

On the Pathetic and Lyrical State of Mind: The Nobel Lecture

Jaroslav Seifert

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I am often asked, particularly by foreigners, how one can explain the great love of poetry in my country: why there exists among us not only an interest in poems but even a need for poetry. Perhaps that means my countrymen also possess a greater ability to understand poetry than any other people.

To my way of thinking, this is a result of the history of the Czech people over the past 400 years – and particularly of our national rebirth in the early 19th Century. The loss of our political independence during the Thirty Years' War deprived us of our spiritual and political elite. Its members – those who were not executed – were silenced or forced to leave the country. That resulted not only in an interruption of our cultural development, but also in a deterioration of our language. Not only was Catholicism reinstituted by force, but Germanization was imposed by force as well.

By the early 19th Century, however, the French Revolution and the Romantic period were exposing us to new impulses and producing in us a new interest in democratic ideals, our own language, and our national culture. Our language became our most important means of expressing our national identity.

Poetry was one of the first of our literary genres to be brought to life. It became a vital factor in our cultural and political awakening. And already at that early stage, attempts to create a Czech tradition of belles-lettres were received with vast gratitude by the people. The Czech people, who had lost their political representation and had been deprived of their political spokesmen, now sought a substitute for that representation, and they chose it from among the spiritual forces that still remained.

From that comes the relatively great importance of poetry in our cultural life. There lies the explanation of our cult of poetry and of the high prestige it was already being accorded during the last century. But it was not only then that poetry played an important role. It burst into sumptuous blossom in the beginning of this century as well and between the two world wars – subsequently becoming our most important mode of expressing our national culture during World War II, a time of suffering for the people and of threat to the very existence of the nation. Despite all external restrictions and censorship, poetry succeeded in creating values that gave people hope and strength. Since the war, too – for the past 40 years – poetry has occupied a very important position in our cultural life. It is as though poetry, lyrics were predestined not only to speak to people very closely, extremely intimately, but also to be our deepest and safest refuge, where we seek succor in adversities we sometimes dare not even name.

There are countries where this function of refuge is filled primarily by religion and its clergy. There are countries where the people see their image and their fate depicted in the catharsis of drama or hear them in the words of their political leaders. There are countries and nations that find their questions and the answers to them expressed by wise and perceptive thinkers. Sometimes, journalists and mass media perform that role. With us, it is as though our national spirit, in attempting to find embodiment, chose poets and made them its spokesmen. Poets, lyrists shaped our national consciousness and gave expression to our national aspirations in bygone times – and they are continuing to shape that consciousness to this very day. Our people have become accustomed to understanding things as presented to them by their poets.

Seen with the poet's eyes, this is something wonderful. But ... is there not a dark side to this phenomenon as well? Does not a surfeit of poetry mean a perturbation in the equilibrium of culture? I admit that periods can exist in the histories of peoples, or circumstances can arise, in which the poetic rendering is the most suitable, the most simple, or perhaps even the only possible – with its ability to merely suggest, to use allusion, metaphor, to express what is central in a veiled manner, to conceal from unauthorized eyes. I admit that the language of poetry has often been, even with us – particularly in times of political restriction – a deputy language, a substitute language, a

language of necessity, in as much as it has been the best means of expressing what could not be said in any other way. But even so, the dominant position of poetry in our country has long been on my mind – all the more so because I myself was born to be a poet and have remained a poet all my life.

I am worried by the suspicion that this inclination toward, and love of, poetry, lyrics may not be an expression of anything other than what might be described as a state of mind. However deeply lyricism might be able to penetrate in reality, however rich and multifaceted its ability to see things, and however prodigiously it can reveal and at the same time create inner dimensions of human nature, it remains nevertheless a concern of the senses and the emotions; senses and emotions nourish its imagination – and vice versa: it speaks to senses and emotions.

