

# The Fundamentals of Milan Kundera's Poetics<sup>1</sup>

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The study is devoted to the early fundamental starting points of Milan Kundera's work from the 1950s to the 1960s. According to the later authorial stylisation, the novelist is born from the ruins of his lyrical world. This assertion creates an impression of a direct, linear authorial development, in which somewhere at the beginning is Kundera's poetry, which the author later abandons in favour of the novel upon reaching an age of artistic maturity. However, if we follow the actual course of Kundera's poetics, we find that this conception does not correspond with the dynamics of the author's development. This is not only because in the creative phase in which the author wrote poetry, he also wrote his first prose texts, but also because his work as a novelist is dependent upon lyrical devices (metaphors, the evocation of inner experiences etc.). For this reason, in this study I shall focus on defining three creative principles – lyrical, dramatic and novel writing. These poetic principles are not exclusively bound to the corresponding genres. The resulting form of the literary work is determined by their mutual relationship, proportions and configuration (whether this concerns poetry, drama or the novel).

I start out from the conviction that a specific authorial style takes shape during the course of the author's creative work. The author's style is crystallised during the writing and correction of his or her first literary (and also essay writing) attempts. The production of a work, its chronology, at the same time represents a wealth of "material" for investigation. Since the work itself is formed by words and certain turns of phrase, we may view the sum of the author's production as the invention of a distinctive creative language. In this it is evident that this invention takes place with varying degrees of the author's awareness.

If we take as an example two key figures of Czech literature of the second half of the twentieth century, Milan Kundera and Bohumil Hrabal (in the former case also covering the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century), we can easily see that this concerns entirely different paths of creative maturing. In the case of Milan Kundera, this represents a development which is reflected upon, abundantly commented on and thus also a development of which the author was acutely aware. In Bohumil Hrabal's case we would rather speak of an intuitive and tentative search for new

creative paths. Both authors in their artistic development arrive at a certain revision or correction of their original conception of artistic production (referring back to their literary beginnings). In addition to commenting upon his own work, Kundera also narrates the story of his poetics. Bohumil Hrabal has no such ambition, and evidently does not possess an analogous analytical ability. In Hrabal's work, we may consider the early existential novel *Cain* to be a certain anomaly, since it represents a manner of narration which the author subsequently abandons in his later work, namely that of a strong narrative voice, semantically defined narration, conceptual metaphors, a specifically conceived inner focalisation etc. Hrabal nonetheless makes no comment on this abandoned creative pathway.

### **A story of poetics: “the novelist being born from the ruins of his lyrical world”**

“If I imagine the genesis of a novelist in the form of an exemplary tale, a ‘myth’, that genesis looks to me like a conversion story: Saul becoming Paul; the novelist being born from the ruins of his lyrical world.” (Kundera 2007: 89)

Milan Kundera presents this conversion as an exemplum, thus also a schema (which he however regards as correct /*ibid.*: 88/). It is therefore apparent that this constitutes hyperbole, that at the same time this and similar pronouncements give rise to a conception of a distinct linear development, in which artistic maturity signifies the ruin of the lyrical world. However, the question will be as to where in Kundera's work we are to place the moment of conversion. I shall also attempt to demonstrate that this myth represents an intrigue of Kundera's poetics (clear, comprehensible, unambiguous). Furthermore, likening a novelist's conversion to a religious one evokes its sudden, definitive and irrational nature (since this concerns an apparition). By contrast, however, Milan Kundera evidently wishes to describe an opposite experience – one of disenchantment, since he attributes the experience of intoxication (incantation, spellbinding) to poetry.

We can understand the myth referred to by the author to be a hyperbolic definition, despite the fact that in the essay from which I quote the author speaks in general terms of the relationship between lyrical poetry and the novel (and not of his poetics directly). Here we may notice the fact that Kundera does not limit plot devices to prose works. But to what extent does this mythologising correspond to the dynamics of Kundera's creative output?

### **In the footsteps of the author's poetics**

In order for us to answer this question in at least a preliminary manner, we must go back to the beginnings of Kundera's work (or to his early middle period, depending on your point of view). We must first of all base our argument on the fact that Kundera wrote his first prose text, the short story "I, the Mournful God" (1958), at a time in which he was writing poems. In 1964 (thus one year after the publication of his first collection *Laughable Loves*) the second edited version of the poetry collection *Monologues* was published.

Let us take a look at how the author understands the concurrency of poetry and his first prose texts. Milan Kundera explained it by means of a change of viewpoint – an acquisition of distance from the experienced, which he considers a sign of maturity.

"Nobody can regard the world as ridiculous if he merges with it entirely. Even for a person to see himself in proportions of ridiculousness, he must step back from himself. He reaches this miraculous standpoint, from where he can perceive the ridiculous, only over the course of the years; it is perhaps some kind of reward for maturity.

Ridiculousness (at least as I understand it) does not deny the serious, but illuminates it. Literature which is absolutely void of this condition (or at least an intimation thereof) today seems to me to be somehow unilateral, one-dimensional, the product of an inconsiderate, naïve or frenzied approach.

(...)

Has not our national history of recent years, in its irrationalities, been among other matters also a ridiculous history – and this despite all the bloody tragedies and dramas it has contained? Let us concede that we could answer this question (incidentally the cruellest that could be conceived of) in the positive; a further question mark immediately emerges: Within the context of the ridiculous, will tragedies cease to be tragedies? Everything indicates that this is not the case; on the contrary: they shall become even more tragic. Ionesco is right when he states that the comic is more inconclusive than the tragic" (Kundera 1964a)

Therefore, already in 1964 we may notice ridiculousness and seriousness as opposing vital, but also artistic, attitudes and approaches: distance as against identification. To view the serious as ridiculous after all requires us to occupy a certain position of distance, thus also to attain a certain perspective of recognition. Milan Kundera addresses this problem of distance from the experienced during the writing of *Laughable Loves*. In it he attempts to build up a certain narrative perspective, which would be distinguished by distance from the experienced (a place from which it is possible to

reflect and perceive). We can also observe the author's ability to deal with tragic events in a comic light in his later fictional work. Beginning with *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, we also receive an answer to why the comic is more inconclusive than the tragic: it is distinguished by an absolute absence of meaning. The tragic provides not only sublimity, seriousness, but also the full presence of meaning. In a certain sense Kundera in his later work responds to the question which he himself asks in the first half of the 1960s.

We can also emphasise the extent to which Milan Kundera's fundamental poetic principles are present in his contemplations already in the first half of the 1960s (and as we will later demonstrate, also much earlier). At the same time it is appropriate to take note of a further proposition, according to which the serious does not disappear upon the acquisition of distance: "ridiculousness does not deny the serious, but illuminates it." These two categories (ridiculous/serious) will also have a constant presence in his later work. The ridiculous cannot exist without the serious, though the reverse does not apply. If we acquire a distance from lyrical tensions, this does not mean that they cease to be valid and effective as such. The comic is thus shown to be a function of the serious.

