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Quo Vadis, Homo Viator?

Journeys in Jože Hradil's *Faceless Pictures*

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Abstract. In Jože Hradil's *Faceless Pictures* [*Slike brez obrazov*] the characters go astray or get into the attraction of adventures and set off for a journey. The spiritual and identity shifts can be interpreted along these eternal human desires as well. A patchwork of remembering and forgetting, the internal journeys of identity preservation, spontaneous or forced assimilation, tolerance and all kinds of politics-induced human deformations are depicted in the novel. The text traces the roles of the journey defined by Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant such as the search for justice, peace, immortality and finding the spiritual center. This study examines how the concrete physical journey changes into an internal road determining the evolution of personality.[1]

Keywords: 20th-century history, migration, travellers, identity

Travelling is one of the determining topoi of cultural consciousness. While travellers of the oldest epics, Gilgamesh or Ulysses, have concrete purposes, the "dialectic journey" in Platonic thinking carries a metaphorical meaning. Dante seeks the perfection of personality in the hereafter while showing the order of the world. The concept of progress in modernity is linked to travelling in a metaphorical sense, similarly to deviation characterizing Foucault's thinking. The journey takes us from somewhere and leads us to somewhere. The process of cognition can also be interpreted as a peculiar journey, since it is achieved by transgression from a narrower horizon towards a broader one. From the very rich symbolism of traveling, Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant in their *Dictionary of Symbols* find fundamental the search for values such as justice, peace, immortality and finding the spiritual centre.

1 This work was created within the framework of the group research project entitled *Travel and Cognition*, supported by Sapientia University – Institute of Research Programmes. The study was elaborated with Jože Hradil's contribution; the fragments cited from the novel are his own translations.

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Jože Hradil is a Slovenian writer, editor-publisher and literary translator. His domestic novel entitled *Faceless Pictures* [*Slike brez obrazov*], published in Maribor in 2012, follows the prose-poetics of realism. Realism, however, bears here the imprints of the twenty-first century: besides the grand stories, the microstories depicted by journeys, forced or willingly made movements are equally important. The external events generated by the great historical changes and the transformations taking place inside the characters mutually determine each other.

In Jože Hradil's novel the characters go astray or get attracted by adventures and set off for journeys. Their spiritual and identity shifts can also be interpreted along eternal human desires. A patchwork of remembering and forgetting, the internal journey of identity preservation, spontaneous or forced assimilation, tolerance and all kinds of politics-induced human deformations are depicted in the novel. The memories span over about a hundred years, reaching back from the present to the end of the nineteenth century. The plot starts at the beginning of World War II, in the childhood of the narrator, calling himself Jurij, and lasts until the present day. The generic features of domestic novel, memoir and Bildungsroman can equally be found in this text, the deeper layers of which can be explored through the analysis of journeys made by the characters as well. It is not only the protagonists who move away from their places of residence, but the place itself is also moving within the frames set by grand history. Beáta Thomka notes: "the border situation is often concomitant with the historical experience and identity of social micro-communities, ethnic groups and their members. In order for this to happen, it is not necessary to live on some border or to cross the border, since history rearranges the European borders without the generations living in the region having ever left their native place, as it happened several times during the twentieth century" (Thomka 2009, 7).

The scene of Hradil's autobiographical novel is the writer's hometown, Murska Sobota. In the course of the one-hundred-year history that the plot comprises this city became part of five countries: the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Serbian-Croatian-Slovenian Kingdom, Hungary, Yugoslavia and Slovenia. In the twentieth century the local population (together with the nations of Eastern Europe sharing a similar fate) could experience the disastrous effects of two extremist totalitarian systems and war-generating nationalism. The identity variations of the characters can be interpreted as individual and collective answers to the pressing historical situation. The scenes where the characters move away from or move to indicate ever extending geographical parameters from the Banat to the Don and Canada, Egres/Igris, Murska Sobota/Muraszombat, Debrecen, Budapest, Fiume/Rijeka, Voronezh, Dachau, Auschwitz, Wien, Hamilton and further.

Daniel-Henri Pageaux (1994) sees travel as an opportunity for personality development (in the case of the pilgrim and the tourist) and for cultural interactions (in the case of the traveling writer), and regards the comparatist as

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the embodiment of the *Homo viator*, the *par excellence* traveller who orients himself within the spaces of imagination. The novel is connected with the topos of travel both in its specific, spatial and abstract sense as an incessant rambling in the spaces of writing and reflection. The "ambulatory" nature of travel can be observed here just like in the case of W. G. Sebald's prose; it provides the transfer from the concrete, physical space to the space of reflection (cf. Long 2007).

