

# Who Believes in Vodyanoy's Today? Ecological Inspiration in Post-modern Czech Literature (the Case of Miloš Urban)

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Thou who has not created, process. Admire.<sup>1</sup>

In a survey conducted by Anna Dosoudilová (for the purposes of her M.A. thesis on so-called “green literature” canon<sup>2</sup>) the respondents, answering a question concerning the most important works representing ecological literature in Czech and world literature, listed *Hastrman* (2001) by Miloš Urban in first place. The novel reveals its principles immediately in the subtitle, *Zelený román* [A green novel]. These principles, fully confirmed in *intentio operis*, also find their justification in self-directed and metaliterary comments by the author:

*Hastrman* is a modern variation of a fairy tale and myth. The state of the Czech landscape devastated me, especially the North, the Česka Lipa area, where I feel at home. [...] In my opinion, over-exploitation should have been stopped already in 1990. However, it was not – stone was still mined from the mountains surrounding Bezděz [a hill and a castle in the Ralskie foothills in Northern

<sup>1</sup> Miloš Urban, *Hastrman. Zelený román* (Praha: Argo, 2001), p. 383. [“Kdo jsi nestvořil, nepřetvářej. Obdivuj.”] Translations into Polish by A. G. Translations into English by P.Z.

<sup>2</sup> Anna Dosoudilová, *Kánon zelené literatury. Co a jak čtou “pestří a zelení”?* Diplomová práce, FFUK, Praha 2013. <https://is.cuni.cz/webapps/zzp/detail/134158?lang=en> (date of access: 23. 02. 2021).

Czechia – A.G.], and Tlustec gained notoriety in the media back then. We were passing through that ragged region with my brother. I pointed to some excavator and said, “I would blow it up”. And he said “So why the fuck won’t you? Because you won’t, I believe? All you can do is talk.” He was really irritated by my empty words and complete lack of action, but actually that was the moment when I decided to do something about owners of quarries in the Northern Czechia; I sent a water emissary (or rather, the Earth), a wet fop with an aristocratic title. I made him a remote-controlled green arrow, which got slightly out of hand and was moving along more complicated trajectories than I had originally planned, but I was really content about his (and hence also my) method of fighting<sup>3</sup>.

Bezděz and quarry on Tlustec, photo by Jan Hodáč



Urban’s prose is often related to the esoteric thriller convention conceptualized in the spirit of postmodernist play with cultural heritage (as in, for example several novels known in Poland such as *Sedmikostelí. Gotický román z Prahy*; 1999, *Stín katedrály. Božská krimikomedie*; 2003, *Lord mord*; 2008<sup>4</sup>, with which, by the way, *Hastrman* shares a number of genological connections, not only in terms of plot), a number of mysterious, supernatural, macabre motifs, as well as placing the sources of contemporary mystery plots in the (often) distant past. Urban’s “early” texts are also characterized by a clear anti-modern (anti-civilizational) message, which encourages surrounding the presented reality with historical allusions and motivations and addressing (typically) first-person narration comments – emotional, nostalgic, accentuating the transience of the world, which offer a negative diagnosis of modern times using

memorial discourse tools and quasi-essay in-words. An appreciation for “long persistence”, juxtaposed with the ephemerality of technological novelties and solutions that are *a priori* meant to be temporary, and are carelessly introduced without accounting for potential – social and environmental – “side effects”, also encourages subjecting the plot and the construction of the fictional reality to the laws of literary parabolization, as well as portraying protagonists and selecting themes who/which can play the role of depositaries of tradition and are inclined to defend this heritage.

<sup>3</sup> Miloš Urban, “Jak jsem dal spálit parlament“, *Host*, č. 7 (2008): 2. [“Hastrman je moderní variace na pohádku a mýtus. Byl jsem zoufalý ze stavu české krajiny, hlavně té na severu, v okolí České Lípy, kde se cítím být doma. [...] U nás se ale toto drancování podle mého názoru mělo zastavit už v roce 1990. Nestalo se — kopce v dohledu Bezdězu se těžily dál, smutnou mediální hvězdou byl tehdy Tlustec. Projížděl jsem s bráchou tou pocuchanou krajinou, ukázal na jakési rypadlo a řekl jsem: «Já bych pod něj strčil bombu.» A on na to: «Tak proč to kurva neuděláš? A ty to neuděláš, vid? Dokážeš jenom žvanit.» Skutečně se na mě za plané řeči a nulovou akci zlobil, a já se právě tehdy a tam rozhodl, že si to s těžaři kopců v severních Čechách vyřídím — a vyslal jsem proti nim emisara vody (neboli Země), navhlého frajířka se šlechtickým titulem. Byla to taková mnou dálkově ovládaná zelená střela, která se trochu vymkla kontrole a lítala mnohem složitějšími cestami, než jsem původně chtěl, ale já byl s jejím (a tím pádem i svým) bojem velmi spokojen”].

<sup>4</sup> Polish editions: *Klątwa siedmiu kościołów* [The curse of seven churches] (2006); *Cień katedry: boska krymikomedie* [The shadow of a cathedral: a divine crime comedy] (2005); *Lord mord* (2015).

However, the statement quoted above shows that in the case of *Hastrman* the author's intentions take a more concrete and radical form. In the novel about the vodyanoy the creature uses (literally) terrorist techniques of influencing political decisions in order to save the natural (and, by the way, cultural) landscape of Northern Czechia, consistently devastated since the communist era. As a result, the area has been transformed into an industrial (or rather postindustrial) landscape, resembling the apocalyptic visions of ecologists and movies. Urban clearly states that writers have the right (duty?) to speak up in discussions concerning the most burning issues of today's world.



Moreover, that statement was published (thus gaining the status of an editorial) in an issue of "Host" magazine, which – after a decade of "choking on freedom" – resumed a debate concerning dilemmas related to possibilities, conditions and potential threats of literature engaging with the current political or social life. "Postmodernist euphoria", inspired by the 1989 transformation, which initially defined mainstream Czech literature (which experienced more communist ideological censorship than Poland), after some time lost its initial, almost "cosmogonic" and rather neophytic impetus. Early in the new millennium it started to raise doubts – initially minor, but later stated more definitively. Set free from serving its previous roles – imposed not only by official administrative guidelines, but also commonly expected from dissident literature – it started to be read as a capitulation, as recklessly giving away tools for directly impacting reality to competing discourses, such as the media. As early as 2002, Miroslav Balašík (founder and editor in chief of "Host") warned against such escapism, reminding readers that:

Literature, which deprived itself from the opportunity of conveying moral, cognitive, communicative or ideological values [...] simultaneously renounced what naturally belongs to it: influence on cultivating the spiritual soil of society<sup>5</sup>.

Disenchantment with the loss of prestige – a logical consequence of this voluntary "self-imprisonment in the trap of estheticism" (as defined by Balašík in the quoted article) – resulted in an increased interest in economic and political themes, which restored seemingly

<sup>5</sup> Miroslav Balašík, "Literatura a politika. Poznámky k tematú", *Dokořán*, č. 22 (2002): 25. ["Tím, že se literatura marnotratně zbavila možnosti být nositelkou hodnot morálních, poznávacích, společenských či ideových [...] zřekla se i toho, co jí bytostně přináleží, tedy vlivu na kultivaci duchovního zázemí společnosti"].

unappreciated genres (such as *roman à clef*, but mostly the popular *political fiction*) to the book market governed by commercialist rules<sup>6</sup>.

By publishing *Hastrman*, Miloš Urban restored the so-called engaged literature (perhaps against his wishes), continuing this trend in 2002 with *Paměti poslance parlamentu. Sexyromán* [Diaries of a member of Parliament. Sexy novel], which, however, did not repeat the success of his eco-horror. Crushing reviews and (probably more importantly) little interest among readers inspired (a doubtlessly disenchanted) Urban to consider the agential (or performative) potential of the written word, and to draw pessimistic conclusions in which his disappointment with his own failure is mixed with awareness (shared by analysts of modernity) that literature has (forever?) lost the status of a “conscience arouser” that had formerly been assigned to it (also as a projection of idealized dreams, close to illusory self-deception):

Although in the case of *Hastrman* I naively expected society to change at least a bit thanks to it, when writing I already knew that nothing would happen. The book would be published, someone would read it, and gradually it would be forgotten. However, the ruthless sentence passed by critics surprised me and threw me off balance. [...] I felt hurt and I had an impression that “people did not deserve my novel”. [...] However, as can be clearly seen, the main role was played by: naivety, frustration, and generally speaking negative emotions, rather than by an attempt at becoming engaged and replace journalistic writing. Today I am content that I took this path, but I have no intention of returning to political writing. However, as they say: never say never<sup>7</sup>.

