

# PRAGUE AS THE SITE OF DEFENESTRATION: ON THE TWENTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF BOHUMIL HRABAL'S DEATH

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“How many times I’ve crossed the road at the red, how many times I’ve walked through the stream of traffic, but in spite of being lost in thought, I am accompanied always by my guardian angel, my little guardian angel, because this guardian angel of mine wants me to remain in this world as yet, in order to reach the final bottom, to go down yet one more flight, to the place of the ultimate pit of remorse, because the whole world hurts, and even that guardian angel of mine hurts, how many times, I’ve felt like jumping from the fifth floor, from my apartment where every room hurts, but always at the last moment my guardian angel saves me, he pulls me back,.....”<sup>1</sup>

Bohumil Hrabal penned these heartrending lines in a short reflective text, “The Magic Flute,” on January 17, 1989, two days after he witnessed police brutality against demonstrators commemorating the twentieth anniversary of Jan Palach’s self-immolation in Prague.<sup>2</sup> This text marks the beginning of Hrabal’s chronological documentation of momentous events leading up to and immediately following the fall of Communism in Czechoslovakia. Hrabal published the documentation, consisting of ten texts, a year later in the collection *Listopadový uragán* (*The November Hurricane*).<sup>3</sup> In addition to the observa-

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1. “The Magic Flute,” in *Total Fears: Letters to Dubenka* 11. *Total Fears* is a collection of translated texts selected from three volumes: *Listopadový uragán* (*The November Hurricane*), *Ponorné říčky* (*Subterranean Streams*), and *Růžový kavalír* (*The Rosenkavalier*). These three books, all published in the early nineties, make up Volume 1—*Dopisy Dubence* (*Letters to Dubenka*)—of the Czech edition of Hrabal’s *Collected Writings*.

2. Jan Palach was a philosophy student who in protest against the 1968 Soviet-led invasion set himself on fire in Prague, on Wenceslav Square, on January 15, 1969.

3. *Listopadový uragán* was published in April 1990, in 150,500 copies. Hrabal termed these texts “lyrical reportages.”

tions of historical changes sweeping across Eastern Europe, the collection also contains impressions of the United States (or to use Hrabal's term: *Spokojené státy* ("the Delighted States")), which the writer visited in March of that tumultuous year upon the invitation of his late-life muse April Gifford.<sup>4</sup> Hrabal juxtaposes these two very distinct worlds—one politically tense, the other peacefully content—not only to underscore political disparities, but also to reflect his own emotional upheaval during that time. As he is wrought with fear and hope for his country, simultaneously he is charmed and startled by America. His conflicting feelings and reactions endow the text with an anxious tension that is further deepened by Hrabal's overall state of mind—the realization that he has reached the "peak of emptiness" both as a writer and individual.<sup>5</sup> Thus the entire collection, notwithstanding the euphoric concluding texts about the Velvet Revolution and Václav Havel's candidacy to the presidential post, reads as one of Hrabal's most anguished and most filled with foreboding.

The opening text of the collection, "The Magic Flute," is especially laden with anxiety and sorrow. Hrabal wrote it at a time when the end of Communism was as yet unimaginable and when the pain caused by the loss of several of his loved ones, most of all his wife, was still too raw. Ultimately his political and personal despair is channeled into musings about suicide—a jump out of a window is particularly alluring. Hrabal presents this yearning for the abyss below the window not only as an inner compulsion, but also as an affliction that is all too common among Prague writers who followed the "hallowed" tradition of defenestration.<sup>6</sup> Throughout the text he recalls writers who had fantasized about, or succumbed to, self-defenestration, paying tribute to them and inscribing their imagined or real act into cultural memory. Ultimately, he shares their fascination for the strong pull toward flight, alluding to it as an inescapable destiny that is tied to the nation's memory, one that also overpowers him both as an artist and an individual.

Eight years after writing "The Magic Flute" and seven years after democracy was restored to Czechoslovakia, on February 3, 1997, Hrabal "fell"—in a gesture both poetic and poignant—from a fifth floor window of the University Hospital Bulovka in Prague. Death was immediate. Doctors categorically

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4. The addressee of the letters, April Gifford, was at the time a graduate student in the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures at Stanford University. Hrabal renamed her Dubenka. They met in Prague at Hrabal's favorite pub "U Zlatého tygra" ("At the Golden Tiger").

