The Construction of Contemporary Reality in Selected Works of Czech fiction:

Emil Hakl and Jan Balabán

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Abstract

At the beginning of the 1990's, after a period of momentary confusion, when Czech literature seems to have temporarily lost its way in the newly establishing democratic society which emerged after the fall of communism a number of rather interesting and important writers appeared. Holding the memories of recent communist past and experiencing the historical turning point when Czech society rejoined the capitalist West, they produced an image of cultural and political initiation. They bore witness to the arrival of chaos, associated with regime change, to a crisis of personal values and a search for new ways of existence. This thesis analyzes the literary work of two contemporary Czech writers, Emil Hakl and Jan Balabán. It explores the way the reality of their narratives is shaped. It investigates the reality these narratives reflect, the reality these narratives create and the reality that the reader of these narratives re-creates on the basis of his or her knowledge of the world. The thesis considers the value judgments which are being made by Czech society through its contemporary literature about its post-communist present. The thesis also examines the question to what extent these narratives construct an image of contemporary Czech society. The thesis deals with the complete fiction written by Emil Hakl (b. 1958) and Jan Balabán (1961-2010), two popular and critically acclaimed Czech writers. The first part of the thesis analyzes Hakl's fiction, in particular his debut *Konec světa* (*The End of the World*), a work which opens the world of Jan Beneš (Hakl's real name), the subjective narrator of this text and also the narrator of all the other texts written by Emil Hakl. The second part of the thesis focuses on the constructed and deconstructed world of Jan Balabán's fiction. It deals with themes and motifs that appear and re-appear in the lives of Balabán's male and female characters and explores individual characters whose lives have been shaped by their own personal breakdowns as well as by changes in the social and political conditions of the external world. The thesis analyzes Hakl's and Balabán's narratives from a narratological point of view. The thesis uses the semiotic and narratological approach (H. Porter Abbott, Gerald Prince, Seymour Chatman), the post-structuralist approach (Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva), the psychoanalytical approach (Jacques Lacan, Slavoj Žižek), the postmodern (Steven Connor), the theories dealing with the typology and the mythology of the novel and the city (Daniela Hodrová), the cultural approach (John Storey) and the approach of New Historicism (Louis Montrose, Hayden White).

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis contains the results of my own work, that it has been composed by me and that it does not include work forming part of a thesis presented successfully for a degree in this or any other University.

Jitka Peřinová ……..

Abbreviations

AH: *Ahoj Honzo! Setkání s Janem Balabánem*

BL: *Boží lano*

CB: *Černý beran*

e. g.: Latin: ‘exempli gratia’ – ‘for example’

Ibid.: Latin: ‘ibidem’ – ‘the same place’

i. e.: Latin: ‘id est’ – ‘that is’; ‘in other words’

JT: *Jsme tady*

KS: *Konec světa*

KSA: *Kudy šel anděl*

LC: *Let čarodějnice*

LO: *O létajících objektech*

MO: *Možná že odcházíme*

ORD: *O rodičích a dětech*

PSC: *Pravidla směšného chování*

PR: *Prázdniny*

SB: *Intimní schránka Sabriny Black*

ST: *Středověk*

ZT: *Zeptej se táty*

Introduction

Telling a story is as old as the verbal history of humankind; it enables people to recognize the world they live in, places they act in and the spheres they think in. All humans have their own narratives which they enjoy and share with others; from childhood, they carry a compulsion to communicate their ideas and images with which they have been surrounded every day since they began to put words together and create simple sentences:

> 'Our very definition as human beings is very much bound up with the stories we tell about our own lives and the world in which we live. We cannot, in our dreams, our daydreams, our ambitious fantasies, avoid the imaginative imposition of form of life' (Abbott 2002: 3).

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Through a narrative, we search for our understanding of the 'real' world and for the recognition of our life in time and space:

> '[W]herever we look in this world, we seek to grasp what we see not just in space but in time as well. Narrative gives us this understanding; it gives us what could be called the shape of time. Accordingly, our narrative perception stands ready to be activated in order to give us frame or context for even the most static and eventful scenes. And without understanding the narrative we often feel we don't understand what we see. We cannot find the meaning' (*Ibid.* 11).

Narrative rises from the tension and the relation between the outer time, which is marked off by the permanent motion of the hands of the clocks, by the astronomical cycle of the universe, by the inner time shaped by our mind and by our apprehension of incidents and events that accompany our lives during the whole period of our existence. Both the human being (the story of one's life) and his or her way of living his or her life (the narration) within the constraints of his or her internal and external experience (the discourse) of his or her life construct the narrative of an individual's world and, in union with others, the narrative of the whole human world.

The story of people born in Czechoslovakia in the second half of the twentieth century has been shaped by the collective experience of communist times and by the political pro-democratic and pro-capitalist regime change that affected the country after 1989. The people living in Czechoslovakia/the Czech Republic have reflected in their life stories upon an individual's perception of these events and borne witness to the individual's

journeys through the new developments. A new, different narrative has been created in all spheres of life.

The literary works written in this era have played an essential and creative part in the story that Czech society has produced over the years of its existence. Their narratives have attempted to capture what has been happening to individuals' lives in the post-communist world and their interpretations have been journeys taken to find out what has been happening with us, the readers living in the world of today. To sum up, their narratives have acted as

> '[t]he structuring mechanisms of the human mind' and 'the means by which [human beings] make sense out of chaos, and literature [has been] a fundamental means by which human beings explain the world to themselves, that is, make sense out of chaos' (Tyson 2006: 219).

Subsequently, the narratives of the contemporary world have been constructs of people's minds created in the moment of their recording and re-created every time a reading individual approached them. Finally, these narratives have also been narratives of individual's life when he or she decided to acknowledge them, voice them and interpret – within the time and the space of their own being. As Myers, the interpreter of Žižek's theoretical legacy, puts it:

> 'I am not the fastest athlete in the world until it is verified by the established athletics institutions. Nor am I a poet until my poems have been published. Equally, I will still be a learner-driver until I have passed the driving test. In each case, even though I will be exactly the same person with exactly the same skills, the fact of my being the fastest athlete in the world, a poet or a driver does not become operative for me or anyone else concerned until it is registered by the big Other of the Symbolic institution' (Myers 2007: 50-51).

Or, in other words, as McAfee says:

> 'we become who we are as a result of taking part in signifying processes. There is no self-aware self prior to our use of language. (…) Language [is] the discursive or signifying system in which the "the speaking subject makes and unmakes himself"' (McAfee 2004: 29).

Or in other words, as Tyson puts it:

> '[m]eaning is created by the reader in the act of reading (…) [M]eaning is produced by the play of language through the vehicle of the reader, though we generally refer

> to this process as "the reader." Furthermore, the meaning that is created is not a stable element capable of producing closure; that is, no interpretation has the final word' (Tyson 2006: 258-259).

There are various ways we can approach narratives of literary works. One approach leads from the writer's experience of the 'real' world to his or her reflection of this experience in the text. The other approach goes in the reverse direction: from a text and the 'fictive' reality a text constructs to the reader's subjective perception of this text and the reality he or she considers a text constructs. My thesis analyzes the work of two contemporary Czech writers, Emil Hakl (b. 1958) and Jan Balabán (1961-2010) and it uses both ways to approach them. It examines the relation between Hakl's and Balabán's texts, the 'reality' these texts reflect, the 'reality' these texts create and the 'reality' that 'I', the reader, re-create on the basis of my own knowledge of the world. The thesis touches on these two writers' actual individual and social experiences – as one of their sources of inspiration**;** it investigates the structure of their narratives – as a unique product of creation; it constructs the model of the world these narratives create and it looks for the possible meanings of these texts, based on the reader's (in this case my own) subjective experience of literary and social discourses that participated in the process of the text creation (or not). Somewhere in between, the thesis searches for the understanding of the text and the reality it contemplates. It looks at Hakl's and Balabán's literary work as an image, as it is:

> 'a representation of the world and the representation of reality despite the fact that it is also an individual unit and that it creates a fictive world which is real only in varying degrees.'
> ['(Literární dílo zobrazuje) a značí svět a realitu navzdory tomu, že je svébytným celkem a že buduje svět fiktivní, v různém stupni reálný.'] (Hodrová 2001: 112)

Or, in other words, because:

> '[a] literary work is a specific literary representation (a sign and a model) of reality. In varying degrees, it is focused on gaining knowledge about reality and on creating an aesthetic effect. At the same time, a literary work shows a tendency to create a reality of its own kind, its own fictive world.'
> ['Dílo je specifickým literárním vyjádřením (znakem i modelem) skutečnosti, vyjádřením v různé míře zaměřeným k poznání skutečnosti i k estetickému účinu, přičemž jeví tendenci, větší či menší, vytvářet realitu svého druhu, vlastní, fiktivní svět.'] (*Ibid.* 112)

My thesis will relate to both the unique product of human creation and the image Hakl's and Balabán's works depict and re-create.

Before we start exploring the work of the two authors mentioned above, it is important to explain what has influenced my decision to select the texts by Emil Hakl and Jan Balabán as two subject matters of my work about contemporary Czech fiction. For this reason, the thesis will begin with an introduction of both writers: it will outline their personal background; it will touch upon some aspects of their political, social and cultural experience and upon their own revelations about their writing career. In other words, it will recall the time and the place in which both writers created their work and consider whether there is anything that connects them. Subsequently, it will turn its attention to the public recognition of Hakl's and Balabán's work. This all will be done with the intention to put the literary work of both writers into the context of contemporary Czech society and with an intention to connect their testimonies with the social impact of their works. It follows from the information about the reception of the works of these two authors that the themes with which the authors deal – and which are the subject of this thesis – receive serious consideration in the ongoing public debate in the Czech Republic. This is why it is important to analyze their testimonies about contemporary life in the Czech Republic. This is also why it is important to analyze any literary testimony about contemporary life in the Czech Republic. It is a message which people give to themselves about themselves and about the reality they live. Each literary testimony contains this message. We, in our perception of these works, relate this message to our own experience of the world.

1. Facts about Hakl's and Balabán's personal lives and experiences

Both writers, Emil Hakl (b. 1958) and Jan Balabán (1961-2010), came from the same generation which grew up during the communist 1960s, experienced the 'normalized'[1] 1970s and 1980s and were affected by the post-communist era after the 1989 regime change. Emil Hakl (his real name is Jan Beneš) spent this time in the capital, Prague, and its regional surroundings. Jan Balabán lived mainly in Ostrava, in an industrial city in the north-east of Moravia, near the borders between Moravia, Silesia, Slovakia and Poland.

The central Bohemian region, and especially Prague, Prague boroughs, Prague streets, buildings and parks, local figures, local clubs and pubs, local concerts and literary

[1] In Czechoslovak history, 'normalization' is a commonly used term denoting the period between 1969 and 1987. Following the Warsaw Pact-led invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968, this period was characterized by an attempt to restore the political principles that prevailed in Czechoslovak society before the rise the reformist movement of the 1960s and to give the ruling Czechoslovak Communist Party back all of its authoritarian power.

happenings became characteristic features of Hakl's literary world. The author's professional career in various jobs and his participation in numerous cultural activities have also served as inspiration for his work, as we will explore later. In the first half of the 1980s, Hakl took part in several amateur theatre performances with a group of his friends; these included adaptations of such authors as Vladimir Khlebnikov (1885-1922)[2] and Boris Vian (1920-1959)[3]. At this time, Emil Hakl graduated from the Jaroslav Ježek Conservatoire (as the institution is called today), specializing in creative writing; later, he also completed two years of dramatic studies at the same school. In 1988, Hakl participated in the establishment of the literary group Moderní analfabet (The Modern Illiterates)[4], whose activity consisted of regular author's reading performances in various Prague and regional clubs. Their tradition was later taken over by Literární klub 8 (Literary Club 8). Hakl also cooperated with the literary Pant klub.

Under the communist regime, Hakl worked in various manual labour jobs. After being a decorator, librarian, warehouseman, petrol station attendant and sound engineer, in 1996-2000 he found himself employed as a copywriter for an advertising company; in 2001 he held the position of an editor for the fortnightly literary journal *Tvar*. Nowadays, he works as a journalist for the popular weekly glossy *Instinkt.* His articles and excerpts from his literary work have also been published in *Iniciály*, *Literární noviny*, *Aluze*, *Salon*, the cultural supplement to the daily *Právo*, the weekly magazine *Týden* and in the internet magazine *Dobrá adresa*.

Jan Balabán, on the other hand, chose Ostrava, the place where he grew up and raised his family, the place with a long history of steel-making, a city which is dominated by coal mines, steel furnaces and its surroundings, including the Beskydy Mountains, as the main locations for his prose. His work emphasizes the unique industrial architecture of the city

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[2] Vladimir Khlebnikov was a Russian poet and playwright, a representative of the Russian Futurist movement. In his poetry, he experimented with the Russian language and with the possibilities of the Cyrillic alphabet. He also wrote futurological essays.

[3] Boris Vian was a French poet, writer, musician, singer, translator, critic, actor, inventor and engineer. Under the pseudonym Vernon Sullivan, he published bizarre parodies of criminal fiction. Under his real name, he published fiction written in a highly individual writing style with surrealistic plots and made-up words. He also had a major influence on the French jazz scene with his work.

[4] The founding members of the literary group Moderní analfabet were Vítězslav Čížek, Emil Hakl, Markéta Hrbková, Jaroslav Jablonský and Jan Kment. In the following years, the composition of the group changed, some other writers joined it, such as Václav Kahuda and Petr Motýl. In 1992, Moderní analfabet changed into a civic association and started to specialize in reading performances at various clubs. In 1990-1993, the publishing house Artforum in cooperation with the group Moderní analfabet produced a literary review of the same title. The review brought out mainly the work of those writers who did not publish their work in official publishing houses during the previous regime; some of them because they were not allowed to, others because they did not want to cooperate with the communist establishment. These authors were not connected by any literary program. See http://slovnikceskeliteratury.cz.

of Ostrava, and the post communist remnants of the culture represented by working class housing estates, factories, local residential schemes and people living in them.

Balabán was brought up in a family with a Protestant intellectual tradition. His grandfather was a Protestant minister. His uncle, Milan Balabán (b. 1929), is a well-known minister, theologian and professor at the Protestant Theological Faculty at Charles University in Prague. Balabán's bond to his family tradition and to his religious faith is reflected in all of his fiction. Faith is omnipresent but it is often questioned.

Like Emil Hakl, Jan Balabán maintained contact with the alternative cultural scene from the 1980s onwards. With his brother Daniel, an artist, and other people with similar political, artistic and cultural view points (e. g. Jiří Surůvka, Jaroslav Žila, Petr Hruška and Ivan Motýl[5]) he held various meetings and unofficial exhibitions in the lofts or stairwells, sometimes also producing anthologies typed on typewriters. In one of the interviews, when discussing the beginnings of his literary career, Balabán said:

> 'We were not really terribly typical members of the underground anti-establishment; after all, we did manage to finish our university studies; we did not say to each other, "Let's ignore the official structures and create our own, alternative ones", but we found out that we could not find satisfaction in those official structures. So we did it all [the unofficial activities] mainly for our own pleasure. But it was, as I said before, also accompanied by our lack of critical judgement and by pseudo-heroism.'
> ['My jsme taky nebyli žádní undergrounďáci, my jsme nakonec ty vysoké školy vystudovali. Neřekli jsme si, tak na všechno kašlem a budeme se realizovat v jiných strukturách, my jsme akorát zjistili, že v těch oficiálních strukturách se realizovat nelze. Takže jsme to dělali hlavně samozřejmě pro své potěšení, ale bylo to, jak už jsem říkal, provázeno také nekritičností a pseudohrdinstvím.']
> (Balabán; Horák 2002: *Tvar*, vol. 18: 1, 14-15)

This attitude will turn out to have been significant for Balabán's whole writing career.

After graduating from Palacký University in Olomouc where he studied Czech and English, Balabán got a job as a technical translator for the Vítkovice Ironworks; later he also worked as a free-lance translator from English (he translated H. P. Lovecraft, Terry Eagleton and other authors) and regularly as a journalist for the Czech political weekly *Respekt*. Jan Balabán died in 2010.

What connected Emil Hakl and Jan Balabán in their lives was their age, their general political and social experiences, a similar critical attitude towards official communist

[5] Jiří Surůvka (b. 1961) is an Ostrava painter, performer and experimentator with multimedia; Jaroslav Žila (b. 1961) is an Ostrava poet; Petr Hruška (b. 1964) is an Ostrava poet, scriptwriter, literary historian and theorist; Ivan Motýl (1967) is a poet, playwriter and journalist.

culture (they participated in the creation of the underground and alternative literary structures), their involvement in various cultural activities, in journalism and in an urban existence. What made them different were the places where they live[d], their family backgrounds, their religious traditions and their individual personalities.

2. The beginnings: poetry and fiction

Both Hakl and Balabán started publishing in the 1990s. Emil Hakl brought out his first work, a book of poetry, *Rozpojená slova* (*Disconnected Words*), in 1991; the second volume *Zkušební trylky z Marsu* (*Experimental trills from Mars*) came out much later, in 2000. Since then, he has been publishing short stories and novels.

Jan Balabán published his first work, *Středověk* (*The Middle Ages*), a collection of short stories, in 1995. But, like Hakl, he also wrote poetry first, although none of his poems has appeared in a single published anthology. A little fragment of his poetic attempts can still be found in Balabán's prose debut mentioned above. However, the influence of poetry and a drive to write stories are evident in all of his fiction.

Emil Hakl and Jan Balabán have consciously decided to write fiction and both have chosen the form of short stories as well as the form of novels, although Jan Balabán also wrote a drama (*Bezruč?!*, 2009) and a graphic novel (*Srdce draka – The Heart of A Dragon*, 2001) and Hakl co-wrote a film script of his novel (*O rodičích a dětech – Of Kids and Parents*, 2008). How the literary work by Emil Hakl differs from the work by Jan Balabán and whether there is something that connects them on the semantic level and on the level of form is one of the main themes of this thesis. The reality which these works depict is another one.

3. Public acknowledgement. Critical recognition.

As it was mentioned above, Emil Hakl and Jan Balabán published their literary works after the 1989 fall of the communist regime. They brought their first works out at the time of political, social and cultural transformation of Czech society and at the time of the arrival of publishing freedom. Generally speaking, unlike during the communist era, since the fall of communism, Czech writers have not had to struggle with any political and cultural restrictions in order to publish their work in recognised publishing houses. But at the same time,

> 'literature lost its role which it had played in the past, specifically from the period of the National Revival[6] onwards when it stood in not only for all the other fields of culture, but also for politology, sociology, philosophy and journalism. The concept of the writer as the "nation's conscience" disintegrated after the "velvet revolution"[7]'
> ['literatura zcela zjevně ztratila roli, kterou hrála v minulosti, od doby národního obrození, kdy literatura suplovala nejen veškerou ostatní kulturu, ale také politologii, sociologii, filozofii a novinářství. Pojem spisovatele jako "svědomí národa" se po "sametové revoluci" rozložil.']
> (Bílek 2003: *Britské listy:* http://www.blisty.cz/art/12456.html)

Nowadays, Czech literature does not play the role of the mouthpiece of the nation, for nowadays there is no totalitarianism in the Czech Republic, no oppressive regime which would suppress an individual's freedom in the name of ideology. There is no need to use literature as a weapon against an ideology of the state anymore as the external conditions which required literature to be the "nation's conscience" have disappeared. Much of the former substitute role of Czech literature was taken over by the media after the fall of communism. Nowadays, Czech literature concentrates on entertaining readers by dealing with various subject matters, including those which were in the past taboo. Contemporary Czech literature is now a dynamic part of contemporary Czech culture and at the same time an important vehicle which contributes substantially to our understanding of contemporary Czech society and the world it creates.

The literary work of both Emil Hakl and Jan Balabán is an integral and highly regarded part of contemporary Czech culture. It has received accolades from the Czech reading public as well as from Czech literary critics, as we can see from the following list of various awards and from the large number of articles and reviews published about the work of these two writers in the Czech Republic as well as abroad (see the Bibliography).

Until now, Emil Hakl has published two collections of poems and six works of fiction (see below). Together with Petr Šabach (b. 1951) and Martin Šmaus (b. 1965), two contemporary Czech writers, he also published a collection of short stories, *Někdy jindy, někde jinde* (*In Another Time, in Another Place*, 2009). His own collection of short stories, *Konec světa* (*The End of the World*), was released in three subsequent editions (2001, 2002

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[6] The National Revival was a cultural movement which began in the Czech lands at the end of the 18th and lasted well into the 19th century. The leading representatives of this movement aimed to revive what they saw as the characteristic national identity of the Czech lands and Czech culture. They did it mostly by starting to re-use the Czech language as a vehicle of intellectual, scholarly and artistic discourse.

[7] The 'Velvet revolution' is a term which denotes the non-violent regime change which took place in Czechoslovakia from 17th to 29th November 1989. It resulted in the collapse of the communist regime and in the introduction of democracy to Czechoslovakia.

and 2003). His novel, *Intimní schránka Sabriny Black* (*Sabrina Black's Intimate Mailbox*, 2002), was re-edited by the author and published in a new 'final cut' version in 2010. His novella, *O rodičích a dětech* (*Of Kids and Parents*), was published in three subsequent editions (2002, 2003 and 2008). In 2003, this novella received the Magnesia Litera Prize[8] for the best contemporary Czech work of fiction. The novella was translated into English in 2007. Marek Tomin's translation, *Of Kids and Parents,* was nominated for the Oxford-Weidenfeld Prize in 2009 and was one of the seven books of the year featured in the *RALPH* magazine. This novella was also made into a film directed by Vladimír Michálek (in 2008). Hakl's latest work, *Pravidla směšného chování* (*The Rules of Laughable Behaviour*), received a nomination for Magnesia Litera Prize (2011), the Josef Škvorecký Prize for the best work of fiction in 2010 and the 2nd place in the *Lidové noviny* Award for the best literary work of the year 2010.

During his professional career, Jan Balabán published seven works of fiction, one graphic novel and one drama (see below). He also contributed his texts to two collections of stories written by a selected number of contemporary Czech writers: *7edm* (*7even*, 2005) and *Nech mě žít* (*Let me Live*, 2006). His collection of short stories, *Prázdniny* (*Holidays*), was published twice (1998 and 2007). The second edition, dated 2007, included an audio CD with the author's own recording of four stories from the collection. His novel, *Kudy šel anděl* (*Where the Angel Walked*), was published twice (2003 and 2005) and the collection of short stories, *Možná že odcházíme* (*Maybe We Are Leaving*), in three editions (2004, 2007 and 2011). In 2004, *Možná že odcházíme* (*Maybe We Are Leaving*) received the *Lidové noviny* Award for the best literary work and a nomination for the State Prize for Literature. In 2005, the collection was awarded the Magnesia Litera Award for the best work of fiction and later also it received the award Magnesia Litera – The Book of the 2000-2010 decade. Balabán's last novel, *Zeptej se táty* (*Ask Your Dad*), which was published after his death, received the *Lidové noviny* Award – the Book of the Year for 2010, the weekly magazine *Respekt* Book of the Year Award for 2010 and the Magnesia Litera Book of the Year Prize for 2010. In 2012; the same novel was recorded and released on audio CD.

[8] Magnesia Litera is an annual book award held in the Czech Republic. It is awarded by an independent association called Litera, which includes members of all the Czech literary and book market organizations. It covers all literary genres in eight categories (prose, poetry, children's book, non-fiction, essay/journalism, translation, publishing achievement, book debut and also a main prize, The Czech Book of the Year).

In 2010, the publishing house Host brought out the first volume of Balabán's collective work, *Povídky* (*A Collection of Short Stories*). The second volume containing novels and novellas was published a year later. In 2011, Balabán's family, friends and colleagues gathered their memories and views of the author in their collective work entitled *Honzo, ahoj! Setkání s Janem Balabánem* (*Honza, good bye! An Encounter with Jan Balabán*). On 29th December 2011, Czech Television 2 broadcast the documentary: *Jan Balabán svými vlastními slovy. Záznamy z let 1998 až 2010. Dokumentární film o Janu Balabánovi, českém spisovateli, překladateli a publicistovi* (*Jan Balabán, in his own words. Recordings from 1998–2010. A Documentary about Jan Balabán, Czech writer, translator and journalist.*)

Emil Hakl and Jan Balabán have presented their work of fiction at various literary events and reading sessions in the Czech Republic as well as abroad. Their names are mentioned in several anthologies, textbooks and critical works. Their fiction can be found in almost every Czech library and bookshop.

A closer look at the list of Hakl's and Balabán's awards and their publishing successes makes us consider some interesting points about their literary work. The works of these two writers have been 'appreciated' by both the general reading public and by literary theorists and critics. The literary texts by Hakl and Balabán have been widely read, which suggests that there is a connection between both writers' works and their readers on the level of common interest, experience, affection and similarity. The literariness of Hakl's and Balabán's works has been noted and recognized by number of literary theoreticians and critics, which makes us think about the existence of some kind of harmony between the form and the essence of the texts. This gives the writings of both Hakl and Balabán a rather unique position. It is possible to suggest that the popularity and literary 'quality' of Hakl's and Balabán's works lies in their meaning, in the message which they give the world about the world. Nevertheless, it also lies in the way these works speak to and affect their readers. For '[m]eaning is not made just denotatively, with words denoting thoughts or things. Meaning is made in large part by the poetic and affective aspects of texts as well' (McAfee 2004: 13). The meaning of Hakl's and Balabán's works seems to connect both aspects well. These literary works are entertaining, hence they have an aesthetic value for the reader, but they are also seen as an interesting analysis of the picture which contemporary Czech society creates on the basis of its own experience of the real world and about itself, so they also have a cognitive value for the reader.

4. Theoretical background

My thesis on the construction of contemporary reality in selected works of Czech fiction consists of two parts: the first part analyzes Emil Hakl's literary works; the second part analyzes the fiction by Jan Balabán. The part focusing on Emil Hakl's work is based on a detailed semiotic analysis of a single volume of his writing. Comparisons are then drawn with the whole context of Hakl's fiction – both in relation to the 'real' world and the contemporary 'reality' of Czech writing. The chapter, 'Life according to Jan Beneš, by Emil Hakl', explores these literary texts as the story of one subjective narrator and his perception of life around him. This is because I believe that the whole of Hakl's fiction is a variation on one individual life – Jan Beneš's life. It deals with the transformations of Jan's life. The volume entitled *Konec světa* (*The End of the World*, 2001) is looked at from the perspective of the identity of the narrator, the identity of the subjective narrator in relation to the author, the narrator's 'I' in relation to his image of the outer world, the narrator's 'I' and his acceptance or non-acceptance of the world and the narrator's 'I' and his perception of being within the world. The identity of the narrator is analysed from the perspective of his awareness of the self, of his body, of his actions and of his mind, as it reacts and interacts with the world. Some aspects of the psychoanalytical approach to the human being have proved useful here, especially the thoughts articulated by the French theorist, Jacques Lacan (1901-1981), and their application to the identity of literary characters and the way they see each other and perceive their own selves within the 'fictive-real'.

The narrator's position within the world is then considered externally in relation to the position of other characters and to the multi-perspective and multi-dimensional reality in which nothing is stable and everything flows; in which nothing is certain and everything is fragmented. In this section, the thesis follows the ideas which have been formulated by the scholars responding to the theory of post-structuralism, especially by Jacques Derrida (1930-2004), Luce Irigaray (b. 1930) and Geoffrey Hartman (b. 1929). In Tyson's interpretation, it is these theoreticians who claim that

> '[o]ur mental life consists not of concepts – not of solid, stable meanings – but of a fleeting, continually changing play of signifiers. These signifiers may seem to be stable concepts – they look stable enough when we hear them spoken or see them written down! But they don't operate in a stable manner in our mind' (Tyson 2006: 252-253).

The narrator's perception of the world within these concepts is analyzed from a subjective perspective, yet acknowledging that this view is not the only one view that applies in the individual's narrative of the world but that it is also influenced by the interplay of various contexts which the contemporary world signifies. In Hakl's works, this thesis explores possible interactions between his texts and the texts written by other authors and, on the basis of these findings it attempts to construct their fictive-real. The thesis is guided in this by post-structuralist theory on inter-textuality, specifically by the theoretical work of Julia Kristeva (b. 1941). Finally, the subjectivity of Hakl's narrator is assessed in relation to the subjectivity of the author – Jan Beneš-the narrator in relation to Jan Beneš-the writer, his own experience of the 'real' world and the reader's perception of it.

The part of the thesis dedicated to Balabán's fiction is structured differently, just as Balabán's fiction is structured differently. Here, the thesis does not analyze the subjectivity of one narrator, as there is no single narrating subjectivity behind Balabán's texts but there are many. It analyzes all Balabán's texts as they expand on individual themes and on a variety of individual characters. It explores various situations as they appear and re-appear in the lives of Balabán's male and female narrating and non-narrating characters. It considers how Balabán's texts touch upon human relationships, erotic love, family and friendship and how they see their position in the world. In Balabán's fiction, we find human beings in the middle of society, yet alone. They are human beings facing their mortality and the passing time. They are human beings who constantly question God and the universe.

In the analysis of the texts by Jan Balabán, semiotics is used as the main theoretical approach to the narrative. The analysis focuses on the interplay between personal narrators and their non-narrating counterparts and on the way they all occupy or swap their positions and roles both in a given moment and in sequence. This is one of the key bits of information for understanding the structure and dynamics of Balabán's fictive world. However, the analysis of Balabán's fiction is, more than in Hakl's case, influenced by psychoanalysis, especially in the parts focused on love and family relationships (as these are the main themes of Balabán's fiction), and by the theory of deconstruction – especially in those parts where it discusses the multiplicity of individuals' testimonies and their perception of the world in terms of binary opposites. Also, in the case of Balabán's fiction, the analysis considers the relationship between the writer's experience of his own life and the fictive reality of his texts. For autobiographical inspiration in Balabán's fiction, as in Hakl's fiction, is undeniable.

The final part of this thesis is comparative and conclusive. In its last chapter, the thesis summarizes the previously carried out analysis of Emil Hakl's and Jan Balabán's work, compares their forms of delivery and contemplates their testimonies about the world and to the world. It considers their work in the context of contemporary Czech culture and in the context of a social reality these texts reflect upon, construct and reconstruct. Here, the thesis uses the approach introduced by those literary theorists whose work expands on the ideas of New Historicism and Culture Criticism, for instance the ideas developed by Stephen Greenblatt (b. 1943) and Louis A. Montrose. According to them,

> 'literary texts are cultural artefacts that can tell us something about the interplay of discourses, the web of social meanings, operating in the time and place in which the text was written. And they can do so because the literary text is itself a part of the interplay of discourses, a thread in the dynamic web of social meaning. (…) [T]he literary text and the historical situation from which it emerged are equally important because text (the literary work) and context (the historical conditions that produced it) are mutually constitutive: they create each other. Like the dynamic interplay between individual identity and society, literary texts shape and are shaped by their historical contexts' (Tyson 2006: 291-292).

One cannot really know what the person involved in the creation of a particular narrative experienced, thought or believed. One can only follow the way the person interpreted his or her personal experience and, based on this knowledge, construct his or her own interpretation of their account of events and things:

> '[T]he literary text, through its representation of human experience at a given time and place, is an interpretation of history. As such, the literary text maps the discourses circulating at the time it was written and is itself one of those discourses. That is, the literary text shaped and was shaped by the discourses circulating in the culture in which it was produced. Likewise, our interpretations of literature shape and are shaped by the culture in which we live' (*Ibid.* 295).

In this sense, Hakl's and Balabán's works are interpretations of history and therefore also interpretations of culture. They construct their own fictive world by using discourses existing at the time they were written and at the same time, they also create one of those discourses. The aim of this thesis is to explore how the perception of Hakl's and Balabán's works shapes the perception of the time and the culture in which these works were written and the perception of the time and the culture in which we live. In other words, the aim of this thesis is to explore how the perception of Hakl's and Balabán's works shapes the perception of Czech reality in which these works were written and in which we currently live.

Finally, it is important to point out that all translations of Hakl's and Balabán's fiction and other texts used in this study have been made especially for the purposes of this work. This is because, apart from Hakl's novella, *O rodičích a dětech* (*Of Kids and Parents*), English translations of Hakl's and Balabán's fiction are not available.

I. 'Life according to Jan Beneš' by Emil Hakl

Introduction

> ‘It was my greatest desire to pick myself up and get out of the city early in the morning. But by the time the alarm clock went, it turned eleven, by the time I was finishing my cup of coffee, it turned half past two, by the time Pavlik pressed the doorbell, it turned four. From the way the light landed on my curtains, I guessed it must be a beautiful day outside. Pavlik and I both drank an extra cup of strong coffee and then set out for a stroll.
>
> In front of the greengrocers next door, we saw a gypsy man, a shop manager hanging about and smoking, fully concentrated on his cigarette. He was trying to scratch his back but with little success. A radio was booming from the inside of the shop. The deregulation of the rental costs was again postponed, indefinitely. The gross domestic product has dropped by two tenths of a per cent. The sign, *Emil’s Greengrocers,* was manually painted on a black gable. Around the contorted letters decorated in an oriental style, dreamy kohlrabies, bananas, radishes and sickly looking, translucent pineapples levitated, and millions of midges sat on shrunken celeries and carrots displayed behind the shop window. The air was full of radiant dust and fluff. Illuminated by the sun, the tower of the television transmitter stood ankle-deep in the paddling pool of houses, as though it was a feature from a book by Jules Verne. As if Verne’s Steel City began to rise from there, from somewhere in the mists above the Žižkov hillside.
>
> Pavlik yawned: “Let’s have a pint somewhere…”
>
> The world around was drowning in ceaseless conversation. Restless, buzzing vapour of talk was hovering above the continents. The ether was packed with useless information. It was indescribably pleasant to go for a pint with Pavlik and drink it with him in silence.’
>
> [‘Mojí největší touhou bylo sebrat se a hned ráno vypadnout z města. Ale když zařinčel budík, bylo jedenáct, když jsem dopíjel kafe, bylo půl třetí, a když zazvonil Pavlik, byly čtyři. Podle toho, jak světlo dopadalo na závěs v pokoji, musel být venku nádherný den. Vypil jsem s Pavlikem ještě jednoho turka a vyšli jsme na ulici.
>
> Před zeleninou ve vedlejším baráku postával vedoucí, dvoumetrákový cikán, zhluboka kouřil a marně se snažil poškrábat na zádech. Z nitra krámu dunělo rádio. Deregulace nájemného byla opět odložena na neurčito. Hrubý domácí produkt klesl o dvě desetiny procenta. Na černém, ručně malovaném štítu byl vyveden nápis *Zelenina u Emila*. Kolem pokroucených, orientálně zdobných písmen levitovaly zasněné kedlubny, banány, ředkvičky a ananasy, nedužívé a průsvitné, a na scvrklých celerech a mrkvičkách ve výloze posedávaly miliony drobounkých mušek. Vzduch byl plný zářícího prachu a chmýří. Světlem zalitá věž televizního vysílače stála po kotníky v brouzdališti domů jako atribut z verneovky. Jako by tam někde v té mlze nad stráněmi Žižkova už začínalo Ocelové město.
>
> Pavlik zívnul: “Tak pudem někam na jedno…”
>
> Svět kolem nás se zalykal nepřetržitými rozhovory. Nad kontinenty se vznášel neklidný, bzučivý opar řečí. Éter byl nabit neužitečnými informacemi. Bylo nepopsatelně příjemné jít s Pavlikem na pivo a mlčet.’] (*KS*: 5).

With these words, Emil Hakl opens *Konec světa* (*The End of the World*, henceforth *KS*). The very first sentence of the first text in this volume pre-signifies the tone that will become an important characteristic feature of the whole book and later also of the whole

literary output by Emil Hakl. For, as we will soon discover, all Hakl's narratives, no matter if they are short stories collected in a single volume or if they are novels, are connected by one and the same narrating character – Jan Beneš. Some of the narratives take place in his active presence (e. g. the nine stories of *Konec světa*), others are hidden behind the narrating voice of another character (e.g. Láďa in 'Láďovo poslední tango'). How these narratives work in relation to the subject of the narration, to the reality they construct and in relation to the readers will be discussed in the following chapters.

> 'It was my greatest desire to pick myself up and get out of the city early in the morning.' ['Mojí největší touhou bylo sebrat se a hned ráno vypadnout z města.'] (*KS*: 5)

What we have here is the subjective narrator using the means of internal monologue to express his desire to leave the city. And what is the city? A greengrocers', a shop down the street, a gypsy man, a booming radio, deregulated rent prices, the GDP, the tower of the television transmitter and radiant dust. The suburban areas of Jules Verne's 'steel city'[9] bathed in sunlight. This all makes up the atmosphere of the city which the narrator of this passage sees, feels and describes as he walks through it. It is the narrator's own, subjective, visual and auditory perception of the city which functions as a background for the story that starts and continues with his 'I', moving about in the streets of Žižkov, one of the Prague quarters, and its localities. The city is contained within the narrator's eyes and ears. Through his subjective testimony, we see that it is a place of various colours and noises and words; a chaos in which it was still 'incredibly pleasant to enjoy a beer with Pavlik and drink it with him in silence.' Our narrator is completely swallowed up by the atmosphere of the place and yet he desires to escape from it. He wants to abandon the city but, instead, he walks about within it. He lets himself be surrounded by the city's striking narratives and yet he enjoys a drink in a silent place. All that comes afterwards happens within the constraints of these contradictions. The narrator's 'I' is considered within these texts as being in harmony with the world and at the same time in conflict with it; as being a part of it as well as outside it; as being in harmony and at the same time in conflict with the 'orderly', and the 'chaotic', the 'fictive-real' and the 'fictive-imaginary'. In an attempt to capture the reality of Hakl's narratives, we will not only discuss the nature of the narrating self (speaking to us through the narrating character of Jan Beneš) but we will also look at

[9] The reference is to Jules Verne's (1828-1905) novel *The Begum's Fortune* (1879).

the way the above contradictions shape both the narrator and the narrative discourse and therefore the world they construct.

Hakl's first prose work, *Konec světa*, published in 2001, will serve as a point of departure for my analysis. This will start with the narrating self.

1. Hakl's narrator

1.1 'I' as the subjective narrator of the text

> 'I was passing Mostecká Street when Renata appeared, suddenly, walking towards me dressed in a flapping skirt. Like two individuals lost somewhere in a desert, we greeted each other and then we went for a drink.
>
> She told me all about London, how busy the city was. How she went to a pub there, but it wasn't a pub, it was rather a wailing cave; everyone was dressed like a sinner who had been sent to hell, all were drunk and stoned, unable to recognize who they were. Cages were hanging down from the ceiling above their heads and naked girls were sitting in those cages. And how everywhere she went people said, "Hey, it's not really our problem, but you shouldn't be taking so much of the stuff, see, you are in an overdrive". And how she said, taking what, how much of what, and they said, well, you know, it's crystal clear …'
>
> ['Šel jsem Mosteckou, a najednou jsem uviděl proti sobě rázovat Renatu ve vlající sukni. Přivítali jsme se jako dva ztracení na poušti a šli to zapít.
>
> Vyprávěla mi o Londýně, jak to tam žilo. Jak tam přišla do hospody, ale nebyla to hospoda, byla to spíš jeskyně nářků: všichni tam byli oháknutí jako hříšníci v pekle, sjetí a zkouření, že nevěděli, čí jsou, a nad hlavami se jim houpaly na stropě zavěšené klece a v těch klecích seděly nahaté holky. A jak jí všude, kam přišla, říkali: hele, ty, nic nám do toho není, ale neměla bys toho tak hrozně moc brát, dyť seš rozjetá jako vlak, a jak ona říkala: a čeho jako brát, co brát, a oni říkali: no dyť víš, dyť je to jasný...'] (*KS*: 50-51) .

Generally speaking, each story that is told is mediated by the narrative discourse. In the world of literary fiction, a story is constructed by a voice (the narrator), a style of writing (the writer) and by the reader's interpretations (Abbott 2002: 17). The voice in the passage quoted above belongs to a man speaking about his experience from the first person perspective ('I was passing...'). It is his voice that takes us into the internal world of the main character and his perception of what is happening around. It would be, therefore, crucial 'to determine the kind of person we have for a narrator because this lets us know just how [he] injects into the narration [his] own needs and desires and limitations, and whether we should fully trust the information we are getting' (Abbott 2002: 65-66).

Hakl's narrator of both examples, given above, and also of most of his other texts, as we will see further below, belongs to the narrated world; he lives within it together with many other characters which appear in the story. He tells the stories that he himself has had a chance to experience either at the given moment or earlier. He also tells the stories which he has heard from the other characters. He presents these stories as his own acts of perception. The narrator's 'I' in *Konec světa* is the actor, a persona actively participating in the world in which he lives ('I was passing Mostecká Street'); the 'I' is the subjective narrator and the observer of all that is happening ('when Renata appeared, suddenly'); the

'I' is a thinker, a philosopher of his own mind (he develops various theories about human existence, about society, about Europe) and finally also the 'I' is the mediator of other people's thoughts and speech ('She told me all about London...'), even when his own presence hides behind another voice.

Each 'I' that functions in Hakl's narratives represents a different role the narrator holds within the process of his narration. We will examine how these individual roles work and interact on the level of the narrative discourse and also how they impact on our understanding of the world, which is being constructed by the narration.

1.2 The narrator of *Konec světa*: the identity

We have determined that the narrator of Hakl's *Konec světa* is a man. He is Jan Beneš, the narrating 'I' and the being 'I' of the story he shares with us. He lives in Prague. The time is the end of the 20th century and the first years of the 21st century. Apart from this, what else do we know about the narrator? How does he present himself to the reader? What is his place in the world he creates and perceives? What testimony about his world does he provide?

Jan Beneš's perception of his own personality is created in interaction with the world in which he lives. His personality develops from numerous encounters with other people – with women, with his friends, with his family and with random people – and from the situations to which these encounters lead him. At the same time, his personality is also shaped by his own perception of himself and by his doubts whether it is true. This is again happening within a process of comparing contradictions of different conflicting visions – 'I' as 'I see myself', 'I' as 'I am seen by others'; 'I' as 'I articulate myself within the world', 'I' as 'I listen to the world and to all it says about me'; and finally, 'I' as what 'I want from life' and 'I' as 'what I should be wanting from life'. All these different approaches confuse the character's internal world and the process of construction of his external reality. All these different approaches have the greatest impact on the narrator's personal relationships, on his work and on his overall attitude to society (not just Czech/Czechoslovak society) and what should the individual's place be within it.

Jan Beneš is about 40 years old. He lives alone or occasionally with his friends, partners or random people. As far as we learn from this particular book, he is divorced and open to sexual relationships with women. He works and he does not work; he enjoys and at the same time dislikes being with friends. He enjoys and dislikes being alone. Whenever he

looks at himself, it is more with emphasized disgust and irony than with self-confidence. As a result, his own image of his physical himself is rather raw, quite bitter and definitely far from any iconic glossy magazine model of male beauty. After one of his sexual adventures, during which he and his partner mutually shaved their bodies, the narrator describes, in quite an expressive manner, his image reflected in the mirror:

> 'I was horrified. I saw a swollen baby, ninety-kilos of weight. A larva with a shaven, rapidly blinking human head attached to it. I saw a bald creature insulting Mother Nature's honest intentions.'
> ['Zděsil jsem se. Uviděl jsem napuchlé devadesátikilové nemluvně. Moučného červa s přimontovanou ostříhanou, rychle mrkající lidskou hlavou. Uviděl jsem jakousi lysou kreaturu, urážející poctivé záměry matky přírody.'] (*KS*: 209).

Or elsewhere, this time at a countryside pond where he goes for a swim, he says:

> 'It came to my mind that, for the female part of the audience, I should pull my stomach back, at least a little bit. But I decided I would not give a damn. It was one of those moments when there was no point in pretending.'
> ['Napadlo mě, že bych s ohledem na dívčí část obecenstva mohl alespoň trochu zatáhnout břicho, ale hned jsem se na to vykašlal. Byl to jeden z momentů, kdy nestojí za to nic předstírat.'] (*KS:* 46-47)

When the narrator talks about his body, he uses the image of a 'larva' or, to be more literal, the image of a 'flour-beetle' (see I., 3.2), a beast which he regards as something quite ugly, shapeless and fat; as something that is not pleasant to see. Even more, he says that he is 'horrified' by the image of himself he sees in the mirror. Nevertheless, one thing is the way he describes himself (in a negative manner), the other is what he does with his perception of the self and how he confronts it, and as it seems, he does not confront it at all. Instead, he turns his head away in a gesture of a careless man:

> 'Instead I pushed Radka back into her bed and once more jumped in as well.'
> ['Raději jsem dostrkal Radku k posteli a skočil zase zpátky do té zahřáté tůně.'] (*KS:* 209)

In the bed, the narrator behaves in a resigned manner, just like when he went swimming: instead of pulling his belly back, he decides to ignore it.

The narrator uses a mirror, water or other people's eyes to reflect upon his own image but, no less importantly, also upon his own behaviour. After one of his drinking nights, he pulls out a kitchen knife and wants to stick it into his friend because he had vomited on his books. Immediately thereafter, the narrator's thoughts turn inside and against his own

actions. Suddenly, he reflects on what he has tried to do, criticizing himself for his selfish behaviour:

> 'What a beast you are I told myself. Books are closer to you than a human being I told myself. Than a friend.'
> ['Co seš to za hovado, říkal jsem si. Knihy jsou ti bližší než člověk, říkal jsem si. Než kamarád.'] (*KS:* 62-63)

Elsewhere, we learn about the narrator from a dialogue he leads with some of the people he encounters:

> "But Honza, you *mustn't* be alone. Loneliness is not good for you."
> "Why do you think that?"
> "Because, when you're alone, you are incapable of being happy. (…) *Especially* you! When you're alone, you are almost invisible! When you're alone, you hardly *exist!*"
> [„Honza, ale. Ty *nesmíš* být sám. Samota pro tebe není dobrá." „Proč myslíš?" „Protože když ty sám, nejsi schopen být šťastný." (...) „*Speciálně* ty! Když ty sám, ty nejsi vidět skoro! Když ty sám, tak skoro vůbec *nejsi*!"] (*KS:* 23)

To want to pull in one's stomach and not to do it, to want to attack a friend for his careless behaviour and not to, and to seek out loneliness while he thinks he 'should not' – these are the two salient sides of the narrator's personality, or at least those two aspects of his personality which the narrator decided to tell us about. Whilst one side of Jan Beneš's personality acts instinctively, the other seems to follow external rules, and the narrator is aware of both types of his behaviour. He wants to live in total, 'natural' freedom of human individuals, yet he knows that he lives in a world which is ruled by constraints and that individuals are expected to conform to certain rules imposed on them by society. This is the way he perceives it. He fights against the imposed rules – as a human being, as a man, and perhaps even more as an employee of an advertisement agency and as a journalist who is in everyday contact with poster-like images of 'ideal beauty' and with the glossy magazine 'propaganda' demanding that he should have a perfect body and a perfect lifestyle.[10] Describing himself in a negative manner is his natural reaction to the world of proposed images and norms.

[10] These are patterns that are more usually imposed on women. It was Mark Simpson (1968), an English journalist, writer and broadcaster specializing in popular culture, media and masculinity, who first pointed out the increasing popularity of featuring masculinity on the pages of popular 'glossy' magazines published in the 1990s. To describe this phenomenon, Simpson invented the term 'the metrosexual man'. According to him, 'the typical metrosexual is a young man with money to spend, living in or within easy reach of a metropolis -- because that's where all the best shops, clubs, gyms and hairdressers are'. Working

Jan Beneš is a man in his middle years who sees himself as a person without any particular physical sex appeal for women. It is important to stress that this is his own entirely subjective view because, as we will see, women do not necessarily seem to care that his body is imperfect, they still sleep with him anyway. Furthermore, his friends and other people seem to like his company too. No matter how rude he might sometimes be to them (or he thinks he is), his company is often sought out.

The fact that the narrator 'presents himself' as an unattractive man can be interpreted in two ways: as a pose he assumes in order to excuse his own inability to look 'better' ('I am what I am and I cannot change it' – due to his lack of confidence or laziness) or a pose he assumes in order to express a carefree attitude towards the shape of his own body and the shape of things in general ('I am what I want to be so leave me alone') whilst he thinks something else. So even on the level of what he feels and thinks, there are two contradicting powers that contribute to the shaping of the narrator's life: his instinctive reactions and the impact of social rules. The narrator is playing with both of them. He listens to his instincts and suppresses them. He adapts to the social rules and rejects them.

These two factors also influence the attitude the narrator employs during his encounters with other people. He is angry with his friend who messed up his books but, at the same time, he admits that this attitude might be selfish and unfair. People around him comment on the conflict which is present in his behaviour. The Danish Arab, Husta, with whom the narrator conducts the dialogue on loneliness quoted above, points out to him that, when he is alone, he is not 'capable of being happy'. Husta warns Jan Beneš that loneliness, which he perhaps 'instinctively' seeks, does not seem to have a positive impact on his personality. In Husta's view, Jan Beneš 'should not' be alone. But why?

Where does this narrator's split personality come from? What are the causes of his indecisiveness that leaves the narrator always wandering between two opposite attitudes? Is it his lack of confidence that makes him question all he sees or does? (But he does see and do things.) Is it his lack of interest in other people's views? (But he does listen to other people.) Is he afraid to confront his own desires? (But he does confront them.) Is he disgusted by the prevailing social norms? (But he does participate in social life.) To answer all these questions and relate the answers to the reality the narrative constructs, we need to learn more about Jan Beneš's world now.

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as a journalist and in the advertising industry, Hakl's narrator is fully aware of the rising popularity of masculine imagery in the media. Hence he reflects on it.

See more, http://www.marksimpson.com/pages/journalism/metrosexual_beckham.html

1.3 Emil Hakl & Jan Beneš

'In some cases, when the voice is strong or interesting enough, it may be that the narrator [him]self, rather than the story, is the centre of interest', says Abbott in his introduction to the theory of the narrative (Abbott 2002: 65-66). This seems to be the case in Hakl's work. *Konec světa* is a story of one man and his perception of reality. It is this man's voice that stands in the centre of the narrative and shapes all that comes into his mind and that comes out of it into a story of the world. That story is called Jan Beneš (or Honza Beneš in a variation of the name). In this sense, the first question is who this Jan Beneš is.

Jan Beneš is the main character of Hakl's work. He is the narrator of the text. He is also the writer of the text, or, to be more precise, the real name of the person who acts behind the mask of the pen-name Emil Hakl as the real writer of the text. Jan Beneš-the narrator is approximately forty years old at the time when the story takes place; Jan Beneš-the writer was born in 1958. Jan Beneš-the narrator lives in Prague; Jan Beneš-the writer also does. [11]

These things suggest that *Konec světa* is inspired by Hakl's own life or, at least, that Jan Beneš-the writer 'uses' real people, real places and events to create a fictive 'real' which is presented in the book. He uses his perception of real people (e. g. Jan Beneš), real places (e. g. Prague, the Žižkov and the Letná quarters) and real events to construct the fictive reality of his book. He uses his perception of the self in order to construct the character and the main narrator, Jan Beneš. Finally, he uses his perception of some features of his own self in order to construct the whole character of Jan Beneš. Nevertheless, how close to the real world Hakl's fictive reality is and how much it reflects just the sheer joy of the writer's playful imagination that is the subject of the reader's construction. The writer, no matter how convincing he may be, is only a vehicle through whom the message is channelled and passed to its audience. '[I]t is not man as conscious subject who thinks, acts or speaks, but the linguistic unconscious that determines his every thought, action and utterance' (Burke 1992: 13). It is not a reality that Hakl imposes on us that we read about in his texts. It is reality itself that 'uses' Hakl as a means of communication between the outside world and us. '[A] text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash' (*Ibid.* 25). Furthermore, it is not the writer who gives the text its meaning but the reader who does it in the process of his or

[11] For more comparisons, see the Introduction chapter.

her reading. '[The reader] is simply that *someone* who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted' (*Ibid.* 27). The author reappears afterwards, 'as a desire of the reader's, a spectre spirited back into existence by the critic himself'(*Ibid.* 30). If Burke is right, it is not Hakl's subjective and conscious self that creates the text. It is the linguistic unconscious that determines the content of his writing. The writer chooses the form in which the content will be passed to the readers. However, only the readers can give this content (and form) its meaning.

When I, as a reader, stated that the text of *Konec světa* was inspired by Jan Beneš's own life, I was referring to the result of my reading experience of Hakl's books and to my own knowledge (and interpretation) of the world. From my own experience, I knew that certain places existed, certain events happened and certain people lived. But there were also other sources such as, for example, the articles and the interviews published in various periodicals that made me consider the autobiographical inspiration of Hakl's work.[12] For it was from these articles and interviews I learnt about the writer's perception of his own life and discovered certain similarities between the story of *Konec světa* and the story of Hakl's life. This information can sometimes be gleaned also from some of the works of Hakl's literary friends. See, for instance, a text written by Václav Kahuda: *Technologie dubnového večera* (*The Technology of an April Evening*, 2000). In this work by Kahuda, Jan Beneš is one of the two main characters and here he also carries certain attributes which connect him with both the narrator and the writer of Hakl's text.

In order to examine Hakl's construction of reality, we need to analyze the identity of Jan Beneš-the character because he is the main subjective narrator of Hakl's texts and because it is his story that he shares with us, the readers. In order to understand his identity, we need to consider all the information available to us, no matter whether it has come from the text only or also from the external world (see the above debate on the autobiographical inspiration of Hakl's fiction). Only a combination of both can give us the desired result.

Speaking in general, every literary work is the product of reality. Every narrative, no matter if autobiographical, biographical, fantastic or documentary, is, to a certain level, inspired by the real. Hence, the narrative of *Konec světa* is also inspired by the real – regardless of the fact that the author has tried to use his own perception of real persons, places and events for the construction of a fictive world that he has created or totally fictive persons, places and events that remind the reader only of the 'real' by their structure.

[12] See some articles on Emil Hakl and the interviews with him which are listed in the bibliographical section of this thesis.

However, this is only one way of understanding a literary work. Another way of understanding it is to look at it as a piece of autobiographical writing.

Emil Hakl is not the only writer who uses personal experience as a source of inspiration for his writing. He works within a vibrant contemporary tradition of autobiographic or semi-autobiographic literature. Czech literary scholar Aleš Haman has pointed out that Czech fiction has been developing along two main lines since the 1990s.[13] In his view, the first line has tended towards the deconstruction of the narrative using a sophisticated but tricky game of various associations. This type of literature mixes fantastic visions with real images. This is, according to Haman, the line of fantastic, imaginative and metaphysical literature. Its representatives are usually regarded as literary postmodernists, even though not all of them accept such a label.[14] The prose of these authors is based on their creative personalities and on their lust for freedom. Their stories are mostly set in a city (often Prague), which is full of bizarre spaces, secret corners, cellars and labyrinths, at the same time reflecting the mythology of the current era with all its icons – advertising, computer games, mass media. Behind the secret, though real places, new spaces inhabited by mysterious creatures are discovered. Fantastic plants and animals complete the picture of a 'chaotic' world. Such narratives are inspired by a desire to explore the depths of the collective consciousness. They use the principles of folk tales, particularly the never ending fight between good and evil; they re-use old allegories and fables and shock their readers by re-interpretations of traditional tales and legends. This type of literature is characterized by intentional work with a number of existing texts and their combinations. Thus a complicated structure of meaning is created within every new narrative.

The second line of contemporary Czech prose, says Haman, uses authenticity and awareness. This work of fiction highlights people's existence which is limited by the passage of time and by the gradual destruction of all the idols which could have served as anchor points on the scale of passing time. The authors of authentic literature show how the 'I' perceives the world and how this 'I' lives within it. Often these writers try to recall various impressions, feelings and moments connected with their pasts as they search for family roots and traditions or their own personal history. Their testimony can sometimes resemble diaries or memoirs but it also uses a more subjective perspective.[15] Often,

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[13] Chitnis 2005: 11-12.

[14] See the work of Jáchym Topol (b. 1962), Michal Ajvaz (b. 1949), Alexandra Berková (1949-2008), Daniela Hodrová (b. 1946), Zuzana Brabcová (b. 1959) and Martin Komárek (b. 1961).

[15] See the work of Jan Zábrana (1931-1984). His diary from 1970-1984, published after his death in 1992, called *Celý život* (*The Whole Life*) is a lively testimony of his era, his personal experiences and views. See the work of Eva Kantůrková (b. 1930). In 1984 Kantůrková published *Přítelkyně z domu smutku* (*My Companions in the Bleak House*) inspired by her experience from prison.

especially in the texts of younger authors, this type of writing is distinctively lyrical.[16] Such literature occurs between personal memories and reflections of contemporary life. It is often characterized by variation and by the blending of different time planes, as the 'I' travels through its own past and recalls the moments that play more or less important roles in its later adulthood. The authors are often looking for a new conception of 'authentic' literature. That is why, apart from writing memoirs and diaries, they approach various literary styles and genres (the epistolary form, gospel writing, parody and fiction) and use their techniques to create a new and different type of prose based in its main intention on authenticity[17] or even better, on quasi authenticity.[18]

There are serious doubts about the validity of Haman's theory of two main strands in Czech fiction after 1989. How would, for example, Ludvík Vaculík's novel, *Jak se dělá chlapec* (*How a boy is made*, 1993), fit into Haman's theory? Vaculík's novel follows the writer's authentic life experience but, at the same time, employs that type of narrative discourse which can be seen in the works fully based on the imagination of the creator. And what about the novels of Jáchym Topol, which have also been inspired by the writer's life experience (childhood, youth and his life in the underground) as well as by the mythology of American native folklore and by Christianity? All these works are based on fictive as well as non-fictive material (or on a perception of non-fictive material). They are all based on the author's perception of real facts, but they also depict magic places. They all exist in a linear real-like time, but there are many escapes to dreams and to apocalyptic myths. Perhaps it is incorrect to assume that there exist two distinctive literary strands in contemporary Czech fiction. Perhaps all themes co-exist and flourish in literary texts simultaneously, only sometimes the accent is given to the 'real' and sometimes to 'imaginative'.

Considering the above theory, we may say that Hakl's work is very close to what Haman sees as the line of 'authentic' literature in contemporary Czech writing. (It seems closely related to work of Jan Balabán, Jan Vrak and Václav Kahuda – if we mention only Czech authors of the same generation as Hakl. The work of Jan Balabán will be discussed in the second part of this thesis.) Yet, Hakl's work never fully conforms to Haman's definition. It is closer to the 'real world' as it uses the image of the 'real world' to construct the fictive world. At the same time, it uses fantastic imagination (see chapters 3 and 4)

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16 For example in works of Jan Vrak (Tomáš Koudela, b. 1967), Václav Kahuda (b. 1965), Jan Balabán or Pavel Brycz (b. 1968).

17 For example in works of Ludvík Vaculík (b. 1926), Lenka Procházková (b. 1951), Martin C. Putna (b. 1968), Patrik Ouředník (b. 1957).

18 It must be also mentioned that, as a reaction to increased eruptions of authenticity, some writers resort to total mystification of authenticity: Miloš Urban (b. 1967), Bohuslav Vaněk-Úvalský (b. 1970)

when the text describes the narrator's dreams and the narrator's thoughts. How both these aspects shape Hakl's literary text and how they affect the reader's perception of Hakl's work as an account of the real is the subject of further analysis of the narrator's 'I' and his position within the outside world.