Doesn't a dominant position for lyricism, with its emphasis on sense and emotion, mean that the sphere of reason, with its emphasis on analysis, its skepticism and criticism, is pushed into the background? Doesn't it mean, moreover, that the will, with its dynamism and pathos, cannot achieve its full expression?

Isn't a culture of such one-sided orientation in danger of being unable to fulfil its responsibility completely? Can a society that mainly, or primarily, inclines toward lyricism always have strength enough to defend itself and ensure its continued existence?

I am not really very worried about the danger of possibly neglecting that element of culture that is based on our rational powers, that arises from reflection and finds expression in the most objective possible depiction of the essences and interrelations of things. That rational element – which is characterized by its distance to things, by mental balance, for it is programmatically not dependent on either the moods and feelings of the lyrical state of mind or on the passions of the state of pathos – that rational element does not allow itself to be lulled into tranquillity; but neither does it hurl itself impatiently at any moral target: in our rationalistically utilitarian, practical civilization, it is sufficiently strongly rooted in our need to know, to acquire knowledge and use it. This rational element has evolved continuously and spontaneously ever since the Renaissance. Admittedly, it is also unsympathetically received some-

times and now and then encounters external obstacles, but its position in our modern culture is nevertheless dominant even so – despite the fact that it faces great problems, for it must seek a new way of reincorporating its conceptual thinking into our culture and of giving reason a new form, since it cannot remain the reason of pre-technological times. I am aware that this element is just as important as both the others I have already mentioned. Despite that, however, I do not wish to devote to it here the same degree of attention, since its way of thinking – conceptual thinking – is not essential to art or literature. I wish to confine myself to the two extreme states of mind from which an author can commence creating. They have their counterparts in the readers' and spectators' attitudes and, through them, affect in their turn the character of our entire national culture.

What worries me is a possible or real lack of pathos. These days, we do not encounter that word very often. And if we use it now and then, we do so almost with a certain timidity. It strikes us as old and moth-eaten, like old sets from a theater of the Romantic era – out of date, as though it only stood for poor, superficial, and emotionless declamation. It is almost as though we had forgotten it describes a dramatic state of tension, a purposeful, energetic, and resolute will, a yearning – not for any material possessions or even consumer goods, of course, but rather for justice, for truth. Pathos is a characteristic of heroism, and heroism is willing to endure torment and suffering, prepared to sacrifice itself if necessary. If I use the word heroism, I am not, of course, referring to the old heroism of the history books and school readers, heroism in war, but rather to its contemporary form: a heroism that does not brandish weapons, a heroism without ostentatiousness, discreet, often utterly silent, civil, indeed civilized, a heroism that has become civic.

I believe that a culture is complete, mature, and capable of enduring and developing only if pathos has a place in it, if we understand pathos and can appreciate it – and especially if we are capable of it.

What leads me to these thoughts? Pathos with its heroism is, above all, unthinkable and would not be what it is if it were not accompanied by a profound understanding of the essences of things, a critical and all-round understanding, an understanding quite other than that which even the most sensitive poetry is capable of; poetry – lyrics – is necessarily uncritical, for it

lacks distance, speaking as it does actually only about its own subject – a subject, moreover, that flows with its time, a subject that forms a unity with its object. Pathos would not be pathos if it did not derive from an insight into the character of the conflict between that which is and that which ought to be. For society to be capable of pathos and for its culture to be complete, it must also understand its time in another manner besides the lyrical. And if it is not capable of pathos, then it is not prepared either for struggle or for sacrifice.

Only literature – which, in addition to its conceptual-thinking culture, its culture of reason, not only has its lyrics but also its pathos, its drama, its living tragedy – can provide sufficient spiritual and moral strength to overcome the problems that society is constantly having to confront. Only in the art of tragedy does society create and find patterns for its attitudes in essential moral and political issues; it learns there how to deal with them consistently, without halting halfway. Only the art of tragedy, with its violent conflicts between interests and values, awakens, develops, and cultivates within us the social aspect of our essence; it makes us members of the community and gives us the opportunity to leave our solitude. Only the art of tragedy – which, unlike lyrics, that "art of solitude," refines our ability to discriminate between that which is essential and that which is inessential from a societal viewpoint – only the art of tragedy teaches us to see victories in defeats and defeats in victories.

