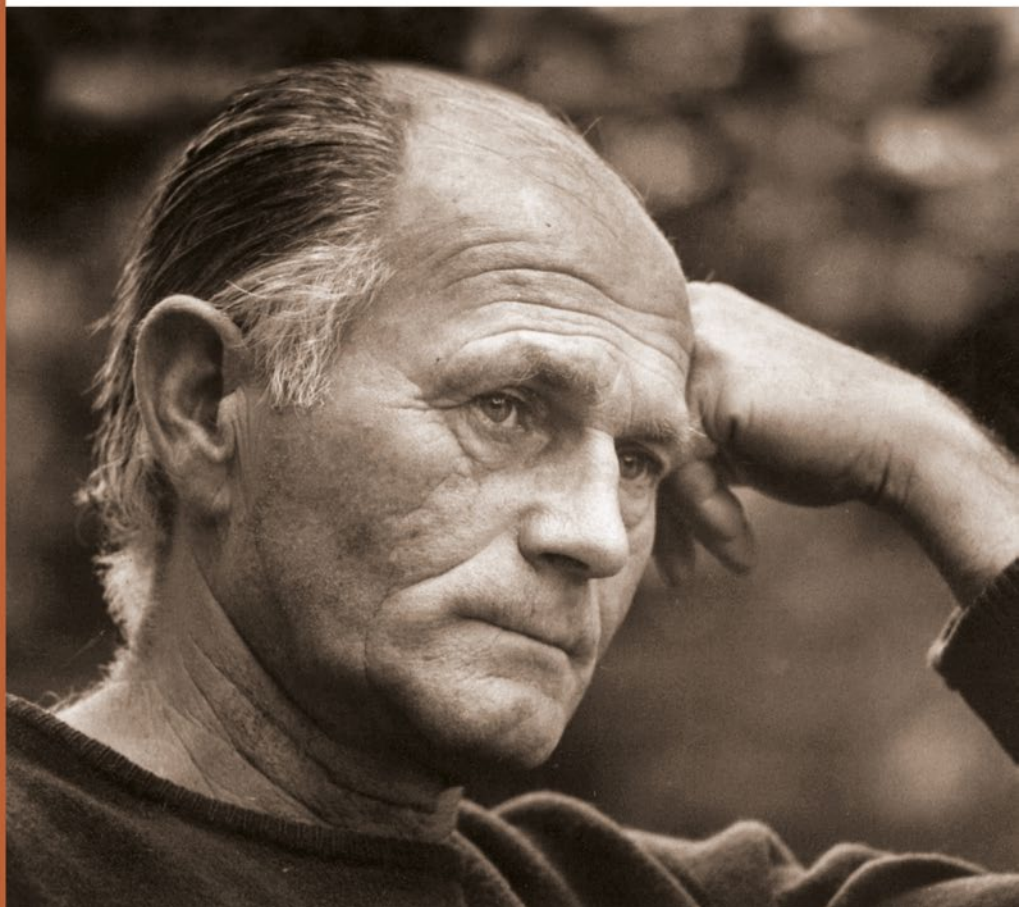
Bohumil Hrabal

A Full-length Portrait

Jiří Pelán



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(I)

When Bohumil Hrabal's *Poupata* (Flower Buds) appeared in 1970, the few lucky souls who managed to lay hands on copies that had escaped the shredder and who had missed the previously published extracts from the long narrative poem *Bambino di Praga*, discovered to their surprise that Hrabal, a remarkable story-teller, had started out as a poet, that a writer, whose prose was typified by its flawless osmosis with what was most coarse-grained, venomous and ruthless about everyday life, had toyed, as he embarked on his writing career, with slightly off-beat semantic configurations to create some ornately impressionistic "Art nouveau tinkerings in verse".[1]

Today, Hrabal's oeuvre having been brought to a definitive conclusion, it would obviously be a grave error to see in this early verse (first assembled as a whole in its original form in the volume *Básnění* [Versifying] as part of the 1992 Collected Works edition, that is, *SSBH* in the Literature) mere juvenile experiments that at best document an adolescent yen to write and are touching testimony to their author's misguidedly high rating of his own talent. These lyrical beginnings are in fact extraordinarily important to any understanding of Hrabal's poetics – and his "literary destiny" generally; and given that, in *Flower Buds*, Hrabal went back to them later, as a writer who had already made a name for himself (though with numerous other texts still hidden away in old folders and bottom drawers), he was undoubtedly aware of their importance himself.

