

James, Petra

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# On Mastodons, Faust and Tight Hugs: Jan Patočka on Literature

Petra James

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## ABSTRACT

Although Patočka did not develop a systematic theory of aesthetics, he wrote numerous texts that together make up for his “philosophy of literature” as he himself called it. He creates a highly personal corpus of writers, a corpus that reflects his own philosophical positions. He dedicates a highly committed, indeed political interpretation to the works of Ivan Vyskočil, where he focuses on the description of mechanisms of power and its abuse. The political, civic dimension of Patočka’s literary criticism, where he does not shy away from contemporary polemics, contradicts the largely shared idea of Patočka’s late commitment to political debate. The persistent presence of the figure of Socrates in his texts, as a symbol of the philosopher’s role in society, further refutes the notion of an apolitical nature of Patočka’s work prior to Charter 77. The topic of “selling one’s soul” that Patočka explores in his texts on Faust could be seen as the reverse side of caring for one’s soul and a complement to his philosophical texts on the soul by Plato dating from the same period. Patočka’s texts on literature and art, where we can see Patočka’s philosophical concepts in action, coming alive in concrete literary interpretations, might be a refreshing, alternative port of entry into the complex but coherent and extremely rich Patočka’s intellectual universe that still maintains its surprises and topical appeal today.

## ABSTRAKT

### O mastodontech, Faustovi a pevném objímání: Jan Patočka o literatuře

Přestože Patočka nevyvinul systematickou teorii estetiky, napsal četné texty, které společně tvoří jeho „filozofii literatury“. Vytváří vysoce osobní korpus spisovatelů, který odráží jeho vlastní filozofické pozice. Bytostně osobní a politicky angažovanou interpretaci věnuje dílům Ivana Vyskočila, kde se zaměřuje na popis mechanismů moci a jejího potencionálního zneužití. Politická a občanská dimenze Patočkovy literární kritiky, ve které se nevyhýbá dobovým polemikám, vyvrací obecně sdílené tvrzení, podle kterého Patočka vstupuje do politické debaty až v pozdějším věku. Konsistentní

přítomnost figury Sokrata jako symbolu role filozofa ve společnosti v Patočkových textech dále popírá ideu apolitičnosti Patočkovy tvorby, která předcházela jeho zapojení do aktivit související s Chartou 77. Motiv „prodeje duše“, který Patočka reflektuje ve svých studiích ze sedmdesátých let věnovaných Faustovskému tématu, můžeme chápat jako odvrácenou stranu důležitého Patočkovského motivu „péče o duši“. Meditace na faustovské téma zajímavě doplňuje Patočkovy soudobé filozofické texty věnované z velké části tématice duše u Platóna. Studie o literatuře a umění, ve kterých můžeme sledovat Patočkovy filozofické koncepty v akci, kde ožívají v konkrétních literárních interpretacích, mohou být osvěžující vstupní branou do komplexního, nicméně koherentního a velice bohatého Patočkova intelektuálního světa, který stále nabízí mnohá tajemství a zachovává si svou aktuálnost i v dnešním kontextu.

## KEYWORDS

Jan Patočka, Ivan Vyskočil, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Faust, phenomenology, philosophy of literature, philosophy of history.

## KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA

Jan Patočka, Ivan Vyskočil, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Faust, fenomenologie, filozofie literatury, filozofie dějin.

Jan Patočka (1907–1977), the most important representative of Czech phenomenology, did not publish a systematic theory of aesthetics. Nevertheless, since the 1930, he regularly published texts on art and literature and authored several major studies dedicated to the understanding of the arts not only in specialised philosophical journals but also in public debate platforms such as the magazines *Čin*, *Divadlo*, *Tvář* and others. He also regularly reviewed literary texts and wrote about important Czech and international writers such as Goethe, Thomas Mann, the major poet of Czech romanticism Karel Hynek Mácha (1810–1836), Josef Čapek (1887–1945), Jaroslav Durych (1886–1962), Vladimír Holan (1905–1980), Ladislav Klíma (1878–1928), Ivan Vyskočil (b. 1929), Milan Kundera (b. 1929) or Ludvík Vaculík (1926–2015). While he mostly focuses on major philosophical categories, such as temporality, mortality, “lifeworld” (inherited from Husserlian *Lebenswelt*), the Heideggerian “being-in-the-world” and the Hegelian philosophical interpretation of history and its successive epochs,<sup>1</sup> we would argue that Patočka’s literary interpretations evolve at the same time around topics of ethical and civic responsibility of art and artists. His meditations on key civic concepts of freedom, truth, moral integrity and authenticity will culminate in his articles on the Faustian theme

1) His engagement with the thinking of Hegel on the question of theory of art is manifested also by his translation of Hegel’s key work, the *Lectures on Aesthetics (Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik)* but is also evident in his *Heretical Essays*.

and private lectures on Plato from early 1970s and the well-known texts from 1977, in which Patočka defines his understanding of Charter 77 and of civic and political dissent. A more profound analysis of the relation of all these facets of Patočka's work has long been overdue. Throughout his life he had also written texts aimed at general public and thus destined to inspire public debate.<sup>2</sup> This dimension of Patočka's activities should not be underestimated.

