní noviny*, and in the last years of his life, he gave numerous interviews to periodicals at home and abroad. In the late 1990s, he had returned to poetry, publishing *Magorova vanitas* ('Magor's vanitas'; 1999), *Ubijech labutí* ('Killer of swans'; 2001), *Rattus norvegicus* (2004), *Okuje* ('Mill scale'; 2007), and *Rok krysy* ('Year of the rat'; 2008). He died in Prague on 9 November 2011. Collections of works from the poet's literary legacy were published in 2013 as *Úloža* and *Magorův noční zpěv* ('Magor's night song').

11 Jiří Tichý (1946), is a writer, artist, and commentator; he worked for a short time after 2000 as a curator at the National Gallery in Prague.

12 Pavel Wonka was arrested 5 April 1988 on suspicion of 'obstruction of the execution of an official decision' and imprisoned in Hradec Králové. The official report identified embolism with subsequent heart failure as the cause of death.



This gives us a broad overview of Jirous's life, and the cultural and social contexts that influenced his work as a poet. We can now take a closer look at his prison poetry, as it is represented by his opus magnum *Magorovy labutí písně*. As mentioned above, these poems were written during his imprisonment in Litoměřice, Ostrov, and (mainly) Valdice during the period 1981–1985.¹³ Jirous's accomplice, Jiří Gruntorád (who was also a political prisoner), smuggled them out of prison as *motáky*, handing them to Dana Němcová at the trial.¹⁴ In its final form, the collection is dedicated to the poet's friend and saxophonist Vratislav Brabenec. What follows is a text divided into six sections dedicated to various artistic figures and personal acquaintances: I. St. Hugo's Swan,¹⁵ II. The House With the Blue Lamb, III. Magor d'or, dedicated to Bedřich

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- 13 As the poet recalls, 'When a verse came to me, I'd quickly make a trip the toilet, where I could write it down (otherwise it was not possible, because someone might see me). So I'd make a note of it in the toilet and then put it together back in the room, where I had to keep it hidden from prying eyes, but there was always a bit of privacy in the corner. I then hid the result so that they would not find it during an inspection. One time I hid poems in the hollow leg of a bed. I then gave a copy of each poem to Gruntorád when he was transferred from Minkovice to Valdice. That's why I numbered them. If I wanted to change a verse later, I could find it according to its number. When I was still in prison, the poems were circulated in samizdat with all the numbers still there — they thought that was my intention, but that's not so, the numbers were only there just to keep them in order.' ('Když mě napadl nějaký verš, tak jsem to vždycky řešil tak, že jsem odešel na záchod, kde jsem si ten verš zapsal, protože v práci to nešlo, kdyby mě někdo viděl, že si něco zapisuju. Takže jsem si to vždycky poznamenal na záchodě a pak jsem to skládal už na cimře, kde taky ovšem nešlo, aby ti do toho někdo koukal, ale vždycky nějaký malý soukromí v koutě se dalo najít. Výsledek jsem pak schovával, aby ho nenašli při šťáře. Jeden čas jsem měl básně schovaný v dutý noze postele. Kopii od každý básně jsem pak dával Gruntorádovi, když ho z Minkovic přeložili do Valdic. Proto byly všechny očíslované, kdybych pak změnil nějaké verš, aby se to dalo podle těch čísel najít a opravit. Když jsem ještě seděl, tak to vyšlo v samizdatu s těma číslama — domnívali se, že to tak má být, ale to nebylo pořadí, ta čísla tam byla kvůli evidenci'); see Placák (2008).
- 14 Jiří Gruntorád (born 1952) is a samizdat publisher and, before 1989, doing manual work. He was persecuted by the communist regime and sentenced to many years in prison. He served his longest prison term in Minkovice, where he objected to the warden's rough treatment, for which he was accused of perjury (on trumped up charges) and punishment by being transferred to the prison in Valdice. There he met Jirous and helped smuggle his poems — in this regard, Jirous mentions him in *Magorovy labutí písně*. After the Velvet Revolution, he founded and now works as director of the library (unique in the world) of Czech and Slovak samizdat, Libri prohibiti.
- 15 The swan motif in the title, as well as the title of the first section, are inspired by the portal of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, a monastery church located in the Valdice prison complex (Jirous describes it in the collection with the words 'Gutted like a pig / the church burns bright here in the prison' / 'Vykuchaný jako prase / skví se tady kostel v base'; p. 326). St. Hugo was the founder of the Carthusian order, who also appears on the portal with other patrons of the order (St. Bruno, St. John the Baptist, and St. Joseph). This too is mentioned by Jirous in *Magorovy labutí písně*: 'Perhaps they should intercede / the saints in the niches of the facade / with St. Hugo, with the swans / Only You can pardon me' ('Přimluvit by se snad měli / světci v nikách na průčelí / se sv. Hugem s labutí / Odpustit můžeš mi jen Ty'; p. 329). St. Hugo is often characterised as a protection against



