

IN AND OUT OF SOCIALIST REALISM

**THE INTELLECTUAL JOURNEY OF
MILAN KUNDERA AND DOMINIK TATARKA,
CZECHOSLOVAKIA
1949-1956**

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Dedicated to:

MILOŠ HAVELKA

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Abstract

What I shall attempt in this essay is a case study of Czechoslovak socialist realism. Milan Kundera (1929-) and Dominik Tatarka (1913-1989) are chosen representatives of the respective Czech and Slovak cultural space of the Stalinist period (1949-1956). I argue that both these authors were interacting with the peculiar, Czech and Slovak, versions of socialist realism. And that the key aspects of these local socialist realisms were derived only from the conflicts inside the Communist Party which began in 1949. Both of the authors under study started as convinced supporters of socialist realism. In the course of six years the nature of their public intellectual statements made a shift toward the repudiation of its basic local premises. I made use of the methods and theories of the Cambridge school of intellectual history. This approach, also known as historical contextualism, allows grasping of the ongoing interaction between transformations of socialist realism and continuous interventions that Milan Kundera and Dominik Tatarka were doing inside such a transforming cultural space. Thus, the essay is an attempt for a reconstruction of the intellectual journey through debates, channels and concepts that were formative for the cultural discourse of Czechoslovak Stalinism.

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Introduction

“Even the most extreme consciousness of doom threatens to degenerate into idle chatter,” wrote Theodor W. Adorno shortly after the end of the Second World War. He addressed this warning to the ranks of cultural critics. One could argue that each and every probe into a cultural history is a cultural critique. Especially the cultural history of the 20th century should attempt for – but will always stay far away from – the ideal of value-neutrality. Thus, Adorno’s remark from 1951 holds water up to the present moment. Moreover, the theme of the following case study is the change in discourse that took place approximately at the same time, that is to say in the first half of 1950s. Being closely focused on the sources dealing with the qualities of Czechoslovak socialist literature, it is exposed not only to the threat of degeneration into idle chatter, but also to the loss of the consciousness of doom.

Adorno’s term “doom” seems possibly far-fetched to be employed in an academic essay. However, by its application it is possible to deliberately avoid the complexities of the debate about the validity of the concept of totalitarianism in Czechoslovakia.¹ Simultaneously, “consciousness of doom” is a memento not to forget the irrefutable regional cataclysm, which provides the body of evidence for the totalitarian thesis. This cataclysm affected the whole of East-Central Europe; it started

¹ Miloš Havelka, who is an inspiration for the present essay, happens to be a defender of this assertion. Also most of the following data are taken from his analysis. See Miloš Havelka, “Vergleich des Unvergleichbaren. Oder: Gab es in der neuesten tschechischen Geschichte eine Epoche des Totalitarismus?” in *Bohemia 2* (2009). As it will be shown however, there were public contentions against dominant Stalinism at least since 1954, which is the reason why the validity of his totalitarianism thesis cannot be defended in this research.

even before the outbreak of the War; and it did not cease with burying the hatchet and Nazism, continuing deep into 1950s.²

The purpose of the introduction of this essay is to give a succinct account of the general sociological and mental frame of the area it is concerned with – postwar Czechoslovakia. This opening regards the point of the essay’s departure, namely the immediate consequences of War and the continuity of the atrocities. It reaches its end in the first half of 1956, Czechoslovakia being a stable state-socialist country, whose Party-State elites well prepared to avoid the turmoil of its Polish and Hungarian counterparts.

Such a time frame breaks a conventional periodization. Among the fixations of historical thought is a separate treatment of the war years (1939-1945), the years of The Third Czechoslovak Republic (1945-48) and the years following the Communist takeover. Bradley Abrams challenges the validity of the majority of regional historical studies, which begin only with the end of the Second World War or later, calling it “national alibism” (it was the Soviets who brought state-socialism on the back of their tanks).³ In the same vein, the following pages bring doubt about the abrupt impact of 1956 on Czechoslovak official culture (it was the Soviets who unpredictably desolated Stalinist cultural discourse). The skeptical reevaluation of both periodization and agency might well become the main assertion of the following analysis.

The outbreak of the Second World War stirred a process of sudden, deep and cataclysmic social and mental change, almost unprecedented in the history of the whole region. It was nothing like an earthquake, but largely a bundle of rationally

² A recent vocal historical reminder of this kind was done by Timothy Snyder in *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2010).

³ Bradley F Abrams, *The Struggle for the Soul of the Nation. Czech Culture and the Rise of Communism* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004): 10.

conducted operations, which came into being under the baton of this or that state power. With the state organized atrocities throughout the war in mind, let us emphasize the continuity of the structural uprooting after VE-day. Regarding Czechoslovakia, about five million inhabitants were *on the move* in a state of 12.5 million citizens.⁴ The programmed eradication of the deepest sediments of its traditional ethnic and social map was “moving full steam ahead”, as if being the fulfillment of Stalin’s vision, proclaimed already in 1929.

First, the impulsive campaign against national collaborators began immediately after the German capitulation and about 38000 Czechs were punished for their guilt against national honor. Second, in the course of the three succeeding waves almost all Germans were expelled from the state territory. Both measures were justified by a collective charge. Collaboration. That mounted up to 2.256 million from Bohemia and 156 000 from Slovakia. In turn, about 1.1 million citizens from inland were transported to the vacated lands and houses of Germans. The reciprocal expulsion of 90000 Slovak Hungarians to Hungary and 72 000 Hungarian Slovaks to Slovakia followed. The program was put on hold and never completed but it was succeeded by the program of massive reslovakization of ethnic Hungarians. Circa 400 000 Slovak Hungarians applied and declared themselves Slovaks. Around 45 000 Slovaks Hungarians were sent to colonize The Sudetenland. However, most of these Hungarians refused to stay and returned to their previous homes by 1949.

Aryanization turned into collectivization. The continuous concept of collective guilt shifted from Jews and Roma onto Germans, Hungarians and capitalists. Private property became a second stigma, healed by the four nationalization decrees, which

⁴ Milan Kučera and Zdeněk Pavlík, “Czech and Slovak Demography,” in *The End of Czechoslovakia*, Jiří Musil, ed. (Budapest: Central European University Press, 1995): 29-31, passim. This was not of course a Czechoslovak exclusivity, but the situation in the whole region followed the pattern of change, always with its own particularities.

were outlined by the Communist Party and signed by president Beneš. This took place a couple of months after his glorious return to Czechoslovakia in October 1945. Decrees were targeted to different fields of production in varying degrees. Cinematography and banks were nationalized without exception, while only companies over 500 employees were taken from their owners in the case of cotton-mills, etc. Massive migration of people and property paved the way to the total nationalization of industry that was declared by The Ninth-of-May Constitution and nine new Nationalization acts in 1948. Forced collectivization followed suit, beginning on February 23, 1949 with the adoption of the Unified Agricultural Cooperatives Act. In the beginning of the industrialization in Stalinist fashion, 380 000 people were forcibly transferred from the countryside to cities. Regarding social mobility, 250 000 members of working class were swiftly promoted into administration and bureaucracy, while 77 000 bureaucrats were degraded into manual labor. The reaction on the takeover of February 1948 of yet another 60 000 citizens was emigration; not to mention 83 000 that were, in an established collaboration discourse, sentenced for the betrayal of the Republic according to the sadly famous law no. 231/1948. 2000 of them died in the age of the foundation of the new state-socialist order.

Young adults, who grew up under the influence of this ethno- and social-homogenizing pandemonium, became one of the key players of Stalinism. A radicalized generation was a fruit of the demographic vital revolution of the economically flourishing 1920s.⁵ The birth rate of the Eastern-European region at that time was twice as high as that of the Western part of Europe; thereby the simple force

⁵ Miloš Havelka is also the original author of this idea. In this unpublished essay *The Prague Spring in the Horizon of Generational Expectation* he draws a line between intellectuals from different generational cohorts, applying it to a 1969 debate between Milan Kundera (b. 1929) and Václav Havel (b. 1936).

of their numbers was outstanding. The poignant grasp of their specific mentality is found in the opening pages of the memoirs of an ex-Stalinist Zdeněk Mlynář (1930-1997). In his own words they were the “children of war who, having not actually fought against anyone, brought our wartime mentality with us into those first postwar years, when the opportunity to fight for something presented itself at last.”⁶

Combined with the pinpointed elements of structural revolution, this insight can be inferred into a conclusion about the new mentality of all Czechoslovaks. The massive turn away from the liberalism of the First Republic went hand in hand with the change of historical memory. The young Stalinist “children of war” only spearheaded the continuous militarism. It was eventually invigorated by the Soviet conflict with Yugoslavia in 1947 and re-affirmed by the 1950 war in Korea. New global armed confrontation was set as a possible event in the horizon of expectation, the financial expenditures on the army skyrocketed in 1950 by a 400% increase.

Intuitively speaking, the logical conclusion would have it as a cultural subscription to yet another sentence that Theodor Adorno wrote in 1951: “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.” But his ethical ban on poetry had been in fact a total opposite of the cultural reality in Czechoslovakia. The imperative was to “Sing! Fill the house with the sound of poetry / fill manufacture with it / sing with the full voice! / To the health of the future days / let poetry sound, poetry new and strong!”⁷ Writers that were accepted among the ranks of communists, first of all the “children of war” adopted the essence of the socialist realist discourse: Optimism.

First the process of affirmation and second the subsequent contention of this joyful proleptic cultural discourse of Stalinism is the actual subject of this essay. It is

⁶ Zdeněk Mlynář, *Nightfrost in Prague: The End of Humane Socialism* (London: C. Hurst, 1986).

⁷ Ivan Skála, “Letter to Poets,” in *Máj Země* [The May of the Earth] (Praha: Československý spisovatel, 1950).

a case study dealing with two authors Milan Kundera (1929-) and Dominik Tatarka (1913-1989), coming from the Czech and Slovak parts of the country respectively. After the theoretical chapter which outlines the analytical tools taken from the field of intellectual history follows the analysis, which is confined to the years 1949-1956. As hinted above, the case study of each author consists of two parts. The first deals with the local peculiarities of the Czech and Slovak versions of Socialist realism. In addition, it exposes both authors as supporters of this art of the construction of socialism. However, it is centered on a common crucial analogy, an uncanny similarity which, to a large extent, determined both Kundera's and Tatarka's later oppositionist writing. At the peak of their trust in Communism they were accused by the Party as its traitors. Both were swept away by the collision inside the Communist Party which in 1949 launched a massive persecution of its own members.

The Czech version of the persecution stemmed from the inner conflict between old moderate and young radical wings of Stalinists. Sudden events that began to occur in the sphere of culture since 1949 reflected the conflict in the highest political circles. This conflict was consummated at the last show-trial against the "anti-state collaboration center led by Rudolf Slánský" in the fall of 1952. It was the largest post-war trial of the leading members of Communist Party in the Soviet bloc, with eleven of the fourteen top communists executed and yet another 280 punished by other means. Rudolf Slánský, who was hanged, was a supporter of the young radical group of socialist realists. Being opposed to the older generation surrounding the minister of information, Václav Kopecký, their priority was not primarily the practical implementation of infrastructural transformation. To the contrary, it was the observation of the purity of Stalinist ideology. The first assault against radicals came much earlier than the show-trial. It was the so called "Pamphlet affair" of spring 1949.

The harshly ironical attack on the poet and leader of cultural moderates, Vítěslav Nezval, was severely repressed. Seventy leading members of the radical group lost their membership overnight. At the same time, because of a trivial note in his surveilled private correspondence, Milan Kundera together with three of his colleagues lost his party membership as well. Children of war went to sleep in the promised land and woke up in the cuckoo's nest called The Communist party of Czechoslovakia.

The analysis continues with the treatment of Kundera's ideological development that in its first half spreads between this breaking event of his life and the cessation of political trials in Czechoslovakia, i.e. 1949-1953. It is shown how Kundera modified his inclinations to the radical ideological position and adopted the moderate version of Stalinism. The theory of limited continuity with the inter-war tradition of culture was in its core. With the beginning of 1954, both the mental and social landscapes of Czechoslovakia changed. At this point the second half of the essay begins and it follows Kundera as a writer for a new magazine platform *Host do Domu* (Guest to the House). His separation from the dominant discourse of moderates to the forming cultural discourse of Marxist revisionism is analyzed mostly on the subject of national tradition. In the Christmas issue of *Host do domu*, he reached the first peak of his contention. In his seminal essay "About the Disputes of Inheritance," he totally delegitimized the master-narrative of moderates. Moreover, he set the tone for the discussion at the culminating event of destalinization in Czechoslovakia - the Second Congress of The Czechoslovak Writer's Union in spring 1956. Kundera, the child of war, moved across all three ideological positions and camps long before Khrushchev shocked the Communist public with the exposure of violence that Stalin unleashed against his Communist comrades.

Dominik Tatarka's development cannot be totally identified, even though the events of accusation and persecution by the Party is formative also in his case. Being 15-year Kundera's senior, he did not grow up in the war. He fought in it. That is to say, he participated in the Slovak National Uprising of 1944. The second difference is that in 1948 he published a canonical novel *Farská Republika* (The Parochial Republic), which in 1949 received a state prize for literature. However, that was the year of regional trials against bourgeois nationalism. Władysław Gomułka was sentenced in Poland, László Rajk in Hungary, Trajčo Kostov in Bulgaria, all as a consequence of the Soviet conflict with Tito's Yugoslavia. Hungarian leader M. Rákosi wrote first to Stalin and then to Klement Gottwald. He accused the Czechoslovak Ministry of the Interior of covering up the nationalistic spy organization inside the Party. Later, the same pressure came from Warsaw. As a result, in May 1950 the Slovak premier of the Czechoslovak government, Viliam Široký, launched the campaign against bourgeois nationalism in Slovakia. Tatarka was among the accused. The following book of the awarded writer was destroyed, his next came under harsh critique as well. From (unknown) reasons he did not lose his party membership, however, and similarly to Kundera, he was writing conformist articles until 1954.

In sum, the first part of Tatarka's analysis is focused on the specific variant of socialist realism in Slovakia. While the Czech discourse is structured around the controversy of continuity with inter-war tradition, its Slovak counterpart is based on the question of national autonomy and the tradition of the National Uprising. Not inter-war, but war tradition stands in the centre. The second part of the analysis of Tatarka's writings begins also in 1954. As in Kundera's case, his first contentions were being published and they are analysed up to the aforementioned Second

Congress of Writer's Union (April 1956). Tatarka not only used this opportunity to give a highly critical speech against socialist realism, but also published an allegory attacking all its basic assumptions.

Altogether I dare not presume to express a definite opinion about such a nuanced problem, but this much I would confidently affirm: the unexpected charges and consequences of the collision inside the Communist Party affected Kundera and Tatarka much sooner and more intensively than the events of 1956. Kundera, along with other convinced Stalinists lost the membership of the Party. Tatarka, charged with bourgeois nationalism, underwent a process of self-criticism and saw his books discredited and rejected. The second part of the analysis follows their published contentions against the establishment. The point of their contention is a partial agreement with Adorno's verdict. They diagnosed too that postwar (socialist) culture needs revision and that (socialist realist) poetry is barbarous. In the words of Dominik Tatarka, it summons *The Demon of Conformity*.

Theory

To those of us who lived through it Dada was, topographically speaking,
the high point of Western European culture - I well remember as though it were yesteryear
(oh, where are they now?)
how Hugo Ball - or was it Hans Arp? - yes! - no - Picabia, was it? -no, Tzara - yes! –
wrote his name in the snow with a walking stick and said:
There! I think I'll call it The Alps.
Oh, the yes-no's of yesteryear.

Tom Stoppard, *Travesties*

If the character of E.H. Carr in Tom Stoppard's play puts Dada on the peak of European culture, there is a consensus that socialist realism lies, topographically speaking, in its deepest dregs. However there is a certain quality that they appear to share. Absurdity. Because The Terminological Handbook of Czechoslovak History asserts socialist realism as a “metaphysical nonsense.”⁸ Even though this paper does not aim at any rejuvenation of the forgotten value of socialist realism, it is based on the disagreement with that assertion. Socialist realists were everything but Dadaists. In other words, they themselves were actually not after any kind of cultural absurdities, nor newspeak. The appearance of analogy is not deceiving only in the case of being on good terms with anachronism.

Let us suppose that socialist realism is the *cultural* discourse of Stalinism. It is one among many distinct discourses of that system on the most general level differentiated from the discursive bundle categorized as *science*⁹ (judicial, economic,

⁸ It reads that socialist realism was conceived “voluntarily, it stemmed from political and ideological needs, therefore to use it in scientific endeavor equaled metaphysics, which clearly created barriers for the development of contemporary literature.” See Milan Jungman “Socialist Realism“ in *Slovníková příručka k československým dějinám 1948-1989* [The Terminological Handbook of Czechoslovak History 1948-1989], http://www.usd.cas.cz/UserFiles/File/Publikace/Prirucka48_89.pdf (accessed May 28, 2011).

⁹ Stalinism is a project of the universal integral Marxism-Leninism with three units: the philosophical underpinning – scientific communism – political economy. These three sub-discourses were conceived

historical, organizational discourse, etc.). Scientific discourses of Stalinism were of course primarily political discourses and are logically studied as such. It is unquestionable that socialist realism was originally intended to transmit the same intensity of political force by means of cultural production.

Socialist realism is a political discourse. This fact can be inferred both from the definite historical statements of the Soviet founding fathers and from present-day historians dealing with the subject. Socialist realism was charged with the mission of ideological transformation and education of workers already in the founding statutes of the Soviet Writers' Union (1934).¹⁰ In the same vein it is grasped in the seminal monograph about its aesthetic features written in the 1990s.¹¹ *Impossible aesthetics* of socialist realism is exposed there as the *enforced translation* of the Stalinist (scientific) ideology into the terms of literature, cinematic and visual arts or even architecture and music compositions.

What does this claim *not* entail? First, it does not aim to fill any kind of a proverbial gap of the factual matter of the past. Most of the sources have probably been studied already, all of them are easily available and even some of their authors are still alive. Second, it is not a foucauldian endeavor set upon a discovery of hidden power mechanisms in aesthetic spheres that would have been heretofore understood/studied as depoliticized phenomena. Socialist realism has been (in some way rightfully) discredited as a worthless absurdity, but it has never been seen as an innocent enterprise.

as a complete knowledge to rule and guide any society. Disciplines such as sociology, psychology or political science were legalized only in 1960s. See Miloš Havelka, "Revisionismus jako osud hnutí: Nad knihou Michala Kopečka [Revisionism as the Fate of Movement: Above Michal Kopeček's New Book], *Soudobé dějiny*, 1-2 (2010): 173-188.

¹⁰ Adam Terzt, *Trial Begins & On Socialist Realism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960): 148.

¹¹ Regine Robin, *Socialist Realism: An Impossible Aesthetics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992): 63.

The chances of new things under the Sun being discovered are bleak in this thesis. Still, from the above-mentioned commonplace presuppositions, it follows that socialist realism is the appropriate subject matter not only for history of art and culture, but even more for intellectual history. Hence socialist realism is first a political discourse and intellectual history is always the history of political discourse, at least according to the contextualist approach embraced in this thesis.¹² It is this embrace that, hopefully, will prove to justify its appearance.

Ideological transformation of masses, education of workers in the spirit of socialism, translation of the commands of political economy into metaphors for infantile subjects... Endless is the list of expressions hinting at the political priority of socialist realism. Carl Schmitt shall help with the simplification of this diversity into the applicable notion. According to his famous concept, socialist realism is political only under this single condition: Does it assert that there are two different *antagonistic* groups in real life? Did poets assert real-life friends and real-life enemies?¹³

It is the hypothesis of this thesis that the friend-enemy distinction was their first assignment. “I am writing verses with one hand / in the other I am holding a revolver,” declared with utmost seriousness young poet Pavel Kohout (1954). However, it is only half of the hypothesis. The second half assumes that years 1949-1956 saw the process of adoption of as well as emancipation from the prescribed mission to “hold a revolver” in each and every artwork. This emancipating discursive practice is understood as delegitimization of socialist realism. It took a long nonlinear process to exchange Kohout’s political revolver for Tsara’s aesthetic walking stick.

¹²J. G. A. Pocock, “The concept of a language and the ‘mérier d'historien’. Some consideration on practice,” in *Political Thought and History: Essays on Theory and Method*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009): 87-106.

¹³Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

After the initial affirmation an intention to justify writing depoliticized literature came about. At a certain point, both Milan Kundera and Dominik Tatarka wanted to do legitimize something like the value of writing into the melting snow, wanted to get away with the assigned duty to delineate friends and enemies in the real life. So far for the explanation of the primary political nature of socialist realism and the process of its delegitimization.

To analyze it as a discourse means to deal with it as a *continuous interaction*. Sources alone do not suffice. The analysis must reconstitute two mutually dependent, unceasingly changing realms. Sources in spaces.

Sources signify written *and* published texts by Milan Kundera and Dominik Tatarka. The relevance is put on the chronological order of their appearance and not on the genre, size nor relevance that they might have acquired in the course of time. However, the preference of publishing over artwork must be admitted. Even though in socialist realism were rules of form always serving the politics of content, the time gap between a decision to write a poem (Kundera) or a novel (Tatarka) and its publication is large. The ideal interval between the decision to make a political speech act and its effects on the audience should be momentary. During the months between writing and publishing lengthy works, the authors could have found themselves in a profoundly different political environment.¹⁴

Spaces denote the realm of various contexts that were originally surrounding

¹⁴ E.g., Dominik Tatarka was at one moment compelled to publish a collection of his 1945-1948 essays from the newspaper platform *Národná obroda*. In them he as a convinced communist affirms the wave of the post-war regime changes in the forming Eastern Bloc. But when published in 1951, the edition was promptly pulverized. That is to say, it was published in the space of the new campaign against “titoism“ and “bourgeois nationalism“. And *Národná obroda* [National revival] was the platform founded as a herold of the tradition of the independent resistance of The Slovak National Uprising (1944).

sources at hand, as they were formulated and delivered.¹⁵ Reading socialist realist texts as a discourse, it is necessary to question their interaction with their space of origin. Socialist realism is an environment. It was the space that, for starters, had its own population of implied, actual and reacting readers, referred to as audience; second, it was the space governed by a cluster of concepts and principles that determined the intelligibility *and* legality of writings – let us design it as ideology; third, it was the space that had its spatial coordinates – territory of its discursive channels; and lastly, it was the space determined by its institutions and platforms (magazines and meetings), exposed to unexpected events (e.g., Stalin happened to die in 1953 and the popular question “What has to be done?” was once again on the writing table). The sum of its institutions, platforms and events is its practical context. To summarize: to study socialist realism as discourse requires to focus on two realms and to insist on the continuous interaction between them. The interaction between the intra-textual realm of sources and the extra-textual realm of spaces.

The first steps of a curious discourse analyst would thereby went this direction: it would be stressed that it was in the environment of early 1917 Zürich where Tristan Tsara wrote his name into the snow; that Lenin was at that time living not only in the physical neighborhood but most probably also in Tsara’s mind as his implied reader. And third, that the symbolical dimension (language) of Dada had substantially tactile (snow), theatrical (stick) and ironic (Alps) qualities. The imagined analyst would do all of this before the would immersed into a close intra-textual reading of that published inscription.

¹⁵ The notion of space is adopted from J.G.A Pocock’s essay “The concept of a language and the ‘métier d'historien’ : some consideration on practice,” in *Political Thought and History: Essays on Theory and Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009): 87-106. It is however preferred to another his term – context, which Pocock limits to the dimension of symbolical political language. Speaking of space should allow to into account not only symbols and ideas but also of practice and institutions.

Particular sources are the second and the more evident realm of discourse. Their interpretation follows the guidelines of Quentin Skinner's approach to the intra-textual realm. His conceptual vocabulary and methodological practice are in turn inspired by the linguistic pragmatism of John Austin. The utmost goal of Skinner's intellectual history is a correct interpretation. In the 19th century, Ranke stood up against the romantic speculations of Hegelians and coined the motto of historiography: what did actually happen? Skinner is indeed an heir of Rankian empiricism and Austinian pragmatism. His own motto, directed against perennial obsessions of the followers of Leo Strauss¹⁶, reads: what was actually meant? Thus, he adopts the crucial linguistic question - what is the meaning of meaning – and delivers its different dimensions: first, meaning is reference; second, meaning is intention; third, meaning is effect. The order of the coming definitions (optimally) provides a methodological three-step sequence for the intra-textual analysis of sources.

First, the referential dimension of meaning is commonly fixed as a definition in dictionaries. Meaning as reference means “content in itself” It pertains to a language dimension that Austin designs as locution, which identifies the referent in the world independently of the spatial situation and of its intended audience.¹⁷ Those who are disregarding socialist realism as a metaphysical nonsense are staying only in this dimension. Not only are they quoting texts from 1950s out of their original contexts, but they are often evaluating them as it suits their own ideological

¹⁶ Quentin Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas,” in *Visions of Politics*. Vol. 1. *Regarding Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002): 57-58.

¹⁷ E.g, Alps: “A high mountain. The name, it is supposed, was originally given to mountains whose tops were covered with snow, and hence appropriately applied to the mountains of Switzerland; so that by Alps is generally understood the latter mountains. But geographers apply the name to any high mountains.” See “Alps” entry in *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*.

orientation.¹⁸ That leads to the questioning of who was who, what kind of group was at a particular moment referred to as an enemy, and what is the source about.

Second, the intentional dimension of meaning is the meaning as intention, as ‘content for author’. To be more specific, this authorial meaning has two sub-dimensions, known as perlocution and illocution. As for perlocution, it is the intention that regards authorial expectations of effects after the publication of a source. Intended consequences. Skinner puts it as an “intention by writing”, where a piece of text is thought to “bring something about”¹⁹. To illustrate it with a line of self-reflection, the perlocutive intention of the Stoppard’s quote was to bring about some surprise, thus heightened concentration (even though the actual effects are most probably saddening, see below). A source can be contaminated with this authorial expectation without its actualization. One explanation of the fierce, almost irrationally unrealistic suggestions of state writers during the Prague spring draws from their long-term frustrations.²⁰ Frustrations from enforced political discourse. That is a grand theory and not a case study like this one. However, it poignantly shows, how useful the notion of perlocution can be.

