

MILAN KUDERA – THE CZECH SCANDAL

Peter STEINER

*History is written by the victors. Legends are woven
by the people. Writers fantasize. Only death is certain.*

Danilo Kis, *To Die for One's Country Is Glorious.*

The skeleton is out of the closet! "Milan Kundera," the slick bi-monthly *Fame* has declared, "*Czechoslovak laureate-in-exile, isn't so popular in his homeland anymore - especially with Václav Havel, that country's resident playwright and president.*" This juicy headline was followed by a choir of authoritative voices (like that of "Michael Žantovský, Havel's short, handsome, and hip spokesman") insinuating that Kundera's literary prestige is suspect if not illegitimate; it has a whiff of indecency, immorality.¹ According to "public opinion" - he omniscient doxa - Milan Kundera is a scandal.

A case of a disgraceful behavior, a cause of stumbling, these are not the only ideas the word scandal evokes. Derived from the Greek *skandalon* - a trap with a bait placed inside - it carries intriguing possibilities. It brings together, as Marcel Detienne points out, "a dual motion, repulsion" and attraction. One points the finger, one becomes outraged, one makes a scene in order to eloin, to put a distance between oneself and the other--between oneself in the eyes of others--and that very thing by which one is in danger of being attracted, seduced, or trapped. Like a double bind whose hieroglyph would be one hand cutting the other."²

Most of the Czech Kundera-bashers epitomize the curious, schizophrenic condition Detienne described so well. Their diatribes against the all-too-successful expatriate are Delphic pronouncements, animated by the contradictory desires that generate them, and hence they resist a simple, synthesizing interpretation. One example of this is Zdeněk Urbánek's one-paragraph "Postscript in the Prague Samizdat Edition" which I came across in the Czech émigré journal *Svědectví* in 1985 and have remembered ever since. It was appended to Urbánek's translation of an interview, "In Defence of Intimacy," that Philip Roth conducted with Kundera and published in *The Sunday Times Magazine* in May 1984:

Upon completing this text, the translator was not sure whether he should offer it for reading. It has a dust-jacket triviality for which P[hilip] R[oth] is, unfortunately, also to blame. With his experience as a freely acting and thinking man, he should have silenced his interrogatee roughly after the second sentence. But, on the other hand, maybe we should know this. Kovo, Art Centrum and other [state] exporting companies are the ones who should be sorry that they had not earlier cooperated with [certain] other institutions and begun to export for hard currency less crafty, or even craftier, charlatans. Now it is perhaps too late to recommend this to their attention. We blew it. And those who would not benefit from the hard currency proceeds [of the transaction] have no reason to bemoan the departures of some of those who left. What would they do here anyway--if, even when they are at large, they cannot find simple, generous, unfeigned and unpretending freedom and precision of thought and expression. Adieu. Good by. Lebe wohl. Have a good time over there. And keep quiet about the details of what goes on here. Like M. K. after your departure from here you were immediately "euphoric" so that the truth about life in this place escapes you. Write about what you experience there. Or, write whatever you wish which, at least for some readers, will be good for nothing.³

The "Postscript" starts in an aporetic mode. "Upon completing this text," Urbánek confesses "the translator was not sure whether he should offer it for reading." What is the reason for this hesitation and should we take it seriously? There are at least two reasons for caution. The "Postscript," first of all, appears only at the end of the interview, after a reader--unaware of the interview's problematic nature--has digested it anyway. Secondly, and more importantly, the sequence of events seems reversed in Urbánek's presentation. Since cultural transmission always presupposes selection, the value of the target text for the translator is determined well in advance of his labors. He is either being paid for his technical skills (but then complaining about his job, he is like a dentist resentful of his patients' bad breath). Or, he translates a text of his own choice (presumably by reading it first), in which case he should know what he is getting into.

But enough of this nitpicking! Let us extend to Urbánek the benefit of the doubt. Perhaps he was duped by the glitzy pages of *The Sunday Times Magazine* to such an extent that only at the very last moment did he notice the duplicitous tone in Kundera's voice and the sneering grimace on his face. Perhaps this belated discovery made him sad or even aghast. Still, he would have had two venues opened to him: either to throw the manuscript away, or to publish it. And Urbánek, as we know, opted for the latter, supplementing the text with an appropriate warning.

