

Spektrum: A Journal from the Czech Cultural Hinterland*

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Looking through the first two issues of *Spektrum*,¹ the “unofficial” literary and philosophical journal produced in Prague, I felt that I had seen it before in a different form: it reminded me of the monthly journal *Tvar* (*Face*) as published in 1965.² The layout of the two journals is remarkably similar, especially when one bears in mind that *Tvar* was printed with official blessing while *Spektrum* is typewritten. The two journals share a sober, well-informed, analytical approach to Czech culture—the real culture which is free from state interference—placing it firmly in its European context. More important, however, is the spiritual link between the two journals. Their contents—a mixture of short reviews of current films, plays and music, selections of poetry by unknown yet mature poets (for example, Bohuslav Reynek and Emil Julis) and extracts from western authors who are relatively unknown to Czech readers—serve one main purpose: to challenge not only the official socialist ideology of the State but also the traditional humanist “orthodoxy” of the Czech intelligentsia.

In spite of the increasingly liberal official climate of the '60s, the people involved in *Tvar*—many of whom (for example, the literary critics Dolezal and Lopatka, and the poets Stankovic and Reynek) are to be found again in *Spektrum*—were the spiritual heirs of traditional literary values which had avoided any compromise with the socialist realism imposed by the Stalinist regime of the '50s. In the early '60s “through book smuggling and indefatigable study, in basement flats, after factory shifts, during discussions in prison and in circles of carefully screened friends, they had already begun the gigantic yet frustrating task of rebuilding the foundations of Czech political and cultural life”.³ The efforts of groups such as this one, together with the pressure being exerted by the younger

*This article is concerned with contemporary developments in Czech, as opposed to Slovak, culture. Czechoslovakia is a federal republic comprising Czech-speaking Bohemia and Moravia, and Slovak-speaking Slovakia. Czech culture has historically included a strong element of secular humanism which is alien to the Slovak tradition.

generation, caused cracks to appear in the totalitarian structure, and the subsequent conflict between the revisionists and the Stalinists weakened state control of publishing to such an extent that even a periodical like *Tvar*, with its crypto-Catholic orientation, could be openly published. However, the journal survived for only a year, as the reformers' concept of "socialist freedom" did not include criticism of the cultural establishment. Although 1965 was a year of hope and greater freedom, the time was not yet ripe for rejecting state "patronage" of the arts.

Although *Tvar* must obviously be considered as a predecessor of *Spektrum*, the assumptions and aims of the two journals nevertheless differ fundamentally, because the general atmosphere since the early '70s in Czechoslovakia differs fundamentally from that of the '60s. Václav Havel recently described the changes which have occurred:

August 1968 was not merely a matter of replacing a comparatively liberal regime with a more repressive one. It was not just the usual freeze after a period of thaw—it was something more: the end of an era, the disintegration of a spiritual and social climate, a complete break with the past. The importance of the events which brought about this change and the depth of the experience which accompanied it fundamentally altered our whole view of the world. The carnival spirit of 1968 was crushed: not only that, but the entire world as we knew it, the world in which we were so cosily at home, in which we got along so well, the world which had, so to speak, reared us—the tranquil, somewhat comical, somewhat disjointed world of the '60s, so reminiscent of the early Victorian period—all this was destroyed. For a while everyone's nerves were stretched to breaking point (in an attempt at resistance), but they could not hold back the course of events and ominously, out of the ruins of the old world, a world was emerging which was intrinsically different, merciless, drearily sedate and imbued with asiatic austerity. The fun was over; it was back to the grind again.⁴

It is only through the terrible experience of the neo-Stalinism of the '70s that the creative intelligentsia has become fully aware of the true nature of totalitarian power.