Fučík¹⁶; IV. *My Lovers are Over the Oceans*, dedicated to Eugen Brikcius; V. *Intermezzo*, dedicated to Julie Nováková;¹⁷ VI. *Hommage à Boris Savinkov*.¹⁸ The composition of the collection produces an internal structure and semantic tension: the first and third sections, which portray the poet-prisoner in dialogue with God and an appeal to the saints, presents the religious perspective, intensified by life in a high security prison ('If I did not take it religiously / I might really be miserable here'¹⁹, p. 325); the second section presents a long-distance dialogue with a beloved woman and family; the fourth and fifth sections call out to friends who have emigrated 'voluntarily' or who have been forced to emigrate; the sixth section (in honour of the Russian radical revolutionaries and victims of the Bolsheviks) presents a montage of motifs and themes from the previous sections.

The unifying gesture that runs through all sections of the collection, including its shorter lyrical texts, could be expressed by the words *to be a poet in spite of everything* — in spite of everything at the prisons in Litoměřice, Ostrov, and finally Valdice in 1981–1985 designed to break his civic defiance, humiliate his human dignity, and destroy his moral integrity ('I get up in the morning among the devils / bit by bit I become the devil myself'²⁰, p. 475). The gesture permeates all of Jirous's prison poetry, and it flickers here and there throughout his letters of the period as well — albeit in terms oblique enough to evade the prison censors. The poetic way of conveying opinions, emotions, and positions — especially as it relates to his prison letters — represents a central pillar of Jirous's creative (and so also moral) integrity from his time of political imprisonment.

The topic of poetry — the act of writing, and what it means to be a poet — is therefore integral to Jirous's prison work, appearing from poem to poem in an array of interrelated contexts.²¹ The first can be seen in the relationship between poetry

scandals, and as one who restores order within the church. One of his main symbols is the white swan. Of course, the title of the collection may also be read in the sense of a 'swan song': the last great song of a poet who finds himself in the toughest prison of communist era Czechoslovakia.

16 Bedřich Fučík (1900–1984) was a literary critic, historian, editor, and translator, as well as the director of the Melantrich publishing house in the 1930s. He was arrested by the Communists in 1951. In 1952, he was sentenced to 15 years in prison in a show trial with the 'clerical-fascist branch of the Green International'. He was tried along with important representatives of economic life, Catholic intellectuals, and poets (Jan Zahradníček, Josef Knap, Zdeněk Kalista, Ladislav Kuncíř, etc.). He was released on the basis of an amnesty in 1960 and was rehabilitated in 1967. In the 1970s and 1980s he organised the collected works of Jakub Deml, Jan Zahradníček, and Jan Čep in samizdat format (with the help of Vladimír Binar and Mojmir Trávníček).

17 Julie Nováková (1920–1994) was Egon Bondy's life partner, starting in 1963.

18 Boris Savinkov (1879–1925) was a Russian writer, revolutionary-socialist, politician, and member of the Socialist Revolutionary Faction, assassinated in a Bolshevik prison. He wrote literature under the pseudonym V. Ropshin.

19 'Kdybych to nebral religiózně / bylo by mi zde věru hrozně'.

20 'Po ránu mezi ďáblu vstávám / pomalu sám se ďáblem stávám'.

