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The Residual Forms in Contemporary Central European Literature

Two Case Studies: Bohumil Hrabal and Ādám Bodor

Abstract: It goes without saying that the residual implies many symbolical interpretations and can generate numerous topics that increase its level of abstractness. However, the same term implies a concrete interpretation that might be marginalized by literary critics and literary theorists. As an attempt to stress the importance of the term in literature and, as a consequence, in literary studies, this article signals a specific literary context in which the residual, in its most concrete features – excrements, vomit and other residuals of the body, garbage –, becomes a topos. I will point out several situations within post-war Central European literature in which this topos exists. As part of this endeavor, I will offer a theoretical profile of this topos and I will analyze several specific literary examples, such as the novel *Too Loud a Solitude* and the novel *The Archbishop's Visit*.

Keywords: Organic Residual; Inorganic Residual; Topos; Impure; Central European Literature.

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In contemporary Central European literature the residual, in its most concrete feature, is a recurrent presence in prose written by authors such as: Milan Kundera, Bohumil Hrabal, Wojciech Kuczok, György Konrád, Ādám Bodor, Attila Bartis, and Gheorghe Crăciun.¹ Within their novels it is quite common to find images such as: excrements, vomit, saliva, parts of the body or the body itself or, having a different nature, garbage, objects out of use and so on. These images represent different forms of waste and can be generically named organic or, if it is the case, inorganic residuals. It goes without saying that this literary presence has many symbolical implications, which are probably linked with the historical context in which the texts appeared, namely during the communist regime. Such a theme requires answers regarding this temporal appurtenance, but it also puts into discussion many other questions. Here are a few. First of all, what is the residual? What are its literary implications? What are the (symbolical) limits of the residual? What are the coordinates of the violence propagated by the residual forms within the novels? In answering these questions,



my article emphasizes the residual, the marginal (as excluded) in its most concrete feature. As the residual, the marginal has numerous symbolical interpretations, this article stresses the existence of a concrete form of this literary theme. Obviously, this concreteness has its own symbolical layers, but, in its essence, this feature represents a literal form of the term.²

The residual is not for the authors that use it a means to shock, but it is part of their creative logic. The residual has its role – not necessarily central – in the way they write literature. The presence of such images changes the role of the novel itself, even if the text does not gravitate around residuals. The fact that the residual becomes a literary image determines us to ask what are the ultimate aims of this presence? Of course, it may take shapes that are rather modest, such as the comic, but it could also be a symbol for nightmarish scenarios: the nasty, the dirty, the unbearable, the monstrous, the grotesque and so on. The residual may change or accentuate the intention of some texts. It can also increase the force, the gravity of a message. At the same time, it might be the sign of a cultural context. My main premise is that the residual is the perfect image of misery, in the sense of an unbearable presence, totally compromised, even detestable: miserable destiny, miserable existence, miserable history. Of course, this is a premise that needs to be explained. But once it is confirmed, it will become obvious not only that the residual goes beyond gratuitous violence, but that it has implications which can be nothing short of metaphysical.

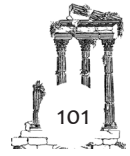
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residual, in its most concrete feature, becomes a topos. This endeavor follows three big steps. Firstly I will offer a theoretical profile of this topos, as it is perceived in cultural anthropology: impure, useless, and dangerous. My second step will be to show how generous and varied the residuals' presence is. I shall signalize and briefly interpret different residual forms, as they are present in a series of novels. As for the last step, I shall focus on the inorganic residual by offering an interpretation of two literary presences of the residual as garbage, namely the way it appears in *Too Loud a Solitude*, written by Bohumil Hrabal, and *The Archbishop's Visit*, by Ādám Bodor. I am choosing these examples not only for the sake of a more detailed approach, but for a comparison between the two. Whereas in the second part my purpose is to show how varied the presence of the residual can be, in the third I shall show how complex its interpretation is.

The Residual and its Extra-literary Definitions

The residual is always useless; it is an excess, so the reflex of excluding it becomes a necessity. Of course, recyclable waste might return into the system, but it will not come back in the same form in which it existed before recycling. It is also true that one does not find a rusty car as repulsive as a latrine, but in both cases inutility remains a minimum property to consider. In the end, whether it is a dirty handkerchief or a broken closet, both exist as an excess.

