

Man, A Wide Garden: Milan Kundera as a Young Stalinist

Jan Čulík, University of Glasgow

1. *The Context*

Milan Kundera (b. 1929) belonged to that generation of young Czechs who enthusiastically embraced the arrival of communism in Czechoslovakia in 1948. There were a number of these young Stalinists who later developed into major cultural and political figures in post-war Czechoslovakia. Many of them took part in the 1960s reformist movement, which culminated in the Prague Spring of 1968. After the defeat of that democratic revolution, they became dissidents, some of them ending in exile in the West.

Why did so many young Czechoslovaks in their late teens or early twenties embrace Stalinist communism so ardently? Zdeněk Mlynář, the author of the reformist 1968 Czechoslovak Communist Party Action Programme and a one-time fellow student of Mikhail Gorbachev in Moscow in the 1950s, explained it rather eloquently in his memoir *Mráz přichází z Kremli*¹:

"I joined the Communist Party in the spring of 1946, when I was not quite sixteen. Thus I belong to the generation of Czechoslovak Communists who were around twenty in February 1948, when the Communist totalitarian dictatorship was installing itself, and my political experience is peculiar to that generation. (...) My generation was made prematurely aware of politics by the stormy events of that period; at the same time we lacked political experience. The only experience we had was of the war years and the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia, and during some of this time we were still children. One of the chief results of this was a black-and-white vision of the world, with the enemy on one side and his adversary on the other. It was either one side

¹ In Czech: "Vstoupil jsem do komunistické strany na jaře roku 1946, kdy mi ještě nebylo šestnáct. Patřím tedy ke generaci československých komunistů, kterým bylo v únoru 1948 – v době zrodu komunistické totalitní diktatury – kolem dvaceti, a moje politická zkušenost je specifickou zkušeností této generace. (...) Moje generace byla generací předčasně zpolitizovanou bouřlivým vývojem tehdejší doby a zároveň byla generací bez politických zkušeností. Jedinou zkušeností, a to ještě zpola dětskou, byla léta války a nacistické okupace Československa. Tato zkušenost plodila především černobílé vidění světa: na jedné straně nepřítel, na druhé straně jeho protivník. Zvítězit může buď jeden, nebo druhý - třetí možnost neexistuje. Jediná zkušenost proto vštěpovala představu, že vítězství správné koncepce je prostě likvidací, zničením koncepce jiné. (...) Opatrnictvím a zbabělostí nám zavánělo všechno, čím se nám někdo snažil rozmlouvat primitivní radikalismus v prvních poválečných letech. (...) Byli jsme dětmi války, ale za války jsme nikde nebojovali. (...) Naše představy o socialismu byly před únorem 1948 a několik let po něm ještě primitivnější a jednostrannější než představy starších generací stalinských komunistů, kteří dogmatickou víru tu a tam přece jen korigovali životní politickou zkušeností." Zdeněk Mlynář, *Mráz přichází z Kremli*, Index, Cologne, 1978, pp. 5-31, in English as *Night Frost in Prague*, C. Hurst and Co., London, 1980, pp. 1-23.

or the other – there was no middle ground. Thus our unique experience drummed into us the notion that the victory of the correct conception meant quite simply the liquidation, the destruction of the other. (...) We perceived any argument used to counter our primitive radicalism as stemming from cowardice. (...) We were children of war who, having not actually fought against anyone, brought our wartime mentality with us into those first postwar years. (...) Before February 1948 and for several years afterwards, our conception of socialism was even more primitive and one-sided than that of older generations of Stalinists who, despite everything, had made minor adjustments in the dogma over the years."

There was a considerable number of other, iconic, young Stalinists apart from Mlynář and Kundera in Czechoslovakia at that time, for instance the writer and journalist Ludvík Vaculík (b. 1926),² an energetic and active journalist, who, like many others around him, gradually discovered the limitations of the political system he had helped to build and started rebelling against it. Vaculík's experimental novel *Sekyra* (*The Axe*, 1966) is an almost menopausal "novel of disillusionment", expounding that whatever may have gone wrong with the Czechoslovak experiment with communism had done so by the early 1960s. Subsequently, like many of his colleagues, Vaculík became a major protagonist in the reform movement of the 1968 Prague Spring and a dissident writer after the Warsaw Pact invasion of August 1968. The poet Pavel Kohout, who would recite his political poetry³ to vast crowds in the early 1950s, the supreme embodiment of the emotional blindness of the young Czechoslovak generation of Stalinists, followed the same route as Vaculík and the others. Jewish writers

² see Jan Čulík, "Ludvík Vaculík", *Dictionary of Literary Biography: No. 232, Twentieth-Century East European Writers*, The Gale Group, London and Boston, 2001, pp. 386-392.

³ "Já nemohu zpívat skromně,
radostí jsem bez sebe,
představte si, že se do mě
zamiloval SNB.

Pranic nedbám o starosti
pranic nedám na řeči.
Vždyť u člena bezpečnosti
nejvíc budu v bezpečí
(I cannot sing modestly,
I am beside myself with joy:
Imagine, a policeman
has fallen in love with me.
I have no worries.
I ignore gossip.
Surely, with a member of State Security,
I will be most secure.)

in: *Podivuhodní kouzelníci: Čítanka českého stalinismu v řeči vázané z let 1945-1955*, ed. by Antonín Brousek, Rozmluvy, London, 1987 p. 133. For Kohout's biography, see Pavel Kosatík, *Fenomén Kohout*, Paseka, Brno 2001, Jan Čulík, "Případ Pavel Kohout – historie o tom, jak vás vyplivne stádo", *Jak Češi bojují: Výbor z Britských listů*, Libri and Občanské sdružení Britské listy, Prague, 2003, pp. 562-573, also <http://www.blisty.cz/art/9568.html>, in English Jan Čulík, "The Kohout Phenomenon", *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 54, No. 5 (Jul., 2002), pp. 815-817.

Ivan Klíma and Arnošt Lustig⁴ became supporters of Stalinist communism primarily because of their traumatic experience of having served time in Nazi concentration camps as children. Lustig, when confronted with the question "How could you have supported Stalinist communism"⁵ just shook his head and put on a frustrated expression, knowing that he was asked to explain the inexplicable to a member of a younger generation without "that experience".

"The communists always tried to recruit the most idealistic, the most courageous and the most enthusiastic people for their Party," reminisces Heda Kovályová, the widow of Rudolf Margolius, a communist Foreign Trade Minister, who was executed in 1952, in the 1999 film *A Trial in Prague* by Zuzana Justmanová.⁶ And indeed, Kundera extols the idealism of the young Czech communists in the early 1950s:

"So the Communists took power in February 1948 with neither bloodshed nor violence, but greeted by the cheers of about half the nation. And now please note: the half that did the cheering was the more dynamic, the more intelligent, the better. Yes, say what you will, the Communists were more intelligent. They had an imposing programme. A plan for an entirely new world where everyone would find a place. (...) They rapidly set about to realize their dream, that idyll of justice for all. (...) But since the idyll is in essence a world for all, those who tried to emigrate showed themselves to be deniers of the idyll, and, instead of going abroad, they went behind bars. (...) And then these young, intelligent and radical people suddenly had the strange feeling of having sent out into the world an act that had begun to lead a life of its own, had ceased to resemble the idea it was based on and did not care about those who had created it. Those young and intelligent people started to scold their act, they began to call to it, to rebuke it, to pursue it, to give chase to it. If I were to write a novel about that gifted and radical generation, I would call it *In Pursuit of an Errant Act*."⁷

⁴ See Aleš Haman, "Arnošt Lustig", *Dictionary of Literary Biography: No. 232, Twentieth-Century East European Writers*, The Gale Group, London and Boston, 2001, pp. 233-242.

⁵ In a personal conversation in Glasgow in 1989.

⁶ for a review of the film, see *Political Communication*, vol. 21, no. 4, Oct-Dec. 2004, pp. 517 – 520.

