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POETICS OF NAMES OF DRAMA CHARACTERS IN CZECH THEATRE OF THE ABSURD

The paper deals with the poetics of the theatre of the absurd which in the Czech environment flourishes especially in the 1960s. Attention is paid primarily to the function of proper names in Czech original plays which can be ranked among the genre of the absurd, but also in the texts which employ only some features out of the rich scale the theatre of the absurd embodies. The paper analyses names of characters within a selected sample of 30 plays by 15 authors taking into consideration their multiple functions: identification, aesthetic function, classification, characterisation and association. It tries to show that a name of a character makes part of the poetics of the genre, plot and semantic structure of the work as a whole.
Keywords*: Czech literature, poetics, theatre of the absurd, names of literary characters, typology of names.*

The subject and the aim of this paper could be exhausted simply by saying that it deals with the poetics of the names of characters in Czech theatre of the absurd. However, such a lapidary statement contains many impediments and therefore requires a more detailed explanation both regarding the definition of the term of Czech theatre of the absurd and the methodology of the poetics of names of literary characters. The specific concept of drama the constitutive features of which are modelling, feeling of existential absurdity and stereotypical language appears in the Czech environment as late as in the 1960s – quite contrary to European and world contexts. This is the reason why original Czech plays written between the years 1960–1969 were chosen. Not only dramas which are classified as purely absurd containing the topics of crisis and loss of meaning of life were chosen for the following analysis (e.g. Vaclav Havel's dramas), but also texts which only partially employ some features of the rich scale the theatre of the absurd embodies. Regarding our previous research into this topic, we have analysed 30 Czech plays by 15 authors including those who employed the features of the theatre of the absurd only occasionally (e.g. Milan Kundera) or who adjusted it for their specific, creative purposes (e.g. Josef Topol). The paper analyses names of more than 300 literary characters out of which about 50 were names of protagonists. The titles of the dramas are complemented with the date of their first print. If the play was not put on stage in the same year, then also the year of its first staging has been added.

Regarding the poetics of names of literary characters, we apply functional approach thus referring to the methodology of Žaneta Dvořáková who described both the definition of individual functions and their typology as well as the specifics of different methodological approaches. We agree with her view that the functions of names should not be perceived separately but in mutual interaction as they are "intertwined, complementing and affecting one another" [1. P. 202]. We realise that one name can perform (and frequently also performs) more functions. Among

these we can rank the function of identification which is manifested simply by denoting a particular literary character in the same way it happens in real life. According to an older typology introduced by Miloslava Knappová [2. P. 15], the aesthetic function is manifested in the form of the name, especially in the order of speech sounds, length, and euphony creating pleasing or appealing impressions". On the other hand, Dvořáková does not limit the aesthetic function solely to the form of the name claiming that actually any name in a literary piece performs aesthetic functions because it is an integral part of its structure and contributes to its overall meaning [1. P. 201]. In the present paper we take this view into account, however, we consider also the aesthetic potential of formally unusual names. Besides these two functions we focus on the functions of classification (classifying function), characterisation and association (allusive, evocative function). The classifying function means that the name ranks the character in a particular group, most frequently from the social, religious or nationalist point of view; the function of characterisation is typical of so-called speaking names which directly characterise their bearer; the function of association is found in names which refer to names appearing in real life, in history, literature or culture.

It is common for every name in a literary text to perform the function of ***identification***. The name individualises its bearer and helps differentiate one character from another. However, in the 20th century world theatre we can find tendencies which lead to depersonalisation of characters and which intentionally deny individualisation and create names poor in meaning or meaningless. "It is so when a character does not have a name or the name is almost meaningless, bare, stylised or modelled, which means substituting. Even a meaningless name attributes some meaning to the character, defines their typology and shows their ontology. […] The tendencies which lead to a depersonalisation of the character are most conspicuous in existential drama and theatre of the absurd." [3. P. 621]. We would like to add that in the world theatre of the absurd generalisation or a complete absence of the name is related to the problematic nature of identity of characters and that the question of the loss of integrity of a character is often a major theme in these dramas. Recalling Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1953), we have a perfect example of a drama in which the protagonist is not only generalised with mystery woven around him, but who even does not appear on the stage.

