

## Fantasy and Reality

Michal Hvorecky

As we all know, boundaries between fantasy and reality are blurred in some of the very first literary works, such as *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. Later Francois Rabelais, Jonathan Swift, Laurence Stern, Goethe and Voltaire further evolved this pattern, but not until the Realism Movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was there any need for categories such as “fantasy” and “reality.” This was because the literature’s original function was more mythic and religious, absorbing all parts of a society’s culture, not simply the artistic part, as we are used to nowadays.

The crossing of the gap between fantasy and reality became part of the tradition of 20<sup>th</sup> century middle European authors of the former Habsburg Empire such as Robert Musil, Alfred Kubin, Sándor Márai and Franz Kafka. This crossing was also an important part of the modern Czechoslovakian literary tradition. The futuristic and catastrophic novels *War With the Newts* and *The White Disease* by novelist and philosopher Karel Èapek were partly inspired by the work of the mystic Joachim de Fiore. Fiore was also the subject of Èapek’s early work of non-fiction.

Whereas the American science-fiction of the 30’s and 40’s tended towards the bug-eyed monster genre, Slavic literature of the same period embraced an ironic sense of humor, a love of the absurd, and an innovative style of writing.

In 1948, the totalitarian regime and strong censorship began in Czechoslovakia. Even Isaac Asimov was forbidden, and Philip K. Dick’s *Scanner Darkly* was only published in Slovak by mistake as anti-drug literature. The regime lasted for four decades and brought with it the doctrine of socialist realism. Within this doctrine, culture was understood to be a mechanism of media propaganda. In the stated governed economy no real book market existed.

The special tension between fantasy and reality in Czechoslovakian literature is particularly evident in the works of two authors:

Egon Bondy (Czech), banned for 40 years, imprisoned many times

Dominik Tatarka (Slovak), banned for 25 years, imprisoned at home

Neither of these authors was born into socialism, but during their lifetimes, both were confronted with the reduced status of the freedom of the author. Reality represented a cultural challenge they needed to respond to.

Censorship was a common thing for authors who refused to write under an ideological dictate. Writers such as Bondy and Tatarka were crossing the traditional borders of the genre in an attempt to express the modern totalitarian world in which they were living. Readers expected signs of this criticism in the writers’ works. The more courageous the writer, the greater the effect of his work on the public.

### **Dominik Tatarka – *The Demon of Agreement* (a novelette, 1956)**

The controversial dystopia *The Demon of Agreement* delivers a horrible vision of a totalitarian society. It is both an engaging story and an allegory, fueled by intense disillusionment with Soviet Communism. The hero, Bartolomej, criticizes the work of the “central ideological organization,” the Czechoslovakian version of the Orwellian Big Brother. Both contemporary and futuristic, the novelette provoked fear because of how closely it fitted

the reality of 50's Stalinism. The mix of characters, both fictional and real, dead and living, reflected the rise of a new paradigm, a symptom of coming postmodern times.

### **Egon Bondy – *Invalid Siblings* (a novel, 1974)**

The novel *Invalid Siblings*, which takes place in the year 2600, exists on the borderline between utopia and dystopia. In this novel Egon Bondy coined the term “second culture” (Czechoslovakian underground subculture), an archipelago of intellectuals and artists who were relegated to the social margin and described by the rulers as “invalids.”

The narrator, 20-year-old Vera, feels caught in joyless isolation. Her outside reality is a threat and the capitol city of Prague appears to be a “glass metropolis, devoid of people” submerged in a flood. The floating metropolis is one of the signs of the looming apocalypse. Bondy's use of carnivalisation and dark humor are references to the invasion of “allied armies” in Czechoslovakia in 1968. A means to an end is the final realization of Huxley's *Brave New World* – the annihilation of everyone. But even this becomes an object of Bondy's incessant irony and derision.

*Invalid Siblings* is fantastic writing in the sense that it exceeds the boundaries of pure realism (Bondy's term: “total realism”). Bondy is a writer who employed the themes of science fiction to expose the foibles of contemporary society, to promulgate his pro-democratic, anti-totalitarian rhetoric, and to outline his relativist philosophy.

Both Tatarka and Bondy give the world an imaginative new dimension, where borders between fantasy worlds and reality blur convincingly. Their literary careers radiate their extraordinary gift: accurate portrayal of the tragic dichotomy imposed upon them by the tension between the historical moment and their own imaginations.

In totalitarian times, Tatarka and Bondy were able them to speak about their society much more openly and critically than the literary mainstream. Specifically, their use of the literary genres of utopia and dystopia provided an excellent medium for the political metaphor.

Their similarities and differences help us to better understand the world to which we return after reading the last pages of their books.