



## Matěj Antoš: Demons and monsters of contemporary Czech prose (in selected works of fiction by Miloš Urban)

### Abstract:

The paper deals with the forms of demons and monsters in contemporary Czech postmodern gothic fiction, especially in selected works of prose by Miloš Urban. Attention will be paid not only to the typology of demons, who may in this type of texts play an ambiguous role due to the genre syncretism, but also to their function within the narrative. In fact, fully in keeping with the intentions of the postmodern gothic fiction, may the demons and monsters cease to play a mere role of a terrifying or supernatural element and give evidence more about the problem of loss of individual identity in contemporary society or about blurring the boundaries between the Good and the Evil and the Barbaric and the Civilized. The paper will also attempt to answer the question why we have in these days such a tendency to inundate our imagination (and not only in literary forms) with so many stories including demons, monsters and other spectres and to what purpose such cultural approach serves.

### Keywords:

gothic fiction, contemporary Czech fiction, Miloš Urban, gothic novel, postmodern literature

### Abstrakt:

Artykuł omawia formy demonów i potworów we współczesnej czeskiej postmodernistycznej fikcji gotyckiej, zwłaszcza w wybranych utworach Miloša Urbana. Szczególną uwagę poświęcę nie tylko typologii demonów, które mogą w tego typu tekstach odgrywać niejednoznaczną rolę ze względu na gatunkowy synkretyzm, ale także ich funkcji w obrębie narracji. W rzeczywistości, w pełni zgodnie z intencjami postmodernistycznej gotyckiej fikcji, demony i potwory mogą przestać grać tylko rolę elementu przerażającego lub nadprzyrodzonego i dają więcej dowodów na temat problemu utraty indywidualnej tożsamości we współczesnym społeczeństwie lub zamazania granic między dobrem a złem, a barbarzyństwem i cywilizacją. W artykule spróbuję również odpowiedzieć na pytanie dlaczego w dzisiejszych czasach mamy tendencję do zatapiania naszej wyobraźni (i to nie tylko w formie literackiej) z tak wieloma historiami, w tym demonami, potworami i innymi widmami i do czego służy takie podejście kulturowe.

### Słowa kluczowe:

gothic fiction, współczesna czeska fikcja, Miloš Urban, powieść gotycka, literatura postmodernistyczna

Postmodern poetics begin to increasingly and persistently influence the Czech literature genre profile as of approximately the late 1980s. This process also includes an increasing productivity of these creative modes, previously somewhat overshadowed or neglected within the Czech literary context. One of these modes is the Gothic mode, corresponding with the basic principles of postmodernity in terms of its thematic focus: issues of identity crisis, epistemological scepticism along with a distrust in rationality and objectivity.<sup>1</sup> Increasing numbers of prose works, thematising inexplicable events, supernatural phenomena, terrifying secrets, etc., have also been emerging in Czech fiction. The complex relations between Gothic fiction and postmodern poetics are distinguished by profounder thematic and structural intersections, particularly regarding the distortion of perspective, the blurring of subject identity and the instability of the setting.<sup>2</sup>

One of the most significant examples of blending of the Gothic mode and postmodern poetics within the Czech contemporary fiction is perhaps Miloš Urban (\*1969) and his works of fiction like *Sedmikostelí* (*Seven Churches*, 1999), *Stín katedrály* (*Shadow of the Cathedral*, 2003), *Hastrman* (*Water Sprite*, 2001), *Michaela* (2004 under the pseudonym Max Unterwasser, 2008 under his name) or *Lord Mord* (2008). The typical fictional world or Urban's novels is shaped into a labyrinth-like prison, a trap or directly a crypt for the modern-day heroes while a potential leakage zone is represented by the idealised world of a lost order, ethical and cultural codes and the positive examples and touching beauty of ancient artifacts. The certain humbleness of a mystery which is not meant to be revealed is permanently present in the "other" world or only for the chosen ones. A key conflict emerges at the moment when the first sphere attempts (arbitrarily and arrogantly) to penetrate the second one, when the profane world aims at (cynically) breaking the taboo of the sacred and mysterious world, this being actually another essential thematic feature of Gothic fiction.<sup>3</sup>

Demons, monsters and ghosts are an inseparable part of Gothic fiction since the beginnings of the genre's existence. For the thematologic analysis of Gothic fiction it is particularly important to analyse the role played by monsters in this type of text – they actually construct the standard of normality within the fictional world with their differentness and otherness. Although villains in Gothic novels of the 18th century and early 19th century certainly have some monstrous features, they are not the monsters themselves. The important change of perceiving of the monsters in literary texts occurs with *Frankenstein*<sup>4</sup> and the resonance of this change can be observed basically to the present. Mary Shelley was probably the first who encouraged sympathy for the monster and allowed him to talk and express the origin of his monstrous behavior. Monsters and beasts therefore play an important role in Gothic fiction – they are not just a simple mechanism that "scares the reader" but they repeatedly challenge the very foundations of humanity and question the

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<sup>1</sup>The connections and intersections of postmodernism and Gothic fiction are described in detail, for example, by D. Punter – G. Byron, *The Gothic*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2013, s. 50–53, or by M. Beville, *Gothic-postmodernism. Voicing the Terrors of Postmodernity*, Rodopi, Amsterdam – New York 2009, pp. 51–60.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. D. Punter – G. Byron, *The Gothic*, Blackwell, Oxford 2013, p. 50–3.