2. The narrating 'I' in union with the world and in conflict with it (in relation to society)

2.1 'I' in communication with others

When the narrator talks about himself, it is often the result of his communication with the people around him; with his friends, with his colleagues, with women or just with random people whom he meets on the streets of Prague or in a pub. How the narrator presents himself varies. It depends on the situation in which he finds himself at the time and on the people he encounters. When he is with his closest friend, he says:

> '…it was indescribably pleasant to enjoy a beer with Pavlik and drink it with him in silence.'
> ['…bylo nepopsatelně příjemné jít s Pavlikem na pivo a mlčet.'] (*KS*: 5)

But when talking about his interaction with strangers, he describes himself with irony:

> 'I was rather good in impressing strangers with cheap tricks. It was one of the things I've always been the best at.'
> ['Dojímat cizí lidi lacinými triky, to mi šlo odjakživa ze všeho nejlíp.'] (*KS:* 40)

and produces personal statements balancing on the verge of bitterness:

> '…yes, there have always been loonies around me; I have always attracted them though longed to be in the company of sensible, intelligent, well-read people with whom it would be possible to analyse serious, preferably philosophical, topics for hours. (…) I longed to be in the company of sensible, intelligent people but when I met them, they bored me and pissed me off so much that I always instinctively detached myself from them even before I managed to notice them.'
> ['…ano, magorů jsem kolem sebe měl vždycky dost; přitahoval jsem je, zatímco jsem toužil po rozumných, inteligentních, sečtělých lidech, se kterými by bylo možno hodiny a hodiny rozebírat vážná, pokud možno filozofická témata. (…) Toužil jsem po rozumných, inteligentních lidech, ale když jsem je potkal, nudili mě a srali tak a natolik, že jsem se pokaždé instinktivně odpoutal dřív, než jsem si jich vůbec stačil všimnout.'] (*KS:* 61)

These three examples represent three different assessments the narrator gives himself after being 'confronted' with other people. The meeting with Pavlik is unambiguously a positive experience. The statement refers to the narrator's intimate friendship that does not need words or any other form of communication. It is enough only to 'drink' 'in silence' and 'be'. On the other hand, his random encounters with strangers make him talk, act and pretend. These encounters make him become a stranger to himself. They make him behave in a different manner – as a person who impresses other people 'with cheap tricks' rather than behaving naturally. They make him act against his own natural self, which desires an unpretentious life in peace and quiet and abhors pretence. But the narrator finds it difficult

to decide whether to be true to himself or to play act in front of other people. He suffers from indecision and oscillates between one and the other position.

The narrator's personality is defined by indecisive chaos – at least the personality he perceives within himself when he speaks about his attitude towards intelligent people and towards 'loonies'. In his own words, intelligent people attract him but he cannot stand them and so he keeps escaping to the 'loonies'. The 'loonies' always welcome him, but he does not want to be with them either. He is afraid of becoming 'a loony' himself and so he longs for the company of intelligent people. His conscious mind tells him to lead a responsible life with an aim. His unconscious mind drags him away from the responsibility for his own actions to the safety and inactivity of his own self. Being in the company of sensible and intelligent people (but 'strangers') means to him he has 'to pretend'. Being with 'loonies' (but his friends), gives the luxury that he can just 'exist'. The narrator does not say that all strangers are sensible and intelligent people. What he says is that sensible and intelligent people are strangers. He does not imply that friends are 'loonies', but that 'loonies' are good friends. He is lost in between these two worlds.

Konec světa is a life story of one character of Jan Beneš. It tells us how he sees the world. The 'world' consists of people and places he encounters at a particular time. It encompasses all that exists as a result of activity around the central figure of Jan Beneš. The following chapter is about the narrator's male friends. Women play a different role in the narrator's life and therefore I will discuss them separately.

2.2 The relation of the narrator to his male friends and to friendship in general

There are many men who flit through Jan Beneš's personal life but only a few of them stay in his mind for any length of time. These are the only ones we know by name, often in a shortened form or as a nickname. So we learn, for example, about Pavlik, with whom the narrator likes to share a quiet beer in the local bar ('Jedno odpoledne': *KS*), about Jirka Vokurka, a parody representation of a member of what was once an underground[19]

[19] **'**Underground' is a term used to identify culture outside the mainstream. 'Underground is a spiritual position of those intellectuals and artists who see themselves as being critical towards the world in which they live. [U]nderground is the activity of those artists and intellectuals whose work is unacceptable for the establishment; those artists and intellectuals who are not in passive in their activity and their attitudes but who create such work as attempts to destroy the establishment.' ['Underground je duchovní pozice intelektuálů a umělců, kteří se vědomě kriticky vymezují vůči světu, ve kterém žijí. [U]nderground je aktivita umělců a intelektuálů, jejichž dílo je nepřijatelné pro establishment, a kteří v této nepřijatelnosti nejsou trpní a pasivní, ale snaží se svým dílem a svým postojem o destrukci establishmentu.'] JIROUS, Martin (2008): "Zpráva o třetím českém hudebním obrození" in Šulc, Jan: *Pravdivý příběh Plastic People.* Prague: Torst. The underground movement was quite substantial within the culture of communist Czechoslovakia. For more details, see Pilař 1999.

generation, who now barely survives in capitalist society (‘Zlaté časy’: *KS*); about Fáfa, the narrator’s pub friend, whom some people see as a well-respected ‘bohemian’, others as a hopeless alcoholic (‘Zlaté časy’, ‘Zlaté časy, díl 2’: *KS*); about Láďa, whom the reader first encounters on the way across India where Láďa travels in order to recover from what he saw as his wife’s infidelity (‘Láďovo poslední tango’, ‘Bouřka’: *KS*); about Zdeněk, Jan’s former colleague from the Prague Waterworks and a punk with black sunglasses who says he knows how to steal cars (‘Druhá třetina’: *KS*); and about Kratochvil, with whom the narrator takes a walk up a hill (*Ibid.*). Names are also given to the three foreigners who appear in the narrator’s life only for a short time but make a strong impression on him: Husta (an Arab from Denmark), the drug dealer (‘První cizinci v Praze’: *KS*); the American, Džouzef, a former soldier who had been fired from the army for some unspecified shady dealings (*Ibid.*); and the German, Georg, ‘Hollywood filmmaker’, whom the narrator’s friend, Láďa, had met in India and later introduced to others (‘Láďovo poslední tango’, ‘Bouřka’: *KS*).

Nearly all these characters have one significant thing in common: they are the narrator’s ‘loonies’. It is their never-ending struggle for survival in this world, which is hostile and indifferent to them, so that it makes them act as ‘loonies’. What is attractive to the narrator is how these characters behave and what they do in order to survive the present era which threatens to overwhelm them. The narrator empathizes with their ‘lunacy’ or ‘lunatic otherness’ which he sees as nothing more and nothing less than a search for a stable place within the world and society – he is searching for the same things. He observes their behaviour and, on the ground of what he sees, he tries to understand.

The narrator’s ‘loonies’ are described as sad caricatures of people who lost their confident and active selves some time in the past. The present seems to be too complicated for them and so they struggle. While struggling, they behave passively or look for ways to escape. They spend time in pubs; they drink alcohol, use drugs or steal. They preoccupy themselves with their own memories and constantly talk about them. They hide behind their ‘lunacy’ and their own spoken and unspoken monologues; they keep escaping to dreams; some of them run away to a different country or they just wander about. Beneš’s ‘loonies’ or ‘tiring cranks’, as he also calls them, are outsiders standing on the periphery of society which they do not understand or do not want to accept. As a result, they do things (if they act at all) that are seen by the ‘orderly’ side of the narrator’s personality as sad and crazy (one of the characters dances with an umbrella in the middle of the road in the middle of busy traffic, another one sleeps in a polythene bag). But the other, the ‘disorderly’ side of the narrator’s character, prefers these ‘tiring cranks’ to individuals who

conform to the system and pragmatically use its resources for their own profit and 'who are only interested in whether the other person agrees with them at the given moment' ['ty, které zajímá jen a jen to, jestli s nimi ten druhý v dané chvíli souhlasí'] (*Ibid.* 148).

The narrator's interest in 'loonies' manifests itself on two parallel levels: on the level of the narrating self and on the level of the acting self. The narrating Jan Beneš enjoys the rich tapestry of 'loonies' because they give him stories – life-like and tangible stories. He does not find 'orderly' and pragmatic people interesting and worthy of mention. He claims they bore him. But he cannot deny that he needs them as much as he needs those 'loonies and tiring cranks'. Without either of them, he claims, his story would not be complete.

The acting Jan Beneš cares for the company of the 'loonies and tiring cranks', but the main reason for this lies in his emotional world. Such individuals attract him, but they also irritate him. Their presence calms him down, but their unpretentious and unpredictable behaviour scares him. This is due to one thing: Jan Beneš-the character feels that he may be one of them. Or perhaps only one side of his personality feels this. The other side of his personality is struggling to make sure that Jan Beneš is not like them. It is trying to persuade him to integrate within 'orderly' and pragmatic society. Here, the same applies: the acting Jan Beneš needs both companies. He cannot be with only the 'loonies' because their lack of stability tires him. He cannot be with only the 'orderly people' because their stability bores him. Jan Beneš's position within these two worlds can be demonstrated by discussing three characters of *Konec světa*: Láďa, Fáfa and Jan Beneš.

2.3 Láďa, Fáfa and Jan Beneš

Not all of Jan Beneš's friends and acquaintances are drawn as round characters. Only a few of them were given a chance to present their world to the reader and to show us various layers of their complicated personalities as they clash with the reality they live in. We often learn about them from the conversations they have with the narrator over a pint of beer or elsewhere, or from the narrator's recollection of the past.

Some characters that participate in the creation of the narrative of *Konec světa* come from the narrator's past, some from his present. The former have been in the narrator's life since his youth or early adulthood. The latter turn up in the narrator's life all of sudden, put it out of order and then leave. Only a few characters, mostly people from his past, have been able to get close to the narrator's heart.

There are individuals who appear in the narrative on more than one occasion, others just once. Those characters who appear more frequently are again mostly people the narrator

knows from his past. Those who flit through the story only once are usually from his present. This distinction is, however, not straightforward. 'Once' does not necessarily mean that they are unimportant. Some characters appear once but, according to the tone the narrator applies when talking about them, we recognize their importance in his life. This happens for instance, in the case of Kratochvil, with whom the narrator takes a walk in the Czech countryside ('Druhá třetina': *KS*). Kratochvil's importance is again related to Jan Beneš's past and to his understanding of security and of peace of mind.

There are two characters the narrator mentions several times: Láďa, who also becomes the narrator of one story included in *Konec světa* – 'Láďovo poslední tango', and Fáfa ('Zlaté časy', 'Zlaté časy, díl 2': *KS*). Jan Beneš finds it interesting and important to observe their personalities, their behaviour in certain situations and their personal struggles for a place within the social environment and so he comments on it. We meet both characters when everything in their lives seems to be breaking down and they have to decide what to do in order to survive. Both of them make an effort but each of them ends up with a completely different personal outcome: Láďa, returning from a lonely journey to India, chooses to lead an orderly or perhaps a semi-orderly life. He acquires a family and a house with a garden for growing vegetables and secretly also marihuana plants. Fáfa, losing his chance for an orderly life after leaving his girlfriend, ends up drinking enormous amounts of alcohol and crying over his loss.

Láďa, Fáfa and Jan Beneš are old friends. We do not know much about their friendship but what we learn from Jan Beneš is that the three men do have something that connects them on a personal level. They know each other from the past, they come from the same generation of people born some time in the 1950s and they all find it difficult to cope with the present. They all struggle and, while doing so, they do things or fall into things that confuse and surprise them. In the end, it is only Láďa who succeeds in gaining a certain stability and inner peace. His personal reconciliation does not come at once, though. It is a process that starts with Láďa's personal breakdown, continues in a small Indian village where he travels to calm his burning emotions, and ends in a rediscovery of his forgotten self in the city of Prague and in the Czech countryside:

> 'The train now travelled very slowly. The hollowed-out chassis chortled noisily. A tiny, child-sized quarter of Libeň was visible from the window. (…) Everything was somehow colourless, faded, yet so familiar... He realized that from now he would have to live here.'
> ['Vlak už jel krokem. Vymleté podvozky hluše rachotily. Dole pod oknem se rozprostírala drobounká, dětská Libeň. (…) Všechno to bylo jaksi bezbarvé, jakoby vyuzené, a přesto tak známé… Uvědomil si, že tady teď bude muset žít.']

(*KS:* 135)

Fáfa's life is fully governed by the spirit of freedom. He constantly travels around, wastes money excessively but is able to survive without it. He drinks and socializes with people. He lives from day to day in a carefree manner. He worries about nothing, especially not about the future:

> 'He lived like on a conveyor belt. He felt the need constantly to change his personal circumstances, because he was never able to look at where he was and how he was getting to a particular place for any length of time. He used to be away for weeks. Then he always returned and, with total carelessness, made debts which he could not repay.'
> ['Žil jako na běžícím pásu. Potřeboval pořád měnit okolnosti svého života, protože se nikdy nevydržel dlouho dívat na to, kde zrovna je a jak se tam má. Býval pryč celé týdny. Potom se vracel a s ukrutnou bezstarostností dělal dluhy, které nemohl splatit.'] (*KS:* 138)

In his life, everything seems to be going fine, up and down, but still OK. But then he falls in love with a girl and he loses her. He sacrifices his personal freedom for love and for a sudden vision of stable life and when his relationship, i.e. his dream of something 'orderly and normal', disintegrates – partly due to his lack of self-confidence and partly due to his misbehaviour – he breaks down. Instead of a free man who knew how to enjoy life, the narrator suddenly sees a broken individual who has given up on his life and who has succumbed to alcohol.

The third person in this group is the narrator, Jan Beneš. If, from the point of view of conventional wisdom, Láďa is a social success and Fáfa a failure, then, the narrator's position would be somewhere in between – never precisely in the middle but as a point constantly moving from one place to another. He is successful when he manages to get a job, when he finds a woman and when he enjoys his one-off sexual encounters, possibly also when he writes his own literary texts. He feels he is a failure when he loses all this. In between, he contemplates his life in relation to the decisions he has made or he is thinking of making and in relation to the people around.

Jan Beneš talks about both of these friends and spends time with them because he searches for his own identity in them. He compares himself to them. Láďa's story attracts him because it brings some kind of solution and clarity to the man's chaotic existence. Perhaps it is not a very brave solution, for it means that Láďa is forced to accept the ways of the establishment and to adjust to them, but it is a solution for a person who does not want to live in turmoil. Fáfa, on the other hand, becomes the subject of the narrator's

interest because he is an embodied representation of unsettled human nature, unexpected behaviour, sadness and apathy into which people fall after losing their place beside someone they love.

All these three individuals, Láďa, Fáfa and Jan Beneš, have grown up in the same environment but their contemporary existence now differs greatly: Láďa's lifestyle is now close to the lifestyle of the 'orderly' world; Fáfa is vegetating on the margins of society; and the indecisive Jan Beneš struggles somewhere in between. His sympathy lies with those individuals who defy society as well as with those who conform to it. He himself is everywhere and nowhere.

Láďa's and Fáfa's behaviour represents two different aspects of how Jan Beneš tries to cope with the current 'real'. But these two men are not the only individuals in *Konec světa* who have been exposed to a desperate situation and whom the narrator confronts. There are many other characters going through much personal turmoil and struggling to find a way of organizing their lives. There is a group of foreigners who play quite an important role in one of the stages of the narrator's life, though their influence does not last for long (see I., 2.2). They come and they leave. They bring stories, expensive cars, alcohol and drugs and take away the narrator's peace and his Czech girlfriends. Still, he sympathises with them: he observes them, talks to them and listens to them; he tolerates them but only for a time. As soon as they disappear, he forgets them. The foreigners function within the narrator's present. He knows nothing about their past. Their stories, if any, are always connected to the present and are always part of the world in chaos. Unlike the 'loonies', the foreigners do not make a deeper impact on Jan Beneš's life but he cannot deny their influence on him and their overwhelming presence he feels when he is around them.

There seems to be a major difference in Jan Beneš's mind between who is a friend and who just a passer by. The way Jan Beneš talks about certain people gives the impression that he values friendship. For instance, there is friendship between Jan Beneš and Fáfa, although it is often developed in pubs and is accompanied with sudden flashes of Jan Beneš's anger; between Jan Beneš and Pavlik, because the friendship does not need any words to communicate (they drink a beer in silence together); or between Jan Beneš and a woman named Renata, who, as the narrator says, still belongs to the 'slowly disintegrating company of people from my younger days' ['zvolna se rozpadající party mladších let'] (*KS:* 45). It is the shared past and the similar life experience that bring Jan Beneš, Fáfa, Láďa, Kratochvil and Renata together. The past is something that connects them; a bond that has developed over the years spent in the same social and political environment. It

does not matter if Láďa later joins the 'orderly' world and Fáfa rebels against it. What connects them all is that they share the same past. And 'sharing' means 'trust' in the narrator's understanding of the world. 'Trust' is given by the narrator to those who 'share' the same experience of the past with him.

Newcomers and youngsters belong to Jan Beneš's present world. But the present world, as the narrator keeps pointing out, is nothing more than wandering between 'moving', 'becoming' and 'staying'. The past seems to be the only thing that is well-known to him and therefore safe. The present is unknown and therefore unsafe. Láďa, Fáfa and Petr Kratochvil come from Jan Beneš's past. The narrator knows what to expect from them and so he feels safe in their company, even though it sometimes means that he feels like being a 'waster'. Newcomers and young people bring ideas, views and things that are new and unknown. Still, it would not be true to say that the narrator despises them. On the contrary, he sympathises with them as much as he sympathises with people locked in a personal struggle and the same way he sympathizes with 'loonies'. However, he never trusts the newcomers because he does not feel a real friendship. This belongs to those who are part of his past; those who did not give up on him as he did not give up on them. His friends might be wasters who spend their days drinking, but still he feels more comfortable and safe among them because he knows them, because nothing about them can surprise him. His friends represent stability in his chaotic world. Paradoxically, it is a stability of people who themselves feel unstable and struggling.

The notion of 'sharing the past' is important in the narrator's approach to the people around him. The present is confusing. How his past and present experiences interact depends on the time he spends in the contemplation of both and on the amount of space he is willing to give them.

2.4 Narrative discourse: Jan Beneš in charge of the narrative time

During one of his numerous encounters, Jan Beneš turns his attention to the concept of reality and he states:

> „... yep! Because reality is definitely only what one wants to see as reality at that time, and it is only what one does and doesn't like...!"
> [„...jo! Protože realita je definitivně jen a jenom to, co člověk v tu chvíli jako realitu chce vnímat, zas jenom to, co má a nemá rád...!"] (*KS:* 218)

What, then, is the reality he has in mind?

We have already noted that the individual stories of *Konec světa* take place in Czech society of the 1980s-1990s, which is the time when Hakl's own personal history unrolls (see I., 1.3). The time in which these narratives are told is therefore linear (successive), as it follows the line of Jan Beneš's life, but it is also cyclic (retrospective, anticipated) as it follows his narrating mind. The 'live' story of his world flows but it is interrupted with quite a few excursions to his own past, to his dreams and to the stories of the other characters, which the narrator re-tells in his own way (sometimes he is even hidden behind the voice of another character). It is exactly thanks to these interruptions from the past and the present that we have a chance to examine the narrator's perception of these events and thoughts and to ascertain which memories have been selected by him for inclusion into his literary text and why and which of them have been intentionally or incidentally blanked out.

The temporal linearity of each single story, of each single volume and of the whole literary output by Hakl is affected by the order in which the narrator retells his experiences and the experiences of others. However, the flow of Hakl's texts is also influenced by the duration of the narrated story and by the speed with which the narrator describes various events and thoughts that have happened in the course of the narrative. According to Prince,

> '[t]he speed of a narrative is equal to the relationship between the duration of the narrated – the (approximate) time the events recounted go on or are thought to go on – and the length of the narrative (in words, lines, or pages for example). (…) [T]he speed of a narrative varies considerably and it is [the] narration which helps to give the narrative a certain rhythm' (Prince 1982: 55-56).

We have already noted that the stories included in the volume of *Konec světa* are told by the subjective narrator, Jan Beneš, and this narrator fully controls the speed of the narrative. Where the narrator's voice focuses on a particular action which has just happened, there the time of the event corresponds to the time of its narration. The event has only been delayed by the fact of its retelling. A direct mode of discourse, accompanied by the narrator's indirect speech is used here: 'Pavlik yawned: "Let's have a drink somewhere…"' ['Pavlik zívnul: "Tak pudem někam na pivo…"'] (*KS*: 5); or not (in dialogues), or the text consists of a sequence of closely connected events: 'When the door slammed shut, I lay down on my sofa (…)' ['Když zaklaply dveře, lehnul jsem si na kanape (…)'] (*KS:* 25). These are the devices that give the Hakl's text the characteristics of a scene (Prince 1982: 55-56). Where the narrator's voice concentrates on the events that

happened some time in the past, the time during which these events occurred and the time of their retelling varies. Such events are often summarized:

> ‘These were bright and erratic times. It did not occur to anyone at that time that they would end. Summer gently broke and autumn was approaching.’
> [‘Byly to pestré, proměnlivé časy. Nikoho z nás ani nenapadlo, že by měly tehdy skončit. Léto se zlehka přelomilo a začal se blížit podzim.’] (*KS:* 20)

stretched:

> ‘It came to my mind that, for the female part of the audience, I should pull my stomach back, at least a little bit. But I decided I would not give a damn. It was one of those moments when there was no point in pretending.’
> [‘Napadlo mě, že bych s ohledem na dívčí část obecenstva mohl alespoň trochu zatáhnout břicho, ale hned jsem se na to vykašlal. Byl to jeden z momentů, kdy nestojí za to nic předstírat.’] (*KS:* 46-47)

or elliptic:

> ‘They took the meat out, put it on the table together with a French roll to go with it. I brought mustard. They applauded me. After the meal, they lit cigarettes and smoke.’
> [‘Vytáhli maso, donesli na stůl, k tomu byla veka. Přinesl jsem hořčici. Zatleskali mi. Po jídle si zapálili.’] (*KS:* 24)

Where the narrator concentrates on one given moment in the present or in the past, the time of the event slows down or freezes completely; the dynamic flow changes to the static, the active to the passive and the action to the scene. The static scene can have the shape of a momentary impression (dynamic within, but static when viewed from the outside):

> ‘Words we did not want to be connected with flew aimlessly all around us. The rain became heavier.’
> [‘Všude kolem nás bloudila slova, se kterými jsme nechtěli mít nic společného. Déšť zesílil.’] (*KS:* 47)

or of a description of people, things or places:

> ‘Pavlik had huge, round, thoughtful eyes I had never seen on him before.’
> [‘Pavlik měl velké, kulaté, pozorné oči, které jsem u něj ještě nikdy neviděl.’] (*KS:* 9)

Finally, where the narration becomes the narration of a thought, time separates and, instead of one line, it forms two different lines that run across each other – the first one, horizontal, is ruled by the real order of events (linear and cyclic; slow, normal and fast), the second one, vertical, follows the internal world of a single human mind and its perception of human existence in general:

> 'What a beast you are, I told myself. Books are closer to you than a human being, I told myself. Than a friend. But it is not the books I am concerned about, I tried to calm myself down, what matters is my living space…'
> ['Co seš to za hovado, říkal jsem si. Knihy jsou ti bližší než člověk, říkal jsem si. Než kamarád. Jenomže o knihy nejde, uklidňoval jsem se, jde o prostor k životu...']
> (*KS:* 62-63)

'The speed at which the narrated unfolds clearly has implications for our processing and evaluating that narrated and for our response to the narrative as a whole' (Prince 1982: 59). Both the order and the speed at which the narrating Jan Beneš introduces his story are subjective. This fully conforms to Jan Beneš's subjective perception of the world and his intention to communicate it to his readers. The narrator is the one who decides what events and thoughts will be involved in the story he narrates, to what extent they will be modified (in time) and how much space they will take up in the story. He shapes our perception of his world.

'[T]he more fore-grounded that event is, the more importance it takes. Similarly, the more frequently an event is described, the more significant it presumably is,' says Prince (*Ibid.* 59). However, as he points out, it is also true that this way of writing 'allows the writer to trick us: an event that was barely described proves to be essential; another that was described at length proves to be insignificant' (Prince 1982: 59). In one of the chapters above (see I., 2.3) we have discussed this ambiguity in relation to 'once' and to 'on more than one occasion'.This has been done in relation to the various encounters which the narrator of *Konec světa* has with different people. These contradictions can be found on all the levels of Hakl's text.

The most frequent motif in the stories of *Konec světa* is the permanent presence of the narrator, Jan Beneš, in all the stories; Jan Beneš – the acting and the speaking 'I' – is omnipresent. He is the entity that lies behind each narrative and therefore his life is an 'event' which is discussed in considerable depth and in considerable detail. However, a large field occupied by other people and other events lies around this centralizing 'I'. This field always shrinks and expands – in both the horizontal (frequency/numbers) and the vertical (depth/details) direction.

The existence of the narrating character, Jan Beneš, is one thing. All that shapes him and all that comes out of him is another. What shapes him is society that surrounds him; the society that exists and develops under certain conditions, at a certain time, in a certain place, in a certain language and within a certain political and cultural background. What emerges from him is his living, observant and critical experience of all that. What we perceive is the outcome of his willingness to share.

2.5 The content: the revealed and the suspended information

It is not only the omnipresent existence of the character Jan Beneš (or Honza) which brings all the stories presented in the narratives of *Konec světa* together. What also matters here is how the individual narratives are both told and integrated within the structure of the whole volume and within the reality which they (re)present.

From the perspective of genre distinction, *Konec světa* consists of ten individual stories. Some of these stories appear as an individual unit, others are divided into several chapters. Each story has a name, every chapter is numbered. All together, however, they build the integrated volume of *Konec světa*; the volume which seems to be balancing on the verge between a novel and a collection of short stories. The linking element is Jan Beneš and his life.

Each narrative of *Konec světa* is different but, at the same time, similar to all the others. Each narrative works with a specific situation or event, yet the main characteristics of the whole book, including the narrator, the places and the memories, stay the same throughout the volume. Time has a major impact on the way each story is narrated and perceived. The narrator's focus keeps shifting our attention from one person, one situation and one scene to another and back. The overall attitude stays the same: it is 'life according to Jan Beneš'. To see how this principle works throughout the whole volume of *Konec světa*, we have to look at the summaries of all the storylines included in the texts of this volume:

'Jedno odpoledne' ('One afternoon') opens the book with the narrator's impression of the momentary atmosphere that surrounds him and his friend Pavlik on the walk down the streets of Prague and on their visit to one of the local pubs where they both order a beer and observe what the usual drunkards do and say. 'První cizinci v Praze' ('The First Foreigners in Prague') plays with the idea of the suddenly blossoming tourist trade and its dual effect on the Prague locals and especially on the narrator himself, his own life and the life of Czech contemporary society. The main narrative is filled with various personal stories which the narrator's acquaintances told him or which the narrator has himself

observed and understood. ‘Zlaté časy’ (‘Golden Times’) contemplates friendship; ‘Konec světa’ (‘The End of the World’) is an account of sexual encounters between Jan Beneš and an ageing ballet-dancer. The sex act provokes an explosion of thoughts in the narrator about what might happen if the world comes to an end. ‘Vzpomínka na Ozzyho’ (‘Remembering Ozzy’) juxtaposes the narrator’s work for the advertisement industry with the personal life of his alcoholic artist friend. ‘Láďovo poslední tango’ (‘Láďa’s Last Tango’) follows the narrator’s friend’s Láďa’s journey through India; ‘Zlaté časy, díl 2’ (‘Golden Times, part 2’) continues the narrator’s exposition on the nature of friendship, this time listening to the narrative of his friend, Fáfa; in ‘Bouřka’ (‘The Storm’), the narrator meets Láďa, his family, his German companion, George, from India and his girlfriend in a rather awkward situation which occurs during their meeting in Láďa’s house. ‘Vrah’ (‘The Murderer’) is based on one of the conversations overheard in a pub. Finally, ‘Druhá třetina’ (‘The Second Third’), with the subtitle ‘rychlorozpustný román’ (‘an instantly soluble novel’), mixes all the above themes. We learn that the narrator found a job and then lost it. We learn about his attitude to friendship, love and sexual experience with various women; we learn about his thoughts regarding his solitude. We learn what he thinks about TV programmes, about his trips abroad, about memories and several of his activities, even addictions.

One way is to look at the stories of *Konec světa* in sequence; the other is to consider the content of the volume from the perspective of time, working closely with the narrator’s focus on particular characters, events and objects:

In ‘Zlaté časy’ (‘The Golden Times’) we learn about the existence of the narrator’s friend, Fáfa, who likes playing the guitar. We meet this character again in ‘Zlaté časy, díl 2’ (‘The Golden Times, part 2’), this time as a person who has lost his girlfriend and now, sitting in the pub with the narrator, talking about it with great regret. ‘Láďovo poslední tango’ (‘Láďa’s Last Tango’) is written in the style of a personal diary of a traveller. Láďa recounts the experience of his journey through India where he decided to go after his girlfriend had left him. Later on, we meet Láďa and his German friend, Georg, whose acquaintance he made in India, in ‘Bouřka’ (‘The Storm’), a story which describes their subsequent encounter at Láďa’s place. Here the narrator, an acquaintance of both men, gives us a brief outline of what happened with them and their lifestyles during the period between their Indian journey and this particular meeting. In ‘První cizinci v Praze’ (‘The First Foreigners in Prague’), the narrator describes his feelings about the first foreigners coming to Czechoslovakia after its opening to Western Europe. He talks about his wild experiences with Danish, French, English and American people as he had a chance to meet

them while being in a relationship with his girlfriend, Řípa, and then with Renata. Renata is remembered also in the last story, 'Druhá Třetina' ('The Second Third') in connection with the narrator's advertised reading performance during a literary evening where he was unable to read his texts because he was drunk. The narrator mentions Renata's presence as his then partner in connection with the apology she made on his behalf to the audience. In several other texts, we learn about Jan Beneš's work in the advertising industry and about his personal interest in aeroplanes, pub talk, beer drinking and films.

As we may see, there are certain characters (Fáfa, Láďa, Renata), certain motifs (pub talks, beer, airplanes, dreams, encounters, advertisement, Prague) and themes ('I' with/against 'them', friendship, sexual relationship, periphery and mainstream, present and past) that keep appearing and disappearing throughout the volume. Altogether, they create the master plot of *Konec světa*. The order of the narration, the narrator's focus on certain people, places and moments and the narrator's omnipresence in all individual narratives of *Konec světa* are the important factors of the narrative discourse that shape this master plot.

We have already suggested that the master plot of *Konec světa* is 'life according to Jan Beneš'. We have also noted that since it is the 'life' of Jan Beneš, it moves forward as it follows Jan Beneš's experience of the real. Since it is the life 'according to' Jan Beneš, it is ruled by the subjective powers of the narrating self. It is Jan Beneš who decides whether the order of the story follows the ordinary flow of time or whether it takes us back to his own memories or to memories of others; whether the story is presented at a pace that corresponds to what we perceive as the real pace of the event or whether it is slowed down or made faster; whether the story is told at all and just left to the reader's own imagination.

What is presented in *Konec světa* are Jan Beneš's encounters with friends and with 'loonies', his sexual encounters with various women, his walks through the city of Prague, his visits to Prague local pubs, his observations of other people's behaviour, his dreams and his contemplations of the world and human existence in it. Other things have been left out or barely mentioned. For example, we know only a little about the narrator's personal background in the past. We know that he was married, that he worked for Prague Waterworks, that he befriended Kratochvil, Láďa and Fáfa and that he was a regular visitor of certain places and pubs. The last two bits of information seem to hold a significant importance in the narrator's life. Hence, the narrator gives us the history of these events and places and their present picture on several occasions and in more detail. The first two pieces of information mentioned here appear in the story only as brief remarks lying outside the narrator's main focus on events and objects. Some information is omitted

completely. For instance, we know nothing about the narrator's birth, his family and his childhood.

There is the revealed part of the text and there is the part which is hidden. In order to understand the narrator's choice to speak about one thing and not about another, we need to examine both the information the narrator has given us and the information he has decided to leave out, and this has to be done within the context of the whole narrative of *Konec světa*.

Firstly, we have to make clear that there is no way of ascertaining the motives of the narrator's decision regarding what to put in and what to leave out, because the decision was made as a result of the narrator's conscious and unconscious thought processes or, more precisely, as a result of the author's conscious and unconscious thought processes. Nevertheless, there are still certain paths we may take in order to approach the narrative of *Konec světa* from the perspective of what is 'in the text' and what is 'outside the text' while respecting their suggested but hidden sense.

One approach expands on the passage from Prince's work quoted above: '[T]he more foregrounded that event is, the more importance it takes' (Prince 1982: 59). According to this statement, what Jan Beneš mentions and what he mentions more often and in greater detail than anything else may be the core information for our understanding of his image of life. Specifically, in *Konec světa*, it is 'friendship' (a representation of what the narrator sees as a social bond that lasts), 'the narrator's sympathy with 'loonies'' (a counterpart of what is 'orderly and normal', a representation of life in emotional turmoil), his 'sexual encounters' (a representation of the world of physical desires and needs), 'the city of Prague' (a representation of the narrator's home), 'pub talk' (a representation of the world of bustling narratives), 'pub visits' (a representation of the narrator's need to socialize and share), 'dreams' (a form of escape from the real) and 'contemplation of the contemporary world' (critical reflections on the human existence within it). All these topics taken together make the core structure of the narrative of *Konec světa*. The other topics, which are barely mentioned, are insignificant. Without these significant topics, the narrative would be radically different. Without the insignificant topics, the narrative would remain basically unchanged.

Another approach to narrative argues the exact opposite of the first one. It points out that 'an event that was barely described proves to be essential' (Prince 1982: p.59). In accordance with this statement, the information Jan Beneš has concealed from us is essential for our interpretation of his story. We have already noted that the narrator does not talk about his family, about his childhood and about his married life. There are many

different ways that this can be interpreted. The first approach would see the lack of the narrator's past personal details in the text as 'insignificant' or 'unimportant' for the story the narrative seeks to tell. The second approach would play with various ideas and among them it would try to discover those which might be crucial to our understanding of the reality the narrative presents and those which might be just of a marginal character in the overall structure of the text. From this point of view, we would analyze the information in the following binary opposites of public (revealed) information and private (omitted) information, pleasant (revealed) information and unpleasant (omitted) information, interesting (revealed) information and boring (omitted) information and important (revealed) information and unimportant (omitted) information. Whilst 'public' information refers to Beneš's adulthood, 'private' information is his childhood; whilst 'pleasant' information is his frequent sexual affairs, 'unpleasant' information is his failure in the role of husband; whilst 'interesting' information is the life of 'loonies', 'boring' information is the life of mainstream society; and 'important' information is his pub friends, 'unimportant' information is his working environment. This varies in Hakl's other works (see I., 5).

Considering both approaches in relation to our understanding of Hakl's narrative, it can be seen that they both have a significant place as an instrument for analyzing the structure of the text. The revealed information is core to our overview of the narrator's world, the revealed and the suspended information taken together is core to our interpretation of the narrator's reactions and his behaviour in a certain place and at a certain time. In this sense, if we want to find out why Jan Beneš talks about his 'loony' friends in such vivid colours, we also need to find out why he finds his life within the 'normal' society uninteresting and almost not worth mentioning. The same will apply to all the other binary opposites.

2.6 The existence of the 'known' and the arrival of the new and the 'unknown'

When we discussed the narrator's attitude to friendship, we mentioned the names Láďa, Fáfa, Pavlik, Petr Kratochvil and Renata. These were all the people whom Jan Beneš would probably classify as the 'slowly disintegrating company of people from my younger days [zvolna se rozpadající party mladších let] (*KS*: 45)', although he uses this expression only in the case of Renata. We can hardly say anything about the character of Pavlik and about the character of Petr, for the only time we meet them is during the peaceful walk they take with the narrator in the city and in the countryside. On the other hand, Láďa, Fáfa and Renata are remembered on several occasions but always in connection with things like

living (or trying to live) a relatively free life; drinking, smoking marihuana, socializing and talking. All of them have been trying to escape from their current lives and all of them have experienced failure. What is also significant for all these characters is that their escape always falls into the category of something 'foreign', or takes the shape of something 'new' and 'young'. Láďa travels to India to run away from his broken relationship but he fails to survive there. Renata travels to London to seek adventure and love but fails to adjust. Fáfa falls in love with a wealthy East German girl but fails to adjust to a world of different morals.

'[T]he slowly disintegrating company of my younger days' – the expression itself signifies that something that was familiar and complete is approaching its end and instead something new, foreign, different is coming. The feeling of the departure of the old and the arrival of the new is referred to repeatedly through the whole narrative; it touches on the narrator's thoughts when thinking about his frequent encounters with women:

> 'These were bright and erratic times. It did not occur to anyone at that time that they would end. Summer gently broke and autumn was approaching.'
> ['Byly to pestré, proměnlivé časy. Nikoho z nás ani nenapadlo, že by měly tehdy skončit. Léto se zlehka přelomilo a začal se blížit podzim.'] (*KS:* 20)

when attending a concert where a group of young French people perform; when throwing the leaving party for Renata:

> 'Even those of us who preferred describable life over unfruitful dreaming felt the weight of the recognition that something was changing during this very night. We could not only feel it but we could almost see it. We found ourselves in a hollow. Something had finished and something had not yet started.'
> ['I na ty z nás, kteří dávali přednost popsatelnému životu před neplodným sněním, dolehlo poznání, že právě této noci se něco mění. Bylo to nejen cítit, bylo to skoro vidět. Nacházeli jsme se v dutině. Něco už skončilo a něco ještě nezačalo.']
> (*KS:* 47)

or when lying in a ditch with his friend, drunk:

> 'A new day was approaching. Future still wanted to uncover many incredible secrets for us. Somewhere behind the horizon, the digital era was slowly making its preparations. But we were lying in a ditch and in no way could we come to life.'
> ['Začínal nový den. Budoucnost nám chtěla odhalit ještě mnohá a neuvěřitelná tajemství. Někde za obzorem se už pomalounku chystala digitální éra. Jenomže my jsme leželi v příkopě a za žádnou cenu se nemohli probrat k životu.'] (*KS:* 149)

These examples show that narrator's attitude to the new, which could be anything – adulthood, new society, a new relationship – is ambiguous. The narrator is full of curiosity but he is sceptical too; he is also full of excitement and nostalgia too. Adulthood brings a sexual interest in young women to the narrator but this interest does not last because the gap between the expectations of enthusiastic and young people and the expectations of a sceptical and tired middle-aged man, as he often sees himself, seems to be too big to be overcome. The new political regime in Czechoslovakia after the 1989 fall of communism to which the narrative refers gives the narrator an opportunity to try things he would hardly be able to do under the old regime (to set up his own business, to travel to the West). Nevertheless, he is often unable to cope with the new moves of post-communist society and fails:

> 'That summer I was a co-owner of one small firm in the Letná quarter. Business went from bad to worse… There were no customers. So the best of all was to sit in the garden of the Šlechtovka restaurant, to enjoy the late morning shade and drink beer, eat frankfurters with a double portion of mustard for lunch, and try not to disturb the scarcely visible summer phantoms which appeared in the corners of the crumbling summer house.'
> ['To léto jsem byl spoluvlastníkem jedné firmičky na Letné. Co se té firmy týká, šlo to od desíti k pěti... Kšefty se nehýbaly. A tak jsem ze všeho nejraději sedával na zahradě Šlechtovky, užíval si dopoledního stínu, pil desítku, obědval párky s dvojitou hořčicí a snažil se co nejmíň rušit řiďounké letní fantómy, zjevující se v koutech rozpadajícího se letohrádku.'] (*KS:* 85)

In an attempt to adjust to the new, Jan Beneš and his friends set up their own business together, but he struggles to sustain it and so he leaves. He tries to find the best way to communicate with foreigners coming to Prague after the regime change to live with him, but he fails to adjust to their needs and finally sends them away. He joins an advertising company but, disgusted by a sudden change in the behaviour of his superiors, his former colleagues, he quits.

In *Konec světa,* there are characters who make similar attempts to integrate within the new post-communist regime and enjoy what it offers although only a few of them are able to do so successfully. These are mainly young people, still full of energy and ideas about the bright future that lies ahead (the narrator's girlfriends Řípa and Petruše) but, even among young people, there are individuals who struggle with depression (Mirka, a girl from the flat next door in 'Zlaté časy': *KS*) and often end up taking drugs (Jan Beneš's visitors in 'První cizinci v Praze': *KS*). Most of Hakl's key characters, however, belong to the generation of middle-aged people who have experienced the communist past and are

now learning to adjust to the principles of the new capitalist society. This seems to be for many an insurmountable problem. The narrator describes (and meets) individuals who have been caught within a single, tight circle from which they do not have the power to escape, or do not want to escape. So often these characters try, but they end up following the lifestyle of those persons who live on the periphery of society (Fáfa, Smrček, Jirka Vokurka – see below) or in the grey zone (Igor, the old barflies – see below). Many of them position themselves as far away as possible from the official structures and the growing capitalist outlook which does not appeal to them. They feel safer on the periphery of mainstream events because there is no one there who would expect them to behave in a certain manner. On the periphery, they do not feel obliged to act according to the ruling society which expects them to find a well-paid job, build a career, get a mortgage and succeed. There, they enjoy day-to-day life in terms of simple things, basic to one's survival, but far away from the external pressure of the new world.

Ageing, the awareness of passing time and memories are important themes which play a significant role in the individuals' search for their identity within the new world. For Hakl's middle-aged characters (Jan Beneš's friends especially), accepting anything new is difficult and sometimes even painful, almost unbearable. Almost every effort these characters attempt to make in order to change their personal and social situation ends in awkwardness and in surrender. But, whilst this surrender means for some to be 'out' (Fáfa, Smrček, Jirka Vokurka), for others it means to be passively 'in' but actively 'dead' or 'in limbo' (Igor, Láďa, the old barflies).

How problematic it is for Hakl's characters to cope with life under the changing political and social circumstances can be demonstrated in the character of the waiter Igor ('Vzpomínka na Ozzyho': *KS*). Igor was:

> '…once a well-known, famous waiter at the U Kafků pub. At one time he was the only waiter who would occasionally pour you drinks for free; you just had to manage to stay at U Kafků until closing time with the right people. This wasn't difficult because they were always the same ones. (…) And Igor smiled, turned a corkscrew, made wisecracks, and he was a king. This was fifteen years ago. Nowadays, with his sleek white hair combed to cover a bald patch he looked like a retired entertainer. (…) He was still a king. Only his kingdom was now covered with cobwebs, many of the subjects in his kingdom had died of heart attacks, had not come back from emigration, stopped drinking and smoking, hanged themselves or drank themselves to death.'
> ['Kdysi známý a slavní vrchní od Kafků. Býval to svého času jediný vrchní, který příležitostně naléval zadarmo, stačilo tenkrát zůstat U Kafků do zavíračky s těmi správnými lidmi, což nebylo nijak nesnadné, protože to byli pořád ti samí... A Igor se usmíval, točil vývrtkou, trousil poznámky a byl král. To bylo před patnácti lety.

> Teď vypadal s bílou ulíznutou přehazovačkou jako estrádní umělec na penzi... Pořád byl král. Jenom se to jeho království tak trochu potáhlo pavučinami, pomřelo na infarkty, nevrátilo se z emigrace, přestalo pít a kouřit, hodilo si mašlí a uchlastalo se.'] (*KS:* 86)

Igor is a typical example of how difficult it is for the characters of *Konec světa* to adapt to the principles of the new society, especially for someone who is getting old. As the narrator points out, Igor grew up in communism. He had found his place in one of the local pubs and there he built his reputation as a head waiter who provided his regular guests with shelter and with a few moments of freedom behind a locked door, especially after the official closing times. Years afterwards, when democracy came and there was not longer any need to look for a hidden place to enjoy freedom, Igor had lost his importance. His pub became only a memory of the old times, now swallowed up by the market-orientated environment, and Igor a vendor at an ordinary garden kiosk selling snacks and beverages.

Jirka Vokurka ('Vzpomínka na Ozzyho': *KS*) is another character whom the narrator sees as a person struggling in between memories of the communist past and the contemporary world:

> 'Jirka Vokurka lived somewhere there around and led an old-world life; he painted pictures, paid alimony and drank. (…) He was a quiet but persistent man, often seen in a jumper saturated with smoke. His shoes were as though a cow had chewed them. He was like a person from the old times, when the truth and the lie still functioned approximately the way they are supposed to. In those times which may have never taken place.'
> ['Jirka Vokurka bydlel někde tam v okolí a vedl starosvětský život; maloval obrazy, platil alimenty a chlastal. (...) Nosil v sobě zvláštní tichou urpustnost. Prokouřený svetr. Boty jak vytažené krávě z huby. Byl jako ze starých časů, kdy ještě pravda i lež fungovaly přibližně tak, jak mají. Z časů, které možná vůbec neexistovaly.'] (*KS:* 86)

In communist times, the waiter Igor was a saviour for many people who found it difficult to fight oppression because he held the 'door keys to freedom'. Also, Jirka Vokurka was someone who played an important part in terms of freedom. He used his creativity to expose the practices of the communist regime. Igor was a 'king' and a happy man because people needed him. With the arrival of democracy, everything in his life changed, though. There suddenly was no need for freedom behind a closed door he provided. With the arrival of the market economy, life became a question of money. State property was privatized and everything became subject to business practice. Igor's pub was no exception. His pub also became a private business and came to be ruled by the market forces. Igor, who used to share what did not belong to him with others for free, lost his

popularity, his respect and, finally, his job. Jirka Vokurka was a recognized artist in the communist era, when art was an important weapon in the struggle for truth (see 1.3), but his existence in the world of capitalism is seriously shaken. He is not the only one who finds himself to be in such a situation. As the old regime disintegrated, art lost its political role and artists lost their privileged position of being the voice of the oppressed Czechoslovak nation. Paradoxically, for an artist from the communist times, the chaotic freedom of post-communism became a bigger problem than was the previous communist oppression (Kratochvil 1992). Jirka Vokurka, as presented by the narrator of *Konec světa*, is a victim of this change. The way Jan Beneš describes him he has always been living on the periphery of what can be understood as the mainstream but nowadays, he is just a shadow of his former self. He is still painting, but his personal appearance (he wears loose jumpers and shabby shoes) is suddenly not as 'alternative and cool' as it might have been before. Due to his obsession with his personal grief over his penniless existence, he forfeits perhaps the greatest opportunity of his life. He misses the only serious admirers of his work, when they come, and thus he misses the chance to become once again a well-known and recognized artist. Because these days, the text implies, it is not enough just to be exceptional, you also have to be a good PR manager for your work. Otherwise your voice is lost in the clamour of all the others. And that was what exactly happened to Jirka Vokurka.

In his essay, 'Obnovení chaosu v české literatuře' ('The Renewal of Chaos in Czech literature' 1992), Jiří Kratochvil commented on the fact that the impact of Czech writers on society seriously decreased in the first years after the fall of communism:

> 'But after November 1989, a completely new and unusual situation arose in the relationship between society and writers, society and literature. The community of writers is no longer seen as "the nation's conscience" (the conception suddenly sounds false and comic); if there are still writers who find themselves in the centre of a revival movement, the nation now expects them to act as politicians who will implement sensible measures, it is no longer interested in them as in authors of absurd drama. The writer's profession has rapidly descended to one of the lowest ranks in society. Czech literature has never been as free as it is now. But, it has remained alone only in its own company (and the company of a handful of its most loyal readers) in an autistic and solipsistic isolation.'
> ['Ale po listopadu 1989 dochází k naprosto neovyklé situaci ve vztahu společnosti ke spisovatelům a k literatuře. Spisovatelská obec už není chápána co 'svědomí národa' (ten pojem zní najednou falešně a komicky) a pokud se několik spisovatelů znovu octne v centru obrodného pohybu, národní očekávání se k nim tentokrát od počátku obrací jako k smysluplným politikům a ne autorům absurdních dramat. Spisovatelské povolání velice rychle spadne na jednu z nejnižších příček

> společenského žebříčku. Dosud nikdy nebyla česká literature tak svobodná, jako je dnes. Ale zůstala už jen sama se sebou (a s hrstkou těch nejvěrnějších čtenářů) v autistické a solipsistické izolaci.'] (Kratochvil 1992: *Literární noviny*: Vol 47: 5)

The character Jirka Vokurka is not a writer, but what Kratochvil says about contemporary literature can also be applied to contemporary Czech visual art. With the arrival of democracy, the writer's position has changed and so has the position of those persons practising visual art, persons like Jirka Vokurka. We do not know whether Jirka Vokurka is an original artist or not. We can only assume that he was from the fact that a couple of Americans decided to buy all his work which they found on display in a beer garden. What we do know is that he was fairly comfortable to lead a life as it was defined by the rules of the communist system, when there was only one clear-cut entity – the communist state – to collaborate with or to fight against. Jirka Vokurka finds the post-communist regime chaotic and unclear. He either despises the 'new ways' or is afraid to accept them. Due to his inability to adjust, Vokurka fails to understand the new role of the visual arts in Czech post-communist society and so he fails. His pictures, displayed on the ropes hanging outside one of the Prague beer garden restaurants, stay unsold. This leaves them 'in an autistic and solipsistic isolation'. The text indicates clearly that Jirka is unhappy with his failure, but is at a loss what to do about it and so he does nothing, only vegetates:

> "Well, man. I would rather be dead today. I am so pissed off! Yesterday, you know… what a day that was! I cannot even go out anywhere. Otherwise I would have to hit someone. The only thing I can just do is to sit here with you, well, of course only if you are not in a hurry... "
> [„Človeče, mně se dneska ani nechce žít, jak jsem nasranej Včera, víš... to zas bylo! Já ani nikam nemůžu jít, jinak bych někomu musel... Jediný, co můžu dělat, je tady s tebou trošku posedět, jestli teda nespěcháš..."] (*KS*: 88)

2.7 The troublesome present and the 'golden' past

When thinking about the present times (and the 'new' customs), the narrator expresses many sceptical thoughts about contemporary Czech society. In his thinking about the past (and the 'old' ways), there is a certain hint of nostalgia. Jan Beneš talks about his life back in the 1980s in two stories called 'Zlaté časy' ('The Golden Times') and 'Zlaté časy, díl 2)' ('The Golden Times, part 2'). When he speaks of the present, he speaks in terms of what has happened for the 'first' time ('První cizinci v Praze' – 'The First Foreigners in Prague'), in terms of memory ('Vzpomínka na Ozzyho' – 'The Remembrance of Ozzy') and in terms of the 'last' ('Láďovo poslední tango' – 'Láďa's Last Tango'). When he

contemplates the times of regime change at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, he uses words like 'the end' ('Konec světa' – 'The End of the World').

The world in 'Zlaté časy' is a world of friendship, of cheap accommodation shared with friends, of wild drinking in various Prague pubs, of hangovers and of women in bed. It is the world of Jan Beneš's youth, of his life on a day-to-day basis when the only worry comes with the morning headaches, with the thoughts on how to get over the effects of alcohol and marihuana intoxication, how to manage the relationship with one of his neurotic flatmates and how to survive the end of his sexual relationships. In 'Zlaté časy', the lives of the individual characters are shown in turmoil but this turmoil does not necessarily mean that the characters have lost control of their existence. As long as they still have a bed, a flat and a company of others, the world is fine. As long as they know what place they hold within society, the world is bearable and safe; as long as they 'belong' somewhere, there are no causes for anxiety. The arrival of the new era does not bring them more happiness, it brings them more troubles. These troubles are for instance the incoming foreigners, whose extended presence in post-communist Czechoslovakia/Czech Republic is felt to be overwhelming and distracting. The arrival of the foreigners is only the first sign of the changing times which *Konec světa* records. Then the narrator notes a change in the political and economic functioning of Czech society, when he talks about the waiter Igor or about his own attempts to set up a business. All these changes bother his mind as he observes what is happening with the people around him, worrying that the world has gone mad.

Konec světa shows people such as Jirka Vokurka, Igor and Fáfa who find it hard to face the new post-communist society and who all fail in their attempt to adjust to it – Jirka Vokurka and Fáfa because they lack self-confidence and assertive behaviour both at work and in their relationships; Igor fails because his principles are in conflict with the new market-orientated values of Czech society. The character of Jan Beneš is caught in *Konec světa* on the borderline between the world of the new consumerist establishment and the individuals marginalised by it.

2.8 The relationship of the subjective narrator towards women

In the chapters above, we have mainly discussed the narrator's attitude to other men. This is purely based on the fact that men are discussed in *Konec světa* more often and also with more depth than their female counterparts. Nevertheless, the narrator cannot deny that his meetings with various women; women as partners in love and in sex, women as his

family members, friends or just those whom he meets in the pub or about whom he learns from other people are of similar importance in his life as his male friends. Just as his male friends, women also provide psychological support to the narrator in his personal struggle for a place within new 'thrusting' society, and in his search for recognition and for love.

It looks as though we cannot really draw any general conclusions about the narrator's attitude to female characters because the information he is giving us about them is fragmentary. Is this because he is hiding things? Is this because he considers his love life to be a private matter? Is this because he finds his dealings with women too sensitive and painful so that he pushes it to the back of his mind and, instead, talks about other topics which are not so difficult for him, such as his work or his pub friends? Does he keep his love life to himself because he thinks he has failed? Or, on the contrary, does he think his relationship with women is an unimportant and boring matter so that there is no real reason to provide the reader with more detail than what he considers essential for the understanding of his overall attitude to life? There are many questions we can ask about the narrator's love life, but once again, we can only find the answers by examining what the narrator has decided to reveal and not to reveal to the public. Only from these fragments can we build a picture that gives us some sort of idea about his love life. These fragments will help us to search for an explanation of Jan Beneš's behaviour towards all the female characters that have crossed his path. We will discuss his behaviour in the role of their partner, their boyfriend, their lover, their friend, their son and their grandson. The starting point of my analysis will be the narrator's experience of marriage and of some of his most serious and lasting sexual relationships with other women.

Only at one point do we find out that Jan Beneš was married once but, apart from the fact itself, he does not mention anything else about his marriage. He does not go into a detailed description of his relationship with his wife. He just simply announces: '[m]y marriage had broken down forever and I did not have anywhere to live' ['mně se definitivně zkazilo manželství a neměl jsem kde bydlet'] (*KS:* 58). Jan Beneš's relationship with the next woman, Řípa, ends up in the same emptiness and, again, the narrator hardly speaks about it. Řípa appears in the text when she brings some foreigners into his flat. She disappears when she decides to leave Jan Beneš for others and for life in a different country ('První cizinci v Praze': *KS*)**.** There are no memories of Jan Beneš's and Řípa's shared past, only a brief statement that she had been there and that she had left. Moreover, the narrator does not even display any particular sympathy towards this girl; on the contrary, all he talks about is a great relief that her youth, her personal determination and

her requirements had disappeared from his life. He is pleased that he has regained his male freedom and his self after their separation was announced:

> 'She absorbed every new bit of information which had reached her, immediately and fully. I had been living with her for nearly two years and I had got really fed up. I hated her ambitious, selfish, bosomy world. So when she finally moved her mane of hair and announced that, anyway, she had decided to leave the country, for someone had given her such an offer, basically I was relieved.'
> ['Nasávala do sebe okamžitě a beze zbytku každou novou informaci, která k ní dorazila. Žil jsem s ní druhý rok a měl jsem toho právě tak dost. Jejího ctižádostivého, sobeckého, prsatého světa. Takže když si nakonec nahodila hřívu a řekla, že se rozhodla a že tak jako tak odjíždí do ciziny, neb jí to bylo kýmsi nabídnuto, v podstatě se mi ulevilo.'] (*KS:* 17)

The narrator's ex-wife represents the world that calls for responsible, reliable and caring husbands, fathers and men, the world he is not able to offer her because he himself struggles with the concept of freedom and with the need to comply with certain obligations. He does not want to face the memories of his married past and so he keeps this information secret. Řípa represents the new, enthusiastic but unstable and unknown world which he finds difficult to accept and he does not want to accept it. She is a young girl. She wants to try to enjoy everything the present offers; she wants to meet new people, foreigners, because they represent an 'exotic' world; she wants to travel and learn about life abroad or about the world that lies beyond the routine. She splutters with energy and youth and, what is more, she is described as a woman with such physical features ('bosomy world [prsatý svět]', 'mane hair [hříva vlasů]') that would be able to "bring a large number of males to her feet". Řípa is a person of change and that is something Jan Beneš finds hard to cope with. She is open to the public; he values his own privacy, his solitude and the company of the closest friends or harmless barflies above all. She is keen on constantly learning new things; he prefers to hibernate in the world he knows well. She has ambitions and future goals; he prefers to stop, live and contemplate various things that momentarily surround him, and his mind often wanders in the past. She uses her physical features to attract the attention of other people; he sees himself as a creature with nothing to display and everything to hide.

With Jan Beneš and Řípa it is the same as it is with Jan Beneš and the world of the people who have fully integrated into society: when he complies with them, he enjoys them; after being a part of them for a while, he cannot bear them, he gets bored, fed up and so he leaves. The moments he is away from them, he feels relieved and appreciates every minute of being free. But again, this feeling lasts only until he realizes the inevitability of

his life in a relationship or within the system. It is the same circle in which the narrator always finds himself imprisoned. His intensely felt desire to protect his own individuality and pride requires that he should be completely free; his manhood, on the other hand, searches out for love, passion and the company of others and so it asks him to adapt.

There are many ways of understanding the narrator's attitude towards his relationship with Řípa. The narrator's expression of relief caused by Řípa's departure may be his true feeling or just a mask to hide his own jealousy towards his partner's public openness, her energy and enthusiasm for life - a mask to hide his inability to act in the same way. He is the one who is not capable of being as open as she is towards the contemporary world. That makes him confused and emotionally lost. Since he does not know a better way of coping with such a situation, he pretends antipathy and ignorance and decides not to analyze his relationship with Řípa more than is necessary for his narrative.

Some time after Beneš's break up with Řípa, Renata appears ('První cizinci v Praze': *KS*) - his long-term friend and partner for eight years; also his saviour and protector during the time when he could not cope with his alcoholism. Again, we do not learn much about their life together. Everything we learn about Renata is from the time they were friends. All that happened between them afterwards is described in few words and without any specific details.

The narrator's next and, in *Konec světa*, also the last serious relationship with a woman called Petruše ('Druhá třetina': *KS*) does not appear until the end of the book.[20] In between, he shares his bed with various women whom he encounters on different occasions. These are one-off adventures or repeated meetings; none of these relationships lasts for long although he describes some of these sex scenes in quite vivid details. This is contrary to his real partnership which he mentions only briefly.

First, we learn that Jan Beneš met with Izabela ('První cizinci v Praze': *KS*), a beautiful woman whom he used to see in the streets. Their nights followed their occasional meetings in one of the Prague night clubs and, as the narrator claims, they always ended up in a fiasco. Still, we learn about this woman's passion for scarves. Then a Chinese girl turns up (*Ibid.*), cleaning his flat, listening to him speaking, even though she cannot understand a single word, and sleeping with him. After her departure, it is Ela, the narrator's flatmate from the years after his broken marriage ('Zlaté časy': *KS*):

[20] The narrator's relationship with Petruše will be explored later when I analyze Hakl's novel *Intimní stránka Sabriny Black* (*The Intimate Mailbox of Sabrina Black*).

