

KUNDERA'S NOVELS IN THE CONTEXT OF TRANSLATION

Jan RUBES

In 1975, seven years after the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia, Milan Kundera left his country for France. This was at the time when Husak's power made it easier to get rid of "anticommunist elements". Kundera had chosen France for several reasons. First, he spoke French relatively well. In the early sixties, he translated and published an anthology of Apollinaire's poetry. Secondly, his books, and especially "The Joke", published in France, had been very successful. Thirdly, he was, like most Czech intellectuals, attached to French cultural heritage.

Upon his arrival in France, Kundera had been known as the author of the novel "The Joke" (1968), a book of short stories "Laughable Loves" (1970), and another novel "Life is Elsewhere" (1973). His fourth book, "The Farewell Waltz" was published in 1976, some months after his arrival in France.

The interest in Kundera and the success of his books in France seem easy to comprehend. Since 1966 Czechoslovak intellectuals tried to integrate new democratic elements in the political practice. In the beginning of 1968 the communist party, which until then had rejected any attempt at post Stalinist reforms, became the initiator of the social transformation process. The role of communist intellectuals was essential : whereas they had legitimized the cultural policy of the party since the 50s, suddenly they became, in the context of liberalization, the most dynamic group in society.

In France, the situation of a number of very well known intellectuals who joined the party after World War Two was similar. Their aspirations remained increasingly in contradiction with the conservative elements in the Central committee (Maurice Thorez, Waldeck-Rochet, Georges Marchais). The Czech reform process therefore justified, in their eyes, the necessary development also inside the French communist party.

One of the prominent French intellectuals representing this current was Louis Aragon. With his wife, Elsa Triolet, he often traveled through Czechoslovakia on his way to Moscow, and was always received by the highest political and cultural authorities. In 1967, one of Aragon's friends in Prague, Antonin Liehm, a journalist, translator and cinema critic, drew his attention to a recently published book by Milan Kundera called "The Joke". Some months later, Aragon introduced Liehm and Kundera to the best French publishing house, Gallimard and convinced its director Claude Gallimard it was worth publishing.

The novel was translated by Marcel Aymonin and published with Aragon's famous preface entitled "The novel that I consider a major work". The book came out in the autumn of 1968, soon after the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. All these events resulted in French readers being extremely interested in this book and thanks to its literary qualities "The Joke" became an immediate success.

Marcel Aymonin, who translated "The Joke" into French, played a very interesting role in Kundera's literary career. Aymonin, a French citizen, arrived in Prague in 1948 as "attaché culturel" of the French embassy and a new director of the French Institute. Three years later, in 1951, the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs informed the French Embassy about its decision to close the Ernest Denis French Institute. Its employers had to leave Czechoslovakia within twenty days. Four days before the deadline, Marcel Aymonin asked for political asylum in Prague. Czechoslovak security services organized a press conference where Aymonin publicly denounced different people working with him as spies, and enemy agents of the Czechoslovak communist regime, both French diplomats and Czech citizens. Some of them were arrested and sentenced to as many as twenty five years in prison¹. Aymonin, during the following years, lived in Prague, worked as assistant professor at the French department at the Faculty of Arts of the Charles University. He was charged in France "in absentia", but granted pardon in the sixties, and after the Soviet invasion in 1968 he left Czechoslovakia for France, where he taught the Czech language at the University of Nanterre near Paris.

In Prague, where he was the sole French intellectual whom the party could trust, Aymonin soon established himself as an exclusive translator of Czech authors. First, of novels written in the spirit of socialist realism (Julius Fucik, "People, Be Vigilant", Antonin Zapotocky, "New Combatants Will Come", Jan Drda, "The Silent Barricade"), then of classics as Karel Capek, and finally of contemporary authors. Many of these translations were published by the Orbis, Artia and other Czech publishing houses, in order to promote Czech literature abroad. Aymonin's quasi monopoly position in the field of French translation was confirmed in the sixties, with the increased interest in Czech literature in France. Books and plays by the philosopher Karel Kosik, the novelist Jiri Sotola, and the playwright Vaclav Havel were all translated by Aymonin. It would seem that none of these young authors knew anything about his political past and the denunciation campaign in 1951. By that time, Aymonin had established his reputation as an important person, well known in Prague intellectual and political circles. A famous womanizer, enjoying the social atmosphere of Prague in the mid sixties, as described in Kundera's "Laughable Loves". Therefore, it was only natural he was asked to translate "The Joke".

¹ Mr Pospisil for example. His wife has been sentenced to fifteen years ; both were amnestied later.

