

## PATOČKA'S REFLECTIONS ON FAUSTUS AND MODERN ART

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### ABSTRACT

The article deals with two Jan Patočka essays, each written to mark the 25th anniversary of the publication of Thomas Mann's novel *Doctor Faustus* (1947). In these essays, the writer is defined as an 'interpreter of myth'. In contrast to his essays 'The Concern of the Writer' (1969) and 'Art and Time' (1966), Patočka here examines the relationship between modern art and myth in two essays on Faustus. The article presents Patočka's interpretation of the fundamental subject of Faustus literature in its metamorphosis from the sixteenth century to the twentieth, and points out that Patočka's Faustus essays manifest an important aspect of his concept of modern art.

**Key words:** Jan Patočka; Thomas Mann; Faustus; modern art; literature

### LES REFLEXIONS DE PATOČKA SUR FAUST ET SUR L'ART MODERNE

Dans cette contribution, l'auteur analyse deux essais de Jan Patočka, datant des années 1970 et écrits à l'occasion du 25<sup>ème</sup> anniversaire de la publication du roman *Le Docteur Faustus* (1947) de Thomas Mann. Patočka définit l'écrivain comme un interprète de mythes. Contrairement à ce qui était son approche dans « L'Écrivain et son objet » (1969) ou dans « L'Art et le temps » (1966), Patočka étudie, dans ces essais, la relation entre l'art moderne et le mythe. L'article expose l'interprétation que Patočka donne du sujet principal de la littérature faustienne, à travers ses diverses métamorphoses, depuis les récits populaires du XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle jusqu'au roman de Thomas Mann, et tente de montrer que les essais faustiens de Patočka représentent un aspect important de sa conception de l'art moderne.

### PATOČKOVY ÚVAHY O FAUSTOVI A MODERNÍM UMĚNÍ

Článek se zabývá dvěma texty Jana Patočky ze 70. let, které byly psány k pětadvacátému výročí vydání románu *Doktor Faustus* (1947) Thomase Manna. Patočka v nich spisovatele definuje jako „ztvárnovatele mýtu“. Na rozdíl od esejů „Spisovatel a jeho věc“ (1969) či „Umění a čas“ (1966) zkoumá Patočka ve faustovských esejích vztah mezi moderním uměním a mýtem. Článek představuje Patočkovu interpretaci základního tématu faustovské literatury v jejích proměnách od knížky lidového čtení po Mannův román a poukazuje na to, že Patočkovy faustovské eseje ukazují významný aspekt jeho pojetí moderní umělecké tvorby.

I

This article is concerned with two considerably different versions of Jan Patočka's article written to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the publication of Thomas Mann's novel *Doctor Faustus* (1947). Both versions were originally written in German. The earlier

version, entitled 'Die Faustlegende von gestern und von heute: Einige Leserbetrauchtungen über den Doktor Faustus' (The Faustus legend then and now: A reader's reflections on *Doctor Faustus*, 1972),<sup>1</sup> remained unpublished; the later version appeared as 'Der Sinn des Mythos vom Teufelspakt: Eine Betrachtung zu den Varianten der Faustsage' (The meaning of the myth of the pact with the Devil: Observations on versions of the Faustus story).<sup>2</sup>

The main reason why I focus on these two essays is that Patočka understood Mann's Faustus novel as a contemporary work of art. It is also one of the very few works of modern literature which Patočka decided to analyse in detail. Moreover, I believe that his thoughts on Mann's novel reveal interesting accents that are different from those in Patočka's writings on the nature of modern art. In his articles about art, such as 'The Concern of the Writer' (1968)<sup>3</sup> and 'Art and Time' (1966),<sup>4</sup> modern art is seen as divorced from a supra-individual epic basis and from the tradition of collectively shared meaning.<sup>5</sup> 'The Meaning of the Myth of the Pact with the Devil' is the only essay in which Patočka, in analysing a contemporary novel, describes a writer as a 'shaper of myth'.<sup>6</sup>

## II

I admit that the task I have undertaken, to search Patočka's interpretation of Mann's novel for links to his theory of modern art and literature, is demanding and, given Patočka's own approach to the matter, perhaps not even quite suitable. In 'The Faustus Legend Then and Now', Patočka does not focus on the question of whether Mann's *Doctor Faustus* fits the notion of modern art as art of a 'subjective style', to use a formulation from 'Art and Time'. Even so, one can at least come to some preliminary conclusions regarding Patočka's view of Mann's novel as an example of modern art. In the following, that is precisely what I aim to do.

