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Bohemica litteraria. 2020, vol. 23, iss. 2, pp. 13-30

ISSN 1213-2144 (print); ISSN 2336-4394 (online)

Stable URL (DOI): https://doi.org/10.5817/BL2020-2-2
Stable URL (handle): https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/143032


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https://doi.org/10.5817/BL2020-2-2

A Guest from the Unknown: *Antigone* and Jan Patočka's Cultural Criticism[1]

Jonathan Bolton

Abstract

Jan Patočka is often seen as an apolitical philosopher who did not step onto the public stage until the end of his life, when he chose to support underground musicians who were put on trial by the Communist government in 1976. This view, seen for example in the obituary issued by Charter 77 shortly after Patočka's death, ignores his long career of cultural criticism and his many essays that use Czech literature and culture as a springboard to discuss social and political concerns. One such essay is Patočka's review of Milan Uhde's 1967 play "The Whore of Thebes," a modernization of *Antigone* that Patočka castigates for misunderstanding the mysteries of this classic play. A reading of Patočka's review points to a different genealogy for his support of the music underground, and his understanding of the relationship between philosophy and action more generally. Patočka's many writings on art and culture constitute an ongoing commentary on the social and political world around him, painting a much different picture than the conventional image of an abstruse philosopher who did not enter the world of politics until the very end of his life.

Abstrakt

Host z neznáma: kulturní publicistika Jana Patočky

Jan Patočka je často považován za filozofa, který se nezajímal o politiku a který vstoupil na veřejnou scénu až na konci života, když se rozhodl podpořit undergroundové hudebníky během jejich stíhání a soudu v roce 1976. Tento přístup k Patočkovi je vidět například v nekrologu, který o něm zveřejnila Charta 77 krátce po jeho smrti v roce 1977. Takové pojetí jeho života a díla

1) This is the text of a keynote address delivered at the conference "Heresy and Heritage: Jan Patočka on Philosophy, Politics, and the Arts," held in Leuven and Brussels, May 3–5, 2017. The lecture was delivered in Brussels on May 5 for the section on "Jan Patočka, Art, and Engagement." I have edited it for publication but have tried to retain the sense of informality characterizing a spoken lecture. Unless otherwise noted in the bibliography, all translations from the Czech are my own. I am grateful to Rajendra Chitnis, Petra James, and Jan Tlustý for comments on the written version.

však ignoruje celou jednu stránku jeho aktivit na poli kulturní kritiky, například jeho četné eseje a recenze, které vycházejí z české literatury a kultury, aby traktovaly sociální a politické otázky. Jedním z těchto textů je i Patočkova recenze hry Milana Uhde „Děvka z města Théby" z roku 1967. Uhde chtěl modernizovat klasický příběh *Antigony*; Patočka ho podrobuje zdrcující kritice a ukazuje, že Uhde nerozumí záhadám této klasické hry. Když čteme pozorně Patočkův rozbor Uhdeho hry i původní hry *Antigona*, rozpoznáme jak jinou „genealogii" jeho podpory pro hudební underground v roce 1977, tak jiný výklad vztahu mezi myšlením a jednáním obecněji v jeho díle. Patočkovy eseje o umění a kultuře představují soustavný komentář k okolnímu sociálnímu a kulturnímu světu a ukazují, že se jeho život se značně liší od od ustáleného obrazu abstraktního filozofa, který vstoupil do světa politiky až na konci života.

Keywords

Jan Patočka, Charter 77, Sophocles, Antigone, Milan Uhde, Plastic People of the Universe, DG307, Dostoevsky.

Klíčová slova

Jan Patočka, Charta 77, Sofoklés, Antigona, Milan Uhde, Plastic People of the Universe, DG307, Dostojevskij.

If we approach Patočka from the perspective of his literary criticism, his cultural journalism, and what we might call the "non-academic" or "non-philosophical" part of his writing, a different image of his thinking appears. True, the very depth and sophistication of Patočka's thought may seem to call us away from such an approach; anyone working with Patočka's philosophy clearly needs to grapple with the intensely academic and even esoteric texts, including the *Heretical Essays* and others, that delineate Patočka's relationship to phenomenology, Husserl, Heidegger, Greek philosophy, and so on. If we want to think about Patočka's heritage today, it seems essential to work through these texts. But this very "pull" toward a philosophical Patočka should also make us wonder about the kind of Patočka canon that we are constructing. We might wonder if there is a different Patočka – I almost want to say a Patočka for the rest of us.

I wonder about this because I am not a philosopher myself. But then it's useful to remember that most of the Czech dissidents, most of the signatories of Charter 77, were not philosophers either. How extensive was Patočka's influence on *them*? How clearly did *they* understand Patočka's writings? We have to admit that some of the ideas around which we build our sense of Patočka's philosophy, like "solidarity of the shaken" or "care for the soul," were picked up

among the Chartists in only a watered-down or superficial form. Sometimes, their understanding of Patočka's philosophy even bordered on kitsch – as Petr Rezek memorably argued when he analyzed Václav Havel's use of the phrase "there are some things it is worth suffering for" (REZEK 2007). How *do* we speak of the political influence of a philosopher who is often abstruse, difficult to follow, and steeped in his own jargon and unusual syntax?