A further circumstance that leads the interviewer toward a comparison of the poetry collection *Monologues* with Kundera's first prose work is the fact that the second edition of *Monologues* was published in 1964 (one year later than *Laughable Loves*), thus inviting a confrontation of these two entirely different creative positions. The endeavour and perhaps also the need of some interviewers to find a way out of this seeming aporia sometimes even has a humorous tinge. Jan Skácel asks why Kundera writes poetry for women and prose for men. Kundera's answer is as follows: "I know nothing of writing poetry for women and prose for men. I know only that you have rejected my poetry, while you have genially accepted my prose. In your formulation of the question you therefore probably wish to say something about the inferiority of the fairer sex. Be my guest. I do the same in my more stupid moments." (Kundera 1964a)

Upon reading interviews from the first half of the 1960s, we do not arrive at a conception of a directly linear literary development (first poetry, then prose). I shall take the liberty of quoting from another interview from 1965 for the magazine *Nové Knihy*, on the occasion of the publication of the *Second Book of Laughable Loves*. Here we find formulations which in no way detract from Kundera's later criticism of the lyrical age:

Since the loves in the *Monologues* are serious, the interviewer asks about the kind of women the author has encountered. Kundera's response is characteristic:

"It's not women's fault. It's a matter of maturity. At a certain moment in life you suddenly gain a

remarkable ability to step back from things, and from yourself. This stepping back enables you to see things in a new dimension: in the dimension of ridiculousness. When I wrote the Monologues, I wasn't familiar with this art of stepping back, I took everything (the world, people, myself) seriously. Perhaps because of this, at the time they criticised me for being cynical." (Kundera 1965a)

In the quote I repeatedly see the "dimension of ridiculousness" explained. It is of fundamental importance that the ridiculous does not relate to the described situation (it's not women's fault, Kundera is not a realist author), but a change of perspective. Kundera is the author of a reflected point of view, not a mirror of the real world. A surprising effect may be created by the subsequent proposition, according to which seriousness, which is not lightened by the dimension of the ridiculous, may lead to an impression of cynicism. Here we could also assert the precise opposite. Milan Kundera will be characterised as a cynical author precisely because he will be capable of regarding all realms of human life from a lightening distance of unseriousness.

Let us pause to take a look at Kundera's second answer (fear of the overwhelming totality of seriousness). Present herein is a further feature of Kundera's distinctive poetics. The author does not stop at the threshold of literature, but proceeds beyond it in the direction toward a diagnosis of the age. In his later work also he does not satisfy himself merely with narrating the destinies of his heroes. It is not by chance that Kundera entitles his first novel *The Joke*, since it is set in a time which has lost the ability to make jokes.

"I have no greater horror than that of people who have no sense of humour. They are obsessive and dangerous. They like to preach about a "joyful life", but at the same time they intolerantly persecute everything that could give off the slightest hint of tomfoolery, flippancy, irony, mockery or mischief. The cultural level of human societies can be fairly reliably measured by the space they provide to humour and fun. A society devoid of a sense of humour is monstrous." (Kundera 1965a)

### **Reflections on the definitive anthology of Kundera's work in La Pléiade, 2011, expansion of 2<sup>nd</sup> volume, 2016**

We may approach the question of authorial stylisation (or self-definition) also from a different perspective; no longer with regard to the author's story of poetics, but in a reflection on the definitive form of his work in the prestigious edition La Pléiade, published in 2011.

In this edition we can first of all take note of what it does not contain: poetry collections (*Man: A Wide Garden, Monologues, The Last May*), plays (*The Owners of the Keys, The Blunder*), of his

essays this concerns above all the early essay on Vladislav Vančura (*The Art of the Novel*) – even if upon viewing his early essays we could mention other significant treatises from the 1950s as well as the 60s; let us name chronologically at least the most important: “On Inheritance Disputes” (Kundera 1955), “In Favour of Full-Blooded Realism” (Kundera 1957), “An Introduction to the Poetry of Vítězslav Nezval” (Kundera 1963) and above all the key text for providing an understanding of lyrical poetry– “The Great Utopia of Modern Poetry” (Kundera 1965b).

The fact that the novelist’s literary stylisation overlaps with the definitive anthology of Kundera’s work (in which, above all, his early work is absent) should not confuse us. Literary stylisation after all signals a certain perspective, whereas random circumstances of the time may also encroach upon editing activity. A certain role may have been played by whether or not the text (essay, poem, short story, play) had been translated into French. For example, why is the first short story that Kundera wrote not included in the collection *Laughable Loves*? Simply for the reason that the short story *I, the Mournful God* was never translated into French.

At the time when Milan Kundera’s novels first began to be published in France (in 1968 *The Joke*, but above all in 1973 his novel *Life is Elsewhere*, for which he was awarded the Prix Médicis étranger), the author probably had no reason to return to his early work and to endeavour to have it translated. Meanwhile, in Czechoslovakia the fourth edition of the poetry collection *Monologues* was published in 1969. That which applied in the French edition of *The Joke* (the sleeve notes list the poetry collections *Man: A Wide Garden*, *Monologues* and also the play *The Owners of the Keys*, and there is a mention of the monograph on Vančura and the study on Apollinaire /Kundera 1968/) did not apply in 1973, when *Life is Elsewhere* was published. In France the novel *The Joke* has a different pedigree (poet, playwright and essayist) from that of the novel *Life is Elsewhere* (on the sleeve Milan Kundera is presented as the author of *The Joke*, and references to his previous poetry, essay writing and dramatic work are now absent /Kundera 1973/).

Viewed consistently, for French readers Milan Kundera set out on his path as a novelist only upon the publication of his second novel. Here it is sufficient to refer to the success of his first novel. It is therefore evident that Kundera’s early work (simply speaking also because it was published in Czech, in which there are considerable difficulties in connection with the search for a publisher and a translation) does not form a part of his French authorial pedigree.

The greater part of Kundera’s early work is therefore unavailable to French readers. In the first half of the 1970s, the horizons of what Milan Kundera could write about opened up before him. For his novel *Life is Elsewhere* he was awarded the prize for the best novel translated into French. By this time he had already completed his novel *The Farewell Waltz* (1971), the French version of which was published in 1976, thus one year after Kundera had left to work as a visiting

professor at the university in Rennes.

We therefore see that the current prospects for Kundera's work from the 1970s onwards did not lead him to publish his early work (it is necessary to emphasise here that he would have had to devote time to its translation).

Another creative trajectory is offered by the Czech form of Kundera's oeuvre. In 2015 he first published his second theatre play *The Blunder* in book form (according to his own testimony he wrote it in 1966, thus its publication was delayed by 49 years).

The reasons why *The Blunder* was not published in French are relatively well known – the iconic symbol of the diamond, diagonally intersected by an incomplete hypotenuse triangle has no generally shared semantics across the languages. Nonetheless, we should not become entangled in contemplating the reasons for the publication (or conversely lack of publication) of individual works. I wished to use the example of *The Blunder* to recall a certain anachronism of the publication of Kundera's work in the Czech Republic. After *The Joke* and a long pause in publication, *Immortality* was the first of his novels previously unpublished in the Czech Republic to be published in 1993, followed by *The Farewell Waltz* in 1997, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* in 2006, *Life is Elsewhere* in 2016 and *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* in 2017.

Since the works were published in Czech only after the definitive edition of the work in La Pléiade (2011, the second volume was published in 2016, supplemented by the author's last novel, which was first published in Italian in 2013), the author made changes to them – predominantly deletions. It is nevertheless necessary to consider them to constitute a distinctive form of the work, which the author presents to his compatriots. The possible reasons for the alterations made and a detailed mapping thereof awaits a detailed analytical study. In any case, it is evident that for his Czech readers Kundera has a different sensitivity with regard to the presentation of individual themes. However, we can also state entirely simply that his foreign readers have no awareness whatsoever of the names which might outrage Czech readers (or which, by contrast, might strike a chord with them – such as the characteristics of Karel Gott in the *Book of Laughter and Forgetting*). Even in this fragmentary example it is evident that Milan Kundera exists in two different forms of his oeuvre: the Czech and the French.

Although the trajectory of Kundera's work follows a linear development, it also has a certain intimated divergence – with regard to its translations into foreign languages, whether the first foreign language is French (1973 *La vie est ailleurs*), or later Spanish and Catalan (2000 *La ignorancia*) and finally Italian (2013, *La festa dell'insignificanza*). To this intimated divergence we could add the Czech publication of *Ptákovina* in 2015.

Not even the definitive anthology of Kundera's work in La Pléiade in 2011 is definitive, since



in 2013 he wrote his last novel *The Celebration of Insignificance*, and as a result a new expanded edition was printed in 2016, including his last novel. The definitive form of the work is given by the author's hindsight, and it is therefore retrospective, never prospective. The author cannot know in advance if he will write another novel, which is at least the case of Milan Kundera in 2010, when he was evidently preparing *La Pléiade* for publication.

