



“TESTAMENTS BETRAYED” BY MILAN KUNDERA

Samuel Abrahám

Many things in life happen by accident. Often, looking back, we feel almost embarrassed that what for years we considered to be a natural part of our existence in fact happened suddenly, unexpectedly and that everything could have been otherwise. In fact, it is a paradox how the big history of mankind and small history of the fates of us individuals unfold on this imaginary, meaningful or meaningless stage of human history. Human beings resist, consciously or subconsciously, this march of history because, in retrospect, the world seems predetermined, as if it were outside our will or influence, beyond our choice. Human freedom, the pinnacle of human rationality, the ultimate goal of modernity, the belief that we are the subject and not the object of history, is in everlasting contradiction with the Hegelian march of history that writes a story over which we have no influence. Milan Kundera defends and marks down human freedom by claiming that humans created art as a defense of their own freedom, where an artist alone is the subject of the history of art. In *Testaments Betrayed* Kundera writes: “the history of art is a revenge by man against the impersonality of the history of humanity.”¹ This is the reason I chose this particular book, from which I quote this sentence and an excerpt from Chapter 8 as my selection for this issue. However, I will first retell my personal story about the circumstances related to this book.

So, many things happen by accident. My meeting with Milan Kundera was also by chance. In 2000, a neo-Nazi party of Jörg Haider became part of the government of Austria. At the same time, there was planned in Vienna the 14th *Meeting of European Cultural Journals*, organized by those who were a few years later to create the internet journal *Eurozine*.² As a Member of the Board, I was participating in the preparation of the conference and my Austrian friends were shocked that their country, which

1 Milan Kundera: *Testaments Betrayed* (1995, Faber, New York, p. 16), translated from French by Linda Asher.

2 Kritika & Kontext became a member of the European publishers' circle from the journal's inception in 1996.

had never come to terms with its Nazi past, was providing the expanding EU with neo-Nazis in power at the beginning of the new millennium.³

They refused to organize the meeting in Vienna and, considering that it was only a few weeks before the event, they asked me whether we could hold it in Bratislava. Of course, I agreed and, although because of the sponsors the meeting actually began in Vienna, on November 10, 2000, two full buses of publishers and editors moved fifty kilometers down the Danube.⁴

When we were preparing the agenda for the Bratislava part of the conference, someone suggested that we should invite the writer Milan Kundera, author of the famous essay “The Tragedy of Central Europe” that resonated so strongly among Western intellectuals.⁵ Around that time I attended in Bratislava a brilliant adaptation of Kundera’s play *Jacques and His Master* in Studio L + S by the great actors Milan Lasica and Julius Satinský. I learned that Kundera almost attended the opening night in 1993 and only sickness at that time prevented his visit. The play was still in the studio’s repertoire in 2000, and Milan Lasica told me that they would just need two weeks’ notice if Kundera were to come and they would gladly play it for him.

I sent an invitation to the conference to Kundera, and enclosed with it my review of his book *Testaments Betrayed* but, in the end, Kundera did not come. Since then, however, I have stayed in touch with him, visited him and his wife Vera, and almost three times I became the publisher into Slovak of his seven books written in French that was never translated into Czech. That odyssey of unsuccessful publishing is for a different story but what connected me accidentally with Kundera, the letter, the review of his book, Jörg Haider...? One would never know. Here I offer the translation of my letter, the review of his book, his answer and then the excerpt from *Testaments Betrayed*.

From my letter to Kundera on September 12, 2000

Dear Mr. Kundera,

I am writing to you because I want to invite you to a meeting of publishers and editors of cultural journals from around Europe which will take place on November 9-12 this year under the title Politics and Culture: New Visions, New Disillusions. It is the 14th meeting since 1983. Since 1990 this annual event has been attended by participants from Central and Eastern Europe...

