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## AUTHOR'S STRATEGY AND MORAL VALUES IN JÁN JOHANIDES' FICTION

### I

*A writer is the bravest person. S/he reveals him/herself, one may judge him/her.*  
Marguerite Duras

The author of a literary text brings into his/her theme apart from world-view, philosophical, political, and sociological also by them motivated and in turn from them following moral attitudes and ideational axioms of both topical and extra-temporal significance, thus consciously and aimfully adopting the latter. This a priori follows from the very essence of the intention of the creator of a literary work and from the function of a literary word in both literary and extra-literary milieu.

The genesis of J. Johanides' authorial strategy, conceived also as sum total of the acquired and the given within a specific personality of the author (talent, education, typological identity of personality) which is to be developing as to the tendency and function, among other things, also in both intra-textual and extra-textual ideational constructions of the text. Gnoms, maxims, and axioms which are expressible by the narrator and the literary character, find their epistemological and noetic support in the author. Viewing from above the discussed phenomenon, the literary text is becoming the author's alter ego in form of the synthesis of components within the intra-textual space and the ways of its vertical (semantics) and horizontal (composition) organization. The author, and we consider J. Johanides to be such author, proceeds through the problem, character, psychological plan of the theme, and conflict in every instance toward intellectual coping with the reality.

Still, what should be emphasized in his fiction and authorial strategy is predominantly the fact that the reality is developed epically and through the theme as a latent dramatic and multi-layered phenomenon. In a natural way and somehow in accordance with the laws of epic writing, literary reflection of historically and socially anchored reality in the fiction of Ján Johanides has manifold and differentiated back projections in the epic situation of the character. Metaphorically speaking, all things in his fiction are done to the benefit of getting to know the universe of human being. J. Johanides himself put it that "literature is most conceivable kind of art" although "what in fact a writer may do in the lives of other people) He may do very little, one should realize this", and this is why "literature of today should be a search for path for man in the places where on his way traditional direction indicators cease to be visible" (J. Johanides, *Som človek tradícií* [*I am a man of tradition*], pp. 6-7). Ján Johanides identifies himself with his fiction, and through the latter he projects himself into the universally perceived, seen, yes, even guessed layer within the tectonics of social space. "Acts" of personification, whether in the role of reflection, character, or the narrator of epic story, single out the author from generalizations and dehumanization and apathy of the mechanisms of individual and social commonness, in fact its meanness.

Finally, from the conventionalities, even monotony of attitudes, perception, and evaluation of the reality they "make" the authorial type of J. Johanides sensitive toward emotional and moral apathy of the anonymous, thus unknown, life. The generalization of being, as an expression of the crisis of the identity of subject, and perceived and materialized as the uniformity of the thesis (paraphrasing B. Brecht) of life as life has been brought to the effect that the uniqueness of any being, any individual, any opportunity to live life disappeared. Even worse is that "orientational" or "binding" ideational and moral values and certainties in form of the expressed sense of life and the significance of inter-personal relations have disappeared as well. Generalization and intellectualization of the reflection of values, certainties, aims of man for man not only bring crisis of his identity, but also means disappearing of moral manifestations of individual and collective acts, but also for, at least originally, motivated attitudes and acts. These are, as a matter of rule, expressed in Johanides' fiction - in theme or conflict - by notions like the good, the evil, compassion, friendship, sacrifice, truth, cruelty, pain, un-love, revenge, selfishness, fear, defence...



The author's strategy is represented by the cooperation between inner-textual and extra-textual intentions, knowledge, ethics, operations, and "encoding" of ideational and moral points (parable, symbol, metaphor) of the creator which are in turn, even hyperbolized by him in the story. There emerges a clear "interplay" of the point-message in the time and space of literary narration through poetics, aesthetics or, eventually, also through a specific literary programme, whether of group or individual character in line with philosophical theses of the author and expressed through intra-textual tools, i.e. tools of composition. We assume that special attention should be devoted to the effect and, metaphorically speaking, to the echo of the author's strategy (timeliness of the problem directed to the spheres with no time restrictions) in cases when the text has such cognitive, ethical, or moral "strength" that through its epistemology it transcends the topicalities of the present social time. However, the aesthetic, artistic = author's = ideational, moral echoing of the author's knowledge, concentrated in the story, goes on living its social and cultural impetus even after the first opportunity has been elapsed (after the first edition) for the text and its creator (critical and readers' reception).

