

Češka, Jakub: *Za poetikou Milana Kundery. Od básnických počátků k poslednímu románu Slavnost bezvýznamnosti* [*Behind the Poetics of Milan Kundera. From His Poetic Beginnings to His Last Novel The Festival of Insignificance*].

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The context is always significant when discussing the literary work of a particular author. This is especially true of bilingual writers like Milan Kundera; Kundera, who died in 2023, made his debut as a poet and published numerous novels in Czech and French. In his essay “A Kidnapped West, or the Tragedy of Central Europe”, he presented the concept of Central Europe, and reviews such as “Betrayed Testaments” or “Curtains” amply proved his knowledge of European literature. There are thus multiple different contexts in which Kundera can be discussed, and which of them to choose in a given situation is an important question.

However, Kundera studies to date have focused too much on the writer’s novels, with treatments of his poetry and drama remaining in the minority. Besides the genre differences themselves, linguistic barriers are probably partly to blame for this; Kundera wrote his early poems and plays exclusively in Czech, and researchers who read only French therefore have limited access to them. The relationship between his early poetry and drama and his prose has therefore remained largely unclear until now. This lacuna has now been addressed by Jakub Češka, who previously published a book centred on motif analysis<sup>1</sup> as well as a study on Bohumil Hrabal, a further leading 20<sup>th</sup>-century author of Czech literature.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Češka, Jakub: *Království motivů. Motivická analýza románů Milana Kundery* [The Kingdom of Motifs. Motivational Analysis of Milan Kundera’s Novels]. Praha 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Češka, Jakub: *Bohumil Hrabal – autor v množném čísle* [Bohumil Hrabal – Author in the Plural]. Brno 2018.

In his latest monograph on Kundera, “*Za poetikou Milana Kundery. Od básnických počátků k poslednímu románu Slavnost bezvýznamnosti*”, Češka argues that interpretations referring only to the French versions overemphasize the poetics of the novel, whereas literary analysis within Czechia tends to overstate the regional context and political dimension in Kundera’s early works (p. 24). He therefore attempts to strike a balance and present a continuity between these two aspects. Naturally, as existing discussions have concentrated on the novel, the strategy adopted by Češka is to focus his efforts on a less well-trodden area with an in-depth analysis of Kundera’s early poetry and plays: Of the seven chapters in the book, four are devoted to the analysis of early works.

The first feature of his approach is to relativise genre differences such as those between novels and poetry, and instead explore the commonalities found across multiple genres like essays and drama. Hence in chapter 1, the author uses a reading of Kundera’s essay “*On the Debate over Heritage*” (1955) to show that lyric poetry is a source of inspiration and poetic tradition rather than simply emphasising personal emotion, irrationality, or the poet. The essay “*The Art of the Novel*” (1960), which – unlike the 1986 French book with the same title – analyses Vladislav Vančura’s work, is also revealed to be essential to understanding Kundera’s poetics: Češka points out that the disappearance of the grand narrative is manifested not only in literature but also in contemporary society, and that consequently – even in Kundera’s prosaic work – lyrical elements such as metaphors and internal monologues are emphasised rather than the complex structures of fabula and plots (chapter 2). Chapter 3 provides an analysis of the play “*The Owners of the Keys*” with particular attention to the “*vision*” inserted several times within it.

Češka describes the function of this passage as follows: “*This element [irrational element, e.g. vision], apparently deliberately chosen, forms a certain counterpoint to the coherent and clear construction, at the same time confirming the semantic openness of the work*” (p. 167). The dream sequences often found in Kundera’s novels thus had their origins in his early plays.

Readings of Kundera’s early poems are of course the second main subject of the book. While carefully examining the variations in the various editions, Češka views the collection of poems entitled “*Monologues*” as the seed of later thematic complexes such as dialogical structure, regular alternation of speakers, rhythmizing and personal narration. The poetic expressions such as metaphor, simile and poetic imagery likewise used in later novels represent instruments for expressing particular situations in economic fashion. As an example, Češka shows that the imagery of the two verses of “*Monologues*” is also employed in the later prose work “*Identity*”.

It goes without saying that Češka has meticulously read poems and novels to examine the continuity between Kundera’s early works and his later novels, but the third feature I would like to emphasise is the author’s careful reading of paratexts like the prefaces and commentaries written by Kundera – for example to collections of poems by František Gellner (1957), Vítězslav Nezval (1963), Guillaume Apollinaire (1965) and so on. These paratexts are often key to Češka’s arguments, as they not only explain how Kundera felt about the writer in question but also provide valuable material for investigating his own poetics.

While there is outstanding analysis in this work, it also highlights that there are still unexplored areas, one of which is the possibility of applying affect theory. Although Češka draws attention to Kundera's approach to empathy in chapter 2, this discussion could have been further enriched had it made use of the affect theory frequently employed today.

Secondly, there would have been avenues for more elaborate textological research. As Češka states that "the definitive wording of the work in the Pleiades can be understood not only as an aesthetic judgment but also as a result of the work's pragmatic context" (p. 55), examination of the variants of individual works (e.g., "*Mono-logues*") as well as comparison between Czech and French versions and chronological reconsideration of each version will be essential for future Kundera studies.

Thirdly, a cross-genre approach might have also focused on translations by Milan Kundera, who rendered poems by Vladimir Mayakovsky and other authors into Czech. Among others, the translation of and commentary on Pavlo Tychyna's poetry<sup>3</sup> seems relevant to the discussion in this book.

At any rate, by tracing the birth and evolution of the giant Milan Kundera's poetics, the monograph by Jakub Češka clearly shows that a reading of the late writer's French novels alone, or of the Czech works published by Atlantis, cannot suffice to understand them.

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<sup>3</sup> *Tyčyna*, Pavlo: *Ocel a něha* [Steel and Tenderness]. Praha 1953. Translated by Milan Kundera, Jan Trafulka, Kamil Bednář, František Hrubín.