

The Mirror Image of Josef Bašek: On Human Metamorphosis in Egon Hostovský's Novel *Ztracený stín* (1931)

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SYNOPSIS

The sphere of art, which became highly personalised after the First World War, reflects the state of fragmentation of society into individuals and their inner world. In Egon Hostovský's novel *Ztracený stín* (Lost Shadow, 1931), this phenomenon appears on various textual levels, but the dominant realm, reflecting the chaos of the world as well as of the inner self, is the level of motifs in the author's poetics. In the process of self-identification of the main protagonist Josef Bašek, the rupture in his psychological experience is encoded in the recognition of his own deformed image, the new identity of the double, in the mirror. The author thus reflects the disintegration of an integrated structure in two directions. On one hand, the external world foments an individual metamorphosis of personality, while on the other this is no longer merely a matter of the human inner self and psychological experience, but in its deformed aspect becomes a visible component of the fragmented society within which the protagonist operates.

KEYWORDS

Movement; space; the double; introspection; literary modernism; Egon Hostovský.

DOI

<https://doi.org/10.14712/23366680.2022.1.12>

The fact that the world is becoming an inscrutable and inexplicable place is indirectly reflected in literary modernism on a number of textual levels — with regard to the level of the narrative motifs we refer primarily to the ways of depicting the psychological defects of the literary protagonists, which appear as authentic expressions of isolation, existential instability and the thus ensuing feeling of emptiness. In Egon Hostovský's novel *Ztracený stín* (Lost Shadow, 1931), this represents an expression of a state in which 'everyone is farthest from himself' (Nietzsche 2002, p. 7), in which this gulf in the relationship to the world or oneself provides the impulse for a search for a new identity, the identity of the double and subsequent (self-)identification.

In the introduction to the novel, the author places the main protagonist, Josef Bašek, in the existential position of Hronský's 'man in a million' or Kafka's¹

1 Franz Kafka appears as a continuator of a line of typological connections following on from the work of F. M. Dostoyevsky. For Egon Hostovský, Kafka represents a further source



‘man-beetle’, thus someone unseen, a ‘superfluous’ existence. Bašek’s existential feeling is augmented by his status as a regular clerk in the textile company Globus,² thus a *pars pro toto* of a man passively contributing to the global operation of a world which appears to him to be alien and remote, even though he is a part of it. All Bašek’s movements are therefore automated, without his conscious participation, while the character of Bašek’s thoughts is also subjected to an equivalent process of automation, since they are regularly generated by a perception of the same objects within an unchanging environment. In this manner Hostovský constructs Bašek’s everyday route, which first of all leads to the bridge, returning later cyclically to its original point of departure — the cramped space of his rented flat. This ultimately functions as a ‘depressingly acting small space [...], via the prism of which everything is measured’ (Papoušek 1996, p. 57):

*Every evening I walked along the riverbank as far as **the bridge**; I ambled **slowly**, I **paused, turned around**, like a **man who has plenty of time to kill**, and who **doesn’t know where to go**. I was caught up entirely **in myself**. And from my **endless monologues** I was struck by such strange, barren thoughts that I was appalled by them — and I was filled with such a strong **desire for conversation or***

of inspiration, in which they are linked also by their Jewish origin (within this context it is possible also to recall the influence of the work of F. Werfel). For further details on influences on Hostovský’s writing see Vaněk (2009).

