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From Report to Mythus. Jiří Kolář's Plays as Creative Transformation of the Shoah Testimonies

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Kolář's plays *Chléb náš vezdejší* and *Mor v Athénách*, written at the turn of the fifties and the sixties, are the examples of aestheticization of testimonies and other texts about the Shoah. Kolář's creative path is in a way *pars pro toto* of artistic and literary search of many authors reacting to the experience of Shoah and to many texts describing this hecatomb. Doubt in the previous aesthetics and in the polyphonic load of words is one of the most common experiences in the second half of the 20th century – until now. The author activates memory or cultural connotations of receiver and by eliminating a factual layer that could became a psychological safety valve that distracts, focuses a viewer (reader) on the most important and by it the most difficult to bear: to the event itself.

Keywords: Jiří Kolář; Shoah; Holocaust; testimony; narration; theatre; bystander; Auschwitz; collage; ekphrasis; mythus; report

> Die Vorgänge in Auschwitz, im Warschauer Ghetto,
> in Buchenwald vertrügen zweifellos keine Beschreibung
> in literarischer Form. Die Literatur war nicht vorbereitet
> auf und hat keine Mittel entwickelt für solche Vorgänge.
>
> (Bertold Brecht,
> *Schriften zur Politik u. Geselschaft 1919–1956*)

An attempt to describe the most important inspirations of artistic, literary and theatrical experiments of Jíří Kolář must include his reaction to the Holocaust and terror of the communistic regime.

In the mid fifties the author visited Auschwitz Museum. He wrote later:

> It was for me one of the biggest shocks I experienced: a great glass room full of hair, shoes, suitcases, clothes, prostheses, dishes, glasses, toys etc. Everything marked with a terrible fate, marked with something the art did not comprehend and will not comprehend. Here my skepticism reached its peak in regards to everything that used and uses artificial shock, to everything that ever wanted to provoke, to irritate, to shock, in regards to whatever exhibitionism (Kolář 1965: 6).

Kolář's confession reminds Bertold Brecht's remark quoted at the beginning of my paper. Although chiasmage called *Vlásy* was created by the artist before his visit to Auschwitz but after this trip he came to conclusion his work gained a new, terrifying context. This reflection in connection with his doubt in a word, rejection of the discursive role of literature as reservoir of symbols feeding demagogical speeches of ideologists, led him to idea of creating or reprocessing of works from pieces and leaving in them, as he called it, a rift of understatement (or a field of action for a receiver). It can be said that the creative path of Kolář is in a way *pars pro toto* of artistic and literary search of many authors reacting to the experience of Shoah and to many texts describing this hecatomb. Doubt in the previous aesthetics and in the polyphonic load of words is one of the most common experiences in the second half of the 20th century – until now.

Jiří Kolář did not really write theatre plays (or the poems of the late fifties): he c o n s t r u c t e d them in the same way as he did it with his prolages, chiasmages and "confrontages", thanks to which he became famous in France, Great Britain, and North America. Kolář's both dramas – *Chléb náš vezdejší* and *Mor v Athénach* – because he published only the two – I treat as narcissistic works (in a neutral sense of the word) and as ekphrastic ones, as they directly rely – by their form and staffage – to a plastic activity of the author himself.

Chléb náš vezdejší was created in 1959 and *Mor v Athénách* in 1961. Reaserchers of Kolář's output underline that the above mentioned dramas and book of poems *Básně ticha* were created in the same time, when the artist started to treat a word not only as semantic unit but first of all as a graphic and iconoclastic one. Transformation of creative conception is reflected in a collage-like composition of texts. Such form reminds to a degree centonic designs: statements taken out from the original context and placed in a new surroundings achieve different, often deepened meaning. A compositional base of the drama *Chléb náš vezdejší* are wordplays, instructions

which are later developed in a book of poems *Návod k upotřebení*. It is the only work where Kolář directly harks back to his prison experience.