Other authors were interested in political motifs in order to point out issues with the “new reality” and at the same time juxtapose and codify the repertoire of shortcomings, soon exposing the “eternal” character of the mechanisms of power, regardless of the current political system (from manipulating the dominating narratives and discourses, through “inevitable” opportunism and “obligatory” loyalty to the party or acceptance for nepotism and corruption, to secret contacts with the criminal world). Contrary to them, in *Hastrman* Urban employs creative strategies of so-called green literature. By looking for (or rather – trying to develop) a formula that would be effective in stating ecological postulates, he shocked critics – as shown by Pavel Janoušek in one of his ironic reviews written in a semi-dialectal language:

<sup>6</sup> However, it should be noted that such an unambiguous distinction of contradictory phenomena, understood in conditions of a dying debate (postmodernist “selfless playing with conventions” vs. care for the world) does not always need to translate into actual writing practice. As Ryszard Nycz argues: “The specific development of modern literature based on transforming external opposites into internal variation (from «or – or» to «both... and») has led to the assimilation of characteristics of competing literary forms, especially those of engaged and popular literature (...). Moreover, over time this freedom from mass culture, as well as the politicizing or ‘politicality’ of literature turned out to be one of the characters of internal oppositions – all modern literature has evolved through constructing and overcoming them” (Ryszard Nycz, *Poetyka doświadczenia. Teoria – nowoczesność – literatura* [Politics of experience. Theory – modernity – literature], (Warszawa: Instytut badań Literackich PAN, 2012), 303).

<sup>7</sup> Urban, “Jak jsem dal spálit parlament, 2. [Zatímco od Hastrmana jsem tehdy naivně čekal že by mohl alespoň něco málo ve společnosti změnit, u PPP jsem věděl, že se nestane nic. Knížka se vydá, někdo si ji přečte, postupně se na ni zapomene. Kategorický odsudek kritiky mne přesto zaskočil a rozladil (...). Byl jsem uražený a měl jsem dojem, že si ji «lidi nezaslouží». (...). Jak je tedy vidět, v mém případě hrály hlavní roli naivita, frustrace a negativní emoce, nikoli snaha suplovat žurnalistiku a nějak se angažovat. Jsem rád, že jsem si takovou fázi psaní prošel, ale vracet se k politickému psaní nebudu. Ale jak se říká: Nikdy neříkej nikdy...].

So, for you to understand well, if this first part of the book is art-for-art's-sake, which is exciting only for us, experts in literature, the second part shows – as they once used to teach us – that the author has fully understood his social duty of an artist, that is, to be engaged in the struggle for a better future, so that everything is again as it used to be. So, this Urban created a novel out of the latest, burning modernity, and brought an inspiring picture of fighters for our bright, ecological future in it. Most importantly, he showed that although individual terror leads nowhere, if only we could join forces [...] and if only, under wise guidance, each and every one of us liquidated this one barrier, one factory, or at least threw one enemy of ecology out of a window, then we would momentarily have a paradise on earth<sup>8</sup>.

Urban's attempts resulted in a peculiar genre hybrid: a historical novel rooted in the romantic-Bohemian literature from the era of the Czech National Revival (the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century) with its predilection for exhibiting ethnographic (and additionally: incorporated into the idyllic-bucolic discourse) – spiritual and material – attributes of the represented, rustic world, with a horror-sensational plot which in fact glorifies this individual terrorism, or at least is inclined towards partially accepting the effectiveness of its arguments (including the argument of force) in the discussion of the proper ways to fight processes that lead towards degradation of the natural environment.

Although genological eclecticism designed in this way, additionally enriched by a number of intertextual echoes and references, highlights the artificial and conventional character of the literary representation of reality, it does not weaken the “interventional” character of the novel. In other words, by entertaining readers and himself (with conventions), the author teaches and instructs readers (in a slightly traditional way): on the one hand, by providing readers with refined intellectual entertainment and forcing them to decipher various cultural references and allusions, and on the other – by concentrating their attention on one of the crucial, burning (as put by Janoušek) issues of post-transformational everyday life. Urban makes ecological crisis the subject of this entertaining education. This crisis has affected the sub-Sudetic area to an unprecedented extent – even for exceptionally industrialized Europe – leading to the destruction of the rustic landscape. This landscape had been shaped for centuries with respect to the symbiotic coexistence of man and nature – nature being respected religiously, with ancient belief in the supernatural representing its different aspects mixed with life-giving pragmatism and practical knowledge that allows one to wisely take advantage of the resources that nature shares with us:

Change what was once given, intervene in what has always been here – it is acceptable only on one condition: providing we create a better masterpiece for celebrating the one or those who constructed mountains or filled lakes in the landscape, a masterpiece for sacrifices for new builders<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> Pavel Janoušek, *Hravé a dravé. Kritikova abeceda* (Praha: Academia, 2009), 276). [“Tož abyste tomu pochopili, jestli ta prvá část tej Zelené knihy je jen takovým uměním pro umění, co z něho můžeme mít rajc jen my, literární fajšmekři, ta druhá už ukazuje, jak kdysi říkali na školení, že si autor plně uvědomil společenskú povinnost umělca se angažovat v boji o pokrok, tedy za to, aby tady zase všecko bylo, jak bylo kdysi dávno. Ten Urban tak stvořil společenský román z naší žhovej současnosti a přinesl v něm inspirativní obraz bojovníků za našu šťastnú ekologickou budúcnost. Důležité přitom je, že ukázal, že individuální teror sice nikam nevede, ale kdybysme se všci spojili [...] pod múdrým vedením každý odstranili jen jednu přehradu, jednu továrnu nebo jen jediného nepřátela ekologie vyhodili oknem, za chvílu tu máme úplný ráj“].

<sup>9</sup> Urban, *Hastrman*, 243. [“Měnit jednu dané, zasahovat do toho, co tu vždycky bylo, je dovoleno pod jednou podmínkou: že stvoříme dílo lepší, určené k uctění toho či těch, kdo stavěli v krajině hory a napouštěli jezera; dílo prostřené k oběti těmto stavitelům“].

Those words are uttered by the narrator (and protagonist) of the novel, who is simultaneously deeply rooted in the Czech cultural discourse (not just folklore), present in it at least since the National Revival, and surrounded by established meaning and concrete notions. What is interesting for us, and crucial for Urban's concept of the protagonist, is that those notions are not related to an unambiguous axiological definition, obligatory in the case of other deities and demons from the Slavonic pantheon. In other words, using Pavel Šidák's remarks, vodyanoy "can be presented as bad and good. Sometimes even his portrait refers to the idyllic imaginarium, oftentimes also ethical evaluation does not apply to him"<sup>10</sup>. The Nietzschean location "beyond good and evil", motivated – according to Šidák – by peculiar, ambivalent relations between this figure and Christianity, consequently, locates it on the borderline of anthroposphere, making it an ontologically dual being (demon- or animal-human), with attributes belonging to (characteristic for) different, seemingly contradictory registers of reality<sup>11</sup>. On the one hand, such an "internal contradiction" corresponds to postulates of ecocriticism (clearly *Hastrman's* interpretative framework), which – according to Anna Barcz – "is mostly interested in how nature has been deprived of its voice"<sup>12</sup>. The antropomorphization of vodyanoy gives this definitely influential voice back to the protagonist. On the other hand, the animalistic (literally – fish) aspect of his identity allows the author to give agency to the natural world (in the spirit of Kenneth White)<sup>13</sup>. Urban takes advantage of this hybrid character, as well as of the belief in the existence of vodyanoy, exceptionally deeply rooted in folk awareness (as stressed by Šidák)<sup>14</sup>, not only in terms of his narrator's "personality outline", but also of supernatural powers and abilities, which allow him to commit numerous crimes almost with impunity. These crimes are partially excused by the nature of the protagonist, and partially – understandable in the face of the challenges he is faced with – by the author:

<sup>10</sup>Pavel Šidák, *Mokře chodí v suše. Vodník v české literatuře* (Praha: Academia, 2018), 63. ["Je představován jako zlý i jako hodný, dokonce idylický, někdy stojí mimo etické hodnocení"].

