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The Power of Silence: Jan Skácel, the Banned Man

Abstract

Jan Skácel is a Czech poet whose literary production marked the second half of the 20th century, a particularly difficult historical period. In 1948 the Communist Party had implemented a coup d'état thus conquering the totalitarian management of power and had begun to accentuate the ideological control of cultural life. After a short period of easing of the censorship, in 1968 the harsh period of the so-called "normalization" began: in 1970 Skácel was banned from publishing. In the decade of ban on official publishing he never left his country and never stopped writing verses, declaring his suffering, and tirelessly denouncing, often using refined figures of speech, the difficult condition of the poet reduced to silence. This article proposes an analysis of these texts following some thematic nuclei: first the poems which contain metaphors drawn from the animal world used to represent the figure of the banned poet will be analyzed, to then examine the compositions in which Skácel more explicitly and directly denounces the censorship.

Keywords: Jan Skácel, Czech poetry, normalization, censorship, totalitarian regime, Czechoslovakia, Central Europe

The present work focuses on the analysis of the verses of the Czech poet Jan Skácel (1922–1989) in which he emphasizes the hardship of the poet reduced to silence by censorship during the so-called period of "normalization" in Czechoslovakia.

Jan Skácel's literary production marked the second half of the 20th century, a particularly difficult historical period in Czechoslovakia. In 1948 the Communist Party had implemented a *coup d'état* thus conquering the totalitarian management of power. Czechoslovakia plunged from the brief phase of unstable post-war democracy directly into the time of the most rigid Stalinism and the normal path of cultural evolution was brutally interrupted. Many important writers were arrested, persecuted, or silenced

because they chose not to adapt their works to the demands of political power. Most of the literary magazines were closed and the normal incoming flow of foreign literature was interrupted. Subsequently, a progressive de-Stalinization of culture took place: starting from the second half of the 1950s, the rigid editorial selection began to ease at least in part.

On January 5, 1968, the Central Committee of the KSČ [Communist Party of Czechoslovakia] elected Alexander Dubček as party secretary. Dubček carried out a reform movement in the direction of liberalism: censorship was abolished, and the press, radio and television were mobilized for reformist propaganda purposes. He laid the guidelines for a modern socialist democracy which would have also guaranteed freedom of religion, press, assembly, speech, and movement; a program which, in Dubček's words, would have given socialism "a human face". This period of political liberalization took the name of *Prague Spring*. Dubček's political reforms did not intend to completely overthrow the old regime and move away from the Soviet Union: the project was to maintain the collectivist economic system alongside greater political and press freedom. Nonetheless, these reforms were seen by the Soviet leadership as a serious threat to the USSR's hegemony over the Eastern Bloc countries, and ultimately as a threat to the Soviet Union's own security.

On the night between August 20 and 21, troops from five Warsaw Pact countries invaded Czechoslovakia, ending the period of *Prague Spring*. In April 1969, Gustáv Husák was elected secretary of the KSČ; this event marked the beginning of the era of "normalization" aimed at establishing continuity with the period preceding the Prague Spring: consequently, political repression was restored.

This period lasted until November 1989, when the Velvet Revolution led to the establishment of democracy under the presidency of the essayist and playwright Václav Havel. The latter defined the totalitarian system that had been established in Czechoslavachia during "normalization" as "post-totalitarian", meaning that "it is totalitarian in a way fundamentally different from classical dictatorships, different from totalitarianism as we usually understand it" (Havel [1978] 1987: 40–41). Essentially the difference is that "the post-totalitarian system touches people at every step, but it does so with its ideological gloves on" (Havel [1978] 1987: 44). The war of the post-totalitarian system against life is invisible, "the wars and murders here have a different form: they are moved from the sphere of observable life and social fabric into the darkness of their unobservable internal destruction" (Havel [1987] 1999: 932).

Life in this system is thoroughly permeated with hypocrisy and lies, individuals must *live within a lie*, and even if they do not believe all these mystifications, "they must behave as though they did, or they must at least tolerate them in silence" (Havel [1978] 1987: 45). Those who, on the other hand, choose to *live within the truth* constitute the independent life of society, such as those writers who issue their work as samizdat (Havel [1978] 1987: 86). However, those who "separate" themselves from society, who deviate from the general norm, are prosecuted (Havel [1987] 1999: 946). This post-totalitarian system has found that a plurality of opinions and interests can lead to the threat of its totalitarian essence and subsequently sees plurality as its archenemy. However, in order to combat plurality, it must necessarily also suppress uniqueness which cannot exist without plurality: this is why this system is characterized by indeterminacy, homogeneity, inexpressiveness, uniformity, anonymity (Havel [1987] 1999: 945–946).