5. The choice of the collection's English title *Total Fears* is appropriate, reflecting the author's mental state—one of paralyzing anxiety.

6. The word defenestration originates from the Latin *de* (out of) and *fenestra* (window). Historically it connotes the forcible removal of an adversary by means of throwing him out of a window. Self-defenestration is to throw oneself from a window. In this essay, I will use the term defenestration in its most general meaning—the fall out of a window—be it an involuntary or voluntary act.

dismissed depression, alcoholism, or foul play as a cause of death (Mazal 30). According to the head physician, Professor Pavel Dungal of the orthopedic clinic at the Bulovka hospital, where the patient was treated for vertebro-genic algic syndrome, the unfortunate event happened during a time of noon rest, when Hrabal was alone. The physician recalled the conversation he had with the writer just a few hours prior to his fall:

“How did you sleep?”

He only grunted: “I slept, I slept ...”

And then he said: “Today, Hlaváček<sup>7</sup> waved to me.”

“What?!”

“Hlaváček waved to me from the cemetery, he invited me over,” he repeated. (online)<sup>8</sup>

The hospital window, indeed, provided Hrabal with a direct view of the Libeň cemetery where the writer’s favorite poet and painter Karel Hlaváček is buried. But what surprised the physician the most was not that Hrabal heeded this beckoning. After all, the writer had talked to him about his admiration for the Russian poet Sergei Esenin, whom he considered a giant because “he had written down everything he considered important and he also squandered everything; he drank away his family inheritance, then arrived at his estate and hanged himself.”<sup>9</sup> Rather it was Hrabal’s ability to find the strength to climb out the window that gave the physician pause: “He built a podium and steps from the books he had here and climbed up on the windowsill” (*ibid.*).

Some believe Hrabal succumbed to his whimsy of bird-feeding when he climbed on to the hospital window to be closer to the pigeons and “fell out.” Perhaps, as was poetically noted in one obituary, Hrabal wanted to imitate the gliding of his beloved cooing darlings—“messengers of God,” as he called them. Thus with this act, Prague, a welcoming hostel to people, birds, and

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7. Karel Hlaváček (1874–1898) was a poet and painter. He was a member of the Czech Decadent and Symbolist movements.

8. /mbasic.facebook.com/notes/nemocnice-na-bulovce/přednosta-ortopedické-kliniky-nemocnice-na-bulovce-prof-pavel-dungal-vzpomíná-na-/625403724202608/ Accessed March 28, 2014.

Dan Hrubý, “Lékař, který léčil Bohumila Hrabala: Jsem přesvědčen, že spáchal sebevraždu” (“The Physician Who Treated Bohumil Hrabal: I am convinced he committed suicide”): <http://www.reflex.cz/clanek/zpravy/55485/lekar-ktery-lecil-bohumila-hrabala-jsem-presvedcen-ze-spachal-sebevrazdu.html>; Accessed March 26, 2014.

9. Translation mine. /mbasic.facebook.com/notes/nemocnice-na-bulovce/přednosta-ortopedické-kliniky-nemocnice-na-bulovce-prof-pavel-dungal-vzpomíná-na-/625403724202608/ Accessed March 28, 2014. In spite of his admiration for Esenin, Hrabal was wrong about most of the facts of his life. Esenin was of peasant stock and had no “inheritance” to squander. He did become a well-earning poet, wasting his earnings (for a while together with his wife, famous barefoot dancer Isidora Duncan) and he hanged himself in the hotel Astoria in Leningrad (in 1925).

poets, frequently apostrophized as a “hundred-speared airport of pigeons,” was granted one more defenestration.<sup>10</sup>

Ten days after the fateful fall, Hrabal’s readers, who used to stand in endless queues to purchase his books, filled up the large ceremonial hall of the Strašnice Crematorium in Prague. They accompanied the king of “palaverers” (the writer’s own term for his meandering dreamers who live not by actions, but by their incessant talk)<sup>11</sup> on his final journey. Close friends, actors, filmmakers, the minister of culture, and the painter Jiří Kolář, who arrived from Paris, were present. The gypsy band “Kormani” honored him with a wistful ballad, “The Gypsy Cry.” At the pub U Zlatého tygra where the writer was a regular, a mourning observance predictably took the form of “a beer celebration” (Pytlík online). Many obituaries appeared in the press. Yet closure was not achieved. The question, whether the writer’s final flight was an unfortunate accident, a well-thought-out act, or an intentional imitation of his art, is still open.