The control exercised by the authorities over what can be published is now much more complete than in the 1960s. The difference between the period when it was becoming increasingly easy for independent creative writing to be published and today, when only state-commissioned "production" is permitted, has undoubtedly had some bearing on the choice of contributors to *Spektrum*. Whilst the editors of *Tvar* were united in their scepticism about the cultural values which were the heritage of the communist takeover in 1948, the subtle irony they used then is today no longer necessary. It is interesting to find that bitter polemics with the

state "arts production" are almost entirely lacking in *Spektrum*. When dialogue is impossible, invective does not help.⁵ The editors have decided that arguing with the official point of view is no longer worth the trouble. Their aim is now different: to create an independent sphere in which culture can grow from the modest resources which are still available. As the historian Petr Pithart writes in the editorial:

So long as we still have the right to go into a stationery shop and buy a packet with the label "Typing paper, white, 30 gr/m²", we can tell the bureaucracy calmly, without defiance and without reproaches, "we ask nothing from you [. . .] you can keep your spurious proposals, all the more worthless since they are made to us by people whom we meet only when we are summoned to an interrogation".⁶

At a time when state control over literature has become so complete, the official ideology has, however, lost its power to attract creative minds. It is no longer even a secondary function of ideology to be an inspiration for art. The only criteria for judging contributions to *Spektrum* have become personal integrity and originality. On the pages of *Spektrum*, therefore, we find writers of such diverse convictions as Vilém Sacher the former communist general, the Catholic theologian Josef Zverina, the implacable critic Jan Lopatka and the Protestant philosopher Ladislav Hejdiánek. This is not just a matter of greater tolerance. It is the consequence of a significant moral shift in the life of the Czech intelligentsia, which is on the verge of being liquidated. Literature has ceased to be a means of subsistence—on the contrary it leads to affliction. It does not lead to fame because for the cowardly majority it is a moral reproach. It is almost becoming a form of asceticism. Writers work for *Spektrum* in personal isolation, after their normal day's work, out of the purely intrinsic need to create. Those who harness themselves to the liberating yoke of creative activity do so for no other reason than their need to proclaim the truth. The very serious moral tone of the whole journal is therefore not surprising. All those involved have found a new solidarity in their longing for truth. The war between various philosophical, aesthetic and literary schools is over: the time has come for searching, for testimonies and above all for communication. This phenomenon may be contrasted with what tends to happen in liberal western societies where everyone listens only to himself, chooses his own spiritual neighbours as it were, and has no real language of communication with those outside his particular circle—or at best tries to reduce the spiritual reality of various "isms" to the lowest common denominator of empirical facts.

In this context, it is perhaps not surprising that the contributors to *Spektrum* make the greatest effort to communicate when it is most difficult to do so, i.e. in the articles which are based on a Christian view of the

world. It is here that we find the fundamental difference between *Tvar*, the journal of the '60s, and *Spektrum*, that of the '70s. While Catholic poets like Jakub Deml, Jan Zahradníček and Václav Renc had become fashionable in the 1960s, particularly among the younger generation, the middle generation of humanists and socialists was not affected by Christian symbolism even in an aesthetic sense. Now, at a time when moral values based merely on anthropocentric humanism are proving to be hopelessly inadequate to the task of overcoming the totalitarian system (as the French philosopher Jacques Maritain predicted), it is becoming ever clearer that the deified Party, reduced now to a pure mechanism of total control, is historically the end-product of that humanist tradition. This realization has naturally led to the rediscovery of that western intuition that the State exists for man and not the reverse and of the concept of objective human rights. It has even led to the rediscovery of objective reality as a basis for common understanding. This is why wherever we find the rule of state monism we also find a renaissance of Christianity, as the champion of objective truth and objective moral values. All the recently exiled intellectuals testify to this (Ludek Pachman, Zdenek Mlynár, Ivan Medek, Vilém Hejl, Vladimír Skutina).

In Czechoslovakia, "multitudes of religious dreamers" are springing up on the fallow land of a disintegrating world.⁷ Thousands of young people are living at subsistence level on the periphery of society because, out of a feeling of moral revulsion, they have often spurned state secondary education. By their long hair and ragged clothes they express their rejection of the police state and mass consumerism. Apocalyptic prophets, who feed them a strange mixture of oriental mysticism and muddled Christianity in frenzied sermons, are emerging as their spiritual leaders. The Churches in Czechoslovakia are not allowed to engage in evangelistic activity. The absence of the solid theological thinking which would normally be supplied by the Church has been compensated for by a sort of folk theology. The amount of religious *samizdat* which is *not* smuggled to the West is increasing. Various accounts of private revelations, collections of testimonies about life after death and fantastic interpretations of recent appearances of the Virgin Mary (for example, at Garabandal in Portugal) are meticulously copied out purely for internal distribution. This situation and its enormous possibilities present a challenge to Christian theologians. The Church is beginning to attract not only large numbers of ordinary people, but also Czech intellectuals. The change of attitude towards the Church among the intelligentsia could lend sanity to the general revival of faith at a time when the church hierarchy is bound hand and foot by government regulations. This is why so much space is given in *Spektrum* to Christian thought. It is characteristic of Czech émigrés who have not lived through the purgatory of the '70s in Czechoslovakia (such as Igor Hájek, Josef Skvorecky and Jirí Kovtun), that they have paid

hardly any attention to this major element in the journal when reviewing it.