There is always an "interface" between a philosopher's ideas and the somewhat different forms in which they reach and inspire political actors. Perhaps Patočka's *cultural writings* can help us explore this interface. Indeed, one way of approaching the *engagé* or political dimension of Patočka's work is by reading his non-academic writings. These writings allow us to confront our larger sense of Patočka as a cultural critic and writer for popular journals – as much *more* than a philosopher. And I think this can only benefit our efforts to explore some questions that may seem to have already been answered, such as Patočka's role in dissent, his brief activities as a spokesman for Charter 77, or the relationship of his words to his actions more generally. Indeed, this approach opens up a new side of Patočka's biography, one that has definitely been understudied, or else has been buried under the very conventional narrative according to which he did not take any political action until the last few months of his life.

1. A bold hypothesis

Let me begin with one statement of this conventional narrative, a quotation from the obituary of Patočka published by Charter 77 as its twelfth official document in March 1977:

> I když by bylo smělou konstrukcí tvrdit, že celé předchozí filozofické dílo Patočkovo a celý jeho předchozí život programově směřoval k podobnému veřejnému vystoupení, je přece ještě nepodloženější předpokládat, že mezi jeho odborně filosofickým a kulturně publicistickým dílem na jedné straně a jeho politickým činem na straně druhé, je naprostá diskontinuita, že tu jde pouze o nahodilou, situačně motivovanou souvislost (HÁJEK 2007: 35).

> Although it would be a bold hypothesis to claim that all of Patočka's previous philosophical writing and all his previous life aimed programmatically at this kind of public statement [*veřejnému vystoupení*], it would nevertheless be even less justified to assume an absolute discontinuity between his

> academic philosophy and his cultural journalism [*mezi jeho odborně filosofickým a kulturně publicistickým dílem*], on the one hand, and his political deed [*jeho politickým činem*], on the other – to assume that the connection between them is merely coincidental and a question of circumstance.

Among the many obituaries and tributes I've read to Patočka, this sentence is somewhat unique in trying to put a name on Patočka's non-academic writing. It calls it his *kulturně publicistické dílo*, which is a fairly common idea in Czech, but is a difficult phrase to translate into English; we might say "cultural criticism" or even "cultural journalism." Much of this work was written for a relatively broad audience, even though we must admit that it can still be fairly abstruse, expressed in Patočka's own language and concerns.

In this sentence from the obituary, it's also striking that Patočka's philosophy and his journalism are placed on one side of an imaginary dividing line, and his "political deed" as spokesman for Charter 77 on the other. Of course, the obituary rejects such a dividing line – but it also admits and imagines such a divide, even as it tries to argue it away. In denying an "absolute discontinuity," it proposes *some* kind of discontinuity, and I think this is still a common way of seeing Patočka. After all, it is not outrageous to imagine a division between Patočka's "academic philosophy" and his organizational work for the Charter. But it *is* a little odd to suggest that Patočka had not been making public statements – *veřejná vystoupení* – for his whole life. In fact, Patočka's cultural journalism should really be seen as an ongoing life project, a consistent effort to reach into the public sphere, to influence people's ideas outside academic or philosophical circles, and indeed to fashion *veřejná vystoupení*, "public statements," long before the (supposedly uncharacteristic) "political deed" of becoming Charter spokesman. His role as a public commentator goes back at least to his writings for *Kritický měsíčník* in the 1930s and 1940s, such as his pointed "Meditation on Defeat" ("Úvaha o porážce"), printed shortly after the Munich Agreement in 1938. So even if we *were* to conceive of Patočka's academic writings as somehow abstract – aimed at philosophy rather than politics, or at knowledge rather than action – we would still have to do something with the whole range of his other writings. These include his articles for cultural and popular journals such as *Kritický měsíčník*, *Kvart*, *Tvář*, *Divadlo*, *Dějiny a současnost*, and *Orientace*; his writings on nationalism and Czech national identity; his prefaces, afterwords, glosses on published books, and program notes for plays; and of course the more overtly topical and political essays in *For the Meaning of Today* [*O smysl dneška*].