21 Writings on the character of Jirous' prison poetry, on which these analyses are partly based, have been published in the catalogue for Jiří Sozanský's *Amnézie* project (cf. Wiendl 2019).



and the reality of prison life. This connection often arises in the juxtaposition of a line of poetry, serving as artistic imprint of a desire for human integrity, to an environment of extreme depersonalisation — the collision between artistic apperception and documentation of real situations or experiences ('So I will spend another year / under the harsh sky of Kartouzy / 04826 Jirous'²², p. 378). The poet finds himself caught up in a hellish reality illuminated here and there by the light of poetry, an almost baroque²³ dichotomy that demonstrates his contrasting range ('I see that I write about hell / dully, badly, and at great length / save me, saints, from my ambitions / at least I don't think I'm Dante'²⁴, p. 331). Vis-à-vis the situation and environment in which he finds himself as a prisoner (which he describes as 'Leviathan's mouth', p. 321), Jirous uses poetry and his own role as poet as a kind of screen or matrix, with which he is able to sort out the more brutal moments of everyday prison life and prevent them from penetrating too deeply — to keep them from contaminating the purity of the soul. It is a topic to which he frequently returns ('I am somehow no longer compelled / to insert monsters into literature / which later seem only to own me / I'd rather write about angels'²⁵, p. 390).

The gesture of writing is an explicit rejection of a reality with which nothing at all can be associated ('I have no desire or inspiration / to write about what I silently vomit', p. 394), and which is beyond human dignity ('The elegy is badly composed / when all around they're sucking dicks / and every rhyme is poor / for describing how you smoke a prick'²⁶, p. 335). Jirous thus identifies the theme of life — its quality and fullness, or emptiness and destruction — with the intensity (or superficiality) of writing poetry ('my poems are clichés / I got eczema on my gob'²⁷, p. 333); and he frequently relates this play of opposites to the 'I' as enunciating subject ('I, in the first person / I will bring fame to the monastery in Kartouzy'²⁸, p. 399). Poetry is thus a steadfast barometer of moral strength and conviction, a measure of the integrity of life under exceptional circumstances.

Jirous's effort to maintain his personal consistency and integrity is particularly pronounced at moments when he is pushed to extremes, especially on 20 May 1983, when StB agents tried (and failed) to recruit him as a collaborator, most likely by promising certain leniencies (his early release, a reduction of his sentence, the possibility of travel, etc.). For all the harsh realities of prison life, nothing seems to have pushed him as far as State Security when it plied him to sell his soul. As the poet-singer puts it so succinctly, 'The song I sing has one measure / never make a pact with

22 'Ještě rok tedy prožiji / pod krutým nebem Kartouz / 04826 Jirous'.

23 The baroque inspiration behind Jirous's writing has been pointed out by several authors: for instance, Bílek (1991) and Vajchr (2014).

24 'Vidím že píšu o pekle / matně špatně a rozvlekle / ctižádosti mě svatí chraňte / aspoň si nemyslím že jsem Dante'.

25 'Nějak už se mi kreatury / přičíí strkat do literatury / zdá se potom že jsem jejich / raději píšu o andělích'.

26 'Špatně se skládá elegie / když kolem cucají si pyje / a každý rým je na to chudý / popsat jak kouří se zde údy'.

27 'moje básně jsou samý klišé / na hubě vyrazil mi lišeř'.

28 'já formou ich / klášter proslavím v Kartouzích'.



the devil'²⁹ (p. 345); and as the poet-documentary filmmaker adds (and dates 20 May 1983): 'At night he dreams vivid dreams / tonight with Juliana / we talked about emigration / In the morning the StB agents came / and I almost gave them / my soul for cremation'³⁰, p. 342).