Mor v Athénách is collage-like (due to its form it can be associated with *Černá lyra*) resembling *Chléb...* but, contrary to this work it has got – to a degree – a traditional dramatic axis. It is built of quotations from *The conquest of Mexico* by William H. Prescott, war memories collected by Otto Kraus and Erich Kulka in a book *Továrna na smrt* (these were also used by Arnošt Lustig in his *Modlitba pro Kateřinu Horovitzovou*), reports from South America colonization, pieces of the sixteenth century treatise of a Spanish friar Bartolomeo de las Casas *La Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias*, old Egypt texts, a book by Václav Kočka *Lidice, dějiny a poslední dnové vsi*, history of Ruthenian sects, pieces of biography of Ladislav Klíma and the ending of *De rerum natura* by Lucretius.

The above set allows me to assume Kolář set a goal for himself to go through history of human meanness, like it was done by Jakub Arbes in his famous romanetto *Newtonův mozek* (of course the only thing both works have in common is the idea and accumulation of historical pictures).

Faithful to an avant-garde conception of arts synthesis, Kolář treats dramaturgy as in a way widely understood creativity, and builds, as I mentioned earlier, ekphrastic works. In this context I understand ekphrasis *sensu largo* as an intermediate link between the verbal and the visual representation of reality, and combine it with the avant-garde pursuit of syncretism.

Ekphrasity of Kolář's dramas realizes in twofold way: through collage form and usage of requisites characteristic of his plastic works and through double form of each of the plays that are preceded by a pre-play which is a surreally transformed, distant reflection of what happens in the text "proper". The concept of author, as he said himself, was as follows: "Každá [hra] měla mít dvě verze: přehrání, jak určuje text, a potom snově bláznivé zpracování jevištní, filmové, jakékoli, které mělo následovat. Spokojil jsem se s předehrou, proto že to «druhé» provedení bylo nad mou víru, musel jsem celý život držet srdce na provaze, aby mi neuteklo" (Bauer 2001: 6). Some of the props – for example a bone in *Mor w Athénách* – and a scenography are common for pre-play and the play. A collage form is visible in quotations from other sources inserted in the characters' conversation – for example a novel by Ladislav Klíma, who, by the way, appears in *Mor v Athénách* as one of the characters – or in the textual stylization

associated with various discoursive forms easy to be distinguished. This intertextuality serves the project of combining of seemingly distant threads into a composition, which – like in a plastic collage – joins decontextualized pieces in a new entity.

A few times Kolář uses in his plays an authentic testimonies concerning the Holocaust, introduces also stories pertaining indirectly to terrifying pictures of genocide and through this manner shows, thanks to deliberate omission of hard facts about place and time of the events he talks about, an universal character of the horrible repertoire:

ALYBIS (*přednáší pomalu s využitím ticha*) Jámy byly
sto metru dlouhé a dva hluboké…
nahnali je do baráků kde se museli svléci
Země była krásná a sličná
stáli tu jako při stvoření…
Potom přeťali dráty
které oddělovaly úsek od hrobů…
Tento průchod był okamžitě obstoupen
špalírem mužů s býkovci a psy…
U každé jamy čekal jeden ten…
Za bití a štěkotu šli…
Ten na vartě nahnal dolů vždy deset lidí
přinutil je lehnout
a jiní čarostřelci na krajích jam...
Živí ulehali na mrtvé až byly hroby plné
Ženy a nemluvňátka stříleli odděleně
Trvalo to asi pět hodin
za doprovodu taneční hudby rozhlasových vozů

The above description is inspired by the authentic testimonies of the Nazi crimes and despite containing motifs characteristic of this kind of stories (a laud dance music, shooting people above the pit, burying victims in "layers" in a mass grave) and through this easily recognizable, is purposefully void of concrete details (where, when, who). The author activates memory or cultural connotations of the receiver and by eliminating a factual layer that could become a psychological safety valve that distracts, makes the viewer (reader) to focus on the most important and by it the most difficult thing to bear: to the event itself.

A collage (in different shapes and variants) as an artistic method, both: discursive and ethical, ties Kolář's output with literary and theatrical

activity of Tadeusz Różewicz. Both creators search their way for creating of literature in non-literary times: non-literary in a sense of the previous understanding of literature (seen, according to Brecht, as a field that was not ready for concentration camps and crematorium chimneys). Kolář started his search in the tome *Černá lyra* of 1948–1949; in which he declared:

> Celá sbírka měla být dějinami lidské podlosti, ukončenými svědectvími z koncentračních táborů. Napřed jsem se snažil vtáhnout tyto výpovědi do mlhy literatury, ale brzy jsem poznal nesmyslnost svého počínání a rozhodl jsem se ponechat jim jejich autentičnost. Proto jsem také tyto básně nazýval "autentickou poezií" (Kolář 1994: 245).

