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Man – City – Universe: The City between Identity  
and Strangeness in Some Central European Novels  
of the Second Half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century\*

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Człowiek – miasto – wszechświat: miasto między tożsamością a obcością  
w niektórych powieściach środkowoeuropejskich drugiej połowy XX wieku

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**Abstract.** The article deals with two aspects of spatiality given by the theory of the relationship between the microcosm and the macrocosm: the encounter with oneself as a way of forming one's identity, as well as the encounter with the stranger as a necessity to know the world. The example of several Central European novels of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century shows that identity shapes home. Strangeness, on the other hand, acts as a moment of melancholy that reshapes the face of the city and reveals the presence of death and infinity.

**Keywords:** space, city, melancholy, identity, Central European novel

**Abstrakt.** Artykuł dotyczy dwóch aspektów przestrzenności, jakie daje teoria relacji między mikrokosmosem a makrokosmosem: spotkaniem z samym sobą jako sposobem kształtowania własnej tożsamości oraz spotkaniem z obcym jako koniecznością poznania świata. Przykład kilku powieści

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\* Publikację tomu sfinansowano ze środków Instytutu Filologii Polskiej UMCS. Wydawca: Wydawnictwo UMCS. Dane teledadresowe autora: Charles University, náměstí Jana Palacha 2, 116 38 Praha 1, Czech Republic; tel.: (+420) 722 803 484.

środkowoeuropejskich drugiej połowy XX wieku pokazuje, że tożsamość kształtuje dom. Z kolei obcość działa jak chwila melancholii, która zmienia oblicze miasta i ujawnia obecność śmierci i nieskończoności.

**Słowa kluczowe:** przestrzeń, miasto, melancholia, tożsamość, powieść środkowoeuropejska

## 1. SPACE AS A RELATION BETWEEN SUBJECT AND OBJECT

Against the objectively mathematical notion of space, Martin Heidegger postulates in his *Being and Time*, the existential spatiality of being-in-the-world, the structure of which has three parts: the world itself, the one who is this being-in-the-world, and, above all, the inherent connection between the who and the world (1962, pp. 32–71, see also Novotný, 2008, p. 18). Thus, right from the beginning, human existence consists of two fundamental moments: 1) the encounter with the other, the stranger, the unknown, i.e. with the world, which, according to Heidegger, is always given in its totality, and 2) the relationship with this other. While the former shows an inevitable givenness, the latter represents a moment of freedom. The Czech philosopher Jan Patočka argues that this relation (Patočka calls it the “scale”, which represents the order of the world, the relation of particulars to the whole and to each other) takes place in language, though not necessarily consciously (Patočka, 2008, pp. 191–196). Language points both to the givenness of the world, but also to our relationship to it, the language that is used to conceive of this relationship mirrors the subjective-objective link between givenness and freedom; each time tinged, nuanced, the language points to a personal relationship to things, and the observer brings himself into the all-encompassing system. Looking at the landscape, observing it and bringing in a point of view, a scale, is a participation in the creation of the order of the existing world, and at the same time testifies to this order. Therefore, the analysis of the structure of space and spatiality in literary texts can be one of the starting points for interpretation: Yuri Mikhailovich Lotman (1977) argues that spatial modelling of the world can also reveal connections and relations that do not primarily concern space as such. Ernst Cassirer (1965), in turn, argues that the causal “why” develops from the originally spatial “where”, and that the general idea of goal and purpose emerges from the “where”. (As part of my profession, I am involved in writing proofreading debut fiction texts for a small publishing house. It’s not without interest that a large proportion of the really bad texts do not deal with the question of environment at all – they don’t thematize it in any way and focus purely on characters and plot. The relationship to the world is greatly weakened here. Of course, this observation does not apply in general.)

In the relationship between space and the world in general, we can find one more specific stage: the city – as a combination of human creation and effort,

urbanism and the almost natural spontaneity of its growth – illustrates even better the relationship between man and the world. How then does Patočka’s “scale” change? The objective pole of scale encounters, instead of pure objectivity (general space), another subjective-objective (that is, the combination of urban planning and the liveliness inscribed in it) entity. Thus, the language of scale must be deformed as a result of the skewed balance. This, too, then speaks to the relationship between man and the world, which is why the space of the city can be more sensitive to this issue. The medieval Gnostic maxim about the relationship between macrocosm and microcosm applies to the relationship between the city and man:

Man’s eternal conviction that the universe is connected to him by many causally linked magical analogies. In this chain, the city would be somewhere in the middle between the universe and man. [...] In the final analysis, if somewhere on the great axis from the universe to man and from the universe to the human cell some unknown city were somehow built, it would mean that this very city would architecturally express the ideal scheme of the minimized universe from the outside, while concealing within itself the outlines of man. (Bogdanović, 2002, p. 49) [translated by T.K.]