⁷ In the Czech original: "Tak se stalo, že se komunisté zmocnili v únoru 1948 vlády nikoli v krvi a násilí, ale za jáсотu přibližně jedné poloviny národa. A teď dávejte pozor: ta polovina, co jásala, byla ta aktivnější, chytřejší a lepší. Ano, namítejte si, co chcete, komunisté byli chytřejší. Měli velkorysý program. Plán úplně nového světa, v němž všichni najdou své místo. (...) Začali rychle uskutečňovat svůj sen, tu spravedlivou idylu pro všechny. (...) Protože však podstatou idyly je to, že je světem pro všechny, prokázali se ti, co chtěli emigrovat, jako popírači idyly a musili odejít místo do zahraničí za mříže. (...) A tehdy ti mladí, chytří a radikální lidé měli najednou divný pocit, že poslali do světa čin a ten začal žít svým vlastním životem, přestal se podobat jejich představám a nedbal na ty, co ho zrodili. Ti mladí a chytří lidé začali tedy křičet na svůj čin, začali ho volat, napomínat, honit a pronásledovat. Kdybych psal román o generaci těch nadaných a radikálních lidí, nazval bych ho *Pronásledování ztraceného činu*." Milan Kundera, *Knihla smíchu a zapomnění*, 68 Publishers, Toronto, 1981, pp. 14-15, in English: *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, HarperCollins, New York and Faber and Faber, London, 1996, pp. 10-12.

It can be clearly seen from this literary extract, as from many other works written by Milan Kundera, that, just as many other Czechoslovak intellectuals who were ardent Stalinists in the early 1950s, Kundera was deeply traumatised by the fact that he had been duped as a youngster into believing that a Communist Utopia was possible. Yet another former communist, Petr Pithart, argued in his dissident period many years later⁸ that the feeling of guilt resulting from the awareness that their idealism had been used by the Stalinist regime when they were young, was the main catalyst for the communist reform movement in Czechoslovakia in the 1960s and the Prague Spring of 1968 was for these communists a "*self-purifying provocation*". Pithart in fact points out⁹, drawing his conclusions, among other things, from his analysis of Milan Kundera's views expressed in the autumn of 1968, that it was only the Warsaw Pact invasion of August 1968 that rid the former young Stalinists, who had become reformist communists in their thirties and forties, of their guilt of having helped turn their country into a Soviet colony.

Kundera's remorse at having been foolish enough in his youth to support Stalinist communism led him in later years to develop a whole theory of impaired human cognition and a related theory of unforeseen consequences emanating from deeds that have "escaped", got out of the control by their perpetrators, i.e. the theory of "blowback" (to use CIA-speak). These themes recur in many of Kundera's mature works. The experience of his younger years turned into an essential motivation for his mature creative writing, the chief purpose of which is to warn against deficiencies in human perception¹⁰. At the same time, he evidently sees his youthful enthusiasm for Stalinist communism as deeply embarrassing and is trying to hide it by various means. Paradoxically, displaying a rather Orwellian attitude, Kundera has, for instance, attempted to "erase" his award-winning, Marxist literary analysis of the fiction by the Czech inter-war avant-garde writer Vladislav Vančura *Umění románu* (i.e. *The Art of the Novel*, 1960), replacing it with a different volume of literary essays under the same name (*The Art of the Novel*, 1986)¹¹. In his communist period, Kundera wrote three volumes of lyrical poetry. It is significant that his later works contain diatribes against lyricism and lyrical

⁸ see "J. Sládeček" (a pseudonym of Petr Pithart), *Osmašedesátý*, Index, Cologne, 1980, p. 20.

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 21.

¹⁰ See Jan Čulík, "A Self-Referential Paradox: Milan Kundera's Unbearable Lightness of Being", <http://www.arts.gla.ac.uk/Slavonic/KUNDERA19.htm>

¹¹ First published in French as *L'Art du roman*, Gallimard, Paris, 1986, in English as *The Art of the Novel*, Grove Press, New York and Faber and Faber, London, 1988.

poets.¹² He has also decided to suppress the publication of all his work prior to *Směšné lásky*¹³, arguing that like composers, writers are fully entitled to determine which of their work should be published and which should be suppressed. Since his pre-*Směšné lásky* output has not been published in Western languages, Kundera's construction of his literary self has worked rather well. Editors should respect the author's individuality, argues Kundera. Here, again, a political motivation seems to have been a catalyst for the creation of a whole literary theory. Kundera passionately defends the author's right to determine what he does with his own work:

"Aesthetic wishes show not only by what an author has written but also by what he has deleted. Deleting a paragraph calls for even more talent, cultivation and creative power than writing it does. Therefore, publishing what the author deleted is the same act of rape as censoring what he decided to retain."¹⁴

Kundera also strictly controls public information about his life. He distrusts journalists. Until recently, in western editions of Kundera's works, his "official biography" consisted of only one sentence: "Milan Kundera was born in Czechoslovakia in 1929 and since 1975 has been living in France." In an interview with the British writer Ian McEwan¹⁵, Kundera said: "We constantly re-write our own biographies and continually give matters new meanings. To re-write history in this sense - indeed, in an Orwellian sense - is not at all inhuman. On the contrary, it is very human." Kundera mythologises his own life. Thus, in an interview with Philip Roth¹⁶ he says:

"Then they expelled me from University. I lived among workmen. At that time, I played the trumpet in a jazzband in small-town cabarets. I played the piano and the trumpet. Then I wrote poetry. I painted. It was all nonsense. My first work which is worth while mentioning is a short story, written when I was thirty, the first story in the book *Laughable loves*. This is when my life of a writer began. I had spent half of my life as a relatively unknown Czech intellectual."

Leading Czech literary critic Milan Jungman pointed out that these statements are distortions of reality, that they are *kitsch*:

¹² See in particular Kundera's novel *Život je jinde* (*Life is Elsewhere*), 68 Publishers, Toronto, 1979, Knopf, New York, 1974. In this novel, Kundera condemns what he sees as immaturity and destructiveness of the European lyrical avant-garde, as well as their political views, which are based on emotion.

¹³ originally published in three separate volumes, 1963, 1965, 1968.

¹⁴ Milan Kundera, *Testaments Betrayed*, Faber and Faber, London, 1995, pp. 268-269.

¹⁵ Ian McEwan, "An Interview with Milan Kundera", *Granta*, 11, 1984, pp. 34-35

"Those who used to know Milan Kundera in the 1950s and the 1960s can hardly recognise him in this account. But even if these arbitrarily selected *insignificant* facts were true, the self-portrait has been retouched to such a degree that Kundera's real appearance has vanished. Everything essential that formed Kundera's image as a leading intellectual of the past few decades of Czech history has been suppressed. (...) It is characteristic for Kundera as for no other author of his generation that from the moment he entered literature for the first time, he became extremely popular and well-known. Even his debut *Člověk, zahrada širá* (*Man, a Wide Garden*, 1953) produced passionate debate and his third collection of poems *Monology* (*Monologues*, 1957) moved like a tornado across the territory of the then Czech literature. (...) These days, we may wonder while reading this very banal poetry what was so stimulating in it and, mainly, why it gave the magic impression of an exceptional work of art. It just shows how pitiful was the standard of Czech poetry at that time. (...) By the end of the 1950s, Kundera's name had become extremely well-known and overshadowed many older and more significant authors. The young poet soon learnt what it was like to be treated like a celebrity, he became a pampered child of young literature, his star shone permanently and whatever the author produced, whether it was poetry or journalism, was greeted with more and more interest. Kundera was one of the most stimulating and penetrating authors, one of those who brought new dynamism into Czech culture by their critical attitude, by being able to avail themselves of lessons from history and by showing how barren [Stalinist] dogmatism was in literature and that it was necessary to break its manacles and to give new quality to literature.¹⁷

In *Testaments Betrayed*, in a discussion of Franz Kafka's work, Kundera takes to task twentieth century literary critics for not considering literary works in the context of literary history, but in the context of biography.¹⁸ Since the dalliance with Stalinist communism has become for Kundera such a trauma that he has felt the need to exorcise it in most of his literary work, surely it is useful to consider Kundera's mature work in the literary context of his early, Stalinist writing, which Kundera now suppresses. Is Milan Jungmann right in saying

¹⁶ "An interview with Philip Roth", *New York Times Book Review*, 30th November, 1980, pp. 7, 78, 80.

