

# The metaphor of “sinking to one’s knees” as a narrative element in the essays of Alexander Matuška



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## Abstract

The presented paper examines the meaning of the metaphor of dropping or sinking to one’s knees in the works of Slovak essayist Alexander Matuška. Drawing on the cognitive theory of metaphor formed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, this paper attempts not only to describe the concrete realisation of the orientational metaphor of the up-down type in the context of ceremonial symbolism, but also to interpret this metaphor as a certain narrative element in the history narrative that Matuška presents in his essayistic work, and as an element present across different cultures.

## Key words

*Alexander Matuška, essay, orientational metaphor, ceremonial symbolism, culture, narrative elements*

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In recent decades of research, cognitive literary science has opened up a number of approaches to exploring and rediscovering the meanings of texts. This includes cognitive narratology, which examines the processes of human perception, reception, and interpretation of narrative texts. Humans, according to the findings of cognitive narratology, are far more literary beings than we might have initially thought – they do not think in charts and exact numbers, they think in stories. We thus believe that even texts that, at first glance, do not have a strong narrative or epic core can, thanks to analogy, be figuratively seen as fragments of historical narrative. Authors present these fragments through their own lens, influenced not only by their own values and beliefs, but also by their lived experiences. From these fragments, it is possible to reconstruct an individual rendering of the historical narrative on the basis of contemporary literary or cultural phenomena, thus creating a literary action (text) in which a given phenomenon from the author’s immediate environment is analysed and interpreted. Such a type of text can be, for example, an essay, in our case the social-critical essays of Alexander Matuška, one of the most important Slovak essayists to date.

Magdalena Bystrzak (2021, 12), a Polish literary scholar based in Slovakia, traces “how the notions of ‘nation’, ‘culture’ or ‘tradition’ changed and what position Matuška took in the dispute over modern Slovak society, its culture, and, ultimately, its literature”. After generalising, one can speak of this dispute as of the struggle for a position in the creation of the modern Slovak nation, in which tradition and progress competed with each other in the 1930s<sup>1</sup>: “Matuška also participated in the debate on Slovak culture in the 1930s as an opponent and critic of the cultural model, which still had national revivalist parameters and whose protagonists wanted to homogenise society on a national basis” (Bystrzak 2021, 16)<sup>2</sup>. Matuška depicts the story of this dispute in a series of essays in which he sharply criticises contemporary Slovak society, its over-theologizing and over-politicisation, but above all, its clinging to tradition. Mária Bátorová (2015, 101) describes Matuška as “a small Goliath [...] hammering onto bastions” of culture that was on its rise. His sarcastic statements are often directed not only against the groups of writers and critics who have been reinforcing these values in Slovak society, they are often directed against specific representatives.

In the 1930s, Alexander Matuška was not an established critic in the Slovak circles – he was a young student in Prague who had yet to enter the processes forming the Slovak literature. It was in Prague that he became a member of the R-10 group – a group of Prague university students. The members included M. Chorváth, D. Chrobák, K. Bezek or J. Kostra<sup>3</sup>. The members of R-10 “published in *DAV*<sup>4</sup>, organized sociographic tours, lectures, and discussions, and tried to define themselves as the opposite of the young authors from Bratislava” (Bystrzak 2021, 41). Vladimír Petřík (2010, 9) contemplated that this group believed that Slovakia was held prisoner by the 19<sup>th</sup> century and that it should move on from its influence much quicker than it had been at that time. One of Matuška’s professors, who had a considerable influence on the way the young critic wrote, was František Xaver Šalda. In this context, M. Bystrzak (2021, 36) states that Matuška’s aim “was to dominate the communicative space [...] thanks to his style”, and for this very reason, he claimed allegiance to the type of critic represented by F. X. Šalda. Several representatives of the Slovak left, especially young

<sup>1</sup> We can also reflect on the struggle between the right and the left, even on the struggle between the “old” and the “young” Slovakia. The word “old” does not allude only to the generational gap between older and younger members of the Slovak intelligentsia – it is Matuška’s expression, which was meant to illustrate the orientation towards tradition and the past professed mainly by members of the Slovak right.

<sup>2</sup> This corresponds with Vladimír Petřík (2010), Slovak literary scientist, who also writes about how Matuška believed that the state of the society determines the state of the culture and thus the state of literature itself.

<sup>3</sup> All of them became active participants in Slovak literary life. M. Chorváth, like Matuška, became a literary critic. The others were authors who wrote prose (D. Chrobák), poetry (J. Kostra), and drama (K. Bezek).

