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Czech culture wars: Is Milan Kundera “a bastard”?

Abstract: Like many countries of the world these days, the Czech Republic is afflicted by intractable culture wars. People obstinately hold on to their ideological positions because they give them power. The world-famous Czech author Milan Kundera, who was a communist until the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, is one of the subjects of such intractable culture wars, currently raging in the Czech Republic. The conflict about Kundera was deepened in June 2020 with the publication of a highly critical, 900-page “biography” of Milan Kundera by another Czech fiction writer, former emigré to the United States Jan Novák. This piece comprises two reviews of Novák’s work, one by a well-know Czech broadcaster and the other by Professor of Czech Literature at Charles University, Prague.

The reception of Milan Kundera in the Czech Republic, a world-famous Czech author who has been living in France since 1975, has been rather problematic since the fall of communism in 1989. Since that time, Kundera has visited his native country rarely, always in secret. For a long time, he delayed the publication of some of his novels in Czech in the Czech Republic, although they had been published in Czech by the writers Zdena and Josef Škvorecký in their Toronto-based emigré publishing house 68 Publishers and throughout the world in translations into many languages. There are still people in the Czech Republic who do not like the fact that in his youth, in the early 1950s, Kundera was a member of the Communist Party and supporter of Stalinism. The fact that although he became a major, official cultural figure in the 1950s and 1960s in Czechoslovakia, he was always openly critical of Stalinist excesses, even in his early collection *Man, A Wide Garden* (1953) and that he was actually expelled from the Communist Party¹, is often overlooked.

In 2008, the Prague weekly *Respekt* created a major international scandal about Milan Kundera. Adam Hradilek a *Respekt* reporter, had discovered² a note in the police archives which said that in March 1950, Milan Kundera as the student leader of a Prague university hall of residence went to report the presence of an unknown person in the room of a student. This report allegedly led to the imprisonment of a young CIA agent for many years. *Respekt*, quite unusually, published this article in English and in its Czech version used it to boost its circulation numbers in the Czech Republic – the issue containing the article about Milan Kundera was given out free to passengers at Czech railway stations, etc. But the problem was that the *Respekt* article had many flaws. It was under-researched and left many unanswered questions. Quite unusually, the police note did not include Milan Kundera’s ID card number, which under normal circumstances would have been included, nor did it contain Milan Kundera’s signature. In theory, anyone could have reported the presence of a strange person in the hall of residence, using the name of Milan Kundera, who was well known as student leader of the hall. Also, it turned out that it was extremely difficult to find witnesses of this event 58 years after it had happened: many of them were now old and frail. Also, Adam Hradilek had a conflict of interest because the student in whose room the CIA agent was allegedly found was his aunt. It was interesting that although the *Respekt* article received a wide international

coverage at the beginning, many Western journalists and authors later realised that it was flawed and some French newspapers rallied behind Kundera. The Prague literary scholar Jakub Češka wrote a brilliant semiotic analysis, based on French structuralism, of the “Process which turned Milan Kundera into an informer”.¹ The American literary scholar Karen von Kunes, who has researched the scandal, argues in her monograph on Kundera² that if he reported anything, it was only the presence of a strange suitcase in the hall of residence. She nevertheless points out in her monograph that it would seem that Milan Kundera has been traumatised by this event for the rest of his life because two motifs, that of a suitcase and that of coincidence, signify disaster in all his subsequent literary work.³

Many readers and literary scholars in the Czech Republic take Milan Kundera’s work seriously. There is, nevertheless, a constituency which distrusts him and regards him as a “bloody communist”.

At the end of June 2020, this latent, ever-present distrust and hate of Milan Kundera in the Czech Republic suddenly burst out into the open with the publication of Jan Novák’s almost 900 page “study” of Kundera’s life and work⁴ in Czechoslovakia prior to his emigration to France in 1975. The publication of this voluminous work has produced a real culture war in the Czech Republic. Many critics have condemned it, some, however, have welcomed it. We would like to acquaint the readers of *Slavonica* with two contributions to this discussion: 1. A transcript of a *Britské listy* interview⁵ about the Novák book with Petr Fischer, former programme controller of public service Radio Prague’s cultural Vltava station (the equivalent of BBC Radio 3)⁶ and with a review of Novák’s work⁷ by Petr Bílek, Professor of Czech and Comparative Literature at Charles University in Prague. It has to be added that when Professor Bílek’s review was published on the *aktualne.cz* website, he was flooded by a wave of hateful emails from Jan Novák’s supporters.