¹⁷ In Czech: "Ti, kteří se s Milanem Kunderou v padesátých a šedesátých letech stýkali, ho v tomto sebezpodobení jen stěží poznávají. Ale i kdyby tahle vytržená *bezvýznamná* fakta byla pravdivá, je ten autoportrét zretušován tak, že skutečná Kunderova podoba v něm zaniká. Je tu totiž zamlčeno všechno podstatné, co tvořilo jeho profil jako vůdčího intelektuála posledních desetiletí českých dějin. (...) Pro Kunderu jako pro žádného jiného autora jeho generace je typické, že od prvního vkročení do světa literatury se stal nesmírně populární a všeobecně známý. Už debut *Člověk, zahrada širá* (1953) vyvolal vášnivé polemiky a třetí básnická sbírka *Monology* (1957) se přehnal jako smršť územím tehdejší literatury. (...) Dnes se při četbě těchto hodně banálních veršů můžeme podívat, co na nich vlastně tak dráždilo a hlavně proč působily tak magickým dojmem velkého uměleckého činu. Svědčí to jen o tom, jak ubohá byla úroveň tehdejší poezie. (...) Kunderovo jméno se už koncem padesátých let stalo pojmem a zastínilo i autory starší a významnější. Mladý básník záhy poznal, co je sláva, stal se hýčkaným dítětem mladé literatury, jeho hvězda vytrvale zářila a strhovala k sobě pozornost stále víc, a to každým projevem, ať básnickým či publicistickým. Kundera byl jedním z myšlenkově nejvýraznějších a nejpronikavějších tvůrců, kteří tehdy vnesli do české kultury nový ruch svým kriticismem, domýšlením historických souvislostí a schopností pregnančně vyjádřit beznadějnou neplodnost dogmatismu, nutnost rozbít jeho pouta a dát literatuře i úvahám o ní novou kvalitu." Milan Jungmann, "Kunderovské paradoxy", in book form in Milan Jungmann, *Cesty a rozcestí*, Rozmluvy, London, 1988, pp. 228-229.

¹⁸ "Following Brod's example, *Kafkology* examines Kafka's books not in the *large context* of literary history (the history of the European novel) but almost exclusively in the *microcontext* of biography." Milan Kundera, *Testaments Betrayed*, Faber and Faber, London, 1996, p. 42.

that Kundera was "one of those who brought new dynamism into Czech culture by their critical attitude, by being able to avail themselves of lessons from history and by showing how barren [Stalinist] dogmatism was in literature"?

The purpose of this article is to consider the meaning and impact of Kundera's literary debut, the collection of poems *Člověk, zahrada širá* (*Man, A Wide Garden*), which was published when the young author was twenty-four years old.

2. The Work

Although the collection was published in 1953, it includes poems from as early as 1949 when the author was but twenty. Thus the collection may be classed as an extremely juvenile work. Its publication seems to show to what extent the new Stalinist regime in Czechoslovakia was willing to use the energies and enthusiasm of an as yet immature and malleable members of the youngest generation. This is obviously where the entrancing feeling of the young Czech communists, living in the period shortly after the 1948 communist take-over, comes from. Kundera has discussed it in his mature work:

"It was intoxicating. We decided people's fate and we decided events. We thought our hands grasped the steering wheel of history."¹⁹

It could probably be said that in a normal society, not be hell-bent on exploiting the idealism of its young supporters, editors in the publishing house to which young Kundera submitted this juvenile attempt, would have taken him aside and recommended him to develop his writing a little more before it could be published. On the other hand, the standard of the officially permitted literary production was so low after the introduction of the Stalinist regime in Czechoslovakia that maybe there was no one in the official literary circles to give young Kundera such professional and impartial advice. And, maybe, in the context of the time, his poems really did seem good. The published reviews of *Člověk, zahrada širá*, certainly seem to testify to the extremely low standard of official discourse on literature. There are also some other aspects to consider.

¹⁹ In Czech: "Bylo to opojení. Rozhodovali jsme o osudech lidí a věcí. Zdálo se nám, že držíme v rukou volant dějin." Ludvík Jahn in Jaromil Jireš's film *Žert* (*The Joke*), 1969, based on the novel by Milan Kundera, screenplay by Milan Kundera.

In spite of the extremely low quality of these poems, they were regarded as controversial, stimulating, rebellious and iconoclastic by the critics of the day. Nevertheless, from the vantage point of today, it is not surprising that Kundera is embarrassed by the low quality of his poetic debut and is aware of the lack of perception he displayed as a young man in these poems. This is experience that he repeatedly reflects upon in his later work. In Kundera's novel *Ignorance* (2002), Josef, a fictitious character, on his return from exile to his native Czech Republic, discovers a diary that he kept as a young man in the "early years of Communism".²⁰ He is horrified by the person he used to be:

"Josef tries to understand the virgin boy, to put himself in his skin, but he is not capable of it. That sentimentality mixed with sadism, that whole business is completely contrary to his tastes and his nature. He tears a blank page out of the diary, picks up a pencil, and copies out the sentence 'I wallowed in her sadness.' He contemplates the two handwritings for a long time: the one from long ago is a little clumsy, but the letters are the same shape as today's. The resemblance is upsetting, it irritates him it shocks him. How can two such alien, such opposite beings have the same handwriting? What common essence is it that makes a single person of him and this little snot?"²¹

A similar feeling of embarrassment, when looking back at one's own past, is a major theme in Kundera's novel *Knih smíchu a zapomnění* (*The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*), where dissident Mirek is attempting to reclaim the love letters he wrote to his first girlfriend twenty years earlier and wants to throw them into the first rubbish bin in an attempt to erase his past – he finds the letters painfully embarrassing.²² This is how Kundera now feels about his juvenile poetry.

Emotion, sometimes bordering on sentimentality, is certainly present throughout Kundera's early poems. Yet, amidst all the pathos, the most salient feature of *Člověk, zahrada širá* is Kundera's emphasis on sincerity and authenticity. The collection is a polemic with formalistic, barren propaganda versifying.

Kundera preaches to his readers in the motto to the section entitled "Soukromá dramata" (Private dramas):

"...O míru vůbec,

²⁰ Milan Kundera, *Ignorance*, HarperCollins, New York and Faber and Faber, 2002, p. 72.

²¹ *ibid.*, p. 83.

o práci vůbec,
o straně vůbec,
těch vůbeczpěvů, básníku, už nech!
Mluv o lidech!

...About peace in general,
about work in general
about the Party in general,
poet, give up these generalities!
Talk about people!"²³

In the epigraph to "Polemické verše" (Polemic poetry) Kundera also chastises the regime, although bathos of the last line ("Man is an infinite garden") is almost unbearable:

"Vy, které na kříž frází
by chtěli přikovat,
volejte, křičte: Člověk
je nekonečný sad!"

"You whom they would like to nail
on the crucifix of clichés,
Call out, yell: Man
Is an unending garden!"²⁴

The collection starts with three "declarations of intent" by Kundera, three short poems in which the author rebelliously and, again, with considerable pathos asserts his right to express his most authentic, individual thoughts. As I have said, it is obvious that Kundera intends his poetry as a polemic against formalistic versifying of the day, yet his "rebellion" does not quite convince. His metaphors are clumsy ("worms in poetry"), and today's reader feels that his individualistic defiance has limits. To paraphrase Jaroslav Hašek, the ironic founder of a Party of Moderate Progress within the Limits of the Law, Kundera does quite go beyond what is permitted. His rebellion is tame. Whatever controversial thoughts he expresses, they are always counterbalanced by his enthusiastic support for Stalin and communism. One must bear in mind that many *real* poets (for instance the Catholics Jan Zahradníček, Václav Renč, Josef

²² Milan Kundera, *Kniha smíchu a zapomnění*, Toronto, 68 Publishers, 1981, pp 23-24, *The Book of "Laughter and Forgetting*, HarperCollins, New York and Faber and Faber, 1996, p. 23-26.

