

PAVOL STRAUSS - A GENIUS OUTSIDER

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Abstract: Tibor Žilka, PAVOL STRAUSS - A GENIUS OUTSIDER. "PORÓWNANIA" 2 (23), 2018. Vol. XXVIII, P. 227-237. ISSN 1733-165X. The aim of this paper regarding Pavol Strauss' Literary Work in the Central European Context is to introduce Pavol Strauss as a man and a writer, who was with his heart and soul a Central European. He had a strong bond to this territory spatially and temporally. At first, he was chased as a Jew, later on in the age of 30 he converted into Catholic. During the period of Stalinism, they considered him a second-class citizen, and he was wrongly called the clero-fascists however he was a believing Catholic. He was literally active in the second half of the 1930s, when he published two poetic collections in German. His poems in German were influenced by avant-garde which he became in touch with in Prague - its literary atmosphere defined Pavol Strauss' literary experiments and further orientation. When speaking of Prague, also think of Franz Kafka, Franz Werfel and, of course, Reiner Maria Rilke. From the literary point of view, Pavol Strauss with his literary essays reached the highest level along with famous authors (R. Musil, K. Kraus, H. Broch). For his 82 years long life, Pavol Strauss cured many patients and left rare books of a unique philosophical dimension.

Abstrakt: Tibor Žilka, PAVOL STRAUSS - GENIUSZ OUTSIDER, „PORÓWNANIA" 2 (23), 2018. Vol. XXVIII, P. 227-237. ISSN 1733-165X. Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie Pavola Straussa jako człowieka i pisarza, który był sercem i duszą z Europy Środkowej. Miał silne związki lokalne w sensie przestrzennym i czasowym. Po pierwsze, był prześladowanym Żydem po czym dokonał konwersji na katolicyzm. W czasach stalinowskich był uznawany za obywatela drugiej kategorii i błędnie nazywany klero-faszystą, a w rzeczywistości był wierzącym katolikiem. Był aktywny literacko w drugiej połowie lat trzydziestych XX wieku, w których to czasach opublikował dwa tomiki wierszy w języku niemieckim. Jego wiersze po niemiecku miały wpływ na awangardę, z którą miał styczność w Pradze. Ta społeczność literacka określała Straussa jako eksperyment

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literacki. W związku z Pragą przychodzą na myśl również Franz Kafka, Franz Werfel i oczywiście Reiner Maria Rilke. Z punktu widzenia literatury eseje literackie Pavola Straussa osiągnęły szczyt wraz z innymi popularnymi twórcami (R. Musil, K. Kraus, H. Broch). Przez 82 lata swojego życia Pavol Strauss wyleczył wielu pacjentów i pozostawił rzadkie książki o wyjątkowym przesłaniu filozoficznym.

He was born on August 30, 1912 in a Jewish family in Liptovský svätý Mikuláš and died on June 3, 1994 in Nitra. In the calendar, both days fall on a Friday – the first was the last in the month; the second was the first Friday.² The first Friday was the day of his death, but this date is symbolic otherwise – Franz Kafka, one of the most prominent representatives of the 20th century literature, died on the very same day. However, he passed away 70 years earlier.

Pavol Strauss M.D. was Central European in body and soul, bound to this territory not only spatially but also in time. The middle of the week i.e. Wednesday also formed his biography. Wednesday was the day of his marriage (April 4, 1945), as well as the day of his funeral (June 8, 1994). And the day when the memorial plaque was unveiled on the occasion of his un-lived 88th birthday was again a Wednesday. The memorial plaque was placed on the building of the former polyclinic (the Faculty of Arts of Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra is currently housed in the building) in which P. Strauss gave back hope for life to many patients. He had a special aureole saturated with extraordinary emotional wealth and spiritual potential. He was one of us, and yet he was different. He was different in how he looked at the world, in forgiveness to his ill-wishers, in grasping the world in his works that were mostly very subtle in extent. Although he published his first two poetry collections in the German language, he considered the Slovak word primary.