In her book about waste in the socialist and post-socialist economy in Hungary, Zsuzsa Gille offers the negative role for the



residual in the following relations: efficiency – inefficiency, utility – inutility, order – disorder, clean – dirty, alive – dead, fertile – sterile. The author argues that residuals stand in opposition with everything that implies the idea of quality, proving this way their lack of purpose, their inutility, their sterility, their lack of life. Whether we are talking about organic or inorganic residuals, they all represent dirtiness, disorder. For instance, the rusty car and the latrine I mentioned before are not only useless, but they also cause dirtiness and disorder. In any possible context the smell of a latrine and the image of a rusty heap can only represent disorder, dirtiness. Being so, many times they are not only useless, but they are profoundly undesirable.

In order to avoid an excessive generalization, the following comparison might be useful. We shall use again the example of the latrine and the rusty car and verify their appurtenance to the pairs of antonyms mentioned above. The rusty car and the latrine are not only useless, but also responsible for producing a state of disorder because the smell of a latrine or the image of a rusty car can never represent harmony, order. This is one of the reasons why uselessness might be replaced by undesirability. Undesirability is translated by Michael Thompson³ in terms of a lack, namely the lack of value. Thus, the human's axiological approach to objects has the following two extremes: utility and inutility. The inutility or the lack of value is socially perceived in negative terms: that object is, in a way, stigmatized. In order to explain the negative perception, the author offers the example of nasal mucus, which provokes a feeling of discomfort, even of nausea or rejection. Basically, the residual does not find its

place in a neutral area, the area of harmless inutility, but goes deeper and provokes disgust.

Another fundamental characteristic the residual has is its dirtiness, its degraded and compromised nature or, as Mary Douglas⁴ would say, its impure nature. According to the British anthropologist, impurity is representative for the situations when an object stands in a place that is totally different from the one it should be in. This misplacement implies a bewilderment of the common state and it is perceived at the level of individual consciousness as a breach into the system, as a violent gesture against normality. For instance, a shoe on the kitchen table contaminates the space around it, because no matter how clean the shoe is, it shatters any hygiene standard. The idea of eating in the same place where the sole of the shoe was is repulsive because the danger of getting ill, a consequence of the contamination, is as close as possible. Likewise, in different contexts, we will perceive uncanny or even scandalous the presence of the excrements, the content of a dustbin or a corpse.

I began by stressing the lack of purpose and value, as well as the inutility of the residual. The residual embodies a presence that has no place, whose image stays under the sign of excess. Then the residual was described as degraded, contagious, being able to contaminate. The residual is dirty and ugly. These characteristics settle the residual within the sphere of anti-value,⁵ of that which damages the functioning of life itself (the residual is sterile and many times it represents the lack of life). Obviously, not all residual forms will represent all the characteristics that were previously described. Something useless does not



necessarily have to be also sterile. What is truly important is to represent the fundamental properties: uselessness, undesirability, impurity – which are often translated into the capacity of being harmful.

Up to this point I have built a profile of the residual. In order to better explain this profile, I will briefly describe the reactions the human has when he gets into contact with the residual. The first impulse is to consider nausea as the basic reaction (maybe less so in the case of inorganic residuals). This represents the organic consequence, the reaction one has when one gets into contact with dirtiness. Whether this reaction is the consequence of detecting a real danger, in the sense of an actual attack upon the human body, or it represents a symbolic danger, one cannot ignore the intensity of its manifestation. The apogee of this reaction is vomit itself – I shall soon describe its significance. Nausea and its consequences represent maybe the most violent reaction through which the body refuses what surrounds it and, partially, it refuses itself.

Whereas nausea is a corporal reaction, processing this reaction at the level of consciousness determines the appearance of disgust. This moves beyond the corporal level because it is more than just the spontaneous reaction that is represented by nausea. Disgust determines the emotion that persists after the intersection between the human and the residual. The primal function of disgust is to signalize that the contamination is almost imminent. According to William Ian Miller, disgust has also a symbolical dimension, because it can represent the reaction in front of a socially condemned act, such as a crime or a rape.⁶

The major difference between disgust and nausea is that nausea is violent, but

lasts a little time, whereas disgust is not very intense, but it does not disappear as soon as nausea. According to Miller, disgust cannot be separated from fear. Thus, it does not only represent the level of a direct, corporal reflex, but it also includes a mental reaction. However, it is important to emphasize that the disgust does not only represent an extra-corporal reaction, because both reactions represent a confrontation with the impure, with dirtiness, with the intolerable. Both reactions dictate the way man relates with residuals. Therefore, disgust will firstly represent all the forms of the residual, including the inorganic residual, whose presence does not necessarily provoke nausea.