²³ Milan Kundera, *Člověk, zahrada širá*, Československý spisovatel, Prague, 1953, p. 27

²⁴ *ibid.*, p. 47

Palivec) were languishing in Stalinist labour camps when Kundera published *Člověk, zahrada širá*:

"Ať už zpívá, o čem zpívá
sebe básník zpívá
Básník, jenž se přetvařuje,
červy v básních mívá.

Hrám své písně na klávesy
svého osudu.
A tak zpívám tak, jak zpívám.
Jinak nebudu.

No matter what a poet sings about
he sings about himself.
A poet who isn't sincere
tends to have worms in his poetry.

I play my songs on the keyboard
of my predicament.
And so I sing the way I sing.
I will not be doing it in any other way."²⁵

Kundera postulates the imperative that a creative artist must "delve into the souls of individual human beings". The formal aspects of his introductory poems are extraordinarily primitive:

"Na dno lidí potápí se
básník potapěč
Jenom tak, jen tam si najde
do bitev svůj meč.

Který básník jenom z páry
slov si kuje meč
jeho báseň nevydrží
ani první seč

To the depth of the people dives
the diver poet

²⁵ *ibid*, p. 5

This is the only way for him to find
his sword for battle.

Those poets who forge
their swords from the mere vapour of words
such poets's poems will not survive
even the first skirmish."²⁶

In line with the political rhetoric of the day, Kundera sees poetry and literature in general in terms of a "military struggle". In the last of the three dedicatory poems, he appeals to himself to become sufficiently "emotionally charged", so that he is not "late for battle":

"Ó, tepej rychleji,
srdce, můj orloji,
ať nerorezní se má polnice
až týden po boji!

Mé v hrudi stísněné písňě,
už roztrhněte žebra má,
dříve než bude bitva
beze mne vyhraná!

O, beat faster,
heart, my astronomical clock,
so that my field trumpet does not sound
a week after the battle!

My songs, constricted within my chest,
tear apart my ribs now,
so that the battle
is not won without me!²⁷

The poems are a strange mixture of emotional individualism, demanding personal involvement, and the ideological paraphernalia of the times – they are both conformist and non-conformist at the same time.

²⁶ *ibid.*, p.6

²⁷ *ibid.*, p. 7

The quality of the verse is inferior. Kundera uses rough-hewn, unsophisticated, provocatively concrete, colloquial expressions, and incongruous metaphors. Their aim is evidently to evoke strength while creating the impression of unpretentiousness, but the overall impression is comic: (*Básník, jenže se přetvařuje, červy v básních mívá; písně, už roztrhněte žebra má; tak to mnou cloumá: Doma!*²⁸; *psi mi svůj štěkot jako zvony rozhoupou*²⁹). Elsewhere, the same principle is applied, along with the use of personification, with a little more success: *tráva se cákala v jezeru ranní rosy*³⁰).

His rhymes are unimaginative and almost offensive in their crudeness: (*ó, tepej rychleji, / srdce, můj orloji; žebra má / vyhraná; cloumá/doma; po mezi/nemrzi*³¹).

His defiant emotions border on hysteria. Kundera implies that he is proud of being a communist, "there can be no other way". He uses colloquial, archaic or dialect expressions to emphasise the bathos ("*Hrám své písně na klávesy svého osudu*" – instead of the normal, casual "*hraj*"; "*Ved' mě za našima, hvězdo vánoční*" – instead of the literary "*za našimi*"³²; "*at už zbankrotují ti, kdož z ověřených nůší/nabízejí místo poezie stokrát ohryzaná jabka*"³³ - instead of the literary "*jablka*"; here, the colloquial expression is used in an attempt to create yet another clumsy rhyme).

Some of these stylistic irregularities became the subject of fairly sharp criticism by period critic Václav Müller. Stalinists have always had a problem with casual, informal, marked, non-literary language. Václav Müller says:

"The symbolist Mallarméesque definition saying that the beauty of a poem lies in the titillating suggestiveness of ideas, which one achieves by erasing the ideological contours of verses and words, is a sinful anachronism according to the principles of Marxist-Leninist aesthetics. Surely, as Stalin has defined it, language 'is an instrument which people use to communicate and to achieve mutual understanding'. Thus language always has (even in works of art) a communicative role. That is why the most important, primary demand which each and every poem must fulfill if it is to find a way to the heart of the reader, is not ideological vagueness, which is

²⁸ "It makes me jerk: [I am] At Home!", see "Vánoční vyznání (A Christmas Confession)", p. 9. In an anxious search for rhyming words, Kundera finds the word "cloumá" (jerk) to rhyme with "doma" (at home) – the overall impression is ridiculous).

²⁹ "the dogs will swing their barking as though it was bells" (sic!), *ibid.*, p. 12

³⁰ "grass splashed about in the lake of morning dew"

³¹ "Stařenka (Old Woman)", p. 21

³² "Vánoční vyznání", p. 11

³³ "Let those who instead of poetry offer be-ribboned baskets full of gnawed apples", "Rozezpívejte, básníci, celou svou širokou duši (Poets, turn the whole of your wide sould into song)", p. 51

often the result of ignoring the principles of spelling, but the rendition of ideas by means of a language which strictly observes the principles of grammar. Neither 'poetistic'³⁴ artfulness, nor the juggling of ideas, but only a comprehensible, clear and firmly defined pithiness of expression, dynamicism of ideas and ideological validity of each and every word produce a poetic effect, since they depict reality fully, and hence truthfully."³⁵

In line with the linguistic "philosophy" outlined above, Müller criticises Kundera for dropping final consonant *-l* in past participles (forms "**řek**" instead of "*řekl*", "**stisk**" instead of "*stiskl*", etc. are colloquial Czech, but Müller rightly complains that Kundera uses them for rhythmic reasons or in order clumsily to create a rhyme. Müller feels that the expression "*tráva se cákala v jezeru ranní rosy*" is not dynamic, but "vulgar". He rejects several other colloquialisms ("**odpočnout**" [*to rest*] instead of "*odpočinout*"), as well as various neologisms. (Surprisingly, he accepts "*za našima*" as appropriately familiar for the given context.)

And yet, young Kundera does know how to write an occasional stanza which is quite atmospheric. In the poem "Toho dne v Brně (On that day in Brno)" he quite successfully evokes the atmosphere of a lazy, hot, summer Sunday afternoon:

"A z dálky spěchal vlak a člověku se chtělo
na lavičku někam do stínu.
Nechati odpočnout své trošku líné tělo
nemyslet na nic, lízat zmrzlinu.

And a train came rushing from the distance and you felt like
finding a bench to sit somewhere in the shade.
To let your slightly lazy body rest
to think of nothing, to lick your ice cream."³⁶

³⁴ "Poetism" was a Czech interwar avant-garde movement.

³⁵ In Czech: "Symbolistní mallarméovská definice, že krása básně je v dráždivé sugestivnosti myšlenek, které se dosahuje smazáním myšlenkových obrysů verše a slova, je podle zásad marxisticko-leninské estetiky hříšným anachronismem. Vždyť jazyk podle Stalinovy definice je 'nástroj, jímž se lidé navzájem dorozumívají a dosahují vzájemného pochopení'. Jazyk má vždy (tedy i v projevech uměleckých) funkci sdělovací. Proto nikoliv zamlženost myšlenky, její bezkonturnost a neohraničenost, vyplývající často z nedbání pravopisných principů, nýbrž její zpodobení jazykem přísně střežícím gramatické zásady je prvním a nejdůležitějším požadavkem, který má a musí plnit každá báseň, má-li si svou pravdivost najít cestu k srdci čtenáře. Nikoliv poetistický artismus a myšlenkové žonglérství, ale srozumitelná, jasná a pevně ohraničená jadrnost obrazu, reliéfnost myšlenky a ideová platnost každého slova vedou k básnickému účinku, protože plně, a tedy i pravdivě, zobrazují skutečnost." Václav Müller, "K některým otázkám jazykové správnosti v uměleckém díle," *Český jazyk*, 4., 1954, No. 9-10, pp. 337-342.