<sup>4</sup> *DAV* was a literary journal issued in the 1920s and 1930s. It was issued by “davists” – a group of leftist intellectuals gathered around Daniel Okáli, Andrej Sirácky, and Vladimír Clementis – it was the initials of their names that formed the title of the journal.

davists, but also Catholic and autonomist-oriented youth, claimed allegiance to F.X. Šalda (Bystrzak 2021, 36).

In one of his outspoken critiques, the essay *Playing the Fujara and Progress* (*Hra na fujaru a pokrok*)<sup>5</sup>, published in the Czech literary magazine *Přítomnost* in 1930 (Slovak literary magazines refused to publish Matuška's first texts), Matuška writes the following: "Who is zealous? Who is trembling at the sight of Vajanský's writing desk, who is falling to his knees in front of Matica, who is falling to his knees before the Liptov cheese, who is falling, falling, and constantly falling" (Matuška 1990, 36). It is the metaphor of falling or sinking to one's knees that Matuška presents here as a gesture, as an attack against the group of "zealous ones", i.e. the young generation that continued the tradition of the previous one, which he calls the generation of "the fathers". Matuška (1990, 30) writes<sup>6</sup>:

Among [them] are such young gentlemen whom you may not have bought, but who agree with you to the last point, no matter what. These are the gifted children; these are the youth who hold the morning! They may not have it right in their heads, but it doesn't matter in the end. And you call them zealous.

Why the fall to one's knees? Why a metaphor working with the image of falling? In the presented paper, we will try to answer not only the question of how and why Matuška works with this expressive image<sup>7</sup>, but we will also try to portray the metaphor of falling to one's knees in the context of ceremonial symbolism and also in the context of the struggle for the modern Slovak nation. The theoretical groundwork is based on the cognitive theory of metaphor introduced by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, specifically focusing on the orientational metaphor of the up-down type. At the same time, we will work with the thesis that Matuška's literary gesture can be seen, through the optics of S. J. Schmidt's theory, as a literary action in the social system of literature<sup>8</sup>, specifically in the category of subsequent processing of literature<sup>9</sup>. We suggest that Matuška "reads" the narrative of history being made around him in a similar way to the way that literary scholar Joseph Carroll "reads"

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<sup>5</sup> The fujara is a woodwind musical instrument closely associated with the notions of tradition and folk art. It can also be linked to the tradition of shepherding, and today it is a typical instrument played during folk festivals in Slovakia.

<sup>6</sup> M. Bystrzak (2016, 82) writes in this context: "Matuška's cultural-critical texts from the 1930s should [...] be seen as a purposeful effort to attack the conservative [...] camp of the Slovak cultural elite."

<sup>7</sup> This image was later adopted by literary scholars and critics who evaluated Matuška's work. Vladimír Petřík (2019, 57) writes, for example, in the context of the surviving remnants of the "nationalist" mindset of the 1930s, that "Czechoslovakism is undoubtedly dying, but it should not be buried by those who fall on their knees in front of Vajanský's writing desk, Matica slovenská, and the Liptov cheese".

<sup>8</sup> The theory of social systems is one of the central theories of empirical literary science. Siegfried J. Schmidt introduced it in the 1980s as a theory based on the theory of communication.

<sup>9</sup> In the category of subsequent processing of literature, S. J. Schmidt includes, for example, the analysis, interpretation, or translation of literary phenomena (Schmidt 2010, 3). Matuška mainly relies on analysis and interpretation in constructing his essayistic texts.

it in his studies *Hierarchy in the Library: Egalitarian Dynamics in Victorian Novels* (2008) and *Agonistic Structure in Canonical British Novels of the Nineteenth Century* (2016), i.e. through the lens of agonistic<sup>10</sup> structure. It can thus be assumed that in this structure, Matuška profiles, with the help of metaphorical networks, a group of protagonists and a group of antagonists who wage a mutual struggle for the shape of the modern Slovak nation, thus presenting the historical narrative of this struggle through his own lens.

Kneeling or falling to one’s knees “has been known in almost all cultures and religions since the dawn of civilization” (Mrozowski 1998, 37). In various forms and meanings, the act of kneeling can already be registered in ancient literary monuments, for example in Greek or Roman myths: “Then Psyche fell on her knees before her [Venus], watering her feet with her tears, wiping the ground with her hair, and with great weeping and lamentation desired pardon” (Apuleius 2018, 29). Kneeling continues to appear in the Bible, both in the Old and New Testaments: “Aaron repeated everything the Lord had said to Moses and performed the signs before the people. The people believed, and when they heard that the Lord had paid attention to them and that he had seen their misery, they knelt low and worshiped” (The Holy Bible 2017, 50); “They were hitting him on the head with a stick and spitting on him. Getting down on their knees, they were paying him homage” (The Holy Bible 2017, 904).



