

BOOK REVIEW

ON MILAN KUNDERA  
– IN A PROBLEMATIC  
MANNER

Jan Novák. *Kundera: Český život a doba*. Praha: Argo & Paseka, 2020, pp. 896.

Jan Novák's book *Milan Kundera. Český život a doba* (*Milan Kundera. Czech Life and Times*) attracted enormous attention not only from Czech, but also from the wider cultural community. The fact that in only three months following its publication in June 2020 there were more than a hundred published articles and a vast body of texts and online commentaries (Šámal 2020) reacting to it, and a vigorous debate about it started before it even appeared in bookstores, speaks for itself. The debate very quickly attracted many journalists, writers, literary critics and historians, literary theoreticians, sociologists and many others. Their reactions to Novák's book are not unanimous. However, the criticism is mostly negative, identifying as the book's sore spot, and rightly so, the author's negative personal attitude towards Milan Kundera.

The subtitle of Novák's book, which can be read as a biography and formally follows the standards of academic writing, is “Czech life and times”. Both parts of the subtitle (“Czech”, “life and times”) deserve a short comment. Regarding the component “Czech”, Jan Novák follows Kundera's literary work, social involvement, and private life during his Czech phase, that is since his birth in 1929 all

the way to his departure for France in 1975. The book comprises a little less than nine hundred pages, it is thorough and aspires to be comprehensive, to take into account all that is important, but nevertheless, Novák leaves aside almost half a century of Kundera's French phase. The second component of the subtitle, “life and times”, confirms the book's intention – Novák tries to reconstruct not only the life and literary work of Milan Kundera, but also a broader cultural-political picture of that time, relying on the extremely rich archival materials and testimonies of Kundera's peers and (once upon a time) friends. Thorough research is desirable and praise worthy, but in the case of Novák's book it is problematic for various reasons. For example, in the reconstruction of Kundera's life and world view, Novák largely relies on documents from the National Security archives, where publicly accessible Milan Kundera's file is stored, bringing to light even the details from Kundera's intimate life, which undeniably exceeds the bounds of common decency (i.e., his love, or more precisely, sex life), which could be characterised as vulgar voyeurism. Novák thus, probably without being aware of it, completed the efforts of the Czechoslovakian secret police in “destruction of human intimacy” (Slačálek 2020), in this case, Kundera's. Furthermore, in psychological and sexual profiling of Kundera, Novák largely relies on testimonies of Prague sexologist and once a close friend of Kundera's, Ivo Pondělíček, and unquestioningly accepts them as competent. But can a reader completely trust the credibility of Pondělíček's quotes, if we take into account the fact that at the time Novák interviewed him he was almost

ninety, that almost fifty years had passed since the time some of the events he talks about took place, as well as the fact that the two of them abruptly ended all contacts (the fact that is mentioned at the very end of the book for tactical reasons, because otherwise the reader would perhaps approach such information with a grain of salt)? Novák accepts Pondělíček's testimonies without criticism, without questioning and relativization, while he is more critical of testimonies by some other persons, i.e.: "[director Jaromil] Jireš recollected the genesis of the movie adaptation of *The Joke* after almost thirty years, so it is not a surprise that the chronology of his reconstruction is not correct" (Novák 2020: 553).

Also, Novák's view on "life and times" in Czechoslovakia, as well as his perception and interpretation of archival materials, is largely based on a simplified, Manichean, black and white perception of the world, which has been divided with surgical precision into good and evil, heroes and cowards – unambiguously labeling Kundera as the latter. Novák ignores the fact that many people's destinies, as well as those of literary authors, clearly testify that the life in Czechoslovakian totalitarianism often implied tactical games with the regime, if a minimum of civil and artistic freedom was to be preserved, and Kundera himself is almost a textbook example of exactly that. This is confirmed, among other things, by the records of police questionings and wire-tapping of Milan Kundera in the years that preceded his departure for France, in which Novák does not even slightly distinguish between "the things a victim [Milan Kundera] says for the microphone and the things he really means" (Just

2020). Despite Novák's slightly biased interpretations, on the basis of materials presented in the book, the critical reader will easily come to the conclusion that Kundera – as well as thousands of his fellow nationals – was in fear of secret services, that he acted submissively at hearings, not causing any conflicts, but also at the same time trying to preserve his own integrity, that he dared to express his own opinions, which in many cases defied the officially proclaimed ones, that during the normalisation period, that is, after 1968, he did not participate in a wide spread network of police confidants and snitches. But in spite of all that, on almost nine hundred pages, Novák is trying to verify his in advance formed projection of Kundera as a moral conformist, someone who manipulates other people's destinies, self-plagiarist, incorrigible Stalinist, erotomaniac, misogynist, etc.