Illocution is an intention that regards authorial expectation that specifies the sort of final written outcome. This expectation is present during the actual process of

¹⁸ Let us not pretend that since 2008 the combination of socialist realism and Milan Kundera has not acquired scandalous connotations. Kundera, adept for Nobel Prize for Literature, was revealed as an agent of secret police in 1950s. Yes, perhaps this discovery of an amateur historian reduced his chances, but it one more time divided Czech public sphere into its pro-Kundera half (i.e., you like his novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, 1984) and its anti-Kundera half (i.e., you like his novel *The Joke*, 1967). The point of this footnote is to remember Kundera’s 1952 polemic phrase against some ‘gloomy priests who shut themselves in Marxism, in the old citadel.’ Pro-Kunderists like this line a lot. They are reading it as an evidence about his lifelong anti-Stalinism. And they just provide a referential identification of *gloomy priests* with Stalinists in general. As it is shown later, Kundera’s verse was actually intended an *affirmative* statement written against radical Stalinists that were being swiftly removed from their posts by their older, more powerful, yet more moderate political rivals. For a problematic ‘reference-only’ reading see Jan Culik, “Man, a Wide Garden: Milan Kundera as a Young Stalinist,” http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/3806/1/Milan_Kundera.pdf (accessed June 3, 2011).

¹⁹ Quentin Skinner, “Motives, intentions and interpretation,” in *Visions of Politics*. Vol. 1. Regarding Method (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002): 92.

²⁰ Petr Pithart, *Osmádesátý* [1968], (Praha: Rozmluvy, 1990).

writing (what is being written). Moreover it regards a particular mode of intended action (what is it immediately doing). The account of Tristan Tsara writing his name with a walking stick into the snow is in this text intended as an aphorism and it is supposed to do an explication.²¹ Surely, illocutive intention is much more evident in other types of utterances. True speech acts such as “Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate” can be invested with very serious authorial intentionality, if uttered by a proper actor in a proper space, populated by a proper audience. Kundera’s *The Last of May* (1955) is an example the use of illocution in the thesis. He employed the allusive title and features of epic poem in order to evaluate Karl Hynek Macha, the most important Czech romantic poet, discredited in the environment of socialist realism.

The third and last dimension of meaning is effect, which is at first only a cognitive effect that appears in a mind of a concrete reader after the reception of a source: “Actions involved in responding to text” (Wolfgang Iser).²² Meaning as effect is then content for reader. As it is the case, reception is often followed by a significant reaction. The question about intended consequences of an author (perlocution) shall be followed by the question about actual consequences caused by publication. Consequent reactions shall be questioned both in the symbolical space of ideology (replies, reviews or exchanges) as well as reactions from the space of practice (awards and punishments, offers, stipends, threats, etc).

Socialist realism is a political discourse. The aim of these notes on theory was to establish a usable approach that unfolds from that axiom. This approach makes

²¹ “Aphorism. From the Greek word aphorismos, meaning ‘definition.’ Aphorism: poetic form of definition,” in Milan Kundera, “Sixty three Words,” in *The Art of the Novel* (New York : Grove Press, 1988): 122.

²² Quentin Skinner, “Motives, intentions and interpretation,” in *Visions of Politics*. Vol 1. Regarding Method (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 92.

socialist realism the subject of the history of political discourse. It is this inquiry that methodologically requires as its first step a reconstitution of the ideological and practical spaces. Only afterwards it allows the proceeding to the reading of particular sources. It is intellectual history seeking for an interactive relationship between both of these realms, the approach that does not resign to deal with seemingly insignificant texts, nor refuses to question intentions of the authors under study.

Expulsion, Foundation, Affirmation Milan Kundera 1949-1953

Expelled in 1949, independently²³ of, but simultaneously with the first Czech wave of expulsion from the Party that hit its members in the summer, Milan Kundera was only 20 years old when his problematic relationships with The Communist Party of Czechoslovakia began. Most of those who followed a similar route were about a same age. The young Kundera could however continue his studies and publish his translations of poetry. Fittingly enough, his rendering of Majakovskij's "Valediction" would appear on the front page of the daily *Lidové Noviny* on November 29 of that year.

At the same time, the affair of the anti-Party pamphlet against Vítěšlav Nezval was germinating into a foundational event of the space of Czech socialist realism. Laco Novomeský – himself not a Czech, and a later victim – was the first who had the idea to “not grind [the affair] into trifles, but to concentrate on ideological sump that it grew out of. I emphasize an ideological solution much more than organizational measures [expulsions].”²⁴ Novomeský designed the solution. His idea was to use an inner-Party cross-generational, and interpersonal attack on the poet to elaborate an ideological doctrine that would codify a 30-year tradition of Czech poetry. On January 20th 1950, the idea came into being and Ladislav Štoll delivered a speech entitled *30 Years of Struggle for Czech Socialist Poetry*, ensuring the domination of the moderate Stalinists inside the CPC.

²³ A detailed account of Kundera's expulsion from the Party has not yet been given. Michal Bauer in e-mail correspondence suggests that it occurred without any link to the scandal around “the anti-Party pamphlet against Nezval,” and that Kundera was never so radical as those behind the pamphlet.

²⁴ Jiří Knapík, “Od korektury k ideologické normě. Ze zákulisí vzniku ‘Třiceti let bojů’ Ladislava Štolla” [From Correction to Ideological Norm: Of the Backgrounds of Ladislav Štoll's ‘30 Years of Struggle’], *Soudobé dějiny* 1 (2005): 62-84.

Although expelled from the Party, even in 1950 Kundera was still tolerated as a university student, future poet, and translator, rising toward his teaching position after graduation as well as the publication of his first volume. These two events along with the compilation of the volume of his edition of Ukrainian poetry, occurred in 1952-1953. Much later, in *Life is Elsewhere*, Kundera would write concerning the era when “the hangman ruled hand in hand with the poet.” Historically speaking, Kundera published his first books of poetry shortly after the hangman finished his work in December 1952. With the scarcity of sources at hand, Kundera’s contemporary statements about socialist realism were supportive. His poems and the refined monopolous moderate discourse defined by *30 Years of Struggle* both asserting the guilt of Stalinist radicals, specifically in their chase of suicidal poet Konstantin Biebl.

Following the Party’s partial tolerance of previously excluded writers announced in 1952, the initially expelled Kundera made a first step toward full reintegration with the official culture. As a consequence of his poetic achievements, intertwined as they were with the pursuit of radical Stalinists, the beginning university teacher won a nomination to the membership of the CSWU.

Expulsion and Foundation

Milan Kundera near the Campaign against Radicals 1949-1952

Born on April 1, 1929, Milan Kundera was one of the prodigious “children of war” (Zdeněk Mlynář), many of whom after the war enthusiastically joined the ranks of The Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (CPC), and later defined the intellectual landscape of Czech lands in the 20th century.²⁵ Around the time of joining the CPC, Kundera moved from Brno to Prague in order to study. Already interested in poetry, Kundera in the capital affiliated with other young Moravians with the similar outlooks – Jan Trefulka, Josef Kainar, Jan Skácel, and translator Adolf Kroupa.²⁶ However, one year after the Communist party came to power, Kundera was expelled and lost immediacy of participation.

The immediate cause was his then intolerable utterances in private correspondence, uncovered by surveillance in the first half of 1949. This deprivation of membership can also be explained as an episode of a larger shift in the recruitment strategy of the Party: as realized under the Stalinist directives to “The Sharp Course” and “the intensification of the class struggle,” it meant the end of the policy of the wide public invitation to party ranks and the beginning the intensive

²⁵ ²⁵ Just for illustration, some of the leaders of this generation were: poet and dramatist Pavol Kohout (1928-); leading politician and author of one of the most important memoirs in Czech literature Zdeněk Mlynář (1930-1997) and his spouse and a founder of Sociological Magazine already in 1963, Irena Dubská (1924-2010); philosophers Karel Kosík (1926-2003), Milan Machovec (1925-2003) and Milan Sobotka (1927-); medievalist František Šmahel (1934-) and modern historian Karel Kaplan (1928-); philosopher Ladislav Hejdiček (1927-); writer Antonín J. Liehm (1924-); sociologist Radovan Richta (1924-1983); philosopher Ivan Dubský (1926-); writer Sergej Machonin (1918-1995); philosopher Lubomír Sochor (1925-1987); sociologist Pavel Machonin (1927-2008); writer Jan Procházka (1924-1971); writer Ivan Klíma (1931-); critic Milan Jungmann (1922-); critic Oleg Sus (1924-1982); critic Jiří Brabec (1929-); Josef Zúmr (1928-); critic Květoslav Chvatík (1930-); sociologist Ivo Možný (1932-); poet Jan Skácel (1922-1989); writer Jan Trefulka (1929-); poet Karel Šiktanc (1928-); writer and publisher Josef Škvorecký (1924-); writer Jaroslav Šabata (1927-).

²⁶ Alfred French, *Czech Writers and Politics, 1945-1969* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984): 104.

screening of those already in.²⁷ Simultaneously with his expulsion occurred the first significant collision between the two major groups of the new Czech Stalinist culture.

Radicals and moderates. They differed in a generational aspect as well as the occupation of different structures of Czech socialist realist space. Radicals controlled the structures of the Party, while moderates were mostly in charge of State cultural institutions. A situation of unabashed power rivalry ensued, and the competition demanded new arguments. In all, the radical-moderate tension was giving birth to particularities of the theoretical dimension of the local cultural space.

Perhaps the most significant among these particularities was the notion of the tradition of socialist culture. In the terminology of historian/contemporary Alexej Kusák (1929-), radicals upheld *the theory of discontinuity*.²⁸ This was articulated among others by Karel Kosík (1926-2003) on the pages of the radical party platform *Tvorba*.²⁹ In its core, it declared zero tolerance towards everything connected with the First Czechoslovak Republic; regarding the cultural past of the Czech nation, radicals counted only with “plebeian” Czech writers of 19th century, who were directly engaged in the international revolutionary movement, who were reckoned the true representatives of the Czech national tradition, and who were supposed to replace the petty-bourgeois humanism of Tomas Garrigue Masaryk. Otherwise, Czech socialist realism was for them a blank slate. War liquidated the legitimacy of the cultural heritage and foreign models were only to be provided by the Soviets. The assault they mounted in the summer of 1949 on the inter-war poet Vítěslav Nezval sprang out of the spite against his defense of the elements of inter-war Czechoslovak Left culture.

²⁷ Jiří Maňák, “Vývoj početního stavu a sociálního složení KSČ v letech 1948-1968,” [The Czechoslovak Communist Party: Changes in the Number of Members and Social Composition, 1948-68] *Soudobé dějiny* 4 (1999): 460-478.

²⁸ Alexej Kusák, *Kultura a politika v Československu, 1945-1946* [Culture and Politics in Czechoslovakia, 1945-1956] (Prague: Torst, 1998): 264-267.

²⁹ Karel Kosík, “Třídní boje v české revoluci 1848” [Class Struggles in the Czech Revolution of 1848], in *Tvorba*, 35-36 (1948).

Moderates upheld *the theory of limited continuity*. Zdeněk Nejedlý (1878-1962) articulated it on the large scale of conventional Czech political history, while its implications for the literary tradition were elaborated by Ladislav Štoll (1902-1981) and seconded by Jiří Taufer, who focused on the contemporary situation. Not even a year after a number of radicals were expelled due to their insult of Nezval, Ladislav Štoll decisively codified the tradition of Czech socialist realism. The foundational speech act of the distinctively Czech version of socialist realism, his speech came about at the plenary meeting of the CSWU in January 1950, and was duly published under the title *30 Years of Struggle for Czech Socialist Poetry* (from now on referred to as *30 Years of Struggle*). What was its basic idea?

Selected influences of the culture of The First Republic were implemented as politically legitimate. The axiom of Štoll's theory was that the poetry was wedged into politico-economic mechanisms. It follows that three previous decades of poetry and art in general had been a *necessary* consequence of the Marxist-Leninist definition of the law of history. Just as it was not known for ages that the Earth revolves around the sun, 1950 Czechoslovakia had no other option but to finally come to terms with the fact the law of history is *dialectical materialism*. The last and final epicenter of history was located in the Soviet Union. The culture of Bohemia was claimed to be governed by mechanical echo of social and cultural processes in the USSR. And the original foundation of Czech socialist poetry was interpreted as a necessary effect of the October Revolution (1917); also secondly as the effect of the founding of the CPC (1920); and finally, as a consequence of the first Czech translation of Lenin's *The State and Revolution* (1920). This translation was achieved by the alleged founding figure of socialist poetry, Stanislav Kostka Neumann (1875-1947):

I speak about the spiritual drama of the Struggle for Czech socialist poetry. I do not have to stress that I don't mean some kind of self-enclosed process developing independently on life in the autonomous spiritual sphere. It is not some kind of isolated struggle for the principles of Beauty and aesthetic norms. I think today it is more than clear that at stake is a peculiar and lawful, even though extremely complex, reflection of the grand struggle. It is the struggle for the new, higher social order, it is the struggle that was fought not only by our [Czech] working class, but also by the proletariat of the whole world and, first of all, by the workers of the Soviet Union. This struggle of the world proletariat is at the same time the struggle for the realization of the old dreams of poetry.³⁰

Only inter-war cultural actors who had been “struggling“ with the realization of the new order *all the way* to the state of affairs in 1950, only poets who did not protest against the Soviet show trials in the 1930s, and accepted the state of affairs of 1949, only these older writers were therefore accepted as Czech socialist poets. It was not radical zero tolerance, but the tradition was brutally limited. To a large degree, it was based not only on personal histories of loyalty to the Party, but also on older friendships, affiliations, and the social capital of the contemporaries. January 1950 was a marginalization of radical theory and establishment of the trio Stanislav Kostka Neumann – Jiří Wolker – Július Fučík as icons of the space.

The final collision occurred in 1952, as an outcome of the last wave of show-trials in Czech lands. The trial with Rudolf Slánský resolved the collision into the monopoly of yet another trio of aforementioned older moderates: Zdeněk Nejedlý, Ladislav Štoll and a poet Vítěslav Nezval. Young radicals were removed by moderates through vehement measures, wide personal and institutional changes in the party were swiftly performed. The leader of radicals, Gustav Bareš, and his Party-Kultprop apparatus were dissolved. Their magazine *Tvorba* (Creation) was stopped. *Lidové noviny* (People's News) was renamed to *Literární noviny* (Literary News). Measures went so far that social historian Jiří Knapík asserts that “The earthquake in

³⁰ Ladislav Štoll, “30 let bojů za českou socialistickou poezii“ [30 Years of Struggle for Czech Socialist Poetry], edited version of the stenographic protocol of the speech published in Michal Bauer, *Souvislosti labyrintu. Kodifikace ideologicko/estetické normy v české literatuře 50. let 20. Století* [Implications of the Labyrinth: The Codification of the Ideologic-Aesthetic Norm in Czech Literature of the 1950s] (Prague: Akropolis, 2009): 381.

the personnel of the apparatus of the Central Committee created basically a new Party elite,” while literary historian Pavel Janoušek suggests 1952 as a periodization point in the history of Czech literature.³¹

A reassertion of the codified socialist-realism program followed, bearing quite slight but very significant modifications. It was brought about by the important article of the authors of *30 Years of Struggle*, Ladislav Štoll and Jiří Taufer. The text was published on the pages of new magazine platform *Literární noviny* (Literary News) under the title “Against Sectarianism and Liberalism – For the Prosperity of our Literature.”³² The authors repeated the strict rejection of the radical program of discontinuity. They moved their discourse into the defense of more personalities who “since the first years of the bourgeois republic proved their loyal relationship to the working class, even if they were members of particular, separated [noncommunist] groups, and even if at that time they declared false, formalist, and decadent programs.” This reassertion modified the limits of tolerance – the loyalty “all the way“ was no longer an ideological premise.

Following Kusák’s terminology, it seems proper to maintain that *the theory of limited continuity* had enwidened its limits. But, to speak my own language, these were limits of personal, not of ideological tolerance. The change can be well illustrated by the new tolerance of the well-known Masarykian author Karel Čapek (1890-1938). In *30 Years of Struggle*, Čapek was unequivocally excluded. He had translated French modernist poetry and thus imported into Czech lands Appolinaire,

³¹ See Jiří Knapík, *V Zajetí moci: Kulturní politika, její systém a aktéři, 1948-1956* [In the Captivity of Power: Cultural Politics, its System and Agents, 1948-1956] (Prague: Libri, 2006): 141. Also Pavel Janoušek, “Proces se Slánským jako periodizační mezník v české literatuře?” [The Trial with Slánsky as a Periodization Point of Czech Literature?], *Tvar* 48 (1992): 1, 4-5.

³² Ladislav Štoll, Jiří Taufer, “Proti sektářství a liberalismu – za rozkvět našeho umění” [Against Sectarianism and Liberalism – For the Prosperity of our Literature], *Literární noviny* 19 (1952): 5-6.

that “most rotten name of the decadent Parnas.”³³ The help of a supporting impulse from the Soviet Union was necessarily present. In sum, Čapek was included into Czech socialist realism by the re-publication of his novel *War with the Newts*. In its introduction, Soviet critic S. V. Nikolskij described the book in the following terms:

The author wrote a versatile satire on capitalist society and on bourgeois international politics in the 1930s. It is a satire on the exploitation of Ford, a satire on Anglo-American racism and on science, which was looking for the new ways of the elimination of people. He rejected the evasiveness and “peacefulness” of the United Nations as it processed the crucial economic and political questions.³⁴

In 1949-1952, Čapek was among the first to be excluded from the official culture. In 1953, he was among the first to be politically “rehabilitated.” He was no longer the enemy of the people, but a mistaken defender of the Czech proletariat. As is evident from the title of the article, the suppressed approach of radicals was coined *sectarianism*.

On the other side of the spectrum was a different enemy: *Liberalism*. It can be interpreted as the umbrella term for all modernist or avant-garde *movements*. Čapek could still be included, but his liberalism stood outside the limits of the space. This is evident from the rejection of the attempt of Vítěslav Nezval for a new reappraisal of cubism. In his congratulatory article at the occasion of the 70th birthday of painter Emil Filla, Nezval wrote that he “is one of the great representatives of cubism.” On the other hand, radical sectarian “simplifiers have been discarding whole epochs in the development of art. That was one of their weapons. Most of all, they discarded the

³³ Ladislav Štoll, “30 let bojů za českou socialistickou poezii” [30 years of the Struggle for Czech Socialist Poetry], edited version of the stenographic protocol of the speech published in Michal Bauer, *Souvislosti labyrintu. Kodifikace ideologicko/estetické normy v české literatuře 50. let 20. století*. [Implications of the Labyrinth: The Codification of the Ideological-Aesthetic Norm in Czech Literature in the 1950s.] (Prague: Akropolis, 2009): 389.

³⁴ S. V. Nikolskij, “Předmluva” [The Preface] in Karel Čapek, *Válka s mloky* [The War with Newts] (Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1953).

modern art of the 20th century.”³⁵ Štoll and Taufer included the response to this defense of cubism in the above-mentioned article. It was a restatement of the limits of 1950. Yes, they tolerated the person of Filla: but exactly on the grounds of his ability to *escape* from modernist cubism. They claimed that this was also the case of Nezval and his surrealist period. They concluded: “Nezval himself will not want to deny the fact that abstract painting (from cubism to surrealism) is today the greatest fashion at the snobbish New York vernissages.”³⁶

Finally, Štoll and Taufer addressed the suicide of poet Konstantin Biebl. In the article, they accused radicals the fierce propaganda of radicals as being responsible for his suicide. The inability of sectarians to forget the mistaken past allegedly, in 1951, had led the important Czech author to the same decision as one of the most revered poet of the period – Vladimir Mayakovskij.

All in all, the victory of the moderates against the radicals allowed new persons to enter the space of socialist realism, but the ideological limits of tradition were only reaffirmed. In the contemporary vocabulary, this shift was called “*the change from The Sharp Course to The New Course.*” After the ebb of persecutions of radicals, came the flow of the writings of expelled Milan Kundera.

Affirmation

Milan Kundera against the Radicals 1952-1953

Prior to 1952, was Milan Kundera nearer the radicals or the moderates? The answer is that we do not know. Even such expert on Kundera as Michal Bauer only offers a slight suggestion. Looking at his translations, it seems possible that in his

³⁵ Vítěslav Nezval, “K sedmdesátinám Emila Filly” [To the 70th Birthday of Emil Filla], *Literární noviny* 10 (1953): 10.

³⁶ Ladislav Štoll, Jiří Taufer, “Proti sektářství a liberalismu – za rozkvět našeho umění” [Against Sectarianism and Liberalism – For the Prosperity of Our Literature], *Literární noviny* 19 (1952): 5-6.

earliest years he might not have been in total disagreement with the radical standpoint. Regardless of his post-1949 party-outsider status, poems were published with the signature “translated by Milan Kundera.” At least six of them appeared even before he made his first open statements about the question on the tradition of socialist realism.³⁷ However, the initial ideas Kundera put forward were clearly affirmative. That is, they supported the moderate accusation of *sectarians*, who came to be held officially responsible for all of the faults perceived in the socialist realism space.

Mayakovsky was the poet who Kundera translated in the very beginning of his publication history. Before his expulsion, the translation of Mayakovsky’s militant poem “Reply to the Imperialists” appeared in one of the May issues of *Tvorba* (18), a radical platform of young Party apparatchiks, in the same year 1949. Probably right after the expulsion he translated the poem “Valediction” (*Lidové noviny*, November 29, 1949). Michal Bauer compares his translation with one written by the established Mayakovsky translator and key moderate ideologue, Jiří Taufer. He concludes, “Comparison of both of translations shows that Kundera surprisingly chose a greater admiration for Moscow than Taufer.”³⁸ The young poet and student was expelled before he got a larger chance for recognition. He continued, however, to publish in the same affirmative tone and could pursue his university studies at the Film Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague until his successful graduation in 1952 and a direct employment at the same university.³⁹

³⁷ Majakovski, V.: *Valediction* (1949), *Reply to the imperialists* (1949); Ščipačev, Š.: *Mičurin* (1950); Becher, J.R.: *Two Germanies* (1951); Rylskij, M.: *Immortal Lenin* (1952); Botvinnik, S.: *There is such a Party!* (1952). See Michal Bauer, “Překladačská činnost Milana Kundery na přelomu 40. a 50. let.” [Milan Kundera as a Translator at the Turn of the 1940s-1950s], *Tvar* 9 (1998): 6-7, passim.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.

³⁹ See Martin Hybner, “Zapírané básnické a divadelní dílo Milana Kundery” [Milan Kundera’s Denied Poetry and Plays] *Proglas* 6 (2007): 25–33. Hybner cannot stress enough that the two other young colleagues expelled together with Kundera were expelled also from a university and sent to forced labour. Kundera himself addresses the question mostly as an omniscient narrator, e.g., “It is important to stress that these [Communist] peculiar pseudo-revolutions, imported from Russia and carried out

In 1953, Kundera put together *Steel and Tenderness*.⁴⁰ This collection of poems by Ukrainian poet Pavlo Tyčyna was introduced as well as mostly translated by the young Czech graduate. The preface is worth noticing because it was in full accord with the imperatives of the moderate theory of limited continuity, slightly remodified as it was after the 1952 show trials. Kundera demonstrably entered a short phase of his public existence when he supported the reigning version of socialist realist discourse.

He stressed Tyčyna's "arduous love of native Ukraine," not contradicting the "glorification of Ukrainian-Soviet companionship." This doublet led Kundera to the affirmation of two core concepts of contemporary Stalinism: *socialist patriotism* and *proletarian internationalism*. The implicit negative of socialist patriotism was naturally bourgeoisie nationalism (Yugoslavia and some Slovaks), and the negative of proletarian internationalism was cosmopolitanism and zionism (Israel and the Slánský's). With these categories set forth in the introduction, Kundera claimed that the national poetic tradition needs to find its sources in the folklore of pre-modern times. This might have given some peculiarity to Kundera's contemporary voice.

The Ukrainian element was identified with the Moravian one, since both were sources of the peripheral pre-modern folk enrichment of socialist art: "It could be either a sound of nature in the poet's juvenile verses or the music of the revolution in his 'Iron Psalm,' in this wondrous abbreviatory image of the Ukrainian revolution, or

under the protection of the army and the police, were full of authentic revolutionary psychology and their adherents experienced them with the grand pathos, enthusiasm, and eschatological faith in an absolutely new world. Poets found themselves on the proscenium for the last time. They thought they were playing their customary part in the glorious European drama and had no inkling that the theater manager had changed the program at the last moment and substituted a trivial farce," Milan Kundera, "Preface," in Milan Kundera, *Life is Elsewhere* (London: Penguin Books, 1986): v-vi.

⁴⁰ Pavlo Tyčyna, *Ocel a něha: Výbor z poesie* [Steel and Tenderness. A Collection of Poems] (Prague: Československý spisovatel (1953). Kundera translated 29 out of 40 poems; the quotes that follow in the main text are from his introduction. (29 out of 40 pieces).

the complex counterpoint of the poem ‘The Funeral of a Friend.’”⁴¹ Regarding the question of the historical orientation of socialist art, this contribution to the literary scene is an articulation of the official view on this subject – it is far from Czech “plebeian” democrats venerated by the young radical Kosík on one side, but it is even further from any kind of modernist tradition unsuccessfully defended by Nezval. The space of socialist realism was related to the space of the Ukrainian/Moravian village.⁴²

Then came *Man, a Wide Garden*, regarded by many purely literary scholars as Kundera’s a first contention against the freshly re-established space of socialist realism.⁴³ But from the viewpoint of intellectual history, triangulated by Kundera’s own contemporary explanations, his first book of poetry was nothing but an affirmation of the space. Interesting for its freshness when compared to a contemporary production, Kundera’s embrace of the theory of limited continuity in 1953 could be proved by his almost verbatim agreement with Štoll and Taufer’s explanation of the suicide of Konstantin Biebl.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² “When in 1980, during a television panel discussion devoted to my works, someone called ‘*The Joke*’ a major indictment of Stalinism,” I was quick to interject, ‘Spare me your Stalinism, please. *The Joke* is a love story,” Milan Kundera, “Preface” in Milan Kundera, *The Joke* (London: Penguin Books, 1984): v. However, in the self-same preface Kundera expresses his long-term fascination with folklore traditions, mainly of a particular custom, “the Ride of Kings”. A reflection of one of the characters (Jaroslav) from a novel may contain at least some of his views from the time of *Steel and Tenderness*: “Capitalism had destroyed the collective way of life. Folk art had lost its footing, its sense of itself, its function. There would have been no point in trying to resurrect it while social conditions were such that man lived cut off from man, everyone for himself. But socialism had liberated men from the yoke of their isolation. Their private and public lives would merge. Once more, they would be united by dozens of communal rites. They would create their own collective customs. The former would come from the past. Harvests, carnivals, dances, work. The latter would come from the present. May Day, rallies, Liberation celebrations, meetings,” (ibid. 122).