In the Czech theatre of the absurd of the 1960s the tendency towards depersonalisation applies rather to supporting characters. If we look at examples from Václav Havel's plays then in *Vyrozumění* (The Memorandum, 1965) a whole group of characters is identified by a substituting term Three clerks. In *Zahradní slavnost* (The Garden Party, 1964, prem. 1963) we can find a similarly conceptualised character of He-Secretary and She-Secretary of the Liquidation Office whose names are poor in meaning and misleading, and differentiate the characters' sex only. Protagonists' names usually identify their bearers more precisely. The names are frequently composed (first name and surname), evoking common names from the real world which is true also about Havel's poetics: the protagonist of *Ztížené možnosti soustředění* (The Increased Difficulty of Concentration, 1969, prem. 1968) is a scientist Eduard Huml, in the above mentioned *The Memorandum* assistant manager Jan Baláš appears, then there is head of the translation centre Zdeněk Mašát and others. In spite of that fact that the tendency towards generalisation of the names of

characters in Czech drama is not a prevailing trend, it can be well identified in the researched sample of texts. Ladislav Smoček's burlesque *Bludiště* (The Maze, 1966) – which is the closest of all Smoček's plays to the absurd drama of Havel's type – is based on an allegoric parable. A character named simply Man talks in front of a maze made of high hedges to an attendant who with bureaucratic pomp and circumstance lets people in, but does not allow anyone out. During an absurd dialogue Man, to no effect, searches for the fate of the people who entered the maze, but also wants to know whether there is a way out. The anonymous and crowd-like impression the character of Man gives is brought even further by the fact that he himself searches for rescue in the maze after the aggressive attendant attacks him. The principle of generalisation of the names of characters can be observed also in Josef Topol's drama *Hodina lásky* (An Hour of Love, 1969, prem. 1968) where the names of the couple differ in grammatical gender only: El and Ela. In this case we cannot unambiguously trace Topol's inspiration back to the world theatre of the absurd. We can rather speak about his specific concept of drama which in the 1960s departed from evocation of reality to incline towards abstract models and timeless parables.

The ***aesthetic function*** can be found to a greater or lesser extent in each selected name. If we narrow it down and understand it as a quality of names with an unusual form, it seems that some streams of the Czech theatre of the absurd are from this point of view marked. For instance model plays and burlesques which were created in the Prague Drama Club frequently contain grotesque names of their characters. In this relation we can refer to Ladislav Smoček's burlesque *Podivné odpoledne dr. Zvonka Burkeho* (Dr. Burke's Strange Afternoon, 1966) where the name of the comic protagonist, a bad-tempered intellectual Burke, appears also in the title. The grotesque quality of the name is closely linked to the ***function of characterisation***.

The authors often choose names which emphasise personal qualities of their bearers, at times creating the comic effect by using a name which sharply contrasts with the character's qualities. When referring to Smoček's above mentioned burlesque, we can give more examples: Dr. Burke's obedient, inconspicuous pupil with a cogent name Tichý (Silent) – a name that for him is "nomen omen", Dr. Burke's landlady's old-maidish daughter symptomatically called Svatava (name in its meaning close to "She-Saint", having the connotation of a saint) and her fiancé who is given a somewhat unlikely but comic name Václav Václav (Wenceslas Wenceslas).

Another truly intriguing language play was created by Pavel Kohout in his drama *August August, august* (August, August, the Clown, 1968, prem. 1967). The main character is a naïve circus clown August whose life dream is to perform a dressage of eight white Lipican horses, i.e. a performance appertaining exclusively to the ringmaster. August loses this unequal struggle with the institution when – obeying the ringmaster's order – tigers instead of Lipican horses run into the arena and devour August. The ridiculous and at the same time tragic dimension of the character, whose illusion is destroyed in front of the spectators, is even strengthened by his self-explanatory name – August. In August 1968, the name had even broader connotation because the actors made reference to the month in which the Warsaw Pact armies invaded Czechoslovakia. One of such contrasting names is

found, for instance, in Alena Vostrá's *Na ostří nože* (On the Cutting Edge, 1969, prem. 1968) where the protagonist is called Hrdina (Hero), a man who is not able to make sense of everyday load of new information and who definitely does not make the impression of a brave hero. Similarly, in Havel's play *The Memoradum* we can see a directing manager with an imposing name Gross (in German meaning The Great). However, the context of the play makes it obvious that the semantics of the name sharply contrasts with the character's qualities. Gross is actually "small", uninfluential person in a system which he is part of because he does not understand the ptydepe language in which a "memorandum" he received is written. [4. P. 27].

The rule that the characters in absurd drama are not characterised in detail and are rather generic in Czech dramas is exemplified by the names which perform mainly – or exclusively – a **classifying** function. Characters with social names, which are sometimes given the name character-function, are in these dramas not only episodic, but can play the role of main characters too. The reduction of the name to the social status of the character is not an end in itself, but makes part of the semantic structure of the text of the drama. "The purpose of the reduction of a name is to weaken the psychologically-realistically perceived individuality, emphasise its interpretational openness, semantic plurality and interchangeability, and possibly also its symbolic and allegoric dimension." [3. P. 632]. Symbolic quality of the names of characters can be observed in Ivan Klíma's *Porota* (The Jury, 1968, prem. 1969). A drama taking place at the court depicts an absurd trial which has a form of a regular hearing, but is actually a camouflage since the accused has already been executed without a decision. Whether a person is guilty and what kind of punishment they deserve is decided upon by an "independent and unbiased" jury composed of members of the public whose name reflect their job or profession (Archiver, Engineer, Captain, Dairywoman, Barber). Other characters' names reflect their role at the court (Prosecutor, Chairman, Defence).

