

# Transcultural Misunderstandings: The bilingual practice of Milan Kundera and the search for *The Joke*

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## Abstract

Milan Kundera's critical views and his difficult relationship to translation and translators has been frequently a subject of heated discussion and debate among translation scholars and experts. While some show understanding and sympathy for Kundera's radical attitude and his uncompromising demand for fidelity, others see in him an author who desperately wants to assert his authority as sole owner of the text, referring to his interventions in the translation process as expression of an 'essentialist' desire or need to control meaning translingually. While demanding utmost loyalty from translators, Kundera himself takes full liberty when translating his own work, making significant editions and creating different versions of the same text in different languages. The history of his novel *The Joke* is symptomatic of the contradictions pertinent to Kundera's bilingual practice. In this paper, I will discuss the problem of translation and the relationship between original and translation in Kundera's work. Drawing on the themes of misunderstanding, remembrance and forgetting in *The Joke*, it will be argued that Kundera deliberately uses misunderstanding as a special mode of reading/writing. While apparently seeking to create a 'definite' version, Kundera's rewriting practice rather erases boundaries and raise serious questions regarding what can be considered a translation and what is supposed to be an original.

**Keywords:** Milan Kundera, *The Joke*, bilingualism and self-translation, remembrance and forgetting, original and translation

## 1. Introduction

In his essay *Verratene Vermächtnisse* (French original: *Les Testaments trahis*, English translation: *Testaments Betrayed*) (1994: 99ff), Kundera cites a sentence from Kafka's novel *The Castle* which would represent the whole poetic intensity of Kafka's prose. Afterwards, the sentence – whose figurative associations would pose a serious challenge for any translation and any translator – is compared to four French versions varying in their closeness to the original text.<sup>1</sup> In doing this,

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<sup>1</sup> The cited examples are from the translations of Alexandre Vialatte, Claude David, and Bernard Lortholary.

Kundera emphasizes Kafka's repetition of the German words "*Fremde*" and "*Fremdheit*" which are rather difficult to translate literally because of their extensive semantic potential (they could designate everything that is strange or unknown for someone, not only being abroad like French *étranger*). All three versions, Kundera argues, do not reach the same level of abstraction and imaginative power as the original and fail to do justice to its semantic and poetic richness and suggestiveness. Kundera sets then out to analyze Kafka's metaphorical language which he calls "existential" or "phenomenological" underlining its significance through further examples.

This is followed by an ironic criticism of what Kundera calls the 'synonymising reflex' and the 'beautiful style' of the translators which – although seemingly unharmful – distorts the aesthetic character of the original text. Thus, Kundera (who sees in the plainness of Kafka's vocabulary an essential quality of his prose) cites further examples showing how the translators try to avoid what could be considered a simple language choosing instead of the most near and obvious translation words that seem more sophisticated and elegant. Why 'the devil', Kundera asks angrily, should one say "*marcher*" (march) and not simply "go" when the original text simply says "go" (1994: 106)? The lexical "sparseness" and the "ascetic indifference" of the original text, which stands in contradiction with the 'beautiful style', constitutes, according to Kundera, an "aesthetic intention" and reflects the true "beauty" of Kafka's writing style. The tension between loyalty and creativity, Kundera explains, causes the translator, who (not without good reason) wants their work to be acknowledged, to want to leave their own impact on the text through lexical variation and poetic exaggeration or dramatization. Kundera, who observes this with sarcastic anger and clear bitterness, obviously does not approve of such a behaviour which would do a great harm to the original. "The highest authority for a translator", he comes to the conclusion, "should be the *personal style* of the author" (ibid.: 107; my trans.).

In an article entitled "Kundera's Sentence", Chesterman (2004) takes up Kundera's discussion of the Kafka sentence in order to show how Kundera's views on translation reflect a 'romantic' conception of the author as an intellectual authority and owner of the literary work. Kundera, who draws on the romantic tradition, would apparently entertain an 'absolutist' understanding of translation as an equivalence of the formal or stylistic effect. He builds his rationale on the idea, Chesterman explains, that a certain literary form would initiate the same response