The abundance of stories/destinies included in Jože Hradil's *Faceless Pictures* shows that there are several characters leaving their places of birth for faraway destinations. They are confronted with newlives, with foreign languages, new circumstances and life conditions. Their reasons for leaving are rather diverse – economic, political, "historically neuralgic"ones – so that notions such as *emigration*, *escape*, *custody* and *deportation* are common indeed.

The position of reflection is predominant in the retrospective narration. The first part of the novel is told by the narrator from a child's viewpoint. The narrator of the second part is the same person, Jurij, but this time he is a conscious adult, looking back to his family members. The procedure lacks traditionally marked dialogues; the discourse of the character caught in the act of remembering includes the other characters' quotes marked by italics. This illustrates collective experience funneled through a single person. Thus, often three or four narrators' texts are layered upon one another.

The determined authorial attitude against exclusivities can be caught in the part summoning the childhood memories, when the child's viewpoint without any reflections is questioned: Jurij believes that everything the newspapers write is sacred, but there is his friend, Bagi, who always insists in favour of another possibility. The two boys are each other's opposites. Jurij's Hungarian father is the Countess' bailiff, he is rich, while Bagi's parents are poor Slovenians who would never kiss Countess Zichy's hand . Jurij is a fan of the Germans, he regards the Jews as enemies but his friend reveals to him that the veterinarian Farkas, teaching tennis to the boy, is also a Jew. Bagi is welcoming the Soviet Army and is fomenting Pan-Slavic dreams. However, as a proof of their childlike innocence, these contradictions do not overshadow their friendship. It is like reading a parable saying that opposing sympathies do not necessarily have to spoil the friendship of neighbours. The awakening consciousness of the six-ten year-old child is a clashing point for the artificially created collective identity that is often the opposite of the micro-identity, the self-interpretation of the family and individuals. Jurij, as young schoolboy, was in love with the daughter of the Hungarian gendarme despite the fact that he found the father's violence repellent. It still hurt him when the family fled from the Russians: "When Jurij realized, when he clearly saw that the wagon with Éva had left, he buried his face in his hands and thought that he should summon his courage and should run helter-skelter after the wagon" (Hradil 2013, 107).

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Nostalgia is not only for the blossoming emotions but also for the lost illusion of cultural superiority.

> The Russian Army is a big zero, my dear Éva, your father told me so. You remember, right? He was telling that always and everywhere, up to yesterday. Remember how beautiful it was when you arrived in Beltinci. Not in a wagon, but by a magnificent, glittering car, that stopped right before Rituper's restaurant, where I am standing right now, here, on this place, where I can still see you – I still perceive you the way I love you. Tell me the nightmare is over...(Hradil 2013, 108)

The horror of twentieth century history is syntethised in Stanko's journey:

> Speaking about Stanislav – Vladimir's and George's cousin – means nothing but trying to find a proper definition of odyssey. Stanko lived his lonely life. Everybody knew he had never left the place he was born, not even for a short time to pay at least a visit to any other town or village. People used to say *Stanislav was a strange person who had never seen anything else but Murska Sobota and heard no other voice than the one coming from his home.*
> When he was nineteen years old, it happened that for the first time in his life he did see some other places too – while peeping through a small opening of a cattle truck which was taking him to – Dachau…
> After one year he came home. Once when everybody thought he had already recovered from the traumas he had suffered – his friends invited him to join them "to forget the past and enjoy the present." But he refused to make any contact with anybody he did not know. Following that he could not even think of any touristic excursion at all, such as proposed by his friends to take part. Usually it was rather difficult to understand his decided refusal – his explanations that in the concentration camp –: *I had no other choice but stopping my ears not to hear so many different languages which I did not understand and that I will never understand …*
> Was there anybody at all who was able to imagine the real weight of Stanislav's odyssey? Anybody to understand, for example, his constant fear that crossing the Hungarian frontier might – even thirty, forty years after the war – evoke his painful memories? Him to react even when hearing only a slight crowing of a cock or to see a simple cock feather … reminding him of the two Hungarian gendarmes who sent him to concentration camp – since their hats were decorated with cock-feathers …? To understand his opposing and not to step over the border because of the possibility to hear the melody of the strange language – to hear the few words he heard

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> when he was pushed into wagon – *büdös bandita?*"[2] His alienation from the society remained an incurable disease till his death in 1993.[3]