**Picture 1.** The Statue of Kneeling Hatshepsut, cca 1479-1458 BC



**Picture 2.** Luca Giordani: Abraham in Prayer, 17th century

<sup>10</sup> From the Greek word *agon*, which denotes a conflict. Agonistic structure is thus a structure of protagonists and antagonists. Both of these groups are in a conflict and are fighting each other in order to reach a specified goal.

A historical image of the development of various meanings of kneeling is given by Przemysław Mrozowski (1988) in his study *Kneeling in the culture of the Middle Ages West: gesture of expiation – prayer posture (Kłęczenie w kulturze Zachodu średniowiecznego: gest ekspiacji – postawa modlitewna)*. Although initially kneeling, e.g. in many cultures of the Ancient East, had the semantic function of expressing reverence, Christian ceremonial rituals perceived kneeling as a symbol of sin tied to the metaphorical fall of Adam and Eve. Mrozowski (1998, 55) argues that this symbolism was gradually changing, as evidenced by the iconographic depiction of the kneeling Virgin Mary on the tympanums of cathedrals in various European cities. The Virgin Mary was perceived in Christian symbolism as untainted by sin, so her kneeling could not be a symbol of it. In this case, kneeling depicts the process of intercession or supplication.



**Picture 3.** Tympanum showing the annunciation of Mary, Mariankapelle Churh in Würzburg, Germany

In the times of feudalism, this ceremonial symbol was taken over by the secular power, namely during the taking of the vassal oath (Mrozowski 1988, 56). With the advent of royal courts and their culture, kneeling also found significance as an expression of affection, e.g. in the case of knights courting ladies. Thus, in the West, the act of kneeling changed in meaning from a humiliating sign of falling into sin to a gesture of a more spontaneous expression of feelings: trust, loyalty, love, and adoration (Mrozowski 1998, 60).

Matuška's depiction of "falling to one's knees" comes close to the last meaning of the act of kneeling. Here Matuška depicts the young generation taking on the values of the previous generation, the "generation of the fathers", by letting them fall to their knees in front of the symbolic "Matica slovenská"<sup>11</sup> and the "Liptov

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<sup>11</sup> Matica slovenská is a Slovak cultural institution founded in 1863. Its task was to focus on national revival activities, for example by spreading awareness of the Slovak language or publishing the works

cheese”<sup>12</sup> – that is, in front of the values and institutions that were founded or maintained by the “generation of the fathers”. Thus, there is a metaphorical representation on a physical basis – “to have authority or power is up; to be subject to authority or power is down” or “high status is up; low status is down” (Lakoff and Johnson 1981, 16). In this metaphor, the authority or the role model (e.g. the aforementioned Svetozár Hurban Vajanský<sup>13</sup> or Matica slovenská) is on top; the young generation that shows trust in it falls on its knees before it, kneels down and does everything as its role models do.

However, Matuška does not portray the act of kneeling as a positive gesture, mainly because he does not consider the role models to whom the kneeling affection is shown to be worthy of such praise – he describes the “generation of the fathers” as “Old Testament prophets” who are “chaste, pure, moral, but prostitute the youth” (Matuška 1990, 57). Matuška thus disdains the act of kneeling in this case, formulating his statement as a mockery, especially with the sarcastic undertone and the repetition of the words “falling, falling, and constantly falling”. He is not concerned merely with the depiction of the uncritical adoption of role models that members of the younger generation are guilty of; he is mainly concerned with mocking and ridiculing his opponent. He achieves this by hyperbolization. Thus, in the historical struggle in which Matuška depicts the protagonists and antagonists of the story of the struggle for the shape of the modern Slovak nation, the metaphor of “falling to one’s knees” is ultimately not only a mockery, but the act of falling may also symbolise another realisation of the orientational metaphor of the up-down type, namely in the realisation of “more is up; less is down”. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1981, 15) state that “the victor in a fight is typically on top”. By letting his antagonists kneel and not kneeling himself, Matuška creates a structure that can be seen in an interpretive framework as an attempt to assert dominance in the struggle between the Slovak left and the right. Therefore, the decision to use such a metaphor to symbolically place someone up and someone down seems, at least to us, quite deliberate<sup>14</sup>. Raymond W. Gibbs (2017, 83) writes that “[m]etaphor scholars have long

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of Slovak writers. During its activity, important literary magazines were created, e.g. *Slovenské pohľady* (*Slovak Views*).

