Academic Journal of Modern Philology

ISSN 2299–7164
Vol. 28 (2025)
Special Issue
67–78

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When Mme de Rênal was Kissing Julien's Feet, the Whole Revolution Cinema in Ústí Roared with Laughter: Eroticism and Sex in the Times of Real Socialism and After the Political System Transformation in Vladimír Páral's Prose

Abstract

This article is devoted to the prose of the Czech writer – Vladimír Páral. It examines his novels written during the era of real socialism, as well as those created before and after the transformation of the political system, through the lens of representations of eroticism and sex. It describes the transformation that took place in the literary presentation of these aspects in Páral's work and defines it as a characteristic shift from erotography (in his early writings) to pornography (from the 1990s onwards). The article is intended as a reconnaissance, a commentary on the transformation of socio-cultural mores as reflected in literary texts. The erotic scenes found in Páral's prose are a valuable record of the changes in morals that have occurred over the decades, revealing the shifting boundaries of permissible expression under prevailing censorship. This does not, of course, imply that the sexual themes depicted in the Czech writer's prose constitute a direct testimony to the sexual life of Czechoslovakia at the time, or of the Czech Republic thereafter. The author draws on Michel Foucault's discourse on sexuality, particularly his concept of *scientia sexualis*. Unlike erotic art, which foregrounds the aesthetic and personal experience of sexuality, *scientia sexualis* examines sex as a biological and social phenomenon, often from the standpoint of an objective observer.

Keywords: Vladimír Páral; real socialism; eroticism; sexuality; *scientia sexualis*; erotography; pornography

The main subject of this text is eroticism and sex in the work of the Czech writer Vladimír Páral. The scenes of sexual intercourse depicted in his prose will mainly serve as an overarching analytical lens through which to examine the moral changes taking place in Czechoslovakia at the time and, simultaneously, the

doi: 10.34616/ajmp.2025.28.6

role of ideology in shaping them, expressed most visibly through censorship. The subject of sex in the broad cultural texts of Czechoslovakia in the second half of the twentieth century is now of considerable interest across various academic disciplines (and is also the focus of numerous popular studies). However, the Czech Republic still lacks an in-depth analysis of sexology as a discipline, let alone an interdisciplinary treatment of it in relation to other fields of knowledge[1], including literary studies[2].

The chosen period is particularly significant for this topic. It was a time of rapid changes in social customs and sexuality, to which literature also responded vividly, becoming an excellent source of knowledge about the taboos and censorship boundaries then in force. In Czech literature of the second half of the twentieth century, four stages can be distinguished, each characterised by a different approach to eroticism and closely linked to successive political turning points in Czechoslovak history.

The first stage was the Stalinist period, when – with respect to the representation of sexuality – an almost total asceticism prevailed. The second stage was the thaw and the 1960s, when literature began to dazzle with bold descriptions of sex, but this tendency was quickly curbed by the onset of Normalisation in the 1970s. According to one expert on this period, from today's perspective Normalisation is seen as a socio-geographical space of an "eastern glacier, because life in these countries was stagnant, immobile, and as if frozen" (Ouředník 2006: 68). With Normalisation came strict censorship, including of eroticism in art and culture, and therefore also in literature.

The true flourishing of eroticism and sexuality in what is now the Czech Republic occurred at the end of the twentieth century. The Velvet Revolution of 1989 opened not only borders and political freedoms, but also sexual freedom. These four periods form the basic framework for discussing the history of moral change in Czech culture in the second half of the twentieth century. This does not mean, of course, that each was internally consistent, normative, or homogeneous in its literary representations of sexuality. None of these periods was monolithic, but each was certainly characterised by discernible tendencies.

I will therefore treat Vladimír Páral's prose as a form of historical testimony, for it may be regarded as a reservoir of knowledge about the past, irrespective of whether it presents a "true" or "fictional" picture of extra-literary reality. It offers the possibility of uncovering the mechanisms of prevailing power or the limits of the ideological system operating at a given time. Hence, in my research, I sought to illustrate certain tendencies. The selected erotic motifs will thus serve as a kind of historical testimony for me, a record conveying particular knowledge about the past, and, at the same time, will allow me to demonstrate how literature depicted this aspect of human life.