<sup>3</sup> D. Punter, *Literature of Terror. A History of Gothic Fiction from 1765 to the Present Day*, Longman Inc., New York 1980, p. 405.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. M. Shelley, *Frankenstein, or, The Modern Prometheus*, Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley, London 1831.

superiority of man over other creatures. In many cases, the monster can also be understood as suppressed aspects of personality or even of entire culture. Therefore, there is a legitimate question as to whether the monster is really “the other”, or whether it is not an unwanted part of every human being, but he refuses to accept it. In science fiction, they play a similar role as a cyborg – although they seem to be another kind of entity due to their mechanical aspect, they are based on a similarly contradictory combination of the human and “the other”, and scare those who encounter them with their hybrid essence.

Now I will focus more in detail on the characters of monsters, scary creatures and other, inhuman beings that can be found in selected prose works of Miloš Urban. First of all, we have to pose a following question: can real monsters be found in Urban's works of fiction? Is it possible that we rather meet here with masks, theatrical disguises, delusional visions, living paintings or a play with allusions? The question is also whether it is possible to speak about "normality" and deviations from it and, if so, is normality always perceived negatively, as a space from which the protagonists try to escape? In the case of Urban's work of fiction we can talk about monsters in the true sense of the word at least in two cases. The first is the novel *Hastrman* and the second novelette *Michaela*. The protagonist of *Hastrman*, Baron Salmon de Caus, is probably the most striking Urban figure with a monstrous aspect. Due to the fact that the main hero himself is actually a monster, the novel occupies an exceptional position among the other books of the author. But *hastrman* is not only a monster, he possesses also a human aspect to some certain extent. This double-minded nature of the character is from the beginning of narration a source of its division, incompleteness – he is neither a monster nor a human. However, he has a clearly defined place and role in the world of people, namely to be a guardian of their morals - an inconspicuous stalker who punishes them for their misconduct.

While the first part of the book takes place in the 19th century, the second part brings us to the present. The people at this time behave so insensitively and greedy to the nature (and to each other) that baron de Caus resigns from his guardian role. He becomes a merciless avenger and stops controlling his dark, inhuman side which manifests itself as a murderous water bear called by a narrating baron simply as a *hastrman*: „I'm watching the *hastrman* to step in his way and grabbing him behind his lapels .... I sit on his back in a Turkish seat, my nine fingers are wiping his sweaty neck; Wrinkles and lines resemble crumpled foam. I'm washing my hands. *Hastrman* says: If you want to drown a clerk, do it in a puddle of rain.“<sup>5</sup> *Hastrman* is to some extent an autonomous creature, the evil and mocking double of baron de Cause, who obviously enjoys murdering of the sinful people. From this perspective, the character of the *Hastrman* / Baron de Cause may also be considered a variation on the bifurcated protagonist of R. L. Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), although the protagonist of Urban's novel realizes his split the beginning of the narrative and is able to control his evil aspect to some extent.

The title heroine of the pornographic-horror novel *Michaela* is a chimeric creature, a compilation of an angel and a monstrous demon, a beauty and a monster. The novel *Michaela*

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<sup>5</sup> M. Urban, *Hastrman*, Argo, Praha 2001, p. 327.



takes place in an uncanny monastery occupied by a strange order of nuns. Michaela is initially an inauspicious mystery that the main hero seeks to uncover and other nuns hide from him. Michaela, the sixth nun, meets him in the final part of the novel. Michaela is an ambivalent, ambiguous character, interpretable as a frightening variation to the fairy-tale topos of an imprisoned princess, a figure that simultaneously combines an angel and a devilish monster, a hidden female side of a protagonist, or an allegorical presentation of love that is unpredictable and can be simultaneously destroying and elevating. The protagonist gains her favor, so Michaela does not kill him like his predecessors. However, during the hero's escape from the monastery she eventually catches up and kills him anyway.

