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Olga Czernikow
University of Wrocław, Faculty of Languages, Literatures and Cultures
olga.czernikow@uwr.edu.pl
ORCID: 0009-0003-6290-1090

Between Laughter and Horror: Humour and the Grotesque in Karel Michal's *Bubáci pro všední den* [*Everyday Spooks*][1]

Abstract

Karel Michal (1932–1984) made his debut as a humourist and has, to this day, been regarded by many readers and critics primarily as the author of bold humoresques, distinguished by their unbridled imagination and inventive language. The uncompromising character and freshness of wit for which he became known were fully displayed in the 1961 volume *Bubáci pro všední den* [Everyday Spooks], perhaps the author's most recognisable work. However, in *Everyday Spooks* laughter and humour are constantly accompanied by horror, which often appears as their grim reverse. The aim of this paper is to examine the affinity between horror and humour, and their impact on the semiosphere. Individual short stories from the cycle are analysed in order to identify negative humour as a paradoxical device for generating positive values.

Keywords: Karel Michal, *Everyday Spooks*, Czech literature, negation, grotesque, humour

Karel Michal (born Pavel Buksa, 1932–1984) first presented himself to readers as the author of witty satirical feuilletons, co-authored with Dušan Karpatský and published in *Plamen* magazine between 1960 and 1961. These texts, forming the *Černé a bílé* [Black and White] cycle, were not signed with the authors' names but with a pictogram of black and white chess knights. However, the style – sparkling with humour, Vančura-like in its ornamentality, at times displaying bravado, and saturated with discreet insinuations and more or less veiled allusions – already bore the unmistakable tone of Michal's later prose. This tone, which fairly quickly emerged in its full rhetorical force, appeared at the very beginning of the writer's

1 This paper is partly based on a chapter from a PhD dissertation to be published in 2025.

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literary path, in a volume of short stories published in 1961 and entitled *Everyday Spooks* [*Bubáci pro všední den*][2].

The collection secured Michal's status as one of the most distinctive authors of the late 1950s and early 1960s and was to become his most recognisable, or at least most frequently reprinted, work. The main reason for its popularity is undoubtedly its fresh, original humour, as well as its clear references to the reality of life in a socialist state, though communicated through a fable-like code. However, it should be noted that here both humour and the fable itself are conceived in a rather subversive manner. Michal's humour has little in common with traditionally understood merriment, while the fable convention undergoes such sweeping transformation that it becomes, in effect, an anti-fable.

In Michal's work, the peculiar, at times plebeian humour, occasionally permeated with subtle sadness, is combined with the uncanny, which is less fable-like and more reminiscent of a penny dreadful. The juxtaposition of comedy and horror, even when the horror at first appears quite harmless, becomes – as we shall see – a source of discomfort and a sobering shock. In order to better illuminate the nature of this shock and the specific characteristics of Michal's frightening yet comic universe more generally, I will use an example from a different text which only seemingly diverges from the Czech writer's work. In his essay "Zweimal Chaplin," Theodor W. Adorno recalls his first encounter with the great comedian as follows:

> Together with many others we were invited to a villa in Malibu, on the coast outside of Los Angeles. While Chaplin stood next to me, one of the guests was taking his leave early. Unlike Chaplin, I extended my hand to him a bit absentmindedly, and, almost instantly, started violently back. The man was one of the lead actors from *The Best Years of Our Lives*, a film famous shortly after the war; he lost a hand during the war, and in its place bore practicable claws made of iron. When I shook his right hand and felt it return the pressure, I was extremely startled, but sensed immediately that I could not reveal my shock to the injured man at any price. In a split second I transformed my frightened expression into an obliging grimace that must have been far ghastlier. The actor had hardly moved away when Chaplin was already playing the scene back. All the laughter he brings about is so near to horror [*Grauen*]; solely in such proximity to cruelty does it find its legitimation and its element of the salvational.[3] (Adorno [1964] 1996: 60–61)

Confrontation with the non-human, manifesting as iron claws "growing out" of the sleeves[4] of a living person gives rise to justifiable horror, even though the phenomenon is rationalised a moment later. An ordinary part of a social encounter, conventional through and through – someone taking their leave – is suddenly invaded by an uncanny element that overturns the ordinary and the conventional. A crack appears: a distortion, a deviation from the norm. Chaplin's parody elicits laughter and, to some degree, relief, but it does not restore balance; on the contrary, it seems to render the aberration even more unsettling. The proximity of horror and laughter, noted by Adorno, forms the very foundation of the grotesque and of the literature inspired by that tradition.

