The Literature of De-Stalinization*

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In recent years two courses have been charted on the Czechoslovak literary scene. On the one hand, a genre has emerged which attacks the excesses of the Stalinist era but which, at bottom, gives the reader the same old socialist-realism. On the other hand, a truly apolitical novel has appeared which would reject in toto the sterile formulae of communist heroics.

When Jean-Paul Sartre visited Czechoslovakia last year, he discussed the situation of the contemporary novel, declaring that the great world novel of the future will be produced under socialism. In this context Sartre mentioned Don Quixote. His words can be understood only in the sense that the hero of this as-yet-unwritten masterpiece will turn out to be some kind of Comrade Don Quixote, i.e., a pure socialist dreamer whose unshorn faith will conflict with the hard realities of communist life. And it is equally easy to predict the conclusion of this novel: its hero Comrade Don Quixote will wise up, and realize that communism as he has known it so far does not correspond with his ideals. However, in spite of this, he will refuse to give up his dream and instead will decide to fight for its purity against all the hostile forces inside and outside the communist world.

One can safely say in advance that this novel of Sartre is never going to be written. At the same time we can understand only too well why all the Czechoslovak writers and all the cultural magazines so eagerly embraced this prophecy and why they share Sartre's belief in the glorious future of this great, unwritten, obviously anti-Stalinist novel — everybody in Czechoslovakia who owns a typewriter has already tried, is trying, or will be trying to turn out this masterpiece. It is equally obvious that the Czechoslovak writers who lived through the conflict with Stalinism from a less safe distance than Sartre are already much more

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familiar with this subject matter. For instance, they already know that the hero of this anti-Stalinist novel will not be a priggish Comrade Don Quixote but rather an antihero who of necessity gets “dirty hands”.

In fact, there is little doubt that everything produced during these years by Czechoslovak writers will be put, by a future historian, under a common heading: literature of the de-Stalinization period. In a certain sense this is correct: everything, almost everything, which is being written in these years in Czechoslovakia in some way contributes to the breaking of the ice under which Stalinism tried to smother all art. However, if we want to characterize more precisely artistic production today, we must first scratch off this political label and see what is beneath it.

In one way or another, everything which is being produced nowadays in Czechoslovakia is necessarily political art. In the broad sense, every public – and consequently every artistic – endeavor is political in its final impact. However, despite this, we can divide the literary production of recent years into political literature proper, and antipolitical or apolitical literature. How do we make this distinction, and is it not largely artificial and arbitrarily drawn? In many cases it may seem arbitrary; however, precisely this kind of division is a great help in analyzing contemporary trends and makes it much easier to decide which works belong to the past, which to the present, and which point the way to the future. In further defining this classification: political, in the current literature of de-Stalinization, is everything which is clearly a response to the preceding period of Stalinism. On the other hand, apolitical or antipolitical are all those recent efforts to transcend or overcome a wholly – and hence narrowly – political outlook, to explore the uncharted area lying beyond Stalinist communism, beyond the system of Stalinist values in order to find new ones.

1. LITERARY BULLDOZERS

This apolitical literature is preoccupied with a new man who no longer hammers on the walls of his prison, who neither breaks these walls nor bloody his helpless hands against them, but confronts the whole world of problems which plague mankind outside of prison walls.

This is not meant to disparage the contemporary political novel. That part of the Czechoslovak literature of de-Stalinization which is a direct reaction to the Stalinist era did fulfill and still does fulfill a very important function. Works such as Ladislav Mňačko’s Belated Reportages, Peter Karval’s The Scar, or Ladislav Bublik’s novel The Spine do have – independent of their purely literary qualities or shortcomings – a great importance in contemporary literature. Mňačko’s Reportages may become an important milestone even for the literary historian. However, the broad and sometimes sensational appeal of this writing for the Czechoslovak public cannot hide the fact that all these works are a species of cultural bulldozer. Books which reek the muddy architecture of Stalinist !

