

The Book of Laughter and Forgetting

Kniha smíchu a zapomnění

Presented by: Anna Gawarecka

The events of 1968 – liberalisation of political and social relations known as the Prague Spring, and the invasion of the Warsaw Pact troops into Czechoslovakia, which brought an end to the hopes from the Thaw (the pre-1968 period of relaxation of repression and censorship in the Czechoslovak Republic) – found their wide-ranging and multi-threaded reflection in Czech dissident and exile literature. Treated as a key experience defining the state of mind and emotional dilemmas of the entire generation, these events and their historical and daily life consequences were viewed by writers (including Josef Škvorecký, Ota Filip, Michal Viewegh, Karel Pecka, Jiří Gruša and Milan Kundera last but not least) from various points of view, employing various strategies and tools of fictional representation of reality. These strategies were used for redefining the established conventions of literary engagement and traditional models of the political novel in Czech culture, which at that time were naturally associated with the poetics of socialist realism prose.

Milan Kundera's *Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, which was the first literary work written and published after the author's leaving Czechoslovakia, fits into this trend, although its genre attributes are far from standard narrative novel solutions and readers' expectations. Instead of a sequence of fictional events organised in a consistent cause-and-effect sequence that (in)directly refer to historical facts and their political consequences, the reader receives a mosaic of seemingly incoherent fragments, at first glance unrelated to each other by any means – neither thematic nor structural. The author's intention, clearly declared in the novel, is that the role of this missing bond is played by both titular concepts, to which the writer assigns the status of cardinal philosophical and cultural categories, treating subsequent plot micro-structures as, close to the Enlightenment philosophical novel, exemplifications of the functioning of these categories in the life practice of the presented characters. In this situation, both reflections on laughter and forgetting (or, more broadly, manipulating of memory) become convincing arguments for exposing the regime's methods of controlling human consciousness and subordinating it to a vision of history designed by the ideologised guidelines of the current dominant state policy.

The awareness of the exhaustion of the traditional novel formula causes the writer to look for new strategies to capture the contemporary existential and political reality. Inspired by the compositions of Ludwig van Beethoven, he finds them in the concept of musical variations, which, on the one hand, allow for mixing discourses and genre models, and on the other hand, facilitate a deepening of the superficial interpretation of a selected topic and enable its consideration through the prism of many semantic or interpretative perspectives. As a result, the text is divided into six relatively autonomous parts, most of which not only tell about the fate of various characters but also use different narratological tools and various construction patterns. And not only literary ones. Kundera, striving for a comprehensive recognition of both titular concepts, uses the genre determinants of a philosophical and/or political essay in order to illustrate and explain these categories through a

multi-layered and multi-directional look, which, in addition to the fictional illustration, also takes into account the quasi-scientific explication of the concepts mentioned. Thanks to this, the novel gains the effect of their holistic approach and the possibility of linking existential issues with the ideologisation of the presented reality. In the world of the novel, great politics influences the private fate of the portrayed characters, deciding for them the course of their professional careers (forcing 'inconvenient' scientists or people of culture to leave their jobs), existential undertakings (the need to leave their homeland) and causing ethical dilemmas resulting from the need to adapt (or refusal to accept) to the system requirements and demands.

In other words, in the novel *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, Kundera is trying to reform the petrified formula of the political novel and offers an innovative variant of it: giving up the current, traditional plot structure and proposing instead a polythematic and multi-problem diagnosis of contemporary, not only communist, reality.

The complicated and unusual publishing fate of the novel (*habent sua fata libelli*) proves that the politicisation of Czech culture determined either its shape, ideological profile and resources allowed by censorship, or the possibilities of reaching the domestic audience. Although *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* was written in Czech, its first edition (1979) was published in French by the Parisian publishing house Gallimard. Only two years later, the novel was published in Czech – in the famous emigrant publishing house *Sixty-Eight Publishers* run by Josef and Zdena Škvorecký in Toronto. This means, first of all, that this text, although discussed many times in Western and dissident studies (including Eva Le Grand or Květoslav Chvatík), remained inaccessible to the Czech reader until 1989, and therefore did not become embedded in his cultural memory. Sentenced, in line with the philosophy of the novel's title, to oblivion, it was only after the 1989 Velvet Revolution that it found its place in the canon of contemporary Czech literature.

LANGUAGE: Czech / Český

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Article

Perceptions, cartographies, and 'cartographies of time' in the political novel

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