[&]quot;Zdejší války a vraždění mají jen jinou podobu: ze sféry pozorovatelných životních a společenských dějů jsou přesunuty do šera jejich nepozorovatelné vnitřní destrukce ". Czech sources quoted in the article have been translated by the author of this paper, unless otherwise specified.

Therefore, the period of "normalization" was the hardest for those writers who refused to bow to the communist regime's demands: one of them was Jan Skácel, who was banned from publishing in 1970.

Jan Skácel was born on February 7, 1922 in Vnorovy, a village in the border area called Slovácko, in south-eastern Moravia. He spent his childhood in the Moravian countryside, in fact his bond with this land is deep, inner, lived and carved into his language (Cosentino 2004: 11). He attended high school first in Břeclav and then in Brno, where he graduated in May 1941.

During the Second World War he was sent to a labor camp from which he tried to escape several times until, as a punishment, in November 1941 he was deported to the Austrian territories of the Reich where he worked in the road construction sites. When he was in Germany he wrote letters to his parents, whilst when he was in Austria, where censorship was systemic, he began to write poems and it was then that he realized how much the metaphor could say and hide (Kožmín 1994: 29). In 1945, at the end of the war, he returned to Brno and in the same year his first poem was published in the *Rovnost* magazine in Brno.

He befriended Oldřich Mikulášek, who worked in the *Rovnost* editorial office and was the one who introduced Jan Skácel in his early twenties to literature (Opelík 2000: 181). Furthermore, again in 1945, he joined the Communist Party. Until 1948 he attended Czech and Russian literature courses at the University of Brno but was disappointed by the fact that the professors would not outwardly acknowledge that the lessons were suspended on November 17, 1939, when, by decree of the Reichsprotektor Konstantin von Neurath, Czech universities were supposed to remain closed for three years due to a series of student demonstrations against the Nazi occupation (Cosentino 2004: 13). For this reason, he did not complete his studies and in 1948 he was hired as editor of the cultural column of the *Rovnost* magazine where he took the place of Oldřich Mikulášek. However, in 1952 he was sacked by the *Rovnost* editorial team because he was accused of Trotskyism and deviations (Kožmín 1994: 30).

In April 1953, his friend Mikulášek wanted him in the Brno editorial office of the Czechoslovak radio, where he remained until 1963 when he became director of the Brno literary magazine *Host do domu*. This periodical provided an outlet for debate on cultural and political issues that could not take place in parliament; also, it published translations of works from countries beyond the Iron Curtain. Furthermore, in the pages of *Host do domu* every month appeared Skácel's "small reviews". In these very particular editorials, short feuilletons often closer to the genre of poème en prose than to the essay, the poet commented on public facts and private events according to a scheme in which the short narrative is always followed by an incisive conclusion, always capable of surprising the reader and never moralistic or moralizing (Cosentino 2004: 19). In 1964 a collection of these proses was released with the title *Jedenáctý bílý kůň* [The Eleventh White Horse]²; in one of these texts, *Malá recenze na tykání* [Small Review on Informally Addressing], Skácel directly refers to censorship:

[...] Zatmělo se mi před očima. Není skoro v této republice člověka, s kterým bych si ne tykal. Není téměř člověka, který by netykal mně. Stalo se to za dvacet let jakýmsi národním zvykem. Mám obavu, že kdyby u nás byla cenzura, tak by mi taky tykala a to bych nepřežil³. (Skácel [1964] 2010: 54)

² The title refers to a popular belief that if the eleventh horse you meet is white, this encounter brings good luck.

^{3 &}quot;[...] It went dark before my eyes. There is hardly a person in this republic that I would not informally address. There is hardly a person who would not informally address me. It became a kind of national custom in twenty years. I am afraid that if there was censorship in our country, it would as well informally address me, and I would not survive that".

