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## Socialist Realism in the Context of Existentialism: D. Tatarka and his Novel *The Birthday Cake*

### Abstract

This study is a free continuation of our monograph *Dominik Tatarka in the context of existentialism*<sup>1</sup>, the aim of which was to grasp the central work of D. Tatarka through the perspective of existentialism. Within the interpretive analyzes, however, we did not deal with the writer's key works of the so-called socialist realism in the mentioned publication, which means the works *The First and Second Strike*, *The Years of Companionship* and *The Birthday Cake*, because they required a separate approach due to their specificity and their relation to the communist regime. We gradually began to compensate the mentioned deficit, the elimination of which will enable a more comprehensive grasp of the existentialism issue in the author's work, in the form of partial studies. In them, through the view of existentialism, we deal with the works *The First and Second Strike*<sup>2</sup>

1 ANTOřOVÁ, M.: *Dominik Tatarka v kontexte existencializmu*. Nitra : FF UKF, 2011.

2 ANTOřOVÁ, M.: Prvý a druhý úder v kontexte Tatarkovej existencialisticky ladenej tvorby. In *Slavica Nitriensia: časopis pre výskum slovanských filológii*, 2012, Vol. 1, No. 2, pp. 128-154.

and *The Years of Companionship*<sup>3</sup>. The presented study solves the mentioned problem in the last novel from this line, meaning in the novel *The Birthday Cake*, and in this direction closes the question of existentialism in Tatarka's key works of socialist realism.

### Key words

Anxiety. Authentic hero. Communist regime. Existentialism. Inauthentic hero. Socialist-realist method. Stylistics.

3 ANTOřOVÁ, M.: Socialist-Realistic Consistency (Companionable Summers). In *European Journal of Media Art and Photography*, 2018, Vol. 6, No. 1, pp. 100-111.

### Introduction

The paper (as already suggested by the abstract) follows the issue of our monograph *Dominik Tatarka in the Context of Existentialism*<sup>4</sup> in a broader sense, which addresses existentialist aspects in the writer's central works (*In the Anxiety of Searching*, *The Miraculous Virgin*, *The Clerical Republic*, *Wicker Armchairs*, and *Scribbles*). In the existentialist discourse, we did not include texts in the monograph that require a specific approach. Works written in the 1950s can be considered as such works. As is well known, the writer became a supporter and public promoter of the communist regime for a certain period of time, and with his work from these years he sought to fulfill the required socialist-realistic concept/dictation, which was also imposed on the field of art. During this period of Tatarka, he wrote works which by their style, a thought diapason and the like diametrically deviated from the writer's "pre-communist" and "post-communist" works. The key texts in this pro-regime direction were the novels *The First and Second Strike*, *The Years of Companionship* and *The Birthday Cake*. Due to a considerable diversion from the previous works – or despite it – however, we consider it necessary to cope also with this plane of his work within the complexity of understanding the problem of existentialism in Tatarka's works. We deal with the problem of existentialism in the novel *The First*

4 ANTOřOVÁ, M.: *Dominik Tatarka v kontexte existencializmu*. Nitra : FF UKF, 2011.

and *Second Stroke* in our paper *The First and Second Stroke in the Context of Tatarka's Existentialist Work*<sup>5</sup>; the novel *The Years of Companionship* was subject to the same optics in the paper *Socialist-Realistic Consistency (Companionable Summers)*<sup>6</sup>. We close the issue of existentialism in Tatarka's key post-regime works in this paper, the subject of which is the issue of existentialism in the novel *The Birthday Cake* with naturally urging correlative and comparative moment towards the novels *The First and Second Strike* or *The Years of Companionship*.

*The Birthday Cake* novel was, similar to *The Years of Companionship*, published in 1954. The plot is situated in the village of Vieska and the main idea is the idea of collectivization in this village. In terms of composition, this work can be "situated" somewhere between *The First and Second Strike* and *The Years of Companionship*. The composition is not linear as in the *The Years of Companionship*, but it does not appear as infinite as in the case of *The First and Second Strike*<sup>7</sup>. Although the book was criticized for its fragmentary nature and inconsistency of plot

5 ANTOřOVÁ, M.: Prvý a druhý úder v kontexte Tatarkovej existencialisticky ladenej tvorby. In *Slavica Nitriensia: časopis pre výskum slovanských filológii*, 2012, Vol. 1, No. 2, pp. 128-154.