- 2 Josef Hostovský, the father of Egon Hostovský, was the founder of a workshop and later a textile factory named ‘Šimon Hostovský and brother’ (during the time of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy under the German name Mechanische Leinen- und Baumwollwaren Weberei S. Hostovský und Bruder Hronov), the operation of which in many respects represented the ‘apple of discord’ of family relations, which is also linked to his father’s status as a ‘misfit’, as Egon Hostovský himself writes in his memoirs: ‘He was probably an inept businessman, and as a result, following his initial rift from his brother, after which each of them operated independently under the same company roof, the more adroit brother prospered and my father fell into poverty. [...] And the society of which he wished to become a member looked down upon him, insulted and mocked him’ (Hostovská — Sádlo — Svobodová 2018, p. 11). According to Vladimír Papoušek, ‘the father’s lack of anchoring within the small environment of Hronov came to define the son’s inability to fit in, manifested above all in his distance regarding all externally forced roles in the world behind the notional small-town limits. [...] Egon’s childhood was marked not only by an incomprehensible family dispute, but also by the atmosphere of the First World War, which within the Hostovský family was reflected in material poverty’ (Papoušek 1996, p. 12). Hostovský himself recalls these times as follows: ‘We experienced unimaginable poverty during the First World War. Our poverty was so great that two of my siblings died of tuberculosis brought on by malnutrition, my brother Max at the age of thirteen and my sister Marta at the age of seventeen. And all my three surviving sisters had pneumonia, and even later, after it had been cured, the illness exercised a malign influence on their fate [...]. Although I suffered from all kinds of diseases throughout my entire childhood during the First World War, from scarlet fever to typhus, by some miracle I was the only one to escape consumption [Egon was the last born of eight children — author’s note]’ (Hostovský 1995, pp. 13–14).

company, so that I could convince myself that my mind was entirely sane, that I hadn't changed.

I had no peace, I was shy and timid like never before. I sat on a bench, **waiting for someone to sit beside me and start up a conversation**. I myself did not have the courage — and for the first time in my life I felt a **raging thirst for human society**. [...]

My walk was the same every evening. It was as if I was afraid to look at the more remote corners of the town. It was the **habit of a mechanised man, a fear of new impulses**. Every familiar object daily awakened in me the same visions and recollections, and thus this **accursed regularity** took hold also of my thought process.

*Patentia pauperum non peribit in aeternum!*³ (Hostovský 1932, pp. 14–15, emphasis Z. K.).

While Bašek's nightly ritual motion concentrates on the bridge, thus the most explicit metaphor of a medium that connects, it later clearly concerns a starting point for his journey to people. Instead of his yearning for dialogues with others, however, Bašek continues within his mechanised solitude and internal monologue, which he holds in an awareness of the chasm between two worlds — his own and that of others. The narrative syuzhet is internalised at this point, since, in the words of György Lukács 'one's own inner life is possible and necessary only when the differences between people become an unbridgeable gulf' (Lukács 1979, p. 56 [cit. in Liessmann 2000, p. 83]).

The psychological experience is indeed made more dynamic by the following events, binding to concrete spatial co-ordinates and objects within them that encode the turning points in the plot within the process of transformation of the personality.⁴ Hostovský thus creates a type of protagonist whose reaction to a series of internal and external conflicts is expressed by means of 'dynamic' (spatial) metaphors. A turn of events leads Bašek to emerge from his anonymity by crossing the threshold of the thirteenth department of the Globus company, which represents — following on from Vaněk's analysis of motion in Hostovský's novel — an "ex-static" motion, wresting him out of a static condition of changeless everydayness and existential stereotypes' (Vaněk 1996, p. 74). His entry into this department — a symbolised entry

3 This is a quote from the Bible, Psalm 9. It translates as: 'The patient abiding of the meek shall not perish for ever.'

4 By emphasising the dynamic experience of the protagonist, which subsequently conditions his transformation of personality, we link to the connection of psychology and art of the 20th century. Indeed, 'A. Hauser, in *Philosophy of the History of Art* introduces Freud's conception of the dynamic personality as the greatest inspiration of 20th century literature' (Bátorová 2000, pp. 104–105). The work of Sigmund Freud in fact begins with 'a developmental line of a psychodynamic current of thought in the psychology of the personality [...]. The unifying element of psychodynamic theories of the personality is the presumption that the core of the personality is formed by a dynamic conflict originating either out of antagonistic internal tendencies within the individual, or out of an antagonism between the wishes/needs of the individual and his external surroundings' (Kafka — Kovaničová — Pálová 2004, p. 15).



into a ‘thirteenth chamber’ (Papoušek 1996, p. 59), thus a great secret — continues by means of the closing of the door of the room, which represents a semantic spatial boundary. From this moment on a series of events begins, from which the subsequent process of personality metamorphosis evolves — a gradual psychological fragmentation of a person seeking his place within new existential conditions.