Indeed, Hrabal’s manner of death makes this query especially difficult. To his readers it is clear that he died in very much the same way as if he had written it. The motif of death, especially the incessant preoccupation with suicide, is present not only in “The Magic Flute,” but also in much of his other work. It appears in many different forms and shapes, from the poignantly mundane to the disturbingly non-normative. Three examples will suffice to show not only the variations on this motif, but also Hrabal’s accepting attitude toward a voluntary departure from the desires and pains of life.

One of Hrabal’s most memorable portrayals of suicide occurs in the novella *Closely Watched Trains* (1965).<sup>12</sup> In this coming-of-age story, which takes place during the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia, a young train dispatcher worries not about the fate of his country, but about his sexual immaturity manifested by “ejaculation praecox.” Ultimately, his despair leads him to cut his wrists in a hotel bathtub—a scene conveyed with such melancholic understanding and gentle humor that it becomes unforgettable.

Indeed, Hrabal’s depictions of suicide can be quite humorous, even whimsical. This aspect is fully explored in the short story “The World Cafeteria” (1964),<sup>13</sup> where a young woman obsessed with death tries to convince her all

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10. The author of this obituary not only suggests that Hrabal committed suicide, but also that he had placed himself into the defenestration history of Prague by the very method of ending his life.

According to Dungl, Hrabal’s fall due to bird-feeding is a myth created by the chief police investigator involved in the case. See [mbasic.facebook.com/notes/nemocnice-na-bulovce/přednosta-ortopedické-kliniky-nemocnice-na-bulovce-prof-pavel-dungl-vzpomíná-na-625403724202608/](https://mbasic.facebook.com/notes/nemocnice-na-bulovce/přednosta-ortopedické-kliniky-nemocnice-na-bulovce-prof-pavel-dungl-vzpomíná-na-625403724202608/) Accessed March 28, 2014.

11. Hrabal described his style of narration as palavering (*pábení*).

12. The film adaptation *Closely Watched Trains*, 1966, has its origins in Hrabal’s *Legenda o Kainovi* (*The Legend of Cain*, 1949).

13. “The World Cafeteria” (“Automat svět”) belongs to a collection of stories titled *Pábitelé* (*Palaverers*). The story was adapted to film in 1965.

too methodical and rational fiancé to jump hand-in-hand with her from a third floor window. Although the pair prepares for the event, washing up and donning their finest clothes, the fiancé backs out of the suicide plan. His reason is not fear nor regret for leaving this world prematurely, but rather something more tangible—physical disfiguration. The presence of an antenna on the first floor threatens to cut off an ear or nose, and as an aesthete he cares about his appearance even after death. Eventually, the suicidal call becomes too strong to resist in the case of the young woman who, unbeknownst to her fiancé, fulfills her death wish alone. In this story Hrabal's tone remains playful to the very end, never veering off into the pathetic or tragic.

Tragedy is reserved for Hrabal's most serious and important work, *Too Loud a Solitude*.<sup>14</sup> Here suicide becomes a form of response to the cultural devastation caused by the Nazi and Communist regimes.<sup>15</sup> After thirty-five years of compacting wastepaper and censored works of literature, art, philosophy, and science, the main character Hant'a, who performs this heart-breaking job in order to rescue individual books from the hydraulic press for posterity, no longer sees the point. A group of young brigade workers also compacting books, but culturally ignorant and disinterested, provoke such despair in him, such hopelessness about the future that he decides to find solace in the bales of compacted paper. Clutching to his heart a volume of Novalis, with his finger marking the sentence that had always filled him with rapture, "Every beloved object is the center of the garden of paradise" (97), he curls up into a ball among the wastepaper and presses the start button of the enormous compactor. He literally becomes one with the book and all that it stands for. His suicide goes unnoticed, as does his protest against the cruelties of humanity against itself. His outcry that "neither the heavens are humane nor is any man with a head on his shoulders" (*ibid.*) remains a sad, unanswered refrain.