<sup>11</sup>Elsewhere the scholar concludes his considerations regarding vodyanoy's ontological status in (post)modernist texts: the basic thesis can be formulated in the following way: as the animalistic character of vodyanoy (associated with water) shows, we should call man everything that does not belong to nature (animal) [...] He lives among animals and considers himself one. Vodyanoy presented in such a way becomes a narrative dominant in stories which exhibit the antithetical dimension of the relation between man and nature. [...] According to the traditional valuation, man is superior to it – but this valuation can be reversed. Such an axiological inversion is characteristic for an ecological conceptualization of vodyanoy's motives, in which the thesis according to which man is beyond nature is radically redefined: man does not exist beyond nature. We are talking about narratives in which the opposition man-antinature, nature destroyed, a technologized world is sometimes accentuated, and which conceptualize the figure of vodyanoy differently than in folklore [and hence – differently than Urban; A. G.], consequently juxtaposing man with non-nature (i.e. separating chaos from cosmos known from religious studies, for example). However, there is also an opposite, "integrative" approach. Resignation from attempts at defining the line for what is human comes to the fore, visible already in the symbolic way of presenting vodyanoy [...] with its dream about flowing down with the elements, water, entirety" (Pavel Šidák, "Člověk mezi zvířetem a démonem, lidským a ne-lidským. Jedna interpretace tématu vodníka v české literatuře", w *Polidštěné zvíře. Kapitoly ke středoevropskému myšlení o literatuře*. Edited by przez Jiří Hrabal (Olomouc: Vydavatelství Filozofické fakulty Univerzity Palackého v Olomouci, 2017), 53-54, 55. ["Základní tezi lze pravděpodobně formulovat takto: člověk je to, co není příroda (zvíře), jak ukazuje animistický vodník totožný se živlem, [...]. Je zakotven mezi zvířaty [...] a sám se do zvířat mění. Tento vodník je jádrem příběhů, jež akcentují opozici člověk-příroda Podle běžného pojetí je člověk hodnocen výše než příroda ale může být i opačně. [...] Samozřejmě je tato axiologie výrazná u ekologického pojetí vodnické látky, která tezi, že člověk je to, co není příroda, radikálně redefiniuje: člověk je to, co není mimo přírodu. Jde tu o příběhy, v nichž se akcentuje opozice člověk versus ne-příroda, zničená příroda, technicistní svět a jejichž pojetí je přirozené opozitní pojetí folklornímu, které důsledně zůstává na pozici oddělování člověka a ne-lidské přírody (jde o oddělování Chaosu a Kosmu známé např. z religionistiky). [...] Nalezeme ovšem i zcela protichůdné pojetí – nazvěme je třeba integrační [...]. Jde o rezignaci na snahu vymezit a ohlídat hranice lidského, předznačenou již vodnickými látkami symbolismu [...] s jejich touhou po splnutí s živlem, vodou, celkem"].

<sup>12</sup>Anna Barcz, *Realizm ekologiczny. Od ekokrytyki do zookrytyki w literaturze polskiej* (Katowice: Śląsk, 2016), 38.

<sup>13</sup>According to Anna Barcz, this world is not "a passive recipient of human actions and projections, but an active agent, co-creating and processing the human culture and society" (Barcz, 38-39).

<sup>14</sup>See Šidák, *Mokře chodí v suše*, 59-63.

Johan Salmon de Caus [...] found himself in the role of a philanthropist and he is more and more forgetting who he was born to be and whom he has to remain until the end of his days. People can be people, but he should be a warning and terror for them. For if he loses this role, they will become terrors, and their fingers will not warn – instead, they will snatch and rob everything without repentance<sup>15</sup>.

Let us put aside the issue of trendy identity-related dilemmas which invariably accompany the narrator from the beginning of the novel (“Only he was water who told stories about it”<sup>16</sup>), forced to obey the laws of a rural community. We should focus on the question of the type and dimension of the tasks the protagonist, baron Salmon de Caus, is challenged by his mission is to save Mount Vlhošť, transformed into a quarry in the fictional world of the novel, and to restore the natural landscape surrounding it, *de facto* annihilated in the communist era – a system of ponds, functional for hundreds of years, flooded after constructing the Nové mlýny dam on the river Dyje. The landscape which the protagonist wants to protect at any cost – restore, in this case – has little to do with pristine nature. Space transformed and adjusted to human economic needs (in this case: for fishing) as early as the Middle Ages is idealized by Urban, who attributes its organization to his own – vodyanoy’s – ancestors:

I too had ancestors whose name was known by everyone here and which can still be found today, together with a family seal on parchment passed down for generations. It is them who improved once wonderful, but already in their time declining water masterpiece, and set up a system of supporting irrigating reservoirs, stream, spring and atmospheric ponds, and connected eight of them into a body of water unparalleled by any other all around the world. Although this masterpiece was artificial, it respected what nature itself gave: they constructed it in a place where little lakes, ponds and wetlands had existed since time immemorial. The masterpiece shared the place with man and entrusted its riches with him, without taking away the original beauty and destination from the marshy landscape<sup>17</sup>.

The rule “first, do not destroy” of the animalistic (i.e., natural in its provenance) side of “Hastrmanovian” identity finds here its peculiar “correcting completion” corresponding to its human part, not far from the postulates of followers of environmental aesthetics and ethics, which, as Mateusz Salwa reminds us:

<sup>15</sup>Urban, *Hastrman*, 154-155. [“Johan Salmon de Caus (...) se zhlédl v roli lidumila a čím dál tím víc zapomíná na to, kým se narodil, kým je a kým musí být do posledního dne svého života. Lidé at jsou lidmi, on at je jejich postrach, jejich varovný prst. Protože pokud jím nebude, stanou se postrachem oni a jejich prsty už nebudou varovat – budou jen trhat a brát, urvi co urvi.”] See. Šidák, “Člověk mezi zvířetem a demonem”, 55.

<sup>16</sup>Urban, *Hastrman*, 399. [“Byl jenom voda, kdo příběh vyprávěl“]. Thus it can be safely assumed that the titular protagonist has so-called nomadic agency, about which Rosi Braidotti writes: “It is a myth, i.e. political fiction, which allows me to consider the established categories and levels of experience, and to move across them: to blur lines without burning bridges [...]. Political fictions can be more effective here and now than theoretical systems. The choice of an iconoclastic, mythical figure of the nomadic subject is thus against the established and conventional nature of theoretical, and especially philosophical thinking. This figuration explains my wish to study and sanction political action, if we assume that the historical downfall of metaphysically established, fixed identities has been proved. One of the tasks we are dealing with here is to find a way to reconcile bias and lack of continuity with constructing new forms of mutual connections and shared political projects” (Rosi Braidotti, “Poprcez nomadyzm” [Via nomadism], translated into Polish by Aleksandra Derra, *Teksty Drugie*, nr 6 (2007), 111-112).

<sup>17</sup>Urban, *Hastrman*, 12. [“I já měl předky, jejich jméno tu každý znal a dodnes je lze najít ma listinách, jež po sobě zanechali. To oni zde zvelebili kdysi velkolepé, v jejich době už dávno zpustlé vodní dílo a založili systém podpůrných napájecích nádrží, rybníků potočních, pramenných i nebeských, a osm z nich znovu důmyslně propojili v areál, jenž neměl obdoby na celém světě. Bylo to zajisté dílo umělé, ale ctilo původní východiska daná přírodou: vystavěli je v místě, kde jezírka, tůně a močály bývaly odjakživa. To dílo je zpřístupnilo člověku a propůjčilo mu svůj užitek, aniž by bažinaté krajíně vzalo přirozenou krásu a účel“].

do not need to limit themselves to natural landscape – they may also concern a cultural landscape, in which nature has been subject to significant human activity. *Genius loci* is a commonly used category in this context. The idea of a spirit of a place refers to the unique character of a given area, resulting from its history, ways in which it has been used and inhabited, which gives it specific aesthetic values. In this conceptualization, ethical action is defined as one that respects this character<sup>18</sup>.

