

The Czech Socialist Literature That Influenced Milan Kundera

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Milan Kundera, who died this month, became known as a staunchly individualist critic of one-party Communist rule. Yet his work was also steeped in the rich earlier traditions of left-wing Czech literature, which grappled with the meaning of human freedom.

The death of Milan Kundera this July 11 brings to a close a unique life story — from his growing up in a musical family in Brno, through his disowned early poetic attempts, to the publication of his great novels and essays. But perhaps paradoxically, it is as if an older narrative comes to a close here as well: the story of the socialist school of Czech literature that shaped the young Kundera and whose legacy he carried on — despite his criticisms and pariah status.

Milan Kundera lived long enough to become friends with the greatest Czech avant-garde poet Vítězslav Nezval as well as the French philosophy publisher [Bernard-Henri Lévy](#). He himself said that friendship stands above politics. And so, he managed to take the best of Nezval — a poet who authored the purest poetist and surrealist poetry written in Czech, along with an ode to the bloody dictator Joseph Stalin — as much as from Lévy — author of *Sartre: The Philosopher of the Twentieth Century*, ideologue for Western military intervention and producer of highly medialized bollocks. As a teacher at the Prague Film Academy (FAMU), Kundera influenced an entire generation of filmmakers who were later to become the New Wave. But he was most respected as a novelist and essayist.

The Great Socialist Tradition and Its Self-Image

It may, at first glance, seem absurd to connect Kundera with the socialist tradition of Czech culture: Did he not rebel against his contemporary situation? Did he not author one of the most poignant portraits of the absurdity of “actually existing socialism”? And did he not then gleefully betray it in favor of a skeptical individuality and radical distance from all collectivist projects? He did, indeed, do all this. Unlike many members of the critical avant-garde, such as Vratislav Effenberger, Milan Nápravník, or Egon Bondy, he was not fighting for the return of authentic socialism nor a return of avant-garde aesthetics. Yet he certainly metabolized a particular desire for a free socialism and a love for avant-garde aesthetics — and made them both his own.

In his novel *Life Is Elsewhere*, likely the most abstract of his mature works, the main protagonist must choose between the aesthetics of the interwar avant-garde, which he loves, and the Stalinist version of socialism, which he believes in. He becomes a bad, self-enamored Stalinist poet. Kundera refused to make a choice in this dilemma, finding it false to begin with. In his description of the inane “lyrism” in which the poet’s inner world fuses with the world, he attempted to resolve the dilemma of an entire generation of Stalinist youth. He himself says that he set a “trap for [Tristan] Tzara” — but the founder of Dadaism and great surrealist poet influenced all his lyrical relationships to reality. To Kundera, this was a retreat into pathos and assumed an inability to distinguish between subject and object, and finally the inability to see oneself at a greater remove, as well as the

realization that our wishes and the reality we create are in fact two different things. We boast of changing the world, when in fact we are only comically tripping over it. . . . Kundera believed that the strength of the novel lies in its ability to drastically portray this discrepancy. The lyric allows us to proverbially “free” ourselves (or rather evade) reality, but in the novel, reality always catches up to us, and we can never be sure which role it will ascribe us.

But a tradition can be inherited even when one later reevaluates or rejects it altogether. Kundera’s individualism was not ignorant of this tradition: one of the founding figures of Czech socialist culture, Stanislav K. Neumann, started his career in the 1890s as an individualist anarchist, emphasizing that the socialist project is justified only under the condition that it simultaneously preserve and develop individual freedom and creative work. Neumann later became an aggressive Stalinist, and Kundera rejected his ideas.

