

Giving an account of oneself through the eyes of the other: On sincerity in Bohumil Hrabal's autobiographical trilogy

MARIE ZETOVÁ

DOI: [10.31577/WLS.2026.18.2.3](https://doi.org/10.31577/WLS.2026.18.2.3)

© Institute of World Literature

Slovak Academy of Sciences

© Marie Zetová 2026

Licensed under [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

Giving an account of oneself through the eyes of the other: On sincerity in Bohumil Hrabal's autobiographical trilogy

Bohumil Hrabal. Czech literature. Sincerity. Judith Butler. Giving an account of oneself. Autobiography.

The study focuses on the construction of sincerity in Bohumil Hrabal's *In-House Weddings* trilogy (1986–1987). In this prose series, Hrabal recounts several decades of his marriage as seen through the eyes of his wife Eliška, placing her in the position of protagonist and first-person narrator. By staging the text as a meditated confession of this kind, Hrabal not only produces an uncompromising autobiography, but also reflects on the identity of his life partner. To grasp this dialectical aspect of the text, we turn to Judith Butler's concept of "giving an account of oneself". This allows us to see that, apart from serving as a narrative device, Hrabal's peculiar handling of perspective is an expression of a certain ethical stance, underscoring the state of being recognized by another, while also recognizing them, as a condition of a truthful, authentic existence.

This work was supported by the Cooperatio program, research area Philosophy, of Charles University in Prague.

Marie Zetová
Faculty of Humanities
Charles University
Prague
Czech Republic
mrzetov@gmail.com
ORCID: 0000-0003-4060-0919

The present study aims to provide a commentary on the role of sincerity within the poetics of Bohumil Hrabal. It focuses on how sincerity is both represented and performatively constructed in his literary autobiography known as *Svatby v domě* – *In-House Weddings*, which consists of three volumes: *Svatby v domě* (1987; Eng. trans. *In-House Weddings*, 2007), *Vita nuova* (1987; Eng. trans. *Vita Nuova*, 2010) and *Proluky* (1986; Eng. trans. *Gaps*, 2011).¹ The individual volumes differ in their style and themes, but what they have in common is the fact that through all three of them, the story is told from the perspective of Hrabal's wife Eliška "Pipsi" Hrabalová (née Plevová). In aesthetic terms, this can be understood as a model example of a defamiliarizing artistic strategy in the sense of Viktor Shklovsky's "ostranenie" ([1925] 1965, 13). However, this narrative choice also seems to have implications that reach beyond the realm of the "merely" aesthetic towards the realm of the ethical, opening questions about the limits and possibilities of understanding the self and the other – and also the question of one's capacity to articulate such an understanding. The author himself, when speaking of the trilogy, even poses the questions about the nature of his work as follows:

Have I surpassed the liminal situation of human existence?... I asked myself the same questions when I finished writing the second part of my trilogy *Vita nuova*... a stream of narration about my life, which, in its flow and lack of punctuation across two hundred and twenty pages, raises the same questions in me: Is this still literature? Is this text still a manuscript?² (Hrabal 1995a, 114)

In order to comprehend the interplay between the narrative and the ethical aspect of the text, we suggest to employ the concept of "giving an account of oneself" as presented by Judith Butler in their eponymous book (2005), as it pregnantly covers the ways of performing sincerity both on the level of the ethics of intersubjective relations, and on the level of constitution of one's own identity – while also addressing the chiasmatic relationship between these two modes of performance.

There is an ongoing debate about the level of Hrabal's "biographical" or "historical" sincerity, as his works notoriously resist being "categorized as either fictional or factual" (Just 2019, 60). Reading Hrabal's literary works through the prism of his life indeed soon becomes treacherous since the many conclusive parallels between them are interspersed with at least an equal number of (un)noticeable discrepancies and literary "mystifications" (Češka 2014, 790–792). The author himself does not provide much guidance either, insisting that in relation to the trilogy "everything is truth" (Hrabal [1990] 2008, 85), while also stating that "[f]iction is sometimes more perfect and realistic than reality itself"³ (1995b, 287).

