

“A novel that does not uncover a hitherto unknown segment of existence is immoral”

A Conversation with Marek Bińczyk on Milan Kundera’s Works (Conducted by Olga Żyminkowska)

Olga Żyminkowska: How did it happen that you became a translator of Milan Kundera’s works in French? What was the context of the first rendition?

Marek Bińczyk: It is a long story which partly dates back to the 1980s and the whole political context of those years. The other day I was in Prague where there was a meeting devoted to Kundera on the occasion of his ninetieth birthday, which he celebrates this year. I talked to Alain Finkielkraut, a French philosopher and a friend of Kundera, and he told me that it was *The Joke* that represented the most important book for his generation. It was May, 1968... For me and for many of my friends and acquaintances the most important work by Kundera was *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, which came to us in a very special moment and was a shock, without which probably I would have never decided to translate Kundera. It was only after the perusal of this book that I read his earlier works. They were not easy to get, because part of them was published only in France and our censorship did not let them be imported. I even had a mate who traded in books in the street for 25 years and he probably made the biggest amount of money precisely on *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*...

OŻ: Therefore, was *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* an aesthetic discovery or, rather, an intellectual one?

MB: It was both. In his book, Kundera sets the proportions between the individual ‘I’ and the collective ‘I’ in a way which is slightly different from

what was known from Polish literature. The need to show appreciation for the individual 'I', to understand individual experience of each of us against the background of unfolding history was something unusual in the times of great collective manifestations and marches during the martial law and in the subsequent years. We liked it that the book which speaks of politics in such a radical way is full of light and vitality while the Polish prose of that time was a little 'hopeless', churning in patriotic needs or – like in Konwicki's works (whom I adore, after all) – it was drowning in melancholy, enfeebling through maundering in the streets like the protagonist of *Rzeka podziemna* (*The Underground River*)... I recall a moment just before the March strike, which seemed decisive, the Soviet invasion was near... I was walking through a park on my own, I had some free time, I sat on a bench and experienced an almost mystical feeling that I was not 'I', but I was a collective subject...

OŻ: "'I' is someone else"...

MB: Yes, there was something from this ecstasy which the poet wrote about. 'I' is everyone else, 'I' is we all.

OŻ: But *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* was not your debut as a translator of Kundera, was it?

MB: No, it had already been translated by Agnieszka Holland, but in the 1980s when a secret conference was held...

OŻ: In Katowice in 1986?

MB: Yes, this was the time of the climax of Kundera's popularity in Poland. At that time, I translated a dictionary of Kundera's terms for the purposes of that conference and later for *Res Publica*. And it was the first Kundera's text that I translated; still in the originally longer form. It was later attached in its abridged version to *The Art of the Novel*, which I translated soon after.

OŻ: After that came *Immortality*?

MB: Yes, the paradox was that Kundera was writing *Immortality* in Czech. But I told him that I could sense a typically 'French' style of writing. It turned out that Kundera really began to write this book in French, a few dozen pages, but then returned to Czech.

OŻ: What does this 'French' style of writing involve?

MB: I think that it is about an even greater clarity of speech. Though it is generally a feature of his writing, at least up to a point. I felt this 'Frenchness' of his style with my senses and he readily agreed on the translation of *Immortality* from French.

OŽ: Is this change of the medium from Czech to French connected with world-view changes? Or maybe was this the issue of choosing French as a more international language? Or a matter of certain political manifestation...?

MB: This was not a political act. If it was any kind of act at all, then it was an artistic one. At that time, he was continuing to develop the utopia of world literature, *Weltliteratur*, as the homeland of the writer. This was a kind of teasing departure from the national language which is, so to speak, a particular language, and it is all too closely connected with national phantasms and profusion of stereotypes. He did not want to be read as a dissident writer. This was a symbolic step in the direction of liberating himself from all kinds of clichés on him, including auto-thematic clichés, e.g. that the writer has to write in his own language.