6 ANTOřOVÁ, M.: Socialist-Realistic Consistency (Companionable Summers). In *European Journal of Media Art and Photography*, 2018, Vol. 6, No. 1, pp. 100-111.

7 For more information, please see: ANTOřOVÁ, M.: Socialist-Realistic Consistency (Companionable Summers). In *European Journal of Media Art and Photography*, 2018, Vol. 6, No. 1, pp. 100-111 and ANTOřOVÁ, M.: Prvý a druhý úder v kontexte Tatarkovej existencialisticky ladenej tvorby. In *Slavica Nitriensia: časopis pre výskum slovanských filológii*, 2012, Vol. 1, No. 2, pp. 128-154.

"segments"<sup>8</sup>, nevertheless (compared to *The First and Second Strike*<sup>9</sup>), Tatarka achieved a more concise and holistic compositionality (which, naturally, does not automatically mean that it is a better work) in this case. Despite the presence of digressions, marginal episodes that sporadically obscure the text, the work shows the continuity and compactness of the plot motifs<sup>10</sup>.

In contrast to two works mentioned above, a change in the author's style can also be registered here. At the linguistic-stylistic level, the novel *The Birthday Cake* does not attract by extremely sentimental-pathetic socialist-realist positions, and on the other hand we do not register in it any existentialist moments. While in the novels *The First and Second Strike* and *The Years of Companionship* the presence of unnatural sentimental expressions is really evident (e.g., hearts on the board, emotions evoked by the Communist Party, doves in the office, etc.)<sup>11</sup>, Tatarka is not as expressive in the case of *The Birthday Cake*. Moreover, the existentialist and extravagant dimension is also not present in this work (it is apparent in *The First and*

8 For more information, please see: ANTOřOVÁ, M.: *Socialistickorealistická „triáda“ v kontexte existencializmu*. [Inaugural Dissertation]. Nitra : Filozofická fakulta Univerzity Konštantína Filozofa v Nitre, 2012, pp. 26-30.

9 In the novel *The First and Second Stroke*, we mainly mean the part dealing with the war and the Slovak National Uprising, where a percipient witnesses various divisions, wanderings, entering the characters into the plot and their subsequent discontinuous "loss", etc., what fragmentize the composition and give it the character of fleeting "images".

10 TATARKA, D.: *Radostník*. Bratislava : Slovenský spisovateľ, 1954.

11 More information are depicted in the above-mentioned studies, note no. 2 and 3.

*Second Strike*, but not in the novel *The Years of Companionship*, where it is also missing)<sup>12</sup>.

However, the unprecedented lack of sentimental expression (as can be seen in *The First and Second Strike* or *The Years of Companionship*) does not mean the absence of socialist realism. It is present on the thematic-content level and, as we have already indicated, on the linguistic and stylistic plane it is realized on a more national level compared to the other two works.

### 1 About the Socialist-Realistic Basis of *The Birthday Cake*

The work in the spirit of the socialist-realistic method has the required theme. The base of the story is external historical events (the already mentioned collectivization of the village Vieska) and the characters who realize themselves within this external “territory”. The heroes are not authentic in symbiosis with socialist-realistic doctrine<sup>13</sup>. The determining “vacuum” that corrects them and by which they are governed en masse is on one hand the communist regime and on the other hand the remains of the old system. According to the typification of the characters, the novel fulfills the “socialist-realistic doctrine” of the art about a “good” (pro-communist) hero, a “saboteur” hero (a follower of the old regime) and a hero who initially rejects the communist regime, but

then changes their thinking<sup>14</sup>. For these socialist-realistic works of Tatarka, the fact of non-free existence underlines (and in fact helps to complete/create) a characteristic approach. The writer ignores introspection of a character (which is a determining attribute of heroes in “non-communist” works<sup>15</sup>) and offers no fundamental space for internal monologue, self-analysis, which would take the character and through it the whole story into more complex, authentic positions.

The heroes of the work move only in the range of either adoring the communist regime (Paľo Masiarik) or on the other hand defending the old system (characters of farmers). They are missing depth and a detached view beyond the externally established determinants, and therefore cannot be assigned a dimension of authenticity. Even from the message of a free, strong “saboteur” Lalinský, it is not possible to see an existentialist authentic man. The author pays minimal attention to this character; it is not developed and more clearly legible in the authentic direction.