I think the myth-making around Patočka's death[2] has pulled us too quickly into a narrow view of politics, of what the obituary calls his *politický čin,* his "political deed." Charter 77 was of course spectacularly political. But this should not overshadow Patočka's lifelong efforts to comment on politics through culture, through his cultural criticism. What do we do with this work? How should we characterize it? What kind of audience is it aimed at? Was it ever a "political deed" on its own terms? Was Patočka's decision to translate and publish Jaroslav Durych's novel *God's Rainbow* a political deed? Was his decision to frame the tension between Jungmann and Bolzano in the National Awakening a political deed? Was his decision to write a series of letters, in German, to Hildegarde Balauff a political deed? The sentence from the Charter 77 obituary may reveal that we are still working with a somewhat narrow idea of the political valence of Patočka's thought, and that the status of his cultural criticism, his *kulturně-publicistické dílo,* is somehow tangled up with this question. We need to incorporate the different sides of Patočka's writing into a broader sense of his public activity and political life *before* Charter 77. Was Patočka a cultural journalist? The question is an invitation, not only to consider a neglected part of his work, but also to refashion our entire sense of his biography, and to rescue that biography from clichés about the life of the mind, the ivory tower, and the abstruse and impractical philosopher.

2. An occasional critic

In December 1967, an occasional theater critic published a crushing review of a gifted young playwright's latest work. The play in question was a version of Antigone called *The Whore of Thebes* [*Děvka z města Théby*], which had been performed earlier that year in the National Theater. Our critic was confused by the play; the only thing that was clear to him, he said, was that it was "weak and arbitrary." He accused the playwright of "taking Antigone's name in vain" and, in the rest of his review, scornfully renamed the play "our mini-Antigone." He then launched into a beautiful and subtle analysis of the *real* Antigone, Sophocles' *Antigone*, only to show that it was infinitely deeper and subtler than the modernized version, which became – in this critic's hands – little more than

2) On the interpretation of Patočka's death in the Charter community, and the creation of the myth of a non-political philosopher who martyred himself by stepping into politics at the end of his life, see BOLTON 2012, esp. pp. 155–160.

"a nostalgic look back at a purity that has no life or force, the sideways glance of those who damn all ideals."

The "young, gifted" playwright in question was Milan Uhde, and the occasional theater critic, as you will have guessed, was Jan Patočka (PATOČKA 2004). It is safe to say that Patočka was more interested in Sophocles than in Uhde, and his review fell in line with other Czech critics at the time, most of whom roundly condemned Uhde's play as a failure. Nevertheless, it's striking that Patočka was so harsh, and this extremely negative review of a beginning playwright clearly hurt. In his 2013 memoir, Uhde wrote that "Professor Jan Patočka subjected my creation to a crushing analysis in the magazine *Divadlo*…" (UHDE 2013: 242). Uhde later tells the story of how he first met Patočka about a year later, in 1969, at a lecture in Brno: "[…] after the lecture, I went up to him to introduce myself. He looked a bit surprised, not knowing what I was going to say. But when I thanked him for the thrashing"– in Czech the word is *výprask*, the "whipping," "thrashing," or "trouncing" – "But when I thanked him for the thrashing he had bestowed upon my play *The Whore of Thebes*, he lit up and slapped me on the shoulder. 'Now there's a man [*Vidíte, to je chlapec*]' he said, turning to the circle of listeners surrounding him. 'That's how you should accept criticism'" (UHDE 2013: 423).

Uhde left the play out of a 1995 retrospective of his dramatic work, and I was not able to find a recent reprinting of it. When I first read Patočka's review, I assumed the play was some kind of absurdist retelling of Antigone, as seemed to be suggested by the very title, *The Whore of Thebes*. When I went to read the play as it was printed in the May 1967 issue of *Divadlo*, I was surprised to find a sophisticated, somewhat ponderous drama – not a very good one, I had to agree, but still very interesting. Perhaps its most striking feature is that it is written in blank verse (something that Patočka does not mention at all in his review). If it's not the best modernization of *Antigone* I've ever read, it is certainly worth revisiting. What was Uhde trying to achieve in this play, and why did Patočka react so strongly against it? Was the play, perhaps, *too* successful in achieving its goals, such that it struck Patočka in a way that a weaker play would not have? I will spend a few moments here reprising Uhde's play and then exploring Patočka's reaction to it.

But first it will be useful to recall Sophocles. The original *Antigone* begins, of course, after Oedipus's two sons, Eteocles and Polynices, have killed each other in single combat. Polynices was leading an Argive army against his own city of Thebes, which Eteocles died defending. Their uncle Creon takes control of the city and decrees that Eteocles, who remained loyal to Thebes, should receive

all the honors of a state burial, while Polynices, who betrayed the city, will be refused burial. His body will rot on the plain. Antigone, the sister of both brothers, immediately disobeys the decree, scattering dirt over Polynices' body to bury it, and is thereby set on a collision course with Creon. In a memorable dialogue with Creon, she defends the laws of the gods against his conception of state interest. He orders her to be buried alive; ultimately, she kills herself, after which her fiancé Haemon, who is also Creon's son, falls on his own sword and dies. Thebes is visited by the plague. Creon's wife Eurydice kills herself. Creon is subjected to terrible suffering: his son is destroyed, his wife as well, his city suffers, and all his earthly goals are defeated.