I wanted to invite you back in 1995, together with Susanne Roth, now deceased, who at that time ran the *Pro Helvetia Foundation* in Slovakia.⁶ We wished to organized

3 I recall Walter Famlar, the editor-in-chief of the Austrian journal *Wesspennest*, shouting in despair: “Austria is a fascist state!” Today, when the specter of fascism is back again, his words seem to me less funny than they did in 2000, in the beautiful halls of Vienna’s IWM.

4 Not all the intellectuals managed to pass our vigilant customs officers. They did not let in one German editor who did not have a passport but “only” an ID. Well done (our former) comrades! “The border is not a walking zone,” raged the future communist leader Gustav Husák in Bratislava in the fall of 1969. The building where he shouted at his stunned audience is gone now; border controls might yet return...

5 The original title of this essay was “Kidnapped Europe”. It was published in *New York Review of Books* as “The Tragedy of Central Europe” in April 1984. In Czechoslovakia, some Czech and Slovak dissidents criticized the essay and a few Russians dissidents raged over one of the essay’s remarks – in the context of the essay a small point – that Russia does not belong to Europe.

6 Susanne Roth translated several of Kundera’s books into German.

a debate between you and Juraj Špitzer.⁷ However, Mr. Špitzer suddenly fell ill and passed away. Shocked and saddened, we dropped the whole idea.

I am aware that you do not like to participate in conferences and seminars. However, our event, like the 13 before it, would be rather informal and non-academic, and is more an opportunity to meet kindred spirits from around Europe. The reason why we would discuss the status of culture in the future Europe is that this topic is very relevant for us and for the societies we live in. The locations for the event are significant: the first part will take place in Vienna and then, for two days, in Bratislava, hence at the border of what were formerly two worlds but are now tiptoeing towards each other very carefully. The participants are people who try, within the small space allowed by their journals, to preserve what spiritually defines and integrates Europe in contrast to that unclear political, military and economic integration that is taking place as if passing us by, in ways that often baffle us.

In Vienna, the keynote speech will be given by Slavenka Drakulič under the title “Who’s Afraid of Europe?”. We would be honored if, in Bratislava, you would address us and convey how you sense developments in Europe, where you see hope, and what keeps you in despair. I remember your article about Russia and Europe in the 1980s, which I eagerly read as an émigré in Canada. Since then much has changed: the communist regimes have fortunately collapsed, sadly Czechoslovakia has fallen apart, and we face the problems connected to post-communist transformation and, ahead, European integration. Many of the hopes that sparkled in Western and Central Europe after 1989 have dissipated, and much has surprised us – for example how much in common we have with those in Western Europe who try to preserve cultural heritage and values in their respective countries.

...

It would be a great honor for us if you could attend the whole event but, in the case you are busy, we would gladly welcome you at least on Friday, November 10 in Bratislava. If you were to come, I can imagine I could persuade Milan Lasica to put on a performance of your *Jaques and His Master*. (I was told that you almost came to the opening night.)

I don’t have to emphasize that, along with many Slovaks, I admire your works and it is a pity that *Slowness*, *Identity* and *Testaments Betrayed* have not been published in Slovak or Czech. (I enclose my review of your *Testaments Betrayed*.)

Yours sincerely,

Samuel Abrahám

⁷ Juraj Špitzer, among many things, organized the famous Czechoslovak Writers’ Congress in 1967 where Kundera read his famous speech; the whole event had a great effect on the political developments in 1968.

TESTAMENTS BETRAYED

(book review, *Národní obroda* January 30, 1998)

The end of the century has many faces: communication via the internet, a devastated natural environment, religious fundamentalism, postmodernism, cloning.

Technology advances with great speed, but how to understand the current era in its contradiction and divisiveness? As often happens, novelists and dramatists, without much effort to achieve it, are able, through their art, to express the essence of where our world is and is heading, oftentimes much more succinctly than piles of sociological or political-scientific tracts. Their ability to describe their own fate can result in us perceiving the global picture through a crystal-clear prism. One such author is Milan Kundera and, in particular, his book *Les Testaments trahir* (1993, *Testaments Betrayed* – written in French). It is a confession in a truly Kunderian way: without any trace of saying a word about his private life, he exposes his most intimate feelings, worries and revelations about art and the world.