This decision, the "Postscript" hastens to assure us, was not taken frivolously. In offering it to his readers the translator was motivated above all by honorable pedagogical intentions. How can one, so the argument goes, recognize evil if he or she has never encountered it? To do evil is

definitely evil but to show evil for the sake of education is good. In this spirit, Urbánek decided to offer Kundera's "dust-jacket triviality" to his compatriots as a bad example: as something they ought to know but should not appreciate.

Urbánek's strategy for neutralizing the pernicious effect of Kundera's words, however, is not devoid of danger. By admitting that under certain circumstances evil can be good, he is willy-nilly undermining his own position and the basis of his judgment about Kundera. From this perspective, values suddenly lose their definition and turn into a mixture of opposites, a dreaded Derridean *pharmakon* that is simultaneously both a poison and a cure. And here comes the rub! Given the variations among human beings, it is obvious that one person's poison may be another's cure. In other words, Urbánek can never be entirely sure that a virgin soul will not fall for Kundera's sweet talk (after all, is he not a "crafty charlatan"--a vendor of quack medicine?) and become polluted to such a degree that, despite the warning label (attached so inopportunistically post factum), he or she will mistake vice for virtue? Is Urbánek going to take the responsibility for the ruin of this mind?

Such a dilemma, I would like to stress, is not solely Urbánek's. All social reformers, who in the name of Truth or Justice marched toward a better future, have had to face it. The metaphors of omelet and broken eggshells, or cut-down forest and flying chips are invoked to gloss over the few unfortunates trampled in the rush toward Utopia. Urbánek, I am happy to say, escapes this snare by placing the responsibility where it squarely belongs: on the co-author of this textual monstrosity, Philip Roth.

"Silencing the interrogatee roughly..."--what an intoxicating prospect for the unfettered mind. Midnight...a darkened basement..."the groveling on the floor and screaming for mercy, the crack of broken bones, smashed teeth, and bloody clots of hair." But, surely, I am taking too much liberty with Urbánek's words. His message ought to be more straightforward. Freedom of speech, Urbánek is arguing, is too precious a commodity to be distributed liberally. It must be preserved at any cost even if this sometimes means censorship. And nobody who has ever experienced the heady feeling of freedom needs to be persuaded about this point: whence Roth's unfortunate failing.

To prove Urbánek right, one might perform a mental experiment, imagining that Roth had behaved as a free man should in muzzling the perfidious villain. Roth would have done so in an elegant manner, without recourse to undue violence, perhaps by eliminating all record of Kundera's raving after his second sentence with a short footnote: "*The 'interview' with this*

paradoxalist does not end here, however. He could not resist and continued it. But it seems to me that we may stop here."⁴ There would have been an immediate reward for Roth had he acted so courageously. Anybody with a modicum of education could not but applaud his shrewd literary allusion. And in the long run.... Well, in the long run, one of the beneficiaries who come to my mind... is, well, Urbánek himself. With the Kundera interview erased, the Czech audience would have remained oblivious to a genre of "dust-jacket triviality" and it could read in full innocence Urbánek's regular column in the daily *Lidové noviny*.

But it was not Roth alone, Urbánek continues, who erred in judgment. The same holds for the Czechoslovak Communist foreign trade companies: Kovo, Art Centrum, and above all the dreaded "other institutions" who missed the chance to cash in on Kundera's mediocre charlatanism. "Now it is perhaps too late," Urbánek sighs wistfully, "to recommend this to their attention. We blew it." These two sentences, I must admit, give me the creeps. Is Urbánek intimating that he has a special channel to the Secret Police through which he can pass his expert advice? Moreover, is he implying that, as one of "those who would not benefit from the hard currency proceeds," he is collaborating with the authorities for free, out of ideological sympathy? If even Urbánek..., I kept repeating to myself, then they know everything indeed!

But after several sleepless nights (I began to smoke again at that time, I think), a plausible interpretation occurred to me that mitigated my horror. Urbánek is engaging in the time honored poetic figure of irony--the elusive trope of dissimulation that permits us to say something other than what we mean. In no way, therefore, does Urbánek implicate himself in the unsavory connections that upset me so much but, in a catachrestic manner, he draws attention to Kundera's cohorts and the despicable milieu natural to this pitiful creature. Through this stratagem the subsequent question of "what would [M.K.] do here" if he had not emigrated becomes purely rhetorical, and only a dullard could give the wrong answer.