> ‘She was a little bit over twenty. She was not particularly clever, but had an instinct. I never tried to touch her. Once before sunrise, I secretly watched her when she was changing her clothes, but that was all. She looked very good. (…) She had a very pretty figure and so I suffered from fits of shyness whenever I saw her.’
> [‘Bylo jí něco přes dvacet. Nebyla zvlášť chytrá, ale měla instinkt. Jakživ jsem si k ní nic nedovolil. Jednou jsem se nad ránem tajně díval, když se převlíkla, a to bylo všechno. Slušelo jí to…. Měla figuru, vůči které jsem nemohl netrpět záchvaty nesmělosti.’] (*KS:* 69)

Again, it is attraction to this ‘young’ woman and shyness in approaching her ‘very pretty figure’ which keeps the narrator drawn to Ela while he remains physically distant. Only once does he succeed in breaking the invisible wall that stands between them and ends up in bed with her. Yet this happens as a result of one of his experiences with drug abuse and not as a result of his finally overcoming his shyness or because he has fallen in love.

Perhaps the most powerful is Jan Beneš’s experience of a psychically painful sexual adventure with an ageing female ballet dancer in the Botanic Gardens (‘Konec světa’: *KS*). The act is described in an expressive, rather naturalistic way; from the beginning, the relationship is marked by mutual sadness, by his personal distaste, and by his cowardice, and it is accompanied with the narrator’s images of the end of the world:

> ‘She could have weighed about 40 kilos. Above her pathetic dog’s ribs her breasts protruded, screaming for help. Her stomach was criss-crossed with a mash of deep scars; it looked like it had been all slashed and sewn back again. From her under-hanging, girly pelvis, a horrible bushy bogey watched me, hysterically.’
> [‘Mohla mít tak 40 kilo. Nad dojemnými, psími žebry trčela prsa, která hlasitě křičela o pomoc. Břicho měla zbrázděné změtí hlubokých jizev, vypadalo jako rozsekané a zase sešité. Zpod vysedlé, holčičí pánve na mě nepříčetně hleděl strašný, chundelatý bubák.’] (*KS:* 81)

In this case, Jan Beneš’s view of both their bodies in a mutual embrace does not come with pleasure but rather with fear, and so, as soon as the sexual encounter is over, he leaves, confused, and is relieved to be away. He never comes back again. Another unstable relationship is waiting for him when he meets Radka (‘Druhá třetina’: *KS*). He describes her as a ginger haired woman with whom it was suicidal to sleep:

> ‘She was hiding from life. She clearly distinguished that part of reality in which she was at home, and the other one, about which she did not want to know anything at all. That was the main thing that was keeping us together.’
> [‘Schovávala se před životem. Přesně rozlišovala tu část skutečnosti, ve které je doma, a tu druhou, o které nechce nic vědět. To bylo to hlavní, co nás spojovalo.’] (*KS:* 207)

Jan Beneš experiences many sexual episodes but no proper relationship ever develops from the described short-lived encounters (and there are more than I have quoted here as examples for the purpose of this research). They always start with a sudden temptation which quickly arises and soon burns out. For the narrator, the sexual encounter is a moment of great pleasure and joy but, when the encounter ends, he is often relieved and welcomes the chance to be alone again. Jan Beneš is a kind of man who seems to attract women, in spite of the fact that he describes himself as a completely boring and unattractive person. He is able to spend days and nights embracing a woman's body but, before something more serious can develop, he often escapes, cutting himself off and going back to his own loneliness. He cannot stand permanent female company but he is also scared because, whenever he tries to live with someone else and love, he fails.

Sexual promiscuity brings the narrator many intimate moments; it gives him a certain freedom to act the way he momentarily likes and keeps his male ego inflated. However, it must be noted that most of his one-off encounters we learn about happen with the initial help of alcohol, possibly also drugs. Without their 'liberating' effects, he is hardly able to approach anyone at all:

> 'For some time, I eyed her up. My heart began to pump blood into my brain in order to help it think up something reasonable. However, it was clear that, if I ever decided to talk to her, what I would tell her would be nonsense; such a woman would disqualify any attempts before they were even started, because she knows. In no time at all, I gave up and broke away. (…) After a while, she stood up. (…) When she came back, I tried to look in her direction again, but I failed. Mechanically, I drank one shot of vodka after another. (…) I went for a pee. And there, standing in front of the urinal, I was finally revisited by courage… I'll try to drag her out of here! (…) I lit a cigarette and opened the door. Her seat was empty.'
> ['Chvíli jsem s ní hrál na koukanou. Srdce začalo pumpovat krev do mozku ve snaze pomoci mu vydumat cokoli přiměřeného. Bylo však jasné, že kdybych ji i nakrásně oslovil, byla by to opravdová hovadina, co bych řekl; takováhle ženská už předem diskvalifikuje všechny pokusy, protože ví svoje. Obratem jsem to vzdal a odpojil se. (…) Po nějaké době vstala. (…) Když se vracela, marně jsem hledal sílu se tam znovu podívat. Mechanicky jsem pil vodku za vodkou. (…) Šel jsem se vymočit. A teprve nad pisoárem mě konečně navštívila kuráž…. Zkusím ji odtud vytáhnout! (…) Zapálil jsem si a vzal za kliku. Její místo bylo prázdné.']
> (*KS:* 144-145)

The narrator describes himself as a man of no ambition and no will to fight for success. Rather than chasing a woman, he would sit and wait for her to invite him to go with her to her flat (the ageing ballet dancer), to her bed (Ela) or for her to turn up in his own flat (Izabela, the Chinese girl). He hardly takes any action to approach women; he likes to be overwhelmed by female interest and enjoys being lost in it.

Jan Beneš seems totally unable to keep any relationship going for longer. When he meets a good looking, young, popular and enthusiastic woman who is full of energy and new ideas (like Řípa or Petruše), he is prone to fall for her (we can only assume for the length of such a relationship) and so he does. However, he soon realizes he does not have the energy to cope with such female beauty and youth and that is the moment he starts to lose it. Then, he claims:

> 'Ugly women calm me down. With them, I know how to relax. They do not have any expectations about what is going to happen; they are not concentrated on what they look like all the time. (…) They tend to listen to what people are talking about. They are more humane simply because they do not have the possibilities.'
> ['Nehezké ženské mě uklidňují. Umím se vedle nich uvolnit. Nečekají už předem, co bude, a nejsou věčně soustředěné na to, jak vypadají. Nevrhají na sebe kontrolky do každého zrcadla. Mají tendenci vnímat, co kdo říká. Jsou lidštější, protože zkrátka nemají ty možnosti.'] (*KS:* 188)

But this is all just another mask which the narrator uses to cover his failures. For ugly women do not really become his partners; they do not end up in Beneš's bed. He observes them; he talks about them but does not have any sexual relations with them. It is purely the attitude of the observing self, not the attitude of the acting self that is interested in 'ugly' women. One of the examples that demonstrate the narrator's interest in visual aspects of life and his being prone to end up in embarrassing situations is this observation of two bar ladies:

> '[with] bottom[s] (…), which in the light of the fluorescent lamp looked grey-pink and were peppered with dark purple pimples (…) scraped armpits, family style…'
> ['zadnice (...) ve světle zářivek šedorůžová, posetá tmavě fialovými pupenci...podomácku oškrábaná podpaží…'] (*KS:* 7),

who are dancing almost naked in the local pub. It is a mixture of admiration, curiosity, sadness and disgust that keeps him interested in the ridiculous behaviour of these rather 'worn-out' ladies and their shapes rather than physical attraction he would be overcome by while watching them.

Women, generally, play a significant role in the narrator's life, although he will not express this fact often and in full. He needs to be with women just as much as he needs to be alone; only he does not know how to cope with both of these needs separately and together. He can be very dependent on a woman's gesture when, for example, he bashfully

waits for an invitation to share a bed with her (the Chinese girl or Ela) or when he accepts a woman's slaps and insults with pleasure ('Bouřka': *KS*). But he also knows how to be stubborn, uncooperative and uncompromising towards women, and he is rather distressed whenever something undermines his privacy and his male self (Řípa disrupting his privacy by bringing a group of strangers into his flat and letting them stay there for as long as they want to; Petruše with her busy life full of work and friends, as a result of which she even forgets their date; the lady in the pub waiting for his attention which he is not able to give her because he cannot find the courage for this while sober).

The narrator of *Konec světa* does not spend much time thinking about any relationship and he does not work on developing any relationship. At least he never mentions this. All his serious relationships end up in a dead end and in separation, but somehow he always claims to be relieved rather than depressed. Personal freedom within a relationship and out of it is very important to Jan Beneš and, whenever this freedom is restricted, he is annoyed and protests. Paradoxically, the same attitude is applied by his partners. As soon as they feel their personal freedom is being threatened by restrictions or by boredom, they escape. At least, this is how the narrator sees them.

There is no open talk of love in the whole of *Konec světa*. Every sexual relationship of the narrator is presented free of any sentiment. All these relationships are emotionally quite dull. They are described factually and usually as being in decline. These are sexual encounters of friends rather than passionate romances and they are always problematic. This is the same for all Hakl's male characters. If they have ever experienced any passion and love, we know that it is long gone and the reader only learns about the consequences of these failed relationships.

In *Konec světa*, we see women as quite flat characters (the only exception perhaps being the ageing ballet dancer) just appearing and disappearing in the narrator's life. They have no depth, no internal thoughts. What is more, they are often depicted in negative terms because most of the time their image is drawn just at the moment when the relationship is breaking down or shortly after it has broken down.

The narrator considers women to be providers of both positive and negative energy; women for him are the providers of loving warmth and safety, which he longs for (when hiding with them in bed). Women are for him also disturbers of his privacy and of his male self, which he always carefully protects (see the relationship with Řípa). As seen by the narrator, women bring pleasure but often break a man's heart and drive him to drink. In *Konec světa*, this happens not only to Jan Beneš but also to his friends. Láďa goes on a trip

to India in order to find peace after his girlfriend has swapped him for another man (he thinks); Fáfa isolates himself from the outside world after an East German girl rejects him; a random man, whom the narrator encounters in the pub, drowns his sorrow in alcohol. He drinks, cries and talks about his wife who has left him ('Vrah': *KS*).

For the narrator and his friends, love and the long-term relationship with women always equal trouble. As the narrator applies only a male perspective, it is specifically the men who are seen as the ones who suffer. Men think themselves to be the victims of women's constant criticism, their ambitions, their youth and their beauty. It is men who feel humiliated and lost, both when in a relationship and out of it.

Hakl's men lack self-confidence in their physicality and flexibility in their actions, and this, as they believe, makes them fail in the eyes of their partners and in their own eyes. As they are not able to face their presumed failure, overcome their self-indulgent behaviour or become happy, they struggle. They look for a way to escape: to pubs, to loneliness and to a different reality. Jan Beneš escapes from his young partner, Řípa, into the quiet environment of his flat; Láďa escapes from his unfaithful partner to India; Fáfa escapes to alcohol and the local barflies escape to the pubs. Or, in other words: Jan Beneš escapes from long term relationships into short-lived sexual affairs; Láďa chooses 'safe' marriage with a village girl; Fáfa goes for whatever woman crosses the path of his drunken wanderings and the local barflies enjoy looking at the half-naked dancing bar ladies.

Contrary to Hakl's men, the role of the women in the narrative of *Konec světa* is extremely shallow. Mostly, they are described as empty bodies with no soul. The narrator gives them only few opportunities to speak about their own personal feelings. Some of the women do not speak at all; they are just like passive figures he meets on his journey through life.

Hakl's women are not given the opportunity to defend themselves. Whatever is said about them is fully controlled by men and by the narrator himself. The narrator gives them only as much space as he needs in order to explain his own behaviour in the matters of love or in anything that is related to his personality and love. There are women who are only mentioned briefly when the narrator refers to his present personal situation (his wife, Petruše); some are provided with a little space to act (Renata, Radka, Izabela), some other women are given the opportunity to act and speak a little (Řípa, Ela, the ageing ballet dancer). However, none of the women is ever a rounded character able to stand up to the

narrator and his male companions on an equal footing. They come and leave whilst men stay. We learn much more about men and their views than about women.

The narrator is a representative of the generation born sometime at the end of 1950s or during the 1960s. The stories of *Konec světa* take place around thirty or forty years later, at the time when the narrator approaches middle-age. The women he encounters belong either to his own generation (Renata, the ageing ballet dancer, perhaps also the two bar ladies), to the generation born in the 1980s (Řípa, Ela) or somewhere in between the two (Petruše). But the way in which Jan Beneš approaches them is different. While Renata is described as a person who was able to support the narrator in the most awkward situations (sending him home in a drunken state after he had failed to read his literary texts at a public event) and as a person with whom he could talk for hours about anything, Petruše, Řípa and Ela are women whom he feels he will never be able to understand. The three latter women are young. They bring youthful energy but also instability into the narrator's life and that is why he is not able to cope with them for long. After attempting to be in a serious relationship with them, he escapes back to his lonely life. Their youthfulness is too 'alien' for him. It requires too much flexibility, too much effort and too much of a compromise and this he is not able to give.

The narrator is aware of the danger that women constitute for him and that is why he often steps back and leaves. But still he cannot resist them, especially their sex appeal. On the one hand, he is attracted by them and by their physical beauty, always noticing the women's hair (often red), their breasts and legs. On the other, he is horrified by them, particularly by the worn-out bodies of certain women of his age. He is scared of young women, of their yet innocent energy and of their lack of experience but he admires them. He is frightened of older women's ageing bodies but he appreciates their experience and their understanding of the world. No matter how much Jan Beneš likes women, he does not go from one relationship straight into another one. However, he is never alone for long. The women are frequent episodes in his life; he enjoys these when they last, but he also enjoys when the women leave. How much he misses them when they leave we hardly ever learn for, as we have noted, he does not express this.

In *Konec světa*, women feature not only in the role of the narrator's partners and lovers, they are also friends, mothers, grandmothers and random passers by. Unlike young and middle-aged women who become the narrator's objects of sexual admiration, older women are there to share with him their stories about what they have experienced throughout their

lives. Jan Beneš talks to his dead grandmother after enjoying the effects of magic mushrooms; another old lady listens to his stories a minute after he had consumed some drugs with a girl from the neighbourhood. During one of his travels, he speaks to Mrs Olczak, the widow of a navy captain living in the suburbs of Gdansk; at another time, he thinks about his mum and the day he went to collect her funeral casket. These meetings with various older women are rare and often happen only in the narrator's imagination, provoked by a momentary situation or a sudden thought. In such moments, the narrator does not act but simply exists. Whenever he meets an older woman, he feels he does not have to pretend anything or behave like an adult man; he only is. During that time, he regresses to a small boy, Honcek, who did something naughty and now he wants to make his confession and ask for forgiveness, or he just wants to talk about any nonsense that comes into his head.

The narrator's experiences with young and middle-aged women always pin him down to his life at the present time and lead him to doubt his manhood. On the other hand, his conversations with grannies and his memories of his mother clear his head. Older women represent the wisdom of old age, experience and death. Young women represent the energetic world of the present time and of the narrator's adulthood which is anchored in the carelessness of youth. Jan Beneš stands somewhere in between. He acts as a middle-aged man reacting grumpily when someone incautiously invades his privacy. He acts as a wise man when we consider his many thoughts on society and on the world's future. He acts as a young man who enjoys everything life brings, women, friends, drink and walks. Finally, he also acts as a child who dreams about aeroplanes and who allows the older people to tell him their own personal stories and to give him advice.

In his work *The Little Czech Nation* (1996), Ladislav Holý asks a number of Czech respondents about their views on what is 'traditional' about male-female relationships in the Czech society and in Western culture and, in reaction to this, he concludes:

> 'I was told that men are naturally predisposed to be assertive and women to be shy, tender, and submissive; that men are more guided by reason and rational calculation and women more by their feelings and intuitions; that men are openly confrontational and women likely to resort to subterfuge, flattery, and subtle manipulation from behind the scenes; that men are innovative and willing to experiment and women tend to stick to traditional and time-honoured ways of doing things; that men are firm in their opinions and intolerant of those of others and women less sure of their opinions and more prepared to see another's point of views; that men are egoistic and authoritarian and women unselfish, loving, and caring. At the same time, it is seen as natural for women to arouse men sexually

> and for men to show sexual interest in them. As in other spheres of life, it is considered natural for men to initiate sexual encounters and for women to show restraint before submitting to their sexual advances' (Holý 1996: 175).

Contradictory to Holý's findings, in Hakl's *Konec světa*, men and women seem to display almost opposite characteristics to the ones Holý's respondents suggested. Hakl's male characters are far from being assertive and firm in their opinions. It takes them a long time before they make a decision and try to enforce it on others (see Jan Beneš's inability to leave his malfunctioning relationship). They are not really guided by reason and rational calculation, for they often act without consideration and on an impulse (Láďa's Indian journey, Beneš's sexual encounters). They are not very innovative or willing to experiment. On the contrary, they have great difficulty in adjusting to what is new and foreign and they often turn away from everything that seems to be unknown and 'alien' to them (like the enthusiasm of youth). They are neither egoistic nor authoritarian, for they struggle to hold on to their masculine self and anything that means responsibility and care (marriage, a long-term relationship). Their authority is doubted and it is never enforced; their ego is more about their escape to loneliness and about their sexual desire than about anything else. Finally, Hakl's men do not even initiate sexual encounters as it is mostly his women who show interest in men first; at least, this is what the narrator wants us to believe. Hakl's men are broken individuals with a confused and unstable mind.

Looking at Hakl's female characters, we can hardly agree with Holý's respondents either. Women described in Hakl's work are not shy, tender and submissive. On the contrary, his young women are described as independent human beings acting on their own initiative and are free; his middle-aged and older women seem to overcome their shyness and they behave openly and in a friendly manner. Hakl's female characters do not stick to traditional and time-honoured ways of doing things. They are innovative. They experiment with people, places and styles; they are the characters of change. The narrator sees them as loving and caring individuals (Renata) but as selfish and ruthless too (Řípa, Petruše). Hakl's women do not show restraint before indulging in sexual activity. They are the ones who are first to show interest and initiate sexual activity. Some of Hakl's female characters are broken individuals with a struggling mind (see the ageing ballet dancer), but others are self-confident people who follow their own aims regardless of others (Řípa, Petruše).

What Holý's respondents describe is their view of traditional behaviour of men and women in Czech society of the 1990s. By contrast, Hakl's narrative, published in 2001, constructs an image of society which seems to have almost diametrically opposed characteristics. The difference between Holý's findings and Hakl's image of Czech men

and women may be due to the fact that both works refer to a different era – Holý's work refers to the time of the regime change, when people just started realizing what had happened with their old world but they were still unable to detach themselves fully from the past, whilst Hakl's work refers to the decade afterwards, when people had already had a chance to adapt to some of the aspects of the new pro-capitalist regime and they had made an active decision to behave selfishly and individualistically rather than to obey the rules, or they had made an active decision to step back from the new capitalist world and seek a private, personal space into which they could escape within it. Secondly, the difference between Holý's findings and Hakl's image of Czech society may be caused by the fact that Holý's work is an anthropological study based on interviews while Hakl has created a subjective, semi-fictious image of contemporary Czech society. In Holý's work, we find a survey of various personal views; Hakl offers us a subjective perception of a single person. Yet, there is no doubt that the works of both authors are important parts of the general discourse created by Czech post-communist society: both the view of the sociologist as well as the perspective of the creative soul are important for our understanding of the 'real' world.

3. The narrating 'I' as a part of the System and outside the System

3.1 Life of work

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A professional business career and an influential position in the new capitalist society never meant much to Jan Beneš. But even Beneš could not avoid being involved in new possibilities for individual enterprise after the fall of communism. Just like many others, Jan Beneš starts looking for a new job where he would be able to use his professional skills better than in the Prague Waterworks. He joins an advertising agency. When this does not work out, he opens his own advertising agency and runs it with a couple of his friends. When even this does not work out, he finds a job as a journalist. In between these jobs, he experiences short periods of unemployment.

Jan Beneš's attitude to work changes all the time. There are periods when he feels obliged to work and there are periods when he longs to stay at home and do nothing,

perhaps just to enjoy visiting local pubs and watching the world around him. Whilst it seems that he prefers inactivity, he is aware that, if he wants to function in this world, he must participate in it. Often it is the lack of money, a pile of unpaid bills, the suddenly unbearable freedom, boredom or a spirit of a momentary ambition that makes him to look for new employment. But, since the narrator is not used to being in a regular job, he has many problems coping with it. Frequently, he tries to overcome his negative attitude towards the official structures and accept the constraints of a regular job.

As a writer, Jan Beneš usually applies for a job with an advertisement agency and starts to work as one of its ideas-men. At the same time, however, he despises his job as something that works against the nature of the human being. In his view, advertising abuses language to create a new reality in order to manipulate the world instead of making the world more accessible and comprehensible to all:

> 'I listened to Špitz's babbling, greeted the director and made up all kinds of happy lies which were not allowed to have anything in common with the real world. (…) The money machine could not be stopped; although the money was not and could never be ours, the factory of promises had to go on functioning. We served a beautiful glittering clown of total stylization; a clown with whom it was necessary to speak using a special sterilised, forced, baby language, otherwise there was a danger that he would have a fit; he would begin writhing in pain, bumping into furniture, fall to the floor, vomit gastric juices and bleat: "I don't understand, I don't understand…"'
> ['Poslouchal jsem Špitzovo žvanění, zdravil ředitele a vymýšlel všelijaké veselé lži, které nesměly mít nic společného s tím, jak život opravdu vypadá. (...) Stroj na prachy se nedal zastavit, sice to nebyly a v životě nemohly být naše prachy, ale slibotechna musela fungovat. Sloužili jsme nádhernému, lesklému kašparu totální stylizace. Kašparu, na kterého se muselo mluvit zvláštním šišlavým, šroubovaným, důsledně předistilovaným jazykem, jinak hrozilo, že by mohl dostat psotník, mohl by se začít svíjet, mlátit sebou o nábytek, padnout na zem, dávit žaludeční šťávy a mečet. „Já nerozumim, já nerozumim... "'] (*KS*: 199)

The narrator is using the example of his own working experience in order to express his concerns about the 'real' and, in his view, the 'pretentious' functioning of contemporary Czech society within the official structures of the new, post-communist market economy. Using expressive language, the narrator voices his confusion which he has been feeling since he accepted a job in advertising. He raises grave doubts about the true nature of his work (and language) and about the sincerity of his superiors and his colleagues. He looks at the others and, through them, he sees himself as someone he cannot recognize any more. He is aware of the fact that, by accepting a job, he has joined the official structures and adopted a questionable, dehumanizing work ethic, and he does not like it. He feels he has

become a machine-like creature of blind determination, whose only aim is to survive but not to feel:

> '…a flat, yet a little greasy face with a rough-hewn jaw, a minuscule head thrust between my shoulders (…) wearing metallic, opalescent armour, silver cosmic ski boots afoot, a shotgun in my hand, whenever I need it… I am a little assembly kit figure from a children's chocolate egg.'
> ['...plochý, trochu pravda vymaštěný obličej s hrubě přitesanou čelistí, nicotnou hlavičku vraženou mezi rameny (...), na sobě kovově opalizující pancíř, na nohou stříbřité kosmické lyžáky, v ruce podle potřeby brokovnici... skládací figurka z dětského čokoládového vejce.'] (*KS:* 205)

Earlier, the narrator described himself as a flour-beetle. In connection with his work, he sees himself as an alien-looking toy or a computerized character. He considers himself as a useless insect that everyone despises and a creature belonging to the artificial world of PC games. Both the images which Jan Beneš uses indicate there is something inhuman in the behaviour of his society. He observes a world that produces machines but not people; a world that brings alienation and uncertainty to individuals' lives. It may be the narrator's awareness of such things that puts him off any cooperation with the official structures and any relationships with the people who represent the economic, social and cultural elites of the state and hence the power of the state. He seems convinced that it is due to them and their insolent and pretentious behaviour that people lose their grip on reality; that people do not understand anymore what is happening around them and to them. They either blindly follow what is offered to them, like machines, or they seek to escape as outsiders. Jan Beneš examines both positions critically.

3.2 The individual facing the System

This is what Jan Beneš's thinks about the individual and the power of the System:

> '(…) for sure, the meaning of all this manifests itself undoubtedly somewhere else than where we think. Somewhere in a place which we cannot see from here; and, if we can, it is as if we were in a cage hanging on some oily, steel rope a few metres above sea level, in a cage where a man waits for hours and hours to see whether an angel comes down and lets himself be seen, attracted by buckets of liquidized fish thrown from a ship by a well-paid crew. It is the same crew which is, at the very same moment, comfortably watching a Real Madrid football match on TV while you are waiting down here in suspension, in the middle of a crimson-grey cloud of fish which peacefully descends. From time to time, a madly spinning fish head flies past. And, when one begins to doubt and slowly becomes bored with occupying one's mind with a lot of rubbish ideas, only then the old Grim Reaper appears and

> smiles, as long as the angel who has come to announce that the creator is pissed off knows how to smile and is allowed to do so. He appears, gives him a stony look and leaves. And then, when you are alone once more, you feel, deep inside, such deep emptiness you have never had a chance to experience so far.'
> ['(…) smysl toho všeho probíhá dozajista úplně jindy, než jsme zvyklí si představovat. Někudy, kam odtud není vidět; a když, tak jenom jako z klece, zavěšené pár metrů nad hladinou na zaolejovaném ocelovém laně, z klece, kde člověk hodiny a hodiny čeká, jestli se mu ukáže anděl, přilákaný kýbly rozmixovaných ryb, které sem seshora z paluby sypou zřízenci, kteří jsou za to – a ne blbě – placeni, a při tom se spokojeně koukají na přenosnou televizi, jak to strká Real Madrid... a člověk čeká tady dole, uprostřed pokojně klesajícího rudošedého mraku, tu a tam kolem proletí bláznivě roztočená rybí hlava. A když už začne pochybovat a začne se nudit a z dlouhé chvíle si vymýšlet hovadiny, tak se mu teprve zjeví zubatec a usměje se, pokud se anděl, který přišel zvěstovat, že se stvořitel nasral, může a umí usmát. Zjeví se, pohlédne na něj dutým okem a zmizí. A teprve potom, když už je člověk zase sám, ucítí v sobě takovou prázdnotu, jakou do té chvíle nepoznal.'] (*KS:* 194)

It is the narrator's criticism of society that is expressed here; the society which has given up its own significance in order to serve the machinery of an alienated System, blindly and unquestioningly. In this example, the machine (the System) is represented by a ship; people who control the ship are the ship's crew. The man suspended in a cage is fully dependent on both the ship and the ship's crew although he never meets them. He lives in a cage which is hanging on a rope attached to the ship. The cage and the ship are the only reality and also the only certainty he currently has. His only task is to sit in the cage and await the solution. The ship's crew members keep the man under control and in constant awareness of their superior position, but they ignore him, living their own existence independently of him. Over the years of the seemingly endless waiting time, the man gets so much used to the reality of his imprisonment that he never tries to escape, not even after he comes to the end of his waiting. He knows that he has been degraded and dehumanized but he does not complain, not even after he loses his faith and reveals the true emptiness of his life. Before, it was a hope for a better future that kept him satisfied with his condition; later, it is just the tiredness of his ageing self that keeps him going.

The narrator's parable is a reflection on the humiliation of the individual by the System and his or her inability to fight it, a reflection on his or her blind acceptance of what is going on, on the suppression of his or her individuality in the name of the System, on his or her false hope for salvation and on the alienation of the self, which are staple concerns discussed throughout the twentieth century. Franz Kafka's (1883-1924) dehumanized world, which suppresses all individuals who submit to it, has similarities to Hakl's fictional world. Jan Beneš's caged man may be compared to Kafka's Josef K.

Kafka's Josef K., the main protagonist of his novel *The Trial* (1920), is arrested shortly after he wakes up. Although he does not understand what he has been accused of, he takes his arrest as a matter of fact that happened but immediately seeks a solution and defence. Similarly, Jan Beneš's man also desires a solution to his current situation but his journey is passive. It is permanent waiting. Beneš never acts.

The 'trial' is Josef K.'s journey in search of recognition of his life. According to Patrick Bridgwater, *The Trial*

> 'is about that process. Once his conscience has awoken' [the arrest] 'Josef K.'s life can never be the same again. He has been leading senseless, routine existence; this being symbolized in his supposed profession: he is shown as working in a bank because he is a *Bankmensch* in the figurative sense of a routine person' (Bridgwater 2003: 110).

The trial brings to Josef K's life a different dimension. It enables him to step out and see things he has never seen before because he was too enclosed in himself, too selfish, too self-indulgent and too blind to be aware of the threat coming from the System. And what he sees is a person with 'no belief, in anything or anyone', a person who 'has pride but no self-respect', who 'believes in his own importance' [within the System], 'but not in his own significance' [within his Self] (*Ibid.* 183-184). Josef K. sees a person who gave up his individuality in order to become a blind servant of the dehumanized System driven by materialism and power. 'He is guilty of being who and what he is, and of acting against his own first subconscious and then conscious judgement of how he should have been conducting his life' (*Ibid.* 112-113). He is guilty because he has forgotten how to live and for this he is also punished. 'K. 'dies', and dies like a dog because he has lived a dog's life' (*Ibid.* 201). In Kafka's imagination, the dog parable may simply be understood as a metaphor of a person who does not have his own free will and who lives only at mercy of his owner and his or her decision to keep him or not. The dog has lost his freedom when he decided to obey the man. He has sacrificed his freedom for the sake of comfort and as such he is treated, as the man's companion in life but as a creature which is always dependent on others. If he disobeys, he is punished and hence lost.[21] It seems that the same also applies to K.

In the case of Jan Beneš's man, the trial has the form of a cage. A cage is his journey to recognition. Only there, if he sits and waits (as Josef K. was waiting), will he be able to learn about the meaning of his life and about freedom because:

[21] In addition see also Kafka, Franz (1961): 'Investigations of a Dog', *Metamorphosis and Other Stories*, Harmondsworth: Penguin books.

> '…for sure, the meaning of all this manifests itself undoubtedly somewhere else than where we think. Somewhere in a place which we cannot see from here; and if we can, it is as if we were in a cage hanging on some oily, steel rope a few metres above sea level, in a cage where a man waits for hours and hours whether an angel comes down and lets himself be seen…'
> ['… smysl toho všeho probíhá dozajista úplně jindy, než jsme zvyklí si představovat. Někudy, kam odtud není vidět; a když, tak jenom jako z klece, zavěšené pár metrů nad hladinou na zaolejovaném ocelovém laně, z klece, kde člověk hodiny a hodiny čeká, jestli se mu ukáže anděl... '] (*KS*: 194)

Without a cage, the man will never be able to uncover the truth. And what is the truth? The emptiness of his life, the idleness of his existence, the lost Self. And what is his guilt? His blind servitude to the power of the System (the ship). His animal-like obedience to his superiors. The lack of interest in the needs of his subconscious and distinctive Self. And what is his punishment? Loneliness, God's anger and Death's laughter:

> 'And when one begins to doubt and slowly becomes bored occupying one's mind with a lot of rubbish ideas, only then the old Grim Reaper appears and smiles, as long as the angel who has come to announce that the creator is pissed off knows how to smile and is allowed to do so. He appears, gives him a stony look and leaves. And then, when you are alone once more, you feel, deep inside, such deep emptiness you have never experienced before.'
> ['A když už začne pochybovat a začne se nudit a z dlouhé chvíle si vymýšlet hovadiny, tak se mu teprve zjeví zubatec a usměje se, pokud se anděl, který přišel zvěstovat, že se stvořitel nasral, může a umí usmát. Zjeví se, pohlédne na něj dutým okem a zmizí. A teprve potom, když už je člověk zase sám, ucítí v sobě takovou prázdnotu, jakou do té chvíle nepoznal.'] (*KS:* 194)

It is their conscious decision to accept life within the System that makes both Josef K. and Jan Beneš's man guilty. The moment they consciously agree to give up their selves to the System and stop questioning it, their path to freedom and salvation is lost forever. The moment they lose their individual's significance in order to become the servants of the machine, they lose their future forever. The moment they become selfless animals, they lose their human nature.

Another similarity[22] between Kafka's and Hakl's literary imagination can be found in their use of the same metaphor of a human body being transformed into a gigantic insect. In the case of Hakl, it is the character of Jan Beneš who has to deal with such a bodily form when, during one of his occasional sexual encounters, he accidentally looks in the mirror,

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22 Furthermore to the previous image: In one of Kafka's visions a room is crumbling away and an angel is falling down through the open ceiling – "it is practically only a painted wooden figure from the fore ship (Hodrová 2006: 276).

and there, instead of a man, he sees a larva, a flour-beetle, staring at him from the other side of the room, and he is frightened:

> 'I was horrified. I saw a swollen baby, ninety kilos in weight. A larva with a shaven, rapidly blinking human head attached to it. I saw a bald creature insulting Mother Nature's honest intentions.'
> ['Zděsil jsem se. Uviděl jsem napuchlé devadesátikilové nemluvně. Moučného červa s přimontovanou ostříhanou, rychle mrkající lidskou hlavou. Uviděl jsem jakousi lysou kreaturu, urážející poctivé záměry matky přírody. '] (*KS:* 209)

Beneš's self-consciousness echoes the transformation of Gregor Samsa, the protagonist of Kafka's *Metamorphosis* (1915):

> 'As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams, he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect. He was lying on his hard, as if it were armour-plated, back and, when he lifted his head a little, he could see his dome-like brown belly divided into stiff, arched segments on top of which the quilt could hardly stay in position and was about to slide off completely. His numerous legs, which were pitifully thin compared to the rest of his bulk, waved helplessly before his eyes' (Kafka 1961: 9).

The transformation of both characters is the same but the outcome is different. Jan Beneš is a beetle only in his mind and only for a moment. To Gregor Samsa, the body of a gigantic insect becomes the true and the unavoidable reality of his life. Furthermore, the way in which both characters deal with their new shapes differs. Jan Beneš's transformation is not fixed and so he can still turn his head away from the mirror and forget about it in the arms of his lover. However, Gregor Samsa's transformation is permanent and this is a completely different situation. The only thing Gregor can do is to learn how to cope with his new shape.

Gregor Samsa, Josef K. and Jan Beneš's caged man can be seen as personified metaphors of the world which, according to both Kafka and Hakl, creates monsters, objects and emotionless characters instead of free individuals. In their fictive world, '[t]he beast is a product of [people's] own blindness, self-centredness and lack of courage, and it springs when [they] realizes that [their] own life has been rendered sterile by [their] efforts to protect [themselves]' (Storr 1985: 23). All three characters represent people who have placed their personal selves freely and unquestioningly in the service of the dehumanized system for which they are punished for this. They have all sacrificed their human lives for the sake of the machine and when they realize that it has been nothing but a delusion, it is far too late to change it.

The vision of a beetle confronts Hakl's Jan Beneš at the time of a momentary lull. It occurs between two of his attempts to enter the structures of the ruling machine. The image of a beetle appears as a warning of what may happen if he submits fully to the dehumanised power, as Gregor Samsa has done. Jan Beneš only imagines the transformation to happen. His transformation is not final because he has not yet abandoned his life outside the system. Nevertheless, the danger is always present. Only sometimes does the warning manifest itself in the shape of a beetle, sometimes as a mechanised toy or a computerised character.

We find a resemblance between Emil Hakl's fictive world and the world of Franz Kafka. This may be due to various factors. Franz Kafka's account of an absurd world appeared at the time of vast political and social changes in Czech society at the beginning of the twentieth century. Kafka's literary work was a reaction to the times in turmoil; the time which produced war and general confusion instead of prosperity, a decline of the traditional Habsburg values instead of their strengthening and the introduction of new ways of thinking and behaviour. Kafka's writing reflected a society disrupted by its failing system, yet corrupted by its own blind contribution to it.[23] And it was society, though presented by certain individuals, that was arraigned, found guilty and punished in Kafka's works – for its 'slavish submission to the system in which [it was] enmeshed' (Robertson: Kafka 2009: XXV).

Kafka's writing can also be understood as a reflection of the writer's fears about his own self struggling between the acceptance of the System and his secret wish but inability to escape from it. It is existential and critical. It is Kafka himself who can be recognized in the character of Josef K., in the character of Gregor Samsa and in the gigantic insect he describes. It is Kafka's own history that can be traced in his fiction.

Hakl's literary work was written almost a hundred years later but it also describes a society undergoing a rapid change. Hakl's writing bears witness to people who find themselves trapped, first in the oppressive communist system and later in the machinery of the capitalist economy (both of which they have helped to build) and who do not know how to free themselves. It is them and their obedience to the System which is the cause of their confusion. For it was their conscious decision to allow the System to take over their lives. Thus, they are being punished – by being dehumanised – in the same way that Kafka's characters are punished.

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[23] Heimann 2009: 1-47.

Just as with Kafka, Hakl's writing may be also seen as a mirror to the writer's doubts about his own existence within the world of the System and about the consequences of being outside it. It is Hakl himself who can be recognized in the character of Jan Beneš; it is Jan Beneš who can be traced in the character of the caged man.

There are similarities between Kafka's writing and Hakl's works, but there is also a major difference between the way and the extent to which both writers apply their criticism. Kafka's picture of society is thoroughly sceptical and hopeless. His people are lost from the moment we meet them and forever. We follow their frustration – they cannot change their predicament. Just like Kafka, Hakl expresses criticism of people's subservience to the System, yet he gives his characters hope. His people still have a chance to avoid the complete destruction of their selves, but only if they recognize what is happening to them and if they recognize it in time. Jan Beneš seems to be one of them.

3.3 The 'Quake' and the 'Cthulhu'

In another example, it is again Jan Beneš who is the centre of Hakl's thoughts and again it is him who speaks about his doubts concerning humans and their position within the world of today. Only this time, he does not approach this world with 'Kafka's eyes' but instead, he looks at it from the perspective of someone who has been living in virtual reality of PC games and myths and who is conscious of their hidden powers:

> 'I was blundering around the labyrinth of a computer game. I was totally absorbed in it. (…) At the beginning, it was quite a common thing that I had to get up quickly and go and throw up. Although gradually, I got used to playing. I was becoming a part of a reality behind the looking glass. That game was called Quake. After several months of wearisome time sitting in the chair, I finally reached a rock cathedral with its ceiling disappearing somewhere in eternity. And there, in the middle of the spluttering pool of lava, a living thing was waiting, waving at me with a bunch of rotten tentacles. It wanted to teach me about the futility of all sensible effort and also about desire and its victory over mere mechanical existence, no matter what desire and what existence. His name was Shub-Niggurath…(…) In those days I had a new body. (…) It looked like a little assembly-kit figure from a children's chocolate egg (…) I managed to survive there for a year exactly. Then I typed out my letter of resignation on a Macintosh computer and left.'
> ['Tápal jsem v labyrintu počítačové hry. Byl jsem tím cele zaujat. (…) Ze začátku se běžně stávalo, že jsem tu a tam musel vstát a jít se rychle vyblít. Postupně jsem

> si ale zvykal. Stával jsem se součástí reality za zrcadlem. Jméno te hry bylo Quake. Nakonec jsem, po několika měsících na židli protrmáceného času, dospěl až do skalního dómu, jehož strop se ztrácel kdesi ve věčnosti. A tam, uprostřed prskajícího lávového jezírka, na mě čekal něčemu živému podobný tvor, mávající pugétem hnijících chapadel, aby mě poučil o zbytečnosti každého rozumného snažení a zároveň i o vítězství touhy nad pouhým mechanickým bytím, ať už je ta touha a to bytí jakékoliv. Jeho jméno bylo Shub-Niggurath...(...) Měl jsem v té době nový tělo.(...) Vypadal jsem jako skládací figurka z dětského čokoládového vejce. (...) Vydržel jsem to přesně rok. Potom jsem napsal na počítači značky Macintosh výpověď.'] (*KS*: 205)

Beneš begins working at an advertising agency again, after a period of unemployment. However, as he becomes integrated into the system, he starts getting warning signs in his mind. Suddenly, he imagines himself to be a player in a new 'computer game' and quickly he 'gets used to playing'. He adapts to the new environment and soon follows all the rules of the game. It is not until about a year later that he breaks down and realizes he cannot go on. He starts drinking and he has visions of himself being transformed into an inhuman form. He thinks his life has become a labyrinth of various corridors through which he has to pass in order to set himself free. He is given the chance. Since he is never fully committed, he has been given the ability to recognize when to move away and this he does.

In Beneš's view, the world within the System is a world of intellect, order, structure and an exhaustive effort to protect them. The world outside the System is a world of emotions, but also a world of personal confusion and chaos. The journey, which leads from one of these worlds to the other, goes through a labyrinth, or the 'Quake'. In the narrator's playful mind, the gate dividing the System and the outside world is guarded by Shub-Niggurath. We know that Shub Niggurath is an entity of an ambiguous character which comes from two different worlds - from the world of a PC game called the 'Quake' and from the mythical world of 'Cthulhu'. In the description of the 'Quake', Shub Niggurath is:

> 'the absolute ruler of the demons and monsters. (…) She has spawned an army to invade the Earth using the humans' own portal technology. (…) [She] spawns hundreds of demons but has no attacks of her own, relying purely on the power of her children. (…) None of the players' weapons can hurt Shub-Niggurath, making her practically invulnerable' (http://quake.wikia.com/wiki/Shub-Niggurath).

In other words, Shub Niggurath is the embodiment of the 'imposing' system, the absolute ruler of the alienated inhuman world. She is the 'imposing' ideology and the 'imposing' power that uses those who respond to her will to destroy the others, those who are still free (human). She uses the humans' weapons to fight humans. The second image of Shub-Niggurath is an image of the 'Cthulhu' goddess, a deity belonging to the realm first

mentioned in H. P. Lovecraft's (1890-1937) *The Last Test* (1928). According to this myth, Shub-Niggurath is a goddess of life who rules over sexuality and all possible forms of pleasure and creation. Her power is in the bohemian lifestyle. Phrases that characterize her best are 'women, wine and music or sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll' or 'life is not to be lived but enjoyed.' '[She] responds to the principle of emotions, she is the antinomy of intellect' which is represented by her partner, Nyarlathotep' (http://acetda.blog.cz/1007/shub-niggurath-a-nyarlathotep).

Shub Niggurath, who is waiting for the narrator at the end of his path which goes to the centre of the labyrinth, is a creature of two powers. The first power is employed to teach the narrator 'about the pettiness of any sensible effort.' Here, Shub Niggurath is a 'Quake' being. She embodies the System and the inevitable destiny of each human being who gives up his or her life in order to serve the will of the System. But Shub Niggurath is also a guardian who wants to teach the narrator 'about desire and its victory over the mechanic existence of the self.' Here, she is 'Cthulhu', a goddess of life, of enjoyment ('sex, drugs and alcohol'), of emotions and chaos. Shub Niggurath is both. She has two faces. She is Jan Beneš and the never-ending controversy of an unstable life.

As we consider Shub Niggurath to be one of the narrator's solipsistic visions of his self, we may consider both the world of the 'Quake' and the world of the 'Cthulhu' to be his perception of reality that surrounds him. He sees the world as a game (of successes and failures) and as a place where two powers of supernatural character clash – one of reason and one of the heart. The narrator copes with both dimensions of the game in his own way, although he often struggles to find a way through them and around them.

3.4 A 'latent deserter'

It is the combination of fear and personal distaste towards any form of officialdom (the System) that drives Jan Beneš away from the establishment and makes him concentrate on what he considers to be a 'more real', and therefore 'human', on identity of the individual and on the freedom of the self. Whenever he reaches the point where he is exhausted from all the effort to be a successful man in the 'prosperous' world, he quits all his jobs and becomes a 'domestic animal', hiding away in his flat, his burrow, going out just to get the daily products essential for his survival or to drink with his friends who lead their lives on the margins of society:

> '…I did not want to go back into dungarees, I had already tried that, and neither did I want to wear ties; I had tried that as well. I just wanted to walk on cobblestones, every morning to the newsagent's round the corner, to buy fags and the newspaper and then simply go straight home again. And so I did.'
> ['...Do montérek se mi nechtělo, to už jsem zkusil, a nechtělo se mi ani do kravaty; to už jsem měl taky za sebou. Chtělo se mi jen každé ráno jít po kočičích hlavách za roh do trafiky, koupit cigára a noviny a jít zase pěkně rovnou domů. A tak jsem to tak dělal.'] (*KS*: 225)

The narrator presents himself as a person who does not care much about his career and about a successful position within the world of profits. He tries various things but he never succeeds. He does not succeed because he does not want to (as in the example) or because he cannot:

> 'I could not think of anything at all I could support myself by. (…) Perhaps I did not know the right tricks; actually I did not know any tricks at all. I only knew what every idiot did: to find a job and then do it.'
> ['Ani náhodou jsem neuměl vymyslet, z čeho budu živ. Asi jsem neznal ty správné triky; neznal jsem vlastně vůbec žádné triky. Uměl jsem jenom to, co každý vůl: najít si práci a tu pak dělat.'] (*KS:* 240)

There are two sides to the narrator's personality: the one, described above, which tends towards his wish to lead a simple life with no stress, with no external pressure and with no worries about his place in its 'voracious machinery' of production and consumption. This part of his personality always takes him back to his internal self. The individualised stance in his case equals a conscious escape from society into his own privacy, to his home burrow and to the seclusion of his own mind. The narrator in no way strives to assert himself in society as a strong personality to be known and admired by others. Occasionally though, Jan Beneš feels compelled by the changing times and by people's expectations to leave his lair and venture out into the outside world. In those moments, he tries to pull himself together, plucks up his spirits and goes to find a job. But the enthusiasm he brings to the new work quickly burns out. Disillusioned, Jan Beneš quits and quickly turns back again to his own lonely world, to idleness and presumed comfort and safety. The resumption of his solitary life has cleansing effects but only until he is again driven by renewed inner or outer pressure to work, earn money, socialize, become successful, find a partner, and make love.

For Jan Beneš, life seems to be like a never-ending cycle. He repeatedly leaves his solitary lair to interact with the outside world and then again returns to being on his own. He is repeatedly within himself then out in the world; in the centre of mainstream society

or out of it, with his marginalised friends. It is the narrator's lack of stability which makes him struggle with his own personality, with people and with work; with the past and the present times. It is the narrator's desire for stability that brings him back to interactive life.

Jan Beneš is a confused personality who struggles between how he views his individuality within contemporary society and outside it. He is trapped in his own inability to decide whether to belong to mainstream society, whether to work, socialize and discuss common things, or whether to search for his own perceived true identity. Being immobilized in this cycle for the whole of his life, he finally resigns himself to the fact that he cannot escape from these two extremes and so submits with some sort of clarity and level of self-expectance that he is who he is:

> 'All over the world, a war of the practical majority of people against the dysfunctional minority is being fought night and day… I realized that, no matter which side I take in the future, I will always be a latent deserter…'
> ['Ve dne v noci po celém světě probíhala válka praktické většiny proti nepraktické menšině... Uvědomil jsem si, že budu vždycky, ať už se v budoucnu octnu na kterékoliv straně, vždycky budu latentní dezertér.'] (*KS:* 148)

The narrator's inability to decide whether he wants to be one or the other is the result of his own internal doubts. His doubts are the result of his observation of the real; his observations of the real are his reflections of the world which he sees in a constant fight between the 'practical majority' and the 'dysfunctional minority' of humans. The narrator's nature and his lifestyle turn out to be more sympathetic towards the latter group. Yet their 'dysfunctionality', which often represents them, scares him, and that is the reason why he often returns to the 'practical' and the 'majority'. However, being part of the 'majority' does not give him enough freedom to move and so he ends up again in the sidelines with the minority.

The narrator's recognition of himself as being a 'latent deserter' is a form of escape from the reality he sees around him. It is either an escape into his thoughts and into the comfort of life without any expectations or, on the contrary, an escape into mainstream society and into the functioning world. Both directions can bring him certain satisfaction if he is willing to accept them, and both can bring him fear, insecurity and chaos if he starts to question them.

As we have noticed, the narrator is a thinking individual who does not seem able to adapt permanently to either side. He will always question the reliability of the world which enables the 'practical majority' to create the rules and use them to rule over the others.

That is where his images of the dehumanized virtual reality of computer games, alien-looking toys made of plastic and steel and visions of the 'steel city' come from. He also questions the so called 'freedom' of the 'dysfunctional minority' and critically observes their chaotic and lost selves. That is where his fear of individual responsibility over one's life comes from. This is where his silence with regard to his failed marriage and lost family life originates.

From the above mentioned perspective, life according to Jan Beneš does not seem very optimistic. Beneš claims that a man is either a part of a machine within the System or a dysfunctional individuality outside the System, wandering in chaos and oblivion.

4. 'To see, to feel and to re-tell': places and their narratives

4.1 'Seeing': advertising, information and others

Jan Beneš's awareness of the unbreakable cycle of his life and his acknowledgment that he is an 'eternal escapee' increases his need for a rich internal world. He often closes himself off in a bubble of his own solitude where he plays with all the impulses his mind produces in response to outer reality. In those moments, he forgets about all the responsibilities he has in his life and just quietly observes what is happening in front of his eyes and comments on it. He carefully notes everything around him and then 'digests' it. The stories of the people he encounters, the places where he grew up and which he shares, his dreams, films and TV programmes fill his life and give him enough entertainment and pleasure in order to survive in this chaotic world. Nothing is more important for him than the stories life provides. Everything is, according to Beneš, only a mask which people put on pursuing the idea of a 'better' world but are rarely successful in creating it.

Jan Beneš looks for any excuse to defend his personal attitude. He does not show any desire to become a well-paid, working, married man who has achieved his goals and has set out his aims; his ambition is to live and, throughout this 'living', to see, to feel and to

re-tell. That seems to be the sum total of his wishes, his purpose for living and also his personal excuse for all he has been doing so far.

'To see, to feel and to re-tell' are the three verbs that follow the narrator everywhere he goes. When he chooses to find work within official structures, he applies for jobs in advertising agencies or in magazines and then these three verbs become his source of subsistence. This is what both Emil Hakl and the character of Jan Beneš have in common (see the Introduction). Both use words to turn their inner, subjective world into the outside world. Apart from working in a job, they also both attempt to write in order to capture the sense of all they can see.

Advertising and work in the media are the professions in which 'words' and images are the means of information and misinformation about society and about the world:

> 'Very little of what we think we know of the social realities of the world have we found out first-hand. Most of 'the pictures in our heads' we have gained from these media – even to the point where we often do not really believe what we see before us until we read about it in the paper of hear about it on the radio. The media not only give us information; they guide our very experiences. (…) [T]he media tell the man in the mass who he is – they give him identity; they tell him what he wants to be – they give him aspirations; they tell him how to get that way – they give him technique; and they tell him how to feel that he is that way even when he is not – they give him escape. (…) They are an important cause of the destruction of privacy in its full human meaning' (Mills 1995: 87-88).

The narrator is aware of all these powers the media have and this makes him interested but worried. As he is not an ambitious person, he does not seek to use the media and the words as a means of getting into the highest echelons of society. He is neither a politician nor a philosopher and he does not wish to become one. On the contrary, the fact that he is employed either in advertising or in journalism, and therefore as a person whose task is to create sentences, slogans and texts in order to manipulate people to embrace the new consumerism, to instil within them a false desire to own or know more than the others, makes him feel terrified and inactive:

> 'I wrote advertising copy. Later, whenever I walked the streets and was confronted without a warning by one of those silly texts I had created, I was always rattled. Whenever those big black letters yelled at me from the side of a house or a billboard or jumped out of the page of a magazine at me, I was always truly scared. I do not know why. I was never able to shake off this feeling.'
> ['Psal jsem reklamní texty. Vždycky když jsem pak někde na ulici bez varování natrefil na jedno z těch pitomostí, které jsem vymýšlel, ve mně hrklo. Pokaždé, když na mě zařvala ta velká černá písmena ze zdi baráku nebo z plakátovací plochy

> nebo ze stránky časopisu, jsem se upřímně leknul. Nevím proč. Nikdy jsem se toho nedokázal zbavit.'] (*KS:* 197)

The advertising world and work for the media becomes a major source of income but also a nightmare for Jan Beneš. As he says, he is 'always rattled' when being 'confronted by one of those silly texts' he has created, although he admits that he does not know why he feels like this. The answer may lie in another section of the text in which the narrator remembers himself walking home with an urn containing his mother's ashes placed in a plastic bag decorated with a slogan advertising: GORBATSCHOW WODKA, CLEAR WODKA SPIRIT [GORBATSCHOW WODKA, ČISTÝ DUCH VODKY.] (*KS:* 194) It is the same sign which he finds above the bar in a brothel he visits with his younger colleagues from Libeň Waterworks. The awkwardness of the situation which transforms the serious into the ridiculous and enjoyment into apathy may be exactly what the narrator has in mind when he talks about a 'spirit'. 'Gorbatschow wodka' is not only a product to him (a product that makes people drunk and oblivious) but a series of words referring not just to alcohol but also to the Soviet era[24]. It is a slogan ('come and get me!'). It is a metaphor for him, a 'spirit' from a world that, in his view, has not yet managed to digest the past (the traumas of the communist era, the fact that the narrator's mother has died, that the narrator youth is gone) and already has to fight with the new (capitalism, consumerism, loneliness and ageing). The urn in a polythene bag with the sign 'Gorbatschow wodka' is a sad paradox of the narrator's life; it is an ironic picture of what he sees as a reality of this world.

There are other reflections that arise in connection with the narrator's scepticism. For example, why is it that the narrator is shocked when he sees his own 'big black letters' shouting at him from various billboards or magazines? Does he feel ashamed for being a part of the state's official policy that plays on people's emotions and uses their weakest points to fulfil the country's market-orientated targets? Does the existence of slogans on billboards remind him of the past when similar signs were created to celebrate the 'greatness' of the united communist nation and to suppress the identity of individual human beings? Is it both the present and the past that, in their joint effort to suppress one thing in the name of power, make the narrator shiver?

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[24] Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev (1931) is a former Soviet statesman.In 1985-1991 he held the post of the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. He was the last head of state of the Soviet Union.

Advertising, banners and slogans have always been instruments of propaganda and propaganda has always been the instrument to promote the idea of a country's political and economic strength. 'Propaganda is the broadest sense is the technique of influencing human action by the manipulation of representations.' (Lasswell 1995: 13) Every system uses the power of propaganda to rule people's lives. It attacks their choice of lifestyle, their political views and their personal philosophy. Propaganda seeks the destruction of all that arises from the individual human being and what is associated with freedom; it wants nothing else but absolute obedience to its principles. In Lippmann's view,

> '[t]he private citizen today has come to feel rather like a deaf spectator in the back row who ought to keep his mind on the mystery off there [on the stage], but cannot quite manage to keep awake. He knows he is somehow affected by what is going on. Rules and regulations continually, taxes annually and wars occasionally remind him that he is being swept along by great drifts of circumstances. (…) He lives in a world he cannot see, does not understand and is unable to direct.'
> (Lippmann 1995: 47)

There are various sources of propaganda. Some are in politics, others are in business. The narrator of *Konec světa* is exercised by the pernicious influence of advertising because advertising is a source of his income and also the source of his fears and hatred. It is his way to success (he sees his own slogans on buildings) but also a source of his demoralisation and he does not enjoy either of these, at least not for long.

Advertising is not the only thing that bothers Jan Beneš in his account of the present world and his position in it. Apart from advertising, there is suddenly an information overload. There is a sudden influx of Western travellers ('amusing buggers, demons, lonely beasts and melancholic freaks' ['zábavné bestie, démoni, samotářské šelmy a smutní podivíni'] and later 'pretentious yuppies' ['vtipní, dobře oháknutí vrabci.']) (*KS:* 144-145). There are suddenly foreign words, foreign languages and foreign cultures. The borders have opened. American programmes flood TV channels and cinemas, Western technologies are omnipresent. Accordingly, everything becomes ambiguous for Jan Beneš. Advertising and journalism provide him with enough money to live on but he despises these professions. 'The world around [is] drowning in ceaseless conversation.' ['Svět kolem nás se zalykal nepřetržitými rozhovory.'] (*KS*: 5) This is the impression that overwhelms Jan Beneš walking through Prague. He finds these conversations 'useless'. Foreigners coming to the country enliven the narrator's life, yet he is glad when they leave: 'A new, kind, familiar and empty world opened up in front of me.' ['Otevřel se přede mnou nový, vlídný, důvěrně prázdný svět.'] (*KS:* 18) Foreign languages and cultures appeal to him as long as he is able just to observe them, yet he feels lost when he stays

among foreigners. In order to make their world more familiar to him, he (or more precisely, the writer acting behind the narrator) transcribes English words by means of Czech phonetics (Czech people – 'ček pípl'; Joseph – 'Džouzef'; where are you from – 'verárjůfrom'). Freedom to travel gives the characters of *Konec světa* the opportunity to move out of the Czech Republic and to learn about the world, and so they go and travel (Láďa travels to India, Řípa to France, Renata to London). But again, the narrator's attitude to travelling is different:

> 'Really, there is no need anymore to travel across the continents and photograph waterfalls and pyramids. That used to be. Basically, the current world is without mystery because the population of the planet is now all the same. For a long time, they were trying to become the same and now they have succeeded. Nowadays, those who have courage and good nerves, those who long for real adventure, stay at home. They sit, look around and listen.'
> ['Opravdu, už není třeba se štvát po světadílech a fotit vodopády a pyramidy. To bývalo. Svět je v podstatě už bez tajemství, protože obyvatelstvo planety se od sebe přestalo lišit. Tak dlouho se o to snažili, až se jim to podařilo. Dneska ten, kdo má odvahu a dobré nervy, kdo touží po opravdovém dobrodružství, sedí doma. Sedí, dívá se a poslouchá.'] (*KS*: 226)

The narrator does not believe that travelling opens minds. He accepts it as an experience of considerable significance (a trip to India helped his friend Láďa to overcome his personal problems with a relationship) but not as something that would bring something overtly new. His characters travel but they come back to the Czech Republic, their own country. He himself befriends foreigners but he always returns to his Czech friends and to Czech society. He observes the 'new' with a considerable concern but, as he himself becomes part of it, he realizes that the 'new' is practically equal to the 'old' and the 'different' is practically the 'same'. He does not reject the mores of the new capitalist society, but he is not enthusiastic about it either. He feels the same about Central and Eastern Europe, criticizing it as well as praising it. According to him, Central and Eastern Europe is:

> '...a 'biedermeier' guest room; a room with a nice cup of coffee on an embroidered tablecloth, and a semolina cake on the table... Twenty, thirty years this lasted and nothing happened but, in the end, the doorbell rang, all the moths flew up, the chambermaid stiffly walked to the door, opened it wide and, her jaw clattering idly, gabbled with a hollow voice: "We… have… been… expecting… you… come… in…"'
> ['...ten biedermeirový pokoj pro hosty, pokoj s kafíčkem na háčkovaném ubruse, s bábovkou na stole... Dvacet, třicet let to trvá a nic se neděje, ale nakonec se přeci jen ozve zvonek, moli vzlétnou, pokojská toporně kráčí ke dveřím, otvírá dokořán a sanice jí naprázdno klapne, když dutým hlasem odříkává: „Už... na... vás... čekáme... pojďte... dál...'"] (*KS:* 24)

The grotesqueness of this image only underlines the narrator's irony when assessing the country's integration into Western Europe, which people surmised would be positive but, unfortunately, that is not what has really happened. In his view, Western influence has brought into people's lives an excess of information and multiple options but also chaos. 'These were bright and erratic times' ['byly to pestré, proměnlivé časy'] (*KS*: 20) full of 'the buzzing vapour of talk' ['bzučivý opar řeči'] (*KS*: 5) and yet they did not bring anything better and new. Significantly, also the paragraph which closes the whole narrative of *Konec světa* summarizes what has already been said above:

> 'But you, rat, you have to understand this. You just can't do what you feel like! This is Central Europe!'
> ['Jenomže tady, hajzlíku, není holubník! Tady je střední Evropa!'] (*KS:* 246)

4.2 'Feeling': the city of Prague

The narrator's passion for 'seeing' and 'feeling' is also centred on Prague, because it is exactly Prague that stands for the *genius loci* of *Konec světa* and of the vast majority of Hakl's works. It is the place that determines Jan Beneš's life as

> '[t]he nature of a place is usually associated with the nature of a person who dwells there or who moves around there. To a great extent, a place determines a person and a person determines a place.'
> ['Povaha místa bývá spjata s typem postavy, která se v něm zdržuje, nebo se jím pohybuje, místo do značné míry determinuje postavu a postava místo.']
> (Hodrová 1997: 18)

In Prague, Jan Beneš's steps lead across the boroughs of Žižkov, Bubeneč, Letná, Libeň and Smíchov; they pass through the streets of Na Záhonech, Mostecká, Pernerova and through the parks of Stromovka and Letná; they stop in local restaurants and pubs like Šlechtovka, U Modré hvězdy, U Pšenice, U Sládečků in order to listen to the narrator's stories and stories of other people whom he meets over a pint of beer. In *Konec světa,* we learn hardly anything about the historical testimony of old-town squares, gothic cathedrals and renaissance palaces. Jan Beneš's Prague is not a city that hides magical labyrinths, magical places and secret messages about other civilizations, as it does in books by Michal Ajvaz (b. 1949). Neither is it a place of mystique, as it is in the literary fiction by Miloš Urban (b. 1967). It is not even a culture depository of the Czech nation, a place of bustling

businesses, shopping zones, blooming parks and attractions for tourists. It is his home and the reality of his daily life.