The aim of this essay is to analyze two aspects in the relationship between man – city – universe, namely the experience of the self as a way of forming identity (“the city is seen in man as on the surface of water” – Bogdanović, 2002, p. 48) and the encounter with the stranger as a way of knowing the world.

## 2. CITY AS A SPACE OF IDENTITY

The same cloud was still outside the window, or a collective of clouds made uniform. On long, thin legs the rain flitted across the rusted windowsill. Once there had been something there. Forms, colors, scraps of emotion in violent movement. My life, or somebody else’s. Most likely some made-up life. A collage of readings, incompletions, old films, unfinished fantasies, legends, dreams which did not come true. (Konwicki, 1999, p. 4)

Tadeusz Konwicki’s hero (*A Minor Apocalypse* [*Mała apokalipsa*, 1983]) is so far only “perfect anonymous Homo sapiens” (Konwicki 1999, p. 6), only later, when his end is near and only the girl Hope (Naděžda) remains with him, the world changes so much that the hero-narrator becomes the One – dead among the living. Identity exists only as a combination of both a certain idea of oneself and the consciousness of one’s relationship, relationality to one’s surroundings. It is, therefore, necessary to distinguish, in Benedict Anderson’s words, “not by their falsity / genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined” (2016, p. 6). Imagination receives an outlet in narratives of various types, but these also represent the form “through which our experience takes shape” (Jedličková, 2010, p. 27), i.e. what Konwicki formulates

as a collage of readings, incompletions, old films, unfinished [!] fantasies, legends, dreams. The relationality that is part of identity has a subjective-subjective character in urban space (instead of a subjective-objective relation between man and nature); the language of this relationality can significantly distort “scale” and is more indicative of the reality (givenness and relationality) of the individual than elsewhere:

When Mama repeated those very words to me, many years later, she did her embarrassment in ironic half smiles, but she was clearly proud. And I understood that from the moment those words were pronounced – or, really, shouted, Father, mama, and I could claim our home here, at Lessingstrasse 17, that those words established the house where I would be born. (Chwin, 2004, p. 77)

It is not easy to tell what all those few words meant when Father encountered soldiers trying to harm a strange man in his home where Father had no business being. But when the narrator of Stefan Chwin’s *Death in Danzig* (1995) uses the words “our home”, relieving the family of the burden of those who came and took over and appropriated the empty houses left by the Germans, those words make them the rightful occupants of the house. With those words, the Father acquired the right of ownership. And so the words seem not only to shape the space, but above all, their repetition creates something we might call home. Patočka characterizes home as something that no longer surprises us, where our expectations are habitually met and satisfied, while on the other side of this axis lies the foreign – the mysterious, surprising and unknowable (Patočka, 2008, p. 193 ff.). But the home is not just a personal place, it belongs to the whole community. The community also emerges as a certain idea of itself – narratives of group cohesiveness on the one hand require this cohesiveness, but on the other hand, they shape it at the same time (cf. Assmann, 2011): ritual, which in the modern novel will be rather unconscious, yet will be determined by the following aspects – repetition as a constant return to the beginning (“I could listen to that tale over and over, the tale of my beginning”), participation instead of mere spectatorship, or one’s own and personal presence and participation in the founding act (“I would grow tense just listening to Mama tell the story”) and, of course, the community that is formed there to affirm its being (“And each time Mama reached the part where the front door of Lessingstrasse 17 slammed shut and the entry hall was so quiet you could hear a pin drop, I knew for sure that the house was ours” [Chwin, 2004, p. 77 ff.]). Through this ritual, the space becomes settled, mastered. Ingeborg Bachmann in her *Malina* (1971) describes the same thing in other words:

Really it’s only a side street, more precisely a small section of the Ungargasse, as it happens that all three of us live there: Ivan, Malina and myself. [...] Small cafés and many old inns and taverns make the street useful; we frequent the “Alter Heller,” which we reach after passing a convenient garage, the Automag, a very convenient drug store, and a cigar stand at the Neulinggasse. (Bachmann, 1999, p. 3)

The ritual that we read almost explicitly in Chwin is hidden in Bachmann in expressions like pubs, “we frequent” – we frequent and often, or “a very convenient drug store” – it is a piece of the city that meets the expectations of its inhabitants according to their needs, regardless of their condition – it is home. It is that piece of the city that answers positively to the question contained in the relationship.

