

THE TENUITY BETWEEN PROGRESSION AND REGRESSION IN BOHUMIL

HRABAL'S TOO LOUD A SOLITUDE

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ABSTRACT

Haňt'a, the narrator of Czech writer Bohumil Hrabal's novella, *Too Loud a Solitude* (1976), often reflects on the duality of permanence and intangibility of ideas. This paper attempts to explore how the author resolves the tension between this duality through an understanding of the intermittency between progression and regression. First published in 1976 and translated in English by Michael Henry Heim, the short novel relates the story of an eclectic and dim-witted old man, Haňt'a, who works as a paper crusher in Prague. Haňt'a is portrayed as a recluse having an encyclopedic range of knowledge. He collects a huge number of rare and banned books by rescuing them from the compacting machine and thus goes against the book-censoring regime in his own unique way. To comprehend the nature of the resolution, progress and regress are seen in juxtaposition with the opposition between 'I' and 'other' as explicated by Julia Kristeva in her essay on abjection and with the opposition between order and disorder as discussed by Walter Benjamin in his work *Illuminations*.

Kristeva, in her essay on abjection, defines "abject" as "the jettisoned object", that which is "radically excluded" and "it lies outside, beyond the set" (*Powers of Horror* 2). She formulates that abjection violently revolts against a threat, which originates at the boundaries of outside and inside. This 'outside' and 'inside' is understood as 'I' and 'other'. This 'I' desires that the difference between the 'I' and the 'other' should remain extant. But abjection threatens the existence of the tenuous boundary between the two. Thus, abjection cannot be assimilated. But it is protected because of the certainty of its existence. Kristeva proposes that "the abject has only one quality of the object-that of being opposed to I" (1). This opposition with 'I' makes abject the jettisoned object, but it still is a part of 'I' and thus for Kristeva, "abject and abjection are my safeguards. The primers of my culture" (2) Abject is what one rejects or banishes. But from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease to challenge its rejecter i.e. the subject "I". Combating this challenge is what safeguards the subject and primes culture. Culture is also primed by its literature. Books are intellectual products of a culture; these are produced and conserved in public and private spaces. In the novella, *Too Loud a Solitude*, Haňt'a lives in "a land that has known how to read and write for fifteen generations" and "where it was and still is a custom, an obsession to compact thoughts and images impatiently in the heads of the population" (Hrabal 3). But production and conservation of books is followed by their destruction and waste. Thus, as the fate of every created object is its destruction, books, after a period, are either naturally destroyed or are thrown away in trash.

KEYWORDS: Progression and Regression in Bohumil Hrabal's *Too Loud a Solitude*

INTRODUCTION

Haňt'a is a collector of books thrown away as trash in his cellar underneath a courtyard. He has been compacting wastepaper and books for thirty-five years. He has educated himself on the books saved from the jaws of his hydraulic

press. Books thrown as trash are cultural waste which is assimilated by Haňt'a. He has read and drunk every word of these books such that he cannot tell which of his thoughts come from him and which from his books. This assimilation makes him stay attuned to himself. In Kristeva's theorization of the abject, culture's waste is the other, the abject which is absorbed by Haňt'a and thus for him, the border between himself and the other does not exist. The duality between the subject and the object as propounded by Kristeva does not hold meaning for Haňt'a as he himself is the subject and the object. Thus he objectifies himself: "I've come to look like my encyclopedias" (Hrabal 1). The assimilation of thoughts and knowledge is a progression, which initiates a journey backwards i.e. a regression where the self is transformed into the abject other. Subject becomes the object and thus Haňt'a considers himself to be his books: "I have only to lean over and a stream of beautiful thoughts come from me and flows out of me" (Hrabal 1).

Books are desired by culture as it desires its thoughts to be propagated through literature. This want, as proposed by Kristeva, is "logically preliminary to being and object - to the being of the object" and "that abjection, and even more so abjection of self, is its only signified. Its signifier, then, is none but literature" (*Powers of Horror* 2). Thus literature is a product of the abjected self. And a cyclic continuity in the form of progression and regression can be seen in abjection of self. The self desires the other to identify itself with. It creates this other by abjecting the self and the product of this creation and abjection is literature. But as the abject is not assimilated and it threatens the borders which differentiate the self and the abject, this abject literature, the books are thrown away as trash by the self.