⁴³ It has been described as Communist poetry “with a difference. Its socialism was closer in spirit to that of the early ‘proletarian’ poets of the ‘twenties than to the versified sloganry of the fifties” (French, 1982, 100) or as a poetry of “tension between a need to comply with the pressure of the norm and the attempt to assert individual and polemical terms” (Bauer, 2003, 16) or as a ‘declarative gesture of the need to reevaluate’ (Janoušek, 2007-2008, 202); finally “the publication of ‘*Člověk zahrada širá*’ was indeed seen as a major, provocative, rebellious event with which the Stalinist reviewers found it rather difficult to cope,” (Čulík, 31).

One of the poems in his book is indeed dedicated to the memory of the deceased poet and begins with a polemical statement:

Konstantin, you never believed / that Communist is a man who does not like people / gloomy priests who shut themselves in Marxism, in the old citadel....
You had this premonition, Konstantine:/ Enemies of life and poetry are one and the same. / Those, who want to turn socialism into hostile deserts / those are the first who sheer the locks of its poetry⁴⁴.

An implied target are radicals and not socialist realists in their entirety, as scholars would like to have it. At this point, Kundera and Štoll were still on the same ideological ship.

In December 1952, a month after of the show trial with Slánský, Kundera repeated and explained the invective at the debate of the circle of young poets. The stenographic protocol of this meeting states that Kundera was pressed to give a comment particularly about this poem. In turn, he is reported to state:

Comrade Kundera explains his poem “Comrades, the enemy is not automatically such a man, who...” and his poem “About Biebl.” Comrade Kundera claims that the meaning the poems is not clear because of the limited selection at hand – in the whole collection they are introduced with by a motto which clearly states the recipient. The poems are polemics against wrong methods of the Party – methods introduced by Slánský.⁴⁵

That, only recently published remark (2003), does not exhaust all the evidence. The poem about Biebl was also recognized as anti-sectarian among official recommenders of the book for publication (who also happened to be later reviewers).⁴⁶

Z.K. Slabý and Jaroslav Janů declared mostly positive views of *Man, a Wide Garden*. Z.K. Slabý time and again stressed Kundera’s valuable polemic young voice

⁴⁴ Kundera, *Man, a Wide Garden* [Man, a Wide Garden] (Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1953): 49-51.

⁴⁵ Michal Bauer, ed., “Diskuse o básních Milana Kundery v Kroužku začínajících autorů” [The Debate on Poems in the Circle of Young Poets – Stenographic Protocol of the Debate], *Tvar* 14 (2003): 18-19.

⁴⁶ Michal Bauer, ed., “Příprava jednotlivých vydání básnických knih Milada Kundery v nakladatelství Československý spisovatel” [The Preparation of the Publication of Milan Kundera’s Books of Poetry in the Publishing House Československý spisovatel – Reprint of the Archives of the Czechoslovak Writers’ Union], *Tvar* 12 (2001): 11, 14-15. .

mounted against radicals, namely “Slánský, Šling, and other vermin”⁴⁷. Slabý even described Konstantin Biebl as Kundera’s teacher in the art of polemics and anti-war poetry. Jaroslav Janů, however, did not limit himself to praises, and criticized the too inspecific nature of Kundera’s polemic: “By means of metaphorical rejection of ‘Gloomy priests who shut themselves in Marxism, in the old citadel’, Kundera generalizes his polemic on the whole of socialist criticism and aesthetics. Thereby it is [the book] permeated by a small shadow of lofty, individualistic, if not anarchistic tone.”⁴⁸ Yet, in general, Janů is willing to “sign Z.K. Slabý’s analysis of the hopeful and positive contribution that his [Kundera’s] poems brought.” The restatement of Štoll’s indictment in Kundera’s poems was thus confirmed not only by him, but also by recommenders and reviewers of the volume.

Besides these two positive public receptions, Milan Kundera was nominated to membership of the CSWU (July 1, 1953). Michal Sedloň, a member of Presidium, wrote in his letter: “Even though Kundera made some ideological mistakes in his book already criticised in the newspaper, he has a large advantage on his side. He is not pretentious and he is not leaving anything out – because he is fighting inside himself with individualism and subjectivism...”⁴⁹ The fact of his past expulsion reverberated, the inconcreteness of his invective was reminded, but nevertheless, the double act of affirmation of the space of socialist realism yielded structural results – the membership in the prestigious CSWU.

⁴⁷ Z. K. Slabý, “První knížka Milana Kunderu” [Milan Kundera’s First Book], *Literární noviny* 35 (1953): 4.

⁴⁸ Jaroslav Janů, “O citu a myšlence v lyrice” [Of Emotion and Thought in Lyric Poetry], *Literární noviny* 36 (1953): 6

⁴⁹ The letter of Michal Sedloň is quoted in Michal Bauer, *Ideologie a paměť: literatura a instituce na přelomu 40. a 50. let 20. století* [Ideology and Memory: Literature and Institutions at the Turn of the 1940s-1950s] (Jinočany: H & H, 2003): footnote no. 1024.

Milan Kundera entered Communist culture at the time when the fiercest proponents of Stalinism were being removed from it. Through the commentaries he made about the author he edited (Tyčyna), through his self-defense against the charge of being too liberal, and through the series of positive reactions and even recommendations for his inclusion in the Writers' Union, it is arguable that this writings at this time cannot yet be understood as the first steps towards the delegitimization of socialist realism. If they were innovative, then only inasmuch as the official cultural politics were being modified and inasmuch as it allowed new degrees of personal tolerance, which was in turn the consequence of the changed situation in the structures and personnel of the Czech cultural sphere.

Affirmation, Foundation, Exclusion, Conformity Dominik Tatarka 1949-1953

In the Slovak part of Czechoslovakia, the late days of August 1949 were dedicated to celebrations. The fifth anniversary of the Slovak National Uprising was the defining national holiday: the denunciation of the wartime independent Slovakia and the celebration of the post-1948 socialist Czechoslovakia were experienced as complementary realities. Among other things, this occasion to highlight the cultural achievements of the new epoch. Prestigious state prizes were presented, and the winning novel in the category of fiction was *The Parochial Republic*.

At that moment, its author Dominik Tatarka was 36 years old. He was born in Drienové, a small village in central Slovakia, in 1913. From 1934 to 1939 he studied Czechoslovak and French literature in Prague and Paris⁵⁰, in 1939 he abruptly returned to the newly founded Slovak state, where he finally graduated in Bratislava and took up the post of high school teacher in Martin and Žilina, the hometowns of the Slovak national movement, not too far away from his own hometown. Before the Uprising he managed to begin his career as a writer. He published two books of fiction, two relevant literary manifestoes, and started to write reviews of books. While the short story collection *In the Anxiety of Searching* (1942) and the novella *The Miraculous Virgin* (1944) were based on either existentialist or surrealist premises, his manifestoes invoked the formalist doctrine of Victor Skhlovskij and went against the grain of Slovak realism, which was typified by its insistence on extra-textual social

⁵⁰ The only available biography of Tatarka is limited to this early period of his life. It was written in Czech, by the translator of his Slovak prose into the Czech language (officially pre-1969, as dissident post-1969) into Czech language. Both of these facts are quite exceptional phenomena. See Zdeněk Eis, *Dominik Tatarka. Mezi domovem, Prahou, Paříží. Vyprávění o zrodu spisovatele*. [Dominik Tatarka. Between home, Prague, and Paris. The Story of the Birth of a Writer] (Prague: Gutenberg, 2001).

and national commitments in storytelling. Tatarka, at the time in which the story of *The Parochial Republic* was situated (i.e. the wartime Slovak state, 1939-1945), was himself a modernist herald of the notion of estrangement.⁵¹

Existentialism, surrealism, and formalism: Not a promising beginning for the aspirant for the leadership of socialist literature in Slovakia. However, when the Uprising came about in 1944, Dominik Tatarka joined and actively fought as a partisan in the mountains of Central Slovakia. He also spent some time in Banská Bystrica, the urban headquarters of the Uprising. Here began his journalist career, in the position of editor of the bulletin *Hlas ľudu* [The Voice of the People]. He followed this track by joining *Národná obroda* [The National Revival], the newspaper founded by leading Slovak Communist Laco Novomeský. However, *Národná obroda* was not the magazine of The Communist Party of Slovakia (CPS), but rather the official platform of The Slovak National Assembly. The newspaper was disbanded after the installment of state socialism in 1948. Besides this, in the course of the Uprising, Tatarka joined The Communist Party of Slovakia (CPS) and without hesitation supported the Communist takeover of power in February 1948. At the occasion of The National Prize that he won in 1949, a concise biography was published in the daily *Pravda*.⁵² It informs us that since 1948, Tatarka had held a contract with *Matica Slovenská*, a major cultural institution located in Martin dedicated to the cultivation of national heritage; it tells us also that he was one of the secretaries of the Slovak section of The Czechoslovak Writers' Union (CSWU), and that he was presently a

⁵¹ “Arguably, the reality of art is more truthful than the reality of history or nature. Only the limited man does not understand that the most real man is a non-existing man, who, even at the expense of tragic effort and toil, wants to realize himself according to his own idea and faith.” See Dominik Tatarka, “Neznáma tvár (1940)” [The Unknown Face (1940)], in *Proti Démonom* [Against the Demons] (Bratislava: Slovenský spisovateľ, 1968): 21.

⁵² “Slovenské národné ceny na rok 1949” [The Slovak National Prizes 1949], *Pravda*, 27 August, 1949, 8.

full-time writer. In other words, Tatarka was a prominent Communist artist with a curriculum vitae that was pregnant with future problems.

What I shall attempt in this chapter is an account of the interaction of the publicly expressed thought of Dominik Tatarka with the changing space of Slovak socialist realist culture in the period 1949-1953. I will claim that before 1951 he was the ardent, ambitious, recognized, and affirming supporter of the yet not precisely defined space of Slovak socialist realism. It would be defined by a conflict. To be specific, what made Slovak socialist realism particularly Slovak was the campaign against bourgeois nationalism in 1951. Tatarka was hit by the pursuit of political enemies who had suddenly detected been in the ranks of the Party. He was excluded, although only for a short time. His writings after his return in 1952 turned for the two following years into an indistinct, conformist praise of Stalinism (which was however a general state of being in the Czechoslovak public sphere, 1951-1953).

Affirmation
Dominik Tatarka Winning Recognition
1950

In the course of 1950, Dominik Tatarka continued to win recognition in the official culture, while at the same time the fragments of later accusations of bourgeois nationalism also appeared and accumulated. First and foremost, it was the year of his second post-war novel, *The First and the Second Strike*. Presumably, it was the most observed and commented on literary event of the year. Presumably also, the ideas ascending from the wide reception prefigured some of the ensuing condemnations in 1951. Still, even though the notion of bourgeois nationalism was already circulating and codified, no one would have suspected that there was any potential political danger inside this book. In 1950, it was generally read as a socialist realist tome. The interactive process of reception took place mostly on the magazine platform *Kultúrny život*⁵³ [The Cultural Life], and in significant instance also in the daily *Pravda*. Let us trace how this process unfolded in the course of the year.

The first, and a very positive, reception of the novel came directly from the head of the Slovak literary scene. Michal Chorváth, the chairman of the Slovak section of CSWU, claimed in his review that *The Parochial Republic* had already been a progressive novel, and that *The First and the Second Strike* was the next step toward the author's identification with the ideology of the working class. However, the vestiges of Tatarka's formalist past were not unnoticed: "The impact of the old form is still present, but only occasionally. It stems from the desire for estrangement and it comes forth in nonlinear and discontinuous sentences that produce unclear

⁵³ *Kultúrny život*, the single most important platform of Slovak literary culture, was founded at the occasion of the first anniversary of the Uprising. After the founding First Congress of The Czechoslovak Writer's Union, it continued to exist an official magazine of its Slovak section.

meaning.⁵⁴” The intention of the highest praise is evident from the conclusion, where Chorváth compares the significance of the novel to the poem of Ján Kostra – the most important Slovak poet in the early 1950s and the winner of the State Prize in 1950. Tatarka’s ascent to the recognized leadership of Slovak fiction was confirmed by the formal head of the national literature.

The second reflection that appeared in July came as well from the eminent writer. Prominent literary scholar Alexander Matuška joined the tone set by Chorváth and welcomed *The First and the Second Strike* as a proper socialist realist novel. The trodden track of argumentation is present also in his review, focusing on the fact that Tatarka had a much more complicated development than other writers: “Tatarka is in the process of transformation. From a spiritualist, he is turning out to be a materialist... The way Tatarka struggles with the vestiges of his old training must be approved by each and every one of us. He is, so to say, acquiring for himself a new skin.”⁵⁵ Only the opaque nature of his language and style are, again, underlined as a negative aspect of the novel. Socialist realism is a transparent and readable discourse, and Tatarka is interpreted as *dashing against* his own inclination to formalistically roughen the textual surface of his stories.

The time went on, and the public activities of Tatarka – a Stalinist writer – did too. Together with colleague Vladimír Mináč, he organized a public debate with student graduates (July 22, 1950); the next week (July 30, 1950) he in participated a public trip with members of the literary elite, followed by a literary debate. Again, Tatarka went with Mináč and also with the aforementioned and renowned Ján Kostra. The event was organized by *Pravda* in cooperation with the Union, and was called

⁵⁴ Michal Chorváth, “Nový Román Dominika Tatarku” [The New Novel of Dominik Tatarka], *Kultúrny život* 9 (1950): 5.

⁵⁵ Alexander Matuška, “Tri nové romány” [The Three New Novels], *Kultúrny život* 14 (1950): 3.

The Second Summer Sunday of the Friends of the Book. Shortly before that, Tatarka spent the first two weeks of July at the political-professional training in Budmerice, in the western region of Záhorie. He wrote a report that filled the front page of *Kultúrny život*.

The article was entitled “The Writer as Collective.”⁵⁶ It pinpointed and affirmed the structural transformation of literary life, i.e. the institutional system that socialist realism had brought about. For the first time in the history of Slovak literature, Tatarka claimed, tens of Slovak writers were spending two weeks together. They were studying Stalinist ideology, getting to know each other, setting for themselves short- and long-term plans. All of this under the auspices of the Party and the People's Republic. The structural, almost sociological sensibility of Tatarka is evident: socialist realism is not only a conceptual demand; it is also an everyday practice. It structures the time, behavior, and social capital of a writer. Finally, Tatarka recalls what was allegedly yet another discursive practice of Slovak socialist realism since 1950: the examination of conscience. By referring to the enemy of bourgeois nationalism, Tatarka makes a critique of the general ignorance of national tradition: “To grow more consciously from the Slovak environment and its people – that is a self-imposed demand of a writer. The pressure is as high as it has ever been. There is a demand of socialist patriotism against bourgeois cosmopolitanism on one side and against nationalism on the other.” Tatarka publicly supports the collectivization of literature and also speaks of the impending danger of bourgeois nationalism. However, no concrete names are yet uttered.

It was not on the pages of the relatively elitist bi-weekly *Kultúrny život* (turned into a weekly in 1951) where the first open rejection of Tatarka's work appeared.

⁵⁶ Dominik Tatarka, “Spisovateľ ako kolektív“ [The Writer as Collective], *Kultúrny život* 14 (1950): 1.

Instead, *Pravda* was used as the platform for the first dismissal of *The First and the Second Strike*. But even the critique of Ján Rozner was not yet essentially political, and it is quite clearly limited to aesthetic problems. Still, Rozner significantly contributed to the sources of discourse that were in the upcoming months utilized in drawing arguments for the accusation of bourgeois nationalism.

For the first time, Rozner's did not solely criticize Tatarka's unintelligible style. By and large he was concerned with the question of content, specifically with the nature of characters in a novel. According to Rozner, they were not socialist enough. Tatarka himself was charged with regress – his protagonist *Štefan Reptiš* becomes a transmitter of the old Slovak mentality that Tatarka is said to aptly condemn in *The Parochial Republic*. Thereby, the author himself was allegedly not class-conscious enough, and he was indicted for the insulting the working class by portraying the workers similarly to sensual bohemians of Tatarka's wartime surrealist period. Rozner summarizes: "It is a novel from the environment of a worker, factory, and village. But it is not a novel about a worker."⁵⁷ Although it was not yet nationalism that he was linked with, the notion of regress utilized in the construction of the concept of bourgeois nationalism was linked with Tatarka and his second novel.

Rozner's article was immediately read as seminal and as a direct consequence, a public debate about the novel was organized in the Club of the Slovak Writers in Bratislava on October 20, 1950, under the baton of Ctibor Štítnický, another secretary of the Slovak section of CSWU. *Kultúrny život* gave the report from the session.⁵⁸ It opens with Tatarka's response. He defends himself almost angrily, in a bitter and ironic tone, perhaps understanding that Rozner had undermined his recognized

⁵⁷ Ján Rozner, "O Tatarkovom románe 'Prvý a druhý úder'" [Of Tatarka's Novel 'The First and the Second Strike'], *Pravda*, 30.9. 1950, 8.

⁵⁸ "Verejná diskusia o Tatarkovom románe a kritike" [The Public Debate about Tatarka's New Novel and about Critique], *Kultúrny život* 20 (1950): 5, passim.

leadership in the field of Slovak fiction, or perhaps already knowing that the argument resonated with the bourgeois nationalist charges mounted against Laco Novomeský.

Tatarka opened his reply to Rozner by explaining what he himself had admitted to were the weaknesses of the novel. These were claimed to have been caused by the *weaknesses* of the new institutional structures of socialist realism. Writers had to explore newly established elements of the practice of writing. Only by understanding the practical dimension of socialist literature could one understand socialist realist novels, he argued. Here we see some continuity with the problems Tatarka was covering in his “Writers as Collective”. However, at the debate he switched the judgmental value. Instead of praise, he intended to convince the audience that it had been impossible to satisfy the requirements for the epic novel under the institutional conditions imposed by socialist realist, i.e. in the course of a six-month stipend. Tatarka asserted that it is manageable to write a socialist epic poem in half a year, but not a full-fledged epic novel. At this point, one can sense the implicit intention to compare his work to the univocal contemporary praise of poet Ján Kostra.

In addition, Tatarka said that Slovak writers in 1950 were only beginning to learn the new skill of writing according to a socialist plan. Therefore what had been written until now he called “novels – sketches.”⁵⁹ The time for the new grand realist novel had not yet arrived. Tatarka agreed that the size and incoherency were his mistakes. Nonetheless, the critique of Rozner he said was purely subjective. Tatarka attempted to convince the audience and his readership that Rozner’s critique is only the expression of his personal taste, and he did it by pointing to the allegedly non-

⁵⁹ Sketch is a genre typical of Russian literature, where it is known as *ocherk* and was acknowledged as a substantial literary genre during the time of the first Five-Year Plan in The Soviet Union, i.e. before the establishment of the monopoly of socialist realism in 1934. See Elizabeth Astrid Papazia, *Manufacturing Truth: The Documentary Moment in Early Soviet Culture* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2009): 15-16.

scientific quality of his argument.

The majority of other participants agreed with Tatarka, and all of them suggested that both the novel and the subsequent reflection were major events of the year. Alexander Matuška's contribution to the debate confirmed Tatarka's fearless, authoritative, and self-conscious argument. Matuška asserted, "*The First and the Second Strike* is the best Slovak post-war novel, and even if Rozner raised so many complaints against it, it is precisely because it is the best Slovak post-war novel."⁶⁰

Present was also yet another soon-to-be victim of bourgeois nationalism – Vladimír Mináč. He defended Rozner's critique with a reply to Matuška. In his view, if *The First and the Second Strike* is the most important post-war novel, then Rozner's critique was the most important critique.

Since the novel's publication in the spring, Tatarka had reaffirmed his position as one of the most prominent figures of Slovak socialist realism. The majority of responses understood his second post-war novel as the breakthrough of socialist literature in Slovakia, and even after the introduction of bourgeois nationalism as the first enemy in the political discourse, the events of 1950 did not make a great difference compared to the changes brought about by the founding of the CSWU (1949).

In the Christmas issue of *Kultúrny Život*, Tatarka published a sketch called "The Confession of the Child of the Epoch,"⁶¹ which was the culmination of his creative praise of socialist realist discourse. He embraces and enriches both its ideological and practical dimensions and gives an account of a Bolshevik self-critique also known as a confession. The sketch itself is a narrative situated in a classroom of a

⁶⁰ "Verejná diskusia o Tatarkovom románe a kritike" [The Public Debate about Tatarka's New Novel and about Critique], *Kultúrny život* 20 (1950): 5, passim.

⁶¹ Dominik Tatarka, "Spoved' dieťaťa svojej doby" [The Confession of the Child of the Epoch], *Kultúrny život* 24 (1950): 11.

nonspecific village, where members of the local Party organization gather to listen to the confession of a new female member. The Party leader is also a woman, as if Tatarka had followed the one of the previous Matuska's comments about the absence of a female element in his last novel. For a long time, the main figure is reads her biography out to comrades, who keep questioning her. Tatarka put the practice of confession into the contrasting perspectives of the life of a bourgeois and a communist. The former is portrayed as a non-reflective confusion, a dark life driven by senseless events, in which an individual is governed by a chance. On the contrary, the communist way of life produces a consciousness of the new epoch, i.e. class consciousness. The agent of cultivation of this consciousness is the Party. And a confession in the presence of other Party members is upheld as a necessary practice for the obtaining the true meaning of life.

Tatarka concludes this almost existential apology of socialism by recalling the argument of an implied enemy. In the enemy's perspective, communists are said to care about man only as for the sake of the workforce and the meaning of his life is said to equal his productivity and efficiency. To the contrary, Tatarka maintains that Communists are not only materialists, but also bringers of the new definition of human consciousness. Confession is the primary means to achieve this goal. Tatarka chooses to write about this subject at the highest point of his recognition and on the occasion when first, it was possible to contribute; second, he was able to contribute; third, he was also willing to contribute to the discourse of socialist realism in its foundation. In Slovakia, the notions of critique, self-critique, and confession entered the discourse simultaneously with the incorporation of the notion of bourgeois nationalism. Many supporters (Tatarka among them) soon became victims in the final foundational act of Slovak socialist realism in the spring of 1951.

Foundation

Dominik Tatarka excluded and returning in conformity 1951-1953

The initializing event of the aforesaid completion of the foundation of Slovak Stalinist literary culture had taken place two month before the celebrations of the anniversary. The international Soviet campaign against Tito had struck its roots also in Czechoslovakia. In June 1949, Slovak Communist Dr. Gejza Pavlík, together with his wife, had been sentenced to fifteen years of prison. Pavlík, an attorney and chief of The Czechoslovak International Travel Agency, spent the Second World War in Switzerland working for the Unitarian Service Committee (USC), and knew Noel Field, an American Communist, who had been arrested and held in Hungary. Pavlík was kidnapped in Czechoslovakia and transferred to Hungary as part of the preparation of the show trial with the group of Hungarian Communists group headed by László Rajk.

Gejza Pavlík was the first person that criminalized the contemporary Slovak political elite. He did this during interrogations, in a foreign state, and under the torture; after his return he even tried to abjure his confession, but its effects were irreversible and set events in motion. Subsequently, Hungarian Communist leader Mátyás Rákosi arrived in Prague, assisted by the leader of the State Protection Authority, Péter Gábor (21-24 June 1949). They brought with them a list of alleged Czechoslovak collaborators and spies, a list which was the outcome of Pavlík's confession: "The list attested, and Rákosi was eager to explicitly stress this fact, that

all of the incriminated persons spent the war either in the West or they were fighting in the domestic resistance.”⁶²

The chase on “Czechoslovak Rajk”, as Karel Kaplan puts it, had thereby begun and its consequences were dire for the whole Slovak political and cultural space.⁶³ Next came the first waves of arrests of the members of the Czechoslovak Communist Party (CPC). The first one to end up in prison was Eugen Löbl who, like Pavlík, pointed to the Slovak dimension of the suspected treason. Löbl called the attention of interrogators to Slovak foreign minister Vladimír Clementis. As a result, Clementis had to resign his position in March 1950, and was charged to write a detailed confession concerning mainly his wartime activities and his disapproval of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Clementis was an opportune entrant to apply the key term – bourgeois nationalism – in the inner-party struggle in The Communist Party of Slovakia (CPS). The watershed event related to this notion was the meeting of The Central Committee of the CPS in April 1950. Leader Viliam Široký unexpectedly indicted “the young generation” led by Vladimír Clementis, Gustáv Husák, and Laco Novomeský exactly of this ideological syndrome. So what was its genealogy and what did it contain?

The crystallization of the concept of bourgeois nationalism can be traced to the Soviet-Yugoslav clash in the summer of 1948.⁶⁴ At that time, the so called “First

⁶²Karel Kaplan, *Zpráva o zavraždění generálního tajemníka* [The Report of the Murder of the General Secretary] (Prague: Mladá Fronta, 1992): 55.

⁶³ This sentence naturally relates to the official culture. To put things in a proper perspective, I would like to recall the fact that out of circa 100,000 political prisoners in Czechoslovakia, only 280 of them were members of the CPC, which is 0.3 % ratio. At the same time, 12% of the whole population was in the Party. And only 6% those executed for political crimes were Communists.

See Jiří Pernes and Jan Foitzik, eds. *Politické procesy v Československu po roce 1945 a “případ Slánský”* [Political Trials in Czechoslovakia after 1945 and “the Slánský trial”] (Prague: Prius, 2005): 11.

⁶⁴ Jan Rychlík, “Problém tzv. slovenského buržoázneho nacionalismu,” in *Češi a Slováci ve 20. století. Česko-slovenské vztahy 1945-1992* [Czechs and Slovaks in the 20th century. Czecho-Slovak Relations 1945-1992] (Prague: Ústav T.G. Masaryka, 1998): 146-169.

resolution about Yugoslavia” asserted “The transition of the Tito-Rankovic clique from democracy to bourgeois nationalism.” Bourgeois nationalism is a Stalinist interpretation of political decision-making in terms of consciousness and identity, i.e. Soviets interpreted the behavior of Yugoslav Communists as a regression from working-class consciousness back into national consciousness. The proof of this regress was in the alliance of class enemies in the national interest. In all, it was a charge whose targets were inside the Communist Party, especially among circles where the demands for a autonomy at the costs of the power centre had appeared. Originally, this meant the autonomy of Belgrade at the cost of Moscow. Transmitted and contained in the territory of Czechoslovakia, it meant the autonomy of Bratislava at the cost of Prague. The diagnosis of bourgeois nationalism was always supported by evidence of historical cooperation with a present-day enemy.⁶⁵

In the core, the horizon of suspicion was dominated by the possible demands for autonomy that may have been raised by the nationalist circles of the Slovak Communist apparatus. In the background, there was the historical experience with Slovak separation after the Munich agreement. Purges and screenings followed Široký’s indictment. However, while in Bohemia they were contained in political and economical spheres, the undifferentiated character of the Slovak elite brought about the immediate transplantation of bourgeois nationalism into the official cultural discourse. To cut to the point, I claim that the Slovak cultural discourse of Stalinism became at this moment even more political than the Czech one.