In his important text "Study on the Past Character of Art" (Učení o minulém rázu umění, 1965, the text was first published in German) Patočka reflected on the nature of aesthetic experience. In texts such as "The Writer's Concern. Toward a Philosophy of Literature" (Spisovatel a jeho věc, 1969) he developed his own version of "philosophy of literature". The text was to be published in a volume of texts dating from 1968–1969 entitled *For the Meaning of the Present Times* (O smysl dneška). Nevertheless, due to political circumstances the whole issue of the book was destroyed and the texts were not published although many copies of the book circulated through unofficial channels.<sup>3</sup>

"Meaning" is one of the key concepts of "The Writer's Concern". It must be understood within the scope of Patočka's phenomenology, where the ultimate goal of philosophy is the "revealing of meaning". Indeed, in this study, Patočka calls the writer a "revealer of life". This text is also the most systematic effort on Patočka's behalf to define the role and function of literature and the role of writers. Patočka ambitiously seizes in this text the whole history of literature, starting with mythical thinking, in the "pre-historic" epoch (we can find correlations of terminology and argumentation with his later *Heretical Essays*), the development of writing that gives humans the possibility to truly affirm and seize the nature of their existence. The modern writer, the one belonging to the "aesthetic epoch", reveals through expression of his individual experience "life's meaning":

For the modern writer, whether they write poetry or prose, this individual capturing of life's meaning is crucial. What we value in the writer-artist is what they are able to reveal of *life's* meaning with the help of ordinary language, as it comes from everyday practical usage, joined with an orientation toward the matter-of-fact and what we know (in an objective sense). Their ability to employ language to uncommon ends, in a seemingly new direction, to make language an expression of life instead of things, to express life as it springs ceaselessly from the living presence within us, creatively integrating this outpouring into all our previous achievements – this is the task that sets the writer-artist

2) Some of these texts were even published as part of booklets with theatre programme distributed during theater performances, for example. See the note of editors of *Collected Works* on the history of the volume.

3) See the note of editors of *Collected Works* on the history of the volume.

apart from other types of writer, from the philosopher, the scientist, the scholar, the rhetorician, the historian. As such the writer-artist is not merely a person with an imagination and ‘ideas’, who creates literary forms, stories and incarnations of ideological concepts; the writer is a *revealer of life*, of life’s meaning as a whole as well as in its particulars (PATOČKA 2019: 46).

Patočka stresses the capacity of literature to express the wholeness of life in the midst of the growing specialisation and fragmentation of knowledge, the capacity of literature to express the totality of life. Indeed, in the modern world, the writer can represent the complexities and ambiguities of existence in its “undividedness” and “wholeness”.

## 1. Jan Patočka and Ivan Vyskočil

If we keep thinking about Patočka’s writings on literature, it is interesting to realise the corpus of artists created by the focus of Patočka’s interpretations. Indeed, Patočka was a keen observer of contemporary tendencies in Czech literature. During his academic stay in Germany in 1965 he wrote a letter to Josef Zúmr (dated 14th December 1965) and defined his personal “pantheon” of contemporary Czech writers as follows: “the only things really capable of competing with contemporary literature, which is reaching high again, are Hrabal, Vyskočil, Hrubín, Holan” (VOJTĚCH, CHVATÍK 2004: 399). In the same letter he mentions his translations of some texts by Holan, Hrabal and Vyskočil into German for the benefit of his friends and colleagues (VOJTĚCH, CHVATÍK 2004: 399).

Vyskočil stands out as one of Patočka’s favorite contemporary authors. The proof is the review of Vyskočil’s works published in revue *Divadlo*<sup>4</sup> on the occasion of publication of Vyskočil’s first collection of short stories published in the publishing house Mladá fronta in 1963 under the title *Indeed, it is easy to fly* (Vždyť přece létat je snadné). It is a very careful, thorough, and personal interpretation of Vyskočil’s work, not only his short stories but also his plays written in collaboration with other artists (Jiří Suchý, Pavel Kopta, Miloš Macourek, Václav Havel), such as *Faust*, *Markéta*, *the maid and me*, *Sad Christmas* and *Autostop* performed in *Divadlo na zabludlém* that Vyskočil co-founded and whose artistic director he was till 1963 when he left and founded *Nedivadlo* (Nontheater). Patočka’s interest in Vyskočil’s work was persistent as attested by

4) The redaction of the magazine *Divadlo* must have constituted an important network of Patočka’s cultural contacts. His daughter, Jana Patočková, was part of the redaction and Ivan Vyskočil collaborated with the magazine as well.

a letter to Walter Biemel from 22 Decembre 1969, where he writes: “I am very pleased that you like Vyskočil, he is a modest person, I like him and he apparently likes me too” (VOJTĚCH, CHVATÍK 2004: 399).<sup>5</sup>

