

Portrait of a Scientist in the Post-Industrial Society

by Josef Pánek

summary:

Josef Pánek's latest book is an essayistic novel that blends fiction with philosophical reflection.

Portrait of a Scientist in the Post-Industrial Society is an emotionally charged, self-ironic, and philosophically inclined monologue of a scientist confronting disillusionment after his groundbreaking discovery is rejected by a prestigious scientific journal. The narrator, an astrophysicist, flees from an international conference in Dublin and spirals into an existential crisis by the side of a foul-smelling, abandoned canal – an evocative setting that mirrors his inner state and broader societal decay.

Pánek explores the stark dissonance between the ideal of scientific discovery and the current reality of the scientific system. Science, he argues, is no longer a pursuit of truth but has become commercialized, bureaucratized, and shaped by funding, PR strategies, and careerism. Genuine scientists – often introverted, unconventional, socially awkward, and uninterested in fame – are marginalized in this system. In contrast, those who master networking, self-promotion, and institutional politics thrive, often by taking credit for others' work. With bitterness, the narrator observes that popularity now trumps truth, and science has been reduced to another form of mass entertainment.

The novella is also deeply personal. Pánek interweaves reflections on childhood, school experiences, and early moments of rebellion with broader meditations on the difference between basic and applied science. He defends basic research against public misconceptions and moral criticisms, arguing that discoveries – such as radioactivity or the properties of matter – are inherently neutral and beautiful. It is not the scientist's responsibility if others weaponize them into destructive inventions like

bombs. The ownership of scientific knowledge, he insists, belongs to humanity, not to individuals.

As the novella unfolds, Pánek expands his focus into a wider civilizational critique. He claims that we live in an era of comfort teetering on the brink of collapse. Science, once a beacon of enlightenment, has been corrupted by ambition and turned into a commodity. In this way, it mirrors the broader trends of the post-industrial world: the decline of meaning, the rise of narcissism, and the exhaustion of resources.

Civilization, he warns, may soon face the same fate as ancient empires – undone not by ignorance, but by the distortion and commercialization of knowledge itself.

In the end, the narrator refuses to return to the conference. The real essence of science – humility, curiosity, and a deep connection with the world – is no longer found there. Instead, he stays by the canal, which, for all its filth, becomes a place of clarity and a final protest against the commodification of truth.