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Bohumil Hrabal and Umberto Eco: *Ad Usum Delphini?*¹

Abstract

This short article came about as a result of the surprising observation that two writers who differ in their backgrounds, education, professional activities, and who are generally associated with works aimed at an adult readership, at some point directed several works to a children's audience. This episodic activity of an academic lecturer and prose writer creating himself as a poet of the outcast resulted in narrative works with characteristics of fairy tales. Three "professorial" fairy tales by U. Eco are described here as modern philosophical poems on the side effects of human civilization. Two animal fables by B. Hrabal (animals speak with a human voice in them) are a bitter reverie on the attitude of humans to animals, on the situation of farmed animals (meat, skins, etc.) and the questionable future of hunting. The article closes with a list of "animal" works by the Czech writer.

Keywords: fairy tale, animal fable, philosophical tale, animal studies, animal world and the civilizing mission of mankind

The writers cited here can perhaps only be linked by their late debuts. Both entered the world of literary narrative prose at the dawn of the so-called Age of Abraham. Bohumil Hrabal (b. 1914), clearly older than Umberto Eco (b. 1932), had previously tried, without much success, to become a poet; Eco first became known as a writer of scholarly books. Nothing in their writing activity foreshadowed their occupation with literary genres traditionally ascribed to a children's audience. Hrabal had no children; he himself – as a so-called illegitimate child – was sired and bore the name of his stepfather, who completely

1 The paper, under the same title, was presented at the International Conference BEYOND LANGUAGE 2023 on June 4, 2023. See: <https://bl2023.epi.uj.edu.pl> [date of access: 10.16.2023].

replaced his biological father. Eco had children, but he tended to write his genre-syncretic fairy tales for his grandchildren and great-grandchildren, and not necessarily his own.

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Considering the overall prose legacy of both authors, it is fair to say that the turn towards a children's audience is episodic. Hrabal wrote two such texts, which can be considered prose animal fables (*Animals Speak with a Human Voice*)², and Eco – in collaboration with the painter-illustrator Eugenio Carmi – wrote three works using the delimiting signals of an epic prose fable, not devoid of ecological accents taken from science fiction, with organic elements of a philosophical poem.³ Their works, when read today, are part of a broadly defined ecology, join the current of contemporary animal studies, and reflect on the side effects of scientific and technological progress.

Hrabal's Fairy Tales

I have written elsewhere about Hrabal's animal kingdom and will not return to that today. Here I will only mention that it is inhabited by almost "all animals large and small."⁴ There is no doubt that cats have a special place in it, and among the flying creatures, pigeons land in the foreground.⁵ But there is also a place for two cows, one of which – with the flowery name *Kopretina/Daisy* – talks in a "human voice" to her herd mates and has an excellent understanding with the herdsman, and a deer - named *Lesan* – who, in the same human voice, utters a dramatic inner monologue.

I have already tried to "illustrate" here the significant share of the animal world in the Czech writer's works with a list of works whose protagonists are representatives of the surrounding fauna. After all, only the above-mentioned two texts seem to be addressed to a children's audience, and the circumstances of the creation of the first of them, as its author later recalled:

Pro děti jsem napsal na objednávku takovou pohádku, takovou story, která se jmenovala *Kopretina*, a vyšlo to v *Mladé frontě* v roce 1962. Dokonce jsem tu *Kopretinu* zasadil do jednoho výboru, jakože tedy s těma dětma jsem počítal, ale nikdy mě nenapadlo psát pro děti, protože já vždycky mám před sebou nějakou knihu, kterou musím napsat, víte? Mám před sebou text ve vzduchu, jsem nabitý jistými obavami, které hledají a pak nacházejí společného jmenovatele, a já to musím napsat (...). Manželku mám, děti ne. Asi proto taky nepišu povídky pro děti (...). Ale i to je pravda, že kdybých měl děti, kdepak se psáním! Určitě bych se staral o děti a na psaní bych si ani nevzpomenul, protože pro mne rodina a děti, to je víc než všechno to ostatní. Ale když nemáte děti, tak co mate dělat? (...) Jenom psát dál, aby se *člověk* vylečil z tesknosti a opuštěnosti. Ale protože i děti se dostanou do brlohu tesknosti a opuštěnosti, já bych jim to přece napsal. Jo, napsal bych tu knížku, ale napsal bych to pro velké děti, pro děti, co jsou ve velkých lidech.