One should not be deceived: when he was writing about a "mist of literature" the artist rejected only literature in a "pre-war" sense. In contrast to Primo Levi, who condemned using artistic means for… artistic mean' reason only, Kolář is perfectly aware that language cannot be freed from figurativeness, and rejection of that "mist" means entering a different poetics. Różewicz's unsuccessful escape from aesthetics ends in similar way. Aleksandra Ubertowska studying a problem of the Polish poet's entanglement in *literariness* notices:

> A figure of trope (a footprint of children's feet, a picture of hair of a murdered women), ethical in its essence is in fact a smart synecdoche, eye-catching concept used to gain a "strong" artistic effect. Undoubtedly a certain "tropologic surplus" is created as if a language itself, against the author's intentions, tended toward figurativity (Ubertowska 2004: 61).

In *Černá lyra,* Jiří Kolář gives this method a try and later he will use it in his dramas in order to select them, take them out of context, change someone else's prose into poetry. He creates poetic collages, binds together, like in cento, utterances coming from initially different works. A creator performs an artistic experiment which, as he himself describes in a commentary to *Samobáseň*, is a "embedding" one work in another to gain the effect of dialogue. Leszek Engelking notices that this method is a literary version of prolage, an artistic technique of cutting away a piece of picture and pasting a different work in this place (it was used later by Kolář), and quotes an important declaration of the author himself: "only collage was able to chase away a «fairy tale» from the stage" ("fairy tale" being the

same as "mist of literature") (Engelking 2007: 6). And as far as a stage is concerned the same prolage method, developed and transposed into dramatic matter, appears in the plays *Mor v Athénách* and *Chléb náš vezdejší*.

Poetic and artistic collages of Jiří Kolář contain that rift of understatement, "indeterminancy" hated by ideologists of all breeds. This is close to Hrabal's remark about a "rift in a brain", without which it is impossible to live in the Central Europe – this remark surly pertained to a life in the Central Europe under the banner of the totalitarian system, which – as the name suggested – totally controls reality, even the one depicted in art works, caring about its "closeness", "airtightness", wedged into a idolatric – seeming – wholeness. Kolář's conception of creativity was – paradoxically from the perspective of the above mentioned remarks about totalitarianism – the consequence of decision about the close tie between art and life, all around unuprated reality (it was the most important slogan of Skupina 42); author assured: "Všechny koláže, co jsem udělal, jsem žil" (Kolář 1997: 283). Words and objects works in his literary output alike his artistic works, they are submitted to a similar decontextualisation, turning inside out, chopping; the author would like to make the receiver – through putting words in the polyphonic surroundings, an object in a new scenery – "to see things anew".

Decontextualisation is a method that applies almost wholly to the play *Mor v Athénách* and to a certain degree it also appears in *Chléb naš vezdejší*. Pieces connected collage-like, taken out from their original textual or historical context allow the artist to bring forth ideas important for the dramas' meaning. Here is one example excerped from *Chléb...*: one of the characters, Žaket, dictates his secretary, Tereza, two versions of speech; she saves them… but not on paper, only in her own memory, so to speak: by heart. When Žaket radically changes concept, his assistant must completely erase the previous version from her mind in order to "purely" adopt a new one (isn't it Orwellian vision?).

> ŽAKET (*ohnivě*) V prvé řadě nesmíme nevidět rafinovanost způsobu vniknutí do našich řad. Napřed fingovaný rozchod s rodiči, později zavržení dědictví, potom život v transfuzním ústavu, jako by vyměněná krev mohla předělat duševní podstatu hyeny, aby bezpečně a s tím větší drzostí mohl hrát svou bezectnou roli a nebyl ohrožován nikde. Návrhy reorganizací v pracovních táborech s odborničením v oboru norem způsobil nedozírné ztráty nejen na společném majetku, ale i v duševní prosperitě každého, kdo podléhal jeho komandu a názorům. Jako člen ředitelství stále a vždy stál na straně