Milan Kundera in his absurd burlesque *Ptákovina* (The Blunder, 1968, prem. 1969) aims at creating a model picture of the world through seemingly realistic human situations. The central character of the main plot is a headmaster who starts a bizarre search for the author of a defamatory pictograph written on the board. The author is he himself and the scandalous drawing is just a pretext for cruel punishment of the innocent. In a secondary story line an omnipotent functionary Chairman asks Headmaster to seduce his fiancée to test her fidelity. Headmaster succeeds, but in a series of schemes the woman wins and starts to blackmail her lover and to control both men. The satirical aspect of the play is strengthened not only by the plot but also by the names of both protagonists which accentuate their influential social status, however, in the context of the play they make the impression of a professional deformation. Chairman assigns tasks and affects peoples' lives. In his private life his bossy wife and unfaithful mistress rule him. The character of Headmaster is disintegrated in a very similar way. He, driven by the self-preservation instinct, hides his better self behind the mask of a rough, sadistic boss for whom it is important to know nothing, but rule mercilessly instead. In Josef Topol's one-act play *Slavík k večeři* (Nightingale for Dinner, 1967) it is the social position in the family that gives the characters their names: besides Mr. Nightingale, who comes for dinner to his girlfriend's, there is Father, Mother, Son and

Daughter. To have the full picture we have to add that the infamous family murder their invited guest and his name (Nightingale) becomes part of the pun appearing in the title: he is in this absurd play literally thrown down like "food" to the inhumane mechanism personified by the four members of the deranged family.

The function of **association** appears both in names which refer to real living people and in proper names which reflect literary and generally cultural traditions. Jiří Holý aptly pointed out that "a zero level of allusion to real living people is when the name is identical with the factual person." [5. P. 56]. A specific case of these allusions is found in the plays where the name of a character is identical with the actor's name. For example the script of Ivan Vyskočil's experimental programme *Poslední den* (The Last Day, prem. 1964), which in fact is a transcript of an audio recording of the opening performance of Nedivadlo (Non-Theatre), contains in its printed publication (1966) characters having the names of the actors who actually played them (Vyskočil, Josef Podaný, Pavel Bošek, Jana Prachařová etc.).

However, more frequent in Czech theatre of the absurd is the tendency towards literary allusions. Authors of absurd plays and burlesques exploit the potential of the genre and extend the meaning of the text using obvious as well as concealed references to other texts. Milan Uhde's political satire *Král-Vávra* (King-Vávra, 1965, prem. 1964) already in its title reveals its inspiration by Karel Havlíček Borovský's lyric-epic composition *Král Lávra* (King Lávra, 1870). Uhde refers to this jolly narrative about a king who hides his donkey ears also when giving names to his characters. The male character of Old Willow, also called "the uncle of the nation", who is actually a backward national revivalist, bears the name of a personified tree which in Havlíček's poem overhears and then spreads the king's barber's secret. In a similar way, the journalist Little Pin got his name from the famous endpin a double bass player Little Worm made of the same willow tree in the same Havlíček's poem. An allusion to a literary context is also made in the king's name: the surname Vávra has referred in the Czech literary tradition since Mrštík brothers' drama *Maryša* (1894) to peasant characters with whom one should not engage in an intellectual debate. Another allusion to this protagonist of the classics of Czech theatre art was made by Ivan Vyskočil in his play *Křtiny v Hbřbvích aneb Blbá hra* (Christening Party in Hbřbve or Stupid Play, 1969, prem. 1965). The surname Vávra is given to two brothers of peasant origin. While the younger brother Julius Vávra is an intellectual who has been "uprooted from his dear native land", his brother Oscar Vávra inherits the family farm and loves being a countryman. Yet another allusion to the literary classics appears in Ivan Klíma's debut *Zámek* (The Castle, 1965, prem. 1964). An intentional inspiration by Franz Kafka is apparent in the title and in the settings placed in a symbolic institution closed to the world, but also in the name of the main character, "surveyor's son Josef Kán". Kafka's *The Castle* (1926) features "surveyor K." while his incomplete novel *The Process* (1925) features a bank clerk Josef K. – Klima's protagonist's name is therefore an allusion to both the characters.