Jan Beneš does not embrace the Prague Castle or St Vitus Cathedral but the tower of the television transmitter which:

> '[i]lluminated by the sun (…) stood ankle-deep in the paddling pool of houses, as though it was a feature from a book by Jules Verne. As if Verne's Steel City began to rise from there, from somewhere in the mists above the Žižkov hillside.'
> ['Světlem zalitá věž televizního vysílače stála po kotníky v brouzdališti domů jako atribut z verneovky. Jako by tam někde v té mlze nad stráněmi Žižkova už začínalo Ocelové město.'] (*KS*: 5)

His walks do not lead across the well-known Charles Bridge or along the banks of the river Vltava, but along one of the built-up sites of Prague's Botič stream:

> 'Taking a narrow path, I slowly approached the banks of the Botič stream. I entered a stinking rat jungle full of scum, mud and waste. Skeletons of dumped buggies and ironing boards were waiting for me in the gloom.'
> ['Po úzké pěšince jsem pomalu došel k Botiči a vstoupil do smrduté krysí džungle, plné pěny, kalu a odpadků. Kostry vyhozených kočárků a žehlicích prken číhaly v přítmí.'] (*KS*: 37)

In his view, the evening sky above Smíchov borough is covered up with 'shining sheet-metal clouds' ['zářící plechové mraky'] (*KS*: 177). The autumn in Letná borough has a 'taste of iron and aluminium' ['železná a hliníková chuť'] (*KS*: 243). With the coming darkness, 'blackened fingers of the Vyšehrad church point[s] up to the sky' ['ukazovaly do nebe zčernalé prsty Vyšehradu'] (*KS*: 177) and the Castle 'is reminiscent of a cracked distillation apparatus, abandoned in a corner of a dusty closet' ['vypadal jako prasklý destilační přístroj, odložený v koutě zaprášeného kabinetu'] (*KS*: 91). At the end of the summer, 'the points of the spires of the Emauzy monastery [rip] the dense sky above the river embankment as if they were a dragon's teeth' ['špičky Emauz páraly neproniknutelnou oblohu nad nábřežím jako hadí zuby'] (*KS:* 48). The restaurant U Modré hvězdy is located 'behind the Radlice footbridge, on the bank of a railway landscape full of signal lights, switch tongues, wires, dead cats and shining rail tracks' ['za radlickou lávkou, na břehu železniční krajiny plné signálních světel, výhybek, drátů, chcíplých koček a zářících kolejí'] (*KS:* 169). '[T]he ball of the Libeň gas-holder' ['koule libeňského plynojemu'] represents an 'optimistic replica of the Globe' ['optimistickou kopii zeměkoule'] (*KS:* 184). From the train going from Libeň railway station to Prague Central Station, one can see 'the tiny, childlike borough of Libeň' ['drobounká dětská Libeň'] and

then also ‘a factory chimney’ [‘tovární komín’], ‘house for the invalids’ [‘Invalidovnu’], ‘[t]he courtyard full of scrap trucks and buses, a crane called “the cat”’ [‘dvůr plný vyřazených nákladďáků a autobusů, jeřáb, zvaný “kočka”’], ‘boarded house galleries’ [‘oprýskanými palubkami obložené pavlače’] and ‘laundry, hanging on rotting clothes-lines’ [‘prádlo na puchřících šňůrách’] (*KS:* 135). And the beer-garden restaurant Šlechtovka is located on the ground ‘bearded with grass and nettles’ [‘travou a hluchavkami zarostlý’]; in the place ‘adjacent to the ruins of a small manor house from one side, to a hollow brick wall from the second side and to a dead fence from the third side’ [‘obklopený z jedné strany ruinou zámečku, z druhé vykotlanou cihlovou zdí a ze třetí prkenným plotem’] (*KS:* 85).

Jan Beneš looks up in order to see heavy clouds and steel constructions; he looks ahead in order to see ‘ordinary’ streets with ‘ordinary’ people standing by and ‘ordinary’ pubs filled with ‘(extra)ordinary’ people’s lives. In his city, there is no emphasis on the historical background of the place. On the contrary, what we find in the centre of the narrator’s attention is a contemporary image of Prague and his momentary impression of it – it is the image of the night as it reminds him of the world of dark, fantasy fiction. It is industrial as it evokes Verne’s idea of the ‘Steel City’. It is shabby and colourless as the narrator reflects upon the concrete architecture of recent times and what has remained of it. His Prague is either dark and grey, or metallic yellow and silver as it gleams in the sunlight or in the light of the local street lamps. His Prague does not have many colours. It is rather ‘ordinary’ and raw, but sometimes it also shines. It is full of contradictions and also full of individual stories and small surprises – within its sites and its residents. It is vibrant, yet dull too.

Jan Beneš’s attitude to Prague and to life within is ambiguous, in terms of colours and especially in his feelings towards the place. In Prague, he feels alienated and at home at the same time. There, he experiences fear and hostility when he observes how the atmosphere in the city has changed with the arrival of the market economy and Western influences. He feels a sincere affection for the place which has always been his home:

> ‘I am going home by subway. In my carriage, couples who do not have any words to exchange anymore stare at the same spot ahead. There are two happy-looking schoolgirls giggling over the magazine ‘Girlie’. A lady with a wrinkled face which is covered by a coat of face-powder is on her way to the theatre, her fur-coat on. The regime has returned the family house to her, her son lives in Canada, her daughter is married to a Czech living in Switzerland and her husband has a prostate the size of a cucumber. Nearby, a monk dressed in a frock displays his noble profile

> (…). At the door, a family hangs about. They seem to be discussing something serious in the language of tourists. (…) but, you can't do just what you like here! This is Central Europe!'
> ['Vracím se metrem domů. Ve vagónu zírají rovně před sebe dvojice, které si už všechno řekly. Pár školaček se šťastně dusí nad časopisem Dívka. Dáma se zapudrovanými vráskami směřuje do divadla, na sobě kožich, vrátili barák, syn v Kanadě, dcera za Čechošvýcara, muž prostatu jako okurku. Opodál vystavuje ušlechtilý profil mnich v kutně (...). U dveří postává rodinka. Vážně před sebou rozmlouvají turistickým jazykem. (...) Jenomže tady, hajzlíku, není holubník! Tady je střední Evropa!'] (*KS:* 245-246)

But the way he and some of his friends often describe this place is marked with scepticism and disgust:

> 'Somehow, all seemed to be colourless, as if it was blacked by smoke. Yet, it was so familiar. (…) [C]rushed polystyrene cups. Ice-lolly wooden-stick leftovers. Matches. Cups. Empty water bottles.'
> ['Všechno to bylo jaksi bezbarvé, jakoby vyuzené, a přesto tak známé (...) zmačkané polystyrénové pohárky. Dřívka od nanuků. Sirky. Kelímky. Flašky od Dobré vody.'] (*KS*: 135).

It is again the confusion of the unknown and of the new (unexpected) that makes the narrator doubt all he sees in Prague and around it; it is the familiarity of the well-known and the remembered (recognized) that makes him reconciled to the city. Both the opposite feelings generate his story, as well as the city of Prague – a *theatre mundi* of his perceptive self – interesting and alive.

Hakl's way of seeing Prague and life within is not exceptional or unique. Similar images of Prague may be found in the literary fiction of other contemporary writers. Václav Kahuda's (b. 1965) story, *Technologie dubnového večera* (*The Technology of an April Evening*, 2000), follows two main characters into a 'coal-dusk' ['uhelné šero'] that is 'sprawling across the city' ['vznášelo nad městem'], into the park, Stromovka, which is 'a dark district in the silence and lanterns gloom there' ['tmavý okres ticha a lucerny tam svítí v křovinách'] and where 'a small light is burning in the kiosk at the Šlechtovka restaurant' ['v kiosku u Šlechtovy restaurace plane světýlko']. On the way to the pub, both characters observe 'the walls of Bohnice housing estate glowing from behind the river' ['za řekou, v dálce, svítily stěny bohnického sídliště']; they see the chimney of the Holešovice power station, 'the defoliated brick gate' ['opadaná cihlová brána'] and 'the slated roofs of the Cathedral' ['břidlicové střechy katedrály'] which 'arises from the tree overgrowth located behind the Letná ground' ['za Letenskou plání se vynořuje nad hladinou stromů'] (Kahuda

2000: 9-10). All these impressions come from a single text which Kahuda dated Prague, June 1998. This is a story about Jan Beneš (Hakl's real name) and Petr Kratochvil (Kahuda's real name), specifically about one of their common talks these characters share together on their way through Prague. In Jáchym Topol's (b. 1962) books – *Sestra* (*City Silver Sister*, 1994) and *Anděl* (*Angel*, 1995) - the image of contemporary Prague is similar; perhaps more negative and extreme in the description of certain places and colours that determine them (blood coloured clouds, a pot hole in the middle of the Anděl crossroads, the smell of urine when passing a synagogue, the metal roller-shutters, hospitals, McDonalds, dodgy pubs, slot-machines, gypsies and junkies in *Anděl*).

In Hakl's, Kahuda's and Topol's fiction we see a realistic but multi-dimensional picture of life in Prague. The Prague buildings, its quarters, streets, pubs, notices and shops create the scenery for people's actions here, and people bring life into the these walls, giving them enough attention and space so that they become also the active participants of the present world. In the works of all three writers, the city is something one can really see (images), hear (voices, TV, radio), feel (atmosphere) and touch (things). It is a city of 'real' things - if we consider the 'real' to represent the 'authentic' rather than the imagined (with the exception of the narrator's anticipated visions on the decline of Czech society).

The attention to the city and an interest in ordinary things that inhabit the city has been a key characteristic of various literary groups since the introduction of the realistic style of writing. In 1945–1948, Skupina 42 (Group 42)[25] wrote poetry which dealt with the 'real' life in the city - the city as a place of raw and civilised but a multi-layered and sprawling reality –, and with the life of ordinary human beings living and working within its walls.

> 'The reality of the modern artist and the modern poet is practically the city: its inhabitants, its pavements, its lamp-posts, its shop notices, its buildings, its staircases and its flats. (…) Should art re-gain its lost meaning in an individual's life, it has to return its attention to things amongst which and with which [Man] lives. (…) Art discovers the real, it creates the real; art reveals the real, i.e. that world that we live in and us, who live within it. Nothing else but the everyday, horrifying and glorious drama of humanity and the real world, a drama facing the miracle is the theme, the meaning and the intention of art.'
> ['Skutečností moderního malíře a básníka je prakticky město; jeho lidé, jeho dláždění, stojany jeho lamp, návěští jeho krámů, jeho domy, schodiště, byty. (...) Má-li umění nabýti ztraceného významu v životě jednotlivcově, musí se vrátit k věcem, mezi nimiž a s nimiž [člověk] žije. (…) Umění objevuje skutečnost,

[25] The members of Skupina 42 were writers Ivan Blatný (1919-1990), Josef Kainar (1917-1971), Jiří Kolář (1914-2002), Jiřina Hauková (1919-2005) and Jan Hanč (116-1963), artists Kamil Lhoták (1912-1990), František Gross (1909-1985), František Hudeček (1909-1990) and others.

> vytváří skutečnost, odhaluje skutečnost, ten svět, v němž žijeme, a nás, kteří žijeme. Neboť nejen tématem, ale smyslem a záměrem umění není nic než každodenní, úděsné a slavné drama člověka a skutečnosti: drama záhady čelící zázraku.'] (Chalupecký 1940: 88-89)

Skupina 42[26] sees reality in motion and in fragments rather than as a static and complex unit of creation. Its contribution to the world of writing lies in portraying human banality as well as in creating an image of human life, an individual's everyday reality and an individual's predicament. The literary work which Skupina 42 produced was not particularly lyrical; it was, rather, a non-literary record of reality which saw the present as a myth of the contemporary world.

The poetics, style and themes of Skupina 42 have had a large impact on that strand of Czech literature that includes works by authors such as Egon Bondy (1930–2007), Bohumil Hrabal (1914–1997) and, later, the literature of the Czech underground movement of the 1970s and 1980s.[27] Furthermore, Skupina 42 was an important source of inspiration for the work of all the three above-mentioned writers, Hakl, Kahuda and Topol. These writers have also become interested in the lives of ordinary people living on the periphery of society. They have also assumed a critical attitude to officialdom.

Nevertheless, there is another source of inspiration which may be discovered when reading the works by the three above-mentioned Czech writers. Hakl, Kahuda and Topol follow not just the line of realistic authenticity, but also the line of human fantasy and myth to construct an image of the current life, Prague included. Hakl uses elements of magic realism,[28] fantasy[29] and sci-fi[30] (the Emauzy monastery looking like 'a dragon's teeth', the reference to Verne's Steel City, to a man in a space suit, to Shub Niggurath). In *Konec světa*, the inspiration by a fantasy-based literary style becomes the most appealing when

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[26] The poetics of Skupina 42 was influenced by the work of Walt Whitman (1819-1892), Carl Sandburg 1878-1967) and T. S. Eliot (1888-1965).

[27] See also: Pilař, Martin (1999): *Underground (Kapitoly o českém literárním undergroundu)*. Brno: Host.

[28] The following is an adaptation from M.H. Abrams' *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 6th ed. (Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 1993) as cited by Dr. Robert P. Fletcher of West Chester University: The term magic realism, originally applied in the 1920s to a school of painters, is used to describe the prose fiction of Jorge Luis Borges in Argentina, as well as the work of writers such as Gabriel García Márquez in Colombia, Gunter Grass in Germany, and John Fowles in England. These writers interweave, in an ever-shifting pattern, a sharply etched realism in representing ordinary events and descriptive details together with fantastic and dreamlike elements, as well as with materials derived from myth and fairy tales. See, http://www.themodernword.com/gabo/gabo_mr.html.

[29] Fantasy is a genre of fiction which builds its plot, theme and settings on the basis of magic. Fantasy literature creates imaginary worlds where magic is common.

[30] Science fiction (sci-fi) is a genre of fiction which works with imaginary content such as future settings, futuristic science and technology, space travel, parallel universes, aliens and paranormal abilities. Various writers and filmmakers used sci-fi as a device to explore variety of philosophical subjects, for instance identity, desire, morality and social structure.

the narrator speaks about his dreams, about his day visions of Prague, about his thoughts regarding how the self is being trapped within the system and, finally, about his contemplations of the world which balances on the verge of the chaotic present and an apocalyptic future.

The double inspiration of Hakl's perception of Prague takes us back to Aleš Haman's theory regarding the two strands in post-communist Czech literature. As it has been noted before, Hakl's work cannot be put into either of the two pigeon holes Haman employs. Hakl's writing uses the elements of both realistic fiction and fantastic fiction. By doing so, it contributes to the creation of a new, postmodern mythology of the postmodern city of Prague. In Hakl's work (and also in the work of Kahuda and Topol), Prague is a multi-layered, multi-dimensional, ambiguous place where everything is possible if a person knows what to see and where to go, and if this person imagines and lives. This is what we may call a 'postmodern' perception of the city and the world (see I, 4.6). *Konec světa* is an important part of Hakl's literary construction. It is realistic as well as imaginative.

4.3 'Re-telling': in the centre of pub talks and random encounters

A large part of Jan Beneš's contemporary world is filled with various stories he has had a chance to experience or he has heard from other people. Individuals' stories approach him whenever he lets them do so: on TV and radio, in dreams, in various flats, on the streets and, most commonly, in pubs. He tells us everything he can see or hear around him. When walking in the streets or sitting in a pub, he describes everything he manages to notice and live through; the buildings, the signs, the noise, the fragmented dialogues and the people whom he encounters. For to him, everything and everyone has its own story to say, no matter how confusing the message is. It is especially the pub which becomes one of the main sites of Jan Beneš's narrations.

Within the context of Czech culture, the pub has always been a public place which has played an important part in communication. People have gone to pubs to express their ideas and to share their own personal difficulties and breakdowns. According to Vladimír Macura, in the first half of the nineteenth century, the pub environment played a crucial role 'in the socialization of the national culture project' ['v socializaci vlasteneckého kulturního projektu'] (Macura 1997: 65). The pub was a place where people could choose whatever language they would like to speak; a place where people could express their national ideas; a place where Czech intellectuals could lead discussions with the bourgeois,

with the artists as well as with the ordinary town folk about their shared problems. However, the pub has always also been the place of (un)controllable beer drinking and of human decline. In the light of such an ambiguity, the attitude to the pub has constantly been changing. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the pub was regarded as a place of alcoholism and of human destruction. 'Bohemia has often been seen as a country where all activity eventually dissolves hopelessly in beer.' ['Obvyklým tématem je reflexe Čech jako země, kde se aktivita beznadějně rozpustila v pivu.'] (*Ibid.* 69) The pub is a place where action ends in passivity – due to beer drinking.

In the twentieth century, the pub continued to be a place of political and cultural discussions, and also a place of desperate escapism to alcohol. It has been a place of encounters and of forgetting; a place of much talk and little activity. Hakl's *Konec světa* fits this image of the pub. His Jan Beneš is a regular visitor of local pubs in Prague. He speaks with his friends in pubs whenever he feels frustrated by the world of work and when he feels lonely. In pubs, he hears his friends' personal life stories and witnesses their breakdowns. He sits and quietly observes what is happening around him. The pub is a place where extraordinary things may happen when no one really expects them (for instance, a dancing performance by two ageing barmaids to amuse the local barflies; Jan Beneš exchanges slaps with his colleague's girlfriend, or he exchanges a long kiss with a local floozy). It is in the pub where serious talk blends in with background noise (a murderer's testimony is heard at one point against the background of normal pub noise). It is in the pub that person's weaknesses are revealed. (This is where we learn that Jan Beneš is unable to approach an attractive woman and Fáfa is unable to stay reasonably calm and often runs crazy and that local barflies are unable to fully enjoy the barmaids' striptease show).

In Jan Beneš's world, the contemporary pub is a place where one feels at home, safe and never alone. It is especially a place of a sharing (conversations), of uncontrolled behaviour (wild drinking nights) and of unpretentious silence (quiet observation). It is never a place for important political discussions, at least not at the present time. The time for political debate has already passed, as the narrator argues when talking about the life of one of his acquaintances – the waiter, Igor. For Jan Beneš, the pub had political significance previously in the text where he talks about his friend, Igor the waiter, but only because in the past, 'Igor's pub' was frequented by people who were interested in music, in books and in events which were suppressed by official communist propaganda. Igor's pub used to be visited by people who exchanged their works of arts there, after closing time and behind locked doors. Beneš's pubs are not even places where people go to show off.

They are places where everyone tends to be equal but unique, as unique as their characters and their stories are. At least the narrator perceives them as such.

The pubs where Jan Beneš spends his time are ordinary places. They are interesting because of their atmosphere, not because of their ranking, their prices or the quality of food. These are mostly cheap pubs. Jan Beneš is also interested in shabby garden kiosks:

> 'U Pšenice is an ordinary communal pub located down there in the Vršovice borough. Only a few guests were sitting inside. Some youngsters were having a game of pool at the bar situated at the rear of the pub.'
> ['U Pšenice je obyčejná občanská hospoda dole ve Vršovicích. Sedělo tam pár hostů, vzadu v locale šťouchala mládež biliár.'] (*KS*: 6)

> 'Behind the Radlice footbridge, (…) there is the restaurant U modré hvězdy. Nowadays, it is an ordinary pub which differs in no way from hundreds of thousands of similar places. Yet, still at the beginning of the 1990s, a person who poked his nose in could not miss the atmosphere that dominated the place… It was an exceptionally silent place. Different from other pubs. (…) You see, the majority of the guests had spent ten, fifteen years in prison. Various plotters, liars and dodgers were sitting there and then, separately from the aristocrats - discreet men in their fifties with blue-coloured chubby circles under their eyes.'
> ['Za radlickou lávkou... stojí restaurace U modré hvězdy. Dneska už je to běžná hospoda, která se ničím neliší od statisíců podobných pajzlů. Ale ještě začátkem devadesátých let si každý, kdo tam strčil nos, nemohl nevšimnout té atmosféry... Panovalo tam zvláštní ticho. Jiné než v ostatních hospodách. (…) Většina štamgastů totiž měla odkroucená tak deset patnáct roků. Vysedávali tu různí kšeftaři, lháři, uhejbáci a stranou od nich šlechta: rozvážní padesátníci s inkoustovým tukem pod okem.'] (*KS:* 169)

Nevertheless, they are the places full of memories of the past communist times:

> 'A new, kind and familiar empty world opened up to me. I went to work. I spent my time with friends in pubs. I visited the musty catacombs under the former Stalin Monument. They smelled of old concrete. Beer was on tap there. Bands performed there and some customers danced in the stirring dust. Others watched them from the tables, still others wandered along the underground corridors, all euphoric and with lighters in their hands on. (…) These were the corridors where, for many decades, only the heavy-stone steps of the Czechoslovak people resounded.'
> ['Otevřel se přede mnou nový, vlídný, důvěrně známý prázdný svět. Chodil jsem do práce, s kamarády do hospod, navštěvoval jsem zatuchlé, starou maltou vonící katakomby pod bývalým Stalinovým pomníkem. Točilo se tam tenkrát pivo, na pódiu se střídaly kapely, někteří návštěvníci trsali v rozvířeném prachu, jiní je od stolu pozorovali a ještě jiní bloudili v povzneseném stavu podzemními chodbami s plápolajícími zapalovači v ruce. (…) Chodbami, kterými se léta a léta rozléhaly jenom kamenné kroky československého lidu.'] (*KS*: 18)

Every pub which Jan Beneš visits has its own peculiar atmosphere; every person he meets has his or her own place within the pub; every person he picks up from the crowd has his or her own unchangeable character. It could be a friend, a woman or just a random person. Only once does he go to a pub with his boss and with his workmates but this does not seem to bring him any pleasure at all. The very next day, when they all sober up and meet at work, the boss acts as if the previous night had never happened. From now on, he is again the boss who does whatever suits his position best, regardless of others (*KS*: 179-246).

In Beneš's pubs, there is hardly any place for bosses, for work and for hierarchy and pretence. It is an open environment where everyone feels equal: the regular barflies, the junkies, the loonies, the criminals, the aristocrats, the businessmen, the artists, the teenagers and just ordinary people of every age. It is the place where everyone can talk about whatever they want or just sit quietly and observe. And people do talk there, and the narrator listens. And everything he hears he marks down: vivid dialogues, intensive monologues, fragmented discussions and the noises. His pub is a place of sharing and that is the main reason why Jan Beneš goes there – to enjoy the company of others (he does so as one of their regular visitors) and to learn about the nature of their human selves (he does so as the narrating self). Jan Beneš's pub is not a place where people come to protest against the regime or to support it. It is not even a place where people get seriously drunk, although occasionally his pubs can get very busy and wild. Jan Beneš's pub is a shelter for those people who feel lonely and lost in the world. It is also a place of entertainment and fun. In sum, Jan Beneš's pub is its own universe.

The pub is not the only place where the narrator learns about people's personal lives. No less important are his walks across the streets of Prague and his occasional travels to the Czech countryside. These 'trips' also bring him desired satisfaction and relief. They inspire him, give him various impulses and various stories to hear and then re-tell. And he does re-tell them, retaining the complexity of all the images and sounds. He carefully distinguishes between language and noise. He describes both meticulously.

4.4 'Being': in the flat

The city, the streets and the pubs are the places where the narrator goes whenever he feels lonely and isolated. On the other hand, whenever he feels overburdened and overwhelmed by others, he shuts himself up in the seclusion of his flat. The pub is, for him, a representation of his extrovert self; his need to be open to new impulses. The flat is for him a representation of his introvert self; his necessity to dedicate himself only to his

own being, to his thoughts, dreams and imaginations, and to his writing. As the flat is a place of his own inner depth and the only safety he feels, he is very careful about who is allowed to enter. In the majority of cases, he meets people outside. Those who are always permitted to come in are the narrator's closest friends (his friend Pavlik) and his girlfriends (Řípa, Petruše).

The flat is a representation of Jan Beneš's natural and unpretentious self. There, he can do anything he wants. There, he does not have to care about his masculine image. He can be completely relaxed and free of any mask if he is on his own:

> 'One evening, I was wandering about the flat only in my boxer shorts. I was listening to MTV and was getting ready to go to bed.'
> ['Jednou večer jsem bloumal po bytě v trenýrkách, poslouchal MTV a chystal se jít spát.'] (*KS*: 20)

> 'I just wanted to walk along cobblestones, to the newsagent's round the corner every morning, to buy fags and a newspaper and then simply go straight home again. And so I did this everyday.'
> ['Chtělo se mi jen každé ráno jít po kočičích hlavách za roh do trafiky, koupit cigára a noviny a jít zase pěkně rovnou domů. A tak jsem to tak dělal.'] (*KS*: 225)

The flat is his sanctuary. It is the place that belongs to him only. It is well hidden. Once the flat becomes occupied by other people (the Danish and French foreigners, Jan Beneš's partners), it loses its spiritual dimension and becomes an alien place. Once the other people are gone, the flat regains its palliative qualities:

> 'As soon as the door closed, I lay down on the sofa and gazed up at the ceiling for a long time. I knew that ceiling well. A new, kind and familiar world opened up before me. The old times came back for a while, when the radio played in the kitchen and a lid bobbed up on a cooking pot on the stove.'
> ['Když zaklaply dveře, lehl jsem si na kanape a dlouho se díval do stropu. Znal jsem ten strop dobře. Otevřel se přede mnou nový, vlídný, důvěrně známý svět. Zase se na chvíli vrátil ten starý čas, kdy v kuchyni hrálo rádio a na plotně nadskakovala poklička.'] (*KS*: 25-26)

While the pub is, for Jan Beneš, a place for sharing, for enjoyment and for escape from responsibility and from loneliness, the flat hides him from the outside world. It calms him down, it inspires him but it also constrains him. Jan Beneš goes home to seek protection and peace from the outside world in his flat. He goes to the pub to seek the company of others. He leaves home because he cannot stand being alone with only his own thoughts.

He leaves the outside world because he is depressed by the behaviour of other people, whom he regards as too dysfunctional, ignorant or hypocritical:

> 'I did not want to go home yet. Because, if possible, a person should go home only if he is free of all emotional images and all emotional experience. Otherwise, these experiences will stay with him in the flat longer than this person wants to, he will not like them then.'
> ['Domů se mi ještě nechtělo, protože domů má člověk chodit pokud možno oproštěn od jakýchkoliv emocemi zatížených zážitků a představ. Jinak tam s ním ty zážitky zůstanou v podnájmu vždycky o něco déle, než aby se mu pak ještě mohly líbit.'] (*KS*: 9-10)

Beneš is an eternal seeker of both his own inner self and of the outside world but he continually keeps escaping from both.

4.5 Apocalyptic visions of the world

It is his negative attitude to the contemporary world that makes the narrator escape and hide in his flat or in the Czech countryside or escape from his inner self and hide in a pub or in another public space. Negative thoughts enter his mind whenever he feels touched by a strong emotional experience. This can be an encounter with a particularly vulnerable individual, a painful sexual experience, stress from work, 'a date' with a bottle of schnapps, a brutal programme on TV or a chaotic dream. Whenever the narrator falls into one of these traps, he loses control over his mind. When this happens, he detaches himself from his physical self and observes whatever is happening in front of him and in him from a distance. Then he comments on it, as if he was an omniscient observer and an omniscient narrator.

The picture which the narrator sees in the moments of his personal crisis is quite horrendous. It is a picture of confusion, fear and ignorance. It is a vision of the world in which individuals do not care about anything in life; they do not care about others or their own selves. It is a picture of the world which is trapped between struggle and survival; the world of destruction and of no hope; the world of inhuman forms and no feelings. It is an approaching apocalypse, the 'end of the world' and bitter demise of society.

One of the most appalling and the most expressive visions appears in Jan Beneš's mind when he describes his sexual experience with the ageing ballet dancer when collapsing onto her scarred, desperate body:

> 'The city creaked, wobbled and floated along the Earth's surface, on and on. No one really knew why they were alive. Pubs were full of shining noggins, and tired jokes resounded into space. Red-hot missiles of the 'shoot and forget' kind incessantly flew above the cooling musk of the human spirit.'
> ['Město skřípalo, kymácelo se a plulo po zemském povrchu dál a dál. Nikdo pořádně nevěděl, proč žije. V hospodách zářily panáky s kořalkou a sršely upocené vtípky. Nad vychládající kaší ducha bez přestání létaly rozžhavené střely typu 'vystřel a zapomeň'. '] (*KS*: 82)

What appears in his mind at the moment of climax is not a woman but a repugnant vision of a stagnant society which is in a perpetual 'contradictory' motion; a society which has ceased to evolve and, instead, is now oblivious to its ignorant hedonism. It is not just Czech society he talks about here; it is human society in general which, the narrator fears, is threatened by a descent into apathy towards the individual and, therefore, towards society as a whole. To drive this point home, the narrator uses the figure of a random man who observes a sex act from start to finish with a blank expression. The narrator uses this device to mirror his own detachment from his own act of copulation and from the misery of the whole scene: 'red-hot missiles of the "shoot and forget" kind' ['rozžhavené střely typu „vystřel a zapomeň"'] (*KS*: 82).

As the narrator's imagination goes further, the same vision, which originally emerged from the sex act with the ageing lady, expands into many directions and creates a string of other pictures that, in the end, lead to his thoughts about the cruelty of human behaviour and, finally, about the anticipated 'end of the world':

> 'Guys tormented their dolls with their incomprehensible silence. The dolls tormented their guys with their irrational reproaches. The nursery children already knew exactly how to be hellish to each other. No one seemed to know what the following day might bring. Everybody was scared to think about it, though everybody could not stop themselves from thinking about it. This created a special tension; that was the best thing one could ask for. Everyone supposed that this was not the end of the world because the end of the world surely did not look like this. They knew from the movies what it should look like. Some people fantasized that life could be organised differently, if there was a will, (…) but they were also mistaken. No one could grasp the basic eternal idea that the world could not possibly end for everybody at the same moment, for each individual's death is unique. Because reality is nothing more than a collection of wishes and hopes. The

> end of the world is a purely personal category. What one person sees as the end is for another a good opportunity to open a bottle and to enjoy the exhilarating feeling that now is the best time of his life.'
> ['Chlapi týrali ženské nepochopitelným mlčením. Ženské trápily chlapy iracionálními výčitkami. Už děti ve školce přesně věděly, jak si navzájem vyrobit to nejhorší peklo. Nikdo neměl zdání, co ho čeká příští den. Všichni se na to báli myslet, a všichni na to museli myslet. Tím vznikalo zvláštní povrchové napětí; to na tom bylo to nejlepší. Všichni věřili, že toto ještě není konec světa, protože takhle konec světa přece nevypadá. Jak může vypadat, to znali z kina. Někteří tušili, že by to při troše fantazie mohlo možná být i jinak... jenže i ti se mýlili. Všem napořád unikala základní věčná úvaha, že svět dobře nemůže skončit pro všechny najednou, jedině pro každého zvlášť. Protože skutečnost není nic jiného než soubor přání a nadějí. Konec světa je čistě osobní kategorie. Co se jednomu jeví jako konec, v tom si jiný s radostí otevře flašku a má přesný pocit, že teprve teď je to ono.'] (*KS:* 82).

It is the desperation the narrator sees in the woman's desire to expose her scarred body and his own feeling of inadequacy to deal with the situation compassionately that triggers his catastrophic thoughts about social cruelty and social ignorance. He leaves the woman exposed to nature and retreats into his own world. Jan Beneš's apocalyptic vision is nothing less than an expression of his own desperate feeling which further shatters the already shattered world. All hope recedes into the distance.

The narrator's critical view of himself and of Czech society can be discerned throughout the whole text of *Konec světa*. It is directed against the system which turns each individual who condones the situation into a machine. It is also directed against every individual who collapses in his or her effort to fight the apocalyptic vision. To express his concerns about the human decline, Jan Beneš uses various metaphors and other devices which come from the world of his experience or which he imagines.

> 'Something was going on. But I didn't have a clue what it was. Suddenly, I could feel the Earth plates moving underneath my feet, slightly. I could feel how they chafed against each other and how they creaked, almost soundlessly. (…) I saw so much candy floss which would cause toothache to a large number of nations. I saw enormous, large and empty bags of time, which could never be filled up with anything else but talk. Shoals of words were running through the screen of my memory. They were swelling like sealant foam and stuffed up my skull from the inside. (…) The sun was rolling across the horizon. It jumped over the hills as if it was a fireball. It was flying around the Earth with a diabolical speed. The Earth was smiling like a corpse which had been stored in the ice. (…) Shattered relationships were moving about the fragile bones of seconds. (…) The ocean was swelling and phantasmagorical creatures the human eye would never see were floating in its depths. Their movement was jerky. Livid undersea bombers were running through the inky waters and luminous hippocampuses jumped up and down in the space between the sea corals as if they were majorettes. (…) I was sitting in a needlessly large, feckless robotic body, surrounded by bubbling fluid, spattering nerve endings, creaking bones, grouching pancreas, beating pumps, dry-crowing lungs

> and various rattling defective aggregates which were all unnecessarily complicated. (…) I was encircled by terrific, chaotically scuttling forms. It is not within human power to describe everything, but still there is an odd possibility to look down into that bottomless, sparkling hole, into a hollow of the collective mind whose bottom hides the slowly beating heart, the single heart that belongs to all of us. We call this heart "habit"…'
> ['Něco se dělo. Ale vůbec jsem nevěděl, co. Najednou jsem ucítil, jak se pode mnou zlehka posouvají zemské kry, jak se o sebe třou a jak táhle, sotva slyšitelně skřípou. (...) Spatřil jsem lány cukrové vaty, ze které by rozbolely zuby celé národy. Uviděl jsem obrovské prázdné futrály času, které nikdy nikdo nenaplní ničím jiným než řečmi. Sítem paměti proplouvala hejna slov, která se na druhé straně nafukovala jako těsnící pěna a ucpávala mi zevnitř lebku. (...) Slunce se kutálelo po obzoru, skákalo po kopcích jako kulový blesk, lítalo kolem Země pekelnou rychlostí. Země se usmívala jako mrtvola v ledu. (...) V křehkých kostech vteřin se přesýpaly střepy vztahů. (...) Oceán se vzdouval a v hlubinách trhaně pluli přízračnı́, lidským okem nikdy nespatřenı́ tvorové. Inkoustovými vodami proplouvaly sinalé podmořské bombardéry a světélkujı́cı́ mořštı́ koníci hopkali mezi korály jako mažoretky. (...) Seděl jsem v nadbytečně velkém, nešikovném stroji těla, obkloben bublajícími tekutinami, prskáním nervových spojů, vrzáním kostí, hudrováním slinivky, tlukotem pump a čerpadel, suchým kokrháním plic a drnčením různých zbytečně složitých, poruchových agregátů.(...) Kolem dokola se nacházelo strašlivé rejdiště forem. Není v lidských silách popsat všechno, ale je možné tu a tam nahlédnout do té bezedné, jiskřící jámy, do Macochy kolektivní mysli, na jejímž dně pomalu buší společné srdce nás všech, a to srdce se jmenuje „zvyk"...'] (*KS*: 215-216).

This rather expressive vision appears as the result of the narrator's playful imagination which has been boosted by his experience of the real and highlighted by his momentary alcoholic intoxication. It describes the Earth already moving, oceans already swelling, time already losing its sense and sun already burning the ground; it sees shattered relationships, freezing smiles, phantasmagorical creatures and close-up pictures of vital human organs. It describes a man sitting amongst all these earthly forms, trapped in a robotic body of his own habit and his own inability to leave. It describes the narrator himself at the moment of his idle existence and yet it laughs at him, in a sad and a sarcastic tune. It laughs at the society which the man in the robotic body represents.

4.6 'The end of the world': the legacy of the postmodern and the apocalypse

The apocalyptic visions of the world, self-reflection, anti-elitism, the rejection of existing practices in post-communist society, spontaneity, escape to the countryside or to the world of illusions and dreams and films, an interest in myths (Shub Niggurath) and literature (Rousseau's *Candide* in 'Zlaté časy': *KS*, Jules Verne), almost the equal position of reality and dreams, strongly expressed eroticism, the existence of labyrinths and mirrors,

and a grotesque perception of the world - these are some of the elements of Hakl's *Konec světa*. These are also some of the elements which some contemporary literary theoreticians would clasify as the characteristics of a 'postmodern' style of writing. Umberto Eco[31] and some other critics see these features as characteristics of the literary style by 'apocalyptic' writers and by 'non-integrated' writers. Can we say that Emil Hakl is an author of postmodern fiction? Can we say that he is an 'apocalyptic' and a 'non-integrated writer'? In order to answer these questions we need to include a brief discussion here of what the concepts of the 'postmodern', the 'apocalyptic' and the 'non-integrated' means.

According to Connor, the postmodern concept of seeing things appears in the second half of the 20th century as a reaction to the 'important changes [that have] taken place in politics, economics and social life; changes that could broadly be characterized by the two words *delegitimation* and *dedifferentiation.*' (Connor 2008: 3) It is a reaction to the world in which

> '[a]uthority and legitimacy [are] no longer so powerfully concentrated in the centres they [have] previously occupied, and the differentiations – for example, those between what [have] been called "centres" and "margins", but also between classes, regions, and cultural levels (high culture and low culture) – [are] being eroded or compiled' (*Ibid.* 3).

In other words,

> '[p]ostmodernism is said to signal the collapse of all universalist meta-narratives with their privileged truth to tell, and to witness instead the increasing sound of a plurality of voices from the margins, with their insistence on difference, on cultural diversity, and the claims of heterogeneity over homogeneity' (Storey 2001: 150).

Postmodernism reflects upon the world in which 'the "real" and the imaginary continually collapse into each other' and in which the 'reality and simulation are experienced as without difference' (*Ibid*. 153).

Postmodernism is 'a culture production born out of previous cultural production'. It 'experiences time not as a continuum (past-present-future), but as a perpetual present which is only occasionally marked by the intrusion of the past or the possibility of a future' (*Ibid.* 159). It pronounces identity crises, 'the end of man' and the birth of the new but plural identity of the self; and so it plays with the idea of the 'end of the real' and the birth of the new hyper-real (virtual real). These characteristics of postmodernism have been

[31] Umberto Eco: *Apocalittici e integrati* (1964).

discussed in many theoretical works analyzing the contemporary culture of the West. The extent to which these characteristics apply to Hakl's text is the focus here.

The text of Hakl's *Konec světa* is a testimony about one man, about Jan Beneš, whose existence is continuously on the move between different places and different spheres. He is a character and so he is a representative of the reality he lives. But he is also the narrator of the text and therefore a representative of the meta-real (or the hyper-real). His 'real' self lives at the time which corresponds to the time of the fall of communism and to the time of the introduction of a new capitalist (and consumerist) lifestyle in Central Europe. He struggles to cope with these. He is alone or with others, with loonies or with ordinary people, with the unemployed, with the employed or with businessmen. He tries to find a place in his life for all of them or just for himself. Jan Beneš's 'meta-real' self dwells in the world of narrations (or representations). He is mostly subjective but sometimes he lends his voice to the personal narrator (in the case of Beneš's friend, Láďa, in 'Láďovo poslední tango') and to the subjective narrator with an omniscient view (speaking from a god-like perspective). The narrating 'I' lives in the present (as 'I' is also the character of the story) but his narration involves all time planes – the vibrant present or, more precisely, the present delayed by the actual moment of narration, memories of the past and thoughts regarding the approaching future. It inter-mixes observations and impressions, descriptions of places and visions, dreams, films and literary texts. Jan Beneš as both the acting and the narrating 'I' is constantly dubious about the world and his own place within it. He characterizes himself but he does it in the way other people would see him. He is constructing and deconstructing himself. He talks about the world but he never approves or disapproves of what is happening around him. He lives 'the real' but speaks of his perception of 'the real' and of everything 'the real' represents for him. He is situated amongst the narratives of the world and so he narrates them.

Is it possible to say, then, that there is Jan Beneš who is a postmodern narrator and a philosopher of both the narratives of the world and the narratives of the self? Is it possible to say that the world he reflects upon is itself postmodern? It is a world in which the truth is constructed from many stories narrated by different people with multifarious views; it is a world in which most people suffer an identity crisis; it is a world of a plurality of approaches, it is a world of the deconstruction and the rebirth of the self; it is a world in which different cultures perpetually blend; it is a world where the multidimensional and the perpetual present is created by the media and by digital technology. Is it possible to say, then, that *Konec světa* is a postmodern text? Finally, is Emil Hakl an author of

postmodern fiction? Or more specifically, is Emil Hakl an author of a postmodern 'apocalypse' or an author of the post-modern 'integration'?

Vladimír Novotný (b. 1946) attempts to analyze contemporary Czech literature with reference to Umberto Eco's thesis from 1964. In *Apocalypse Postponed*, Umberto Eco (b. 1932) describes two kinds of writers: 'sceptics' ('apocalyptics'), who defend themselves from any phenomenon connected to mass culture, and the 'integrated' ('comforters'), who, on the contrary, associate with the theories and practices of mass culture production. Using Eco's theory, Novotný (Novotný 2002: 38-40) talks about two main groups of Czech contemporary writers. Into the first group of the 'integrated' he places those authors who signed up for the codified family of mid-culture genres in the 1990s[32], e. g. for mass production of professionally written bestsellers, new conventional narrative fiction, a post-modern polemic with postmodernism, socio-journalism, political tabloid-novel production, popular feminist writing, a didactically-catholic version of the 'Bildungsroman' and academically theorizing fiction. On the other hand, in his view, the 'apocalyptics' create an apocalyptic image of human micro-/macrocosm.[33] Some of their works grow under the influence of magic realism; others go back to classical existentialism. Some writers create a negative vision of society; others create a documentary record of human authenticity or build a new genre of the postmodern grotesque. Whilst the literature of the 'integrated' is, according to Novotný (and Eco), a 'sophisticated entertainment for lavishly spent leisure' ['sofistikovaná zábava pro marnotratně prožívaný volný čas'] (*Ibid.* 40), the literature of the 'apocalyptics' reflects a plurality of styles and thoughts; whilst the 'integrated' create a new literary tradition of the 'integrated' (mid-cult) world, the 'apocalyptics' use their right to pronounce disagreement with the current world (*Ibid.* 34-42).

Considering all the aspects that Novotný (and Eco) suggested in relation to mid-cult literature and in relation to the postmodern, and taking into account the theories that define the postmodern, it can be said about Hakl's *Konec světa* that it fits somewhere in between. The work is 'apocalyptic' as it is about a person's doubting individuality, about an individual's destruction of the self and thoughts regarding 'the end of the world'. However, it is also 'integrated' because it is about the acceptance of the current world. It is about a person's acceptance, perhaps even a person's joy of being a part of life. *Konec světa* is 'apocalyptic' as it is built on the variety of different narratives and individual structures. It

[32] Novotný refers to Michal Viewegh, Pavel Kohout, Martin Nezval, Alexandra Berková, Sylvia Richterová etc. when talking about „comforters".

[33] Novotný thinks about Michal Ajvaz, Lubomír Martínek, Jáchym Topol, Iva Pekárková.

is 'integrated' as it flows along the life of a single character and along his unprecedented observations of the world he sees around him.

As Emil Hakl is the author of *Konec světa*, he is also an author of a postmodern text and so an author of an apocalyptic and multi-dimensional image of the current world. Hence, he is also an author of 'integration', as his work is a part of the tradition of socio-realistic literature[34]; that kind of literature which represents the world of ordinary people living their chaotic lives in post-communist Czech society and which comments on the image it has constructed.

5. Life according to Jan Beneš – continued: the context of Hakl's fiction

Konec světa was Hakl's first attempt at fiction. Since then, he has published several other volumes of prose: the novel *Intimní schránka Sabriny Black* (*Sabrina Black's Intimate Mailbox* 2002), the novella *O rodičích a dětech* (*Of Kids and Parents* 2002), the collection of short stories *O létajících objektech* (*On Flying Objects* 2004), the novel *Let čarodějnice* (*Flight of the Witch* 2008) and, most recently, three single stories collected in *Pravidla směšného chování* (*The Rules of Ridiculous Behaviour* 2010). It is the aim of this brief discussion of Hakl's later fiction to ascertain whether the reality of Hakl's writing has changed with the passing time and if so, what impact this change may have on our perception of the contemporary world.

5.1 *Intimní schránka Sabriny Black*: the history of one love, the history of one career

The main character and at the same time the only subjective narrator of the novel, *Intimní schránka Sabriny Black* (henceforth *Sabrina Black*), is again – Honza Beneš, though now he is known as Hanz (and Honst). Hanz lives in Prague. If he has a job, it is work for an advertising agency, for a magazine or he tries to run his own business. Similarly to his counterpart in *Konec světa,* he experiences a very unstable life when in work and out of work, in a sexual relationship and out of a sexual relationship, in a

[34] Socio-realistic literature is interested in the life of people who experience economic hardship and who struggle to cope with the idealism official propaganda, which creates an image of overall prosperity. Socio-realistic literature describes social and racial injustice often choosing a member of the working class as its hero and as a hero of everyday life.

friendship and out of a friendship. He struggles with existence on the margins of mainstream society after losing his ability to cope with the chaotic world of business. He suffers from broken relationships with a woman he loves and from a broken friendship with men he thought were his friends. He struggles with life within the official structures after joining a company of young, materialistic professionals. In disagreement with the lifestyle of mainstream society and with his own frustration with it, he often locks himself in his flat or hides in pubs. In his flat, he enjoys the solitude of his own self; in pubs, he enjoys both his own company and the company of local barflies and the people who share the same experience of having an unstable, chaotic mind. He drinks, smokes, quietly observes the world around him and absorbs everything that surrounds him – pub talk, sounds, pictures, various slogans, television programmes and dreams. All of them are important for his world; all form part of the narrator's fictive reality.

Honza (*Konec světa*) and Hanz (*Intimní schránka Sabriny Black*) share many character similarities (friends, partners, places, environments), as we can see from the above brief description. It would not be far from the truth to say that the two characters are the same person, only this time Hanz is seen from a slightly different perspective and at a slightly different age.

In comparison to *Konec světa*, which relates to many different topics, the novel, *Intimní schránka Sabriny Black* (henceforth *Sabrina Black* or *SB*), concentrates more on two main themes: one is the narrator's experience with the running of a private advertisement agency, the second, and maybe more focused here, is his relationship with Petruše and the withdrawal symptoms he suffers after losing her. What was only glanced at in the previous volume (there was a short remark that the narrator had a share in a company; there was a brief reference to how wild his life was with Petruše) is used here in detail to create a complex picture of the narrator's world and all it embraces. In *Sabrina Black*, the narrator reveals various personal details that are a part of both his working life and his privacy.

The structure of *Sabrina Black* is slightly different – as a novel, it is more linear and less fragmented. The story begins when the narrator accepts employment in an advertising agency and it goes on to describe his attempts to set up a private business and his failure to make it profitable. The novel then follows Hanz's unemployment, his unsuccessful attempts to work for another advertising agency, a long break when he writes a literary text, and it ends up announcing that Hanz was offered an editor's position on staff of the literary magazine, *Tvar*. Certain linearity can also be found in Hanz's testimony of his relationship with Petruše. It begins with a description of their mutual understanding and

love; it continues with several arguments and break-ups and ends with separation and with the narrator's depression over Petruše's disappearance from his life.

In my analysis of Hakl's *Konec světa,* I pointed out the existence of several parallels we find when taking into account all we know about the narrator and about the author. In *Sabrina Black,* the resemblance of the two worlds, the fictive world and the real world, seems to have increased. Hanz is a German version of the name Jan (as we know, the real first name of Emil Hakl). The narrator's great-aunt, whom he mentions on one occasion, has the writer's surname, Benešová (the male form of this name is Beneš). Both Jan Beneš- the author and Hanz live in Prague. The narrator visits the really existing Club 8 (Klub 8, which is frequented by people with literary ambitions). Both Jan Beneš and Emil Hakl have worked in various places including the Libeň Waterworks, the university library, an advertising agency and the literary magazine, *Tvar*. Both write. What is more, Hanz talks about certain people who exist in the real world, for example the actor Radovan Lukavský (1919–2008), Karel Gott (singer, b. 1939), Petr Zelenka (film director and playwright, b. 1967), Petr Kratochvil (pseudonym of Václav Kahuda, writer, b. 1965), Mejla Hlavsa (singer and musician from The Plastic People of the Universe music band, 1951–2001), Magor (Ivan Martin Jirous, poet, a representative of the Czech underground, 1944-2011) and Jim Čert (František Horáček, singer, b. 1956). These similarities between Hakl's fictive world and Hakl's experience of the real world confirm what has been said in the analysis of *Konec světa*. Even in *Intimní schránka Sabriny Black*, Emil Hakl uses the perception of his own life as one of his inspirations to construct the fictive character of Jan Beneš and the world that surrounds him.

As has already been shown, also the picture of society, drawn in *Konec světa,* is inspired by Hakl's own experience and his perception of the contemporary world. *Konec světa* describes a broken society; a society full of people who do not know what to do with their lives after the fall of the previous political regime and after the arrival of the 'new' and so they struggle. The work shows a whole range of people – the enthusiastic and ambitious (perhaps also naïve) youths on the one hand, the lost and depressed young people trying to find the reason for their existence on the other; the assertive sharpshooters and business owners, the servile and pretentious employees as well as various middle-aged individuals lost in the chaos of the post-communist society, who find themselves unable to cope with the present. There are some people who somehow manage to find a way through life without losing their own identity, but these are only few and they often build their lives

on the margins of the society, living in isolation in the countryside, far from the prosperous civilization.

Just as there are similarities between Emil Hakl, Jan Beneš as the narrator of *Konec světa* and Hanz in *Intimní schránka Sabriny Black*, Czech society reflected in *Sabrina Black* is also very similar to the society known to the reader from *Konec světa.* Czech society in both these literary texts appears to have been constructed on the basis of Emil Hakl's experience of life under the communist regime in Czechoslovakia of the 1970s and 1980s, on the basis of his experience of the breakdown of the communist system in 1989 and of the capitalist takeover and the chaotic times thereafter. *Sabrina Black* is also crowded with all the above mentioned categories of people but, in comparison to the previous work, it solely concentrates on the figure of the narrator and on what he personally experiences within his life. The narrator and his perception of society is the raison d'être of the whole narrative and its main theme. However, the picture we reconstruct is similar to the picture formed in Hakl's *Konec světa.*

5.2 *O rodičích a dětech*: Father and his son, son and his Father

In 2002, Hakl published the novella, *O rodičích a dětech* (*Of Kids and Parents*, henceforth *ORD*). Unlike both previous texts, this novella is a single dialogue – a dialogue between a son and his father. The forty-two-year old son and the narrating 'I' of the text comes to visit his seventy-one-year-old father who works as a tour guide in the Prague ZOO, and takes him for a walk via several Prague pubs. The narrative is built up from variations on serious themes (racism, family history and the war) as well as humorous themes (food, the broken washing machine, poems, sex), and from comments of each of the two characters on the surrounding world. The conversation grows from the characters' need to communicate everything, all the past and the present, and all that has been experienced and observed in one single moment. The dialogue contains complete stories as well as only narrative fragments. Some stories are told once and in full, others are scattered throughout the narrative and we return to them several times. Topics such as food, aeroplanes, health and women appear on a regular basis.

The atmosphere of the talk between the son and his father changes as often as their mood goes up and down. The conversation fluctuates between sarcasm, irony and personal bitterness, and respect and mutual love, which are more hidden than openly manifested.

The narrative of *Konec světa* plays with a variety of different themes. *Sabrina Black* explores Honza's working life and his relationship with Petruše. *O rodičích a dětech* talks of Honza Beneš's relationship with his father, Ivan. The text features the father's narratives and his son's reactions to them and vice versa. It contains the father's memories of the Second World War and of his life in Yugoslavia at that time, the father's reminiscences about his marriage, his fatherhood, his friends (and their stories) and his professional experiences as a scientist. It follows his talk about his health problems, his adventures as the ZOO tour guide, his worries about his son and his rather critical opinion of the contemporary world. The son, Honza, contributes the memories of his childhood. He talks about his life in the town, Buštěhrad, where he lived with his mother, Zdena, now dead, and his stepfather. He remembers how his mother cleaned their flat and that his father had problems with alcohol. He speaks about his youth and his experience with women (he has had two unsuccessful marriages), about his current relationship with Hanka, about his dreams and about his interest in aeroplanes. He shares his opinions (on life, on racism, on food and on a healthy lifestyle), his feelings, his thoughts, his momentary observations of the surrounding atmosphere and the stories of other people, as he has heard them from his father or from others. In short, there is the perspective of the son (as the narrating and the acting 'I') and the perspective of his father (as the narrator's essential counterpart); there is a perception of the past and the present; there is experience of today's society (because the two characters live within it and are observing it). There are the characters' internal feelings and thoughts.

The father and the son look at the world from different points of view. The father's views are influenced by the attitude of his generation – he is a representative of the generation of the people who have experienced not only the Second World War and communist Czechoslovakia, in which they have lived for most of their lives, but also the regime change of 1989 and what followed. The father is scared by years of humiliation (experienced when living under fascism in Yugoslavia and under communism in Czechoslovakia). He has coped with these regimes by isolating himself from them and devoting himself to science and alcohol, though his past traumas have not been forgotten. For years he has been waiting for an appropriate moment to talk about them. The father's dialogue with his son seems to be the best opportunity for the old man to give his own testimony of life. He is full of scepticism but what he says has still its importance and its value.

The father's attitude has been formed by many years during which he has lived under a dictatorship. His personal freedom was always limited by the rules created by other people

in the name of ideology. The only thing he could do was to find a way of surviving by 'sneaking through' – by avoiding political commitment – without losing his integrity. For the seventy-one-year-old father, the arrival of democracy does not mean anything particularly exciting. He continues living in the past. His memories, his job, his health, food, women and his son's life are the only things that still bring him joy and that are worth of discussing, worth becoming angry about. Contemporary Czech society is observed and criticised but more from the perspective of an old man, from the point of view of a person who has most of his life behind him and who does not bother learning about the new world. The father does not have a particular desire to understand it any more, commenting caustically on what is fashionable:

> "Blondes have definitely been massively on the increase over the last thirty years," Father said incredulously. "It didn't used to be like this. Today there are blonde girls all over the place… Maybe it's the diet or something…" (*ORD*: 59),

on the media which influence the ways people think:

> "No one gives a toss about the fact that the cetaceans are almost extinct, but everyone's interested in the fact that a ninety-year-old woman got raped, that was in the papers this morning (…)" (*ORD:* 145),

and on the new generation of Czech drunks:

> 'I took a swig and realised Father was staring with a terrified expression at something in one corner of the room. I looked in that direction. There was a bunch of grown-up kids, their hair already going grey, lowering shots of green mint liqueur into freshly drawn pints of beer. The shots descended to the bottom of their mugs like small, heavy divers.
> "Oh Christ…, " Father said slowly' (*ORD:* 84).

In the father's present life, the most important things are those which survive any regime change without major harm: memories, science, sex, food. Due to this belief, his dialogue with his son goes in circles and repeatedly comes back to discussing various historical, scientific, culinary or personal topics (women, health and friends).

Over the years, the father's personal views have hardened and narrowed. He appears to be less tolerant and less open now towards the new regime and towards anything he does not know and will probably not have a chance of learning about in detail. He tends to be a bit grumpy, sometimes sentimental, explanatory and apologetic. At other times, he likes to

preach to his son, to criticise his behaviour and to persuade him to accept the father's views as the truth and to force him to accept his own vision of the world:

> "Something's always happening! Even if you're sitting at home in your comfy armchair, something's always happening! Increasingly sophisticated viruses are continuously trying to reprogramme the way your cells work, antibiotics have almost lost their potency, organisms are being cloned, almost every day an animal species disappears from the planet, the darkies have got the atomic bomb, that's not enough for you? Entire nations are being displaced around the world, is that not enough for you?"
> "The only thing I'm interested in is people you can sometimes have an interesting conversation with, and there's not many of them left, either. And don't say *darkies*!" (*ORD:* 53).

Father does all this to provoke the son to a reaction, thus prolonging their conversation and the time shared together:

> "There's always a need to talk about the soul! Look around you in the street, or in the metro, just take a moment to look around and you'll get the creeps!"
> "From what?"
> "The freak show."
> "I can see it alright, but it doesn't surprise me one bit. From the moment something takes a wrong turn on the evolutionary path, it just keeps going down it and there's no way of turning it back… Just look at all the growth anomalies around, all those deformations and obvious mutations and aberrations, look at the current U. S. president - with a mug like that, the most you could accomplish a hundred years ago was doing the milk rounds in a loony bin! By that I mean to say that, if we consider the body to be normal today, in what state must the *soul* be! But knowing you, you probably wanted to say something about yourself…" (*ORD:* 140).

It is quite evident from the two examples quoted above that the son's attitude to life is much more open and much more tolerant. He has also spent many years under the communist rule but this has never affected his attitude to politics. Apart from one occasion (he mentions that he witnessed the arrival of Russian tanks in 1968 when he was still a child), he does not talk about politics or about any moments when politics has affected someone's life. He listens to his father; he asks him about his past but joins the discussion only when it touches on politically neutral subjects. He argues with his father about the differences in their personal taste (types of aeroplanes, types of women, kinds of alcohol) and in their personal attitudes towards contemporary society (work, racism, youth). Honza hides his anger within himself. Face to face with someone, he is not capable of letting his rage explode. No matter whether it is out of respect ('father' is always capitalised as

'Father') or whether it is because Honza lacks confidence or interest in things. He suppresses his views and does not remonstrate.

The son's youth and his early adulthood were influenced by living in a communist country but, when the regime change came, there were many years in front of him. As a result, his attitude towards contemporary society is much more understanding and open than that of his father. In this work, the son does not really criticise what is going on around him. His criticism is directed only at his father whom he secretly reproaches for lack of care, and at the past he remembers from the time when he was still a child. At the same time, the son also records what is happening around him. He notes down everything he can see, hear or sense. In his description of the world, he tries to catch every single impression, speech or sound, but without weighing its positive or negative side:

> 'Cigarettes in hand, we then entered the heart of the Bubeneč district. The space opening before us, framed by graffiti spattered garages, decomposing villas, and brand new used car salons, was called Papírenská Street' (*ORD:* 42).