> nepřátel státu a po utvoření ministerstwa našeho sektoru ukázal se jako hlavní škůdce a sabotér, podrývač a zesměšňovač každého usnesení vyšších míst. Svými nestoudnými proievy, spojenými s drzým vystupováním a rafinovaně nepřátelskými články, živou mocí zabraňoval všemu, co jen tak trochu mířilo vzhůru. Pro toto všechno nevím, kdo by ještě mohl souhlasit, aby…

This passage, in which Žaket uses a kind of newspeak characteristic for the functionaries of the communist apparatus can be regarded also as an expression of the position of Kolář in the debate between artists and experts on the issue of the Shoah, on the (un)ethical, metaphorical or universalizing representations of these events, which some disputants would treat as a taboo: becouse such hecatomb just cannot be a subject of metaphorization (metaphor assumes the possibility of finding an adequate counterpart in the history). Almost immediately after the February revolution, Kolář in his works linked the Holocaust and the trauma of the Second World War with the Stalinist terror, which he experienced. In 1949, he began to write a kind of lyrical diary, significantly entitled *Očitý svědek. Deník 1949* and dedicated to the witness of the Holocaust, the Czech Jew Jiří Weil. At the date of February 23, when Weil's book *Život s hvězdou* came out, there is a note:

> Téma okupace bude ještě dlouho zneklidňovat básníky. Snad jednou, až bude vše zdánlivě zapomenuto, vyjde na světlo něco opravdovějšího a většího, ona veliká vize ponížení a utrpení, vize nezahladitelné síly člověka, jeho neomezené a nezastrašitelné víry v život a nenávisti k lži, polopravdě, tuposti a nelidskosti nejkonkrétnější a nejobyčejnější. Prameny zrůdnosti a falše ještě neukázaly jedinou známku utišení a ochablosti (Kolář 2012: 25).

Kolář's reflection – it was the artist who, along with Josef Hiršal, Josef Škvorecký and other young authors, was one of Weil's closest friends – already contains the seeds of doubt in the possibility of a verbal presentation of the war trauma. Memory – as Kolář suggests – is a phenomenon that should be understood as the way of communication, it aspires to the impossible fullness and uniqueness. A valued reflection comes later, "až bude vše zdánlivě zapomenuto" – before there is only a chaos and the tangle of items that are arranged in a seemingly coherent sequences, but they contain the seeds of non-obvious inconsistencies. The eyewitness (or maybe rather bystander…?) Jiří Kolář sought an adequate language (not

necessarily a language woven with words), the provision referring to the preached by "creators of Holocaust *decorum*" (in terms of Leszek Engelking) imperative rejection of aesthetics.

One of the most direct artistic expressions about Shoah was a set of collages created in the sixties from copies of pictures made by atelier of Prague Jewish community. The workers of this shop photographed goods and furniture taken away from their Jewish owners, proving in this way the process of registering and transporting people to concentration camps. Kolář included in his collages also pictures of Hungarian Jews taken in 1944 to Auschwitz-Birkenau, usually connecting two photos that were tied together according to a semantic "rhythm" or chronological order of the depicted events.

The eye witness Jiří Kolář was looking for the adequate language, cautiously treating an imperative to reject aesthetics as it was preached by, let me repeat, "creators of Holocaust *decorum*".

The search for adequate forms, undertaken immediately after the war and carried out in subsequent volumes of poetry, collage dramas, in visual *Básně ticha*, led the artist finally to the idea that the word does not have to be a substance of literature; what is more: it no longer can be its substance. Kolář began to search for the essence of poetry somewhere else: in the rhythm, repetition, analogy of objects as well as impressions, conditions that could suggest a chain of possible associations to the recipient. Above all, what the Kolář distinguished in the operating of poetic art is the use of pre-existing images or objects, turning them only in new contexts and relationships with other objects: the creator defined his method as a poetic system copied in the non-linguistic sphere. Disgusted with the poetry created with compromised words, Czech artist sought the salvation *extra Ecclesiam* of language. This concept can be no doubt the resignation of substance criterion for distinguishing between the branches of art (like for example sound for a music, paint for a painting, stone and plastic materials for sculpture etc.), a rejection – as a consequence – of the notion of syncretism, which complicates the existing divisions. In this case, it is no longer possible to talk about "breaking/moving the frontiers of arts", because such frontiers cease to exist at all; it is also difficult to use the concept of "synthesis of arts" if the difference of substance ceases to be a distinguishing factor of the various types of artistic expression, and