My work draws on Michel Foucault's discourse of sexuality, especially his concept expressed in the notion of *scientia sexualis*. This entails approaching sexuality from a scholarly perspective, treating it as an object of investigation and analysis. Unlike *ars erotica*, which centres on the aesthetic and personal experience of sexuality, *scientia sexualis* examines sex as a biological and social phenomenon, often from

1 One of the few texts that addresses the issue of sexology in the Czech Republic is by Věra Sokolová (2001), who stated that "the medical science of sexology helped essentialise the biological basis of sex and sexuality" (Sokolová 2001: 279–280). An interesting sociological perspective on human sexuality and erotic life during the period of real socialism is offered by Kateřina Lišková's publication *Politika touhy. Sex a věda v komunistickém Československu*.

2 These topics are mentioned only occasionally – for example, the literary depiction of sex as a complement to the image of Normalisation was examined by Petr Hrtánek in his article "Politika, sex a erotika – k obrazu ‚normalizace' v románu Jaroslava Čejky *Most přes řeku zapomnění*."

the standpoint of an objective observer (Foucault [1976] 1978: 52–70). In his *Histoire de la sexualité* (*The History of Sexuality*), Foucault argued that conceptions of sexuality – how we speak about it and the norms that regulate it – change with historical, cultural, and social context. He also noted that sexuality is intertwined with power: power not only suppresses or regulates sexuality, but also produces it, shapes it, and gives it meaning (Foucault [1976] 1978: 1–50).

Vladimír Páral is a major and eminent figure in Czech literature of the second half of the twentieth century, clearly standing out among other prose writers of the period. He exists in the readers' consciousness as a renowned chronicler of his times, at once a provocateur breaking taboos and accepted social conventions, at other times a postmodern writer, and still at others the favourite of the social system or a mysterious living legend with numerous exotic interests, including yoga, which he emphasised in almost every interview.

The literary life of the 1960s – the period in which Páral entered the literary scene – was colourful, diverse, and far from confined to strictly literary matters. It intersected with such fields as historiosophy, ethics, and politics and formed part of a vigorous intellectual and artistic ferment in Czechia. The 1960s were the years of the Prague Spring, the liberalisation of the socialist regime in Czechoslovakia. Thanks to Alexander Dubček, the First Secretary of the Central Committee, who promoted the slogan of building "socialism with a human face," censorship was abolished and reforms were introduced, which led to a flourishing of social and cultural life (see also Páral, Bartíková 1995: 109–110).

In Czech cinematography, this period is known as the New Wave, a time of remarkable creative vitality, as Milan Kundera succinctly stated in his keynote address at the writers' congress in 1967 (see Žalman 2008: 18). The Prague Spring came to an end with the invasion of Czechoslovakia by Warsaw Pact troops in 1968. Páral's prose attracted wide reader interest from the very beginning. His works were published eagerly and in large print runs. To quote Jan Polák, "those who do not know even a single novel by Vladimír Páral could be counted on one hand" (Polák 2009: 226). The demand for his books was so great that bookshops, having sold out of his titles, would place a note on the door reading "Páral is sold out," as assistants had grown weary of being constantly asked for his works.

Páral does not idealise Czech reality, nor does he uncover deeply hidden humanistic values in it, as is the case with the films of the New Wave (Miloš Forman, Věra Chytilová, Jiří Menzel) or with the prose of Bohumil Hrabal and Milan Kundera. Páral is a phenomenon unto himself, truly unique against the backdrop of the typical literary antonomasias (the Hrabal line, the Kundera line). Naturally, the context of his work is not a tabula rasa. The poetics of his prose derives from the tradition of naturalism in Czech literature, yet his writing cannot be confined within the rigid boundaries of this artistic paradigm, nor can it be considered a simple continuation of it.

Naturalism in nineteenth-century narrative prose, defined as a literary movement stemming from realism, sought to render descriptions with scientific accuracy and objectivity, akin to biological observation. Grounded in a materialistic conception of life, it displayed a tendency towards extreme themes, brutal motifs, and existentially hopeless situations that exposed social hypocrisy and the predatory struggle for survival. The strength of the naturalists, and their twentieth-century successors, resided in their boldness in seeking out motifs neglected by realists or softened in works striving for harmonious balance, as in the novels of real socialism, for which naturalistic prose offered a counterweight. The theme which was most prominently dwelt on by the naturalists was that of physical love, in all its possible aspects and configurations.