Since his arriving in France in 1975, Kundera had progressively modified his own image. Even if he has never admitted this, it is undeniable. I have no doubt his intention was genuine: the events (the Prague Spring, the Soviet invasion, the semi-clandestine literary activity and the exile) had changed him and he severed, once he arrived in Paris, all relations with his former country. In this process, he presented himself exclusively as a novelist, denying any implication in the official cultural policy, saying nothing about his engaged poetry, about his plays and essays published in Prague. Through Aymonin's name, however, he was still linked to the past. In France, where the "Aymonin case" was well known, Kundera attempted to make sure his name was no more associated with Aymonin's. At the same time he expressed his disappointment over the quality of the translation of "The Joke" : "In 1968 and 1969 The Joke had been translated into all western languages. How tristeful. In France, the translator has practically rewritten my novel completely changing my style... I have found a translator friend, faithful and admirable, François Kérel... So, as all the changes made in the second version of "The Joke" in 1980 seemed to me inadequate, I decided to work on the translation once again, from top to bottom, and I revised all books published in France."²

Consequently, the connection with Aymonin come to the end. In 1982, Aragon died and in 1985, the new translation of "The Joke" was published without his preface. Kundera argues, and he is partly right, that Aragon's preface was essentially political and didn't adequately stress the literary qualities of the book. But I think that he wanted his name not to be associated with Aragon any more³.

Since that time, Kundera finds himself in the particular situation of an exile writer condemned to communicate with his readers essentially through translation. Although his books were published in the Czech in Toronto, in an exile publishing house founded by the writer Josef Skvorecky, none of these books reached readers in his country where they were banned and practically nobody knew them. Kundera realized he had only one exclusive reader : his French translator François Kérel : "Writing "The Unbearable Lightness of the Being" I thought very often about Prague but did I think of my Czech readers? The only person I really thought about was François Kérel who had to translate my manuscript. Forming my sentences, I heard, as an echo, their future French version. Closely following his translation, I didn't see any difference with the original and I accepted to be translated (in Portugal, in Brazil, in Greece, in Sweden, in Island, in Norwegian) from the French version, with which I identified myself."⁴

In the revised versions Kundera insisted a note be included that "the French translation has the same authentic value as the Czech original". From that moment on, many things started changing in Kundera's style. Essentially, he no longer addressed his books to Czech readers but

² Milan Kundera, *Quatre-vingt-neuf mots*, *Le Débat* n° 37, Novembre 1985, p. 87-117

³ Aragon will stay member of the French communist party to his death.

⁴ Milan Kundera, *Quatre-vingt-neuf mots*, *Le Débat* n° 37, Novembre 1985, p. 89

to French readers or other foreign language speakers. In his stories, the intimacy of individual life is constantly confronted with a social and political situation : destiny crushed by History ; the small personal events and world History ; actors and victims ; how to survive in that situation... When the topic of the book had been inspired by Czech reality, he had to explain certain situations : the political context of the Prague Spring 68, the history of February 48 when the communist party seized power, the “normalization” and its personalities Gustav Husak or the pop singer Karel Gott.

In addressing his books to the French reader, Kundera was constantly confronted with the difficulty of expressing exactly the meaning of certain words, certain concepts used in Czech that had been changed in the French translation. This constant swaying between both languages had led Kundera to write a personal dictionary of 89 words, published in the review “Le Débat” in 1985, and later with a few corrections in “The Art of the Novel” where he comments on 71 words.

To be more precise, it is rather an anthology of ideas, proposals of individual perceptions of the two worlds : objective (the word, its common denotation) and subjective (the connotation) based on different life experiences : Czech and French. What is *The Home* for a Czech (domov) (das Heim) for a German and (chez-soi) for a Frenchman. Or what is the meaning of “Slav” : for Kundera it is a purely negative notion, “Soviet” a lexical screen behind which all russified peoples of the Empire hide , “Czechoslovakia” never used by Kundera and replaced by Bohemia. It is a dictionary of key notions used in his work. The idea is not new : already in his novel “The Unbearable Lightness of the Being” published in 1984, Kundera entitles chapter 3 “Words misunderstood” and produces there “A Short Dictionary of Misunderstood Words”, a source of misunderstanding between the two protagonists, Sabina, a Czech émigré, and Franz, her Swiss boy friend. Very basic words : “Woman”, “Fidelity and betrayal”, “Music”, “Light and darkness”... How is it possible that so many simple words have different meaning for two young people living at the same time and born less than five hundred miles apart? Because of the language? Because of the political context? Because of the social condition? Because one is a man, the other a woman? Because of their behavior ? Because of their past? All of these, of course. And this novel is to a large extent, a pretext for Kundera, to express differences and the difficulty to understand other people and to be understood by them.

