

**Subjectifying Socialism: *Existentialism in Czechoslovakia, 1945-1968***

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## Abstract:

This thesis explores the influence of the French Existentialists on their Czechoslovak contemporaries during the height of its popularity, between 1940-1970. Although no clear group adhered to the philosophy, it had a palpable influence nevertheless. Existentialism was first visible in Czechoslovakia in the classes and books of Václav Černý between 1945-1948, at which point the Communists came to power. Existential sentiment and debate would resurge again in the late 1950s and into the 60s, playing an important role in the artistic and philosophical output and debate of the Prague Spring.

This thesis involves an interdisciplinary examination that combines history, philosophy, art and politics, all of which are characteristically linked in the Czech case and cannot be considered separate from each other. Through studying the use of political concepts, it argues that even in the absence of a concrete allusion to Existentialism, the philosophy informed part the Czechoslovak conception of their position relative to their world and the Communist regime. The work will examine the intellectual output of Czech's primary thinkers through their debates, personal essays on the philosophy, articles in the journal *Literární Noviny*, and the prevalence of Existential themes in the film, theatre, and art scenes. Czech translations from the original French works often are prefaced with commentary that reflects the contemporary sentiment regarding the philosophy. Transcripts from conferences on the topic reveal an interest in establishing parallels between national existential figures and the in-vogue French ideas. These sources ultimately underline the demonstrable influence of the philosophy in the pre-Spring Czechoslovak discourse.

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## Introduction

In the post-war European context, the Existentialist philosophy arose from feelings of alienation and uncertainty. Although its fundamental emphasis on the autonomy of the human subject was timeless—parallels could be found in the earlier philosophies of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Dostoyevsky—the most famous contemporary Existentialists by the end of the Second World War were in France: Jean Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Simone de Beauvoir. Their work quickly spread across the world and was immensely popular in its time, particularly between the 1940s and 1970s, at which point new philosophies developed forward from these ideas. This thesis explores the influence of the French Existentialists on their Czechoslovak contemporaries during the height of its popularity.

In the Czech case, Existentialism first attracted a following and inspired debate in the period after 1945 and until the Communists consolidated their control in 1948. During this time, the French-educated philosophy professor Václav Černý taught a class at Charles University on Sartre and Camus and wrote books on the philosophy; in this period, he was all but the sole portal through which these Western ideas could be reached. He found that Existentialism articulated a sentiment that was not foreign to the Czechs, who had also lived through the wars and had read the works of Dostoyevsky, Heidegger, and Kierkegaard, and sought to establish the philosophy's key concepts in Czech phraseology. His project was interrupted by the 1948 Communist takeover; yet this did not herald the end of Existentialism's effect in Czechoslovakia. Existential sentiment and debate would resurge again in the late 1950s and into the 60s, playing an important role in the artistic and philosophical output and debate of the Prague Spring.

Many scholars have marginalized the role of existentialism in Czechoslovakia, arguing that it never existed as an influential entity because it did not have any direct followers, that is, any 'circle' that exclusively handled and developed the French strain of the philosophy. Scholars such as James Satterwhite, Jiří Pechar, and Michal Kopeček focus on the Czechs' more distinct contributions to

Marxist Humanism and Phenomenology. Others, such as Petr Horak, limit their analysis to more overt evidence (such as printing statistics), which I find to be insufficient way to measure the power of abstract ideas. These too-simple explanations overlook the extent of political, social, artistic and intellectual impacts the philosophy had and how it was absorbed, challenged, and even modified to fit the Czech circumstances.

While indeed Existentialism never had its own clearly defined group within Czechoslovakia, as did the Marxist Humanists and later Phenomenologists, its influence in this time period was palpable and vast, running through much of the intellectual and artistic production in the aftermath of the war and the pre-Spring sixties. Its evolution in many ways paralleled Existentialism's own evolution in the West, in so far as the French existentialists Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus took divergent paths with the philosophy; the former becoming a political figure attempting to reconcile Existentialism with Marxist Humanism, and the latter maintaining a more philosophically pure understanding of Existentialism, denying its suitability for mutations. Within the Czech camp indeed, an early obsession with the raw themes of Existentialism also tended to give way to a split with those who supported one figure or the other, and a focus on political themes emerged. Czechoslovakia, as a country led by intellectuals that were closely tied to the arts, particularly playwriting, found its counterpart in a French movement that artfully articulated its own "humanist" philosophy in its plays as well as prose.

But if we acknowledge the pan-European phenomenon of the wars, which bred these philosophical sentiments and dispositions everywhere, not just in France, and if we account for the limitations on sharing information that quickly arose between the East and the West, Czechoslovakia's own Existential evolution cannot be defined by its engagement with the French variety alone. Instead, I will highlight how this early contact with Existential themes and the general interest in a philosophy that promoted individual human experience pervaded intellectual output even in the absence of direct contact with the French. In fact, the seeds planted by early interaction with the philosophy

influenced the works of some of the Prague Spring's leading figures. The rupture between 1948 and 1963 on the one hand accounts for the differences in political preoccupations before and after Stalinism; on the other hand, it tends to obscure Existentialism's impact. Due to their early exposure to the philosophy, it was available for intellectuals to draw upon such that when the sixties provided the environment for a more open intellectual flowering; the seeds of Existentialism had been planted and were already beginning to mature.

## Chapter 1: Theory and Methodology

Previous attempts to trace the impact of French philosophy have been limited, mostly as a result of the lack of demographic and statistical information about text availability and dispersion, philosophy courses offered, or the extent of translations. Petr Horák, who published essays on the influence of French philosophy in the Czech lands, outlined these main periods of influence, however his brief analysis was limited to this—insufficient—statistical data. Useful to my analysis, he found that the library of the Institute of Philosophy of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences had a broad selection of French books and periodicals including *La Revue de philosophie et de morale*, *La Revue philosophique de la France et de l'étranger*, *Critique*, and *Les Temps Modernes*, the publication founded by Jean Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir.<sup>1</sup> But a more thorough exploration of impact must go beyond this data. In the scope of this thesis I have attempted to not only find other data on the publication information of the selected translations and monographs and draw inferences about their popularity based on their authors, publishers, and where available, the response in the press, but I have also delved into writing selections from those intellectual exponents of existentialism in order to deconstruct their political language and employment of existential themes.

This thesis involves an interdisciplinary examination that combines history, philosophy, art and politics, all of which are characteristically linked in the Czech case and cannot be considered separate from each other. The work will examine the intellectual output of Czech's primary thinkers through their debates, personal essays on the philosophy, articles in the journal *Literární Noviny*, and the prevalence of Existential themes in the film, theatre, and art scenes. Czech translations from the original French works often are prefaced with commentary that reflects the contemporary sentiment regarding the philosophy. Transcripts from conferences on the topic reveal an interest in establishing parallels between national existential figures and the in-vogue French ideas. The amount of material published in these periods is extensive and this thesis by no means attempts to explore every single

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<sup>1</sup> Petr Horak, "La philosophie française dans les Pays tchèques," *Cahiers du CEFRES*. N. 29, *L'inspiration française dans les sciences sociales en pays tchèques* (ed. Pavla Horská, Martin Nodl). Published online 05/2010. Accessed 05/05/2014. [http://www.cefres.cz/IMG/pdf/horak\\_2003\\_philosophie\\_francaise\\_pays\\_tcheques.pdf](http://www.cefres.cz/IMG/pdf/horak_2003_philosophie_francaise_pays_tcheques.pdf)

productive output of the era; rather, I have selected key examples to elucidate impact and interconnections between the Czech and the French.

But a direct analysis of the Czech work alone is meaningless without an investigation into the development of the French philosophy as well in order to underline how the Czech development was both influenced by and distinct from this group. Sartre's own frequent letters and contributions to Czech newspapers and publications reflect the disparity and similarities between the French and Czech varieties; Camus's engagement with the absurd works of the Czech literary icon Kafka underlines the latter's role as an international as well as national existential figure. There was clearly an interplay between the two national groups, not merely a one-sided transfer of ideas.

In the Czechoslovak case there also exists a peculiar distinction between the authorial intent and the perceived intent, which in many ways was powerful in itself. For example, many Existential themes were visible in the famous Czech New Wave films of the sixties. Yet, no explicit documentation exists that outlines whether the directors or screenwriters had been literally impacted by or intended to use these themes. However, philosophers interacting with the films and reacting to them were moved by what they perceived to be Existential elements. Whether or not the themes were intended to be Existential, they were interpreted as such, and this dimension cannot be ignored in so far as it had further politico-philosophical repercussions. Similarly, in the third chapter I will discuss Kafka's own role as an existential icon, although there is no way that Kafka could have been aware of the French existential works as he wrote before their time. In order to render an authentic historical analysis, we must therefore comply with the a-historicity of our subjects.

Where direct reference to the French camp's work does not exist, I have employed J.G.A. Pocock's theory of political languages, similar to the work of conceptual historians. Pocock argues that relationships between concepts and patterns of political language do not necessarily need to be

explicit, they may remain reasonably assumed or subsumed.<sup>2</sup> I will try to show that the more mature existentially-impacted discourse in the sixties used language and organized their arguments in a manner that was strikingly parallel to the French existentialists. The political language at this time was rich with Existential concepts, including “alienation,” “existence,” “absurdity.”<sup>3</sup> These thinkers did not make Existentialism their political platform but articulated their agenda with its vocabulary. I also have adopted Quentin Skinner’s idea of “speech acts,” whereby the value of a speech can be analyzed in regard to its intended as well as accomplished impact.<sup>4</sup> This latter idea is closely associated with one of the main Existential themes articulated by Jean Paul Sartre: the prose writer chooses his words intentionally for maximum impact and expression; his speech is directed for influencing something and is therefore considered an “action.” It therefore cannot be ignored, especially since it was an idea that gave impetus to the authors that read and followed this idea.

Existentialism was on one hand a literary toolkit (primarily circa Sartre and his essay *What is Writing?*); it was also an artistic toolkit (often using Camus’s themes of absurdity) to describe the present situation and even describe the Czech soul and the history of the nation. These historical discourses are distinct from those of other time periods and other groups not influenced by such philosophy.

Finally, this examination primarily concerns itself with the work and thought of the urban group of intellectuals operating in Prague. While Czechoslovakia was of course a multi-national state and has undoubtedly benefitted from the rich heritage of its Slovak citizens, I do not examine the works of those Slovaks operating beyond Prague. Historically, this is a logical distinction not only because of Prague’s unique and unparalleled urban status as the capital, but also because the Slovak intellectual currents, whether operating in their own direction or when parallel to the Czechs, were always

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<sup>2</sup> Iain Hampsher-Monk, “The History of Political Thought and the Political History of Thought” in *The History of Political Thought in National Context*, Dario Castiglione and Iain Hampsher-Monk, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 162.

<sup>3</sup> Iain Hampsher-Monk, “Speech Acts, Languages or Conceptual History?” in: *History of concepts: comparative perspectives*, Iain Hampsher-Monk, Karin Tilmans, Frank van Vree, eds. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1998), pp. 37-50.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

distinct. For this reason, a proper analysis of its influences and motives requires a completely different examination of different figures, influences, and structures, not to mention a different language, all within the bounds of this thesis.<sup>5</sup>

## The philosophy of Existentialism

By the time the French articulated Existentialism, it was not a new phenomenon. “The psychological ground tone of existentialism is an overwhelming sense of tragedy arising from the inherent and insurmountable senselessness of man’s position in the world. Such a sentiment of the irrationality of existence [had] welled up before in history. But it [had] become especially prevalent and acute [in its mid-twentieth century context].”<sup>6</sup> The initial optimism for the progress of mankind that people had anticipated early in the twentieth century and late nineteenth century gave way to pessimism as the century unfolded, bringing with it major geopolitical overturns, two World Wars, the use of the bomb, and clashing ideologies. Existentialism was bred from within that pessimism, from the anguished realization of the distance between the expected hopes and the actual reality that was so far out of joint: “The shock waves of these upheavals have dislodged [many] people from their accustomed grooves of life... they [were] wracked by anxieties, buffeted by forces beyond their

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<sup>5</sup> As the famous sixties figure Antonin Liehm explains in his book *Politics of Culture* (New York: Grove Press, Inc. 1967) pp.45: “the center of gravity of the de-Stalinization movement was unquestionably among the Czechs. Located in Prague, it’s driving force came from Czech intellectuals.” The Slovaks outside of this Prague group did play an important role, however: while initially the Slovaks were “paralyzed by accusations of separatism that had been brought against them in the early 1950s; resentment [apparently] tied their hands, preventing a more radical anti-Stalinist attitude,” the events in Hungary in 1956 and the backlash on those early intrepid intellectuals that were beginning to denounce Stalinism affected some key Czech and Slovak figures (including filmmakers Jan Kadar and Elmar Klos), the Writer’s Union and its journals. It wasn’t long until the anti-Stalinist spirit also took hold in the Slovak lands, “reinforced by the Slovaks’ desire to vindicate themselves of the charges leveled at them during the political trials of the 1950s.” At this point the Slovaks took it upon themselves to rehabilitate those Slovak individuals victimized in the trials, as well as “clear the name of the Slovak National Uprising.” According to Liehm, the Slovak’s initiative was invaluable, as the Slovaks incidentally “took up the slack of the anti-Stalinist struggle at the time when their Czech counterpart seemed to be faltering” from the government’s pressure to cool down. It therefore preserved the momentum of the anti-Stalinist movement and enabled the Czechs to rebound, shifting the center back to Prague for the sixties. It wasn’t really until 1967, when Novotny’s régime was directly challenged and he lashed out against the Czech intellectual writers (threatening to shut down their Union and their journals) as well as criticized the Slovak’s national aspirations, that the Slovaks once again significantly complemented the activity of their Czech counterparts. The bottom line is that at all these various stages the Slovak initiative ran perhaps parallel to, but was always distinct from the Czech group.

<sup>6</sup> George Novack, *Existentialism versus Marxism* (New York: Dell Publishing Co. 1966), p. 5.

understanding and control, confronted with uncertain choices. Such bewildered individuals... could not help questioning their [fundamental] values. How was one to make sense of it all?"<sup>7</sup>

Thus it was not that Existentialism was the first to articulate such themes, but rather that the twentieth century context faced unprecedented circumstances that made this view of human nature widely relevant. Thus, an important component of Existentialism is the nature of the individual's environment itself: "the external world is [considered to be] fragmented, indifferent, meaningless."<sup>8</sup> This view of human nature stressed subjectivity of perspective and existence; in such a world lacking a universal order, the individual had to carve his own path and meaning. Yet this is understandably an uncomfortable and uncertain position: "this encounter with the nothingness of existence, disclosed by nausea, anguish, and other painful states, is the fundamental, all-encompassing, ineradicable characteristic of being human."<sup>9</sup>

Thus Existentialism was attacked as an anti-humanistic philosophy for the personal turmoil it engendered. "The Existentialist thinker feels solitary in the midst of [his] society, cut off from nature, the rest of humanity, his most intimate friends, and even his deepest self. This many-sided alienation weighs on him like an eternal fate that cannot be changed or conquered, even though man is obliged to contend against it."<sup>10</sup> But this realization was a double-edged sword: on one hand, the individual felt alienated; on the other, he was given the freedom (through the valorization of self-reliance) to determine his own way. This philosophy stood in direct opposition to the milieu of philosophies, which were restricted to academic discussions and rarely spoke to the realities average man:

[A significant] reason for the welcome accorded Existentialism [was] the estrangement of professional philosophy from the concerns of everyday life... [it] aspired to close the gap between philosophical theorizing and the hot immediacies of personal existence... [Existentialism's] impelling purpose is to overcome the separation of thought from feeling and action by approaching the realities of life as these are undergone by struggling, suffering, uncertain human beings. It seeks to rescue the individual from the cares and horrors of a

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<sup>7</sup> George Novack, *Ibid.* 7.