Ján Johanides from his first-fruit (*Svedomie [Consciousness]*, 1963) presents his views-probes once in a more demanding manner, at other time more directly, among other things, in the sphere of morale and ethics of the society. The author, his readers, and literary critics (J. Felix, M. Šútovec, V. Šabík, M. Hāmada, A. Halvoník, and others) knows enough of the exposed moral hot-bed and the point of his stories motivated in this way. There exists an agreement in the statements of literary-critical reflections in reminding in Johanides' fiction the presence of moral consequences which follow from the author's literary elaborated in fiction latently present and variegated conception of being (the postulates of existentialism motivated by Christianity) and the corresponding quality of moral phenomena in accordance with the very essence of getting to know "the situational ethics", "theory of justice", and "emotionality" where dominant for the development of plot are "emotional memory", "the world of conscience", "conception of truth". J. Johanides supported the findings of his interpreters in such a way that he offered his own authorial interpretation of the crisis of the subject and humankind in modern society. According to his system of thinking, "the notions of God, Heroism, Fidelity, Conscience, Honour, Love, Sacrifice have been doubted" (J. Johanides, *Identity in Crisis*, 1992, p. 21). J. Johanides creates that axis of his moral ideas, into which he,



however, has not included according to him limiting entities of being: life and death.

In line with the authorial strategy, not without attention remains for both reader and interpreter the "operation" of the author (alter ego, personal integrity through his characters) within and without the text, i.e. the transposition into the plot of his standards (thesis) and practice (intra-textual relations) of morals (of both an individual and the society). We assume that before we concentrate - in the case of J. Johanides - on the intimate ideational and emotional relationship between the author and his text, one should try and find the sources of the author's strategy, or better yet, the central ideas which create his ideational, moral, and narrative universe in his latent text (amended by every new book). This is also one of the reasons - and in the lights of the relations indicated - why it is significant to appropriate for oneself from Johanides' literary essay *Rembrandt* (1995) its central ideational and value supports for Johanides' fiction.

The first one shall be named as sign cultural genesis which frameworks and inspires Johanides philosophically and intellectually well equipped epic workshop. Another reason for this is that this represents the author's spiritual and artistic "row of columns" of ideational and aesthetic context in which "one fixed star stands next to another. Dante. Shakespeare. Rembrandt. Balzac. Dostoyevsky".

Another established, even systematically strengthened, certainty of J. Johanides, shall be named as space in which he and the existing humankind operate. Their common existential and moral space creates a (limited) world and by this world generated contradictory occurrences (act and consequence), taking place both in the real and literary and dramatically composed "space" between life and death of man. The fiction writer does not leave the view according to which we exist where "our contemporary low-spirited world in which it is getting ever darker... This is one of the reasons why we are doomed to loneliness in such a world. All of us, not only women, have a suspicious face, a face of hundred faces", whereas "one should not forget the sad and sharp reality, since it is only when we walk on the edge of anything", indicates Johanides, "only from there can one gain a view into the injustice, into the depth and width of the injustice". One should see, no doubt about that, as far as man, since "the only and main Achilles' heel of man rests in human platiability, in dangerous plasticity, in plasticine-formability - once a person takes into his/her power with evil intention



the SOUL of man, s/he may make such soul worse crippled than comprachicos of the children in Hugo's novel *L'Homme qui rit*.

The third support / certainty on Johanides' search for eternal man - but also along with him and side by side with him - for his fate, that is for the story in personal CRISIS (the awareness of latent crisis, loneliness, uselessness, even emotional desertion of an individual is ever more present in his fiction, which are supported by FEAR of hopelessness), for man and humankind "living away" their time in the crisis of (personal and social) BEING, in the crisis of impetus, significance, but also by them motivated resulting VALUE, for the performance or support of any ACT OF AN INDIVIDUAL for some other person or for the MOB. The narrator views the being in *Rembrandt* (1995) with the help of metonymy and symbol of the lamp, since "the lamps remain. They are no subjects to change. They are comforters. As if they were telling us: we did LIVE here, we experienced PAIN over this or that, even we did LAMENT..." He acknowledges the motive of a lamp at another place in the parable as the intimate and social, i.e. historical, memory of man, also here man and humankind intersperse. The motive of a lamp comes to live in some of his other fiction works in form of parable of a document in the archives, in family chronicle, court brief, etc.