It is a passage with an extremely prophetic content that illustrates how censorship was a key theme in Skácel's works even before the beginning of "normalization". He was already worried and aware that the censorship would not have spared him. With the beginning of "normalization" in 1970, indeed, the poet was expelled from the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, the magazine *Host do domu* was closed, and from that moment he was banned from publishing. Skácel's name disappeared from the "normalized" publishing houses and his poems were confined to the clandestine samizdat circuit or to the magazines published abroad by Czech intellectuals in exile (Cosentino 2004: 20–21).

Only in 1981 he was able to officially publish again, albeit in a limited number of copies.

Although in his lifetime he was always denied an award in his country, in 1989 Skácel received two important literary awards abroad: the German Petrarca-Preis award, given to him in Lucca by the Austrian writer Peter Handke, and the Slovenian award of the Union of Slovenian Writers Vilenica 89 for Central European literature.

He died on November 7, 1989 of heart failure, just a few days before the fall of the Czechoslovak totalitarian regime. The funeral was celebrated in the Brno-Židenice district and the funeral speech was prepared by the Czech literary critic Jiří Opelík. The most important Czech poets of the time were present but all of them remained outside the building as a protest to the enormous difficulties encountered by Skácel in publishing his works (Musil 1992: 97).

Jan Skácel publishes his first collection of poems *Kolik příležitostí má růže* [The Many Occasions of a Rose] at the age of thirty-five, in 1957. It is a well-studied mature debut: he decided to postpone it in order to have more freedom in writing than he would have had if he had debuted in the previous years (Černý 1992: 821–822). This choice testifies to Skácel's inner need to express himself freely in his verses, "all his life activity has rather a common denominator in that it appears to be a struggle for free movement" (Kožmín 1994: 32).

The maturity of his debut means that in this first collection Skácel's poetic world is already condensed, with its concentrated language and its fixed and tight form, with its innovative and revealing metaphors that capture the atmosphere of a single situation. Over time there will be not so much a change in the themes, in the poet's attitude and creative methods, but rather a deepening of all these elements (Musil 1993: 80).

That of Jan Skácel is the poetry of Moravia, of silence, of fear and of time, it is a struggle for the truth, which lies helpless against power. It contrasts insecurities with indisputable values such as love, loyalty, and tenacity. His poetic world is effectively summarized by the Czech literary critic Václav Černý:

It is a year in a Moravian village in the rural environment of constant work and natural home horizons, in the mirror of the memory of a boy who as an adult man often returns home to refresh himself, tormented by nostalgia, mainly due to the feeling of time running away irretrievably and a little also to the sorrow for the changes that in the meantime have ruined that ancient corner and home⁵. (Černý 1992: 823)

This personal and intimate poetic world is nevertheless threatened by censorship in the 1970s and thus begins a very difficult period for Skácel, in which he finds himself in poverty. However, despite the

^{4 &}quot;Všecka jeho životní aktivita [...] má spíše společného jmenovatele v tom, že se jeví jako zápas o svobodný pohyb".

^{5 &}quot;Je [...] rok na moravské vsi v kruhu venkovsky ustálené práce a rodných přírodních obzorů, v zrcadle chlapecké vzpomínky, kterou si uzrálý muž přichází občas domů osvěžit a potrápit se přitom nostalgií, složenou hlavně z pocitu nenávratně prchajícího času a trochu i z lítosti nad proměnami, které zatím ten starobylý kout a byt narušily":

difficulties of livelihood, he chooses the *internal exile* and never leaves Brno. Jiří Opelík comments on this choice as follows:

From the outside and from the ex post, it is difficult to consider the weight of everything through which he had to redeem his decision not to give up the status of an independent artist and at the same time to preserve that measure of inner freedom that is a condition of every true creation: the weight of hardship, defenselessness, isolation, persecution, denial of one's own name⁶. (Opelík 2000: 165)

He returns to publishing officially after ten years of silence in 1981 with the collection *Dávné proso* (Ancient millet), which contains both unpublished verses and poems previously appeared in clandestine publications. Here the boundaries of Skácel's world do not substantially change: it is always based on fundamental, immutable, old, and lasting values, but among them, those closest to the pole of pain are intensified (Kožmín 1994: 192–193).

