

Hejno bez ptáků. By FILIP DOUŠEK. Pp. 133 + 448. Prague: Toito. 2012. CZK 590. Hardcover. ISBN: 9788026030775.

Filip Doušek's *Hejno bez ptáků* (*A Flock Without Birds*) is a masterly combination of postmodern sensibility and new approaches to the traditional form of the novel. An ostentatiously well-read author, Doušek quotes in chapter headings everything from Voltaire through Wittgenstein to Homer Simpson. The novel itself is split into two volumes: *Kniha* (*Book*) and *Příběh* (*Story*), the former, with a black cover, representing a diary intermittently kept by the protagonist, Adam, while *Story* is the narrative of how this diary was written.

The international outlook of the novel (its plot takes us from Cambridge to Prague, India, and Japan) is typical for the Czech post-revolutionary generation, but the philosophy outlined and utilized by Doušek is certainly not. While he attacks stern, outdated scientism and platonic dualism, he also rejects postmodern relativism. As Adam says, his generation refuses old traditions and systems, but is also not satisfied with trash from the river Cam being exhibited in art galleries. The philosophy outlined by Adam in his diary (*Book*) is one we might call relationism; he rejects Aristotle's idea of truth, while presenting it as being the foundation of Western civilization. Instead of an object-based view of reality, he proposes one that concentrates on relationships.

The problem, as with any paradigm-shifting proposition, is in the near impossibility of imagining its existence, and the author does not provide any examples that might help the reader visualize his ideas. Indeed, when considering truth, it seems a very small step from relationism to relativism, and not just etymologically. However, the philosophy in the novel does present a series of irresolvable perceptual paradoxes such as the flock without birds itself, or the classic example of the drawing that alternatively becomes a duck or a rabbit. With fractal graphics in one volume and small birds on the pages of the other, these hand-drawn illustrations add to the unique visual aspect of the book, which earned it second place in the Czech Beautiful Book of the Year award. Philosophically, the only aspect left wanting is perhaps twentieth-century post-structuralism and semiotics. These would do well to complement the ideological developments in the book, whilst also giving established formulations to many of the ideas discussed (much of the thought presented as novel by the story's protagonist can be viewed as a metaphysical formulation of Saussure's structuralism).

In view of the philosophy mentioned above, as well as the general intellectual scope of the book – which includes illuminating references to the links between set theory and Wagner or Messerschmidt – it may come as a surprise that the main character should be a PhD student in statistics rather than philosophy or literary theory. His doctoral project, called *Faustomat*, sets out to collect as much possible data from various disciplines in order to discover some kind of higher power that connects all this information. The concurrence of an ultra-rational discipline with various philosophies and mystic teachings provides perhaps the most thought-provoking aspect of the novel: the development of what we might term secular or rational mysticism.

Despite these observations being presented by a rational statistician who calculates the amount of hours he wastes having sex, they often begin to make one feel uncomfortably sceptical. Indeed, in an intense passage near the end of *Story*, scepticism leads to insanity in Adam. Nevertheless, there are several surprising conclusions to be drawn from the use of mysticism and its interrelatedness with the formal structures of the book. Most notably, this manifests itself in the mysterious character of the author of *Story*, who speaks directly to the reader from a Prague of the future and offers snippets of his library to read. This library is wholly invented by Doušek, with scholarly scripts and works of fiction reading extremely convincingly and often comically. If we were to look for a resolution from Doušek's side, it is worth noting that had the author wanted to, he could have made Adam a mystical god who solved the puzzle for which he built the *Faustomat*. Despite all the indications that this is indeed the case, we find a very different conclusion at the end of *Book*. The unclear identity and surprising knowledge of the author of *Story* suggest that there is nothing left but to stare the paradox straight in the eyes – as stated in the last sentence of *Book*, '[...] and we pulled those around us inside, to the epicentre of life, to the centre of the flock. And what else can a man wish for in this world?' (p. 133).

This realization goes hand-in-hand with a humanism that is at the very core of the novel. While there are many philosophical insights in the books, the narrative momentum comes from Adam's relationship with his girlfriend Nina. This relationship is examined just as rigorously and connected with set theory and presocratic philosophy as much as all the other aspects of Adam's life, yet Doušek also presents passages of striking lyrical beauty. When the couple are together in Prague, Nina worries aloud about the basic question any philosophy faces: the meaning and purpose of pursuing anything in life. And while Adam assuages her with economic talk about potentialities, he knows he himself does not believe in the answer he is giving.

A Flock Without Birds is a novel true to its subject matter, in that it presents a relational plurality both in idealistic and formal ways, whilst also reading as a thriller or love story in many instances. The postmodern aesthetic does not carry through into the idealistic level, as Doušek replaces the postmodern relativism he openly decries with an extremely primary humanism to create a novel that approaches paradoxes without defeatism.

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