However, the present article does not intend to join the discourse around the question of the extent to which Hrabal's literary works are grounded in real-life events. We will not approach sincerity within Hrabal's writing in referential terms, as a matter of correspondence between "what happened" and "what is told", or between the presupposed inner state of the writing subject and its actualization in language, but rather as a performance – "a 'doing' instead of a 'being'" (van Alphen and Bal 2009, 3) – which unfolds itself within the text and is constructed by literary means such as narrative voice or focalization. Therefore, the question of the correspondence

between historical and literary events will be secondary to our reading. After all, as Paul de Man notes in his essay “Autobiography as De-facement”, within autobiography, the relationship between reality and fiction is ultimately irresolvable. On the one hand, the autobiographical testimony seems to be the result of the life of the writing self. However, to the same extent, this historical life itself is a product of “the illusion of reference” evoked by reading the text as an autobiographical one (1979, 920). “The interest of autobiography, then, is not that it reveals reliable self-knowledge – it does not – but that it demonstrates in a striking way the impossibility of closure and of totalization” (922). Therefore, this study will not assess the degree of sincerity in Hrabal’s trilogy on the basis of how faithfully it reports on the author’s life, but on the basis of how transparently it reveals this aporetic nature of the autobiographical genre.

Yet this should in no way deny the significance of biographical inspiration that went into creating *In-House Weddings*. The trilogy belongs to that line of Hrabal’s work which was inspired by his own family, or more precisely, two important female figures: his mother and his spouse, who both entered the fictionalized universe Hrabal had built around the actual timeline of his life. The characters they inspired seem to pose as intertextual doppelgangers of sorts, as the texts in which they appear stand out precisely because of the distinct narrative voice and perspective controlled by the female protagonists.

HRABAL’S WRITING BETWEEN FICTION AND HISTORY

In his earlier prose, when Hrabal draws inspiration for his protagonists among the people who are close to him, the text unfolds as third-person narrative, or it is composed in a “documentary” manner, as if a stream of oral discourse of the main character was just written down – such is the case of the stories narrated from the point of view of Uncle Pepin. But in the 1970s, when he first created his mother’s literary alter ego as the center of his novella *Postřižiny* (1976; *Cutting It Short*, 1994) Hrabal abandons both the style imitating a documentary record and the third-person narrator, assigning the narrative voice directly to the character of his mother.

In the context of his pre-existing poetics, this can be understood as a somewhat surprising and innovative gesture. On the other hand, it is also possible to interpret the new narrative mode as a logical response to the choice of the time period from which Hrabal decided the story of *Cutting It Short* would unfold. The story follows Hrabal’s mother Maryška and her husband Francin as a young, newly married couple. Therefore, it would disrupt the “realistic” effect of the narrative if their (step)son – who was just an infant at the time – was narrating the story from his point of view. What is striking, however, is the fact that any mention of the character of Hrabal as a son of the main couple is omitted from the story altogether as if he was not even born yet. This, of course, is in conflict with actual biographical events.⁴

This suspension of his presence – both on the level of the narrative voice as well as on the level of the characters, can be read as a twofold gesture. In one way, it is possible to interpret Hrabal’s omission of his past self from the story as a narrative vehicle used by an adult writer to rearrange the literary account of his family history

towards its idealized version. In this vein of interpretation, the absence of the character of “the child Hrabal” from the narrative invites the readers to assume that he is simply yet to be born as the biological offspring of the protagonists. From this perspective, the lack of mention of their son can be understood as an auto-fictional act signaling that the author – within the possibilities of the narrative space – wishes to treat the characters of his mother and his (step)father as his only parents. (This interpretation is openly employed in the 1980 film adaptation of the novella by Jiří Menzel.)

Yet the moment we admit Hrabal manipulates history to convey a certain message, the very same strategy can be equally read as a non-idyllic one. The author could have easily changed the course of fictional events so that his literary alter ego appeared in the story as a biological child of the central couple explicitly – which he had obviously chosen not to do. From this perspective, the same narrative element can denote a sense of omission or inadequacy rather than loving parental relationships. Naturally, we can only speculate what various features of the story – or lack thereof – really mean in relation to Hrabal’s biography. Still, this example is an instrumental one as it provides us with a strong indication that the instances of utmost sincerity within Hrabal’s writing are not to be looked for in precise correspondence between fictional and “actual” events, nor do they reside in offering a definite, unambiguous testimony about oneself.

AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY TOLD BY THE OTHER

Putting aside any guesses about the psychological motives behind Hrabal’s writing, we can note that even though his oeuvre drew on many themes from his family history, up to some point in his career, he had been reluctant to write purely autobiographical prose (Pelán [2002] 2019, 80). While he had previously written texts with some autobiographical features, in these works the depiction of his own self is blurred by projecting his life experience onto a conventionally fictional character – as in *Ostře sledované vlaky* (1965; Eng. trans. *Closely Watched Trains*, 1968); or by filtering it through the childlike perspective of the narrator – as in *Krasosmutnění* (Beautiful sadness, 1979). Hrabal even returned to the formula established in *Cutting It Short* in his novella *Harlekýnovy miliony* (1981; Eng. trans. *Harlequin’s Millions*, 2014), where the protagonist and the narrator of the story is, once again, the character of the author’s mother. Although the time of the narration as well as its tone differ significantly from *Cutting It Short* (the story no longer follows the protagonist in her prime but covers her final years spent in a retirement facility), what remains similar is that the latter text – again – contains very little reference to Hrabal himself as a character.

