WRITING PHILOSOPHY WITH ONE'S HANDS TIED: LETTERS FROM CZECHOSLOVAK COMMUNIST PRISONS

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Abstract: This paper addresses the question of how Czechoslovak intellectuals and philosophers from the dissident movement coped with the difficult situation of normalization and their own imprisonment. The failure to invoke justice led many to identify with characters from Franz Kafka's novels concerning the dead-end situations. Writing philosophical texts in official publishing houses and journals was impossible and unimaginable even for those who were at liberty. The dissemination of ideas was even more difficult for those who were in prisons. One way was to write letters from prison, which became a peculiar tool of communication and a specific genre of writing. Letter-writing was subject to the rules of prison life, which forbade writing about politics and the regime. It was up to the creativity of the political prisoners how they managed to sneak civic themes into their letters. They did this either like Václav Havel, who used long philosophically sounding reflections and carefully chosen code-words, or like Milan Šimečka, who chose to philosophize about ordinary, intimate life, real or oneiric memories of his family, and supposed conversations with his loved ones as a way of thinking freely. Although in retrospect one can accuse both of various shortcomings (and this has happened, even from the milieu of the dissidents themselves), it is important to remember that these texts were not produced in quiet study rooms and with access to the necessary literature in libraries. Even if they were philosophically "leaky", fragmentary or interpretively weak, it is in this "writing-at-this-moment" that their historical and philosophical value lies.

Keywords: Czechoslovakia, communism, dissidents, prison letters, freedom, fragmentary writing.

Introduction

The history of Western culture is very familiar with the image of the body as a prison. A good example here is the Latin expression *ergastulum animæ*, which referred to the imprisonment of the human soul in a cramped, claustrophobic dungeon of the human body.

This cultural image was based mainly on Gnostic doctrines of body and soul. According to them an evil demiurge, Yaldabaoth, created the material world and cast immortal human souls into mortal bodies. Yaldabaoth also prevented people from knowing the truth and the real God. Nevertheless, the knowledge of the truth did reach some people, and Gnostics of various types and denominations believed that those people were them.

The imprisoning and restricting body was a metaphysical problem for centuries. Only after the Enlightenment did philosophers change their attitude to corporeality while twentieth century philosophy (especially phenomenology) rehabilitated it completely and made it one of its core themes. The body has now lost its former prison-like pathos. One no longer feels bound by one's body, but lives as a corporeal, embodied being. Thanks to the living body (or flesh), one *can* do this and *can* do that.

The Czech philosopher and dissident Ladislav Hejdánek wrote in 1983 in the fourth of his *Variations and Reflections on Topics in Václav Havel's Prison Letters* (dedicated to Havel after his release from communist prison): "The idea that man is an immortal soul living in a mortal body stands and falls with the old metaphysics, which has collapsed and is now dead (surviving only in relics in the form of prejudices). No attempt to modernize the formulation can help it" (Hejdánek 2009: 70).

But — paradoxically — something from the old Gnostic metaphysics is still at work, when the intelligence of nations is imprisoned in the body of totalitarian states. Here the individual finds oneself in the grip of one's own restricted possibilities, the restrictions of the law and the arbitrary possibilities of the prison guards and bureaucracy. The totalitarian regime forms a new anthropology of man-inside, man-in-prison, man-with-restrictions.

If we follow Ernst Cassirer's interpretation of a human as *animal symbolicum* and his concept of symbolic forms (Cassirer 1970: 80), we could say that a human being in an unfree regime or in prison relates to the world according to cultural frameworks (symbolic structures