The preface of the book discloses that the main impulse of Novák's engagement in writing a monography about Milan Kundera was his accidental "discovery" that in 1963, a time when more liberal tendencies in Czech literature and culture were already present, Kundera published the third (remade, as well as the second edition from 1961) edition of the epic poem *May* (*Máj*). For the community of literary scholars this, understandably, cannot be considered as a discovery. It is well known that in 1955 Kundera published the mentioned epic poem, dedicated to the icon of Nazi resistance, and later also an icon of the communist ideology, Julius Fučík, otherwise known as the author of the *Notes from the Gallows* (*Reportáž psaná na oprátce*), which he wrote in prison and which was published posthumously, that in 1961

the second edition was published, and the third followed in 1963. It is also well known that Kundera's epic poem, the title (and partially the motives) of which refer to the famous epic poem of the same name written by Czech romanticist Karel Hynek Mácha, was written in the spirit of highly cliché-ridden and propagandist poetry of that time. Novák is mostly right when claiming that Kundera was “a Stalinist poet in his youth” (Novák 2020: 10), although the political label “Stalinist” should be replaced by “social realist”. But Novák does not say anything about another well-known fact – that such as it was, Kundera's poetry distinguished itself in quality from a large part of official poetic production of that time. By saying this, I do not wish to relativize or diminish the fact that young poet Kundera was indoctrinated. After all, the naiveté and self-deception of a great number of verses from his first two collections of poems that he wrote in 1950s, is a fact that he himself later became aware of. Kundera distanced himself from his early, poetic phase, and described (with irony) the intoxication with the communist myth about hero-idol Fučík in his famous novel *The Joke* (*Žert*, 1967). Kundera reduced this period of falling under the influence of mass ideological hypnosis, the blindness of youth characteristic of “a certain way of being” (Kundera 2006a: 84), with no sense of history, irrational and concerned with only one single subject, with its own “I” (Kundera 2006a: 84.), into the term *lyrical age*, which he tackled artistically in the novel *Life is Elsewhere* (*Život je jinde*) (see Kundera 2001a). Despite all this, Novák presents Kundera's youthful world view as petrified and permanent. This is why

on approximately the seven hundredth page (and the book follows Kundera's life chronologically) he still writes about him as if he were a Stalinist: “With his Stalinist past and political instincts, Kundera was closer to the police than to Havel and other dissidents” (Novák 2020: 685). The facts, however, unambiguously testify that Kundera's phase of disillusionment with communist dogma, and especially with the practices of the communist regime, started in the 1950s, and became more intense in the 1960s, culminating in the so-called normalisation era. Let us look at his literary production: after tendentious collections of poems *Man: A Wide Garden* (*Člověk zabradá širá*, 1953) and the aforementioned epic poem *May*, in 1957 Kundera published his third and also last collection of poems *Monologues* (*Monology*), which with its sceptic, pessimist, almost brutal view on relations between men and women “brings into the second half of the 1950s rare intimate pictures of love misunderstandings, loneliness, and mutual alienation” (Janoušek 2007: 255). In the end, this collection of poems caused Kundera to suffer harsh criticism, and the second edition of this collection of poems was banned (Just 2020). In the 1960s he became famous thanks to his collection of stories *Laughable Loves* (*Směšné lásky*), and particularly thanks to the aforementioned legendary novel *The Joke*, which, among other things, tells a story about political awakening from ideological dogma that many blindly believed in after 1948, which in the end led to great crimes. In his novels from the 1970s Kundera continues to critically reflect on the totalitarian regime, first in the novel *Life is Elsewhere*, and then – he was already in France at that time – in

the *Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (*Kniha smíchu a zapomnění*),<sup>1</sup> and also in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (*Nesnesitelná lehkost bytí*). Or let us consider Kundera's social involvement which in the end will affect his personal life: his today undeniable role at the Second Congress of the Czechoslovak Union of Writers in 1956, where it was demanded that literature be freed from the firm grip of ideology and its dictate, and especially at the Fourth Congress of the Czechoslovak Union of Writers which took place in the summer of 1967, where "[Kundera] in his introductory paper elevated the quality of literary production of the recent years and emphasised the moral role of writers in a society" (Bláhová 2011). Along with Pavel Kohout, Alexander Kliment, Antonín Jaroslav Liehm, Ivan Klíma, Václav Havel, Ludvík Vaculík (Bláhová 2011), Kundera was one of the writers who by their open endeavours in the promotion of civil and artistic freedoms directly arranged the Prague Spring of 1968. He was one of more committed and media exposed reformed communists among writers (Novák, however, morally relativizes Kundera's reformed communism with open irony, considering it mere hypocrisy; see Novak 2020: 585). After the intervention of the Warsaw Pact, more precisely from 1970, Kundera was completely denied the possibility to act as a writer and express his views publicly, in 1971 he was kicked out from the Academy

of Performing Arts, where he had been working as an assistant professor, and was left with no steady job and income, in 1972 he was expelled (for the second time) from the Czechoslovak Communist Party, his passport was confiscated, the State Police surveyed him, he was tapped and frequently questioned, subtly provoked to emigrate, he was forced to provide for himself by writing horoscopes for a magazine under other people's names, and traumatized by the harassment of the State Police, he disguised himself when leaving his apartment – all this disproves Novák's thesis about Kundera being a Stalinist in the "normalisation" neostalinism, who "still stood by the communist ideals of his youth" (630). Taking all into account, how can we explain the fact introduced by Novák himself (658), that in 1972 communist censorship prohibited Milan Kundera's entire literary production arguing that "the author is a leading opponent of the right-wing forces in the years after 1968/69", that "the regime [...] has erased him from Czech culture forever and ever", and that the State Police decided to deny him to come back to Czechoslovakia after he left for France in 1975?