OŽ: Was this connected with changing the way of thinking about the novel?

MB: This was connected with changing the form of the novel, since his first novel written entirely in French, i.e. *Slowness*, and two subsequent ones are short novels which have the form of the fugue. Earlier he had rather been faithful to the form of a seven-part sonata, to use musical terms. Changing the language is also connected with his belief that French, which he is now using, is a quite clear language, devoid of unnecessary ornamentation and virtuosity, and this is how he saw the art of the novel: say what is the most important, do not make sentences and descriptions overwrought.

OŽ: Is it possible to notice a greater role of ornamentation in those works in Czech?

MB: The easiest thing is to set a Czech-French dividing line in Kundera's literary output. This is quite simple. The second dividing line, slightly different, would split those novels whose plot is set in the Czech Republic and those set outside this country. The third dividing line is less evident but, to my mind, deeper: this is the dividing line between *The Joke* and the author's subsequent moves. You asked about ornamentation... If we were to measure 'language weight', language wealth in his books, *The Joke* would be much heavier than *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* or *Immortality*. This is connected with two things. Firstly, *The Joke* is a novel written by still quite a young man... Do you like *The Joke*?

OŽ: It is not my favourite book of this author.

MB: I have read it again recently. I was struck by the power of this novel... perhaps his best one... There is a kind of zest, energy in it which results, firstly, from the writer's age and, secondly, from the fact that it has a different narrator than later novels or, to be precise, there is no narrator whatsoever, since this book consists of monologues uttered by the characters. Brilliant monologues. This kind of monologue trance, which Kundera evoked, can be

found only in novels by Roberto Bolaño thirty years later... And afterwards Kundera is beginning to introduce an external narrator, which changes the language of the novel.

OŻ: His prose is perhaps becoming more 'intellectual'. Could this be due to musical inspirations? His novels do not stand out as being particularly inspired by painting or, generally, visual arts.

MB: Yes, after all he was a musician by education. I remember I was at his place in Paris, and a day before my visit he had listened to Janaček's opera and then he was telling me about how he had been waiting in suspense to see how the orchestra would play the concrete note in the second act... But also Kundera's stage imagination is developed; dialogues of his characters often create a theatrical scene.

OŻ: So the dividing line in his output is the change of the narrator?

MB: Apart from stories which the writer tells in his books, he also tells a story of his form. In Kundera's works, the course of the novel leads from the large form to the smaller form, or from the swelling form to the purified form. I feel in this his 'gnostic' sensitivity, which manifests through the gradual process of disincarnating the novel. There is less and less matter in it and this is in some part connected with the position of the narrator. In any case, this is one of the reasons.

OŻ: I would like to continue with the thread of the narrator. What role does the narrator perform after this division? As we read in Kundera's essays several times, the novel is, according to him, a space where moral evaluation is suspended. Sometimes, however, I am under the impression that after the dividing line of *The Joke*, the narrator attempts to explain and sometimes judge characters loudly and clearly, maybe sometimes too unambiguously... This creates certain tension between the declared impartiality and the narrator who comments in an explicit manner.

MB: Good point. But I would say that he is not often caught red-handed giving explicit judgement; maybe except when he adopts a sarcastic tone, as he does at times in *Slowness*, which is why I came to like this book less today. Generally speaking, these novels do not provide answers after all, but only a sketched field, a musical score.

OŻ: But there are, for instance, the so-called keywords, with which the narrator often assesses the characters...

MB: 'Assesses' is perhaps too strong a word. Keywords, such as 'darkness' or 'cathedral', serve to describe different activities of imagination in each of us. But you are right in this sense that you can feel his liking for Sabina, for instance, and irony towards her lover. Overall, it can be said that the blocks

of the structure of the novel are stacked clearly, yet the field of relation between them is ambiguous.

OŽ: So we could say that the tones of the variation are clear, but it remains to be seen what music they will play, again using this musical metaphor. The blocks of the structure which you mentioned can come in the form of the protagonists. Some critics accuse Kundera of creating 'paper' characters, or characters who are supposed to be only figures of some idea, and who are anti-psychological...