The experience of the community, and the identity that results from it, is even more spatial than the experience of the individual, because it presupposes physical proximity and, in turn, a delimitation to “the other”, a more or less distinct and permeable boundary. This spatiality of experience also refers to its perspectivism, its partiality and incompleteness. In his novel defining the Czech underground of the 1970s, *Disabled Siblings* [*Invalidní sourozenci*, 1974 – translated by the author of this article], Egon Bondy consistently distinguishes between the space inhabited by the underground community of disabled pensioners and the space inhabited by normal people, in at least two ways. Firstly, there is the particular temporality of the space, or rather its counter-temporality. The novel is set in the far future and almost all of the space is imbued with significant scientific progress; the space of the invalids, on the other hand, goes against this development, goes against the general time. Scientific advances have been so far along that people live in buildings where “there were no elevators in high-rise buildings, for example, because anyone who stood in the shaft was pulled by a stream of air by the hair into the apartment” (Bondy, 1991, p. 120). However, the protagonist “lived in a small house that had formerly been a grand garage, which now overhung offered two living rooms” (p. 10). Yet progress itself can and is part of the life of the disabled, although the timeline does not close only at its apex but remains open throughout. The temporal ordering of the world’s space is matched by the artworks of disabled pensioners, which we would otherwise classify as spatial: the sculptures exist only if it takes a direct touch, the sweater with embroidered motifs, likened to the shield of Achilles, structures the world towards its final demise – the total flooding of the island, instead of spatial organization, etc. This temporal contradiction, however, remains specific only to the perception of space, but in the concept of time itself we do not encounter anything similar. But perhaps a more important feature of spatiality in Bondy is the loss of orientation of the main character, which is normally perfect, the moment he finds himself in the world of normal people. This is also related to the fact that any symptomatic character of the otherwise ordinary spatial determinations of top – bottom, center – periphery completely disappears: these determinations lose their orientational or referential value: the water, which has been gradually flooding the rest of the land for years, defies the laws of physics and the flooding proceeds in a way that cannot be predicted.

The whole region has already been flooded in this way. Strange, for the hill on which he stood was by no means the highest on earth. But the water had already flooded the high mountains and covered them like a mantle, which trembled and overflowed and flowed over them in surprising constancy, spilling over again into the lowlands. (p. 9)

Not only the possibility of orientation in a geographical sense disappears, but at the same time spatial categories lose their usual values in a cultural, ethical sense; instead of the corpse of the world being buried in the ground, it lies on top, but also mud pours out of it. The underground becomes a shelter fit for life in times of bombardment almost as much as the normal ground above. The surface of the earth is bounded from above by the sky, which, however, refers instead to the world below, not only in its simplicity, but rather in its vulgar Bakhtinian sense of the corporeal “below”. While the first spatial characteristic is only determinative of a group of invalids, the impossibility of orientation is a general feature of Bondy’s world.

### 3. CITY AS AN ENCOUNTER WITH A STRANGER

It can be seen that spatiality points to the integrity of the subject and its meaning. In the spirit of the already quoted Gnostic precept, the city can only be an expression of man to the extent that he is sure of himself; man can only know the city in the sense of Patočka’s home to the extent that he does not doubt himself. And *vice versa*. In Bondy’s work it is clear that the spatially expressed self becomes confused and confusing, unnoticeable and complex, when the community, or rather the subject, becomes uncertain of its being, when it loses it or exposes it to doubt. (How else to understand foreignness than as the surrender of the self to the new, the unexpected and the unknowable?) But how does this shift occur? The main character of Bachmann’s novel *Malina* one day acquires “a new dress, a long casual dress, for an hour in the afternoon, for a new special evening at home” (Bachmann, 1999, p. 86) and when she was getting ready to wear it, she stepped into the mirror and vanished there.