<sup>8</sup> George Novack, *Ibid.* 5.

<sup>9</sup> George Novack, *Ibid.* 6.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

perilous world by shoring up his self-reliance and encouraging him to fight for personal independence at all costs against the forces bent on its erosion and destruction.<sup>11</sup>

### *French Existentialism: Influences on its themes of human crisis*

The basis of existentialism, an emphasis on subjective thinking and self-determination, echoes throughout human history. French Existentialism could trace its roots to a handful of keystone European thinkers, including: Søren Kierkegaard, Karl Jaspers, Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Henri Bergson, Fyodor Dostoyevsky and Franz Kafka. Sartre highlighted two different types of existentialist strands: the Christians (Kierkegaard, Jaspers and Carl Marcel) and the atheists (Heidegger and the French).<sup>12</sup> This thesis restricts itself to the French variety and its predecessors, both in the atheistic vein. This is not to say that Christian existentialism did not potentially have an impact in Czechoslovakia, in this case most likely in the Slovak lands, but this topic will have to be explored at another time as it involves different theorists and a different receptive audience.

The thesis will primarily concern itself with the works of the three main French existentialist figures: Jean Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Simone de Beauvoir. Sartre was a literary, philosophical, and political figure, whose evolution spanned from an early interest in Phenomenology and Ontology and would develop into a more political direction as he tried to use Existentialism to save Marxism, thus identifying himself as a Marxist Humanist in the process. Albert Camus was a smaller and primarily literary figure, which particularly gained popularity after Sartre's ideas were bankrupt after the sixties. His concept of the "absurd" was absolutely central in the Czechs' identification of the ills of their regime and their relationship to Kafka. His theatrical pieces were popular in the 1960s and his theory even inspired a Czech version of the French Theatre of the Absurd. Simone de Beauvoir's reception will also be touched upon, but her philosophical distinctions will not be so closely picked apart, as she was considered to be more of a sociological figure for her work on the gender-bending exposé *The Second Sex*.

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<sup>11</sup> George Novack, *Ibid.* 9.

<sup>12</sup> Jean Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Tr. Philip Mairet (London: Methuen & Co., 1955), p. 26.

The French Existentialists commonly reflected on the philosophical and literary works of their predecessors and implemented these ideas into their own work. Søren Kierkegaard explored the relationship between man and God, which is full of solitude and anguish, subjectivity, absurdity of existence, and the dependence of destiny on liberty. For Karl Jaspers, existence was based on pure and free subjectivity; Man chooses his own path. Edmund Husserl concerned himself with determining what really exists, and the extent to which our consciousness forms our perception of reality. Martin Heidegger challenged again the metaphysical principle of “essence.” Henri Bergson was another French thinker who wrote a lot about life and liberty; the first main Czech figure to connect with Existentialism drew this parallel because he was a close follower of both Bergson and Sartre. And finally, the literary figures Fyodor Dostoyevsky and Franz Kafka, who are considered the predecessors of literary existentialism, also influenced the work, primarily inspiring the artistic and literary structure that would be the medium for the Existentialists work.<sup>13</sup> It was perhaps these last two authors who managed to capture the corollary strand to human subjectivity that can be found in the French variety of Existentialism: alien or uncertain external circumstances, which impinge upon the individual’s attempts at self-actualization.

Of these influences, the French school was perhaps most notably influenced by the confluence of two currents of thought. The first stemmed from the likes of Kierkegaard, Jaspers, and Heidegger, supplying the “main themes for its deliberations; the encounter with nothingness, the plunge into anguish and dread, the overcoming of mortal crisis by the assertion of the individual’s absolute freedom to stake all on a risky commitment in action.”<sup>14</sup> Another theme Sartre would add to this repertoire is “seriousness,” a trait he accused Marxism of possessing. Seriousness is “the antithesis of sincerity because it attributes greater reality to the world than to oneself and looks upon man not as a free being, but as a thing no better than a rock. It is an expression of ‘bad faith’ that hides from

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<sup>13</sup> Lucie Bergerova, “Václav Černý et son importance dans le contexte de la littérature française” Palacky University in Olomouc School of Philosophy Thesis Archives, 2010. p. 33.

<sup>14</sup> George Novack, *Ibid.* 16.

man the consciousness of his freedom.”<sup>15</sup> Man should strive to be “authentic” by maintaining his quest for individual freedom, even in the face of a world that undermines these goals.

These themes were easily translated into literary mediums such as those that could be found in the works of Kafka and Dostoyevsky. The French Existentialists themselves used art, primarily literature, as a medium for expression, as it originated as a movement of literary rebels: “its career as an artistic tendency has been inseparable from its philosophical elaboration. The characters and situations of the novels and plays of the Existentialists are often transparent exemplars of their philosophical theses while the more theoretical works are direct extensions of their aesthetic credo and psychological interests.”<sup>16</sup> This fact is a significant parallel to the intellectual group that I examine in Prague in the 1960s, which were also a group of “literary rebels” who used philosophy to wage war on an undesirable status quo.

### *Sartre's Existentialism and Phenomenology; influences and elaborations*

Here we must focus in on Sartre’s work, as he kept developing the original ideas of Existentialism into political philosophical-categories. The second important current of thought from which the Existentialists built their work came from Husserl, who was the source of its phenomenological method. Sartre himself did a lot of work outlining the phenomenology of Existentialism in his first work, *Being and Nothingness*, which was literally subtitled: *An Essay in Phenomenological Ontology*.

However, as regards the actual content (and not the “scientific” method) of the philosophy, Husserl had notoriously distinguished himself from the early existential-like thinkers, such as Jaspers and Heidegger, because he believed their philosophy was a form of “antirationalism.”<sup>17</sup> On the one hand, Husserl could understand *why* it was popular: “*Existenphilosophie* had ‘given needed expression to something real: a deeply felt lack of direction for man’s existence as a whole, a sense of the

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<sup>15</sup> George Novack, *Ibid.* 17.

<sup>16</sup> George Novack, *Ibid.* 15.

<sup>17</sup> Edward T. Findlay, *Caring for the Soul in a Postmodern Age: Politics and Phenomenology in the Thought of Jan Patočka*, (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press), 2002. p. 18.

emptiness of Europe's cultural values, a feeling of crisis and breakdown, the demand that philosophy be relevant to life.'"<sup>18</sup> But beyond this concession, he thought that the European crisis had its roots in a "misguided" rationalism, rather than thinking that rationalism is a fallacy that should be overcome.

The scientific method of Phenomenology was nevertheless a useful tool for Sartre's own investigations. Most generally, the procedure can be described as one which:

Turns its back, at least provisionally, upon the real social and natural environment and concentrates attention upon the states of consciousness and array of objects scrutinized by the reflecting individual. Phenomenology rests upon the direct intuition of states of mind and immediate inspection of things, not as the initial state of knowing what they are, but as conclusive evidence of their definitive nature. The introspective thinker deliberately restricts himself to phenomena as they are manifested without going on to link the appearances of things with the conditions and causes of their occurrence.<sup>19</sup>

In a most basic explanation, the Phenomenological method entails examining things as if you were to perceive them for the first time, without preconceptions of their essence. This directly relates to Sartre's famous reversal of the age-old metaphysical assertion that essence precedes existence, (meaning loosely that all things can have a known or imagined form or meaning before (or without) tangibly existing.) The essence is like the soul of an object; its "Platonic form." Tangible manifestations are copies of these "essential" objects. Similarly, Husserl articulated "essence" as the "ideal." Sartre distanced himself from his predecessors when he argued that existence comes before essence. The Existential individual must begin from the subjective, assuming no objective or universal nature or essence exists. Sartre described this processes:

Man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world—and defines himself afterwards. Man is what he wills; man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself... Man is responsible for what he is. Thus, the first effect of existentialism is that it puts everyman in possession of himself as he is, and places the entire responsibility for his existence squarely upon his shoulders.<sup>20</sup>

The implications of this philosophy, which advocated individual action and decision making outside of collective, was serious for any government that hoped to maintain control over its populace with soft

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<sup>18</sup> Edward T. Findlay, *Ibid.* 18.

<sup>19</sup> George Novack, *Ibid.* 16.

<sup>20</sup> Jean Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism. Ibid.* 28.

power. This stood in direct contrast to conventional Marxist thinking and practice, and was therefore banned by the Communist government. The irreconcilability of the philosophy with essentially any formal state system also made Sartre's eventual turn to Marxism all the more baffling.

And phenomenology as a method seems to be predicated on this formula: one observes the world 'as it is' without "going on to link the appearances of things with the conditions and causes of their occurrence." This is a useful tool for stripping away the preconceived notions of reality that one has been taught prior to their Existential awakening. Sartre applied this method of descriptive psychology in all his early philosophical works, particularly *Being and Nothingness*, where he outlined his particular conception of phenomenological ontology. George Novack, a contemporary historian of Socialism from America, explains Sartre's idea:

Consciousness is a consciousness of objects, as Husserl had stressed. In Sartre's model of intentionality, the central player in consciousness is a phenomenon, and the occurrence of a phenomenon just is a consciousness-of-an-object... All things in the world, as we normally experience them, are phenomena, beneath or behind which lies their "being-in-itself" (essence). Consciousness, by contrast, has "being-for-itself", since each consciousness is not only a consciousness-of-its-object but also a *pre-reflective consciousness-of-itself* (*conscience de soi*). Yet for Sartre, unlike Husserl, the "I" or self is nothing but a sequence of acts of consciousness, notably including *radically free* choices.<sup>21</sup>

Consciousness is aware of outside objects (phenomena) AND of itself. Everything we see exists and has its own "essence" (being-in-itself) but not everything is aware that it exists (being-for-itself). For Sartre, the practice of phenomenology proceeds by a "deliberate reflection on the structure of consciousness. Sartre's method is in effect a literary style of interpretive description of different types of experience in relevant situations — a practice that does not really fit the methodological proposals of either Husserl or Heidegger, but makes use of Sartre's great literary skill."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> The entry "Phenomenology," Stanford Dictionary of Philosophy. <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/phenomenology/>. "In the novel *Nausea* (1936) Jean-Paul Sartre described a bizarre course of experience in which the protagonist, writing in the first person, describes how ordinary objects lose their meaning until he encounters pure being at the foot of a chestnut tree, and in that moment recovers his sense of his own freedom... The chestnut tree [he] see[s] is, for Sartre, such a phenomenon in [his] consciousness." The italics are my emphases.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

### *Patočka's Phenomenology, versus Existentialism*

The link between Existentialism and Phenomenology deserves a bit more attention, because it is a significant element in the Czech case, helping to establish the political-philosophical discursive context on my research. This exercise also helps to challenge the basic precepts of Existentialism. Jan Patočka was one of Husserl's students and a famous phenomenologist, also inspired by Plato and Heidegger.<sup>23</sup> He was a key Czech intellectual figure, although he was most prominent after the period of my examination. Patočka was not particularly politically active up to 1968, but during this time he would be making strides with his philosophical work in phenomenology. This philosophy would eventually form the basis of Charter 77, although he did not live to fully partake in its creation and dispersion. In 1977 he died as the result of an intensive police interrogation.

The basic idea of phenomenology revolves around the concept that the world exists as we "consciously" conceive of it. As in Husserl's philosophy, Patočka believed in a *life-world*: "the primordial way the world appears to us, full of meaning and purpose, before it goes through objectification and loses its immanent meaning."<sup>24</sup> If we accept that seeking authenticity in all endeavors is the basis of humanity, Phenomenology constitutes a revolt of individual consciousness against an alienating ideology and system, stressing the importance of subjective morality and decision-making.<sup>25</sup> Both of these sound as if they were compatible with Sartre's phenomenological understanding, but they are distinct. Patočka outlined some of these ideas himself in his earlier works, which analyzed French existential ideas.

In 1947 he published an essay: "Doubts about Existentialism, Some Comments" in which he criticized the Existentialists for "presenting subjectivity not as an extramundane [meaning: otherworldly,

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<sup>23</sup> Edward T. Findlay, *Ibid.* 3. He takes perfectionism and communitarianism from Plato; i.e. virtue as essence of person, politics should aim to foster virtue.

<sup>24</sup> Aviezer Tucker, *The Philosophy and Politics of Czech Dissidence from Patočka to Havel*, (Pittsburgh: The University of Pittsburgh, 2001), p. 10.

<sup>25</sup> By the time he was a major philosophical and political player in the seventies, this was a direct attack on the Marxist-Leninist doctrines: materialism, the Marxist pseudo-scientific worldview, the objectification of the humans, reducing humans to a means of production, myth of historical progress, and the technological manipulation of human resources. From Edward T. Findlay, *Ibid.*

transcendental] precondition of mundane [earthly] life but as a mundane passion for the extramundane, making pathos into a substance.”<sup>26</sup> Subjectivity, something both Patočka and the Existentialists can agree exists, has an inherent philosophical value as it liberated us from the erroneous belief in a universal truth. Here the two groups diverge. Patočka believes that from here, man should begin to pursue a virtuous ethics beyond the self. However, Patočka thought the Existentialists were incorrectly interpreting the significance of a subjective world, essentially accusing them of misusing their freedom for personal gain. That is, if subjectivity means that there exists a vacuum of virtue, we should fill the vacuum by creating ethics. Instead, the Existentialists were “anarchistically” reveling in all the individual possibility that emerges in the absence of universal truth and order; as evidenced in their credo “Man’s freedom is not limited by his own nature, by his passions or his motives, or by other things or people. Man is utterly at liberty to decide what he wishes to become.”<sup>27</sup> Hence, emotion is the foundation of Existential human action and decision-making, which is to Patočka morally irresponsible:

Ecstatic is not an ‘authentic’ alternative to the inauthenticity of mundane existence, caught up in need and gratification, but rather another form of escape into inauthenticity from the authenticity of freedom and responsibility... for Patočka, human authenticity is not some altered consciousness but rather consciousness affirming its freedom and responsibility against the mindless anonymity of the world.<sup>28</sup>

Patočka believes this “responsibility” is absent in Existentialism: if the Existentialists advocate a world where people seek to fulfill their own needs and gratification, they are escaping “responsibility” just like most other philosophical or dogmatic systems that can’t handle the truth and their ethical burden. Patočka is more optimistic than the Existentialists here, seeing the “mindless anonymity of the world” to be a challenge to be overcome instead of a status-quo to become accustomed to. Thus the basic thrust of existentialism appeared to Patočka analogous to the thrust of ideology: “for all their differences, each is a manifestation of the same basic movement of being human with which philosophy must constantly struggle, the perennial temptation to objectify, which is rooted already in

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<sup>26</sup> Erazim Kohák, *Jan Patočka: Philosophy and Selected Writings*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, August 1989.) p. 45.