Páral[3] published his début, *Šest pekelných nocí* [Six Hellish Nights], under the pseudonym Vladimír Laban in 1963 in the magazine *Průboj*. This work is often omitted in accounts of the writer's literary achievements. This is, however, unjust, because – as noted by the distinguished Czech literature scholar Lubomír Machala – both in the content of this neglected novel and in its form, one can already identify numerous literary devices and stylistic features that would later come to be labelled "typically Páral" (Machala 2008: 168). Even in this first piece of writing, his characteristic protagonist type appears, who – much like Danny Smiřický in Josef Škvorecký's prose – will subsequently wander through his books, carrying with him an entire constellation of motifs and functioning as a kind of alter ego of Páral himself. In his novels, one can distinguish a whole gallery of narrators – protagonists who bear the author's features. Their fates reflect the writer's own life path and his determined attempt to fashion himself as a hedonistic author. This is most clearly visible in motifs concerning professional life and, above all, the erotic lives of his characters. Páral, a chemist by profession, worked for thirteen years in various chemical plants before eventually settling in Ústí nad Labem. In this industrial city in North Bohemia, he ended his chemical career in 1967 and was, as it were, reborn as a prose writer (see Pohorský 1990: 405).

Páral entered the literary world under his own name in 1964 with the book *Veletrh splněných přání* [Fair of Granted Wishes]. This novel marks the beginning of the period in his writing referred to as the "Black Pentalogy." Its protagonist is a young technician, already sketched out in Páral's début. This time, his name is Milan Renč, and he works as a manager in a chemical laboratory. His job consists merely of mechanically carrying out tasks that he finds senseless. His private life is characterised by the same scepticism. Páral's protagonist does not believe in love, replacing it with cold, calculated sex, treated as no more than a physiological need, like food or sleep. His existence takes on the character of purely biological functioning. He thinks and acts out of habit, and speaks in stereotypical phrases. Though professionally successful, he is utterly emotionally empty and completely lacking in directness.

The reader is drawn into the absurdly trivial existence of people reduced to machines in a crude and absurd socialist system. This portrayal of human existence would become a hallmark of Páral's idiostyle. In all his subsequent novels, he exposes a gallery of human types and the stereotypicality of their behaviour. The enumeration of bare, cool facts underscores this stereotypicality, and each person appears determined by the very language which they use. The protagonist may attempt to escape boredom and repetitiveness, but in the end he slips back into patterns of similar (if not worse) boredom and repetitiveness. In time spans measured minute by minute, the reader follows him through his workplace, leaving work, and so on. The erotic sphere of his life is reduced to spiritless mechanical, or even brutal, sex:

> He realised it was 10:01. […] He took a deep breath, grabbed her and forced his tongue into her mouth, turned her round, knelt on the cardboard boxes and methodically entered her again and again until he was finished… He went to the city centre and, as it was only 10:35, he still had plenty of time. (Páral 1987: 82)

Páral's world is a "world without transcendence." Paraphrasing Immanuel Kant's famous sentence, it is a world without the freedom of the starry sky above and without the moral law within the characters. His later novels reveal further scenes from the protagonist's life in a secularised, rationalised world devoid of transcendence and lacking any overarching meaning. Bereft of spirituality, he is subject to deterministic

3 Three of his novels were translated into English. Two of them – *Catapult. A Timetable of Rail, Sea, and Air Ways to Paradise* and *The Four Sonyas* – were translated by William Harkins, and *Lovers & Murderers* by Craig Cravens. All remaining titles have been translated into English for the purposes of this article.

constraints imposed by his urges and by his surroundings (see also Scheler 1987: 82–83; Novotný 1989: 407–409). Páral refrains from presenting psychological depth and omits almost entirely the illustration of psychological traits, moral attitudes, world-view, habits, spirituality, or emotionality in his characters. His heroes are one-dimensional, uncomplicated – one might even say monolithic.

The subtitles of his novels play an important role, as they carry additional information about the author's intentions. Thus, the novel *Fair Granted Wishes* analysed above bears the subtitle *Příběh pokleslé aktivity* [A Story of Indecent Activity]. The later works belonging to the "Black Pentalogy" reveal further characteristics signalled already in Páral's début. Whereas *Fair Granted Wishes* set out an analysis (less psychological than socio-biological) of a single attitude, the following novel, *Soukromá vichřice* [Private Storm], introduces the complicated affairs of several couples succumbing to similarly "indecent activity." The protagonists are young and middle-aged inhabitants of the same town, working in the same factory. Their ordinary days are filled with boredom and monotony, which is emphasised through elliptically broken, stereotypical dialogues. This novel, too, was given a telling subtitle: *Laboratorní zpráva ze života hmyzu* [Laboratory Note on Insect Life], a succinct Páral-style depiction of humanity.

