Tragic Realism: On Karel Kosík’s Insight into Kafka

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to shed light on the reflections that Czech Marxist philosopher Karel Kosík dedicated to literature, and particularly to the writings of Franz Kafka, from the 1960s to the 1990s. More specifically, this article clarifies whether and how Kafka’s work influenced Kosík’s philosophy of praxis and critique of modern society.

KEYWORDS

Kosík; Kafka; Praxis; Realism; Tragic

From Masaryk to Havel, the destinies of national philosophy and politics in Czechoslovakia have always gone hand in hand. The publication in 1963 of Dialectics of the Concrete (Dialektika konkrétního), the most celebrated work by Karel Kosík, represented an important chapter in this complex relationship. Drawing upon the latest trends in phenomenology, existentialism, and Marxist theory, Kosík’s book played a decisive role both on the intellectual and political level, becoming a focal point for the reform movement that in 1968 led to the Prague Spring. Moreover, thanks to numerous translations that soon appeared into the main European languages, its influence has expanded to encompass developments in Western Marxism in both Europe and the United States.

Dialectics of the Concrete addresses some of the most important themes in Marxist thought, such as alienation, labour, historicism, and economic determinism, coming from a complex perspective that presupposes not just Kosík’s expertise in Marxist doctrine, but also his solid knowledge of Western philosophy’s main trends, such as phenomenology, existential philosophy, and critical theory. Kosík had the chance, like many other young scholars who witnessed the Communist takeover in 1948, to study in Russian universities (in Leningrad and Moscow, between 1947 and 1949). Among the causes of his following interest in western philosophy is the teaching of Jan Patočka, whose private seminars on Heidegger were attended by Kosík in the late 1950s. In particular, as the subtitle suggests, with this book Kosík aims at investigating the human condition in the world. He intermingles Marx’s analysis of labour and...
economics with a phenomenological investigation of the relationship between individuals and the totality of what is, understood both in its authentic and alienated facets. Phenomena like history, temporality, culture and art are all part of this picture, and all contribute to a critique and a reinterpretation of Marxist methodology in light of the historical changes that the twentieth century was facing.

Besides these interpretative patterns, another peculiar and rarely thematized subtext that one can detect in the *Dialectics of the Concrete* and in Kosík’s later output regards his insight into literature, and particularly into the writings of Franz Kafka. The aim of this article is to shed light on this topic in order to clarify whether and how Kafka’s work influenced Kosík’s philosophy of praxis and critique of modern society. Dealing with this topic will also involve examining the great echo that Kafka’s work enjoyed in the socialist countries during the 1960s, especially as a consequence of Sartre’s speech at the 1962 Moscow Peace Conference, where he addressed Kafka’s literary work, and underlined the need to interpret it through Marxist categories. A further stage of this rehabilitation was the conference held in 1963 in Liblice (Czechoslovakia), in the same period when *Dialectics of the Concrete*, as well as Kosík’s essay on Hašek and Kafka were both published. I will conclude by referring to Kosík’s later account of Kafka, where he focused on the figure of Grete Samsa in order to explain a crucial aspect of our world today, and suggested the need to recover a tragic element within it.