finally: the literary works can no longer be interpreted in the context of the literary tradition – what could give interesting results in reference to such writer, like Milan Kundera, who has write in French, but his output grown out of the Czech or, more broadly, the Central European tradition). With all the doubts related to the correction or even a revolution in the field of art, proposed by Kolář, it is important to precise the homogeneity, syntheticity of the artist's vision; he creates both literary texts (including drama) and art works in the spirit of doubt in the old divisions. An attempt to find a new concept which is to revolutionize the art and along with its theory it is a consequence of the avant-garde provenance of the Czech creator and its relation to the non-distant historical events, especially to the tragedy of the Holocaust.

The Czechoslovak post-war literary and theatrical audience was a subject of similar mechanisms (perhaps in a subtler extent) as the Polish audience: the output related more or less directly to the Holocaust, Jewish transports, attitudes of bystanders, usually elicited the question of the status of the author namely whether he belonged to the witnesses (bystanders) or to the victims of the Holocaust. Such questions were often politically motivated. Regardless of which side the creator was identified with, he intervened in a special network of relationships and expectations of readers or viewers. An accumulation of – not necessarily expressed and expressible emotions related to the adoption of such issues made the author's sovereign decisions about the choice of artistic means difficult, if not impossible. Kolář clearly declared himself as a "bystander" (according to the famous nomenclature and classification by Raul Hilberg), considering the tragic experience of the common people of Central Europe. In the play *Mor v Athénách* one of the characters utters words that sound like the biblical Jonah lament or Job's cry of pain (the last line is, moreover, almost a pure quotation from the biblical words of the latter):

ALYBIS (*zvedne hlavu*) Nešťastné místo
ke zkáze určené
nevinné
že přihlíželo ponížení…
Běda tomu
kdo byl jen svědkem potupení
dvakrát běda tomu
kdo nečinně přihlížel

třikrát tomu
kdo pomáhal
Lépe by mu bylo kdyby se byl nenarodil…

The "witnessing" (bystanding) in the quoted passage is described as a three-stage experience: there is the one who looks (probably as an accidental witness), the one who idly stares and the one who helps. While the helper and the bystander are the figures whose status is immediately understandable, the category of "idle staring" requires consideration. I interpret it as an image of the so called "innocent perpetrators", i.e. a form that derives some pleasure – in the sense of Lacanian *juissance* – from the act of violence, acted by someone else (someone makes some "dirty work" for me). This experience is maybe more common in the Central Europe than it is admitted. Tying it only with anti-Semitism or, more broadly, with ethnocentrism perhaps lead as astray, as suggested Timothy Snyder in his latest book *Black earth*, proving from the historian's point of view, that the search for ideology usually occurs after the crime – not before.

Michal Bauer wrote about Kolář lofty, that "he is nailed to his experience of the poet-witness as to the cross" ("Kolář je přibit na svůj úděl básníka-svědka jako na svůj kříž"; Bauer 2001: 6); Václav Černý described him as an observer of reality and as a visionary; Emanuel Frynta called the author of collection *Prométheova játra* "the listening poet" ("básník naslouchající"). In the first part of this prosaic-poetic book, written in 1950, equally innovative in terms of form as *Černá lýra* (which preceded it), the author in collage-like way connects his own lines, which penetrate the tragedy of everyday life in the Stalinist regime with the images of the nightmare of the war. He also uses the fragments of the second part of Zofia Nałkowska's story *When the railroad tracks* (1946) published in volume *Medallions*, translated in 1949 into the Czech by Helena Teigová (as *U trati*), and included in the anthology of Polish translations entitled *Mír světa*. In the Kolář's book, the story was presented in the song *Skutečná událost* (Rod Genorův; the title is also a sign of a very loose, indirect reference to the story of Ladislav Klíma *Skutečná událost sběhnuvší se v Postmortálii*, published in 1932 (after author's death) in volume *Slavná Nemesis*), but this was not the only reference to Nałkowska. The artist confessed, that Nałkowska's prose moved him "tentokrát tak silně, že jsem se bez rozmýšlení odhodlal napsat, či spíše sestavit ze slov a vět povídky samé

báseň stejného obsahu. Byl to pro mne zprvu jen pokus, jak jsem schopen zmoci cizí námět" (Kolář 1985: 34). (In the drama *Chléb náš vezdejší* one of the characters – Fate (Osud) – talks about the production of soap from human fat: this fragment probably was inspired by the first story of *Medallions*, entitled *Professor Spanner* (but it is also possible that Kolář, like Nałkowska, used the testimony of the preparator of bodies, Rudolf Spanner).

