

Writing Underground

Reflections on Samizdat Literature
in Totalitarian Czechoslovakia

Martin Machovec



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5. THE THEME OF "APOCALYPSE" AS A KEY BUILDING BLOCK OF UNDERGROUND LITERATURE DURING THE PERIOD OF "NORMALIZATION"

Firstly, some remarks regarding the two expressions in commas in the title of this text.

1) The Greek word *apokalypsis*, meaning "revelation" that we know chiefly from the New Testament, is often used in a non-religious sense in present-day Czech as a synonym for doom, perceived in a general or final sense, but in a partial sense too.

So the modern Czech literary variant of the Biblical or gnostic apocalypse definitely has no connotations of wild visions of "a star named Wormwood"¹ or a "a beast with ten horns and seven heads"², or of kings assembled at "a place called Harmagedon"³; the sense of it is simply a premonition of the end, or extinction.

2) The expression "normalization", which acquired a new, political meaning in Czech after 1969, is a very good example of the principles of Orwellian Newspeak, or what Bohumil Hrabal called "semantic confusion"⁴, being introduced into everyday speech. There are other examples of such political and journalistic jargon from the early seventies, of "semantic shifts" due to pressure from the regime and the political situation. The spontaneous process of democratization in 1968 started to be described as "counter-revolution", which was intended to suggest, among other things, that the Stalinist putsch of 1948 was a "revolution"; the invasion of Czechoslovakia by troops of foreign countries was suddenly designated "fraternal assistance"; and the usurper regime and what was still at its core a totalitarian system was described as "democratic socialism".

The clear aim of the Czechoslovak puppet government, which was once more entirely in the hands of pro-Kremlin apparatchiks was not only to totally suppress the remnants of the efforts of

1) Revelation 8:11.

2) Revelation 13:1.

3) Revelation 16:16.

4) See Hrabal's text collage entitled *Sémantický zmatek* [Semantic confusion], in *Sebrané spisy Bohumila Hrabala*, vol. 15 - *Domácí úkoly*, Praha: Pražská imaginace, Praha 1995, p. 363.

democratization of 1968 and silence its representatives at all costs, but also to deprive people of their means of expression, and hence their scope for communication and mutual understanding.

Enforcing changes in the meaning of many well-used expressions, which were contingent on specific historical realities was also an attempt to alter the way people actually thought, because if something in Czechoslovak history in the period 1948-1989 was worthy of the description "normalization" then it was precisely that attempt at democratization in 1968, and not the years following the Soviet occupation. So perhaps it is not surprising that the poets and writers who sought in the 1970s to reflect in an authentic, unmanipulated and non-ideological manner on the time they were living in - one truly characterized by a new "confusion" as at Babel, if not of "tongues" then at least of one tongue - tended to update the theme of doom, or "apocalypse" in the broadest sense of the word.

It is a well-known fact that in 1968, the literary authors and musicians of the Czech underground of the seventies and eighties were definitely not among the foremost representatives of the democratization process of "renewal", either as politicians, columnists, or journalists. Broadly speaking, the latter were mostly members of the Communist Party with varying degrees of attachment to genuine democracy (i.e., people who were previously socially privileged, who had now become aware of the possibility, or rather the necessity of economic and political reforms). However, insofar as those literary authors and musicians of the future underground were mostly quite young, they took advantage of the much greater degree of freedom of those days to express their views and engage in artistic activity as much as possible. Nevertheless, the very fact that they did not get involved in the thick of political activity meant that they were subsequently capable of reflecting the frustration of the Husák regime's emerging "normalization" much more objectively than the foremost Czechoslovak writers, political commentators and journalists of the time - the future emigrés or so-called dissidents, who were, by and large, totally absorbed by the specific political message of 1968/69. Another paradoxical advantage of the authors and creators, who would subsequently become the main exponents of underground culture, was the fact that until the beginning of

the 1970s they had either simply languished on the fringes of the Czech literary scene⁵ (sometimes deliberately and consciously out of an aversion to anything that was fashionable, sometimes because of the subject-matter of the period was mostly alien to them, while their own subject-matter did not attract sufficient interest among the wider readership, but mostly because most of their texts were not publishable at all before 1968, and the subsequent period of relative democracy was too short), or they didn't manage to even enter Czech literary circles, or their first appearance in print was limited to a few magazine issues in 1968-69.⁶

These minor observations of a psychological and sociological nature, rather than from a literary and historical viewpoint, should be borne in mind if we are to adequately interpret the literary underground, particularly that of the 1970s. But another way of looking at it would be to conclude that the underground authors of those days were much less traumatized by 1968 than the former leading figures and future dissidents, who were suddenly – again in a very Orwellian sense – not only prevented from being published, but were actually “erased” from the history of Czech literature and culture. And one other factor should probably also be taken into account, namely that the frequent visions of doom, destruction, hopelessness, and sometimes self-destruction or at least disintegration or decay, as articulated by underground authors were truly much more universal than the reflections on personal frustrations from the pens of the “sixty-eighters” (suffice it to mention the well-known polemic between Milan Kundera and Václav Havel on “Czech Destiny”⁷) and are also only in apparent contradiction with

5) Such as Egon Bondy, Milan Knížák, Ivan M. Jirous or Andrej Stankovič, as well as the marginalized folk singers such as Jaroslav Hutka or Vlastimil Třešňák, and particularly the disdained rock musicians writing their own texts under the influence of the American underground music and literary scene of the time.