1. Kafka or the Destruction of the Pseudoconcrete

In the *Dialectics of the Concrete*, Kosík refers to Kafka in a short yet meaningful footnote, in which he shows that he had knowledge not only of Kafka’s writings, but also of the essays that Günter Anders and Wilhelm Emrich dedicated to him. This circumstance is noteworthy, given the limited access to both Kafka’s writings and research on Kafka in Czechoslovakia at that time. Although Pavel Eisner’s translation of The Castle was already published in 1935, when the first Czechoslovak Republic was on the verge of its dramatic conclusion, the first Czech edition of The Trial appeared only in 1958, while Amerika came out four years later. Despite these limitations, however, already during the 1950s the figure of Kafka had a sort of underground reputation in the eyes of readers and intellectuals, who saw in his writings (whose unofficial translations were widespread) both a critique of and a possible path out from the social and political apparatus in which they were forced to live. By mentioning Kafka in the *Dialectics of the Concrete*, Kosík seems to share this feeling in full: “The theory and practice of ‘epic
theatre’ based on the principle of estrangement is only one artistic way of destroying the pseudoconcrete. Bertold Brecht’s connection with the intellectual atmosphere of the twenties and with the protest against alienation is obvious. One might also consider the work of Franz Kafka as an artistic destruction of the pseudoconcrete. With this term – pseudoconcrete – Kosík means that “collection of phenomena that crowd the everyday environment and the routine atmosphere of human life, and which penetrate the consciousness of acting individuals with a regularity, immediacy and self-evidence that lend them a semblance of autonomy and naturalness.” Among these phenomena, Kosík includes manipulation, routine ideas, and fixed objects that are not seen for what they are – i.e. mere outcomes of human social activity – but as immutable natural conditions. These are all consequences of a decayed version of human praxis, which has lost the creative and revolutionary character that Marx originally attributed to it, and thus became fetishized. The world of the pseudoconcrete, which goes along with this “everyday utilitarian praxis”, is described by Kosík as a “chiaroscuro of truth and deceit.” Ambiguity is its main trait, as the essence of what exists appears in this context only partially, in an incomplete and therefore misleading fashion. Phenomena, rather than revealing essences and allowing the observer to constitute clear meanings, become deceitful, insofar as instead of simply directing us to essences, they are themselves perceived as pure essences. The world which follows this description is thus a fictitious one, and yet people understand it as though it were a petrified historical condition, and not something merely contingent, i.e. the mere outcome of uncritical reflective thinking, in which fixed ideas relate to fixed conditions, with no chance to overcome this closed scheme.

While describing this world of the pseudoconcrete, Kosík clearly has in mind liberal capitalism, but also actually existing socialism, in which the critical and dialectical praxis which is at the core of Marx’s thinking has been substituted for a fetishized one, with the consequence of a general bureaucratization of the social and political apparatus. This world, however, also corresponds to Kafka’s world. One can indeed find the same ambiguity between real and unreal, between existence and appearance, which characterizes the situation of socialist republics in the aftermath of Stalinism, in the reality that Kafka describes in his writings. This parallelism, which Kosík explicitly makes in the Dialectics of the Concrete, has various consequences. On the one hand, it implies looking at the crisis of socialism through Kafka’s viewpoint, namely as an absurd and grotesque reality which recalls the one experienced by K. in The Trial and The Castle. On the other hand, it also entails interpreting Kafka in a realist way, as if his works do not consist of an expressionist account of the human condition as such, as suggested by many Western commentators, but can rather function as a realist description of a

10 Kosík, Dialectics of the Concrete, 87.
11 Ibid., 2.
12 The idea of a “fetishized praxis” is widespread in Kosík’s Dialectics of the Concrete and can be read as an extension of Marx’s commodity fetishism to the realm of human activity per se. About Kosík’s reconsideration of the problem of praxis in Marxist theory, see Schmidt, “Praxis and Temporality”.
13 Ibid., 2.
14 Besides Dialectics of the Concrete, Kosík dedicated a series of articles to the issue of the socialist political crisis, with an emphasis on the case of Czechoslovakia, which appeared in 1968 in the journal Literární Listy, under the title “Our Current Crisis”. See Kosík, The Crisis of Modernity, 17-55.
15 The attitude of universalizing Kafka, especially in the French context, overlooking any concrete historical situation to which his work might be directly or indirectly referred, is especially criticized by Marthe Robert (see Robert, Introduction à la lecture de Kafka [Introduction to the reading of Kafka]; “Kafka en France” [Kafka in France]). Jo Bogaerts
determinate historical situation, which Kafka could not directly witness, but that he foretold in his novels: the one lived by people in East Central Europe after 1945.

An alternative, realist reading thus emerged during the 1960s in opposition to the universalising interpretation of Kafka that had become popular particularly within French existentialism. The 1962 Liblice conference represented a fundamental step in this direction. Among its participants were, on the one hand, unreformed Marxists who rejected any possible reappraisal of Kafka’s work within socialism, while, on the other hand, scholars who were closer to the emerging reform movement took the chance to show how Kafka’s world can faithfully portray the aporias of socialism. The Czech Germanist Eduard Goldstücker, who organized the conference, represents through both his research and his life a junction between these two stances. He himself had been a victim of Stalinism, as he had been convicted in the Slánský show trial in 1952 and was rehabilitated three years later. Despite these dramatic circumstances, however, during the Liblice conference he took a cautious position, focusing on the major importance of the historical context that Kafka witnessed in order to understand his work. He also rejected the idea that this could provide any valid criticism towards the current establishment.