³⁶ *Člověk, zahrada širá*, p. 17.

Has Kundera included the linguistically clumsy expressions in his poetry deliberately, as his own "revolutionary" contribution to poetic style, wishing to drag poetry down from an official poetic Olympus, attempting to make it casual, authentic, immediate and hence to make it comprehensible to the Communist Party officials in charge of literature he was trying to influence? Czech specialist in the literature of the 1950s Michal Bauer points out³⁷ that Kundera's stylistics would have been influenced by his translations from Russian revolutionary poetry and by the style of Czech newspapers from the Stalinist era.

Within the context of the poetry of the times, Kundera's banal poems were seen as extraordinarily revolutionary and rebellious. This can be seen from the literary reviews of *Člověk, zahrada širá*, which are basically overwhelmed by Kundera's semi-critical gesture, to the point that they misinterpret the meaning of this poetry, not daring to take fully on board what he is trying to say.

The collection consists of five sections. Many of Kundera's major themes, which are developed in his mature work, appear in this juvenile collection in an inchoate form.

Zeleň mého domova

It is primarily in the first section, entitled "Zeleň mého domova (The Greenery of my Home)" that Kundera attempts to humanise lifeless Stalinist ideology by linking it with individual experience. In this approach, warm interpersonal relations and the intimacy of the home environment are important instruments. Kundera emotionally humanises Marxism by writing about his native Moravia, the city of Brno and its inhabitants, "members of the Czech collective" to whom he feels close. He uses the atmosphere of the intimately familiar, Czech surroundings as a symbol of peace and consolation. Communism is for Kundera a guarantee of all major values, associated with the concept of *home*: it is everything that is comfortable, pleasant, cosy and provides a secure haven for the Czechs.

For instance, in one of the poems in this section, an old woman is confused by the new Stalinist regime. She does not understand the political jargon of the communist era. But at the end of the poem, she is happy because her grandson, a Young Pioneer with a red scarf round his neck, embraces her and takes her by the hand. Kundera seems to argue that the communist

³⁷ in a personal conversation.

dogma will be more acceptable to people if it is communicated in terms of individual experience and emotional human relationships (never mind that in this poem, Kundera, with the arrogance of youth, reduces the elderly lady he is writing about to a sclerotic imbecile):

"Anebo, božinku, ten hrozný nerozum
po těchhle pětiletkách čítat čas
Jako by život i po jednom roce
neutíkal jak d'as.

(...)

Pod jakým plamenem že smutek roztává?
Nu, pod plamenem lásky, přece.
Chlapec už objal stařenku
a pustit se jí nechce.

Drží ji za ruku. Stařenka šťastna je náhle
vesele cupitá s ním dále po mezi.
A náhle se jí líbí jeho rudý šátek
a náhle vůbec nic jí nemrzí.³⁸

My God, how foolish it is
to count time in five-year plans!
Doesn't life trickle away quickly enough
even when you count it by single years?
(...)
Under what flame does sadness melt?
Well, surely, under the flame of love.
The boy has now embraced the old lady
and will not let her go.

He holds her hand. The old lady is suddenly happy
and merrily pitter-patters with him in the fields.
And suddenly she likes his red scarf,
suddenly she is upset by nothing."

He similarly humanises communist ideology in "Toho dne v Brně (In Brno on that Day)", where during a pleasant, hot summer day while strolling in his intimate, familiar surroundings he hears from one of the local tenements the voice of a boy signing the *Internationale*. For

³⁸ "Stařenka", *ibid.*, p. 20.

Kundera this is not a warning against the saturation levels of political indoctrination under Stalinism, it is an encouragement from "one of those, closest to him" to firm up his ideological beliefs:

"Co naplat, - vzdychl jsem. Tak tedy na pochod!
Honem jsem zpevnil krok. Už žádné odpočívát!
A chtělo se mi smát, ach, smát se na život...
A dětský hlásek zpíval, zpíval, zpíval..."

OK then, I sighed. We must march on!
Quickly, I firmed up my step. No more resting!
And I felt like smiling, oh, smiling at life...
And the child's voice went on singing, singing, singing."³⁹

In "Vánoční vyznání (A Christmas Confession)" Kundera equates the safety and intimacy of his home with communist collectivism. He swears histrionically that he will never again be an "individualist":

"Dnes já už vím, že je to zrada,
žít v sobě jen sám a sám.
(...)
Tak to mnou cloumá:
Doma!
Jen kruš mne, stesku, kruš...
Soudruzi moji, já bez vás,
já bez vás nikdy už!

I now know it is treason
to live within oneself on one's own.
(...)
It makes me jerk!
I am at home!
Sadness, just crush me, crush!
My comrades, I will never without you
I'll never again act without you!"⁴⁰

³⁹ "Toho dne v Brně," *ibid.*, pp. 17-18.

⁴⁰ "Vánoční vyznání", *ibid.*, pp. 11-12.

This theme was later developed in Kundera's mature novel *The Joke*. The principal conflict in *The Joke* revolves around the fact that the Stalinist regime denies people the right to be individualistic:

"Anyone who failed to rejoice was immediately suspected of lamenting the victory of the working class or (what was equally criminal) giving way *individualistically* to inner sorrows. (...) I demanded that my colleagues prove to me why I was an individualist. For want of concrete evidence they would say, 'Because you act like one.' 'How do I act?' 'You have a strange kind of smile.' 'And if I do? That's how I express my joy.' 'No, you smile as though you were thinking to yourself.'" ⁴¹

In the poem "Zeleň mého domova (The Greenery of my Home)" Kundera offers the beauty and intimacy of his native Brno region to his new girlfriend:

"To je můj domov, srdéčko,
řeknu zajíkávě,
...a kdyby se ti nelíbil,
jak žebrák náhle před tebou bych byl,
neboť duše má,
srdéčko, slyš,
je spletena
jen ze stuh těchto kopců a zahrad..."

'This is my home, my little heart,
I will say falteringly,
'...and if you did not like it,
like a neggar I'd stand before you
because my soul,
listen, sweetheart,
is woven
only from the ribbons of these hills and gardens.'" ⁴²

He expects "his woman" to embrace these values of his:

⁴¹ In Czech: "Každý, kdo se neradoval, byl okamžitě podezírán, že ho vítězství dělnické třídy zarmucuje, anebo (což nebylo o nic menší provinění), že je *individualisticky* ponořen do svých niterných smutků. (...) Chtěl jsem, aby mi kolegové doložili, proč jsem individualista. Neměli pro to dokladů zvlášť konkrétních, říkali: 'Protože se tak chováš.' 'Jak se chová?' ptal jsem se. 'Pořád se tak divně usmíváš.' 'No a? Raduji se!' 'Ne, ty se usmíváš, jako by sis něco pro sebe myslel.'" Milan Kundera, *Žert*, 68 Publishers, Toronto, 1989, pp. 31-32, in English, *The Joke*, Faber and Faber, London, 1983, pp. 23-24.

⁴² "Zeleň mého domova", *Člověk, zahrada širá*, pp. 13-14.

"A tehdy mne obejměš
a cvrček začne hrát
a obruč, v níž je stísněno mé srdce,
se rozletí..."

And then, you will embrace me
and the cricket will start playing
and the hoop which constricts my heart
will break asunder..."

As we will see, Kundera is firmly convinced that women should play a secondary, supportive role to the man's "struggles" – they should fully adopt their men's views and beliefs. Kundera has retained a very emotional relationship to Brno until advanced age. Since the fall of communism, he has been visiting his native town in secret.