2 Bohumil Hrabal ([1978] 2008) and ([1993] 2014).

3 Eugenio Carmi and Umberto Eco ([1966/1992] 1994/2005).

4 At the end of this text, the reader will find a list of Bohumil Hrabal's works with animals in their titles.

5 The metaphorically treated *Skřivánci na niti* [*Skylarks on a Tether*] occupies a special place in Hrabal's work. The book, which was completed in 1958, saw the light of print four years later and its long life was ensured by the film of the same title based on it. The larks of the title are political prisoners used by the communist authorities for slave labour in the scrap yard of the Kladno steelworks. The fate of the text and the film, written by the censors, is told by the author in a text entitled *Překrasný osud skřivánců* [*The Precarious Fate of the Larks*]. Hrabal could not have known at the time that the film would be a twenty-year 'shelf life'.

I wrote a story for children, a story called „Daisy”, and it was published in *Mladá fronta* in 1962. I even put this „Daisy” in a committee, as it were, with three children, but it never occurred to me to write for children, because I always have a book to write, you know? I have a text in the air in front of me, I’m charged with certain fears that seek and then find a common denominator, and I have to write it (...). I have a wife, not children. I guess that’s why I don’t write stories for children (...). But it is also true that if I had children, I wouldn’t be writing! I would certainly take care of the children and I would not even think of writing, because for me family and children are more than all the rest. But if you don’t have children, what do you have to do? (...) Only to write on, so that man may be relieved of his anguish and desolation. But since even children fall into the den of anguish and desolation, I would write to them. Yes, I would write the book, but I would write it for the big children, for the children who are in the big people⁶.

Taking place in a socialist agricultural cooperative, this story of a cow who has secretly calved in a forest retreat in order – as the communal shepherd guesses – to protect her son Doubek/Dąbek/Little Oak from being separated from his mother and coldly raised for veal – is assured by the same shepherd that her secret will be kept. And it does not matter that the experienced milkmaid does not notice the cow’s pregnancy; and it does not matter that the secret cannot be kept in the long run. The fairy tale does not end with a phrase “they lived happily ever after”; it ends with a kind of utopian *consolation/consolazione*⁷: the brutal course of things of this world cannot be stopped, but it can be delayed for a while.

The *Nejkrásnější oči* [Most Beautiful Eyes] is a completely anthropomorphised, poignant internal monologue of a small deer, longing for its mother and little brother (previously mauled by a combine harvester) “acquired” as a result of the hunt, and having to cope alone in the hostile environment around it; telling of the slow overcoming of the barrier of fear by humans; about his friendship with the gamekeeper’s son and his mother, who replace his own mother and little brother; ending with a dramatic finale in which the goat unexpectedly becomes a kind of “whipping boy” for his human brother and is “acquired” during a hunt, becoming a prize in a fancy lottery. Dying, he sees it leaning over him with “those most beautiful eyes in the world that my mummy had, and now my other mummy too, eyes that housed the whole world, that is me ... Mummy, Mummy!”⁸

When reading this fairy tale in the context of the so-called ethos of the hunt (but also the heated debates about the welfare of slaughtered animals), it is impossible not to reflect on the present state of this important part – not only of Czech cultural tradition, but also of literary tradition. And Hrabal, who in his other prose works deals freely with this tradition, mocking it, here points emphatically to its, so to speak, side effects, casting a deep, and still deepening, shadow over this tradition. It is difficult, however, to demand from a writer who describes himself as a modest “describer” of the world, rather than a “changer” of it, possessed of a vision of “moving it from its foundations”, a growing sensitivity to the changes taking place in humanity’s attitude to animals, in which the tendency to endow our “lesser brethren” with human rights is beginning to dominate.