6) Such as Vratislav Brabenec, Svatopluk Karásek, Pavel Zajíček, and František Pánek, as well, of course, as the entire “younger underground generation” who wouldn't appear on the (samizdat) literary scene until the 1980s.

7) See Havel's essay “Český úděl?” [The Czech Deal?], in HAVEL, Václav, *Spisy 3 – Eseje a jiné texty z let 1953–1969*, Praha: Torst, Praha 1999, p. 888 (the notes also include the text of Milan Kundera's essay, “Český úděl”, pp. 992–998).

the markedly joyful creative atmosphere so typical of the “merry ghetto” of the underground in the first half of the 1970s. That micro-community, was also the natural source of the “micro-climate” that allowed like-minded individuals and artists to survive better and support each other, a source of self-affirmation, and sometimes of “feedback”. (The fact that the Czech underground was also a very heterogeneous community, even though its exponents were initially above all rock musicians and fans of that “accursed music” and of the specific value system and lifestyle associated with it, was more the outcome of a happy coincidence; this fact is anyway very familiar and need not be particularly emphasized.⁸⁾

Now a few examples of “apocalyptic” themes in underground poetry:

Milan Knížák’s experimental musical formation AKTUAL⁹ was in many respects the forerunner of the Czech underground in the real sense of the word. In addition to ephemeral Czech bands such as the the Primitives Group or The Hell’s Devils, it was Aktual that inspired The Plastic People of the Universe that came into being somewhat later, in autumn 1968, and is now the most acclaimed legend of the Czech underground, as well as the band DG 307, formed

8) See particularly: “Zpráva o třetím českém hudebním obrození”, in JIROUS, Ivan M., *Magorův zápisník*, Praha: Torst, 1997, p. 171. Also: MACHOVEC, Martin, “Od avantgardy přes podzemí do undergroundu” [From the Avant-Garde via Unofficial Publishing to Underground: The Midnight Editions Circle, 1949-1955, and the Underground Circle of the Plastic People, 1969-1989], in *Pohledy zevnitř*, Praha: Pistorius & Olšanská 2008 (part of it in English is Chapter 1 of this volume); also: JANOUSEK, Pavel (ed.), *Dějiny české literatury 1945-1989, vol. IV, 1969-1989*, Praha: Academia, 2008, esp. the chapter “Společenství a poetika undergroundu”, pp. 279-295; the chapter “Próza undergroundu, okruh Revolver Revue”, pp. 455-460.

9) The original recordings and some cover versions of Aktual songs were released on 2 CDs: *AKTUAL - ATENTÁT NA KULTURU*, Praha: Anne Records, 2003; *AKTUAL - DĚTI BOLŠEVIZMU*, Louny: Guerilla Records, 2005.

in 1973,¹⁰ and several other underground bands including Umělá hmota [Artificial Material].¹¹

A number of Knížák's texts¹² mostly from 1968 were written in an obviously ironic spirit of political provocation, or even blasphemy, such as: *I Love You and Lenin*, *The Kids of Bolshevism*, *Messiah The Bolshevik*, and *Bolshevik Gods*, others articulate a vision of a "new world", undoubtedly spawned by the utopia of American 60s "counter-culture", such as *The Apostles*, *How Divine it Would Be*, *Fuck and Don't Make War*, *Emissaries from the Cosmos*, *City of Actuals*, *The March of the Actuals*. The notions of fundamental "change", "transformation", and "purification" they contain already have something in common with "apocalyptic" moods. But Knížák's best-known texts of 1968 are probably *Assault on Culture* and *Be a Pig*. The latter includes the words: "Throw out your brain / Throw out your hearts / throw out all / that makes you human // Be a pig / Be a pig / Be a pig / Be a pig // A pig lives well / eats drinks and fucks / its life away".¹³ This reflection of disgust at pseudo-humanity in the form of an appeal was without doubt already very radical.

Even before Egon Bondy became acquainted with The Plastic People and their community, he wrote many poetic and philosophical

10) The original recordings of DG 307 compositions were released on a number of CDs. The most valuable are: *DG 307 - HISTORIE HYSTERIE*. Archiv dochovaných nahrávek 1973-75 [2 CDs], Louny: Guerilla Records, 2004; *DG 307 - SVĚDEK SPÁLENÝHO ČASU 1979/1980* [5CDs], Louny: Guerilla Records, 2013.

11) The group Umělá hmota soon split up in two groups: Milan "Dino" Vopálka's Umělá hmota II and Josef "Vafák" Vondruška's Umělá hmota III. The original recordings are found on 4 CDs: *UMĚLÁ HMOTA II. VE SKLEPĚ - 1976/77* [2 CDs], Louny: Guerilla Records, 2003. *JOSEF VONDRUŠKA: THE DOM & UMĚLÁ HMOTA III - ROCK'N'ROLLOVÝ MILÁČEK* [2CDs], Louny: Guerilla Records, 2010.

12) A collection of Knížák's texts for Aktual were published in the volume: KNÍŽÁK, Milan, *Písně kapely Aktual*, Praha: Mafá, 2003. The English translations by Karolína Dolanská of some of Knížák's lyrics are found in a booklet added to the CD *Děti bolševizmu* (Footnote 9).