The same problem, in a different context, preoccupied another Czech writer more than sixty years earlier. In 1920, Karel Capek, later a very successful author and an important personality of Czech cultural life between the two world wars, published a short book entitled “Words criticized”⁵. In the preface he explains the reasons pushing him to write this book : “An error, a stupidity or a lie doesn’t begin with an idea but with a word. Because we use words more

⁵ Karel Capek, *Kritika slov*, Odeon, 1920

frequently than ideas, the aim of my criticism is double : First, to review the contents of a word, second to review the use made of a word because it is absolutely not the same”.

Capek’s approach is essentially philological : he looks at the etymology or semantic meaning of words. But behind all the commentaries appears a moral intention : In the twenties, Czechoslovakia was a young democracy and Capek was closely attached to Masaryk’s philosophy and ethic. We had to build our nation on sound moral basis and the language was to be a tool in the struggle against lies, Capek seems to say. And he will pursue this idea until his last unfinished book, “Life and work of the composer Foltyn” (1938). It is a meditation about truth and lies, about being and appearance. The composer has built an image of a genius, misunderstood by society. The question which Capek asks is very simple : is Foltyn, the protagonist of his book, a genial composer or a mere swindler? Some witnesses assert his music is beautiful, others assert it’s plagiarism. No answer is proffered. The book is unfinished and Capek, may not have had an answer either.

Back to Kundera. In 1986 he published “The Art of The Novel” a series of essays about literature and music, some of them already published in various literary magazines. It is evidently written in French, but at the same time Kundera declared : “For some years I have been trying to write articles and essays in French. But thinking and speaking are two different operations : I feel, I am incapable of writing a novel in French.”⁶

His last book written in Czech is “The Immortality”. The French reader, opening it in 1990, when the book was published, was surprised by at least two things. The topic is different from earlier novels. Nothing about Czechoslovakia, the past, the politics. No humor, no eroticism. It is largely inspired by Kundera’s experience with French intellectual society. The other surprise is that the book had not been translated by his “friend translator” François Kérel but by Eva Bloch. Who is Eva Bloch? Nobody knows. I have translated a dozen of books into French, I think I know all the translators in this linguistic field, but I have never heard the name of Eva Bloch. When I asked Kundera himself who she was, he refused to say anything about her. We can assume she doesn’t exist and that this book is his first attempt to become a French writer.

Other books attest to this evolution and it seems evident that his target audience has changed. It is no longer a Czech audience, just as Kundera is no longer a Czech author writing for the French reader. Kundera has become a French author writing for French readers. But since “The Immortality”, his way of writing and the aim of his writing have changed. The Slowness (*La lenteur*), The Identity (*L’identité*), The Ignorance (*L’ignorance*). The topic has also changed. The story is reduced, it is as short as possible and gives space to reflection, commentary of philosophical, esthetical or psychological concepts. No longer Man against history, the existential tragedy of Destiny, merging with humor, as the last resort for all victims of injustice, but rather

⁶ Milan Kundera, op. cit. p. 89-90.

an illustration of ideas. Obviously, it is the continuation of Kundera's fascination with translation. His latest novels are an extension of his "89 Words" .

Let me conclude with these remarks about the role of translation in Kundera's work.

The paradoxical situation of the exiled writer has made Kundera think in terms of translation. The first impetus to revise the translation of his most successful novel, "The Joke" was partly political. Having severed all relation with his former country, Kundera tried to erase the name of Marcel Aymonin, as well as that of Louis Aragon from the book wishing to build his own image in accordance with the spirit of the novel. At the same time he realized that any word, any concept translated from Czech may be perceived differently depending on a multitude of factors. To be well understood becomes a priority for him, later an obsession. He refuses to give interviews in fear that his words could be misinterpreted. He changes translators, he rewrites translations already published and asks his editors to publish new translations. This obsession appears in his latest novels : what is slowness, what is identity, what is ignorance. Evry book illustrates his personal vision of these terms with the purpose of being understood essentially by his French readers.

Consequently, Kundera finds himself in an absurd situation. He refuses to authorize the Czech translation of his books written in French. It seems to him inconceivable to accept that his books would be translated by a translator into his native language and he himself will never write his books in Czech. Therefore, if his compatriots wish to read Kundera's latest books, they must read them in French or in another language.

A historian of literature will always ask one question : how is it possible that Kundera's French work is so different from the novels he had written during his Czech period ? The answer must be sought first of all in his concept of literature as a medium of communication and interpretation of similar experiences by people coming from different cultural backgrounds. This becomes for any exiled writer an important pre-occupation, and for Kundera almost an essential topic of novels.