

Heresy and Heritage: Jan Patočka on Philosophy, Politics, and the Arts

“The Writer and his Object”: Jan Patočka, Art and Engagement

Organizer: Centre d’Etudes Tchèques, Université Libre de Bruxelles

Friday, 5th May 2017

Venue: Maison des Arts, Campus de Solbosch de l’ULB, Avenue Jeanne 56, Brussels

9h – Opening of the conference by Xavier Luffin, Director of the Department of Modern Languages and Literatures at ULB

9h30-10h30

Keynote: Jonathan Bolton (Harvard University, USA): A Guest from the Unknown: Jan Patočka, Antigone, and the Theater

11h-12h30

PANEL I: Jan Patočka, Politics and Society

Tomáš Herrmann (Institute for Contemporary History, Academy of Sciences, Prague): **Patočka’s Platonism as the Key to his Intellectual and Public Activities**

The paper concentrates on the Patočka’s reception of Plato’s philosophy and Platonism. Patočka refers to Platonism as the base of European culture frequently in a specific situation when he has to leave the University and finds himself in certain isolation. It happens for the first time in the fifties during the project of so called “Negative Platonism” when he connects the interpretation of Platonism with problems of modern humanism. It happens for the second time in the seventies when he combines interpretation of Plato with phenomenology and with central motives of “caring for the soul” and the so-called “post-European” era. In both cases, there are broadly outlined projects created that finally remain a torso. The paper touches on some factual biographic and generally philosophic connections of both projects and shows one of possible keys to Patočka’s intellectual biography.

Rajendra Chitnis (University of Bristol): **The Politics of Translation: Patočka and Durych’s *God’s Rainbow***

Translations of imaginative literature may be motivated not just by a vague desire to promote a national culture or contribute to world literature, but in support of a more defined cultural-political end. In 1975, Patočka’s West German publication of his own German translation of Jaroslav Durych’s novel *Boží duha* (God’s Rainbow, 1969), with an essay focusing on the theme of repentance and reconciliation, sought to provoke a shift in post-war Czech-German relations, away from mutual recrimination to mutual understanding and forgiveness. Though its impact at the time was minimal, the essay was included in the 1988 French translation, both post-1989 Czech editions, and the 1999 German edition. Conservative Czech Roman Catholic critics, led by Durych’s son, Václav, have, however, always criticized the co-opting of the novel to this cause, and the inseparability of Patočka’s interpretation of both the novel and its author imposed on subsequent editions. This paper will examine this reception in the light of enduring antipathies between Czech intellectuals identified with ‘Masarykian humanism’ and Roman Catholicism, and prevailing views about the post-war expulsions of Germans from Czechoslovakia, and assess how far Patočka’s essay anticipates and seeks to overcome these ingrained attitudes in the interests of a new, shared national position on Czech-German relations. It will also consider the legitimacy of Patočka’s interpretation of the novel and his exploitation of it, with reference to Tilman Kastan’s account of Pavel/Paul

Eisner's similarly motivated 1933 German translation of Durych's *Bloudění* (in English as *The Descent of the Idol*, 1935)

Astrid Muls (Université Libre de Bruxelles): **Between Crisis and Identity Construction. Ladislav Klíma and the Czechoslovak Underground**

A permanent struggle with the surrounding structures, an identity built at odds with a certain reality which is a source of pain, a life lead on the margins of society, an absolute conception of subjectivity; these dimensions of Ladislav Klíma's thought echoed within the Czechoslovak underground of the 1970's. Expelled from public life by the Normalization authorities in the end of the 1960's, the members of the underground found in Klíma's works a certain formulation of their own identity, of their own position within society, as well as a similar will to interlace the thought and the act, to live the thought with the body. In his essay about the key points of Klíma's philosophy ("Pokus o rozbor klíčových tezí", 1967), Jan Patočka established a link between the philosopher's personal experience and the violence of his relationship to the world. As it is the case for the Czechoslovak underground, Klíma built his identity facing a state of crisis, taking on the harsh reality through his subversion. Obsessed by the question of the praxis throughout his life and unable to crystallize it, Klíma used his literary works to show the supremacy of the Absolute Subjectivity and engaged himself in some kind of "experimental" praxis. Shifting the praxis in the field of the fiction was also characteristic of the Czechoslovak underground community. As underlined by Jonathan Bolton's in his work *Worlds of Dissent* (2012), the underground had a significant tendency to "legendarize" its actions, to give its existence a mythological dimension. Through those observations, a parallel between Klíma and the Czechoslovak underground will be drawn.