Although these three fictional portrayals of suicide represent only a small sample of Hrabal's continuous and complex exploration of the theme, they are typical in their matter-of-fact tone, as if suicide was an integral part of anyone's life. In 1989, following a four-year hiatus from writing, the motif reemerges in the autobiographical documentary prose *The November Hurricane*. The texts in this collection, written "a la prima," spontaneously, uninhibitedly, and most of all fervently, gave rise to a more immediate and intimate presentation of suicide. This is especially evident in "The Magic Flute," where preoccupation with death is so incessant that it involves practically every person mentioned in the text including the author himself.

Hrabal's narratorial I is specifically drawn to self-defenestration. This lure

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14. The author was proud that the critic Susan Sontag predicted that this novel would prove "one of the twenty books that would shape literature in the twentieth century" (*Total Fears* 78).

15. *Příliš hluchá samota* (*Too Loud a Solitude*) was officially published in Czechoslovakia in 1990; however, it also came out in a highly edited version in *Kluby poezie* (*Poetry Clubs*) in 1981 and in exile in 1977. It was widely distributed in samizdat as were many other Hrabal texts.

is clearly and persuasively explained as if understanding and absolution were sought from the reader. He states that the reason for wanting to jump out of a window is caused by personal and historical circumstances: "I'm hurt now, not just by my own little bedroom, I'm hurt by this whole town in which I live" (*Total Fears* 11). Hrabal's private pain stems from the recent and successive loss of his loved-ones: his brother Slávek, wife Eliška (nicknamed Pipsi), and life-long friend Karel Marysko. Although the death of all three is a great source of his loneliness, only his wife's passing is mentioned in this text: "my wife found it better to depart this life also, just like Pearl, daughter of the rabbi from Bratislava, she who loved me and I her, because she was so much like my wife Pipsi,..." (14). It is worthwhile to consider the first part of the above sentence in the original: "moje žena odešla raději." The presence of the adverb "raději" (better) and the verb "odešla" (to depart) conveys an active participation of the subject (the English translation accurately reflects this as well). In other words, Hrabal's stylistic choice carries the implication that his wife made a decision not to fight for this life anymore, instead to voluntarily depart, as it was better for her that way.<sup>16</sup> Although the author's tone is tender and accepting here, he does not disguise the profound sadness stemming from the solitude caused by her "departure."

The historical circumstances that distress Hrabal are embodied within the context of "the whole town" he lives in. For centuries Prague has been plagued by tragedies of self-immolation, defenestration, invasion, displacement, war, and political upheaval. And during his lifetime, spanning most of the twentieth century, he witnessed them all. In January 1989, as the author once again sees violence and police brutality on the streets of Prague, he is overwhelmed by utter despair, penetrating pain, guilt, and paralyzing fear for his nation and himself. Unable to join the demonstrators because he had reached the "final state of perturbation," he realizes that he is "no longer good for anything":

"I know I've no longer got it in me, by mistake I'd get what was coming to me, as the water cannon broke my back and the sharp needle of that tear-gas tore out my eyes, like Oedipus Rex, crushed by fate, tearing his eyes out of their sockets ..." (19).<sup>17</sup>

The author's fears and feelings of complete dejection reveal more than just self-chastising. Presented within the context of Greek mythology, Hrabal connects his destiny to that of Oedipus, suggesting a belief in the inevitability of fate and its cruel continuum. Thus, as he positions his fantasy of falling from a window almost casually next to the other self-defenestrations either evoked or carried out by writers of Prague from past times, such an end seems fated,

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16. Hrabal's wife suffered from pancreatic cancer.

17. Throughout the entire collection Hrabal expresses feelings of guilt caused by what he sees as his own political failure, specifically complicity with the Communist regime, or perhaps more accurately, a sense of not having resisted the regime enough.

irrevocable. Moreover, the inclusion of other self-defenestrations underplays the uniqueness of the act itself. It prompts the reader of "The Magic Flute" to ponder not only whether Hrabal had a presentiment that suicide would become his final choice or whether life cruelly imitated art, but also why jumping from a window is so common in the cultural landscape of Prague.