Contamination, nausea, and disgust are the reactions man has when he gets into contact with the residual. The residuals' lack of purpose does not represent an image of the tolerable, of the indifferent; on the contrary, it opens a gate to the abject, to the grotesque, even to the monstrous. The residual represents a form of evil, the evil as ugly, the evil as sickness, the evil as decadence and corruption. Of course, as I already said, there are nuances of this evil, but even in its most inoffensive form, the principle remains. In the last part of this article, I will approach exactly these soft forms of the residual and prove that they still remain an embodiment of evil.

The Numerous Forms of the Residual

As was mentioned before, this article aims to prove the complexity of the topos generically named the residual. In this section I will offer several examples of what this topos can be. I will use



representative cases and try to briefly interpret them. However, space is too short to compare these examples or to emphasize their characteristics by discussing other contexts, imagined by other novelists. Despite the common properties that all residuals have in common, the residual forms I will soon explain share another thing, even though it is not always evident: the reference to the socio-political context in which they were written. Because the complexity of this notion depends on its variety, in this section we will follow the residual in its both main features, namely organic and inorganic.

There is no doubt that excrements are the residual *par excellence*. Also, there is no doubt that excrements represent the most repulsive residual matter. It is true, excrements can represent a tragi-comic context and, in this situation, their violent strength is limited (which does not make them inoffensive, on the contrary). However, most of the time, at least in the literary context this paper is approaching, excrements provoke unforgettable humiliations, unreal tragedies, and unbearable stigmas. Even in its most inoffensive literary features, excrements are a symbol for impurity, for corruption, for nausea.

In the *Unbearable Lightness of Being* excrements represent a scenario that oscillates between irony and black humor, between the tragic and the absurd. We find out the story of how Stalin's son, Iakov, committed suicide in a Nazi camp, where he was a prisoner. Because he had the bad habit of dirtying the latrines without cleaning them up, he got into a conflict with the English prisoners. As this conflict humiliated him, he wanted to restore his pride by asking the camp commander to

resolve the conflict. However, the Nazi officer refused to be associated with a conflict about excrements. The commander's refusal was considered unbearable by Iakov, who chose to end his life by throwing himself into the electrified fence that was surrounding the camp. Kundera's verdict goes beyond black humor: he says that Stalin's son was sacrificed in the name of shit. Feces, argues the Czech novelist, move into the core of Iakov's life, who is the son of one of the greatest dictators the world ever had. In addition to this, excrements are the reason for his death. Kundera uses maybe the strongest symbol of misery to mark a moment in history:

Not until 1980 were we able to read in the *Sunday Times* how Stalin's son, Yakov, died. Captured by the Germans during the Second World War, he was placed in a camp together with a group of British officers. They shared a latrine. Stalin's son habitually left a foul mess. The British officers resented having their latrine smeared with shit, even if it was the shit of the son of the most powerful man in the world. They brought the matter to his attention. He took offense [...] He wanted the commander to act as arbiter. But the arrogant German refused to talk about shit. Stalin's son could not stand the humiliation. Crying out to heaven in the most terrifying of Russian curses, he took a running jump into the electrified barbed-wire fence that surrounded the camp. He hit the target. His body, which would never again make a mess of the Britishers' latrine, was pinned to the wire. [...] Stalin's son laid down his life for shit.⁷



It is hard to imagine that someone chooses to die because of such an event. It is absurd, just like the historical moment in which this event occurred. However, Kundera argues that Iakov's death makes more sense than the death of any soldier that died during the war. Probably both situations lack any sense whatsoever, because both are produced by the huge generator of nonsense, the war. Thus, it reaches the point in which death is ridiculed, but not because existence is preceded by eternal life, so that death might appear to bear no importance; on the contrary, death is ridiculed because man is a ridiculous creature. All takes place at the border of the absurd, in a place where life and death are humiliating.