He would never betray his artistic production, his conscience, his humanity, but this results in him feeling alone, abandoned, empty and tormented. Indeed, as Václav Havel recalls, "life here seems to be deprived of its real inner significance, of its true tragedy and greatness, of its true questions" (Havel [1987] 1999: 955). It is therefore not surprising that the poet begins to emphasize in his verses the total devaluation of man as a living being, the man who feels lost (Musil 1993: 82). Furthermore, sadness and fear go together with silence: "the sadness of not living and the fear of the unknown" (Musil 1993: 82).

All these feelings reach their maximum expression in the verses composed in the Seventies and the Eighties, the years most fraught with suffering for his condition as a poet reduced to silence. Therefore, it is necessary to analyze them: the analysis will take place on a thematic, compositional-structural, and stylistic-rhetorical level; in some cases, an interpretation of the meaning of the verses will also be provided. The examination will first follow the path traced by the metaphors drawn from the animal world that Skácel uses to represent the figure of the poet, and in particular the metaphors of the fish, the bee, and the canary, to then analyze the compositions in which Skácel more explicitly and directly denounces the difficult condition of the poet.

In 1983 the collection *Naděje s bukovými křídly* [Beech-Winged Hope] is released. It contains the quatrains already published in samizdat and abroad (Kožmín 1994: 103). The work includes two cycles of one hundred quatrains each: *Chyba broskví* [The Error of the Peaches] and *Oříšky pro černého papouška* [Peanuts for a Black Parrot]. These two cycles mark the culmination of the poet's formal research characterized by a constant tendency towards closed forms (Cosentino 1998: 177). In the quatrains the Moravian poet aims to obtain the maximum richness, intensity, and surprising effect of the expression on the smallest surface (Opelík 2000: 170).

Skácel's quatrains are very dense, they point to the depths of human existence and are often conceived as a single metaphor; they are a new, particular form that has no equal in modern poetry, if not

[&]quot;Zvenčí a ex post těžko zvážit tíhu všeho, čím musel vykoupit své rozhodnutí nevzdat se postavení samostatného umělce a zároveň si uchovat onu míru vnitřní svobody, která je podmínkou každé opravdové tvorby: tíhu nuzování, bezbrannosti, izolace, pronásledování, zapírání vlastního jména".

^{7 &}quot;Život jako by tu byl zbaven svého skutečného vnitřního rozpětí, své pravé tragiky i velikosti, svých skutečných otázek".

^{8 &}quot;Smutek z nebytí, strach z neznáma".

in Japanese haiku. However, Sylvie Richterová recalls that compared to the oriental models, his quatrains "are dynamic, dramatic, full of tension" (Richterová 1991: 104).

The *Chyba broskví* [The Error of the Peaches] cycle contains two significant quatrains in which Skácel refers to the figure of the poet, using figures of speech linked to the animal world:

```
ta němá slova vypůjčím si od ryb
budu je říkat vroucně pod vodou
a ani trochu nebude mi líto
jestli se utopí a na břeh nedojdou.<sup>10</sup> (Skácel [1975] 1996: 114)
```

The quatrain opens with an oxymoron: the words are silent. The poet is also silent just like the fishes. Yet the words, even if they are only spoken underwater, are equally full of meaning. In fact, "silence is the true goal of Skácel's words and is so present in his poetry that it is possible to draw up an entire phenomenology of silence" (Richterová 1991: 100). The latter can undoubtedly be considered the highest and most essential value of Skácel's poetic world (Opelík 2000: 169). It is a noisy silence, which can be heard, *must* be heard; it does not represent the absence of sound but the sound that remains when all other sounds stop resonating (Opelík 2000: 168). Silence is even more powerful in the verses dating back to the period of the publication ban, as it also becomes the forced silence of culture: "political power [...] occupies and swallows up everyone so that all should become integrated within it, at least through their silence" (Havel [1984] 1987: 147).

Furthermore, the cult of silence "is a necessary condition for the word to resonate, strike, become concrete" (Richterová 1991: 103). And indeed, Skácel's words, albeit immersed in silence, are sharp, wisely lashing out against censorship.