The authorial stylisation (with emphasis on caution with regard to lyricism, which Kundera later attempts to alleviate by distinguishing between poetics and lyricism) and the definitive anthology of Kundera's work in *La Pléiade* may reinforce the not entirely correct impression that his early work is somehow of lesser value.

We may conceive the edition in *La Pléiade* not only as an aesthetic judgement, but also as an outcome of the pragmatic contexts of Kundera's work. It is necessary to include among these the absence of the above-mentioned translations of his early essays and poetry. At the same time it is necessary to concede that *The Owners of the Keys* was not to become a part of the edition, even if it had been translated into French already at the end of the 1960s (published in 1969 in a translation by François Kérel). The omission of the play *The Owners of the Keys* from *La Pléiade* is thus a sign of an aesthetic judgement.

Let us now remind ourselves of the content of the definitive anthology. In addition to the play *Jacques and His Master*, it contains all the novels (in which we include also *Laughable Loves*), as well as four books of essays (*The Art of the Novel*, *Testaments Betrayed*, *The Curtain*, *Encounter*).

This definitive anthology is compact, and does not include any extemporal essays conditional upon the time, in which the best known is "The Kidnapped West or the Tragedy of Central Europe" from the beginning of the 1980s. It will therefore come as no surprise that not even the text from the autumn of 1968 entitled "The Czech Destiny" (following the invasion of the Warsaw Pact forces and the occupation of Czechoslovakia) is a part of the edition.

It is precisely these polemical texts, whether from the end of the 1960s or from the beginning of the 1980s, that conspicuously betray the selection criterion – political polemics and cultural-historical essays on Central Europe are also to be excluded.

Despite the fact that we may be hoodwinked primarily by the absence of poetry collections and the play *The Owners of the Keys*, we should not overlook the emphasis that Kundera places on the artistic, aesthetic and poetic aspect of his work.

In this emphatically stated "no" to the political context of his work, we could see another of the possible reasons why Kundera's early work is not included as part of his definitive anthology. It is too embedded in the time during which it was created, namely the dark period of the 1950s. Furthermore, in the first poetry collection *Man: A Wide Garden*, the poet's political orientation



is conspicuous. When reflecting upon the crystallisation of the author's writing style, we cannot omit the poetry collection *Man: A Wide Garden*. Nonetheless, the earlier poems which Kundera published at the end of the 1940s in the literary journal *Mladé Archy* are not of any especial importance for an understanding of the author's poetics, even if we may view these also as a vestige of the reflexivity of the author's work – that which is first of all a component of the direct communication of a literary work becomes the subject of criticism, contemplations and reflection. In the novel *Life is Elsewhere*, Kundera parodies the poetic style of his own early poetry from the end of the 1940s.

### **An outline of three fundamental poetic principles**

A view of Kundera's early work, which from the perspective of authorial stylisation might give an impression of a kind of invisible and in no way significant prehistory of his oeuvre, on the contrary enables us to reveal its dynamics. I shall attempt to define Kundera's early work by distinguishing its three fundamental principles: lyrical (metaphors), dramatic (the ability to express plot tensions, the feeling of necessity and alternatives, as well as the plot principle) and novel writing (which should relate primarily to cognition). We will subsequently be able to project these three principles into Kundera's later work.

I intentionally speak of principles, and not of characteristics of a genre. In my opinion they are not bound to a particular genre (poems, drama, the novel, the essay), as we later see also from the author's statements. The author combines these principles across genres: poetry (the epic aspect of lyrical poetry), prose (lyricised prose), drama (emotional tension of plot conflict) and essay writing (dramatically presented analysis). Lyrical evocation may stimulate plot tension, dramatic intrigue evokes cognition and essay writing may rest upon a dramatic principle (even if, as is the case in the early essay on Vančura, it is clearly the analytical aspect that predominates herein).

Milan Kundera started as a poet – he published his first poems in 1947 and 1948 in the magazine *Mladé Archy*. At the same time, at the end of the 1940s he presented himself as a mature essay writer. In 1949 he had four extensive treatises published in the journal *Kulturní politika*<sup>2</sup> – in my opinion his review of a selection of Kalinin's speeches is especially worthy of attention. In this Kundera formulates a critique of the ossified language of the party apparatus, today formulated as “wooden language”. From an overview of his bibliography it is evident that from 1950 until the autumn of 1952 there was a pause in Kundera's publication activity. In 1949 Kalinin is an exemplary teacher, pedagogue and thinker for Kundera, in the author's last novel he becomes the last of Stalin's inner circle and a humanely touching figure. The subject matter of Kundera's essay writing from the end of the 1940s is remarkably broad: from Kalinin to a collection of Klement

Gottwald's treatises, via an essay on Gellner, as well as an interview with the ice hockey player Bubník, an essay on the neon signs in Wenceslas Square at night, a contribution to a discussion on poetic realism, as well as a questionnaire response regarding the value of the new French novel etc. Although this early essay writing would itself merit a detailed analysis, since I intend to trace the mutual relationship of three creative approaches – lyrical, dramatic (plot) and essayist – I shall focus only on those essays that can be used in modelling the fundamentals/starting points of Kundera's oeuvre.

### **Towards the lyrical and epic principle in Kundera's early essay writing**

I consider an essay published in 1955 entitled "On Inheritance Disputes" to be of absolutely fundamental importance for an understanding of Kundera's poetics. In this we find Kundera's poetics in a nutshell. Although it represents a relatively early formulation of an aesthetic programme (Kundera was only 26 years old at the time), it contains a broad cultural scope (from a theory of poetry writing to a discourse on prose, as well as on painting and the history of music, the possible uses of metaphor etc.), and also showcases Kundera's ability to formulate themes in a clearly presented, lucid and economical style. Furthermore, in this essay we arrive at the first of the principles of his creative work – and surprisingly – the essay is devoted to the possibilities of modern poetry – the epic. Kundera sees the prospective development of modern lyrical poetry in the mid 1950s as residing precisely in the epic. For this reason also he devotes attention to the plot as an artistic device.

We can "match" this essay with Kundera's later and far more wide ranging monograph on the work of Vančura (Kundera 1960). This analysis of Vančura's prose, written five years later, can be understood as complementary to the former essay. If Kundera found a way out of the excessive subjectivity of modern lyrical poetry in a certain pole of objectivity, in the plot, in dealing with Vančura he asks entirely the opposite question: with what are we to replace the lost epic in Vančura's prose work? Whereas the future of lyrical poetry is the epic, conversely the future of the novel lies in lyricism. Here we may see the extent to which the discourse on two creative principles (lyrical and epic) is not necessarily bound to a corresponding genre: Kundera binds lyrical devices to the epic and conversely epic devices to the lyrical. In my view, this approach is reflected both in Kundera's poetry, which is epic, and in his prose, in which he draws from lyrical sources, primarily from metaphors which evoke a heightened emotional state. In opposition to these two essays, the origin of which is dated at the latest to 1960, I place two later essays: the first of these is devoted to the poetry of Nezval (Kundera 1963), the second to Apollinaire (Kundera 1965).

In my opinion this does not so much concern the poems on which the author focuses,

but rather a transformation of understanding of lyrical gesture. His essay on Nezval is entirely fundamental for an understanding of the lyrical principle, in his study on Apollinaire he further elaborates and historically anchors this understanding, and at the same time distances himself from it as a certain illusion (or utopia). Whereas in the first two essays he observes epic and lyrical devices with respect to their function within the framework of a work of literature, in his essay on Nezval – in addition to revealing the lyrical principle – the affective resonances of poetry in the reader) – he also reflects upon the social impact of the poetry. In this Kundera presents a certain utopian version of society<sup>3</sup>. In his essay on Apollinaire he renounces the social function of lyrical poetry and diagnoses it as an illusion. These two essays thus map a closed narrative of lyrical creative foundation. Despite this, we may nonetheless read Kundera’s formulations on the evocative power of Nezval’s poetry as an implicit commentary on the use of lyrical devices in Kundera’s later work as a novelist.

