

What distinguishes a great artist from an average one or a mere scribbler? Who is to judge that one text is a piece of art, another just pulp? Certainly, there is literary criticism that we often refer to despite its authority being undermined by postmodernists; for many of whom each text is of equal value and the author is not that important. We need literary criticism for the better appreciation of authors like Proust, T.S. Eliot or Kafka, or we refer to music scholars while listening to Mahler, Schönberg or Scriabin - their art is absorbed gradually and we continuously discover in their work new shades, forms and meanings. There are a number of rare great artists for whom we need no further reference to fully comprehend and admire their art. When we read authors-poets, like the Slovak writer Dominik Tatarka, García Márquez or Bohumil Hrabal, or when we listen to Bruckner, Haydn or Janáček - reading and listening grip our senses and we come close to a spiritual experience or euphoria. The former authors radiate human genius and nobility of spirit, the latter emit "joie de vivre" and humbleness in front of the creator. The art of both is an immense gift that gives meaning to our life, allows us to laugh at the frustrations of daily life. It connects us with kindred spirits near us and also with those that are distant in time and space.

The following excerpts are from an interview with the late Czech writer Bohumil Hrabal conducted by László Szigeti, a Hungarian journalist living in Slovakia. Hrabal died after falling from the 5th floor of a hospital in Prague while feeding birds... Hrabal belongs among authors whose prose tends to lose much in translation. We are thus very thankful to Derek Paton for the mastery translation of the following text. Paton, a Canadian, is an expert on Czech society, history and literature, and has lived in Prague since 1988.

## BOHUMIL HRABAL - LÁSZLÓ SZIGETI

EXCERPTS FROM A SET OF INTERVIEW WITH HRABAL TAKEN AND EDITED IN 1984-85 BY A HUNGARIAN JOURNALIST LIVING IN SLOVAKIA, LÁSZLÓ SZIGETI.

*We thank Mr. Szigeti for granting us the permission to publish these excerpts and for providing us with yet unpublished photos taken by Tibor Hrapka while interviewing Hrabal.*

### ***Don't you like the shade?***

No. I love the dark, but I don't like the shade. If I go out into the street and the sun's shining, I make sure to walk in the sun. Even if it's hot, even if it's forty degrees, I keep walking out of the shade to where there's sun. Don't ask me why. It's been that way since I was a child. Where there's no sun, there's no Hrabal. Except in the pub.

### ***And you love the dark.***

And I like the dark; not impure dark though, but a beautiful night full of stars and even a beautiful night when it's raining, when ...

### ***So it's not the dark, it's the purity, the purifying.***

Exactly. If I had to be in impure darkness, I'd go mad. But - I like being afraid ...

### ***You're not talking about the dark now but about some sort of beauty.***

That's it. Actually about the night; I'm terrified of the dark. But I like being afraid.

***T. S. Eliot didn't like dark either, and he, too, liked tomcats. You said that as a child when you wanted to read you were surrounded by tomcats. In Hungary a book was published in which many poets and prose writers, among them Eliot, write about their attitudes to tomcats. What did you think about tomcats when you were young and what do you think about them now?***

I think I've never devoted myself to a lover as much as I have to cats. With them I experience the shocking syndrome of lovers...

### ***When did this great love begin?***

I remember that I was once on my way home from school in the town of Nymburk and suddenly something was meowing in the grapevine beneath the windows

and I saw a kitten there. It had a pink nose and under its chin and on its paws it was white; its back was greyish. I could tell it was miserable, and when I showed my amazement it cuddled up to me and I felt something I'd never felt before. All of a sudden I was gentle, I even knew at that moment that I could never let that kitten go, that it was mine and that it pressed itself up against me and I fought to get the kitten in our home. It used to sleep with me and if it wasn't with me in the early morning, I'd go out dressed only in my shirt and called out across the meadow, and, with powerful leaps, it always came running out of the malt-house and I cuddled it, and it was wet and smelled of grass. Then we lay in bed, the tomcat stretched out beside me, and I paid close attention not to lie on it, we lay face to face. At the time I was in the cinema and they were showing slapstick films, and one of them was called *Serpentine the Bricklayer*; I now have a feeling it was *Lupino Lane*, and so the tomcat was called *Serpentine*.