In another quatrain the poet is compared to a bee:

```
třeba se nedotýká okraje
básník se jako včela brání
a tomu koho poraní
daruje vlastní umírání.<sup>13</sup> (Skácel [1975] 1996: 121)
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When the bee stings it dies, the same fate belongs to the poet whose words hurt, they are full of the bitterness caused by marginalization, they aim to tear the veil of the *life within a lie* imposed by the regime; therefore, if the poet pronounces them he dies metaphorically as he is banned.

The image of the poet-bee is recurrent in Skácel's work, it appears also in a sonnet included in the *Dávné proso* (Ancient millet) collection entitled *Sonet se spánkem včel* (Sonnet with the sleep of the bees):

```
Nakonec uteče nám bílé kůzlátko
a osiříme
- - - -
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^{9 &}quot;Jsou dynamická, dramatická, plná napětí".

^{10 &}quot;I borrow the silent words from fishes/I pronounce them fervently underwater/ and I don't mind even a little/ if they drown before reaching the shore".

^{11 &}quot;Ticho je pravou metou Skácelových slov a je ho v jeho poezii tolik, že lze sestavit celou fenomenologii ticha".

^{12 &}quot;Je podmínkou toho, aby slovo mohlo zaznít, zasáhnout, být činem".

^{13 &}quot;Perhaps he does not touch the edge/ the poet defends himself like a bee/ and to whom he will hurt/ he will give his own death".

```
Z velikých zásob noci
bude kanout tma
----
Oživnou kopřivy
Hlasitý spánek včel naplní krajinu
-----
a úly
zeptáš se
kde ukryty jsou úly. 14 (Skácel [1968] 1996: 55)
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The use of the sonnet form testifies that, in addition to the prevalence of four-line stanzas, Skácel's poetry is marked by the organization into four-stanzas structures (Cosentino 1998: 177).

By metaphorically identifying the image of the bee with that of the poet, it can be said that the sleep of bees is that same sleep, that lethargy, which was forcibly imposed on poets. Moreover, such sleep is not silent, but noisy, just like Skácel's silence. There is no longer any place where the poet can feel safe, as the unanswered question in the last three lines demonstrates.

A peculiarity of this sonnet is that the author keeps silent five of the fourteen lines foreseen by the form of the sonnet. This significant ellipsis is a demonstration of how much silence has become stronger in Skácel's verses. He often resorts to the use of this technique: using the ellipsis the poet eliminates all that he does not consider necessary, his poetry is always condensed and yet very intense. According to Jiří Opelík, the use of ellipsis certainly complicates the reader's understanding, but nevertheless concentrates his attention where the author wishes (Opelík 2000: 171).

The image of the poet-bee is still found in the poem *Předčasné jaro* [Early Spring] included in the collection *A znovu láska* [And Again Love] published posthumously in 1991. The first two lines of this text read as follows: "Jak ti mám vylíčit to jaro// s kterým jsem osaměl jak zabloudilá včela" (Skácel [1991] 1996: 359). The poet in this case, such as in the quatrain contained in *Chyba broskví* (The error of the peaches), explicitly identifies himself with the bee, he feels lost because of his condition.

The last three lines of the same poem read as follows: "Vylétly předčasně// a nemají kam uložiti snůšku// Včelíny vyhořely dávno" (Skácel [1991] 1996: 359). Poets have nowhere to publish their verses, in the totalitarian regime there is no place for those who try to *live within the truth*. The image of bees that flew away prematurely can be interpreted as a metaphor for all those poets who chose to abandon their country and move abroad due to severe restrictions during the period of "normalization".

It is not surprising that the figure of the poet compared to the bee appears several times in Skácel's verses: indeed, a fundamental compositional procedure in his poetry is that of continuous quotation,

^{14 &}quot;In the end the white goat will escape us/ and we will be orphaned/----// From the large stocks of the night/ the darkness will drip/----// The nettles will be revived/ The noisy sleep of bees will fill the landscape/-----// and the beehives/ you ask/ where the beehives are hidden".

^{15 &}quot;How can I describe to you/ the spring in which I was left alone as a lost bee".

^{16 &}quot;They flew away prematurely/ and have nowhere to store the harvest/ The apiaries burnt out a long time ago".

both that internal to his poetics (self-quotation), and that which has modern Czech poetry as an object (Cosentino 1998: 181). For this reason, it is possible to identify some thematic nuclei and follow their development within Skácel's poetic world.