MB: This is true, they have always been anti-psychological. The language used by the protagonists is a thematic-existential language. Do you remember the notion of 'existential code'? It greatly appealed to us in the 1980s. Such an 'existential' way of talking about a human being is connected with the anti-psychological [Wilhelm - O.Ž.] Dilthey's tradition. It has both analytical and poetic potential. True - some characters are more physical and some are less. It was possible to make a film out of Tereza and Tomas [*The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, directed by P. Kaufman - O.Ž.], even though Kundera has never hidden the fact that these are characters-ideas. Or, rather, characters-themes. All protagonists are created by the author in the same way; he keeps underlining the way of their 'conception', how they were born in his mind. And then, in the course of events, some characters acquire this 'body'...

OŽ: For instance, Jaromil from *Life Is Elsewhere* seems to be a figure that is quite clear psychologically.

MB: I remembered him in the same way. Likewise, Chantal from *Identity* seems to be quite incarnated. I also clearly see Agnes from *Immortality*.

OŽ: I think that what we are talking about touches upon a very important problem of truth and fiction in the philosophy of Kundera's novel. On the one hand, the fictionality of characters is heavily stressed and, on the other, his novels seem to claim the right to analyse the reality outside the novel...

MB: The notion of the character is fundamental to him, it goes without saying. Characters are this 'experimental ego', but it is only through them that it is possible to say something about the world. Through their existential concrete. Friends of mine who were Kundera's students in Paris and created the magazine called *L'atelier du roman*, consider the literary figure to be the base for creating the novel and talking about it. Certain things cannot be said without literary figures. Hence the novel, not philosophy. Do you remember Kundera's sentence that characters are existential experiments for him...

OŽ: ... "unfulfilled possibilities of human existence".

MB: This can be annoying about them that they are so consistent in this experiment. Kundera drafts them in such a way as to make the

character-experiment vivid. They can seem to be 'paper' characters when compared to their 19th-century counterparts, but Kundera understands that he will not be either Balzac or Flaubert, because he is already at a different stage of novel development. I must confess that I have always been curious about which of Kundera's characters I can actually 'see' and which I cannot...

OŻ: And why. Does the fact that we 'see' the given character help us to reconstruct the ideological layer of the novel, or maybe it makes concentrating on the ideological dominant more difficult?

MB: I think that they are supposed to be signs, notes in the composition. Each of them, nonetheless, represents a separate whole. From the point of view of the reader, those protagonists who are more evocative will obviously be more attractive. I do not know if you have seen some reviews of *Cold War* by Paweł Pawlikowski. If there were any critical remarks, they concerned the fact that the characters are dead, empty, that their relationship is incomprehensible. And these are characters typical of Kundera, elliptical in a sense. Kundera is, generally speaking, a writer of ellipsis: through uncovering certain features and behaviours of the characters, he always refers to the whole, which is some 'grand existential theme'. Personally, I like this technique. Even though now it can be seen as slightly dated after several dozen years. But please, do not talk about "the novel's ideological layer"; this is not a good term for Kundera.

OŻ: Or is it, perhaps, that – according to Kundera – also 'human nature' (not only the nature of the character) has some musical structuring, or that a human being's identity is shaped through keywords which form a chorus, recurrent problems, and situations in the compositional whole of life? Does Kundera go beyond the novel and state anything about a human being as such?

MB: Yes, he does, and keywords may be treated as composition notes, 'nodes' of existence which sometimes determine the whole life. What does Kundera say about a human being? Among other things, he says that a human being cannot be described analytically, in Freudian terms, for instance; the psychological description says little or nothing about existence, and it is existence that Kundera is interested in. And existence can be described through the novel, although naturally this will be an infinite description. In addition, Kundera is very sensitive to the theatre of human behaviours. This is very Proustian. Extraordinarily Proustian in him. He likes demystifying. I remember a situation when he once told me in some bar: "Let's sit near the restroom, because I like looking at how people are behaving when they know they are being observed while going to the restroom". He is staring in a way in which [Witold – O.Ż.] Gombrowicz does, just as Gombrowicz is observing how [Joanna – O.Ż.] Młodziakowa is going to the restroom.