This interpretation, however, casts Urbánek in a strange light and moves him uncomfortably close to Kundera. For is he not himself succumbing to the sin of which he accused the cunning exile: an ironic stance marred by feint and pretence, leading to an ambiguity of thought and expression, a scandal described in a scandalous language? Is this not a logical trap, an example simultaneously good (as a demonstration that what repulses may also attract) and bad (Urbánek's unfortunate stumbling)?

Let us step out of the double bind Urbánek's text posits. We must read the "Postscript" in a serious manner, without equivocations! The text hints at an important difference between

Kundera's and Urbánek's ironies. Kundera was "at large" in a free, democratic society where the duty of every citizen is to speak his mind directly and honestly. Urbánek, in contrast, suffered under a totalitarian government that erased the line between truth and falsehood. In such circumstances, needless to say, irony is the only safe weapon the oppressed have for subverting general dishonesty and corruption. Yet, as many respectable philosophers (the list is too long to be included here) have warned, this simple argument has a hollow ring. Irony, they argue, is so explosive that it can overthrow not only ideological lies but also the very idea of law, morals and truth. Its product is nihilism and self-destruction.

In other words, if readers detect in Urbánek's discourse the smallest grain of ironic ambiguity, they may, rightly or wrongly, become suspicious of his intentions. They might think, and why not, that the lure of the bait in the Kundera-trap was too strong for Urbánek to resist, and that all his fury and scorn heaped on the "laureate-in exile" were just a performance, choreographed to hide this fact. "How can we tell the dancer from the dance?"

The disturbing suspicion provoked by Urbánek's slip into irony is not, unfortunately, a laughing matter. Once it enters readers' minds it will necessarily color their perceptions of a text. Infected with the bacillus of doubt as they plow through the "Postscript" toward its end, they cannot but notice the increasing affinity between its author and Kundera. In particular, they will look with a keen eye on Urbánek's advice to "euphoric" Czech exiles personified by M. K., which amounts to: "*Shut up, or if not, we won't bother with you!*" These are callous words for uprooted people already isolated through geographical and linguistic displacement. Perhaps. Yet, what any true cognoscenti of Czech verse cannot fail to hear in them as well an echo of Kundera's 1953 poem "Christmas," which ostracized Czech expatriates in a similar tone: "*A windy snow will sweep away from our forehead / all that is false and alien. / Even the dogs should turn away / from those who betrayed us. / There abroad the head of the traitors / grows heavy and falls down. / Today their solitude / is becoming a coffin.*"⁵ The logic of scandal is inexorable, and even Urbánek has not escaped its steel jaws. The trap has closed and his aggressiveness toward Kundera has turned inevitably into identification.

Postscript in the Philadelphia "tamizdat" edition. Upon completing this text, the author was not sure whether he should offer it for reading.... My God, I sound like poor Urbánek. Maybe there is no way out. I'm falling into the same trap that he did, I fear. Just looking at the last paragraph of what I wrote brought the message home. Upon re-reading it, I realized that

Urbánek did not ventriloquize Kundera's verse because he agreed with it (as I claimed), but because he wanted to ridicule his Communist past. And the second time round I became convinced that the poetic echo reverberates solely in my ears, not in Urbánek's "Postscript," and that all this apparent repercussion might have been nothing more than an accident, an irony of history, like a story I remember from an old, old novel, a story about the excommunication of a Communist (or was it about communication with an ex-Communist?). This sudden revelation made me sick of wit and sarcasm and in my wounded heart I began to yearn for days of old when "laughter was not mocking, love was not laughable and hate was not shy." And at this moment the words of eternal wisdom came to me, about history written by victors, the legends woven by people, the fantasizing writers, and the certainty of death. Upon a third re-reading of my awkward piece have I made these words its epigraph.

¹ Carlin Romano, "Czech Mates," Fame, Summer 1990, pp. 48-56.

² The Creation of Mythology, tr. M. Cook (Chicago, 1986), p. 14.

³ "Dovětek v pražském samizdatovém vydání," Svědectví, no. 74, 1985, p. 368.

⁴ Fyodor Dostoevsky, Notes from Underground, tr. R. E. Matlaw (New York, 1960), p. 115.

⁵ "Vánoce," Člověk zahrada širá: Verše (Prague, 1953), p. 25.