Even at this early stage, what we are seeing is a need – if in an adolescent, mildly graphomanic form – to write out of his system everything that was his life at the time, to put into words all "the dreaming, the platonic love-making, the student boozing, and the endless walks in shades of pink and gold".[2] From the very start of his career, writing was more important to Hrabal than living: the poet and translator Kamil Bednář and the critic, art theorist and

1) Bohumil Hrabal: 'Doslov' [Afterword] to *Poupata: Křehké a rabiátské texty z let 1938–1952* [Flower buds: Delicate and disorderly texts from the period 1938–1952], Prague: Mladá fronta, 1970, p. 237. Also as: *Kdo jsem*, in the Collected Works edition (hereafter abbreviated to *SSBH* and volume no., see Literature herein, p. 91), Vol. 12, p. 303.
2) Ibid.

translator Karel Teige did try to put him off writing, but he never stopped, writing on and on, as if racing against time. If Pirandello's "la vita o si vive o si scrive" is broadly true, it applies doubly to this early Hrabal.

Hrabal's life was absorbed to the last drop by his literature; by nature he was timid, and, constantly pursued by his "total fears",[3] the ground beneath his feet never firm, he had to force himself into contact with life by prescribing "artificial destinies" to himself and casting himself in roles (of, say, a labourer or insurance agent) that were not even remotely cut to the measure of his disposition. His position in life was that of an observer and – as he reiterated constantly – a *recorder*: throughout, his task was to record images from life, whether they sprang up before his gaze or rose out of stories told by others. He "wrote" those moments with the same intensity with which others lived them; and the moment he felt that he had "recorded" everything, he lost interest in living.

This obsession, this need, to make every transient image gleam with a new presence, is, by its nature, lyrical. Hrabal had not been wrong about his particular talent: if, following his juvenile overture, he turned to prose, we are entitled to believe that this switch, too, was a considered decision, one of the imposed "artificial destinies" that were to bring him closer to a life in anarchy. But then his prose never did displace this lyrical foundation: on the contrary, the horizontal of the narrative segments in his short stories is constantly intersected by the vertical of lyrical expression. Later developments merely confirmed that, for him, the lyrical and narrative modes were freely interchangeable. It is no accident that during his phase of "total realism", when he produced such a superlative narrative text as *Jarmilka*, he also wrote – now in the same total-realist diction – two spectacular poems, *Krásná Poldi* (Poldi the Beautiful Steelworks) and *Bambino di Praga*. And a particularly eloquent example of the unity between the two poles in Hrabal's work is the fact that the first version of *Příliš hlučná samota* (Too Loud a Solitude), the acme of his work in the 1980s, was also written in verse.

As with all juvenilia, Hrabal's early poems were in search of models, paradigms, that would help his particular sensibility to speak

3) A key idea that will peak as the title of one of Hrabal's late prose pieces. [DS]

out and put his own sensory experiences in some kind of order. He was to recall later, on numerous occasions, how, back then, he had read everything that he could lay his hands on. While it may be banal to say that the emancipation of any author's voice comes about against the backdrop of literature that has gone before, it is no less true that this dialogue with the polyphony of literary texts unfolds in manners unique to each and every author. In Hrabal's case, it has to be stressed, this period of intense dialogue with existing literature overlapped almost entirely with the first period of his output (from the lyrical verse of the 1940s to the prose of the 1950s); back then he was in permanent "communication with literature",[4] and it was then that he discovered all the writers that he would later acknowledge time and time again: Ungaretti, Céline, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Kafka, Chekhov, Babel, Faulkner and, above all, his Czech forerunners Jaroslav Hašek, Ladislav Klíma and Jakub Deml. Later on, he did very little reading: he gave his pantheon its final form at quite an early stage, and although he never stopped dropping these names, with fervour and respect, to the very last, this was more born of a disciple's gratitude than it constituted a body of developing, constantly updated, attitudes. The moment Hrabal found his own poetics he patently lost all interest in reading as a corrective to the direction in which he was going: he had not the slightest intention of keeping pace with the literary trends of the day, he lacked any kind of competitive instinct and was not interested in being "up-to-date", and nothing was more alien to him than strategic musings on the current state of the book market (unlike many others setting out on a writing career in the 1960s). Accordingly, intertextuality researches never arrive at a more than a very limited body of palimpsests. And therein probably lies one reason for the surprising fact that, though whole decades could pass between the writing of so many of Hrabal's works and their appearance in print, this has never been a particular obstacle to their reception.