Medicine, literature and music determined the life of P. Strauss but first of all the Catholic faith made it worthy. Even though he was born in a Jewish family, on August 29, 1942 as a 30-year-old he converted. It happened on the eve of his birthday, when the war had raged on the Eastern front. The dates in his life play an important role – they are also symbols of the exceptional nature of a person who has become an outsider even according to the criteria of the Nazi ideology, and even according to the anti-religious demagoguery of Marxists. Almost all his life he was a domestic dissident – once persecuted, sometimes dismissed and humiliated because he stuck out of the line. As he writes about himself in his autobiographical novel:

And while I was a Judo-Bolshevik in the Slovak State, I learned from the cadre's files (let us add: during socialism), that I am a clergy-Fascist bandit. And yet, there was nothing stranger to me than all the darkness that surrounds all the establishments where the practice of ideology is rude, unjustified and primitive violence (Strauss, 2000, p. 137).

2 This contribution is a part of the VEGA 2/0020/13 project on Hyperlexicon of Concepts and Categories in Literary Studies.

The Jewish boy was not even 5 years old when he started going to the Catholic church. However by the time he converted, a long time had elapsed. It did not happen until 1942. He converted to the Catholic faith as a thirty-year-old. During his activity in Ružomberok from 1939 he was in contact with the Munk family who had converted from Hebraism to Catholicism. They were the parents Franz and Gizela and their gifted children: the elder Tomáš and the younger Juraj (jezuiti.sk/blog/munkovci/zivotopis/).³ In person, he often referred to the influence of this family on his further development, after all – as we know – they all became victims of racial discrimination: Gizela and Juraj probably died in a concentration camp, Franz and Tomáš were shot dead by the Germans on April 21, 1945 near Neuruppin north of Berlin when prisoners were transferred (Šuppa 28). The process of their beatification began in 2011. As Martin Koleják points out in his monograph, he always returned cheerful from the Munk family finding there the environment he needed.⁴

After completing his secondary grammar school studies (he passed his school leaving exams in 1931), Pavol Strauss enrolled at the Faculty of Medicine of the University of Vienna where he also completed two semesters. From there he got to the German University in Prague where he obtained his medical doctor diploma in 1937. Since he spoke German at mother tongue level, his first two poetry collections were published in this language. Even the titles of the collections are unusual: *Die kanone auf dem Ei* (*Delo na vajci, Cannon on the Egg* 1936), *Schwarze Verse* (*Čierne básne, Black Poems* 1937). Willy-nilly, the first title evokes surrealist poetry.⁵ Not by accident. Then in the Czech environment surrealism gained relatively a large living space. As many as poppy seeds were the poets who became adherent of this artistic movement. At the beginning of the thirties, Vítězslav Nezval, one of the most

3 Tomáš's parents, František Munk and Gizela Kohn, came from well-off Jewish families. František (his original name was Filip) graduated from the Higher School of Economy in Prešpork (Bratislava) in June 1912. He completed his military service (1915 – 1918) with honours. After that he lived in Lučenec where he met his future wife Gizela who was married to an engineer from Lučenec, Eugen Policzer. In January 1923, the marriage of Eugen and Gizela Policzer was ended by separation of their bundles after the agreement of both spouses and after a court hearing in Banská Bystrica. Hereupon Gizela and František Munk got married in Lučenec on May 2, 1923. At that time, František was twenty-eight and Gizela was twenty-three. In Budapest on January 29, 1924 his son Tomáš was born to the Munk family. The Munks lived in Lučenec and it was not until 1926 they moved to Bratislava. The father in the family, František continued to build his career. At the beginning of the thirties, he worked as a director of an economic and industrial joint stock company in Mukachevo. He left the company in March 1932. In Bratislava on April 16, 1930 his second son Juraj was born.

4 See Koleják, Martin: *Pavol Strauss, hľadač pravdy (Pavol Strauss, the Truth Seeker)* (Gelnica, G-ATE-LIÉR, 2013, p. 26-29).

5 It was also said that these poems were the first surrealist poems in the German poetry, which Ladislav Šimon denies, on the other hand – as he claims – “these poems are significant literally also in the context of the entire then art of lettering created in the German language.” (See Šimon, L.: Pavol Strauss a Rainer Maria Rilke (Pavol Strauss and Rainer Maria Rilke). In: Žilka, T. (ed.): *Duchovnosť ako princíp tvorby (Spirituality as the Principle of Creation)*. Nitra, Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra 2001, p. 26-27).

prominent personalities of the Czech literature of the 20th century published three surrealist poetry collections.