This tendency, however, seems to have taken an opposite turn with the emergence in the 1980s of a manuscript that would later grow into the *In-House Weddings* trilogy, thematically centered around the author’s marriage to Eliška Plevová. The perspective of the trilogy appears to follow the method established in *Cutting It Short* and *Harlequin’s Millions*. Again, we are dealing with a first-person narrative of the female protagonist inspired by a distinct family member, but this time, the narrative

voice belongs to the character of Hrabal's life partner. Simultaneously, in relation to the persona of the author, we observe a substantial shift from the genre of fictionalized biography towards that of autobiography or autofiction (Tlustý 2018, 86). Since the text is composed as Eliška's account of the history of her marriage to Hrabal, the author – or rather his semi-fictional alter ego – is acutely present in the text as a character, even as a protagonist.

As a narrator, Eliška carefully observes her husband, showing a great deal of empathy and understanding. At the same time, she ironically comments on Hrabal's numerous vices and anxieties, such as his drinking habit, hypochondria or his indulgence in self-pity, while also describing her own inner life, marked by her own traumas and insecurities going back to her Czech-German descent and her previous failed engagement.

Both of these choices – the decision to put Eliška in the position of the first-person narrator and the inclusion of the author's own adult persona into the story – should require our attention at least for two reasons. One of them being, of course, the obvious shift towards a narrative with an openly autobiographical ambition. Yet the biographical dimension of the text with relation to Eliška should also not go unnoticed – if only by virtue of its relative unprecedentedness; despite being married to Hrabal for decades, she had never previously appeared as a major character in any of his stories (Pelán 2019, 79). In this light, Hrabal's decision to give Eliška's persona a central focalizing role within what turned out to be his most extensive text is, at the very least, noteworthy.

Hrabal himself interprets this maneuver with regard to its humorous or parodic potential. In one of his later reflexive essays, he states that the choice of the perspective of his wife was prompted by his encounter with the memoirs of Sophia Tolstaya and Anna Dostoevskaya who both documented the lives of their husbands:

My trilogy owes its style and content to Mrs. Tolstaya and Mrs. Dostoevskaya, who have now published two biographies of their husbands in Prague, praising them so highly in those books that I decided to write my own biography through the prism of my wife's perspective, to whom I was actually Max and Moritz and an enfant terrible, writing not a libel about myself, but rather a little bit about how it was, our marriage, me as the jewel and adornment of our life together. So I turned my wife into a fellow of both Mrs. Tolstaya and Mrs. Dostoevskaya.⁵ (Hrabal 1996, 186)

In this manner, Hrabal is ironically comparing himself to these canonical authors. Simultaneously, he is implying that Tolstaya and Dostoevskaya might be portraying their husbands in a more flattering light than they deserve. This he counters with a statement that he also desires his own biography written from the perspective of his wife, that will be more about "how it was" – and therefore more unforgiving towards him. But since his wife is not a writer, he must write this sincere "biography" himself.⁶

This seemingly ironic figure present in the conception of the text, however, has entirely non-ironic implications for the development of the narrative, which then acquires a complex dialectical structure; in order to attempt to speak honestly about himself, the author must also speak honestly about his wife, who speaks about him, creating "a remarkable mirror-like structure in which the author presents himself

and his views on life and art, but in which he also seeks his true image in the shifting gaze of the other” (Jankovič 1991, 193). In this way, Hrabal’s narrative identity is dependent on that of his wife. But, at the same time, the construction of the narrative identity of Eliška emerges from her discourse about Hrabal as her husband. Thus, the narrative of the trilogy aims not only to paint a sincere portrait of the author himself, but, dialectically, also the portrait of his wife, rendering their identities inseparable.