The structure of *Skutečná událost* and indicated part of the drama *Chléb náš vezdejší* led some interpreters (for example Leszek Engelking) to conclusion, that even in the decade of the fifties the poet identifies himself with the idea of the ethical imperative of giving "the truth" or "naked facts" precedence before empty, and therefore immoral, decorativeness of artistic tricks (the consequence of such thinking would be the abandonment of attempts of metaphorical association of the Holocaust with other genocides in the history of the crimes of Stalinism). But I think in fact it was just paying attention to the properties of the forms of a collage, which in itself is a neat trick; about how much a summary of authentic certificates can be regarded as evidence of formal asceticism, whereas the third row in the order of the series in question, entitled *Samobáseň* (*Samowiersz*), including in the form of a text *rollage* of the first two songs, testifies to the choice of a specific artistic methods. Kolář, in this text, "pressed together" two layers: the war and the post-war related to overwhelming sense of horror. The procedure of locating monologues and dialogues in a new context is not only artistic, but also ethical message: the word turned inside, transferred, reveals meanings that at first glance "escape". A new context refreshes senses of expression hidden under a patina of habit or deliberately masked. This artistic Kolář's "struggle with the word" is connected by Michal Bauer with Halas inspiration (Bauer 2001: 6), referring to the experimental poetry of František Halas, who, moreover, was Kolář's first reader, publisher and promoter, introducing him into the environment of Jindřich Chalupecký.

A question of the context is also a key element in the Zdeněk Pešat's reflection on the status of Kolář's "autentická poezie":

> soubory se do řádu poezie začleňují ani ne tak proto, že obsahují projevy rozepsané do veršů, ale díky kontextu, v němž se ocitají. A to jak v knize samé, tak zejména díky obecnému dobovému povědomí o poezii, které bylo a stále je nakloněno tomuto prudkému odosobnění a zcivilnění básnického projevu (Pešat 1998: 176).

Pešat evokes the question of reception habits and reader's expectations, like Leszek Engelking, who notes: "You can not forget about the pragmatic frame of text, requiring the reader to adopt specific rules for the interpretation. Text is printed as a line and as a part of the volume of poetry, so it is perceived as such and it is difficult to be received otherwise" (Engelking 2007: 7). Despite strong prosaisation, the text "prescribed" by Kolář cannot be regarded as a prose, especially as a documentary or historical fiction. "Smashing non-literary texts in the lines of *Černá lyra* introduces them in the sphere of literature, because it includes them in the course of the line, the line forms. The artist (as well as the reader) makes them poems, his own poems" (Engelking 2007: 7). In his deliberations the investigator recalls the thesis of Yuri Tynyanov the minimum conditions of rhythm and Yuri Lotman's the status of a word in the verse songs, arguing that the mere breaking stories on the verses in order to associate them with a poem irrevocably changes the status of the sentences used by moving them to the realm of literary, arts, ruling their rights – which should be seen as particular, suspended in the case of verifiability.

Kolář, who in 1945 gave the communist party legitimacy and since that moment has been consistent opponent to the communist system (due to this the author in 1979 emigrated to France), if indeed at the initial stage of his career dreamed of the poetry 'which you believe', probably also almost immediately gave up the search for those. The artist's considerations since the beginning of his post-war artistic activity go in a specific direction: he sees the Holocaust as a display of widely understood people's meanness and this meanness shown by repetition of myth is a subject of both his dramas. Such conceptualization allows to a certain degree disarm contradiction "ethic-aesthetic"; it seems that the artist's interest is focused rather on the language of art than on the above mentioned opposition, the language that assumes the search for a form most adequate to a subject in order to articulate essential feature of the new epoch.

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