*Here! **Department thirteen.** Curious that it has no other title! Strange that it didn’t strike me before! A key was hanging from the lock. I waited until I had calmed down a little. Then I smoothed my hair and adjusted my clothing, and knocked. [...] — I was trembling, shaking feverishly, my teeth were chattering. **I unlocked the door and entered.** With one leap I threw myself towards the table and rummaged among the documents and books...*

Three minutes later I again emerged from there. I was almost fainting with excitement. I had to lean against a wall and breathe deeply. My heart was thumping.

*I had discovered a fraud to the tune of several million. Taxes had been stolen from the state. [...] ‘Wait, now I’ll show you, just you wait!’
[...]*

*A sharp thrill coursed through my whole body. To be able to take command with one imperious gesture! [...] **I have the entire ‘globus’ in my hands!** [...] My head was spinning. To dictate, to command... **I felt a sense of horror at my own hands** — and God knows why, but I recalled how as a young boy I had visited quarries with my father. From this visit a memory had become fixed in my mind of the man who pointed to a kind of lever in a small wooden hut, and said: ‘All it takes is one pull on it, and that entire rock face goes up in the air.’*

***And now I looked at my hands with the same horror that I’d then looked at the hands of that man, as he grasped the perilous handle** (Hostovský 1932, pp. 49–52, emphasis Z. K.).*

However, in dynamic (spatial) metaphors, Hostovský continues by working with an intentional deformation of space — an inert world in its details, which is brought to life in the protagonist’s perception. The character of space is then exclusively the result of the internal reflection of the subject — it concerns a shift of perspective, which is projected into the movement of the entire space, and which generates anxiety and fear in Bašek.⁵

Shrinking, shrinking, shrink...** are the details lost from the images when they’re shrunk? No! But still! Let’s imagine a segment — five centimetres. Please... and now a reduced reproduction... There must be something missing... I haven’t chosen a good example — not a segment, better a curve... Nonsense, such stupidity! **I feel like I’m starting to lose my mind.

5 Within the context of the creative output of the 1930s, Josef Vojvodík speaks of fear as an atmospheric feeling which became an ‘intense experience of loss of a hitherto familiar world, and its transformation into an environment hostile to humanity; an experience which phenomenological-anthropological psychiatry [Ludwig Binswanger — author’s note] described as a “fear in the face of the world” (Vojvodík 2014, p. 72).



I raised my head and paused in astonishment. Up to now I'd never seen the street like this. You can't see anything, just the heavens; it makes your head spin. So many high walls, so many windows, doors, terraces, signs, windowsills, drainpipes — all fused together. **And suddenly — suddenly** (I touched my forehead and shivered under the clammy touch of my fingers) **the objects take on a different form, take on quite unknown qualities, they come to life, speak... A house is no longer a house, a pavement is no longer a pavement, a railing is no longer a railing... They are the beings with whom each day I talk, argue, reason within myself; and now they have escaped from me — the beasts — they have come to life and are mocking me.** My desolation and insignificance, my comicality and... My God, my God, what is this? I've gone out of my mind!

[...] **I must be sick, exhausted...**

I turned and ran once again. Why was I first struck by this idiotic image of shrunken pictures? That's how it all started!

[...]

I crouched against the wall and covered my ears. **The image was projected into space by my tortured nerves. The hum of the machines, the patter of footsteps, reinforced concrete, shiny sirens blaring, blaring! The lantern above me has a human head, its mouth is laughing at me:**

'Look, you fool, it's

Globus G l o b u s GLOBUS!!' (ibid., pp. 58–59, emphasis Z. K.).

At the beginning of the space which comes to life and swells is Bašek's reflection on shrinkage. In an analysis of the space delineated by the protagonists of Hostovský's prose works, Václav Vaněk emphasises precisely the shrinkage, or more precisely constriction of space, which he considers to represent a parallel to the feeling of existential anxiety ensuing from the narrowing of prospects and options in life (Vaněk 2009, p. 318). However, in this case it concerns a shrinkage of the intimate — mental space of Josef Bašek as a consequence of the operation of the world of the powerful, in which a human being is merely a powerless reduction, in the process of losing his individuality. The space is thus again a projection of Bašek's current existential conditions, which are leading him to a cumulative physical and psychological debilitation.