The first part of the novel follows the events up to the end of the war, the establishment of the new social order, watching the gradual maturing of the child Jurij as his thinking is getting more sophisticated. His internal journey until the end of the novel aims to explore the truth. In a world of ideology-determined confrontations preserving humanity is very difficult. The father's fate, through the journeys made by them, becomes parable-like just like the older boy's, Vladimir's. The half Hungarian, half German father wants to emigrate to the United States for adventure, boards the ship, then throws himself into the water and returns to land. From this point on, the search for the spiritual center shapes his way. To him, honour and humanity are more important than any political success: after World War I he voluntarily remains in the homeland of his Slovenian bride. However, when Prekmurje Region is attached to Hungary (1941) and he has a steady job, he provides shelter for a Slovenian university professor. When Tito's partisans take over the reign after the Soviet Army marches through, he gets imprisoned for being Hungarian. Jurij's older brother and model, Vladimir, having a Slavic name, volunteers to the Hungarian Army out of love for adventure. He gets wounded on the front and falls into captivity, escapes to the Soviet troops and – knowing German, Hungarian, Slovenian and "a bit of Russian" as well – becomes their translator. Thus he gets home with the Red Army. However, the Yugoslavian partisans do not welcome him at all – the ex volunteer fascist soldier – so he flees over the Austrian border. He inherited his father's adventurousness, while Jurij walks the paternal road searching for truth and peace.

The adult Jurij is interested in the fate of his mother's aunts, in the shifts that take place in the characters' identities. The processes of inclusion and exclusion, the voluntary and forced assimilation can be observed in personal destinies. (His parents and his older sister, Ilka, who remained in Murska Sobota, cast Paula off not because she changed her language in Budapest but because she married a Jewish man.)

> Jurij's father in Slovenia and his mother's relatives in Hungary both got in new circumstances, in a new language and spiritual environment. A melting pot where they adopted some and gave up on others in everyday habits or language, even changing their names and religion. The Hradil name, with the characteristic Czech *–il* ending in a Slavic environment, in the country of Serbians, Croatians and Slovenians naturally meant no trouble. The same name, however, in Hungary was annoying, therefore some of his father's siblings chose to Hungarianise it to Hragyil. Those who felt that the

2 'stinky bandit' (Translator's note).
3 Jože Hradil's contribution.

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> Hungarian social and political environment and the Hungarian language did not agree with this, chose an even more radical solution, changing their names to Balsai or even Hegyaljai and Hargitai. The indisputable Slavic name of the three women from Prekmurje Region did not cause any problem. After marriage, the two Markovič sisters used the name of their Hungarian husbands [...]. (Hradil 2013, 298–299)

The career of Markovič's family, that of the narrator's mother is very instructive as well.

> Paula Markovič left her birthplace, the Austro Hugarian Muraszombat (today Murska Sobota, Slovenia) for Budapest in about 1910. She married a Hungarian man. They did their best to solve several problems they had to face. Among others, the problems of assimilation. For instance: *The way Paula behaved was not what people in Budapest liked, they made fun especially of the language she spoke, saying it was a swinish blab…*
> In Paula's confession to her nephew it is written:
> *… All the connections with my home were disconnected and the images of Murska Sobota faded in my memories every year more and more. … They were replaced by palaces, villas and large bridges across the Danube. I must admit I did enjoy the comfortable life in the beautiful metropolis. But the unpleasant time followed as well. … Many people I met – told me straight out that my knowledge of their language was poor, ugly, uncultivated.*
> 'What kind of accent do you have?'
> 'What an odd, rustic pronunciation!'
> 'From where did you drag up yourself anyhow, Mrs. Vincze?'
> *I clenched my teeth and did everything possible to erase the traces which did not fit into my new environment. I decided to learn the language to become nice and clean and grammatically correct. I was lucky since there was a man who helped me a great deal. You can imagine, what it was like, George, as you know him pretty well! … What was your uncle József's gallantry like! Since I was aware that the problems I had were mostly linguistic I did obey my careful teacher. And after several years I was even thinking in Hungarian so that I stopped translating my sentences from Slovene. My new language got richer and richer, while on the other hand my mother tongue increasingly sank. I firmly decided that I would never utter any Slovenian word. But it turned out to be unnecessary: Nobody came to visit us in Hungary, nobody at all with whom I could chat in Slovenian language. Who else could help me – but my husband? We were very much dependent on the society, on the lofty people. And my husband was very much aware of it so he had to protect me – as well as himself.*