In the world of insects without transcendence, the characters make choices based on strict physiology, and their desires relate exclusively to the satisfaction of their physiological needs. This is why Páral creates a fictitious report from the life of insects, i.e., Czech society. In a laconic, brusque, and concise manner, he sketches a picture of contemporary interpersonal relations: after ten years of marriage, every Sunday Áda Vinš receives a chicken from his wife Jožа, and every Saturday – sex (Páral 1966: 51). Such concise and crude stylistics would become characteristic of almost all of Páral's works. Similarly, Áda's subordinate, the thirty-year-old, hard-working labourer Standa, who lives in a workers' hostel, makes love to his wife Bohunka on Saturdays and spends Sundays and every afternoon building a small house of his own. All the days of Páral's characters resemble one another as closely as two drops of water. Only the seasons change. Hence the protagonists seek new partners who might bring them new erotic experiences. For them, the sexual act is an attempt to break free from everyday monotony; yet the fireworks quickly die out, and each new relationship slips back into the familiar rut of boredom and routine.

The next novel, *Katapult* [*Catapult*] (1967), continues the poetics adopted in Páral's two preceding works. The reader is given a hyperbolised image of a segment of society composed of grotesque and tragicomic tones. The novel is filled with interwoven, parallel motifs and situations that highlight the empty mechanisms of life. Here too, the ironic subtitle *Jízdní řád železničních, lodních a leteckých drah do ráje* [A Timetable of Rail, Sea, and Air Routes to Paradise] interprets the pursuit of quasi-happiness. The protagonist becomes a victim of this pursuit. Empty and devoid of emotion, he is unable to build a successful relationship or even an intimate one. He introduces himself by placing the following personal advertisement in a magazine: "Jacek Jošt (33/5'9) oval face, brown eyes and hair, no special markings; Motto: Live!" (Páral [1967] 1989a: 1). The description of the protagonist's external features overlaps with the description of his inner self. The lack of distinguishing marks is also a defining feature of Jacek's personality: he is an insignificant, grey little man. This "nobody special," during his business trips, forms various acquaintances and has casual sex with women that he meets through such advertisements. He searches for partners via personal notices, unconcerned that his wife and little daughter are waiting for him at home. He selects his partners according to their location along the railway route Ústí nad Labem–Brno, which he travels for work. His successive conquests are presented in a report-like, detached tone. Yet Páral's idiostyle is only seemingly unemotional. His language is thoroughly imbued with irony, hyperbole,

and the grotesque: devices that form a stylistic dominant not only in the "Black Pentalogy" but also in many of his later novels.

Páral's protagonist, commonly an engineer or technician, is a highly representative figure for a socialist economy striving for development. The plot of all the novels takes place in the same environment of highly industrialised north-western Bohemia, in textile factories or chemical plants. The rough, low-status protagonists of the 1950s production novel have now been socially and financially promoted. The new social system has privileged them in every respect, offering opportunities for a comfortable and settled existence. Meanwhile, the original ideals have faded and become formalised into routine social habits. Rapid adaptation to the new world results in a complacent "small stabilisation," in which boredom and routine quickly take hold. Páral plunges the reader into the stream of his protagonists' consciousness. Following Jacek Jošt's line of thought (in which the daily life in the socialist world with his wife Lenka and daughter Ledička clashes with his dreams and desires) creates a phantasmagorical impression.

Páral's protagonists automate both production and themselves to a remarkable degree: they sleep and eat at designated times, and they also rest and have sex at designated times. This state of affairs becomes so intolerable to Jacek Jošt that he is eventually catapulted beyond its confines at his own insistence. Desperate in his search for happiness and freedom through a succession of quasi-relationships with women, Jacek fails to notice that the noose around him is tightening. The novel is full of comic situations, intensifying the sense of the protagonist's insignificance and superficiality, as he repeatedly attempts to change his life – yet continually falls back into new forms of routine. The women he meets are likewise typical, defined by monotone aims and expectations. Jacek Jošt therefore remains trapped in a pattern of false fulfilment.