Alongside excrements, occupying a similar position on the scale of violence, there are other remnants of the human body that have a remarkable symbolical force. Vomit, saliva, blood, sometimes hair or nails, appear in contexts that aim to provoke a profound disgust. The disgust follows the ascendant path whose constants are nausea and fear. With the exception of nails and hair, all the other residual forms mentioned above have in common the following elements: they are liquid, slimy, sticky, slippery, and soft. The lack of firmness, the vague colors, the intermediary character between solid and liquid, the imperfect shape confirms an undefined existence, a sick nature. The organic, in such a shape, signifies what the body rejects.⁸

Vomit is the matter that was inside the body. It was in contact with internal life. Its nature is modified and then it is ejected by the body, it is violently refused. It appears as a mix between the intervention of the body and what initially was. It

is the result of a interrupted bodily process. Ideally, it should be transformed into useful matter, to be integrated and utilized by the internal mechanisms of the body, but something bad occurred or, from the very beginning, it represented something bad. The body tries to transform it, to assimilate it, but it fails. This is the reason why, as a final gesture, the body protects itself by ejecting it out of the system. In its very essence, vomit means a matter that cannot be accepted, it means something that is dangerous. At the same time, vomit is the supreme symbol of imperfection, of interrupted life.

In the surreal universe from *The Walk*, the gesture of vomiting represents the reaction to terrible news:

And then my mummy started to feel sick. She was silently getting dizzier, then she leaned against the desk and started throwing up. First it was cremeschnitte, then orchid petals and sperm, and Chinese tea, and everything, everything, and the others were staring at how many dishes got out of my mummy and in what quantities. Then she drank fresh, cold water so she wouldn't go totally crazy, took the pistol from the station master and sneaked into the bushes.⁹

In Attila Bartis's novel there are described tragic events that represent an (unspecified) historical moment that is profoundly unstable. A love story ends tragically, the lover is shot and, when the news is found out, the partners' reaction combines profound fear and crazy revolt. The body has its own reaction. Considering the situation, as a sign that nothing is as it used to be, the body "rejects" everything



that keeps it linked with the past. The signs of love and erotic moments are now vulgarized and ejected out of the body. The body cannot accept the material proof of a reality that vanished so suddenly. At the same time, the body is paralyzed by an unbearable emotion. The body, in its carnality, cannot accept the disappearance of the beloved one. The reflex of the stomach is the gesture of a body “turned inside out”, it is the carnal answer to an absurd situation.

Regarding blood, in the Christian tradition it has a positive connotation: it represents both the sacrifice and the life. However, blood might also have a residual identity because, just like other corporal liquids, it has a contaminant and repulsive character. Blood might carry a disease or might represent a weakness of the body, a wound, a loss, a danger. It might represent death itself or it might just be perceived as a presence that belongs to someone’s biological intimacy. Once it is exposed, this intimacy is affected. At the same time, if it is present in a different place than the place where it should be, it affects the intimacy of the one near it. This is, it is clear, the situation described by Mary Douglas: an object is contaminant, dangerous when it is in another place than the one in which it should be.

The novel *Gnôj*¹⁰ describes the life of a child who is terrorized by his father. The psychological violence the boy has to bear transforms his childhood into a nightmarish experience. The routine of the two characters is as bizarre as possible and violence is a constant. The father applies numerous punishments to his son and the reasons lack any logic. The boy develops a series of unusual habits, as a consequence of the deformed normality in which he

lives. For instance, many times he makes his nose bleed by picking it. It is important to stress that his aim is not to clean his nose, so bleeding is not an accident. In this context blood is not a vital symbol: it does not represent a vigorous life, but becomes an excess that the boy wants to eliminate. Blood becomes evil and its quantity in the body must be limited. It is even more unusual if we consider that the bleeding was provoked by a gesture as banal as possible, which has nothing tragic in it – unlike a cut, for instance. It is as if the character is so insignificant that he does not deserve a more spectacular means to provoke a hemorrhage. Thus, blood becomes the symbol of a reversed vitality. Blood is shed to limit the vital energy. Personal strength is not used for a productive purpose: it is not used to encourage and develop life but in a contrary sense, namely a continuous decomposing.

I didn’t feel sorry for my blood; I was thinking that the less I have the better, maybe it wasn’t good blood, when I had too much, it was leading me onto a path at whose end the old K. was always expecting me with his whip. Thus, whenever I felt that I had too much blood, I would pick my nose and let it bleed.¹¹

When I defined the residual, I specified that its nature can be organic or inorganic. So far I have discussed about the organic residual and I have chosen three examples: excrements, vomit, and blood. Now I shall offer some examples of inorganic residuals. As I have already said, both types of residuals share fundamental characteristics: the lack of utility, an intolerable presence, and a contaminating effect. Both



types of the residual share the same symbolic signification: decadence, lack of purpose, misery. However, there are also differences. Whereas most of the objects that are thrown away lack any value whatsoever, some of them might have a dual nature, because an object may represent a connection with the past for someone, probably a past that is considered better than the present. Thus, some of the inorganic residual forms might not be totally useless, at least for one person. However, this partial exception does not obliterate the main characteristic, the miserable character. The following example will prove this.