Patočka's idea of the poet as someone who deals with myth is somewhat reminiscent of his analysis of the pre-philosophical reflection of reality. In his *Heretical Essays in the*

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<sup>1</sup> Jan Patočka, 'Die Faustlegende von gestern und von heute: Einige Leserbetrauchtungen über den *Doktor Faustus*', in Jan Patočka, *Umění a čas II* (Prague: OIKOYMENH, 2004), 314–29. In my article, I use the Czech translation, Jan Patočka, 'Faustovská legenda včera a dnes: Nad románem Thomase Manna *Doktor Faustus*', in Jan Patočka, *Umění a čas II* (Prague: OIKOYMENH, 2004), 105–19.

<sup>2</sup> Jan Patočka, 'Der Sinn des Mythos vom Teufelspakt: Eine Betrachtung zu den Varianten der Faustsage', in Jan Patočka, *Umění a čas II*, (Prague: OIKOYMENH, 2004), 330–62. In my article, I use the Czech translation 'Smysl mýtu o paktu s ďáblem: Úvaha o variantách pověsti o Faustovi', in Jan Patočka, *Umění a čas I* (Prague: OIKOYMENH, 2004), 510–25.

<sup>3</sup> Jan Patočka, 'Spisovatel a jeho věc', in Jan Patočka, *Češi I* (Prague: OIKOYMENH, 2006), 280–92.

<sup>4</sup> Jan Patočka, 'Umění a čas', in Jan Patočka, *Umění a čas I*, (Prague: OIKOYMENH, 2004), 303–18.

<sup>5</sup> A complex analysis of Patočka's differentiation between the binding, objective meaning in the art of classical antiquity and the personal, individual meaning of the modern art is provided in Miloš Ševčík, 'Umění minulosti a přítomnosti v Patočkových interpretacích Hegelovy teze o minulém rázu umění', *Acta Universitatis Carolinae. Philosophica et Historica* 1 (2011), *Studia Aesthetica* IV: 75–94.

Ševčík deals here with Patočka's differentiation of the two kinds of 'meaning' in the art of the past and in the art of today. *Ibid.*, 77–81. The article also refers to the correction of this conception in Patočka's later reflections of the ontological origin of the artworks of both eras; nevertheless, it points out, that Patočka did not sufficiently clarify the relation between the two eras. *Ibid.*, 90–91.

<sup>6</sup> Patočka, 'Smysl mýtu o paktu s ďáblem', 510.

*Philosophy of History* (1973–75), he describes the epic as the genre that is fundamentally connected with the mythical consciousness and the expression of the universal objective meaning of life and things.<sup>7</sup> What kind of mythical or collective consciousness does a late medieval folk legend express? And how and why do writers treat mythical subject matter in the era of the 'disintegration of mythical consciousness'?<sup>8</sup>

In 'The Meaning of the Myth about the Pact with the Devil', Patočka presents us with a definition: 'A myth is a question with which people turn to people, a question coming from a depth that lies even deeper within a person than *logos* does. And this radical question, which we do not pose but which considers us as a question calls upon the poet for explicit formulation and treatment.'<sup>9</sup>

One such question, which, in Patočka's view, is shared by both Greek and Christian culture, is the subject of the soul. Faustus literature reflects the question of the immortality of the soul and in particular the question of whether a soul can be sold and lost.<sup>10</sup> The development of Faustus literature between the sixteenth and the twentieth century inspired Patočka's analysis both of spiritual movements and of developments in this era and also his analysis of the role of the poetic narratives used to express them.