⁶⁵ E.g., Clementis was accused on the basis of his critique of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, because of his support of the imperialists, his cooperation with the Allies in exile, etc. The pasts of both Novomeský and Husák contained cooperation with convinced leading fascist Alexander Mach. Even earlier, Novomeský and the whole DAV group came to be interpreted as the synthesizers of all the classes of Slovak national culture and thereby leaders of the nationalist movement and not socialism.

1951 saw Tatarka's sudden fall from the status of the most prominent novelist and public figure of the early stage of Communist regime. This fall was a byproduct of the first but unrealized concept of the show trials with the "Czechoslovak Rajk". Happily enough for all included Slovaks, except executed Vladimír Clementis, the original two-fold scheme of Czech cosmopolitanism (headed by Šling) and Slovak bourgeois nationalism (headed by Clementis) was abandoned in the second half of 1951 and replaced by the second construction that consummated with *The Slánský Trial*. The ideological priority of bourgeois nationalism/cosmopolitanism was finally replaced by the charge of Zionism. In all, until the spring of 1951, Tatarka had enjoyed the recognition of a celebrated novelist.

After an event called The Second *Aktív* of the Slovak Section of CSWU in May 1951, he was officially accused of bourgeois nationalism and worked for several months among manual laborers. Finally, as a consequence of the shift in the concept of the show trial at the end of the year, he could return among public figures. Following is a reconstruction of this three-step process with the conclusion that both his leading position in socialist realism and his willingness to enrich it permanently disappeared.

On February 6 1951, Gustáv Husák was arrested in the office of Štefan Baš'ovanský, the general secretary of the CPS. The same fate befell Laco Novomeský on the following day. Until February 21, more than fifty top members of the party were assembled in the prison of the State castle Koloděje near Prague. They constituted the body of the first construction of treason. On February 21, a meeting of the Central Committee of the CPC took place in Prague. Štefan Baš'ovanský enjoyed the highlight of his political career, fully revealing the occult enemy among Slovak Communists. He reclassified the mistakes of the mistaken – already pinpointed at the

IX. Congress of the CPS – as the crimes of criminals: “When we strip Husák in political fashion, what awaits us underneath, what will spring out right in our faces? A stupid Populist Fascist!”⁶⁶ The party-wide political campaign had been launched.

Early in 1951, Tatarka published a new book, *People and Deeds*, and it became yet another pretence to Tatarka’s fall. It was a collection of his journalistic writings published before 1948 on the pages of the disbanded *Národná obroda*. The party-wide pursuit of bourgeois nationalists, initiated in late February, expanded from the political headquarters in Prague to the cultural periphery in Bratislava in a month. Indeed, the book was the first motive for the verdict against him, and it first occurred on March 21, 1951, at a session of the Central Edition Council (a censorship organization). The main speech was given by the chief censor of Czechoslovakia and leading radical Stalinist Pavel "Poly" Reiman.

A newly formed group of four Slovak writers was upheld as the bourgeois nationalist core of the Slovak section. Its members were Michal Chorváth, Vladimír Mináč, Alexander Matuška, and Dominik Tatarka. If the victims of the trials were to be elites of the Party, then the expansion affirmed this pattern. Chorváth was a president of the Slovak section of the CSWU, Matuška a leading critic, Tatarka a

⁶⁶Quoted in Karel Kaplan, *Zpráva o zavraždění generálního tajemníka* [The Report of the Murder of the General Secretary] (Prague: Mladá Fronta, 1992): 55.

Štefan Bašťovanský was recounted in Tatarka’s oral memoirs. In *Recordings (Navrávačky)*, Tatarka states that during the war he was hiding his Jewish wife Magda Karpáty. He summons an anecdote about a visit of the Bašťovanský family right after *The Parochial Republic* was published: “The great Bašťovanský came to his bookshelf and took out my book, exactly my own poor Parochial Republic, already in hardcover, and he was browsing through it in front of me. Every page had underlined sentences. And what did it mean? What was in there?...: ‘Is this what the working class look like, is this what class conscious comrades look like?’“ [asked Bašťovanský] I was not speaking like that publicly, but I actually did write in such a way...So, I became a bourgeois nationalist. Why? Because all Communists during the Uprising were very quickly arrested by the State Police. Široký, Bašťovanský. There was the only single hero – Šmidke.“ See Dominik Tatarka, Eva Štolbová, *Navrávačky* [Recordings] (Cologne: Index, 1987): 81.

Secondly and paradoxically, Tatarka like Bašťovanský went from riches to rags in the course of 1951. However, at the time when Tatarka fell, Bašťovanský rose, and at the time when Tatarka returned, Bašťovanský killed himself. As mentioned, his wife was Jewish and the main ideological charge in the second half of the year was Zionism. On November 27, 1952, Štefan Bašťovanský committed suicide. It was the day of the verdict for Slánský and Co.

leading novelist, Mináč a leading satirist. The person to replace Chorváth in the position of the leader of Slovak literature was 25-year-old Milan Lajčiak. It was he who wrote the report of this session in *Kultúrny život*. Regarding Tatarka, he stated: “The edition of his book *People and Deeds* had to be destroyed, because the tone of the magazine [Národná obroda] was set by bourgeois nationalist traitor Novomeský. This book contains gossips about anti-fascist workers, it is downplays of the criminal activity of arch-murderer Tiso, it contains lies about historical truths from the time of the war against Hitler's Germany.”⁶⁷

Later on, Július Šefranek, who was the leader of the Slovak section of Kultprop,⁶⁸ stepped in and made the situation even worse. At the meeting of the Slovak Writers (known as The Second *Aktív*) on March 30, 1951, Šefranek elaborated the accusation of Tatarka by criticizing his Christmas-time “Confession of the Child of the Epoch.” Tatarka's opposition of Bourgeois versus Communist life was interpreted as a very logical underestimation of the new Communist humanity. Logical, because Tatarka's biography was now re-narrated as a life of the non-communist in the Communist Party. Šefranek stressed his past alliance with Novomeský and revived arguments against the characters in his novel (Rozner's critique and debate). He came to the conclusion that at this point, it was of no surprise that Tatarka had inserted the phrase “my employees” in the mouth of one of

⁶⁷ Milan Lajčiak, “Proti buržoáznemu nacionalizmu a kozmopolitizmu, za vyššiu ideovosť našej literatúry” [Against Bourgeois Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism: For the Higher *Ideovosť* of our Literature], *Kultúrny život* 13 (1951): 1.

⁶⁸ Kultprop was a Party structure officially called The Department of Culture and Propaganda. In Bohemia it was the home of the most radical Stalinist group. It was dissolved after the Slánský Trial because it was a Party (not State) structure strongly affiliated with Slánský. Leading figures such as Gustav Bareš or Pavel “Poly” Reiman were scattered into insignificant posts. See Jiří Knapík, *V zajetí moci. Kulturní politika, její systém a aktéři, 1948-1956* [In the Captivity of Power: Cultural Politics, its System and Agents. 1948-1956] (Prague: Libri, 2006).

the Comrades in his “Confession” text.⁶⁹ For Šefranek, this was a fissure of the text, a slip of mouth that revealed Tatarka’s true occult bourgeoisie-nationalist identity.⁷⁰

And the case became even more complicated. The expansion of the campaign against bourgeois nationalist in the cultural field was seen as a great opportunity to solve the pressing problem of the tradition of socialist literature *in Slovakia*. In comparison, the Czech norm of tradition had already been codified in January 1950 by Ladislav Štoll. He had spearheaded a moderate version of Stalinist ideology and admitted limited continuity with the avant-garde. In March 1951, with *30 Years of Struggle* as a paradigmatic model provided by the centre, Július Šefranek for the first time attempted to narrate the last thirty years of Slovak socialist literature.

In the course of 1950, it would have been incomprehensible to skip Laco Novomeský as a founding figure of the tradition of Slovak socialist literature. In the spring of the following year, Novomeský was linked to Clementis and revealed as the head of the reactionary culture. Only writer Peter Jilemnický and critic Edo Urx were upheld as founding figures similar to Július Fučík and Stanislav Kostka Neumann in the Czech territory.⁷¹ All of them were dead. The initial narrative was completed at

⁶⁹ His speech was even published as a hardcover booklet. Šefranek, Július. *Niektoré ideologické problémy našej literatúry* [Several Ideological Problems of Our Literature] (Bratislava: Slovenský spisovateľ, 1951). The career of its Slovak leader, Július Šefranek, went in the direction of a contemporary Slovak leader, Viliam Široký, who managed to keep his post of prime minister until 1963. Unlike the suicide of Bašťovanský or the degradation of Bareš and Reiman, Šefranek had a conspicuous career. After the cessation of the campaign and the end of Kultprop, he became a dean of the Department of Marxism and Leninism at the Comenius University in Bratislava, and later on, he held the position of rector (1956-1960).

⁷⁰ The passage in question comprised the following monologue: “It seems to me that even though I am ideologically well-off, my behavior is impossible. I am the director of a factory. Out of sixty employees, only three of us are Communists. My situation is difficult. When I asked my employees to demonstrate for peace, they told me that they are willing to demonstrate for peace only in their work time. Until now, I have not succeeded in unable to vitalizing the conditions in the factory. Dominik Tatarka, “Spoved’ dieťaťa svojej doby“ [The Confession of the Child of the Epoch], *Kultúrny život* 24 (1950): 11.

⁷¹ E.g., the campaigns of mandatory reading were called *Fučík’s Badge* and *Jilemnický’s Badge*, respectively. Badges were prizes that a student received after passing an exam that consisted of questions pertaining to the list of mandatory literature that a candidate had to have read.

the Plenary meeting of the Slovak section of the CSWU. The speaker was Július Špitzer, but nothing original regarding the reception of Tatarka's writings was added.

After these three speeches, Tatarka not only lost credit as a socialist writer, he was at the same time removed from the whole tradition. Ján Rozner wrote later in summer:

It has to be pitied that Slovak writers did not pay attention to the report of Ladislav Štoll given at the Plenary meeting of Czech writers [January 1950]. Štoll's book could have taught us a lot. It could have quickened the ideological struggle also in Slovak literature as well. Instead of [Czech avant-garde group led by Teige] Devětsil, we had the DAV [Slovak avant-garde group led by Novomeský]. Instead of Teige and his group, there was Novomeský and his people. They imported cosmopolitanism into Slovak culture – that dull admiration of western decadence that was turning away from reality, despised the people, and was full of phrases instead of revolutionary attitude. As Czech poetry had its Stanislav Kostka Neumann, Slovak literature had its Peter Jilemnický. He knew very well the squalor of coffee-shop intellectuals and their loudmouthed programs. Jilemnický posed his own, party-minded, combative art of the socialist realist writer.

In the course of two months, Tatarka not only accused but also excluded from the normative tradition that was forged during the accusations.

As a result of The Plenary meeting, Chorváth was dismissed from the position of the president of the Slovak section, Mináč had to leave its Committee and Matuška had to leave the publishing house of *Pravda*. As for Tatarka, he had to enter manual labor, specifically railway construction. He was the only one whose membership in the Committee of CSWU was preserved. Štefan Drúg even writes that after his degradation he did not become a forced laborer, but was dispatched among railway workers to “collect the material for his next book.”⁷²

Tatarka's trajectory toward the leadership of Slovak socialist realist fiction had

⁷² Štefan Drúg, “Premeny umeleckého života po roku 1948,” in *Umenie v službách totality 1948-1956* [The Changes of Cultural Life after 1948, in The Art that Served Totalitarianism, 1948-1956], Štefan Drúg ed., (Bratislava: Ústav slovenskej literatúry, 2001): 17-39.

Reading through the harsh indictments, I am inclination to trust Tatarka's memoirs on this specific question (“Everybody condemned me and I was sent to the shovel”). *Trat' Družby* [The Railway of Companionship] was a project of building the second track of rail between Čierna nad Tisou on the borders with The Soviet Union and Žilina in the central territory. It is known that Tatarka had planned to visit the construction and write about it – he promised it for IX. Congress of the CPS in 1950. The promise was published in *Kultúrny život*. The result was a short novel, *The Years of Companionship* (1954). What I know now is only that he was physically there during the second half of 1951.

come to a definite halt. As fast as he had been excluded, he was also replaced. Competitor František Hečko took the imaginary throne. The rest of 1951 was a period without debate; the number of pages of *Kultúrny život* was considerably reduced and filled mostly with translations of Soviet literature and calls to train a new generation of writers (March 1951 - February 1952). It during this time that Hečko published *The Wooden Village*. From its publication until today, textbooks of Slovak literature refer to this novel as an unequalled prototype of Slovak socialist realism. As the single fiction writer in Czechoslovakia, František Hečko won The State Prize for literature the following year and later he succeeded Milan Lajčiak in the post of the president of the Slovak Section of the CSWU.

The exclusion of Tatarka was relatively short-lived. The preparation of show trials had discarded the first construction, and bourgeois nationalism became a secondary issue. The second construction appeared, was executed, and, among other things, meant a watershed not only for Czech, but also for Slovak literature.⁷³ The new priority of the notion of *The Second Power Centre* headed by the General Secretary Rudolf Slánský (arrested on November 23, 1951), brought about a paradoxical rehabilitation for Tatarka and his colleagues. Simultaneously with the trial, the second editions of both of Tatarka's post-war novels were published with a statement about their correction.

This corrected edition of *The Parochial Republic* is a first sign of his rehabilitation. The book was newly dedicated to Alexander Matuška. It contains an epilogue explaining and to a certain point defending both of Tatarka's post-war novels. František Oktavec, the author of the epilogue, even dared to compare the discriminated Tatarka with the rising Hečko. Specifically, *The Parochial Republic*

⁷³ Pavel Janoušek, "Proces se Slánským jako periodizační mezník v české literatuře?" [The Trial with Slánský as a Milestone in the Periodization of Czech Literature?], *Tvar* 48 (1992): 1, 4-5.

was put on the same footing as Hečko's previous novel *The Red Wine*. In addition, Oktavec claimed that both of them contained ideological mistakes, and of *The First and the Second Strike*, he asserted that without the impact of this novel, František Hečko would have been unable to write “the [first epic] Slovak socialist realist novel – The Wooden Village.”⁷⁴ Tatarka was back among publishing writers, but his once-cherished book was now interpreted as a stepping-stone for a major epic narrative written by someone else.

To conclude, Dominik Tatarka ended 1950 with a defense of communist confession as the best practice for the cultivation of a meaningful way of life. In January, he was able to publish a collection of his pre-1948 writings. This was an action would cost him dearly – harsh criticism by the chief censor of Czechoslovakia and leading Stalinist radical Pavel Reiman. This was followed by condemning verdicts, joined with the attempts to codify the tradition of Slovak socialist realist culture. And even though Tatarka's exclusion from active participation on the literary scene was relatively short-lived, František Hečko had filled the vacuum of the most reputed Slovak writer. However, in light of this process and after his rehabilitation, Tatarka's texts in the course of 1952-53 became not only fully affirmative but also by no means innovative, polemicizing or enriching the monopoly discourse, as had been the case in 1950.⁷⁵

An editorial in the first February issue of *Kultúrny život* can be considered as a breakthrough text that modified Slovak socialist realism. It was a report from a relatively small meeting of Union elite (with excluded writers invited and present),

⁷⁴ František Oktavec, “Doslov,” in *Farská Republika* [The Epilogue, in The Parochial Republic], Dominik Tatarka (Martin: Matica Slovenská): 257.

⁷⁵ The first debates appeared in this period – there were a long conversation about the new novel of Peter Karvaš, *The Offspring Striking*, or a debate about satire. Vladimír Mináč was already a participant in these exchanges. Tatarka did not join any.

which took place immediately after the last Czechoslovak show trial in December 1951. The author of the report, Milan Lajčiak, welcomed back the four colleagues who had been so harshly excluded in the previous persecution of bourgeois nationalists. He did this, turning to Tatarka personally, by the separation of the "sentence against traitors and spies: Clementis, Novomeský et. al., who were hiding under the banner of the Party," from "their unfavorable impact on several writers".⁷⁶ Secondly, Lajčiak brought about the new key notion of post-Slánský socialist realism: *the broad front*, resp. *the united forces*. Looking back at 1951, even the official voice of culture contended the implausible, negative, intolerable silence in the pages of the official press:

People do not feel certainty. They think that they will be existentially affected if they utter an opinion that is not totally correct (or if their opinion turns out to be false in the course of a discussion). Those who criticize in good faith and those who fight openly their opinions must be reassured that nothing bad will happen to them. Quite the contrary: It is only in the regime of the People's Democracy where there is total freedom for any critique.⁷⁷

Notwithstanding this promise of legal security, Lajčiak added that it was a grave mistake not openly to publish self-critiques of the affected authors. Therefore, almost one year later, Tatarka's own words from the spring of 1951 are published on the pages of the magazine:

I thank the Party for her care about the development of Slovak literature. I thank her for the deep and piercing critique of my work which I have been doing until now. The critique of Comrade Šefranek was correct and good also for this reason: Thanks to his critique, I finally understand my mistake and I feel at ease. Moreover, I reject any expressions of pity or false tears from the public, who may sigh about the execution of several Slovak writers.⁷⁸

In March 1952, yet another plenary meeting of writers came about and institutional changes followed ideological ones: the editorial board of *Kultúrny Život* hired Dominik Tatarka again. Then, on April 1, 1952, he is already listed among the key speakers at the cultural protest against "the bacteriological war against Korea" that

⁷⁶ Milan Lajčiak, "Správa o zasadnutí slovenskej sekcie SČSS" [The Report of the Meeting of the Slovak Section of the CSWU], *Kultúrny život* 6 (1952): 1.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

occurred in the National Theater in Bratislava. He was back on the main stage of the official culture.

Self-critique reappeared as a praised practice in his first, larger published sketch after his rehabilitation. It appeared in the last August issue of *Kultúrny život* under the title “Breaking Bonds”. It is situated in a village on the verge of collectivization, and focuses on the character of local Communist leader Mäsiarik. The narrative revolves around the need to break family bonds in favor of social change. The local pub owner is declared a class enemy by a Communist protagonist, but at the same time, the class enemy is his father-in-law. In the past, Mäsiarik had made a mistake by granting him a membership. The father-in-law was a non-communist in the Communist Party. And now, under the pressure of collectivization, Mäsiarik is eager to undergo a self-critique and step down from his position as local Communist leader.

Biographical resonances are perhaps not a matter of chance, as may be the case with the main point: Mäsiarik resolves to admit his own mistakes but cannot allow himself to resign from his function. He is told to go on and conduct the big plan of the future. The most positive hero, Party instructor Podmaník, instructs him in his wavering. Tatarka echoes the programmatic article by Milan Lajčiak, that opens this section, as Podmaník states:

...you are a brute. Let it be said – you are a jack-ass...filled with self-pity: oh, now [after confession] comrades are going to hurt my pride.... But even if you are still having a pity on a rich man, and self-pity because of this fact, a stab with a knife in your belly will not solve anything....⁷⁹

At this time, confession is still seen as a legitimate practice. However, the weight is put on the assertion that any Communist self-critique should be followed by exclusion.

⁷⁹ Dominik Tatarka, “Putá sa trhajú” [Breaking bonds], *Kultúrny život* 35 (1952): 8.

In the following months, Tatarka acted as one of the main socialist realist public commentators. He had a major article in *Kultúrny život* 44, writing about the 19th Congress of CPSU. In the next number, he welcomed the anniversary of the October Revolution in main article of the issue “To Awaken the Creative Initiative of Workers – With a Soviet Book.” In the following year, he wrote condolences to Stalin and to Klement Gottwald. Then he wrote an editorial dedicated to the celebration of the First of May – the most important holiday – unambiguously praising all the codified names in the Czechoslovak socialist realist canon: Július Fučík, Peter Jilemnický, Fraňo Kráľ. He attacked, as if recalling lines from *The Parish Republic*, the ideology of passivity allegedly asserted by Slovak clergy. This was the agenda of his sketch “Lights in Orava were Turned On”, which was published at the occasion of the launch of one of the acclaimed successes of Stalinist industrialization situated in the northern region, The Orava Reservoir:

The priest from Ústie told me without hesitation: “We pray at every liturgy for the sacred gift of patience.” I figured that the priest from Ústie was telling me the same thing what the dead and buried writer J. C. Hronský had told his people: “Suffer Jozef Mak, a man-in-a-million. You have survived so many governments and so many states, you will survive this one, too.” But where will Jozef Mak arrive, this man-in-a-million, with his truly inhumane patience? Neither the priest in Ústie, nor the writer Hronský were able to give an answer to this question.⁸⁰

To summarize, during the two years after his return, Tatarka’s expressions had become much more conforming and much less modifying than his writings of 1950. He wrote congratulations and condolences and avoided any opportunity that could have realigned him with bourgeois nationalists. Novomeský was still imprisoned and

⁸⁰Dominik Tatarka, “Rozžali sa svetlá na Orave” [Lights in Orava were Turned On], *Kultúrny život* 19 (1953): 3. Hronský actually died in his Argentinean exile only in 1962. He was the chairman of Matica Slovenská during the war. His managerial skills played an important role later in the revisionist phase of Tatarka's ideological orientation in the 1960s. By that time, he was openly presenting Hronský as an inspiration because of his demand for the financial autonomy of Matica from the wartime Slovak state.

waiting for a judicial trial.⁸¹

⁸¹A look into the numbers regarding personal changes after the arrival of bourgeois nationalism might support the claim about Tatarka's conformity due to insecurity. In 1953, only 18 members remained of the 79 members who had been on the Central Committee of the CPC in 1945. Looking at the Presidium, this was the case only with 2 members out of 13. See Michal Barnasovský, *Prvá vlna destalinizácie a Slovensko (1953-1957)* [The First Wave of De-Stalinization and Slovakia (1953-1957)] (Brno: Prius, 2002): 30.

Contention, Ambiguity, Repudiation

Milan Kundera 1954-1956

The New Course of the Party brought Kundera not only a membership in CSWU, but also a first position in publishing sector. After the establishment *Host do Domu* in Brno, Kundera appeared on its editorial board. It was under these conditions when his journalistic articles began to for the first time openly challenge and push the limits of the established tradition.

Already in the first issue Kundera wanted “creative” instead of socialist realism on the grounds of the necessity for a continuous experiment within the space. He charged established poets and critics of repetitiveness bordering on servility but did not mention anyone in particular, which brought him a repeated charge of unspecificity. However when his old colleague Jan Trefulka repeated his contention but provided the name of the most recognized young socialist realist (Pavel Kohout), what ensued was not only the first great debate in the socialist realist state (Milan Kundera kept aside), but also exclusive measures on the editorial board. Yes, I argue that it was already possible to open a polemic and risk one’s position and yes, I argue that Milan Kundera maneuvered the space very well and that he was resolved nevermore to repeat the experience of exclusion.

The theory of limited continuity was nonetheless contended and finally with some concrete historical material. In March Kundera published a protest against the ways the apartments buildings were erected in his hometown. What he missed was a public debate and consideration of the cultural elite which, as he claimed, was traditionally expressing its opinions on the subject on the pages of the inter-war

journal *Index*. In rather a small and unnoticed article Kundera for the first time challengingly touched upon a question of tradition of Czech socialist culture.

These demands did not Kundera to realize his creative potential by entering the most prestigious socialist realist *Július Fučík's Literary Competition*. Although the official winner was never announced, his *The Last of May* was univocally recognized as clearly the best poem in a competition and both contemporaries and historians unite in a conclusion that this was Kundera's act of conformity with the space.

But there is an underlying continuity with the contentious statements of the previous year that twists the obvious conformism into ambiguity, no matter that the first excerpt of "The Last of May" was published around the time when Kundera was allowed to enjoy a stipend in Romania, no matter that it probably played a positive role in his re-acceptance among the ranks of the party in 1956 and no matter that it won him the nomination at the 1956 CSWU elections in which he succeeded and was catapulted into the central committee of this institution. The strange and ambiguous intellectual stance between the univocal affirmation of his second published book and a contention came at the *Conference about Poetry* in June 1955, where he reflected upon the ongoing debate about the value of intimate poetry. To his 1954-claim that inter-war modernist movements should not be entirely ignored, Kundera added that ignorance ought not to be reglemented also concerning the all-important theme of private life under socialism.

About the Disputes of Inheritance was the final intervention. Final, regarding Kundera's contributions to the preparations of the Writers' congress and final, when it comes to the depth of confidence he had in the premises of Czech socialist realism. Published not in peripheral *Host do domu*, but in more prestigious *Nový život* in a

symbolical Christmas issue of 1955, *About the Disputes of Inheritance* declared *30 Years of Struggle* invalid and instead stated “50 years of recession”. To overcome it, Štoll’s theory of limited continuity had to be reappraised and all limits abolished. That is to say, the condemnation of modernist movements had to stop. Anyway, their outcomes had nevertheless already found their ways of influence and the ideological wall of socialist realist space could change nothing about the fact. Kundera’s repudiation acquired coherency.

Contention

Milan Kundera on the New Platform of The New Course 1954

The New Course replaced the sharp one. Unlike in Hungary or Poland, The Czechoslovak New Course, as the general strategy of official policies was called, was its nature composed of two elements. First, there were the immediate consequences of the trials connected with the fierce elimination of the most radical group of Stalinists. Second, there was a first liberalization that followed the death of Stalin and Gottwald - Jiří Knapík designs its results as the liberalization in the shadow of gallows.⁸² Modified limits of tolerance, concerning the space of official culture, were but one of the symptoms of the approaching changes.

The New Course of the Czech socialist realism was formally declared by Václav Kopecký (then minister of culture). His speech took place during the large meeting of the Central Committee of CPC on December 3-5, 1953. If Štoll and Taufer ideologically prefigured The New Course already in 1952, Kopecký introduced the need for changes also in the practical dimension of the socialist realist space. Yes, he also repeated the same demand for pushing the limits of tradition and accepting new persons (living as Milan Kundera or dead as Karel Čapek), but predominantly he demanded new magazine platforms. These were supposed to be dedicated to a cultivation of genres until then until then ignored or mistakenly discredited.

⁸² “The trials had basically wholly recreated the garniture and it were the trials, to which this garniture was so to say genetically related. Jiří Knapík, *V Zajetí moci: Kulturní politika, její systém a aktéři, 1948-1956* [In the Captivity of Power: Cultural Politics, its System and Agents, 1948-1956] (Prague : Libri, 2006): 235.

The declaration of The New Course *has* its tangible cultural consequences.⁸³

Magazines are what matters here. New platforms were mushrooming (as a contemporary caricature has it) and the most significant among them were *Host do domu* (Guest to the House) and *Květen – Magazin pro mladou literaturu* (May – The Magazine for Young Literature). The former one was not even located in Prague, but in Kundera's hometown Brno, with its first issue published in January 1954. *Květen – Magazin pro mladou literaturu* began its public existence in January 1955.