But the ludicrousness that accompanies the grotesque is not an innocently cheerful kind of fun that invites a carefree smile. It is a negative, diabolical form of ridicule. Much ink has been spilled on the

2 All quotes from the book are from the English translation by David Short (Michal [1961] 2008).

3 Translation slightly modified.

4 Harold Russell (1914–2002), whom Adorno discusses in this passage, in fact had two prosthetic arms, having lost both hands in a grenade explosion.

"evil" roots of laughter, including in treatises by the Romantics (Jean Paul [1804] 2000: 523–524) and in Baudelaire's "On the Essence of Laughter" (Baudelaire [1885] 1956). The grotesque amplifies and exposes this negativity – which is why Michał Głowiński calls it "an appeal through negation" (Głowiński 2003: 10). According to the Polish scholar:

> the grotesque, in its most outstanding and original manifestations, challenges the established image of the world, lays bare complications and the flipsides of phenomena, often unexpected or surprising, those to which one pays no attention in everyday life (often for ideological reasons).[5] (Głowiński 2003: 10)

The contestation of accepted conventions, the deformation of the image to the point of the ridiculous, peculiarity, exaggeration – all these features signal a distortion of the natural order, a departure from the norm and its replacement by an "anti-norm" (see Jennings [1963] 2003: 45). In Czech culture, in a sense, horror literature itself is an anti-norm. As Patrycjusz Pająk notes, Biedermeier, the foundation upon which modern Czech culture gradually built itself, with its love of the mundane, the routine, and a down-to-earth stance, pushed to the margins anything that strayed beyond this desirable golden mean (Pająk 2014). Commenting on this assertion, Anna Gawarecka adds:

> All references to the aesthetics of horror, with its emphasis on ontological excess, transgression, suspense or the breakdown of epistemological automatism, may therefore be treated as a specific deviation from the cultural norm, requiring both an in-depth philosophical justification and functionalising mechanisms that would make it possible to legitimise the presence of horror in the world represented in literary works. (Gawarecka 2015: 261–262)

Gawarecka emphasises that under socialism the marginalisation of works showing inclinations towards mysticism or spiritualism was particularly strong, even when there was some "justification," *i.e.* when they otherwise fulfilled the demands of the ideology. Gawarecka adds: "The publication of *Everyday Spooks*, a collection of short stories by Karel Michal, in 1961 thus seems even more surprising" (Gawarecka 2015: 263).

Indeed, the publication of short stories that veer towards grotesque fantasy and, moreover, openly mock the dysfunctional socialist state may well seem surprising, given the thoroughness of the censorship and police apparatus at the time. According to Viola Fischerová, the reason lay in the objective qualities of the text itself. In the afterword to the Polish edition of the volume, she writes: "at the meeting of the commission charged with approving books for publication on behalf of the KSČ, *Bubáci...* was approved by none other than Jiří Hendrych – the second most important figure in the party and its chief ideologue [...]. Well, he liked it" (Fischerová 2008: 152).

Viola Fischerová's account, based primarily on her own recollections, cannot be verified today, but an analysis of the internal reviews (which served as censorship protocols[6]) in the archives of the Museum of Czech Literature (Památník národního písemnictví) indicates that the original manuscript was nonetheless subjected to numerous revisions. Moreover, one of the stories, "The Ballad of Doodledoor," owing to its potentially "controversial" content (the main character is an officer of the security services),

5 All translations, unless otherwise indicated, are mine – O.C.

6 The censorship procedures of the 1960s are further discussed in the publication *V obecném zajmu. Cenzura a sociální regulace literatury v moderní české kultuře 1749–2014* (Wögerbauer *et al.* 2015).

was referred back to the relevant branch of the Ministry of the Interior even after it had been approved for publication.