In later years, Kundera's strong bond to his native land manifested itself in emotional denial. When Czech dissident critics were unenthusiastic⁴³ about the novels that made him famous in the West in the 1980s, he was extremely upset and disallowed the publication of these novels in Czechoslovakia after the fall of communism.⁴⁴

Negative aspects of life, such as the funeral of his friend, are an integral part of Kundera's intimate Moravian experience and Kundera reacts to them just as emotionally, using the poetics of the folk song ("Ne, černý průvode [No, oh, you black procession]").

The comfortable, intimate and comforting Czech communist experience can defeat and erase foreign horrors of past and present – both the traumatic memories of the Nazi occupation as well as the current horror of the Korean war. In "Tři braši u pěti jabloní (Three pals near Five Apple Trees)" workmen digging up soil in an orchard find a rusty German bayonet. Briefly, this evokes the traumas of the bygone, "capitalist" Second World War:

⁴³ See Milan Jungmann, "Kunderovské paradoxy", *Svědectví*, No. 77, 1986, pp. 135-162, reprinted in his *Cesty a rozcestí: Kritické stati z let 1982-1987*, Rozmluvy, London, 1988, pp. 214-254, also *Svědectví*, special Kundera section, No 74, 1985, pp. 333-368.

⁴⁴ Kundera's novels *Život je jinde (Life is Elsewhere)*, 68 Publishers, Toronto, 1979, and *Kniha smíchu a zapomnění (The Book of Laughter and Forgetting)*, 68 Publishers, Toronto, 1981), have never been published in Czechoslovakia/Czech Republic. *Nesnesitelná lehkost bytí (The Unbearable Lightness of Being)*, originally published in Czech by 68 Publishers, Toronto, 1985, did not come out in the Czech Republic until the autumn of 2006 (Atlantis, Brno).

"Můj bože, vždyť on cítí náhle,
jak železo, jež drží,
proniká řezavě a táhle
bělostnou lidskou kůží
a ruce plny krve má
a žeberního praskotu.

My God, he suddenly feels
the metal which he is holding
penetrate piercingly and in a long-drawn-out way
through snow-white human skin
and his hands are full of blood
and of the cracking of the ribs"⁴⁵

Interestingly, Kundera was criticised by the Stalinist critics of the day with regard to this passage for being "too naturalistic and disgusting", even though they surely must have remembered in 1953 the horrors of war.⁴⁶ "War still circulated in the blood of the members of this generation as crushed glass," said poet Jiří Šotola⁴⁷. But the Czech literary Stalinists wanted idyllic conventionality. They did not understand that, in line with Marxist dialectics, Kundera used these drastic images only to emphasise the happy reality of the contemporary situation under Stalinism. While doing so, he availed himself of his tried and tested principle of intimacy, referring to the heritage of the folk song, familiar to all Czechs:

"Pak podíval se na své brachy.
Braši se na něj smáli.
A z pěti polních jabloní
pěnkavy zazpívaly.

Then he looked at his pals.
The pals smiled at him.
And finches sang
from the five apple-trees in the fields."⁴⁸

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, p. 15-16

⁴⁶ "...obraz [je] silácký brutální, naturalisticky odpudivý (...the image is forced, brutal, naturalistic and repulsive)", Václav Müller, "K některým otázkám jazykové správnosti v uměleckém díle," *Český jazyk*, 4., 1954, No. 9-10, p. 340; "...někde vede autora snaha po originalnosti a nevhednosti až k nevkusu ("žeberní praskot") (...sometimes the author's desire to be original and unusual makes him tasteless ["crushing of ribs"]), Z. K. Slabý, "První knížka Milana Kundery (The first book by Milan Kundera)", *Literární noviny*, No. 35/1953, p. 4.

⁴⁷ quoted by Igor Hájek in "Česká literatura od začátku padesátých let do konce šedesátých let", in Jan Čulík, *Knihy za ohradou*, Trizonia, Prague, 1991, p. 11.

⁴⁸ *Člověk, zahrada širá*, p. 16.

In *Nesnesitelná lehkost bytí* (*The Unbearable Lightness of Being*) Kundera defines *kitsch* as "categorical agreement with being".⁴⁹

Again, using Marxist dialectics, the "sunshine situation" at home is sharply contrasted with "evil" abroad: People are enjoying the happy life under Stalinism. A former communist fighter from Spain, who is now peacefully tending his garden in Czechoslovakia, is disturbed by thinking that a brutal war is still going on in Korea. Yet the fears of foreign evil can be overcome by the positive impact of the intensity of the comfortable, home, collective experience:

"Válka?

Neboj se, děvčátko.

(...)

Na hlavní děla, jež ve stráni

rezaví tam a hnije,

obkročmo seděl klučina

a volal: Hyjé,

hyjé!

War?

Don't be afraid, little girl.

(...)

On the barrel of a cannon which on a hillside

rusts and rots

a boy was sitting astride,

shouting: Giddy-up!

Giddy-up!"⁵⁰

Homey, intimate Moravian collectivity is a palliative for everything. The "traitors" who have left their native land, are justly suffering from having lost their home and their community, especially at Christmas:

"Od těch, kdo zradili,

⁴⁹ Milan Kundera, *Nesnesitelná lehkost bytí*, Atlantis, Brno, 2006, p. 265; in English as *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, ... p 248.

⁵⁰ "Procházka Vysočinou (A Walk through the Highlands)", *Člověk, zahrada širá*, p. 24.

i psi se odvracejte!
(...)
Těm zrádcům v cizině
těžkne a padá hlava.
Dnes jejich samota
rakví se stává.

Even you, dogs, turn away
from those who have betrayed!
(...)
The heads of the traitors abroad
are heavy and they are drooping.
Today, their loneliness
is turning into a coffin for them."⁵¹

Soukromá dramata

The section "Soukromá dramata (Private Dramas)" is particularly interesting, when considering Kundera's further literary and creative development. In "To není láska (This is not love)" Kundera displays an early manifestation of what he feels the role of the woman in a relationship should be. The male, in his perception, is a warrior and the woman should console him, listen to him, support him in his work and cater to his every need. The wife of the party official in "To není láska" evidently does not conform to this "ideal" and is thus condemned. The male is frustrated because the female of the species is inherently stupid and cannot understand his "struggles":

"Spěchal domů. Tak už toužil podělit se
s někým blízkým
o ten náklad denních bojů, o ten život bolševický.
(...)
Kdy se zeptá? Vždyť přece ví! Kdy se zeptá:
Tak jak dneska?
Bojoval jsi? Zvítězils?
(...)
Tak sám začal. Dvě tři věty. A ona jen roztěkaně:
'Opravdu? Nu, teď jsi doma. Teď už
na nic nemysli.'

⁵¹ "Vánoce (Christmas)", *ibid.*, p. 25.

(...)

Ale to není láska!

Slyšíš!

To není láska!

(...)

Vidouc ho, jak smutně sedí, řekla jeho hodná žena:

‘Já vím, já vím. Odpusť mi to

Rýže je dnes přesolená.’

He was rushing home. So very much he yearned to share
the load of his everyday struggles, his life of a bolshevik
with someone close to him.

(...)

When will she ask? She must surely know! When will she ask:

How was it today?

Did you fight? Have you won?

(...)

So he started on his own. Two three sentences. She said, distracted:

‘Really? Well, you are at home now. Don’t think of anything now.’

(...)

But this is not love!

Do you hear!

This is not love!

(...)

Seeing him sit there sadly, his kind wife said:

‘I know, I know. Forgive me.

I oversalted the rice today.’⁵²

Z. K.Slabý, a Stalinist critic reviewing *Člověk zahrada širá* in 1953, comments approvingly:

"It is not the task of the poet to provide prescriptions. It is enough to provide a hint, to make an ironic comment, to highlight an important question. This is what the poem 'To není láska' is like: it criticises the fact that some of our officials and outstanding workers are misunderstood by their bourgeois wives."⁵³

The poem "Maminky (Mummies)" is a variation on "To není láska". The poet's mother is sad because the son has grown up and no longer needs her to take care of him. He assumes the

⁵² "To není láska", *ibid.*, p. 29-31.