The writer J. Johanides is potent and willfull "to remain a writer", but till the time for his word comes, he must touch the lamp, memory, document, "a story lived away", the "existing man" to make certain once again that "to see precisely means only one thing: TO KNOW, since "to see is my profession". This is why he again and again offers himself to his readers through his narrator or his characters, he offers his self-reflecting I. One cannot help but believe him when he promises: "I shall only be your custodian, do you want?" (*Rembrandt*, 1996).

## II

*You can never certain about anybody whether his/her character is strong enough, whether s/he will stand the test - ... people usually hold their ground somehow in the relations of their time, but in the grand ones they fail. ..*

Ladislav Hanus

J. Johanides has not prepared great, dynamic, noisy stories for his characters, although these may take place on the background of such social scenery (15th century, 1950s, etc.). Contrary to that, he leaves his



characters and their intimate or social memory, their familial (*The Ballad of the Savings Book, The Saddest Orava Ballad, Burial of the Brother, Dry Frost, Tom Cat and Winter Man, Punishing Crime*) and broader relations (*Privacy, The Essence of Stone Pit, No Elephants in Mauthausen, Crows Unconceded, Marek the Horseman and the Pope of Hungary*) wrought from the experienced and lived only and only through their fluent, slow, detail-considering personal and lonesome return as far back as the relations and moments of their fatally and morally grandiose, but surely not heroic decisions. Metaphorically speaking, both author and narrator stopped, maybe slowed down the time (for the time of epic necessity) in the inner world of the character determined by the conflict. Nothing ever changes within the structure of the character type notwithstanding the fact that both objective and literary time flow. Thus, the character is not being formed through metamorphosis or remedy of less fortunate situations of his experienced being, although it is exactly this, the practice of life, is becoming the topical, threatening, and for the character dangerous worry. Paradoxically, the character is being thrown into his/her own past by someone from the outside. S/he must act, in fact take a decision, since forgiveness as juristic and moral verdict does not exist in the fiction by Johanides. Simply because time cannot be returned. Through details, descriptions, returns, and atomization of the situation which has become remote past and subject of one's personal experience, the character, and his/her creator alike, calls for understanding the mechanism of power and its tool of evil in any and all mutual moral, typological, and situational modifications. The characters once again live through their own past since this is inescapable, and one has to "pay" several times for the content of personal and social memory in Johanides works. The events around the character take place again on the axis life and death, truth and lie, humanity and inhumanity (*The Ballad of the Savings Book, Crows Unconceded, Highways Full of Rats, Tom Cat and Winter Man, Dry Frost, Crime and Punishment*). The notbed of Crime, cruelty and non-love is not missing (World War II, political repression in the after-war years, exercise of power by the state administration in the post-war years or, respectively, power as a tool for the limitation of freedom and deformation of the relations among people (*Elephants in Mauthausen, Dry Frost, Punishing Crime, Marek the Horseman and the Pope of Hungary*)). It appears that the author's types - characters are content with this for them latently tense situation within and without themselves, with the trauma of guilt and responsibility. This means



