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WITNESSES OF (GOOD) OLD TIMES: ON PERCEPTION IN BOHUMIL HRABAL'S NOVEL *HARLEQUIN'S MILLIONS*

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Abstract

Based on previously published articles dealing with the outer and inner space in Bohumil Hrabal's novel *Harlequin's Millions*, this study is devoted to the phenomenon of "the witnesses of (good) old times" who, as characters, occupy a great deal of the narration, yet are simultaneously a purely surrealistic illusion within the fictional world. The theoretical point of departure is perception, embedded in the wider scope of consciousness and motion (kinetics). Thus, within the narration, a special form of perception arises, oscillating between the purely sensory perception of the witnesses and their being conceived of as mental images, despite their real life actions as characters in the novel's narration. Hrabal himself ironically designated the novel as "a fairy tale", thereby intentionally questioning the degree of truthfulness of this highly biographical fiction.

Keywords: *Czech Literature; Bohumil Hrabal*

In 1981, the Czech author Bohumil Hrabal (1914-1997) published the novel *Harlequin's Millions* (*Harlekýnovy miliony*; Československý Spisovatel), that had its final (fourth) version in 1994, when the novel appeared in Hrabal's complete works.¹ The coming into being of the final version was rather complicated, due on the one hand to Hrabal's own habit of – partially or fully – rewriting his texts, while on the other due to the demands of the time before the Velvet Revolution. Therefore, the 1994 version is regarded as the basic, canonical text which should, in turn, serve as the source text for translations.²

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The plot of the novel starts approximately at the point where Hrabal's novella 'The Little Town Where Time Stood Still', i.e. chapter 11,³ ends. Uncle Pepin has recently been transferred to a home for elderly people in Špork's castle, near the "little town where time stood still" (Lysá nad Labem nearby Nymburk). Here he spends the last part of his life and factually dies. Particularly remarkable are the multitude of motifs in the novel *Harlequin's Millions*, including the motif which also encompasses the book's title itself. This motif is in fact based on a musical composition for ballet by Riccardo Drigo (1846-1930) and popularized by Jiří Malásek (1927-1983). He was the author of many background musical arrangements and, as a pianist, the performer of many romantic melodies. It is this arrangement that was used by Hrabal for the title of his novel.⁴ In Hrabal's setting of the novel, this melody was used as an auditive means to tranquillize the elderly people in and outside of the castle. Likewise, it created a smooth atmosphere within the building and in its external environs, therefore performing a connective function as well. The music itself was not only of a sentimental character, but also sounded iconically: the trembling sound of the violins potentially symbolizing the trembling of the elderly people. As a refrain, it repeats throughout the story, while in a literary sense, one could speak of it as a *leitmotiv*, offering many of the story's dynamics their own certain rhythm. Thus, such a novel, already possessing the title of a musical composition, naturally invites a sensorial approach to its literary analysis.

In a previous article devoted to this novel,⁵ I conceived a scheme for the various senses within a sensory system and subsequently placed this in a wider scope of consciousness and motion. Since this article was written in Czech, I will now briefly present this particular scheme,⁶ as well as the results of my research into the function of sensorial impressions in the novel:

↓ A) Consciousness, process of awareness (recognition), subconsciousness

↑ B) Spiritual activity:

- a. imagination, thinking
- b. understanding, interpretation
- c. evaluation, verification, identification, etc.

↑ ↓ C) Sensorial activity:

1. exteroception:

- a. visual, auditory, olfactory, taste impressions, feeling (from without)

↑ b. interrelationship between these extero-senses

↓

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