Fantasies about self-defenestration have been part of the consciousness of Prague writers for quite some time. Hrabal notes that the contemplations of Franz Kafka were very much the same as his own, for "he too was hurt by the world, and hurt by his life" and he too "wanted to jump out of the fifth floor window, from the Maison Oppelt, which you enter from the Old Town Square, but the Herr Doctor would have fallen into Pařížská [into Paris Avenue]..." (*Total Fears* 11). Indeed, a closer look at Kafka's diaries reveals at least ten direct references to falling, jumping, or being forcibly thrown from windows. These thoughts occupied the writer more than fleetingly. In 1911, for example, he wrote: "To awaken on a cold autumn morning full of yellowish light. To force your way through the half-shut window and while still in front of the panes, before you fall, to hover, arms extended, belly arched, legs curved backwards, like the figures on the bows of ships in old times" (*Diaries, 1910–23* (14 November 1911) 117). Kafka's description of his imagined falling body is not only poetic, but also mythical. As if the final fall could inscribe his body onto a frame of ancient times, times when carved figures were placed on the bows of ships, times when the boundaries of a landlocked country were not defined. In other words, Kafka's imagined self-defenestration encompasses something mysterious, adventurous, fantastical, but most of all, eternal—transcending space and time.<sup>18</sup>

A similarly paradoxical desire for immortality through self-defenestration appears in the suicide of the poet Konstantin Biebl (1898–1951). Hrabal writes that Biebl "jumped out of the window, but first, and this was a long time before, he had Jindřich Štyrský (1899–1942) paint him a picture, of a man falling backwards out of a window, just like turning the page of a book" (*Total Fears* 11).<sup>19</sup> This premeditated visual depiction of an act that anticipates Biebl's dramatic end places the poet in the cultural memory of a nation, at least for as long as the picture exists.

Hrabal performs a similar act within the pages of "The Magic Flute," where we find not only the premonition about his own end, but also the evocation of the spiritual, the beyond embodied by his guardian angel that saves him from the fall. Thus paradoxically, all three writers try to evoke immortality and

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18. Kafka also pondered self-defenestration in more physical terms: "To run against the window and, weak after exerting all one's strength, to step over the window sill throughout the splintered wood and glass" (Kafka, *Diaries, 1910–23* 153).

19. Jindřich Štyrský was a painter, photographer, graphic artist, poet, and member of the Surrealist movement. Konstantin Biebl committed suicide by jumping from the window of his Prague apartment.

continuum by inscribing the act of self-defenestration into another medium, into either the pictorial or literary form.

It may seem unusual to choose self-defenestration as a tool for cultural remembrance. Yet in Prague, windows have continuously served as loci of memory. Windows, which were used as execution blocks, have played a sinister role in the city's historical making and has haunted its inhabitants since the fifteenth century. The first such defenestration occurred in 1419 when the Hussite revolution (a war between the followers of the priest and reformer Jan Hus and those who enforced the authority of the Roman Catholic Church) turned violent. An angry crowd, led by the Prague priest Jan Želivský, threw the king's representatives, the burgomaster and several city councilors, from the windows of the New Town Hall. This incident seems to have set the tone for the way to deal with political strife in the future. In 1618, the year of the second defenestration, two Catholic imperial officials of Bohemia guilty of closing down Protestant chapels, as well as their scribe, were thrown from the windows of the Prague Castle. It is said that they survived only because below the window a pile of manure eased their fall. This defenestration foreshadowed the Thirty Years' War, a prolonged European conflict between the supporters of Catholicism and the Reformation. The third defenestration that took place in Prague is sometimes linked to the death of Jan Masaryk (the son of the first Czechoslovak president Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk). Only three weeks after the Communist Coup in 1948, Jan Masaryk, who was then the Foreign Minister of Czechoslovakia and the only remaining non-Communist minister, was found dead several stories below a bathroom window of the Foreign Ministry building in the Černín Palace. Given Masaryk's stature and the timing of the fall, many believed that this was another politically motivated defenestration, one that marked the beginning of a difficult four-decade-long period for the Czechoslovak people.