OŽ: Can we say that Kundera is a sceptic if it comes to recognising the possibilities of reaching some truth?

MB: Definitely. The novelist may not know one truth. And he is skeptical in his outlook on the state of culture and civilisation. When it comes to the possibilities of cognition, Kundera, let's repeat this, believes in the novel; he follows [Hermann – O.Ž.] Broch. He believes that cognition through the novel is more advanced. I am under the impression that Kundera believes also in beauty, although this may be a thread which is not discussed. Moments of beauty in human life are rare and difficult to capture, but they exist...

OŽ: Is this capturing of beauty connected with some cognition again?

MB: These are metaphysical intuitions which the characters are living through. They represent the truth of their world: a possibility of beauty appears in their world. Some of the characters of his novels see it, i.e. those who are more self-conscious and who understand more of life, such as Tomas from *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*...

OŽ: Does it mean that they need the narrator-hermeneut less?

MB: Perhaps it rather means that they are such possibilities of existence that can experience this beauty. This is not ultimate beauty, these are all temporary revelations.

OŽ: It has always seemed to me, in turn, that Kundera has been deeply sceptical of beauty in particular, which may be connected with his ardent criticism of lyricism, which manifests the most in *Life is Elsewhere*...

MB: Why do you call it scepticism? The lyrical attitude is just an attitude of an over-theatricalised identity... For him, lyricism is not a guarantee of beauty at all. Rather the opposite. Of kitsch – yes, but not of beauty.

OŽ: Interestingly, Kundera began his literary career writing poetry...

MB: But he soon renounced it. He wiped lyricism on every level, but mostly on this level of existential attitude which gives a human being an easy identity. Maybe this is why so many people harass him politically – both from the right and from the left – as Kundera is somewhat politically indefinable. He does not delight in revolution due to its kitschiness, which resembles – you remember those descriptions – a collective dance round a circle. Recall the Polish government dancing and holding hands at [Tadeusz – O.Ž.] Rydzky's party... You have a tangible example of what the lyrical attitude is in Kundera's works – kitschy to the core. Sometimes this demystifying attitude assumes a more decisive form, as in *Slowness*, in which there is not only irony but also sarcasm and satire, which personally I am not fond of...

OŻ: Criticising the lyrical attitude, Kundera draws attention to certain solipsism of the lyrical 'I' who may one day say that life is beautiful only to deny it the next day. These two contradictory theses are simultaneously true as the criterion of authenticity is included only in the subjective feeling. I keep pondering what Kundera could think about novels in which the figure of the narrator gets near the lyrical subject, as is the case in sentimental and epistolary novels?

MB: He definitely likes them less. So he will value [Louis-Ferdinand - OŻ] Céline more than [Albert - OŻ] Camus. It is not easy, however, to admit this openly. He certainly appreciates [Marcel - OŻ] Proust or [Gustave - OŻ] Flaubert, where the lyrical 'I' of the characters is subjected to ruthless demystification. Consequently, he has difficulties with [Fyodor - OŻ] Dostoyevsky, whose characters go to the limits of their Self, like Jan Palach, whose gesture of self-immolation is - according to Kundera - blatantly anti-Czech, going against the Czech nature. Likewise, he will like the psycho-analytical prose less, e.g. [Georges - OŻ] Bataille... Freud, in a sense, could be regarded by him as a lyrical thinker as he locks himself in a dogma, a pattern or a system, which Kundera does not like.

OŻ: What is, therefore, his approach to philosophy? On the one hand, he admits to drawing inspiration from philosophy, but on the other - he does not want to be called a philosopher...