⁵³ In Czech: "Není však úkolem básníka podávat recept. Stačí nápověď, stačí ironický šleh, stačí ukázat důležitou otázku v její vyhraněnosti. Taková je třeba báseň To není láska, pranýřující nepochopení některých našich

guise of a "monumental warrior" ("*vichry mě oplétají*") and requires that she should support his "heroic struggle":

"Maminko, tam mne nenajdeš,
v tom vzpomínkovém háji.
Já tady vprostřed boje jsem.
Vichry mě oplétají.
(...)
Pojď se mnou, maminko,
a dívej se, kam jdu,
a nesni nazpátek,
sni se mnou,
dopředu!

Mummy, you won't find me there,
in that grove of memories.
Here I am, in the middle of the struggle,
surrounded by gales.
(...)
Come with me, mummy,
watch where I am going.
Do not dream backwards,
dream with me,
forwards!"⁵⁴

The poet's requirement that his woman should support him unconditionally though all his crises takes a remarkable form in "*Láska a život* (Love and life)" where a "male fighter" enters into conflict with his communist party organisation and is expelled from the party "as a traitor". Incidentally, Z. K. Slabý is exercised by this:

"Why aren't the characters' faces in the poem '*Láska a život*' clear? This artistic drawback is, after all, connected with a serious ideological drawback: the poet shows a person who is being expelled from the Party without defining his guilt in concrete terms, without acquainting us with the times when the expulsion takes

funkcionářů a vynikajících pracovníků jejich měšťáckými ženami." Z. K. Slabý, "První knížka Milana Kundery", *Literární noviny* No. 35/1953, p. 4.

⁵⁴ *Člověk, zahrada širá*, p. 32-33.

place, etc. Thus the poem, in particular in its first part, acquires individualistic features, and this undoubtedly was not the poet's intention. The collective can never be seen as 'a wall', hostile towards the hero."⁵⁵

But the nature of the expelee's transgression is not what Kundera is interested in. The point of the poem is that the author expects the hero's woman to support him in his hour of need, no matter what is the nature of the difficulties he might be experiencing. Kundera expects unconditional *loyalty* from his women. Thus, in line with his poetics in this collection, human relationships are *above ideology*. In this poem, the hero's partner, Zdena, betrays him and opts for ideology rather than the relationship. Fortunately, there is another girl in the poem, Věra, who chooses to stand by the hero, offering herself to him fully:

"Je-li v tvém srdci málo bolševické krve,
z mého ji dolívej!

If in your heart there is not enough bolshevik blood,
top it up with mine!"⁵⁶

she says. A girlfriend's betrayal of the "hero" in political difficulties seems to have been a personal trauma of Kundera's in the early 1950s. "Kundera had a relationship with Monika Gajdošová, a dogmatic communist. She was a Slovak and studied script-writing. While they were making love, he said something derogatory about the scheme of the socialist shock-worker's pledges. She reported him to the authorities and they wanted to expell him from university," says film director Vojtěch Jasný, Kundera's fellow student at the Film Academy in Prague in the 1950s.⁵⁷ The conflict between a personal relationship and ideology is highlighted in Kundera's novel *Žert (The Joke)*, where the main character Ludvík Jahn tries in vain to court the young, ideologically blinded Stalinist Markéta and out of sexual frustration sends her a provocative postcard which proves to be his undoing: he is expelled from university and ends in a penal unit, working in the mines. A variation on this theme can be found in Kundera's short story "Eduard a Bůh (Eduard and God)" in *Směšné lásky (Laughable Loves)*: young man Eduard is trying to seduce Alice, a bigoted Catholic girl, who only succumbs to him once she thinks he has become a political martyr for the Catholic cause – but

⁵⁵ In Czech: "Proč nejsou jasné tváře postav třeba v básni *Láska a život*? Tento umělecký nedostatek souvisí s koncem konců se závažným nedostatkem ideovým: básník líčí člověka, vylučovaného ze strany, aniž blíže určil míru jeho viny, aniž nás seznámil s dobou, v níž se ono vylučování děje, atd. Tím dostává báseň zvláště v prvním oddílu rysy individualistického postoje, o který básníkovi jistě nešlo. Kolektiv nelze nikdy líčit jako 'stěnu' proti hrdinovi". Z. K. Slabý, "První knížka Milana Kundery", *Literární noviny*, No. 35, 1953, p. 4.

⁵⁶ *Člověk, zahrada širá*, p. 37.

Eduard loses interest since his exaggerated religiousness was only an act to get Alice into bed and their eventual lovemaking was the result of a ruse in which Alice was found wanting.⁵⁸

Polemické verše

The section "Polemické verše" contains two quite courageous, controversial poems, which possibly could have landed Kundera in trouble, in spite of their banality that strikes us when we consider them today. This is perhaps why they are surrounded, in the remaining two sections ("Od obzoru jednoho k obzoru všech [From the Horizon of an Individual to the Horizon of All]" and "Veliký Pochod [The Grand March]"; Kundera satirises the concept of the "Grand March" in his mature novels) by orthodox exhortations about the importance of collectivism and about the heroic struggle of workers recently under Nazism and in contemporary times under "Western capitalism". These poems often use folksong inspiration, in an effort to elevate themselves into "timeless myth". One of these orthodox poems is "Italská (From Italy)" where Kundera sings about a persecuted Italian worker who has been thrown into prison where, while languishing in his cell, he dreams about Stalin, which gives him strength and rejuvenates him. There are influences of the poetry by Jiří Wolker (1900-1924), Czech interwar "proletarian" poet, and, again, of course, of folk poetry:

"Tam za Stalinem leťte,
sniváci, ptáci mí,
tam za Stalinem leťte,
mí ptáci ohniví!
(...)
ta Stalinova země
je studně našich sil.
Ej, pijte, ptáci, pijte
z hluboké studně té
a ohnivým svým peřím
pak nebe podpalte!"

Až cely otevřou se,
silnější, mladší vyjde z nich.
Z hlubiny očí zářit mu bude

⁵⁷ In an interview with Jan Čulík, *Britské listy*, 26th July, 2004, <http://www.blisty.cz/art/19053.html>

⁵⁸ Milan Kundera, *Třetí sešit Směšných lásek*, Československý spisovatel, Prague, 1968, pp. 113-115; in English, *Laughable Loves*, Faber and Faber, London 1991, pp. 284-286.

paprsek oken kremelských.
Už vidím, vidím ho, jak v první řadě kráčí,
když strana zase k stávkám bubnuje,
už slyším jeho hlas ve zpěvu demonstrací:
Avanti popolo! – a znovu do boje!

'Fly over there to meet Stalin,
my dreams, my birds,
fly over there, to meet Stalin,
my fire-birds!
(...)
Stalin's land
is the well of our strength.
Oh, drink, birds, drink
from that deep well,
and then with your fiery feathers
set the sky alight!'