1. *Britské listy* Interview: Is the new book about Kundera communist?

<https://youtu.be/QTyrZ2BAZxQ>

Jan Čulík: Hello and welcome. Today, 26th June, on Friday, Jan Novák's book “Kundera: Czech life and times” has been published. Those people who have been following Czech literature, maybe even emigré Czech literature, perhaps know of Jan Novák. He was born in 1953, his debut was a collection of short stories entitled *Striptease Chicago*, which was published by 68 Publishers in Toronto a long time ago, in 1983. These were quite good short stories from the environment of Czech immigrants to the USA, I was really captivated then by Jan Novák's literary slang: In my book here⁸ I have a quote which then captivated me. Mr Novák writes in one of these short stories: “A mad old man suddenly appeared, running towards me, full of hate, with his arms outstretched,

holding an enormous piece of wood, without a word, as silent as time.” This is how Mr. Novák wrote a very long time ago, then, later, he wrote his book about the Mašín brothers [who had committed acts of violence against the Stalinist regime in Czechoslovakia in the 1950s], which was called *Zatím dobrý* (*So far, so good*), but I have a feeling that the book which has been published today, the book about Kundera, has not been welcomed with enthusiasm by the Czech critics. In today's *Britské listy* Interview, we have Mr. Petr Fischer, a critic and a writer on cultural matters. Am I wrong, Mr. Fischer? Or, let us start with the question, maybe it is not too relevant, has Mr. Novák retained, in this Kundera book, his original language which he used, once upon a time, in the 1980s?

Petr Fischer: I don't think it is particularly original, linguistically. The book has a fairly, let us say, unclear shape. Because Jan Novák says occasionally that it is a novel and then he says that it is a biography. It certainly is not a novel. It is a biography which Mr. Novák calls a “free-thinking” biography. This means it is unauthorised, evidently it has not been consulted with anyone, simply, he says, my writing is instinctual. It is instinctual writing on the basis of some material that he has found, on the basis of conversations with people, on the basis of the secret police files, on the basis of period material. Most of it consists of material which is in the public domain. With the exception of some conversations with Milan Kundera's personal friends or period witnesses. Undoubtedly, it is not particularly interesting linguistically. The re-telling of the narratives of Kundera's fiction is a major part of this book. These are attempts to interpret Kundera's work. Linguistically, I did not find it particularly interesting. But it is a kind of book in which you have not even realised that you have already reached page 350, because it consists of very short little chapters and that is therefore very easy to read.

Jan Čulík: I would probably be really concerned, as an academic, by the fact that it is supposed to be both a documentary work and a work of fiction. Because, surely, fiction works differently from a documentary text. Ludvík Jahn, the main character in Kundera's novel *The Joke*, has never existed, yet we have learned quite a lot about the situation in those times from that novel. But surely a documentary text does not function the same way as a work of fiction. What do you think about this? A mixture of documentary stuff and a novel?

Petr Fischer: I think that the framing, the word “a novel” functions here as an alibi. It enables the author to avoid the necessity to examine the facts that he has found and to confirm their reliability. To consider what Kundera himself has said and to compare it with various other interpretations. Mr. Novák does not quote almost any other critics or authors who have been writing about Kundera, it is all just his own views. He emphasises this in his Epilogue. He says that this is what free-thinking writing looks like.

In my review of Mr. Novák's book which has been published in *Salon*, the cultural supplement of the *Právo* daily, I have pointed out that freedom is first of all responsibility. I do not mean

necessarily in any moral sense, but you must simply respond to the reviewed work, to the person you are analysing. And I have not found too much of that in Mr. Novák's book.

Jan Čulík: What did you learn about Milan Kundera from reading more than 700 pages of Mr. Novák's book?

Petr Fischer: I think it has all been decided right at the beginning. I would probably need a long time to explain this, but briefly: Mr. Novák's writing method, I mean his ironic detachment with which he looks at Kundera, he sees him as a person who has failed, he has failed morally. This is given by the fact that Kundera was a member of the communist party. This is something that cannot ever be forgiven. A reasonable person would never join the communist party. And if you do do this, you must later openly condemn this, but Kundera has never done this. So the basic conclusion from Mr. Novák's book is that Kundera as a communist opportunist has never got rid of his communist mentality. He has been going out of his way to hide his communist past. In the West, he has created a totally different image of himself than what is the reality here in the Czech environment. It is a person who has systematically, for a very long time, been suppressing evidence about his own life, and his literary work is to a large extent based on his own personal experience, it is material which has often been stolen from other people. And so on. So this is, briefly, what Mr. Novák's book communicates. But I have the feeling that the author knew this even before he started examining Milan Kundera. This has all been written before he started working on his book. I am fascinated by the fact that even Mr. Novák's reading of Kundera's recent books comes to the conclusion that Kundera has remained the same. And even, in Kundera's latest novel, *The Feast of Insignificance*, there is an image of Stalin. I am sure you have read it.