Let us first take as an example of this narrowly political literature Bublik’s novel The Spine, which is completely imprisoned by Stalinism, in spite of, or possibly because of, its negative attitude toward the cult. His hero has fallen victim to a Stalinist purge and been hurled from a prominent position into the muddy hole of a construction site which he now tries very hard to get out of. Thus the book seems to be an anti-Stalinist novel containing direct allusions to the Slnsky trial and to the brutal police persecution of those years. However, when we take a closer look we can see that The Spine – for all its manifest anti-Stalinism – is still our old familiar socialist-realist novel glorifying the building of a socialism of precisely the same variety we knew in the times of the cult of the personality.

Yes, in its conception, its characters and even its conclusion, it is the same set of outworn Stalinist precepts which Bublik has merely turned inside out like a glove. The Spine is anti-Stalinist only in its intent. Of course, Bublik’s hero-victim violently despises the Stalinist police dogs, finks and inquisitors. At the same time he does not really differ from them in his own behavior, in his own emotional attitudes, and in his own inability to become a truly different man who does not just have second thoughts but undergoes a true change of heart and of outlook.

It is true that he is now anti-Stalinist in his political beliefs and utterances. But he acts exactly like a model party apparatchik in his private emotional life. For instance, in his relationship to his wife. After his downfall, instead of trying to find work somewhere near his pregnant wife, he chooses, with typically Stalinist austerity, that same muddy hole mentioned above, that same socialist construction site, which does not even now cease to be his first mistress and to which he almost sacrifices his marriage. In other words, only the side of the barricade has been changed. Bublik did not dare to quit this narrow political background,
he did not start seeing people and human relations in a new light, in a more humane way.

Bublík’s hero fell from the ladder of power into the mudhole but he never gave up his desire to ascend the Stalinist pyramid; he never understood that in life there are more important things than one’s career. This of course clearly limits the impact and import of the novel which, it is true, tries to destroy something but does not replace it with anything new and better. That’s why all the novels of this kind – Karvaš’s drama *The Scar* or František Pavlček’s *The Fight with an Angel* and, to some extent, even Miahčko’s *Belated Reportages* – do not, in spite of their great present-day importance, open a bold new chapter in the Czechoslovak chronicle. Rather, they are an anti-Stalinist comma inserted after the age of the purges with which these works are – in spite of their critical and hostile attitude – undeniably linked.

If these are the books of the new literary wrecking crews, this automatically means that the object of all their efforts remains the same as that of socialist realism and of the Stalinist novel – the same old ugly houses or their ruins we learned to despise and despise.

In considering future trends, there are other works which are more important, aside from their literary merit or shortcomings, novels which resolutely abandon the ruins of Stalinism and search for new signs of life in different terms altogether. Examples of this kind of apolitical or antipolitical literature are Josef Škvorecký’s books *The Cowards* and *The Emoeka Legend*, Dominik Tatarka’s novelette *The Chairs Made of Straw*, Alexander Kliment’s short story *Meeting Between Two Trains*, Josef Topol’s play *The End of the Carnival* and Václav Havel’s *The Garden Party*. Havel’s brilliant satire is at first glance just as political as Karvaš’ *The Scar*; both plays attack Stalinism. Why then do we put Karvaš into the political category and Havel into the apolitical group?

### 2. REFUSING TO PLAY THE GAME

The important difference between the two plays is that *The Scar* criticizes Stalinism and its world in its own terms and from the same party positions Stalinism itself would adopt in fighting a “deviation”. Havel, on the other hand, portrays the whole world of Stalinism and of anti-Stalinism as absurd, and thus condemns not only the Stalinistic “Union of Organizers” but also Karvaš’s revisionists, represented as “Commissions of Liquidators”. And he shows by this comparison that both sides of the current communist power struggle have, despite all their differences and mutual antagonisms, the same ugly and inhuman traits.

Since *The Garden Party* negates in a Kafkaesque way not only Stalinism but also the familiar terms of the struggle against it, the author clearly reveals his essentially apolitical credo. Havel’s first article of faith is that the whole political world is in reality a masquerade and a farce, a pointless and vain exercise in futility, because the real problem of human existence lies somewhere outside Stalinism and anti-Stalinism, Marxism or Leninism. That is why Havel’s play cannot be properly called revisionist. It is much more than that. It is a refusal to play the game.