The first no doubt Kundera's contention came about in the (new) course of 1954 exactly on the pages of *Host do domu*. The first among them was his reply to the "Survey about Realism," organized in the very first number of *Host do domu*.⁸⁴ Instead of the notion of socialist realism, Kundera he made up a notion of creative realism. Regarding the question of the tradition of cultural discourse he managed to omit an explicit reference to the particular historical lineage, values or authors. Notwithstanding his unconcreteness (noticed by the way also by his contemporary reviewers in the previous year), almost half of his short answer is was a harshly critical intervention against the dominant state of affairs:

There is also something else except such creative realism [he was until here describing]: it is poetry of poets whose verses are attired in the official list of well-known truths. Their main merit is that they do not make any mistakes. They walk on their own, narrow alley and they pray to God not to step aside. Since God here and there hears of their pleads, it happens, that those of our critics - who are only capable of playing the role of pointers of poets' mistakes – declare those without any mistakes as models of realism.

That statement begs a question. What specific group and which concrete poets and critics was Kundera contending?

⁸³ E.g., In terms of new personal tolerance: famous conductor Václav Talich was able to make a comeback, writer A.C. Nora was no more threatened with expatriation and was engaged to write and publish, Vítěslav Nezval even made proposals to Catholic Writer Jakub Deml to publish his works, theatrical production ceased with the production of plays about rebuilding the country and conquering factories, the composers like Antonín Dvořák, Leoš Janáček, Zdeněk Fibich and others were acknowledged as acceptable, Ibid., 240.

⁸⁴ "Anketa o realismu" [The Survey about Realism], *Host do domu* 1 (1954): 13-14.

Implied intellectuals in the above speech act are not identical with his targets in 1952 and 1953. In 1954, radicals had been already passé for Kundera. Despite the fact that his answer provides neither names of people nor that of groups, it still can be interpreted and concretized contextually in the perspective of the major cultural conflict of the year.

*The Struggle about Pavel Kohout*⁸⁵ started by an article from Jan Trefulka. It occurred on the pages of the same magazine (*Host do domu*) and it was the self-same Jan Trefulka who had been together with Kundera simultaneously expelled from the Party (summer 1949), the same man whom Kundera dedicated one of his poems in *Man, a Wide Garden* (“Italian,” 1953) and finally the one who came from the same town (Brno). This ex-party member Trefulka mounted an unprecedented assault on one of the most eminent poet of the foundational period of regime. With his help, it is possible to put a finger on the author in Kundera’s mind when he uttered a statement about poets who “pray to God not to step aside.” *The Struggle about Pavel Kohout* came about later in the year, thus after Kundera’s reply to the survey. It can be argued that Trefulka took up Kundera’s vague objections and delivered them directly in the face of Pavel Kohout:

[Pavel Kohout] perceives reality as if he were standing on a stage, a stage on which he is used to perform with his [folklore] ensemble. He perceives reality from the tribunes of celebrations, from the arena of fests, from the windows of ongoing train or from a flying airplane, from newspapers and bulletins. His fierce activity – praiseworthy as it is – is chasing him from place to place. Pavel Kohout has no time for a quiet poetic walk or a wise pause worth of a poet. He stays a player in the high positions of monumental perspectives, where ‘the Milky Way is sparkling over our heads / the world is widely opening up / neverending seas are awaiting us / the creative eternal work awaits / and is founding the glory of the years to come.’ Many people will say, these are good verses. Well yes, objectively speaking there is nothing wrong with them, but these generic future-oriented proclamations have been in different variations

⁸⁵ A lengthy debate unfolded and *The Anthology of the Czech Thought about Literature* dedicates the issue a whole chapter of contemporary articles. It is also described as a very first assault on Czech socialist realism from officially publishing authors. See Michal Příbání et al., eds., *Z dějin českého myšlení o literatuře 2, 1948-1958* [The Anthology of the Czech Thought about Literature 2, 1948-1958] (Prague: Ústav pro českou literaturu AV ČR, 2002): 177-209.

uttered million times already...In the first poem of Kohout's, in 'The Time of Love and Fight' he speaks programatically: 'I am writing verses with one hand / in the other I am holding a revolver.' The question might rise, which of these things he is doing with his left hand.⁸⁶

Such a statement was beyond the border of tolerance, widened or not. It stirred a wide debate but what is more, the political intervention was made and a pressure for self-critique exercised. Later on, changes were even made at the editorial board.

It was noticed that Kundera pinpointed the problem at hand already in January 1954. It was his and only his reply to the survey that was largely quoted in a summary written by Jaroslav Janů. By means of quoting Kundera's contention the critique identified "the growing polemical wave against the narrow concept of realism."⁸⁷ Same as in Janů's review of Kundera's *Man, a Wide Garden*, he welcomed his writings, but in the same breath raised objections against his ideas by calling them unspecific and he repeated his conclusion that Kundera is exaggerating. In sum, January 1954 was the month of the initial contention of Milan Kundera. He expressed his dissatisfaction with just recently reaffirmed concept of socialist realism, did it in quite vague but noticed and memorable way and earned an equivocal reply by a critic who did praise as well as objected to his first book.

Positive historical exempla for "the creative realism" Kundera provided in the two following articles that appeared in *Host do domu* in March and June of the same year. In March, he wrote a seemingly irrelevant protest against insensible ways in which the intensive building process of flat apartments in suburbs of Brno was being realized. But he recalled the what was then a prohibited part of the inter-war tradition. For the first time in his journalistic writings Kundera opened the question of "inheritance" by calling for the "return to the tradition" of the magazine *Index*. *Index*

⁸⁶ Jan Trefulka, "O nových verších Pavla Kohouta – polemicky" [Of Pavel Kohout's New Verses – Polemically], *Host do domu* 11 (1954): 505-508.

⁸⁷ Jaroslav Janů, "Zhodnocení ankety o realismu" [The Evaluation of the Survey about Realism], *Host do domu* 4 (1954): 171.

was published in the time of the First Czechoslovak Republic under the baton of one the vocal Communist Brno-based critique Bedřich Vaclávek (1897-1943). Kundera contended: "...shouldn't a final urban plan of a particular town be accepted only after such a public debate, with the participation of wide public sphere, first of all the [visual] artistic public sphere?"⁸⁸ This quite striking suggestion of a democratic participation on decision-making process is supported with an historical evidence. It is said that such a practice had already been used by The Left Culture of The First Czechoslovak Republic.

But the inter-war Czech avant-garde had also been dissolved due to the inner-conflict about the relationship to the Soviet Union after the revelation about show-trials came to light. Plus, neither Catholics, nor Fascists, but people and ideas representing The Left Culture were in Štoll's *30 Years of Struggle* chosen as a most dangerous enemies of Czech socialist realism. To be specific, as archenemies of SK Neumann, Jiří Wolker and Július Fučík were presented Karel Tejge (1900-1951) and František Halas (1901-1949). Kundera's model Bedřich Vaclávek can be also be incorporated into the group of politically intolerable. He was rehabilitated only after a long Czechoslovak de-stalinization came to its end, i.e. in 1962 through. Long-lasting Kundera's apologist Květoslav Chvatík then published a significant monograph *Bedřich Vaclávek and the Development of Marxist Aesthetics*.

"The Debt to be Returned as Soon as Possible"⁸⁹ was a pregnant title of the second Kundera's contending article comprising specific sources of innovations now sought for the socialist realist space. This piece of writings was intended as a congratulation at the occasion of the 60th birthday of writer Josef Kopta (1894–

⁸⁸ Milan Kundera, "Mluvte o domech" [Speak about Houses], *Host do domu* 3 (1954): 143.

⁸⁹ Milan Kundera, "Dluh, jehož splátka spěchá (k 60. Výročí narozenin Josefa Kopty)" [The Debt that is to be Returned as Soon as Possible (At 60th Birthday of Josef Kopta)], *Host do domu* 6 (1954): 280-281.

1962). Kundera's wish was to withdraw the reigning ignorance of Kopta's inter-war oeuvre: "There has been a silence because many were enraptured by a dumb reflection of several sommersaults of Kopta's personal political history. And maybe also because there was not enough erudition to talk this work over."

The New Course topos that the personal past of the author should not automatically lead to the definite verdict his exclusion was what Kundera made a pragmatic use of in this second contention. Not in discord with with the ideology was a furthermore a claim about aesthetic, formal qualities that could have been found in Kopta's texts:

It is a powerful vein in the modern Czech prose. It is the work with qualities that raise above the average of the fiction of the First Republic. At the time when subjectivistic psychological novel led to the minimalization of the art of fabulation Kopta governs with the unseen epic inventions and writes three vast, rich trilogies. At the time, when naturalistic journalism makes its malignant penetration into the language of fiction, Kopta writes with plastic, beautiful and metaphorical Czech language and similarly to Vančura he made a fruitful attempt to revive a classical sentence structure...⁹⁰

Therefore on one hand Kundera was gradually concerned about the inter-war Czech literary tradition that was left outside of the codified borders of the space (specifically on the tradition of The Left Culture), while on the other hand elements Kundera assessed as "creative" were but the elements of epic trilogy and classical style, i.e. the concepts actually not directly contradicting the basic premises of the socialist realism.

Classicism and nationalism of a socialist art were namely a staple core value for Zdeněk Nejedlý who expressed their essentiality in his 1948 article "Of True and False Realism:"

Realistic art is conceivable only as a real art, not as a bungle. That must stressed at the first place...A muddy puddle stays a muddy puddle, no matter how realistic it is trying to look like... There is some hierarchy even in the art and it can't stand equal status of everything. Not

⁹⁰ Ibid.

because of some aristocratic aberration, but because of the simple fact that art, no matter of what style, can be in turn again only art.⁹¹

Plus, the trilogy was the basic formal structure of great socialist realist novel. A positive hero had to undergo the arc of confrontation with capitalism - winning a struggle about new order – and finally building it. The trilogy argument was appeared as late as 1958-59 with the scandal which aroused around Josef Škvorecký's *The Cowards*. He defended himself by saying that *The Cowards* were only the first part of a great whole.⁹²

To sum up: In the context where many previously excluded authors were being allowed and even invited back to the official cultural institutions, some of which were only being founded, was Milan Kundera, as a member of a group of young writers around new Magazine *Host do Domu* in Brno, trying for the first time not only to express his dissatisfaction with the state of socialist realism, but also point to the leftist inter-war cultural tradition that had to be reappraised. Even though he was not as critical as Jan Trefulka, the challenge of the established had been for the first time publicly articulated.

Ambiguity

Milan Kundera for Intimate Socialist Realism

1955

“The name of the author can be disclosed only in the next issue because poem ‘The Last of May’ is participating in the literary competition about the life Július Fučík.” This comment appeared on the front page of the 1954 Christmas issue of *Host do domu*. Above it was an excerpt of a poem entitled “The Last of May”. And above

⁹¹ Zdeněk Nejedlý, “O realismu pravém a nepravém” [Of True and False Realism], *Var* 8 (1948): 225-232.

⁹² “[At the meeting of the presidium of CSWU] Writer Marie Majerová announced that after reading *The Cowards* the first thing she had to do was to clean her hands.” See Michal Bauer, *Souvislosti labyrintu. Kodifikace ideologicko/estetické normy v české literatuře 50. let 20. století*. [Implications of the Labyrinth: The Codification of the Ideologic-Aesthetic Norm in Czech Literature of the 1950s] (Prague: Akropolis, 2009): 329-330.

it, an prototypical a socialist realist drawing: a muscular figure, a hybrid of a partisan and a Slovak highwayman, clasping a rifle in his left and a shepherd's axe in his right over his head, victoriously stomping on an obviously Nazi banner, his long hair waving in a squall, accompanied by an enlarged version of a peace dove. Undisclosed contender was Milan Kundera.

The Literary Competition about the Life of Július Fučík fell under 1953 year-long festivities and conferences organized at the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the death of this single most celebrated national historical figure in Czech society of 1950s, a Communist journalist executed in German captivity in 1943. While imprisoned in Prague, Július Fučík (1903-1943) managed to write *The Reportage: Written from the Gallows*. Peter Steiner stresses its exceptional place in the history of Czech literature proving it by a simple fact that whether one likes or not it is “a most widely translated book ever written in Czech.”⁹³ By virtue of his martyrdom, very close pre-war cooperations with contemporary master ideologues Ladislav Štoll and Zdeněk Nejedlý and his steady loyalty to The Soviets, Fučík was celebrated as the ideal living personalization of the positive hero of socialist realism.

Kundera accepted all this. *The Last of May*, published in the first half of 1955, is an elaboration of the single scene from *The Reportage: Written from the Gallows*. It is a scene of temptation where member of Gestapo Böhn offers Communist Fučík freedom for a betrayal and confession. Kundera's work turned out to be great success, univocally praised by an appointed jury as well as by reviewers, going through three

⁹³ Peter Steiner, *The Deserts of Bohemia. Czech Fiction and Its Social Context* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000): 95.

re-editions up to 1963 when the cult of Fučík finally faded away and the first harsh accounts appeared, even in Kundera's own oeuvre.⁹⁴

Regarding exclusively its practical consequences, it would seem that the *The Last of May* was indeed the best quality affirmative act of the year. The scenario of *Man, a Wide Garden* repeated itself on a higher level. If Kundera's first volume of poetry was secured him the membership in CSWU, the work of 1955 secured him a nomination among the highest cultural elite, secured him the nomination to the Central Committee of Writers' Union, which eventually turned into an election victory. The nomination stated:

[Kundera's] second book represented Fučík as a type of contemporary communist hero. It fulfilled the hopes that have been invested to Kundera. This book is not only one of the most significant works about Fučík, but also it ranks among the most significant books of contemporary poetry in general. The poem was awarded both at the competition of the Writers' Union and at the Festival of Youth in Warsaw, where it won a gold medal.⁹⁵

The space of socialist realism was a space where Kundera had since 1953 been doing a successful career and winning a significant recognition.

Folkloric identity of Kundera's positive hero found applause at young critic Antonín Jelínek (1930-2003). He praised it in weekly *Literární noviny*, claiming the correctness of Kundera's identification of Fučík with a plebian figure of highwayman (as drawn in *Host do Domu*). The link with a most famous popular figure of the Slovak folklore tradition – legendary national hero Jánošík – was unavoidable: “To let a Slovak highwayman song sound on Petřín hill [in Prague] at the time of [German]

⁹⁴ Anachronic note: In its preface, novel *The Joke* is said to be written between 1962-1965. Seven years after *The Last of May*, Kundera's praise of Fučík turned to mockery. The three lines on the postcard that caused protagonist Ludvík Jahn the membership of the party (“Optimism is the opium of the people! A healthy atmosphere stinks of stupidity! Long live Trotsky!”) are at his trial confronted with almost a page-long quotations exactly from *The Reportage: Written from the Gallows* (e.g. the proverbial “May melancholy never taint my name”). See Milan Kundera, *The Joke* (London: Penguin Books, 1984): 165-167.

⁹⁵ Unfortunately there is no reference to a concrete writer of this judgment, nor its particular date. See Michal Bauer, *Souvislosti labyrintu. Kodifikace ideologicko/estetické normy v české literatuře 50. let 20. století. [Implications of the Labyrinth: The Codification of the Ideologic-Aesthetic Norm in Czech Literature of the 1950s]* (Prague: Akropolis, 2009): 253-254.

occupation was an act of courage on the side of the poet. And the truth is that through the connection with the agelong people's hero he succeeded in the creation of the image of Fučík⁹⁶. Kundera persisted with the notion of essentiality of folklore that he as an authentic source of socialist tradition affirmatively introduced already in his preface to *Steel and Tenderness* in 1952.

The overcoming of inner-struggle was a second aspect of Fučík's character positively reviewed at the time of the publication. Review appeared in new magazine *Květen* (May) and Miroslav Červenka (1932-2005) united his acclaim with that of Vítěslav Nezval's work about Fučík. Červenka pointed out in 1956 what Ladislav Štoll did in *30 years of Struggle*, i.e. the interconnection of an internal conflict of a hero with decisive mental process in authors themselves:

The author is able to stress the conflict in Fučík's inner world even in such a short time in which this poem takes place. The dialogue on Petřín hill is only an abbreviation of the process. It is a difficult development through which the hero reaches his knowledge...And what is more: Kundera's Fučík proves that the voice of temptation shall never cease, it proves that we must earn and fight for our balance and our freedom in the world of necessity. And that we must do it repeatedly and painfully, facing the new demands and challenges of life.⁹⁷

The qualities of characters were attended also the second review and Miroslav Červenka stressed the priority of cognitive struggle between individualist and collectivist, required as they were in socialist realist literary texts and taken for granted in consciousness of everyman under Stalinism in general.

Finally, the publication history of *The Last of May* supplement the claim that it was a pure conformist statement. In the publishing house *Československý spisovatel* the poem came out first in 1955, second in 1961 and finally as late as 1963, i.e. in the year of *Laughable Loves*, when the legitimacy of socialist realism had been irrevocably denied. Together with Kundera's continuous upward mobility, his

⁹⁶ Antonín Jelínek, "Pathos hrdinského života" [The Pathos of the Heroic Life], *Literární Noviny* 37 (1955): 6.

⁹⁷ Miroslav Červenka, "Dvojitý Fučík" [Double Fučík], *Květen* 8 (1956): 216-217.

willingness to write about *the* emblem of socialist realism and consequent univocal positive reviews, it could seem that he wrote this 20-pages long poem as an appraisal of its space.

Although the contemporary reviewers mostly strangely silent about the fact, the title in itself is an allusive hit right between the eyes of a Czech man. The reference if poem *Máj* (May) by Karl Hynek Mácha (1810-1836), in all likelihood the single most important romantic poem of the Czech national movement of 19th century. In contemporary Czech language the term for May is “Květen”. *Květen* was actually the name of the second of the new magazines coming out of The New Course (*Host do Domu* was the first one). It alluded to The Day of Victory (May 9th 1945). Mácha used the older Latinized term for May and entitled the poem *Máj* - and Kundera used this older outsider of a daily Czech lexicon, too. Second, the opening of Mácha’s *May* belongs to the most famous verses in Czech culture and they are known by most of the Czechs by heart: “Late evening, on the first of May / The twilit May — the time of love / Meltingly called the turtle-dove / Where rich and sweet pinewoods lay.” Kundera’s title *The Last of May* as the contrast to *The First of May* have had therefore resonate. And resonate it does, still.⁹⁸

There was a ban on *May* included into Czech historical master narrative of 1950s. Its chief inventor was Zdeněk Nejedlý, a top proponent of the moderate’s theory of limited continuity. Since the end of the war until his death he was a cultural personage of Czech Stalinism always in hold of this or that minister post. Between 1952-1962 he was also as a president of then founded Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences. It was this historian and politician in one Zdeněk Nejedlý who designed the

⁹⁸ Karel Hynek Mácha, *Máj*, translated by Edith Pargeter, <http://www.lupomesky.cz/maj/may.html> (accessed June 3, 2011).

historical narrative according to which Czechoslovakia experienced under the rule of CPC a second national revival.

Curious parallels between the revolution of 1848 and that of 1948 appeared; Nejedlý adopted the notion of Dark Age from nationalist fiction writer Alojs Jirásek (1851 - 1930) and this second Dark Age was placed in between of these revolutions. By the same token he adopted the early 19th century nationalist criterium about Czech literature functioning as the main instrument of Czech national interests and upgraded it with the category of class. What matters here is that the pacesetting ideologue also revived a prevailing pre-1848 Czech hostility towards Mácha's *May* and did not select the poem to the forefront from the newly established Czech tradition of socialist literature. "The history of villain Vilém and anonymous Jarmila did not become the property of the nation," his verdict was.⁹⁹ Kundera agreed with Nejedlý on this point and as the opposition to the *First of May* and *Vilém* he wrote *The Last of May* and designed the character of *Július Fučík*.

The intratextual confrontation of Mácha's *May* and Kundera's *The Last of May* was done by Peter Steiner who repeats the assertion that Kundera's refutation of Mácha was affirmative with socialist realist discourse. Cultural and political discourse were to be one and the same thing. Kundera opposed Mácha's worldview fully ignorant of social, political, economic and international usefulness up to the point that he modeled his Nazi policeman Böhm on Mácha's hero Vilém:

Through such an analogy Kundera is able to draw a distinction between two existential stances, two attitudes toward thanatos. For Vilém – bereft of any transcendental ideals – death

⁹⁹ Zdeněk Nejedlý quoted in Pavel Janoušek ed., *Dějiny české literatury, 1945-1989* [The History of Czech Literature, 1945-1989] (Prague : Academia, 2007-2008): 591. For a more detailed account of Nejedlý's reinterpretation of history and the reasons for its great success among post-war intellectuals see Bradley F. Abrams, "The Interpretation and Reinterpretation of Czech History and the Reorientation of the Czech Nation," in Bradley F. Abrams, *The Struggle for the Soul of the Nation. Czech Culture and the Rise of Communism* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004): mainly 104-117.

is the ultimate horror, gate to the void of nothingness, and the buoyant nature of May [the month] only reminds him how cruel his punishment is. For the Communist Fučík, the herald of historical optimism, death is merely a personal sacrifice, a contribution to the final victory of the collective Cause outside of which life is meaningless.¹⁰⁰

While Kundera's second published book was a great socialist realist success, it was not the case that after initial contentions expressed in 1954 he would turn into a fully-fledged socialist realist. His speech given at *Conference about Poetry* was a defense of the conflicting notion of *intimate poetry*. 1955 was the year of ambiguity.

The ongoing debate about *civic* versus *intimate poetry* dominated the summer Conference (June 6-7, 1955). Moreover, it was permeated with the repercussions of the scandalous critique of Pavel Kohout.¹⁰¹ Organized at the occasion of 80th birthday Stanislav Kostka Neumann (1875-1947), it functioned as the preparation for the all-important and as it later turned out also the groundbreaking 2nd Congress of The Czechoslovak Writers' Union (April 22. – 29. 1956).

The Last of May was the best *civic poem* of the year and yet Kundera spoke up in a defense of *intimacy* as a necessary but missing part of socialist realist space. The opening of his address was an affirmative preparation for a contention:

Since 1945 appeared a handful of great works about political and civic subjects and it has not been in any time in history that our poetry would have been so fertile in this regard: Panichida, Thank you Red Army, To you, Bread and Steel, Job Night, Stalin, The Song of Peace, From the Country, Without Worries, The Great Love, The Czech Dream, all these poems deal with the theme that is par excellence political and I have no doubts that the civic poetry is still the highest goal of a poet.¹⁰²

The turn into ambiguity appeared after this acknowledgement. Kundera reproached the latest writings of Antonín Jelínek, who had just recently spoke highly of *The Last of May*. Jelínek's assaults on private and depoliticized themes were

¹⁰⁰ Peter Steiner, *The Deserts of Bohemia. Czech Fiction and Its Social Context* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000): 211-212.

¹⁰¹ E.g., Jan Trefulka's speech was ordered immediately after the speech of Pavel Kohout and both had to address the issue.

¹⁰² Milan Kundera, "Speech at The Conference about Poetry" [Originally untitled]. Literary Archive of The Museum of Czech Literature, fond Československý svaz Spisovatelů, *Konference o poezii* [fond Czechoslovak Writers Union, The Conference about Poetry] (June, 4, 1955): 27/1.

exposed as “vulgar positions.”¹⁰³ Socialist poetry cannot any longer ignore the themes of intimate emotions and most private desires simply on the grounds that they do not have a bear direct political fruition. It is vulgar, claimed Kundera. But was not than identification of Mácha’s protagonist with a Nazi policeman in *The Last of May* the most vulgar action to perform?

Vulgar demands supposedly led a regretful state of cultural space. There was not a “book of a contemporary love poetry which would be equal to Biebl’s *No Worries* or Nezval’s *Song of Peace*” (both political poems). The danger of such absence was seen as dire because first of all young readership tended to reach out for it in places which Kundera identified as the most dangerous. Bourgeois thought. Bourgeois feelings. Bourgeois sentimentality. Banality. Kitch:

There is a serious danger of bourgeois thought and feeling in our life and it must unite all of us in our effort. Only then, when our literature and poetry paves a way to full-blooded realism it shall embrace the whole of human life. In order to take this road, we need to remove all that vulgarising rubbish that some diligent journalists are throwing under our feet.¹⁰⁴

Did Kundera had it that Mácha’s intimacy was “bourgeois” whereas socialist realism without intimacy was “vulgar”?

Ambiguous notion of ‘full-bloodied realism’ was a solution. Taking everything into account, *The Last of May* was the highpoint of Kundera’s affirmative public work. It was read as such and it is his only work has ever been consensually read as such. But it came about between 1954-1955, in the process of his growing discontent with the state of affairs in socialist realism. At the same time being he pinpointed the absence of privacy in the space built solely upon political ideology. This ambiguous tension between his poem *The Last of May* and the contention that it

¹⁰³ 27/5.

¹⁰⁴ Milan Kundera, “Diskusní příspěvek na Konferenci o poezii” [The Speech at the Conference about Poetry], *Host do domu* 7 (1955): 307-309.

would be the most vulgar to have all poems like *The Last of May*. Regarding the question of tradition, if Mácha and romanticism was not the answer, where was one to find it? Christmas 1955 brought about another 20-pages long statement.

Repudiation

Milan Kundera About the Disputes of Inheritance 1955-1956

1956 is a historical milestone. In terms of Czechoslovakia, it was the cultural event that is considered as the first open straightforward but short-lived rejection of Stalinism. Writers at The 2nd Congress of CSWU in April 1956 are seen to play an immensely important and political role, this time with implicit historical evaluation turned upside down. The histories of Czechoslovakia often begin or end by this date or are revolve around its number loaded with meaning. However one of the hypotheses of the paper says that in the discursive channels of socialist realist space there contending voices had been growing already for some time. These voices had been eroding the legitimate status of the official ideology. Pre-1956 groupings and debates prefigured the Writers' Congress. Certain continuity could be overshadowed by setting the new point of departure in 1956. Kundera's text "About the Disputes of Inheritance" is an instance of this continuity.

It is possible to surmise that he outfaced the core concept of socialist realism. It was done in of the preparations for the Writer's Congress and in this aspect it is a second Kundera's intervention in the process that contradicted Štoll's *30 years of Struggle* (first being the defense of apolitical poetry, see above). The repudiation did not appear in *Host do domu* as most of his previous articles. On the other hand it was again the symbolical Christmas date when the important Kundera's text appeared on

the pages of press (first being his winning contribution to the poetry competition, see above).

