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Milan Kundera's *Žert* Overviewed: Critical Reception of the Novel at the Time of Its Release and Today

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Abstract

The article deals with critical reflection of the novel *Žert* (The Joke) in the period from the end of the 1960s up to current reviews. In the first part of the critical historical analysis, the author examines the critical acceptance of the novel in the aftermath of its release (1967–1969), in Czech, Slovak and exiled journals and literary magazines in particular. The second part considers critical reactions to the novel throughout the 1970s and 1980s with an emphasis on the aftermath of its reception in the 1960s, official critical reviews in the era of normalization and its reception in exile and samizdat literature as well. Finally, the last part of the article offers a contemporary critical response to *Žert*, analyzed on the basis of Czech journals, literary magazines and newly emergent Kundera monographs. The aim of the article is to find out to what extent the critical response to Kundera's much-respected novel has changed and whether current literary critics read the novel from different points of view than those at the end of the 1960s, when the novel was published for the first time.

Milan Kundera is nowadays probably the most famous writer of Czech origin. His work, well-appreciated both at home and abroad, has always enjoyed great attention from readers as well as literary critics and theorists. Plenty of reviews, essays and books have been published on Milan Kundera's personality and his work. In this article,¹

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we mainly focus on the domestic critical reception of *Žert* (The Joke). The reason for the selection of this novel is that it makes it perfectly possible to analyze in detail the transformation of the critical understanding of Kundera's work over a period of more than forty years.

Before we proceed to the reception of *Žert* by its reviewers, let us briefly recap the plot of the novel. The main protagonist, Ludvík Jahn, is attracted to Markéta, a somewhat naive girl. Right before the relationship between the young couple is about to become intimate for the first time, Markéta leaves for a Party training course. Ludvík feels offended. After receiving a letter from Markéta stating that the atmosphere of the Party training is healthy and that the revolution in the West is imminent, he decides to shock her. As a joke, he sends her a postcard with the following words „Optimism is the opium of the people! The healthy atmosphere stinks of stupidity! Long live Trotsky!” (Kundera 1969, p. 30; my translation). However, such pranks do not pay off in 1950s Czechoslovakia. Ludvík is excluded from the faculty and, as a „Trotskyist”, is assigned to a forced labor unit in the mines. Long afterwards, at the beginning of the 1960s, Ludvík accidentally meets Helena, the wife of his former friend Zemánek who played a big role in the exclusion of Ludvík from society. Ludvík wants revenge, and so he seduces Zemánek's wife. However, it turns out that Zemánek does not live with Helena anymore. As a result, Ludvík gets the impression that one does not have power over one's own life, and that history can play a very cruel joke on a man.

I

Kundera's first novel was published for the first time in Czechoslovakia in April 1967. By the mid-sixties, the process of democratizing public life had already been launched, marked by the breakthrough moment of the 12th Congress of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (CPC) during which certain „mistakes” perpetrated in the Stalinist era were admitted. Social issues were openly discussed not only in elite intellectual circles, but amongst all citizens (Czechoslovakia

suffered economic difficulties in 1962–1964, specifically disturbances in the supply of food and other basic goods). Sympathizers of reform, economic and otherwise, had begun to emerge even among members of the Communist Party.

The political „thaw” related to the events of the early 1960s was reflected in the development of literary and journalistic circles. Many writers and editors in the 1960s became prominent figures who were heavily engaged in the process of democratization and who played a major role in determining the evolution of public life. Articles and discussions that occurred primarily in cultural periodicals often went above and beyond the defined focus on culture, and began to discuss social and political issues. The Union of Writers’ weekly, called *Literární noviny* (The Literary Newspaper), filled the void of a critically oriented political press and went on to become the most widely read magazine of its time, reaching between 100 000 and 300 000 copies per issue.

The tension between *Literární noviny* and the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, however, was obvious. It escalated at the IVth Czechoslovak Writers’ Union Congress in June 1967. Critical speeches by writers Pavel Kohout, Ludvík Vaculík and Milan Kundera confronted the CPC leadership with opinions quite different from the official policies. A demand for full freedom of expression was also voiced. Nevertheless, the leadership of the CPC Central Committee made it clear that freedom of expression was not yet feasible. The greatest punishment for writers and the readership was *Literární noviny* being taken away from the Union on 1st October 1967. The magazine was transferred to the Ministry of Culture and Information and entrusted to the Czechoslovak Literary Culture Headquarters.