Boundaries between valuable and trash are disturbed when absolute and fanatic control is exercised by power. Alfred Thomas in his book, *Prague Palimpsest: Writing, Memory, and the City* informs us that "*Too Loud a Solitude* was completed in 1976, during the period of political repression known as the Normalization and was not published in Czechoslovakia until the fall of Communism in 1989" (105). Many authors like Hrabal were not allowed to publish due to which many of the books were previously published abroad and in *samizdat*, the unofficial dissemination of any variety of text within totalitarian political systems, especially those after World War II (Machovec 1). In this novella, we are told that Haňt'a finds many of the exquisitely made volumes of books from the Royal Prussian Library thrown away. Such cultural and literary regression initiated a progression, which gave birth to *samizdat* literature and in this novella, by witnessing destruction of books; Haňt'a learned the beauty of destruction.

For Haňt'a, the world is a beautiful place only when the abject, the impure is absent. The impure is the abjection of self and literature is its signifier which has taken the form of books. Thus he imagines: "How much more beautiful it must have been in the days when the only place a thought could make its mark was the human brain and anybody wanting to squelch ideas had to compact human heads" (Hrabal 2). Haňt'a's job is to extirpate culture's waste by turning books and wastepaper into pulp in his press. But, because of his love of reading, Haňt'a regresses back in time to rescue those books. When he reads them, he internalizes literature which is culture's abject. For him books are byproducts of the abjected self and thoughts originate in the human brain and not in books, thus "inquisitors burn books in vain" (Hrabal 2). As books have taught Haňt'a the joy of devastation, he has turned into an artist at the site of destruction. He worships his habit of collecting books by decorating bales as if performing a ritual or a mass. He says: "I have a need to garnish my bales, give them my stamp, my signature" (Hrabal 5). He always anticipates finding a book among wastepaper.

With a mood of anticipation that is aroused by books in a genuine collector, Walter Benjamin writes his essay on "Unpacking my Library: A Talk about Book Collecting". He gives some insight into the relationship of a book collector with his possessions with a particular emphasis on the habit of collecting rather than a collection. He opines that, "every

passion borders on the chaotic, but the collector's passion borders on the chaos of memories" (*Illuminations* 60). When memories surge towards Haňt'a, as he contemplates his possession, he becomes "the embalmed embodiment of cultural memory" (Thomas 106). The fate suffusing the cultural past is brought forth into the present. For Benjamin, the collection of books is a disorder, which is habituated to such an extent that it appears as order. "Thus there is in the life of a collector a dialectical tension between the poles of order and disorder" (*Illuminations* 60). Disorder emanates from the abject produced by culture and it is Haňt'a's job to manage this disorder, thus he orders each bale and decorates them with a book. He is the only one on earth who knows in which bale lies a *Faust* or *Don Carlos*, a *Hyperion* or a *Thus Spake Zarathustra*.

Benjamin's contention, that the most profound enchantment for the collector is to add a magical value to his items and experience the thrill of acquisition (*Illuminations* 60) finds echo in Haňt'a's exhilaration when he is unable to take his eyes off the splendor of the bales decorated by himself. He becomes "both the artist and the audience" (Hrabal 6). Haňt'a's collected items include works of Goethe, Schiller, Hölderlin, and Nietzsche. As regarded by Benjamin, the essence of the period, the background, the craftsmanship, the whole background of an item for a collector is the fate of his object; the fate of the works of these philosophers in Haňt'a's case is to get transformed into paper pulp in his press. The progression of thoughts, which met their apex in these books, has to undergo a regression where these thoughts are turned into zilch. After a regression, paper pulp undergoes a process of progression when it is recycled into paper for production of more books. But the reproduced material is again thrown in trash. Artistic aspirations of culture, nearly fifteen hundred pounds of "Old Masters" reproductions, of Rembrandts, Halses, Monets, Manets, Klimts, Cezannes are dropped into his cellar.

For thirty-five years Haňt'a has been compacting wastepaper "piled to the ceiling, wet and moldy, ferments in a way that makes manure seem sweet" (Hrabal 21). Haňt'a is aware that decomposition signifies death. The decomposing 'other' resides on one side of the border where the 'self' is not present and this 'other' progresses to encroach upon the 'self' and forces it to regress towards death. The opposition between the 'other' or the abject and the 'self' is also manifested as the opposition between the inferior and the elite Haňt'a has learned how the proletariat went from base to superstructure and how the university-trained elite carry out their work. We are told that his best friends are two former members of Academy of Sciences who have been set to work in the sewers. They made an accidental discovery while studying the sewages of Prague. They reported a humanlike war waged between the white rats and the brown ones that ended in the victory of the whites. These white rats broke-down into two groups and again engaged in a life-and-death struggle for supremacy of the sewers. The winning side would again break down in two camps with "the desire for conflict resolution promising imminent equilibrium, the world never stumbling for an instant" (Hrabal 23). Hrabal makes explicit the significance of abject in life by making society's elite do a study on society's abject and thereby making a chance discovery of an insight into the opposition in human life and a struggle to gain equilibrium. He indicates that the best may emerge from the worst. The relation of this incidence suggests that some of our best lessons are learned from a study of our own abject. Hrabal indicates that the abject always encroach on the 'self', which continually breaks itself into the abject and the 'self' and the struggle between the two keeps the equilibrium. Jettisoning the abject from the 'self' keeps the 'self' alive. A replication of this view is found in Kristeva when she propounds "These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. . . .Such wastes drop so that I might live" (Kristeva 3). Thus abject is necessary for the existence of life.