As a result, the axiological subsoil of the novel is ruled by a peculiar “melioration ethos” inspired by the theory of ecosystems, which differentiates between desired and harmful ways of taming aquatic matter<sup>19</sup>. The narrator juxtaposes the living water of ponds, which has been growing into natural order for centuries until full naturalization, obedient only to its own laws and “the strong word” of a folk spell, with dead water (leading to desertification of local areas<sup>20</sup>) of the Novy Mlyn lagoon. At the same time, he confronts the lost might of the eternal tongue, which was able to express the rules of cosmic order (the novel contains references to numerous folk texts) with political-legal cliché *newspeak*, deprived of any deeper meanings (“Our activity does not conflict with any act of this state”, the manager of the mining corporation Tytania defends herself<sup>21</sup>). Thanks to the antinomization of worlds, epochs and axiological paradigms designed in such a way, Urban opens a space for textual meanings, which, in the first place, are deeply rooted in a network of references to Slavonic myth and to criticism of Czech politics (which he diagnoses – via the protagonist – to be corrupted and completely indifferent to evidence of the climate crisis):

No state is to be trusted that it will not rip open the land it appropriated. And least of all do I trust this republic, no-com, dense mascaron. To think that it would protect green areas which it claimed like a ruthless usurper is suicidal naivety<sup>22</sup>.

<sup>18</sup>Mateusz Salwa, “Znaczenie estetyki przyrody dla etyki środowiskowej” [Significance of nature aesthetics for environmental ethics] *Etyka*, No 56 (2018), 35. One of the most influential “revivers” of the notion of nature aesthetics, Gernot Böhme, states that modern art points out to nature – showing, reminding, mourning, accusing, warning (Gernot Böhme, *Filozofia i estetyka przyrody w dobie kryzysu środowiska naturalnego* [Für eine ökologische Naturästhetik], translated into Polish by Jarosław Merecki (Warszawa: Oficyna Naukowa, 2002), 17). Referring to those words (which may be an accurate interpretation of the ecological message of Urban’s novel), Beata Frydryczak stresses that: “The question about the new nature aesthetics does not include the issue of the art-nature relation, but a more essential one: about renewed contact of the modern man with the world of nature. It is accompanied by a belief that aesthetics can contribute to abandoning the strategy of ruling over nature, whose goal is to take advantage of and change the man-nature relations, i.e. create conditions in which this relation will be based on the idea of harmonious co-existence (Beata Frydryczak, “Estetyka przyrody: nowe pojmowanie natury” [Nature aesthetics – new understanding of nature], *Estetyka i Krytyka*, nr 15/16 (2008-2009), 42).

<sup>19</sup>See.: “Let us consider the co-called ecosystems, locally connected organic and inorganic processes, which renew themselves cyclically [...]. It has been known for ages that ecosystems should be understood only as perfect, that on a local and global scale the original state does not regenerate itself without man’s intervention. Hence – more realistically – we talk about man-made ecosystems, or even more modestly: about ecological structures. Maintaining the desired form of nature requires more and more work from man” (Böhme, 149-150).

<sup>20</sup>See: “The decision to construct the dam was motivated by the need to drain the wetland, its legendary marshes and alluvial meadows. It was a success. The dam sucked in all the water; interestingly, it could not pass it on where it was needed. There are shallow sandy trenches in the area today. The wind can be really strong here – they say it is because of the war – and carries the sand all over the area. On the verge of the forest there are drifts, but not snowdrifts. To those with an ominous imagination they resemble Sahara dunes” (Urban, *Hastrman*, 237). [“Důvodem pro stavbu přehrady bylo vysušení věčně vlhkého kraje, jeho pověstných močálů a zaplavových luk. Povedlo se. Přehrada do sebe vsála všechnu vlahu; kupodivu už ji nebyla schopná předat tam, kde jí bylo zapotřebí. V jejím okolí jsou dnes mělké písčité doly. Vítr je tu obzvlášť ostrý, prý od války, a rozfoukává písek po kraji. Na okraji lesu vznikají bílé návěje, ale sníh to není. Tomu, kdo je nadán zlověstnou obrazotvorností, připomínají saharské duny“].

<sup>21</sup>Urban, *Hastrman*, 259. [“Naše činnost neodporuje žádnému zákonu téhle republiky”].

<sup>22</sup>Urban, *Hastrman*, 385. [“nedá se věřit žádnému státu, že nerozežere zevnitř zemi, kterou si pro sebe zabral. A nejméně ze všech věřím této republice, zupacké, tupohlavé obludě. Myslet si, že bude ochraňovat zelené území, na které se vrhla a které si zabrala jako sebevražedný uzurpátor, je sebevražedně naivní”].





A literary device, deeply rooted in literary tradition and commonly employed by postmodernists – “authenticating” fantastic events (or at least those which defy commonly understood nature) by situating the fictional plot in a place that is specific, known, and additionally inscribed in a number of cultural associations and connotations – favors a similar indication of engagement. In Urban’s clearly emotional view this device becomes a tool confirming the author’s right to intervene – via his work – in such a way as to achieve real-world results:

What attracted you to a character in a blue-yellow tuxedo, with a pike-like smile and gills? To a fairytale vodyanoy?

Máchův kraj – not the most accurate name – is the region I consider my own. When I was a child, I used to boat on a lake covered in thick, green duckweed. I would imagine there were trees growing under the surface. That there were people resembling fish living there. I was horrified when I later found out that dams were constructed there, which would result in whole villages being flooded; my fairytale vision was actually close to the truth, although far more romantic<sup>23</sup>.

<sup>23</sup>Alice Horáčková, “Urban: Jen počkejte, ztrestám vás svým románem!” [https://www.idnes.cz/kultura/vytvarne-umeni/urban-jen-pockejte-ztrestam-vas-svym-romanem.A010515\\_175240\\_vytvarneum\\_cfa](https://www.idnes.cz/kultura/vytvarne-umeni/urban-jen-pockejte-ztrestam-vas-svym-romanem.A010515_175240_vytvarneum_cfa) (dostup: 22. 03. 2021). [“Co vás přivedlo k postavě v modrožlutém fráčku, se štíším úsměvem a žábami? K hastrmanovi z pohádky? Kraj, který považuju za svůj a kterému se trapně říká Máchův. Jako dítě jsem jezdil na lodičce po jezeře pokrytém hustým zeleným žabincem. Představoval jsem si, že pod hladinou rostou stromy. Že tam žijí lidé, kteří se podobají rybám. S děsivým pocitem jsem se dozvěděl až mnohem později, že se napouštějí přehradý a na jejich dně zůstávají celé vesnice. Že ta moje pohádková představa byla vlastně docela reálná – i když romantičtější”].

Novomlynská dam, photo by Jan Hodáč



Hence the plot is founded on a fairytale product of imagination that resembles childhood memories. This allows him to revive the now slightly forgotten, but once canonical and opinion-forming, nineteenth-century tradition of the “ethnographic novel”, in a natural and obvious way (within Czech culture). This type of novel subjects chains of presented events to descriptions of folk rituals and habits and references to linguistic folk. Urban takes over from the ethnographic novel not only in terms of themes and compositions (“picture of everyday and holiday life of rural communities and the changing seasons”), but also a conglomerate of beliefs typical for the identity model of the National Revival, discovering (as

utopian projections, romantic dreams) signs of indigenusness, authenticity and naturalness free from any civilizational intrusions in rural culture<sup>24</sup>. Those beliefs, translated into the environment portrayed in literature, lead to its peculiar mythologization based on respecting the reliability of beliefs functioning within it that define the functional essence of the universe (ethically and ontologically). In other words, writers who are trying to show the rural mentality from the inside take the real presence of various personified natural forces at face value (of course within literary fiction), transferring the reader to a space where the existence of vodyanoy is normal<sup>25</sup>.

