

Quoth the Raven

Hungarian language inlays in Petr Rákos' novel Korvína čili kniha o havranech

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Received: March 17, 2025 • Accepted: April 28, 2025

Published online: May 28, 2025

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ABSTRACT

The paper deals with the novel *Korvína čili kniha o havranech* (*Corvina or The Book of Ravens*, 1993) by Petr Rákos from the perspective of multilingualism, stylistic hybridity, genre parody and metafiction. The poetics of the Czech author's novel opens the door to a wide range of genre traditions, languages and stylistic registers, including certain Hungarian historical and cultural items, as well as witty language play and references to literary history. The aim of the interpretation is to explore these and to shed light on their poetic role.

KEYWORDS

Petr Rákos, *Korvína čili kniha o havranech*, multilingualism, parody, Hungarian language and culture

Petr Rákos's novel *Korvína čili kniha o havranech* [*Corvina or the Book of Ravens*, 1993] was presented by contemporary critics and later literary history syntheses as a typical representative of the so-called fantasy movement in Czech postmodern literature. The author was ranked alongside other artists (Michal Ajvaz, Daniela Hodrová, Jáchym Topol, Jiří Kratochvíl) whose works were characterized by the revival and rewriting of archaic forms and genres (myths, legends, parables, fairy tales), mysterious events with magical twists, grotesque transformations and a high degree of self-reflection. Lubomír Machala defined Rákos's novel as a parodically voiced postmodern animal tale that stands out for its linguistic creativity, diversity of genre

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traditions, ironic reflection on social behaviors, and frequency of narrative techniques of self-interpretation and metafiction (Machala, 2001, p. 21, pp. 63–64). To this list of characteristics, one can also add that the *Corvína* makes a mockery not only of literature, but also of traditional forms of historiography.¹

In addition to the diversity of genres, styles and discourses, the mixing and twisting of languages is an important element of Rákos's poetics of the novel. The text contains traces of many languages, some in grammatically correct form, while others are distorted. The meaning of foreign, i.e., non-Czech, terms is not always provided, or if so, it is sometimes incorrect. In this playful, ironic use of language, the Hungarian language and the historical and cultural references encoded in it play a prominent role. The Hungarian expressions blend into the structure of this multilingual text in a manner similar to inlays. They can be seen as recurrent decorative motifs that form a coherent pattern, even if their true meaning is often hidden.

The main aim of my study is to explore these motifs, categorize them and define their poetic role. Their study is justified simply because their occurrence is not accompanied by any explanation, and it is often not obvious whether they refer to Hungarian words, Hungarian literary works or historical figures. It is for this reason that these Hungarian inlays carry a much stronger connotation of strangeness and exoticism than the French, Italian, English or German allusions and language games that also appear several times in the text.

The link with Hungarian culture is mostly established through proper names, and in my analysis, based on the second, expanded edition of the novel (Rákos, 2009), I will therefore consider how name choice and name manipulation become a tool of exoticization on the one hand, and linguistic humor and genre parody on the other.

To understand the motivation for the use of Hungarian language elements, it is necessary to refer to the origin of the author. Petr Rákos (1956–1994) was the son of the renowned Hungarian philologist, Péter Rákos (1925–2002). His novel was translated into Hungarian – excellently, one could say – by his father, who wrote in the preface to the edition that “the author of *Corvína* understood and spoke some Hungarian, and he rightfully considered himself, after his father, the author of these lines, partly Hungarian.” (Rákos, 1998, p. 8)

PLAYING WITH LANGUAGES

Mixing and blending a wide range of languages, language varieties, styles and genres has been a distinctive poetic feature of the novel since Bakhtin's time, as have irony and parody that often accompany this feature. The work of Petr Rákos further evidences this. To put it very simply, the novel is about the conquest of history and the modern world by ravens. The many astonishing details and hidden connections are revealed to us by an essentially ironic, sometimes sarcastic authorial narrator, who involves his imaginary audience – the potential readers of the text – from the very beginning, through various, sometimes provocative utterances.