***And your love of tomcats has lasted till today?***

Every morning I have to go from Prague out to the town of Kersk to look at them, keep an eye on them, feed them, even when the weather's bad, to keep their spirits up. I also write there of course. They sit and watch me, while my wife screams that I'm playing a Mahler record too loud. I have two tomcats. One is called *Pepito* and the other *Pusinka* (which means 'a kiss'). They sigh softly and listen to Mahler's symphonies, the Sixth, the Tenth, they sigh even more, and then they sleep and they softly sigh in their sleep. Of course whoever keeps tomcats, whoever keeps cats, watch out, I'm also a bit of a farmer. There comes a time when you've got to kill kittens. Ever since my youth it was always me. That's why I love them. I lived with them and I knew that there was no way they could be left to live, so I was the one who dispatched them from this world. I was also the one who last year or the year before last had to put down two cats because I had twelve of them. Two had to go. They had to be shot so there'd be less of them. But there is also less of me ...

***Did you do that out of compassion?***

Well, what would I do with twelve cats? There's no way. You also have to be a farmer, and a farmer who has a farm has to know when to kill something. It has to be the father. We all like to eat steak, well there's got to be someone who is the master of killing, he has to be a butcher. Whoever wants a bit of harmony in the house, well

he can't have fifteen cats. Not to mention in the woods. You see it's enough to have two cats and it'll drive you mad when the cat has kittens and begins to bring home bunny-rabbits. Then you don't know who to indulge. Whether the bunny-rabbits or the cat. And sometimes you're so furious that if you really did have a rifle there, then you'd knock off that dearly beloved cat. Because the bunnies they catch are far more beautiful and gentle than my famous cat. So, Mr Hrabal also has to know how to be cruel, at his own expense of course. I wrote about that in a book which I named after the cat who had to be put down. The story is called *Autičko* (which also means 'little car'); it's about eighty pages long, and I wrote it as an indictment against myself for a crime which was almost against humanity. Because by having to kill two cats, I saw that just as a human being cannot with impunity kill a cat, so in the broader sense neither can he kill a man. And we live in a time when – as I heard in radio report from Vienna, since the end of the war, that is, from 1945 till today, a total of 21 million people have died in battle. Whether in a fight for a better future or out of cruelty, it's all the same, 21 million have been killed, and I have a breakdown because I've had to kill two cats to maintain harmony at home. Because cats which aren't in harmony with this building will make life hell, just like if you had two lovers who came to visit your wife and tell her all about it. So it's better to dispatch the wife or the lover humanely from this world at least in spirit. Except that I had to kill those cats, and that is an indictment not only against me, but also against the whole world, because I wrote that book as a list of charges against myself. It's a ballad. I once again, as I said about *Jarmilka*, went straight to the heart of total realism. It's got a literary form but as an honest journalist I wrote a story about how it all happened to me. We had an almost fatal crash, and I later saw it as an act of retribution. Our Ford Escort was in a head-on crash; it's a miracle we're still alive. Catharsis and my stars.

***Were you driving?***

My wife was. But I was happy that I felt it was retribution for my causing the death of two cats. It seems to me that in the message of that story, in the telling, I stepped beyond something, the boundary, where it then ceased to be literature.

***Mr Hrabal, what about that transcendence?***

That won't help you. All the great lovers – in

Dostoyevsky too – were sometimes close to killing the ones they loved. And I also loved those cats, but some of them had to go. Them or me. I couldn't stand the noise at home anymore. All the great writers know that, and they've come up against the problem; almost everybody has. Just like Livy, who wrote a history of the world, writes that he never met a man in the whole wide world who hadn't wanted to commit suicide, I, too, have never met anybody who wouldn't have wanted to dispatch from this world some creature they loved. But it takes place only in the words 'I could just kill you' and 'I could just shoot all those cats', whereas I actually did it. What is the difference, then, between that conditional 'I could just' and 'I have'? According to Christ, anyone who coveted his neighbour's wife, or if you wanted to screw her, as we say, then in your heart you've already had intercourse with her. Light on the horizon...