During autumn 1967 the inhabitants of Czechoslovakia witnessed an intra-party crisis, which resulted in the separation of Antonín Novotný’s party and state functions on 5th January 1968. Novotný was to be replaced as the First Secretary of the Central Committee by Alexander Dubček. The beginning of the so-called Prague Spring, a short

but intense period of liberalization in communist Czechoslovakia and linked to the extraordinary expansion of artistic creative power, is associated with his accession to the function.

Kundera’s first novel caused a great stir in Czechoslovakia right after its first publication in April 1967. Although Kundera was ranked alongside the new generation of modern novelists (Josef Škvorecký, Bohumil Hrabal, etc.), his breakthrough was quite original in several ways. There were three printings of *Žert* in a row and the novel became one of the most important literary events of the late 1960s in Czechoslovakia. Reviews and other literary responses to *Žert* appeared in the whole spectrum of the official press from the official Communist Party daily *Rudé právo* (Red Right) through the Ministry of Agriculture daily *Zemědělské noviny* (Agricultural News), to cultural and literary magazines, as well as in exile periodicals, and not only in the year of its release but also in the following two years.

What we consider contemporary criticism of the work is the articles and reviews that appeared in the three years after its first edition, that is, in 1967–1969, before the viewpoint on Kundera and his work was officially revised by the critics and cultural ideologists of the normalization regime in the early 1970s and, as a result, *Žert* was withdrawn from Czechoslovak bookstores and libraries.

Particular attention will be paid to the first four famous contemporary reviews of *Žert*. The main criterion for their selection is that the four texts were highlighted by Milan Kundera himself in his epilogue to the 1990 edition of the novel’s first post-1989 publication in the Czech language:

I remember until today several really profound reviews of *Žert* in 1967, written by for example Opelík, Pohorský, Václav Černý or Kožmín (Kundera 1996, p. 325; my translation).

Kundera particularly recognized the value of Czech literary criticism of the second half of the 1960s because of its high quality. Among other things, Czech literary critics gained his respect by their ability to identify themselves with the artist’s intention.

In an interview that Liehm wrote in 1967, I had said the same thing that I repeated over and over in Paris ten years later: the historical situation by itself is not the subject of the novel, its significance to me lies in the fact that it illuminates the existential topics I am fascinated by with a new, exceptionally bright light; be it revenge, oblivion, seriousness and non-seriousness, the relationship between history and people, the alienation of one's own actions, the split between sex and love and so forth. For Czech literary criticism in the second half of the sixties (at that time, Czech literary criticism might not have had an equal competitor anywhere in the world, as I later realized abroad) such an attitude was obvious (Kundera 1996, p. 325; my translation).

The literary critics, whose texts were marked by Kundera as profound, meet the demand for an „ideal” criticism which is heading towards objectivity, as formulated by the famous Czech critic Václav Černý. According to Černý, a real review should primarily be identified within the scope of the artist's intention and work. The main objective of a review is critical judgment, which should result from the knowledge acquired by such identification. Such critical judgment can then be objective: the scale of the judgment remains aesthetic and, in the search for absolute values, the critic looks at the work of art through deeper criteria (Černý 1968, p. 68).

The main characteristic of the novel, which pervades all four of the above-mentioned reviews, is a direct or indirect designation of *Žert* as a novel of disillusionment. The literary critics, whom Kundera appreciates until today, recognized it as more than just an update of historical circumstances and revealed the novel's polyphony and the existential philosophy in it.

In his review, Kožmín writes that the story is „sinking into ever newer forms of human devastation” (Kožmín 1967, p. 56–57; my translation). The collapse of illusions is linked to all the characters of *Žert*. It becomes obvious that, between the lines of his text, Kožmín compares Kundera's novel with shallow pieces of socialist realism, when he writes that „the author has avoided cheap syntheses, soothing postulates, and über-normative supplies of injections of optimism” (Kožmín 1967, p. 56–57; my translation).

