
SLOVAK WRITER DOMINIK TATARKA IN THE WORLD OF PHILOSOPHICAL/EXISTENTIALISM INSPIRATION

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Abstract

This paper deals with philosophical inspirations of the Slovak writer D. Tatarka who is perceived as a philosophizing writer in the literary world. In addition to peripheral interconnections of the author with different philosophers (E. Levinas, J. Patočka, etc.) he is most often and very frequently correlated by professionals with the French philosophy of existentialism (J.P. Sartre, G. Marcel, A. Camus). Our paper is precisely focused on this fact. Although, due to a limited space this is just a probe into the researched problem, it however, confirms the relevance of these connections.

Keywords: Tatarka, existentialism, Camus, Sartre, philosophy

1. Introduction

In Slovak literature Dominik Tatarka represents an interesting phenomenon of thoughtful, meditative writer combining literary and philosophical aspects in his works. This intention is perceived and stated not only by the Literary science, but also he explicitly admits himself to philosophical authorities being his ‘sources’ of inspiration [1]. After all, he expressed his ambition to become a writer - philosopher (“I wanted to be a writer-philosopher...” [2]) in one interview with him published in the book of essays *Proti démonom* (Against the Demons) and despite the fact that he was not lucky to study Philosophy, his affection towards knowledge, thinking, his fragile sensitivity in perception of the world, life situations and analytical approach to them caused that he is perceived as a philosophizing writer in the literary-scientific world. (I would marginally like to point out that for example also Brunclík points out to literary – philosophical inspirations (or inspiration of writers by philosophers) in his monograph *Introvertnosťou ku katarzii* (By Introversion to Catharsis) focused on work of Ján Motulko [3]).

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Contemporary literary criticism registered philosophical dimension of Dominik Tatarka only in 1942, when his debut collection of novels and short stories *V úzkosti hľadania* (In the Anxiety of Searching) was published. The literary criticism found out that he is thoughtful, meditative, and philosophizing author trying to analyze the man and marginal situations he/she lives through [4]. His further works such as *Rozhovory bez konca* (Conversations Without End) (1959) and *Prútené kreslá* (Wicker Armchairs) (1963) stated this author's feature to be a fact [5-7]. The modern Literary science describes him exactly in this way. "(...) a realistic story is preceded by poetic imagination, which is connected with philosophizing mediation of existential perception of the man and the world. It is a sort of a generic syncretism which is very rare in the Slovak literature. He represents connection of a poet and a philosopher, what is so rare in our literature." [8] "Tatarka presents both of these components, a romantic journey of a patriotic lyrical poet and a modern philosophical-scientific essay in a synthesis which is very original and I think also unique in the Slovak literature" [9]. "(...) a theme of his work: irrationality, transcendentalism, a kind of philosophizing literature, where also the simplest rotation of words can be considered as a real philosophy" [10].

In addition to these evaluations of his work, the name of Dominik Tatarka is also connected with many specific philosophical names. M. Hamada stated that a source of Tatarka's philosophical nature is his inspiration by A. Aurelius [11] and this thesis is underlined by the author himself [1].

Besides A. Aurelius, the writer is also correlated with M. de Unamuno [12, 13], E. Levinas [14], J. Patočka [15] and L. Straus [16]. However, Dominik Tatarka is most intensively and most frequently connected with French existentialism, namely with J.P. Sartre, G. Marcel or A. Camus [11, 12] and this fact is exactly in the centre of our focus.

2. Tatarka and the existentialism

Connection of Dominik Tatarka with the philosophy of existentialism, specifically with its French version, is currently interpreted with certainty and in general or on the specific-partial level in connection with selected texts of the author by the contemporary Slovak literature science [12, 14, 17-19]. We will try to point out at least to some of these interconnections - with respect to space limits of this paper and a huge issue to cover. We will really present just an outline (a sketch of the issue). This issue is discussed in more details in our monograph *D. Tatarka v kontexte existencializmu* [20] (Dominik Tatarka in the Context of Existentialism). In the wider intentions of Tatarka's key works, it means his debut collection of prose *V úzkosti hľadania*, a novel *Farská republika* (The Clerical Republic) (1948), a double novel *Rozhovory bez konca* (Conversations without End) – consisting of novels *Kohútik v agónii* (A Cock in Agony), *Ešte s vami pobudnúť* (To Stay with you for a While) – and the novel *Prútené kreslá*. However, before we do this, it is necessary to deal with the fact that Tatarka himself refused his inclusion into existentialism: "It seems to me

that there is no surrealism in my books, they are even not a response to existentialism” [21].

