

Dialogue or Monologue?



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Translated by Stanley Bill.

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All the terms we use in writing about the philosophy of the encounter, of dialogue, or of drama, have no philosophical provenance. They originate in other languages — the languages of theology, theater, poetry, and of the everyday. Ethics is made equal with metaphysics, or even surpasses it, as in the case of Lévinas; life explains philosophy.

I realize that the task set before me by the editorial staff is not an in-depth analysis of the philosophy of dialogue, but rather to focus on Father Józef Tischner as a “dialogist,” more in practice than in terms of what he wrote and how he wrote it. The task is an extremely difficult one, and indeed I have long shrunk from it. Nevertheless, this task has fallen to me, as I have co-authored a book of conversations with Professor Tischner under the title of *Encounter*. The subject of this book is Tischner himself — his biography, the genesis of his practical and intellectual choices, and finally, the philosophy that he created.

Our *Encounter* was an attempt at a conversation with the professor about the man himself. This was no easy task, neither for me nor for him, and it required a great deal of courage and mutual intuition. He had to sense and to know when I was “egging him on”; I had to fight to stop him slipping away from me in evasive phrases. 149

Capturing a personality is not an easy thing to express or to explain. For is it really the case that someone who considers himself a philosopher of dialogue — and is one — must also be an exemplary “dialogist” in his own life? Long ago Zygmunt Krasiński revealed that “the stream of beauty flows through you, but you are not beauty.” Perhaps you truly are, but not in the way that readers, listeners, and viewers would like to see you. There is a kind of mystery here, whose borders we can barely touch and beyond which is only a darkness that demands respect.

On setting out upon his own road of the philosophy of dialogue, Józef Tischner begins with the encounter of two people. At first glance, the reason for their encounter seems banal. Is this a philosophy of the encounter, or of drama, at all?

We shall be returning to this question later. However, I think that it is indeed a philosophy of dialogue, because in it the world is written out between You and I. There is no longer just a lone subject that finds, describes and understands everything. Robinson Crusoe on his uninhabited island is truly alone, a kind of mute.

The world of Tischner’s philosophy is clearly written out between the You and the I, and at certain moments into a kind of We. The question is simply this: Who is the YOU and what role does it play in our drama? Is it a partner or someone who fills a “supporting” role?

We ought not to forget that in his first texts on the encounter, as well as in *Filozofia dramatu* [The Philosophy of Drama], Tischner defines the encounter on the road as the moment when the other liberates me from my my-ness, from my reclusive world, and asks: “Where does this road lead?” The I is jolted out of its world, as if awoken from a dream. The other stands before him asking a question: I can reply, I can choose not to reply, or I can lie. THIS is the first decision of the encounter — how shall I treat the Other? Shall I treat him seriously or not? Shall I tell the truth or shall I deceive him just for fun?... All right, but what happens next? In fact, irrespective of what I do, nothing further can result between us. The other goes off on his way and I remain behind with the consciousness that I am good and honest, or that I am a liar or a foolish prankster. I may know this about myself through the other, but he will not return. Our roads have met and parted. Have we really encountered each other or merely touched each other in order to each discover something about ourselves? Where is the drama?

The next sentence with which Tischner defines the encounter is as follows: “I know that you understand me, therefore we are.” This provides strength, a feeling of security, and confirmation. Yet it is not “WE — or

150 I — understand you, therefore we are.” No, it is “YOU understand me, therefore we are.” Is the Other then not he who confirms, he who lets me become myself, who justifies me in my existence? There are a great many such motifs in *The Philosophy of Drama*, but also later in *Spór o istnienie człowieka* [The Controversy over the Existence of Man].

Dialogue or monologue? Let us examine the themes and protagonists of the book. The whole encounter takes place within the horizon of going astray and being found again, the Denied Land and the Promised Land. At the same time, we essentially live and encounter one another on stage in the Denied Land, only after death going to the Promised Land, the Long-awaited Land, the Land where there are no lies, treachery, fear, deception, or seduction.

Do I walk with the Other along that road? Do I cross the boundary with him? Or do I suffer alone, wounded and deceived, so that it might someday be otherwise — there in the Promised Land? Shall we arrive there together or is the Other necessary to me rather so that I might understand that I have been mistaken, that I have gone astray, and that nothing good awaits me here, but only THERE? But together or apart? Am I redeemed or damned by You or together with You? Are you simply a trail that I must walk in order to reach my true Homeland? Or, in spite of everything, do we walk together toward redemption or damnation? Do we walk together because we met upon the road and one of us decided to ask and the other to answer? Or does this encounter — which was the metaphor for the Tischnerian encounter — have no meaning at all in the drama that we live? Who is its main character? We? I? You?