When Strauss published his books, the surrealist group played a significant role in Slovakia as well. Its members and activists were Rudolf Fabry, Štefan Žáry, Pavel Bunčák, as well as the prose writer and later signatory of Charta 1977, Dominik Tarka. ⁶ Surrealism even inspired Catholic poets; its traces are discernible in the then poetry of the Catholic poet Rudolf Dilong. The German poems by Pavol Strauss are indeed influenced by the avant-garde movements; after all, at that time surrealism got domesticated in the Prague environment; especially the poetry collections by Vítězslav Nezval represent this direction (*Žena v množném čísle, Woman in Plural* – 1933, *Praha s prsty deště, Prague with Fingers of Rain* – 1936, *Absolutní hrobář, Absolute Sexton* – 1937). ⁷

The literary atmosphere in Prague thus largely determined literary experiments and Pavol Strauss's orientation. Here he had the opportunity to meet Vítězslav Nezval, Max Brod, Franz Werfel, he also got to know Hermann Broch, whom Milan Kundera praises in the work titled *Umění románu (The Art of the Novel)* and considers him one of the best writers of the 20th century. ⁸ Frankly, Pavol Strauss often recalls the name of this writer and in his library he attentively cared for his German works and he read many of them again and again. However, it was the Prague native, Oskar Baum (1883-1941) a blind poet and prose writer, who was only eleven when he lost his sight in Pilsen, he kept the closest contact with. Later he taught music and died as a result of an operation before the Fascists could completely liquidate him under the influence of racial discrimination. His wife and other members of the family died later in Terezin.

Remembering Prague, the first thing we can think of is the big three: Franz Kafka, Franz Werfel and naturally, Reiner Maria Rilke. Above all Reiner Maria Rilke is his great example for Pavol Strauss soon cast off the influence of surrealism in such a way that this poetic giant gradually slipped into the backgrounds of all his contemporaries.

The final poem in German from the last preserved collection of poems, because one of them got lost, was written at the end of 1940. This poetic collection was published only in 2001, moreover bilingually – in German and in Slovak – under the title *Slová z noci – Worte aus der Nacht (Words from the Night)* (Bratislava, DAKA 2001). Teofil Klas, a Catholic poet, translated the poems into Slovak. If we read the poems carefully, we find that there is a strong influence of R.M. Rilke. From then on, Rilke stands the highest on Parnassus for Strauss.... There is only one poet, the Slovak

6 Mária Bátorová argues that P. Strauss tended towards surrealism. See Bátorová, M.: *Paradoxy Pavla Straussa (Paradoxes of Pavol Strauss)*. Bratislava, Petrus 2006, p. 42-44.

7 See Jelínek, Antonín: *Vítězslav Nezval*. Praha, Československý spisovatel 1961, p. 84-89.

8 See Kundera, Milan: *A regény művészete (The Art of the Novel)*. Budapest, Európa Könyvkiadó 2000, p. 72-75.

Milan Rúfus, who can approach him. But he approaches him so close that Professor Lev Bukovský, the rector of the University of Pavol Jozef Šafárik in Košice, on May 21, 1992 awarded both poets the Honorary Doctorate of the university (doctor honoris causa) at the same time. Pavol Strauss personally recalled many times that these two poets mostly touched his soul.

It is true that Milan Rúfus knew how to express wonderful thoughts about Strauss's texts and essays about his peculiar art. Both of them understand art identically. According to them, poetry equates prayer, so poetry can bring our imagination to such heights where only prayer can penetrate. Poetry and prayer, prayer and poetry! These two terms are even substitutable: Strauss and Rúfus, Rúfus and Strauss. Both of them, they reach the heights of poetic ethos. Both of them, they are never reduced to the level of ordinariness. Their poetry resounds with transcendental spheres.

When Pavol Strauss finished his earthly pilgrimage at a hospital in Nitra, Milan Rúfus bid farewell to his friend with a poem titled *Rekviem za Pavla Straussa a za nás* (*Requiem for Pavol Strauss and for Us*).⁹ He also felt, even knew, that Pavol Strauss was not a common phenomenon in the Slovak literature. However, the same applies for him: as a poet, he is a lonely figure who even in the times of totalitarianism was able to oscillate religion in a poetic image or a hint, capture the Biblical (Godly) word in his poems of a soft voice.