In 1969, the novel *Milenci a vrazi* [Lovers & Murderers] appeared, a crowning achievement of Páral's prose of this period, and not only in his own oeuvre but in Czech literature in general. The author's idiostyle is fully realised in this work, subtitled *Magazín ukájení před rokem 2000* [Magazine of Satiety Before the Year 2000]. The novel, built upon a bipolar struggle between "the blue ones" and "the red ones," might more accurately have been titled *Magazine of Dissatisfaction*. The main characters are the residents of house number 2000: among them are representatives of "the red ones" (the lower social class – conquerors and hunters of victims intended to satisfy all their physiological needs) and "the blue ones" (the besieged – victims of the "red" characters' physiological drives, primarily the sexual drive).

The narrator himself explicitly defines – through catchphrases and symbols characteristic of him –what is red:

> Men, flesh, blood, conquerors, youth, hunger, the jungle, the interior, the ghetto, erections, rape, sadism, rivers, deserts, motors, east and south, curiosity, morning, fires, states of agitation (of cells, biological or fuel), barbarity, typhoons, revolutions, bread, wolves, settlements around castles, oil wells, war, excess pressure, salt, technology, machine guns, debt, spring and summer, ravines, the longing for freedom, grass, force, natives, aggression, gothic architecture, freshness, volcanoes, jazz, intuition, will, fanaticism, hatred, black, insults, anger, sex, longing, the beginning (Páral [1969] 2001: 99)

and what is blue:

> women, spirit, words, being besieged, age, satiety, parks, coasts, ports, post-coital gratification, onanism, masochism, lakes, mountains, stabilizers, west and north, wisdom, afternoons, ice, states of rest (of cells, biological or fuel), culture, calm weather, democracy, ice cream, dogs, palaces, pumps,

> peace, low pressure, sugar, art, long-range guided anti-missile systems, savings, fall and winter, combs, freedom, garden flowers, rational persuasion, colonists, submission, rococo, fatigue, sediment, Mozart, ratios, knowledge, wisdom, love, white paint, anecdotes, quiet, eroticism, indifference, literature, the end. (Páral [1969] 2001: 195)

In creating the blue–red dichotomy, Páral quite consciously alludes to Stendhal, who is explicitly mentioned in the novel with the phrase: *Stendhal in the conditions of North Bohemia*, which – although tinged with irony – nevertheless carries a deeper meaning. He depicts men's dependence on their environment, their entanglement in the time and space in which they live and function. The markers of this North Bohemian Stendhal are therefore the era of real socialism and human psychobiology, expressed through physiological needs, mainly sexual ones.

The novel under analysis is the most expansive of all Páral's books, yet it is another "laboratory note of insect's life" i.e., an observation of people who, like ants, move about within the vast hierarchical swarm of a socialist enterprise, only to rest and shop after work. They wander through the spaces of a socialist city, returning to their homes (whose standard reflects the social position they occupy) and engage there in mechanical, routine sex. This is why they seek a way out of their situation: under the conditions of real socialism, once residential and nutritional needs have been met (for the upper social class) or remain unmet (for the lower social class), the only recourse left is to add variety to their sexual lives.

A central character of the novel, Borek Trojan, is a chemical engineer who passes through all levels of the social hierarchy – from a laboratory worker to the director of the Kotex chemical plant – changing his colour from red to blue as he ascends the storeys of house No. 2000 (from the basement, through workers' rooms, up to a beautiful director's flat). Páral's protagonists, "programmed" by the masters of naturalism, are statistical types, and the situations of their daily lives are model examples. These characters, "with empty sky above them and without moral rights within them," are unable to form deeper relationships and are incapable of feelings other than physiological ones. Love is not something that one feels; love is something that one *does* (see also Pohorský 1990: 411). The prostitute Madda even uses the English word *love* to mean money. Páral's hero does not exist in a diachronic dimension: he has no history, no roots, no cultural grounding. He exists only synchronically, in the – here and now – conditioned solely by biology. Such a socio-biological portrayal of human nature leads to the animalisation of a person and of interpersonal relations. This has consequences for the depictions of human sexual life, which resemble a blood hunt rather than an expression of feeling, summed up in the following words: "Inconspicuously observe, follow, chase, pounce, seize, then do the deed" (Páral [1969] 2001: 181). The characters derive their understanding of the world and of people not from Shakespeare but rather from hunting magazines (Páral [1969] 2001: 180).