The son does not make any direct personal comment on current society. His opinion is fully reflected in the way in which he observes the world around himself during the walks with his father, not in spoken words.

Representatives of three generations meet in this book by Hakl: the father's, the son's and finally the youngest generation of grandsons and granddaughters. Whilst the first two generations, represented by the two main characters, actively respond to what they see around them in the text, the youngest generation is only the object of their conversation. The youngest generation is criticised by the father, observed and in part also defended by the son. However, the grandchildren never have a chance to speak for themselves. The existence of the youngest generation serves as a background for the performances of father and son.

The image of society in the narrative of *O rodičích a dětech* seems unchanged from the image of society in Hakl's previous works. Neither the father nor his son bring anything significantly new which would radically change our perception of society as depicted in Hakl's earlier work. All is happening in fixed constants. The dialogue of the protagonists is built on archetypes as much as on their actual reactions to the current state of the world. It is influenced by their age and the experience they share in the moment of their talk. This transforms them into objects within the world's narrative discourse. At the same time, they act as subjective powers within the world:

> "So what's new?" I asked.
> "Nothing's been new in this world for more than two billion years; it's all just variations on the same theme of carbon, hydrogen, helium and nitrogen," Father answered.
> (…)
> "For goodness sake, why do you of all people always ask what's new?" Father said in time to his strides. "That's such a difficult question, in fact it's the most difficult of all! Now, if you had asked me how I am, that I would know…" (*ORD:* 10-11).

5.3 *O létajících objektech*: 'I' amongst the 'aliens' and with them

In 2004, Emil Hakl published his fourth work of fiction entitled *O létajících objektech (On Flying Objects*, henceforth *LO).* This book was Hakl's second attempt to write short stories with a similar theme and to gather them together in one volume. The volume contains eleven stories (two of them are built up from several subchapters carrying separate titles or, alternatively, numbers). There is also one photo-story done by the book illustrator, Miro Švolík.

Most of the stories are again told from the perspective of the subjective narrator and so by a man – Honza – in his middle-age, a man who has the same characteristic features as the narrators we already know from Hakl's previous works. Placed among them, we find the story, 'Dva dny ze života Evy F.' ('Two days in the life of Eva F.'), which is presented by a female subjective narrator, and the story 'Večer' ('Evening') retold by a male personal narrator. A photo-story 'Pejsek (fotopovídka Mira Švolíka)' – ('Doggie, a photo story by Miro Švolík') - holds a special position. It consists of fifteen pictures without any additional text.

When analyzing *Konec světa,* we discussed the subjective narrator of the text and his present (subjective) as well as his hidden (omniscient, personal) existence in the individual stories of the volume. We have argued that *Konec světa* can be seen as a novel because of its characteristic features and its structure. We cannot draw the same conclusion about *O létajících objektech*. The three stories mentioned above are testimonies made by different characters. From this perspective, they are individual. However, as we will see below, the stories of *O létajících objektech* have many features which make them rightful participants in the structure of Hakl's literary work.

In *O létajících objektech*, the main narrating character of Honza is again a man in his forties. He still lives in Prague, he still writes and struggles with occasional employment, he still enjoys going to a variety of pubs, he still talks to different people and contemplates

his own feelings and thoughts. The world in which this Honza (Jan) lives and which he observes is again not very different from the one introduced by the narrator of Hakl's previous works. Only this time, everything he describes is even more distorted. It is stranger and more 'alien' than before. Things that Honza observes in this volume look to him as though they have been brought to this world from a different planet and as though they have hugely attacked it. People and their noisy and everlasting presence remind him of a swarm of insect, always in a clustery motion:

> 'The smoky sky above his head had been vertically cut by a thin white beam of light. Although it was past ten o'clock, the inside of the building was still alive. Lively, gesticulating figures were streaming up and down the escalators. Shops were bursting with noise. Cafés were buzzing. Young salegirls, allured by the trappings of advertised promises, were yawning out of boredom. Hundreds of mandibles were trying to process numerous salads, crisps and sandwiches, lipstick painted lips were sucking spaghetti, lame pincers of old gaffers were pulping chicken fillets. In front of the entrance door, an unfinished fountain was bubbling among black marble-slabs.'
> ['Zakouřenou oblohu nad jeho střechou prořezával kolmo do výšky tenký bílý paprsek. Ačkoliv bylo deset pryč, uvnitř to žilo. Po eskalátorech plynuly živě gestikulující figurky. Řvaly tam obchody. Hučely kavárny. Zívaly mladounké prodavačky, chycené na inzerát do pasti. Stovky kusadel tam zpracovávaly saláty, brambůrky, chlebíčky, rtěnkou obarvená makadla srkala špagety, polámané chelicery starých fotrů drtily kuřecí řízky. Před vchodem bublal mezi hromadami černých mramorových desek nedostavěný vodotrysk.'] (*LO:* 10-11)

The space around Honza is full of visions that describe an alienated world. Prague buildings become like structures created by UFOs. He describes them as if they were animal and all that was inside them was their internal organs, vessels, veins and liquids. The situations the narrator comes across, the people he meets, the places he passes, all form a picture of the world which confuses him. Everything he experiences he finds incredible and hard to understand. He walks the streets and meets a girl holding a dog dying from a wound caused by a cross-bow. On his trip to the countryside, he and his friends lose their way and, at a building site, a man shoots at them with a gun. With an American lady, he conducts a long discussion on life, exploring his theory of disguise (living as within the shell of a spacesuit) and the chaotic emptiness outside it. Tourists, filling the space around him, remind him of aliens; they look to him unbelievable and strange and he feels lost and breathless surrounded by them. A handless waiter is carrying a tray with two 'shots filled up to the top with a poisonous reminiscence of something we used to drink once' ['panáky naplněné až po okraj jedovatou reminiscencí na něco, co se kdysi dalo pít.'] (*LO*: 67). When buying meat at a local butcher's, Honza is listening to the

news on the radio about a human hand found in a rubbish bin. In the street, he is stopped by a twenty-five-year-old girl who asks him for a cigarette and afterwards offers him sex. Outside the new Carrefour supermarket, a new artificial hill stands, made from the soil dug out for the construction purposes. As he finds out from a random boy, the trees planted on this hill were brought here by trucks and grass carpets were rolled over the land. The bailiff who comes to visit him in order to speak about his debts turns out to be an amateur poet. A goat is carrying a heavy chain around its neck and a pilot, whom the narrator meets on his holiday, talks about buying his dog a bitch.

The narrator's 'alienated' visions expand even more as they are fed by his interest in world cinema and literature (which he often quotes). Together, they create an incredible, almost apocalyptic picture of the human race, similar to the one commented in *Konec světa*. This time, the vision is even more intense:

> 'In front of me a man was hurtling on his motorbike along the pavement towards me. His back mirror touched my sleeve, only lightly, and he was away. I passed a few people who resembled a well-made-up group of extras waiting to act in a story taking place fifty years after a global nuclear catastrophe. I saw a big lump of a woman swallowing a whole potato pancake at once. I saw a lame man with a severe squint. I saw a pensioner with the look of a dolphin, with a smooth face without any features whatsoever. There was a convoy of little children with evil eyes and bat-ears. There was a granny with a tiny, almost bald, head, three or four wisps of tangly hair remaining on it. She looked at me, pouted her little goat mouth and let out a sharp laugh.'
> ['Naproti mně se po chodníku řítil člověk na motorce. Lehce mi lízl zpětným zrcátkem rukáv, opravdu jenom lehce, a byl pryč. Minul jsem několik lidí připomínajících náročně namaskovaný kompars k příběhu odehrávajícímu se padesát let po globální jaderné katastrofě. Odulou machnu, polykající vcelku bramborák. Krutě šilhajícího muže s koňskou nohou. Delfíního starce s hladkým obličejem, prostým jakýchkoliv rysů. Konvoj drobounkých dětí se zlýma očima a netopýřími ušima. Babičku s malinkou holou hlavou, ze které trčely tři čtyři chomáče zhoudelených vlasů. Ta na mě pohlédla, našpulila kozí pusinku a ostře se uchechtla.'] (*LO*: 154).

In *O létajících objektech*, the narrator once again analyzes and observes his feelings of confusion regarding the current world. As he struggles, his mind travels back to his past, back to his own self and other people's stories only to find out where exactly is his place within all that intensive chaos the present life offers him. As an unemployed man, he locks himself up in his flat where he lies on the sofa, watches TV and allows himself to be fully absorbed in its fictive reality, far from the real world which confuses him and which he claims he does not understand. He writes but, when he writes, he does not seem to be himself either. He is sceptical about his self as well as about the outside world. He calls

himself an idiot to whom people speak only out of pretended politeness. He sympathizes with a random girl's statement that all people are 'cunts' and he thinks of himself in the same manner.

As Honza is dubious about his personal position, he is unhappy with the whole world and society living in it. His doubts increase when his friend says he cannot come to see him because he is ill. As a reaction to this, Honza questions everything the present has brought to people; he wonders what has happened to their past and where all the fun and careless freedom they possessed when young and single has gone. He asks existential questions and expresses existential thoughts about humans and their reaction to the passing time:

> 'Where are we, a sudden thought occurred to me. Where are we and what are we doing here!? Where did all the fun we used to share go? The only thing we have been doing lately is swearing, grouching and laughing at the same things all over and over again; where is real humour? Where are those days when we kept drinking the whole night through until late morning, when we ran from one big beat concert to another and then set off to work straight afterwards? Nowadays, the only thing we are able to do is walk and talk. And even this we do not enjoy anymore!'
> ['Kde to jsme, napadlo mě. Kde to jsme a co to tu vyvádíme!? Kam se poděla sranda? Poslední dobou už jenom sekáme pyskem, pořád dokola nadáváme na ty samé věci a těm samým věcem se smějeme, kde je humor? Kde jsou ty časy, kde jsme pili do rána a lítali po bigbítech a ráno šli do práce? Teď už se jenom procházíme a mlátíme pantem, a ani to nás už nebaví!'] (*LO*: 144)

Honza is disappointed with his generation, with his friend and he also criticizes other people. He cannot come to terms with the sudden growth of new supermarkets around him or with the streets overcrowded by tourists. He cannot cope with the attention of young girls. He is afraid of being the centre of attention. It is only through contemplation and experience that he is able to achieve some sort of relief. It is only through observation that he is able to find himself and his place in the world. No matter how much the world he sees seems to be out of joint, he still finds it fascinating and worth living in – for these reasons:

> 'The gentle blondes from the counting offices. The pale girls from the housing blocks. All these rummy old geezers who are constantly pissed off. All these arts educated frog princes with whom it is nice to talk but from whom you must never expect any sort of help. And after all, all those fast crooks who know how to cheat you even before you manage to notice them. It is their way of communication.'
> ['Měkké blondýny v účtárnách. Bledé holky ze sídlišť. Všechny ty věčně nasrané rumové dědky. Všechny ty humanitně vzdělané žabí prince, se kterými se tak pěkně žvaní a kteří pak pro člověka nehnou prstem. A koneckonců i všechny ty rychlé šmejdy, co s člověkem zametou dřív, než si jich stačí všimnout, protože je to jejich způsob komunikace.'] (*LO:* 19-20)

What the narrator of most of the stories collected in *O létajících objektech* describes is the feelings of a man in a mid-life crisis; a man who wanders about the world but cannot recognize it any longer. Everything around him seems to be changing and he feels it is changing for the worse; his friends are growing old and they bore him, women starve him of sex and shocking news hovers around. He feels like a lost boy whose youth has been stolen and, instead, he has been given an existence in a new, chaotic world. However, as the time goes on, he realizes that the only way to cope with the confusion is to accept it and carry on, which he does. Then he claims:

> 'I was standing on a hilltop covered by darkness. And suddenly I had it. I understood that in fact everything was ok here. Completely everything. That all those chintzy ideals for which people used to perish for thousands of years - good, evil, justice, all these kinds of things - are gone. Or they are still here, but no one really takes them for real anymore, luckily. (…) I realised that it was enough to be purely on one's own behalf; that there was no reason to become angry about unimportant details. This is simply the point we had reached and from here we would go on. (…) Suddenly an unclear but unexpectedly strong feeling of luck filled my head; luck that I lived at this and at no other time (…).'
> ['Stál jsem na kopci v černé tmě. A zčistajasna mi došlo, že je to tu vlastně všechno v nejlepším pořádku. Úplně všechno. Že už jsou pryč ty křiklavě nabarvené plechové ideály, kvůli kterým se chcípalo několik tisíc let, dobro, zlo, pravda, kdesi cosi. Že jsou tu sice pořád, ale nikdo je naštěstí už nebere vážně. (...) Došlo mi, že už opravdu stačí být jenom sám za sebe. A že není nejmenší důvod rozčilovat se kvůli nějakým nepodstatným detailům. Sem to zkrátka došlo a odtud to zase půjde dál. (...) A zalehlo mě nejasné, ale zato nečekaně silné štěstí, že žiju právě v tomhle a ne jiném čase (...)'] (*LO*: 157-158).

This gradual change from resisting the 'alienated' world and then coming to terms with it, the change from confusion to personal openness, is reflected in the structure of the volume. As I have said above, the volume, *O létajících objektech* (*On Flying Objects*), contains twelve stories. 'Blízká setkání' ('Close Encounters') reveals the narrator's discovery of the 'alienated' world of Czech society. The reference to Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind,* seems to be more than obvious. Both Spielberg's film and Hakl's stories follow the story of a man whose life went through a lot of changes after he had encountered an unidentified flying object. The story, 'Amerika je zkrátka Amerika' ('America is simply America'), describes the narrator's meeting with an American woman and their discussion of American films, his fantastic theories and her frustration due to lack of sex. The third story with the significant title, 'O létajících objektech' ('On Flying Objects'), revolves around Honza's adventures which he experiences with his friends during their journey through the countryside. This time, the flying objects are the bullets

fired by the man protecting a building site. The scene appears as if it was taken from some unspecified Western movie which has been shifted to the Czech environment. The next story, called 'Dusno' ('Muggy'), expresses the narrator's sultriness and confusion which he feels in the middle of a crowd of tourists in the Old Town of Prague. He imagines that people who surround him are Martians whom he is never going to understand. In 'Podivín' ('Weirdo'), the narrator listens to his female friend's story of her relationship with a man who had decided to prefer a collection of toy army vehicles to going out with her. In 'Macha' ('The Routine'), the narrator looks critically at his writing skills and his life. Sitting in a pub with one of his friends he gets nostalgic, thinking of his past experience at school, of girls and of bedtime stories. Any topic that touches the narrator's future is recognized as nothing more than nonsense.

After these six short stories with a similar subjective narrator, the volume includes the three stories which are told from the perspectives of other people. The story, 'Dva dny ze života Evy F.' ('Two days in the life of Eva F.'), describes the journey which two characters - Eva and her husband Josef - take in order to find a way back to their own selves and to their relationship. The road that awaits them is both real and symbolic. It takes them to an exploration of their momentary state of mind and to an examination of their attitude to reality. It is a test of their relationship, of their mutual tolerance and love. It reveals their fears and their personal differences.

In this story, the man and the woman both oppose each other and support each other. On one side, there is the man (Josef) who does not want to be a hero and prefers doing only those things that are safe and that cannot cause any personal damage or change to him and to others. From his perspective, his whole life has dried out and so the only thing one can do is accept what is going on in the world and carry on. On the other side, there is the woman (Eva) and her way of seeing the world. Since she is the narrator of the story, we learn a lot about her and about her perception of the world. Eva is more open and more sensitive towards reality than Josef. She is still full of hope that nothing is lost and everything can be fixed. Where Eva comes with a positive view, there Josef appears as a pessimist. She is the one who wants to have children, he is the one who does not. She believes in the exceptionality of each individual and in the individual's power and strength, he dismisses all this. She is an idealist and romantic, he is a rationally acting man who has already thought through the questions of his future life and has decided on his own what to do next, not taking her into consideration at all. His scepticism towards society leads him to claim that we are all 'in the shit' ['v hajzlu'] (*LO*: 97) and the only way to survive it is to be completely passive and to avoid any changes.

The story, ‘Dva dny ze života Evy F.’, is about two individuals, two representatives of two different genders and two different worlds who meet on their life journey and who do not really know how to protect their relationship against the outside world and against themselves. While Eva seems to see the solution in founding a family, Josef talks about being passive towards everything life offers. While Eva dreams of children and love, Josef talks about sexual desire and its destructive powers. Where Eva is confused by what she sees as male deviousness and fear, there Josef invokes rational behaviour and behaves with the frigidity of a man who is willing to gamble for life when his or her life is in danger but denies everything else. What connects Eva and Josef is their habit and love, regardless of the fact that they are so different. What separates them is their individuality and their different ways of seeing life and the future. The photo-story, ‘Pejsek’ (‘Doggie’), features a man’s and a woman’s frustration from their unfulfilled sexuality. The third non-Honza story is entitled ‘Večer’ (‘Evening’). It is the testimony of a man who is losing his sexual interest in his wife when he sees her ageing body. He does nothing to change his situation. He just accepts it.

The last three stories of the volume are once more in the hands of the main male subjective narrator, Honza. ‘Události a komentáře’ (‘News and Comment’) again highlights the narrator’s feeling of loneliness in the alienated world that surrounds him and of his passive acceptance of this. ‘Vyhlídkové lety nad mořem’ (‘Sightseeing flights above the sea’) and ‘Nesmíš se dát!’ (‘No one must get you!’) feature (extra)ordinary stories the narrator has heard from some other people or has experienced during his holidays in the Czech countryside.

All the twelve stories deal with the same topic. They are testimonies of people who live in the contemporary world. They feature tales of confusion in which the personal pendulum of each individual constantly swings between recognition of the new social lifestyle and its denial, between the will to act and the passive observation and acceptance of what is around. This is the theme of all previously published writings by Hakl. In Hakl’s earlier work, the theme of confusion dominates. It also dominates in *O létajících objektech* in the first six stories narrated by Honza and in the three stories narrated by other characters, but the last three stories centre more on acceptance of the new social conditions. In *O létajících objektech,* the narrator, Honza, realizes that, if he accepts the new social conditions, he can still exist comfortably and enjoy all the stories the world offers.

The text of *O létajících objektech* was published in 2004, about fifteen years after the fall of communism and the re-introduction of the new economic, political and social lifestyle. By 2004, capitalism had put down its roots firmly in Czech society and commercial principles and "managerialism" would have assumed control over all walks of life.[35] The writer consciously observes all these changes and points out some of their significant features. He notes that pubs have now regular opening hours; that there are chain stores and shopping centres which are open twenty-four-seven; that bailiffs come to knock on the debtors' doors; that cinemas and television show mostly American films and TV series, and that Prague is full of foreigners. Hakl's narrator walks, passing the places he should know well but he suddenly cannot identify them anymore. He meets people but cannot understand them. He talks to various women, listens to their appeals but stays completely detached from any possibility of a close relationship. All the places and people seem to him strange. He is fully alienated from the new society. Places have lost their original shapes. People have lost their anchors, their roots and their confidence for life. The gap between men and women has grown and friendship does not have the same qualities as before. The narrator feels that more and more barriers are built between individuals and society, individuals and the machinery of the state, the past and the current times. From this point of view, the narrator's reaction to the new state of affairs is negative. Yet, there is now also hope in the narrator's world and this hope appears as he begins to understand and accept what is the nature of the new real.

5.4 *Let čarodějnice*: trouble with communication

In 2008, Emil Hakl published the novel, *Let čarodějnice* (*A Flight of the Witch*, henceforth *LC*). It is again a story about Honza's life, now again, from a slightly different angle. The narrative takes place in the first years of the 21st century. It again describes Czech society as it looked, in the narrator's view, approximately fifteen years after the fall of communism: there are large chain-store shopping centres, American films, mobile phones and omnipresent advertising and consumerism. Honza is again totally confused by the new society. On one hand, he operates within mainstream society by working for a low-brow, glossy magazine, writing articles about the lives of celebrities; on the other hand, he admits he can do this job only under the influence of marihuana. He does his food shopping in the local supermarket but cannot bear the crowds and the recklessness of some

[35] See Večerník 2009.

people. At the first opportunity, he explodes and stabs one of the security guards with a pen knife. The mobile phone becomes his main tool for communication with women. Marihuana keeps him active and well-behaved in the company of his workmates; its effects help him cope with the requirements put on him by his employer and by the society he questions. This is the way he lives in Prague and tries to enjoy it. However, this does not last. Honza realizes that this is not how he wants to live. When there is a chance to escape, he accepts an internship in Lisbon. When the internship finishes, he does not return to Prague. He is not bothered that he has left everything behind. In Lisbon, he shares a flat with Iris, a girl of half-Hungarian origin, and her aunt Bea and earns money by delivering various strange parcels to the most awkward places. He cuts himself off from everything connected with Czech life – from women and from work. However, his stay in Portugal is again only a temporary solution and, as soon as he realizes that he cannot live there, he returns home, renews the relationship with a girl, Barunka, gets in touch with his ex-wife, his friends, visits the man he knifed in the supermarket and finds a new job. At home, he loses his mother (who dies); in Portugal, he loses Iris (who moves back to her husband) as well as her aunt Bea (who dies shortly after he leaves).

So, no matter where he stays, Honza finds communication with the outside world and the people living around him very difficult. He works himself into a state where he only talks to his Czech girlfriends by mobile phone and he is only able to talk to anyone when under the influence of marihuana or alcohol. He is hardly able to speak with his mother and sister. The two women he meets in Portugal, Iris and Bea, are exceptions to this rule. They make it possible for him to say things freely, for their conversation is the result of mutual effort to understand each other's languages and worlds rather than to fight with the prejudice of his own kin.

The most difficult relationship Honza has is with his mother. From everything he says about her, we feel a great distance has grown between both mother and son over the years of his adulthood. On the one hand, there is the mother, a former sympathizer with the Communist Party, for many years an organizer of official cultural-political entertainment shows. On the other hand, there is the son whose personal background is that of the anti-communist social periphery. The mother and the son are thus incompatible and this incompatibility never disappears. The mother is now retired. She is writing her personal memoirs. The son does not argue with her anymore; he visits her, does the shopping and helps her run her household. Yet, neither of them is able to talk freely to the other. Both are wrapped up in their own thoughts and they disregard anything else that transcends their narrow personal interest. The narrator's attitude to his mother does not change even after

he learns about his mother's death. He looks at her body and sees the body of a stranger. He turns to her writing hoping this might help him to understand her life, but does not find anything which might bring him closer to her.

The narrator's relationship with his mother fails because they are both totally different personalities. His engagement within Czech society fails as a result of his experiences at work in the editorial office of a popular magazine and as a result of his perceptions while walking the streets and observing Prague life. Honza's boss on the glossy magazine is a lady who will make any personal sacrifice in order to get a good interview with a celebrity. His colleagues at work, mostly women, are pictured as dull office workers who love chocolates and laugh at the narrator's jokes. The world of Czech celebrities is a world of hypocrisy:

> 'Many of them did not tolerate any interruptions and said only what they wanted to say. Others revealed everything about themselves, then they thought about it but, during the process of authorization of the interview, at the last minute they started sending manic tracts overloaded with general moralizations. When this happened, the whole article had to be completely broken down into bits and then again built up, while the graphic designers vomited their gastric juices, for the text should have been sent to print five minutes ago. Most frequently, however, I did battle with unemotional robots, pre-set to behave in a detached way, and I always lost. Such people used language which disintegrated when you tried to write it down and melted into evil-smelling slop. They always attempted to look pleasant while trying to hide the existence of their villas or of their wife who was in a psychiatrist's care. This made me anxious. I did not need to care, for even the most widely read Czech daily newspapers produced only helpless noise, and grammatical and stylistic and factual mistakes had long since formed one, large, dirty inflationary river.'
> ['Mnozí si do toho nenechali mluvit a řekli jen, co chtěli. Jiní na sebe pověděli první poslední, ale při autorizaci se jim to rozleželo a posílali na poslední chvíli traktáty plné maniakálně přezdobených všeobecných moralizmů. Takže se stať musela komplet rozebrat a znovu poskládat, zatímco grafici blili žaludeční šťávy, jelikož to mělo jít před pěti minutami do tisku. Nejčastěji však šlo o předem ztracené klání s chladně nastavenými roboty, používajícími řeč, která při prvním pokusu převést ji do psané podoby tála a rozpouštěla se ve škaredě páchnoucí louži. Bývalo mi úzko z té jejich snahy být za každou cenu fajn, zatlouct ty vily, manželku v péči psychiatra. Mohlo mi to být fuk, i nejčtenější deníky v republice už vydávaly jen bezmocný lomoz a gramatické a stylistické a faktické chyby dávno plynuly v kalný inflační veletok.'] (*LC:* 109),

and the Czech print media is regarded as the power which blindly follows profit instead of quality. The only way Honza can cope with working for a magazine like this is to smoke marihuana, as its effects allow him to look at things in a laid back manner and with detachment. In doing so, the narrator withdraws from his bosses, managers and leaders who act selfishly and ignorantly as well as from his colleagues at work who act

subserviently and are double-faced. Apart from using marihuana, Honza also escapes by going to the countryside and to Portugal, by watching films or children's stories which he remembers from the past. He is always trying to escape to a different reality. He hides in these areas from the ferocity of his work, from women, from his family and from his own personal cowardice and fear he feels after stabbing a man in the supermarket. The world seems to him to run too fast; too many things are happening around him and he does not have the power to stop them. His journey to Portugal and his prolonged stay there give him a chance to get out of the never-ending world of interviews and articles he is forced to write in order to fulfil the expectations of his boss. It offers him the desired break from his unsettled and unclear relationship with Barunka. It enables him to flee from Czech society, superficial in actions and thoughts, tragic in the idleness of its behaviour and ridiculous in its effort to embrace fully the capitalist system. His stay in Portugal, although it lasts only for a few months, gives him rest and peace; it provides him with time to gather his strength to come back home and cope with life in his native country again.

The narrator searches for help from his overloaded existence at a psychiatrist's and a healer's but the only outcome is that he is given tablets to reduce his anxiety. He looks for help in his mother's writings but does not find anything that might tell him why he feels so excluded from society. He seeks understanding from a lady called Barunka and accepts her flat as a place of hiding after he stabs the supermarket guard, but Barunka is not the solution of his problems with his own identity. Neither is the Portuguese break.

Reality in *Let čarodějnice* is constructed from a variety of different narratives. There are Honza's own stories as well as the stories of the people who live around him. There is some other material which the narrator uses in his text: his mother's writing, letters from magazine readers, various articles, adverts, films scenes and tales he has made up. The tension between all these conflicting narratives attracts Honza. It makes him look through each text in order to seek an explanation of the world around him and of the way people live. All this is the material that provides him with impulses to start thinking critically about society. Adverts, magazine articles and their readers all seem to him rather silly. His mother's writing is a simple diary of her life and he discovers nothing surprising or deep in its content.

The narrator looks for answers within the texts. He is strongly interested in language as a vehicle that signifies these texts and Czech reality that lies behind them. His relish for a diversity of words and their function is a matter of his professional career as well as of his personal enjoyment. It is a part of his job to go through the texts written by other people in order to check their compatibility with the house style of the magazine and he does not

seem to enjoy this. He points out that whenever he tries to use unusual language humour in the magazine articles, he is criticised for being irrational, too 'difficult' and too abstract for the readers.

The narrator likes to observe words and play with them, with their flexibility and their sounds. By playing this game, he again hides his personality behind it. He has a special taste for words which originate in the animal kingdom. The names of existing animals, their diminutives and their fictional counterparts are used as metaphors of the human form and human behaviour. And this applies to him as well as to the description of other characters:

> 'I was a proudie, I was proud. Karel, Kája, Michal or Martin, mole, spider. A Proudie-cunt with a capital P, a Daftie and a junkie; surprisingly, my memory was now my sharpest instrument. A functional lack of concentration and memory do not go well together.'
> ['Byl jsem pyšánek, pyšan. Karel, Kája, Michal nebo Martin, krtek, pavouk. Pyščan s velkým pé, Blboš a feťák, paměť byla teď kupodivu můj nejostřejší nástroj, funkční nesoustředěnost a paměť spolu nemají co dělat.'] (*LC*: 134).

Honza's girlfriend, Barunka, takes him for a proud junkie who enjoys his marihuana trips too much. His female boss calls him various names, never addressing him by his real name. He sees himself as a mole who escapes the light and happiness and hides in a dark hole, in his flat-burrow. He is a spider, a predator that spins his net to catch victims, but then lets them pursue their own destiny as he cares no longer. All the pictures he draws of his own character are full of strong self-criticism, irony and sarcasm. The narrator does not seem to value himself very highly but neither does he think highly of Czech society he belongs to. His life is a verbal extravaganza. Words serve him as an instrument for his observations, his feelings and his criticism and doubtful tolerance of society. The reality he experiences is the subject of his perception, it is much more passively observed than enjoyed and lived. Because living, it seems to him, is chaotic and painful.

Let čarodějnice is again the story of a man who finds it very difficult to relate to the world today. The only way he can survive is by means of numerous escapes to different realities. However, he is not the only one who suffers from such a predicament. His mother encloses herself in the memories of her past life; Barunka isolates herself within her affection for the narrator; his friend, Arnošt, locks himself up in a hut located far away from civilization. Communication between these individuals and the outside world is still possible, but the gap between them seems to be growing. Their world is made up of

confusion and chaos. They are confusion and chaos, and this is one of the messages this novel communicates.

5.5 *Pravidla směšného chování*: an end, or a new departure?

Hakl 2010 novel *Pravidla směšného chování* (2010, *The Rules of Laughable Behaviour*, henceforth *PSC*) is again a contribution to the reader's knowledge about Honza's life; it continues the story of the same autobiographical narrator and people and places which surround him. Thematically, the novella, which addresses us in three parts, follows the story of a son, a fifty-year-old man, and his dying father, Ivan. We may find a forerunner to this novella in *O rodičích a dětech*. *Pravidla směšného chování* bears witness to the end of one stage in the narrator's life – the period when he was a son.

The work consists of three separate parts but what the writer finally produces is a single, integrated account. *Pravidla směšného chování* is the story of a person whose life has more or less disintegrated after he has found himself alone, after he has lost his wife (see *Konec světa*), his son, the love of his latest girlfriend, Hanka (see *O rodičích a dětech* he was happily living with her), his mother (see *Let čarodějnice*) and finally his father. The book is a self-ironic account of the narrator's actions, talk and thoughts during the days of his father's hospitalization and death. The three stories are interconnected and all of them are narrated in the present tense, unlike the previous texts which were basically written in the past tense. The first story coincides with one of the last phone calls the son has with his father before he goes to hospital. In the second story, the son listens to his hospitalized father and later to some recordings he made with his father during the last days of his life and some time before. In the third story, the son is looking for the best place to scatter the ashes of his father's cremated body.

The action in all the three stories serves only as a catalyst for various thoughts that go through the narrator's mind when sharing the last minutes with his father and shortly after his death. Whatever occurs during this period, no matter if it is paragliding, walking in the streets or rowing on the Danube, all this serves only as a background to the real story that is once again happening in the narrator's mind. When paragliding above the Czech countryside (in the story 'Ve visu' – 'In hanging'), his thoughts drift back and forth between the present and the the past. The momentary feelings of the person who finds himself imprisoned in the company of two practically unknown men (Rulpo and Murgo) and later tied to the paragliding equipment are intertwined with his memories of his former girlfriend, Hafina, the years spent in the army, his uncle and his random meeting with both

the above-mentioned men. The regular visits he pays to his father, in the hospital or at home (in the story 'Pravidla směšného chování' – 'The Rules of Laughable Behaviour'), are complemented with random walks and talks with his friend, text messages to his girl-friend and recordings of his phone calls with his father made some time ago. His trip to the Danube delta in Romania and to the sea (in the story 'Hřbitov na pláži' – 'The Graveyard on the Beach') is not only a random holiday he tries to enjoy with Murgo and Rulpo but also the fulfilment of the promise he had given to his father before he died. The narrative connects the personal stories of each participant, the narrator's perceptions of the surrounding country life and, again, a mobile phone conversation between him and the same girl-friend.

Once again, the world Emil Hakl presents in this book shows a society of people who lack an ability to respond to the requirements which the present time puts in front of them. The narrator himself again seems to have serious problems with his life. Often he encloses himself in his own inner world of images and words, letting in only those which cannot harm his contested freedom and solitude. It is easy for him to share a pint with his friends, Vláďa or Michal as, in their company, he does not have to pretend anything (compare with *Konec světa*). He finds communication with women much harder than before. His attitude towards a 'mobile phone' lady is very distant, as is her attitude to him. She blames him that he is distant from her, she criticises him for his ignorance, his self-centredness and his cowardice. In spite of all this criticism, the narrator cannot avoid texting her but protects himself by keeping away from any intimacy that could develop if they meet. Out of fear, he prefers a safe distance to the possible devastating effects of a relationship.

The communication between the narrator and his two mates, Murgo and Rulpo, floats on the waves of mutual agreement to be silent when needed, to talk when it seems necessary to talk. We can assume Murgo and Rulpo have been good friends for a long time before they met the narrator. They have their own interests; they know the same people and each other's lives more than the narrator's. One day, they turn up in front of him and later they do this twice more – they take him for paragliding and to the Danube delta. Conversation, when it happens, occurs mainly between Murgo and Rulpo. The narrator seems to be left aside – firstly, because he does not share the environment the two friends come from, and secondly, because he wants to. There is a certain conflict between his thoughts and actions. When considering things in his mind, he often denies them; when things happen, he accepts them. He does not want to go paragliding but, in the end, he does go. He does not enjoy flying but pretends it was a great experience. He rarely expresses his

own opinion. Rather, he keeps all his thoughts locked up inside his head. If he does talk, the outcome he sees is more than awkward.

The same problem the narrator has with communicating with others also appears in his relationship to his father, as we can observe best in the novella, *O rodičích a dětech*. In *Pravidla směšného chování*, his behaviour towards his father becomes more sincere, tolerant and open. The narrator suddenly realizes that there is no need for him to hide his thoughts anymore. His father is dying. Questions are answered, private experiences and doubts shared. Their mutual conversations circle on various topics but none of them goes very deep. Both talk about scientific discoveries, about politics, about the son's work or about women. The father complains, the son listens, possibly giving back certain facts and answers. His time comes when sitting at the bed of his unconscious father. There, he finally uses the opportunity and, with no internal barriers, he speaks of everything that touches his mind - his own son, history, wars, aeroplanes:

> "It might look strange, the fact that I am interested in such a rubbish," I say. "I am simply fascinated by this gratuitously vehement optimism and the traumas of the twentieth century, this alternation of slaughtering and the paradise of flourishing economies. The gradual transformation of a careless outing into a march of death. I am interested in the real shape of these moments …"
> [„Možná je divný, že se zabejvám takovejma kravinama," říkám. „Mě zkrátka fascinuje ten bezdůvodně prudkej optimizmus a traumata dvacátýho století, střídání jatek s rajskejma zahradama kvetoucích ekonomik. Plynulej přerod bezstarostnýho vejletu v pochod smrti. Zajímá mě pravá podoba těch chvil.(...)"] (*PSC*: 62)

Only at this moment does he feel free to express himself - he is talking to someone who is not going to oppose him, only listen. It is the same opportunity that Honza had, for example, with the Chinese girl in *Konec světa*. She, too, was unable to understand him. The language of unconscious people or the language of foreigners gives the narrator a freedom to say things that are normally stuck behind the barrier of his own doubt.

Pravidla směšného chování is another chapter of the oeuvre Emil Hakl has published since 2000. But now the main character, the subjective narrator Honza, is slightly older, around fifty years of age. He is employed but works from home, and he still writes. He lives alone. Apart from his 'mobile phone' girl-friend, he does not mention having any sexual affairs. He has never ceased to enjoy friendly beers with his peers. He loves his father, though he blames him for the years of the narrator's childhood. His relationship towards the other family members is very impersonal. He is a good observer and a good recorder of everything he is able to absorb with all of his five senses. Everything he chooses to say is noted down in its raw form. The language is a mixture of proper Czech

(in indirect speech) and its colloquial counterpart. There is also Russian, English and French, mostly in their broken form (in the direct speech of the characters). When the toothless father speaks, this is presented as the narrator perceives it. The same principle is used when the narrator tries to take down all the sounds he can recognize from the phone calls he receives during his paragliding experience. He attempts to catch everything in detail. After all, these are his last days with his father.

In *Pravidla směšného chování,* Emil Hakl depicts Czech (specifically Prague) society as it exists more than twenty years after the fall of the communist regime. The narrator, Honza, seems to have found stability so that he is able to work, but he still lives alone, not able to keep a relationship with any woman. Age and loneliness do not seem to bother him much. However, this all changes after he experiences his father's death which forces him to contemplate his situation. Still, he keeps out of mainstream Czech society. He does not rush about, although mobile phones, taxis, paragliding and billboards become part of his everyday reality. He even becomes a part of the mainstream culture when posing for a billboard advertisement, which was originally meant as a protest against the pettiness of the famous, but has resulted in the narrator's self-exposure. He then feels that he has made himself into a laughing stock.

The position of the other characters in the work by Emil Hakl does not seem to be any less complicated than before. The characters are also just as diffident as ever in Hakl's prose. The 'mobile phone' lady, the woman with whom Honza exchanges text messages, has basically wasted her youth. She is a woman who now yearns for intimacy after many years of wild and chaotic personal relationships and alcohol abuse. Rulpo and Murgo lead lives of everyday surprises and enjoyment. But, like the narrator, they live on their own. The narrator's father, a grumpy old man who lately used to be a caring person, fights his illness by exercising his memory and by questioning his son about certain discoveries in biology, comparing his knowledge with what can be found on the internet.

In *Pravidla směšného chování,* Hakl presents a picture of the same society we know from his previous work. Furthermore, the style he uses to describe his fictive world follows the same principles. But this time, the composition of the text is much more tightly tied up with the narrator's story. The text does not stretch out in various directions; it holds on to a single line and enriches it with details which the narrator perceives at the given moment. In comparison to other texts by Emil Hakl, this moment is always the immediate present. The narrator's memories are no longer the only important thing. The thing that matters now is the present world, everything that is happening right now. There is no reason to go back in time anymore. The present itself is overwhelming; it swallows up everything and everyone

around. The narrator's dying father is a true symbol of the departing times. And, with the father's death, comes the son's recognition of the present and the 'new'. Is this the end of 'life according to Honza Beneš'? Or is it just the beginning of another story – the story of the world here and now?

The narrating and the acting Jan Beneš lived in his stories for nearly fifty years. When he was in his forties he made a decision to share with us what he experienced on his journey through Prague and along the lives of his friends, his family, his partners, colleagues and random people he met on his everyday wanderings. In *Konec světa* he was a passive observer of the present world, in *Pravidla směšného chování* he mainly acts. In *Konec světa*, he was still living in the gap between the memories of his past and the present world. In *Pravidla směšného chování* he finds his 'now' and he tries to live it. Here, he is not a son anymore but a grown-up man who decided to face his life the way it is:

> '(…) The water is still, medium-dense, bland.
>
> I'm plunging, I'm diving, I'm swimming under the water-level. I'm opening my eyes. I'm peering at my face. It's a horrible spectacle but it's still much better than to see nothing.'
> ['(…)Voda je nehybná, středně hustá, nijaká.
> Nořím se do ní, potápím se, plavu pod hladinou. Otevírám oči. Dívám se sám sobě zblízka do ksichtu. Je to hrozný pohled, ale pořád mnohem lepší, než nevidět nic.'] (*PSC:* 134)

In *Konec světa* Jan Beneš was a critic of Czech society, sceptical to its existence within the post-communist world. In *Pravidla směšného chování* he accepts it. In spite of the fact, that his position of in-betweener stays unchanged.

6. Emil Hakl - Summary

6.1 Jan (Honza) Beneš

The analysis of Emil Hakl's work has revealed several changes that have occurred in the level of the writer's style as well as in the subject described – 'life according to Honza' and the society that surrounds him. As the narrative discourse oscillates between an attempted diversity of perspectives and their final centralization within the single character of one subjective narrator-actor, and shifts from the distant past to recent moments and to the present and from the narrator's internal thoughts to his reflection about the world around him, the main theme of Hakl's prose stays the same. The narrator of most of his texts is the same man, Honza, whom the reader meets in the Prague streets welcoming the first foreigners who came to Czechoslovakia after the fall of communism (*Konec světa*). It is the same Honza who struggles with the loss of his girlfriend, Petruše, and his inability to participate in the life of mainstream society (*Intimní schránka Sabriny Black*), the same man who argues with his father (*O rodičích a dětech*), who wanders through the alienated world of the city of Prague (*O létajících objektech*), who escapes from reality into exotic places and other languages (*Let čarodějnice*), who thinks about his mother (*Let čarodějnice*) and who speaks with his dying father (*Pravidla směšného chování*).

Honza's world reflects the world of a person who has spent his youth under communism and under the decades of Czechoslovak 'normalization'. There, he chooses the lifestyle of an individual living on the periphery of Czechoslovak society, being involved with the

country's socialist politics as little as possible. He retains the attitude of a detached observer when living in the post-communist system but this time, he acts as a person who is not completely against the system but stands somewhere in between. He is a person who is always partly 'in' (accepting mainstream, capitalism and the consumerist society) and always partly 'out' (behaving as an outcast and as an outsider). The narrator is always on the move between being a successful person and being a failure, not only in his career but also in his personal relationships. With the awareness of the character's advancing age and of the passing of time, Honza Beneš's attitude slowly shifts. As a result of this, protest against the system slowly loses its power and he becomes more and more tolerant towards the society that surrounds him. But his criticism never disappears completely as it is in his nature to look at the world critically and never as a member of an unthinking mass of people.

From this point of view, the series of literary texts by Emil Hakl can be seen as *the narrator's* record of *his own psychological process* of adaptation to the previous communist regime and to the contemporary post-communist world.

6.2 An image of society

In all his works, Emil Hakl takes us close to the society of lonely people who find their adaptation to the principles of the world in which they live extremely difficult. His key characters are ordinary and extraordinary people who come from different generations, represent varying values but still have one thing in common – they experience solitude and confusion and are threatened by mental breakdown as they struggle to cope. Their life is a zigzagging journey between triumphs and defeats, between partial success and repeated failure. They are seekers of personal stability and love but, instead, they find chaos and grief. It turns out that the world is complicated and more hostile than they could ever imagine. The communist regime did not make their lives happy. Capitalism does not make them happy either. The generation of older people does not see anything overtly positive in the democratic openness of the country. They reject it for its focus on consumerism, for a multiplicity of options and for its impact on an individual's ability to make a decision and pursue it. They also cannot cope with the confusion which the new society seems to have created in its value system. There appears to exist no single truth any longer. They hide themselves in their personal memories and in chatting about seemingly unimportant things. The generation of their sons survives on alcohol, in temporary employment and in nostalgia for their anti-regime, underground lifestyle which some of them led in their youth

and which made their youth, in their eyes, socially and politically worthwhile. Finally, there is the generation of young people. These are also lost in the ferocity and aggression of the adult world that surrounds them. They cope with the new world in their own way: they become either fast and furious participants in the activities of the new era, or they fall by the wayside, depressed.

The world of losers, loners and freaks, in the works by Emil Hakl, is contrasted with the world of enthusiastic individuals, businessmen and their obedient employees, successful directors, musicians and filmmakers. As the narrator looks at the first group with love, with compassion and dismay, he sees the second group as a bunch of naïve, hypocritical and careerist individuals who exchanged the real for a life of pretension. Yet, he sees some of these people as a source of inspiration. In the narrator's view, Czech society he describes is full of both types of people: of idealistic and careerist yuppies on the one hand and of depressed young people on the other; of disappointed, scared and confused adults on the one hand and of successful and aggressive businessmen on the other; of sceptical old women and men on the one hand and of contented people on the other. Jan Beneš stands always in between. He is an alien in all these worlds. He is a respectful observer of a society which has gone through a political, economic, social and cultural transition. He faces the victorious capitalism and seeks new recognition, stability and love. In the new freedom, it seems difficult for the members of Czech society to find these values. From this point of view, the series of literary texts by Emil Hakl can also be seen as the narrator's record of *a psychological process* of adaptation of *society* to the previous communist regime and, later, to the contemporary post-communist world.

6.3 An image of the 'real' world

In the majority of Hakl's works, the narrative is subjected to one, single and subjective personality. This personality is Jan Beneš – the character, the narrator, the author. The character of Jan Beneš is Hakl's main actor, although sometimes he stays hidden behind the voice of another person. Jan Beneš-the author is Hakl's real name and, therefore, the real personality that lies behind each text by Hakl, although he is never directly present.

The reality in which Jan Beneš-the character lives, in which Jan Beneš-the narrator shapes and Jan Beneš-the writer experiences carries information which we are free to compare with our own perception of the real world. Throughout the narratives of Hakl's works, we follow the image of Czech communist and post-communist society, we learn about existing places, about political, social and cultural events and about authentic

representatives of the contemporary world. The autobiographical inspiration of Hakl's texts is indisputable. However, it is only one of many sources that play a part in each construction of Hakl's fictive-real. In this sense, Hakl's perception of the real world functions as a point of departure for the construction of Jan Beneš's-the narrator's account of a fictive-real world. This fictive-real world then functions as a point of departure for the reader's perception of Hakl's text in relation to both the real and the fictive world.

The series of literary texts by Emil Hakl can also be seen as *the author's* and *the reader's* record of a psychological process of adaptation of *Jan Beneš-the author* and of *the real Czech society* to the previous communist regime and to the contemporary post-communist system. From this point of view, everything that has been said about the narrator and about his perception of the world can be seen as a critical reflection of the real world in a work of fiction.

6.4 Contemporary, realistic and postmodern

The world which the narrative of Hakl's texts constructs combines both the vertical and the horizontal perspective. It responds to the linear time flow (the actual flow of Jan Beneš's life) and to the characters' memory (the cyclic time). It incorporates the observations and thoughts of individuals and their actions (the network of different perspectives, perceptions and lives). It is complex as it is centralized around the subjective narrator of Jan Beneš and it is fragmented as it consists of a variety of different stories and views. It is articulate in a way it describes different characters, situations and events, and silent in a way it does not speak about certain things. It is chaotic in an individual's erratic actions and thoughts but it also conforms to the order of human life and it respects it. It is deconstructive, depressive and critical in its relationship with the outside world and the self, but it is also understanding towards all human imperfections. It admires the variety of human natures. It is ambiguous, versatile and elusive, yet it despises it.

Hakl's narrative connects the world of the real with the world of fantasy and imagination. It follows a single story of a man and yet it spreads into many directions and spheres. It is highly subjective and yet it plays with objectivising views. In its description of the world, it acts realistic and yet it is multidimensional and postmodern.

From this point of view, the series of literary texts by Emil Hakl can be seen as *a postmodern game with the* author's/the narrator's/the reader's *record* of the psychological process of adaptation of real *Czech society* to the communist regime and later to the post-communist system. It is a society which is wandering along the streets of Verne's Steel City and through the labyrinth of the Quake and the Cthulhu. It is a society which is

struggling to find a way out of a Kafkaesque alienated world. It is a society which waits to free itself from sci-fi visions of the apocalypse and of glossy magazines, billboards and TV programmes. It is society which found itself in the narratives of the others but in actions it stays indecisive and stagnant. It is society in which every individual leads a journey towards recognition of the self.

'Life according to Jan Beneš' is an individual's perception of the world of today and yet it arises from the contemporary Czech world. It is a story of Czech society seen through the eyes of a middle-aged man who grew up on the periphery of communist system and who has struggled in his search for a stable place within the post-communist system. This man is Hakl's embodiment of Czech society - and he is confused.

II. The constructed and deconstructed world of Jan Balabán's fiction

Introduction

Unlike the writing by Emil Hakl, Balabán's texts are built up of personal stories of different individuals whose lives go separate ways or connect in the most common way such as within a family bond, love or a childhood friendship. Balabán offers a variety of individual stories. Some of them are narrated once and within the confines of a single collection or a novel. Some of them extend beyond a single volume and re-appear in a series of other texts.

Balabán's works consist of literary sketches which contain a gallery of people whose lives are followed from the moment of their personal breakdown onwards. Some of these texts are in-depth studies of certain individuals connected by the same environment and the same circle of people that surrounds them. Others are just single stories of single characters and single events.

Balabán's texts work in line with their structures: they expand on several themes and explore particular characters. To deal with both aspects in full**,** Balabán's works will be analyzed from two different perspectives. One will concentrate on the themes (thoughts and events) and motifs (elements) as they appear and re-appear in the lives of individual characters within single texts, single volumes and in the whole context of Balabán's fiction. The analysis will follow certain topics which are repeatedly discussed in

connection with individuals' life experiences, the variations in these topics and the forms and the frequency with which certain events intervene in the lives of each character. In addition, the analysis will focus on the nature of particular characters and their transformation within various stages of their personal existence.

The first chapter of the analysis will establish the way Balabán's work is constructed. It will consider certain principles that shape the structure of these texts and points out certain changes these texts have formally implied in the course of their creation. It will discuss the narratorial perspective, subjectivity in the narrator's view of the world and the way it influences the reader's perception of both the fictive and the real. This will set the ground for a semantic exploration of Balabán's works. This exploration will have two major parts: one will follow the collective (social) experience of Balabán's characters; the other will follow their individual experience. It will touch upon the individual's position within the outside world and upon the individual's perception of the self within the self. The analysis will reveal the parameters of Balabán's fictive reality which his characters keep exploring and which the reader of Balabán's universe perceives and relates to the world he or she knows best – the reality he or she lives.

The following are Balabán's texts I will examine: the collection of stories, *Středověk* (*Middle Ages*, 1995, henceforth *ST*), *Boží lano* (*God's Rope*, 1998, henceforth *BL*) and *Prázdniny* (*Holidays*, 1998, henceforth *PR*), the novel, *Černý beran* (*The Black Ram*, 2000, henceforth *CB*), the novel, *Kudy šel anděl* (*Where the Angel Walked*, 2003, henceforth *KSA*), the collections of stories, *Možná že odcházíme* (*Maybe We Are Leaving*, 2004, henceforth *MO*) and *Jsme tady* (*We Are Here*, 2006, henceforth *JT*) and the novel, *Zeptej se táty* (*Ask Your Dad*, 2010, henceforth *ZT*). I will leave aside Balabán's graphic novel, *Srdce draka* (*The Heart of the Dragon*, 2001), his drama, *Bezruč?!* (*Bezruč?!*, 2009) and his journalistic and essayistic work because non-prose works are outwith the scope of my analysis.

1. A few words on the narrator and genres

1.1 Personalisation of the narrator's position

There are several narratorial tendencies in Jan Balabán's writing. The first one is represented by the changes in the narrator's voice and by the perspective each narrator of each of the stories applies while reflecting on the world. In his prose debut, *Středověk*, Jan Balabán introduced all three types of narration (subjective, personal and omniscient). In *Boží lano,* he experimented with opportunities offered by the subjective narrator only. All the other texts written and published thereafter employ the personal perspective of the narrator (with only a few exceptions of an omniscient view). The personal perspective of the narrator is the view of a man, a woman or a child. It is either a single narrator, two alternating narrators – a man and a man (Hans and Emil in Balabán's last three works), a man and a woman (Roman and Uršula in 'Uršula': *MO*) or a woman and a child (Magda and Jaromír in 'Magda': *MO*), or several people who share their experiences and their views within a single narrative (*KSA*).

In Balabán's collections of stories, one person acts as the narrator of several texts (Pavel Nedostál or Ivan Satinský: *PR*; Emil, Hans or Kateřina in Balabán's last three works) or as the narrator of a single story. In Balabán's novels, the situation is similar. There are three narrators in *Černý beran* (František Josef, Patricie and Jennifer) and even ten narrators in *Kudy šel anděl*. Some of them take the opportunity to speak on more occasions, others speak only once. Both in Balabán's short stories and in his novels, it also applies that a

person who acts as the narrator of one particular story becomes later one of many characters in the other text, and vice versa.

The changing voice of the narrator opens up the world of various interpretations and meanings. A testimony provided by one individual is never clear as it is often fragmented and often interrupted by the views of other people. An individual's reality is looked at from different perspectives. An individual's truth is questioned by a variety of other individuals who adjust it according to their own perception of the world. Single characters become the narrators of their own lives, the readers of lives of others and the objects of someone else's narration. They access reality that cannot be fully discovered because it consists of multiple meanings and subjective truths. They explore their own behaviour, their feelings and their minds. What they find they apply to their present lives. They submerge themselves in their own selves and through these selves they question their relationships to certain people and things.

Initial experiments with the perspective of the narration and with the narrator's point of view led Jan Balabán to a decision to drop the omniscient and subjective view and, instead, to replace it with the personal view only, or with a number of personal views. By application of the personal narration to his texts, Jan Balabán separates his subjective 'I' from the fictive reality of his works and enables them to act as independent constructs of human life. His subjective narrator

> 'recedes behind the characters of the narration so the reader is not aware of his presence anymore. (…) The reader is there under an impression that he is in the middle of the narration, or that he observes the narration through the character who does not narrate but who reflects the narrated in their mind.'
> ['ustupuje za postavy vyprávění, takže si čtenář už ani neuvědomuje jeho přítomnost. [V]e čtenáři vzniká iluze, že se nachází uprostřed dění, nebo toto dění pozoruje očima postavy, která sice nevypráví, ale v jejímž vědomí se vyprávěné zrcadlí.'] (Kubíček 2007: 60).

From the perspective of time, the personalized testimony gives the reader of Balabán's texts a chance to follow the lives of his characters in their immediate presence. Moreover, it supports the reader's freedom to choose the way he reads the text, he feels about the text and he understands the text. It provides him with an opportunity to make his own independent judgment about the presented fictive reality without being subordinated by the strong subjective 'I' or by someone else acting externally, outside the constructed world. It gives him an illusion of objectivity and his subjective powers.

The illusion of objectivity of Balabán's texts is also supported and, at the same time, rejected by another factor. This factor is the application of multiple narrations – the narrations in which two or more characters look at the same relationship, the same situation or the same event from their own perspectives. To quote Kubíček, multiple narrations have

> 'a special ability to shake the identity of the fictive world by pointing out their individual and legitimate truths. (T)he fictive truth becomes a subjective construct with only a temporal validity. (…) It is the reader who becomes responsible for the reconstruction of the truth in his search for the unity of the text.'
> ['zvláštní schopnost znejistit identitu fikčního světa tím, že poukáže na jeho individuální platnost. (F)ikční pravda se ukazuje jako subjektivní, dočasně platný konstrukt. (...) (V)elkou část odpovědnosti za její re-konstrukci přebírá pak čtenář v interpretačním procesu sjednocení.'] (*Ibid.* 136)

The reader is the unifying element of Balabán's texts with multiple personal narrations. This is because, in these texts, there is no one else who could be trusted. In these texts, every character is reliable and unreliable at the same time. Their projection of the self is either parallel to or in conflict with other people's perception of their identity. As a result, the overall picture of the fictive world is deprived of its simple clarity and its simple truth and replaced with uncertainty about the recognition of human life. It signals that the presented image is relative.

Balabán has chosen a personal narrator for the majority of his works because he wishes to be objective and detached. For the same reason, he uses multiple narrations and looks at every individual, every situation and every event from different angles and from a distance. However, the principle of multiple narrations destroys objectivity. The principle of multiple narrations transfers all the responsibility for reconstructing the text onto the reader only and so it makes the interpretation of the text subjective and its truth relative again. In this sense, the picture we seek to recognize in Balabán's works is the reader's subjective perception of a multi-perspective, fragmented and uncertain fictive world which has been created from the author's interaction with the external reality of his texts and from the reader's own recognition of the world.

In Balabán's texts, each truth – the author's, the narrator's and the reader's – is being questioned, constantly integrated with other truths and destroyed. Hence, it makes both the real and the fictive worlds multidimensional and alive, yet insistent.

1.2 The gradual separation and the re-union with the writer's personality: part I.

A few paragraphs above, it was noted that: '[b]y application of the personal narration to his texts, Jan Balabán separates his subjective 'I' from the fictive reality of his works and enables them to act as independent constructs of human life.' This separation is definitely happening on the level of the narrative discourse. On the level of the story itself, the change is not so straightforward. There, the 'I' of the writer and the story of his characters find their common ground. Certainly, we can have a look at Balabán's life, we can examine the various interviews he gave to the Czech media about his literary fiction or we can take into account all that Balabán's family and their closest friends have said about Jan Balabán, for example, in the work, *Honzo, ahoj! Setkání s Janem Balabánem (Bye, Honza! An Encounter with Jan Balabán*, henceforth *AH)* published posthumously in memory of Jan Balabán in 2011. In this work, various people who had a chance to know Jan Balabán have published their memories and reflections about him and his testimony about the world. It is also here, where we, the readers, learn more about certain episodes, images and thoughts that have helped to shape Balabán's life and later also his literary world.

Some statements which repeatedly come up in people's testimonies about Balabán's personality reflect his family background:

> 'Jan's stories are full of things he knew very well. They are about his family, about the church, about the city he inhabited. His religious faith and theology also play an important role (…) At the beginning of the 1960s, when the family of Daniel Balabán M.D. moved to Ostrava, their two children perceived this new environment with intensity and eagerness. (…) But there were also other things: the regional hospital with pavilions located in various areas of a large garden; the hospital environment which had its own specific problems of doctors and their patients.'
> ['Janovy povídky se zabývají opravdu tím, co důvěrně znal, prostředím rodiny, církevního sboru, města, v němž žil. Také víra a teologie si přišly na své. (...) Když se začátkem šedesátých let rodina MUDr. Daniela Balabána přistěhovala do Ostravy, vnímaly jejich dvě děti nové prostředí ostře a dychtivě. (…) Ale bylo tu i leccos jiného: Prostředí krajské nemocnice s pavilony rozhozenými ve velké zahradě, které si žilo specifickými problémy lékařů i těch jimi léčených.'] (Klobása 2011: *AH*: 27);

his relationship to brother Daniel:

> '[f]or Honza, it was his older brother Daniel, an artist and a very highly educated person, who played an essential role during his growing up. Jeník wished to be an artist too, but... he became a writer.'