The socialist-realistic theme, a focus on external events, a superficial approach to the shallow characters – this is what connects Tatarka’s works of socialist realism to a greater or

lesser extent<sup>16</sup>. But as we have already outlined, the stylistic level of *The Birthday Cake* is different compared to *The First and Second Strike* and *The Years of Companionship*. The percipient in the complex is not disturbed so significantly by excessive expressive-emotional outputs and the mentioned linguistic and stylistic factual feeling is sometimes “pushed” into the semantic level of the text, namely in the sense of some pragmatic, factual, and in some moments not really pro-regime evaluation of induced event situations. And if in the interpretive analysis of *The First and Second Strike* we have pointed out that that moment of pragmatism and unsentimental position is expressed here through images of the dead, depicted destruction of war, nihilism, etc., then in the novel *The Birthday Cake* it can occasionally be registered with regard to perceived stylistic pragmatism, which also affects the semantic level of the text at some moments. Paradoxically, it is despite the fact that, as Mikula stated, for example, *The Birthday Cake* is really a more conformist work towards the socialist model of literature<sup>17</sup>.

<sup>16</sup> However, it can be noted that with regard to the complex composition, the motive of war, the occasional serious conversations of the characters in *The First and Second Strike*, the simplicity and naivety are disrupted and not felt as unequivocally and comprehensively as in the novel *The Years of Companionship* or in *The Birthday Cake*. For more information, please see: ANTOŠOVÁ, M.: Prvý a druhý úder v kontexte Tatarkovej existencialisticky ladenej tvorby. In *Slavica Nitriensis: časopis pre výskum slovanských filológií*, 2012, Vol. 1, No. 2, pp. 128-154; ANTOŠOVÁ, M.: Socialist-Realistic Consistency (Companionable Summers). In *European Journal of Media Art and Photography*, 2018, Vol. 6, No. 1, pp. 100-111.

<sup>17</sup> MIKULA, V.: *Démoni súhlasu i nesúhlasu*. Bratislava : F. R. & G., 2010, p. 19.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> For more information, please see: NOVÁČIKOVÁ, D.: *Modlitba v prozaickej tvorbe slovenského literárneho realizmu*. In *Modlitba v umení*. Banská Bystrica : Ústav vedy a výskumu Univerzity Mateja Bela, 2005, pp. 61-68.

<sup>14</sup> LAUČEK, A.: *Schéma a dogma v literatúre*. Prešov : Vydavateľstvo Michala Vaška, 2006.

<sup>15</sup> ANTOŠOVÁ, M.: *Dominik Tatarka v kontexte existencializmu*. Nitra : FF UKF, 2011.

### 2 On more Factual Positions or on Truly Realistic Indications of Socialist Realism

There are passages in the work, which have the character of depicting the real village atmosphere under the pressure of new politics. And when Lauček stated that: “(...) *Mináč* or *Tatarka* were able to depict (even though sometimes false) pulse of that time in several places of the “building” novels and to connect stories of people with the atmosphere of that time”<sup>18</sup>, then this aspect can be also seen in various fragmentary moments, while it does not sound false in some moments in *The Birthday Cake* (although according to Lauček’s classification, it is rather a “collectivization” than a “building/ industrial” novel)<sup>19</sup>.

A realistic-authentic narrator’s description of a defense lawyer from political processes can be taken into account. The author defined the character (in the sense of a black-and-white vision of good, pro-socialist, and evil, anti-socialist hero) as a “saboteur” of the system, but he did not place the character in a negative light as an “enemy” of the communist regime. The author kept his distance in this regard, and a kind of understanding of the human dramas caused by the totalitarian regime is evident even from the narrator’s description of the defense lawyer: “(...) *a man not even fifty years old, but prematurely old, tormented...*”<sup>20</sup>;

<sup>18</sup> LAUČEK, A.: *Schéma a dogma v literatúre*. Prešov : Vydavateľstvo Michala Vaška, 2006, p. 26.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p. 103.

<sup>20</sup> TATARKA, D.: *Radostník*. Bratislava :

*“Nothing young fit to this martyrlike face, not even the rough-rimmed glasses modern when he was at the top of his fame”*<sup>21</sup>; *“A prudent lawyer, a defender of political trials, was surely impressed by appearance of a blond young man... He closed the door discreetly, but promptly; his sad eyes connived softly, even a smile came to his face. A thought of a life job could rejuvenate him even now. A degraded man, now unimportant official in the communal enterprises, suddenly took over from a stunted pose”*<sup>22</sup>.

Another “sober-realistic” moment is the character of Lalinský. Despite the fact that this character clearly fits into the role of a “saboteur”, the author portrays him as a strong, rebellious personality that can only grow in the West<sup>23</sup>.