The book comprises several chapters, seemingly unrelated. However, with Milan Kundera these themes are crucial and interconnected. The book stems from the following premise: “...the history of humanity and the history of the novel are two very different things. The former is not man’s to determine, it takes over like an alien force he cannot control, whereas the history of the novel (or of painting, of music) is born of man’s freedom, of his wholly personal creations, of his own choices. The meaning of an art’s history is opposed to the meaning of history itself. Because of its personal nature, the history of an art is a revenge by man against the impersonality of the history of humanity.” It is seemingly a celebration of art, but Kundera’s scope is wider. In particular, by assessing and devising the status of art, he succeeds in depicting the general condition at the end of 20th century. Art provides us with a human dimension, and hence a way to defend ourselves against impersonal human history. Kundera, among other things, writes about the crisis in which the art of the novel finds itself today, where the majority of writing is prose that adds nothing new, lacks aesthetic value, does not reconnect with the 400-year-old tradition of the European novel, and becomes just another consumer item. With brilliance comes brilliant style. Consider for yourself:

“To my mind, great works can only be born within the history of their art and as *participants* in that history. It is only inside history that we can see what is new and what is repetitive, what is discovery and what is imitation; in other words, only inside history can a work exist as a *value* capable of being discerned and judged. Nothing seems to me worse for art than to fall outside its own history, for it is a fall into the chaos where aesthetic values can no longer be perceived.”

And Kundera continues:

“...most novels produced today stand outside the history of the novel: novelized confessions, novelized journalism, novelized score-settling, novelized autobiographies, novelized indiscretions, novelized denunciations, novelized political arguments, novelized deaths of husbands, novelized deaths of fathers, novelized deaths of mothers, novelized deflowerings, novelized child-births—novels ad infinitum, to the

end of time, that say nothing new, have no aesthetic ambition, bring no change to our understanding of man or to novelistic form, are each one like the next, are completely consumable in the morning and completely discardable in the afternoon.”

He also writes about the crisis in which classical music found itself, the result of which is cacophony beaming from all direction; about the media that – like, for example, the Secret Police during Communist Czechoslovakia – intrudes into what, for Kundera, is the most sacred thing: human privacy.

At the end, when we read, for example, about Stravinsky or Gombrowicz and about the influence of emigration on their work and their relationship towards the country where they were born, we start to appreciate why Kundera writes in French and why he is not returning to his native Moravia.

To Samuel Abrahám

From Kundera.

Dear Mr. Abrahám,

You pleased me very much with your fax and the newspaper clipping in which you write so smart about my book. Truly smart: you cited the most important thing: the difference between history and the history of art; and you stressed what I perceive to be so dangerous: the general and systematic attack on human privacy.

I did not realize that you wanted to invite me for a discussion with Juraj Špitzer! Most likely, I would not have wished to have a debate, but how happy I would have been to see Juraj Špitzer one more time!

Thank you also for your invitation to your meeting. As you rightly alluded, I try to avoid these kinds of events and, as the time is getting shorter, I try to avoid them more and more.

But I promise you that if I ever get to Slovakia, I will let you know so we could meet. And if on that occasion I could see *Jacques* in Lasica's and Satinsky's rendition that would truly be a great joy!

Thank you so much that you thought of me, and I send you my best regards,

Milan Kundera

As a selection for this issue I offer a short segment from the book of essays Testaments Betrayed. Milan Kundera was glad to allow me to use the translation. he only asked me to send him a page of translated text (not the whole translation) so he could, as he wrote, read in slovak the text he originally wrote in French but was never published in czech.