TRANSPARENCY AND OPACITY

It is probably no coincidence that Hrabal’s trilogy repeatedly touches on the motif of the transparent self – a metaphor associated with the genre of autobiography at least since Jean-Jacques Rousseau declared in *Les Confessions* (1782–1789; Eng. trans. *Confessions*, 1928) that his heart was “as transparent as crystal” (697). As Miloslava Slavíčková (2019, 82–86) notes, Hrabal explicitly builds on the literary tradition of transparency and its employment as a means of performing self-knowledge (and self-exposure), making various intertextual references to André Breton’s semi-autobiographical prose *Nadja* (1928; Eng. trans. 1960), where the motif of glass-like transparency of the self also appears: “I myself shall continue living in my glass house where you can always see who comes to call, where everything hanging from the ceiling and on the walls stays where it is as if by magic, where I sleep nights in a glass bed, under glass sheets, where *who I am* will sooner or later appear etched by a diamond” (1960, 18). In *Vita Nuova*, the second volume of the trilogy, Eliška observes her husband as he paraphrases these lines to their friend Vladimír Boudník:

And I will live in a glass house where everything will be made of glass and I will see everyone who ascends my glass staircase and I will lie down to sleep upon a glass bed and I will cover myself with a glass sheet upon which a diamond inscription will eventually appear that reads ... WHO AM I ...? My husband went on quietly and his words defused the tension that hung in the air they added sort of magic ... And even I succumbed to the spell and perhaps for the first time to the significance of what my husband was saying and I saw that Vladimír was indeed transparent and that he had revealed himself his crazy heart to us. (Hrabal 2010, 153)

In the thematic plane of the text, the transparency of the self (in this case projected onto the character of Vladimír) is presented as an aspirational state, a “spell” that for a fleeting moment unites the perspective of the narrator with the perspective of her husband, allowing her to see Vladimír the way Hrabal sees him. At the same time, the aspiration towards transparency seems to function as an underlying principle of the entire narrative structure of the prose, governing the interplay between the model author who uses the penetrating gaze of the character of his wife in order to write a transparent autobiography. Yet, for this principle to work, her consciousness must first be made transparent by the discourse of the author – whose fictional simulacrum simultaneously arises from the reflector of Eliška’s mind as a subject of this transparency. Hence, transparency is an aspirational state even within the context of the narrative situation, recurring indefinitely in the process of this intersubjective mirroring, but the point of its definite realization is never reached.

Accordingly, the explicit meditations on transparency appearing within the story are complemented by a polarly opposite symbolism of a mask-like opacity; a motif which Hrabal directly borrows from Roland Barthes, particularly from *Le degré zéro de l'écriture* (1953; Eng. trans. *Writing Degree Zero*, 1970), also referring implicitly to René Descartes (Diamond 1982, 1).

In *Gaps*, the character of Hrabal, speaking to his wife, proclaims: “and like I already told you, like Mr. Barthes says ... Although I forge ahead, I point to this mask of mine, which I wear like an actor who has decided to play the clown, the fool ... so said my man, kneeling before me, washing my feet, and I knew that he was my husband and I was his wife” (Hrabal 2011, 57). The lines quoted are a paraphrase of the following passage from *Writing Degree Zero* by Barthes to whose theses the trilogy also tellingly corresponds also in terms of its chosen narrative situation (Förster 2025, 82; see Meyer 2015): “The preterite and the third person in the Novel are nothing but the fateful gesture with which the writer draws the attention to the mask which he is wearing. The whole of Literature can declare *Larvatus prodeo*, As I walk forward, I point out my mask” (Barthes 1970, 40).

It is worth noting that within *In-House Weddings*, the mask motif is not merely present as a figure of speech, but also as an actual material prop that repeatedly appears throughout the story in the form of Hrabal’s “death mask”, a plaster cast of the writer’s face created by his friend Vladimír. The “death” attribute attached to the mask is also not without significance in relation to Barthes’s essay – where the author famously claims that the traditional novelistic form is itself a form of death, turning “life into destiny, a memory into a useful act, duration into an orientated and meaningful time” (1970, 39).

Regarding Hrabal’s death mask, it is rather symbolically featured in the opening scenes of the first volume when Eliška makes acquaintance with her future husband in his eccentric household in Libeň. In *Vita Nuova*, Hrabal mentions this mask to Eliška (who is now his wife), again, telling her it was lost over time, sinking into the soil of their yard. As a motif, however, it persists until the very end of the story: in the closing lines of the final part of the trilogy, the author’s lost death mask re-emerges from the stream of images Eliška associates with the – both loved and hated – house in Libeň she is about to leave behind: “and I even saw that death mask still hanging here, girdled by tendrils of wild ivy, the death mask Mr. Boudník made of my husband ... I stood here dazzled by those images I thought were long gone and buried in the past” (Hrabal 2011, 130–131). The constitution of the protagonists’ ever-escaping narrative identity then seems to be caught up within this dialectic of the transparency, enacted by autobiographical writing, and the admitted opacity – the mask which, by the very same act of writing, the author points out.