But he was also influenced by other figures in the Czech socialist tradition. As late as the mid-1980s, in his published reaction to Jaroslav Seifert receiving the Nobel Prize (with critics saying to this day that the award was given to the Czech patriarch of poetry, former [Communist Party](#) member and signatory of the Charter 77, as a result of behind-the-scenes machination on the part of the Czech dissidents who disliked Kundera and prevented him getting the award), Kundera noted the significance of five Czech poets who were in some way connected to the avant-garde: Nezval, Seifert, Konstantin Biebl, František Halas, and Vladimír Holan. All of them were members of the Communist Party for at least part of their life, and all five were dedicated to the interconnection between creative freedom and social justice. A similar dilemma also characterized the great novelist Vladislav Vančura, an eminent socialist writer who was executed in 1942 by the Nazis, and the main protagonist of Kundera’s 1960 *habilitation* thesis entitled *The Art of the Novel*.

Kundera indicated his connection to the avant-garde most explicitly in the foreword to a selection of works by Guillaume Apollinaire entitled *Alkohol života* (*Alcohols of Life*, 1965). Much like philosopher Robert Kalivoda at around the same time, he emphasized the significance of avant-garde poetry as a form of utopian prospecting — the analysis of various forms of socialist freedom — and juxtaposed Nezval’s concept of the “whole man” with that of the “new man” characteristic of the young Stalinists of the 1950s. The “new man” was a kitsch fantasy about humanity wholly overcoming its conditions and profoundly transforming itself as a result. It developed from a basic inability to accept humanity as it was — and often colluded with puritanism.

Nezval’s (and at that time also Kundera’s) “whole man” meant accepting and developing the faculties of a person in the form in which they exist in the here and now. For both Nezval and Kundera, socialism meant opening up to the potential of human souls and bodies, a “new renaissance.” These ideas were heralding the future events of Czechoslovakia in 1968, in which Kundera actively participated and which he reflected in his own particular way.

Kundera vs. Havel, or Socialism Without Secret Police

The exchange between Kundera and Václav Havel from late 1968 and early 1969 keeps surfacing not only due to our tendency to keep replaying this key debate as a prestigious encounter of intellectual celebrities, but also because it clearly formulates the struggle for the significance and potentialities for the [Czechoslovak 1968](#) and for a liberal socialism in general.

But Kundera in fact did not relish the polemic, and rather drifted into it by accident. As he later reminisced, he intended to write an agitational text that would inform the Czechs that, even after four months of occupation, nothing was lost and that they ought to remain dedicated to the ideas they were developing before the tanks came. Kundera was building on the thought of Tomáš Masaryk and his problematic assertion that small nations must show particular effort in order to

have meaning and participate in world history. According to Kundera, this is exactly what happened in Czechoslovakia in 1968.

The attempt to create (for the first time in world history) a socialism without the pervasive power of the secret police, with freedom of expression, with impactful public opinion and a politics which derives power from it, with a modern and freely developing culture and people who have lost their fear, that was the effort through which Czechs and Slovaks, for the first time since the end of the medieval era, stood once again in the limelight of world history and addressed their call to the world.

It sounds almost insufferably pompous; one is tempted to side with Havel, who mocked Kundera's "laughable provincial messianism." But Havel continues by writing that the Czechs and Slovaks did not want anything so original: "Freedom and the rule of law are the first conditions for a normal and healthy functioning of the social organism, and if one state attempts to reintroduce them after years of absence, it is not doing anything historically unprecedented, but is rather trying to get rid of its own absence of normality, simply attempting to normalize itself. . . ."

Kundera felt ridiculed by Havel's ironic tone. He retorted with a text that tells us much about the year 1968 as well as about Havel, in which Kundera accused the latter of pushing his morality and "not really trying to identify the other's mistakes . . . but rather his inferior moral model." Socialism connected to freedom and cultivation was, for Kundera, an alternative to both the Eastern degradation of socialism as well as to Western capitalism:

Although Havel has no illusions about socialism, he has illusions about what he calls "most of the civilized world," as if it were the locus of a realm of normalcy which we need only adopt. The word normal is not among the most precise terms, but it is Havel's favorite word, and so be it: we can agree that freedom of the press is, for example, normal. But that is merely an abstract principle which in its concrete manifestation, meaning in "most of the civilized world," is something which is not at all normal (something dehumanizing, foolish): the rule of commercial interest and commercial taste. In its reach, content, structure and function, freedom of the press in the form we started realizing it last year in this socialist country was a new social phenomenon. There was nothing to imitate, there was no normal to return to, everything had to be developed anew and on our own.