6 Unless otherwise indicated translations are those of the author.

7 Term used by Umberto Eco ([1999] 2016).

8 Bohumil Hrabal ([1978] 2008: 63–77).

Eco(logical) Fairy Tales

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The Italian writer's "fairy tale interests" appear to be quite different at first glance. His *Tre racconti* [Three Tales] are engaged with the following issues: the ever-present problems of the production and use of nuclear weapons (*La bomba e il generale* [The General and the Bomb]); the description of a possible meeting between Earth cosmonauts, nota bene, an American, a Russian and a Chinese, and a six-armed inhabitant of Mars, which, from initial distrust or even hostility, leads them to understand "that on Earth as on other planets everyone has his own taste and it is enough to communicate with each other" (*I tre cosmonauti* [The Three Cosmonauts]); the problems arising from the spontaneous civilising action of Earth's conquistadors against the civilisation of the conquered planet (*Gli gnomi di Gnu* [The Gnomes of Gnu]). Eco the fabulist leans with concern on the future of a humanity so fascinated by progress that it forgets all its known and potential side-effects.

Eco's fairy tales stem from the author's concern for the fate of our planet, becoming a kind of voice in the rapidly growing and increasingly turbulent discussion about the global catastrophe to which the biblical sentence about making the earth one's own subject may lead.

Judging by the two translations, the bitterly ironic story entitled *Gli Gnomi di Gnu*' in Polish translations, respectively: *Gnomy z planety Gnu* [Gnomes from the Planet Gnu], or *Karły z planety Gnu* [Dwarfs from the Planet Gnu], told in the convention of an epic prose fable, encrusted with elements of ecological science fiction and organic elements of Voltairean philosophical poems. Here, the *Esploratore Galattico* [Galactic Explorer], in the service of the Emperor, frustrated by the lack of intergalactic conquests, finally discovers, not without difficulty, "a lovely planet with an azure sky, lightly streaked with a few white clouds", inhabited by very friendly, and no less curious about distant worlds, dwarfs.

When he fails to convince the filigree natives of the virtues of Earth's ecologically degraded civilisation (peeped at by a "megagalactic megatelescope"), he agrees that they, the rather likeable gnomes from the planet Gnu, should discover the Earth and want to civilise it like their own idyllic and absolutely ecological planet. However, the initiative crashes through a wall of soulless regulations of Earth's bureaucracy.

A Polish critic opened his review of this fairy tale with an epigram along these lines:

It's a very sad fairy tale. / Instead of a dragon, it's haunted by smog, / instead of a princess, full garbage cans bloom, / instead of the charm of ancient times / the stench of sewage greets children. / In a word – it's not about witchcraft, / but about the nightmares of civilisation. (Gondowicz 1994)

Without attempting to come to a definitive conclusion, years ago I referred to the review I quoted and, paraphrasing its language, wrote that a work that started out as a fairy tale ended up as a philosophical tale, and then, using Eco's terminology, described the situation as a lack of dialectical connection between *intentio operis* and *intentio lectoris*.⁹ Today, after almost two decades, I am inclined to extend this observation to his other fairy tales, and to temper this conclusion, but – and this is what I wish to emphasise – Eco, who writes for children, remains invariably a university professor. And his fairy tales, if they remain in the memory of readers from all over the world, will go down in it alongside other, not at all numerous, "professor's fairy tales".

9 Compare [in:] Stefan Collini (1992).

Bohumil Hrabal, on the other hand, as an “occasional” fairy-tale writer, seems more authentic in this context, more “down-to-earth” in every sense of the word, playing no role, and as a man without children – better able to understand the child reader than Umberto Eco’s pater familias, although (in a very peculiar way) – anticipating the issues of animal studies, which are developing vigorously today at universities all over the world.

Animals in the Titles of Bohumil Hrabal’s Works in Other Volumes of Bohumil Hrabal’s Collected Works [Sebrané spisy Bohumila Hrabala – SsBH]¹⁰