I was too **limp, beaten down, apathetic.** And then **my shadow, my inner double,** appeared once more. He pushed me along, turned me around, and I felt how inch by inch he was absorbing my body into himself. **At first I tried to resist his movements by doing the opposite, but I merely gained balance [...].** Then I weakened. I tried to raise my hand and place it on my chest. I could only raise it a little — it could not go any further, he would not allow it to go further.

And all the time he spoke to me, cajoled me out of my resistance, scolded me, threatened me. I was becoming ever fainter, weaker, fading away: **now I was gradually turning into a shadow. But he grew, became more powerful, I entered into him like moisture enters the earth, and he soaked up my blood, grew heavier and heavier, swelled up, increased in length, bloated... ..and then suddenly I had disappeared into him for good. As if light had been swallowed up by a shadow. In the place where Josef Bašek had lain, there now rested**



a stranger [...] *He turned contentedly on his side and fell asleep* (Hostovský 1932, pp. 97–98, emphasis Z. K.).

The relationship between both identities of Josef Bašek, expressed via the motif of the shadow,⁶ is ambivalent — the shadowy aspect of the protagonist gradually materialises into the visible identity of a double, while his original identity is dispersed into a mute, shadow form. Hostovský describes this process of transformation again via a figurative constriction of the physical space of one identity in parallel with the expansion of the physical body of ‘a stranger’. The paralysis of his limbs⁷ as an expression of the loss of strength of his own will is at the same time a visualisation of the internal conflict of two identities. It therefore concerns a state which could be described allegorically, following on from Hermann Schmitz’s phenomenology of corporeality, ‘as an extreme constriction of the space of the body and its possibilities of movement [...], as a rupture of communication with one’s surroundings and a plunging into a state of isolation and powerless’ (Schmitz [cit. in Vojvodík 2006, p. 130]). The peace which is subsequently established within Bašek following his transformation is only illusory, because it relates exclusively to his new identity. However, in this phase it still appears to him as alien, as indicated also by the impassive statement of the presence of a stranger in place of Josef Bašek.

This metamorphosis of personality, in the form of a two-way transition between two identities, is symptomatic of the entire novel, in which the main identifier of the protagonist’s present psychological state is the mirror, which makes Bašek’s deeds visible in the form of a deformed face.⁸

6 Carl G. Jung defines the shadow as a psychological concept that represents ‘that part of the personality which has been displaced from the consciousness in order to preserve a certain idealised image of the identity of the conscious self. [...] Such denial naturally does not remove the dark energies from the personality, and these then accumulate in the unconscious, where they form a “dark brother”, an inferior, primitive, independently functioning sub-personality’ (Greene 1998, p. 137). Jung thus places the shadow in opposition to the persona, thereby creating two opposing, relatively autonomous dimensions of the human psyche.

7 The connection of the inner world with outer bodily manifestations is based here on the character of psychology as an independent scientific discipline in the 19th century, which represents one of the contexts that to various extents condition the form of art in the 20th century, inasmuch as ‘scientific psychology in the modern sense of the word has worked its way to the very core of the soul precisely through those parts of it that are in a direct relationship towards the external world. [...] The relationship towards the body was therefore of absolutely essential importance for the nascent psychology’ (Mlejnek 2010, p. 294, 296). Among other matters, this follows on from Freud’s definition of paralysis of the limbs, fainting, vomiting, or other manifestations that involve the body and are often indicative of a psychological state, within the context of which Freud refers to hysteria. From the field of the Czech psychology of the 19th century, which conditioned the development of its 20th century counterpart, we can again recall the strong influences of Jan Evangelista Purkyně, whose psychology is supposedly founded upon physiology, thus bodily manifestations in the sense of expressions of emotions (Mlejnek 2010, p. 294).