What Patočka clearly values in Vyskočil’s universe is the creative power of imagination and fantasy. The notions of fantasy, imagination, play and freedom are closely connected to the concept of art in Patočka’s thinking. It is key for Patočka’s interest in the work of authors as different as Ivan Vyskočil and Ladislav Klíma. Indeed, they both place the power of imagination at the centre of their creative process and create their imaginative spaces from the potentialities of language, transpositions of metaphors, metaphorical expressions and transfers of psychological and philosophical concepts into characters and plots. Indeed, the space of art, of artistic imagination and creation is by Klíma or Vyskočil this space of “absolute play” (absolutní hra)<sup>6</sup> and absolute freedom. In Vyskočil’s texts the language experiments bring us to the essential, which is always a seeking for the truth and an interrogation of its uncertain nature. The text on Vyskočil has a close correlation with Patočka’s meditations on the role of the modern writer in his essay “The Writer’s Concern”:

Fantasy, as philosophers teach us, is a space where essence is accessed; fantastic variation, variation in fantasy, teaches us how to keep that, which cannot be changed, excluded or replaced, without the loss of the thing in itself. And so Vyskočil’s fantasy, jokes and jumps are mental experiments, whose aim is to reach the essence of this given human reality, reality of a human being in its world (PATOČKA 2004a: 184).<sup>7</sup>

## 2. Mastodons

Patočka repeatedly refutes literature that puts exclusive emphasis on its formal aspects. This fact explains why Patočka’s interpretation does not focus

5) Patočka probably recommended to Biemel the German translation of Vyskočil’s short stories translated by Věra Černá and published by Suhrkamp under the title *Bei-Spiele*. The respect between Patočka and Vyskočil was definitely mutual. In 2015, Vyskočil mentions Patočka as one of his most influential teachers in a TV programme *Uchem jehly*, available on the website of Česká televize [www.ceskatelevize.cz/porady/10314156487-uchem-jehly/315298380010011/](http://www.ceskatelevize.cz/porady/10314156487-uchem-jehly/315298380010011/) (consulted on 8 September 2020).

6) The Czech adjective “absolutní” could be also translated as total, utter or ultimate.

7) “[...] fantazie, jak nás poučují filozofové, je ve skutečnosti půdou, na které se proniká k podstatě; fantastická variace, variace ve fantazii, učí nás podržet to, co obměnit, vyloučit, nahradit nelze, aniž se ztratila sama věc. A právě také Vyskočilovy fantazie, vtipy, skoky, jsou myšlenkové experimenty za účelem proniknutí k podstatě této, dané lidské reality, reality člověka v jeho světě.”

solely on formal and linguistic aspects of Vyskočil's texts. Indeed, Patočka offers rather a political, "civic" reading. He focuses on Vyskočil's exposing of power structures in dialogical situations that allow the subjugation of one human being by another through a speech act, which becomes an act and a tool of power and its potential abuse, rather than a space of encounter and solidarity. This is yet another proof that Patočka approaches literary analysis not as an aesthete or a literary critic but as a philosopher safely anchored in Socratic and Platonic tradition, where philosophy, politics and the polis stand closely together. At the center of his analysis, Patočka places a peculiar character that he calls a "mastodon". The prototype of such a "mastodon" is the character of Dr. Nieman (sarcastically meaning "Nobody") from the short story "The Incredible Ascension of Albert Uruk"<sup>8</sup> (called by Patočka in his text "friend Wasserl" according to the first version of the short story published in *Divadelní noviny* from 28<sup>th</sup> November 1962) (JANOŮŠEK 2009: 121). According to Pavel Janoušek, the character of Wasserl-Nieman was inspired by a real life character, Vladimír Vodička (1925–2015), who was appointed as director to *Divadlo na Zábradlí* by the Czechoslovak Ministry of Culture in 1958. The arrival of Vodička subsequently led to Vyskočil leaving the theater. According to Janoušek, Vyskočil took his departure badly and the autobiographical short story is a way of coming to terms with it (JANOŮŠEK 2009: 121). This fact could not have been lost on Patočka, who was closely following the theatre scene in Prague. Vodička remained in place till 1991 (surviving all the political upheavals of the following decades) and at the time of the publication of Patočka's article he was an influential figure of the Prague culture.

The political dimension of Patočka's text is thus undeniable. Patočka uses this peculiar expression, "mastodon" to describe the type of an abusive, sociopathic, career-thirsty, social climber who is ready to sacrifice everything and everyone for his own advancement, with Vodička clearly on his mind. In Patočka's description it is a toxic, cynical character that lacks ethical integrity, moral authenticity and profoundness and his only aspiration is a cold, calculated pursuit of power. The philosopher offers us a rather chilling, clinically precise analysis of a sociopathic narcissist personality. The passage seems highly personal and we can almost feel Patočka's revulsion. On the occasion of Vodička's death in 2015 numerous articles were published discussing Vodička's legacy as the head of *Divadlo Na zábradlí*. While acknowledging that he was ready to compro-