A monster in the next novel, *Lord Mord*, is of a different nature than the mentioned hastrman or Michaela. It's a disguise, a theater masquerade, a bogeyman, whose purpose is to get the people of the Prague Jewish ghetto away. Nevertheless, its effect is primarily based on already existing, old Jewish narratives, which were mainly used to haunt children. Masičko, or Kleinflesch, is a type of monster that resonates between the folk tale and a mask, between the child's fear, imprinted into the subconscious of the people, and a rampage of the serial killer in disguise. From this scale arises the power of his dreadfulness. An important aspect of the monster is its local reach – „*unlike the globally famous golem, Masičko is an obscure creature and formerly unknown outside the ghetto.*“<sup>6</sup> Masičko is also equipped with clear attributes of monstrosity, apart from the weapon (long butcher knife), it is mainly his terrifying appearance. At the end of the story, Masičko is revealed as the protagonist's cousin Mani, who was manipulated by the secret Austrian police. They used the "ghost" to force the inhabitants of the ghetto to move out. Therefore, an important question arises – who is the true monster in the novel *Lord Mord*? Is it Masičko, or rather the establishment that can kill, manipulate, and spread terror in the name of power, and against which is an individual person virtually defenseless?

Another category of monsters in Urban's works appears at the level of delusions and visions that their characters experience. This group includes, for example the figures of Satan and Death, which he sees as the protagonist of the novel *Shadow of the Cathedral* (2003). However, it is not really clear how are we supposed to interpret these phenomena. It is merely a hallucination of a hero? After all, he is a neurotic kind of man with an extremely sensitive personality and an opportunistic narcotic user. The category of monsters as a vision also includes the hallucination of the protagonist of the *Seven Churches* (1999) who suffers during his imprisonment in the funnel of the church attic. This terribly blasphemous, grotesque scene is not the only manifestation of the Monstrosity in the *Seven Churches*, even though it is the longest passage in narrative. The book also features a unicorn, which is an allegorical symbol of protagonist innocence and the perverse experiment of pathologist Trug, Urban's variation on the Frankenstein figure of a half-insane scientist. A similar allegorical figure is the police chief – a strange dark liquid is occasionally emanating from his ears, as a visible manifestation of his black conscience.

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<sup>6</sup> M. Urban, *Lord Mord*, Argo, Praha 2008, p. 149.



Another level in which we can encounter monsters in Miloš Urban's prose is a depictive or a metaphorical plane. These monsters exist only as a function in narrative. We might also call it an exaggerated narrative strategy, because the narrator actually creates monsters by means of exaggerating of the presented characters, objects and scenes. Instead of a simple description of the scene, we encounter the typical narrative strategy of Gothic fiction: exaltation, exaggeration and metaphorical language.<sup>7</sup> These so-called monsters serve only to illustrate the ghostly atmosphere, the mood, or the terrifying impression of reading. The specific *genius loci* of the church interiors in novels like *Seven Churches* or *Shadow of the Cathedral* is enhanced by a suggestive play of lights and shadows, where at times it seems as if the sacral buildings themselves are coming alive as murderous monster-wraiths.

In several cases of Miloš Urban's works, monsters and demons can be certainly seen, albeit at different levels. Some of them can be rightfully interpreted literally as monsters (Hastrman, Michaela), but most of the figures are rather human characters in grotesque or frightening masks and disguises (Masíčko in the novel *Lord Mord*), delusions and visions, often with allegorical allusions to artworks (for example the visions of Death and Satan in the *Shadow of the Cathedral*). Sometimes the monsters only exist in the narrator's language. In essence, only in case of the protagonist of *Hastrman* we encounter the popular aspect of contemporary Gothic fiction – an intention to make the reader sympathise for the monster or directly casting monsters into the role of the main heroes. In any case, it is obvious that the stories of Urban prose are typically outside the limits of normality, which is often perceived as perverse and bad. Heroes do not have to be monsters, they do not fit into normal society, they are either outsiders or individuals with special, exclusive interests that average members of the company probably do not understand. Comprehension or direct passion for things and phenomena that seem strange, outdated or even monstrous to the majority are Urban's heroes. Thus, a certain level of normality exists in Urban's books, but the main characters are typically trying to leave it and change their lives.

Hiding, travesty, pretending, imitation, deceiving, role playing, gestures, etc. are not merely key and recurring motifs, but also become a fundamental principle in the meaning-making principle of a cunning literary game with the reader. The ambivalence, illusion and uncertainty of such a literary “performance” is in fact limiting and is placed in layers: the mask can frighten with its appearance, but only until it reveals that it is only a mask, which of course raises further uncertainty, namely uncertainty about the identity of who is hiding behind the mask. The Gothic mode adds one more “horrific” layer – a mask can actually cover the void. Analogously, it can be related to the overall Gothic tone of postmodern works: questioning, exposure and unmasking of the fictional and hence the actual world as a simulacrum, a semantically empty illusion, an optical illusion, a diabolical delusion, etc. may in the end mean that efforts to remedy the dismal condition are pointless and not even possible (the escape zones of Urban's heroes have indeed attributes of a utopia). This is perhaps the most frightening finding concerning Czech Gothic postmodernism at the turn of the millennium.

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. D. Punter, *Literature of Terror. A History of Gothic Fiction from 1765 to the Present Day*, Longman, New York 1980, p. 10.

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