Let us now look at some of the characteristics of this new metaphysical writing in *Spektrum*, based as it is on personal experience of totalitarian monism which forces the human spirit almost painfully to look for ultimate answers if it is to survive. It is strongly apologetic in the best meaning of the word. It contains no trace of the gloating attitude which a besieged Church might be expected to adopt towards disillusioned communists: "Well, this is what you wanted! We told you from the beginning what would happen!" On the contrary, the theology in *Spektrum* is based on personal experience and starts from the fact that Christians and communists alike have lived through their own purgatory and that neither side has cause to envy the other. The writers in *Spektrum* have more than just the ability to forgive, or to distinguish between communism as an ideology and communists as people whom one should love: they have respect for people who have struggled against the tide to discover true values by which they can live with dignity. This is the greatness of Christian realism, which allows a distinction to be made between the varying degrees not only of sinfulness, but also of suffering. Imprisonment, persecution or harassment for a faith which is truly lived and is therefore sustained by the believer's relationship with God must be as nothing compared with the suffering of those who spent years trying to build a better life only to have their "humane" brand of communism, for which they were prepared to sacrifice everything, come crashing down about their ears.

The starting point of their analysis is a consistent rejection of all forms of progressive utopianism.

For the thinking man the notion of some sort of future harmony, which could be a satisfactory solution both to the concrete problem of human suffering and to the riddle of "evil", is as offensive to his moral sense as the notion of a pagan human sacrifice . . .⁸

Thus writes Jan Zalich at the end of his review of Eva Kanturková's short prose piece *Sen o zlu (Dreaming about Evil)*. He adds immediately,

No, evil exists and we must be aware of its irrefutable reality. Recognition of its existence is essential to a truly open way of life . . .⁹

Jan Bratrík, in his essay about the sculptor Olbram Zoubek, says:

History is not movement from A to B, it is not a straight line terminating in a Great Future [. . .] If it does have a goal, then this goal is connected with the personal perfection of the individual.¹⁰

The second characteristic of this analysis is that it returns to a "realist" view of the world. When asking questions about the objective significance of given experience, the *Spektrum* writers do not lapse into individual relativism, and thus they have a chance to give a meaningful answer to questions concerning the purpose of human life, because "man finds his *raison d'être* in the world and not in himself".¹¹ This "realistic" approach allows man to free himself from the idea that deified human consciousness is the measure of all things; and hence to transcend himself, as well as all contemporary crises, be they crises of ecology, technology or totalitarianism.

A recurrent theme in many articles is that of the loss of harmony between man and nature. It is interesting how many articles point out that the roots of this problem lie in idealistic philosophy. When human consciousness is seen as the only creative force, the universe as merely a blind mixture of chance and necessity, and scientific knowledge as a process of successful manipulation, it is not surprising that reality comes to be regarded as a passive material for ruthless exploitation, and that nature is now being destroyed because man has a shortsighted vision of what it should become rather than attempting to understand what it is.

It is interesting to find that all criticism of ideology in *Spektrum* ignores Marxism. It would be a luxury to give space to it when Marxism no longer represents any real spiritual force in the country. It is theology now, rather than anthropology, which helps to define true humanism. Jan Zalich distinguishes between "humanism" and "humaneness".

