Francesco Tava

Tragic Realism: On Karel Kosík’s Insights into Kafka

The publication in 1963 of Dialektika konkrétního: Studie o problematice člověka a světa (1976, Dialectics of the Concrete: A Study on the Problem of Man and World), the most celebrated work by Karel Kosík, represented a decisive turn not only within Marxist theory, but also within European philosophy and intellectual history more generally. From Masaryk to Havel, the destinies of national philosophy and politics in Czechoslovakia have always gone hand in hand. Kosík’s book played an important role on both the intellectual and political level, becoming a focal point for the reform movement that led to the Prague Spring in 1968 (Kusin 1971; Kohák 2008; Landa 2019; Mervart 2017; 2019; for a more critical account of the role Kosík played in 1968–1969, see Tucker 2000, 124–125).

Dialectics of the Concrete addresses some of the most important themes in Marxist thought, such as alienation, labour, historicism, and economic determinism, from a complex perspective that presupposes not just Kosík’s expertise in Marxist doctrine, but also his solid knowledge of the main trends in Western philosophy, such as phenomenology, existentialism, and Critical Theory. In particular, as the subtitle suggests, with this book Kosík seeks to investigate 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 such as 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 the twentieth century was facing.

Besides these interpretative patterns, another peculiar and rarely thematised subtext detectable in the Dialectics of the Concrete and in Kosík’s later output regards his insights into literature, particularly the writings of Franz Kafka. The aim of this chapter is to shed light on this topic in order to clarify 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.
Walter Benjamin and the Frankfurt School

(Sartre 1962). A further stage of this rehabilitation was the conference held in 1963 in Liblice (Czechoslovakia), in the same period when both *Dialectics of the Concrete* and Kosík’s essay “Hašek a Kafka neboli groteskní svět” (1963, “Hašek and Kafka, or, the World of the Grotesque”; Kosík 1995, 77–86) were published. I will conclude by referring to Kosík’s later account of Kafka, in which 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 (Anders 1960; Emrich 1957; both quoted in Kosík 1976 [1963], 87). 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 *Das Schloss* (1926, *The Castle*) had already been published in 1935 (Kafka 1935), when the first Czechoslovak Republic was on the verge of its dramatic conclusion, the first Czech edition of *Das Urteil* (1912, *The Trial*) did not appear until 1958 (Kafka 1958), while *Amerika* came out four years later (Kafka 1962). Despite these limitations, however, during the 1950s the figure of Kafka already enjoyed a sort of underground reputation in the eyes of readers and intellectuals, who saw in his works (whose unofficial translations were widespread) both a critique and a possible path out of the social and political apparatus in which they were forced to live (Zábrana 1992, 886; quoted in Nekula 2016, 16; Václavek 1993; Čermák 2000).

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. (Kosík 1976 [1963], 87)

By this term – pseudoconcrete – Kosík means that

a 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. (Kosík 1976 [1963], 2)
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 idea of a “fetishized praxis” is widespread in Kosík’s *Dialectics of the Concrete* (Kosík 1976 [1963], 2–5) and can be read as an extension of Marx’s commodity fetishism to the realm of human activity per se (Schmidt 1977). The world of the pseudoconcrete, which goes along with this “everyday utilitarian praxis”, is described by Kosík as a “chiaroscuro of truth and deceit” (Kosík 1976 [1963], 2). 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 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 (on this see also Kosík’s articles on the issue of the socialist political crisis, which appeared in 1968 in the journal *Literární Listy*, under the title “Our Current Crisis”; Kosík 1995, 17–55). This world, however, also corresponds to Kafka’s. One can indeed find the same ambiguity between the real and the 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 works. This parallelism, which Kosík outlines explicitly 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; the approach of universalizing Kafka is especially criticized by Marthe Robert (1946; 1961), while Jo Bogaerts (2014; 2015) has recently challenged this critique by reappraising the “existentialist Kafka” and advocating the universal meaning of his literary work. A realist interpretation, on the other hand, suggests Kafka’s works can rather function as a description of a
determinate historical situation that he could not directly witness but foretold in his novels: that 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 (Camus 1955; Sartre 1956 – 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, Deleuze and Guattari 1975). The 1963 Liblice conference represented a fundamental step in this direction (the conference proceedings are published in Goldstücker et al. 1966; a selection of papers from this conference are available in English in Hughes 1981, 53–122). Its participants included, 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 (Liehm 1975; French 1982; Steiner 2000; Nekula 2016). 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, having been convicted in the Slánský show trial in 1952 before being 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 of the current establishment. In his late autobiography, Goldstücker abandoned this cautiousness and explicitly related his own experience as a victim of political persecution to the events described by Kafka in *The Trial* (Goldstücker 1989; for a detailed analysis of Goldstücker’s standpoint, see Tuckerova 2015).