***And that's a sin.***

Yes. For me too. I'm cat-lover, but when the time comes, since the age of twelve, I'm always the one who ended up with the task, and I always either drowned the cats or killed them by bashing them against the cement. It was me; my mother just about went mad. I only know that I'd done something terrible; the blood rushed to my head at the very thought, and I have the impression that I had been committing a crime since those childhood days. It had to be done, and I did it. Because I loved them, and still love them today ... the cats.

***What other crimes do you have on your conscience?***

Well, that sometimes ... What on earth is the difference between whether you kill or someone kills you? Sometimes in life when a person returns to that fact that he's hurt some young woman, he simply wasn't interested in her, he abandoned her, and she writes you and asks you again and again and again to be part of your world, and you wouldn't listen to her at all. That is also in a certain sense psychological murder. Those are problems we come up against; that is the other side of my *ludibronism*, of my blethering of melancholia, of my hominism - not humanism – that even I am able to be, or have to be, cruel sometimes. But I am usually cruel even towards myself. I am not making light of anything, I'm increasing the feelings of guilt in my case, I even, when something horrible happens in the world, take it like I had done it or as if it had been done by me. Those big massacres, everything that happens, it's me. That is what

I learned from Schopenhauer and he learned it from Indian philosophy. I see how people are shot in the back of the head, during a war, the innocent, and it's me. And that cat, the killed cat, it's me. When I see a dog that's been run over somewhere, then it's me; in other words that profound sympathy. Sometimes it happens that out of sympathy we let live some miserable, abandoned cat which has practically been starved to death. Well, isn't it more humane to shoot it? When ... That you help it over to the other side. That is also a job of a man who calls himself a lover; indeed what I experience with cats, the way we understand each other, there's nothing like that any more...

***Can you tell me their names again...***

Pepito, a greyish tomcat, and Pusinka, a ginger tom, that's Pusinka like the Real Club Madrid are Pusinkas.

***Are they different from each other in any way?***

They are as different as chalk and cheese. They've got completely different natures. Pusinka is always elegant and eats slowly and is quiet and the way he expresses himself is sweet as pie, chaste. Pepito likes to eat, is always making a racket, calling us; he's very expressive with sounds, and he eats, actually devours, and he has no qualms about letting himself be pampered, whereas Pusinka is scrumptious – And that's the way I am: when I like animals I can't have fifteen of them. They go mad then. They get so jealous! I once had six or maybe even nine of them; they'll actually turn your little home into a hell. Inferno non Paradiso.

***And you turned killing a cat into a psychological problem ...***

No less than Dostoyevsky did.

***You wrote in your Něžný barbar (Gentle Barbarian) about Vladimír that his illnesses amount to good health. In that case it's true for you as well.***

I have to go back. Dostoyevsky did it as an intellectual who investigated by means of Roskolnikov to see if he could take it. Two women, what's more nothing special, not worth much at all, so that if he kills them nothing will happen. In other words he was exploring the question of moral conscience and the conscience of that *Weltgefühl, Welthafte*, I grant you that. Whereas I killed for the reason that there was nothing else to be done, because the cats were going mad together and I was

going mad because of them, I was done for out of a love of cats, and it was either going to be I who was going to hang himself or one of them was going to go. It was a question that I always see come up in the case of farmers, and of people who live in the country and are, in my opinion, incomparably cruel to animals, but that's

have Stavrogin, and one can say that it is him in those figures, there are his devils who control him, there's his sacred disease. And in the Brothers Karamazov! That is where Dostoevsky splits into parts. He's simultaneously Alyosha, the intellectual Ivan, the spontaneous Mityenka and also the old and lascivious Karamazov.



the way it has to be. A dog has to be tied up; there can only be as many cats as the farmer can give milk to and so that they catch mice for him, and the rest have to go. That's my view as a farmer who wants to have a certain harmony in his house among the animals which are there. But someone has to be the master of killing.