“About the Disputes of Inheritance” appeared in the twelfth issue of CSWU monthly *Nový Život* (The New Life).¹⁰⁵ The more prestigious magazine platform as *Host do domu* published Kundera’s first longer essay disputing the dominant narrative of the national history. To be specific, Kundera’s explicitly treated years 1948-1955 in negative terms and moreover, he outspokenly rejected the ideological limits put on the literary tradition. He was well aware of the polemical nature of this *Dispute*. Same as in his speech at the Conference about poetry, he began the article with the praise of the space, throughout invoked uncontested propositions and authorities and at the end even anticipated the rejection of his cause in concrete terms.

Negative identity was one of the means by which Kundera legitimized the text. This is *not* a socialist critique, he wrote. Why? It could be an attempt to avoid the charge of an assault on the ideology in general (which the text in fact was). In the opening Kundera presented the illocution of the text with a practical observations written by the award-winning author of *The Last May*: “I would approach the subject ‘untheoretically’ and I would simply express some fragmentary thoughts, which more or less have the nature of the personal confession of a practitioner.”¹⁰⁶ Kundera called practicing poets already in his survey answer in January 1954 encouraged not to be afraid of possible ideological mistakes and the tolerability of political faults in the process of writing is situated at the very conclusion of the text:

I am wondering at myself that I ended up so much entangled in theoreticizing. I am not a theoretician. I am speaking out my feelings about things as a practitioner. Therefore I won’t be angry if am not agreed with. Moreover, I am little worried if I have not expressed some of

¹⁰⁵ Milan Kundera, “O sporech dědických” [About the Disputes of Inheritance], *Nový život* 12 (1955): 1290-1306.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 1290.

my propositions with a voice too sovereign and apodictic. Because I dislike such an apodictic, prophetic tone immensely....¹⁰⁷

Kundera legitimized his contention in reflective writings by the evident state-wide praise he received for being “a practitioner” who wrote *The Last of May*.

The second grounds Kundera laid in order to be able to outface was the standard device of pre-constructed discourse. He employed numerous quotations of unquestionable Soviet authorities of the time-period. E.g., the assertion that socialist art cannot and will not resign on the concept of innovation and originality was, at very last sentence of the essay, backed by the no doubt originality of the most highly revered Soviet socialist realist art works of most various genres: *The Tenth Symphony* of Shostakovich, poetry of Pavlo Tyčyna, novel *And Quiet Flows Don* by Mikhail Sholokhov. In the same vein was defended an utterly non-socialist realist assertion according to which neither institutional nor ideological limits are in fact potent to stop the absorption of innovations made by enemy classes, reacting cultures or during the periods of dark age.

The lengthy inserted quote of Lenin alone was deployed to support the argument about the impossibility of immobility of aesthetic inventions across the political borders. With the help of Lenin, Kundera distinguished between rough, primitive, metaphysical, in sum *vulgar materialism* and materialism that is *dialectical* and precise and to be preferred. To attire one’s statement in quotations of Marxist-Leninist classics was a common discursive strategy Kundera used, his rebuff of *vulgarity* came about already in June at the poetry conference but his stress of Lenin in a way preconfigured the upcoming Writer’s Congress where it became the major ideological move. Stalin’s/Zhdanov’s authority became a matter of past and faults.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 1306.

The third device of acceptability was agreement with a codified philosophy of history. Kundera's outlined a narrative resonating with that of Zdeněk Nejedlý. In its essence, it told the story of the progression from a dark age into an age of awakening. Of course, Kundera also applied proper ideological vocabulary. Thus he spoke of the succession of a progressive and a reactionary era. Nejedlý used it to reformulate the established narrative of Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk (1850-1937) and by a catchy sequence of rising and falling intended to scientifically justify Communists as necessary leaders of the postwar great Czech era. The second Czech Dark age called Fascism was to be overcome in the same fashion as the Czech national revivals of the 19th century overcame the Dark age called Baroque or the same way as in 14th century Hussites overcame the Dark age called Ecclesiastical plutocracy. In 1955, the *Communist, The Inheritors of The Great Traditions of Czech Nation*¹⁰⁸ was still in the core of the political discourse.

At the first glance Kundera was in a general accord with this master narrative. He claimed that he is only transposing it into the realm of art. This was achieved in the opening through the quotation of yet another of the unanimously recognized classics of socialist art, Goethe: "All receding disintegrating epochs are subjective, while all progressive epochs are directed objectively."¹⁰⁹ *The Last of May* was objective and in accord with Nejedlý's expropriation of Mácha out of the traditions, too. In all, in the first and last lines Kundera gave an account of himself as a practicing poet admiring Sholokhov and firmly standing on the ideological basis founded by Lenin and at home historically narrated by Nejedlý.

¹⁰⁸ Such is the title of a programmatic essay. For the first time published promptly after the war as Zdeněk Nejedlý, *Komunisté - dědici velikých tradic českého národa* [Communists – The Inheritors of the Great Traditions of Czech Nation] (Prague: Secretariat of CPC, 1946).

¹⁰⁹ Milan Kundera, "O sporech dědických" [About the Disputes of Inheritance], *Nový život* 12 (1955): 1291.

But right after the opening, and shortly before the finale, a twist unfolds. After Kundera affirmatively moved a Stalinist historical master narrative to the sphere of poetry, his second step was to infer that the conclusions Ladislav Štoll had come to in *30 Years of Struggle* became invalid. Kundera argued that no apparent victory in the “struggle” came into being before 1955. Because, referring to the axioms of Marxist-Leninist aesthetics, all straightforward progressive epochs are objective. Even Goethe is invoked to agree on this point. It is said to logically follow that the prevailing genre in poetry must be by definition *epical*. The historical evidence came to the fore and more than surprisingly, the first Kundera’s historical exemplum was just recently rejected Karel Hynek Mácha. Bourgeois and individualist as it were, his *May* was still considered a major *epical* poem of a Czech literature.

Kundera self-esteem shines through his claim that it was not until his *The Last of May* when the socialist progressive epoch *began*. This was the year 1955, i.e. five years after Ladislav Štoll canonized as the fact that after “30-years’-struggle”, Czech socialist poetry came in 1950 to be finally victorious. In terms of dialectics, Kundera fashioned his major poem as the synthesis of Mácha’s bourgeois epic poetry and socialist realist doctrine. Until his arrival, Czech social realist poetry rightly ‘civil’ (political) but lacking the device of fibula, not speaking of longer narrative forms. Plus, a phrase “*50 years of recession*” was deployed near the introduction as well as near the conclusion of the essay. The intention to confront the commonplace of “*30 years of struggle*” is beyond any doubt.

30 years of Struggle were wrong, and here Kundera added a main reason for its illegitimacy, because its argumentative force was a minion of purely political criteria. Results are young poets whose education did not include weighty package of their inter-war politically incorrect predecessors. What it led to was that...

...young poets, who had entered the literature in such a light manner, were suddenly weighted as too light. The culture of their verse suddenly appeared as too poor and under the average of the historical development of the Czech poetic culture. And it must be clearly said, that it was neither because these poets were not talented, nor because they were too political or dealing with themes all too contemporary but simply because they had missed something in their growth, they had not come to terms with something. They had not come to terms and they had not digested the last fifty years of Czech poetry.¹¹⁰

Even though the last 50 years subscribed to the period of recession and there were not reason for any kind even of aesthetic nostalgia, even though major cultural representatives of the last 50 years were politically among enemies, even though they had to be profoundly studied and their works accepted into the tradition. This is a demand that cultural and political discourse should go astray.

Kundera foreshadowed the rhetorical move already at the June Conference. Intimacy, yes, but bourgeois ways of turning intimate into poetry, not anymore. On the grounds of such a dialectical argumentative strategy, *About the Disputes of Inheritance* contains plenty of examples of essential inventions and influences of modernist-bourgeois poets left out by the theory of limited tradition. Rimbaud, Apollinaire, Desnos, Mallarmé, Rilke, Valéry, Pasternak, Hora, Holan, Orten and others are referred-to as having a strong and indispensable impact on tradition whether it suits the laws of political-economical development or not.

Good socialist realist poems inherited the “culture of metaphor“ of excluded. Whether it suited them or not and what is more, whether they were aware of it or not. As a “practitioner,“ Kundera proved this inevitable principle on his own generally praised poetry. At length he quoted a passage from his *The Last May* as the empirical evidence for the futility and harmfulness of any limits of tradition:

There is several metaphors in that passage [from Kundera’s *The Last of May*]. I don’t think someone could argue I am not their original author. These images appeared to me when I imagined the emotions of Fučík, after he was bemused by the strong stroke of the world when

¹¹⁰ Milan Kundera, “O sporech dědických” [About the Disputes of Inheritance], *Nový život* 12 (1955): 1304.

he left the prison. But still: Where is the whole *way* of the creation of metaphor, uniting such a distant images as a little pub, a hanging balcony, houses of The Lesser Side in Prague with floating pigeons, the ribs of churches and more with and the sounding strings of harph? Is such a mode of metaphorisation stemming only from my own head? Did I make it up myself? In no way. I was helped by the whole particular culture of metaphor and a poetic vision. And these came to existence exactly during the last fifty or eighty years of the development of poetry. And here, it “spoke through me.”¹¹¹

In sum, Kundera denied Štoll in two points. Progress and victory of socialist literature was refused on the basis of the absence of epical element in its the cultural production. The odds for “new great historical epoch of new classical realism“ were recognized as good, judging his own work. But the last “50 years of recession“ would be overcame if and only if the limits puts on the tradition were abolished and the works of modernists underwent a deep scrutiny.

¹¹¹ Milan Kundera, “O sporech dědických” [About the Disputes of Inheritance], *Nový život* 12 (1955): 1295.

Contention, Ambivalence, Repudiation Dominik Tatarka 1954-1956

Limited to a degree of conformity in his expressions as never before or after, in the course 1953 Dominik Tatarka nevertheless regained some of his lost recognition and became once again an acknowledged public figure. In 1954 a chain of change broke out leading to Tatarka's definite repudiation of Slovak socialist realism in 1956 that he reached from a passage through ambivalence in 1955. For one thing, 1954 brought about a significant change in the practical dimension of Slovak socialist realism. That is to say, almost simultaneously with the long-prepared trial against bourgeois nationalists finally held in Bratislava (April 21-24, 1954), Prague hosted The First State-Wide Conference of the Czechoslovak Writer's Union (April 5-6, 1954). The existence of the Slovak Section was disbanded. In turn, an independent Slovak Writer's Union (SWU) came into existence. This was also the moment when František Hečko became not only a recognized leader of Slovak literature but also a formal president of the SWU.¹¹² Later in 1954 appeared the first public contention by Tatarka against the inherently political nature of socialist realist discourse.

Secondly, the next year was determined by the interaction between the the reassessments of political trials with the massive preparation for the 2nd Congress of the CSWU. One of its elements Especially came under analytical scrutiny – *The Pre-Congress Discussion* held on the magazine platform *Kultúrny život*. Dominik Tatarka violated this originally preventive measure by an unexpected call for an unseen liberalization of the socialist realist structures. He added also a first general rejection of *The Wooden Village*, Hečko's novel, at that time already established as a canonical

¹¹²René Bielik, *Slovenská literatúra po roku 1945 (1945-1963)* [Slovak Literature after 1945 (1945-1963)] (Trnava: Pedagogická fakulta Trnavskej univerzity, 2009): 35.

socialist realist novel. Still, however radical Tatarka's intervention was (and it was immediately perceived as such), it was also essentially ambivalent (and immediately thus perceived as well). The nature of his ambivalence lay in the fact that his idea to implement market mechanisms into the Slovak publication industry was made due to the perfection of the predominant contemporary function of Slovak socialist realism, i.e. making the case for the collectivization of Slovak agriculture. Both the motives and the intentions of Tatarka's claim had their pragmatic layer, as competition with František Hečko came into the open. At the end of the discussion, his practical initiative fell on deaf ears and the liberalization of the Union's structure was turned down as a joke.

As a joke about anarchy in the union. And in the spring of 1956 he took up this charge and utilized it in both of the key speech acts by means of which he finally outfaced the Slovak space of socialist realism and declared it illegitimate. The first of these speech acts was a three-part allegory, "The Demon of Conformity", published in the wake of The 20th Congress of the CPSU. The second was his discussion contribution at The 2nd Congress of the CSWU. Here he stated: "Trust me. I do not want to propagate anarchist moods. But still, I must say that the essence of our mistakes is this: A Czechoslovak writer became a quasi-state bureaucrat. He adopted the fundamental approach of a quasi-state bureaucrat. I call such a writer a state writer." This speech against the concept of the state writer and against the institutions that maintained him meant the repudiation of the Slovak space of socialist realism by a final, unequivocal demand for its depolitization.

Contention

Dominik Tatarka against the Positive Hero and Socialist Critique

1954

The contention occurred in Tatarka's theoretical assault on the notion of socialist realist criticism and critique. It was a reply to an article by Bohuš Trávníček in which he incorporated some of the arguments of Tatarka's 1951 condemnation. However, Tatarka does not automatically reject the whole bundle of socialist realist themes, commonly known under the umbrella term 'the construction of socialism'. Still, this year clearly brought his return among the creators of cultural debates (logically limited in the borders of the official discursive territory of the Slovak literary culture).

The third edition of *The First and the Second Strike*, the novel about collectivization *The Wedding Cake*, the novel about industrialization *The Years of Companionship* – Tatarka published all three substantive books of fiction in the course of 1954. It is widely accepted that “With these books, Tatarka paid the debt to the contemporary schematism,”¹¹³ although this claim begs a question by assuming that he had been working on these texts already in the course of previous years, i.e. by assuming that their largely conformist content is a repercussion of the conformity that lasted two previous years. Plus, it was already in the course of the 1953 when the fragments of both of the new books appeared on the pages of magazines. “Bonds are breaking”, the sketch analyzed in the previous section, was the a part of *The Wedding Cake*; a much longer chapter from *The Years of Companionship* was published in *Slovenské pohľady*, which is the platform of *Matica Slovenská*.¹¹⁴ If he indeed “paid

¹¹³ Ludvík Patera, “Tvorba Dominika Tatarky ve společenském a literárním kontextu” [The Writings of Dominik Tatarka in the Social and Literary Context], *Slovenské rozhľady* 1 (1994): 33.

¹¹⁴ Dominik Tatarka, “Družné letá” [The Years of Companionship], *Slovenské pohľady*, 69, no.7-8 (1953): 597-650. A strangely acute letter of an unsigned reader (given were only initials) arrived to redaction *Kultúrny život*. It was highly praising of this fragment and appeared in one of the October

the debt” in 1954, it was in the form of the publishing harvest of his writings, which had been prepared and composed well before and under the immediate threat of persecution.

This is not to say that supportive statements, so vocal in the two previous years, had suddenly ceased. E.g., the consistent governing idea of Tatarka's thought – the transformation of the Slovak man from Catholic defeatist into Socialist activist – was repeated in his greeting to the leading members of the CPC at its 10th Congress in June 1954: “The character of individual citizens has become enriched with a new and very intense feature. It is rationality and prudence. In an unseen measure, our nation has been adopting a rationalistic attitude to reality. The nation today wants to understand and to reasonable govern the external as well as the internal world.”¹¹⁵

The incentive to return among open cultural debaters was provided by critic Bohuš Trávníček. In his “Notes on the Positive Hero in Slovak Literature”, Trávníček joined the aforesaid quest to find a narrative of the tradition of Slovak socialist literature. Turning his attention to the post-war period and novels specifically, he outlined a short progressive development of the category of positive hero in Slovak socialist literature. Significant for us is the fact that the first and thereby the most insufficient positive hero was the character of Štefan Reptiš from Tatarka's *The First and the Second Strike*. Štefan Reptiš was denied as a true positive character. The reason given for this contention is the lack of Reptiš's proleptic vision: “As critics [Rozner in 1950] have asserted already, there is a deficiency of clear faith in the character Reptiš. He is a narrow protagonist, he is more pulled than growing. What he

issues: “Dear comrade redactor, I am writing this letter largely due to the fact that, alas, it has not yet become a Slovak custom to write about texts from magazines and short stories. Although we all know only too well that for example, “Reconciliation” – the short prose of Sándor Nagy – was awarded with The Stalin Prize“ –mm-, “K próze D. Tatarku v Slovenských pohľadoch píše nám čitateľ!” [Of the Prose of D. Tatarka in Slovenské pohľady. The Letter from a Reader], *Kultúrny život* 41 (1953): 6.

¹¹⁵Dominik Tatarka, “Slovenskí spisovatelia pozdravujú X. Zjazd KSČ” [Slovak Writers Greet the 10th Congress of the CPC], *Kultúrny život* 24 (1954): 3.

lacks is a clear destination.”¹¹⁶ In a single paragraph, the critique dismisses the whole novel. Trávníček brought back the looming possibility of the elimination of Tatarka from the tradition of socialist literature.

Tatarka contended. His older distinctive tone returned to the pages of the Slovak cultural press, bitter and immediate. “About the Positive Hero, Conscience and Truth” as a text is a springboard for the imagination. Why is there a mention of conscience in the title when nothing that would come even close to it is referred to in the whole text? And why is he so ironic? “Aye, how tall seems the critic to be when he mounts his high stilts! Aye, in what heights he hovers, when instead of wings he assumes this particular general notion: The positive hero in our fiction should be like this and this...”¹¹⁷

One possibility to get a grasp of his intentions has already been foreshadowed. The author could have meant his reply predominantly as a self-defense, because he considered Trávníček’s conceptual narrative about the positive hero a renewed threat of to own position. Also, he surely remembered how the seemingly innocent rejecting evaluation of Ján Rozner in 1950 contributed to liquidating the general recognition of Dominik Tatarka as the leader of Slovak socialist fiction. Also supporting this hypothesis is the fact that Tatarka’s successor František Hečko was highly praised in

¹¹⁶ Bohuš Trávníček, “Niekoľko poznámok o kladnom hrdinovi v slovenskej literatúre” [Notes on the Positive Hero in Slovak Literature], *Kultúrny život* 29 (1954): 3,6. In the end of the article, there was a comment that stated that the editorial board of the magazine does not identify with the claims of the article. First of all, with those claims of article, especially with those applying to material of particular novels.

Concerning the clear destination, Andrei Sinyavsky (Also Abram Tertz) wrote in the seminal analysis of socialist realism (note the irony): “It is not easy to enumerate these basic qualities of the positive hero: ideological conviction, courage, intelligence, will power, patriotism, respect for women, self-sacrifice, etc., etc. The most important, of course, are the clarity and directness with which he sees the Purpose and strives towards it. Hence the amazing precision of all his actions, thoughts, tastes, feelings, and judgments. He firmly knows what is right and what is wrong; he says plainly “yes” or “no” and does not confuse black with white.” Adam Tertz, *The Trial Begins and On Socialist Realism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1965): 173.

¹¹⁷ Dominik Tatarka, “O kladnom hrdinovi, svedomí a pravde” [About the Positive Hero, Conscience and Truth], *Kultúrny život* 30 (1954): 8.

Trávníček's "Notes".

Be it as it may, Tatarka's intervention refuted the essential idea behind the progressive development of the anthropological features of characters in Slovak fiction, articulated as the vector that started with Tatarka and led toward Hečko. Plus, he rejected the insistence on the anticipatory, optimistic essence of the heroic figure. Instead of *systematic prolepsis*,¹¹⁸ he asserted the positive hero to have a polemical core: "With positive heroes in life and in literature it is like with mythical Anteus: you will defeat him, if he does not touch the ground. The positive hero in the literature of People's Democracies – unless he carries the weight of the epoch, i.e. the concrete historical experience and consciousness of its people – immediately breezes away like a little balloon and already resides in Communism."¹¹⁹ *Systematic prolepsis*, a key feature of the positive hero, was thereby declared illegitimate because it was claimed to be unconvincing for the readership. And untrue as well.

However, this is not the main act of the text. Tatarka used the opportunity to speak to contest the whole concept of socialist realist critique. He intended to deprive it of its inherent political dimension. Thus, instead of critique functioning as a cultural detector of political enemies, instead of the production of accusing revelations and Bolshevik evaluations, the socialist literary critique is asserted to become a purely historical explanation of a literary artifact. At this point it should not surprise anyone that Tatarka argues historically and implicitly refers to the events of 1951 and the pursuit of bourgeois nationalism: "Let critics, conductors of literature, and consultants come up with their demands. Truly, we do not have any dictator in our literature, and

¹¹⁸ Régine Robin conceptualizes systematic prolepsis as a substantial quality of socialist realism that was „blocking all indeterminacy, the unspeakable of language; because it tends to designate for all time the historical vector with full certainty, blocking the future since it is already known, as well as the past, which is always reinterpreted in function of the origin time of October.” See Régine Robin, *Socialist Realism: An Impossible Aesthetics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press): 74.

¹¹⁹ Dominik Tatarka, "O kladnom hrdinovi, svedomí a pravde" [About the Positive Hero, Conscience and Truth], *Kultúrny život* 30 (1954): 8.

hopefully we have become mature enough not to be misled by these demands. (Hopefully, critics are not so uncritical concerning themselves and they are able to look into a mirror – I mean a historical mirror).”¹²⁰

In April 1954 and after three years of imprisonment, the Supreme Court in Bratislava finally uttered a sentence against Slovak bourgeois nationalists. Simultaneously, Slovak literary culture was given its own Writer’s Union with a very reliable socialist realist – František Hečko – in its lead. However, already in August 1954 Tatarka had insisted that socialist critique must only put characters and texts in their proper historical setting. The discourse of socialist realism lost for him its complete legitimacy and this loss came about by his contention against the legitimacy of socialist realist critique.

Ambivalence

Dominik Tatarka for Liberalization and Collectivization, 1955

The threat evaporated. *The Suppressed Report of the Dubček Government’s Commission of Inquiry* of 1968 states: “We have shown that [already] in 1953 and 1954 the Party leadership had enough information from domestic and foreign sources to make it clear that something was seriously wrong.” The long process of reassessment and rehabilitation concerning the political trials against members of the Communist party had started in January 1955. The first goal of the special commission was to reassess the first and unrealized construction of trials (concerning bourgeois nationalism). This priority was linked with the surprising rehabilitation of “Superspy” Noel Field in Hungary in October 1954.¹²¹ The Czechoslovak response, beginning in March 1955, was a reassessment of the 1949 verdict against Gejza Pavlík,

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ See the introductory text in Bernd-Rainer Barth and Werner Schweizer, *Der Fall Noel Field. Schlüsselfigur der Schauprozesse in Osteuropa*, vol.2 Asyl in Ungarn (Berlin: BasisBruck Verlag, 2007): 1-21.

the person whose confession in a Hungarian prison was misused for the initial criminalization of Slovak elites. The sentence was reduced to ten years, and after serving seven years he was to be granted a conditional release.¹²² Plus, the decision that Laco Novomeský should not rot in jail had been made even before his trial was held, on March 31, 1954.¹²³ After almost five years of imprisonment, Novomeský was released at the peak of the preparation of the Writer's Congress in December 1955. Even though four more Slovaks were still serving their bourgeois nationalist sentence (Husák, Holdoš, Horváth, Okáli), the reassessment of Pavlík and the release of Novomeský largely contributed to the reduction of the general sense of danger inside official circles.

Not only was March 1955 the month of Pavlík's rehabilitation, it was also the month when the final date was determined for The 2nd Congress of the CSWU: April 22-29, 1956. The months between saw an in-depth preparation for this event. The Party and the Writer's Union cooperated to prevent any unplanned results. One of the first structural measures was taken at a meeting of editors of the literary magazine platforms with the leaders of the Cultural Department of the CPC on June 29 in Prague. According to the demand of the head of the department, Václav Pelíšek, all 350 members of the CSWU were to explicitly pledge allegiance to the Communist Party. The Writer's Congress should have become a univocal affirmation of 350 voices. In order to prevent the unexpected, the preparatory campaign had to commence on the pages of magazines. Besides wide reports from numerous preparatory conferences, the pages of literary magazines had to contain the rubric

¹²² Jiří Pelikán, ed. *The Czechoslovak Political Trials, 1950-1954*. The Suppressed Report of the Dubček's Government's Commission of Inquiry, 1968 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1971): 153-154. Since Pavlík had already spent six years in prison, he was to be released in 1956. Indeed, his release occurred in February 1956.

¹²³ Jan Vorel, Alena Šimánková and Lukáš Babka eds., *Československá justice v letech 1948-1953 v dokumentech* [The Czechoslovak Justice in Documents. 1948-1953], vol. 1 (Prague: Úřad dokumentace a vyšetřování zločinů komunismu, 2004): 293.

entitled “The Pre-Congress Discussions.”¹²⁴ Writers were obliged to speak at conferences and discussions, which functioned to preclude any unexpected conflicts during the Congress. The preparation, however, did not fulfil its function.

Instead of being the affirming prevention, The Pre-Congress Discussion on the pages of *Kultúrny život* turned into a debate that heavily contested the space of socialist realism. Dominik Tatarka continued the initial rousing dissatisfaction expressed by poet Ivan Kupec, published in the first November issue of the magazine. Their articles were referred to in most of the following contributions to the rubric all the way up to the Congress. Kupec’s “For the Defense of Poetry”¹²⁵ (*Kultúrny život* 44) was a reaction to the preparatory *Conference of Slovak Poets* (September 27-28, 1955). The protocols of speeches dominated the four issues of *Kultúrny život* (40-43) after the event. Tatarka’s most relevant cultural statement in 1955 – “A Word to Contemporaries about Literature” – came in turn as a response to Kupec’s essay two weeks earlier.

Tatarka’s first contention of 1954 – “About the Positive Hero, Conscience and Truth” – had been equally a response. Back then, his intention could have been categorized as self-defense, broadened to the reinterpretation of the meaning and

¹²⁴ Michal Bauer, “Úzkost Spoluviny. II. sjezd SČSS jako pokus o vzdor vůči moci” [The Anxiety of Complicity. The II. Congress of CSWU as an Attempt to Resist Power], in *II. sjezd Svazu československých spisovatelů. 22-29.4.1956*, vol. 1, Protokol [The II. Congress of the Czechoslovak Writers’ Union. April 22-29, 1956. vol. 1, The Protocol], ed. Bauer, Michal (Prague: Akropolis, 2011): 7-32.