Patočka links the subject matter of the legend of Doctor Faustus (which was first published by Johann Spies in 1587) and the disintegration of the spiritual world of the Middle Ages. At the dawn of the modern era, the danger that stemmed from the Christian concept of freedom came to the fore. The first aspect of the Faustian is titanism, which Patočka defines as the arrogance of knowing what is good but consciously denying it and choosing the opposite in order to 'rise to a position of someone participating in the taking of decisions about the fate of the world, even if only temporarily.'<sup>11</sup> Patočka emphasizes the motif of having such knowledge at one's disposal. This feature of the Faustus character indicates something typical of the spiritual trend in the modern era. For mankind at the dawn of the Reformation period, this motif is linked with a warning about losing oneself (becoming separated from God, surrendering to demons and delusions). Patočka reminds us that in Spies's book of folk tales, Faustus is deceived; he never achieves a higher level of existence, does not become a magus discovering the secrets of things. Instead, he succumbs to the temptation of easily satisfying his immediate desires, and thus wastes his dearly bought time.<sup>12</sup>

What in Goethe's famous version of the story is different from other versions? In Patočka's view, the main difference is that the gravity of losing one's soul is missing from Goethe's version. In his view of Faust, Goethe, according to Patočka, tries to demonstrate 'the flourishing of the German spirit in poetry and other intellectual pursuits as a portent of the general spiritualization of the period'.<sup>13</sup> Goethe believes that man is always justified as long as he is spiritually moving forward, gaining experience, striving for more. Within this celebration of the active attitude, the demonic is depicted as uncreative,

<sup>7</sup> See Jan Patočka, *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, trans. Erazim Kohák, (Chicago: Open Court, 1996), 24–25, 35–36.

<sup>8</sup> Patočka, 'Spisovatel a jeho věc', 283.

<sup>9</sup> Patočka, 'Smysl mýtu o paktu s ďáblem', 511.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Patočka, 'Faustovská legenda včera a dnes', 107.

<sup>12</sup> Patočka, 'Smysl mýtu o paktu s ďáblem', 513–14; Patočka, 'Faustovská legenda včera a dnes', 107–08.

<sup>13</sup> Patočka, 'Smysl mýtu o paktu s ďáblem', 515.

empty, and somewhat toothless. Patočka notes that even Faustus's revolt becomes weak and unimpressive. The Faustus character is not dangerous; this Faustus does not question the established order of the world. What we see is rather the evil of a mind that takes no account of others and wants to grasp the material pleasures of life. Faust does not gain the fullness of life. Quite the opposite: by seeking to prolong pleasure, he invites physical annihilation and death, which, however, befalls not him but Gretchen. Patočka emphasizes the importance of the question of guilt, which Goethe introduces into the Faustus story with Gretchen's death. Guilt is a precondition of atonement and hence of redemption. In Part II, Goethe depicts the stages of Faust's penance, his catharsis by means of 'beauty, liberation, and his supporting of others'. He presents an image of spiritualization, the rise of the spirit, which in Goethe's version of the story was in fact immanently present in all the phases of Faust's development.<sup>14</sup>

Mann, in Patočka's view, does not endorse Goethe's humanism. Germany, as Mann experienced it, represented the opposite of the spiritualization that Goethe had in mind. Mann thus had to treat the Faustus theme in a world that was 'soulless', completely objectified, and deprived of all magic, where 'it seems that people not only co-determine but also fully shape the meaning of the universe'<sup>15</sup> and neglect their immortal soul. Patočka demonstrates that Mann's solution is to describe the descent of the 'most beautiful human spirit' into the depths of a cold, demonic world. The power and gravitas of evil again comes to the fore, as does the motif of a pact, of selling oneself – though in this case, the pact is about gaining a soul.<sup>16</sup>

This is Patočka's initial view of the story of Mann's protagonist, the brilliant composer Adrian Leverkühn, who 'subscribes to the cold evil of the world and, driven by the will to power, surrenders to this evil'.<sup>17</sup> We can clearly see here how this Faustus essay reveals Patočka's thoughts about the twentieth century as a century of the night, of unleashed blind powers. Within this framework, Patočka reads Leverkühn's story as a story of rebirth, a transition from abuse of free will to self-realization in humble service, self-sacrifice, and the loss of self in a work that would be the truth about a soulless era. It is with delight that Patočka acknowledges Mann's transposition of Faustus the scholar and alchemist to Faustus the artist. This Faustus is active not in the world but against the world as a whole. In Leverkühn, his self-examination and outward passivity are the notable features which distinguish him from previous Faustus characters. At the same time, Patočka points out, his activity against the world is indisputable. Leverkühn's life is a quest to meet a single crucial challenge: to wrest art from a soulless era, to achieve a new breakthrough in music.<sup>18</sup>

Patočka maintains that in this process Leverkühn undergoes a change. The proud self-denial of an ambitious individual gradually turns into service, fate, something unavoidable. In his private life, Leverkühn experiences his brilliance and exceptionality with a sense of guilt, and bears his fate with remorse, but does not consider himself privileged. Writing a work that is 'the truth of an era that has no soul', Leverkühn overcomes his

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 516; Patočka, 'Faustovská legenda včera a dnes', 110.