An object that was part of the domestic universe transcends its role as a simple object because, as I said, it becomes a means to relate with the past. These objects are the lifeless witnesses of an individual existence and are the palpable proofs of some important past events. At the same time, the same objects are the main actors that create a domestic atmosphere that is hard to bear and is ugly. This happens when the objects are part of a décor that is chaotic, dusty, overcrowded. Broken furniture, which is randomly deposited and agglomerates the space creates an environment that is profoundly unbearable. Thus, these objects, which are a means to connect with the past for some, are for others the utensils that transform the living space into a storage area, into a source of claustrophobia.

Attila Bartis's character lives in his mother's apartment. The woman, closed in her house for more than fifteen years, transformed her living space into a deposit for the objects that were used as décor in the theater where she used to be the star actress. Her apartment is transformed into a fortress of the bizarre, where an artificial

world is built. Among the dusty boards, the huge beds, and the drawers full of unfashionable dresses, lives a senile and frustrated woman together with her depressive son. Whereas these objects keep her connected with the times when she was the diva of the city, for Antoniu this is space in which he cannot breathe, a grave for his mother, but also for his fragile normality. Obviously, his mother does not accept to throw away the huge ballast and thus remains captive in her imaginary and destructive universe. Of course, the fact that the actress cannot give up all the furniture does not contradict the uselessness of the objects. Once the actress dies, the only person that manifested any interest in them disappears. It is also interesting that the objects represent a double failure and, if I may say so, a double inutility. On one hand, the objects are the dirty décor of a sad universe, the universe of a partly insane woman. Also, from the very beginning, these objects were meant to exist only in the artificial universe of the theatre; they had a purpose only for some plays that are not staged anymore. Basically, uselessness and unfulfillment multiply in different layers.

The marginalized universe that stays under the sign of the useless and of failure takes ingenious forms in the short stories¹² of Bohumil Hrabal. I am referring to the text that anticipates the novel *Too Loud a Solitude*. It focuses on the same character, Hanta, the unhappy intellectual employed at a recycling center. In order to make the money he needs for alcohol, he sells books that should be recycled and helps people with some of their housework. One of his clients is a church cantor who has to cut the wooden figurines that were replaced from the church. So Hanta and the cantor have to cut a huge pile of wooden angels. As if this blasphemy is not



enough, many of the angels resemble people from Prague. Obviously, the temporary deposit of angels may represent the Prague society. The symbolic slaughter is totally pitiless and shows no concern for the divine past of the figurines; the angels are transformed into pieces of wood and nothing more.

The wooden angels mark maybe the most abrupt fall: the one from the sky. The intermediate destination is a space as profane as possible, namely the cantor's yard, whereas the final destination is fire – it is true, not hellish fire. Hrabal shows us the path for a quick, total, and irreversible desacralization. The final results of this desacralization is nothingness, uselessness and ridicule. Even though the whole episode has a ludic component and is vaguely ironic, the Czech novelist manages to feature total decay. Not only can the human be brought to the level of nothingness, but the same can happen to divinity. Even though it is not apocalyptic, this abrupt fall is fully tragic. Those angels who look like individuals from Prague are the victims of a symbolical slaughter: because they are divine creatures, they are thrown into flames. This might even represent the scenario of the total fall that is hidden under such a discrete form.

People and angels get to the point where they are totally useless. Is fire a punishment? It just obliterates a useless presence. In a way, it confirms the useless role and has a purifying effect. However, the most important aspect is the preparation before the setting on fire, the symbolical slaughter we have already mentioned. This is where the punishment is truly applied. Is it necessary? What is its cause? There is no clue about this. However, one thing is sure: this is the point of a final humiliation, the equivalent of a public flagellation.