<sup>27</sup> George Novack, *Ibid.* 18.

<sup>28</sup> Erazim Kohák, *Ibid.* 45.

the way humans experience the world.”<sup>29</sup> It is here where virtue ethics from Plato are most visible: although no universal right or wrong might exist, we must use rational methods to deduce a moral direction; and strive toward its fulfillment for the better of humanity, not solely for our Self.

Sartre seemed to implicitly respond to this in his work *Existentialism is a Humanism*, when he argues that in “choosing for himself, man chooses for all men.”<sup>30</sup> Since we cannot tell other people what to do (the world is subjective after all), we can only live by example; our choices reflect the action we deem most appropriate and therefore most imitable. His essay was published in Czechoslovakia after Patočka’s “Questions...” and it is unclear as to whether indeed Patočka felt they had been answered.

### *Marxist Humanism and the Czechoslovak Intellectual-Philosophical Discursive Context*

While my next chapter explores the earlier manifestation of Existentialism in the post-war climate before Communism, the latter two concern themselves with the post-Stalinist environment, in which Marxist Humanism surged forth as a way that the socialist intellectuals of the era could reform the ills of Stalinism and achieve a better socialism. Jan Patočka’s zenith came after these debates had been quashed by the Soviet invasion that restored the official version of Communism.

Toward the end of his career, Sartre took an unusual turn and attempted to reconcile Existentialism with Marxism. Although Existentialism’s focus on individualism was traditionally considered antithetical to Marxism’s mass movement, Sartre found a niche for himself in the Humanist movement. But it was not an easy process. He wrote two key books on the topic: *In Search of a Method* and *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. In the first he describes how he was drawn to the movement not because of Marx’s theory but because of the literal power of a movement leading so many real people: “what... began to change me was the reality of Marxism, the heavy pressure on my

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<sup>29</sup> Erazim Kohák, *Ibid.* 46.

<sup>30</sup> Jean Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, *Ibid.* 29.

horizon of the masses of workers, an enormous, sober body which lived Marxism, which practiced it, and which at distance exercised an irresistible attraction on petit-bourgeois intellectuals.”<sup>31</sup>

He was supposedly drawn to Communism after he witnessed the horrors of “his own bourgeoisie,” namely French colonialism and the official repressions of Communists in France.<sup>32</sup> He went so far in his zeal for the movement that he implicitly condoned Stalinism—arguing that it was necessary for the masses to take their orders from the Party leadership in order to achieve their goals—and in doing so contradicted his own philosophy, alienating himself from his prior political and philosophical allies, such as Albert Camus.<sup>33</sup> His love affair with Communism had other ups and downs: following the events in Hungary in 1956, he condemned those who blindly followed the Party line instead of keeping the movement’s greater goals in mind. It was clear to him at this point that Marxism needed an overhaul if it were to truly realize its goals as a mass movement. Yet he had to find a way to reconcile his interest in what the movement represented with its very tenets. So he attempted to use Existentialism to refine scientific socialism’s failings. As he and many other Marxist Humanists would argue, the Dialectic stripped autonomy and agency from the individual by objectifying his role in history. Sartre believed it was here that Existentialism’s signature focus on subjectivity could “rescue and renew the original ideas of Marx, which had been misinterpreted and mishandled by his official disciples.”<sup>34</sup>

Similarly, Marxist Humanists in Czechoslovakia tasked themselves with rectifying their corrupt Socialist government. A handful of prominent thinkers would shape the Czechoslovak debate, among them the Marxist Humanist philosopher Karel Kosík. This group explored the ways in which, and how a new and more democratic system could replace and rectify the old. They strove to dismantle the rhetoric and dogmatism of the regime and promoted critical reflection, for people to seek to challenge inadequate political systems and to overcome the false conflicts it had created in society in

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<sup>31</sup> George Novack, *Ibid.* 23.

<sup>32</sup> George Novack, *Ibid.* 30.

<sup>33</sup> George Novack, *Ibid.* 31.

<sup>34</sup> George Novack, *Ibid.* 22.

order to maintain power: for example, the bourgeois and working classes should not be separate, but rather united in a common humanistic cause.

Kosík published his most famous work, *Dialectics of the Concrete* in the critical year of 1963; shortly thereafter he added the political essays “Dialectics of Morality and the Morality of Dialectic,” and “Our Current Crisis.” These works importantly deconstructed the predominating trends in Marxist-Leninism. His main criticisms not only highlight the nature of the debate at the time but they also underline some of the ideological forces they were up against.

To begin, Kosík cautioned against the unexamined following of Party doctrine, as it relied on “mystification,” that is, it sought to maintain its power through an information monopoly, by explaining crises in its own words and, if necessary, replacing certain elements of its system without undermining its hold on power.<sup>35</sup> Additionally, and most devastatingly, the Dialectic view of history stripped human existence of its intrinsic meaning: “the historical process was at its very inception dehumanized, that is, deprived of its human significance, naturalized and reified, that it might be the object of scientific examination.”<sup>36</sup> Similarly, Kosík warned about the danger of the “pseudo-concrete,” that is, the perception of the world in which transformative processes are reduced to fixed objects and objectified social relations appear as natural conditions.<sup>37</sup> In simplifying complex historical and social processes by applying one law-like rule upon them, people began to believe that they knew all there was to know about a given subject, that the subject was in fact entirely and simply knowable.

Autonomy, to Kosík, formed the basis of historicity. To solve this ‘crisis’ evolving in the sixties Czechoslovakia, it was firstly important for the new system to restore subjectivity to the objectified Man and his human relations. As a political system, the state should return to a socialist democracy

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<sup>35</sup> Karel Kosík, “Our Current Crisis.” in *Crisis of Modernity* ed. James H. Satterwhite, (Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1995) p. 18.

<sup>36</sup> Karel Kosík, “Dialectics of Morality” in *Crisis of Modernity* ed. James H. Satterwhite, (Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1995) p. 64.

<sup>37</sup> Karel Kosík, “Dialectics of Morality.” *Ibid.* 65.

rather than the current totalitarian structure. Without the ability for subjects to act independently and critically, the nation's memory and perspective would be forfeited and history would become one-dimensional and stagnant.<sup>38</sup> Thus "ideology critique" was essential as well to the revival of conceiving of the Czech nation as unique and different from the Soviet superstructure to which it had become fused.<sup>39</sup> Another important element was to choose leaders that are not just self-serving politicians that espouse another's (namely, foreign Soviet) doctrine but rather capable of formulating their own, more appropriate policy.<sup>40</sup> Power should work to protect humanity, not to destroy it.

Sartre would grow in popularity as a Marxist Humanist figure, known throughout the Soviet Bloc<sup>41</sup> as well as in the West. He would even work in tandem with the Czechoslovaks, visiting Prague (1962, 1968) and arguing on their behalf at the 1962 World Peace Conference in Moscow for the censorship of Kafka to end and for the overall "disarmament of culture." He directly addressed the Czechoslovak people in letters published through *Literární Noviny*. Yet his and the Czechoslovak spirit of Marxist Humanism alike ended with the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968.

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<sup>38</sup> Karel Kosík, "Our Current Crisis", *Ibid.* 22.

<sup>39</sup> Karel Kosík, "Our Current Crisis", *Ibid.* 24.

<sup>40</sup> Karel Kosík, "Our Current Crisis", *Ibid.* 22.

<sup>41</sup> Although with mixed reviews, such as in Poland, see: Adam Schaff and Leszek Kołakowski, and in Hungary, see: György Lukács.

## Chapter 2: Existentialism in Post- War Czechoslovakia

The earliest entry of French Existentialism into Czechoslovakia began after the Second World War. Existentialism was a fashionable ideology in Europe at this time; yet, due to a lack of access to Western philosophical production, many Czechs were not adequately acquainted with the philosophy behind its use as a “buzzword.”<sup>42</sup> Václav Černý, a French-educated literary critic and professor at Charles University, was perhaps the first official window to the philosophy, writing books on it and dedicating a course in his 1947-1948 school year to the thought of Albert Camus and Jean Paul Sartre.<sup>43</sup>

Václav Černý studied at the Lycée Carnot in Dijon, France where he obtained his baccalaureate in 1924. Here he would come to know French culture and language. In 1928 he wrote his doctoral thesis on the poetic work of Henri Bergson, a French philosopher that had influenced the Existentialists. He also was awarded an honorary doctorate of French universities in 1946.<sup>44</sup> Additionally, he closely studied Roman language and history, which he would continue to study and translate back in Prague. He taught at Charles University between 1945 and until 1948, when he was marginalized by the new communist regime for his ‘anti-state’ political leanings. In September 1952, he was accused of subversive activities, arrested and tried, and in the spring of 1953 acquitted for lack of evidence.<sup>45</sup>

On the one hand, Černý was influenced by pan-Slav romanticism; on the other, he was a supporter of the Western European orientation of Czech society and culture; his lifelong goal therefore was to investigate a comparison of historical periods and movements in European, mainly Czech and early-

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<sup>42</sup> In his *Workbooks on Existentialism*, Černý explains one of his motives for writing the book: “I wrote this book about existentialism... because [as the philosophy] becomes fashionable, it typically is widely talked about, but nobody actually knows what it is.” Václav Černý: *První a druhý sesit o existencialismu*. (Prague: Mladá Fronta, 1992). p. 74.

<sup>43</sup> Lucie Bergerova, *Ibid.* 32.

<sup>44</sup> The entry “ Václav Černý” in the Dictionary of Czech Literature After 1945 (Slovník české literatury po roce 1945). Published 5/6/2006, <http://www.slovníkceskeliteratury.cz/showContent.jsp?docId=357>. Accessed 3/6/2014.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

medieval Roman textual arts.<sup>46</sup> From 1954 he worked in the Department for Modern Philological Sciences, where he was able to employ and develop his penchant for literary criticism and translation. He was moved once again in 1960, when he was employed in the Archives of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences Commission working to organize and file Romanesque manuscripts collected from the nationalized monastery and castle archives.<sup>47</sup> In 1968, he was able to return as professor at the Faculty of Arts and restored Department of Comparative and General Literature. Yet shortly after the Soviet invasion, in 1970 he was dismissed and sent into retirement. He was prevented from teaching, as well as critical and editorial work. In 1977 he became a signatory to the famous humanitarian Charter 77.<sup>48</sup>

Václav Černý apparently considered French Existentialism to be the most important literary current in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; “the summit of literary evolution before and after the Second World War.”<sup>49</sup> In 1948, he published his *First Workbook on Existentialism* and later that year had prepared the second, which was blacklisted by the incoming Communist government. The *First and Second Workbooks on Existentialism* are by no means a complete systematic analysis of the French ideas, but nevertheless comprise a coherent study and the only one of its kind published in Czechoslovakia.

In the first workbook, Černý sought to introduce the Czechs to the basics of Existentialism. Although he closely agreed with and followed Existential thinking, he did not think it was anything new, but rather was the articulation of a long-held deep European sentiment. The war had been the impetus for its consolidation and expression:

Existentialism... is a sort of re-interpretation process of a long matured underground modern soul... in European collective subconscious. The wars were but a time of maturation, final concentration and expression: for it is in moments of supreme suffering and facing the worst

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<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> Lucie Bergerova, *Ibid.* 5.

of uncertainty outside the body, that Man is led most passionately back to himself. For a person thinking historically, Existentialism is therefore not surprising.<sup>50</sup>

Indeed it was evident that the French Existentialists were products of their time and circumstances, as well as the work of those who came before them. But Černý felt their work was nevertheless invaluable as it gave form and articulation to these sentiments. In his first Workbook he analytically interrogated the main ideas of Existentialism and strove to make it relevant in the Czech context:

It is a valid philosophy to the extent that I encountered such a sentiment and phenomenon during the war, at which point I didn't yet know about the work of the French Existentialists and had no opportunity to learn about it. [Yet now that I see their work], I can do more than just formulate their views - with their themes and issues... [I see that I am] at least good for something: that is, to run with these ideas and create [an Existential Workbook] now in Czech phraseology [in order to explain the] language of Existentialism; the task has come naturally to me.<sup>51</sup>

Černý also accepts the Existential idea of the subjectivity of truth; any attempts to describe the world universally or rationally are absurd: “meanings are attributed to the world, but the meanings are mine, inserted by me, my interpretation: the world does not interpret itself, it's just me in it, based on my understanding of it as my home.”<sup>52</sup> This idea was controversial in France as well as Czechoslovakia, where a brief booklet, *Existencialismus není Humanismus* (Existentialism is not a Humanism), was published in response to Jean Paul Sartre's work of a similar title: *Existentialism is a Humanism*. The authors of this critical work believed that Existentialism was a pessimistic and rabidly individualistic philosophy, which led to concern only for oneself and to an abandonment of social action, and is therefore incompatible with humanism or socialism.<sup>53</sup> Yet Černý agreed with Sartre's conclusions, countering criticisms that the Existentialists were selfishly promoting their own worldview: “Existentialism is said to be representative of the personality of its Existentialists. This should not surprise anyone considering that Existentialism is a philosophy of experience, and not some universal discourse that has based on the subjective reality of life, that is something supremely

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<sup>50</sup> Václav Černý, *Ibid.* 74.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> Václav Černý, *Ibid.* 34.

<sup>53</sup> Vlasta Tatjana Miškovská, *Existencialismus není Humanismus* (Prague: Kostnická jednota, 1948), p. 1.

personal.”<sup>54</sup> A philosophy of experience was, to Černý and the Existentialists, the only relevant way to conceive of reality. Existence is interpreted by Václav Černý as a new type of realism: the realism of human life and existence, the realism of Man, individual, isolated, and alone. One is situated in his time, born into a situation without a choice; his era, society, family, etc., create a specific world for him. According to Černý, our understanding is conditioned by our circumstances, therefore understanding is subjective; we can understand and interpret things uniquely, but this does not mean it is invalid.<sup>55</sup>

He thought of the plays of Sartre and Camus not as concrete manifestos but as examples or models of what an absurd life or circumstances might look like. He defended the absurd themes in Camus's book *The Plague*: “If life is absurd, and it is irreparably, then what else can be the first act of human wisdom than to acknowledge what is irreparable - recognize and make it his, owning his tragic and hopeless fate? Thus one accepts their absurd fate, but accepts it under protest, because he does not have a choice.” Černý believed that it was anxiety, the “substance of the absurd,” which kept the Existentialist accountable to humanity. When one acts, as Sartre would say, “in bad faith,” he experiences anxiety; thus anxiety keeps us responsible for what problems we create or for what we neglect to take action.

In the second *Workbook*, Černý made an *ex post facto* analysis of Protectorate Czech poetry with an aim to highlight the presence of similar “Existential” themes. His goal was essentially to underline the applicability and importance of the philosophy by showing its relevance in the Czech case. Černý sees the most striking example of Czech “existentialism” from the Protectorate period in, for example, the verse of the poet Jiri Orten, and even pays attention to poets such as Hanus Bonn, Kamil Cooper, Blatný, Kainar, Hiršal, Mikulasek or Valya.<sup>56</sup> He selects elements of their poetry to display the presence of these themes for the reader. This task is however controversially “un-Existentialist.” Jiří

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<sup>54</sup> Václav Černý, *Ibid.* 33.