According to Kundera, the radicalism of this attempt was obvious also in that resistance to it brought together such incompatible figures as Leonid Brezhnev's Czech ally Gustáv Husák as well as his chief opponent Havel, who was also calling for "normalcy." But Kundera did not consider the free socialism of 1969 as lacking in normalcy. It was a civilizational alternative in which the strong democratic and cultural institutions afforded a heretofore-unseen level of human freedom by curbing its negative effects and refusing to be colonized by the dictatorship of profit.

The debate remains relevant to this day, despite the fact that Kundera did not return to it and — judging by offhand remarks about the polemic as a genre — he was rather embarrassed by his role in the whole affair as well as his formulations full of pathos. If socialism was only possible with an absence of freedom, he was clearly the loser of that bout. But if freedom means the dictatorship of commercial bollocks, as Kundera aptly characterized it, then the Western alternative is equally unacceptable.

As numerous observers have noted, this polemical battle is especially wonderful because its actors eventually swapped positions. When Václav Havel was developing his philosophy of Czechoslovak dissent a decade later, he started thinking about the new forms of freedom and "postdemocracy" which might offer an alternative to the West, which he suddenly started to consider abnormal:

This entire complex of stale, conceptually nebulous, and politically motivated mass political parties controlled by professional apparatuses that evict the citizen from concrete personal responsibility; these complex structures of covert manipulation and expansive nodes of capital accumulation; the pervasive dictate of consumption, production, advertisement, commerce, consumer culture, and the flood of information, all that . . . cannot be considered any prospective path to humanity finding itself once more.

Here, Havel constructs his meaningful alternative from Heideggerian philosophy rather than free socialism. In the end, he became a willing yes-man of just such a “static complex” ruled by “professional apparatuses” and their “expansive nodes of capital accumulation” that he had so pertinently described.

Kundera, on the other hand, escaped and identified with the West to such a degree that he emigrated and became a French writer. His books largely show a lack of pathos and describe the process of wising up, the distancing of the individual from collective folly. And in one of his major essays, he goes even further, describing his disappointment as a question of cultural difference.

Central Europeanness = Cultivated Xenophobia?

The abovementioned essay was published in the French original as “The Kidnapped West,” while in English it became famous under the title “The Tragedy of Central Europe” (1983). Just connecting those two titles gives a hint as to the solution of the riddle: according to Kundera, Central Europe is the West, but political violence had dragged it over to the East. This position, however, also gives it a unique vantage point: if European unity was based on culture (which for Kundera basically means the high arts, like literature and music), then for a region suffering from forced Sovietization, culture becomes a key battlefield in the struggle for its identity. The country was fighting for those values that Western Europe was taking for granted and losing. In Western Europe, Americanization thus meant willingly giving up on the key position of European culture, destroyed by consumerism and the nonsense of mass media. In such a reading, Central Europe well remembers the West before such a transformation, and that is why it can serve as a reminder of its “true” values. As Kundera reminisces in the essay, while the literary magazines of the 1960s were a key medium for the Czechoslovak spring, if all the literary magazines in France suddenly vanished, perhaps not even their writers and editors would notice.