Based on archival material from the Československý spisovatel publishing house (held in the collection of the Museum of Czech Literature), it can be established that *Bubáci...* was not spared censorship procedures, that the text was returned to the author several times, and that its final version is the result of certain – though it is unclear which, or how many – alterations made by Michal in line with the reviewer's suggestions. From the final protocol confirming that the book had been approved for publication, dated 4 April 1961, we also learn that the volume originally contained a short story entitled "Legacy" ("Odkaz"), probably not preserved today. In the editor's concluding note we read: "After unsuccessfully trying to rewrite 'Legacy', Michal removed the short story from the book and added the short story 'The Dead Cat'" (LA PNP 1960–1961).

The final contents of the book were thus as follows: "Strength of Character," "How Piml Struck Lucky," "The Dead Cat," "An Extraordinary Occurrence," "The Cockabogey," "The Ballad of Doodledoor," "Cookie." Each of the stories follows a similar pattern: a supernatural being suddenly enters the life of an ordinary citizen of 1960s Czechoslovakia, overturning the existing order and exposing its fragile foundations. These more or less grotesque monstrosities crop up in workplaces, state institutions, offices, blocks of flats, and sometimes pubs or streets in a perpetual state of construction. If a traditionally conceived "Gothic" setting does appear, it is always in a pastiche style, confronting classical Gothic conventions with the everyday, practical functioning of the spaces in question. Thus, when the White Lady appears in the castle cloister ("How Piml Struck Lucky"), the castle administrator is terrified not so much by the sight of the ghost as by the prospect of reporting the encounter to a state institution, which naturally produces cognitive dissonance: on the one hand, he feels obliged to report what he has seen, while on the other, he is convinced that, as a conscientious worker and upright citizen of a socialist state, he cannot possibly have seen it. In the end, driven by official loyalty, he decides to report the matter to the Department for the Protection of Historical Monuments, which naturally backfires (he is transferred to another post because "anyone who is capable of instilling in others a belief in ghosts cannot, in this day and age, remain in charge of a state-owned castle" (Michal [1961] 2007: 56)).

The ghost in "An Extraordinary Occurrence" haunts the barracks corridors or the latrine and, like the White Lady, makes the characters afraid not of its existence but of the potential trouble it may bring (the officers, however, quickly find a solution to the problem: "Anyone who sees it will be punished. [...] For spreading alarm and undermining morale" (Michal [1961] 2007: 118)). The attics in "The Ballad of Doodledoor" are by no means haunted repositories of old trunks or mysterious enchanted objects, but the setting for regular thefts, observed by an otherwise amiable, though apparently repulsive, apparition. Finally, on a busy street in Prague one can buy a magic ring that turns a human being into a bear, or find an egg from which hatches a chicken-like, not particularly friendly creature with workaholic tendencies, while in the sewers one may encounter a dwarf who, upon request, will dispose of any enemy. The juxtaposition of the supernatural and uncanny with what is all too familiar, its oppressive everyday quality and absurdity, is in itself comical. The condition of "disappointed expectation," emphasised in so many theories of comedy (Dziemidok 2011), is fulfilled on multiple levels: where we expect horror and the demonic, we get comic deformity ("The Cockabogey," "The Ballad of Doodledoor"); where we expect pious trepidation in the face of the supernatural, we witness irritation leading to malice and beatings ("The Cockabogey," "How Piml Struck Lucky"). Contrast and a certain deflation of expectations, on

which the humour of the stories relies, are also the main instruments of defamiliarisation, which force the characters (and with them the readers) to leave the safe sphere of automatism and view a given situation from a completely different perspective. Michal's humour, however, is "layered": it is amusing not only to see how the protagonists react to the appearance of the uncanny in a rationalised (though by no means rational) everyday world, but also how they desperately try to incorporate the uncanny into the framework of a joyless, yet at least familiar, daily life.