Therefore, as I look around me and warm myself in the good will of poetry lovers, I would like to bear witness, not to the death of tragedy, but to its rebirth as a result of its pathetic state of mind, its state of powerful emotions, since something has been set into motion within us, and we are beginning to want that which we regard as just and to oppose that which exists though it should not.

While the lyrical state of the mind is a state in an independent individual, which testifies to its own innermost self, which agrees and coincides with the object, the pathetic state does not sense this unity between subject and object. It is born of a tension between reality and the ego, my conception of how this reality ought to be – and thus of a tension between power and reason, between politics and morals. The lyrical state does not discriminate between that which is and that which ought to be. It is indifferent to the

lyrical subject, whether its imagination is fired by reality or by fiction, by truth or by figments of the imagination; the illusion is as real to the imagination as reality can be illusory to the imagination. The lyrical state is not interested in these differences; it neither confronts them with each other nor regards itself as confronted by them. The pathetic ego not only sees these differences, but also perceives itself as confronted by them; it sees how two alternatives, two possibilities, stand arrayed against each other, and it sees itself as drawn into the tension between them. This very tension sets the ego into motion. That motion is initiated by worry, discontentment, vexation; its goal is to achieve or to introduce a state that appears rational, natural, pleasant – and that bears the form of right, justice, freedom, and human dignity.

The moral greatness and meaningfulness of this motion of pathos in no way alters the fact that its goal is constantly and continuously becoming more distant and that no chord in the harmony so heatedly sought after by pathos is final. The motion of pathos is a counterpart to our esthetic emotion's intentions when we experience a work of art. This emotion, too, constantly strives, in vain, to achieve a broad and exhaustive understanding of the values of the work in all their richness and to enjoy the thought structure and form of the work; it attempts to achieve a state in which one's satisfaction with the work of art and one's joy in experiencing it are simultaneously maximal and lasting.

Pathos is always one step ahead; it does not stand on today's ground; it feeds on other nourishment than the nectar of the present moment; that, it can forego. It can control itself, be disciplined, ascetic in the proper sense of the word – by no means because it must, but rather on the basis of its own free decision; it knows why it does so. Nothing in this is difficult for it. It is quite simply incapable of being indifferent and cold. And thank goodness for that. For otherwise society would become deadlocked, find itself in a cul-de-sac; truth would become handmaiden to power, right the tool of brute strength – or, rather, it would become rightlessness and injustice. Truth has not prevailed, does not prevail, and will not prevail without pathos. Sometimes, it does not prevail even at that price. But in that case, pathos does transform even a failure – that which would otherwise look like a natural calamity, a fateful event, the end – into something more. Of a defeat it makes a sacrifice; it elevates the failure and makes it an event that is a component of a

larger entity, an event that had and that retains its meaning and fulfil its task as a partial movement toward the goal that was to be achieved and that, perhaps, one day will be achieved. So long as we retain our pathos, we retain our hope. Pathos cannot be finally conquered; it survives its setbacks. Both the pathos of the individual and the pathos of the nations survive setbacks, with seriousness, pride, and dignity. It is above failure. Thus, it is simultaneously elevated and elevating. Above, elevated, and elevating even where, without pathos, there would be scope only for discouragement and grief.

But now that I have said that, which has been on my mind for a long time, and been freed of my concerns, I feel not only compelled but also entitled to return to the matter of lyricism and the lyrical state of mind.

I have several reasons for doing so. I was born to be a lyrist, and I have always remained one. All my life, I have enjoyed my lyrical frame of mind, and it would be ungracious of me not to admit it. I have a need to justify and defend to myself this basic attitude of mine, despite the fact that I know my poems have often sounded tones that have borne their own pathos. After all, even tenderness can have pathos; my grief has had it; my anxiety and fear likewise.