<sup>24</sup>The creative strategy used by the author seems to stem from considerations which were formulated by Roch Sulima. Considering the contemporary fate of folklore, he came to the conclusion that “Although the whole world of folk culture is almost completely gone, as well as the model – based on solidarity with life – of social culture, once specific among peasants, folk culture remains vivid as social culture. Objects of folk culture are gone, but it is reinforced by a myth feeding on, for example, the values of the folk word [...]. I will repeat most concisely: folk culture is dead. Its myth is alive, reinforced – among others – by ecologism, which today functions almost like historiosophy. This culture is present in symbols, reminders, allusions, it is part of our unconsciousness, an obligation to the world of values. [...] At the same time it cherishes the role of non-aggressive «sacrificial culture». It is a symbolic expression of the indestructible will to live. At the same time, it is also familiar with fatalism, a sense of the world coming to an end. The vitality of that culture is next to the peculiar philosophy of dying with dignity. There is a culture of life as much as there is a culture of death, i.e. «perishing» understood as the beginning of future life” (Roch Sulima, *Głosy tradycji* [Voice of tradition], (Warszawa: DiG, 2001), 102-103).

<sup>25</sup>Codifiers of determinants of the ecological humanities (Ewa Domańska is one Polish example) often employ the so-called *tribal science* in their considerations. Trying to rehabilitate it (oftentimes surprisingly decisively), they propose a reconstruction of the whole paradigm of academic science. According to Domańska, for example: “It is hardly surprising that non-European autochthons – for how should we write within the framework of a rational discipline about the past of cultures which treat gods, spirits, ancestors, animals, plants, and objects as historical figures? If scholars claim to be open to various approaches to the past, and universities have equal treatment of representatives of different races, ethnicities, and cultures in their statutes, than ‘is there any reason to maintain the epistemic privileged treatment of modern historiography, and to see it as more important than the myth, legend, or dream itself?’” (Ewa Domańska, “Wiedza o przeszłości – perspektywy na przyszłość” [Knowledge of the past – perspectives for the future], *Kwartalnik Historyczny*, No 2 (2013), 227. Quotation: Sanjay Seth, “Historiography and Non-Western Pasts”, *Postcolonial Studies*, vol. 11, nr 2 (2008), 144). See also: Ewa Domańska, “Humanistyka ekologiczna”, *Teksty Drugie*, No 1-2 (2013), 22-26.

The first part of *Hastrman* employs the same *licentia poetica*. Its plot tells the story of the protagonist's stay in a sub-Sudetic residence in the 1830s, evoking the atmosphere of the "lost world" of the Czech countryside. It is presented in the spirit of Rousseau's sentimental vision of authentic and proper existence: authentic and proper because obeys the laws of nature – although this thesis should be treated with caution (especially regarding the drastic and "sexualized" imaging<sup>26</sup>). Such a vision is close to Enlightenment ideas, as thanks to it a chance for seeking legitimization for one's own emancipatory, national aspirations appears in the most prestigious philosophical trends of that time. It encouraged both the employment of Arcadian conventions and the reinforcement of the impact of imagological mechanisms based on a broadly understood mythologization of what corresponds with the "ruling" rustic discourse. Urban employs basic components of such a discourse, modifying the meanings and values associated with it only to some extent. He incorporates signs of polemics with the original axiological stratification of the genre in the model of the ethnographic novel, corrected in the nineteenth-century realizations by the mitigating filter of the Biiedermeier ethos. This leads to a radical confrontation of three worldviews, fully harmonized in this model: Christianity, rationalism, and pagan beliefs, with which the peasant community, cultivating primeval magic rituals, persist. It is in this community's (only seemingly) anachronistic consciousness where the protagonist finds ontological support; only this community is able to accept his right to be inside what is possible, probable, and real. Representatives of other ideological orientations either deny it (Voves the teacher), or place it in the infernal-demonic space, because all they see in folk rituals are remnants of archaic cults, which should be unconditionally and consistently eradicated (Fidelius the priest, whose name is significant due to its clear Christian reference):

I assure you, that I was surprised with the ways of my subjects more than you were, father. I, however, contrary to you, understood how perfectly those people understand the land their lives depend on. Although admittedly you can give them a bit more than that, as – say – a missionary, you cannot take away from them what they had before you. How can you know who will succeed you? [...] And what if it is someone who will bring completely different teaching from yours? [...] I am telling you, if you completely detach them from their roots, which hold them, roots they

<sup>26</sup>Scholars often stress the specific, "prudish" way (characteristic for nineteenth-century students of folk) of reading (and, as a result, correcting) folk texts, which acts as a form of (self-)censorship, and leads to "cleaning" the collected and later published songs or tales off vulgar words, as well as any clearly erotic contents, which are a petty bourgeoisie taboo (see Jiří Rak, *Bývalí Čechové. České historické mýty a stereotypy*, (Jinočany: Nakladatelství H&H, 1994), 85-95). Urban clearly rejects this way of making folk "domesticated" or euphemized: "Why did you choose vodyanoy to be your Orlando, Golem, or Frankenstein, who, almost immortal, travels across time so that he can go through with his great plans? [...] Because vodyanoy is a thoroughly sexual creature [...], with water nymphs and vilas they, descendants of the Greek naiads. This sexuality brings him closer to man, and I wanted my narrator to be as human as possible. Except that I had to reconstruct his hierarchy of values, and to present the struggle for animality and civilization differently than the 20<sup>th</sup> century art did (Irena Reifová "Jsem na straně krásné lži. Rozhovor s Milošem Urbanem" *Přítomnost*, (Winter, 2002), 51). ["Proč jste si za svého Orlanda, Golema nebo Frankensteina, který do jisté chvíle nesmrtelný prochází věky, aby provedl záměr s velkým Z, vybral právě figuru vodníka? [...] Protože vodník je skrz naskrz bytostí sexuální [...], konec konců je s vilami, bludičkami a rusalkami potomkem starořeckých nájad. Touhle sexuální podstatou se strašně blíží člověku, a já samozřejmě chtěl mít co nejčlověvěčšího výpravěče – jenom jsem mu potřeboval zpřevracet morální hodnoty, a taky ten zápas civilizovanosti a živočišnosti musel být jiný, než jak se to ukazovalo v umění dvacátého století"].

share with the sun, moon, rain, trees, flowers and animals, and lift them too high, this new one who will come after you, will strike them down. Ant the fall will break their spines<sup>27</sup>.

The diagnosis formed by *Hastrman* is one of replicas in a dispute which is key for the novel's philosophy, in which the protagonist presents his arguments to the priest, validating the causative power of rituals rooted in eternal agrarian myths – for he himself is one of their heroes, and it is he to whom sacrifices are made by those who participate in them, inadvertently or rather intuitively sensing his “actual essence”:

You are both proud, you and your God, but neither of you can reach me. [...] I am the prince of water and whether forests wither and fields are flooded depends solely on me<sup>28</sup>.

This conversation brings the first part of the novel to a close, opening perspectives for the future (from today's point of view it is obviously a classic *vaticinium post eventum*) and delineating “room for maneuver” for the protagonist's actions presented in subsequent chapters. Already the first lines of part two:

An explosion. This is how it has to be. Noon, crescent that now appears also in the middle of the day, turned its face towards the empty sky, indifferent to his mother's body being torn apart. [...] My humbleness, unlike his, has disappeared. I am here and I cannot any other way. Days of wrath are coming<sup>29</sup>,

transfer the reader to a world that is different from the idyll designed in the “nineteenth-century parts” of the text (quite bloody, we should remember). This idyll is based on a vision of symbiosis between man and nature (today, in this context we would surely consider the issue of sustainable growth or, to use the title of Ernest Callenbach's novel, *ecotopia*<sup>30</sup>), to which sacral qualities are attributed, always respecting the rules of metaphysical order which guarantees this symbiosis<sup>31</sup>. The protagonist returns to this lost paradise of youth at the beginning of the third millennium, but neither as an aristocrat revered by his subjects, nor as an omnipotent embodiment of the aquatic element. Finding this “promised land” to be:

<sup>27</sup>Urban, *Hastrman*, 218-219, [“Ujišťuji vás, že jsem byl zvyklostmi svých poddaných udiven víc než vy. Na rozdíl od vás jsem ale pochopil, jak dokonale ti lidé cítí krajinu, na níž jsou závislí. Vy jim sice můžete dát něco navíc, řekneme jako misionář, ale nesmíte jim brát to, co měli ještě před vámi. [...] Jak můžete vědět, kdo přijde po vás? Co když to bude někdo s úplně opačným učením než je vaše? [...] Říkám vám, že jestli je zúplna vyrvete z kořenů, jež je drží pevně v zemi, kořenů společných jim, slunci, měsíci, dešti, stromům, květinám a zvířatům, a povznesete je příliš vysoko, ten nový přichází je zase srazí dolů. Ten pád jim přerazí páteř”].