MB: Because he is not one. He reads philosophers selectively, he takes from them what he needs. He will not write anything about [Martin - OŻ] Heidegger, but this philosopher is important to him when he warns against the technicisation of the world. Back then, in the 1980s, there was even a notion of the "Kundera's human being", i.e. one that is enlightened, critical; a reflexive essayist, so to speak.

OŻ: Then, Kundera tends to identify philosophy with dogmatism...

MB: Yes, one could not mention in his presence the name of [Jacques - OŻ] Derrida, or semioticians such as [Gérard - OŻ] Genette, because he would scoff them. Perhaps he simply refused to understand them. He did this in the name of anti-dogma, albeit the significance of this gesture was peculiarly dogmatic. So he understood philosophy traditionally, i.e. as a system of dogmas...

OŻ: Which was perhaps quite unfair to many contemporary philosophers...

MB: You are right, although he may not have read the philosophers of the last few decades in great depth.

OŻ: Kundera once uttered an important sentence, namely that if the philosophical essay is included into the structure of the novel, it acquires a totally

different meaning than the meaning it would have if it was a separate work. However, Kundera often chooses the form of the essay from the beginning to the end. Is it possible to say, therefore, that Kundera states something, affirms it in his essays, and the same theses become only suppositions in his novels?

MB: Kundera includes the essay in the novel as a function of thinking of individual characters; it also serves to construct a thematic spectrum of the presented world. The essay in the novel is not burdened with such seriousness as it is in the case of closed essays, which are, in majority, a presentation of his aesthetic ideas.

OŽ: And his interests in phenomenology? The influence of Jan Patočka on young Kundera is often mentioned in this context. I am under the impression that this may account for his perception of human nature in a 'synchronic' way, i.e. one that aims at discovering the this nature's unchanging essence. Likewise, the variation structure of his novels seems to correspond with this tendency to look for what is important.

MB: It can be said that Kundera is a phenomenologist 'by nature' – as Proust and Flaubert. Obviously, he read Patočka or [Edmund – OŽ] Husserl, but probably he is simply a 'natural' phenomenologist. You are right in saying that he constructs somewhat ahistorical human nature even though this is not any timeless nature, but nature which manifests itself in happening.

OŽ: So his essence is not transcendent?

MB: Let us say that he is somewhere between transcendence and immanence. Today, for instance, with the invention of electronics, impatience is not the same as it used to be, but the phenomenon of impatience still exists.

OŽ: I have recently taken an interest in a certain thread – maybe not so popular – in Kundera's works, namely the presence of drama as a literary genre in his output. As we know, he debuted with a collection of poems, which was followed by a theatre play titled *Les propriétaires des clés*, and then he came back to drama only once in his later works, i.e. in a variation on *Jacques the Fatalist*. I am wondering why Kundera abandons writing theatre plays for the benefit of the novel? Because we have already explained why he abandons poetry.

MB: It is difficult to say. I have never talked to him about this. I can only presume that he has never fully abandoned theatre. It appears to me that theatre moved to the territory of the novel and theatricality is preserved in the relations between characters. Note that many scenes in his novels are written as theatrical scenes, actually with stage directions: who stands where, which place a character goes to, when they start to scream, when they sit on a chair, etc.

OŻ: And maybe the reason for this is the lack of presence of the narrator in theatrical plays? All we deal with in drama is stage directions.

MB: Perhaps – this is not a bad thesis. The figure of the narrator in Kundera’s works is quite complex. We deal, in a sense, with another character, but one that has wider competences. This is a heavy influence of his stay in France.

OŻ: The theatrical play is perfect for showing polyphony, which Kundera is constantly aiming at.

MB: Yes, it is, yet polyphony is present in his works all the time, particularly in those longer novels.

OŻ: Finally, I would like to ask you about your being inspired by Kundera in your own works. Your latest book (*Kontener*) seems to have quite a distinct musical structuring, as is the case in Kundera’s works. To what extent are these conscious inspirations?