But I want to do something more. I want to deal with the lyrical state of mind. I want to defend this attitude toward life, emphasize its advantages, too, now that I have professed my respect for pathos. To do so seems to me not only just, but also downright necessary. And here I am referring not merely to the altogether excessive emphasis that, ever since the Enlightenment, our traditional culture has accorded rational conceptual thinking, which (together with the development of our will) has brought us to the unsatisfactory societal state of today, where we feel it necessary to have change and necessary to seek new ways of understanding our problems – primarily in light of the vast exertion of will and tendency toward an exacerbation of disputes into dramatic conflicts that we are witnessing. This seems to me necessary in view of the increasing behavioral aggressiveness present in interrelationships within society – whether it is aggressiveness still borne by some manner of pathos or the kind that is merely destructive in itself and incapable of any pathos at all. I want to elucidate the special advantages of lyricism under these very circumstances in our time.

For while the mind in a state of pathos burns with impatience and seethes with fervor in its endeavor to master an unsatisfactory situation and often succeeds in so doing with a well-intentioned but nevertheless one-sided straightforwardness, the lyrical state is a state without exertion of will or determination; it is a state of serenity that is neither patient nor impatient, a state of quiet experiencing of those values upon which man bases the most profound, the most fundamental, and the most essential foundations of his equilibrium and of his ability to inhabit this world, to inhabit it in the only possible manner, i.e., poetically, lyrically, to borrow from Hölderlin.

Pathos incites us and corrodes us; it is capable – in our anxiety and in our longing to realize ideals – of driving us to sacrifice and to self-destruction. Lyricism keeps us in its affectionate embrace. Instead of perceiving a conflict between forces, we feel a pleasurable joy in their equilibrium, which pushes them away from our horizon and results in our not feeling their weight. Instead of bumping into the edges of the world around us, we flow along with it to unity and identification.

Pathos always has its opponents: it is aggressive. In his lyrical state, man needs no one else. And if, in his loneliness, he does turn to someone and speaks to him, that other person is not his enemy. Under these circumstances, it is as though one's counterpart – whether nature, society, or another human being – were a part of himself, merely another participant in the lyrical monologue. That which otherwise would oppose us we let suffuse us, while at the same time we ourselves suffuse it, too. We listen intently to that which is around us, and in that very way, we find ourselves. And thereby we achieve our most genuine identity and most complete integrity. And it is in this very surrendering of ourselves that we find our security.

Pathos is active: it strives to reach a set goal. In our lyrical state, we do not want to achieve anything; we experience what we already have and we devote ourselves to the present and the existing, even if the existing can also consist of an evocation of the past. This is not a result of moral indifference. We merely move on – or, rather, at present occupy – a different plane; we are in a different position in regard to thinking, feeling, and wishing: a position in which the will is not committed. It is by no means absent, mind you just not interested in achieving results.

While pathos must put strength into its gestures and has the capability of being violent, dynamic as it is, its counterpart – poetry, lyrics – does not employ strength. It is non-violent and does not need to force itself into placidity. It opens its defenceless embrace, and that gesture is one of love. It is harried neither by the concerns of the intellect nor by those of the passions; it does not compete with time. It has the ability to contest, as it were, the passage of time and in its best moments, conjoin with time in a sort of motionlessness where only one thing matters: that it be lasting.

The lyrical attitude has no desire to convince others. It merely offers them an opportunity to partake of that which it feels and experiences itself. No more and no less. It does not even go so far as to take a stand. It lacks distance; it conjoins, after all, with the flow of life. And if it takes no stand, it is all the less capable of becoming involved in disputes.