The slaughter includes numerous blasphemous gestures supported by stories about incidents that occurred in the church. For instance, the cantor caught an old man who was urinating while he was praying in the church. Even though it does not represent a typology or a common place for the novelists we are approaching, we must ask ourselves what is the role of the divinity in the scenario imagined by Hrabal. It is clear that the wooden angels and the stories of the cantor have their role in the text. Of course, the most predictable interpretation has desacralization at its core. But we do not really know if this is necessarily a bad thing for Hrabal. Maybe the old man that urinates in the church only confirms that the church is an ordinary place. Likewise, the angels are only wooden statues. However, most probably this desacralization has nothing solar in it, on the contrary. In addition to this, this process does not have to be interpreted in a strictly religious key. Desacralization means the break-up from a more balanced world, where things were closer to authenticity, to normality, where the values were more firm. Thus, the man that urinates is the embodiment of some twisted times, and the angels – the people from Prague – are the waste of this world. Basically, Hrabal imagines a very personal death of God. The burial ceremony is held by the cantor himself, who recounts stories with believers that defy God and his church.

The Unlimited Strength of Garbage

Up to this point, residuals did not grasp all the space. Things change now because cesspools are at the core of attention. The cesspool and the garbage collecting points give the impression that the whole space is trapped inside the chaotic and



disgusting universe of garbage. Garbage transforms the objects into amorphous matter, and this matter multiplies and increases its role as a contaminant presence. In this section I will try not only to offer examples of this residual form, but also to explain and to compare it. This is the reason why the same residual form is compared in the context of the novels of two very different authors, Bohumil Hrabal and Ādám Bodor. However, they do share a similar socio-political context.

The Archbishop's Visit is an allegory of the communist regime. The colony from the novel represents a place where people barely have food to eat and where they are terrorized by the authorities (in this case, the authorities are a clerical elite). In the novel the cesspool is a significant presence. There are two elements that make it impossible to ignore: its smell and its bizarre light. Even though the light is not disturbing, it says something about its unusual resources. The danger of the cesspool goes beyond the predictable level and reaches an area where the mysterious, the repulsive and the quasi-esoteric combine. No one tells us what is the source of the light, but it is sure that it works as a wave of danger. The light is the strange aura, an inverse divine sign of the matter that it represents. The fact that the light can be seen during the night emphasizes the toxic character of the cesspool, but also suggests that the danger may overcome the natural limits. One way or another, the light is a sign of a bizarre, uninterrupted activity. The light is a sign that proves that the cesspool is alive, that it is at work and generates evil:

At Bogdanski Dolina, the sunset would last for hours. The garbage had

its own light, so the night was never totally dark. The sun was setting beyond Pop Sabin forest, but the sticky fog kept lighting over the piles of garbage like they were full of fireflies, with their enticing lights; an enticing light was floating over the city.¹³

The smell of the cesspool has really unusual effects upon the people from the colony. Those who get into contact with the strange smell might fall into a sleep that could last for years – as is the case of the Pripava vicar, who has been sleeping for almost a decade. Even though his connection with religion is debatable, his title emphasizes the mysterious character of the unhappy event. His sleep looks a lot with an inversed miracle.

On one hand, the cesspool contains toxic substances buried there by the authorities, who show their contempt for the people who are forced to live in such an environment. From this perspective, the long sleep that makes victims may in fact be a disease which, if it is interpreted outside the allegory, might be a disease that lasts for years, such as cancer – a very common affliction caused by toxic environments. On the other hand, the quasi-religious elements of this novel and the bizarre miracles of the cesspool might stand as clues for the supernatural strength the cesspool has – which means that the evil itself, even the political one, has unlimited forces.

Whereas the cesspool from the colony is as toxic as possible, the garbage from the *Too Loud a Solitude* is as inoffensive as the residual can be. For more than thirty years Hanta has been responsible for a hydraulic press. In the cellar of the collecting point Hanta mills old boxes, papers that were



used at the slaughter house, newspapers, and books – especially the ones that are not compatible with the official ideology. There are days when the cellar is filled with dust, blood, and fleas. There are other days when the space is enriched with art volumes or with great novels and philosophy books. Every time precious books are destroyed, Hanta has the feeling that the authors are killed along with their volumes. He tries to fight with this tragedy by taking home as many books as possible. This is why his apartment has been transformed into a deposit, a deposit for the forbidden books. It is obvious why this situation might work, partly, as an exception. Hanta venerates the books he saves, so the books are not rejectable objects, but on the contrary. On the other hand, the majority of these objects lose their identity when they are part of the matter that is collected at the recycling point. In Hanta's house the books find a temporary salvation. Even so, there are moments when even for Hanta all these books become a huge burden which, in his nightmares, will kill him.