Hrabal's persistent references to his great icons is indicative of something at least for the first phase of his career. He tells us himself of the extraordinary importance to his poetic beginnings of Ungaretti (more precisely the Ungaretti of *Il porto sepolto* [The

4) *SSBH*, Vol. 17, p. 308.

buried port, 1916], Czech translation by Zdeněk Kalista, 1934, that is, the Ungaretti associated with pre-war avant-garde Modernism), and of Czech Poetism and Surrealism.

Ungaretti's being named in the role of Hrabal's teacher has generally been rather perplexing: the lyrical concentration of Ungaretti's texts has been seen as the complete antithesis of the somewhat disorderly rambling of Hrabal's works in prose, encircling reality *ad infinitum* with ever new imagery. However, if we can dismiss such comparing and contrasting as merely superficial, the trigger effect of Ungaretti's verse is actually quite conclusive:[5] while in Hrabal's early poems we may find no quotations from or allusions to *Il porto sepolto*, many of them genuinely come close to the Ungarettian verse of hints and pauses that apprehends the world of objects in simultaneous perceptions expressed in sober language:

I want to go to sleep. But see!
A cart flows silently down the sliced-open street
like a barge along a navigation
and the horses,
two brown blots,
row to the rhythm of their nodding necks,
while the counterpoint
of a shower of sobbing drums away from boredom.[6]

Hrabal's verse, too, like Ungaretti's, aspires at this stage to be a "concentrated footprint of emotional life" and "beautiful biography". Hrabal's verse, too, seeks to speak in "essential" metaphors, and, above all, Hrabal's verse, too, desires to go beyond being mere ornament, to touch the existential horizon and to speak of those rare moments when the individual dissolves into the whole, becoming one "docile thread of the universe":

A slumbering village
was smouldering

5) For another closely argued view of the Hrabal-Ungaretti connection see David Chirico: 'Towards a Typology of Hrabal's Intertextuality: Bohumil Hrabal and Giuseppe Ungaretti', in Short: *Bohumil Hrabal*, pp. 11–33.
6) *Město v dešti* (The City in the Rain), in *SSBH*, Vol. 1, p. 85 (trans. DS).

with happiness,
the monotonous barking of dogs counted
the hours
and a chugging train shattered
the fragrant dark,
galloping somewhere across the land like
a copper stallion.
Bewitched, still in the small hours I was
sipping
from the goblet of night until I had left
at the bottom
only
dew-decked stars.[7]

Not for nothing have we placed such emphasis here on the Ungarettian roots of Hrabal's juvenile verse: the main reason is that many shades of inspiration from that source later crop up as key components of Hrabal's mature prose. One of his guiding principles will continue to be the search for "essential images", and one fundamental reason for him to write will always be the urge to record sudden, intuitive perceptions of a vital depth and fullness (a meaning that can also be attached to his familiar metaphor of the *perlička na dně* – variously translated as 'a/the [little] pearl on *or* at the bottom' [of a tale]).[8]

From this perspective it can also be appreciated why Hrabal, in a single breath, spoke not just of the lesson of Ungaretti, but also of that of Poetism and Surrealism (he actually said that he hoped to initiate – in collaboration with his friend Karel Marysko – a trend to be called "Neopoetism"). For Poetism, which emerged at the very start of the 1920s as a product of the Czech adoption of European avant-garde verse (notably the Cubist patterns of associative combination initiated by Apollinaire's *Zone* [1912]), and the programme of which was given concrete form by nearly two dozen poets, prose-writers, dramatists and artists (Karel Teige, Vítězslav

7) *Scherzo*, in *SSBH*, Vol. 1, p. 136 (trans. DS).