In the consciousness of the nation, these three defenestrations signify defining historical moments that brought adverse political changes and as such they have inscribed themselves into the nation's everlasting memory.<sup>20</sup> At the same time, on the subconscious level, these defenestrations seemed to have acquired the function of a cultural meme. They captured the imagination not only of Prague writers, but also of ordinary citizens who in unusually high numbers succumbed to the lure of an abyss beyond the windowsill.<sup>21</sup> But could the high rate of suicide by jumping out of a window be attributed solely to a specific historical and cultural memory and continuum?

As a number of both native and foreign writers have noted, the spatial and

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20. Peter Demetz writes that Prague is a place of never-forgotten defenestrations.

21. Prague does not have the highest rate of suicide among European capitals, but it has a very high number of self-defenestrations.



architectural character of the city also seems to play a role in this phenomenon. The Surrealist poet Vítězslav Nezval (1900–1958) opens his poetry collection *Pražský chodec* (*The Prague Pedestrian*) (1938) with a first person prose paragraph on the longing to commit what he calls an “absolute defenestration.”<sup>22</sup> The thought occurs to him while he is roaming the city. Positioned on a hill with the Prague castle behind him, he leans over the edge of a wall, with rooftops below. More than anything else he is drawn to the abyss. He wants to jump into a lake, which appears to him as a bewitched castle of a hundred spears.

Here the desire to jump is not a reflection of despair as one would expect. Instead Nezval reacts to this location in Prague with its magnificent, fairytale-like views with rapture. It inspires him. As he states later, this is where his poetry learned to embrace the city. The longing to jump can thus be read as the poet’s innermost desire to merge with his muse, even if the muse is a stone city—cruelly dangerous with its 100 spears, but also mysteriously bewitching. For Nezval, Prague possesses a powerful lure, which precariously tempts the poet to become one with it.

Franz Kafka also experienced this pull by his native city. He, on the other hand, expresses an unequivocally negative view of Prague’s atmosphere in spite of its inspirational value, providing him with a setting for *The Castle*. In a 1902 letter to Oskar Pollak, at the age of 19, he writes: “This old crone has claws” and it “does not let go. [...] We would have to set fire to it on two sides, at Vyšehrad and the [Hradčany] Castle, only then would it be possible for us to get away” (qtd. Ripellino 5–6). Ten years later he asks: “How can I live in Prague?” Again and again he expresses the futile wish to leave Prague. It is said that the narrow cobblestone streets oppressed Kafka. His daily walks took him away from the Gothic and Baroque architecture of the Old Town, toward the river and into the parks—Chodkovy sady and Petřín. Kafka felt trapped by the city and although his creative imagination made the most of it, he battled the ever-present yearning to end it all by jumping out of the many rooms he had occupied.<sup>23</sup>

Although Kafka did not yield to this call, others did. And some, as already noted, had no choice in this matter; they were cruelly thrown out of windows—assassinated. Their ghosts still prowl the streets of Prague.<sup>24</sup> “Too

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22. Nezval did not jump out of a window to his death. He died of a heart attack.

23. In his travel diaries, when away from Prague, Kafka does not write about the desire to jump out of a window.

24. It is interesting to note how many writers feel deeply unsettled by Prague. In the nineteenth century, the traveling British and American authors write that when they strolled the old streets of the Prague ghetto, chills ran down their spines. Francis Marion Crawford described this atmosphere in his novel aptly titled *The Witch of Prague*. The Czech and German fin-de-siècle writers Karasek of Lvovic, Gustav Meyrink, and Paul Leppin saw the city as awash with

many ghosts inhabit it,” wrote Carlos Fuentes when recounting his visit to the city in December 1968, just a few months after the Soviet led invasion crushed the liberalization movement known as the Prague Spring (160). Deeply touched by the city’s atmosphere of lost hope, he saw the ghosts of defenestrations everywhere: “the windows of Prague send a shiver down your spine; it is the capital of defenestrations. You look toward the windows and see how they fall, killing themselves on the long and glistening stones” (160). Fuentes’s image of Prague as a city plagued by defenestrations is haunting. Yet it is not only the political situation of the country that disquiets him. He also comments on Prague’s architecture: “between the High Gothic and the Baroque, its opulence and its sadness consume themselves in a wedding of stone and river” (160).<sup>25</sup> This “wedding,” made of incongruous opposites, evokes a sense of disturbance and imbalance. Thus in Fuentes’s view, Prague is cursed not only by its history, but also by its architectural setting, morbidly re-playing its defenestrations as if they were its destiny.