However, the novel's protagonists are not only the birds in the title, but also the word “raven” (havran). We could say that it is the key word of the novel, a leitmotif that characterizes the whole text and compensates to some extent for the extreme thematic fragmentation and genre variability. By the end of the story, the *raven* becomes a universal metaphor, a narrative

¹The quotes from the original novel were translated by Dóra Green into English.

trope rich in connotations, that intertwining everything – mythology, history, science, art and the everyday world of the present. This expansive process is what the text calls *ravenization* (*havranizace* in Czech). As the narrator explains, in response to a question presumably received from a reader, “[...] when you write a book about ravens, everything is connected to ravens.” (Rákos, 2009, p. 95)

The narrator’s attitude and manipulative tendencies are revealed in the section listing the different language equivalents of the word *raven*: “The name of the raven is cordeau in French, corro in Italian, curvo in Spanish, chorus in Latin, halló in Hungarian, rábe in German, raween in English, gavran in Russian. There may have been a typo or two in the above, but that’s what crows are all about.” (Rákos, 2009, p. 65) Almost all of the bird names listed are incorrect, with the Hungarian *holló* (raven) replaced by the word *halló*, which is used mainly when on the phone to initiate, confirm and maintain contact, or at the start of a conversation to attract attention. The exchange is inspired by a similarity in sound. Rákos allows himself to be led by acoustic associations on other occasions as well, thus mixing up languages and confusing (Czech) readers. The correct pronunciation of *oda* (the Hungarian equivalent of *there*) is indicated as *voda*, which means *water* in Czech. Otherwise, the text does not indicate that it is a Hungarian adverb. And the Russian word *perevod*, which means *translation*, is transformed into the name of the washing powder brand used by ravens, saying “Perevod pere vše za použití vody. Bez vody Perevod nepere.” (Rákos, 2009, p. 49) That is: “Perevod washes everything with water. Without water, Perevod does not wash.” The expression “pere vodou” is Czech for “to wash with water”.

It is often such misrepresentations or arbitrary explanations that lead to bizarre conclusions that the narrator presents as further “convincing” evidence of the prevalence and power of ravens. The following two examples are similar, where the distortion of language is accompanied by the distortion of facts: “The etymology of the name of the city of Le Havre is also undoubtedly linked to ravens. This is according to my dear father, who has been studying Matthias Corvinus since his birth in 1225.” (Rákos, 2009, p. 90) For the narrator, the name of the French city rhymes with the Czech word *havran*, and the reference to his father is doubly misleading: Péter Rákos was born exactly seven hundred years later, in 1925, and according to his publications, he did not study Matthias Corvinus. Chapter CI begins with the following introduction: “When Gauvain Micaille reached Avranches with his army of nineteen thousand ravens...” (Rákos, 2009, p. 87) After the successful attack of the ravens, the mystification narrative continues, and the town is renamed *Havranches*. In this instance we can observe that the author, in the manner of paronomasia, reads or “hears” the Czech word *havran* (raven) into the name of the small town in Normandy, which still exists today. The poetic use of language is reflected in the text in a multitude of ways.

PLAYING WITH HISTORY AND LITERATURE

As I have already mentioned, Petr Rákos’ *Corvína* is a novel bearing the formal characteristics of historiographical works. Following the conventions of historical narrative, the story of ravens unfolds in front of us from the origin stories of the prehistoric period embodied in myths, tales and sagas (“In the beginning was the egg” – Rákos, 2009, p. 53), through the expansion of power and dynastic structures in space and time (battles, wars of conquest) to the fateful events of the modern period. It includes typical events from the power-oriented history of diplomacy, as well as the

history of everyday life, the history of lifestyle and cultural history. These are, of course, only scattered hints - in the form of arbitrarily selected "facts", adjusted to the novel's conceptual requirements. Rákos writes a new, previously hidden - or apocryphal - history, while at the same time shedding new light on known events and personalities, and thus rewriting them, or rather ravenizing them (*havranizace*). In other words, he transforms them into grotesque fate stories of human-like ravens or raven-like people. And he does this by setting out a threatening vision of the future: "Respect the ravens! In time, you will become ravens too." (Rákos, 2009, p. 99) The invasion of birds across space, time and culture both evokes and mocks the narrative of conspiracy theories.