It is probably not arbitrary that the key metaphors of transparency and that of a mask employed here are chosen from the realm of the visual experience. In Hrabal’s oeuvre, the motif of vision, including its intersubjective dialectics (as in “seeing how others see me”), appears to be conspicuously connected to obtaining various kinds of (self)knowledge – an act, which for Hrabal, namely in its specific relation

to seeing, oftentimes presents itself as being closer to mysticism than to any conventional epistemology (Fulka 2014, 181).

AN ACCOUNT OF ONESELF AND INTERSUBJECTIVITY IN *IN-HOUSE WEDDINGS*

To examine the implications of this narrative cycle marked by transparency and opacity, we can now turn to the concept of “giving an account of oneself”, as Judith Butler formulates it in their 2001 article and subsequent book of that title (2005). Butler is concerned with ethics and subjectivity – and with the ethics of how we narrate our subjectivity to others. They argue that, in fact, the narration about one’s (own) identity can never be fully completed – that an individual can never really give a truthful account of oneself in a definitive way (2005, 79). For Butler, the state of being transparent is unattainable.

In this vein, they critique moral theories, such as Kantian ethics, that assume that the self is fully autonomous and rational. Instead, they draw from the Hegelian notion of subjectivity as always already constituted dialectically within the intersubjective context. According to Butler, the emergence of one’s identity as one’s own is always conditioned by someone or something other than oneself – such as other people, social norms, language, or even various unconscious processes (135). For this reason, we can never fully account for ourselves – there will always be certain opaque, unknowable parts of us, brought about by the inherent strangeness within our subjective constitution.

Butler approaches the question of how we can explain ourselves, if our sense of self is always already shaped by forces that are beyond our control. The solution they provide is an encouragement to keep trying nevertheless, to never cease in the effort to provide an account of our deeds, even if the very project of self-narration is a paradoxical one. As Butler says: “In speaking the ‘I,’ I undergo something of what cannot be captured or assimilated by the ‘I,’ since I always arrive too late to myself” (79). In their statement we can hear the echo of the autobiographical aporia we already encountered in de Man’s essay, as well as an echo of the doubts about the possibilities of writing formulated by Barthes which Hrabal himself reflected upon.

According to Butler, then, the productive ethical position is to accept the fact that our self-narration will always be incomplete. This, in turn, implies that we are not entitled to demand such a definitive account from others, as the same conditions apply to them. After all, it is their recognition what our own identity relies on and where it stems from – so to compromise the right to this indeterminacy within the identity of the Other would always be connected to compromising one’s own (2001, 28).

Referring to Adriana Cavarero, Butler thus asserts that the central ethical question, and a condition of any attempt at autobiography, is not the question “who am I?” – which we encountered in the Bretonian fragment devoted to Vladimír, and which keeps on returning in Hrabal’s later texts (see Hrabal 1989), – but the question “who are you?” (Butler 2001, 24):

I am not, as it were, an interior subject, closed upon myself, solipsistic, posing questions of myself alone. I exist in an important sense for you, and by virtue of you. If I have lost

the conditions of address, if I have no “you” to address, then I have lost “myself.” [...] one can only tell an autobiography, one can only reference an “I” in relation to a “you”: without the “you,” my own story becomes impossible. (24)

By the virtue of its intersubjective nature, any attempt at a “fully transparent” account of oneself is always, in a way, bound to fail. Therefore, Butler concludes, we are not entitled to any definitive narrative explanation of others, as this would present a form of ethical violence:

If the identity we say we are cannot possibly capture us, and marks immediately an excess and opacity that fall outside the terms of identity, then any effort “to give an account of oneself” will have to fail in order to approach being true. As we ask to know the Other, or ask that the Other say, finally, who he or she is, it will be important not to expect an answer that will ever satisfy. (28)

Hrabal’s trilogy by its very composition seems to correspond to Butler’s thesis. As we can see, for Butler, the sincerity of one’s own account is not a matter of correspondence between one’s “true” or “inner” identity and the identity they proclaim. What, on the other hand, is fundamental, is to acknowledge that our identities are open and relational – and to speak of them as such.

If we adopt this perspective, it becomes irrelevant whether all the events described in the story of Hrabal’s trilogy correspond to the actual life events of the author and his wife. The sincerity of the text dwells in its narrative dynamics, which, not only despite being a pure artistic fabrication, but precisely because of it, points to the intersubjective foundations of identity, and to the fact that we need others to be able to say something about ourselves.