1. “Rackové” [Gulls]. First as a poem [in:] *Dni a noci* [Days and Nights] [in:] SsBH, vol. 1; 9, then as poetic prose [in:] *Etudy* [Etudes] [in:] SsBH, vol. 5; 388.
2. “Dnes zapadalo slunce krvavé jak rajka...” [Today the sun set as bloody as a tomato] [in:] *Obrázky bez rámu* [Pictures without frame] [in:] SsBH, vol. 5; 429.
3. “Štědrý den je kapru Velký pátek” [Christmas Eve is Carp Good Friday] [in:] *Obrázky bez rámu* [Pictures without frame] [in:] SsBH, vol. 5; 432.
4. “Hostinec u bernardyna” [The Bernard’s¹¹ Pub] [in:] *Slavnosti sněženek* [Snowdrop Festival] [in:] SsBH, vol. 8; 9. *Bernard is a breed of dog*.
5. “Zdivočelá kráva” [Wild Cow] [in:] *Slavnosti sněženek* [Snowdrop Festival] [in:] SsBH, vol. 8; 38.
6. “Kralíčci v křídle” [Piano and rabbits] [in:] *Slavnosti sněženek* [Snowdrop Festival] [in:] SsBH, vol. 8; 44.
7. “Lucinka a Pavlína” [Cats and humans] [in:] *Slavnosti sněženek* [Snowdrop Festival] [in:] SsBH, vol. 8; 135.
8. “Myš ukradla dítěti cumel” [A mouse stole a baby’s pacifier] [in:] *Krasosmutnění* [Joyful Blues/Beautiful Sadness] [in:] SsBH, vol. 10; 75.
9. “Ovčí hubičky” [Sheep mouthpieces] [in:] *Krasosmutnění* [Joyful Blues/Beautiful Sadness] [in:] SsBH, vol. 10; 94.
10. “Když umře hospodar, pláče i dobytek” [When the farmer dies, the cattle cry] [in:] *Krasosmutnění* [Joyful Blues/Beautiful Sadness] [in:] SsBH, vol. 10; 100.
11. “Žlutý ptak” [Yellow bird] [in:] *Krasosmutnění* [Joyful Blues/Beautiful Sadness] [in:] SsBH, vol. 10; 167.
12. “Autíčko. Balada” [Small car. Ballad] [in:] *Kdo jsem* [Who am I] [in:] SsBH, vol. 12; 95¹².
13. “Třínohý kůň na dostihové dráze” [Three-legged horse on the racecourse] [in:] *Listopadový uragán* [November Hurricane] [in:] SsBH, vol. 13; 72.
14. “Cassius v emigraci” [Cassius in exile] [in:] *Ponorné říčky* [The Subterranean Streams] [in:] SsBH, vol. 13; 223.
15. “Písečný kocour” [Sandy Cat] [in:] *Ponorné říčky* [Subterranean Streams] [in:] SsBH, vol. 13; 233.
16. “Kůň truhláře Bártý” [Horse of the carpenter Barta] [in:] *Růžový kavalír* [The Pink Cavalier] [in:] SsBH, vol. 13; 343.

10 I do not include here titles where animals appear as names of restaurants, hotels, etc., such as: *U Zlatého Tygra* [Under the Golden Tiger], *U Modré Štíky* [Under the Blue Pike], *Hovor u Tygra* [Conversation under the Tiger], *Bílý Koniček* [The White Horse - Club in Greenwich Village, New York].

11 Bernard is a breed of dog.

12 Autíčko and Cassius are Hrabal’s favourite cats.

17. “Kočičí šibřinky aneb zpověd bez rozhřešení” [Cat’s masquerade or confession without absolution] [in:] *Večerníčky pro Cassia* [Cassius’s Evening Fairytales] [in:] *SsBH*, vol. 14; 139.
18. “A havran krák už nikdykrát” [And the raven rabbit never again] [in:] *Večerníčky pro Cassia* [Cassius’s Evening Fairytales] [in:] *SsBH*, vol. 14; 180.
19. “Zavražděný kohout” [Murdered Rooster] [in:] *Balony mohou vzlétnout* [Balloons can take off] [in:] *SsBH*, vol. 14; 200.
20. “Ubili koníčka ubili” [They killed the little horse] [in:] *Balony mohou vzlétnout* [Balloons can take off] [in:] *SsBH*, vol 14; 222.
21. “Koťata a kocouři” [Kittens and cats] [in:] *Domáci úkoly (Úvahy a rozhovory)* [Homeworks: Contemplations and Interviews] [in:] *SsBH*, vol. 15; 101.
22. “Přes ty svoje kočky se stanu tak trochu nesmrtelným” [Despite my cats, I’ve become somewhat immortal] [in:] *Domáci úkoly z pilnosti* [Homework from diligence] [in:] *SsBH*, vol. 15; 163.

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