of myth, language, art, science, religion etc.) that are typical of their situation. As far as *myths* are concerned, the old ones are here replaced by new ones, and it should come as no surprise that Franz Kafka, with his emphasis on dead-end, labyrinthine situations, offered such a new myth for dissidents. "Joseph K." from *The Trial* or "K." from *The Castle* is a modern mythical hero in a modern mythical world. It is the same with *language*; the prison experience also changes the ways of expressing ideas, which emerge on the fly, and writing becomes, as it were, "writing-at-this-moment". The symbolic form of *art* (and the art of writing) is also applied in a new context in creative fragmentism, intimate and personal writing, where imaginations and dreams play a big role, as reality appears to be inaccessible. As far as *science* is concerned, the intellectual in prison may indeed use the language of the humanities, referring to other authors they have read, but this is not strictly speaking a scholarly methodology. Often the intellectual falls into the role of the sage who gives advice to those who are at liberty. And Cassirer's symbolic form is *religion* as well: questions of transcendence are also at play here, but outside of any official ecclesiastical structures and often more a deep, personal confession of either religious faith or relating to some form of spirituality, morality, humanity or something that transcends the everyday routine of normalized reality. The applications of these symbolic structures will become apparent when we take a closer look at the authors discussed in the following sections.

In this article, I will therefore discuss the situations in which the Czechoslovak dissident movement found itself, especially regarding the arrests and imprisonment of intellectuals for whom writing was not only a form of communicating ideas, but also a way of thinking of their own. Dissidents, as I have already mentioned, often experienced their situation in identification with Kafka's characters. From 1980 onwards, it was in this milieu that many prepared to commemorate the centenary of Kafka's birth, which the secret police assessed as a risk. Not surprisingly, any interest in Kafka was suspicious to the secret police. And if Jacques Derrida came to Prague at the end of 1980 with an official explanation that he wanted to visit Kafka's birthplace, he must, of course, have been immediately suspected of subversive activity. The dramatist and leading figure of Prague dissent, Václav Havel, and the philosopher Milan Šimečka have also described their lives as Kafkaesque. Both ended up in prison at the same time. And both sent letters from there, which, in addition to their personal messages, also contained philosophical reflections, developed with the limitations they were subjected to in the prison system. Their letters from prison will be the key focus of this investigation, especially in view of the

way in which it was possible to write philosophically at all under such conditions.

This paper is part of a broader research in which I am concerned with the hermeneutic relations between imagination and the formation of philosophical ideas, especially in a Central European context. My aim is to show how the necessity to work with imagination (even under difficult, prison-like conditions) became deeply inscribed in the philosophical legacy of Czechoslovak dissidents and remained an enduring value for them.

Kafka's Stories as an Imaginative Scene: Derrida, Havel, Šimečka

In the short story called *Before the Law* (*Vor dem Gesetz*, originally in 1915), a latter part of the novel *The Trial*, Franz Kafka used a narrative in which he described the absurd situation of a countryman who found himself at the gates of the Law. Although the gate was open, a burly doorkeeper stood in front of it and prevented the countryman from entering. When the countryman asked him if he would ever be able to go in, the doorkeeper replied that he might, but not now. And so the countryman took his place at the gate and for years tried to soften the doorkeeper's heart. Unsuccessfully. As he was dying of exhaustion, he realized for the first time that there was something he hadn't asked the doorkeeper: Why was it only he who had come here in all those years? And then, in the last moment of his life, the doorkeeper growled in his ear: "No one but you could gain admittance through this door, since this door was intended only for you. I am now going to shut it" (Kafka 1999: 121). That is true Kafkaesque sarcasm; that is "Kafkasm".

The situation of the helpless countryman and the doorkeeper may resemble the Gnostic story in which the doorkeeper Yaldabaoth also made it impossible for the individual soul to know the truth. Kafka's story is open to many interpretations, and it presented a fascinating scene for many people in normalized Czechoslovakia. The individual stood in front of a regime guarded by pseudo-personal official power. But Kafka's story also brought together three intellectuals who found themselves in Czechoslovak prisons at the same time. These were Jacques Derrida, Václav Havel, and Milan Šimečka.

On December 30, 1981, during his visit to Czechoslovakia, Jacques Derrida was arrested by the state police at Prague airport. The secret police tried to frame him, claiming they had found hashish in his baggage. The reason for his arrest was drug trafficking and even drug production. Both were absurd, however. The philosopher was detained,

interrogated and arrested. After a few days he was released on January 2, 1982, after intervention by French diplomats and politicians, including President François Mitterand, and thanks to the threat of disruption of diplomatic relations.