Another recurring motif in Jirous's prison poetry is his development of an internal dialogue that serves to strengthen his self-awareness as a full-fledged human being, and in this way survive the limbo of prison among serious criminals, murderers, and paedophiles. Dialogue, which is to say communication linking different times and circumstances, invoking the presence of diverse acquaintances living outside the prison space, is a feature typical of Jirous's prison poetry. From the depths of the Valdice Prison, it resonates with sensitivity, compassion, and concern for others (especially for his wife and daughters — see *Magor dětem* / 'Magor for children', mentioned above), a powerful gesture in both the artistic sense and that of the human perspective. (These aspects of Jirous's poetry have already been described in other studies; particularly inspiring are those by Vajchr [2014] and Hruška [2014]). It is precisely in this context that we may understand the dedications mentioned above, concerning the collection as a whole (Vratislav Brabenec) and its sections. The dialogic character of Jirous's poetry, its spirit of 'communicativeness', oscillates here between his often sarcastic observations and friendly jabs at friends and comrades from the underground ('I have a hard time writing without Brikcius / in fragments and incompletely'³¹, p. 441). The poetry of Egon Bondy³² is widely evoked — Jirous virtually raises him to the status of a guru ('Above two suns / rose the third / it wouldn't work without you, Bondy // Without you I would be without a poetics / sitting like an ox / gluing bags'³³, p. 511). Jirous inhabits his poetry with dozens of people from this circle, whom he addresses, calling to them and thinking about them. This is also true in the case of those dedications to friends who have died, and figures who the poet treats in a more straightforward manner. This is evident, for example, in the figures of Vladimír Holan and Bedřich Fučík, to whom Jirous dedicates the third section of the collection. Deeply affected by Fučík's death (2 July 1984), which he learned about only a few days later, he writes on 5 July 1984: 'Your soul returns to God / I'm tearing up over my dedication / so I'm sorry you didn't even / wait for my dedication'³⁴ (p. 420). A separate poem is also dedicated to the memory of fellow inmate Jan Zahradníček and the suffering of his family (p. 410).³⁵

29 'Píseň si zpívám má jeden takt / s ďáblem se nesmí sjednat pakt'.

30 'V noci se živé sny mu zdají / na dnešek s Julianou / mluvili jsme o emigraci / Ráno přijeli estébáci / a málem duši svou / dal jsem jim ke kremaci'.

31 'Těžko píšu bez Brikciuse / útržkovitě jen a kuse'.

32 Egon Bondy (1930–2007), born Zbyněk Fišer, was a poet, novelist, and philosopher, and a celebrated figure of the Czech cultural underground. His deliberate and long-term cooperation with the communist State Security became a point of conflict with many of his friends and colleagues.

33 Glueing bags was a common form of prison labour. 'Nad dvěma slunci / třetí vzešlo / bez tebe by to Bondy nešlo // Bez tebe bych byl bez poetiky / seděl jako vůl / lepil jen pytlíky'.

34 'Vaše duše se k Bohu vrací / já slzím nad svou dedikací / tak je mi líto že jste ani / nepočkal na mé věnování'.

35 Jan Zahradníček (1905–1960) was a poet, essayist, translator, and important figure in Czech Christian-inspired poetry. In a 1951 show trial he was sentenced to 13 years in pris-



In several places, Jirous emphasises the connection and affinity between his situation and that of other poets imprisoned or excommunicated in the past, often with a touch of sarcasm (his allusions to Dante, p. 331), or in order to express the horror and absurdity (in a literary context) of their shared predicament ('My dear! Scenery like in a Dickens novel, / Gogolesque mouths / is all I see around me'³⁶, p. 359), which is intended not to establish a literary heritage so much as a similar life situation, pointing with undisguised self-irony to the desperate isolation of the poet in Valdice ('Oh, I'm no Oscar Wilde / It is more the pitchfork not a pen that suits me // More like dead flies in an inkwell / these ballads of mine about prison'³⁷, p. 364; 'After years of nightmare, / the events of today were like a dream vision: / to Honza Staněk³⁸ from Žižkov / in the middle of the monastery courtyard / I'm telling my poems / This player

on; in 1956 his family inadvertently ate poisonous mushrooms, which his wife and son survived but his two daughters did not. Zahradníček was released so that he could attend their funeral, and was even promised that he would not have to return to complete his sentence. Two weeks later, however, he was called back to serve in Mírov and then in Leopoldov for another four years until he was given general amnesty in May 1960. He died a few months after his release from heart failure.

36 'Má milá! Scenérie jak od Dickense, / v ní tlamy jako z Gogola / vidím jen kolem dokola'.

37 'Ach nejsem Oscar Wilde / Víc než pero sluší mi vidle // Víc jak mrtvé mouchy v kalamári / balady moje o žaláři'.