13) In Dolanská's translation. The original Czech text: „**Staňte se prasetem** // zahodte mozky / zahodte srdce / zahodte všechno / co vás dělá člověkem // **STAŇTE SE PRASETEM!** / **STAŇTE SE PRASETEM!** / **STAŇTE SE PRASETEM!** / **STAŇTE SE PRASETEM!** // prase si dobře žije / jen žere a pije / a taky mrdá // **STAŇTE SE PRASETEM!** / **STAŇTE SE PRASETEM!** / **STAŇTE SE PRASETEM!** / **STAŇTE SE PRASETEM!**“

texts that could be interpreted as a modern parallel with apocalyptic or prophetic/admonitory literature. The evidence is also there to show that “thirsting for an apocalypse” or rather for a “radical social change”, which simply must come about, even if it involves huge social upheavals or the actual extinction of existing civilisations, constituted an entire creative line of thought in Bondy’s literary oeuvre from the 1950s. There is no space here, however, to deal with it in more detail, besides which this particular strand of his work would seem to have less of an impact on the underground of the 1970s.

Although Bondy’s *Tzv. “Březnová báseň 1971”, čtená na veřejném shromáždění* [The So-Called “March Poem 1971” – Read at a Public Gathering], from the collection *Zápisky z počátku let sedmdesátých* [Notes from the Beginning of the 1970s]¹⁴ was written before its author was accepted by the underground community as an “underground classic”, in places its style clearly anticipates the texts he wrote in subsequent years, when the underground became truly entwined with his life and work. The text is actually one long litany: a series of curses and warnings, in which – truly in the manner of a Biblical prophet – the author indicts not only his neighbours, but all people indiscriminately:¹⁵

14) This collection was published in vol. 7 of *Básnické dílo Egona Bondyho*, Praha: Pražská imaginace, 1992, pp. 5-55 (the text cited is on pp. 40-42); the original samizdat edition dates from 1972; more recently in *Básnické spisy II - 1962-1975*, Praha: Argo, 2015, pp. 346-351.

15) Compare Gerald Turner’s translation with Bryson’s and Klepetářová’s translation of the same part of the text as quoted in the previous text (chapter 4 of this volume). The original Czech text of this part of the poem goes as follows: “Ne – je jasné že nelze začít bojovat holýma rukama a zničehonic / ale kdo ještě je člověkem / musí se už od nynějška připravovat / protože režim státního kapitalismu musí být zničen / jen nesmíte znovu dopustit abyste se opět jako v osmašedesátém dali vláčet profesionálními aparátníky / Svobody Dubčky a Černíky / kteří pochopitelně nemají zájem na tom aby se opravdu změnil režim jenž je vytvořil a z něhož žijí / Musíte si stále být vědomi že socialismus / není nic víc a nic méně / než samosprávná organizace společnosti / že tedy všechna síla je ve vašich rukou / jen když jich použijete / A pochopíte právě teď / co říká Mao Ce-tung / že nikdo nemůže osvobodit lidi shora / shora je je možno jen ujařit / Za vašimi zády se ve skutečnosti třese vykořisťovatelská oligarchie / Sovětský svaz nepřežije osmdesátá léta / ale vy musíte být připraveni / I kdyby pozavírali všechny marxisty / nemohou pozavírat všechny vás // Nepíšu

[...] No – obviously we can't start to struggle with our bare hands and out of nowhere / but whoever is still human must as of now prepare themselves / because the regime of state capitalism must be destroyed / but you mustn't let yourselves be dragged along by the professional aparat-chiks as you did in sixty-eight / the Svobodas, Dubčeks and Černíks / who understandably are not interested in a change of the regime they created and which gives them their livelihood / You must always be aware that socialism / is no more and no less / than the self-governing organisation of society / and so all power is in your hands/ so long as you use it / And at this moment you will understand Mao Zedong when he says / that no one can liberate people from above/ from above they can only be enslaved // In reality, behind your backs the exploitative oligarchy is shaking / the Soviet Union will not survive the nineteen-eighties / but you must be prepared / Even if they jailed all the Marxists / they can't jail all of you // I don't write poetry for you, and I've never wanted to write poetry / if you want poetry shit on your faces and smear it all over like skin cream / which precisely suits your souls / Because the brutality in which individual people are deprived of their freedom and even their lives is not the most terrible thing / the most terrible thing of all is the bestiality with which they force us to watch it and even applaud / If you're in your sixties go form a queue at the crematorium / if you're in your forties may your genitals and your wives' and vile mistresses' genitals rot away while you're alive / if you're in your twenties go off straight away and hang yourselves / unless from today you prepare every day for war war war / war and war on the criminals / who otherwise / won't waste time with you [...]

As they listened to such appeals, the young underground newcomers of the time tried to express their own feelings, which chimed

vám poesii a nikdy jsem vám nechtěl psát poesii / chcete-li poesii naserte si do ksichtu a pěkně si to rozmažte jako pletový krém / který právě k vaší duši sluší / Nejstrašnější není totiž brutalita s níž jednotliví lidé jsou zbavováni svobody ba života / nejstrašnější je bestialita s níž nás všechny s klidem přinucují přihlížet ba tleskat / Šedesátiletí – jděte se přímo postavit do fronty před krematorium / čtyřicetiletí – ať vám uhnije zaživa vaše přirození i přirození vašich manželek a hnusných milenek / dvacetiletí – jděte se rovnou oběsit / jestliže nebudete ode dneška připravovat den co den válku válku válku / válku a válku zločincům / kteří jinak / s vámi nebudou dělat žádné cavity”.