None of this happens in Milan Uhde's version. In fact, we hear nothing at all of Eteocles; we discover that Polynices was slaughtered in his prison cell five years earlier, after an unsuccessful revolt; we first meet Haemon as he is sleeping with Ismene, Antigone's sister, whom he had met earlier that day. (Incidentally, Patočka found this scene to be particularly distasteful.) The chorus of Sophocles' play, representing a council of Theban elders, is replaced by two guards who carry on a running commentary throughout the action – sometimes they function as comic relief, offering a carnivalesque view of tyranny; sometimes they channel otherworldly voices; sometimes they speak quite chillingly of state power and torture, in dialogues that, in 1967, would still have carried faint but clear echoes of the political show trials of the 1950s. They also intervene in the action of the play, and at its end, one of them tempts Antigone to sleep with him, which she apparently does – an act that becomes an objective correlative for her status as a "whore," which has already been established through her inability to stay true to one conception of truth, of good and evil.

Uhde turns many of the Sophoclean relations on their head. In his memoir, he wrote that he was uninterested in the whole question of divine obligations and burial: "for my Antigone, then, there remained a single motivation that could make her bury her brother illegally: the desire to stand forth [*vystoupit*] against Creon and confront him at the level of power relations" (UHDE 2013: 225.) Uhde sought to blur the distinctions between Creon and Antigone, making both of them creatures of power calculations. The play creates a striking representation of this affinity: in their various soliloquies, they repeat and recycle each other's lines. Overall, Uhde sets up an anticipated confrontation between Creon and Antigone, but it never quite culminates in open conflict – instead, we get a series of delayed or postponed confrontations, which peter out in Antigone's own cynical apathy. First, Creon tries to co-opt Antigone; he praises her for

burying Polynices – he just wishes she had come to him first, so they could have arranged a state funeral, during the day, with all the proper pomp and circumstance. Creon is clearly willing to do whatever is politically expedient. Antigone resists his overtures, saying: "Have my tongue torn out / and cripple me if you want peace, else I / will make of Thebes a courtroom" (UHDE 1967: 83). But she herself falls prey to doubt:

> Maybe it's easier to say: There is no good,
> no evil. All there is is what the weak
> agree among themselves. Or what the strong
> force on them through their power. Am I strong? (UHDE 1967: 87)

Monologues such as these led Patočka to complain that Uhde's heroine was "more Hamlet than Antigone" (PATOČKA 2004: 389). But the play's true center comes in a long monologue by Creon, in which he laments the fact that he had to kill Polynices, and then kneels before Antigone and asks her to kill him – to free Thebes from his rule, so that she can take his place. Antigone rejects the offer. She is crippled by her own cynicism; changing rulers, she says, would simply be like pouring dust from one vessel into another. By the end of the play, she seems to have given up on any principles or hope for change. She proclaims: "Full of holes, we are drowning. While the sated gods look down from above, we howl with hunger. Give us something to eat, and we are yours. […] Reason teaches us to live on our knees. […] We deceive ourselves that our filthiness is pure, and thereby soil all the purity left in us." In her typical blurring of opposites, she declares her own play "a comedy that will make you cry," or else "a tragedy where no one dies – it's something to be laughed at" (UHDE 1967: 94). Patočka glossed all this as follows: "In the conclusion, the girl proclaims a kind of philosophy of passive cynicism instead of active cynicism: she becomes a whore so as not to become a Creon" (PATOČKA 2004: 389). In that, says Patočka, she is the true creation of the Creons themselves.

Even Uhde distances himself from the play in his memoir, but we still might ask why it struck such a negative chord with Patočka. Why did it push him, not just to write an essay on Sophocles' *Antigone*, but to mount such a harsh attack against Uhde's version? He clearly felt that Uhde had no understanding either of the play *Antigone* or the character Antigone; Uhde could identify only with Creon, the cynical manipulator. Patočka wrote: "Today we have come so far that, for a young author of recognized gifts, only *Creon's* pathos is comprehensi-

ble; he [Uhde] would *like* to believe the Antigones, he has some kind of memory of them, some kind of nostalgia, but he doesn't understand them – they are, for him, implausible [*neuvěřitelným*]." Lamenting Uhde's shallowness, he calls the original Greek play "a classical, wondrous drama, one of those that are and always will be the subject of boundless admiration, which should be touched only with the greatest respect and trembling" (PATOČKA 2004: 390). Clearly, Uhde has not shown the proper respect for Sophocles. He has not trembled sufficiently before the mysteries of this ancient drama. And those mysteries are the subject of the rest of Patočka's essay, where he offers his own virtuosic reading of *Antigone*.