The state police weren't only watching Derrida as an intellectual who dared to enter the territories of their state. They were also aware that he was the co-founder of the Jan Hus Association, which had just been established (in 1981) by French intellectuals. The Association — headed by Derrida, Jean-Pierre Vernant, Etienne Balibar and others — helped to organize secret dissident conferences in the Czechoslovakia, supported the Czechoslovak samizdat financially and created a bridge between the Czechoslovak intellectuals and the West. At that time, Czechoslovakia was visited by several prominent philosophers who gave lectures during secret, so-called "home seminars": these included Paul Ricœur, Jean-Pierre Vernant, Etienne Balibar, Catherine Chaliere, Roger Scruton, Donald Davidson and Richard Rorty. Among them was also Derrida who came to Czechoslovakia as a participant in Ladislav Hejdánek's home seminar. Hejdánek understood the attack on Derrida as a state attack against his philosophical seminar. He wrote about Derrida's arrest on January 2, 1982:

> No matter whoever is afraid of real philosophy, we will not give it up and we intend to continue to cultivate it, if it is even a little bit possible. And if our authorities want to make it illegally impossible for us to do so (and they cannot do so except illegally), we hope for the support and protests of those who know the importance and indispensability of philosophy and of cultured people in general (Hejdánek 1982: 80).

At the time, Derrida was preoccupied with Franz Kafka and his reflections on him resulting in the lecture *Préjugés: Devant la loi* (the lecture was given at the Cerisy conference in summer 1982 and published in 1985 in a collection edited by Jean-François Lyotard and titled *La faculté de juger*). In the text, Derrida discusses Kafka's short story mentioned above and asks who would judge, and by what criteria, whether such a short story could be considered as literature. If some narration is literature, this is the result of various historically conditioned interpretations and conventions. At one point, he recalls his personal experience of being arrested in Prague. According to him the arrest itself and the narration about it are certainly not literature (Derrida 1985: 103).

But something else is important: the Czechoslovak secret police knew of Derrida's interest in Kafka and believed that his presence in Prague was related to preparations to exploit the upcoming centenary

of Kafka's birth for political provocations against the regime, at least according to the report given later by the Czech poet Petr Kabeš in the samizdat monthly magazine Obsah. An investigator, Dvorský, asked Kabeš during the interrogation about Kafka: "He is going to have an anniversary, as we have found out. Didn't some foreign journalists visit you because of that?" Dvorský then added that it had been discovered that they (the foreign journalists) wanted to exploit this anniversary. Moreover, the whole interrogation took place in a strange atmosphere: first there was a long silence, then the interrogator pronounced a simple and short "Franz Kafka" as the main question, and the whole scene was completed by the sound of glass being broken in the next room by the cleaning lady (Kabeš 1983: 61–62). Derrida might have felt very similar to Kabeš during the interrogation, and it might have reminded him of being in a Kafka novel and a character in literature.

Derrida didn't understand his arrest as literature, however, but two prominent imprisoned Czechoslovak dissidents, dramatist Václav Havel and philosopher Milan Šimečka, reflected on Kafka differently. Václav Havel wrote from prison in his *Letters to Olga* on November 8, 1980:

> I've always harbored a feeling (hidden, since it might raise suspicions of arrogance) that I somehow understand Kafka better than others, not because I can claim a deeper intellectual insight into his work, but because of an intensely personal and existential understanding of experience that borders on spiritual kinship, if I may put it that way. (I have never much held with theoretical "interpretations" of Kafka; immensely more important for me was the quite trivial and "pretheoretical" certainty, as it were, that he was "right" and that what he writes is "exactly how it is") (Havel 1989: 126).