<sup>55</sup> Lucie Bergerova, *Ibid.* 34.

<sup>56</sup> Jiří Pechar, *Lze Mluvit v české literatuře o existencialismu?* (Palacky University Faculty of Philosophy, 2008), p. 2 <http://www.ucl.cas.cz/edicee/data/sborniky/2008/SMVII/19.pdf>

Pechar argues that because Sartre outlined his distinction between prose writers as philosophers and poets as artists, Černý's attempt to identify these poets as some type of Czech Existentialists was likely misguided. This distinction will be analyzed next. On the other hand, if one looks more toward Albert Camus's conception of the absurd, the elements he highlights as important from the Protectorate-era poetry are more in line with this version of Existentialism.

### *Sartre on the philosophy of literature*

Sartre's famous book *What is Literature?* appears to have been one of the most influential non-fiction Existential works for the literary milieu of Czechoslovakia.<sup>57</sup> Written in French in 1947, he would even write a letter to the Czechs about the topic, published in *Literární Noviny*.<sup>58</sup> In this essay, Sartre articulated his philosophical conception of the relation of an author to his time and his work. In the work he distinguishes, as I mentioned, between poetry and prose: the former is an artistic enterprise and the second is philosophical. This is because poetry, which Sartre felt had been overwhelming and diluting the contemporary literary output, essentially only plays with language and "serves" it without any specific goal. The poet selects his words with different criteria than the prose writer, perhaps trying to find those that rhyme or add color or beauty, whereas the prose writer must carefully and meaningfully select words for impact.<sup>59</sup>

Prose is, in essence, utilitarian. I would readily define the prose-writer as a man who *makes use of words*. M. Jourdan made prose to ask for his slippers, and Hitler to declare war on Poland. The writer is a *speaker*; he designates, demonstrates, orders, refuses, interpolates, begs, insults, persuades, insinuates... To speak is to act."<sup>60</sup>

The prose writer necessarily takes a stance on his world and his circumstances when he elucidates his reality. And in so far as Sartre aligns this idea with his Existential conception of reality, he therefore believes that the author's duty is to write to his personal circumstances and his own time, instead of

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<sup>57</sup> Jean Paul Sartre, *What is Literature?* Translated from French by: Bernard Frechtman, (New York: Philosophical Library, 1950).

<sup>58</sup> In the years immediately after the war, *Literární Noviny* was a dedicated literary journal; by the fifties and sixties would become more of an intellectual newspaper and discussion forum. Jean Paul Sartre, "Spisovatel a doba" in *Literární Noviny*. Year 16, Numbers 3-4, March-April 1947.

<sup>59</sup> Jean Paul Sartre, *What is Literature?* *Ibid.* 12.

<sup>60</sup> Jean Paul Sartre, *What is Literature?* *Ibid.* 18-21.

trying to divine the future or making universal statements, since no idea is immutable. This has a very Hegelian Dialectical ring to it, but it echoes more with Sartre's basic Existential precept that man cannot be immortal, no idea exists forever; therefore man can only focus on his present reality.<sup>61</sup>

On the one hand, as a devoted literary critic, philological concerns such as language choice were matters that would have resonated with Václav Černý. Perhaps Sartre's distinction would have alienated Černý, unlike Camus's more general existential theory of the absurd, which was a theme that echoed throughout both literary and artistic works. In the 1940s, Václav Černý was more concerned with the works of Jean Paul Sartre; it was not until the eighties that he would turn more toward Albert Camus and his moral of the absurd.<sup>62</sup>

This delineation between poetry and prose, however, spoke volumes to the literary figures of the Writers Union in the sixties in Czechoslovakia, many of who were prose writers, such as Milan Kundera and Ivan Svitak, and therefore envisioned themselves as philosophers. In the new context that would come, reaction against Stalinism was the impetus behind their direct "speech acts."<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Jean Paul Sartre, "Spisovatel a doba," *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> Lucie Bergerova, *Ibid.* 32.

<sup>63</sup> I refer to the theory of Quentin Skinner, who believed that the value of a speech comes from its intended, not necessarily actual, impact. This idea resonates with Sartre's definition of the philosophical weight of prose writing. Both are relevant in an analysis of the 1960s literary directions.

## Chapter 3: Existentialism's Literary Reception 1956-1968

Between 1948 and the 1960s, Czechoslovakia would experience Stalinism. The new state direction limited creative output, dictating the form and substance of literary work. Yet Igor Hajek highlights the fact that the coming of communism and socialist realism was not a complete surprise, that the seeds of its form were laying in Czech society: "What happened to Czech literature in 1948 is sometimes presented as an enforcement of an alien tradition, one imported from outside. This is only partly true. A sizeable group of communist writers and left-wing sympathizers had been close to socialist realism at least since... the 1930s. It might not have been accepted by them as a binding doctrine, but not all writers rejected it outright." There was also widespread admiration for the work of old Slavic and the newer Soviet writers: "A part of the intellectual community had thus been conditioned well in advance for the adoption of the Soviet model." Another conditioning factor was the existence of the tradition that demanded that the Czech writer should "speak in all ways to the nation."<sup>64</sup>

### *Stalinism and Censorship*

This initial optimism for communism cannot be interpreted anachronistically as an enthusiasm for Stalinism. As Hajek has emphasized some of the more benign factors in the decision to embrace the Soviets, including perhaps most notably the last rather communitarian and humanistic goal to "speak... to the nation," the reality was that many Czechoslovak intellectuals envisioned a more positive change than the reality of what occurred:

Many writers were seduced by reference to national tradition to accept that commitment to society was the same as commitment to socialism... In this way, both creative imagination and independent social criticism were obliterated. Literature, which had been free under the First Republic and again in the post-war years, was henceforth split asunder into literature which was officially published (but had to follow conventional content and formatting), exile literature which was published abroad, and independent literature circled at home in samizdat. The consequences were momentous... the communists turned the written word into an instrument of propaganda and whatever was unsuitable for the dissemination of a militant ideological message... was discarded... Quite a few authors believed that they were

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<sup>64</sup> Igor Hajek, "Traditions of Czech Literature" in *Czechoslovakia, 1918-1988*. Ed. Gordon Skilling (New York: St. Martins Press, 1991), p. 181.

following a time-honored tradition when they embraced the normative aesthetics and ideology of socialist realism.”<sup>65</sup>

Censorship was the chronic plague affecting the writers and artists of Communist Czechoslovakia. Even though pressure would lift in the sixties: “despite a temporary setback at the end of the [1950s], more liberal attitudes were gaining ground and the 1960s saw the rapid advance of a multifarious literature not unlike that in the 1930s,” it was still an omnipresent reality around which the writers had to work:

The demand for a committed socialist literature meant that anything at all different from this, let alone opposed to it, was attacked and prohibited... Allegorical statements describing reality in a secret code of vague hints and absurdities—these were tolerated, albeit with no enthusiasm. But any overt discussion or documentary evidence was denounced as hostile thinking... [and it was effective because] the authorities, after all, held all the reins of financial and publishing policy in their hands; they were in a position to influence not only what the writers wrote, but how much they ate.”<sup>66</sup>

By the end of the fifties, the writers were beginning to challenge the customary socialist realist style, hoping that they could forward socialism with different artistic conventions. Yet the reality was that censorship in Czechoslovakia was considerably milder than elsewhere in the Soviet Union:

Our censors were in fact a great deal less interested in purely literary matters... the works of Franz Kafka, Albert Camus, Eugene Ionesco and their followers in Czechoslovakia, all representatives of rotten, degenerate bourgeois pseudo-art’, made little impression on the eagle-eyed guardians of socialist doctrine as long as there was no intrusion into public affairs. To this extent the policies of the Party Centre were genuinely liberal—and were indeed regarded as highly blasphemous by the still more dogmatic guardians of thought in, for example... the GDR.”<sup>67</sup>

This more lax censorship would pave the way for the opening of cultural and artistic production in the sixties.

### *The creative opening in the sixties*

After Khrushchev denounced Stalin’s crimes in 1956, the infallible image of the Party was undermined. Across the Soviet Bloc, people fundamentally questioned the system and ideology to which had been subscribing and began to discuss reform alternatives. In Czechoslovakia, the debate

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<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> Dušan Hamšík, *Writers Against Rulers*. (London: Hutchinson, 1971) p. 33.

<sup>67</sup> Dušan Hamšík, *Ibid.* 95.

was slower to take on beyond the groundbreaking work of a few central philosophers; it wasn't until the *Slansky Trials* were revealed to have been show trials in 1963 that the bulk of Czechoslovakia's intellectuals were also substantially launched into this "existential crisis."<sup>68</sup>

The common goal of all those involved in the Spring was the general "renaissance of Marxist philosophy," to "subjectify" the individual that had been objectified under Marxist-Leninism for so long. If the spirit of existentialism's first intrusion into Czech debate was closely linked to the post-war vacuum, its later manifestation had an alternate significance, directing itself against the Stalinism that had censored and reduced its creative development to ideological banter. Karel Kosík highlighted the "cross fertilization between literature, art, and philosophy, [joined together] and focused its attention on existential human problems, and the common denominator was the question: What is man?"<sup>69</sup>

This was directly inspired by a reinvigorated exploration into existential philosophy: "between the end of the 1950s and the middle of the 60s.... plays were staged and books by Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Franz Kafka, Eugene Ionescu were read, and when new interest was shown in Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Husserl."<sup>70</sup> The artistic and intellectual output in this time period drew

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<sup>68</sup> Slansky Trials: a Stalinist show trial in Czechoslovakia. On 20 November 1952, Rudolf Slánský, General Secretary of the KSČ, and thirteen other Communists, eleven of which were Jewish, were accused of participating in a Trotskyite-Titoite-Zionist conspiracy and convicted. Eleven, including Slánský, were hung in Prague on December 3, 1952. Three were sentenced to life imprisonment.

<sup>69</sup> "Karel Kosík," in *Politics of Culture*, *Ibid.* 398.

<sup>70</sup> Vladimir Kusin, *The Intellectual Origins of the Prague Spring*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, July 18, 2002.) 49-- To attempt to map the extent to which these books were published, when they were published, and who had translated and/or provided commentary for the publications, I tracked the translations and editions of the works of the three main French existentialists: Jean Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Simone de Beauvoir.

This matrix highlighted a few important details: first, it gives us a timeline of what was considered important when—you can see, for example, in the early sixties that there was a boom in the translation of plays. Second, there are some books or plays that were republished or put into a collection for more widespread audience access, perhaps due to their controversiality or their popularity (specifically Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex* (a controversial work; a second edition was published that featured responses from key intellectuals) and Camus's *Stranger* (the first edition was published in 1948 so a new edition was published with updated commentary to the contemporary situation). Finally, we are able to trace the involvement of some of our key intellectuals, who were translating and/or writing the official published commentary on the works (e.g., A.J. Liehm, Ivan Sviták, and Jan Patočka are the most important names, in descending order of translation/commentating involvement).

But these translations were seemingly for the benefit of a larger audience, as many of the foremost

inspiration from these existential figures and leveraged it in a new direction to undermine the objectifying tendencies of socialist realism and the dialectic and promote a Czech version of Marxist Humanism.

According to Vladimir Kusin, the period of criticism began in the second half of the fifties as “old theorems which stipulated the only true way of philosophizing were collapsing.” Czech philosophers did not limit themselves merely to academic debating, but set to rectify the political ills their philosophizing unraveled by attacking the status quo government and bureaucracy.<sup>71</sup> Kosík, in his contribution to Antonin Liehm's *Politics of Culture*, takes this explanation further:

The fundamental reality of Czech culture did not consist of subtle political allusions nor explicit criticism of the political situation nor of veiled attacks on government leaders. Those were superficial, ephemeral things. The real, fundamental polemic of our culture lay in the fact that against the official concept of Man it put forth an entirely different concept of its own. Thus, our culture attacked the ruling bureaucratic regime not in its secondary aspects, but in its very core and essence.<sup>72</sup>

Sviták underlined the necessary openness of a proper philosophical system, one that must be constantly evolving and hold man's liberty above all else. The question of man's personal quest for meaning was to be integrated fundamentally into any new state philosophy.

In line with the Marxist Revisionism and de-Stalinization of the day, around the 60s there was a reinvigorated interest in anthropology, defined most loosely as “the study of Man.” Yet for intellectuals and especially the characteristically philosophically minded milieu of the Czech scene, this seemed to have more of a metaphysical significance than an ethnic or scientific conception of anthropology. The goal was not to determine how ancient peoples lived or structured society; rather, they sought to strip away the layers of the modern man and determine his metaphysical, fundamental, core being.

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intellectuals could speak French already and were able to read what was published in French directly, and ultimately having influence over what would be eventually brought to the Czechoslovak audience as they were the translators. A.J. Liehm's influence and position cannot be overstated enough. For a comprehensive listing of the works and their translation data, please see Appendix.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> “Karel Kosík” in *Politics of Culture*, *Ibid.* 398.

## Kafka

The metaphysical feeling of alienation that is so fundamental to Existentialism was perhaps one of its most distinguishing characteristics. In the Czech case, this trait that was often described as “Kafkaesque.”<sup>73</sup> According to Liehm, the ‘Kafkaesque’ became a Czech idiom even before the first volume of Kafka’s collected works was published:

‘People had never even heard of *The Trial*, *The Castle*, or *Metamorphosis*, but now, when they got together in their offices or shops or in the street and confronted man’s complete alienation and the way they were all manipulated by society in their daily lives, they would cast up their eyes and confide in a whisper to the first stranger they met, ‘This is just like Kafka!’<sup>74</sup>

Despite his Prague roots, the German-speaking author’s works had been lost and for a time banned on the grounds of Kafka’s supposed fascist-capitalist leanings. It was incidentally the French existentialist Jean Paul Sartre who was a key player in his rehabilitation; in 1962 Sartre appealed to the Soviets to allow these works of Czech heritage to re-emerge.<sup>75</sup> Yet, the debate on Kafka climaxed at the Liblice Conference held in 1963 to discuss and promote Kafka’s rehabilitation. Led by Edward Goldstucker, the participants included intellectuals from across Europe, including the translators of Kafka’s works and intellectual figureheads of the period. Participants varied in their reasons for rehabilitating Kafka, which ranged from simply enabling an important piece of world literature to analyzing his work historically, or most importantly, analyzing its contemporary significance.

Kafka’s allegorical themes, which presaged those of the existential movement, appealed to the intellectuals of the sixties as well as informed the French existential movement itself. In Prague, those intellectuals following existentialism could not ignore the parallels between Kafka’s voice and the philosophy’s tenets. Though he did not produce any direct philosophical treatise himself, his books, primarily *The Trial* and *The Castle* depict a certain relationship between the individual, his environment, and his search for meaning.

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<sup>73</sup> Steven Dowden, *Kafka’s Castle and the Critical Imagination*. (London: Campden Books. 1995) p. 66.

<sup>74</sup> J. Hoberman, *The Red Atlantis: Communist Culture in the Absence of Communism*. (Temple University Press, March 1, 2000.) p. 136.