['Zásadní postavou Honzova dospívání byl jeho starší bratr Daniel, akademický malíř a člověk velkého rozhledu. Jeník si přál být také malíř, ale... stal se z něj spisovatel.'] (Žila 2011: *AH*: 39);

his relationship to his daughter:

'[y]ou suffer from diabetes. This is going to stay with you until the end of your days. It is untreatable. I remembered: Jesus, this is the same illness Balabán's daughter has too. But she's had it since she was a child. I guess since she was around seven years old.'
['Máte cukrovku, to je už napořád, to už je nevyléčitelné. Vzpomněl jsem si: Ježíš, to má i Balabánova dcera, ale už od dětství, snad od sedmi let.']
(Surůvka 2011: *AH*: 62);

his Canadian adventure:

'Bohouš Čermák, whom he [Jan Balabán] visited in Toronto, was not a typical emigrant. (…) His house used to be welcoming and open to many other people. Perhaps it was so because of his Canadian wife Jenny.'
['Bohouš Čermák, ke kterému do Toronta přijel, nepatřil k typickým emigrantům. (...) Jeho dům byl domem otevřených dveří. Snad na tom měla svým způsobem zásluhu jeho kanadská manželka Jenny.'] (Březina 2011: *AH*: 78);

his difficulties with alcohol:

'Honza led a life full of arguments, controversies and wars. With himself and with the world around him. Lately, I sadly observed his war with alcohol.'
['Honza vedl za svého života řadu pří, sporů a válek. Sám se sebou i s okolím. Já poslední dobou intenzivně vnímal tu jeho válku s alkoholem.']
(Šnajdr jr 2011: *AH*: 107);

his internal struggles:

['there were] moments when Honza's life collapsed into chaos. And there wasn't a single person able to alleviate his misery. There was not enough love, not enough intimacy, not enough understanding and not enough encouragement. There was not enough faith and not enough hope… That feeling of being an outsider, a loser and an outcast prevailed over him.'
['Chvíle, kdy se Honzovi všechno naopak propadalo do chaosu, a nebyl člověk, který by mohl to utrpení zmírnit. Nebylo dost lásky, dost blízkosti, dost pochopení a povzbuzení, nebylo dost víry a naděje... Ten pocit outsidera, ztroskotance a vyděděnce nad ním vítězil.'] (Voglová 2011: *AH*: 91);

his fictive characters:

> ‘[he wrote] the stories of renamed individuals. There is a name behind the predicament of each individual. A fictional name, a story name. And yet, it is a name which hides a real person made of flesh and blood. A real person, whom Jenda [meaning Jan] meets. He lives his life in these names. He lives the way he writes. He writes the way he lives. He does not give his name the meaning of an illusion. He gives his name a story which unfolds in his mind.’
> [‘Příběhy přejmenovaných osudů. Za každým údělem je jméno. Jméno románové, povídkové. A přece jméno, v němž spočívá postava z masa a krve. Postava, kterou Jenda potkává. V těchto jménech žije svůj život. Žije, jak píše. Píše, jak žije. Nedává svým jménům vymyšlený smysl, jen příběh, který se odvíjí v jeho mysli.’] (Šimsa 2011: *AH*: 65);

and writing:

> ‘Anděl [meaning his work *KSA*] is the turning point in my writing career because it was in this work where I finally managed to get out and meet other people. There is still a certain hypertrophy of the author’s ego present here, which is testimony about the difficulties I had with this step. There I felt being addressed by other lives, other characters for the first time. This is when I realized that I do not have to write all the time just about myself. And I think that I managed to ask questions not only about the meaning of my own life but also about the life we live here or we have been living here. At the same time, I have managed to keep the core far away, without putting in any great symbolic narratives.’
> [‘Anděl je pro mě přelomová kniha v tom, že se mi v ní podařilo vyjít k ostatním lidem. Je tam ještě hypertrofie autorského ega, což je svědectví o potížích toho vykročení. Tam jsem poprvé pocítil skutečně oslovení jinými osudy, jinými postavami. Že nemusím psát pořád o sobě. A myslím si, že se mi podařilo položit otázku ne po smyslu mého života, ale toho, co tu žijeme, nebo jsme žili. A přitom udržet knot hodně daleko, nedávat tam nějaké velké symbolické příběhy.’] (Chrobák 2011: *AH*: 119).

It is these quotations and our knowledge of Balabán’s fiction (as it will be analyzed below) which make us consider the autobiographical inspiration of his works, look at the extent to which his work reflects upon his experience of the ‘real’ world, think about how the ‘real’ world shapes Balabán’s literary testimony and how it influences the reader’s perception of Balabán’s work in relation to his or her own experience of the ‘real’ world.

1.3 Understanding the complexity of Balabán’s fictive world

Tensions between the subjective and the objective angles and between the ‘real’ and the ‘fictive’ world cut across the whole field of Balabán’s fiction. It has been already pointed out that the majority of Balabán’s narrators belongs to the fictive reality of Balabán’s works, that they act there as voices as well as characters. In other words, they are both the subjects of the narration as well as its rightful objects. In addition, some quotations

regarding the author's own life have been selected to anticipate the influence of the author's experience of the 'real' world on the fictive reality of his texts. Bearing all this preliminary information about the dispositions of Balabán's texts in mind, it is now important to look in detail at the position which the narrating and non-narrating characters occupy in the structure of these texts and how they shape their individual narratives.

Daniela Hodrová (b. 1946) considers the characters and their position in the world of fiction from various perspectives. She talks about the distinction between the character-type and the character-function, between the character-definition and the character-hypothesis, between the character-subject and the character-object; and between the character-real and the character-fictive. To address all four distinctions in their contradictive positions, she emphasizes the individuality of each character:

> '[we] can talk about the character as about a certain type of subject (the other subjects are the author and the reader), who is a textual parallel to the human being, real or fictive… in the literary work. The character is a bearer of certain features, states and actions. But above all, he or she is the bearer of an individual mind (even in those cases when the mind is hidden or when it is suppressed), which is built on his or her relationship to others, to the world, to the object.'
> ['O postavě můžeme mluvit jako o určitém typu subjektu (dalšími subjekty jsou autor a čtenář), který je v díle textovou analogií člověka, skutečného nebo smyšleného... Je nositelem určitých vlastností, stavů a činností, především však individuálního vědomí (a to i v těch případech, kdy nám není v textu zjeveno nebo kdy je potlačeno), konstituujícího se vztahu k druhým, ke světu, k objektu.'] (Hodrová 2001: 545);

the fictive, defining and hypothetical nature of each individual character:

> 'Characters which are presumably taken from the real world… presuppose a certain differentiation in their interpretation. They cannot be completely real precisely because they appear in a fictive world. The profile of a fictive character always overlaps the real model or, on the contrary, does not cover the real model completely. In this sense, the character always remains more or less hypothetical in spite of the fact that his or her model was a real person.'
> ['Postavy, které jsou údajně vzaty ze skutečnosti...předpokládají ve svém ztvárnění vždy určitou diferenci, nemohou být zcela skutečné už pro svou literární zprostředkovanost, literární postava svými obrysy vždy nějak přečnívá, nebo naopak zcela nepokrývá reálný předobraz, zůstává tedy vždy v té či oné míře hypotetická, i když je jejím předobrazem skutečná osoba.'] (*Ibid.* 550-551);

the author's contribution to the image of the multidimensional and complex world which each hypothetical character co-creates:

> ‘The hypothetical approach… does not mean a deflection from the real to fiction. On the contrary, it contributes to the creation of a more complex, multidimensional image of the real world which is captured in all its possibilities and in a person who is the sum total of all his or her potential ‘I’s and predicaments. It is an attempt to search for a more complex truth.’
> [‘Hypotetizace... neznamená odklon od reality směrem k smyšlence. Naopak namnoze přispívá k vytvoření komplexnějšího, vícedimenzionálního obrazu reality, uchopené současně v jejích možnostech, člověkem v souboru jeho potenciálních já a osudů, je pokusem o hledání úplnější pravdy.’] (*Ibid.* 552);

the significance of the author’s approach to each individual character:

> ‘In literary fiction, the conception of the character-definition and the character-hypothesis is based on the way the author approaches the character, on the angle he applies. The character-hypothesis is not considered as something total, as a completed whole which would have been transferred to the literary work in the moment of its creation. The character-hypothesis is a silhouette, a torso which appears in the work in its undefined and fragmented form and which the author tries to reconstruct in his or her text. In spite of that, the whole of the character still disappears somewhere in infinity. The work always refers to the world outside the text.’
> [‘Pojetí postavy-definice a postavy-hypotézy se v díle opírá především o způsob, kterým autor k postavě přistupuje, o úhel pohledu na postavu. Tam, kde se jedná o postavu-hypotézu, není postava nahlížena jako totalita, celek ve chvíli tvorby hotový a do díla jakoby pouze přenesený, ale jako silueta, torzo, které se v této neurčité a fragmentární podobě objevuje v díle a které se autor pokouší... v textu rekonstruovat, celek postavy se však i na konci jakoby ztrácí v nekonečnu, dílo odkazuje mimo text.’] (*Ibid.* 556);

and the significance of using the concept of the character in the creation of literary texts:

> ‘Using a similar concept of the character, the author is trying to capture the process of human thinking as a process which is unfinished, chaotic, contradictive; as a process which can be “truthfully” (in all relativity of this word) portrayed only when it is portrayed in its process, in its continuously escaping, undefined and incomplete totality.’
> [‘Autor se snaží prostřednictvím podobného pojetí postavy uchopit proces myšlení jako nezavršený, chaotický, protikladný, „pravdivě“ (při vší relativitě tohoto pojmu) zobrazitelný právě jen v jeho procesuálnosti, v jeho stále unikající, neurčité a neúplné totalitě.’] (*Ibid.* 556-57)

In all these examples on the nature of the literary characters, Hodrová speaks of literature that aims to capture reality in its complexity and in its full extent and yet it fails to do so; literature that aims to be ‘real’ and yet it is fictive; literature that aims to be whole and yet it is fragmented. All this seems very similar to what Jan Balabán attempts to do in his work. As we will see further below, he takes a ‘real’ person and turns him or her into a

fictive character in his writing (for instance, the above mentioned Bohouš Čermák is turned into Bogomil: *CB*). Balabán uses various angles (and voices) to describe one world and yet he ends up with the image of several fragmented worlds. He chooses certain types of characters (losers, alcoholics, sick people and doctors) and pictures them at various moments (during an alcoholic breakdown, during an illness). He draws individuals who are affected by various problems and whose views are uncertain.

Balabán's literary world contains nothing predictable and nothing fixed. It is full of character-types and situation-types, yet it deconstructs them and makes them hypothetical and relative – and thus multidimensional.

1.4 In between short stories and novels

The process of construction and deconstruction of Balabán's fictive worlds also occurs on the level of genre distinction. It is clear from his listed literary oeuvre that the author was always struggling between the genre of short stories and the genre of novels – he produced five collections of short stories, three novels and one graphic novel. To address this, Balabán states:

> 'I said to myself that it is perfectly fine if I keep writing short stories. The short story is possibly the best narrative instrument for these hectic times, when we meet each other only briefly and constantly rush somewhere else. (…) My novels disintegrate into short chapters. My short stories merge and create larger units. I am really interested in this tension between an individual story and the so-called grand narrative. As a novelist I cannot accept the genre of a 'great novel'. I am interested in its constituent elements. I am constantly speculating whether and how it might be possible to merge single stories into a larger unit; whether and how the lives of individuals may, when taken together, really come to constitute a really essential supra-individual event. I want to find out whether the stories of ordinary, small, completely unknown people can be as significant as, for example, the biblical stories, the stories of Joseph and of Samuel, or the stories in the Icelandic sagas. I want to find out whether what a human being experiences and achieves can transcend his individual life. Only if this is true, is it meaningful to write, to write novels.'
> ['Říkal jsem si, že je to prima psát povídky, povídka může být tím pravým vyprávěcím nástrojem pro tuhle uspěchanou dobu, kdy se jen na chvíli vidíme a už zase někam pospícháme. (...) Romány se mi rozpadají do povídkových kapitol a povídky se zase scelují do větších celků. To napětí mezi individuálním příběhem a takzvaným velkým příběhem mě hodně zajímá. Nedokážu to vzít s romanopiseckým nadhledem jako daný žánr – velký román. Pořád jako by mě více zajímaly jeho elementární částice a pořád přemýšlím, zda a jak je to možné, aby se jednotlivé příběhy spojovaly v nějaký vyšší celek, zda a jak osudy jednotlivých lidí dávají dohromady nějakou skutečně podstatnou nadindividuální událost. Jestli příběhy drobných neznámých lidí mohou být stejně nosné jako třeba

> příběhy biblické, Josefovy nebo Samuelovy, nebo příběhy z islandských ság. Zdali to, co člověk prožije a vykoná, přesahuje jeho individuální život – jedině tehdy má smysl psát román a vůbec psát.']
> (Balabán: Balaštík: Reichel 2004: *Host*, vol. 8: 5-9)

According to his own words, Jan Balabán considered the possible advantages and disadvantages of both genres well enough. He expressed the wish to write short stories because their structure gave him an opportunity to express things in an immediate form and simply from one single perspective. He also expressed his wish to write novels because novels made him think about the world in its complexity and its wholeness.

In Balabán's works, the tension between these two genres is always present. To minimize the genre distinction, he tries to create links between individual stories from a particular collection - by introducing the same characters in a number of the stories, or between his short stories and some of his novels – by re-introducing the characters from his individual short stories in the novels. The former happens in every collection of short stories by Balabán (for instance, in the case of Pavel Nedostál and Ivan Satinský: *PR*), the latter happens in three of his latest works (in the case of Emil, Hans, Kateřina) both within the frame of a single volume and in the sequence of all the three works. As a result of this linking effort, the narrative structure of a book of short stories acts similar to that of a novel or a series of novels.

The second method to blur the difference between both genres has led the author to act in the opposite direction – to go from the novel to the short story. As we will see below, Balabán's novels are subject to fragmentation. They are split up into several chapters and several personal narrations. Each narration acts individually and also behaves as if it were material related to a larger unit. This principle is applied in all the three novels by Balabán (*Černý beran, Kudy šel anděl* and *Zeptej se táty*). *Boží lano* is somewhere between a short story and a novel. Although frequently classified as a short story, the same subjective narrator links his memories and thoughts into a linear but fragmented flow of time.

To sum up, Balabán's fiction is governed by several important principles. The ambiguity of his texts is formally and in content realized by means of tension, which arises between the subjective and objective views, between the fictive and the 'real' and as a result of a consistent fragmentation and centralization of individuals' stories and the genres he uses. His texts show the world as unsettled within its structural unity and in each of its individual parts. The texts reflect upon the impossibility of anything absolute and the

relativity of all. They play with the author's experience of his own world, yet they are completely fictive.

How these formal principles tie in with the semantic content of Balabán's works and how they participate in the testimony that Balabán's literary fiction provides about the world of today will be the subject of the following analysis.

2. Collective (social) experience

There are certain character-types and certain situation-types which appear in Balabán's works on a regular basis. The following chapters will consider them both. They will be structured around Balabán's most frequent themes and motifs as they come up in connection with the individuality of each character and, at the same time, as they shape the individual's experience with the outside world and with their own self. In addition, these chapters will follow the development of some particular characters, in the places where the analysis will require some expansion.

2.1 Human relationships and love

One of the main themes which Balabán's works explore is the concept of the human relationship. Nearly every character finds himself or herself in a situation when he or she has to deal with his or her own certainty and uncertainty in relation to other people. Balabán's characters wander somewhere in between love, tolerance, misunderstanding,

total disagreement and distrust. They think about the human relationship and what it means as they become aware of their responsibility for their own lives and for the lives of others. They attempt to define the nature of the human relationship from their early adolescence, from the time they start searching for their first partners, for friends and for close human bonds. Rarely do they find any concrete answers, however.

2.1.1 Destructive: a search for love

Erotic relationships are always complicated in the lives of Balabán's characters. Balabán's characters experience many difficulties before they find love and peace. Many of them taste disillusionment from their first real relationship. They suffer from personal frustration when they lose everything they have built since early adulthood. Just like Hakl's characters, they squirm into their own solitude, become grumpy and drink. They stagger from one relationship to another or just stand still, scared to try again. Married couples drift apart or they endure the pain their relationship causes them and adapt, sacrificing their own individual desires and needs. Partners split up in order to discover a new way of life. Old bonds are destroyed; new complicated bonds are created.

In Balabán's works, the characters' erotic relationships usually fail due to various revelations, doubts or mishaps which the characters experience in their search for happiness. The source of the characters' problems lies in their unsettled personalities and in their individual feelings. For every character is an individual as well as a part of the human world and he or she acts as such – in a similar way (as a 'type') and yet differently (as a 'hypothesis'). What Balabán's characters have in common is the situation they have to deal with (a 'type' of situation). Here we are discussing love. What make the characters unique is their own mind with which they make decisions about the situation and the world they live in (life for them is a 'hypothesis'). Here we analyze how the individuals deal with love.

2.1.2 Destructive: lack of personal comprehension

The search for love is one of the most explored and discussed topics in all the texts by Balabán. Nearly all the characters go through the process of defining for themselves what love means for them, and they try to find it. It is one of the most important experiences that determines the way their life unfolds.

In ‘Niagarské vodopády’ (*ST*), we are taken in by an unnamed woman, a toilet attendant, who speaks her mind in order to tell us the story of her life. Her thoughts about one young male customer she fancies but never approaches are interwoven with memories of her past, her failed love and her lost motherhood. When doctor Satinský (‘Proměny’: *PR*) reaches the bottom of his own existence, when he drowns himself in alcohol and is consumed with grief for his lost family and his career, he meets Taťána. In his relationship with her, he slowly regains his self-confidence. However, even this change does not bring him much happiness. As soon as he frees himself from all his addictions and began to think positively, he is left by Taťána and once again is reduced to loneliness. Pavel Nedostál and his wife Dana (‘V neděli’, ‘Silvestr Svinov’, ‘Prázdniny’: *PR*) are experiencing a crisis of their married life. They live with each other but do not communicate, even for the sake of their children. Later, they separate. Karel (‘Odpoledne a večer’**:** *PR*) pretends to be asleep rather than to have sexual intercourse with his wife Pavla. František Josef (*CB*) is already divorced when he tries to plan his future with a new partner Patricie, but even this relationship is not completely without difficulties and fights. Bogomil (*CB*) leaves his wife, his femme fatal Johana, forever. To escape from her power, he flees to Canada and there starts a new life with a new partner, although quiet sorrow from his loss never disappears. Eva Topolská (*KSA*) breaks off her relationship with her teenage boyfriend Martin Vrána after she realizes she wants more from life than just dreaming about pure love and pure happiness. Eva never finds love again; all her attempts to find someone else end up in loneliness. Roman Hradílek and his wife Uršula (‘Uršula’: *MO*) struggle badly after losing their mutual understanding and trust. Edita (‘Edita’: *MO*) leaves her husband for a love affair with her colleague, but that relationship does not work out either. Hans (‘Hlas jeho pána’: *MO, ZT*) is divorced as is his new partner. Both have children from previous relationships and, in their new life, they struggle to understand each other. The same applies to Hans’s brother Emil (‘Emil’: *MO*, ‘Tchoř’: *JT*, *ZT*). Patricia (‘Vděčná smrt’: *JT*) is not able to control her emotional life. She leaves her partner and when she is due to give birth, she hides alone, scared of any intimacy with anyone.

In Balabán’s works, an erotic relationship is never simple. Love that unfolds between Balabán’s characters is always the concern of at least two different individuals and as such is examined. All the interested parties have a chance to talk about their feelings and thoughts. They fill the story with their subjective views and expect to be considered and judged. They make a single truth hypothetical and relative. So we learn about Jan’s (‘Výročí svatby’: *ST*) increasing frustration due to the fact that his deeply loving wife Marie denies him sex. Then we read about Marie’s fear and disgust which every sign of

sexual desire from her husband evokes in her (*Ibid*.). Dr Satinský ('Proměny': *PR*) talks about his life crises and about the personal change he underwent, partly thanks to support from his new partner Taťána. Later, it is Taťána ('Balkán': *PR*) who expresses her feelings about Dr Satinský. Another character, Pavel Nedostál ('V neděli', 'Silvestr Svinov': *PR*), considers his marriage to Dana already beyond redemption. All he is capable of is a few unfriendly words. Dana talks of her loss and emptiness with great sorrow ('Prázdniny': *PR*). Pavla ('Odpoledne a večer': *PR*) finds it difficult to cope with the loss of her youth and with the fact that her children have grown up and will leave soon. She longs to be young, attractive and once more to be loved by her husband. Instead, she finds in him a scared man who escapes into his dreams rather than face her needs. Karel (*Ibid.*), on the other hand, sees himself as a person whose behaviour Pavla could possibly only despise and hate. He recognizes his passivity and a lack of passion for her body but still does not want to change it and so he continues in the relationship. In *Černý beran,* we follow many episodes from František Josef's life and also reflect on his partner's views. Their perspectives are seen as separate but sometimes they interact in a lively manner, as the example below shows:

> 'Once more I can hear that cracking, the cracking of the trees which are being bent in the middle of their lives. Josef has become a malicious drunkard! He takes out his moods on me. Why do I have to put up with this? Maybe he isn't even drunk but he isn't sober either. He carries his grudge within himself as if it were a snake.
> Why can't that female understand that I can't stand this world? Suddenly, it is too much for me, it is like having to queue at some repulsive office, it all multiplies like unsolved problems, divorces, children, the ex-wife, my drugged friends and love made light by pornographically-deviant thoughts. A futile silence. As if I had to hide my hangover from some beastly officials, from children, from disgusting schoolmates.
> Am I not a human being? Am I just a container for slop? Yes, people say that women are vessels of sin, but people don't say that it is man's sins which are poured into these vessels. His moods into my vessel. Can I understand what he says, me, a stupid woman out of luck? I could shut up and listen to his words like Maria did at Jesus's feet. But he doesn't speak like Jesus…'
> ['Už zase slyším ten praskot, praskot stromů ohýbaných v polovině života. Už je ten Josef jen poťouchlý opilec! Vybíjí si na mně svoje nálady, a já to mám snášet? Možná ani není opilý, ale střízlivý také není. Nosí to v sobě jako hada.
> Copak ta ženská nechápe, že jenom prostě nemůžu vydržet na světě? Je toho na mě moc. Najednou se to zřetězí jako fronta na odporném úřadě, nedotažené trable, rozvody, děti, bývalá žena, zfetovaní kamarádi, úchylné pornograficky zlehklé podoby lásky. Marné mlčení. Jako bych musel skrývat kocovinu před nějakými bestiálními úředníky, před dětmi, před jakýmisi odpornými spolužáky.
> A já snad nejsem člověk. Jen nějaká nádoba na splašky. Ano, říká se o ženách, že jsou nádoby hříchu, ale neříká se, že je to mužský hřích, který se do těch nádob nalévá. Do té mé nádoby ty jeho stavy. Copak já tomu můžu rozumět, já blbá

> ženská, která měla smůlu? Můžu držet hubu a poslouchat jako ta Marie u noh Ježíšových. Kdyby aspoň mluvil jako Ježíš...'] (*CB:* 70)

The thoughts of both František Josef and Patricie always clash or merge when something important happens or when something important is supposed to be discussed: love, death, childhood, memories, past and present, faith, František's alcoholism and Patricie's illness. Both individuals have their own views on these matters. They constantly quarrel and make peace. Patricie cannot stand František's drinking and his lectures on God and she feels sad when trying to understand his never-ending search for something lost in his past. František, on the other hand, feels that Patricie should not be judging him for his behaviour because she does not know the reasons for his actions. Both strive for mutual understanding and through their relationship attempt to attain it.

The structure of *Kudy šel anděl* is rather more complicated. There are several characters in this work and most of these characters act as both narrators and objects of narrations. The unity of life is broken down into several individual views and then re-built around the story of Martin Vrána. The text becomes open to a number of different interpretations and then settles on a single interpretation.

Throughout the novel *Kudy šel anděl*, we follow the life of Martin Vrána from his teenage years to his adulthood. We get to know about his loves, his work, friends, habits, feelings and thoughts. The narration of his life is linear and articulate. It is interrupted only when Martin's personal path crosses the path of another person. When this happens, the role of the narrator is temporarily passed to that other person – usually to Eva Topolská, Ivan Bereza (Figura) and Monika Tomská. Love is discussed by everyone.

The relationship between Martin and Eva is the first to be debated. It is anchored in their youth and from there it also develops and fails. The beginning of their love is connected to Martin and Eva's school years, their talk, their wine drinking sessions and anti-communist views. Young Martin is depicted as a romantic soul with long hair and a hard-rock image. Young Eva represents the pragmatic world. Facing the hostility of the communist regime, they both stand strong and united. In the face of the reality of everyday life, they succumb. And it is the pragmatic Eva who makes the final decision to leave Martin's romantic world behind. She walks away. Their mutual dialogue of love comes to an end but not forever. It continues in their minds over the years until the two characters meet again. This time, Eva has already been through several relationships but she stays on her own. Martin remains single for long, but then finds himself in personal turmoil. He gets

married, divorces and later finds a new partner in young Monika Tomská. Eva's and Martin's love is unfulfilled and lost but, in spite of this, it is never forgotten.

The story of Martin's and Eva's relationship has the most complete shape in the novel. It is examined from both sides equally but also from the position of other characters – Ivan Figura (later Eva's lover) and Monika Tomská, Martin's new girlfriend. From Eva's pragmatic point of view, her relationship with Martin was nothing more than a romantic dream that could not have continued. From Martin's romantic perspective, the relationship was a fatal love that was wonderful while it lasted but hurt when it came to an end. From Ivan's perhaps 'jealous' point of view, it was an unhealthy relationship that could have never succeeded. From Monika's loving point of view, that relationship is only a painful memory that lies deep within Martin's heart. Each of these characters has his or her own subjective truth about Martin's and Eva's world and none of the truths is superior to another. The views of the characters are as different as each character could be.

Apart from the examination of Eva's and Martin's relationship, the text examines a number of other erotic relationships: between Eva and Ivan Figura, Martin Vrána and Monika, Mr Vrána and Mrs Vránová (Martin's parents) and Ester Tomská (Monika's sister) and her girlfriend Pavla. All these relationships have their own significant place and value in the structure and the reality of the whole text. They are relationships based on sexual attraction and emotional distance (Eva, Ivan), on salvation (Martin, Monika), on dependence (Vrána's family) and on lesbian love (Ester, Pavla). Apart from the last mentioned, no relationship listed above is without problems. Monika and Martin are plagued by the burden of their past experience that complicates their way to happiness. For Eva and Ivan, it is the lack of emotional connection that prevents them from coming near each other. Vrána's parents are unable to communicate after many years living beside each other. Only the love between the two women, the two people of the same gender does not have any negative aspects.

All the stories about relationships in *Kudy šel anděl* have a similar structure: apart from Pavla, every character is given his or her own narrative voice; everyone expresses his or her feelings, thoughts and opinions. Everyone comments on what is momentarily happening around them and everyone reacts to it.

Balabán's three other works – *Možná že odcházíme*, *Jsme tady* and *Zeptej se táty* – deal with the same problems that relationships bring. Again, they often use the same principle of double-sided narration. Some relationships are thoroughly explored from several perspectives whereas others are looked at only from one side.

The difficulties that Balabán's couples have to overcome if they want to save their relationship or create a new one are again many. Once more, they arise from a lack of understanding, from the characters' obsession with their own personalities and their own problems and from their incapacity to change anything. Some characters test their relationships throughout the whole period of their mid-life crisis. They question themselves and the people around them; they worry about themselves too much and, as a result, mess up their lives. Roman Hradílek and Uršula ('Uršula': *MO*) reach the point when there is nothing left to discuss. Their perhaps once contented marriage falls to pieces and survives only on the basis of a mutual passive sufferance. The chance of the two partners re-constructing their relationship is minimal. They do not talk, both prefer to avoid the problem and to escape, Uršula by hiding in the bathroom, crying her eyes out and Roman by going to the pub.

2.1.3 Destructive: the fear of parenthood (the fear of adult responsibility)

The same kind of silence surrounds the relationship of the successful photographer, Bednář, and his partner, a singer and a rising star ('Kolotoč': *MO*). Here, the problematic situation is the result of uncertainty and the different views held by both partners regarding their future life. They find themselves unable to answer the most 'basic' question – should they have children or should they devote themselves to their careers? Both are talented artists who give everything to their work but no matter how successful they are their thoughts about having children keep coming back to them. Bednář takes pictures of children and fathers and his partner cries because she is not a mother:

> 'The world will become a barren belly where there is a plenty of space for anything but there is no place for them to snuggle up to each other. The bed is no longer a nest but an airport, an international airport, where each of them takes off for a different destination. With wobbly knees, each of them, now unfaithful, thinks of a little happiness, but this time with someone else.'
> ['Svět se stane jalovým břichem, kde je dost místa pro cokoli ale není koutku k přitulení. Postel už není hnízdem, ale letištěm, a zrovna tím mezinárodním, kde každý na jiném konci startuje jiným směrem. Každý nevěrný s rozklepanými koleny myslí na ten kousek štěstí s někým jiným.'] (*MO:* 37)

Bednář's relationship is a desperate metaphor of human desolation in the world where there is no space for pure love. The desire to have children and to found a family on the one hand and the fear of losing their freedom and independence on the other lies between

both characters as a burden and, finally, it leads to the total destruction of their relationship.

Concern about parenthood is also a barrier in the life of Oldřich and Betyna ('A ptáci taky': *MO*). As soon as Oldřich realizes his wife is pregnant, he cannot come to terms with this and feels sick every time the word 'child' is mentioned. In his mind, the thought of children is transformed into a phobia about birds. However, unlike in the case of the previous couple, Oldřich eventually chooses family life, undergoes therapy and is thus able to conquer his fear.

2.1.4 Destructive: sexual frustration (the fear of intimacy)

Sometimes, the relationships which Balabán's texts describe are disrupted due to sexual dissatisfaction between partners. Jan and Marie ('Výročí svatby': *ST*) are not able to sustain their marriage because the sexual frustration that they have both felt and not talked about for many years becomes suddenly unbearable. It becomes too humiliating for both of them to keep the relationship going. Whilst Jan suffers due to lack of sex, exchanging reality for dreams, Marie resents anything sexual. Neither of them is able to cope with such tension, but it is Jan who leaves the relationship. No matter how much he loves his wife, he cannot stand the humiliation he feels as a man in her unsympathetic eyes – when he wakes up every day with wet bed-sheets after dreaming of sex.

Or elsewhere, one day Karel and Pavla ('Odpoledne a večer': *PR*), a rather contented married couple, reach the point when they are at a loss what to do with their sexual life. Their children are growing up and Pavla feels there is something missing in her life now. As an ageing woman, she becomes aware of her womanhood and once more she desires to be physically loved. Her husband Karel, lulled by the comfort and the certainty of his marriage, finds her new sexual requirements abnormal. Rather than attempting to satisfy her, he pretends to be asleep. He refuses even to try to reach any understanding with his wife and makes a conscious choice to escape into a world of dreams.

2.1.5 Destructive: external circumstances which make people part their ways

Relationships also end when external circumstances create insurmountable obstacles for the couple. Ivo and Ema, two fictive heroes in Johana's story (*CB*) are frustrated in love when Ivo is sent to participate in a space mission to save the planet and civilisation. Their love ends up lost in the vast space of the universe. Hana's and Ludvík's ('Viadačka': *JT*)

young love languishes when Hana decides to leave the country. The relationship between Monika Tomská and Martin Vrána (*KSA*) is almost finished by Martin's accident when he is hit by a passing car.

Sometimes, it is death that destroys the relationship between two individuals. Dr Satinský's auntie, Natálie ('Natálie': *PR*), goes insane after losing her lover during the war. Světlana ('Světlana': *JT*) loses her husband on holiday when he drowns in an attempt to save the life of their daughter. Marta Nedomová (*ZT*) remains alone when her husband Jan dies after a long illness.

2.1.6 The history of love – revealed and unrevealed

As it is apparent from all the above examples, in the lives of Balabán's characters, an erotic relationship is often shaken or breaks down. This happens for various reasons. These reasons arise from the personality of each individual and from the fact that partners realise they are incompatible with each other. Balabán's women and Balabán´s men act differently from each other (see II, 3.2) as do people who come from different backgrounds and different generations. Attempts to reach understanding are difficult. This is a matter of concern and results in emotional turmoil.

The majority of Balabán's heroes, especially men, marry young. Most of them have a family and children but, when they reach their forties or mid-forties, they divorce. In most cases, we meet them after their marriage has failed. An exception is the story of Martin Vrána (*KSA*), whose personal history we follow from its inception throughout the whole novel. The explanation of the reasons that have led to a personal separation or divorce is fragmented. It is provided only in connection with certain individuals. Sometimes, the author offers a single fact and uses it to build a new narrative line. So while we know of various reasons that have led to the breakdown of the relationship between Johana and Bogomil (*CB*) or Pavel Nedostál and Dana ('V neděli', 'Silvestr Svinov', 'Prázdniny': *PR*), we can only guess at what happened in the past love life of Emil Nedoma or in the relationship of his sister Kateřina (see Balabán's final three works). When Emil first appears on the scene ('Emil': *MO*), he already carries the burden of his past and struggles to cope with it now, whereas we first meet Kateřina ('Hořící dítě': *MO*) when she is still a little girl and is fighting with a serious medical condition. She re-appears only much later when she already has children and has been through a marriage and its breakdown ('Mléčná dráha': *JT*).

For some of the characters, the most significant thing that has happens in their lives in relation to 'love' is their first love (Martin Vrána: *KSA*). For some, the most significant experience is the first signs that indicate the end of their love (Pavel Nedostál and Dana in 'V neděli', 'Silvestr Svinov', 'Prázdniny': *PR*, or Roman Hradílek and Uršula in 'Uršula': *MO*). Some of the characters are trapped in thoughts of escape (Bogomil: *CB*, Karel in 'Odpoledne a večer': *PR*). Others concentrate on the preservation of their love (František Josef and Patricie: *CB*). Some live in remorse (Taťána in 'Balkán': *PR*, Jonáš in 'Denatur' and 'Ptakoještěr': *ST*) while others are in raptures over their new love (Emil: *ZT*).

As we can see, Balabán's characters all experience different aspects or stages of love – a love full of pain, a love filled with doubt or replaced with happiness. They all experience the different ways in which love arrives and disappears. Sometimes love is replaced with pain (see the relationship of Martin Vrána and Eva Topolská: *KSA*). Sometimes love overcomes pain (Martin Vrána and Monika Tomská: *KSA*) and sometimes it is destroyed by doubt, though occasionally it has strength to conquer doubt (see the relationship of František Josef and Patricie: *CB*).

2.1.7 Re-constructive: newly-found and recovered love

Because of their emotional instability, Balabán's characters lose many things during their lives. They struggle for love and their relationships. Only when there is nothing left, do some of them finally find love. Older men attain their personal happiness with younger women and younger women find their security in relationships with older men: Pavel Nedostál meets Jeny ('Moving into the universe…', 'Lední medvěd Telecomu': *PR*), Martin Vrána finds Monika Tomská (*KSA*), Jaromír befriends Lenka ('Triceratops': *MO*) and Emil Nedoma starts going out with Jeny (*ZT*). Elsewhere, it is not a young person but a different environment that brings characters together. Bogomil (*CB*) builds a new life with a Canadian woman, Jennifer, and Johana's fictive hero, Ivo (*CB*), starts a new family on the planet he lands after the destruction of his own planet (see II, 3.2).

2.1.8 To sum up: love, relationships and society

What kind of image of society is provided by Balabán's work? Each character has serious problems with relationships. People get married, divorce and find new partners. People in relationships with persons from the same age group often experience substantial difficulties and often decide to leave. The only relationships that seem to work are between

older men and younger women, between two people of the same sex, and between men and women from different countries. Only a few marriages manage to overcome personal problems and survive; most collapse.

Amongst all of Balabán's characters, the most common reasons for the decision to divorce are lack of personal understanding, different views on life, burnt-out feelings of love, alcoholism (Jonáš in 'Denatur', 'Ptakoještěr': *ST*, Dr Satinský in 'Proměny', 'Pilot': *PR*, Emil in 'Emil': *MO*, 'Tchoř': *JT*). Balabán's married couples live together until their children grow up enough to understand what is going on (when they are ten or so). Then the parents fight and, as a result, often separate. Marriages without children do not last either. Marriages are fatal and destructive for both partners (Jan and Marie in 'Výročí svatby': *ST*, Johana and Bogomil: *CB*, Bednářs' family in 'Kolotoč': *MO*).

What does this tell us about Balabán's work? What does this say about the author's and the reader's perception of the Czech society it depicts? What does it say about their perception of human relationships as these relationships unfold in the contemporary world? In Balabán's fiction, love is the most important emotion and yet it is never certain. People feel they have to search for love in spite of many difficulties. They only sometimes find it. But where do these difficulties come from? They seem to lie in the characters' personal uncertainty. Difficulties stem from their indifference, lack of understanding and lack of faith, alcoholism and obsession with their careers. Relationships break down also because Balabán's characters refuse to assume responsibility for their own lives and for those of others.

Finally, what does it say about the author's perception of his world? Just like his literary characters, he too experienced personal turmoil when he got married. He had children, got divorced and found a new love. Should this have any bearing in our reading of his work? By way of elucidation, I propose now to outline what Balabán's characters feel in relationship to those people who belong to his closest family circle.

2.2 Family relationships: given, lost and found

2.2.1 Children and their parents

Balabán's characters define their attitude to their environment through love – both in the sense of an erotic relationship but also in terms of respect for family and friends. In Balabán's fiction, one of the most discussed relationships is the relationship between children and their parents. People think of their parents at the time of a personal crisis or

when they look for an explanation for their lives. The uncertainty they experience today makes them go back to their past and reassess all the landmark events in their lives that may have shaped their personalities.

The subjective narrator of the three stories collected in *Boží lano* questions his religious faith in an attempt to dispel his doubts about his father who taught him to believe in God and in the family. Martin Vrána (*KSA*) thinks of his childhood in connection with the death of one of his former schoolmates. The news of his death comes at the moment of Martin's own personal crisis. It becomes a burden and a symbol of his lost youth, which he has not considered so far. Death makes him realize how many things he has lost over the past few years and how he has never really understood the value of the things around him. Reminiscing about his childhood, he goes back to the time when he was twelve. He thinks of one of the numerous dialogues he had with his father at that time. They discussed Martin's wish to have his own room and a proper space for his own life, which his father kept denying him. Martin did not manage to get his own room until he was forty and again living alone, separated from his wife and his children. Comparing both situations now, Martin sees the bitter paradox of his life and expresses sadness.

Through Martin's reminiscing about a deceased friend we see Martin's family as extremely patriarchal:

> 'In his parents' flat he let his children go and play with a crowd of their cousins and went to greet his father. Again he saw his father's strange smile, which was full of anxiety and anger. This is how his father mastered these patriarchal situations; he used a little spur of wrath. Martin liked and respected this man. He respected him from the time he had stopped being afraid of him. And he had stopped being afraid of him after he had disobeyed him.'
> ['V bytě u svých rodičů pustil děti do bratraneckého a sestřenického houfu a pozdravil se s otcem. Zase ten jeho zláštní úzkostně zlostný úsměv, jeho způsob zvládání těchto patriarchálních situací, drobný osten hněvu. Martin měl toho muže rád a vážil si ho, vážil si ho více od té doby, kdy se ho přestal bát. A přestal se bát, když ho neposlech.'] (*KSA:* 143)

Martin's father is described as a man with a strong personality who wields control over the whole family. He is the head of the family table. He is well respected by all his children and his wife. Martin depends on him but he tries to avoid him. Father loves Martin but shows disappointment when things do not go according to his wishes. Still, it is father who keeps calm and takes care of Martin's health after Martin is hurt in a traffic accident.

In Martin's family, father is recognized as an authority, 'mum' (always 'mum', not 'mother') is seen as a pure angel who gives her love to others through her hands – by

preparing meals, by tidying rooms and by ironing clothes. While father speaks, 'mum' does all the work and hence is loved by Martin.

Seeing Martin's parents in their individual roles, we may suggest that Vrána's family is an example of traditional Christian upbringing. However, while the parents try to keep this tradition going, their children do not follow it when raising their own children. Martin struggles somewhere in between the old traditional values and the contemporary practices of today.

Martin and both his female partners look for a key to their lives in their relationships to their parents. In order to understand what led to her conscious decision to become a single mother, Eva Topolská refreshes her memory of family life. She thinks of her mother who was always away at work, of her father who left the children when they were small and did not come back until Eva was in her twenties. It was really Eva's grandparents who brought her up. She bestowed the warm feelings she would normally give her parents upon her grandparents, especially upon her grandfather who, as she remembered, was the only person who really looked after her and the only one who showed her love. Without the parents' authority, Eva grows up into a woman who has little trust in true love. She has never been able to live with a man for long; she was always escaping from one man to another, looking for something she could not recognize until she finally remained alone.

Where Eva lacks passion, Monika (Martin's latest partner) has had an over abundance of it. She grew up under her mother's overwhelming care but was always hidden from other people's view. She never knew anything about her father, apart from the fact that she had his eyes. She was always hidden away because she was her mother's 'sin'. Monika was able to bear this kind of life only until she became an adolescent when she ran away and for several years hid away in an underground community searching for her own independent identity and strength.

Martin, Eva and Monika came from different family backgrounds. While Martin was raised in a patriarchal environment, Monika grew up under matriarchal care. While Martin's parents represented traditional family values, Eva suffered from lack of support. Her parents were more interested in their professional career than in love. Martin and Monika knew what family love meant and so they find each other in love. Eva did not trust family relationships and so sought isolation and single motherhood.

Elsewhere, it is Patricia and Paul, the two protagonists of the story, 'Vděčná smrt' (*JT*), who search for an explanation of their current lives in their personal relationships with their parents. In order to understand what has happened to their current world, Patricia goes back to her past and recalls everything that had formed her American childhood. She talks

of her mother who had German roots and was never able to adjust to the American environment; a mother who could not cope with her husband's departure for the Vietnam War and so used her son, Paul, to calm herself down by pinning her emotions to him. Patricia's mother could not cope with her husband's return and with her husband's post-war trauma and ended up committing suicide. Patricia thinks of her father who taught his son how to shoot animals; a father who went to the Vietnam War and then returned with a war trauma. She thinks of her father who left the family after her mother's death, who bought a truck and exchanged it for their real home. The memories that Patricia recalls in her mind are examined in relation to her and her brother's life, their loneliness, their unsuccessful relationships, their excessive sensitivity, and their inability to love and live a 'normal' life.

The relationship between children and their parents becomes a trauma for almost all of Balabán's characters. It turns out to be also one of the main topics of Balabán's last work, *Zeptej se táty*. In this novel, it is Emil, Hans and Kateřina, two brothers and a sister, who seek an explanation of their life through their relationship with their father. Their observation of the present is interwoven with various thoughts and memories of their dying father and of what followed in the years after his death. Kateřina remembers the time when dad was standing at her bed praying for her life after she was hospitalized with serious health problems and nearly died. She remembers him as the only person for whom she decided to survive. So, whenever she felt vulnerable, she thought of her dad – he was her support, he saved her. In the novel's present time, Kateřina is thirty-nine and she has an unsuccessful marriage behind her. And she is again ill. She is not suffering from a physical disease, but from depression and sadness due to her current life. This is the time when she turns her thoughts back to the past, to her father and the things they shared together. Paradoxically, she finds out that the most of what they shared was blurred at the time of her illness. She considers the memories of her father to be the only untouchable security of her life.

Kateřina accesses the memory of her father through the heart. Hans does the same through his eyes. He is an artist and everything that happens in his life is connected to his visual and lyrically romantic perception of the world. However, like Kateřina, he has not found happiness in love. He cannot sleep and in the dark he thinks of his dad who also suffered from insomnia. Hans walks in the countryside and the light that comes through the trees reminds him of the same light he saw in his dad's eyes shortly before he died. Hans feels lost in life without love. He calls out for dad but is scared that there will be nothing,

only his own darkness without love. His father is the light, the tree, the poplar and God. Hans desires his father's (God-like) help but he never openly asks for it due to fear he cannot overcome and out of respect.

Emil's view of his dad is different. Emil wants to become a writer and so he tends to write down his thoughts in a descriptive way. We follow him through his actions, his memories of dad lying on his death bed, his numerous visits to the hospital, the last words his dad said before he died, his feelings about his dying dad, his disgust directed towards his dad's former friend, his dad's stories, his contemplations of death, his visits to dad's grave, his memories of childhood and his dreams of dad brought before a judge to defend his life. Unlike Hans, Emil does not desire his father's help. Emil observes, he talks, he thinks and, in all his actions, he looks to understand of his dad's life and his influence on him:

> 'Emil sees his childhood as a pre-history, a mythical time, when he still lived in unity with his gods, his mother and father and grandparents. Our human and pagan gods are always our grandparents. (…) Emil knows that he has become the sort of a man he is just now in the moment when this unity shattered. When he suddenly saw beyond his tribe, when he realized that he would be alone and die.'
> ['Skutečné dětství Emil vnímá jako prehistorii, mytický čas, kdy žil v jednotě se svými bohy, s matkou a s otcem a prarodiči. Naši lidští a pohanští bohové jsou vždycky našimi prarodiči. (...) Emil ví, že člověkem, jakým je teď, se stal ve chvíli, kdy se tato jednota otřásla. Kdy najednou viděl mimo svůj kmen, kdy pochopil, že bude sám a umře.'] (*ZT:* 148-149)

In contemplation of his father, Emil realizes how important and secure it is to live within his united family and how complicated, uncertain and painful it is to be separated from it and to live alone as an individual man. He feels that without the support of his family he would quickly lose his bearings, suffer from unbearable loneliness anbd die.

The parents represent home and safety for all the three above-mentioned Nedoma characters. The parents are their only certainty, the only thing that seemed to last whilst all the other certainties dissolve. The parents are the only stability which Kateřina, Emil and Hans have in their broken worlds. Nothing can destroy this stability, not even father's death, not even accusing letters sent by their father's former friend. Their father is a doctor, a saviour of human lives (as Kateřina sees him), a man of faith, 'God', whom it is never possible to understand fully (as Hans sees him), a man full of doubt, grappling with unanswered questions (as Emil sees him). This is a picture of a patriarchal, Christian society; a picture of respect and deep love. Yet Balabán's texts highlight individuals'

questioning of the concepts of family and home. Significantly, the surname Nedoma means ‘not being at home’.

2.2.2 Parents and their children

Balabán’s work analyzes the relationship between children and their parents from the perspective of both the children, as it has been explored in the previous chapter (see II., 2.2.1), and the parents. It has been noted that the relationship between Kateřina, Emil and Hans (*ZT*) and their parents is complicated but still solid. Between the three siblings and their own children there is also a difficult and fragile link. It does not seem to be subject to any rules – the relationship is neither patriarchal not matriarchal – and so it struggles to survive. Kateřina lives with her bereaved mother and shares the care for her children with her mother-in-law and her ex-husband. Hans argues with his son about money and trust. Emil separates from his children after his marriage disintegrates. Pavel Nedostál (‘Highlander’: *PR*), Dr Satinský (‘Seno’: *PR*) and Martin Vrána (*KSA*) do the same.

In Balabán’s texts, those men who divorce always live separately from their children, but they never lose contact with them. Children are their only certainty in a world which has been shattered. They are an inspiration for the men’s thoughts; they are their relief but also a source of confusion.

The time that the fathers spend with their children functions as their personal retreat. During the time with their children, the fathers take a journey through their present and their past, their negative experiences and their confusion. It is their way of looking for peace with themselves and with others. The negative experiences include their failed relationship, arguments and deep misunderstanding between the men and their former wives and between the men and their children. Confusion means a search which is usually followed by recognition of the current state of affairs and an analysis of their situation. Peace comes with the acceptance of the status quo. Balabán’s characters find themselves at all the three stages of this complicated journey. Only some of them reach the last stage.

Pavel Nedostál (‘Silvestr Svinov’: *PR*) does not feel comfortable in his marriage anymore and the only way he can escape this unpleasant situation is through his children. He observes them taking them for a trip along a frozen river and to the places he knew in his past but still he is not able to get rid of the burden of his personal guilt. Dr Satinský (‘Seno’: *PR*) seems to be more advanced than his fellow character. His divorce is behind him and now he only needs to go over the personal mess and then enjoy time spent with his

son in the countryside. Roman Hradílek (‘Salámoví koně’: *MO*) finds himself in the same situation as Pavel. He is still in a relationship which is deteriorating. No matter how hard he tries to forget about his situation, the awareness of his regrettable situation always comes back to him. Like Dr Satinský, he takes his son for a trip but the trip does not bring him any relief. All it does is that it takes him even deeper into his thoughts about his personal mess. The same applies to Hans (‘Kluk’: *MO*) and his fifteen year old son. Their journey back from a trip to the mountains causes Hans to realise that the breakdown of his marriage is inevitable:

> ‘A man cannot be a mother. A man isn’t allowed to go into the red and pink room. He can only lean over the railings and look from the outside. He can hide his hands behind his back, dig his nails into his palms, hold tears back. He looked into the boy’s face. His eyes were impenetrable, he could no longer see into them the way he had been able to do in past, when that small baby’s head raised itself towards him from a pillow with trust. (…) He felt how uncertain his son still was, how he swung like a bean stalk. And yet he will have to push him away soon and stay alone in the wasteland that has appeared in the middle of his own heart.’
> [‘Muž nemůže být matka. Muž nesmí do červeného a růžového pokoje. Může jen viset na zábradlí, nahlížet zvenčí. Schovat si ruce za záda, zarýt nehty do dlaní, zadržet slzy v očích. Díval se klukovi do tváře. Jeho oči byly neproniknutelné, už do nich neviděl jako dřív, jako tehdy, když se k němu ta malá dětská hlaa s důvěrou pozvedala z polštáře. (...) Ucítil, jak je jeho syn ještě nepevný, jak se zakomíhal jako fazolový stonek. A přece ho bude muset už brzy od sebe odstrčit a zůstat sám na periferii, která vznikla uprostřed jeho vlastního srdce.’] (*MO:* 89)

Balabán’s men look for their personal redemption in the time shared with their children, but mostly end up facing a bare reflection of their own deeds. Women, on the other hand, see the hope of their life in their child totally and without a doubt. Pregnant Patricia (‘Vděčná smrt’: *JT*) leaves her past behind and moves to the small hut where she plans to start a new life with a baby on its way. Eva Topolská (*KSA*) is quite happy to raise her child without a man. Mrs Tomská deliberately decides to be the single mother of her daughter Monika (*KSA*) and Magda becomes the single mother of her son Jaromír (‘Magda’: *MO*). For Světlana (‘Světlana’: *JT*), her daughter is the only person who gives her strength to survive her husband’s death. Kateřina (‘Mléčná dráha’: *JT*) receives much support from their children after she suffers an attack of glycaemia. Dana (‘Prázdniny’: *PR*) fights her depression from a failed marriage only with the help of her children’s love.

2.2.3 Brothers and sisters (siblings’ rivalry and reunion)

This discussion about family relationships would not be complete without a few important remarks on communication between brothers and sisters. This communication is highlighted as one of the most significant for a number of Balabán's characters.

When the subjective narrator of *Boží lano* ('Americká elegie') immerses himself in the memories of his youth and recollects all that may have been significant for his future life, he thinks of his brother Daniel. He remembers him as an artist who was always bespattered with paint and who was always drunk. He was a brother who was both detested and loved:

> 'So awfully different, so awfully unpleasant, hanging onto our parents by means of quarrels without an end. He occupied all the rooms so ruthlessly and viciously. I could always only enter them as the second person. There was no place in the world where my brother had not been first. I had to look for such places outside of this world and then to seek the attention of the other people who were so preoccupied with the painful existence of my best friend.'
> ['Tak hrozně jiný, tak hrozně protivný, zavěšen na rodičích v hádkách, které nemají konce; bezohledně a neurvale zabydloval všechny pokoje, do kterých jsem já už mohl vstoupit jen jako druhý, a nebylo na světě místa, kde by můj bratr už přede mnou nebyl, musel jsem ta místa hledat mimo svět a pak se opožděně domáhat pozornosti lidí, tak zaměstnaných bolestnou existencí mého nejlepšího přítele.'] (*BL:* 14)

Brother Daniel is the narrator's best friend and he is the only ally he has in his family. But he is also the narrator's greatest enemy and rival on his path towards personal recognition by people in his environment. The narrator looks up to him, for Daniel is a few years older. He is an intelligent and talented man. The narrator despises him for all the attention his parents give first to Daniel and only then to him. The narrator's attitude does not change even after his brother starts drinking and spends most of the time sitting in pubs. When the family situation deteriorates, the family and the narrator stop admiring Daniel's personality and start worrying about his lifestyle. Later on, when the narrator becomes older and engaged by other matters of personal interest, his feelings of anxiety vis-à-vis his brother subside and he finds peace within himself.

Emil Nedoma, one of the main characters of last three works by Balabán, experiences a very similar relationship with his brother Hans. His feelings towards Hans follow the same pattern. They oscillate between affection for an admirable and talented man and jealousy of his brother's success with women and in his career. Emil is split between gratitude for the relationship he has with his brother, for, understanding and trust that he shares with him and between his anger at his brother's perceived superiority and his own despicable thoughts about him:

> ‘I liked you even more when we boozed together, when we went on pub crawls, when you still wasted your time with me. That was the time when we were closest to each other; in the ditch we swore at all and everyone and no one could understand us, the Nedoma boys. We were both in despair, no one took us seriously. Nowadays it is only me who is in despair and I can hardly cope with it since I do not have a mate upon whom I could lean in my grief. You could have failed just as easily as I have done. As it is, we are brothers only in name, not in predicament.’
> [‘Ale ještě radši jsem tě měl, když jsme chlastali, když jsme chodili po hospodách, když jsi se se mnou ještě zahazoval a marnil. To jsme si byli nejblíž, v pangejtě jsme nadávali na všechny a na každého a nikdo nám, klukům Nedomovým, nerozuměl. Byli jsme zoufalí a zneuznaní oba. Teď jsem zoufalý jenom já a hůř se mi to nese, když nemám tovaryše svého, o kterého bych se v té lítosti mohl opřít. Stačilo málo a nic bys nedokázal jako já. Takhle jsme bratři jenom podle jména, ale ne osudem.’] (*JT:* 95)

In Emil’s memories, Hans used to take up different roles. Hans was a child who used to accuse Emil falsely of not being his real brother; he was a drinking fellow at the time of Emil’s personal frustration; he was an understanding companion at the time of Emil’s personal breakdown and his ally against the enemies of his father; Hans represented someone Emil could have possibly become had he tried or he had been lucky which he believes he was not. Next to Hans, Emil feels always to be a second rate partner, depressed and down, but he still loves his ‘better brother’.

Hans’s feelings towards Emil are not expressed as openly as his brother’s. When Hans talks of Emil, he does it only in connection with the places he happens to be in at the moment of his thoughts or in connection with his memories from his past. Hans remembers the things both brothers used to do together when they were children, but otherwise he reflects only on his own problems.

The third person to complete this Nedoma triangle is Kateřina. As Emil is more affectionate about family relationships than Hans, his bond with his sister is full of love. When Kateřina falls ill, he feels weak and sorry for himself. On the one hand, he is ashamed of being healthy; on the other hand, he is terrified that he might also succumb to such a serious condition as she has done. Lastly, he is embarrassed because, deep in his heart, he is glad not to be ill. He admires his sister’s strength and blames himself for not being such a person himself. Kateřina seems to be closer to Emil than to Hans. She observes him, listens to his thoughts and understands him. Emil supports her when her marriage breaks down. Hans’s behaviour does not show us any specific feelings for his sister. He is fully preoccupied by his own life.

The relationship between Emil’s partner Jeny and her sister Johana (*ZT*) is very strong. This is love redeemed from hatred and pain. Johana appears in the story at two different

stages: first as a junkie who lives in Germany amongst the same sort of people and then later as a hospital patient on a recovery course. She swears at her sister and accuses her of collaborating with the corruption of capitalism. She looks up to her sister as though she was the Virgin Mary or could save her soul, and feels embarrassed about her own collapse. Jeny does not hate her sister. She is worried about her situation. She phones Johana, listens to her complaints, persuades her to have her baby and stands by her when she decides to undergo hospital treatment for her drug addiction. No matter how much Johana and Jeny differ, their relationship is solid. One sister cannot live without the other. Their mutual dependence is very strong, although each of them lives a different life in a different country. One represents light and one the other darkness.

The relationship of two other sisters, or rather step-sisters, Monika and Ester Tomská (*KSA*), is quite different. Many years have to pass before both women are able to meet and talk. Ester, the older sister, cannot forget that her mother, Marie Tomská, decided to abandon her and concentrated her love on the younger sister Monika. The mother did this because Monika indulged in pre-marital sex. Monika does not know anything about Ester. But it is Monika who decides to write a letter to Ester and meet her. All this, however, happens only when they both grow old enough to be able to forgive and then they both do forgive.

The family relationships of Balabán's characters are never smooth. They are full of various complications each individual has to overcome if he or she wants to find stability, and many of them never do. As a child, Emil Nedoma (in the last three works by Balabán) suffers from lack of confidence within his own family circle (brother Hans chases Emil away by telling him he does not belong to their family, sick sister Kateřina gets more attention from their parents than anyone else). This feeling is later reflected in his own love life and in his parenthood. He finds it difficult to maintain a stable family life. He gets married, he becomes a father, he divorces, his ability to love dissolves, he drinks, he has suicidal thoughts and suffers from depression. He feels abandoned and so he encloses himself in his internal thoughts and in drunkenness. He thinks of death but before he is able to commit suicide, he is saved by a mad country man, Vladek ('Tchoř': *JT*), who wakes Emil up just in time before he dies. Only after this experience does Emil stop drinking, finds a girlfriend, re-connects with his children and finally also with his parents. He becomes the one who is by his father's bedside when he dies.

Emil's relationship with his sister Kateřina shifts from envy and remorse to love and sympathy with her sickness. Emil's relationship with Hans is based on ambiguity. Emil admires Hans but he is also angry with his success.

Kateřina's childhood bond to her father is so strong that she is never able to find a man who would equal him. When she loses her husband, this only highlights the fact that she never found a relationship based on total unity of the two souls, a total devotion of one individual to the other. She can never find the ideal which her father instilled in her at the worst point of her illness. The loss of her father is painful but it is never destructive.

Hans is so wrapped up in the bubble of his own intelligence, creativity and success that, when his life starts to fall apart, he finds himself in a state of shock. The only way he can deal with the crisis is through his art – because art has become his life. (All that we learn about Hans's life is through art, his art friends and his thoughts on art.) There is an analogical feature like this in all of Balabán's other characters.

2.3 Relationships with friends and random people

Balabán's characters do not spend time only in the closest circle of their family. No matter how much their minds are pre-occupied with relationships and with the members of their family, they still go out and meet people, although friendships or acquaintanceships do not seem to be at the centre of their attention, as it was in the texts by Emil Hakl. In many cases, we do not learn anything at all about the relationships of Balabán's characters with other people. Friends or acquaintances are often remembered in connection with a specific occasion (e. g. a character sees a drunk colleague in the street) and only serve to complete the image of the main character and his life (we learn of the main character's thoughts regarding the drunk colleague and regarding the situation which led to his drunkenness). Nevertheless, there are still some narratives that build their main plot from friendly discussions or random meetings of two former colleagues, love rivals or perhaps hospital patients.

Love and family on the one hand and friendly encounters on the other stand at the opposite poles of the characters' interests. Where love is discussed, everything else is forgotten. When family, friendships or other people are discussed, there is hardly any space for thoughts about love. Some short stories deal only with erotic relationships and the relationships within the family; some (but not many) are based on friendly conversations or on casual encounters with different people.

A bond of friendship exists between Pavel Nedostál and Ivan Satinský ('Pilot': *PR*), but we only learn about the existence of this friendship when Ivan reminiscences in the presence of his lover. Both Nedostál and Satinský are otherwise fully pre-occupied with their families and their erotic relationships. Elsewhere, we discover that there is a personal connection between Emil Nedoma and Petr Zábranský ('Tchoř': *JT*) when Emil borrows Petr's cottage in order to get drunk there, and when Petr comes to the same place to drink and to die ('Dona nobis pacem': *JT*). Nothing more and nothing less is said about their friendship, nor do the two men ever meet in the course of the narration. The subjective narrator of the story, 'Žraločí srdce' (*ST*), and his friend Benda are brought together only for the purpose of a dream, a dream about love.

Pavel Nedostál, Ivan Satinský, Emil Nedoma and the subjective narrator of the story 'Žraločí srdce' are pre-occupied with their search for love and with attempts to clarify their family relations. We follow both Nedostál and Satinský on their way to their personal breakdown and then up to their spiritual recovery, but we hardly get any information about the existence of other people that surround them. We know nothing about their friends, their acquaintances or colleagues at work. A completely different situation prevails in the case of Hans Nedoma, Emil's brother. His personal interest lies in the balance of all: love, family and friends. As he opens up to the reader, we follow not only his doubts about love (his relationship breakdown) and his thoughts on the family (after his father's death: *ZT*) but also his encounters with some friends: photographer Bednář ('Kolotoč': *MO*), with whom he discusses his art and once again his relationship, or with artist Michal ('Teroristka': *MO*), with whom he talks about one of his paintings. Nedoma's father, Jan, also has some friends, although we do not learn this until after his death (*ZT*).