The mechanisms that govern the characters' lives are emphasised through purely animal metaphors, which dominate the sex scenes. This is somewhat reminiscent of medieval bestiaries; however, whereas those allegorical and didactic tales of real or fantastical animals were intended to popularise the principles of Christian ethics, Páral uses the device to portray social atavism. There is no room for sublime love here; socialist roughness and plainness prevail. The quotation featured in the title of this discussion also comes from this novel: "When Mme. De Rênal was kissing Julien's feet, the whole Revolution Theater in Ústí roared with laughter" (Páral [1969] 2001: 247).

The first three novels are described as a trilogy for good reason, which is reflected, for instance, in their joint publication in 1977 under the meaningful title *Three from the Zoo*. "The Black Pentalogy"

concludes in 1971 with the novel *Profesionální žena* [Professional Woman], bearing the enigmatic subtitle *Román pro každého* [A Novel for Everyone]. As noted by the literary scholar Pavel Janoušek, the four prose works in this series rank among the crowning achievements of contemporary Czech literature (Janoušek 2009: 199). Yet they also provoked, especially *Lovers & Murderers*, considerable discontent among critics, and Páral was accused of being an apologist for consumerism, which ran counter to the ideals of the socialist state. As Witold Nawrocki remarked in the introduction to the Polish edition of *Lovers & Murderers*, Czech literary criticism received the novel with substantial ideological reserve and caution, questioning the social relations depicted in it and levelling the charge that the social and behavioural observations which had always constituted a strength of Páral's prose were here rendered as risky moral and social generalisations (Nawrocki 1998: 7).

Páral took the warning to heart. Other writers, such as Josef Škvorecký, Bohumil Hrabal, and Milan Kundera, were blacklisted and banned from publishing soon after the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968. Many of them published through Sixty Eight Publishers, established in 1971 in Canada by Zdena Salivarová, Josef Škvorecký's wife. Normalisation-era criticism, however, approached Páral differently, perhaps because he had publicly promised in interviews that he would shift the tone of his prose from pessimistic to more optimistic. He kept his word. In his next novel, *Young Man and White Whale*, which was favourably received by critics, Páral abandoned his previously sceptical view of humanity and found a more "positive" direction consistent with the poetics of socialist realism (see also *Dějiny české literatury* 2008: 171–175).

This stage of the writer's work is known as "The White Series." It begins in 1973 with the aforementioned novel *Mladý muž a bílá velryba* [Young Man and White Whale], which deals with the same subject matter as his earlier works, though the emphasis shifts. Satisfying basic physiological needs remains a central theme, but the issue of work moves to the forefront. Páral's interpretive subtitle signals this as well, in this case: *Malý chemický epos* [Little Chemical Epic]. His earlier protagonists – shirkers and blasé young people – treated work as a means of satisfying their physiological needs: they desired higher salaries to buy more things (including love), or they combined work with sex, thereby securing professional advancement or the submission of their subordinates. In the new novel, however, the hero's satisfaction in work becomes paramount; he pursues professional success at the expense of his health and ultimately – as it turns out – his life. He dies in a manner quite different from the phantasmagorically catapulted Jacek, the protagonist of *Catapult*. Sex scenes play only a background role here, providing variation in the narrative.

Another novel, *Radost až do rána* [Joy Until Morning] (1975), is the result of Páral's determination to continue writing and publishing even under the unfavourable conditions of the Normalisation period. Although the new novel bears the diagnostic subtitle *O křečcích a lidech* [About Hamsters and People] and revisits motifs from "The Black Pentalogy," the author's provocation is only superficial: all the characters – according to the expectations placed upon literature by the censors – do penance for their indecent behaviour and wrongdoing. Everything concludes with a happy ending, while the sex scenes (tame and barely sketched) serve only to add a touch of colour to the plot. Páral's early Normalisation work thus marked a clear departure from the 1960s.

The 1977 novel *Generální zázrak* [General Miracle] carries the subtitle *Román naděje* [Romance of Hope]. Its young, passive protagonists repeat the following phrase like a mantra: "something must happen and then the general miracle will come" (Páral 1989b: *e.g.* 60, 85, 92, 150), yet the miracle never

arrives. The characters are people dissatisfied with their lives, ineffectual, incapable of forming deeper relationships and devoid of emotions, for whom "love from three in the afternoon till nine in the evening" is sufficient (Páral 1989b: 91). Although they long for genuine feelings and deeper emotions, they are unable to attain fulfilment in this regard.