Much more explicit was Goldstücker’s former student Alexej Kusák, according to whom Kafka was neither simply an alert observer of the conflicts that were widespread in the Austro-Hungarian society, nor a prophet of the forthcoming catastrophes of the twentieth century. The greatness of Kafka as a “monumental realist” is due to his ability to identify and depict the profound alienation that was already ongoing in his day; an alienation that was also at the origin of twentieth-century social and political crises that led to the rise of totalitarian regimes. This point of view is certainly debateable, not only from a historical point of view, but also because it implies a peculiar notion of realism. “Being realist” – Kusák states – “means not only knowing which characters and situations are to be seized and typified, but also understanding the relations between humans, and knowing what in the world is devilish, its dehumanization, as well as its countermovement, protest, outcry, and enraged pain.”

This definition clearly diverges from György Lukács’ classic definition of realism, which Kusák recollects critically. As Lukács clarified already in his 1938 essay “Es geht um den Realismus”, and later on in other works on this topic, such as his later book recently challenged this critique, by reappraising the “existentialist Kafka”, and advocating the universal meaning of his literary work (see Bogaerts, “Sartre, Kafka and the Universality of the Literary Work”; “Against Allegory”).

16 See, in particular, Camus, “Hope and the Absurd in the Work of Franz Kafka”; Sartre, Being and Nothingness, 265-66. This existentialist reading, which privileged the allegorical meaning of Kafka’s work rather than its concrete implications, was later criticized both in France and abroad. See, for instance, what Deleuze and Guattari maintained in this regard in their well-known essay on Kafka (Deleuze and Guattari, Kafka. Pour une littérature mineure [Kafka. Towards a minor literature]).

17 The conference proceedings are published in Goldstücker, Kautman, Reiman, Franz Kafka aus Prager Sicht [Franz Kafka from a Prague Perspective]. A selection of papers from this conference are available in English in Hughes, Franz Kafka: An Anthology of Marxist Criticism, 53-122.

18 Accounts of the Liblice conference can be found in Liehm, “Franz Kafka in Eastern Europe”; Steiner, The Deserts of Bohemia; Nekula, Franz Kafka and His Prague Contexts. Concerning the tight bond between Czech literature and politics, also with reference to this episode, see French, Czech Writers and Politics: 1945–1969.

19 In his late autobiography, Goldstücker abandoned this cautiousness and explicitly related his own experience as victim of political persecution to the events described by Kafka in The Trial. See Goldstücker, Prozesse [Trial]. For a detailed analysis of Goldstücker’s standpoint, see Tuckerova, “Reading Kafka, Writing Vita”.

20 Kusák in Goldstücker, Kautman, Reiman, Franz Kafka aus Prager Sicht, 169. All translations from Czech and German are my own.
Wider den missverstandenen Realismus, realism simply consisted in grasping reality as it truly is, by avoiding any superficial account of it.\textsuperscript{21} A realist work of art is indeed nothing but a form through which objective reality is reflected. In this sense, the perfect realist writer was for him Thomas Mann, and certainly not Kafka.\textsuperscript{22} According to Lukács, the idea of interpreting Kafka as a realist writer relies on a fundamental misunderstanding. The many details and thorough descriptions that Kafka scattered in such a meaningful way in his writing are not, as in realism, “concentrations, intersections of those expressions and conflicts that characterize one’s own existence”, but rather “mere indicators [Chiffrezeichen] of an incomprehensible beyond”.\textsuperscript{23} In other words, the raw descriptions, the insistence on futile and often scabrous details, are always balanced in Kafka’s works by the onset of something completely irrational and absurd that inevitably causes turmoil in both the characters and the reader. The clearest example of this mechanism is probably the metamorphosis of Gregor Samsa, which bursts into an otherwise perfectly banal scene, whose ordinariness is well represented by the figure of his sister Grete. Abrupt passages such as this are the reason why Lukács can confidently argue against the idea of a “realist Kafka”.