A much more explicit stance was taken by Goldstücker’s former student Alexej Kusák, according to whom Kafka was neither simply an alert observer of the conflicts that were widespread in Austro-Hungarian society, nor a prophet of the forthcoming catastrophes of the twentieth century. The greatness of Kafka as a ‘monumental realist’ was 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 debatable, not only from a historical perspective, but also because it implies a peculiar notion of realism. For Kusák, being a realist means
capturing and typifying not only characters and situations but also human relationships, the devilish in this world, its dehumanization, but also the countermovement, protest, outcry, the enraged scream. (Kusák 1966, 169)

This definition clearly diverges from György Lukács’ classic definition of realism, which Kusák recollects critically. As Lukács clarified in his 1938 essay “Es geht um den Realismus” (1938, “Realism in the Balance”, 2001), and later in other works on this topic, such as his book *Wider den mißverstandenen Realismus* (1958, *Against Misunderstood Realism*), realism simply consisted in grasping reality as it truly is, by avoiding any superficial account of it. A realist work of art is indeed nothing but a form through which objective reality is reflected. In this sense, for him the perfect realist writer was Thomas Mann, and certainly not Kafka (on Mann and Kafka, see also Lukács 1963, 47–92). 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 their own existence”, but rather “mere indicators [Chiffrezeichen] of an incomprehensible beyond” (Lukács 1958; quoted in Kusák 1966, 174). 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 for Kafka, this beyond does not consist 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 lives. In other words, for Kafka, the true alienation from reality corresponds 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 fantasy, 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 (1966, 176), in order to support his argument, refers directly to Kosík’s *Dialectics of the Concrete*, from 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 kind of society and what kind of world is it 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 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. (Kosík 1976 [1963], 48–49)

The references to human transformations into animals and to parables are clearly allusions 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. Kusák, recalling the Liblice Conference 40 years on in 2003, emphasized the importance of the *Dialectics of the Concrete* for his interpretation of Kafka, and more generally for cultural and political life in Czechoslovakia during the 1960s (Kusák 2003, 76). Nevertheless, examining 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. The subject of this article was a comparison between Kafka and another great Prague-born writer, Jaroslav Hašek (Kosík 1995, 77–86; both František Kautman and the then director of the literature and art journal *Plamen*, Jiří Hajek, referred to this article during the conference). 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 (Weiskopf 1956 [1945]; other analyses of this relationship can be found in Pytlík 1962; Ripellino 1994; Kundera 1981; 1986). 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 Benjamin, 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 (Benjamin 1968, 137). 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. Indeed,

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. (Benjamin 1968, 120; on the idea of gesture in Benjamin, see Sussman 1977)

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 in “dissolv[ing] happenings in their gestic components” (Benjamin 1968, 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 is probably referring here (Doherty 2000). This is precisely the function of the Nature Theatre of Oklahoma in Kafka’s *Der Verschollene* (1927, *The Man Who Disappeared*). At the end of the novel, the theatre promises to find employment for *everybody* who decides to apply (Kafka 2012, 195). Everybody — that is, including the protagonist Karl Rossmann, whom Benjamin describes as a character without character, insofar as he is as purely transparent and without any essential connotation, besides his postures and gestures. As is the case with 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” (Benjamin 1968, 121). Because they are always out of proportion, these gestures end up disrupting the whole scene, becoming events in themselves: 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 (Benjamin 1968, 120–121). When, for example, in the short story *Ein Brudermord* (1920, *A Fratricide*) 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” (Kafka 1971, 403). Another example is in the penultimate chapter of *The Trial*, 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. (Kafka 2009b, 151)