Despite his close friendship with Rúfus and the artwork of Rilke, P. Strauss devoted himself mainly to prose. It was not a narrative story; it contained only fragments of a story that served to develop commentary, reflections, and essayist passages. Even though all sorts of things can be examined in P. Strauss's work, his essayistic writing seasoned with spirituality is the most frequented which is far from the journalistic factography. Documentarity, though sometimes inaccurate, is typical for essays by Vladimír Mináč. Even Alexander Matuska did not rise to such a height with his essays as P. Strauss. Both representatives of the Slovak literature missed that dimension that characterized P. Strauss as a thinker. It seems that essayizing prose reaches the highest level in Central Europe as evidenced indirectly in this quotation:

A specific phenomenon of the 20th century is the essayizing of fiction prose, manifested in the overall intellectualization of the style or by interlacing the narration with separate essayistic texts, especially in the production of R. Musil (The Man without Qualities), H. Broch (the novel The Sleepwalkers blends together with the essay Disintegration of Values), L. Klíma, M. Kundera and D. Hodrová (Mocná, Peterka, p. 178).

9 The poem was translated also into Hungarian by Sándor Tóth along with further poems by M. Rúfus and P. Strauss. It is a bilingual publication under the title *Liptói lantosok* (Liptovskí pevcí, Liptov Lyrist). Poems by Milan Rúfus and Pavol Strauss were translated by Sándor Tóth.

It is with the writings of Robert Musil that many of the features of P. Strauss's texts show similarity even though he did not produce works of a larger scale. Usually, his works lack compositional consistency, yet the book *Človek pre nikoho – Man for No-one* (2000) with its content as well as its scope considerably reminds of novel structure. Although this work is characterized by autobiographical factography, but the facts or small anecdotes are just the starting points for reflections, for essayistic passages that dominate the whole book. As he writes in this book: "For a while, I have also yielded to the claim that the novel is the poetry of the twentieth century. Well, sometimes it was and it is. Because everything that is true is poetry. It is true not in the sense of shallow realism but with its tentacles as spiritual radars that penetrate everything that is both apparent and anticipated in all directions and depths" (Strauss 2000: 52). In the next paragraph, he lists many of the major authors he read, the Austrians Broch and Musil dominating among them: "From Döblin to Werfel and Hesse, from Broch and Musil to Joyce" (Strauss 2000: 52). But other authors of the German language area are also precious and inspirational to him: Prague native Franz Werfel, whom he also met personally, Hermann Hesse, author of biographic essays *Boccaccio* (1904) and *Franz von Assisi* (1904, František z Assisi), but he also mentions Karl Kraus, author of the book *Die letzte Tage der Menschheit* (*Posledné dni ľudstva*, *The Last Days of Mankind* 1922). In the writings of Austrian writers, the criticism of the Austro-Hungarian society and its abidance on the old foundations is prevailing and either they predict its extinction (R. Musil) or they put up with its dissolution (K. Kraus).

P. Strauss no longer had to worry about the breakup of Austria-Hungary; he was born in another period, lived in a successor state – in Czechoslovakia. However, he was an author who was bred on the intellectualism of his predecessors. He was an aristocrat of the soul by which he approached these writers. He read the authors who were based on education and were real intellectuals. Neither of them created their works for the masses, for cheap spiritual food based solely on the story and the proven effects. These authors were far from what is considered to be popular literature today and eo ipso it also applies to P. Strauss. He does not often mention Slovak predecessors or works by the authors from the Central European region – naturally with the exception of German and Austrian writers –, he got acquainted with them later in his life when he settled in Slovakia. During the Prague era he meets prominent personalities, as is shown by the following quotation: "All in all, it was an evanescent and sometimes indirect acquaintanceship with Broch (from Broch I also have private photos, some letters and some poems), Werfel, Max Brod and Oskar Baum in Prague. On a lecture in Vienna, I met Béla Bartók who gratefully remembered Bratislava."¹⁰ He seems to have sought and found these acquaintances; after all, P. Strauss was

¹⁰ See the interview that was first published in *Literárny týždenník* (1990, no. 15, p. 1, 6, 7. Žilková, M. – Žilka, T.: *Odmocnina ticha* (*The Root of Silence*). In: Strauss, Pavol: *S výhľadom do nekonečna* (*With the View to Infinity*). Vol. 1. Prešov, Publisher of Michal Vaško 2009, p. 321.

already a personality, so he could make contact with any contemporary or future giant of culture but also of political life. As for the politicians, he also met with V. Clementis, on whom he gave a very positive opinion, in Prague he was also in contact with Ladislav Novomeský, but he also met V. Nezval.