But perhaps one might dare take yet another step and pose a question concerning the possible influence of the lyrical state of mind on economy, ecology, or politics, for example. Additionally, one might ask about the participation of the lyrical state of mind in the upheaval in human consciousness in general, in possible changes in mankind's ways of seeing and perceiving (changes generally regarded as necessary); one might ask whether traditional patterns of behavior (considering that they are not equal to the problems of today) should be replaced by other ones. One might pose the question of lyricism's role in a possible shift from conceptual thinking (*das begriffliche Denken*) to rational perception (*vernünftige Wahrnehmung, Vernunft-Wahrnehmung*) now that we have entered that state that C.F. Weizsäcker (*Wege in der Gefahr*, p 258) characterizes thus: "Wir haben unsere Gesellschaft in einer Weise stilisiert, die weder der Wahrnehmung der Affekte noch der Wahrnehmung der Vernunft entspricht. Die Folge ist eine Desintegration der Affekte und ein Verstummen der Vernunft."

The lyrical state of mind is capable, however paradoxical it may seem, of contributing as one of several forces to the return of wisdom to our civilization – capable, for example, of contributing to technology's being guided anew by reason: a reason that, naturally, is united with life and with nature in ways other than through rational abstractions – in other words, a reason that

would differ from our present, rational, utilitarian reason and its conceptual thinking.

It also presents itself as a moderating factor in our aggressive and dynamic spirit, in our so highly self-assertive will. Admittedly, our dynamism and will – in the context of our conceptual-thinking culture – were the sources of our technological and economic advancement, of our industrial revolutions, and thereby also of our power and influence in the world. But that spirit has also brought with it the problems and other negative aspects of our time, which, the greater the successes achieved by that dynamic and aggressive spirit, move more and more into the foreground. It is a spirit of subjugation and conquest, a spirit desirous of ruling over nature as well as over men, nations, and entire civilizations, a spirit of rationalized will to power over nature and people. It is a state of mind in which our will strives to become lord over everything it can, to gain riches and possessions, instead of allowing us to find joy in things without bringing them under our sway. This far-too-powerful will can be balanced and bridled and led to other attitudes than the aggressively rapacious precisely through the agency of the lyrical state of the non-committed will. As E. F. Schumacher wrote (in his book *Small Is Beautiful*, p 27): "A man driven by greed or envy loses the power of seeing things as they really are, or seeing things in their roundness and wholeness, and his very successes become failures. If whole societies become infected by these vices, they may indeed achieve astonishing things, but they become increasingly incapable of solving the most elementary problems of everyday existence."

Is it not so that, in addition to the need for new values that various writers speak of, the lyrical state of mind, which is rooted in identification with nature and the world around us, is also one of the possible sources of an inner change in man and thereby, too, one of the ways that can lead man out of his untenable position as a self-designated ruler who places himself outside nature, above it and against it? Is not the lyrical state of mind a possible instrument for overcoming the idea that nature is something that has been given to man, given to man's strength and competence so that he may make himself lord over nature, treating it as his prey and using it to satisfy his insatiable possessive instinct? And is not the lyrical state of mind ultimately the change in our relationship to life demanded by Heidegger? A change that means we allow life to be what it is so that, in the end, it will speak to us itself

and reveal itself to us in its meaningful essence in such a manner as to make it comprehensible to us?

Can one fail to see that lyricism is the diametric opposite to the cult of strength and power and, in an utterly natural manner, offers itself as a corrective to our tendency to resolve society's problems by forcible means and through power struggles, through technological, financial, organizational, political, and physical power – power that, in any case, is ultimately merely a product of incomplete insight («ein Produkt unvollständiger Einsicht»)? And in precisely the same way, one can place it in contrast to our worship of work and performance, to our obsession with the idea of ruling and exploiting nature and people, particularly since power often elevates the efficiency and gradual perfecting of its power systems to issues of the greatest importance, even when what is involved are systems that, from the most exaltedly objective viewpoint, are not at all functional and that achieve their tasks only at the cost of losses in human dignity and losses not only in material but also in moral terms – and at the cost of loss of harmony within man himself and of harmonious relationships among people.