8) Patočka calls the character erroneously "Alfréd" in his text. I thank Martin Kolář for attracting my attention to it.



mise and sacrifice some members of the ensemble, he was mostly credited with maintaining a rather high general quality of the production and with sheltering a lot of leading cultural figures during the 1970s such as the directors Ewald Schorm, Petr Lébl, Juraj Herz, Jaromil Jireš or Jiří Menzel (STEIGERWALD 2015). While not pronouncing a judgment on Vodička's character, we can clearly see the political and very topical dimension of Patočka's text on Vyskočil, where he took a clear moral and political stand vis-à-vis of a highly influential political figure of the decade. Patočka's interpretation of Vyskočil's work proves the presence of a political dimension of Patočka's cultural journalism from a very early on and the final engagement with Charter 77 could be seen as a logical continuation. The extremely intransigent (and sometimes exclusive) concept of morality is certainly something that links Patočka and Vyskočil and that will also define Patočka's understanding of Charter 77.

In Patočka's view as of 1963, the way to oppose the "mastodons" is the refusal to take any part in their stratagems and power struggles, the categorical refusal of their political games and moral compromises. For Patočka, the example of such an opposition is the character of the maid Vágnerová from the play *Faust, Markéta, the Maid and Me*, co-written by Vyskočil and Suchý.<sup>9</sup> While Faust in the play is yet another example of Patočka's mastodon, whose every action is guided by his desire of career enhancement (in his case, it means entering into world literature) to the point of being ready to sell his soul to the devil and to corrupt both Markéta and Vágnerová, in Patočka's interpretation, Vágnerová is a simple mind, innocent victim of Faust's intrigues: "It means that, in them, lives the real humanity, which is the purest in its naïf, unaware form, before it starts demanding, setting rules, revolting. Its purest image is Vágnerová, whose pureness overcomes and overturns the hell itself" (PATOČKA 2004a: 188).<sup>10</sup>

The way to oppose the mastodons and their dehumanised world is to refuse to condone their behaviour and hope that even they can change:

But Markéta [...] is at her core also without defence. This defencelessness is the only way to preserve pure humanity in a world controlled by the struggles of mastodons and mechanised by their organisation and their automatisisation. The victims cannot defend themselves: they would thus join the mastodons. On the other hand, they can appeal to the sparkle of humanity,

9) It is somewhat ironic that Vodička took part in the creation of the play and participated in the music arrangements. As a music composer he was involved in the creation of other plays of Divadlo Na zábradlí throughout his career.

10) "To znamená, že v nich žije skutečné lidství, které je nejčistší v naivní, nevědomé podobě, dokud nevyžaduje, nestanoví práva, nestaví se na zadní. Nejryzejší podoba je Vágnerová, jejíž čistota přemůže a obrátí samo peklo."



sleeping in everyone, even in a mastodon, they can cry out, attempt at solidarity. This is the principle of “autostop” [hitchhike, PJ]: to stop the mechanical, the objectifying, dehumanising, stop to automatons, auto-stop (PATOČKA 2004a: 188).<sup>11</sup>

The concern for the destiny of humankind in a dehumanised, objectified world is evident here, as is the attempt at defining a form of opposition to an abusive system of power. Patočka’s “civic”, indeed political reading of Vyskočil is clear in these reflections on power structures and opposition in this quote, which is a joint interpretation of the play *Faust, Markéta, the Maid and Me* co-written by Vyskočil and Suchý and the play *Autostop* co-written by Vyskočil and Václav Havel. As Pavel Janoušek points out in his monograph on Ivan Vyskočil the title of his collection of short stories from 1963 *Indeed, it is easy to fly* is actually a paraphrase of a passage from the play *Autostop*, thus bringing Patočka, Havel and Vyskočil close together. They are related also by their refusal to “lose their soul” in a dehumanised world (represented metaphorically in *Autostop* by people turning into soulless cars) and their challenging call for moral integrity.

### 3. Auto-Stop

The figure of an innocent victim is central to Patočka’s interpretation of Vyskočil’s world (the central character of the final short story that has the same title as the whole book, *Indeed, it is easy to fly*, is designed by Patočka as “an orphaned victim, isolated and reduced to one act, senseless in its isolation” (PATOČKA 2004a: 188).<sup>12</sup> The mechanical, dehumanised, automaton-like existence is the link between the short story and the play *Autostop*. Patočka stresses again the key role of victims: “In a world inhabited by mastodons, victims are absolutely inevitable; their destiny is bitter but in a certain way softer than the destiny of their aggressive partners” (PATOČKA 2004a: 187).<sup>13</sup>

11) “Ale také Markéta, která již vidí do ‘mastodontské’ situace a která dovede Fausta klepnout přes prsty, je v jádře bezbranná. Tato bezbrannost je jedině možný způsob zachovy čistého lidství ve světě ovládaném boji mastodontů a zmechanizovaném jejich organizací a automatizací. Oběti se nemohou bránit: tím by se přidaly k mastodontům. Mohou však apelovat na jiskru lidství, dřímajícím v každém, i v mastodontu, mohou zavolat, pokusit se o solidaritu. To je princip ‘autostopu’: zastavit to mechanické, zvětšující, odlidšťující, stop na automaty, auto-stop.”

