CHAPTER TEN

HOMECOMING.
JAN PATOČKA’S REFLECTIONS ON THE FIRST WORLD WAR

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For Erazim Kohák

... But many there stood still
To face the stark, blank sky beyond the ridge,
Knowing their feet had come to the end of the world.

Wilfred Owen, *Spring Offensive*

I. Introduction

Jan Patočka’s reflections on the First World War are undoubtedly among the most challenging writings produced in response to the war to end all wars.1 Removed from the great cataclysm itself and its immediate aftermath by more than half a century and another world war, and written from behind the Iron Curtain during a subsequent world war in suspended animation, Patočka’s *Heretical Essays* stand among the last attempts to divine philosophical meaningfulness from the apparent meaninglessness of the First World War. With invocations of Ernst Jünger and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin as witnesses to the truth of the front-line, Patočka’s reflections can be seen as belonging to the “geistige Mobilmachung” of philosophical thinking that began immediately with the outbreak of hostilities in August of 1914. Through a wider lens, Patočka’s reflections can equally be seen as a call to conscience in the 20th-century’s quest for the cultural meaning of the First World War, and through such remembrance, for the secret of Europe’s historical destiny. And yet, Patočka’s reflections elicit unease, if not bewilderment and alarm. What are we to make of his pointed claim: “War can show that among the free some are capable of becoming gods, of touching the divinity of that which forms the ultimate unity and mystery

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of being”?2 As Kurt Flasch observes with respect to German war-writings of the First World War:

Die Weltkriegstexte sind uns geschichtlich ferngerückt; die meisten sind im höchsten Maße befremdlich; viele kommen mir ‘gewesener’ vor als die mittelalterlichen Bücher, mit denen ich mich sonst befasse.3

In Patočka’s case, the *Heretical Essays* is arguably more *befremdlich* given the distance separating Patočka from the war itself, the inter-war period of the 1920s and 1930s, and the added circumstance of his own censorship and internal exile within Communist Czechoslovakia. Published in 1975, these essays represent a final testament to Patočka’s own Socratic fate and are imbued with a strangeness even less penetrable, or, in other words, more uprooted or homeless, than the strangeness of the war-literature produced during and immediately after the First World War.4

Much of the difficulty posed by Patočka’s reflections gravitates around its complex thesis regarding the war’s metaphysical significance. On the one hand, the First World War represents the fullest expression of the technological essence of modernity, which, in turn, consists in the total mobilization of earthly energies in the pursuit of mastery over what exists. This thesis regarding war as the essence of the 20th-century (in other words: as the essence of modernity) is itself complex, as the war is in turn an expression of the two dominant and often conflicting tendencies, pace Patočka’s philosophy of movement, of natural existence. The First World War is paradoxically an expression of a will to power and an expression of losing oneself to the illusion of a greater power; it is both a revolt against the everyday by the everyday and the rapture of the demonic or orgiastic against the everyday. On the other hand, within this manifestation of war as total mobilization, an internal experience of war, in truth, the only experience that is meaningfully lived and suffered, becomes in turn revealed. The front-line experience introduces a second conception of war—a war within war, but also, we might further specify, a war against war, or war-heresy. The front-line crystallizes an authentic and redemptive possibility of human existence that breaks with the pre-given meaning of the

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