Only two of Balabán's stories are built on dialogues between two friends or acquaintances: the story 'Cedr a kladivo' (*MO*) offers personal testimonies of two men who are being treated in a rehabilitation centre for alcohol addicts. The story, 'Viadačka' (*JT*), follows the friendly discussion between two male colleagues about illness and possible treatments.

2.4 To sum up: Balabán's characters in relationships with other people – the image of the real and the fictive

The above analysis of Balabán's work, specifically the analysis of the human ties between all Balabán's characters, leads to several questions that concern both the author's fictive and his 'real': Is the world of Balabán's fiction akin to Balabán's personal

perception of the real world in which he lived? How close were the author's narratives to his own reality? How similar was the author's memory of his father, a doctor, and his mother to the memory of the Nedoma family (see the last three works by Balabán)? How similar was the author's relationship to his children? How similar was the author's relationship to his brother, the artist Daniel? How Balabán's personal experience influence the world that he has created? Was it his own journey through confusion to inner peace that has been transferred into his books, as the quotations from *Honzo, ahoj! Setkání s Janem Balabánem* suggest? Is it the real journey undertaken by Czech society within the last fifty years that Balabán's work describes? On the basis of the knowledge we possess regarding Balabán's life and the life of Czech society over the past half a century or so, we may only assume what the answer is. But our knowledge of Balabán's life and experiences and of the life and experiences of Czech society over the past half a century may be an important key to our understanding of Balabán's fictive world. Our knowledge of Balabán's life and the life of Czech society is undoubtedly a tool that can be used to interpret the world that has participated in the creation of Balabán's fictive real.

If we do accept that Balabán's work is the image of the author's self, we thereby also accept that it is the image of Czech society that has formed the author and his work. If we agree that Balabán's work is an imprint of the author's own self, we also agree that it is his perception of the world that constructed him. By analyzing both the above aspects we analyze the world in which Balabán has lived, which he has reconstructed in his literary work and has given to his readers to live.

Human relationships are one of the most discussed themes in Balabán's works. Love is an extremely important part of Balabán's characters' lives. When love disappears, it has a negative effect on all involved. The family gives Balabán's characters the certainty of a human bond but it is also the source of severe problems and long-term damage if the relationship breaks down. When love and family relationships get stuck in an awkward position, friends and their intercession can sometimes replace the family bonds, but not indefinitely.

In Balabán's work, a strong human relationship is an important foundation for a satisfying existence. If there is no one to share your life with, it becomes a wasteland with no way out but death. Sharing or, in other words, love, is, in Balabán's view, the only way to happiness. Love brings faith and faith brings belief in the self and in God – in the self within God. Balabán's characters perceive their relationships with others through their love; how they perceive their selves within the outside world is the subject of the following chapter.

3. The individual experience

3.1 Life as a reflection of the self. Words and thoughts versus actions.

Balabán's characters live their lives in interaction with other people. When they think of love, they do so on the basis of already existing relationships or a relationship that has ended, not as romantic dreamers. When they talk of love, they do it briefly. Mainly they stay silent. Love is contemplated inside the characters' heads and only sometimes does it turn into words. Dying love is never subject to discussion. We learn about the breakdown

of relationships from separate internal testimonies of both partners. Existing love is lived and analyzed within the minds of the characters rather than openly.

The majority of important matters dealing with love and family issues is communicated to the reader in the form of the narrator's internal monologue. As we gain access to the minds of the characters, we discover things that have happened before the relationship broke down, the family split up, the friendship disintegrated and before people experienced their personal crisis. We are never directly present during the conflict between Emil Nedoma and his ex-wife ('Tchoř': *JT*), during the conflict between Pavel Nedostál and Dana ('V neděli', 'Silvestr Svinov', 'Prázdniny': *PR*) or Roman Hradílek and Uršula ('Uršula': *MO*). We never directly witness the friendship between Jan Nedoma and Petr Wolf (*ZT*) or Pavel Nedostál and Ivan Satinský ('Pilot': *PR*). We are never directly introduced to the upbringing of Emil's, Hans's and Kateřina's siblings. We find out about all these matters in retrospective and we track them in the characters' minds. There are some dialogues that unfold between Emil Nedoma and his young partner Jeny, between all the members of the Nedoma family (in the last three works by Balabán) and between Martin Vrána and his lovers Eva Topolská and Monika Tomská (he talks to themseparately, *KSA*). But, even if we follow these dialogues, we do not learn much more than what we have already discovered from the individuals' inner thoughts. There are only a few actions presented in Balabán's fiction. They always consist of spoken and unspoken words and thoughts. All we get to know is mediated through these inner thoughts. The internal world is the place where most of the important things happen:

> 'They talked for a long time. Four chimneys of the old power station rose on the other side of the river, and behind them, grey blue clouds moved along the golden looking afternoon sky.
> "You know, I am very much afraid even to touch it."
> "Touch what?"
> "Our life."
> "Have we had any?"
> "Exactly, the life we've never had; the life which has never taken place."
> "At least we couldn't spoil it," Martin said harshly, all of sudden.
> "You have already spoiled a life, haven't you?"
> "More lives. Some of them I have spoiled, some of them I did not even allow. And I feel as though nothing has really taken place yet."
> "I don't believe you. I think this might apply to me, but not to you."'
> ['Dlouho si povídali a za řekou vystupovaly čtyři komíny staré elektrárny a za nimi na zlatavém odpoledním nebi táhly modrošedé mraky.
> „Víš, bojím se toho třeba jen dotknout."
> „Čeho vlastně?"
> „Toho našeho života."
> „My jsme nějaký měli?"

„Právě toho, který jsme neměli, toho, který se nestal.“
„Aspoň se nemohl pokazit,“ řekl Martin najednou tvrdě.
„Ty už jsi nějaký život pokazil, že?“
„Více životů, některé pokazil, jiné vůbec nepřipustil, a připadám si, jako by se vlastně ještě pořád nic nestalo.“
„To ti zas nevěřím já, sobě bych to věřila, ale tobě ne.“’] (*KSA:* 115)

In this example, it is Martin Vrána and Eva Topolská (*KSA*) who express their disappointment and grief for the loss of their love. Actually, it is almost the only dialogue in which both characters engage on this matter; almost the only dialogue the reader can follow directly and without just imagining it. Everything that has happened before or after is a matter of individual internal testimony. Even this particular dialogue does not provide any direct answers to many questions which will arise in the reader’s mind throughout Martin’s and Eva’s story. Whatever the partners say seems to be distant from anything that may have happened. The second example is focused on thoughts only:

‘František Josef has been feeling in danger for several months now. Patricie and he have been trying to save themselves by conducting long discussions at the kitchen window. They talked and talked as if they wanted to rewrite their lives into more sensible shapes. As if it were possible. They have wine and coffee and plenty of cigarettes and long nights. That’s probably all they have. František Josef has also a bottle of vodka about which Patricie doesn’t know. And he fears that Patricie is not well, her eyes, her round eyes, what has happened to her eyes? As if they belonged to a totally different, horrible woman. As if it were a different, horrible man staring at him. The darkness outside in the courtyard is fading. Time is running through the narrow bottleneck of an hour-glass.’
[‘František Josef cítil ohrožení už několik měsíců. Zachraňovali se s Patricií dlouhými hovory u kuchyňského okna. Mluvili a mluvili, jako by chtěli přepsat své životy do smysluplnějšího tvaru. Jako by to bylo možné. Mají víno a kávu a kupu cigaret a celé noci. A to je tak všechno, co mají. František má ještě vodku, o které Patricie neví. A obavy, že Patricie není v pořádku, její oči, její kulaté oči, o to má s očima? Jako by se na něj dívala úplně jiná, hrozná žena. Jako by se na ni díval úplně jiný, hrozný chlap. Tma na dvoře za okny bledne. Čas protéká úzkým hrdlem.’] (*CB:* 32)

There is a relationship between František Josef and Patricie (*CB*). There is a problem. We do not know who or what has created the problem. We can only assume. We do not know what František and Patricie did to solve the problem, what actions they took or how they discussed it. We know they did but we can only assume what they did. All we are given is their observations and their thoughts.

Similar things are happening throughout the whole of Balabán’s fiction. Balabán’s characters do not like to give us their stories in full and in detail. Many things are only

suggested or mentioned without any further explanation or background. Facts are hidden behind a mass of internal thoughts. They are kept in the secrecy of the human mind.

Balabán's stories are not based on physical action but on mental turmoil. The texts are built on the self-reflection of various individuals, on the personal testimonies of women and men who look at the world through their minds rather than through their words. Their internal world is an important processor of the surrounding reality. The outer world is overwhelming but what effect it has on each individual we learn only from their fragmented memories and from their conscious decision to respond to it. Everything merely reflects their thoughts and internal feelings.

We have noted that all the characters' thoughts and internal feelings are delivered to the reader by means of an internal monologue. The internal monologue gives the reader the illusion that he or she has an unmediated access to the characters' minds and to the reasons for their actions. The internal monologue brings the reader in the proximity of the character and into sympathy with his or her actions.

> 'The representation of the internal world is the most effective means of controlling the reader's sympathies, because it unconsciously influences the reader's affection for one of the characters. The more the reader learns about the most internal motives of the character's behaviour, the greater is his or her willingness to understand the character's behaviour, his forbearance, tolerance etc.' (Stanzel 1988: 161).

As Balabán uses more than one narrating character, the question of sympathy becomes the question of balance between them. Whenever there are two characters, usually one is a man and one a woman, two people of different genders and different individualities. Whether there is something that connects Balabán's characters of the same gender will be subject of the following chapters.

3.2 The difference between Balabán's male and female characters

3.2.1 Balabán's men and their escapes

Balabán's work consists of a variety of stories that mostly describe men who belong to the same or nearly the same generation. At the time of the text's fictive present (see below), they are between 35 and 45 years of age. Most of them have grown-up children. Most of them have attempted to lead a normal family life and failed. Most of them are divorced, live alone or are in a new relationship with a much younger person. All of them

find it hard to cope with their loneliness and so they drink and get very drunk. All of them have or have had a serious problem with alcohol and lack self-confidence. Jonáš ('Denatur': *ST*) drinks because he cannot express his feelings when sober. Only in the state of complete drunkenness is he able to reflect upon his own life. Then he lets his thoughts roam and he says, in sadness and irony:

> 'We are not here. We are somewhere else. For example we sit in a room whose only furniture is a cabinet filled with bottles containing colourless liquid. And we drink and drink. We drink automatically, mechanically, like a human being breathes while sleeping. We always reach out for the bottle when there is a danger that we might become sober. Fear of death has been replaced by fear of sobriety. But how can we even think about this since we are totally wasted?'
> ['Nejsme tu. Jsme někde jinde. Kupříkladu sedíme v místnosti, jejímž jediným nábytkem je skříň plná láhví s bezbarvou tekutinou. A my pijeme a pijeme. Pijeme po paměti, mechanicky, tak jako člověk ve spánku dýchá. Sáhneme po láhvi vždy, když už bychom měli vystřízlivět. Strach ze smrti byl zaměněn za strach z vystřízlivění. Ale copak o tom můžeme uvažovat, když jsme zpití pod obraz boží!']
> (*ST:* 59)

Roman Hradílek ('Uršula': MO) escapes to a pub because he does not have the strength to face his wife's complaints and his presumed responsibility for being the main reason for them. Ivan Satinský ('Proměny': *PR*) and František Josef (*CB*) drink in order to forget their shattered lives after divorce and family disruption. For Martin Vrána (*KSA*), alcohol is the only way of coping with an abrupt awakening from his romantic dream (love, youth and light-hearted reality) into an unfriendly present (his sudden separation from the love of his life, his routine work and unhappy marriage). Ivan Figura (*KSA*) is haunted by his own remorse for everything that happened to him after he had lost his job, his wife, his friends and his confidence in whatever he does or did, and so he drinks. For Emil Nedoma ('Emil': *MO*, 'Tchoř': *JT*), alcohol is the only salvation available in this world, the only thing that helps him cope. At home, he keeps a ten-litre bottle of vodka to be sure he always has enough to drink. When thinking of his brother, he does it through an alcoholic haze (his brother bought him the above mentioned bottle; it was with his brother that he used to drink in protest against conventional society. Inebriation helps him to reflect upon his family and his position amongst its members:

> 'Dad, I kept thinking of all that when, later, during bad Christmas Eves and other evenings, now without you, without my wife, without my child, without Mark, Mark and without little Child Jesus, I ordered a shot of rum in a half-empty non-stop bar. That's where it had brought me. There I was. Television broadcast the most beautiful fairytales, those Communist fairytales with Werich in the main role

> of the king, which he once was. And we, the unhappy morons, were moved by the smell of rum, which used to be kept in pantry, it was only to be used for Christmas cookies. I won't have time to tell you where it has brought me, what I have achieved by this. What I did with it. I know you weren't over the moon because of me.'
> ['Táto, na to všechno jsem vzpomínal, když jsem si potom o zlých štědrých dnech a večerech už bez vás a bez ženy a bez dítěte, bez Marka, Marka a bez Jezulátka poroučel v poloprázdném nonstopu rum. Tam mě to přivedlo. Tam jsem byl, a v televizi dávali nejkrásnější pohádky, ty komunistické pohádky s Werichem králem, který jednou byl. A my, pitomci nešťastní, jsme se dojímali vůní rumu, který druhdy stával jen v komoře, jen do cukroví. To už ti nestihnu říct, kam mě to přivedlo, co jsem tím dokázal. Co jsem s tím udělal. Vím, že tobě radost ne.']
> (*JT:* 98)

When considering his possible death, Emil again does this with the help of alcohol (in his friend's cottage where he goes to get drunk). Through alcohol, he tries to beat his own sadness (due to his lost youth, lost love and lost ideals) and omnipresent feelings of his own inappropriateness in the family and the world. Alcohol is his light and, at the time of his personal crisis, also his only sad lover (he physically embraces the bottle). Emil's brother, Hans, does not drink anymore but, in the course of the story, we learn he used to when he was young and when he separated from his wife ('Tchoř': *MO*). And so we could endlessly multiply examples of how Balabán's characters approach the difficulties of the world. Escape into inebriation is one of them. The other is escape into dreams (Karel in 'Odpoledne a večer': *PR*), to the countryside (Pavel Nedostál in 'Silvestr Svinov': *PR*, Ivan Satinský in 'Seno': *PR* or Emil Nedoma in 'Tchoř': *JT*), into art (Hans Nedoma in 'Kolotoč', 'Teroristka': *MO* or painter Bednář in 'Kolotoč': *MO*), a different environment (František Josef, Bogomil: *CB*), memories (Emil in 'Tchoř': *JT*, Pavel Nedostál in 'V neděli', 'Highlander': *PR*), ancient history (Jaromír in 'Triceratops': *MO*), life on the road (Patricia's and Paul's father in 'Vděčná smrt': *JT*), God (Štěpán Jařab in 'Armagedon': *PR*) and death (Petr Zabranský in 'Dona nobis pacem': *JT*).

Balabán's male characters are antiheroic heroes. Whenever a problem arises, they break down. They suffer from the loss of their naïve dreams and from the loss of confidence in the possibilities of a happy life. They search for a way how to escape from the world in which they live. They find refuge in alcohol or in their inner reality. They wait, hidden within their human shell, until it is safe to come out and to look for another way of life. After his divorce, Emil Nedoma (see the last three works by Balabán) spends many years in total drunkenness and in search for his own self. He occupies himself with his memories, with his mind and with his relation to God. František Josef (*CB*) tries to find a way out of his personal confusion with the help of alcohol and a temporary stay in a

foreign country. Bogomil (ibid.) runs away and for many years wanders through the world before he regains his safe stability on a different continent in the company of completely different people.

Nearly all of Balabán's key male characters follow the same path – they remember a relatively idyllic or naïve childhood, a romantic youth before they fall in love and marry. Then follows failure and a personal breakdown and they go wandering and reflect on their lives. At the end of their journey, some of them receive a reward in the form of new love and strengthened family bonds. Some of them seek death as they believe that only death can free them of any restraints. Some find only loneliness.

Balabán's male characters are people with no special features and no special achievements. Their stories are as unique as the world of each individual can be, yet there are many aspects that connect them. From the conventional point of view, they are not heroic. They are dreamers. They are losers, cowards and naïve believers in good until there is a crisis and they stand face to face with the suddenly discovered cruelty of the world. Only a few of them accept responsibility for their own lives and then they hold on to it (father Nedoma: *ZT*, Martin Vrána's father in *KSA*). Most of them find it extremely difficult to cope. They struggle and in this struggle they finally become their own heroes fighting against their own personalities, their faults and their failures. Balabán's female characters display different qualities.

3.2.2 Women, their responsibilities and their grief

Like Balabán's male characters, Balabán's women also have their own voice and they use it to express their own feelings and thoughts. They are the narrators of their own lives as much as their men are the narrators of their own reality. Nevertheless and contrary to men, Balabán's female characters are not of a similar age. Dana ('Prázdniny': *PR*), Uršula ('Uršula': *MO*), Johana (*CB*) and Eva Topolská (*KSA*) are of the same generation as their male counterparts (Dana – Pavel Nedostál, Uršula – Roman Hradílek, Johana – Bogomil, Eva Topolská – Martin Vrána). They are their first partners or wives. Jeny ('Moving into the universe…', 'Lední medvěd Telecomu': *PR*), Jeny (*ZT*), Patricie (*CB*), Monika Tomská (*KSA*), possibly Taťána ('Proměny', 'Pilot': *PR*) and Jennifer (*CB*) are several years younger than their men. They are the men's new partners (Jeny – Pavel Nedostál, Jeny – Emil, Patricie – František Josef, Monika Tomská – Martin Vrána, Taťána – Ivan Satinský and Jennifer – Bogomil). The difference is not only in the age of female characters but also in the way they approach the world in which they live.

When we are introduced to Dana's and Uršula's testimonies, we meet them on the verge of their middle-age personal breakdown. Dana is separated from her husband. She is living alone with her children, unable to work and to care for anyone. She suffers from sudden loneliness and depression and all she does to forget about it is that she drinks and sleeps. She thinks of her husband, who has left her for someone else but, instead of keeping herself active, she buries herself in the memories of her past and in tears. Uršula is facing the same predicament. We meet her at the time when the deteriorating relationship becomes an ongoing problem. Uršula suspects that her husband cheats on her and, in order to escape from such thoughts, she spends hours in the bathroom crying her eyes out. Johana does not have her own voice. For Bogomil, she represents a 'femme fatale', always different and always strong in her life and in her views. She has never really accepted reality. Eva Topolská is the only woman we are able to see in a continuous manner. We see her as a young, determined and pragmatic person who sacrifices romantic love for personal freedom and a more stable and practical existence (when she splits up with Martin Vrána). We see her as a woman who pretends to be hard and strong in her attitudes and feelings. She tries not to show her weaknesses and fears (in her relationship with Ivan Figura and afterwards). We also know about her painful relationship with her parents, with all the men she meets and with the father of her child; we learn about her fear of intimacy and of her strength in her struggle against adversity in life at the expense of love.

František's Patricie, Bogomil's Jennifer, Martin's Monika, Emil's Jeny and some other women have a totally different position in Balabán's texts and in the lives of his male protagonists. All of them are new partners to their male counterparts. Their main problem is not bitter loneliness but the uncertainty of their current relationships they experience with their new partners who are much older than them. They are 'in' a relationship whilst the previously mentioned women are 'out' of a relationship. These women struggle with their current situation and with their youth while the older women struggle to cope with their ageing and with things that happened in the past.

Kateřina Nedomová has an exceptional position. She is solitary and her life is mainly a fight against illness and all that relates to it. She fights for her health and re-gains her father. She fights for her marriage and re-gains her children. She fights for her dying father and re-gains her brothers' love.

From all that we have learnt about Balabán's men, we can conclude that their most significant characteristic seems to be weakness in their behaviour towards the outside world. Whenever something important or unexpected happens, whenever they are

supposed to act, change, decide or fight, they crumble and run away (with the exception of Nedoma's: *ZT* and Vrána's father: *KSA*). They drink because with the help of alcohol it is easier to face reality or forget. They go to the pub and meet friends because with them they do not have to be responsible for anyone else. They pretend to go to sleep because, in sleep, nothing is real, not even their failure in sexual activity, should it happen. They move to a different country, they occupy themselves with work; they get ill or do everything possible in order to escape from the responsibility of conquering their own fears. They lose control over their own selves and over the lives of others.

The burden of responsibility for the outside world is carried on women's shoulders. Women are caring mothers (Dana in 'Prázdniny': *PR*, Patricia in 'Vděčná smrt': *JT*), patient partners or wives (Patricie: *CB*, Monika: *KSA*, Jeny: *ZT*), doctors for the men's souls (Taťána in 'Proměny': *PR*) and bodies (Betyna in 'A ptáci taky': *MO*). At the same time, they fight to preserve their own health (Patricie: *CB*, Kateřina: 'Mléčná dráha': *JT*, Johana: *CB*), they fight for their family (Světlana in 'Světlana': *JT*, Mrs Tomská: *KSA*), to save the world (Johana's fictive hero Ema: *CB*) and for the protection of their personal dignity (Johana: *CB*). Women are the ones who are left to fight in defence of their own lives and the lives of their children whilst the majority of men just wander away until happiness finds them.

Each of Balabán's characters has personal issues. But, whilst men are simply afraid of any kind of responsibility and try to avoid behaving like adults, women are different. There is no place for fear in women's lives. They have a very strong sense of self-preservation. They have personal strength that guides them through all the difficulties they encounter.

3.2.3 The acceptance of ageing and its denial

As it is apparent from the above analysis of Balabán's characters, Balabán's male characters and his female protagonists apply a different attitude to the reality of their ageing. Balabán's men are stuck in timelessness. They grow old but they are hardly concerned about their age or at least they do not express any fears about it. Their minds seem to be still the minds of boys, avoiding any concept of duty. These men are much more irrational than pragmatic and they are far more romantic than practical. Balabán's women are the opposite. As they grow old, they are more and more conscious of their own age. They look in the mirror and see bodies deserted by their husbands and children. They

cry because they are helpless and they cannot change the effects of time. Whenever they experience a crisis, they turn back to their own bodies and embrace them:

> 'Dana felt that something inside her broke. As if a part of her body got loose. A kidney, the uterus, a lung. Ah. She turned onto her side. She closed her eyes in front of the scratched wall. The children scratched it, when they were still small. With fingernails. She kept her eyes closed, tears escaping through her nose. She turned back, burying her face in the pillow. They don't come to my bed anymore as they used to. Her belly was underneath, her breasts were squashed and she felt constricted. What is the time? I don't care. It's not dawn yet.'
> ['Dana cítila, že se v ní cosi utrhlo. Jako by se uvolnil nějaký orgán. Ledvina, děloha, plicní lalok. Och. Převalila se na bok. Zavřela oči před podrápanou zdí. Podrápaly ji děti, když byly malé. Nehtama. Držela oči zavřené a slzy jí tekly nosem. Převrátila se zpátky tváří do polštáře. Už za ní nelezou do postele jako kdysi. Pod sebou břicho, rozpláclá prsa a těsno. Kolik je hodin? Ale kašlu na to. Beztak se teprv rozednívá.'] (*PR:* 60)

Dana ('Prázdniny': *PR*) embraces her own exhausted body in bed; Magda ('Magda': *MO*) takes shelter within her body while thinking of her recent decision to leave the father of her child and stay alone with her son:

> 'Magda sits down on the plastic chair which has been left behind by the previous tenant. She lights up a cigarette and huddles within her own intimacy bounded by her shoulders and knees, her collarbones, her small bosoms, her womb and her arms. This is my home. Here, I will make a bed for you, my little son. She smokes and cries a little.'
> ['Magda si sedne na plastikovou židli, kterou tu nechal předchozí nájemník. Zapálí si cigaretu a celá se schoulí do intimního prostoru ohraničeného rameny a koleny, klíčními kostmi, malými prsy, klínem a pažemi. Tady jsem doma. Tady ti ustelu postýlku, chlapečku. Kouří a trochu brečí.'] (*MO:* 22-23)

Both women hide within their bodies as they feel that their bodies are the only thing which remains after everything else is gone. Their body is a representation of their womanhood as well as a symbol of their motherhood.

Nearly all Balabán's female characters take a stance on the issue of motherhood. If they have children, they often rely on them as on the only surviving reminder of their past, of their once happier times as they perceive it. If they do not have children, they regret not having had them. Children do not seem to betray their mothers; they stay even after the family disintegrates and save their mothers from a total breakdown (this happens in the cases of Dana in 'Prázdniny': *PR*, Uršula in 'Uršula': *MO*, Mrs Tomská: *KSA*, Mrs Nedomová: *ZT*, Eva: *KSA*, Kateřina in 'Mléčná dráha': *JT* and Magda in 'Magda': *MO*). If there are no children, life becomes strange, wasted and sad (as in the cases of the

photographer Bednář's wife in 'Kolotoč': *MO*, Marie's in 'Výročí svatby': *ST* and Johana's: *CB*).

In Balabán's works, the women who are of the same age as their men represent the disrupted family. Younger women represent an attempt of their older partners to build a new life. Men leave their original partners in order to seek happiness elsewhere. As they grow older, they fall for younger women and, to their surprise, younger women accept their courtship.

In contrast to Balabán's male characters, all of Balabán's women seek maturity and experience in matters of love and relationships. The older women are disappointed when their partners do not show enough commitment to family life and to them and so they complain. The younger women see experience in their older partners and for this they admire them. Nevertheless, even these younger women often struggle with their male partners and their habits which have survived from their first relationship and the chaotic years after its breakdown. Monika Tomská (*KSA*), František Josef's Patricie (*CB*), Emil's Jeny (*ZT*), Bogomil's Jennifer (*CB*) or Jaromír's Lenka ('Triceratops': *MO*), all go through the same experience. Jennifer knows that Bogomil's heart has been torn out by his mad ex-wife Johana, but still she loves him, in spite of all his loneliness and the oddity with which he presents himself in his new world. Jeny loves Emil Nedoma, being aware of all his weaknesses, alcoholic excesses and the inappropriate behaviour which he sometimes displays when dealing with others. The same applies to Monika and Patricie. Lenka is attracted by Jaromír because she finds him an inspiring teacher and mentor for her own thoughts.

For Balabán's characters, age is a factor with an ambiguous value that matters to some but does not matter to others. Age is a key issue for the ageing women whenever they think of their physicality – their receding fertility and sex appeal (see the predicament of Dana in 'Prázdniny': *PR*, Uršula in 'Uršula': *MO*, Eva: *KSA*, female toilet attendant in 'Niagarské vodopády': *ST* and Pavla in 'Odpoledne a večer': *PR*):

> 'Does she want to make love to her man? After so many stagnant years she wants a guy? She made an angry grimace. But still! It's like a cramp, this urge. To have him inside. To be full of him. She can understand now why a woman can kill her husband with a kitchen knife. She used to say that no one should be sacrificed to sex. But not any more. The police would call it a slaughter. Things like this happen everywhere. Pah! I don't want to be an old and closed woman yet. Don't you see this?'

> ['Chce se milovat s mužem? Po tolika letech nehybnosti chce chlapa? Vztekle ohnula ret. Ale přece! Je to jako křeč. Mít ho v sobě. Být ho plná. Už chápe, že ženská může zabít manžela kuchyňským nožem. Vždycky říkala, že za to nikdo nestojí, ale teď! Policajti tomu říkají domácí zabíjačka, je toho všude plno. Fuj! Já nechci ještě být stará a zavřená. Copak to nevíš?'] (*PR:* 34)

Age is an important point also for younger women, especially if they find themselves in a relationship with a man who belongs to an older generation (Jeny - Emil, Patricie – František Josef, Monika – Martin Vrána) because of the age difference that lies between them. But age is not such an important issue for men, because men's minds do not seem to grow old, they remain juvenile till death.

Another difference between Balabán's male and female characters lies in the way they approach the reality of their own selves and in the way they balance their selves with the reality of the outer world.

3.2.4 Men are out for themselves, women work for others

Balabán's male characters live their lives, they love, give, take, share, fail and survive. They seek things, they miss things; they suffer and gain. They do not fight for themselves; they prefer to give up, get lost and wait until new 'happiness', always in the form of love, or death finds them. Their heroic side manifests itself in their internal struggle with their personal weaknesses and in their dreams and their imagination. In reality, they fight with their inability to comply with the responsibility of adulthood and with their habits. In dreams, on the other hand, they fight dragons (Karel in 'Odpoledne a večer': *PR*), sharks (the subjective narrator in 'Žraločí srdce': *ST*) or other fantastic creatures ('Men': *ST*). In their own imagination, they fight to save the whole planet (Ivo: *CB*) or the civilization as a whole from hunger (Animuk: *CB*). In relation to the outside world, they often give up and lose.

The position of Balabán's women is different. Women fight with the real because they have to fight – for themselves and their family. They do not have any illusions, they are clear about what they see and they call it by its true name. So Patricia ('Vděčná smrt': *JT*) unveils the truth about the unfortunate relationship between her mother and her brother Paul, whilst he does not want to hear about it. Uršula ('Uršula: *MO*) openly talks about the infidelity of her husband while he never mentions it. No matter how much Jeny loves her partner Emil (*ZT*), it does not stop her from drawing a raw picture of his behaviour. And Kateřina's (*ZT*) thoughts do not need any further comment:

> ‘I am thirty nine and I still remember the holidays I have not had for the last twenty years. I have two children and I still feel as a childless person after an abortion. As if the only thing that has come out of my whole life was the sensation of a brutal ending, everything was stopped abdominally, my blood, my milk, my heart, my motherhood was ejected. After you have done it you don’t even know why you are still alive, disconnected from all that good that is now running away. (…) Who are you, Kateřina?’
> [‘Je mi třicet devět a pořád si pamatuji na prázdniny, které jsem už dvacet let neměla. Mám dvě děti a pořád si připadám jako bezdětná po potratu. Jako by mi z celého života měl zbýt jen ten pocit brutálního ukončení, jen to hnusné zabrzdění krve, mléka, srdce, jen to vyvrácené mateřství. Když to uděláš, ani nevíš, proč jsi ještě na světě, odpojena od všeho toho rozbíhajícího se dobra. (...) Co jsi, Kateřino?’] (*ZT:* 47)

Balabán’s women are not scared of the truth. Instead, they face it, no matter how hard it is and how much pain it can cause them and others. Men are different. In order to face the pain, they often need their women and their help and support.

3.3 Body (time) and soul (eternity)

In the above chapters, I have indicated the way the characters’ personalities are shaped by the influence of their relationships with other individuals. I have discovered connections that work on the levels of partnership and love, family and friends and gender distinctions. I have analyzed what impact these connections have on the individual’s perception of the real. Now it is time to have a look at how Balabán’s characters react to the material of the world and to the spirit of the self, to God and to the universe. I will argue that Balabán’s works are built as human reflections of body and soul, reflections of time and eternity.

3.3.1 Illnesses and mental disorders

The previous discussion of people’s individuality within gender distinctions touched upon the problems which Balabán’s characters have with time. This related to the ageing of individuals and the way time functions in relationships between men and women or between them and their parents or them and their growing children. But time works on various levels in Balabán’s narratives: on the level of an individual’s age, on the level of an individual’s life and death and on the level of the external world.

Balabán’s individuals are plausible. They are not shapes, schemes or ideas with an immortal soul. They have bodies and their bodies suffer from various illnesses, physical

sicknesses and mental disorders. Like real people, Balabán's characters are also limited by the length of their lives and by the experience of the physical being within the time of their existence. They experience physical and mental pain and, as a result, they begin to think about basic human values. Through such thoughts, they search for their place within the world they inhabit.

In Balabán's work, illness is random; it chooses its victims without any rationale. Death does the same; it affects the retired as well as the young. A toilet attendant from 'Niagarské vodopády' (*ST*) has a problem with obesity. Marie ('Výročí svatby': *ST*) is repulsed by every form of sex and she hates everything that relates to it. Daniel Nedostál fights with the sleeplessness of old people ('Nespavost': *PR*). Dr Satinský's aunt, Natálie, also suffers from insomnia after her lover dies ('Natálie': *PR*). Patricie (*CB*) is diabetic; Johana (*CB*) is insane. On one of his walks, Martin Vrána (*KSA*) becomes the victim of a car accident and he remains unconscious for many days. Dr Kraus and Pavel Červenka ('Cedr a kladivo': *MO*) both spend time in a psychiatric hospital in alcohol addiction wards. As a child, Kateřina Nedomová ('Hořící dítě: *MO*) nearly dies from a combination of leukemia and acute diabetes. Oldřich ('A ptáci taky': *MO*) tries to battle ornithophobia, and the old doctor, Karel Chudoba ('Ray Bradbury': *MO*), does everything possible to resist a rapidly approaching Alzheimer's disease. Patricia's father ('Vděčná smrt: *JT*) experiences a post-war trauma after he comes back from the Vietnam War. Ludvík Chmelnický looks for the help of a natural healer after his asthma gets worse ('Viadačka': *JT*). Saša's lungs fail after many years of heavy smoking ('Oblak': *JT*). Father Jan Nedoma (*ZT*) is diagnosed with cancer and kidney failure and Jeny's sister, Johana (*ZT*), ends up in hospital in the department for drug addicts; she undergoes dialysis. Many other characters fight with depression.

As much as Balabán's characters become their own patients, they also become their own healers. Some face serious health conditions; others end up working in a hospital or doing a job connected with the life sciences. Father Jan Nedoma (*ZT*), Karel Chudoba ('Ray Bradbury': *MO*), Monika Tomská (*KSA*), Leoš's sister Elena ('U Komunistů': *MO*), Roman Hradílek ('Prázdniny': *PR*) and Emil's new girlfriend (*ZT*) work in a hospital. Kateřina Nedomová (*ZT*) is a biologist. Dr Satinský ('Proměny': *PR*) and Dr Kraus are medical doctors ('Cedr a kladivo': *MO*) and Marie Severinová ('Viadačka': *JT*) is a natural healer.

But Balabán's doctors or healers are not merely seen as the people who treat human bodies. Their impact is wider. In the eyes of some characters, they are regarded as angels, as saviours of people's souls from the darkness of depression or from death. So Emil

Nedoma calls for them from the depth of his alcoholic existence, using expressions such as 'saviours in the white cloaks' ('Emil': *MO*). The first thing that Martin Vrána (*KSA*) sees after he wakes up from being unconscious is a nurse with a shining smile. Elena comes into Leoš's life ('U Komunistů': *MO*) at the time he thinks his world is lost in apathy. Monika Tomská (*KSA*) plays the same role in her relationship with Martin Vrána. For Kateřina Nedomová ('Hořící dítě': *MO*, *ZT*), her father and doctor, Jan Nedoma, is the only person who kept her in the world of the living while she was struggling with her health problems.

3.3.2 Death

Balabán's doctors are able to help their patients but, as they are also mortal human beings, they are not able to escape their own deeds and they die. Father Jan Nedoma (*ZT*) dies of a combination of cancer, kidney failure and diabetes and the old doctor, Karel Chudoba ('Ray Bradbury': *MO*), dies of the consequences of Alzheimer's disease.

Death becomes a harsh reality in the lives of many other Balabán characters. Světlana's husband, Jiří ('Světlana': *JT*), dies when he tries to save their daughter in the wild sea. Petr Zábranský ('Dona nobis pacem': *JT*) drinks himself to death. Saša ('Oblak': *JT*) dies of lung problems. Patricia's mother commits suicide ('Vděčná smrt': *JT*). Bogomil (*CB*) meets his death in Canada and Johana's fictive hero, Ivo, on a new planet (ibid.). Mother, grandmother and great grandmother of Štěpán Jařab ('Armageddon': *PR*) suffocate after their house fills with smoke. Marie's friend bleeds to death during labour ('Výročí svatby': *ST*).

Death does not only befall human beings but animals too. But whilst people die and leave an empty space in the hearts of the bereaved, an animal's death is seen as a sacrifice for those who suffer. A dangerous shark has to be killed in order to save the life of a human ('Žraločí srdce': *ST*). A cat is 'removed' because, when alive, it reminds its owner of the dangerous effects of sexual life ('Výročí svatby': *ST*). Killing a turkey brings its performer relief from his fear of birds at a time when he is expecting the arrival of his first child ('A ptáci taky': *MO*). An animal's death is a real (and symbolic) sacrifice to what humans need. It is also yet another biblical motif that has made its way into the literary work of Jan Balabán.

In Balabán's texts, death appears in many forms. During one of his post-alcoholic moments, Emil Nedoma dreams about death ('Emil': *MO*). In the dream, he plays the role of a lighthouse caretaker who is not able to save a man in a boat struggling in the waves at

the foot of the lighthouse. The dream is a metaphor, an image of Emil's own unconscious in which he is the person who knows that he must keep his 10-litre bottle of clear vodka (his own lighthouse as he calls it) safe but who wrecks the life of anyone who tries to approach him. Emil is an alcoholic caretaker who observes how people try to get close to him but instead of helping them, he destroys them – as he destroyed the unity of his own family. In his thoughts, the end of his relationship with his children and his wife resembles his death.

Pavel Nedostál ('Highlander': *PR*) also thinks of death. On one of his regular walks with his son, he tells his version of the story about Highlander, a famous Scottish hero, who became immortal during the course of his life. In his son's imagination, this story provokes a number of questions regarding the possible immortality of human beings.

The sudden presence of illness and death makes individuals think about their own existence within this world and about the world itself. When hearing that his friend Tonda Góna is dead, Martin Vrána expresses strong anger and accuses society of taking away all joy from people and destroying them, so that they end up embracing alcohol and lose all they value and love:

> 'What am I doing here, what are we all doing here? Slagheaps and housing estates in the fields, high-rise buildings in the countryside, dormitories, barracks and garrisons. Why are you all here? What are you all doing here? Who ordered you to come? (…) You see, Tonda Antifona, it's a fraud, it's a fucking German, Austrian, Jewish, Capitalist, Russian, Communist fraud! To the Ostrava coal mines! Leave your lassie and wains at home and catch the train, to the Přívoz railway station and hurray to the mines! Grab the hammer and enjoy the mining! Three thousand net pay! Build the country and sustain peace! Your children as dull as alcohol can make them! Fuck your feelings, go to Ostrava! There you will get a factory flat, a bathroom with warm water, a bath tub, sausages and meat, the red Communist membership book and a savings book! Then, they'll hit you on the head with a pipe. All of us are here, piled-up. Here, people live only piled-up. Here they are building a new world. Everyone fucks everyone else, everyone fucks with everyone else.'
> ['Co tu vlastně hledám, co tu vlastně hledáme všichni? Haldy a sídliště na polích, na vesnicích, paneláky, ubytovny, kasárna a garnizony. Proč sem lezete? Co tu všichni chcete? Kdo vás sem nahnal? (...) Vidíš, Tondo Antifono, vidíš ten podvod, zasraný německý, rakouský, židovský, kapitalistický, ruský, komunistický podvod! Banovať do Ostravy! Nech doma robu a děcka a na vlak, na hlavní nádraží do Přívozu a vzhůru do dolů, uchop se každý kladiva a měj se k dolování. Tři tisícky čistá ruka, buduj vlast, posílíš mír, a děti blbé od chlastu. Ser na city, jeď do Ostravy, tam dostaneš závodní byt, koupelnu s teplou vodou, vanu, párky a bůček a červenou knížku a vkladní knížku a trubkou do hlavy. Všichni jsme tu na jedné hromadě, tady se žije jenom na hromadě. Tady se buduje nový svět, tady každý jebe každého, tady každý jebe s každým.'] (*KSA:* 62)

In the destiny of a single person, his friend Tonda, Martin Vrána sees the destiny of all those who forget about basic human values and have agreed to become a small cog in the huge machinery of the state. He curses the society which blinds people with false values. He curses himself because he has fallen into the same trap as many others and he is unable to escape.

Death dominates the minds of various Balabán characters, but this theme is explored in the greatest detail in Balabán's last novel, *Zeptej se táty*, in the novel which was coincidentally published after the author's own death. Here, the description of the last days of the old father, Jan Nedoma, is interwoven with reflections and memories of all the people he left behind when he died. His wife Marta Nedomová thinks of him but the pain of loss she experiences is so overwhelming that she cannot even remember the last moments of his life nor can she picture her husband's face alive. All she can think of is her own existence fading without Jan's presence. Hans's memory of his father is accompanied by images of the light (light in the eyes of his dying dad), the tree (symbol of infirmity and strength of the family life) or beautiful young women (striving). Whenever he recollects his father's fatal illness, he does it in connection with his own life. He thinks about his unsuccessful attempts to create a happy family life and a good career for himself and he expresses pain. He thinks about his father, his family and his life and in connection with this he looks for balance:

> '[E]very moment of happiness, not only chemical happiness, but the real one, is redeemed, I am using this word in an inverted sense, but on purpose, is redeemed by a significantly longer moment of pain. Otherwise we wouldn't be able to want to die.
> And do we want to die?
> We must want to die, otherwise we will have to want to.'
> ['[K]aždá chvíle štěstí, nejen chemického, i toho skutečného, je vykoupena, to slovo teda používám naprosto převráceně, ale schválně, je vykoupena podstatně delší chvílí bolesti. Jinak bysme ani nemohli chtít umřít.
> A my snad chceme?
> Musíme chtít, jinak budeme muset.'] (*ZT:* 46)

In the death of his father, Hans feels he has lost his bearings; when his wife leaves him, he feels he is losing the sense of his being and his courage to fight to retain it. He hides in his own internal thoughts and images.

Emil's perception of his father's death emerges with the physical sickness he experiences whenever he passes a hospital or a graveyard and it is also associated with painful memories of his own past. Through the recollection of the last visit he paid to his

dying father, he thinks of particular moments which have formed his family life and his current attitude to the world. Being hurt by the death of someone so dear to him, he becomes even more attached to God and the people who share their most intimate thoughts with him. He spends hours and hours in discussions with his girlfriend Jeny and his sister Kateřina and in contemplations of the time they still have left to enjoy:

> 'Do you think, Katka, that we are already old?
> Well, we are not children anymore.
> Hans says that you are a child as long as you still have your parents.
> That sounds logical.
> As does everything Hans says.'
> ['Myslíš, Katko, že už jsme staří?
> No, děti už nejsme.
> Hans říká, že člověk je dítě, dokud má rodiče.
> To zní logicky.
> Jako jsou všechny Hansovy řeči.'] (*ZT:* 109)

And Kateřina adds:

> 'Moments do not end. Moments last forever. Only we cannot live forever within them.'
> ['Okamžiky nekončí. Okamžiky pořád trvají, to jenom my v nich nemůžeme pořád žít.'] (*ZT:* 177)

Face to face with their father's death, Kateřina and Emil search for the meaning of their lives. They question their past and all that has been left behind after their father's death. Emil clings to his girlfriend Jeny as much as Kateřina does to her children and her illness. Emil expresses his sorrow in thoughts and talks with certain people. Kateřina holds her sadness inside. She recalls everything that her father suffered and sacrificed when she was seriously ill and nearly died, and blames herself for the fact she could not be there for him when he was dying. She remembers her last dialogue with her dad; she recalls the places he showed her and the words he said when she was a child. She cannot bear the thought he died without her.

Each of the members of the Nedoma family has a different understanding of their father's death but one thing they have in common is their attitude to the letters they started receiving immediately afterwards. These letters have been written by their father's former close friend, Wolf. In them, Wolf blames Mr Nedoma for alleged malpractice he committed as a doctor and in respect of God. What happens to people who used to be friends (just as Wolf and Nedoma used to be) but who later separate under the pressure of the outside world?

> ‘They were such bosom friends. In that godless world of their native working class housing estates controlled by the communists and their militia men, she saw them as two witnesses or apostles of everything she could respect, of everything that separated her from the dull materialism of their schoolmates and neighbours, who weren’t able to see further than to their pay days, than to the borders of their own flats and garages. These two were men who cared for the truth and the meaning of life, life which was given to us so that we would achieve something.’
> [‘Takoví byli přátelé. V tom bezvěreckém světě rodného dělnického sídliště ovládaného soudruhy a milicionáři je vnímala jako dva svědky nebo apoštoly všeho, čeho si chtěla vážit, všeho, co ji oddělovalo od tupého materialismu spolužáků a sousedů, kteří nevidí dál než na konec své výplatní pásky, než za hranice svého bytu a garáže. Byli to muži, kterým šlo o pravdu a smysl života, který nám byl propůjčen, abychom v něm něco dokázali.’] (*ZT:* 51)

Wolf’s unexpected reaction to their father’s death creates great doubt in the minds of all members of the Nedoma family. When facing the written accusations, they all suddenly feel confused and lost. They start doubting their own memories of their dad, as well as what seemed to be an unbreakable bond of friendship between their father and Wolf. In order to find out the truth and to understand what actually went on, Kateřina visits the hospital where her father used to work but, instead of being given an explanation, she is told to believe her own memories of her father. In the mind of the mother, Marta Nedomová, Wolf’s letters evoke the long evenings her husband and Wolf spent together discussing politics, God and various moral issues. She recalls the last evening during which both men argued viciously. Wolf’s letters confirm all her doubts and remind her of the arguments that she had with her husband when he was still alive. Emil looks for the truth about his father in his dreams. There he stands as a defender of his father’s life against Wolf’s accusations. Emil’s dream replays the time-honoured dispute between a religious code of ethics (Wolf was strongly religious) and a doctor’s loyalty to the Hippocratic Oath. Emil’s dream, however, ends inconclusively – the matter is not resolved and the debate will not continue. In the end, Wolf turns up at Jan’s funeral but no one ever finds out what was the source of his sudden hatred of Dr Nedoma. No one knows whether Wolf’s attacks were motivated by envy (Wolf has never had a proper job), jealousy (his family disintegrated), a different philosophical attitude (to accept the communist regime and be allowed to work as a doctor, or not to accept the regime and not to be allowed to work as a doctor) or a different understanding of religion (to forgive or not). In Wolf’s character, the Nedoma family faces both the equity and the inequity of society and the world.

3.4 God and the universe

Thinking of death brings Balabán's characters to a more persistent consideration of the passing of time, the beginning and the end of human life, God and his influence on the human spirit, nature and the universe.

From the first texts that Jan Balabán published, we can observe a strong line in his work that leads from people's minds to God **(**'a god's rope', as the title of Balabán's first prose – Boží lano – indicates). Various individuals turn to God when looking for answers regarding their doubts, when searching for forgotten memories or when looking for a way out of confusion. God becomes the subject of their numerous discussions, questions and thoughts.

In *Středověk*, God takes the form of a light, a non-material being whose presence one can sense but never touch; it is a voice that comes to people from above. Ena ('Ena') is following all the three metamorphoses of God and hopes this will help her to find a way out of her terrible depression, her presumed internal darkness, her solitude and her fear of emptiness. Daniel ('Kde jsi byl, Adame?') is not very happy with the direction in which his life is going and so he questions God. He sees himself as a biblical Adam, a naked man who lost his paradise (the love of his family, his youth) and now he hides away embarrassed about what kind of human being he has become (he is a victim of alcohol and lives in painful solitude). Jonáš ('Denatur'), another alcoholic, finds a similarity between himself and Noah – both loved drink and so drank their lives away.

The life of the subjective narrator presented in *Boží lano* follows the path of the wanderers. In the first part, called 'Americká elegie', the narrator goes back in his memories and recalls all the important moments that occurred in his past before he lost his faith. He remembers his childhood and youth, the time before his family moved to a different town; he remembers the New Year celebrations in the church, his first sexual experience and his grandfather, an evangelic priest from Siberia. He thinks of his first kiss, of his numerous talks with his brother Daniel. He recollects how his parents were worried about his lifestyle, he looks back at certain moments in school; he remembers children's fairytales and a series of historical events that he has experienced. His memories are interwoven with reflections of his current American lifestyle and with various philosophical and religious contemplations, but even this narrator feels pain. He is confused and lost. His whole life is wandering; a search for the origins of his own life and for God.

The second part of *Boží lano,* called 'Studené jaro', takes us back to the narrator's early adulthood and his middle-years, but the same litany continues. Only this time, the 'rope' of his thoughts is connected with his first work experience in the Czech industrial city of Ostrava and with his unsuccessful marriage. It is spring. The narrator lives behind the ocean but thinks of his Czech past and of God whom he left behind when he moved away. In the course of his personal meditation, he recites the Ten Commandments and stops at each of them whilst considering his failures, never successes. In the third part of *Boží lano* – 'Znamení' – the narrator sets out on a journey through the labyrinth of his native town. With his girlfriend, he walks through the streets and the quarters he remembers from his childhood. He looks for the church he lost sight of after he had moved away; in the end he finds it. Then, he also finds his faith.

Boží lano is a story of the narrator's fall to earth (after he had left the realm of his childhood), and of his wandering through a mundane chaos, a labyrinth of his world. It is a story of the narrator's failures and losses, and his search for a way back. 'God's rope' ('boží lano') helps him to find a way. It helps him to find his religious faith (on a journey which leads back to his childhood), his love for his fellow human beings, and peace of mind. In the end, this narrator is able to accept the world in all its shapes and forms.

In *Prázdniny*, Balabán's characters also turn their minds to God. The ageing doctor Daniel Nedostál ('Nespavost') thinks of all the 'godly' and 'ungodly' people he has accompanied from the world of the living to death, whilst he himself sends quiet prayers to heaven before his own time to die comes. Another character, Pavel Nedostál ('V neděli'), remembers God whenever his thoughts touch his memories of childhood. Seeing his own children enjoying their Sunday mornings in front of the TV, he recalls other Sundays – the time when it was still important to celebrate the seventh day of the week, to clean and decorate the house, put on Sunday clothes, go to church and share a festive meal. His family's religious tradition observed in the family party seems to him superior to everything he sees around himself today:

> 'A perfectly polished shoe doesn't really exist. But it is an ideal and you can be a step closer to it every Saturday. An enamelled drum in the bathroom spouts out large amounts of hot water into the bathtub. Children go first. Everyone has clean pyjamas. It takes some time to fall asleep. You can still see shadows moving on the ceiling. You hide deep in our duvet. You are scared a bit. You would like to pray a little longer but you fall asleep, with the grace of God.'
> ['Dokonale vyleštěná bota vlastně neexistuje. Ale je to ideál a ty se k němu můžeš každou sobotu o chloupek přiblížit. V koupelně smaltovaný válec chrlí horkou vodu do vany. Děti jsou napřed a všichni čistá pyžama. Dlouho se neusíná. Jen před

> chvílí se na stropě posunují stíny. Kutáš se do peřin. Malinko se něčeho bojíš. Chtěl by ses ještě pomodlit, ale už usneš, v milosti Boží.'] (*PR:* 16)

Pavel Nedostál does not think of God only in connection with his childhood. He considers God in his discussions with his girlfriend Jeny who believes in God but despises organized religion ('Moving into the universe…'), in debates with his friend Dr Satinský who does not believe in God and is a believer in science (*Ibid.*), and in the story of the old man, Timoteus, whose faith was stronger than love for his family and so it destroyed him ('Vyznavač').

A large number of Balabán's characters talk about God but their talk does not produce any satisfactory outcomes, only more doubts. One of the main topics that are often discussed in these talks is the contradiction between a belief in God and a belief in science. In *Prázdniny,* this is the topic of various debates between Dr Satinský and Pavel Nedostál ('Moving into the universe…'). In the novel *Černý beran*, this contradiction is dealt with on different levels. Once again, the conflict of views creates tension between two characters:

> '"Deus est circulus…" Bogomil pronounced a Latin sentence which no one sitting around the table understood.
> "What does it mean in English?"
> "God is a circle whose centre is everywhere and whose borders are nowhere."
> "That is interesting." Amy got suddenly excited. "It reminds me of a definition of the Universe by Stephen Hawking. He says that the Universe is finite but has no borders."
> "But Comenius speaks of God," Bogomil objected.
> "But surely, God and the Universe must be the same thing," Amy answered quickly.'
> ['„Deus est circulus..." Bogomil pronesl latinskou větu, jíž nikdo u stolu nerozuměl.
> „Co to znamená anglicky?"
> „Bůh jest kruh, jehož střed je všude a okraje nikde."
> „To je zajímavé." Amy byla náhle nadšená. „Podobá se to definici kosmu od Stephena Hawkinga. Ten říká, že vesmír je konečný, ale nemá žádné okraje."
> „Jenže Comenius mluví o Bohu," namítl Bogomil.
> „Bůh a vesmír přece musí být jedno," odpověděla Amy pohotově.'] (*CB:* 15)

In this example, Bogomil, a Czech emigrant, proudly speaks of God using quotations from the works by 17th century Czech theologian, Jan Amos Komenský[36], a member of the

[36] J. A. Komenský (Comenius). (1592-1670), the last Bishop of the Unity of Brethren, theologian, philosopher, teacher and educator, writer. He became a religious refugee and one of the earliest champions of universal education (*Didactica Magna*, *Orbis Pictus*).

Unity of Brethren[37], whilst his friend, the Jewish lady Amy, refers to the scientific theories of the Universe and the possible unity of both religion and science. Her understanding of the world derives from a religious tradition (Christian and Jewish) and merges with modern scientific views. Debates about God also take place between the same Bogomil and his ex-wife Johana. Bogomil talks of God and he reads from the Bible while Johana writes a story about the outer space and a non-existent planet Barson. Elsewhere, in the story with the significant title 'Ray Bradbury'[38] (*MO*), one of the female characters explains the origin of her son's name, Timoteus, with reference to his father's evangelical tradition. She also talks about her and her husband's shared dream they both had in the past of an escape from Earth to another planet.

The ever present tension between God and the universe, between religion and science and between mind and body is also highlighted by the fact that many of Balabán's characters have either a religious or a scientific profession or interest, or both at the same time. Many of them work in hospitals treating human physical illnesses and diseases (Dr Satinský in 'Proměny': *PR*, Roman Hradílek in 'Uršula': *MO*, Bogomil: *CB* or Jan Nedoma: *ZT*). Others are involved in religious activities. Some of them are members of the Church hierarchy (Nedoma's grandfather was a Protestant priest as was the grandfather of the narrator in *BL*). Bogomil, the protagonist of *Černý beran*, represents both religion and science. He works for the ambulance services and constantly studies the Bible. Father Jan Nedoma (*ZT*) does the same – he works as doctor but has a strong religious faith.

There is another antinomy that influences the attitude of Balabán's characters to life and to God: a different cultural experience. Bogomil's and Amy's experience (*CB*) comes from two different people from two different countries. Bogomil's roots lie in the world of Czech Protestants. Bogomil comes from a small Czech village called Svébohov (God's own place). He left this place in order to escape from his insane wife, Johana, and in order to find peace and re-gain his faith in God and in himself in a country across the Atlantic Ocean. Despite all his efforts, though, he is frustrated even in America. He claims that America is a country where faith in God is glorified on the surface but it is, in fact, commuted into money, fame and freedom without any rules. Amy is presented as the product of this environment even though she has doubts. Bogomil never accepts the American-Canadian philosophy of life. He joins American society, gets married, makes friends and finds a job but never gives up his memories, his doubts, his private thoughts

[37] One of the Christian Protestant (Evangelic) denominations with roots going back to the pre-reformation work of priest and philosopher Jan Hus who was martyred in 1415.

[38] Ray Bradbury (1920-2012) was an American science fiction, fantasy, horror and mystery fiction writer.

and his Protestant faith. Until the end of his life, Bogomil never forgets his God; he never refuses to help others and he continues to support his first wife, Johana. He stays loyal to his Czech name which means 'a lover of God' and so 'a lover of people', although it never brings him the forgiveness he desires so much. At least, this is what Bogomil's new partner Jennifer and his nephew František Josef think.

František Josef comes from the same Protestant-Evangelic background. His faith in God is also very strong. Unlike Bogomil, he is not tolerant towards contemporary secular society. He is also very critical of the United States:

> 'Americans are colonizers and God supports them. They land somewhere and build a petrol station there. Then cars arrive with men accustomed to live anywhere. (…) A lost paradise with the ghosts of exterminated native Indians who hang around the parked cars. Everyone knows that the devil is as beautiful as New York City, as a Hollywood night bar. A rubbishy place full of celebrities. TV gospels for stupid children, cowardly men and women, drunks who drink martini, masturbate in front of the TV and long for the celebrity devil. And he comes to them and gives them American freedom to be lonely, to be independent of others, to have the right to carry arms and a cheque book, gives them a passport, a lawyer, a psychoanalyst, a priest, Jesus, Santa Claus. The North Americans know that Heaven meets Hell at every corner. If you want to be in Heaven you must stand with one leg in Hell.'
> ['Američané jsou kolonisté, kterým Bůh drží palce. Přistanou a postaví benzinovou pumpu. Pak přijedou vozy a muži uvyklí žít kdekoliv. (...) Ztracený ráj s duchy exterminovaných Indiánů, kteří se poflakují kolem zaparkovaných aut. Každý ví, že ďábel je sličný a krásný jako New York City, jako hollywoodský noční bar. Sajrajt plný hvězd a televizní evangelium pro blbá děcka, pro zbabělé chlapy a ženské, alkoholičky, které pijí martini a onanují u televize a touží po hvězdnatém ďáblovi, a on k nim přichází a dává jim americkou svobodu k samotě, dává jim nezávislost na druhých, právo nosit zbraň a šekovou knížku, pas, právního zástupce, psychoanalytika, faráře, Ježíše, Santa Klause. Severoameričané vědí, že nebe se potkává s peklem na každém rohu. Když chceš být v nebi, musíš být jednou nohou taky v pekle.'] (*CB:* 51)

Hence, František Josef criticizes society in general, not just American society. He accentuates his faith in God and the romantic memories of his childhood which are connected with the church. He goes back to his past and compares what he remembers with the current times. Everything he perceives he then projects onto his relationship with Patricie, onto his attitude to his children, on Bogomil or on society in general. He suffers psychological pain, feels sorry for himself; drinks, talks about God and Jesus, about people's ignorance of his own 'misery', or their 'graceless' behaviour and of the chaos they create for themselves in this life.

It is evident that, unlike Bogomil who found peace, František Josef has an urge to express his problems with the world he lives in and does not really know how to deal with

it. On the one hand, he is fully aware of the naivety of his childhood memories, on the other, he still sees his childhood as life blessed by God's light:

> 'The word of God was always hidden for František in the form of a little light in that crude socialism, in that future scrap yard of heavy machinery and absurd mechanisms.'
> ['V tom hrubém socialismu, v budoucím vrakovišti těžkých strojů a nesmyslných mechanismů bývalo pro Františka slovo boží vždy ukryto jako malé světlo.']
> (*CB:* 111)

Whilst the present is for him just:

> 'A terrible confusion of a chaotic human world. A mixture of debris and discarded plans scattered about and piled up on top of each other. All over the place.'
> ['Hrozný zmatek neuspořádaného lidského světa. Chamraď krámů a plánů poházených a složených přes sebe, od sebe a kolem sebe.'] (*CB:* 112)

František Josef's thoughts are dark whenever he thinks about the present world. He brightens whenever he thinks of his past and of God. Although, as time passes and as love re-appears in his life, even František Josef changes his attitude and finds hope. He drinks less and starts to appreciate what people around offer him. He is no less critical towards the world but embraces it with more optimism than before. Now, his God becomes a God of human hope, a God of the ambiguity of love (Patricie) and death, of Paradise and Hell, of purity and evil, a metaphor of fate. His God is omnipresent: no matter what people do, they can never hide from God. Bogomil is given the peace and strength to build a new life but he is never able to escape his destiny. No matter how hard he tries to undo what he perceives as his 'sins' (running away from his destructive love to Johana), no matter how many trees he plants to celebrate God's creation, no matter how many people he supports, his destiny finds him and finally strikes him down. The same thing happens to Johana's fictive hero Ivo. He is also struck by God's anger when the forgotten voice of Ivo's love sounds. Johana, the author of the story, is entangled in her madness and creativity. She is out of touch with a world she has never really understood. Only František Josef and Patricie are not touched by any catastrophe. Both accept, although with difficulty, what the world brings them – to Patricie, diabetes and to František Josef, his first failed marriage.