<sup>15</sup> Patočka, 'Faustovská legenda včera a dnes', 112.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Patočka, 'Smysl mýtu o paktu s ďáblem', 525.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 522–23.

introversion and natural reserve.<sup>19</sup> His work, which in Patočka's view is a dream about a new community, awakens Leverkühn's soul and awareness of his responsibility for his life, his work, and for the world he has entered by his existential decision. His assumption of universal responsibility is the definitive act by which Leverkühn loses his titanism, gains an immortal soul, and ends his conscious existence. Patočka summarizes it, saying: 'the genius, the great magus of art must disappear; his madness, though incomprehensible to the public, is an internally unavoidable confirmation of the gravitas of his change.'<sup>20</sup> The final lesson of this novel about a soulless era is, in Patočka's view, therefore about the assumption of responsibility and the total loss of self – paradoxically, its seriousness opens the way for hope.

We note that Patočka views the assumption of responsibility, which is at the same time a step towards transcendence and the defeat of demons, as the key motif not only in Mann's *Faustus* novel. He sees it also in his interpretations of other twentieth-century works of literature, in particular William Faulkner's *The Wild Palms* (1939) and Jaroslav Durych's *Boží duha* (*The Iris of God*, 1955). But it is in Mann's work that Patočka finds it most closely linked with the notion of the emergence of a soul, the awakening of that which is capable of truth and enables clarity about oneself.

The essential concept of Patočka's interpretation of Mann's *Faustus* novel is the 'soulless era', and what he is actually talking about is the twentieth century and its art. Especially in 'The Faustus Legend Then and Now', Patočka carefully notes the way Mann presents the state of modern art. Patočka shows that Mann, by means of the character of a brilliant composer, is actually dealing with the end of the subjective stage in the development of art and the turn towards the 'objective, elemental stage, [...] the emergence of a new emotional warmth which music, currently in the service of technical intellectuality, denies.'<sup>21</sup> Patočka notes that Leverkühn strives for art of a 'higher union', for art as 'the servant of a community which will comprise far more than 'education' and will not have culture, but will perhaps be a culture.'<sup>22</sup> In Patočka's view, Mann is here considering an important subject of German classic aesthetics, the notion of 'art as the renewal of man, as something that is part of the education of humankind',<sup>23</sup> but Mann shifts the emphasis, stating that 'first, one has to acquire the dimension of responsibility, in which an 'immortal soul' should emerge. From this restoration to health then emerges a turn to a new art which could be a suitable vehicle of further renewal.'<sup>24</sup>

### III

Reading 'The Faustus Legend Then and Now', one feels that Patočka sympathizes with this aspect of Mann's endeavour. Patočka wrote several essays expressing certain expecta-

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 532.

<sup>20</sup> Patočka, 'Faustovská legenda včera a dnes', 118.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>22</sup> Thomas Mann, *Doctor Faustus*, trans. Helen Tracy Lowe-Porter, (London: David Campbell Publishers, 1992), 328.

<sup>23</sup> Patočka, 'Faustovská legenda včera a dnes', 117.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

tions he had of his contemporaries. 'The Concern of the Writer', for example, starts with the anticipation of an era that would overcome the crisis and start a renewal that would leave behind the powerlessness of reason and return to objectivity.<sup>25</sup>

In his 'Notes on Ancient Humanity: Strife and Reconciliation' (1941, unpublished), Patočka expresses a critical view of his times, saying:

It is somehow a misfortune of modern man that he has only literature, not poetry in the full sense of the word. In comparison with ancient Greek poetry [...] more recent poetry is almost an abstract game. The first portent of the crisis of modern man having been overcome, having been addressed, could come once again in the form of poets who would not deal with all matter of things, substantial or irrelevant, but with the one fundamental thing alone: they would again formulate the idea of being human.<sup>26</sup>