In the brutal world in which the books are destroyed among papers from the slaughterhouse, Hanta becomes the savior and the executioner (without will) of culture. In this context the book loses its symbolic and noble role, as a means to provide knowledge, and remains no more than a piece of paper. In this chaotic and destructive process, at the border between symbol and its miserable embodiment, culture as a human ideal is discredited and destroyed. Waste becomes for Hrabal the perfect pretext to describe the way in which a political regime attacks an axiological status-quo.

I was glad the *Bonjour, M. Gaugain* sides showed above the slats, and I

hoped that everyone the truck passed would enjoy it. As the truck drove off, the fresh flies came alive in the Spálená Street sun, swarms of blue, green, and gold flesh flies that were certainly entitled to be locked up with Paul Gaugain's *Bonjour, M. Gaugain*, in large crates and doused with acids and alkalis in paper mills, because those wild flies refuse to give up the idea that life is at its most beautiful in gloriously rancid, decomposing blood.¹⁴

However, this brutal attack upon books has an inkling of nobility because the hero imagines the mill as a symbolical funeral. Thus, there is a split between him, the dusty intellectual who is exiled in a space where no one can find him, a cellar (the reference to the regime is obvious), and the others, the society, the system, the regime that cleans, that puts together everything it considers useless, dirty, and dangerous. Beyond the symbolical gesture made by Hanta, the paper is milled, the purpose is reached: one cannot make a distinction between the valuable and the useless, between present and past, between good and evil.

Hanta is a pale link with the world that vanished. He has remained hidden in an obscure place and lives an existence that is noble and ingrate at the same time. He is the one that buries the world that, according to those who have the power, has to be forgotten, recycled together with everything that that world produced: art, knowledge, and values. He uses his role to provide, within the limits of the context, a dignified break. Of course, at the macro level, his gesture is insignificant. This tragic



routine, which is nonetheless accepted almost with serenity, functioned for thirty years. The situation changes when a new, more modern collecting point is built. Here are employed young and robust men, the socialist brigades, people who have no compassion for books and who are determined to be as efficient as possible. None of the young men can be corrupted by books; they are all convinced that there are serious reasons for the books to be there. The way the socialist brigades do their job has an apocalyptic connotation; basically they bring into function an efficient mechanism that destroys culture. The culture itself becomes a residual form, something dangerous and indecent, which imposes the destruction of any material presence of its own. After he observes with his own eyes the whole slaughter, Hanta receives a final strike, he is fired. He chooses to kill himself in the hydraulic press that marked his all life as a grown man.

There is a contrast between the socialist brigades and Hanta that reminds us of a dystopia. Same as the firefighters from *Fahrenheit 451*, these young and vigorous men destroy books with maximum efficiency. Another characteristic that represents them is the incapacity to understand the consequences of the work they are responsible for. On the other side there is the fragile hero, lucid, kind and devoted, marginalized and weak. Whereas the young workers always drink milk, he prefers alcohol; whereas the others dress nicely, he is always sloppy; whereas the others always eat properly, he skips meals. The good, the humanly is as fragile as ever.

There is no doubt that the two novels mentioned in this section are very different. Even the topics that we are interested

in has a different approach in the two texts. In Ádám Bodor's novel garbage is the bizarre presence that represents a nightmarish place. Garbage represents an unbearable atmosphere. It can destroy destinies and can almost kill people. Garbage intimidates, harms, and contaminates. Garbage almost has its own existence, one in the name of evil. On the other hand, for Hrabal garbage has its humane face: it is tolerable, many times acceptable, it even has elements that need to be saved. Garbage becomes nasty, dusty and impure, but it remains a tolerable environment. However, in both novels garbage represents first of all misery. What misery? It is a personal misery, one of ruined destinies. The ruined lives of the people from the colonies, and the ruined life of Hanta. These lives are ruined because they were trapped in a more general form of misery – the misery of history. In both novels garbage is mainly a symbol of an intolerable political system. Garbage represents the evil propagated by an absurd regime. In both novels garbage is a stigma: it is the stigma of the man that, one way or another, is marginalized and persecuted. In both novels the residual in the vicinity of man signalizes a condemnation, a blame upon that individual.