Černý perceives the issue through a similar lens as he points out in his review that *Žert* is an infernal story in the first place, a depiction of

doom, „a novel about human souls alienated from the truth to the extent of becoming completely wasted, looted, robbed of their moral strength through self-delusion and lies until the last string of their humanity” (Černý 1994, p. 34; my translation).

Opelík's opinion of *Žert* as a novel of disillusionment, destruction and the problematization of values is reflected in the name of the review itself – *Hoře z rozumu* (Woe from Wit). The critic explains this as follows:

Only a rationalistic destructionist can clear the field of the weeds of illusion (Opelík 1967, p. 5; my translation).

Opelík appreciates the fact that Kundera puts mirrors in front of society and figuratively strips it naked.

The overall feeling of disillusionment in the novel is equally perceived by the last of the critics, Miloš Pohorský. According to him, *Žert* ends with a paradoxical victory when a human being's complete failure becomes the moment of his/her discovery of values (Pohorský 1990, p. 280; my translation).

All of the aforementioned critics (Zdeněk Kožmín, Václav Černý, Jiří Opelík and Miloš Pohorský) came to a similar conclusion in their studies – they mainly appreciated Kundera's genuine literary depiction of the decay and disillusionment of Czech society. As the four famous critics were all linked by their interest in criticism with a literary-historic and theoretical focus, their texts have not lost their contemporary appeal until today.

In the 1960s, the critical perception of *Žert* also appeared frequently in the daily press. Generally positive assessments of *Žert* appeared in the official newspapers, such as in *Rudé Právo* or in *Práce* [Labor], the daily of the official (and the only) communist trade unions called the Revolutionary Trade Union Movement, which hints at a massive liberalization of the media and public life in general. One of the reasons that led to such widespread support for Kundera's *Žert* was a general reassessment of the period of Stalinism, of the so-called „cult of [Stalin's] personality”. This ideology-ridden term was widely

used in the democratized atmosphere of the Czechoslovak media in the 1960s, apparently without the realization that it was also a part of the language of the regime propaganda (Fidelius 1998, p. 224).

Although the cultural sections in the dailies do not have much space for more profound studies, several reviewers managed to deal with *Žert* in a more than respectable way. The high-quality reviews were characterized by the fact that in their assessment of the novel they did not remain only on the surface but sought to evaluate the novel's philosophy. Even then, forward-looking reviewers were already predicting a long future for the novel and envisaged its permanent place in Czech literature. For example, in mid-June 1967 the reviewer of the daily *Mladá Fronta* (Young Front), a central journal of the Czechoslovak Union of Youth, considered the piece to be a successful novel that deserves much respect. He also wrote about the legitimacy of „the recognition *Žert* has received, is receiving, and one hopes is going to receive” (Šimůnek 1967, p. 5; my translation).

In comparison with the more insightful reviews by Opelík, Kožmín, Černý and Pohorský, the reviews published in newspapers laid, possibly with regard to their readers, their emphasis on stating that *Žert* is a book which combines an attractive story with serious and thought-provoking ideas.

Besides the reviews that appeared in the culture sections of various newspapers, the critical feedback on Kundera's first novel can be found in a wide range of cultural and literary periodicals from the late 1960s. In the second half of the decade, Czech fiction was shifting away from the concept of socialist art, which claimed allegiance to the ideological basis of the principles of Marxism-Leninism. The primary feature of socialist literature was then conceived as „the principle of partisanship emphasized by Lenin, understood as a close connection between literature and the proletariat's struggle for a classless society” (Šámal 2002, p. 590; my translation). The major (liberal) literary-critical part of the spectrum tended to move away from that notion, too. *Žert* found its biggest admirers among the pro-reformist critics (retreating from the outspokenly ideological understanding of art and

renouncing (Stalin's) personality cult and the so-called ideologically oriented schematism) who often hailed Kundera's courage in naming the unpleasant truth and appreciated the subversive focus of the novel.