In order to contrast this critique, and show how one can detect a deeper realist meaning in Kafka’s work, Kusák does not negate the existence of this “beyond” in Kafka’s writing. Nor does he disregard this abrupt passage, by means of which the writer seems to point to a further level of existence, abandoning what is real. Kusák rather turns this argument upside-down by showing that this beyond does not consist for Kafka in an escape from reality, but simply in a way out of the alienated condition in which the characters of his novels find themselves in their everyday life. In other words, the true alienation from reality corresponds for Kafka not to the transcendent beyond, but to everydayness, while reality, in its deepest sense, shows itself precisely in that beyond, which allows one to elude this alienation. The beyond for which Kafka longs is not a phantasy, but rather what is real, what in one’s existence is truly authentic, while the expressions and the forms that Lukács evokes as the very core of realism are for Kafka nothing but the surfaces, the mere phenomena that are wrongly taken for essences (to use Kosík’s words: the pseudoconcrete), and that must be revealed for what they truly are. What is of interest here is that Kusák, in order to support his argument, refers directly to Kosík’s Dialectics of the Concrete, of which he cites a long excerpt.

The world of everyday familiarity is not a known and recognized one [as it is for realism]. In order to present it in its reality, it has to be ripped out of fetishized intimacy and exposed in alienated brutality. […] In one instance, the alienation of the everyday is reflected in consciousness as an uncritical attitude, in the other as a feeling of absurdity. To behold the truth of the alienated everyday, one has to maintain a certain distance from it. To do away with its familiarity, one has to “force” it. What is the kind of society and what is the kind of world whose people have to “turn into” lice, dogs and apes in order for their real image to be represented adequately? In what “forced” metaphors and parables must one present man and his world, to make people see their own

\textsuperscript{21} Lukács, “Realism in the Balance”; Wider den missverstandenen Realismus [Against Misunderstood Realism].
\textsuperscript{22} On Mann and Kafka, see also Lukács, The Meaning of Contemporary Realism, 47-92.
\textsuperscript{23} Lukács, Wider den missverstandenen Realismus; quoted by Kusák in Goldstücker, Kautman, Reiman, Franz Kafka aus Prager Sicht, 174.
faces and recognize their own world? One of the main principles of modern art, poetry and drama, of painting and film-making is, we feel, the “forcing” of the everyday, the destruction of the pseudoconcrete.²⁴

The allusions to human transformations into animals and to parables are clearly references to Kafka. To show the world in a realist way, a faithful description is not enough; to see how it really is, its alienated crust must be broken. In this sense, one can say that Kafka’s parables are examples of realist writing: because they are able to represent the pseudoconcrete, and also because they succeed in shattering and destroying it through this representation.

2. Hašek and Kafka

The foregoing analysis has shown how the Dialectics of the Concrete played an important role in the reappraisal of Kafka’s work in the socialist context.²⁵ Nevertheless, looking at the proceedings of the Liblice conference, one might notice that various speakers did not deal with this work, but rather focused their attention on an article that Kosík wrote shortly before the conference was held. The subject of this article was a comparison between Kafka and another great Prague-born writer, Jaroslav Hašek.²⁶ The idea of comparing these two authors is not new, as many other commentators had addressed the same topic from various angles. F.C. Weiskopf, for instance, stressed how Kafka was deeply influenced by the literature and culture of his country, and especially by the work of Hašek, with whom he shared humour and melancholy.²⁷ Besides their biographical similarities, however, one can easily detect a more profound link between them. Walter Benjamin briefly addressed this topic in an essay that he wrote on the tenth anniversary of Kafka’s death. According to him, this link rests on a fundamental contrast which reverberates in their main characters: whereas K. is astonished at everything, the good soldier Švejk is never astonished.²⁸ What they both share, however, is the way in which they manifest these opposite attitudes; the way in which they move around, their “Gestus”, which to a stranger’s eye might look like odd behaviour. Benjamin insisted particularly on the “gestures” or “gestic behaviour” of Kafka’s characters, underlining their peculiarity and weirdness. One could even say, according to him, that “Kafka’s entire work constitutes a code of gestures which surely had no definite symbolic meaning for the author from the outset; rather, the author tried to derive such a meaning from them in ever-changing contexts and experimental groupings”.²⁹ This explains why for Benjamin the appropriate setting of Kafka’s stories – “the logical space of these groupings” – is theatre, whose function should precisely consist of “dissolv[ing] happenings in