Humaneness is the will of one man to understand another, it is respect for his freedom, it is prudence and restraint in evaluating his actions: equally, it is the will to help others effectively and the desire for human solidarity. Humanism, on the other hand, is the bourgeois ideology of inevitable progress and a consequence of the "death of God" that Nietzsche talks about: in fact, it simply transfers the Christian concept of redemption to the realm of the purely terrestrial and is not concerned with the absurdities which result from this transposition.¹²

By showing that rationalist or supposedly scientific ideologies in fact borrow a great deal from the Biblical picture of the world, merely because without a mythical perspective these ideologies cannot have any historical influence, theologians are able to rehabilitate a world in which myth and religion have a firm place.¹³ Without either myth or religion, human existence becomes absurd and introduces a process of slow death into everything man does. The problem of myth therefore occupies an important place in the journal: the myth as symbolizing the search for human togetherness and for a true home. One rather unpleasant aspect of all cosmic myths of both the ancient and the contemporary world is their

determinism, which does not permit a truly free act. It is therefore necessary to investigate ways of reconciling cosmic order with free choice. The theologian Fr Josef Zverina knows that this cannot be done with the help of mere philosophy, and to the question "how can we escape the constraints of a this-worldly existence?" he offers the same paradoxical answer as Karl Marx once did: by acting. Yet our actions, he insists, must be taken out of the context of a "metaphysics of class hatred"; they must be based on love, in a world which is no longer anthropocentric and can accommodate God, a Beginning and an End. Such a world is transcendent and yet immanent, distant and yet nearer to us than a world whose only meaning is its own existence. It is a world created by God and entrusted to us; this world is our task.

I am challenged by my faith to perfect [the world]. In love, courage, justice and wisdom [. . .] I strive to imitate its Creator. The created world is then a dynamic, open system.¹⁴

Aware, however, of the fact that there are many believers who are not worthy of their faith and realizing that even faith may become ideology, Zverina ends on a warning note:

But it is precisely this faith which must unite me with all men who are concerned with real values. Faith is not just a collection of truths, theses and dogmas. Faith is identical with truth, but is also a unique movement of the human spirit. It fills the world with hope, faith and charity.¹⁵

Spektrum bears witness to a profound intellectual change which has taken place in Bohemia. The secular intelligentsia has lost its faith in man. If Czech Christians can now adopt this new attitude of openness to "being", they will be able to participate actively in building a real world, and thereby ensure that Christianity experiences a true renaissance rather than remaining merely an interesting speculative option.

¹⁴*Spektrum* No. 1, December 1977, reprinted in *Czech by Index on Censorship*, 21 Russell Street, London WC2B 5PH, August 1978; *Spektrum* No. 2, 1978, reprinted in *Czech by Index on Censorship*, September 1979.

¹⁵*Tvář* was a monthly literary and philosophical journal published for two years (1964-65). In 1965 the editorial board was replaced by a new team with strong Catholic tendencies and the journal changed out of all recognition to become, during 1965, the organ of an important group of writers and thinkers. The members of this group stayed together after the journal was closed down, and published symposia of their works in 1966 and 1967 while *Tvář* was banned. The journal reappeared in September 1968, but was again closed down in May 1969.

¹⁶Rio Preisner, "Blouznivci našich úhoru", *Svědectví*, Paris, 1971.

⁴Václav Havel, *Hry*, 68 Publishers, Toronto, 1977, p. 306. (A collection of his plays.)

⁵It should be noted that since 1970 only a handful of authors have joined the new, servile Writers' Union. The majority of writers are either living in exile or are banned from publication and have to resort to *samizdat*. This situation is without precedent in the whole of Czech history, even including the German occupation, which after all lasted only six years. Louis Aragon called the policy of Husák's government "spiritual genocide". Hardly a month passes without a Czech writer being forced to choose exile.

⁶Petr Pithart, "Prukleповý papír bílý", *Spektrum* No. 1, *Index on Censorship*, 1978, p. 12.

⁷The quotation is from Věra Linhartová, a Czech writer now living in Paris.

⁸Jan Žalich, "Kanturkové sen o zlu", *Spektrum* No. 2, *Index on Censorship*, 1979, p. 61.

⁹*loc. cit.*

¹⁰Jan Bratřík, "Kandidáti existence", *Spektrum* No. 2, p. 66.

¹¹Zdeněk Neubauer, "Chiliasmus a eschatologie", *Spektrum* No. 2, p. 40.

¹²Jan Žalich, "Kanturkové sen o zlu", *Spektrum* No. 2, p. 61.

¹³This method is used very wittily by Karel Skalický in *Kritika kultu osobnosti* (*Criticism of the Cult of Personality*), Opus Bonum, Frankfurt, 1978.

¹⁴Josef Zvěřina, "Svět je mnohorozměrný", *Spektrum* No. 1, p. 39.

¹⁵*ibid.*, p. 41.

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