Positive reactions to the novel largely predominated; they appeared, for example, in *Orientace* (Orientation Review), a literary review which developed the tradition of Czech structuralism in the context of contemporary art and philosophy, or in *Nové knihy* [New Books], an informative weekly about newly published books. Some reviewers even commented on this fact, calling it a „unified view” of literary criticism (Hájek 1972, p. 72; my translation). Negative reactions appeared primarily in more dogmatic periodicals (such as *Kulturní tvorba* (Cultural Creation), a weekly published by the CPC Central Committee, or *Plamen* (The Flame), a monthly magazine about literature, art and life style, published by the Union of Czechoslovak Writers), but this was not always the rule. Very positive reviews were printed even in these journals (for example in *Impuls* (The Impulse), a monthly devoted to literary criticism and theory, published by the Czechoslovak Literary Culture Headquarters). It was rather the younger generation of critics who was critical towards *Žert*, because they did not believe in such new „liberalized” literature, as it was only considered as engaged journalism in the disguise of fiction (Aleš Hanman 1968, p. 31; Jan Lopatka 1968, p. 134). Nevertheless, the novel also caught the interest of certain periodicals focused on areas others than literature, such as magazines focusing on folklore studies (*Národopisné aktuality* – Ethnographic News) or Christian-oriented periodicals (*Křesťanská revue* – Christian Review); even they dealt in depth with Kundera's first novel and printed positive evaluation of it.

Reviewers for Czech magazines published abroad by Czech exiles, for example the quarterly *Proměny* (Metamorphoses), published in New York, or the monthly *Nový život* (New Life), published by the Christian Academy in Rome, came to almost identical conclusions to the reviewers for Czech periodicals in the late sixties. They decoded the novel as a true artistic depiction of the disillusionment which was prevailed in Czechoslovak society. However, the texts written outside

the socialist environment were apparently able to enjoy greater freedom of expression than the reviews written in Czechoslovakia. For example, the characteristics of the disillusionment in *Žert* were voiced much more openly and straightforwardly by Petr Den in *Proměny*, published in New York, than in any Czech or Slovak critical piece. According to Den Kundera's novel:

[...] depicts the disillusionment of people and their sobering up from the Communist fever, their sobering up related to the sadness of the self-recognition, and often disturbing the nature of people who experience the tragedy of their terrible mistake together with the whole nation (Den 1968, p. 78; my translation).

II

The next – not entirely jubilant – phase of the critical reception of *Žert* came between 1970 and 1989, the years of what Czech and Slovak communists called „normalization” (a period which saw the restoration of communist rule following the defeat of the Prague Spring 1968 by the Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia), when Kundera's work was withdrawn from bookstores and libraries. Nearly nothing was written about Kundera or his work at that time. Several „aftermath” responses to *Žert* could be found in 1970 but, after that, Czech and Slovak readers could read only a single critical article, published in the official press, which reassessed, re-interpreted, and repudiated *Žert*. During this period, only exile or samizdat² journals could speak freely about *Žert*, but even in them, the novel was not particularly a big issue and there was a greater focus on the works Kundera wrote after his emigration.

At the very beginning of 1970, before a wide range of literary magazines went out of existence, banned by the Communists or simply discontinued, several studies on *Žert* were published in liberal journals, such as *Host do domu* (Houseguest) or the above mentioned

² The term samizdat refers to texts that could not be legally published, and therefore were circulated unofficially in the form of copies or photocopies in limited numbers.

Orientace. Two distinguished Czech literary critics (Zdeněk Kožmín and Miloš Pohorský) were among the authors of the essays. It was the last chance Czech literary critics had to freely express their opinions for the next two decades. Unlike in previous responses to Kundera's *Žert*, at that time critics rather focused on one particular aspect or topic of the work, which they discussed in great detail in their studies. For example, the authors accentuated the nostalgia of *Žert* more than the texts from the 1960s did.

The official normalization-era reaction to *Žert* in the 1970s, a hard-core Marxist one, read the novel in the context of the political events of the second half of the 1960s and even named it as one of the causes of the Prague Spring in Czechoslovakia. Heavily loaded with ideological, almost propagandistic jargon, a review which presented the official Communist view of *Žert* came out in early May 1972 in the weekly *Tvorba* (Creation), a cultural-political magazine that was established as a platform for critics who were aligned with the normalization regime. At that time, there were no longer any literary magazines left from the wide spectrum published in the late 1960s and *Tvorba* practically became the only Czech weekly dealing, among other things, with literature in the 1970s.³ *Tvorba*, „a journal for politics, science and culture,” as it was characterized by its publisher, the Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, had as its editor-in-chief Jiří Hájek.