Jan Čulík: Yes.

Petr Fischer: So Jan Novák says that here Kundera again supports Stalinism. In my view, this is an absolute misunderstanding of what Kundera writes in this novel. And you would find many such misunderstandings in Mr. Novák's book.

Jan Čulík: So, basically, this is a hatchet job. A work of a communist mentality? Which condemns Milan Kundera as a communist. Would you agree? If I am to sum it up in such simple terms.

Petr Fischer: This is quite a strong statement. I would perhaps not formulate it exactly like this. Nevertheless, generally speaking, you are probably right. Because what happens here is that whenever Mr. Novák criticises what he sees as Kundera's Marxist, Stalinist opportunism, which develops in some way, he becomes a victim of his own logic and a movement takes place which Kundera enjoys to the full in his literary works. This is this situation when you feel that you have your finger on the pulse of the times and that you are fully in control of everything and then it all suddenly turns against you. I think that exactly this has happened to Jan Novák. You see, the title

of my review of this book is “Kundera's Prosecutor“. And this is not because I myself think this. Jan Novák says at the end, in his Epilogue, that if he met Milan Kundera, this would probably be impossible, because he would need to ask him many prosecutor's questions. So he himself admits that his book is a public accusation of Kundera, that he is trying to tear off his mask, to remove his make-up.

Jan Čulík: My experience: I do know a little about Kundera's literary work, I have been teaching it for many years. I would say that he does deal with his communist past in the whole of his literary work. Would you agree? Do you think that the prosecuting attitude of Jan Novák is legitimate? I am really surprised that Mr. Novák does not seem to deal with the fact that Kundera really analyses communism in his work. No?

Petr Fischer: Well, Mr. Novák does concede this, but I have the feeling that his view of Kundera is that one's life and one's literary work are inseparable, that they are intertwined, especially in Kundera's case. Mr Novák says that if Kundera deals with communism in his literary work, he should be also doing this in public, as a public personality, and he does not do this, he hides his past. We both know from the reading of Kundera's literary work that his texts are incredibly sophisticated structures. In them, it is extremely difficult to separate what is literature and what is a public statement. And I do think that what Kundera does in his novels is much more worthy than if he made some kind of public confession admitting that he used to be an opportunistic Marxist. Because Kundera in his works captures something much more general: Kundera shows in what way human beings behave within history, he shows how history destroys human beings, he shows to what extent human beings are capable or incapable of controlling history, and so on. He also shows how whenever you try to hide something, you always pay a heavy price for this. How whenever you try to erase something, it always eventually emerges from memory in a Freudian manner. I think that Kundera works with this very efficiently, but he deals with this in general terms, without assessing individual details. Which is what Jan Novák demands. Mr. Novák has this neurotic need to try to prove “This is Kundera“, using the memories of various people, using various quotations from public speeches, using literary texts...

Jan Čulík: It is interesting, I really do think, on the basis of reading Kundera's literary works for many years, that Kundera's flirtation with communism, especially in the 1950s, when he was, up to a point, a convinced Stalinist, was for him an incredibly traumatising experience. Which he then tries to come to terms with for the rest of his life. He has even reached the opinion that he was such a fool, in the 1950s, that he draws a general conclusion from this, namely that the human brain is totally incapable of any understanding of anything.

Have you seen this book which was published last year? It has been written by the US Czech scholar Karen von Kunes, *Milan Kundera's Fiction*. Karen von Kunes starts out from that incident when Kundera allegedly reported a CIA agent, Mr Dvořáček, to the Stalinist police in 1950. She

detects an almost hysterical horror of what was going on then in the 1950s in Kundera's work. She points out that - you see if Milan Kundera reported anything to the secret police, he only reported a strange suitcase in the student hall of residence - she finds two fundamental motifs in Kundera's literary works: A suitcase as a symbol of danger and absolute coincidence. She argues that these two things are extremely important for Kundera. He apparently looks at the whole of his life as a great trauma. Maybe on the basis of this incident with Dvořáček. For me, this would be a proof - if Karen von Kunes is right - that Kundera takes his "guilt" - as you spoke about it - very seriously in his literary texts. But I would like to ask you, does Mr. Novák totally ignore or negate the fact that there were reformist communists and that there were some communists who did good things in the 1960s? Does he have this in the book at all? Or how is it?