in to a great extent with the thoughts quoted. A number of texts by Pavel Zajíček, written in the years 1973–75 for his experimental band DG 307,¹⁶ express above all a yearning to destroy existing pseudo-values. The influence of Milan Knížák is quite evident in them, such as *Attack on History*, *Paper aPpsolute*, *Appearance*, *When*, *Degeneration*, *Sewer Called Fetishism*. There is a truly apocalyptic mood in the texts: *Returns* and *Purification*. *Returns* has the words “the return of time / without limit / the return of space / without possession / the return of the rock / to the cliff // everything as at the beginning / of creation / everything to the primordial transformation // the return of wild / nature / to obliterated cities / the return of iron to the earth / the return of stars / fallen long ago [...]”.¹⁷

We note a similar mood at the end of *Purification*: “[...] every morning we should purify ourselves / every night we should make love / and at every moment we should be / prepared for the end”.¹⁸

In Zajíček's early works, however, we can also hear utopian tones, paradoxically joyful visions of the world, in which it is possible to live in spite of all the horrors. These “post-apocalyptic” themes, which will be referred to later, are probably the most original contribution of the Czech underground ghetto to Czech literature. In Zajíček's poem *New Warriors*, which is actually a not particularly ironic paraphrase of Norbert Zoula's “working-class anthem” *Prison Song*, these aspects are particularly evident: “[...] new warriors are arising / in hope rejoicing / new warriors are arising / no whores demanding / new warriors are arising / enthused and understanding”.¹⁹ In the text *Explosion of Thought* a positive attitude to life after

16) See the volume Z[AJÍČEK], Pavel, *DG 307 (Texty z let 1973–1980)*, Praha: Vokno, 1990.

17) The Czech original: “**Návraty** // návraty času / bez omezení / návrat prostoru / bez vlastnění / návrat kamene / do skály // vše jako na počátku / tvoření / vše se do prvotního / promění // návrat divoký / přírody / do vyhlazenejch měst / návrat železa do zemský hmoty / návrat dávno / spadlejch hvězd [...]”.

18) The Czech original: “**Očišťování** // [...] každý ráno bychom se měli očišťovat / každou noc bychom se měli milovat / každou vteřinu bychom měli bejt / připravený na konec”.

19) The Czech original: “**Nový bojovníci** // [...] vstávaj nový bojovníci / v naději se radující / vstávaj nový bojovníci / žádný kurvy žádající / vstávaj nový bojovníci / nadšený a chápající”.

“destruction” is also apparent: “[...] the explosion of thought / heats up the air / explosions of sympathy / a penetrating sound // how beautiful is / this destruction / how beautiful is / a common spirit”.²⁰

The fact that Knížák's, Zajíček's and above all Bondy's postulates expressed in poetic or quasi-poetic texts are more reminiscent of proto-communist than early-Christian visions, and that they tend to evoke slightly the refrain of Pottier's once popular song, namely: *C'est la lutte finale, / groupons-nous, et demain / L'Internationale / Sera le genre humain*, is certainly not fortuitous, because the Christian apocalypse and eschatology were revived repeatedly in the course of history, and sometimes what they inspired was used to surprising ends, but in the case of the Czech underground authors these reminiscences are always offset by a strong dose of irony and self-deprecation, which, moreover, is one of the other permanent features of underground literature as a whole, which we shall also mention later.

There are no ideological or theological references in the apocalyptic themes of František Pánek, another outstanding underground author, albeit one with a markedly psychopathic personality. Symptomatic in that respect is the opening text of Pánek's cycle from the 1970s and 1980s²¹, the poem *Monarch God*:

In the frame of the graves through space / talons on the wings of the corpses / there appeared voices of predatory / riddles! // The cradle of the birth through the asshole / the glowing miracle so unique / the stroke of the end, the ideal / dung-beetle of mist, the ghost of nausea / the death's head moth, the monarch God. ²²

20) The Czech original: “**Exploze myšlení** // [...] exploze přemejšlení / rozpaluje vzduch / výbuchy soucítění / pronikavej zvuk // jak krásný je / tohle ničení / jak krásnej je / společnej duch”.

21) A complete collection of Pánek's poems in their original versions was published in PÁNEK, Fanda, *Vita horribilis 1972-1985*, Praha: Kalich, 2007 (Pánek's original samizdat collections were either untitled or came out under the title *U prdele* [I don't give a shit].)

22) The Czech original: “**Monarcha Bůh** // V rámu hrobů prostoru / drápy na mrtvol křídlech / zjevil se hádanek dravčích / hlasy! // Porodu prdelí kolíbka / zářící zázrak

In the text entitled *Ill Will* the vision of extinction is powerfully present:

Ill Will / To your life, dude, you've got the will / It's a dream / Like the brontosaurus / you'll just / die out, / dude. // Icarus / He flew up high, dude / Today same as yesterday / you fell / in the fucking shit, / you hog. // Vermin / You know fuck-all about it, you worm, / that in the grave of nature / you dig graves, / dude, / in your / fucking self.²³

When Pánek's text *Eliášův oheň* [Elijah's Fire] or [St. Elmo's Fire] was set to music by The Plastic People, a poetic image in which a fundamental reassessment of values was established not simply by contrast but rather by creating a parallel or synonymity between a so-called lofty vision of "love begotten by God" and a so-called inferior vision symbolized here by "a bottle of rum already begun".²⁴

The "primitive rocker", drug addict, and highly idiosyncratic naïve poet Josef Vondruška wrote lyrics that may probably be considered in the context of underground literature to be direct variations on "apocalyptic themes". The very titles of the poems or songs, that were set to music by the band Umělá hmota,²⁵ speak for themselves, such as *Strange Theatre*, *Living Corpses*, *Wild Angels*, and particularly *End of the World* – a text that was allegedly inspired by Bondy's prose work *Disabled Siblings*. Vondruška's *End of the World* includes the words: "[...] Sirens started to wail / migraines are

unikum / konce šlak, ideál / hovnivál mlh mdloby duch / smrtihlav monarcha Bůh“.