among other things also that their situation cannot be changed (the crime remains, evil does not change, fear persists, revenge waits for its fulfillment), it only may be better understood with the time elapsed and a renewed personal experience, and come to terms with its original solution rationally and, if possible, impersonally, although all things have been long gone and there is nothing to worry about. The past is ever active in the life of an individual, and is also present (*Dry Frost*, *Punishing Crime*), it cannot be resisted, since the truth (historical, personal) adapts within a new situation (moral, social) and justice, in form of a formula on verdict, does not exist (*Dry Frost*, *Tom Cat and Winter Man*). Both values – truth, justice – although literary unwound on the background of a verifiable social context, acquire in the story of the character a subjective dimension of a kind of open account in which the evil, crime, injustice, vileness, cannot be persecuted. They might appear so, one should understand, from the distance, they might have been the only rational solution of the situation in that place and on that time, and might have been concerned with not merely one character, they are interpreted, one should understand, as a model of being of that time in its civil, moral, individual, or any other position. Finally, the author demands from his characters and his readers that they understand what happened, what is being so extensively reconstructed by the character, more often by the author-narrator, since it could not have happened in any other way, believe me, reader, not even if viewed from the optics of this time (*Dry Frost*). Even more so, since the ethics of being, the philosophy of the acts are being personalized in (non-) human types with whom the character (the narrator of the story, as a matter of rule) was taken into the system of accidental and generally supported crime and punishment (*Elephants in Mauthausen*, *Marek the Horseman and the Pope of Hungary*, *Tom Cat and the Winterman*, *Dry Frost*, *The Saddest Ballad of Orava*, *The Ballad of the Savings Book*). Epically renewed situation – and with that also the original conflict – revitalizes also situational moral judgements of the past (crime, death, murderer). However, the treachery of the lives of those who have long been dead (*Dry Frost*) gives nourishment to the hotbed of a new treachery and postpones the moral settlement with the past (unconcerned character repeated himself/herself into the histories and relations of the past, who is being manipulated by some other character into the role of a listening “witness” or arbitrator who, however, without realizing it, should take the responsibility for the guilt of those committed it (*Dry Frost*, *Tom Cat and the Winter Man*, *Punishing Crime*, *Elephants in Mathausen*).



This is the same procedure of the narrator which adopt the innocent (the old man, victim, possible witness) into new relations (he is being told a past history, they provoke him to commit a crime for money, and others), whereby the "innocent" character gets intentionally and not by any chance into a kind of chess-like situation, moreover, into the role of a guilty, sacrificed, and useless person (*Highways Full of Rats, Elephants in Mauthausen, Tom Cat and the Winter Man, Punishing Crime*).

### III

*What is then within man? ... The relationship between "man" and "man" still somehow survives, but acquires gradually and almost unnoticed a quite different nature to that of the recent past. It acquires the form of the relations between "man" and "object" which I need and which is pleasing to me.*

Ján Johanides

Johanides might have been developing one and the same story over all those years, as literary critics appear to be saying. This knowledge might be extended with the author's belief according to which it is precisely him who manages to impersonally inform of the existing open space in semantics, ethics, philosophy, sociology of the question posed by him: "what is then within man?" This question is not loaded with emotional deposits from the author or from its literary adaptation and is sensed as a story in time and space. They concentrated together on the universe of man. Johanides, moreover, has become a "personal witness" of the acts and thoughts of an eternal man, he has an unmistakable personal and moral experience with him and narrates of his universal dimension, he even offers his "undisprovable" belief of the loss of his human identity. The loneliness of man, even the state of his being condemned (man, woman, child) is being polarized into rude selfishness, fear is strengthened with cruelty and desire for revenge, insensibility to emotions and knowledge is longing for the gilded facade of the over-technologized, consumer society. Great and small feelings are absent in man, between man and wife, in children toward their parents, i.e. they are absent in family and society. Those which have remained are directed toward blind animal protection, toward ruthless selfishness, indifference, and the belief that somebody has got some duties (those of material character as a matter of rule) toward somebody else.



Loneliness, alienation, the feeling of being deserted, loss of perspective, uprootedness, predetermination for loss, the disability to resist injustice no matter how great it may be, these are the warning news from Johanides on a reasonable and emotionless man who is being changed, in line with the author's words, to an "object" with which it is being counted, but merely because it is being manipulated, since this man-object has lost everything. Even that which man gives to the world and which in turn changed him into a unique being in the universe. The characters of Johanides stand before a critical place, maybe on the threshold of their moral purgation. However, first they have to cope with the evil within themselves which they - by way of paradox - do not sense, i.e. do not value in its moral but rather existential stance. In their seclusion within themselves they even do not distinguish between the good and the evil, truth and lie, love and non-love. Instead, they suffer from emotional loneliness, from lies, from dreams, from nothingness, but it is their author who knows all that about them. As if they were not waiting for being rescued by themselves. And if they succumb to the hope of change, they may be waiting for their other self, but it is only after their moral purgation, they are waiting for a new idea, a new aim. This is among the reasons why punishment for evil has no sense, since it is only knowledge and self-knowledge may change the complicated situation into which the character had occurred in the past and allows to be destroyed although he might have understood it and become identified with it. Johanides is asking a question: what is then in man? Instead of providing a direct answer, he organizes stories in which he announces the state of emotional insensibility, existential loneliness, the nothingness of values in man. We assume that the reader may ask the author also a question: is it really pleasant to encounter such character and accompany him/her on such a (non)way? And whether Johanides is walking through such literary arch along with universal man and his memory toward man? A what is he trying to find?