or reaction in all languages and at all times, leading to a universalist aesthetic theory in which stylistic instruments and literary tropes constitute an objective entity and a material value in themselves. When Kafka repeats a certain word, then all translators would have to do the same. Simultaneously, there is hardly any problematisation of the cultural norms and expectations of target readers or of the internal systemic relationship of the text to other texts in the target language. The sociocultural differences and aesthetic preferences as well as the diachronic and synchronic divergences between the contexts of production and reception of both original and translation would seem to play no role. The text would seemingly exist by and for itself outside any spatial or temporal relevance and regardless of any cultural and historical reality. "In this a-historical no-man's land", Chesterman writes, "the only authority is the source-text author. [...] Translators are 'sentenced' to play a very subordinate and restricted role" (ibid.: 77). Translations, as Kundera would see them, are not 'better' or 'worse' but just 'right' or 'wrong'. At the same time, Kundera would seem to have no doubt regarding his access to the intention of the original text. Being himself an author, he would apparently have the exclusive privilege to know what Kafka (or any other author) actually wants to say when he says or writes something, which some translators might not be able (or not want) to do. In addition, Kundera would not give or try to give any answer to the question why all translations change the original the way they do. There would seem to be a universal translation method regardless of cultural specificity and the different literary and textual traditions of languages. "There is", Chesterman contends, "one absolutely and universally correct method for translating Kafka, and one only" (ibid.: 79-80).

Chesterman's analysis sheds a negative light on Kundera and his relationship to translation. His criticism is symptomatic of the discussions and debates circulating around Kundera and other bilingual exile authors who – not seldom at the expense of the translator – intervene in the translation process and express sentiments ranging from relative doubt and discomfort to total rejection and opposition to free or adaptive translation methods and strategies. Venuti (1998: 5), for example, calls Kundera's thoughts on translation "remarkably naive": "He [Kundera] assumes that the meaning of the foreign text can avoid change in translation." Some go even further talking about an "organic unity" (Margala 2010: 30) between author and work in which Kundera embodies with his exaggerated wish for control the figure

of ‘God’, leading to the demonstrative assertion that Kundera ‘is’, in fact, his work (ibid.).

The picture remains, however, abridged if one would not consider the other side of the discourse taking into account other positions and arguments that are circulating in expert discussions on Kundera and his relationship to translation. Thus, two distinct positions could be recognized here: While some see in him a striking example for a ‘naïve’ and ‘essentialist’ attitude regarding cultural difference and the stability of meaning, others criticize the unrestricted ‘liberty’ some translators and publishers allow themselves when dealing with foreign texts, seeing in this an illegitimate intervention in the autonomy and the ‘rights’ of the original and its author. According to this position, the case of Kundera embodies an ‘irresponsible’, ‘free’ translation culture and a long tradition of ‘appropriation’ of Eastern authors by the economic interests of major publishing houses in the ‘West’. With reference to Kundera’s *The Joke*, Kuhlitz (1990) shows, for example, how the simplification and adaptation to what publishers and translators see as the expectations and aesthetic and/or cultural values of the target-cultural readers has caused ‘irreparable damage’ to the work and its author. The translators of *The Joke*, he states (ibid.: 128), “have trespassed across the magical line beyond which simplification can be taken for reality.” Similarly, Zybatow (2012) takes the case of Kundera as occasion for a comprehensive criticism of the ‘modern-liberalist’ translation culture and theory which emphasize the creative role of translators and the independent position of the translation in relation to the original text and its author. The “non-recognition” of the original by the translator as creative maker, he argues with reference to authors like Nabokov, Kundera and Erich Fried, leads to a “falsifying culture transfer” (ibid.: 10, my trans.). The modern science of translation (*Translationswissenschaft*) would take, of all things, this ideologically and economically led ‘un-culture’ of translation as a basis for orientation, adopting misleading ‘metaphorical transcriptions’ of scholars like Bassnett and Lefevere who have proclaimed the “cultural turn” in translation studies.

This shows a state of polarization and misunderstanding in scholarly debate regarding the relationship between author and translator/original and translation which is still largely determined by traditional dichotomies and binary oppositions. This is especially obvious when authors – like in Kundera’s case – proclaim their ownership of the text trying to preserve what they see as the text’s intrinsic meaning and style to which the translator ought to be loyal. This, however, is a simplification

of the problematic of translation and its significance for authors like Kundera who, because of their exile experience, became themselves active in translating and rewriting their texts, thus creating different versions of the same text in different languages. This makes clear that another, more complex and more differentiated view on Kundera and his translation/rewriting practice is needed for a better understanding of the problems and conflicts inherent to it. In the following, I will endeavour to provide such a differentiated account of Kundera's bilingual practice. Supported by a critical reading of the theme of remembering, forgetting and misunderstanding in his novel *The Joke*, I will analyse the translation history of this work, arguing that Kundera uses translation to deliberately create a productive state of misreading and misinterpretation.