The novel that closes the "White Pentalogy" – and one written during the difficult literary climate of the 1970s (it was published in 1980) – is *Muka obraznosti* [The Torture of Imagery], with the subtitle *Konfrontace snu a skutečnosti* [Confrontation of Dream and Reality]. It illustrates the writer's further wrestling with the poetics of Normalisation literature and constitutes a rather perverse conclusion to the series. A chemical engineer familiar to readers returns to centre stage. This time his name is Marek Paar. He does not care about his work, nor does he have any serious interests, friends, or colleagues. Instead, he thinks constantly about his physiological needs (desire for power, possession, and sex). All these needs converge into one: he seduces his female boss, hoping to satisfy them all at once. In order to deflect the vigilant criticism of the censors, while simultaneously thumbing his nose at them and giving a wink to the reader, the narrator (undoubtedly Páral's "porte-parole"), distancing himself from his own story, declares at the end that the entire plot is only the hero's fantasy.

In 1982 Páral published another novel whose title explicitly refers to a love motif enduringly present in culture: *Romeo & Julie 2300* [Romeo & Julie 2300]. The novel inaugurates a new cycle of works written in a science-fiction convention. Adopting this poetics represents yet another attempt to escape the rigid and suffocating corset imposed on literature during the Normalisation period. In this novel, the author attempts to liberate the theme of love from its social, economic, and political entanglements. It is a deliberate endeavour to move away from the pressing problems of everyday life, the "correct" depiction of which was so fiercely scrutinised by the censors of the time. Consequently, Páral places the plot in a utopian fairy-tale world, where all social problems have been solved, and all needs are met quickly and effortlessly (see Janoušek 1983 and Pytlík 1988).

Naturally, Páral's irony remains the dominant feature, and as a result some parts of the novel assume an anti-utopian character. The characters have reached the final stage of automation, even in the sphere of sexual needs. This corresponds to Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, which portrays a vision of an automated future in which humans assume total control over the reproductive process. In the Czech writer's novel, everyone receives whatever they desire, from material goods (such as a house) to experiences (such as conquering Mount Everest), and even matters of intimate life, such as an ideal partner. Pavel Janoušek's remark that this is "a market place of synthetically fulfilled wishes" could make an excellent subtitle for the novel (Janoušek 1983: 3). The erotic life of these "characters-figures" is stereotypical and barely present in the plot.

Further novels in this vein (*Pokušení A-ZZ* [Tempting A-ZZ] from 1982, *Válka s mnohozvířetem* [War with Manybeast] from 1983, and *Země žen* [World of Woman] from 1987) continue in the same convention of evading depictions of real-socialist reality. However, they do not add anything substantially new to the subject under discussion. Páral merely juggles motifs already familiar to the reader, through the same formal and narrative devices, changing only the props and the setting.

Vladimír Páral entered the 1990s, which, together with the change of political system, opened new opportunities for artists, with a new sequence of novels beginning with *Dekameron 2000 aneb Láska v Praze* [Decameron 2000 or Love in Prague], published in 1990. In this work, composed of a series of short stories (following Boccaccio's model), Páral returns to the idiostyle which he had established in "the

Black Pentalogy." In a cycle of tales, he spins a hundred variations on love between a man and a woman. All forms of love appear: love for profit and selfless love; tender and coarse love; platonic and debauched love; the love of virgins and the love of prostitutes; love in the circles of intellectuals and the love among ordinary people; fulfilled love and unfulfilled love.

In a manner characteristic of postmodernism, the writer weaves characters from his earlier novels into the plot. Tracing their further stories and observing their intersections creates the impression of human life resembling a swarm of insects, devoid of any deeper meaning. The various shades of love merely function as invariants: stylistic variations on the single, sombre truth that sex and eroticism are just tools for escaping the ruts of monotony. Yet, after moments of delight, the characters awaken to find that their newfound freedom is an even greater burden and that their "new life" is even more stereotypical. This is the common denominator of all Vladimír Páral's novels.

Although the sexual scenes are more crude than those in, for instance, "the White Pentalogy," the next novel, *Kniha rozkoší, smíchu a radosti* [The Book of Delight, Laughter and Joy], published in 1992, is even less allusive. In his review of the book, Pavel Janoušek posed a question in Páral's own style (signalled through his interpretative subtitle): *A Moralist or a Lecher? Or as Mr Writer Thwarted Himself* (Janoušek 2009: 204–208). Here Páral no longer attempts to show interest in the problems of the world, the cosmos, or even the small Central European country which, at the time, was undergoing a political transformation that eventually led to its division into the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Freed from censorship, he no longer labours to construct possible worlds in the science-fiction mode. Now, the axis of the narrative lies solely and exclusively in the characters' erotic experiences and sexual pleasures, juxtaposed (to heighten the contrast) with scenes of sexual abstinence. The descriptions of sex are extremely blunt, and the book is essentially pieced together from such erotic passages, with the scenes linked by the protagonist's movement from place to place in search of ever new savage pleasures and sexual ecstasies. The vocabulary and descriptions used in the novel cannot properly be called erotic – they verge on pornography.