Clearly, Hrabal as an author is an architect of this narrative situation, but it is important to consider that, as an author, he also stands outside the text. The situation of the protagonists, on the other hand, is a chiasmatic one. The identity of Hrabal as a character is dependent on and co-determined by Eliška’s perspective, while we can also see how his presence affects her identity and her narration. In the following excerpt from the first volume, we can observe how the relational nature of the two selves manifests even through the descriptions of the protagonists’ cognitive processes, their individual sensory and emotional perspectives merging into each other:

At that hour in the morning, as we walked, we said nothing, we simply looked about us, the doctor, happy I saw the same things as he, and I, glad this person I walked with, who buried me in flowers at work, had quickened in me an interest for something besides that torture with my fiancé [...] for the first time I looked beyond *me*, I admired the old trunks on the trees, raised my head and gazed through branches into the sky, couldn’t hold back, and I touched the old bark on the tree’s trunk, I put my arm up to rub my fingers against the leaves ... I saluted the lot, and as soon as I looked into the doctor’s eyes, I saw his face light up, in some way he grew younger on all I was seeing for the first time, and nodded and let go a profound sigh ... (Hrabal 2007, 59–60)

In this manner, the sense of openness and mutuality of the characters and their stories established on the formal level of the text penetrates also the level of the events described in it. Later, the structural openness manifests itself more pronouncedly at

the stylistic level of the prose as well. In the second volume of the trilogy, Hrabal almost completely abandons punctuation. In his commentary, he claims that the lack of punctuation is a means of encouraging the reader to perform what he calls “diagonal reading”. By this method he wants to prompt the recipients to read the entire text not in a linear way, but rather to skip through it and focus only on the parts that strike them as captivating. This way, the intersubjective inquiry contained within the question “who are you?” extends towards the reader as well:

we can all turn a page a minute without losing the thread of a text’s semantic message making diagonal reading a kind of suspended descent of the eyes from top to bottom though the alert mind always spots where to pause in this kind of reading because a higher signalling system says that here is something worthy of the reader’s attention here he must revert for a tiny moment to horizontal reading as if to underline in red a core message and then carry on in the manner of alert subliminal global reading [...] ...by reading diagonally a reader finds [not]⁷ only imprints of himself but also what structures the style of the person who wrote the text... (Hrabal’s foreword to *Vita Nuova* as quoted in Pelán 2019, 86)

Hrabal’s text, therefore, does not aim to provide any definitive meaning in and of itself, but is ready to be understood in multiple ways. Similarly to the account of oneself as described by Butler, the literary text conveys meanings that are hidden and opaque to the author themselves, no matter how open, transparent or sincere they are trying to be. Also, the author has no control over the plurality of interpretations that arise when the text is read by others. To draw this parallel further, an (autobiographical) literary text, like any account of oneself, should be approached with the understanding that its inevitable (and in this case, even admitted) incompleteness is not a weakness, but a sign of its authenticity. The method of diagonal reading proposed by Hrabal addresses this situation and works towards creating a space where such an inherent semantic openness is not merely tolerated but encouraged. Thus, the intersubjective nature of a sincere attempt at an autobiographical account is emphasized by Hrabal through the chiasmically constructed narrative situation as well as the (explicit) invitation to its variable readings.

In *Gaps*, the final volume of the trilogy, the character of Eliška eloquently summarizes this technique as follows: “I looked at that famous book of his, but when I read it, I got the sense that every reader should finish it off at home, [that with my husband’s writing it’s]⁸ like those prepared meals I buy, the ones I have to finish off, tweak a bit, add spice to so they’re whole...” (Hrabal 2011, 12)

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Hrabal’s trilogy can be read as a paradigmatic case of sincerity understood not as a referential truthfulness, but as a mode of autobiographical writing that openly admits its own performative and relational nature. Through the chiasmatic construction of the narrative perspective, Hrabal exposes the impossibility of any fully transparent autobiographical account, while simultaneously affirming the ethical demand of striving towards it. In Hrabal’s prose, the act of giving an account of oneself is mediated through the constant attempts at narrative

portrayal of the consciousness of the other – which, by this means, also sheds light on the author's own fictionalized persona arising from Eliška's discourse. The structure of the work thus becomes an enactment of an ethical paradigm, in which self-recognition and self-narration function as inseparable from the recognition of alterity. This is represented, of course, most conspicuously by the central character of Hrabal's wife, but at the stylistic and paratextual level, also through the acknowledgment of the importance of the reader's role. Hrabal's trilogy then ultimately situates sincerity at the intersection of aesthetics and ethics: as an artistic strategy that renders visible the intersubjective conditions of identity, and as an ethical gesture grounded in the acceptance of the inherent incompleteness of any (auto)biography.⁹