MB: It is difficult to say. I was wondering many times what I have in common with him. We are certainly divided by the language. As opposed to him, I do not aim at language clarity. On the other hand, we share the liking for ellipsis and the shape of the composition, which you have already mentioned. Yet, I am quite distant from Kundera as far as my fondness for verbal ornamentation is concerned. And the essays which I am writing – or what can be called essays in absence of a better term – are thought in a completely different manner, i.e. fictional inclusions are essential to me in the essay; I introduce the fictional character into the essay. The opposite happens in Kundera: he introduces the essay into the novel.

When I was writing *Tworki*, I knew from the start how the novel would end and that I would include a time shift identical to that from *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, namely: the death of the protagonists takes place earlier and the last chapter comes back to the time before their death. I do not know now if I adopted this technique from Kundera or I came up with it myself. It is likely that I adopted it.

OŻ: Would you define yourself more as a novelist or an essayist? Or maybe these two genres should not be separated?

MB: Sometimes I refer to myself as ‘a genre bastard’. I wrote too few novels to refer to myself as ‘a novel writer’. Probably I am not a pure essayist either, since all my essays are, as I said, infected with the narrative of the novel. So I am somewhere in-between. The other day I went to a colloquium held by a former Kundera’s student and when I happened to say something ‘off the cuff’, his commentary would appear: “You are a novelist”. This means that I do not speak the way you speak in seminars, but in a way that is typical of novels. I am treated – if anyone pays attention to that – a bit like a specimen,

a strange case in nature. If I were to define myself in any way, I would say that I am just 'a writing human being'.

OŻ: Is the choice of the genre 'a worldview choice' for you, like it was for Kundera?

MB: Definitely not to such an extent. Kundera ideologised the choice of the novelistic form quite strongly.

OŻ: So would it be possible for you to write poetry? We know that in the case of Kundera this would be impossible.

MB: Some kind of lyricism is, in fact, foreign to me, namely the immediacy of experience, delighting in it. Admittedly, this kind of poetry in Polish is very rare these days. The new generation of authors grits their teeth not to, God forbid, reveal any trace of lyricism! So if anyone wants to be really modern in the Polish poetry, they should keep their own emotionality and naivety in check, because feelings are always naive. In my case, the choice of the genre results from a rather undefined but strongly internalised imperative of the mixed form; there is some place in it, in any case, for lyricism and sentiments. I presume that this can be traced back to the geography of my childhood. I was brought up, bluntly speaking, in a 'hoodlum' district of Warsaw (also Andrzej Stasiuk lived there for some time). As a result, I learnt to be somehow distrustful towards the 'purity of the form'. Of course, I like elegant writing, but I am sceptical of 'solemn' writing.

OŻ: So would you say that you belonged more to the Hrabal tradition?

MB: Partly yes, partly no; like Kundera, I do not have the tale-telling talent similar to that of Hrabal, although I stylised some texts for tales. I am now being reminded of an anecdote when, once in Paris, Hrabal went for a pint with Kundera and one day he told him some fascinating story and the following day he told him the same story but with a completely different ending. This is unthinkable for Kundera's style! Hrabal meets the Polish phantasm of being Czech. France does not have this phantasm, so Kundera is easier to read and more important to the French than Hrabal is. Poland is maybe the only country in which Hrabal is much more popular and more widely read.

OŻ: In closing, would you care to make some comparative assessment of Kundera's role against the background of the contemporary European literature? Can we look for some similarities in style, e.g. in [Michel - O.Ż.] Houellebecq's works?

MB: Houellebecq is, indeed, a bit from Kundera's school. This is about such a kind of prose which is not autotelic, it is 'close to life'. Houellebecq would be close to Kundera's style, even though he is read more as a prophet, which definitely does not happen in Kundera's case. With all Houellebecq's

virtuosity, there is a certain sharpness of his *hic et nunc* diagnoses, and this is what people expect from us now. Diagnoses in Kundera's works are not so clear-cut, they have a larger degree of subtlety. If Kundera's works were, in turn, juxtaposed with the expectations of the Polish readers, I would say that Poles do not appreciate composition in literature so much, preferring literature which is less 'structured', more direct, without ellipsis, outright.