## **2. Translation is my 'nightmare'!**

In an interview in 1987, Milan Kundera is asked whether he could ever imagine himself immigrating back to Czechoslovakia, his former home country which he had to leave because of political suppression through the communist regime. He has been now living for ten years in his self-chosen exile in France where he is teaching and publishing. The answer is pessimistic: "I don't believe I'll ever be able to return to Czechoslovakia. It will never be possible" (Elgrably and Kundera 1987: 11). In his age, Kundera explains, one would not have the power any more to make a second decisive transition. At the age of 46, he has managed to switch from his mother tongue to a new language. He has now more French friends, is writing articles in French and is thinking increasingly in this language which would later become the medium of his novels as well. The question is simple. One has in principle only two possibilities: "[E]ither you live looking over your shoulder, there where you are not, in your former country, [...] or you make the effort to profit from the catastrophe, starting over at zero, beginning a new life right where you are" (ibid.). Kundera has chosen the second option. He wants to look forward, not backward, to live the present, not the past. He cannot be an '*émigré*' twice in his life, once from Prague to Paris, and once again from Paris to Prague. But this is only the half truth, he tells the interviewer, "for even if I could go back I would never wish to!" (ibid.: 12).

Chesterman (2004) sees a direct relationship between Kundera's views on translation and his exile biography which is characterized by a dramatic loss of home and mother tongue and in which there is apparently no place for compromises, which is reflected in Kundera's total adoption of the French language. For him,

Kundera's logic is one-sided because he apparently fails to negotiate and combine both, Czech and French, Prague and Paris. His views on translation would reflect an 'unhappy' and 'failed' exile biography in which the gain of one thing is only possible through the loss of the other and where there is no place for cultural and linguistic variability or relativity. Kundera's identity, Chesterman argues, is threatened by translation and difference. He would accordingly seek refuge in an 'absolute' authorial identity and an equally absolute understanding of language and meaning.

Kundera himself makes no secret of his difficult relationship to translation and translators.<sup>2</sup> "Translation", he says, "is my nightmare. I've lived horrors because of it" (Elgrably and Kundera 1987: 17-18). The case of his novel *The Joke*, whose translation history is symbolic of the interlingual 'suffering' and the 'misuse' of the original by the hand of 'irresponsible' translators and publishers, is characteristic of this conflict. In one of his essays, *The Art of the Novel*, he writes the following:

In 1968 and 1969, *The Joke* was translated into all the Western languages. But what surprises! In France, the translator rewrote the novel by ornamenting my style. In England, the publisher cut out all the reflective passages, eliminated the musicological chapters, changed the order of the parts, recomposed the novel. Another country: I meet my translator, a man who knows not a word of Czech. "Then how did you translate it?" "With my heart." And he pulls a photo of me from his wallet. [...] The shock of *The Joke's* translations left a permanent scar on me. (Kundera 1988: 121; Asher's trans.)

Because of the disappointment and the distrust, Kundera took the task of overseeing and reviewing the translations in the foreign languages he can speak on his own shoulder, a task which has, as he says, cost him a considerable amount of "conflict and fatigue [...] a whole period of my life" (ibid.). He compares his struggle for and with words with that of a "shepherd" chasing after "a flock of wild sheep" (ibid.). Because he made translation into a destiny question, he is paying a high price and has become a 'comic', 'sad' figure whom one should pity and whom no one understands, in his own words "a sorry figure to himself, a laughable one for others" (ibid.: 121-22).

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<sup>2</sup> According to him, Kundera has once almost left a publisher "for the sole reason that he tried to change my semicolons to periods" (Kundera 1988: 130)

### 3. ‚Bad‘ surprises!

The experience of the translation of *The Joke* marked the turning point in Kundera’s relationship to translation and brought him “to put some order in the foreign editions of my books” (Kundera 1988: 121; Asher’s trans.). It is, therefore, meaningful to look more closely at the history of this work. The novel was first published in the English language in 1969 (by MacDonald, in the translation of David Hamblyn and Oliver Stallybrass). After the publication – Kundera was then still in Czechoslovakia – Kundera criticised in a public letter in the *Times Literary Supplement* the editorial changes vehemently, even drawing parallels to his previous experiences with the Soviet censorship office:

I do not doubt that the English publisher has broken up my book in good faith that this would improve the sales. In Moscow, my play had been altered in good faith that this would help to obtain easy permission to stage it. Neither in Moscow nor in London did anyone care whether I approved the changes or not. The mentality of a London bookseller and that of a Moscow official responsible for art seem to have a mysterious kinship. (Kundera 1969)

The translator did not remain silent and defended his decisions with reference to the expectations of the target-cultural reader: “But the vast majority of its English readers, as opposed to Czechoslovakian readers with their different cultural traditions, would surely find the chapter on Moravian folk-music (with musical examples), if not tedious, at least ‘abstruse’” (Stallybrass 1969). Because of Kundera’s protest the book was eventually withdrawn from the market, and a new, complete edition was published in which the original order of the chapters and the deleted passages were retained. In 1982, another translation by Michel Henry Heim followed which Kundera praised in his foreword as “the first valid and authentic version of a book that tells of rape and has itself so often been violated” (Kundera 1987: xvi). Later, Kundera distanced himself again from Heim’s translation, justifying this change in attitude with the fact that he had had no chance to read the text thoroughly. The new definitive version appeared in 1992 (in New York by HarperCollins) under the name of Kundera and Aaron Asher. In order to justify the new version, Kundera lists in the foreword the faults and inconsistencies of the previously praised Heim translation which would not reflect his language and his

own writing style, stating that “I had the increasingly strong impression that what I read was not my text” (Kundera 1992: x).

The definitive and completely revised English version of *The Joke* contains, however, many deviations from the Czech original which was published in Prague in 1967. Comparing the two versions, Stanger (1997) counts up to fifty-five deleted passages as a whole, suggesting more than stylistic reasons behind the changes. Is the author, who compares the editorial interventions of a London publisher with the censorship practice of the Soviet office, in this way not himself practising “self-censorship for marketing purposes”, Stanger (ibid.: 99) asks expressing her disappointment. It looks as if Kundera would deliberately solve the connection of the novel to its direct cultural environment in the former Czechoslovakia, itself on the ‘losing’ side of history (ibid.: 98), for the sake of a ‘best seller’, thus creating a ‘compliant’ version that fits easily in the West-European context.

The disappointment which Stanger’s criticism shows is symptomatic for the case of Kundera. Her ‘search’ for *The Joke* started with the relatively simple presumption that the English text ought to be *the* translation, even “the most faithful of renderings possible” (ibid.: 94) of the Czech original. She had followed with much interest, partly with admiration, the dispute with the publishers and the discussion initiated by Kundera regarding the credibility and authenticity of the translations. She sincerely hoped to once read *Žert* in the original language, which she was – because of the unavailable language skills – able to do only after some time. What she discovered, however, was everything but the text which she assumed to “underlie all the translations”: “[Y]ou may understand how surprised I was to discover that your definitive English-language translation [...] in reality introduces numerous changes into the original Czech language text” (ibid.).

As she became aware of the discrepancies, Stanger widened the perspective including versions from other languages into the comparison. The definitive French version showed, however, no better results and deviated also from the Czech original. *The Joke* was apparently nowhere. Each language had its own version, and each version had its particularities that distinguished it from the Czech original and the other versions. The concept of a ‘definitive’ version seems to collapse: “[W]hich edition should readers consider to be definitive – and in what language” (Stanger 1997: 99)? Nonetheless, the reader is given indirectly the impression that the authorized English version, which is preceded by a brief history of the translangual ‘deformation’ of *The Joke*, is a (loyal) rendering of the Czech original text. The



novel ends with the suggestive remark: “completed December 5, 1965”. The reader is not informed in the outset about the nature and extension of the changes. *The Joke* has obviously developed. But why should these changes be withheld from the Czech audience, Stanger asks, if they merely reflect an aesthetic maturity of the novel? What should one read if one wants to read ‘the’ *Joke*: *Žert*, *The Joke*, *La Plaisanterie*? If every language has its own version, would Kundera then not be ultimately providing each audience with a “work in its own image”, “a fate reserved only for books written in the language of the small nations” (ibid.: 98)?