By depicting the actions of protagonists confronted with the uncanny, Michal follows the Chaplin-impersonator, ready at a moment's notice to turn the horror and pathos of dramas into a prank. In its spontaneity and liveliness, the humour in *Everyday Spooks* is close to Czech *recese* humour[7], with all its – also quite radical – methods and consequences. The slogan coined by the founders of the *Recese* movement, "jest is a must" (*sranda musí bejt!*), could just as well be taken as the motto of Michal's stories. In *Everyday Spooks*, the supernatural creatures seem to appear only to induce a state of discomfort in the haunted unfortunates and make them doubt their own senses – much like the "victims" of *recese* pranks. In doing so, the spooks themselves display an ironclad composure (reminiscent of the impassivity with which *recese* practitioners carried out their pranks in public spaces), since, as beings belonging to a realm situated beyond good and evil, they are simply incapable of making moral judgements about their actions. The comic power of *Everyday Spooks* is thus born from the inexhaustible energy of clownery, from the provocative impulse to compromise reality with brilliant and cruel gags which – just like those of Chaplin – are also disturbing. Liberated from all rules, gravitating towards the absurd (while targeting the absurd nonetheless), laughter "absorbs" the grim potential of horror and thus becomes ghastlier and more dangerous than horror itself. Indeed, the spooks, although mostly ugly and repellent, can hardly be seen as genuinely frightening. Apparently, neither do the characters perceive them as such: unlike in horror stories, in Michal's work the horror generally lasts only a moment and arises from surprise rather than fear. The ease with which the human protagonists rationalise the irrational is, as already noted, an important and perhaps the strongest source of comedy in Michal's stories.

Although the appearance of each spook causes a brief episode of panic, a moment later it is integrated into procedures so mundane, so ordinary, and so formalised that the uncanny evaporates without a trace. A transformed bear attends a job interview like any other candidate, Houska's supervisors weigh the possibility of including Cockabogey on the appropriate payroll, and the attic phantom gives testimony as a witness in a theft case. All the phantoms speak to people in the most natural manner possible, sometimes demonstrating their knowledge of "earthly," specifically Czech, historical context ("I am Cockabogey, not a reforming Protestant"[8] – says Cockabogey (Michal [1961] 2007: 146)), and a certain clear-headedness (when an officer asks "What are you doing?," the ghost haunting the military barracks immediately replies: "Haunting […] Any idiot can see that" (Michal [1961] 2007: 111)). The human protagonists take these retorts at face value; some even – whether involuntarily or by conscious decision – adopt the logic of the supernatural world and begin to apply it as if it were the most natural thing imaginable. Yet this logic is, in fact, the only truly "terrible" aspect of their existence.

7 "Recese" (also spelled "recesse") eludes definition. It denotes both a kind of humour (close to practical jokes or pranks), a type of behavior (somewhat like brief happenings), and an artistic – or perhaps social – movement that developed in the 1930s, based on such behaviour or humour.

8 In the Czech original: "Jsem plivník, ne Chelčický" (Michal 1961: 86).

For it is a logic that admits no exceptions or modifications, the logic of an automaton. It is also the medium through which Michal charts a gradation of humour: from the relatively innocent (when he describes playful interactions between the real and supernatural worlds), through humour that is sour (when he uses as a shield the absurdities of bureaucracy and socio-political life in a socialist state), to the truly dark (when logic becomes the reverse of morality). Let us consider the first two. Cockabogey is surprised that its owner wishes to be rid of it, because according to its logic, the one who "sat on" the egg is entitled to own the kobold, not to mention that, as a wealth-generating creature, it must surely be desirable. The fact that this magical assistance spells disaster to the man who lays paving stones never occurs to it, because it simply lacks such a disposition: empathy is entirely alien to it. The confrontation between Houska's tribulations and Cockabogey's contentment provokes laughter: the reader laughs at the mutual incompatibility of the two systems of thought, but also at the absolute incompetence of the socialist official apparatus, which has no appropriate column for Cockabogey and thus becomes completely useless in resolving the problem.

The same occurs in the short stories "How Piml Struck Lucky" and "An Extraordinary Occurrence" - the discrepancy between what a citizen of a socialist state is permitted to see and what they actually see creates dissonance and draws the characters into less (Mikys) or more serious (Piml) trouble. In both cases, it is the general, systemic principle rather than individual experience that prevails: the officers in the barracks unanimously decide that they have not seen a ghost, while administrator Piml can do no more than nail a picture of Jan Hus at the Council of Constance to the wall and cast a meaningful glance at this eloquent symbol of the struggle for truth.