Jiří Hájek, who was also the author of a critical (read: denunciatory) analysis of *Žert*, was the chief editor of the monthly magazine *Plamen* in the years 1959–1968 and then was in charge of the renewed *Tvorba* magazine from 1969 to 1976. The novel was marked by Hájek as a poor literary work which could not enjoy long-term success, because it merely „jumped on the bandwagon” of the fashion of that time. Hájek acknowledges in his review that the novel was indeed the

³ Next to the *Tvorba* magazine, there was also *Literární měsíčník* (Literature Monthly), which had been following the concept of normalization in literature since the beginning of its publication in 1972.

most popular and most representative book of the „fatal years” of 1967–1969, together with *Sekyra* (The Axe), a novel by Ludvík Vaculík. This was probably part of the reason why Milan Kundera became, as one of the few officially unpublished authors of that time, the subject of criticism by the normalization regime.

In the view of Hájek, the unambiguity of views on Kundera’s first novel did not testify to its quality, but rather the „abnormality of those years” (Hájek 1972, p. 72; my translation). Hájek believes that

[...] in the atmosphere that was created around *Žert*, it was a matter of a certain amount of civil courage to voice any reservations about this book, even in a narrow circle of acquaintances. It was not a book that could become a subject of individual judgments: how people related to the book attested to their civil adherence to the program targets of the so-called „Prague Spring” (Hájek 1972, p. 72; my translation).

An alternative reception of Kundera’s work was no longer permitted by the normalization regime. This criticism defined Kundera’s *Žert* in the official literary sphere, and all references to Kundera and his work were cut off for almost twenty years.

That is why further reactions to *Žert* in the 1970s and 1980s could appear only in exile magazines, such as *Svědectví* (Testimony), a political and literary monthly published by Czechoslovak exiles in Paris, and *Obrys* (Outline), a quarterly of independent Czech and Slovak culture published in Munich, or in samizdat journals, for example, *Obsah* (Content), or *Lidové noviny* (The People’s Newspaper). Here the critics perceived *Žert* from a greater distance in time, and on top of that, they reflected on the facts that had not been addressed in the earlier contemporary criticisms. A comparison of *Žert* with other Kundera’s pieces was an important factor in these reviews, for example, in an essay by the literary critic Milan Jungmann which came out in the mid-1980s first in samizdat and later in exile (in *Svědectví*). According to Jungmann, who resents the attempts of Kundera’s later output to be successful with his readership at any cost, *Žert* represents a highlight of the author’s fictional work:

Since *Žert*, the level of his thought has been gaining more and more in brilliance, but it has been losing depth and seriousness (Jungmann 2005, p. 338; my translation).

III

It was only after 1989 that Milan Kundera, as well as one of his most acclaimed novels *Žert*, could officially return to Czech literary life. The last weeks of 1989 brought a number of significant changes not only in the functioning of the Czechoslovak state, but also in the cultural sphere. All areas of public life, including literature, witnessed the comeback of personalities persecuted during the previous regime. Shortly after the so called Velvet Revolution, Czechoslovakia could therefore resume the publication of the writers whose works had been printed or distributed as typescripts or mimeographed volumes exclusively by exile and samizdat publishers.

In his afterword to the post-Velvet Revolution edition of *Žert*, Kundera recalled the events of December 1989 when he suddenly received a letter in Paris from Jan Šabata in Brno. Šabata was the chairman of a newly established publishing house, and Milan Uhde, another friend of Kundera’s, was supposed to become the literary editor-in-chief:

He offered to be in charge of publishing my books after they had been prohibited for twenty years. The letter invoked a strangely happy mood in me, a little melancholic. In front of my eyes, I suddenly saw Jan’s father, Jaroslav, whom I admired when I was seventeen and he was nineteen. And I saw the young Milan Uhde and a path in the fields between the city of Brno and Královo Pole on which we would have long talks in the days when I was hardly twenty-five-years old and he was not even twenty. It seemed to me that the circle was closing down (Kundera 1996, p. 319; my translation).