These few pages, written for a popular reader in 1967, are one of my favorite readings of *Antigone*. They are all the stronger in that Patočka is trying to make the play speak to a modern spectator even as he rejects the overt "modernization" of the plot carried out by Uhde. Patočka begins from the Greek idea of *nomos*, what we usually translate as "law" (and which Hegel translated as *Gesetz*), but which Patočka ties to its root in the Greek verb *nemo*: "to give what is due," "to divide," "to allot," "to apportion." Hence, Patočka's conception of *law* in the play has to do with allocation and allotment (the Czech word he uses is *příděl*). His reading of the play places each of the two main forces, Creon and Antigone, in their proper domain, allotting them to their proper sphere or realm. For Patočka, Creon's sphere is reason, human rationality; Antigone's is death, the realm that we cannot penetrate or perceive with our human minds. Creon represents the pathos of Day, Antigone the pathos of Night.[3] Patočka writes: "Antigone, this last member of a tribe of terrible transgressions – terrible, because they are unconscious and blind trespasses into the empire of Night – is a rock thrown into the path of a new conception of human life, a conception that is just raising its head [...], and that is Creon" (PATOČKA 2004: 394). For Patočka, Creon represents the first impulses of Greek enlightenment: human reason just as it is stepping out of the world of myth, seeking above all to preserve the safety of the state for the good of its citizens. Creon *does* still believe in the gods; his mistake is that he *subordinates* them to the security of the state. And so his idea of justice, of allotment, is different from Antigone's: Eteocles is given to the earth, to the gods, to the rites of burial, while Polynices is given to the dogs and the crows. And when Antigone disobeys his edict, she is also given her *příděl*, her assignment: to be buried alive.

3) There is a prefiguration here of the night-day opposition in the sixth *Heretical Essay*. For my own part, I find this idea to be much more appealing and persuasive in Patočka's *Antigone* essay than in the later work.

What Creon fails to see is that he has overstepped his own allotment. Indeed, his very nature as a calculating ruler, thrown back on his own intelligence, is to reduce the world to what he understands best: strategic calculations of power and security. In doing so, he must always overstep his bounds. Patočka writes: "In this lies the dangerous abyss of humanity: humans are seeing and knowing creatures; seeing, knowing, artifice are their sphere, and so they easily miss the fact that this sphere is not everything: it [only] contains everything that can be seen, named, clearly understood and grasped" (PATOČKA 2004: 393). What it *cannot* see is the boundary of its own perception, the boundary "beyond which every human meaning falls silent. That boundary is death. Beyond it is night, which our human meaning can never penetrate. But the mythic insight is as follows: this night is not nothing, even though it behaves as nothing for our human judgment and understanding – otherwise it would belong to our *příděl*, to the human *nomos* of Day" (PATOČKA 2004: 393). What is the ultimate message of Sophocles' *Antigone*? For Patočka, it is that night cannot be grasped by day, but rather day is grasped by night. When Creon makes his famous analogy comparing the state to a ship, Patočka glosses this in similar terms; the ship thinks it is firm, self-contained, an inner world protected from the elements, but in fact it floats on the unpredictable ocean, on "the surface of an abyss."

We can now understand Patočka's complaint that Uhde missed the pathos of *Antigone* without replacing it with anything compelling. But we still might wonder why Patočka felt the need to inflict such a "thrashing" on Uhde. A first point to emphasize is the essay's subtle but clear emphasis on Uhde's youth – Uhde was about to turn 31, but even if he was over 30, Patočka clearly didn't trust him. He twice calls him a "young author," which lends a particular tone to the idea of a disrespectful and inexperienced writer who dares to touch a cultural monument like *Antigone* without showing the proper respect and "trembling." Patočka also briefly mentions a larger generational problem: "Perhaps the author also wanted to say that today's youth, in their cynical revolt, regardless of their internal weakness, are nevertheless potential Antigones; but he did not provide the evidence" (389). Not only is Uhde himself a young playwright, but he is unable to make sense of youth rebellion, cannot make it *mean* something. In the end, he joins it in its cynicism and shallowness.

In other work, as well, Patočka dismissed the youth culture of the 1960s, and it is interesting to think that if we strip away the conceptual sophistication of his writing, we often find the relatively conventional distaste of a sixty-year-old for the excesses of youthful revolt. (For example, Patočka was clearly

discomfited by the sex scenes in *The Whore of Thebes*, which he says "do no honor, either to them [Ismene and Haimon] or to him [Uhde]" [PATOČKA 2004: 389].) In this context, we may remember Patočka's wary comments about young people as a political force in the 1968 essay "Intelligentsia and Opposition," where he repeatedly refers to students as a dangerous, volatile, and "highly mobile" mass that can turn violent if it is not properly guided: "it thrives on negation, which is its only space of freedom" (PATOČKA 2006a: 235–236). We might also recall the passage at the beginning of the fifth *Heretical Essay*, from 1975, where Patočka is exploring examples of crisis and decadence in European society in the nineteenth and twentieth century; he ends by saying that: "today we could add drug abuse, the revolt of the young, and the destruction of all social taboos, all of which manifest an evident convergence on anarchy as their limit" (PATOČKA 1996: 97). Antigone herself was, of course, a youthful rebel breaking social taboos – indeed, this is one of Uhde's points – even if she didn't do drugs or engage in premarital sex. But Patočka did not interpret her in such terms.