8 It is indisputably possible here to identify parallels with Wilde’s *Portrait of Dorian Gray* (published in pamphlet form 1890, in book form 1891). According to Ondřej Selner, this



I turned away and **caught sight of my face in the mirror**. I saw myself (perhaps as a result of the poor lighting, perhaps as a result of my unusual, contorted posture) in such a form as I had never seen myself hitherto. **My head shrunk into my shoulders, an amazingly long nose, ugly, thick lips. In mute horror I stared at my appearance. My God, how disfigured I am, how monstrously disfigured! This is my true form, this is how people see me.** — Everything agreeable that I had ever done, said, felt, now seemed impossibly preposterous, grotesque. I did not move, so as not to see my face in the familiar form to which I have grown accustomed, and which hides my ugliness (Hostovský 1932, p. 66, emphasis Z. K.).

I began to fear.

Fortunately the **hotel** was nearby.

On the **animated staircase** I felt a sense of relief: he had gone. I took the **lift**, ran along a **long corridor** and **opened the door to my room**. In spite of all my fear I wanted to be alone, in order to convince myself that it had all been a mere aberration, that my double would not return.

I fumbled for the **light switch** and only afterwards **closed the door**. I turned on the light. **The mirror standing opposite returned my own image to me** (ibid., pp. 94–95, emphasis Z. K.).

Bašek takes this look into the mirror,⁹ by which the process of new self-identification culminates, within his own intimate environment — behind the closed door of the hotel room. The intimate space of the protagonists of literary modernism is often of the merely transitional character of a rented flat or hotel room, it is an impersonal and empty room with a minimal appearance of objects indicating any emotional attachment. The topos of the home is thus substantially reduced in literary modernism,¹⁰ because isolation within the delineated space of the hotel room in a certain sense foreshadows states of deep isolation, and this in spite of the fact that a hotel is after all a space full of people, a public space. Psychological disposition is thus presented in an allegory through the intimate topography of a character into

novel is ‘a variation on the Freudian alter ego, mirrored in the image of the ageing Dorian on the canvas, which ultimately becomes his own reflection, which he wants to destroy. Individuality is seen in his own reflections’ (Selner 2020, p. 23).

⁹ An analysis of the motif of the mirror as a catalyst of mental states in 20th century prose is presented by Tomáš Jirsa (2008), who traces this motif within the context of duality through an analysis of the prose works of Richard Weiner (e.g. *The Game for Real*).

¹⁰ In Hostovský’s output, home is transformed into the feeling of a loner who yearns to belong somewhere. In many cases this concerns characters who are unable to find their home, who feel alienated in the space which they themselves have chosen as their home. At this point it is possible to identify parallels with the fate of Hostovský’s sister Irma, whose influence on the author’s life and work is not disputed even by Hostovský himself (Hostovský 1995, p. 15). ‘The worst of all is when you realise too late that our home is somewhere else than where we have settled by mistake. In a true home, even in an earthquake, one cannot be as alone as I am now. [...] You and I should have been born on another planet, or at least in another continent’ (from a letter to Egon Hostovský; ibid., pp. 19–20).



whom Hostovský intentionally places a mirror, functioning as a link between the internal — experienced and the external — seen world, as two components of a single, fragmented being.

Fragmentariness can be spoken of also on a narrative level, where the narration is directed more inward than outward. The majority of Josef Bašek's conversations,¹¹ which would satisfy a desire for human company, remain unspoken, and do not pass through the censorship of his own consciousness. The reversal of Josef Bašek's perspective in an inward direction in the sense of introspection therefore presupposes a distinctive, internal language, which is able to encode the tensions of mental life and the splitting of the personality into two parallel identities through a fictional dialogue. Even despite the fact that the genesis of the motif of the double dates back to antiquity, the Orient and later takes on a special form in the 19th century, in the epoch of romanticism, as illustrated by František Kautman (1999, p. 74), in the modern era it is modified precisely on a narrative level — its characteristic trait becomes dialogue,¹² which is a recasting of the inner processes of the human psyche. The internal monologue is then transformed into an internal dialogue, consisting in a duel of two aspects of the personality. The domination of one of these depends on an intentional choice of perspective, which has control over the other, and therefore also over its narrative.