In the spring of 1991, Kundera’s *Žert* was published again in his homeland after more than twenty years,⁴ by the Atlantis publishing house in Brno. This event sparked a new interest in Kundera’s first novel in newspapers and cultural magazines. The popularity of Kun-

⁴ Before that, *Žert* was published in Czech in 1989 by Josef Škvorecký’s Canadian publishing house Sixty-Eight Publishers, based in Toronto.

dera's work with literary theorists and readers also encouraged the emergence of a number of monographs dealing with his entire oeuvre.

Immediately after the release of *Žert* in 1991, several newspaper articles reflecting the return of the novel to the domestic book market were published. Both national – *Lidové noviny* which had gone official again, *Mladá fronta Dnes* (Young Front Today), the successor to *Mladá fronta*, the official daily of the Socialist Youth Organization, and *Právo* (Right), into which the Communist *Rudé právo* was transformed, and regional dailies, for example *Brněnský večerník* (The Brno Evening News), dealt with the novel.

As the literary historian Pavel Janáček wrote in *Lidové noviny*, compared to the 1960s, there was quite „a hush” when the novel was published in the 1990s. (Janáček 1991, p. 4). According to Janáček, this was, firstly, due to the fact that the criticism in the 1960s rendered *Žert* with dignity, and, secondly, because „the story of Kundera's *Žert* is a greater event nowadays than the book's new edition” (Janáček 1991, p. 4; my translation).

Indeed, the texts about *Žert* published in various Czech dailies in 1991 did not address the purpose of the novel, but mostly only pointed to the fact that the novel was again available in Czechoslovakia, and were more interested in the fate of the previously prohibited book as well as its author.

More extensive reviews and studies on *Žert* also emerged after a break of more than twenty years in cultural periodicals, such as *Česká literatura* (Czech Literature), the journal of Bohemistic studies, or the cultural magazine *Labyrint* (Labyrinth) etc. They were largely devoted to examining the meaning of the work, which they discussed in more details than the dailies. However, because of the interval of more than twenty years since the novel's publication, the texts often focused on other features than critics in the 1960s did. The authors of the studies evaluated *Žert* in the context of Kundera's other works, and they often viewed it crucial in the framework of Kundera's career, or at least as a „catalyst” that introduced the author into world literature. The main focus of the reviews in the 1990s was the issue of the con-

temporary importance of Kundera's work for Czech readers after the Velvet Revolution.

Several Czech monographs devoted to the work of Milan Kundera were published in the 1990s, some of them translated from foreign languages. The author of the first Czech monograph on Kundera, *Svět románů Milana Kundery* (The World of the Novels of Milan Kundera, 1994), was Květoslav Chvatík, a Czech literary theorist and historian. In his monograph, Chvatík, who was one of the most important experts on the work of Kundera since the 1960s, deals with the narratological aspects of the novels from a structuralist point of view. Chvatík's monograph deals with all Kundera's novels and he also devotes a separate chapter to *Žert*. He looks at Kundera's first novel from a distance of a quarter of a century and emphasizes that *Žert* is in many ways the most serious of Kundera's novels. Firstly, it was written without a steady narrative concept, almost spontaneously, and secondly, it was written in „close proximity to contemporary conflicts and the author's personal experience with them.” At the same time, however, the 1967 novel „already contained the immanent poetics, the narrative concept and a number of themes which only developed fully in his other novels later on” (Chvatík 1994, p. 45; my translation).

Chvatík does not see the novel either as a socially critical work or a psychological or realistic one. Instead, he considers it to be a typical example of a polyphonic novel⁵ depicting human existence and which deals with basic questions of human existence in the late modern age. According to Chvatík, in *Žert* Kundera revealed certain important features that were typical of totalitarian ideology – the total domination of a symbol over a character, a context over a text and the coding over an individual message. In his opinion, the central theme of *Žert* is the relationship between the individual and history (Chvatík 1994, p. 56–57).

⁵ According to Chvatík, in this context it means that the narrator seeks the truth in its plurality and relativity, through the consciousness of all the fictional characters (the novel *Žert* has four alternating „voices”, four zones of narration with different standpoints).