¹²⁵ Ivan Kupec, “Na obranu poézie” [For the Defense of Poetry], *Kultúrny život* 44 (1956): 4-5. His argument brought about wide repercussions and was basically a reflection of the Czech confrontation between intimate and civic poetry (Kupec defended the former). Since his text falls purely within the ideological and conceptual plane, and this section my essay questions socialist realism mostly as an institution, I provide only a quotation from Kupec in which he prefers Tatarka’s talent to his political merits: “Do we not today take the identification of literature with agitation as a self-evident schoolboyish equation? Even not so long ago there surely were talents that created effective and permanent artistic values. But it should be said aloud that we would not have *The Parochial Republic*, nor *Stalin*, nor Ondrejov’s short stories, nor *The Visit*, if we had not also some other concept of art, if we had not the concept of art that turns away from the pedantic orthodoxy of our critique and press, if we had not the concept of art that was maintains itself with the power and laws of the artists’ own talent, and thereby creates true and effective works of art.”

practice of socialist realist critique. This second contention is, however, an intensification Kupec's initial polemic. Specifically, Tatarka's "A Word to Contemporaries about Literature" takes up Kupec's claim for the delimitation of the tradition of socialist poetry (at stake for Kupec was the post-1948 exclusion of an old important Slovak poet – Ján Smrek). However, Tatarka wrote his follow-up article on the genre of fiction, using Kupec's *Defense* mostly as a springboard for his own provocative, but ambivalent, call for the liberalization of the socialist realist space.

The inter-war success story of author Jozef Nižňanský served Tatarka as a factual illustration for his argument. He compares undesirable features of the just recently established SWU with the practical system of publication, which the once highly popular Nižňanský had enjoyed decades before:

Editions of our most average and second-rate books, editions indeed huge in our conditions, are venturing into some unknown places in the very same way as extremely small editions of extraordinary books. This is a paradoxical fact: compared to a contemporary writer, Nižňanský prior to the war knew much more exactly to what extent he had satisfied his reader's taste.¹²⁶

The issue of tradition did not typically figure among the subject matter of Tatarka's writings in this period. Back in the conforming 1953 he had called Jozef Cíger Hronský, a writer then living in Argentinian exile, a death author. It is highly probable that "A Word to Contemporaries about Literature" was the first case where Tatarka invoked in positive terms the inter-war figure, who had been excluded in the codification of the tradition of Slovak socialist realism (Nižňanský's first books reappeared only in 1957). All in all, as with the article by Kupec, Nižňanský was used mainly to put forward Tatarka's own agenda – the liberalization of the structures of the SWU.

¹²⁶ Dominik Tatarka, "Slovo k súčasníkom o literature" [A Word to Contemporaries about Literature], *Kultúrny život* 47 (1955): 6.

Nevertheless, although Tatarka published a call to liberalize socialist realist structures, he supported it by affirming the dominant ideological function of socialist realism in Slovak literature. In 1955, the main agenda was the collectivization of Slovak agriculture. Provocative and controversial as it was, the basic quality Tatarka's article is thus its ambivalence.

Tatarka's attempt to liberalize the SWU took advantage of the new situation resulting from its separation from the CSWU the previous year. New statutes had been passed only recently and were to be discussed again at the Congress. The definite ebb of political trials and the hopeful flow of the Congress, offered itself to change.

Arguing historically, Tatarka claimed that it used to be the case a book's popularity could be evaluated by the edition [the total number of copies of a book issued at one time]: "Today we do not have this approximate indicator at hand. Editions of contemporary production are not determined by the interest of the reader, but solely by didactic and political factors."¹²⁷ Tatarka basically recycled his evaluation of the hero of literature, who should *not* have been positive and optimistic, but conflicted and significantly – convincing. At the end of 1955, persuasiveness and popularity had become the prism through which he evaluated the whole space of cultural discourse. He demanded institutional means by which to measure this basic quality. The ability of socialist cultural discourse to attract and convince the reader was identified as "the truth of socialist literature." It should be remembered that it was the banner of *The Truthfulness of Socialist Literature* under which the founding conference of the SWU had been organized the previous year. This phrase penetrated

¹²⁷ Ibid.

Czechoslovak culture as a conceptual answer to the question of how to correct the mistakes of radical Stalinism.

Saying that literature must attract and convince is equivalent to saying that socialist realism has never been literature. Yes, the purpose of socialist realist discourse was to make comprehensible the political language of Stalinism, but its popularity among the reading public was totally irrelevant. Since the truth of literary statement was understood as primarily conceptual (derived from the science of Marxism-Leninism) and only then as aesthetic, its ultimate stake was political didacticism. Sociologist Miroslav Petrušek hit the bull's eye with his observation that the implied receiver of this discourse was always designed to be an "infantile subject of revolution."¹²⁸ What infantile subjects of Stalinism found popular was not expected to be the Stalinist art of the construction of socialism. The caveat could be made by noticing that since 1953, entertainment and popularity had gained some value, famously promoted by leading Czechoslovak ideologue Václav Kopecký.¹²⁹ The driving force of socialist realism was not its appeal (it was a figuration of science after all), but its impact was thought to be reached by a constant, homologous, monopolizing, and unavoidable invasion of the consciousness of the infantile subject. In all, Tatarka's demand to measure the likeability of literature sounded as illogical as would a demand that drafted teenagers ought to enjoy the painful first steps of their military training. Socialist realism with market principles was anything but a coherent claim. The demand came about by means of a historical argument, in the context of recent as

¹²⁸ Miloslav Petrušek, "Umění totalitních režimů jako sociální fenomén. K sociologické analýze estetizace strachu a zla" [The Art of Totalitarian Systems as a Social Phenomenon. About the Sociological Analysis of the Aestheticization of Fear and Evil], in *Studia Moravica IV. Symposiana* (Olomouc: Univerzita Palackého v Olomouci, 2006): 20.

¹²⁹ Kopecký even enriched the Czech language by his notion of "suchar," literally translated as a biscuit, cracker, or a dried bread, freely perhaps as a "dry-as-dust". It accompanied his accusation of extremely serious radical Stalinist in December 1953, and it is a living metaphor in the Czech language today.

well as expected structural reforms of the national literary institutions – but was there not yet another cause?

Indeed, and it was also the already observed rivalry with František Hečko. This time Tatarka argued so successfully that it is not an exaggeration to state that his idea to liberalize the structures of socialist realism angered Hečko to the point where he revealed much of their long-lived personal competition in his “That is Where Our Paths Diverge.”¹³⁰ By quoting an alleged unpublished remark of Tatarka – “Hečko who wrote *The Wooden Village* is and shall stay its only reader” – Hečko most probably uncovered a substantive rhetorical layer inside Tatarka’s text. Socialist realism in Slovakia, led by the community of the fifteen members of the Central Committee of the SWU, was a highly competitive space. In all, Jiří Knapík’s theoretical observation that in the Czech cultural space of Stalinism it was the struggle for power positions which was the actual stake inside all theoretical arguments, can be extrapolated to this exchange. To put it much more generally, reading socialist realist debates is to a great degree an exercise in rhetorical exegesis.

An anecdote stemming from the agricultural phraseology proves the personal conflict between the two writers. However ridiculous that might seem, the trope of a *goat* played quite a noticeable role in the exchange of insults between the authors. Tatarka opened the exchange with a plain rejection of the ways by which Hečko was making the case for entering into a collective farm: “The reader must leave dissatisfied. He must leave with an impression of misunderstanding, as if he expected the talk about a cart [*o voze*] and instead was spoken to about a goat [*o koze*].”¹³¹ As already stated, the reader’s respect, taste, and trust became Tatarka’s criterion for the

¹³⁰ František Hečko, “To je to v čom sa rozchádzame” [That is Where Our Paths Diverge], *Kultúrny život* 51 (1955): 4.

¹³¹ Dominik Tatarka, “Slovo k súčasníkom o literature” [The Word to Contemporaries about Literature], *Kultúrny život* 47 (1955): 6

quality of socialist literature. Since Hečko could not deliver a persuasive and popular message, in the Pre-Congress Debate Tatarka openly maintained that “The Wooden Village is a typical mistake of our literature...I find it my duty to express my opinion, because this work is regarded as a conquered position of socialist realism in our literature.”¹³² Tatarka referred to the canonical work of socialist literature as a failure that no one read, and as having no chance to bringing about its expected aim: persuading the reader to enter a collective farm.

The goat reappeared in Hečko’s threatening reply. He put forward the idea that Tatarka wrote purely out of personal spite and envied Hečko the recognition that he had been constantly winning since 1951.¹³³ Hečko came up with an allegory of Paradise where representatives of various nationalities were asking the Lord God various gifts. An Englishman asked for a sea, a Frenchman for a vineyard, a German for a machine, a Russian for a field. Hečko punched it with the plea made by a Slovak: “Lord my God, I don’t want anything for myself. But look here, I have this neighbor and he has a goat, which I do not. Please manage it somehow, so that his goat shall conk out. That Slovak man, that is Dominik Tatarka. His neighbor, that is František Hečko. And that goat, that is *The Wooden Village*.”¹³⁴

The bittersweet exchange reached a finale in a harsh joke on Hečko’s address that appeared in the daily of the Slovak Youth Union *Smena* [The Shift]. Above a caricature showing chubby František Hečko hiding a goat and Dominik Tatarka hidden behind bushes in a posture of a Slovak highwayman ready for an assault, the exact quote from Hečko’s article was restated. Moreover, under the caricature was a

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ The name of the author of this article is accompanied with a sizeable sign, “The Laureate of the State Prize.” Hečko received the title in 1952 for *The Wooden Village*, together with 200.000 Czechoslovak Crowns (Kčs). The average monthly salary in Czechoslovakia at this time was 1,050 Kčs.

¹³⁴ František Hečko, “To je to v čom sa rozchádzame” [That is Where Our Paths Diverge], *Kultúrny život* 51 (1955): 4.

short column entitled “Clandestine Goat:” “The agricultural section of the Central National Committee [CNC] has only now found out that František Hečko, coming from The Wooden Village, owns an unregistered goat. CNC sent a letter of thanks to *Kultúrny život*, expressing gratitude for its help with the revelation of this anti-state activity.”¹³⁵ Who was behind this practical joke remains unknown. Certain is that Hečko’s reaction was hardly a pleasing one. “The goat case” may appear trivial, but it proves the pushing of the limits of possible invective in 1955 (impossible at the heights of bourgeois nationalist pursuit), it proves a strong personal antipathy (competition for recognition), and thereby it proves rivalry to have been a structuring force inside the debate on the theoretical nature of socialist realist space in Slovakia.

The third element, next to the example of tradition and the struggle for recognition, which played a role in Tatarka’s argument that the time was ripe to install market mechanisms into socialist realist institutions, was the element of collectivization. In this respect, however, Tatarka’s intent was not to depoliticize the cultural discourse of Stalinism and turn it into aesthetic enterprise, like Ivan Kupec had imagined it. The argument unfolded on the matter of the collectivization of agriculture. In 1955 this issue was the priority for Tatarka as well as for František Hečko and for Czechoslovak political elites. In the progress of collectivization, it was a time when, “after two years of relative leniency, the kid gloves were replaced once again with bare knuckles and persuasion resumed the true meaning given it by Communist semantics.”¹³⁶

¹³⁵ “Zatajená koza” [The Hidden Goat], *Smena*, 31.12.1955.

¹³⁶ Edward Taborsky, *Communism in Czechoslovakia, 1948-1960* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961): 402. Between 1953-1955, 300 already existing collective farms fell apart in Slovakia, of which 213 were in the Prešov region. See Michal Barnasovský, *Prvá vlna destalinizácie a Slovensko (1953-1957)* [The First Wave of Destalinization and Slovakia (1953-1957)] (Brno: Prius, 2002): 35.

Still personally convinced about the legitimacy of the collectivization of agriculture,¹³⁷ Tatarka intended to convince his readership about the issue by making literature more convincing, and thus more politically effective. This is how he justified his idea to integrate market mechanisms into socialist realism as measures of its efficiency. While his contemporary Hečko understood this claim as an unspoken statement of personal competition, historian Juraj Marušiak suggests that “this call of Dominik Tatarka intended to deprive the Writer’s Union of the function, which was the primal cause of its establishment, of being the instrument of the control of literary life and to hinder the differentiation process among writers.”¹³⁸ Yes, he wanted to liberalize the space of socialist realism, and next to the monitoring of market demand he asked for new magazines, the revaluation of spontaneous friendships, circles of writers, etc. But the *primus movens* of the call was hardly to *abolish the control of literary life*, even though that this how Tatarka’s text is interpreted by Jozef Marušiak today as well as by some of Tatarka’s readers half a century ago (for the latter see also below). Because the demanded liberal reform was without a doubt meant to *help the construction of socialism*. The fact, the liberalization of literature was suggested to promote the collectivization the agriculture remains ambivalent.

“A Word to Contemporaries about Literature” asserted many more innovations and, what is more, it delved also into the aesthetic dimension of socialist realism. As for the latter, Tatarka quite logically incorporated them into his rejection

¹³⁷ Concerning Tatarka’s biography, 1953-1955 was the period of his highest agitation for the collectivization of Slovak agriculture. To this end he dedicated his novel *The Wedding Cake*, and he was also quite an agile journalist in this respect for *Pravda*. He published more than twenty articles, plenty of them about the subject: “The Collective Farm is not a Goose to Pluck” (December 22, 1954), “A Collective Farm and Rice will Grow” (Report from Mongolia, November 7, 1954), “About a Collective Farm that Faltered” (August 25, 1954), “Our Deeds Speak For Us” (January 9, 1955), etc.

¹³⁸ Juraj Marušiak, *Literatúra a moc v druhej polovici päťdesiatych rokov* [Literature and Power in the Second Half of the 1950s] (Brno: Prius, 2001): 9.

of *The Wooden Village*, claiming that it was not a socialist realist novel proper. Why? First of all, he claimed it was not realism at all, but what he designated as ‘apriorism’. *The Wooden Village* is said to be wrong in its conceptual core, it is said to be “unrealistic, unscientific. If you want, call it logistical. A *thèse*?”¹³⁹ Even though the analysis of this essay is focused mostly on the practical dimension of the Slovak socialist realist space, it is fit to mention that also this statement is ambivalent.

It is exactly a *roman á thèse*, i.e. “the aprioristic, logistic, unrealistic, unscientific novel” (Tatarka), that all great socialist realist novels are by definition:

The *roman á these* is a novel of demonstration, then, an illocutionary novel that seeks to persuade and convince according to the old rhetorical formulas, a novel that aims to manipulate or program the reader: not only in order to supply the reader with facts, a story, but to convince him of the validity of an action or moral, by provoking his adherence or assent through identification. The *roman á these*, which can claim a relationship with the exemplum, the parable, the fable, or the apology, is *teleological*. Its entire story and the narrative that supports it are determined by a preexisting purpose. Because of this, the narration blocks all multivalent readings, all mirroring, all escape hatches for meaning. By virtue of naming the signification to excess, as Barthes might say, *the roman á thèse*, a readable text, is monologic, monosemic, perpetually seeking to disambiguate. Its value system is always clearly signified, either by the characters or by the narrator’s voice: “Any ideological conflict is resolved by a narrative super-system that is itself ideological and that evaluates the competing ideologies.” (Susan Suleiman).¹⁴⁰

Previously, already we have seen how Tatarka wanted to install the market to promote collective ownership. At this point, Tatarka suggests removing the teleological, *á thèse* nature of socialist realist novels to achieve the same goal.

The aesthetic ambivalence Tatarka elaborated was immediately recognized by Vladimír Mináč. It was Mináč who was in June, as editor in chief of *Kultúrny život*, officially charged with organizing the preventive *Pre-Congress Discussion*. Even before František Hečko put his pen to paper, Mináč had retorted with his article “The

¹³⁹ Dominik Tatarka, “Slovo k súčasníkom o literature” [A Word to Contemporaries about Literature], *Kultúrny život* 47 (1955): 6.

¹⁴⁰ Régine Robin, *Socialist Realism: An Impossible Aesthetics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press): 250.

Crisis of Criteria.”¹⁴¹ Throughout the text he asserted “the confusion” inside the Tatarka’s argument in “A Word to Contemporaries”. Mináč pinpointed the fact that it is a contradiction in terms to claim Tatarka as an orthodox defender of socialist realism, and thereupon to declare that *The Wooden Village* may contain some good episodes but is mistaken *conceptually*: “Some Comrades [Kupec with Tatarka], even though rightfully criticizing the present state, are looking for solutions outside of the aesthetics of materialism, behind the borders of artistic realism. But – sunt certae denique fines – beyond certain borders there is only darkness.”¹⁴² The point is not to decide whether or not *The Wooden Village* is true socialist realism. It is only to notice that Tatarka’s statement was understood as ambivalent, inconclusive, confused, and wavering at the very moment of its utterance.

What Tatarka employed to vindicate himself was a most common rhetorical device of Stalinist discourse and its socialist realist branch: the opportune use of authoritative quotations. His defense against the accusation that he had ventured into the darkness of ideological confusion and personal revenge took place at the preparatory *Conference about Prose* a couple months later and was published in the second issue of *Kultúrny život* in 1956.¹⁴³ Lenin’s praise Tolstoy’s and Marx’s observations on the nature and perception of beauty were here added to lengthy quotations of from his own articles, which Tatarka obviously read aloud at the Conference in front of the audience. Intending to refuse to respond publicly on

¹⁴¹ The title is an implicit reference to the greatest inter-war debate inside Czechoslovak Left culture. The conflict known as *The Crisis of Criteria* (also as *The Generational Discussion*) revolved around allegiance to the Communist party after its Bolshevization in 1929. Mináč thus hinted that the disorder in priorities which Kupec and Tatarka suffered was the same as some of the members of the inter-war avant-garde.

¹⁴² Vladimír Mináč, “Kříza kritérií” [The Crisis of Criteria], *Kultúrny život* 49 (1955): 6-7.

¹⁴³ Dominik Tatarka, “Z diskusie na celoslovenskej konferencii o próze. Diskusný príspevok Dominika Tatarku” [From the Discussion at the Slovak Conference on Fiction. The Speech of Dominik Tatarka], *Kultúrny život* 2 (1956): 3-4.

Hečko's article "That is Where Our Paths Diverge", Tatarka argued that there is not a single argument in the text, therefore nothing to discuss:

Regarding the article by František Hečko, I cannot discuss it. There are no arguments. Only threats. And if you allow me – I won't let anyone scare me. I refuse all accusations. I find them preposterous. Regarding the threats and accusations, I demand an explanation from the author. I guess that I don't have to provide evidence that I have always considered my literary efforts to be a part of our shared effort toward the prosperity of socialist literature.¹⁴⁴

Even if Hečko's article was without arguments and filled only with threats, it still brought about a major clash between these two writers and as such was taken as a serious subversion of the expectations of *The Pre-Congress Discussion*, which function was set in June 1955 as a preventive measure for 2nd Congress. This conclusion was stated in the summary of the yearlong preparation by Ctibor Štítnický. The chairman of the Union stated it at the meeting of the Committee of the SWU on February 2, 1956.¹⁴⁵ In the published report, Štítnický said that what happened between the elites of Slovak literature was an unfortunate collision in its very "forefront"; and moreover that it was the "most serious problem of our pre-Congress situation."

What Tatarka had presented as a threat was here explained as a clash. Finally, Štítnický publicly addressed Tatarka's call to liberalize the structures of socialist realist space. Following Mináč's lead, Štítnický assumed a warning position. By suggesting the decrease of control and the increase of the spontaneity of socialization, the individuality of writer, and feedback the from public, Tatarka had allegedly crossed the borders of the space of socialist realism. Štítnický's reply: "I think there is no time to waste with joking." Then he went on to clearly restate the ideologically

¹⁴⁴ Dominik Tatarka, "Z diskusie na celoslovenskej konferencii o próze. Diskusný príspevok Dominika Tatarku" [From the Discussion at the Slovak Conference on Fiction. The Speech of Dominik Tatarka], *Kultúrny život* 2 (1956): 3.

¹⁴⁵ Ctibor Štítnický, "Za úspech II. Sjazdu čs. Spisovateľov, za ďalší rozkvet slovenskej literatúry" [For the Success of the 2nd Congress of the CSWU, for the Continuous Prosperity of Slovak Literature], *Kultúrny život* 7 (1956): 3-4, passim.

assigned functions of a socialist realist institution such as the SWU: “Often it might seem that the Union governs by decrees (mainly when state prizes are a question) and that it casts a vote about literature but, but – least temporarily – I cannot imagine any better form for the creation of public opinion about literature, especially in case of controversy.”

What Tatarka wanted, though, was an *account* of public opinion about literature, not its *creation*. All in all, “A Word to Contemporaries about Literature” was a double and ambivalent demand, for its author was asking of socialist realism a) the production of novels that would be *interesting reading*, and b) the implementation of *market principles*; what should be the result, he argued, was smoother collectivization of Slovak agriculture. Štítnický however proclaimed that instead of an accelerated collectivization, “we would drown in anarchy.”

Repudiation

Dominik Tatarka Between the Two Congresses, April 1956.

April 1956: the month when Dominik Tatarka repudiated socialist realism.¹⁴⁶ In this month, Tatarka overcame his state of conceptual ambivalence. But however important a factor it was, The 20th Congress of the Communist Party of Soviet Union (the Party Congress) cannot be identified as a single necessary cause of this move. Even though Dominik Tatarka had publicly delegitimized socialist realism in a ferment created by the Czechoslovak reception of Khrushchev’s Secret Speech, his exact wording was influenced by the approach of The 2nd Congress of the Czechoslovak Writers’ Union (the Writers’ Congress), as well as the influence an

¹⁴⁶ This is not an exclusive statement. Of course, The 2nd Congress of the Czechoslovak Writers’ Union is an event of delegitimization, but rejecting remarks from the Slovak space of socialist realism were rather rare. See René Bielik, *Slovenská literatúra po roku 1945 (1945-1963)* [Slovak Literature after 1945 (1945-1963)] (Trnava: Pedagogická fakulta Trnavskej univerzity, 2009): 37-38.

older poem written by Jerzy Walcyk. It seems that a Polish factor that played at least some role in Tatarka's overcoming of his previous position.

It is neither desirable nor possible to underestimate the importance of the Party Congress. Miloš Havelka seems to consider it an impulse for the end of totalitarianism in Bohemia, Jiří Knapík speaks of it as a reason for a general crisis of ideology, Michal Kopeček sees it as the launch of an identity crisis of thousands of predominantly young members of the Party.¹⁴⁷ Khrushchev held his secret speech on February 27, 1956. It was a day after a Czechoslovak delegation (except Antonín Novotný, the General Secretary) left Moscow and two months before the third and last part of Tatarka's breakthrough, "The Demon of Conformity", was published.

The phrase was uttered for the first time on March 7. It was a new banner of the official Soviet ideology and caused great alarm among the long established Czechoslovak elite. *The cult of personality*. It took the Party yet another three weeks to organize a large scale official meeting about the impending changes (March 29-30, 1956). There, already a month after the Party Congress in Moscow and three weeks before the Writer's Congress in Prague, Antonín Novotný at length informed attendees about the revelations of the Soviet Congress.¹⁴⁸ CSWU president Jan Drda was present. And his discourse took a new critical direction against the cult, which was now believed to have negative consequences on official writers – many of them

¹⁴⁷ Miloš Havelka, "Vergleich des Unvergleichbaren. Oder: Gab es in der neuesten tschechischen Geschichte eine Epoche des Totalitarismus?" in *Bohemia 2* (2009). Jiří Knapík, *V Zajetí moci: Kulturní politika, její systém a aktéři, 1948-1956* [In the Captivity of Power: Cultural Politics, its System and Agents, 1948-1956] (Prague: Libri, 2006): 270. Michal Kopeček, *Hledání ztraceného smyslu revoluce. Zrod a počátky revizionizmu ve střední Evropě, 1953-1960* [The Search for a Lost Meaning of Revolution: The Conception and Beginnings of Revisionism in Central Europe, 1953-1960] (Prague: Argo, 2009): 295-298.

¹⁴⁸ A trivial, but in this respect illustrative, remark about the hesitant nature of de-Stalinization in Czechoslovakia: The world largest sculptural group with Stalin was erected in Prague, finished only in 1955, and removed only in 1962. The highest mountain in Slovakia was called Stalin's peak, also until 1962.

allegedly turned into mere “hunters of state awards.”¹⁴⁹ Since then on, Drda/the CSWU were continuously receiving the newest/changing/chaotic instructions from the Party. The thorough year-long preparation for the greatest cultural event of the 1950s was thus deeply disturbed.¹⁵⁰ Change was in the air,¹⁵¹ in the subtitle of Tatarka’s “The Demon of Conformity (*A Tractate about the End of an Epoch*),” and what seems to me a most exact grasp of the atmosphere is Milan Kundera’s remark from October of the same year – it was a time of “ideological fermentation.”¹⁵²

The negative notion of cult appeared vigorously straightaway in the opening address of The Writers’ Congress. Czechoslovak president Antonín Zápotocký stated: “With the utmost boldness, The 20th Congress of the CPSU pointed to an unpropitious effect of the long-reigning cult of personality. Now, with a larger decisiveness and consistency, Leninist principles of Party and of Soviet life need to be developed.”¹⁵³

¹⁴⁹ Jiří Knapík, *V Zajetí moci: Kulturní politika, její systém a aktéři, 1948-1956* [In the Captivity of Power: Cultural Politics, its System and Agents, 1948-1956] (Prague : Libri, 2006): 255.

¹⁵⁰ Michal Bauer, “Úzkost Spoluviny. II. sjezd SČSS jako pokus o vzdor vůči moci” [The Anxiety of Complicity. The II. Congress of CSWU as an Attempt to Resist Power], in *II. sjezd Svazu československých spisovatelů. 22-29.4.1956*, vol. 1, Protokol [The II. Congress of The Czechoslovak Writer's Union. April 22-29, 1956, vol. 1, The Protocol], ed. Bauer, Michal (Prague: Akropolis, 2011): 26.

¹⁵¹ The following illustration of the horizon of experience comes from a diary entry of professor Chorváth. Date: April 22, 1956 (the opening day of the Writer’s Congress): “Aktívs of CPC are organized. The whole speech of Novotný, and parts of Khrushchev’s speech are distributed. However, even that part of the latter is enough to shock most Party-members. It has a hair-raising effect. At these meetings, even though not yet in a newspaper, they begin to speak openly about Stalin’s tyranny, about executions and false trials. About the fact that the tragic beginning of the war was Stalin’s fault; that Churchill had warned him, but Stalin ignored this warning and caused innumerable loss on life. Stalin is said to have ordered the execution of his whole military officers corps, and allegedly he committed a number of other crimes. It is interesting to observe how Party members react at these meetings – as if all of that were true news for them. Mainly some of these meetings are very tumultuous, e.g. the one at Barrandov. At a certain point, [Minister of Culture] Kopecký and [Minister of National Defense] Čepička were said to be murderers. The complaint was voiced: ‘Why has our red aristocracy reintroduced manners which a real aristocracy had abandoned already in the last century?’” See Jiří Pernes, *Krise komunistického režimu v Československu v 50. letech 20. století* [The Crisis of the Communist Regime in Czechoslovakia in the 1950s] (Brno: Centrum pro studium demokracie a kultury, 2008): 132.