23) The Czech original: "Zvůli // Zvůli / k životu máš vole vůli / je to sen, / jak brontosaurus / vymřeš / vole / jen. // Ikar / vysoko si vole lital, / jako včera dnes / do hoven si / hlade / kles. // Hmyz / hovno červe víš, / jak v přírodě hrobě / hrobaříš / vole / sám / v sobě”.

24) See *The Plastic People of the Universe* [texts of the songs, chronology, discography etc.], Praha: Globus Music – Maťa, 1999, p. 65, translated by Marek Tomin.

25) A selection of Vondruška's songs and poems from the 1970s was published in the volume: VONDRUŠKA, Josef, *Rock'n'rollový sebevrah* [Rock'n'roll Suicide], Brno (Czech Republic): "Zvláštní vydání...", 1993 (the text cited is called *Konec světa* in original and is on page 11; the cited part in Czech original: "[...] Začly houkat sirény / šířejí se migrény / Celá zem se v peklo mění / je slyšet jen řev a klení / Lidé z toho strachem šílí / nejsou jim nic platný prachy / Vědějí že pojdou strachy [...]”.

spreading / The whole land is changed into hell / only roaring and cursing can be heard / It makes people go mad from fear / pills are of no use to them / They know they'll die of fear [...]"

Two other authors from underground circles, Svatopluk Karásek and Vratislav Brabenec, are only seemingly unconnected with such apocalyptic themes. They both studied protestant theology and so one might expect that their treatment of apocalyptic themes would have an overtly Christian colouring. And this is undoubtedly the case of Svaťa Karásek's songs,²⁶ which include direct quotations from the New Testament (including Revelations), but they are selected and brought up to date in order to be most relevant to the burning issues of the "normalization" era. This is evident, for instance, in the texts *There was a Struggle, Say No to the Devil, Visit to Hell, It's Late*, and *Sermon on the Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah*, whose closing several verses run as follows: "[...]When clutch of madmen embarks on ruining the town entire / a few brave people can save it in evil time. / God did not find those ten just men he sought: / With fire and brimstone his destruction wrought // In our town too those needed ten God seeks. / If he can't find them, then we're up shit creek."²⁷

Religiosity is perhaps not so immediate in the case of Vratislav Brabenec²⁸ but is sublimated into a kind of ecologically tinged "pantheism"; it is a vision of the world from which the Christian God has already departed. Thus *Letter* from 1973, reads:

26) The texts of Karásek's songs were published in two different editions: KARÁSEK, Svatopluk, *Protestor znamená vyznávám* [Protestor Means: I Confess], Praha - Žďár n. Sázavou: EKK - Kalich, 1993; KARÁSEK, Svatopluk, *V nebi je trůn* [There is a Throne in Heaven], Praha: Maťa, 1999 (the latter has more reliable versions of the texts).

27) In Paul Wilson's translation. The Czech original goes as follows: "**Kázání o zkáze Sodomy a Gomory** // [...] Vždyť hrstka bláznů nakazí celý město, / pár statečných spasí město v dobách zlých. // Nenašel Bůh těch potřebnejch deset, / města se vzdal - život z něj odvolal. // I v našem městě hledá Bůh aspoň těch deset. / Nenajde-li - pak je vše v prdeli."

28) A collection of Brabenec's samizdat poems was published in BRABENEC, Vratislav: *Sebedudy* [Self-Bagpipes], Praha: Vokno, 1992 (the text of "Letter" is on p. 80-83). Later the collection was published again in an augmented edition: BRABENEC, Vratislav: *Sebedudy a jiné texty z let 1966-1987*, Praha: Kalich, 2010 (pp. 84-87).

[...] don't ask and sleep it's morning and we can't see anything / you're in the sea and there is no sun in the grave / and no death, it left them / it is now the life of a fly, flying and annoying / and revenging sins / I fly / I fly / the dead are coming and they wish me all the best / for the morning / pleasure of the sea is dreadful / is joy dreadful / do you know the joke about the fall / is hatred dreadful is love is murder the blaze / of a star / it's morning they have left they are carrying the worm to execution / and the wings of the murderer and they are carrying the murderer / each his own / it's murder the lamp blazing on the water / it's the star the murder shines [...].²⁹

But Brabenec also had a powerful impact on the development of underground literature by his choice and arrangement of texts by other authors, or literary collages of a kind, which was one of the high points of Czech underground music. This relates not only to the New Testament texts in the *Easter Passion Play* cycle (1978) but also to the texts of Ladislav Klíma in the cycle entitled *How It'll Be After Death* (1979).³⁰ We need hardly add that both cycles evoked moments of extreme imperilment, and contained themes of confrontation with death and nothingness.³¹

29) The Czech original of the part cited: "**Dopis** [...] neptej se a spi je ráno a není vidět / jsi v moři a není slunce v hrobě / a není smrti odešla od nich / přišel muší život létat a trápit / a pomstít hřích / létám / létám / přicházejí mrtví a přejí mi všechno / nejlepší k ránu / je radost moře hrozná / je radost hrozná / znáš vtip o pádu / je nenávisť hrozná je láska je vražda záře / hvězdy / je ráno odešli nesou červa na popravu / a křídla vraha a vraha si nesou / každý svého / je vražda záře lampa na vodě / je hvězda vražda svítí [...]".