Another Czech monograph, Eva Le Grand's *Kundera aneb Paměť touhy* (Kundera or The Memory of Desire) was published in Olomouc in 1998.⁶ In her work, she develops, among other things, Květoslav Chvatík's thesis of a „pure” novel, thus „a novel without attributions” (Chvatík 1994, p. 44; my translation):

To me, Kundera's novels are neither ideological nor historical or philosophical or autobiographical, but rather they are deep polyphonic novels, polysemantic and (perhaps most importantly) beautifully ludic (playful), fictional (Le Grand 1998, p. 22; my translation).

Le Grand takes *Žert*, together with *Knihy smíchu a zapomnění* (The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, first published in France under the title *Le Livre du rire et de l'oubli* in 1979), as the most extreme example of that synthetic game of polyphony and its variations. Being Kundera's former student, she understood that the novel mainly presents the author with an opportunity to examine human existence through different characters.

Kundera's *Žert* is perceived similarly by Helena Kosková, the author of yet another Kundera monograph. In her book *Milan Kundera* from 1998, Kosková writes that the plot of *Žert* itself works as a metaphor that captures the existential quality of life in a totalitarian state. The author compares the novel to Kundera's favorite piece, Robert Musil's *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* (The Man Without Qualities),⁷ and reminds us that neither of the two authors wrote a historical novel, but rather a phenomenological one – an analysis of a time period is elevated into a more general statement. In Kosková's opinion, that is why *Žert* received such worldwide acclaim.

⁶ The text *Kundera ou La mémoire du désir* was not primarily aimed at Czech audience, the author wrote it for a Canadian publishing house XYZ Éditeur in Montreal. Despite this fact, it is considered one of the most important post-1989 books on Kundera in Czech.

⁷ Milan Kundera chose this work written by Robert Musil as the best novel of the past century in a survey in *Lidové noviny*.

Kosková also points out that although the novel does give a testimony about the period after 1948, the subject of Kundera's interest is not the period as such, but the exploration of the existential situation of a man at that time (Kosková 1998, p. 84–85). Ludvík's skeptical attitude is then to deconstruct the false myths to which the book's characters subscribe. The compassion of Ludvík, the main protagonist of the novel, for the world is, according to Kosková, one of the first variations on the existential themes developed in Kundera's later novels.

The narrative strategies of *Žert* are explained in detail in *Vyprávět příběh: naratologické kapitoly k románům Milana Kundery* (To Tell a Story: Narratological Notes on Milan Kundera's Novels, 2001), by Tomáš Kubíček. Kubíček sees *Žert* as „a novel of several consciousnesses” (Kubíček 2001, p. 41), and its narrative construction, in his opinion, „participated in the formation of the noetic validity of the text, it became the means of the reader's initiation and the carrier of interpretative keys” (Kubíček 2001, p. 66–67; my translation).

The fifth and for the time being the latest Kundera monograph in Czech is the work of Jakub Češka, *Království motivů: motivická analýza románů Milana Kundery* (The Kingdom of Motifs: A Motivic Analysis of Milan Kundera's Novels, 2005). It rises above the average standard of the books that have been published about Kundera. Firstly, we must consider the fact that Jakub Češka (b. 1971) already belongs to a completely different generation than literary theorists such as Chvatík, Le Grand or Kosková. In addition, his contribution to the research methodology on Kundera provides us with a new perspective on Kundera's fictional work. It is based on an analysis of motifs which does not separate individual novels, but looks at the whole „fictional world” created by Kundera, and examines the context for the use of his favorite motifs. Inspired by French narratology and structuralism, Češka uses a structural analysis to assess Kundera's narrations, but, as his method suggests, he does not offer a separate analysis of *Žert*.

Since 1989, there has been no doubt about the qualities of *Žert* in literary circles. Literary theorists focusing on Kundera's novels currently understand *Žert* in accordance with its intention, not as an ideo-

logical or a historical novel, but as a novel of human existence, a polyphonic novel, which is „only” a novel and nothing else.

Žert, although a multi-layered novel, has remained the same text for more than forty years. How do we explain the changes in how the book was received? Social and political conditions in Czechoslovakia meant that a certain book could at first be almost universally praised for its qualities, and subsequently forcibly withdrawn from sale, removed from library shelves and condemned as worthless by official propaganda, to be discussed only unofficially in samizdat and exile publications, and later, after 1989, it returned to the official literary sphere to be appreciated again.

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