38 Jan Staněk (1952) was Jirous's fellow prisoner at Valdice. We would draw attention to the remarkable interview of Staněk by the artist Jiří Sozanský (see Sozanský 2019, pp. 167–171). Staněk recalls, for example, the first time he met Jirous and the moments they spent together in Valdice: 'In 1981, he came to us at forty-seven. At Valdice we shared a single cell for about three years, I was also on the holes a lot. I worked together with Magor and later Gruntorád at a jewellery shop in the church. Magor was always making rings, that was his punishment. He made clasps, which was the least paid and most tedious work. He was diligent, he worked, he met the quotas. Occasionally, with someone who had not met the quota, he would trade his tea and finish making the rings. [...] We were friends, we got along well. I remember how he came to the cell with everything in a ball, with his things tied up in a blanket, and began to lay them out. He'd already been through Mírov, Stráž... He wrote poems in Valdice. But he never trusted me enough to show me what he was writing, that was clear. He didn't trust anyone in prison except Jirka Gruntorád. I read *Labutí písně* once I got out. When Magor and I were on a walk, he told me the poems, so I guess he must have trusted me. I really liked them. I was proud to go on walks with Jirous' ('V jedenaosmdesátým k nám přišel na sedmačtyřicítku. Seděli jsme ve Valdicích na jedný cele asi tři roky, já byl tedy taky hodně na dírách. S Magorem a potom i s Gruntorádem jsme pracovali v kostele na bižuterce. Magor byl pořád na kroužkách, tím ho trestali. Dělal zapínátka, což byla nejmiň placená, nejprotivnější práce. Byl pilnej, makal, plnil normu. Občas s někým, kdo neměl splněno, vyměnil svůj čaj za jeho plato kroužků. [...] Byli jsme kamarádi, padli jsme si do oka. Pamatuji si, jak přišel s koulí do cely, s věcmi svázanými v dece, a začal si je rovnat na místo. Měl už za sebou Mírov, Stráž... Ve Valdicích psal básničky. Nikdy mi ovšem natolik nedůvěřoval, aby mi ukázal moták, to je jasný. Ve vězení nevěřil nikomu, akorát Jirkovi Gruntorádovi. *Labutí písně* jsem si přečetl až venku. Když jsme byli s Magorem na vycházce, ty básně mi vyprávěl, takže mi přece jen musel věřit. Hodně mě to bavilo. Byl jsem pyšnej, že chodím na vycházky s Jirousem'); Sozanský 2019, s. 167.



and thief listens to me / I feel like Mandelstam'³⁹, p. 373). As we mentioned earlier, Jirous refers to the fate of Savinkov, the Russian revolutionary and poet, in his dedication of the last section of the collection.

The central and indispensable aspect of Jirous's work we have been considering so far is his approach to poetry as a self-identifying gesture that, under extraordinary circumstances, brings into close proximity life and the creative act. It is naturally this same gesture that determines the form of the poems, which we might describe as the objectification of the poetic *modus vivendi* intensified by the conditions of imprisonment. More specifically, Jirous's work here presents a poetic treatment of lived reality that makes sparing and concise use of expressive techniques: a radical gesture that is part caress and part punch in the face, oscillating between a tenderness that borders on sentimentality and a coarseness that borders on vulgarity — indeed, that frequently crosses the line. Each stanza is made up of a small number of eight- or nine-syllable dactylic and trochaic lines conveying simple metaphorical devices, usually without punctuation (with the exception of abundant question marks and exclamation points, representing the extreme poles of an excited communication with oneself and the environment). There is also a marked multilingualism in Jirous's prison poems that should not be overlooked — words in Latin, English, German —, integrated into the Czech by way of sound similarities, verse variants, and rhymes. They thus create riddles, allusions, and ciphers, referring to intimate aspects of private life, or else to suprapersonal religious ties. The rhymes are, almost without exception, 'simple', but they bring together — in a gesture that is often the semantic point of the whole poem — two very disparate realities. Each rhyme thus takes on new meaning, capturing the ambivalent feeling of life in prison brought to its logical conclusion *ad absurdum* ('With disgust interwoven with pleasure'⁴⁰). We are drawn in empathy towards the mind of a poet that, in the midst of the endless bullying and prison drills, cannot stop searching for the best rhyme — the magic *shem* that activates the golem⁴¹, the spark of life. Jirous gleefully and masterfully laces his verses with internal and sight rhymes: 'Wilde', for instance, with *vidle*, meaning 'pitchfork' (p. 364). This gesture, as Justin Quinn argues so succinctly, 'links the specificity of names with the specificity of the rhymes, thus doubling the grounding of his poems in Czech' (Quinn 2014, p. 53). Perhaps this is why rhyme is considered to be one of the most complicated structural elements of Jirous's poetry — why it is so difficult to translate his work into other languages (cf. Baugh 2014). We might also point out, conversely, that Jirous's

39 'Po letech jenom noční můra, / vidina snová dnešní děj; / Honzovi Staňkovi ze Žižkova / uprostřed klášterního dvora / své básně povídám / Naslouchá mi ten hráč a zloděj / já cítím se jak Mandelštam'.