8) The short-story collection *Perlička na dně* remains untranslated into English. A film version exists whose traditional English title is *Pearls of the Deep* (1965), which translation will be kept in later references to the book. [DS]

Nezval, Jaroslav Seifert, Konstantin Biebl, Vladislav Vančura, Adolf Hoffmeister among others), sought above all else to magic life itself into words: life as an unpredictable adventure, life in its simultaneous manifestations – beyond the hierarchy of high and low, life as data presented directly to the senses, and life in its lyrical immediacy. The instrument of this two-way permeation of life and poetry, the principle of association, an instrument common to Poetism and Surrealism, again points to the core method that Hrabal applies to his prose: the multidimensional evocation of reality by means of juxtaposed images. The poetics of both Cubism (Reverdy) and Surrealism (Breton) recommended bringing closer together the most mutually distant realities (Reverdy: "The more distant and clear-cut the relations between two realities that have been drawn together, the more powerful will an image be and the greater its emotive force and poetic reality."[9]), and Hrabal the prose-writer, speaking in one Babelesque breath of "a diamond and gonorrhoea",[10] was unshakeably steadfast in his application of the principle.

For its part, Hrabal's attitude to Surrealism is rather complex. It is broadly the case that the prose Hrabal – like so many modern European prose-writers – happily exploits the prodigious expansion of the space made available to the imagination by the Surrealist experience. In particular his tendency to transform the real through hyperbole is indubitably the fruit of this Surrealist dauntlessness. Yet Hrabal's relation to Surrealism is in no way circumscribed by this vague legacy. He was obviously also fascinated by the Surrealist practice of *écriture automatique*; and while this fascination is projected in his early verse with moderation, it is much more in evidence – in a modified form – in his only slightly later interest in the unregulated stream of narration based on "oral gesture", and then again in the 1970s, after he has given up on his compositional method of ex post collage, favouring instead writing "alla prima". To this extent, then, Hrabal's recurrently vaunted attachment to

9) Pierre Reverdy, *Le gant de crin* (1927), in: Idem, *Oeuvres complètes* II, ed. Étienne-Alain Hubert, Paris: Flammarion, 2010, p. 555: "Plus les rapports des deux réalités rapprochées seront lointains et justes, plus l'image sera forte, plus elle aura de puissance émotive et de réalité poétique."

10) See, for example, 'Interview na hrázi věčnosti' (An interview on the dike of eternity), in *Domácí úkoly* (*SSBH*, Vol. 15), p. 269.

Surrealism is more to do with method than content. There is, for example, one disparity in the fact that Hrabal's "flow" method, clearly an echo of Surrealist automatism, is far from conceding a core role to the unconscious (the dream records of 1944 are a mere episode) and is not a pathway to oneiric alternative worlds; on the contrary, it remains – more in line with the Cubist tradition – totally tied to the crudest of reality and its supply of the verbal "ready made". This typical contradiction need not, however, be made too much of, since the way Czech Surrealism evolved did rather blunt it: there is no overlooking the fact that in the 1940s and 1950s the second wave of Czech Surrealism (Zbyněk Havlíček, Karel Hynek, Oldřich Wenzl) admitted solid chunks of the specific (including politically anchored) reality into the imaginative space while also intellectualising its methods (notably through humour, sarcasm and irony).

It has often been averred that the most remarkable period in Hrabal's development was the 1950s. And yet this time of workshop trials remained long hidden from view. Hrabal made his debut in 1956 with *Hovory lidí* (Things People Say, a bibliophile edition of 250 copies), coming to the notice of a wider public only in 1963, by then as a seasoned author with a distinctive style, through the collection *Pearls of the Deep*.[11] The first insight into the work that pre-dated these publications came with his personal anthology *Flower Buds* (1970), while a broader view can be gleaned from two volumes of his Collected Works: Vol. 2, *Židovský svícen* (Menorah, 1991) and Vol. 3, *Jarmilka* ([a girl's name], 1992).