Without a need to attribute the author an aspect he refused, it is still a fact that Tatarka studied in Paris at Sorbonne University (1938-1939) and this stay in France caused his well-known inclination to French culture and France as such. Despite the fact that he refused his inclination to existentialism, he knew works and philosophy of the existentialists (J.P. Sartre, A. Camus, G. Marcel). Their names are often used in his reflections. He mentions them explicitly in his books and discussions *Písачky* (Scribbles) [22], *Navrávačky s Evou Štolbovou* (Recording with Eva Štolbová) [1], *Proti démonom* [2, p. 268, 306-307, 310]. Moreover, beside these ‘connections’ there is also his undeterminable contact with G. Marcel (we have not been able to tract more detailed circumstances), who offered Dominik Tatarka E. Rotterdam award [23], and a more interesting reality - Tatarka personally knew J.P. Sartre [2, p. 269]. G. Marcel granted the prize to Dominik Tatarka in order to come to France, so he could enable Dominik Tatarka to escape from the pressure of the communist regime that was raised at that time in Czechoslovakia. But Tatarka was forbidden to leave the country and he could not come to France to take over the prize and so he was not able to fulfil his dream to move to France and live there.

The above stated biographical facts suggest that he was aware of French existentialism. On the other hand, it is still the fact that we can see a certain existentialist feeling in his texts published in 1930 and 1933 [20, p. 45-53]. We mean his first short stories published in a debut prose *V úzkosti hľadania, Rozprávka o prichádzajúcej jari* (A tale of Upcoming Spring), *Cesty* (Roads), *Záchvevy duše* (Trembles of a Soul). It was in fact far before exploring this movement in Slovakia (at that time, even the existentialism movement was present only in France). More complete knowledge about existentialism was brought to Slovakia by an analytical essay of M. Vaross *Pohľad na súčasnú filozofiu* (View of Current Literature) published in *Philosofica Slovaca* on 1945-1947, and by Jozef Felix essay *Neužitočné ústa – typ novej drámy* (Useless mouth - New Drama Type), written in 1947 on the occasion of introduction of the play of S. de Beauvoir on the stage of National Theatre [24].

All other works of Dominik Tatarka (we mean also other novels from his debut) were published in 1940 or only after this year, when he had already finished his study at Sorbonne University (1938-1939) and had already met with existentialism.

Two basic moments emanate from this knowledge - namely undisputable contact of Dominik Tatarka with existentialism as a movement and with its representatives (whatever form and range it can be); while to contact, read or explore means either intentional or unintentional ‘absorption’ of knowledge, intentionally keep the knowledge in the depths of consciousness and unintentionally keep the knowledge in the depth of subconscious. However, the second fact is that the writer had a potency to think in existentialist manner before the movement of existentialism.

This fact of existentialism before the existentialism movement is underlined not only by D. Tatarka, but it is also confirmed by other authors such as F.M. Dostojevskij [25, 26], J. Čapek, L.N. Tolstoj [27], J. Červeň [28], in case of whom the experts state the presence of existentialism moments in their works before existentialism, while Dostojevskij is considered to be a predecessor of existentialist philosophy within the philosophy, just as Kierkegaard in philosophical theology [29].

This possibility of existentialism before the existentialism and indeed after the existentialism is allowed by a non-classical way of thinking. In this case it is not a strict doctrine whose 'land' is implicitly just a medium of intellect, scientific concept, scientific reflection, abstraction, but it is a philosophy of a particular human existence, of a particular human experience. There is a particular man in the centre "who enters into philosophy with his/her specific historical situation and experience, a man who participates in his/her existence by tasks and difficulties of his/her life" [30]. There is thus no other "path to an authentic subjectivity" except through "the complicated and sometimes painful struggles of life. One should not expect to make sense of his own life without an arduous struggle to interpret one's existence in relation to self, the world..." [31] It is also a doctrine which "is artistically nothing more than it is philosophically" [27, p. 29]. Existentialism opens the 'diapason' of invariant subtle 'human' (experience specifically - in variant) problems (death, questions about the meaning of life, fear, anxiety, etc.) on the platform of specificity. And in this invariance of death, disgust, anxiety, fear, searching of a meaning of life - that is not typical for any other philosophical theory (only existentialism pointed out on it and put it in the centre of its interest), where a human subject, who in his/her activity, in self-projection (determining his/her essence) to those invariance problems awakes through a space of his/her specificity – the dispersion of existentialism into different times and spaces is natural. As stated by V. Černý, existentialism is a movement which is based in "wider, more general and more effective life intuitions than the intuitions which are just temporal and fashionable" [27, p. 14], and "anyone will be considered to be existentialist who refuses direct affiliation to this movement and anyone who belongs to this movement only seemingly or partially is being allocated to this movement" [27, p. 25-26].