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Przełożył na angielski:  
 Štefan Franko



## STRATEGIA AUTORSKA WOBEC WARTOŚCI ETYCZNYCH W PROZIE JÁNA JOHANIDESA

(Streszczenie)

Prozaik Ján Johanides zajmuje od lat sześćdziesiątych w prozie słowackiej wyjątkową (choć niezbyt eksponowaną) pozycję autora-filozofa, co zresztą zauważono także w krytyce europejskiej. Zwyczajowo już proza Jahanidesa jest traktowana jako tekst, w którym przejawiają się wyraźnie mechanizmy autorskiej strategii zarówno w planie kompozycyjnym, w „filozofii” postaci literackich oraz w etycznej orientacji wobec konfliktów ewokowanych w akcji z retrospektywnego punktu widzenia, ale – paradoksalnie – nie ograniczonych czasowo. Taka strategia narracyjna określa przede wszystkim usiłowanie autora, by niejednoznaczne przejawy społecznych działań (wojna, przestępstwo, krzywda) nie były przemilczane i nie zostały poza moralną oceną nie tyle z powodu ich prawnych i legislacyjnych elementów lecz za sprawą misterium niezapominania.

W prozie Johanidesa ponad normy prawne wyrastają jednostkowy czas i osobnicza pamięć, która nb. nie daje się sprowadzić do egzystencji jednego tylko człowieka. Uniwersum pamięci wchłania zarówno empiryczne oraz historyczne doświadczenia jak też intensywne wspomnienia postaw ludzkich (indywidualnych, historyczno-społecznych) w złożonych życiowych oraz moralnych sytuacjach. Bohaterowie Johanidesa stanowią element dominujący w konstrukcji zdarzeniowej, zaś akcja modelowana jest wedle zasady ciągłego powrotu do przeszłości. Postaci te nie poszukują rozstrzygnięć doświadczanych już dawniej, ponieważ już poniosły karę za czyn ongiś popełniony i kara ta w końcu ich nie interesuje. Są przekonane, że nic się nie zmieniło, nic się nie wyjaśniło za sprawą kary. Bohaterowie ci dokładnie koncentrują się na przejawach, zmianach oraz niebezpieczeństwie – rzecz by można – nieograniczonej obecności zła. W filozoficznej koncepcji autora zło wykracza poza przeżywanie, ogólnych interpretacji etycznych przyjmując pozycję dostarczyciela norm na życie, na przeżywanie, działanie i konkretne czyny. Johanides nie demonizuje zła ani też nie stara się moralizować. Obecność zła i jego nosicieli jest dla niego przedmiotem literackiego „eksperymentu”. Pragnie określić jaką ono (sc. zło) przyjmuje formę, kto lub co to jest, czego możemy się o nim dowiedzieć, jakie są jego cele, do jakiego stopnia jest niebezpieczne. W prozie Johanidesa nie walczy się ze złem, raczej – jak sądzi autor – należałoby je zrozumieć, iść na kompromis, pogodzić się z nim w końcu, ponieważ nie da się inaczej żyć z ludźmi i wśród ludzi. W materiale fabularnym prozy Johanidesa wyłaniają się i kształtują sytuacje, w których postać jest uwikłana w takie relacje, kiedy zło (tożsame ze sposobem przeżywania i przyczyną spójności osobowej uwikłanej w przeszłość), staje się elementem dominującym w płaszczyźnie egzystencjalnej, zaś w płaszczyźnie moralnej posiada tylko wartość sekundarną.