All the administrative absurdities with which the characters must grapple – only to discover that they have done so needlessly – are portrayed as though in a distorting mirror, grotesquely disfiguring what is already ridiculous in itself. Michal identifies such satirical deformation with humour, as can be inferred from his essay "View from the Ground Floor" ("Pohled z přízemí"), dating from roughly the same period as *Everyday Spooks*. The writer notes that "literary humour and literary satire, in successful cases, are ultimately identical. The distinction between them, which is otherwise very vague, is a matter of the author's original intention or a historical literary definition"[9] (Michal [1960] 2001: 573). In the same essay, Michal emphasises the negative foundation of all humour:

> Every humour has an object [...] Something is funny or it is not funny. If it is funny, it is because of some trait, and that trait is something bad, no matter how one tries to pretend otherwise. There is no need, though it is apparently becoming a habit, to beg mercy for literary humour by explaining that if something is good, laughing at it will not harm it. A good person does not laugh at good things. Why should we? They are logical and appropriate. Still, we can and must laugh at the bg and tiny nonsense that clings to every human action and slows it down, just as various aquatic creatures slow down the ship to whose bottom they have attached themselves.[10] (Michal [1960] 2001: 575)

9 "Literární humor a literární satira splývají v dobrém případě v jedno v závěrečném účinu, a doposud mlhavě platné rozlišení je záležitostí literární historie nebo prvotního autorského záměru."

10 "Každý humor má svůj objekt […] Něco buď je, nebo není směšné. Je-li to směšné, je to směšné pro něco, a to něco je nedobré, ať je to cokoliv, a ať se to sebevíce tváří jako něco jiného. Není třeba, jak se leckdy stává zvykem, žadoniti o milost pro literární humor vysvětlováním, že dobré věci smích neuškodí. Dobré věci se dobrý člověk nesměje. Není proč. Je logická a správná. Smát se však můžeme a musíme rozličným nesmyslům a nesmyslíkům, které se na ni nalepují jako na kterékoliv lidské konání a zpomalují její běh jako přílepky běh lodi, k jejímuž kýlu přilnuly."

A world haunted by spooks is neither logical nor properly functioning (examples of its dysfunction are innumerable, so let us limit ourselves to the meagre repertoire of oppressive "big and tiny nonsense" characteristic of the socialist state: the imperative of endlessly exceeding production norms which, taken literally, has a destructive and demoralising effect on workers; red tape inflated to such gargantuan proportions that it paralyses entire workplaces; the obligation to share a flat with random, often repulsive people; the pressure to denounce one's neighbours and co-workers; the subordination of individual experience to officially sanctioned views, *etc.*). In line with Michal's concept mentioned above, sarcastic humour seems fully justified in biting back[11].

Still, the mockery has a deeper, hidden meaning. "Every good literary humour has its more or less obvious morality [...]. However, the notion of morality cannot be equated with moralising," the author stresses in the essay quoted above (Michal [1960] 2001: 573). Mockery, however merciless, becomes a tool that reveals the wavering or even outright disappearance of moral values, but also attempts to restore them. Michal's subject is thus akin to the jester figure, ruthless yet concerned: a figure whose universal aim is to dispel illusions and unapologetically mock the "excellent foppery of the world" (Shakespeare [1605] 2004: 27). Ultimately, a fool is someone who, through laughter (including bad laughter and ridicule), directs the attention of others to what is flawed, evil, and harmful – following the principle that, in order to fight evil, one must first see and define it. The jester's negative humour, paradoxically, serves to safeguard positive values.

As already mentioned, one source of comedy in Michal's work is the ease with which the real world "absorbs" the uncanny and feeds it into the machinery of socialist everyday life. The fairy-tale creatures cannot fully realise their fairy-tale potential because that machinery blocks it in exactly the same way as it blocks people's aspirations to function normally within the state. A paragraph, a rubric, or a mere provision has more power than all the ghosts, dwarves, and kobolds put together. Moreover, contrary to fairy tales, the encounter with a supernatural power does not change the characters' lives, or the characters themselves, for the better – on the contrary, it brings their dark sides to the surface. Houska, after his battle with Cockabogey, gets drunk and refuses to work; the accountant Mikulášek decides that, having been wronged, he will now use his appearance and physical strength to bully and rob others; the policeman claims the merit earned by the attic spook in order to gain a promotion; and the editor Kotlach, tormented by life in a shared flat and by the ideological demands imposed by his superior, finally decides to take advantage of the repeated offer made by the murderous (though fortunately inept) dwarf and almost kills a random drunk. In this sense, *Everyday Spooks* is an anti-folktale or anti-fairy tale, revealing the real advantage that evil holds over good.