In the diptych *Playgirls I & II* (1994), published two years later, Páral continued the poetics of the previous novel, sharpening it even further. *Playgirls* is a story centred entirely on the theme of sex. The main heroines are three young women living in Prague, depicted only through the prism of their "sexual status." Ewa Joštová has just been abandoned by her lover; Ája Machová lives without a permanent partner and engages in various sexual adventures; and Klárka Jagrová has been left by her husband in their large and luxurious apartment. It is in this very apartment that the three friends decide to open an exclusive erotic salon called "Playgirls," where high-end prostitutes will provide services to selected clients from Czechia and Germany. The book reads as a report on how the salon swings into action and on the services performed there.

Riding on the wave of its commercial success, Páral quickly published *Playgirls II*. While the first book offers a bare sketch of the social backdrop which, it must be said, is brilliantly attuned to the central theme, particularly in its depiction of the transformations accompanying the political transition, such as the restitution of property to private owners, *Playgirls II* is a fairly monotonous narrative focused around the erotic salon, laden with increasingly perverse descriptions of sex and sexual deviation. Moreover, men also appear among the providers of services in the salon. Páral's artistic output concludes with the novel *Kniha o biči* [A Book on the Whip] (2014). The title foregrounds the central figure of this somewhat tedious and formulaic work, which adds nothing new to the established poetics, apart from confirming

the observations already made in this discussion, namely, that Páral's novels reveal a gradual but consistent shift from eroticism towards pornography.

Páral, in his engineered, carefully constructed prose with its unemotional narration, materialistically and scientifically recording the mechanisms of human behaviour in a reified social reality, lays bare the futility of a consumerist way of life. Unselfish love is absent and, in a sense, not even possible in this world. What seems to fascinate Páral most is the interpersonal theatre whose rules are governed by desire in its materialistic and biological dimensions. It is therefore unsurprising that sex is his most frequent theme. It recurs obsessively throughout his novels, and its representation evolves from erotography (in his earlier works) to pornography (from the 1990s onwards), that is, from depicting sexuality as one aspect of human existence to pornography in which all other contexts are elided and the entire text is devoted only to the sexual dimension of human life.

Obviously, this transition was closely related to the cultural and political circumstances of Czechoslovakia at the time. The 1960s encouraged innovative depictions and tolerated a loosening of thematic constraints, which bore fruit in Páral's novels in the form of exquisite observations of the lives of "human insects," their struggles in the realities of real socialism, and micro-analyses of their mutual interactions, including sexual ones. In the difficult 1970s and 1980s, Páral, keen to continue publishing and to slip through the coarse sieve of censorship, escaped into the realm of science fiction, where depictions of sexual activity were reduced to schematic, conventionalised forms. Finally, the 1990s allowed him to break free from the constraints imposed by the poetics of the Normalisation period and to return to the subject of human sexuality anew. Paradoxically, however, it was the allegorical and allusive poetics of his earliest works – hampered though they were by extra-literary demands placed on literature and art – that produced the most interesting and artistically successful treatments of the theme.

This article is a reconnaissance, a gloss on the changes in socio-cultural mores reflected in literary texts. Indeed, the erotic scenes captured in Vladimír Páral's prose are a valuable testimony to the moral transformations that occurred over time, revealing the shifting boundaries of the prevailing censorship. This does not mean, of course, that the sexual themes depicted in the writer's prose are a direct representation of the sexual lives of Czechoslovak citizens at the time, or of those in the later Czech Republic. The following discussion, based on an analysis of selected erotic scenes, concerns rather the ideas, attitudes, norms, and, above all, the *acceptable* literary representations of sexuality of the period, rather than the actual intimate lives of Czechs. My aim has been to analyse Páral's prose on the assumption that it does not mirror an externally existing reality, but instead *communicates* that reality in a specific way, shedding light on broader questions of eroticism and sexuality under real socialism.

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Received:
15.03.2025
Reviewed:
28.04.2025
Accepted:
07.05.2025