If he did not see Antigone as a youthful rebel, Patočka also did not see her as a *political* rebel. In fact, my second larger point about Patočka's review has to do with the place of the political. There is a long tradition of reading *Antigone* as a political play, one in which the claims of the individual, the family, or the gods conflict with those of the state. Many of the dialogues in Sophocles' play can be seen as staging such conflicts. Patočka refers to this interpretive tradition, only to reject it, when he speaks of Hegel. Hegel offered one of the most famous readings of the play, as a conflict between the demands of *family*, represented by Antigone, and those of the *polis*, represented by Creon. For Hegel, this conflict issued in a dialectical synthesis: Creon ultimately absorbs Antigone's protest and emerges, chastened, to represent a higher form of community. Like so many modern readers, says Patočka, Hegel was too enamored of Creon, and could not see that Creon was involved in an *irreconcilable* clash with Antigone – and would always be subordinated to her. For Patočka, there is no dialectical synthesis, merely an ongoing antithesis – no sublimation or reconciliation of competing forces, but rather a victory of Night over Day.

And to go even further, this antithesis is not one of competing obligations vis-à-vis the state and social order; it is rather a conflict of two forms of pathos. Antigone does not represent a *principle* or *obligation*, but rather what Patočka calls a *pathos* – a recognition that humans don't belong to themselves, that the world they can see is conditioned by the world they can't see. Likewise, Creon does not represent the state, but rather a misguided "Pathos of Day" – an

excessive faith in human ability, in reason and enlightenment, Thus, when Antigone buries her brother, she is not simply obeying a divine law or custom; nor is she (as Hegel argued) honoring the laws of the family against those of the state. Nor is she "an ethical hero in the modern sense," says Patočka, someone who unselfishly sacrifices herself in the name of a higher good. Rather, she is "delimiting the human," in Patočka's terms – upholding the allotment or *příděl* of Night: "finite, mortal man endlessly carries within himself the sign of the fact that he is not everything, that the world is not his world, that meaning is not his meaning, that he himself can strengthen and ground the meaning of day only by relying on the deeper meaning of Night" (PATOČKA 2004: 394). Antigone is a "rock thrown in the path of reason," an obstacle on which Creon must stumble, but only because he is seeking to move beyond his assigned sphere. Thus, Patočka rejects a *political* reading of the play: it does not stage conflicts between opposing duties, principles, or human interests. Rather, he reads the play as a study in human limitations: it is "a reminder of something that our Creon-like thinking has completely eclipsed: that humans are not their own, that their meaning is not Meaning, that human meaning ends at the shore of Night, and that Night is not nothing, but belongs to what, in the true sense of the word, *is* [i.e., to what exists – JB]" (PATOČKA 2004: 400).

For the purposes of my talk today, the main point I want to emphasize is that Patočka *rejects a political reading of Antigone's oppositional stance*. Indeed, he feels that the political reading simply replicates Creon's mistake by "allotting" Antigone to the world of calculations and consequences. This was Uhde's real mistake: in reducing Antigone's protest to a political deed, he saps it of all its pathos and undercuts her own justifications, until she is nothing but a cynical rebel, too weak for the state even to bother co-opting her. If we were to summarize Patočka's argument, we could say that Uhde, the angry young man, is unable to understand the pathos of a non-political protest against the interests of the state – or to explain that pathos to the rebellious youth around him.

3. An unusual meditation

Let me now jump ahead nine years to a later essay, an unusual meditation that is somewhat difficult to place within Patočka's oeuvre – his short samizdat essay called "On the Matter of the Plastic People of the Universe and DG 307," which

was written in December 1976. It's hard to classify the genre of this essay. It's not a rigorous philosophical text; it might be called a *fejeton*, although we don't have a clear sense of its audience and so we can't exactly assign it to the occasional journalistic genre of the feuilleton. In fact, I think our inability to classify a text like this is yet another symptom that we don't quite have a clear sense of the whole range of Patočka's writing. Whatever it is, the essay can be seen as an *apologia* for Patočka's support of the music underground in their trials of 1976.

Now, if we think of the reasons usually offered for Patočka to add his name to the protests in support of the underground, we are familiar with some of the accepted answers: there is Václav Havel's idea that this was an attempt to step out of the "protected space" of prominent dissidents and lend support to unknown people who could not defend themselves; there is the idea of "the indivisibility of freedom," according to which an attack on one member of society is an attack on everyone – this was articulated in an open letter to Heinrich Boll from August 1976, which Patočka signed; there is also a more convincing reading in terms of the larger, Patočkan themes of individual responsibility, authenticity and "care for the soul." But here I would like to imagine a somewhat different genealogy for Patočka's decision.

Patočka begins the essay by referring to Dostoevsky's short story "The Dream of a Ridiculous Man," in which an earth-dweller is carried in a dream to another planet. On this planet, people are innocent, free of sin, living in bliss, but the visitor from earth infects them with all the ills familiar to us from the planet Earth:

> […] like an atom of plague infecting whole countries, so I infected that whole happy and previously sinless earth with myself. They learned to lie and began to love the lie and knew the beauty of the lie. […] They knew sorrow and came to love sorrow, they thirsted for suffering and said that truth is attained only through suffering. […] They just barely remembered what they had lost, and did not even want to believe that they had once been innocent and happy (DOSTOEVSKY 1997: 317).