<sup>28</sup>Urban, *Hastrman*, 223.

<sup>29</sup>Urban, *Hastrman*, 229. [“Výbuch. Snad to tak musí být. Poledne, srp měsíce, který teď vychází i ve dne, odvrátil tvář k prázdnému nebi synovsky lhostejný k trhání těla své matky. [...] Moje pokora, na rozdíl od jeho, je pryč. Jsem tady a nemůžu jinak. Nadcházejí dny hněvu”].

<sup>30</sup>See Petr Kopecký, *Robinson Jeffers a John Steinbeck. Vzdálení i blízcí* (Brno: Host, 2012), 65.

<sup>31</sup>The tendency to attribute nature with divine (or at least sacra) qualities, the basis of the ethical message of the novel, brings to mind biocentric concepts which, contrary to ecocentrism (based on scientific findings and the ecosystem theory) correspond with “the idea of the sanctity of life and, generally speaking, nature, and consequently have a spiritualistic dimension” (Petr Kopecký, *Robinson Jeffers a John Steinbeck. Vzdálení i blízcí*, 94). [“představou posvátnosti života a přírody obecně, a má proto často spirituální rozměr”].

on the verge of complete destruction, caused by actions of the mining corporation and its managers' and owners' greed for profit, he becomes an alien in his motherland. And with an alien's eyes he is watching and describing his former landscape. With eyes of someone, who is looking at the unreal effect of devastation of his home place<sup>32</sup>.

Strangeness, or rather, Otherness defines both the way in which *Hastrman* perceives reality, and how he is perceived. And it is this position of an "ontological misfit" that allows him (and, by the way, the author) to omit (put in brackets?) any ethical concerns and dilemmas accompanying the evaluation of terrorist acts which, even if they happen for a good (?) cause, are commonly condemned if they result in so-called innocent victims<sup>33</sup>. However, as Tadeusz Sławek explains, when we:

talk about an animal, a coup, destroying the existing order is not such a far-away topic. Those whose sensitivity makes them live "like animals" are treated as revolutionaries. They do not just appear, like a natural phenomenon, they do not take their place. Their goal is to take the place of others, expropriate them and [...] make them homeless. [...] Those who are "like animals" see with shocking, overwhelming clarity [...] that agreeing with one of the sides of the conflicting forces does not lead to the reconstruction of the world. Hence being "like animals" means going beyond<sup>34</sup>.

This "going beyond" (above, alongside), which could also mean being outside of mainstream social identity constructs and habitual models, makes it easier for the protagonist to establish cooperation with the NGO "Children of Water". The organization tries to peacefully achieve the same goal of stopping the exploitation of Mount Vlhosh<sup>35</sup>. This cooperation ends with the pro-

<sup>32</sup>Richard Zmélík, "Reálná a fukční krajina v díle Miloše Urbana", *Česká literatura v intermediální perspektivě*, red. Stanislava Fedrová, (Praha: Akropolis, 2010), 329. ["na pokraji totální zkázy způsobené činností těžební společnosti a ziskuchtivostí jejich představitelů a majitelů, stává se ve své původní domovině cizincem. A očima cizince je právě popsána i vlastní krajina. Očima toho, kdo se dívá na neskutečnou devastaci rodného místa"]. The protagonist is perfectly aware of his passage from the familiar to alienation: "I liked it better in the past. I felt wonderful then, the world was as it was supposed to be, and I was at its center. Every step forward brought some benefit – there was nothing to be scared of. Today I find myself at the periphery of society; although I have to admit that I am to blame for that. Serves me well. I am a living anachronism, a fairytale hero, a children's bogeyman. But despite all that I cannot shake off the feeling that I have been tasked with something. Something connected with [...] the coming postindustrial age" (Urban, *Hastrman*, 391). ["Mně se víc líbilo v tehdejší době. Tenkrát jsem se cítil úžasně, svět byl takový, jaký být měl a já čněl v jeho středu. Každý krok kupředu byl dobrý – nebylo třeba se bát. Dnes jsem na okraji společnosti; dlužno dodat, že vlastním přičiněním. Dobře mi tak. Jsem přežívající anachronismus, postava z pohádek na strašení děti. A přesto se nemohu zbavit pocitu, že mám nějaký úkol. Úkol, jenž souvisí (...) s příchodem postindustriálního věku."].

<sup>33</sup>It should be noted that among the numerous murders committed by the protagonist, there is actually only one case of an innocent victim (of course within the novel's ethos) – blowing up the quarry's machinery kills a caretaker. This guilt justifies and excuses killing *vodyanoy* (in terms of a sacrifice) by neo-pagan sect of ecologists recreating the nineteenth-century "aquatic idyll".

<sup>34</sup>Tadeusz Sławek, *Śladem zwierząt. O dochodzeniu do siebie* [Following animals. About coming to self], (Gdańsk: Fundacja Terytoria Książki, 2020), 118. The quote refers to Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*.

<sup>35</sup>This is how Urban manages to omit one of paradoxes defining the activity of various alternative "resistance groups", i.e. weaken the common belief that the modern world no longer offers opportunities for going beyond the mainstream system. The process of "totalization of capitalism", which – as Jan Sowa stresses – has dominated all aspects of life, causes that "The only outside which exists in a similar situation is, for example, one chosen by Ted Kaczyński (better known as the Unabomber): forest wilderness, where it is possible to reach the state of autonomy and 'drop out' from society – however, ways of influencing it become, to put it mildly, limited. [...] *Dropout*, i.e. the only, guarantee outside of capitalism of ethical purity, but it is also means depriving oneself of having a significant influence. [...] Such a state of affairs clearly shows one thing: because there is no effective position outside of capitalism, we should completely abandon understanding in terms of outside-inside categories, especially the phantasm of the unblemished knight, who attacks the capitalism fortress from outside" (Jan Sowa, "Co jest wywrotowe?" [What is revolutionary], *Kultura Współczesna*, nr 2 (2010), 16, 17).

tagonist's death, treated as propitiation, leading to completely abandoning the dream *status quo ante*, partially regulated by nature's own forces (breaking the Nové Mlýny dam, bringing to mind the mythical release of waters), and partially developed with cottage-artisanal techniques dating back to before the Industrial Revolution, whose usefulness is strongly confirmed by mission statements of the organization's leader (yet another significant name, Tomáš Mor):

And what about the energy given to us? [...] We are living, strong, thinking, feeling people, a unique form of *continuum* in space. If we continue to strive forward, we will lose sight of where we came from; we will detach ourselves from our ancestors, and thus from ourselves, for we are only their descendants. Sometimes we need to return to them, because otherwise we are doomed. Machines can do our work for us. We can make money to buy them and energy to set them in motion. If we take this energy from water, which flows by itself, or from the sun, which shines by itself, or from wind, which blows by itself, it will be good energy. However, if we take it from what we tore from the inside of earth, and then burn it with fire and sulfur, it will be bad energy. Riddled earth will become brittle like an eggshell, we may sink into it with each step. We have our own energy. Let's use it<sup>36</sup>.