We should particularly mention two Communist politicians with a different destiny: Václav Kopecký and Otto Šling. He remembers both of them in his autobiographical novel *Človek pre nikoho* (2000). He was in contact with them when he inclined to leftism. It is worth quoting a passage from his book in relation to the period when he moved in the leftist circles:

Student circles, meetings, manifestations and erotic-bohemian adventures with artists were deformation forms of these years. Speechmaking on Slavonic Island with Vaško Kopecký and Sinkule was the culmination and the big student rumpuses around insignia when I was observing all this, hanged on Otto Šling.¹¹

In the first case, it is Václav Kopecký who, in the 50s, during the hardest period of totalitarianism, was the head of the Communist Czechoslovakia and fully assumes responsibility for the fabricated processes and dictatorship.¹² Otto Šling, on the other hand, became a victim of his communist persuasion, because in 1952 he was executed on the basis of fabricated allegations made in a process which is also known as an anti-state conspiracy. Together with Vladimír Clementis and the other twelve accused, he was sentenced to death (only three out of 15 were not executed). With these later known politicians, P. Strauss met in the years while all were young and V. Kopecký did not even know the negative direction his life would take. Nevertheless, it is remarkable how fast P. Strauss finished with leftism. His education, his intellect and his extraordinary talent for music helped him a lot in doing so. In the next paragraph, he describes his turn which is often mentioned in connection with his transition to rightism:

But then there was a break when the first book of poems came out. I had just entered the forces. I learned that Stalin did not like the performance of Shostakovich's opera. He immediately banned his public activity. Reportedly, Shostakovich had been drinking heavily for a long time. At that time I interrupted all the contacts with the Communist movement, outraged and horrified by such a style of cultural policy¹³.

11 See Strauss, Pavol: *Človek pre nikoho*, p. 66.

12 M. Koleják in his monograph also recalls the speech of P. Strauss at a student demonstration in Prague: "He made a speech on a large student demonstration on Slavonic Island in Prague next to Vaško Kopecký, Sinkule and Samo Takáč. Afterwards, Vaško Kopecký the later minister and he were beaten up under a gate." See Koleják, M.: *Pavol Strauss, hľadač pravdy (Pavol Strauss the Truth Seeker)*, p. 23.

13 See Strauss, P.: *Človek pre nikoho*, p. 66-67.

True, it has to be said that his mentality and personal givenness have always inclined to individualism rather than to collectivism, which is a characteristic feature of every leftism. At the same time, it is necessary to add that every type of collectivism carries in itself the seeds of dictatorship and terror, because the involvement of the people in the politics inherently creates space for an individual who, sooner or later, finds himself at the very peak of unlimited power and dictatorship. And as it is mostly a man suitable for the common people, he is a “man without qualities” in Musil’s concept and a man without an extraordinary intellect who balances his personality shortcomings with the persecution of the intellectual elite. There is even no need to mention the most striking cases (J. V. Stalin, A. Hitler), but it is enough to name Kopecký again, who started studying at a college but did not complete his studies.

P. Strauss inevitably had to part from these wasters of world and Czechoslovak history. Figuratively speaking, since this split with the Communist movement, with which – let me claim – he had never fully identified with, he remained on the substitute bench till the end of his life. Never again he got to the centre of action, although he had all the prerequisites. Even in the literature, he remained, as he himself said, “the writing physician” without proper recognition and appreciation. He gained a little respect after the changes in 1989, but it was too late, there were even other authors who worked out to the top better than P. Strauss.