<sup>12</sup> Liptov is a region of Slovakia known for its tradition of shepherding and the production of cheese products. Liptov cheese is thus associated with a long tradition of cheese production, which is why Matuška uses it in his essay as a proxy symbol of the tradition itself.

<sup>13</sup> The writer Svetozár Hurban Vajanský (1846 – 1916) was a role model, in a sense even an idol, for many members of conservative and nationally based groups, especially for his writing of poetry, prose, and his publishing activities. Later, Matuška subjected Vajanský’s prosaic work to harsh criticism, in which he directly attacked the myth that had arisen around this writer and the values that his work and name embodied.

<sup>14</sup> A pioneer of the Deliberate Metaphor Theory, Gerard Steen (2015, 2), believes that “[d]eliberate metaphor use hence reveals a communicative dimension of metaphor, pertaining to the value of a metaphor as a specific means of communication *between* language users, which is a dimension that has been mostly left aside during the development of the contemporary theory of metaphor”. Matuška’s use of the metaphor of “falling to one’s knees” can be understood as a deliberate attack against his ideological

argued that certain notable metaphorical expressions in speech and writing may have been deliberately composed and quite consciously employed for their unique, didactic qualities and sometimes poetic beauty". Matuška uses this metaphor to create a deliberate attack against a group he disagrees with, taking on a role of a judge who condemns his opponents.<sup>15</sup>

In this context, anthropologist Christopher Boehm (2001) writes about the aversion to subordination, which he frames as a universal human trait. Humans tend to rise against tyrants, they tend to protest if they feel their freedom is at danger. Subordinated groups revolt against the dominant ones in a constant historical struggle for power. While there have been many bloody revolts even in recent human history, a metaphor is a tool by which one can discredit an opponent without physically attacking them. As a result, a revolt that once would be bloody takes on more of a symbolic meaning. For Matuška, metaphor is a weapon used to discredit an opponent whom the essayist lets fall to their knees – he relegates them to a lower level, consolidating the position of the protagonists of his historical narrative. These protagonists are often left-leaning young writers and artists. Matuška was among the young leftist intellectuals who professed values at odds with nationalist exploitation of tradition, conservatism, isolationism, or an exaggerated confessional approach to the problems of society. It is natural that he would seek to advance the interests of the group with which he sympathises at the expense of groups for which he harbours antipathy. Joseph Carroll writes about this tendency, stating that in war it is common to “glorify” the group one belongs to while also emphasising its cooperative nature. On the other hand, we tend to treat enemies as embodiments of the desire for dominance.

Matuška proves this by using other metaphors in which the influence of the up-down orientation can be discerned. For example, he writes about the backbone<sup>16</sup> of certain people that is twisted out of meek reverence for the past – “[the twisted backbone] *takes away all our courage, it twists us*” (Matuška 1990, 46). Here again, metaphors overlap. In Slovak proverbs, there is a well-known notion of “a man without a backbone”, i.e. a man without a firm character and without principles. Matuška plays with the phrase “backbone” by not letting it be absent in his opponents – he deliberately “only” twists it. By contorting it, he indicates the presence of principles in his

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opponents. Its meaning in the discussions that took place in the discourse of the formation of Slovak culture communicated his plea for change. For more information on the Deliberate Metaphor Theory, see, for example *Deliberate Metaphor Theory: Basic assumptions, main tenets, urgent issues* (Steen 2017).

<sup>15</sup> More information on the matter can also be found in *Taking metaphor studies back to the Stone Age: A reply to Xu, Zhang, and Wu* (Gibbs and Chen 2017).

<sup>16</sup> It seems interesting that Matuška often works with metaphors using body parts. That correlates with the opinions of Ning Yu (2008, 250), who writes: “It also follows that our body, with its experiences and functions, is a potentially universal source domain for metaphorical mappings from bodily experiences onto more abstract and subjective domains.” Although Yu (2008, 259) believes that “metaphorical mappings are grounded in bodily experience”, he also highlights the role of “cultural understanding and interpretation”. The deliberate character of such metaphors once again serves the purpose of an attack against the dominant social group, conceptualized by Matuška in an antagonistic way.

opponents, but it is a presence in a distorted, imperfect form. These principles thus acquire the symptom of a defect. In this way, Matuška refers to another common phrase, which is “twisted/crooked character”. Moreover, he puts these expressions in close proximity to the word “meek”, thus once again placing people who possess a metaphorically twisted backbone lower than those who do not. Therefore, Matuška once again conceptualizes his antagonists in a worse light than his protagonists.