The retrospective (one could say – post-pastoral<sup>37</sup>) utopia actualized in the novel's ending, described via a rhetoric characteristic of ecological discourse (here referred to in the form of a slightly banal praise for renewable energy), is supposed to prove that the activists' initiatives may bring a positive result, as long as their program clearly and explicitly declares its aversion to technological achievements, instead calling for a return to so-called tool culture<sup>38</sup>. This is the only culture that offers a chance to be free from the oppression of global conformism, which forces people to not only accept the gradual degradation of the natural environment, but also to actively (although

<sup>36</sup>Urban, *Hastrman*, 390-391. ["Co s energií, která nám byla dána? (...) Jsme živi, silní, myslící a cítící lidé, jedinečná forma kontinuity v prostoru. Pokud se poženeme pořád jen kupředu, ztratíme ze zřetele bod, odkud jsme vyšli; ztratíme se svým předkům, ztratíme se sami sobě, neboť jsme jejich potomci. Nebudeme-li se k nim čas od času vracet, upadneme do záhuby. Dílo za nás můžou udělat stroje. Můžeme si na ně vydělat, můžeme si koupit energii, která je uvede do pohybu a bude je udržovat v chodu. Dá-li tu energii voda, jež sama teče, anebo slunce, co samo svítí, anebo vítr, jenž sám od sebe vane, bude to energie dobrá. Pokud však tu energii získáme z toho, co jsme vyrvali z útrob země a pak jsme to spálili ohněm a sírou, bude to energie špatná. Děravá země bude křehká jako skořápka vajíčka – při příštím kroku se můžeme propadnout. Máme svou vlastní energii. Využijme ji!"]

<sup>37</sup>Julia Fiedorczuk uses the adjective post-pastoral, coined by Terry Gifford and also used by Lawrence Buell, in order to "describe aesthetics which combines the pastoral inclination towards celebrating non-human nature with a sense of responsibility for the state of the natural environment. She is mostly interested in such literary forms in which the anthropocentric celebration of imagination makes room for more eco- or bio-centric focus on non-human nature, its inherent value, independent of pragmatic of aesthetic benefits that people can have from it" (Fiedorczuk, *Cyborg w ogrodzie* [Cyborg in a garden], 92). Perhaps this need to untangle literary representation from those economic-aesthetic conditions and connotations was the decisive factor in terms of the choice of space in which *Hastrman's* plot takes place. As Karel Stibral observes: "Growing fascination with wilderness and pristine nature manifests itself not only in admiration for mountain ranges and jungles. Regardless whether it is in some tropical area or in moderate climate, awe is born for marshes, wetlands and bogs, which were omitted until now. Before, this type of terrain was largely ignored, perhaps with the exception of Thoreau" (Karel Stibral, *Estetika přírody. K historii estetického ocenění krajiny*, (Červený Kostelec: Pavel Mervart, 2019), 419). ["Vzrůstající hlad po divokosti a divočině je spojen nejen s obdivem k velehorám a pralesům. Ať již v tropickém či mírném pásmu, ale objevuje se i nově obdiv k dosud pomíjeným močálům, bažinám a mokřadům. To byl typ terénu, který byl – snad s výjimkou Thoreaua – doposud značně přehlížen"].

<sup>38</sup>See "A quality shared by all those forms of resistance is that they are not just attempts at doing without a system or life as if they did not exist, but also the fact that most people who undertake them are trying to construct a world that would be different from the systemically regulated one. [...] Building a house, sewing a piece of clothing, or even cooking a meal from unprocessed ingredients with one's own hands require [...] getting used to tools and, first and foremost, perseverance and time. It also requires going back to the tool culture [...], in which individuals deal with reality that requires taming in such a way as to serve man" (Marek Krajewski, "Dyskretna niezgoda. Opór i kultura materialna" [Discreet disagreement. Resistance and material culture], *Kultura Współczesna*, nr 2 (2010), 44,45).

not always consciously) participate in this process. Researchers stress that the “philosophy of secondary instrumentation of objects” facilitates their de-semantization, that is, it deprives them of their expressive potential. According to Marek Krajewski, by losing the function of a prop in rhetorical games, they become a semantically neutral “instrument of direct change of reality”<sup>39</sup>. Such observations, raising doubts at first glance (they suggest the possibility to leave Goffman’s “theater of everyday life”, or going beyond Debord’s “performance society”), turn out to be decisively inaccurate in the case of *Hastrman*. The repudiation of devices fuelled by “steam and electricity” (not to mention optical fibers) in the novel’s world becomes an ideological manifesto, as it guarantees the success of the program to re-install the nineteenth-century lifestyle (and the mode of living with nature), proposed in the novel. On the one hand it signals a lack of agreement for the modern, false cult of development, and on the other it is a sign of belonging to a community proposing *modus vivendi* and *operandi* alternatives to what is treated as obvious today<sup>40</sup>:

Machines cannot go to either Old Village, or the mountain. Caravans of mule- and horse-carts leave Holan from morning until evening, going around ponds to leave stone, wood, lime, sand, and peat, either on the slopes of Vlhóšti, or the outskirts of Old Village. Workers carry load on their backs or use wheelbarrows and wagons. [...] Where there once was a quarry, now there is a mountain, in every way similar to the original one. In the place of ruined houses there are new buildings, which are no less beautiful or useful than the demolished ones. [...] I look at all those people and I see the impossible – they willingly, at least for some time, sacrificed their selfishness, and became a part of a perfectly functional whole, for a wise ruler explained to them its purpose and benefits. [...] Vodyanoy, this fairytale warning against human pride, was suddenly no longer needed. Children of Water can do everything he could do. And better<sup>41</sup>.

The inter(archi)textual element in which the author places the story of *vodyanoy* facilitates emphasizing the peculiar conventionality of the organization of the plot, which – especially in the second, “modern” part – as has been said, clearly models itself on sensational thrillers (from this perspective *Hastrman* can be treated as a typical example of postmodernist “playing with kitsch”<sup>42</sup>), at the same time reversing the direction of evaluating the protagonist’s actions. Open conventionality

<sup>39</sup>Krajewski, 44.

<sup>40</sup>Julia Fiedorczuk, referring to Leo Marx, concludes that this disdain for mechanical appliances, associated with a return to the Arcadian imaginarium, “‘is in no way anachronistic in the times of high technology’, for since early 1960s [...] there have been strong anti-technocratic impulses, wherein the meaning of machine’ is now not only literal, but also metaphorical; it is identified with a «system» against which one should rebel. Anti-hegemonic, pastoral mentality characterizes [...] the ever-growing group of people who want to live «closer to nature» and profess values incompatible with the myth of eternal progress” (Fiedorczuk Julia, *Cyborg w ogrodzie*, 89-90). Internal quotation: Leo Marx, “Pastoralism in America”, translated into Polish by Marek Paryż, in *Kultura, tekst, ideologia. Dyskursy współczesnej amerykanistyki*, edited by Agata Preis-Smith (Kraków: Universitas, 2004), 101.

<sup>41</sup>Urban, *Hastrman*, 393. [“jak k hoře, tak do Staré Vsi žádné stroje nesmí. Od rána do večera vyjíždějí z Holan karavany volských a konských spřežení a každá z jedné strany objíždí rybníky, aby složila kámen, dřevo, vápno, písek a zeminu buďto na úpatí Vlhóště, nebo za humny Staré Vsi. Dělníci nosí břemena na zádech, nebo je vozi v kolečkách, na trakářích, na žebřinácích. [...] Kde býval lom, tam je dnes plná hora, co nejpodobnější té původní. Kde byly rozvaliny domu, tam jsou dnes nová stavení zachovávající krásu a účelnost původní. [...] Dívám se na všechny ty lidi a vidím nemožné – dobrovolně se aspoň na čas vzdali svého sobectví a stali se součástí dokonale fungujícího celku, neboť dobrý vládce jim objasnil, jak a proč a v čem je to dobré. [...] *Hastrman*, ten bájný korektiv lidské pychy, je najednou zbytečný. Děti Vody umí vše, co uměl on. Svedou to líp”].

<sup>42</sup>In one interview (conducted by Irena Reifová) the author does not deny that “my books have at least a bit of an artistic character inasmuch as they stem from commercial writing, which in turn originally freeloaded on genuine art. So, I tolerate this commercial current, because I know from experience that those two circulations permeate and inspire each other” (Reifová, “Jsem na straně krásné lži”, 51). [“Jsou-li tedy moje knížky alespoň trochu umělecké, tak vlastně vycházejí z pokleslého umění, které zase při svém vzniku zneužívalo opravdové umění. Onen pokleslý proud tedy toleruju, protože mám zkušenost s tím, jak se to obrací a vzájemně inspiruje.”]