Patočka takes Dostoevsky's story and imagines an opposite plot. Rather than a planet of innocence, he imagines a planet of warring factions locked in bloody struggle; they have slaughtered each other in the tens of millions; they have "renamed good as evil and evil as good, freedom as slavery and enslavement as freedom, and carried out thousands of similar changes in the language, so that no one can figure out what is real, so that everyone is weaned on deception, as it were, in the mother's milk that is their language" (PATOČKA 2006b:

425–426). Patočka then imagines a small group of cosmonauts arriving on this planet from elsewhere in the universe and, against all the odds, infecting everyone with their purity and goodness. This is the "exact opposite" of Dostoevsky's story – the visitors from beyond purify a corrupt planet rather than corrupting a pure one. Through their own "awakened consciences," this tiny group of cosmonauts awakens the consciences of everyone else.

In this fantasy – and it is, avowedly, a fantasy; we could even call it a *fantasia* – the cosmonauts clearly represent two musical groups, the Plastic People of the Universe and DG307, and through them the whole music underground and the youth culture surrounding it. Patočka hopes that they will influence others with their own authenticity and sincerity. Let us look at what he writes about the young cosmonauts: "They will fill their souls," he says, with "whatever, in the simplicity of their spirit, gives them pleasure, not causing harm or injury to others; if they are loud, so that the external confusion doesn't reach them, then this is a necessary concomitant of their situation, rather than empty boasting; although I come from a different part of the universe, they will say, I am a human being, all too human, and I am happy to remind myself of this [...]" (PATOČKA 2006b: 426-427).

Patočka then closes the essay with a meditation on youth:

> But what else is youth, in general, than a guest from the unknown who comes to start a new life? The story of our cosmonauts could happen anytime, anywhere – we don't want to give the impression that it's an exception. Beginning anew means, first of all, a refusal, in part or almost in whole (perhaps no one can manage a total refusal). What is the genuine attitude to take toward this act of grace (I don't know whence it is given to us), namely, that life always begins anew? That we old people, bogged down in our routines and our well-used and worn-out perspectives, have the possibility – even the necessity – of reviewing ourselves, retesting ourselves, simply renewing ourselves – not through slavish imitation, not through toadying, but by coming to an agreement with something we don't produce ourselves? (PATOČKA 2006b: 427).

Patočka was 69 when he wrote this essay. If we place it against the abundant testimonies and evidence that he did not like the music of the underground (indeed he found it quite unpleasant) and did not feel particularly sympathetic toward the underground lifestyle, we can see why I called this essay an *apologia*; among other things, it is an effort to explain, justify and deepen his own tolerance toward the underground youth. We can even understand why he makes a point of saying that the young cosmonauts are "loud" – perhaps this was his

primary gloss on underground music.[4] Patočka even admits that the behavior of the youth might look like "empty boasting" (*naparování*) or banal self-affirmation (as if they simply wanted to affirm: "I am a human being…").

But I also think this essay takes on a new dimension if we read it alongside the review of *The Whore of Thebes*. I don't mean to suggest that Patočka is alluding to his earlier review, or even trying to activate a memory of Antigone in this piece; rather, I am suggesting an alternate genealogy of his support for the underground, one in which his frustration with the rebellious youth of 1967 evolves into a deeper respect for the mystery of youth rebellion in 1976. The extraterrestrial perspective of the cosmonauts in this essay is not a direct analogue for Antigone's pathos of the Night, but the idea of a "guest from the unknown," a perspective that hails from a completely different source than our earthly calculations, is familiar from his reading of *Antigone*. We can feel here Patočka's resistance to the jaded world of power calculations and self-interest, a world where words have lost their meaning; this is the world of "Creontic thinking," the world where human reason tries to encompass everything and declares that anything it can't encompass is simply irrational. While Patočka may have been skeptical about youthful rebellion in the earlier essay, he now sees youth as a renewable resource, indeed a resource for the renewal of us elderly people, provided we are willing to treat this "guest from the unknown" with sympathy and respect. In his account of the cosmonauts from another planet, we feel something of the "pathos of Night" – not seen as a dark force, but rather as an expression of the limitations of human reason, as a set of impulses that his own rationality cannot fathom, encompass, or subsume. And Patočka's desire "to come to an agreement with something we don't produce ourselves" recalls the end of the Antigone essay, where he defined the Greek "know thyself" as an effort to see oneself from the outside, from beyond the perspective of human reason and "the pathos of Day."