¹⁵² Michal Bauer, *Souvislosti labyrintu. Kodifikace ideologicko-estetické normy v české literatuře 50. let 20. století* [Implications of the Labyrinth: The Codification of the Ideologic-Aesthetic Norm in Czech Literature of the 1950s] (Prague: Akropolis, 2009): 309.

¹⁵³ Antonín Zápotocký, “The Opening Speech of The II. Congress Delivered on April 22, 1956” in *II sjezd Svazu československých spisovatelů. 22-29.4.1956*. Vol. 1, Protokol [The II. Congress of the

Despite the fact that his message ended with the essence of Stalinist/socialist realist discourse, i.e. with “the great and bright future“ in waiting and to be fought for, at this moment the great Stalinist march forward was openly diagnosed to be in need of revision. At the opening of the Writers’ Congress this call for change came from the president of the state speaking in the name of the single ruling Party-State in front of circa 1000 members of the cultural crème de la crème.

The cult of personality was accommodated in Tatarka’s thought. Immediately, although not without certain reservations. In his discussion contribution at The Writers’ Congress, he refused to accept this new notion as a justification for all wrongs of the contemporary cultural sphere. What is more, he was hesitant to incorporate this concept into cultural space at all: “Neither schematism nor cult of personality I consider to be some kind of natural disaster like disastrous frost or drought. Why and how the invasion of schematism came about...that is a question which has not been addressed in our discussion so far.”¹⁵⁴

It follows that *why not* socialist realism and *how to* overcome it formed a complementary pair of questions he rose. The Answers he provided appear in two intertwined texts: the pre-Congress lengthy allegorical-satirical *The Demon of Conformity* published in *Kulúrný život* (15, 16, 17) and the aforementioned concise discussion contribution at the Writers’ Congress. In these two interventions, Tatarka reinterpreted a number of problems he had faced since 1949, most of which have been addressed in this essay thus far. Bourgeois nationalism. Collectivization. Socialist

Czechoslovak Writers’ Union. April 22-29, 1956. Vol. 1. The Protocol], Michal Bauer, ed. (Prague: Akropolis, 2011): 37-41.

¹⁵⁴ Dominik Tatarka, “Discussion Contribution, April 26, 1956,“ in *II. sjezd Svazu československých spisovatelů. 22-29.4.1956*. Vol. 1, Protokol [The II. Congress of The Czechoslovak Writer's Union. April 22-29, 1956. Vol. 1, The Protocol], Michal Bauer, ed. (Prague: Akropolis, 2011): 37-41.

Critique. Positive hero. Liberalization. Personal Rivalry. He repudiated the space of socialist realism in a comprehensive fashion. Let us go through it one issue at a time.

Bourgeois nationalism was surprisingly ignored in Tatarka's speech at the Congress, although it was substantively covered in "The Demon of Conformity." The surprise about the absence is due to the fact that the 2nd Congress of the CSWU is generally known as an unexpected demand for unrestrained rehabilitation of persecuted writers without regard to their political and religious beliefs, and a call for a new justice made by Jaroslav Seifert and František Hrubín. However, Tatarka did not omit to place the experience of his 1951 persecution in the very opening "The Demon of Conformity." He likened it to a wreckage: "I wrecked. Against my best knowledge but in the name of my holy conviction, I had publicly pled guilty and had acknowledged that I was a traitor of the people. In this confession I outdid even my accusers. I myself convinced them that yes, I am an enemy, a dangerous enemy."¹⁵⁵

Most probably this opening statement gives us a valid insight into the original intentions of Tatarka's personal confession, which he was made to give at the height of the pursue of bourgeois nationalism. As noted in the previous chapter, a short section of this confession was published only after his "rehabilitation" in 1952. Tatarka chose not to speak about political crimes at the Congress, and he revealed that his own confession was not only a matter of necessity. This happened in the text published shortly before the Congress started, wherein it served as a springboard for the repudiation of the whole space of socialist realism.

This total rejection unfolded upon a premise: Socialist realist discourse is fundamentally inconsistent. Why? Because it is identified with the discourse of the political. The case of bourgeois nationalism and its transplantation into culture was

¹⁵⁵ Dominik Tatarka, "Démon Súhlasu" [The Demon of Conformity] *Kultúrny život* 15 (1956): 9.

used as an illustration to explain this assertion. To be more specific, the main antagonist character in “The Demon of Conformity”, writer and politician Valizlost’ Mataj, is shown as once having been a main speech-writer of the leading bourgeois nationalist [obviously Novomeský]. The same person (Mataj) later became his foremost accuser. He is portrayed as herald of one political cliché after another, always submitting to the latest ideological order, always submitting to the “demon of conformity” and endangering his previous allies, and vice versa. Tatarka rejects a cultural discourse which was by definition subordinated to diffuse political distinction of friend/enemy, to produce works of art defined by this pair of empty signifiers.¹⁵⁶ In “The Demon of Conformity” he uses his own experience with pursue/rehabilitation of “bourgeois nationalist writers” to prove the illegitimate “fickle consistency” (as he calls he) of socialist realism.

“*Frequent improvisations*”¹⁵⁷ was the yet another descriptive label of the existing cultural discourse coined by Tatarka at the Writers’ Congress. His own exclusion seemed in this light to be one among many cases where cultural discourse had served the interests of contemporary political distinctions. Now the practice of “frequent improvisations” had become so intolerable that Tatarka even dismissed the adoption of the new categories used to criticize the Stalinist past (the cult of personality and schematism). He respected them as an explanation of some mistakes, but insisted that they should never be “*implemented into the aesthetic realm.*”¹⁵⁸ A fickleness of socialist realism leads to frequent changes of evaluation – bourgeois

¹⁵⁶ “The political distinction of friend/enemy has no ‘substantial content’. It is not an ‘exhaustive definition’ nor one ‘derived from other criteria’ — in effect it is a contentless antagonism (or to do violence to Schmitt’s language, an empty signifier) which is the excess of other ‘relatively independent criteria.’” Mark Bahnisch, “Derrida, Schmitt and the essence of the political,” refereed paper presented as part of the Political Theory Stream Jubilee Conference of the Australasian Political Studies Association (Canberra: Australian National University, October 2002): 6. <http://arts.anu.edu.au/sss/apsa/Papers/bahnisch.pdf> (accessed May 21, 2011).

¹⁵⁷ Dominik Tatarka, “Discussion Contribution, April 26, 1956,” ... 409.

¹⁵⁸ Dominik Tatarka, “Discussion Contribution, April 26, 1956,” ... 408.

nationalism was only one instance of this scandalous practice. How to overcome it? The space of socialist realism had to be disbanded *in toto*. Instead of the political improvements, the cultural discourse is challenged to moralize.

Tatarka turned his back against his own vehement pro-collective-farms interventions of 1953-1955 and the collectivization of agriculture was newly reinterpreted as a wrong enterprise for a writer to be a part of: “Not as a writer, but as a state bureaucrat I defended something that I should not have. I conscientiously defended state policies at moments when I should have criticized them. I agreed with capricious trespasses of law either in silence or even explicitly.”¹⁵⁹ This modification of his public statements about collectivization went also against the evaluation of Slovak writers, including Tatarka, done by the Party in March 1956. The Party itself was namely *critical* of too vehement actions of writers in this regard.¹⁶⁰ In April, however, Tatarka openly confessed his own wrong attitude of the last six years at the open. He recollected his experiences of forcing peasants into collective farms, and the previous ambivalence had thereby been overcome. *The truth of our literature* was no more coined as aesthetic and political persuasiveness. It gained a new definition: “moral cogency.” The qualities of a writer and his “moral qualities” were identified as one.¹⁶¹ Collectivization fell from the agenda.

The rebuff of the positive hero and socialist critique was intensified and generalized. In 1954, literary critic Bohuš Trávníček asserted that the character of Štefan Reptiš, i.e. the main protagonist of Tatarka’s *The First and the Second Strike*, was insufficiently politically correct, positive, or proleptic. Tatarka replied not only

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ A selection from the meeting of the Central Committee of the CPC (March 7, 1956) quoted in Juraj Marušiak, *Literatúra a moc v druhej polovici päťdesiatych rokov* [Literature and Power in the Second Half of the 1950s] (Brno: Prius, 2001): 14.

¹⁶¹ Dominik Tatarka, “Discussion Contribution, April 26, 1956,” ... 405.

rebuffing the notion of the positive hero and his unconvincingly linear development toward communist utopia, but more importantly, he challenged the contemporary form of literary critique and rejected it as an instrument for drawing a political line between recognized and excluded writers.

“The Demon of Conformity” as well as the discussion contribution contained parts that resonated with the two-year old debate with Trávniček. During his stays in the countryside, Tatarka claimed to have met a man who introduced himself as a real-life Štefan Reptiš. Their occupation and their situation in 1945 were essentially the same.¹⁶² From listening to the real man’s later experience, Tatarka inferred that his hero from *The First and the Second Strike* was actually *too* positive, and that post-1948 developments were much more dissatisfactory than his fictional accounts, criticized as they had been. The real-life man was said to have been thoroughly exploited by a local leader of the Party. Tatarka named the leader *Figure*, and real-life Reptiš a *Figurine* in *Figure’s* hands: “A great hero turned into a ludicrous fool. Surely, the whole village ‘freely’ entered into a collective farm, but they also freely refused to work there at all.”

Since he was approached by a real life person who claimed to be a version of the character of his novel, Tatarka implicitly assumed that back in 1951, the novel had at least some quality of verisimilitude. But compared to 1954, he intensified his point by pointing to the fact that even his own conclusions were too positive and too optimistic. Finally, Tatarka argued against Trávniček’s idea of socialist critique. At a congress he generalized his previous premise that critique should be concerned mainly with historical explanation on the whole space of cultural discourse. Instead of creating a new group of enemies who would have been guilty, this time guilty of the

¹⁶² Dominik Tatarka, “Démon Súhlasu” [The Demon of Conformity] *Kultúrny život* 15 (1956): 10

cult of personality, his speech at the Congress was structured about the questions *what and why* regarding the present situation of Czechoslovak literature.

First it appeared in 1955, wedged into the larger theme of collectivization. The problematic institutions of Czechoslovak literature were decried as mistakenly state-planned. Practical suggestions for their liberalization involved a layer of personal competition with František Hečko. In 1956, Tatarka kept repeating his diagnosis again, and again it was connected with an implicit hint of his inadequacy. But he stripped it of its original assignment to help the construction of socialism; in his speech, Tatarka objected that literature is like planned industry,¹⁶³ in “The Demon of Conformity” he compared it to a subordinated army.¹⁶⁴ The burning question of book editions was left out, and what came forward as the most important practical point on the agenda was the quality of the new leadership of literature. Institutionally the lead was to be taken by emancipated magazines, individually by charismatic leaders. In this perspective he again discarded another ideological concept upheld after the death of Stalin – collective leadership. In contrast, literature was supposed to be led by natural authorities – great poets, who were defined as universal leaders of world literature. František Hečko as a leader was definitely not one of these. In this respect, Tatarka even here mentioned that the implied leader would be an innovative thinker (in the 1955 polemic, Hečko had been presented as unable to come up with an intelligent thought either about literature or collectivization) and would not be a hysteric (and Hečko’s reaction on Tatarka’s “A Word to Contemporaries about Literature” was generally read as hysterical).

One thing can be ascertained with a high degree of certainty: The nature of Tatarka’s personal conflict with the leader of Slovak literature underwent a change.

¹⁶³ Dominik Tatarka, “Discussion Contribution, April 26, 1956,” ... 409.

¹⁶⁴ Dominik Tatarka, “Démon Súhlasu” [The Demon of Conformity] *Kultúrny život* 15 (1956): 9.

Before, they had both aimed at the same ends and the conflict was one of means. In 1956, they now had opposing goals. Were personal ambitions the exception, and was Tatarka speaking about himself when he spoke of a need for a new leader? We do not know. However, the personal aversion detected in 1951 was (quietly) reinforced.

Finally, two questions remain unanswered regarding the significant intellectual move of Dominik Tatarka in April 1956: what was the impulse and when did it reach him? The possible answer is that he overcame ambivalence with the help of Polish literature sometime between late 1955 and early 1956. Chronologically speaking, the first part of “The Demon of Conformity” was published in the first half of April in the 15th issue of *Kultúrny život*. However, almost ten years later the author himself claimed that the original idea existed already in 1954.¹⁶⁵ This is highly improbable, because “The Demon of Conformity” bears a strong resemblance with “The Poem for Adults” by Adam Wazyk. The latter work was published in Poland only on August 19, 1955. It has topoi and themes that are essential for Tatarka’s text. Tatarka himself explicitly quoted “a Polish poet who spoke of *the vultures of abstraction*.”¹⁶⁶

And therein lies the tropological likenesses: the demon and the vultures and the conformity and abstraction create an analogical doublets both in denotative and connotative terms, not speaking of the same referent. Secondly, the basic metaphor Tatarka used both in “The Demon of Conformity” and in the opening of his speech was that of “violets which do not smell, but everyone claims they smell wonderfully.” It is noteworthy that in the same section Wazyk’s “The Poem for Adults containing

¹⁶⁵ Elvíra Olonová, “Úvahová próza Dominika Tatarky,” [The Reflective Fiction of Dominik Tatarka] *Česká literatura* 5 (1969): 510.

¹⁶⁶ Dominik Tatarka, “Discussion Contribution, April 26, 1956,” ... 409.

his “vultures” also introduces a metaphor “drawn from an old fable: the emperor was wearing no clothes. Wazyk said this not triumphantly, but with disgust”¹⁶⁷:

Fourier, the dreamer, charmingly foretold / that the sea would flow with lemonade. And does it not? They drink seawater / and cry out – lemonade! They return home furtively / to vomit / to vomit.

Tatarka’s metaphor of the violets which do not smell seems strikingly similar to the metaphor of seawater as limonade, again underscoring the possible influence of the Polish poet.

“The Poem for Adults” is also said to be “the first clear-cut sign received by the world that Poland was moving along a path ... toward achieving independence that related primarily to historical, cultural, and ethnic factors.”¹⁶⁸ Lastly, the Polish factor in the modification of Tatarka’s view of socialist realism can be inferred also from the fact that the motivically analogous text by Jan Kott – “Mythology and Truth” – was published for the first time in Slovakia in the very same number as the first part of “The Demon of Conformity.” Even though involves speculation, it seems a probable alternative to the received understanding of how and when his new attitude developed. If it is not a explanation of his whole act of repudiating socialist realism, it gives a sense of the timing and source of its exact wording.

Most of the problems of socialist realism were addressed and twisted against the political nature of cultural discourse. This twist is published in April 1956, at the 2nd Writer’s Congress probably under a significant Polish influence. The attempt have been made to move the cultural discourse out of the political and into the moral, on the wings of independent magazines and natural leaders.

¹⁶⁷ Marcy Shore, *Caviar and Ashes: A Warsaw Generation's Life and Death in Marxism, 1918-1968* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006): 407.

¹⁶⁸ Philip Skardon, *A Lesson for Our Times: How America Kept the Peace in the Hungary-Suez Crisis of 1956* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2010): 60.

Conclusion

[Socialist realist] agenda boiled down to the defeat of modernism.
Its utopianism lay in its attempt to “jump out of history....”

Evgeny Dobrenko, *The Making of the State Writer*

Today, the Writers' Congresses of 1956 and 1967 are milestones. The first one consummated this essay as the first great attempt to repudiate the era of Stalinism. The one of 1967 is presented in textbooks as the harbinger of the Prague Spring. Writers made history, there is no question about it. But what gave socialist writers the power that actually seems to be the question.

The high status of writers under state-socialism had many reasons. The nature of socialist realism, though, is usually not counted among them or is seen as too trivial to be an answer. Bradley Abrams stresses continuity, the fact, that postwar political commitment and authority of writers' stems from the Central European national movements of the 19th century. Boris Groys traces the ambitions of the socialist realist agenda from avant-garde life-changing programs.¹⁶⁹ Antonín Brousek practically combined the two and localized the roots of Czechoslovak Stalinism in the Czechoslovak late inter-war and early postwar culture.¹⁷⁰

What if, however, the Czech and Slovak socialist realist “attempt to jump out of history” was serious, original, and long-lasting? What if the pattern of its sudden Soviet foundation (1932-1934) repeated itself in Czechoslovakia? Thus for example

¹⁶⁹ “Thus [today] socialist realism (like Nazi art, for example) finds itself in the position to which the avant-garde originally aspired – outside the museums and art history and set apart from traditional and socially established cultural norms.” See Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism. Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992): 7.

¹⁷⁰ “[Stalinism] does not begin as late as February 1948. It is not some kind of usurped import that radical communists brought from half-Asiatic USSR, and only thereby raped our ‘Central-European’ culture.” See Antonín Brousek, *Podivuhodní kouzelníci: Čítanka českého stalinismu v řeči vázané z let 1945-55* [Wondrous Wizards: The Reader of Czech Stalinism in Verses, 1945-1955] (Purley: Rozpravy, 1986): Introduction, pagination unknown, <http://www.sorela.cz/web/articles.aspx?id=28> (accessed June 2, 2011).

the Writers' Congress is an institution, which came to being together with socialist realism in 1934 (The First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers in Moscow, August 1934). The fact that immense concerns of the Party were invested into its months-long preparations cannot be, I suggest, deterministically derived from any pre-1949 tradition. Did it not modify self-esteem and enrich the capital of writers by something new, and in its beginnings also very attractive?

At the Writer's Congress of 1956, Milan Kundera declined to deliver his speech. Dominik Tatarka spoke unspareingly against the structural features of the socialist realist space. At the Writer's Congress in 1967, it was Kundera who stood up against the concept of tradition ingrained in the official culture since 1950. Dominik Tatarka excused himself. The bundle of themes they addressed on both these occasions were imprinted in the period 1949-1952, and they continued to address them from at least 1954 to as late as 1969.

Let us look how Kundera's thought was defined by a socialist realist attempt to defeat modernism. At the Writers' Congress in 1967, he proclaimed that "the existence of the nation is not a self-evident truth." The tradition of national collective was denied its status of justification force, so deeply ingrained in dominant version of Marxist-Leninist ideology. In contrast, Kundera maintained that nationhood is to be vindicated over and over by new achievements, and the Czech modernist tradition was evaluated as an exemplary vindication and "cultural blossom." The Nazi occupation and Stalinism were *merged* into a single period designated as "25-years of Tragedy."¹⁷¹ Kundera's 1956 "About the Disputes of Inheritance" with its "50-years

¹⁷¹ Ivo Bock, "Kultur und Macht. Wandlungen des tschechischen Literaturbetriebs in den sechziger Jahren," in *Der Geist der Unruhe. 1968 im Vergleich*, Reiner Rosenberg ed. (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2000): 295.

of recession” was only intensified – Štoll’s *30 years of Struggle* was still a narrative worthy of the assault.

Kundera went on in keeping the theme. He moved through “The Czech Fate”, written at Christmas 1968, opening with it a significant debate with Václav Havel, the outsider of socialist realist space. Havel did not understand either the need or the value of a great, apologetic narrative of national tradition, “The Czech Fate” had provided, at the time, when the most pressing daily necessities and rights were endangered. Kundera kept the theme in *Life is Elsewhere* and *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. Finally, he elaborated it into the most famous essay “The Tragedy of Central Europe,” written already in French (1984). Would there be such an intellectual outcome without the long interaction with Czech socialist realist space, its theory of limited continuity, its Writers’ Congresses?

In contrast, Dominik Tatarka stayed home. In 1967, he did not come to see the opening act of the Prague Spring at the 4th Writers’ Congress. Officially he excused himself for illness. It is more than probable that what made him sick were, as in 1955, preventive measures taken a year before the Congress started. In other words, the collectivist planning practices of the socialist realist organization. After the Congress was over, he summarized: “The Congress clearly showed that no one is so wise and prudent as to write a fitting Congress resolution half a year before it actually happens.”¹⁷²

Structures, in other words the practical dimension of socialist realist space, had become the major theme of this thought from the early 1950s. Later, he worked on the idea of *Culture*, his distinctive mark in the time of the Prague Spring. Slovak socialist realism was founded on more nationalistic and practical grounds than its

¹⁷² Dominik Tatarka, *Kultúra ako obcovanie. Výber z úvah* [Culture as Consorting. A Selection from Reflections] (Bratislava: Nadácia Milana Šimečku, 1996): 235.

Czech neighbor. Tatarka's work is a reflection of this fact. Let us just notice his liberal program for *Matica Slovenská* (1968): total separation from the Party structures; foundation of its own publishing house and its own multimedia platforms (radio and television); rehabilitation of its wartime leader J.C. Hronský (whom he condemned in 1951) and of Hronsky's vision of the financial autonomy of this most important cultural institution.

He stayed "home" also in a broader sense. In contrast to Milan Kundera, Tatarka did not leave Slovak territory. But his *Writings*¹⁷³ are full of the idea of leaving and full of bitter personal experience of exclusion, comparing himself to Milan Kundera's fame in France. After the invasion of the armies of the Warsaw Pact Tatarka decided to leave the Party on his own (October 24, 1969). That caused his second exclusion from the tradition of Slovak literature, which he had experienced shortly already as victim of the pursuit of bourgeois nationalists in 1951. He became one of the few members of a dissident movement, giving harsh judgments of Slovak writers who joined the normalized establishment on nationalistic grounds.

If Writers' Congresses give a puzzling account of unprecedented political power and control of literature after 1949, the personality of Laco Novomeský reflects both the indeterminist nature and long-durée effects of socialist realism. And, same as in the case of Writers' Congresses, in my essay Novomeský crossed the borders between Czech and Slovak space of socialist realism.

Despite my idea of the value of the *ingenuity* of socialist realism, it first must be said that Novomeský represents the undeniable importance of *continuity* between the 1950s the 1930s. Since the late 1920s, he had cooperated with Július Fučík (Fučík the hero, also from Kundera's *The Last of May*) in the magazine platform *Tvorba*. The

¹⁷³ *Writings* is the title of his most important text written in course of 1970s and 1980s.

story of *Tvorba* is also the story of the continuity. It was founded by the one of the founders of Czech modernism F.X. Šalda and given over to Czech Communist Journalist in 1929 – after the war *Tvorba* became the platform of the most radical Stalinists, i.e. anti-modernists. Not to mention the fact that Novomeský and Nezval were present at The First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers in Moscow in August 1934 and thus experienced the very foundation of socialist realism in person. The matter of continuity with the 1930s did not, however, mean any predictability about the 1950s.

The Slovak Novomeský coined the founding idea of Czech socialist realism. As a member of the older generation, he proposed legitimization of the inter-war Czech tradition he helped to create. He made up a phrase *30 years of tradition*, which is for Czech socialist realism as defining as the phrase *construction of socialism* for Stalinism in general. The question of Czech identity, which had been continuously on the agenda from the 19th century (*Česká otázka*), surely prefigured its significance, but the decision to codify the narrative of Czech poetry appeared in the horizon of ideologues' experience only after the unpredictable collision with the younger radical group of the Party. The old guard took unprecedented measures after they had mocked Vítěslav Nezval, the leading Czech poet. The speech Štoll gave after this impulse was the Czech version of the socialist realist “jump out of history.” And his theory of limited continuity codified *selection* of the inter-war Left Culture (radicals accepted *nothing*). The point is the genuine indeterminism of socialist realism. In 1949, a Slovak man invented its Czech core, all of this motivated by an accidental event and opportunely digesting a long-standing issue and cultural personnel.

Suddenly, from the accuser in Prague, the Slovak became the victim in his own country. Novomeský was charged of the newly constructed notion of bourgeois

nationalism, a concept particular and central in the Slovak socialist realist discourse. The pattern of foundation was analogical. The unpredictable political conflict was turned into binding definitions about a long-existing problem, although the nature of these issues in the two cultural spaces were quite different. Bourgeois nationalism was for a short while (1949-1951) a concept that permeated the whole Eastern bloc. Later on it was replaced on the international stage by Zionism. The notion internalized into a purely Czechoslovak one (end of 1951). In the time between, Slovak socialist realism was founded. It was much nearer to the immediate political arena than in the Czech case – it was a ban on Slovak nationalism and the imperative of centralist organization. To ask for the autonomy of anything was a political taboo. Laco Novomeský was arrested under these charges, the blame also fell on Dominik Tatarka on a number of times.

Both local versions of socialist realism were therefore spurred by unexpected conflicts. The Czech version was much more contained. It was a question of cultural politics, even though it culminated at the show trial with Slánský. Milan Kundera began his career by joining the campaign against radical Stalinists who were opportunely connected with Slánský's group. Also, the lines of the conflict copied generational layers. The question was: when were you born and do you remember the inter-war period? The Slovak version was less differentiated from the political process with a direct connection to the first construction of the show-trial with the enemy within. The lines of the conflict were delineated upon experience and personal history. The question was: where have you experienced the Uprising? Since Tatarka experienced it in the Slovak mountains, he was excluded from the cultural leadership in 1951 due to his bourgeois nationalism.

Kundera's thought developed more typically than Tatarka's. Innovations and modification referring to the inter-war Left culture were the defining theme of Czech socialist realism and Kundera's particularity was in the succinct form of the young poet's critical argument. Kundera as a case study represents *typical* conversion of a socialist realist into revisionist (at least until 1969). Tatarka's development in the environment of Slovak cultural discourse was more marginal than Kundera's. Unlike Mináč, Chorváth, Novomeský, Matuška, and most of the Slovak intellectuals, he did not welcome the federalization of Czechoslovakia in January 1969: "Federalization should have been preceded by a plebiscite. And in any case, it should have taken place only after foreign armies leave the country,"¹⁷⁴ insisted Tatarka in an interview and thus continued his pro-liberal standpoint, as documented in the present paper, from 1955. As a case study he would then represent *a marginal*. Responses and silences to his exotic ideas uncovered how more practical and profoundly personal Slovak socialist realism was. The same would hardly been conceivable in the case of the most recognized writers of the Czech lands, for example arguing about the persuasive methods of bringing peasants into a collective farm (1955).

In 1956, the original *ideology* of Socialist Realism was no more legitimate for these two writers. But it was politically binding. For the next 12 years, the Czech question of cultural tradition and the Slovak question of institutional autonomy, stood in the center of ongoing debates. No matter how one evaluates the socialist realist space and those who joined its ranks, believed in its creed, and behaved according to its regulations, fruits of the repudiation process are fresh even today. Thereby the process deserves attention and those fruits, I believe, even respect.

¹⁷⁴ Dominik Tatarka, *Kultúra ako obcovanie*. Výber z úvah [Culture as Consorting. A Selection from Reflections] (Bratislava: Nadácia Milana Šimečku, 1996): 242-243.

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