#### **4. Translation as misunderstanding**

Kundera seems to contradict himself when he rejects the ‘free’ translation culture and the tradition of ‘rewriting’ while at the same time he rewrites his novels on each occasion, thus recreating his own work continuously in translation. No version turns out in the end to be definitive, and not even the Czech original manuscript, which Kundera calls a “matrix” (1977: 3)<sup>3</sup>, forms a solid basis for what can be seen as a unified, identifiable work. If there is no definitive version at all, and if not even the Czech original can be considered as a reliable starting point, “then with what justification”, Woods (2006: 3) asks, “can Kundera demand fidelity?”. Critics like Stanger (1997) see in this practice a conscious and deliberate attempt to uproot the text from its socio-historical context and replace the original narrative with another one that conforms to the expectations of a Western readership representing the dominant discourse of world literature. Otherwise why should the changes to *The Joke* – if they really reflect an aesthetic maturity of the novel – be withheld from the Czech audience. Kundera was read in the west before the background of political upheavals and was predominantly perceived as a dissident author. The changes could accordingly be explained as an act of resistance against a politicized reading of his work, situating him in the tradition of Nabokov who also rejects the politicization of art. Thus, Kundera, who clearly states in his foreword to the Heim translation that *The Joke* is a love story and not an ‘indictment of Stalinism’ (Kundera 1987: xi), might have felt the obligation to stress the aesthetic qualities versus the political dimension of the novel. Translation has given him the opportunity to do so through rewriting it and recontextualizing it against what he considers a dissident label reserved for any exile writer from Eastern Europe. This

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<sup>3</sup> There are supposed to be three potential sources for every new Czech version of Kundera’s prose work: the manuscript, the Skvorecky version and the definitive French version (Woods 2006: 2)

does not seem as necessary in the Czech context, as the novel was there presumably not read primarily as a political statement. Nevertheless, Kundera has rewritten the Czech text three times (in 1968, 1969 und 1991) (Woods 2006: 5), suggesting (against claims to the contrary) that the original Czech text was actually also developing and trying to keep pace with the other versions in the other languages, mainly English and French. But as Kundera continuously rewrites his work, why should he deny translators exactly the same thing? Woods (2006: 24) argues that Kundera is not concerned with an absolute identity of meaning as claimed by many but with the personal style of the author, suggesting that his demand for fidelity is often misinterpreted and misunderstood. Indeed, Kundera himself has repeatedly highlighted the importance of the authorial style (e.g. 1994: 107). He has on different occasions edited and adapted his work removing elements that appeared very culturally specific for foreign readers (Woods 2006: 2). Yet, he objects to any kind of target-cultural adaptation done by translators and publishers, insisting that he should be translated faithfully and that the priority of all translation is to preserve the author's writing style. Thus, he seems to allow himself a liberty in translating his work that he denies anyone else, disregarding the efforts of the translators whose work he is making use of in his authorized versions. Kundera, who sees translation as his 'nightmare', feels himself misrepresented and has gradually but steadily withdrawn from the public discourse and the media, expressing himself only occasionally in written interviews. His 'testament' is seemingly being constantly 'betrayed' in a ruthless, inconsiderate world. As author, Kundera might very well have the legitimate right to rewrite and develop his work, and indeed, he is not the only author who has given himself extended liberties in translating his own work. In this regard, Kundera is in good company with other exile and bilingual authors. Nabokov, with whom Kundera identifies himself, has, for example, done quite the same thing. Although praising literalism as the ideal of translation and continuously condemning free translations, his translations of his own work are anything but literal or 'faithful' renderings, pointing to a similar gap between theory and practice as in Kundera. However, this alone is not sufficient to explain why Kundera's demand for fidelity is being constantly misunderstood and why his relationship to translation and translators is so contradictory and problematic. Does Kundera perhaps want to be misunderstood? What constitutes ultimately the specific, kunderian 'way of reading' (Woods 2006: 24) which Kundera is trying to enforce through his interventions?

## 5. Reading *The Joke*

To understand Kundera's philosophy and his relationship to translation, one has first to understand the role misunderstanding and ambiguity play in his work. The novel consists for Kundera in themes and motives which are spanned around a rather simple plot. The theme of misunderstanding, error and forgetting plays a central role in *The Joke* and constitutes one of its main motives. Accordingly, explicating this aspect would potentially help clarify the confusion and defuse some of the complexities surrounding Kundera and his (translation) practice, shedding a different light on the relationship between original and translation in his work.