And therefore, if being motivated by frequent statements of the Literary science and also by biographical facts of the writer, we think about the work of Dominik Tatarka through existentialism movement and state mutual interconnection, it is not done in order to 'classify' the author. We only want to point out to moments in thinking of meditative and thinking human beings. By discussing the problems of human existence, they meet on a common 'wavelength' intentionally or unintentionally. We also suppose that not connecting the work of Dominik Tatarka with French existentialism (with regard to the writer's relation to France and its connection with Sartre or Marcel) would mean to neglect something very important.

3. Existentialistic features of the work of Dominik Tatarka

A basic feature of existentialistic philosophy is the central focus on man - his/her internal world and surviving, what in literary world represents significant orientation on a person - subject of a hero and his/her internal world and surviving. As stated by Š. Vlašín [32] or V. Černý [27, p. 25-26], literature of existentialism (using elements of philosophy of existentialism) is a literature that is subtle, focused on catching of authentic living, diverted from objective stories; it is a literature depicting intimate internal life of a hero; a literature of fear from own existence.

This model of a text focused on subtle/intimate living of a human subject and his/her internal world is evident in works of Dominik Tatarka. Whether we focus on lieutenant Dušan in the novel *Pach* (Scent) (from the collection of prose *V úzkosti hľadania*), Katarina and her bother from the novel *Kohútik v agónii* (A Cock in Agony) or in the novel *Prútené kreslá* (Wicker Armchairs), the central focus is put on Bartolomej Slzička and his internal living at the background of historical events (coming up to the Second World War). The same happens in the novel *Farská republika*; it can be even stated that the environment and external events are depicted even in a more evident way. However, they are set in such a way that these external events evoke existential, internal intimate status of the heroes. This fact was stated by I. Jančovič: “He (note of M.A. - Tatarka) opens a problem of being in direct connection with a specific historical space-time. At first, unsolved problems of a main character are caused by specific social conditions; they disrupt the personality of Menkin that is otherwise not tragic; they graduate a feeling of disgust and glumness inside him.” [33].

Another determinative moment of the philosophy of existentialism is an emphasis on authenticity of human existence (authentic/honest existence versus false/insincere existence) and on authenticity of conduct. (I would marginally like to point out that for example Z. Vargová also discusses about the ‘constant’ of acting (of conduct) in interesting way in her work *Židovský fenomén v stredo európskych súvislostiach* [34].) A man who underlies some determinants within his/her self-formation (either consciously or unconsciously) is insincere: “each person that invents some determinism is a person who is insincere” [26, p. 48], he/she is a false personality. “In case, for example, I passively accept a summary of orders that are seemingly forced on me by an environment to which I was born, by a party to which I was fixed without real thinking, etc., everything happens as if I was just a tool, an ordinary wheel, it means as if I was denied a opportunity to act, which is a human possibility par excellence. However, all this further consideration assumes that the aggrieved person does not know himself/herself, that he/she pushes away exactly what gives him/her own dignity.” [35]

The above mentioned polarity ‘authentic versus false’ is made more clear in case of Dominik Tatarka in several ways. One of them is a contradiction of characters when the authentic hero ‘confronts’ the false one. As an example, we

can mention Martin and ‘crawling’ people from the prose *Rozprávka o prichádzajúcej jari*. Dominik Tatarka brilliantly puts the authentic hero Martin, outliving his own ending, into opposition (who feels the end of his existence) thinking about the meaning of life, feeling anxiety, fear and rebelling against the life by the typical question ‘Why?’, and on the other hand crawling people who are asking nothing (“The people - driven by an invisible force - have never asked Why” [36]), just passively accepting the reality. Tatarka likened them very cleverly to ‘wastrel’ moving ants just to signify/underline unawareness of their conduct: “People were crawling in the village like ants, as if driven by an invisible force” [36].

A conflict of authentic/honest existence versus false/insincere existence is further revealed as an internal conflict in the character only. For example, Magda from the novel *Pred zrkadlom* (In front of the Mirror) (from the collection of prose *V úzkosti hľadania*) can be considered as this type of character. In this case a mirror is a moment of a truth and it is a symbol of awakening from determinacy/crowd into own authenticity. Magda (behaving exactly according to the will of her parents and following the ‘constants’ attributable to her social status) standing in front of the mirror is in the ball wearing heavy brocade dress in the community of ‘artificial’ non-authentic officers bound by conventions. A moment of ‘draft’ into the mirror opens her different dimension. Magda ‘behind the mirror’ is in the bosom of nature, she dreams of a dress made of light muslin and she is with her liberal-minded, unbound cousin who makes her happy: “How is it possible that I have forgotten about my dream and what made me happy?” [36, p. 61].