<sup>75</sup> Steven Dowden, *Ibid.* 66.

Kafka's works notoriously dealt with alienated characters that were victims to an omnipotent and authoritarian force against which they had to struggle for their existence. Although Kafka originally wrote in the early twentieth century (his last work, *The Castle*, was published in 1925), when Kafka's works re-emerged in 1963, many Czechs believed Kafka's worlds to be stunningly relevant to their contemporary situation. Khrushchev's revelations, coupled with the sterile Socialist Realist style, made life seem absurd; man, in the face of this absurdity, could only attempt to resist it and thus to remain true to himself. Kafka's alienation, interpreted in its modern setting, was identified as "an expression of man's refusal to identify himself with the political structure of his state."<sup>76</sup>

One such figure, Ivan Sviták, was one of the most central Czech intellectuals of the time. He was closely acquainted with the work of the French Existentialists, from which he even drew inspiration for his own political philosophy, writing many essays published as the forewords to their translations.<sup>77</sup> He had also compiled an anthology on Camus.<sup>78</sup> At the Liblice conference, he contributed his own analysis of Kafka as an existential philosopher.

Sviták's analysis reveals perhaps more about the philosophical directions of the sixties than it does about Kafka. Heinz Politzer, one of Kafka's most famous critics, once wrote that Kafka's works are "like a Rorschach test: they reveal not Kafka's meaning but the thoughts and predispositions of the critic." That is to say, it is not that Kafka's works have diverse literary interpretations but rather that the significance of his work can mean different things in different cultural and temporal contexts. Kafka was widely popular across the world at this time period, but indeed the Czech interpretation was distinct to their particular political and cultural context and the presence of a clear enemy: the state.

Anthropology is an important theme in Sviták's analysis, which in many ways was an anthropological investigation, in so far as it required an investigation of a man (in this case, Kafka) who existed before

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<sup>76</sup> Vladimír Kusin, *Ibid.* 65.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> Ivan Sviták. *Absurdni Rebel: Camus* (a group of essays on Camus that Sviták had collected sometime between 1956-1962).

Sviták's time, with an aim to elucidating the common human elements. To Svíták, Kafka was not evidence of a past being, but rather tragic evidence of the situation of present man.<sup>79</sup>

Kafka's subject matter is not the only important contribution; his writing style stood as an alternative to realism as well as modernism, emphasizing the complexities of human nature in alien circumstances. Eduard Goldstucker later remarked on the significance of Kafka and the conference's contribution to the cultural movements of the era: "conventional [Stalinist] literary means were incapable of expressing the complex situation created by the history of our era. [Socialist] Realism, as we have inherited it, has shown its inability to capture the essence of reality by describing its superficial manifestations."<sup>80</sup> In contrast to the state's realism, "Kafka created a literary method based on the principle of doubting the authenticity of reality as it is presented to us... if we want the truth we must penetrate behind the facade."<sup>81</sup>

Sviták begins his essay, "Kafka- filosof," in sync with Goldstucker's opinion of Kafka's distinction from socialist realism, which was not able to consider the "inner development" of man and the potential role of the individual in history, because it was so focused on a material-economic interpretation of historical change. In Svíták's opinion, Kafka's writing breaks with modern trends, heralding a transformation of modern literature from "stable realism" to a mélange of "frightful," "ridiculous," "untrue" or "false" human themes. While these elements dwell on the dark, perhaps imperfect, psychology of man, they offered a more precise explanation of people's lives.<sup>82</sup>

Yet, the similarities end here. Goldstucker does not consider Kafka a philosopher, but rather merely an "artist." This debate harkens back to Sartre's distinction between the two; Svíták aligns with Sartre on this matter, in so far as Kafka is the "guarantor" of his depicted world, and not an objective

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<sup>79</sup> Ivan Svíták, "Kafka filosof" in *Franz Kafka: liblická konference 1963*. (Praha : Nakladatelství Československé akademie věd, 1963) p. 95.

<sup>80</sup> "Eduard Goldstucker," in *Politics of Culture*, *Ibid.* 284.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> Ivan Svíták, "Kafka filosof" *Ibid.* 85.

observer, he assumes the role of a philosopher, “whether he likes it or not.”<sup>83</sup> Literature, to Sviták, was at its essence philosophical because the author had to implicitly take a stance on human nature and circumstances when he tried to present the world through his lens.

Sviták believed that Kafka’s work was Existentialist, but was in some ways distinct from the French variety. The French Existentialists seemed to Sviták to focus more on the individual, but to the Czechs Kafka rendered a concrete portrayal of an individual’s struggles in a hostile environment.<sup>84</sup> Beyond this basic distinction, Sviták believed that Kafka’s philosophy shared with existentialism three main tenets: subjectivity of the truth; personal experience of the man in his “existential” crisis situation; and the nature of the work, which includes “fantasy” (Kafka’s hyperbolic accentuation of the absurd) and “code” (what Goldstucker calls Kafka’s “nonrealism;” that is, his literary portrayal of deeper psychological and human themes).<sup>85</sup>

The first tenet in common with Existentialism is the subjectivity of the truth. Sviták believed that writers like Kafka “seek to reach the substance of man and witness it.”<sup>86</sup> Kafka’s Man is a tragic being in all of his humanness, distanced from the world in its current state as a totality of empirical things.<sup>87</sup> According to Sviták, Kafka stresses that the essence of being is our possibility of choice. Man’s nature is not based on rational knowledge. He does not judge reality; he *creates* reality as his fiction and gives to it uniqueness. Man can only control his own self and not the greater world around him.

To Sviták, the quintessential moment of choice comes when man experiences his border or crisis situation in which he confronts the contradictions of human existence: “Man himself is a mystery; he never knows who he is and never is what he thinks he is.”<sup>88</sup> Through Kafka’s characters’ struggles one sees the struggles of Man. Kafka, who charts perhaps his own discoveries in his novels, is a living

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<sup>83</sup> Ivan Sviták, “Kafka filosof” *Ibid.* 93.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> Ivan Sviták, “Kafka filosof” *Ibid.* 94.

<sup>87</sup> Ivan Sviták, “Kafka filosof” *Ibid.* 95

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

existence, an “original” man, a discoverer of the meaning of his Being.<sup>89</sup> The answer to the difficulty of existence that Existentialism gives us is the “process” of living, not some Dialectical or Positivistic teleological endpoint. Kafka apparently understands life as a tension between meaning and absurdity, happiness (fortune) and misfortune, reality and desire, misery and hopelessness; all of these elements comprise total existence.<sup>90</sup>

Further, Sviták explores how Kafka incorporated imagination (*fantazie*) into his philosophy, which serves an important anthropological-philosophical purpose. Typically, imagination and fantasy are considered as limits to cognition and knowledge and antithetical to reason. However, Sviták in a way believed in a new epistemology in which not only a strictly scientific tool kit would be used (based on reason), but it would also incorporate less “rational” tools such as intuition, empathy, or imagination, which would lead to a more complex picture of man and society. He considered fantasy to therefore be a valuable analytical tool in so far as it is an anthropological constant; to deny the value of the absurd imagination is to reject the human element. “Kafka,” he writes, is “most realistic in the absurdity of his fantasy.”<sup>91</sup> The fact that Kafka’s fantastic worlds do not literally reflect reality does not undermine their significance.

Kafka is described as an author who depicts Man “encountering his existence.” His writing style is also a form of “code.” The third motive that connected Kafka’s work with existentialism (according to Sviták) was the “code” in which it is written, which Sviták defines as the medium of portraying secrecy and transcendence (something unknown, strange, and perhaps all powerful like God). The transcendent is something we can neither understand nor express (i.e. the totality of the world). This conception of literary style seems to connect more with Camus’ idea of the “absurd” than with Sartre’s early definition of prose. This absurd style is important because it is subjective and allows precisely this intrusion of fantasy and man’s attempt to connect to the transcendent. Kafka’s reality

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<sup>89</sup> Ivan Sviták, “Kafka filosof” *Ibid.* 96.

<sup>90</sup> Ivan Sviták, “Kafka filosof” *Ibid.* 96.

<sup>91</sup> Ivan Sviták, “Kafka filosof” *Ibid.* 93.

is not reality of the facts, it is more a composition of facts, ideas, and dreams. Kafka's work fluctuates between phenomenon and reality, between abstract and concrete, between existence and extinction.<sup>92</sup> Kafka's world is not whole, he pictures his world in fragments and pieces and details. This is because the real human cannot see the world in its totality.

The French Existentialists also looked to Kafka as an icon. The theme of Kafka facing an alienated world and struggling as an alienated being is re-echoed in Camus's analysis of the allegory of Sisyphus (which was an essay that Sviták had read). Sisyphus is condemned by the Greek gods to roll a rock up a hill for the rest of time. Every time he makes it to the top of the hill, he is for a moment cognizant of his fate and despairs. It is in the process of pushing that, engaged in the struggle, Sisyphus finds (temporary) meaning. Man's journey through his life's "ups and downs" are the point of our existence; Kafka also struggles metaphorically up a hill, but we should not be alarmed by the lack of a cathartic ending; Camus would suggest that the struggle itself, although it lacks a catharsis, is the point of life.

This is why Camus identifies Kafka as an Existentialist: one of his main characters, the land surveyor K. in *The Castle*, is hopeful despite the futility of his absurd predicament, continuing to metaphorically 'push the rock up the hill.'<sup>93</sup> The absurd is defined by a constant struggle between our desire for meaning in the face of the meaningless void that we encounter. Camus suggests that we can only be authentic so long as we continue to struggle.

On the other hand, the tone of Sviták's analysis itself has more in common with that of Jean Paul Sartre than Camus's, who also tried to reconcile Existentialism with Marxist Humanism. Despite Sartre's contemporary efforts to achieve such a synthesis, many remained unconvinced of Existentialism's compatibility, namely Camus himself. In so far as Existentialism is adverse to any form of compromise, one cannot install a political system that establishes any type of laws or values

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<sup>92</sup> Ivan Sviták, "Kafka filosof" *Ibid.* 94.

<sup>93</sup> Albert Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* (Vintage, 1991).

as the truth that would trump subjective truths and goals. One cannot live authentically if he/she has to make compromises. To Sartre, this is to live in “bad faith.”

The point is not to suggest that Kafka was anachronistically influenced by the Existentialists, but rather that some were reading his motives as existentialist in nature and selecting these themes for further inquiry. And Kafka's was not the only work of Czech artistic heritage that was being dissected and interpreted by the era's philosophers.

### Milan Kundera: *The Art of the Novel* and his Fourth Writer's Congress Speech on Czech Existence

Milan Kundera is perhaps one of the most internationally-known authors from Czechoslovakia, as he was published prolifically in the West following his immigration to Paris in 1970 following the Soviet coup. Yet before his exile, he was an influential intellectual who worked as a Literature professor at Charles University and on the editorial board of *Literární Noviny* in the sixties.<sup>94</sup> Kundera was described by his *Literární Noviny* colleague Dusan Hamsik as “much influenced by Sartre,” references to whom appear in his prosaic works and whose themes resound in his fiction and famous 1962 play, *The Keepers of the Keys*. According to his interview with Antonin Liehm, Kundera met and continued to revere Sartre throughout the sixties, although Sartre's popularity was waning abroad (for his preoccupation with “man-in-history,” Kundera thinks that actually Sartre was more relevant in the sixties than ever). Kundera remarked that Sartre's play *No Exit* (which he saw in 1947 in Brno) served as his “last great memory of the ‘rejected world’” throughout the period of the “socialist-realist quarantine.”

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<sup>94</sup> *Literární Noviny* offers a “fascinating cross-section and mirror[s] the total state of society... at that time... [It] was the only paper, apart from the Slovak *Kulturný Život*, that the powers-that-be had not managed to get under their control, officially or otherwise.” It was “sentenced to death” in September of 1967 after it succumbed to the censorship committee before resuming the next March (1968) as *Literární Listy* with the same board and same editors, publishing with no censorship but it lasted only until the Soviet occupation in August. During the peak of its publishing years in the sixties, it had a circulation of 130,000 (significant “in such a small country”), and the “newspaper every Thursday was sold out in two hours.” From Dušan Hamšík, *Ibid.*

Sartre's influence would visibly impact Kundera's work, starting with Kundera's own prosaic and quasi-philosophical work in *The Art of the Novel*. In his book, Kundera articulates his theory of literature as philosophy and its stages of development, which mirror the greater European periods of crisis and self-reflection. He starts by examining that which Sartre (and Heidegger before him) articulated about the turnover in the traditional link between essence and existence in metaphysics (essence precedes existence has now been changed to existence precedes essence). This is of course linked with the "death of God:"

As God slowly departed from the seat whence he had directed the universe and its order of values, distinguished good from evil, and endowed each thing with meaning, Don Quixote set forth from his house into a world he could no longer recognize. In the absence of the Supreme Judge, the world suddenly appeared in its fearsome ambiguity; the single divine Truth decomposed into myriad relative truths parceled out by men. Thus was born the world of the Modern Era, and with it the novel, the image and model of that world.<sup>95</sup>

Here Kundera acknowledges the reality of subjective truth, which he argues is what has precipitated the creation of the novel. Without this fundamental Existential discovery, literature would not be possible. And like Svítak, he seems to insinuate that the author is a philosopher of sorts. Kundera believes that human nature is reflected in an author's attempt to portray the world:

Man desires a world where good and evil can be clearly distinguished, for he has an innate and irrepressible desire to judge before he understands. Religions and ideologies are founded on this desire. They can cope with the novel only by translating its language of relativity and ambiguity into their own apodictic and dogmatic discourse. They require that someone be right: either Anna Karenina is the victim of a narrow-minded tyrant, or Karenin is the victim of an immoral woman; either K. is an innocent man crushed by an unjust Court, or the Court represents divine justice and K. is guilty. This "either-or" encapsulates an inability to tolerate the essential relativity of things human, an inability to look squarely at the absence of the Supreme Judge. This inability makes the novel's wisdom (the wisdom of uncertainty) hard to accept and understand.<sup>96</sup>

Kundera implicitly advocates a more nuanced and less dogmatic style that embraces the subjective nature of the world. Yet he lambasts those who are unable to appreciate the subjectivity of the novel and seek dogmatic discourses instead. Furthermore, the influence of Kafka in his work, *The Art of the Novel* is palpable. Throughout his examples of European literature, Eastern and Western, Kundera

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<sup>95</sup> Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, Tr. Linda Asher (Grove Press, 1988). p. 6.

<sup>96</sup> Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, *Ibid.* 7.

repeatedly uses the juxtaposition of “land surveyors” (from *The Castle*) and “K” (from *The Trial*) to represent interpretations that reduce a conception of Man to his position in society.

This conception of Man and his relation to the world also mirrors Existential themes: according to Kundera, there were two past conceptions of Man: Man grappling with his Self and Man grappling with his circumstances:

The time was past when man had only the monster of his own soul to grapple with, the peaceful time of Joyce and Proust. In the novels of Kafka, Hašek, Musil, Broch, the monster comes from outside and is called History; it no longer has anything to do with the train the adventurers used to ride; it is impersonal, uncontrollable, incalculable, incomprehensible and it is inescapable. This was the moment (just after the First World War) when the pleiad of great Central European novelists saw, felt, grasped the terminal paradoxes of the Modern Era.<sup>97</sup>

In Kundera’s present, man was in a third stage: unable to reconcile the two prior conceptions as he is coming up against limits and barriers. This alludes directly to the difficulties of a writer in the Czechoslovak situation; but also the difficulties of the Existential Being.