The spooks themselves have no intrinsic sense of the boundary between good and evil; they possess only their logic. Its absurdity provokes laughter, yet at the same time it is disturbing in how closely it resembles the logic of all doctrinal systems: unshakeable and inhumanly consistent. When the dead cat hears a question on a radio show about how to radically prevent crop blight, it answers with complete simplicity: "Stop growing grain crops […]. Don't grow any new ones and burn the old ones" (Michal [1961] 2007: 75). One may laugh at how detached from reality this advice is, but the laughter turns into a shudder of horror when the same cat concludes that it is more beneficial to kill people than to cure them,

11 "Každý dobrý literární humor má totiž svou více nebo méně evidentní morálku. […] Pojem morálky nelze ovšem ztotožnit s moralizováním."

because it requires less effort and reduces the risk of further diseases developing (Michal [1961] 2007: 86).

Michal's humour is founded on the prominence of the so-called "negative trait" (Dziemidok 1958): the flaw, the blemish, the inefficiency, the gap between the way things should be and the way things really are. A world haunted by spooks does not function properly: the weak are humiliated, the hard-working are ostracised, the two-faced are rewarded and admired. While the realm of the spooks is amoral, the human world is simply immoral, and it glorifies immorality, seemingly accepting it as the final state. One evil feeds another, creating a kind of closed circuit. The appearance of a supernatural being does not interrupt this perpetual motion, but it does introduce visible deviations that draw the reader's attention precisely to the cracks in the seemingly infallible mechanism of the socialist state, as well as to the distortions and fractures in the intricate structure of human relations.

The grotesque clearly exposes the ugliness of everyday, ordinary evil: the harmful and petty actions of various Prouzas, Tomečeks and Hammerníks, comrades whose obstinacy and blind zeal make the lives of others unbearable. The critique is total, aimed both at the system and at individuals. As far as the former is concerned, Michal, as befits a *recese* artist, plays a prank on the regime – one composed of bizarre stories which, at first glance, seem completely innocent, but in fact constitute a reservoir of merciless derision and righteous accusation. It is a bold, perhaps audacious gesture, a provocative prank of the kind that Michal relished, since several years after leaving Czechoslovakia he admitted in an interview with Karel Hvížďala that he missed "playing cat and mouse" with the communists (Hvížďala [1981] 1992: 118). Michal was well aware of the consequences of adopting the prankster's stance (in the purely literary sense) even before the publication of *Everyday Spooks*. In the essay quoted above, he wrote:

> All humour, all satire, must choose between two fundamental risks: excessive restraint or exaggeration. By deliberately diluting, tempering, or silencing what is funny, silly, petty, or just plain wrong, we achieve nothing. Exaggeration is a risk, but it is an occupational risk, an honourable risk - a risk whose perpetrator will not be castigated.[12] (Michal [1960] 2001: 578)

In *Everyday Spooks*, Michal clearly opts for the second risk: by introducing creatures from another world into the reality of the drab socialist state, he brings to light every ludicrous feature of the inept system and lays it bare in grotesque, pseudo-folktale magnification or multiplication. Still, it should be noted that his unmasking humour targets not only the absurdities of the socialist machinery, but also human characters. In *Everyday Spooks*, individual morality is portrayed as a relative value, subordinated to personal goals: career, the accumulation of wealth, the satisfaction of ambition. In fact, it can hardly be called morality.

This is especially clear in "The Ballad of Doodledoor," where the creature, itself amoral like all the other spooks, learns the rules of human coexistence and human ethics from a police sergeant. When he asks about "what else is not allowed," the sergeant replies in a way that could almost read as a moral code in miniature:

12 "Každý humor, každá satira si musí volit mezi dvěma zásadními riziky: nedotáhnout, nebo přetáhnout. Vědomým nedotahováním, vědomým zastíráním nebo zamlčováním toho, co je kolem nás stále ještě směšné, pitomé nebo malicherně zlé, se nedosáhne ničeho. Přetáhnout je riziko, ale je to riziko profese, riziko čestné, a nikdo rozumný nebude na pachatele strkat psí hlavu."