In all of Balabán's fiction, we find many references to God and many religious motifs that relate to his characters' everyday experiences. Almost all of his characters think about God whether they believe in him or not. However, it is especially men who have the urge

to talk about God, to seek out God, to accept God or to deny his existence. Women mostly listen to the men's views, hardly ever disputing them. They follow their men to the church and to the holy places, but almost never reveal their own faith. Women are described as primarily concerned with the stability and health of their families rather than with anything else. They take care of what is real to them, whilst men always have their heads full of big ideas.

Balabán's female characters are afraid of the passage of time when it concerns their ageing bodies. They accept the passage of time when they fight for someone else, not for chimaeras. Their strength is derived from the everyday practical world. Men, on the other hand, live in the world of ideas; they analyze human existence in its intricacy, instability and finality. They do not care about the passage of time when it relates to their age. They fear the passage of time when it speaks of death. In these moments, they also speak of God or the universe.

Balabán's fictive world is a world of spiritual awareness. His characters live in the present time, they are born and they die, but their mind expands to different spheres. It is the alliance of nature, God and the universe that shapes them and they recognize this. They often doubt as they lose a person they loved, home, stability or faith and sometimes they give up completely and choose to die. The majority of Balabán's characters find their hope and finally also the way back to life within nature, God and the universe. They find a new life in the present and they try to enjoy it – the same way as they enjoyed their life in past before they were swallowed by the world of adulthood.

3.5 The present and the past: time and places

3.5.1 Memories

Balabán's characters spend a lot of time thinking about their own selves and, whenever they do, they do so through personal memories of their past. In their minds and in reality, they go back to their childhood and youth in order to recall those moments that have shaped their future life. In replaying these memories in their minds, they seek an explanation for what happened in the past and afterwards, and why certain things did not happen at all. Almost every important character has the power to recollect a key experience that influenced their personality during the course of its formation. Some have to go back to the time when they were still young and naive and enjoyed life without any major

difficulties and breakdowns. Others recall what came after they started to love, to study, to work and to socialize.

The characters' childhood memories are often connected with the family and with faith. They are wrapped in the spirit of something mysterious, something that now seems to be almost like a fairytale rather than something from the real world. Characters recall their memories as if they were just someone's innocent dreams where things were still good and in their right place rather than real. Childhood is seen to have been an Eden, a paradise; everything that happened afterwards they consider to be a journey through Hell and Purgatory back to God's embrace:

> 'I missed being a child. But then I saw you between two trees in our courtyard, in the place where a villa used to be. Our high rise blocks of flats were later built in its garden; only the villa foundations remained in the ground and they are still being touched by the roots of those two trees, the trees are wild, now every autumn shedding a whole harvest of unripe pears; pears which then rot on the grass and on the footpaths, wasps feast on them – a hammock was stretched exactly between those two pear-trees, and your little den in it was exactly where there used to be the children's bedroom in the house; a cot was made of carbide tubes and a woollen netting which protected you from falling down onto the hard floorboards. Do you remember this? Walking away from the window I caught sight of those women, women with massive legs, heavy knees, thighs and big cow-like buttocks; they had breasts as big as wrists and they had big lips and beautiful eyes; Gauguin's women.'
> ['Stýskalo se mi po dítěti a pak jsem tě uviděl mezi dvěma stromy na našem dvoře, dříve mezi nimi stávala vilka, naše paneláky byly postaveny na její zahradě, po vilce zbyly jen základy zasuté v zemi, kde se jich ještě stále dotýkají kořeny těch dvou stromů, stromy jsou zplanělé a každý podzim z nich spadne celá úroda nedozrálých hrušek, které pak hnijí na trávnících a na vyšlapaných cestičkách, jen vosy na nich hodují a mají se dobře – síť byla natažena právě mezi těmi dvěma hrušněmi a tvůj pelíšek v ní byl zrovna tam, kde býval dětský pokoj, postýlka z chromovaných trubek s přízovou síťkou, která tě chránila před pádem na tvrdou prkennou podlahu. Pamatuješ si to? Cestou od okna jsem zase zahlédl ty ženy, ženy s velkýma nohama, těžkými koleny, stehny a zadky jako krávy, měly prsy jako pěsti a velké rty a oči krásné, ženy Gauguinovy.'] (*BL:* 11)

This particular example is a single memory of the subjective narrator from *Boží lano*. We walk with him through his personal interpretation of his life. We follow the self-analysis of his past and note which experiences influenced his perception of his self and the world around him. The whole book is basically a search for a personal understanding of the reality of one man, from the past to the present.

The narrator is a middle-aged man. He takes us deep into the memories of his childhood and early adulthood. He talks about his first loves and family disruptions, his marriage, communist Ostrava, Canada, his relationship with the woman called Donna and his belief

in God. The memories of this particular man are the memories of different colours and different shapes. His childhood is a time of pure innocence. There is a villa, there are fruit trees, there is ripe fruit; there are bees and bosomy women (see the example above). There are night shirts and fairytales; there are green cockles and tiny milk-jars. There are churches. No subsequent experience could destroy the clarity of these moments. Not until he grew up enough in order to be able to see the dark side of things. For the narrator, it was sometime between his 10th and 18th birthday when his life changed. He lost his virginity through masturbation and then his first love. The villa was replaced by high-rise blocks of flats, and the trees growing in the former garden went wild. His brother smoked his first cigarettes and family arguments became more intense and louder than ever before. A decision that changed the narrator's life was made: his family gave up the safety of their home town and moved to the industrial city of Ostrava. This was when the narrator finally saw through the veil of his childhood and broke down for the first time:

> 'I thought about you when I was still a boy. At night I often couldn't sleep, I was looking out for something, anxiously waiting for something. The light from one of the street lamps behind the window drew an ethereal pattern of the net-curtains on my duvet. It was the net which we can see sometimes fleetingly behind our closed eyes, we see it in the stars that shine in the deep winter sky, in the wrinkles of old people, when they smile at us sometimes at the end of a long day. In such a net I saw you, a small child, who was trying to get the hold of the threads, spun for many years between the point finger and the thumb of eternity. Do you remember that moment, when the net shook as my thought of you crossed it? How old were you then? Only a little light falls on those years now. A shadow is moving across our land. The sun still sets in the west only; the darkness always comes from the east. The world is flat again, like a map and someone's hands keep pushing it away from the sun. The frost of the endless Siberian plains eats the land and we have no choice but to keep moving away. It is the world of the evening into which we, the children of autumn, were born. They say there will be twilight for sixty years. We have to leave our old dwelling places and toil along the roads to follow the copper sun which is always low above the horizon. We are losing things, you know, you cannot pack your life into a suitcase, even people are disappearing, they get on to a different bus and God knows where they end up. If only you knew how anxious I felt once when I stopped under the windows of our flat, breathless from my own game, and understood that there is only a little time left before we leave the place forever, our home, our box, where we used to have everything, even the weak bulbs in the kitchen and the loud conversations which I did not really understand, and the soups which smelled everywhere like my brother's first cigarettes, whose fires floated in the darkness above his bed like the lights of a little firefly whose shirt we both left behind forever. So we had to go through the twilight and I didn't want to do that. I made up stories which I inhabited myself like a primitive man living in a cave; I crouched down by the fire whilst enemies circled around, outside in the damp and cold mist of the forests and swamps.'
> ['Myslel jsem na tebe, když jsem byl ještě chlapec. V noci jsem často nemohl spát, něco jsem vyhlížel, úzkostně jsem něco čekal. Světlo lampy z ulice za oknem

> prostíralo na moji peřinu nehmotný vzorek záclony. Síť, kterou vídáme jen někdy v prchavých mžitkách za zavřenými víčky, ve hvězdách na hlubokém zimním nebi, ve vráskách starých lidí, když se na nás usmějí na konci dlouhého dne. V té síti jsem tě uviděl, malé dítě, které se ručkama chytá vláken, spřádaných po věky mezi ukazováčkem a palcem věčnosti. Nevzpomeneš si na tu chvíli, kdy se síť zachvěla, jak po ní přeběhla myšlenka na tebe. Kolik mi tehdy bylo let? Už jen málo světla padá na ty roky. Naší krajinou se sune stín. Slunce zapadá stále jen na západě a z východu věčně přichází tma. Svět je zase plochý jako mapa a čísi ruce jej stále posunují dál od slunce. Mráz nekonečných sibiřských plání žere zemi a nám nezbývá než se pořád stěhovat. Je to svět večera, do kterého jsme se my, podzimní děti, narodily. Šedesát let se prý bude jenom stmívat. Musíme opouštět svá stará bydliště a plahočit se za hranatým měděným přízrakem slunce, které je vždycky nízko nad obzorem. Ztrácíme, to víš, do kufru svůj život nenaložíš, i lidé mizí, nasednou do jiného autobusu a kde je jim konec. Kdybys jen věděl, jak úzko mi bylo, když jsem se jednou, udýchaný svou vlastní hrou, zastavil pod okny našeho bytu a pochopil jsem, že jen malinko a už tam nikdy nepůjdem, do našeho domova, do krabice, v níž jsme měli všechno, i ty slabé žárovky v kuchyni a halasné hovory, kterým jsem moc nerozuměl, a polévky, které všude voněly podobně jako první bratrovy potají zapalované cigarety, jejichž ohníčky se vznášely ve tmě nad jeho postelí jako světélko svatojánského broučka, z jeho košilky jsme však už oba nenávratně vyrostli. Tak jsme museli jít soumrakem a já se tomu tehdy na trávníku bránil. Vymýšlel jsem si příběhy a sám jsem je obýval jako pračlověk jeskyni, choulil jsem se u ohně, zatímco venku v sychravé mlze lesů a bažin obcházeli nepřátelé.'] (*BL:* 7-8)

The sudden awakening of the narrator in *Boží lano* during his teenage years was not only due to his own momentary personal breakdown but also due to the overall political and social situation that affected his society. Judging by the text of the narrative, we may assume that the narrator's childhood corresponds to a period akin to 1960s Czechoslovakia (he says that he studied at a grammar school in 1976). It was not until ten years afterwards that he was sufficiently mature to realize what kind of society he was living in. The narrator characterizes this time as a time close to darkness. He uses images of decay, loss and destruction: rotten fruit, packing, leaving, death (we know that his grandmother died), mist, cold, approaching frost and darkness, winter sky, Siberia. In reaction to all these fatal discoveries, he experiences an anxiety attack (when he learns about his parents' decision to move from his childhood home to Ostrava) or just simple anger (when crossing the road, he drops his school books in the middle of a tram track). What is the worst for him is the realization that nothing will ever be the same again. The new town later brought him a new life. It gave him a job (the same one he held ten years); he met (and lost) his first wife there), this is where he fought for his brother (an alcoholic) and drank himself; there he forgot his personal dignity and faith and eventually also was issued his passport to the West:

> 'I was always a bit of a lame duck, always a little moody. I rummaged through the old corners, the old coats, my stuff… (…) I kept running away, to pubs and abroad, to the places which allowed me to give small things big names; I talked rubbish and pumped and kept building a precarious world which was, they said, only all about me. And then I rolled around the floor in the hall calling myself an imprisoned soul and my wife didn't know how to love me; with a hangover, I rushed to catch my tram and in sorrow I whispered the names of my children.'
> ['Vždy trochu zajíknutý, vždy trochu rozmrzelý. Prohrabával jsem staré kouty, staré kabáty, ten svůj materiál. (...) Utíkal jsem pryč, do hospody, do ciziny, kde jsem nazýval malé věci velkými slovy, plácal jsem a pumpoval a stavěl tak vratký svět, který prý byl jen o mně. Potom jsem se válel v předsíni na podlaze a nazýval se vězněnou duší a moje žena nevěděla, jak mě mít ráda, a s hlavou plnou kocoviny jsem pospíchal na tramvaj a lítostivě si šeptal jména svých dětí.'] (*BL:* 21)

When recalling the memories of his life in Ostrava, the narrator also recalls the atmosphere of his hopeless wanderings through the "desert" of his soul as he felt it during these years. Everything seemed to have broken down by then, all his youthful idealism had been swallowed by the grey routine of everyday reality: job, wife, children and house. He realized that, as many others around him, he lived the 'normalized' life of a 'normalized' society in 'normalized'[39] times and he hated it. For a long time, he kept escaping into alcohol and to foreign countries until he settled abroad, on the American-Canadian border. There he found a new house with the view overlooking Lake Ontario. He also met a new girlfriend, Donna. However, the move to America does not give him happiness either. He appreciates the beauty of the environment but misses the familiarity of his Czech home. Even when he travels, he keeps choosing places which somehow remind him of his Czech past. He likes Pittsburgh because, in a certain way, he finds it being like Ostrava - it is also a former steel-making city located on the junction of several rivers. He mentions Hamilton (which is also a steel-making city), Toronto (a city with a large Czech population), and Cleveland (a city with a large Slovak population). He visits the Carnegie museum but thinks there of the Czech girl he first dated. In his Toronto flat, he looks in the mirror but, instead of his own reflection, he sees the portraits of all the members of his family who remained in Czechoslovakia.

No matter how much the narrator tries to enjoy his life overseas, his memories keep coming back. Over and over again, he is examining his past and looks for any explanation of what happened between his childhood and the present. He is finally giving names to memories that never had any, for they lay hidden in his mind. However, in order to make his real and symbolic return complete, the narrator has to make one more step – he has to go back to the Czech Republic, to the place he had left, because there he thinks all his life's

[39] See note 1.

wanderings started, and so he does go back (in the third part of the book). Together with his girlfriend, he walks through the streets of Ostrava-Vítkovice, passing the places he knew well. He still recognizes them. He searches for the lost evangelic church and for his forgotten faith until he finds it. At this point, we leave both these characters to their fate – in a fusion of the narrator's old European Evangelic faith, his partner's Catholicism, her mythological dreams and the experience of a city of steel beneath the red sky.

Similar journeys into the past are undertaken by the majority of Balabán's characters. Yet the story of each of them is always different. The female narrator of the story, 'Niagarské vodopády' (*ST*), remembers how it happened that she ended up working as a public toilet attendant – she fell in love with the 'wrong' person. Marie, from 'Výročí svatby' (*ST*), recalls the reasons for her aversion to sex – her friend died during labour. One day in August, Daniel, the protagonist of the story 'Kde jsi byl, Adame?' (*ST*), sets out for a walk with his son. The landscape to which he takes him evokes the memories of another summer and another walk. It was his last summer before the reality of the August 1968 Soviet occupation broke into his young life and into the lives of others, and disrupted them. In search of his lost identity, the protagonist of 'Men' (*ST*) climbs up a hypothetical pyramid, re-living all the levels of his previous conscious and unconscious experiences. He goes back as far as his birth.

3.5.2 The perception of time – linear and cyclic, destroyed and re-built

In Balabán's works, time flows in two directions: forward as the life of individual characters is also moving forward, and backwards as the mind of the individual characters keeps wandering back to their past in order to seek the understanding of the present world and their own individual position within it. In *Boží lano,* the narrator returns to the place where he lost his faith in order to rediscover it and connect the future and the past in a fusion of a dual peaceful present (his and his partner's). It has been already mentioned that the protagonist of 'Men' (*ST*) seeks some understanding of his current life in his travels into his subconscious mind. In *Prázdniny*, the passage of time in the narrations of certain individuals is disrupted by a number of breaks. The lives of Balabán's characters are presented in several episodes. These episodes do not follow each other sequentially but often overlap in both time and place. In 'Proměny', Dr Satinský reveals what preceded his alcoholic breakdown and what happened after he made a decision to stop drinking. In 'Je

to jako děcko', we are suddenly with Dr Satinský on the motorway. He is driving a car but drifting into the memories of his journey across America. Later, Dr Satinský takes us for a visit to his insane artistic aunt, Natálie ('Natálie') and, under the impact of her stagnant existence, he uncovers another part of his childhood (the year 1966). In the story 'Pilot', Satinský sits in the pub with his then girlfriend Taťána (he was dating her during his alcoholic period) and talks to her about another memory, this time going back to his study years deep in the socialist era. Then, we meet Dr Satinský while he is walking with his grown-up son who is now, after his parents' divorce, living with his mother. Dr Satinský's personal story is partly interwoven with another character, his friend Pavel Nedostál ('Pilot'). However, the reader gets to know Pavel Nedostál much earlier, in some of the previous chapters, and again this is happening in several different episodes. This time it is done in sequence which is interrupted only by minor unspecified breaks and a few personal memories: Pavel, in the presence of his wife, comments on their ongoing argument. He also mentions their children who are sleeping in the next room, comparing their games with his own childhood memories ('V neděli'); Pavel and his children set out for the New Year's Eve walk to Ostrava-Svinov in order to avoid his wife's criticism ('Silvestr Svinov'); Pavel and his son Ludvík visit an old amphitheatre ('Highlander'); Pavel is writing a letter but he is interrupted by his thoughts about his new girlfriend Jenovéfa (Jeny) and about their discussion regarding the consequences of religious belief ('Vyznavač'); Pavel, during on one of his night-walks with Jenovéfa, debates love, God and the Universe with her ('Moving into the universe…'). Finally, Pavel is sitting in a pub observing people around him and thinking of Jeny, his future and his dreams ('Lední medvěd Telecomu'). This is all we learn about Dr Satinský's and Pavel's lives, the rest stays hidden in the memories of both.

Time is formally disrupted in the novel, *Kudy šel anděl*. The story opens with chapter 19 and with a description of Martin's solitude in his empty flat. Only then do we go back to the beginning and learn about the time when all Martin's troubles started.

3.5.3 Time and place – the external reality

In the world of Balabán's fiction, time is a category of an ambiguous – external and internal – quality, as it is in the real world. It is linear when it follows events in the external world; it is disrupted, cyclic or spiral when it depends on what happens in people's minds. Moreover, the place interacts with both the external and the internal levels of perception. It is real when people inhabit it in a particular moment in their lives; it becomes a reflection

of their mind when people think about it through recollections of their past. Balabán's people relate to both the external and the internal reality regardless of whether they talk about it or keep silent.

In *Prázdniny*, the two frequently mentioned protagonists (Pavel Nedostál and Dr Satinský) hardly ever make any comments on the reality of the place and the time that defines them. They seem to be fully preoccupied with their own individual existence within the world. Dr Satinský ('Proměny'), a doctor of the life sciences who first works at an institute of microbiology, loses his job as a result of personal failure (due to an extramarital affair, family quarrels, alcoholism and divorce). His dismissal, however, is not a direct consequence of adversity in the external world, of the fact that Satinský lives under an authoritarian regime. He does not blame the external world for the loss of his job and his overall failures. He hardly connects anything that has been happening in his life with the policies of the Czechoslovak communist regime. Only once does Satinský really look back at the communist era:

> 'Students Ivan Satinský and Pavel Nedostál and their girl-friends were sharing a table. Satinský and Nedostál swore at the Communists. They wore loose jumpers. They had second-hand books and ideas which then seemed to matter to them. They were enjoying the pleasant, cosy feeling that they were outcasts – this feeling will never come back – and the two pretty girls were somehow naturally on their side.'
> ['Studenti Ivan Satinský a Pavel Nedostál seděli u stolu se svými kamarádkami a nadávali na komunisty. Měli vytahané svetry a knihy z antikvariátu a ideje, na kterých jim tehdy nějak záleželo. Bavili se v útulném vyvrženeckém pocitu, který se už nevrátí, a dvě pěkné dívky byly jaksi samozřejmě na jejich straně.'] (*PR:* 57)

However, this scene does not expand into anything more than what it is: it serves the narrator as a point of departure for another story, this time a story about an awkward meeting with a drunken war pilot ('Pilot') that took place in a similar pub several years ago. Only now it is not the pilot who babbles alcoholic nonsense but Dr Satinský just shortly before his breakdown. At another time, Satinský gives his views about American society ('Je to jako děcko'), but once again these views only serve as a vehicle for his own thoughts about life (a car is like a kid, it cries but does not die – life is painful but it does not necessarily mean fatally). Pavel Nedostál seems to be a slightly more concerned about the reality outside his head when he describes the unsatisfactory behaviour of his children and compares it to what he sees as the purity of his own childhood ('V neděli'). Even so, Nedostál is not interested in pointing out the current problems in society either. His remarks about contemporary society serve him as a vehicle to express his own doubts about the human self:

> ‘Can a person feel both good and bad at the same time? God knows.’
> [‘Může být člověku zároveň dobře i špatně? Bůh ví.’] (*CB:* 17)

The majority of Balabán’s characters display similar attitudes to reality in which they live. They do not deny that they are influenced by the time in which they live but, instead of perceiving themselves as victims of a particular era (the period akin to normalization and the fall of communism in Czechoslovakia), they consider their lives in more general terms and as a never-ending struggle between two contrary forces: good and evil. It is these forces which, as they believe, shape their lives in the first instance; only afterwards it is the external world which they experience in a particular moment of their existence. The present is where the powers of good and evil meet and materialize.

Yet the same does not hold true for all of Balabán’s characters. There are others who sense the impact of the external world on their internal selves to a certain degree. This applies to some of the characters in the novel, *Černý beran*: Bogomil, Johana, František Josef and Patricie. It is these characters whose lives are influenced by the external and the internal worlds most visibly.

One of the main narrative lines of the novel follows a relationship between two very different individuals, Bogomil and Johana, and their fatal love. Johana is the daughter of a famous Czech legionnaire who fought against the Austro-Hungarian Empire in Russia during the First World War. The legionnaire brought a large Russian girlfriend back from Siberia. Their marriage was never approved by the father’s family, not even after both of them were thrown into prison under the communists. Johana, who was born when Czechoslovakia was occupied by Nazi Germany, was placed into the care of her brutal and hateful uncle after the Second World War. She did not know her parents well and the only ‘care’ she experienced in childhood was the aggressive behaviour of this uncle, a former guerrilla fighter, who himself was traumatized because his wife had eloped with an American soldier. When Johana grew up, she fell in love with Bogomil, a strong man from the neighbourhood, but their relationship was too complicated for them to survive as a couple. Johana’s traumatising experiences made her ill with schizophrenia. She became an original artist, but also came to believe that she was being pursued by secret agents. Bogomil could not stand this and ran away, first to Europe, then to Canada.

Johana’s personality was shaped by many forces, political forces included. Without the impact of external political pressure, she would hardly have become the person she was, with all her complications and illnesses. She is a victim of her past and all the changes

which Czech society went through during the course of the twentieth century. She is a product of two different cultures which clashed in her society. Their clash crushed her. She is a victim of violence which people practised for the sake of their own sanity and this made her go insane. Furthermore, Johana thinks she lives in a society of spies that follow her and her partner. She does not believe anyone who approaches her; she despises anything that comes from the West; she does not accept anything except her own thoughts. She locks herself away in a cottage far from civilization and there she paints out her memories, over and over again. She hides herself in a world of timelessness which is filled only with the images from her own mind. And in this world, she writes a story of universal love between two fictive heroes, Ivo and Ema, a love story that never ends. While Johana escapes into her own fantasy, Bogomil runs away from his past. While Johana is unable to overcome her trauma and, instead of moving forward, she looks back, Bogomil sets out for a new life in America. However, his mind stays at home. He keeps helping Czech immigrants in the US in spite of the fact that they take him for granted. He takes many pictures by Johana with him to the US and keeps sending her the best paints he can find as well as money. She never accepts them. Their common experience of the world keeps them connected and hardly allows anyone else to come near. In this sense, their experience becomes universal; it crosses the frontiers of time and place. Yet, it is individual too. Johana's vision of society is full of suspicion; Bogomil's is modest and full of hope and faith.

František Josef is another character whose personal story we follow in the novel *Černý beran*. František Josef is Bogomil's nephew and so he is a generation younger than Bogomil. He grew up in communist Czechoslovakia, living and working in Ostrava. He is divorced but in a relationship with Patricie who is younger than him. We do not really know much about his family and about his childhood, his focus is basically on the present time.

František Josef does not present himself as a happy character. The reader meets him at the stage when his thoughts are preoccupied with his personal failure and his inability to recover. His view of the world and society around him reflects the negativity of his thoughts and is full of anger and hatred. František Josef feels he lives in a cruel world. This is how he presents it to his readers:

> 'Such a murder. Such a woman. A porous face, bulky earlobes, a perm. She stares like someone who has just been slapped and who wants to slap. She stretches her nostrils and curves her lips. What has happened to her, that cow? She holds her handbag tightly on her knees, so rudely apart. She does not care. Her head is full of

> problems. Broken nerves. (…) Children scream here and that girl over there, everything she wears seems to be a little too big or too small for her, as if someone had touched her figure, created by God, with messy hands. Look at that awful pimple below her bottom lip, she keeps touching all the time. Well, if you ever find a husband! You will. There is one. He had his head shaved and is proud of it. Fat nasal bone. He wants to look brutal but at the same time he keeps fidgeting, as if he forgot to wipe his bum in the morning. And here there is a young mum, we should look up to her as if she was Virgin Mary, with dyed hair and elastic topic, necklaces, bracelets and rings and a baby wrapped in something that reminds you of a crimped yarn. He is teasing her messing around with a lollipop and the mum, the mum's face reflects her wish to switch him off, like she would do with a walkman, with chicken tamagochi, which dies after nine days and its spirit flies to the digital heaven, then you can turn it on again, people say you need a small slip of paper to do it. Slip of paper! And who will pay for that? A chap in a waistcoat asks. He is on the way home from the doctor who made him able to work again. He is so angry that a single look of his eyes gives you a blow. Do not stare at me, you fucking bastard! Do you get it?'
> ['Taková vražda. Ženská. Pórovité líce, tlusté boltce, trvalá. Dívá se, jako by byla právě zfackovaná a sama chtěla fackovat. Roztahuje chřípí, křiví rty, co se jí stalo, babě? Drží kabelu na kolenou, tak vulgárně jí jdou od sebe. Je jí to jedno. Starostí nad hlavu a nervy v prdeli. (...) Děti tady řvou a támhleta holka, všechno je na ní trochu velké nebo trochu malé, jako by její bohem stvořenou formu někdo tak nějak pošahal. A ještě ten strašný uher pod spodním rtem. Pořád si na něj musí sahat. No, ty jestli se vdáš! Ale vdáš. Támhle máš ženicha. Nechal se ostříhat dohola a je na to hrdý. Tlustý kořen nosu. Snaží se vypadat brutálně, a přitom se tak podivně kroutí, jako by si ráno špatně vytřel zadek. A mladá maminka, k té bychom měli všichni vzhlížet jako k madoně, s odbarvenou kšticí a v lesklé elastice, řetízky, náramky, prsteny a děcko v čemsi z umělé příze. Otravuje a patlá lízátko a mamka, mamka se tváří, že by ho nejradši vypnula jako walkmana, jako kuře tamagoči, které po devíti dnech zdechne a jeho dušička odletí do digitálního nebe, pak si ho můžeš pustit znovu, strká se tam prý nějaký papírek. Papírek! A kdo to zaplatí! Ptá se chlap v bundě do pasu. Jde od doktorky uschopněný do práce, naštvaný tak, že ještě jeden pohled a už ji máš, pěstí mezi oči. Nečum na mě, kurva! Rozumíš?'] (*CB:* 20-21)

František Josef describes Czech society with a sarcastic eye. He applies his scathing criticism to everyone who happens to be around. In his momentary state of mind, people are pictured as ugly, pretentious, rude and faithless. Places are dirty and dull. However, this criticism is directed solely at the present world. His memories are mostly bright and so he keeps going back to them. He sees his past as bright, sincere and full of faith. It was the time when the adults' problems were still far away from his childish mind, churches were welcoming for human souls. But current society is seen as a wasteland, it is a society without direction, the churches are deserted, and individuals are left on their own, unprepared for the difficulties that life brings and human relationships reflect. František Josef feels angry thinking about his own personal failure, about the failure of Bogomil's and Johana's relationship, about his relative, Vlastimil, who was destroyed by his family, about the Czech immigrants who befriend Bogomil only to get some benefit from him.

František's resentment sweeps the world; it does not embrace only Czech society but society in general:

> 'Ontario, Ostrava, Bystřice, where exactly do people live? Where is that home? Is it possible they took it away from us a long time before we were born? Or is this just one of those bad days when something has happened with the optic lens? Everywhere you look there are ugly people. Where did all the beautiful people go?'
> ['Ontario, Ostrava, Bystřice, kde vlastně lidé žijí? Kde je ten domov? Nevzali nám ho už dávno před narozením? Anebo je jen špatný den, kdy se něco stalo s optikou. Všude jen samí hnusácí. Kam se poděli ti krásní?'] (*CB:* 21)

In order to find himself at peace with the world, František Josef returns to the places where his life journey started. He takes his partner Patricie with him. But the reality seems to be much different from what he remembers and definitely different from what he has described to Patricie:

> 'If only I knew what he is looking for, Patricie sighed. A crazy walk around the old slag heaps and Josef's reminiscences of a world that has disappeared. On the asphalt highway, he speaks about country cottages and weeping willows. He argues that a river in which he used to bathe now runs in the pipes buried under the surface of the road. At the foot of the slag heaps cows used to feed and people camped. There were ponds and green fisherman's huts, summer houses, groves were strawberries blossomed, and gardens full of beetroots and rhubarb. And there, where there is nothing now, there was a gymnasium and a cinema. (…) He is tormenting her with his disappeared world of which he sees only grey, dusty, grim slag heaps. Everything is hidden behind it, behind the old heap that reminds you of a rusty saw before which people must retreat because it moves slowly but surely towards them, like a Russian tank. This is how Patricie sees it. She faces the approaching nothingness with her back to an uncertain future.'
> ['Kdybych tak věděla, co vlastně hledá, povzdechla si Patricie. Bláznivá procházka kolem staré haldy a Josefovo vyprávění o zmizelém světě. Na asfaltové dálnici povídá něco o venkovských domcích a smutečních vrbách. Tvrdí, že v trubkách pod silnicí teče říčka, ve které se kdysi koupal. Pod hromadami strusky se prý pásly krávy a tábořili nějací lidé. Byly tam rybníky a zelené rybářské boudy, letohrádky, háje, ve kterých kvetly jahody a zahrady s řepou a rebarborou. A tam, kde teď není nic, byla sokolovna a kino. (...) Tak ji trápí svým ztraceným světem, z něhož ona vidí jen šedivou, prašnou, nahoře zubatou haldu. Všechno je schováno za ní, za starou haldou připomínající rezavou pilu, před níž musí dva lidičkové ustupovat, protože se k nim sune pomalu, ale jistě jako ruský tank. Tak to vidí ona, Patricie. Čelem k postupující nicotě a zády k nejisté budoucnosti.'] (*CB:* 97)

However, neither František Josef nor Patricie lose their faith completely and, at the end of their long journey marked by various question marks and doubts, both of them do find reassurance in the timelessness of their love.

The world described in Balabán's novel, *Kudy šel anděl,* is very similar to the world featured in his previous works. The story is set in Ostrava, where all the main characters live and work. The novel touches their lives at the beginning of their adulthood and henceforth it explores their personal narratives. The work follows their experience of communist Czechoslovakia, of the fall of communism and the years afterwards; it comments on the state of the past and the current society, and on the environment in which people live when searching for happiness. Ostrava is a place of grey slag heaps, destroyed forests, high-rise housing estates and steelworks; it is a place where people moved to because they had been promised a job, money, a flat and presumed freedom. Instead, they had to squeeze in the buses transporting masses of steelworkers and miners in and out of work, they had to look for places of intimacy between industrial pipes and dust from the coal waste; they had to live within small flats in identical square houses called Stage 4. Such was communist Ostrava in the eyes of Martin Vrána, the main character of the book. However, democratic Ostrava after the fall of communism does not seem to be any better; quite the contrary. The prefab houses remain the same and, instead of nurseries and schools from the times of communism, people opened casinos, second hand shops, pawnbrokers, pubs and shops selling wine from the barrel. The steelworks and the coal mines were closed down. People were made redundant and have ended up on social benefits. Young graduates frequent the local job centres. Everyone drinks and everyone has the latest mobile phone. Where is the place for Balabán's characters amongst them? Martin Vrána has a job which he does not particularly enjoy. He is divorced, living alone on the housing estate. He is unhappy and he drinks. His new partner, Monika, whose family has disintegrated, has problems with self-confidence. Martin's ex-partner, Eva, suffers from lack of family life. She avoids everyone who could become more intimate with her than she could bear until she ends up as a single mother with a successful job. Her lover, Ivan, is a victim of the post-communist regime change. So is his father. Martin's ex-schoolmate, Tonda Góna, just drinks in the local pubs.

In *Kudy šel anděl*, Balabán's reality is once again seen as destructive. No one can hide from it. People can find refuge only in love. The only people who eventually experience happiness are people in love – Martin and Monika, and Ester and her partner Pavla. The world Balabán describes in this novel is as hostile and cruel as people allowed it to be. The individuals succumb to its chaos. They get lost and often break down. Those few of them who find within themselves the strength to accept it gain confidence and are eventually able to appreciate the diversity of life. However, not everyone is given an opportunity to change, not everyone has love. Not everyone is capable of believing in love and those who

are not survive only with extreme difficulties (like Ivan, like his father and Tonda Góna) or not at all.

Balabán's last three works draw the same picture of Czech society. Again, in these works, individuals find themselves in a struggle between the romantic memories of their childhood and the ferocity of the adult years that followed. The present is seen hostile and is bitterly criticised. In the view of Balabán's characters, contemporary Czech society is under pressure of imposed political and economic changes and it is unhappy. There is no enthusiasm and there is hardly any hope. Balabán's people are tired from living in the cages of the prefab housing estates and from ideological pressure. They are exhausted from life in the city of Ostrava full of remnants of the coal and iron industries, heaps of waste and industrial pipes which cross the last remaining patches of greenery. They bend to the gravity of their own existence and they repeatedly escape from it to the timelessness of their childhood memories, to alcohol, to dreams or to other fictive stories they have created from their personal misery. They hold on to their own inner world in which they keep losing themselves in the moments of their worst crisis. Existence is questioned, faith, life and death too.

3.5.4 Places discovered and re-discovered – universal and real

The role that particular places play in the lives of Balabán's characters has considerable significance for our understanding of the characters. Of primary importance in Balabán's texts is Ostrava, a city agglomeration in the Moravian-Silesian region in the north-eastern part of the Czech Republic. This is where the vast majority of Balabán's characters live. From an historical point of view, we know that Ostrava was the city that attracted many people from all around the country by its fast developing heavy industry, by an extensive construction programme and by providing a large number of people with work.[40] People from agriculture based regions moved to Ostrava looking for a better life and Balabán's

[40] After 1945 and through the 1950s, Czechoslovakia concentrated on the development of mining, the steel industry and other areas of heavy industry. Ostrava became its centre, becoming that period's 'city of coal and iron' and also the 'steel heart of the republic'. In 1949, construction was started on the vast Nová Huť industrial complex in Ostrava-Kunčice. A massive support of heavy industry meant an influx of new workers to Ostrava and its vicinity. Many new neighbourhoods grew up in the peripheral quarters of the town at that time. See http://www.ostrava.cz/jahia/Jahia/site/ostrava/lang/en/ostrava/o-meste/historie-mesta-ostravy.

heroes did the same. However, the prosperity of the town was closely connected with the communist regime. As soon as it collapsed, the city lost its industrial importance and the quality of life of the local residents deteriorated. Balabán's texts assume a highly critical attitude to these developments. According to Štolba,

> 'Ostrava was always affected by being exceptional. The period of communism, which chased records in mining output, while "taking care" of "the workers", disfigured it greatly. Balabán describes a city of "brutally sharp-edged housing estates built on mud", of cheap bars and pubs, stinking rivers and inhuman teachers. He writes about a place marked by hard labour, alcohol and animal-like pettiness, a city which under its surface hides a damaged pride, exiled human warmth and a kind of imploring, inhospitable magic.'
> ['Ostrava byla výjimečností postižena asi odevždy. Doba komunismu ji však honbou za důlními rekordy a péčí o své pracující stačila docela znetvořit. Balabán popisuje město brutálně ostrohranných, z bahna vyrostlých sídlišť, laciných barů a knajp, páchnoucích říček a nelidských učitelek. Líčí místo poznamenané ubíjející tvrdou prací, chlastem a živočišnou malostí, jež však pod povrchem skrývá i poničenou stavovskou hrdost, vyhoštěnou lidskou vřelost, jakési úpěnlivé nehostinné kouzlo.'] (Balabán: Štolba 2003: *Host*, vol.7: 17-20).

Disappointment with their lives in Ostrava, their uncertainty about the place and their personal crises leads Balabán's characters back to the places where they spent their childhood, or at least a part of it – to the countryside. This is mostly Vysočina, the Czech-Moravian Highlands; a region that consists of small towns and villages, large forests and hills. This is regarded by many of Balabán's characters as their real home, a place nearest to nature, to the heart and so to God. Ostrava is seen as if it was only its necessary but almost unavoidable substitute:

> 'Hans and his siblings loved this dying landscape. A long time after its total destruction they still searched for the remains of the disappeared world and their memories of all those buried places only confirmed their feeling of exile which they felt in this city. They did not treat this place as their home. And their parents, driven to work here by communist bullying, kept promising to each other for thirty years that in a year or two at the latest they would move back to Vysočina, the region they left young in order to study and work in this hostile world. Distant Vysočina and the lost villages, these were the unattainable horizons of people who were stuck like flies onto the flycatcher named Ostrava.'
> ['Hans a jeho sourozenci tuhle zanikající krajinu milovali. Ještě dlouho po totálním zplanýrování slídili po zbytcích ztraceného světa a vzpomínky na všechna ta pohřbená místa jen utvrzovaly jejich pocit exilu, který ve městě zakoušeli. Nepovažovali to město za své, a jejich rodiče, zahnaní sem komunistickou šikanou za prací, si třicet let slibovali, že se za rok, nejpozději za dva odstěhují zpátky na Vysočinu, do kraje, z něhož jako mladí odešli studovat a pracovat do nepřátelského světa. Vzdálená Vysočina a ztracené vesnice, to byly nedosažitelné horizonty lidí nalepených jako mouchy na mucholapce jménem Ostrava.'] (*JT:* 36)

For those who were born there, Vysočina is the place where romantic ideas meet the reality of contemporary times (Kateřina, Hans and Emil Nedoma in the last three Balabán's works, Bogomil and Johana: *CB*). Balabán's characters travel there to look for answers to their personal confusion. They look there for their peace of mind which, they believe, is probably hidden only in that place where the memories of their childhood survive.

Sometimes, the Moravian-Silesian Beskydy Mountains play a similarly purifying role as Vysočina. If they do not do so, at least they give Balabán's heroes an opportunity to escape and relax in their hills and woods. In addition, the territory along the river Odra, a river that flows through the Moravian-Silesian region, and the surroundings of the Ostravice river, offer Balabán's characters a momentary distraction from the urban reality of their lives. In general, any countryside is perceived to be a good place for contemplation, a place for healing when one has painful thoughts; the countryside is also seen as a good place to die (Petr Zábranský in 'Dona nobis pacem': *JT*, Emil's attempted death in 'Tchoř': *JT*). Any countryside is perceived to be at peace with the self, with nature and with God. A city is confusion and is an everyday struggle for survival.

An urban-rural dichotomy is being played out in Balabán's works.[41] According to Daniela Hodrová who dedicated a whole study to her exploration of the human perception of the city and the countryside,

> 'In the countryside, in the "wilderness", the sense of communion of a being and the surrounding world, the sense of one's blending with the world of nature is quite a common experience. One hardly experiences the same feeling in the city. Perhaps, because one finds it hard to accept the city, an ambiguous world which is mostly based on camouflage, pretence, expulsion, false idols, lack of communication and lack of understanding. Despite of this and first of all, the city is still a flow. An inhabitant who is trying to find a way through the stream of the city and drifts along or allows himself or herself to be carried away is a contribution to that flow – by his or her life, his or her thoughts, his or her dreams and his or her transformations. He or she feels, tries, thinks, dreams and transforms this flowing city into his or her own consciousness, but also to his or her unconscious, a communion of one and the other – a stream of these spheres and a stream of the city are the one.'
> ['Zatímco v přírodě, v „divočině" je pocit splývání bytosti s jejím okolím, vplývání do proudu přírodních dějů zážitkem poměrně běžným, ve městě ho člověk zakouší spíš výjimečně, snad že není snadné přijmout město, tento ambivalentní svět založený namnoze na zastírání, předstírání, vytěsňování, na nepravých modlách, nedostatku komunikace a porozumění. A přece je město plynutím povýtce a

[41] Post-communist Czech feature film also consistently sees the Czech countryside as a healing place. See ČULÍK, Jan (2013): *A Society in Distress: The Image of the Czech Republic in Contemporary Czech Feature Film.* Brighton and Toronto: Sussex Academic Press, p. 9.

> obyvatel, který se proudem města pokouší plout nebo se jím nechává unášet, se na tomto proudu plynutí zároveň podílí – svým prožíváním, myšlením, sněním, svými proměnami. Vnímá, zakouší, myslí, sní, proměňuje plynoucí město ve svém vědomí, ale také v nevědomí, vplývajících jedno do druhého – proud těchto sfér a proud města jsou vlastně proudem jediným.'] (Hodrová 2006: 63)

Balabán's characters seem to be flowing in the same stream. For them, the countryside is a place where things are happening in communion with nature and in harmony with a cycle of life. There they feel in the centre of things and at peace with themselves. They feel understood and this is the reason why they keep returning. On the other hand, the city – Ostrava – is seen as a place of both – the human structures and their destruction, structured industry and human wilderness. The city attracts them, yet they suffer there. The countryside is their place of heart: they dwell there. The city is their place of participation: they act there.

Yet, the journey to the countryside and to the core of their selves does not seem to be for everyone. Some of Balabán's characters leave the countryside in order to save their own sanity and life (Emil in the last three works), some hide in the town (also Emil), others hide in another country: Bogomil (*CB*) escapes to Sweden and then to Canada in order to get away from the madness of his wife, Johana. František Josef travels across America and Canada not only to visit his uncle Bogomil but to find clarity of thought on his momentary existence (ibid.). The subjective narrator of *Boží lano* also moves overseas to seek freedom from the machinery of the industrial society that Ostrava represents. Dr Satinský ('Je to jako děcko': *PR*) goes to America to learn English and to see the world. It is something he has decided to do as a part of his therapy when he was trying to free himself of alcoholism.

Despite the characters' expectations, the experience from a different country is not always positive. For Světlana and her family ('Světlana': *JT*), the journey abroad ends up in disaster and death. Bogomil, Johana's fictive hero, Ivo, and František Josef's fictive character, Animuk (*CB*), also meet their death far away from their homeland.

In Balabán's works, places play an important role on both the level of facts (Ostrava – industry) and on the level of abstraction (the city versus the countryside). Ostrava and its attributes (factories, trams, coal-miners and gypsies) become essential participants in the life of many of Balabán's characters. Yet, it is only one of many factors that influence their cycle of life.

4. Summary: the gradual separation and the re-union with the writer's personality: part II.

Having analyzed the interaction of motifs in the structure of Balabán's works, it is well worthwhile to consider again the relationship between the reality which Balabán's works describe and the reality the author himself has experienced in his own life. Looking at the stories he tells and the information we have about his world, we see quite a few common elements. Real people become fictive heroes of Balabán's narrations (Bogomil) or they serve as inspiration for the creation of Balabán's characters (the author himself – Emil, the author's brother Daniel – Hans). Real memories appear transformed into the memories of Balabán's characters; real places provide the settings for the narrative.

Putting this in a larger context, Balabán's work is inspired by the author's own world and of the world the author observed and lived in during different stages of his life. His work is a study of people from different generations who meet at the end of the 20th century and at the beginning of the 21st century in Ostrava or are somehow connected to the city. Balabán's fiction shows Czech society constantly moving in between the personal turmoil of individuals and their journey seeking peace with themselves. His protagonists are ordinary individuals who experience their individual love and misery, family life and

loneliness. They are people who have spiritual awareness but keep losing it. They experience emotional breakdowns and personal comebacks. Each of them has a different way of coping with these, but they are strongest when they share. They are weak if they fight alone.

Balabán's fictive world is full of individuals who go through years of confusion and through years of a desperate questioning of their identity within the external world. We meet them when they are emotionally weak and tired from the life they have experienced so far, when they are exhausted from the current world and uncertain of their future. Through repeated recollections of their past, they seek an explanation of their momentary condition. They search for the reasons that brought along the end of their relationships, their divorces, their loneliness and their inclination to drink or to want to commit suicide. Over and over again, they delve into their thoughts about their past. They explore their relationship with their parents, their partners and children, with Ostrava, with society and God. Using what they discovered about themselves, they re-define themselves. Balabán's men lack confidence in relationships and love. They break down when things fall apart. They escape whenever the situation turns out less favourable and more complicated than they expected. It is their own personal weakness that makes them behave as cowards when facing accusations and unpleasant surprises. In order to protect their own sanity, they hide themselves in their inner thoughts, in memories or in the worlds which they have created through their imagination. They drink because drink gives them strength to fight. They dream because a dream takes them away from any demands the contemporary world may throw at them. They search for their lost selves, but only some of them find it.

Balabán's men and women come in three categories: they are grandparents, parents and daughters and sons. The grandparents appear only on a few occasions and often only as a subject of other people's thoughts. But the parent-child relationships are highly discussed topics on all possible levels. No less important are the erotic relationships between men and women.

Love, passion, marriage, partnership, divorce, separation and personal loneliness are matters in which all Balabán's characters are deeply interested. For both men and women, there is never an easy way to reach understanding in matters of love. The majority of Balabán's characters experience separation or divorce and many years of undesired loneliness before they find another love and another reason to live. Men, exhausted by the collapse of their first relationships or marriages, retrieve their personal confidence when they strike up relationships with much younger women. Women do not seek new relationships; they are content with their motherhood. Disappointed by their partner's

behaviour towards them, they devote themselves to their children and that keeps them going. The family and love become the only ties that bring individuals together.

Balabán's society consists of people who are desperate and weak in their never-ending struggle for peace of mind but they become stronger whenever their wandering involves two of them or more. The notions of family and of love give many of them the strength they need to overcome the obstacles life has laid in front of them, and obstacles there are many: lack of personal understanding, conflicts with their partners, intolerance, different attitudes to life, different expectations, age, illness, death, place of residence as well as the social and political changes that have been affecting their life all the way through. Balabán's characters are lost in the diversity of their own internal thoughts; they are not heroes accomplishing great deeds, but they are heroes of everyday battles for their own sanity and for personal happiness.

The world which Balabán describes is full of many individuals who struggle to regain a lost unity with people and society, with God and spirituality, and with the Earth. They find this unity through love. This seems a rather mythological, religious way of thinking.

Balabán's fiction shows a world of constant creation, destruction and recovery. It reflects upon the reality known by the writer himself, upon Czech society which went through political, social and cultural turmoil during the 20th century. Like many Czech citizens, Balabán's characters live in a world affected by both World Wars and by the forty years of communist rule, followed by the regime change in 1989. The majority of these people have experienced the Soviet invasion. Some of them experienced it directly, some were affected by the consequences of the invasion. Balabán's characters became the witnesses and the victims of the country's industrialization within its centralized economy and socialism and then of a suddenly de-regulated and highly individualistic regime. Many of them had to leave their village homes behind in order to join the industrial world of socialism and the post-industrial world of capitalism. Under communism and as a result of their move to the industrial city, they lost faith in God and in themselves, in the stability of family life and in society in general. After the arrival of capitalism, Balabán's characters found themselves in chaos. The only way out of chaos is through an examination of their past. This takes them back to the times before all the problems started, to their childhood and to the countryside, to a Christian unity of the world. Only in reunion with their past do they reach satisfaction and happiness in their present lives.

In contemplating their individual predicament, its beginnings, breaking points and its finality, Balabán's characters try to capture the sense of their existence in a world that

offers more confusion than stability and more introversion than openness. Such seems to be the view of the author himself. Such seems to be Balabán's own experience of Czech society at the time of regime change from communist 'normalization' to capitalist 'democracy'. Balabán's characters stand somewhere between 'maybe we are leaving' ('možná že odcházíme') and 'we are here' ('jsme tady'). They are standing somewhere between their grief over the passage of time and their hope for the future. They live in the real world but with an awareness of the universe and eternity. They live in Balabán's world and Balabán himself describes this world with the following words:

> 'Life is constantly and tirelessly surviving in the inhospitable environment. And now someone will tell you that it is all futile, that such growth does not make any sense! I would say that because it is so persistent, it has to make sense. I am interested in this persistence of human spirit – it moves me that we keep trying to re-inhabit this inhospitable radioactive plate over and over again and still consider it to be beautiful. I am trying to find some traces upon which I can hang my belief that all this is not futile, whether it occurs in the life of an individual or in the whole Universe.'
> ['Život se pořád neúnavně chytá v nehostinném prostředí. A teď vám někdo řekne, že je to celé zbytečné, že takovýto růst nemá smysl! Já bych řekl, že když je to tak urputné, tak to právě smysl mít musí, už skoro nic jiného než smysl. Tahle urputnost mě v lidských osudech zajímá a dojímá, že tu nehostinnou radioaktivní desku pořád znovu zabydlujeme a považujeme za krásnou. Snažím se najít nějaké stopy, o které by se dala opřít víra, že to všechno není marné, v individuálním životě i ve vesmíru.' (Balabán: Balaštík: Reichel 2004. *Host*, vol. 8: 5-9)

Conclusion

1. The constructed world of Hakl's and Balabán's fiction – comparisons being made

Detailed analysis of Hakl's and Balabán's works reveals certain patterns and certain differences in 'the image of reality' these works construct and in the way they construct this image. The literary testimony of both writers creates a world of Czech society as seen by several narrating individuals (in the case of Balabán's fiction) or one person (in the case of Hakl's fiction). We explore various urban territories (Balabán's Ostrava and Hakl's Prague) in which most of the stories unfold and we learn about how the texts see the post-communist times during which Hakl's and Balabán's characters live.

In the works of both writers, we see the world through the eyes of people who struggle to cope with the reality in which they live. They are the people who do not seek material wealth but, instead, they look for peace within their internal selves. They are the people who care for their families and their friends but do not know what to do with their feelings for them and often end up disrupting their closest relationships. They are the people who suffer from depression when they are alone but who find it difficult to be happy in relationships with others. They are the people who search for the opportunity to improve

their material wellbeing within the new regime but who give up on any effort as soon as they realize that each success would have to be paid for by serious encroachment into their personal freedom and with personal sacrifice of which they do not seem capable.

In Hakl's and Balabán's works, we see men who lose their self-confidence because they have experienced broken relationships, seen missed opportunities and lost jobs. We see men who have become loners, alcoholics, losers and wasters of their own time. They do not know how to behave as proactive individuals, responsible husbands and partners at work. In the majority of cases, Hakl's and Balabán's characters are men who struggle to find a stable job and to keep it. These are men who are unable to carry the burden of responsibility for the lives of others and end up escaping from the real world to a world of fiction, of dreams, of games and alcoholic or marihuana visions. We follow the predicament of men who find themselves on the verge of their mid-life crises and in the situations when they are trying to re-examine their lives, all their past losses and mishaps, their confusions and their hope for the future.

Hakl's and Balabán's men do not seem to be heroic, yet they are heroes. They do not possess any supernatural powers and they do not accomplish any exceptional tasks. They struggle, escape, fight and fail, gain and lose. Their youth is romantic and naïve; their middle age makes other people show them respect but they never have full authority in the eyes of others. Nor are their characters spotless. They are vain individuals who have their own views about the world but end up entangled in words and thoughts rather than taking action. Their thoughts and their talks are self-defensive and self-centred. Their actions are confused. They often get lost in the chaos of their everyday reality.

Hakl's and Balabán's men are the philosophers of their own lives; they speak but they rarely act. Yet their actions are not without significance. While words lead them only to more and more doubts, their actions give them a chance to move on. In this sense, Hakl's and Balabán's men are heroes of everyday reality. They are forced to cope with a chaotic mixture of life.

In many ways, Hakl's and Balabán's male characters are alike. The major difference between them lies in their level of adaptation and in the extent of their faith which influences their perception of the world around them and their hope for the future. Balabán's men believe in God, in the power of nature and in love. Since they usually have faith, they are able to overcome their often painful past, accept the changing world and find a way to be happy. Those who lack faith, however, break down or die. Hakl's men do not have faith. Their lives are a mixture of impulses. Their personalities are shattered. They are almost totally unable to connect with other people. They are unable to adapt their old

habits for the exploration of the new world around them. Thus they live in permanent uncertainty. Either they live alone, or they quickly start up relationships and just as quickly break them. They cannot hold down a job. They live partially among friends but they cannot stand this and so they opt out of society and live like outcasts for the time being. Balabán's male characters consider life with great emotions. They struggle with it. They are filled with nostalgia and with sorrow about the world and the human existence within it. Hakl's male characters also look at the world with a critical eye, but they know how to be ironic, sarcastic and how to laugh at themselves.

The image of women is not so clear cut in Hakl's and Balabán's fiction. Generally speaking, Hakl's and Balabán's women are more proactive than their men. Just like men, these women experience much destructive confusion, many failures, breakdowns and losses but the attitude they employ to overcome all their difficulties is different. Their minds are firmly anchored in the present. Unlike men, they do not repeatedly mull over their past actions but they do act, now. Young women are full of energy. They are eager to discover what the world is about. They travel abroad. They explore the hidden nooks and crannies in the souls of older men. Older women live to care for their children and their men.

Hakl's and Balabán's women are passionate and loving. If men do not reciprocate their love, they move on or turn into their internal selves. They concentrate on their children or on their careers. Hakl's and Balabán's female characters are much more mature and realistic individuals than men. They know what they want, what they need and what their families require, and then set out about securing it. In Hakl's fiction, however, we observe female characters only through the eyes of a male, the main subjective narrator. This is why the image of women in Hakl's fiction is often shallow and biased. Balabán's female characters have their own voices. Thus we learn more about them.

The world which Hakl's and Balabán's fiction constructs is a world of broken relationships and individual failures. It is a world where communication between men and women, between family members and between friends has been temporarily lost. It is a world which people find to be hostile to their individual needs and desires. It is a world which they struggle to accept and to understand. It is a world where people fear losing their private existence and their intimate contact with others. It is a world in which people are afraid of losing control over their affairs. It is a world in which people struggle to find a balance between their own individuality and outside reality. They yearn for a settled, relaxed and contented existence, yet they do not know how to achieve it.

Is it the nature of the human beings that makes Hakl's and Balabán's characters constantly struggle for their desires and their needs? Is it the life in the city that makes Hakl's and Balabán's characters question their individuality within the crowd? Is it life in the new market-orientated society that gives Hakl's and Balabán's characters the feeling of insecurity within a world which places profit above social values? Is it the mores of Czech post-communist society that have made Hakl's and Balabán's characters re-examine their pre-1989 lives in an attempt to find a way to live peacefully in the new chaotic society? Is it life under post-communist capitalism in the digital age, dominated by advertising and the celebrity culture that makes Hakl's and Balabán's characters worry that it is no longer possible to reach out to human beings and to live one's own, authentic existence? These are the main questions I have examined in this work.

Finally, it would be interesting to consider the relation between the world which Hakl's and Balabán's fiction constructs and the reality which I, the reader living at the present time, perceive on the basis of my own subjective experience.

2. The image of history and the image of society

Poststructuralist theory of literature argues that the meaning of a text cannot be stabilized. However, representatives of New Historicism have reconsidered this statement. They argue that '[a]t the same time, writing and reading are always historically and socially determinate events, performed in the world and upon the world by gendered individual and collective human agents' (Montrose 1989: 23). According to Montrose, 'our analyses and our understandings necessarily proceed from our own historically, socially and institutionally shaped vantage points; that the histories we reconstruct are the textual constructs of critics who are, ourselves, historical objects' (*Ibid*. 23). In other words, they argue that the writing and the reading of texts is a form of momentary construction and reconstruction of one's history and one's present life. Writing is a form of reconstruction of the reality in which the writer's (conscious and unconscious) experience merges with his or her perception of 'now' and results in a single act of the construction of a fictive real. The process of reading is then a form of reconstruction of the fictive reality of another text in which the reader's (conscious and unconscious) experience merges with his or her perception of 'now' and results in a single act of construction of another fictive real. From this point of view, the reality which Hakl and Balabán have constructed in their works is the result of their personal (conscious and unconscious) experience and their perception of the contemporary world. It is a reality that reflects their personal, historically and socially determined values – their individual histories (their upbringing) and their collective

background (human and Czech). It also includes their perception of 'now'. To sum up, their writing is their personal testimony about the life they live. The question is how we, the readers, understand this testimony and how we, the readers, relate to it. It is because we construct our own subjective image of it.

At this point we have to go back to the beginning of this thesis. The task this thesis set itself was to examine the construction of the contemporary reality in selected works of Czech fiction, by Emil Hakl and Jan Balabán. In order to complete the task, this thesis analyzed both Hakl's and Balabán's literary work using a variety of different theoretical approaches to the text. But in relation to what has been said above about the act of reading, it needs to be pointed out that it was the reader (in this case me), who has reconstructed the fictive reality of Hakl's and Balabán's works with regard to his or her own personal (conscious and unconscious) experience of the world and in line with his or her perception of 'now'. According to the poststructuralist theory of multiple meanings, this thesis has provided a reader's understanding of Hakl's and Balabán's works and therefore it has created another fictive reality. According to the theoreticians of New Historicism, this thesis has also created a reader's reconstruction of history – the history that Emil Hakl and Jan Balabán have constructed in their fiction. By trying to analyze it, this thesis has re-constructed it. It is a history of human beings, middle-aged men and women of different age, Czech nationals living in Czech post-communist society of recent times, Czech nationals residing in the city of Prague and in the city of Ostrava, journalists, translators and writers, lost individuals, sensitive and careful observers of the world around them, Emil Hakl-Jan Beneš and Jan Balabán. Nevertheless, it is also a history of the reader's perception of contemporary life and the reality it creates.

This thesis sees the world of Hakl's fiction in terms of loneliness, indecisiveness, wandering, loss, confusion and chaos, but it also sees a world that it is worthwhile to recognize and to accept. It reads the world of Balabán's fiction as a journey of lonely people who have lost their confidence in confusion. Their own world is broken. They struggle to regain stability and happiness. In the end, either they find it in love or they are lost forever. It sees Hakl's and Balabán's fiction as bearing witness to the present, which they perceive as insecure in its relativity and chaotic in its diversity, but interesting to be observed and worthwhile to be written about. It reads Hakl's and Balabán's fiction as testimony about life of contemporary Czech society which, over the last fifty years, has experienced major political, economic, social and cultural upheavals and which is now struggling hard to regain its lost identity and to come to terms with new realities of today.

This thesis considers Hakl's and Balabán's fiction as an attempt to understand the confusion and anxiety around them. It sees that these writers are rather sceptical about what is going on in their society, but they have not lost hope. Otherwise, they would not have been writing.

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