The 1948 Communist coup, which cast Czechoslovakia out of its short-lived and shaky phase of post-war democracy right into an era that was the acme of Stalinism, meant a second break in the evolution of Czech culture (the first had been occasioned by Nazi occupation), and an extraordinarily brutal one at that. Many major writers, such as Egon Hostovský, Jan Čep, Milada Součková and Ivan Blatný, emigrated, some forty writers, including Jan Zahradníček, Zdeněk Rotrekl, Zdeněk Kalista, Josef Palivec, Jiří Mucha and Josef Knap, disappeared for many years into the country's jails, while Záviš Kalandra was executed. Avant-garde modernism was rejected; its erstwhile representatives, all of them left-leaning, fell prey to persecution (Teige, Biebl), opted unwillingly for silence (Seifert), or adapted their poetics to order (Nezval). Most literary journals were extinguished, foreign literature was prevented from entering the country, mountains of recent publications were turned into waste paper and thousands of titles were removed from libraries. The publishing plans of the newly nationalised houses were trimmed radically back to a narrow "cultural legacy" (what were called "progressive" classics) to serve as the backdrop against which a new literature might emerge, offering a positive and optimistic image of the path newly taken towards "bright tomorrows". The total devaluation of aesthetic criteria meant that second- and third-rate authors donned the mantle of representing Czech literature.

11) See note 8. [DS]

All connection with post-war developments in the West was not totally eliminated. In fact, even the officially sanctioned output – prose lauding partisans, collectivisation and the construction of socialism and verse panegyrics on the new idols and ideals (from the pens of such as Jan Drda, Václav Řezáč, Bohumil Říha, Pavel Kohout or Milan Kundera), all manufactured in line with instructions laid down by Andrei Aleksandrovich Zhdanov – ran largely in parallel to the general post-war revaluation of politically or ethically engaged literature, as represented by, for example, the Sartre-esque novel or Italian Neorealism. In the Czech context, however, the specific feature of this trend was that the texts published were typically highly schematic ideologically and went for a long time without any polemical counterpoint, such as the western literary context soon had in Beckett's immoralism, Robbe-Grillet's apathetic stock-taking of physical objects or mental acts, Queneau's non-mimetic constructions or Calvino's use of allegory. Such correctives only started to pass into Czech culture with the gradual de-Stalinisation of cultural politics, and the great depth of the crisis that had to be gradually overcome was tempered, from the later 1950s onwards, by some relaxation of the previously severe publishing plans, including the role that came to be played, as alternatives to Socialist Realism, by certain *engagé* texts of western provenance, for example, writings by Alberto Moravia, Pier Paolo Pasolini or Italo Calvino.

If we confine our considerations to published texts only, the impression is left that Czech culture was quite untouched by the explosion of creative energies, stalled by the war, which made themselves felt during the 1950s in other European literatures and gave rise to numerous innovations in both prose and verse while quickly making earlier, highly conservative engagé literature look quite antiquated. This view is necessarily false, since we can only form a true image of 1950s literary output in Czech by bringing in not only the – often fairly dull – work produced in exile, but, and above all, the vast body of writings engendered either within closed circles of friends or in total isolation, and with no hope of their ever being published.

Such writings, including many by Hrabal, never actually lost contact with what was going on throughout European post-war literature, and since their authors were aware that publication was

impossible, they were, paradoxically, amazingly liberated and full of adventurous explorations. They eventually began to reach a wider public during the 1960s, and a major part of the remarkable creativity of the time is attributable precisely to these delayed publications. For a complete and reliable mapping of the subterranean continent created in the 1950s, so heterogeneous as to the subjects and means of expression employed back then, we had to wait until the 1990s and the new situation in the politics of culture that arose after the fall of Communism. Thus, viewed in retrospect, Hrabal's samizdat production of the 1950s proves to be among the most important items that had been passed by. *En passant*, let us also mention here such other crucial items as, among others, the hermetic lyrical and existentialist narrative verse of Vladimír Holan, the civilisation poetry of Jiří Kolář, inspired by Sandburg and Lee Masters, the spiritual meditations of Jan Zahradníček, the verse of Bohuslav Reynek, imbued with a Franciscan humility, the rudimentary autobiographical fragments of Jan Hanč, the introspective probing of Jiřina Hauková, the concrete surrealism of Zbyněk Havlíček and the ironic surrealism of Karel Hynek, the mystical spirituality of Jan Kameník, the brutish naïvisme of Egon Bondy, the uniquely humour-infused "embarrassing poetry" of Ivo Vodseďálek and the jazz prose of Josef Škvorecký.