While in this particular satire the new, more human world is of necessity merely implied, in other books of contemporary apolitical Czechoslovak literature we can already detect a concerted and purposeful search for a new humanism. This task, from the point of view of tackling the censor, as well as reckoning with the purely literary obstacles a writer may run into, is relatively easiest in those works which do not deal with the present. This occurs in Mr. Tatarka’s novelette *The Chairs Made of Straw* or in Ladislav Fuchs’ beautiful novel *Mister Mundstock* and in most other books preoccupied with the war and with the fate of the Jews during the occupation. However, even this kind of escape into history is not always easy, for the dogmatic supervisors of Czechoslovak literature always knew how to impose their Stalinist concepts even on the historical novel.

For this reason, one can truly appreciate Tatarka’s novel describing the adventures of a Czechoslovak exile in the post-Munich Paris of Daladier, because its author knows how to express – together with his condemnation of the French police of those times – a condemnation of the police of all kinds and of all regimes. With his sympathy for the exile of that unhappy period he also unmistakably shows his compassionate attitude toward exiles as such, toward an exile *an sich*. Of particular interest was the fact that he was not afraid to set against a political backdrop a hero who is basically nonpolitical, who is truly involved with a woman and with her world and not with leaflets and underground intrigues and police interrogations which merely interfere with and endanger his inner world. This is also why a Czechoslovak reviewer ranged this book – which otherwise in no way concerns the regime and does not directly touch upon the current problems – with the group of *libri prohibit*, with the books which until recently could never have been written or published. This is a dangerous book because
Mr. Tatarka clearly parts company with Stalinism and communism at the most essential point — by considering not the socialist hero but existential man in search of a new humanism.

Despite the successful use of the historical genre, the main struggle for a new novel has to be fought out on the circumscribed territory of the contemporary theme, a no-man's-land full of traps but at the same time offering the best possibility for a genuine breakthrough. In this category belongs Topol's play The End of the Carnival which — though in a slightly baroque fashion — marginally touches upon the political struggle of a collectivized Czechoslovak village, but in reality is preoccupied with its human tragedy and with the emotional problems of its young victims.

Beside it we can place Kliment's novelette Marie, which is only superficially a "kitchen sink" novel. In this work the author also observes the incredibly impoverished world of a successful Stakhanovite worker viewed against the emotional backdrop of his ugly family life. A similar technique is used in his next novel, A Meeting Between Two Trains, as well as in the stories of Hermína Franková, Bohumil Hrabal, Jan Trefuška, Josef Nesvadba, Jaroslava Blažková, Hana Bělohradská, Vladimír Přibský, Vladimír Mináč, Ivan Klíma, and finally in the movies of Věra Chytilová and Miloš Forman.

3. A LOST WORLD

The most important and prominent representative of this trend is unquestionably Josef Škvorecký. In his first and best novel, The Cowards, which was roundly condemned by all neo-Stalinists in 1958, Škvorecký seemingly does not deal with contemporary problems but instead places his hero back in the first days of May 1945. But in reality The Cowards is an obvious extrapolation of much more recent feelings and attitudes: it is the outcry of a heart oppressed by Stalinism. For those readers who did not detect this while reading The Cowards, the fact should be abundantly clear in Škvorecký's more recent books of stories, The Seven-Arm Candelabra, or in his Em oe ke Legend. In the latter diptych, he presents a precisely drawn trio of characters and strikes the most important theme of all in Czechoslovakia today: the problem of emotional life, of the conflict between the ideological and emotional worlds of the contemporary Czechoslovak man as he looks toward the future.