*The Joke* has a relatively simple plot. Everything revolves around a mistake, a joke that is misunderstood and the bitter consequences of this misunderstanding. Ludvik, the main protagonist, becomes the victim of a sarcastic, political allusion which he sends to his girlfriend, Lucie, in unstable times. The 'innocent' postcard is, however, interpreted by no one as a joke, and Ludvik is as a result expelled from university and sent to a military penal unit in Ostrava where he has to do forced labour for years. The plan to revenge himself on the old friends who were responsible for his tragedy fails, however, due to the simple fact that during his long absence things have changed and almost nothing has remained as it was before his departure. While for him time in the labour camp seemed to stand still, everyone and everything he knew and experienced in his previous life has changed – including himself. The whole country has changed. Thus, Ludvik, who in his inner moral struggle and continuous hesitation and helplessness reminds us of Shakespeare's Hamlet, is torn between the pressing wish for revenge and the real disability to take action and execute the revenge plan in view of the progress of history. All memories are poisoned and contaminated by the unstoppable lapse of time and the pollution of the present perspective. Forgiving alternates and occurs in correlation with forgetting as condition for and synonym to forgiving. Ludvik, who is fettered by the past, cannot forgive because to forgive would mean to forget. But how can he forget the 'wrong' done to himself, the 'error' which has marked his life and for which he bore the least responsibility. In one place Ludvik reflects on his old love letters to Lucie:

I would like to read my letters today, and at the same time, I am glad that I am unable to read them; a person has a great advantage in that he cannot revisit himself in a younger edition; I fear that I would find myself irritating and that I would then tear up even this

narrative, because I would recognize that the testimony, which I give about myself here, is much too steeped in my contemporary attitudes and opinions. But what remembrance is not at the same time (and involuntarily) a repainting of an old picture? What remembrance is not a simultaneous exposition of two faces, that of the present and that of the past? What kind of a person I really was no one will ever find out. (Žert 1967, cited in Stanger 1997: 95-96; Stanger's translation)

Ludvik is not only plagued by the incapability to read his old love letters. Even the memories of his deceased mother seem to be all contaminated there, “[...] in the town where her remains lie buried fraudulently under alien marble” (Kundera 1987: 143; Heim's trans.). In order to be able to ‘read’ his old letters, to visit himself ‘in a former edition’, Ludvik has to be in control of sense and meaning. But this is exactly what he is not. His life, life in general consists in a tremendous ‘mistake’, and this mistake is not only his:

How happy would I be to revoke the whole story of my life! But what power have I to do so when the errors it stemmed from were not wholly *my own*? *Who*, in fact, made the error of taking my stupid joke seriously? *Who* made the error of arresting and sentencing Alexej's father (long since rehabilitated, but nonetheless dead)? So frequent, so common were those errors that they cannot be considered mere exceptions, “aberrations” in the order of things; they *were* the order of things. (ibid.: 240)

His life, his history is then not simply his own. The common belief in “rectification”, just like the belief in “eternal memory”, is precisely a “false faith”, a “sham” (ibid.: 245). They do not exist in reality. On the contrary: “[E]verything will be forgotten and nothing will be rectified” (ibid.). Because rectification is in this constellation impossible, it is replaced by forgetting as inevitable necessity and human operation which does not replace but rather complements and goes alongside remembrance constituting with it one entity. There can be in this sense no pure, untouched remembrance because forgetting as forgiveness requires rectification and is therefore impossible, as in the end there will be no rectification and consequently no forgiveness. A reconstruction of history is therefore impossible and delusive because this history does not exist physically or materially, in a pure state, and is always contaminated by the present perspective and the current state of mind. One is too much involved in the here and now in order to be able to remember outside

this dialectic process. Yet, in the end, one has to remember because the roots, the origin lies always in the past, in some distant place and time, but never in the actual moment.

No doubt, Kundera is very similar to his protagonist. He also is misunderstood by everyone, and this seems to be the peculiarity about him and his biography. Kundera cannot go back to Prague for the same reason Ludvik cannot read his old letters. Kundera is 'happy' in his new life, he has redefined himself and feels himself not at all as an 'émigré'. He has decided not to look behind but live ahead. Nonetheless, he cannot begin from nothing. "We are fatally rooted in the first half of life", he states (Elgrably and Kundera 1987: 10). Even if he would go back to his old home he would find nothing the way it was. The language, the people, the country and he himself, all would not be the same anymore.