12) The Czech word “oběť” can be translated as “victim” but also as “sacrifice”, which needs to be taken into account while evaluating Patočka’s reflection. See for example Lubica Učník, “Patočka on Techno-Power and the Sacrificial Victim (“Oběť”)” (UČNÍK 2011: 187-201) or Edward F. Findlay, *Caring for the Soul in a Postmodern Age* (FINDLAY 2002: 146-160).

13) “Oběti jsou ve světě obývaném mastodonty naprosto nutné; jejich osud je trpký, ale přece v jistém aspektu mírnější než osud jejich agresivních partnerů.”

The main character of the story, Leopold Drum, used to be a talented musician. Nevertheless, his talent is wasted through his automaton-like work in a music school, which focuses more on delivering degrees quickly rather than on teaching students to enjoy and make music. Indeed, the title of his job, the “first violin”, is a deeply ironic one. Contrary to what the reader expects (the most prestigious violin player in an orchestra), his job in the dystopian space of the story consists in a couple of minutes spent with each new student showing her/him the first technical steps in the learning process – how to hold the violin and the bow. He finally decides to oppose this mechanical existence in a giant building divided into social classes and travels to the very bottom in a lift. When the bottom of the lift opens, he could choose to look down and “would see the scattered dots below, the remains of those who, like him, travelled ‘to the very end’” (VYSKOČIL 1963: 155),<sup>14</sup> but instead, he spreads his arms, jumps... and flies away:

Then, filled with amazement and desire, he stepped to the threshold of the open cabin, a violin in one hand and a bow in the other, spread his arms wide, and bounced. He was flying down in a giant arch. In the fall, he waved his arms, flicked his legs a few times, leveled the flight, and began to gain height. And after a while all one could see was a dark dot disappearing in the infinite blue sky... (VYSKOČIL 1963: 155).<sup>15</sup>

In this final subversive act the character refuses to take part in the dehumanised system any longer and escapes in order to safeguard his soul. This short story is the last one of the collection and can thus be seen as the conclusion of Vyskočil’s book. As we will see, Patočka resents Vyskočil’s choice to end the book with a story that he interprets as the one that offers “the darkest, the most extreme perspective”. Quite evidently, Patočka understands the ending of the story as an escape into non-being and perceives it as a desperate, cowardly escape from responsibility, which he visibly begrudges. This interpretation of the ending is shared also by Pavel Janoušek, who interprets it as a “gesture on the threshold between life and death. It is not so much about a man flying but about what he is flying away from” (JANOUSĚK 2009: 141). Although we share the acknowledgment of serious existential undertones in the story, we

14) “viděl by dole rozseté tečky, pozůstatky těch, kdo jako rovněž jako on vyjeli ‘až na konec.’”

15) “Pak, naplněn úžasem a touhou stoupl si na práh otevřené kabiny, v jedné ruce housle v druhé smyčec, rozpřáhl zeširoka paže a odrazil se. Velikánským obloukem letěl dolů. V pádu zamával rukama, párkrát zastříhal nohama, vyrovnal let a začal nabírat výšku. Za chvíli už jen tmavý bod mizel v tom nekonečném modru...”

maintain that the definitely dark interpretation of the ending is not totally faithful to Vyskočil's intentions. Indeed, Vyskočil takes time to describe the difference between the unhappy predecessors of Leopold Drum, who fell to their death while trying to escape from the dystopian building, and Leopold himself. The difference lies in the intention for the escape. As Vyskočil states in the story, Leopold finally decides to get out because he hopes that in "those dark unknown realms he will try to play Boms one more time" (VYSKOČIL 1963: 154). Indeed, it is his love for art, the desire to play real music that saves him from the fatal fall; the rosin that he carries around for his bow falls on the floor by chance and he tramples it into pieces under his feet, which blocks the trap of the lift and prevents Leopold from falling. The hopeful message of the story and of the whole book is that of power and supremacy of art, a conclusion, we might imagine, would be shared by Patočka, had he understood it that way. Moreover, the title of the story and of the whole book is a quote from a passage of the play *Autostop*, a parallel, which strengthens its hopeful tones. "Autostop" means hitchhiking in Czech and the quote comes from a definition of the activity of hitchhiking as a way of getting away from the mechanical world of ordinary stifling existence: "When you wait by the road, be it just a moment or for hours, when you wave and you succeed at a meeting, you feel so great thanks to that meeting, that you overcome gravity and you rise higher and higher. And it is suddenly clear to you that, sometimes, to a man, it is quite easy to fly" (quoted from JANOUŠEK 2009: 134).<sup>16</sup>