And later, after the Velvet Revolution, when receiving an honorary doctorate from the Hebrew University in Jerusalem in 1990, Havel said something similar:

> I'm not an expert on Kafka, and I'm not eager to read the secondary literature on him. I can't even say that I've read everything Kafka has written. I do, however, have a rather special reason for my indifference to Kafka studies: I sometimes feel I'm the only one who really understands Kafka, and that no one else has any business trying to make his work more accessible to me. And my somewhat desultory attitude about studying his works comes from my vague feeling that I don't need to read and re-read everything Kafka has written because I already know what's there. I'm even secretly persuaded that if Kafka

> did not exist, and if I were a better writer than I am, I would have written his works myself (Havel 1990; 2014: 27–28).

And Milan Šimečka, in his letter from prison on January 21, 1982, writes in a similar vein: "I used to be only amused by Kafka, now I am experiencing him. It was better to be entertained by him" (Šimečka 1999: 133). And again (a little more seriously) in his *Letters about the Nature of Reality* (written in prison in the form of a letter to his sons):

> I had the impression of being forcibly transferred to a reality that was specially manufactured and modified to make one lose one's way in it, lose contact with one's own reality, and eventually lose one's wits. Of course, I realized right away that I was familiar with it from literature, that it was all to be found in Kafka, but now I was capable of fully experiencing Kafka for myself. Previously I had only read him (Šimečka 1999: 310; 2002: 87).

Letters from Prison as a Special Genre of Writing and Thinking: Havel

This brings me to the issue of prison letters, a Czechoslovak cultural phenomenon which created a specific form of philosophical thinking, even if imperfect and very subjective. Writing letters from prison isn't, in any way, an invention of the Czechoslovak dissent, but it clearly bore characteristic features of anti-communist writing: both in content and form. In this context, the Slovak literary scholar Pavel Matejovič even speaks of a special "aesthetic of underground" (Matejovič 2006: 102). Prison letters were a counterpoint to official state literature and philosophy emphasizing the great continuous historical progress of society towards a communist future and trivializing the role of the individual. Most Czechoslovak literary and religious dissidents responded to this with very strong autobiographical, personal and fragmentary writing with a deep accent on phenomenology and existentialism as sources of intellectual inspiration. Michael D. Gubser gave a comprehensive picture of the Czechoslovak dissident movement and its relation to existentialism and phenomenology in the 1970s and 1980s (see Gubser 2014: 133–187).

Under normal circumstances, literature and philosophy are free activities. It is up to individual authors what style they choose what subject they treat, *what* they write about and *how* they write about it. They can invent fictions, describe real events, weave one into the other. They can use libraries, share and discuss their ideas with others,

revise and improve their texts. But this wasn't the case of philosophical writing from Czechoslovak prison. The obstacles to free writing were enormous and the imprisoned intellectual was left with only his memories and his own imagination.

The law, of course, allowed prisoners to write letters, but only under strict and often crazy conditions. Václav Havel, several years after his arrest, mentioned that they were only allowed to write once a week and only four pages. The text had to be written legibly, without any cuts, with the margins kept, graphic and stylistic editing, without quotation marks, highlighting of words, the use of foreign words, and so on (Havel 2015: 232).

The prison post office functioned formally as a regular post office. The prisoner had to procure stamps (usually brought by family members during visits or mailed to them), without which they would have no way to send the letters.

Havel particularly recalled the half-mad warden at Heřmanice Prison. He was fond of following up on letters written by political prisoners to their families. In terms of content, the prisoner had to stick only to "family matters" and was to avoid humor when referring to the prison sentence since it was a serious matter that wasn't to be ridiculed. That's why the letters from prison carried a certain air of seriousness and dignity. This didn't prevent Havel and his fellow prisoners from "sneaking" philosophical reflections into the letters: letter-writing became a kind of prison sport for them. Havel later remembered: "Will we manage to outwit the warden or not? Will we manage to say something meaningful in the letter or not? It has become a passion" (Havel 2015: 233).