It was natural that Hrabal, who even in his juvenile lyrical verse aspired to testify to life's authenticity (and at the end of his life he declared that a writer's basic disposition is "amazement at the visible world"[12]), could not accept the schematic parameters laid down by the Stalinist culture policy in force at the time. But then he did not have the slightest reason to: for him, writing was always an elemental, inner need, a thoroughly personal task bordering on egotism; throughout the 1940s and 1950s he wrote without regard to any readership. Writing the foreword to *Utrpení starého Werthera* (The Sorrows of Old Werther, 1981) in an evocation of those times, he said: "It was never me anywhere, it was all the others, things beyond me, I saw myself as no more than a pocket mirror…".[13] And later still, as he took stock, he would keep repeating that writing

12) *Beseda v restauraci Hájenka* (A conversazione in the Hájenka restaurant), in *SSBH*, Vol. 17, pp. 268–300 (268).
13) *SSBH*, Vol. 2, p. 239.

for him had never been anything other than "an exchange of love letters" with the world,[14] a lovelorn gaze fixed on "nature", "the human milieu", "all those veins and strata of human life",[15] and "a running commentary on reality, sort of progressing from minute to minute, day to day".[16]

As a "recorder" – never a "writer" – he was basically untouched by the imperatives of the cultural ideology of the age. True, by the end of the 1940s his writing, which had begun in a spirit of expressionism, was increasingly consciously borne along by the idea of mimesis; however, this mimesis was equally *désengagé* and free from all pragmatic considerations. What interested him were not ideological disputes over the complexion of literature, but Aristotelian "nature". To the extent that the Hrabal of the early 1950s turned instinctively to where this "nature" manifested itself in elementary, plebeian, forms, this did not constitute a turning away *from* literature: on the contrary, this was for him the only thinkable route *to* literature. This was the road to "total realism" (the term he was to borrow later from his friend Egon Bondy), a non-ideological, apolitical, non-didactic realism, in a sense even an amoral realism. Paradoxically, of course, this radically apolitical stance made Hrabal the most authentic chronicler of the 1950s (and obviously not just of that decade) and gave his texts *in retrospect* an unmistakably political dimension.

Hrabal himself, writing an afterword to *Flower Buds* in the late 1970s, was surprised at the instinctive consequentiality of the choices he had made:

> I even invented a theory to account for me, the theory of "artificial destiny", sticking my own self somewhere I never wanted to be. I, shy little me, used to hawk life insurance, was an assistant in a pharmacy, had a job at a steelworks, but always I kept on writing. The bleak, coarse side of reality came whooshing towards me, blinding me like a blizzard. And I, instead of dreaming and reflecting, I took a great liking to reality just as it was.[17]

14) *Beseda*, p. 273.
15) Ibid.
16) Ibid., p. 270.
17) *Poupata*, p. 237. Also in *SSBH*, Vol. 12, pp. 303–304.

Hrabal repeated the choice made by his beloved Isaak Babel, a timid intellectual who, in search of reality, had cast himself into the brutal turmoil of civil war; the similarities between their poetics is entirely due to that gesture. Having spent the last years of the war as a train dispatcher at Kostomlaty (thereafter completing his legal studies to graduate in 1946), he had then been an insurance agent for the *Starobní a invalidní živnostenský fond* (Tradesmen's Old-age and Invalidity Fund, 1945–47), a rep for a wholesale company (1947–48), a volunteer at the Kladno iron and steel works (1949–53), an employee of the state enterprise in charge of recycling (1954–59) and a stagehand at one of the Prague theatres (1959–61). Each of these environments provided Hrabal with an endless stock of material, observed and recorded by his "eidetic memory", whether that material was the product of his own postmortemising or had been provided by the "things people say". The key problem of his work at this time was how to apprehend and organise the material, how to furnish this raw content with a literary syntax. The struggle to find a personal poetics had been particularly intense back in the early 1950s (the core years were actually 1949–52), but by the time the struggle was over all the constituents of his poetics were firmly in place.