Looking more closely at this perspective on *The Philosophy of Drama*, a problem with its fundamental ideas appears. We have no particulars with which to define them. For who is the You standing before me? Are we capable of creating a We at all on this earth, and is this even the point? Is this truly my — or Our — desire? Perhaps not at all. Perhaps the fundamental desire is not to find and to create the WE, but rather redemption, in place of damnation, and reaching the Promised Land. For only there is the true drama possible.

We are living in the Land of Denial, where every attempt at entering into a real encounter must end in separation and disappointment. No other possibility exists. Let us look more closely at the places of the encounter and its horizon as Tischner describes them in *The Philosophy of Drama*. Over the encounter reigns the world of axiology, the world of value choices, and over this is the world of agathology, the world of seeking and choosing the Good, which draws us in and teaches goodness to the good. It is precisely in and through this world that I may respond truthfully to the question posed by the other, that I may find the courage to say “I do not kill” and seek the truth of the other’s face beyond his fear and pain, his veil, or his mask.

I may do so, but what for? Because I seek the truth of the Other, 151
because I wish to allow him to be, because I wish to accompany him in
his pain. Or is there something else?

Indeed there is, for if I am to seek the Good in the face of the Other —
in myself, but for him — then he confirms me. He will tell me that I am
honest, just, and good. He will tell me that I am his redeemer. And in this
way, might he not justify me and perhaps redeem me as well? I have no
right to existence — this oft-repeated phrase of Tischner’s prompts deep
resistance within me. Who grants me the right to existence? The Other?
I myself? Before whom am I called to account for this freely granted exist-
ence? Before the Other or before the Creator who freely gave it to me?
Apart from that, why must I justify my existence, since nobody asked me
whether I wished to exist? And I never promised that I should be good,
loving, or that I should redeem others. I may be like this, but no prom-
ise was made in the act of creation. A creature is unconditionally granted
a dangerous free will.

Father Tischner knew this perfectly well; so where does this problem
of justification arise? Why do I wish to enter into the drama at all if I am
living an unjustified existence? Do I wish to free myself from it through
the encounter or draw the other into a life to which he has no right?

We all live in the Land of Denial. Everything we touch, learn, love,
and attach ourselves to is an illusion of the real world, like theatrical scen-
ery. And yet without it we cannot live.

Tischner sketches out before us the world of the Land of Denial
through encounters with the truth of the other, with beauty, and with
goodness. Each of these accounts — characterized by the author as “going
astray” — is presented through stories of various dramatic encounters,
taken largely from great works of world literature. Each of the accounts
ends in a form of defeat, betrayal, lying, derision, or murder. It is like
a line cast out by Satan or by an evil man: if only the other might believe,
if only the other might be tempted, if only the other would say “yes” to eve-
rything, not suspecting that he is being “led” into “temptation” or simply
that he is participating in a game in which the first to believe must lose.

Pairs of betrayers and betrayed are placed before us — Raskoln-
ikov and Porfiry, for instance, as symbols of the drama of lying. In going
astray in the realm of good we meet Queen Anne and Gloucester from
Shakespeare’s *Richard III*. Gloucester kills Anne’s loving husband in order
to take his place. In this cunning fashion he plays a game with her, so
that in the end she is ready to forgive him and to accept his arguments.
Tischner perceptively describes the various seductions and subjugations —
through fear, through suffering, through bravado, and finally, through
beauty. The main protagonists in the chapter on going astray in the realm
of beauty are Don Juan and the nun he seduces, Donna Elvira, as well as
Johannes and Cornelia from Kierkegaard’s *Either/Or*.

Each case is concerned with seducing the other, winning him over,
then destroying and abandoning him, while savoring his defeat and

152 gullibility. In the end, every one of these dramas echoes with the tears of an angel and the scornful laughter of a devil. In the Land of Denial we live torn between two realms, and a battle rages over our souls for our redemption or damnation.

This is how the world of mutually going astray presents itself, a world that was meant to be a promised land but became accursed, a land of denial, where betrayers betray, liars are lied to, and we — with all our hopes, longings and despair — are subject to the triumph of evil. Why is this so? After all, we ourselves have done nothing evil? We have merely wished to be happy in this world.