The prisoner never knew whether the letter had gone or not. He wasn't allowed to rewrite it from a previously prepared draft but had to compose it all at once as a complete and unaltered letter, without any cuts or corrections. Since he had no copies, it was only a matter of his memory if he remembered what he had written in previous letters. Often, he only received a reply several months later. Havel wrote about it: "Over time, of course, I began to think a little ahead, to try to weave my reflections in certain thematic cycles, to interweave the motifs of these cycles with each other, and to build — somewhat intermittently — a kind of little building of mine over several years, to build it like one of my plays" (Havel 2015: 233–234).

Gradually, the prisoners came to understand that their contact with their families was a "public matter", that their letters circulated among their friends. Havel conceived that his letters were read as "literary facts and reports to the world about the state of our spirit" (Havel 2015: 234). He saw that they would stimulate the thinking

of many people out there. He soon found that if he wrote too clearly, the letter would not pass the censors. So he began to prefer to write complicated long sentences with complex wording. He also changed meanings of words: instead of the word "regime" he used the cryptic Fichtean-sounding term "non-I" or "world". For example, in a letter to Olga on February 20, 1982, he wrote: "By the way, the roots of my controversial stance are not only to be found in the structure of the specific 'non-I' into which I was cast by fate, but very probably lie deeper, which is to say in my relationship to 'the world altogether'" (Havel 1989: 288). One month later he added: "Defending one's identity in the context of the 'non-I' (and above all face-to-face with its diabolical aspect, the order of death) is only possible if one has a solid, lasting, life-giving and meaningful relationship with the 'non-I' " (Havel 1989: 301).

Interpreting retrospectively the semantic field of prison epistolary literature isn't easy. When Havel writes, for example, about Levinas, we understand that Havel isn't a philosopher interpreting a philosophical work, but that his reading of Levinas is conducted through the prism of his actual situation. On May 8, 1982, Havel writes in *Letters to Olga*: "In Levinas, I sense a storehouse not only of the spiritual traditions and millennial experiences of the Jewish people, but also the experience of a man who has been in prison. It's there in every line, and perhaps this is another reason why it speaks to me so vividly" (Havel 1989: 312). Levinas became for Havel the prototype of the imprisoned philosopher (in 1940–1945) with whom Havel, the prisoner, identifies forty years later as, the figure through whom he speaks out of prison. It should be added that the Levinasian notion of responsibility was a key concept in Havel's *Letters to Olga* — even if blurred by his reading Heidegger (Gubser 2014: 183). And it is also important to say that Havel read Levinas for the first time only in prison, as Daniel Brennan reminds us, and that "Havel did not read Levinas as opening a new way to think about responsibility. Levinas, for Havel, articulates ideas which are already present in Czechoslovak debates" (Brennan 2016: 121).

Perhaps the strongest philosophical motif that dominated Havel's thinking in this period was the phenomenological idea of the "concrete horizon," which was Patočka's term for "home" (Havel 1989: 120). Havel interpreted it against the background of the situation he was in. The concrete horizon has several layers: the first is the one that is closest to us, into which we are thrown and constitutes our actual situation — a kind of "pseudohome" (the prison). The second layer consists of the real home from which he emerged; but it is only the final, absolute horizon that constitutes the third layer — the existential home, "the most imaginary, the most abstract," which gives meaning to the whole of life (Havel 1989: 122–123). The image of horizontal

circuits is the result of Havel's thinking in prison and became his permanent conviction.

The Strange Case of Milan Šimečka

Another example of the dissemination of philosophical ideas from behind prison walls began in May 1981 when the police arrested the Czechoslovak dissident and philosopher Milan Šimečka. He ended up in prison, where he spent almost two years without ever knowing why he was convicted. He began writing letters to his family from the very first moment. Quickly he realized that the letters hadn't been delivered or had been sent very late. Following the example of Dante, he gave up all hope that they would ever reach their addressees, or that they would arrive on time. Writing letters from prison thus became a written soliloquy for the sender.