The main observable tendency during this period is Hrabal's quest for some balance between the lyrical basis of his vision (enchantment, amazement, an indestructible longing for Plato's "begetting in the beautiful") and the brutality of the prose of life that each new milieu afforded him. The job had to be tackled repeatedly, and the different solutions constituted the alternative styles that would, in most cases, resurface later on in Hrabal's career as a writer.

Lyrical enthusiasm is still the driving force of the collection *Židovský svícen* (Menorah, typescript of 1949), which contains seven shorter stories and the longer "existential short-story" 'Kain' (Cain, on which more anon). However, the raw material for these stories already consists largely of hyperbolised narrative segments that draw on specific environments (a railway station, a brewery) and on "things people say", here the discourse of two cynical insurance agents who blithely have a dying man sign a contract. This time, the lyrical tension is regulated consistently by a grammatical operation: all these shorter texts are presented in the second-person plural (i.e. the 'you' form). The subjective, lyrical *Ich* is concealed behind the "you" that belongs formally to the objective, storybook universe that is being evoked. In fact, however, this "you" is a point of intersection from which one can equally well set off in pursuit of the story being told or of its lyrical transformation, it being the wellspring as much of narrative distance as of lyrical empathy.

Thus, for example: one of the best pieces in the collection is the short story 'Dům, který se osvěžoval bleskem' (The House that was Refreshed by Lightning), of which the narrative bare bones are this: a stationmaster's wife falls pregnant just as she is leaning out of the window, waving to her departing mother, her husband having jumped her from behind without warning; the little girl born of this momentary union listens, enchanted, to her father's descriptions of the universe; in time the stationmaster goes mad, rubberstamps his own entire body and commits suicide; his wife lives out the rest of her life in an asylum. The story is also undoubtedly remarkable for its existentialist "gory-story" dimension, so typical of the later Hrabal – with eros and thanatos as the fateful bounds of human freedom; however, we only mention that here in order to illustrate

how the grammatical "you" opens up, above the narrative segments, a space for breathtaking lyrical elegy:

> Surely you can remember that afternoon, station master! That glorious afternoon that everyone for miles around remembers. It's still not coming back. You're too remote from us, but maybe you'll remember how you uncovered the Burdensome Death file as if you knew where it sprang from. You came to the very jaws of your doom (or salvation?)! And you sucked that curse up into the tiniest of your blood vessels. Put better: you set your imprint against the matrix! You matched your teacher, your master! You found your God! Your everything! And having locked yourself in your office, you stripped naked and stamped your body all over with all the rubber stamps you used to use. In all the inks, so after half an hour's meticulous endeavour you looked like a gigantic parrot! For your rear you contrived a device from a poker and some string and a pair of sugar tongs so that even your back got its fair share! So not a single spot got left out! And then you took a tiny revolver with a mother-of-pearl grip and shot yourself in the temple. (…) … anyone who seeks causes and works them out from effects will confirm that it was a neat job by Burdensome Death! The same Burdensome Death that is glad for a certain lady in an asylum to lean twice a day from a first-floor window, though it's actually happening on the ground floor, from where she is waving good-bye to her departing mother, albeit the latter has been dead for several years. It's the Burdensome Death that was happy for the lady to fall pregnant twice a day, though she was long past the menopause.[18]

Thus this first step on the way to prose gave rise to a poetics of which the characteristic feature is the ambivalence of the narrator, perched as he is between lyrical subjectivity and story-telling objectivity. At the turn of the 1940s and 1950s, this ambivalence became so assertive as the guiding principle of Hrabal's writing that it also impacted on his work in verse: there is clear evidence of this in the two large poetic compositions which Hrabal wrote at the time and with which his career as a poet peaked: the long Prague poem *Bambino di Praga* (1950) and the long Kladno poem *Poldi, the Beautiful Steelworks* (1951).

18) 'Dům, který se osvěžoval bleskem,' in *SSBH,* Vol. 2, pp. 45–46 (trans. DS).