Alongside this world of illusion, lust and lying is another human world, which Tischner calls the Promised Land. He then maps out the four fundamental places where the human drama of life can take place through the encounter. I and You, and ultimately We. The four places of the drama's human fulfillment on earth — what he calls the "stage" — are the home, the workplace, the church, and the cemetery.

In fact, the description of the Promised Land and our path towards it is somewhat reminiscent of a Polish highland folk tale about two young people meeting with nothing to threaten their love, then building a home and raising children, who increasingly become the meaning of their home and of their very lives. They learn how to farm the land, which they know they have "received in trust." The land bears fruit and repays them; they too repay each other for faithfulness and love; they thank God for the blessings he has bestowed upon them. This is the brief period of happiness in the Promised Land. Suddenly, as if at the wave of a magic wand, without our willing it or doing any evil, everything changes. Children leave home, once young and beautiful married couples grow old and die, houses fall into ruin and only sometimes do they preserve the signs of their former abundance and joy. The cemetery becomes the place of encounter with loved ones, not the home any longer. In the same way, we must part with our former work colleagues, with whom we have endeavored to create something in common. Our work and our ideas are taken up by younger people, who only sometimes carry on our work. Our life on this earth is short, and what will remain after it? Are we able to save anything? Can we at least leave memory? We may never know, and history's sentences remain mysterious to us.

Therefore, Tischner says that it is not here, but only THERE that we find the promise of real Life, real love, real hope, real creativity, as well as real and full respect and understanding for what it means to undertake a legacy and a friendship. Only THERE. Somewhere THERE. The moments of fulfilled desires that we experience here — the moments of joyous mutual love — are merely the promise, the harbinger of what awaits us on the Other side. Hence the drama of this earth: I rescue You and You rescue Me. I may be redeemed through You and You through Me, while as lone individuals we are incapable of this. Thus I seek and

desire You, and You Me, because we are signs to each other of the hope of salvation, redemption, or of damnation. The measure here is mutual fidelity, freedom of choice, and a desire that is profoundly different from lust or need. 153

Tischner borrowed this conception of “need” and “desire” directly from Emmanuel Lévinas and adopted it for his philosophy of drama. A need is something that demands immediate satisfaction. A person needs water or bread, a sleepy person needs a comfortable place to rest, someone might need wealth, someone else women or men, but in any case it must be now, at this very moment, at once. Desire is something much more metaphysical and open, it is hope, it is the dream, it is openness to that which we do not know, that which is to come, that which is good, beautiful and gracious, which does not threaten us, which wants to save and redeem us. Desire is a great metaphysical longing, something we anticipate so as not to fall into tragedy, nothingness, and the void. For “true life is absent,” as Lévinas repeats after Rimbaud.

Perhaps here we reach the very source of Tischnerean drama: it unfolds between need and desire. The encounter and the question of the face of the Other awaken in me a desire for the Mystery, a desire for the promise and for transcendence. I do not know exactly what he is promising me, but I feel, or know, that he may be my salvation and I his. Precisely He and no one else. Something important and beautiful may occur thanks to him, with him, and through him. So I fight for our shared drama, for after all “none of us liveth unto himself, and no man dieth unto himself.”

On the other hand, an encounter in “need” means appropriation, the will to possess, the “devouring” of the other, the use, exploitation, and abandonment of the other. It is a test of my strength to dominate You, into which the evil joins. Through need we move toward perdition, for need involves domination and not mutual “being” through each other.

But is Tischner concerned in both encounters with a kind of WE, or is he always concerned with I through You, or thanks to You? Is there a kind of “together” in the philosophy of drama, a building of a common We? Or do I satisfy my own needs through you, even if they lead me toward perdition? Do I fulfill my desires through you, so that they may redeem me and lead me to the eternal Promised Land, where there will be no more weeping or wailing? Is it together with You, through You, or thanks to You? And if I go astray and become deceitful, shall I save you from my deception so that You at least might experience the Promise? Or shall I drag You behind me, or leave you alone?

What emerges from the examples given in those sections of *The Philosophy of Drama* that discuss going astray in the realms of beauty, truth, and the good?

In building a home, a workplace, a church, or a cemetery together, shall I be doing it with You or only thanks to You, through You, for You, while

154 my main aim and the final end of my (not our) religious drama is my redemption and salvation, not ours, not yours and mine together?

So this is indeed a dialogue, for thanks to the encounter, we make this land our home — but is it not a dialogue tinged with monologue? Salvation and redemption must be with You, through You, and beside You in this land — which might become the Promised Land — but above all they concern me alone. My justification, my salvation, my redemption are what count. You are merely aiding me in this, serving me. It takes place through You, but not with You or for You. In fact, You are for Me and not I for You. In the final scene of the drama of salvation or damnation I am alone, without You. The human You turns into the Divine YOU and the drama must be essentially a religious drama. In the end, this is what truly matters.