It was as if his “provincial messianism” again reared its head, now extending over the entire region. The basic trope of this essay is the peculiar superiority of Central Europe over the experiences of Western Europe: Central Europe knows the “essence of the West” best, because it had to fight for its values under extreme conditions. Over recent decades such a trope has appeared numerous times. It is just this “essence of the West” that gradually changes. Kundera’s opponent Havel used a similar expression in his speech before the US Congress: such an essence is found in loosely defined moral values and the idea that idealism is superior to realism. The Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán and his like have used it even more often and in harsher contexts: at one point, this essence of the West was said to consist in “fighting for freedom,” while in another era it basically means being white. The idea about the edge of the West that is better than the rest because it must face an external enemy was recently revisited with the war in Ukraine, and has been [well deconstructed](#) by [Volodymyr Ishchenko](#).

Whether the original idea in Kundera’s formulation was courageous or simply pompous, it evidently failed. As soon as they were able, the Central European countries opened up to Americanization just as willingly, maybe even more willingly, than the West. They may have adopted Americanization second-hand but were always glad to do so. Central Europeans no longer needed literary magazines and did not pay more attention to them than the French and Germans did in their own countries —

in fact, rather less.

Any comparison must contrast oneself against another — and Kundera's Central Europe largely contrasts itself against Russia. The occasionally insufferable Russophobia that we see in Kundera's work, as well as in the work of many writers of his generation, has two sources. The first is obvious at first sight: it is simply a reaction to imperial conquest. The second explanation has to do with the position of the Soviet Union in the context of socialism's history. Just as the Czech historian František Palacký (whom Kundera mentions in another context) complained that Western ideas arrived in the Czech lands only after being mediated by German culture, so could later Central European Marxists complain that the Western ideas about the emancipation of the proletariat arrived altered from Russia, a country that Marx and Engels never considered a place where their ideas could come to fruition. For Central European Marxists, this was a good excuse: the mistakes were not of the "original," but of the faulty "copy."

Occasionally, the rhetoric of Central European communists was based in the idea of civilizational superiority. Only a few people — like Kundera's friend, Brno-based communist and later dissident Jaroslav Šabata — were able to reject such a rhetoric. As the historian and dissident Jan Tesař reminisced in one of his texts, when they brought Šabata a petition that read that such an "educated and cultural nation" as the Czechoslovaks cannot be treated like some Tartars, he angrily replied that no one can be treated like slaves. Most Czechoslovak socialists, however, adopted a cultural explanation of their separation from Soviet socialism and along with it an idea of their own superiority built on the local "democratic tradition," which is not present in Russia. Kundera's idea of "Central Europe" shows this approach even after he rejected socialism.

Questions regarding the role of Russia are still very topical. With almost brutal coldness, Kundera expresses his stance by citing Polish poet Kazimierz Brandys: "It would have been better for me never to have encountered their world, never to know it exists." This type of passive-aggressive ignorance is common even today, and besides being arrogant and unacceptable, it is also ineffective. Russia (and especially the unofficial, trampled, oppositional Russia) is showing us that it needs our solidarity and equal treatment. It is, however, another thing to tout one's difference. It is a bit strange when the culture and politics of countries such as Czechia, Slovakia, or Poland (or even Hungary and Romania) are being studied at Western universities under the banner of Slavic studies, meaning within a discursive field clearly dominated by Russia. One must agree here with Kundera's sense of alienation, assuming that in the case of at least some countries and their cultures, it might be better to study them within the discourse of German studies.

The Wisdom of the Novel

But the core of Kundera's thinking was not found in essays, especially not occasional political speeches (he forbade republishing them, including his essay on Central Europe), but in his novels. He composed his work with an almost musical passion.

Jan Lopatka has noted that Kundera's *Art of the Novel* considers the pinnacle of Vančura's work to be his *Depictions from the History of the Czech Nation*, which is anything but a novel. What constitutes a novel for Kundera remains debatable, as he often struggles to fix its boundaries.