As in Havel's case, there were certain prison rules governing letter writing: letters couldn't contain allusions to or direct attacks on the government policy of the time, the texts could only talk about personal experiences, memories, family trivialities, and so on. More serious messages had to be carefully "encrypted into the subtext", even if Šimečka didn't use to do this often. Writing for him was a tool for thinking and an opening of the narrow prison space to the broader reality that he portrayed in his imagination as a means of intellectual survival.

Šimečka's early philosophical work was typically academic and Marxist (*Social Utopias and Utopians*, 1963; *The Crisis of Utopianism*, 1967). After his re-awakening from Marxist ideals after the Soviet invasion in 1968 (he was then 38 years old), a series of interrogations, persecution by the secret police, wiretapping, surveillance, and threats followed. Gradually, he moved away from official academic philosophical discourse, and elements of freer writing, essays, and even literary writing began to predominate in his work. In a prison letter from February 19, 1982, he wrote to his son Milan, who couldn't study at university, that he (the father) already considers him (the son) to be a philosopher thanks to the way he framed questions. The father wrote here to his son not to expect too much from contemporary academic philosophy (Marxism-Leninism) and that reading Kant just for the sake of it, as a spiritual exercise, is more useful and entertaining than watching TV (Šimečka 1999: 172). Let us recall that along with Kant, Bergson, Camus and Sartre, the most popular philosophy among the Czechoslovak dissidents was clearly phenomenology, promoted mainly by Jan Patočka.

Slovak historian and political scientist Juraj Marušiak has noted that normalization in Czechoslovakia was a depressing experience for Šimečka, but at the same time a new and culminating stage of his work: "The individual human being in the normalization regime comes to the fore in his works, confronted with the massive pressure of the system to achieve individual conformity" (Marušiak 2010: 148). Šimečka changed the form of his philosophizing: from objectively tuned analyzes of utopianism, he switched to very personal and intimate writing.

In 1978 Šimečka published his political essay *Restoring Order* (*Obnovenie poriadku*). The title of the book referred to the communist plan of normalization, the establishment of the normalization order into the democratizing chaos. Šimečka described in the book, among other things, two groups of people: the courageous and the fearful. The former were not afraid to go, for example, even to interrogations whereas the latter withdrew and cut off contacts even with their closest friends, so as not to hurt others and especially themselves. However, it was the courageous and free people which Šimečka wrote about at the time: "They are people of a special stamp. Freer, more cheerful, more generous, more friendly, and above all more reliable. The freest and most reliable are those who have also been in prison" (Šimečka 1990b: 105). Little did he know then that this ordeal of imprisonment would befall him only three years later. This reference to two groups of people is an echo of Patočka's "life in truth" as "a new human community" (Patočka 1996: 82), a thesis so important to Havel that he made it the main theme of his manifesto of free humans *The Power of the Powerless*. The basic challenge here was: If you are a free human being, you must not succumb to fear and must try to live in truth, in freedom even if in a totalitarian or post-totalitarian state.

Šimečka and Havel knew this motif not only from Patočka, but also from Slovak writer Dominik Tatarka and his novel *The Demon of Consent* (*Démon súhlasu*) originally published in the journal *Kultúrny život* in 1956. In the novel, Tatarka described a situation in which one writer (Bartolomej Boleráz) is up against an entire writers' organization that passes off as truth what is a lie (they claim, for example, that a violet, which doesn't really smell, actually does smell). It's important for members of the organization *to consent* no matter what. Just as the greengrocer in Havel's *The Power of the Powerless* who obediently and automatically puts communist slogans among his onions and carrots, so Tatarka's members of the writers' organization unanimously *consent* to their institution. And the protagonist just sighs, "Oh, we consent again! But why? Why?" (Tatarka 2019: 92).

Fittingly, it was Havel himself who wrote the preface to *The Demon of Consent* in 1985, where he noted, among other things, that the works

of writers from totalitarian states (and he added that he meant those works that are worth something) "are always, regardless of the will or interests of their authors, infinitely more political than the works of writers from freer countries" (Tatarka 2019: 42). What Havel meant was that while other writers have much more freedom to write about all sorts of subjects, it is different for writers living in totalitarian regimes: they (including Havel himself) are forced to bear witness to a historical moment and are so hopelessly "enchanted" (Havel's own term) by it that even a simple description of a forest will carry a political message.