An arresting feature of Kundera’s essay on *Nezval* is the date of its publication (1963), the same year in which his first book of *Laughable Loves* was published. Notwithstanding, the essay on *Nezval* and *Laughable Loves* evoke entirely different (one is tempted to say opposite) worlds: an idyllic and deeply felt human world – a longing for a world in which “I would not restrain even a child” (Kundera 1963), as against an ironised world with a hint of melancholy, but also a world that is humanly inconclusive and solitary (*Laughable Loves*). In emotional terms I would place the essay “On Inheritance Disputes” (1955) within Kundera’s developmental period later (due to its sober and dispassionate view of the possibilities of artistic devices) than I would his essay on *Nezval* (1963). The essay on *Nezval* belongs to a mentally different world (previous, earlier, younger) than the other three mentioned essays. The fact nevertheless remains that the essays on *Nezval* and Apollinaire are distinguished by the relationship of illusion to disillusionment.

Indeed, is there not a certain illusion of linear development in the attempt to collocate Kundera’s work? Should we not simply accept the diversity of creative development in his output (literary and essay writing)? A striking motif by which it is possible to define prose, the novel, shall be distance. From here we can measurably deduce the dialogic of Kundera’s work: this concerns the dialogic of lyrical devices and the possibilities of the novel (also as a response to lyrical utopia). Meanwhile we can find Kundera’s tirade against bittersweet and kitsch lyricism in a text from 1957 entitled “In Favour of Full-Blooded Realism”:

### **Against bittersweet kitsch – In favour of full-blooded realism (1957)**

“Recently a graduate from one of the arts faculties wished to become an intern at our film scriptwriting department. The department gave me his screenplay for assessment. Incidentally,

it was a screenplay in which all the dialogues were written in verse. I have never seen anything so appalling in my life. *Kitsch*, loquacious and saccharine, with scheming seducers and innocent virgins, lilac blossoms on denuded girls' breasts (...) But what is interesting about this, and what lends this case a peculiar relevance is the fact that this was written by a young man of 28 years, who a few years previously had been the chairman of the Communist Party organisation of an entire Prague university. Where will we not find such bourgeois tempers, escapist sentimentality and banality?" (Kundera 1957)

The line of argument is carried by an ethos of realist poetry, intended to sweep out the cobwebs of sentimentality and decadence. Already in the mid 1950s, Milan Kundera was a vehement critic of mendacious and bittersweet sentimentality (he demands realism even in poetry). Kundera strategically attributes sentimentality to the petty bourgeoisie, which at the same time enables him to defend Miroslav Florian's poem *A Simple Motif*, a poem that in Kundera's view had been wrongfully accused of decadence. Truthfulness, sincerity, realism – these are the motifs on which Kundera places emphasis in the cited text.

Polemicism and a certain nonconformity of Kundera's poetry were present even in the preparation of his first poetry book. The then forthcoming poetry collection *Man: A Wide Garden* became the subject of a discussion among poets and party members (for an edition of the discussion see Bauer 2003). This took place on two levels of argumentation – social and poetic. It was precisely the poems "Love and Life" and "This Isn't Love" that became the target of criticism for social reasons, inasmuch as they were considered "ideologically unstable, sometimes fabricated and untrue" (Bauer 2003: 18), presumably because Kundera in his poetry revealed truths about party life which were meant to remain suppressed. It is after all unthinkable that nobody would lend a helping hand to a comrade in doubt ("Love and Life"). Later, after the publication of the poetry collection, Jan Drda (Bauer 2014: 187) remonstrated that Kundera had evidently never been to a party meeting, since comrades do not behave in the manner he describes (this concerned expulsion from the party).

Kundera's poetry (and not only his, as we have seen) was of a dual nature – poetic and social. In his essays, Kundera attempts to assert the relative freedom of his work with emphasis on the lyricism of poetic language (in the essay "On Inheritance Disputes", as well as in the text in question here, "In Favour of Full-Blooded Realism"), though here also he makes strategic use of the motif of the petty bourgeoisie, which enables him to criticise the bittersweet kitsch and mendacious sentimentality that he detects also in the poems of party members. Kundera's interpretative and polemical scalpel is thus not guided by the political division of society, but cuts across it. Already in

his early essay writing, we can observe a consistent and clearly defined outlook, in which he takes a critical stance on issues of the time. As a result, we may return with surprise to his essay on Nezval, in which poetry figures as a humanising device. We may therefore reach relatively far into the past in order to take note of the fact that Kundera's rancour towards bittersweet sentimentality and kitsch (and at the same time it is necessary to concede that Kundera is further elaborating his anti-lyrical attitude and offering a more thorough understanding) dates from relatively early on (we can record this at the latest in the mid-1950s).

From the mendacious sentimentality of (some) poetry, via kitsch (of the screenplay), we may arrive at Milan Kundera's crowning novel (*The Unbearable Lightness of Being*). In this I would restrict myself to kitsch as the "second tear", which says "how nice to be moved, together with all mankind" (Kundera 1991: 251). This therefore also concerns a kitsch, inauthentic living of one's own existence. Here we can find in Kundera's work an understanding of kitsch as sentimentality (later the aggression of lyrical gesture), which is based on a number of stereotypical images, from the mid-1950s onwards.

A strong authorial stylisation, resting upon an exemplary myth ("the novelist being born from the ruins of his lyrical world") may also lead to misunderstandings, primarily to those according to which Kundera's poetry represents an inferior creative activity than his later prose work. This impression is reinforced also by the above-mentioned "definitive" edition in La Pléiade (Kundera 2011a,b, 2016). Here we have been able to see that sentimentality, kitsch, and inauthenticity (Kundera's objection to socialist realism is that it is illusory and therefore not realistic<sup>4</sup>) may relate just as well to poetry as to prose. Both sentimentality and kitsch become one of the themes of his later novels (in a negative light), as do lyrical devices (metaphors, in some cases taken from his previous work, which are however presented in a positive light). In this also we can observe the fundamental difference in the negative nature of sentimentality as opposed to the veracity of poetry: in the essays of Milan Kundera this has its beginnings in the mid-1950s.

### **Lyricism is not a lyrical attitude!**

#### **Troubles with lyricism, its various meanings in the mid-1950s and the second half of the 1960s**

Kundera repeatedly takes stock of his poetry. The four editions of *Monologues* differ from each other, the author removes some poems and adds others. When the fourth edition of *Monologues* was published in 1969 (in the same year as he completed the novel *Life is Elsewhere*),

it was published by a different author from the one who published the first edition in 1957. We may therefore in a certain sense understand the fourth edition of *Monologues* to represent the definitive form of Kundera's poetry. In my opinion, Kundera's specific conception of lyricism is responsible for a range of misunderstandings (both on the part of readers and by those who have presented his work – these are present in the relatively cautious incorporation of Kundera's early work into more general analyses). I believe that what Milan Kundera originally denotes as lyrical poetry in the mid-1950s has little in common with what we shall refer to as a lyrical attitude, namely the designation which we may date to the mid-1960s.

In the mid-1950s lyricism for Kundera represents one of two dominant principles (as against the plot principle), and in his essays it is not burdened by a negative evaluation. It would therefore be premature to repudiate the entirety of Kundera's poetry. Both the later authorial stylisation and the edition in *La Pléiade* invoke a partial confusion (a conception of the malignancy of poetry). At the same time it is necessary, at the latest from *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, to separate two types of poetic devices: one shall be cast in a negative light as kitsch, the second will become a place of evoked affectivity (above all metaphors: it is thanks to a metaphor that Tomáš falls in love with Tereza). We can therefore see that this differentiation is a certain version of the difference between sentimentality and the realist poetry of the second half of the 1950s (“In Favour of Full-Blooded Realism”). Here we could therefore find a fundamental conceptual pairing of his later lyrical poetry with regard to his experience as a novelist. There is no dispute that Kundera continues to elaborate this opposition further, and otherwise anchors it historically and aesthetically, though as a starting point and core argumentation (or as a stance of a poetic character) this is present (at least in embryonic form) already in the mid-1950s.