Václav Havel in his dramas likes to parody motifs from Czech history. As for the names of characters we have to mention a couple appearing in *The Garden Party*. Oldřich and Božena Pludek are proud of being a middle-class family, however, their first names are an obvious allusion to a legendary medieval Czech duke

and duchess of identical names. Another fact of importance is the unequal status of the couple: duke Oldřich was a descendant of the Přemyslid dynasty whereas his wife was a "simple girl from the public". In Havel's play the couple feels close to common people with their simple, everyday worries. The aristocratic grandeur is present only verbally in the phrases and pseudo-citations they use.

Resulting both from the overview and the particular examples provided above it can be seen that even the well-defined genre of absurd drama can contain names of different types and functions. This is especially true about the Czech variety of this genre which – as it has already been emphasised – is highly specific, containing intertwining streams and tendencies. In spite of this fact we can trace certain unifying trends. The tendency towards depersonalisation of characters in Czech absurd drama is rather typical of the supporting characters. On the other hand, protagonists' names usually have the characterising function not only in the sense that their name intentionally expresses the character's qualities, but also by creating a sharp contrast with their personal qualities. Authors do not aim at any kind of identification of spectators with a character. They rather put in doubt the so-called heroes with their traditional qualities. A significant amount of names perform the classifying function. These are namely the socially named characters whose names are reduced to their social status (or function) and which tend to symbolism. And it is in these names that the literary character of the text and its anti-illusiveness is reflected since the authors do not aim at imitating the world but at creating its model picture. Czech absurd drama features names that perform the function of association with surprisingly high frequency. They purposely refer to names outside the artistic text, which requires the reader (or the spectator) to be familiar with characters from other literary works as well as general knowledge of the cultural tradition. Allusions usually refer to Czech literary canon, are used to a comic effect and therefore linked to satirical tendencies, which is typical of Czech drama of the period in question. Finally, Czech theatre of the absurd of the 1960s contains names of characters which make part of higher semantic layers, pertaining not only to the poetics of the character, but also to the poetics of the genre, plot and semantic structure of the work as a whole.

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ПОЭТИКА ИМЕН СОБСТВЕННЫХ ДРАМАТИЧЕСКИХ ПЕРСОНАЖЕЙ В ЧЕШСКОМ ТЕАТРЕ АБСУРДА

Автор статьи анализирует поэтику абсурдистского направления, которое развивалось в чешской драматургии в 60-е гг. XX в. Внимание сосредоточено на функции имен собственных в оригинальных чешских пьесах, относящихся к жанру абсурдистской драмы, а также в текстах, где используются только некоторые элементы абсурдистского театра. Автором исследования было выбрано более 300 имен литературных персонажей, 50 из которых принадлежат главным героям драматических произведений. На материале 30 пьес 15 различных авторов в исследовании разбираются имена персонажей с точки зрения идентификационной, эстетической, классифицирующей, характеризующей и ассоциативной функции.

Из анализа и конкретных примеров явственно вытекает, что и настолько жанрово специфичный тип, как абсурдистская драма, может содержать имена различных типов и функций. Особенно ярко это проявляется в чешском варианте данного влиятельного направления, обладающего своей спецификой и имеющего взаимообусловленные течения, где, однако, можно проследить определенные объединяющие моменты. Тенденция к деперсонализации героя проявляется в чешской абсурдистской драматургии в основном у второстепенных персонажей. У имен главных героев более ярко проявляется функция, характеризующая, и не только таким образом, что имя персонажа преднамеренно выражает его качества, но и так, что наименование персонажа (имя) контрастирует с его характером. Авторы не стремятся к тому, чтобы зритель идентифицировался с персонажем, но ставят под сомнение так называемых положительных персонажей и их типичные качества (например, Вацлав Гавел). Большая часть приходится на имена с классифицирующей функцией: речь идет, главным образом, о социально названных персонажах, чьи имена связаны с социальным статусом и являются символичными. Именно в таких именах отражаются литературный характер текста и его антииллюзорность, ибо авторы стремятся не воспроизвести мир, а скорее создать его модель (например, творчество Ивана Климы и Йосефа Топола). Поразительно частыми в чешских абсурдистских драмах являются имена с ассоциативной функцией – они умышленно направлены за границы художественного текста и требуют от читателя (либо зрителя) знаний о персонажах других литературных произведений и общих сведений о культурной традиции. Намеки касаются в основном домашнего литературного канона, вызывают комический эффект и соотносятся, таким образом, с сатирической тенденцией, которая типична для чешской драматургии исследуемого периода. Таким образом, для чешской абсурдистской драматургии 60-х гг. XX в. типично, что имя драматического персонажа является составной частью высших семантических уровней – не только поэтики персонажа, но и поэтики жанра, сюжета и семантического единства произведения.

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