30) See the CDs: *THE PLASTIC PEOPLE OF THE UNIVERSE V. Pašijové hry velikonoční* (1978), (ed. Jaroslav RIEDEL), Praha: Globus Music, 1998; *THE PLASTIC PEOPLE OF THE UNIVERSE VI. Jak bude po smrti* (1979), (ed. Jaroslav RIEDEL), Praha: Globus Music, 1998.

31) Brabenec's arrangements of texts by other authors for musical performance by the Plastic People were published in the collected edition of texts set to music by the band; see *The Plastic People of the Universe: Texty*, Praha: Maťa, 2001 (2nd revised and augmented edition); in English in *The Plastic People of the Universe*, Praha: Globus Music – Maťa, 1999, pp. 87–107. The title of the Klímasque cycle *Jak bude po smrti* is translated by Marek Tomin as "Afterlife" here.

The crowning achievement of underground apocalyptic writing was probably Bondy's novel *Disabled Siblings* of 1974.³² In the context of utopian, are rather "antiutopian", dystopian literature, this work is now fairly well known, and it has been written about not only within the context of Czech literature, but also on the German, Italian and Polish and other literary scenes, thanks to translations.³³ For the present context it is interesting as a vision of a "post-apocalyptic" world, in which the only possible option is to live to the full. It is evidently also Bondy's reflection on life in the "underground ghetto", and in fact also about its apotheosis. However the text of the work is so full of visions that it perfectly constitutes apocalyptic literature, with the opening theme of "the corpse of the world", again treated with a strong dose of irony, and also images of "celestial television", the threat of "rising waters", or the frequently prominent theme of "joyful self-destruction".

Echoes of apocalyptic moods, in the sense on reflection on the "normalization" years, are also very much present in the texts of the so-called "eighties" authors belonging to the younger underground generation mentioned earlier. They are mostly connected with the samizdat magazine *Revolver Revue* that was founded in 1985, but a number of its regular authors made their debut in samizdat in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

A prominent author of that younger generation was the poet and prose writer Petr Placák. The main figure of his prose work *Medorek* (the first samizdat from 1985)³⁴ is a sort of self-caricature

32) To this day there have been four Czech editions of Bondy's *Invalidní sourozenci*: 1/ Toronto: Sixty-Eight Publishers, 1981; 2/ Bratislava: Archa, 1991; 3/ Brno (Czech Republic): "Zvláštní vydání...", 2002; 4/ Praha: Akropolis, 2012. The last edition contains detailed comments.

33) See, for instance: BONDY, Egon, *Fratelli invalidi*, Eleuthera, Milano 1993; BONDY, Egon, *Die Invaliden Geschwister*, Elfenbein, Heidelberg 1999; BONDY, Egon, *Kuzyni inwalidzi* [an extract], in *Czeski underground. Wybór tekstów z lat 1969–1989*, Wrocław: Oficyna Wydawnicza ATUT, 2008; BONDY, Egon, *Invalidna sorojenca*, Vnanje Gorice (Slovenia): Police Dubove, 2017.

34) There were 4 samizdat editions of Placák's *Medorek* (each a different version) before 1989 and since then 3 printed (abridged) editions: PLACÁK, Petr, *Medorek*, Pra-

and irony, but also a prototype of the human monsters or freaks, who are apparently made to populate a dehumanised world. It has been compared, for instance to the figure of Oskar in Günther Grass's novel *Blechtrommel* [The Tin Drum]. The other characters in *Medorek* also display only a minimum of genuine human features. Placák's vision of the world is a picture of a satanic panopticum, a labyrinth, in which maybe only "the mad" can survive. And here again, in the spirit of the reappraisal of values under normalization, "black" is often substituted for "white". For instance the chapter entitled "In the Tomb" is possibly the most cheerful and optimistic chapter of the whole book, even though it ends in a massacre. Themes of extinction or coming to an end also figure frequently in Placák's poems,³⁵ such as in the undated text *The Raven*:

[...] I rose into the air on my enormous black wings / and with the long talons of my feathered legs I / caught hold of the highest branch of the highest tree / I dug my claws deep into its soul / I screamed in anger and the sun went down swiftly / a pale moon rose and infamous clouds sailed across the sky / crookbacked rats finally left their holes / the red sky was burning itself out, foul-smelling funerary candles / I sat on a gibbet lulled and reconciled / as far as the eye could see there was a huge snow-covered graveyard.

J. H. Krchovský (a pseudonym), who these days is probably now the most renowned Czech underground poet, alongside Ivan

ha: Lidové noviny – Česká expedice, 1990; PLACÁK, Petr, *Medorek + Starcovy zápisky*, Praha: Hynek, 1997; PLACÁK, Petr, *Medorek (anonymní román)*, Praha: Plus, 2010.

35) A selection of Placák's samizdat verse appeared in the publication, PLACÁK, Petr, *Obrovský zasněžený hřbitov* [A Huge Snow-Covered Graveyard], Praha: Torst, 1995; the cited text appears on pp. 47–48; the cited part of the poem in Czech original goes as follows: "Havran [...] vznesl jsem se na svých obrovských černých křídlech / a dlouhými drápy svých opeřených nohou jsem se zachytil / na nejvyšší větví největšího stromu / zaryl jsem pařáty hluboko do jeho duše / zlostně jsem se ozval a slunce rychle zapadlo / vyšel pobledlý měsíc a na oblohu vypluly zlopověstné mraky / přihrbelé krysy konečně vylezly ze svých děr / červánky dohořívaly, smrduté zádušní svíce / seděl jsem na šibenici, ukolébán a usmířen / kam oko dohlédlo, obrovský zasněžený hřbitov".