Rákos not only imitates historiography, but also - in an ironic tone - reflects on its theory, the methodological dilemmas of research and processing, and therefore the novel can be classified as historiographic metafiction (Hutcheon, 1989). In this respect, chapters XXXVII, XCVI and CLXXXIII deserve special attention, but since they are not related to the Hungarian aspects, I must refrain from their presentation and analysis. For illustrative purposes only, here is a quote that reflects the approach of the *Corvina* to history and the narrative concepts used: "And since history is entirely a matter for the living, every living being has the right to have a say in it. But the nature of history is such that it has a present that is in progress, a future that is being planned, and a past that is being regulated by active interventions." (Rákos, 2009, p. 248)

The hidden history of the ravens is the result of the juxtaposition and interweaving of many small, fragmented narratives. To achieve this, Petr Rákos achieves a fusion of the most diverse genre traditions and linguistic registers. The *Corvina* is characterized by a collage-like structure, the building blocks of which are the genres of the epic and the treatise. The narrative of the ravens, set in a world-historical context, is composed of what is said and written in myths, sagas, tales, jokes, anecdotes, poems, sermons, historiographical works, scientific treatises, pastoral letters and telegrams, and to this we can add the (pseudo)editorial reports and the index, which are an integral part of the work and are found in the second edition. Chapters are usually no longer than one page, rather half a page, alternating irregularly with even shorter sections, sometimes consisting of only one sentence.

The listed sources mix factual information (monarchs, artists, places, historical events) with fiction, and the seemingly serious discussion often leads to speculative or ridiculous conclusions. Rákos thus mocks not only historiography in general, but also the practice of rewriting history from an ideological point of view and falsifying history. The narrator tries to give the impression of historical authenticity by quoting fictional documents. For example, he tells the story of a siege of a French castle by referring to the non-existent memoirs of a knight (Rákos, 2009, p. 87). In a three-line chapter, without any introduction, an article in the June 10, 1901 issue of *Pester Lloyd* is mentioned, in which - allegedly - ravens are reported to have settled among the rocks of the Buda Castle (Rákos, 2009, p. 132). Readers would search in vain in the archives for this issue and article of the German-language Hungarian newspaper published between 1854 and 1945. The novel also quotes from Mozart's diary entries written in the last months of his life, which tell us why his symphony in A flat major, *The Cawing of the Ravens*, was never completed (of course there was no such symphony).

The combination of real and fictional elements can be observed in the confusing encounters between historical figures and literary characters (most of whom are ravens), which combine events of world historical scale with random, insignificant everyday events, creating a comic effect. The narrator does not leave unmentioned the historical allusion in the title of his book, which gives it a prominent place in the history of origins: "(...) it is a well-known fact that King

Matthias Corvinus of Hungary (the Raven King) founded a world-famous library, which was later named after him. The later fate of the Corvina Library was very unfortunate, and this is not a matter of insignificance to us, since this library inspired the title of our present work: more precisely, the Raven Codices which were the foundation of this famous library.” (Rákos, 2009, p. 25) In addition to Matthias Hunyadi, other monarchs (Ottokar II of Bohemia, Charles the Simple, Pepin the Short, Władysław III) and their non-existent, bizarre libraries are also described in this section.

Hungarian references can sometimes be decoded in the text by name association. This happens in chapter LIX, which mocks the heroic narrative forms of the ruling dynasties, where a king named Kálmán Leiffson appears in a long list of fictional Scandinavian and Czech kings (Rákos, 2009, p. 51), who, based on his first name, can be assumed to be of Hungarian origin. This suggestion becomes particularly interesting when we consider that the only Hungarian king known by this name was Coloman the Bookish (approx. 1074–1116), a king whose exceptional education has earned him a place in historical memory. Another monarch, whose figure is linked to books, thus fits well into the historical mystification of the novel. Another example is Francisco Serafino Kovacs’ name, where the surname refers to Hungarian origin, but the context does not suggest any specific historical parallel: it can be found among the names of the vultures living in Patagonia (Rákos, 2009, p. 97).