Both the act of hitchhiking and the act of flying away are clearly meant to express the striving for freedom (striving for the Patočkan "*life at the peak*", PATOČKA 1996: 134), which is actually not in conflict with the existential edge that Vyskočil's creation definitely contains. Patočka probably saw the play *Autostop* and he might even have been aware of the link between the play and the title of the short story. Nevertheless, he chose to write a personal interpretation, where the final escape is measured by the figure of Socrates, an important proof of Patočka's early and persisting concept of a philosopher engaged in the *polis*. We can entertain our mind while imagining that in this morally challenging stance Patočka would have liked to see the main character in a final act of courageous, open confrontation with the system, where its dysfunctional aspects would be clearly denounced and decried. Only then could the character

16) "Když někde čekáte, ať chvíli nebo hodiny, na silnici, když máváte a když se vám podaří takové setkání, je vám z toho setkání tak ohromně, že sami v sobě překonáte zemskou tíži, že se vznášíte stále výš. A je vám jasné, že někdy pro člověka létat je docela snadné."

calmly accept death as Socrates did. Only thus can death be a noble reckoning with the system and an expression of personal moral integrity. Patočka's interpretation thus foreshadows his own reckoning with a political system he cannot condone and his ethically demanding definition of Charter 77 and of civic opposition.

## 4. On Faust: Selling One's Soul or Caring for it?

In Patočka's thinking the interpretations of art and literature are thus inseparable from the evocations of ethical and civic categories. Among them, the concept of responsibility plays a central role and illuminates his support for Charter 77. There is also a clear correlation with reflections developed in *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History* (published in samizdat, in Ludvík Vaculík's Edice Petlice in 1975), especially as he develops the theme of Faust. As we have already mentioned, he touches on the Faust theme in his interpretation of Vyskočil's work in 1963 but the topic of Faust will further occupy him throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Indeed, two important texts by Patočka dating from early 1970s are two variants of an essay prepared with the idea of commemorating the 25th anniversary of the publication of Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus* and which were finally published in two slightly different versions in Polish and in German.<sup>17</sup> Patočka writes in a private letter that it is his attempt at a "philosophy of literature". This essay is yet another proof of the centrality of philosophy of history in Patočka's thinking. The legendary topic of Faust and its variations by Goethe and Mann, are actually Patočka's attempt at formulating the philosophy of German national destiny, with Faust being seen by Patočka as a typical German theme. Moreover, as he points out at the end of his essay, the gradual shifts in the representation of Faust illuminate at the same time European history and the whole humanity at the threshold of what he calls the "post-European epoch" (PATOČKA 2004b: 119). In the fifth of his *Heretical Essays* Patočka also mentions Faust in his description of the evolution of the philosophical concept of responsibility (PATOČKA 1996: 105). The highly metaphorical theme of Faust is interpreted by Patočka as the motif of "selling one's immortal soul" (PATOČKA 2004c: 511).<sup>18</sup> The selling of one's soul is just the reverse side of the Platonic/ Patočkan "care for the soul", a concept, whose

17) See the editors' comment on the history of these texts (VOJTĚCH, CHVATÍK 2004: 416–418).

18) "problém prodeje nesmrtelné duše"

core theme is again individual “responsibility”. The centrality of the concept of responsibility in Patočka’s thinking is also highlighted by Jacques Derrida in his *Gift of Death* (Donner la mort), based on the interpretation of the mentioned fifth *Heretical Essay* (DERRIDA 1995).<sup>19</sup>

The Socratic / Platonic topic of the “soul” and “care for the soul” is ever present in Patočka’s writings in the 1970s, *Post-European Epoch and its Spiritual Problems* (1970), in the interpretations of Plato in the text *The beginnings of systematic psychology* (1971), *About soul by Plato* (1972), *Plato and Europe* (1973) or *Europe and Post-European Epoch* (1970–1977) (JOSL 2018: 23–24). The motif of immortality is understood and interpreted in ethical and philosophical terms. Indeed, the definition that Patočka gives of immortality is that of ethical integrity and responsibility, a concept that will be key for his understanding of Charter 77: “The immortality in its right sense is achieved by those, who prefer non-being to the destruction of one’s soul” (PATOČKA 2004c: 511).<sup>20</sup> Once more, the figure of Socrates is clearly on Patočka’s mind when he talks about the true immortality as the courage to choose death as the price for preserving one’s philosophical consistency and ethical integrity: “True immortality is for those, who overcame the horror of physical death by the horror of an absolutely negative existence, so that they could achieve what is achievable at the peak of this life: one’s finite absoluteness” (PATOČKA 2004c: 512).<sup>21</sup>

Socrates is described in the text on Faust as a figure of “ethical being in the world”. Socrates’ choice is summed up by Patočka as the choice between “possible annihilation as a way of preserving one’s authenticity” on the one hand and “prolonging of one’s life as a denial of one’s true self” on the other (PATOČKA 2004c: 511). The texts on Faust thus reflect Patočka’s parallel work on the concept of soul by Plato and reflects the meditations on the sense of history of the *Heretical Essays*. In Patočka’s texts on Plato, the category of the ethical and of freedom are central, as in the interpretation of soul in *About Soul by Plato* (1972). As Jan Josl remarks, according to Patočka, Plato starts from “the human existence in this original crisis and problematic aspects, which is fundamentally ethical, that is such, that it is concerned with our own existence and non-existence, partially dependent on us, on our decision” (quoted according to JOSL 2018: 25).<sup>22</sup> The

19) For the discussion and criticism of Derrida’s interpretation of Patočka see UČNÍK 2011: 187–189.