> "Stealing's not allowed, whether from lofts or anywhere else, or killing, or saying things that aren't true, and it's not allowed to cheat people of things they've been promised or exploit their labour for private gain."
>
> "And do all people know that?"
>
> "They all know it, but they don't always observe it. The ones that don't are wicked and everybody else has to help prevent such wickedness succeeding." (Michal [1961] 2007: 167–168)

Doodledoor, the most human of the spooks, absorbs this accelerated course in ethics with the eagerness of a child and looks forward to further conversations with the police sergeant, whom he henceforth calls his "friend." The narrator tells us: "He had begun to relish conversations about what was good and what wasn't," then adds: "If spooks could blossom, he would have burst into bloom like a rose-bush over those two nights" (Michal [1961] 2007: 169). Doodledoor is perhaps the only character in the whole of Michal's cycle who undergoes any significant transformation. From an amoral – neither evil nor good – spook, he becomes a sensitive, altruistic being. Let us note a reversal of a classic folktale motif. Whereas in folktales the human protagonist, usually in a "weak" position in the world – due to origin, poverty, or mere averageness – is suddenly "promoted" socially, intellectually, or materially through the intervention of supernatural forces, or gains magical powers that secure success, in "The Ballad" it is a being from another world who is transformed through contact with earthly ordinariness and its ordinary representative.

Nor do the paradoxes end there. When Doodledoor overhears the sergeant's conversation and realises that the man has no intention of keeping his word to the spook and has claimed all the credit for himself, the arc of his metamorphosis is inverted. Doodledoor, disillusioned as only someone whose newly built world has just collapsed can be, intuitively begins to do evil:

> He opened a dormer window and slipped down into the loft. He took a huge piece of white cloth down from a line, spread it out on the floor, piled onto it all the other pieces of cloth he could find, made a bundle of them, then crawled back out of the window and, bent double under the weight, set off across the roof. He didn't know where to take it, but he did know he was going to take it away somewhere where no one would find it. And the same thing tomorrow, and the day after. He viewed it as a duty, because he had understood everything. For he lacked imagination. He was only a spook. And he did have such a small head. (Michal [1961] 2007: 187–188)

The passage concludes the story, leaving the reader with a bitter punchline: a human being, as Michal sees him, is no better than the monster; yet, unlike the phantom, humans possess the tools (reason, feeling) to act in accordance with a human ethical code, but deliberately fail to use them. The ironclad, non-human logic of the spook-world exposes the fragility of the relativised logic of the human world. Above all, it reveals the rotten foundations of the human moral system. "The Ballad" and the following "Cookie," which concludes the cycle, are essentially sad, if not tragic, stories, unmasking reality in its grotesque, diabolic form. It is a reality populated by a variety of more or less rotten individuals, who together form more or less rotten communities, which in turn make up a completely rotten system.

This anti-folktale world, a world *à rebours*, is somewhat reminiscent of the universe of Gogol's *Dead Souls*, where evil, though not revealed in its extreme form, is clothed in the ordinary, sometimes even lawful, yet still immoral acts committed by assorted robbers, crooks, and swindlers, evoking a peculiar

sense of amusement tinged with disgust and sadness. The comical exchange between Chichikov and Sobakevich, in which the latter claims that "there is but one – and only one – decent man [...]; and even he, if the truth were to be told, is a swine" (Gogol [1835–1852] 1996: 92), could equally apply to the world of Michal's accountants, paving-stone workers and editors, their superiors, and the superiors of their superiors, who, through their learned, automated actions, consciously or unwittingly reinforce the absurd construction of an equally absurd reality.

To conclude, in *Everyday Spooks* laughter is perpetually entwined with horror, but the horror arises not where we expect it, i.e. in the intervention of the supernatural world, but in the various situations and behaviours which, though grotesquely exaggerated, tell the reader – both then and now – more about reality than many realistic novels. The seemingly innocuous humoresques are thus transformed into miniatures imbued with a spirit of scepticism, wrapped around the theme that interested Michal most: human morality and its transformations conditioned by circumstance and the temporal context of his age. Perhaps this is where we should look for the reason why his little book of short stories has remained so unusually popular: in its original presentation of banal truths and its return to primordial problems, comically and grotesquely distorted, yet still recognisable and thoroughly real.

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