This brief attempt to sketch out a different genealogy for Patočka's defense of the underground leaves a lot of questions unanswered, and I'm afraid I won't answer all of them today. What I have really wanted to suggest is that we can draw lines from knowledge to action, from word to deed, in Patočka's career *without* moving through his philosophical writings. This movement toward a political deed did not arise suddenly in the context of Charter 77; instead, it

4) In the first English translation of this essay, Gordon Skilling attempts a more intuitive translation of this phrase as "they will cry out" (SKILLING 1981: 206), an idea that is in line with what I have called the "metaphysical" reading of the underground (BOLTON 2012: 134–139). In this reading, inspired by Václav Havel, the underground experiences an existential angst that they are desperately trying to communicate to the rest of society. But Patočka's Czech here is unequivocal – *budou hlasití*: not "they will cry out" but simply "they will be loud."

represents a specific kind of public engagement that runs alongside his philosophical work from the beginning. Rather than representing a philosophical decision to move from abstract thought to direct action, Patočka's support for the music underground is quite understandable and consistent, given the Antigone essay. He is still insisting on a perspective that comes from outside our worldly understanding; what is new here is the act of sympathy and tolerance toward a lifestyle and music he doesn't understand. In particular, we can see how precisely this encounter with something alien and alienating (the music and lifestyle of the underground) could become an impetus to reach outside himself, to explore something that his own reason couldn't fathom. Just a few months later, in his essays "What Charter 77 Is and What It Is Not" and "What We Can Expect from Charter 77," he would imagine the Charter as an act that transcended political calculation (Creon's world of day, we might say) and gestured toward a realm of moral statement (Antigone's world of night) beyond the tactics and strategies of everyday political behavior.[5]

4. A public statement

In conclusion, let me return to the Charter 77 obituary in order to offer a few final meditations about the role of "the political" in Patočka's life. Here again is the statement I referred to earlier:

> I když by bylo smělou konstrukcí tvrdit, že celé předchozí filozofické dílo Patočkovo a celý jeho předchozí život programově směřoval k podobnému veřejnému vystoupení, je přece ještě nepodloženější předpokládat, že mezi jeho odborně filosofickým a kulturně publicistickým dílem na jedné straně a jeho politickým činem na straně druhé, je naprostá diskontinuita, že tu jde pouze o nahodilou, situačně motivovanou souvislost (HÁJEK 2007: 35).

> Although it would be a bold hypothesis to claim that all of Patočka's previous philosophical writing and all his previous life aimed programmatically at this kind of public statement, it would nevertheless be even less justified to assume that there was an absolute discontinuity between his academic philosophy and his cultural journalism, on the one hand, and his political deed, on the other – to assume that the connection between them is merely coincidental and a question of circumstance.

5) In BOLTON 2012: 155–157, I discuss these two essays and suggest how Patočka "imprinted" the distinction between political calculation and moral conviction onto the Charter community.

This time I'd like to focus on two other words in this sentence, *veřejné vystoupení* — a "public statement" or "public stand"; the etymology of the Czech word *vystoupení* suggests a "stepping out" into the public realm. Here again we see the obituary's claim that Patočka's philosophy and journalism had previously been, somehow, private – an implausible claim given his active participation in Czech cultural life and his frequent publications in the Czech cultural press. Later, the obituary returns to that idea of a *veřejné vystoupení*: "His unobtrusive persistence and courage, in the end, had to step forth [*vystoupit*]; he did not hesitate to wager all his spiritual wealth and all his intellectual achievements for the sake of a short civic public *vystoupení*" (HÁJEK et al.: 36). It is easy to see how and why this narrative acquired so much force after Patočka's death; it was picked up and transmitted, not only by Patočka's Czech colleagues and students, but also by a range of public intellectuals who were well known in the West, including Paul Ricoeur, Roman Jakobson, and Richard Rorty. Elsewhere I have given some arguments for rejecting this reading of Patočka's death. Here, I would just like to point out that this reading mistakenly frames all of Patočka's cultural journalism as somehow *non*-public and *non*-political – and it simply ignores the fact that Patočka published so much outside of academic philosophical circles.

Instead of this mistaken reading, let me close by offering another perspective – by asking us to think about all of Patočka's "cultural criticism" as an ongoing political project, an interface between his philosophy and the cultural world. This was the spirit in which he might write a polemic against a young playwright, in an effort to defend his own conception of Greek myth as relevant to Czech culture today; and this spirit may explain, better than his philosophical writing does, the decision to cross the cultural boundary separating an academic philosopher from the music underground and to defend underground musicians – to defend them, in effect, in the same spirit in which he had attacked Uhde. Throughout his life, Patočka was "engaged with" the culture around him – perhaps not in the straightforward sense of an *engagé* writer who seeks to be political and to promote a particular ideology, but in the more complex sense of someone who follows contemporary literature and culture, and who frequently talks and writes about it, often in polemical or striking ways. Patočka left behind a body of occasional writings that, even if he had not written a word of academic philosophy, even if he had not been a spokesman for Charter 77, would still mark him as a participant in Czech politics and culture of the twentieth century, and as a vital thinker who should not be overlooked.

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