40 'S radostí v jedno spleten hnus'.

41 [According to popular medieval Jewish belief, the 'shem' (*šém* in Czech) was a word written on a scrap of paper that could be placed inside (or otherwise attached to) a wooden or clay figure to bring it to life. See, for instance, Elizabeth R. Baer, *The Golem Redux: From Prague to Post-Holocaust Fiction* (Wayne State University Press, Detroit 2012), pp. 34–35. It is Jirous himself who suggests the shem as an analogy for poetic inspiration (cited in the following).]



use of rhyme has a deceptively elementary character. If his language seems at times to be exceedingly simple, unassuming, or playful, then it is all the more alarming, all the more memorable, in light of the harsh realities it conveys. The point is to capture reality as directly as possible, without too much finesse — without artistic impulses, and therefore life itself, giving in to mere fancifulness. We see this, for example, in his response to Bondy's tentative application of a concept in the context of underground debates: 'Why do you tell him / the ontological field, man? / So befuddled by the bottle / you're afraid to say Yahweh?'⁴² (p. 496; cf. Putna 2021, p. 15–16).

The imprisoned poet's relationship to faith represents another central aspect of *Magorovy labutí písně* ('If I did not take it religiously / I might really be miserable here'⁴³, p. 325). If he asks in fear and trembling for the poetic word, that is because it is the most precious thing that still remains to him, the only thing that — held in his mind and his memory — cannot be stolen or confiscated ('I am meek, I overcome my fear / today I pray to You / to place in my mouth the *shem* of the poem'⁴⁴, p. 317). The poetic word is often associated with finding the right expression for effective prayer, and while he is often rather frank in his search for the appropriate depth of expression, he is never blasphemous ('I don't know if I can't pray / whether I'm allowed to compose prayers / who cares what Rome thinks / I'm talking to the Virgin Mary'⁴⁵, p. 425). The framework of poetic space often coincides with that of religion, especially when the poet thinks back on friends who have died while he was in prison and funerals he could not attend: Holan's, for instance (p. 493), and those of Bedřich Fučík and Bohuslav Reynek ('The funeral was for Mr. Reynek / Poets with candles / went to give their gifts / [...] / With a candle behind the altar / walked Jiří Kolář / and Bedřich Fučík / was standing somewhere'⁴⁶, p. 509). The poetic word for which he beseeches God, and for which he withstands severe authorial self-criticism, then forms the basis for a plea to God: for Milada Horáková and Závěš Kalandra, for instance, executed by the communist regime ('I ask Jesus to receive in heaven / the martyr Závěš / Into His arms, I pray, / He take the martyr Milada', p. 422). Jirous makes similar prayers for his loved ones, as also for his own soul — an age-old struggle, admittedly, that surely extends beyond the prison walls of the third correctional group.

In an effort to identify the unifying elements and unfolding structure of Jirous's *Magorovy labutí písně*, a collection of prison poems made up of ideas and memories that seem rather disparate — perhaps, at first glance, even incidental —, we might consider a fundamental question that has to do with the very definition of prison poetry (and then consider a possible answer). It is a question first raised by Jiří

42 'Pročpak mu říkáš vole / ontologické pole? / Tolik jsi zblbnul z lahve / že se bojíš říct Jahve?'

43 'Kdybych to nebral religiózně / bylo by mi zde věru hrozně.'

44 'Pokorný jsem přemáhám strach / dnes budu Tě prosit v modlitbách / abys mi aspoň po tom všem / položil do úst k básním šém.'

45 'Tak nevím když modlit se neumím / jestli modlitby skládat smím / nedbaje co si myslí Řím / k Panence Marii hovořím.'

46 'Funus byl pana Reynka / Básníci se svíce / chodili na ořeru / [...] / Se svíce za oltář / šel Jiří Kolář / Někde tam stál / i Bedřich Fučík.'