²⁴ Kosík, Dialectics of the Concrete, 48-49.
²⁵ Kusák further emphasized in a book that he wrote in 2003, in which he recalled after 40 years the Liblice Conference and its aftermath, the importance of the Dialectics of the Concrete for his interpretation of Kafka, and more generally for the cultural and political life in Czechoslovakia over the 1960s. See Kusák, Tance kolem Kafky [Dancing around Kafka], 76.
²⁶ Both František Kautman and the then director of the literature and art journal Plamen, Jiří Hajek referred to Kosík’s “Hašek and Kafka” article during the conference.
²⁷ Weiskopf, “Franz Kafka und die Folgen” [Franz Kafka and the aftermath]. This article was originally written in 1945. Other analyses of this relationship can be found in Pytlík, Jaroslav Hašek; Ripellino, Magic Prague; Kundera, The Art of the Novel.
²⁸ Benjamin, “Franz Kafka”, 137.
²⁹ Ibid., 120. On the idea of gesture in Benjamin, see Sussman, “A Reading of Walter Benjamin’s Kafka Study".
their gestic components.” 30 This is precisely the function of the Nature Theatre of Oklahoma in The Man who Disappeared. At the end of the novel, the theatre promises to find employment for everybody who decides to apply. 31 Everybody, that is, including the protagonist Karl Rossmann, whom Benjamin describes as a character without character, insofar as he emerges as purely transparent and without any essential connotation, besides his postures and gestures. As is the case for most of Kafka’s figures – these gestures are always amiss, almost grotesque and offensive in comparison with their surroundings, thereby causing a sense of estrangement. “The greater Kafka’s mastery became, the more frequently did he eschew adapting these gestures to common situations explaining them” 32. Because they are always out of proportion, these gestures end up disrupting the whole scene, becoming themselves events: dramas within the drama.

In order to demonstrate his point, Benjamin refers in his article to several episodes in which the disproportion of the gestures of Kafka’s characters becomes more apparent. 33 When, for example, in the short story “Ein Brudermord” Wese rings the doorbell, Kafka tells us that it was too loud for a doorbell, so much so that it rang “right over the town and up to heaven”. 34 Another example is in the penultimate chapter of Der Prozess when K. stops at the first rows of the Cathedral: “but the distance still seemed too great for the priest. He stretched out his arm and indicated, his forefinger pointing sharply downwards, a place just in front of the pulpit. K. obeyed him in this as well, from that spot he had to bend his head back to see the priest”. 35 All these gestures imply exaggeration and distortion, and contribute to stage a grotesque scene. The characters who accomplish these gestures end up being infused with this same distortion, which emerges in their physical constitution. This is the case of Odradek in “Die Sorge des Hausvaters” – “the form which things assume in oblivion. They are distorted” 36 – as well as of Gregor, who turns into a bug, and also of the half-lamb, half-kitten animal in “Eine Kreutzung” whose “skin feels too tight for him”. 37 Despite their many differences, Kafka’s characters succeed in accomplishing these excessive gestures, and in so doing they are able to disrupt the setting in which they are placed: “Like El Greco, Kafka tears open the sky behind every gesture”. Nonetheless nothing opens beyond the gesture itself: “the gesture remains the decisive thing, the centre of the event”. 38 In other words, Kafka’s gesture points to what is beyond itself; beyond the same grotesque situation that his characters continuously witness. Nonetheless what is decisive for him is not the beyond, which remains unreachable, but the opening gesture itself, the excessive act which breaks the mise-en-scène.

If we now look at how Kosík addressed the work of Hašek, we find something very close to what Benjamin argued about Kafka. The good soldier Švejk is indeed for Kosík what Benjamin would call a gestic character, and this constitutes in his eyes one