OŻ: If you were to summarise your 'prophecy' on the future of 'kunderology' and the interest in Kundera in both Poland and all over the world, would these be two separate prophecies?

MB: It seems to me that in Poland nowadays Kundera is read particularly at universities; his works are, simply, researched. In turn, he seems to be received less 'methodologically' in the world. When I read text of Frenchmen, Italians or Canadians on Kundera, these are texts of universal character and often devoid of the widely understood context of their creation, which was so important for Poles. And further future? I have no idea; today it seems that it will be Houellebecq who will survive, but in fifty years' time?

OŻ: Kundera seems to dissociate, in general, from everything that is not the text itself. From his biography, from the political context; this is particularly visible in *Testaments Betrayed*.

MB: Yes, he does, this is why he did not include many more 'political' texts in the issue of *la Pléiade*. And for us, Poles, this political context was immensely important, which I mentioned when talking about *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*... He wrote *A Kidnapped West* then; it was so immensely important, but he renounces this text today.

OŻ: In the case of poetry, only several poems from the collection titled *Man: A Wide Garden* have been translated into Polish...

MB: This is true, he radically distances himself from his early Stalinist poetry; his poems are not to be found in *la Pléiade* either.

OŻ: Is it possible that the unwillingness towards autobiographical interpretation may result from some earlier structuralist tendencies? I am thinking of the Prague School.

MB: No, no, he just thinks he is an artist and artists do not have biographies. His works are his biography... There was even quite a funny situation when one of the Polish newspapers published an interview with Kundera. It came as a surprise to me, because, knowing him, I had known for a long time that he did not give interviews. I even asked him about it. He naturally denied; he did not speak to anyone. Eventually the whole situation came to light. In the end, Kundera issued a statement for the Polish press that the interview had never been conducted. Anyway, that interview was very boring

and by no means provocative... The author simply adjusted the questions to the theses included in *The Art of the Novel* in order to appear in Kundera's company.

OŻ: A story like for a new novel...

MB: Yes, Kundera's game of pretence and truth... a joke... which could give rise to something.

SUMMARY

The interview with Marek Bieńczyk covers, in general, the subject of the philosophy of novel by Milan Kundera and the reception of his works nowadays in Poland and abroad. Marek Bieńczyk – the French translator of Milan Kundera's novels – talks about the history of his first translations and the beginnings of scientific thinking about Kundera. Moreover, he explains the problems connected with Kundera's authorial and elaborate philosophy of novel: the conception of narrator, hero and composition. Bieńczyk also narrates his own memories with M. Kundera. What is more, he indicates the inspirations he draws in his own work from innovative prose by Czech novelist, who is celebrating his 91st anniversary this year.

Keywords

Kundera, interview, Bieńczyk, translations, novels.

Marek Bieńczyk – professor in the Institute of Literary Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences. He wrote many essays devoted to world literature and studies on melancholy and Polish Romanticism. He is also a prose writer and a translator. He received the Nike Prize in 2012.

e-mail: marek.bienczyk@ibl.waw.pl

Olga Żyminkowska – student of philosophy in Międzyobszarowe Indywidualne Studia Humanistyczne i Społeczne at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. Laureate of Leszek Kołakowski Prize for young philosophers (2018), winner of Philosophy Olympiad (2018) and laureate of Best Student Grant for research (2019) entitled: "Milan Kundera's philosophy of novel in *Life is Elsewhere*. Studies on a demarcation between philosophy and literature". Interests: aesthetics, problem of fiction and reality in a literary text, philosophy of novel (especially such authors as Milan Kundera and Orhan Pamuk), problem of literary space.

e-mail: olgazyminkowska@onet.pl