*As if from a great distance, **a dialogue came to me from within**, in which the largest part of my brain did not take any part, and which suddenly emerged from the twilight of my subconscious:*

'You are grossly disgusting, and at the same time comical!'

'I should like to know why?'

'You know very well! You're constantly wallowing in filth!'

'So what should I do?'

'There's so much, but you're so useless I could cry!'

*Surprised and a little confused, I paused for a moment. And here... **here I perceived with my inner vision — no, I not only saw and heard, but sensed and felt within the frame of my being a kind of foreign existence. It was as if an unfamiliar person now stood wrapped in the cloak of my body and spoke to my bewildered senses. I could even see his face, his red, angry and hatefully drawn***

11 Josef Bašek speaks aloud about his psychological state only once — before Máša Lierová, although even in this case he styles himself as a creator of hypothetical reflections, rather than in the position of a penitent in a sincere confession. The need to 'unburden' himself of all his troubles onto someone is typical of Hostovský himself, which is confirmed by his older fellow student Václav Černý: 'Egon always wanted to confess his martyr complex, for him everything was a process of self-purging' (Hostovská — Sádlo — Svobodová 2018, p. 16).

12 The dialogical character of duality has ultimately already been identified by M. M. Bakhtin in Dostoevsky (Kautman 1999, p. 75). 'In Dostoevsky's novel *The Double*, a Petersburg official appears who suddenly splits into two personalities, each with the same outward appearance, who nevertheless communicate with one another and quarrel, while each of them reveals a different side of the protagonist's nature' (ibid.).

face. I was not alarmed, since I regarded it all as one of those harmless internal follies of which I have spoken before. And when I then heard how the intruder insolently remarked, as if he had been interrupted by some third party, ‘... we’ll leave it here, but one day I must tell you my opinion,’ I felt like laughing. I was reminded of [...] my childhood fantasies.

[...]

It occurred to me that I now resembled a pregnant woman, and this amused me immensely.

‘And what shall I call my little one? Hahaha!’

‘Fool!’

He spat out this curse so angrily that it made me jump (Hostovský 1932, p. 93, emphasis Z. K.).

The catalyst of the inner dialogue between the two aspects of the personality becomes the crisis situation, which is reflected in a fragmented consciousness that is incapable of communication either with others or with oneself — reflective contemplations become an internal monologue, which in turn is then transformed into an internal dialogue. However, fragmentariness extends also to the level of the novel’s composition, inasmuch as the syuzhet is built exclusively upon that section of life in which the problematic relationship between the internal and the external is aggravated. Although outwardly the running of the Globus company, thus the running of the world as such, functions like a perfect machine, in reality this controlled ‘body’ is split into fragments. The product is then the modern subject, to which no transparent gesture of revolt against society pertains. A sense of dissatisfaction, accumulated over a long period of time, is transposed into the form of an internal rift. The modern subject, which constructs itself through the discourse of psychological and social background, identifies this rift also outwardly, in the deformation of its own face *pars pro toto* representing a society of amoral characters.

Cowering in fear, I stared in icy horror at **my hideous appearance**. I was now much uglier than that time in the theatre; every blemish of my face, every formless contortion of my figure was magnified a thousand times. And distorted. But there then followed something far more appalling: **a roaring, triumphant laugh soared through the room**. As if a saw was slicing into my ears. In the mirror I saw the mortal terror on my face. **I spread out all ten fingers**, as if I were about to collapse, **opened my mouth as wide as I could** and gasped for air, **my legs were bent at the knees, my torso lay lamentably on the door like a flaccid sack**. And I had to regard myself, for it was he who was laughing at me, now back in his place, once again with that angry, mockingly laughing face.

It only lasted a moment — and he disappeared again. [...] But I... **I am placed at the mercy of some kind of monster who looks through my eyes, laughs with my mouth, who can do anything he likes with my arms, against my will... and I cannot resist!** (ibid., pp. 94–95, emphasis Z. K.).