Another of these thematic nuclei is the comparison between the poet and the canary that emerges forcefully from the lines of the *Sonet o smrti Dona Quijota* [Sonnet on Don Quixot's Death], contained in the collection *Kdo pije potmě víno* [Who Drinks Wine in the Dark] from 1988:

Naříká Sancho pláče Dulcinea za zídkou zblblý dav se chichotá Ježíši Kriste v něžnou náruč přijmi rytíře svého Dona Quijota

Zbroj jeho ulož do nebeské šatny nechť jeho sedlo o hvězdy se dře před rzí chraň meč ať nezaliská bláto přilbu jež byla miskou bradýře

Bojoval za čest za kanára v kleci a národ vzdychal: to jsou ale věci když k tvrdé půtce s násilím a lží

pobídl koně neschoval se za strach Teď koňský řezník na ústředních jatkách ubohou Rosinantu ruče poráží.¹⁷ (Skácel [1988] 1996: 329)

The metaphor of the poet as a canary in a cage is poignant; the poet just like the canary sings and would like to free his singing, but he cannot do so because he is locked in a cage. And poetry fights against the violence enacted by the regime, against the prevailing lie, it fights for truth, for the honesty and the courage of the artist. This image had already appeared in the speech given by Skácel in 1967 at the fourth congress of the Czechoslovak Union of Writers in which he had explicitly denounced the censorship that silenced poets like canaries in cages:

Ale bylo mi sympatické, že kanárek odmítá zpívat ve tmě. Když přehodíte přes klec šátek, pták zmlkne. Tohoto způsobu tmářství se užívá ve všech rodinách, které vlastní kanárky. A to tenkrát, když se zpěv stává obtížným. 18 (Skácel 1968: 118)

All the thematic nuclei analyzed so far refer to the animal world which is closely linked to the human one. In fact, metamorphosis, in which animals take on human traits and vice versa, is a recurring

^{17 &}quot;Sancho's lamenting. Dulcinea's weeping,/ the silly crowd is giggling out of sight./ Lord Christ, into Thy soft embrace receive/ Don Quixote here, ever Thy valiant knight. // Into the heavenly cloakroom place his armour,/ his empty saddle let it graze the stars,/ protect his sword from rusting and his helmet/ from spattering with mud from suffering scars. // He fought for honour for the caged canary,/ the nation heaved a sigh: extraordinary/ the way he fought against brute force and lies, // he spurred his steed and any fear was far./ Now butchered at the central abattoir/ poor orphaned Rosinante sadly dies". Translation [in:] Osers (2001: 68).

^{18 &}quot;But I found it endearing that the canary refuses to sing in the dark. When you throw a scarf over the cage, the bird shuts up. This method of obscuration is used in all families that own canaries. And that is when singing becomes difficult".

phenomenon in Skacel's poetics: in the first hundred quatrains of *Naděje s bukovými křídly* [Beech-Winged Hope], for example, animals appear 72 times (Cosentino 1998: 182). The human and animal worlds frequently merge, so much that it is no longer possible to recognize their boundaries; Skácel brings nature closer to man, anthropomorphizes the world. Václav Černý also recalls, that "Skácel's metaphor has two basic features, it is a personification and it is concretized in an image drawn from the natural world" (Černý 1992: 828). Thus, as it was shown in the compositions examined, the result of the Skácel's metaphor is the perpetual movement from man to nature and vice versa.

However, there comes a time when Skácel no longer uses metaphors or similitudes, the suffering becomes stronger and his denunciation more and more explicit. The poet comes out of hiding and writes openly autobiographical poems using the first-person narrative. One of them is *Kotlářská 35A* [Kotlářská Street 35A], included in the collection *Odlévání do ztraceného vosku* [Casting in Lost Wax], in which the autobiographical feature is already evident from the title that indicates Skácel's residential address in Brno. The last quatrain of this poem reads as follows:

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Posléze je tu ještě něco
a povědět to nesmíme
potichu jsme to zapomněli
hlasitě o tom nevíme. <sup>19</sup> (Skácel [1984] 1996: 229)
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Poets cannot speak, they cannot denounce out loud the brutality and falsity of the regime, however they quietly do so by resorting to illegal, hidden, alternative ways such as the samizdat circuit or the publication abroad.