Does dialogue exist alongside monologue or does monologue orient dialogue? Therefore perhaps what really matters is my dialogue with God, while You — the other person — are merely a sign of Him, a transcendental trace. And yet I cannot live without You, neither in this accursed land nor in the promised land. I need your support and You need mine, for I desire your confirmation just as You desire mine. I cannot live without your faith in me being constantly renewed, nor without your choice of me as your You. And yet the moment will come when our drama will end. We do not know how, nor do we wish to know, but we believe in the parting of ways. Even if it is unavoidable, we wish it to be honest and beautiful, however painful, so that we might not be ashamed, so that we might not wish to forget, to erase, or to falsify reality. so that a trace of the Infinite might remain between us, in spite of our parting.

But how will it be? How will it end before the curtain falls? Will it end in betrayal, lies, the denial of reciprocity, rejection? Or will it end in that which is inevitable, in that which is beyond our power, beyond our control — in death? Yet a moment beforehand there was no I and You together, no We. Each of us departs alone — sooner or later, nobly or shamefully, but alone. We do not depart together. We each depart alone. Perhaps I depart for You, perhaps thanks to You, but not with You. Departure is a human monologue. Perhaps it becomes a dialogue with God. Or perhaps it remains forever a monologue or a silence.

For a long time I have been fascinated by how a second part of *The Philosophy of Drama* might have looked. In which direction would Tischner's thought have moved: toward agathology, aesthetic drama, or religious drama? How would the matter of reciprocity and the phenomenon of the WE have been resolved? We shall never know. It would be difficult to consider *The Controversy Over the Existence of Man* as the continuation of *The Philosophy of Drama*. It is rather a return to a debate with his master, Roman Ingarden, to whom even the title alludes (Ingarden wrote the three-volume *Controversy Over the Existence of the World*). Tischner wished to link his dispute with Ingarden with his own original philosophy

of the encounter, in which he included elements of both theology and religious thought. We might therefore risk the hypothesis that his further investigations might have moved toward the drama of man with God. He once wrote that this was the only drama worthy of the name. 155

But these are only hypotheses. Professor Tischner wrote his last book in the hospital, when he was fatally ill with cancer. He was in haste, it was the last word that he wanted to utter, and he knew that he would not have time to say it all. Writing in the face of impending death also changed the perspective and attitude of the author. *The Controversy Over the Existence of Man* is quite clearly directed toward dialogue with God. The problem of Grace appears, as do those of mercy and of freedom, which ultimately is “Your will,” along with the great problem of the Good, or Goodness, the profound Tischnerean analysis of which is still before us. The other person is beside me, for me, through me, but he is not with me. Our roads through mercy, grace and goodness are shared, but in the end I am redeemed or damned through him, or thanks to him, because I was not faithful enough, merciful enough, kind enough. Yet he — because now it is HE, not YOU — has no say in the matter and can do nothing about it. The matter plays itself out between God and I, and it is here that the last word falls. But is it a word of dialogue?

What was Tischner really like? Was he a dialogist, or a monologist as I saw him at the time of our conversations, as I experienced him? This is an enormously difficult question and one from which I have long shied away, as I have not been able to find a formula that would allow me to make an adequate response. It is terribly difficult to write that someone who is no longer present — a person one knew for years, with whom one had hundreds of better or worse conversations — was either a dialogist or delivered monologues. Before I respond to this impossible question, a little history is required.

After I had completed my doctorate, the PWN publishing house proposed an “extended conversation” with the professor — who was also my advisor for successive philosophical dissertations — about him, his life, and about his philosophy. As the philosophy of dialogue was of great interest to me and I considered it to be the future of contemporary thought, I enthusiastically agreed. Tischner also agreed, or at least he did not express any opposition to the idea. I drew up an outline for our conversations, which he accepted, and then we got started.

Tischner was extraordinarily conscientious at work. We arranged two two-week sessions during semester breaks at his home in Łopuszna in the Gorce mountains and we spent whole afternoons over these conversations. Every day, including Sundays, we worked for four or five hours. These were substantial doses.