Many people are well aware that this ever more powerful possessive instinct, this ever stronger emphasis on conquest, expansion, and exploitation, must be fettered and bridled in order that the damage resulting as its negative social product does not become greater than the advantages. But it is not enough to be aware of these circumstances, to know of their existence. If there is to be a fundamental change – and a fundamental change, of course, away from our striving to increase our power and develop it in every direction – to man's detriment – then a change in our consciousness is called for, a change in our mental set. As it was once expressed so beautifully, what is needed is a "revolution of the mind and the heart".

I do not wish to try making lyricism, or more over lyrics, into a political force or a political tool and deprive poetry – or art generally, for that matter – of its true, specific, and irreplaceable purview, nor do I wish to subordinate that purview to other interests. Nevertheless, I feel – and I make so bold as to state – that the lyrical state of mind is something that far transcends the boundaries of lyrics and poetry – or, indeed, of art itself. Where it could manifest itself actively, it would be able – in a new and positive manner – to

make its mark on culture and on all societal organizations in general. It would contribute to a necessary, thoroughgoing transformation of the consciousness, a process already underway in many people today, most in artists, least in those who have allowed themselves to be drawn into the power game of politics. In its way, it would be able to fill a function akin to that of mystical meditation – which, incidentally, has always been close to lyrics, but, which, compared to lyrics, is too exclusive a means or instrument. It would contribute to people's acquiring the ability and the desire to "den Willen still werden zu lassen und das Licht zu sehen, das sich erst bei still gewordenem Willen zeigt." Like mystical meditation, it would be "eine Schule der Wahrnehmung, des Kommenlassens der Wirklichkeit" (C.F. Weizsäcker).

Not all cultures can manage this task. Pinning one's hopes on culture, as such, alone – culture in the sense of cultivating and further refining that which we have taken over from the past – would lead to disappointment. It would still be the same, traditional culture of the will and the old reason. Even if we were to forget that our culture could have been not merely intolerant (despite the fact that there reigns in it a conviction that tolerance also belongs to culture), that it could have been repressive, arrogant, and messianic, that it could have been insensitive to numerous important values, lack understanding for many values, and, on the other hand, impose upon people a great deal that is of no value at all, we could not help but see that the legitimacy of this culture's traditional values has been more than undermined.

Today, this task can be achieved only by a culture whose point of departure is an essentially modified state of consciousness, another state of mind. And right here, I see a great opportunity and a great task for lyricism and lyrics, for this state of mind, which is distinguished by identification with the world, by empathy, by sympathy, and by an uncommitted will. Despite the fact that so irrational an element as love would play an essential role in such a culture, the wisdom in that culture would in no way have to be less than the wisdom in the culture we have to cope with today.

I would even like to declare that only then would it become the happy culture, truly rich in blessings, that it ought to be.

And now, as I say that, yet another question comes to my mind – a question that, at this moment, strikes me as merely rhetorical: is it not true that pathos lives on, and is fueled by, precisely the vision of this happy understanding of things and of how wisely they are ordered on the basis of mutual sympathies? In a spirit of "love as the seeing state of mind that abolishes the struggle for existence," as C.F. Weizsäcker formulated it? Is not pathos an attempt to reach outside one's own shadow and an attempt to return to Arcadia, where the rational, the just, and the natural are identical to reality? Is not pathos merely an attempt to return to the idyll – that is, to a state in which we know no foreign power over us and where the conflict between that which is and that which ought to be disappears, a state where reason and power, morals and politics, can sit down at the same table together? And finally, is the lost paradise sought by pathos not the world of lyricism? Is not poetry itself, lyrics, one of the foremost creators and interpreters of the vision of that paradise?

As I write this, I am tempted to wish that, instead of having been a lyrist by birth, I could become one by conviction: a lyrist by my own choice.

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