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30 Ibid., 120. The idea of Gestus, understood as the embodiment and revelation of a character’s attitude, is at the core of Bertolt Brecht’s acting technique, to which Benjamin probably refers here. About this topic, see Doherty, “Test and Gestus in Brecht and Benjamin”.
31 Kafka, The Man Who Disappeared, 195.
32 Benjamin, “Franz Kafka”, 121.
33 Ibid., 120-21.
34 Kafka, “A Fratricide”, 403.
35 Kafka, The Trial, 151.
36 Kafka, “The Cares of a Family Man”; quoted in Benjamin, “Franz Kafka”, 133.
37 Kafka, “A Crossbreed”, 427.
38 Ibid., 121.
of the main points of comparison between the two writers. Švejk’s peculiar gestures emerge in the way in which he relates to the other characters of the novel, and especially to his superiors, whom Hašek depicts as a series of petty bureaucrats in the Austrian-Hungarian army. \(^{39}\) In this rigid scheme, Švejk – the “good soldier” – is an exception. Unlike his comrades, he is not interested in making a career in the army, he laughs at his superiors’ orders, he never does what he is supposed to do: “Švejk does not take part in the game”. \(^{40}\) In everything that he does, he is so unconcerned that he does not even realize that every gesture he accomplishes ends up being scandalous and reprehensible in the eyes of others. This makes him “dangerous and suspect against his will”: he is at once an “idiot” and a “rebel”. \(^{41}\) Just like Kafka’s characters, Švejk’s behaviour continuously threatens to tear up the scenery, by shattering its internal rules, and pointing to something that is beyond. This is indeed the same “beyond” that Kosík already identified in the *Dialectics of the Concrete* as the site of what is truly real, beyond the pseudoconcrete and alienated world in which both Hašek’s and Kafka’s storeys take place. Hašek particularly highlights the “gestic” component of Švejk’s behaviour, such as in the scene in which the good soldier faces the doctor in the lunatic asylum in which he was interned: “Take five paces forward and five to the rear’. Švejk took ten. ‘But I told you to take five’, said the doctor. ‘A few paces more or less are all the same to me’, replied Švejk”. \(^{42}\) Commenting on this passage, Kosík argued that the very essence of Hašek’s anti-hero comes to light.

This is a key to understanding Švejk: people are always being placed in a rationalized and calculated system in which they are processed, disposed of, shoved around, and moved, in which they are reduced to something not human and extrahuman, that is to say to a calculable and disposable thing or quantity. But for Švejk a few paces here or there don’t matter. Švejk is not calculable, because he is not predictable. A person cannot be reduced to a thing and is always more than a system of factual relationships in which he moves and by which he is moved. \(^{43}\)

A strong critique of any kind of political and economic determinism clearly emerges in these last words. However, what is most important here is the link between this interpretation of Hašek and the way in which Kosík tackles the work of Kafka. This confrontation emerges in the conclusion of Kosík’s article. Both Hašek and Kafka offered with their works a vision of modernity, which is characterized as an alienated reality, in which people are powerless in front of the bureaucratic machinery that regulates their lives. In this sense, they are both realist writers: they simply named these phenomena, and endowed them with an artistic form. Nonetheless what essentially distinguishes their works is the tone of their realism: the way in which they choose to describe the same reality. Whilst Hašek opts in favour of farce, where only laughter can reveal the absurdity of the system, Kafka’s realism is somehow tragic. Kafka’s characters are indeed incapable of opposing the reality in which they live with humour. Their reaction to the absurd

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39 See, for instance, the description of Lieutenant Dub and of his relationship with Švejk. Hašek, *The Good Soldier Schwei*k, 612ff.
40 Kosík, “Hašek and Kafka”, 80.
41 Ibid.
42 Hašek, *The Good Soldier Schwei*k, 39-40.
43 Kosík, “Hašek and Kafka”, 85.
situations they run up against is an unstoppable search for truth, which invariably ends up failing. “Kafka’s man is condemned to live in a world in which the only human dignity is confined to the interpretation of that world; while other forces, beyond the control of any individual, determine the course of the world’s development and change”. 44 No matter how hard they try, the only thing they can accomplish by laying claim to their freedom is reaffirming the same necessity that they always try to escape. If Hašek can therefore show through Švejk’s humour that humans can transcend their own status as objects, that they are more than that, as they always harbour within themselves “the enormous and indestructible force of humanity”, 45 on the other hand Kafka’s characters can shatter this reality, but never really overcome it. In this respect, Kosík’s conclusion recalls Benjamin’s interpretation of Kafka: the essence of the dramatic event is not indeed what it aims at, the beyond that it opens up, but the dramatic gesture that points at this beyond but that can never touch it. For this reason, Benjamin can argue in a letter to Scholem that Kafka’s parables are a sort of Haggadah (exegetical texts) without Halakha (religious laws), in the sense that they present narratives without referring to any truth or positive doctrine: “Kafka’s real genius was that he tried something completely new: he sacrificed truth for the sake of clinging to its transmissibility, its haggadic element”. 46 Similarly, while referring back to Benjamin’s standpoint Adorno defined Kafka’s prose as a parabolic system the key to which has been stolen: “Each sentence says ‘interpret me’ and none will permit it”. 47 The same tragic condition that seals the fate of Kafka’s characters seems therefore to extend also to Kafka’s readers, who can only guess but never fully grasp what lies beyond the absurdity of the world that he depicts.