Inasmuch as those who have presented Kundera's work have a tendency to identify lyrical poetry with an unoriginal and kitsch state of sentimentality, they also take a negative view of the emotion evoked by lyrical means. However, it is necessary to separate both lyrical modes from one another, and this applies also in his later novels. For example, we may conceive Kundera's vision of poetic realism (Kundera 1957) as a poetic gesture, whereas we can designate kitsch and sentimentality as lyrical – in order to adhere to Kundera's later terminology.

That which Milan Kundera began to refer to in approximately the mid-1960s as lyrical poetry, or later as a lyrical attitude or standpoint, most certainly cannot be identified with lyrical poetry as one of the elements of the genre triad (the lyrical, the epic, the dramatic), and indeed also not with lyrical poetry as Kundera characterised it in the mid-1950s (in his essay *On Inheritance Disputes*). At this time the author had not yet burdened it with negative connotations, and the

Lyrical attitude (beginning in the first half of the 1960s) shall denote a peculiar concept as defined by the author, into which he projects a whole range of heterogeneous matters: the immaturity of youth (inexperience), identification (the absence of distance), kitsch and sentimental poetry, or by contrast its decadence, but also the oppressive experience of the first half of the 1950s (Stalinism) which the poets glamorised. To this it is necessary to add also the young Czech literature, which was distinguished by a marked predominance of expressive poetic works.

Lyrical poetry is an established, powerful and effective designation that we are familiar with, though it is also newly defined by the author. This designation may indeed repeatedly lure us into a trap of confusion (because it has a double meaning – the traditional one and the one defined by the author): poetry will be identified with an immature, aggressive and kitsch attitude to life. This ambivalence seems also to be projected into a certain confused evaluation in the novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Why should Tomáš's desire be kitsch, why should we understand the painful death of the dog Karenin as kitsch merely because of its emotional charge? Through the definition of a lyrical attitude, Milan Kundera placed in the hands of his readers (and also critics) an overly powerful weapon, which in my view they erroneously aim also at emotional scenes as products of kitsch (or lyricism).

Even so, it is apparent that emotionalism is always ambivalent, since it has its unpredictable dynamic and is also usually not synchronised. As a result, Tomáš's sentimental return to Tereza in Prague is narrated by the author with certain comic elements. The oppressiveness of an excessively critical stance toward lyrical poetry was expressed inversely by Thomas Pavel at a conference devoted to the work of Milan Kundera in Brno in 2009 as follows: I tell my students not to fear kitsch, that kitsch represents no evil. In my opinion this recommendation is a reaction to the lack of distinction between emotionality and kitsch, and so the recommendation (do not fear kitsch!) resounds above all with the following: do not fear emotionality, sensitivity, intense experience, even if it is evident that it will not always be possible to differentiate the intimacy of emotionalism from gushing sentimentality.

We may conclude this aside with a comment as to whether Kundera, by defining the lyrical age, may also have arrived at a certain misunderstanding which leads to an inappropriate suspicion of intimacy, sensitivity and any emotional anchoring of human being whatsoever, which is heavily present especially in his later work (beginning with *Identity* and ending with *Ignorance*).

### **Can we date the origin of the anti-lyrical attitude?**

In order to obtain a broader conception of all that Kundera refers to by means of the term



“lyrical poetry”, it will be suitable to quote his response to a writers’ poll in 1962. In this he expresses his view not only on lyrical poetry and the tradition of Czech literature, but also on the conception of hybrid genres as criticised by Kainar, namely those in which an intermingling of lyrical and plot approaches is used. In my opinion we may project this early characteristic of Kundera’s also into his later work.

“The majority of discussions on Czech literature have demonstrated its problems in lyrical poetry. We could show this from the times of Mácha’s poetry up to today. (...) And lyrical poetry has become the measure of the heights of our literature. (...) Our literature has begun to carry its poetic potential as a peculiar deformation, as a kind of lucrative carbuncle. How ingeniously and deeply we have succeeded in analysing questions of Czech verse, Czech poetics, for example in the work of Jan Mukařovský. And on the other hand, how little and how wretchedly this has been conducted in the theory of the novel and drama. There is no distinguished poet, no great poetry in the world that has not been exquisitely translated in our country. We are so much worse off when it comes to drama, the novel, philosophy.

(...)

Thus lyrical poetry has become a virtue, but at the same time a dangerous bias of our literature. I sometimes think that this is not without a certain influence even on shaping the national mentality, that here also is one of the causes of its deficiency of rationality and lack of broadminded, conceptual thinking. (...)

The novelist who does not have a wealth of objective observations, education, philosophical potency, is simply ineffective, is capable of writing only paltry novels, whereas the average, even intellectually very limited lyrical poet is always capable of producing something readable (...).

Even the Czech reporter is an incorrigible lyrical poet. From school days, when children are obliged to wax lyrical on the theme of “Autumn is Here” and write about a “golden carpet of leaves woven by November”, we corrupt the nation with lyricism. Now that we have a Club of the Friends of Poetry, I would like to find a Club for Persecution of Lyricism.

(...)

But allow me to return to Kainar’s idea. I do not believe that the novel has nothing to learn from lyrical poetry, that lyrical poetry cannot draw upon drama etc. However, what is important is the fundamental principle, which truly cannot be betrayed without punishment. A novel may have lyrically strong details, but it must not be lyrically composed. On the other hand, if lyrical qualities are developed in a novel on a firm epic foundation, this can only have a positive significance. This was demonstrated by Vančura in his best novels.” (Kundera 1962a)

In this critical audit of Czech poetry, Milan Kundera stops short of a vehement stance against all forms of lyricism (it may have its place in a novel, just as in poetry he sees space for dramatic conflict).

### **The plot foundation of the novel, but with a lyrical centre of gravity?**

Let us therefore examine how Milan Kundera in his later novels combines lyrical and plot devices. In *The Joke*, although the plot is the fundamental compositional device, it appears that the centre of gravity of the work is the contemplations, thoughts and feelings of its characters. At the same time, in his essay “On Inheritance Disputes”, Kundera determined the internal monologue of a character as one of the main narrative devices<sup>5</sup>.

Despite the fact that in the essay he does not explicitly present the internal monologue as a device by which he would achieve a strong feeling of reality, I nevertheless believe that this approach serves this purpose very well. In order for us to attain a direct entry into the plot, it is sufficient to view it through the prism of a character. The reader is then a reflex of the character, and thus has a tendency to perceive individual events directly<sup>6</sup>.

Let us recall Kundera’s praise of distance, which we understand as a defining feature of prose. The narrative construction thus represents a hoist of diverse levels of narration, by which the author attains varying degrees of distance from the experience (of the characters). Should a system of distances therefore be a sign of the presence of the principle of the novel? This principle manifestly does not overlap with the plot principle, which concerns a chain of causally linked events. Lyricism, by contrast, is a mode of identification. We may then understand the internal monologue – in the terminology used by Kundera – as a lyrical device, because it is one of subjectification. A further device will entirely unequivocally be metaphors, which in the work of Milan Kundera are of a defining character (to situate oneself into a certain metaphor as if into a certain perspective of meaning). Therefore, despite the fact that the novel *The Joke* has a clear plot foundation, does its centre of gravity not reside in lyrical devices?