Petr Fischer: He does have it in the book, when he deals with the 1960s. He likes some communists more than others. Kundera is one of the worst, surprisingly, even though -

Jan Čulík: What is Kundera guilty of then, if I may ask. Why is he one of the worst?

Petr Fischer: It is his absolute opportunism, it is this game-playing, it is the fact that Kundera refuses to own up to his guilt, he does not sufficiently admit that the past was bad, and so on. Some other people did this much better than Kundera.

But then, suddenly the character of Václav Havel appears in Mr. Novák's book. And Havel is the moral beacon which shines everywhere.

Jan Čulík: Which is also exaggerated, isn't it.

Petr Fischer: And Havel's moral beacon illuminates everyone so that we can see how terrible everyone is. And I feel that the whole of Mr. Novák's book is based on the Kundera-Havel controversy from 1968-1969 about the Czech predicament. This was that great debate between Kundera and Havel. And here, Jan Novák, absolutely radically, supports the views of Václav Havel. Kundera looks like a ridiculous left-wing intellectual. Basically, being left wing is horrifying, left wing views are a threat to the whole world, to this very day.

Jan Čulík: But is this not somewhat authoritarian? If you, in a democracy, are unable to accept that people might have different views, right-wing, left-wing, centrist?

Petr Fischer: I do feel that this is a strange inversion of a vulgar interpretation of Marxism.

Jan Čulík: Exactly. It looks as though this is really a communist book, yes, indeed.

Petr Fischer: Exactly. This has happened to him. What he criticises he suddenly does himself, in a strange way. It is obsessive. For instance, Kundera's literary success in the West with his novel *The Joke* is seen as a left-wing conspiracy. Because both the translator of the novel, the publisher of the novel and the author of the preface were all left-wingers. So Kundera's success in the West is undeserved, because his friends had helped him. Mr. Novák's ideology penetrates everything and influences everything he has to say. This unfortunately devalues even the facts which are significant in Mr. Novák's book, I think his work is most worth while where it analyses Milan Kundera's poetry, where it shows in what way he wrote poetry. What poetry he wrote.

Jan Čulík: Those early poems by Milan Kundera, in his collection *Man, a Wide Garden* (1953) there are many Stalinist poems, but I must say there are also anti-Stalinist poems there. Does Mr. Novák deal with this?

Petr Fischer: This is typical. Mr. Novák constantly suspects Kundera of game playing. That Kundera in reality holds a different view from what he writes. I really cannot accept the argument that Kundera has remained a convinced Stalinist to this very day. That he has not seen the light.

I have the feeling that there is one other very important thing. In my view, Milan Kundera suffers from a melancholic incapability to deal with the watershed we are now experiencing. He does try to deal with this in some way in his novels - with the transition from modernism through post-modernism to the current era of post-history. This is something that Kundera does not understand but he tries to deal with it in his novels. He does try to deal with it, after all the ironic movement of history is exactly this.

This is actually captured in his novel *The Feast of Insignificance*. You find resignation in this novel - "I no longer understand this, I no longer have the instruments to deal with this."

But I fear Jan Novák fails to understand this development as well. And this is why Jan Novák has made that radical move to go to the past. He demonstratively supports a set of values represented by Havel in 1968-1969. This is that "normality" which Havel points to in the "Czech predicament" debate: In Havel's view, "normality" is liberal democracy, a free market and freedom of speech. These are those three fundamental values. And so we have suddenly reverted in our debate to 1990.

Jan Čulík: While democracy is kind of disintegrating somewhat, these days.

Petr Fischer: Exactly. And I think the way Jan Novák's book has been written is basically a reaction to the current process of disintegration of democracy. Mr. Novák is strongly against the "devaluation of values", even though what is going on these days is that we are trying to re-define our values. We simply need, again, to reassure ourselves whether these values really do exist. We need to reevaluate which of our values are still worth while. We need to check whether so far, we

have been constructing our values falsely. This is still the approach to be found in Kundera's literary works. And I think that Mr. Novák's book, the way it is written, is a reaction to today's insecurity.

But unfortunately, Mr. Novák has adopted a questionable certainty of a metaphysical kind of natural life. He argues, "This is what the world should look like", the way Havel defined it so many decades ago. Havel called it "a normality".