Šimečka also belonged to the group of people who created space for a free life in an unfree world. He did not only read Tatarka, but knew him as well as Havel, personally. Both were deeply influenced by Tatarka, and it was also evident in their writings, even if Šimečka considered the ethos of *The Power of the Powerless* (the living in truth) an *exclusive* demand. He understood it more as a challenge for the intellectual class, while ordinary people (the masses) would never understand and believe it (Šimečka 1990a: 172–173). Šimečka worked hard (especially after his prison experience) not to become an intellectual representative of an elite, an upper caste. This didn't mean that his language became more folkish, but he tried to make it very personal, clear and simple.

Dominik Tatarka, formerly a respected Slovak writer but later a banned author and dissident, lived a lonely life in the last years of his life. When he died, Šimečka wrote an article about him titled "Against Night and Power" (originally written for the Italian *l'Unità* journal), in which he emphasized one of Tatarka's typical characteristics — communication, being-together, intercourse (*obcovanie*) in the sense of the effort to create *civitas*: "Humanity for him was identical with communication, to which he counted not only conversation, but also various ancient ceremonies that had developed in rural communities, customs, festivals, worship and so on" (Šimečka 1989: 3). Both Šimečka and Havel took this message of the desire to live together with others from him.

It was Tatarka's call for free communication that was behind Šimečka's idea of convention as the opposite of objective reality which he described in his prison letters. He understood this convention as very personal communication, as an encounter with the other and as the formation of a common world through the figurative 'fusion of horizons' (to use a well-known Gadamerian expression):

> The landscapes of our realities can penetrate end enrich each other; the smell of home cooking wafts through the open windows in both directions. If there is mutual interest, doors to secret rooms are opened, and the paths in the garden lead out to sun-drenched

> meadows as well as to tenebrous hollows which even the master or mistress of the house fears to visit. (…) Every reality is enriched by such encounters, expanding as it absorbs new material. This kind of communication is in fact a condition for the growth of one's own reality. Loss of interest in the reality of others is tantamount to loss of interest in the development of one's own reality. It is a loss of interest in life, in fact (Šimečka 1999: 338; 2002: 121).

When Šimečka enumerates the various means of such mutual enrichment and shaping of shared reality, he adds that life shows "a hundred forms of human communication and intercourse of every kind, as D. T. would say" (Šimečka 1999: 339; 2002: 122). "D. T." is, of course, Dominik Tatarka, whose name he couldn't write openly in his letters at that time. For Šimečka, the landscape (i.e. reality, the common world), which is enriched by communication with others, was the whole secret of freedom, which cannot be taken away or annexed by any ideologist or doctrinaire. And just as the natural landscape requires the care of people, so it is with this metaphorical landscape. This then helps us to better understand Šimečka's words from *The End of Immobility* of 1990:

> It is the case all over the world that dictators leave behind them an eaten-up shop, a debauched morality, widespread criminality, and a reality obscured by lies; freedom usually comes in rather ragged and does not carry much in its hands. It is welcomed only by those who know its value; the others wonder after a time that it is so difficult, laborious, and inconvenient (Šimečka 1990a: 31).

Certainly, there are many other topics in Šimečka's *Letters from Prison* that deserve our attention. The theme of the absence of nature come to the surface, because the world of prison is for him a world without nature. There is also the theme of intellectual drought and deprivation, because the prison environment provides him with only few stimuli, and he must search for real ones through memory and imagination. And there are grand themes such as home and alienation, fearlessness and courage, friendship and familiarity. It is interesting that, independently of Havel, Šimečka developed in prison a very similar theme to Havel's layers of the "concrete horizon". For Šimečka, the reality of the individual has a "spherical structure". There is, according to him, our most personal sphere (personal home), into which we allow only what we ourselves recognize as valuable. This is the reality in which we live authentically. Other people have their own spheres of reality. It is up to us which of these foreign spheres remain closed to us and to which we open.