In the first chapter of the novel, the narrator lists a number of notable figures who have written about ravens in their works. Sometimes we can understand why someone is mentioned (Edgar Allan Poe), sometimes we suspect that the author is just playing the fool (Gaetano Donizetti, Henri Bergson, Clara Zetkin). He then adds thirteen more names to this list in chapter XXIX, where the name of János Arany (1817–1882) also appears (Rákos, 2009, p. 28), without any further explanation. It must be noted that the Hungarian poet is not unjustly ranked among the “raven experts”. This is justified by two reasons. Firstly, his ballad *Mátyás anyja* [The Mother of King Matthias] (1854), which deals with an episode in the life of Matthias Hunyadi, and in which the symbol of the raven plays a key role:

“What comes here?
What comes here?
Look, a pitch black raven;
one like it
on the shield
of Hunyad is engraven.”²

On the other hand, his poem *A lejtőn* [On the Slope] (1857), with its opening lines recalling the lyrical speech situation and mood of E. A. Poe’s famous poem *The Raven*:

“Evening flies. Its raven wingbeat
To my window quiver sends,
Brooding over passing times is
My soul’s shade as it descends.”

The ballad titled *A vörös Rébék* [Becky Scarlet] (1877), in which the superstitious motif of a witch turning into a bird appears, can also be linked to this theme. The evil woman in the title is

²Translated by Neville Masterman: https://allpoetry.com/Janos-Arany#t_main.

transformed into a crow – a close relative of ravens. In the penultimate verse, she invites the ravens to the corpse of her male victim:

“Now for lunch, ravens, crows
Everybody who’s there!
But no one shall hurt his eyes:
I’ll deal with them myself.”

In addition to János Arany, the Slovak poet Svetozár Hurban-Vajanský (1847–1916) is also on this rather distinguished list, and not by accident, as he published an allegorical poem titled *Havran* [The Raven] in 1879.

Hungarian references are also found among the fictional animal characters, and as in the previous cases, the text does not reflect on this, so only for those readers who understand Hungarian “will the penny drop”, and the comic motivation behind the name becomes clear. Those who do not speak Hungarian only sense the strangeness and peculiarity of the name, as in the case of the Scandinavian or Italian-sounding raven names that occur frequently in the novel (e.g. Thornbjörn Ódínsson, Harald Mývalson, Gaetano Gaetani, Giulio di Giulia). A recurring character in the novel is *Vastag Orrszarvú* (Thick Rhinoceros), whose ancestors include *Óriás Orrszarvú* (Giant Rhinoceros). In fact, in the chapter mocking creation myths (CLXXXIV), we learn that everything in the world, including ravens, came from a raven called *Orrszarvú* (Rhinoceros) (Rákos, 2009, p. 172). The strangeness of the names is double-coded. On the one hand, by the fact that we are talking about ravens, a different species, and on the other hand, by the fact that these grotesque creatures bear Hungarian evocative names. The same applies to *Daru Gizi* (Gizi Crane), who, despite her name, is not a crane but an egret and is a famous dancer all over Europe (Rákos, 2009, p. 111).

The comical combination of the real and the fictional also extends to the use of geographical names. Rákos shamelessly alternates the names of real towns with invented, absurd place names or events. We can also find Hungarian expressions here. Sometimes the Hungarian name is used for clarification purposes only: “Kismárton (now known as Eisenstadt)” (Rákos, 2009, p. 189). At other times, it serves to highlight a bizarre parallel: “In Europe, no one knows what a jungle is. They all read Kipling and think they’re clever. Huge mistake! Europe is Europe, the world is the world. The Mayor Vacek Square in Prague (...) is not the Broadway. Of course, *Mosonmagyaróvár* is no Saigon either.” (Rákos, 2009, p. 131, emphasis: K. B.) Chapter LXVIII contains an absurd discussion of the close relationship between peace and coffee. According to him, “the most closely related beverage to peace is coffee” (Rákos, 2009, p. 59), so much so that a World Congress resolution made coffee the conventional measure of peace. And such “conventional” coffee, we read in the quoted paragraph, is sold at the Nyugati Railway Station in Pest. The translator (the author’s father) confirms the biographical implications of this reference: his son also “sipped the exceptional (!) Hungarian espresso in happy euphoria at Nyugati Railway Station on countless occasions on arrival and departure” (Rákos, 2009, p. 9). Chapter I also contains a list of places (real and imaginary) where the symbol of the raven appears on the coat of arms. Here *Hülyefalva* (Village of Idiots) also appears (Rákos, 2009, p. 7). The meaning of the name of the fictitious Hungarian village is not mentioned here, but in the dictionary at the end of the novel we find its translation: *blboves* (Rákos, 2009, p. 196).