Once the cells are opened,
a stronger, younger worker will emerge.
From the depth of his eyes
the rays of the Kremlin's windows will gleam.
I see him, see him now walking in the front row
once the Party has again begun beating the strike drums
I hear his voice in the chanting of demonstrations
Avanti popolo! – again, to battle once more!"⁵⁹

Later, Kundera exorcised his early admiration for Italian communist activists in his novel *Žert* (*The Joke*) by creating the character of Helena, an unreconstructed Stalinist whose husband has left her and who finds herself in an alien world in the liberal 1960s:

"...Pavel happened to be standing next to me in the crush, and I heard him shouting something of his own into the general hubbub, something different, and when I looked over at his lips, I realised he was singing, or rather screaming, a song, he was trying to get us to hear him and join him, he was singing an Italian revolutionary song that was in our repertory and very popular at the time: *Avanti popolo, a la riscossa, bandiera rossa, bandiera rossa...* That was Pavel all over, he was never satisfied with reaching the mind alone, he had to get at the emotions, wasn't it wonderful, I thought, saluting the leader of the Italian workers' movement in a Prague square

⁵⁹ *Člověk, zahrada širá*, pp. 61-62.

with an Italian revolutionary song, I wanted more than anything for Togliatti to be moved the way I was, so I joined in with Pavel as loud as I could, and others joined us and others and others, until finally the whole ensemble was singing..."⁶⁰

Helena in *Žert* becomes a metaphor for what Kundera came to see later in life as a destructive, lyrical emotionality. He tried to rid himself this particular ghost of the past by cruel mockery, eventually destroying this character in a scene where Helena thinks she has committed suicide, but has in fact overdosed herself on laxatives, so she suffers from an unstoppable diarrhoea. There are two features in the above quotation which are worthy of note and which evidently relate back to Kundera's early poetry. Pavel Zemánek is trying hard to be "original" in the scene that Helena reminisces about, but his "originality" is strictly controlled, it is fully aware at all times of the limits that must under no circumstances be transgressed. Hence the whole game of "originality" smacks of hypocrisy. The other point is: Kundera is horrified by the naivety of the young Stalinists' reactions – they enthused over banalities. There seem to be a direct link leading from the character of Helena to Kundera's own, early poetic attempts.

Polemické verše

But let us turn to the most critical poems in the collection, included in the section "Polemické verše (Polemical Verses)". In the poem "Vy jste, Konstantine, nikdy neuvěřil (You, Konstantin, never believed)" devoted to the memory of Konstantin Biebl,⁶¹ Kundera openly protests against oppressive tendencies in Stalinist communism:

"Vy jste, Konstantine, nikdy neuvěřil,
že je komunistou ten, kdo nemá lidi rád,
ti zachmuření kněží,
co zavřeli se do marxismu jako na studený hrad.

⁶⁰ In Czech: "Náhodou stál Pavel v té obrovské tlačenici vedle mne a já jsem slyšela, že do toho křiku sám cosi volám cosi jiného, cosi svého, podívala jsem se mu na ústa a pochopila jsem, že zpívá, spíš křičel, než zpíval, chtěl, abychom ho uslyšeli a přidali se k němu, zpíval italskou revoluční píseň, měli jsme ji v repertoáru a byla tehdy moc populární, *Avanti popolo, a la riscossa, bandiera rossa, bandiera rossa...* To byl celý on, nestačilo mu nikdy útočit jen na rozum, chtěl zasahovat lidské city, zdlo se mi, že je to nádherné, pozdravit na pražském náměstí italského dělnického vůdce italskou revoluční písní, toužila jsem, aby byl Togliatti dojat, tak jako já jsem byla už předem dojata, přidala jsem se proto ze všech sil k Pavlovým ústům a přidávali se další a další, přidal se postupně celý náš soubor..." Milan Kundera, *Žert*, 68 Publishers, Toronto, 1989, pp. 19-20, in English: *The Joke*, Faber and Faber, London, 1983, pp. 12-13.

Mrazivým dechem hesel a příkazů
zhášeli plamének radosti, který se rozhořival.

Dávali pouta básním i obrazům,
jimž příliš směle vlála hřiva.

(...)

Když někdo viděl v komunismu více,
hned oblékli mu úchylkářův háv.

(...)

Vy tušil jste to, Konstantine:

Nepřátelé života i poesie jedni jsou.

Kdo chtějí socialismus změnit v pouště nehostinné
nejdřív jeho poesii kadeř oškubou.

You, Konstantin, never believed
that a communist is he who dislikes people,
those grim priests,
who locked themselves up in Marxism as in a cold castle.

By their frosty breath of slogans and orders
they have extinguished the little flame of joy which was beginning to burn.
They have put manacles on those poems and images
whose mane fluttered in the wind too freely.

(...)

If someone saw more in communism,
they at once put him into a deviationist's gown.

You knew this, Konstantin:

The enemies of life and poetry are one.

Those who want to turn socialism into inhospitable desert
will first destroy its poetry's curled lock."⁶²

One of the period's literary critics was evidently too afraid to accept this poem for what it was – as a direct onslaught on censorship and party dogmatism in literature. Z. K. Slabý is convinced that "Kundera's polemical poems are directed against the influence of Slánský, Šling and other saboteurs"⁶³ i.e. the victims of the 1952 Czechoslovak Stalinist show-trials

⁶¹ Konstantin Biebl (1898 – 1951) was a Czech avant-garde poet, member of the Communist Party, who strongly supported the Stalinist regime in Czechoslovakia, but fought against poetic stereotyping. In November 1951 he committed suicide.

⁶² "Vy jste, Konstantine, nikdy neuvěřil," *Člověk, zahrada širá*, pp. 49-50.

⁶³ In Czech: "Kunderovy polemické verše (...) jsou namířeny proti vlivům Slánského, Šlinga a ostatních škůdců." Z. K. Slabý, "První knížka Milana Kundery".

a oni zůstanou vzadu.

Comrades, the person dragging on his back
a rucksack of sadness, doubt and bad habits
is not automatically an enemy.
Maybe such a person even with such a heavy rucksack
will more gladly than you sacrifice his life for the republic.

Comrades, the person who gladly hikes alone
through forests and orchards
is not immediately an individualist.
Maybe such a loner likes people more
than do all his critics combined.

To criticise, it is not to lie in wait with sceptre cruel
following our friends' every smallest steps
watching every little step our friends make.
Otherwise they will become timid
and they will fall behind."⁶⁶

From the political point of view, if not from the artistic point of view, these "Polemical Verses" surely constitute the most important part of *Člověk, zahrada širá*.

Was Kundera's juvenile collection of poems a naive attempt by a young Stalinist, whose energy and enthusiasm the totalitarian regime abused, to contribute, "sincerely and honestly and critically", to contemporary public debate, or was there something more behind it? In this respect, it is perhaps interesting that one Ladislav Fikar (1920-1975) is given as the "responsible editor" of the *Člověk, zahrada širá* on its copyright page. Fikar was a talented poet and had the reputation of an extremely honest and decent person. Five years later, as editor-in-chief of the *Československý spisovatel* (Czechoslovak Writer) publishing house, in 1958, he risked the publication of Škvorecký's seminal novel *Zbabělci* (*The Cowards*), which, although it was suppressed at the time and Fikar was sacked, was soon reprinted and meant the downfall of Socialist Realism as a literary method. In 1960-1968, Ladislav Fikar was the *šéfdramaturg* (chief script adviser) in the Czechoslovak State Film Enterprise and almost single-handedly brought into existence the "Czech New Film Wave" of the 1960s. Was

⁶⁵ *Nový život*, 1955, pp. 1290-1306.

⁶⁶ "Není, soudruzi, hned nepřítelem ten", *ibid.*, pp. 51-52.

Člověk, zahrada širá, in all its naivety, clumsiness, pathos and banality, a deliberate early attempt to liberalise the Czechoslovak cultural and literary discourse?

In conclusion

It is not easy to dismiss Kundera's juvenile poetry as naive propaganda, the way it is possible to do so with the early work by some other Czech authors who idealistically supported Stalinism in Czechoslovakia in the 1950s. From the vantage point of today, Kundera's juvenile poetry may seem banal, even primitive. If we look at it through the prism of the 1950s Czech reviewers, we can see that in the context of the times, the publication of *Člověk, zahrada širá*, was indeed, seen as a major, provocative, rebellious event with which the Stalinist reviewers found it rather difficult to cope. In this sense, it would appear that Milan Jungmann was right when pointing out the fact that from the inception of his literary career "Kundera was one of the most stimulating and penetrating authors, one of those who brought new dynamism into Czech culture by their critical attitude". At the same time, as Kundera proved after he moved to the West in 1975, from the very beginning he has been a gifted marketing manager of his own work – always being able to judge exactly what to do to present the originality of his ideas in an accessible and socially acceptable way, so that they would be disseminated to the widest possible audience.