Trávníček in the mid-1990s with regard to this same collection: to what extent and in what way does the aesthetic effect of prison poetry (and not only by Jirous) deepen our awareness of the place and destiny of the poet who composes it? To what extent are the images this kind of poetry conveys artistically intensified by the reader's awareness of the fate of the poet-prisoner. Even more precisely, as Trávníček puts it: 'What do we actually read in them? Poetry or documentation? [...] Are we not rather looking beyond the boundaries of the text in order to make sense of it, with considerable regard for the author's *mukl* fate?'⁴⁷ (Trávníček 1996, p. 185). However much the present introductory (and rather functional) outline may lead to such conclusions, we should remember that *the self-identification of the poet as a poet*, his thematisation of himself as a creator of verse under extraordinary circumstances, is the most essential. Like all poetry, prison poetry is a category unto itself: a documentation and pure manifestation of the word at its original inception. It is both an act of depersonalisation and a self-defining confession. Like all art, it has its peaks and plateaus, its strong and weak moments. However, one of the most essential and distinguishing aesthetic criteria of prison poetry as a *sui generis* literary form can be defined in relation to its characteristic mechanisms of self-identification. We must recall the specific practices involved in the production of prison poetry: lines are memorised (by their author or by fellow prisoners); they are jotted down from time to time on scraps of paper — after dinner, under the pillow, or in the most profane places; and finally, conspiratorially, they are carried out into the civilian world. Even when the author considers himself not only as a prisoner but as a poet — that is, when his purpose in writing goes beyond that of mental relaxation (though this too belongs to the process of creation) — these conditions shape the act of self-identification to produce uniquely complex features. The poet must actively defy the pressure of the moment, the randomness of the here-and-now, when he strives to make a coherent artistic statement about his situation. In this way, he is compelled to draw on the broader and suprapersonal context: the cultural field and spiritual domain, for example: 'Oh, I'm no Oscar Wilde / It is more the pitchfork not a pen that suits me // More like a dead fly in an inkwell / these ballads of mine about prison'⁴⁸ (p. 364). In this excerpt, for example, we might set aside such aspects as the remarkable rhyming pairs, and the self-irony of the poet conveyed by the Wilde allusion. What interests us rather is the poet's express commitment to the continuous creation of poetry on a related theme, namely that of prison poetry itself, the 'ballad of the dungeon'. What interests us moreover is a form of prison poetry which, from the outset and in authentic connection to a specific time and place, rises to the level of a broader, timeless, and more spatially expansive awareness of life, precisely through the poet's conscious use of specific compositional techniques and other poetic means. It is thus a form of literary expression that directly confronts the stereotypes of prison time and spatial confinement by consciously crossing into a diverse variety of temporal planes, where the poet is open to changes in the surrounding world beyond the prison walls, intensi-

47 'Co v nich vlastně čteme? Poezii, nebo dokument? [...] nepomáháme si ke smyslu mimo hranice textu a s přílišným ohledem na autorův muklovský úděl?'

48 'Ach nejsem Oscar Wilde / Víc než pero sluší mi vidle // Víc jak mrtvé mouchy v kalamáři / balady moje o žaláři.'

fied by its juxtaposition to the daily life of the prisoner from which these dimensions have been brutally stripped. Finally, we are interested in applying this principle to the complexity of more expansive literary projects and frameworks, often developed over many years: *Dům Strach* ('The house of Fear'; 1951–1955/1981), for example, and other works originally written by Jan Zahradníček in the 1950s; the extensive works by poet, playwright, and political prisoner Václav Renč, especially *Popelka Nazaretská* ('Cinderella of Nazareth'; 1969); and *Sonety* ('Sonnets'; 1950–1962/1993), by the economist and writer Jiří Hejda. This poetry was created with a single purpose: to define oneself against the restrictive environment of the cell and prison life by means of a complex gesture unified by a range of interrelated poetic devices: aural (sound and metre), figural, metaphorical, compositional, stylistic, etc. For those who made use of this gesture in their writing and for their fellow prisoners — i.e. the *muklové*, or 'men destined for liquidation' — it provided a means of survival, not only in the physical sense, but above all spiritually, as integral, unbroken personalities. It is above all with relation to such works that we can best understand Jirous's *Magorovy labutí písně*.



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