#### *Fourth Writer’s Congress Speech and Kundera’s Existential Conception of Czech History*

Milan Kundera’s Existentially-impacted view of history permeated his narrative of Czech history. According to Kundera, since the nineteenth century Revival, the Czech nation has been occupied with the fundamental question of their own “existence:”

There has never been anything self-evident about the existence of the Czech nation and one of its most distinctive traits, in fact, has been the unobviousness of that existence... This emerged most clearly in the early nineteenth century when a handful of intellectuals tried to resurrect our half-forgotten language and then, a generation later, our half moribund people too. The Revivalists faced a decision: to go the easy way and melt into a larger nation, or to strike out on their own. Thus the questions: ‘to be or not to be? And if so, why?’ Was built into the very foundation of modern Czech history. When the men of the revival opted for ‘to be,’ this was a great challenge to the future. It now fell to the nation to justify their choice in the course of its own history.<sup>98</sup>

Kundera has established a historical continuity with earlier nationalist conceptions of the Czech state, which was fragile in its historic attempts to remain autonomous. This sentiment is not new, but the

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<sup>97</sup> Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, 8.

<sup>98</sup> “Speeches made at the Fourth Congress of the Czechoslovak Writer’s Union June 27-9, 1967: Milan Kundera” in Dušan Hamšík, *Ibid.* 169.

manner by which it is articulated has changed. “Existence” is a concept that had a contemporary political significance that alluded more to Existentialism than the same mindset of those early Czech nationalists. Kundera weds this sixties conception of culture being the crux of a state’s essence with Existentialism: the strength of state’s distinct cultural autonomy determines its right to exist. Existence is not a fundamental right but must be asserted:

Was the cultural worth of the Czechs great enough to justify their existence as a nation?... The men of the Revival saw the nation’s existence as dependent on those cultural values which the nation might create. They measured these values, moreover, not in terms of their direct utility to the nation alone but by the criteria of universal humanity. Is the belief of the Revivalists any less true today, that the nation’s existence cannot be guaranteed without solid cultural values?<sup>99</sup>

The concept “existence” is a loaded term that seems to allude to the cornerstone of Sartre’s philosophical creed: “existence precedes essence,” which reverses the traditional philosophical view (in metaphysics) that there is a fundamental and immutable nature of things (e.g. Platonic form), whether they are manifested in a tangible existence or not. To Sartre, Man (or in this case, Nation) creates their own values and asserts their own identity as a distinct and unique being. Here Kundera implicitly assumes a philosophical stance that aligns with Sartre: if Kundera thought that the nation’s essence was a fixed and fundamental thing, he would not be worried about its corruption or disappearance. Instead, the Czech nation exists and it must be fundamentally built upon cultural contributions and kept protected from corrupting influence or sequestration, in this case by the Soviet government but historically also by the Nazis or Austro-Hungarian occupiers. This conception of the Czech state as a fragile entity susceptible to corruption and annihilation is heavily loaded with existentialist influence.

### **Patočka: French Existentialism and Simone de Beauvoir’s *Second Sex***

Patočka also contributed another essay to the debate on Existentialism in the foreword he wrote to Simone de Beauvoir’s *Second Sex*, which was controversial abroad as well as in Czechoslovakia, where it inspired a weeks-long debate between such figures as Svitak and Patočka himself. In the

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<sup>99</sup> *Ibid*, 170.

foreword, Patočka begins by focusing on the German roots of the French philosophy, describing Sartre's studies of German philosophers; during his studies in Berlin, Sartre would encounter Husserl's philosophy in particular. Unsurprisingly, Patočka, a devout follower of Husserl, found this to be the "most important years in Sartre's intellectual development."<sup>100</sup> According to Patočka, Sartre's contribution to the field would be his style; French philosophy is more "artistic" and beautiful than the straightforward and scholastic German structure. Sartre tried to show Husserl and Heidegger's thoughts through novels and essays and thus he was able to express new things by using German *Existenzphilosophie* through the French "artistic" (and less "stiff") academic style.<sup>101</sup> At the same time, Sartre's Existential analysis is a deep moral psychoanalysis (Patočka called it "existential psychoanalysis"). More than the seeker of the "ontology of existence," Sartre is a "phenomenologist of the morally destroyed life of bourgeois society."<sup>102</sup>

In all these themes the closest person to the Sartre's point of view was Simone de Beauvoir. The main topic of Beauvoir's work was the dualism of individuals. According to Patočka she combined the "concreteness" of life with "drastic abstractness" to show philosophy in real life; she wanted to create a "living philosophy" in the spirit of Marxism.<sup>103</sup> The main feature of her writings was the contradiction between the people's desire for "absoluteness" and their real, limited and finite existence. The inequality between men and women presented such a barrier personally for Beauvoir: this traditional existential problem was indeed at the base an everyday concrete reality for her.

Thus the most important work of Simone's examination of "concrete life" is the book *The Second Sex*, in which she applied Hegel's conception of man and slave to the relationship between men and women. Beauvoir revealed how women are exploited and made to subordinate to myths that are created by men. Thus, according to Patočka, her work is not just a philosophy of man, but also a

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<sup>100</sup> Jan Patočka, "Essay on Francouzský existencialismus a Simone Beauvoirová" in Druhé Pohlaví. (Prague: Orbis, 1966) p. 393.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.* Patočka argues that Sartre "integrated" motives of German existentialism into the French tradition of moralist literature (such as Montaigne and Pascal).

<sup>102</sup> Jan Patočka, *Ibid.* 394.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

sociological study of contemporary social conditions.<sup>104</sup> Through *The Second Sex* she adds to the philosophy of existence the features of the human body and sexuality—man is “physical” which means man is defined by his body and it is also part of our existence. Yet although Man has a body, he is not wholly defined by it, such as a rock (a being-in-itself) for example. Humans should rather defined by the person they are inside, not by social “prejudices” and superficial distinctions. Thus women are not actual the “second sex.”<sup>105</sup>

In her book Beauvoir describes the current conditions between man and women; she did not provide a solution. But Patočka finds the book valuable insofar as she produces a deep psychological and sociological analysis of male-female relationships. Thus although Patočka in a way reduces French Existentialism to a sort of more artful or fanciful version of “the more potent stuff,” that is, German philosophy, he sees a value in their rather unorthodox experiments. In the work of Beauvoir, Patočka believes that French Existentialism shows a sincere aim to understand the real world in its complexity (society as well as individuals – connecting the personal with the public and the collective).<sup>106</sup> It is an attempt to overcome one’s individual position in the material world and to see the “truth” of subjective existence. This “true” seeing of the world is not just a theory, it is a part of praxis. This element resonates with Patočka’s own philosophical interest in phenomenology.

Though Svitak, Kundera, and Patočka were not the only literary or philosophical figures to be impacted by Existentialism, the goal of this chapter is to begin to demonstrate the extent of the impact of the French cross-currents; as well as how a more close conceptual and discursive analysis can elucidate the presence of themes that may not be so directly stated. Others who I imagine would have been impacted by existentialism include Antonin Liehm, who translated a majority of the French Existentialist works.<sup>107</sup> All of these were all pivotal figures in the sixties (though Patočka was even more significant after 1968), many served on the editorial board of the main intellectual

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<sup>104</sup> Jan Patočka, *Ibid.* 395.

<sup>105</sup> Jan Patočka, *Ibid.* 396.

<sup>106</sup> Jan Patočka, *Ibid.* 397.

<sup>107</sup> See Appendix.

newspaper or wrote contributions. They were widely read and acknowledged by their peers. And all were considered primary threats to the state and closely monitored.<sup>108</sup> These thinkers acted in tandem with other intellectuals in close fields of theatre, film, and art as well.

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<sup>108</sup> Dušan Hamšík, *Ibid.*

## Chapter 4: Existentialism in Performance Art, 1960s Czechoslovakia

Art (literature, theatre, film, and visual art) would be the primary “hammer” of the new philosophical and critical spirit. Art had a metaphysical importance to the Czechs; after Karel Kosík’s *Dialectics of the Concrete* gave it a literal direction, it was articulated by Antonín Liehm as “a sum total of activity by all the creative forces in the nation,” as “its painful awareness and conscience” and as “an expression of all the complexity and all the aspects of the national spirit.”<sup>109</sup> Art, as the unity of diverse perspectives, thus became a collective and complex embodiment of “Man” (*člověk*); to censor, ban, or regulate it would be perceived as a direct attack to the essential spirit of the nation and the individuals therein. The turning point in state reformation would occur when the Socialist state hypothetically embraced its role as, first and foremost, a “cultural state.” And not only would the state need to remove all constraints from creative production, but Liehm envisioned it should provide “material guarantees” and work to spread it throughout the nation.

The most common manifestation of Existential themes was the general category of the “Absurd.” In the next section on Theatre, I will articulate the theoretical distinction between those plays that can be deemed Existentially absurd and those with are an alternate Czechoslovak reading of the absurd.

### Theatre

The Czech lands have a strong historical legacy of theatre that spans back to Middle Ages and perhaps most notably included the Avant Garde and Expressionistic plays of the First Republic. After the Second World War, the country was in a tradition period that ended with communism; as with the other forms of art, theatre also faced nationalization and censorship; plays had to abide by socialist realist aesthetics.<sup>110</sup> By 1958, “Czechoslovakia once again found itself on the theatre map of Europe.”<sup>111</sup>

<sup>109</sup> Vladimír Kusin, *Ibid.* 50.

<sup>110</sup> “Czechoslovakia” in *The Cambridge Guide to Theatre*. Ed. Martin Banham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 275.

<sup>111</sup> Adam Robert Grunzke. *Models of Aesthetic Subversion: Ideas, Spaces, and Objects in Czech Theatre and Drama of the 1950s and 1960s*. (University of Toronto. 2011) p. 15.

The secondary literature consistently acknowledges an explosion of existential themes: on an intellectual levels, the Existentialist's plays were literally being shown (primarily at the Balustrade Theatre, which featured works by Camus, Sartre, Beckett, Ionescu, and Kafka among others)<sup>112</sup>, but on a more general level there was a shift in the portrayal of characters from the standard socialist realist type. The new hero of the state's dramatic productions was the 'ordinary man.' He was no war hero or apparatchik, neither an evil kulak nor Western spy. He was rather just a man, with strong and weak points. This everyman found his way into the plots of theatre productions across the country, films, and even the experimental happenings of the art world:

The plays of the late 1950s began to emphasize individuals rather than groups, and the individuals are presented in relation to problematic issues with an established socialist context in Czechoslovakia. Indeed the characters are often introduced as members of the Communist Party, and on more than one occasion we are introduced to the world of Party membership—its duties, conflicts of view, and internal issues. Considerable indirect criticism is made of various aspects of life under socialism and Marxist-Leninist principles, but the issues are resolved by attributing faults and shortcomings to weaknesses of individuals rather than to the Party or its ideology... a considerable portion of the meaning of these plays is to be found in their subtext.<sup>113</sup>

The bulk of the plays mentioned here fall into this category. But before we go into a brief examination for the sake of highlighting the presence of Existential themes, it is important to theoretically distinguish between those plays which are Existential, or Absurd in the French sense, versus those that came to comprise a unique Czech version of absurdity, attacking a different element of the alienation of human experience.

### *Did Czechoslovakia have a 'Theatre of the Absurd'?*

Many scholars such as Martin Esslin and Jan Čulík claim that Czechoslovakia had its own local version of Theatre of the Absurd, a French Existential phenomenon. Esslin coined the term, which was derived from Camus' conception of human existence as meaningless and absurd, outlined in his

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<sup>112</sup> The entry "Czechoslovakia" *Ibid.* 275.

<sup>113</sup> Jarka Burian, *Modern Czech Theatre: Reflector and Conscience of a Nation* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2000.) pp. 94-95.

essay 'Myth of Sisyphus' (1942).<sup>114</sup> The term encompassed the 'absurd' plays by Samuel Beckett, Arthur Adamov, Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet, Harold Pinter and "others all shared the view that man is inhabiting a universe with which he is out of key. Its meaning is indecipherable and his place within it is without purpose. He is bewildered, troubled and obscurely threatened."<sup>115</sup> Typically, Vaclav Havel is highlighted as the figurehead of this so-called Czechoslovak Theatre of the Absurd.

However, these interpretations reduce the quite vibrant Czechoslovak theatrical production to a status as a copy of the French model. In his book *Models of Aesthetic Subversion: Ideas, Spaces, and Objects in Czech Theatre and Drama of the 1950s and 1960s*, Adam Grunzke disagrees with this typical reasoning (citing Esslin's general ignorance of the nature of theatre production beyond the Iron Curtain).

On the one hand, there appears to be a similarity between the structure of Havel's work: Grunzke refers to the circular nature of Havel's plays, which tend to ultimately lead back to the beginning: "This aspect of absurdity has a profound effect on the structure of the play, bending the plot back to the starting point. In Havel's works of the 1960s in particular, this leads to an overall circular structure. Thus, not only the play's structure, but also the dialogical structures return to its starting point."<sup>116</sup> Grunzke likens Havel's style to Ionesco's, pointing out that the point is not the content of the play and what happens, but how it all ultimately leads to nothing. "The absurdity in both plays arises from the inability of human beings to understand the world around them."<sup>117</sup>

But the key distinction between the Czech playwright and the Theatre of the Absurd lies in the fact that the absurdity in most of the Czech cases results from a sense of the individual's alienation

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<sup>114</sup> Albert Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, *Ibid.*

<sup>115</sup> Jan Čulík, "The Theatre of the Absurd," *The West and the East* [Online] 2000. Available at: <http://www.arts.gla.ac.uk/Slavonic/Absurd.htm> [Accessed June 6, 2014].

<sup>116</sup> Adam Robert Grunzke, *Ibid.* 31.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*

relative to the regime; the forces of the world around him act indifferently.<sup>118</sup> Miroslav Kačer articulated the difference in his nearly contemporaneous article from 1966:

One difference from the overwhelming majority of contemporary authors of absurd theatre is that Havel doesn't capture the absurdity of the human situation, such as the absurdity of the existential situation of man as an individual, but rather the absurdity of reality, such as the absurdity of a situation, in which man as a creature of society, becomes a mere machine of that which he originally created to be his instrument.<sup>119</sup>

Unlike in the French case, the Czechs were reacting to a direct and hostile threat, namely Socialist Realism and their restrictive political circumstances.<sup>120</sup> As Kenneth Tynan, a British playwright, remarks in his notes on 1960s Czech Cinema following a trip to Czechoslovakia: "It is virtually impossible for a Czech artist to make a statement that has no political resonance; no matter how remote the symbols and metaphors he uses, the audience at once translates them into practical politics and current events"<sup>121</sup> Although Sartre started to move his doctrine of Existentialism toward these motives of political significance, it would be speculative to assume that it accounts for the Czech style in itself. For this reason, like Grunzke, I do not believe we can speak of any playwright or theatre movement in the Czech case that was specifically Existential after the French model.