(avoiding the use of the word *artificiality*), also orchestrates idealized images of life in a recovered, old-fashioned enclave, revealing only a wishful dimension of the realization of the anti-civilizational undertaking proposed in the novel, radical in its principles and brutal in practice. Because readers, familiar with the tradition of utopian fantasies easily transforming into their Orwellian-Huxleyan opposite, have no difficulty in predicting possible consequences of the eco-revolutionaries' zeal<sup>43</sup>. Also, they are not hard to predict, especially that the Children of Water resemble a neo-pagan sect, additionally burdened with the original sin of totalitarian inclinations, rather than organizations such as Greenpeace or WWF, which employ rational means of persuasion and influence<sup>44</sup>.

Urban seems to say that nature (in the novel, of utmost religious importance), similarly to revolution, requires sacrifices, and its wellbeing depends on sustaining its processes, which also includes (along with strictly economic actions) updating ritualistic-symbolic practices. Faith in the causative power of sacrifices (in *Harstram* – plants, animals, and people) justifies the peculiar omnipresence of death in the post-pastoral world. This omnipresence, partially delineating subsequent fields of play with readers' cultural experience (this time focusing on the topos *et in Arcadia ego*), at the same reminds one of the absolute and inviolable character of the natural order based on the constant change of cycles of birth, ripening, and death. The final, fatalistic lines of the novel (“I am giving, so you shall give. Because this is how it must be. MUST.”<sup>45</sup>) reinforce and *de facto* consecrate this inalienable imperative of self-sacrifice for the sake of maintaining the continuity of the eternal order of things. In order to highlight this universal order, extricated from authoritative simplifications of the official (anthropocentric) historiography, Urban refers to elements of alternative historical philosophy, which also includes natural processes, via a speech the protagonist gives to his subjects:

Earth is water, and people – are water creatures, their bodies are bones, and tissues, and muscles immersed in fluid, a handful of dust in a sea, a continent in an ocean [...]. Water, which you think you are holding in your palm, is very old, it has been stirred a thousand times, and purified as many times, those drops come from the Nile, they were poured into a red jug by a young slave [...]. Those were the same drops that were later taken to the paradise of seventh heaven, but they did not stop there, they returned to earth, because the eternity of water does not lie motionless, it constantly returns. Rain was prominent and sweet, the salty sea sucked it in and changed it into an iceberg, which circulated the Earth twice, and released those drops, so that they could get stuck in a salmon's gills. The fish was caught by a fisherman [...], who started rowing towards the port, a storm was coming from the West, Calais was shortly in the hands of the French, but was seized by the English the following day [...]. You will find the whole world in those drops, and all times, and

<sup>43</sup>Anna Kronenberg treats the so-called green humanities as a revolutionary theory. She believes that “This subversive, or even revolutionary character [...], is based on questioning the current models of exercising authority and rejecting culturally reinforced scientific, historical, political, economic paradigms based on eurocentrism and patriarchy. Such a perspective is connected with subsequent turns taking place in new humanities (a performative turn towards agency), and with the new concept of agency: engaged, agential, nomadic, performative” (Anna Kronenberg, *Geopoetyka. Związki literatury i środowiska* [Geopolitics. Relationships between literature and environment] (Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 2015), 16).

<sup>44</sup>According to Barbara Pasamonik, one common if slightly unexpected “side effect” of modern forms of social protest “is not only emancipation of individuals from imposed identities and almost limitless freedom of self-creation. ‘Unbearable lightness of being’ provokes ‘escape from freedom’ Too much freedom results in the renaissance/return to the times of unshakable faith, social order, and stable moral rules. Reactive cultural fundamentalism is also an unexpected side effect of counter-culture” (Pasamonik, “Fundamentalizm kulturowy jako współczesna kontrkultura” [Cultural fundamentalism as modern counter-culture], 62. The statement refers to Islamic fundamentalism).

<sup>45</sup>Urban *Hastrman*, 399. [“Dávám, abys dal. Protože tak to být musí. MUSÍ”].





it is also a matter of time when the same water will be poured into a red jug by a young slave<sup>46</sup>.

The concept of history combining the idea of nature's cyclicity with the Nietzschean "eternal return", outlined in the statement above (far broader and richer in the whole text), referring to the principles of the so-called environmental history, allows the reader to synthetically

combine the formulaic tradition of anthropocentric reading and writing the past with the accompanying history of man's natural surroundings, so far rarely considered in historiography<sup>47</sup>. Vodyanoy – a figure in which human and animal characteristics permeate each other – highlights and verifies this synthesis. He reminds us about the relationship connecting bio- and anthropo-sphere, making the recognition of these colligations *conditio sine qua non* of salvation and survival of any form of human life, threatened by short-sightedness and man's pseudo-demiurgic pride, convinced of his right to take advantage of quickly shrinking natural resources without any consideration.

translated by Paulina Zagórska

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<sup>46</sup>Urban *Hastrman*, 140-141, 142. ["Země je voda a lidé povodňané, jejich těla jsou kosti a tkáně a svaly ponořené do kapaliny, hrst prachu v moři, světadíl v oceánu. [...] Takhle voda, o níž se domníváš, že ji máš v hrsti, je velmi stará, tisíckrát kalená a stejně často čištěná, tyto kapky jsou z pramene Nilu, nabrané do červeného džbánu mladou otrokyní [...]. Byly to právě tyhle kapky, které pak vstoupily do ráje sedmého nebe, ale nezůstaly tam, vrátily se dolů, protože věčnost vody nespočívá v nehybnosti, nýbrž ve věčných návratech. Déšť to byl vydatný a sladký, slané moře ho pozřelo a proměnilo v ledovou kru, jež dvakrát obeplula Zemi, než roztála a pustila uvězněné kapky na svobodu, aby uvízly v zábrách lososa. Rybu vylovil rybář [...] a vesloval do přístavu, od západu se blížila bouře, Calais bylo nakrátko francouzské a na druhý den mělo znovu padnout do rukou Angličanům. [...] V těch kapkách najdeš celý svět a celý čas, a jen jeho otázkou, kdy tuto vodu nabere červeným džbánkem z Nilu ruka mladé otrokyně"].

<sup>47</sup>Recapitulating those principles, Ewa Dąbrowska states that "Environmental history is interdisciplinary, and most closely related to historical geography and ecology, although it is also close to the history of cities, climate, economy, and agriculture. It also accommodates the histories of rivers, animals and fish, plants (often forests), as well as water and ice. The most common topics concern epidemics, natural disasters, degradation of natural environment resulting from urbanization or pollution. It also contributes to the revival of history of agriculture in the spirit of ecology (history of agriculture of sustainable growth) and history of landscape and gardens (Ewa Domańska, "Wiedza o przeszłości – perspektywy na przyszłość" [Knowledge of the past – perspectives for the future], *Kwartalnik Historyczny*, nr 2 (2013), 249).

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# KEYWORDS

## ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

### kryzys ekologiczny

#### ABSTRACT:

Miloš Urban, a Czech writer, is mostly associated with postmodernist playing with the convention of the metaphysical thriller. In 2001 he published *Hastrman*, a novel representing so-called green literature, for which he received the prestigious *Magnesia Litera* award. His concerns about progressive degradation of the natural environment of northern Czechia inspired him to develop a creative method which allows him to highlight threats related to the ecological crisis without excessively lecturing the reader. By reaching for genealogical models of the nineteenth-century ethnographic novel, combining them with elements of horror and contemporary political fiction and – first and foremost – adding the vodyanoy (i.e., a figure that is not only deeply rooted in Czech cultural memory, but also characterized by an animalistic-or demonic-human ontological duality), Urban achieved a particular ethical undecidability of the protagonist's actions. The titular *hastrman* acts for “a good – ecological – cause”, but in order to fulfill his mission, he uses criminal, *strictly* terrorist methods. As a result, the novel asks questions instead of offering definitive answers, forcing the reader to rethink their own attitude and propose tools for salvation of the gradually, but inevitably disappearing traditional order based on the harmonious cooperation between man and surrounding nature.

## postpastoral utopia

“GREEN LITERATURE”

### *Slavonic demonology*

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