You could say that we — that is, the relatively small group of Tischner’s students, seminarians, and sometimes companions for evening bonfires and hikes to Turbacz — knew him rather well. In Krakow, on

156 Św. Marka Street, where he lived, we could drop in unannounced at any hour of the day for an Ingarden book, a course reader, a volume of poetry, or the latest issue of *Znak*. He would buy us books and sometimes even train tickets when he knew that we couldn't afford them. Nevertheless, while speaking almost constantly about philosophy or sometimes politics during our lessons, private seminars and strolls, we never spoke directly about himself, his life, his choices and experiences. We probably did not dare to ask, and it certainly would not have been maintaining a sense of propriety to do so. For this reason, we knew almost nothing about him privately. He was our teacher, perhaps even our philosophical master, a sort of much older friend to whom one could go with even the most personal matters, but never the other way round. The hierarchy was maintained.

So when on a certain cold morning in his new highland home we began to talk, I was shocked. Tischner told me about his youth during the occupation and his childhood in the school run by his parents at Łopuszna. He told me about his partisan complex: he was too young to head into the woods, and yet too mature not to realize what was going on. He told me about his family's flight from the Germans to nearby Rogoźnik, about his first important readings, about a dispute with his father, who thought he was spending too much money on books, about the first humiliations under the occupiers. The first part of our conversation — about the occupation, his law studies at the Jagiellonian University, and then the seminary years — were his story. I listened with bated breath. He spoke and I listened. Might I say that it was a monologue? No, I could not say that. For although he spoke and I listened, Tischner was not speaking into a void, to himself or for himself. He was speaking to me and I wanted to understand what he was telling me. In a certain sense I might say that I had some sense of being chosen, that he wanted to tell me things that nobody outside his family had known until then.

So perhaps we might now attempt to form some definitions, no longer in theory but practice: What is dialogue and what is monologue? When one person speaks and the other listens, is this a monologue? And does dialogue always depend on two people taking part in the conversation? Theoretically, yes; but in fact this is untrue. Everything depends on the subtle prepositions "to" and "for." Do I speak for you or for me? Do I speak in order to tell you something or in order to get something off my chest? Monologue can, and usually does, go as follows: I speak because I want to get something out of me and not because I want to tell you something or to reveal something of myself. My words are my property and expressing myself is a necessity to me, irrespective of to whom, or for whom, I am expressing myself.

In fact, dialogue can be very similar, when each of us speaks his own mind without listening to the other, closed off to his questions, his desire to understand, and ultimately, his need to reply. In exploring monologue or dialogue we must be sensitive to these issues.

Coming back to my story, the first days of our conversations were devoted 157 to his tales about himself, so that I might understand things better. I was extremely grateful to him for this. But then the hard part began. We stopped talking about biography and began to discuss philosophy, not philosophy in general, but his philosophical masters and his own philosophy of drama. The roles were reversed. Until then the professor had been in control of the situation and he had spoken about what was important to him. Now he had to start answering questions that he might not have been expecting.

Did we cross from a monologue (that was really a dialogue) into my monologue, into my asking the way and his wondering how to answer? There was probably something of this in it. After the story-telling of the first days, which he was prepared for, he seemed to feel somewhat worn out, or even “grilled,” by my questions. Because I wanted to know, and he had no ready answers. Even if he did have his so-called “answers for the press,” he knew that these would not satisfy me, and that I would delve deeper. He knew this, and he sensed that it was authentic, but did he want it? I do not know, but he let down his guard, and we began to talk with each other. I challenged certain theses and he defended or explained them. After a monologue that was joined with appreciative and attentive dialogue, we entered into an engaged dialogue. What is an engaged dialogue? It certainly did not concern where the path of his philosophy was leading. Instead, the questions concerned how I was to understand what had been written and said, and whether it might conceal any hidden traps or misconceptions. Perhaps there was something I had misunderstood.

Tischner was probably not internally prepared for such a barrage of questions, and in any case, he never liked explaining himself. Yet he entered into the conversation, sometimes to the point of friction, and our conversation, in which unknown questions met unknown answers, was fascinating. And I think that it revealed a great deal of the thought and personality of my interlocutor.

Today, years later, I think that there was a considerable amount of Tischnerean courage involved. When we had our conversation he was at the height of his fame and he had managed to skillfully shape his image. Suddenly he was brave enough to let it go and to enter into a conversation, into a dialogue that was not always easy for either of us, but was very honest. This courage to enter into a dialogue, or into a monologue not for “me,” but for another person, in order that he might understand, in order that he might enter into an unknown world, which was in front of him and to which he had no experiential access, testifies to the fact that Tischner’s courage and openness to the other person were not merely a theory with which he fled from reality.