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<sup>118</sup> Grunze defines the Czech version as "The Model Drama;" it presents a fictional world, or model, in which the individual collides with society. Trapped within absurd, vicious circles of (bureaucratic) mechanisms are human beings, individuals who attempt to assert their individuality within a societal structure that is fundamentally dehumanizing. Just as absurdity defines the structure of the Model Drama, so, too does it define humanity. An individual cannot assert himself through metaphysical ruminations. He can only act as a position in a bureaucratic mechanism that is by nature a de-humanizing force. In Havel's Memorandum, the desires of the [hero] are insignificant; the cogs and wheels of the system still turn." Adam Robert Grunzke, *Ibid.* 34.

<sup>119</sup> Miroslav Kačer, "K významové výstavbě dramatické grotesky," in Adam Robert Grunzke, *Ibid.* 38.

<sup>120</sup> In many ways we must look at this distinct Czech version of Absurd Theatre to both adopt and rebel against elements of Socialist Realism: "Model Dramas like Havel's Memorandum do not adopt the didactic approach to their audience indicative of Socialist Realism; rather, they view that approach with a critical eye and leave judgments up to the spectator. On the one hand, they adopt some of the tactics employed in Socialist Realism, like providing the audience with character types rather than fully fleshed-out characters. On the other hand, unlike parables of Socialist Realist works, there is no moral to the story in a Model Drama. The de-humanization of society creates an empty existence. Havel's bureaucracies no longer have quotas for characters to fill or goals for them to reach; rather, all of the workers in the office are engaged in fruitless actions. As a result, the Model Drama illustrates the absurdity of the Socialist Realist approach to art by questioning the underlying assumption of the parable: that there really does exist an attainable goal, and that the path of the socialist hero will lead to the realization of that goal. Without this assumption, all of the hero's actions, all of his sacrifices, and all of the on-stage actions amount to nothing." Adam Robert Grunzke, *Ibid.* 34 .

<sup>121</sup> Tynan's "Dispatch from Prague," in Adam Robert Grunzke, *Ibid.* 37.

However, although the direct message was distinct from that of the French Existentialists, there are certain stylistic conventions employed by the Czech that must be mentioned for their sheer proximity to the model established earlier by the French. When one considers the fact that the “Czech style of absurd theatre looks at the world through a glass darkly, or... ‘under a bizarre magnifying glass.’ He focuses on one specific aspect of life and subjects it to extensive scrutiny,” we see that “Havel’s is not a sweeping realism like Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, but rather a targeted attempt to portray a certain category of contemporary human life in all its absurdity.”<sup>122</sup>

### *Existentialism leaves its mark*

This distinction helps narrow the plays that I have selected to provide an illustrative example of the opposite of Havel’s variety of absurdity; that is, an absurdity much closer to the French variety. The sampling of plays I highlight here are selected for their psychological portrayals of an individual’s position in a meaningless world; these are themes and figures that have been connected to the French.

Joseph Topol perhaps stands out as one of the foremost Czech playwrights engaged with Existential themes. His pair of plays *Cat on the Rails* (*Kočka na kolejích*, 1965) and *Hour of Love* (*Hodina Lásky*, 1968) revolves around a pair of lovers that have abandoned their social roles and try to focus on each other.<sup>123</sup> In the first play, they are overwhelmed with a sense of the emptiness that lies beyond everything, not just in their social roles but also in their affection for each other, and in this context their intimate moments become violent and destructive. The play ends with no resolution, but with the “distinctly existential suggestion that their lives are in their own hands, from which one might infer that no social system is finally capable of satisfying the complex, often tormented drives posed by the human condition.”<sup>124</sup> Topol’s second, “denser, less accessible,” play takes up later in their

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<sup>122</sup> Adam Robert Grunzke, *Ibid.* 36.

<sup>123</sup> Jarka Burian, *Ibid.* 98.

<sup>124</sup> Jarka Burian, *Ibid.* 99.

relationship, as it appears to have hit a dead end.<sup>125</sup> At this point, the ideal that had given their lives meaning, love, is proven bankrupt and the two search for meaning in this bleak vacuum. Another one of Topol's plays, *Nightingale for Supper* (*Slavik k večeri*, 1967) was a "more abstract and overtly symbolic, absurdist-influenced study of the inability of the ideal to survive amid the materialism and cruelty of the everyday. A young man visit's his girlfriends home for supper; as the visit progresses, the man is persecuted and eventually destroyed by the girl's family, who "represent the forces of brutality and death in the world."<sup>126</sup>

Alena Vostra's *When your Number is Called* (*Na koho to slovo padne*) also focuses existentially on the directionless nature of youth: a "disenchanted cluster of young people who feel cheated by life find a perverse satisfaction in playing malicious tricks on those less clever... yet they are unable to hide for long their gnawing sense of boredom and insecurity."<sup>127</sup> As with many plays in this time period, it lacks a clear point or resolution, unlike the socialist realist plays from which it stands distinct.

And just as Czech film would turn toward portraying psychological existential matters, the plays would as well. When analyzing, it is important to mention that it is not just the text that conveys the play's meaning. The tone is also established by acting and stage productions, which all contribute to elucidating the "subtext." In his book on Czech theatre, Jarka Burian highlights the example of Joseph Svoboda's artistic stage design for Frantisek Hrubin's *A Sunday in August*, which features a group of misfits in the new socialist order. The play takes place near a pond in a small provincial town frequented by Sunday visitors from Prague. It is a political in appearance, but the play is fraught with a deeper meaning; and this is visible in the pond's surface that was rendered with use of "scrim, projections, and reflective surfaces" that metaphorically reflected the "states of mind and spirit," which are fraught and vulnerable.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>127</sup> Jarka Burian, *Ibid.* 100.

<sup>128</sup> Jarka Burian, *Ibid.* 96.

Similarly, the structure of plays was another way to not only break with socialist realist convention but also underline the uncertain and tentative psychology of the day. Joseph Topol's *Their Day* (Jejich den) thematically explores the conflict between different values in different elements of society after Stalinism. The play uses a fragmented structure of action and dialogue that break with the typical linear standard and highlight the distress as well as disparate views of the individualized characters. Once again, Svoboda uses projection to create an abstract background setting for his characters, which only underlines the sentiment of alienation.<sup>129</sup> Theatre, as well as cinema, was able to add to the mood of Existentialism by making use of visual as well as verbal elements.

## Cinema

Karel Kosík found that the critical question of the era: *What is man?*, was manifested perhaps most fiercely in cinema, and it was cinema that the country's philosophers were attracted to:

Why were philosophers so fascinated by Czechoslovak films, plays, novels, and poems, and why did they take such an active part in their interpretation? Apparently it was because they encountered in these works the very same problems they had so long been contemplating. By interpreting these works and commenting on them, they were thus actually answering their own questions by means of material supplied by others.<sup>130</sup>

And this relationship only fortified the interconnectedness of Czech culture at this time period, the link between art and philosophy and ultimately politics.

Thus it is important to consider the cinematic production of the time, to highlight the themes that might be existentially speaking to those literary philosophers who would respond to them. In his authoritative work on Czech New Wave cinema, Peter Hames highlights an entire category of films that he classifies as the "Absurd," and describes as influenced by the French Theatre of the Absurd.

Perhaps the most paradigmatic example is Jan Nemec's film *The Party and the Guests* (O Slavnosti Hostinec), about a group of picnickers (incidentally played by other key artistic figures) who

<sup>129</sup> See Appendix, Item 3, "Figure 1".

<sup>130</sup> "Karel Kosik" in *Politics of Culture*, *Ibid.*

encounter a metaphorical (Communist) Party meeting in the woods.<sup>131</sup> The host is clearly meant to represent the head of the Communist Party, and his followers are implicitly the secret police. The picnickers are pushed to join in celebrating the 'host.' The film's focus is on how the guests react to the host's (rather clear) pantomimes of Socialist diatribes. The interaction between the two groups is nonsensical and absurd.

Apart from the manifest absurdity of the situation, the film uses nonsensical dialogue as a tool to demonstrate the meaninglessness of established codes:

Acknowledging the influence of Ionesco, [the screenwriter] tried to create dialogue in which the characters said nothing meaningful about themselves- 'it was my intention to demonstrate that people generally only talk in terms of disconnected ideas, even when it appears that they are communicating with one another. I tried not to mimic real speech but to suggest its pattern.' [The famous author] Skvorecky described it as a film 'in which people keep talking and talking—yet the resulting mood of the film is a strange deafness, an appalling apathy, and a peculiar alienation.'<sup>132</sup>

The power and message of the film is therefore paradoxically not verbally communicated but rather comes from the significance of the fact the words mean nothing. The point is that that charades of the two groups amount to nothing, yet the (Communist) Party enacts influence over the picnickers.

Another Nemec film, *Diamonds of the Night* (Diamanty Noc), also touches upon Existential themes without the use of dialogue. This work was groundbreaking in its disturbing psychologically realistic imagery. In the film, two boys escaping a train bound for a concentration camp stumble through the woods. The film has no clear ending or even beginning; there are flashbacks throughout, which serve to humanize the boys. Yet the viewer is never certain if the flashback occurred before they were captured or after their escape. It ends in a circular format, much like that used in Havel's plays, as a small village hunting group begins to shoot on the boys. As they run again through the woods, the viewer can't be certain if this was the same scene from the beginning. The general feeling by the end

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<sup>131</sup> According to Peter Hames, Jan Nemec "mentions Camus's *The Outsider* as a parallel" to the film: "just as the hero [in the *Outsider*] was arrested for failing to cry at his mother's funeral so Nemec's collective hero has no idea why they are accused or what crime they have committed." Peter Hames, *Czech and Slovak cinema : theme and tradition*. (Edinburgh : Edinburgh University Press, 2009) p. 131.

<sup>132</sup> Peter Hames, *Ibid* 134

is that the world is dark and meaningless beyond them, their struggle is futile but still they keep running. This film was one of many that resurrected Holocaust themes; until the sixties, Czechoslovakia had never truly had a time to evaluate its position and losses during the Nazi period as Socialism had simplified history.

Another famous film, Jiří Menzel's *Closely Watched Trains*, depicts a group of ordinary men who work at a train station during Czechoslovakia's protectorate period. One of them is a teenage boy coming of age, and also coming to terms with his sexuality; he is fixated on women. In the background of this rather ordinary preoccupation is the dark presence of the Nazi trains that periodically pass through the stations. The focus on the world of the train station helps to create this absurdly disconnected reality; whereby we are never actually aware of the war directly but implicitly feel its significance through the trains. In a world devoid of meaning, he derives his from his pursuit of women, or as Hames articulates, his "quest for sexual initiation." He is ultimately recruited into a resistance plot to blow up one of the passing trains; in exchange for his service he spends the night with a glamorous resistance fighter named "Victoria Freie." The next morning, he presumably is killed when the bomb he drops on a passing train swallows him as well as the target.

Not all films had direct political significance. Frantisek Vlácil's *Marketa Lazarova* was a historical film, taking place in 1250, when the Czech lands were medieval and clan warfare revolved around the battle between Christianity and Paganism. It is about a girl who chooses her love for a pagan boy over life in a convent. The film is dark and eerie and fatalistic; it seems to take place in a frost-covered tundra of the Existentialist's bleak nothingness. And indeed it is literally the environment that overwhelms the film. It is winter, people will starve; wolves prowl the icy world, and humans conspire against each other. The characters are struggling against this cruel landscape as well as the darkness of man's most rash and animalistic nature. Marketa's innocence stands in sharp contrast to the barbarism of these "Dark Ages;" and through it all, she faces a "crisis" as she attempts to react against her status quo.

## Art: The “Happening”

Around the sixties, the Fluxus school from Austria spread to Czechoslovakia. Famous for live-action stagings in public, its “happenings” were a popular new art form whose style broke tremendously with Socialist Realist precepts; police were almost always on the scene to intervene in case the work seemed suspicious or political. One such artist, Eugene Brikcius, was directly influenced by Existentialism and the Theatre of the Absurd. The goal was to show how social patterns or conditioning maintain their control or effect on individuals: Brikcius “visualized well-known cultural ideas exceeding the duration of the action itself which are made actual through it.”<sup>133</sup>

Time was one of the phenomena which Brikcius used to show the control of social conventions over the individual. In a happening called “Time Confrontations,” participants compared the times on their private watches to “normalized time” on a public clock.<sup>134</sup> In another event, for example, participants sat in a room listening to a metronome ticking for some time until he turned it off; the silence that ensued signified the nothing of eternity when convention was gone. Brikcius explained that he was “attracted by the limits at which the true normality disappears without any trace behind the omnipresent horizon of absurdity.”<sup>135</sup> In another metronome and time activity called Sundial, he juxtaposed the steady beat of a metronome with a sundial keeping time as the sun moved across the sky. His goal was to exalt the natural time over the artificial; “unlike natural time, the artificial time represented for Brikcius a value which could be overturned and questioned in various ways.”<sup>136</sup>

Another theme was to make direct observation difficult to suggest that humans do not understand the direct reasons for things. In some of the actions, participants would for example listen to a child recount what she saw through a first floor window, but they could not see it for themselves; in another they would look at a picture with only the light of a candle. Many of his actions involved

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<sup>133</sup> *Akce slovo pohyb prostor : experimenty v umění šedesátých let: Galerie hlavního města Prahy* (Action word movement space : experimental art of the sixties in City Gallery Prague) (Prague: Galerie hlavního města Prahy, 1999) p. 364.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*

beer, which was seen as a Czech or Slovak national icon. Participants would look at the beer glasses through a mirror. To Brikcius, this action challenged the subconscious subscription to an identity without truly understanding why.

These are only a few examples of many that underline the themes and impression of Existentialism in the Sixties artistic spheres. I have by no means provided an exhaustive analysis of all artistic objects, but I also do not believe this is necessary in order to paint a picture of the impact of Existentialism. In most all cases, the Existential toolkit was used to counter the often simplified and objectified view of man through a Socialist Realist lens:

While the official view saw human characteristics in terms of Man's limits, emptiness, simplicity, and lack of dynamism, Czech culture emphasized Man as a complex creature, continually active, elastic, striving to overcome conflicts, a being irreducible to a single dimension. The fact that culture began to emphasize such basic aspects of human existence as the grotesque, the tragic, the absurd, death, laughter, conscience, and moral responsibility did not simply mean that these aspects suddenly reappeared in everyday life. Rather, the official ideology had refused to acknowledge their existence.<sup>137</sup>

Indeed it was not the case these sentiments had stopped existing in the communist interim, but the hyperbolic force with which they returned to the cultural stage was a response directed toward the regime, underlining that which it had neglected. The personalities of characters were once infused with humanity and shown in all their complexity. And often it was through perceiving man's limitations in the world that this was truly possible.

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<sup>137</sup> "Karel Kosík," in *Politics of Culture*, *Ibid.* 399.