As it can be seen, Dominik Tatarka again depicted determined/insincere versus authentic/honest by contrasting phenomena: ball as a symbol of conventions, social etiquette, rules - versus - nature as phenomenon of spontaneity, freedom, rampancy; heavy brocade as uncomfortable fabric restricting natural movement - versus - muslin as a fine material which gives person a freedom to move; and officers as people ‘bound’ by conventions living within determinations and rules set by outside world - versus - unbound, free cousin living in the ‘rhythm’ of his own personality.

If we are speaking about existentialism moments, we can not bypass the phenomenon of death. It is a basic principle of existential philosophy. From feeling of upcoming end, a human being feels the problems of his/her existence; he/she asks questions about the meaning of human existence and experience existential feelings of fear, anxiety, absurdity, etc. “a man is condemned to invent a person at every moment without any support and help ... and then we are abandoned by all.” [26, p. 25] “As far as death does not come on the basis of our freedom, it can only take away what is dear.” [37]

Dominik Tatarka works with death in this existentialist sense. In his texts, death is a reason of existential anxiety, fear for beloved ones (e.g. *Posol prichádza* (A messenger is coming) from the collection of prose *V úzkosti hľadania* – fear of a mother for death of her son; the novel *Ešte s vami pobudnúť* (To Stay with you for a While) – fear of a son for death of his mother). Death of

a beloved person, of a main hero, is also a 'trigger' of existential pain, emptiness, feelings of meaninglessness of life (*Kohútik v agónii* - anxiety of a mother for death of her son). Characters being aware of their own death feel existential anxiety, fear, and meaninglessness of human existence (from the collection of prose *V úzkosti hľadania: Rozprávka o prichádzajúcej jari* – the main character Martin). Tatarka even deals with the motive of suicide (in the collection of prose: *V úzkosti hľadania: Ľudia za priečkou* (In the Anxiety of Searching: People behind a Partition)), which underlines Sartre's boundless freedom and so a possibility to choose death instead of life [37].

As result from the above stated, Dominik Tatarka corresponds to existentialism also with the fact that his characters experience basic existential feelings, such as anxiety ("His pale face and a bald forehead was sweated because of anxiety. His month was bloody because of biting it in anxiety." [36, p. 111]), disgust ("Disgust... Everything is disgust." [38]), being fed up ("I was offended that you can be fed up with me... Why are you fed up? And your answer, because everything is meaningless." [36, p. 30]), tragic ("What are we, small Slovaks, in this war? It was a general and tragic feeling." [38, p. 15]), loneliness ("We were sad due to loneliness on the banks of the river Váh." [34, p. 66]) and typical for existentialism (as noticed by V. Černý [27, p. 36]) psycho-physiological feeling of indisposition, it means vomiting, sweating, shivers, etc.: "I [Bartolomej Slzička, note of M.A.] vomit into the Siena from this height instead of tears or sorrow." [39]; "just let them throw up, tell [Menkina and Pižurný, note of M.A.] what they need to" [38].

It is evident from the above mentioned that the writer uses in his works the lexemes 'belonging' to the philosophy of existentialism (disgust, anxiety, loneliness, tragic, etc.). We can not omit other moment of existentialist stylistics - naturalistic aspects of his work. Despite the statement of Sartre that existentialism does not imply naturalism in such outer form which is typical for naturalism, it means, for example for Zola [26, p. 11], these intentions can not be denied within the existentialism. Naturalistic aspects are evident in Sartre literary work: "An odour of urine was around him like around old men with prostate." [40]; "Everything that came out of my body was disgusting and suspicious." [40, p. 26]; "She loves me, but she does not love my appendix in the spiritus..." [40, p. 95]. And these themes were not avoided by Dominik Tatarka: "They put me into jug. Jug was full. People took crap under themselves." [38, p. 38]; "An express train rushed further breaking free from the will of a man. Until it came to deadly country blemished by human ulcers, scabs and pus." [38, p. 79].

4. Conclusion

The above draft of existential moments declares presence of existential philosophy elements in the work of Dominik Tatarka. As we have already stated above, for limited space possibilities it is just a short probe into this 'wide' issue [19]. Moreover, beside the above mentioned existential moments, it is also

legitimately possible to trace presence of both Christian and atheistic aspects, what is also reflected in value 'turbulences' of the writer's work. However, due to space limitation this is a subject of another paper.

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