Both Šimečka and Havel understood their writing from prison not so much as a way to agitate against the regime, but rather to shape what Václav Benda, and after him Havel in *The Power of the Powerless*, called "The Parallel Polis" (Havel 1985: 79). This is that space where only those people whom Patočka describes as 'the shaken' live, people who know "what life and death are all about" (Patočka 1996: 134). For them, a stimulative debate must not be reduced only to an offensive reaction against the current power but should involve an effort to engage in more valuable (though not self-evident) debates. To put it together with Ladislav Hejdánek: "The aim of our philosophical seminars is not even a polemic with official Marxism; we need quite different interlocutors if the professional level of our thinking is to be raised" (Hejdánek 1982: 79). These more valuable interlocutors create the possibility of making communication, even in restricted circumstances, a much wider world, wider in terms of its meaning. The argumentative battle with destructive and totalitarian power is exhausting, which is why dissidents understood well that their intellectual life could only be amplified in communication with others who cared about freedom as much as they did. Freedom grows in the deep forms of communication between intrinsically free people.

Conclusion

If we return to Gnostics, we can see there was a time when the old metaphysics gave us the idea that we should be ashamed of our bodies for imprisoning our souls. But times changed, and the body was no longer understood as a prison of the soul; a human being became an embodied entity situated in the world and in its unpredictable dramas without a pre-written script. They thus had to face this world, confront it and seek their place in it. In such a world — if it takes the form of a totalitarian or post-totalitarian state — many times even innocent, highly educated and free people end up in prisons. Their time is anachronistic to our time; their imagination is more sensitive than ours; their philosophy is more personal, intimate, braver, but also often hesitant, indecisive, mistaken, multi-attitude and therefore *imperfect*. But as Derrida put it: who will judge this?

Totalitarian and post-totalitarian regimes are based on the old Gnostic metaphysics, where the aim is to keep free intelligence in chains or at least under control and in deep silence. Democratic regimes are based on a different philosophy of corporeality, in which fragile intersubjective exchange, communication and expressivity

plays a key role. They are based on open polemic and critical debate, where confrontation must never become a road to prison.

I began this paper with a Czech story by Kafka serving as a new myth for the modern age. I will end it with another Czech story, but by a different author. In his novel-essay *A Limping Pilgrim* (*Kulhavý poutník*), Czech writer Josef Čapek (1985: 68–77 *et seq.*) created the opposite pair of *the human being* ("soul") and *the Person*. The limping pilgrim himself has one shorter leg and therefore does not consider himself a perfect being, but this is what characterizes his existential view of life, in which one succeeds sometimes and fails at other times; he can be good, but many times he also fails; life is easy for him one day and hard the next. Such is *the human being* he describes. Compared to him *the Person* is a totally different being. *The Person* would never allow themself to be identified with something like an ordinary human being. *The Person* knows only success, instead of existential crises; in Čapek's narrative *the Person* merely glides forward in his career, the certainties and uncertainties of life do not bother them in any way, because *the Person* "knows how to arrange things in it"; *the Person* does not live in the real world, but only as a figure in the scenery. *The Person* may live in a body (aestheticized, projected, carefully designed, ideologically conforming), but it is as if they do not have a piece of living flesh on them, as if they are not even a living body. The pair of *the human being* and *the Person* are the mythic expression of two distinct anthropologies. In normalized Czechoslovakia, a dissident could feel exactly like the imperfect limping pilgrim all the time being instructed by *Persons* in the bureaucratic apparatus of the state about how to live. He could not and did not want to live that way and therefore had to interpret his world in terms of a completely different, imperfect anthropology.

Perhaps a free human being in a totalitarian regime has limited options; perhaps in a freer world they would be an object of laughter for their imperfections resulting from thinking with one's hands tied. Together with the limping pilgrim, however, they can still declare: "I'm going — albeit lamely!"

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