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> *He did his best we could stay and remain in the company we needed so much. . . . Once it happened that in the middle of social chat one of the acquaintances of mine suddenly asked me where I had in fact come from.* 'Were you, she asked, at the time of the Serb-Croat-Slovene kingdom living in a town or in a village?'
> *Besides, I was badly hurt too when a woman sitting next to me suddenly said:* 'Don't say you to have lived in a village?! In the company of pigs and cows?' *Soon a lot of people gathered around me, waiting for my answer. But then, of course, it was my husband who saved me. My resourceful József. Though, on the other hand, it had already happened that I asked myself whether he had saved me at all? In reality? Was it a good decision I had decided to stay …? To be assimilated by foreign people? In their country? Among people who had built a rigid wall around themselves … so that I had to remain there shut and isolated within the wall of selfishness? In the circle with tradition, with millennial history of Hungary, as they used to boast. But your uncle József loudly told the company standing around, and the curious ladies in high heels and gentlemen with monocles that I had come from Maribor*. 'From the beautiful town, he went on, by the river Drava, the very place where our Sándor Petőfi had composed a poem!!! The very poem … the one …. Which one?' *He, deadly serious, suddenly asked the bewildered ladies with professorial rigor. He was waiting silently and provokingly pretended to help lady Várady with some words:*
> 'Come on, say it, you know it, you who adore our poet so much,'
> *And the naughty József played on as if he had heard something … someone …. He even nodded to an invisible gentleman and to a lady next to him*: 'Come on! Say it, good gracious. That's it! Yeah! You are right, buddy! The Drava river is the very title of his poem! Anyone who does not know this poem cannot claim to know the greatest poet, right? Right, Mrs. Várady? I am sure this is the answer you had known and it was even on the tip of your tongue! Wasn't it? And I am also convinced everybody knows, *József tirelessly continued*, that Maribor is a beautiful city as far from stables and pigs as Budapest is far from those we feed in Vác and Visegrad.' *My József gracefully bowed and turned in the direction he had come from. Since then I had never been hurt by them!* (Hradil 2013, 355–357)

After getting into a confrontation with her family, Paula consciously changes her language.

> I gritted my teeth and made everything I could to erase the clues that did not fit into my new environment.[...] I knew it well that coping with the language would not be easy, therefore I obeyed in everything my stern

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> teacher and after a while I even thought in Hungarian. *My learnt language got steadily richer, my mother tongue faded away. I also vowed and decided hard not to speak Slovenian ever again.* (Hradil 2013, 359)

The forced self-surrender, however, causes psychological harm. Years later Paula recounts: "*I denied my heritage, my roots. Owing to my situation, my circumstances, I had to hide my real face. Both in Budapest and Murska Sobota*" (Hradil 2013, 359).

Paradoxically, Paula's daughter, Gizella, clings above all to her Hungarian "mother tongue" after she leaves Hungary for Canada to join her daughter's family. For her the cause of suffering is that she has to give up the Hungarian language and culture. Gizella's daughter, Judit, who emigrated to Canada, consciously severs the ties to her native land and mother tongue, just like her grandmother did.

The faceless picture, the metaphor of identity loss, is linked to Jurij's cousin, Gizella. This also appears on the book's cover. Gizi's mother, Paula, is a Catholic woman with Slovenian mother tongue; her father is a Jew with Hungarian mother tongue. She is a Hungarian Catholic, while her husband is a Jew with Hungarian mother tongue. Her daughter is a Hungarian Catholic who also married a Hungarian Jewish man, and they emigrated together to Canada. They encourage the ninety-year-old Gizella to learn English, to change language.

> Gizi once remarked jokingly that her relatives, if they could, would prefer to chase her with the broom to the English dictionary, though they know that this is to no avail. *They know very well what the situation with me is: however fast I learn a word, I keep forgetting the previous one, so I am always left with one word.* (Hradil 2013, 396)

Before her death, the lonely, uprooted woman cuts the faces of lost family members out of the photographs.

The book's most memorable metaphor is a positive one, the peculiar journey toward immortality: the chain of handshakes is a beautiful, humane and reconciliatory symbol-variation. According to a grotesque and amusing version of the metaphor, its inventor, uncle Józsi, Paula's husband, was in love with Queen Sissi. They walked twenty kilometres with two of his friends to catch a glimpse of Franz Joseph's wife in the Gödöllő Mansion. When they were spotted and expelled, Józsi pleaded to be slapped too: the butler hitting him could have certainly touched the Queen's hand, and thus, indirectly, Józsi could contact the adored creature. According to the didactic and uplifting version of the handshake metaphor, uncle Józsi's wealthy American friend once gave a large sum to a beggar child who, out of gratitude, was following him everywhere. When the rich man had an accident, he accompanied him to the hospital, too and rescued his life

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having just the needed blood type. As an intermediary of the metaphorical, time-spanning handshakes, uncle Józsi could transfer the greetings of Mór Jókai to Jurij, who became a writer: "[...] through my hand you touched the right hand of someone who wrote the greatest of the Hungarian masterpieces. In other words, through many handshakes you, Jurij, in a sense, touched the hands of one of the greatest classics of Hungarian literature" (Hradil 2013, 378).

The main role in Jože Hradil's novel is played by exploring the problems and looking for the path of truth. The Slovenian author succeeds in presenting the humane, reconciliatory behaviour in an authentic way and in finding the way to peace and reconciliation. Truth, peace, a special immortality through literature and finding the spiritual centre: these symbolic values of the topos of the journey all appear in the destinies of the novel's characters.

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