M. Jirous and Egon Bondy, created an oeuvre³⁶ abounding in “monstrous” and “perverse” dreams of an “outcast”, an “alien being” on this earth, scorning existing values, and articulating his longing for the earliest possible release from this earthly existence. In his verse Krchovský’s “ideological theme” is greatly enriched by a very strong dose of self-deprecation and black humour, which actually adds a new spiritual dimension to his pessimistic agnosticism. Krchovský’s poems have been put into music by The Plastic People and by other underground bands, also they have been translated by several translators; e.g., Justin Quinn, Marek Tomin, Craig Cravens, and have been published in various anthologies and CD booklets. The following example, in O. T. Chalkestone’s translation, was originally a part of a samizdat volume *Bestiální něha* [Beastly Tenderness], 1981–82, and is also found in the volume mentioned in Footnote 36:

IF I WANT TO VANISH WITHOUT A TRACE / drowning in the river won’t be my case / – I’ll lay my lazy bones / in a bath full of acid at home // While I get the water running / I tame my anxiety mulling: / – how when I’m all dissolved / will I unplug the tub hole? // I’ll employ mechanical power! / – linking the plug to the door knob with a wire / and when they open the door later / I shall need no undertaker // I am sure that all in all / the bath tub will retain my soul... / through the hole as I flow down / my soul asleep nirvana bound // A piece of shit cannot be soaped... / what there is not cannot be broke / only the pretty nothing that troubles the brain / will never go down the drain.³⁷

36) An extensive selection of Krchovský’s samizdat poetry continues to appear in reprints, but initially as: KRCHOVSKÝ, J. H., *Básně* [Poems], Brno (Czech Republic): Host, 1998.

37) From KASJAS, Piotr (ed.), *Anthology of Slavic Poetry*, [London, UK]: Kasjas Publishing, 2016, p. 121. The Czech original goes as follows: “CHCI-LI ZMIZET BEZE STOPY / nebudu se v řece topit / – uložím svou kůži línou / na dno vany s kyselinou // Zatímco si chystám lázeň / přemýšlím a krotím bázeň: / – jak, až budu rozežraný / vytáhnu pak zátku z vany? // Pomohu si mechanikou! / – spojím drátem zátku s klikou / a jak někdo chytne kliku / pohrbí mě i bez hrobníků // Jsem si jist, že každopádně / zůstane má duše na dně... / já vyteču stokou z vany / duše usne do nirvány // Hovno nelze umýt mejdlem... / to, co není, zničit nejde / jen to nic, co trápí hlavy / kanálem se neodplaví...” (KRCHOVSKÝ, J. H., *Básně*, Brno, Czech Republic: Host, 1998, p. 31).

The poems of Jáchym Topol³⁸ reflect the thinking of a “barbarian in the urban jungle”, a Huxleyesque “savage” rejecting a priori the “laws” of the majority population, who no longer display the features of real people.

Jan Pelc’s prose debut, which, with charming irony, he entitled *Děti ráje* [Children of Paradise] (1983), even though “Hell’s children” would be a more apt description (and which subsequently formed part of a trilogy with the title ...*a bude hůř* [...things’ll get worse],³⁹ teems with individuals who are simply socially-detrimental, semi-bestial “monsters”; whereas the opposite is true, when viewed in the light of the hypocrisy of “normalization”. In Pelc’s presentation, the world of “normal people” is a totally alienate place – empty and cheerless; only in the “hell” of the outcasts is it possible to find authentic feelings, albeit at the cost of following a path to self-destruction.

Paradoxically *Magorovy labutí písně* [Magor’s Swan Songs]⁴⁰ the supreme verse collection of the “founding father” of the Czech underground, Ivan Martin Jirous, belongs – with regards to the years it was written – in the context of the younger underground generation. Jirous wrote the poems in prison in the period 1981–85, and it was in fact through them that – initially in connection with underground literature and later, in the nineties – that he became known as a poet *par excellence* in the context of Czech literature as a whole. Much has been written about Jirous’s *Swan Songs*, and suffice it to mention it here, but this part of his oeuvre is quoted here only be-

38) Topol’s selection of his samizdat poetry was published in TOPOL, Jáchym, *Miluju tě k bláznění* [I Love You Like Mad], Brno (Czechoslovakia): Atlantis, 1990, subsequently reprinted several times.

39) Pelc’s prose text *Děti ráje* (Part 2 of the trilogy ...*a bude hůř*, but was probably the first part to be written) first appeared in print in the Paris-based Czech exile journal *Svědectví* (18, no. 72 (1984), pp. 673–724), and was subsequently reprinted in the Czechoslovakia in various samizdat editions. The complete, unexpurgated trilogy was eventually published years later: PELC, Jan, ...*a bude hůř*, Praha: Mafá, 2000.

40) See the complete edition of Jirous’s poetry: JIROUS, Ivan M., *Magorova summa* [Magor’s Sum], Praha: Torst, 1998; 2nd, enlarged edition: Praha: Torst, 2007; 3rd, enlarged, complete edition in 3 volumes: Praha: Torst, 2015 (all three editions include commentaries, registers, indexes of names and bibliography).

cause of its supposed relevance to our reflection on the themes of destruction, extinction, and ruin. Of course such themes are present in *Swan Songs*, but we would be hard-pressed to find actual apocalyptic moods. Jirous's poetry has too much Catholic "earthiness", or rather his Christianity is anything but a yearning for a sudden ontological transformation after universal destruction. Nevertheless, the very fact that Jirous's spiritual poetry was written when the author was in Czechoslovakia's harshest prison, one that had even something in common with a death camp, is of itself quite revealing.