The necessity of abject to establish the 'self', can be understood through the character of Manča, Haňt'a's girlfriend, who provides the reader with an example for Kristeva's explication of "the improper/unclean". In the novella,

Manča on two occasions accidentally carries excreta in public, once on her ribbons and on the second occasion on her skirts making people repulsive and leaving her ashamed. But she reacted differently on both occasions. On the first occasion, “Manča, having relinquished glory, was left with shame” (Hrabal 28). While on the second occasion, when Haňt’a asked for an apology she left him with her head held high. For Haňt’a, her refusal to his apology confirmed Lao-tze’s dictum: “Know thy shame and preserve thy glory” (Hrabal 31). The feeling of shame was evoked when a feeling of disgust was directed towards the one who experienced shame. This feeling of disgust and repugnance according to Kristeva, preserves the ‘self’ from the abject. Repugnance expels the abject from the self and as the abject is part of the self, “I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which “I” claim to establish *myself*” (Kristeva 3). Peoples’ reaction to Manča evoked shame and separated them from her, ignoring the fact that she, like them, is human. The separation gave them a sense of glory and established them as the ‘self’ and Manča as the abject. While Manča’s awareness, that what happened was only too human and that people revel in their ignorance, preserved her glory. Hrabal here suggests that glory and shame reside at both the sides of the boundary between self and abject. And as this boundary is tenuous, experience of being the ‘self’ or the abject is an intermittent process. The self can regress or progress to become the abject and vice versa.

In yet another instance sublime realization emerges at the nub of loathful. Soaked in beer while pulping bloodstained paper from a slaughterhouse in his musty and dim cellar, Haňt’a had a vision of Jesus and Lao-tze standing side by side. He perceives them in opposition with each other:

“I saw Jesus as a romantic, Lao-tze as a classicist, Jesus as the flow, Lao-tze as the ebb, Jesus as spring, Lao-tze as autumn, Jesus as the embodiment of love for one’s neighbor, Lao-tze as the height of emptiness, Jesus as *progressus ad futurum*, Lao-tze as *regressus ad originem*” (Hrabal 40).

In my contention, Haňt’a re-pronounces these two dictums of progressing towards future and regressing towards the origin by juxtaposing the two processes with compressing and decompressing motion of his hydraulic press to assert that in his profession, spiral and circle come together and *progressus ad futurum* meets *regressus ad originem*. Going forward means coming back and thus even the reverse *progressus ad originem* equals *regressus ad futurum*.

Hrabal, by giving a unique space to Haňt’a between the borders of progression and regression, production and destruction, the ‘self’ and the ‘other’, the ‘self’ and the abject is providing the reader a comprehensibility of the tenuousness of this border. Haňt’a is positioned at the center of ‘self’ and abject, human brain and book. He is thoughts personified: “I look on my brain as a mass of hydraulically compacted thoughts” (Hrabal 2). When he assimilates the abject other by reading the books and relates his life as a paper compactor as his love story, he makes the abject a part of himself. In this way the other for Haňt’a resides in his own being and as the ‘self’ continually tries to get rid of its abject self, Haňt’a feels alienated from himself, a stranger to himself. He experiences a tenuous connection with the outside world. The continuous attempt made by the self and the abject to negate each other finds perfect manifestation when both are destroyed. Hrabal achieves this narrative perfection when he shows Haňt’a placing himself in his own hydraulic press and committing suicide. Just before crushing himself in his press, he remembers Lao-tze’s saying that “to be born is to exist and to die is to enter” (Hrabal 96). When Haňt’a became the ‘other’ by taking an exit from the outside world, he progressed towards death and at the same time regressed to enter the world of art where he became an artist at the site of destruction of art and writing. Thus, the tension between progression and regression is resolved when life returns to its point of departure.

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