I have seen into the future, I was one with myself and am again not-one with myself. [...] For a moment I was immortal and I – I wasn’t there for Ivan and wasn’t living in Ivan, it was without significance. (p. 87)

It lasted only a moment, but it was enough to completely shatter the unity of essence, the identity of the character. She needs to go out on the street and get some air, but the street that is her home (“inns and taverns we frequent”, etc.), suddenly becomes a source of danger:

out of respect I turn around at the Heumarkt, threatened by the proximity of the Stadtpark, by its shadows and the dark figures, I make a detour over the Linke-Bahn-Gasse, agitated by the eeriness of this section, but in the Beatrixgasse I again feel secure. (p. 87)

Does the threat stem from the space that surrounds her, or from the recognition of the gap that has opened up between her and that domestic space, and thus that it is no longer unsurprising, no longer home for her? Is not this sudden gap opening in herself, while it is only mirrored in the space: “reconciliation comes and drowsiness, my impatience softens, I wasn’t sure of myself but am again insured, no longer walking past the Stadtpark at night” (*ibid.*, p. 88)?

But alienation, which we recognize in Bachmann as a mirroring of a disintegrating identity, was supposed to be on the other side of the relationship between man and city; it was supposed to be a cosmos, a strangeness. The narrator of the story, Max Aurach from Wienfried Sebald’s *The Emigrants* [*Die Ausgewanderten. Vier lange Erzählungen*, 1997], who had never been further away from home than a five or six-hour train journey, arrives in Great Britain for the first time.

In contrast to today, when a continental zeal for business has infected the British, in the Sixties no one was out and about in English cities so early in the morning. So with only an occasional traffic light to delay us, we drove swiftly through the not unhandsome suburbs of Gatley, Northenden and Didsbury to Manchester itself. Day was just breaking, and I looked out in amazement at the rows of uniform houses, which seemed the more rundown the closer we got to the city center. In Moss Side and Hulme there were whole blocks where the doors and windows were boarded up, and whole districts where everything had been demolished. Views opened up across the wasteland towards the still immensely impressive agglomeration of gigantic Victorian office blocks and warehouses [...] it turned out that even there, in the heart of the city, not a soul was to be seen, though by now it was almost a quarter to six. (Sebald, 1997, p. 151)

Although Manchester should astonish and surprise the narrator, should be alien to him, even this city only mirrors his soul because, we soon learn, the narrator has been “felt a deep sense of isolation in which I might well have become completely submerged” (p. 154 f.). At this point, at least two fundamental questions arise: what is the difference between a city in the north-east of England and a city in central Europe, and what role does its location play? How does this location change Patočka’s “scale”? For the scope of this article, however, it is not possible to address them further.

Does the universe, as the most extreme strangeness on the other side of the axis, represent only a complete subversion of the integrity of the subject? According to László F. Földényi, the union of the two extremes in one point, in one person, where they are not excluded from each other, forms the being of the melancholic,

the outside and the inside, the subject and the object, are not separated in them and the surrounding nature, intermingling with their own human nature, so to speak, permeates their bodies, which are now really just a husk, dust that turns to dust, and therefore there is no need to fear the fall, the destruction. (Földényi, 2013, p. 186) (translated by T.K.)

The exaggeration of appearances that Földényi speaks of allows one to see the world from a distance and thus to come out of the orders of being; melancholy is a strategy of survival. Death, as the ultimate form of strangeness, becomes immanent to the city.

We come to Parade Square. The uneven colonnade of the Congress Hall is before us now. The spotlights are trained on a row of exit doors or perhaps on that stone platform which awaits me like my native earth. (Konwicky, 1999, p. 227)

The hero comes to die in a place that encompasses both death and birth, both strangeness and identity, the space of the square resembles the throat of hell into which the hero is going without being convinced of the usefulness of his act, only of its necessity. It is a hell that the narrator already has within him. Bohumil Hrabal's character, Hant'a, who looks forward to being able to press old paper in his retirement as he already does, gathers bundles at home for future pressing. But what should be a hope for the future quickly turns into doom, and his home becomes a place of death as in Hrabal's *Too Loud a Solitude* [*Příliš hlučná samota*, 1980]:

I've been bringing home books every evening in my briefcase, and my two-floor Holešovice apartment is all books: what with the cellar and the shed long since packed and the kitchen, pantry, and even bathroom full, the only space free is a path to the window and stove. Even the bathroom has only room enough for me to sit down in: just above the toilet bowl, about five feet off the floor, I have a whole series of shelves, planks piled high to the ceiling, holding over a thousand pounds of books, and one careless roost, one careless rise, one brush with a shelf, and half a ton of books would come tumbling down on me, catching me with my pants down. (Hrabal, 1993, p. 17)

In Hrabal's work we can observe how what is supposed to help man inhabit the world – books, graphic sheets, sheet music, but also all kinds of leaflets, the world of culture – changes its essence in a radical way and becomes extinction. This becoming extinct is, moreover, merely a multiplication of the whole situation of the ageing Hant'a, whose task is to destroy this world of culture in the name of supposed progress, or rather totalitarian power. Death, which is the most extreme strangeness, becomes home, Hubert says to Konwicky's hero: "You're intimate with death, you shouldn't be afraid of it" (Konwicky, 1999, p. 19). The city and death are not a new connection, "just as, overall, modern literature has presented the topoi of city and death as almost hysterically entangled" (Kliems, 2021, p. 62), and whoever wants to encounter true strangeness in the city encounters death, death within himself, because,



as we have shown, even the other extreme only mirrors the abyss in the soul, the disintegrating integrity of the subject.

Does this mean that the city merely holds up a mirror to the passing melancholic, allowing him to become aware of the death within himself? That the city itself remains a mere mirror? The countryside was, at least until a certain time or in certain imaginations, firmly linked to the cycles of nature, and life here results from this unity. The city does not know this natural unity.

I could not believe my eyes. A few scattered snowflakes were falling. A sweltering, muggy afternoon had been followed by a short winter night. Pikush was chasing the slow, gliding snowflakes, which made him think it was some happy Christmas for dogs. (Konwicki, 1999, p. 222)

By losing time's natural rhythm, the city became infinite, eternal – because that is what happens when rhythm is lost: eternity means timelessness, timelessness, amorphous matter that has neither content nor form, but man remained finite. And

it is self-evident that there is no proportionality between the infinite and the finite; it also follows in the clearest way that where we find more and less, we cannot arrive at what is the absolute maximum, for what is greater and less is finite. (Nicholas of Cusa 1440; as cited in Földényi, 2013, p. 103)

Neither the city nor nature is knowable to its consequences, but while in nature its unknowability is shaped by God and its relation to man is thus preserved, the unknowability of the city is established at the very moment of its creation as a combination of planning and development, human endeavor and elemental exuberance. The city is shaped by the multiplicity of possibilities and the immensity of the self; it is the universe within it. Man, himself finite, tries to “read” the city, to know it and understand it, but it is precisely the impossibility of understanding it, of reading it in its entirety, the gap between what man represents and what he has created, but beyond his comprehension, that constitutes the basis of the melancholy of the city. The city does not passively mirror the innermost movements of its pedestrians, but itself allows those who pass through it to glimpse the abyss, to become aware of it.

“A true pedestrian is like a reader who reads a book only to pass the time and for pleasure” (Hessel, 2001, as cited in Derdowska, 2011, p. 37 – translated by T.K.) – the city as its own system of language, this too refers to the city as a universe. Again, this brings us back to Patočka's term “scale” as a relation between aspects to each other and between them and the whole. The pedestrian, it is the one who can read the city, move around the outline of the text, who sets this scale or pronounces it. The text of the city, as wide and infinite as the universe, is given to him, the extent to which he understands its language is a question of home, of the center that he understands, both of which are his fatal situatedness. What direction he takes and how he reads it is, of course, a choice. It is a defiance of fate and an

appropriation of the uncertainty of the leap into the abyss between self and eternity. It is the acceptance of identity and strangeness that, by shifting the “scale”, comes to the same place in a person.

Now I begin walking slowly toward that stone platform wreathed with a short flight of stairs. My legs are becoming heavy and my head is pulled down toward the earth from which I had arisen and to which I must, of my own free will, return. People, give me strength. People, give strength to everyone in this world who is, at this very moment, going, as I am, to make a burnt offering of himself. People, give me strength. People... (Konwicki, 1999, p. 232)

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