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* (1919, *The Cares of a Family Man*): “the form which things assume in oblivion. They are distorted” (Benjamin 1968, 133), as well as of Gregor, who turns into a bug, and also of the half-lamb, half-kitten animal in *Eine Kreuzung* (1931, *A Crossbreed*) whose “skin feels too tight for him” (Kafka 1971, 427). 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” (Benjamin 1968, 121). Nonetheless, nothing opens beyond the gesture itself: “the gesture remains the decisive thing, the center of the event” (Benjamin 1968, 121). 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. For Kosík, the good soldier Švejk is indeed what Benjamin would call a gestic character, and this constitutes one 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 (see, for instance, the description of Lieutenant Dub and of his relationship with Švejk; Hašek 1973, 606–609). 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” (Kosík 1995, 80). In everything that he does, he is so unconcerned that he does not even realize that every gesture he performs 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” (Kosík 1995, 80). 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 lies 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 stories 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” (Hašek 1973, 34). 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 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. (Kosík 1995, 85)

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 before 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 for farce, in which 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 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” (Kosík 1995, 86). 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. While 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” (Kosík 1995, 86), 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 indeed not 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” (Benjamin 1968, 144). 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” (Adorno 1981, 245). The same tragic condition that seals the fate of Kafka’s characters therefore seems to extend to Kafka’s readers too, who can only guess but never fully grasp what lies beyond the absurdity of the world that he depicts.

3 The End of Silence

The two works by Kosík considered so far, the Dialectics of the Concrete and “Hašek and Kafka, or, the World of Grotesque”, were both written in the early 1960s, when Kosík was one of his country’s most influential intellectuals. After the failure of the Prague Spring and the following political normalization in Czechoslovakia, the situation abruptly changed. In 1970 Kosík, who had become a professor at the Charles University in 1968 and had been a member of the Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Communist Party in 1968–1969, was expelled from the party and dismissed from the university; he was not re-admitted until 1990. Unlike many other philosophers and writers, who resorted to spreading their works through the samizdat network, Kosík resolved rather to silence himself; he did not publish anything until after 1989. The only occasion on which he broke his silence was in 1975, when he wrote an open letter to Jean-Paul Sartre, denouncing the secret police’s theft of a thousand-page manuscript during a search of his apartment (Kosík 1975). When this long period finally ended, Kosík was invited to give a talk at a conference on Kafka held in November 1992 at the Goethe Institute in Prague (see Krolop and Zimmermann 1994). This was the first public event dedicated to Kafka for almost thirty years after the 1963 Liblice conference. The title of Kosík’s presentation was “Das Jahrhundert der Grete Samsa: Von der Möglichkeit oder
Unmöglichkeit des Tragischen in unserer Zeit” (“The Century of Grete Samsa: On the Possibility or Impossibility of the Tragic in our Times”). (“The Century of Grete Samsa” is also the title of a collection of essays that Kosík published a year later; Kosík 1993.) 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, exemplified by their never-ending search for meaning, 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” (Kosík, 1995, 77) – 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” (Kosík 1995, 78). 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 Die Verwandlung (1915, 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 lends Kafka’s short story its title is not Gregor’s, but rather that which 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 (Kafka 2009a, 68):

It is simply in the logic of things that Grete Samsa, the anti-Antigone of our age, does not bury her brother, but lets the housemaid take care of removing [wegschaffen] his remains, and wiping them off the face of the earth. (Kosík 1993, 16)
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 the modern age, which nothing can upset and which therefore proceeds towards its goal, whatever the cost” (Kosík 1993, 16). 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 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. (Kosík 1993, 17)

By staging both the tragic and its negation, Kafka portrays in realist fashion the main historical trends of the twentieth century. Not only does he model the figure of Grete, who for Kosík represents the modern anti-tragic zeitgeist, but also suggests with his many characters – distorted, enslaved, and yet still active and struggling – the need to renew 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 allows 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 onto the tragic stage as heroes is to make a mockery of them” (Adorno 1981, 261). This principle of inwardness is, according to Adorno, the only aspect by which Kafka can be seen to be 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 Enten – Eller (1843, 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 of her father’s secret from the very outset and therefore suffers, as she loves him and yet cannot forgive his terrible guilt (Kierkegaard 1987, 154). 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 the right
or the wrong thing to do, 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 to be an evil system. (Kosík 1993, 18)

In the attempt to think this new Antigone, Kosík particularly deals with the figure of Milena Jesenská, the Czech journalist who with her life and destiny faithfully embodied the above-described posture (Boella 2013; Buber-Neumann 2014; Tava 2022). It is noteworthy that, as for Kafka, what characterizes these figures is not so much their words or ideas as, again, the small, futile gestures, the everyday acts of resistance and dissent on which the hope of creating a new polis depends. These are, for 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.

References