By conceiving the disputes between the two groups as struggles, or as wars, one might also consider that the up-down orientational metaphor comes into close connection with the conceptual metaphor that Lakoff and Johnson (1981, 4) describe as “argument is war”<sup>17</sup>. This war between the representatives of conservative and progressive groups in the 1930s takes place in terms of the struggle for dominance in the creation of modern Slovak society, and it also finds its way into the statements of literary scholars, historians, and critics, who write: “In the 1930s, Matuška had to choose on which side of the struggle he would fight, who he would help” (Petřík 1986, 17). His texts can thus be “seen as a purposeful effort to attack the conservative<sup>18</sup> [...] camp” (Bystrzak 2016, 82). With “Šaldaean vehemence and venomous sarcasm, he attacked established ideological, literary, and social values” (Petřík 2019, 7). At the same time, he has been given adjectives such as “combative polemicist” or “warrior essayist” (Petřík 2019, 19, 78).

The “warrior essayist” with a metaphorical weapon<sup>19</sup> in his hand deliberately uses specific stylistic means in his texts to attack and provoke, to make a targeted appeal to Slovak society, to portray his opponents in an often unpleasant light, to let someone fall, fall, and continuously fall, while not letting others’ knees buckle. Matuška, who in addition to the title “warrior essayist” also bears the title “angry critic”, especially because of his sharp criticism of Slovak shortcomings in the field of literature and culture, himself wrote in the later phase of his life: “Being angry can cause one to ridicule. I exaggerated for pedagogical reasons<sup>20</sup>, I defiantly denigrated, sowed [...] the seeds of scepticism” (Jurík 1975, 115). And it was through expressive

<sup>17</sup> Lakoff and Johnson reflect on how we use this conceptual metaphor in everyday thinking. We can win or lose an argument, we attack our opponent’s arguments, we create strategies, etc. It is this kind of thinking that allows us to think about Matuška’s literary actions in terms that take much from the very content recognisable within that conceptual metaphor.

<sup>18</sup> For example, regarding the “generation of the fathers”, Matuška writes: “... they are some kind of prehistoric, diluvial creatures, some kind of Old Testament prophets, at the very least” (Matuška 1990, 57). In a very similar way, he attacks even the members of the younger generation: “Man is not physei zoon politikon, as Aristotle said, but physei zoon stupid, and therefore he feels the need to associate, to seek out fellow men – fellow fools” (Matuška 1990, s. 41).

<sup>19</sup> Vladimír Petřík (2010, 14) writes about Matuška’s “sharp pen”. Mária Bátorová (2015, 100), on the other hand, writes even more specifically about Matuška’s use of a sharp critical “rapier”.

<sup>20</sup> This brings us back to the quote of Raymond W. Gibbs (2017, 83): “[M]etaphorical expressions in speech and writing may have been deliberately composed and quite consciously employed for their didactic qualities.” Matuška knew he was not giving an exact depiction of the struggle between the two groups in their fight for influence over the formation of Slovak culture, yet he deliberately used metaphors and vivid imagery to make the society think about the matter at hand, to make everyone consider his views.



stylistic means that Matuška wanted to “shake the Slovak man, indeed the whole society” (Petrík 2019, 24) and thus remove the remnants of the traditional (romantic) thinking that stayed in the contemporary mind-set of people and which led to the rise in popularity of nationalist movements.

It can thus be concluded that Matuška’s historical narrative, which he “reads” as well as “writes”, relies heavily on the use of figurative means, more specifically, on the use of metaphors. The critic finds himself in the middle of a culture war between several groups keen on more influence and power. Therefore, he chooses to conceptualize who will be the protagonist in this war and who will not, who he will show affection for and who he will show antipathy to, who he will leave “up” and who he will let fall “down”. The metaphor of falling to one’s knees serves him as a narrative element, which he uses in its imagery and symbolism to depict the struggle for the influence over the Slovak nation, culture, and literature, the war for dominance in the process of their formation and further development. The critic’s gesture here is at the same time a literary action – Matuška here processes literary and non-literary materials, inserting them into narrative structures that can be abstracted back from his essays. We also see it as interesting that Matuška presents the historical narrative in a series of essays, in a genre that does not typically operate with a strong narrative core. Thanks to his texts from the 1930s, we can reflect on the changes in the contemporary Slovak nation and on which residues in human thinking persist and even today form the value orientations of individual groups that wage symbolical wars for the current shape of the nation, culture, and society.

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#### Picture references:

Picture 1 (May 15, 2024): <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/544449>.

Picture 2 (May 15, 2024): <https://www.artnet.com/artists/luca-giordano/abraham-in-prayer-HngaAuNuX23Y8mvGYS9NYQ2>.

Picture 3 (May 15, 2024): <https://www.flickr.com/photos/hen-magonza/48742680967>.

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