3. End of Silence

The two works by Kosík considered so far, the Dialectics of the Concrete and “Hašek and Kafka”, were both written in the early 1960s, when Kosík was one of the most influential intellectuals in his country. 48 After the failure of the Prague Spring and the following political normalization in Czechoslovakia, the situation abruptly changed. Unlike many other philosophers and writers, who resorted to spreading their works through the samizdat network, Kosík resolved rather to silence himself, as he stopped publishing until after 1989. 49 When this long period finally ended, Kosík was invited to give a talk at a conference on Kafka, which was held in November 1992 at the Goethe Institute in Prague. 50 This was the first public event dedicated to Kafka in almost thirty years since the 1963 Liblice conference. The title of Kosík’s presentation was “Das Jahrhundert der Grete Samsa. Von der Möglichkeit oder

44 Ibid., 86.
45 Ibid.
46 Benjamin, “Some Reflections on Kafka”, 144.
47 Adorno, Notes on Kafka, 245.
48 Besides the academic work at the Charles University in Prague, where he became professor in 1968, Kosík was also a member of the Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Communist Party in 1968-69. In 1970 he was expelled from the party and fired from the university, where he was re-admitted only in 1990.
49 The only occasion in which Kosík broke his silence was in 1975, when he wrote an open letter to Jean-Paul Sartre, denouncing the theft by the secret police of a thousand-page manuscript, during a search in his apartment. See Kosík, “Le philosophe Tchécoslovaque Karel Kosík écrit à J.-P. Sartre” [The Czech Philosopher Karel Kosík writes to Jean-Paul Sartre].
50 The proceedings of the conference are available in Krolop and Zimmermann, Kafka und Prag [Kafka and Prague].
Unmöglichkeit des Tragischen in unserer Zeit”\(^{51}\). This text provides a clearer explanation of the tragic discourse that Kosík detected in Kafka’s work, and that – as the above has shown – lies at the core of his interpretation.

According to Kosík, Kafka’s work came to the conclusion that modernity is not hospitable to the tragic, as it tends to hide and substitute it with the grotesque. This stance reveals a change from what Kosík had maintained in his previous writings. Whilst in “Hašek and Kafka” all the emphasis was placed on the tragic aspect of Kafka’s characters, which is exemplified by their never-ending search for a sense, in “The Century of Grete Samsa”, Kosík focuses his attention on the non-tragic context in which this search takes place, that is, on the way in which the modern world strives to conceal any tragic element within it. The contradiction between these two perspectives is only superficial: the concealment of tragedy is in fact what makes the agency of Kafka’s characters even more tragic, as in this way the search for truth that they undertake ends up being not just endless, but also meaningless. In a context in which all the tragic aspects of life are negated, the beyond that their gestures always evoke is not only unreachable, but even inconceivable.

In “Hašek and Kafka”, the character that seems to interest Kosík the most is Josef K. At the end of The Trial, while two men wearing top hats lead him to the Strahov quarries – the place where eventually one of them will “thrust a knife into his heart” – Josef K. still struggles to get a better image of what is happening: “[he] is preoccupied with studying the physiognomy and behaviour of his mysterious attendants”.\(^{52}\) In other words, even in this extreme situation, this man’s search for truth has not ended. On the other hand, in “The Century of Grete Samsa”, Kosík focuses on “The Metamorphosis”. What interests him is not the tragic destiny of Gregor Samsa, but rather the figure of his sister Grete, who becomes for him the real protagonist of the story. According to Kosík, Grete Samsa embodies the negation of the tragic. The real metamorphosis which gives the title to Kafka’s short story is not the one of Gregor, but rather the one that Grete undergoes, once her brother has turned into a bug. From then on, Grete immediately stops looking at Gregor as a human being. In so doing, she has no doubts or regrets: Gregor is now called a monster [Untier], and she loses any interest in his fate.\(^{53}\) “It is simply in the logic of things that Grete Samsa, the anti-Antigone of our age, does not bury her brother, but let the housemaid taking care of removing [wgeschaffen] his remains, and wiping them off the face of the earth.”\(^{54}\) Grete tries to justify her behaviour by ascribing to Gregor the guilt of disrupting with his transformation the calm of family life, which nothing should ever disturb, not even death or despair. “Grete Samsa personifies the imperturbable ‘calmness’ of modern age, which nothing can upset and which therefore proceeds towards its goal, whatever the cost”.\(^{55}\) Kafka represents Grete as young and in great shape: all that interests her is the future and the prospect of successfully affirming herself in the world. “Grete Samsa, whom nothing can shake, not even her

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\(^{51}\) Kosík, “Století Markéty Samsové” [The Century of Grete Samsa]. This is also the title of collection of essays that Kosík published one year after the Prague conference on Kafka. I will refer here to the Czech version of the essay, as it appears in this book. All translations are my own.