The occasional "apocalyptic" echoes in *Magor's Swan Songs* are neutralized by irony or hyperbole, and lack any vision of a global catastrophe as they tend to evoke concrete, sometimes drastic images of everydayness. Occasionally, they take the form of a "dialogue with God", virtually a prayer, by means of which the author begs for the destruction not to come, but to be averted. Thus for example in the four-verse poem: "All rednecks in Pelhřimov know / that because of uranium they'll destroy Křemešník in a single blow // God grant me one wish / let them find uranium under Hradčany rather than fish."⁴¹ Or there is a part of a poem with the incipit *V neštěstí se vždýcky hbité* [Whenever tragedy knocks on my door]:

[...] Oh Lord, is it yet noon / Or is dusk upon the world so soon? / Is a bomb just a big knife? / Is the wind tearing the very last leaves / From the courtyard's hawthorn trees / Or will they turn again green? Do tell // Is there bark around heaven / As around earthly trees? / Or are you in your glory surrounded / By nothing but angelic spheres? / Is there fire in the heart of the void? / God, is that you in the void? [...]⁴²

41) The Czech original: "VÍ v Pelhřimově kdejaký buran / Křemešník zbourají našli tam uran // Vyslyšet přání ať Pán Bůh dá mi / aby ho našli pod Hradčanami", in *MS*, Praha: Torst, 1998, 2007, 2015, p. 494. The English translation in *Up the Devil's Back / Po hřbetě ďábla. A Bilingual Anthology of 20th Century Czech Poetry* (eds. and translators Bronislava Volková & Clarice Cloutier), Bloomington, Indiana: Slavica Publishers, Indiana University, 2008, pp. 308–313.

42) The Czech original: "[...] Bože je teprv poledne / nebo pad na svět soumrak už? / Je bomba jenom velký nůž? / Poslední listí vítr rve / na dvoře z hlohů nebo se / zazenají poznovu? řekni mi // Je kolem nebes taky kůra / jako na stromech na zemi? / Nebo jen kůry andělské / obklopují Tě v slávě Tvé? / Je oheň v srdci prázdnoty? / Jsi v prázdnotě to Bože Ty? [...]", in *MS*, Praha: Torst, 1998, 2007, 2015, pp. 329–330.

In conclusion, I would look to point to a connection between “underground apocalyptic writing” and the literary oeuvre of an author who definitely does not belong to this circle, although along with Ladislav Klíma, Josef Váchal, and Jakub Deml he has been perceived as a kind of *magnus parens* of Czech underground literature. That oeuvre could indeed serve as proof that the apocalypse was not simply the prerogative of some underground screwballs, as it were, but was probably an appropriate reflection of the years of “normalization”. I am referring, of course, to Bohumil Hrabal’s prose *Příliš hlučná samota* [Too Loud a Solitude], the first version of which was penned in the years 1973–74;⁴³ i.e., the same period as the most representative texts of the first wave of underground literature, and yet independently of them, as can be proven. I hasten to add that it is by no means my intention to compare the artistic qualities of Hrabal’s text with the various “primitivist” writings of the underground “barbarians”, let alone to establish any kind of chronological precedence. But it is necessary to emphasize a number of congruent themes:

They both comprise reflections on the crisis and hopelessness affecting Czech society in the nineteen-fifties, and particularly in the seventies and eighties, as well as an articulation of generalized human hopelessness, as well as explicit cosmic hopelessness. They both display a paradoxical joyfulness, which is achieved even at the cost of self-destruction, in both cases they reflect on the feelings of social outcasts; and finally, they both include similar, truly almost apocalyptic visions of some kind of “last judgement”, hinted at in the words of Christ, Buddha, and Lao Tse. Another obvious similarity is the considerable use of irony and self-deprecation, stylistic and even noetic techniques that are favoured by Hrabal and most of the underground authors.

The English translation in JIROUS, Ivan M., *My itinerary has been monotonous for quite a while. Selected prison poems translated from Czech by Marek Tomin*, London: Divus, 2017 (pp. 32–33).

43) This (approximate) dating is given in an editorial comment by Milan Jankovič (on p. 243) on the 9th volume of Hrabal’s collected works: *Sebrané spisy Bohumila Hrabala – Hlučná samota* (Praha: Pražská imaginace, 1994). The book was published in the English translation: *Too Loud a Solitude* (translated by Michael Henry Heim) San Diego – New York – London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1990.

Nevertheless, in the context of Hrabal's overall output *Too Loud a Solitude* is more of a one-off, at least as far as the themes mentioned are concerned. Absent from Hrabal's work is the theme of a "post-apocalyptic" life opportunity, which was used, and capitalized on to the maximum degree by his erstwhile friend and literary fellow-traveller Egon Bondy in *Disabled Siblings*, a theme which was probably an echo of life in the "underground ghetto".

One can only speculate whether that literary dimension is absent from Hrabal because by the 1970s he no longer had access to the underground community, but the fact remains that from the mid-seventies to the end of the eighties Hrabal's new texts were simply intensely varied evocations of a more or less idealised past, and he turned his back on raw narrative like the prophetic apocalyptic urgency of *Too Loud a Solitude* or certain texts of the underground authors. The fact they would never have published anything like that of his in pre-1989 Czechoslovakia is another matter, and there is no way we can deal with it here and now.

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Translated by Gerald Turner