12h30-14h30 LUNCH BREAK

14h30-16h30

PANEL II: Philosophy of Jan Patočka and the Arts

Jan Josl (Charles University, Prague): **Art and Care of the Soul in Patočka's Philosophy**

The aim of this paper is to approach art from the perspective of 'care of the soul'. The concept of "care of the soul" along with a few others (natural world, phenomenology) expresses the essence of Patočka's philosophy and it can offer more complex view on position and meaning of art in Patočka's thinking.

Since soul consist for Patočka of freedom, *krisis* and *fysis* as its main features, it will be necessary to show that artistic experience includes all important features of experience of soul. The lecture will also demonstrate the boundaries of art as only limited form of care of the soul compared to philosophy. Though philosophy seems to be in principle superior to art, in current situation it represents in Patočka's view the only way of care of the soul we have left.

Ondřej Sládek (Czech Academy of Sciences, Czech Republic): **Jan Patočka on Structuralism**

The aim of the lecture is to 1) present Patočka's views on structuralism, in its Czech as well as French version; 2) examine the relationship between phenomenological conception and some of the theoretical-methodological principles of Czech structuralism. Patočka wrote about structuralism only rarely. Nevertheless, it is possible to form a relatively clear idea of his view on structuralism from what he published on structuralism and the comments he made on

different occasions. Patočka knew the representatives of the Prague Linguistic Circle (V. Mathesius, R. Jakobson, J. Mukařovský and others) well; together they organized Husserl's stay in Prague, but they never established a closer scholarly cooperation. However, we can find several connections between Czech structuralism and Patočka's phenomenology. Some of these links are highlighted in my lecture.

Jan Tlustý (Masaryk University, Brno): **Jan Patočka's Philosophy and its Contribution to Literary Studies**

Patočka's philosophical thinking inspired reception approaches in Czech literary studies, especially Zdeněk Kožmín's interpretative approach and Milan Jankovič's concept of a work of art as a "process of meaning". These approaches reflected upon the issue of meaning in both literary works and aesthetic experience. Kožmín and Jankovič derive their positions from Jan Mukařovský's structuralism, but they are further inspired by other schools of thought, namely Patočka's phenomenology. The aim of my contribution lies in outlining Patočka's impact on Czech literary studies, while showing his aesthetics in a broader literary and philosophical context. Specifically, I am going to point out the surprising similarity between Patočka's idea that a literary work points towards our "lifeworld" (Lebenswelt) and Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics.

Petra James (Université Libre de Bruxelles): **Art as Absolute Play : Jan Patočka as a Literary Critic**

Jan Patočka dedicated numerous texts to the question of aesthetics. More particularly, Patočka wrote essays on specific Czech writers and artists such as the poet Karel Hynek Mácha (1810-1836), Josef Čapek (1887-1945), Jaroslav Durych (1886-1962) and many others. In his studies and numerous reviews, he explored the frontiers and differences between literature and philosophy and focused on philosophical topics developed by artists. Moreover, we should note that these major texts reflecting Patočka's thinking on art were written at dramatic moments of Czech(oslovak) history – the first mentioned in 1969, the ambivalent year following the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968 and the subsequent suppression of the Prague Spring. The text was to be published in a volume of texts from 1968-1969 entitled *The Struggle for the Meaning of the Present Time (O smysl dneška)*. In the end, due to political circumstances, the whole issue of the book was destroyed.

As for the text on Mácha, it was published in 1944, during WWII and the "Protectorate" imposed on Bohemia and Moravia. The prologue to his own German translation of Durych's novel *The Rainbow of God (Boží duha)* was published in 1975, in the middle of the « normalisation » period (the Czech version of the novel was published for the first time in 1969, seven years after the author's death). For all these reasons I suggest exploring in my paper this under-researched topic of the potentially "engagé" dimension of Patočka's writing on art.

16h30-17h30 – Closing discussion