***What do you think: did Dostoevsky kill?***

Dostoevsky was not far from killing somebody, and then the motif appears in him, and always only a tiny bit beforehand ... or else he'll kill! We have Raskolnikov, we

***And I think he's also that wanton Grushenka?***

Grushenka! O.K., Grushenka! Careful, she's a saint! The women there completely save the men. And in general in Russia, all the men have women beside them who save them. O my dear Mityenka!

***And do they also save you?***

I haven't really noticed. I've tended always to be saved by a man. You see, I've loved too much, and never wanted anything other than to marry with the sort of love in life and in death. I have been terribly in love, four times



in all, and it always lasted four years. Indeed my famous jobs also lasted four years; four years in Kladno, four years in the theatre, four years in the waste paper warehouse and four years on the railway. But I always loved the object of my rather erotic love in such a way that I resembled an infatuated puppy, the ten of diamonds in the card-game mariáš, where there's a bear-handler with a bear with a ring in its nose. The bear was me. And I always wanted to marry, but my sweethearts decided that I wasn't suitable for marriage, that I was a person too lost in dreams, and that I spent more than I earn and and it always came to naught, so that I was usually left alone. And I broke down, broke down...

***Is that perhaps why you write more about men than about women?***

Or maybe now ought to begin to write. Now ...! Look, The Haircutting for example is told by mother, the trilogy I'm writing now is narrated with great laughter by my wife. They are the manuscripts of women who talk about their husbands. One talks about Picasso, the second about Tostoy and the third about Dostoevsky. Mrs Dostoevsky talks about her husband. And it seems to me that the women defend their husbands too much and tend to stylize them into great artists and great people. I came to the conclusion that I would have my wife talking in completely the opposite way. I already wrote one volume, and have just finished writing the second where my wife is talking about me and she is continually taking me down a notch; she tends to portray my negative sides. Men's manners are, after all, dreadful.

***And are you writing fact or fiction?***

Not fiction, more like the truth. Careful: everything is true.

***How much of that has been published?***

Nothing yet. The third volume I have in outline, but my wife is talking about me and she's taking me down a peg or two. Not that she would cut me down completely; she's talking about me the way I am, describing all my characteristics, my baseness. And I was driven to that precisely by the three books I had read, mainly by Mrs Dostoevsky. But I have the impression that the book of Mrs Pasternak has just come out in Paris, in which she talks about her husband. Unfortunately I don't have it. It is said to be excellent. Those women... look at the Russians, they always have women at their sides, and Frenchmen have women at their side who are their equal. The women know whom they're with and they

are their men's match. Jackson Pollock, my beloved painter, who ended by killing himself in a car, had a woman by his side, Lee Krassner is her name, and she isn't his Beatrice, she's the woman whom he lived with and who, despite all the nearly metaphysical sufferings was with him and told him what he had to do, so that when she speaks it's the same thing as if he were speaking. And she is still painting in gestures to the present day.

***If you have sympathy for the damned, do you perhaps know in which way you yourself are damned?***

I was never damned. Even though you have experienced sufferings because of love or if you have to do something you don't want to do, that doesn't mean being damned. Because my fate probably wasn't that I'd be damned. But through sympathy, as I learned, just like that, as a child and later from Schopenhauer, through sympathy I was immediately affected by a person who was damned. And I'd say that I have tried to portray a lot of those people in my stories. Even Jarmilka ought to be damned. But she isn't. In fact she's the Virgin Mary. One man doesn't want her because she's pregnant, everyone makes fun of her and she glows with something like – not happiness, but a sort of blessedness of the poor in spirit, there is something in her like those figures on the tympanum of a cathedral. That's always where the blessed are. Those people to whom neither birth nor death nor suffering relates any more and who are incomprehensibly happy in this world. And in fact their lives are such that you sometimes envy them it, because these people do not suffer from ennui. I always suffered from ennui or profound melancholy, but melancholy is, as we have learned from Mr Jaspers, a limit-category, even a mood is a limit-category. That mood, that's immensely fruitful, because you may be alone but it is such a sparkling solitude, and one can even say – after all one learns it from others – that it is sought after, even artificially induced by alcohol so that you suffer from ennui, so that you're melancholic – because in that situation you are most susceptible to what is called firm revelation. Suddenly something simply comes, an idea appears to you which you could've expected only in that melancholy. In that sort of hip-hip-hooray, in tremendous joy, you don't find that certain idea. It has to be in quiet, in the depths of melancholy. Leibniz's sentence on the melancholy of an infinite construction, that's a sort of a basic sentence for me. I know in that melancholy that I shall die; in that profound