In terms of Tatarka’s depersonalized approach, in which pro-communist linguistic and semantic propaganda is not perceived, we can also mention characters who do not have the “status” of an “enemy of the communist regime” in the work, but quite the opposite. Despite the fact that they act in a pro-regime “mode”, the author inserts statements such as those mentioned below into their speeches: *“You, communists, are all like that: you only come when you need something... Except for Bert Švec, you are all such comrades: you think just of yourself”*<sup>24</sup>.

The uprising of local villagers against the “agitation colony” also sounds non-servile (instead of listening

to the agitators/communists, they leave and go to the fields, note of M. A.): *“They are only speaking (agitators, note of M. A.). Can’t you see? They will not graze the cows for us”*<sup>25</sup>. And even though the narrator states that the way of demonstration is disgusting: *“No one can doubt for a moment that Vieska is demonstrating in front of them in such abominable way...”*<sup>26</sup>, he continues in his statements, such as: *“In Vieska, all the farmers seemed to stick to the crows’ tails rather than empty words (it means speeches of agitators, communists, note of M. A.)... Everyone who did not graze the cows went to the church for a worship”*<sup>27</sup>.

Tatarka intensifies the dissenting atmosphere of this situation with a mild naturalism, in the undertone of which one cannot help but feel a touch of irony (i.e. cows incensing in front of the National Committee): *“Four cows pass in front of the National Committee - beauties... In such a heat, Vieska had not taken the cattle to graze yet. In such a time, as soon as a heifer or a dumb calf hears or thinks that a bug or a botfly buzzes somewhere around, it raises a tail and starts to prance... Pompoms of dried manure shake on thighs of heifers and calves...”*<sup>28</sup>. Contemporary critics upbraided Tatarka for this ironic and ridiculous moment<sup>29</sup>.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p. 67.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p. 70.

<sup>27</sup> TATARKA, D.: *Radostník*. Bratislava : Slovenský spisovateľ, 1954, p. 70.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p. 68-70.

<sup>29</sup> For more information, please see: ANTOŠOVÁ, M.: *Socialistickorealistická „trída“ v kontexte existencializmu*. [Inaugural Dissertation]. Nitra : Filozofická fakulta Univerzity Konštantína Filozofa v Nitre, 2012, pp. 26-38.

Slovenský spisovateľ, 1954, p. 15.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p. 24.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p. 80.

### 3 About Potentially Existentialist Motives in the “Service” of Neutrality

It has already been mentioned that with regard to socialist realism, in the novel *The Birthday Cake* it is possible to register relatively factual statements that do not lead to extreme pathos and sentiment, or even have the ambition of (undistorted) realistic statements (even statements which do not have only positive value towards the communist party), so it is also the same in connection with existentialism (as we have indicated above). There are no stylistic twists (extravagant expressions) that would follow Tatarka's existentialist work, and we also do not register semantic positions in the work, which should have the ambition to sound in the sense of existentialism. However, also in this novel, Tatarka again uses a few motifs (directly related to existentialism) in his own typical “Tatarka's” way, which intersect with his work and with the help of which Tatarka built the existentialism in his existentially tuned works.

In accordance with the mass (with inauthentic grasp of life) of the characters, for example, the motif of a chance - accidental acceptance of life - is again represented here. This motif is explicitly connected with the character of Justín Mikleš, who is aware enough to perceive his servility and lack of freedom in decision-making, but despite this he is subject to pressure from the outside. A conflict of “external versus internal” is explicitly indicated only in connection with this character: “*I am a weak man. – As a weak man, I left my life in hands of a chance, I have not decided*

*about my life so far*”<sup>30</sup>.

From other moments, we can see the phenomenon of nausea (sweat, shivering) whenever the characters feel threatened, bad, anxious: “*He shook as a man in anxiety. His eyes darkened again*”<sup>31</sup>; “*Paľo Masiarik was forpined, sweating and breathing hard*”<sup>32</sup>; “*He frowned and sweated*”<sup>33</sup>; “*Standing in front of the National Committee nervously, wiping sweat from his forehead with one sleeve and then with another (a tense situation, when Mikleš stole a document from Masiarik)*”<sup>34</sup>.

There are also obvious naturalistic miniatures (for which the writer was ultimately criticized by contemporary critics)<sup>35</sup>, which “work” with the human body, body fluids, and which evoke disgust and heinousness<sup>36</sup>. “*He pushed the wetness out of his nose with his fingers and boldly threw it on the floor in his own pub. It was bad to look at him, when he was eating ... He ate everything with a spoon. He held a hen in both hands. When he was gnawing meat from bones, he shook his head like an animal*”<sup>37</sup>.