From the literary point of view, however, his essayism reaches such heights that have not been reached by any other author of the Slovak literature and which is congenial with the authors of world recognition (R. Musil, K. Kraus, H. Broch). And all the mentioned authors are Austrian, and they are part of the Austrian literature. Essayism during the period when P. Strauss found himself on the writer’s track was also prevailing in Germany. This is what the Slovakian essayist Zoltán Fábry, distant from the world and writing in the picturesque spa village of Štós, drew on.

This essayism grows through P. Strauss’s oeuvre and becomes the most distinctive feature of his prose work. It is based on the introduction of facts or sometimes a short story to which a philosophical thought often on the level of the world’s giants is linked and seasoned by a subtle intellect. In this he is so peculiar and unique in the Slovak literature. But this depth and submersion is due to the fact that in the younger years he was moving about extraordinary personalities or at least touched their radiating rays of genius. Finally, it was helped in particular with his own contribution in the form of extraordinary education and humanistic orientation, thanks to the medical profession which gave him thoughts for reflection. This is evidenced by the book *Zákruty bez ciest* (*Curves without Roads*, 1993), first published in the period of Dubček’s thaw.

Medicine, literature, and music determined the life of P. Strauss, but above all, Catholic faith made sense to him. The music belonged to P. Strauss’s life, which is partly understandable after considering the family background in which he grew

up. *"In the mother's family there were many musicians, two singers, a cellist, a native of Detva, mother herself was a good pianist."*¹⁴ His essays fell back on the experience gained from listening to or playing musical masters such as J. Brahms, T. Billroth, R. Wagner, and F. Liszt. Even more intense are his reflections on the combination of music and medicine, although – as he claims – it is about touching and interconnecting seemingly unrelated worlds. Music according to him has a special function for the doctor. A wonderful world of inner beauty and new outlook opens up for him when he is exhausted from work.

P. Strauss built up his inner life on the principles of religious faith, but music did not contradict it. As he himself claims in several places, the mystical state of the artist, the poetic upheaval has become the starting point of many artistic directions. Music brings people closer together, creates emotional unity, and stabs them in a friendly bundle. It is also connected with the conscious rejection of the consumer crowd, but also with the acceptance of suffering and pain.

Music stretches in the work of P. Strauss to the very top of his existence and takes on an ontological form. It is the manifestation of divine powers, especially love for man – at least which sounds from the artist's confession. According to him, music is the speech accessible for all which has a great power of bringing together.

Through medicine, there were spaces that opened up for the author to map the philosophy of life and death, the transition from one state to another. But the most interesting are those passages that deal with doctors-artists. He considered himself a writer-doctor. As a physician, he became an author of the constantly perturbing question of death. He pictures the life of a doctor as a service and the basis of this service is love for fellowmen. There is a Christian principle in this, even the highest. When analysing the surgeon's duties, he does remember hope. Love, hope, faith! He is even able to describe death or rather closeness to death in many variations and alterations. It is enough to recall the description of the death of A. P. Čechov:

Čechov loved flowers and trees above all and often sent his wife to stroll in the park. On July 14, 1904, when she came back from her walk, he was cheerful; he even told her a funny anecdote. Suddenly a severe shortness of breath came upon him. The doctor sent for oxygen. But Čechov objected peacefully: "There is no need, until they bring it, I will be dead." He asked for a glass of Champagne and emptied it to the health of his wife. Then he fell asleep and never woke up again (Strauss 1991: 139).

He scoops deep into the mysteries of medicine and, from the point of view of his subject, analyses the work and life of writers coming from doctors. There were many, because medicine and its representatives are most able to approach the human soul, penetrate into the interior of a human being.

14 See Strauss, P.: *S výhledom do nekonečna*, p. 322.

The Christian sense of life is also reflected in Strauss' attitude towards the patients: he is always kind, human and understanding. Even in humour. Even though it is death, respectively the closeness of death, he can give instructions for the acceptance of this state with natural calmness, even humour – incomprehensible, good-natured, and soothing. P. Strauss was also a medical personality as if being controlled "from above" by God's laws. He helped without recognition or consideration; he helped to heal both body and soul.

During his 82 years of life, he healed and cured many patients, leaving behind valued books that have their philosophical dimension. What he wrote persists in the Slovak literature. This is evidenced by the effort to make his work accessible again to the readers.

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