We may ask simply: what is the plot of *The Joke*? Our conception of this is complicated by the fact that we alternately follow the destinies of four characters (Ludvík, Helena, Jaroslav and Kostka). Nonetheless, Ludvík is both quantitatively (in terms of pages spent on him) and qualitatively (towering above the other characters in his depth of insight, capacity for reflection and also in his distance from his own destiny) the chief figure of the novel. If *The Joke* is a story of revenge, then why does it not end with Ludvík’s dismay when he discovers that the wife of Pavel Zemánek is long estranged from her husband? Such a story could guide us to a certain type

of morality: revenge is always illusory, since it completely fails to take into account the passage of time (we always take revenge on someone other than the person who wronged us). If revenge were to be the main plot principle, the reader would have no reason to read the novel to the end. Although we may speak of side plots (Helena experiences disillusionment, as does Jaroslav, when he discovers that his son has renounced his dreams of the folk celebrations), these in themselves do not offer the reader sufficient stimulation. We must therefore understand *The Joke* also as a play with plot codes (of failed revenge, lover's disillusionment, the distress caused by a son's betrayal – Jaroslav).

Should we therefore understand *The Joke* as a novel of disillusionment? Let us return to the beginning of the book. We discover that in the introduction a return to the narrator's native region is evoked by lyrical devices (recollections, metaphors, as well as an attempt at a cynical distance). From the first lines of *The Joke* a certain atmosphere is thus evoked (in addition to the intimation of the plot codes): one of homesickness denied. Is lyrical evocation therefore not the dominant framework of the novel, into which a story of revenge is merely inserted? Since the failed revenge does not provide the reader with effective satisfaction, the plot is unable to achieve even a certain balance<sup>7</sup>, which had been upset by the previous betrayal of Ludvík by his friend Pavel Zemánek.

A resolution of the initial state of imbalance is therefore not accomplished by means of the plot (revenge), but by a shift in the perspective of the novel. Let us recall that a sentiment denied is evoked also in the opening passage. If we pair the opening scene of Ludvík's arrival in his home town with the closing scene, we find see how his initial emotional distance is replaced in the closing scene with the rekindling of a seemingly lost friendship with Jaroslav. A certain initial deficiency of emotional experience is compensated in the final scene of the communal musical gathering in the cimbalom group. It is precisely the passage of originally withheld sentiment that completes the framework of the novel.

Do the plot devices in Kundera's novels thus have more than a "merely" factual function (to maintain the reader's attention)? Is it rather the establishment of a certain atmosphere, an atmosphere that also has its own peculiar dynamic, which is the dominant feature? This can be evoked only by lyrical means. Although Kundera's novels are built upon a plot foundation, they have their centre of gravity in lyrical devices: the dispatchers of the branching plot are metaphors which evoke a certain affective state of the characters.

### **Distance as a principle of narration, reflection and cognition**

Let us pause once more to examine the motif of perspective, ironic distance, and thus also the birth of the novel. Milan Kundera mentions a whole range of other skills which the novelist

should master (he should be well-versed in philosophy, have thorough knowledge of the period about which he writes, he should also have further specialised knowledge, for example of history or economics), but one feature appears to be common to all: the novelist should not take himself too seriously. This is possible only if the novelist occupies a certain distance with regard to his life and world. We have addressed the issue of distance already in relation to its opposite – the moment, immersion, the removal of any kind of distance. Here the internal monologue was shown to be an appropriate literary device (applied by Kundera also in his poetry, indeed his second collection of poetry is aptly named *Monologues*). For this reason I have taken the liberty of concluding that a certain system of distances from the experienced, as well as from the narrated, will evidently be a defining characteristic of the novel. In *The Joke* it appears that we have nothing of this sort, since it is narrated sequentially by individual characters. Nonetheless, what is of fundamental significance is the fact that the “chief” character occupies a manifest distance with regard to his former illusions. At the same time Ludvík, in his narration, returns to events that took place fifteen years previously, and is thereby figuratively split into the person who experienced those events at the time, and the person who narrates them now. Distance is thus a defining characteristic also of *The Joke*: the time interval – in *The Joke* of fifteen years – enables the author to make a single character both an experiencing subject and the object of narration.

Furthermore, *The Joke* is still Kundera’s first novel, which has its origin in a time not remote from his poetry writing. At the time there was not yet such a pronounced rupture between lyrical poetry and the novel as we know it from Kundera’s second novel. However, if we place directness as a lyrical principle in opposition to distance as a characteristic of the novel, as I have done above, we do so appropriately at least in mapping Kundera’s understanding of the creative principle.

Even so, it is apparent that such delineations are so general that they may be applied to a whole range of diverse phenomena: (from lyrical evocation to the internal monologue of a character, from essayist passages to narration, in which the mediation of the narrative gesture is made present for the reader by various means).

First of all we briefly pause to take a look at distance, which has its peculiar status. In the previous commentary I already defined it in a dual manner: partially with regard to one’s own experience, partially with regard to lyricism, or another language which evokes in us an illusion of a direct approach to the world. Distance and perspective enable us not only to untie ourselves from events (experiencing), but also from the power of language, which interpellates us (poetry may serve as a very good example). Distance is therefore not only a condition of narration, but also a condition of cognition. We therefore see that distance stimulates two modes – narration and reflection (contemplation, an essayist passage). It is essential to appreciate (perceive) that in

Kundera's work essay writing and narration have the same status (while lyricism and dramatic tension have an entirely different status).

This finding leads us to the conclusion that Kundera narrates in order to illustrate an idea (a mutual referring of the mode of narration and contemplation), or narrates in order to develop an idea. In other words, in Kundera's work narration does not have a dramatic character, but a defining feature, revealing the natures of the characters, simply an illustrative function. Since through narration Kundera reveals the nature of his characters, this concerns units of a metaphorical type – an index in the sense referred to by Roland Barthes (Barthes 1975: 246-250). Distance therefore creates a space for narration or for contemplation. The index, by its metaphorical nature, brings narration close to lyrical evocation.

If Milan Kundera makes use of the category of distance for a definition of the novel (whether with regard to lyricism, seriousness or experience), he places emphasis on circumstance, which is entirely subsidiary for classical narratology (which becomes a clarifying measure for a reflection of Kundera's peculiar conception). From the perspective of French narratology, this would concern a level of narration which is third in importance after the story and the characters. Kundera builds his poetics manifestly outside the lines of classical narratology, and at the same time informs his readers that distance, as well as that which ensues from it, is of entirely fundamental importance for him.

### **Lyrical moments as dispatchers of the plot**

If we were therefore to describe the genesis of the concepts of Kundera's poetics, we would begin with the lyrical principle, which has no support in the objective world and serves for entirely free imaginative creative output (poems from the end of the 1940s). In the essay "On Inheritance Disputes" (1955) this is joined by the epic principle, while in my opinion distance does not become a feature until the beginning of the 1960s. As soon as we have at our disposal three fundamental creative trajectories, a highly diverse development takes place within its framework.

In a similar manner to that with we reflected upon distance, we could focus also on lyrical (now purely lyrical) and plot devices (here dramatic). It will not be possible to understand the dramatic principle entirely without means of lyrical evocation, which also leads to an instability that it would not have in the traditional conception of the nodal points (in Barthes's terminology nuclei /Barthes 1975: 248-250).

On the theme of the plot function of lyrical devices, we proceed as follows: first of all we examine them through the prism of classical narratology, and subsequently I shall attempt to

determine their place (with regard to their importance) in Kundera's poetics.

In Barthes's *An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative*, of the greatest importance are plot functions, while Barthes considers literary elements which create a certain atmosphere of events, their symbolism, consistently taken certain anthropomorphic gestures, to be secondary elements which merely develop upon the fundamental elements (nuclei). What is essential is that the nuclei form the framework of the plot, and for this reason are designated by Tomashevsky as bound motifs (Tomachevski 1965: 274)<sup>8</sup>, since they have a binding sequence, guided by a necessary logic of human activity – their order cannot be altered.

It is of fundamental significance that plot elements in Barthes have a metonymic sanction, and indexes a metaphorical sanction. If we return to Kundera's poetics, we could speak of lyrical devices as free motifs (the author may place them entirely as he likes within the narrative) and plot devices as bound motifs (as stated above, their order is binding), and we would thus have our fundamental taxonomy. However, we have already noted one problem in our partial analysis of *The Joke*, namely that in Kundera's novels lyrical devices do not have a secondary role, but are entirely essential to the dynamics of the work. Although Tomashevsky's (and later Barthes') taxonomy enables us to classify the literary units of Kundera's work, it tells us the precise opposite about their importance. As I have stated above – it is precisely free motifs in Kundera's work that are the dispatchers of the outline of events: they decide whether or not a certain act will take place.