Patočka also discusses the contemporary crisis in art in 'Epicality and Dramaticity, Epos and Drama' (1966), where he notes the 'acute crisis of epic narration, that is, the crisis of an objective, moral world'.<sup>27</sup> He points out that literature is turning to the kind of artistic mimesis which does not describe and state meaning, but only searches for meaning and helps to shape it. He claims that the main (and dramatic) task of living art is to reveal the 'fundamental event, which cannot be stated, but can only be carried out, performed'.<sup>28</sup>

In Patočka's view, Mann achieves precisely this when presenting his *Faustus* novel as a poetic mythical explication of the times, as poetic mythical reflections on the fate of Germany and Europe as a whole on the threshold of the post-European era. Patočka appreciates that his near-contemporary, Mann, transcended the level of the subjective, tentative, and aesthetic, descended in his reflections on the era to the level of mythical powers, and managed to employ 'his creative powers in the service of subject matter which [...] accompanies a certain part of mankind in their quest for self-understanding'.<sup>29</sup>

The notion of 'accompanying a part of mankind in their quest for self-understanding' has a clearly different emphasis than the subjective notion of pure creation, which dominated Patočka's thoughts about modern art in his essay 'Art and Time'.<sup>30</sup> At the same time, however, Mann's novel fits well with Patočka's other analyses of modern literature especially in the aspect of Mann's novel not describing or didactically depicting some ready-made meaning but searching for it and shaping it. In Mann's account, the Faustian subject undergoes a basic, non-arbitrary metamorphosis, and *Doctor Faustus* becomes literature about the crisis of meaning. This novel also fits Patočka's definition of modern art being art without harmonic emphasis, art of unrest and pain, as Patočka puts it in his 'Art and Time'. *Doctor Faustus* also fits the notion of intellectually demanding art which does not strive to accommodate entertainment or self-confirmation, but requires that the

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<sup>25</sup> Patočka, 'Spisovatel a jeho věc', 280.

<sup>26</sup> Jan Patočka, 'Poznámky o antické humanitě. Boj a smír. Prožití a promyšlení v antice', in Jan Patočka, *Umění a čas II*, (Prague: OIKOYMENH, 2004), 29.

<sup>27</sup> Jan Patočka, 'Epičnost a dramaticčnost, epos a drama', in Jan Patočka, *Umění a čas I*, (Prague: OIKOYMENH, 2004), 357.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Patočka, 'Faustovská legenda včera a dnes', 105.

<sup>30</sup> Patočka, 'Umění a čas', 316–17.

perceiver remain open to the meaning of the work. On the other hand, *Doctor Faustus* is, at least in the narrow sense, an example of a 'great epic' rather than of the 'acute crisis of the epic', and thus does not conform to other claims made by Patočka.

Over and above claims that Patočka explicitly made in some of his other writings about art, his view of Mann's novel can be summarized as follows: Modern literature does not just witness the autonomy and freedom of the individual. It does not just celebrate the particular, subjective grasp of the meaning of the reality. It also retains the ability to 'bring to light' and reflect on matters which open the 'gravity of life and its ultimate tensions and hopes' to a contemporary human being. It has a cognitive value that can be shared. In this culture, the writer assumes the position of a responsible intellectual. If the modern crisis of meaning is a drama, as Patočka notes in 'Epicity Dramaticity, Epos and Drama', the writer's task is to feel and creatively to articulate this fundamental contemporary event and thus 'accompany' his contemporaries 'in their quest for self-understanding'.<sup>31</sup>

Patočka also considers these themes in some of his other interpretations of modern works of literature, which he wrote in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> See Patočka, 'Epično a dramaticita, epos a drama', 357–58.

<sup>32</sup> See Patočka's essay (written for radio) about William Faulkner's novel *The Wild Palms* (Jan Patočka, 'Zpěv výsostnosti', in Jan Patočka *Umění a čas I*, (Prague: OIKOYMENH, 2004), 416–32) and the preface to his and Frank Boldt's translation of Jaroslav Durych's short novel *Boží duha* into German (Jan Patočka, 'Vorwort zu: J. Durych: *Gottes Regenbogen*', Jan Patočka, *Umění a čas II*, (Prague: OIKOYMENH, 2004), 347–357).

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