20) “Nesmrtelnost duše v pravém smyslu dosáhnou ti, kdo dají přednost nebytí před zkázou duše.”

21) “Pravá nesmrtelnost je zde pro ty, kdo hrůzu z tělesné smrti překonali hrůzou z absolutně negativní existence, aby dosáhli toho, čeho je možno dosáhnout na vrcholku vezdejšího života: své konečné absolutnosti.”

22) “[...] z lidského bytí v jeho základní krizi a problematičnosti, která je bytostně mravní, tj. taková, že v ní běží o naše vlastní bytí a nebytí v částečné závislosti na nás, na našem rozhodnutí [...]”

fall of the main character of Mann's *Doctor Faustus* is therefore logically interpreted by Patočka as the taking on of the universal responsibility, which means the loss of the titanic soul (and thus madness and subsequent death) but at the same time allows Adrian Leverkühn to acquire immortal soul.<sup>23</sup>

As we know, Havel and Patočka would go on to become the first spokesmen of Charter 77. After Patočka's death in March 1977 Havel would use quotes and terms from his texts to illustrate the principles of Charter 77, thus making Patočka's concepts such as "care for the soul", "living in the truth" or "the solidarity of the shaken" known to wider audience and at the same time exposing them to the danger of simplification and sometimes even turning them into slightly pathetic catchphrases. The morally challenging nature of opposition and dissent defined by Charter 77 is reflected in Patočka's interpretation of Vyskočil and his reflections of potential forms of opposition in the face of abusive power through his meditations on the figures of victims-sacrifices and mastodons. However, the texts written by Patočka in early 1977 in which he tries to explain his understanding of Charter 77 show that his understanding of civic opposition has evolved towards an even more active stance. The right and indeed duty of every individual to protect his human rights become central in the last texts dedicated to Charter 77. It is clearly visible in his text "What Charter 77 is and What it is Not" from 7<sup>th</sup> January 1977: "Therefore, every individual who is *truly* oppressed, has the right not to feel isolated and given to the mercy of overpowering circumstances, if he is determined not to resign his duty to defend himself, which is also a duty towards society, whose member he is" (PATOČKA 2006a: 430).<sup>24</sup> The personal civic action has thus become a means of expressing responsibility towards the *polis*, responsibility that cannot be avoided without losing one's integrity, one's soul.

From the morally incorruptible, but unknowing Vágnerová as the best example of pure humanity in 1963, Patočka moves to an active understanding of civic opposition in the 1970s, well expressed by the title of one of Patočka's text on Charter 77, "The Obligation to Resist Injustice". Even if we are not trying to suggest that there is a clear and teleological line in Patočka's thinking, which leads to his commitment in Charter 77 as its teleological "crown", it is nevertheless legitimate to suggest the gradual development of key concepts that have always

23) In our point of view, the interpretation of Mann has deep roots and we can find similar ideas expressed in Patočka's review entitled "Titanism" and dating back to 1936 (PATOČKA 1989b: 139–144).

24) "Proto žádný jednotlivce, který skutečně je utlačen, právem se nemá cítit izolován a vydán přemoci okolností na milost a nemilost, je-li sám odhodlán nerezignovat na povinnost zastávat se sám sebe, která je též povinností ke společnosti, již je fakticky členem."



been present in Patočka's thinking and that will find its echo in his final texts on Charter 77 and his direct involvement with civic dissent.

In his last text written on Charter 77, "What We Can and Cannot Expect from Charter 77", Patočka puts again art and culture in close proximity to ethical categories. According to him, art, literature and culture are inseparable from ethics. Otherwise, they become senseless mechanical activities such as those described and decried in Vyskočil's short stories "Indeed, it is easy to fly" and "The Incredible Ascension of Albert Uruk" or in his "Autostop", co-written with Havel. In the view of Patočka's texts on Charter 77, his "political" interpretations of Vyskočil's short stories take on a whole new dimension. This is how Patočka follows after the well-known (and sometimes misused) passage on "things for which it is worthwhile to suffer", in his famous defence of freedom and of art's "soul" that would certainly be shared by Leopold Drum from Vyskočil's titular short story: "[...] the things for which we might have to suffer are those which make life worthwhile, and that without them all our arts, literature and culture become mere trades leading only from the desk to the pay office and back. We know all that now, not in the least thanks to Charter 77 and all it has meant." (PATOČKA 1988a: 346)<sup>25</sup> The centrality of art in Patočka's reflection on dissent is key and represent a hefty argument for a deeper study of Patočka's literary criticism.