For Kundera, the novel primarily offers an ambiguity that corresponds to human existence. If in retrospect we can clearly see and evaluate, when we make decisions in the present moment, our information remains insufficient and our dilemmas hazy. Analyzing Anatole France's novel *The Gods Are Athirst*, Kundera appreciates that his description of the tyrannical Jacobin Gamelin was not "an indictment of Gamelin" but presented "the mystery of Gamelin": "The man who ended up sending dozens of people to the guillotine would surely have been a pleasant neighbor under other historical

conditions. . . . We, who knew the repulsive Gamelins, are we today able to recognize the monster slumbering in the pleasant Gamelins living among us?" The wisdom of the novel requires distance; it is the opposite of a moralism that cries: "A villain is a villain, where is the mystery?" The victory of such moralism over the wisdom of the novel — as was the case with anti-communism — also means the loss of an opportunity to learn: "The existential mystery has been lost behind political certainty and certainties don't care for riddles. That is why people, despite the wealth of lived experience, always come out of historical trials just as stupid as they were before."

Unlike a philosopher or a poet, the novelist thus always remains somewhat hidden behind the reality they wish to understand and the form with which they experiment. According to Kundera, the so-called "roman à clef" — which consists in the rewriting of real situations without recasting them in the writer's imagination, and whose characters are clearly based on real people — is a betrayal of the novel genre as such. The novelist is able to explore the possibilities of reality precisely because he can detach himself from it.

Kundera wrote the book entitled *The Art of the Novel* twice, and with completely different contents — once as a habilitation thesis based on an analysis of Vladislav Vančura's work in 1960, and the second time, in 1986, as a set of essays published already in French exile. It was the analysis of both books that was the starting point for the political theorist Pavel Barša in his analysis of Milan Kundera in the book *Román a dějiny (The Novel and History)*. There, Barša shows how the abandonment of the communist utopia led Kundera to appreciate the depoliticized everyday life that, quite paradoxically and not of his own volition, made him a thinker, or at least a fellow traveler, of the new utopian faith of post-Cold War liberalism in which depoliticization played a key part. He expressed this moment impressively but, according to Barša, it is no longer enough for us today: the planetary ecological catastrophe reveals the everyday as the most political of our spheres of life. Whether the novel can retain its wisdom within such a context remains to be seen.

Emigration as the Greatness of Freedom

Milan Kundera was not a dissident. Or better yet: he refused to become one. He emigrated in 1975, and he often irritated his dissident friends while in emigration, especially by asserting that resistance to tyranny is an environment in which bravery and various virtues may indeed thrive, but not original thinking. After all, thinking needs freedom — the freedom to ruthlessly criticize. But how to formulate ruthless criticism of friends who are living under the pressure of dictatorship? Such criticism easily becomes an ally of the secret police. The responsibility of a good dissident — and a good friend — thus finds itself at odds with that of a consistent thinker. It is not surprising that the dissidents did not like Kundera — he condemned them, quite unfairly, to not really thinking.

Emigration was a difficult experience, but also represented a new version of freedom for him. Freedom is a limit experience and can result in madness (such a story is impressively rendered in the story of the emigrant Tamina in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*), but at the same time it frees a person from the givens of the past and allows them to start anew. If, according to Kundera, we make the most important decisions when we are young and inexperienced, and once we have enough experience our life is in fact already running along a given trajectory, the marginal experience of emigration will allow a person to make some crucial decisions once again — when they are richer for the experiences of a "past" life in another country.

Kundera elaborated on the theme of emigration in his last novel *Nevědění (Unknowing)* about the Czech Republic (this time the 1990s and the period of the restoration of capitalism) as well as in shorter essays, such as the one dedicated to Věra Linhartová. According to Kundera, the misunderstanding of exile begins with the question of whether someone is "still" Czech or "already" French, and asks which country is his homeland. According to Kundera, the émigré does not leave

“somewhere” to go “somewhere else,” but rather to various combinations of the previous and the present. A “homeland” is precisely the in-between space created by emigration; emigrants leave for the “homeland of their exile.”