PLAYING WITH THE TEXT AND THE READERS

The already discussed questions of language, genre and composition are also thematized in the work. Petr Rákos' book is a text that is highly reflective of itself – of its linguistic form, of the process of narration, writing and reception. The reader's experience, which is immersed in the world of fiction, is regularly interrupted by the author's comments on the use of language and the narrative strategies applied. Frequent references, foreshadowing and statements commenting on the twists and turns of the story, which unfold only slowly and in digressions, remind the reader that they are reading a literary text.

Throughout the work, the narrator, posing as the author, engages in an intense dialogue with his imaginary readers: he addresses them, advises them on how to read the work, answers their unvoiced questions, asks for their consent or objects to their wishes, mocks their curiosity, their impatience, their impulses and fears evoked by the story. In this respect, it is most closely related to the works of Laurent Sterne (*The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*), Denise Diderot (*Jacques le Fataliste*) and Italo Calvino (*Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*).

Part of this metafictional poetic technique is that the novel tries to create and maintain the impression of a work in progress. The narrator regularly lists, considers or rejects various possibilities for the continuation of the story, emphasizing openness and freedom of development rather than a closed, finished text. In chapter LXXXIV, for example, he provides a list of female figures who were originally included in the novel but were eventually omitted (Rákos, 2009, p. 71), including *Izabella Tarcsay*. The name, which appears to be of Hungarian origin, is most likely unknown to most Czech readers, but even among Hungarian readers it will only mean something to those who are familiar with the history of Hungarian psychology. Izabella Tarcsay was a renowned psychologist in her field, author of fundamental works mainly in the field of experimental psychology and psychodiagnostics, such as *A kísérleti akaratvizsgálatok fejlődése* [The evolution of the testing of will-temperament] (1938), *Pszichodiagnosztika. A Rorschach vizsgálat és klinikai alkalmazása* [Psychodiagnostics. The Rorschach test and its clinical application] (1940). Petr Rákos, who worked as a psychiatrist, must have known about these works, and it is no coincidence that he includes the name of his Hungarian colleague in the book. But, as in the case of János Arany, he does not give any information about her in the quoted passage or in the index. It should be added that, thanks to the mystification element in the book, the reader cannot be sure that the name is real and not invented.

The paratexts in the second edition further reinforce the metafictional nature of the text. At the end of the work, before the table of contents, there are three (pseudo)editorial reports. Two of them do not recommend *The Book of Ravens* for publication. One refers to the author's immature, mediocre talent and the inconsistent, originalist nature of the text ("The Corvina is an absurd attempt at hyperbolic modernism, originality at all costs, banal l'art-pur-l'artism, snobbish intellectual populism." – Rákos, 2009, p. 201), the other editor considers it zoologically unacceptable to mock animals, more specifically birds. The author of the latter is – nota bene – an ornithologist, and his name is Ptáček, which means "bird" in Czech. If nothing else, this makes it clear even to the less suspicious reader that the attached documents are fictitious. The third opinion is somewhat more accepting, more permissive of the linguistic lapses and the fragmentation of content but its recommendation against publication is not due to any lack of conviction in the manuscript's literary value, rather, it is motivated by reader response, and the unpredictable changes in critical standards. And it is in this supportive

editorial report that the author includes his own surname in the language games: “the name Rákos, however rustically Slavic it may seem, actually means cancer.” (Rákos, 2009, p. 200) This explanation is necessary because the name has a completely different connotation in the Czech language than in Hungarian, where the word for cancer (rák) is the same as the name of an arthropod species, the crab. The surname also has an appellative meaning in Czech: it means *reed*. So if we “translate” the author’s name (Petr Rákos) into Hungarian, we get Péter Nádás (Peter Reed)... One can only regret that the author did not reflect this in the text and take advantage of the irony of this coincidence. It would have fitted perfectly into the mystification-based poetics of the work. All he had to do was link the works of the great Hungarian writer of prose and drama to birds, or even better, to ravens, and he could have joined János Arany on the list of raven experts. (Given Rákos’ linguistic inventiveness and literary erudition, this would not have been an impossible task for him.)