## 5. Tight Hugs

As we have indicated earlier in the text, Patočka did not like the final arrangement of Vyskočil's collection of short stories. To end his interpretation with the last short story "Indeed, it is easy to fly" would mean for him, that "the absurdity would triumph as a last word and the end of every struggle for meaning." (PATOČKA 2004a: 188) This quote is yet another proof of Patočka's consistency as far as terminology and thinking is concerned. The acclamation of the lack of sense (real or presupposed) is something that Patočka, with his classical training, cannot condone. Indeed, he makes a special effort at explaining it in the third *Heretical Essay* entitled "Does History Have a Meaning?", where he philosophically distances himself from nihilism and defends the Socratic "con-

25) "Že tzv. umění, literatura, kultura etc. bez těchto věcí jsou pouhý řemeslný provoz, který to nikdy nepřivede nikam, než z kanceláře do účtárny a z účtárny do kanceláře. To všechno dnes vidíme – nemalou měrou díky Chartě 77 a všemu tomu, co s ní souvisí" (PATOČKA 2006b: 443).



stant seeking of the truth". So he again gently scolds Vyskočil for what he (in a rather significant overinterpretation) understands as a lack of hope expressed by the final arrangement of his book: "But this extreme 'solution' would exclude the poet and his hope, the hope, that can never be extinguished" (PATOČKA 2004a: 188). So Patočka decides to "improve" and "correct" Vyskočil and while not being able to change the order of short stories in the book, he reverses their order in his review and ends his text with the interpretation of the short story "Obrozel 5 km" (Obrozel 5 kilometrů). In the story, a couple lost in the countryside finds a tube with a text that tells about a desperate story of an orphan who tries to make sense (find the meaning) of his life in a series of fruitless wanderings and repeated losses. The tube is seen by Patočka as a sign of hope, the trust in possible contact and human solidarity (could the meaning of that battered life be acquired through that furtive, uncertain meeting...?): "it does not cease to hope, to hope for the response of other hearts, for the annulment of this curse, for a touch and for a meeting" (PATOČKA 2004a: 189). Although the couple make light of the story found in the tube as an attempt at a joke the event visibly shakes them in their banal everyday routine as Patočka clearly hints at in the final passage of his review: "so why, those who read those strange pages, hug each other so tightly?" (PATOČKA 2004a: 189). The final scene of affection and proximity could be seen as a metaphor of the "solidarity of the shaken", whose concept will Patočka develop in detail later, in the sixth, final *Heretical Essay*. Through the life story discovered in the tube, the couple might have come closer to this solidarity by glimpsing "what life and death are all about, and so what history is about" (PATOČKA 1996: 134) and they might have approached the possibility of becoming a "spiritual person" (PATOČKA 1996: 135) that Patočka calls for in the final passages of his *Heretical Essays*, a spiritual person that can grasp that "history is the conflict of *mere life*, barren and chained by fear, with *life at the peak*, life that does not plan for the ordinary days of a future but sees clearly that the everyday, its life and its 'peace', have an end" (PATOČKA 1996: 134). The couple hugging each other tightly at the end of Vyskočil's story might possibly represent for Patočka a moment at the threshold of *metanoia* (PATOČKA 1996: 134), a moment of a crucial conversion that might set the life of the two characters on a new path, which they will tread with a heightened awareness of their life's meaning and of their place in history.<sup>26</sup> The review from

26) The name of the town in the title of the story, Obrozel, is a neologism and reminds of the verb *obrodit*, which means "to renew". The noun *obrození* means "renewal" or "rebirth". On the interpretation of the concept of philosophical conversion by Patočka see Karel Novotný, *La Genèse d'une hérésie* (NOVOTNÝ 2012: 169–180).

1963 thus interestingly foreshadows Patočka's philosophical preoccupations of the 1970s that coincide with his civic engagement in Charter 77.

## 6. Conclusion

It might come as a surprise to read a deeply personal, emotionally engaging text, such as the review of Vyskočil, coming from the pen of the author of objective philosophical treatises, sometimes disengaging by the complexity of their precise terminology. Yet, as we have tried to show, they represent a consistent coherence with his philosophical thinking. The political, civic dimension of Patočka's literary criticism, where he does not shy away from contemporary polemics contradict the largely shared idea of Patočka's late commitment to political debate. The persistent presence of the figure of Socrates in his texts, as a symbol of the philosopher's role in society, further refutes the notion of an apolitical nature of Patočka's work prior to Charter 77. It is fascinating to follow Patočka's work in progress, where, in texts on literature, he plays out images and concepts that he will later formulate in philosophical terms and categories, such as the metaphor for "solidarity of the shaken" or the figure of Faust as a reverse image of the "care for the soul".

These texts, where we can see Patočka's philosophical concepts in action, coming alive in concrete literary interpretations, might be a refreshing, alternative port of entry into the complex but coherent and extremely rich Patočka's universe that still maintains its surprises and its topical appeal today.

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*Mgr. Petra James, Ph.D., petra.james@ulb.ac.be, Département de Langues et Lettres Modernes, Faculté de Lettres, Traduction et Communication, Université Libre de Bruxelles, Belgium*



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