The literary process is not always rational. Rationality and irrationality are for Kundera two sides of the same medal. Nothing endangers the literary process as creative process more than clarity and transparency. The novel is for Kundera nothing more and nothing less than "the art which strives to discover and grasp the ambiguity of things" (Elgrably and Kundera 1987: 6). According to him, the author has to be silent if he has nothing more to say (ibid.: 9). Kundera seems to fear precisely this. He wants not to be transparent, understandable and in his practice and his life attitude consequent and reasonable because this would be his death sentence as an author. For to be understood means to have to be silent and 'damned' to silence. This is what Kundera seems to suggest when he says that "[t]here is a certain danger in talking about oneself" (ibid.: 22). What fascinates him about Lucie is the fact that he does not 'understand' her (ibid.: 23), that he does not know 'from where' she comes and where, in which layer of his imagination she might be located. Sartre's concept of the 'anti-novel' which he sees as characteristic for Nabokov could – as Kristmannsson (1998) maintains – as well describe Kundera's theory and his overall attitude towards literature:

These anti-novels maintain the outward appearance and outlines of the novel; they are imaginative works that present us with fictional characters whose story is related. But this is only the better to deceive us; the aim is to pit the novel against itself, to destroy it under our very eyes (at the same time as it would seem to be erected), to write the novel of a novel that does not, that can not develop, to create a fiction that might be to the great works created by Dostoevski and Meredith what Miró's canvas entitled *Assassinat de la*

*peinture* is to the paintings of Rembrandt and Rubens. These strange and unclassifiable works do not prove the weakness of the novel form, they merely indicate that we are living in an age of analysis and that the novel is in the process of analyzing itself. (Sartre and Brombert 1955: 40)

No wonder then that Kundera's bilingual practice, this not-willing and not-being-able-to-be-identical-with-oneself, which characterises the relationship of original and translation in Kundera and which becomes a fatal trap for Stanger in her search for *The Joke*, 'disrupts' us and at times perplexes us as readers, critics and translators: No less is here being endangered than the unity and integrity of the speaking subject represented by the original text as stabilizing factor and guarantee for sense and meaning. What if not translation can be a better weapon against understanding and being 'understood', against being reduced to a dissident, to Czechoslovakia, the Prague Spring and the Soviet invasion?

It does not seem helpful to search here for coherence and clarity. Translation implies always transformation. A 'transparent' translation, translation in general as a pure, uncontaminated and untouched remembrance is not possible because the 'reparation' is not possible and is in principle a 'misbelief'. Translation itself is never remembrance or forgetting alone but always a mixture of both. Its 'mistakes' and 'errors' belong to no one per se, no author and no translator. The 'error' lies rather in translation itself and is inherent and specific to it. Such a translation has its own 'sense', its own 'reason' and its own 'laws' which do not necessarily correspond to or stem from human rationality and reason.

For this reason, we will never learn with certainty which version in which language and at which time is the 'true' (rendering of the) *Joke* because ultimately we will never learn 'what kind of person Ludvik really was'. For what remembrance is not "a repainting of an old picture [...] a simultaneous exposition of two faces, that of the present and that of the past." The search for 'the' *Joke* must therefore always be in vain. The original is irreparably and irrecoverably lost. It belongs to all and to no one at the same time. *The Joke* is definitely gone because Czechoslovakia of the 1950s and 1960s is also gone. We will thus never find *The Joke*. *Žert*, *The Joke*, *La Plaisanterie*, all are contaminated, false memories, temporary snapshots and moment interpretations which lose their meaning and their validity in the same breath in which they are uttered and the same moment in which they are born. There is, in fact, no such thing as 'the' *Joke* but only the *search* for *The Joke*. The search

is itself *The Joke*. Consequently, one can only correctly 'read' *The Joke* by misreading and 'misunderstanding' it, by acknowledging error and misunderstanding as part of its history and its natural order. This misunderstanding is by no means unwanted or coincidental. It has a function and a sense, and it belongs as well to the translation process.

This means that one has to open oneself to this truth, to surrender and abandon all demands for consistence and transparency and ultimately accept, even welcome, error and misunderstanding as natural part of the process. Perhaps then some knots might be untied and one learns to view the contradiction with which this procedure confronts us as a productive force. There is in the end no 'meaning identity' but only 'meaning continuity'. The identity is comprised of and constituted by continuity implied in translation as continuous rewriting. "The novel's spirit is the spirit of continuity: each work is an answer to preceding ones, each work contains all the previous experience of the novel" (Kundera 1988: 18; Asher's trans.). Translation is then an ongoing dialogue directed against fixing and limiting oneself to a single 'version', a dialogue which constantly negates translation as untouched, pure remembrance. This 'anti-translation' is intended to dismantle and deconstruct itself through enacting a dialectic of remembrance and forgetting, causing original and translation to go alongside each other as separate but yet related entities in a productive process which accepts no authority other than itself.