NOTES

- ¹ We list the years of the first Czech editions in the order in which the individual volumes of the trilogy were first published by the exile publishing house '68 Publishers, where the chronologically last volume, *Gaps*, was published first. The trilogy could not be officially published in Czechoslovakia until after the fall of the communist regime. However, with help of samizdat publishers Ludvík Vaculík and Václav Kadlec, Hrabal managed to get unofficial transcripts of all three parts into circulation as early as 1986 (Kotyk, Kotyková and Pavlíček 2014, 194).
- ² "Nepřekročil jsem mezní situaci lidské existence?... A ty samé otázky jsem si kladl, když jsem dopsal druhý díl mé trilogie *Vita nuova*... proud vypravení o mém životě, který v proudu a bez interpunkce na dvě stě dvaceti stránkách vyvolává ve mně ty samé otázky: Je to ještě literatura? Je tento text ještě rukopisem?" Unless otherwise stated, the translations from Czech are by the present author and the original passage is cited in the footnote. If an officially published English translation of Hrabal's text is available, we always cite primarily from this translation.
- ³ "Fikce je někdy dokonalejší a realističtější, než sama skutečnost."
- ⁴ Hrabal had been born in 1914 as a child from his mother's previous relationship, while Marie "Maryška" Kiliánová and František "Francin" Hrabal wed in 1916. The author was then adopted by František Hrabal and his surname was changed accordingly (Kotyk, Kotyková and Pavlíček 2014, 6–14).
- ⁵ "Ta moje trilogie děkuje za svůj styl i obsah paní Tolsté a paní Dostojevské, které v Praze vydaly nyní dvě biografie o svých manželech a v těch knihách své manžely tak chválí, že jsem si řekl, že svůj životopis napíši přes prisma pohledu mé paní, jejíž jsem vlastně byl Max a Moric a enfant terrible, že sám napíši o sobě ne hanopis, ale tak trochu jako to bylo, to naše manželství, já jako klenot a zdobnost našeho soužití. Tak jsem ze své manželky udělal družku jak paní Tolsté, tak paní Dostojevské."
- ⁶ Not long after it was first published, Hrabal's trilogy itself has been promptly incorporated into a similar intertextual dialogue by Péter Esterházy who in his *Hrabal könyve* (1993; Eng. trans. *The Book of Hrabal*, 1993) intentionally builds both the plot and the narrative situation as a paean to *In-House Weddings* and *Cutting It Short* and its protagonists.
- ⁷ "diagonálním čtením nachází čtenář nejen otisky sama sebe, ale také stylovou strukturu toho kdo ten text napsal..." (Hrabal 1995c, 182).
- ⁸ "že to je s tím psaním mého muže, jako když nakupuju v Polotovarch" (Hrabal 1995d, 433).
- ⁹ My gratitude goes to my thesis supervisor Jakub Češka; the anonymous peer reviewers, and to the editors of this volume for their thoughtful comments and suggestions.