Since the devices that decide on the development of events are free motifs (lyrical devices), the design of Kundera's work has an even looser (and less calculable) structure than classical narratology would wish to contemplate (in an endeavour to break up Propp's rigid syntagmatic model). Even if Kundera's novels have a distinct epic framework, inasmuch as this is at the same time of secondary importance (it need not lead from an initial unbalanced situation to a concluding settlement) Kundera creates a yet more diverse literary world than he would be guided to create by the principles of classical narratology. It is of essential importance that lyrical devices have an absolutely fundamental impact on the development of the plot, which is inconceivable for classical narratology.

### **Dramatic tension – the ambiguity of the serious and the comic**

The starting point for an understanding of dramatic tension is unequivocally the theatre play *The Owners of the Keys*, despite the fact that we first view its form in Kundera's later novel writing. It is here that it is made distinctly clear that in Kundera's work the dramatic tension will be built upon the polarity of the serious/unserious (comic).

The characters are capable of seeing themselves reflected in the mirror of destiny, and this

ability shall be ironised in the author's later work as a novelist. Several examples of such ironising are offered by the novel *The Farewell Waltz*, especially by the character of the chief protagonist Jakub. Jakub is capable of perceiving banal and everyday events within the interpretative framework of the political trials of the 1950s. He may thus in an unknown nurse see a "hangman's assistant" (Kundera 1998: 160), since during a dog chase in the spa gardens she took the side of the "persecutors" (the old pensioners who catch the freely running dogs). Inasmuch as Jakub rescues one dog, he sees it as a metaphor of the "escaped"<sup>9</sup>, as one who has survived the political trials of the 1950s. At the moment when he perceives the inappropriate comicality of his own interpretation, he ceases to entertain the notion of taking away the rescued dog as a trophy, and sets out to return it to its owner.

Here we may notice not only the ambivalence of the situation (serious/comic), but also the reflexiveness or layering of Kundera's manner of writing. Although the argument over the ("rescued") dog does not take place within the atmosphere of the 1950s (but evidently some time at the beginning of the era of normalisation), this is nevertheless present here as an interpretative framework and affective schema (the interpretative framework not only ascribes meaning to the spectacle, but also how it is to be experienced). The spectre of the past controls Jakub's capacity for interpretation. A conflict-ridden, oppressive and dangerous situation (the political trials of the 1950s) becomes a mere interpretative model.

Jakub is not perturbed whatsoever by his present danger, the journey to the state border – and thus his yearned-for emigration, this takes place too easily. The only thing that disturbs him is the spectres which he projects into his present situation. These spectres (Jonathan Culler speaks of the discursive production of events /Culler 1980: 30-35) have a decisive influence on the development of events.

By contrast, *The Owners of the Keys* is set in the era of the Nazi protectorate. One of the plot lines (the communist resistance) signifies the real danger of death for Jiří and his entire family. Kundera allows this harrowing situation to be presented in a comic light. This approach is therefore the opposite of that which we have defined in *The Farewell Waltz*. At the same time it is no surprise that then the serious was present in a recollection, whereas the unserious was a part of the current scene, and now the precise opposite applies.

In *The Farewell Waltz* the inappropriate seriousness of the situation will be shattered (the serious is transformed into the unserious), whereas in *The Owners of the Keys* the serious was conversely meant to become the measure of the comic. While in *The Farewell Waltz* the serious is disrupted due to an inappropriate interpretative model, in *The Owners of the Keys* we by contrast see the inappropriateness and illusory nature of the comic, which cannot overturn the seriousness



of the situation (from the perspective of the Krůta family the comic is by contrast the cause of their tragic fate). These inverse situations (from *The Farewell Waltz* and *The Owners of the Keys*) mutually illuminate one another.

The dramatic tension unfolds from the presentation of a certain unambiguous situation: all (the surrounding characters, viewers, readers) must perceive this in the same way. Here evidently lies one of the important motifs of Kundera's poetics of "specification". If the nodal points of the plot were not unequivocally defined, the structure would fall apart. At the same time it is clear that these nodal points cannot function without semantic concretisation, whatever form this might take (from an internal monologue to a discourse of a character, narrator, inserted essay). The event is necessarily bound together with its duplication in the explanatory commentary. In his semantic specification, Kundera does not concentrate only on the meaning of an objective event, but also on the inner aspects of the characters, their experience, emotional responses etc. It is precisely via this relatively broad realm, which requires specification (from the perspective of the work or the author), that we arrive at a certain interconnection of the plot tension and lyrical evocation. Both manners serve the author in his creation of the plot tension – whether this concerns the external course of events or the inner drama of the characters (in the play *The Owners of the Keys* these are Jiří's visions, in which not only his motivations are revealed, but also the context of the time is explained).

This brings us to another finding. Although the poetic fundamentals are preserved (the combination of plot and lyrical devices), the conception of the event is changed. A further direction of investigation is shown to be a certain cataloguing of variously modelled events. The conception of the event changes during the course of Kundera's novel (and also poetry) writing by means of the aforementioned proportion of lyrical and epic devices.

Let us therefore take a look at the decisive scene from *The Owners of the Keys*. Věra has arrived in Jiří's flat, and is seeking his help. The flat is entered by the janitor Sedláček, who is collaborating with the Germans, carrying a revolver in his belt. The entire scene takes place in an ambiguity of conversation and interrogation (Sedláček asks Věra about the train she had travelled on, whether it had come via Olomouc, what she was doing in the construction office etc.). The seriousness of the conversation is indicated also by Jiří's warning that Sedláček is a porter at the armaments factory (Věra is pretending that she works there in the construction office). The tension of the situation is created by the question of whether Věra will succeed in leaving the flat, or whether Sedláček will detain her. His power is latently present in the fact that he subjects Věra

to an interrogation (which is informal, not backed by any institution), and thus asks her questions which she would not have to answer in a regular conversation.

Here we have present one of the central themes – the ambivalence of human dialogue (of interrogation as acquiescence and extracting of information, or conversation): who has the right to ask, and does the person questioned have any obligation whatsoever to answer? The dialogue between Věra and Sedláček culminates at the moment when Věra attempts to reverse the situation by turning upon Sedláček (who has in the meantime found her guilty of lies and fabrications) and retorting that she is not obliged to answer his questions.

All at once, her leaving the flat appears easy. An impression may be awakened in the audience (and in the reader of the play) that Věra has become master of the situation. It is only a short distance to the door, and it suddenly seems that Sedláček's power has been a mere illusion. The flipside of the interrogation is the comicality and inappropriateness of Sedláček's impertinence:

“Sedláček: If you were able to say, ma'am, that you were working all night on the construction, then surely you can also tell the porter who was there with you, can't you?

*Věra remains silent.*

After all, someone else was there with you, weren't they? (*The janitor savours the pleasure of the attack*) Or were you working alone? Hm?

*Věra remains silent.*

Well come on! Can't you even tell me where that construction office is? Don't you know?

*Věra remains silent.*

All right then, I'll tell you something. No express train arrives in Prague at noon. What do you say to that? And there was nobody in the construction office last night. It's right behind my gate.

*Věra (who has now prepared herself for the counter-attack):* I know better than you do that nobody was in the construction office. And everybody knows that no train arrives at midday.

Sedláček: Don't equivocate, ma'am, you said you arrived on the midday train.

Věra: Yes, that's what I said.

Sedláček: But no train arrives at midday!

Věra: I know it doesn't...

*Sedláček appears flustered.*

I just don't know why I should have to tell you the truth. I could quite happily tell you that I rode here on a camel. It's still none of your business.

Sedláček (*stung and still flustered*): You truly are a very fine lady!