In conclusion, it is necessary to mention two of Skácel's most polemical compositions against the capillary control of the regime that represent the two poles of censorship, the oppressors and the oppressed: *Ti kteří zakazují* [Those Who Ban] and *Zakázaný* člověk [Banned Man]. In the first text, included in the collection *A znovu láska* [And Again Love], those who ban are presented as "velké hrubé vši" (Skácel [1974] 1996: 345), loveless people who persecute poets and all those who fight for freedom of expression. "Děsí je ticho" (Skácel [1974] 1996: 345), they are frightened by those silences which, like Skácel's, are extremely noisy. He was one of the most influential and beloved poets of the second half of the twentieth century, therefore his forced silence is heavy, it cannot go unnoticed. The last stanza of this poem reads as follows:

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Povinnost smrti se jim omrzela dávno nemohou unést mezi živými tak těžkou věc
A potom není láska potom je zakázáno vyzpívat se z tmy.<sup>22</sup> (Skácel [1974] 1996: 346)
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^{19 &}quot;And finally there's something else,/ something we mustn't talk about;/ quietly we've forgotten it/ and we don't know it out aloud". Translation [in:] Osers (2001: 60).

^{20 &}quot;Large gross lice".

^{21 &}quot;The silence scares them".

^{22 &}quot;The obligation of death has long bored them/ they cannot bear among the living/ such a heavy thing/ And then there is no love/ then it is forbidden to sing out of the darkness".

These figures are devoid of any trait of humanity, and this deeply frightens Skácel. The lack of love is terrible because it is a driving and revealing force, nothing is possible without love and Skacel's poetry is above all love poetry (Cosentino 1998: 180). Furthermore, the very absence of love does not allow him to overcome the darkness caused by the repression of culture with the poetic word. The value of love is opposed to the inhumanity of the "normalized" world.

The poem Zakázaný člověk [Banned Man], contained in the collection Kdo pije potmě víno [Who Drinks Wine in the Dark], is extremely effective and represents the perfect conclusion for this journey through Skácel's verses of denunciation marked by suffering:

Všechno co mám je obráceno dovnitř a je to z druhé strany jako kravaty na zadní stěně dveří šatníku

Pomalu přivykám si na ticho a vůně

Dovedu z bláta zvednout peříčko a zas je nezahodit

Někdy sám sobě vypravuji příběh a jindy zazpívám si malou písničku o tom že nohy máme jenom na bolení a duši k tomu aby vydržela

A jsem zas neslyšný jak neslyšné je světlo

Tak dopodrobna zabývám se tichem že podle hmatu podřezávám strach

Cizí i svůj

A proto když se slepí ohlédnou jako bych patřil k nim

Spolu se provlékáme potmě uchem jehly.²³ (Skácel [1988] 1996: 286)

The censored poet recites his verses to himself, he cannot do otherwise. Here the writer openly confesses his pain, his fear, his soul cannot find peace in these conditions. He is inaudible but despite this he does not stop writing verses. The poet's image is linked to light, which is opposed to the darkness mentioned in the previously analyzed poem. Poetry is light also because it illuminates and reveals the depths of

^{23 &}quot;All that I have is inward turned./ And from the other side it is just like my ties/ on the inside of my wardrobe door. // Slowly I'm getting used to silence and the perfume. // I can pick up a tiny feather from the mud/ and now throw it away. // Sometimes I tell myself a story/ and sometimes sing a little song;/ that we have legs solely so they should hurt/ and a soul so it should persevere. // Again I am inaudible, inaudible as light. // So thoroughly I am engaged in silence/ that by mere touch I sever fear. // Others' and mine // And that is why, when the blind turn their heads,/ I feel I'm one of them. // Together we slip through the needle's eye". Translation [in:] Osers (2001: 78).

phenomena. Moreover, Skácel claims to meticulously deal with silence and actually he based his entire poetics on it.

Finally, there is the biblical reference to the needle's eye: both the blind and the poets manage to pass through such a small hole since what really matters is the wealth of spirit. Just the one that Jan Skácel, with his tireless denunciation of censorship and his fighting in defense of the fundamental principles of the human world, has always preserved.

In conclusion, it can be said that Skácel seems to follow a very precise path in bearing witness to the harsh socio-cultural situation of the time: initially, drawing from the animal world, he uses the power of rhetorical figures, in particular of the metaphor, to conceal his message; subsequently, as time passes without any change, thus confirming the stasis of the current situation, openly denounces the censorship confessing his torment and also writing many autobiographical texts using first-person pronouns.

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36