Hrabal, who spent most his life in Prague, does not depict the architectural atmosphere as oppressive, or the fifth-floor windows as terrifying. On the contrary, the window that beckons him in “The Magic Flute” is alluring, even liberating in its open possibilities for an escape. Yet on the twentieth anniversary of Jan Palach’s self-immolation, on January 17, 1989, in Prague, in the city of defenestrations, he is denied this escape. His very own guardian angel will not allow him to jump, for he wants him “to reach the final bottom, to go down yet one more flight, to the place of the ultimate pit of remorse.” And so Hrabal writes about his remorse in *Total Fears* and waits eight more years to fulfill his wish.<sup>26</sup>

His choice of end confirms his poetics, or as Radko Pytlík states: “To the very last moment Hrabal remained a dandy, creator, and thinker, who while touching the stars and edges of ‘the unknown,’ chose a fall, so that he could

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eccentrics, sex-killers, and vampire women. More recently, Milan Kundera laments in his novel *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* that there are “all kinds of ghosts prowling these confused streets, ghosts of monuments demolished over centuries of strife and upheaval” (158). And Irish native John Banville also felt it when visiting the city. In his *Prague Pictures* he writes that the city has a power which is not quite healthy and that there is something off about the place.

25. Prague as the capital of defenestrations is also part of Kundera’s understanding. He writes about the poet Biebl’s death in this city of defenestrations similarly to Hrabal, but he compares his flight to that of Icarus. In 1908 Arthur Holitscher could not resist the story of the Golem. His play of the same title depicts the sorrows of the golem named Anima who falls in love with the very human Rabbi’s daughter Abigail. The love between the two ends tragically. Abigail jumps out of a window and the golem pulls his heart out, to become the golem made of mud he once used to be.

26. It is not impossible that the title *The Magic Flute* owes its title to Mozart’s opera in which Papageno is saved from committing suicide by a group of angels who prevent him from committing this act.

see the world and himself ‘from the other side of the mirror’” (online).<sup>27</sup> To open the window as if it were a page in a book, to enter it with determination, and to freely fall, allows for a moment of transcendence and transformation.<sup>28</sup> It also allows Hrabal to bring his poetics of “total realism” to its logical conclusion, to become physically one with his words, sentences, and messages.

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### Konspekt

Hana Pichova

Praha jako místo defenestrace: k dvacátému výročí úmrtí Bohumila Hrabala

Článek pojednává o jedné nedávné pražské „defenestraci“, typu sebevraždy „letem“ z okna, jež je specifickým způsobem odchodu ze života hojně zachyceným v literárních i historických reprezentacích Prahy. Bohumil Hrabal o „defenestraci“ nejen

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27. /[http://radkopytlík.sweb.cz/his\\_dm\\_h.html/](http://radkopytlík.sweb.cz/his_dm_h.html/). Accessed March 28, 2014.

28. Vladislav Khodasevich (1866–1939), who fell out of a window when a young boy, described the fall in surprisingly positive terms in the poem “Bylo na ulitse polutemno”: “Schastliv, kto padaet vniz golovoi: / Mir dlia nego khot' na mig—a inoi” (December 22, 1922). “Happy is he who falls [from a window] headfirst / The world—even if only for a moment—takes on a different shape”).

Konstantin Bal'mont perhaps felt a similar thrill from such a surreal moment. He twice attempted to end his life by jumping out of a window.

obsáhle psal ve svém fikčním a dokumentárním díle, ale v únoru 1997 také ukončil svůj život skokem z nemocničního okna. V článku se zabývám tím, jak se ozdobná okna pražských budov, prosycených dějinami, stávají komplexními symboly ducha Prahy a jejího historického a kulturního osudu. Hrabalův poslední čin překračuje meze osobního a stává se součástí kulturního fenomenu evokujícího historické tragédie Prahy a bývalého Československa.