At the moment when the metamorphosis of personality becomes far more visible to the protagonist upon his recognition of the deformed mirror image, Bašek reacts





with an involuntary downward movement — the buckling of his knees and torso here copies his psychological splintering. The ‘erect posture, associated with effort and exertion, through which a person acquires his “status” in the world, the possibility of adopting an independent, free stance towards the world,’ is replaced in Josef Bašek’s case by a ‘collapse of the body [...] and the shattering of its “architecture” by fracturing’ (Vojvodík 2006, pp. 131–132). The fragmentariness that manifests itself here on the level of the splitting of Bašek’s identity foreshadows his mental emptiness, in which the original identity of his own consciousness is suppressed. A question remains as to whether it can be ‘relocated with the help of finding a fixed point in the metaphysical void, which will be the cornerstone of the construction of the subject and his own deconstruction of his internalised schizophrenic hyperreality’ (Gerbery 2010, p. 66).

*But strangely — I was unable to dream my usual bold plans for the coming days: **something was missing inside, a pillar, a foundation, God only knows what! And tomorrows terrified me, I felt too weak for them, so weak. There was no doubt: something had disappeared from my inner being and left a great void that I could feel even physically; something had been violently torn out of me, something had been amputated.***

I looked at myself once again before the mirror. All that was left of him was that evil gleam in my eye.

*I paced slowly, heavily. A single thought burned itself into my head like a hot needle: **he had been there long ago, he must have been! He acted on my behalf, he made decisions... And he... will return again!*** (Hostovský 1932, pp. 95–96, emphasis Z. K.).

Bašek himself is conscious of his inner emptiness as an expression of the loss of a pillar, a foundation that has been violently torn out him, amputated. If we follow on here from Eliade’s conception of the symbolism of the ‘centre’ in the sense of the core of human existence, the *axis mundi* which is lost by the protagonist, in the imagery of creative art we can then speak of an allegory of a problematised being in the phase of its own existential instability. This destabilisation, which Bašek perceives as the loss of a pillar, a foundation, is therefore not connected to his material base (property), since at the given moment he himself is in possession of it, but it is rather of a psychological origin — it ensues from a vain search for a point of orientation that would determine the meaning and define the essence of his being. Ultimately, ‘that which Welsch refers to as the “fragmented, lost subject”, is referred to by others — both authors and theoreticians — as the modern intervention into life or the dynamic, searching subject’ (Bátorová 2000, pp. 104–105).

The presupposition of the self-identification of the protagonists of literary modernism in the new existential conditions is a process of splitting the personality into mutually disparate identities, which compete for dominance and which the protagonists become aware of especially through the influence of some kind of medium, most often a mirror. This process of transformation takes place within their own isolation from the surrounding world, which ensues from the need to avert their gaze from the stigmas caused by reality. Their psychological isolation is thus

naturally also transformed into emptied spaces, which are adapted for the experience of their current state of being to a far more intense degree than any other space. Their existential uprootedness is implied already by the simple fact that the protagonists have no stable home, and instead live alone in rented flats or hotel rooms of a transitional nature. Josef Bašek is a nomad, wandering through life without a constant guide. This nomadism is also projected into his intimate topography, which is of a transitory character. Within this transitory space, an important function is performed by a spatial boundary, which intersects not only two parallel worlds, but above all two ways of being, against the background of which the identity of the double is profiled. We could refer to the novel in question as an art that originates at the moment when homogeneity is replaced by a kind of emblem — fragmentariness. On one hand fragmentariness, on the level of motifs, is what stands behind the depersonalisation of the protagonists and foreshadows their (self-)destruction, whereas elsewhere it produces a metaphorical field aimed at fragmenting the whole as a consequence of some kind of cataclysm. In the above manner, the phenomenon of fragmentariness is applied in the compositional structure of novels, where the unspoken word, abbreviation or textual aposiopesis are of particular significance. However, in this case the constructive principle of fragmentariness is dualism, which is transformed into multiple positions of meaning, each time expressing an aggravation of the problematic relationship between the internal and external. This struggle is played out within the protagonist's inner being, and thus splits him into fragments. Within the modern context these fragmented beings, on their path to attaining stability in life, in their endeavour to return to homogeneity, essentially require a guide, namely openness towards another person, towards love as a new existential centre, which the modern subject is nonetheless often unable to achieve.

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