Apart from the debatable interpretation of the role and status of Kundera in the cultural-political milieu of the time, the book also brings the controversial approach to Kundera's works. Although he is not a literary historian or theoretician, but a writer and a screenwriter, it is a bit surprising that Novák, whose book lacks secondary bibliographical sources, apart from rare exceptions (i.e., the book by Květoslav Chvatík *The World of Milan Kundera's Novels – Svět románů Milana Kundery*, 1994), ignores relevant scientific contributions on Kundera and his works,

<sup>1</sup> It needs to be mentioned that this novel had a great role in Kundera being stripped of his Czechoslovakian citizenship in 1979, partly because he referred to Gustav Husák, the Czechoslovakian president at that time, as the "president of forgetting" (Kundera 2001: 185).

the number of which has grown enormously, not only in the Czech Republic, but also abroad. Novák’s considerations and interpretations of Kundera’s prose works almost unambiguously take mimesis as a starting interpretation frame, regardless of the fact that in many cases he expresses aversion towards the mimetic view on literature, typical of Marxist criticism. Novák justifies his analytical approach, based on the conviction that literature reflects outside, historical reality, and thus also the personality and life of the author as a historic person, by Kundera’s reference to Proust’s statement that “the writer’s I appears [...] *only* in his books” (Kundera 2007: 229). It is hard to believe that Kundera wanted his works to be read as some sort of autobiography, same as the quoted Proust’s thought did not aim to promote biographism on which the understanding and interpretation of literature would then be based. On the contrary, Proust objected the “biographical frenzy” (Kundera 2007: 229), considering his works to be the product of his other, aesthetic “I”, that had nothing to do with his historical “I” (Kundera 2007: 229). However, Novák considers Proust’s, and thus also Kundera’s motto literally, verifying Kundera’s works by his life and vice versa, measuring Kundera’s biography by his literature. Novák reads Kundera’s works as one continuous text about his life, which carries the weight of historiographic truth. In accordance with this, Ludvík’s expulsion from the faculty and the Communist Party in *The Joke* is, according to Novák’s interpretation, a story about Kundera being expelled from the Communist party at the beginning of the 1950s; Jaromil’s denunciation of his girlfriend’s brother in the novel *Life is Elsewhere* is a story about Kundera’s al-

leged denunciation of Miroslav Dvořáček from the 1950, the “revelation” of which in 2008 raised a lot of dust in Czech and world media, and Novák considers it as an undeniable and confirmed fact, although it cannot be taken as such; he also claims that *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* is a novel about Kundera’s marriage (Novák 2020: 762); the relation of Ludvík Jahn towards Helena in *The Joke* Novák subjectively comments with the words that “it irritates him [...] how *the author* brutally abuses the character of Helena as a mere tool of Jahn’s revenge [...]” (Novák 2020: 494, emphasis mine); he also states that from all the characters in *The Joke*, “the author is by far the closest to Jahn, a bully who uses sex as a power tool [...], a bully who beats women [...]” (494–495), etc. Novák, by all means, seeks and finds analogies between words, events and characters of Kundera’s prose works and his life, in the analysis of literary works mimesis dominates as a basic method, while all that makes Kundera’s poetics so recognizable and unique mostly escapes Novák’s analytical view.

However, despite the “uncritical criticism”, selectiveness and tendentiousness in dealing with the (literary)historiographic sources, lack of ability to take into account a broader context when considering certain historic events, anachronistic, almost positivist assimilation of Kundera and his works, in which he looks for the author’s biographic elements, assuming the role of a moral arbitrator, Novák’s book also has some good qualities, and brings permanent contributions to (contemporary) “Kunderology”. It is hard to deny Novák’s great effort and thoroughness in his long-term scientific work, that is, in collecting the materials on Kundera’s life and his public involvement (which should, neverthe-

less, be distinguished from its processing). Furthermore, Novák came to some very important discoveries that are obligatory for contemporary and future "Kunderologists" and literary historiography as such, and they relate to the attribution of some texts that have not previously been considered to be Kundera's. Kundera is thus (most probably) the author of some plays, scripts, radio-plays and translations that were performed and published under other people's names, at the time when he was forbidden to publish his works.

Czech literary science and literary lexicography have taken into consideration these discoveries by Novák, and thus a lexicographic text on Milan Kundera on the web pages of the *Dictionary of Czech Literature after 1945 (Slovník české literatury po roce 1945)*, which represents a competent source of information for scientists dealing with Czech literature, and is published by the Institute of Czech Literature of the CAS, was updated and supplemented with the said data (see Pilař et al. 2020).

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