REFERENCES

- Barthes, Roland. [1953] 1970. *Writing Degree Zero*. Trans. by Annette Lavers and Colin Smith. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Breton, André. [1928] 1960. *Nadja*. Trans. by Richard Howard. New York: Grove Press.
- Butler, Judith. 2001. "Giving an Account of Oneself." *Diacritics* 31, 4: 22–40.
- Butler, Judith. 2005. *Giving an Account of Oneself*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Češka, Jakub. 2014. "Literatura v perspektivě života, nebo život v perspektivách literatury? K hrabalovskému kalendáriu." *Česká literatura* 62, 5: 785–800.
- de Man, Paul. 1979. "Autobiography as De-facement." *MLN* 94, 5: 919–930.
- Diamond, Marie Josephine. 1982. "The Social Configuration of Descartes' Discourse on Method." *Dialectical Anthropology* 7, 1: 1–9.
- Esterházy, Péter. [1990] 1993. *The Book of Hrabal*. Trans. by Judith Sollosy. London: Quartet Books.
- Förster, Anna. 2025. "Divoká teorie: Bohumil Hrabal a jiní jako čtenáři a překladatelé francouzské literární teorie." In *Bohumil Hrabal neidylický: Přehlížené a ukryté aspekty jeho díla*, ed. by Jakub Češka, Marek Đurčanský, and Pavel Hošek, 79–95. Dolní Břežany: Scriptorium.
- Fulka, Josef. 2014. "Dívat se buzem: Pohled u Bohumila Hrabala." *Slovo a smysl – Word & Sense* 11, 21: 178–192.
- Hrabal, Bohumil. [1965] 1968. *Closely Watched Trains*. Trans. by Edith Pargeter. New York: Grove Press.
- Hrabal, Bohumil. 1979. *Krasosmutnění*. Praha: Československý spisovatel.
- Hrabal, Bohumil. 1989. *Kdo jsem*. Ed. by Karel Dostál. Praha: Pražská imaginace.
- Hrabal, Bohumil. [1976] 1994. "Cutting It Short." In *The Little Town Where Time Stood Still; And Cutting It Short*, Bohumil Hrabal, trans. by James Naughton, 1–134. London: Abacus.
- Hrabal, Bohumil. 1995a. "Naivní fuga." In *Naivní fuga*, Bohumil Hrabal, ed. by Karel Dostál and Václav Kadlec, 73–117. Praha: Pražská imaginace.
- Hrabal, Bohumil. 1995b. "Rozhovor sám se sebou." In *Domácí úkoly*, Bohumil Hrabal, ed. by Karel Dostál, Vladimír Gardavský, Václav Kadlec, and Claudio Poeta, 284–292. Praha: Pražská imaginace.
- Hrabal, Bohumil. 1995c. "Vita nuova." In *Svatby v domě*, Bohumil Hrabal, ed. by Jaroslava Janáčková, Milada Chlěbcová, Milan Jankovič, and Václav Kadlec, 179–419. Praha: Pražská imaginace.
- Hrabal, Bohumil. 1995d. "Proluky." In *Svatby v domě*, Bohumil Hrabal, ed. by Jaroslava Janáčková, Milada Chlěbcová, Milan Jankovič, and Václav Kadlec, 421–563. Praha: Pražská imaginace.
- Hrabal, Bohumil. 1996. "Sacre du printemps." In *Pojízdná zповědnice*, Bohumil Hrabal, ed. by Karel Dostál and Václav Kadlec, 186–188. Praha: Pražská imaginace.
- Hrabal, Bohumil. [1987] 2007. *In-House Weddings*. Trans. by Tony Liman. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Hrabal, Bohumil. [1990] 2008. *Pirouettes on a Postage Stamp: [An Interview-novel with Questions Asked and Answers Recorded by László Szigeti]*. Trans. by David Short. Prague: Karolinum Press.
- Hrabal, Bohumil. [1987] 2010. *Vita Nuova: A Novel*. Trans. by Tony Liman. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Hrabal, Bohumil. [1986] 2011. *Gaps*. Trans. by Tony Liman. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Hrabal, Bohumil. [1981] 2014. *Harlequin's Millions: A Fairy Tale*. Trans. by Stacey Knecht. New York: Archipelago Books.
- Jankovič, Milan. 1991. "Tři tečky v Prolukách Bohumila Hrabala." In *Nesamozřejmost smyslu*, Milan Jankovič, 193–210. Praha: Československý spisovatel.
- Just, Daniel. 2019. "Literatura a život: Sebestylizace jako strategie v autobiografických a esejistických textech Bohumila Hrabala." *Česká literatura* 67, 1: 60–83.
- Kotyk, Petr, Světlana Kotyková, and Tomáš Pavlíček, eds. 2014. *Hlučná samota: Sto let Bohumila Hrabala*. Praha: Mladá fronta.
- Meyer, Holt. 2015. "Roland Barthes's Masks in Bohumil Hrabal's Gaps: Accounts of a Transfer, Transfer of Accounts." *Slovo a smysl – Word & Sense* 12, 24: 59–89.
- Pelán, Jiří. [2002] 2019. *Bohumil Hrabal: A Full-Length Portrait*. Trans. by David Short. Prague: Karolinum Press.

- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. [1782–1789] 1928. *The Confessions of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*. Trans. by W. Conyngnam Mallory. United States of America: Albert and Charles Boni.
- Shklovsky, Viktor. [1925] 1965. “Art as Technique.” In *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, ed. and trans. by Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis, 3–24. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Slavíčková, Miloslava. 2019. “Hledání identity – Hrabalova trilogie *Svatby v domě*.” In *Schizofrenická historiografie: Literatura Bohumila Hrabala v krátkém 20. století*, ed. by Jakub Češka, Marek Ďurčanský, Petra James, and Holt Meyer, 79–102. Dolní Břežany: Scriptorium.
- Tlustý, Jan. 2018. “To See Oneself through the Eyes of Others and through the Eyes of Books: Perspective in Bohumil Hrabal’s Autobiographical Texts.” *Prace Filologiczne: Literaturoznawstwo* 8 (11), 1: 85–98. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32798/pflit.57>.
- van Alphen, Ernst, and Mieke Bal. 2009. “Introduction.” In *The Rhetoric of Sincerity*, ed. by Ernst van Alphen, Mieke Bal, and Carel Smith, 1–16. Stanford: Stanford University Press.