Jan Čulík: Very interesting.

Petr Fischer: This is one of those paradoxes. In effect, it was Havel who first used the term "a normalisation of the political situation" in our debate here. Except that the communists then, [after the Soviet invasion], turned it round [calling the whole colonial two decades after the 1968 Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia "the Normalisation Period"]. Again, we see here the ironic movement of history. This is a totally Kunderesque motif.

Jan Čulík: Remarkable. Mr Fischer, thank you very much. Thank you for watching and good-bye.

Petr Fischer: Thank you for inviting me. Good-bye.

* * *

Petr Bílek: Novák is a dilettante. He has only a vague idea about Kundera and literature in general

Has a culture war been started in the Czech Republic as a result of the publication of an extensive biography, written by Jan Novák and entitled *Kundera: Czech life and times*? If the 91-year-old writer decides to follow it from his French exile where he has been living since 1975, he can only laugh.

You see, the alleged "struggle" imitates one of the narrative strands of Kundera's first novel *The Joke*. In it, three men are "waging a war" about Helena - an old-fashioned, limited and self-centred creature. In fact, the warring suitors are not interested in her. The aim of the war is not to win a woman, but to solve their own problems and to offer an impressive image of themselves to the public.

In this sense, Novák's biography of Milan Kundera is similar: it pretends to be like Helen of Troy, the most beautiful woman in the world, but in reality it is an extremely inferior piece of writing which has been turned into a "great event" only by the commercial humbug which has been created

around its publication. To sell these 896 pages for the high price of 798 Czech crowns is reminiscent of the commercial methods used by Horst Fuchs in the era of teleshopping of the 1990s.

The 67-year-old Jan Novák has spent a large part of his life in the United States, so his concept of literary biography is inspired by Western standards. It is not a problem that Novák's biography of Kundera does not respect the Czech tradition, according to which biographies are written in a deferential way and their argumentation fully empathises with the subject of the work. In the English speaking world, it is quite common for provocative, highly critical, even scandalising biographies to be published. But it is customary in the English speaking world that biographies are written by authors who have had a good academic education. Jan Novák is a self-centred dilettante. He knows nothing about history. He knows nothing about literary history and that is a real problem.

The way Novák works with his material is reminiscent of the times when the musicologist and later Stalinist Culture Minister Zdeněk Nejedlý wrote his monographs about Smetana: 400 pages about his childhood, 400 more pages about his education, so once we have reached page 1000, finally, Smetana arrives in Prague. Novák has no idea that that kind of writing was comic already one hundred years ago, when Roman Jakobson compared it to the action of the police, who, to be on the safe side, arrests everyone who happened to be at the crime scene.

Novák's fetishism of a collector means that anything that has some kind of connection with the life of Milan Kundera must be included in his book. So the book gives prominent positions to a revered female beauty in Kundera's secondary school class as well as to his other fellow students because Novák is convinced that the characteristic features of the teenage Kundera, excavated from memory 75 years later, somehow shed light on Kundera's later behavior and will allow us to understand his allegedly decadent nature.

Novák re-tells the content of the pamphlet "How to listen to music", which Kundera's father, the musicologist, published during World War II, because surely Kundera's father had greatly influenced Milan and the father's book undoubtedly reflects Milan Kundera's ways of thinking. The biographer reads the minutes of the 1956 Second Congress of Czechoslovak Writers only to discover that Kundera did not speak there at all. But since he had spent time reading the minutes, why not retell their content for us on a few pages.

In this respect, specialist advisors provided a perfect service for Jan Novák. They gathered together for him anything that you could think of. How come, though, that instead of producing a work comparable to his novel *Zatím dobrý*, (*So far so good*), about the Mašín brothers who decided to fight the Stalinist regime in Czechoslovakia in the 1950s with arms, in the case of the Kundera biography, Jan Novák has drowned himself in the amassed material?

A scoundrel, whichever way you look at him

Evidently, the main problem is that the task that Jan Novák has been given has been misconceived. Jan Novák used to be a good, sometimes even remarkable fiction writer. He knew how to write the biographies of those people into whose worlds he had been invited. However, in this Kundera project he was asked to write a book with footnotes and with references which were supposed to substantiate all his assertions. And so Novák included thousands of minor details in his texts. These, however, have not in themselves created a clear and persuasive narrative. So Novák needed to impose a unifying “interpretation” onto all these details. He decided to offer us Kundera's life as the life story of a scoundrel and a social climber who abuses literature for his own commercial benefit.