melancholy I know that even that starry sky will one day come crashing down, but nevertheless there's a moment here in which I suddenly feel that that eternity will last and that I am, that sometimes I'm even the one who I am. That which was to Moses by God. Except that happens to us only a couple of times in our lives. Dostoevsky says when he had an epileptic fit, which didn't last long, fifteen seconds, he seemed to see what Breton had been trying for, that glass house in which everything is under glass, where there's a glass staircase, glass walls, a glass bed and he is lying there and is covered with a glass blanket on which sooner or later appears the words etched with a diamond: Who am I. One could say that writing is inquiring as to what I am; you never know. And if you do, then you're brilliant; young people can be affected by that. A prose writer finds that out by that whole process and perhaps sees it a few minutes before his death, but he is always on guard, like Zen Buddhists, and what does a Zen Buddhist do? He meditates, reads and watches out for when one sentence appears. And when that one sentence arrives, then his heavens are saved, and he cures with that one sentence, revives another person. It is the boss at the intersection of the ribs in a vault. In other words, you see my writing is also a continual inquiry into my last definition of myself. And was I ever in my life ever identical, the way Koh-i-noor Waldes snap-fasteners are identical to one another. And you are identical, but suddenly you're split, *kein Objekt ohne Subjekt*. And you're already in that rattling along, in that Kant, there is no *Ding an sich selbst*, and if there is, you reach it like you reach a Platonic idea, like Kierkegaard by a leap, like a Christian by that miracle or by grace. A writer, too, has it, writing is in a certain sense asking for help from others, an invocation. I always like to quote what others say. When I'm identical to them, I agree with them, but I keep asking myself about my mission and by asking about my mission I am simultaneously asking about the mission of my fellow man, my fellow citizens. In fact, literature has the mission of sometimes asking about the fate of people all over the world. That is given to geniuses like Mr Dostoevsky, like Bruno Schulz, like Babel, like Mr Hemingway, like Whitman, who inspire boys in Africa, Japan and all sorts of other places. But the stories have been written from completely different milieux, some are from Russia, some from America, some from France; the ancient Chinese died out long ago, but it happened that Lao-tse inspired Henry Miller only now, in the middle of the twentieth century. Only now are Lao-tse's writings com-

prehensible because the crisis of the world has reached the stage where suddenly we understand The Canonic Book of Virtue and we understand Mr Lao-tse who left China in the sixth century and disappeared somewhere in India because it seemed to him that society and order in the country where he lived where not in harmony with how he thought things ought to be and the way the elders had taught him. That is also an answer to the question of identity, and my identity, too, because I think that I looked for who I am in others and probably that's also why I am so fond of communicating with others. I think it follows from what's been said so far that what I like best of all is living in communication. That's the defence against boredom and ennui. Communication is the neck of the bottle through which I gurgle to those other people. In communication I'm able to be, and I've been with cats since my childhood because it's so easy to reach a tomcat's soul, to win it over, make friends with it like with people. And I know that the cats count on me. I've had them in Kersk for fifteen years, they patiently wait for me to come home only for them. Because it's snowing and it's been raining for a long time, I've got to be with them because they are my friends, I have to give them milk and meat, but when I arrive they don't want to eat, they want me to pamper them for a while, they're waiting to hear a word from a human being. That is the communication which for me is a symbol of the relation to the rest of nature; I consider any time of the year beautiful because I am in love with nature, I am pregnant with it ...