The selection is from the Part eight “Path in Fog” (translated into English by Linda Asher):

THOSE WITH NO SENSE OF GUILT ARE DANCING

Milan Kundera

The music (commonly and vaguely) called „rock“ has been inundating the sonic environment of daily life for twenty years; it seized possession of the world at the very moment when the twentieth century was disgustingly vomiting up its history; a question haunts me: was this coincidence mere chance? Or is there some hidden meaning to the conjunction of the century's final trials and the ecstasy of rock? Is the century hoping to forget itself in this ecstatic howling? To forget its utopias foundering in horror? To forget its art? An art whose subtlety, whose needless complexity, irritates the populace, offends against democracy?

The word „rock“ is vague; therefore, I would rather describe the music I mean: human voices prevail over instruments, high-pitched voices over low ones; there is no contrast to the dynamics, which keep to a perpetual fortissimo that turns the singing into howling; as in jazz, the rhythm accentuates the second beat of the measure, but in a more stereotyped and noisier manner; the harmony and the melody are simplistic and thus they bring out the tone color, the only inventive element of this music; while the popular songs of the first half of the century had melodies that made poor folk cry (and delighted Mahler's and Stravinsky's musical irony), this so-called rock music is exempt from the sin of sentimentality; it is not sentimental, it is ecstatic, it is the prolongation of a single moment of ecstasy; and since ecstasy is a moment wrenched out of time—a brief moment without memory, a moment surrounded by forgetting—the melodic motif has no room to develop, it only repeats, without evolving or concluding (rock is the only „light“ music in which melody is not predominant; people don't hum rock melodies).

A curious thing: thanks to the technology of sound reproduction, this ecstatic music resounds incessantly and everywhere, and thus outside ecstatic situations. The acoustic image of ecstasy has become the everyday decor of our lassitude. It is inviting us to no orgy, to no mystical experience, so what does this trivialized ecstasy mean to tell us? That we should accept it. That we should get used to it. That we should respect its privileged position. That we should observe the *ethic* it decrees.

The ethic of ecstasy is the opposite of the trial's ethic; under its protection everybody does whatever he wants: now anyone can suck his thumb as he likes, from infancy to graduation, and it is a freedom no one will be willing to give up; look around you on the Metro; seated or standing, every single person has a finger in some orifice of his face—in the ear, in the mouth, in the nose; no one feels he's being observed, and everyone dreams of writing a book to tell about his unique and inimitable self, which is picking its nose; no one listens to anyone else, everyone writes, and each of them writes the way rock is danced to: alone, for himself, focused on himself yet making the same motions as all the others. In this situation of *uniform egocentricity*; the sense of guilt does not play the role it once did; the tribunals still operate, but they are fascinated exclusively by the past; they see only the core of the century; they see only the generations that are old or dead. Kafka's characters were made to feel guilty

by the authority of the father; it is because his father disgraces him that the hero of „The Judgment“ drowns himself in a river; that time is past: in the world of rock, the father has been charged with such a load of guilt that, for a long time now, he allows everything. Those with no guilt feelings are dancing.

Recently, two adolescents murdered a priest: on television I heard another priest talking, his voice trembling with understanding: „We must pray for the priest who was a victim of his mission: he was especially concerned with young people. But we must also pray for the two unfortunate adolescents; they too were victims: of their drives.“

While freedom of thought—freedom of words, of attitudes, of jokes, of reflection, of dangerous ideas, of intellectual provocations—shrinks, under surveillance as it is by the vigilance of the tribunal of general conformism, *the freedom of drives* grows ever greater. They are preaching severity against sins of thought; they are preaching forgiveness for crimes committed in emotional ecstasy.

PATHS IN THE FOG

Robert Musil's contemporaries admired his intelligence much more than his books; they said he should have written essays, not novels. A negative proof suffices to refute this opinion: read Musil's essays: how heavy they are, boring and charmless! For Musil is a great thinker *only* in his novels. His thought needs to feed on concrete situations and concrete characters; in short, it is *novelistic thought*, not philosophic.

Each first chapter of the eighteen books of Fielding's *Tom Jones* is a brief essay. Its first French translator, in the eighteenth century, purely and simply eliminated all of them, claiming that they were not to the French taste. Turgenev reproached Tolstoy for the essayistic passages in *War and Peace* dealing with the philosophy of history. Tolstoy began to doubt himself and, under pressure of advisers, eliminated those passages in the third edition of the novel. Fortunately, he later restored them.