Thus Novák found himself in a situation which was totally different from when he wrote about the film director Miloš Forman, the anticommunist fighters the Mašín brothers or the famous Czech runner Emil Zátopek. When he wrote about the individuals who were seen as good people, it was enough to emphasise their positive, remarkable features and to ignore their problematic characteristics. His image of Zátopek in his comic entitled *Zátopek - when you are exhausted, run faster!* is quite typical of this writing method. In a Hollywood manner, Novák here piles up the positive features and does not emburden the portrait he is creating with any negative characteristics.

In order to turn Kundera into a scoundrel, however, Novák exaggerates his negative features. A random example of this: The biographer is about to write about the fact that in 1952, Milan Kundera submitted his application to become a member of the Translators' Circle, a subsidiary organisation within the Union of Czechoslovak Writers. But even this bit of information must be presented as a controversial event and so Novák uses dramatic expressions in order to describe it. What words does Novák use to describe this application? Kundera was “vibrating with ambition“. He was trying to “gatecrash into the Union“.

Novák is pretending that he is writing a serious scholarly monograph, but in order to make sure that it does not disintegrate, he helps himself with metaphors from the writing of fiction. These metaphors enhance the image of the miscreant. Sometimes, they even construct it from scratch.

Apart from using a writing method taken over from fiction, whereby he uses tabloid vocabulary in order to describe neutral phenomena as dastardly, Novák also uses other methods. Phenomena which cannot be presented as evil, are at least described as para-normal, hence mysterious and suspicious. The fact that the theatre production of the first drama written by Milan Kundera was successful, is described by Novák like this: “*The Owners of the Keys* gained control over the Czech world of theatre so fast that it is difficult to understand.” Novák cannot admit that the evil Kundera scored a success, so he needs to hint that something stank.

All these are quite interesting manipulations. But most of the image of Milan Kundera as a scoundrel is much more boring and idiotic. Novák describes an event and then pronounces a

judgment over it. How does he substantiate his judgments? He says that these are his views. He is convinced that his judgments are correct. He feels like it.

Milan Kundera publishes an article, but Novák is suspicious that this was fraudulent. Any evidence of this? Since the article is about classical music, surely the article must have been co-written with his father. Novák says: “In my view, this article was the work of both of them, it had been written by father and son in cooperation.” No evidence, just “feelings“.

Feeble notions about literature

People are perfectly free to hold personal views on various things. However, the question is, why publicly announce them when we cannot substantiate them. This is another unpleasant feature which makes Novák's book substandard.

Jan Novák is an amateur and a dilettante. It was not until the four years during which he was writing the Kundera book that he finally tried to gain some knowledge of Czech history and Czech literature. Thus he overwhelms his book with descriptions of things that seem to him to be remarkable discoveries - yet most of his readers would have known these things for many years. Thus Novák feels the need to tell us that the Czech surrealist poet Vítězslav Nezval wrote a poem about the wife of the Czech Stalinist CP leader Klement Gottwald. He feels the need to quote Stalinist poetry written by writer Pavel Kohout or to tell us that Klement Gottwald died shortly after Stalin.

Novák maybe puts these bits of text into his work because he wants to translate them later into other languages in countries where readers do not have this knowledge. But it is unclear why he retells in great detail - in the style of a primary school pupil's reading diary the content of all of Kundera's short stories and novels. Maybe he does this because he has written his book also for those people who have never read Kundera's *The Joke* or his *Unbearable Lightness of Being*.

Novák's book presents material about Kundera and then he pontificates about it as his interpreter and judge. But if we leave aside Franz Kafka, Milan Kundera is the only Czech author about whose work literally dozens of monographs have been published. In Czech, in English, in French, in Korean.

For a mysterious reason, Jan Novák ignores this secondary literature about Kundera's literary work, even though it has existed for decades. He ignores the monographs about Kundera even though many of them do not necessarily interpret his work positively and according to his wishes. Novák's whole game in the style “Look what has occurred to me when I read Milan Kundera's *The Joke*” is extremely embarrassing because Novák does not really know what literature is and how it functions.

The Leninist theory of reflection

In this respect, Novák refers to a single work, Norman Holland's book *The Dynamics of Literary Response*, which was a curiosity already fifty years ago, when it was published. Holland had discovered for himself Freud's belief that the literary author projects - often unwittingly and subconsciously - his instincts, his hidden characteristics, his suppressed urges, and so on, into his literary work. Holland then applied this belief to his reading of literature.

