

Title: Language as a metaphor for the human condition in Fyodor Dostoevsky's "The House of the Dead" and Eva Kantůrková's "My companions from the Bleak House"

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Abstract:

Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The House of the Dead* (Записки из Мертвого дома, 1862) and Eva Kantůrková's *My companions from the Bleak House* (Přítelkyně z domu smutku, 1984) share much more than just a similar title. They both reflect the atmosphere of an oppressive socio-political system and in both accounts the role of narration is foregrounded and problematized. Dostoevsky's novel is often read as an example of narration as a means of building community and maintaining dignity and identity. We will argue, however, that in this case the author overturns the conventional understanding of narrative: the virtuosity of language creates distortion, while the failures of language, paradoxically, allow communication. Broken, unpolished speech, or even lack of words, create links between characters, while elaborate narrations are used only as a smokescreen.

Similarly to *The House of the Dead*, Kantůrková's book about her time as a political prisoner in Czechoslovakia can be seen as an attempt to reveal the human moments of this experience. The women around her constantly strive for communication and it is in their stories that the narrator finds respite from a brutalizing environment. Her companions are almost transfigured in their narratives, yet, in the end, narration falls short in concealing reality.

Thus, both novels are concerned with how discourse can be used to maintain humanity in a de-humanizing context. We will examine whether in situations of oppression language can indeed be an instrument of reclaiming one's freedom or is merely an illusion. To this end we will, on one hand, contrast the treatment of language in both novels with how Nietzsche describes the construction of community through the usage of language in a generally accepted way ("On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense"). Derrida's *Limited Inc* on the other hand will help us highlight the intrinsic contradictions within second-hand narratives (that have travelled from the prisoners to the narrators and finally to the reader) and the imperfect system that is language itself.