However, a special corollary to this view of liberating exile is found later in the life of the Kunderas: the acceptance of citizenship at the hands of prime minister and oligarch [Andrej Babiš](#) and, above all, the interview with Věra Kunderová in which she categorically states that “emigration is a difficult thing. It is the stupidest thing a person can do in life.” The magnitude of émigré freedom carries with it a special weight. Kundera’s *Unknowing* lacks the other side of such an experience.

An Epoch of Literalness

Milan Kundera was almost obsessive in his efforts to control his work. After being disappointed in the film version of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, he banned film versions of his lyrical works altogether. At one point, he fundamentally refused any further press interviews. After some very bad early experiences, he was very strict in controlling his translations — to the extent that for a long time he did not allow translations of his French novels into Czech. He translated the essays himself (quite poorly, according to many), and he emphasized two things: the absolute control of the author over his work and the absolute separation of the work from the person of the author. The author is hidden behind the work, but at the same time remains its sovereign ruler.

Václav Bělohradský once called Kundera’s approach “the dream of absolute authorship” and exposed its utopian nature. But that utopianism was heroic and was (how many times already with Kundera?) a defense of the combination of freedom and cultivation. When the work and its meaning are controlled by the author, and not by overly inventive translators and publishing editors — or superficial journalists who write about it and impose their own questions, emphases, and interpretations on it — the author can better preserve the meaning of his work against vulgarizations. However, this utopianism goes against the spirit of the times, which demands the increasing unity of the author and their work and invokes the reader’s right to the comfort of unequivocal statements — uncomplicated ones, which will be simply “correct.” Kundera does not belong to this era, and not only because a number of his statements about women (and about lyrical poets!) raise reasonable questions about his misogyny.

It is significant that the writer became the target of Czech anti-communists. Based on a problematic case backed up by insufficiently interpreted “evidence,” they turned him into a “informer,” although to this day it remains unclear whether the young student Kundera thought he was reporting a suspicious suitcase to the authorities, a possible murderer in a purely criminal case, or an agent of a foreign power — and whether he in fact reported anything at all, or whether he was rather retroactively assigned to the report due to his position as dormitory foreman.

The anti-communists also unanimously applauded the tabloid biography written about Kundera by the Czech American writer Jan Novák. He discussed the novelist’s life with the mandate of a moral chastiser looking for personal slipups and discussed his work like a detective, revealing hidden paths into his “life.” The creed to which Novák subscribed is telling: “A work is just a kind of intermediate link between the creator and the reader, the viewer, the listener . . . in art it is actually a kind of connection between two people through the work.”

The idea of a literary work as a mere medium between two people is emblematic of the primitivism that Kundera was trying to escape. But it is primitivism that is winning today, even far beyond the circles that at one time applauded the biographer Novák. How many debates about literature and art in general nowadays end simply as a debate about the right or wrong attitudes of the author, how many as a dispute about their moral corruption, as an effort to show their “inferior moral attitude”

and the corrupt form of being from which such an attitude arises?

Returning to the “Whole Person”?

Milan Kundera adopted much from the great tradition of Czech socialist literature. He developed this legacy in his own way. In addition to his contribution to world literature, he also made a significant contribution to international socialist thought, whether as a direct participant in the 1960s or as its later critic. If his eloquent criticism of “actually existing socialism” contributed to a convincing formulation of contemporary “real individualism,” he gave today’s socialists an opportunity to respond. If they learn anything from the acute insight of his novels, they stand a chance that this answer will be similarly compelling, and not as schematic as contemporary political thought and culture sometimes tend to be.

Through its finality, death always prompts us to return and revisit. In addition to the anti-utopian critique of his novels, perhaps today we ought to return to the utopian dynamics of Kundera’s reflections from the 1960s about the “whole man” and the “new renaissance,” as well as about democratic socialism. For there, freedom of speech and art are constructed on completely different foundations than the logic of the market and its production of commercial pulp.

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