So using this Freudian junk, his own intuition and experience, Novák sets out to look at Kundera. He looks for “evidence” in Kundera's writing of instances where allegedly Kundera unwittingly included his hidden feelings in his literary texts. This obsession, when Kundera's fictitious characters are being constantly connected with the author or some other real persons, is justified by Novák by referring to Proust's assertion that “a writer's ego manifests itself only in books“. However, what Proust meant was that a writer's ego is not accessible anywhere else but in books and we should not be nosying about in the lives of authors.

However, Novák has turned Proust's statement into an amateurish version of the Leninist theory of reflection. Using this theory, he “reveals” that Jaromil in Kundera's novel *Life is Elsewhere*, Nečas in his drama *The Owners of the Keys* and Tomáš in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* are all masked Kunderas. And if a character in Kundera's work cannot be Kundera himself, it must be some other real person. So Novák tells us which of the characters is really Kundera's friend Jestřáb, where his wife Věra is hiding, and so on. Thus arises the most interesting paradox of this media event: A book which is based on an understanding of literature, with which the author would be able to graduate from only the most neglected Czech secondary schools, has been jointly published by two prestigious Czech publishing houses, Argo and Paseka.

The overall image as Kundera as a bastard, offered by Novák, is on the whole based on such dilettante methods. The biographer has gathered together existing sources and as a narrator proclaims his verdict: Kundera is guilty, I am convinced of this.

Nevertheless, there is a strange tension in the book. With a certain amount of fascination, a number of sections describes events and phenomena seemingly in a neutral way, but then it is as though an alarm clock rings for Novák: You must condemn, you have promised a book which will create a scandal! The monotony of the condemnations however deprives Novák's book of any charm of openness because Novák never gives preference to the drama of events. He never emphatically succumbs to the complexity or ambiguity of the narrative.

Far too heavy a burden

In short, Novák's need to judge on the basis of a pre-existing ideological filter wins over the narrative. From this point of view, even the fact that Milan Kundera re-published a part of his article about the Czech surrealist poet Vítězslav Nezval, which was originally printed in the *Kultura* journal, in a booklet published by the district library in the Moravian town of Znojmo, is a disgraceful act. Novák is unable to judge whether such recycling was or has been a common and understandable practice, so he immediately unmasks Kundera as a fraud: he says it is “shocking”, “embarrassing” and it allows Novák to raise a number of ethical questions which he leaves without an answer. Novák cannot understand that the concept of instinctual poetry, quoted from Nezval, who listens to the “noise” within his soul, is only one of many possible ideas about how poetry works. Since Kundera is a rational poet and he does not hear any noise within his soul, for Novák, he is not a poet at all.

And more: the witnesses of Kundera's youth are now around ninety and only some of them are telling Jan Novák what he wants to hear. So Novák manufactures a group of reliable witnesses, while those whose testimony does not contribute to the image of Milan Kundera as a bastard, - for instance the testimony of the journalist and critic A.J. Liehm - are turned by Novák into unusable old men, disabled by senility.

Novák's approach of giving equal importance to written sources and subjective memories of old people who talk about the times of seventy years ago is unbelievable. Just like when Novák “analyses” Kundera without any support of existing interpretations, he works with oral history without feeling the need to gain some knowledge about how it should be used. When Novák then offers us statements like “the only rule of poetry is that it has no rules“, the reader just feels sorry for Novák. He was evidently given a task which absolutely cannot be completed due to his lack of ability and lack of education.

A novel with footnotes

Novák's criticism of Kundera's alleged “lying” is also based on his illiteracy. In exile, in the first half of the 1980s, Kundera speaks differently about his life from what facts indicate. To ask Novák that he should give Kundera the right to do mystifications, that would evidently be too much.

We should, however, expect Novák to respect the fact that the philosopher Walter Benjamin, when discussing Proust and Kafka, spoke about the methods of constructing an image of an author - and again, that he did so almost one hundred years ago. Novák should respect that the construction of an image of an author, or a myth of an author has been a legitimate category of literary scholarship for many decades. As an emigrant from communist Czechoslovakia to the West, using his own experience, surely Novák should be aware of the fact that in a new cultural context certain things do not work and they must be simplified or changed.

To end, let us come back to weird Norman Holland for a moment. Influenced by Sigmund Freud, Holland argues not only that the author is unwittingly reflected in any literary work, but also, that the reader is free to find whatever he or she wants or needs in a literary work. Jan Novák does not quote this argument, but he certainly does apply it to his work.