In connection with this double meaning of the surname (“crab” and “reed”), the editor also allows himself an ironic comment on the Hungarian origin of the author: “Rákos’ ancestors arrived in Central Europe on small, hairy horses, which were often crossed with small, hairy donkeys.” (Rákos, 2009, p. 200) The name of the metro station that Dagobert Nordlicher (one of the novel’s raven protagonists) describes in his description of his journey through the city also belongs to this concept (the origin of the Hungarians): *Finnugorok* (the Finno-Ugric) (Rákos, 2009, p. 181). And perhaps it is no coincidence that one of the pastoral letters begins and ends with the phrase *Kekkonen!* (Rákos, 2009, p. 91). The word, besides its Finnish connotation, also carries a historical allusion: it can refer to both the Finnish politician Urho Kekkonen (1900–1986), who was a former Prime Minister and President of Finland, and his wife, the writer Sylvi Kekkonen (1900–1974). And to further confirm the Finnish–Hungarian connection, the word *Forradalom!* (Hungarian for *revolution*) (Rákos, 2009, p. 66) appears in the same function in one of the earlier pastoral letters, of course – as usual – without translation. Both the Finnish and the Hungarian word seem to be a kind of ritual formula, like a linguistic relic, the function of which is more important than its obscured meaning (call, encouragement, framing).

The book also includes an index of certain words and names, which provides the correct pronunciation or explanation of the meaning of foreign words. At least on the surface, but in reality, this is just another literary device for Petr Rákos to play with languages in a comic manner. E.g. *par excellence* – for His Majesty, nymphomania – the opposite of feminism, János Arany – *araň jánoš* (pronounced with a dark Szekszárd “a”), Ciudad Porciúncula – the Hispanist is on holiday, we apologize, *Vastag Orrszarvú* - you’ll find out who *Vastag Orrszarvú* is!, etc. The Czech phonetic transcription of János Arany’s name is correct, but the instruction in brackets has no linguistic (dialectological) relevance (Rákos, 2009, p. 196).

Finally, we should mention the group of Hungarian linguistic inlays that belong to the category of cultural realia.³ Rákos refers on several occasions in his novel to Hungarian food and drink names that have become internationally known brand names and therefore carry a strong cultural connotation. The narrator is fond of compiling long lists of the most extraordinary things. And in such long lists he hides the terms *aszú* (Rákos, 2009, p. 126), *Gyulai kolbász* (sausage) and *hárslevelű* (a grape and wine variety, the name of which refers to the lime tree leaf) (Rákos, 2009, p. 191). According to the book, the world-famous Hungarian dessert

³Food and drink names are among the realia of material culture in the corpus of translation theory: Mujzer-Varga (2007), 2.

wine (Tokaji aszú) cures lung disease, while the robust, fragrant dry white wine (hárslevelű) and the slightly spicy, tangy sausage are among the things the ravens – contrary to their plans – have not invented.

CONCLUSION

As the examples analyzed have shown, the Hungarian linguistic and cultural connotations of Petr Rákos are most evident in his use of bizarre, vaguely motivated evocative names (Vastag Orrszarvú, Óriás Orrszarvú, Daru Gizi), confusing associations of real and fictional personal names, the mobilization of unusual associations of names (Kálmán Leiffson), the suppression or manipulation of historical, geographical and literary references, and speculative explanations of words. Another factor that contributed to the comic effect was that, as is typical of grotesque works, it blurred the boundaries between the world of humans and animals, which, among other things, led to a break with naming conventions. The human and animal characters were thus given inappropriate and therefore ridiculous names. This confirms the tendency that the use of unusual evocative names and the distortion of names often becomes a technique of expressing parody in postmodern literature (Slíz, 2006; Benyovszky, 2018). The extent to which Rákos used similar strategies for other foreign-language words and proper names could be the subject of further studies.

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