30 TATARKA, D.: *Radostník*. Bratislava : Slovenský spisovateľ, 1954. p. 35.

31 Ibid, p. 11.

32 Ibid, p. 97.

33 Ibid, p. 102.

34 Ibid, p. 34.

35 ANTOŠOVÁ, M.: *Socialistickorealisticcká „triáda“ v kontexte existencializmu*. [Inaugural Dissertation]. Nitra : Filozofická fakulta Univerzity Konštantína Filozofa v Nitre, 2012, pp. 26-38.

36 This is a fact which is typical, for example, for Sartre –he underlined the misery of human existence with a naturalistic miniature, and in this direction it was also used by Tatarka in his existentially tuned works. For more information, please see: ANTOŠOVÁ, M.: *Dominik Tatarka v kontexte existencializmu*. Nitra : FF UKF, 2011.

37 TATARKA, D.: *Radostník*. Bratislava : Slovenský spisovateľ, 1954. pp. 171-172.

A motive of death and with regard to it the meaninglessness of human life can be also registered in *The Birthday Cake*: “*A man works hard, undergoes tortures, then snoozes, falls asleep and it is the end*”<sup>38</sup>.

These moments are again only fragmentary, laconic, without wider description in this work, and even in contrast to the other two works (*The First and Second Strike* and *The Years of Companionship*) they no longer resemble the existentialist Tatarka. *The Birthday Cake* has the slightest ambition to follow Tatarka's existentialist-tuned work. The works *The First and Second Strike* contained “scattered” explicit existentialist fractions, rhetoric, and atmosphere. It contains many of the motives which are inherent in Tatarka's existentialist works, and some were sketched (though weakly expanded) in this sense<sup>39</sup>. The novel *The Years of Companionship* no longer “disturbed” with existentialism. And even though the author re-used motives directly related to existentialism, which served for existentialist purposes in the works with existentialist tuning, he not only used them in minimal quantities and did not set them within the existentialist framework, but he was careful to explain the mentioned moments consistently in the socialist-realistic sense. Therefore, if Tatarka in *The Years of Companionship* draws attention to his previous work with existentialist elements, then through his

38 Ibid, p. 112.

39 For more information, please see: ANTOŠOVÁ, M.: *Prvý a druhý úder v kontexte Tatarkovej existencialisticky ladenej tvorby*. In *Slavica Nitriensia: časopis pre výskum slovanských filológii*, 2012, Vol. 1, No. 2, pp. 128-154.

diligent preciseness he turns everything which is potentially existentialistic to socialist realism, so that a reader does not explain anything in conflict with the socialist-realistic doctrine (and therefore existentialistically)<sup>40</sup>. Thus, in paradox, Tatarka most of all achieves a balance of both stylistic and semantic senses in his novel *The Birthday Cake*. We do not register obvious formal pathetic and sentimental positions adoring the communist reality in this work, but on the other hand, Tatarka did not even miss a fraction of his existentialist instrumentation. With regard to the level of meaning: motives, phenomena, moments (fate/chance - as a basic paradigm of non-authentic heroes; death, anxiety, etc.) communicating with existentialism have (towards existentialism) a neutral value and are incorporated into the text without an existentialist dimension. At the same time, the author does not need to explain them in the intentions of socialist realism (as it was in case of *The Years of Companionship*) or in any other sense, so without some “loudness” they do not draw attention to what is not in the work (the case of *The Years of Companionship*) and they behave as the natural stylistic handwriting of the author in the text.

40 For more information, please see: ANTOŠOVÁ, M.: *Socialist-Realistic Consistency (Companionable Summers)*. In *European Journal of Media Art and Photography*, 2018, Vol. 6, No. 1, pp. 100-111.

### Conclusion

Based on the interpretive analysis, the following final summary can be stated. Although the work *The Birthday Cake* uniquely uses a few moments directly related to existentialism (Tatarka also uses them in this sense in his existentialist-tuned work), they are used without existentialist context in the text and the author does not need to be explained or correct them “guiltily” in the name of socialist realism. And exactly the naturalness and neutrality in their use causes the novel *The Birthday Cake* to be the most distant from the existentialist Tatarka compared to the other two key works of socialist realism. Moreover, the presence of existentialism cannot be discussed here, either at the formal or at the semantic level.

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