Just as there are novelistic dialogue and action, there is also novelistic reflection. The lengthy reflections of *War and Peace* are inconceivable outside of the novel—for instance, in a scholarly journal. Because of their language, certainly, which is filled with intentionally naive similes and metaphors. But above all because Tolstoy talking about history is not interested, as a historian would be, in the exact account of events and of their consequences for social, political, and cultural life, in the evaluation of this or that person's role, and so on; he is interested in history as a *new dimension of human existence*.

History became a concrete experience for everyone toward the start of the nineteenth century, during the Napoleonic Wars that figure in *War and Peace*., with a shock, these wars made clear to every European that the world around him was subject to perpetual change that interferes with his life, transforming it and keeping it in motion. Before the nineteenth century, wars and rebellions were felt to be natural catastrophes, like the plague or an earthquake. People saw neither unity nor continuity in historical events, and did not believe it possible to influence their course. Diderot's Jacques the Fatalist joins a regiment and then is seriously wounded in battle; marked for life, he will limp for the rest of his days. But what battle was it? The novel doesn't say. And why should it say? All wars were the same. In eighteenth-century novels the historical moment is specified only very approximately. Only after the start of the nineteenth century, from Scott and Balzac on, do all wars no longer seem the same and characters in novels live in precisely dated times.

Tolstoy looks back on the Napoleonic Wars from a distance of fifty years. In his case, the new perception of history not only affects the structure of the novel, which has become more and more capable of capturing (in dialogue, in description) the historical nature of narrated events; but what interests him primarily is man's relation to history (his ability to dominate it or to escape it, to be free or not in regard to it), and he takes up the problem directly, as the very *theme* of his novel, a theme he explores by every means, including novelistic reflection.

Tolstoy argues against the idea that history is made by the will and reason of great individuals. History makes itself, he says, obeying laws of its own, which remain obscure to man. Great individuals „all were the *involuntary tools* of history, carrying on a work that was *concealed from them*.“ Later on: „Providence compelled all these men, each striving to attain personal aims, to combine in the accomplishment of a single stupendous result not one of them (neither Napoleon nor Alexander and still less anyone who did the actual fighting) *in the least expected*.“ And again: „Man lives consciously for himself, but is *unconsciously* a tool in the attainment of the historic, general aims of mankind.“ From which comes this tremendous conclusion: „*History, that is, the unconscious, general herd-life of mankind ...*“ (I emphasize the key phrases.)

With this conception of history, Tolstoy lays out the metaphysical space in which his characters move. Knowing neither the meaning nor the future course of history, knowing not even the objective meaning of their own actions (by which they „involuntarily“ participate in events whose meaning is „concealed from them“), they proceed through their lives as one proceeds *in the fog*. I say fog, not darkness. In the darkness, we see nothing, we are blind, we are defenseless, we are not free. In the fog, we are free, but it is the freedom of a person in fog: he sees fifty yards ahead of him, he can clearly make out the features of his interlocutor, can take pleasure in the beauty of the trees that line the path, and can even observe what is happening close by and react.

Man proceeds in the fog. But when he looks back to judge people of the past, he sees no fog on their path. From his present, which was their faraway future, their path looks perfectly clear to him, good visibility all the way. Looking back, he sees the path, he sees the people proceeding, he sees their mistakes, but not the fog. And yet all of them—Heidegger, Mayakovsky, Aragon, Ezra Pound, Corky, Gottfried Benn, St.-John Perse, Giono—all were walking in fog, and one might wonder: who is more blind? Mayakovsky, who as he wrote his poem on Lenin did not know where Leninism would lead? Or we, who judge him decades later and do not see the fog that enveloped him?

Mayakovsky's blindness is part of the eternal human condition.

But for us not to see the fog on Mayakovsky's path is to forget what man is, forget what we ourselves are.