### *What god do you believe in?*

Definitely not in a god as a person. That god is in me. Not that it would be Bohumil Hrabal; but in my soul I literally feel that I am allied with something, even that I have a place there somewhere able to communicate which is higher than I am, which has a higher charge, which is transcendental and that is always heading towards metaphysics. In other words it's that certain good which achieves that tiny bit of progress in the world, and every person in the world believes in it. And that good which achieves that tiny step forward, and I feel, and not only I but others too, that this step is a God. God is always good, in my opinion. The problem is, of course, that why he uses evil. Obviously, it is light and shadow, and everything has its opposite, and only a certain synthesis of these opposites is that which is redolent of something we call God. In other words, for me it is also in Christ and it is mainly in Lao-tse, it is a path. And by

that path I find out when I've met with that good and when, on the other hand, I've been abandoned by that good. But I always make a concerted effort to find it, it's a continuous road to something called the light. My God is my native language. The word ...

***You've surely had lovers and friends who've let you down and abandoned you, haven't you?***

Sure. My angels have vanished. And then I had to find out by groping with my feet that there was almost a chasm in front of me. Like a real trapper it seems I had to wait. I waited. I waited anxiously in real darkness and I was waiting for a light somewhere, for a signal, simply for somebody almost to hold out a hand, one of my friends, or I heard that voice we were talking about. If somebody had groped his way to Mr Mayakovsky at that particular moment he wouldn't have knocked himself off. It would have been enough to overcome that particular moment; but nobody came, not even a friend, not even his wife, in short, for Mayakovsky it must have been like it is for me, he simply waited... I was anxiously waiting for weeks sweating, wasting away, sleepless, for someone to come from outside, and it was actually that angel in disguise, Uncle Pepin came, an angel disguised as Uncle Pepin, as Mr Karel Maryska or as ... Olinka Micková came and said, *Bogan, let's go, let's go and play tennis...* but I've never been in the sort of situation where I'd want to throw myself under a train or drown myself. On the contrary.

***And what about death Mr Hrabal?***

I once handed in my notice to Death. You know, Death is a letter written in white chalk on a white board; death is a jammed typewriter, a robotic machine that produces mangled rejects, an invisible threatening hand without fingers, death is an express train falling into a bottomless chasm, little figures poured out of an aeroplane that's exploded. Till the last moment, though, there's always hope for life. The fear that there is nothing more to fear. This very evening you shall sit down with Abraham. Although God knows that I would rather not eat. I gave Death notice ... by wanting to live.

***You said that after the car crash you looked at people differently. Were you both close to death?***

Ever since my operation I look at people differently. From a distance I can tell who's holding his gall bladder, from a distance I see the diabetic reeling, I see his strained eye, that sweet illness, on account of which one has to go everywhere with scales and a watch, I can recognize by the ashen face all the bad livers, I can tell who'll snuff it within six months, the eyes which are always saying goodbye to everything and are already looking at the other side of the door handle. I see that most people are limping and staggering, I see the nervous ticks in sleepless eyes, I recognize the hand pressing the thyroid gland, I see the wrinkles which are the result of extracted molars, I see the carefulness of chewing with false teeth and gum disease, I see the painfully treading heels with calcified tendons, the shaking of alcoholics' fingers, I see women leaving the hospital in tears because they've left their husbands there, I see men walking out of the local-authority services where they have organized their wives' funerals; the only healthy ones I see are young people, who are happy they're ill because of their glands and because of love. Why didn't I see it before? Didn't I see it properly? That's why there are so few suicides, because when a person's breathing is fucked up he begins to have hope and faith that the cancerous lesion will disappear, that the cancer of afflicted lungs will disappear with radiation treatment, that a miracle will take place, you know that is why there are beautiful eyes saying goodbye continually leaving somebody. You know, of all instruments I like the needle best. Instead of a head it has an eye through which you pass the thread and only then can you sew with it. Sometimes when I look at a moonlit night, I have a strong feeling that someone has poured the moonlight up into my brain, and so I see things I don't know anything about. I suspect that the greatest misfortune that mankind can meet with is healthy people. So the healthiest people in the world are sick and full of suffering...

*The Insulted and Injured.*

Translated by Derek Paton