\(^{52}\) Kosík, “Hašek and Kafka”, 78.

\(^{53}\) Kafka, “The Metamorphosis”, 68.

\(^{54}\) Kosík, “Století Markéty Samsové”, 16.

\(^{55}\) Ibid.
brother’s death, goes towards her future, which is the reproduction of her past, and will therefore repeat in her upcoming life its sterility, narrowness, and routine.\(^5^6\) By staging both the tragic and its negation, Kafka portrays in a realist way the main historical trends of the twentieth century. Not only does he model the figure of Grete, who represents for Kosík the modern anti-tragic zeitgeist, but also suggests with his many characters – distorted, enslaved, and yet still active and struggling – the need of renewing the tragic discourse within reality. This contradicts what Adorno argued about Kafka, namely, that in his works there can be no tragedy, insofar as his characters are not free, but rather subjected to a principle of “objectless inwardness”, which allow them to manifest themselves in external reality only through an inexorable estrangement. “Kafka’s figures are struck by a fly-swatter even before they can make a move; to drag them on to the tragic stage as heroes is to make a mockery of them”.\(^5^7\) This principle of inwardness is, according to Adorno, the only aspect by which Kafka can be seen as Kierkegaard’s pupil. Kosík rejects this interpretation by showing how Kafka’s and Kierkegaard’s positions are far apart precisely in this respect, and he does so by referring again to the myth of Antigone. In Either/Or Kierkegaard reinterpreted the figure of Antigone in terms of pure inwardness, insofar as unlike the ancient Antigone, the modern variant that he depicts is aware from the very beginning of her father’s secret and therefore suffers, as she loves him and yet cannot forgive his terrible guilt.\(^5^8\) But all her suffering takes place in her inwardness, and not in public, as in Sophocles’ tragedy. For a modern Antigone, any public action would in fact make her more isolated since, according to Kierkegaard, a public view would not be able to recognize her betrayal as love. Antigone’s suffering is therefore purely passive; it cannot imply any possible action, as it is utterly limited to Antigone’s inner world.

In dealing with this theme, Kosík shows how Kafka’s stance diverges from Kierkegaard’s. According to Kafka, in modern times Antigone did not simply withdraw to her inner being, but rather did something much more radical: she chose to repress her suffering by entirely committing herself to an outward existence. In so doing, she transformed and took the shape of an anti-Antigone – Grete Samsa – who does not even think whether burying her brother would be right or wrong, as this problem does not concern her at all. Contrary to Kierkegaard’s Antigone, who suffers without acting, Kafka’s anti-Antigone is always acting, but never suffers. However, as this anti-Antigone can freely inhabit today’s world, Kosík asks himself at the end of “The Century of Grete Samsa” whether one might follow the opposite path – thereby not rejecting but renewing the sense of the tragic. Can a new Antigone emerge, who could contrast with both the pure outwardness of Grete and the pure inwardness of Kierkegaard’s modern heroine? According to Kosík, this difficult posture consists of bravely resisting all the attempts at hiding what is tragic in the world. “What identifies Sophocles” Antigone with the present one is the fact that they both get out of the silenced and fearful crowd, they step out of line, and while standing alone in that position they become outstanding figures. They step out of line, in order to speak and act against what they reckon as an

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56 Ibid., 17.
57 Adorno, Notes on Kafka, 261.
58 Kierkegaard, Either/Or, 154.
It is noteworthy that, as for Kafka, what characterizes these figures is not so much their words or ideas, but again the small, futile gestures, the everyday acts of resistance and dissent, on which the hope of creating a new polis depends. These are, according to Kosík, the gestures of Josef K., of Švejk, and of anybody else who decides to break the surface of the pseudoconcrete, revealing its inner conflicts. This is the only way in which people, living through years of political normalization, could maintain a space of individual freedom. A dimension that Kafka’s literature, with its tragic and yet realist account, helped him to define and defend.

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