Věra: (convinced that *she has sufficiently discomfited the janitor, goes to pick up her coat*): I hope

you'll leave off the interrogation now.

Sedláček: As you please, I'm just a little man.

Věra: (*her coat in her hand*): Goodbye, Jiří, I'm going.

Sedláček (*allows Věra to go in silence to the door, takes his revolver from his holster and says in the same obliging tone*):

I don't have the right to interrogate you.

Jiří: Mr. Sedláček, please, she's our friend, you know us!

Sedláček (*points his revolver at Věra*): A janitor is not a fool, lad. (*To Věra*) Turn around, ma'am! Do it.

*Věra very slowly turns around.*

And higher placed men will investigate which train you came here by.

*The janitor goes to push Věra out of the flat in front of him, but in the meantime Jiří has picked up a paperweight from his writing desk and taken several steps toward the janitor, who has his back turned to him, as if to strike him with the paperweight."*

(*Kundera 1962b: 46-47*).

It is evident that we cannot reduce the entire dramatic tension to a single reversal in the conversation, since this is present in a whole range of rejoinders (Sedláček – Jirka, his impertinence, use of the informal “you”, his addressing of Jirka as “lad”, his haranguing; Sedláček – Věra – his exaggeratedly courteous use of the formal “you”, on the borderline of mockery, addressing her as “ma’am”, up to the reversal: “you truly are a very fine lady”). This is also present in Sedláček’s insolent barging into the flat, in a certain type of haughty joviality. Despite these and other components which contribute to creating the plot tension, we are interested above all by the nodal points, with which Kundera works in a distinctive manner.

### **The comic/tragic (serious) as a polarity of disruption in behaviour in contrast with its continuation**

We could define these places of (potential) plot reversals as a reversal of the serious (a life and death situation for the characters) and the unserious and comic (“I rode here on a camel”). It is as if even the most tragic situation is illuminated by a chink of light of the unserious. Conversely, it also appears that beneath a humorous situation a tragic fate is lurking. Let us recall Ludvík’s disciplinary misconduct hearing before the university party committee in *The Joke*. At first Ludvík believes that all those present will surely understand that it had been meant as a joke. However, he suddenly realises that he will never convince them that it had not been meant seriously. The

boundary between the tragic and the comic is invisible (herein the elasticity of the created intrigue resides). Had the comic triumphed, then the plot would have been disrupted: Jakub ultimately does not take the dog away with him into emigration as “rescued” (he returns it to its owner), Věra would have left the flat (thus averting the tragic denouement of the plot), Ludvík would not have experienced his personal downfall had he convinced the others that his postcard had been meant as a joke. The tragic (serious), by contrast, represents the plot’s continuation.

If we were to use the terminology of Claude Bremond (Bremond 1980: 388 - 390), we would define the tragic moment by the conclusion of an elementary sequence (thereby provoking a counter-action), whereas the comic would signify an unsuccessful realisation of an intended act (the plot line would be disrupted in the second phase, its realisation would be commenced but not carried out to its conclusion (Bremond 1980: 388-390)).

It is therefore evident that the dominance of the comic signifies a disruption of an act in progress, the dominance of the serious its continuation. We may present as an example Tereza’s leaving Tomáš (*The Unbearable Lightness of Being*). For Tomáš this initially has the sweet taste of relief and freedom (idleness in matters of a fateful story of love, as if the love story had forgotten him). However, three days later he has an attack of longing, when he imagines her sense of utter abandonment upon unlocking their Prague flat (let us recall Kundera’s discourse on emotional visualisation in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*). It is evident that this continuation of the plot line (Tomáš as a result decides to return to Tereza in Prague) is determined by lyrical devices, or at least by emotionalism (this is not a rational decision; by contrast his reason would have led him to remain in a well-paid job in emigration). We therefore see that certain nodal points of the plot are given by purely lyrical devices, evoked by emotionalism etc.

### **Further perspectives of the theme**

At this point a new field of interpretation opens up broadly before us, in which we could modify our proposition concerning the three principles of Kundera’s poetics (lyrical, dramatic and essayist and novel writing – narrative) with regard to Kundera’s entire later output as a novelist. Since in this study I have been concerned primarily with designating the fundamentals of his poetics, one of the motifs was the rehabilitation of the lyrical principle, which is applied virtually throughout Kundera’s entire oeuvre (an exception is his last novel), and it shall therefore be possible to conclude this initial essay. In this study I considered it important to point out that the poetic fundamentals are formed in Kundera’s essay writing (in his reflections) and in his literary work from the end of the 1940s, but above all in the 1950s and in the first half of the 1960s. By

this I do not wish to say that the following work would be a mere variation on that which was discovered by the author in his poetics in the aforementioned early phase, I was rather concerned with a description of formal devices and fundamental insights, and not with the thematic aspect of the novel, which shows a further wide-ranging development, though no doubt objections could be raised that in this study I remain indebted to a more detailed insight into the building of plot tension (which Kundera approaches from two directions – from within the character, by means of an internal monologue, and externally, by a commentary on the meaning and sense of a specific event). It shall certainly be necessary to examine this principle further, but as I have already intimated, certain dispatchers of events are of a lyrical nature. This direction of research would therefore point to a metaphorical anchoring of events, or even an understanding of the plot as an iconic signifier, thus in turn pointing to a future direction of research. Through this text I intend to open up a discussion on the early work of Milan Kundera, which is generally overlooked. If attention is focused on this work, then it is especially as one of the literary-historical phenomena of the time and with less emphasis on the development of the author's poetics as a whole. Without any knowledge of the poetic fundamentals of Kundera's early work, it is not possible to thoroughly understand the process of meaning of Kundera's novels.

## Notes

1. In working on this study the author was supported by a grant from the Czech Science Foundation no. 18-11753S Development of Poetics of Milan Kundera from Poetical Beginnings to the Celebration of Insignificance.
2. Thanks to František Podhajský for processing the bibliography of Kundera's early essays.
3. On this theme see the early form of this conception in the text devoted to the potential use of neon signs on Wenceslas Square (Kundera 1959).
4. "In the literature of the 1950s I did not object to its advocacy of realism, but that its realism was illusory, irrational and incapable of getting to the root of the matter, that this realism was insufficiently realistic." (Kundera 1964b)
5. "Spiritual life illuminated in such solitude needed to be portrayed by a far more precise method than that of an indirect characteristic (i.e. dialogue and event), or by an even more precise method than that of detailed psychological description, as used by Flaubert in *Madame Bovary*. Here the object of interest becomes the character's train of thought itself in its naked form, with all its twists and turns. It is therefore no longer merely a psychological description, i.e. a detailed reflection on what the character may be thinking and feeling. The writer attempts to portray the character's thinking directly. And in this way an artistic device used by the modern, so-called "analytical" novel, is born, namely the device of the internal monologue." (Kundera 1955: 1302)
6. Milan Kundera uses the setting as a means of "immersion" into the plot. It is evidently possible to attain this also by the above-mentioned internal monologue, as we may deduce from the following quote: "The reader does not hear the narrator, he hears the dialogue of the characters, he does not hear verses, he sees the situation, environment, landscape. He does not hear about events, he is drawn into the plot. He does not read the poem, he loses himself in the poem." (Kundera 1955: 1294)
7. According to thinkers of classical narratology, the final resolution of an initial state of imbalance represents a fundamental principle of the narrative. The starting point is a state of a certain deficiency, which is removed during the course of development of the story. The concluding balance is nonetheless of a different order than the initial balance. In the example given, it is not possible to undo Pavel Zemánek's betrayal of Ludvík (which is in the past and irreversible), but the situation can be retrieved in various ways: reconciliation under certain conditions, revenge, the magnanimity of forgiveness etc.
8. Barthes' analysis is based upon Tomaševský's terminology, and for this reason I take the liberty of mentioning it in case of necessity.
9. "as a souvenir of persecution, as one of those who had escaped." (Kundera 1998: 110)

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