The process is then not unidirectional as it seems to be, not going only from Prague to Paris, but also from Paris to Prague. Translation has given Kundera his authorial voice and has helped him escape censorship and discover his writing style, becoming itself a new exile and creating a state of complete dependency. There seems to be no way back in this inexorable process. The only feasible and realistic option is to keep moving forward while at the same time looking back at one's former selves and one's former 'versions', knowing though that there is no way to recover them in their original state, prior to any transformational remembrance, that is, prior to any 'translation'. There is a risk and a price to be paid for this complete reliance on and deep involvement in translation. But the process is also rewarding. Kundera is no doubt aware of this. He decides accordingly to accept translation as his destiny and confront his translingual exile with courage and thankfulness because he knows that he has no other option if he does not want to become silent and lose his voice. Kundera is in reality not the sad, pitiful figure which he claims to be or which he is thought to be. Nor is he the victim of an inconsiderate, ruthless

appropriation culture determined by unscrupulous translators and publishers. The myth of the ‘betrayed’, ‘misrepresented’ and ‘misunderstood’ author is not least a construction, a self-aware staging which is rooted in the text and systematically enhanced in translation. In fact, what Kundera is trying to control with his interventions is not meaning but rather the impossibility and ‘uncontrollability’ of meaning as a stable unit resistant to the lapse of time and change of location. The way of reading which he is trying to enforce and which is protected by silence and ambiguity is nothing less and nothing more than misunderstanding as result and double effect of both operations of remembrance and forgetting. That he is laughed at, that he is accused of authoritarianism and absolutism, even ‘betrayal’ towards his own language and his own biography, is necessary and comprises part of a tacit agreement. All are equally part of this transcultural ‘misunderstanding’: author, translator, publisher, critic and reader. This is the only thing which gives this biography a unified meaning and ties author and work to each other. In addition, it is a misunderstanding which no one – not even Kundera himself – knows how it came about and how it will further develop. As Ludvik seems to stand on equal terms with Zemanek, the main actor behind his prosecution, due to an extramarital relationship with the latter’s wife, offering the opportunity for forgiveness, Ludvik realizes with a ‘shock’ that he would “do absolutely nothing” (1987: 235; Heim’s trans.). The question of guilt and innocence, mistake, error and sense is taken *ad absurdum* by history:

And who made them? History itself? History the divine, the rational? And why call them history’s errors? What if history plays jokes? And all at once I realized how powerless I was to revoke my own joke: I myself and my life as a whole had been involved in a joke much more vast (all-embracing) and absolutely irrevocable. (ibid.: 240)

## **6. Conclusion**

The passage in which Ludvik reflects on his old love letters and the impossibility of a transparent memory (see above) is (like many other parts) not retained in the definitive English version (1992). In her public letter to the author, Stanger (1997: 95-96) assumes stylistic reasons behind this erasure as the understanding of the protagonists would, according to her, not be affected. Kundera himself gave no answer to the critical letter. He remained – not surprisingly – silent. There is some amount of paradox in this, but somehow Stanger has read Kundera ‘correctly’ by



unintentionally 'misunderstanding' him. Her search for *The Joke* was a search for transparency, for a consistent, reliable concept of author and text as definite, rehearsable entities, which does not exist in Kundera's bilingual practice and his aesthetic (or translation) theory in which 'misunderstanding', 'mistake' and 'error' are natural elements. There is also a striking parallel in *The Joke*: Interestingly, Ludvik's letters to Lucie remain also unanswered. Kundera is keen on preserving enough space for ambiguity and unpredictability in his biography as well. He has stated in the interview with Jordan Elgrably (1987) that he would never want to go back to his former home country, Czechoslovakia, today the Czech Republic. At the same time, he maintains that he has been mistaken about a lot of predictions in his life and that almost all his attempts to foresee the future have gone wrong. This prediction has, however – at least until now, proven right. Kundera is now 90 years old and he still lives in France. He was lately offered the restitution of his Czech citizenship, but also this offer has until now remained unanswered. Are these coincidences? Who knows what Kundera might do next? Irrespective of this, the most adequate and proper way to read Kundera is 'not' to (try to) understand him, to 'misunderstand' him and let him be 'misunderstood'.

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