This paper tried to bring to light the presence of an unusual but not at all exotic literary presence. By explaining it, both in a literary context and outside it, we tried to emphasize the fact that the generous theme of insignificance, of marginality has its almost palpable, literal feature. And this feature is responsible for a unique universe, one that stands under the sign of misery. Both at the level of literary interpretation and of the significations outside the literary paradigm, the residual determines



a web of concepts that actively shape its identity. This galaxy of concepts whose logic and order is determined by the term around which they exist represents one of the aims of this paper. The discussion about the residual opens an atypical universe – one that engages both the aesthetic and the moral dimensions. The residual activates a specific existence for evil itself: the impure, the contaminating, the dirty, the disgusting, the nasty. These all meet under the big

umbrella of decadence, of misery. Misery, with all its possible meanings (miserable life, miserable history, etc.) becomes the main interpretation for the residual. The echo of this symbol in literature is predictable (and, at the same time, spectacular): from the most evident level of realist misery, dirtiness, which exists to signalize a space overwhelmed by dirtiness, to the presence of misery as a sign for despair, of incompatibility with life.

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NOTES

1. The starting point of this article is Adriana Babeți's study "Universurile reziduale și identitățile descompuse. Reprezentări în romanul central-european postbelic," published in the volume *Dilemele identității. Forme de legitimize a literaturii în discursul cultural european al secolului XX*. The study argues that the residual is a topos for authors such as Ivan Klíma, Bohumil Hrabal, Milan Kundera, Marin Preda, Adám Bodor, Endre Fejes, Paweł Huelle, and Gheorghe Crăciun. Even though the study does not limit its interest to scatology, it mainly analyzes this residual form. Thus, my paper will extend the interpretation of the residual and, as a necessary step entailed by this broadened perspective, it will explain the residual's (extra)literary identity, in all its forms.
2. In this paper I mention ideas that I used in other articles.
3. Michael Thompson, *Rubbish Theory, the Creation and Destruction of Value*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1979.
4. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger. An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, New York, Routledge, 2001.
5. Michael Thompson, *Rubbish Theory, the Creation and Destruction of Value*, p. 26
6. William Ian Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust*, Boston, Harvard University Press, 1997, p. 56.
7. Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, trans. by Michael Henry Heim, New York, Harper and Row, 1984, pp. 243-245.
8. William Ian Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust*, p. 38.
9. The translation was made from the Romanian edition of the novel. Attila Bartis, *Plimbarea*, trans. by Marius Tabacu, Polirom, Iași, 2008, p. 102: "Atunci lu' mămica a început să i se facă rău. Amețea în tăcere, apoi s-a sprijinit de masa din birou și a început să verse. Mai întâi cremșnit, apoi petale de orhidee și spermă și ceai chinezesc și tot, tot, iar ceilalți se holbau la câte feluri ies din mămica și în ce cantități. Apoi a băut apă proaspătă, rece, ca să nu înnebunească de tot, i-a luat pistolul șefului de gară și s-a furișat în deșiș."
10. I have used the original title.
11. The translation was made from the Romanian edition of the novel. Wojciech Kuczok, *Mizeria. Antibiografie*, trans. by Constantin Geambașu, Iași, Polirom, 2003, p. 122: "Nu-mi părea rău să mă despart de sânge; mă gândeam că e mai bine să am cât mai puțin, poate că nu era un sânge bun, când aveam prea mult în vene, se înfierbânta și mă ducea pe un drum rău la al cărui capăt stătea întotdeauna bătrânul K., cu biciul. Așadar, când simțeam că se adună prea mult sânge, mă scobeam în nas ceva mai tare și îl lăsam să curgă."
12. Bohumil Hrabal, *Minunea noastră cea de toate zilele*, trans. by Jean Grosu, București, Univers, 2000.
13. The translation was made from the Romanian edition of the novel. Adám Bodor, *Vizita arhiepiscopului*, trans. by Marius Tabacu, Iași, Polirom, 2010, p. 93: "La Bogdanski Dolina, asfințitul dura ore întregi. Gunoii își avea lumina lui, așa că aici nici noaptea nu se întuneca niciodată de tot. Soarele se pierdea deja de mult în dosul pădurii Pop Sabin, dar ceața lipicioasă continua să lumineze peste grămezile de gunoai, de parcă ar fi fost pline de licurici, cu luminițele lor ademenitoare; plutea peste oraș un fel de binecuvântare ademenitoare[...]."
14. Bohumil Hrabal, *Too Loud a Solitude*, trans. by Michael Henry Heim, New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1990, p. 46.