In these works, the author confirms what we merely guessed while reading The Cowards, i.e., that Škvorecký, in spite of all his occasional public pronouncements, is in reality a Catholic writer, and what's more, a writer deeply in love with that type of Roman Catholicism which one could almost call un-Czech because it is rather akin to the South Moravian or Slovak, or let us say the Mediterranean, variety. It is a Catholicism strikingly permeated and humanized by the influence of the feminine or Marian element. One must not be misled in this respect by the superstitious and ridiculously naive beliefs of Škvorecký's heroine Emoeke, who, with good reason, is a Slovak girl rather than a much more sober and down-to-earth Czech woman. Škvorecký quite intentionally chose this type of woman who is superstitious rather than truly religious, and who parallels the setting of the novel — a deteriorating, carnival-like place of pilgrimage called Marienthal. He did so because he intended to show — not unlike Graham Greene in The Power and the Glory — that this almost provocatively distorted religiosity, seen through the eyes of a skeptical existentialist hero, is the only really spontaneous form of faith modern man may be capable of. What Škvorecký demonstrates is that the forms do not matter very much after all; it is not important whether we deal with a superstition or with an organized religion. What does matter is the strength of our beliefs and their capacity to channel the stream of our emotional life and thus provide modern man an opportunity to find some kind of metaphysical perspective.

This belief of the author is also obvious in a more indirect way from his hostile and stutteringly furious attack against the antihero of his Emoeke Legend, the Marxist teacher the man Škvorecký calls "a bird-brain" and who represents an acidly sketched parody of all Marxist attempts to eliminate the emotional side of man. Such efforts only end in an empty and humiliating fiasco. Between these two antagonists — one representing the old superstition of the heart and the other symbolizing the new superstition of the "brain" — stands Hamlet-like the third hero, the "I" of the novel, who only knows how to refute but not how to embrace. Škvorecký's sophisticated editor can repeat the formulae of existentialism which contain a glaring light but no solace and can vainly try to unite the emotional spontaneity of American jazz with scientific facts, and can confront a bearable though aimless world; he cannot, no matter how hard he tries, enter the lost world of the girl Emoeke.

It is clear that if, by some human necessity, our editor should have to choose, he would unhesitatingly reach out for the twisted world of Emoeke and the cheap carnival-like Marienthal. He could abandon the
dry desert of the Marxist teacher with his "recreation" consisting of a ping-pong table and party propaganda where the soul experiences an even more hopeless emptiness and where the wind merely blows about a few dirty scraps of paper full of even more superstitious and meaningless shibboleths than the revelations of Nostradamus.

Škvorecký's world is a tragic one. It is existentialist, and faith — a clear faith — seen only as an unattainable dream which the writer is unable to embrace. Yet at the same time, in every line, Škvorecký expresses his conviction that a spiritual will has to be rediscovered, and also his timid hope that a new breed of men will rise again which will not be subhuman and which will have a sane mind as well as a full heart.

It was shown in the ice age of Stalinism that a man without a heart will not in the end be a man of reason, he will not even be that supposedly rational human being out of Marxist textbooks, but will end up in a frighteningly short time as a brute without heart or brain, the Homo Gletkin of the terrible purges. In this clear recognition lies the main importance of Škvorecký's new book *The Emoeke Legend*.

We can also recognize in Škvorecký and in the other embryonic antipolitical literature of recent years an opening toward a better future in which Czechoslovak artists will bother neither to deny nor to destroy the ugly Victorian façades of communism but will outline instead a blueprint of a new architecture fit for a new man, a man with no unthinkable thoughts and with no unfeelable feelings, a man who understands the nature of his essentially tragic condition and of his inalienable hope.

**BOOKS DISCUSSED**

Ladislav Mňačko: *O neskorené reportáže* (Belated Reportages).
Petr Karvaš: *Jízva* (The Scar).
František Pavlíček: *Zápas s andělem* (The Fight with an Angel).
Josef Škvorecký: *Zbarcelci* (The Cowards).
Dominik Tatárka: *Prouténá křesla* (The Chairs made of Straw).
Alexander Kliment: *Seikání před odjezdem* (Meeting between Two Trains).
Josef Topol: *Konec masopustu* (The End of the Carnival).
Ladislav Fuchs: *Pan Mundstock* (Mister Mundstock).
Josef Škvorecký: *Sedmíramenný svícen* (The Seven-Arm Candelabra).