## Conclusion

*From the viewpoint of the generations. . . We ran through those gates of paradise in 1945 and once again in 1948 [the year of the Communist takeover]; our eyes were blazing, we hardly had time to catch our breath. Most of us were spared the existential skepticism that plagued our generational peers in the West. We felt that we knew how to solve human problems. We stepped from the darkness of Nazism straight into the sunny realm of freedom, friendship, happiness—in short, socialism. We considered anyone who failed to understand this as a reactionary bourgeois; people were neatly divided into good and bad; everything was clear and simple.*<sup>138</sup>

This quote by Antonin Liehm captured the sentiment with which the Czechs initially embraced Communism; unlike the West, they were spared Existential angst as the party gave them direction and goals. Yet with the bankruptcy of the Party's ideology in the fifties and sixties, it seemed it was the Czech's turn to face the meaninglessness of the slogans they had touted under Stalin. They set to react against and reform the Socialist regime. This process was built from the task of overcoming an objective view of reality by fundamentally acknowledging the subjectivity of truth. Existential themes underlined those artistic attempts to highlight Man's complexity and his crisis when God, or in this case dogmatic Socialism, fails.

The tone of the two main periods of Existentialism, 1945-1948 and 1956-1968 was fundamentally different, as Existential themes were leveraged toward different ends, although the sense of angst experienced in both eras was abstractly timeless. In the first case, the trauma of war and vacuum that followed it led to a fundamental questioning of the self in relation to the state and greater political and social movements that purported to know the truth, such as Nazism. In the second wave in Czechoslovakia, a resistance to Stalinist Socialism was invigorated by Existentialism, which stressed human autonomy and subjective reality in the face of a dehumanizing Dialectic. Lamentably, the experiment was cut short by the Soviet invasion in 1968 to restore control over the rapidly liberalizing Czechoslovakia.

The consequences of the Soviet invasion in 1968 and the defeat of the reform movement are only too well known. The wrath of the victorious mediocre was unleashed on the intellectual community. The post-invasion purges devastated all areas of cultural and academic life... the

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<sup>138</sup> Antonin Liehm, "On Culture, Politics, Recent History, the Generations, and also on Conversations" in *Politics of Culture*, 48.

ranks of writers allowed to publish were radically thinned: about 200 were placed under a direct ban. A new, normalized Writer's Union had only one-sixth the membership of the old one... The field was very much left to the average to rule over it.<sup>139</sup>

But even before the invasion, by 1967, the Czechs had begun to move beyond ruminating on their situation and the emphasis began to shift toward actual calls for political, economic, and social change, away from more abstract philosophizing. The Communist President Novotny was pushed to resign and as new contenders stepped to take his place, it seemed that these abstract philosophical deliberations were now ripe for actualization.

Beyond these more literal turns, support for Existentialism turned away from Sartre and toward Camus. Herein lies the paradox of existentialism as a philosophical movement that came into fashion to such a degree that it grew too mainstream and cliché, especially as its dynamo Sartre lost his original popularity. As a school of philosophy, on the one hand its survival relied on its followers to develop its ideas and in theory to keep the philosophy relevant. On the other hand, there is the phenomenon of a philosophical movement becoming intrinsically linked to its disciples, such that if the credibility of their personalities is undermined, so is the credibility of the philosophy. As Sartre's downfall began with his attempt to reconcile existentialism with Marxism, his name became taboo or cliché. Leading up to, and especially after 1968, there was a visible shift in support away from his works and toward Camus's alternative direction for the philosophy (Černý, Sviták are prominent examples) and most commonly in the Czech case toward more relevant and different (while cognate) movements such as Kosík's variety of Marxist Humanism and ultimately Phenomenology.

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<sup>139</sup> Igor Hajek, *Ibid.* 183.

## Appendix

Table I. French Existential Translations and Monographs

| Title (CZ)                                                                                                                                                                                                            | Author                           | Translator,<br>(Commentator)                                        | Publisher                                                           | Date                                 | Original<br>Date P.                                                             |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. Cesty k svobodě, I.<br>Věk rozumu (FR: <i>Les chemins de la liberté: l'age de raison</i> )                                                                                                                         | Sartre                           | Jaroslava Vobrubova                                                 | ELK                                                                 | 1946                                 | 1945                                                                            |
| 2. Cesty k svobodě, II.<br>Odklad (FR: <i>Sursis</i> )                                                                                                                                                                | Sartre                           | Jaroslava Vobrubova                                                 | ELK                                                                 | 1947                                 | 1945                                                                            |
| 3. Cizinec (FR: <i>L'étranger</i> )                                                                                                                                                                                   | Camus                            | Svatopluk Kadlec                                                    | Václav Petr,                                                        | 1947                                 | 1942                                                                            |
| 4. Krev těch druhých<br>(FR: <i>Le Sang des Autres</i> )                                                                                                                                                              | Simone de Beauvoir               | Antonín Bartůšek                                                    | Nakladatelske<br>druzstvo Maje.                                     | 1947                                 | 1945                                                                            |
| 5. Camus a morálka<br>absurdity                                                                                                                                                                                       | [rukopis]<br>Václav Černý        | n/a                                                                 | n/a                                                                 | Sometime<br>between<br>1948-<br>1987 | n/a                                                                             |
| 6. Existencialismus<br>neni Humanismus                                                                                                                                                                                | V.T.<br>Miskovska                | n/a                                                                 | Kostnicka<br>Jednota                                                | 1948                                 | n/a                                                                             |
| 7. Absurdni Rebel<br>Albert Camus                                                                                                                                                                                     | Ivan Sviták                      | n/a                                                                 | n/a                                                                 | 195-                                 | n/a                                                                             |
| 8. Hola Pravda (Play)<br>(FR: <i>Georges Nekrasoff</i> )                                                                                                                                                              | Sartre                           | A.J. Liehm                                                          | CDLJ                                                                | 1956                                 | 1955                                                                            |
| 9. Kean (Play)                                                                                                                                                                                                        | Dumas<br>(Sartre) <sup>140</sup> | Ludmilla<br>Kopečna and<br>Zdenek Dufek                             | CDLJ                                                                | 1956                                 | 1953                                                                            |
| 10. Věžňové z Altony<br>(Play) (FR: <i>Les séquestrés d'Altona</i> )                                                                                                                                                  | Sartre                           | A.J. Liehm ;<br>(Jana<br>Patočková)                                 | Dilia                                                               | 1961                                 | 1959                                                                            |
| 11. Uragán nad cukrem<br>(EN: <i>Hurricane over Cuba</i> )                                                                                                                                                            | Sartre                           | Miloš Veselý ;<br>(A.J. Liehm)                                      | Praha : Státní<br>nakladatelství<br>krásné<br>literatury a<br>umění | 1961                                 | 1961                                                                            |
| 12. 5 her a jedna<br>aktovka: S<br>vyloučením<br>veřejnosti (FR: <i>Huis clos</i> ) - Počestná<br>děvka (FR: <i>La putain respectueuse</i> ) -<br>Đábel a pánbůh (FR: <i>Le diable et le bon dieu</i> ) - Kean - Holá | Sartre                           | A.J. Liehm a<br>Evženie a Evžen<br>Drmolovi ;<br>(André<br>Wurmser) | Praha : Státní<br>nakladatelství<br>krásné<br>literatury a<br>umění | 1962                                 | (HC) 1944<br>(PR) 1946<br>(DBD) 1951<br>(Kean)<br>1951<br>(N) 1955<br>(SA) 1959 |

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|                                                                                       |          |                                                                                                            |                                                 |      |                                  |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|------|----------------------------------|
| pravda (FR: <i>Nekrasoff</i> ) - Vězni z Altony (FR: <i>Les sequestres d'Altona</i> ) |          |                                                                                                            |                                                 |      |                                  |
| 13. Mor (PR: <i>La pest</i> )                                                         | Camus    | Milena Tomášková ; (Ivan Sviták)                                                                           | SNKLU                                           | 1963 | 1947                             |
| 14. Mouchy (FR: <i>Les mouches</i> )                                                  | Sartre   | František Vrba ; (Ivan Sviták)                                                                             | Orbis                                           | 1964 | 1943                             |
| 15. Spravedliví (FR: <i>Les Justes</i> )                                              | Camus    | Alena Šabatková                                                                                            | Dilia                                           | 1964 | 1949                             |
| 16. Zed' (FR: <i>Le mur</i> )                                                         | Sartre   | Eva Musilová a Josef Čermák                                                                                | Státní nakladatelství krásné literatury a umění | 1965 | 1939                             |
| 17. Slova (FR: <i>Les Mots</i> )                                                      | Sartre   | Dagmar Steinová (also wrote afterword)                                                                     | Mlada Fronta                                    | 1965 | 1963                             |
| 18. Exil a království (FR: <i>L'exil et le royaume</i> )                              | Camus    | Josef Pospíšil (also wrote afterword)                                                                      | Státní nakladatelství krásné literatury a umění | 1965 | 1957                             |
| 19. Caligula; Stav obležení                                                           | Camus    | Alena Šabatková a Jiří Konůpek ; (Ivan Dubský)                                                             | Orbis                                           | 1965 | (written: 1938, performed: 1945) |
| 20. Druhé pohlaví (FR: <i>La Deuxieme Sexe</i> )                                      | Beauvoir | Josef Kostohryz a Hana Uhlířová (Essay on Francouzský existencialismus a Simone Beauvoirův by Jan Patočka) | Orbis                                           | 1966 | 1949                             |
| 21. Marxismus a existencialismus (FR: <i>Critique de la raison dialectique</i> )      | Sartre   | Oldřich Kuba                                                                                               | Svoboda                                         | 1966 | 1960                             |
| 22. Cizinec; Pád                                                                      | Camus    | Miloslav Žilina ; (Jaroslav Putík) ; illustrated: Karel Vaca                                               | Mlada Fronta                                    | 1966 | n/a                              |
| 23. Nevolnost (FR: <i>La Nausee</i> )                                                 | Sartre   | Dagmar Steinová ; (Jozef Felix)                                                                            | Československý spisovatel                       | 1967 | 1938                             |
| 24. Dramata: Mrtví bez pohřbu (FR: <i>Morts</i> )                                     | Sartre   | A.J. Liehm                                                                                                 | Orbis                                           | 1967 | (MSS) 1946 (LMS) 1948            |

|                                                                                                                 |                                                             |                                                                    |                              |      |              |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------|------|--------------|
| <i>sans sepulture</i> ),<br>Špinavé ruce (FR: <i>Les mains sales</i> );<br>Trójanky (FR: <i>Les Troyennes</i> ) |                                                             |                                                                    |                              |      | (LT)<br>1965 |
| 25. Mandaríni (FR: <i>Les Mandarins</i> )                                                                       | Beauvoir                                                    | Eva Musilová ;<br>(Václav<br>Zykmund)                              | Odeon                        | 1967 | 1954         |
| 26. Velice lehká smrt<br>(FR: <i>Une mort très douce</i> )                                                      | Beauvoir                                                    | Eva Pilařová ;<br>(A.J. Liehm) ;<br>Illustrated:<br>Vladimír Tesař | Československý<br>spisovatel | 1967 | 1964         |
| 27. Druhe pohlavi:<br>vybor (Author:<br>Simone de<br>Beauvoir)                                                  | n/a                                                         | n/a                                                                | Orbis                        | 1967 | n/a          |
| 28. Běsi (FR: <i>Les Possedes</i> , adapted<br>from Dostoyevsky's<br><i>Demons</i> )                            | F.M.<br>Dostoyevsky<br>[adapted<br>into a play<br>by Camus] | Jaroslav Král                                                      | Dilia                        | 1967 | 1959         |
| 29. Nedorozumění (FR: <i>Le Malentendu</i> )                                                                    | Camus                                                       | Alena<br>Šabatková                                                 | Dilia                        | 1968 | 1944         |
| 30. Romány a Povidky<br>(a collection of<br>Camus' most<br>beloved plays and<br>essays)                         | Camus                                                       | Miloslav Žilina,<br>Milena<br>Tomášková,<br>Josef Pospíšil         | Odeon                        | 1969 | n/a          |
| 31. Paměti spořádané<br>dívky (FR: <i>Memoires<br/>d'une jeune fille<br/>rangee</i> )                           | Beauvoir                                                    | A.J. Liehm                                                         | Československý<br>spisovatel | 1969 | 1958         |
| 32. Líbivé obrázky / (FR: <i>Les Belles Images</i> )                                                            | Beauvoir                                                    | Marie Veselá                                                       | Odeon                        | 1969 | 1966         |
| 33. Zlomená žena (FR: <i>La femme rompue</i> )                                                                  | Beauvoir                                                    | Eva Janovcová a<br>Eva Pilařová                                    | Svoboda                      | 1970 | 1967         |

*Antonin Liehm's Interview with Milan Kundera, select passages from Politics of Culture.*

A.J. Liehm studied at Charles University at the same time as Václav Černý was teaching his classes on French existentialism. Liehm was originally pro-communist and remained socialist even throughout the events of the sixties, although he would be aligned in the Humanist camp.<sup>1</sup> In 1960 he started work at *Literární Noviny* and took over as editor in 1960-61. During this time he was an active member in the Writers Union and worked closely with the key intellectuals of the time (Ludvík Vaculík, Milan Kundera, Jan Procházka, Pavel Kohout and Ivan Klíma). He kept his contacts close, and after the Soviet invasion he published many books with interviews from the top literary and cinematic thinkers in the country.

Antonin Liehm: I will turn to a question which has interested me for a long time. You are close to Sartre. Young writers, especially in France, still honor Sartre, yet at the same time they regard him as part of the past. The same attitude seems to be taken by structuralists in the theoretical realm.

Kundera: Here again, my personal prejudices will confuse the issues. Sartre evokes my last great literary experience before February 1948. I remember a performance of *No Exit* in 1947 in Brno. I had shivers running down my back. No theatrical piece since then has wrenched me to such an extent. Throughout the period of the socialist-realist quarantine, Sartre represented my last great memory of the "rejected world." You can't imagine how moved I was when several years ago I suddenly came upon Sartre face to face.

Is he passé? I have heard it said in France. People here heard this rumor, too, and immediately began to accept it as fact. I cannot judge whether Sartre represents the past or the present for France, but let me ask you this: Are today's Czech and French literatures really contemporary? Are they living in the same historical time? Of course, they are united by a single European Zeitgeist. But Czech history and French history of the past twenty years are totally different. Our history is in a state of flux, we are living in an epoch of great adventure. Sartre's outlook was shaped primarily by the war and he was influenced by the immediate postwar atmosphere, and therefore Sartre was also fascinated by the story of man-in historic flux. For this reason, Sartre seems more contemporary to me than current writers such as Robbe-Grillet.

Liehm: This characterization probably wouldn't apply to all of Sartre, to works such as *Nausea*.

Kundera: *Nausea* isn't really a novel in the true sense of the word. Sartre himself referred to it as a "novel-essay." He became a dramatist and novelist only after having become a somewhat different person. Lyricism, the epic, the drama are not simply artistic genres from which an author is free to choose as he pleases; they are also existential categories. Sartre became a dramatist only at the moment when the question of action and the choice of action became for him the fundamental question of life. He became a novelist at the moment when he became concerned with the question of man and history, and when he himself began to live fully in history.



Figure 1: Otomar Krejča's production of Joseph Topol's *Their Day*, with scenography by Svoboda. National Theatre, 1959. Photo by Dr. Jaromir Svoboda. Taken from Jarka Burian's *Modern Czech Theatre*.

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