The scandalous image of Milan Kundera that Novák offers us is primarily the product of Novák's desire and of his fantasmagoric ideas. Novák has managed to “unmask” Kundera. In his view, Kundera is different from how literary scholarship has presented him to date, because, normally, literary scholarship avoids tabloid and dilettante methods, which Jan Novák uses deliberately and systematically.

If, to end, inspired by Jan Novák, we also speculate a little, we find an author in a trap behind this work. The material offered him dramas of an almost classic, ancient Greek nature. It would have been possible to develop them in many remarkable ways, if the author was capable of empathy and of sophisticated analysis. But since the principle of a best seller says clearly that the number of sold copies of the work will be directly influenced by whether the author manages to turn Kundera into a really devious monster, Novák must systematically behave like a prosecutor with an amateurish interest in psychoanalysis, who pushes all this remarkable material into pre-existing compartments and presents these to the poor reader as though they were solid instruments of scholarly analysis. The trapped author has thus created a superficial and shallow novel with many footnotes.

NOTES:

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- Jan Čulík, “Man, a Wide Garden. Milan Kundera as a Young Stalinist”. *Blok, międzynarodowe pismo poświęcone kulturze stalinowskiej i poststalinowskiej*. 2007. <http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/3806/>
 - In an exclusive interview given to Jan Čulík for *Britské listy* at the Uherské Hradiště Summer Film School in July 2004, Vojtěch Jasný, one of the most important Czech film directors of the era of the 1960s, who was also a communist in the early 1950s and knew Milan Kundera well, explained the circumstances of Kundera's expulsion from the communist party. Kundera's girlfriend Monika Gajdošová reported Kundera to the authorities for mocking the ongoing regime campaign which was trying to persuade workers to sign “shock-worker pledges”. Here there is evidence that Kundera was critical of the Stalinist regime from its inception. See Jan Čulík, “Vojtěch Jasný: Dítě, dobrodruh a filmař (Vojtěch Jasný: A Child, an Adventurer and a Film Maker)”. *Britské listy*, 27th July 2004. <https://legacy.blisty.cz/art/19053.html>
 - Petr Třešňák, Adam Hradilek, “Milan Kundera's denunciation”. *Respekt*, 13th October, 2008, <https://www.respekt.cz/respekt-in-english/milan-kundera-s-denunciation>
 - Jakub Češka, “The process which turned Milan Kundera into an informer“. *Britské listy*, 8th June, 2009, <https://legacy.blisty.cz/art/47276.html>
 - Karen von Kunes, *Milan Kundera's Fiction: A Critical Approach to Existential Betrayals*. Lexington Books, New York and London, 2019.

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- ❖ Karen von Kunes speaks about her Kundera monograph in this fifteen-minute Britské listy TV interview: “Detektivní záhada: Nakolik byl Milan Kundera udavačem?” (A detective mystery: To what extent was Milan Kundera an informer) *Britské listy Interview* 176. 1st August 2018.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pfAMzjybMNM>
 - ❖ Jan Novák, *Kundera – Český život a doba* (*Milan Kundera - Czech life and times*). Argo a Paseka Publishers, Prague, 2020. 898 pp.
 - ❖ *Rozhovor Britských listů* 295. *Je nová kniha o Kunderovi komunistická?* (*Britské listy Interview* 295. *Is the new book about Kundera communist?*)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QTyrZ2BAZxQ>
 - ❖ Petr Fischer is a brilliant cultural commentator. He was an excellent Programme Controller of the Radio Prague Vltava station, but he was removed from this post two years ago by populists in the management of Radio Prague.
 - ❖ Petr A. Bílek, “Recenze: Novák je diletant, o Kunderovi a literatuře tak vůbec má chabou představu” (“A Review: Novák is a dilettante, his ideas about Kundera and literature in general are really feeble“). *Aktualne.cz*. 3rd July, 2020.
<https://magazin.aktualne.cz/kultura/literatura/recenze-novak-je-diletant-kundera-cesky-zivot-a-doba-recenze/r~5c552c94bc7111ea8b230cc47ab5f122/>
 - ❖ Jan Čulík, *Knihy za ohradou: Česká literatura v exilových nakladatelstvích 1971-1989* (*Books behind the Fence: Czech Literature in the emigré publishing houses 1971-1989*). Prague, Trizonia, 1991. The quote from Jan Novák is on p. 163, the section of Jan Novák’s early writing is on pp. 163-165.